



Montana Healing

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Category: Romance, Western

Description: Small-Town Therapist Mia Marlene falls for a grumpy Bull Rider.

Hold on for a Wild Ride with this steamy Romance set in the heart of Montana.

As a therapist, I've seen it all, but Tyler Parker is a special case. A bull rider with an intense glare and a heart of stone, he's not my type—until he is.

Our sessions are more than just therapy—they're a battlefield. I'm sunshine; He's a brooding thunderhead. We clash at every turn. But when a storm traps us together, the forced proximity changes everything. Suddenly, the grumpiest man in Pine Creek is the only one I can't resist.

He's got secrets, and so do I, as well as our careers on the line.

Walking away was supposed to be easy, but leaving Tyler? That's a heartbreak I'm not sure I can handle.

Will our secrets tear us apart, or can love conquer all?

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Chapter 1

Tyler

Arrival in Pine Creek

“I hate that I have to be here.”

I mumble to myself while impatiently waiting in the tiny sitting room.

I’m far from home in the small town of Pine Creek, where I’ve just moved with my son and his elderly nanny, who is like a grandmother to us both.

I know Timmy, my six-year-old son, is secretly relieved to be here. He’s a movie fanatic, so moving to a new town he’s never been to is quite an adventure for him.

He didn’t care for living in Rondale because every child born there had a bit of demon in them.

There were more bullies than friendly kids for my son to play with. And I had grown to hate the unsafe ranch where I practiced bull riding.

The staff there acted as if they weren’t licensed to work the jobs they did, and the cowboys and bull riders were arrogant and didn’t understand what friendly competition was.

But the knee injury I sustained at that ranch forced me to take a hiatus from my bull

riding career and move to another town.

Mrs. Carolyn, the nanny, suggested that I see a therapist on my road to recovery because, in her eyes, I hadn't been healthily handling my injury.

Plus, she said something about it not being a good thing to keep feelings bottled in, whether good or bad.

So here I am for my first meeting with the therapist recommended to me and who is supposed to be 'the bee's knees' from how she's lauded so highly.

Mrs. Joanie Mitchell, one of our new neighbors, talked this Sarah person up to the point of sparking my interest. Her husband, Bill, just nodded, and he had a huge smile.

"Mr. Parker?"

I look up from twiddling my thumbs in my lap at the sudden voice cutting into my thoughts. I lift my head and don't expect to see the stunning beauty before me.

She has a clipboard in her hand, and I wonder if she's the therapist's assistant.

"Yes, I am. And you are?"

I anxiously wait as she gives me a sunny smile and adjusts her square glasses.

"I'm Dr. Marlene. I noticed you didn't check off a few boxes, and I wanted to return this to you so you could do that."

Annoyance washes over me and is strong enough to overtake my attraction for her.

I feel like a child being scolded to finish their class assignment before they can go outside for recess.

Or maybe my not wanting to be here in the first place and believing that getting therapy is a huge mistake is making me defiant.

“What’s a few unanswered questions on a piece of paper? Don’t you have to ask me those questions anyway?”

Dr. Marlene tilts her head slightly, a patient yet firm look settling in her eyes. "Mr. Parker, the purpose of these forms is to streamline our session.

It gives me a preliminary understanding of why you're here and what areas we need to focus on.

It's not just about asking questions. It's also about efficiency and depth in our conversation."

I cross my arms, feeling a stubborn resolve tighten in my chest. "But if we talk about all this stuff anyway, why must I write it down first?

Isn't that just wasting time? We could be talking about things that matter instead of ticking boxes."

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She sets the clipboard on a nearby table, never breaking eye contact.

"It might seem redundant, but this process helps me serve you better. Having this information beforehand, I can prepare for our sessions more effectively, ensuring we cover the necessary ground. Plus, some people find it easier to express themselves in writing than speaking out loud."

I scoff, the annoyance bubbling up again.

"Well, I'm not one of those people. I don't see why I can't tell you what's happening. All this paperwork feels like just another hoop to jump through."

Dr. Marlene nods, her expression softening slightly.

"I understand it can feel that way, especially if you're not accustomed to therapy. But these 'hoops,' as you call them, are designed in your best interest. It's not just about bureaucracy or formality. It's about creating a foundation for effective therapy. Can we agree to work together on this, even if it initially seems tedious?"

I hesitate, her words making sense despite my resistance. The stubborn part of me wants to argue further, but another part recognizes the logic in her explanation.

Still, it's hard to shake off the feeling of being cornered.

"Fine, but I still think it's unnecessary. I'm here to talk, not write an essay about my feelings."

Dr. Marlene picks up the clipboard again, offering it to me with a gentle smile.

"Thank you, Tyler. I promise that the more we cooperate, the more fruitful our journey will be. And who knows? You might find some value in this process after all."

Reluctantly, I take the clipboard from her.

Its weight feels like a concession.

"We'll see."

I mutter, still unconvinced but willing to move past this impasse.

I push open the door to my house, the familiar sound of the creek promising the comfort of home.

As soon as the door swung open, a blur of energy rockets towards me.

"Daddy!"

Timmy's voice, filled with the joy only a six-year-old can muster, wraps around me even before his tiny arms do.

"Hey, champ!"

I sweep him up into a hug, lifting him off the ground.

At that moment, the weight of the world and the annoyance of the therapy session all melt away.

Mrs. Carolyn strides into the hallway with a smile that could light up the darkest rooms.

"He's had an absolute ball of a day, Tyler."

She says, her voice carrying the warmth of a summer's day.

"We went to the park, fed the ducks, and he even made a new friend!"

"That's awesome, buddy,"

I tell Timmy, setting him down but keeping one hand on his shoulder.

Mrs. Carolyn catches my eye, a twinkle of wisdom in hers.

"And, Tyler, remember when I said moving here over the summer, before Timmy started at his new school, would be good for him? For both of you, actually?"

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I nod, recalling our many conversations about the move and starting fresh.

At the time, I was skeptical and hesitant to uproot what little stability we had.

But looking at Timmy now, seeing how he's flourished and embraced this new beginning with an open heart, I know she was right.

"You were right, Mrs. Carolyn."

I admit, the words were not as hard to say as I thought they might be.

"This was the best decision. Seeing him so happy, so... alive. It's more than I could've asked for."

Mrs. Carolyn smiles, her gaze softening.

"Well, I've been around the block a time or two."

She says with a chuckle.

"I'm just glad to see you both doing so well."

With a burst of energy that only a child possesses, Timmy dashes upstairs to his bedroom, the sounds of his laughter trailing behind him like the tail of a comet.

Mrs. Carolyn watches him go with a fondness that speaks volumes of their relationship before turning her gentle, inquiring eyes back to me.

"So, Tyler."

She starts, her tone shifting to a more serious note.

"How did it go with your new therapist today?"

She leans against the kitchen counter, inviting me to open up.

I sigh, the weight of the world seemingly settling back on my shoulders.

"Honestly, Mrs. Carolyn, I don't get it."

I confess, my frustration bubbling up as I lean on the opposite counter facing her.

"Why do I need a therapist for an injured knee? Isn't the rehab enough? I'm here to get my body back in shape, not spill my guts to some stranger."

Mrs. Carolyn nods her expression understanding but stern.

"Tyler, remember how you were after the injury? The anger you felt wasn't just because of the pain. You were on a fast track to the top, and then, in one moment, everything changed. It wasn't just your knee that needed healing. It was also your mind. The depression, the pushing everyone away... Moving to Pine Creek was about starting fresh in more ways than one. And bull riding again, especially at a ranch that values safety like Beartooth Ranch does, is your dream, right?"

Her words, spoken with the wisdom and frankness I've come to rely on, hit me harder than I want to admit.

Yet, the skepticism and doubt about the therapy process cling to me stubbornly.

"I just... I don't see how talking about my feelings will help me get back on a bull again. If anything, it's going to annoy me more. Make me feel even more on edge."

I argue, though part of me wonders if I'm just afraid of facing those feelings head-on.

Mrs. Carolyn's smile is kind, yet her firm gaze tells me she won't back down on this.

"Tyler, healing isn't just about the physical wounds. And sometimes, facing what annoys or scares us most is exactly how we move past it. Give it a chance. For Timmy, if not for yourself. He needs his dad in all ways; not just halfway."

Her words linger between us, a gentle yet undeniable challenge. I find myself forced to consider that maybe, just maybe, there's truth in her perspective.

And as I stand there, in the warmth of our kitchen, the sound of Timmy's joyous play echoing down the stairs, I can't help but wonder if Pine Creek—and everything it represents—might be the healing ground I've been so stubbornly resisting.

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But this whole therapy deal? It's hard for me to get on board with that.

It still makes me uncomfortable and angry that this seems to be something I'm pushed into doing.

I grew up with a father who believed in keeping personal stuff within the family and not telling your business to strangers.

And Dr. Marlene is every bit of a stranger, no matter how raved about by the locals.

Chapter 2

Sarah

Clashing Personalities

It's been two weeks since I started seeing Tyler as his therapist.

Keeping my calm while remaining professional has been a challenging but essential boundary for me, especially considering Tyler's tendency to be combative.

He deflects every time I try to guide our sessions deeper, ranting about how he finds therapy annoying and pointless.

His argument is always the same—that his injury is physical, not mental.

"Tyler, understanding the connection between your physical condition and your

mental state is crucial for your recovery."

I explain. Attempting yet again to bridge that gap for him.

"How we think and feel about our physical limitations can significantly influence our healing process."

He scoffs, crossing his arms defensively.

"But why does it matter how I feel mentally? If my knee's busted, it's busted. Feeling happy or sad about it won't change that. And it sure doesn't stop the limping or the stares from people."

I lean forward, trying to make him see the more profound implications of his mindset.

"It matters because your mental state can affect your motivation, recovery pace, and even pain perception. If you're always focused on the negatives, it could make your physical pain feel worse. Have you noticed your mood affecting your physical therapy sessions or how you cope with pain?"

He pauses, seemingly caught off guard by the question, but quickly recovers.

"I just think this is a waste of time. I should focus on returning to the saddle, not talking about my feelings."

Despite his resistance, I press on gently but firmly.

"But Tyler, part of getting 'back in the saddle' is being mentally prepared. It's not just about whether your knee can handle it physically, but also about whether you're ready to face that challenge again without fear or doubt holding you back."

He looks away, and for a moment, I think I've broken through to him. However, his walls go back up, and he's not ready to face these truths.

The sessions continue with this pattern.

Tyler often veers off-topic, complaining about everything from the uncomfortable chairs to the décor in my office.

"Why do therapists always choose such bland colors? Is it supposed to make me feel calm? Because it's just boring."

I smile patiently, redirecting him again.

"Let's focus on you, Tyler. How have you been feeling physically? And how do those feelings translate mentally?"

He rolls his eyes.

"I feel like I'm being punished. I'm stuck here talking instead of doing something to fix my knee. You ask how it 'translates mentally?' It's frustrating. End of story."

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I nod, acknowledging his frustration while trying to guide him deeper.

"Frustration is a valid feeling, especially in your situation. But let's explore why you feel punished. Can we find a way to transform that frustration into something more productive for your recovery?"

Tyler shakes his head, his usual defensiveness on full display.

"Why bother? It's not like talking about my feelings will magically heal my knee. This whole thing... it's just pointless."

Each session becomes a delicate dance of push and pull.

I gently guide Tyler toward a deeper understanding of himself while he resists, barricading himself behind a fortress of skepticism and dismissiveness.

Yet, I see glimmers of potential breakthroughs—moments when his defiance wavers, when the honest Tyler, vulnerable and scared, peeks through.

But as quickly as these moments come, they vanish, with Tyler retreating into his shell.

His resistance is intense, but I always notice a slight flicker of worry in his eyes whenever I ask questions.

So, I know he has real answers to my questions but refuses to answer them.

He continues to hide behind his shield in front of him—a man with a tough exterior to keep people out unless it's loved ones.

Over the years, I've met plenty of people like that in my professional and personal life.

My brother used to be the same way until he fell in love and settled down. He became a lot more open and less offensive than he had been all his life.

Despite the challenges, I remain patient and steadfast.

My goal is not to break Tyler but to be a steady presence, guiding him towards the light of self-awareness and healing.

It's a journey that I am committed to walking with him, step by step, no matter how resistant he may be.

Change is never easy, especially the kind that involves honestly facing oneself. My job—as challenging as it may be with Tyler—is to guide him through this process.

I want to help him see that healing is as much about the mind as it is about the body. So, I press on, session after session, hoping to eventually reach him.

It's not just because it's my professional obligation and duty to try to help him. There's just something different about him.

Even with the walls he's built around himself and his combative attitude, there seems to be something that slowly draws me to him.

I'm in the process of collecting my belongings.

This routine marks the end of another grueling day at the office when I notice Cara, my ever-diligent receptionist, positioning herself against the frame of my office doorway.

A distinctive expression on her face unequivocally signals she's got something on her mind, a thought brewing that she seems compelled to share.

With a slight clearing of her throat, she steps slightly into the room, her demeanor one of hesitancy.

She may be weighing each word with care before giving it voice.

"You know."

She starts, her voice trailing off momentarily as if to marshal her thoughts,

"I've been observing Tyler's behavior lately. Whenever he emerges from your office after those in-depth sessions, he seems... I don't know, unusually disturbed, more so than one might typically expect."

I respond with a soft chuckle, my head gently nodding in agreement.

"Yes, I've noticed that as well. But my guess? He's just feeling a bit unsettled. Being the new guy in a small town isn't easy. It's quite the adjustment, especially without familiar faces around. I have faith that, eventually, he'll begin to come around. Until then, I'll continue being patient."

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Cara nods, her eyes reflecting a profound understanding of the situation.

Suddenly, her mood shifts, the previously contemplative air around her giving way to an unmistakable spark of enthusiasm.

“It’s just so surreal, you know? Having Tyler here, of all people. I’ve been an avid follower of his bull-riding career for years. He was nothing short of phenomenal. To watch him in the arena was like witnessing poetry in motion. It’s a real shame that his knee injury has put such an abrupt pause on everything.”

As Cara’s excitement and passion flood the room, I am genuinely intrigued by her depth of feeling.

“I had no idea you were such a fan of his.”

Her reply is immediate, her eyes shining with admiration.

“Absolutely.”

She affirms.

“He was one of the greats in the sport. That’s why it’s so heart-wrenching to see him in this condition. Everyone knows how resilient and determined he is, but to witness him grappling with this new reality... It’s just devastating. And what makes it even worse is that the Wildcard Ranch, the very place where his life took such a drastic turn, is still operational. It boggles my mind how such a notorious place continues to function, especially given that children are often present.”

Her words resonate with a gravity that momentarily roots me in place.

“It’s deeply troubling.”

I admit.

“The idea that a place with such disregard for safety continues to operate is beyond irresponsible.”

Cara’s concern deepens as she elaborates,

“And to think, his injury didn’t even occur during a competition. It happened during a routine practice. The level of frustration and disillusionment he must be feeling...”

She trails off, her voice laden with empathy.

“I just wish he knew the extent of support available to him. That there’s a whole community of us who believe in his capacity to return stronger than ever.”

My response is a mix of frustration towards the circumstances surrounding his injury and hope for Tyler’s recovery.

“It’s a terrible situation all around. But there’s hope, Cara. Despite everything, I believe Tyler can navigate through the rehabilitation process successfully. And perhaps, in time, he’ll find comfort and a sense of belonging here, embarking on a new chapter of his life.”

Cara’s smile is infectious, her optimism seemingly endless.

“That would be amazing, Sarah. Seeing him back in action or finding a new passion would be incredible. But more than anything, I hope he rediscovers joy in the arena

or through a new venture.”

She returns from the doorway and adds.

“He’s lucky to have your support. And remember, if there’s anything I can do to assist, don’t hesitate to reach out. With enough encouragement and support, we can help him see how many people are rooting for him.”

As she walks away, I’m filled with a fresh sense of determination. The journey to assist Tyler in his recovery and adaptation will have obstacles.

However, Cara's surprising support and faith in his abilities strengthen my commitment to help him through this process, aiming to support his path to recovery and perhaps a fresh start.

He’s unaware that people are still rooting for him from the sidelines.

Actual fans of his reside in Pine Creek, but he doesn’t know because he doesn’t go out much.

During our sessions, he said he comes here, goes to his rehab sessions at Beartooth Ranch, and goes home.

Tyler to himself at the ranch but won’t explain why. He sprinkles in some information and shuts down when I try to go deeper into it.

He becomes defensive or annoyed when I ask him about his feelings. He won’t speak about his family, which makes me realize his personal life is private.

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I know about Tight Grip Tyler, the infamous bull rider, but I have no idea who Tyler Parker, the individual, is.

I smile as I lock up the office and head towards my car in the parking lot to unlock it.

I have all the faith in the world that Tyler will eventually warm up to me and open up.

Chapter 3

Tyler

Unwilling Attraction

This morning just sets the tone for the whole damn day.

There I am, walking out of the kitchen, feeling somewhat decent for a change, when my knee gives out.

No warning, no gradual pain to signal it's about to happen—just bam, and I'm stumbling like a calf on ice.

The worst part? My son, Timmy, sees it all. The look on his face... I've seen respect, awe, and now, pity.

Seeing that shift is like a punch to the gut. It puts me in a foul mood, one that I can't seem to shake off.

By the time I get to therapy with Dr. Marlene, I'm a ticking time bomb of irritation and self-loathing.

She greets me with her usual calm demeanor.

"Good morning, Tyler. How has your morning been so far?"

I barely keep the snarl out of my voice.

"Why does that matter? We're just here to go through the motions, right?"

I can tell I'm being unreasonable, but stumbling this morning stripped away any patience I had.

Dr. Marlene, unphased by my tone, tries to steer the conversation back to a productive path.

"Tyler, therapy is a process that facilitates healing and understanding. It's not about prying into your personal life but offering support and strategies to improve it."

Her words are meant to be soothing, but they feel like sandpaper against my raw nerves.

"Healing? Understanding? It seems more like a deep dive into someone's privacy under the guise of professional help. I don't buy it."

I know I'm being harsh and combative, but I wouldn't say I like the thought of spilling my guts to someone who, in my mind, could never understand the depth of what I'm going through.

The worried look on Timmy's face this morning, the pause in my career, my

identity—it's too much to package neatly for a therapy session.

Dr. Marlene remains patient, her voice steady.

"I understand your skepticism, Tyler. Many people feel vulnerable in therapy initially. But I assure you, the goal is to help you build strategies to cope, to find ways to adapt, and to grow beyond your injury."

I scoff, unable to help myself.

"Adapt and grow? I was a bull rider, Dr. Marlene. My whole life was about conquering, not coping and adapting."

Dr. Marlene leans forward, her gaze fixed on me with an intensity that feels too probing.

"Tyler, you've mentioned your whole life has been about conquering. But have you dedicated so much of your time and energy to your career that now, as you're healing, you're unsure of your identity outside of being a bull rider?"

Her question hits closer to home than I care to admit. I shift in my seat, discomfort written all over me.

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"It's not just about riding bulls,"

I grumble, avoiding her gaze.

"It's about living a life that feels worth something. Right now, with the sponsorships being my only income, I feel... worthless. Weak."

I stop talking, horrified that I've allowed myself to reveal so much.

Dr. Marlene's strategy, whatever it is, has me opening up, and I can't stand it.

"You're being sneaky, making me talk about all this personal stuff."

I accuse her, my voice laced with resentment.

She raises her eyebrows slightly, expressing calm understanding rather than offense.

"Tyler, I don't intend to trick you or make you uncomfortable. It's important to explore these feelings, to understand that your worth isn't solely defined by your career or how you earn your income."

But her words are like dust in the wind to me. I've built a wall, and I'm not letting her in further.

"I think we're done here."

I say curtly, standing up abruptly, my chair scraping against the floor.

"I don't need someone else telling me how I should feel about my life."

"Tyler.. we have thirty minutes left. You should stay for all of your time."

I reluctantly sit back down on the couch with an attitude, but now I refuse to answer any more of her questions.

I fold my arms across my chest as stubbornly as a child, allowing her to talk in this one-sided conversation.

The session continues in this vein, with Dr. Marlene trying to break through the walls I've built around my pride and my pain and me fighting her every step of the way.

She doesn't know about Timmy, and I won't tell her.

She knows me as the guy who rode bulls, not as a father who can't even walk out of his kitchen without nearly falling in front of his son.

The therapy session wraps up, and honestly, not much has changed.

Dr. Marlene tried, but I'm just not feeling it. I walked out as mad and frustrated as I walked in, maybe even more.

And to top off this fantastic day, it all started with me tripping in front of Timmy. It's just been one of those days.

I know I'm torturing myself, refusing to see how therapy could help, clinging to my anger like a life raft.

Yet, somewhere beneath all that bluster and bravado, I'm terrified.

I'm frightened that this is as good as it gets, that I'll never be the man I once was in the arena or as a father.

But admitting that, even to myself, feels like conceding defeat—and that's something Tyler Parker has never been good at.

Hours later, I find myself nursing a whiskey at the Last Chance Bar like it's medicine.

Maybe it is, in a way. The kind that doesn't heal but numbs. I didn't worry about driving.

My boots could carry me back home just fine. And Timmy, he's safe at home with Mrs. Carolyn.

I will forever thank that woman. Moving to Pine Creek with Timmy and me was a miracle.

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She's significantly more family to us than my blood ever was, especially after I cut ties with my greedy relatives.

Her being here, it's a relief I can hardly put into words.

Sitting here, swirling the amber liquid in my glass, I can't help but feel a heavy sense of depression sinking in.

It gnaws at me, the realization that my blood family only saw dollar signs when they looked at me, not the man or the father I strived to be.

And Joyce, Timmy's mother, was cut from the same cloth.

That one-night stand turned my world upside down when she showed up nine months later, saying I would be a dad.

But her eyes weren't filled with the joy of bringing a life into this world, they were filled with greed, seeing me as nothing more than a paycheck.

I ensured she wouldn't be a part of Timmy's life, not in a way that mattered.

A hefty chunk of change in exchange for her signature on a contract and an NDA, and just like that, she was gone.

Maybe I was too harsh, but I've seen firsthand what greed can do to people, and I wasn't about to let my son be raised in that environment.

Mrs. Carolyn has been our rock through all this.

She was just the neighbor back in Boulder Springs, our former small-town home, but now, she's family.

She even moved here with us from Boulder Springs. When I was clueless, she showed me the ropes of being a dad.

She's been there, from feeding Timmy to ensuring he slept safely at night and baby-proofing the house. I would've been lost without her.

I owe this woman more than I can ever repay. Her guidance has made me the father I am today.

Taking another sip, I try to shake off the dark thoughts. But it's hard.

It's hard not to feel like you're drowning when you've got a past heavy enough to pull you under.

After becoming good and buzzed, I start feeling somewhat better—enough that now I want to step outside for some nice fresh air on this incredible night.

I turn my head towards the door and could swear that I saw Dr. Marlene, or someone who looks like her from the back, walk out.

I hurry towards the door and step outside the bar to see a woman walking toward the same forest green Buick Century parked outside Dr. Marlene's office.

"Dr. Marlene?"

I call out curiously, as the woman whips around in surprise, her wavy brown locks

swinging when she turns to face me.

It is her, and for some reason, she looks so beautiful to me tonight.

Maybe because the alcohol puts me in a better mood, and not sitting on her couch for therapy isn't putting me in a foul mood.

"What are you doing here?"

I ask, taking a few hesitant steps towards her.

The pale moonlight filters down, accentuating the confusion dancing across her features.

"I was just dropping something off for Sam, the owner. We've been friends for years. But I'm heading home now."

Dr. Marlene explains, clutching her purse a little tighter, perhaps a subconscious barrier between us.

I can't quite pinpoint why the idea of her leaving stokes a flicker of disappointment.

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"Why don't you come inside for a drink with me?"

I suggest, trying to mask the hope lacing my words with casual indifference.

Dr. Marlene hesitates, her professional demeanor surfacing.

"Tyler, I can't."

She starts, her voice firm but gentle.

"Having a drink with a patient... it's not professional. It crosses boundaries that shouldn't be crossed."

Her refusal ignites a spark of frustration in me.

"But you can prod and poke into every corner of my life in your office? Ask me all those personal questions?"

I challenge, the alcohol loosening my tongue.

"One drink. How's that any different?"

She looks at me, her expression softening, indicating she understands my frustration, but her stance remains unwavering.

"It's about maintaining a professional relationship, Tyler. There are ethics involved. It's not about what I ask or don't ask in session, it's about our roles. I'm your therapist,

not a friend. That line exists for a reason... no matter how handsome you are."

There's a beat of silence as her words sink in, and I can tell she didn't mean for the compliment of my handsomeness to slip out.

Once filled with my burgeoning hope for something undefined, the night air now tastes bitter with rejection.

I nod, finally stepping back, recognizing the boundary she's unwilling to cross.

"Alright, Dr. Marlene. Goodnight then."

I say, a hint of resignation trailing my voice.

"Goodnight, Tyler."

She says, heading to her car. This conversation left me thinking about how crazy and complicated human connections are.

It's weird how the things that link us can also pull us apart.

I start to turn around and head back inside, but then I notice an unfamiliar feeling inside me—something drawing me towards Dr. Marlene.

There's been some hidden attraction since the first day we met, hiding underneath the disdain I've held for her from our therapy sessions.

I cross the parking lot to close the distance between us, her words calling me handsome swirling in my mind as I gently grab her by the elbow.

I spin her around as her wide eyes lock onto mine before my lips press against hers.

She's stunned but shocks me when she kisses me back.

That is until she finally breaks the kiss and returns my expression of shock.

She quickly gets into her car and pulls out of the bar's parking lot while I touch my lips, which continue to tingle..

Chapter 4

Sarah

Revelations and Confessions

The morning sun sneaks in through the blinds of my office window at Beartooth Ranch, throwing light streaks across my messy desk while I review inventory lists.

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The ranch runs smoothly under Jake's name, but not everyone knows about the quiet force behind it all—me, Sarah Marlene Tarleton, his kid sister.

In the peace of my little sanctuary, I'm just Sarah Marlene, this big ranch's therapist and silent partner.

Living this double life, a life that brings me immense fulfillment comes naturally to me.

Using my middle name keeps me under the radar, away from the heavy expectations tied to the Tarleton name and allows me to find my path.

"I think the inventory looks good."

I say, scrolling down the digital spreadsheet. The quiet of my office is my haven, so different from the public life my brother leads.

Jake's always been the golden boy, his charm and wild horseback stunts putting him in the spotlight—a place he fits right into.

On the other hand, I have always loved staying in the background, enjoying the silence, far from the constant gossip and stares.

Just a few months back, Jake burst into my therapy office with excitement and doubt in his eyes.

"Sarah, I need you."

He began, and by the end of our talk, I had made a profound decision.

I had agreed to co-own Beartooth Ranch with him, a testament to my unwavering support and love for my brother.

It was a big decision, but it showed my solid support for him and was a way to stay connected to our roots while keeping my life private.

Thinking back, I can't help but be filled with joy.

Jake has built a beautiful life with Mia and their kids, transitioning from a wild cowboy to a loving dad and husband in a way that's better than any story.

His new role doesn't just fit him; it makes him shine, and knowing I play even a tiny role in this chapter of his life fills me with deep, abiding happiness.

My phone vibrates, snapping me out of my thoughts. It's a text from Jake.

"Check the new foal in the north pasture. You'll love her!"

These little moments, these slices of everyday life, keep me grounded, reminding me that no matter how big the Tarleton name gets, we're just a family at the end of the day.

I shove my phone into my pocket and stand up, stretching out the stiffness from sitting too long.

It's time to leave my office and head out to the wide-open spaces of the ranch, a constant reminder of where I belong and who I am deep down.

I make my way to the north pasture and reach the fence, spotting the herd in the

distance.

They move as one, graceful and free, until a smaller shape breaks off, capturing my attention.

It's the new foal, tottering on unsteady legs, its coat shimmering like polished mahogany under the rising sun.

My heart swells at the sight, every worry and stress melting away in the presence of such pure innocence.

"Hey there, little one."

I whisper, climbing over the fence and making my way over slowly, not wanting to startle her.

Her big, brown eyes watch me as I approach, curious and cautious.

"Isn't she the most beautiful thing you've ever seen?"

Jake's voice suddenly comes from behind me, making me jump slightly. I didn't hear him approach, but I should've known he wouldn't miss this.

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I smile, watching the foal nuzzle her mother before looking back at us.

"She's perfect, Jake. Have you named her yet?"

He leans on the fence, his eyes never leaving the foal.

"Mia wants to name her Luna after her grandmother."

"Luna."

I echo, the name fitting the foal as perfectly as a glove.

"It suits her."

We fall into a comfortable silence, watching Luna prance around her mother, embodying the new life and beginnings that define Beartooth Ranch.

Standing beside my brother and watching a new day dawn over the land we love, moments like these remind me how deeply rooted we are in this place.

"Sarah."

Jake says, his voice pulling me from my thoughts.

"Thanks for being here. For everything. This ranch, my family, wouldn't be the same without you."

I turn to look at him, struck by the sincerity in his voice.

"It's my home too, Jake. There's nowhere else I'd rather be."

"I'm just so glad you moved back earlier this year. I know our childhood was a bit complicated, with you being raised with Grandma Jean and Grandpa Boris in Aleridge."

I sigh softly since I already know where he's going with this. I don't understand why he feels he needs to apologize to me when it's not his fault.

Our parents planned him while I was quite a surprise pregnancy.

Our parents weren't financially well off enough to have two children then, so my mother sent me out of town to live with my maternal grandparents a few months after I was born.

Few knew that Jake had a sister since he was raised here, whereas I had not been.

Sure, we saw each other often, especially during holidays, but we weren't raised together like we would have preferred.

That's why I hadn't met Mia when Jake had dated her in high school.

He rekindled his romance with her last year when she moved back to Pine Creek with her daughter, Emily.

That was out of respect for me, and he wanted to ensure I was comfortable meeting her.

I moved to Pine Creek earlier this year because I wanted to be close to my nephew

and now-nieces.

But I had done so with the promise that Jake would not let people know we are siblings, because I love having my own life and identity.

"Don't you dare apologize."

I stop him before he can even try. He chuckles in amusement and with a shake of his head.

"I'd be surprised if you agree to come to dinner again one of these nights. You've been working so much at your office and here at the ranch that we barely see you."

"That's because I'm a workaholic, big brother."

I grin at him and playfully nudge his arm.

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"Big brother??"

My entire body freezes at the sound of a third voice coming from behind us.

I turn around to see a wide-eyed Tyler staring at me. Jake also looks at him in surprise.

"I... I was looking for you because Dr. Carmine had a question to ask you about Terry, the new cowboy."

Tyler addresses Jake while continuing to stare at me.

"Go ahead, Jake. We'll finish up later."

I tell him this before he can try to come up with some lie to throw Tyler off from just hearing me refer to him as my older brother.

After Jake leaves, Tyler and I are left standing in silence.

I avoid his gaze, staring at a piece of hay on my boot instead. The foals nearby are making soft noises, unaware of our awkward silence.

Finally, I can't take the silence anymore and try to explain.

"I don't know what you think you heard—"

Tyler cuts me off.

"I heard enough."

He says firmly.

"I heard you call Jake your 'big brother.' We often call each other family in small towns, but it sounded different coming from you."

I try to argue, to make up some excuse, but Tyler laughs, and I stop.

"No, I'm not convinced."

