



Old-Fashioned Rancher

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Category: Romance, Western

Description: When the surly, divorced rancher meets his match in the pretty local florist, he soon finds the ice around his cold heart beginning to melt. But is he willing to change his bachelor ways to keep this woman who makes him feel alive again?

Grady

Even though I have my hands full with running High Plains Ranch, my daughter won't stop heckling me about dating again. After my divorce two decades ago, I have no intention of finding another wife. Then Beatrice "Birdie" Knowles waltzed into my life to prove me wrong, smelling like honeysuckle.

She was hired to handle the floral arrangements for the annual Ash Ridge Harvest Festival that I've been roped into hosting for the whole town. No matter how much I bluster and scowl, Birdie remains bright, cheerful, and unfazed by my grumpy demeanor while everyone else runs for cover or gets the hell out of my way.

The last thing I need is a woman complicating my life. But it seems I've developed a soft spot for Birdie. She's under my skin. For better or worse.

Birdie

I know how to handle big, burly, and tough men like Grady McCall. He's a prominent figure in the small town of Ash Ridge, Colorado, operating the biggest and wealthiest ranch for miles around.

I'm not blind. Grady is an attractive man who would be married in a heartbeat if he didn't scare off the women who ogled him from afar. With his delicious square jawline, tight Wrangler jeans (a firm ass to go with them), and a commanding presence, Grady needs a brave woman to soften him up.

But that won't be easy. He's rough around the edges and set in his ways. I'm more than ready to fall in love with him. The question is...will he make that commitment to me in return? Or am I chasing a man who will never love me back?

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Chapter 1

Grady

I swore under my breath as I navigated traffic on my way to the Denver airport. Big cities put me on edge and made me cranky—well, crankier than usual, at least. I preferred my small, rural hometown of Ash Ridge, where there were more horses and cattle than people, and the only skyscrapers around were the mountains rising in the distance.

A car swerved in front of me. I hit my brakes hard enough to burn rubber on the road. I gritted my teeth so tightly with irritation that my jaw ached.

God only knows why I ended up marrying a woman from New York—a city girl on vacation, who preferred shopping at high-end boutiques, and dining at five-star restaurants. She always loved visiting Denver when we were together. All I could offer her was a life working cattle, riding horses, and bossing around ranch hands.

No wonder Diana wanted a divorce.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I finally reached the airport, grateful for a respite from the stress of traffic, no matter how brief it was. I grabbed the bouquet of flowers I'd picked up on the way—exorbitantly priced in Denver, compared to the little florist in Ash Ridge. But I didn't give a damn about the price tag as long as they put a smile on my daughter's face.

I was barely out of the truck when Avery came striding out of the airport to meet me

at the curb. My heart squeezed at the sight of her.

My little girl had grown up so fast, right before my eyes. At twenty-five years old, she had the confidence of youth, ready to take on the world. Her breezy linen pants, crop top, and smooth tan served as a reminder of just how much her college years in California had changed her. The only mark that hinted of her Colorado home was her cowboy boots.

Avery abandoned her suitcase and ran toward me, flinging her arms around my neck in a crushing hug. Even though she'd paid me a surprise visit at the beginning of summer, it still felt like a lifetime ago. With October in full swing, the autumn chill that lingered in the air promised snow would be around the corner soon.

"God, it always feels good to come home," Avery murmured against me.

I smiled softly to myself with a twinge of inexplicable relief to hear her say that.

"Does that mean you're not moving to California with your mother?"

She pulled back and huffed a laugh.

"Not a chance. Hanging out with Mom is fun, and California is wonderful, but it's not the ranch."

"Then let's get you home," I replied, passing the flowers into her arms and opening the passenger door of my truck for her.

Deep down, part of me had always been holding my breath a little bit. Waiting for the day when Avery would follow in my ex-wife's footsteps and leave High Plains Ranch behind.

I'd built my cattle empire from the ground up with my own two hands. Now that I was in my early fifties, I was faced with the reality of naming an heir in my will. I didn't want to leave the land to Diana. She wasn't a bad person, but she didn't understand the value of the place. As soon as I was buried, she'd sell the land and some gaudy strip mall would be built on it.

Running the ranch would be a monumental responsibility to place on Avery's shoulders, but she was serious about taking the task head on. I would do everything in my power to make sure she was ready for it.

After loading up Avery's luggage, I started the truck and braced myself to get back into traffic. I cleared my throat.

"So, how was college? How much homework do you have to get done over fall break?"

Avery sighed and leaned her head back against the seat.

"More than I want to think about right now."

"Things are going well in school though?" I ventured.

"Oh, sure. I have a fantastic roommate, and a great group of friends I hang out with. This one guy is a genius and he's usually willing to lend a hand with my assignments when I need help."

I gripped the steering wheel so tight that my knuckles turned white.

"Are you two...close?"

My voice turned gruff on the last word as my overprotectiveness leaked out. I always

knew the day would come when my wild, beautiful, headstrong daughter would give her heart away to someone, but now that I faced the likelihood of it actually happening, I realized just how poorly prepared I was for it.

“Relax, Dad,” Avery said with amusement. “He’s a friend. That’s all.”

“Would you tell me if he was something more than that?” I countered, casting a glance in her direction. “As I recall, you were doing a lot of sneaking around when you were seventeen. There were a number of boyfriends tiptoeing in and out my back door that I never got a chance to meet.”

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Avery might look like the spitting image of her mother, with tightly coiled dark ringlets, rosy cheeks, and a charming personality, but she got her stubborn streak from me. We butted heads on more than one occasion during her teenage years over the subject of dating.

“That’s because you don’t behave yourself,” she replied. “I still haven’t forgiven you for scaring the shit out of my first boyfriend. He literally wet his pants because he was so intimidated and you kept interrogating him. You wouldn’t let up.”

I shrugged, feeling no remorse over that particular incident.

“Do you really think that boy would have survived with a rancher for a wife? He couldn’t keep up with you.”

Avery wrinkled her nose and looked away, feigning a pout.

“I hate it when you’re right.”

I chuckled.

“Since we’re on the subject of dating,” she said with a sly note in her voice. “What about you, Dad? Are you seeing anyone?”

“That answer hasn’t changed for twenty years, sweetie. I’m over the hill now. An old man. My dating days are over.”

Thank God for that.

I hadn't dated since the divorce, claiming excuses like I was too busy, or I had a five-year old daughter to raise. The truth of the matter was that I had no clue how to be a good husband. I knew cattle and horses like the back of my hand, but I wasn't romantic, and I'd seen the way Diana suffered because of it. I couldn't stand to watch the light go out in another woman's eyes because I was too rough around the edges.

"Not true," Avery said. "There are plenty of people who date later in life. I could set you up."

I sputtered in disbelief.

"Absolutely not."

"But the apps—"

I shot a pointed look at Avery.

"Sweetie, I don't even use that coffee maker you bought me for Christmas five years ago. It has too many goddamn buttons on the fucking thing. And the coffee is more frothy milk than anything else."

"That's because you keep using the cappuccino setting, Dad."

"Which proves my point. Too many goddamn buttons, like I said. Do you really think I'd be any good at using a dating app?"

Avery waved off my protest like it was nothing more than a pesky gnat.

"You built a multi-million-dollar ranch. I'm sure you could figure out a little dating app. Besides, you would have so many matches. You're the quintessential cowboy with that chiseled jawline, deep raspy voice, and brooding attitude."

“I don’t brood,” I scoffed.

“You would be like catnip to the ladies, I just know it.”

“Jesus Christ, I can’t believe what I’m hearing.”

“I could run your account,” Avery offered. “You wouldn’t have to mess with it at all. Just go on a few dates.”

“You make it sound so simple,” I said in a flat voice.

“See? I knew I’d win you over eventually.”

“Wore me down is the more accurate way to put it.”

“Is that a yes? You’ll do it?”

“No,” I said, emphatically.

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Avery clucked her tongue.

“That’s a shame. I guess you’ll have to go back on your word then.”

I frowned, confused.

“What are you talking about? I haven’t given my word to do anything.”

A small, wry smile curled the corner of Avery’s lips up.

Shit. That look meant trouble.

I stepped on the brakes and swerved to the shoulder of the road. Car horns blared around me, but I didn’t pay any attention to them. Bracing my arm on the back of Avery’s seat, I turned on her.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing!”

“Avery Marie, don’t lie to me.”

She fiddled with a flower petal, the bouquet resting on her lap.

“I might have volunteered you for...something.”

I stifled a groan. This girl had always been wily and too smart for me. She hadn’t

even been living in the same state with me for the last few years, and yet she'd still managed to wrangle me into something I would undoubtedly regret.

"Like what?" I demanded.

"Hosting the Ash Ridge Harvest Festival."

It was a good thing she had me wrapped around her little finger. If anyone else tried to pull this shit on me, I'd bury them alive.

"That is never going to happen," I said.

"But it would be a perfect way for you to meet people! Find a date. Flirt with some older single ladies."

"I can find my own date without you meddling, thank you very much," I countered.

"This isn't meddling. It's an intervention."

I scrubbed a hand over my face, still reeling from being blindsided with all this.

"Avery, the festival is next weekend."

"Exactly. So, we have a lot of planning and prep work to do before then."

I pressed my lips into a thin line of disapproval.

"There are at least half a dozen other places to have this damn party," I pointed out.

"The fairgrounds, town hall, the Snowdrop Inn..."

"If you host it though, it shows how warm and welcoming you are to your

community. A generous man ready and willing to spread his wealth around, ensuring that his humble little hometown gets a taste of the good life alongside you.”

A pause settled between us.

“That is the biggest crock of bullshit I’ve ever heard,” I said. “You should have been a lawyer.”

She beamed.

“I do make a compelling argument, don’t I?”

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“It’s still not happening,” I replied.

Avery crossed her arms.

“You’re such a stick in the mud.”

“And now you sound just like your mother. Did you think you could out-stubborn me, young lady?” I said, amused. “You got me into this mess, so you’re going to get me out of it. As soon as we’re back in town, fix it.”

She winced.

“Do you really want Ash Ridge hearing about how you backed out of your commitment? Your word has always been your solemn vow, Dad. It’s practically sacred.”

“I didn’t make this promise,” I protested. “I don’t know how you managed to do it, but you started this. Not me.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that the McCall name is still signed on the dotted line.”

Damn it. My Achilles’s heel. She had me trapped like a worm on a hook all because of my damn pride and she knew it. When I commit to doing something, I always follow through, come hell or high water.

“Avery...” I said in a warning tone.

“Don’t be mad,” she said in a rush. “I was only looking out for my aging father. I didn’t want you to be alone,” she added, softening her tone and widening her eyes like a kicked puppy.

No matter how old my daughter would get, she knew how to pluck my heartstrings and play me like a fiddle.

“Don’t act all innocent,” I said. “And I didn’t appreciate the remark about my aging, by the way. I’m fifty-two. That doesn’t mean I have one foot in the grave, for God’s sake.”

Avery grinned, toed off her boots and propped her feet on the dashboard.

“I think it will be great to have the festival at the ranch. It’s huge, with plenty of room to spread out. Since you’re always working, you rarely get a chance to meet new people. This way, the whole town will come to you.”

I guided my truck back into traffic, envisioning my ranch overrun with hundreds of people. I wasn’t going to like this one little bit.

“Goddamn it, Avery,” I said with a sigh of defeat.

“Love you, too, Dad,” she chirped, pleased with herself that she got her way. “Oh, I almost forgot. The florist will be at the ranch first thing tomorrow morning to discuss flower arrangements for the party.”

I shook my head, bewildered that I’d been roped into Avery’s perfectly laid plan like a spider’s web.

Chapter 2

Birdie

At eight o'clock in the morning on the dot, I arrived at High Plains Ranch. The magnificent gated arch was an ostentatious display, depicting a stampede of horses and cattle, kicking up billowing clouds of dust, rendered in metal. The ranch's name was spelled out in bold letters across the top.

I sucked in a steadying breath to quell the jittery nerves in my belly. Maybe I should have skipped that shot of espresso this morning. It was bad enough knowing that I was about to provide floral arrangements for one of the wealthiest men in Ash Ridge. Grady McCall wasn't exactly known to be a friendly, easy-going man. His bullheaded ways, backbone of steel, and ruthless ethics had scared off lesser men who chickened out of doing business with him.

His temper wasn't the part that bothered me about all this though. If I screwed up, the whole town would know that I bungled flowers for a millionaire.

God help me.

After navigating the winding driveway over a mile long, the McCall home came into view and my jaw dropped. The house was massive, standing two stories tall, with a pair of natural rock chimneys flanking either end of the building. A porch stretched across the front of the house, disappearing around the back, but there wasn't a scrap of decor in sight. Not even a potted plant. Two lonely rocking chairs were tucked together at the corner.

Did anyone even use that gigantic porch? Or were they too busy running the ranch to spend time making their house a home?

To my right was a barn, two corrals, and several other smaller buildings that I couldn't identify. One of them had to be the bunkhouse. On a ranch this size, the

McCalls would need hired hands to do the hard labor required to keep everything running smoothly.

Shaking my head, I pulled to a stop outside of the house and parked. I couldn't imagine living like this. At forty-three years old, I'd managed to make a modest life for myself by running the local flower shop, Lavender Lane. It wasn't much money—just enough to cover bills with some spare change left over at the end of every month—but I was proud of it.

I retrieved the coffee and pastries from the seat next to me, tucked my old battered iPad under my arm, and stepped out of my vintage Ford truck. Crisp, cool mountain air greeted me. I shivered, regretting the fact that I'd left my scarf at home.

