



One Hot Texas Summer

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Category: Romance

Description: She's been fooled before by sweet words and hot kisses

Kelly Turner loves being a florist, and being asked to take the lead on the new site for the town's festival is an honor. If only she didn't have to work closely with the town player, Tate Prentice. After being burned once by a serial cheater, her inconvenient attraction toward Tate needs to be nipped in the bud.

Tate Prentice's focus is on ensuring his father recovers fully from his stroke and making sure the family's peach farm continues to thrive. When his brother nominates the farm to be the satellite site for the festival, he's less than impressed. The only good thing is he'll be working with Kelly – even though he knows she'll never give him a second glance, not with his reputation.

The more time Kelly spends with Tate, the more she sees the man behind the reputation. Can she trust her instincts, or will her heart be broken once again?

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Chapter One

Kelly Turner had a nice buzz going on, and it wasn't from the alcohol she'd consumed. No, the pleasant feeling flowing through her was from the company she was keeping. Macy and Charlotte Cooper were so much fun. Gage, Charlotte's husband, had greeted them at Silver Spurs when they'd arrived, wrapping his arms around his wife and kissing her so passionately, Kelly had blushed on their behalf. He'd then proceeded to take their daughter so Charlotte could enjoy her lunch. Without a doubt, if Gavin had been there, he would've kissed Macy just as passionately.

"Before I could stop her, Oil Slick jumped on the kitchen counter and proceed to swipe the piece of cooked chicken I'd taken out to cut up for my salad. When I complained to Gage, he just picked up the cat and crooned that his precious Oil Slick would never do anything like that."

Kelly laughed. "I still can't get my head around Gage Cooper being owned by a cat."

"Trust me, he totally is. But"—Charlotte paused and took a sip of her drink—"it's kind of sweet. Oil Slick seems to know when he turns the car into the driveway. She races to the door, and the second he opens it, she's rubbing up his leg, begging to be picked up. Soon she'll have competition when Jacqui starts walking."

Kelly sighed inwardly at the picture Charlotte was painting. That was the type of life she'd always imagined she'd have. The husband, kids, and pets. Everyone excited to see him when he got home from work. Her elusive husband kissing the kids' cheeks, petting the dog and cat, and then his eyes would find her and a special sparkle would

enter them. A sparkle just for her. He'd stroll across the room to her, pull her close, and kiss her with a passion that only increased over time.

This man would be her true soul mate.

She closed her eyes and her mystery husband's face formed fully in her imagination.

Tate Prentice.

What? No way.

A gasp escaped and her eyes flew open to find Charlotte and Macy looking at her, concerned expressions on their faces.

"Is everything okay, Kelly?" Macy asked, leaning across the table and placing her hand on Kelly's arm. "You look like you've seen a vase full of dead flowers on a bridal table."

Kelly spluttered. A vase of dead flowers would've been preferable to the image of Tate Prentice as her husband. Why the hell was she even giving him space in her mind? The chances of him playing happy family with her were as likely as her winning the lottery. So what if his recent visits to her shop had set her heart fluttering, a reaction that made no sense to her at all. "I'm fine. Just remembered that I hadn't responded to an email. It's okay. Nothing to worry about." She was rambling, and from Charlotte and Macy's right looks, her friends didn't believe her. But they were good enough to let it fly.

Grabbing her drink, she took a long swallow. She really needed to go on a date. Anything to get the vision of Tate Prentice as her husband out of her mind. There were slim pickings of good-looking guys sitting by themselves at the bar when they'd walked in. With Gage bringing his business headquarters to Sweet Ridge, she had

hoped there would be more opportunities for her. Then again, she hadn't been actively looking, so how would she really know who was available? Time to change that.

In the corner, opposite from where they sat, she spied Tate's older brother Tyler at a table, a folder in front of him and an intense look on his face.

Out of the three brothers, Tyler had always been the one who acted like the world was against him. He was as good-looking as Tate and Trey, but there was not one iota of spark or interest flaring to life inside her. Unlike when she looked at Tate. Ugh, she needed to stop. Tate was younger than her, and with his reputation around town, he was still in that playing-the-field phase of life. A phase she'd left far behind. Although she hadn't done much playing when she'd been younger. She was beginning to sense a pattern about her love life.

Thinking about it, her ideal man would be someone older who had a bit of life experience. Edwin had been the same age as her and she'd thought they were a great match. Wrong. Oh, how she'd been so wrong about her ex and his lifestyle.

"There was another reason I wanted to meet with you today, Kelly." The teasing tone had exited Macy's voice and Kelly gripped her glass a little tighter. Everything in her was screaming for her to run away.

"Okay. This sounds serious."

"Not really. What I'm about to ask is going to be a big task. And I know it's short notice, but if anyone can pull it together you can."

The more Macy talked, the more apprehensive Kelly became. What did her friend want of her? "Okay, I'll listen, but I can't guarantee I'll be able to do what you want me to do."

A chair scraped over the floor and Kelly looked to her right. She should have controlled the urge. Tate Prentice had walked in and was sitting down at the table with his brother. He took off his cowboy hat and ran his fingers through his brown hair, giving it the just-out-of-bed look instead of the flatness from wearing his hat. Tate chose that moment to look over at her, and his eyes widened with shock at seeing her. He nodded and just the corners of his mouth quirked up and dammit, her heart gave a little flutter at the gesture.

Hell, she needed to get control of herself. This was beyond ridiculous.

With a concentrated effort she returned his smile and then turned back to look at her friends. Both had sly little grins on their faces.

Now would be the perfect time for a sinkhole to open up beneath her chair and suck her down. No way was she going to be able to get away by answering her friends with a vague response.

“What?” she asked, trying to feign innocence.

“That was an interesting exchange between you and Tate Prentice. Anything you want to tell us?” Charlotte asked before clamping her straw in her mouth and taking a long sip. If it was an attempt to hide her smile, it failed miserably.

“Nope. He’s just been coming into my store a lot recently to buy flowers. Wants a different arrangement each week.”

“Hmm, I hadn’t heard he got himself a girlfriend,” Macy mused, looking over at the table where the Prentice brothers sat. Kelly resisted the urge to glance over to see if they were looking at them.

“You think he has one girlfriend? Just look at him and you have heard about his

reputation, right? I'm sure he's got many girlfriends." Damn, she hadn't been able to keep the snark out of her voice. Not to mention how telling it was to comment about his looks.

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“You sound a bit put out by that thought. Care to tell us why?” Macy asked.

No way was she answering that. And Macy still hadn’t told her why she wanted to meet with her. Yes, she could turn the conversation back in that direction.

“What I’d really like to know is why you asked me here.”

Macy wagged her finger. “Uh-uh, I know what you’re doing here, and it’s not going to work.”

Kelly rolled her eyes. “Fine. You want to know why I have a problem with him? It’s because I don’t want to think of my flowers as being a kiss-off gift to Tate Prentice’s latest bed partner.”

Of course, the song would finish while she was speaking. Her words echoed around the bar and everyone looked her way, including Tate and his brother.

Seriously, where was that damn sinkhole when she needed it?

“Well, okay then,” Charlotte commented and waved a hand in the air. “Nothing to see here, folks. Go back to your beer.”

Another song blasted out of the jukebox and everyone did as Charlotte asked. Could this day get any worse? Everything in Kelly wanted to turn toward Tate’s table and see what he was doing. How he’d reacted to her outburst. Her cheeks burned and she didn’t need a mirror to know they were bright red.

“So, that thing I wanted to ask you, I’m not sure it’s a good idea now.” Macy toyed with her straw.

“Nothing you say now could be as bad as just announcing to the whole bar what I think of Tate’s personal life. I might as well shut up shop now. No one is going to want to buy flowers from me.”

Maybe she could look at getting back in accounting. Move to a big city again, where the chances of her being the main topic of conversation over the evening meal at Betty Lou’s Diner were slim.

She could learn to love numbers again, couldn’t she?

A shiver of revulsion swept through her at the thought of being chained to a desk instead of being free to create beautiful flower bouquets. Maybe she could find a florist job somewhere.

“Stop it, Kelly. Just because you said something about Tate doesn’t mean you’re going to lose business. Probably the opposite. You know how this town is, they’ll all drop by wanting your beautiful arrangements,” Charlotte said.

Well, hopefully, everyone felt the same way as Charlotte. She, on the other hand, wasn’t so sure. She’d love to be proved wrong though.

“I agree with Charlotte. Here goes nothing.” Macy leaned forward and Kelly copied her actions. “You know I’m the new chairperson for Founders’ Day committee.”

“Yep. You’re doing an amazing job.”

“Thanks, Kel. I’ve got big shoes to fill, seeing as Meg Dawson has left and she could do everything with her eyes closed.”

“Macy, you’ve toured the country and the world. If anyone can wrangle the masses to do your bidding, it’ll be you,” Charlotte said, smiling big at her sister-in-law.

“I don’t know about that, Char, but I appreciate your vote of confidence. Anyway…” She redirected her attention back to Kelly, and immediately Kelly sat a little straighter. There was a glint of humor and challenge in Macy’s gaze, and she wasn’t sure she really wanted to know what her friend was about to ask of her.

“We’re going to change it up a little bit this year. We’ve decided to hold some events in the town square like always, but we want to have some of the vendors display their wares at another location.”

So far, it didn’t sound too onerous. It was fine by her to have her stand at the other location than the center of town. No doubt Macy had a plan to get people to and from both sites.

“That seems like a good idea. If you’re asking me to relocate to the alternate place, I’m happy to.”

“Well, that’s good to hear, but no, that’s not what I’m asking. What I want to know is if you’ll oversee the setup at the other location. You’ll have full control of where you want to place the stands. How you want to decorate them. We’re going with a red-and-gold theme for the satellite site and the usual red, white, and blue for the center of town.”

“But I’m not on the committee. Shouldn’t the person in charge of the other location be from there?”

“Well, yes, but I know you do most of the flower arrangements for the weekend, and I just think you have such a better eye for decorating than”—she lowered her voice to a whisper—“Mary-Beth Jones. God, I love that woman, but honestly, her sense of

style is so outdated it's not funny.”

Kelly had to agree. Mary-Beth was a much loved member of the community, but every time Kelly had suggested a different type of flower arrangement for the urns on either side of the stage, Mary-Beth had put her foot down and said, “You don’t mess with tradition.” So Kelly had done the same arrangements for the last few years. It would be nice to branch out.

Okay, so maybe the day was going to get better.

“I love the idea of being in charge of the decorations and the other location, but seriously, Macy, I don’t want to step on anyone’s toes. I’ll gladly assist, but it really should be a committee member who does this.”

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Macy waved away her concerns. “I’m the chairperson. I can appoint subcommittees and others to help. I want you to do this. You know we need some new blood on the committee, it’s been the same folks for decades.”

“Well, sure, count me in.”

“Fantastic. It’s going to be so good. This year’s Founders’ Day event is going to be the best yet.”

“So was it your idea for the two locations this year? And isn’t it a bit late in the planning to go for two sites?” Kelly asked. Founders’ Day was held on the first weekend in August. It was close to the end of June, so not a lot of planning time.

“Umm, no.” Macy darted a look across to where Tate and Tyler appeared to be having an intense conversation.

And just like that the bad feeling returned. She had an idea of where the other location was going to be, and she hoped to God her intuition was wrong. Which it had to be because her intuition had never been right.

“Whose idea was it?”

“Well, you know the committee needs new people on it. Apart from me, Tyler Prentice took his dad’s place. He was the one who suggested the other venue.”

“Let me guess, the other location is the Prentice Peach Farm.”

Macy grimaced and nodded.

Damn, for once in her life, Kelly's intuition seemed to be on point.

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"No way, Tyler. Not happening." Tate Prentice sat back and crossed his arms over his chest. "I won't have the whole town traipsing through the peach orchards."

"It's not just your orchard, Tate. From what I recall, Dad still owns the farm—you're just running it."

Tate clenched his jaw until he almost broke his back teeth. "That was a low blow, Tyler. I love the farm as much as Dad, if not more. I'm the one who has walked it over and over with him. Not you or Trey. All you're concerned about now is your vines. You don't give a shit about the peaches. The very thing that has given you the ability to create the wine you're so passionate about."

It would be so easy to walk out and leave Tyler sitting by himself, but the last thing he wanted to do was cause a scene. Especially after what had happened with Kelly Turner basically calling him the town playboy. A reputation he supposed he deserved. But he was done sowing his wild oats. In fact, he hadn't even gone on a date in three months. Of course, looking after the farm and visiting Dad put a crimp in his social life, but he'd gotten tired of the merry-go-round that had become his dating routine.

But it still stung she thought his flowers were a kiss-off gift. Of course, he hadn't explained why he purchased the bouquets to her, and well, fuck, he didn't have to explain his actions to anyone. He was his own man and could do his own thing.

Like not agree to the asinine idea of Tyler's to allow the Founders' Day committee to hold part of the town's weekend-long festival at the farm.

“Look, I’m really telling you as a courtesy, Tate. It’s a done deal—the committee thinks it’s a great idea, and Macy was excited to breathe life into the event. You know it’s been the same for decades. It’s time to liven it up a little bit.”

A sneaking suspicion wove its way into Tate’s mind. Tyler was so passionately defending it and trying to convince him it was the best thing since peach jam. “It was your idea, wasn’t it? And I bet it has something to do with your wine.”

Tyler’s expression didn’t change, but Tate caught the slight tic in his right eye. A giveaway he’d gotten something right. Tate wasn’t even sure Tyler was aware of the little tell, and there was no way he planned on mentioning it to his brother.

“So what if it was?” Tyler sat forward. “Look, Tate, I want this wine to succeed. I want to bring something to the family. Yes, this is my dream, just like Trey’s is baseball and yours is following in Dad’s footsteps and running the farm. Wine is my thing. By having the festival at the farm, I’ll be able to create a little buzz for the business. Even have a couple cases of wine for people to sample before it releases in the fall.”

Tyler’s indifferent wall he’d encased himself in cracked a little, letting Tate see his brother for the first time in a long while. Never would he have imagined that Tyler would all but beg Tate to do something for him. Tyler had always walked to his own drumbeat, even more so since their mom had died.

Could he do this for him? Could he let the town hold part of its festival at the peach farm? What would Dad do? That was the million-dollar question, because Trenton Prentice had closed in on himself as well after his wife’s death. They all had. The Prentice family had splintered when Mary Prentice had died of a sudden heart attack. She’d been the glue that bound them. He, Dad, and his brothers had yet to find their way back to being the unit they’d once been. Life went on, and now Tate was faced with making a decision that would normally have been Dad’s. He wouldn’t ask Dad’s

opinion on this scheme of Tyler's. Tate wanted his father to concentrate on his recovery after his stroke, not on matters related to the farm. And he was getting better, but the stress of having to play mediator between his two sons wouldn't do him any good.

"You know Dad is due to come home soon. Don't you think all the people traipsing around the farm will cause him undue stress?" Tate asked.

"It's not like they're going to go through the house. Besides, maybe seeing the farm flourishing will help his recovery."

Tate highly doubted that, but this was his brother asking, and even though their relationship was strained, he would do anything for his family—including this. Why argue the point, especially if Tyler said the whole committee had agreed on it. The choice had been taken out of his hands. "Fine. You win. I'm okay with part of the festival being held at the property."

Tyler smiled, a genuine happy smile, something he rarely did. "Thanks, bro, it will be good for all of us, I promise."

"I hope so. Just don't involve me too much, will you? Between making sure Dad is keeping up with his rehab and dealing with the harvest schedule, I won't have time to mess around with things."

Tyler fidgeted in his chair and couldn't meet Tate's eyes. "Well, here's the thing. I'd arranged for a trip to California to look over the wineries there. See what's happening and latest techniques. The trip has been booked for months. I can't be the liaison with the committee."

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Tate felt like a bull charging a matador. Just when he thought things between him and his brother might have a chance of changing, Tyler had to go and make it all about himself. For too long, Tyler had been self-absorbed with his wine venture. Tate totally understood the need to follow dreams, but not at the expense of others. It wasn't like Tyler didn't know how busy this time of year was at the farm—hell, he'd grown up there and helped with the harvests.

“Why the hell did you volunteer our farm to host the event when you knew you were going to be away? What exactly are you expecting of me, Tyler?”

He shifted again, and Tate was glad to see his brother looking uncomfortable. “Macy said she was going to arrange for someone to be in charge of setup and decorating the place. You'll need to work with them to make sure you're happy with the placement of everything. It won't take up too much of your time. The committee will be doing most of the hard work.”

Tate scrubbed his hand down his face. This was getting worse with each passing second. “I'll still need to oversee what they're doing, make sure they're not going to places where they shouldn't be. I can't believe you're expecting me to do this when it was your idea.”

Tyler actually looked sorry. His normally stoic brother had shown him some chinks in his armor today. “I know it's a lot to ask, and I know I'm being selfish making you deal with it all...”

“Ya think?”

“I admit I got carried away when I was at the meeting. I thought it was a good idea to showcase all that Prentice Peach Farm is. How we’re expanding.”

“Again, it’s all about you and what you want, Tyler. Everyone in Sweet Ridge knows exactly what Prentice Peach Farm is. I bet not once did you even think about what this means to me.”

Silence descended between them. He’d come to Silver Spurs hoping to have a nice lunch with his brother. Why had he ever expected that to happen?

Misplaced hope, that’s what.

But maybe if he did this for Tyler, it would be the start. Tate was ever the optimist, and it was his biggest flaw, too. He always left himself wide open to be hurt.

He looked around the room, and his gaze went to Kelly. The pretty florist was laughing at something Macy was saying. Tate had no idea what it was about her that drew him in, but he needed to get a handle on it. There was no time in his life now to even consider a relationship of some sort. Not that she’d give him the time of day after her earlier declaration. Yet...

“I think Macy was going to ask Kelly to be the liaison. She does all the flower arranging for the festival. Macy thought she’d be a good person to help with the setup.”

“What?” Had he said Kelly was going to be his liaison, or had he imagined Tyler saying Kelly’s name because he’d been thinking about her?

“Kelly Turner, the woman who thinks you’re the town playboy, she’s going to be the one you will be working with.”

“Great,” he muttered. How much more complicated was this event going to get?

Chapter Two

“I should’ve never gone back to Macy’s place.” Kelly groaned as she opened her eye a crack the next morning. Her head pounded, and the thought of sitting up had her stomach turning somersaults.

Perhaps she shouldn’t have used alcohol as a way to forget the location of the satellite Founders’ Day event and who she’d be working with. She was certainly paying for it right now.

Taking a deep breath, she sat up and waited for her stomach to settle down before she staggered out of bed and went into the bathroom. Gazing at herself in the mirror, she winced. Her hair looked like a flock of birds had decided to nest in it. Her mascara had created half-moons under her eyes. She looked stellar. She could go right out and snag the best-looking man in town.

Next time Macy and Charlotte decided to take her to lunch she was sticking to water and only staying for an hour. If only it was the alcohol that caused her to look like death’s best friend, but it was the lack of sleep as well. Every time she’d drifted off, her dreams had been full of kissing Tate and more in the middle of his peach orchard. And in the workroom of her shop.

Why, all of a sudden, was she so fixated on the guy? She didn’t like him. Well, okay, that wasn’t quite true. She just didn’t like what he represented. And now she was going to have to work closely with him for the Founders’ Day festival.

If she had any sort of magical power, she’d curse Macy for dangling such a tempting job in front of her. For years she’d wanted to do more with the decorations for the festival and now she could.

Kelly turned the shower on and stripped while the water warmed up. Maybe a nice, hot shower would make her feel human again. That and a vat of coffee. Thank goodness Mom wasn't going to be in the shop until later. Explaining why she looked the way she did wasn't something she fancied doing.

As the warm water sluiced over her, she switched her thinking back to the Founders' Day event, dutifully ignoring Tate's involvement. She loved the idea of a red-and-gold theme. A ton of flowers came in red. Not a lot came in gold, but she could get plenty of yellow ones and maybe paint the tips with gold paint. Or she could make the flowers all red and the vases or urns gold.

The more she thought about it, the more excited she got and couldn't wait to get to her tablet to start sketching out designs. Of course, she'd need to visit the Prentice farm to get an idea of the layout. But one thing she did know—she wanted to have a beautiful lattice arch covered in flowers for people to walk through as a statement entrance piece. Or maybe she could do two.

She rushed through the rest of her shower and got dressed. Grabbing her keys, she raced out the door. The pounding in her head was fading. A stop at Betty Lou's Diner for a coffee and a donut might slow down her arrival to the shop, but it was a necessary one. She desperately needed the caffeine and sugar fix.

Fifteen minutes later, she opened the door to the diner and inhaled the scents of fried food, coffee, and pastries. If she weren't so eager to get to her store, she might have been tempted to get some eggs and bacon. Greasy food was a known cure for a hangover.

"Morning, Kelly. How you feeling? I heard you had a good time at Silver Spurs yesterday."

Kelly pasted a smile on her face. Everyone in town loved Betty Lou, and Kelly did

too, but the diner's owner loved to gossip. Was Kelly surprised the news of what had happened at the bar yesterday had reached her? Nope, not at all. In fact, she'd expected it.

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“I did.”

Betty Lou looked over the top of her signature retro red glasses. The style had never changed over the years, and Kelly had always wondered if she had a few boxes of the frames stashed somewhere. “So you’re gonna be helping with the Founders’ Day festival. I think it’s interesting having the two venues.”

Her stomach grumbled and the ache in her head was beginning to intensify again. She really needed some caffeine. “It’s going to be different, for sure, but maybe that will bring more people into town as well. People driving past the Prentices’ property see the activity and decide to call in. I think change is always good.”

“Hmm, we’ll see. So, what can I get you this morning? Today’s donut special is cherry maple glazed.”

“I’ll have a large latte with an extra shot today, and I’ll take one of the specials as well as a plain cinnamon donut.”

“Okay, you take a seat and I’ll get everything for you.”

“Great, thanks.” Kelly wandered over to the counter overlooking the kitchen. As usual, the diner was busy, but she spied one stool and grabbed it before anyone else.

She drummed her fingers on her handbag, eager to get her order and get to the shop. She wanted to transfer the myriad designs running through her head onto her tablet.

“In a hurry to go somewhere?”

Oh, shit, that voice—she recognized it, and he was the last person she wanted to see. Life really was messing with her recently.

Pasting a smile on her face, she swiveled to her left. “Morning, Tate, how are you?”

Yes, she could be polite and professional with the guy. If she just ignored the way her heart rate kicked up a notch and her palms grew a little sweaty. No way was her reaction anything to do with the man sitting next to her. It was because she was dehydrated and her blood sugars were low.

“I think I’m a lot better than you.” He tempered his words with a smile and a rush of warmth pooled in her lower belly. Yet another symptom of hunger, of course. But she wasn’t so hungry that she didn’t notice Tate wasn’t stuttering like he seemed to do whenever he came to the store to order his flowers.

Interesting.

“I’m fine. Just hungry.”

He picked up his mug of coffee, and her mouth watered as he took a slow sip. Oh, boy, did she need to get herself together. Drooling over Tate’s cup of coffee in front of the diner’s patrons wouldn’t help keep gossip about her to a minimum.

“I recommend a big plate of bacon and eggs—might help you feel a little better.”

Great, now she was getting advice from him. So not what she needed. “I’ll take that on advisement, but I’m happy with my coffee and donut order.” If Betty Lou would just hurry up and give it to her, she could leave and not have to talk to him.

Inwardly, she winced at how horrid she sounded. Tate wasn’t a bad guy. Her reaction to him seemed over the top, and considering they were going to be seeing more of

each other, she should at least try to make an effort to be nice to the guy. Plus, he was providing her with business. Even if that business was supporting his Casanova reputation. Damn, those poor flowers being tossed aside instead of admired.

Why was she wasting so much time on what Tate did with the flowers he purchased? Who was to say other people weren't using her arrangements for the same purpose she was condemning Tate for?

Yeah, she needed to stop being cynical about relationships. Just because hers didn't work out the way she'd hoped didn't mean everyone else's was doomed. Macy and Charlotte were a prime example of love being true and pure. Kelly's own parents had a great marriage until her father passed away.

She jumped when a takeaway coffee cup and white paper bag were pushed in front of her. Kelly looked up to find Betty Lou watching her intently, her eyebrows perfectly groomed arches above her glasses.

Kelly flashed a smile at the diner's owner. "Thanks, Betty Lou. I'll see you later, Tate."

She marched out of the diner, feeling like every single eye was on her. Ahh, the joys of living in a small town where everyone knew her business. As much as that rankled her, and it did big-time, she wouldn't live anywhere else. She loved Sweet Ridge, and she loved the life she'd carved out for herself.

She lifted the cup and closed her eyes as the coffee coated her tongue. People who didn't like coffee needed to have their heads examined. Who couldn't appreciate this fine bean?

The morning June sun beat down on her head. The weather was definitely getting warmer and soon long, lazy summer days would be upon them. Again, an image of

her sitting on her back patio, glass of wine in hand, laughing with a mystery man flittered in her mind. She quickly closed off the memory before she could see the face of her companion. The chances of it being the man she'd just been talking to in the diner were pretty high.

Once and for all, she had to forget about this silly infatuation with Tate. Yes, he was good-looking. Yes, he seemed to have a good sense of humor. But he was younger than her. No way was she going for a younger man. There were plenty of women who did, but it just wasn't in her wheelhouse. Now that she was in her mid-thirties she was looking for someone she had more in common with. Someone more mature. What did she have in common with Tate? Nothing. And so far she hadn't seen any signs of the maturity in Tate she was seeking for her life partner. Was the observation fair? Probably not, but it was where she was in her life right now.

Switching her cup to her other hand, she juggled with the keys to unlock the shop. Her daily flower delivery should be arriving soon. That was the only downside to living in Sweet Ridge—the inability to go to the market herself and purchase the flowers fresh. But she'd contracted with a reliable agent and arranged for them to be delivered each day. So far, her trust in that person hadn't been betrayed, and every day the flowers arriving at the shop were fragrant, in pristine condition, and ready to be arranged.

“Here, let me help you with that.” A big hand reached around her and inserted the key, unlocking the door. With a quick shove, the door was open, and she breathed deeply, inhaling the scent of her flowers.

God, she loved the aroma; it was almost as good as smelling freshly brewed coffee. Both ignited the flame inside of her.

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“Are you following me?” she asked Tate as he stood aside to allow her to enter her shop.

“I wanted to talk to you. You hightailed it out of the diner before I had a chance to say anything.”

Kelly dumped her purse and the paper bag with her donuts on the counter. She kept her grip on her coffee, swallowing more of the brew. “Shouldn’t you be at the farm or something? I mean, going to the diner is not exactly on your way to work when you live out there.”

Clamping her lips shut to stem the flow of words seemed like a good idea. The chances of her saying something she’d regret were high. For some reason, her filter was more off the job than it was on that morning. Could be because of the big night she’d had with Macy and Charlotte.

But there was no response from Tate. Had he walked out? Looking up, she found him staring at her, his lips compressed in a thin line. The brim of his Stetson hung low on his face, hiding his eyes from her. If she had to hazard a guess, she would bet he was sending daggers her way.

“Kelly, I don’t know what I’ve done to offend you, but do you think you can put that aside? We have to work together on this Founders’ Day event. It’s not going to be fun if you’re going to constantly be sniping at me.”

She owed the guy an apology. He’d been nothing but nice to her and she was being snarky. Something that wasn’t really in her nature. “I’m sorry, Tate. You’re

right—that was uncalled for. I could blame it on a headache and the lack of caffeine in my system. But I won't. I was rude. I acknowledge that and promise to do better.”

The only indication he accepted her apology was a quick nod before he looked about the shop. Perhaps he wanted to talk about another flower arrangement. Whatever he wanted, she would arrange with a smile on her face and no accusations in her heart.

“You said you wanted to talk to me at the diner. Is it about the event, or did you want to talk about another flower arrangement?” Inwardly, she patted herself on her back for the professional and polite way she'd spoken to him.

“No. No flower arrangement, today. But...” He lifted the brim of his hat, and her breath caught in her throat. His blue eyes sparkled like the Caribbean Sea, and she caught a hint of mischief in their depths. “I will be back on Thursday for another arrangement.”

And just like that, any good humor she had in her disappeared. Two arrangements in one week? He hadn't done that before. “Right, fabulous. I'll try and work out something special for you then.”

Tate took a step toward her, his mouth opening before closing again, as if he were about to explain something but then decided against it. “I—uh—wanted to t-talk about the Founders' Day event at the f-farm. I want to invite you out so you can have a look around. I h-have an idea of where I think it should be held.”

What was up with the stutter now? Did she make him nervous? Kelly bit back a giggle at the preposterous thought. No way would she make him nervous. It was ridiculous to even contemplate it. But the talk of the town's festival had ramped up her creative juices, and she still itched to get the ideas from earlier out of her mind.

“Sounds great. I've already got some great ideas. What I'll do is sketch them out and

bring them with me.” She hustled over to the counter to her appointment book. It ended up being double the work, but she kept a computer schedule as well as a paper one. At the end of each day, she updated both. Technology could be fickle, so having a backup plan was always a good idea. It also meant that when she was out back doing administration work and Mom was dealing with customers, she could also see what was on the schedule. Kelly grabbed the book and ran her finger down the sheet.

“Okay...” She turned and gasped as she bumped into Tate’s hard chest.

He’d come up behind and she hadn’t heard him. His hands gripped her arms to keep her steady. The skin beneath his fingers warmed, and a tantalizing tingle splintered through her.

Kelly breathed deeply and his scent filled her, a combination of peaches, sunshine, and pine. It was like nothing she’d ever smelled before. Her gaze connected with his, and everything she was about to say and do faded to the back of her mind. Time slowed. She could make out darker specks of blue in his eyes, and the light dusting of freckles across his nose. His lips were plump and rosy pink, and if she went up on tiptoe, she would be able to find out if they were as soft as they looked. Would he taste like peaches?

The thought pulled her up short, bringing everything back into focus. And as if the spell had been broken around him, Tate released his hold and stepped back, giving her space to breathe.

What had she been about to do?

Right, look at the appointment book so she could go out to the farm. Yes, focus on business, not on wishing that she could go actually kiss Tate Prentice.

“Umm, so today is Tuesday...will Thursday morning work for you?”

“I can’t. I mean, I’ll be coming in to see you, as I said, but I’ve got a prior commitment I can’t get out of. Can you do Friday afternoon?”

Yeah, she wasn’t going to ask about that prior appointment at all. Friday afternoons were usually one of her busiest times as she prepared arrangements for the shop on Saturday, and if they had a wedding, she usually worked all day Friday on the bouquets, table settings, etcetera. As luck would have it though, she didn’t have a wedding this weekend, and if she got Mom to come in all day instead of only half day...