He says, smiling slightly.

"You meant it, and you and Jake look alike."

His correct guess makes me uncomfortable. I sigh, accepting the truth I've kept secret.

"Yes, it's true."

I say, looking at him.

"Jake is my brother. But please, keep it between us. No one else knows, and I'd prefer it stays that way."

Tyler's face turns to understanding, his earlier amusement gone.

"Your secret's safe with me."

He promises, but his curious look tells me he's still interested in the story. But I don't know if I should open up about my story.

I am still his therapist, and I believe it would be weird if he knew more about my personal life when I knew nothing about him.

Especially since he refuses to open up in therapy.

He notices my silence when I refuse to elaborate on how Jake is my brother and why it's supposed to be such a big secret.

"Since I know your secret... I'll tell you mine."

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He offers, as I raise an eyebrow. The only thing personal I know about him is the fact that he kissed me last night.

That sends both shivers and tingles throughout my body as I try to convince my mind that I hadn't enjoyed his lips on mine that much.

"I'm a father."

He pauses, and then uncertainty crosses his face. It's almost as if he instantly regrets letting that out.

"A father? "

I mimic in surprise, as I study his face to see if he's pulling my leg. But he looks dead serious.

"Y-yes. To a six-year-old. Tim... well, we call him Timmy. The reason for my bad mood yesterday is that... well... I fell due to my knee going out. And it happened in front of him. It made me feel weak and embarrassed, setting me in a foul mood."

Wow... I'm getting a confession and more out of him than I've gotten out of all of our therapy sessions combined.

He lets out a deep exhale afterward, like saying that out loud makes him feel free somehow.

I know the feeling because even with my apprehension, I think the same way about

him knowing my true identity.

And weirdly, I feel glad that he knows.

That kiss is clouding your mind. He's your client, not a friend.

"Is that why you hold back so much during therapy? Does having such a big secret make it easy for you not to open up so that it doesn't accidentally slip out?"

"That and I do have negative thoughts about me being in therapy. But I think it's due to my insecurities and shortcomings due to my injury."

"And that's why therapy is so important, so you don't keep it bottled in."

"I might have accidentally let it slip out if you would have let me buy you that drink last night."

He jokes as I blush at the teasing tone in his voice.

"A therapist having a drink with a client wouldn't have been such a great look."

"Dr. Marlene, we live in a small town, not a big city. Those kinds of rules are more for the city. Small towns are less populated, and everyone is supposed to know everyone. I know that Dr. Gibson is married to Mary Beth Gibson, and I heard that years ago, she was his patient when she had pneumonia."

I can't argue with that because he's right. It can be perceived differently in small towns than in big cities.

But it also seemed weird for the client, who never wanted to open up to me in therapy, to invite me to have a drink with them.

“You are right.”

“Okay, so can we have a drink one of these days? Or at least lunch?”

“I’m surprised that you’d want that. You act as if you cannot stand me.”

I find myself joking now, as he chuckles with a nod.

“I admit, I am still trying to decide about you. Maybe my not wanting to do therapy is making me see you more negatively. So, allow me to get to know you better, Dr. Marlene.”

“Okay, fine. We can have dinner tomorrow night. How does that sound?”

He doesn’t answer as he pulls out his phone and types something.

Seconds later, my cell phone vibrates in my back pocket as I pull it out to see that he’s texted me a smiley face.

“I know you gave me your cell phone number when we first met so I could call you whenever I had an emergency after hours. And I know I never used your number.... So here is mine in case you never put mine in your phone. I’d love to have dinner with you tomorrow.”

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I feel slight butterflies in my stomach as I smile at him.

“Then it’s all set then. You give me a place and time. And please... call me Sarah.”

Chapter 5

Tyler

Forced Proximity

I find myself pacing the floor of my cabin, a place I've considered my escape from the world.

It's nestled quietly in the woods, a mere ten-minute drive from the town's prying eyes but miles away in terms of privacy and peace. The idea of inviting Dr. Marlene here — Sarah, as she insists I call her now — for dinner seems both exhilarating and anxiety-inducing.

Would she see it as a step too far, or would she appreciate the gesture for what it is: an attempt to show her a side of me that's not just another name on her appointment list?

The memory of our last encounter outside her office hits me like a playful slap of reality, reminding me of the boundaries we're meant to dance around.

Offering her a drink at the bar was my moment of wild abandon. She gracefully sidestepped me, reminding me of the etiquette that's supposed to simmer between a

therapist and their client.

It's a gentle but necessary nudge back to our lanes, yet here I am, plotting to not just cross those lines but to dynamite them into oblivion by inviting her into my hideout.

At first, making a reservation at a restaurant seemed like the logical choice, but the risk of being seen and the unspoken judgments from familiar faces made the idea unappealing.

This cabin, with its walls echoing nothing but the serenity of nature, might be the perfect compromise. It allows us the privacy we need, away from the nosy residents of our small town.

Recalling my conversation with Richard, the old cowboy from the ranch, brings a half-smile to my face. I'd broached the subject of Sarah's favorite foods with casual ease I hadn't felt, disguising my probing behind a veneer of casual conversation.

His revelation that she loved chicken and dumplings — and was practically a passionate devotee of chocolate pecan pie — felt like striking gold.

With the afternoon wide open, I roll up my sleeves and dive into the kitchen. Cooking is my second language, a personal kind of therapy. Mrs. Carolyn taught me to cook more than macaroni on the stove, and the primary staple of eggs and bacon.

I kick things off with the pie, giving it time to chill, before I tackle the chicken and dumplings. It's a dance of sorts, methodical and almost meditative. Each chop, stir, and simmer keeps me focused on not making a mistake. I realize that Sarah is the third person I've ever cooked for, the first and second being my son and Mrs. Carolyn, and it gives me weird jitters.

Why am I going out of my way to do this? Why not just take her to a small diner?

She accepted my invitation to dinner, meaning she didn't mind us being seen together. We're not exactly friends, but we aren't strangers either, since I've been seeing her for therapy for over a month.

The rhythm of cooking, the steady chop and sizzle, has a way of smoothing out the rough edges of my thoughts. I focus on the task, measuring flour for the dumplings with a precision that's more often found in my work than in my kitchen. But today, the kitchen is my workshop and chicken and dumplings is my project.

I start with the chicken, seasoning it with salt, pepper, and rosemary and letting it brown in the pot. There's something deeply satisfying about watching it transform, the golden crust forming under my watch. The smell fills the kitchen, a comforting, warm aroma that seems to wrap around me, soothing my nerves.

While the chicken simmers, I turn to the dumplings, my hands moving with a confidence I didn't know I had in the kitchen. Mrs. Carolyn's voice echoes in my head, reminding me that cooking is as much about feeling as it is about measurements.

"The dough should be soft but not sticky," she'd say, and I find myself repeating the words under my breath as I mix.

By the time I drop the dumplings into the pot, my earlier anxiety has simmered down, much like the dish on the stove. As I watch them puff up, I realize that this isn't just about impressing Sarah or proving something. It's about sharing a part of myself that Mrs. Carolyn helped nurture, a part that my son got to see every day.

The final touch is a handful of fresh parsley, chopped and sprinkled over the top. I step back, looking over the meal I've prepared, and for a moment, I allow myself a slight sense of pride. Cooking, I understand now, is more than therapy. It's a way of communicating and sharing joy and comfort without needing words.

And as I set the table, my mind isn't filled with doubts about the evening ahead but with quiet hope. Maybe, in the shared space of a meal made with care, Sarah and I can find common ground beyond the confines of a therapist's office. Maybe, just maybe, this chicken and dumplings can say what I've struggled to articulate—that beneath the surface, there's someone worth getting to know.

A couple of hours have passed as I nervously stand on the front porch and see Sarah's car pull up the gravel driveway. My heart skips a beat, anxiety and anticipation swirling in my chest. I smooth down the front of my shirt and take a deep breath to calm the flurry of emotions, as I step off the porch to greet her.

Sarah steps out of her car, her expression confused and curious. I can't help but notice how the sunlight catches in her hair, framing her face in a soft halo. Her brows furrow slightly when she sees me standing there as if she's trying to piece together the scenery before her.

"Tyler, I wasn't expecting—Why are we having dinner here?" she asks, her voice laced with genuine confusion. There's a vulnerability there I hadn't expected to see, and it catches me off guard.

I step forward, offering a smile to lead her inside as I reach to take her jacket. "I thought you might prefer this," I say, trying to keep my voice even. "You seemed a bit uncomfortable the last time we bumped into each other in town. And, I don't know, I just figured it might be easier here—more private."

She hesitates momentarily, then nods as she hands over her jacket.

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"I'm sorry about that. It was hypocritical of me, wasn't it?" Sarah's cheeks pink slightly, and she looks away.

"I've shared meals with plenty of people around Pine Creek. I shouldn't have been so off-putting towards you, especially when I don't know much about you. Not personally, anyway, aside from... you know, your professional life."

I nod, understanding the unspoken reference to my days spent on the rodeo circuit, riding bulls, and chasing belt buckles. "It's alright," I reassure her. "Come on in. I'll show you around."

The cabin is small but cozy, bathed in the warm light of the setting sun streaming through the windows. I give Sarah a quick tour, pointing out the little details that make this place feel like home. I tell her the reason why I purchased it.

I needed a private escape when I felt myself going crazy and didn't want my son to see me in that state. Throughout, she nods and smiles, a gentle warmth in her demeanor that I hadn't fully appreciated until now.

"What's that amazing smell?" she asks suddenly, her eyes brightening with curiosity.

"Oh, uh, that's dinner," I say, leading her back to the small kitchen. I gesture for her to sit at the kitchen table, and she does, her gaze following me as I scoop a generous portion of chicken and dumplings into a bowl.

I place the bowl in front of her, and her eyes light up with surprise. "Chicken and dumplings?" she echoes, a hint of disbelief in her voice.

I feel my cheeks warm at her reaction. "Yeah, I, uh, I heard it was your favorite," I admit shyly, avoiding her gaze as I take the seat opposite hers after getting her a glass of iced tea. Watching her face, the openness strikes me, the genuine appreciation shining back at me.

"Tyler, I'm touched," she says, her voice soft and filled with an emotion I can't quite place. "No one's... It's been a long time since someone made something special for me."

We settle into a comfortable rhythm, the clink of utensils against our bowls filling the silence as we dive into the meal. The savory aroma envelops the cabin, creating a relaxing atmosphere.

Watching Sarah take the first bite, her eyes briefly closed in appreciation, a wave of accomplishment washed over me. It's oddly satisfying to see her enjoy something I've made. "This is delicious, Tyler," she says, her smile radiating sincerity. "Thank you."

I grin, feeling a warm sense of pride. "I'm glad you like it. It's the least I could do." The conversation slowly shifts as we speak about our lives beyond the surface level. Talking to her feels natural. I'm telling her about Mrs. Carolyn before I know it. "She's been with us since Timmy was born," I explain. "I honestly don't know what I would've done without her. She's like family now."

Sarah listens intently, her fork pausing mid-air. "It sounds like she's been a huge help to you and Timmy."

I nod, stirring my bowl absentmindedly. "Yeah, she's been amazing. Whenever I'm home, I try to take over so she can have a break. It's important to me to be there for Timmy, especially with all the traveling I do for rehab and therapy sessions."

I pause momentarily, realizing how much I'm opening up to her. It feels right, though,

like Sarah's someone who genuinely cares to listen.

Ironically, this is the kind of openness Sarah wanted in her office during therapy.

Maybe being in a homier atmosphere is helping me to open up easier.

The conversation takes a more profound turn, and I find myself talking about something I rarely do – my family.

"My family, well, they've never really been there for me, not in the way that matters. From my grandparents to my parents, uncles, and aunts, even my cousins, it's always been about what I can do for them, not the other way around."

I can see Sarah's expression change to one of concern, her eyes softening. "That sounds tough, Tyler."

"It's been a challenge," I admit, feeling a heaviness lift off me as I speak. "Their greed, their constant need for more... it pushed me away. I changed my number years ago, moved to Pine Creek, and never looked back. They don't even know I live here."

"It sounds like you've built a pretty good life for yourself, though," she encourages gently, reaching over to place her hand over mine. Her touch is comforting and reassuring in a way I didn't know I needed.

"Yeah," I say, looking into her eyes, finding an understanding I hadn't expected. "Finding out I would be a dad changed everything for me. It gave me a purpose, you know? Suddenly, I wasn't so alone anymore." My voice is quiet, but in the silence of the cabin, it feels like it echoes around us, carrying the weight of my words.

Sarah nods, squeezing my hand. "I can see that. You're doing an amazing job, Tyler. Anyone who knows about your son can see how much you love Timmy."

Sarah's gentle yet hesitant voice breaks through my train of thought. "Can I ask... what about Timmy's mother?" Her eyes search mine for permission to proceed.

Taking a deep breath, I decide to lay it all bare. "Joyce... she was a one-night stand. And honestly, I think she messed with the protection that night. She was the one who offered me the condom, and later on, I couldn't shake off the suspicion that she might have poked holes in it after learning about the pregnancy."

It feels surreal to discuss this out loud, especially with Sarah.

Her brow furrows in confusion and concern. "Why would she do that?"

"It's complicated, but she thought she'd score a payday by getting pregnant. I guess she figured since I have a bit of a name for myself, it'd be her ticket to something bigger."

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Sarah's expression softens further, her eyes reflecting a mix of sadness and disbelief. "That's... that's awful, Tyler. I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

I shake my head slightly, a wry smile forming. "The craziest part? She thought she could use the pregnancy to bind herself to me somehow. But she miscalculated. When she finally told me about Timmy, she made it seem like she was doing me a favor, keeping it all hush-hush to 'protect' me."

"And the public... they never found out?"

"No, they didn't. When Joyce revealed she was pregnant, I had my lawyer draw up a non-disclosure agreement. She couldn't talk about the pregnancy, our child, or even me. In exchange, she signed away her parental rights, and I ensured she was compensated well enough to start a new life. Far away from us."

Sarah reaches across, her hand finding mine again, this time with a grip that conveys a mixture of empathy and support. "I can't even imagine how hard that must have been for you, Tyler. To deal with all that, and then to take care of Timmy alone."

I nod, feeling a mix of gratitude and relief. "It was tough, yeah. But having Timmy? He makes it all worth it. Everything else falls into place."

The wild uproar of a storm outside quickly drowns out the clink of forks and knives against our plates. In no time, the dining room's comfortable vibe gets swallowed by the relentless dance of rain pelting against the windows and gusts of wind that scream like spirited stallions.

Sarah's eyes dart towards the window, her earlier calm replaced by strong tension. "Wow, that storm escalated quickly. It sounds pretty intense out there."

I glance through the window, observing the storm's fury with a nonchalance honed from years of being used to heavy thunderstorms. "It's fine. The cabin is sturdy enough for this kind of weather."

"But it looks dangerous," she protests, her voice laced with a hint of panic.

Sensing her distress, I lean back in my chair, trying to inject a dose of calm into the situation. "Hey, it's fine. Really. If it's still bad when you're ready to leave, you can always wait it out here. Or worst comes to worst, you can spend the night and head out tomorrow once it's all cleared up."

She chews on her lip, clearly wrestling with the idea. The thought of her staying the night sends an unexpected jolt through me, but I do my best to keep my expression neutral.

Before she can respond, I stand up and head to the kitchen counter near the refrigerator, sensing a need to lighten the mood. I return holding a plate with a big piece of chocolate pecan pie. "Here, try this. I baked it myself," I announce with a hint of pride, placing the plate in front of her.

Sarah's apprehension seems to melt away as she stares at the dessert. "You baked this?" she asks, her voice imbued with surprise.

"Yeah, baking has always been a bit of a hobby," I admit, watching her reaction closely while feeling nervous. I've never baked chocolate pecan pie before. This was the second pie I baked today. The first was a failed attempt that went straight into the trash.

I sit down on the same side of the table she's on instead of across from her like before, maybe because I oddly want to be closer to her. Her sweet perfume scent is stronger this close to her, to the point I'm mesmerized.

Taking her fork, she scoops up a sizable piece of the pie and brings it to her mouth. Her eyes close in appreciation as she savors the taste. "Oh, Tyler, this is amazing," she declares, her earlier worries momentarily forgotten.

With a glowing review of my pie, her anxiety about the storm dissipates. "I... I think I'll be fine staying here until the storm passes," she finally concedes, her voice more robust now, laced with a newfound steadiness.

The storm outside seems to rage with a ferocity that mirrors my heart's racing. It's strange, this feeling as if the universe conspired to lock us away together, away from the rest of the world.

"So, you've got hobbies," Sarah begins, breaking the silence with a playful tone as she takes another bite of the pie. "Baking, huh? What else do you do when you're not being an amazing father or hiding out in your cabin?"

I chuckle at her description, finding her curiosity about my life flattering. "Well," I pause, pondering over my next words. "As you can see with the meal I prepared... cooking as well. The men at the other ranch I used to be at were very sexist. "Cooking and cleaning are things women do"... those were the kind of things they would say. So, I never felt comfortable showing off my cooking skills or baking for our events. I feel I can do that here in Pine Creek. I love experimenting with new recipes."

Her intrigued expression encourages me further. "Really? I'd love to try some of your test dishes sometime," she says earnestly.

With courage I didn't know I possessed, I reached across the small space separating us, taking her hand in mine. "Sarah," I began, my voice barely a whisper. I can't explain this, but..."

The rest of my words are lost as she leans in, and our lips meet in a kiss that feels like a promise. The storm outside might be howling, but here in my cabin, there's only us. Every touch and kiss feels like a discovery of something precious and long-awaited.

I lift her into my arms as I deepen the kiss. The world outside fades away, but the sound of the rain stays. I lift her into my arms from her chair to carry her out of the kitchen.

The thunder is like a soundtrack for us... background music to the passion filling up the cabin as we continue kissing like we never wanted to stop. I carried her through the living room towards the hallway where one of the bedrooms is. My heart pounded against my chest like a drum as I entered the bedroom and lay her on the bed.

"Sarah.. I have no idea what's going on with us, but I promise I didn't invite you to the cabin for this. It's just.. when you kissed me.."

"I hope you're not about to apologize, Tyler. I am a grown woman, and I kissed you because I wanted to. And I let you pick me up and carry me wherever you wanted because I want you like you want me. Maybe this storm keeping me here overnight is a sign."

Her words shock me, and she begins to unbutton her blouse while I stare transfixed at her. I start undressing as well, following her lead and hoping that this is really okay. We can't blame anything on the alcohol tomorrow because we only had iced tea for dinner. Or maybe I'm slightly confused since she looked ready to run in the other direction, just from me offering to buy her a drink at the bar.

Maybe when I opened up to her over dinner, a bond finally grew and forged between us. She sees the other side of me that I rarely show anyone else.

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We free our bodies from our clothes and find ourselves on the bed together. I am swept up amid passionate kissing and these electrifying feelings I have never felt before.

The rain pounds against the windows, mimicking the intensity of our bodies pressed together. Sarah's hands roam down my back with a burning hunger, pulling me closer until there is no space between us. We desperately gasp and moan, our sounds blending in harmony as we seek more from each other.

As I enter her, she consumes me from the inside out. A fire rages through my veins, but it pales compared to the inferno growing between us. It feels almost surreal to think that we were two strangers brought together by a storm just hours ago.

But now, there is no denying the intense connection between us. I feel waves of emotion crashing over me with every touch, every caress. And as we move together with an urgent rhythm, everything else fades into oblivion.

Sarah's nails dig into my skin, urging me on as she cries out my name at the height of her pleasure. She knows exactly how to push me to my limits and beyond.

We can't bear to part from each other even after we both find release. We lie there in a tangled mess of limbs and breathless gasps, completely lost in each other.

"I can't believe this is real," I whisper hoarsely into her ear.

She traces circles on my back with a contented smile. "It's very real," she replies, her voice laced with pure satisfaction.

I kiss her deeply before nuzzling my head against her chest, listening to the steady rhythm of her heart beneath my ear. The storm passes outside, but inside this room, a different kind of storm rages on - fueled by passion and desire that shows no signs of slowing down.

Chapter 6

Sarah

Unexpected Chemistry

It's Wednesday, and the day feels different. It's charged with an electric current of anticipation and newfound affection.

Tyler walks in for his therapy session, and the moment I see him, my heart ignites. There's a lightness in his stride, a smile playing on his lips that wasn't there before.

"Good morning, Sarah," he greets, his voice a gentle rumble that stirs something profound within me.

"Good morning, Tyler," I reply, trying to maintain the professionalism that's become harder to uphold since that night in his cabin. There's an unspoken conversation in our glances, a warmth that we both try to set aside in the confines of these sessions.

Today, Tyler is more open than I've ever seen him. He talks about his fears, his dreams, and even the small victories he's recently experienced. It feels like we're breaking down walls, his honesty forging stronger connections between us, not just as therapist and client, but something more personal, more profound.

I think it also helps that I know he has a son, and that's something he doesn't have to hold back or hide from me during sessions anymore.

The session progresses, and I am caught in the whirlwind of my feelings. Tyler's presence fills the room, a comforting, exhilarating force. Despite the professional setting, his every word seems to pull me closer. His laughter and insights show sides of him I'm eager to explore. It's clear he feels the connection, too. His eyes hold mine with an intensity that speaks volumes.

When our time is up, he stands, hesitating for a moment. "Thank you, Sarah. Today felt... good," he says, his eyes lingering on mine.

"I'm glad to hear that, Tyler. I'm here to help," I manage to say, though my heart races with the unsaid.

He nods, a silent understanding passing between us.

"Would you like to grab lunch together?" he asks, his voice hopeful yet uncertain. Without a moment's hesitation, I say, "Yes, that would be nice," echoing how easily I had accepted his coffee date offer yesterday. It feels like we're gradually peeling back the layers of formality and caution, stepping into territory that's both exhilarating and terrifying.

I'm still worried about blurring the line between professional and personal, but I believe that line is already blurred based on what happened this past weekend.

We ride together in Tyler's pickup to Grandma's Comfort Diner. The drive from my office is short, but every second is laden with an unspoken anticipation. I glance at Tyler, his focus on the road, yet I can sense an undercurrent of eagerness in how he occasionally steals glances my way.

Walking into the diner with Tyler, I'm acutely aware of the shift in dynamics. Instead of the weird, nosy glances I half expected, we are greeted with warm, friendly smiles from the diner patrons. It's a small town, and Grandma's Comfort Diner is a local

institution where everyone knows everyone. Yet, their acceptance of Tyler and me together catches me off guard, warming something inside me.

We find a booth by the window, and as we settle in, I can't help but notice how right it feels to be here with him. Perusing the menu, I ask Tyler, "Have you eaten here before?"

He shakes his head, his eyes scanning the extensive menu. "No, I haven't, but I've heard great things about it. What's good here?"

I smile, eager to share one of my favorite spots with him.

"Everything's good as this diner has the best food in town."

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That piques his interest even more as the waitress approaches us to take our drink orders, but Tyler is already ready to order. "Alright, then I'll try the salmon croquettes with garlic mashed potatoes and a lemonade," he decides, handing the menu back to the waitress as she jots down his order.

I opt for the brisket Brunswick stew, a personal favorite of mine, and hand my menu over. Once the waitress leaves, the reality of sitting across from Tyler, not as his therapist but as... something else, starts to sink in. I'm nervous, but there's also an undeniable spark of excitement.

I want to ask him something about us, but I realize I should let things play out a bit longer—maybe to see where this all leads. I smile as he glances around the diner to check out its décor while I'm busy checking him out.

Thirty minutes have passed, and we've settled into an easy rhythm of conversation as we enjoy our lunch. The diner is alive with the hum of other patrons, but it feels like we're in our little world. Tyler takes another bite of his salmon croquettes and lets out a contented sigh, his eyes meeting mine as he does.

"These croquettes are phenomenal," Tyler exclaims, hardly able to contain his enthusiasm. "And these garlic mashed potatoes—are you sure they don't have some secret ingredient?"

I can't help but laugh, watching him enjoy his meal with such enthusiasm. "I told you, this place has the best food in town. It's all pretty straightforward, though—just good, honest cooking."

He nods, taking another generous forkful. "Well, they've certainly won me over. I can see why this is one of your favorite spots." His gaze lingers on mine a little longer than necessary, and I feel excitement in my stomach.

I bite my brisket Brunswick stew, savoring the rich flavors. "I'm glad you like it. This stew has been my go-to comfort food since moving here. There's something about it that feels like home."

Tyler smiles, and a warmth in his eyes makes my heart skip a beat. "I get that," he says. "It's nice to find those places or foods that ground you, remind you of what's important."

I agree while taking another heaping scoop of the brisket onto my spoon.

"So, Sarah, tell me about one of your most daring adventures," Tyler prompts, his elbows resting on the table as he leans in, genuinely interested.

I chuckle, the memories flooding back. "Well, one time, I decided to go skydiving on a whim. My friends thought I had completely lost it, but something about throwing caution to the wind just... called to me. I realized I was burnt out from work and my life. This is before I moved back to Pine Creek."

Tyler's eyes widen in admiration. "Skydiving? Wow, I have to admit, that's impressive. I'm not sure I could take that leap—literally."

"It was terrifying and exhilarating, all at once," I admit, my heart racing at the mere recollection. "But once I was in the air, free-falling, it felt like pure freedom. Like every worry I had just vanished."

He nods, visibly impressed. "That's incredible, Sarah. It sounds like a life-changing experience."

"It was. But enough about my escapade. What about you, Tyler? Have you had any wild adventures in your past?" I ask, curious to peel back another layer of his intriguing persona.

He laughs, a sound that seems to resonate straight through me. "I'm afraid my adventures are all centered around my career—literally. My biggest thrill is bull riding, and it's always adrenaline-pumping, no matter how many contests and events I've done."

The admiration in my eyes must be visible because he quickly adds, "It was a dream of mine for years, and seeing it come to fruition was... well, it was everything I hoped for and more."

"That's fascinating," I say, my curiosity piqued. "Bull riding must take an incredible amount of courage and skill. Out of all the contests and events, what would you say has been your proudest accomplishment?"

Tyler pauses momentarily, his gaze drifting off as if sifting through a treasure trove of memories. "Hmm, that's a tough one," he admits with a modest shrug. "But, if I had to pick, it'd probably be when I won a Professional Bull Riders event 6 years ago. It was more than just winning. It was about overcoming my fears and proving I could do it. That event was a turning point for me, not just in my career, but in my life as a whole."

His eyes meet mine, and the intensity of his conviction strikes me. "That sounds incredible, Tyler. It's inspiring to hear how much it meant to you," I respond, genuinely moved by his story.

He smiles, that easy, heart-stopping smile that's become all too familiar. "Thanks, Sarah. It's been a wild ride, but I wouldn't change a thing. What about you? In your adventures, what's something you're most proud of?"

I ponder the question, tracing the wood grain on the table with my finger. "Besides surviving skydiving?" I joke, earning a chuckle from Tyler.

"Honestly, it's leaping to move back to Pine Creek. It may not seem adventurous compared to skydiving or bull riding, but it was a big step for me. Leaving a steady job, a town full of noise and chaos, to return here... It was scary. Especially since I know that, with me not growing up here, I had many people forgetting that Jake had a sister. And I hoped I could continue living with my own identity, away from his spotlight. But I realized this is where my heart is."

Tyler nods, understanding flickering in his eyes. "Sometimes the bravest adventures are the ones that bring us home," he says softly, his gaze holding mine. We stare into each other's eyes a bit longer before pulling away to finish our meal as excitement swirls in my heart.

Chapter 7

Tyler

Healing Begins

The warm afternoon sun blankets Beartooth Ranch in a golden glow, but inside Dr. Carmine's rehabilitation area, the atmosphere is all business.

I'm supposed to be here for my knee, to get it back in shape after the accident that nearly ended my career. Yet, all I can think about is Sarah. Her laughter echoes in my mind, her resilience inspires me, and the simple pleasure of our lunch together has my heart racing faster than any rodeo.

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I'm lying on the therapy table, trying to focus on the exercises, but it's as if I'm somewhere else entirely. Dr. Carmine has been talking, but his words are a distant buzz against the vivid memories of Sarah's smile, her joke about skydiving, and the way her presence seems to ground me, bringing me back to Pine Creek in a way I hadn't realized I needed.

"Tyler? Are you with me?" Dr. Carmine's voice cuts through my daydreams, his tone a mix of amusement and concern.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, sorry, doc. Just got a lot on my mind," I admit, shifting uncomfortably on the table as I try to refocus on the present.

Dr. Carmine raises an eyebrow, clearly not convinced. "Thinking about Sarah, aren't you?" he asks, and I can't help but wonder if my feelings are that obvious.

I chuckle, not seeing the point in denying it. "Is it that easy to tell?"

"Only to someone who's seen as many love-struck patients as I have," he says with a smile, then grows more serious. "But let's get back to why you're here. Tell me about your knee. Any pain today?"

I flex my knee, testing its range and assessing the discomfort. "It's there, but manageable. Feels tight, mostly," I respond, more attuned to the physical sensations now that I've been pulled back to reality.

Dr. Carmine nods, making notes on his clipboard. "Okay, I want you to try some light stretches, then we'll do a bit of walking therapy. It's important to gauge your progress

accurately."

The session becomes more hands-on from there, with Dr. Carmine guiding me through various exercises designed to strengthen my knee and improve flexibility. "Just like that, perfect," he encourages, as my muscles stretch and burn with the effort. Each step, each stretch, brings me back to the present, the physical effort grounding me in a way that's reminiscent of being on a horse. The pain is a sharp reminder of my accident, the fragility of life, and what I stand to lose if I'm not careful.

Yet, even as I concentrate on my rehabilitation, my thoughts drift back to Sarah. "You seem distracted today," Dr. Carmine observes, not missing a beat. I nod, the realization hitting me with the force of a runaway steer. My feelings for her are deepening, rapidly transforming into something serious, something real. And the most astonishing part? She seems to be feeling the same way, comfortable with our growing closeness despite the unconventional start to our relationship.

By the end of the session, I'm physically tired but emotionally energized. Dr. Carmine gives me a knowing look as I get ready to leave, his earlier question having served its purpose in getting me to participate more actively. "You're making good progress," he says. "Just remember, healing is not just physical. It sounds like your heart's getting a workout too."

"Keep focusing on your rehab, Tyler. And Sarah," he adds with a wink.

I flash him a grateful smile. "Will do, doc."

I step out of his rehabilitation room and find myself roaming the grounds of the ranch with his words echoing in my mind. Is it that obvious about Sarah? I did see a lot of familiar faces yesterday when she and I were having coffee so maybe word traveled around the ranch?

Did we look cozy together to the point people suspect that we are dating, even though we still aren't to that point yet?

That concerns me because I have no idea if Sarah's stance on us will change if she believes people think we're already in a relationship and we're not. I decide that maybe we need to have a talk with everything that's happened between us the last few days.

I sit down on the bench in front of the duck pond as I await Sarah's arrival. I'm feeling anxious and my palms are even sweaty with the fear of where this talk may lead. I feel it's important to let Sarah know that if Dr. Carmine is jokingly bringing her up to me then it's obvious that people are suspecting something is going on between us.

Sarah appears on the path leading to the pond, her stride confident yet cautious. My heart races as she approaches, the weight of our impending conversation grounding me to the bench.

"Hey, Tyler," she says, her voice carrying a hint of uncertainty that mirrors my own. I only texted her asking her to meet me here without giving her a reason why, so without context I can understand why she's looking at me like that.