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Craning my neck back, I gazed up at the house again. When Avery McCall had phoned the shop to set up a consultation appointment, she'd been so friendly and down-to-earth. Now that I stood on McCall ground, a nagging voice whispered in the back of my head that maybe I'd bitten off more than I could chew this time...

Before I could brave my approach, the front door opened and a man emerged, tugging the brim of his cowboy hat down over his eyes. My mouth went dry at the sight of him. He looked like he belonged on the cover of a bodice-ripping western romance novel. Broad shoulders, a square jawline darkened by salt and pepper stubble, and large hands rendered rough by years of work.

Stop drooling and say hello, I chastised myself.

"Good morning!"

He froze. Then he lifted his head, granting a full view of his face. As soon as I got a glimpse of his crystal clear, sharp gray eyes, and the firm line of his mouth that rarely—if ever—smiled, I knew who he was. My jittery stomach roiled with butterflies.

Grady McCall, rancher, millionaire, and most eligible bachelor in Ash Ridge. Many women in town admired him, but only from a distance. His prickly demeanor usually deterred any attempt at flirtation.

Despite the undeniably attractive man in front of me, I pushed away those thoughts and focused on what I came for—business. Taking a bold step forward, I held out my hand.

“I’m Beatrice Knowles, founder and florist of Lavender Lane. Everyone calls me Birdie. Avery McCall sent me to discuss the floral arrangements for the Harvest Festival.”

Grady flicked a glance down at my hand. For a moment, I thought he wouldn’t take it. Then he grasped my hand briefly with a firm grip, callused fingertips rasping against my skin before releasing me.

“I’m her father, Grady,” he grunted, obviously less than thrilled about introducing himself. His gaze shifted in the direction of the barn, and the mountains beyond it. “Avery isn’t home at the moment. She left a note, saying she went for a ride this morning with one of my ranch hands. I suspect she won’t be back for many hours.”

“Oh, well, that won’t be a problem,” I replied. “She said you were the man to talk to about any big decisions that needed to be made anyway.”

Grady grumbled under his breath.

“Flowers aren’t really my area of expertise,” he said.

“That’s all right. I brought coffee and pastries—a little sweet treat I like to offer my clients as we chat. I’ll walk you through some of my ideas. Choosing a few bouquets won’t take up too much of your time, I promise.”

Grady’s gaze slid toward the mountains again, looking like a man trapped with no escape. I’d seen that expression on men’s faces before, seeking an apology bouquet and feeling completely lost when it came to the myriad of choices before them.

“Whatever you think is best will be fine,” he said.

Then he was on the move, striding away from me as if he couldn’t escape fast

enough.

“That’s a dangerous thing to say to a woman,” I called after him. “Regardless of whether or not you know anything about flowers, Mr. McCall, may I remind you that the resulting bill in your name will be your responsibility to pay, whether you like it or not. And if I’m given free rein to do as I like, the resulting costs could be very, very high.”

Grady waved me off without breaking stride.

“Money is no issue, Ms. Knowles.”

I stared at his retreating back as he practically ran to the sanctuary of his barn. This wasn’t the first time a man had left all the floral decision making to me. It was one thing to trust my expertise implicitly, it was another thing to bolt for the hills and leave a blank check in my care for a festival that would cost more than I earned in a year.

Just as Grady reached the barn, I spoke.

“So, do I understand correctly that you’re willing to spend thousands of dollars on flowers instead of cattle?”

That got him to stop dead in his tracks. He turned to look at me. Thank God those steely gray eyes were shielded by the brim of his hat. It was hard to think under his piercing stare otherwise.

I flashed him a smile.

“Of course that’s just a ballpark estimate at the moment. I’ll have a better idea for a more specific number when I’ve selected the arrangements, factored in last-minute

costs. Little things like that can add up quickly.”

A muscle twitched in Grady’s jaw. He cast one final baleful glance of longing toward the barn and the mountains and his beloved freedom of the open range. Reluctantly, he started making his way back to me.

“I feel like I’m being press-ganged into this bullshit,” he said.

“Oh, that’s exactly what’s happening, Mr. McCall,” I replied. “Avery paid me a pretty penny in advance to ensure that I didn’t let you wiggle out of it.”

“I’ll double whatever she paid you if you get back in your car and forget about this festival nonsense.”

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I laughed and shook my head.

“Avery told me you’d say that. The battle lines have been drawn, and I’ve chosen my side. I’m also a member of the Harvest Festival Planning Committee, so I’m looking forward to this event. You’re outnumbered, Mr. McCall. And you can’t change my mind. Coffee?”

I pressed one of the cups into his hand. He gave it a skeptical look.

“Black,” I added before he could ask. “No cream or sugar.”

“Another tip off from my meddling daughter, I assume?”

Grady took a sip and dipped his head in a brief nod of bare approval. I bit the inside of my cheek to hide a smile, pleased that he liked it.

“She was quite informative.” I held up my own cup. “Besides, I had a feeling you weren’t a caramel white chocolate macchiato type of man.”

“That doesn’t count as real coffee. That’s a cup full of sugar.”

“And it’s delicious. Pastry?”

I held out the bag with the Bread & Butter Bakery logo on the front. Over the years, I discovered that even the most difficult, irascible clients mellowed into nearly docile kittens at the first bite of a pastry still warm and fresh from the bakery.

Grady eyed the bag for a moment before he grudgingly took a danish.

“Why don’t you give me a tour?” I suggested. “Let me see the lay of the land. Then I can offer better suggestions when it comes to selecting floral arrangements.”

Even though it was a perfectly reasonable business suggestion, I couldn’t help feeling a little curious. I drove by the McCall ranch all the time, but I’d never seen it up close and personal like this before.

Grady cleared his throat and lifted his chin in the direction of the barn.

“Bunkhouse and barn are over there. House is behind you. The rest is forest and open fields.”

“That’s not a tour, Mr. McCall.”

When I moved closer, his gaze locked onto me, watching, steady. My throat tightened and my courage almost gave out. But I forged on and hooked my arm into Grady’s elbow.

“A gentleman who entertains a lady should be ready and willing to show off for her,” I added. “So, go on. Try again. Impress me this time.”

When I gave his bicep a squeeze, he croaked a flustered cough. I never treated my other clients like this. There was a thin line between friendly and flirtatious, and I always remained safely in the friendly camp.

In Grady’s case, I gladly obliterated that line without looking back. Now I hurtled full speed into flirting territory. My resolution to remain strictly professional was in shambles.

“Avery put you up to this, didn’t she?” Grady countered, shaking his head. “I told her I didn’t need any help finding a date.”

“Hold your horses, mister. No one said anything about a date. Not even Avery. Ever since I showed up, you looked like you wanted to make a run for it. So, I’m merely providing a little guidance to help you out. I’ve lived in Ash Ridge long enough to recognize a man who doesn’t spend much time in the company of a lady. You have no clue what to do with yourself.”

Grady hesitated.

“Is it that obvious?”

I patted his shoulder.

“It’s written all over your face. Now, try again and take me on a real tour this time.”

Grady began to move. But I didn’t budge, letting my hand slide away from his arm. He glanced back with a frown of confusion. I raised my eyebrows, waiting for him to catch on.

“What?” he said, exasperation growing in his tone. “What am I missing now?”

“An invitation.”

Understanding dawned on his face. Grady gave a heavy sigh. Then he returned to my side and offered his arm.

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“Would you like to join me on a tour, Ms. Knowles?” he asked gruffly.

I beamed, sliding my hand into the crook of his elbow.

“I’d love to, but only if you call me Birdie.”

Maybe there was a gentleman under that calloused, grumpy old cowboy exterior after all.

Chapter 3

Grady

With Birdie on my arm, I tried to remember the last time I’d been this undone by a woman. Practically blushing like a schoolboy. Humbly taking orders without protest.

If Avery could see me now, she’d never let me live it down.

Twenty years ago, when I met Diana, it was an entirely different story. I was young, hot-headed, and cocky, cutting my teeth on building my ranch. She liked the romantic ideal of falling in love with a cowboy more than she liked the reality of early mornings, long hours dedicated to hard labor, and the smell of cattle that permeated everything.

Our attraction to each other had burned too fast, fizzling out within a year or two. I would always hold a special place in my life for Diana as the mother of my child, but with the wisdom of age came the realization that we never truly loved each other. If I

hadn't been driven by raging hormones in my early twenties, I might have recognized sooner that Diana didn't actually like me. She liked the fantasy version of me instead, glamorized by Hollywood westerns.

This attraction to Birdie felt...different. Softer, genuine. Naturally falling into place like puzzle pieces.

On the other hand, I'd rushed into things too quickly with my ex-wife. I had no desire to make the same mistake again with another woman.

As I showed Birdie around, her sweet honeysuckle perfume invaded my lungs on every breath. No matter how hard I tried to focus on anything else, my awareness kept zeroing in on the feather-light touch of her hand resting on my forearm.

Despite my non-existent love life for the past twenty years, I wasn't blind. Birdie was a beautiful woman, with pale blonde hair swept up in a loose bun. Her green plaid skirt hugged her curvy hips with perfect snugness that drove me to distraction. And her soft, ample cleavage brushed against my arm as we walked side by side.

Birdie was the perfect storm to awaken feelings in me that I fully believed had died a long time ago. Ever since the divorce, I went to great lengths to ensure that I didn't cross paths with women who might express interest in me. And yet, here was Birdie, not-so-subtly feeling up my arm, teaching me how to entertain the company of a lady, and batting those blue eyes at me.

She had her iPad out now, showing me pictures of flowers and arrangements, gesturing with sweeping movements as she indicated where she'd like things to go. It gave me a chance to watch her, cheeks flushed from the cool air, animated with her creative vision and eager to see it come to life.

"Everything about High Plains is big and bold, magnificent," she said. "We should

use flowers to match that statement. Sunflowers would be wonderful—tall, towering. We could sprinkle in some snapdragons for a pop of color. Oh, and evergreen foliage, too, for earthy texture. What do you think?”

I shrugged. I really had no opinion, but Birdie seemed excited for it.

“That sounds fine,” I said.

She shot me a withering look of impatience.

“A little more input than that would be appreciated.”

“Like I said before, I trust your expertise. I know cattle, not flowers.”

Birdie didn’t press and snapped her iPad cover closed. We’d stopped at the fence that bordered the southern pasture, leading into a crop of trees, and eventually the rocky terrain of the lower mountain range. She turned around, leaning back against the fence to face me.

“It’s a gorgeous place you have here, Mr. McCall. You must be very proud of it.”

“I’m surprised to hear you say that,” I replied.

She cocked her head.

“Why?”

I propped my forearms on the fence, watching the grass ripple in a faint breeze.

“I thought you’d tell me that a proper gentleman shouldn’t exhibit pride.”

“You have every right to be proud of something you built,” Birdie countered.

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That's your problem, Grady, Diana told me as she signed the divorce papers. You always loved the land more than you ever loved me. There isn't enough room in your heart for both of us.

I closed my eyes against the memory. Deep down, I knew she was right. That's why dating after our separation had felt so...pointless. If I ever remarried—as impossible as that sounded—I needed a woman who loved this land as much as I did.

My gaze slid toward Birdie again, studying her. Whether I felt attracted to her or not, my judgment about women had led me astray once before. Diana didn't like the ranch life, and I couldn't imagine Birdie would either in that snug plaid skirt. She was a florist, for God's sake. Not a rancher.

The thunder of hooves echoed in the distance. I lifted my gaze and turned north toward the sound until I spotted Avery on horseback, racing across the field with a whoop of laughter. My foreman, Bowen, was close on her heels. He could have easily overtaken her if he let his horse have its head, but he kept a tight rein and held back, letting Avery outpace him.

They skidded to a stop by the barn in a cloud of dust. Avery circled her horse around Bowen, savoring her victory. He simply watched her with a small smile playing on his lips, one hand resting on the pommel of his saddle.

Raising my daughter around a bunch of rowdy cowboys hadn't been easy. I watched them like a hawk, making it clear in no uncertain terms that if they laid a finger on Avery, they were dead meat.

I was never concerned about Bowen though. He was the most trustworthy man I'd ever met, loyal to a fault. Shadowing my daughter around the ranch for years to keep her out of trouble.

I let out a piercing whistle to get Avery's attention. Her head snapped up. I waved her over. She said something to Bowen and he nodded. After she dismounted from her horse, she passed the reins to him.

Avery wiped her hands on her jeans and jogged over.

"You must be Avery," Birdie said, extending her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Birdie."

"Hey, glad to see you made it all the way out here. And my father hasn't scared you off yet."

"Oh, he certainly tried to get rid of me, but I wouldn't let him off the hook that easily."

"Stop talking about me while I'm standing right here," I interjected.

"Poor Dad. We haven't forgotten about you, I promise."

Avery grinned and wrapped her arms around my middle. I sighed, knowing damn well that she purposefully put me in this position, thanks to that note on the kitchen table.

Gone for a ride with Bowen. Be back around noon.

That gave her plenty of time to dodge the appointment with the florist, leaving it entirely on my shoulders. Not that I minded meeting with Birdie. That wasn't the

point. I cast a stern look in Avery's direction, as if to say, you and I are going to have a serious talk after this.

She didn't even bat an eye.

"So, did you get the flowers sorted out?"

With no help from you, I thought, but I bit my tongue and held it back. For now. She'd hear about it later.

"We did," Birdie said. "Sunflowers, snapdragons, and evergreens. It's going to be stunning. I'll send you a cost estimate later today."

"I can't wait to see them." Without missing a beat, Avery added, "Why don't you stick around for lunch? We'd love to have you."

I bit back a growl, knowing damn well what Avery was up to. She was putting me in an impossible situation. Again. If I didn't support her invitation, I would appear cold and rude, when Birdie had been nothing but warm and welcoming.