“I can do that. Would two p.m. be a good time?”

“Can you make it around four instead? By then, most of the hard work should be done for the day and I’ll be able to give you my full attention.”

“Yep, that will probably work better for me too.” Having Tate’s full attention on her sounded exciting and, like earlier, he managed to have most of this conversation without stuttering over any of his words.

Maybe she did make him nervous. Kelly wasn’t sure she liked that idea much. She’d always considered herself to be a very approachable, relaxed, friendly person. So for Tate to stumble over his words confounded her.

“Great, I’ll see you then. Have a good day.” He turned and strode toward the store’s exit.

“Bye,” she mumbled as she admired his back view.

He really did fill out his jeans well. As he reached the door, he glanced over her shoulder, and heat filled her face at being caught admiring his ass. He tipped his hat toward her in the age-old tradition of cowboys. What made it even more heart-

melting was the smile he sent her way. His lips stretched wide, and his eyes crinkled in the corners. It was the first genuine smile Tate had given her, and it had the power to weaken her knees and soften the walls she'd erected around her heart.

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Oh, boy, she was in trouble.

Chapter Three

Tate stood to the side of the general room of the center. His father sat gazing out the large window at the garden. Tate would bet the whole proceeds from the upcoming harvest that Dad was wishing he were outside enjoying the Texas sunshine.

As if aware of the scrutiny, Dad turned toward Tate. His face lit up when he saw him standing there. The left side of his face still drooped a little, but it was looking much better than it had right after the stroke. Tate banished those memories. His father was alive and on the road to recovery and that was all that mattered.

Smiling, Tate weaved his way through the mix of lounge chairs, couches, and tables.

“Tate, this is a surprise,” Dad said each word slowly and carefully, attempting to hide the way he slurred the words, but Tate could still hear it.

“Hi, Dad, you’re looking great today.”

“I’m feeling great. I have something to tell you.”

Tate sat opposite his father, leaning forward so that he could focus totally on him.

Trenton’s chest puffed out a little. “I fed myself this morning. I didn’t need any help cutting my food.”

Tate swallowed down the ball of emotion lodged in his throat and blinked rapidly a couple of times. “That’s fantastic, Dad. Before you know it you’ll be back at the farm, issuing orders.”

Trenton chuckled. “You can bet on it. Now tell me what’s happening. I heard some scut-scuttlebutt that the Founders’ Day festival is going to be held at the farm?”

Damn, Tate was hoping to keep that quiet a little longer, the last thing he wanted was any form of stress to hinder his father’s recovery. Knowing that for three days hundreds of people were going to be walking through the orchards at the busiest time of year would be enough to worry his father if he was healthy. Now he was ill and recovering, everything became a little more intense.

Tyler had a lot to answer for, suggesting the farm as the ideal satellite location. All because he wanted to get the word out about his upcoming release.

“Yeah, you heard right. The committee is wanting to try something a little different this year. I’m going to be liaising with Kelly Turner from This Bud’s For You about the setup, etcetera.” The less he said to his father about it, the better it would be.

“Was it your idea?” The stroke might have slowed down some of the physical aspects of Dad’s body, but his mind was still as sharp as ever. The last thing he wanted to do was put more strain on an already tense relationship with Tyler; however, no way was he going to lie to his father.

And trying to keep anything hidden from his father was a pointless exercise. Gossip was a mainstay of conversation in the rehab center.

“It was Tyler’s. He wants to showcase the vineyard as well and try to get some hype happening around his first vintage.”

Dad nodded, and Tate could tell he was turning the information over in his brain.

“Where are you”—Dad paused, gathering the right words—“planning on having it?”

“I was thinking of having most of the tents set up in front of the house. I don’t know how many exactly will be set up at the farm. If we have to, we’ll put some close to the east orchard, as that one is being harvested first. The west should be almost done by the time of the festival.”

Dad nodded. “Good plan.”

“Thanks. But I’ll know more once I meet with Kelly tomorrow. Hopefully, she’ll have met with Macy and can tell me how many vendors we’ll have out there.”

Dad leaned forward and placed his right hand on Tate’s left forearm. “I’m proud of you, son. Thank you.”

Tate wasn’t one to cry, but it had been a rough, emotional couple of months. Having his father tell him he was proud of him was a dream every child hoped for. From the minute he’d been old enough to walk the orchards with Dad, he’d known with everything in him that he wanted to run the farm, take it over after his father retired. He’d always thought that, as the youngest, he wouldn’t get the opportunity. Then Trey had shown his baseball skills and set his sights on the majors. The day Trey had been drafted by a New York team, Dad had strutted around town telling all who would listen. Tyler had worked the farm, but it had been a nominal effort. His heart hadn’t been in it until he found his true passion with wine. After the rough years where Tyler was out more nights than in, Dad had been relieved he’d finally found a focus. When that happened, Tate believed his dream would come true and he would run the farm.

But he hadn’t wanted to take full control because his father almost died.

“You know I love the peach farm, Dad. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else. I can’t imagine being anywhere else.”

“Don’t forget to bring balance to your life, Tate. You can’t be all about work. And you’re not made to be alone.”

Why did an image of Kelly pop into his mind? Yeah, like that would ever happen. “I know, Dad.”

“One day, I hope all my boys will find a love like I shared with your mother. You’re all getting older. Don’t let love slip you by, son. Look for the signs and when they appear grab them with both hands and don’t let go. Life is richer when you have love in it. If you find a person who’s important to you, never be afraid to ask them to go steady with you. It was the best day of my life when I asked your mom on graduation day and she said yes. She wore my class ring proudly. We had a wonderful life and three wonderful sons. Wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t asked her.”

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Laughter sputtered out of Tate. “Steady? Dad, no one asks anyone to go steady these days. Heck, I didn’t even ask someone to go steady when I was in high school.”

Dad shook his head. “I know things are done differently these days, and the tradition of class rings has gone by the wayside. But if you find a woman who’s special to you, treat her with respect and love. Forever.”

It was the longest Dad had talked and his words had begun to slur. But Tate grabbed onto the advice, like he always had. Dad was his idol. Always had been. Always would be.

As for love, well, it wasn’t often Dad gave him relationship advice. But as with everything else Dad had ever said to him, he would open his eyes, heart and mind. Part of him couldn’t help wondering if he’d already been given a sign.

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Kelly turned her SUV into Tate’s driveway late Friday afternoon. Two large cement peaches sat on either side of the entryway. A large sign overhead proclaimed she was entering Prentices’ Peach Farm.

Keeping one hand on the steering wheel, she wiped the other one down the side of her skirt.

Why was she so nervous?

It wasn’t like she hadn’t spoken to the man before. So what if they’d gotten into each

other's personal space and she'd wondered what it might be like to kiss him? Mom had said he'd come in for another lot of flowers yesterday, just as he'd said he would. She didn't know why she'd hoped he wouldn't. Why she hoped their encounter a few days ago had meant something. Whatever happened the other day needed to be ignored and forgotten. Why was she even giving it any thought? Tate wasn't the man for her, regardless of what her body might be telling her. There was a festival to plan, and sitting in a leather folder beneath her handbag was her tablet with various designs she hoped to be able to incorporate in the event.

The road she traversed was lined with oak trees, their foliage lush and the branches stretched across the driveway as if reaching out to touch each other. The effect was like driving through a tunnel. After a short distance, it opened up to the main house. Even though she'd lived most of her life in Sweet Ridge, she hadn't ventured on to the Prentices' property. She was a year older than Trey, the oldest Prentice son, so she hadn't associated with him too much at school. She'd been focused on getting the necessary grades to get into a good college so she could leave the stifling confines of small-town life behind. How funny that she now loved living back in Sweet Ridge.

The Prentices' main house was a two-story Colonial. A large porch wrapped around the lower floor. Even from a distance she could make out the porch swing tucked into the corner. In her opinion, it wasn't a house unless there was a swing on the front porch. Sadly, her house didn't have one, if she got married, their forever home would have a wraparound verandah so she could get her swing.

As she pulled up to the front of the property, the door swung open and Tate came out to stand against the white wooden railing.

Kelly killed the engine and closed her eyes, centering herself before gathering up her things to get out of the car.

The door opened before she could grasp the handle, and she gasped in surprise, her

heart beating a little faster than it had been a few seconds ago. “Give a girl a little warning.”

Tate chuckled and the sound trickled down her spine like a raindrop sliding down a window. “Sorry, I thought you saw me.”

“Yes, I saw you as you exited your house, not actually coming up to my car,” Kelly grumbled as she stepped out, the action bringing her closer to Tate. Again the scent of sunshine, peaches, and earth mingled together and wafted around her, tempting her to lean in a little closer and inhale again.

She definitely needed to go on a date or something. Maybe she should head up to Houston, look up an old work colleague and go out and have some fun. Yet, the second she finished the thought she discarded it. Nothing good would come of visiting the past. Her dad had always told her to look forward because it was a vast openness just ready to be filled with wonderful adventures. He believed the past was in the rearview mirror for a reason.

“Kelly? Would you like to come inside and have some iced tea before we walk the grounds?”

Get a grip, Kelly. Think business. Not your woeful dating life.

“Sure, that would be great.” She plastered on a smile and gripped her tablet a little tighter.

Tate walked beside her, and she concentrated on keeping her breaths nice and even.

“After you,” he said as he stood to the side to allow her to enter the house.

A cool breeze from the air conditioner flowed over her and she was grateful for it.

She needed something to cool her down. She could blame the sudden spike in her body's temperature on the warm Texas sun, but she'd be lying to herself. The strange heat zipping through her was caused by the man beside her.

Even after she'd just given herself a mental lecture, her body had vastly different ideas.

"Oh, wow, this is gorgeous, Tate," Kelly gushed as she gazed at the foyer.

The area was open and a grand staircase was off to the right, leading up to the second floor. The cathedral ceilings gave the house an open and welcoming feeling. The hardwood floors gleamed and she caught the slight hint of lemon furniture polish lingering in the air.

"Thanks. We had the floors sanded and re-varnished last year. They were scratched up pretty bad. With three boys, it was pretty hard to keep them looking good."

"Well, whoever did it, they did a fantastic job."

"Thanks, we're happy with it. Follow me, the kitchen is this way."

There was something about the house that called to Kelly. She couldn't name what it was, but it was like the house was opening itself up to her and inviting her in. As they walked to the kitchen, she spied a large living room off to the left and a couple of closed doors to the right. They probably led to a half bathroom and, most likely, Tate's father's office.

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“Here we are.”

Kelly stopped and stared. The kitchen was a gourmet chef’s delight. The white quartz countertops glistened from the afternoon sun streaming through the windows, the beams hitting the sparkles embedded in the rock. All the appliances were stainless steel, and there wasn’t a hint of a fingerprint on any of their gray surfaces.

“How the heck is this room so clean?” she asked.

Tate laughed as he walked over to the fridge and extracted a glass jug with amber-colored liquid in it. “Mrs. Bates was in today and she cleaned the house. Trust me, if you’d come over yesterday, you’d have seen dirty countertops and dusty surfaces.”

Kelly set her stuff down on the counter and hopped up on one of the black leather stools. “Well, that makes me feel a little better. Although, I suppose it’s only you and Tyler here so the mess should be minimal.”

Tate reached up to get some glasses, and she admired the pull of the cotton T-shirt he was wearing across his broad shoulders. Working in an orchard kept the man in shape. He’d come about his muscles honestly and not in a gym.

“Tyler is the messy one. I’m the angel.” He winked as he placed two tumblers on the counter.

“Of course you are. And I’m the world’s best florist.” She finished with a roll of her eyes.

“You are.”

“What?”

Tate pushed her iced tea toward her. Her fingers closed around the glass and his fingers brushed against hers, halting her movement. She raised her eyebrow in a silent query.

“An amazing florist,” he said, his blue eyes serious and intense. She could lose herself in their depths. A hint of something lingered in the background, something she couldn’t quite identify.

Kelly ducked her head to hide her reaction. “Thank you. I love what I do.”

“I can tell. It helps when you have that sort of passion for what you do for a living.”

“How about you? Do you love what you do, Tate?”

“Yeah. I can’t imagine doing anything else.” Tate released the light grip he had on her fingers, and she took a long swallow from the glass.

A myriad of flavors burst on her tongue. The tartness of the tea, the sweetness of the sugar and the overwhelming taste of peaches.

“Peach tea,” she said delightedly and took another swallow.

“Did you expect anything else? This is Prentice Peach Farm after all,” Tate teased her as he lifted his own glass to his lips.

She couldn’t look away even if she wanted to. His long fingers held the glass. His pink, plump lips caressed the rim and his Adam’s apple bobbed up and down as he

swallowed.

Her tongue darted out to wet her suddenly parched lips, and his eyes flared wide. Holy shit, she should run. Turn around and walk out right now because they were heading into dangerous territory. All she wanted to do was reach out, take the glass from him, and press her lips against his. Without a doubt, he would taste of peaches. Not just from the tea but because peaches were an integral part of who he was.

A door slammed and they both jumped, the spell that had encased them broken.

Kelly gulped down the rest of her drink, looking up to see Tyler strolling into the kitchen, phone in his hand.

“Hey, Tate, who owns the Chevy Traverse out front?” He tapped away, not lifting his head to see who it was for himself.

“It’s mine,” she said.

He looked up, surprise lighting his features. “Oh, hey, Kelly, good to see you. Are you here about the festival?”

“Yep. I am.”

Tyler nodded and, grabbing Tate’s glass, he drained the contents.

“Dude, what are you, thirteen again? Get your own damn glass.” Tate smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

The two brothers were similar in height, Tate maybe a fraction taller. They shared the same blue eyes. Where Tate’s hair was a rich mahogany brown, Tyler’s was jet-black. She could tell they were brothers, but any relationship they had appeared to be

strained.

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“It was easier to grab your glass than get another one dirty.” As if to prove his point, he grabbed the pitcher and topped up the tumbler.

Kelly had always wondered what it would be like to have a sibling. Someone she could share confidences with. Have fun with. But seeing the tension between the two Prentice brothers, she was kind of glad she was an only child.

“So, Tate, shall we take a look around the grounds? See if we can settle on the locations of where the stands are going to be set up?” She injected a brightness in her voice, hoping it would alleviate the mood that had fallen over them.

“Yes, let’s.” Tate made his way around the counter and stopped at her side. “Shall we?”

“It was good to see you again, Tyler. Next time, grab your own glass—that was really gross and unnecessary.”

Tate snorted beside her. “You just got told, bro.”

Tyler had the good grace to look embarrassed. “You’re right. Sorry. I promise I’ll do better. Have fun, kids.”

“Oh, you were so close to almost making me believe you were sincere,” she joked.

Tyler winked and grabbed an apple out of the bowl on the opposite counter. “I aim to please.”

Throughout this interaction, Tate's shoulder muscles got tighter and tighter until she thought his shirt would split. His annoyance radiated out of him. She almost believed he was jealous of his brother. Well, he had nothing to worry about. Yes, Tyler was good-looking, but he didn't set her heart racing like Tate did. Her dreams at night weren't of her and Tyler tangling the sheets. No, the man who visited her in her dreams stood right beside her.

And, oh, shit.

As much as she wanted to deny it, as much as she didn't want to believe it possible, everything in her was telling her different.

She was attracted to Tate Prentice.

Chapter Four

"I was thinking we could put the majority of the vendor stands at the front of the property—that way there isn't much interference with the harvesting." Tate kept his voice modulated and calm even though he was still seething over the way Tyler flirted with Kelly. And the way she flirted back with his older brother.

This rush of emotion was irrational but not unexpected. As much as he'd tried to push it aside, he found Kelly Turner attractive and wanted to get to know her better. Prior to Tyler's appearance in the kitchen, they'd been talking freely. He'd loved the way she reacted to the taste of the peach tea he'd given her. It had taken everything in him not to lean forward and capture her lips. To find out if the tea added another level of sweetness to her taste.

"If we have all the action at the front of the house, where will everyone park? They can't park on the street because, while you don't have a long driveway, it's still a fair distance from the road to the front of your house," Kelly said as she looked up to

him.

Hell, she was the perfect height to tuck her into his side and keep her safe. No other woman he'd dated had given him this reaction swelling through him. He had no idea where the thought to protect her even came from. Kelly was the type of woman who would balk at that sort of attention. She was fiercely independent and strong. Ran her own business. No way would she let him go all alpha macho on her.

"Tate? Did you hear what I said?"

Crap, he'd been caught staring at her like a deer caught in the middle of the road with a car bearing down him. "Yeah, you said something about parking. We can put some cars around the back of the house. It will be okay."

"I don't know when you last went to the festival, but it's grown over the years. There's going to be a lot of cars here. Like a lot."

"God dammit," he muttered and pulled his hat off, running his fingers through his hair. "Why the hell did Tyler think this was a good idea, right in the middle of harvest season, and not to mention, Dad being in the rehab center?"

When he got back to the house, he was going to let Tyler know what an asinine idea it was to hold the festival at the farm. Kelly was right, the front area would be the best place for parking.

"It's going to be fine, Tate. We'll work something out." A warm hand landed on his forearm. Electric shocks filtered through him, and he wanted to lay his hand over Kelly's so he could continue to experience the sensation. Unfortunately, she'd probably stomp on his instep if he tried it.

"I don't know what. The last thing I want are people traipsing around the orchard.

We're full swing into our harvest. We're almost done with the east orchard, and I want to have a good start on the west area before the festival. Of course, it'll depend on the peaches. They work on their own schedule, not mine or Tyler's or the damn Founders' Day festival."

The more he talked, the angrier he got. Tyler hadn't thought through the ramifications of holding the event at the farm.

"Look, I know you're stressed. It's totally understandable, and I agree it's not the best time. But it is what it is. The town is expecting to come here and experience a new outdoor location."

"It's easy for you to say; it's not your world being turned upside down." Beside him Kelly sighed heavily, and part of him knew he was being unreasonable. But that other part still burned with annoyance. The thing was, she was right. The town was expecting to visit Prentice Peach Farm and he had to suck it up and make it work. "Sorry. You shouldn't bear the brunt of my annoyance at my brother. Let's take a walk around and see what else we can come up with."

"Maybe I can talk to Macy about reducing the number of vendors we put out here. As I said, we'll work something out."

"I hope so."

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They spent the next twenty minutes walking around the house and surrounding area in an attempt to work out where they could set up a designated parking zone as well as a great location for the stands. The longer he spent with Kelly, the more the tension and stress seeped out of him.

“As I said earlier, we’re well into the harvest,” he said in the east orchard. “This area is closest to the house, so if we can get it picked, it won’t be so chaotic. The less machinery we have around the house, the better. The last thing we want is for someone to get hurt.”

“Yeah, I don’t think you want a hike in your insurance premium. I’ll also speak to Macy to find out what insurance they already have in place. I’m sure they have something.”

“They should.”

“You know, the design for the flower arch is going to fit perfectly here. It’s going to complement the one at the entry to the farm.”

“Wait. Why would you need to have any sort of flower displays here?”

“For aesthetic purposes, not to mention we’ve got a completely different color scheme here to what will be displayed in town. We always have large flower displays, Tate. It’s as traditional as Betty Lou’s fried chicken.”

Tate didn’t understand the need to have various flower arrangements. Not that he had anything against them, of course, he just didn’t think they were necessary for his

farm. “This is an orchard. We have an abundance of trees to give you the aesthetics you want. If we have to have colors on display, we could tie ribbons around the base of the trees.”

“Oh, that would be perfect. I love that idea.” He watched as Kelly pulled out her tablet and used the pen attached to it to make some notes.

“Great, so we can forget about the flowers and just go with the ribbons?” Yes, at least he got one thing he wanted out of this.

“What? No. No way. There will be flowers.” Kelly tapped her pen on her tablet. “Along with ribbons around the trees.”

“Come on, Kelly, why do we need to have buckets of flowers when we have this gorgeous vista?” He waved his hand toward the trees behind him. Maybe if he kept repeating it she’d come over to his way of thinking.

“Tate, let’s be reasonable here.” Her tone suggested she was talking to a willful child, and he was anything but a child.

“Stop right there. Don’t say any more. If you can’t talk to me like an adult, this meeting is over.”

“I thought I was talking to you like an adult, but with the way you’re acting now...”

Tate turned his back on her. It was rude, but he had a gamut of emotions bombarding him. Anger at his brother. Frustration that he was the one whose working life had to be turned upside down to cater to Tyler’s whim. Not to mention the more they walked around the farm, the more he realized that keeping disruption to a minimum was going to be difficult.

A hand landed on his shoulder. Warmth speared him at the point of contact. His body reacted in a crazy manner whenever Kelly got close. Did she feel anything as well?

God, why was he wasting time on even letting that thought take root in his mind? Kelly had made her feelings about him more than clear. She thought he was the town's playboy. Not to mention a child. He was anything but a child, and as silly as it seemed he was ready to settle down. He wanted the relationship his parents had right up to the moment Mom died. Having that with Kelly Turner was as likely as Tyler changing his mind and canceling the Founders' Day festival at the farm.

Shaking off Kelly's touch, he took two steps forward before turning to face her. "You know what, I don't care what you do. You can decorate all the trees with blooms. Make the orchard an English flower garden." With that he brushed past her and headed into the orchard. At least the trees understood him. He always found peace among endless rows of branches and leaves. This was where he belonged and he would make sure nothing happened to them.

*

Kelly wandered into Betty Lou's Diner in a bit of a daze. Tate's abrupt attitude change had been dizzying. He'd gone from being super friendly and fun when having their tea to abrasive and argumentative when they'd discussed the layout and decorations for the festival.

"Hiya, Kelly. You eating here or picking up some donuts?" Norma's exuberant greeting was a welcome distraction from her train of thoughts.

"Hey, Norma. I'd like a table, please." The last thing she wanted to do was go home and cook a lonely meal. It wasn't like she didn't normally do that, but tonight she needed to be surrounded by people.

“Sure, hon, follow me.” Norma picked up a menu and led her through the busy diner to a booth in the back, facing the main street. “Sweet iced tea for ya?”

Kelly slid across the red vinyl and grabbed the menu from Norma. She didn’t need it but took it anyway. “Actually, can I have a Coke instead?”

“Sure. I’ll be right back.”

Norma scuttled off and Kelly gazed out the window. Summer was settling in around Sweet Ridge. The days were getting longer, and people walked the streets heading toward the town center. The green space had become more popular over the years, and when she let herself, she pictured a time when she, her husband, and kids would visit the area as well. The kids would play on the swings and other equipment while she and her husband would watch them from a bench, fingers entwined as they talked about nothing and everything.

As each year passed without her finding her special person, the dream drifted further and further away. Slowly, she was coming to the realization that she might travel through life alone, and she was adjusting to that thought.

You don’t have to be alone. What about Tate?

And what in the hell was she thinking? After today, the only thing she and Tate would be having was polite conversations. Anything else was never going to happen. Yes, she might find him good-looking, and yes, her heart always seemed to do the do-si-do around him, but he couldn’t be the man of her future, could he? Attraction didn’t always lead to happily ever after. But was she being close-minded to the possibility that dating a younger man was a bad thing? There were more eligible bachelors around town these days than ever before. Perhaps the time had come for her to live a little. Yet the pull toward Tate was one she couldn’t deny.

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“Here you go, hon. Now you ready to order?” Norma placed her glass and a paper wrapped straw on the table in front of her.

“Thanks, Norma, I’ll have the Betty Lou’s fried chicken platter, with mashed potatoes, corn, and biscuits.”

“Coming right up.” The waitress collected the menu and bustled off to the kitchen, smiling at one of the other patrons who waved her down.

Kelly resumed her people watching. The straw slipped out of her mouth when she spied the person in the forefront of her thoughts standing across the street, looking directly at her.

As if an invisible piece of thread grew between them, Tate kept his eye on her as he crossed the street. Within seconds he was standing on the opposite side of the glass. For the first time in her life, words seemed to escape her.

After the abrupt way their conversation finished that afternoon she didn’t expect him to voluntarily approach her. If anything, she expected him to turn away and walk in the opposite direction.

Their eyes met and held. She couldn’t read what he wanted from her. And what did she want from him?

The truth of the matter was, they had to work together. The success of the festival’s new format hinged on them being on the same page. Arguing and being petty wouldn’t achieve that. They needed to talk out what happened that afternoon so it

wouldn't happen again. A good team worked cohesively to come up with compromises and solutions that would benefit both parties.

Kelly lifted her hand and waved it toward the empty bench seat opposite her. "Would you like to join me?" She mouthed the words, and judging by Tate's raised eyebrows, her invitation was the last thing he expected. But he must have thought something would happen—why else would he cross the street and stop in front of her? Had he planned to stare at her while she ate her dinner? Now that would've been creepy.

After a few heartbeats, he nodded and disappeared from view as he headed to the front door. The bell over the door tinkled. She used the few seconds it would take him to get to her table to compose herself. Part of her was regretting her impulsive invitation. The other part was elated she'd taken the plunge.

"You want me to join you?" Tate kept his voice low, no doubt in case she'd changed her mind and withdrew her invitation.

"Yes. Please sit."

"Thanks." He took off his Stetson and sat, his leg brushing against hers as he settled in. Even the small contact of his rough denim against her bare skin set it tingling. His hair was suffering from wearing his hat for too long, and her fingers itched to reach over and ruffle it to bring a little life to the flatness. As if he reading her mind, he completed the action for himself.

Damn, maybe it would've been better if he hadn't done that. Now the fine brown strands stuck up, and he looked more like he'd just gotten out of bed instead of sitting down to eat.

"Well, Kelly, I didn't know you were entertaining this evening. Hi, Tate, what can I get you to drink?"

A warm flush spread across her cheeks. A quick look around confirmed that most of the diners had swiveled in their chairs and were looking in their direction.

“Hi, Norma, I’ll have a Dr Pepper, and, yes, Kelly and I are having dinner so I’ll have today’s special. If you didn’t know, we’re working on the Founders’ Day festival and have a few things to discuss.” Tate said it loud enough for everyone to hear.

Again, this was the downside to living in a small town. Everyone wanted to know everyone’s business. But Tate had effectively squashed the gossipmongers from putting two and two together and coming up with wedding bells.

Wedding bells.

That definitely wasn’t happening.

“Sure, Tate, I’ll be right back. You two go about discussing business.” Norma sashayed away.

“You know she didn’t buy our reason for eating together, don’t you?” Kelly said.

“Sure, but hopefully everyone else will believe me.” Tate sat back, bringing his legs in contact with hers again. This time she didn’t move them out of the way.

Another look around confirmed that the people closest to them were again talking among themselves and eating their food.

“Thanks for joining me, by the way. I hope I didn’t interrupt any plans you may have had.” Like maybe meeting the recipient of his flowers.

“Nah, no plans. I was thinking of hitting Silver Spurs for a quick beer before heading back to the house.”

On closer look, she could see the dark shadows under his eyes. It must've been hard to take over the farm after his father's stroke. She'd seen for herself that it was harvesttime, so she imagined he had long days. The more she considered it, the more she could understand why he was frustrated.

“Did Tyler ask you before he volunteered your place as the satellite location?”

Norma returned to the table with Tate's drink. Neither said a word, just waited for her to walk away. The waitress looked between them as if hoping to break their silence and get a piece of juicy gossip to share with the staff and patrons in listening distance.

Just keep fiddling with your straw, Tate. Don't look at her. Don't give her anything to work with. After a few moments Norma gave up and headed back to the front of the diner.

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Both of them burst out laughing. “She’s itching to say something about our little dinner, isn’t she?” Tate mused.

“For sure.”

Tate leaned forward and crooked a finger. “You know we could give her something to talk about if we wanted to.”

Kelly smiled and shook her head. “As tempting as that is, I don’t think so. Besides, I know what you’re doing.”

“What? What am I doing?” His eyes widened, but Kelly wasn’t born yesterday.

“You’re avoiding answering my question. And by doing that you’ve already confirmed what I suspected.”

“And what’s that?” His fingers continued to fiddle with the wrapper from his straw. She noticed they were long and his nails were neatly cut. Considering he worked with plants and dirt every day, they were clean.

“Tyler didn’t talk to you about it at all. I wondered when I saw the way you two interacted today.”

Tate’s chest rose and fell. “Yeah, he sprung it on me. It’s typical Tyler behavior. I should be used to it, but I’m not.”

The dynamics between the brothers wasn’t something she needed to get involved

with, but Tate looked so defeated. Clearly, everything was getting to him and he didn't know what to do.

Right then, she decided she would accommodate as many of Tate's wishes for the event as possible. Except maybe the flowers.

Chapter Five

Tate was surprised he was able to make coherent sentences. Normally, around Kelly, he seemed to stumble over some words like he was fifteen years old. The more time he spent with her, the more relaxed he became.

Her dinner invitation surprised the hell out of him, considering the way they'd parted at the farm.

"Look, I want to apologize for how I acted today. Like I said, Tyler didn't tell me, and then we got into it in front of you, and then I took out my bad temper and annoyance at him on you. You didn't deserve that. So I'm sorry."

She reached out and touched him, a light connection that was over in seconds, but he savored it. "Thank you. I can't begin to understand the dynamics between siblings. I'm an only child, and the only people I argued with growing up were my dolls. It was always a one-sided argument."

Tate chuckled, trying to picture a young Kelly arguing with dolls. "I'm sorry you lost all the arguments."

For a second she was silent, and then she laughed. "How did you know I always lost?"

He shrugged. "Lucky guess?"

Norma arrived at their table. The aroma of fried food assailed his senses, and his stomach grumbled in appreciation. It had been a long time since he'd had anything to eat. He'd been so focused on making sure he got everything done before his meeting with Kelly that food was the last thing on his mind.

Once Norma walked away, he grabbed his silverware and dug into the chicken fried steak, corn, and mashed potatoes. The first mouthful was ambrosia.

"Been a while since you had something to eat," Kelly commented, a small smile playing around her lips.

"Yup." No way was he going to be embarrassed about enjoying a good meal.

After Mom had died, Dad had employed Mrs. Bates to cook for them. Tate had always enjoyed sitting in the kitchen, watching her. Occasionally, she'd let him help, and after Tyler left for college and it was just Dad and him, his dad made the decision they didn't need her to cook anymore, just clean. Tate had taken on the task of chef for them. One of the main reasons he'd gone to college nearby was so he could still live at home and keep an eye on Dad, because he hated the idea of him being alone in the house. It had been tricky sometimes with his schedule, but he'd made it work.

For the next few minutes, they enjoyed their food. He wondered if she spent most evenings with her mom or by herself. Kelly had her own place, but her mom was a widow.

