



Love Me, Cowboy

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Category: Romance, Western

Description: Wallflower Claire would be more excited about the wedding if it didn't mean running into Mary Catherine's brother—the bull rider she once had a scorching one-night stand with...

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Chapter One

The day would come when Claire Campbell stopped being guilted into performing insane tasks by her mother, but that day would not be today. As the first ribbons of gold pierced the eastern Texas skyline, Claire stared at the various desserts stacked in the back seat of her Chevy Malibu, debating how to get them across the sprawling lawn of the Double H Ranch without making a mess.

The need to be in her classroom in just over thirty minutes paired with the fact that she was nearly twenty-five minutes from town left no option for multiple trips. A room full of nine-year-olds with no teacher would not be pretty. One trip it had to be.

The lack of light on the horizon added transporting her delicate cargo across damp grass in the dark to the list of tricks Claire would need to perform. This is what she got for never having grown a backbone. She'd only had twenty-eight years to do so. Maybe she could get a shot of moxie just from standing next to George.

Georgia Hightower, Claire's six-foot-tall best friend, the third in the Camp Winnekoba trio, which also included Mary Catherine Holly, had more backbone than any woman Claire had ever met. And a few men of her acquaintance as well. Claire couldn't wait to see both women that afternoon at the bridal shower. Too much time had passed since they'd been in the same room together.

Loading the two trays into her arms, Claire balanced them against her stomach and crept toward the screened-in porch along the left side of the house, where she'd been ordered to leave the delicacies for the party later in the day.

She'd never heard of a lingerie party as a bridal shower, but as the brouhaha was in honor of her best friend Mary Catherine's wedding coming up in two weeks, she went along. Though who was Claire kidding? She always went along. It was her *modus operandi*.

Shuffling as fast as possible while watching her step and balancing the heavy trays, Claire reached a dark-colored pickup truck parked not far from the porch and hung a right to swing around the vehicle's back end.

That's when the first catastrophe hit.

Claire smacked hip-first into the dropped tailgate of the pickup truck, knocking the wind out of her and sending the top tray of cupcakes soaring into the air. Purple frosting passed before her eyes as she fought not to lose the bottom tray as well.

"Holy moly," she said, though the words came out as more of a breathy whisper due to lack of oxygen. Claire closed her eyes and wheezed, hoping when she opened to the light of day again, the cupcakes would have landed upright with all desserts perfectly intact.

Opening one eye at a time, Claire assessed the situation. Not what she wanted to see. The cupcakes were scattered about, several frosted side down on the tailgate. There was no salvaging them now. The only thing she could do was carry the intact desserts to the porch, then return to clean up the mess as quickly as possible.

Though whoever had left the truck sitting in the yard like this deserved to find dried purple frosting covering his tailgate. The jerk.

Taking a deep breath to calm the rising panic, Claire took one step to the right, then moved forward only to step on the cover from the dropped cupcakes. The heavy clear plastic creaked in protest, the high-pitched sound piercing the silent dawn like a

trapped coyote.

That's when the next catastrophe hit.

As the plastic snapped beneath Claire's boot, a man jerked upright in the bed of the truck saying, "What the..."

Claire screamed and flung her arms into the air. Strawberry pastries hit her full in the chest, then dropped into the dirt at her feet. Half a second later, a wayward tart landed on her left shoulder, filling side down. Of course.

Adrenaline and fear sent Claire's heart racing out of her chest, while a slew of expletives danced on the tip of her tongue. Habit made her keep them there, though if she were about to die, be it by a stranger's hand or utter humiliation, spewing a profanity or two was the least of her worries.

The man in the truck folded into a sitting position, moving slowly, as if a woman hadn't screamed her fool head off at his sudden appearance. A black cowboy hat covered most of his face, while dark denim clung to his long legs, and his boots were caked in dirt. By the smell of them, the dark matter contained more than the Texas turf.

How had she missed that smell before now?

Broad shoulders rolled, but before the joints could make a full turn, the stranger halted the movement, jerking both shoulders forward and resting his elbows on his thighs.

And then, as he pushed the hat back off his forehead, a beam of sun like a perfectly timed spotlight streaked out of the east, blanketing the cowboy in golden light. Claire's galloping heart came to a full stop as Tyler Holly's green eyes met her own.

Her best friend's younger brother, Tyler was also the man who'd stolen Claire's heart many years before. Not that he was aware of doing so. Nor would Claire ever sink to admitting the fact. She'd humiliated herself enough where this cowboy was concerned.

"I..." she stammered. "I didn't expect anyone to be out here."

A strong hand rubbed the reddish-brown stubble covering Tyler's chin. "I didn't expect anyone to be out here either," he said, pushing his way down to the tailgate.

Claire thanked her lucky stars there wasn't a woman sharing the truck bed with him. Playing witness to the last chapter of a Tyler-slash-buckle-bunny sexcapade would be more than she could handle this morning.

Or any morning for that matter.

Hovering in a state of shock at stumbling across the lanky cowboy, Claire forgot all about the cupcake mess covering the tailgate. "Wait," she said, holding her hands out to stop his progress. But it was too late. He looked at her expectantly, and she said, "You just sat in purple frosting."

He shrugged one shoulder. "I've sat in worse." Tyler reached out a hand in her direction, freezing Claire to the spot. One finger slicked across her shoulder, then carried cherry filling back to his mouth, where he licked it clean. "Odd way to bring a man breakfast." One eyebrow shot up as the dawning sun hit his features, revealing the scar Claire had heard about but never seen.

Tyler had chosen bull riding as his profession. Something that served as a constant worry for his sister due to the fact their mother had died in a rodeo accident. Shortly before Claire returned to town, Tyler had taken a bad hit. His face had connected with the back of a bull's head, splitting open his left cheek. It was a wonder his entire face

hadn't shattered.

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Or so Mary Catherine had lamented during an angry phone rant fueled by sisterly love and concern for a little brother hell-bent on pursuing the most dangerous occupation around.

“What are you doing here, Claire?” Tyler asked. If he was surprised to see her, it didn’t show. Which seemed odd since she’d managed to avoid him for the entire four months she’d been back in Holly Hills. Before returning to her hometown, Claire had spent a five-year stint in College Station after graduating from A&M.

“I’m delivering desserts for the lingerie party.” This statement would forever be catalogued as one of the strangest things she’d ever said. But then this entire conversation could also land in that category.

“Are people supposed to eat off your sweater?” One side of his mouth tilted up in that crooked grin that had been curling Claire’s toes since high school.

Once again aware of her predicament, Claire glanced down. “Now what am I going to do?” she said, pulling a tart off her stomach with as much dignity as she could muster. “I can’t go to work like this, and there’s no time to go home and change.”

She glanced up to find a smile on Tyler’s chiseled face. The scar had taken him from beautiful to ruggedly handsome. Claire cringed at the thought of the pain he must have endured.

“Maybe I can help with that,” he said. “There’s a clean flannel in the truck. You’re welcome to it.”

“A flannel?” she asked.

Another one-shoulder shrug. “It’s free of cherry filling, so it’s an improvement over what you’ve got now.”

Claire considered her options, which were, as Tyler pointed out: spend the day looking like a walking baking accident or wear a shirt that likely smelled like the cowboy offering it up. Which would provide her the option of being presentable while giving her flashbacks she didn’t need.

After a quick deliberation, Claire proved to be her mother’s daughter, choosing the presentable option. She clung to the hope that the shirt would smell like nothing more than run-of-the-mill laundry detergent.

“If you really don’t mind, I’ll take the offer. But I need to hurry.” She glanced at her watch, turning it toward the rising sun. “I’ll barely make it if I leave right now.”

Tyler hopped off the tailgate, landing close enough for Claire to feel the heat coming off his body. Tilting her head back to see his face, a memory flashed of the long-ago night they’d spent making love in Tyler’s bed. A night neither had spoken of since.

Claire nearly swayed toward him, but common sense, or maybe some kind of survival instinct, kicked in and she stepped back.

Tyler cleared his throat and proceeded to his driver’s side door.

Claire kept her eyes on the burnt orange streaks spreading across the eastern sky. The sun was high enough now to see the mess surrounding her. And covering her. Making sure the brown tank top remained low over her waist, Claire pulled her arms out of the sleeves and lifted the heavy wool sweater over her head.

When the material cleared her face, she looked up to find Tyler staring at her, flannel in hand, mouth open, eyes dark as emeralds. The last time he'd seen her, Claire had been forty pounds heavier. She'd yet to adjust to the new body and the attention it garnered. Though none of the looks she'd gotten so far had sent her libido into overdrive the way Tyler's did in that moment.

She hugged the sweater to her chest. "This is going to sound weird, but could you turn around?"

He didn't respond for several seconds, then seemed to snap back to reality. "Yeah. Sure. Sorry."

Tyler dropped his eyes to the ground, handed Claire the flannel, then turned as she'd asked. She knew the request was ridiculous, as Tyler had seen her naked before. Something Claire would gladly forget if only her brain would let her.

But that had been nothing but drunken pity sex, or so she reminded herself. Some called alcohol liquid courage, but Claire had since considered it humiliation hooch.

Squeezing the sweater between her knees, Claire pulled on the flannel, which hung well past her waist. Modest by nature, even she knew wearing the shirt loose was too dowdy. She compromised, buttoning the first four buttons, then tying the bottom half into a knot.

"Okay," she said, after making sure everything was covered. "You can turn around now."

Tyler turned his head first, then the rest of him, smiling all the way. "Looks good." For a moment, his cheeks looked pinker than usual. Claire chalked it up to the colorful sunrise.

“I’ll be sure and wash it before I give it back. I don’t know when that will be, but I’m sure we’ll see each other again soon, what with the wedding and all.” She was babbling. A nervous habit Claire had never managed to control. “Speaking of, I bet it’s going to be crazy for the next couple weeks. All the family in town and the parties and showers. Lots of family and parties.”

Why couldn’t she stop talking? It was as if her mouth had gone rogue.

Ignoring her prattling, Tyler said, “You should probably get on the road.”

“Yes, I should!” Claire hesitated. “But what about this mess?”

“You go on,” he said, spinning her by the shoulders. “I’ve got this.” He gave her a gentle push. “I’ll let Marilyn’s Pomeranian have at it and this will be gone in no time. If we’re lucky, the little puffball will throw up purple frosting on the stepmonster’s white rug.”

So Tyler’s feelings about his stepmother hadn’t changed any more than his sister’s had over the years. Marilyn Holly fancied herself some sort of royalty for having landed a spot in the family for which their hometown had been named. Most of Holly Hills ignored her highfalutin ways, but that was harder to do when the woman was married to your father.

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Also hard to do when she'd insinuated her way into every aspect of the shower Claire and Georgia had been determined to plan. In fact, it was Marilyn's idea to make it all lingerie. Something about a woman needing a trousseau. Mary Catherine's stepmother was living in the dark ages.

"Are you sure?" Claire asked, walking sideways to her car.

"Positive," Tyler said. "Can't leave the tots without a teacher."

For some reason, Claire was surprised he knew her occupation. Though Holly Hills was a small town with plenty of gossip, she'd assumed her own status wouldn't be of interest to anyone, especially not Tyler.

Maybe Mary Catherine had told him. That was probably it.

"Thanks again for the shirt," she said, opening her car door. "I'll get it back to you."

"No rush," Tyler said.

Claire hoped he was only joking about the dog but had no time to worry about it now. She'd have to break the speed limit by quite a bit to make it to school before the first bus delivered the munchkins. Fingers crossed old Deputy Dan wasn't hiding behind any bushes along Highway 7.

As she turned the key, Claire took in a deep breath. The scent of pine and man hit her like a blow. "Okay," she said. "No breathing in for the rest of the day."

How hard could that be?

* * *

Tyler pulled the dusty cowboy hat off his head and skimmed a hand through his cropped brown hair. Claire Campbell is still as beautiful as ever, he thought, followed closely by a mental slap at how she'd found him. If Ginger hadn't come down with a case of colic, Tyler would have been in his own bed instead of the one on his truck.

Thankfully, the horse had pulled through and done her business around four a.m. After less than three hours' sleep the night before, thanks to the damn pain in his shoulder, Tyler had been too tired to bother driving the three miles down the road to his own cabin. None of which he'd gotten to explain to Claire.

But then in typical Claire style, she hadn't asked for explanations. She'd looked almost afraid to ask. What did she think he was doing out here anyway?

At least that was over.

He knew she'd been back in Holly Hills for a while now. Four months, two weeks, and three days to be exact. Not that he paid attention to such things. Tyler had hoped they'd bump into each other in town. Some natural, unplanned run-in where they'd say hello, she'd give him that shy smile, and then maybe they'd talk about catching up sometime.

He'd gotten his unplanned run-in, but the rest hadn't gone nearly the way he'd hoped.

Tyler plopped the hat back on his head and surveyed the damage on both his truck and the driveway. Purple icing glowed like neon paint against the navy blue of his tailgate. He reached around to survey his back pockets. Purple frosting stuck to his fingers. Not something he wanted to transfer to his truck seat.

Grabbing two plastic bags from his truck box, he scooped the confectioned ground coverage into one, then spread the other bag on his seat. Tyler threw the garbage onto the floorboard and swung one leg in just as the high-pitched yipping started. Glancing up to the sky, he prayed the way the day was starting was not indicative of how the rest of it would go.

“You comin’ or goin’?” Billy Holly asked.

His father always had been an early riser. Tyler should have remembered that.

“I’m goin’, sir,” he answered over his shoulder. “Had a late night in the barn.”

“What’s this?” the older man asked, forcing Tyler to exit the truck to determine what this the old man was asking about. His dad motioned toward the frosting on the truck.

“You piss off some berry-eating buzzards or something?”

“Claire Campbell showed up with some desserts for the underwear party for Bug.” Tyler leaned on the truck. “I guess I startled her, though she’s the one who woke me up. I didn’t mean to scare her.”

“Claire Campbell was here?” his dad asked, green eyes similar to his own open wide. “Why didn’t you bring her in?”

“No time,” Tyler said. “She had to get to work.”

Billy scratched the back of his head. “Then where are the desserts?”

This conversation was going in circles. “She was carrying them when I scared her, and they ended up half on the truck and half on the ground. I’ve cleaned up the ones on the ground already. For the most part.” Tyler nodded toward the fur ball licking the grass. “I guess Little Bit there is taking care of the rest.”

“Right.” The old man finally looked satisfied he’d gotten his answers and moved on to another topic. “What’d you think of Claire?”

Tyler had no idea how to process the question. He’d always had a thing for Claire but didn’t believe his father was aware of it. No one was aware of it.

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“Excuse me?”

“Looks good, doesn’t she? Slimmed down and all.”

Crossing his arms, Tyler planted his feet wide. “Claire was always beautiful. A few pounds up or down wouldn’t change that.”

Billy nodded. “Can’t argue with you there. You helping with the cattle today?”

The indignation lit by his father’s comments on Claire waned with the change of subject. “Not today. I need some sleep, then I’ll have to check on Ginger again before heading into town for my PT.”

Not that the therapy was doing a damn bit of good. Tyler had taken a spill on a bull during the Mesquite Championships at the end of summer. Thanks to a nasty headbutt, he’d been knocked out cold but still attached to the bull by his rope. By the time the bullfighters had gotten him free, not only was the gash in his face bleeding like a stuck pig, his left shoulder was shredded.

The docs in Dallas said they’d fixed him. That he might be able to ride again. Tyler wasn’t interested in might.

“That’s fine,” Billy said. No one in the family talked about his injury. Just like they wouldn’t talk about his determination to ride again. “We’ll manage without you for today.”

Both men stared at the snuffling dog in silence.

“Think that’ll make him sick?” his dad asked, not sounding overly concerned.

“Probably,” Tyler answered.

Another short silence before Billy Holly shrugged, then turned back to the house. “I’ll check on Ginger before heading out. You’d better get some shut-eye.”

Chapter Two

Later that day, Tyler stood at the counter of Prescott’s Pharmacy awaiting the refill on his pain pills. He didn’t like the idea of taking them, proven by the fact that his first month’s supply took three months to run out, but his physical therapist insisted he keep them handy. Something about easing the pain helping to relax the muscles.

Right. Tyler had had enough relaxation in the last three and a half months to last him a lifetime. He wanted to get off his ass and back to normal.

“You have to be patient,” Mya kept saying.

He’d like to tell her where she could stick her patience but held his tongue. She was trying to help him. He had to remember that.

Prescription in hand, Tyler pulled out his cell phone to check the time as he passed through the exit. Which meant he wasn’t paying attention to where he was going and didn’t notice the tiny redhead charging down the sidewalk, carrying a stack of desserts.

A redhead he barreled into.

“No, no, no!” yelled Claire, as the two collided. She bobbed the dessert trays, dipping at the knees to keep them from hitting the ground.