"Hey, Sarah. Thanks for meeting me." I gesture to the spot next to me, trying to appear more composed than I feel. She sits down, turning slightly to face me, her attention undivided.

"So, what's on your mind?" she asks, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

I take a deep breath, considering how to start. "Dr. Carmine mentioned you today, in a way that suggests... people might think we're... more than what we are." My words trail off, but her expression encourages me to continue. "And, I guess, what I'm trying to say is—I don't want rumors or what people might think to influence what's

happening between us. But, more importantly, I realized I don't want to hide or pretend about how I admire and care about you."

Sarah listens intently, her eyes searching mine. After a moment, she speaks, her voice soft but steady. "Tyler, I've been feeling a bit overwhelmed by all of this, too. It's not just about what others might think, but also about what we're comfortable with... ourselves. I care about you, more than I've planned or expected to, especially given that I am your therapist. But I told myself as long as we remain professional within the office, we are free to show our feelings outside of the sessions."

Her admission sends a warm rush through me, reassuring me that opening up was the right choice.

"I'm glad to hear that because I feel the same," I tell her. "I'm not just here for the physical healing, you know. These past days, talking and spending time with you, it's been helping me heal in ways I didn't expect."

Sarah nods, her eyes reflecting a mix of emotions. "Me, too. I've been carrying this... loneliness, I guess. Keeping everything professional, detached, it's easier. But with you, Tyler, it feels different. I feel like I can be myself, and that's terrifying and... wonderful."

"We're peeling back layers, talking about our pasts, the fears, and the dreams we've been too scared to follow. I think it's amazing and has helped bring us closer in a way."

Sarah nods, taking a deep breath. "I've always wanted to have a life outside of my career," she confesses. "But the fear of people finding out that I'm Jake's little sister, of disappointing myself and others due to some insecurities I have about myself, it holds me back."

I understand her all too well. "I get it," I reply, "For me, it's been about finding who I am outside of the rodeo circuit. After my injury, I had no choice but to confront my identity beyond just being a competitor in the public eye, since no one knows about me being a father."

"It's tough, isn't it?" Sarah says, a hint of empathy in her eyes.

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"Yeah, it is. But talking about it somehow makes it feel less daunting," I admit, grateful for this shared moment of vulnerability.

We fall silent for a moment with smiles of understanding etched on our faces.

"Tyler, I've never felt this comfortable sharing my weaknesses with anyone," Sarah says, her hand brushing against mine.

"And I've never trusted someone enough to show them my scars. Not just the physical ones," I reply, entwining my fingers with hers. "I think we're on the path to something real here, Sarah."

She squeezes my hand, her smile a promise of continuing to spend time with me like this. "I agree. I'm looking forward to seeing where this path takes us."

Shifting slightly, I reach for the brown paper bag lying next to me on the bench, offering a lighter transition from the depths of our conversation. "You know," I begin, a playful gleam twinkling in my eyes, "I can't think of a better way to top off this heart-to-heart than sharing a bag of stale bread with some ducks." I wave the bag gently in the air between us, a silent invitation to a simple joy.

Sarah's laughter peals out, clear and vibrant against the backdrop of the park's serene beauty. "Feeding ducks? That's your grand follow-up?" she teases, her tone light and full of mirth.

I can't help but chuckle, nodding. "Absolutely. It's the perfect metaphor, isn't it? Giving what we can, even if it's just a bit of bread, to make someone else's day a little

brighter." Standing, I extend my hand to her, an offer to join me in this small, yet significant, act.

She accepts my hand with a gentle squeeze, standing gracefully. "Well, when you put it like that, how can I refuse?" Sarah's voice is soft, imbued with a newfound lightness that our conversation has bestowed upon her.

We walk over to the pond's edge, where a group of ducks has already gathered, as if they were waiting for us. I tear off a piece of bread, demonstrating how to toss it to the eager birds without getting too close. "You try," I encourage, handing her a piece.

With a cautious hand, Sarah flings the bread towards the ducks, watching in delight as they scramble over it. The simplicity of the moment, the laughter and lightness that follows, feels like a cleansing breeze, sweeping away the residual heaviness of our earlier disclosures.

"I can't remember the last time I did something like this," Sarah muses, her voice a mix of wonder and contentment. "It's silly, but it feels... freeing, somehow."

I nod, understanding the sentiment all too well. "It's the simple things, isn't it? They remind us that not everything has to be so complicated. That there's beauty and peace in the mundane if we're just willing to see it."

She leans into me slightly, a gesture of comfort and connection. "Thank you, Tyler. For today, for this." She gestures to the bag of bread, the ducks, the park, encompassing all that we've shared in a simple expression of gratitude.

"Anytime, Sarah," I reply, my heart full. "And thank you. For being brave enough to share your fears. Your dreams. It's made all the difference."

As we continue to feed the ducks, throwing bits of bread and watching as they paddle

eagerly toward each offering, I can't help but feel a deep sense of anticipation for what's to come.

Today has marked a turning point, not just in our relationship but in our individual journeys of self-discovery and acceptance.

Chapter 8

Sarah

The Ranch Visit

Sitting alone in the small, cluttered office tucked away in the corner of Beartooth Ranch, I find myself surrounded by stacks of inventory forms and scattered files.

The hum of the old computer mixed with the distant sounds of ranch life creates a backdrop for my troubled thoughts. I'm methodically checking through each form, making sure we're not running low on anything essential—feed, medical supplies, maintenance tools—but my mind is elsewhere, caught in the web of my recent interactions with Tyler.

The office, usually a sanctuary of solitude and focus, now feels like a confining space where my own walls seem to close in on me. It's ironic, considering how much of my life is spent encouraging transparency and trust among our team here at the ranch. Yet, here I am, cradling my own secrets close to my chest, especially from Tyler.

Reflecting on our time at the park, the ease of our conversations, and the heartfelt exchanges, I realize how much Tyler has opened up to me. He's peeled back layers of his life, his past, his fears, and his dreams, with a level of honesty that was both unexpected and deeply moving. In contrast, I've been a guarded fortress, revealing so little, especially the fact that I'm not just Jake's sister but also a co-owner of Beartooth

Ranch. The significance of this omission weighs heavily on me, creating a chasm of discomfort.

Why haven't I told him? The question gnaws at me, echoing around the sparse room. Is it fear of how he might view me differently? Or perhaps the uncertainty of exposing that aspect of my life, knowing it could change everything between us? The truth is, my feelings for him have deepened, quietly and steadily, like the roots of an ancient tree. Acknowledging these emotions scares me, not because they exist, but because I know they could lay the foundation for something genuine and meaningful—if only built on trust.

Tyler has shown me the courage it takes to be vulnerable, to share oneself wholly with another. And here I am, holding back significant threads of my own story, threads that are essential to understanding who I am and what I stand for. This realization sits heavy on my heart, a tangible weight of unease and contrition.

If I'm to honor what's growing between us, no matter how nascent or undefined, I must step into the vulnerability he's so bravely exhibited. Keeping this part of my life hidden feels incongruent with the foundation we're laying together, a foundation I hope can be built on mutual openness and shared truths.

Taking a deep breath, I push the inventory forms aside, a symbolic clearing of space for what needs to be done. It's time to share my truth with Tyler, to invite him into this integral part of my life. It's a risk, but one that's necessary. For the potential of 'us' to flourish, it must be nurtured by honesty, however daunting that may be.

I decide that the walls of my office are closing in on me, each piece of paperwork a brick adding to the confinement. I need air, space, anything that's not suffused with the weight of my unshared secrets. Pushing back from my desk, I stand and make my way outside, the cool breeze a welcome caress after the stuffiness of indoors.

Just as I take a deep breath, trying to draw in the serenity of the vast, open skies above the ranch, a voice slices through the quiet. "Sarah!" My heart skips, knowing instinctively who it is before I even turn. And there he is—Tyler, his approach easy and confident, with a little boy trotting at his side who is the very image of him. My eyes widen in surprise, a thousand questions surging to the forefront of my mind.

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Tyler's grin is as warm as the afternoon sun. "Hey, Sarah," he greets me, the fondness in his voice wrapping around me like a comfortable blanket. But it's the presence of the boy that has my curiosity peaking, an eyebrow arching in silent inquiry.

Noticing my gaze, Tyler places a hand on the boy's shoulder, guiding him gently forward. "Sarah, this is Timmy," he says, his voice imbued with a pride so palpable, it almost takes on a form of its own. "Timmy, this is Sarah, a very good friend of mine."

"Hi, Sarah!" Timmy's voice is bright, a mirror to Tyler's in its warmth. His eyes, so like Tyler's, regard me with an openness and curiosity that children wear so well.

The introduction, while simple, sends a myriad of emotions through me. Part of me wonders if this is Tyler's way of testing the waters, showing me a more intimate part of his life. Or perhaps it's simply a coincidence they're here. Either way, my heart swells at the sight of them together, at the undeniable bond they share.

"Hi, Timmy," I manage, my voice soft but sincere. "It's... wow, it's really nice to meet you." Turning to Tyler, I ask, "What brings you two out here today?"

Tyler's gaze holds a hint of something deeper, something that tells me this isn't just a casual visit. "We were just going for a little adventure, weren't we, kiddo? Timmy's been wanting to see the ranch, and I thought, who better to show us around than you?"

The question hangs between us, an invitation laced with layers of meaning. This isn't just about showing Timmy the ranch, it's about sharing parts of our lives that have

remained untouched by the other's presence. It's about vulnerability, about the possibility of blending our worlds together in a way we haven't yet explored.

With a deep, steady breath, I nod. "I'd love that. Shall we?" I gesture broadly towards the open expanse of the ranch, a symbolic offering of everything I've held back, everything I've wanted to share but haven't found the courage to.

Tyler's smile in response is enough to lighten the load I've been carrying, and as we start walking, Timmy's shy glances at me, and Tyler's gaze warm upon us, I feel something shift. A door opening, perhaps, or walls coming down. The start of something new, something terrifyingly and wonderfully honest...

We start our tour at the heart of the ranch, where the air is filled with the scent of fresh hay and earth. I lead Tyler and Timmy to the small arena where bull riders practice, the soft dirt underfoot still containing the imprints of recent activity. "This is where your dad will practice bull riding eventually," I explain to Timmy, whose eyes are as wide as saucers, scanning the enclosure in awe. "It's good that he comes here for rehab because he gets to get a feel of where his new practice ground will be once he heals."

"He's really brave, isn't he?" Timmy's voice is filled with a mix of pride and curiosity, looking up at me for confirmation.

"Absolutely," I affirm, my gaze shifting to Tyler, who stands silent, a contented smile playing on his lips, watching us bond over the legacy he's built.

Next, we head to the stables, where several horses poke their heads out, curious about our presence. "And this is where your dad helps out with loading the hay. He's pretty strong, huh?" I chuckle, leading them inside. The massive size of the horses seems to both frighten and fascinate Timmy. He hesitates at the entrance, gripping Tyler's hand tighter.

"They're so...big," he whispers, a mix of fear and excitement lacing his words.

"Want to pet one?" I offer, gently guiding him closer to a gentle mare named Daisy, known for her calm demeanor. With a nod from Tyler, Timmy steps forward, his small hand shaking as he extends it towards Daisy, who lowers her head graciously. The mixture of thrill and trepidation on Timmy's face as he makes contact is pure magic.

Tyler maintains his role as the observer, the silent strength beside us. As we move from one place to another, sharing stories and laughs, I can't help but feel a deepening connection, not just between Tyler and me, but with Timmy too.

There's something profoundly beautiful in watching a child discover new worlds. Especially when it's through the lens of his father's life. I am curious though at Timmy's excitement over the horses and foals as if he's never been up close to any of them before.

Tyler must notice the expression on my face as he chuckles. "That ranch back in my hometown was a walking safety hazard... as you know due to my injury. I never let him go to the ranch because I always feared for his safety. So, he's only seen horses and stuff in books and on television, never in person."

Timmy's wonder transforms into a beacon of endless questions. "Can horses understand us when we talk?" he asks, his voice filled with curiosity.

I kneel down to his level, smiling. "In their own way, yes. They sense kindness and love more than words. When you're gentle with them, they'll trust you and listen to you."

He turns his attention back to Daisy, whispering something in her ear. Daisy nuzzles his hand in response, making his eyes light up. "She likes me!" he exclaims, looking

back at us for confirmation.

Tyler kneels beside us, wrapping an arm around Timmy. "She sure does, bud. You have a way with animals."

"Can we feed them, Dad? Do they eat carrots like in the cartoons?"

Tyler looks worried, wondering if he's allowed to have Timmy feed the horses or will they need to have staff be present for that. And that's when I realize this is my chance as I take a deep breath before smiling at Timmy.

"You sure can feed them. As the co-owner of this ranch, I am perfectly fine with that.

Tyler's eyes balk in shock at hearing that before he tries to relax his expression to smile at Timmy.

"Absolutely," Tyler answers, standing up. "But we've got something even better than carrots." He leads us to a storage area, retrieving a bucket of specially formulated horse pellets. "These are designed to provide all the nutrients a horse needs. Here, take a handful and keep your palm flat."

Timmy follows his instructions meticulously, delighted as Daisy gently picks the pellets from his hand. I stand back for a moment, observing them—a father and son sharing a moment of discovery and bonding. Tyler's glance meets mine, an unspoken gratitude in his eyes for facilitating this moment.

After feeding Daisy, we make our way around the barn, meeting each of the horses. Timmy's initial apprehension has entirely vanished, replaced by an eager inquisitiveness and a burgeoning confidence.

Once Timmy is distracted, Tyler leans closer towards me as his voice drops to a

whisper.

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"Co-owner, huh? I see someone's been holding back on me."

His tone is joking, which calms my beating heart when I think for a second that he's angry with me.

"I guess my biggest secret is out now..."

Chapter 9

Tyler

Unraveling Secrets

Standing there, leaning against the old, weathered wooden fence that marks the edge of the dusty practice area, I watch the other riders with a complex mix of admiration and a deep, gnawing envy.

The sound of hooves thudding against the hard-packed earth, the enthusiastic cheer from the small group of folks gathered around, and the sight of man and beast in a dangerous, yet beautifully choreographed dance—it's a scene rich with familiarity, one I've been part of more times than I can count.

Yet, now, I find myself just a spectator, sidelined by an injury that cuts deeper than the visible scars, an injury that has temporarily stolen from me the thrill of the ride, the wind against my face, and the partnership with a creature as wild-hearted as myself.

Watching each rider take their turn, demonstrating skill, bravery, and an unspoken bond with their horse, I'm reminded of the countless hours of training, the early mornings, and the late nights spent in pursuit of perfection.

The arena, filled with the scent of dust and bulls, has always been my second home, a place where I felt alive.

But now, as I stand here, relegated to the sidelines, I'm forced to confront the possibility that my journey might take a different path, one that requires as much courage off the horse as on it.

My knee, concealed beneath the fabric of my worn jeans, serves as a constant, pulsing reminder of my vulnerability. The doctors, with their optimistic tones and encouraging words, assure me I'll ride again, but the stark truth is, they aren't the ones who'll be sitting atop a raging bull, staring straight into the eyes of fate.

They can't possibly understand the sheer intensity of the moment when even a millisecond's hesitation could spell the difference between a triumphant dismount and the crushing pain of being trampled under hooves.

Throughout my career, I've always been one to face fear squarely, to confront it with a blend of courage and recklessness. However, this... this pervasive uncertainty that now shadows my every thought, is a new kind of fear entirely.

It's not just the physical pain that gnaws at me—it's the whispering doubts about my future in the rodeo, the potential end of a passion that's defined my very existence.

Every quiet moment seems filled with the echoes of what if, challenging my resolve, and forcing me to question whether I'll ever truly find my place in the rodeo again, or if I'm destined to be a spectator of the sport I love.

Watching the young guns take their turns, each ride a mixture of raw talent and fearless ambition, I can't help but wonder if my time in this arena is up. The idea of finding a new career is as daunting as staring down a particularly mean bull. Rodeo isn't just what I do. It's who I am. Or, at least, who I was.

I've never been one to back down from a challenge, but the thought of getting back on only to be thrown, not by a bull, but by my own body's betrayal, fills me with a cold dread. There's anger there too—anger at my knee for not holding up, at my mind for entertaining the idea of quitting, and at my heart for even considering letting go of the one thing that's always made me feel alive.

The clang of a gate snaps me back to the present. Another rider takes off, the crowd's excitement rising in loud cheers. I try to muster some semblance of that enthusiasm, but it's overshadowed by a wave of introspection.

What if my best days are behind me? This ranch, with its mix of tranquility and exhilarating chaos, has become my home. But standing here, at this crossroads, I can't help but feel like an outsider in my own life.

"Maybe it's time," I murmur to no one in particular, the words more bitter than I expected. The idea of throwing in the towel isn't just about giving up the rodeo. It's about recalibrating my identity and figuring out who Tyler is without a bull beneath him. It's a thought that's as terrifying as it is liberating.

Usually, when I get like this, I find a bar to drink my worries and woes away. But I've come to realize how toxic that can become if I do it long enough that it turns me into an alcoholic. And I couldn't become that kind of man to my son.

Remembering that Sarah is working at her office here gives me an idea to head inside, so that I can maybe open up to her and hopefully feel better afterwards.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself before knocking on Sarah's office door, my heart pounding not just from the physical exertion of walking here, but from the anticipation of what's about to unfold. A soft "come in" beckons from the other side, and I push the door open. The sight of her, surrounded by stacks of paperwork yet lighting up at my appearance, eases the knot in my stomach, if only slightly.

"Tyler? This is a surprise. Are you ok?" She stands, her concern etched in the lines of her forehead, yet her eyes dance with a happiness that warms me.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything important, Sarah. I just... needed to talk, if you've got a moment," I stammer, feeling suddenly out of my depth. This room, her space, feels worlds away from the dusty arenas and ranches that I call home.

"Of course I have time for you," she reassures me, gesturing to the chair across her desk. "Sit, please."

The chair creaks under my weight as I take a seat, trying to gather my thoughts. Sarah sits too, her attention all on me, making the room feel smaller, more intimate. I've never been good with words, not like this, but looking into her understanding eyes, I find the courage I didn't know I had.

"It's... it's about my career," I start, my voice barely louder than a whisper. "Ever since the injury, I've been wrestling with this fear that... that maybe I can't go back to it. That maybe one fall was all it would take to end everything I've worked for. And now, with my knee acting up, it feels like even if I manage to get back on, another injury's just waiting for me."

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The words tumble out, messy and raw, exposing the fears I've kept caged inside for too long. Sarah listens, her expression soft but attentive, making me feel seen in a way I hadn't anticipated. It's more than just talking. It's opening up wounds I'd stubbornly tried to ignore, laying bare the insecurities that night after night have kept me company.

"Tyler," Sarah begins, her voice steady and warm. "It's natural to feel this way after what you've been through. But it's also brave to face these fears head-on, to acknowledge them. Not everyone has the courage to do that."

Her words, simple yet profound, wash over me, offering a solace I hadn't expected to find in this office, of all places. Something shifts inside me, a connection forged not just by shared laughter and fleeting moments, but by understanding and empathy. For the first time in what feels like forever, I don't feel quite so alone with my demons.

I take a deep breath, the weight of my vulnerabilities heavy in the air between us. "And there's something else," I confess, the words snagging in my throat. "My worst fear isn't just another injury... it's Timmy seeing it happen. I can't shake the image out of my head. Him witnessing it all, getting traumatized by what he sees. That thought alone is enough to..." I trail off, unable to articulate the depth of my dread.

Sarah leans forward, her presence a calming force. "Tyler, I hear you. And it's a valid fear, especially as a parent. But remember, not everything is within our control. And fearing something doesn't increase its chances of happening."

Her words, meant to console, do their job. But there's a but lingering in my mind, persistent and nagging.

"But how do I live with that? How do I take that risk every day?" My voice cracks, revealing the strain of my internal turmoil.

"By remembering why you do what you do. And also by acknowledging the steps you've taken to mitigate those risks," she counters gently. "Your injury wasn't during an event or contest. It happened at your old ranch, remember? A place you knew wasn't safe for those stunts you were practicing."

Her reminder strikes a chord, the tension in my shoulders easing fractionally. That's right. The ranch's conditions were far from ideal, something I had overlooked in my pursuit of perfection.

"I had forgotten that," I admit, the corner of my mouth twitching upwards in a semblance of a smile. "I was so caught up in the what-ifs that I forgot the circumstances surrounding the accident."

Sarah's smile is encouraging, her eyes sparkling with something akin to pride. "It's easy to get lost in the what-ifs. But focusing on the now, on what you can control, that's what's important. You've made changes since then. You're not the same person who had that fall. You've grown, learned, and most importantly, you've implemented safer practices."

The realization dawns slowly, a beam of understanding piercing the cloud of my fears. She's right. I've taken steps to ensure my safety and by extension, Timmy's peace of mind. The likelihood of history repeating itself under the same circumstances is slim.

"Thanks, Sarah," I say, my heart lighter than it's been in weeks. "Sometimes, I get so tangled up in my head, I forget to look at how far I've come."

"That's what I'm here for," she quips, her tone light, "to untangle you from your

head."

We share a laugh, the sound bright in the confinements of the office, dispersing the last remnants of my fears like smoke in the wind. For the first time in a long while, I allow myself to believe in the possibility of a future unmarred by the shadows of the past.

Chapter 10

Sarah

Growing Attraction

I take a deep breath as I step onto the porch of Tyler's home. It's a beautiful, sunny day, with the kind of light that adds a golden hue to everything it touches.

Tyler is waiting for me, a smile lighting up his face when our eyes meet. "Sarah, I'm glad you could make it," he says, his voice warm.

"Thanks for inviting me," I reply, smiling back. I'm nervous but excited to be here, to see this part of his world.

He leads me inside, and that's when I see Timmy, his bright eyes filled with surprise and joy. "Miss Sarah!" he exclaims, running towards me. I scoop him up in a hug, laughing at his enthusiasm. "Hey, Timmy, it's so good to see you again!"

We spend some time catching up, with Timmy telling me all about his adventures on the ranch since we last met. The warmth and love in their home can be felt, filling the space with a comforting ambience that I find myself relaxing into almost immediately.

Then, Tyler mentions he has someone he wants me to meet. "I've been talking Mrs. Carolyn's head off about you. She's been eager to meet you."

I nod, curious about the woman who's been a significant part of their lives. We find her in the living room, settled comfortably in her favorite chair. Her eyes light up when she sees us, a kind smile spreading across her wrinkled face. "You must be Sarah," she says, extending a hand. "I've heard so much about you."

Her warmth instantly puts me at ease, and as we talk, I can see why Tyler and Timmy are so fond of her. Mrs. Carolyn is proof of the strength and kindness that seems to define the people in Tyler's life. Not to mention I'm sure she's the one who keeps him grounded whenever he's close to spiraling.

It's clear she's taken a liking to me, her laughter filling the room, echoing warmth and acceptance. Tyler watches us with a pleased expression, his gaze softening when our laughter melds into the comfortable silence of the room.

After a while, he clears his throat, breaking the comfortable lull. "How about we head into town and grab some pie from Patty's? I reckon Mrs. Carolyn here could use a sweet treat, and I know just the place."

The mention of pie lights a spark in Timmy's eyes, and he practically bounces in his seat on the couch. "I heard Patty's Pies has every flavor of pie!"

I can't help but laugh at his enthusiasm. "I think that's a fantastic idea," I say, glancing towards Mrs. Carolyn for her approval.

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She nods, her smile deepening. "I think a little outing sounds lovely."

The ride into town in Tyler's truck is filled with easy conversation, the scenery rolling by in a peaceful blur of greens and browns. Patty's Pies is nestled in the heart of town and welcomes us with the sweet aroma of baked goods and the sound of light chatter. Inside, the warm, inviting atmosphere feels like stepping into a friend's kitchen.

We all trail into Patty's Pies, our senses immediately bombarded with the rich, tempting aromas of freshly baked pies. The interior oozes charm, with checkered tablecloths and quaint, mismatched chairs, making it feel homey and inviting. Behind the glass display, a dizzying array of pies beckons, from traditional apple and cherry to more adventurous flavors like rhubarb and peach bourbon.

"Wow, look at all these pies!" Timmy presses his face against the glass, his breath fogging up the surface as his eyes dart excitedly from one pie to the next.

Mrs. Carolyn chuckles softly, watching Timmy with a tender gaze. "Each and every one looks more delicious than the last," she observes, taking her time scrutinizing the assortment before us.

Tyler leans in, his interest piqued by the savory selections. "I don't know about you all, but my stomach's ready for a feast. Mrs. Carolyn, what's your pie of choice?"

She ponders for a moment, her eyes scanning the display before settling on one. "I think I'll go with the blueberry pie today. It reminds me of summers at my grandmother's house," she says with a reminiscent smile.

Encouraged by her choice, I peer closer at the display, my heart set on finding the perfect slice. That's when I spot it—chocolate pecan pie, gleaming under the display lights, its rich, nutty filling promising a taste of decadent sweetness with a hint of savory. "I've made my decision," I declare, pointing at the pie. "Chocolate pecan pie for me. It's my absolute favorite."

Tyler's gaze follows mine, and he nods approvingly. "No surprise there. For me, I can't pass up a classic dutch apple pie." He grins, a look of sheer anticipation on his face. "Can't go wrong with apple and a good crumb topping."

We place our orders, each of us picking a substantial slice that promises to satisfy our sweet cravings. Timmy can barely contain his excitement, hopping from one foot to the other as he waits for his slice of strawberry rhubarb pie—a daring choice for a young palate.

Once we have our slices, laden with whipped cream and accompanied by steaming mugs of coffee for the adults and a tall glass of milk for Timmy, we choose a table near the window.

The pies are every bit as delicious as they look, each bite a perfect blend of flavors and textures. Mrs. Carolyn's eyes light up at the first taste of her blueberry pie, and Tyler looks contentedly at his apple cobbler, confirming his choice with a satisfied nod.

Between mouthfuls of my chocolate pecan pie, I can't help but feel grateful for this simple yet perfect moment. Sharing stories and laughter over pie, I feel a sense of belonging and happiness that's been missing for too long. It's clear that here, in this small town, with these wonderful people, is exactly where I'm meant to be.

I'm standing in the foyer, slipping on my jacket, the warmth of Tyler's house wrapping around me like a cozy blanket. The day's adventures loop through my mind,

bringing a smile to my lips. "Tyler, today was... it was just perfect," I say, my voice imbued with genuine gratitude. "Thank you for everything, really."

Tyler leans against the doorframe, a soft, contemplative look in his eyes. "Sarah, I..." he starts, then pauses, as if searching for the right words. "I wish the night didn't have to end here. I wish we had more time."

Those words spark something inside me, a surge of warmth that rushes from my heart to every corner of my being. It's unexpected yet feels entirely right. Without another thought, I close the distance between us, my actions fueled by the connection that's been simmering between us all day.

Our kiss is gentle at first, an exploration that quickly deepens into something more passionate, more urgent. It's as if all the words we haven't said are being communicated in this one act, a mingling of emotions that's both exhilarating and calming. It's a promise, a moment of truth in the simplicity and complexity of our budding relationship.

When we finally break apart, there's a moment of silence, a charged space filled with unsaid words and emotions. But it's comfortable, filled with the warmth of shared affection and the potential of what might come next.

"I didn't see that coming," Tyler whispers, his voice laced with wonder and a hint of laughter.

"Neither did I," I admit, my heart still racing from the kiss. "But I'm glad it happened."

We stand there for a moment longer, basking in the glow of the night and the connection we've forged. It feels like a new beginning, a doorway to something beautiful and profound.

Finally, Tyler takes my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "I guess we should say goodnight, for real this time," he says, though the reluctance in his voice matches the feeling in my chest.

"Yes, goodnight," I reply while leaning in to kiss him again. This time, his arms wrap around me tighter than before while pressing me against the front door. Our kiss is so heated that I end up taking my jacket back off and it alarms Tyler into breaking the kiss.

"Would it be too forward for me if I... stayed the night? It would be inappropriate for me... wouldn't it?"

His eyebrows raise in surprise before he grins at me.

"Sarah, I'm a grown man and this is my house. You can stay if you want, and I'd love it if you did."

Now that that's settled, he pulls me back into his arms and kisses me deeper this time. Before he reluctantly breaks it again as his eyes look toward the staircase.

"Let's take this upstairs to my room," he whispers to me while I nod my head, my hand finding his. He leads me out of the foyer after I've picked up my jacket from the ground while we try to be as quiet as we can be heading up the stairs. Once he leads me into his bedroom, all bets are off once he's closed the door and pulls me by the hips into him to kiss me again.

Desire courses through our bodies as we break our embrace, eager to strip away the barriers between us. Tyler's nimble fingers unbutton his shirt in one swift motion, revealing a sculpted chest that takes my breath away. With trembling hands, I mimic his actions, feeling exposed and vulnerable as I stand before him.

Our eyes lock, a silent understanding passing between us as we both shed our inhibitions along with our clothes. As he pulls me closer, I can feel the heat radiating from his skin, igniting a fire inside of me.

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"I want you, Sarah," Tyler whispers, his voice hoarse with longing. "You mean everything to me."

My heart swells with emotion as I gaze up at him, my mind and body consumed by this overwhelming connection we share. And as his lips meet mine in a gentle yet passionate kiss, I know that this is more than just physical desire—it's a deep emotional bond that has been forged between us.

We crash onto the bed in a frenzy of tangled limbs and insatiable desire, consumed by each other's touch. Our moans mingle together in a symphony of pleasure before we remember to quiet it down.

With every thrust, he plunges deeper inside me, igniting a fiery sensation that has me gripping his shoulders like a lifeline. My moans are muffled against his neck as we move together with primal urgency.

But our bodies crave more, pushing us towards the brink of ecstasy. He thrusts harder and I can't contain my moans of pleasure as my eyes roll back in sheer bliss.

Our lips meet once again, but this time it's not just a kiss - it's an explosion of passion and emotion that pulsates through every inch of our beings. In this moment, time stands still as we become lost in each other's embrace, every touch amplified with an intensity that threatens to overwhelm us.

As we teeter on the edge, Tyler pulls away, locking his intense gaze onto mine. "Look at me," he commands in a soft, husky voice.

I obey without hesitation, captivated by the raw intensity in his eyes. And then he whispers into my ear, "I want to remember this moment forever, Sarah. Every detail of how perfect and right this feels."

His words strike a chord deep within me, bringing tears to my eyes as I understand the weight of his request.

With newfound intensity, we continue our dance of passion and connection, our bodies moving in perfect sync as we lose ourselves in each other. The universe fades away as we explore each other intimately, experiencing the most profound level of physical and emotional connection imaginable.

And finally, as our bodies reach their peak, Tyler thrusts into me one last time with all his might. I feel the warmth of his release inside me, sealing our bond in a molten fusion of passion.

As we lie there, breathless and entwined, a sense of peace and contentment washes over me. This night has brought something new and beautiful into my life, and I know it will change me forever in ways I can't even begin to fathom.

Chapter 11

Tyler

Fostering Trust

Sitting in Sarah's therapist office, I'm fidgeting with the edge of my sleeve, trying to find the right words to start.

Across from me, Sarah's hand finds mine, giving it a reassuring squeeze. She's been my rock through this whirlwind of recovery, understanding my silences as much as

my words.