"Do you like to cook?" he asked once he'd satisfied the immediate hunger gnawing at his insides.

"I wouldn't say that it's a passion, but I don't mind it. Seeing as I only cook for myself, I usually make enough to have for two meals. If I've got a ton of orders and work late, knowing that I've got a meal already prepared at home makes life a little

easier.”

Well, that answered his question. “Must be lonely cooking for one.”

The spark in her eye died the second he said the words, and he wished he could take them back. He’d highlighted her single status. No one wanted to be reminded of that. Yet she had to be happy in herself because she’d been prepared to have a meal alone tonight. If he hadn’t been walking past, she would be sitting by herself.

Yeah, probably not a good idea to bring that up with her, either. That would definitely get him kicked out of the booth.

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“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that,” he blurted out before she could say anything. “It was uncalled for and unnecessary.”

Okay, so maybe he wasn’t stumbling over his words, but he was doing a pretty good job of putting his big size twelve boot in his mouth. Whenever he’d been out with other women, he hadn’t said anything inappropriate. Kelly put him off-kilter and he wasn’t sure if he liked it or not.

“Thank you. And yeah, it was a little rude. But I’ll answer it. Sometimes it is lonely cooking for one person. But it also gives me freedom to do what I want. Eat what I want when I want. If I want to have cereal for dinner because I’m too exhausted to do anything else, I can. I don’t have to answer to anyone.”

Tate studied her. Her words were confident and to the point. However, yearning lurked in the depths of her eyes. As if, while she believed what she was saying, she wanted more.

“I don’t mind cereal for dinner. What’s your favorite variety?” Talking about breakfast foods seemed a good way to direct the conversation away from personal to general.

“Oh, I go through phases when I only eat one variety at a time. Like at the moment I’m on a Cocoa Krispies fad. Nothing like chocolate-flavored cereal to start the day.”

“Mmmm, my favorite. Maybe we can share a bowl.”

What the hell? Did I just insinuate spending the night with her?

Why deny that he was attracted to her and wanted to get to know her better? It was the truth. It definitely wasn't hard to imagine sharing a bowl of Cocoa Krispies with her in his bed, her hair deliciously rumpled from sleep and from him running his fingers through it.

He shifted on the vinyl bench seat in an attempt to alleviate the pressure building in his jeans.

Yes, he liked Kelly Turner.

"I'll bring a box the next time I come to the farm to talk about the festival and we can each have a bowl."

Well, there went his early morning fantasy, but she hadn't totally blown his suggestion out of the water. Perhaps it was for the best they started with an afternoon snack together before working up to snuggling in bed. He hadn't missed the emphasis on them both having a bowl and not sharing one.

He cleared his throat. "Sounds good." Tate went back to concentrating on his meal, but he couldn't quite let go of his little fantasy. Not yet anyway.

The rest of the meal passed in silence, and when Norma came to collect their plates she looked between the two of them, raising her eyebrow a fraction before placing the dessert menus on the table and then walking away.

"Do you want to get some dessert?" he asked, breaking the silence. While it hadn't been uncomfortable, it hadn't been too relaxed either. At least the desire in his body had settled down a little.

"I shouldn't, but I can't resist Betty Lou's donuts. I think I'll grab a couple to go. I've still got a bit to do tonight before I can turn in."

Disappointment flared and he squashed it quickly. They were going to be seeing a bit of each other over the next few weeks, but he really didn't want the night to end. "Are you going to be working on the Founders' Day stuff?"

"Yes, I am."

He recalled something she'd said to him earlier at the farm, before things had gone off the rails. "You have some designs worked out already for the farm, don't you?"

"Uh-huh."

Great, she was responding in short sentences. Did that mean, like him, she didn't want to leave, or was he reading too much into her responses? Probably reading too much. Or maybe she was worried he was going to shoot down everything she suggested. After all, he hadn't been too open that afternoon.

"Look, I know this afternoon I was being bullheaded, but I would like to see what you've designed. Your vision."

She canted her head to the side as if determining whether he was being genuine or saying pretty words to lull her into a false sense of security. "Are you serious? Do you really want to see them?"

"Would you two like dessert?" Norma asked brightly.

Damn that woman and her timing. "Umm, yeah," he started and gave the menu a quick look. "I'll have the peach pie with whipped cream and ice cream."

"Okay, what about you, Kelly? Do you want anything?"

"I'll have the donut of the day, and I'll also take a plain glazed one. You can put the

glazed one in a to-go bag. Thanks, Norma.”

“Either one of you want a coffee as well?”

The last thing Tate needed was a shot of caffeine. He had a feeling that sleep was going to be difficult anyway. No way did he need any more stimuli to keep him awake. “No thanks, I’m good.”

Kelly shook her head as well.

Once they were alone, Tate looked expectantly at her. “What?” she asked.

“I want to have a look at your plans or designs for the floral displays.”

“Oh, right.” She dug into her oversize purse and pulled out her tablet. She flipped the cover over and tapped her finger on the screen. Tate had a tablet as well—who didn’t these days? He mainly used it for tracking sugar levels in the peaches. How his father and his father before him had done things without the technology that fine-tuned the process these days always amazed Tate.

“Okay, so here’s what I was thinking we could do as everyone arrives on your property. We use your sign welcoming everyone to Prentice Peach Farms. Below that we have the Founders’ Day banner. On either side of the sign we have massive urns with red blooms. They’ll have to be changed out maybe once or twice during the festival, but that’s okay. With an order this big I’m sure my distributors will do a deal for me.”

She slid the tablet across the laminate tabletop. The colors were so vibrant he could almost smell the aroma of the flowers in the design. He noted that she highlighted the farm’s sign with rosettes of red and gold.

The urns, while large, didn’t look too ostentatious—if anything they enhanced the farm’s entryway.

He looked up at her, smiling big. “These are gorgeous, Kelly. I love the look of this

whole design.”

“Does that mean I have your approval?” she teased him.

He laughed and relaxed a little. Perhaps he’d been making the whole floral arrangements around the farm into a bigger deal than it needed to be. “Yes, you do. But”—he halted her little dance of delight on her bench—“I still have the right to refuse if it’s too over the top.”

“Fair enough.” She inclined her head before smiling smugly. “But I don’t think you will. I can assure you that all my designs are as tasteful as this one.”

“Okay, Ms. Turner, dazzle me.”

Over the next twenty minutes, Kelly walked him through the vision she had for the farm. He noted that, as she said she would, she’d taken his suggestion and drawn a design of some of the peach trees with ribbons wrapped around the trunk. At the center of each tree was a rosette design like the one she’d put on the front sign.

Both of them barely acknowledged Norma returning with their desserts. They ate as they talked.

“You know what I think would look great?” Kelly gushed as she drew on the screen. “How about this?” She turned the screen back to him.

Yet again, her creativity surprised the hell out of him. She’d drawn a picture of a wooden cart filled with baskets of peaches and flowers. He could almost taste the sweetness of the peach juice as he bit into one.

“Okay, I like it, but where are you planning on placing that? We’re already tight on space at the farm as it is.” During the evening, they’d also come up with a rough plan

of the layout of the vendors and where they would be.

“Oh, this wouldn’t be at the farm. This would be in the town center. Not that I think we need it, because everyone loves the Founders’ Day festival, but if we want to draw people passing by to stop and spend the day in Sweet Ridge, we need to tease and entice them. We can do that with this cart. We could get a couple of them and place them strategically on the road coming into town. They’ll see the beautiful peaches and flowers and won’t be able to resist finding out what is going on in Sweet Ridge.” She tapped the stylus pen against her lips. “I wonder if Grayson and Becca would be interested in showcasing some avocados as well. I’ll make a note to speak to them.”

As much as Tate was caught up in her excitement and he liked the idea, he wasn’t sure about the fact that he was going to have to use some of the peaches from his harvest for this display. Like anything, there were always peaches that didn’t make the grade, and usually he sent them to Betty Lou because she could use the slightly bruised fruit in her pies and donuts. No way would he put second rate fruit on display for all to see, though. Prentice Peach Farm’s reputation of producing the best peaches in Texas was something he was extremely proud of.

“Kel, before you go too far on this, if you’re talking about doing two or more carts, how many peaches do you think you’ll need?”

“Umm, I don’t know. We’ve got to make the displays big enough to see, so I’m thinking we’ll need a couple hundred or more.”

Tate sat back. Hmm, how to phrase his objection so he didn’t deflate Kelly’s excitement or send their relationship back to where it had been when he’d first sat down. Over the course of the evening, the tension and awkwardness that surrounded them had disappeared, and he liked to think they were moving forward in the manner where he may be able to ask Kelly out for a dinner date where they didn’t have to talk

about Founders' Day.

"That's a lot of fruit."

"Well, you have a lot of trees," she teased.

"We do, but we supply a lot of places with our peaches. I have to allow for fruit that isn't quite up to standard. There will be some fruit that will have been eaten by birds and other critters, no matter how many measures we put in to counteract those incidents. They still happen." Tate looked over at her, noting the way her excitement had dimmed a little. He didn't want to extinguish it completely. However, Kelly needed to know all the facets of what he had to deal with on a daily basis. "As careful as we are when harvesting, some fruit gets bruised or slightly damaged."

"Well, we can use that," Kelly interjected. "We'll just turn it so that damaged part isn't on display."

Tate shook his head. "No, Kel, we can't. I'm not prepared to risk the farm's reputation for the sake of a display."

He held his breath, waiting to see if she would argue with him, try to get her way. Convince him that they could make it work somehow. Instead, she nodded, and he relaxed his shoulders.

"Okay, I can understand that. I'll see if I can come up with a different concept. I still think the carts on the side of the road are a good idea."

"Thank you for being understanding. And I agree, I like the idea too. Maybe Macy can help you come up with something we can put in the carts. Of course, we have to get the carts to start off with."

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Kelly waved away his concern. “Oh, that’s easy. I know someone who has a couple of them lying around in his barn. He’ll let me use them, no worries.”

A stab of jealousy pierced his gut, churning the food he’d eaten and he grabbed his drink and took a swallow, hoping to still the motion. Who was this person? A former lover? A current lover? Surely, if Kelly were seeing someone he would’ve heard it from the gossip truck that meandered through town on a daily basis.

“Great. That’s great.” Even to his ears his words sounded strained.

“Wow, I didn’t know it was so late. I’m surprised we haven’t been kicked out.” Kelly packed up her tablet and popped it back into her purse, signaling that the evening was over.

Tate glanced around. She was right, there were only two other couples in the diner, and they were getting ready to leave. “I guess they could see we were busy working and didn’t want to disturb us.”

Disappointment cloaked him in a depressing cloud. He didn’t want to go back to his big house and have to deal with the quiet. Tyler had taken over the caretaker’s cottage and only came to the house when he wanted food or to annoy Tate. He very rarely came over to spend time with Dad and him to watch a game or just hang out. Ever since Dad had had his stroke, Tyler’s visits had been even more scarce.

Kelly went to grab the folder containing the bill for their food, but he stilled her movements. The light touch, once again, sent fissures of sparks through him. He heard her intake of breath and knew she’d experienced it as well. “Let me get this.”

She tightened her grip on the faux leather holder. “It’s fine. I can pay for my own meal.”

Tate sighed. After the way they’d spent the evening, the last thing he wanted to do was create tension between them again. “I know you can, Kel, but I’d like to do this. Next time you can pay. But be warned, I’m gonna order the most expensive thing on the menu.” He winked.

Kelly removed her hand, and he wanted to grab it back but controlled the urge. “You’re on.”

Tate’s heart stuttered before kicking back into its normal rhythm. Did she just agree to go on a date with him? He studied her but couldn’t discern if she regretted her comment or not. No way would he look like a lovesick teenager and seek confirmation of his wayward thoughts, so he slid out of the booth, the check in his hand.

As he dealt with the bill, he was conscious of Kelly standing at his side.

“You both have a nice evening, ya hear?” Betty Lou smiled at them.

It was the first time he’d seen the diner’s owner all evening. Her hair was still in the updo with curls draping her cheeks. Her signature red glasses with their silver chain framed her face. The pink apron covering her white uniform was pristine, and he had no doubt she had a supply of them in her office so she always looked like she never worked, when the whole town knew she was one of the hardest workers ever.

“Will do, and the food was superb as always. Ms. Betty Lou, you’re looking as lovely as ever.” He tipped his hat at her.

“Oh, go on with you.” Betty Lou cast her glance over to Kelly. “He’s a smooth talker,

this one.”

Kelly chuckled. “I’m well aware of that fact.”

Tate couldn’t help but feel a little insulted but then brushed the irrational feeling away. Both women had smiles on their faces and were teasing him. After so many years of Tyler’s veiled digs, he’d become a little sensitive. The time had come to be the adult he was and wanted everyone to realize he’d become.

He slung an arm over Kelly’s shoulder and brought her close to him. Her body tightened momentarily before relaxing into his side. Betty Lou’s eyebrows rose above her frames. Just more fodder for the gossip truck. He had no doubt that most of the town would know that he’d had dinner with Kelly and had his arm around her shoulder when they paid.

Outside, the sounds of summer surrounded them. Crickets trilled, calling for company. A light veil of humidity hung in the air, not quite stifling yet. Come July and August, humidity would be heavy and unpleasant. Hopefully, Mother Nature would play nice for Founders’ Day and make the days and evenings pleasant.

“Where did you park your car?” he asked.

“Behind the shop.”

“Okay.” Tate headed in that direction, aware that he still had his arm around Kelly’s shoulders. Interesting. Why hadn’t she shaken him off? Not that he was complaining. She fit snugly, and he could get used to it.

A second later, she took a step to the right and his arm slipped to his side. The universe liked to give and then take away from him pretty quickly.

“You don’t have to walk me to my car, Tate. I’m a big girl and can get there by myself. The town is safe.”

He shoved his hands in his pocket to stop from reaching for her again. “I’m aware of that, but Dad would box my ears if he knew I’d let you walk alone after spending the evening with you.”

“Ahh, the gentlemanly gestures. It’s kind of sad they’re dying out.”

“You sound like you don’t want that to happen. You do know you just told me I didn’t have to do one of those gentlemanly gestures with dinner.”

She shrugged. “I have mixed feelings. I’ve been on my own for a long time. I’m an independent business owner. I’m in charge of my own life. And I love that, but when I listen to Mom talk about the early days of her and Dad’s courtship, it kind of makes me sad that some of those traditions are being lost. Some days, I’d like to experience it, and other days I don’t.”

Tate itched to rest his arm on her lower back as they walked down the darkened alley by her shop. Would this be one of those gestures she wanted? He compromised and raised his hand to her lower back, not touching but close enough that he could if she needed it. “I’m sure in time a balance will be struck that will please everyone.”

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“I hope so,” she murmured as they stopped by her car, unlocking it. The flashing lights brightened the night for a heartbeat.

Deciding to risk it, he leaned around her and opened the door for her. “I had a really nice evening tonight, Kel. Thanks for asking me to join you.”

She looked up at him, the action bringing her face closer to his. In the muted glow from the only light in the parking lot, he caught the way her tongue darted out to moisten her lips. Tate bit back a groan. Memories from earlier in the day when he’d been tempted to kiss her in his kitchen slammed into him. His blood heated and his lower body tightened in his jeans.

He didn’t miss the increase in her breathing. “Kel?” he asked, sure of what he wanted but not wanting to assume she wanted the same thing.

“Tate,” she whispered and swayed a fraction toward him.

He rested his hand on her hip and lowered his head, keeping his eyes open. If she pulled back, he would give her space. Only she raised her face and their lips met. His eyelids drifted down and relief swept through him.

Her lips were soft and sweet beneath his. He could taste the lingering orange flavor from the zinger donut she’d eaten. Her hands clasped the front of his shirt, and he tightened his hold on her, angling his head to deepen the kiss. The second her mouth opened beneath his, he bit back a groan. Never in a million years would he have imagined he’d be kissing Kelly Turner, yet here he was and she was kissing him back.

As much as he wanted to keep going, he pulled his lips away and peppered her with a couple of soft touches before finally dropping his hands to the side. As first kisses went, this was the best he'd ever had.

They stood looking at each other for endless moments, as if reluctant to say anything and burst the fragile bubble of contentment surrounding them. Eventually, Kelly made the first move, as he seemed unable to.

"Good night, Tate." She slipped into her car, closing the door with a click that echoed around the empty area.

"Night, Kel."

Chapter Six

"Dammit," Kelly muttered as she tossed away another bloom she'd cut too short. The day hadn't been going well at all. Every time she looked at a flower all she could see was Tate's face as he bent to kiss her.

Oh God, what had she been thinking to let him kiss her like that? Of their own volition her fingers crept up and touched her mouth. If she closed her eyes, she could remember the feel of Tate's touch. The way his lips moved over hers. The sweetness of his embrace.

"Kelly, are you okay?"

Her eyes flashed open and she spied Mom looking at her intently. "Yeah, I'm fine, just a little frustrated. This arrangement isn't working out the way I wanted it to."

"I can see that," her mom responded drily. "Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

No way was she going to tell her mom she'd kissed Tate Prentice. What had she been thinking? She needed to nip her wayward thoughts in the bud, no pun intended. They had to work together on the logistics for the festival. The last thing they needed was to muddy that arrangement with a relationship of some sort.

A snort erupted out of her. A relationship with Tate. Yeah, that was as likely as Betty Lou changing her hairstyle and eyeglasses on the same day.

“Well, clearly you don't want to answer my question, so I'm going to assume that maybe it has something to do with your dinner with Tate Prentice.”

That was another reason not to even consider doing anything with Tate—the whole town would know. It had been three days since their dinner at the diner and still people looked at her and asked how Tate was. After the third time of being questioned within the space of fifteen minutes, she wanted to lock herself away from everyone. Of course, she didn't—that wasn't her. She faced everything head-on. Something new would board the gossip truck and she and Tate would be forgotten. She just had to hang in there a little longer. At least it wasn't as bad as when she was a teenager. Back then, she'd thought her life was over.

“Mom, as I told you when you called me at seven in the morning after our dinner, there's nothing going on. We were working on the Founders' Day festival stuff. I'd had a meeting at his place that afternoon. We were just recapping everything and discussing some new ideas.”

Her mom picked up the discarded flower stems from the worktable, studied them for a moment before tossing them in the trash can. “You keep telling yourself it was a working dinner, Kelly, but that's not what everyone who was in the diner told me.” Her mom leaned a little closer. “Every single person said sparks were flying between the two of you.”

Kelly rolled her eyes and snatched up another bloom, this time cutting it the right length. “Those people see things they want to see. Trust me, Mom, there were no sparks.”

“Okay, dear, but I’m just saying, he’s a good-looking man. You could do worse.”

“Mom!” A flush of heat warmed the back of her neck and she wished that a customer would walk in. “Stop it. He’s too young.”

“Oh, honey, age is relative these days. It doesn’t matter if he’s younger than you. I bet if he were older, you’d be giving him a second look.”

Kelly didn’t want to examine too closely how accurate Mom’s comment was. She didn’t want to think she’d treat Tate differently if he was older than her, but she couldn’t deny she probably would.

Society always seemed to accept the older man-younger woman scenario without much issue. However, when the roles were reversed, more gossip surrounded older woman.

“I don’t know. As I said, we’re working together on making sure the festival is a success. Any sort of relationship between us could cause more issues with the planning than we already have.”

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“Aha. So you are attracted to him. I knew it.” Mom smiled smugly and Kelly rolled her eyes again.

The more she denied what she was feeling toward Tate, the more Mom would keep at her until she admitted the truth.

“Fine, you win. Yes, I find him attractive, but nothing more can happen between us, Mom. It just wouldn’t work.”

“Nothing more? What more is there to happen? And why wouldn’t it work?”

Of course, Mom would pick up on her slip of the tongue. “Not what you’re thinking, that’s for sure. But we kissed the other night. He walked me back to my car, and I don’t know, it just happened. And it wouldn’t work because it just wouldn’t.”

“Honey, I know your ex really hurt you. He’s a loser, and if I could get my hands on him, well, let’s just say he would be looking down the barrel of your father’s shotgun.”

“Mom, that’s a little extreme.” She had no idea Mom still had Dad’s guns.

“Is it? That man had the morals of a snake, and he was going to add you to his harem.”

She burst out laughing. “Geez, Mom, he wasn’t going to add me to his harem. I wouldn’t let him. You know there are more polyamorous relationships happening now than ever before.”

“People are free to live their own lives the way they want to. The difference in those relationships you’re talking about is that all parties are aware of what’s going on when they enter it. You didn’t. As far as you knew you were both in a monogamous relationship. He was being deliberately dishonest with you, and not to mention a married man. So, yes, if he sets one foot in this town, I’d chase him out again.”

Kelly dropped the tools she was working with and wrapped her mom in a hug. “I love you, Mom. Thank you.”

Mom returned her hug. “I love you, too, baby girl. I’d do anything to see you happy.”

Kelly disentangled herself from the embrace. “I am happy, Mom. I’m doing what I love. I live close to you again. I’ve got good friends. Life is good.”

Her mom reached out and touched her cheek softly. “But you’re lonely, honey. You weren’t meant to be alone. You’ve closed yourself off from living. From seeing the possibilities that surround you. Don’t ignore Santa’s sleigh.”

“What are you talking about, Mom? Santa’s sleigh? It’s June, not December.”

“I’m talking about the signs that are put in front of you. Signs that if you ignore, you miss the best part of your life. So don’t ignore them. More importantly, don’t be afraid to grab them.”

Had she missed a lot of signs in her life? She wasn’t sure. “How do you know what the signs are, Mom? I’m sure they’re not labeled, hey, I’m a sign—you need to pay attention to me.”

Mom laughed. “No, that would be too easy. Honey, if you open yourself up to all possibilities life has to offer, the signs will make sense. Take Tate, for instance.”

No. She needed to put a stop to Mom and her philosophies right now. “What are you talking about? Tate is in no way part of my future.”

Except her subconscious mind seemed to think that maybe he was part of it.

“See, you’re still being closed off. Listen to me, Kelly. Out of the blue, Tate started coming into the shop and buying arrangements on a regular basis.”

“You know his reputation, Mom. Those flowers were probably more thanks for a good time than I got you these because I like you.” She really wanted this conversation over and done with. Why couldn’t a customer walk in right now? Surely, if the universe was sending signals out to her, she could send her own signals asking for intervention.

“Stop interrupting. Yes, I’m aware of his so-called reputation. You, more than anyone else, knows how everyone loves to gossip in this town. Who’s to say that half of what the townspeople think about Tate is just exaggeration and speculation? That boy is a hard worker and you know it. He stepped up to take over all the workings of the farm when Trenton had his stroke. Do you think a man who is so busy putting notches in his bedpost would step up to the plate like that? There’s more to that man than what you see on the surface.”

A beat of silence passed between them. “Oh, I’m supposed to answer that? I thought you told me to stop interrupting.” She softened her words with a big grin.

“I guess I left myself open for that.” Mom laughed and tapped Kelly on the nose with one of the discarded roses.

“You kinda did, but yes, I have to agree that maybe his reputation is all talk now, but there have been many a time I’ve seen him at Silver Spurs with a different girl on his arm each time.”

“I’m not condoning it, but he’s young. He should be playing the field.”

“See!” Kelly exclaimed. “You agree that he’s young.”

Mom shook her head. “You really need to let go of the age issue. I don’t think it’s that big of a deal. You’re well aware that I was older than your father.”

Kelly hadn’t forgotten that, but the age difference between Mom and Dad was one year, not five, like it was between her and Tate. She wisely kept her mouth shut, though.

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“Anyway, back to the signs,” Mom continued. “So, one, he’s been coming into the store more than ever before. Two, Macy asks you to get more involved with Founders’ Day and the event is being held at Tate’s place and you have to work closely with him. Three, you kissed him and you find him attractive. If they aren’t all signs, then my favorite flower isn’t the calla lily.” Mom crossed her arms over her chest, and nodded her head once.

Kelly recognized that sign—her lecture was over. Did she want to believe what Mom was saying? That the universe was giving her some big arrows pointing her in the direction of Tate?

If she did follow the path, how would it end? In glitter and rainbows? Or would it be dark clouds and endless rain? Taking that next step, the step into the dating pool again, scared the crap out of her.

Out of the blue, anger consumed her. How could she let one man ruin her future? Why would she do that? Kelly had no doubt that Edwin hadn’t given her another thought when she broke it off. In fact, he’d probably replaced her three weeks after she’d kicked him to the curb. So why was she still letting Edwin stop her from experiencing the joys of love?

Not that she was in love with Tate or believed that she would fall in love with him. But she didn’t have to deny to herself that she liked the guy. Enjoyed spending time with him. Their dinner had been fun and relaxed and one of the best times she’d had in a long time. She wanted more of that. How many times had she looked at Macy and Gavin or Charlotte and Gage and wished for what they had? Someone to share the ups and downs of their day with. Someone to share the burden when things got

too hard.

Kelly was never going to get that if she continued to hide behind her flowers and her shop. Her business was profitable. She had a ton of online orders and her reputation was spreading for her fine floral arrangements.

Why shouldn't she enjoy the other parts of her life?

Just like Mom had done moments ago, Kelly nodded firmly. "You know what, Mom? You're right. I have hidden away too long. Not anymore. From now on, I'm going to be open to the signs and grasp them with both hands."

Mom's arms came around her and she relaxed into the embrace. "You go, girl."

Chapter Seven

The crunch of gravel permeated Tate's concentration. Looking up, he blinked twice, sure that his eyes were playing tricks on him. He recognized the ice-blue Chevy coasting to a stop in front of the house.

Placing his tablet on the small squat table on the front porch, Tate got up from the swinging chair. The sun was setting behind the house, making the front porch a nice place to sit and go over the day's figures from the harvest. He was exhausted, but it disappeared the second he spied Kelly exiting her car.

Ever since their kiss last week, he hadn't been able to keep Kelly from insinuating herself into every aspect of his life. She was there in his dreams, her beautiful hair spread out over his pillows, a large welcoming smile on her face as he lowered his head to kiss her. The leftover wildflowers on the side of the road as he turned into his house reminded him of her, too. He'd been hoping to see her when he went in for some flowers, but she'd been out, so again, her mom had served him.

Now here she was, standing at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at him. “Kelly. This is a nice Monday night surprise. Did we have a meeting?”

She pulled a bottle of wine from behind her back. “No, but I thought I’d bring you dinner.”

He smiled. “Wine for dinner? That’s different.”

She laughed. The tinkle floated around him, and he wanted to hear it more often. Wanted to be the one who made her smile like she was now. He cocked his head to the side. There was something different about her. She appeared lighter, as if her worries had disappeared.

“No. I’ve got food in the car.”

Tate skipped down the three steps. He breathed deeply, inhaling her floral scent. It reminded him of the roses and lilies he’d smelled at her shop. Everything in him wanted to scoop her up against his chest and kiss her hello, but he didn’t have that right.

Instead, he reached out to take the wine from her. “Do you need some help with the food?”

“Thanks, but no, it’s all in a carry bag that isn’t too heavy. I’ll be right back.”

She turned, and her pretty pink sundress floated around her legs, giving him a little glimpse of her firm thighs.

Desire, deep and strong, assaulted him and he gripped the wine a little tighter. Tate had no idea what had prompted her to bring him dinner, but he wasn’t going to complain about it. It was as if she’d read his mind. He’d considered going into town

and seeing if she was eating at Betty Lou's Diner again. The chance of her being there was slim, but the urge to see her had become too much for him to ignore.

The beeping of her alarm engaging brought his head back up from his study of the ground. Geez, she must think he was flighty as hell, standing here holding the wine like a statue.

In her hand, he spied the familiar logo of the very place he was thinking about. "Please tell me you have some of Betty Lou's famous fried chicken in that bag."

"I cannot confirm nor deny what I have in the bag," she said cheekily. "Be prepared to be surprised."

"Well, you being here is a surprise, so I don't think what's in the bag is going to top that." Oh man, did he sound corny, but he wouldn't take the words back. Not when he meant them.

"Thank you. I was hoping you wouldn't mind me turning up out of the blue. It was a big risk to come here. You could've been out having dinner somewhere else, with someone else."

The last words were spoken in a rush and so quietly that he wasn't sure he heard her correctly. But he wanted to reassure her that he was most definitely single. Even if she did believe he was buying flowers as a kiss-off gift. "The flowers aren't for girls. They're for the residents at my dad's rehab center."

He hadn't meant to say that at all. But now that it was out there, he was glad. Everything in him wanted to see where this attraction between him and Kelly was headed. The only way that could happen would be if they were totally honest with each other.

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“What?” she asked, clearly stunned by his outburst.

Tate cupped her elbow and steered up the stairs. “I’ll explain everything inside.”

This was a conversation better had while sitting down over a table, not on his front porch. Before stepping into the house, he veered slightly and grabbed his tablet. Once inside, he led her to the kitchen where she placed the bag on the counter.

Reaching into the upper cabinet, he grabbed two wineglasses. The menial task gave him a few more seconds to compose himself. He noted that while he was fixing the wine, Kelly had begun to extract various boxes from the bag.

He definitely caught a whiff of fried chicken and his stomach grumbled loudly.

“You always seem to be forgetting to eat. When did you last have food?” she asked, smiling, as she placed the last box on the counter and scrunched up the bag.

Tate sighed. “Yeah, it’s been a long, hard day. I grab food when I can, but I was grimy after helping with the harvest, so I came in and had a shower. I hadn’t thought much about dinner.”

“Well, now you don’t have to worry.”

Should he tell her what he’d thought about doing? That she was the reason he was dressed to go out and not dressed to sit in front of the TV with a bowl of cereal?

“May I tell you a secret?”

Kelly halted in opening the boxes. “Depends. Is this a secret I have to take to my grave or a secret that’s going to be announced to everyone in a couple of weeks?”

“A minor one, at most.”

“Well then, tell me.”

Tate moved a little closer to her. Ever since he’d inhaled her floral scent upon her arrival, he’d been resisting the urge to pull her close. The one and only kiss they’d shared had occupied so much of his mind, he was lucky he hadn’t hurt himself while working the harvest. He rested a hand on her hip, waiting for her to pull away while hoping she wouldn’t. When she didn’t, he relaxed a little more. “My plan tonight was to head into town in the hope that you may be eating at the diner again or maybe you would’ve gone to the Silver Spurs.”

Her eyes widened and appeared bluer than he’d ever seen them. “You were going to look for me? Why?”

Taking a risk, he placed his free hand on her other hip. She fit perfectly in his arms. He could get used to being close to her. “Because I wanted to see you again. I enjoyed our evening together last week.”

