



Overdue for a Cowboy

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Description: Sweet librarian, Maisie Graham, has a passion for books as vast as the Colorado skies. Armed with her trusty bookmobile, she journeys to rural farmland bringing the magic of books to kids who can't make it to town. But there's one story she's never dared to dream—the tale of her and the rugged cowboy, Dodge Lassiter, the man she's harbored a crush on since high school. Hidden behind her glasses, she sees herself as a plain Jane in a world full of glamorous and much more adventurous heroines. Dodge Lassiter has enough on his plate trying to run the family ranch where he and his two older brothers were left when they were kids. A fear of abandonment runs deep in his veins, making him hesitant to open his heart to romance, even if he is drawn to Maisie's kindness and intellect. He thinks she's amazing and deserves someone better than a nerdy cowboy who spends most nights hanging out with a good book and his dog.

But fate has a way of stepping in where love is concerned, and suddenly Maisie and Dodge find themselves the only two members of a secret book club, the shared owners of a rescued llama named Phyllis, and spending hours together bumping along dusty mountain roads in the bookmobile. As Maisie battles her self-doubt and Dodge wrestles with the ghosts of his past, can they find the courage to write a new chapter together?

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Chapter One

Assistant librarian, Maisie Graham was lost in thought about the latest romance novel she'd been reading the night before as she steered her car up the deserted country road, which must have been why she didn't see the llama standing in the middle of it...until it was too late.

The llama didn't even move as Maisie screamed and yanked the wheel of the Subaru Outback to the left to avoid the animal, which probably would have been okay if it weren't for the bookmobile she was towing behind the car. The bookmobile was an old camper she'd been restoring that she used to bring library books to kids in rural areas around her small Colorado mountain town of Woodland Hills.

The weight of the camper combined with the speed of the skid sent her car swerving onto the gravelly shoulder and pitching into the ditch.

Then everything seemed to happen at once.

Two of the wheels of the car lifted off the ground then the vehicle rammed into a rock and came crashing back down. A loud bang like a gunshot sounded, and Maisie's neck jerked back as the airbag deployed and slammed into her face. The seat belt wrenched across her body as it locked, and a loud groan sounded as the camper rolled onto its side and crashed into the trees on the opposite side of the ditch.

Her body was tossed back and forth like a child shaking a rag doll as the car rocked then came to a stop, angled against the embankment. The left side of the vehicle clung to the hilly part of the ditch, and Maisie's shoulder pressed awkwardly into the

driver's side door.

Pushing herself up with a pained groan, she blinked against the stars swimming around her head. Her vision blurred in the familiar way it did when she wasn't wearing her glasses—they must have come off in the crash.

The car seemed to be filled with smoke, and she choked on the powder and foul-smelling air. Fine white dust covered the interior as if her clothes and the inside of her car had been dusted with powdered sugar, except instead of smelling sweet, it stank of the acrid scent of burnt chemicals.

Her body hurt and her brain was fuzzy, but she knew enough that she needed to get help.

Her phone was in her purse. Hoping the dark blob on the floor was her bag, she reached toward it. Pain shot through her wrist, and she let out a small cry at both the hurt and the fear that it was broken. A sharp ache across the bridge of her nose caused her eyes to sting, but the wetness on her face felt different than tears. She gingerly touched her cheekbone and even with her blurry vision, she could see the bright red tinge of blood. The frame of her glasses must have cut her nose.

She blinked against the tears as she scanned the seat and floor for her glasses but didn't see them.

She also hadn't seen another car since she'd turned up this road.

Using her good hand, she tried to free herself from the seatbelt cutting across her torso but couldn't quite reach the release. Fighting a little panic and more tears, she leaned her head back against the headrest and tried to think. Logic and reason were her strong suits, so she could figure this out.

The first rule of any emergency situation was to stay calm. Although, this wasn't exactly an emergency. True, she was bleeding, couldn't see, was trapped in her seat, and had possibly broken a bone, but hey, she wasn't dying.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to come up with a plan. She just needed to reach her purse. And find her glasses.

Except she couldn't reach around her body far enough to grab the bag and a cursory pat along the seats with her hurt hand didn't yield her glasses.

At least her front windows were down—she'd never been more grateful that the air conditioning of her late model Outback was on the fritz—so at least some of the smoke and dust was clearing and she wouldn't boil to death in her car. Although the afternoon sun was beating through the windshield, making her thankful for the slight breeze of warm summer air that blew against her sweat-dampened forehead as she closed her eyes and tried to figure out a way to save herself.

She wasn't sure how long she sat like that—she might have fallen asleep—so it could have been two minutes or twenty-five. Her head felt foggy as she blinked her eyes and struggled to sit up, not sure if she was dreaming, but she swore she heard the sound of an engine. Turning her head, she strained to listen. And prayed that if it was a car, they would see her and stop to help.

Yes, it was an engine, and she heard the distinct crunch of tires on gravel as it pulled to the side of the road and stopped.

Thank goodness.

“Maisie!”

She heard her name being called followed by a dog's excited bark. Her brain might

be fuzzy, but she would recognize that voice anywhere. “Dodge?” she whispered.

No. It couldn’t be.

She must have really hit her head. There was no way that Dodge Lassiter, the guy she’d been in love with since high school, the man she imagined as the hero in every romance novel she read, would just happen to be driving up this same road. Although there was a slight chance that this road might border one of the pastures of his family’s ranch. But it made her brain hurt to think about where the many acres of the Lassiter Ranch might spread to.

A thump hit the side of the car.

“Dodge?” she called out as she turned to squint at the head peering into her window.

But this was not Dodge Lassiter. Not unless his blond hair had turned black, he’d grown a really shaggy beard, and he’d eaten dog food for lunch. This guy’s breath was terrible.

Her heart sank. This really wasn’t Dodge coming to save her. And not just because she realized this was a dog—a really big dog—sticking his head into her window and panting as he tried to lick her face, but because Dodge didn’t have a dog.

“I’m here, darlin’,” a breathless voice said from behind the shaggy mutt.

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She swallowed and tears sprung to her eyes again. It really was him. And he'd just called her darlin'. If her head wasn't already swimming, she might have swooned at the sound of it.

She squinted up at him, only able to make out a blue shirt and the shape of his cowboy hat. "But how?" she whispered.

"Maisie, you're bleeding." His voice rose in alarm as he reached through the window and gently tilted her chin toward him. "Your head is cut—not too bad—but you could have a concussion. What happened? Where else are you hurt? Talk to me."

His words broke through her haze, and she struggled to focus as she raised her right hand. "I think I might have broken my arm."

"Anything else? Your back or neck? Should I call for an ambulance? I don't want to risk moving you if I'm going to do more damage."

She shook her head. "No, I'm okay. I don't need an ambulance. I just need help getting out of this seatbelt. I can't reach the latch."

"Okay, hold on. I'll get you out of there." He lifted the handle and carefully eased the door open then filled the empty space with his body as he cradled her side against his broad chest. "I'm gonna reach around you and try to release the seat belt. Are you okay with that?"

She nodded. She was okay with anything as long as it meant she got to lean against him.

“All right. Here we go.” He reached around her, his forearm pressing against her belly, his bicep smooshing her breast.

Not that she minded. This was the closest she’d ever been to Dodge Lassiter. Heck, she normally got so flustered around him, that she could only utter a few words or make dismal or awkward attempts at small talk. The last time she’d seen him, she’d asked him how his cattle were enjoying the weather.

She’d had a crush on him since the tenth grade when she’d transferred to Woodland Hills High School and sat next to him in Sophomore English. Her mom had lost her battle to breast cancer the year before, and her dad made his living as a truck driver, which meant he was always on the road, so she’d come to live with her grandmother to finish out her last few years of high school.

She’d always been shy but losing her mother and moving to a new town had her escaping even more into the imaginary worlds of her books. And she couldn’t imagine a boy as cute as Dodge ever wanting to talk to a plain, boring girl like her—even if he did seem to like reading as much as she did. When she did occasionally talk to him, she usually got tongue-tied or couldn’t bear to look him in the eye.

They were older now. Both had left Woodland Hills to attend college then later come back to town. She had a little more confidence than she’d had in high school, and she could hold a mostly coherent conversation with him now, but her stomach still filled with butterflies whenever she was around him. And not the sweet fluttering kind, but the dive-bombing, kamikaze swirling that made her want to throw up, kind.

She swore, Dodge had only gotten more handsome—with his shaggy blond hair, scruff of whiskers, and cerulean blue eyes—but she’d stayed the same boring glasses-wearing, head-in-a-book girl. She hadn’t even changed her hairstyle in all those years. It was still the same shoulder-length mess of ordinary brown curls that ended

up in a ponytail or a messy-bun more often than not. She'd tried to wear contacts, but they made her eyes dry and burn, and it was easier to stick with her glasses.

"Maisie. You okay?" Dodge asked, concern filling his voice. "I think you stopped breathing for a second there."

"I'm fine," she assured him, not wanting to admit that she might have been holding her breath—both at the feel of his body so close to hers and with the effort of trying to suck in her stomach, which had gone soft and squishy from too much pasta and nightly bowls of ice cream.

"Okay, I've got the latch, and I'm going to release you." He had his knee wedged against the bottom edge of the door. "Don't worry if you fall into me. I'll catch you."

Her heart pounded like a hammer against her chest. She'd fallen for him years ago, but she wasn't ready for her tall, curvy body to actually fall on him. Her arm hurt and her head was bleeding, but her prayers were all focused on not knocking the wind out of him when he released the seat belt.

Chapter Two

With a click, the clasp released, and Maisie was finally free of the constricting seat belt. Her body slid sideways, colliding into Dodge. But as he'd promised, he caught her and they did not, as she'd feared, go toppling into the grass with her splatting on top of him.

In fact, he surprised her by pulling her against him in a tight hug.

"I got you," he said softly into her hair. "You're okay now."

It almost felt as if he were reassuring himself as much as her, and his hands seemed to

tremble as he clutched her back.

Letting out a long breath, he loosened his hold. Still holding onto her, he took a step back, carefully easing her out of the seat. “Keep your arm pressed against your chest, so you don’t bang it around,” he told her as he pulled her all the way out and tried to help her stand.

Her knees buckled as she tried to get her legs under her, and she grabbed onto him with her good hand. “Sorry,” she mumbled. At least part of her was. Her head was feeling completely embarrassed, but her body was loving the contact and wasn’t sorry in the least.

“Don’t worry about it,” he told her, sliding his arm around her waist to steady her. “We’re gonna take it nice and slow and get you back up to the road.” He grabbed some spare napkins she had stuffed in the pocket of her door and held them up. “I don’t want to hurt you, but that cut on your head is bleeding pretty good, so I want you to hold this against the wound, okay?”

She nodded then winced as he pressed the napkins to her forehead. He guided her good hand up to hold them in place. “We need to get the books,” she told him. “They probably fell in the crash. I need my glasses. And my purse. My phone’s in it.”

“I’ll come back for them,” he said, keeping his arm securely around her waist. “Let’s get you up to my truck first, then I’ll grab whatever you need and drive you to the hospital.”

“Hospital?” She shook her head then winced at the pain that shot through it. “No, I’ve got to get up the mountain. I’ve got work to do. I promised Eli Danvers that I’d introduce him to Captain Underpants today. And Daisy Lambert has been waiting to hear more from Lemony Snicket.”

She couldn't see his expression, but she could see the way he tilted his head and his tone sounded even more concerned. "Umm. I'm not sure how to respond to that, except to say that you might have hit your head harder than I thought. I don't know anything about any Lieutenant Underpants or lemon-whatever, but I can tell you, you're not going up the mountain today. You're going to the hospital."

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She inhaled a quick gasp as he reached down and swept up her legs. Cradling her body against him, he carried her out of the ditch and to his truck. The dog raced up the grass beside them. He set her down then pulled open the passenger door.

Squinting, she tried to look along the road as he helped her get into the truck. “What happened to the llama?”

“Did you say llama?” His voice sounded a bit strangled. “Now you’re really starting to scare me.”

“No, really. There was a llama standing in the middle of the road. I swerved to miss it, and that’s why I ran into the ditch.”

He scanned the fields on either side of the highway. “I don’t see one now. You sure it wasn’t a deer?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I saw it before I hit my head, not after.”

He shrugged. “If you say so.”

She took one last look around before climbing into the truck. No llama in sight. Had she really seen it?

He helped her into the seat, holding her arm until he was sure she was steady. “I’ll be right back. I’m going to grab your purse and the car keys and see if I can find your glasses.”

The dog jumped into the seat next to her, pushing her closer to the center. His head was a blurry black blob as he sniffed at the cut on her brow then gently rested his chin on her shoulder.

Aww. Sweet puppy.

She leaned her cheek against his furry head.

“Found them,” Dodge said a few minutes later as he slid into the seat next to her and passed her both her purse and her glasses. “The frames were bent a little, but I tried to twist them back into shape.”

“I don’t even care,” she said, putting them on and gently pushing them up her nose. She let out a sigh as the world came back into focus. “I’m just thankful I can see.”

Turning toward him, those dang butterflies took off in her stomach again. When he was blurry, she could almost pretend that he wasn’t ridiculously good-looking, but now, looking at his chiseled jaw and scruffy blond hair, she was reminded again just how out of her league he truly was.

“I’m not sure you want to see your trailer,” he said. “It’s good and stuck in that ditch.”

She let out a gasp as she turned to see her camper trailer lying almost on its side. “Oh no.”

“Don’t worry. We can get a tow truck out here to haul it and your car out,” Dodge assured her as he pulled onto the highway. “Right now, I’m more concerned with getting you to the hospital.”

Her shoulders drooped, and she bit her lip to hold back a sob. “You don’t understand.

It's not just a camper. I've spent all summer working on restoring it and turning it into a bookmobile for the library. Not only do I use it to take books out to kids in rural areas, but I entered it into a competition that could win a huge grant for our library. I don't know what I'll do if it's completely wrecked. The competition is in less than a month."

"It might not be that bad," he said. "We won't know the extent of the damage until we get the tow truck out here."

She leaned her head back against the seat. It was nice the way he kept 'we', but she knew this was her problem, and she couldn't stand the thought of letting the library—or the kids—down.

The dog laid his head on her lap and looked up at her with huge dark brown eyes. Now that she could see it better, it appeared to be a cross between a Bernese Mountain Dog and a pony. The dog was huge. Its fur was a mix of black and brown except for a white area on its chest and a tuft of white fur in the middle of its forehead.

"This dog is adorable," she said. "In a giant teddy bear slash Sasquatch kind of way. Who's is it?"

"Mine. I guess. I mean, I'm watching him for a friend, but on an extended basis. Sort of."

"Sort of a friend or sort of an extended basis?"

"Both, I guess."

"I'm confused."

“Me too. I’m still not exactly sure how it happened.” He reached a hand over to pet the dog’s head. “It was a few weeks ago. I was in Creedence at The Perk, just standing in the lobby waiting for a coffee and a breakfast sandwich,” he explained, referring to the neighboring town a few miles down the mountain from Woodland Hills. “This guy was on the phone next to me. He was a soldier and about to be deployed, and I swear, he called like five people and practically begged them to take care of his dog while he was gone. Apparently, they all said no. The guy looked so dejected, and I felt bad for the poor dog, so I told him I’d help him out and take the dog while he was gone.”

She blinked at him. “You were in a coffee shop and just told a complete stranger that you would take care of his dog?”

“He wasn’t a complete stranger. I knew from his red hair and the name tag on his uniform that he was a Johnson. And you can’t throw a rock in this county without hitting a Johnson. Or two.” His neck reddened as he backpedaled his statement. “Not that I would throw a rock at anyone. You know what I mean.”

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“Yes, I do. And you’re right. For the most part, the Johnson’s are good people.”

“Except for Brick,” they both said at the same time.

Dodge laughed. “I don’t normally like to speak ill of people, but Brick Johnson is a mean son of a gun and about as dumb as his name implies.”

“I hate to say it, but I agree with you,” she said. Brick and his wife, Lisa, had a farm outside of Woodland Hills, and their three kids were some of Maisie’s favorites on her bookmobile route. “His kids are sweet though. And smart.”

“They must have got that from Lisa.”

She grinned then the dog nudged her hand as if asking for her to pet him some more. She obliged by rubbing his fuzzy neck. “Did you know how big he was when you took him on?”

Dodge chuckled. “No. That was a surprise. Along with the five hundred pounds of dog chow the guy dropped off with him. Although I should have guessed when he told me the dog’s name was Moose. I’d been hoping the name would be ironic.”

She laughed. “The name fits. But holy cow. That’s a lot of dog food. How long are you keeping him for?”

Dodge shrugged. “He wasn’t sure. Could be a year. Or maybe two.”

“That’s not dog-sitting. That’s custody.”

He shrugged again. “No one has ever suffered from the company of a good dog.”

Maisie swallowed at the sudden burn in her throat. Her voice was soft, and she couldn’t look at him as she said, “You’re a good man, Dodge Lassiter.”

“I don’t know about that. My brothers just think I’m a sucker for any animal in need.”

“Like I said.”

Chapter Three

Dodge eased the truck into a parking spot in front of the pharmacy. The hospital had called in a prescription for some pain meds for Maisie, and he wanted to grab them before he took her home.

They hadn’t been in the emergency room for as long as he’d thought they’d be. Although every minute there had seemed like hours to him. He hated hospitals, hated the antiseptic smell and the hushed hallways that only amplified the sound of someone’s phlegmy cough. And there was always someone in the hospital with a phlegmy cough.