Tyler dropped down as well, catching the top tray before it toppled over. By the time they both froze, the dessert trays hovered around six inches off the ground, and their faces were close enough for Tyler to see the gold specks in Claire's hazel eyes.

They lingered there, staring at one another as if frozen in place. Tyler could feel Claire's breath mingle with his own. Smell her cinnamon apple scent. The scent that always lingered around her. His eyes dropped to her lips, covered in a sheen of lip gloss. Claire cleared her throat.

"I think we saved them," she said, returning to a standing position.

Tyler picked up the phone and bag of pills he'd dropped before rising to join her. "Sorry about that. I guess I wasn't paying attention."

Claire shrugged, nearly lost control of the pastries, then steadied again. "I'm starting to think this party wasn't meant to have any cupcakes."

With a nod, Tyler agreed. An awkward silence, punctuated by the sounds of traffic and holiday shoppers shuffling by, fell between them. Claire wavered again, and Tyler finally found his manners.

"Let me take one of those for you." He lifted the top tray before she could argue. "Imperial Hotel, right?"

"That's right," she said. "If I don't hurry, I'm going to be late again."

"Again?" he asked, falling into step beside her. "So you didn't make it on time this morning?"

Claire shook her head. "Missed it by three minutes. Of course Principal Jones had to be the one to find the kids being rowdy with no supervision."

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“Did you get in trouble?” Tyler asked, feeling bad he hadn’t helped her get away quicker.

“A scolding was all. I’m still the staff rookie so she had to make sure I understand how we do things around here.” The words were accompanied by an eye roll. “As if I don’t know that a teacher should make it to school before her students.”

“I’m really sorry.”

Claire looked his way, brows up. “Why? It wasn’t your fault I was late. If my mother hadn’t insisted I deliver those sweets this morning, none of that would have happened. She was so afraid I’d get them to the party late if I waited until the afternoon. And now she’ll be right. Again. I hate when that woman is right.”

Tyler knew Claire’s mother had been strict with her when they were younger. It appeared that fact hadn’t changed with the arrival of adulthood. “If we hurry, we can still make it. Bug is never on time for anything. I doubt that’ll change for some party. Even if it is for her.”

A soft chuckle filled the air. “I’d forgotten you call her that. Mary Catherine always hated it.”

“Nah,” Tyler said. “She only pretended to hate it because I was her little brother. Besides, the name fits. There wasn’t a surface around was that safe from her doodles. I still can’t believe she’s not doing something artistic.”

“Surprises me, too.” They reached the front door of the Imperial Hotel, with its large,

covered porch decorated with white rockers sporting green garland, and Claire stopped at the bottom step. “I don’t think I can open the door. Can you get it?”

“Sure,” Tyler said, shifting the tray to his left arm to open the door with his right. Holding it open, he said, “Ladies first.”

Though he’d only been doing what was natural in holding the door, Tyler didn’t dismiss the chance to watch Claire from another angle. She’d found time to change from his flannel into another oversized sweater. This one brown instead of beige. He had to wonder why she wore such big clothes when the body underneath was so small.

Not that he cared what she wore. Or didn’t wear. Or what the body beneath her clothes looked like. He’d tried that path once before and hadn’t gotten so much as a thanks-for-the-multiple-orgasms note the next morning. Though she’d never said as much, he knew Claire felt their night together had been a mistake.

But it hadn’t been a mistake for him. Except that he’d been comparing every woman he met since to the one who’d left him before dawn. And none of them measured up.

Tyler followed Claire past the front desk and down a hallway to the right. Following the signs, they found the party in a large ballroom about twenty yards down. Leave it to Marilyn to rent out an entire ballroom for an underwear party. Maybe she’d booked those Victoria’s Secret models to put on a show.

If that was the case, Tyler might have to find a reason to stay.

Claire stopped just over the threshold, forcing Tyler to put on the brakes to prevent running into her again. He flinched as one cupcake fell over, but the others held their ground.

“Where are we putting the desserts?” she asked a passing hotel employee.

“There are more?” the woman asked, flipping a dark ponytail so hard she nearly smacked herself in the face. “I guess you can put them over there with the others.”

Tyler looked over Claire’s head to see where the hotel employee had pointed. On the far side of the room, in front of a wall of windows, sat a long table covered in more sweets than Tyler had ever seen in one place. There was everything from cookies to pies to cupcakes. Cupcakes like the ones he was carrying.

If Tyler didn’t know better, he’d swear that was steam coming out of Claire’s ears.

“Oh no she didn’t,” Claire growled, charging across the room. Tyler hurried to keep up. “Tell me you didn’t bring these desserts,” she said to an older woman straightening a row of purple cupcakes.

“There you are,” Claire’s mother said, looking her daughter up and down as if she were sizing up a horse at auction. “Nice of you to show up.”

“The party doesn’t start for another hour and a half, Mother. I’m not late.”

“I decided not to take any chances and picked up the desserts myself.” Mrs. Campbell moved two cupcakes less than an inch to the right. “Better safe than sorry.” She flashed a smile that held neither warmth nor kindness, and Tyler could practically feel Claire wilting.

Her shoulders lowered. “Then what am I supposed to do with these ones?”

Mrs. Campbell waved the question away. “Maybe they’ll get eaten.”

Unless Marilyn invited the entire county, which Tyler had to admit was possible,

Claire's cupcakes would never get eaten. At least not today.

"The ranch hands are always hungry. I could take them out to the Double H," he said, trying to make Claire feel better.

The mayor's wife turned his way for the first time, her face pinching tight with blatant distaste. "I didn't see you there, Tyler. I realize you're Mary Catherine's brother, but I didn't expect any men at this gathering."

The woman made it sound as if someone had allowed farm animals to enter the building.

"I'm just helping with the delivery," Tyler said. "I won't be staying."

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He tried not to take the cold treatment personally. Both the Campbell and Holly families had a hand in founding the town. When it came down to picking a name, the founding fathers couldn't agree and settled the dispute the old-fashioned way—with a hand of poker.

Holly won, Campbell lost, and a rivalry that would last more than a hundred years was born. In fact, when Claire and Mary Catherine had become friends, you'd have thought international borders had been breached. Tyler liked to think their generation would put an end to the pettiness.

“Since when are you two spending time together?” Mrs. Campbell asked. “I wasn't aware of this.”

Claire set her tray of desserts on the back corner of the table. “We aren't spending time together, Mother,” she said, blowing a lock of hair out of her eyes. “We bumped into each other on the way here, and Tyler was nice enough to help me out.”

Tyler gave Mrs. Campbell his best smile, determined not to give her the pleasure of affecting him. “Us Hollys might not be in civil service, but we're still good for a helping hand now and then.”

The older woman's face took on the look he expected, as if he'd shit on her shoe. The shot was petty, but the hit felt good anyway.

“I've got everything under control, Mother,” Claire said. “Georgia should be here somewhere.”

“She isn’t,” Mrs. Campbell replied. “Why does it not surprise me she’s dumped everything on you once again?”

Claire sighed as she closed her eyes. Tyler could see her mentally counting to ten.

“I’m not in a hurry,” he said, stepping closer to Claire. “You give the orders and I’ll hang or move whatever you need until Stretch gets here.” Though hanging purple wedding bells was not Tyler’s idea of fun, he’d have volunteered to hang a hundred of them to get Claire’s mother off her back.

“Really?” Claire asked, looking up at him with relief on her face.

“Sure. Tell me where to start.”

The smile he received for his offer sent heat into Tyler’s gut. If only this tiny woman knew how much he’d like to put that smile on her face every day.

“See, Mother,” Claire said, keeping her eyes on Tyler. “We’ve got it completely under control.” With a wave of her hand, she added, “You’re free to go.”

Before Mrs. Campbell could respond, Claire moved into action, calling for the hotel employees to gather around near the front of the room. Tyler shot his nemesis a beaming smile, ignoring the tug on his scar from the effort. The woman actually growled before stomping off, leaving the smell of a decaying flower garden in her wake.

* * *

A half hour later, Georgia had yet to make an appearance, and Claire was quickly losing patience. Where could she be? Annoyance shifted into concern as she contemplated her friend stuck in a ditch somewhere. Claire checked her phone for the

sixth time, but Georgia had yet to return her calls or texts.

“I’m really getting worried. Should we send someone out to find her?” she asked Tyler.

“Stretch can take care of herself. I’m sure she’ll be here any minute.” Tyler dangled a large purple crepe-paper bell in the air. “Now where do you want this one?”

“I really do appreciate this,” she said, stifling a giggle at the cowboy with the dainty decoration. “I know you only volunteered to save me back there.”

His full lips tilted up. “What are friends for? You can return the favor when Marilyn gets here by helping me sneak past her.”

“Crap.” Claire glanced at her watch. “She’ll be here any minute. How could I forget about her?” If everything wasn’t done, Marilyn would take charge, and Claire would lose control of the whole affair. The woman would also start barking orders at Tyler, and he’d never get away.

He’d saved her. Now Claire owed him the same.

“You’d better leave now if you want to make a clean getaway.” Claire took his hand and dragged him toward the ballroom doors. “I’ll scan the entrance to make sure we don’t run into her before we get you out.”

“You’re making it sound like we’re trying to outsmart some movie villain,” Tyler said, trailing behind her. “She isn’t that bad.”

Claire pulled up and turned on Tyler, who stopped mere inches before running into her.

“She’s forcing your sister to open endless boxes of underwear in front of half the town. Does that sound ‘not that bad’ to you?”

“When you put it that way...”

“That’s what I thought,” she said, dragging Tyler farther down the hall until they reached the entrance to the lobby. Claire peered around the corner. “I don’t see her. Wait here while I check outside.”

“But—”

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Whatever Tyler was about to say was lost in the distance as Claire charged across the lobby, glancing left and right for any sign of Marilyn. But when she reached the entrance, Claire forgot her mission when she spotted a tall brunette climbing out of a dirty, white pickup.

“Georgia!”

Chapter Three

Tyler wasn't sure how it happened. One minute he was following orders, hiding from his stepmother, and the next he was riding along with Reed McCormick to drive Georgia Hightower's BMW back to town. She'd run out of gas on a back road where Reed found her and came to the rescue.

After filling the gas tank, Tyler squeezed into the tiny luxury car, while Reed went his own way. Thankfully, no one seemed to notice Tyler peeling himself out of the girly car in the Imperial Hotel parking lot. He'd been tempted to check in on the party. To see how Claire was holding up against both his stepmother and her own parental unit.

But then common sense returned. Nothing was ever going to happen between him and Claire Campbell. He'd chased that trail and gotten nothing but an empty bed the next morning. Tyler would be damned if he'd play the fool again on that front.

So they'd see each other off and on over the next couple of weeks. Both would play a part in his sister's wedding, surrounded by flowers and rings and happy-ever-after junk.

That was the problem—the wedding stuff. It was as if some virus had been let loose in the air and was muddling his brain.

Tyler hadn't encountered Claire in the four months she'd been back, and he hadn't even been trying to avoid her. Once the wedding was over, they'd probably not see each other but every few months, and even then, from a distance.

That meant Tyler just had to get through the next two weeks without making an idiot of himself. He could do that. Or thought he could, until he walked into the Thirsty Cowboy later that night and spotted Claire looking hotter than he'd ever seen her look before.

* * *

Claire felt like a stuffed sausage wearing silver Lycra, painted-on jeans, and the reddest lipstick she'd ever seen in her life. She might as well have a sign over her head flashing the words hard-up hooker for all the Thirsty Cowboy crowd to see. And thanks to Georgia's little makeover, every cowboy in the room was getting the message, even without the actual sign.

As soon as she'd separate herself from one with fast hands, she'd encounter another who leaned in close enough to threaten her with razor burn. She'd been bobbing and weaving for hours, while Georgia kept the boys on the dance floor drooling. Her little black dress was so little, Claire feared there would be an underwear flashing any minute.

As if Claire hadn't seen enough lingerie for one day.

This time Georgia was dancing with Reed McCormick. Claire liked Reed. He was a stand-up guy who didn't chase every pretty girl in town. In fact, he'd fended off a number of advances if the Holly Hills grapevine was to be believed.

Heck, if Reed showed the slightest inkling toward political aspirations, Claire's mother would have made him the victim of one of her matchmaking dinner parties, where the poor schmuck thought he was dining with the town's first family but was really being hurled into Claire's path for future matrimony. Lucky for Reed, he preferred tangling with barnyard animals instead of the ones vying for political power. Though he looked a bit tangled up with Georgia at the moment.

The look on Reed's face as Georgia left him standing at the edge of the dance floor said the vet hadn't been quick enough to avoid George's claws. And then Claire caught sight of a grinning cowboy moving in from her left and scrambled through the crowd in Reed's direction.

"Quick," she said, her hazel eyes filled with panic. "Dance with me."

Claire didn't give Reed time to answer, looping her arms around his neck and maneuvering him back onto the dance floor from the sideline where George had left him.

"What is wrong with men?" Claire muttered, moving easily through the crowd.

"You know I'm one of them, right?"

"Well, yeah, but you're not really a guy-guy, you know?"

Reed looked offended. "I'm a guy-guy. Want me to prove it?"

Claire stiffened. "What?"

He laughed. "You're safe. I won't ravage you here on the dance floor in order to prove my masculinity."

Claire rubbed her red lips together and contemplated her dance partner. “You have the hots for Georgia, don’t you?”

He shook his head. “Too difficult.”

“Yeah, that’s what they all say, but they come anyway. You’d be good for her, you know,” Claire said, happy to focus on something other than cowboy dodging. George put up a strong front, as she always had, but the stubborn woman could use a little male TLC to scrub away some of her cynicism. “She needs someone gentle.”

“Again, you’re wounding my pride. I’m going to have to open beer bottles with my teeth for the rest of the night.”

Claire laughed. “You know what I mean. You have a way about you. It stills a person.”

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The country vet looked less offended by that one. “Thanks, I think, but that doesn’t change the fact that your friend will be gone after the wedding. No sense starting what I can’t finish.”

Claire nodded. “Yeah, that’s the way of it. But you know what Georgia would say?”

He arched an eyebrow.

Enjoying a bit of matchmaking, Claire said, “Where’s the fun in that?”

* * *

Tyler ignored the desire to rip Reed’s throat out as he watched the man exit the dance floor with Claire on his arm. They’d looked right cozy during their dance, with Claire’s arms around Reed’s neck, her body pressed against his. The vet had two things going for him.

Tyler liked him. And Claire returned to the bar alone.

She was a few feet away before she spotted Tyler standing next to his sister, and she stumbled when their eyes met. Tyler reached out to steady her, heat shooting up his arms the moment his hands made contact with her waist.

Hazel eyes wide, Claire said, “Thanks,” but the word came out on a breath, barely audible over the country tune pumping through the club.

Unable to suppress the lopsided grin, Tyler nodded, allowing his hands to linger

seconds longer than necessary, then stepped back.

“About time you hit the dance floor, Claire Bear,” Georgia said. If Claire didn’t know any better, she’d swear there was a hint of annoyance in Georgia’s voice.

“I was desperate to outwit a couple of cowhands,” she said, watching Georgia’s face closely. “Reed was nice enough to help me out. Looks like you made quite an impression on him today.”

Georgia’s eyes snapped to where Reed stood on the other side of the bar. “I let him play hero is all,” she said, eyes dropping to her drink. “Guys like that sort of thing.”

What Reed liked was Georgia, but Claire let the subject drop.

“You looked good out there,” Mary Catherine said to Claire. “But I want to see some of the old moves. Don’t you do the twists and turns anymore?”

Claire climbed onto an empty stool between her friends. “I’m a respectable schoolteacher now,” she answered. “I don’t go out honky-tonkin’ like we used to.”

“That doesn’t mean you’ve forgotten how to do it.” Mary Catherine tugged on her brother’s sleeve. “Take her out for a spin, Tyler. Show the rest of this place how it’s done.”

“I don’t think so,” Claire said, shaking her head in Tyler’s direction. He stood tall and sweet next to Mary Catherine, with one hand held out in her direction.

“If you don’t mind a partner with a bum shoulder,” he said. “I promise not to embarrass you.”

He had to play the injured cowboy card. How could she say no to that?

With a deep breath, Claire hopped off the stool and took his hand. “All right. One dance.”

Instead of simply walking onto the floor, Tyler twirled her onto the hardwoods, sliding seamlessly in between two couples doing a simple two-step. Picking up the step as if she'd been trained to it from birth, Claire finished the spin, locked her right hand with Tyler's as her left landed on his shoulder, and the pair began floating around the dance floor backward.

Tyler turned them a couple times before wiggling his brows as his smile grew daring. Claire couldn't help but laugh, then she nodded, giving him approval to try some fancier tricks. Without warning, she found herself spinning around him, and then tucked against his side, both of them facing forward.