Kelly smiled, big and bright, and it lit him up. “I had fun too, that’s why I’m here. I like you, Tate Prentice.”

“Well, that’s good, because I like you, too, Kelly Turner.” He lowered his head and pressed his lips softly against hers. At the back of his mind, he had to remember the Founders’ Day committee was counting on them to work together to create a great event. The last thing he wanted to do was push Kelly and have her push back so that whatever tenuous relationship that was building between them shattered.

He kissed her briefly again before releasing his hold on her. “How about we eat out on the back verandah?” he asked, disregarding his earlier thought about eating inside. He still hadn’t explained about the flowers. Somehow, the subject got lost between discussion about food and him declaring his intention to find her that evening.

“Sounds good to me, it should be a nice night.”

Tate walked over to one of the cupboards and pulled out the paper plates. “I’m using the best china tonight,” he said as he held them up for her to see.

“Wow, you sure know how to show a girl a good time.”

He pulled some paper napkins out of the cupboard as well, placing them on the plates. “Hey, I’ve got a reputation to uphold, you know.”

And just like that the smile died on her face, and Tate could’ve kicked himself. Why had he said something so stupid? They’d come full circle—back to the flowers he purchased.

“Before you say anything,” he started, “what I said on the front porch about the flowers...” She nodded. “Look, did your assumption that I was buying the flowers as a kiss-off annoy me? Yes, it did. I didn’t think you needed to know the real reason behind my purchases. Now, I think it’s time you do.”

He withstood her scrutiny. Had he blown his chance with her? Was she about to take her food and walk away?

“Okay. I admit I want to know what you’re doing with the flowers,” she said.

“Thank you. Let’s get our food and head outside. I’ll tell you everything you need to know.”

“I hope you will.”

He would. If there was any chance of something growing between him and Kelly, he had to be truthful with her.

*

Kelly sat at the small glass table on the covered back patio. The night insects were singing a tune.

She scooped up some potato salad and shoved it in her mouth. Mom would admonish her for not waiting for Tate to sit down, but she needed to do something. For a few minutes as he'd held her and kissed her, she'd forgotten all about what they were going to talk about. In some ways, she wished the conversation wouldn't happen. Didn't want to face that she'd been so quick to judge based on circumstantial evidence. But what else was she supposed to think given his reputation as a player and the fact he was buying flowers every week? Making assumptions without the facts was the worst way to act. Facing her shortcomings and hearing Tate out was the least she could do.

Her mom told her to look for the signs, but was this a sign Tate was the man she could kick her heels up with? The man who could help her seize the fun her life had been lacking for so long.

"You forgot your wine." Tate set the glass down before taking the seat opposite her. She noticed he didn't have his own glass. Did that mean he thought she'd need some alcohol to fortify her during the conversation? Given she was going to have to admit she'd been wrong, maybe wine wasn't such a bad idea.

No, drinking too much would do Tate a disservice. She needed to relax and listen to him. Yes, she'd told him she liked him and he'd responded in kind. But liking didn't mean white picket fences. Liking meant seeing where it would go. Living in the

moment and throwing caution to the wind.

“I can see a million thoughts running through your mind, Kel.”

“How do you know I’m thinking a lot of things?” she asked.

Tate reached across the table and brushed the flesh between her eyebrows. “Because you have two little lines here. I noticed them when you were thinking about the festival when we were at dinner.”

“Oh.” Tate noticed that about her? What else had he noticed? She forked more potato salad into her mouth. Normally, she savored Betty Lou’s salad, but tonight, it could’ve been full of chilies and she wouldn’t have noticed the heat.

“To understand why I keep getting flowers, I need to start the story just before my dad had his stroke.” He took a bit of his chicken and swallowed. “I’m well aware that the town thinks I’m a player, and I’ll admit I did date an awful lot. I was having fun, and the girls I dated were looking for the same thing.”

Tell me something I didn’t already know. But she didn’t voice her thoughts. Her plan was to listen, absorb, and then decide what she was going to do.

He smiled ruefully, as if he could totally read her mind again. “But like all things, my so-called reputation has been exaggerated. It’s been a few months since I’ve had a date. Even before Dad had his stroke, I turned my attention to the farm, making it a success and carrying on my family’s legacy is my passion. Yet the stories still circulated. Could be because I went out of town a few weekends to take some workshops on the latest techniques in organic farming.

“Then Dad had his stroke and everything changed. In a blink of an eye, I saw my strong dad become almost a shell of himself. We found him too late for a tPA to help

him with a faster recovery. We've had no choice but to put him in a rehab center and hope that he would get back to as near normal as possible. He will never be like he was before the stroke."

Kelly brushed her fingers across the top of his hand. Immediately, he turned and closed his fingers around hers. He looked up and smiled, but sadness tinged the edges of it.

It hit her then how much of a burden had been placed on his shoulders. Trey, his oldest brother, the one who, in society's eyes, should take the farm over simply because of birth order, was off playing baseball all over the country. Tyler—well, she'd seen with her own eyes that his focus was on his vines and nothing else. Which left Tate being the main caregiver while making sure the farm continued running without any hitches.

She had to face the fact she'd misjudged him and had believed the town gossip when she shouldn't have.

"I'm sorry about your dad. I'm sure once he gets back home he'll improve even more. Do you know when that will be?"

"The rehab center is helping him a lot. He's got more movement than they expected he would, but he still has periods where he has trouble forming what he wants to say. As for when he'll be home, they're not sure, but I hope it's soon. I miss him. The house is really lonely without him."

While her father never had to go to a rehab center, Kelly could imagine that they weren't a party place. "That's why Mom sold the house I grew up in when Dad died, and she moved to a smaller place closer to town. I guess you don't have that luxury."

Tate chuckled. "Yeah, that's not really an option. Can't run the farm from a little

house in town.”

“I suppose that would be rather difficult to do.” She took a deep breath. “You said the flowers are for the center. Are they for the nurses?”

“No, but they certainly deserve to have something pretty to look at. As you can imagine, the center isn’t always a barrel of laughs. People are there for a reason—to recover. Some are going to be there for months. Others not for long at all. But, as I walked past the residents’ rooms to see my dad, I noticed how dull and lifeless every single one was. It was depressing. After the third visit I knew I wanted to do something, but I wasn’t sure what.” He pushed his plate to the center of the table, most of the food untouched.

The man in front of her continued to blow her misconceptions about him out the window. Her mom told her there was more to Tate than met the eye, and she was right.

“The flowers,” she said into the quiet that had settled around them.

“Yeah. I had just gone to the diner and had some breakfast. I had a meeting with the doctor to go over Dad’s treatment plan. As I was walking back to my car, I passed your shop. I smiled at the beautiful arrangements. I kept walking for a little bit but then stopped and went back. If they could make me smile, they could make anyone smile. So I went in and bought the arrangement. When I got to the center, I handed it to the girls at reception and said they were for a resident. Any resident. They could choose whoever they wanted to give them to. When I left, one of the girls stopped me and said the recipient cried. In all this patient’s time at the center, no one had ever done something like that for her.”

He shrugged as if it weren’t a big deal. Kelly knew differently. His simple action had brought someone so much joy. And to know that it was her arrangement that helped

warmed her heart. Flowers were a universal giver of joy, and she loved being a part of it.

“After that you decided to do it every time you visit your dad,” she surmised.

“Yep. I never know who gets them and the staff doesn’t tell the residents that it’s me who’s bringing the flowers. I overheard a resident the other day saying that he’d been visited by the Flower Magician. I liked knowing that even men enjoy receiving flowers.”

“Oh, Tate, that’s so awesome, and I love the name Flower Magician. Flowers are magical.” Her heart swelled at the humbleness of the man in front of her. “Thank you for telling me. And I’m sorry for accusing you of using the flowers as a kiss-off gift. That was wrong of me. I’ve made assumptions when I really shouldn’t have.”

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“Thank you. I appreciate that. But I don’t blame you for thinking what you did. It isn’t as if I’ve tried to change people’s thoughts.”

“No, don’t make excuses for me. As I said, I shouldn’t have made false assumptions.”

He nodded, accepting her apology before taking a bite of his food. Once he swallowed, he smiled. “I have to admit I like having a secret identity.”

“Tapping into your inner Superman persona,” she teased.

He laughed. “Maybe.”

“Well, I’m honored to help the Flower Magician spread his magic everywhere. I promise, the next time you come in, I’ll make the arrangement extra special.”

“They’re already amazing. You really are talented, Kel.”

“Thanks.” A rush of heat bloomed in her cheeks.

Over the years, she’d had many brides gush about their bouquets and table arrangements and not once had she blushed in embarrassment. But coming from Tate, the words seemed more sincere. Which was stupid, as there wasn’t anything mind-blowing about the compliment. He’d already told her once before she was an amazing florist.

Kelly reached for her glass of wine and gulped down the remaining warm liquid. She was glad she’d heeded Mom’s advice—and taken a chance with Tate.

What other man would think to give flowers to people he didn't know for the simple reason he wanted to make them smile? Not many. Definitely not anyone she'd dated. She could count on one hand the amount of flower arrangements she'd been given over her dating life.

No, Tate was considerate and caring—traits she'd been craving in a partner. Traits her father had had.

Her body and mind were tallying Tate's good points. He liked to have fun, and because she'd decided to throw caution to the wind and have a fling he was the perfect candidate. Yet, she still couldn't quite let go of her dream. The one where she wanted to settle down. Wanted to start a family almost the second she got married.

At present, Tate was his father's main caregiver. He always would be Trenton's caretaker. Kelly had no doubt that Tate would be a wonderful father, but he might not want it to happen the second he got married.

Then again, who was to say that Tate was her forever guy anyway? He could be her right-now or even her six-month guy. The point was, she'd never know if she didn't take the plunge. Ever since she'd come back to Sweet Ridge, she'd been focused on, first her dad and his illness; then, she'd been concentrating on making her business a success. Which she had. Orders were flowing in and now the Founders' Day festival was another way to showcase her talents.

Now was her time, and she had to let go of her fear. Really grasp the live-in-the-moment edict. Her time was now and tonight was the first step.

She jolted when his hand landed on hers. Kelly looked up to find Tate watching her intently. "Everything okay, Kel?"

"Better than okay." Twisting her hand beneath his, they were palm to palm. His touch

was everything. It warmed her and gave her hope. She smiled. “Everything’s great.”

Chapter Eight

Never in his dating life had he experienced this feeling of complete contentment. Normally, when silence fell between him and his dates, he’d found himself gazing around, wracking his brain to come up with something to break the awkwardness. Yet, with Kelly it didn’t happen. Words didn’t seem necessary.

“I guess I’d better go,” she said quietly. “It’s getting late and I’ve got an early start, and I’m sure you do too.”

“You’re not wrong. For the next couple of months, I’m going to be awake before the sun.”

“Life on a farm, huh?”

Tate chuckled. “Yeah, life on a farm during harvest season. Late June to the end of August are always the craziest months.”

“But you wouldn’t change it for the world.”

“Nope, never. There’s nothing like walking through the orchards as the sun is peeking over the horizon. Little drops of dew glistening on the ripening fruit. Circle of life in front of me every day.”

“You would fade away if you lived in the city.” Her fingers tightened around his. He liked the contact they shared.

“Yes.” How did she seem to know and understand him?

Or was he just being fanciful at the moment, caught up in experiencing one of the best nights of his life? Romance had never been a big agenda item for him. He never bought into the whole love-at-first-sight or soul mates convention. Regardless of the fact that his dad still mourned the loss of his wife.

But just because Dad believed he was a one-woman man didn't mean Tate did. His past dating life was a testament to that. But for Kelly, he could see himself spending more than just a couple of dates with her. Question would be if she wanted to date him.

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“Do you want to go steady?” he blurted out. Whoa, that wasn’t what he meant to say. He certainly hadn’t consciously formed those words in his mind. Especially not a sentiment that hadn’t been used in decades.

“What?” Kelly pulled her hand away from him and he mourned the loss. He also couldn’t help thinking that was the answer to his question.

But life was nothing if he didn’t take the plunge, and as he’d already put it out there, no point trying to deny or retract the statement. Instead, he pushed away from the table, his chair scraping along the concrete. He reached out a hand, holding his breath to see if she would slip hers back into his.

After the longest time, but really only a second or two, Kelly placed her hand in his. Tate gently tugged until she stood facing him.

He rested one hand on her waist while he smoothed the other down her hair. “The other day I was talking to Dad, and he said that if I liked a girl a lot and wanted to date her, I should ask her to go steady. I laughed because it’s so 1970s, but you know, sometimes the old traditions work. So, Kelly Turner, will you go steady with me?”

It should’ve sounded corny. Yet, somehow, for the two of them, it seemed right. Well, to him it did. And hadn’t Kelly said she liked some of the old traditions that were dying out? Suddenly a thought hit him. It would be perfect.

“Wait right here, Kel. Don’t move.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead before racing into the house. Taking two steps at a time he made his way upstairs to his room. What he was about to do next could either go over well or could blow up in his face in a

memorable way.

Opening the top drawer of his dresser, his hand hovered over a square box. He didn't even have to open it to know what was inside. A sapphire dress ring his mom had worn only on special occasions. A ring he loved and told her so every time she'd worn it. When Dad had given it to him after she died, he'd taken it and then cried in his room. The long, rectangle box sitting next to the ring contained a matching tennis bracelet. He grabbed that instead. He hoped Kelly would understand the nature of his gesture.

Life wasn't a dry run—it was real and it could be over in a flash. As he made his way down the stairs, he clutched the box tightly in his hand. Whatever happened would happen.

But he found the patio empty. Shit, did Kelly leave without saying goodbye? She wouldn't have done that, would she? He hadn't taken that long, had he?

He walked to the edge of the concrete, looking out of the expanse of grass. He could put the spotlight on, but over to his left he saw a shadow of movement.

Kelly.

She hadn't left after all. He joined her by one of the trees marking the edge of the family property to the start of the orchard. He stopped behind her, itching to touch her but controlling the urge.

"It's so peaceful here." She turned, the corners of her lips lifting. "I can understand why you don't want to have too many people traipsing around."

"Yeah, I'm worried about it, but I know we'll work together and protect it."

“That we will.” She smoothed her hands down her dress, pressing the material against her body, outlining her figure. His body responded but he willed it to settle down. “So, um, you asked me something before you disappeared?” She licked her lips and she couldn’t quite meet his eyes.

Damn, was she nervous?

Excitement zoomed through him, perhaps his gesture wouldn’t be shunned. “I believe I did.” Doubts crowded back in.

Was he doing the right thing? Jewelry was so personal. But he’d come this far, he couldn’t go back. He wouldn’t die if she said no to wearing it.

“Asking you to wear my class ring would be taking old traditions a bit too far. Instead, I thought I would do it my way.” He opened the box and held it out. “So how about it, Kelly, will you date me and only me?”

A few beats of silence hovered in the air and Tate held his breath. Then she held out her hand. “I’d be honored to go steady with you, Tate Prentice.” She winked.

His breath whooshed out.

She understood what he was doing. A connection was building between them and he didn’t want to rush headlong into something only to have the bond disintegrate before it had fully formed between them. Whether it led to anything was anyone’s guess, but like the tortoise and the hare, slow and steady won the race and this was a race he wanted to win.

Tate slipped the delicate bracelet around her wrist and clipped it closed. Resting against her flesh it looked as if it had been made for her. “A perfect fit,” he murmured.

“It is.” She reached and laid a hand against his cheek and he rested his own over it, not wanting to lose the physical contact between them. “Thank you, Tate. I promise I’ll take good care of it.”

Placing his free hand on her waist he stepped close to her, their thighs brushing each other. “I know you will, Kel.”

Her tongue darted out to wet her lips and he inwardly groaned. How sweet she’d tasted when they kissed before. He wanted to taste her again.

Time slowed around him as Kelly lifted her head to meet him halfway. A shudder rippled through him the second their lips touched. How was it possible to have such a strong reaction with someone when this was only the second time they’d kissed? Tate had no idea, but he wasn’t going to question it.

Angling his head, he deepened the kiss, his lips teasing hers until she opened, allowing him access. Curling his arms around her he tugged her until she was flush against him. Warmth flooded him as her arms closed around him and her hands rested against his back. His dick twitched against the zipper of his jeans.

It had been so long since he’d slept with a woman. Since he’d given himself freely. He wanted to do that with Kelly, but not tonight. When he and Kelly made love, it would be because the timing was right. Not just to scratch an itch.

She was too special for a quick roll in the hay.

Chapter Nine

“Why are you so eager to get out of here?” Tyler asked as he hauled another full box of peaches into the back of the box truck.

When he’d turned up just after lunch, declaring he was here to help, Tate had wondered if Tyler had an ulterior motive with his sudden offer of assistance. But as the afternoon progressed the two of them had worked alongside each other in harmony. Something that had surprised the hell out of him, but he couldn’t deny he liked it.

“No reason. I’m just hot, and all I want is a shower and cold beer.” Plus he wanted to see if Kelly had called or texted him. Normally, he had his phone on him, but he’d forgotten to charge it last night and the battery had died as he’d walked into the house for lunch. With Dad in the rehab center, he’d kicked himself for forgetting something so important. But after Kelly had left the previous evening, he’d been feeling awesome and had gone to bed without doing half of the things he normally did.

He’d called the center and told them to call him on the landline. Before the advent of cell phones, Dad had installed a system that blared telephone calls over the orchard. Today, Tate was grateful that they hadn’t made the decision to get rid of the old technology.

“I put a bottle of my new sauvignon blanc in the refrigerator. I just got it from the winemaker, and I thought we could order in some food and share the bottle.”

Tate rested his elbow on the box he just put in. Now Tyler wanted to have dinner with him and share a bottle of wine? Something was definitely going on. Or he wanted another favor. “Okay, what have you volunteered me for now?”

Tyler held his hands up in mock surrender. “Nothing. I swear.”

“Not sure I believe you.”

“That hurts, bro.”

Tate couldn’t deny if the roles were reversed he’d probably feel a stab of hurt as well. But given Tyler’s track record, he wasn’t out of line telling his brother he was skeptical—he was being truthful with him. “You gotta admit you don’t voluntarily help out. You haven’t in the last couple of years. And when we were younger, Dad always had to drag your ass outside to help.”

“More like Mom promising me biscuits and gravy with dinner.”

“Of course you got your favorite meal in exchange for doing something we all had to do.”

Tyler laughed and punched him in the arm. “Don’t tell me Mom didn’t make your favorite meal once every couple of weeks. I know she did. She also cooked Trey’s.”

Tate couldn’t deny his brother’s words. Mom always knew how to make all of them feel like they were king of the castle. “God, I miss her,” he muttered and closed his eyes on the pang of regret that she couldn’t see all her sons had achieved.

“Yeah, me too,” Tyler said.

For a few moments they were in accord in their shared grief. Without a doubt, Mary

Prentice had been the glue that held the family together. She'd probably be most annoyed about the fact that, over the years, instead of getting closer, her boys had drifted further apart.

"The vines have kept me busy. There's so much riding on them. That's why it's important that the festival here is a success." And I'm counting on you to make sure that happens wasn't said, but Tate got the message loud and clear.

He knew there was a reason why Tyler was being all helpful. He'd come to check up on what was happening with the planning.

"I'm aware the festival has to be successful, Tyler, and not just for you. This is a big deal for Macy too. It's her first year as committee chair and she's changing the dynamics of an event that has worked well for over fifty years. Even Kelly knows how much is riding on it. Her business is going to be highlighted as much as the peach farm and your damn wine." And just like that the tension between the brothers ratcheted up twenty notches.

Tate stomped over to another box and hefted it up. If anything could cool his temper, it was physical activity, and there were still plenty of boxes that needed to be loaded in the truck before it left.

The crunch of gravel and the low hum of a car engine reached his ears. Turning, he spied Kelly's car coming down the driveway. A warm glow flared to life in his belly. He hadn't been expecting her, but he wasn't about to turn her away.

Quickly, he loaded the box in the truck and made his way to where he figured she'd park, wiping his hands down his jeans in an attempt to get them clean. A task that was kind of impossible. He should've worn his gloves, but all he'd wanted to do was get the boxes loaded.

“Hey, I wasn’t expecting you today,” he commented as Kelly got out of the car.

Her hair was pulled into a messy bun on top of her head. Little tendrils of hair had escaped and curled around her face. She looked fresh and natural, and his heart gave a little patter of excitement.

“I know we didn’t have plans, but I had a couple of other ideas for the festival I thought I’d run past you. I know we’re tight on space here so I didn’t want to assume that I could just add a couple of arbors to showcase some flowers.”

“More flowers? Don’t we have enough already?” He thought they’d come to an understanding after the first discussion on decorations.

Behind him, Tyler laughed; Tate clenched and unclenched his fists. Hitting his brother wasn’t a good idea, no matter how tempting the thought was.

Kelly hitched her bag up on her shoulder as she approached. He couldn’t help but enjoy watching the sway of her hips. “I thought you already knew this, Tate. You can never have too many flowers,” she teased.

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“I’m beginning to see that,” he murmured and wished his brother wasn’t there so he could scoop her up in his arms and kiss her. Although she didn’t look like the type of girl who would be into PDAs—but then again, maybe she was. Tate also didn’t want to advertise his interest in Kelly in front of Tyler and give his brother the opportunity to talk smack about him in front of her.

“I think you should listen to her, Tate. Kelly knows what she’s talking about.”

Yeah, this was why he didn’t want to have any more conversation in front of his brother. Tyler’s comments were unnecessary, and Tate ground his teeth to stop from telling his brother where to go.

Instead, he looked over his shoulder. “Why don’t you continue loading the rest of the boxes? You know, make yourself useful instead of making unwarranted comments.”

Tyler chuckled, but, thankfully, he went back to the task at hand.

“Why don’t we take a walk?” Tate suggested to Kelly. He used the hem of his shirt to wipe the sweat from his forehead. Kelly’s eyes went wide, and her tongue darted out and touched her lower lip. A light dusting of pink highlighted her cheeks.

Tate tamped down the urge to puff out his chest. It wasn’t like he didn’t know she was attracted to him. The kisses they’d shared were off the chart.

“Um, sure. A walk sounds good,” Kelly finally answered.

He breathed deeply. Her hint of flowers and sunshine assailed his senses. Tate

imagined if she took a deep breath he probably wouldn't smell as fresh. He took a step to the side so he didn't offend her. "Sorry, I probably should've taken a shower before we went on this walk."

Way to go, doofus, just highlight the fact that you stink.

He slammed his inner voice down quick smart. So what if it was right?

"I know you've been working, Tate. It's fine. You should smell me after I've been working four hours straight on flowers for a wedding. Plus, it's not like you knew I was coming anyway. I just turned up."

The last thing he could imagine was Kelly smelling anything but like she did right now. "Can't say I'm disappointed by the unexpected visit."

The sun glinted off the bracelet he'd given her as she brushed a stray lock of hair off her face. A wave of possessiveness washed over him. "I like your bracelet."

"You do? A handsome man gave it to me last night." She winked, as if enjoying the game they were playing.

"Handsome, huh? Lucky guy."

"Yes, he is."

God, it had been ages since he'd flirted with someone and Kelly made it so easy to have fun with.

After his mom had died, the thought of thinking himself in love with someone wasn't on his radar. Part of him had died with Mom. She'd been so special that his final year of high school he'd been more about making sure he graduated than dating anyone.

He'd enjoyed playing the field and that trend had continued until the last year when the appeal of dating began to wear off. What was building between him and Kelly was more than a fling. Well, for him anyway.

Tate glanced over at the woman walking beside him. Was he getting ahead of himself? So much of his life was up in the air at the moment. The time had come for Dad to retire and enjoy life. Leave the running of the farm to him. Tate could do everything his Dad did and more. He had his degree and had ideas to streamline the watering system and harvesting. He could run the farm as well as Dad, if not better now.

"What are you thinking so hard about?" Kelly asked, touching his cheek.

He looked at her, concern shining in her blue eyes. He wanted to wipe it away. Let her know everything was fine, but it wasn't really fine. His dad was still in rehab. He and his brothers had a strained relationship. True, the harvest was going well, they were on track for one of their best seasons ever. But that could all be derailed because of the festival.

"Everything. I was thinking about everything. Dad. My brothers. The farm. The festival." He placed his hand over hers, keeping it close to his cheek when she went to pull it away. "You. I was thinking about you, too."

Her eyes widened. Tate took a step closer, sliding his free hand around to cradle the back of her head. In the dappled light through the branches of the trees basking her face in a golden glow, her lips shone from the gloss she wore, tempting him to taste them. Giving into the need, he lowered his head and a shudder rippled through Kelly as they touched. The tension he'd been carrying around for the last couple of hours seeped from his shoulders. She wiggled her hand free from where he still held it against his cheek and wrapped it around his neck. He pulled her tighter, deepening the kiss. Kelly was with him all the way. It was almost like she couldn't get enough

of him—just like he couldn't get enough of her.

The wind rustled around them and he resisted the urge to lower her to the ground. Lay his body over hers and make her his under the trees that were as essential to him as breathing.

However, he and Kelly weren't there at the moment, no matter how much he wanted to be. He was taking things slowly. Would respect any pace she'd like to go. Breaking the kiss, he reached up and grabbed her arms from around his neck, bringing them down until they were in front of him. Tate rubbed his thumb across his mom's bracelet.

"I can't tell you how the sight of this on your wrist makes me feel. I wasn't sure if you'd keep it on or not." He couldn't explain the sense of joy growing inside of him to know everyone who'd come into the shop today would've seen it on her arm. How many had asked her about it?

"That's why you gave it to me, isn't it? To be worn."

"Sure, and I know you accepted it last night, I guess—" He paused and looked up for a heartbeat before looking back at her, his words lodged in his throat.

"What?" Her fingers touched the bracelet and it was almost like she was touching him. Which was an entirely stupid concept to believe.

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“I don’t know. I just, look forget it. I’m really happy that you’re wearing it.” He took a step back, putting a little breathing room between them. He couldn’t think straight. Everything coming out of his mouth sounded so wrong.

“Do you regret giving it to me?”

Beneath the words he could hear the hurt in her voice. Shit, he was making a mess of things.

“No.” He practically shouted the word. Closing the gap he’d just made he gently cupped her elbows. “No, Kel, I don’t regret it. If I could articulate what I want to say properly you’d know exactly how seeing something so beautiful, something that my mother loved, on you makes me feel.”

“I’m truly honored that you’ve entrusted me with this. It means a lot to me too.”

He pulled her in tight for a hug. “Thank you for not rolling your eyes and walking away. I know I was acting like a complete idiot being unable to articulate myself well.”

“Trust me, you’re far from an idiot. But I have to ask...” She leaned back to look at him. “Do I make you nervous? I mean, when you first came into the store, you stuttered around me, but not when you spoke to Mom. Why?”

For weeks before he’d walked into her store, he’d been attracted to her. He’d seen her at Silver Spurs bar, laughing with Macy. Her whole body seemed to vibrate with happiness, and he’d stopped in his tracks, fascinated by her. He’d wanted to go over

and talk to her, but one of the guys who worked at the guacamole factory whisked her onto the dance floor and he'd missed his chance.

"I wouldn't say you make me nervous, per se. It was more like I really wanted to impress you and that made me nervous when I spoke to you those first couple of times. Only I think I impressed you for the wrong reasons."

Kelly laughed. "Well, yes, but I know why you're doing it now so my opinion has changed. And I'm glad I don't make you nervous now."

No, you just make me want to forget about all the things I want to do with the farm and spend all my time with you.

Something he should not say out loud to her. As it was, she seemed very different from the woman she'd been a week ago. Turning up unannounced at the farm last night and today was out of the ordinary for her.

It was definitely time to get off the cliff edge of conversation about what they felt for each other. "I think the reason you came out was to talk about the event and your idea for more flowers."

If his change in subject shocked her, she didn't show it. In fact, she almost looked relieved. "Right, yes. Let me get my tablet out and show you some of the designs I mocked up."

"Before you do that, let's find somewhere to sit. I think it might be best that I don't stand while you show me your grand plans."

Cupping her elbow, he led her back the way they came and around to the front of the house so they could sit on the porch swing. Tyler's car was still parked close to the house, but the truck was gone. At least Tyler had finished loading all the peaches and

hadn't slacked off the second he walked away with Kelly. Perhaps his brother did want to sit and share a bottle of his wine with him.

The last thing Tate wanted was to be suspicious of his brother's motives, but he couldn't help it. What did Tyler want this time?

Chapter Ten

Kelly watched the play of emotions cross Tate's face. When she arrived, she'd picked up on the tension between the brothers. She'd always thought all the brothers had gotten on well together. Maybe Mom knew more and could give her a heads-up.

And maybe it's none of your business, or you could ask Tate.

Her inner voice had a valid point. Leaving it alone was probably the wisest course of action. Asking Tate would take their relationship to another level. A level where they were sharing their deep, dark secrets. Things couples in love, or falling in love, did. Where they told each other their hopes and fears.

They'd only just begun to date. Regardless of the fact she'd accepted Tate's bracelet and agreed to date him exclusively, this was still a fling for her. A stepping stone into getting back into the dating pool, so sharing her fears or finding out Tate's wasn't high on the list. Did that make her sound insensitive? Probably, but Edwin had burned her so she wasn't about to give out her heart quite so freely this time.

She was here because of the Founders' Day festival. Macy had emailed her asking for an update.

Maybe talking about the festival would be just what Tate needed to get out of his head. For the first time since they'd had dinner at the diner, he'd been quiet and introspective, something he hadn't done as much the previous times they'd been

together.

“Okay, this is what I wanted to show you.” She pulled up the designs on her tablet and handed them to Tate. “What I’ve done is changed up the designs of the displays at the front of the property a little. I initially had them high and wide, but I think this version is better. It’s still high, but has a more rounded look, so it matches the shape of the peaches you grow.” She swiped across the screen a couple of times and pulled up another design. “I thought we could add a couple more arbors along the edge of the trees.”

“What? Why?” Tate interrupted. “I thought we discussed this and had decided on two arbors only. I don’t want anything interfering with the trees. Plus they’re going to provide a nice, green backdrop.”

She knew Tate would push back on these additional arbors. “You’re right, we did. If we add just these two in, it will create a bit more of a barrier against the outside tree line.”

“And what if some kids are fooling around and run into the arbor, knocking it down? It could lead to an injury, and the last thing I need or the festival needs is an unnecessary injury claim. I honestly think we’ve got enough.”

Kelly tapped her finger against her lip. “That’s a really good point. I haven’t given much thought to the safety aspect around the farm. Something I probably should’ve considered. But if they’re secured to the ground, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

She really hoped Tate would change his mind. These arbors were going to be spectacular.