The doctor had checked Maisie out and ordered an ex-ray of her arm, which thankfully turned out to be sprained instead of broken. Dodge was a little surprised to hear she didn’t have a concussion, considering all the nonsense she’d been spouting about llamas and lemony underpants.

He cut the engine and turned to tell her he would just be a minute, but she was sound asleep, slumped against the passenger door. Moose was pressed against her hip, his head in her lap, Maisie’s good arm wrapped around his neck.

That crazy mutt was already smitten with the sweet librarian.

A smile pulled at Dodge's lips as he looked at Maisie. It was easy to see why the dog was so taken with her. She was one of the kindest people he knew, and she looked adorable in little pink sneakers, jeans that rolled at her ankles and a pink T-shirt that read, "A bookworm is my Patronus". A lock of her curly brown hair fell across her forehead and rested against her bruised cheek.

His smile pulled into a frown, and his heart twisted at the sight of that bruise and the blood caked in the edge of her hair. The nurse had splinted and wrapped Maisie's wrist then secured it in a blue sling strapped around her shoulder. Three small steri-strips held together the cut on her brow. Another smudge of bruising darkened her other cheekbone.

But things could have been much worse.

He closed his eyes and inhaled a deep breath, fighting the panic building in his chest and trying to block out the images of another car accident that filled his head.

Stop. Maisie is okay. She isn't Julie.

He swallowed and pulled in another deep breath before opening his eyes. His hands hurt, and he realized he was clenching his fingers tightly around the steering wheel. He loosened his hold and forced himself to relax back against the seat. The dog lifted his head and offered him a concerned whine.

"I'm okay, boy," Dodge assured the dog as he scratched his flank.

Moose dropped his head back onto Maisie's lap. The nurse had already given her a pain pill, and it must have really knocked her out because her steady breathing hadn't changed with the dog's movement.

Dodge considered his options. It was after six and the night had cooled enough that

the truck wasn't hot. And this was Woodland Hills, population of less than fifteen hundred people, so he knew she would be safe if he left her for the few minutes it would take him to run in and grab the prescription.

He eased out of the truck then leaned his head through the open window to talk to the dog. "Keep an eye on her, boy. I'll be right back."

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The drugstore was mostly empty of customers, but Dodge knew the cashier who was standing at the register leafing through a magazine. They'd gone to school together, but she'd been a year ahead of him. "Hey Alyssa."

"Hey Dodge," she answered, closing the magazine then looking beyond him toward the door, no doubt hoping his older, and much more charming, brother would walk in after him. "Chevy with you?"

He shook his head, and her shoulders slumped. He was used to that reaction. Chevy was the middle brother—the one everyone loved—the charmer who made people laugh and who flirted with anything in a skirt. Chevy loved a party and could create one just by showing up. The total opposite of Dodge, who usually preferred horses and dogs to people and was content to never leave the ranch and spend his evenings in the company of a good book.

He pointed out the window to where his truck sat. "Can you see that woman asleep out there?"

She nodded. "You mean Maisie?"

"Yeah," he said, already walking toward the back of the store to where the pharmacy counter sat. "Can you keep an eye on her and holler at me if she wakes up?"

"Sure. Seems a little early in the day to be passed out. You two have a party?"

"No. She's just asleep. She was in a car accident, and the pain meds knocked her out. Just yell if you see her wake up," he called, his tone probably sounding too firm.

“Sheesh. Okay,” she said with a huff. “I’m watching her.”

He’d grabbed several things on his way to the back of the store and laid a couple of bottles of Sprite and Gatorade, two cans of chicken soup, a bag of Cheetos, a bottle of Advil, two protein bars, two Snickers, and a package of gummy bears on the pharmacy counter.

Abe Abernathy had been the owner and pharmacist of Abernathy Drugs for as long as Dodge could remember. Abe knew everyone in town and probably knew all their secrets from the medication he filled for them. But the man always had a kind word and never gossiped, which made him a good guy in Dodge’s book.

Thinking about gossip, he realized he probably shouldn’t have called out through the entire store that Maisie had been in a car accident. But he didn’t want Alyssa, or anyone else, spreading stories that Maisie had gone on a bender with him and was passed out on Main Street in his truck. He’d spent enough time in his life fending off rumors about his mom being a drunk—although those rumors were true—but he didn’t want anyone saying that about Maisie.

Abe smiled at Dodge and held up a white pharmacy bag. “I heard. Is Maisie okay?” he asked as he rang up the stack of items.

“Yeah, she will be. Conked her head and sprained her wrist. She needs some rest, but she’ll be all right,” Dodge told him, this time keeping his voice quieter.

“Those will help,” the pharmacist told him, pointing to the bag. “Tell her to take one every four hours to stay ahead of the pain. They might make her drowsy, so no driving.” His instructions echoed the ones the doctor had given them in the emergency room. “And she doesn’t have to take them with food, but if they bother her stomach, a few crackers should help.” He nodded to the aisle of crackers and chips.

“Thanks,” Dodge told him as he grabbed a box of Saltines and added it to the pile. He tapped his card to the reader, grabbed his bags, and hurried back toward the front of the store.

“She hasn’t moved,” Alyssa told him as he strode past.

“Thanks,” he called back as he pushed through the door and headed to the truck. Maisie stirred as he slid back into the driver’s seat and pulled the door shut. “You doin’ okay?”

She nodded as she blearily blinked her eyes. “Tired.”

“I know.” He reached to rub her shoulder, then pulled his hand back and started the engine. The scent of her—something floral with a hint of vanilla—filled the cab of his truck and it was doing funny things to his insides. The sight of her, battered and bruised and slumped against the door, not only had his protective instincts coming out, but other feelings as well. Feelings that had him wanting to scoop her into his arms and kiss away the bruises and pain. And he hadn’t had feelings like that in a long time. “I’ll have you home and in your own bed in no time.”

She laughed as her eyes closed again, and she muttered, “Dodge Lassiter is taking me home and to bed. I must be dreaming.”

He shook his head as he backed up and pulled onto the street, but he couldn’t keep the grin from crossing his face.

He drove a few blocks and turned onto Fourth Street. He knew where she lived, not just because everyone in Woodland Hills knew where everyone else lived, but because she had told him about the small house she’d bought the year before and renovated herself when they were working together a few weeks earlier at the rundown farmhouse his oldest brother, Ford’s girlfriend, Elizabeth, had purchased.

Elizabeth had assigned them the upstairs bedrooms to paint, and they'd had fun that day as they'd worked together.

Maisie had always acted quiet and a bit shy around him, but that day, as she had focused on cutting in the trim and he had concentrated on the paint-rollering, they had talked easily about books they'd both read, how things at the ranch were going, and her work at the library.

They had a lot in common, not just in the people they knew or their shared love of reading, but in the harder parts of their lives, the parts where they had both been abandoned by parents and both had close relationships with the grandparents who had stepped in to raise them.

They didn't say those things aloud, but having known each other so long, they knew them, and there was an unspoken bond between them in that regard. He'd always considered Maisie a friend, had always thought about her as that sweet, shybookworm he'd known forever, but more and more lately, he'd noticed how big and blue her eyes were behind her glasses and how pretty she'd become.

He turned into the driveway of a small blue house with white shutters and a neatly mowed lawn. An array of colorful flowers filled the garden areas on either side of the front steps. White slats lined a wide front porch that held a well-worn wicker sofa covered in blue and white overstuffed pillows.

Dodge carefully opened the passenger door so Maisie wouldn't fall out and then gently nudged her shoulder. "We're here."

She blinked open her eyes and let out a sleepy sigh. "Home sweet home."

He got an arm around her and helped her up the steps. Moose padded along behind them. Dodge pointed to the rug on the porch. "Stay."

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“It’s okay,” Maisie said, digging in her purse for what Dodge assumed were her keys. “He’s fine to come in. Just don’t let the cat out.” She held up a ring of keys but missed the doorknob as she tried to insert one in the lock.

“I got it,” Dodge said, taking the keys from her and unlocking the door.

Maisie’s house was a one-level ranch style with an open floor plan. Directly in front of them sat a cozy living room with a matching gray overstuffed sofa and chair and a large fireplace. A pink fuzzy throw lay over the arm of the chair, and a tall stack of books sat on the floor next to it.

Dodge smiled at the four floor-to-ceiling bookcases that covered the far wall. All the shelves were neatly lined with an array of books that had him itching to explore their various titles. A small nightlight in the shape of a book was plugged into the outlet inside the door and gave off just enough light to create a cozy glow.

The flooring was weathered gray hardwood, and Maisie had strategically scattered throw rugs throughout the room and down the hallway that Dodge assumed led to the bedrooms.

He set Maisie’s keys and the bag of medication and groceries on the large island that separated the living room from the spacious kitchen. The light above the sink was on, and a coffee mug was turned upside down and rested on a stainless-steel grate inside of a sleek black granite sink. The kitchen had white cabinets, gray and white quartz countertops, and touches of black and yellow with several honeypot and honeybee decorations.

The space felt good to him. Relaxed and nice. A place that made him want to curl up on the sofa with a cup of coffee and put his feet up. Homey.

“Your house is wonderful,” Dodge told her sincerely.

“I know,” she said on a big sleepy sigh as she leaned against the back of the sofa. “I love it so much. I did it almost all by myself.”

“That’s amazing,” he told her, and meant it. He reached for her arm as she started to slide off the side of the sofa. “Why don’t you show me where your bedroom is. I think you might need to lie down.”

“Good idea,” she said then pointed to the hallway. “Take me to bed Cowboy.”

He pressed his lips together to keep from grinning again. Maisie Graham on pain meds was a whole different woman than the quiet librarian he was used to.

Her bedroom was large enough that he wondered if she hadn’t knocked down a wall between two smaller ones, but it was decorated with the same cozy bookish charm. The walls were painted a light silvery gray, and her bed was covered in a thick pink quilt and had way too many pillows. Several of them had graphics of books or cute bookish quotes like ‘Just One More Chapter’ or ‘My Weekend is All Booked’.

One corner had been made into an obvious reading nook with tall bookcases framing a wide overstuffed blue chair and a huge matching ottoman that stuck out into the room. It was almost as big as a twin bed and looked inviting with several comfy-looking throws draped over one arm and more pillows lining the chair. A small end table held a lamp, a mug warmer, a journal with a pen sticking out of it, and another stack of books. Two more stacks were on the floor in front of the table.

“This looks a lot like my room at home,” he told Maisie. “Except for the millions of

pillows and all the bookish knickknacks.” He also had a tall stuffed bookcase in his bedroom, stacks of books on his bedside table and one on the floor by his chair. “And instead of a cozy oversized one like yours, I just have a ratty recliner that used to be my grandpa’s.”

His brothers gave him a hard time for spending so much time alone, but he didn’t feel alone when he was immersed in adventures and fantasy worlds where all the death and pain was only fiction.

“I’d like to see your bedroom some time,” Maisie said as she dropped onto the edge of her bed and fell back into a cloud of pillows.

Dodge wasn’t sure how to respond to that, so instead he focused on lifting her legs onto the mattress and pulling off her sneakers. He tossed them toward the closet so she wouldn’t trip on them when she got out of bed. “Do you want some water? Or something to eat? I bought you some chicken noodle soup.”

“You bought soup? That was so nice. I’d like some soup. Soup would be good.” Her eyes drifted closed again. “Soup is kind of a funny word, isn’t it? Soup. Soup. Soup.” She changed her tone each time she repeated the word.

Dodge shook his head as he smiled down at her. “Are you okay if I use your kitchen to make us some supper?”

“Dodge Lassiter, you can use anything of mine that you want.” Her eyes were still closed, but an impish grin curved her lips. “And I mean that in the dirtiest possible way.”

He laughed. He couldn’t help it. He’d never heard her say anything even remotely crass or crude, but apparently the reserved librarian had a bit of a dirty mind. He kind of liked it.

Soup. Focus on the soup.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” he told her. “You okay on your own for a few?”

Her breathing evened out, signaling she’d fallen back asleep. He covered her up with one of the throw blankets from the chair. Moose had followed them into the room, and he jumped up on the bed and stretched out next to Maisie’s legs.

Dodge eased out of the room and made his way back to the kitchen. He put the drinks in the fridge and found a small pan to heat the soup in. Canned chicken soup was nothing fancy, but it was warm and seemed to always hit the spot when he felt ill or out of sorts. Not that Maisie was ill, but he had a feeling she would be hurting when the meds wore off. She would probably find more bruises in the next few days.

He was impressed with the neat and organized way she’d laid out her kitchen, and after opening several cupboards, he found everything he needed to put together a tray for her. He turned the soup to low but had a mug with a few crackers ready for when she woke up.

He had just poured a glass of water to take into her when a muffled thud came from the direction of the bedroom.

Then he took off running when he heard Maisie’s voice call out, “Help!”

Chapter Four

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Dodge raced down the hall and into Maisie's bedroom, then pulled up short at the sight of her standing next to her bed. One of her arms was bare and caught up in her T-shirt, which was pulled halfway over her head, as if she'd tried to pull it off and gotten it stuck on the sling. The fabric covered her face, but completely exposed her torso and gave Dodge an excellent view of a sexy-as-hell black lacy push-up bra.

"Hold on," he said, struggling to reconcile the sin-sexy underwear with the normally demure librarian as he hurried to her side. "You're going to hurt yourself. Let me help."

He gently took hold of the T-shirt while trying to avoid staring down at the impressive amount of cleavage on display. And struggling to keep his thoughts from racing with images of filling his hands with her lush breasts.

This was new.

He liked Maisie. They'd known each other and been friends for a long time. And if he were being honest, he might even admit to having a bit of a crush on her in high school. And maybe still an attraction now. He wasn't interested in dating anyone, but he had to admit that the sweet librarian made him smile more than usual when he was around her.

But this—this was a new image of Maisie that made him do more than smile. This image had his heart pounding as blood surged through his veins, and his mouth went dry as he reached to help her and was suddenly all too aware of her lavish curves and creamy skin.

“I was just trying to put my pajamas on.” Her voice was muffled as it came through the fabric of the T-shirt. “I think I got my hair stuck in my watchband.”

Her jeans were lying in a pile on the floor, and she now wore a pair of light blue cotton pajama shorts that matched the blue sleeveless top tossed on the edge of the bed. The top showed a picture of a cat holding a book and the caption read “Easily distracted by cats and books”.

This was more like the style of clothing he imagined when he thought of Maisie—cute graphic tees and little cardigan sweaters. The lacy intimates were sending his brain—and certain other parts of his body—into overdrive.

Which made him the world’s shittiest caregiver and friend. He was supposed to be helping her—she had a sprained wrist, for Pete’s sake—not getting hard at the sight of her half-naked body.

Gah. Now he was imagining her whole-naked body.

Down boy.

She turned, and he saw a faint purplish bruise cutting across her shoulder where she must have slammed into the seatbelt. And all his thoughts flipped back into protector mode—or in this case, protect her, from the likes of him and his dirty mind.

“I got you,” he said, trying to untangle her arm from the T-shirt. “Dang. Your hair is caught in your watch. How the devil did you manage this?” He carefully loosened the strands of hair hooked around the watch’s dial then undid the straps of the sling so he could tug the shirt the rest of the way over her head. “Watch your wrist,” he told her as he gently pulled the shirt sleeve over her bandaged wrist.

Her shoulders slumped as she let out a sigh. “I’m free. Thank you.” She threw her

arms around his neck and hugged him.

His body reacted before his brain did, and his arms came up to hold her against him, his mind going back to all those naked thoughts as her lace-encased breasts pressed against his chest. And now all he could think about was taking his T-shirt off too.

She pulled back and looked up at him, her face inches from his as she stared up into his eyes. She tenderly touched the pads of her fingertips to his cheek as she pulled in a shaky breath.

Her eyes still held that sleepy, dreamy look from the pain medication, and her body was loose in his arms. “You are the hottest guy in this whole town. And I’m just a girl standing in front of a boy in her push-up bra and cat-lover pajama pants trying to tell him how much she likes him.” She let out a little giggle. “That didn’t sound the same as it had in the movie, but that’s okay, because this is just a dream anyway.”

“A dream?” he asked, trying to keep his focus on her words and not on the feel of her soft skin under his hands.

“Of course this is a dream,” she told him. “Otherwise, this would be pretty embarrassing, don’t you think?” She giggled again then sent a shiver running down his spine as her gaze dropped to his mouth and she grazed the edge of her thumb along his bottom lip. “But this isn’t the first time you’ve shown up in my dreams, Dodge Lassiter. Or the first time you’ve kissed me like this...”

She pushed up on her toes and pressed a soft kiss to his lips.

He should not be kissing her. She thought this was a dream.

This isn’t right.

His whole body was screaming at him to untangle himself from her arms and put her back in bed.

But then she tilted her head and deepened the kiss and suddenly it felt exactly right—like he'd been waiting years for this one moment when their lips would touch.

And he couldn't help himself—he surrendered.

For just a moment, he lost himself in the delicious taste of her, the feel of her lush body pressed to his.

And he kissed her back.

It started out soft. Then she melted into him and made a sound like a contented kitten sigh against his lips. Her good hand clutched his back, and all sense abandoned him as he ravished her mouth.

He was keeping his hands in check, even though he wanted to fill them with every part of her, to tangle in her mass of curly hair, but he held them at her waist, his fingers digging into the soft flesh as she held her in place, still cognizant enough to try not to hurt her arm or her bruised torso.

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Damn. What am I doing?

She'd been hurt. She was on pain medicine. His brain was yelling at him—he had to stop.

He couldn't stop.

He had to stop.