They traveled that way for a full turn around the floor, then Claire was spinning again, this time ending up facing backward, but still to Tyler's side, their hands entwined at shoulder height in what she thought was called a window. Claire hadn't danced like this since her college days, and some of the moves' names had faded.

Thankfully, she still remembered how to do them, since keeping up with Tyler would be impossible if she didn't. Another twirl and they were face-to-face again. Then the song faded out, replaced with a slower waltz.

Claire smiled and nodded, expecting Tyler to escort her back to the bar, but instead, he pulled her in, sliding his arm around the small of her back. He had to bend a bit to make it work, which landed his lips next to her ear.

When Claire didn't move right away, Tyler whispered, “Dance with me.”

Her eyes slid shut as every nerve ending in her body came to life. They moved through the waltz with no tricks or fancy turns. The classic country tune filled the

room and for all Claire knew, they could have been in the bar alone in that moment. Memories flooded into her mind as she tucked her face against his neck, breathing in his scent and heat and all that was the man she'd loved for far too long.

By the time the song was over, they were practically wrapped around each other. Second by second, reality returned. Tyler lifted his head, Claire stepped back, and the rush of cool air where his heat had been was like a bucket of cold water.

She knew that everything she'd ever felt for him was written across her face. Keeping her head down, she let him navigate her through the crowd by her elbow, grateful he didn't speak. Steps away from her friends, Claire broke contact and reached for her tiny purse on the bar. "I need to powder my nose."

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“Do you want—” Mary Catherine started.

“I’m fine,” Claire said, keeping her head down. “I’ll be right back.”

Her mind screamed to turn around. To look into Tyler’s face and see if he might be feeling what she was feeling. But Claire knew better. He’d only danced with her because Mary Catherine pushed him to do it. Same as he’d only taken her to bed because they’d both been drunk.

And she’d been his sister’s frumpy best friend who’d been hard up and desperate.

The bright light of the bathroom blinded her as Claire raced through the door. By some miracle, the room was empty, so she moved to the mirror and stared at the unfamiliar face looking back. The makeup Georgia had applied made Claire look worldly and experienced, two things she would never be.

Running on emotion, she snagged a paper towel from the dispenser and rubbed roughly along her lips. The red substance was as determined to stay on as Claire was to get it off. Wetting the towel, she rubbed harder, staring into the mirror at the frantic woman she’d become.

Then she stopped as quickly as she’d started. What was she doing? Claire was no longer the fat girl in high school afraid to be made fun of at the dance. She wasn’t the chubby college sidekick to the pretty head cheerleader and stunning star athlete.

And no one had made Tyler stay on that floor with her. That had been all him. No coercion from his sister. No alcohol talking, and there was no pity in the voice that

had whispered in her ear. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe she'd been wrong for a long time.

It was too late to repair the lipstick, but Claire took a second to apply the light pink lip gloss she kept in her purse. Her hazel eyes looked brighter with the coal black liner surrounding them, and as gaudy as the outfit was, it did show off her figure. The figure she'd worked hard to get.

"Hey there, sugar," said a familiar voice from Claire's left. Turning, she spotted one of the secretaries from the school.

"Hi, Carlene."

"You're looking good tonight, lady," the older woman said, her bright-pink lips turned up in a smile. "About time you stopped hiding under those old sweaters."

Claire wasn't sure how to respond. She liked her sweaters.

"I saw you twirling around the floor with Tyler Holly." Carlene sighed. "I'd give my best pair of Ropers if Cooter would look at me the way Tyler was looking at you." Patting the sides of her bouffant, which looked teased to within an inch of its life, she added, "All Cooter ever does is say, 'Get me another beer, Car,' while looking right through me. I don't know why I put up with that man."

Torn between wanting to ask how Tyler was looking at her, and the urge to console the woman who'd been waiting more than twenty years for Cooter Hightower to pop the question, Claire patted the secretary on the shoulder and held silent.

"I s'pose we take what we can get," Carlene said, applying a new coat of pink lipstick, then smacking her lips together. "Getting that Holly boy would be a score and a half if you ask me." Carlene surprised Claire with a quick pinch on the cheek.

“And it looked to me like you’re about to score big. Good for you, honey.”

With that, Carlene disappeared into the noisy bar, leaving Claire dazed and confused. If someone else spotted Tyler giving Claire an interested look, then it had to be true. Then she wasn’t imagining what had sizzled between them on the dance floor.

One more deep breath and Claire walked out of the bathroom with her head high and her shoulders back. But halfway to the bar, she saw him. Tyler. On the dance floor with a woman who was tall and lean with legs that went on forever. His new dance partner was laughing and spinning, and Tyler grinned down at her every time she faced his way.

Angry with herself for letting her imagination run wild, there was no way she could spend the rest of the night watching Tyler dance with every pretty girl in town. Or, God forbid, leave with one. No, she couldn’t do that.

Without bothering to find her friends, Claire changed direction and walked out of the bar.

* * *

Tyler escorted Britany back to her husband as soon as their dance ended. Danny was a good guy but suffered from a complete lack of rhythm. So anytime he was around, Tyler gave Britany a spin around the dance floor as a favor to them both. Danny offered to buy him a beer, but Tyler turned him down, anxious to find Claire for another dance.

Only she was nowhere to be found.

“Where’s Claire?” he asked an off-balance Mary Catherine as she exited the dance floor.

“I thought she was with you,” she said, the words slightly slurred.

“No.” He shook his head. “I haven’t seen her since she hit the little girls’ room.”

Mary Catherine shrugged, which sent her swaying.

“Whoa there,” Tyler said, steadying his big sister. “I think you’ve had enough for tonight. Let’s get Johnny to pour you some coffee.”

Mary Catherine jerked away. “It’s my party and I’ll drink if I want to.”

Tyler rolled his eyes. Bug never had been able to hold her liquor. All but dragging her to the bar, Tyler lifted his sister onto a stool, then let her lean on him so she wouldn’t fall off.

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“Where’s Georgia?” she asked, glancing around with squinted eyes that probably couldn’t see much.

“I don’t know,” Tyler said, “but this party is over.”

“No,” Mary Catherine argued, “I want to stay.”

Before Tyler could answer, his sibling froze, eyes locked on something behind him. Tyler turned to see Jax Tipton, owner of the ranch next door to the Double H, being adored by a couple of buckle bunnies.

In a slurred voice, Mary Catherine said, “I think it’s time to leave.”

Bug and Jax had a history, as the whole town knew since their high school days, but Tyler never did get the details about why they’d ended way back then. Being sixteen meant Tyler wasn’t all that interested in his sister’s love life, and she’d never been willing to talk about it since. At least not with him.

From the look on Bug’s face, whatever had happened between them might not be totally over. Which didn’t bode well when she was set to marry someone else in two weeks.

“Okay, but we need to find Claire and Georgia first.”

“Yes. I need the girls.” Mary Catherine glanced down to her phone. “According to this text, Claire left a while ago. Where the hell is Georgia?”

Disappointed that Claire would leave without saying goodbye, Tyler followed his sister through the Thirsty Cowboy in search of her friend. As they rounded the end of the bar, their target stormed through the front entrance.

“Whoa,” Georgia said, nearly running into them. “What’s going on?”

“We’re leaving,” Bug said, grabbing the tall brunette by the wrist.

Georgia shot Tyler a look, but all he could do was shrug. “Says she’s ready to go.”

Before she could respond, Mary Catherine pushed through the door, dragging Georgia with her. Tyler followed on their heels.

“I’ll drive,” he said, but his sister charged on, rambling about something to do with fittings and flowers.

Over her shoulder, Georgia said, “Looks like we’re walking to the hotel. Let your parents know where she is.”

With a tip of his hat, Tyler strode to his truck. There wasn’t much point in going back inside the bar, since the person he wanted to dance with was already gone anyway.

Chapter Four

Clair bit her tongue. Hard.

Watching Mary Catherine look miserable in a dress that she never would have picked for herself was almost too much to bear. And there was nothing Claire could do to help her friend now. If nothing else, Claire understood why the bride-to-be had allowed herself to be bulldozed by her stepmother.

A bulldozing parental unit was something with which Claire was more than familiar. She was practically an expert on the subject. And as she'd yet to stand up to her own mother, Claire couldn't exactly demand Mary Catherine stand up to hers.

Even if hers was little more than an attention-seeking stepmother.

So Claire held her peace and stepped into her fitting room, dreading the task ahead of her. Hanging like an impending blow to her self-esteem was a gorgeous, floor-length, deep-purple dress. As she ran a finger along the sweetheart neckline, lamenting the lack of straps, someone tapped on the wall outside her dressing room.

"Are you ready to be zipped up, ma'am?"

"Um... Not yet. Give me a minute."

"All right. I'll wait here until you open the curtain."

As if this wasn't awkward enough, now Claire had to peel off her sweater and jeans with a woman listening from three feet away. You'd think a bridal salon would have bigger dressing rooms. She'd come prepared, at least. The strapless bra felt weird under her sweater, but Claire had no intention of prancing around the salon with wide, extra-support beige bra straps showing above the dress.

Shimmying and prepared to tug, Claire nearly smacked herself in the nose when the dress shot up her body. She'd expected the thing to get stuck around her hips, the way most things once did. Pulling the top over her breasts, Claire tucked the silky material under her arms and turned her back to the curtain.

"Okay. I'm ready."

The curtain whooshed open seconds before cold fingers touched the small of Claire's

back, making her jerk forward.

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“Sorry, hon,” the associate said as the zipper whizzed up Claire’s back.

There was no tugging required. No sucking in. No struggle at all.

Then a slight turn to her left and Claire stopped breathing.

“Oh my.”

“Oh my is right, hon. That dress fits you like a glove, and you’ve got the perfect figure to pull it off. If you’re a single gal, I hope you’re prepared for every single man attendin’ this shindig to be buzzing around you like bees in a strawberry patch.” The older woman laughed at her own joke. “Heck, maybe even some of the married ones, too.”

“Unzip me, please,” Claire said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“But you just got it on and—”

“Please,” Claire repeated, her voice stronger this time. “This is a fitting and it fits, so unzip me.”

“Don’t you want to—”

“No,” Claire cut her off.

Why couldn’t the dressing room have been bigger? Everywhere she turned, there was that image in the mirror. The woman with giant boobs and giant hips and why

couldn't MC have picked out ugly, oversized dresses like other brides did.

Nearly panting, Claire spun as far away from the mirror as she could. "I need to take it off. Now. Please," she pleaded. "Help me get it off."

"Okay, honey," the woman said, sounding as if she were dealing with a petulant child. "I've got ya now."

The zipper lowered, and Claire spun again. "I can do the rest, thank you."

Even in a panic, Claire's manners pushed through. What she really wanted to do was throw the woman out of the tiny space, not thank her as if she'd brought the perfect bottle of wine to a dinner party.

But she could hear her mother's voice in her ear. We don't make a scene in public, Claire. We're the Campbells, the first family of Holly Hills, and we have an image to protect.

An overweight, spinster schoolteacher hadn't been part of the Campbell image, and now Claire was going to be an overweight bridesmaid walking down the aisle, looking like a giant purple float.

Was there no end to how many ways in which she could be a disappointment?

"I won't be far in case you need me," the woman said, looking concerned that Claire might rip the dress to shreds as soon as she turned her back, but exiting and pulling the curtain closed.

Raising her arms, Claire let the dress hit the floor, scrambled out, and hung it by narrow silk loops on the hanger. Within seconds, she was back in her own clothes and sitting on the small bench at the back of the fitting room, staring at the dress as if she

could change it into something less... fitted.

How was she going to do this? Claire would never let her friends down, and it was too late to change dresses now. This must have been how MC felt about her own dress. How much she wanted to try something different, but it was too late now, with only two weeks until the wedding.

If Mary Catherine could walk down the aisle on the biggest day of her life wearing a dress she hated, then Claire could do the same. And have a couple of glasses of wine while they all got ready.

Or maybe tequila.

Mary Catherine wasn't happy when Claire returned to the pedestal in her regular clothes. "Where's the dress? I want to see how it looks."

"The fit was fine, so I put it back on the hanger." Before MC could demand that Claire put the purple confection back on, she said, "Where's Georgia?"

"In the café," MC's stepmother Marilyn said. "Probably drinking something no self-respecting person would drink this early in the day."

MC rolled her eyes, and Claire took the chance to escape. "I'll go check on her," she said.

Hustling through the salon, dodging poufy, white gowns at every turn, Claire stepped into the café and spotted Georgia sitting alone and tipping back a Bloody Mary. She'd really hoped Marilyn was wrong.

"Here you are," Claire said, plopping into the chair opposite Georgia. "Booze? It's not even eleven o'clock."

“It’s five o’clock somewhere and Bloody Marys are the breakfast of champions... and losers. Whichever.”

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Something wasn't right. "Are you okay?"

"Does a woodchuck chuck wood?"

"I don't know, but you're acting weird."

Staring into her glass, Georgia stayed silent for several seconds. Then she sat up straighter. "I'm fine. Did you try on the dress that shows off your magnificent tits?"

"Really, George? Diversion by obscenity?" Claire shook her head. "Tacky."

"What? I'm trash, remember?"

"How about you grow the heck up and stop thinking about yourself. We're celebrating MC and the new life she's about to start. So snap out of it," Claire said. "No one cares who you were. Most of them didn't care back then. You're wearing your insecurity on your sleeve."

A waitress stepped up to the table with what must have been Georgia's second round. Jerking the drink out of the waitress's hand, the cranky bridesmaid tilted the glass back for a large gulp. Her propensity to play the bitch was usually an act, and today George was putting on an award-winning performance.

"I'm not trying to steal MC's thunder. I just think she's screwing up by marrying lame-ass Brad. He's not the right guy for her."

Claire wasn't going to fall for the distraction. "Not our decision to make. She's a big

girl, and you can stop pushing me away by acting ugly.”

Georgia slammed the drink onto the table. A spatter of tomato juice landed on her hand. “You think you know me so well.”

Claire smiled. “Yeah, I do.”

Georgia’s shoulders fell as if one smile had taken the wind out of her. “I’m sorry.”

“I know,” Claire said. “You’re all bark and rarely leave teeth marks.”

“Not on you.”

Claire accepted the water the waitress handed her. Lifting it she said, “To MC and happy ever afters. Maybe they do exist.”

Georgia clinked her glass against her friend’s. “If you say so.”

“I do. I have to believe.” And Claire did believe. Maybe not for herself, but she wanted nothing more than to see her friends happy.

Georgia took another swallow of her drink, opting to remain silent on the matter. She’d had a rough start in life, which had gone a long way to creating the hard outer shell she kept in place. She was only protecting the soft heart hidden deep inside.

Something Claire couldn’t hold against her friend. She’d done the same thing, only with food instead of attitude. And the memory of that skin-tight purple dress was the only thing that kept Claire from calling the waitress back and ordering an outlandish-sized piece of the chocolate cheese cake that was calling to her from the display case across the room.

* * *

Tyler pounded in the final nail that would reinforce the slats around the old wooden flatbed, ensuring none of the preschool tykes riding through the parade on the hay stacked inside would take a tumble onto the street.

He knew Claire was working on another float on the other side of the old warehouse, as he'd been watching her from under his lashes all afternoon. She'd yet to spot him, but that was likely due to the fact that she had several little kids to herd. As there was paint involved, Tyler was surprised they weren't all covered in the stuff by now.

Rubbing his hands on his back pockets, Tyler picked up his toolbox with his good arm and ambled across the warehouse, trying to look as casual as he could. Claire was one of his sister's best friends. Had practically been a member of his household during their teen years. No reason not to say hello.

"I can help wield a brush if you've got an extra," he said, stepping up behind her and setting the toolbox on the floor.

She'd been down on her haunches showing a little one how to work the brush when he approached. At the sound of his voice, she dropped onto her bottom and looked up with wide eyes.

"You've got to stop sneaking up on a girl like that," she said, holding a paintbrush high in one hand as she tried to push off the ground with the other.

"Here," Tyler said, offering a hand. "Let me help."

Lifting her took no effort at all, which put her on her feet and nearly pressed against him in a second flat. She gazed up at him as if surprised to find herself upright, her mouth opened just enough to make him think about kissing her.

“Are you a real cowboy?” asked a voice near Tyler’s left hip. The question sent Claire a step back, but she gave him a hesitant smile.

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Tyler pushed his cowboy hat farther back on his head. “I am. How about you?” he asked the little boy wearing blue jeans, boots, and a red-and-blue flannel.

“I sure am,” the little one said. “I can rope a baby cow and everything.”

“Then we might could use you out at the Double H.” Tyler dropped down to the boy’s level. “What’s your name, big man?”