To my relief—and a small prickle of disappointment—Birdie waved her off.

"That's such a kind offer, but I really have to get back to the shop. I've stayed away too long already. But if either of you have any questions or concerns about the flowers, just give me a call and I'll be happy to help."

"We're really looking forward to seeing those arrangements, and thank you for coming all the way out here." Avery jabbed her elbow into my ribs. "Dad will walk you to your car."

I scowled at Avery. I was supposed to be the one giving the orders around here. But I

fell into step beside Birdie anyway without protest.

As soon as we were out of Avery's hearing range, Birdie spoke with a note of amusement in her voice.

"Does your daughter usually try to marry you off to any woman that crosses your path?"

I grunted as my neck prickled with embarrassment. It was bad enough for Avery to put me on the spot like that, but the fact that Birdie noticed made the whole ordeal worse.

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“No, not really. This is...new.”

Birdie laughed softly and bumped her shoulder against mine. I caught a deep breath of her honeysuckle scent and my heart thundered against my ribs.

“Relax. I don’t expect you to propose any time soon, if that makes you feel any better.”

As if this nonsense wasn’t awkward enough.

“Please don’t pay my daughter any attention. I’ll have a talk with her.”

We’d reached Birdie’s truck by now. She deposited her iPad on the front seat. What little remained of our coffee and the bag of pastries had been left in the kitchen after a tour of the house.

“I don’t get embarrassed that easily, Mr. McCall,” Birdie replied. “Don’t worry about it. I like Avery. And she obviously cares about you very much if she wants to see you happy.”

Retrieving a business card and a pen from the pocket of her skirt, she scribbled something down quickly. Then she stepped closer until only a few inches separated us. The shadow of my hat brim fell across her face, shielding her eyes as she gazed up at me.

Birdie pressed her lips to the card until a blush-pink lipstick stain remained. My throat worked as I watched her open my coat and slide the card into the breast pocket

of my shirt.

“That’s my personal number.” She patted my chest, resting her palm there for a moment or two longer than necessary. Gentle and faintly warm. “You would never call about flowers, I know that. But you’re welcome to call me about...other things. If you want to.”

Before I could think of something to say, she turned back to her truck and climbed in. With a wave, she headed down my driveway. Long after she was gone, I stood there, rooted to the spot and rubbing my chest where the phantom heat of her touch still burned.

The crunch of footsteps on gravel signaled Avery’s approach. I hastily stopped rubbing my chest in case she noticed that too and used it against me.

“So,” she said, slotting her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. “What did you think of the florist?”

“Busy. Like a bee.”

And cute.

I kept that part to myself.

A grin spread across Avery’s face.

“You like her.”

“What did I tell you about meddling?”

She shrugged. “If I don’t give you a friendly nudge now and then, you won’t do a

damn thing about fixing your dating situation. Or lack of it.”

“I don’t need your nudges.”

“You should ask her out,” Avery replied, relentless as ever.

I didn’t mention Birdie’s business card resting safely in my pocket. I could have sworn her faint perfume still clung to my clothes where she’d touched me.

“Don’t you have homework to do?”

“That can wait,” Avery said. “Besides, we need to get catering squared away for the festival. I was thinking we could talk about it over lunch.”

“As long as you don’t try to set me up with anyone else,” I said sternly.

Avery hummed, looking smug as she trotted past me toward the house.

“Why would I do that? You’re going to ask Birdie out, remember?”

“I never said—”

I broke off when she turned away, laughing. My protest fell on deaf ears. As Avery disappeared inside, I lagged behind. When I was finally alone, I retrieved Birdie’s card from my pocket and studied the looping numbers in dark ink. I traced my thumb over the lipstick kiss—a breezy, delicate shade of pink.

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Twenty years was a long time to be without the companionship of a woman. I thought I didn't need it. I thought it wasn't possible to have a goddamn crush at my age.

But I couldn't deny how good it felt to have Birdie on my arm.

Chapter 4

Birdie

I did my best to quell my disappointment when Grady didn't call, even after two days had passed. He was a busy man, I reasoned. He had things to do, a ranch to run, a festival to plan in less than a week, and his daughter was visiting from college for only a few days. He probably didn't have time to call.

On the other hand, a little voice nagged at the back of my mind

Had I been too forward? Maybe I'd misinterpreted things between us.

I closed my eyes with a groan and rubbed my forehead. God, I really hope I wasn't getting tangled up in unrequited love, especially at my age. I didn't need to pine after a man who didn't want me in return. That would be...utterly mortifying.

With the Harvest Festival approaching so fast, I didn't have the luxury to hide away and nurse my wounded pride over Grady's silence. I'd been hired to provide floral arrangements, and I would do my job as promised. Whether my complicated feelings for Grady were involved or not.

So, on Wednesday morning, I headed out to the ranch again. This time, I had an entire caravan to accompany me, which meant there would be no chance of getting Grady alone. I couldn't decide if that was good or bad.

When I arrived, there was a flurry of activity by the corral. Cowboys on horseback herded cattle in a haze of dust that lingered in the air. I recognized a few of the ranch hands from around town—Cody, who had bashfully visited the shop last month, blushing red to the tips of his ears as he requested flowers for the girl he was sweet on; Beau, the ladies' man who finally settled down; and Bowen, who never failed to tip his hat with a politely mumbled, good afternoon, ma'am, when we crossed paths.

Then my gaze settled on the broad-shouldered figure barking orders. Despite the restless horse pacing back and forth beneath him, Grady sat easily in the saddle, overseeing the whole thing. The way he moved—confident, bold, powerful—was pleasing to watch.

“Birdie!”

I wrenched my attention away from Grady. Avery emerged from the barn, raising her arm overhead in a big, friendly wave. Her dark curls were tightly braided back, tucked under her Stetson, and her boots were coated with dust.

Behind me, the caravan rolled to a stop—six vehicles in all, carrying decorations, chairs, tables, tents, and sound equipment for the live bands that would be performing.

“I didn't warn Dad that it's set-up day,” Avery said as she approached. “He would find every excuse in the book to disappear if I breathed a word of it.”

“It looks like you have your hands full though,” I replied, nodding toward the corral. “Is this a bad time?”

Avery brushed off my concern, shaking her head.

“Not at all. Just a routine check-up with the vet. They’re almost done anyway. Then the cattle will be put out to pasture. I already told Bowen to spare a few ranch hands for the festival crew. We’ll need all the manpower we can get.”

Movement drew my attention back to the corral. Grady had pulled his horse to a stop, watching us with his mouth set in a firm line. Avery propped her hands on her hips.

“Here we go,” she said. “He’s gearing up to protest our nonsense. Stand your ground, Birdie.”

My heartbeat stuttered at the realization that I was about to come face to face with Grady again. I still remembered the solid expanse of his chest beneath my palm when I dared to slide my phone number into his pocket. I wanted to be frustrated with him because he hadn’t called for two whole days, but the physical reaction to his presence won out in the end.

Focus, focus, focus.

Grady nudged his horse into an easy gait, making his way toward us. I could have blamed my too-warm cheeks on the bright sun. Or the biting wind that nipped at my skin with the promise of colder temperatures in the coming weeks. Deep down though, I knew the reason why I blushed like a schoolgirl and it was entirely Grady’s fault for looking so damn handsome.

“Good morning, Mr. McCall,” I said when he was within hearing range.

“Birdie,” he replied with a nod. “Who the hell are these people?”

He lifted his chin in the direction of the caravan where volunteers scurried around,

unloading equipment.

“This is the Harvest Festival Planning Committee,” Avery put in. “You would know that if you weren’t such a grouchy old hermit and actually participated in town events once in a while.”

I coughed a laugh behind my hand and quickly fixed a neutral expression on my face.

“They’re making sure everything is ready for this weekend,” I said.

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“It’s only Wednesday,” he protested. “Why do they need to be here so early?”

“Remember what we talked about, Dad?” Avery said lightly with a pointed look. “You’re a generous and welcoming host.”

He grumbled something under his breath I couldn’t make out. His steely gaze swept over the volunteers before settling on me.

“Are you sure I can’t bribe you to be on my side in all this?” he asked. “My daughter has turned against me.”

I shook my head.

“Not a chance. I’m enjoying this too much.”

Grady sighed and dismounted from his horse. In the blink of an eye, Avery swept the reins out of his grasp.

“Since you two are perfectly capable of holding down the fort, I’m going to find Bowen and strong-arm him into handing over those cowboys like he promised.”

Grady started to sputter an objection, but Avery was already striding away with his horse trailing along behind her.

“I’m tempted to put that little troublemaker on the first flight out of here,” he muttered.

I bit the inside of my cheek to stifle my laughter.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

Grady turned to look at me and arched an eyebrow.

“Is that a challenge?”

“Just calling your bluff. It’s obvious that you like having Avery around. You get along very well together. You would never do anything to get rid of her.”

He sighed, his bluster rapidly deflating like a balloon.

“She’s as stubborn as an ox.”

“Oh, so she takes after you then.”

Grady’s gaze snapped toward me. I beamed. He shook his head.

“You know, most grown men don’t have the guts to talk to me like that. And yet, you barely even flinch.”

I shrugged.

“What can I say? You can huff and puff all you want. I’m not afraid of a big bad wolf like you.”

I could have sworn something darkened in Grady’s eyes. Then he glanced away, scrubbing his hand over his mouth. Before I could get confused about what just passed between us, he reached into the pocket of his shirt and pulled out my card.

“I didn’t call,” he said, soft with chagrin.

For a moment, I remained quiet, mesmerized by the way he traced the edge of my business card with his callused thumb. He’d changed his shirt since our last meeting, which meant that he’d purposefully kept that card in his pocket for two days, carried close to his heart.

“No, you didn’t,” I replied gently. “And if I’m honest, I’ve been a little disappointed about it, Mr. McCall.”

“Since you’re conspiring with my daughter, I think it’s safe to say we can be on a first name basis. Agreed?”

A faint smile touched my lips.

“Agreed.”

Grady continued trailing his thumb along the edge of the card. That damned blush threatened to steal up my neck again. Why did my whole body suddenly become hot, tight, and achy all over at the thought of his touch?

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“I’d like to make it up to you,” he said.

I raised my eyebrows.

“An apology? I didn’t think you were the type of man who did that sort of thing.”

“It’s a rare occurrence, I’ll admit.”

I considered for a moment, eyeing him.

“Did Avery force your hand?”

“I’m a grown man. I can make my own decisions.”

I paused. My gut told me that Avery didn’t know about the card in her father’s pocket. She hadn’t exactly been subtle about pushing us together, but it seemed Grady was pursuing me out of his own interest, with no prompting from his daughter.

“Lending a hand with the festival set-up would be a wonderful way to apologize,” I offered.

Grady looked like he instantly regretted his decision.

“Do I have a choice in the matter?”

“Of course you do. Although I don’t think I need to point out that every decision has consequences.”

“Meaning?” he prompted.

“My phone number has an expiration date, Grady. I won’t wait around forever.”

He nodded, sliding the card into his pocket again.

“I didn’t think you would. That’s why I spoke to my cook this morning. Lunch will be prepared for us at one o’clock if you’re interested in staying.”

“Is this more of Avery’s doing?” I asked.

“Despite my daughter’s best attempts to socialize me and turn me into a functioning member of society, no, this has nothing to do with her.” He shifted in place, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “So...will you join me?”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. The wealthiest, grumpiest bachelor in Ash Ridge had just invited me on a date. I felt like I had wings on my feet.

“I’d love to. Since it’s only nine o’clock in the morning, that gives us plenty of time for festival prep.”

Grady sighed.

“Where do you want me? I’m following your lead.”

“It’s your ranch,” I pointed out. “Shouldn’t you be the one giving orders?”

“When it comes to the business of cattle, I’ll gladly take charge. But this?” He gestured to the volunteers laying out one of the tents by the barn. “This is entirely outside my wheelhouse. You are much better suited to it than I am.”

Warmth bloomed in my chest. It must be difficult for a man like Grady to surrender control over his ranch, especially when he had been the one in charge for decades. The fact that he trusted me to manage the festival was an honor I wouldn't take lightly.

"In that case, I'll put you to work."

The next few hours were a whirlwind of preparations. I couldn't help noticing that the volunteers gave Grady a wide berth. He never smiled, and his muscled figure loomed over everyone else like a thundercloud threatening to burst at any moment. But he did every task without complaining that I delegated to him. I wouldn't say he was excited for the Harvest Festival, but at least he'd seemed to reach some level of tolerance for it.

When lunch rolled around, Grady cupped his fingers to my elbow and pulled me toward him until my shoulder bumped against his chest. Startled, I glanced up to realize how close we were—his hot breath against my cheek, the way his ribs expanded against my side as he breathed in.

"Time to make good on your promise," he said.

"Is it one o'clock already?" I checked the clock on my phone for confirmation. "I'll just finish up here—"

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“No,” Grady said, firmly. “You’ve been bustling around for hours, and I’m tired of running into all these goddamn people.”

A moment later, the clatter of a bell rang through the air. Avery cupped her hands around her mouth.

“Food! Come and get it!”

One long buffet table had been set up outside the bunkhouse, piled with hamburgers, pickles, potato salad, and corn on the cob.

“Did you do this?” I asked. “The planning committee usually orders takeout for lunch when we’re setting up.”

“It was Avery’s suggestion. Our ranch hands eat enough for a small army, so she thought we might as well provide lunch for the whole festival crew.”

“She really has you wrapped around her little finger, doesn’t she?”

Grady narrowed his eyes but didn’t reply. He would never admit out loud that his daughter would always have his heart in her hands.