Finally, he forced himself to pull away. His breath ragged, his heart racing, he peered down at her, wondering if now that they'd stopped kissing, she would push him away. But instead, she closed her eyes and nestled against his chest as she let out another of those soft, satisfied sighs.

"I always knew you'd be a great kisser," she murmured into his shirt. "But that was better than anything I could have ever imagined. You kind of just rocked my world."

Guilt settled in his gut like a rock falling to the bottom of a lake. Great. Just what he'd always wanted to hear. He'd just rocked the world of a semi-lucid woman on pain-meds who thought she was dreaming.

Probably not his finest moment.

But for the record, she had kissed him first.

He reached around her back, grabbed her pajama shirt from the bed, and carefully pulled it on over her head. He gently guided first her bandaged hand then her good

one through the arm holes of the shirt and pulled it down. He could think more clearly now that all that skin and cleavage wasn't on display, and he helped fit the sling into place and tightened the strap over her shoulder.

Pulling down the comforter and top sheet, he guided her back into bed. Her eyes closed again as her head hit the pillow and her breathing evened out as he peered down at her, noticing the loose waves of hair that fell over her shoulder. She looked a little like an angel. A book-loving librarian angel...in a black lacy bra.

He carefully took her glasses off and set them on the nightstand next to her. The big lug of a dog had never left the bed, and he rolled closer to Maisie with a groan.

Feeling like a creep for just standing next to her bed and watching her, he went back into the kitchen and ate one of the protein bars. He made a quick trip out to his truck to grab the Ziplock bag of dog food and collapsible food and water dishes he always carried with him, in case he got stuck out in the field after the dog's mealtime.

Moose was waiting for him at the door when he came back inside, the dog's inner food-radar apparently stronger than his need to cuddle with Maisie.

He put the soup in the refrigerator, washed the pan, and wiped down the counters as the dog ate. He could always heat the soup again if Maisie woke up and was hungry.

Moose lifted his face from his now empty bowl and tilted his head as he stared in puzzlement at something behind Dodge. He turned to see an orange and yellow cat sitting in the door of the kitchen that led to a small laundry room and pantry. Her tail swished around her, and she licked one paw, seemingly unconcerned that a strange man and a dog the size of a small pony were in her kitchen. Cats had a way of doing that.

"Hey kitty," Dodge said. "Where'd you come from?"

Apparently, that wasn't as important as where she was going. With another swoosh of her tail and an annoyed meow, she turned and flounced into the laundry room. He heard the soft thud of her landing on the washing machine and noted the water and empty food bowls on top of the dryer as he poked his head into the room. A clear container of cat food sat next to the bowls, and he dumped a scoop into the empty dish and refilled the other one with fresh water.

The cat offered him another meow that could have meant thank you or it's about dang time.

Dodge offered her a nod in return then turned his head as he heard a soft knock at the front door.

Chapter Five

Dodge opened the door and was surprised to see Chevy standing on Maisie's porch holding a plastic grocery bag and a grease-stained paper sack bearing the name of The Tippy Pig, their favorite local restaurant famous for its baby back ribs and secret recipe barbeque sauce.

His stomach growled as the scent of grilled meat and greasy fries wafted into the room. "Hey Brother. What are you doing here?"

Moose padded over to sniff at the bags and Chevy's boots, probably just as excited to see the man as he was to smell the food.

"Didn't think you'd had a chance to eat, so I brought you some grub." Chevy held up the bags. "Not much. Couple of cheeseburgers and some fries."

"You're a life saver, man," Dodge told him, taking the bags and stepping back to let his brother in.

Chevy shook his head. “I can’t stay. Just wanted to check on you all and bring you some supplies. How’s she doing?”

Dodge had called his family earlier that day and filled them in on what had happened and had texted them with updates after they’d left the emergency room. “She’s asleep. The pain meds knocked her out. And made her a little loopy. I don’t feel comfortable leaving her alone though, especially since she could have a small concussion, so I’ll probably crash on the sofa.”

“I figured as much.” He pointed to the second bag. “Packed you a couple of things—a clean shirt and socks, stick of deodorant, your toothbrush, and a cell phone charger. And Gramps stuck in some cookies.”

Dodge smiled, touched at the gestures of his brother and his grandfather. “You guys didn’t have to do this, but I’m glad you did. Thanks.”

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“No problem. We all love Maisie.” Chevy clapped a hand on his brother’s shoulder and his brow furrowed as his expression changed to one of concern. “How about you? You doin’ okay with all this?”

A hard ache squeezed at his chest. But Dodge pushed the pain away—just like he always did—as he nodded at his brother. “Yeah, sure. I’m okay. I’ll admit I was pretty rattled when I drove up and saw Maisie’s car in the ditch and she wasn’t moving. But it’s not like...before. She’s going to feel it tomorrow, but she’ll be okay.”

“Yeah. Of course she is. She’s sweet, but I’ll bet she’s tougher than she looks.”

“She is,” Dodge answered, thinking about how she’d wanted to save the books over worrying about her own injuries.

His brother’s comment reminded Dodge of how she’d look half an hour ago, and ~~tough~~ wasn’t the word that came to mind. ~~Sexy~~ was, and that thought alone staggered him. It wasn’t the way he usually thought of Maisie, but now he couldn’t seem to get the image of that black lace against her pale skin—or that kiss—out of his mind.

“I’m here if you need me,” Chevy said, giving Dodge’s shoulder a squeeze before letting go. “And don’t worry about your chores tomorrow. I’ll cover you.”

“I appreciate it.” He’d briefly thought about how he was going to get back to the ranch to feed his horse and the cattle in the morning but had just figured he’d go after Maisie was awake and he knew she was all right. Or he thought about sneaking home

and trying to get back before she woke up. Now he didn't have to worry.

Chevy offered him a quick nod of his head as he took another step back. "I know you'd do the same for me. Tell Maisie we're thinking about her and give her a hug for me when she wakes up."

"Um...yeah, okay." Dodge stumbled on his words, heat flaring up his neck as he thought about hugging Maisie.

His brother raised an eyebrow as he reversed his motion and took a step closer. "Hold up. What's that weird look about?" Chevy's gaze bore into him as if trying to read his thoughts, which he'd pretty much always been able to do. They'd always dubbed it the middle child thing because even as kids, Chevy could always seem to read the emotions of him and their oldest brother, Ford. A cocky grin curved his lips. "Did something happen with you and Maisie?"

"No." Yes. Something had definitely happened. That kiss had awakened something in him that he'd long since buried.

Chevy's grin widened as if he didn't believe his brother for a second. "But did you want something to?"

Dodge shook his head, the familiar anxiety building in his chest. He wasn't going down that road again. Ever. He couldn't. "Stop. No. It's not like that. We're just friends."

"You sure? Because you and Maisie seem like a perfect fit. She's a sweetheart and dating a librarian would be great for a nerdy bookworm like you."

"Yeah, I'm sure," he said, his tone turning more serious. The memories of his past swirled up from his stomach and tightened around his heart like a fist squeezing a

ball. He forced himself to take a calming breath. “You know I’ll never let myself get involved like that again.”

“Okay. Sorry, I didn’t mean anything.” The teasing grin fell from Chevy’s face, and he reached a hand out to grip his brother’s shoulder again. “But I really hope that’s not true. You don’t have to spend your life alone.”

He shrugged. Alone was better than heartbroken and shattered. “Anyway. Thanks for dropping this stuff off,” he said, hoping to change the subject. “Appreciate it.”

“No problem. Keep us posted on how Maisie is doing. And let us know if you need anything else.”

Maisie blinked awake, her head still groggy, but her bladder was full, and her throat was completely parched. She threw back the covers and sat up on the side of the bed, disoriented as she stared down at her cat pajamas. She could barely remember putting them on.

The windows were dark, and the room was lit only by the soft glow of her bedside lamp. How long had she been asleep?

She patted the nightstand and let out a thankful sigh when the tips of her fingers touched her glasses. Putting them on, she was surprised, and pleased, to see a cup of water sitting next to a small saucer holding several saltine crackers and a prescription bottle of pain medication with her name on the label. She took a big drink of the water. It felt amazing on her dry throat.

A note sat next to the saucer that read, “Take one pill at eight o’clock. Eat the crackers first.”

The digital clock read seven-fifty-five, but she figured it was close enough. She

smiled around a cracker as she stuffed it into her mouth. The note had to be from Dodge. He must've written it before he'd left.

She ate two more crackers then washed down a pain pill with the rest of the water.

Standing, her whole body achy and sore, she felt a little dizzy, but was able to shuffle into the small bathroom in her bedroom. Enough light from the bedroom shone into the bathroom that she could see to take care of her nightly routine. The sling made everything awkward, so she didn't bother with washing and moisturizing her face, but she could still manage brushing her teeth with her good hand.

Bits and pieces of her day flitted through her mind as she rinsed her mouth and applied a swipe of lip balm. She remembered being in the emergency room and parked outside of the pharmacy, but she didn't remember going inside to get the pills. And she knew she didn't have any saltine crackers in her pantry. So, Dodge must've bought them for her.

She faintly remembered him coming into her house, then that's where things got a little fuzzy. Having him in her home must have sparked all the fantasies about him, because she'd been dreaming that he'd kissed her and put her to bed.

Heat flamed her cheeks, just thinking about his soft lips and warm hands, as she shuffled back to her bed, then gave a yelp of surprise at the man and giant black dog standing in the doorway of her room.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you," Dodge said, as Moose padded over to gently nudge at her hand.

"I didn't know you were still here." She pressed her good hand to her chest, trying to quell the hard pounding of her heart.

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He'd stayed? For her? The thought had her stomach feeling like someone had poured jumping beans into it.

"Of course I'm still here. I wasn't going to leave you alone." His eyes cut to the bedside table. "I was just coming in to tell you it was time to take another pill. It's been four hours, and the doctor said it was important to stay ahead of the pain."

"I just took one," she told him. "And thanks for the crackers and the water."

"I made soup too. But you fell asleep again, so I stuck it in the fridge. I can heat it back up for you if you're hungry. Or I bought a couple of protein bars if that sounds better."

Geez, how long had he been here? And how much stuff had he bought at the store?

At the mention of food, the jumping beans felt like they were suddenly being tossed around the spin cycle of a washing machine. Her hand moved from her chest to her stomach as she shook her head. "Thank you, but I don't think I'm up for much food right now."

"Okay, well, um...do you need anything else?" Dodge glanced around the room, anywhere but at her, and she suddenly realized she was wearing only a skimpy pair of pajamas.

She climbed back into bed and pulled the top sheet up to her neck. Moose jumped onto the mattress and settled in next to her with a groan. He rolled toward her, tipping his head back in a shameless attempt to get a neck scratch—to which Maisie willingly

obliged.

“Sorry about that,” Dodge said, taking a step toward her. “You can push him down if you want. He loves to cuddle but he doesn’t realize how big he is, and sometimes he gets a little needy.”

“He’s fine. I like him. We’re friends, aren’t we, Moose?” she asked the huge mutt, to which she received several dog kisses in reply.

“You’re sweet.” He stood awkwardly at the door, shifting from one foot to the other, as if he wasn’t sure if he should come into the room or leave. His gaze once again cast around the room, this time landing on the latest John Grisham novel on her nightstand. “I’m reading that one too,” he said, pointing to the book. “I loved *The Firm*, but I’m only on chapter three in this one.”

“I just finished it. I loved *The Firm* too. It was the first one I read of his, and it’s so fun to have a sequel after all these years. I think you’ll like it,” she told him, a funny quell of happiness rising in her at their shared regard for the same author. “Maybe when you’re done, we can chat about what we thought of it. Like a mini-book club.”

Like a mini-book club? Could she be any more of a dork? Why had she said that? She should have just said something about how she’d liked to hear what he thought of it when he was done—not ask him to be in a book club with her. Especially one where they were the only two members.

But he was grinning as he shrugged, apparently not bothered by her dorky comment. “Sure. Just don’t tell my brothers. They already think I’m a huge book nerd. They’d never stop teasing me if they heard I was in a book club...even one with just two people.”

She smiled back. “Then it will be our secret. We’ll call it *The Secret Society of Book*

Nerds, and no one will ever know about it but us.” The happy feeling in her chest grew at the thought of being in a secret club with Dodge Lassiter...even if it was completely dorky and no one else knew but them.

“You’re on,” he said.

“I can’t believe you’re still here,” she said after a few seconds of neither of them apparently knowing what to say next. “You must be so bored. What have you been doing this whole time?”

He shrugged again. “I haven’t been bored at all. I think I’ve spent the last hour just checking out all the books on your shelves in the living room. You’ve got quite a library. And I made some calls, checked in with the towing company. They took your car and the camper to the shop. Hal said he’d call with an estimate when they’ve figured out the extent of the damage.” He didn’t need to say which shop—Hal’s Auto Repair was the only one in town.

“Oh no, my books.” She pushed up from the bed, panic flaring in her chest at the sudden thought of her precious books getting ruined in the crash and then toppling around the back of the camper as it was towed to town. “I need to get the books out of the bookmobile, before they get any more damaged.” She took a step, reaching toward the pile of clothes lying on the floor, then pressed her hand to her forehead as a wave of dizziness washed over her.

“Steady now,” Dodge said, practically leaping to her side. Then his warm hand was under her arm, supporting her as he gently guided her back into bed. “Don’t worry about the books. I called Elizabeth, and she and Ford got them all out before they towed the camper.”

“What do you mean by got them all out? There were hundreds of books in there.” Her voice caught just thinking about the damage. Because the bookmobile was geared

toward kids, she'd spent the last year collecting tons of picture books, chapter books, and middle grade novels to fill the shelves inside. She had a small section of adult books too, but she mainly took requests or brought out specific books with her that she would recommend to the parents of the kids on her route.

"I know. I looked inside the camper when I went back for your stuff."

She cringed, almost afraid to ask. "How bad was it?"

"It was hard to tell. But I knew you would want to save the books, so I called Elizabeth from the hospital while you were getting your arm x-rayed, and she said she'd find some boxes and totes, and she and Ford would take care of it and make sure they emptied the trailer of books before they tried to tow it."

Her shoulders sagged in relief, and she sank back into her pillows. She and Elizabeth had only known each other a few weeks, but they'd hit it off right away and had become quite good friends in that time. They shared a love of reading, and Maisie knew Elizabeth would handle her books with care. "I'm heartsick about the damage to the trailer, but that makes me feel so much better about the books." She tilted her head at Dodge. "That was really thoughtful of you."

He lifted one shoulder in a small shrug. "I was just worried about you. Seeing your car in the ditch like that really threw me. I was just standing around the hospital, feeling useless, and trying to think of ways I could help."

His words formed a lump in her throat. Which was probably dumb. Dodge was just that kind of man—he would have helped anyone in the same way. But he had said he was worried about her.

She swallowed. "You've helped me in so many ways today. I never even expected you to stay at the hospital."

He drew his head back. “Geez. Thanks. You think I’m the kind of guy who would drop you off at the emergency room and expect you to take an Uber home?”

“Well, no,” she backpedaled. “I didn’t mean anything against you.”

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I just didn't think I was worth sticking around for, a tiny voice whispered in her head.

"And besides," she said, trying to lighten up the tone of their conversation, "you know we don't have Ubers in this town. We only have Ernie Trimble, and I heard the last time someone called him for a ride, he drove so slowly that they could have gotten to the market faster if they'd walked."

Dodge laughed. "Poor Ernie. I do not understand why an eighty-two-year-old man decided to become the self-professed taxi driver of this town. Did you see he even had his minivan painted bright yellow and added a big magnet on the side that says, "Trimble's Taxi Service"?"

"Oh no. But it doesn't surprise me." She laughed but her laughter turned into a yawn as the pain meds must have started to kick in. "Sorry. These pills just make me so tired."

Dodge shook his head. "Don't be sorry. You need your rest. I'll be here if you need me. Oh, and also, I met your cat."

Her eyelids felt heavy as her head sank further into the pillows. "Then I'm even more sorry. She can be a tyrant. Her name's April—for April Ludgate."

"The mean girl from that show, Park and Rec?"

Maisie nodded, her voice feeling as if it were drifting away. "She seems sweet, but she's got a dark side. And she pretty much hates everyone. Sometimes even me."

Drowsiness was pulling her down, but her lips curved into a smile as she heard Dodge's soft chuckle and his murmured, "I doubt that. No one could hate you."

Chapter Six

Maisie woke the next morning to sunlight streaming across her pillow. Her head felt groggy—she imagined either from the drug-induced sleep or from the airbag slamming into it. She hated taking pain meds, they always knocked her out then left her feeling like she had a hangover when she woke up.

A soft purring sound filled the room, and she turned her head to see Dodge sprawled out on her reading chair, her pink and white fuzzy blanket across his body, his cowboy boots on the floor next to the ottoman, and her cranky cat curled in the crook of his arm, purring like a well-oiled lawnmower.

She couldn't believe he'd stayed the whole night. And she really couldn't believe her cat was curled up next to him, content as a bug in a cowboy-sized rug.

That throw he was using had never been one she preferred, but it suddenly became her new favorite as she imagined the scent of Dodge clinging to its fibers. The John Grisham book sat on the end table, and she was pleased to see he hadn't dog-eared any pages or left it tented at his place.

He was still asleep, and she took her time studying him, letting her gaze linger on his long legs, his strong arms, his chiseled jaw, the set of his mouth. She stared at his lips, imagining what it would be like to kiss them. Then heat flushed her cheeks as she remembered standing next to her bed the night before, her arms around his neck, their bodies pressed together, heat filling her as they'd passionately kissed.