“I’m Colt,” he said, jabbing a small, paint-covered hand in Tyler’s direction. “Colt McIntyre.”

Ignoring the paint, Tyler took the offering. “I’m Tyler Holly. Nice to meet you, Colt.”

“I’m Victoria,” said a little girl who hopped up next to Colt. “And you’re pretty except for that mark on your face.”

Claire’s gasp didn’t seem to register with the youngsters.

“How’d you get that?” another little boy asked. All the children had stopped painting and gathered around Tyler.

He glanced up to Claire to make sure it was okay to share the story. She looked apologetic.

“I don’t mind telling them if you think it’ll be all right.”

Crossing her arms, Claire said, “You don’t have to do that.”

Propping onto a short stepladder sitting a few feet away, Tyler let the kids settle into new positions before starting. A couple elbowed for space near the front. “There’s room for everybody,” he said, which put an end to the elbows. Meeting Claire’s eye, he said, “I’ll keep the details kid-friendly.”

She rewarded him with a smile. “I and their parents appreciate that.”

“This not-so-pretty mark on my face was given to me by a nasty old bull named Meat Grinder,” Tyler started. “I was riding him over in Mesquite last August when I got too far forward, and he pulled me right down out of my seat.”

“You ride bulls?” a little blonde asked, her blue eyes wide with wonder.

“Yes, ma’am,” Tyler assured her. “On this particular ride, Meat Grinder jerked me hard enough to make us bump heads. As his head was much harder than mine, I got the worse end of the exchange.”

“I bet blood gushed everywhere!” Colt exclaimed, with more enthusiasm than sympathy.

Claire shook her head vigorously, but Tyler had no intention of sharing the gory details.

“Don’t know,” Tyler said. “Knocked me clean out. When I woke up, I had this.” He pointed to his cheek. “Now I’ve always got a reminder of ugly ol’ Meat Grinder right there in the mirror.”

“I hope you won’t do that anymore,” Victoria said as she leaned against Tyler’s right arm. “Sounds scary to me.”

“Sounds scary to me, too,” Claire said, her eyes intent on his.

Tyler had every intention of doing that again, though he did hope to avoid the cranial collision. But now wasn't the time to have that conversation.

“And now I've distracted y'all from your painting.” Tyler glanced over to the large banner the kids had been working on. The center said It's a Holly Hills Christmas, and around the edges was a string of holly in progress. “Looks like we've got two more sides to do.”

“Are you going to help us?” Victoria asked.

“That's why I'm here.”

Claire stepped forward. “I'm sure you have other work to do.”

“Nope,” Tyler said, taking the paintbrush from her hand. “Finished up the hay bale truck before I walked over. I'm all yours.”

A pretty shade of pink crawled up Claire's cheeks as she ran a hand through her hair. “Well,” she said. “If you're sure. We still need to attach the banner to the brace at the back of the float. When it's done being painted, that is.”

“Then let's get to painting.”

Tyler let Colt bring him up to speed on the project. The boys were doing the holly and the girls were doing the berries, since that was more delicate work and girls were the more delicate creatures.

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“How old are you, Colt?” Tyler asked.

“I’ll be ten on New Year’s Eve,” he said proudly.

With a twitch of his nose, Tyler made a face he hoped supported the wisdom he was about to share. “I’m a few years older than that, so I know a little more about girls than you do.” He caught Claire’s raised brow in his peripheral vision but pressed on. “Would you say delicate means fragile?”

Colt had to think about his answer. “Yeah, I guess so. Like Mama’s good dishes. They’ll break if I stomp my feet while walking by the glass cabinet where Mama keeps them.”

The boy sounded as if he knew this fact from experience, and Tyler believed he probably did.

“Would you say your mama is fragile?”

“No, sir,” Colt answered. “Why, she fell off old Gypsy just last week. She said some words I’m not s’posed to repeat, but she didn’t break.”

“That’s the secret about girls.” Tyler sat back, giving the young man time to absorb his meaning.

After a prolonged pause, filled with head scratching and gathered brow, Colt said, “I don’t get it.”

“Girls aren’t delicate at all. They’re softer, I’ll give you that.” Tyler winked at Claire, who was struggling not to laugh. “But they’re as tough as you or me. Some of ’em are tougher.”

Doubt shone in the young man’s eyes as he glanced over at fair Victoria. She was fighting for space with another boy, holding her ground as she added more berries to the painted vine.

“I’m gonna have to think about that,” Colt said.

Ruffling his hair, Tyler said, “You do that. But I wouldn’t steer you wrong, partner.”

The little cowboy fell into silent contemplation as Tyler scooted closer to Victoria.

“You mind if I help with the berries?”

Blond hair flipped over a pink-clad shoulder in a move that must have been instilled in females from birth. Blue eyes sparkled his way while her bright smile revealed a hole where a tiny little tooth used to be.

“I don’t mind at all, but are you sure you don’t want to paint the leaves with the other boys?”

“Nope. I’d rather paint the berries.”

That seemed to be the right answer if the little girl’s beaming smile was any indication. As he dipped his paintbrush into the red paint, Tyler glanced over to where Claire worked farther down the banner.

The smile on her face said she approved as well.

Chapter Five

If Claire fancied herself half in love with Tyler Holly before today, the sight of him painting berries next to a smitten nine-year-old put her all in. He was wonderful with the children. They'd been direct and curious about something he likely didn't want to talk about. Most adults would have brushed them off, but not Tyler.

He'd gathered them in and mesmerized them with his story, as if what he'd been through was little more than a scraped knee. As if his life hadn't been changed, and nearly cut short due to doing something as ridiculous as climbing onto the back of a bull.

Growing up in Texas meant rodeo was a part of life. And Claire had never thought too much about it until she saw what it did to Tyler. Thank God he'd survived to tell the tale and would never tempt fate in the same way again.

"Those berries look especially festive," Claire said, stepping back to admire their handiwork. "And the handprint Christmas tree was a very artistic idea."

As soon as Tyler suggested the tree, the children had taken immediately to the idea of sticking their hands in the paint. By some miracle, no one left a handprint on his neighbor, and all of the parents were good sports about the unexpected paint on their clothes.

"My mom had Bug and me make one when we were little." Tyler crossed his arms as he stood next to her. "I hadn't thought about it in years. Not sure why it came to me today."

What he didn't say was clear in his eyes. Even bull-riding cowboys missed their moms.

“So now we need to attach it,” Tyler said, breaking the silence that had fallen between them. “I’ve got some wire in my toolbox, along with some cutters. That should work.”

Crossing the short distance to where he’d left his tools near the back of the truck, Tyler bent down and lifted with his left arm, only to have the box drop back to the floor with a crash. He gripped his left shoulder as his face contorted in pain.

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“Tyler? What’s wrong?” Claire was afraid to touch his arm for fear of hurting him more. “Tell me what to do. I don’t know how to help.”

“It’s fine,” he said through a clenched jaw, then took several deep breaths, keeping his eyes closed. “I just forget sometimes.”

Claire caught herself taking deep breaths with him and had to make herself stop. “Forget what?” she asked.

Dropping his hand, Tyler opened his eyes and slowly lowered his shoulders. “The face wasn’t the only thing damaged in the accident. As I said at the Thirsty Cowboy the other night, my shoulder got torn up pretty bad, too. Doc has me in physical therapy and it’s mostly healed, but the weight of the toolbox was too much, I guess.”

He guessed? The man had taken years off her life with that reaction. The pain must have been excruciating to take his breath like that.

“Thank goodness you won’t be doing that anymore.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, working his shoulder up and down. “Picking up the toolbox? Not with that arm, I won’t.”

“Not the toolbox,” Claire said with a roll of her eyes. “Riding bulls. No more climbing onto the back of a beast that would rather kill you than let you stay there.”

Tyler’s face turned serious. “I have every intention of getting back on a bull.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Dead serious.”

Claire threw a hand on her hip. “If that’s supposed to be a joke, it isn’t funny.”

“I don’t make jokes about my life.” His eyes darkened. “My life. I’m a bull rider, and I’m going to continue being one. No matter what you or my sister or anyone else says.”

Jerking the toolbox off the ground with his good arm, Tyler slammed it onto the truck bed, then hopped up after it. Claire had to shuffle around to the back so she could use the bumper to climb up, but she wasn’t about to let this stubborn cowboy walk away from this argument.

“Your sister loves you,” she yelled, storming across the empty flatbed. “And I..” She what? Loved him? Unfortunately so, but she wasn’t about to tell him. “I care about you, too. That bull could have killed you.”

“And I could get hit by a truck tomorrow. Doesn’t mean I’m going to hide in my house.”

“That isn’t the same and you know it.” Why couldn’t he see what getting back on a bull would do to the people around him? How they’d feel if the worst happened?

Tyler turned so quickly, Claire nearly charged into him. “What if someone told you to stop teaching?”

“What?”

“Didn’t your parents push you to be a lawyer? To do your civic duty and join the

family business of running towns and making decisions for other people?”

Her situation was nothing like his. “Being a teacher isn’t going to get me killed.”

“No? How many school shootings have we had in the past few years?” Tyler asked. “Life is random, Claire. A meteor could kill us all tomorrow. You have to live while you can, the way you want.” His voice dropped as his eyes held hers. “I’m a bull rider. That’s what I do.”

Claire felt deflated. He was right. It was his life, and only he could decide how he wanted to live it. But that didn’t stop her from wishing he would choose another way.

“It’s going to kill your sister when you climb back on one of those bulls.”

And it will kill me, too, she thought.

“I can’t do what she’s done, Claire. I can’t walk away from the thing I love because it’s what other people think I should do.”

The need to grab him and hold on was so strong, Claire did the only thing possible.

She backed away.

“That banner probably needs to dry before being hung up. I’ll get someone to help me with it tomorrow.”

“Claire, don’t—”

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“Mom’s expecting me for dinner.” Claire looked at her watch. Then at her feet. Anywhere but at the cowboy with his hand out. “You should head out, too. Thanks for helping the kids.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, but she barely heard the words as she hopped off the truck and stepped through the open warehouse door into a chilly December evening.

* * *

Claire tossed the salad as Bonita Fuentes hummed an upbeat Spanish tune. They didn’t employ the cook on a regular basis, but Sylvia Campbell liked to give the impression that they had staff when it came to dinner party nights. Which happened at least once a week.

Bonita suited her name, a pretty, curvy woman with laughing brown eyes and dark hair that Claire would love to have. Long and lush with a soft wave. Nothing like her shock of red hair that garnered the kind of attention Claire preferred to avoid.

No, she did not have a temper.

No, she was not a sex kitten in bed.

No, she did not get the color from a box.

“If Claire is in your way, Bonnie, tell her to move,” her mother said as she breezed into the kitchen to refill her wineglass. In the minutes before a party, she always tossed back two glasses of red, then chewed a mint seconds before greeting the first

guests.

Claire cringed every time, knowing the mixture of flavors had to be awful.

“Your lovely Claire is never in the way,” Bonita said, winking in the long-suffering daughter’s direction. “I love having her around.”

“At least someone does,” Sylvia muttered, running a finger over each eyebrow in the mirror near the swinging kitchen door. “Please tell me you’re wearing makeup, Claire.” Instead of looking at her daughter to answer her own question, the first lady of Holly Hills continued to stare at her own reflection.

“Yes, Mother,” Claire said, tossing the salad harder than necessary and sending a string of onion over the side. After dropping it back in, she set the wooden spoons on the counter so she wouldn’t throw one at her mother’s head.

“With that face,” Bonita said, “she doesn’t need any makeup. Porcelain perfection like that is a gift.”

“She gets it from my mother-in-law, who looks like an albino raisin in her old age. We’ll see if she’s still calling it a gift in forty years.”

Claire managed not to dump the salad bowl over her mother’s head. Barely.

“I’ll be happy to look like Grandma when I reach her age.” Which wouldn’t be for fifty years, but Claire left that part out. “She’s a beautiful woman, inside and out.”

Bonita snorted, Claire’s mother huffed, and a heavy, yet not unwelcome, silence fell over the kitchen. Until her mother downed the second glass of wine.

“By the way, Claire. I’ve invited Greg Reddington to dine with us tonight. You’ll be

next to him at the table.”

“Greg Reddington?” Claire asked. The boy who’d called her Claire the Pear in high school because she resembled the shape of one? Who had seen her changing in the girls’ locker room and told everyone she wore granny panties?

The boy who had single-handedly made her life even more of a living hell than it already was from ninth to twelfth grade?

“Relax,” her mother said with narrowed eyes. “You’ve lost enough weight that he might consider you now. His father has been on the city council for years, as was his grandfather. I’m sure Greg will follow in their footsteps.”

Claire was still reeling from the “consider you now” part and unable to form a coherent reply before her mother exited the kitchen. This could not be happening. Though Claire hadn’t seen Greg in years, thank the heavens, she highly doubted he’d changed. Thinking about having to spend an evening with him made her want to toss something besides a salad.

“Why does she do this to me?” Claire asked Bonita, who floated across the kitchen to place a consolation pat on her shoulder. “Why can’t she deal with the fact that I’ll marry when I find the right guy? When I find him. On my own.”

The cook shook her head. “Some mamas can’t stand to give up control. And if there was ever a woman with control issues, it’s your mother.”

“If you’d like to apply for the job, I’d happily replace her.”

“If only we got to pick our family.” Bonita returned to stirring something that smelled wonderful on the stovetop. “My paternal grandmother thinks I’m disgracing my heritage by hiring myself out as a cook. Says I should be home raising babies and

serving a man, not the fancy townspeople.”

“Since that would mean missing out on your amazing empanadas, I’m very happy you’re generous enough to offer your services.”

With a broad smile, Bonita said, “I’ll pass that along to my grandmother. Since those are from her recipe, at least she’ll know my clients have good taste.”

In that moment, the doorbell rang, and Claire’s heart sank. She considered her options. She could hide in the kitchen and refuse to join the party. Or claim a sudden migraine, though she had never experienced one in her life. Which was a miracle considering she’d grown up with her mother’s constant harping.

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No wonder she'd eaten her feelings for the majority of her life.

The reality was, Claire had no choice but to endure this night, as she'd endured many nights before. Smile and nod. Don't engage unless absolutely necessary. This approach had worked before; it would have to work again.

With a deep breath, Claire dropped her shoulders back, raised her chin, and marched out of the kitchen. Upon entering the dining room, all of her positive thinking went out the window when Greg Reddington turned in her direction.

"Well, I'll be," he said, propping his hands on his hips. "I'd heard you dropped the pounds but didn't believe it. How about that, Claire. You're not a pear anymore."

She wanted to fire back an insult. Mention his receding hairline and expanding middle. But catching her mother's critical eye, Claire did what she'd been trained to do.

She smiled.

"Would anyone like a drink?" she asked, stepping over to the small bar against the dining room wall. "Wine, perhaps?" Tequila would have been excellent in that moment. Too bad her mother kept the good stuff hidden in the kitchen.

"I'll take a highball," Greg said, joining her at the bar. "Hard to believe that's you. I had no idea this pretty little thing was hiding under all that weight."

If Claire had been a violent person, she might have decked him right there. Instead

she said, “Screaming to get out, I guess.” Because she was. Screaming to get out of this house and away from this slimy jerk.

A city council member called Greg away, and Claire exhaled, repressing the urge to spit in the butthead’s drink. She handed it to him while he was in the midst of conversation, then made a clean getaway to linger in the corner talking to her father’s secretary, Gloria, until her mother called for everyone to sit down.

Claire pulled out the chair between her father and Gloria, but before she could drop into it, her mother tugged her backward.

“You’re over here next to Greg,” she said, pulling out another chair. “You two have a lot to catch up on.”

Greg stared at Claire’s breasts, looking as if he’d rather have her than Bonita’s empanadas. Bile teased the back of her throat, but she swallowed it down and tried not to look as disgusted as she felt.

For fifteen minutes, Claire endured Greg pressing his knee against hers, speaking to her boobs instead of her face, and talking about how important he was at the Holly Hills branch of the Lone Star Bank. As manager of the loan department, he wielded the power (his term) to decide who did and did not get approved.

After making some comment about feeling like God, Greg laughed at his own distasteful joke and then leaned into her. “Thank goodness when the fat fell off that you didn’t lose the girls, if you know what I mean.” Claire turned to see watery blue eyes locked several inches beneath her chin. “Would have been a shame to lose those puppies.”

“I need to go,” Claire blurted, rising out of her chair and tossing her napkin onto her plate.

Silence fell over the table before her mother said, “Claire, what are you talking about? Dinner just started.”

“I forgot about an appointment, and I’m late.” Keeping her eyes down, Claire all but ran out of the room.

“Claire Renee, you...” Her mother’s words faded as she pushed into the kitchen, snagged her jacket, keys, and purse from the counter, and continued at full speed out of the house. She started the engine, then buckled her seat belt as the Malibu rolled backward out of the drive.