I started toward the buffet table but Grady steered me in the direction of the house instead.

“That’s for everyone else,” he said. “I have something different in mind for you.”

Before I could protest, Grady slid his hand down my forearm and laced our fingers together. My heart leaped into my throat. The heat of his rough palm felt scorching hot against my skin as he led me up to the porch. A private spread waited for us there, with golden brown pillowy bread rolls, thick cuts of steak, mashed potatoes swimming in butter and chives, and a blackberry pie glistening with chunky sugar crystals.

“This looks wonderful,” I said. “Thank you, Grady.”

“You should thank my cook, not me. He planned the whole thing. It’s been...well, a few years since I’ve entertained a lady like this.”

He removed his hat and combed his hand through his hair, smoothing it back—a surprisingly vulnerable gesture for a big, gruff man like him. I admired the fact that he maintained some semblance of humility, granting credit where credit was due. It would have been easy for him to dismiss his cook as nothing more than an employee.

When I pulled my chair out, Grady did the same and sat across from me. He held his hat for a moment awkwardly, casting around for a place to put it. Then he set it on the porch railing behind him.

My gaze shifted past his shoulder to see Avery, frozen mid-step, with a plate of food in her hand as she stared at us.

“I think your daughter just realized what you’re doing,” I said.

Grady turned around to look, then started cutting into his steak.

“Avery was bound to figure it out sooner or later.”

“And you’re not concerned about wagging tongues? You seemed like a private man

to me. Ash Ridge is a small town and people love to talk. If you're not careful, people will say the Harvest Festival is really a wedding in disguise."

Grady paused. For a moment, I thought he might be reconsidering our date. Then he dragged his gaze up to my face.

"If you're looking for an escape—"

"I'm not."

"As I recall, you said you weren't scared of the big bad wolf."

I picked up my fork and dug into the fluffy mashed potatoes to prove my point.

"I still think you're as harmless as a lamb."

Grady choked on his food and cleared his throat.

"Harmless? I can safely say no one has ever accused me of that before."

"It probably has something to do with the scowl permanently etched into your face."

"Sounds like you're calling me old," he countered.

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“Just a little grumpy.” I picked up a bread roll and cut into it with my knife until steam billowed out. “You still haven’t told me why you didn’t call, by the way.”

Grady paused, pushing a piece of steak around on his plate as he deliberated.

“Rusty, I guess.”

“Is that the only reason?” I prodded, curiosity getting the better of me.

“There hasn’t exactly been much room for romance where cattle are concerned. And I know cattle.”

I met his gaze across the table. I couldn’t imagine how hard it must be to date again after getting divorced. Especially when the whole town would have their eyes on him, watching every move he made.

A gust of wind sent Grady’s hat flying across the table like a tumbleweed. When he scrambled to grab it, his elbow collided with his glass of water. Liquid sloshed across the table and splashed down his front.

Grady swore, pushing his chair back as he looked down at himself in dismay. I grabbed my napkin, pressing it against his damp chest.

He curved his fingers around my wrist. I froze and looked up.

Grady’s pupils dilated nearly full black. Only the slightest rim of stormy gray marked his irises. His heartbeat thrummed, strong and fast, beneath my palm.

I should pull away, I thought.

All I wanted to do was lean in and close that little gap of space between us.

“It’s a good thing we’re in public,” Grady said, his voice pitched low and rough.

My fingertips traced the buttons on his chest, traveled the coarse fabric of his shirt.

“Why?” I whispered.

“If we were alone, I’d have you in my lap right now, and I wouldn’t be a gentleman about it.”

My eyebrows shot up.

“Is that a threat or a promise?”

Grady’s grip on my wrist tightened, and he smoothed his thumb along the inside of my forearm. My breath lodged in my throat. Goosebumps rippled across my skin. Leaning over him like this, halfway standing out of my chair, it would be easy to make me lose my balance. Grady could simply tug on my wrist and I would tumble into his lap. Willingly.

“What do you want it to be?” he asked

I hesitated, stunned by the thrill of the moment. My dating record had been bland ever since I’d reached my mid-30s. I thought my days of getting swept off my feet were behind me and I would have to settle for something tame, mundane, and boring in my 40s.

Grady was far from boring.

“I think you should behave yourself as long as your daughter and your ranch hands can see you,” I replied.

He gave a thoughtful hum. Then he squeezed my wrist one last time and released me. I sank back down into my chair, fighting to catch my breath.

A promise, I thought. That was definitely a promise.

Chapter 5

Grady

The next day, I woke before my alarm. Sunrise was still hours away and darkness swathed my room. The red glow of numbers on my clock read 4:13am. When I breathed in, I could have sworn I smelled honeysuckle perfume.

My throat grew thick as the low burn of arousal swept through me, coiling my muscles tight.

I never liked to linger in bed once I was awake. There were too many things to do in a day, and lounging around would accomplish none of it. But this time—just this once—I let my eyes slip closed again.

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The image of Birdie rose to the forefront of my memory. Partially standing over me at lunch, attempting to mop up the water dripping down my chest. The sky-blue cashmere sweater she wore gaped open at the collar, providing a teasing glimpse of cleavage—softly mounded, heavy breasts that made me weak at the goddamn knees.

A better man would look away and give her privacy. A decent man wouldn't stare the way I did.

That damn sweater made her skin look soft enough to touch, to kiss.

I thought I was too old for this—craving a woman so deeply that I went blind with it. Losing my common sense as I battled the desire to fill my hands with her bare curves. My iron will had built this ranch from a few scrawny heads of cattle and a dozen acres of scrubby grassland into the empire it was now. Although it seemed that my iron will didn't stand a chance against Birdie Knowles.

If we were alone, I'd have you in my lap right now, and I wouldn't be a gentleman about it.

Fuck, I never talked like that. Not even with my ex-wife. She hated that I rarely said anything in bed. With Birdie, it had simply popped out before I realized what I was thinking. I usually had more self-control than that.

She hadn't backed down either. Birdie held my gaze, with her hand on my chest and my heart racing at top speed.

Is that a threat or a promise?

She always looked as pretty as a posy—colorful, delicate, feminine, with an endearing flush to her cheeks, and bright eyes. By all rights, she should be completely at odds with the ranch and everything I stood for. Even with the comfort of money, it was still a tough way of life, and Birdie should have wilted under it.

Instead, she seemed to lean into the challenge of being around me. Most women scampered out of my way, but she didn't budge.

My cock throbbed beneath the sheets. Just thinking about Birdie's curvy hips in my lap as I sucked a bruising kiss into those gorgeous, creamy white breasts had me half-hard. I couldn't remember the last time I woke up like this—aching and ravenous.

My breathing grew shallow in the darkness as I stood on the edge of surrender. I told myself I wouldn't fall for another woman as fast as I fell for my ex-wife. A cold shower would knock me down a peg and get my hot blood to calm down. A cup of black, bitter coffee would set me straight. Getting my ass in the saddle would get my mind off Birdie and back to business as usual.

The problem was that I didn't want to stop thinking about Birdie. Not right now. I would rather revel in the fantasy of her skin against mine, and the way she would sigh so perfectly as I slid inside her.

I shoved my sweatpants down and wrapped my palm around my cock. In a few minutes, my alarm would go off. So, I kept my eyes firmly closed, picturing a naked Birdie perched on my lap. My mouth watered as I imagined drawing one of her nipples between my teeth, grabbing a fistful of that plump ass, coaxing her to ride me until she fell apart and I made her mine.

With a groan, I thrust up into my hand, wishing it was Birdie's tight, slick heat gripping me like a vise. I swore I could feel her soft, warm palms anchored on my chest in the dark. If only she could be here now, working herself on my cock with her

head tipped back in ecstasy.

I came hard, spilling over my fingers. This woman had me waking up horny and jerking off like a sexually frustrated teenage boy. A small needle of fear prickled the back of my mind with the realization. Things had moved so fast with my ex-wife, and in the end, it had been a mistake.

With Birdie, things were moving even faster—at lightning speed. I didn't want to make the same mistake again. But there was a level of certainty with Birdie that I never experienced with my ex-wife. Maybe that certainty was some kind of wisdom that came with my older years. Birdie made me feel alive again, igniting a protectiveness over her even though she didn't need protecting. She could handle herself and she'd already proven that.

She knew exactly what kind of man I was, and it didn't scare her off. That was rare—a gem I couldn't afford to lose.

On Friday, I lost track of time. Dropping off cattle at an auction two towns over took longer than I'd planned. When I got back to High Plains, there were flowers bursting everywhere. Spires of snapdragons in peachy pinks, russet reds, pumpkin oranges, and golden yellows. Bushels of big, nodding sunflowers. Swaths of thick evergreens tied with harvest-colored plaid ribbons.

Birdie had been here, dropping off the floral arrangements as she'd promised. I glanced around, my heart in my throat, hoping to see her again.

“You just missed her.”

I turned to see Avery standing on the porch, shielding her eyes with one hand. Textbooks were sprawled on the table behind her.

“I don’t know who you’re talking about,” I said. A blatant lie that would never escape Avery’s notice.

“Your poker face is usually better than that,” she replied.

I grimaced and scrubbed the back of my neck, kicking a rock away with the toe of my boot until it skittered across the driveway. I had no intention of hiding my budding relationship with Birdie, but Avery would want to talk about it. I was still adjusting to the whole concept myself—dating and falling in love again after a divorce.

Avery was only twenty-five years old, with the confidence and resilience of youth. She didn’t know what it was like to get married, build a life together, start a family, and then watch it fall apart. She didn’t know what it was like to approach the precipice of a second chance at happily ever after, wondering if the jump is going to break every bone in your body all over again like it did the first time.

“It’s not my poker face,” I countered. “I’m not hiding anything.”

“Well, you’re not exactly saying much.”

The memory of this morning returned to mind, thinking of Birdie as I came. And my daughter did not need to know that.

“She left something for you,” Avery added.

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I leaned forward on my toes, ready to move. Then I rocked back on my heels, telling myself to calm down.

“What is it?”

Avery tilted her head toward the house.

“Find out for yourself. It’s in the kitchen with your name on it.”

I made my way inside. When I reached the kitchen, a quick glance around showed nothing out of the ordinary. Avery stood in the doorway and gestured to the refrigerator.

“Look in there.”

Casting a suspicious look in her direction, I opened the refrigerator door. Inside was a small clear box with a note on the top in Birdie’s handwriting that read: For Grady. When I lifted the lid, I found a small corsage of blue flowers, bundled together with a tiny silver ribbon. That crisp, delicate shade of blue reminded me of the sweater she’d worn during our lunch date. Touchable soft. With the deep V-neck that gaped when she leaned over.

“Birdie said it was a gift,” Avery continued, pulling me out of my thoughts. “The blue is supposed to make you stand out amid all those warm colors—a stark contrast among the reds, oranges, and yellows, to mark you as the host. She told me if you refused to wear flowers because you’re a manly rancher who’s too tough for that, I should blackmail you into cooperating.”

The faint scent of Birdie's perfume clung to the flowers. A small smile curled the corner of my lips up.

"Excuse me," I said, moving out of the kitchen. "I have to make a call."

"Does that mean you're going to wear them?" Avery called after me.

I made no reply and retreated to my bedroom, closing the door behind me. Retrieving Birdie's card from my pocket, I dialed her number and waited for her to pick up.

"Hello?"

"I got your flowers," I said.

A smile warmed Birdie's voice.

"Did you know flowers have a secret language? In the past, people used flowers to send their lovers private messages of desire and passion."

I held up the small corsage, barely bigger than my thumb. It wasn't grand and showy like the ranch, like the floral arrangements for the Harvest Festival. This was...personal. Private. A secret between the two of us.

"I thought I'd make it simple for you," Birdie added. "As long as you can identify the flower, you can figure out the secret message I left for you."

"Birdie, like I said, I don't know a damn thing about flowers," I replied.

She paused, letting the anticipation grow to unbearable proportions before she finally spoke.

“Fine. I’ll make it easy on you. They’re forget-me-nots.”

Oh.

“After the Harvest Festival is over,” Birdie went on. “I hope you don’t forget about little ol’ me in my flower shop when life goes back to normal for you on that big ranch.”

I sank onto the edge of my bed, the corsage looking so small, pinched between my forefinger and thumb. How could a few simple clusters of flowers hold so much meaning? How could Birdie think I could ever forget about her when she was on my mind from the moment I woke up to when I fell asleep at night?

“Believe me, Birdie. There’s no chance I’d ever forget you.”

The morning of the Harvest Festival dawned in a dizzying level of activity. A stream of cars filed up my driveway by 8am, directed by volunteers to the field for parking. I felt off-kilter, unbalanced after my routine had been disrupted. There were always people on my ranch—cowboys, veterinarians, horse trainers, builders, mechanics, and cattle buyers. But there never this many people, and never for a party.

I tugged at the collar of my shirt, starched stiff and itchy.

“You look nice,” Avery chirped, breezing by.

She wore a snug black sweater, a brown leather mini skirt that showed a little too much leg for my liking, with black tights, and her customary cowboy boots. She looked every inch the California college student—fashionable, intelligent, accomplished, and attractive.

“I could say the same for you,” I replied. “Are you expecting to meet someone

special at this festival?”

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She huffed a laugh and waved me off.

“I’m not the one wearing a corsage like it might as well be an engagement ring.”

I glanced down at the corsage pinned to my lapel. Every once in a while, when the breeze shifted just right, I caught a whiff of honeysuckle perfume from it. The blue petals practically glowed against the black fabric of my jacket.

I hope you don’t forget about little ol’ me in my flower shop...