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“Look”—she continued and enlarged part of the design—“can you see the peaches in the display? It’s another way to showcase the farm.”

“I’m still not convinced showing our damaged peaches is a good look for the farm. It’s going to be on display for all to see.”

Oh, that was still a sore point between the brothers. That could account for the tension she’d felt between the two of them when she’d arrived. “Right, well that’s not an issue. As for the use of the slightly damage peaches, please trust me to make sure that I won’t do anything to harm the reputation of the farm. I wouldn’t do that to you, Tate.”

“I do trust you, Kel. Although, I’m sure Tyler would prefer to have grapes, seeing as he wants the focus on his wine and not the peaches. That’s why we’re having part of the festival here.”

“I can easily incorporate both fruits into my designs. It won’t be an issue.”

“He’ll be happy.” No way could she miss the sarcasm in his tone. Here she was trying to make him forget about what was troubling him and it looked like she’d only made it worse.

“Does that mean you’re agreeing to the two additional arbors?”

“No.” She opened her mouth to argue her point, but he held up his hand. “Maybe you can do some smaller versions of the decorations in pots and place them along the edge of the orchard. That way they won’t be in people’s way and are less likely to

cause accidents.”

“Oh, I like that idea. How about this?” She grabbed the stylus pen and created a new page in her design app. An idea was forming in her mind and within a few minutes she had a rough draft. She’d have to refine it, but she liked what she’d created.

Turning to Tate, she almost collided with him. She hadn’t noticed he’d moved closer and was looking at what she’d been creating.

“You know, you’re pretty amazing. Watching you come up with that design out of a concept you’d had and a comment I made was inspiring. I think this looks even better than the arbors. Everything looks perfect. You’ve convinced me about using the peaches.”

Her thank-you was swallowed up by the press of his lips against hers. God, she could get used to this. For so long, she’d avoided getting involved with another man. Edwin had hurt and humiliated her, but none of it was truly her fault. He was the one who hadn’t been truthful with her. He was the one living the polyamorous lifestyle without informing her.

And what the hell was she doing thinking about her ex when she had a warm, male body holding her? The glimpse she’d gotten of Tate’s tanned belly had lit a fire in her, and her imagination ran wild now with thoughts of running her tongue and hands all over his body. Learning the ridges of his six-pack. Finding the spots that made him moan. Was he ticklish? She couldn’t stand for her feet to be touched, but she loved to have her earlobe sucked.

She sighed when Tate broke the kiss. “I wish Tyler wasn’t waiting for me. I’d much rather spend the evening with you.”

Kelly would rather spend another night with Tate, too. She was finding that the more

time she spent with him, the more difficult it was to say goodbye. As scary as it was, she wasn't going to let it freak her out too much. Whatever was happening between them was normal with the excitement of being with a new partner. The thrill of the slightest touch. But over time that always faded and comfortableness set in. Although Mom always said the excitement never died between her and Dad. She'd told Kelly that even when she folded his clothes, a rush of love would overcome her and she'd have to call him to let him know she was thinking of him.

That was the type of relationship Kelly had always wanted. Would she find that with a fling? She didn't know. But she was going to have fun finding out.

"I want that too, but you need to spend time with your brother."

Tate pulled back, narrowing his eyes. "Why do you say that?"

She shrugged. "Because he was here before me and you just said he was waiting for you. It's clear you had plans and I turned up unannounced."

"Not really. He just wanted to share a bottle of wine with me."

In the fading sunlight, Kelly could see the returning tension on Tate's face. The way the corners of his mouth were turned down. The faint creases in his forehead. He looked like he'd rather have his wisdom teeth removed without pain relief than go inside and see his brother.

Again her interest was piqued. What was going on between Tate and Tyler? Whatever it was, tonight would be about them and she'd let them hash it out.

She gathered up her things and stood. "Go and see your brother, Tate," she said softly.

He leaned back in the chair, and she watched the rise and fall of his chest as he took in some deep breaths. “You’re right, I should.”

Reaching over, she laid her hand on his arm, his callused one covered it when she would’ve pulled it away. “Will you go out with me Friday night?” he asked.

“You don’t know how much I want to say yes, but I can’t. I’ve got a wedding in Houston on Saturday so I will be working most of the day finalizing the arrangements. Then I’ll have to drive them up first thing Saturday morning.”

“Do you need some help on Saturday? Another set of hands to help you set up?”

Normally, she was able to handle all the wedding floral arrangements without any hassle. Her mom always manned the shop when she had to go do a wedding setup so she never had to worry about losing business while she was away. The thought of having Tate by her side as she did her thing was appealing. “I’d like that, but can you afford to take time away from the farm? Not to mention your dad.”

“Tyler owes me for agreeing to have the festival here, and I’ll see Dad on Thursday. Maybe we can spend the weekend in Houston. If you drive up Friday, will the flowers last until Saturday?”

The last bit was said so casually but there was a wealth of meaning beneath the words. Her blood hummed at the prospect of spending a weekend together in a hotel in the city. Of having Tate’s lips all over her body. Feeling his hands hold her as he possessed her.

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“If I can refrigerate them, they’ll be fine. I’ve done it before and I’d like to spend the weekend with you in Houston.” The last few words rushed out of her like a flash of lightning.

“Great. Why don’t you text me the details of where the wedding is and I’ll make all the arrangements for you?” Tate gathered her close and she closed her eyes, resting her head against his chest. “I’ll even book two rooms.”

God, that was such a sweet gesture, but so unnecessary. Was he letting her know that he wasn’t going to pressure her into doing something she wasn’t ready for? Well, he didn’t have to worry at all. She was more than ready for the next step and, going by his reputation, she figured he would be too. Surely he didn’t see her as a young naïve girl who hadn’t had a boyfriend before and needed to be protected every step of the way in a relationship? He couldn’t be more wrong, she was a grown-ass woman who was older than him.

She’d show him that he didn’t have to be all old-fashioned with her. Kelly trailed her hand down his back until she reached his ass, giving it a small squeeze. “That won’t be necessary. I’m okay with one room.”

Tate jumped and a small smile stretched his lips before it disappeared and he turned serious again. He loosened his hold on her, putting a little bit of space between them. “I was just trying not to rush you—you know, take things slowly. I didn’t want to assume that we’re on the same page.”

What was going on here? Here she was ready to go the next step and Tate was taking a step back. None of this made sense. His actions contradicted his words. “The kisses

we've shared don't suggest we're moving in a forward direction?"

"Well, yes, but as I said, I don't want to assume."

Okay, this serious Tate needed to take a hike. Kelly placed her hand on his chest, slipping her fingers in the gap between the buttons. "Well on this occasion you can definitely assume with me."

She went up on her tiptoe and pressed a quick kiss on his lips. If that didn't give him the confirmation he needed she was definitely okay with one room, then she didn't know what would.

Tate tightened his hold on her, now they were getting somewhere. "Okay. Okay, I get the message; one room is fine. But I want you to know I will never assume with you, Kel. Never."

Her heart skipped a beat at his declaration. Even though Tate had been the one to suggest going away for the weekend, he'd been nothing but considerate about it. The total opposite of how she thought a player was supposed to act. Now who was assuming when they shouldn't have been? Still, they had the weekend together; maybe he'd be more relaxed away from the farm.

Picking her purse up off the ground, Kelly hitched it on her shoulder. "I think I need to go now. I'm sure Tyler is wondering where you are."

Tate nodded, yet he didn't release his hold on her. "Yeah, probably. Thanks again for coming over. I'll see you Thursday morning."

"Thursday? Don't you mean Friday?"

"No, I'm seeing Dad on Thursday, so I'll need some flowers."

“Ahh, the Flower Magician.” She smiled when she saw a trace of pink bloom across his cheeks. “I’ll work some of my magic to make sure it’s the best arrangement yet.”

If she didn’t make a move now she’d never leave. Going up on tiptoe again, she pressed her lips against Tate’s. “Have fun with your brother.”

“Thanks, I’m sure it will be great.”

Laughing, she made her way to her car. If Tate weren’t watching she might have skipped, she was feeling that happy. She couldn’t wait to see him on Thursday.

*

“Are you planning to stay out here all night?” Tyler said from behind where Tate stood, gazing at the dark driveway. Kelly’s lights had disappeared a long time ago, but he hadn’t made a move to go back inside.

Tonight would be the first time he’d be alone in the house without Dad acting as a buffer between him and Tyler. Tyler hadn’t spent time inside the house for any length of time since Dad had his stroke. Dad never interfered much anyway if he and Tyler were exchanging words, he’d look at them both, roll his eyes, and walk away. Usually, after that Tate and Tyler would go their separate ways.

Perhaps Dad did do something, after all, and Tate just never realized what it was until now.

Knowing he couldn’t avoid his brother, he turned to see Tyler leaning by the door. He’d been so lost in his thoughts he hadn’t even heard his brother come out onto the porch with two glasses of wine in his hand.

“One of those for me?”

“Yeah.” Tyler held a glass out and Tate grasped the slender stem of the glass. “Have you come up with a name for your hobby yet?”

“Never picked you to be an asshole, Tate. What’s wrong, Kelly didn’t put out for you?” Tyler fired back, and just like that he and his brother were back to taking cheap shots at each other.

He was so tired of it all. Tired that he and his brothers had somehow lost the connection they’d had growing up. Tate had memories of him, Trey, and Tyler all swimming in the creek at the back of the property during summer. Many a time, they’d ended up camping in the backyard, Mom bringing what they needed to make s’mores. Nine times out of ten, Dad joined them and they’d eat until they were all full. Mom and Dad would disappear back into the house, leaving the boys to do their own thing.

In those days, they had fun.

“I can’t take any more of this, Ty. I’m sick of the bickering and low blows. I’m sorry for calling your winemaking a hobby.” Tate took a swallow. The wine was dry but had a sweet aftertaste. “I’m no wine connoisseur and I’m sure you’ll be able to tell me all the different undertones that wines have, but it’s good. Smooth and tastes good.”

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Tyler chuckled. “I’m sorry too, Tate. My comment about Kelly was uncalled for. I like her. Although she’s a bit older than you, isn’t she?”

Why were people so hung up on the age difference? He didn’t care if she was younger or older. He liked her. Liked spending time with her. He found her funny and attractive and he couldn’t wait for their weekend away.

“I don’t see the difference in our ages as a big problem.”

“That’s good then. As I said, I like her and I think you like her too.”

Tate took another sip of the wine, as much as he and Tyler were back on the shaky ground they called normal, he wasn’t going to share his innermost thoughts about Kelly with him. “So, the wine. What’s the plan? I know you’re not planning to launch until the fall, so what are you wanting to achieve with the festival being held here?”

Tyler’s raised eyebrow was the only indication he noticed Tate’s attempt at changing the subject. “Why don’t we go inside? I cooked while you were talking to Kelly.”

Tyler disappeared back in the house, leaving Tate gaping at his retreating back. His brother had cooked dinner for them? Since when was Tyler domestic like that? Tate supposed he’d have to be, considering he lived by himself.

Inside the house, the scent of garlic and tomatoes filled the air. Tate’s stomach grumbled, reminding him it had been a long time since he’d last eaten. He walked into the kitchen and burst out laughing. “Did you use every single fucking pot to make dinner?” The sink was piled with dishes and the countertops were covered with

salad cuttings and what looked like a piece of uncooked chicken. Mrs. Bates, their housekeeper who came once every two weeks, would freak out if she walked in and saw the mess Tyler had made. “Also, I thought you said we were going to order food.”

Tyler looked around him and shrugged. “I changed my mind. I made a couple of different things to go with the wine.”

Tate sat on one of the bar stools. “Well, don’t expect me to clean up this mess. You made it, I didn’t.”

Tyler waved a spoon at him. “Nuh-uh, that’s not how it works. The cook doesn’t clean up.”

“Not sure where you heard that, but doesn’t apply here. I cook, I clean. Dad cooks, Dad cleans. Tyler cooks. Tyler cleans.”

Tyler burst out laughing. “Oh, I didn’t realize it was so difficult to heat up Mrs. Bates’s meals.”

“She hasn’t made us a meal in years.”

While they bantered, Tyler had been putting the chicken pasta he’d made into some bowls. “Why don’t you grab the wine and bring it over to the table while I bring the food?”

Tate’s stomach grumbled again; he really needed to eat. “I can do that, where is it?”

“In the ice bucket on the counter.” He headed toward the round table situated in the bay window. The table he and Dad always sat at to eat breakfast. The table Tate hadn’t been near since his father had his stroke.

No way was he going to tell Tyler that though. Tyler wouldn't understand how hard this was for him.

"Food's getting cold and my glass is nearly empty."

"Nothing about this is going to be pleasant," Tate muttered to himself as he picked up the ice bucket.

Chapter Eleven

"So I'm going to hire a PR firm in New York to help come up with a great label design for the wine. I'm also going to get them to help with some launch activities, create a campaign I hope will attract some of the biggest wine merchants to the area."

While Dad had agreed to help with some of the launch costs, Tate didn't think he meant for Tyler to hire a firm out of New York. "How expensive is all this going to be? Couldn't you use a firm from Houston or something? Why New York?"

"You don't have to worry the cost, I've allocated some of my business loan for this sole purpose. I won't be needing much from Dad like I first thought. Plus the firm I'm using, one of the guys I went to college with works there. He said he'd be able to get me a good deal."

"Yeah, be careful with that. I've found that sometimes when friends say they're going to help you they actually can't and it costs you twice as much as you thought it would be."

Tyler laid his flatware down on his empty plate. "You really don't trust me, do you? You think I'm going to fuck this all up and cause embarrassment to Dad and the family company."

Tate thought carefully before he spoke. Prior to Tyler telling him of his marketing plans for the wine, the two of them had had a pleasant meal. The food Tyler cooked was delicious and he could admit his brother's wine was pretty damn good. But Tyler was right, Tate didn't trust him. Tate might have only been fifteen when Mom died, but he'd seen the way Tyler had acted after her death. Not only had he closed himself off from everyone, he'd gone off the rails as well. He'd gotten caught underage drinking more times than Tate could remember. Tyler also got into many fights and Dad had been worried his middle son was going to end up in jail. The local sheriff had been more understanding than one of his city counterparts would've been, Tate was sure. It helped that Sheriff Hodgson had been a good friend to Mom and Dad so he understood that Tyler was grieving.

While Tate didn't think Tyler was going to go off the rails quite like that should the wine venture not work out, some of Tyler's decision-making processes still left a lot to be desired.

"You're taking an awful long time to answer my question, which really gives me the answer I expected." Tyler pushed back from the table. "One day, you, Dad and Trey will trust me. I know grapes, wine, and winemaking, Tate. I've got a fucking viticulture degree, just like you've got your agriculture degree that helps you manage the farm. You're younger than me, but I trust that you know what you're doing. That you're not going to kill all the peach trees. All I ask is you give me the same courtesy."

Tyler gathered up his plate and stalked over to the kitchen, leaving Tate to give himself yet another mental kick for fucking things up.

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Picking up his own bowl and wineglass, he, too, headed to the kitchen. Tyler was rinsing the pots he'd used and was stacking them in the dishwasher, the metal clanking loudly against the other items already in there.

Tyler was right, he hadn't questioned Tate stepping in while their father was recovering from his stroke. Tate could counter that he'd spent the last four years working with his father and had been taught all the things necessary to make the farm run like a well-oiled machine—but it wasn't a good idea to bring that up. It would only make Tyler angrier, and he didn't want to do that. He was tired of fighting with his brother.

“Tyler, you're right, you deserve the same amount of trust you've given me.” He walked to Tyler, whose back was straight, and his fingers gripped the pot as if it would shatter if he released his hold on it. “I'll do everything I can to help make sure plenty of eyes get to your booth at the festival. I want your wine to be a success. I do. As I said earlier, I know nothing about wine, I prefer a beer. But your wine tastes really good, and I'll happily drink more glasses of it.”

Tyler remained impassive for a few heartbeats. He was always a little hard to read. Then his grip on the pot relaxed and he smiled. “Appreciate it. And glad you liked the wine. Just hope everyone else will. How is the planning going, by the way? Looked like you and Kelly are getting along well.”

Tate's mood lifted and his lips stretched into a smile. He couldn't wait until their weekend together. He would need to check out hotels tomorrow.

“Oh yeah, by the look on your face, things are going really well,” Tyler teased him

and Tate picked up the dishcloth and tossed it at him. Tyler caught it one-handed. “Nice try, bro, but I saw that move coming a mile away.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. But in answer to your question, the organizing is going well and you’ll be pleased to know, tonight Kelly added some bunches of grapes into her floral designs that are going to be placed around the farm and the town square. That’s gonna get interest in the wines. I’ll have to see who else is coming out here.”

“You mean you haven’t gone over all the vendors with Kelly? You know the festival isn’t that far away.”

“I’m well aware of the timing, but I’ve been concentrating on the harvest. We’ve organized the layout and placement of the booths. She’s been working on the floral arrangements etcetera, because that’s the job she’s always had. When it comes to the actual setup of the booths, I’m going to be in charge of that.”

Before he could say anything more, his phone rang and his heart leaped into his throat. It was well after nine p.m.—most people didn’t call this late unless it was bad news.

“Shit,” he muttered as he picked up the phone and saw the rehab center’s number flash on the screen. His stomach dropped to his feet and he hesitated a moment before accepting the call. “Tate Prentice.”

“Good evening, Mr. Prentice, I’m sorry to be calling you so late. This is Darla from Sweet Ridge Rehabilitation Center.”

“Is Dad okay?” Darla was the night manager of the center, and he hadn’t had a lot to do with her, but he had met her.

“Yes, your dad’s fine. In fact, I’m calling with some good news. Dr. Matlock was late

to visit the center today, he had an emergency he couldn't get away from. Anyway he spoke to your dad, reviewed his file and the case notes by the physical therapists, and has determined that your dad can be discharged from the facility on Friday. He'll have to come back to continue his therapy plan, but he doesn't need to be a full-time resident anymore."

Tate's mind whirled at the information just downloaded on him. Dad was coming home. "Wow, okay. I wasn't expecting this news. So Friday he can come home." He needed to confirm the information, make sure he hadn't imagined it.

"Yes, Friday. Umm, will this be a problem?"

"A problem? No, not at all. I'm just surprised. I didn't expect this news."

Darla chuckled down the line. "I do enjoy making these calls when I get the chance. I ask this of all our patients' families; do you have a room prepared for your father on a lower floor?"

Something tapped him on the shoulder, and he swiveled to see Tyler, concern etched into his features. Dad's coming home? Tyler mouthed and Tate put his thumb up. Tyler nodded and stepped back.

Tate focused back on the conversation and Darla's question. "Yes, Dad's room was on the ground floor anyway. We've added large bars to the shower as well as by the toilet, to help him when he uses the bathroom."

"That's good. What your dad also needs is peace and quiet to adjust to living away from the facility. I know you own a busy farm, but if you can do everything possible to keep stress and the daily hustle and bustle away from him, that will help his recovery as well."

Shit, having hundreds of people traipsing around the farm for the Founders' Day festival was the exact opposite of what Darla recommended. Not that he could do anything about it right now. The festival was only a couple of weeks away, too late to back out of hosting it now.

"I understand and I'll do everything possible to keep things relaxed and calm for Dad." Keeping Dad away from the action was going to be a challenge, because Tate knew the second his father stepped foot on the property he'd want to go through the orchards to see how they were doing and how the harvest was going. No way would he let that happen.

"Good to hear. Well, I'm sure Friday can't come soon enough for you or your father."

"Definitely. Thanks for calling, Darla."

"My pleasure. Have a good rest of the evening."

Tate disconnected the call and blew out a breath—Dad was coming home. For a while, he hadn't thought that was going to happen.

"Dad's really coming home?" Tyler asked as he pressed start on the dishwasher.

"Yeah." Tate ran a hand through his hair. This all felt so surreal. "On Friday."

"That's great." A mix of emotions rushed across his face—surprise, happiness and then, finally, wariness.

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Why was Tyler wary about Dad coming home?

Tate blew out a breath. He was too tired to worry about the dynamics between Tyler and Dad. What he would do was make sure that he maintained as peaceful an atmosphere as possible inside the house. If he had to keep Tyler away to achieve that, he would. Tate didn't want to though. He wanted Tyler to be able to visit Dad.

“Darla from the rehab center said that Dad needs to remain calm and relaxed. Not exposed to any stressful environments.” Hopefully, Tyler would get the message loud and clear.

“Not going to be easy with the festival and harvest upon us.”

No shit.

But he and Tyler had formed sort of a truce tonight and he didn't want to do anything to jeopardize that. “I know, but we'll have to work together to make sure we keep Dad away from it all. Or keep all the action away from the house as much as possible. I'll have to talk to Kelly about this as well.”

“It's going to be a crazy weekend. With Dad coming home and getting him settled in.”

“Yeah, it—fuck.” There went his plans to go to Houston with Kelly. No way could he leave Dad on his first weekend home.

“What? What's wrong?”

“Nothing. It’s fine.” Tate shoved his hands in his pockets, as if pushing his disappointment further down inside of him.

“No. There’s something wrong. Tell me.” Tyler used his big brother voice and Tate stared at him.

“Really? You’re going to try and boss me around? Bro, the chances of you bossing me around are pretty slim.”

Tyler chuckled. “Okay, not bossing, but come on, tell me what’s wrong. Did you have plans?”

“Kind of.”

“That doesn’t tell me anything.”

The second he relayed his plans with Kelly to Tyler, his brother was going to know that they were more than co-organizers. “I was going to Houston.”

“Dude, you never just go to Houston. You have to have a reason. Why?”

His hope of fobbing off his brother was dying as quickly as a shooting star flashing across a night sky. “It doesn’t matter what the reason was. I’m not going now. Settling Dad in is a priority.”

He didn’t want to disappoint Kelly, but what other choice did he have? His dad came first. If he wasn’t here, who would make sure Dad didn’t wander all over the farm?

No, as much as it frustrated him, he’d made the right decision—he would cancel his trip. There would be plenty of other times he and Kelly could sneak away for the weekend.

“Tate, tell me. I can see that this change of plans isn’t making you happy.”

Dammit, Tyler wasn’t giving up. “What do you mean I’m not happy? I’m ecstatic Dad’s coming home.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I know you’re happy he’s getting out of the rehab center. I am too. But I can also tell that you were really looking forward to this weekend away. If anyone deserves some time away it’s you. You’ve been working your ass off ever since Dad had his stroke.”

“Someone had to make sure the farm work got done. We were approaching harvest season.” Try as he might he couldn’t leave the anger out of his voice.

Tyler had been so focused on his vines that he hadn’t bothered to even attempt to help him with the day-to-day running of the farm. Not that he needed it, but it would’ve been nice of Tyler to offer.

“Okay, I’m not going to get into an argument with you about the farm operations. It’s one we don’t need to have again. But I can help this weekend. Let me watch over Dad. You go and enjoy your time away.” Tyler canted his head to the side, as if trying to read Tate’s mind. “You’re going with Kelly, aren’t you?”

Shock sailed through him. How did Tyler know this? Had he been listening in on their conversation on the porch? There was no point denying the truth though. Dawn would be here before he knew it; Tate just wanted to get to bed. He’d have twice the busy day he initially thought with making sure the preparations for Dad’s return were taken into hand.

“Fine. Yes, I was going to Houston with Kelly. She’s doing the flowers for a wedding there and I asked if she needed any help.”

Tyler whistled long and low. “I had my suspicions, but...” He stepped forward and slapped Tate on the back. “Good for you. She’s a nice girl. A little older than you though, isn’t she?”

“Haven’t we already done this? I’m sure you made some comment about her being older than me earlier this evening. Besides, it doesn’t matter. We’re just seeing where this goes.”

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“Well, going to Houston is a pretty big step forward.”

The last thing he wanted to do was discuss his sex life with his brother. “The subject is closed. I’m not going, and that’s that.”

Tyler blew out a frustrated breath, and Tate could see his temper was rising to the surface like his own was. “Tate. Let. Me. Do. This. For. You. I want to do it. I’ll make sure Dad’s settled, and I’ll stay in my old room over the weekend to make sure he doesn’t overdo things. You can trust me to look after him.”

A weekend away with Kelly was within reach. They could spend time together without worry of their every word being overheard. They could lose themselves in the anonymity of a big city.

Wasn’t it also time he trusted Tyler to step up to the plate? With Trey playing baseball all over the country, Tyler, as the second oldest, should be the one taking the lead on everything to do with their dad.

“I know you want to say yes, Tate. So do it. Go and enjoy your weekend with Kelly. Get away from the farm. The stress of the harvest and the festival. I’ve got this.”

Tate stared down Tyler, both of them unwilling to let the other win. Could he trust that Tyler would do everything possible for Dad? And why shouldn’t he? Tyler wasn’t irresponsible anymore, he might have been after Mom died, but he’d straightened himself out. Now he was annoying and aggravating.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Tate asked.

“Yes, I do.”

“Okay, then, we’ll do this together. Get Dad home and settled, then I’ll go and meet Kelly in Houston.”

Tyler reached out and pulled him in for a bro hug—something they hadn’t done in years. For half a heartbeat, Tate was as stiff as a board, but then he relaxed and slapped his brother on the back.

It seemed like they’d taken steps toward mending their relationship, and Tate couldn’t be happier.

Chapter Twelve

Kelly hummed to herself as she made the finishing touches to the flower arrangement. Tate had told her he would be coming in to get a bouquet to take to the rehab center. She’d made sure the display was extra special for the mysterious recipient of the Flower Magician’s gift.

The bell above the door tinkled a cheery greeting and Kelly looked up, her heart rate increasing when she spied Tate heading toward her. His eyes crinkled in the corners as he smiled at her.

She was acting like a sixteen-year-old girl, all giddy and excited when her crush walked by, hoping he’d notice her but also praying that maybe he wouldn’t. And she was spending the weekend with the fine specimen of a man standing opposite her on the counter.

On closer inspection, she saw that while he was smiling, it didn’t quite reach his eyes and there were faint tension lines marring his forehead.

Her excitement tempered. “You don’t want to go away now, do you?” The words erupted out of her before she could fully think them through.

“No, but I’m—”

“I knew it, you’re having second thoughts.” Needing to keep hands busy to stop from reaching over the counter, grabbing his shirt, and kissing him until he changed his mind, she bundled the cuttings into a neat little pile.

Whoa, slow down. I’ve never been like this with anyone. I’m not going to start now.

“Kelly, will you let me finish?” Tate caught her hands in his as she went to sweep the flower cuttings to the side. The warmth from his touch seeped into her skin, spreading tingles through her.

God, she was an independent woman who ran her own business. She’d handled far worse humiliation and disappointment in her life than a canceled weekend tryst.

Tryst.

Oh, boy, now she was sounding even more ridiculous.

Tugging her hands out of Tate’s hold, she shoved them into the front pockets of her apron, fiddling with the florist wire she’d placed there.

“The weekend is still happening. I’ve made a booking at the hotel near where the wedding is being held. But I’m not going to be able to come with you like I hoped. Dad’s coming home Friday. Tomorrow. I need to make sure he’s settled in before I leave. Tyler has said he’ll look after Dad, and while I was worried at first, I know Tyler won’t do anything to harm Dad. I’m probably not going to get to the hotel until around nine or ten in the evening.”

A mixture of emotions flowed through her. Relief that the trip was still on. Happiness for Tate that his dad was coming home. Worry about how Tate was going to cope being away from his dad on his first weekend back at the farm.

“That’s wonderful news about your dad, and I don’t care when you get to the hotel. I’ll be waiting.” She truly was happy that Trenton was coming home. The worry Tate had been going through was a lot for someone to carry alone. “When did you find out? You haven’t been to the center already this morning, have you?” She glanced at the display she’d spent the last hour making for his visit. Well, if he had, the arrangement would sell so she wouldn’t lose out—in fact, she’d make money on it as she’d planned on not charging Tate for this particular bouquet.

“The night manger called me the other night, after Tyler and I had eaten.” He canted his head toward the flowers. “Is that for me to take?”

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“Yes, it is.” Kelly gently ran her finger over the petal of the pale pink rose. Immediately, the connection she experienced when she worked with flowers grounded and calmed her. The four years she’d spent at college getting her degree and another eight years working in an accounting firm had never given her the peace she now had in her life. Sometimes, she wondered why she’d ignored the pull of flowers. Then again, if she hadn’t gone to college and gotten her degree she wouldn’t have been able to run the business profitably.

“It’s beautiful, Kel. Like you.” Tate whispered the words from beside her.

Kelly looked up, her breath catching in her throat at the look of desire burning in his blue eyes. She licked her lips reflexively and his mouth opened a fraction. As if the invisible thread joining them was being wound in like a fishing line, they both leaned in at the same time and their lips meshed together.

A sigh rippled out of her and she gripped the front of his shirt, crushing the soft fabric. Her blood sizzled to life and she pressed herself against his chest, wanting to get closer. His arms slid around her, anchoring her to his chest. Arousal pooled between her legs and she wished they were anywhere but in her store.

From the second he talked about coming with her to Houston, she’d known what it would mean to their relationship. And a relationship was what they were embarking on. As much as fear had held her back in the past, Tate made her want to throw caution to the wind. Take a flying leap off a ledge and know that he would catch her.

The sound of a phone ringing penetrated the sensual fog that had enveloped them and she pulled away from him. She staggered a little, surprised that her legs had turned to

jelly from his kiss.

Now that had never happened in her life before.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his hands gripping her upper arms lightly.

“Yes.” The only sound in the shop was their voices; the phone had stopped. “Was that your phone or mine?” she asked as she opened the drawer beneath the counter where she usually put her phone.

As soon as she finished speaking, the ringing started again. As she peered in the drawer, her phone remained dark.

“Hi, Dad,” Tate said as he moved to stand on the opposite side of the counter.

Kelly tried not to read too much into the symbolism of the three feet of glass separating them. After the kiss they’d just shared, there was no way he wanted nothing to do with her. She was pretty sure that, given a sign from her, he’d hoist her onto the counter and have his wicked way with her.

Hmm, maybe that would be something they should try—after their Houston trip. There was no guarantee they were going to be compatible between the sheets.

She snorted at the thought. After the kisses they’d shared, there was no chance they wouldn’t be compatible.

Tate raised his eyebrow and reached over to touch the hand resting on the counter. In a quick motion, he adjusted his hold so that their fingers entwined. It was a little awkward, but she had no plans on breaking the connection between them.

“Dad. Dad. Calm down. If you don’t stay calm, they’ll never let you out.” Tate

paused, listening.

A trace of discomfort surrounded her at eavesdropping on a private conversation. But the way Tate kept a firm grip on her hand, he didn't want to let her go either.