There would be hell to pay come tomorrow, but Claire could not have survived one more minute sitting next to that jerk. She desperately wanted a shower after less than five minutes of forced conversation. Not that she’d done much talking.

“Carol of the Bells” chimed from Claire’s phone inside her purse. She didn’t have to look to know who was calling. Sylvia Campbell had to be really pissed to leave her guests long enough to make a phone call. Claire ignored the phone and kept driving, not sure where she was headed.

She didn’t feel like going home. Though unlikely, there was always the chance her mother would show up on her doorstep and spend the rest of the night berating Claire on everything from her manners to her wardrobe to her heartlessness at refusing to marry the proper candidate.

If Greg Reddington was her mother’s idea of the proper candidate, Claire would gladly die a lonely old maid. After several minutes of silent driving, Claire found herself driving down Main Street. Her phone went off again. Pulling into a parking space in front of the diner, she yanked the cell from her purse and turned it off.

“Leave me alone, Mother,” she said, throwing the phone onto the passenger seat.

Looking up, Claire stared through the diner windows. “Pie,” she said aloud. “If ever there was a night I deserved pie, this is it.”

Chapter Six

Tyler had been at the Thirsty Cowboy for less than thirty minutes when his feet carried him out the door. He felt restless, which meant he should have danced off the energy. But he didn't feel like dancing tonight. At least not with any of the women in the bar.

For two days, he'd been berating himself for being so harsh with Claire. He should have been happy that she cared enough to worry about him. Even if her feelings stemmed from him being her best friend's brother and nothing more.

Yes, his line of work was dangerous. Tyler didn't want to get hurt. He wasn't a masochist. But riding was his passion. Bug hated the rodeo because it took their mom, but Catherine Holly had died doing what she loved. And something told him she'd be proud that her son was following his dream. Following in her footsteps in a way.

Tyler couldn't explain how it felt when he rode. The rush of conquering the fear. The feel of all that power churning beneath him. The surge of adrenaline when the chute opened and all hell broke loose. How could he make anyone understand it without putting them in the moment?

How could he explain the heart-pounding glory churning through him when that eight-second horn blew and he was still in his seat? Still hanging on and in the money.

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Pulling his corduroy collar tight against the chilly air, Tyler lamented the fact that his family might never understand him as he strolled down Main Street, dodging evening shoppers and tipping his hat to those he knew. Which was nearly everyone he passed. When he reached the diner, the idea of a hot cup of coffee sounded good. And then he saw Claire sitting alone at the counter, staring down at something he couldn't see.

He owed the woman an apology and giving it to her over a cup of coffee was as good a time as any. Bells jingled overhead as he stepped into the bright lights of the diner. Claire sat with her head on her hand, looking less than happy from his vantage point.

“Hey there,” he said, sliding onto the stool next to her. “Mind if I join you?”

She didn't so much as glance his way. “You sure you want to?” Claire asked, shoving a plate full of pie forward and back.

Tyler removed his hat and set it upside down on the empty stool beside him. “Yeah, I'm sure.” She continued toying with the dish. “Are you going to eat that or dance with it?” he asked, trying to lighten her mood.

“I haven't decided yet.”

Not the answer he expected.

“What can I get you, Tyler?” asked the waitress behind the counter.

“Coffee, please.”

Setting a cup and saucer in front of him, she filled the mug, then set three creamers on the counter.

“Thanks, Belinda,” Tyler said. The older woman had been working behind the counter at Dawson’s Diner for as long as he could remember.

“You know what I’m doing with this pie?” Claire asked.

Watching her give the plate a half turn, Tyler answered, “No, ma’am.”

Turning to face him, she said, “I’m using it as a crutch so I don’t have to deal with how I really feel. It’s called eating my feelings. I’ve done it all my life.”

Tyler felt as if he’d just climbed onto the meanest bull he’d ever seen. One wrong move and this could be really bad.

“Interesting,” he said, buying time. Claire turned back to the pie, staring it down as if in a duel. Against his better judgment, Tyler said the words no man ever wants to say. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” Claire said, lifting her fork. A second later, the utensil hit the plate. “Why can’t she leave me alone? Why couldn’t I have a nice mother? A supportive mother who wants her daughter to be happy and accepts her for who she is?”

“I don’t—”

“She is so determined to marry me off. As if I’d give that woman grandchildren so she could make their lives miserable, too.” Stabbing the pie with a fork, Claire continued her rant, waving a bite of chocolate cream pie in the air. “Do you know who she had the nerve to set me up with tonight?”

“Set you up?” Tyler didn’t like the sound of Claire being set up with anyone.

“Greg Reddington,” Claire said, her face puckered as if she’d licked a slice of lemon. “That arrogant, insulting, no good piece of... crap. He was awful to me in high school, and if you haven’t seen him lately, I can tell you nothing has changed.”

“Greg has always been a jerk,” Tyler said, considering ways to hurt the man. “He isn’t good enough for you.”

She slapped a hand on the counter. “Thank you. Now tell my mother that, because she keeps trying to marry me off to guys just like him. If they have connections and money and the right, promising future, then I should take ’em and be glad.”

“You deserve so much more, Claire. You need a guy who will put you first. Who gets that you’re kind and sweet but really tough underneath.” Tyler leaned his elbows on the counter. “He should be able to take care of you, sure, but you’re not the type to need a fancy mansion and a new car every year.”

“No, I’m not,” Claire said, but Tyler had more to say.

“You deserve a guy who thinks you’re the best thing he’s ever found.” Lost in the moment, Tyler lifted a lock of dark-red hair off Claire’s shoulder and rubbed it between his fingers. “The man you marry should be someone who’s always thought you were beautiful. Who knew that he was lucky to have even one night with you and would regret for the rest of his life ever letting you go.”

As his voice trailed off, Tyler realized what he’d said. And by the look on Claire’s face, so did she. Hazel eyes stared into his as her full pink lips formed the shape of an O.

“Tyler—”

“It’s late,” he said, darting off the stool. “Gotta be up early for the parade tomorrow.”

“The parade,” she said, setting her fork gently on the plate and pushing it away.

“Right.” Looking up as he tossed a five-dollar bill on the counter, she said, “Tyler, I—”

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“I’m sorry about the other day,” he said, sliding his hands into his coat pockets. “I shouldn’t have lost my temper like that.”

“I’m sorry, too,” she said.

An awkward silence fell between them, broken by the sound of clanging dishes in the back.

“I’d better go.” Tyler backed away before he dragged Claire off her stool and kissed the concern out of her eyes. “I hope your night gets better.”

The bells jingled once again as Tyler stepped onto the sidewalk. He couldn’t resist a glance through the window. Her back was to him. She was probably embarrassed by what he’d said. That’s what he got for letting his heart do the talking.

Maybe someday he’d stop being an idiot around her. Tyler only hoped that day would come soon.

* * *

Claire was thankful for the excuse of the early morning parade for not returning her mother’s phone calls. The voice mails started as disapproving, rolled into demanding by the third message, and shifted into an extensive dressing down by the fifth.

According to her mother, Claire had made a completely unnecessary scene, disgraced the family name, and most predictably of all, embarrassed her mother. The woman even had the audacity to claim Claire had insulted Greg Reddington, who would

likely never have her now.

No question about what Greg had done to prompt her abrupt departure. No concern over her daughter's whereabouts or emotional state. Not that Claire expected anything different, but hope did spring eternal.

As the parade got underway, Claire preferred to think about the more positive development of the night before.

Tyler.

What he'd said about the kind of guy she deserved ignited a spark of hope in Claire's chest. Those were not the words of a man who regretted the night they'd spent together. If anything, he felt quite the opposite. Which made Claire even more of a fool than her mother claimed her to be.

Not that she was ready to reveal her feelings. She had hope, not certainty. But hope was more than she'd had in a long time where Tyler Holly was concerned. Claire had smiled as she'd thanked Belinda for the pie but let her know she didn't want it after all.

She'd also smiled all the way home and was still smiling as she waved to the citizens of Holly Hills, who were packed along the parade route. At least in the rare moments when her attention wasn't focused on keeping everyone on the float. Twenty-nine ten-year-olds amped on sugar and packed onto a moving vehicle was more than a little stressful.

Mrs. Noble, her fellow fourth-grade teacher, hovered on a hay bale at the head of the float, near the sign the children had made with Tyler's help, while Claire took watch from the back. This way they could keep them all in their sights and stop any misbehaving before it got out of hand.

So Claire had three things to focus on—waving to the spectators, monitoring her students, and casting occasional glances toward a certain cowboy in the group behind her float.

By sheer luck or coincidence, Claire wasn't sure which, nor did she care, the representatives of the local ranchers' association were positioned right behind the Holly Hills Elementary float in the procession. She'd spotted Tyler atop a gorgeous chestnut mare when they lined up near the warehouse. He'd touched the brim of his cowboy hat in acknowledgment, but they'd been unable to speak to each other.

Not that Claire knew what she would say. She knew what she wanted to say, but whether she'd have the courage to let the words pass her lips was still up in the air. For now, she could enjoy the sight of the lanky cowboy cutting a fine figure high in the saddle. She'd never shared George's weakness for a cowboy, but Tyler had always been the exception.

Shortly after breaking up an elbow-jabbing match between Johnny Baker and Caleb Stone, Claire noticed a toddler dart into the street beside their float, chasing bits of candy the students were tossing. The little one appeared oblivious to his surroundings, intent on collecting the sweet treats.

As the float rolled on, the boy trudged farther from the curb, his eyes intent on the candy treasure. Claire glanced back at the approaching riders. They were waving to the crowd and unlikely to see the little one so low to the ground. As her heart skipped a beat, Claire scoured the crowd for any sign of a parent who would pull the toddler back, but no one seemed to be paying him any mind.

Claire couldn't wait. She had to do something.

Jumping off the back of the float, Claire ran for the child and scooped him into her arms. A second later, a body pressed close against hers, pushing both her and the boy

toward the curb. The scent of horse leather and a familiar cologne hit her senses as Claire's knees hit the ground.

* * *

Tyler had been watching Claire for several blocks, having to remind himself to wave to the locals lining the parade route. The ponytail high on her head made him remember how she looked as a teen, when she and George would spend weekends at the ranch with Bug, laughing in the kitchen or painting each other's toenails while they hogged the TV.

He'd been the annoying little brother back then, but Claire would sneak him snacks when the others weren't watching. Or convince Bug to let him watch the scary movie with them. In high school, she'd helped with his homework and watched him break his first horse.

Claire had always been a part of his life. Within arm's reach, but still untouchable. And then he'd touched her and everything changed.

Somewhere around the halfway point of the parade, Tyler noticed Claire watching something along the side. She wasn't smiling or waving. He squinted to see her face and recognized concern etched around her hazel eyes.

Then she was leaping off the float. Tyler scanned the street to figure out what she was after, then he spotted her target. A small, blond toddler gathering candy into his pockets. He'd ventured far beyond what was safe. Looking for his parents, Tyler spotted a man and a woman searching the sidewalk behind the crowd. They looked frantic, and he had no doubt they were searching for this little boy.

They wouldn't see him over the spectators, and Tyler's fellow riders wouldn't see him either. Pulling his mount out to the side, Tyler dropped out of the saddle and hit

the street at a run. Claire reached the little one seconds before he did, but they were still too far into the street. With as much control as possible, he threw his weight behind Claire, wrapping her and the boy in his arms.

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Claire fell forward, but Tyler rolled to take most of the impact. Unfortunately, he took it on his bad shoulder. The yelp of pain was out before he could stop it. When he was able to catch his breath and sit up, Claire was soothing the crying child while casting concerned looks in his direction.

“His parents are behind the crowd,” he said through gritted teeth. “I saw them looking for him from up in the saddle.”

“Are you okay?” she asked, pressing the toddler’s head to her shoulder.

Tyler nodded. “I’ll be fine.” Though his physical therapist was going to have his ass. “Let’s get him back where he belongs.”

Several locals who’d seen them fall had arrived to help. That opened a hole in the crowd big enough for the boy’s parents to pass through. The mother was crying as she hugged the boy tight, while the father patted her on the back, his face ashen and stoic.

“I can’t thank you two enough,” he said, his jaw tight with suppressed emotion.

“No problem,” Claire said, brushing off her jeans. “I’m glad I spotted him in time.”

“You’re an angel,” the mom said before the whole family faded back into the crowd.

Tyler looked around to see Claire’s float was more than a block away, as were his fellow riders. A glance in the other direction revealed Ginger had stayed right where he’d left her, though a bit skittish with the crowd on one side and a convertible

carrying a waving pageant queen on the other.

“Come on,” he said to Claire, taking her by the hand. She stumbled behind him, and he pulled up short. “What’s wrong?”

“I hit my knees harder than I thought.” She rubbed one joint as she bent it a few times. “I don’t think there’s any real damage, but it hurts like crazy.”

Without another word, Tyler swung her up into his arms and carried her over to Ginger. Ignoring her protest, he set her gently back on her feet and said, “I’m going to toss you up, but I don’t want you to fall off the other side.”

Claire rolled her eyes. “I’ve been on a horse before, Tyler. But you don’t have to do this.”

“There’s a marching band coming fast, and I’m not sure how much longer Ginger is going to be patient. You want to walk the rest of this parade?”

As if seeing his point, Claire nodded and placed her left foot in his cupped hands. Seconds later, he was in the saddle behind her as they scrambled along the side, keeping a close eye on the parade watchers. When they caught up to the riders, he expected her to demand he put her down.

But she didn’t. Instead, she settled into him, clearly in no hurry to put distance between them. Which put a smile on Tyler’s face, and brought certain parts of his anatomy to the party. He shifted, trying to hide the evidence. If Claire noticed, she didn’t make a move to alter the situation.

And Tyler was willing to endure a little discomfort in the saddle if it meant keeping Claire in his arms. But the chance didn’t last long. The parade ended within a few blocks, and as the line filtered into the warehouse parking lot, Tyler edged Ginger

close to the back of Claire's float. Swinging a leg over the horse's head, she slid onto the flatbed.

The kids crowded around her instantly, all talking over one another. All except Victoria, who was more interested in petting Ginger than the brave exploits of her teacher.

"I'll see you at the barbeque tonight?" he asked over the din.

Claire nodded, smiled, and then gave the children her attention. Tyler was still smiling when he turned Ginger toward her trailer in the back corner of the lot.

Chapter Seven

Countless garments lay scattered across Claire's bed where she'd tossed them. Five outfits in and she was still debating. For once, she was going to show off her new figure. The one she currently sported, not the one her brain saw in the mirror. If only her brain would listen.

The first skirt was too short. The second top was too tight in the arms. The third try, a dress, made her hips look big, and by the fifth she was back to jeans and a sweater.

But Claire was determined. She pulled out a dress she'd bought a month before but had not had the courage to wear in public. After pulling up the zipper, which took some contortionist-like moves, she turned to the mirror with her eyes closed.

"This is not the body you used to have," she said. "This is your new body. Just as good, but smaller. So stop being critical and be nice to yourself."

Upon opening her eyes, Claire couldn't believe it. She liked what she saw. The emerald green was perfect for her pale complexion and red hair. It even made her

eyes look darker. The strategically placed pleats along the front flattered her hips, and the simple jersey material made it the right level of dressy-casual for a classy barbeque.

Even her breasts looked moderately understated behind the cowl neckline.

Something told Claire she didn't need this dress to catch Tyler Holly's eye. That he'd always seen her as beautiful. He'd practically said as much the night before at the diner. No, she wasn't wearing this dress for Tyler.

She was wearing it for herself.

And now that she was about to walk out of the shadows into the milling crowd gathered for the feast, Claire called on all the strength she'd mustered in front of that mirror. Her black suede knee boots carried her into the expansive backyard of the Double H Ranch as she scanned the crowd for her two best friends.

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George was bringing Reed McCormick as her date, which Claire took as a good sign. If anyone could break through the high walls behind which Georgia Hightower hid, it was Reed. Though she did worry he might find himself buried under the rubble and Georgia long gone before he knew what hit him.

Claire reached the edge of the patio before she spotted Mary Catherine, but before she could gain her friend's attention, the familiar and unwelcome scent of Chanel No°5 accosted her.

"Please tell me you brought a date," her mother hissed, pasting on a fake smile and waving to someone she knew.

"No," Claire said. "I didn't. I don't remember seeing the words date required on the invitation."

"If you hadn't made such a fool of yourself last night, you might not look so pathetic now."

Did her mother really call her pathetic? "I'm not—"

"I don't know why you bothered to lose weight if you were going to chase off every eligible man I find for you." Raising her wineglass to her lips, she added, "Grandchildren don't grow on trees, missy. At the rate you're going, I'll be too old to enjoy them by the time you pop one out."