I watched as Avery fell into step beside my foreman. She pointed toward a booth selling spiced cider, hot chocolate, and coffee, then hooked her arm through his elbow. If anyone could ward off the swarm of men that would undoubtedly flock to Avery today, it would be Bowen.

Avery, on the other hand, seemed to be getting a little starry-eyed around him.

Before I could fully examine how unsettled that thought made me, I spotted Birdie near a tent, ushering a band onto the stage. With knee-high calfskin boots, a flowing floral skirt, and a thick cabled cranberry sweater, that low burn of hunger for her ignited in my stomach all over again.

Part of me thought I shouldn’t interrupt her while she was working. The other part of me didn’t give a damn.

So, I headed straight for her. As I approached, Birdie turned and greeted me with a bright smile that made my brain go blissfully blank for a split second.

“Hello, handsome.”

She reached out and smoothed her thumb over my lapel, admiring the corsage of forget-me-nots. My hand strayed to her hip, drawing her closer before I realized what I was doing.

“Did Avery tackle you to the floor this morning to pin those flowers on you?” Birdie asked.

I curled my fingers around her hand and tucked her arm in the crook of my elbow. I liked having her here. She fit like a glove, like a piece of my life that I didn’t realize had been missing until she was beside me.

“No,” I said, only a little sullen at her lack of faith in me. “I pinned them on myself. Voluntarily.”

“You really are going soft in your old age.”

“Better watch that pretty mouth. I was going to kiss you but if you start insulting me, I’ll have to change my mind.”

Birdie’s eyebrows shot up and she squeezed my bicep. I liked it when she did that, too. She couldn’t keep her hands off me. I felt the same way about her. With a quick glance over my shoulder to make sure no one was watching, I guided Birdie behind the barn, away from the festivities.

“Well, you do claim to be a man of your word,” she said. “But you should probably make your rounds and greet a few guests first. Since you’re the host.”

I slipped my hand lower, cupping her ass as I pulled our bodies flush together.

“You’re toying with me. Making me wait.”

Birdie gave a pleased little hum, sliding her hands up my arms and around my neck.

“It’s fun to see you grumble like a thundercloud.”

She’d barely finished speaking before I pressed my mouth to hers, pouring every ounce of pent-up frustration I’d endured over the past few days into that kiss. Birdie melted with a whimper. I slipped my fingers under the hem of her sweater, discovering that soft, warm skin I’d been craving. I buried one hand in her perfect, silky blonde waves with a tug until she gasped.

When I slid my tongue into her mouth, the only thought that echoed in my head was mine mine mine.

Chapter 6

Birdie

It was torture to break away from Grady and get back to running the Harvest Festival. The taste of him lingered on my tongue long after we weren’t making out anymore—bitter black coffee, with a hint of sharp, smoky whiskey.

Seeing my big, strong rancher wearing those petite little forget-me-nots so proudly on his broad chest for the world to see was proof of his commitment. After countless bland, boring dates, I’d stumbled across a man who was willing to hold nothing back.

For the remainder of the festival, Grady remained close at hand. While he begrudgingly greeted guests and suffered small talk even though it clearly pained him, he kept his palm resting on my lower back and worked a gracious compliment about my floral arrangements into every conversation.

“You’re better at this than I thought,” I said, passing a cup of spiced cider to him.

He leaned in and pressed a kiss to my temple.

“Trying my best to impress the beautiful florist.”

I ducked my head to hide a smile, suddenly feeling shy and giddy all at once. I slipped my hand into Grady’s jacket, smoothing my palm up the warm, solid planes of his chest. He’d made an effort to dress up with a crisp white button-down shirt, and a suit jacket, but he still wore jeans like a true cowboy.

“Well, if that beautiful florist isn’t interested, you have my number.”

His gaze swept over me from head to toe with blatant greed. Heat prickled my cheeks and I turned away, flustered.

“I can’t think straight when you look at me like that.”

Grady rumbled a laugh and crowded closer, dipping his head toward my ear. His breath fanned over the curve of my neck, sending a shudder of need down my spine.

“You don’t have to think when I have you bare beneath me.”

I choked on my cider with a whine and jabbed my elbow into his ribs. I didn’t want to miss the Harvest Festival, but at this rate, the foreplay was getting unbearable.

“You don’t play fair.”

A faint smile touched Grady’s lips. Laugh lines crinkled around his eyes.

My heart twisted with a familiar ache. I was falling deeply in love with this man.

I reached up and placed my hand against his cheek, tracing my thumb along those laugh lines as if I could memorize them by touch.

A balled-up napkin sailed through the air and bounced against Grady's back. It tumbled into the dirt. Avery stood a few feet away and gave a little wave. She held up a plate of food—fried chicken, apple fritters, and popovers.

“When you two are done being disgustingly indecent, come get something to eat.”

Grady offered his arm to me.

“Hungry?”

I hooked my hand into the crook of his elbow.

“Starving.”

While Grady and I browsed the selection of cakes, pastries, and muffins at the Bread & Butter Bakery booth, my ears perked up when I overheard part of a conversation at a nearby vendor.

“Never thought McCall would go for a woman like her.”

“He's probably just having a bit of fun. After twenty years being single, it's about time he sowed some wild oats.”

I froze and swallowed hard but I didn't show any indication that what was being said had any effect on me. It was talk, that's all. Empty, shallow talk that meant nothing.

The first speaker grunted.

“He’s too damn old to be playing games like that. Rolling around in the hay is a young man’s game.”

“Hell, with McCall’s well-fed bank account, all he’d have to do is crook his finger and he could have any woman half of Birdie’s age. He might not be a young man, but the sweet little thing warming his bed could be.”

Suddenly, my appetite vanished. I couldn’t hear anything else over the roaring in my ears. It took me a few seconds to recognize the heat emanating from a warm, solid body next to me. Feeling like I was moving through molasses, I lifted my head and looked up to see Grady standing over me.

Before I could process what was happening, he took my hand and led me over to the next vendor. Two white-haired men with pints of beer in hand stared at him in surprise with a wide-eyed look of guilt. They were definitely the ones who’d been gossiping.

“Duvall, Cyrus,” Grady said with a nod of greeting. “I’ve known you two since I was a boy. So, I’d like to introduce you to my lady, Birdie.”

Duvall and Cyrus sputtered for a split second.

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“What are you doing?” I whispered, clutching Grady’s forearm for dear life.

“Clearing up a misunderstanding.”

Duvall had the decency to look chastised and shook my hand.

“Pleasure to meet you, Birdie,” he said.

Cyrus followed suit.

“It’s been a while since we’ve seen McCall fancy a woman around here.”

Grady wrapped an arm around my waist and tugged me tight into his side in a startlingly protective gesture.

“She’s a special lady to tolerate a hardass like me.”

Duvall shook his head and clucked his tongue.

“She certainly has her work cut out for her, doesn’t she?”

“If you’re not careful, she might make a run for it. Lock her down with a rock on that finger, McCall.”

Grady bared his teeth in a smile that held no warmth and his eyes were cold.

“Oh, don’t worry. I intend to get the fattest diamond on the planet for my lady. She

deserves it.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. The conversation continued for a few more minutes but I barely registered any of it until Grady made his excuses and pulled me away. He didn't stop until we were in the privacy of the barn. Since it had been blocked off for the party to give the horses a safe place to rest, we were alone in here.

“Bastards,” Grady grumbled under his breath. He turned to face me, rubbing his hands up and down my arms. Angling his body between me and the festival, it seemed like Grady was shielding me, using his broad shoulders to block everyone else out and hem me in against the barn wall. “Don't listen to a damn word they said, Birdie.”

“This is what I meant, Grady.”

His hands stopped their soothing rhythm.

“I said people would talk,” I added.

He shrugged.

“I don't care.”

“What they said—it changed you. It made you angry.”

“Of course it did.”

I raised my eyebrows as if to say, you're proving my point. He did care what people said about us.

“They can say what they like about me,” Grady countered. “I don't give a shit. But

they won't drag you through the mud. I won't allow that."

The echo of his words still replayed in my head.

Oh, don't worry. I intend to get the fattest diamond on the planet for my lady. She deserves it.

He could have been bluffing. He could have said it simply to get Duvall and Cyrus to shut up.

Although Grady McCall had always been a man of his word. He wouldn't have said it if he didn't intend to follow through. That meant he'd thought about it—proposing to me, getting married. I'd barely known him for a few days and he was already dreaming about becoming my husband.

Fireworks began to pop in the twilight sky, followed by a burst of light and an appreciative noise from the festival guests.

But I couldn't take my eyes off Grady. It should have scared me that he was talking like this when we barely defined this attraction between us as a relationship. Now that he'd confronted the town gossip and spread the word that I was his lady, it wouldn't take long before everyone knew that Grady McCall, wealthiest bachelor in Ash Ridge, Colorado, would tie the knot one day. With me.

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I curled my fingers around the back of Grady's neck and pulled him down to me in a searing kiss. He groaned against my mouth, deep, rough, and delicious. When he shifted his weight forward, he pinned me against the wall of the barn. Electricity sparked hot and fast through every nerve in my body.

Grady hitched my leg around his hip, with his hand up my skirt. His rough knuckles grazed along my inner thigh and my core clenched in anticipation of his touch.

"I've wanted to have you like this since that first day you showed up," he murmured, scraping his teeth over my neck.

I arched against him, desperate. Grady dragged one fingertip along my panties, tracing my slick clit. A whine caught in the back of my throat.

"I wake up thinking about you," he continued, kissing the curve of my jawline.

My eyes fluttered shut. I clutched a fistful of his shirt to steady myself.

"Good thoughts, I hope."

When he hummed in response, it went straight between my thighs. He cupped my breast in his big hand, stroking his thumb over the nipple.

"You make me so fucking hard that I can't focus on a goddamn thing until I do something about it. That's what you do to me, every morning."

Dear God in heaven, this man was going to be the death of me.

Somehow, a glimmer of rationality broke through the haze of lust that clouded my brain.

“Grady,” I rasped. “Anyone...could see us...like this.”

He applied a little more pressure to my clit in a steady circle—just enough to have me squirming, but not enough to come.

“Let them see,” he said. “They can watch while you soak my fingers and scream my name.”

My knees threatened to give out. Grady shifted even closer, rolling his hips against my thigh. He really wasn’t kidding when he said I made him hard. I could feel the bulge in his jeans throbbing.

Another hiss—pop from the fireworks. Another cheer from the guests. Grady and I were too lost in each other to pay attention to the rest of the world.

“Turn around,” he whispered, his lips brushing my ear as he spoke.

I obeyed, pressing my ass back into his groin. He growled and grabbed a fistful of my skirt, shoving it up around my hips. When he hooked two fingers in my panties and yanked them down, cool air kissed my overheated, exposed skin.

“Jesus, Birdie,” Grady muttered, curving his hand over my ass with an appreciative squeeze.

I could have easily felt self-conscious about my body in Grady’s presence. He was toned with muscle, lean and trim despite reaching middle-age. My metabolism had slowed down in my late 30s, until I’d developed soft rolls in my stomach. It seemed every time I looked in the mirror, my thighs grew thicker with each passing day.

Any shyness I might have felt about the way I looked disappeared when I heard the gritty rasp of Grady's zipper. A moment later, the thick, hot weight of his cock settled between my ass cheeks. He grabbed my hips with a bruising grip, rutting against me.

Pop—sizzle. Another firework. A flare of light.

The crackle of a condom wrapper echoed in the pause between one firework and the next.

"Please tell me you haven't been carrying that condom in your pocket for years," I said.

Grady grunted.

"No. With you waltzing around the ranch looking so fucking tempting over the past few days, I knew I needed to be prepared. I forgot how troublesome these damn things are."

I reached back over my shoulder and pushed Grady's hat off his head. Threading my fingers through his hair, I pulled him closer until his body snugly fit against mine, with his chin hooked over my shoulder.

The sharp snap of the condom signaled it was in place.

Then I felt the blunt heaviness of his cock pressing in, deeper and deeper. My mouth dropped open at how good that stretch felt, and the hot glide that came with it.

"Fuck," Grady rumbled, his voice strained and gravelly. He buried his face in my neck, tightening his grip on me. "You're even better than I dreamed you would be."

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The deafening explosion of fireworks drowned out the noises we made as we grasped at each other, grinding, chasing our pleasure. I was overwhelmed with sensation as Grady's big hands roamed my body, tugging my bra down under my sweater to toy with my nipples. That drag of his length against my walls rendered me a babbling, incoherent mess.

With the ground-shaking finale of the fireworks, Grady's rhythm faltered. I flung an arm back and grabbed his hip, pulling him against me hard. He buried his cock deep, pulsing and twitching. He pressed a hot kiss to the hollow beneath my ear, breathing hard.

And I could have sworn I felt his lips move against my skin with one word.

Mine.

Chapter 7

Grady

This time, when I woke on Sunday morning before my alarm, something was different. I felt it right away. The mattress dipped to my right, and a tangle of silky blonde hair tumbled over my arm. The scent of honeysuckle perfume lingered heady and sweet in the air.

A thin sliver of moonlight slipped through the curtains, casting Birdie's sleeping figure beside me in a faint glow. The sheets had pooled around her waist, leaving her shoulder and back bare.

I smiled to myself as I recalled last night. Having sloppy, messy sex in the barn, too eager to wait until we got into the house. Stumbling into my bedroom, laughing between one kiss and the next as we tripped over each other.

I rolled over, curling my body around Birdie. Her curves fit so perfectly against me. Now that the Harvest Festival was over, life would return to normal. I was looking forward to inviting Birdie over without festival planning to get in the way.

I skimmed my hand over her hip, savoring the dip of her waist as I moved higher. Birdie shifted in her sleep with a sigh.