"I know. I'm the same. I'm happy you're being released too. I'm on my way over. I should be there in about twenty minutes. Do you think you can contain your excitement until then?"

Kelly smiled at the teasing note in Tate's voice. The relationship between Tate and his father was a good one, like what she had with her mom.

"Okay, Dad. I'll see you soon. Bye." Tate's voice cracked as he said goodbye.

Because she was watching him she saw the faint sheen of tears in his eyes. Extracting her hand from his, she rushed around the counter and gathered him in her arms.

A shudder rippled through Tate, followed by another as he hugged her tightly. They didn't say anything, and Kelly was glad she was able to provide the emotional support he needed in the moment.

"Oh, sorry, didn't mean to interrupt."

"Hey, Mom." Her words were muffled against Tate's chest, but at her mom's chuckle, Kelly figured she must've understood them.

Tate held her for another half a minute before brushing his lips across the top of her head. The touch was light but as meaningful as the kiss they'd shared earlier.

Kelly patted his chest once before walking back to her side of the counter, where Mom wasn't even trying to hide her interest in what the two of them were doing.

She kissed Mom on the cheek. “You’re early today.”

Speculation was rife in her mom’s gaze and Kelly appreciated it when she kept her counsel to herself. “I know. I had a feeling you may need me, so I came in. Looks like I was right. How are you, Tate? I hear Trenton is coming home tomorrow. You must be happy about that.”

Kelly’s mouth dropped open. “How do you know that, Mom? I just found out myself.”

“It’s Sweet Ridge, honey, nothing is ever secret here and”—she looked between her and Tate—“if you two don’t want to be the brunt of everyone’s gossip more than you already are, I’d be careful about doing what I just walked in on in public places.”

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All her joy from Tate's kiss and the upcoming weekend fizzled out. She'd returned to town because of her father's illness; the fact that it was just after her humiliation at Edwin's hands was fortuitous. Everyone thought her sadness was to do with her father, which it was, but she'd also been grieving the loss of her relationship with Edwin. Which was totally stupid now, looking back. That jerk didn't deserve any sympathy from her. Everyone in town had been excited when she returned later and bought This Bud's For You. That was the upside of living in a small town, the openness they had for everyone. The gossipy side of town was the one she could do without.

"Yes, Mrs. Turner, Dad is coming home. I was just coming in to pick up some flowers to take to the center. I know it may seem a waste, but I wanted to make his last day at the center happy and bright for him."

The lie tripped off Tate's lips so easily, Kelly wondered how many other times he'd lied in his life. Had he lied to her during their time together?

She immediately banished the thought. If anyone knew the reason for this little lie it was her.

"Oh, that's such a sweet gesture. I'm sure if he doesn't want to take them home, he could let someone else enjoy them."

"Exactly," Kelly interjected as she passed the glass vase closer to Tate. "I hope your dad enjoys them."

He hesitated a second, before wrapping his hands around the vase. "Would you like

to come with me, Kelly?”

“What?” Surely she hadn’t heard him correctly.

He didn’t just ask her to go with him to see his dad, did he? Although it wasn’t like Trenton Prentice was a stranger to her. She knew him well enough to say hello. Like she knew almost everyone in town.

“Kelly, don’t be rude. I know you heard what Tate asked. I think it would be a good idea. I’m sure Trenton would love to see you. See, there was a reason I came in early.”

Mom’s matchmaking attempts were far from subtle, but she spoke the truth—it was a good thing she’d come in early. Arguing the point would make Kelly look petty.

“Thanks, Mom, you’re the best.” Kelly whipped her apron over her head before folding it and laying it on the shelf beneath the counter. “There are a couple of internet orders you can work on, and if you could go over the inventory so I know what to order, that will be great.”

“Sure thing, honey. Now you go have some fun.” She waved at the two of them, as if shooing them out the door.

Kelly rolled her eyes at her mother’s antics. “Let me get my purse. Do you want to go together or separately?”

“Together.” Tate picked up the vase and held it carefully, as though it was so precious that the slightest pressure would cause the glass to shatter beyond repair. She only hoped he would hold her heart as carefully.

As much as she tried to deny it, her feelings for Tate were growing day-by-day. The

intensity, and how rapidly she was falling, was completely different to what she'd felt during her relationship with Edwin. The sensation scared and excited her.

Was this what Mom had felt toward Dad? Or even what Macy felt for Gavin? Could Kelly even trust her feelings? Her track record wasn't the best.

"Are you going to stand there daydreaming, Kelly, or are you going to get your purse? Time's a wasting."

"I'm going. I'll be right back."

Trust her mother to bring her back to earth. Actually, she was grateful that Mom had interrupted her ramblings. Getting lost in her head was never a good thing. Unless it was working with flowers.

Grabbing her purse, she glanced at her reflection in the mirror by the door as she exited the office. Her hair was in her usual messy bun, strands brushed her cheeks and her lips were plump and red. There was a slight pink hue to her skin. She looked like she'd been well kissed, and she wasn't ashamed of the look. In fact, she embraced it.

Smiling, she breezed into the shop area, noticing that only her mom remained in the space and the arrangement she'd made was back on the center of the counter.

"Where's Tate?"

Surely he hadn't gone without her and left the flowers behind.

"He had another call and took it outside." She pointed to the arrangement with the scissors in her hand. "Why don't you grab those and go?"

Kelly scooped them up, holding them so that none of the delicate blooms were crushed. “Thanks again, Mom.”

“Always, honey.” She’d reached the door when her mom called out to her. “Kelly?”

She glanced over her shoulder, her heart cramping at the love shining out of her mom’s face. “I like Tate, and I think your dad would too. I’m happy for you.”

Kelly swallowed against the sudden lump in her throat. “Thanks, Mom. I shouldn’t be too long, maybe a couple of hours.”

“Take your time, honey. I’ve got it all under control.”

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Her mom was right—she could spend some time getting to know Trenton a little better. After all, she was dating his son. Was she walking the fine line between a fling and a relationship? Perhaps, but her feet were firmly on the fling side, at least she hoped they were.

Kelly opened the door and walked out in the Texas sunshine. The heat and humidity slammed into her, but she didn't let it bother her. Nor would she let the thought of the shift in her and Tate's relationship dull her shine. Happiness swelled in her in a way it hadn't done in a long time.

*

Tate's fingers flexed over the steering wheel as he pulled into the parking spot in front of the rehab center. On the drive over, he and Kelly had talked about their trip to Houston. He promised he'd forward her the hotel reservation so that she could check in.

"Are you nervous about me seeing your dad?" Kelly's softly spoken question washed over him.

He swiveled in his seat, noticing her white knuckled grip around the vase, and chuckled. "No, but I can see you are."

"What?" She glanced down and immediately relaxed her fingers. "Uh, no, not really. I just wanted to make sure nothing happened to the bouquet."

If he wanted, he could push her to admit her nervousness, but he wouldn't. She had

nothing to be concerned about. Dad might have had a stroke, but he still could read between the lines.

His walking in with Kelly would surprise Dad, but it wouldn't shock him so much that he'd have a relapse.

Tate unclipped his seat belt and opened his door. "Ready?" he asked.

"Yep."

"Okay, stay there and let me come and open your door. Don't argue—you've got a vase plus your purse, so opening the door is going to take some effort."

"Fine." The word huffed out and he bit back a grin.

Every opportunity he'd get, he'd open Kelly's door for her. It didn't diminish her independence in his eyes at all. His parents had instilled the importance of being a gentleman while still treating a woman as his equal and respecting her. Opening the door was the least he could do.

Once Kelly stepped out of the car, he placed his hand at the small of her back, just the lightest of touches, but enough to let her know he was there.

They made their way into the facility, and he welcomed the cool rush of the air-conditioning washing over his body. It acted to cool him from the heat and humidity of a Texas summer but also from walking closely beside Kelly.

"Hi, Tate. It's great news that your dad is being released tomorrow."

"Hi, Angela," he responded to one of the newer employees who manned the reception desk. "Yeah, I'm glad Dad will be home soon. The house has been very quiet without

him.”

“Trust me when I say today he’s been itching for your visit. I think if he could, he’d try and talk his way into leaving today.”

Tate laughed. “Sounds about right. He was pretty excited when he called me earlier.”

“I love today’s arrangement, and I know ju—” Angela abruptly shut her mouth.

Beside him, Kelly shifted and he flattened the hand he still held at the base of her back. A slight pressure to let her know he hadn’t forgotten about her. “Angela, this is Kelly. Kelly, Angela. Kelly’s the person responsible for these arrangements. She owns This Bud’s For You in town. If you ever want flowers, you need to go see her. She also knows the purpose behind the flowers.”

“Oh, hi, Kelly. I’m new to the area, but I’ve driven past your shop a couple of times. I’ve always loved the displays Tate brings in for the residents.”

“Nice to meet you, Angela. Thanks, and next time you’re in town, come in and say hi. Fresh flowers always brighten up a house or room. I’m happy to help Tate.”

Kelly’s sales pitch was sleek but not pushy. Making a person think they needed something without them realizing it.

“Oh, for sure, when we were kids, my mom always had a pitcher of wildflowers or other flowers we picked on the kitchen table. She said they made her smile when we were at school and feeling lonely. I definitely need to get some for my place.”

“Yep, flowers are the universal spreader of happiness and cure all for loneliness.” There was a wistfulness in Kelly’s voice he hadn’t heard before as she placed the vase on the reception desk.

How often had someone sent her flowers?

Did she take flowers home at the end of the day to brighten her place? Tate didn't know the answer to those questions, but he was going to find out. And he was going to send an arrangement to be waiting for her in the hotel room in Houston. He would order them from her store, but that would kind of spoil the surprise.

"I'll make sure these flowers are delivered, and I know the patient we've picked out is going to love them. Your dad's waiting in his usual spot."

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“Thanks, Angela. You ready to go?” Tate asked as he slipped his arm around Kelly this time, tucking her close to his side. He had no idea how she was going to react to this public display. For all intents and purposes, he’d claimed her as his own to those looking at the two of them.

She stiffened for a second and he expected her to pull away. Instead, she relaxed into his hold and he breathed easy. She was okay with his declaration. Then again, the facility was far enough away from Sweet Ridge that the town gossips wouldn’t see them.

“Sure, let’s go see your dad.”

With Kelly firmly by his side, he led her to the large common room where he and Dad always met. He paused outside of the large open double doors. After a couple of months, Tate was used to the residents and their various levels of physical and mental abilities; however, Kelly wasn’t. Tate shifted so he was standing in front of her and her attention was all on him. “Before we walk in, I want to prepare you for what you might see.”

Kelly reached up and laid a hand on his face with a gentle smile. His heart clenched at the compassion in her eyes.

“Tate, you don’t need to do that. Dad was in a nursing home. I’m sure what’s beyond the doorway we’re blocking isn’t anything I haven’t already seen.” He stood still when she went up on tiptoes and pressed her lips against his in the briefest of touches. “But thank you for your concern. How about we go see your dad?”

Chapter Thirteen

The visit with Dad was going better than Tate thought it would. Currently, Dad and Kelly were engaged in a battle to see who could create the highest house of cards. Kelly was winning but her house was teetering precariously. All it would take was a puff of air and they would all come crumbling down.

Tate looked up and caught his father's gaze. There was a devilish glint shining in his blue depths, the same piercing azure eyes all the Prentice boys had inherited. His father was up to no good and while Tate could stop it, if he wanted to, he found he didn't.

Whether it was because his release was imminent or because of Kelly's visit, Dad was happier than he'd been in a long time. He almost looked the way he'd looked prior to the stroke. If it weren't for the way the left side of his face still drooped a little, no one would know that the man had been balancing between life and death.

"Better be careful, Kelly girl—that card you're about to put on could bring it all tumbling down."

"Pfft," she responded. "I know you're trying to psyche me out, Trenton Prentice. But I've worked in the cutthroat world of corporate America accounting, so your mind games won't work on me."

Tate bit his lip to stop from laughing out loud. As Kelly placed her card on the top of her design, the whole thing wobbled before settling down, the card staying in place.

"See," she crowed triumphantly. "Never any doubt in my mind it wouldn't come tumbling down. Come on, Trenton, show me what you've got."

She sat back and Tate leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Thank you."

She turned and her lips were so close it wouldn't take anything for him to close the gap and possess them. Only the fact his father sat across from them made him control the urge.

"For what?" she asked.

He canted his head to where Dad was getting ready to place his card on his creation. "This. For spending time with him."

He thought for a second Kelly was going to shift, putting space between them again. If she did, Tate would want to snatch her close again.

"It's no hardship at all. Your dad is fun, and it's been a long time since I've built a house of cards."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his dad's fingers creeping closer and closer to Kelly's house on the table.

"He's going to knock my cards down, isn't he?" she whispered.

"I cannot confirm nor deny the possibility that that event may occur."

Kelly sighed at the sound of her precariously balanced cards hitting the table, along with his dad's laugh. "And here I thought you were on my side."

"Sorry, Kel, I'm Switzerland."

Giving into the need to be close to her and cement their connection even more, he closed the gap between them and kissed her. Everything about the two of them felt right. As if the universe had got its act together and aligned everything so they found each other, finally.

As much as he wanted to deepen their embrace, being in a roomful of people wasn't the best place to do it. He broke the kiss and rested his forehead against hers for a moment. He turned back toward his father, and he couldn't believe what he was seeing. Tears were shining in Dad's eyes, along with pride. Tate couldn't remember the last time he'd seen his dad this full of emotion—probably when Mom had died. Dad had remained stoic for his sons, but Tate recalled walking past his bedroom door not long after the funeral and hearing his father crying.

Dad nodded toward Kelly and lifted his left hand just high enough for Tate to see the thumbs-up he was giving him. Tate nodded.

“That was pretty sneaky of you Prentice boys,” Kelly commented as she straightened in her chair.

“What do you mean?” Dad asked innocently. His father was far from innocent. “Your cards fell fair and square. Not my fault you were too busy to notice how unstable they were.”

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Kelly laughed. “My cards were perfectly fine. But I guess I did fall for your tricks, after all.” She looked over at Tate and tried to mock frown at him. “And you, buster, kissing me as a distraction. That’s just low.”

Tate held his arms up, palms out. “All’s fair in love and card games.”

“I hate to break up the party, but it’s time for your physical therapy, Mr. Prentice.”

Tate hadn’t seen the therapist come up to the table. A shaft of disappointment swirled through him. He’d been having so much fun with Kelly and Dad that he hadn’t been aware that they’d been visiting for more than two hours.

“Can I skip this morning’s session and do two lots this afternoon, please?” Dad cajoled, but the nurse crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. “Okay. Okay.”

“Hmm, I may have to practice that look to get you to do what I want when you get home, Dad,” Tate teased and was pleased when his dad smiled.

“We have courses. I’ll be sure to book you into one,” the therapist deadpanned.

Beside him, Kelly laughed out loud. “Maybe I need to sign up for one too. You know, for future reference with my kids and all.”

An image of Kelly rubbing a pregnant belly while he massaged her feet filled his mind.

Yeah, that was a fantasy he’d like to bring to life. But would Kelly?

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Kelly stood at the back door of her shop, reluctant to open it and enter her business. She'd had such a good time with Tate and his dad. Watching the two of them together had given her an insight to their relationship.

They were close and it was clear Trenton was proud of the way his youngest son had stepped up to the plate and taken over running the business after his stroke. There'd been a brief moment where a dark cloud had hung over the three of them, and that had been when Tate had told his dad that Tyler would be looking after him his first weekend home as he was heading to Houston to help her.

It had been on the tip of her tongue to tell Tate that he didn't have to come, but he'd made it clear to his dad that he needed the weekend away. That the hotel had been booked before he'd even known that Trenton would be being released.

That was a little white lie, but Kelly also had a feeling Tate had been telling the truth when he said he needed a weekend away. But, in any case, she had a lot of work to do now to make sure the wedding actually had flowers.

Pulling the door open, she headed to her office where she dumped her purse on a hook. She veered around her desk to check her emails. There were a couple of orders for bouquets her mom could handle. She spied one from Macy and opened it.

Hey, Kel,

The committee is getting anxious that we don't have a final layout plan for the Prentice Farm site. Can you and Tate work on it and get it to me ASAP? I know you have it under control, but with the event two weeks away we're going to have it all set up by the end of next week.

Let me know what's happening.

Mxx

A sigh rippled through her. There were still a couple of things she and Tate needed to sort out, but with his dad heading home tomorrow, she imagined tonight Tate would be busy getting the house settled. Not to mention, she'd be working late because she'd taken part of the morning off to spend with Tate. A decision she'd make over and over again because she enjoyed her time with them.

Kelly chewed on her bottom lip. She could make the minor changes and send the final layout to Macy and that would be off her plate before she headed to Houston. Or should she send a message to Tate to see if he was free that evening for a short time?

"Oh, Kelly, I didn't know you were back. How was your visit?"

Kelly looked up as Mom walked into the office, carrying a pile of mail. "Hey, Mom, I just got in. The visit was great. Trenton is funny and he's really excited about coming home."

"I bet he is. I'm sure the boys are too. Although Trey is too busy playing baseball to worry about his family back here." The censure in her mom's voice shocked Kelly.

The whole town was proud of their homegrown baseball hero. Why wasn't Mom?

"I'm sure that's not right. I'm sure Trenton understands where Trey's responsibilities lie. So do Tate and Tyler."

"Regardless, the boy should've been here to carry some of the burden. Everything has been left to Tate. Trey is the oldest, he should've been the one to come back and take over."

Kelly shook her head. “Geez, Mom, it’s not the early 1900s where everything was passed down to the oldest child and the other siblings were forgotten. Tate loves that peach farm as much as Trenton. He loves it more than Tyler and Trey. All of the Prentice brothers are following their passions in life. I’m sure that’s exactly what Trenton wants for them. No way would Tate be happy to sit in the background while Trey waltzed in and took over. That’s if Trey even knows how the farm works. He’s been away for a long time, whereas Tate’s been there working alongside his father for years, learning everything he can about the farm.”

Mom studied her. Had she said too much? Shown her mom she was beginning to care deeply for Tate? He had her feeling things she hadn’t felt in a long time, if ever. And while the age difference bothered her at the beginning, the more time she spent with him, the less it was becoming a factor.

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“I suppose you’re right. It’s just a lot for a young man to take on himself.”

“But he did and, honestly, Mom, it’s not a chore to Tate.” The bell situated at the shop’s door tinkled, and Kelly was grateful for the interruption. “Looks like we’ve got a customer. Can you please see what they want? I need to send an email to Macy, then I’ll be right out. I need to get started on these flowers for the wedding this weekend.”

The twinge of guilt for sending the email without talking to Tate about it was swept aside as a warm glow settled in her stomach. There were some things she wouldn’t tell her mom, like the weekend where she and Tate would be alone in a hotel room with a big bed.

She couldn’t wait.

Chapter Fourteen

Anticipation fired through Kelly as she waited at the bar for Tate to arrive. He’d texted her to say he’d be there in about forty minutes and wanted to meet her for a drink. She had expected that he’d want to go up to the room to dump his stuff, but maybe it was better they started the weekend off casually with a drink before they went up to the hotel room.

When she’d checked in, she’d been surprised at the size of their accommodations. It was more a suite than a standard hotel room. Tears had welled in her eyes when she spied the beautiful flower arrangement on the coffee table in the sitting area. Tate’s message to her had been short and sweet.

I can't wait to spend time with you. Txxx

“Hey, beautiful, can I join you?”

The voice over her shoulder was familiar, and the hairs on her arms rose, like she had a million ants crawling over her skin.

Kelly swiveled her chair and came face to face with her past. “Hello, Edwin. And, no you can't join me.”

Ignoring her, Edwin slipped onto the stool she'd been saving for Tate. “Oh, come on, Kel-Bell, don't be like that. Surely, enough time has passed for you to let go of your bitterness about our breakup.”

Kelly clenched her fists at her side, controlling the desire to pick up her glass and toss the remainder of her wine in his face. At the time, she thought his nickname for her cute. Now it grated on her every nerve ending. “I haven't allowed myself to think about you over the last couple of years. Though I'm surprised you're allowed out. Or are you on the prowl again for another woman to join your little wives club?”

“Are you interested? Are you lonely, Kelly, and that's why you're sitting at the bar all by yourself?”

Dammit, she'd walked right into that.

“As if,” she scoffed. “And no, I'm not lonely. I'm waiting for someone.”

“And that someone is here, so I suggest you leave Kelly alone and go hit on some other woman.”

Relief swept through her. She slid off the stool, and in two seconds, she was by his

side. “Tate,” she murmured as she wrapped her arms around his neck, pressed her body fully against him and captured his lips.

Tate’s hands gripped her waist tightly, and he angled his head, deepening the kiss as if he was as starving for a taste of her as she was for him.

“If this is for my benefit, it wasn’t necessary. I did enjoy the show though.”

Pressed up against him, she knew the moment Tate’s whole body tightened. The last thing she wanted was for him to get into a fight with Edwin. The guy wasn’t worth it. Plus, she needed to deal with this herself. Edwin was her past, not Tate’s.

“I’ve got this,” she muttered before turning to face her ex again. Even though she didn’t need it, having Tate behind her bolstered her confidence. “You’re such an ass, Edwin. What Tate and I have is a million times better than what we ever had. I’m with a real man now, not a guy who has to surround himself with ‘yes’ women to make himself feel important.”

Edwin’s face turned redder and redder with each word until it looked like he was about to explode. He got off his stool. “You were one of those women, Kelly. And if I do say so, you weren’t that great.”

“Enough.” Tate moved until he was standing toe to toe with Edwin. “I don’t know who the hell you are, but you don’t speak to Kelly, or any woman, that way.”

“What are you going to do about it? Hit me?” Edwin sneered and Kelly resisted the urge to do just that. It was what he deserved.

“Don’t tempt me,” Tate ground out.

How on earth had she thought Edwin attractive? Imagined he was the man who was

going to be her future? Looking at him standing in front of her and Tate, he didn't resemble the person she'd dated for more than a year. It was clear he'd been hiding his true nature, and she was now seeing it. Pity for his wife and any other woman who lived with him filled her, and as much as she'd like to tell them his real nature, in all likelihood they wouldn't believe her. Or they already knew and were happy to stay with him.

"You're not worth our time, Edwin." Kelly placed her hand on Tate's forearm, the muscle still hard beneath her touch, as if ready to spring into action if she said the word. "Let's go, Tate."

"You're the type of person who gives men a bad name," Tate said and slipped his arm around Kelly's waist.

She welcomed his strength and warmth.

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Neither one said anything as they walked toward the elevator bank. Kelly's heart rate was beginning to get back to normal, and the adrenaline that had been pumping through her was tapering off.

Tate stabbed at the button; clearly, he needed a few more minutes for him to calm down a little bit. The wait wasn't long and Tate stood to the side, allowing her to precede him into the empty car.

"Are you okay?" he asked as the doors slid closed.

"I'm fine. How about you?"

Tate blew out a breath and lifted his head, gazing at the ceiling. "I don't know. I just wanted to, shit..." He scrubbed a hand down his face. "Who was that guy?"

That was the last question she wanted to answer, but it was the most logical one for him to ask. "That was Edwin Lines, my ex. I was seeing him before I moved down to Sweet Ridge permanently."

His eyes widened in surprise. "You dated that jerk?"

"Yes, I did." The doors opened on their floor, and Kelly stepped out without waiting to hear Tate's response. As if his dating life was perfect. Tate had left a string of women in his wake. He had no right to judge her past.

God, she wished she could go back thirty minutes and not run into Edwin at the bar. Then, instead of being on the verge of an argument, she and Tate could've been

sitting at a cozy table, knees rubbing together as they flirted with each other.

She fumbled with her keycard, and an arm reached over her shoulder, inserting the plastic rectangle into the slot. The lock disengaged and Tate pushed open the door. She ducked under his arm and strode into their room, tossing her purse on the bed.

Why was she getting so upset? It was true Edwin was a jerk, but it hurt that Tate seemed amazed that she once dated him.

The Edwin on display tonight was a completely different one to the Edwin she'd worked with and dated. He was also different to the Edwin who confirmed he was indeed married and the lifestyle he wanted. A lifestyle he hoped she'd be a part of. The second he'd finished speaking she'd dumped his ass and walked out. She had no issues with polyamorous relationships, but it wasn't one she wanted to be part of. Edwin had kept his true life a secret and it burned how easily she'd been sucked into his charming web. The Edwin blinders had been ripped off, and she was glad they had been.

The last thing she wanted to do, though, was let the asshole spoil her weekend with Tate. This weekend marked a turning point in their relationship. She didn't want Edwin or his toxic actions anywhere near the two of them.

She had to let her irrational anger at Tate's comment go. "This wasn't how I wanted our weekend together to start," she said quietly. "I had imagined our evening being different."

Kelly started when Tate's large hands landed on her shoulders. He applied pressure and she turned from staring at the curtains to look at him.

"I'm sorry, Kel." He cupped her cheek, his touch light but comforting. "I shouldn't have said what I did. It's not my place to judge who you dated in the past. Can't say

some of the women I dated were stellar decisions.”

Considering the reputation Tate had around town, she could believe that. “We all have a past, there’s no denying it. What we’ve been through on that journey has shaped us to being who we are now. Edwin used me and he hurt me. He lied the whole—” Two fingers pressed against her lips.

“I don’t need to know about him, Kel. He lost out, and I won because I have you here with me. All I want is to start the night over. I’ll be back in a few minutes.” He pressed his lips against her forehead and then walked out of the room.

Yes, she’d like to start the night over. Picking up her purse from the bed, she placed it on top of the dresser. She might as well check her appearance while waiting for Tate to return.

In the bathroom, she ran a brush through her hair, touched up her makeup and instead of putting on more lipstick she settled for a light pink gloss.

Wandering back into the main part of the suite, she fluffed pillows that didn’t need fluffing and, for once, was grateful that there were minimal lights in hotel rooms.

Should she sit on the bed or one of the armchairs close to the window?

Open the curtains or keep them closed?

Closed. They might be thirty floors up, but there was still the chance that people could be cleaning the building opposite the hotel and be able to see into their room.

The door opened and thoughts of curtains and buildings and cleaners flew out of her mind. Kelly held her breath, waiting to see what Tate was up to. He walked in with an ice bucket that had a bottle sticking out of it in one hand, and in the other he held two

champagne flutes.

Her heart rate inched up with every step he took, closing the distance between them.

“Hey, Kel. It’s good to see you.”

“Tate, glad you made it here safely.”

Tate placed the glasses and ice bucket on the coffee table near where she was standing and then placed his hands on her waist, exactly the same way as he’d done in the bar.

“You look beautiful.”

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“Thank you.” Kelly was glad she’d packed this wraparound dress. The style accentuated her breasts and waist. The best thing about it was that it was easy to remove. “You don’t look too bad yourself.”

Tate was wearing a white button-down shirt that fit snugly across his broad shoulders. His jeans were dark blue and, having looked at his back view often enough in denim, would no doubt cup his ass nicely.

“Can I get you some champagne? It’s the only way to start off our weekend, don’t you think?”

With a couple of simple actions Tate had created the atmosphere she’d been hoping for all day while she’d been getting everything ready for her to set up the flowers for the wedding. Every time she thought about Tate joining her, tingles of excitement and anticipation fired through her.

“I’d love some. And Tate?” He raised an eyebrow in query as he removed the gold foil from the neck of the bottle. “Thank you.”

He inclined his head, acknowledging her words. The pop of the cork echoed around the room and some of the straw-colored liquid bubbled up and over the open bottle. “Let’s hope that’s not a sign of things to come,” Tate quipped as he grabbed a glass and started filling it.

Kelly laughed. “Let’s hope not, but I know a few tricks.”

Tate’s eyes flew to hers, his mouth open in surprise. “I’m not sure what to say.”

She sidled up to him, a sense of wild abandonment building in her. Kelly ran a hand up the side of his jeans and then reached around and squeezed his ass. “Don’t say anything. Just enjoy.”

She pressed her lips against his and she heard ice crunching as Tate placed the bottle back in the bucket. His arms wrapped around her, and she shrieked as cold liquid poured down her back.

“Oh, my God, Kel, I’m so sorry.” Tate jumped back, holding the now-empty glass.

She burst out laughing while grabbing the tie of her dress. “If you wanted me out of my dress, all you had to do was this. You didn’t have to waste good champagne.”

Tate blinked and licked his lips when she let the sodden fabric drop to the ground. Standing in front of him in her white lacy matching bra and thong set should be nerve-wracking, but it felt right, as if everything in her life had led up to this moment.

“I was wrong. You’re not beautiful, you’re exquisite.” Tate’s fingers were on the buttons of his shirt, and he was shucking it off before she had a chance to breathe in.

His chest was lightly tanned, as though he spent some time out in the orchards without his shirt on, but not every day. She could picture him pulling peaches from the tree, his body glistening from exertion. Muscles bunching in his back every time he moved.

A shiver wracked her body and her mouth suddenly went dry.

“Are you cold?” Tate asked as he closed the gap between them and pulled her tightly against him. Even though she wasn’t cold, being wrapped in his warm embrace was amazing.

“Not anymore, but you’ve got too many clothes on.” She pressed a kiss against his chest and her fingers found the button of his jeans. The material was stiff and not only from the engorged flesh she could feel.

“Let me.” He brushed her hands away. A few moments later she was pushing the denim down his legs. “Get on the bed,” he ordered as he dealt with the removal of his shoes and jeans.

So he liked to be in charge, did he? Well, she’d let him believe he was but she planned to have her way with him. There were plenty of things she wanted to do to him.

Kelly scooted back until she rested against the pillows and admired the view in front of her. Tate’s muscles came from honest, hard work. He had a nice six-pack, and she couldn’t wait to run her fingers over the ridges. She already knew how strong his arms were as she’d touched them plenty of times.

Her eyes dipped lower and could see the evidence of his arousal straining against his boxer briefs. Kelly ran her tongue across her lips, she couldn’t wait to lick, suck, and taste every inch of Tate’s body.

Excitement and desire pumped through her as he climbed on the bed. He cupped her ankle and brushed the underside of her foot. Her body jolted from the contact. Immediately, Tate looked up, worry and need shining in his eyes. “Are you okay? Is something wrong?”

“No, everything’s fine. I just have ticklish feet.”

A wicked glint entered Tate’s eyes, and she braced herself for what was to come next. His callused fingers encircled her ankle. “You shouldn’t have told me that,” he said as he kissed the arch of her foot.

Arrows of electricity sizzled all the way up her leg, coalescing at the juncture of her thighs. “Why?”