But that had been a dream. Hadn't it?

She shook her head, trying to remember what she'd dreamed versus what really happened, as fragments of the night before played through her mind. She had a clear image of kissing him in only her bra and pajama shorts, but surely that had been the dream part. But then how had she gotten her T-shirt off over the sling and then gotten it fastened again over her pajama top?

Her cheeks flamed again. In her dream, she'd taken advantage of the fact that Dodge Lassiter was in her bedroom and practically thrown herself at him, wrapping her good arm around his neck and kissing him for all she was worth. But that's only because she was 'dream Maisie' not 'real Maisie'.

What if she really had kissed him?

In the dream, she remembered him kissing her back, and she could almost recapture the feel of his muscular chest pressed to hers. But if that were real, then that also meant he'd seen her half-naked, wearing only tiny shorts and a lacy push-up bra.

Thank goodness I was wearing one of my best bras.

But it probably wasn't real. Was it?

What was real was that Dodge had spent the night in her bedroom. Albeit, on her reading chair and snuggled up with her cat, but she was still counting it as a win. His dog was sprawled on his back in the bed next to her, his furry legs stretched out in a spread-eagle position, his pink belly exposed.

As if he sensed that she was awake, Moose opened one eye and regarded her before stretching his legs out then flipping over and attempting to crawl into her lap. He gave her chin a quick lick then nuzzled his big head into her shoulder and let out a groan. He was a very vocal dog.

The groan must have woken Dodge, because he stirred and stretched almost the same as the dog had done.

“Mornin’,” he said, his voice still husky with sleep. “How are you feeling?”

She licked her lips. Her mouth had gone dry. He was so dang sexy. She imagined him asking that same question but after waking up in her bed, not next to it. All she wanted to do was run her fingers through his thick hair and cuddle into his chest—the same way her cat was doing.

Lucky cat.

“Sore. But I’m okay,” she told him. “Feel a little like I got run over by a Mack truck.”

“I imagine you will for the rest of the weekend,” he said, lazily stroking his hand over the cat’s back. She let out a low purr as she stretched out her body.

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Her eyes widened. “What have you done to my cat?”

He lifted his hand. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that cat hates everyone. Including me sometimes. But she’s apparently succumbed to your charm.” She offered him a coy smile. “She must like cute cowboys.”

A grin tugged at his lips.

Oh my gosh. Was she flirting with him? That felt like flirting.

She’d never been any good at it and hadn’t had that many opportunities to try. There weren’t a lot of handsome single men that hung around in the library. And even if there were, she probably wouldn’t have noticed them around the huge flaming torch she carried for Dodge.

“She probably just likes me because I fed her,” Dodge said. “I hope that’s okay.”

“Yes, that’s great. And so nice of you. But I’m surprised you even saw her. She usually hides when other people are in the house.”

“She came into the kitchen last night when I was feeding Moose and clearly explained to me that she would like to be fed too. She even showed me where her food and water dishes were.”

Maisie shook her head in amazement. “You must be the cat whisperer then. She is

normally quite fussy.”

“Really? She seems like a real sweetheart.”

Maisie laughed. “That is not a word I would ever use to describe that cat. Bossy, opinionated, sometimes ornery. Although she has on occasion left me a sweet gift of a hairball or a dead mouse on the floor. And one time when I was eating supper, she waltzed over and dropped a cricket into my chicken alfredo.”

Dodge laughed, and the sound of it filled the whole room, making it feel warmer and touching something inside Maisie. First, she was flirting, now she was being funny. What was happening?

She didn’t know. But she knew she wanted to make him laugh again.

“You think that’s funny? The dang thing was still alive. It hopped back off my plate. Scared the poop out of me and ruined a perfectly good plate of pasta. I had to throw the rest away and considered dumping the dish in the trash too.” She let out a shiver just remembering the black insect fleeing across her table.

“What? You threw away a perfectly good plate of chicken alfredo just because it had a little cricket in it. You know, crickets are a delicacy in some places.”

“Not in this place.” She laughed then smiled down at the cat. “I still love her though. We have an understanding. She watches the house while I’m gone, and I feed her and let her sleep on the sunny chair. She has her moments too, and she keeps me company. I never really considered myself a cat person, but she came with the house—just showed up the day I was moving in and let herself inside. Hasn’t left yet. She’s a fickle little thing though. Reminds me a bit of a cranky old lady—like one of my grandma’s. Sometimes, she’s kind of mean, other days she treats me with only a mild disdain, then sometimes she’s loving and cute and cuddles up next to me and

allows me to pet her.”

“I never thought of Ruby as cranky or mean, but that’s nice that she lets you pet her.”

Maisie laughed. “Notthatgrandma. My grandma Ruby is the best.”

“Oh shoot,” he said, leaning forward. “That reminds me. She called a couple of times last night. I saw the notifications on yourphone when I put it by your bed. I was worried she might have heard about your accident, so I had my grandpa call her and tell her you were all right. I hope that’s okay.”

“Yes, that’s perfect. She’s in Florida for the next few weeks helping her sister who broke her ankle. I can’t imagine she would have heard about my accident though.”

“Really? In this town? She probably got a prayer-tree call as soon as you were admitted to the emergency room.”

Maisie reached for her phone and gasped at the notifications. “Shoot. I’ve missed twelve calls from her. Andeighttext messages.” As if on cue, the phone buzzed in her hand, and a picture of her and her grandmother popped onto the screen. “That’s her calling now. I’ve got to take it.” She tapped the screen and held the phone to her ear. “Hi Gram.”

“Merciful heavens. It’s about time you picked up.” Her grandmother’s voice blared through the phone. From the grin on Dodge’s face, Maisie was sure he could hear every word. Ruby’s tone softened. “Are you all right, honey? I’ve been so worried.”

“I’m fine, Grandma. I promise.”

“Duke called me last night to tell me what happened,” she said, referring to Dodge’s grandfather, Duke Lassiter. “Which was kind of him, because I was about beside

myself since I'd already had four other calls telling me you'd been in an accident. I've been looking at flights, and I think I can get one out today. Should I come home?"

"No. Absolutely not. I'm fine, really. I've got some bumps and bruises, and I sprained my wrist. And my glasses cut my forehead when I hit the steering wheel, but I'm pretty sure I didn't even need stitches."

"What do you mean you're pretty sure?"

"Yesterday was kind of a blur."

"Kind of a blur? Why? Do you have a head injury? Or a concussion? That's it. I'm booking a flight back."

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“No, really, Gram. They just gave me some pain meds that made me kind of fuzzy.” And possibly made her bold enough to kiss the cowboy she’d been crushing on since the tenth grade...but that fact was still undetermined. “But you donotneed to come home. Aunt Opal needs you way more than I do. And besides, Dodge has been taking care of me. He’s the one who found me after the crash and took me to the emergency room. And he’s been with me ever since.”

“Dodge? Lassiter?”

“Yes. Of course, do you know a lot of other men named Dodge?”

“No, I suppose not. But when you say he’s beenwith youever since, do you mean he spent the night?”

“Um, yes...but...”

She was worried her grandmother would get the wrong idea and be upset about a man sleeping over at her house. But it was quite the opposite.

Ruby’s voice was filled with glee as she practically shouted into the phone. “Hallelujah! It’s about time you two finally got together. You’ve only been mad for the boy since you were sixteen years old. So, tell me everything. Did you do the horizontal mambo? Or just make out? How was it? Everything you’ve always dreamed of? Is he a good kisser? I can imagine he would be a good kisser. And I always knew you two would get together. As soon as he realized what a great girl you were.”

“Oh my gosh. Gram, stop.” She covered the phone with her hand, but from the way Dodge’s lips were pressed together as if to keep from laughing, she was pretty sure he’d heard the whole exchange.

Carefully dislodging the cat, Dodge sat up and pulled on his boots. He stood and pointed to the dog as he mouthed, “I’m gonna let him out and give him some food.”

She nodded and couldn’t help admiring his great butt as he left the room before uncovering the phone. “It wasn’t like that, Gram. Dodge is a good friend. That’s all. He made me soup and fed the cat.”

“Too bad,” Ruby said, the disappointment evident in her voice. “But he’s still there, so it’s not too late to win him over with your feminine wiles. Tell me everything.”

Maisie cringed. She wasn’t sure she had the right kind of feminine wiles to win over a guy like Dodge Lassiter. Unless he was charmed by messy curls, thick glasses, curvy hips, awkward attempts at flirting, and nerdy discussion about books—because that was about the extent of her wiles.

She spent the next few minutes filling her grandmother in on all that she remembered from the day before. Except the part where she may or may not have kissed the cowboy—she kept that part to herself.

Satisfied that she’d told Ruby every pertinent detail of the day before and convinced her to stay in Florida with her sister, Maisie ended the call and hoped to get into the bathroom to wash her face and brush her teeth before Dodge came back.

Flipping on the light, she caught sight of herself in the mirror and let out a shriek.

Chapter Seven

Maisie's hair was sticking up and out all around her head—and not in a good way. One side of her hair was smashed flat to her head while the other had curls that were winging out so bad, it's a wonder she didn't take off and fly.

Her glasses couldn't hide the day-old mascara smudged under her eyes. Not that anyone would notice the gray smears—not with the purple shiner she had going on. The blueish-purple bruise sat under her eye and across her cheek bone then yellow and gray bruising went up the side of her face, ending by her brow bone.

Two rust color-stained Steri-Strips were stuck across her eyebrow, and as she peered closer into the mirror, she realized that blood from the cut on her head had dried and hardened in her hair. She let out a groan.

She had seriously been having a conversation with the man she'd been dreaming of for over a decade—ack, she'd even been attempting to flirt with him—while she looked like this. He must think she was an idiot.

The sound of pounding feet came from the hallway, then Dodge and Moose rounded the door of her bedroom and ran into the bathroom.

“You okay?” Dodge asked, his gaze traveling over her face and down her body as the dog pressed against her leg. “I heard you call out. Are you hurt? Did you fall?”

Her shoulders slumped as she tried to bury her face in her hands, which was difficult since one of her arms was in a sling. She winced as her thumb hit the bruise by her eye. “Don't look at me. I look terrible.”

“Aw heck, I've been looking at you for the past twenty minutes. We've been having a whole conversation.” He gently pulled her hands away then grimaced as he peered at her eye.

“I told you. I look awful.”

“You don’t look awful. But your eye does. And it just looks like it hurts.”

She dropped her hands. He was right. He’d already seen her—in all her gorgeous crash-victim glory. She turned to the mirror and tried to smash down her curls. “I can’t blame this on the accident though. My hair looks like it was combed with a mixer and then styled by a drunk hairdresser in Who-Ville.”

Dodge laughed then used his pointer finger to press one of the curls down. It sprang back out as he pulled his hand away. “I don’t know. I think it looks kind of cute.”

“Cute?” She took off her glasses and held them out toward him. “Are you sure you don’t need these?” She returned her glasses to her face then looked into the mirror and choked back a gag as she poked at the crusty edge of her hair. “Did you see this dried blood in my hair? It’s so gross.”

“It’s not that bad. But the doctor said not to shower until tomorrow. You don’t want to get your bandages or those Steri-Strips wet.”

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“I have to do something.” She frowned at her bandaged wrist and let out a frustrated sigh. “I just want to wash my hair.”

He tilted his head as if an idea had just come to him. “I think I can help with that.”

“How?”

“My grandma used to wash our hair in the kitchen sink. I can do the same for you.”

She frowned. “Really?”

“Yeah, sure. It’ll be easy. Well, maybe not easy. But not hard. We can do it. You grab your shampoo, a hairbrush, and whatever else you need, and I’ll find a couple of towels and meet you in the kitchen.”

It sounded like a terrible idea, but he was so earnest about wanting to help her, and she couldn’t deny the temptation to have his hands in her hair. Although when she’d imagined his fingers twisting through her tresses, he’d been kissing her passionately, not washing crusted blood from them.

“Okay. I guess. There are some blue towels we can use in the linen closet in the hallway,” she told him as she reached for a makeup remover wipe. “Just give me a few minutes to wash my face and brush my teeth, and then I’ll be in.”

Ten minutes later, she walked into the kitchen holding her shampoo, conditioner, a detangling hairbrush, and a tube of leave-in curl cream.

Dodge had laid a rolled-up towel on the counter next to the empty sink. He'd pulled the kitchen chair up too and patted the seat. "You can step on this to get up on the counter."

She raised an eyebrow. "Wait. You want me to lay down on the counter? I thought I was just going to hang my head over the sink."

"No way. You have to lean your head back into it. I don't want to take a chance on getting those Steri-Strips wet or bumping your eye." He tilted his head. "What are you worried about?"

"I don't know. What if I break the counter?"

"You're not gonna break the counter." He held out his hand. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes. Mostly." She took a hesitant step forward. "Did you wash out the sink?"

"Of course." He patted the counter again.

She stepped onto the chair, then turned around and sat down. The quartz countertop was cool against her bare legs, and she could feel the chill of it through the skimpy pajama shorts. She let out a little shiver—from both the cool of the countertop and the anticipation of Dodge's hands on her again. She put one hand behind her, trying to figure out how to lean herself back without falling, while awkwardly holding the sling against her chest.

"I can't watch this anymore," Dodge said. "Can I please help you?"

She nodded, the desire to have her hair clean apparently outweighing the embarrassment of the situation. "I think you're gonna have to."

In what felt like one move, he lifted her legs onto the counter while turning her body, and with his other hand on her back, gently lowered her down until her neck was resting on the rolled-up towel. He carefully pulled her hair free and hung it down into the sink.

She shifted positions and tried to stretch out her legs, taking care not to knock over the cookie jar or the sugar canister. As she relaxed her shoulders, a long low, rumbling growl sounded from her stomach.

“Wow,” he said with a soft chuckle. “That was impressive.”

She groaned as she pressed her good hand to her belly and heat flared in her cheeks. “More like mortifying.”

“I can imagine why your gut is complaining. You skipped supper and haven’t eaten breakfast. Let’s get your hair washed then we’ll take care of food next. I may not be the best in the kitchen—Chevy is the one who likes to cook—but I can manage a scrambled egg sandwich.”

“Sounds perfect.” Her belly rumbled again. “Apparently my stomach agrees.”

“I was gonna make a pot of coffee, but I couldn’t figure out your fancy dang coffeemaker,” he said, flipping on the faucet and holding his hand under the water.

“It’s an espresso machine. And if I can manage it one-handed, when we’re done here, I’ll make you the best cup of coffee of your life,” she told him.

“It won’t be hard to beat the stuff that Gramps makes. It’s so strong, your fork will stick up in it. But I look forward to testing your claim.” He must have deemed the water warm enough because he swung the faucet back into the other sink and let it flow over her hair.

She was going to ask him why he was using a fork in his coffee, but then his hands were in her hair, gently lifting handfuls of it into the water then running his fingers through her matted curls.

It felt heavenly. All she could do was let out a sigh.

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She heard the snap of the shampoo bottle lid as he opened then closed it, then the soft clap of his hands as he must have been rubbing the shampoo between them. She hadn't realized she was holding her breath, until she felt his large hands lift her mass of curls again and massage the shampoo into it.

He rubbed her scalp with the end of his fingers, and she pressed her lips together to hold back a euphoric groan, worried that it would be louder than the growl of her stomach.

She closed her eyes, focused only on enjoying the feel of his hand on her scalp and laced in her hair. His movements were thorough, but gentle as he loosened the dried blood and rinsed the shampoo from her hair.

"Do you want me to use this conditioner stuff too?" he asked. "The stuff in the green bottle?"

"Yes, please. I mean, if you don't mind. Otherwise, my hair will completely frizz out."

"I don't mind." He repeated the process of opening the bottle then working the product through her hair.

"This feels amazing," she said, before she could stop herself.

"Good. You deserve a little amazing after what you went through yesterday."

She blinked at the sudden well of tears in her eyes. "Gosh. That's one of the nicest

things anyone's ever said to me."

His expression formed a concerned frown as he peered down at her. "Did I just make you cry?"

"No," she said, swallowing back the emotion. "I must have just got some water in my eye." She waved away his concern, barely missing the bottom of the cabinet with her hand. "Don't worry about me. Just keep doing what you're doing." Now she wished she would have brought out more hair products for him to massage into her head.

He finished way too soon, and she sighed again when he turned the water off. He used another towel to dab the moisture from her hair then wrapped it around her head.

"Let me help you up. I don't want you to hit your head on the cabinet," he said, sliding his hand under her neck and lifting her to a sitting position.

The room seemed to spin a little. But she wasn't sure if that was from getting whacked in the head with the airbag the day before or from the fact that Dodge's strong arm was wrapped around her waist and the side of her body was pressed into chest.

They had known each other for years, but she couldn't remember a time that he had ever touched her. But in the last day, he'd had his arms around her and his hands on her skin and in her hair. Her chest had been pressed to his, and he'd taken her hand several times to help her.

So, maybe none of those touches meant anything to him—he was just being nice. But just thinking about the feel of his hands on her—anywhere on her—made her a little dizzy.

And if she really had kissed him...well, that thought made her want to pass clean out.

“You okay?” he asked. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” she told him, but knew that he could. Not physically, but he could easily destroy her heart. “I’m okay.”

“I just realized that you haven’t taken a pain pill today.” He held her arm as she stepped down from the kitchen chair. “Do you want me to get you one?”

She shook her head. “No. I think I’m going to try to stick with ibuprofen. At least until I go to bed. Some parts of yesterday are still a little hazy to me. I’m not sure if some of the things I remember are real or if I dreamed them.”