"I've been..." I start, my voice trailing off as I gather my thoughts. "I've been struggling a lot. With everything." Glancing at Sarah, I find encouragement in her eyes. "Not being able to ride, feeling... helpless. It's like I've lost a part of myself."

Sarah leans forward, her presence comforting. "But you're here, Tyler. You're fighting through it. That's strength, not weakness."

Her words are like a balm, and I find myself opening up more about the frustrations and fears that have been haunting me. The days when getting out of bed feels like an insurmountable task, the nights filled with dreams of arenas and cheering crowds that morph into nightmares of falls and failures.

"The pain... it's not just physical," I confess, feeling the weight of the words as they leave my lips. "It's the watching from the sidelines, knowing I used to be that guy. The adrenaline, the crowds, the feeling of being alive on the back of a bull. Now, there are days I feel so disconnected from that world, like I'll never get it back."

Sarah's response is soft but firm. "You are more than a bull rider, Tyler. You're strong, kind, and have so much to offer. This injury, it's just a chapter in your life, not the whole story."

Hearing her say it, I'm struck by the truth in her words. She's been incredible, standing by me, making me laugh when I least expect it, and listening patiently during my numerous mood swings.

And I've had plenty of them around her.

Despite my grumpiness and self-pity, she's never wavered. It dawns on me how deep our connection has grown, how crucial she's become in my recovery. How Mrs.

Carolyn adores her and how my son asks about her in a way that means he looks forward to seeing her.

"We'll get through this," she says, her hand still holding mine, grounding me. "Together. Recovery isn't just about the physical wounds. It's about healing here," she taps her chest lightly, "and here," pointing to her head. "And you're not alone in this. You have people who care about you, ready to support you through it. Me included, of course."

It's an intense session, filled with revelations and tough admissions, but by the end, I feel lighter, like I've started to lay down some of the weights I've been carrying. Sarah's consistent support, her empathy and understanding, have made all the difference.

Sarah's gaze doesn't waver as she leans in slightly, her voice a beacon in the dimly lit room. "Can you tell me what's the fear that holds you back the most right now?"

I hesitate, my throat tight. "It's... it's failing, not just as a rider but as a father, a person. I'm scared I'll never be the person I was before the accident."

She nods, understanding showing in her expression. "It's okay to feel that way. But remember, change doesn't mean failure. You're evolving, and with every step of your recovery, you're becoming stronger in ways you might not yet realize."

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I ponder her words, the idea of evolving rather than failing. It's a perspective I hadn't allowed myself to consider, always comparing my current state to my past.

"How can I start to believe that?" I ask, genuinely curious. "How do I start to see this 'evolution?'"

"Start by acknowledging every small victory," she suggests warmly. "Every day you're healing, making decisions that contribute to your well-being, and showing love to those around you. These are signs of strength, not failure."

Her encouragement sparks a kind of warmth in my chest. Maybe she's right. Maybe I've been too hard on myself, focusing only on the losses rather than the gains.

"And what about my Timmy? How do I... how do I make sure I'm there for him through all of this?" The worry for my child is always lurking, adding weight to my shoulders.

"Communicate with him, share with him that everyone faces challenges, but it's how we overcome them that matters. Show him that it's okay to be vulnerable. It's a powerful lesson for him to learn resilience through your recovery."

The thought of turning my struggles into lessons for my son brings a flicker of hope. Maybe my fears and my recovery can help sculpt him into a compassionate and understanding individual.

"Thank you, Sarah," I say, feeling a sense of relief washing over me for the first time in what feels like forever. "This... talking, it's helping more than I thought it would."

She smiles, her presence a steady, calming force. "I'm here to support you, Tyler. Through the ups and downs. Again, you're not alone in this."

Our session continues, each question she poses guiding me gently towards a deeper understanding of my emotional landscape and how I can maneuver through it with a new sense of resilience.

With each answer, I feel a piece of the burden lifting, replaced by a growing belief that maybe, just maybe, I can emerge from this stronger than before.

The therapy session ended fifteen minutes ago, and I've just been sitting on the porch outside of the office with Sarah since then.

She'd closed up the office since I had been her last client of the day, and we decided to enjoy the nice breeze outside. I think Sarah could see this session was kind of heavy on me so she wanted to make sure that I was okay.

It's peaceful here, the kind of peace I've been yearning for but seemed just out of reach. Sitting here, with the day winding down, I can't help but bring up something that's been gnawing at me.

"Sarah, if you could suggest some exercises for someone who's feeling anger at times, or hopelessness, what exercises would you suggest?" I ask, hoping for some useful advice I can cling to.

"For anger, one effective exercise is physical activity. It could be anything from a brisk walk to a session of hitting a punching bag," she begins, her voice as calming as the breeze. "Physical activity helps by releasing endorphins, I'm sure you know, which can improve mood and reduce anger."

She pauses, probably to gauge my reaction, and continues, "For moments when

you're feeling hopeless, I recommend practicing gratitude. It might sound simple, but writing down three things you're grateful for each day can significantly shift your perspective. It helps by drawing your attention away from the negative thoughts and focusing on the positive aspects of your life."

I nod, absorbing her suggestions. The idea of converting my anger into something physical, something I can control, feels empowering. And gratitude, well, that's something I've overlooked for too long.

It makes sense, as bull riding used to always help melt the stress right off me and why now I'm more wound up than usual ever since my injury.

"And there's another exercise for both feelings—meditation. It might seem intimidating at first, but even just a few minutes a day can help increase self-awareness and bring about a sense of peace and stability. It teaches you to observe your emotions without getting overwhelmed by them."

I can see the passion in her eyes as she speaks. It's clear she believes in these methods, not just as a professional but on a personal level too. I can also see that she's worried about me and hoping that I use one or all of the exercises if I'm feeling like the negative emotions are affecting me too heavily.

"Thank you," I say, feeling a surge of hope. Maybe these exercises are the tools I need to help me through this storm.

She smiles warmly. "Remember, it's about taking one day at a time. Be patient with yourself."

I scoot over and wrap my arm around Sarah's shoulders, pulling her close as we sit together on the step. I lean in and plant a soft kiss on her head, just a quiet way to say how much I appreciate her. "Thank you," I whisper, really meaning it.

I'm feeling so grateful for this woman, and glad that I allowed myself to be pressured into attending therapy for my emotional state once I moved to Pine Creek. Fate definitely brought us together.

Chapter 12

Sarah

Emotional Confessions

It's my off day, and I've got plans to spend it with Tyler, maybe a walk by the creek or a picnic in the meadow.

But as I knock on his door with a box of homemade muffins in my hands, Mrs. Carolyn answers, her expression drawn with worry.

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"Tyler's caught himself a summer cold," she says, her voice low. "Poor thing's been in bed all day, barely awake long enough to take his medicine. Makes him drowsy."

My heart sinks a little, both with concern for Tyler and the change in plans. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Mrs. Carolyn sighs, rubbing her temples. "Honestly, Sarah, I just wish I could have a moment to sit down. Been running around all morning trying to keep up with Timmy and tend to Tyler."

An idea sparks in my mind, and I find myself offering before I can overthink it. "Why don't I take Timmy off your hands for the day? We can explore the town. Have a little adventure. It might be good for both of you to have a break."

Her eyes light up with gratitude. "Would you, Sarah? I would owe you one. Plus getting him out of the house helps me focus on taking care of his father and helps Timmy stop being so worried over his father being ill."

"Oh, it's no problem at all, Mrs. Carolyn. I'm just happy to help in any way that I'm able."

While Mrs. Carolyn goes to look for Timmy to tell him about hanging out with me for the day and getting ready for it, I think of all the places I can show Timmy that I don't think he's seen yet.

With a plan in place, I head upstairs to peek in on Tyler. The sight of him, pale and barely awake, tugs at my heart. "Hey there," I whisper, not wanting to disturb his rest.

He cracks open an eye, a shadow of his usual bright smile on his face. "Hey, Sarah," he murmurs, his voice hoarse.

"I'm taking Timmy out for the day. Get him out of your hair so you can rest. You okay with that?"

A relieved smile crosses his features. "Sounds perfect. Thanks, Sarah."

Leaving Tyler to his much-needed rest, I find Timmy in the living room, his curiosity as big as his bright eyes when I tell him about our day out. "Really? We're gonna explore the whole town?"

"Every nook and cranny," I promise, and his excitement is infectious.

Our first stop is the general store, where Mr. Miller, the owner, greets us with a hearty "Howdy!" and a lollipop for Timmy, which earns him the biggest grin. We wander aisles filled with everything from horse tackle to homemade jams, Timmy's wonder never ceasing.

After leaving the candy aisle, Timmy's attention shifts to a collection of vintage comic books near the back of the store. He runs his fingers over the plastic sleeves with wide-eyed reverence, each title a whispered name of heroes and adventures.

"Look at this one, Sarah!" he exclaims, holding up a brightly colored issue with a superhero soaring across the cover.

Mr. Miller gives us a warm smile, leaning on the counter and telling us about the history of some comics. It feels more like a mini history lesson than just shopping. Timmy is captivated, listening to every word Mr. Miller says, forgetting his worries for now.

Of course, I think it's okay for Timmy to worry about his father, but not to the point where it makes him sad.

We then wander towards the creek, the heart of Pine Creek, where Timmy tosses pebbles and watches them ripple across the water. "It's so peaceful here," he says, a serene look on his face. I can't help but agree, the tranquility of nature wrapping around us like a warm hug.

As we sit by the creek, I can see Timmy's imagination taking flight. He starts crafting tales about pirates searching for hidden treasures along the banks and daring adventurers setting off on quests downstream.

I can tell that the more excited he becomes, the more he puts his imagination to use, expanding on his tall tales that elicit a bright smile from him.

Lunch is at Pop's Beastly Burgers, where Timmy's eyes go wide at the size of the burgers. "Do you think I can finish it all?" he asks, determined.

"I bet you can," I encourage, and the daring look on his face as he tackles the burger is downright comical.

After eating enthusiastically, Timmy stops and looks up at me with ketchup on his cheek. "This is the best day," he says, smiling brightly. The diner is lively with the sound of locals talking, giving it a warm and welcoming feel.

Our waitress, a friendly woman with lines from smiling around her eyes, tops up our drinks and tells us about a huge burger challenge the diner had once. Timmy listens eagerly, already thinking about returning to take on that challenge.

The day continues with more stops, each place a new discovery for Timmy's eager mind. From the small history museum with its tales of Pine Creek's founding to the

park where we feed the ducks, his laughter is infectious.

Hours continue to fly by until it's time for us to head back to the house. Mrs. Carolyn meets us at the door, her relief evident as she sees the joy in Timmy's eyes.

"Did you have fun, Timmy?" she asks, already knowing the answer.

"The best day ever!" he exclaims, throwing his arms around her in a hug.

I then follow them into the house, while hoping that Tyler is feeling much better.

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I quietly head upstairs, giving Timmy and his dad a moment alone. I can hear the muffled sounds of their voices, laughter bubbling up through the hallway, a clear sign that Timmy is pouring out stories of our adventures.

I wait it out until Timmy comes rushing out in excitement, gives me a big hug once he sees me, and then rushes downstairs to go bake cookies with Mrs. Carolyn.

I pause at Tyler's door, taking a deep breath before I enter, ready to see how he's fared through the day.

Tyler is sitting up against the pillows, a steaming mug of tea in his hands, his eyes glued to the TV screen. But as I step in, he quickly grabs the remote and mutes the volume, a wide smile spreading across his face. He looks so much better than this morning, the pallor replaced by a hint of color, making my heart do a little flip.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, as I sit down on the side of the bed close to him, careful not to spill his tea.

"I'm feeling a lot better, thanks," Tyler responds, his voice stronger than it was. "This tea's a real miracle worker." He gestures to the mug with a chuckle, then sets it down on the bedside cabinet.

I can't help but smile back, relieved to see him more like himself. "I'm glad to hear that. Timmy had the best day, by the way. He hasn't stopped talking about coming back to take on the burger challenge," I share, a laugh escaping me.

Tyler's eyes light up at the mention of Timmy. "That's my boy," he says proudly, the

love for his son evident in his voice. "Thanks for today, Sarah. Knowing he was having a good time made resting up a lot easier."

The gratitude in his voice sends a warmth through me, a reminder of the small, beautiful moments that we've started sharing. "It was my pleasure, truly. I enjoyed it as much as he did."

Tyler's gaze shifts from the muted TV to me, the intensity in his eyes almost taking my breath away. "Seeing Timmy so happy today, coming home boasting about his day with you... it got me pretty emotional," he admits, his voice just a whisper against the stillness of the room.

I reach for his hand, squeezing it gently, encouraging him to continue.

"It's just...I've always wished for Timmy to have a motherly figure in his life. Someone who cares for him, challenges him, and enjoys his boundless energy," Tyler pauses, his eyes searching mine for a reaction. "And seeing how fond he is of you, Sarah, it...it means a lot to me."

My heart swells, my mind racing to process his words. A mix of happiness and fear knots in my stomach. "Tyler," I start, my voice barely above a whisper. "I care about Timmy so much. He's a wonderful boy, and you're an incredible father. Being a part of your lives, even just as a friend, has been so rewarding for me."

He smiles, that warm smile that brightens the darkest days. "I was hoping you'd say something like that. But, Sarah, it's more than just being friends to me now. You've become a part of our lives in a way I never expected, but always hoped for," Tyler confesses, his gaze holding mine.

The room feels charged with an energy I can't describe. The significance of his words settles over me, wrapping around my heart like a warm blanket. I realize, in this quiet

moment, how much Tyler and Timmy mean to me, and how much I want to be there for both of them.

"Tyler, I—" My voice falters as emotions threaten to overwhelm me. Taking a deep breath, I find the courage to continue. "I feel the same. You and Timmy have become my world too. I don't know what the future holds, but I do know that I want to be part of your lives, in whatever way I can."

A tear escapes Tyler's eye, and he quickly brushes it away. "Sarah, hearing you say that—it's all I've wished for."

Tyler's arms envelop me in a hug, a fortress of warmth that seems to shield us from the world's chaos. He holds me close, and I can feel the steady beat of his heart against mine, a comforting rhythm in the silence that stretches between us.

His sigh, deep and content, vibrates through his chest, sending waves of reassurance through me. It's a moment of pure bliss, a safe haven in each other's arms, where the complexities of our emotions find a peaceful respite.

The silence, thick with unspoken words and burgeoning feelings, wraps around us like a cocoon. It's in this quietude that I muster the courage to voice the thoughts that have been swirling in my mind, shadowed by fear and hesitation.

"Tyler," I begin, my voice a soft murmur against his shoulder. "I've realized something." I pull back slightly, needing to see his face, to gauge his reaction to my confession. "I use the term 'friends' a lot when it comes to us, but...I don't feel that way. It's just easier to say 'friends' because I'm terrified to admit we're straddling the line between friendship and something more. Between friendship and a relationship."

Tyler's response isn't with words, but with actions. His hand comes up to gently rub my back, a soothing motion that calms the storm of emotions raging within me.

"Sarah," he says after a moment, his voice a tender caress that warms me to my core, "I understand. I do."

He pulls me closer again, as if to reinforce his words with the security of his touch.

"And that's the beauty of it, isn't it? We're taking our time, letting whatever this is between us bloom naturally. There's no rush, no need to label it. As long as we continue to nurture this...connection, everything will be alright."

His words, simple yet profound, wash over me like a balm, soothing the raw edges of my fears and doubts. In his arms, the world seems to right itself, and the possibilities of 'what could be' shimmer on the horizon, bright with promise.

Tyler's understanding, his patience, and his quiet strength are the anchors I didn't know I needed.

And with him, I feel like we can weather any storm, as long as we're together, taking it one step at a time.

Chapter 13

Tyler

Falling Walls

Gradually, as the days turn into weeks, I notice the changes in myself.

The grumpiness that had been my constant companion, my shield against the world, begins to wane. Where once a sharp retort would have been my knee-jerk reaction, a soft chuckle takes its place. Sarah has this way about her, a lightness that seeps into the shadows I've clung to for so long, dispelling them with a persistence I hadn't known was possible.

I begin to share more of myself, the parts I've kept hidden. Stories of my childhood, the dreams I quietly harbor, the fears that skulk in the dead of night. Sarah listens, really listens, her eyes never wavering, her presence a constant reassurance.

It's in these moments, bared and raw, that I understand the true strength in vulnerability. It's not in the stoic facade I've worn like armor, but in the trust it takes to allow someone to see the real you.

The change isn't overnight. It's a slow bloom, the kind that takes time to nurture and grow. But Sarah's patience is endless, her belief in me, unwavering. She sees through the surliness, the grumpiness that I've wielded like a sword, to the person beneath. And somehow, miraculously, she thinks that person is worth knowing.

It's scary, this opening up, this being seen. Every fiber of my being screams to pull back, to retreat behind the safety of my grumpiness. But looking into Sarah's eyes, feeling the sincerity of her touch, I know I can't. Not anymore. Because with Sarah, I've found something I didn't even realize I was searching for. A connection that goes

beyond words, beyond the superficial layers we present to the world.

In her, I've found my safe harbor, the calm in the midst of the storm. And as we stand together, the world around us fades into the background, and I realize that as long as we have each other, everything really will be alright.

With every day that slips by, my connection with Sarah deepens, a tangible warmth that wraps around us, drawing us closer still. The world, once a blur of grayscale, now blooms in vibrant hues, each moment with her infusing my life with unprecedented color and light.

"I never really paid much attention to sunsets before," I confess to Sarah, as we sit side by side on the old wooden bench outside my house, the sky a canvas of oranges, pinks, and purples. "But now, it's like I'm seeing them for the first time."

Sarah smiles, her eyes reflecting the spectacular colors of the sky. "It's amazing, isn't it? How something so everyday can suddenly become so special."

And she's right. Everything is special now because she's part of my life. The way she sees beauty in the ordinary, celebrates the simple joys, and finds happiness in the moment has transfused into my perspective, altering it subtly yet profoundly.

"I used to live for the future," I tell her, as the last light fades, turning our surroundings into silhouettes. "Always planning, worrying about what's next. With you, I'm learning to just be, to live in the now and appreciate the present."

Sarah reaches for my hand, her grasp warm and reassuring. "That's all we really have, isn't it? This moment, right now. The future is important, but it's the little moments that make up our lives."

For a long time, I've shielded my heart, afraid to expose it to potential hurt and loss.

But as I sit here with Sarah, sharing not just a sunset but so much of ourselves, I realize that the vulnerability I once feared is the very thing that's brought me true happiness. Being understood by someone, truly understood, is a form of comfort I never knew I was missing until now.

"We don't need much, do we?" I muse, watching the day pretty much close its eyes so that the night can open theirs. "It's these moments, simple and quiet, that mean everything."

Sarah leans her head on my shoulder, a contented sigh escaping her. "Exactly. It's not about grand gestures or extravagant possessions. It's about sharing life with someone special. You've made everything better, Tyler."

Hearing my name on her lips, feeling the weight of her head against my shoulder, I know she's right. Life is infinitely better with Sarah by my side. She's shown me a world where companionship weaves a safety net of warmth and contentment, where every shared laugh, every touch, adds a layer to our connection.

In the stillness of the day transitioning into evening, with the chorus of crickets starting their nightly symphony, I find myself grateful for this moment, for Sarah, and for the unexpected journey that brought us here. I'm no longer the man who hides behind a facade of grumpiness, using it as a shield against the world.

With Sarah, I've found more than just companionship. I've discovered the joy of living, the beauty of the present, and the peace of being truly seen and accepted. Once the delicious aroma of spaghetti wafts through the screen of the open window, I stand to my feet.

I extend my hand to a giggling Sarah who has once again been invited to stay for dinner, like she's been doing a few times a week now.

My growling stomach leads the way as we step into the house for dinner.

The warm, inviting scent of garlic and tomatoes fills the kitchen as we settle around the old, oak table that's been in my family for generations.

I might have left my old hometown, but there's no way I'd part from furniture and objects that hold sentimental value to me.

Mrs. Carolyn, with her apron still tied around her waist, places a large, steaming bowl of spaghetti in the center, accompanied by a basket lined with a red and white checked napkin filled with golden-brown breadsticks. She pours from a fresh pitcher of lemonade, the ice clinking gently against the sides, and sits down with a satisfied smile, her eyes twinkling as she looks at each of us.

Timmy, energetic as always even after a long day of being, well, a boy, can't wait to start. "Did you know spiders can have up to eight eyes?" he blurts out between mouthfuls of spaghetti, sauce dotting the corners of his mouth.

Sarah laughs, wiping away a stray drop of sauce from his cheek with a napkin. "No, I didn't. That's quite a lot of eyes to keep track of everything around them," she says.

I chuckle, leaning back in my chair, watching the scene unfold with a warmth spreading through my chest. "And what would you do with eight eyes, Timmy?" I ask, amused at the thought.

Timmy ponders this seriously for a moment, fork paused midair. "Hmm, I guess I'd be really good at video games and never miss when Mrs. Carolyn hides the cookies," he finally decides, causing all of us to burst into laughter.

Mrs. Carolyn shakes her head, still smiling, as she refills Timmy's glass with lemonade. "Oh, I think you're plenty sharp with just the two," she says.

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Sarah interjects with genuine curiosity, "Timmy, did you learning about spiders at school?"

"Yeah, we studied insects and arachnids at my old school. Did you know that not all spiders make webs? Some are hunters!" Timmy's enthusiasm for the topic is infectious, his earlier fascination with video games and hidden cookies forgotten momentarily.

Mrs. Carolyn nods encouragingly. "That's right. Nature is fascinating. There's always something new to learn."

I lean forward, intrigued by Timmy's newfound fascination with spiders. "Hey, Timmy," I start, trying to hold back a smile, "with all this talk about spiders, would you ever want one for a pet?"

Timmy's eyes widen as if the thought had never occurred to him. He drops his fork with a clank against his plate, the sound echoing slightly in the sudden silence that follows my question. "Ew, no! Never!" he exclaims, shuddering visibly at the idea. "Spiders are cool to learn about, but I'd never want one near me. No way!"

Mrs. Carolyn's laughter rings out first, clear and melodious, and soon Sarah and I join in, our laughter mingling together in the warm kitchen air. It's a moment of genuine happiness, the kind that's so rare and precious. "I just love that," Sarah manages to say between giggles, "You've been talking our ears off about spiders, and you wouldn't even think of having one as a pet!"

Mrs. Carolyn wipes a tear from the corner of her eye, still chuckling. "Seems like our

little expert here has his limits after all," she says, her voice full of mirth.

I catch Timmy's eye and wink at him. "Well, it's good to know where you draw the line, Timmy. We'll stick to cookies for snacks instead of spider pets."

Timmy finally cracks a smile, still a bit wary from the subject of our laughter but relieved at the change of topic. "Yeah, cookies are way better than spiders," he agrees, nodding vigorously as he picks up his fork once again.

The conversation drifts away from spiders as we finish our dinner, each of us sharing bits and pieces of our day. During this time, I can't help but to steal proud glances and smiles at Sarah, who is captivated by Timmy's tales.

I'm realizing the more she spends time with us, the more it feels like she's part of our family.

Chapter 14

Sarah

Love in Unexpected Places

Every day, the lines between Tyler, Timmy, and me fade just a bit more, painting a picture of a connection I never dared dream of.

Tyler effortlessly draws me into the everyday rituals of his life with Timmy—from casual dinners to weekend escapades—stirring up a warmth in me that's hard to label. It's like he's slowly prying open a door I had locked tight, letting light dance into the neglected nooks of my heart.

Mrs. Carolyn, with her spirited laughter and endless warmth, reminds me so much of

what family means. Her occasional breaks, her time for herself, only underline the importance of balance in life—an example I deeply appreciate.

But it's in the everyday moments with Tyler and Timmy that I find something profoundly simple yet overwhelmingly significant. It's in the way Tyler looks at me across the table, a silent thank you for being there, or the laughter we share over Timmy's vivid storytelling—it's in these moments I feel something shifting.

Jake and his new family welcomed me with open arms from the moment I set foot in Pine Creek, shining like a beacon of stability and kinship in the wild frontier. But, oh, as wonderful as they are, what's unfolding with Tyler and Timmy kicks up a whole different kind of dust storm.

It's like I'm not just a bystander to their lives but riding shotgun, becoming an indispensable part of this unfolding saga. The love and affection swirling between Tyler and me, growing stronger with every unexpected twist and turn, catches me off guard and sends my heart racing.

It's a wild ride, proving the unpredictable beauty of life—how love and belonging can lasso us at the most unexpected of watering holes.

Reflecting on everything, a wave of gratitude washes over me—for the laughter that spices up our evenings, the knowing glances we share, and the quiet nods toward a future we're painting together in broad, hopeful strokes.

With Tyler and Timmy, even Mrs. Carolyn, by my side, I stumble upon an unexpected family, one that fits as snugly and truly as anything I've ever known. It's a flavor of sweet and sour realization, sprinkled with the thrill of belonging and a dash of fear for the vulnerability it drags along.

Yet, as I settle down tonight, my heart's lighter than it's been in ages, lifted by the

love of a family I never saw coming but now couldn't dream of doing without.

Just thinking about Tyler's smile, crooked and disarmingly genuine, sends a ripple of giddiness through me that I can hardly keep under wraps. It's like being hit with a wave of enchanting happiness. The kind that reminds you of your first crush but goes way deeper, striking right at the soul.

I've felt affection before, sure, and been caught up in the whirlwind of infatuation, but with Tyler, it feels like the universe has hit pause and decided to rewrite the whole love rule book just for the two of us. His laughter is a melody that lingers in my ears, becoming the soundtrack I'm hooked on.

And those moments when our eyes lock? I'm swept up in a whirlwind of warmth and excitement, sparking an electrifying buzz that's completely new and exhilarating.

I used to scoff at romance novels for being too predictable, but here I am, smack in the middle of a story I'd have called too good to be true.

My once skeptic mind is now playing with the idea of soulmates. How else can you explain this undeniable connection, this sense of being whole only when he's around?

Tyler, with his gentle soul and fierce compassion, has breezed into my life, tearing down barriers I didn't even know I had.

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The realization hits me quietly one evening as we're sitting together on the porch, watching the sunset. Our chat wanders, touching on everything and nothing, and in those quiet moments, I catch him looking at me with this mix of admiration and shyness that just melts my heart.

In that instant, my heart does somersaults, thrilled by the sheer joy of being seen and understood.

"Soulmate" isn't just a fanciful term anymore. It's a very real possibility that's suddenly within reach. Who else could stir up such a storm of feelings with just a smile?

Who else could make the ordinary sparkle with excitement? Finding such a deep connection in Pine Creek, of all places, feels like the plot twist I never saw coming.

As the stars begin to dot the sky, I can't shake the feeling that they're in on it too, helping the universe craft a love story that breaks all the molds. With every heartbeat, I'm more convinced that Tyler is my soulmate, the one who reflects my soul, balances out my flaws, and turns every day into a celebration of joy.

Wrapped up in these revelations, I fall asleep tonight, my dreams colored with the hope of what's to come—a future interwoven with Tyler, where every laugh, glance, and touch is a chapter in our own extraordinary love story.

It's amazing to discover that another heart can be your sanctuary, a place where my once-lost soul has found its anchor.

I feel like I'm on vacation, as if I've just hit the jackpot—an unexpected bounty of time a whole two weeks before my next showdown with therapy session and clients.

Seems like the universe is playing matchmaker, pushing me closer to Tyler, and with Timmy as our sidekick, we morph into an adventurous trio, ready to take advantage of the beautiful summer weather.

It's during one of these sun-kissed afternoons that Tyler, with a mischievous glint in his eye, pitches a canoe ride down the creek, lighting up Timmy's face with a thrilling mix of excitement and a dash of nerves.

"I've never set foot in a canoe," Timmy admits, his voice dancing on the edge of fear and excitement. "What if we capsize?"

Tyler just laughs, expertly securing our life jackets, his hands a steady presence of reassurance. "Not on my watch," he vows, sending a wink Timmy's way. "I've got mad skills with a paddle."

So, we launch our canoe into the creek, the water a welcoming sight for the three of us. The canoe wobbles at first, sending a thrill of fear through Timmy, but it soon finds its rhythm, and I watch Timmy's fear melt into pure wonder.

Seen from the heart of the creek, our world transforms into an intimate, immediate experience, like we've stumbled into a secret realm meant just for us.

"Wow, this is incredible!" Timmy can barely contain his excitement, his eyes wide as he soaks in the lush greens and the playful darting of wildlife.

Tyler, true to his word, is a master with the paddle, guiding us smoothly through the water, parting the reflections of sky and trees with each stroke. I'm the quiet one, the observer in the heart of this serene adventure, enveloped in the easy bond that ties us

together.

I've been on a canoe ride before, but it was before I came to Pine Creek and it did not go well at all.

"It's like we've stepped into another world," I whisper, my voice full of wonder.

Tyler shoots me a grin, his eyes sparkling with the thrill of shared discovery. "That's Pine Creek for you. Always revealing new wonders, even to the seasoned explorer."

Our journey becomes a dance of light and shadow, our laughter mingling with the water's murmur, and silences filled with comfortable understanding.

Timmy's initial fears are long gone, replaced by uninhibited joy that fills me with warmth. I realize these moments are weaving into Timmy's childhood experiences, memories he'll carry forever.

And as for Tyler and me, something real and deep is blossoming. It's there in his frequent glances, his laughter mingled with mine, and the unspoken understanding between us. Even Timmy, young as he is, senses the growing spark between his father and me, a budding romance that's as exhilarating as it is grounding.

Finally, as we head back to shore, Timmy boasts, "I wasn't scared at all," his chest puffed out in pride.

Tyler just ruffles his hair, laughing. "You're a natural, buddy. Next time, we'll let you paddle."

And just like that, the promise of more adventures loom on the horizon. I always love the promises of another time spent together and another tomorrow.

Tyler never falters with making it known that he wants me to spend more time with Timmy. In a way, I believe our future together is solidifying more and more.

Chapter 15

Tyler

The Bull Riding Comeback

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I can't believe how well the rehab is going.

Every session with Dr. Carmine pulls me closer to a complete recovery, and I can feel the strength returning to my knee. The doctor has been impressed with my progress, even giving me the nod to start practicing bull riding again, but only under the watchful eyes of a seasoned bull rider. There's no way I'm messing this up again. I've worked too hard to throw it away now.

"Hey, you ready for this?" Sarah's voice cuts through my thoughts, making me smile. Her constant support has been my bedrock, and just hearing her encourage me fuels my desire to get back on a bull.

"More than ever," I reply, looking into her eyes. "Can't thank you enough for sticking with me through all this."

"Always," she says, squeezing my hand. "We're in this together."

We walk around the ranch after my appointment, and seeing those bulls brings a rush of memories and a surge of adrenaline. It's been too long since I last felt the thrill of the ride, but I know I'm more prepared than ever, and it's all because of Sarah's strong belief in me.

"Tyler, I've got someone for you to meet," Jake calls out, motioning toward an older, stern-looking cowboy. My eyes widen at recognition once I realize that he's Bill "Blue Buffalo" Turner, a seasoned bull rider who is now retired.

I'm startled by the sudden introduction. Sarah excuses herself with a sly smile and

leaves me with her brother and a legendary bull rider.

“This here’s Bill. He’s been riding longer than you’ve been alive, and he’s going to make sure you do this right,” Jake says, as I raise an eyebrow in confusion. “We’re going to ensure you return to riding a bull, and practice makes perfect. I’m pretty sure you know how well-rounded Bill is, and if you know his career, then you know you have the best ready to assist you.”