He nipped the skin above where his fingers held her. “Because now I know your weak spot.” Tate licked and nibbled his way up her leg and all thought of responding to him left her mind. All she could concentrate on was the way his touch energized her in a way Edwin and all her other lovers hadn’t been able to. It was like Tate was wired to know what she liked and didn’t like.

He nibbled his way up her inner thigh and pressed a warm kiss against her core over her thong.

A long moan escaped her. “God, yes.” Her fingers gripped the sheets as Tate removed the tiny scrap of material and worked his magic on her sex. His tongue dipped and stroked until she was a mass of jelly. Her orgasm was fast approaching. Releasing her grip on the sheets, she reached down and threaded her fingers into his hair, holding him so he wouldn’t move away from her. Her toes curled and she arched her back as she ground her hips against him as her climax hit her with the force of a fastball from a star pitcher.

“Tate!” Her cry echoed around the room, and he kept his grip on her as the aftermath of her release rippled through her.

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Tate worked his way up her body, swirling his tongue around her belly button before he reached her breasts. Somehow, she found the strength to sit up and reach around to remove her bra. His sharp intake of breath was a sign he liked what he saw.

“I don’t think I can say this enough, Kel, but you really are beautiful.” He placed a hand on her chest and pushed her gently until she lay back on the pillows. Tate leaned down and nuzzled the top of each breast before taking one nipple into his mouth. The action caused her sensitized body to jerk, and she bit her lip to stop another moan from escaping.

The guy might be young, but he knew all the moves. But she still had a couple she could show him. Kelly didn’t allow herself to think about how Tate got all his experience, all that mattered was he was with her now and not anywhere else.

A brush of fingers against her cheek made her open her eyes.

Tate loomed over her, but not in a threatening way. “You okay?” he asked resting his head against her forehead.

Somehow, he’d picked up on her distracting thoughts. Tonight was about them. She had a past—Tate had seen that firsthand earlier and hadn’t run. Tate had a past, and right this second it didn’t matter. He’d given her a mind-blowing orgasm and she had a feeling the next one would be even better.

Wrapping her arms around him, she tugged until he fell on top of her. The hard ridge of his arousal, through the fabric of his underwear, rested against her stomach. “I’m not okay.” He tensed beneath her but she pushed on before he could pull away.

“Because I’m naked and you’re not.”

“Your wish is my command.” Tate’s laughter rumbled through her as he pulled away and stood by the bed to remove his boxer briefs. His erection sprang out, long and hard, and she wanted him inside of her like she’d never wanted anyone before.

Kelly could get addicted to everything about the man. His laughter. His sensitivity. His magical tongue and hands. Her mom had been so right. There was so much more to Tate than her first impression of him, and she couldn’t wait to see what else he had planned for her.

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Tate was surprised he hadn’t blown his load already. The taste of Kelly still lingered in his mouth, and the sounds of her cries of completion echoed around his mind. He wanted to make her scream like that again and again.

He hadn’t been a monk, but nothing had ever given him more satisfaction than making Kelly orgasm with only his mouth. He climbed back on the bed and cuddled up to her. He pressed a kiss on the side of her cheek before working his way around until he captured her mouth with his.

Their tongues tangled, and her arms wound around his neck, pulling him closer to her. He was totally fine with that.

Kelly yanked her mouth away from his, her ragged breathing rushed against his ear. “I need you inside of me now, Tate. I can’t wait any longer.”

“I want that too.” He couldn’t wait to sink into her wet, warm body. Hear her intake of breath at the first thrust. Yet he pulled away from her even though he didn’t want to.

“Where are you going?”

“Getting some protection,” he said as he slid off the bed to grab his jeans where his wallet was still in a back pocket.

The crinkle of foil halted his progress and he glanced over his shoulder to see Kelly holding a packet in her hand. “All taken care of.”

He plucked the condom out of her hand. “I think I lo—ah, I think you’re amazing.” Tate couldn’t believe he almost blurted out that he loved her.

But it was true. He had fallen in love with Kelly and the thought didn’t freak him out at all. In fact, it propelled him to make her his in the most basic of ways. With quick movements he rolled on the condom and settled himself between her legs.

He couldn’t tell if she picked up on what he was about to tell her or not. Her eyes were heavy lidded with desire and her mouth was parted, ready for him to take possession of her.

Bracing himself on his forearms, he nudged her entrance with his dick. “Are you ready?”

Her hands landed on his ass, her nails digging into his flesh. “More than ready. And don’t be gentle, Tate. I don’t need gentle from you.”

Blood swelled through him and he hardened even more. He liked that she told what she wanted and needed. They were equal partners in this relationship, and he would ensure that that didn’t change.

Pressing his lips against hers, he slipped one arm underneath her hips, lifting her so he could thrust into her warm heat. Both of them groaned when he was fully seated

inside her.

“Fuck, Kel, this feels unbelievable.” Her inner muscles clenched around him, and he took a deep, steady breath so he didn’t come in that moment. Once he had himself under control, he began the slow slide out before diving back in. Her hips met his and increased the pleasure of the action.

He maintained a smooth in-and-out motion, steadily increasing his speed. Kelly matched him all of the way. Her breaths panting in his ear while her lips peppered kisses on his shoulders.

The only thoughts that consumed him was to give Kelly the maximum amount of pleasure he could. The back of his spine tingled, a sure sign his orgasm was imminent. He upped the pace and Kelly’s cries became a little louder. Reaching in between them, he circled and pressed his thumb down on her clit. It was enough to send her over the edge, and she called out his name. A few moments later, his own orgasm rocketed through him. He groaned loudly as his body pumped his release into her.

Tired and replete, he collapsed on top of her and rolled them so that she lay over his chest, her hair a curtain of gold.

Pressing a kiss on top of her hair he closed his eyes, happier than he’d been in a long time.

Chapter Fifteen

“We never did discuss how things went with your dad,” Kelly commented as she placed one of the table arrangements on the mirrored plate in the center of the table.

“Yeah, we kind of got sidetracked,” Tate said from beside her.

How she was getting any work done when he was practically glued to her side amazed her. Her skin still tingled from everything they’d done the previous evening and that morning when she’d shown him a few of her tricks.

“It was a good sidetrack for sure. But was it hard to leave him?”

Tate sighed and threaded his fingers through his hair, mussing it up and reminding her of how it looked when they’d woken up that morning. “It was hard, but he looked so happy to finally be home. Tyler was great as well. He had made sure that everything Dad needed was within reach. I called Dad while you were in the shower and he sounded good. A little tired, but I think it’s because he was so excited to be back in his own home and not a room at a facility.”

Even though she had a million more things to do, she went over and embraced Tate, inhaling his woodsy scent. “I’m glad, and I know you were worried about how Tyler would be with him.”

“I was and I shouldn’t have been. We’re family, and I need to let go of the control a little bit. I took on everything after Dad had his stroke. I couldn’t help it. But I now see that letting Tyler in helps me as much as it helps him. Although, I am still worried

about the festival.”

Kelly released her hold on Tate and went back to work in setting up the flower displays. She ignored the tinge of guilt; she still hadn’t told Tate she’d sent the final plan in without him looking at it. “What are you worried about?”

“Well, the rehab center said that, as part of Dad’s recovery, I had to keep him away from stressful situations. Having the farm full of people for three days straight for the festival, not to mention all the time it’s going to take to assemble and disassemble the stands, is not a stress-free environment. There’s going to be so much activity.”

If the roles were reversed, she’d feel the same way. “I promise I will do everything I can to make sure that we keep it as stress free as we can for your dad.”

While she knew it was a tall task, it wasn’t impossible, and if she explained it all to Macy, she was sure Macy would understand as well. They’d speak to the volunteers and ask them to be as quiet as possible.

“I appreciate that, but it’s not going to be easy. Maybe between the two of us we can achieve it. Although, you’re going to be busy with the flower arrangements, aren’t you?”

It was going to be a mammoth task getting arrangements ready for two sites, but she had a plan, and when she had one of those everything always worked out.

“Yes, it’s going to be crazy busy, but I like that. And barring any unforeseen dramas that will keep me away from the farm, I’ll try to be there as much as possible.”

“Kel, I appreciate that, and even though I’ll be busy with the harvest, I’ll be able to oversee the arrangements as well. I don’t want you working yourself ragged just for me.” Tate placed a soft kiss on her lips. The urge to sink into him and prolong the

kiss was strong. As if he could read her mind, he pulled away. “In a few hours, I’m going to show you just how much I appreciate your words.”

A shiver of desire thrummed through her, and her heart rate kicked up a couple of notches. “I like that idea.”

He laughed. “I think I need something to cool me down. Do you want a soda or water?”

“Water would be great.”

“On it.” He turned and headed for the ballroom exit. She would never get tired of looking at his ass in jeans.

“Tate?” she called out. He glanced over his shoulder at her. “Thank you for coming with me. As much as I would’ve understood if you’d canceled, I’m glad you didn’t.”

A soft smile played across his lips. “Me too, Kel. Me too.”

*

A few hours later, Tate opened the door to their suite, and Kelly walked in and collapsed in the closest chair. “Thank goodness that’s over.”

“Are all brides as difficult as this one?”

Kelly laughed. “No, thank goodness.” Prior to the wedding her bride had been super relaxed, but today, she’d turned into bridezilla, hating every arrangement Kelly had created for her. Fortunately, her mom had stepped in and calmed the bride down and reminded her, with pictures from her phone, that everything she wanted Kelly had provided. Of course, the bride hadn’t apologized, but when her mom made the final

payment, the amount had been increased by a couple of hundred dollars.

Kelly understood the pressures of getting married, and weddings turned the sanest of people into crazy ones.

“Well, I have to say you handled her tantrum better than I would’ve. I probably would’ve collected all the flowers and walked out. Or maybe done something to them all.”

“I could never ruin anything I’d spent hours creating. You’d feel the same if you were in my shoes. I guarantee it.”

“I suppose so.” Tate dropped a kiss on her forehead.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:40 am

She really wished he'd aim a little lower and kiss her on the lips. He'd been nothing but a gentleman while she'd been working. But she wasn't on the clock now, and tonight was their last night at the hotel before they had to head back to Sweet Ridge and the arrangements for the festival. Life was going to be crazy, and the chances of her spending time with Tate without a million prying eyes was going to be very slim.

"What do you want to do for dinner?" she asked. "Do you want to go out somewhere? Or go to the restaurant in the hotel?"

What she really wanted to do was order room service. Now that she'd stopped, the late night and busy day was catching up to her.

"Nah, I think we'll stay in and order room service."

"Did you read my mind?"

Tate laughed and again the sound did jittery things to her insides. "I can tell you're exhausted, Kel. I plan to pamper you tonight. Don't you worry about anything. I have it all worked out." He disappeared into the bathroom, and she heard the sound of water running.

"Now this is something I could get used to," she murmured and closed her eyes, tiredness pervading every part of her.

I shouldn't get used to this. Shouldn't get used to being pampered.

But why shouldn't she get used to it? Wasn't this what she wanted? To be number

one in someone's life. Right this second, Tate was putting her needs above his, and she felt cherished. And, did she even dare voice her inner thought?

Loved.

She felt loved by Tate, but that was impossible. He couldn't love her. They hadn't spent a lot of time with each other, and even though last night had been amazing, mistaking chemistry and wild, hot sex as happily ever after could be so dangerous. Too many women had succumbed and found out that their prince wasn't a prince after all, but the villain.

Was Tate a villain?

Again, she dismissed the thought. Anyone who did what Tate did when his father had his stroke wasn't a villain.

God, why was she thinking so much? Hadn't she decided to just go with the flow and see what happened between her and Tate?

Falling for Tate hadn't been part of the plan, though. Today, he'd silently worked beside her. Taken her instructions and followed through on them correctly. Got her drinks before she even asked for them. He'd worked his way past the barrier around her heart, the one she'd erected after Edwin had hurt her. All without her knowing.

A brush of fingers down her cheek startled her. She blinked a couple of times before her vision narrowed in on Tate squatting beside her chair. A sweet smile on his face and a look of such caring in his eyes it took her breath away. "Hey," she said.

"Hey yourself, your bath is ready."

She recalled the water running when he disappeared into the bathroom but the idea

that he was drawing a bath for her hadn't even entered her consciousness. "You drew a bath for me?"

"Yep. You looked like you needed one after today." He lifted her hand and pressed his lips to the top of it. Such an old-fashioned, gentlemanly action that her heart stilled for a couple of moments before kick-starting again.

"Thank you. No one has ever done that for me."

Tate rose effortlessly from his squat, and because he still had her hand, he tugged her up. He secured her closely to his side and led her toward the bathroom. "Well, I'm glad I can be the first."

The aroma of jasmine filled the air as they entered the room. Gentle swirls of steam rose from the foam laden bathtub. "Tate, it looks wonderful. I can't wait to sink into it. You'll never get me out."

"That's a good plan, although I'm not sure you turning into a prune would be a good thing. But I'll make sure that doesn't happen." He gave her a gentle push toward the tub. "Go and soak. I'll order dinner. Do you want anything in particular? Like a burger or steak or salad."

Food was the last thing on her mind, and she really didn't care. All she wanted was to get in the bath. "Anything is fine."

"Okay. But if you don't like what I order, just remember what you said."

Kelly laughed. "Noted."

Tate shut the door behind him. Kelly stood looking at the white door for a few moments, wondering how the hell she'd gotten so lucky.

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Tate leaned up against the bathroom door and blew out a breath. The temptation to suggest to Kelly that he join her had kept him company as he filled the tub. He'd been ready to put his thoughts into action, but he'd found her in the chair, her eyes closed, her hair falling out of the updo she'd had it in while she worked, and he'd known that he would put aside his needs and desires and concentrate only on Kelly and what she needed.

Through the door he heard her moan of delight and pictured her up to her neck in water and bubbles. The image made his dick jump against the zipper of his pants. All day he'd been semi-hard around her. The way she moved from table to table, her hands adjusting the arrangements had been lyrical and effortless. The fine sheen of moisture on her forehead suggested it wasn't easy, but she'd made it look that way. He'd been in total awe of her.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:40 am

Tate had known she could create beautiful arrangements. The work she'd done for this wedding was amazing and he couldn't wait to see her designs for the Founders' Day festival brought to life.

His grumbling stomach pulled him from his internal musings, and he headed over to the table where the leather binder with all the hotel amenities sat. Fifteen minutes later dinner was ordered and he had a glass of champagne in his hand.

"Knock, knock," he said before turning the handle to the bathroom.

"Come in. Oh, you're already in here. You know you're supposed to wait for permission to enter." Kelly's voice didn't hold any hint of annoyance, just humor.

"I figured you wouldn't mind so much when you saw what I have in my hand." He held up the flute filled with champagne.

"Hmm, on this occasion I'll forgive you. Do I have to get out? Is dinner here?"

Kelly standing, the water sluicing from her body, bubbles in tempting places on her gorgeous flesh, was a vision he would love to see.

Again, his body sprang into action. He really needed to get himself under control. "Um, what did you ask?" With his mind full of a wet, naked Kelly, he'd completely blanked on what she'd asked him.

"Is dinner here yet? Do I have to get out? And can I have my drink, please?"

“Oh, right. Umm, no, dinner will probably be another forty-five minutes, the kitchen is busy so you don’t have to get out. And here.” He held out the glass for her.

“Thanks.” She took the glass with one hand and kept hold of his hand with her other. Her eye contact remained locked with his, and he tracked the movement of the glass as she brought it to her lips and took a delicate sip. Kelly still hadn’t released his hand, and he wasn’t in any hurry to lose contact with her.

“You know what?” she said conversationally as she placed the glass down on the tiled ledge behind her.

“What?” he answered. If it was what he thought, he was okay with it.

“I’m lonely.” Tugging his hand, with more strength than he expected, he tumbled toward the tub.

Tate could’ve stopped himself from falling into the water, but he didn’t because he wanted to be with her as much as she wanted to be with him. What he did though was maneuver himself so he didn’t crack his ribs on the edge of the porcelain tub.

Water splashed up and over the sides, landing on the white tiles with a loud splash. Kelly’s giggles filled the room, and he grabbed her face with both hands. “You are so going to pay for that, Ms. Turner.”

“Really? How do you plan to punish me, Mr. Prentice?”

“Just you wait and see.” He lowered his head and open-mouth kissed her. Both of them moaned at the contact, and Tate knew in that moment that he’d found his home with Kelly. Now all he had to do was convince her that they belonged together.

Chapter Sixteen

“Macy, did you get my email about the workers at Prentice Peach Farms?” Kelly asked as they sat in a back booth at Betty Lou’s Diner.

Work was starting the next day at the farm and Kelly wanted to make sure that she followed through on her promise to Tate to keep the disruption to his father to a minimum.

“Yeah, I’ve already talked to the guys who will be doing the work. They can’t guarantee there won’t be a lot of noise, but they’re going to do their best to make sure that Trenton isn’t disturbed.”

“Good. I know Tate will be there to oversee as well, but he also has to make sure the harvest is still on schedule.” Kelly couldn’t help the smile that stretched her mouth.

Their weekend away had been wonderful, especially the night of the wedding. After she’d pulled him into the bath, he’d gotten out and stripped off his sodden clothing before getting back in and set about “punishing” her.

A rush of warmth pooled between her legs and she shifted on the chair. With both so busy over the next week and half, the chances of hooking up again was slim. Tate would want to spend as much time with his dad as he could now that he was back home.

“Well now, I certainly recognize that look,” Macy commented with a laugh.

Kelly’s grin widened and she shrugged. “I had a good weekend.”

“Tell me more.”

As much as she wanted to tell her friend, she also wanted to keep it quiet. What she and Tate had was new, and she didn’t want to spoil it by telling everyone. Oh, she

knew telling her good friend wasn't like she was standing in the middle of town center with a bullhorn and broadcasting for all to hear. But she still didn't want to become the subject of the town's gossip, so keeping quiet was going to be her plan.

She motioned with her hand that her lips were locked up tight. Macy rolled her eyes. "You're no fun, Kelly."

“Sorry, Mace, but I just don’t want to say anything.”

Macy reached across and touched her hand. “I get it. It’s okay. When you’re ready I’m here to listen. But I have my own suspicions, and if it’s who I think it is, good for you, Kelly.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask who Macy suspected she was seeing, but she bit down and kept the words within her. “Right, let’s get back to the festival. I want to say, Macy, for your first year, you’re doing a great job. Not sure how you fit it in with everything you’re doing. When do you see Gavin?”

“Trust me, we make it work. We’ve been through too much not to make time for each other.” Macy’s eyes turned dreamy and Kelly wondered if that was the look on her own face when she thought about Tate. Macy’s face shone, and it could only be described as pure love.

Tate treated her like a princess and put her needs first. Kelly couldn’t deny that she’d fallen for him.

As hard as she’d tried not to. As much as she thought the age difference between them would be an issue. Tate had proven time and again that he was her equal and that years on the earth was nothing when two people connected. And she and Tate had connected in the most basic of ways.

A sigh escaped her—what if he didn’t feel the same way about her? What if he’d just been looking for a good time? No, he wasn’t like that. He’d shown her in so many ways how much of a gentleman he was. He was the complete opposite of Edwin.

“Edwin.” The word burst out of her.

“What? Who’s Edwin? Wait, are you talking Edwin your ex?” Macy’s eyes widened until she looked like a cartoon character. “No way. Don’t tell me you’re back with that loser.”

“No,” Kelly practically shouted. “No, I saw him this weekend in Houston. I was in the bar waiting for Ta—umm, waiting for someone. It wasn’t pleasant. He showed even more of his true colors.” She shuddered as she recalled his sneering comments. “I would never go back to him.”

Macy was one of the few people who knew the full story. In fact, Kelly and Tate hadn’t even talked more about Edwin, and she felt bad about that. The fact he hadn’t brought up her ex surprised her—then again, maybe he didn’t want anything to spoil the weekend either. Talking about Edwin and his lifestyle would’ve definitely put a gray cloud over their time together.

“Well, that’s good. I’m glad you had Ta—someone there to protect you from the loser.”

Kelly couldn’t help it, she laughed at Macy’s not so subtle way of letting her know she’d picked up on Kelly’s slip. Happiness welled inside of her and threatened to explode out. If she couldn’t tell her best friend, who could she tell? “Fine. I spent the weekend with...” She lowered her voice and looked around the diner. No one was paying attention to them, and there was no staff around to watch them, but she still wanted to make sure. “Tate. But you can’t say anything to anyone.”

Macy clapped her hands. “I knew it.” She got up from her seat and rounded the table so she could hug Kelly. “I’m so happy for you, Kel. Tate’s a good guy. And nice work on bagging yourself a younger man. I swear on Jack Cooper’s grave that I will not share this information around. I know how you like to keep yourself out of the

clutches of Sweet Ridge's gossip gang."

Macy's comment about the age difference between her and Tate stung, but she brushed it off like an annoying piece of lint. If they went public with their relationship, then she would have to face the similar comments, and Macy's comment wasn't exactly offensive. But there was a chance some comments from others could be downright condescending. "Thanks, Macy. He's so wonderful, and I really like him. But, you're right, I don't want everyone talking about us."

"Well, they won't hear it from me."

"I know." And she did.

Macy wouldn't breathe a word of her and Tate's relationship to anyone.

Macy reached out and pointed to Tate's mom's bracelet on her wrist. The bracelet was one of the first things she put on in the morning after her shower. "That's a really pretty bracelet. Is it new?"

Kelly touched the delicate gold and sapphire jewelry and remembered the many times Tate had grabbed her wrist just to run his fingers over it. He enjoyed seeing his mom's bracelet on her. "Umm, yeah, it's Tate's mom's. He gave it to me when he asked if I would date him."

Macy's gasp echoed around the room. "Oh, my God, that is so romantic. I love it. Who knew he could be so thoughtful, given, you know, his..."

"His reputation as a player?" Kelly asked, and when Macy nodded she continued. "Being a famous country star, you should know that sometimes there's more smoke than fire and what people see and think aren't necessarily true."

“Yeah, you’re right. Well, anyway, I’m just gonna say again that no one will hear anything from me, but it’s going to be hard to keep it quiet while you’re sporting his mom’s bracelet.”

“Don’t worry; I’ve got it under control.” She responded before looking down at her large list of items they still needed to discuss. Mom couldn’t cover the shop for much longer as she had afternoon plans. “How about we continue going through the items we need to get sorted with the flower arrangements for the festival? I know the committee has finally approved all of my designs. When I leave here I’ll need to contact my suppliers and confirm my order. They’ve been great and have assured me they’ll have the flowers here next Tuesday so I can start arranging and getting them ready to display Wednesday and Thursday.”

“Sounds great, and will they still look good by Sunday?”

With Texas’s hot weather, the question wasn’t unreasonable. “Yep. Mom, a couple of girls from the high school, and I will be keeping an eye on the arrangements and will change them out if they’re looking bad. I’m ordering extras.”

“Great, that sounds perfect and I love that you’re using some of the kids from the high school. Who knows, maybe one will be the next Kelly Turner and take over the store when you’re ready to sell. Just like you did.”

“Maybe,” she murmured. Would she be sharing her retirement with Tate?

Or would she be alone?

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Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:40 am

Tate strode through the orchards, frustration biting at his heels. The day had started off badly and had steadily worsened until he wanted to pull his hair out. Instead, he pulled off his cowboy hat, slapped some nonexistent dust off it, and jammed it back on. It didn't make him feel any less frustrated, but it was better than slamming his fist into a tree trunk. Yeah, he didn't need a broken hand with the festival almost upon them.

His mood could also be because he hadn't seen Kelly in over a week since their weekend away, both of them so busy with last minute festival arrangements. The most they'd been able to do was text, and they'd had a couple of FaceTime conversations, which he wouldn't have minded them turning into more. Only he didn't want to be getting hot and heavy with Kelly only to have Dad call him because he needed something.

His phone buzzed in this pocket and he pulled it out, anticipation leaping in his throat. He might see Kelly's name scrolling across his screen. Sadly, it was Tyler's—another cause of his frustration.

“What do you want, Tyler?” So what if his greeting was less than friendly. His brother had pulled another disappearing act and instead of being around to help with some of the setup, he was in Houston speaking to wine representatives to see if they could get his wine into restaurants once it officially launched. While he hoped his brother could achieve his goal, Tyler's timing could've been better. When they'd talked about the festival he'd only mentioned going on one trip, and that was to California. He'd added this Houston one in.

“Bad day, bro?” His chipper and blasé greeting grated on Tate's already frayed

nerves. Instead of yelling at his brother, which he wanted to do with a passion, he took a couple of steady breaths.

“I wouldn’t push it, Tyler. I’ve got a million things to do because of you, so if you could just cut to the chase and tell me what you want, I’d appreciate it.”

“Fine. I wanted to let you know I should be back in town tomorrow night. I managed to get a last-minute appointment with one of the best wine merchant’s in the city, and I’m also seeing if I can arrange a conference call with the PR firm I’ve been trying to get on board.”

Tate shook his head. All of these things that Tyler was doing should’ve been done a while ago. A wine label and marketing strategy shouldn’t be left to the last minute. If his brother wasn’t careful, his wine release could be a big flop instead of the success he wanted it to be.

Which is why it’s important you help your brother, Tate.

Dammit, his inner voice, which sounded weirdly like his mother, was right. No matter what, the Prentice brothers were a team, a fractured one but still a team, and their success had come because they’d always helped each other. So as mad and annoyed at Tyler as he was, he would do everything to make sure his brother’s wine was a success.

“Okay, fine. I’ll make sure everything is set up and ready for you to man your booth on Friday. You will still be manning your booth, right?” The fact it would add a few extra items to his already packed to-do list was something he’d have to live with.

“Bro, thank you. And, yeah, I definitely will be there to talk up my wine. I know I’ve been a pain with this. I’ve asked a lot of you, and you’ve done it for me. I will repay you, I promise.” Tate wanted to believe he heard sincerity in Tyler’s voice, but until

he saw his face, he wouldn't be convinced.

"Trust me, you'll pay alright and I can't guarantee it's going to be a nice payoff either."

Tyler laughed. "Bring it. I can take whatever you dish out. Later, bro."

"See ya." Tate smiled as he disconnected the call. Sure, he was still annoyed at his brother, but he was glad that his and Tyler's relationship was getting better with each passing day. Now if Tyler failed to show up, it could be an entirely different story. In the meantime, he had a harvest to get back on track. A festival setup to continue to oversee, all the while making sure his dad stayed inside and out of trouble.

His dad was living up to his stubborn attitude. That attitude helped him a lot on his recovery, but it didn't help when Tate was trying to make sure his father relaxed and didn't relapse. If Dad knew that the harvest had taken a sharp left turn off the track, he'd be out here pulling peaches off the trees himself. That was something Tate definitely wasn't going to allow to happen.

He felt like he was drowning under the weight of it all.

You've got this, son. I know you can do it all.

Well, now Mom was his inner voice, giving him a pep talk. That was different. Clearly, he needed to either eat, drink more water, or get a decent night's sleep.

He closed his eyes and tried to picture his mother's face smiling down at him. Would she be proud of all that he was doing? He hoped so.

Tate opened his eyes and shook his head, hoping he could dislodge all these confusing thoughts and imaginary voices and return everything to normal. There were

things he needed to do, and standing in the middle of the orchard wasn't going to get them done.

An hour later, it looked like the harvest was back on track; the crew of pickers who had been causing some issues were straightened out and were actually doing what they were supposed to be doing.

The slightly bruised peaches they'd picked earlier could be used in the various displays Kelly had planned at the entrance of the farm and in the carts at various locations around town. They would just have to be placed in a manner that showed their good side, not their bad. He still had some apprehension on using damaged fruit but Kelly had convinced him that the Prentice name wouldn't be tarnished. He trusted her to keep her promise.

"Tate, hey, how are you?"

He stilled. He couldn't have heard Kelly; she wasn't supposed to be at the farm today. Was his mind going back to playing hijinks with him? Turning, relief swept through him when he actually did spy Kelly standing behind him—a vision of gorgeousness among the beauty of his peach trees.

"Kel? What are you doing here?" Without giving thought to who may be watching them, he rushed up to her and pulled her close, burrowing his head into her neck and inhaling her sweet, flowery scent. Kelly stiffened for a second before relaxing into his hold, her arms going around his waist.

Just a simple hug from her and all his frustration and worry seemed to seep away, flowing into the soil and leaving him with a sense of peace.

After a minute she pulled out of his hold, but he made sure he kept hold of one of her hands.

“Is everything okay, Tate? You look a little stressed.”

The last thing he wanted to do was burden Kelly with his troubles. Besides, he'd gotten the major one sorted out so the others weren't too much of an issue. “It's been a day, but it's definitely looking brighter now that you're here. Are you here to see me, or are you here about the festival?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:40 am

“Both?” she responded. Tate tried to ignore the stab of hurt that she hadn’t made the trek out to the farm just to see him.

“Okay, well, what can I help you with then? The setup is proceeding well and not really causing too much of an upheaval with everything else going on around here.”

“I’ve got some of the urns for the flower arrangements being delivered this afternoon, and so I wanted be sure that someone will be around to make sure nothing happens to them. The committee purchased them for use at future festivals, so it’s important that they’re handled with care.”

“And you can’t stay to make sure that happens?” he asked. Everyone was dumping their jobs on him. First Tyler and now Kelly. Well, that wasn’t entirely fair to Kelly—she didn’t know about Tyler, but he kind of felt that the urns and their safe delivery was her responsibility, seeing as they were for her bouquets.

“I asked the company for a staggered delivery so I could be at the town square for the first delivery and then oversee the drop-off here. Only the company informed me that they would both be delivered at the same time at the two different locations.”

Okay, so it wasn’t all her fault. “Right. Well, you’re here now—why don’t you stay and get someone else to oversee the delivery at the town center? Seems pointless to turn around and drive back to town.” Another thought hit him. “Why did you drive out here? Why didn’t you call me?”

A rosy glow bloomed in her cheeks and his heart swelled. “You really came to see me, didn’t you?” he asked, pulling her close to him again.

“Yes,” she whispered and brushed her fingers against his cheek. He loved the soft caress. “I could’ve called you, but I wanted to see you. I’ve missed you.”

God, he wished they were anywhere but in the middle of the orchard. He tightened his hold on her. “I missed you, too; it’s been crazy busy. But seeing you here is making my day so much better.”

Fuck it. He didn’t care if anyone was watching. Framing her face, he placed his lips softly on hers. She moaned and the sound arched through his body and his dick hardened against his jeans.

Aware that the timing and location wasn’t ideal, he resisted the need to deepen the kiss. He broke their connection. “As much as I want to keep doing this, you came here because you have an issue and you need help.”