“What time is it?” she mumbled.

“Early. You don’t have to wake up yet.”

She wiggled back against me, tugging my arm tighter around her like I was her human blanket.

“You’re so warm,” she murmured. “And your wandering hands suggest you have no intention of sleeping.”

“As tempting as it is to go another round, I’m not as young as I used to be. I need a little more recovery time.”

I ghosted my lips over her shoulder and along her neck, nuzzling into her hair. Birdie made a happy little noise of contentment.

“You’re a smart man. Put your other resources to good use.”

I cupped her breast, loving the way she filled my hand so well.

“Was that an order?”

She breathed a tired laugh.

“Get to work, mister.”

I shifted over her, pushing the sheets aside to expose her fully. In the dim light of the room, I could only make out a few swells and curves but that was more than enough. I didn't need to see her right now. I needed to taste her.

When I wedged my shoulders between Birdie's thighs, the scent of her arousal made a growl rumble in my chest. I hooked my hands behind her knees and tugged her closer. She squeaked in surprise, covering her mouth with both hands to stifle a giggle.

I sucked a bruising kiss into her silky, soft thigh. By now, Birdie was fully awake, combing her fingers lightly through my hair. I felt her twitch and inhale a sharp breath when my stubble rasped along the junction of her hip.

Then I closed my mouth around her clit. Birdie pressed her head back into the pillow.

“Grady.”

Strangled with pleasure. Fighting to stay quiet.

As soon as Avery was back at college and the house was empty again, I would have Birdie entirely at my mercy. The bunkhouse was far enough away that my hired hands wouldn't hear anything. I wanted her to be loud. I wanted her hoarse and so satisfied that she could barely string a sentence together.

In the dim room, every touch, taste, and sensation was heightened ten-fold. My

fingertips sank into the cushion of Birdie's hips. Her thighs flexed around my head. I dragged my tongue through her sweet folds, working my jaw into her until she was so sensitive that she was whining with need.

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When I curled two fingers inside her, Birdie arched off the bed, grinding against my face. A switch flicked in my brain, primal, feral. Crooking my fingers knuckle-deep and pressing upward, I sucked on her clit hard.

Birdie swore. Her thighs locked tight. She scrabbled at my shoulders, fingernails leaving stinging red welts as she shattered.

When she came down, I smoothed my hands over every inch of her, caressing her hips, her stomach, her breasts. I might not be able to summon the stamina I had when I was a 20-something young buck, but my appetite for her still burned like a raging wildfire—insatiable, unstoppable.

Little aftershocks twitched through Birdie's body. I gave her pussy a few more teasing licks to soothe her before I wiped her slick from my chin and crawled up beside her.

"I had no idea you could be that resourceful," she said, panting.

"You should see what I can do after I've had my morning coffee."

Birdie laughed softly and burrowed into my chest.

"I might have to wave the white flag of surrender."

I didn't remember drifting off to sleep, with Birdie curled up in my arms, and her head tucked under my chin. I'd forgotten what it was like to share a bed with someone, how comforting it was to feel their body heat and listen to the rhythm of

their breathing.

When I opened my eyes again, a stream of golden sunlight filtered through a crack in the curtains. I glanced at my clock. 8:45am.

Fuck. I'd slept through my alarm.

Easing out of bed, trying not to wake Birdie, I grabbed my jeans and tugged them on. I scooped up a shirt from a nearby chair and pulled them on, too. Four hours behind my regular routine felt strange, like I was racing to catch up.

I turned the door knob as quietly as I could, but Birdie stirred anyway.

"If anyone should be sneaking out, it's supposed to be me. This is your bed."

"I didn't want to disturb you," I replied.

When she rolled over, the sheets fell away to expose her bare hip and thigh. My self-control almost caved in.

"I'll get us some coffee and something to eat," I added. "Stay there."

Birdie snuggled into my pillow until her tousled blonde hair was the only thing visible from the cloud of rumpled sheets. Tearing myself away from her, I stepped out of the bedroom and closed the door.

As soon as I reached the kitchen, I found Avery seated at the table with a cup of coffee and a bagel, pouring over a textbook while taking notes. She was still in her pajamas with her hair up in a messy ponytail. She blinked up at me in surprise.

"Dad?"

I hesitated, cursing myself for not being more aware of my surroundings. Avery's gaze darted over me, taking in my unbuttoned shirt, my unbuckled jeans, and my bare feet.

"Did you oversleep?" she asked, incredulous.

I shrugged and tried to play it off, making my way to the coffee pot.

"I guess all that festival activity made me more tired than I realized."

"You've never overslept in my entire life," Avery countered. "Not once. Even when you're sick with the flu, you're still awake at four-thirty every morning. Like clockwork."

She paused and I hoped she would drop the subject, moving on to something else. But I should have known better. She was my daughter after all, inheriting my hard-headed genes.

"How's Birdie?"

I froze, coffee pot in one hand, mug in the other. The memory of where I'd left Birdie a minute ago rose to mind—naked, content, with her perfume on my sheets. The lingering salty taste of her arousal was still on my tongue.

I knew I would have to talk to Avery at some point. My relationship would have an impact on her since she would be getting a new stepmother. Birdie and I were still so new though, and everything was happening so fast.

"I noticed you two were all over each other at the festival last night," Avery went on. "It was cute. Lots of people were talking about what a handsome couple you made." She paused and I could have sworn I heard her smile when she added, "I also noticed

her car is still parked in the driveway this morning.”

Shit.

Before I could reply, the heavy tread of footsteps in the hallway signaled a visitor. A moment later, Bowen appeared, with his hat in his hand.

“My apologies for interrupting like this, sir,” he said. Then he nodded at Avery. “Mornin’, Miss Avery.”

“Hey, Bowen,” Avery replied, with a sudden hint of pink in her cheeks. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “Would you like some coffee?”

“No, thank you. I came to talk to your father.” Bowen shifted his attention to me. “A mountain lion stampeded the cattle last night in the north pasture. Busted a fence. I’ve got Beau, Cody, and a few other ranch hands rounding up the missing cattle in the woods. I came back for supplies to mend the fence and I’m heading out there now.”

I scrubbed a hand over my mouth and set aside my mug, coffee forgotten as I switched into business mode.

“I’ll ride out with you.”

Bowen swept his gaze over me, assessing the same way Avery did a minute ago. I was unkempt, half-dressed, and nowhere near prepared to face the day. He was a wise man though, and decided to hold his tongue instead of cracking a wise-ass remark about the boss sleeping in when there was work to be done. With a firm nod, he placed his hat back on his head, and walked out.

When I returned to my bedroom, Birdie sat up, rubbing her eyes. I grabbed my boots, cursing myself that I didn't bring a cup of coffee back with me at least.

"I have to go," I said. "Mountain lion in the area. Cattle got out. Some of them might be injured or dead. Could you—?"

I broke off when I realized what I was about to say.

Could you see yourself out?

God, that was absolutely not how I wanted to end the night we'd shared together. But it was too late. Birdie must have sensed something had changed because she turned away, hugging the sheets protectively around her body when she hadn't been that modest earlier.

"It's all right," she said. "I get it."

I stood there like an idiot as Birdie disappeared into the adjoining bathroom. When she shut the door behind her, I cursed myself for ruining the mood.

I'd make it up to her later.

After I was dressed, I approached the bathroom door and rapped on it with two knuckles.

"Birdie? I'm heading out. I'll call you tonight, okay?"

No response.

"Birdie?"

“That’s fine.”

I hesitated at the tightness of her tone. This is how it started before, with my ex-wife.

You’re always obsessed with those damn cattle! Why didn’t you marry one of them instead?

I gritted my teeth, torn between my livelihood—the thing I knew best—and the woman I loved. In the end, it was really no contest. Birdie won by a landslide. She always would. And that’s why I needed to work. To build a life for her—for us—that would bring her comfort and everything she ever wanted. So she didn’t have to work another day in her life if she didn’t want to. So I could wake her up with my hands and my tongue and my cock every morning.

“I promise I will call,” I said, one final, desperate attempt to reach her.

Birdie said nothing.

Damn it. How could I make a mess of all this in such a short amount of time?

Reluctantly, I left the house. Bowen had my horse saddled by the barn, ready and waiting as he presented the reins to me. I took them, grateful for the familiar smoothness of worn leather in my grip.

The slam of a door caught my attention.

I looked up to see Birdie hurrying toward her truck. She didn’t look my way.

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“Did you ever think about get married, Bowen?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“No, sir. Came close once. Before I worked at High Plains. We were too young though. Barely out of high school. Her parents wanted more for her than what a ranch hand could offer. So we parted ways.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Birdie started her truck. A cloud of dust billowed behind her as she drove away, growing smaller and smaller on the horizon. My chest tightened as I watched her leave.

Bowen shrugged and turned his horse toward the north pasture.

“Sometimes, things don’t turn out like you hoped they would. I guess that’s just the way life goes.”

I thought Birdie and I would be together. I could see a place for her here, settled in and comfortable, with a garden, and a vase of fresh flowers at dinner every night. I would always wear forget-me-nots pinned to the lapel of my shirt or coat, so I could carry a piece of her with me while I was working.

What if life was stripping Birdie out of my grasp right now? What if we weren’t meant to be together after all?

Bowen pulled his horse to a stop and cleared his throat.

“Permission to speak freely, sir?”

I wrenched my gaze away from the horizon. Birdie was gone. I couldn’t even see the little cloud of dust that marked her truck’s retreat.

“You always have that, Bowen. Speak your mind.”

He gestured toward the pasture.

“You keep hired hands for a reason, sir.”

I waited for him to continue.

“Your head isn’t in the saddle,” Bowen added. “And if you’ll excuse me for being so bold to say it, but it seems to me like your heart isn’t in the saddle either. Not right now at least. It’s driving down that road somewhere.”

My horse shifted beneath me, restless to get moving. I closed my eyes and inhaled a steadying breath. Bowen was right.

I dismounted and tossed the reins to him. He caught them easily.

“Take care of those cattle for me.”

“Yes, sir.”

I broke into a jog toward the house, barging inside. I found Avery standing in front of the bathroom mirror, rubbing a clay mask into her cheeks and forehead.

“Wow, Dad,” she said with a laugh. “Were you raised in a barn? You usually knock first—”

I braced my hands on the door frame and leaned in, fighting to catch my breath.

“I need your help.”

Chapter 8

Birdie

Armed with a watering can, I closed Lavender Lane for an hour at lunch and set to work tending my flowers. I bought the crumbling old cottage when I was twenty-one years old, with a head full of floral dreams. The glassed-in porch attached to the house had been in shambles and in desperate need of some TLC to turn it into the greenhouse I’d been fantasizing about for years.

I replaced the grimy and broken windows. Scrubbed away the mildew gathered in the corners. Ripped out the rotten floorboards from years of water damage. Now the porch served as my sanctuary, an escape from the shop with a chair and a table tucked in one corner. Every shelf was full of plants—trailing nasturtiums in lush reds and golds; lacy sprays of baby’s breath; perky pink miniature roses; and elegant arches of orchids in an array of colors.

A door led outside to my garden, where foxgloves towered nearly as tall as I was. Creeping thyme and moss sprawled between stones of the path, creating a thick, green carpet. Stocks and carnations were still in bloom despite the increasingly colder weather, filling the air with their heady perfume. Deeper into the garden, my roses were faded, petals wilting. Rose hips dotted the bushes now, turning plump and vibrant orange at the end of the growing season.

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Living in a small town afforded me the opportunity to keep my operating costs to a minimum. I grew most of the flowers that I needed. For bigger events—like the Harvest Festival—I ordered the flowers I needed from outside Denver. As I wandered my porch, snipping sprigs of flowers and putting them into a vase, checking for disease, deadheading the spent blooms, this was the part about my business that I always loved the most. Surrounding myself with the colors, scents, textures, the small humble flowers, and the big, showy blossoms.

My gaze landed on a pot of forget-me-nots by the door. My heart squeezed. I trailed my fingers through the flowers, making their little heads bob.

I knew Grady was a busy man. I knew his ranch would take priority more often than not. And yet, I couldn't help feeling...dismissed...this morning.

Then I began to wonder. Hosting the festival at his ranch was always about making Grady appear to be a generous man, friendly and inviting. What better way to convey that than having a woman on his arm for the evening? Maybe I was a pretty ornament to him and nothing more. Maybe he had no use for me now that the festival was over.

I sighed. My head was starting to hurt from thinking in circles.

Eventually, I would have to face Grady again. For now, I would lick my wounded pride after virtually getting kicked out of his bed unceremoniously.

After my lunch break was over, I gathered the flowers I'd cut, and placed them in a vase by the register. I flipped the sign from CLOSED to OPEN and pushed Grady firmly out of my thoughts.

The bell over the door chimed, signaling the arrival of a customer. I lifted my head, prepared to speak, and the breath rushed out of me when I saw the figure standing on the threshold.

Grady filled my doorway with his broad shoulders. He removed his hat, looking self-conscious, rough, and out of place amid the delicate lilac and white decor.

A heartbeat of silence settled over the shop.

“May I...help you?” I asked, haltingly.

Grady seemed to snap out of his reverie and started to move, striding toward me at the front counter. He withdrew a folded piece of paper from his back pocket and smoothed it out.

Were his hands shaking?

No. I must have imagined it. There was no way a stoic, grumpy man like Grady would be nervous enough to have unsteady hands.

“I was hoping you could offer your professional opinion,” he said.

“About what?”

“I need a bouquet. And it has to send the right message.”

Something tugged at the back of my mind, but I brushed it aside and turned to the wall of cut flowers behind me, waiting to be freshly arranged.