Bill nods at me, not one for many words, but his presence is reassuring. “Ready when you are,” he states, his voice gravelly and seasoned. Jake nods at both of us to depart and leave us to it. I see Bill is more about action and not standing around shooting pleasantries.

My nerves are high as Bill and I approach the fenced-in practice arena. I feel every fiber of my being humming with anticipation and nerves.

Under Bill’s supervision, I begin the slow process of getting reacquainted with the bulls. Each practice session is grueling, but a fire in my belly burns hotter each day, ignited by Sarah’s faith in me.

Bill’s quiet confidence does wonders to calm the storm inside me, even if he isn’t one for talking much. He glances at me, his eyes two piercing blue orbs that seem to see right through into my soul.

"First things first," Bill says, his voice as rough as the leather of his gloves. "You have to remember the basics. No fancy tricks. Fundamentals are your best friend out there."

I nod, taking his words to heart. The fundamentals are what got me this far, and they’re what will carry me forward. Bill gestures for me to get up on the practice bull—a mechanical beast designed to mimic the unpredictable nature of a real one.

As I climb on, Bill stands by, hands on his hips, watching every move I make. "Find your grip," he instructs. "You ever forget your anchor hand, and you'll be tossed like a rag doll."

My hands sweat as I grip the rope, feeling the familiar texture beneath my fingers. I square my shoulders and take a deep breath, centering myself just as Bill showed me. He hits the switch, and the mechanical bull roars to life. It bucks and spins, trying to throw me off, but I hold tight, muscles burning with the effort to stay centered.

"Good! Remember, your balance is everything!" Bill shouts over the whirring machine. "Move with the bull! Don't fight it!"

I try to sync my movements with the jerky rhythm of the bull, struggling at first but gradually finding my stride. Each successful ride, though small, builds my confidence.

After a while, Bill stops the machine. I pant heavily, my shirt sticking to my body with sweat. "You're getting there," he says, an edge of approval in his tone. Coming from him, it's high praise.

We move on to the next stage of training. Bill sets up a bull, indicating that I practice my grip and positioning. He demonstrates fluid and precise movements, even at his age.

"See that? Your free hand has to stay steady, like this," he explains, gesturing with his free arm, keeping it tight but flexible. "It's your balance arm. You've got nothing without it."

I imitate his stance as closely as possible. Still, I have a lot to relearn. Bill's stoic nature gives way just slightly to offer more detailed critiques, each one more insightful than the last.

During a brief break, Sarah joins us with some cold water. “How’s it going?” she asks, eyes scanning my face, searching for any sign of discouragement.

“Pretty well, I think,” I reply, grinning despite the fatigue. “Bill’s the best there is.”

Bill chuckles, a rare sound. “Been doing this a good while,” he admits. “But it’s up to you to work hard.”

Sarah smiles at him. “Thank you for helping him. He’s got more heart than anyone I know.”

Bill nods solemnly. “Heart’s a good start. Needs to be matched by skill, though.”

We resume training, Bill pushing me further each time, correcting my posture, timing, and every move. The grueling hours blur together, each one a step closer to returning to prime riding shape.

One afternoon, as the sun dips low and bathes the practice yard in a golden hue, Bill surprises me with a real bull. “Time to see how you do with the genuine article,” he announces. My heart skips a beat, but I know I’m ready—or at least as ready as I can be under these circumstances.

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Climbing onto the real bull, the difference is immediately apparent. The sheer power and unpredictability of the animal beneath me send a thrill through my body. Bill and Jack flank the pen, their eyes locked on me.

“Remember what you’ve learned, Tyler. Move with him, not against him,” Bill advises one last time.

The gate swings open, and the bull erupts into motion. Each buck feels like an attempt to launch me into the stratosphere, but I hold on, every muscle straining with effort. Bill’s training flashes through my mind, grounding me in the chaos.

Seconds feel like hours as I ride, my focus undivided. When the buzzer finally rings, signaling the end of the ride, I dismount, knees shaking but triumphant.

“Good job,” Bill says, a rare smile on his face. “Welcome back, cowboy.”

Sarah rushes over, her eyes shining with pride. “You did it, Tyler! You’re back!”

I take her hand, feeling the thrill of victory coursing through me. “We did it,” I corrected, smiling down at her. “Couldn’t have done it without you—or Bill.”

Bill nods, tipping his hat ever so slightly. “You got potential, kid. Keep working hard, and there’s no telling how far you’ll go.”

I feel grateful and confident that my career isn't over as we leave the arena. I'm back on track, but this is just the start. With Sarah and Bill by my side, the future looks promising.

Hours later, we head to the dining hall for dinner. The aroma of pulled pork and hickory baked beans greets us as we walk through the doors. There's a comforting familiarity to the scene, the communal tables filled with fellow ranch hands sharing stories and laughs. Sarah and I find a spot near the window, the twilight casting a warm glow over our table.

We grab our plates, heaping them with pulled pork sandwiches, hickory baked beans, and mashed potatoes smothered in rich gravy. I take a bite, savoring the tangy, smoky flavors that remind me of home. Sarah looks at me with a soft smile, and for a moment, everything feels perfect.

“Sarah, I know I’ve come a long way since the accident,” I begin, setting my fork down. “But there’s something I need to tell you. I still have this fear... this gnawing doubt that I could easily get injured again once I go back to bull riding. My knee—it’s just not the same.”

She reaches across the table, taking my hand in hers. “Tyler, you’re getting better every day. You’ll return to your career once your knee is fully healed. You’ve got this. I believe in you.”

I shake my head, the weight of my worries pressing down on me. “Sarah, that’s the thing. Even with a healed knee, it probably won’t be as sturdy as it used to be. I can’t shake off the fear that I’m more vulnerable now, that any wrong move could end everything again.”

Sarah’s grip tightens, her eyes locking onto mine with a fierce determination. “I get that you’re scared, Tyler. But you’ve always known the risks. This injury doesn’t define you. It’s how you come back from it that will. Besides, you’re not alone in this. You’ve got Bill, the whole ranch supporting you, and you’ve got me, Timmy, and Mrs. Carolyn.”

Her words are a balm to my troubled mind, but the doubts linger. "I just don't want to let anyone down. What if I'm not as good as I used to be?"

She smiles, the kind that reaches her eyes and makes me feel like everything might be okay. "You've already proven your strength by making it this far. You'll keep working hard, and we'll support you every step of the way. I know you'll figure it out."

I look down at our joined hands, trying to draw strength from her unwavering belief in me. "What if I've lost my confidence, Sarah? What if I freeze up in front of everyone? I've never thought about stage fright, but what if it's different this time? What if it's so bad that it leads to a serious injury all over again?"

Her gaze softens, but I can see the resolve in her eyes. "Tyler, it's okay to be worried about that. It's completely natural. You've faced a life-changing injury. Anyone in your shoes would have doubts. But I believe that when you're up on that bull, with the crowd cheering your name, it'll all return to you. Bull riding is second nature to you—those instincts won't disappear."

I sigh, feeling the gnawing uncertainty claw at me. "I've been out of the scene for so long. It's hard to imagine getting back out there in front of everyone with all eyes on me. What if I can't handle the pressure? What if I'm not the same Tyler everyone remembers?"

Sarah squeezes my hand tighter, her eyes never leaving mine. "You are not the same, Tyler, and that's not bad. You've grown stronger through this, mentally and emotionally. The people who matter, the ones who support you, we know that. And the crowd? They're there because they love the sport and the riders. They'll root for you because they see your passion and determination."

I nod, but the turmoil inside me doesn't settle quickly. "It's just—sometimes I feel

like everything has changed. Like, maybe I'm not cut out for this anymore."

"You'll never know unless you try. And I'll be right there with you every step of the way. We'll face those fears together."

Her words are a beacon of light in my cloudy thoughts, but the path ahead still seems daunting. "What if I fail, Sarah? What if I get hurt again, and there's no return from it now?"

Her fierce determination flares again, and she shakes her head. "Then we'll cross that bridge when we get to it. But Tyler, I refuse to believe that's how your story ends. You're a fighter. You've overcome so much already. You've got everyone here, at the ranch, believing in you, and most importantly, you've got to start believing in yourself again. One step at a time."

I take a deep breath, feeling a bit of the weight lift from my shoulders. "I guess I just needed to hear that. It's been hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel."

"We'll get there," she says, with a confidence that almost convinces me. "And when you do, it'll all be worth it. The crowd will go wild, and you'll feel that rush again. Remember why you fell in love with bull riding in the first place."

I allow myself a small smile for the first time in what feels like an eternity. "You always know what to say, don't you?"

She grins back at me. "That's what partners are for. Now, let's finish dinner and plan out your rehab for tomorrow. One day at a time, remember?"

I gaze out the window, the stars beginning to dot the night sky. "You always know the right thing to say," I whisper, squeezing her hand. "I'm lucky to have you."

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“You’re not lucky,” she replies softly, “you’re deserving. Now, finish your dinner. You need your strength for tomorrow’s training, and you know Timmy will want to see you before he goes to bed.”

We eat in comfortable silence, the fears still present but less overwhelming. The food, the laughter around us, and Sarah’s unwavering support make me feel like maybe, just maybe, I can face whatever comes next.

As the night deepens, I find solace in the simple moments, knowing this journey is far from over but feeling ready to take it one step at a time.

Chapter 16

Sarah

Overcoming Obstacles

I glance at the clock on the wall, the ticking hands seemingly mocking me as they relentlessly push forward into the late hours of the night.

My desk is cluttered with medical files, the jumble of papers threatening to topple over at any moment.

It’s been a long day, filled with back-to-back sessions, and now I’m finally alone in my office, trying to catch up on the new client’s files. Dr. Jones, the client's old therapist I spoke to on the phone, warned me that this client would be a tough case, and I can see why. Her history reads like a tragic novel, filled with layers of trauma

and hurt. I make a few notes in the margins, reminding myself to ask her about her relationship with her parents during our next session.

The gentle hum of my office lamp is a comforting sound, as is the occasional rustle of papers as I sift through the files, but the persistent buzzing of my phone shatters that peace. It's Tyler — again. His name lights up my screen, and I almost feel the phone vibrating in frustration. I had told him earlier that today would be hectic, but that message didn't stick. I let the call go to voicemail, hoping he'll take the hint.

A surge of irritation washes over me, momentarily clouding my thoughts. Doesn't he understand that I need this time to focus? I run my fingers through my hair, trying to untangle both the knots and the chaotic swirl of emotions Tyler's calls incite in me. It's not that I don't care about him — because I do, deeply. But there are times and places for these conversations, and now is not one of them.

I am sure it's because he's become so dependent on me with his bull riding practice with Bill. Wanting me to be there at the ranch any time he hops on a bull so I can cheer him along. He tells me it gives him confidence and motivation with me there. I'm glad to hear that, but I am a woman who owns her practice and co-owns a ranch.

Sometimes, I am up to my neck at work, and today is one of those days.

I force myself to concentrate on the task, diving back into the client's files. Her detailed history demands my full attention. Fragmented notes from previous therapists suggest a host of undiagnosed issues. There's a glimmer of a breakthrough in the last entry — she had opened up about a childhood memory that seemed pivotal — but then the phone buzzes again, derailing my train of thought. Tyler. Again.

I slam the file shut in frustration, leaning back in my chair as I try to calm the irritation inside me. I know my responsibilities, my promises to my clients, and the standards I set for myself. Tyler's continuous interruptions feel like an intrusion on a

sacred space. I know he worries. I know he means well. But tonight, it's hard to see past the annoyance.

He texted me, and I decided to read his message, saying he would bring me dinner. I realized I couldn't afford the distraction, so I texted back that it was okay since I would have a light dinner.

I then checked the time and saw that I should take a much-needed break and walk into town to grab something to eat.

I could have driven, but it's not a long walk to where I plan to grab dinner, and the cool air feels nice tonight.

As I grab my purse and prepare to leave, I glance back at my office one last time. It's my little sanctuary, a room filled with echoes of countless therapy sessions, tears, and breakthroughs. But tonight, it feels oppressive, weighed down by the files demanding my attention. Stepping outside feels like reclaiming a small piece of myself.

I make sure everything's in order before locking up the building. My clinic stands on the edge of town, a steady beacon for those seeking solace. As the key turns in the lock, the finality of the click brings a semblance of relief. It's time to disconnect, if only briefly, from the endless demands of my practice.

Stepping outside, the crisp evening air embraces me, unraveling the tension knotted in my shoulders. The sky is a deep twilight, with stars beginning to sprinkle across the canvas. My thoughts drift as I walk to Johnny's Subs, following the familiar sidewalk towards the center of town. The cool air against my skin is invigorating, a gentle reminder of life beyond work's confines.

The anticipation of a roast beef sandwich and kettle chips grows with each step. Something is comforting about indulging in a simple pleasure that promises a

temporary escape. And a large, iced tea—I can almost taste the refreshing chill of it already. The small joys, like a good meal from Johnny's, often bring a semblance of balance to my hectic life.

The warm glow from inside beckons as I reach the small, inviting establishment. I walk in, greeted by the familiar hum of conversations and the comforting aroma of freshly baked bread. Johnny's Subs is a haven. The staff know me by name and always greet me with a smile. I place my order—a roast beef sandwich, kettle chips, and a large, iced tea—and decide to take it to go.

Bag in hand, I exit the restaurant, feeling satisfied. The sandwich is a promise fulfilled. Its weight in my hand is reassuring. I unwrap it as I walk, taking my first bite and relishing the burst of flavors. The roast beef is tender and savory, perfectly complemented by the crispness of the chips. I alternate bites with sips from my iced tea. The chill in the air is refreshing my senses and washing away the day's remnants.

The walk back to the office takes about seven minutes, and each step feels lighter than the last. The food, the air, and the release from constant interruptions create a brief, blissful respite. Even though I know the files and responsibilities await me, this moment of solitude and indulgence is enough to fortify me for the evening ahead.

As I approach the office building, I notice Tyler's vehicle parked next to mine in the lot—the sight of his midnight blue truck mingles with my mundane sedan. My heart skips a beat, wondering what could have happened to bring Tyler here at this hour.

As I get closer, I see him sitting on the steps outside, looking distinctly annoyed. He's holding a plate covered in aluminum foil and a fountain drink cup, his fingers tapping impatiently on his knee.

"Tyler?" I call out, my voice mingling curiosity with cautious cheer. "What are you doing here?"

He glances up at me, his brow furrowed. "Oh, hey, Sarah," he says with a hint of sarcasm. "I brought you dinner, but you decided to get your own."

I hold up the bag from Johnny's Subs, feeling guilty. "I told you I was getting a light dinner."

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Tyler's eyes narrow, and he stands up, the plate balanced precariously in his hand. "A light dinner? Sarah, I went to the diner to pick up chicken and dumplings to ensure you ate a full meal. I waited about an hour for the order because it's packed tonight."

I sigh, feeling a wave of frustration wash over me. But Tyler's sincere effort tugs at my heartstrings. "I appreciate it, really, but I walked over to Johnny's because I needed a break. The day's been rough. Plus, again, I told you I was getting my dinner."

"Rough?" Tyler's voice rose. "You're always talking about managing stress, but all you do is add more to your plate. It's like you're trying to break yourself. And yet when I do it, you jump into therapist mode with your lectures and suggestions on how self-care is important."

I step closer, the aroma of my sandwich mixing with the scents from the wrapped meal in Tyler's hands. "Look, I get it. And I'm grateful. But sometimes, I need to do things my way. I needed that walk, fresh air, and it helped relax me after a long day."

Tyler shakes his head, still holding firmly onto the plate. "And you don't think I know that? That's why I brought you dinner, so you wouldn't have to stress about one more thing. But seeing you here with that bag... annoys me for some reason. Like I can't do something nice for you or be there for you, like you push to be there for me."

Tyler's eyes blaze, and I can feel the tension radiating off him like heat from a summer sun. "Sarah, you don't get how much this means to me," he says, his voice soft but steely. "I wanted to show you I care, and you just brush it off like it's nothing."

Exasperated, I run a hand through my hair, trying to articulate my thoughts without adding fuel to this rising storm. "Tyler, it's not that I don't appreciate it," I say, my voice tinged with fatigue and sincerity. "I just needed to reclaim a bit of my own space and routine. It was a rough day, and sometimes I must handle things on my terms."

He stands there, silent momentarily, the plate in his hand looking like a fragile peace offering. Finally, he sighs, his shoulders slumping in defeat. "Fine, Sarah. You win," he mutters, leaning over and placing the wrapped plate and fountain drink on the steps by my feet. "Have a good night."

He turns sharply, striding towards his truck with an air of finality, his boots clattering against the pavement. "Tyler, wait—" I start, but he's already opening the door.

"Just... forget it, alright? I'll see you around," he calls over his shoulder, before climbing into his vehicle and slamming the door. The engine roars to life, and with a squeal of tires, he pulls away, leaving me standing there, the cool evening air doing little to soothe my roiling emotions.

I let out a heavy sigh, the sound echoing slightly in the deserted street. I don't understand why he's acting like this and can't see that sometimes, space and solitude are the only things that help me breathe.

Unlocking the office door, I bend down to pick up the wrapped plate and fountain drink, balancing them carefully with my bag, holding the half-eaten sandwich and iced tea. I head inside, the familiar smells of paper and ink wrapping around me like a comforting blanket.

Setting everything down on my cluttered desk, I take a moment to steady myself, closing my eyes and inhaling deeply. The work ahead feels like a mountain, but I must push through.

I need to finish up, head home, and get some sleep. Hopefully, tomorrow will bring some clarity, and maybe Tyler and I can find a way to understand each other better.

Chapter 17

Tyler

Cracked Relationships

I can still feel the anger bubbling under my skin as I sit at the kitchen table, absently poking at the scrambled eggs on my plate.

Mrs. Carolyn moves around the kitchen with practiced ease, preparing a second batch of breakfast, but my mind's trapped in the events of last night.

I don't get it. I don't. She knew I was planning on bringing her dinner. I felt that I made it clear when I texted her about dinner. It's not like the diner is vacant or dead at that time of night, either. I sat there, waiting patiently for them to finish her order, all while imagining her smile when she saw me taking care of her after what I know was an exhausting day.

But no. Sarah just had to walk into town, get herself a sub sandwich, and head back to the office like I didn't even exist. Like my efforts didn't matter at all. It's maddening. She says she needs breathing space and solitude—but where does that leave me? Balancing on some invisible edge between caring too much and not enough?

And how in the heck does she need space and solitude when she's not only a pivotal part of my life as a significant other, pretty much, but she also has a dual role as my therapist?!

I take a deep breath, trying to calm the turmoil in my head. Growing up, I was always

taught that showing you care means doing things: providing, protecting, and making sure your loved ones are taken care of. It's ingrained in me, part of who I am. I want to be the man who makes her life more accessible, even in small ways, like bringing her dinner after a long day.

But every move I make seems to push her further away. I can respect her independence—I really can. It's one of the things I admire most about Sarah. She's strong, capable, and fiercely self-sufficient. But where does that leave me? Does she not see how much I want to be there for her; how much I care?

I let out a frustrated sigh and took a bite of my toast, the buttery crunch doing little to ease the tension knotting my stomach.

"Tyler, is Sarah still coming over to take Timmy to that new movie all the kids in town are talking about?" Mrs. Carolyn's voice cuts through my thoughts. I almost forgot I need to get ready for rehab.

"Yeah," I mutter, scraping the crust of my toast with a wary finger, my eyes fixed on a speck of dust on the table.

Mrs. Carolyn lingers, her motherly radar picking up far more than I wish it would. "Is everything okay, love? How'd it go, bringing Sarah dinner last night?"

I let out a humorless laugh. "How'd it go? Mrs. Carolyn, it was a disaster. She didn't seem grateful. If anything, she seemed standoffish. She felt she didn't see where I was coming from about wanting to bring her dinner. I even brought her favorite meal, which still didn't seem good enough."

She settles into the seat across from me, knitting her brows in that look of concern only someone like her can pull off. "Sarah strikes me as an independent woman, Tyler. Experience tells me she's probably not used to folks doing things for her.

Might be she's accustomed to handling everything on her own."

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I clench my jaw, the frustration from yesterday bubbling back up. “But how is that fair, Mrs. Carolyn? When I try to do something nice, something to show I care, I get pushed away. Isn’t that exactly what you do when you love someone? Show them you care?”

“Well, yes, dear. But sometimes, independence can be a tough wall to break through. She might feel like she’s burdening you, even when you’re just trying to help. You’re taking this to heart, but it might not be as big a deal as you think.”

“Not a big deal?” My voice rises, sharp and edged with a tinge of hurt. “I feel brushed off, and she doesn’t even notice. How can she not see that?”

Mrs. Carolyn extends her hand across the table, resting it on mine. “Tyler, relax, love. She’s not trying to hurt you. Maybe you two need to talk about it and have an honest conversation. When she brings Timmy back from the movie, clear the air. Explain how you feel.”

The words hang in the air, settling around me. I give a reluctant nod. Deep down, I know she’s right. “Yeah, I guess we need to talk. I’ll try to talk to her later on, I guess.”

Hours later, in the early afternoon, I’m back in rehab with Dr. Carmine. It’s one of those days where everything feels like it’s weighing a ton, especially the pain in my knee. Dr. Carmine is trying to get me through knee exercises, but I can barely focus. Each movement feels like a knife jabbing into my muscles.

Maybe because I’m not concentrating as much on what he’s telling me since I’m so

focused on my thoughts.

I'm still a bit peeved about last night with Sarah, and probably have a chip on my shoulder.

"Alright, Tyler. Let's try another set," Dr. Carmine says, calmly and professionally.

I grind my teeth, pushing through the pain once more before I throw my hands up. "I need a break, Dr. Carmine."

He checks his watch and looks up at me with raised eyebrows. "Tyler, this is your fifth break in the last fifteen minutes."

"If my knee hurts, I can do nothing about it. I need that break," I snap, frustration creeping into my tone.

Dr. Carmine lets out a sigh, backing off a bit. "Okay, you can take a brief break from the knee exercises." He oversees me, and after a few seconds of silence, he gently asks, "Is there something else going on, Tyler? You seem pretty worked up today."

I shake my head, trying to deflect. "No, nothing's going on."

He gives me a knowing look, and I feel the walls closing around me. Taking a deep breath, I decide to come clean. At least mostly. "It's just... these past 48 hours haven't been great."

Dr. Carmine nods, encouraging me to continue. "How's therapy been going?"

I sigh, looking away. "The sessions haven't been as frequent. I've been giving Sarah more time with her other clients. We usually see each other during our off hours."

"Tyler," Dr. Carmine says, his voice firm but kind, "you need to prioritize therapy. You're dealing with a lot of emotional stress, not just physical pain. Keeping up with frequent therapy sessions will help."

He pauses, letting his words sink in before continuing. "It's fine that you and Sarah are connecting on a personal level but remember why you started seeing her in the first place. Your mental and emotional health is important, too."

I nod, taking in his advice. "You're right, Dr. Carmine. I need to get back on track with therapy. But what if things become tense in our relationship? Won't that affect our professional one?"

Dr. Carmine mulls over my words before responding. I can tell he thought long and hard before saying what he would say next.

"It could be a possibility that it will happen, yes. But it depends on how well you separate the personal and professional. Is she only Sarah during your time together, or is she also Sarah in the professional setting? Do you view her as the woman you desire during therapy, and it's hard for you to see her as Dr. Marlene?"

I ponder on his words for a moment while rubbing my chin. "I believe I've done a good job keeping the roles separated. I'm her client on her couch in her office during therapy, and I'm the man who will do anything for her outside of office hours. But I guess I'm worried about the previous spat we've just had. If it's going to be harder to see her as my therapist during my therapy session."

"Then maybe you two need to cool the personal relationship for a while to ensure the professional one is on track."

From what he said, it feels like a rattlesnake got a hold of my shin with a nasty bite. I don't like the advice he just gave me because I still want Sarah, even if I am a bit

miffed at her.

"But won't cooling the personal relationship cause issues in the professional?"

"Do you believe it will?" Dr. Carmine asks me, with a raised eyebrow. I nod my head while slightly feeling embarrassed to admit it out loud.

"Yes, I honestly do, and I think it'll be more on my end than hers. Sarah has been so patient with me. I'm sure she can be okay with the personal relationship taking a back seat for a while to focus on our professional one, but I know that I wouldn't be okay with it."

"Then you have to find a way for both relationships to co-exist so neither relationship suffers from the other one."

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to wrap my mind around Dr. Carmine's advice. "I guess I'll try," I say reluctantly. The words taste bitter on my tongue, but I know he's right. Somehow, I have to manage this balancing act between personal and professional.

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He gives me a reassuring nod. “That's all I can ask for, Tyler. Now, let's move on to your knee exercises.” He pats the cushion beside him. “Have a seat, and we'll get started.”

I shuffle over and sit down, my knee already aching in anticipation. “You know these exercises never really help, right?”

Dr. Carmine smiles knowingly. “Humor me today. Let's do them with full concentration. Trust the process.”

I reluctantly extend my leg and start the first stretch, feeling the resistance almost immediately. Dr. Carmine guides me through each movement, correcting my form and encouraging me to breathe deeply. “Focus on each stretch,” he advises. “Feel the muscles lengthening and contracting. Pay attention to your body.”

It's a struggle at first. My mind keeps drifting back to Sarah and the tangled mess of our relationship. But gradually, I start to settle into the rhythm of the exercises. Dr. Carmine's steady voice keeps me anchored, and for the first time in a while, I find myself fully present in the moment.

“Good,” he says, as I move through the final set. “You're doing great, Tyler. Keep going.”

I grit my teeth and push through the discomfort, driven by a sudden determination to prove to myself that I can handle this—the exercises, the pain, the emotional turmoil. Maybe, just maybe, if I can conquer this, I can figure out a way to balance my feelings for Sarah with the professional boundaries we need to maintain.

After an eternity, Dr. Carmine finally says, “That’s enough for today. Well done.” He gives my shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “I know it’s tough, but you’re physically and emotionally progressing. Keep trusting the process, and we’ll get through this together.”

I nod, feeling a strange mix of relief and exhaustion. “Thanks, Doc.”

“Anytime, Tyler. Remember, one step at a time.” He smiles, and for the first time today, I find myself returning the gesture, feeling a flicker of hope amidst the confusion.

Chapter 18

Sarah

Navigating Doubts

I sit in the bustling theater with Timmy perched beside me, nearly bouncing excitedly.

The auditorium is overflowing with children and their gleeful chatter, the air thick with the buttery scent of popcorn and the occasional rustle of candy wrappers.

Grandparents and parents fill the rows, eagerly awaiting the new cartoon action movie that has every child's imagination running wild. Timmy has a giant Coca-Cola in his cup holder and a big bag of popcorn on his lap, devouring it as the opening trailers flash across the screen.

While the vibrant previews enthrall Timmy, my mind can’t seem to escape a loop of negative thoughts about last night. Tyler got under my skin with his behavior. All I did was mention that I had dinner covered, and he blew up, seeming to take it as an

insult or challenge. His insistence on turning it into a petty squabble left me wondering what I could have said to set him off like that.

It's not like Tyler to be so argumentative over something so trivial. As Timmy crunches away happily, seemingly oblivious to anything but the screen, I scrutinize every second of that conversation. Tyler's face, contorted in frustration, keeps flashing in my memory. What if this outburst wasn't really about dinner? Is there something else weighing on him that I'm not seeing?

Part of me feels for him, battling whatever inner demons have made him irritable. But another part of me—a guiltier part—relishes this brief respite from our tensions. With Timmy's innocent laughter echoing in my ears, I can focus on being the fun, carefree chaperone he likes spending time with... without the cloud of my and Tyler's issues hovering above us.

Yet here I am, feeling almost traitorous for enjoying this moment of peace away from the deepening strain Tyler's presence has brought lately. His anger last night, irrational as it was, hints at a more profound disquiet, something festering beneath the surface that I'm unsure how to address.

Hopefully, he will address the issue at the next therapy session or bring it up today to discuss it.

Timmy's animated voice snaps me back to the present moment, though the weight of my thoughts continues to pull me under. It's hard to shake off the unease from last night's argument with Tyler. The more I think about it, the more unsettled I feel. Tyler's inexplicable frustration over something as trivial as dinner gnaws at me, leaving a bitter taste.

I can't help but feel annoyed at the underlying notion that Tyler doesn't like it when I take charge of things myself. His reaction made it painfully clear that my

independence might be a trigger for him. For a moment, I tried to remind myself that his offer to bring dinner was a sweet gesture, and maybe he just misinterpreted my response. But how he completely dismissed my assurance that I had dinner covered left me baffled and slightly angry.

Part of me wanted to believe he was just stressed about something else, and my comment accidentally hit a nerve. But another part of me, the part that's getting harder to ignore, questions if this will become a recurring pattern with Tyler. That thought turns my stomach. I can't imagine being with someone for the long haul who constantly overrides my decisions. It feels controlling.

As I watch Timmy engrossed in the movie, I suppress a sigh. My mind drifts back to the intensity in Tyler's eyes, his tone brimming with unspoken tension. What if this behavior is just the beginning? If he can't handle something as simple as me having dinner sorted, what happens when more significant issues arise? Will he always react this way, looking for a fight over my attempts to manage my life?

It's not like I want to shut him out, but as my thoughts swirl, the idea of a future where I'm constantly second-guessing myself because of how Tyler might react is terrifying. I cherish my independence, and the notion of having it eroded bit by bit by someone who should be my partner in freedom feels like a slow suffocation.

Maybe we can reach a middle ground and communicate better without these misunderstandings spiraling into conflict. But my faith in that possibility wavers as I recall his harsh words and dismissive attitude.

Timmy shrieks in delight as something spectacular happens on screen, pulling me from my spiraling thoughts. I shoot him a quick smile, trying to hold onto this moment of peace a little longer before the looming conversation with Tyler dominates my mind again.

Timmy's hand brushes mine as he digs in the popcorn, snapping me back to the present. His eyes are wide and sparkling with joy, and I can't help but smile at him. Despite the turmoil raging within me, there's a flicker of clarity.

Being with Timmy right now, sharing in his pure, untainted excitement, is precisely where I need to be. And maybe, just maybe, I'll figure out a way to help Tyler fight his battles without losing myself in the process.

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Hours later, I returned a hyper and excited Timmy home, and he burst into the house in search of Mrs. Carolyn, who he found sitting in the living room watching soap operas.

“Mrs. Carolyn! Guess what? The movie was so awesome! And after that, Sarah took me for pizza and ice cream!” Timmy's voice echoes through the house, a delightful change to the tension I've felt regarding Tyler.

Mrs. Carolyn looks up, a warm smile spreading across her face. “Did she now? Sounds like you had quite the adventure, Timmy. Come, tell me all about it!”

As Timmy animatedly narrates his day, Tyler walks into the living room. He sees me, and I can see hesitation in his eyes.

“Sarah, can we talk in private for a moment?” he asks.

I nod, feeling a flutter of anxiety. “Sure, Tyler.”

Mrs. Carolyn engages Timmy further, asking him about his favorite parts of the movie as Tyler leads me out to the backyard. We sit on the patio, the cool evening breeze brushing against our skin.

“Listen, Sarah,” Tyler begins, his voice soft yet strained. “I want to apologize for my behavior last night. I shouldn't have snapped at you.”