Her sigh radiated through her, and he felt every second of it as well. He was that in tune with her. “Yeah, I don’t want to cause you any more stress. You have a lot to do. But I know that if you oversee the delivery, the urns will be unloaded safely and I won’t have to make any last-minute orders.”

Now it was Tate’s turn to sigh. He hadn’t spent much time with Dad today, and he was worried Dad had managed to slip past the young farmhand he’d assigned to watch him.

“Are you sure you can’t stay here and get someone else to supervise the delivery in the town center?”

“I really wish I could. I’ve got other things related to the festival that I need to do in town, so it’s really not feasible for me to stay here.” She closed the distance between them and grabbed both his hands in hers. “But I’d rather be with you here than in town.”

Irrational anger swelled up inside of him; it was a combination of everything going on around him and not because of Kelly's request. He shook his hands free and stuffed them in his pocket while taking a few steps back. The flash of hurt in her eyes cut him deeply, but he refused to show how it affected him. "Fine." He ground out the word. "I'll make sure everything goes smoothly. Like I do with everything else everyone asks of me. Oh, and thanks for letting me see the final plans before submitting them? I guess I'm just your helper, not your partner, aren't I? Now I need to get back to work."

He turned and walked away from her knowing in his mind he was acting out of character, but he was just so tired of everyone expecting him to fall in with their plans. No one ever asked him what he wanted to do. If he needed help or wanted help. An offer was as meaningful as someone actually following through and taking some of the burden from him.

Problem was, he could acknowledge he'd brought this on himself by doing what everyone asked of him, without putting up too much of a fight.

"Tate, wait."

He heard Kelly calling his name, but he continued walking. It was better he put distance between them than say something he'd regret later.

Chapter Seventeen

The urns were placed exactly where Kelly wanted them to be. Once the arrangements were completed, they would look amazing and accentuate all the good things about Sweet Ridge. Not one urn had been broken here or at the farm.

"Urn's are fine."

The text message from Tate had been short and to the point, and it aggravated her to no end. His anger at her request annoyed her. He was the one who didn't want too many people around the farm upsetting his father. If she'd arranged for someone to make sure the delivery went off without a hitch, that would've been an extra person and he would've probably got upset about that as well.

Kelly had a feeling that no matter what she did or said, Tate would be unhappy. She hadn't meant to add to his stress. His reaction surprised her, though. She was sure they'd reached the point in their relationship, especially after the weekend they'd spent together, that if he was mad or upset with her they could talk about it. Over the course of the planning of the festival, they'd had disagreements but had always managed to find a way to reach a compromise. She'd taken that as a sign of maturity in Tate. Maybe she'd been wrong. Maybe he wasn't as mature as she thought he was.

Kelly ran a cloth over one of the urns, wiping away dust that wasn't there. This was why she'd been reluctant about pursuing a relationship with someone younger. She liked to think that someone older would've shared their troubles with her. She'd asked Tate about it. Could see he was stressed, but he'd brushed it off.

"Kelly. Thank goodness you're still here."

Kelly whirled around to see Macy rushing toward her. "Macy? What's wrong? Is everyone okay? Has something happened to Mom?"

"No, your mom's fine, but Tate's dad isn't. I heard that an ambulance has been called to the Prentice Farm because Trenton collapsed."

Kelly's heart sank to her toes. Tate would be devastated if his father didn't make it this time. After having spent time with the two of them, she'd been able to see their relationship was more than father and son; they were best friends as well. "Oh, my God. Do you know what happened? Was it another stroke? Is he still alive?"

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“I don’t know anything except what I told you, that he collapsed. But the timing couldn’t be any worse. What with the festival starting in two days. And being at a satellite location this year for the first time. This is a disaster.”

“Macy! A man is on his way to hospital. I think the festival should be the least of your worries.”

Macy ran a hand through her long hair. The country singer normally looked in control, but Kelly could see she was stressed and worried and had blurted out her words without really thinking about them. “Shit, you’re right. Sorry. Sorry. I want everything to be perfect this year, with me organizing it all.”

While Kelly wanted to reassure her friend that it would all go off without a hitch, her main concern was Tate and his father. “I need to go to the hospital. I need to be there for Tate.”

Her friend hugged her. “I’m sure everything will be okay. Go be with Tate. And forget about what I said about the festival. Everyone attending probably won’t even notice all the changes we’ve made.”

Kelly returned her friend’s hug. “Thanks, Mace. And don’t worry, if I have to not sleep for the next forty-eight hours”—which had been entirely probable anyway—“I’ll make sure everything is completed on time. I know Mom will help out more.”

Macy released her hold. “Now, don’t you go getting yourself sick. I’m sure with the trees and everything else at the farm, if you don’t get out there to do the flowers, it

will be fine. All that greenery will be nice anyway.”

“Funny, that’s exactly what Tate said.” Her voice hitched and she swallowed down tears. Oh, what pain the man she loved must be in.

The man she loved.

It was true. She’d gone and fallen in love with Tate, and he was everything she’d told herself she didn’t want. But he was everything she needed.

And he needed her now. “I’ll keep you updated.”

“Sounds good.”

With a wave, Kelly hurried out of the town square, heading to her shop to get her purse and go the hospital.

She had no idea if Tate would welcome her there, but for once, he was going to accept help and support even if he didn’t want it.

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Tate paced up and down the waiting room. He was here alone. Trey was off on the West Coast and Tyler was in Houston. Tate had left a message asking Trey to call him when he could. The call to Tyler had gone straight to voice mail as well, and so he had to leave another message, this one a little more terse and demanding than the one he’d left for Trey.

Once again, the burden of his father’s ill health had fallen on his shoulders. He was tired of it. Tired of always having to be the strong one, when all he wanted to do was sit down on one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs and sob his heart out. Tired of

bearing all the responsibility alone.

As quickly as the thoughts entered his mind, he threw them out. Dad's health wasn't something Tate should resent. If it wasn't him standing here alone, it could've been one of his brothers. He'd like to think, though, that he'd be there for either Trey or Tyler. He liked to believe he wouldn't leave them to shoulder the responsibility alone.

Tate paused in his pacing and slumped down in one of the chairs, burying his face in his hands. The second he closed his eyes, the image of his father lying on their front porch, the front door wide open, flashed before him. His father's skin had been clammy and his breathing labored. Tate had called 911 and grabbed his father's hand, willing him to hang on until help arrived. The harvest workers all stood around him, watching. How he controlled his urge to yell at them to back off surprised him.

His worst nightmare had come true and all the activity surrounding the festival had caused his father to have another stroke.

If only he hadn't been making sure the damned urns weren't damaged as they were placed in the spots Kelly designated. He'd just finished texting her that they were safe when he'd found his father.

He should've been inside with Dad. He could've stopped him from going outside and attempting to do work he was in no fit state to do.

"Tate?"

He kept his head down, he didn't want to speak to her or anyone. He wanted to be alone. He deserved to be alone. But there was no mistaking the gentle hand on his shoulder or the aroma of flowers and sunshine, the smells he associated with Kelly.

Lifting his head from his hands, he saw her standing in front of him. “What are you doing here?” His words were harsh.

The person standing in front of him was the reason his dad was in this place again.

“I came as soon as I heard about your dad. I didn’t want you to be alone.”

Tate couldn’t take it anymore. Anger at everything that had happened over the last few months erupted. “Really? Do you want to know why I’m here? I’m here because of you.”

“What?” Kelly’s face paled and her eyes widened. A rational part of him told himself that he was taking his anger out on the wrong person... but he had no idea if he would ever see his dad alive again.

“I was making sure your precious urns were delivered and placed in the areas you wanted unscathed. Everything about this damn festival has caused me nothing but stress and upheaval. I’ve had to change the harvest schedule to accommodate the workers doing the setup. I’ve had to ensure that those same workers didn’t get in the way of the day-to-day running of the farm. All the while making sure that my dad didn’t get stressed out over all the activity.” He stood and placed his hands on his hips. “Do you know how hard that is? No, because your first visit out to the farm was today and it wasn’t to supervise the setup. It was to ask me to do you a favor. Well, that favor could cost my father his life, and I’m not sure I can ever forget or forgive that.”

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His chest heaved in and out. His skin buzzed with pent-up energy, and he wanted to hit something.

“Is that what you really think? That it’s all my fault?” Kelly asked, her face now had color blooming on her cheeks.

“I told you with Dad coming home that he couldn’t be stressed out. That all the activity around the farm wasn’t going to be good for him. But you promised me, promised, that you would do everything in your power to make sure nothing happened to him. Well, guess what, all that activity was too much and, now here we are. My father’s in a sterile room having God knows what done to him all because of a stupid festival.”

None of what he was saying was making him feel better, but he had to get it out. The red haze in him wasn’t dying down.

“I did do everything possible to keep the stress away from the farm, Tate. But I’m not the one you should be blaming. Tyler is the one who volunteered the farm, not me.”

“Yes, you’re right, and I’m hell angry at my brother. But you were the one who had to make it extravagant with arbors and urns and carts full of flowers. Like Tyler, this event at my farm is all about showcasing your business. The trees should’ve been enough decoration for everyone. No one’s going to notice what you do. They’re not going to ooh and ahh over roses and whatever other pretty little things you put in them.”

Her sharp intake of breath should’ve been a sign for him to slow down. Stop and

think before he said anything else, but worry about his dad was making his thought processes slow.

“Is that what you think of my business, that it’s just pretty little things? Those pretty little things bring joy to people, and don’t you forget it.” Kelly shook her head and her fingers played with her wrist. “You know, I thought that I was wrong about the age difference between us. But I was right. You’re immature, and you’re acting like a spoiled brat.”

“Jesus Christ, you can’t let the age thing go, can you? You’re scared to be with someone younger than you, but being with someone the same age didn’t do you any favors, did it?”

She held out her hand, palm up. He could see his mom’s bracelet sitting in the middle. He looked up at her, tears shone in her eyes. “I think we’re done here. I don’t want this anymore.”

On autopilot, he reached out and took the jewelry from her, the metal still warm. The anger fizzled as if doused with buckets of cold water. “Kelly, I—”

“Save it. I don’t want to hear it. Sometimes, what we really want to say is said in anger, and you’ve made your opinion more than clear. But here’s the thing, Tate. You don’t always have to be the one to shoulder all the burden. You don’t give anyone else a chance to help you. You just say yes to everything and take it on yourself, including caring for your dad.”

His anger simmered up again, and he clenched his fist, the bracelet digging into his palm. He welcomed the pain. “Now, wait just a minute. You were the one who came to me telling me that I was the only one you could trust to make sure the urns were delivered safely. So don’t tell me that I don’t have to take everything on myself. You. Didn’t. Give. Me. A. Choice.”

“You know what, you’re right. I didn’t, and perhaps I should’ve, but it’s not like it’s the first time you’ve been unable to say no.” She shook her head and gripped her bag tighter on her shoulder. “You know I was giving my heart to you, Tate. I was taking the chance to put myself out there with you, but I can’t be with someone who isn’t willing to ask for help. Actually, it’s more than not willing to ask, it’s that you don’t want to. You don’t want to be seen as unable to cope with everything handed to you. I’m sure if you let them, Trey and Tyler would’ve done what they could’ve to help you with the farm and your dad. I really hope Trenton is okay, Tate.”

She walked out of the waiting room, and pieces of him broke off and shattered to the ground. His heart clenched tightly and the pain was so intense he grabbed at his shirt. After a moment, the pain settled to a dull ache and Tate didn’t think he’d ever be the same again.

Chapter Eighteen

Exhaustion had been Kelly’s constant companion since she walked out of the hospital waiting room and driven back to the shop. Her mom had taken one look at her and put the closed sign up on the shop door. The second Mom’s arms closed around her, she broke down in great, heaving sobs, relaying her confrontation with Tate in the hospital waiting room.

Once she’d stopped crying and rational thought returned somewhat, Kelly acknowledged that fear and worry were probably behind most of Tate’s words, but it didn’t make it any easier to deal with.

Her heart was shuttered with a pile of doors not entered signs hammered across it. How many times was she going to allow herself to open up her heart, only for it to be trampled on? Well, no more. Those signs weren’t coming down.

Of course, her worst nightmare had also come to fruition. Their argument had been

observed by a couple of regular customers of Betty Lou's Diner. They were quick to relay their juicy gossip to anyone who would listen, and now everyone was talking about her and Tate. God, she hated living in a small town sometimes. She couldn't go anywhere without someone tutting her for being insensitive to Tate's worry about his dad. Very rarely did she come across someone who had sympathy for her or her broken heart.

With the festival in full swing, avoiding people wasn't an easy task either. Then again, she had the excuse that she was super busy and couldn't spend time chatting. She had her group of friends that rallied around her and tried to keep her mind off Tate. They'd informed her that his dad was fine and had only had a reaction to the medications he was taking. She was relieved to hear that it wasn't another stroke. As far as she was aware, he was already back home at the farm. Not that she'd seen him—she'd tried to avoid her contact with Prentice Peach Farm as much as possible, preferring to send one of her high school helpers than going out there herself to refresh the arrangements. The thought of seeing Tate was too much for her to cope with on top of the festival arrangements.

Her cart displays had been a big hit with a lot of people who stopped in at the farm and then headed to town to see what was happening there.

By all intents and purposes, she should be happy that her idea made the festival a success, but everything felt hollow. At least she'd done something right for Macy.

Tonight was the final event. Macy was giving a big concert, and Kelly couldn't summon up the energy to go. The bell over the shop door tinkled with a new arrival. Damn, she really should've put up the closed sign, and why was anyone coming to see her anyway? They all should've been heading to the concert.

"I'm sorry, we're closed. I just didn't put the sign up."

“Well, that’s good to hear. I was wondering if you were going to bail out and not come to my show.” In front of the counter stood Macy, looking stunning and every inch the country rock star she was. Her hair was curled and teased but still managed to look natural. Her makeup was heavier than she normally wore, but didn’t look garish. Her outfit of a flowy green top over a denim skirt that stopped above her knees looked effortless. She’d finished her ensemble off with a pair of green cowboy boots to match her top.

“You look fabulous, Macy, but I was about to text you. I can’t keep my eyes open. I don’t think I can make it to your show.”

Macy crossed her arms over her chest and frowned. “You’re not doing this to avoid being around everyone, are you?”

“What if I am?” she responded belligerently. “Everyone has spent the whole weekend gossiping about me and Tate. Talking about the fact that I’m the cougar of Sweet Ridge. I hate being talked about. Why don’t they do something more constructive with their time? Like start a community garden or go keep people company at the rehab center.”

Kelly closed her eyes and took a couple of deep breaths. Complaining about things wouldn’t make them go away, but being the brunt of the town gossip wasn’t high on her bucket list of things she wanted to achieve before she turned fifty either. In fact, her worst fears about dating Tate had come to fruition. But her heart hurt at not seeing him. She’d gotten so used to the text messages they sent each other.

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How many times had she picked up the phone only to put it down again? They were no longer Kelly and Tate the couple. They were just Kelly. And Tate. Not that they'd been a couple for long, but long enough for her to fall in love with him totally.

“Look, Kel, I know you're hurting. I'm not excusing what Tate said, but there were extenuating circumstances. But I also know you can't turn your feelings off. Not when you're in as deep as you are.” Macy grabbed her hands and squeezed them. “Come to the concert. It's the final event of the weekend. After that you can go home and hibernate all you like. I've already told Gavin I'm going to sleep for three weeks.”

Kelly laughed and hugged her friend. “You deserve that sleep. You've done an amazing job. I've heard people say this is the best festival ever. And thank you for being a friend.” Straightening her spine and pushing out her shoulders, Kelly scooped up her purse. “Now let's go to your concert.”

“Thatta girl!”

Kelly locked the door and wished locking away her feelings was as easy as keeping her business safe.

*

Tate took another swallow of beer from one he didn't want. Tyler had dragged him to Silver Spurs to celebrate the end of the festival and the fact he'd received a lot of interest from people around the area for his wine. Tyler was excited for his launch in a couple of months—Tate wished he could get as excited.

“I should go home. Dad will be wondering where I am, and I’m sure Mrs. Hewitt would like to come to the town square for the last of the Founders’ Day celebrations.” Tate wanted to get out of the bar as soon as possible. Less chance of him running into Kelly, although that was exactly what he wanted to do. He wanted to talk to her, but every time he thought about doing that he almost threw up. Which was silly considering they had no trouble talking previously.

“Mrs. Hewitt is fine, Tate. She told you she was happy to sit with Dad. Although, I can’t say he was too happy about it. He’s probably being a grumpy ass to her.”

Tate chuckled, the sound rusty to his own ears. He hadn’t laughed much in the last few days. “You’d be right about that, so I probably should go and rescue her from Dad.”

“No.” Tyler slammed his hand down on the table. “Stop trying to do everything yourself. I know I’ve taken advantage of you recently, and for that I’m really sorry. I’ve been a shitty brother. We’ve already discussed how I should’ve stepped up more after Dad had his stroke. I’ve been selfish and made you take a burden you didn’t need to. But that changes now. I’ve seen how you can juggle everything I’ve thrown at you, as well as what you took on after Dad had his stroke. I can do more at the farm while still making sure the winery gets the attention it needs with the big launch just a couple months away.”

Tate stared at his brother. Kelly had said the exact thing; that he always had to take the burden of everything on his shoulders. “Okay, what have you done with Tyler? Because this isn’t the Tyler I know and love.” And for all their faults, he did love his brothers. They’d all just gotten lost and their relationship fractured. Tate liked that he and Tyler had done a lot of work over the last couple weeks to improve it.

Tyler laughed. “Yeah, I deserve that. But, seriously, I’m proud that you’re my brother. But I’m not letting you go home tonight. We’re going to go to Macy’s

concert and we're going to have a good time." He leaned forward. "I know that something happened between you and Kelly, and if I was somehow to blame, I'm saying sorry again. The last couple of days you've been walking around the farm in a daze."

If only Tyler knew how hard it had been to keep away from the festival goings on at the farm. Dad's health scare kept him close to the house, and the only times he left were to oversee the final harvesting of the peaches. Now that it was done, his life would slow down a little—which left him too much time to think about Kelly and how badly he'd fucked up with her.

Was it too late to fix it?

Tate stuck his hand in his pocket and fingered the bracelet he'd been carrying around. Somehow the delicate piece of jewelry had become a connection between him and Kelly, even though they weren't together. He should put it away, back in his top drawer, but he felt if he did that then it would signify the end of what he and Kelly had shared. He wasn't sure if he could do that. But how could he win Kelly back?

Tyler elbowed him. "Come on, it's time to go to the concert."

Tate grabbed his beer and drained the contents. The last thing he wanted to do was be around people, and especially happy couples, but Tyler asked, and Tate could admit he wanted to spend some more time with him.

By the time they reached the town center, a huge crowd had gathered to hear Macy sing. Having a famous country rock star for a resident, one who'd grown up in Sweet Ridge, was a huge drawcard, and ever since Macy moved back and married Gavin, the Founders' Day concert had been born.

As stupid as it was, he scanned the crowd, hoping to see Kelly. While he'd tried to

maintain his distance at the festival events at the farm, he'd always taken a quick look for Kelly. On the first day, he'd even hung around by the urns that had been part of their argument to see if she would update the flower display. Only it had been a young girl, one he guessed was from the local high school, who'd completed the task.

The hurt cut deep, but it was what he deserved after what he'd said and done to Kelly. How was he supposed to enjoy himself when his heart wasn't in it? Tyler was buzzing with happiness; he hated to ruin his brother's buzz. He turned to tell Tyler that he'd changed his mind and was going to head home when he saw the face he'd been yearning to see staring straight at him.

Kelly.

Without thought he pushed his way through the crowd. Please stay right there, Kel. Please don't move. His breath whooshed out of him when he reached her side—she hadn't run.

“Hey.” Well, that was original. He mentally slapped the side of his head.

“Hi.”

The crowd moved around them, but it was like he and Kelly were locked in their own little cone of silence.

“How are you? You look good.” Okay, well, that was a little better.

“I look tired, but thank you. Umm...” She glanced around, and he suspected that she was looking for a way to escape. Now that he had her close he wasn't going to let her go. The pain and heartache that had been his constant companion was lifting after just being a few feet from her. His heart was beating again.

God, he loved her, and he didn't want to go through life without her. He should've chased after her at the hospital. Not let her walk away from him.

The music started up and Macy's distinctive voice echoed around the area. The crowd cheered as she belted out one of her most popular hits.

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As much as he wanted to talk to Kelly, he wanted to hold her more. They'd spent so much time planning part of the festival, and because of their fight, they hadn't been able to spend time enjoying it together. There'd been no walks through the vendors to see what wares they were selling. No shared bowls of guacamole or some of Betty Lou's donuts. But maybe they could have this. "Will you dance with me?"

Kelly worried her bottom lip with her teeth, and he wanted to run his thumb across it, soothing the hurts she was inflicting on herself. She still looked like she wanted to run away from him.

Taking a risk, he reached out and brushed his thumb across her lower lip. She released her hold on it. "Please, Kel."

He felt like punching the air in victory when she nodded. Slipping his arm around her waist, he steered them through the crowd toward the area where the temporary dance floor had been set up. Fortunately, most of the people were strangers. He'd heard the gossip around town the last couple of days about him and Kelly, and he had a feeling she wouldn't be happy about it.

Tate found them a space and pulled her into his arms. The song wasn't slow, but it wasn't too fast that their swaying looked out of place. Macy segued into another song, this one slower. So far, Kelly had been holding herself stiffly against him, but at the change of pace, a little of the tension in her faded and she relaxed the death grip she had on his shoulder.

He changed his hold so his hands rested on her waist. Macy crooned about lost souls finding each other again, and the words sank deep into the parts of him that had been

hollow since Kelly walked out on him.

His step faltered when Kelly's arms wound around his neck and her body relaxed fully against him. He breathed deeply and the familiar scent of flowers and sunshine filled him. Peace settled over him. This was the perfect moment. Everything was right. But there were things that needed to be said and apologies he needed to make.

"I'm sorry, Kel," he murmured against her ear. "I overreacted and took everything out on you when I shouldn't have. You were there to provide me with support and I threw it away." He looked up to the sky, swallowed a couple of times before resting his cheek against hers again. "I've never had anyone come to me when I needed them. No one was there when Mom died. Trey was at college and Tyler ran off to deal with his grief by getting into as much trouble as he could. And Dad, well, he remained stoic. I wanted to share my grief with someone. I was fifteen. I didn't know how to feel or what to feel. No one was there and I dealt with it alone. That became the pattern of my life. I was determined to prove I didn't need anyone and could do everything myself. I'm sorry I didn't appreciate the gift you were giving me when you came to the hospital."

Baring his soul to another person wasn't anything he'd ever done, but he couldn't deny how freeing it was. To share his burden. No, to acknowledge that he was wrong and wanted to fix it. "I promise to do better. Promise to talk more. I need you, Kelly. These last couple of days have been the worst of my life. I haven't wanted to do anything. I kept hoping I'd see you at the farm, but you weren't there. I realized that I'd hurt you so much you couldn't bear to be near me. I deserved the way you ignored me.

"But I want another chance. Will you give me one?"

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It was taking everything in Kelly not to cry. Tate was baring his soul to her while Macy sang about taking chances on love when you find the right person, no matter how scary it was.

She could hear the truth in Tate's words; hear the pain he was going through. The pain mirrored hers. As she'd been manning her booth in the town square she'd been watching for Tate, even knowing he'd be staying close to the farm and the chances of him walking past her were nil, part of her had hoped she'd see him.

"When you lashed out you hurt me a lot, Tate. I didn't want to be around you. Again the person I cared for treated me like a worthless possession. Like I didn't deserve to be an important part of their life. Help you through dealing with whatever happened with your dad."

"I know, Kel, I know that now. I didn't see it at the time, but you walking away opened my eyes for me. I've said I want a second chance, but I will understand if you feel you can't give it to me."

Did she want to go through life the way she'd been feeling the last couple of days? Macy's words came back to her. You can't shut off your feelings. And it was so true. It had been so easy to move on from Edwin. Everything she felt with Tate was ten times more intense than anything she'd ever experienced with her ex. That had to mean something, didn't it?

She tried to imagine a future without Tate in it and couldn't. She didn't want to. She wanted to share all his ups and downs. Be a shoulder when he needed it. He would always be a shoulder if she needed it. She wanted to share her ups and downs with him as well. And she wanted children, but not just with anyone—she wanted Tate's children. He would be a wonderful father. They'd already proven that when they communicated they worked together beautifully as a team.

And there was the gossip of the last few days. Had it really hurt her? She'd allowed it to, she'd given power over to people who didn't deserve it. Really, at the end of the day, what did it matter if she and Tate were the subject of the town's gossip because of the age difference between them? Was she going to let that stop her from finding her true love and happiness?

No, she wasn't. Ever since she'd made the decision to seize the day and live in the moment, she'd been living it with the man holding her. Her life was complete.

"Yes, Tate, my answer is yes to a second chance. I want that so much, too. I can't bear to think of a future without you. I don't know if you're ready to hear this, but I need to say it. I'm in love with you, Tate Prentice. I've been miserable ever since I walked out of that hospital waiting room. I don't ever want to feel that way again."

Tate's mouth crashed down on hers, and she whimpered against the onslaught. She missed him so much. His arms banded around her and she sank into the kiss. Wanted to relay to him how much she loved him and needed him. She liked to think he was giving the same back to her.

He pulled his lips away from hers and she moaned. "Oh, thank God, Kel. It killed me to watch you walk away. I should've gone after you." He framed her face, and in the muted evening light, his eyes softened. "I love you, too, Kel. So much."

Tears pooled in her eyes. He loved her. And it was a true love, not the false love Edwin had given her. He pressed his lips to hers again before reaching into his pocket. She couldn't see what he pulled out but she gasped when he went down on one knee. The people around them stopped dancing and stared as well. The music came to a halt and for once in her life, Kelly didn't care that she was going to be the center of attention.

Dangling between his fingers was the bracelet that he'd given her. "Kelly Turner, will

you do me the honor of going steady with me for the rest of our lives?”

“Yes,” she practically yelled the word. “Yes, Tate, I will.”

“I know it’s not a ring and we will get the perfect one for you, but in the meantime.” He slipped the bracelet around her wrist.

The crowd cheered and Macy and her band started playing again. Tate slipped his arms around her again and Kelly snuggled in tight. She’d never been happier in her life than she was right now.

Chapter Nineteen

Two hours later, Kelly and Tate arrived at the Prentice farm. After an impromptu celebration at Silver Spurs with a large group that included Tyler, Macy and Gavin, and Gavin’s brothers and their wives, as well as Kelly’s mom. Now they were going to tell Trenton their exciting news. Tate hadn’t wanted to tell his dad over a phone call that they were engaged, and Kelly had no problems with it.

“Everything okay?” Tate hadn’t made a move to get out of the car and she hoped he wasn’t having second thoughts.

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Tate took her hand and rubbed his fingers over the bracelet. “Everything’s wonderful. I just wish Mom was sitting next to Dad when we tell him our news.”

Kelly brought Tate’s hand to her mouth, kissing it gently. “She’s always with you and knows what’s happening.”

“You’re right and I know she’d love you too.”

Kelly leaned over the console and pressed her lips against his. Tate cupped her head, deepening the kiss as if he didn’t want to let her go. She didn’t want him to either, but they were here for a reason. She broke the kiss. “As much as I want to continue this, we need to speak to your dad. And making out in your car is so 1970s.”

Tate laughed. “That’s our thing though isn’t it? Doing all the traditions that are being forgotten.” He opened his door. “Come on, let’s go.”

She met Tate at the front of his car and electricity tingled through her when their palms connected. They entered the house and Tate led her through the hallway straight into the living room. Trenton was sitting in a recliner watching the big-screen TV.

“Hey, Dad,” Tate said as he approached his dad.

“Tate. You’re home earlier than I expected. Mrs. Hewitt left when Tyler got home.” He peered around Tate. “Kelly? Is that you?”

“Hi, Trenton, how are you?”

“Good. How are you?” He looked between the two of them and his eyebrow rose.
“What’s going on?”

Tate walked over and slung his arm around her shoulder. “Dad, we have some news.”
Trenton sat a little straighter. “I asked Kelly to marry me and she said yes.”

Kelly leaned into Tate’s side and watched the tears well in his dad’s eyes.

“Tate, Kelly, that’s wonderful news. Congratulations.” He struggled to get out of his chair, but he succeeded and came over to give them a hug. “I’m really happy for the both of you. Wait here, I’ve got something for you.”

He left them where they were standing. “Where’s he going?” Kelly asked, watching Trenton’s slow walk out of the room.

“I’ve no idea.”

“Should you follow him?”

Tate dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “Nope, he’s getting better and better and I don’t want him to think that I don’t trust him to be able to move around the house by himself.”

Trenton returned to the room a few minutes later and walked up to the both of them. He held out his hand toward Tate. In his hand was a black square box and Kelly’s heart jumped a beat. “Tate, I think your mom would be happy for you to have this.”

Tate gripped her hand a little tighter, but didn’t move to accept the box his dad was holding out. Why was that?

“Tate?” she murmured.

“Are you sure, Dad? What about Tyler? Shouldn’t he have this?”

Tyler? What did he have to do with the box Trenton held? And why should he have it? Damn this family was complicated but she couldn’t wait to be a part of it.

“Tyler will be fine with it, I promise. Don’t you worry.” Trenton waved his hand again and Tate took it this time. “I hope you two will be as happy as your mom and I were. I’m proud of you, son.”

Tate enveloped his dad in a hug and Kelly wiped the corner of her eye. “Thanks, Dad. I know we will be.”

“Well, I’ll leave you two to it.”

Once again, Trenton walked away, this time to his room. Kelly faced Tate when they were alone. “Is that what I think it is?”

Tate ran a finger over the box before smiling at her. “Yes.” He flipped the lid and nestled amongst the black velvet interior was a diamond ring. The setting was beautiful in its simplicity. The center stone was raised with two smaller diamonds on either side. It wasn’t flashy and she loved it.

“Oh, it’s beautiful, Tate.”

“It is, but if you want something else we can go look in Houston.”

Kelly reached out and cupped his cheek. “No, I don’t want anything else. This is perfect.”

The corners of his eyes creased as he smiled and he lifted it out and slipped the box in his pocket. She knew what was coming next, yet she couldn’t stop her heart from pounding out of her chest when he used his free hand to lift her left hand up.

“I know we’ve been through this, but let me ask you the right way this time.” He rested the ring at the tip of her finger. “Kelly Turner, will you marry me?”

“Yes.”

Tate slipped the ring on and it fit her like a glove. A sense of rightness engulfed her. Against all odds, her fling had become her happily forever after.

The End