Enjoy them? She meant torture them.

“If I marry, it will be on my terms to the man of my choosing.” Claire ignored her mother’s gasp of disapproval. “And if I have children, they’ll know they’re loved unconditionally no matter their size, their choice of career, or their lack of political aspirations. I only wish someone had done that much for me.”

The stunned look on her mother’s face bolstered Claire’s spirits at the same time the urge hit to apologize. But she would not take back the words. She’d wanted to say them for most of her life, and the cold woman before her needed to hear them.

“Your father and I have given you every possible privilege a child could ask for, and this is how you repay us?” Claire should have known her mother would gladly pick up the gauntlet she’d just dropped. “If you want to die bitter and alone, surrounded by cats and pretending all those ungrateful little brats you teach will remember you, then go ahead. But don’t ever say I didn’t try to help you.”

So much for making her mother hear her. Claire felt as if she’d been slapped, and then stabbed in the gut. Without so much as a blink, as if she hadn’t lacerated her own child, Sylvia Campbell strolled off with a smile on her face, chiming a greeting to one of her country club friends. And Claire headed for the bar.

* * *

Tyler had put on his best shirt, the red one with the pearl snaps, along with his newest pair of Wranglers for the big barbeque. Whiffs of smoking brisket had carried on the air all the way to his front porch, which had his mouth watering for the last hour.

The Double H Ranch holiday shindig was a big event every Christmas, but this one was special. This was a big night for Bug, and whether Tyler approved of her choice or not, he would be there for her. Brad Hampton wasn’t somebody Tyler wanted for a brother, but if he was the man Mary Catherine wanted to marry, then he was welcome to the family.

But Tyler had another reason for wanting to look his best. And she was standing by the bar looking better than anything he'd ever imagined in his dreams. Her red hair hung loose over her shoulders, and the dark-green dress made her pale skin glow in the torchlight. As he drew closer, Tyler saw the look in her eyes.

She looked miserable.

“How’s the local hero doing tonight?” he asked, hoping to make her smile. Claire hadn’t seen him approach and started at the sound of his voice in her ear. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“That’s okay,” she said. “I was distracted, wallowing in my own little world. Did you say hero?”

“Yeah. You saved that little boy.”

She blushed. “I didn’t keep him from falling off a cliff or anything.”

“No, but he could have gotten trampled by the horses if you hadn’t done something.”

She lifted an auburn brow. “You did something, too. I’m guessing you had the same reaction I did, but how did you see him?”

Tyler considered making something up but went with the truth. “I was watching you, then followed your gaze and spotted the munchkin in the street. It didn’t take much to guess the two people looking frantic behind the crowd were looking for him.”

“You were watching me?”

“Yeah,” he said, opting for evasion. “How are your knees? I’d meant to take the brunt of the hit, but momentum won out.”

“They’re fine,” she said, flexing them as if to prove her recovery, then falling silent.

Before Tyler could keep the conversation going, he spotted Reed McCormick with Georgia at the other bar across the yard. Cooter looked to be talking their ear off as Reed nodded in Tyler’s direction. Seconds later, the vet disappeared with his date in the direction of the old barn. He sure hoped the man knew what he was doing.

He turned back to Claire in time to see her toss back half a glass of wine in one swallow.

“Whoa,” Tyler said, steadying her as she swayed. “How many of those have you had?”

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“Not nearly enough.” Claire wiped her mouth on the sleeve of her dress.

“Want to talk about it?” Something told him the motivation for the alcohol was likely the same as what had sent her in search of pie the night before.

Blinking, Claire seemed to be pondering his question. “You know what I want? I want to get out of here.”

Tyler tipped his head. “You mean leave the party?”

“Yes,” she said with a nod. “Leave the party. The sooner the better.”

Torn between family duty and giving Claire what she wanted, Tyler hesitated. “I think there’s going to be a toast to Bug and Brad soon. We probably shouldn’t miss that.”

“A toast to a doomed marriage. That’s pointless.”

Claire spoke loud enough for fellow partygoers to hear, gaining them some curious stares.

“Maybe cutting out is a good idea.” Taking Claire by the hand, Tyler pulled her around the back of the bar, where he grabbed what was left of a six-pack of Lone Star and stepped through the crowd into the open air.

Pulling the tiny redhead around the side of the house, Tyler stopped next to a dark-green four-wheeler.

“Where are we going?” Claire asked.

“My place,” Tyler said, waiting for her reaction. If she said no, he’d offer something else. Take her to town, or even take her home. He held his breath, hoping she wouldn’t ask to go home.

“I like that idea,” she said, a seductive grin curling her lips. The look hit him in the chest.

Hard.

Handing her the beers, Tyler climb aboard. “You sure you’re okay to hold on?”

Hiking up her dress, Claire threw a black suede boot over the vehicle and clamped her arms around his waist. “Is this good?” she asked, pressing her breasts against his back.

Instead of answering, Tyler put the machine in motion. The quicker they reached his cabin, the better.

* * *

Claire nearly lost her nerve by the time they parked in front of Tyler’s cabin, but the quick beating of his heart beneath her hand gave her courage. Her escort proved himself a gentleman once they made their destination by turning his back so she could dismount the four-wheeler without flashing him the pretty underwear she’d worn.

Which had been a last-minute decision. Just in case. And the case was escorting her to his front door.

Though she'd wanted to grab his attention, this night hadn't been about seducing Tyler into another one-night stand. She needed to let him know how she felt, and make sure she'd understood him right at the diner. If so, then they'd wasted too much time already.

Once Claire was on her feet, Tyler gave her a tentative smile, took the beers, then offered his hand. She filled it with her own, reveling in his warm grip around her fingers. At his front door, he stopped.

"I need to warn you about something."

By all that was holy, Claire prayed there wasn't another woman inside. "Okay."

"I wasn't expecting company."

Claire tensed. "Okay."

"So I haven't straightened up in a while."

Air whooshed out of her lungs. "Oh, thank goodness," she said.

Tyler laughed. "What did you think I was going to say?"

Telling the truth was out of the question. "I was afraid you had a... snake in there. Or something."

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“Horses and dogs are more my thing, and I’m not home often enough to keep a dog out here.”

“Then we’re good.” Though Claire prepared herself to step inside a filthy bachelor pad, she exhaled with a smile. “I’m sure it’s not that bad.”

Silently girding her loins, she let Tyler open the door, then preceded him in, happy he wouldn’t be able to see her first reaction. And then her mouth fell open.

The place was spotless.

“You’re a real funny guy, Mr. Holly.” Claire moved into the cabin. “If you ever come to my place, I’m going to need several days’ warning so I can clean.”

“Is that an invitation?” he asked, closing the door behind them, then carrying the beers over to a counter that ran between the living room and kitchen.

Talk about a weighted question. Claire would be more than happy if Tyler became a frequent visitor at her place, but she needed to reach more solid ground before admitting so.

“How long have you been out here?” she asked, ignoring his question. For now.

“Four years.” Tyler popped the tops off two beers and passed one her way. “After college I knew I’d come back to the ranch but living up in the house with Dad and Marilyn would have made me nuts.”

“I’m guessing Marilyn was more of a problem than your dad.”

Tyler nodded. “You guess right.” He leaned on the edge of the counter and crossed his ankles as he smiled at her. The smile sent a herd of wild horses galloping through Claire’s midsection, making her wish she had the courage to do what Georgia would do.

To saunter up to the counter, press herself against the cowboy watching her, and show him exactly what she wanted. But Claire had been born without the brazen gene.

After removing his hat and flipping it over to rest top down on the Formica, Tyler ran a hand through his short, sandy hair. “So what got you so riled up tonight? You downed that wine like a woman on a mission to drown a problem.”

The quickness with which Claire thought how nice it would be to drown her mother was probably an indication she should slow down on the drinking. Looking to the couch, Claire said, “Is it okay if I sit down?”

Tyler nearly choked on his sip of beer. “Of course,” he said, his face turning red. “I should have offered already.”

Claire had never thought much about a cowboy wearing a blush but found it incredibly sexy. Settling onto brown leather, she set her bottle on the coffee table and waited for Tyler to join her. Instead of sitting on the sofa, he took the chair to her left.

She sighed, her confidence faltering. “The wine guzzling was brought on by a run-in with my mother. Which reminds me, I’m sorry about venting about her the other night. You shouldn’t have to listen to my problems.”

“I don’t mind,” Tyler said, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. “I don’t

mind at all.”

The intensity in his green eyes put a damper on her doubts. Mustering all the courage she could find, Claire asked, “Did you mean all that stuff you said at the diner?”

Swallowing hard, sending his Adam’s apple bobbing, Tyler nodded. “Every word.”

A warmth started in the vicinity of Claire’s heart and spread through her extremities. Her eyes dropped to her hands, where her fingers toyed with the hem of her dress. “Then I have some things to say to you, too.”

“You don’t have to—” Tyler started, but Claire interrupted him.

“Yes, I do. I think it’s about time we talk about this.”

Tyler rubbed his palms along his thighs and nodded but held his tongue.

Closing her eyes, Claire blurted, “I feel the exact same way.”

She waited for him to say something, but silence loomed like a suffocating fog in the air. Opening one eye, she glanced to the left to see his reaction. Her breath whooshed out at the sight of his grin. But she had to be sure. “Do you understand what I mean?”

“I hope so,” Tyler continued to grin. “But maybe you should explain a bit, so I’m sure.”

Claire dropped the dress hem and crossed her arms over her thighs. “I’ve never regretted the night we spent together. In fact, that was the most special night of my life.”

“But you left,” Tyler said, his voice barely above a whisper. “No note. No nothing.”

Shaking her head, Claire said, “I thought you only had sex with me because you’d been drinking. Pity sex for your sister’s chubby best friend. The idea of you looking at me with regret that next morning, trying to figure out how to get rid of me, was more than I could stand.” She shrugged. “So I left, sparing us both the embarrassment.”

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Tyler didn't respond right away. Instead, he looked up to the ceiling, then back down to the coffee table. Then, without warning, he joined Claire on the couch, taking her hands in his. The contact felt like a lifeline.

"I've been half in love with you for probably half my life," he said, taking Claire by surprise. "You were always beautiful. Back in high school as much as you are now." With the grin back in place, he added, "When I saw you in that dress tonight, you took my breath away."

If Claire could have pinched herself in that moment, she would have. But Tyler held fast to her hands.

"I thought you were the one who regretted that night," he said. "Falling into bed with your friend's baby brother after too much alcohol. Then having to see me on all those visits and school breaks, wishing that night had never happened."

Two distinct feelings warred in Claire's mind. Frustration and happiness. She'd missed so much due to youth and insecurities, but tonight she had the chance to grab hold of a dream. Lifting a hand to Tyler's cheek, trailing a gentle finger along the jagged scar that only served to make him more beautiful, she vowed not to make the same mistake again.

"Seeing you was the best part of those visits," she whispered. "If I could, I'd go back in time and stay in that bed with you." Her thumb rubbed across his lower lip. "But I can't change the past. Maybe we could try again in the present. Do you still want me in your bed, Tyler?"

The look in his green eyes threatened to bring her to tears. “Always,” he said. “Always, Claire.”

Chapter Eight

Tyler feared he'd wake up to find the party hadn't started yet. That he'd only dreamed of finding Claire looking beautiful near the bar and bringing her home with him. That a dream he'd had a million times was simply replaying in his mind, and soon the sound of his alarm would jar him awake, sending the soft body beneath him fading into the ether.

But then his hand slid along her warm thigh and Claire moaned into his mouth, and Tyler knew this couldn't be a dream. This was better than any dream he'd managed to conjure.

“I can't believe we've been missing this for so long,” Claire murmured while trailing wet kisses along his jawline. “We're such idiots.”

He couldn't help but laugh, even as she shifted to make more room for him on the sofa, which sent his hand higher to brush against soft lace. His temperature spiked. “I'm definitely an idiot,” he agreed, “but right now, I'm the luckiest idiot I know.”

Claire giggled and tucked her head under his chin. Then she kissed his neck and purred. “God, you taste good.” His thigh pressed between her legs, and she ground against him. “So good.”

The blood raged through Tyler's body, all headed for the same place, which was not his head. At least not the one that held up his cowboy hat. If she kept driving him crazy like this, Claire would have to carry the weight of the conversation.

Though Tyler hoped she wasn't much interested in conversation for the next little

while.

To make sure, he took her mouth for another hot kiss, tasting red wine, cold beer, and hot woman. As her arms snaked around his neck, Claire pulled him closer, her tongue meeting his in a dance as old as time. She gave and demanded in equal measure.

She may have been a sweet-natured school teacher, but tonight she was all sensual woman. And Tyler was more than happy to give her anything she wanted.

As if she could read his thoughts, Claire broke the kiss and said, "I want to see you."

"You can see me anytime you want," Tyler answered, trailing his lips down her neck.

"No," she said, pushing on his shoulder until he met her eye. "I want to see you." One pearl snap clicked open. "I want to look at you." Unable to do more than nod, Tyler let her undo another snap. "All of you."

He'd never stripped for a woman before, but for Claire, he'd drop to his birthday suit and run around the cabin if she asked. Raising up on his knees, Tyler braced his arms on each side of her, letting her open his shirt the rest of the way down. When she brushed warm hands over his chest, he locked his elbows to keep from dropping.

When her nails danced along his rib cage, Tyler's jaw clenched. She was trying to kill him.

And when one finger slid behind his belt buckle, his whole body jerked.

"Did I hurt you?" she asked, a knowing lilt in her voice. Claire was enjoying torturing him. Which made him wonder if he'd survive the night.

"Do I get to see you, too?" he asked, opting to turn the tables and show his sexy

redhead she wasn't the only one who was enjoying this game.

A moment's hesitation shone in her hazel eyes. Tyler dropped low to place a kiss on her abdomen. "You're beautiful, Claire. You always have been. Don't ever doubt that."

She nodded, a tiny smile sending one side of her mouth higher than the other. "You make me want to believe that."

"Good," he said, dropping a hard kiss on her mouth. "It's true."

"Okay," she said, and the smile grew naughtier. "But you first."

"Yes, ma'am."

* * *

Any sense of play went out of Claire's head the moment Tyler rose above her and peeled off his shirt. Tan skin shifted over defined muscle, and a dusting of light-brown hair created a trail down along flat abs to disappear behind the shiny silver belt buckle.

Her mouth went as dry as a West Texas field in August, while her body felt as if she'd walked into a brush fire. Tyler Holly was the most beautiful man Claire had ever seen. He'd been long and lean the last time they'd been together, a boy with potential he'd yet to reach. But now.

Oh my, Claire thought.

Tyler seemed taller from her vantage point, flat on her back on the couch, and his narrow hips made her brain a little fuzzy. But it was the raw sense of power that took her breath. Years of fighting to keep his seat on a bull had turned Tyler's body into a fine-tuned machine. One Claire was more than ready to ride.

Until she noticed the flinch when the shirt came off his left arm.

"Are you okay?" Claire asked, sitting up and then hopping onto her knees on the couch. "I keep forgetting about your shoulder. You look so perfect, it's hard to believe there's an injury under..." She waved a hand in front of his chest. "Under all that."

Tyler stepped close and slid his arms around her back. "Did you say I look perfect?"

he asked, nuzzling her ear lobe. “Are you sure you’re talking to the right guy?”

He was trying to distract her. Which was working. “You are perfect,” she breathed, melting at the feel of his warm breath on her neck. “But I don’t want to do anything that will hurt you.”

Pulling back, he locked green eyes on hers, and the grin disappeared. “The only thing that would hurt me right now would be to let you go, Claire.”

Sliding her hands into his hair, she sighed. “Then don’t do that, Tyler. Don’t ever do that.”

A second later, Claire found herself pressed against Tyler’s chest as he carried her through the cabin. “What are you doing?”

“I’m not making love to you on an old couch. You deserve better than that.”

He said making love, not having sex. A distinction Claire hadn’t given much thought but realized she should have. In her relatively short adult life, she’d had sex a handful of times. But she’d only ever made love with Tyler.

And by the time he dropped her to her feet and pressed her back against one of the four posts surrounding his bed, Claire knew this cowboy was the only man with whom she’d ever make love.

Kissing Tyler was like taking a drug, and she couldn’t have said how long she’d been indulging when they finally came up for air. They were as close as two people could be with their clothes on.

“I think it’s your turn now, Claire,” Tyler said, pressing her hair behind her ears before cradling her cheeks. “How about it? Will you let me look at you?”

Claire took in her surroundings, noticing the only light in the room came from the full moon shining through the windows flanking the bed. But even that felt like too much.

As if reading her mind, Tyler said, “You’re beautiful, remember? I’ll keep telling you that as long as I have breath in my body, but you need to feel it for yourself.” Taking her hand, he pulled her the few feet to stand before his closet door. Pulling her in front of him, Tyler dropped his chin on her shoulder as they both stared into the full-length mirror before them.