“Oh...yeah...you were a little loopy yesterday,” he said as he let go of her hand and busied himself cleaning up the sink. He didn’t seem to want to look her in the eye. Was that because she’d completely embarrassed herself and him by throwing herself at him?

She wished she could remember what had happened. She could ask him, but she wasn’t sure she wanted to know the truth just yet. Even though the idea that she had kissed him was a little humiliating, in her dream he had kissed her back, and she wanted to live in that fantasy a little longer.

She opened the cupboard in front of her and got out two of her favorite cups. “How about that coffee?”

“Yeah, sounds good. But let me do it.” He took the cups from her, set them on the counter, then faced the espresso machine. “I can rope a steer from the back of a horse, deliver a calf in the middle of the night, and drive a combine. Surely, I can manage this little machine.”

She laughed then walked him through grinding the beans, filling the portafilter with

the freshly ground coffee and tamping it evenly down. Standing next to him, she showed him how to work the machine, where to position the small espresso pitchers, and which buttons to push for the desired strength of brew.

“You’ve got quite a set up here,” he said, motioning to the counter where she had an extensive coffee bar set up with a coffee grinder, several bottles of flavored syrup, small sweetener packets, different size mugs, and mocha and caramel sauce.

“My two vices are coffee and books.” She gave a quick glance toward the shelves in her living room. “I’m afraid I tend to indulge in both.”

“There are worse vices to have.”

“True. And the money I spend on both is totally worth it.” She pulled a gallon of milk from the refrigerator. “So, do you want a fancy caramel cappuccino or a plain espresso coffee?”

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He shrugged. “Normally, I take my coffee black, but I’ll have whatever you’re having.”

“Fancy cappuccino it is then. You’re gonna love it,” she told him as she poured each of the tiny pitchers of espresso into a mug then pumped two squirts of caramel from one of the bottles on the counter into each. “You stir those up while I froth the milk.”

He did as she said then pulled the spoon out so she could pour the frothed milk into each cup, reserving the foam to dollop on top.

“This is the best part,” she told him as she drizzled caramel sauce over the foam then pushed one of the cups toward him. She anxiously watched as he picked it up and took a small sip.

He smiled at her over the rim of the cup. “It’s pretty dang good. Seems like a lot of trouble for one cup of coffee, but it tastes delicious.”

“I told you.” She picked up her own cup and took a decadent sip. She closed her eyes and let out a sigh. “That first sip is always the best.”

He took another drink then set his cup down. “Point me toward a skillet, and I’ll get to work on those scrambled eggs.”

She gestured to the cabinet next to the stove while she got out the eggs and bacon. Her hip bumped his as they maneuvered around each other—she still couldn’t believe Dodge Lassiter was in her kitchen—and each time his arm or hand brushed hers, a thrill of desire went shooting up her spine.

“You can sit down, and I’ll do this,” he told her, motioning to the chair. “I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

“I’m being careful. And I don’t mind helping. It’s kind of fun to have someone to cook with.”

He laid several pieces of bacon in the skillet and turned it on low as she cracked eggs into a bowl and whisked them together. After washing his hands, he nodded to her head. “That bacon’s gonna take a few minutes. Do you want me to help you comb out your hair while it’s cooking?”

She started to protest then realized his hands would be on her again and offered him a small shrug. “Sure. If you want.” She handed him her hairbrush and the bottle of curl cream. “Can you put a little of this on it once it’s combed out? Then I won’t have to blow dry it.”

She sat at the table, and he pulled the towel from her head then used the brush to gently untangle and comb through her hair. Squeezing a dollop of curl cream into his palm, she explained how to work it through and then scrunch it toward her scalp.

“This is a little more complicated than what I do,” he said, filling his palm with a handful of her hair and scrunching it as she directed. “I’m lucky to even get a comb through mine. Usually, I just get out of the shower, shake my head like a dog, and call it good.”

Which is obviously how he got that sexy tousled look that she loved.

“This is my easiest styling method,” she told him, trying to rein her thoughts in from imagining Dodge in the shower. “If I blow my hair dry and attempt to straighten or style it, then it can take me up to thirty minutes.”

“Thirty minutes? Just to do your hair? In thirty minutes, I can shower, shave, eat breakfast and have the horses fed.” He turned her chin toward him. “I think I did it. Looks good.” He brushed a lock of her hair behind her ear, and she tried not to shiver as the pads of his fingers grazed her cheek.

He paused, for just a moment, his hand resting lightly on the side of her head as he looked at her, and she stared back, as if trapped by his gaze.

Then an acrid scent filled the air, and the dog started barking as the smoke alarm went off.

Chapter Eight

“Oh no! The bacon’s burning!” Maisie yelled over the shriek of the smoke alarm as Dodge raced into the kitchen and pulled the skillet off the burner.

She pushed the window above the sink open and grabbed a dish towel, but it was hard to wave at the smoke using only one hand.

Dodge hit the button to turn on the fan above the stove, and the alarm silenced as the acrid smoke was sucked into the vent. “Damn,” he said, shaking his head before turning to her. “I’m sorry. I should have been paying closer attention. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. And it’s not your fault. It’s mine.” She offered him an impish grin. “I tried to tell you that my hair takes more time than you’d think.”

He stared at her then his lips curved into a grin, and he let out a soft chuckle.

She laughed with him. “This is not the first time, nor will it be the last, I’m sure, that I’ve burned something in this house. It’s no big deal. I’ve got more bacon.” She opened the cabinet, took out another skillet, and handed it to him.

The cat chose that moment to wander into the kitchen and offer him a disapproving glance.

“I know,” he told the cat. “I said I was sorry.” Moose walked closer to the stove, lifting his head to sniff the air. Dodge waved him away. “There’s the difference between dogs and cats,” he told Maisie as he reached into the fridge to get the package of bacon. “April is annoyed at the disturbance, while Moose is happy to dispose of the evidence.”

Maisie laughed again. She liked his easy-going charm and the way he’d calmly handled the mini crisis. She lit a vanilla cupcake scented candle while he started more bacon frying and cleaned up the burnt pan.

After the bacon finished, he expertly scrambled the eggs, adding a little cheese at the end, and arranged them on two slices of buttered toast before topping them each with the perfectly crisped bacon and another slice of toasted bread.

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“This is delicious,” Maisie told him after taking her first bite. “I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be. It’s just an egg sandwich. And my first attempt at making this bacon was a colossal fail.”

They made comfortable small talk as they ate breakfast and then cleaned up the kitchen.

Dodge dried his hands then hung the dishtowel on the handle of the oven. “You okay on your own for a bit? I was hoping to grab a quick shower. If that’s okay.”

She nodded, then swallowed as her mouth had gone dry thinking about Dodge being naked and wet somewhere in her house. “Sure, of course. You can use the guest bathroom in the hall. There’re clean towels under the sink, and the shower already has shampoo and body wash in it. Do you need to borrow anything? I’ve probably got a spare toothbrush around here somewhere.”

“Nah. Chevy stopped by last night and dropped off my toothbrush, deodorant and some clean clothes.” He held up a grocery sack that had been sitting on the edge of the counter. “He even packed it in our good luggage.”

She laughed. “That was really nice of him.” It was nice of him, but she’d just realized that if Chevy knew, then the rest of Dodge’s family would also know that he’d spent the night at her house. Although, what did she think? Of course, they would know something when he didn’t go home to the ranch.

“Yeah, he brought a couple of cheeseburgers too.” He lifted one shoulder in a mock-

innocent shrug. “Or he might have brought us both one, but since you were asleep, I ate yours.”

“That’s okay. I’d hate to see a good cheeseburger go to waste.”

He jerked a thumb toward the hall. “I’ll be out in ten minutes. You sure you’ll be okay?”

“I’ll be fine. I need to clean up and get dressed too.” Her shoulders drooped as a thought occurred to her. “Oh. Wait.”

His brow furrowed. “What’s wrong?”

How did he seem to already be able to read her?

She shifted from one foot to the other, not sure how to phrase what she needed his help with. “Well...it’s just that...I want to change out of my pajamas into some regular clothes, but I don’t think I can manage the...logistics of it all by myself.”

His brow drew further down then lifted as if suddenly understanding. “Oh, do you need me to help you with taking off the sling? That’s where you got stuck last night.”

“I did?” Heat climbed up her neck. “You helped me change my clothes last night?”

He shook his head, his cheeks going as red as her neck felt. “No. I mean yes. Well, sort of. You’d already changed into your shorts, but you got your hair stuck in your watch when you were trying to take off your shirt.”

Her eyebrows raised. “So, you helped me? With my hair? And my shirt?”

“You asked me too. And I couldn’t leave you all tied up like you were.”

If he'd helped her change clothes the night before, that must be why she'd worn her bra to bed. At least that showed he was a gentleman and hadn't tried to take advantage of her or the situation.

But she knew that about him already.

"Well, then, thank you? I guess."

"No problem."

"The thing is though. I do need help with the sling, but that's not the only problem," she told him. "I can't get my...um...my bra unhooked with one hand."

He offered her a cocky grin. "Finally, something I'm good at. I may not be able to make a fancy cap-a-caramel-chino, but I do know how to manage those hooks. I can even do it one-handed."

She waggled the elbow encased in the sling like she was doing a one-armed chicken dance. "Well, unfortunately I can't."

Dodge laughed as he set the plastic bag he was holding down on the table then released the latch on Maisie's sling. Being careful of her bandaged wrist, he slid the fabric contraption off then set it on the table too. "I'll help you put it back on when I get out of the shower."

He let out his breath. The sling was the easy part.

"Thanks." Maisie turned her away from him and twisted her good hand around in an effort to lift her shirt.

"I got you," he said, sliding his hand up her back, and skillfully unhooking her bra.

He tried to turn that part of his brain off—the part that was noticing how soft her skin was and was thinking about helping her remove the rest of her clothes.

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“I’ll find a better one to change into now. One that snaps in the front.” She pressed her hand to her chest to hold the unhooked bra in place as she headed toward her bedroom. “Then I won’t have to bother you again.”

“It’s no bother.”

She must have caught the amusement in his voice because she turned around and flashed him an adorable grin—one that said she thought he was cute and possibly charming.

But the truth of it was, he was bothered—hot and bothered.

And it wasn’t all amusement in his tone. There was a strong possibility he’d just been flirting with her. As much as he was trying to stay in the friend zone, he couldn’t deny his attraction to her. And how could he not flirt a little when he’d just had his hand up her shirt and was unhooking her bra?

He picked up his bag of toiletries, and started down the hall to the guest bathroom, thinking that his shower might need to be a little colder than usual.

Ten minutes later, he walked back into the kitchen to find Maisie sitting on the sofa, a book open in her lap and a fresh fancy coffee in her hand. She’d changed into loose black cotton shorts, a soft pink sleeveless shirt, and a pair of fuzzy pink flip-flops.

The air smelled of rich freshly brewed coffee, and she motioned to a full cup sitting on the table in front of her. “I made more coffee, but yours isn’t quite as frou-frou this time.”

“Thanks.” He picked up his cup and took a sip before sinking into the sofa next to her. “Dang. That’s good.”

She smiled at the praise. “I told you. My vices are reading and coffee. And I excel at both.”

“So, what do you normally do on a Saturday?” he asked as he set his coffee down and held the sling out for Maisie to slide her bandaged hand into.

“Saturdays are super exciting around here. I usually make plans to clean my house all day or run errands then end up speed-cleaning everything in thirty minutes, forgetting the errands, and sitting on the sofa reading all day.”

“That sounds like a perfect day to me.”

“Really?” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you teasing me?”

“Heck no. I love to read. It seems like there’s always something I need to be doing at the ranch, so I usually only get to read at night.” He adjusted the strap on the sling, trying to ignore how close his fingers came to grazing her breast.

The image of her lacy push-up bra flashed through his brain. He pushed it away. What was wrong with him? He was literally fastening her injured arm into a sling—she was bruised and banged up—and all he could think about were her boobs.

He picked up his coffee and took another sip, trying to switch off his testosterone-fueled brain. “And it sounds like the perfect activity for someone who was just in a car accident and needs to rest.”

“I brought the Grisham book out for you,” she told him, gesturing to the book sitting on the table.

“Great. Thanks.” He reached for the book while sneaking a glance at her long, tanned legs. Her toenails were perfectly painted in a bright pink that reminded him of watermelon slices.

So much for switching off his brain.

He leaned back and opened the book but found himself unable to concentrate on anything other than the woman beside him.

Chapter Nine

Dodge huffed out a breath as he read the same page for a third time.

Normally, he could lose himself in a book, and hours would fly by. But this afternoon, his mind, and his gaze, kept drifting to the woman next to him. He tried to keep his focus on the book, but then she would shift or make a small sound, and he found himself sneaking glances at her face or accidentally brushing her leg as he reached for his coffee.

What was going on? This was Maisie. The girl he’d known since the tenth grade. The same one who used to wear her hair in braids and hid behind big glasses and the pages of a book as she sat by herself at lunch every day.

He had to admit though, he’d been noticing her more often the past few years. And in the past few weeks as they’d both helped out at Elizabeth’s farm, he’d become aware of other things about her, like how her eyes seemed to sparkle when she laughed and how smart and funny she was. And how amazing she smelled.

The scent of her surrounded him now, and he inhaled a deep breath as he tried again to focus on the sentence he was reading. Vanilla and something floral—that’s what she smelled like. He didn’t know if it was her lotion or her perfume or the smell of

her laundry detergent—but it all combined to create the heady scent of her. And now all he could think about was grazing his lips along her neck as he breathed it in.

Stop dude. Stop thinking about her boobs and her legs and how good she smells. She was in a car accident, and he was supposed to be taking care of her.

He looked up from his book to catch her staring at him.

She looked quickly away. “How is it? The book, I mean.”

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“Oh, yeah. It’s good. I’m almost finished.”

“Then we’ll have to talk about it over lunch then pick the next selection for our Secret Society of Book Nerds club. Do you have any suggestions?”

He grinned. “You’re the librarian. You pick.”

She tapped her finger against her lips.

And now he was thinking about her lips.

“How about a mystery? I just heard someone talking about a book they read the other day called, Everyone in My Family Has Killed Someone. It’s a murder mystery that’s supposed to be like Knives Out meets Agatha Christie.”

He shrugged. “Sounds good.” Yes, better to think about mysteries and murder than what it would be like to kiss her again.

“Okay. I’ll see if we’ve got a couple of copies at the library on Monday.”

“Monday?”

“Yes. That’s when I go back to work.”

He frowned. “Are you sure you’ll be ready?”

She lifted the shoulder of her good arm and flashed him a mischievous grin. “As long

as I can figure out how to hook my bra, I'm sure I'll be fine."

He laughed with her, despite his brain going back to thinking about her bra again. "You don't want to overdue it." He waggled his eyebrows as he teased her. "You see what I did there? A little library humor...don't want to overdue it."

That's it. Tell some cheesy jokes and do a cease-fire on the sexy images of the half-naked librarian.

"Funny. And so original," she said, giving his shoulder a good-natured nudge. "But seriously, I'll be fine. It's not like my job requires a lot of strenuous activity. I mainly sit at my computer...well, except when I'm shelving books or checking in the returns or shooing away the teenage boys who are trying to use the library's computers to look up porn."

Doing his best to ignore the fact that she had just brought up porn, for Pete's sake, he raised one eyebrow as he stared at her.

Her shoulders shrank in, and her lips curved into a sheepish grin. "Okay. Some of that does sound a little strenuous. But I can get a volunteer to help me with the books and the returns. And even one-handed, I think I can still manage to run off the horny teenagers."

The last few days of hanging out with her had him feeling like a horny teenager. And he couldn't remember the last time he'd been so unsettled by a woman. He needed to get it together. Focus on taking care of her.

"Speaking of your hand, how is it feeling? Do you want a pain pill?"

She shook her head. "I'm okay for now. I'll take some more ibuprofen at lunch."

“Can I do anything for you? I mean, like get you anything?”

“I’m good.”

“Just let me know. I’ll get it for you.” He raised a teasing eyebrow. “You were pretty fun on painkillers.”

“Oh gosh. What did I do?”

“You don’t remember?”

The way her cheeks went pink made him think that maybe she might remember the way she’d kissed him. Or the way he’d kissed her back.

“Maybe. A little. Most of my day yesterday is a bit hazy.” She wrinkled her nose. “Did I...?”

Her phone buzzed on the coffee table, interrupting her question. Which Dodge was thankful for since he wasn’t prepared to answer it. Did she remember the kiss?

“It’s the garage,” she said, picking up her phone and tapping the screen to answer. “Hello.”

Her face fell as she listened to the call. “They said my car won’t be fixed for two weeks.”

“Oh no. What’s wrong with it?”

“Um...something engine...blah, blah...leaking...blah...needs repair. I couldn’t concentrate after they said the part they needed was on backorder and wouldn’t arrive for two weeks. They’re going to send me an email with all the specifics. They said insurance will cover most of it, but what am I going to do without my car?”

“I can help.”

“I mean, the library is close enough that I can walk to and from work. I’ve done that many times,” she said as if she hadn’t heard him. “But what if I need to buy groceries? And I’m supposed to go over and check on my grandma’s house this week.” Her bottom lip trembled as her eyes welled with tears. “And how am I going to haul the bookmobile? I already missed yesterday. I can’t disappoint all those kids.” She sucked in a breath as she looked over at him with wide eyes. “What if the bookmobile is too damaged to pull? What if it’s beyond repair? I’ll lose the competition and miss my chance at getting the grant for the library. They’re all counting on me. What am I gonna do?”