“All right,” I said. “Read them to me. Let’s see what I’m working with. I’ll build as we go.”

Grady cleared his throat and started to list flowers.

“Roses, red.”

That was no surprise. Red roses were a classic for a reason. In the language of flowers, they conveyed love, romance, eroticism. Men always wanted to get their girlfriends and wives red roses.

I selected a bundle of velvety red roses and turned to look at Grady, waiting for him to continue.

“Lily-of-the-valley.”

I clucked my tongue in dismay. The tiny little white clusters of bell-shaped flowers weren't in season. They were spring beauties that held a variety of meanings, from sweetness and humility, to you make my life complete.

I paused as the realization sank in. Despite Grady's pride, he was capable of humility. I'd seen it before. And he was doing it now by learning the language of flowers that I spoke, even when it was a far cry from the cattle he was used to.

“I'm afraid lily-of-the-valley isn't in bloom,” I said. “I can order some if you like.”

Grady shook his head.

“That's a shame. What about the next item on the list? Ivy?”

It sat at the end of the row and I plucked a healthy selection out of the bucket, twining it through the bouquet in my grip. The greenery symbolized wedded love.

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There was no denying Grady's intentions now. My heart hammered around my chest.

"Next?" I asked.

"Ferns," he replied.

Sincerity. A genuine confession.

"Honeysuckle."

Bonds of true love. Devotion, commitment.

The bouquet was bursting now, sweetly scented and beautiful. My gaze roamed over the cut flowers, waiting for Grady to continue reading from his list. What more did he have to say?

When he didn't continue, I glanced over my shoulder, expectantly.

"Is that all?" I asked.

Grady shook his head.

"There's...one more."

He wasn't looking at the list. He was looking at me. And in my arms were all the things he wanted to say to me.

“Go on,” I prompted.

“Forget-me-nots.”

My eyes slipped closed and I buried my face in the flowers. Of course it would be forget-me-nots. The flowers I picked for him, pinned to his lapel to practically mark him as mine in front of the whole festival.

Grady’s boots scuffed on the floor as he approached and his big, warm hands cupped my cheeks. When he tipped my head up, I opened my eyes.

“I told you, Birdie,” he said quietly. “I’m no good at this. My first marriage failed because I wasn’t a good husband. For twenty years, I told myself that I wasn’t the marrying kind. But you...when I’m with you, all I can think about is how desperately I want to try and be a better man for you.”

I was melting on the spot. I just needed to know one thing.

“This morning...it almost seemed like you were kicking me out.”

Grady shook his head.

“That wasn’t my intention, I swear. I could have easily left the cattle in Bowen’s care. He’s perfectly capable of handling the situation after working with me for years. I got caught up in the moment.”

I chewed my lower lip as my gaze fell to his mouth. I really wanted to kiss him. My whole body ached with it.

“Grady, I know your ranch is important to you. I would never ask you to give that up.”

“And you are important to me, too.” He cradled my chin in his palm. “I want you by my side, Birdie, for the rest of my days. If you’re willing to have me, I’ll do everything in my power to make sure I don’t lose you.”

The flowers slipped from my hold and scattered across the floor in a pile of stems, petals, and colors. Grady pulled me into his arms and sealed his mouth to mine. I curled my fingers into his shirt, stumbling backward and pulling him with me until I bumped against the front desk.

Even after spending only a few hours apart, I was desperate for him again. The empty throb between my thighs was torture. Grady slid his hands down my back and gave my ass a firm squeeze, sucking at my neck.

“We should get out of here,” he said. “Before we’re indecent.”

My eyes fluttered closed at the delicious sound of Grady’s low, gruff tone. It was so unfair that his voice alone could turn my panties into a mess. He nuzzled against my cheek, pinching my earlobe between his teeth. The sandpaper roughness of his stubble against the sensitive curve of my jawline made me whimper.

I hooked my fingers into his belt buckle and hauled him out of the room, around the corner. I lived above the shop, with a modest bedroom that would probably be cramped, thanks to Grady’s size. I was too impatient to drag him all the way upstairs though.

So, I pulled him into the cutting room—a small, private space where I made my arrangements, kept cool to maintain the flowers’ freshness as long as possible. I swept an arm across the old white-washed table at the center of the room. Tools, wire, and flower stems tumbled to the floor.

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By the time I turned around, Grady was on me, pinning my body between him and the edge of the table. He grabbed a fistful of my skirt, rucking it up around my waist. I fumbled at the buttons of his shirt with frantic fingers. I loved the feel of his strong chest beneath my palm, the coarse texture of dark hair, and the shift of his muscles when he lifted me onto the table.

As I started unbuckling Grady's belt, I gasped as he slipped his hand past the elastic of my panties and crooked two thick, callused fingers inside me. He brushed a kiss to my temple, bringing his mouth to my ear.

“Spread your legs for me, sweetheart.”

As soon as I shifted my legs apart wide enough, Grady pressed his fingers deeper. Pleasure raced hot and fast through my veins. A smile spread across his face, crinkling his eyes as he watched me arch into his touch, trying so desperately to grind my clit against his palm.

“I wish you could see how fucking gorgeous you look right now. Flushed and squirming and so needy.”

He twisted his fingers, hitting just the right spot to make me shudder. And he was so damn smug about it.

“Take off your shirt.”

I grabbed the hem of my shirt and pulled it over my head, tossing it aside. I hurried to unhook my bra, too. Grady's pupils dilated full-black as his gaze fell to my breasts. A

muscle flexed in his jaw.

“I have a confession to make,” he said.

The steady curling, coaxing rhythm of his fingers had a haze of arousal fogging up the edges of my vision.

“I—I’m listening.”

Grady pressed a hot, open-mouthed kiss at the base of my throat, tracing his lips between my breasts.

“That day we had lunch together,” he said. “When I spilled water all over myself like an idiot.”

I barely registered what he was saying. The slow burn of my rising orgasm was maddening and I just wanted to come.

“I looked straight down your shirt,” Grady finished. “And I’m not sorry for it. Your tits are goddamn perfect.”

I let out a breathless laugh as I fisted my hand in his hair. They were far from perfect, with stretch marks after hormonal changes and weight gain. They sagged more than I liked, too. But the slick heat of Grady’s mouth made me forget any misgivings I had about them.

“Then show your appreciation,” I replied.

Grady flicked a quick look up at my face with the slightest twitch of one eyebrow. For a big, bossy rancher man, he certainly liked it when I gave him orders now and then. Lowering his head, he closed his lips around my nipple, teasing at it with his

teeth.

I fisted my fingers in Grady's hair to anchor myself and let the pleasure wash over me. The rhythm of his fingers, the hot suction of his mouth, the scrape of his stubble against the soft curve of my breast—it was too much to take. My orgasm hit, and I clenched around his fingers.

Grady grazed his teeth over my nipple with a sweet sting of pain to contrast the overwhelming surge of pleasure. I made a noise of frustration when he pulled his fingers out, leaving me empty. He peeled my panties off while I unzipped his fly. My breath hitched at the feel of his hard length in my hand.

I gazed up at him as I swirled my thumb over the thick, red head. Grady groaned deep in his throat and braced his hands on the table, bracketing my thighs. He flexed his hips forward, trying to thrust into my grip.

“Looks like I’m not the only one needy around here,” I said.

I could do this all day. Watching the way Grady's body strained with every touch and stroke. When I pressed my thumb beneath the crown of his cock, the tendons in his neck tensed. I liked seeing him fight for his self-control, slowly unraveling because of me.

Hooking my legs around Grady's hips, I pulled him between my thighs. His breathing was shallow and fast, teeth clenched, cock throbbing. I slipped my hand into his back pocket and pulled out a condom, tearing the packet open with my teeth.

I nuzzled at the curve of Grady's throat as I rolled the condom on. He smelled incredible—like black coffee and horses and wild mountain air. Everything about him was rough, wild, barely tamed, but he was gentle as a lamb when I had him in my hands like this.

As I lined Grady's tip with my entrance, he lightly grasped my chin between his thumb and forefinger. Then he shifted closer, pushing deep. Every inch was slick and scorching and glorious.

I sucked in a breath and clamped my lower lip between my teeth with anticipation. Grady leveled me with his gray-eyed stare that never failed to fill my stomach with butterflies. He placed his palm, scratchy and rough, on my inner thigh, pressing my legs wider. I couldn't decide what was hotter—his unrelenting, steady eye contact as he buried himself inside me, or the temptation to watch where we were joined until I'd taken his entire cock.

Grady kissed me slowly, deeply, stealing my breath away with the measured roll of his hips. I clutched the back of his neck, drawing him closer. His knuckles grazed the heavy curve of my breast.

Clinging to each other, every gasp and thrust sent us climbing higher. My second orgasm lingered just out of reach, but Grady was losing his rhythm fast. With a growl, he sank balls-deep inside me, pulsing, throbbing. As he fell apart, he shoved one hand between my thighs and pressed the rough pads of his fingertips to my sensitive, aching clit.

I flinched with a cry of ecstasy and wrapped my legs around Grady like a vise, keeping us locked together. He trailed lazy kisses over my shoulder, down my chest, softer this time, showing his appreciation as he'd been ordered to do. I smiled, hiding my face in his neck.

I couldn't wait to call this man my husband someday.

Chapter 9

Grady

One month later

After Avery flew back to college, little signs of Birdie began to appear all over the house. Her toothbrush rested on the opposite side of the sink from mine. Her high-heeled, lace-up boots rested by the door, snuggled close to my cracked, dusty old cowboy boots. The faint scent of her honeysuckle perfume lingered in the bathroom every morning, even after she'd left to open Lavender Lane for the day.

A few plants appeared in the kitchen window—basil, sage, and rosemary—lending a cozy, spicy scent to the room. No one had ever bothered with keeping any kind of greenery on the ranch before. I had a notoriously black thumb. My ex-wife had never been the type to bother with plants. And Avery was usually too busy riding horses or flirting with local boys, despite my protest.

Having those herbs on the windowsill, flush and thriving, made the house feel more like a home. I had a habit of throwing myself into business, getting tunnel vision on my goals. Birdie knew how to live, cultivating and nurturing the little things that brought joy and comfort.

“Are you sure you don't mind me intruding?” Birdie said.

It was Friday afternoon in late November, and she'd closed the shop for the weekend. As she wrestled a bulging duffel bag full of clothes from the back of her truck, I reached past her and slid the strap off her shoulder. Then I hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her close for a kiss.

"You're not intruding, sweetheart," I replied. "I promise. I like having you around."

A pleased flush of pink crept into Birdie's cheeks. I was looking forward to having her all to myself for the weekend. I never realized how big and empty the house was before she came along and filled every empty, dark corner with her warm personality.

I hoisted her duffel bag onto my shoulder and offered my other arm to her. She took it, hugging my bicep.

"Avery called the shop this morning. She said she'd like to meet up over Christmas break. Maybe spend the day together, just us girls."

"Sounds like you two are scheming again," I countered.

Secretly, I was relieved to see them getting along so well. Even though Avery had been the driving force behind pushing me into the dating world again, I wasn't sure how she would handle it with Birdie under our roof. But she seemed to be delighted, calling Birdie just to chat—about school, the flower shop, the ranch.

"Does she know?" Birdie asked.

I faltered for a split second.

"About what?"

Birdie gestured toward the house.

“That I’m staying with you every weekend! This is her home, too. I don’t want her to be blindsided. Just because you don’t feel like I’m intruding, doesn’t mean that Avery feels the same way.”

That’s what I loved about Birdie—her kindness. She had so much love and consideration to give everyone around her. I swept a lock of hair away from her cheek and tucked it behind her ear, dragging my thumb down her jawline.

“Trust me, honey,” I said. “Avery is perfectly fine with you being here. When I told her we were officially dating, she wasn’t surprised at all. She wants you in our lives just as much as I do.”

Birdie ducked her head but not before I caught a glimpse of her small, pleased smile.

“Hey, boss!”

I turned to see Beau, one of my hired hands, striding toward us with a paper bag in hand. The logo on the front was recognizable instantly: Bread & Butter Bakery.

“My wife told me to drop this off for you and Birdie,” he said. “Rory made too many pastries again. Now that Thanksgiving is over, we have more leftovers than we know what to do with.”

Birdie accepted the bag and breathed in deeply.

“They smell heavenly! Thank you! That was very kind of Rory.”

I studied Beau who stood there, bursting at the seams with pride. Ever since he got married to the woman of his dreams earlier this year, he wouldn’t shut up about her. Praising her to everyone who would listen. They were expecting a baby in the spring, too.

“So, married life is treating you well, Beau?” I asked.

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“Best decision I’ve ever made, if I’m honest, sir,” he replied without missing a beat. “God only knows how I got so lucky.”

I glanced at Birdie’s profile, her eyes gleaming bright, her breath frosting in the cold air. It struck me that I had no clue how I ended up with this beautiful, thoughtful, incredible woman on my arm. For twenty years, I was convinced I would remain a bachelor for the rest of my days. Then she appeared in a cloud of flower petals and honeysuckle perfume and I was lost forever.

God only knows how I got so lucky.

I couldn’t agree more.

Saturdays were designated for sleeping in. Unless it was an emergency, my ranch hands knew not to approach the house with anything business related until noon, at the earliest.

Birdie and I browsed a light breakfast in bed—fruit, toast, and muffins. She managed to figure out the coffee maker on the first try, making frothy, vanilla-scented cappuccino for herself. I remained devoted to my black, bitter coffee.

All night long, I stared at the ceiling, replaying the interaction with Beau in my head. I knew in my gut that I wanted Birdie to be my wife. I knew it within the first week of that whirlwind flirtation during the Harvest Festival last month. The question of a marriage proposal weighed heavier on my tongue with every passing day.