I relax slightly, appreciating the effort he's making. “I understand, Tyler. But I only wanted to make things easier for you when you offered to bring me dinner. You'd had

rehab practice at the ranch with Bill, and I thought you might value some time with Timmy last night.”

“But you don’t get it,” he snaps, his composure breaking. “I feel slighted because I only wanted to bring you dinner. Are you saying my efforts aren’t good enough?”

I take a deep breath, trying to keep my voice level. “Tyler, I never implied that. I truly appreciate the gesture. I just wanted you to focus on having some downtime and relaxation.”

“Relax?” he retorts, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “Maybe my rehabilitation for my injury or being a single father is turning you off. Is that it?”

I feel my frustration rising. “Tyler, don’t put words in my mouth! I never said anything like that. Why do you always assume the worst?”

“Because it feels like you’re always trying to manage everything – including me! It’s like you don’t think I can handle anything alone. I don’t mind you being my therapist at the office, but I expect you to be my woman outside of that!” His voice raises, anger boiling just beneath the surface.

“That’s not true!” I exclaim, shaking my head. “I know you’re capable, but that doesn’t mean you must do it alone. Can’t you see I’m just trying to support you?”

He runs a hand through his hair, sighing heavily. “I just... it’s hard. Sometimes, I feel like you’re more of a crutch than a partner.”

His words hit me like a physical blow. “I’m sorry you feel that way, Tyler. But this isn’t just about you. I also need to express my independence without feeling like I’m doing something wrong. I wouldn’t say I like feeling micromanaged or controlled. I appreciate you thinking of me enough to bring my dinner, but I want you to respect

me when I say I have things under control.”

He looks down as if he’s struggling to find the right words. “Maybe there’s a middle ground we can find. I don’t want to fight with you, Sarah. I’m fighting with myself enough, perhaps taking it out on you. I feel less of a man with this injury, and if you don’t think of me that way, I shouldn’t treat you as if you do.”

I reach out, touching his arm gently. “Me too, Tyler. We must talk openly without jumping to conclusions about each other’s intentions. Communication is key.”

He nods, a trace of a smile forming on his lips. “You’re right. I guess we both have some learning to do.”

Relief sweeps through me like Vitamin D entering my veins from things becoming resolved between us. Silence engulfs us for a bit while we relish in the tension slowly melting away.

"I also believe I need to pick back up with therapy. It's obvious that I have some emotional issues that I need to get off my chest and talk through rather than keep it bottled in to attack you with."

"We can go back to doing therapy once a week, even during weeks you feel well enough that you don't think you need it. Not all sessions have to be marred with negative thoughts or worries. You can also talk about positive things in therapy as well."

"Is that so, Dr. Marlene?" He flirts with me, as a flash of heat graces my cheeks from blushing. I lean in to peck his lips in happiness, making up for our fight.

"Yes, that is so. I want you to understand that you can always come to me, regardless of your feelings. Whether it's during therapy or outside of it, I want you to remember

that I am here for you."

"I know..." He nods his head as shame flashes across his face. "I just feel so awful about last night. I've never felt this way about someone before, and I guess that is when you think about doing thoughtful things for people who aren't your family or fans. It's a different feeling. Especially when it involves a romantic partner."

I grab his hand to hold in mine because I can tell he's still beating himself up. He upset me greatly yesterday, but he's already apologized and held himself accountable. That's the most important thing when someone is self-aware of themselves - to own up to something they did, said, or the way they've behaved.

"Tyler, it's fine. We must remember that communication is key to this foundation and the future we're building together. No one is perfect. Everyone has a bad day, and yesterday just happened to be yours. I'm here with you now, saying I understand and forgive you. But it's also important that we talk this out so that this doesn't become normal in our relationship. What is the root of your anger from last night?"

Tyler hesitates before sighing heavily.

"I just feel pushed aside. Like I'm not even good enough to bring you dinner. I know I had a full day between rehab and practice, which had me at the ranch all day. But I wanted to see you and bring you dinner to spend five minutes with you before heading home. My body and mind took a beating yesterday, and I just wanted to seek comfort from seeing your face. Being in your presence."

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My heart lifts like a rollercoaster, about to go over the hump and go down the track at full speed at his words. Such sweet words made me feel even guiltier about my behavior last night. I should have pushed more to get him to open up to me once I realized how upset he started to get. I did feel that I had been patient, but maybe not as patient as I would have liked.

"And I'm sorry about that. I wasn't pushing you away or anything. I had been well aware of your day and how long and grueling it must have been. I only wanted you to head home to relax and spend time with Timmy. To unwind from the long day you had."

"And I would have after seeing you. But... I don't know... Last night made me feel like you threw your independence in my face. Taking a stance that you can handle yourself and don't need anyone for anything."

I lower my head and feel down for a minute. It's the same thing my brother used to get on me about when I first moved here. He kept running to my house to help me move in, get situated, etc. I kept telling him I would be fine, but he became upset one day and told me it was okay to accept help when offered.

I told him I'm not used to people helping unless it involves having staff for my practice, and he chastised me for not thinking about myself outside of work. If Tyler feels the same way, I may have a firm grip on thinking I can only care for myself.

"I'm sorry for making you feel that way. Sometimes, how you are raised or live your life becomes a part of you. My grandparents raised me to be independent and not depend on anyone for anything. As a woman, it's easy for some men to expect

something from you if you let them do something for you. Plus, I learned it's better to do things yourself because depending on others can let you down."

"I get that. Trust me, I do. But you must understand that you have someone who wants to help make your life easier. To help shoulder your burdens, problems, and any hindrances you believe you have. You always say that you and I are a team, but I want that to mean the same thing when it comes to you as well, not just when it comes to me."

I feel myself growing emotional while nodding my head because he's right. If anything, I've been hypocritical because I always preach to him that he needs to let me in and always confide in me. He has to be okay with someone being there by his side while he feels pushed away when he tries to do the same with me.

"I guess it's something I never imagined working on within myself. It's like when something becomes routine, or you get so set in your ways that it's just naturally a part of you. When it comes to you, Timmy, and even Mrs. Carolyn, I need to understand better that it's not just me anymore. I think I always felt like that, even with my brother, because he has his own family, and I felt I could fend for myself. But you three? You're like my family now, and I should learn to embrace that more."

Tyler wraps an arm around my shoulder to pull me into him before kissing me on my head.

"That's all I can ever ask for, Sarah. Just try to be more accepting that things have changed in your life. It's not just you anymore. Know that you have us now."

Chapter 19

Tyler

Shared Passions

I wake up slowly and feel a sense of contentment that has eluded me for a while now, and it takes a moment to realize why.

The air had been tense yesterday, but Sarah and I managed to break through it together. We talked, listened, and understood each other in a new and profound way. It was like adding another sturdy brick to the foundation of our relationship.

I glance over at Sarah, her face cradled in a dream-like tranquility. She looks so peaceful and beautiful, lying there with her hair splayed out on the pillow, her breathing slow and rhythmic.

As I watch her, a soft smile spreads across my face, and the memory of last night's conversation replays in my head. It's brought us closer, and I know it. We were both honest, raw, and vulnerable. Now, we are stronger for it.

When I finally glance at the bedside table's clock, I am pleasantly surprised to see that it's already eight in the morning. Usually, I would be up by dawn, but today is different.

We have the house to ourselves.

Mrs. Carolyn had taken Timmy to the ranch for a special breakfast event, imploring us to sleep and get some much-needed relaxation. She understood, probably more than we did, just how worn out we were from our demanding schedules.

Sarah's long hours at the therapist's office and her late nights at the ranch, coupled with my intense rehab sessions and bull riding practice, had left us both drained.

But this morning is a gift—a stolen moment to recharge, to be. I pull the blanket

tighter around Sarah, careful not to wake her, and lie beside her, soaking in the quiet. It feels like a new beginning, a fresh chapter where we can grow closer.

Today will be a good day, filled with promise and the love we have cultivated so tenderly.

As the minutes pass, I wonder what Sarah is dreaming about. Is she reliving our conversation from last night in her mind, too? Is she feeling the same sense of peace and connection that I am? I hope so.

As I lie there next to Sarah with the sun shining through the window, I can't help but feel a sense of contentment. The quiet of the house, the stillness of the world outside, it's almost as if time has slowed just for us. I glance at Sarah again, her face serene and beautiful, and something stirs inside me.

I lean in closer, the scent of her shampoo still lingering in her hair, and I softly kiss her neck. She doesn't stir, so I place another, lingering longer. A quiet hum escapes her lips, and I smile.

"Good morning, beautiful," I whisper against her skin between kisses, feeling the warmth of her body radiating through the thin fabric of her nightgown. She shifts slightly, her eyes fluttering open and a lazy smile spreading across her face as she meets my gaze.

"Good morning," she murmurs, her voice husky with sleep. "What are you up to?"

"Oh, nothing," I say with a chuckle. "Just starting the day right." I continue to kiss her neck slowly and deliberately, feeling the way her body responds to each touch.

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“Mmm,” she sighs, her hand coming up to gently thread through my hair. “I could get used to this.”

“You should,” I reply, my voice low and playful. “I’m planning on making it a regular occurrence.”

She laughs softly and shifts to face me, her eyes sparkling affectionately. “You’re insatiable, Tyler.”

“I can’t help it,” I say, leaning in to capture her lips in a slow, tender kiss. “Not when it comes to you.”

We stay like that for a while, lazily kissing and enjoying the moment's intimacy. There’s a sense of peace, a feeling of being entirely in sync with one another. Eventually, Sarah pulls back slightly, her eyes searching mine.

“Are you ready for breakfast?” she asks, her tone teasing.

“Well,” I say, smirking. “I was thinking we could start with dessert.”

She laughs again, swatting my shoulder playfully. “You’re impossible.”

“Only for you,” I reply, pulling her back into my arms.

She nestles against me, and for a moment, everything is perfect. The world fades away, and it’s just the two of us wrapped up in each other. Now, I know we’ll face challenges together, no matter the challenges. We’ve already come so far. I do not

doubt our love will grow stronger daily.

My fingertips trace a path along her bare legs, the smoothness of her skin igniting a more profound sense of urgency within me. I start kissing her suggestively, working my way down her neck and lingering at every inch of bare skin that I can find. Her breath hitches as I continue, my hands now rubbing up and down her legs, sending little shivers across her body.

“Tyler,” she whispers, her voice trembling slightly with anticipation.

“Hmm?” I respond, my lips never leaving her skin, finding the most sensitive spots and savoring every soft sigh and shudder I can elicit from her.

“What if... someone comes in?” she breathes, her eyes half-closed in pleasure.

“No one's here but us,” I murmur, my hands tugging gently at the hem of her nightgown. “Remember the breakfast at the ranch....”

Her response is a soft moan as I slide the fabric higher, my fingers teasing the newly exposed skin. She arches her back, pressing herself closer to me, and her hands grip my shoulders tightly. The light in her eyes dances, reflecting the passion brewing between us.

“You drive me crazy,” she whispers, her voice a mix of frustration and desire.

“A good kind of crazy, I hope,” I say with a grin, lifting my head to meet her gaze. Her eyes are dark, filled with an intoxicating blend of love and lust, making my heart race.

“The best kind,” she replies breathlessly, pulling me in for a deep and emotional kiss that erases any lingering doubts or hesitations.

Our kisses grow more intense, filled with an almost overwhelming hunger. Her hands slide down my back, nails grazing lightly, sending electric shocks of pleasure through me. I groan against her lips, my hands now fully sliding her nightgown up and over her head. She complies willingly, raising her arms to let the garment slip away.

“God, you’re beautiful,” I say, taking a moment to admire her. The morning light filters in through the window, casting a soft glow on her body, making her look more ethereal than ever. Her cheeks flush with a delicate shade of pink, and she looks away shyly for a second.

“Stop it,” she says with a bashful smile, hitting me lightly on the chest.

“Never,” I reply, pulling her closer and reveling in the feel of her against me. “I love every part of you, Sarah.”

She bites her lip, her eyes sparkling with a mix of emotions. “I love you too, Tyler,” she whispers, her voice filled with a sincerity that wraps around my heart. I return my attention to wanting to disrobe the rest of her before removing my nightwear.

I lay her flat on her back once we’re both undressed to lay my eager body on top of her perfect one. I part her legs naturally before entering in without thinking of protection. Sarah is on birth control now, and it just heightens the passion without the plastic in the way of things.

Each thrust is a new apology for my behavior two nights ago, and her moans seem to be her acceptance of my apology. I am excited to know we have many hours to make love uninterrupted.

I thought we’d have to go to the cabin to give us privacy, where we didn’t have to be mindful of how loud we were.

“You feel so damn perfect,” I growl in her ear, as I slide deeper inside of her while sinking more into the throes of passion. I nibble on her neck as she pays me back in moans with her responses, since she can’t formulate words right now.

I hope that we last forever.

The way her fingernails dig into my flesh is just everything to me. It’s like her way of letting me know that I’m pleasing her right and not stopping.

To keep going.

And I promise to keep going... both literally and figuratively.

Forty minutes later, I'm downstairs, freshly showered and changed into a light pair of sweats. The aroma of banana pancakes fills the kitchen as I flip another golden-brown disk onto a growing stack. Humming to myself, I can't help but feel a rush of contentment. The sizzle of batter hitting the skillet mingles with the gentle morning sounds seeping through the open window.

Just as I finish the last pancake, Sarah strolls into the kitchen, her eyes bright and her smile infectious. She's now dressed in a tank top and fitted tights, her damp hair cascading freely over her shoulders.

"Are you making banana pancakes?" she asks, her voice laced with excitement.

I pause and look up, a smile tugging at the corners of my lips. "I am indeed," I reply, lifting the skillet to show her.

She claps her hands together, her face lighting up. "I love banana pancakes!" she exclaims, her excitement evident in her rising voice.

I chuckle, a mix of surprise and delight washing over me. "You do? It's not every day you meet someone who shares that particular taste," I say, setting the pan aside and walking over to her with a platter of warm, fragrant pancakes. "It's usually blueberry, cinnamon, and sometimes pecan when people choose a flavor other than regular pancakes."

“I know, right?” She laughs, her amusement filling the room like a sweet melody. “They remind me of Sunday mornings at home.”

“Well, I’m glad we have that in common,” I say, handing her a plate. “There’s nothing better than banana pancakes to start the day.”

She looks up at me, her eyes shimmering with appreciation. “It’s like you read my mind, Tyler,” she says softly, taking the plate from my hands. “Thank you.”

We sit at the small table by the window, and there’s a comfortable silence as we dig into our breakfast. The pancakes are as delicious as I had hoped.

As Sarah takes her first bite, she closes her eyes and sighs contentedly. “These are amazing,” she murmurs, and I can’t help but feel a sense of pride swelling in my chest.

“Glad you like them,” I say, taking a bite from my stack. “There’s plenty more where that came from.”

Her eyes twinkle mischievously. “Are you saying you’ll make me banana pancakes every morning?”

I laugh, shaking my head. “Only if you promise not to get tired of them.”

“Deal,” she says with a grin, leaning back in her chair. “I could never get tired of this... or of you.”

Her words hang in the air, wrapping around me like a warm embrace. In this moment, everything feels just right. Things can only go up and get better from this point on.

Chapter 20

Sarah

The Town's Whisperings

I weave through the grocery store's aisles, lingering on how great it's been lately.

My cart is half-filled with necessities and a few indulgences when I debate which apples look the freshest in the produce section.

As suggested, I've taken up grocery shopping for the Parker residence. Mrs. Carolyn's at the age where she should walk around the grocery store less.

I've moved into the residence in a way since I've spent more nights there than at my actual home.

But Tyler, Timmy, and Mrs. Carolyn have embraced my constant presence with open arms, so that's all that matters.

"Sarah?" a familiar voice calls out, pulling me out of my thoughts. I turn, and Marie Harlow is standing there, her face lighting up in a broad smile.

"Marie!" I exclaim, walking over to her. We embrace each other warmly, the scent of her floral perfume reaching my nostrils. "How have you been?"

"Oh, just busy as ever," she replies, adjusting her purse on her shoulder. "My in-laws are coming to town tomorrow, and Frank is back home doing yard work. You know how it is, preparing for visitors."

I nod, giving her a sympathetic smile. "That must be a lot of work. I hope it all goes smoothly."

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“Thanks, I hope so too,” she says, plucking a bunch of bananas and placing them in her cart. She looks back at me, curiosity glinting in her eyes. “How’s Tyler doing with his bull riding practice?”

My heart skips a beat at the mention of Tyler. “He’s... he’s doing great,” I manage to say, hoping my voice doesn’t betray my sudden nervousness.

“And that cute little boy I saw you take to the movies last week?” she continues, pulling a head of lettuce from the pile. “Is he a relative of yours?”

“Oh, you mean Timmy,” I say quickly, feeling a blush creeping up my neck. “He’s just a friend’s child. I was doing a favor.”

Marie raises an eyebrow but doesn’t press further. “How sweet of you,” she says warmly.

“Well, I must hurry and finish my shopping before it gets too late. It was lovely running into you, Marie.”

“You too, Sarah,” Marie smiles warmly at me with a nod. “I have some errands to run as well.”

We embrace again, the gesture brief but genuine. “You have a good day now,” she says, giving me one last smile before pushing her cart down the aisle.

“You too,” I mutter, as she walks away. I stand there momentarily, trying to steady the flurry of thoughts racing through my mind. Finally, I take a deep breath, trying to

shake off the unexpected encounter and focus on my grocery list.

Marie's questions linger in my mind as I wheel my cart down the aisle, wrapping around my thoughts like a fast-growing vine. Why was she so interested in Tyler? Did she know something? Panic begins to bubble up inside me, my heart racing faster with each step.

I try to remember if there's been any moment when I was too familiar with Tyler—anything that might have given people the wrong idea. Being his therapist, it's unethical to have a personal relationship with him, and yet there have always been unspoken feelings dancing between us that are hard to ignore.

Not to mention that we're in a relationship of some sort, and I'm practically living in his home.

My thoughts are interrupted by the memory of last week's movie outing with Timmy. At the time, it seemed like a harmless outing, a fun way to spend an afternoon.

But now, thinking back, I realize how many people from the town were there, children running up and down the aisles, parents chatting and undoubtedly observing. Good grief, Sarah, could you have picked a more public venue?

The more I replay the event, the more convinced I am that people like Marie must be talking. They might be speculating about my relationship with Tyler, piecing together fragments of encounters and weaving their narratives.

The thought makes me feel exposed, like every glance and smile I share with Tyler has been dissected and misinterpreted. It feels like a vice gripping my chest, making it hard to breathe.

I focus on my shopping list again, forcing myself to look at the mundane

items—eggs, bread, milk—but Marie’s words echo loudly. The rumors could ruin everything I've worked hard for. I need to finish this grocery shopping quickly. The sooner I get out of here, the better. Being around other people now makes my palms sweaty and me immensely uncomfortable.

My hands tremble as I pick up a carton of eggs, trying to steady my shaky breath. In small towns like this, privacy is an illusion. Everyone knows everyone, or at least they think they do. My only option now is to be more careful, to ensure that nothing I do can be misinterpreted further.

However, I can't shake the feeling that the damage might already be done. I quicken my pace, my mind a storm of worries, keenly aware of the eyes that might still be watching.

I pull into the Parker residence, my heart pounding like a drum. The gravel under the tires crunches loudly in the otherwise serene afternoon, announcing my arrival. As I step out of the car, I try to calm myself, pushing the intrusive thoughts away.

I glance up, and there he is—Tyler, walking out of the house with that laid-back, effortless stride. He's quick to approach, his smile reassuring, but it does little to quell the turmoil inside me.

"Hey, let me help you with those," he says, his eyes twinkling as he reaches the trunk of my car.

"Thanks," I mutter, trying to force a smile. I pop the trunk, revealing the grocery bags tightly packed together. Together, we start unloading. I pick up two bags, grateful for the distraction of occupying my hands.

"How was the grocery store?" Tyler asks, breaking the silence as he grabs a couple of bags himself.

"It was... fine," I reply, avoiding eye contact and willing my voice steady. My mind replays Marie's words, and I wonder if Tyler has heard any of those rumors.

We walk side by side into the house, the cool air inside offering a slight relief from the thoughts swirling in my head. As we set down the first round of bags in the kitchen, Tyler tries again.

"You seem a bit off today. Did something happen?" His tone is gentle, filled with concern.

"Nothing, just tired," I answer curtly, returning to the car for more bags. I can feel his eyes on me, studying my every move.

With each trip back and forth, Tyler continues his attempts at casual conversation.

"Did you see anyone you knew?" he asks on the next round.

"Not really," I respond, my tone clipped. I hope he'll take the hint, but he continues.

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"You know, you can talk to me about anything," he says softly on our last trip, carrying the final bags inside. His words tighten my chest, but I can't yet confide in him.

We finish bringing everything in, and the kitchen is now filled with bags of groceries. Tyler gently touches my shoulder, giving it a comforting squeeze. "I'm here for you, Sarah. Remember that," he says, looking earnestly into my eyes.

"Thank you, Tyler," I manage to say, my voice barely above a whisper. As we begin to unpack the groceries, I can't help but wonder if he's already sensed the tension, especially if he's telling me that he's here for me. I can't take it anymore.

Setting a bag on the counter emphatically, I finally turn to Tyler.

"Where's Mrs. Carolyn and Timmy?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady but knowing it trembles slightly.

"Mrs. Carolyn's lying down 'cause of a headache," he says, looking at me with a concerned and confused expression. "Timmy's watching a movie in his room."

That was all I needed to hear. The house was clear. I take a deep breath, trying to gather my thoughts. The words come tumbling out before I can stop them. "I need to tell you something, Tyler."

His eyes widen slightly, but he nods, waiting for me to continue. As we move around the kitchen, putting groceries away, I find talking easier while my hands are busy.

"I ran into Marie at the grocery store," I say, not daring to look directly at him. "She asked about you... about us. Even asked who Timmy was."

Tyler chuckles softly, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "And what did you say?"

"What could I say?" I reply, feeling the frustration bubbling inside me. "That you're—" I lower my voice "—that you're more than just a friend and client. That we've been seen together, and not just seen but... being affectionate. Something I hadn't realized until she asked me about you. Until she brought up Timmy."

He shrugs, a small smile playing on his lips as he loads groceries into the pantry. "Well, I didn't think we were all that discreet. We've been out for lunch and dinner in town, and sometimes, we're pretty close at the ranch. It's not exactly a secret, Sarah."

I suddenly feel a wave of horror washes over me. "You mean... people have noticed? They're talking about us?"

Tyler's expression softens. He steps closer, gently resting a hand on my arm. "It's fine, Sarah."

"No, it's not fine!" I blurt out, pulling away slightly. "I'm your therapist! This probably doesn't look good. Everyone in town is probably gossiping about us."

He sighs, his grip on my arms firm but comforting. "Sarah, people gossip no matter what. But I doubt it's in a bad way. And honestly, the only thing that matters to me is how you feel about this. About us."

His words hang in the air as I try to calm down, but to no avail. Public perception is important to people in the helping profession. We want to be positively perceived as being for the community and considered helpers.

This alone makes me wonder if it's overshadowing all the work I do in the community. I have chosen to fall in love with this person, which will be my undoing regarding my good reputation.

Tyler's eyes stay fixed on mine, full of calm reassurance.

"Sarah, listen to me. Yes, you're a therapist, and that's a huge part of who you are. But you're also a person, a woman who has every right to live her own life and make her own choices. Pine Creek isn't the kind of place where people judge harshly. It's more of a close-knit, positive community."

"But do you think that?" I ask a hint of desperation in my voice. "Do you believe people won't see me differently because of this?"

He nods firmly. "I do. This town is small, which means people understand each other better. They know everyone has their struggles and stories. Relationships like ours happen here more often than you'd think because the dating pool isn't large. People get it. I might still be considered a newbie here, but my time here has shown me how kind the people in this town are."

I stand there, feeling torn between his certainty and my fears. "And what about Timmy? What if they find out about him? That you're his father?"

Tyler steps closer and takes my hands gently in his. "Sarah, I always knew there would come a time when I couldn't keep Timmy a secret forever. He's part of my life, and you're a part of my life—even more now. We're a family when we go into town, and people need to see that. I realize maybe I should just come clean about being a father. Better now than later."

His words resonate through the maelstrom of anxiety churning inside me. "But how?"

"As a father, the first responsibility I have is to Timmy, and honestly, I don't want him to feel like he has to be hidden because of me or us. I'll make it my mission to ensure everything is okay. We will figure things out together no matter how complicated they seem."

I feel a tear slip down my cheek, and I let it. His hands hold mine with a steadiness that begins to ground me. "You think we can face this?"

"I know we can," he says with a quiet intensity. "Because I care about you, I'll always be here for you. Anytime, forever and always."

I step into his embrace, wrapping my arms around him, feeling his strong presence envelop me. "Thank you, Tyler. For being in my life. For... everything."

He chuckles softly, giving me a loving squeeze. "Anytime, Sarah. Forever and always."

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As I rest my head against his chest, listening to his heartbeat, I start to believe that maybe, just maybe, we can face whatever comes our way.

Together.

Chapter 21

Tyler

The Healing Power of Love

The days have rolled by since that heart-wrenching conversation between Sarah and me.

Despite the anxiety in her eyes, there's also a newfound resolve. I can sense it every time she looks at Timmy, with love that's not just genuine but healing. She's been a balm to old wounds I didn't even know needed tending.

Sarah hums softly in the kitchen, and I can't help but smile as I watch her from the doorway. She's been more at ease these last few days, though there's still the underlying tension about being the subject of town gossip. I step in quietly and slide my arms around her waist. "Caught you," I say softly into her ear. She leans back against me, no longer startled by my sudden appearance.

"Tyler, don't sneak up on me like that," she laughs, though the warmth in her voice fills me with a deep sense of contentment.

“I can't help it. Seeing you like this feels... right,” I say, reaching for a piece of bread on the counter. “You and Timmy have bonded, haven't you?”

Sarah smiles, the kind of smile that reaches her eyes and lights up the room. “He's such a sweet boy. I love him like he's my own.”

Pulling a chair around to sit nearby, I notice Mrs. Carolyn bustling in with a laundry basket. She pauses, watching Sarah move about the kitchen. Sarah catches her eye and gently nudges her. “Why don't you take a break, Mrs. Carolyn? I've got this covered.”

Mrs. Carolyn hesitates, then nods approvingly. “Thank you, Sarah. I don't know what we'd do without you around here.” She exits the room, leaving me with a profound sense of gratitude.

“Do you realize how good you are with Timmy?” I ask, feeling the need to voice my admiration.

“I just want him to feel loved and cared for. It's the least I can do,” she responds, with a tenderness that tugs at my heart.

“Sarah, you've done so much more than that. You've filled a void I didn't even know was there,” I confess, feeling a lump in my throat. “And honestly, you've become such an incredible mother figure for him. It's like you were meant to be here.”

Her eyes flicker with emotion. “It's still hard, you know, worrying about what people might say about us.”

I reach out, taking her hand in mine. “Let them talk. What matters is what we have—this bond, this family we are becoming. You're a part of us now, and nothing anyone says can change that.”

She takes a deep breath, her grip tightening around my hand. “Thank you, Tyler. I just... sometimes, it feels overwhelming.”

“I know,” I nod, bringing her hand to my lips. “But we’ll face it together, all of it.”

I help her finish setting the table for dinner, and soon enough, Timmy bounces into the room, full of energy and stories from the day. Watching the two of them interact, I feel a surge of happiness and pride. Timmy needed someone like Sarah, and I never truly realized how much until now.

Later that afternoon, we gathered in the living room. Sarah curls beside me on the couch as Timmy plays with his toys nearby. It’s a simple scene but fills me with peace and an overwhelming sense of belonging.

“Do you ever think about the future?” I ask Sarah, my voice low and thoughtful.

“All the time,” she replies, her eyes meeting mine. “I think about how we can make this work and be happy... together.”

I nod, feeling the weight of her words. “Me too. I think about the life we can build, the home we can have, and how we can face every challenge as a family.”

Sarah leaned her head on my shoulder, and we sat in comfortable silence for a while, listening to Timmy’s laughter and feeling the warmth of the budding home we were creating together.

“Tyler, do you think this will work?”

I pull her close, brushing a kiss against her temple. “I know it will. Because we have love, and with love, we can heal, grow, and face anything together.”

She nestles into my embrace, and for the first time in a while, her doubts disappear, replaced by the promise of what we are building together.

"You know," I start, adopting the soft, analytical tone she uses with her clients, "it's perfectly normal to have fears about our relationship's public perception."

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Sarah raises an eyebrow at me, half-amused, half-skeptical. "Oh? And what do you suggest, Dr. Tyler?"

I smile, continuing in a mock-serious voice, "I recommend confronting those fears head-on. Perhaps we can start dismantling them individually by understanding they stem from a deeper vulnerability."

She giggles, lightly hitting my arm. "You're incorrigible, you know that?"

I laugh with her, but the playful banter soon softens into something more earnest. "But seriously, Sarah, we can't let what others might think dictate how we live our lives or measure our happiness. We get to define that for ourselves."

She sighs, her face becoming thoughtful again. "I know you're right, but it's hard. I've always cared too much about what people think."

I nod, gazing into her eyes with all the seriousness I can muster. "It's okay to care, but don't let it control you. We must focus on what we have together—a strong and real love. No one else's opinion can diminish that."

She looks away for a moment, then back at me, her eyes shining with a mix of resolve and vulnerability. "When you put it that way, it does make sense." Her voice is softer now, almost like she's talking to herself, processing everything.

Taking her hand in mine, I continue, "Remember, we have each other. We're a team. Whenever doubts creep in, we'll face them together. That's how we'll make this work."

Sarah smiles, and it's like the clouds parting after a storm. She leans in, resting her head on my shoulder once more, and we sit quietly, finding strength in each other's presence.

"Thank you, Tyler," she whispers. "For always knowing how to make me feel better."

I chuckle softly. "Any time. Just call me Dr. Tyler."

She gives me another playful smack on the arm, then wraps her arms around me, holding tight. At that moment, everything feels just right. The doubts and fears are whispers compared to the symphony of what we're building together.

As the room fades into the background, I can only focus on her warmth, her heartbeat syncing with mine. And I know, without a doubt, that what we have is worth fighting for.

Just as we're basking in the moment's warmth, Timmy, quietly playing with his toy cars on the floor, suddenly perks up. His eyes widen with excitement, and he jumps to his feet, clutching a tiny action figure.

"Daddy, can we go to the cowboy event at the ranch today? Please?" he begs, his voice full of eagerness. "I heard there's gonna be lots of BBQ and sweets!"

Sarah's body tenses beside me, and I feel her grip tighten momentarily. I draw in a deep breath, letting the weight of the situation sink in. Today might be the day I let the world know that Timmy is my son, and the mysterious kid seen with Sarah around town is not just any kid—he's mine.

"Sure, buddy," I reply, trying to keep my voice steady. "We can go. Why don't you ask Mrs. Carolyn if she wants to join us?"

Timmy's face lights up with pure joy as he dashes out of the living room, his little feet pounding against the wooden floor. I hear him calling out excitedly as he races to find Mrs. Carolyn.

Sarah turns to me, her eyes wide with fear. "Tyler, are you sure this is a good idea?"

I meet her gaze, feeling a surge of confidence wash over me. "Yes, Sarah. I believe it's the best idea I've had in a long time. It's time the world knows about Timmy. I've kept him a secret for too long."