“What do you see?” he asked, and Claire had never wanted to hide more than she did in that moment. But Tyler was pressed against her back, his arms wrapped around her, giving her the strength she needed to look, really look, at herself.

“I see a short woman with wide hips,” she said.

Tyler squeezed. “Try again.”

With a deep breath, Claire did as ordered. The dress did make her hips look a little smaller. And her breasts. Well, they were big no matter what she wore, but they balanced out her hips, giving her an hourglass figure. Which was kind of sexy. She definitely had curves, but they were womanly, not lumpy as she’d always thought of herself.

“You’re getting it,” Tyler said. “I can see it in your eyes.”

And then she caught his gaze in the mirror, and for a split second, saw herself the way Tyler did. A tear turned her reflection watery. “I’ve never liked looking at myself before.”

“But you do now,” Tyler said, his voice deeper, vibrating along her spine as he lowered the zipper down the back of her dress. “You see what I see.”

Claire could do little more than nod as he slid the dress over her shoulders and down her arms. When the silky material landed in a puddle at her feet, Tyler ran his hands over her hips, then across her abdomen. Every touch bringing the beautiful figure in the mirror into sharper focus.

Claire didn't only feel beautiful, she felt sexy and hot and more aroused than she'd ever been in her life. Tyler was giving her a gift. Giving Claire herself. And he deserved to be rewarded.

Turning, Claire reached for Tyler's belt buckle at the same moment she took his lips with her own. Callused hands settled on lace, and the rest of the world disappeared. What could have been seconds or hours later, Claire found herself pressed between cool sheets and a hot cowboy with nothing between them but heat and moonlight.

When he took her nipple between his teeth, Claire moaned. When he slid a hand between her thighs, she bucked and bit his bottom lip. What began as a rush of limbs and sweat and nails digging into flesh, turned slow and languorous once they were skin to skin.

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Claire had never felt worshipped before, but as Tyler gave every inch of her body his thorough attention, she became more and more aware of how sexy he made her feel. Something as simple as a soft kiss dropped on the inside of her knee was like a revelation. When his tongue slid along her collarbone, she melted deeper into the mattress.

And when he slid a hand between her thighs, she bucked against him and pleaded, but the words were garbled and incoherent.

“I’ll give you anything you want,” Tyler said, pressing one finger against her most sensitive spot.

Claire cried out, too far gone to be concerned or embarrassed by her response. Tyler took her mouth in a searing kiss, and all she could think was that she wanted to give as much as he was. Following her instincts, she trailed a hand along his rib cage, then reached between them to take him in her grip.

Now it was Tyler who bucked in response. His shiver gave Claire a sense of power. She smiled against his lips and said, “I want everything, Tyler.”

With a clenched jaw, and eyes so dark they were nearly black, the man pressed against her turned serious. “I’ve been waiting so long for this.”

“I’m here now,” she said, trying to communicate with her body everything she was feeling inside. Opening for him, Claire pulled Tyler closer. “Love me, Tyler.”

“My pleasure,” Tyler responded, reaching for something over Claire’s shoulder.

Within seconds the condom was in place, and he was back to hovering above her, kissing her senseless until she worried she would die waiting for him to take her.

And then he did. In one gentle motion, Tyler buried himself to the hilt, stealing Claire's breath as her body stretched to accommodate him. He paused long enough for her to adjust, then began the motion again, picking up the pace with every stroke.

Claire couldn't have said how long the sweet torture lasted, she only knew nothing had ever felt this good, this right. Like a drowning woman struggling to survive, she held tight to Tyler as he sent her over the edge, then groaned out his own shuddering orgasm seconds later.

When Claire once again became conscious of something other than the waves of pleasure coursing through her limbs, she and Tyler were shaking in each other's arms. She would never forget this moment and immediately longed to repeat it.

The afterglow was filled with soft words and shared laughter before reality wedged its way into their private sanctuary.

"We have to get back to the party, don't we?" Claire asked, as Tyler dropped kisses across the top of one breast.

"I suppose we do," he said, making no move to leave the bed.

Claire nudged him under the chin until he met her eye. Trailing a finger over the scar that marred his perfect cheek, she asked, "Does this still hurt?"

"Nah," he said, smiling with complete satisfaction in his eyes. "It's ugly is all."

"Don't say that," she scolded, rising onto her elbow. "You were beautiful before the accident, and you're still beautiful to me."

Turning to place a kiss in her palm, Tyler rubbed his thumb along the outside of Claire's breast, making it difficult to remember they needed to get dressed.

"I never thought I'd like being called beautiful, but I like it a lot when you say it."

"Good," she said, dropping a quick kiss on his forehead. "Now help me find my underthings before someone from the party comes looking for us."

To Claire's surprise and enjoyment, getting dressed took another twenty minutes, and was the most fun she'd ever had putting her clothes on. Who knew helping a cowboy slide into his Wranglers could be as much fun as getting him out of them?

Chapter Nine

Claire wasn't a bit ashamed of what she and Tyler had been enjoying while everyone else enjoyed the barbeque, but that didn't mean she wanted to draw attention to their disappearance. Tyler parked the four-wheeler where they'd found it, gave her a long, panty-melting kiss, then sent Claire back to the party, agreeing to stay behind for at least five minutes so they didn't appear to return together.

"Where have you been?" MC asked, surprising Claire as she stepped onto the patio.

"Um..." Claire hedged. "I went for a walk."

"With Tyler?" George asked.

"What?" MC echoed. "You were with Tyler?"

"Is this a party or an inquisition?" Claire wasn't ready to share her time with Tyler. Not yet. It was too new and fragile. And theirs. For now.

Mary Catherine huffed. “I needed you for the toast.”

“There was a toast?” Claire hadn’t received any instructions about writing up a toast for the barbeque. “If I’d known you expected me to give one, I’d have been here.”

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“So why weren’t you?”

She had no idea what had gotten into her friend, but Claire didn’t appreciate the flash of anger aimed her way. Then she caught a look at MC’s eyes in the torchlights. She looked as if she’d been crying.

“I had a fight with my mother and needed some air. Why were you crying?”

“Don’t be silly,” MC said, looking anywhere but at her two best friends. The women who knew her better maybe than she knew herself.

“It was Jax, wasn’t it?” George asked, drawing a gasp of surprise from Claire.

“Jax was here?” Jax Tipton had been MC’s moment of rebellion in high school, and if her dad and Marilyn hadn’t stopped them, they might be a married couple today. So this was the reason George had been so vocal about her not marrying Brad.

If Jax put that look in MC’s eyes, she wasn’t over him.

“He was,” MC said, her voice low and gravelly. “We ran into each other in the house.”

“You mean you followed him into the house.” George crossed her arms. “What happened?”

MC bit her bottom lip as she snagged a flute of champagne off a passing tray.

“Nothing.”

“Liar,” Georgia said.

“Lighten up, George,” Claire scolded, noticing the flute shaking in MC’s grasp. “How far did it go?” she asked gently.

“Far enough for me to know I’m making the right choice.”

There was no conviction behind the words. No confidence or even a hint of happiness. If anything, MC sounded more confused than ever. Claire instantly felt bad for not being here for the toast. And for not paying more attention to what was going on in her friend’s head.

And heart.

“We’re here to support you, no matter what choice you make,” Claire said, determined to let MC know she could still turn this ship around.

“Yeah,” George said, nudging MC with her shoulder. “We’re here. No matter what boneheaded thing you pull next.”

That gained a weak smile from the future bride, who still looked miserable, but a bit relieved. “Marrying Brad isn’t boneheaded,” she defended.

“Who said it is?” George asked, shooting for innocent and missing by a long shot.

As the women laughed softly together, Reed and Tyler joined them. “Hey,” Tyler said, his eyes lingering on Claire in a way that sent her temperature spiking.

“Hey yourself,” MC answered. “Where’ve you been?”

Tyler shrugged. “Around.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he answered, smartly diverting his gaze from Claire. “I needed something at the cabin so I took the four-wheeler home to get it.”

“I bet you did,” George said, innuendo dripping from her voice.

“Did you and Reed have a nice time at the barn?” he asked, wiping the grin off Georgia’s face.

“You and Reed went to the barn?” Claire asked. She hoped Georgia wasn’t toying with Reed. He really was a good guy.

Reed turned a shade of red that matched Tyler’s shirt as Georgia said, “You’re still a little shit, Tyler.”

Tension sparked for several seconds before MC said, “This might be the most interesting barbeque this ranch has seen in years.” Taking Reed by the arm, MC said, “Let’s eat, everyone.”

The three left behind exchanged knowing glances until George said, “You heard her, y’all. Let’s eat.”

* * *

Tyler had worn a permanent smile for the last four days. Thanks to Claire being off for Christmas break, they'd spent every free moment together. Reminiscing about the past, and finding their way in the present, while the future loomed heavy above their heads.

Any discussion about Tyler returning to the riding arena had been avoided. Which was chickenshit on his part, but Tyler didn't want anything to come between them when they were finally finding something real. With time, Claire would see what riding meant to him. She'd come to understand that he couldn't give it up and would never ask him to.

But they had time to get there. Tyler wouldn't be able to ride until spring at the earliest. Closer to summer if his therapist had her way. By then, they'd be on firmer ground. Four days meant whatever they were building was still fragile. No sense in breaking it before they were out of the chute.

As he parked his truck in front of the Campbell house, one of the few Victorians in town, Tyler took a deep breath and sent up a quick prayer that this night would go well. He doubted Claire's mother would see her daughter pairing up with a Holly as a good thing. In fact, Claire had warned him to be ready for the worst. But she'd also promised they would stand together, and her mother's snooty opinions wouldn't change anything.

Still, Tyler would take climbing onto an angry bull over facing Sylvia Campbell on her best day. If she ever had one.

Wooden floorboards creaked as Tyler crossed the wide, covered porch to reach the entrance. When he failed to locate a doorbell button, he lifted the heavy knocker in the middle of the door. From the other side he heard Claire's muffled voice yell "I got it!" along with what sounded like running footsteps. The door flew open and a second later closed again, shutting Claire out on the porch with him.

She pulled him down into a long, hot kiss without saying so much as hello. As far as greetings went, this kind suited Tyler just fine.

"Are you ready for this?" Claire asked after abruptly breaking the kiss.

Tyler was too dazed to understand the question. "Ready?" he said.

"She's in a good mood," Claire said, taking his hand in her own and reaching for the doorknob. "As soon as I told her I was bringing a man to dinner, she went on her best behavior. She hasn't even insulted me in the last half hour."

Claire's excitement over not being insulted by her mother made Tyler's stomach tighten even more. He took his share of dings from Marilyn, but his stepmother was an amateur compared to the Campbell matriarch.

"This is a smaller gathering, thank goodness," Claire said, taking Tyler's jacket and hanging it over the coatrack to the left of the front door. "And the others aren't scheduled to arrive for fifteen minutes or so. Best to get the initial announcement out of the way before she has an audience."

Tyler felt as if they were embarking on a military maneuver once again. Claire was talking fast enough to make it difficult to keep up, and her eyes kept darting around the corner as if looking for snipers.

"Claire," he said, tugging her toward him. "Take a breath, darling. You're going to

give us both a heart attack here.” Her mouth clamped shut, but her eyes continued to scout. “Come on now.” Tyler held her chin between his thumb and forefinger. “We’re a team, right? It’s two against one. How bad could she be?”

Hazel eyes went wide. “I would tell you, but you probably won’t believe me. She’ll say absolutely anything. She’s mean, Tyler. If you weren’t so important to me, I’d never make you go through this.”

That sounded a bit backward, but Tyler understood. He didn’t want a fling with Claire, he wanted forever. And that meant facing the parents. He’d face hungry lions if it meant having a life with this woman.

“Then let’s get this over with.”

Hand in hand, Tyler let Claire lead him through a richly decorated living room and under an arching doorway into the fanciest dinner setup he’d ever seen. Everything was white and sterile, with splashes of green foliage holding down large pots in the corners. A burst of color exploded from the center of the table where an elaborate flower arrangement sat, flanked by heavy candlesticks on either side.

Marilyn definitely had nothing on the first lady of Holly Hills.

“Mom,” Claire said, squeezing Tyler’s hand tight enough to cut off blood flow to his fingers. “Tyler is here.”

Sylvia Campbell’s head shot up so quickly, Tyler feared it might fly right off. Blue eyes narrowed at the same time coral-colored lips flattened into a straight line.

“Why is he here?” she asked, her voice low and unfriendly.

“He’s my date,” Claire answered. “I told you I was bringing someone to dinner.”

Mrs. Campbell crossed her slender arms while her body remained rigid. “Is this a joke, Claire?”

The tiny redhead held her ground, but her grip grew tighter. “Tyler and I are together, Mother. He’s here as my guest, and I would appreciate it if you’d be a little nicer.”

“Nicer?” the woman exploded. “You cannot be serious.”

“Mother, please.”

“He’s a Holly,” her mother said, spewing his name as if it were poison on her tongue.

“Yes, he is,” Claire said, lifting her chin and making Tyler proud. “Which is better than being a Campbell right now. If you don’t want Tyler here, then we’ll both leave.”

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“You will not choose a dirty cowboy over your family.”

“The hell I won’t,” Claire said, dragging Tyler back through the living room.

“What are you going to do, Claire?” her mother asked, following them into the foyer.

“Marry him? And then what?”

“We haven’t gotten that far, Mother,” she said, handing Tyler his jacket, then reaching for her own. “But if we do, don’t worry. I won’t involve you in it in any way.”

“How is he going to take care of you? He rides bulls for a living, for heaven’s sake.”

“I can take care of your daughter just fine, Mrs. Campbell.” Tyler had played a bystander in this confrontation long enough.

“And what happens the next time you get thrown off a bull?” she asked, waving a hand in the air. “When you break your neck this time? Is my daughter supposed to waste her life taking care of a vegetable?”

“Mother, how could you say that? And it’s not as if he’s going to ride bulls forever,” Claire said, shoving an arm into the sleeve of her coat. “He’ll get a respectable job eventually, and we’ll be fine.”

Tyler froze, feeling as if he’d taken a horn to the chest. A respectable job? So riding bulls, his life’s passion, wasn’t respectable?

Silence loomed as Claire covered her mouth and turned wide eyes his way. “Tyler, I didn’t—”

“I’d better go,” he said, ignoring the older woman’s smug expression as she opened the door for him.

“Wait,” Claire yelled, grabbing his left arm. When she yanked, Tyler winced, hating the weakness that gave weight to her mother’s accusation. “I’m so sorry. Please, let me explain.”

Tyler wasn’t interested in explanations. She’d made her feelings clear. If she couldn’t respect what he did, then she couldn’t respect him. There was no future for them if Claire was only biding her time until Tyler found something else to do with his life. Until he gave up what he loved.

“This was a mistake,” he said, stomping down the porch steps. “Better we know now than later.”

“No,” Claire cried. “We’re not a mistake. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Tyler stopped and turned fast enough to force Claire to stop on the bottom step.

“But you did.” He let his words sink in and watched her face fall. Then he climbed into his truck and left.

* * *

Claire couldn’t breathe. Why had those words tumbled off her lips? Why had she said such a horrible thing? When Tyler turned on her, she saw the anger in his eyes. But it was the hurt lingering deeper that did her in. She’d done that.

Shattered the most precious thing she'd ever found.

“What’s going on out here?” her father asked, stepping onto the porch behind her.

“Just taking out the trash,” her mother said, sending Claire spinning in her direction.

“Tyler Holly is a better human being than you will ever be!” she screamed, tears flowing freely down her cheeks. Anger, guilt, and fear pulsed until Claire could hear little over the buzzing in her ears. “I never should have brought him anywhere near you.”

“You’re the one who drove him away, missy.”

“That’s enough.” Richard Campbell turned on his wife. “Leave her alone.”

Chapter Ten

Sufficiently silenced, Claire’s mother disappeared into the house. Her father became a watery silhouette against the light pouring through the front door.

“Are you all right, honey?”

Claire shook her head. “No,” she said. “Nothing is all right.” Reaching the top step, she asked, “Why does she have to be so hateful?” But she knew her mother was right about one thing. It was Claire’s words that sent Tyler away. Dropping to the wooden planks beneath her feet, Claire dropped her head into her hands. “How could I say something so horrible?”

Taking a seat beside her, Claire’s father put an arm awkwardly around his daughter’s shoulders. “There, there now. It can’t be that bad.”

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She leaned forward to rest against his chest. Shaking her head from side to side, Claire said, "I don't know how to fix this, Daddy. I don't know what to do."

Lifting her chin with one finger until Claire was staring into hazel eyes that matched her own, he said, "Do you love him?"