I scrubbed a hand over my mouth and rose from the bed, grabbing my jeans.

“I was thinking,” I said. “You should start planting some flowers around here in the spring.”

Birdie glanced up in surprise, a slice of strawberry halfway to her mouth.

“At High Plains?”

“Why not? There’s plenty of space. You could grow more, which would benefit your business.”

She considered for a moment and put her fork down, adjusting the sheets as if that would make her more presentable even though I was fully aware she wasn’t wearing a stitch of clothing.

“I know what you’re doing,” she said.

I tugged my jeans on, zipped up the fly, but left my belt unbuckled.

“Which is...?”

“You’re going to convince me to sell Lavender Lane and move in with you.”

Well. She wasn’t wrong. That was part of my plan.

“You can set up a new shop,” I offered. “A bigger one. It would cut down on expenses, travel time...”

Birdie shook her head.

“I don’t want a bigger one.”

I paused, confused. Maybe I needed to back off. Maybe I was taking this too fast.

“I love Lavender Lane, Grady,” Birdie continued. “I built it. I repaired the house. I weeded that garden until my hands were bleeding. It might look shabby to you when you have this grand ranch, but it’s mine. I’d like to keep it.”

I nodded, moving to the closet to grab a shirt. I understood what it was like to feel fiercely protective of the dream you had fought to build for years. I would never ask her to give that up to be with me.

“Then keep the shop,” I said. “You can still grow more flowers here, right?”

Birdie fiddled with the edge of the sheets. I could tell she liked the idea, restraining herself from pouncing. I placed my hands on the mattress and leaned in, kissing her forehead.

“There is plenty of room for flowers and cattle to exist on a spread of land this size. I promise.”

She beamed and wrapped her arms around my neck, nuzzling into my cheek. I palmed at her breast through the thin fabric of the sheets until her nipple stiffened beneath my hand. I desperately needed to put a ring on this woman’s finger, sooner rather than later.

“Come to town with me today,” I said.

Birdie hedged.

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“I should stay here. I’ve been putting off some stuffy bookkeeping.”

“The bookkeeping can wait. Let’s go to the courthouse and get married.”

She blinked at me, wide eyed. My stomach twisted and my throat went dry. I had intended to have the ring in hand before I popped the question. But it was all tumbling out now anyway.

“We can put together a big fancy wedding later,” I hurried to add. “It’s not a very romantic proposal, I know, but I thought when we tied the knot, it could just be you and me. Then you can invite the whole damn town—”

Birdie flung the sheets aside and raced for the bathroom.

“I’ll be ready in five minutes! Don’t leave without me!”

She was dressed in record time, flying out of the bathroom breathless as she twisted her hair off her neck into a hurried knot. Bouncing on her toes, she rose up to place a quick peck on my lips. I chuckled.

“You’re not disappointed?” I asked.

Birdie grabbed her boots and tugged them on.

“Why on earth would I be disappointed?”

“It’s hardly a proper proposal. I didn’t even get down on one knee.”

She waved me off.

“Grady, if you got down on one knee, you’d have trouble getting back up.”

I frowned, but I let the comment slide. Mostly because it was true.

“I don’t have a ring yet,” I pointed out. “And I promised to get you a big diamond.”

Birdie slipped her arm through mine.

“I know you’re a man of your word. Now, let’s go get married.”

I grew increasingly nervous as we neared the courthouse. For my previous marriage, I’d been too cocky to realize the full extent of what I was getting into. This time, I knew exactly what I had to lose if I screwed things up with Birdie.

Meanwhile, Birdie seemed steady as a rock. She signed the paperwork with a firm signature, while my ink was shaky and jittery on the paper. I tugged at my collar, attempting to get some air.

Birdie put her hand on my shoulder, unbuttoned my collar, and pressed her lips to my neck. I closed my eyes, feeling a sense of calm wash over me. We were good for each other. It was going to work this time.

When the paperwork was finished, I turned to Birdie, wrapping my arms around her waist.

“Wife,” I said, savoring the wonderful taste of that word in my mouth.

Birdie grinned from ear to ear.

“Husband,” she replied, and I knew I would never tire of hearing her say that as long as I lived.

Chapter 10

Birdie

One month later

Avery and I managed to wrangle Grady into a Christmas wedding. Despite his good-natured grumbling, I think he secretly enjoyed watching us turn the ranch into something out of a fairy tale, wreathed in velvet red ribbons, glossy holly garlands, and mistletoe. He might not be thrilled about the guest list a mile long, but he liked celebrating this new chapter in his life.

A fresh blanket of snow had fallen the night before, leaving everything swathed in pristine white, sparkling in the sunlight. A heated tent had been set up on the front lawn for the ceremony and reception. The ranch hands had been busy all morning shoveling the sidewalk and plowing the driveway.

“Damn complicated thing,” Grady muttered.

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I smiled to myself and set aside my powder brush, poking my head out of the bathroom. He fumbled with his tie in the mirror attached to his closet door.

“I told you,” I said. “Skip the tie if you hate it that much.”

Grady sighed with exasperation and fixed me with a look in the mirror.

“For my first wedding, I didn’t wear a tie. I’m doing it right this time.”

I couldn’t help noticing how often he made little comments like that. Letting his worry leak out that he would screw up his second marriage, and how much he genuinely wanted to make it work this time around. As I crossed the room, he kept his gaze locked on me.

The lace that clung to my body almost appeared transparent in all the right places—a teasing glimpse of bare hip, hugging my cleavage that he couldn’t resist. Avery had helped me select it, giving me a little nudge when I tried to talk myself out of it. I’d never felt more beautiful in my life than when I was wearing this dress.

“I thought it was bad luck for the groom to see the bride in her dress before the wedding,” Grady said.

I snorted and came to stand in front of him, taking his tie.

“We’ve already been married for a month. This ceremony is just for show, so there’s no bad luck here. Besides,” I added, looping the tie around his neck. “You’ve seen me naked often enough. It’s about time I was fully clothed in your presence for more

than a few hours.”

Grady rumbled a laugh and placed his hands on my hips as I finished with his tie.

“Does that mean wedding night sex is off the table?”

I rested my palms on his chest and rose up on tiptoe to kiss him. He looked so handsome in a button-down shirt, a suit jacket, with his customary jeans and cowboy boots. A small corsage of forget-me-nots was pinned to his lapel.

“Not a chance, mister. I’m counting on you to get me out of this dress so fast that you set a world record tonight.”

He smiled, giving my hips a squeeze. Just as he started to pull me closer, a knock interrupted us.

“Are you two decent?” Avery called. “I need Birdie’s help with my hair, and I don’t want to see you making out. Again. It was cute for the first fifty times you did it in front of me. Now I’m getting a little traumatized.”

I laughed and pulled away from Grady, opening the door. Avery was still in her bathrobe, her makeup flawless, but her hair was wrapped in a towel.

“You’re both dressed!” she said. “That’s a surprise.”

“If you showed up five minutes later, it would have been a different story,” Grady replied.

“Grady,” I admonished.

Avery made a face but I could see the amusement in her eyes. She hooked her arm

through mine, drawing me into the hallway.

“Birdie, I place the blame entirely on your shoulders for my father’s horndog behavior. If you didn’t look drop dead gorgeous in that dress, he might be able to keep his hands to himself.”

“Joke’s on you, kid,” Grady called after us. “You started this with your meddling, remember?”

Avery was a stunning bridesmaid in a breezy, pale blue gown and her curls intertwined with tiny pearls like ice crystals. Grady couldn’t stop tugging at his tie during the ceremony, until I finally pulled it free and tucked it in his pocket. He didn’t need to strangle himself to keep our marriage alive.

After saying our vows, Grady was true to his word and slid a massive princess cut diamond onto my finger. The room erupted in applause. His ranch hands cheered the loudest, whooping and howling.

I couldn’t believe how much had changed so quickly. Lavender Lane would remain open for business, and I would continue to grow my own flowers and arrange them. That part would remain the same until I was old and gray. But this was my family now, my home. With the promise of a new year around the corner, I couldn’t wait to fully settle in at High Plains Ranch as a wife to Grady and a stepmother to Avery.

When the reception began, Grady lasted thirty minutes before he brought his mouth to my ear.

“Please tell me I can get you naked now. I’ve been patient.”

I huffed a laugh.

“At least dance with me first.”

He relented, leading me to the dance floor. The broad heat of his palm came to rest on my lower back, drawing me closer. When I looked up at him, I could have sworn I would drown in those gray eyes. I reached up and traced my finger along his square jawline. Even though he was clean shaven for the wedding, I missed his stubble.

“I changed my mind,” I said.

Grady blinked.

“What?”

I could see the flicker of hesitation cross his face. He thought I’d changed my mind about the wedding. About him and our future together.

I slid my hands up Grady’s chest and toyed with the button at his collar, stroking the hollow of his exposed throat.

“We can dance later,” I amended. “We have the rest of our lives to do that. Take me away.”

Grady’s face softened. He took my hand and kissed my knuckles, his thumb anchored firmly over my diamond. Picking a path through the crowded reception, he led me up to the house. We had barely reached his room—our room now, I realized—before he was fumbling with my skirts. He hooked his fingers inside my barely-there panties and slid them down my legs.

Then he looped an arm around my waist and pulled me tight against him as he dropped onto the mattress. I sprawled on top of him with a squeak of surprise.

“Ride me,” Grady said, gruffly. “I want to look at you.”

I didn’t need to be told twice. Using his chest to anchor myself, I shifted position

until I straddled him. I rolled my hips against the bulge in his jeans. He pushed my skirts out of the way until his hot, rough palms settled on my smooth thighs.

“So pretty and pink for me,” he murmured, tracing his thumb over my clit.

I moaned and tilted my head back at the slightest, sweetest friction. Grady skimmed one hand over my lace-covered breasts, giving them a squeeze. I started to tug his shirt free from his jeans, then got too impatient halfway through and gave up. Leaning down, I sucked at the juncture of his neck and jawline. The rumbling vibrations of his answering growl tasted heavenly on my tongue.

“God, Grady, I need you inside me,” I rasped.

“Go on then,” he replied. “Take what you want, sweetheart. I’ll give you everything you ever ask for.”

I brought my hands down to his belt buckle, scratching lightly at the strip of exposed skin above his waistband. He’d put on some weight since our marriage at the courthouse, rendering him softer around the middle. I liked to see him padded with comfort now, instead of the lean rancher hardened with muscle that I met two months ago.

After making quick work of Grady’s belt, I unzipped his fly and dragged a knuckle along the ridge of his hard cock. He groaned deep in his chest, flexing his hips up toward my touch. He curved his palms around my hips, clutching me tight.

“Come on, sweetheart,” he said, strained. “Have mercy on this old man, will you?”

I huffed a laugh and thumbed at the head of his cock until he squirmed beneath me.

“You’re not old. That’s what you always say when Avery teases you.”

Grady sat up, sucking a kiss into the top of my breasts.

“That’s different. I’m looking for a little sympathy here, love.”

Wrapping an arm around me, he tugged my zipper down my spine until my dress gaped open. After he pushed the fabric aside, he swept his thumbs along the swell of my cleavage, circling over my lacy white bra until my nipples hardened.

“Would burying your face in my tits offer enough sympathy for you?” I replied with amusement.

Grady pulled the cups of my bra down, pinching my stiff nipples until jolts of pleasure raced through every nerve in my body.

“It might do the trick,” he said. “I’d have to check.”

I shook my head with a smile and looped my arms around Grady’s neck, pulling him closer. He pinched, sucked, and licked my nipples, flicking his tongue over them until the empty throb between my thighs was unbearable.

Ever since our wedding, Grady and I rarely used condoms. My birth control would be enough. And I loved the feeling of nothing between us but skin against hot, pulsing skin.

I set the tip of Grady’s cock at my entrance and slowly sank down. That first breach never failed to take my breath away—the perfect stretch, thick, scorching, and so good. The slick sounds of my pussy mingled in the air with our labored breathing as I rolled my hips in a steady, even rhythm.

Grady cupped my ass in both hands, encouraging me to rock back and forth. The wet heat of his mouth matched the easy glide of his cock—in, out, deeper, dragging

against my walls until my world became filled with the sensation of him. His heat. His taste. His mouth. His hands.

I pushed him back against the mattress, growing frantic as I chased the heady rise of pleasure building in my body.

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“That’s it, honey,” Grady murmured into the hollow beneath my ear, his lips brushing my skin as he spoke. “Come all over your husband’s cock like the good girl you are.”

I whimpered, thighs shaking. The next thing I knew, Grady twisted until I was the one beneath him. My skirts flared around me in a cloud of white as he plowed into me. When I brought my hand up to touch him, he interlaced our fingers together, kissing my knuckles.

Then Grady covered me with his big, heavy body and pressed his mouth to mine. I shattered, whining against his lips. He gave a few more sloppy thrusts as my pussy clenched around his cock. With one final stroke, he pushed deep, throbbing.

After a moment, Grady broke away, brushing feather-light kisses on my cheeks, nose, and forehead. I panted, clutching his hips to prevent him from pulling out. I felt so gloriously full when he was inside me.

Breathing hard, Grady propped his hands on the bed, bracketing my head as he gazed down at me. That same steely-eyed look came over him. Possessive. Protective. Lust-filled. Even though he was still buried inside me, it seemed like he wanted to devour me all over again.

“Welcome to the family, Mrs. McCall,” he said. “You’re going to make one hell of a rancher’s wife.”

I beamed and grabbed the collar of his shirt, yanking him down for a kiss.

“And you are going to make one hell of a florist’s husband.”