She studies me momentarily, searching my face for any sign of doubt. Slowly, she nods, a small smile forming on her lips. "Okay. If you're sure, then I trust you."

I squeeze her hand reassuringly. "We're a team, remember? We'll face this together."

Sarah nods again, and I can see some of the tension easing from her shoulders. Timmy comes running back into the room, practically bouncing with excitement.

"Mrs. Carolyn said she'd love to come! She said she'll get ready right now!" he announces.

I chuckle at his enthusiasm. "Alright, little man. Let's get our boots on and head to the ranch."

We arrive at the ranch, and I can feel a knot of anxiety tightening in my chest. Beartooth Ranch is bustling with life, transformed into a makeshift carnival ground in a way. Families and friends crowd the area, their laughter and chatter adding to the festive atmosphere. Makeshift concession stands dot the landscape, offering everything from sweet treats to games where you can win prizes.

Timmy holds Mrs. Carolyn's hand tightly, his eyes wide with excitement as he enters

the vibrant surroundings. He skips beside her, occasionally pointing out something that interests him. Mrs. Carolyn looks down at him with a warm smile, clearly enjoying his enthusiasm.

Sarah walks beside me, her posture rigid and eyes darting nervously. She's trying to catch any sign of people whispering or staring, but everyone is too busy enjoying the festivities to notice us. I can feel the tension radiating off her in waves.

I reach out and touch the small of her back, leaning in to whisper in her ear. "Hey, relax. Everything is fine."

She glances up at me, her eyes wide with unease. "But what if they start asking questions?"

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I give her a reassuring smile. “Then we answer them honestly. We have nothing to hide, Sarah.”

Timmy tugs at Mrs. Carolyn's hand, returning our attention to him. “Can we play that game? The one with the balloons?”

Mrs. Carolyn looks back at us, and I nod. “Sure, buddy. Let's go give it a try.”

We go to the balloon dart game, where Timmy eagerly steps up to the counter. The carnival worker hands him a set of darts, and he carefully aims before throwing his first dart. It misses, but he's undeterred and quickly tries again.

Sarah leans closer to me, her voice barely above a whisper. “What if someone recognizes Timmy from town and starts gossiping?”

I wrap an arm around her shoulder, pulling her close. “Let them talk. We're here for Timmy, and nothing else matters.”

Timmy's face lights up as he finally hits one of the balloons, popping it with a satisfying burst. The carnival worker hands him a small stuffed animal as a prize, and Timmy clutches it to his chest, beaming with pride.

“Look, Dad! I did it!” he exclaims, running over to show us.

I ruffle his hair affectionately. “You sure did, champ. Great job.”

We continue to wander around the carnival, stopping occasionally to let Timmy try

his hand at different games or to grab a tasty treat. Despite her initial apprehension, Sarah starts to relax, her smiles becoming more frequent and genuine as the afternoon wears on.

As we approach a stand selling cotton candy, Timmy tugs on Sarah's sleeve. "Can we get some, Miss Sarah?"

She glances at me in surprise that Timmy's asking her permission, and I nod. "Of course, Timmy. Let's get some for everyone."

We stand in line, and I can't help but feel a sense of pride. I feel like a real family at this moment, and I will forever cherish it.

We're finishing our cotton candy when I see Jake approaching with Mia and their kids. Jake's got that familiar swagger, and Mia's carrying their newborn, Faith, nestled in her arms. Emily and Dylan, their older kids, run ahead, their laughter mingling with the carnival noise.

"Jake! Mia!" I call out, waving them over.

Jake reaches us first and wraps Sarah in a big bear hug. "Sis! It's great to see you!" He turns to me and gives me a hearty handshake. "Tyler, good to see you, man."

"Good to see you too, Jake," I say, returning his handshake with a genuine grin. "Mia, the baby looks adorable."

"Thank you, Tyler," Mia responds warmly, adjusting the blanket around Faith's tiny face.

I place a hand on Timmy's shoulder and steer him forward. "Jake, Mia, this is Timmy, my son."

Jake's eyes widen with surprise, and he looks from Timmy to me and back again. "Your son? I had no idea, Tyler. It's wonderful to meet you, Timmy." He extends a hand down to my boy and gives him the biggest smile.

Timmy shakes Jake's hand timidly but can't hide his beaming face. "Nice to meet you," Timmy replies.

"And this is Mrs. Carolyn," I continue. "She's been Timmy's nanny since... well, forever it feels like."

Mrs. Carolyn politely nods and smiles at everyone. "It's a pleasure to meet all of you," she says.

Jake glances at Sarah, then back at me. "Man, you've got a whole little family going on, huh?"

"Yeah," I nod, feeling a swirl of emotions.

"I'd like you to meet someone, Timmy. This is Dylan," Jake says as he gestures to his son, who's about the same age as Timmy. "And this is Emily," Jake points to the shy little girl standing close to Mia.

Dylan steps forward and gives Timmy a curious look before smiling. "Hey, Timmy. Wanna go check out some more games?"

Timmy glances up at me, waiting for permission. I nod. "Go ahead, champ. Have fun."

Emily joins in, her eyes twinkling with excitement. "Come on, I know the perfect game we can play!"

"Wait, I'll go with you-" Jake starts to say, before the kids start running, their laughter echoing in the air. He grins at Sarah with this teasing glint as he slings an arm around his sister's shoulders. "Seems like you're about to discover what being a parent is all about."

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Sarah blushes profusely as we burst out laughing before Jake rushes in the direction of the children to escort them.

"Mia, I guess you and the baby are with us." Sarah includes her sister-in-law as Mia smiles, relieved that she's not alone after Jake has taken off after the kids.

I lead them to an empty picnic table, where we can sit and rest our feet while watching Jake help the kids win prizes at a nearby booth.

Chapter 22

Sarah

Revelation and Acceptance

I watch Jake with the kids, a smile tugging at the corners of my lips as their laughter echoes back to us.

Sitting here with Mia and the baby feels surreal as I remember how hesitant I was to make this trip. Amidst all this joy and acceptance, I realize just how much mental baggage I've been carrying around. Tyler sits beside me, his hand gently resting on my back, offering silent support.

It's funny. My constant worry about what people might think of us together seems almost laughable now. I see open, accepting faces everywhere I look without a hint of judgment. Seeing how warmly the community has embraced Timmy and even Mrs. Carolyn fills my heart with warmth.

Mrs. Carolyn, once somewhat of a recluse, is now often seen laughing at bingo nights or showing off her knitting prowess, surrounded by friends who genuinely enjoy her company. She looks ten years younger, and I know it's because she feels valued and included.

I think about Timmy, who has been utterly accepted by the kids here. Tyler's decision to bring him to the ranch regularly has worked wonders. Timmy, who was once so shy and reserved, now bursts with enthusiasm and joy as he talks about his new buddies. Playdates, sleepovers, and impromptu soccer matches have now become the norm, creating a joyous rhythm to our lives that we hadn't anticipated.

The best part is how naturally everything has fallen into place: there have been no forced introductions, no awkward explanations, just straightforward, unadulterated acceptance.

It's a revelation that peels away layers of doubts and insecurities I didn't even realize I was lugging around. Tyler, too, seems lighter, as if he's stopped holding his breath and finally exhaled a burden he didn't know he was carrying.

As I watch the kids running around, I reflect on my journey. The road to where we stand now wasn't easy. Facing my past, embracing my vulnerabilities, and learning to love myself through the lens of new experiences have all been part of it.

But this event at the ranch solidified something crucial: people are kinder, more understanding, and far less judgmental than I ever gave them credit for. It's a simple truth, yet a powerful one.

Tyler turns to me as if sensing my thoughts. "Earth to Sarah," he teases lightly, pulling me back to the present.

I chuckle, leaning into his side. "Just thinking," I say, my voice soft with

contentment.

“About?” he probes gently, his eyes filled with curiosity.

“About how lucky we are. About how much I’ve worried for nothing,” I admit, my honesty coming quickly in this moment of peace.

He nods, understanding reflecting in his eyes. “It’s amazing how everything seems to be falling into place. I never thought we’d get here, honestly.”

“Me neither. But here we are, and I couldn’t be happier,” I reply, squeezing his hand.

Jake walks over to us with a broad smile, casually tipping his hat back. “You two feel like sticking around for dinner? Mia’s making lasagna, and she always makes enough to feed an army,” he says, with a playful glance toward Mia, who stands a few feet away, prepping a table.

Mia catches his comment and blushes, attempting to hide her embarrassment behind a roll of her eyes. “Jake!” she scolds, but there’s a warm smile behind her words.

Tyler doesn’t waste a second. “We’d love to stay,” he responds enthusiastically. “I’ve been dying to get to know my future brother-in-law better.” He winks at me, and now it’s my turn to blush, heat rising to my cheeks despite the cool breeze.

Jake laughs and looks between me and Mia. “Seems like Tyler and I are competing to see who can make their woman blush more!” His hearty laugh is contagious, and soon we’re all laughing together.

As the laughter fades, a comfortable silence settles over us, and we take a moment to watch the kids—Timmy, Emily, and Dylan—playing with the goats in Jake’s backyard. Their joyous squeals and carefree energy are infectious, making the scene

even more idyllic.

I lean into Tyler's side, feeling the warmth of his body against mine. "Looks like the kids are having a blast," I note, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Nothing like playing with animals to make a day special," Jake agrees, his tone reflective. "I always loved coming home to this. It's good for the soul."

Tyler nods. "That's what we're all looking for. Those moments that complete the puzzle and make everything feel just right."

I feel a blush creeping up my neck as I soak in the warm, familial atmosphere. Excusing myself from the cozy scene, I walk over to Mia, who's still bustling around the table. "Need a hand?" I offer, my smile mirroring the friendliness in my voice.

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Mia looks up, momentarily startled, but her eyes soften as she realizes it's just me. "Oh, Sarah, that'd be wonderful. I could use some extra hands," she replies, gratitude evident in her tone. She hands me a stack of plates, and we fall into an easy rhythm of setting up.

As we work, a comfortable silence blankets us, broken only by the clinking of dishes and the distant laughter of the kids. "So, how've you been? Settling into a parental role must feel exciting but exhausting," Mia ventures, her eyes twinkling with genuine interest.

I chuckle softly, balancing two glasses in one hand. "Exciting and exhausting, for sure. But in a good way," I admit, feeling fondly for the whirlwind that planning has been.

Mia nods knowingly. "I remember when Jake and I were trying to get comfortable becoming parental figures for each other's kids. It was chaos, but the kind that's wrapped in love," she muses, her gaze drifting slightly as if replaying old memories.

"Speaking of love, you and Jake seem happy," I comment, neatly placing the last plate down. "What's your secret?"

She pauses, considering her answer carefully. "Honestly, it's about the little things. Checking in on each other, being there even in the mundane moments, and laughing—a lot," she tells me, her voice steady, filled with warmth and sincerity.

"That makes a lot of sense," I say, nodding. "Tyler and I have been trying to stay grounded, focusing on what matters despite how busy we've been."

Mia's face lights up with a big smile. "That's the best way to do it. You two already have such a strong connection. Not everyone gets that lucky right off the bat. Days like today remind me how precious these moments are. Getting lost in the hustle is easy, but it's always worth stopping to appreciate life's small joys."

I glance back at Tyler, who's now catching Timmy mid-air in a playful toss, his face radiant with laughter. "You're right, Mia. These are the moments we'll remember forever."

Mia places a hand on my arm, her eyes shimmering. "Here's to many more moments like these," she says softly, and I can't help but feel my heart swell with gratitude.

Her words seem to cloak my heart in the kind of warmth that's everlasting.

The warm aroma of lasagna fills the air, mingling with the laughter and chatter around the table. It feels like these moments could last forever.

"Dinnertime, everyone!" Mia calls out, her voice brimming with enthusiasm. We all gather around the table, the delicious spread watering our mouths. Timmy and Dylan rush to their seats, eyes wide with excitement.

"Wow, Ms. Mia, these breadsticks are amazing!" Timmy exclaims, taking a big bite. Dylan nods vigorously in agreement, his cheeks puffed out with a mouthful of food.

"Yeah, they're awesome, MOM!" Dylan adds, his voice muffled by the breadstick he's chewing on.

Emily, seated beside me, picks up a forkful of lasagna, her eyes lighting up as she takes a bite. "It's so cheesy!" she giggles, her expression one of pure delight. It's moments like these that make my heart feel full.

Mia watches us, a satisfied smile spreading across her face. "I'm so glad everyone is enjoying the meal," she says, her voice filled with warmth. I catch her eye and give her an appreciative nod, feeling a wave of gratitude for the effort she's put into this dinner.

"This lasagna is incredible, Mia," Tyler comments, cutting into his slice. "You've outdone yourself."

Mia beams, her face glowing with pride. "Thank you, Tyler. It's my mom's recipe. She always said the secret ingredient is love."

I look around the table, seeing the joy on everyone's faces, and realize how vital these shared meals are. They're little islands of connection in our busy lives. I take a moment to savor the taste of the cheesy lasagna, the crispness of the breadsticks, and the happiness that fills the room.

Timmy catches my attention again, with Dylan joining him in a near-synchronized exclamation. "These breadsticks are the best!" they almost shout, their enthusiasm contagious.

"I'm glad you like them so much," I say, smiling at their excitement over the food.

Emily looks at Mia with wide, earnest eyes. "Mommy, can we have lasagna every day?" she asks, her voice filled with innocent hope.

Mia chuckles softly, ruffling her hair. "Maybe not every day, sweetie, but I promise we'll have it often."

The conversation flows easily, stories and laughter filling the gaps between bites. Tyler catches my eye across the table and gives me a knowing smile. We're both thinking the same thing—these moments matter.

The kids' energy wanes as the evening progresses, but their spirits remain high. Mia stands up to clear the plates, but I quickly intervene.

"Let me help you with that," I offer, standing up and gathering a stack of plates.

Mia shakes her head, her smile unwavering. "You've done enough, Sarah. Just enjoy the evening."

Reluctantly, I sit back down, watching as she moves gracefully around, collecting the plates before Jake gets up, not taking no for an answer from Mia as he insists on helping her clean up. The kids rush into the living room to watch television while Tyler and I are left at the table.

"How do you feel?" he asks me with worry in his eyes. I hope being here with your brother and his family wasn't too much for you.

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"It's perfect," I admit, with a twinkle in my eyes, reaching across the table to grasp his hand. "Thank you for encouraging us to come spend time with them. I do feel like we're a family now."

That pleases Tyler as his face lights up in happiness hearing that.

"Good. Then it means I'm doing my job of ensuring that."

Chapter 23

Tyler

New Beginnings

I feel proud that Timmy wants to spend the afternoon at the ranch, learning to ride a horse.

Timmy is already waiting by the barn, shifting from foot to foot in anticipation. His eyes light up when he sees me approaching, and I can't help but grin back at him.

"You ready to meet your horse, buddy?" I ask, reaching down to ruffle his hair.

Timmy nods enthusiastically, but there's a flicker of hesitation in his eyes. "Yeah, but... what if I fall off?"

Bill, who is standing by the stable door, walks over and kneels at Timmy's level. "You won't fall off, Timmy. That's why we're here to help you," he says reassuringly,

giving him a gentle pat.

I'm glad Bill is here and eager to assist in this since, on the inside, I'm nervous about Timmy getting on a horse. My knee injury has made me more paranoid about the possibility of someone being quick to get hurt.

Taking Timmy's small hand in mine, I lead him to the horse. It's a gentle mare named Daisy. Her eyes are kind and patient. She nuzzles Timmy's shoulder, making him giggle nervously.

"She's friendly, see?" I say with a smile, watching as Timmy's fear begins to melt away.

Bill grabs a stool and brings it over beside the horse. "Alright, Timmy, let's get you up here," he says, placing the stool firmly on the ground. "Tyler and I will be right here. You're safe."

With a bit of help from both of us, Timmy climbs onto the stool and then onto Daisy's saddle. His hands grip the reins tightly, his knuckles whitening visibly. I gently adjust his hands, showing him the correct way to hold them.

"Just like that, see? You're doing great," I encourage, fixing the stirrups so they fit his feet perfectly. "Remember, Daisy is gentle. She needs to feel you're calm."

Timmy looks down at me, still a bit unsure. "What if I mess up?"

"Everyone starts somewhere," Bill chimes in, mounting another horse to lead by example. "Even Tyler fell off a horse once, didn't you?"

I nod with a chuckle, "Oh, more than once. But falling is part of learning."

Timmy takes a deep breath, his tiny chest heaving. "Okay," he says with determination.

Emma and I exchange a look, and I know we're both proud of the kid for facing his fear. With gentle coaxing, we walk Daisy forward, each holding onto one side of Timmy. His initial worry softens into a smile as he feels the rhythmic motion of the horse beneath him.

"See, you're doing great!" I cheer, keeping a firm yet gentle hold on Daisy's bridle.

Timmy beams at us, the sun catching his golden hair in a halo. "I am, aren't I?" he says, a hint of awe in his voice.

"Absolutely," Bill says, riding his horse alongside us. "You're a natural, Timmy."

Timmy's confidence grows with each step, and soon, we're walking a complete circle around the paddock.

As we guide Timmy through the basics of horse riding, I can't help but feel a deep sense of fulfillment. Watching his fear transform into joy reminds me why I love being out here. The vast open fields, the sound of hooves against the earth, and seeing the wide-eyed wonder in kids like Timmy bring it all together. This, right here, is what matters.

By the time we finish, Timmy looks up at us with eyes full of admiration and gratitude. "Thank you, Dad. Thank you, Bill," he says earnestly.

"Anytime, buddy," I reply, lifting him gently off the horse. "You did amazingly well today. How about we do this again tomorrow?"

Timmy nods eagerly. "Yes, please!"

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As Bill and I stable the horses, I watch Timmy run back toward the ranch house where some of his friends are, excited to tell everyone about his adventure. Bill claps a hand on my shoulder, and we share a moment of silent camaraderie, feeling the weight and the joy of the day's success.

"He's a good kid," Bill says, and I can tell he's as moved as I am by the simple joy we've been a part of today.

"That he is," I agree, feeling a deep sense of contentment settle over me. This life, this family—it all feels just right. Speaking of the family... I remember I promised Sarah I would pop in on her as soon as the riding lesson finished.

Sarah is probably still in her office, knee-deep in invoices and paperwork. The thought makes me quicken my pace, eager to see her after a long day.

When I reach her office, I find her exactly where I expected—her head bent in concentration over a pile of papers, her brow slightly furrowed as she meticulously works through each document. I knock lightly on the open door, and she glances up, her face smiling as she sees me.

"Hey there," I say, leaning against the doorframe, taking in the familiar scent of the office mixed with Sarah's subtle perfume. "Am I interrupting?"

Sarah shakes her head, her eyes sparkling with warmth and relief at the sight of me. "Not at all. I could use a break right now." She stands, gracefully moving around the desk to come towards me. We embrace, the scent of hay and horses mingling between us as we share a tender kiss, the warmth of her body melting the day's stress away.

“How did Timmy’s riding lesson go?” she asks, her voice full of genuine curiosity as she looks into my eyes, her fingers gently brushing a stray piece of hay from my jacket.

“It was fantastic!” I exclaim, unable to keep the enthusiasm from my voice. “He was a bit nervous initially but was practically a natural by the end. We did a full circle around the paddock, and he even took the lead for a bit. You should’ve seen the look on his face.”

Sarah’s smile widens, her joy evident as she imagines the scene. “That’s wonderful to hear, Tyler. Timmy’s been looking forward to this for weeks. You must be proud.”

“Oh, I am,” I reply, grinning from ear to ear. “By the end of it, he was beaming. I’ve never seen the kid so happy. It’s moments like these that make all the hard work worth it. Seeing that joy on his face—it’s priceless.”

Sarah nods, her eyes reflecting the same contentment I’m feeling. “It’s amazing how much joy the ranch brings to these kids. You’re making a difference, you know that?”

“Yeah, I think we all are,” I say, wrapping an arm around her waist as we stand there, soaking in each other’s presence. The muted sounds of the ranch outside create a comforting backdrop to our moment.

“Let me finish these invoices, and then I’m all yours.”

“Take your time. I’ll be right here,” I assure her, giving her a gentle squeeze before she heads back to the desk. Standing there momentarily, I feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude wash over me. “You know what, Sarah?” I say, breaking the comfortable silence. “I was thinking, how about I treat you to dinner later? Just the two of us after I drop Timmy off at home.”

Sarah looks up from her work, a soft smile on her lips. "That sounds lovely, Tyler, but why don't we dine here at the ranch instead? As, you know, a family?"

Her bashful suggestion warms my heart in ways I can't quite describe. Not only that but she's gone from cowering at people seeing us together to now wanting us three to eat in the dining hall surrounded by people.

"Sarah, that's perfect," I respond, my voice laced with genuine appreciation. "I know Timmy will love it too. He always gets so excited about eating here. Besides, the food at the ranch... there's nothing like it."

She beams at my reaction, her face lighting up with a soft glow that makes everything feel right. "I'm glad you think so. I've been wanting to spend more time together like this. It feels... right."

"It's more than right," I assure her, stepping closer and gently touching her shoulder. "It's exactly what we need. You, me, and Timmy. A real family dinner."

Sharing an evening meal under the fading light of the ranch fills me with a profound sense of contentment. I watch as Sarah's eyes soften, her dedication and grace evident in every little movement she makes. Standing there, I'm reminded again why these simple moments mean so much.

"How about I help with those invoices?" I offer, my voice tinged with affection. "After all, the sooner we finish, the sooner we can fill our bellies." I wink at her, and she chuckles softly, nodding in agreement.

"Alright, partner," she says playfully, sliding a stack of papers towards me. "Let's get these done."

We work side by side concentrating on getting the work done.

Chapter 24

Sarah

Epiphany and Redemption

As I sit across from Tyler, feeling the warm glow of his presence, I can't help but reflect on how far we've come.

From the early days when I first met him, I was tangled in his defenses and dark moods, and now our lives are intertwined in ways I never imagined. It's hard to believe that the grumpy, stubborn man who first walked into my office as a new client is now my rock and partner in this beautiful journey we've been on.

I remember our first session vividly. Tyler had walked in, shoulders tense, eyes shadowed with unresolved emotions. He was so angry, so unwilling to open up. A fortress built from years of hurt and mistrust stood tall before me. I'd encountered many challenging cases as a therapist, but something about Tyler differed. His reluctance wasn't just resistance - it was pain masked by anger, a soul yearning for solace yet too afraid to seek it.

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He'd continually show up for the sessions, though begrudgingly at first. I would patiently coax him out of his shell, asking about his thoughts and feelings, but his responses were curt, almost as if giving me a piece of his mind was a concession he wasn't willing to make. But I could see glimpses, here and there, through the cracks in his gruff exterior. The way his eyes softened when he spoke of Timmy, the quiet tremor in his voice when he mentioned Timmy's mom. Slowly but surely, a rapport began to build between us.

And then, one day, something shifted. Tyler shared something deeply personal—his yearning to give Timmy the stable, loving home he never had. It was like an essential turning in a lock. His vulnerability in that moment was a turning point, and our professional boundaries began to blur into a deeper, more personal connection.

Then, of course, when we would begin spending time together outside the office, our encounters moved from the sterile space of therapy sessions to walks on the ranch and dinners where laughter and heartfelt conversations flowed easily.

In time, what started as a therapist-client relationship transformed into a romance neither of us had anticipated. Tyler began to trust me more, to let me in, and I fell for the man behind the walls—a caring, ardent individual with depths of love and passion. But it wasn't easy. I was terrified of what people would say about us, about me. The fear of judgment was a constant shadow, whispering doubts that threatened to overshadow the light we were creating together.

Still, whenever I felt that fear gnawing at me, I thought of Tyler's courage—how he bravely faced his demons. How could I not muster the strength to face mine? Every day, I grew prouder to stand by his side and walk around town and at the ranch with

him and Timmy. The whispers and stares gradually lost their power, replaced by a sense of peace and pride that I never thought possible.

Timmy's infectious excitement and Mrs. Carolyn's warm embrace solidified the feeling that we were a family. Little moments, like the one we are sharing now, working together towards a common goal, showed me the beauty of our togetherness's simplicity. I leaned into it and allowed myself to savor and cherish it, letting go of the fears that once held me back.

"Sarah," Tyler's voice cuts through my pensive thoughts, drawing me back to our present moment. I glance up from the cards in my hand, meeting his amused eyes. There's his smirk again, which makes my heart beat. "It's your turn," he reminds me, leaning back comfortably in his chair in the kitchen.

"Oh, right," I say, shaking my head slightly to clear my mind. We are deep into our game of Go Fish, the cards spread out on the kitchen table between us. Timmy's giggles fill the air as he bounces next to me. He is too young to grasp the rules but is enthusiastic in his attempts to play along.

Tyler's gaze holds a playful challenge, and I can't help but rise to it. "Got any tens?" I ask, arching an eyebrow.

"Go fish," he replies with a grin, clearly enjoying this. I sigh dramatically, drawing a card from the pile.

"Mom, look!" Timmy exclaims, showing me his mismatched cards with a beaming smile.

"Great job, sweetheart," I reply, ruffling his hair.

That's another new occurrence. Timmy has recently begun referring to me as mom,

and at first, he would do it timidly, as if to test it out to see if it's okay. But realizing I'm more pleased with hearing it and not upset that he calls me that, that has transpired into him calling me that all the time.

Tyler leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "You're not going to win if you keep getting distracted," he teases.

I shoot him a mock glare. "Just focusing on giving you a false sense of hope," I jest, picking up another card.

"Is that so?" He chuckles, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "I think you're just stalling because you know you're losing."

"I'll show you losing," I retort, setting down a book of 4 cards. "Got any sevens?"

"Go fish," he responds again, his smirk widening slightly.

We continue this back-and-forth, our banter light and filled with the kind of warmth that comes from shared love and experiences. Each playful nudge, each shared laugh, strengthens our bond, cementing the foundation of the life we're building together.

Timmy grows more boisterous with each passing moment, his joy evident in the simple happiness of the here and now. Mrs. Carolyn glances occasionally from the other side of the kitchen, smiling as she cooks dinner.

Our love story continues to unfold in these small, tender moments—amid cards, laughter, and playful banter. It's a quiet yet profound attestation to our journey from uncertain beginnings to this moment of shared contentment. The echoes of our past struggles seem distant, overshadowed by the brilliant, present joy of being together.

"Sarah," Tyler whispers as the game continues, the sound of my name on his lips like

a promise. "I'm glad you're here."

Something he tends to say every night when I choose to stay rather than head back to my house that I haven't been to in weeks.

I look at him, my heart full of gratitude and love. "Me too, Tyler," I reply, squeezing his hand. "Me too."

Dinner earlier had gone just as pleasantly as the card game. Mrs. Carolyn's cooking is always something to look forward to, and tonight she's outdone herself.

The smells of meatloaf and mashed potatoes wafted through the air, mixing with the comforting aroma of freshly baked bread. When it was time to eat, Timmy spent all of dinner boasting about looking like a real cowboy during his riding lessons earlier.

As Tyler and I are getting ready for bed, and I can't help but reflect on how far we've come. Tyler and I have been through a lot, and looking back, I realize how much we've changed.

Not just our relationship and connection but also how we've changed individually.

As I brush my hair in front of the mirror, Tyler comes up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist. "You know, Sarah," he murmurs, his voice soft, "I never thought I'd be this happy."

I look at his reflection, our eyes meeting in the mirror. "Me neither," I admit. "It wasn't easy, but getting here was worth every struggle."

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Tyler nods, and we stand there in silence for a moment. "Do you remember how distant and untrusting we both were?" he asks. "I don't think I could have made it without you."

I turn around to face him, placing my hands on his chest. "We helped each other," I say softly. "You showed me that it's okay to trust again, and I showed you that it's okay to embrace life outside of a career."

He smiles, but there's a hint of seriousness in his eyes. "You've taught me so much, Sarah. I learned about growth and about being okay with letting the world in on me being a father. I didn't think I could feel whole again after everything, but you changed that."

"And you taught me about redemption, Tyler," I reply, the words heavy with emotion. "About how it's never too late to turn things around, to find peace and happiness, no matter how lost you feel. How it's important not to go through life alone if you don't have to."

Tyler rests his forehead against mine. "We've come a long way, haven't we?"

I nod, becoming emotional all of a sudden. "Yes, we have. And we still have a long way to go, but now I know we can face anything together."

Tyler takes a deep breath, his forehead still resting against mine. "You know, as happy as I am, there's something I've been nervous about."

I pull back slightly, just enough to look into his eyes. "What is it? You can tell me

anything."

He hesitates for a moment before speaking. "It's Timmy starting school. The school year is just around the corner, and summer is almost over. I can't help but worry about how he'll adjust."

I smile reassuringly, squeezing his hands. "Timmy has come a long way, just like us. He's made some great friends already. Remember, Dylan and Emily will be attending the same school. Timmy won't be alone."

Tyler's face relaxes a bit, the tension easing from his shoulders. "Yeah, you're right. I almost forgot about that. They get along so well with Timmy."

I nod, feeling the warmth spread through my chest. "Exactly. And they're excited to show Timmy the ropes. You'll see, he'll settle in just fine. Plus, the teachers there are wonderful. They know how to support children who need more time to adjust."

Tyler sighs, his grip on my waist tightening slightly. "I guess I'm just being overprotective. I know how hard it can be to start fresh, especially for a kid."

"We're doing everything we can to ensure he has a positive experience," I gently remind him. And besides, he's not alone in this. We'll always support him every step of the way."

He smiles, the worry in his eyes giving way to gratitude. "Thank you, babe. You always know how to calm my nerves."

I rest my head against his chest, taking comfort in the steady beat of his heart. "We're in this together, remember? Timmy's not the only one who's grown. We've all become stronger as a family."

Tyler strokes my hair. His voice is soft. "You're right. We've faced so much already and become stronger on the other side. We can handle this too. I am also relieved that Mrs. Carolyn will have more time to herself with Timmy at school. I've been wanting her to relax and enjoy herself more."

"I honestly think she's going to go crazy with Timmy being gone all day and will probably volunteer at the school," I joke. Tyler chuckles in amusement but nods, since he can see something like that happening.

Chapter 25

Tyler

The Joy of Companionship

"Alright, let's get Timmy ready for his first hayride," Sarah says, her eyes twinkling with excitement as she glances at my mini cowboy, who is busy inspecting his cowboy hat.

I nod, catching Timmy's eye. "Hey, partner, you ready for some adventure?"

Timmy grins, his apprehension from earlier fading away. "Yes, Daddy! I can't wait!"

We go to the barn, where the other kids are gathered, giggling and chattering like a flock of noisy birds. The horses are hitched up to a couple of large hay wagons, and the smell of fresh straw fills the air.

I glance around, seeing some parents helping their children settle into the wagons while others chat. The atmosphere is one of excitement and camaraderie, and it warms my heart to see Timmy already making new friends.

"Timmy, stay close to us, alright?" Sarah instructs, as she mounts the wagon, helping him up. "You don't want to miss out on any of the fun."

"Okay!" Timmy says, his tiny hands clutching the edge of the wagon. His enthusiasm is contagious, and I feel a surge of pride watching him.

As the kids get comfortable on the hay bales, Sarah and I go to the front of the wagon where Mr. Jenkins, the ranch owner, sits. "Thanks for helping out today, folks," he says, tipping his hat. "We always appreciate the extra hands."

"Anything for the kids," I reply, giving him a firm handshake. "Just let us know what you need."