“Whoa now. It’s gonna be okay,” Dodge said, slipping his arm around her shoulder and pulling her to him in a hug. She’d mentioned the competition before, but he’d hoped to figure out what kind of shape the camper was in before she brought it up again. “Please don’t cry. My heart can’t take it. I said I’d help, and I promise you I will. I can give you a ride to the grocery store or over to your grandma’s house or out to Timbuctoo—wherever you want to go. And we don’t even know how bad the damage is to the camper yet. But I can help you with that too.”

She sniffed. “How?”

“From what I saw, most of the wreckage was on the inside. One of the windows had a tree branch through it, and there were some definite dings and scrapes on the outside, but we’ve got a paint sprayer and pretty much any tool you can imagine out at the ranch. Between me, my brothers, and my grandpa, we can fix just about anything. How long do we have to get it done?”

“A little less than three weeks. It’s a statewide competition, but the judges are scheduled to come to Woodland Hills on the last day of the month.” She peered up at him. “Do you really think we can get it fixed by then?”

He nodded. “Sure I do. I can’t imagine there’s anything you can’t accomplish when you set your mind to it.”

She lifted her sling. “Even with one arm?”

“I’ll be your arms. I’m all yours for the labor end of it. And I’m pretty good with my hands.”

A playful grin curved her lips. “Oh yeah?”

He hadn’t meant it like that. Or had he? Was he flirting with her? It had been so long since he’d actively flirted with a woman, he assumed that he’d forgotten how. But at least she wasn’t crying anymore.

Ignoring the dropped innuendo, he tried to offer her what he hoped was an encouraging smile. “We’ll figure it out. I promise. And the Lassiter men don’t go back on their word.”

The Lassiterwomen, or at least his mother, were a different story. She’d broken all

sorts of promises when she'd dropped him, Ford, and Chevy off at her parents' ranch for the summer, then never came back for them. It was bad enough that she'd saddled them with their ridiculous names, choosing to name them after the trucks each of their different dead-beat dads had driven away from them in. But then she'd abandoned them too.

Her leaving them with their grandparents was probably the best thing she'd ever done for them—all three boys loved Duke and June Lassiter with everything in them—but it did something to a kid to have both of their parents choose to walk away and leave them behind.

"Thanks Dodge," Maisie said, cuddling in closer to his chest. "I believe you."

He hugged her to him, breathing in the scent of her and relishing the feeling of holding her in his arms. It felt good. She felt good. Too good. This was a feeling he could get used to.

Except he couldn't. Because he'd felt this kind of feeling before, and it had been ripped away. In the space of a few seconds, a semi-truck and a drunk driver had taken everything he'd loved and left him shattered and broken.

Chapter Ten

Being held in Dodge's arms was everything Maisie had imagined it would be. His arms were strong, his muscular chest solid, and she could easily have spent the whole day nestled against him.

But then he suddenly stiffened and cleared his throat as he pulled himself out of her embrace and pushed to his feet. "How about some lunch? My culinary skills also include grilled cheese sandwiches. And we've still got the soup from last night that I can heat up."

“Yeah, sounds good,” she said, her voice a little unsteady.

What had just happened? One second, he was pulling her close, he might have even been smelling her hair, then the next his arms went rigid, and he was pulling away. Or maybe she had just imagined the intent of his hug.

She’d gotten teary-eyed—dang it, she could cry at the drop of a hat—and he’d probably just felt sorry for her and offered her a friendly hug. Or had she hugged him? She’d thought he was putting his arm around her, but maybe he was just stretching out his arm. Had he pulled her to him, or had she just fallen into him?

She smoothed down her shirt and adjusted her sling from where it had shifted during their embrace. “What can I do to help?”

“I got it,” he told her.

She stood and raised an eyebrow at him, offering him the kind of look that meant she was not about to just sit on the sofa and let him wait on her.

His easy grin was back as he held up his hands in surrender. “What I meant to say was, would you like to help me make us some lunch?”

His smile had her stomach doing funny flips that had nothing to do with being hungry. “I’d be happy to. I’ve got a loaf of French bread that will be perfect for grilled cheese sandwiches.”

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They worked side-by-side in the kitchen again, him making the sandwiches while she heated up the soup and made a pitcher of iced tea, then sat on the back patio to eat.

Maisie had spent countless weekends, multiple pairs of gardening gloves, a little blood, a few tears, and lots of sweat creating the gorgeous space in her backyard. She'd built a small deck on the back of the house and strung twinkle lights across the top of it by connecting the cords to tall beams she'd secured in concrete in tall planters. Then she'd filled the tops of the planters with flowers.

She had laid paving stones to create paths to different areas—one path to her flower garden and one to a sitting area/reading nook she'd set up under the huge oak tree that took up the back part of the yard. The middle had a nice expanse of green lawn that was watered by an irrigation system she'd also installed herself.

“Your yard looks amazing,” Dodge said around bites of grilled cheese sandwich.

“Thanks. I did it all myself,” she told him, beaming with pride.

His eyes widened. “Wait. You created this whole yard by yourself?”

“Yep.”

“You built this deck?”

She nodded.

“And those raised garden beds?”

She nodded again. “And I laid the paving stones and all the sod and installed the sprinkler system. All by myself.”

“I’m impressed.”

“I’m a little impressed with myself as well.”

“How did you know how to do all of this?”

“I didn’t. But I’m a librarian. So, I did research, and I took classes, and I learned. I’ll let you in on a little secret. A couple of times when I wasn’t completely sure or confident on how to do something, like the irrigation system and building the deck, I called some experts and asked them to come teach a class at the library for the whole community on whatever it was I needed to learn. Then I was helping others to acquire a new skill as well as learning something myself.”

“You’re pretty dang smart.”

“And resourceful.” She laughed then her smile faltered as she shrugged. “When you don’t have anyone else in your life to help you do these things, at some point, you just have to figure out how to do them on your own.”

“So, you don’t have anyone...special...in your life?”

“Oh, I do. But I think I’m the only one who realizes I think he’s special,” she muttered before taking a sip of her soup. She let out a sigh. “If you’re asking if I’m seeing anyone, then the answer is no. Not for a long time now.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. He wasn’t the one for me. And neither was the one before that.” She blew

out a breath. “How about you? Is there anyone special in your life?”

She was praying he would say no, but her heart sank when he nodded.

“Oh yes. There’s someone very special. Someone with dark hair, who’s a great listener but who hogs the covers and takes up more than their share of the bed. And is currently eating me out of house and home. He goes by Moose.”

Maisie laughed as the big black dog must have heard his name being used in an affectionate way, because he stood and walked over to look adoringly up at Dodge as he rested his head on his leg.

They talked easily about the projects she’d done in the yard and the things he’d accomplished at the ranch as they finished their lunch and cleaned up the kitchen together.

She refilled their glasses of iced tea, and they went back to their spots on the sofa to read. Maisie normally curled into one corner of the couch, but today, every time she sat down, she tried to sit almost in the middle, hoping he would take the spot next to her. And so far, he had.

She still couldn’t believe he was here, in her house, sitting next to her on the couch. Her arm still hurt, and her body was sore, but he didn’t have to stay to take care of her. She was used to taking care of herself and would be fine on her own.

But she wasn’t about to tell him that.

If he wanted to stick around and watch out for her, she wasn’t going to stop him. In fact, she was going to relish every moment of it.

Like she might possibly have done the night before. After everything that had been

said and the funny looks he'd had when she'd brought up anything about it, she was pretty sure she had kissed him.

But there was one way to find out for sure.

If she were brave enough to try it.

She inhaled a deep breath, then set her book down on the coffee table. It's not like she could focus on it anyway. Not with Dodge sitting within inches of her and the possibility of her arm or her leg brushing his whenever either one of them moved.

She turned her body to face his. "Hey, can I ask you something?"

He set his book down. "Sure. Shoot."

She looked down at her lap. "It's a little embarrassing."

"I think we're past embarrassing," he said with a small chuckle.

"I told you that most of yesterday was a little hazy for me, but I feel like I might have done something that was a little out of character for me."

His gaze cut away from hers. "What kind of something?"

"Something like..." Oh geez. Just say it. "Dodge, did I kiss you last night?"

"Well...um...yeah, I guess."

"You guess? Was it that terrible that you can't even remember?"

“No. It wasn’t terrible at all. It was great. I just feel bad because I’m not sure you were totally coherent when you did it. And I didn’t want it to seem like I took advantage of the situation.”

It was great?

He’d said it was great. It might have been buried in the middle of his sentence, but she’d heard him. “How could you have taken advantage if I’m the one who kissed you?”

He shrugged, clearly uncomfortable with this topic.

But she’d waded in so far—and he had said the kiss was great—so might as well dive off the deep end. “There is something about it that seems a little unfair though.”

“What do you mean?”

She took a deep breath, pulling at all her courage. He’d spent the night at her house, he’d taken care of her, and don’t forget...he’d said the kiss was great. She’d been in the friend zone with him for over a decade. If she ever had a chance to make it out, this felt like it.

“Well, I don’t think it’s a real big secret that I’ve had a crush on you for years, so I’ve basically been waiting for you to kiss me since I was sixteen years old. And then when we do finally kiss, I can barely remember it because I was doped up on pain meds.”

His eyes widened, and his mouth opened as if to say something but then he shut it again, so she just barreled on.

“So, I think the only way to remedy the situation is for you to kiss me again.”

Chapter Eleven

Maisie held her breath, waiting for Dodge's reaction.

He studied her face for a moment, and she couldn't read his expression. Then she caught the tiniest of movements, like the smallest tug of a grin at the corner of his lips. And Lord have mercy, the man did have amazing lips.

Her heart pounded against her chest like it was trying to get out then it went into warp speed as Dodge gave a slow nod.

"Okay," he whispered.

Okay?

Oh crud. What had she done?

He lifted his hand to cup the back of her neck then leaned in as he pulled her to him. Tilting his head, his lips grazed hers, just the softest touch, but enough to make her draw in her breath and for the butterflies in her stomach to take off in whirlwind swirls.

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Another tender touch, then his lips pressed to hers as both his palms cupped her cheeks, holding her in place as he kissed her, his mouth teasing hers, as if she were an exquisite treat that he was tasting for the first time.

A soft sigh escaped her as she melted into him. But she wanted more, needed more.

One of his hands moved down her neck, his fingers tickling as they brushed over her skin. His mouth followed the path of his hand, laying a trail of warm kisses along her cheek then down the line of her neck. His fingers curled around the top of her sleeve and slowly drew it and her bra strap down her shoulder so he could kiss her bared collarbone then the slight dip of skin underneath it.

She caught her breath, the intimate feel of his soft lips grazing her skin sending waves of heat coursing through her.

The scent of him surrounded her—his freshly laundered shirt and something woody with a hint of citrus—and she wanted to inhale him.

His lips made a humming sound against her shoulder. It felt like a cross between a moan of pleasure and a sigh of satisfaction, and she reveled in the feel of it.

Tipping her head back, she gave him more of her neck to feast on, then let out her own sigh as his mouth moved over the sensitive area, the scruff of his beard leaving a delicious scrape on her skin.

His lips came back to hers, his kisses now harder and more demanding, as if he'd been starving for her and could finally sate his desire.

In a move that was smoother than she would have imagined, she moved her body so that she was straddling his lap. From this vantage point, she could run her hand over his muscled arm, finally getting to touch his strong shoulders and biceps. As she moved her hips, pressing into him with need, she could feel how much he wanted her as well.

This position also allowed his hands to run over her, and a shiver ran through her as his long fingers slipped under her shirt and skimmed up her back. He gripped her waist, pulling her closer as this time, she deepened the kiss. She loved the feel of his hands on her and wanted him to touch her everywhere.

She'd spent years imagining what it would be like to kiss this man, to touch him, and this was everything she'd dreamed of. Except it wasn't enough...she wanted even more. She wanted his skin against hers, wanted to feel his hands, and his lips, on every inch of her body.

Squirming against him, she loved the way he growled into her mouth, as if he wanted her just as much. With one kiss, this man had her totally at his mercy. She would do anything for him. And she was ready to.

The fingers of her good hand reached for the hem of his shirt, ready to pull it up and off, her body craving the touch of his skin.

Her hand paused as the doorbell rang.

Moose stood and let out one warning bark, and Maisie wanted to cry. Who could be at her door?

Who cares? Ignore them.

But Dodge had already pulled away, looking as dazed and disoriented as she felt.

The dog ran to the door then back to them, giving Dodge's leg a quick nudge as if maybe he hadn't heard the bell.

Maisie stared at Dodge, her breath ragged as she tried to reorient herself. This felt like a fantasy come true. A fantasy that had just been interrupted by someone at the door.

Someone she was going to get rid of as soon as possible.

She just hoped that after the interruption, they could get back to doing this, because she had more of Dodge Lassiter that she wanted to explore—with her hands, and her mouth.

Dodge shushed the dog as she crawled out of his lap. He pushed up from the sofa then held his hand out. She let him pull her up, then adjusted her clothes, pulling her shirt and bra strap up and adjusting the sling as she made her way across the room.

She opened the door to see Jacob Meyer, her seven-year-old neighbor, standing there. He had on shorts and a SpongeBob T-shirt and was holding a small shoebox, the size that might hold a child's pair of shoes. "Hi Jacob," she said, still trying to catch her breath.

"Hi Miss Maisie." He squinted up at her, a pained expression on his face. "You got a black eye." He said it as a statement rather than a question, as if he were letting her know as well as realizing the fact himself.

"Yes, I do."

"Does it hurt?"

She hadn't even been thinking about it the last few minutes, but now self-doubt

washed over her as she wondered how Dodge could find her the least bit appealing with her bruised face and a shiner around her eye. “Not too bad.”

“Did you break your arm?”

“No, but I sprained my wrist.”

“Does that hurt?”

“A little bit, but I’m okay.”

“My mom told me you got hurt in a car accident, so I thought I’d come over to bring you some Band-aids and see if you wanted me to loan you my pet frog. He always makes me feel better.”

“Oh gosh, that is a really thoughtful offer, but I think I’m okay for now.”

“You sure? Alfred’s a pretty good frog. He’s my best friend.” He reached into the box and withdrew a large green toad. Its throat bulged as it let out a loud croak.

“I agree. He does look like a good frog. But I don’t want to take your best friend away. I’m sure he prefers to be with you. And I’ve already got a friend visiting me.” She turned to the man who was hanging back several feet. “This is Dodge.”

Jacob narrowed his eyes at the cowboy. “You like frogs?”

Dodge offered him a solemn nod. “I do. Looks like you got a good one there.”

The boy nodded too then carefully tucked the frog into the box before turning his attention back to Maisie. “My mom told me you had a man who stayed over at your house last night and that he was really hot, so I thought I’d bring you some Popsicles too.” From the same box he’d just put the frog into, he withdrew two white packages and held them up to Maisie. A trickle of lime green syrup leaked from one and dribbled down his wrist.

“Thank you,” Maisie said, carefully taking the popsicles and passing them to Dodge.

“That was really thoughtful of you, Jacob.”

“I hope you feel better soon. Oh, I almost forgot to give you the Band-aids.” He licked the green syrup from the side of his arm before pulling three packets of various sizes of bandages from his pocket and passing them to her.

She took them from him then leaned down to give him a one-armed hug, careful not to squish her slinged arm or Alfred’s box. “Thanks for thinking of me.”

“See ya.” He waved to her then pointed to the popsicles in Dodge’s hands. “Hope those cool you off. I brought lime and orange.”

“Perfect,” Dodge said. “Those are my favorite flavors.”

Jacob smiled then turned, and as if channeling his pet frog, hopped off the porch and down the sidewalk.

Maisie shut the door then grinned at Dodge.

He held up the popsicles, syrup from the green one pooling in his palm. “You hungry for a frog-flavored popsicle.”

She grimaced. “Not even a little.”

“You sure? A little frog slime never hurt anyone. In fact, I’m not sure if this green stuff on the package was leaking from the popsicle or from the frog.”

“Oh gross. I’m for sure not eating that one now. But if the orange one is still sealed, I’d eat it.”

Dodge took the packages to the sink to open them and rinse his hands then held the

orange one out to Maisie. “You feel up fortaking a walk? Maybe just around the block? Stretch our legs and get a little fresh air?”

Not really. All she wanted was to get back to making out with him on the sofa.

But his demeanor seemed to have changed a little, his shoulders tenser, his expression more somber, and even though he was teasing her about the frog-slimed popsicles, his mouth drew back into a tight line rather than relaxing into an easy smile.

“Sure. That sounds good. I could use a little walk.”

Through the kitchen window, she could see a few clouds, so she grabbed a light jacket from the coat closet and tied it around her waist before taking the popsicle.

They stopped at Dodge’s truck to grab a leash for Moose then walked up the sidewalk toward the small park a few blocks away.

They worked on their popsicles as they meandered along, not talking, but neither seeming to feel uncomfortable in the silence.

Dodge offered the last bite of his popsicle to the dog then dropped their sticks in the trash can at the edge of the park. “You okay if I let Moose run a little?”

“Sure,” she said, sinking onto a bench that faced a large grassy area.

Dodge released the dog from his collar, then picked up a stick and hurled it across the grass. Moose raced after it, grabbed it from the ground, and sprinted back to Dodge. He threw it again then sat down next to Maisie. “He could do this all day. He loves the park.”

“I do too.” She inhaled the warm summer air, the woodsy scent of the man next to her

mingling with the smell of freshly mown grass. “Summer is my favorite season.”

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“Mine too,” he said, tossing the stick again and leaning back against the bench.