Claire nodded, jerking on a hiccup.

"And does he love you?"

"He might have, but I ruined it."

"Nonsense." Pulling her into a hug, he added, "There's always hope."

She wanted to believe her father was right. That Tyler would let her explain that she didn't mean what she said. Yes, the thought of him getting back on a bull scared her to death, but he'd told her once he couldn't give it up. And she would never ask him to.

He needed to know that. To hear her say that whatever he chose to do, she'd be there to support him one hundred percent.

"I need to go after him," Claire said, pushing out of her father's arms. "I have to make him understand."

"Give him some time," he said. "If I heard right, you punched a hole in his ego. A man's ego is a sensitive thing, though if you ever tell anyone I said that, I'll deny it."

A soothing hand squeezed Claire's. "Let him sulk for tonight, then he'll be more likely to listen tomorrow."

Claire swiped the tears away. "You really think so?"

"I do," he said, tapping the end of her nose the way he had when she was a little girl. "And if he doesn't come around, then he doesn't deserve you."

It was more likely that Claire didn't deserve Tyler, but before she could say so, a black BMW pulled into the winding drive.

"I'd better go," she said, rising to her feet with her father's help. "Mom can't possibly expect me to stay now."

"I'll take care of your mother. That's something I should have done a long time ago."

"I don't know why she doesn't like me." Claire had never talked to her father about the tenuous relationship she shared with her mother. He'd always seemed to turn a blind eye, as if his only job was to tweak her nose and sneak her candy now and then, which he'd done often throughout Claire's childhood.

"Your mother loves you," he said. "In her own way. But she doesn't know how to let you go."

"Let me go?" Claire snorted. "She barely lets me breathe."

Maneuvering Claire away from the entryway, her father greeted their guests. "Go on in," he said, gesturing toward the door. "I'll be right there."

The Holly Hills sheriff and his wife nodded and moved inside as he turned back to his daughter.

“You’re all she has, Claire.” Her father’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Your mother lost three babies before we got you. And one more after. All that loss changed her.”

It was a good thing they’d reached the porch swing, since this unexpected revelation knocked Claire backward. “She lost four babies?”

The older man joined her on the swing. “Don’t ever mention it. She’d never forgive me for telling you.”

“But why?” This didn’t excuse her mother’s meanness, but it did explain her overbearing need to control Claire’s every move.

“Took me years to figure it out, but I think she sees it as her failure. She couldn’t keep those babies alive inside her, and that somehow turned to shame.” Her father sighed. “Once I realized what she was doing, I tried to make her see that none of it was her fault, but the guilt runs too deep. That guilt turned bitter, and I’m afraid you’ve gotten the worst of it.”

Would the blows never end? First Claire destroyed anything she and Tyler might have, and now she was being forced to see her mother in a new light. Anger and years of resentment melted into pity.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s nothing to say.” Her father eased off the swing. “I’m only sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I thought she might ease up as you got older. I guess I was wrong.”

The resignation in her father’s voice brought out Claire’s protective side. “This isn’t your fault, Daddy.” She stood and straightened his tie. “This isn’t any of our faults.”

But the mess with Tyler was her fault. And Claire would fix it.

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“I love you, baby,” her father said, dropping a kiss on her forehead.

“I love you, too, Daddy.”

* * *

By Friday morning, Tyler had turned his phone off. Claire had sent three text messages and left him a voice mail. The texts had been requests to talk, but as far as Tyler was concerned, Claire had said all she needed to say at her parents' house.

He'd not bothered to listen to the voice mail, but he also couldn't bring himself to delete it. What could she possibly have to say? She couldn't take the words back. They'd been spoken in anger toward her mother, which meant that's how she truly felt.

He'll get a respectable job eventually.

Just thinking about the words made him angry all over again. Which meant he was stewing mad when he answered the unexpected knock on his door. If she thought she could show up unannounced and make him listen...

But Claire wasn't the one knocking on his door.

“Cooter?” Cooter Hightower worked as a ranch hand on the Double H. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, happy to see you, too,” he said, not waiting for an invitation before barging

past Tyler and dropping onto the arm of the couch. “Before you turn that temper on me, I’m only the messenger.”

“Does Dad need me for something?” Tyler would usually have reported to the barn first thing in the morning, but as it was the day of Bug’s rehearsal dinner, the hands were taking care of business to let the family celebrate.

Not that Tyler felt much like celebrating.

“This message is from Carlene.”

“Your girlfriend?” Considering both Cooter and Carlene were in their fifties, using the term girlfriend felt out of place, but as Cooter refused to tie the knot, that was the only word that applied.

“You’re an asshole.”

“Excuse me?”

“That’s the message.”

As Tyler hadn’t seen Carlene in longer than he could remember, nor had he done anything to provoke her, Cooter’s message didn’t make a lick of sense.

“Are you sure she wasn’t calling you an asshole?” Tyler asked. “Last I checked, you’re the one who won’t make an honest woman out of her.”

Cooter shook his head. “This ain’t about my love life. Miss Claire stopped into the school today. Carlene saw her in the hall during her potty break and said the poor thing was a mess. Eyes all swollen and red from crying.”

The nosy school secretary needed to mind her own business.

“I don’t see what that has to do with me.”

“She said you’d say that.” Cooter crossed his arms. “Makes you an even bigger asshole if you ask me.”

Tyler rolled his eyes. “I’m not asking you anything except to get out of my house. What happens between me and Claire is no one’s business, especially not yours and Carlene’s.”

“She ask you to stop riding?” Cooter asked, taking Tyler by surprise.

“No, she didn’t.” Why was he even answering the question? “This conversation is over.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“The problem is none of your business,” Tyler growled, yanking his front door open. “Now get out before I throw you out.”

“Will you throw me out, too?” asked a familiar voice from the doorway.

Tyler turned to see Claire standing on his threshold, engulfed in a bulky sweater, looking pale and fragile. “Now I’ll go,” Cooter said, sliding out the door with a tip of his ball cap in Claire’s direction. “Good luck, ma’am.”

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“Thanks, Cooter,” Claire said, giving the annoying ranch hand a sad smile. Facing Tyler, she said, “Can I come in?”

He wanted to drag her into his arms and make her swear to never leave, but then her words echoed in his ears, and Tyler stiffened his resolve. With a shrug he said, “Suit yourself,” and took the place Cooter had vacated on the arm of the couch.

Claire closed the door behind her but didn’t move far into the house. Lingered in what served as a foyer in his tiny cabin, she hugged herself tight as if she might fall apart if she didn’t hold herself together.

Tyler knew the feeling.

As much as he wanted to lash out at her, Tyler couldn’t bring himself to be harsh. “I’d invite you to sit down, but I need to head into town.” That was a lie, but he didn’t care. Dragging this out would only make things worse. Better to cut it off quick.

“I was hoping you’d let me apologize.”

Tyler shook his head. “Nothing to apologize for. You’re entitled to your opinion, and it’s better we find out what that is now instead of later.” When losing her would hurt even more.

“You can’t really think I meant those words.”

“Then why did you say them?” This is what had been driving him crazy. No, he didn’t want to believe that’s how Claire felt. That she didn’t respect his choices. But

he'd heard her loud and clear.

"Tyler." She reached for him, but he leaned away. Claire sighed and wiped away a fresh tear. "I was angry, though I know that's no excuse. The idea of you getting hurt like she said set me off. I don't know what I'd do if that happened."

He never intended to be a burden on anybody, least of all Claire. But the idea that his getting hurt would somehow be a deal breaker for her...

"Think about it from my side," she said. "How would you feel if I was in a bad accident and nearly died?"

"That's not the same thing."

"It is," she said, stepping close before he could leap off the couch and move away. "You mean more to me than I can ever explain. The thought of seeing you in pain, suffering, and knowing I couldn't take that pain away, would be a living hell."

"I doubt it would be a picnic for me either." Claire had him cornered, and Tyler couldn't bring himself to push past her. Instead, he crossed his arms and stared past her. "So you're out. Like I said, better now than later."

"God, you're so damn stubborn," she said, the sudden anger so unlike her. "I'm not out. And I'm not letting you out either. We've wasted too much time already."

"Claire, I'm not walking away from bull riding."

"And I'm not walking away from you."

The standoff continued for what felt like an eternity before Claire raised a brow of challenge and said, "I can't say I won't be scared out of my mind every time you

climb onto one of those animals. But I'll be there, Tyler. I'll be there to cheer you on. To celebrate the wins and soothe the soreness. I respect everything you do, and if you know me at all, you know I'm telling the truth."

He wanted to believe her more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life. Even more than he wanted to climb back on a bull.

Rising to his feet, Tyler dropped his arms. "I've loved you for so long, Claire. For exactly who you are, not for who you might change into someday. I need to know you feel the same. I need to know you're not waiting for the day when I'll give up bull riding."

Claire shook her head. "I can't go back in time and make those words go away. But I promise, I'm not waiting for you to change. I've told you before, you're perfect, Tyler. You're the perfect man for me. Now and ever after."

He couldn't hold out any longer. Tyler crushed Claire against him, taking her mouth in a kiss that he hoped would tell her all the things he couldn't find the words to say. He was a fool to think he ever could have let her go.

Minutes later, when they were both desperate for air, Claire said, "Do you really have to go into town?"

"We're not going anywhere," Tyler said, tracing Claire's lower lip with his thumb. "Not for several hours."

Wearing the naughty smile Tyler would never get enough of, Claire took him by the hand and led him to the bedroom.

* * *

Claire tried to feel bad that she was the happiest woman in the room, considering she was standing in the middle of her best friend's wedding rehearsal, during which the bride should have been the one beaming. But Mary Catherine wasn't beaming. In fact, she looked miserable.

"If that glow gets any brighter, I'm going to need shades," MC said, downing what Claire counted to be her third glass of wine. "Are you going to tell me what has you shining brighter than Marilyn's obnoxious, overly illuminated Christmas tree?"

Claire longed to yell her good news from the church's bell tower, but she and Tyler had agreed to tell Mary Catherine together, and Tyler had yet to arrive at the church. To be fair, Claire had shown up a half hour early, claiming she was there for MC, when the truth was she couldn't stand to be away from Tyler.

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Silly since she'd only left his house less than an hour before, giving her time to shower and dress and get to the rehearsal. Her hair wasn't even dry when she hopped in the car.

"This is your night," Claire said, evading her friend's direct gaze. "I'm just happy for you."

"You don't expect me to believe that, do you?"

"Oh, look," Claire said, thankful for the distraction. "Here's Georgia."

"Thank God there's wine," Georgia said in greeting, looking angry and sullen in her bright-yellow dress that showed off her long legs to perfection. Claire felt a twinge of jealousy, then remembered her mirror session with Tyler and decided she was fine just the way she was.

"You're late," MC said, pouring wine into the flute Georgia held with impatience. "Trouble peeling yourself off the vet?"

"Something like that," George answered, downing half her glass. "Now let's get this show on the road." Stilettos snapped out a staccato beat as the former model charged out of the tiny room MC would be using as a dressing room tomorrow.

"What's wrong with her?" MC asked. "You'd think she was the one playing lead in this spectacle."

At the rate her friends were going, Claire would be lucky if they gave her a pat on the

back once she and Tyler shared their news.

“George is moody on a good day, and you know how she feels about your stepmother.” Claire took the bride by the elbow, leading her into the hall. “Which is why we should probably get out there before Marilyn says something that provokes our volleyball player into spiking a bouquet in her face.”

“I would pay to see that,” MC said, picking up her pace.

Five minutes later, the rehearsal began. Somehow, Tyler had finagled the groomsmen order so that he and Claire were paired up for the trip down the aisle. Georgia shot her a raised-brow look when she joined her at the front of the church. Claire tried to pretend nothing had changed, but the moment Tyler shot her a grin, then tucked her hand against his side, memories of what they’d done all afternoon flooded back.

She could no more stop the blush crawling up her cheeks than bank the sparkle she knew was dancing in her eyes. There was no denying it. Claire Campbell was head over heels in love with Tyler Holly. And as soon as this rehearsal was over, she’d tell her two best friends in the world, and she hoped they would be happy for her.

An hour later, Claire worried that moment would never come, since Marilyn seemed determined to make this rehearsal go on forever. First, she didn’t like the speed at which the bridal party came down the aisle. Then she didn’t approve of how Brad took MC’s hand from her father. The woman even had the nerve to tell the preacher how to do his job.

Claire could hear Georgia grinding her teeth beside her, and even MC’s father ran out of patience. When Marilyn insisted the bridal party rehearse their exit for a third time, Billy Holly stepped in and declared the rehearsal over. His overbearing wife tried to argue, but the Holly patriarch shut her down with words Claire couldn’t hear from her vantage point.

Whatever he said, Marilyn clammed up, and everyone in the church sprinted for the parking lot while they had the chance. Which was the moment Claire and Tyler chose to make their move.

“Could I talk to you two for a second?” Claire asked, laying a hand on each of her best friends’ arms before they stepped from the church into the cool Texas night. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

“Sure,” MC said, “but what’s so important that you can’t tell us tonight?”

Both Claire and Georgia had agreed to spend MC’s last night as a single woman with her out at the Double H.

“Well,” Claire said, smiling as Tyler stepped up beside her. “I’m not sharing this news alone.”

“I knew it,” George said, smacking Tyler on the arm. “And it’s about damn time.”

“Easy there,” he said, elbowing her back. “I’ve got to escort a pretty girl on that arm tomorrow.”

“Is this what I think it is?” Mary Catherine asked. “Are you two finally hooking up?”

“Not exactly how I’d say it,” Claire said, nerves making her squeeze Tyler’s hand. “Would you mind if we became sisters-in-law?”

“Oh my God!” MC exclaimed, throwing her arms around the happy couple. “Of course not.” Stepping back, she grinned at her brother, but spoke to Claire. “I knew you two had the hots for each other, but really? Marriage?”

Claire nodded, unable to keep the smile from splitting her face.

“Are you sure you want to settle for this ornery cowboy?” MC asked. “He’s pretty rough around the edges.”

“He’s just right,” Claire said, tucking herself against Tyler’s side. “And he isn’t rough at all. In fact, he’s quite smooth to the touch.”

It was Tyler’s turn to blush as Georgia said, “Go get ’em, Claire Bear.”

“I am now highly uncomfortable with the direction this is taking.” Mary Catherine gave Claire another hug. “This is the best girl in the world, Tyler.” Pointing at her brother’s nose, she added, “If you hurt her, I’ll kick your ass.”

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“You’ll have to get in line,” George said, winking at Claire.

MC hugged Claire again, then pulled back. “We need to tell everyone.”

“No,” Tyler said. “This is your time.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“We’re serious,” Claire said. “There’s no way I could go another minute without telling the two of you, and Tyler and I aren’t going to avoid each other tomorrow, but we refuse to steal your spotlight. Sunday is soon enough to share our good news.”

“Speaking of,” Georgia said. “What’s your mother going to say?”

“We’ve crossed that bridge already.” Claire read the concern in Tyler’s eyes. “Not the reaction I’d hoped for, but she’ll come around. And if she doesn’t, then it’s her loss. We’ll be happy no matter what.”

“I don’t know what Tyler has done to you, but I like this new and improved version.” Georgia draped an arm across Claire’s shoulders. “And if you ever tell your mother what you just said to us, promise me you’ll record it so I can see her face.”

“I’ll do my best.”

The group laughed together as they made their way toward the parking lot. Hugs were exchanged once again before George climbed into the SUV with MC, and Tyler walked Claire to her car.

“You happy?” he asked, as if the answer wasn’t written all over her face.

“Are you?” she said in return.

Tyler shook his head. “Happy isn’t a big enough word for what I’m feeling right now.” Holding her close, he said, “I’ve spent so long thinking this could never happen. Fearing the day you’d come home and plan a fancy wedding of your own to some big-city politician.”

“That was never going to happen.” Claire played with a button on Tyler’s shirt. “Do you want a big wedding?”

He sighed and his arms tightened. “After this circus, I’d be happy with something small, but I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Good,” Claire said, relieved they were on the same page. “Small and intimate works for me.”

Growing serious, Tyler asked, “Do you really think your mom will come around?”

After what her father had shared, Claire felt confident her mother would see reason. Sylvia Campbell was never going to be sweet and loving, welcoming Tyler like the son she never had. But he would be the father of her grandchildren, and that would be enough to soften her a bit where he was concerned.

“Eventually,” she said. “And Dad is on our side, which will help as well.”

“Mayor Campbell approves of his daughter being with a cowboy instead of a lawyer or doctor?”

“Daddy is more enlightened than you’d think,” she said. “He wants me to be happy and knows that you’re the man who can make that happen.”

“And I will,” he said, his voice full of love and conviction. “I love you, Claire.”

“And I love you, Tyler.”