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"Well, you folks can watch and ensure the kids stay seated during the ride," he chuckles. "You won't believe how adventurous some of these little tykes can get."

Sarah and I exchange an amused glance. "We can handle that," she says, her tone confident.

As the horses begin to pull the wagons, the kids' laughter and squeals fill the afternoon air. The sun is warm on our faces, and the bright blue sky is dotted with a few fluffy clouds. Timmy sits beside a girl his age, and they chat animatedly about their favorite games and animals.

"So, how do you like the hay ride so far?" I ask Timmy, leaning closer to hear him over the noise.

"It's amazing, Daddy! I love the horses and the hay and everything!" he exclaims, his eyes wide with excitement.

Sarah smiles, her gaze shifting from Timmy to the other children. "It's great seeing all the kids so happy. This is exactly what we wanted for him."

"Yeah," I agree, my heart swelling with gratitude. "It's days like these that make all the hard work worth it."

The ride continues around the expansive ranch, passing fields of wildflowers and grazing cattle. Sarah and I stay vigilant, making sure none of the kids get too rowdy or try to stand up. Now and then, I catch her eye, and we share a moment of understanding and contentment.

After the ride, we help the kids down from the wagons. Timmy immediately runs to pet one of the horses, his face glowing joyfully. "Can we do it again, Daddy? Please?"

"Maybe later, buddy," I tell him, ruffling his hair. "There are more fun activities lined up for the afternoon."

Sarah's laughter draws my attention to where she's talking with a group of parents. Mrs. Johnson, the mother of one of Timmy's new friends, approaches us with a smile. "Timmy's a natural with the horses," she comments.

"Thanks," I reply, feeling a puff of pride. "He loves animals."

As the afternoon progresses, Sarah and I take turns supervising different stations. There's a sack race, a makeshift petting zoo, and even a cowboy boot toss. Throughout it all, Timmy is never far from our sight, and his cheerful presence is a constant reminder of the happiness we've built together.

"Hey babe, look at them go." Sarah nudges me as we watch a group of kids, including Timmy, jumping with all their might in the sack race. The sight of his excited face makes us both laugh.

"He's got some competitive spirit," I say, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

"I wonder where he gets that from," Sarah teases, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

The sun dips lower in the sky, casting a golden glow over the ranch. We gather the kids for a snack break as the activities wind down. Timmy plops down on the grass beside us, munching on an oatmeal cookie. "This was the best day ever," he declares, through a mouthful of crumbs.

"We're so glad you had fun, sweetheart," Sarah says, kissing his head.

"And don't forget, there's more to come," I add, giving him a wink. "We've got a lot of great days ahead."

"To many more days like this," Sarah murmurs, linking her fingers with mine.

"To many more," I echo, squeezing her hand gently as we bask in the warmth of the setting sun.

As the campfire crackles with life, I glance at the kids huddled close to one of the older cowboys.

His weathered face glows in the firelight as he spins a thrilling tale, his voice rising and falling to the children's delight. The kids inch closer with each twist in his narrative, their eyes wide and excitedly sparkling.

Timmy is right in the thick of it, gripping a stick with a half-eaten s'more, the marshmallow gooey and melting over the chocolate, leaving sticky traces on his fingers.

His pure and uninhibited laughter mingles with the others, rising into the cool evening air, blending with the occasional hoot of an owl or the gentle rustling of leaves in the breeze.

Sarah and I are sprawled out on a blanket a little ways away, enjoying a rare moment of tranquility. The night sky above us is studded with stars, twinkling like diamonds against the dark canvas.

The vast expanse of the Milky Way stretches out in a luminous band of light, and now and then, a shooting star streaks across the sky, prompting whispered wishes and

soft gasps from the onlookers.

We're surrounded by other couples, each wrapped in their little worlds yet sharing this beautiful moment. The gentle hum of conversation creates a soothing background chorus, punctuated by the occasional crackle of the fire and the soft murmur of the breeze.

I turn to Sarah, my heart swelling with my love for her. Her eyes reflect the firelight, and the peaceful contentment on her face makes me fall in love with her all over again.

A lock of her hair, still faintly smelling of lavender from the earlier shower, falls across her forehead. She brushes it back absentmindedly, nestling closer to me.

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"This is perfect," she whispers, her voice barely audible over the crackling fire. Her warmth is intoxicating, a comfort I never knew I needed so badly.

"Yeah, it is," I reply, my arm wrapped securely around her. The campfire stories mixed with the crackling logs and children's laughter offer a serene backdrop. The scent of burning wood and roasting marshmallows fills the air, a perfect blend of nostalgia and present joy. The scene feels almost magical as the firelight flickers, dancing shadows around us.

Sarah's hand finds mine, our fingers intertwining in a familiar dance. "Remember our therapy sessions?" she asks, a playful glint in her eyes. "You used to hate the silence."

I chuckle softly. "Now, it's therapeutic. It's funny how things work out." We share a knowing smile before Sarah leans her head against my shoulder, her warmth and the faint scent of vanilla bringing a sense of tranquility. "I enjoyed today," she says, her voice a soft murmur. "I wish Mrs. Carolyn could have come."

I chuckle, shaking my head. "Mrs. Carolyn was not missing her knitting class or bridge game for anyone," I joke, picturing the elderly lady's concentrated face while playing card games with the other elders. Sarah giggles at the thought, her laughter a musical sound that complements the ambient noise around us.

"True," she agrees, her eyes twinkling with amusement. "But it would have been nice. She's always so full of stories and wisdom."

"She's got a lot of years under her belt," I reply, staring into the fire. "Bet she's seen

and done more than we could ever imagine."

Sarah nods, her face contemplative. "I hope we get to be like her one day, with stories to share and a lifetime of love."

"We're off to a good start," I say, gently squeezing her hand. The fire crackles, adding emphasis to my words. "Today was one for the books, no doubt about it."

She smiles, her eyes filled with a mixture of happiness and reflection. "Yeah. The hay rides... even just sitting by the lake... everything felt so perfect."

I find myself nodding along with her words. It had been a day filled with moments I wanted to bottle up and keep forever. "And the best part," I add, "was sharing it all with you."

Her cheeks flush a soft pink, and she looks down, clearly touched. "You always know how to say the right thing, Mr. Charming."

"Only because it's true," I respond, kissing her forehead softly. I glance over at my son, still captivated by the stories being told.

We sit silently for a while, content in our bubble of happiness. The serene night surrounds us, punctuated only by the occasional nocturnal sounds.

Sarah stirs slightly, bringing me back to the present. "Do you remember when I let you talk me into camping that weekend?" she asks, a mischievous glint in her eye.

"Oh jeez, how could I forget?" I laugh, recalling the disastrous attempt at setting up our tent. "You were determined to do it without looking at the instructions because Dr. Marlene always knows best."

"And I did it," she retorts, grinning. "Eventually."

"After about three hours and a lot of cursing," I remind her playfully.

"Hey, it was a learning experience," she says, nudging me with her elbow. "Besides, we had a great night despite the chaos."

"True," I agree. "I wouldn't trade those memories for anything."

Sarah sighs contentedly, her fingers tracing gentle patterns on my arm. "Here's to many more days like this," she murmurs wistfully.

"Absolutely," I reply, tightening my arm around her. "Let's make sure Mrs. Carolyn comes next time."

"Deal," she laughs softly, her voice a soothing balm in the night air.

We fall silent, but it's the comfortable silence we've come to treasure. The kind that speaks volumes without needing words. I feel her relax against me, the stress of the day melting away. Nights like this, where we can just be, are what I live for.

Behind us, the laughter escalates as the cowboy's story climaxes. Timmy's squeals pierce through the night, making us smile. "He's having the time of his life," I murmur, tightening my arm around Sarah.

"I'm so thankful," she responds, her voice barely above a whisper. "For him. For us."

"Me too, babe. For all of it," I say, kissing her forehead. "And there's so much more to look forward to."

"To many more nights like this," Sarah says, echoing our earlier sentiments.

“To many more,” I agree, drawing her even closer as we lie there, enveloped by the magic of the evening and the depth of our emotions. We watch the stars together, appreciating the big moments and the small, quiet ones alike.

Chapter 26

Sarah

Turbulent Waters

Today feels like it's full of mysteries waiting to be unveiled.

During breakfast, I glance around the table and smile.

“So, what’s everyone’s plans for today?” I ask, pouring syrup over my pancakes.

Tyler looks up from his plate, a glint of mischief in his eyes. “I’ll be at the ranch all day.”

Timmy giggles suddenly, his eyes sparkling with excitement. I cock an eyebrow, curiosity piqued.

"And what about you, Mrs. Carolyn?" I ask, turning my attention to her.

Mrs. Carolyn glances at Timmy with amusement dancing in her eyes. “Oh, I’ll be spending the day with Timmy. He’s eager to show me his horse-riding skills.”

Timmy can hardly contain his excitement, giggling even more. Tyler chuckles, shaking his head. I can’t help but smile at their little exchange.

“Well, I only have two client sessions this morning, so I’ll have a half day,” I say. “I’ll join you at the ranch once I’m done.”

Timmy's giggles intensify, making me wonder about the real secret behind all this joy. Nevertheless, I nod and smile, leaving the surprise for later.

My workday concludes by mid-afternoon. Eager to discover what had everyone in such high spirits, I park my car in the driveway of the Parker residence. As I gather my things to head inside, I spot Joanie, our next-door neighbor, rushing over.

"Sarah, oh, thank goodness you're here!" Joanie exclaims, flustered but smiling warmly. "I've made too many sandwiches, expecting the whole family, but they couldn't make it due to a family emergency. Won't you come over for lunch? I hate to waste all this food."

Her genuine distress, mixed with hospitality, tugs at my heart. "Of course, Joanie. I'd love to," I reply, closing my car door and following her to her house next door.

Joanie's home is as welcoming as she is, filled with the comforting aroma of fresh bread and the soft hum of a country radio station playing in the background. She leads me to the quaint, cozy kitchen where an impressive spread of sandwiches, salads, and homemade lemonade awaits.

"Help yourself," she says, motioning towards the table. "I made enough for an army."

"This looks amazing, Joanie," I compliment, grabbing a plate.

We sit down together, and as we eat, Joanie shares stories about her children and grandchildren, making me feel like an honorary family member. The food is delicious, the conversation light-hearted, and time flies by.

As our lunch concludes, I thank Joanie for the lovely meal and head back to the Parker residence, curiosity still bubbling. Making my way to the ranch, I feel the intrigue intensifying with each step.

Upon arriving, I find Timmy on his pony, proudly showing Mrs. Carolyn his new skills. Tyler is nearby, a grin plastered on his face as he watches his son. As they notice me, Timmy lets out an excited squeal.

“Mom, look what I can do!”

He expertly guides his pony in a small circle, his face glowing with pride.

“That’s incredible, sweetheart!” I cheer, clapping my hands.

Tyler walks over to me, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. “Looks like we’ve got a little cowboy on our hands,” he says, with a pride-filled voice.

“I’m so proud of him,” I reply, leaning into Tyler.

We watch Timmy for a while longer, applauding his tricks and listening to him chat excitedly about his pony. The sun's warmth, the joy on Timmy’s face, and the love in Tyler’s eyes make me feel like the luckiest woman in the world.

Then suddenly, my brother Jake rushes over to Tyler and whispers something in his ear. Jake then smiles and hurries away as Tyler looks ready to follow him before turning back to me.

"They need my help. I will be busy the rest of the day, but try to relax since you're off work now." He kisses my lips and rushes away while a funny feeling grows in my stomach.

It appears that something is afoot right underneath my nose, and yet, I can't place what is happening.

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I watch Tyler head off, my curiosity gnawing at me. But before I can ponder further, Mrs. Carolyn approaches and smiles warmly.

"Sarah, I packed a huge picnic basket for Timmy and me to have a picnic near the lake," she announces, a twinkle in her eye. "You're more than welcome to join us."

It's a sweet offer, but I rub my still-slightly-full stomach, remembering the delightful lunch Joanie prepared. "Thank you, Mrs. Carolyn, but I just had lunch with Joanie. I'm quite full."

Timmy's eyes light up at the mention of a picnic, and he rushes over to me. "Mom, please come! We can have so much fun! You have to come!" He looks up at me with that irresistible, hopeful expression.

I chuckle, trying to remain resolute. "Oh, Timmy, I ate so much already. It wouldn't be fair to you or Mrs. Carolyn."

But Timmy isn't giving up. "Please, Mom! There's apple pie! And we can watch the ducks, too!"

His enthusiasm is infectious, and I find myself caving. "Alright, alright," I say, laughing. "I suppose one slice of apple pie won't hurt."

Timmy's cheer of triumph makes us all smile. Mrs. Carolyn grabs the picnic basket, and the three of us head towards the lake. The trail is lined with wildflowers, and the sky is a perfect blue, making it a beautiful sight.

Upon reaching the lake, we find a lovely spot under a sprawling oak tree. Mrs. Carolyn spreads out a huge blanket, and the aroma of the packed food makes me regret my earlier resolve not to eat. She lays out a magnificent spread of sandwiches, fresh fruit, and, of course, the apple pie.

Timmy immediately starts digging in, chatting away about the new school year. "I'm so excited to start school with my new friends! Did you know they take field trips to the next town? It's much bigger, with many cool places to see and fun things to do!"

I smile at his excitement, cutting a slice of apple pie. "That sounds wonderful, Timmy. You're going to have such an adventure!"

He then gets more enthusiastic about starting school, but I also notice the wink that he and Mrs. Carolyn trade when they don't think I see it. I tilt my head to the side while studying them, realizing something is indeed going on.

After three hours of lounging on the blanket, playing tag with Timmy, and feeding the ducks by the tranquil pond, I finally suggest returning to the ranch. The sun is beginning to dip below the horizon, casting an orange glow over the landscape. Timmy looks at me with his big, pleading eyes, his hair tousled from our adventurous day, but I know he's getting tired, too.

"We should probably get going, sweetheart," I say, brushing a strand of hair from his face and gently touching his flushed cheeks. "It's been a long day."

He sighs in that adorable way he does when he's reluctant but doesn't argue. Mrs. Carolyn, with her kind and warm demeanor, helps pack up the remnants of our wonderful picnic, carefully folding the blanket and placing the leftover snacks back into the basket. We begin the walk back along the dusty, well-trodden path that leads

to the main part of the ranch. The sounds of the evening – crickets chirping and the distant mooing of cows – accompany us.

As we approach the ranch yard, I find it odd that there's no one outside. Usually, there's a bustle of activity – people tending to chores, horses being groomed in the stables, and just the general hum of ranch life. Today, though, it's eerily quiet. The barn doors are shut, and there's no sign of the workers who are usually busy at this time.

“Why is it so quiet?” I ask, looking around, sensing something is off. The silence feels almost tangible as it hangs in the cool evening air.

Mrs. Carolyn smiles and shrugs. “Maybe it's just one of those days,” she says, but I can tell she knows more than she's letting on. There's a glint of mischief in her eyes that she can't entirely hide.

Timmy grabs my hand eagerly, his tiny fingers warm and insistent, pulling me towards one of the side doors that leads to the dining hall. “Come on! We have to go this way!”

“Timmy, what's the rush?” I ask, tugging back a little, but he's insistent, his excitement growing even more.

The moment we enter the dining hall, I freeze. It's beautifully decorated, in a romantic way. Fairy lights twinkle from the ceiling like stars, lanterns cast a warm, inviting glow, and the room is filled with fresh, fragrant flowers. Every detail seems meticulously planned. My heart begins to race, and I can't figure out why. The room is enchanting as if we've stepped into a fairy tale.

“Timmy, what's going on?” I ask, but he smiles brightly, his eyes sparkling with a secret he's held all day. He gives my hand an encouraging squeeze and leads me to

the center of the room, where the soft sound of music begins to play, wrapping the moment in a magical aura.

Everyone seems to be smiling, looking at me with anticipation and warmth. The room is softly lit, and there's a lot of excitement. Tyler steps forward from the crowd before I can fully process what's happening. His hands are behind his back, and he looks more nervous than I've ever seen him, his usually calm demeanor replaced with a trembling intensity.

"Tyler, what's all this?" I ask, my voice trembling slightly, my heart pounding.

"Sarah," he begins, his voice steady but filled with emotion, his eyes locking onto mine. "Since you came into my life, you've brought happiness and light. You've made Timmy smile more than I've seen in a long time, giving Mrs. Carolyn and I hope for the future. I know I don't want to spend another day without you." His words hang in the air, heavy with sincerity and love.

My heart pounds even more as I realize where this is going. The room seems to shrink around me, every eye fixed on us.

"You mean the world to me, Sarah," he continues, dropping to one knee as he pulls a black velvet box from behind his back. The room falls silent, the anticipation almost tangible. My breath catches when he opens it, revealing a stunning diamond ring that sparkles under the soft lighting. "Will you marry me?"

Stunned, I feel as if the room is closing in on me. My vision blurs, and I struggle to breathe. The weight of everyone's expectations presses down on me.

All I can manage is a soft "Excuse me," before I turn and run out of the dining hall, my footsteps echoing down the hallway toward my office—everyone's gasps ringing in my ears, a mixture of shock and confusion.

Tyler's hurt and confused expression is the last thing I see before the tears cloud my vision completely.

Chapter 27

Tyler

Riding Through the Storm

I stand there, frozen, as if the world has stopped spinning beneath me.

The murmur of shocked whispers grows louder around me, a cacophony of concern, sympathy, and confusion. Everything feels surreal, like a nightmare I can't wake up from. My heart aches, and I don't know what to do next.

The sound of boots scuffing against the wooden floor draws my attention. Jake strides towards me, his brows furrowed with concern. "Tyler," he says, his voice low yet firm, "maybe it'll be okay. My sister has always been weird about surprises."

I hear him, but I can't seem to process his words. My feet feel rooted to the floor, and all I see in my mind's eye is the image of Sarah running away, her face pale and eyes wide with disbelief. Jake places a reassuring hand on my shoulder and shakes me gently. "Go talk to her, Tyler. You two need to sort this out."

His words finally penetrated my haze of shock. I push myself to move, each step heavy with the weight of the situation. The dining hall seems to stretch forever, but I eventually reach the hallway. Every synchronized murmur of the guests irritatingly

rings in my ears, reminding me of my public rejection.

Reaching Sarah's office door, I halt, taking several deep breaths. My initial sense of hurt is burgeoning into anger. I steel myself, knocking firmly on the door. "Sarah, it's me," I announce, trying to mask the wavering tremor in my voice.

"Come in," she responds softly from the other side.

I push open the door, closing it quietly behind me. Sarah is at her desk, her elbows resting on its surface, her face buried in her hands. She looks up slowly, her face pale and eyes brimming with tears of confusion and perhaps sorrow.

"What's wrong, Sarah?" I ask, my voice strained, trying to mask my growing unease. "I didn't expect you to, well, just run like that."

"I didn't expect you to propose," she replies, her voice barely above a whisper, laden with anxiety. Her hands tremble slightly, and she clutches them together to steady herself.

I try to rein in my growing frustration, attempting to lighten the mood with a weak joke. "Proposals are supposed to be a surprise, you know." I offer a small, forced smile, hoping to ease the tension.

"I'm serious, Tyler," she answers, her eyes finally flicking up to meet mine. Her gaze is filled with a mixture of fear and confusion, and it makes my heart ache.

A surge of anger flares within me, a bitter taste filling my mouth. "Why are you so surprised, Sarah? You're practically living with me. We've talked about our future together!" I gesture around the room, filled with reminders of our shared life.

She bites her lip, avoiding my gaze once again. "Maybe it's too sudden... for a

proposal." Her voice wavers and I can see the conflict in her eyes.

"There's no time limit on love," I retort, unable to keep the edge out of my voice. "Are you saying no to my proposal?" My heart pounds in my chest, fearing the answer.

"No, I'm not saying no," she insists quickly. "I'm just... surprised." Her words are hesitant as if she's still processing everything.

"It sounds like you're saying no," I snap, my patience wearing thin. I feel a sharp sting of rejection, which cuts more profoundly than I expected. I turn away from her, heading towards the door. The wound of her reaction seeps deeper, the words as sharp as knives, leaving an aching void in my chest.

"Tyler, wait!" she calls, but I don't stop. I fling the door open and walk out, the hurt and anger swirling inside me like a storm refusing to subside.

I hear Sarah scrambling after me, her footsteps echoing down the hallway. "Tyler, wait!" she calls. Ignoring her plea, I continue walking, the anger and hurt surging through me.

Before I reach the exit, I feel a gentle tug on my elbow, forcing me to stop. I turn slightly, just enough to see the look of distress on her face. "Tyler, please," she says, almost out of breath. "Can we please talk about this?"

My eyes are stinging, but I fight back the tears. "What is there to talk about, Sarah?" I spit out. "I thought you wanted this. I thought you wanted a future with me."

Her face is ashen with guilt and concern, and she hesitates before speaking. "I do want a future with you. I'm not saying no... I was just caught off guard by the proposal," she mutters, her voice trembling.

I shake my head in disbelief. "Caught off guard? How can you be caught off guard?" I ask, my voice rising. "We've been living like a couple planning a future. It's been a month, maybe longer since you've stayed at your home. You only go back to grab more clothes to bring here."

She opens her mouth to respond, but I don't let her. "Timmy calls you 'Mom' now, Sarah. And Mrs. Carolyn dotes on you as if you're already family." My voice cracks with emotion. "Why is it okay for Timmy to call you 'Mom' so soon, but when I propose, it's too soon?"

Her eyes widen, and she looks genuinely hurt. "Do you regret Timmy calling me 'Mom?'" she asks quietly, her voice shaky.

I sigh, the anger dissipating slightly. "No, I don't regret it," I say, softening my tone. "I don't understand how you see that as normal and natural, but my proposal is too sudden." I run a hand through my hair, struggling to control my emotions.

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Her eyes fill with tears, and she steps closer to me, placing her hand gently on my arm. "Tyler, I love you. I love Timmy. I want a life with you both. I was just surprised, that's all," she whispers.

I look into her eyes, searching for the truth in her words. The storm of emotions inside me begins to calm, although the hurt is still very much present. "You have to understand, Sarah," I say, my voice softer now. "I thought we were on the same page. Your reaction made me feel like I was wrong about everything."

She shakes her head vehemently. "No, you weren't wrong. I'm sorry if I made you feel that way," she says, her voice steady. "I want this. I want us. I've just... never been proposed to before. It just threw me off balance. I guess I never thought of marriage much all my life because it's always been just me and my career."

I take a deep breath, considering her words. The hallway is silent, the tension between us slowly ebbing away. Maybe I can understand her position. Perhaps I can see how my sudden proposal could have been overwhelming, even if the signs seemed evident.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling the tension in the air. "I understand Sarah," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. "I'm sorry if my proposal was too sudden. I didn't mean to overwhelm you. At this point, I thought we would get engaged and have a very short engagement to get married sooner. We're practically living together as a family now-"

Before I can say anything more, she grabs my hand and gently pulls me down the hallway. "Come on," she says, her tone soft but stern, her grip warm and reassuring.

We walk back to the dining hall, hand in hand, each step echoing in the quiet corridor. As we enter, the room falls silent. The air feels heavy and awkward, with everyone having sensed the tension.

The guests, a mix of close friends and acquaintances, look at us with wide eyes, their conversations halted mid-sentence. Sarah doesn't let it faze her. She smiles, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Everyone, I'm so sorry for running out like that," she chirps, squeezing my hand warmly, her voice carrying across the room. "Tyler and I just needed a moment."

She turns to me, her eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that makes my heartbeat. "You should probably take your place on your knee again," she says, her voice gentle yet insistent, leaving no room for hesitation. Her words hang in the air, a mixture of command and encouragement.

I blink, stunned, my heart pounding like a drum. For a moment, I can't move, paralyzed by the gravity of the situation. Is this happening? However, the look in her eyes tells me all I need to know. Slowly, I drop to one knee, trembling as I hold up the box with the ring. My hands are shaking so much that I'm afraid I might drop it, but I hold on tightly, determined not to let this moment slip away.

Sarah beams at me, her eyes filled with love and joy, her smile brighter than I have ever seen. "Yes, Tyler," she says, her voice steady and clear, a beacon of certainty in the whirlwind of emotions. "I will marry you."

The room erupts into excited, congratulatory cheers, the sound bouncing off the walls as I look up at her, feeling as though I might pass out from the overwhelming surprise and happiness. The sound of clapping and joyous shouts fills the air, but all I can focus on is her radiant smile, the promise of a future together shining in her eyes. We did it. We are getting married.

As I rise to my feet, the weight of the moment finally sinking in, Sarah throws her arms around me, pulling me close. The warmth of her embrace and the scent of her hair provide a sense of comfort and belonging. The guests gather around us, their faces beaming with happiness, and we are soon enveloped in a flurry of hugs and handshakes, laughter and tears of joy mingling in the air.

In the midst of it all, I can't help but marvel at the turn of events. I was consumed with doubt and uncertainty a short while ago, fearing that my hasty proposal had ruined everything. Standing beside the love of my life, surrounded by our closest friends and family, I realize that this perfect, beautiful moment is the beginning of our new journey together. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Timmy barrels into me as I scoop him up so he can hug me in excitement while I see a tear-stricken Mrs. Carolyn hug Sarah in happiness. All the hurt emotions weighing down my heart dissipate as I enjoy this celebratory moment.

Epilogue

The Promise of Forever

Sarah

Two months later, I find myself standing at the altar of the makeshift outdoor chapel at Beartooth Ranch, hand in hand with Tyler.

It felt right to have the wedding here, surrounded by the Pine Creek community, to help us enjoy today.

Having already walked down the aisle as the ring bearer, Timmy stands next to our Matron of Honor, Mrs. Carolyn, while watching the ceremony.

As I gaze into Tyler's eyes, I am filled with a profound sense of peace and certainty—emotions that had once seemed so elusive.

"Do you, Tyler, take Sarah to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, for better or worse, till death do you part?" the officiant's voice rings out, clear and steady.

Tyler's eyes never leave mine as he replies, "I do." His voice is firm yet tender, carrying the weight of promises I know he will keep. The sincerity in his tone is enough to anchor me to this moment, casting aside any lingering shadows of doubt.

"And do you, Sarah, take Tyler to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, for better or worse, till death do you part?" the officiant asks.

"I do," I say, my voice barely above a whisper, but it carries an unmistakable conviction. I smile as I see Tyler's eyes glisten with unshed tears, and I know this is where I am meant to be – with him, now and forever.

As we exchange vows, the world fades away. "Tyler," I begin, my voice trembling with emotion, "From the moment our paths crossed, you've been my rock, my confidant, my best friend. You've shown me the true essence of love and given me a family. Today, I pledge to stand by your side, to support you unwaveringly, and to love you with all my heart. I vow to cherish every precious moment and to grow old with you, building a life overflowing with joy, laughter, and boundless love."

Tyler grips my hand tightly, his smile overflowing with love and tenderness. "Sarah," he begins, his voice filled with emotion, "You have changed my life beyond my wildest dreams. You've filled my heart with joy and made me the most amazing father to Timmy. Today, I vow to always be by your side, to honor, cherish, and adore you. I promise to build a life together that is filled with adventure, warmth, and

endless love. No matter our challenges, our bond will grow stronger each day."

Our guests, seated on rustic wooden benches, are a sea of familiar and loving faces. Standing beside Mrs. Carolyn, Timmy can hardly contain his excitement, his eyes lighting up each time they meet mine. He had been ecstatic about our wedding, especially knowing that I'd officially become his mother figure legally. Mrs. Carolyn, having been an incredible support for Tyler and Timmy, is now an irreplaceable part of our family, and Tyler had worked so hard to ensure she knows it.

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As the moment to exchange rings arrives, my hands tremble slightly while slipping the simple gold band onto Tyler's finger. He reciprocates, and I am in awe of the metallic glint symbolizing our union. With a collective sigh of relief and immense joy, the officiant announces, "I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Tyler leans in, his lips meeting mine in a kiss that is both tender and passionate.

Timmy 'ews' at the sight as everyone cheers and laughs at Timmy's antics. Jake, who had walked me down the aisle, stands on the other side of Tyler with tears of happiness.

It's as though time freezes, capturing the essence of pure happiness and love in this singular moment. As we break apart, our guests explode with applause and cheers. Timmy rushes towards us, and we sweep him up together, the three of us enveloped in a family hug.

The atmosphere is abuzz with excitement and celebration during the reception in the main dining hall. The rustic elegance of the room, adorned with flickering candles and tasteful floral arrangements, exudes warmth and festivity. Laughter and chatter fill the air as our guests eagerly await the start of the reception.

Tyler takes my hand, and we weave through the crowd, accepting congratulatory hugs and handshakes. The band strikes a lively tune, signaling the beginning of the festivities. Guests begin to sway to the rhythm, their joy palpable.

Timmy races past us, his laughter echoing as he plays tag with Dylan and Emily.

They dart between tables and chairs, their energy seemingly boundless. Meanwhile, Mia cradles baby Faith, the center of attention as cooing guests take turns admiring her cherubic face.

Near the entrance, a small crowd has gathered around Jake. Their astonishment is evident as they pepper him with questions, still in disbelief that we are siblings. Jake, ever the charmer, handles it with a broad smile and easy banter. "Yes, it's true," he chuckles, "I had the honor of giving my sister away today."

Tyler pulls me close, and we go to the dance floor. The moment we've been waiting for—our first dance as husband and wife. The band switches to a slow, romantic tune. Tyler's arm wraps around my waist, and I rest my hand on his shoulder, our eyes locked.

"May I have this dance, Mrs. Parker?" Tyler asks with a playful grin.

"It would be my pleasure, Mr. Parker," I respond, unable to suppress my smile.

We move in unison, our steps synchronizing effortlessly as though we've been dancing together our entire lives. The world seems to fade away, leaving just the two of us in this magical moment. Tyler's eyes sparkle with the same love and affection I feel radiating from my own heart.

"I can't believe we're finally here," he murmurs, resting his forehead against mine.

"Neither can I," I whisper back. "It feels like a dream."

Tyler laughs softly. "If it is, I never want to wake up."

As we continue to dance, our guests circle the dance floor, watching us with warm smiles. The music changes pace, and more couples join us, filling the dance floor with twirling skirts and laughter. We slip into another rhythm, our movements more

relaxed, our smiles wider.

Across the room, I glimpse Timmy, who has abandoned his game of tag to join Mrs. Carolyn. She bends down to his level, whispering something in his ear that makes him giggle. He looks over at us, waving enthusiastically.

Tyler and I wave back, our hearts swelling with love for the little boy who has brought so much joy into our lives.

The evening progresses with delicious food and elegantly decorated cake that tastes as heavenly as it looks. Guests mingle and share stories, filling the hall with a familial warmth. There's a sense of unity, of shared happiness, that envelops us all.

Tyler and I find a moment to steal away and share a private word. He leans in, his breath warm against my ear. "Are you enjoying yourself, Mrs. Parker?"

"More than I ever dreamed possible, Mr. Parker," I reply, my voice tinged with the sincerity of the moment.

He takes my hand once more, placing a soft kiss on my knuckles. "Here's to many more nights like this," he says, his eyes filled with promise.

"And endless love," I add, completing the toast silently between us.

As the reception unfolds, it becomes evident that this is more than just a celebration of our marriage—a joyous acknowledgment of new family bonds and lifelong friendships being forged. This magical night will linger in our memories, marking the perfect start to our journey together.

The End.