She smiled as she noticed his lips were tinged just the slightest green.

He tilted his head. “What’s that smile about?”

“I just noticed your lips are kind of green, and I was wondering if I kissed you again, would you taste like the lime flavor of your popsicle.”

He offered her a lopsided grin. “Maybe. Or I might taste like a frog.”

She laughed then lifted her good shoulder in a shrug. “They say you have to kiss a lot of frogs to find a prince.”

His expression darkened. “Sorry Maisie, but I’m no prince. And I’ll never be anyone’s happily ever after.” He pushed up from the bench and strode out to meet the dog, clipping his leash back to his collar.

Maisie’s brow furrowed as she stood, not sure what had just happened. But something had. One minute Dodge’s body was loose, relaxed as he leaned back and grinned at her, the next his shoulders were tense, and his lips were drawn out in the same tight line they’d been in after Jacob had left.

Dodge led the dog to the sidewalk then paused as he waited for Maisie to catch up. She fell into step next to him and neither one spoke as they walked the few blocks back to her house. His brows drew together as they climbed her porch steps, and he tilted his head to the house next door. “I feel bad that your neighbor’s are talking

about you. I would never want you to be the subject of any kind of rumor.”

She laughed as she pushed open the front door and led them inside. “Why not? I kind of love the idea. I never get to be the subject of rumors.” She wagged her eye brows at him. “It’s kind of exciting to think my neighbors are whispering about how that dull librarian is suddenly doing something scandalous.”

The tenseness of his mouth and shoulders eased again as he shook his head at her and let out soft chuckle. “You really do make me laugh. And I can’t imagine anyone thinking of you as dull.”

She pushed her shoulders back at the compliment. “Thank you. That’s nice of you to say, but it’s true. I do lead a pretty boring life. Other than work, I spend most of my time with a book and my cat.”

April chose that moment to saunter into the room and jump onto the back of the sofa. She lifted one paw and licked at it as she offered Maisie a look that clearly said the librarian was the boring one, certainly not her.

“I must lead a dull life too, then,” Dodge said. “Because I try to read every night before I go to bed, and I don’t think reading is boring at all.”

Her mind flashed to an image of Dodge in bed with a book...with her next to him. The idea of two people lying in bed reading next to each other might not be the sexiest fantasy to some, but the idea of it sent a thrill through her.

She turned away, hoping her cheeks weren’t pink, as she tucked her jacket into the closet then pushed the door closed and leaned her back against it. “So, what now? Do you want to watch a movie or something?” She loved the fact that he still hadn’t mentioned anything about going home, and she certainly wasn’t going to suggest the idea.

“Sure. I’m up for whatever.”

Whatever, huh?

She could certainly think of a few things that she was up for. And most of them involved getting naked with the cowboy. Her cheeks warmed again at the thought. Especially because she never thought things like that. But she’d never had the cowboy of her dreams standing in her living room before.

It’s not that she hadn’t ever dated. And she had been with a few men, although not in a long time. But she’d never been the one to instigate any kind of intimacy. She felt inadequate and lacking the knowledge or experience in the games of seduction. Even thinking about trying made her want to giggle like a nervous girl in junior high school.

But she had tried with Dodge before. She’d brought up the first kiss and asked him if he wanted to do it again. And apparently, he did.

So, why not try it again?

She might not be very good at seduction or flirting or really any kind of sexual persuasion, but she had succeeded in getting him to kiss her the first time. Or the second time, because the first time didn’t really count. Well, it counted, but she just couldn’t fully remember it.

Gah. Just try again.

She sucked her bottom lip under her front teeth, a move she’d read about a million times in romance novels and offered him a small coy shrug. “Ya know, I think we were just starting to get the hang of that kissing thing. Since we were interrupted though, it seems like maybe we should try again, just to see if we might be able to

improve.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Do you think that earlier kiss needed improvement?”

She gave him what she hoped was a teasing grin. “I’m not sure. That’s why I think we need another go at it. You know, give it the old college try.”

The old college try?

What was she talking about? This wasn’t sexual persuasion. It was dissuasion. She was supposed to draw him in with her flirty charm, not repel him with her goof-ball personality. Her brain was obviously not connecting to her mouth because she couldn’t seem to control the words coming out of it. And she was apparently the worst at flirting. It looked so easy on television.

“I don’t know why I said that,” she told him, looking everywhere but at his face. “I’m nervous. And obviously, I didn’t think that last kiss needed improvement. It was one of the top ten best kisses of my life. And now I’m babbling.”

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She snuck a glance at him, and he was smiling down at her with an amused cocky grin. “I like it. Especially that part about being one of your top ten kisses.”

She buried her face in her good hand. “Oh geez. Please just tell me to shut up.”

“How about I just give you something better to do with your mouth instead?”

Her eyes widened as she raised her head to gape at him.

His eyes widened too as he quickly shook his head. “Wait, that sounded...I mean...I didn’t mean that.”

She grinned, kind of loving that he could be as dorky as her. “I think you’d better just kiss me before we keep talking and get ourselves into even more trouble.”

“Good idea.” He pulled her to him and leaned down, his lips curving into a grin, his voice husky as he drawled, “Although, I think with a little effort, I could make it into the top five.”

Chapter Twelve

Maisie started to laugh, but Dodge cut off the sound as he captured her mouth in a kiss.

Tender at first, then more insistent.

One of his hands cupped her cheek while the other gripped her hip, his long fingers

tightening with the intensity of the kiss. Her arm went around his neck, her fingers digging into the soft locks of his hair as she pulled him closer. His body pressed into hers, pushing her up against the door.

Now this was like a scene from one of her romance novels—his mouth ravaging hers as she writhed against him, pinned between the door and his hard muscled body. Except the heroine in her books didn't usually have a bruised face and a sprained wrist in a sling smashed between them.

Although she barely noticed her injuries—other than the fact that she didn't have two hands to run all over his body—all she could focus on was the heat coiling inside her and the feel of his fingers as they moved from her hip, sliding under her shirt and over the bare skin of her back.

Then his hand slid around and up her stomach to cup her breast, and she thought she might die from the want and need coursing through her.

The scruff of his whiskers scraped her skin as his lips moved from hers, grazing down her neck. His breath was warm against her skin, and she tipped her head back, craving more of the delicious heat of it. Skimming his lips back up her neck, he kissed that delicate spot behind her earlobe, and she let out a sigh of pleasure.

It was a good thing she was pressed against the door because she feared her knees might buckle. Although everything in her wanted to wrap her legs around his waist and have him carry her into her bedroom.

Her thoughts were scattered, trying to focus on feeling everything at once, every delicious sensation of this man—his kisses and his every touch that had her yearning for more.

His lips were on hers again, his kiss filled with heat and passion, and she moaned into

his mouth as the thumb of his hand, the one cupping her breast, slid inside the lacy fabric of her bra and grazed the tightened nub of her nipple.

Her good hand was still around his neck, and she started to move it down, but instead Dodge caught her hand in his and pulled it above her head, twining his fingers with hers as he pressed it against the door.

Her breath was ragged, and heat coiled in her center as one of his hands had hers pinned to the door above her head while the other one continued to tease her hardened nipple.

She was fairly certain she might die from need—she'd never wanted anything as much as she wanted Dodge Lassiter—and she could feel the way he wanted her too. He'd kissed her with passion when they'd been on the sofa earlier, but this was something different. This was raw hunger, and she freaking loved it.

Grinding her hips into his, her body greedy for more of his touch, she felt like she might explode. She'd never wanted—physically ached—for a man like this. And it was killing her.

In the books she read, she always admired the way strong women asked their lovers for what they wanted. She'd never been able to do that. The thoughts were there, but she could never get them to come out of her mouth. It felt too embarrassing, like she would say something wrong, or it would come out sounding stupid.

She knew she wasn't that experienced when it came to sex, but somehow it felt different with Dodge. Maybe because she'd been fantasizing about him—about being with him, like this—for so many years.

I want you. I need your hands on every part of me. Take me to bed then strip me naked and ravage every part of me.

The words were there, but before she could find the courage to say them, the doorbell rang.

No. Please no.

Not again.

If Jacob was back with another pet in a box, she was going to scream.

She considered ignoring it, but Dodge had already pulled his hand out of her shirt and let go of her. Her body cried out as he took two steps back.

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He swallowed, his expression a little dazed then he turned his head toward the front door as the ring was followed up by a knock and a loud “Yoo hoo!” that Maisie recognized as Gertrude Henderson. Gertie was her neighbor on the opposite side of the frog and popsicle gift-bearing Jacob.

Maisie had just yanked her shirt back down when she saw Gertie’s face appear in her kitchen window. The woman had one of her hands cupped around her eyes as she squinted into the house. Catching sight of Maisie, she waved and pointed to the door.

“Do you always get this many visitors?” Dodge asked. He sounded a little winded, and Maisie smiled as she hurried toward the door, loving the idea that their fervent kissing had affected his ability to catch his breath as well.

She paused to draw in a calming breath before she opened the door to her neighbor. “Hi Gertie.”

Maisie wasn’t sure how old her neighbor was, but she was a fixture in the town—famous for her pecan crumble-topped sweet potato casserole and her skills in the Presbyterian church’s hand bell choir—and Maisie had known her most of her life. Gertie had on a pair of denim capri’s, white sneakers, and a sunny yellow T-shirt that read, “Too blessed to be stressed”. Her silvery hair formed a curly cloud around her head and always made Maisie think of white cotton candy.

“Hello honey,” Gertie said, striding into the house without waiting for an invitation. “I heard you were in an accident and wanted to bring you over a meal. I didn’t have time to make anything, but I stopped by the store and grabbed a lasagna and some salad. It’s frozen and the salad is in a bag, so you can have it whenever it works for

you.” The older lady set the bag on the kitchen island then bent to scratch the neck of Moose, who had run over to greet and sniff her. “Aww. What a good doggie.”

Moose wagged his fluffy black tail and let out a low groan as Gertie rubbed behind his ears.

The older woman chuckled, but the laughter died on her lips and her eyes widened as she turned and got a real look at Maisie. “Goodness dear, your poor face. That eye looks painful.” She took a few steps closer. “You’re awfully flushed. I hope you’re not running a fever. Or did I make you run for the door?”

“No, neither one. I...” Heck, she had zero ideas for a way to explain why her face was red. She couldn’t very well tell her eighty-something year old neighbor that she was flushed from a crazy-hot make out session she’d just been having while being pressed against her coat-closet door.

“We went for a walk, and she must have gotten a little too much sun,” Dodge offered, stepping forward.

Smart and sexy.

“Yes, that must be it.” Maisie nodded at Gertie then snuck a quick glance at Dodge. A slight grin tugged at the corner of his lips. That little smile and knowing they shared a secret—a secret that involved him kissing her—sent her heart racing like it was in the Indy 500.

Gertie narrowed her eyes as she studied first Dodge then Maisie, then seemed to accept the excuse as she returned her attention to Maisie’s injuries. “What happened to your arm? Did you break it?”

“No. Thankfully. I just sprained my wrist,” Maisie told her. “Although, I don’t know

why I said thankfully, because having asprained wrist and being bound by this dumb sling is no picnic. At least a cast would let me move my arm around.”

“Yes, but a sprain will hopefully heal faster. I heard that they’ve got your car over at Hal’s, but I didn’t hear how the accident happened.”

Maisie explained how she’d swerved to avoid an animal in the road—she didn’t mention the llama since her brain was still a little fuzzy on that detail—and lost control of the car. “I think the weight of the bookmobile contributed to the accident, and when I went into the ditch, I slammed into a big rock.” She pointed to her face. “The black eye is from the airbag hitting me in the face.”

“You poor thing.” Gertie glanced over at Dodge again. “Although, it seems like you’re being well taken care of.”

“Oh yes, well...” Maisie wasn’t sure how to respond to that either, but hoped Gertie didn’t notice the flame of heat that just flared in her cheeks again. “I’m sorry I didn’t introduce you. This is a friend of mine. Have you met Dodge Lassiter?” She thrilled at the idea of calling him her friend. Although, her heart had always wished to call him something more. Maybe, after this weekend, and all those kisses...

“Of course I know Dodge,” Gertie responded with a huff. “I recognized your pickup,” she told him. “And I noticed it was sitting out there all night.”

“Miss Gertie was my Sunday school teacher when I was kid,” Dodge explained to Maisie, deftly ignoring the mention of his truck parked in front of her house. “She taught me and my brothers.”

“I surely did,” Gertie said, puffing up her chest. “All three of you tried my patience at times, but I’m awfully proud of the fine men you all turned out to be.”

Dodge dipped his head in response.

“Speaking of church, I’d better get going,” Gertie said. “I’ve got choir practice starting in twenty minutes.” She gave Maisie a gentle squeeze. “You take care of yourself, and let me know if you need anything, honey.”

“I will,” Maisie assured her. “Thanks again for the meal.”

“Anytime. You know I’d been feeling guilty that I didn’t think to pick you up anything sweet. But now that I’ve been here, it looks like you might already have something for dessert.” She cut her eyes to Dodge then gave Maisie a saucy wink before slipping out the front door.

Maisie’s mouth dropped open as the older woman’s voice called, “I’ll check in on you tomorrow,” before Dodge shut the door behind her.

He grinned as he turned back to Maisie. “She always has been a sassy little thing. I remember one Sunday morning when I was in high school, I walked into the church kitchen and caught her and another little old lady swigging the wine they were using to prepare for communion. She didn’t even look embarrassed. She just raised the wine bottle at me and grinned as she proclaimed that she loved Jesus, but she still drank a little.”

Maisie barked out a laugh then covered her mouth, embarrassed by the loud sound, but also not able to stop laughing. “I would swear you made that story up, but since I know Gertie, I believe every word.”

“It’s the God’s honest truth,” Dodge said, laughing with her. “I don’t have the imagination to make up the kind of trouble that woman gets into. Duke told me that one summer he was running fence and caught her, Ida Johnson, my grandma, and yours drinking homemade strawberry wine and skinny-dipping in the ranch’s west

pond.”

Maisie’s mouth dropped open again. She had to stop doing that—she was going to catch flies. “Wait. My grandmother? Ruby Foster? Drinking wine and skinny-dipping?”

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Dodge laughed again. “I love that you so easily accept the other women involved but are shocked by Ruby’s part in it.”

Maisie shook her head as she laughed with him. “No. I mean I am shocked about my grandmother, but I can’t imagine June or Ida Johnson doing it either.”

Ida and her husband, Frank, had been the neighbors and best friends of Dodge’s grandparents, Duke and June. The Johnson’s house was the rundown farm that her new friend, Elizabeth, had purchased that summer and had been renovating with Dodge’s brother, Ford.

“I don’t want to picture any of them, especially since my grandpa said one of them was sunbathing on a rock and another was jumping into the pond from our rope swing, and they were all buck-naked. But I can imagine all of them taking part. Gramps said it was decades ago, and I think both of our grandmother’s had more spunk that we probably give them credit for.”

Maisie shrieked with more laughter and covered her ears. “Gah. I do not want to hear any more. I’m not going to be able to look at my grandma with a straight face next time I see her.”

“From the stories Duke tells, that one is tame. You know what it’s like growing up in a small town. If you can’t find trouble to get into, you sometimes have to make some.”

She shook her head. “Not me. I was too shy. And too grateful to my gram for taking me in that I never wanted to cause her any trouble.” Her gaze dropped to a dusty

pawprint on the floor, and she swiped at it with her foot. “I’m probably still a little bit that way. It’s easier to live adventures through books and stories than to find the courage to actually be adventurous.”

He let out a small laugh, and she brought her gaze up to meet his.

Was he laughing at her?

His face held a smile, but it seemed like a flirty one, and her stomach did a little flip.

“I used to think you were pretty shy too. But after spending time with you this weekend, I think you’re more daring than you give yourself credit for.” He took a step closer, and she caught her breath as the familiar ache for him built in her chest. His voice dropped lower, and he drawled out, “Maybe your trouble-making days are still ahead of you.”

Chapter Thirteen

Dodge had no idea where these teasing comments were coming from. It was like he was suddenly channeling his brother. Chevy was the one who charmed the ladies. Dodge was friendly and easy-going, but he wasn’t known for flirting or ever trying to hook up with women. He had occasionally dated, but never let anything get too serious.

He knew all too well the heartbreak and devastation loving someone could cause.

Which was the reason he would never let himself get that close to anyone again.

So why was he tossing out playful remarks and thinking about pulling Maisie into his arms again? She’d surprised him earlier, first with her flat-out asking him to kiss her, then again when they’d come back from the walk.

His head was still spinning from the memory of pressing her against the door and ravaging her with his mouth while his hand found its way under her shirt.

Heat surged through his veins as he recalled skimming his thumb over her nipple and imagined how it would feel to swirl the hardened nub with his tongue. Not just how it would feel to him, but how it would feel to Maisie. And what he could with his tongue to draw out another one of those kitten sighs that she made. Those sighs that drove him crazy.

He was seeing the quiet librarian in a whole new light.

He'd known her a long time, but always thought of her as shy and a little timid. Even after spending time with her working on Elizabeth's house earlier that summer, talking and laughing, his mind might have occasionally wondered what it would be like to kiss those bow-shaped lips, but he never thought of her writhing against him, her fingers gripping his hair, with soft moans escaping her lips as he pinned her against a door.

And now he couldn't stop thinking about it. And how he wanted to do it again.

Before Maisie could respond to his comment, the dang doorbell rang again. This place was like Grand Central Station. Since he was standing closest to the door, he reached for the knob, then glanced at Maisie for consent.

She nodded, and he pulled open the door to find a red-haired, teenage girl standing in the doorway and holding a large bouquet of flowers.

He recognized her as a Johnson, the red hair and freckles tipped him off, and thought her name was something like Mandy or Mindy. He couldn't remember which, but he thought she was one of the girls who worked the register at the feed store. Although that could be one of her sisters. Or cousins. There were enough Johnson's in town, that

you couldn't walk a half a block without running into one of them.

The girl peered over the top of the bouquet, a mix of purple wildflowers and pink roses, and flashed a toothy grin at Maisie. "Hi, Miss Graham. These are for you. I heard you were in a car accident. Hope you're okay."

"Wow, they're gorgeous. And I'm fine." Maisie reached out her good hand to take the flowers, but Dodge beat her to it, taking them from the teenager and carrying them into the kitchen. Not that she couldn't manage them, but he didn't want to chance her hurting her wrist.

"I just finished that book recommended," the girl told Maisie.

"Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children, wasn't it?" Maisie asked, although Dodge had a feeling she knew it was. Maisie waited for the girl to nod then asked, "What did you think of it?"

"I loved it. I wasn't sure about it at first, but then I really got into it."

"I'm so glad," Maisie told her, and Dodge could see that she really meant it. "We should have the whole series available. I can hold the next two for you when I get back to the library on Monday, if you'd like."

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The girl nodded eagerly. “That would be great. I’ll come in after school.” She raised her hand to wave. “Take care of yourself, Miss Graham. And enjoy the flowers.”

“Thanks Mikayla. I will.” Maisie pushed the door shut then joined Dodge in the kitchen to admire the flowers.

Mikayla. Mindy. Mandy. He’d been close enough.

“You seem to have a real knack for suggesting great books,” he told Maisie.

“I’m a librarian. That’s what I do,” she said with an offhand shrug, but he could tell from her smile that his words made her happy.

He watched her pull the card from a pink envelope stuck between the flowers. His brow furrowed as he wondered who had sent them to her, and a strange feeling pinged through his belly.

Was it jealousy?

He had no right to be jealous. He certainly had no claim on Maisie. She’d told him that she wasn’t seeing anyone, but that didn’t mean there weren’t men interested in seeing her. She was pretty and sweet and thoughtful—the kind of woman any man would be lucky to come home to every night.

Whoa. Since when did he think about what it would be like to come home to a woman every night?

He didn't. Because that wasn't in the cards for him.

So why did seeing the smile curving Maisie's lips as she read the card cause another one of those feelings to punch him in the gut? He refused to ask her who the flowers were from—it was none of his business—so he also refused to acknowledge that it was killing him not to know.

"They're from my team at the library," Maisie said, setting the card with the message face up on the counter. "I can't believe they would do this."

"Why not?"

"Because it's just so nice. And I don't deserve this. I'm basically fine."

"You got hurt in an accident where your car slammed into a ditch. Your body is bruised up, and you sprained your wrist. That is not fine."

"Well, it's not enough to make a big fuss over me."

"You're worth making a fuss over." He had to swallow at the emotion suddenly filling his throat. She was worth not just a bouquet of flowers, but also making chicken soup for and sleeping in a chair all night for. And so much more. "And they obviously care about you. Just like your neighbors."

"I don't know." She offered him a sheepish grin. "I mean, yes, I do believe that Gertie cares about me. But I think she made a mad dash to the store to grab a frozen lasagna more out of an excuse to check in on why a handsome cowboy's truck was parked out in front of my house all night rather than a dire concern for my health or well-being."

A different funny feeling pinged through his stomach this time. One that had his lips

curving into a grin. “So, what you’re saying is...you think I’m handsome?”

She barked out another loud laugh then covered her mouth as a snort laugh followed. But she didn’t have to. Her full belly laughter and even her snort giggles were a sound he was beginning to love.

Well, maybe not love, but certainly like a lot.

Dang. How could he have this much attraction and this many feelings swirling around in his gut for a woman he’d known since high school? Although, yes, he had known her, but he hadn’t ever kissed her, or felt the passion simmering underneath her quiet exterior that he’d experienced today.

And now a woman he had known forever suddenly felt like someone new.

He took a step toward her, his hand reaching out as if it had a mind of its own...to what? Reach for her hand to hold? Or to pull her into his arms again? Or to cup her face for another kiss?

He would never know...because the blasted doorbell rang again.

He cocked an eyebrow at Maisie. Her shoulders lifted in a shrug as she let out another snort laugh behind her hand.

“Maybe this is your neighbor from across the street,” he said, as he headed for the door. “Or the minister coming to check on all your scandalous behavior.”

She giggled again. “Gosh, I hope so. That would really start some rumors.”

But it was neither another neighbor nor a member of the clergy. It was his oldest brother, Ford, and his girlfriend, Elizabeth, and she was holding a pizza box and a

bottle of wine.

“Hey brother,” Ford said, holding up a six pack of his favorite beer. “Chevy brought over burgers last night, so we thought we’d bring you guys a pizza tonight.”

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“And we weren’t sure if you could have wine or not,” Elizabeth said, walking into the kitchen and setting the pizza and the bottle on the island. “So, if you’re on pain meds, you can save it for another time.” She turned to give Maisie a hug, exclaiming over her black eye and sprained wrist.

“I’m fine, really,” Maisie said into her shoulder as she hugged Elizabeth back with her good arm. “But I’m the one who should be bringing you pizza and alcohol.”

“Whatever for?” Elizabeth said, letting her go then fussing over her sling, straightening the fabric and carefully tucking in the strap.

“For saving my books.” Maisie’s voice was choked with emotion. “I don’t care about my stupid wrist, or even my dumb car. I’m just so thankful you and Ford took the trouble to rescue the books from the bookmobile.”

“It was no trouble,” Ford said.

“We were happy to do it,” Elizabeth told her. “Goodness knows, you helped me so much with the renovations on the farmhouse and creating my amazing library nook, it was the least we could do. I’m just so sorry for the damage to the bookmobile.”

Maisie winced. “How bad is it?”

Dodge was standing behind Maisie and shook his head at Elizabeth, trying to give her a signal to not divulge the level of the damage. He hadn’t seen the full extent of it himself, but Chevy had texted him some pictures, and he knew it wasn’t good.

“Now don’t worry,” Ford said in his big brother, everything’s going to be all right voice. “I’m sure it can all be repaired. Like Gramps always says, there’s nothin’ a little bailing wire and some time won’t fix.”

“But we don’t have time,” Maisie said, a tremble in her voice as she explained to them about the bookmobile contest. “There’s a substantial grant on the line, and that money could mean so much to our library and the bookmobile program.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Dodge said gently as he laid a comforting hand on Maisie’s shoulder, the gesture so automatic and natural that it took him a little by surprise. Before this weekend, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d offered a woman a comforting touch. Chevy was the hugger. His brother was always draping his arm around someone’s shoulder, drawing them in for a hug, or offering out handshakes and high-fives.

He lived in a household of men. Sometimes they didn’t even speak until half the morning had gone by, communicating in a series of grunts and gestures like ranching neanderthals. His grandmother had been the talker. Even though she’d been gone for years, there were still some days he walked into the kitchen expecting to hear her laughter and her warm call of ‘good morning’.

Not that he and his grandfather and brothers didn’t ever talk. There was always conversation around the table and in the barn about the weather and the animals and the crops. Chevy had their grandma’s gift for gab, and he was always cracking them up with one story or another. It had been quieter since Ford had moved into the house next door with Elizabeth. He still came over every day to help with the ranch, but the house felt different without him.

It meant a lot that both of his brothers had stopped by Maisie’s with an offer of help. Their presence had a grounding effect on him—the three men had always depended on each other. Their bond had been forged, not just by brotherhood, but by the fact

that both of their parents had abandoned them. They would do anything for each other.

His brothers and his grandfather were the only ones he trusted to not turn their back on him and to never leave. Every other woman in his life had abandoned him—his mother, his grandmother, Julie. His mom had left by choice, the other two were taken from him, but that was the reason he didn't let himself get involved with women. They never stayed. And every time he'd let himself love one of them—they'd ripped his heart out when they'd left him behind.

He dropped his hand from Maisie's shoulder, took a step back, and stuffed his hands in his front pockets to keep them from reaching for her again.

Moose had been wiggling around, begging for attention from both Ford and Elizabeth, but now he ran to the door and then back to Dodge again.

"I think Moose needs to go out. Okay if I take him in the backyard for a few?" he asked Maisie.

"Of course," she answered.

They'd let him out in the yard several times, but somehow with Ford and Elizabeth there, he felt the need to ask.

"I'll come with you," Ford said, grabbing a couple of beers from the carton and following him outside. He pulled a multi-tool from his pocket to pop the tops then passed one to Dodge as they watched the dog run around the yard. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, sure."

Ford raised an eyebrow in that way older brothers do when they know their younger

brothers aren't telling them the truth.

Dodge shrugged. "I'm fine. Just worried about Maisie. She's acting like it's no big deal, but she got pretty banged up in the accident, and she's really worried about the trailer."

"That explains why you didn't want me to tell her how bad it looks."

Dodge nodded. "Chevy sent me pictures, so I've seen some of the damage, but I can't tell how bad it really is."

"It's pretty messed up. Not that it can't be fixed. But I'm not sure it can all be repaired and fixed back up in only a few weeks."

"Yeah, but you heard her. She only has a few weeks until the competition. It has to be fixed by then."

"Okay, well then we can all pitch in and help get it done." His brother narrowed his eyes as he studied him. "Are you sure you're all right? You seem pretty tense."

He rolled his shoulders and took a sip of beer, trying to loosen the tension his brother saw there. "I'm good. It's Maisie I'm worried about." He let out a sigh. "But I guess you know I'm not used to worryin' about a woman."

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Ford nodded. “I’m not used to being worried about you, but I’ve been a little concerned that Maisie being in a car accident would be bringin’ old stuff up for you. We wanted to drop off the pizza, but I also wanted to make sure you were doing okay.”

“Yeah, I’ll admit I freaked out a little when I first drove up and saw Maisie’s car in the ditch. I’m not sure I took a breath between getting out of my truck and making it down to see if she was okay.”

“I’m sure. But it seems like she’s doing pretty well. You plannin’ on staying another night?”

“Yeah. The doctor said he didn’t think she had a concussion, but he didn’t want her to be on her own for the first few days, just in case. Her grandmother is in Florida, so I think I’ll stick around another day.”

Ford nodded. “Good idea. And it doesn’t seem to be too much of a hardship on you. You two tend to get on pretty well.”

He didn’t say anything or have to ask, but Dodge knew his older brother and knew what he was thinking without him having to say a word. “It’s not like that.”

Ford shrugged and took a sip of his beer. “Maisie is pretty great.”

“I know she is. She’s sweet and kind. And she makes me laugh.”

“And it was hard to miss that wall of books in her living room...seems like you two

bookworms have a lot in common.”

“We do,” Dodge said, ignoring his brother’s jab at him being a book nerd. “We get along great, and we haven’t run out of things to talk about yet.”

“So, what’s the problem? I’m pretty sure she’s been sweet on you since high school.”

Dodge let out a sigh, wishing the motion would lessen the tightness around his heart. “I can’t. You know I can’t.” He jerked his thumb toward the house. “Look at this place. She didn’t just buy a house, she created a home. She deserves a good guy and a family to share her life with, and that guy isn’t me.”

“It could be.”

“No, it couldn’t. That guy is never gonna be me. You know I don’t do relationships. And I especially don’t do kids. I can’t. And she obviously loves them. She’s created a whole passion project around kids and bringing them books to read.”

Ford stared out into the yard. “I hear you. I do. But it seems to me like you’re focusing a lot on things that happened in the past and things that might happen in the future. Can’t you just enjoy the present? It’s obvious that a sweet, pretty girl is into you. What could it hurt to just appreciate being with her and see where it might go?”

He shook his head. He knew it could hurt. It could hurt so much. “It’s easier to just not let it start than to go through the pain of it ending. And I know from experience, this is not the life that I get.”

Chapter Fourteen

Maisie pulled a wine bottle opener from a drawer then got two wine glasses from the cupboard and set them on the counter. She grinned over at Elizabeth. “Since you went

to all the trouble to bring it, we might as well have a glass.”

Elizabeth grinned back as she reached for the bottle opener. “I wasn’t sure if I should bring wine. I didn’t want to tempt you if you weren’t able to drink because of taking painkillers for your injuries.”

Maisie knew all about temptation. But the things tempting her today weren’t found in a wine bottle. “I haven’t taken anything today beyond ibuprofen,” she told Elizabeth.

“That seems good. Does that mean you’re feeling better?”

“I’m still sore, but the painkillers made me groggy, and apparently I got a little bold with Dodge when I was taking them yesterday.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow as she passed her a glass of Pinot Noir. “What does that mean?”

Maisie took a big drink from the glass, as if the wine would give her courage. She lifted her shoulders in a sheepish shrug. “It means that apparently, I kissed him.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened. “You did?”

Maisie nodded. “But I couldn’t really remember everything about it, so today, I asked him to kiss me again.”

This time, Elizabeth’s mouth dropped open, and she took a step closer as she lowered her voice. “Tell me everything.”

Maisie tried not to giggle. Her friendship with Elizabeth was newer, but the two had really hit it off and enjoyed each other’s company. Maisie had never really had a close female friend—well, she had her grandmother, who was the best friend a girl

could ask for—but no one her own age. She and Elizabeth had met for coffee a few times and gone to lunch once the week before.

Elizabeth had talked a lot to Maisie about how exciting her new relationship with Ford was, so Maisie knew the other woman would understand.

“It was incredible,” Maisie whispered. Even though she was dying to tell someone about kissing Dodge, it still felt a little unreal, and part of her was almost afraid that if she said it out loud, it might take away some of the magic of the moment. But she couldn’t help it. She was bursting to tell her friend. “Better than I’ve ever dreamed. And I’ve been dreaming about kissing Dodge Lassiter since the tenth grade.”

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“Wow. That’s a long time to carry a torch for someone,” Elizabeth said.

“You’re telling me.” She didn’t go into all the details, but she did share how they’d kissed once and gotten interrupted, then how she’d sought every ounce of her courage and asked him to kiss her again.

“I’m proud of you,” Elizabeth said. “It took guts to do that. And it sounds like Dodge was only too willing to comply.”

“It’s weird. Sometimes it feels like he’s into me, then other times he seems to totally shut down. It took everything I had to ask him to kiss me.”

“It’s okay to ask for what you want. And from what Ford tells me, Dodge hasn’t done a lot of dating in the last several years, so maybe he’s just shy.”

Maisie shrugged. He hadn’t seemed shy when his lips were on her neck and his hand was in her bra.

“From what I’ve learned over the past six months of my life, sometimes you have to take chances to move ahead and to get what you want,” Elizabeth continued. “And I’ve also learned that you might be braver than you think you are.”

Maisie huffed. “I don’t know about that. I’ve never considered myself brave at all.”

“You need to give yourself more credit. You are absolutely brave. And you’re caring and funny and so pretty. Dodge has to see that. Plus, the work you do at the library is amazing. You change people’s lives.”

“I don’t—” She started to protest but Elizabeth cut her off.

“You do. I went to the class you offered a few weeks ago on gardening in Colorado. And I saw you also had courses for seniors on embracing technology, parenting classes for young moms, and SAT training for high schoolers. I know the bookmobile was your idea and that has made a difference to so many kids this summer who wouldn’t have been able to make it down to the library to be able to read or get books.”

“Thank you. That’s nice of you to say, but teaching Bud Watkins how to send an email and creating a program to help kids read does not take the same kind of bravery as telling Dodge Lassiter that I want to kiss him again.” Or that I want to do something more.

Elizabeth laughed. “True. But I still think you have it in you. And don’t sell yourself short. Dodge would be lucky to be with a woman like you.” She offered her an impish grin. “And maybe you don’t have to make it so serious. There are other ways to get flirty with a cowboy.”

“Like what? Ask him if he wants to take me for a ride in his truck?”

“Forget the truck, just tell him you might not have a horse, but he can take you for a ride.”

Maisie had just taken a sip of her wine, and she almost spit it out as she snort-giggled.

Elizabeth cracked up with her then waggled her eyebrows. “Or you could ask him if he wants to show you his belt buckle? Or if he knows how to use a lasso? You know, so he can tie you up?”

Maisie could not stop laughing. She held her stomach as she and Elizabeth giggled

together.

The back door opened, and Dodge and Ford came back inside.

“Sounds like you two are having a good time in here,” Ford said. “What’s so funny?”

“Oh nothing,” Elizabeth said, winking at Maisie. “Just girl stuff.”

Maisie’s cheeks hurt from laughing. She hoped they weren’t red from blushing, and also hoped that the guys hadn’t heard any of their comments.

Moose came bounding inside and ran to sniff Elizabeth’s legs then raced over to sit at Maisie’s feet. The dog tipped back his head to stare lovingly up at her, and she couldn’t help herself from giving his neck a scratch. He let out a loud groan as she rubbed his ears, and the whole group of them laughed.

Which was good, since it meant they were no longer asking about what—orwho—she and Elizabeth had been talking about.

“Looks like you’ve got a new friend,” Ford commented.

“He’s a sweetheart,” Maisie said, thinking that she had two new friends. Although she was really hoping that Dodge might become more than a friend.

“We’d better take off,” Ford told Elizabeth. “I’ve still got chores to do, and we need to feed all those new chickens you talked me into getting.”

“Chickens?” Maisie asked.

“Yep,” Elizabeth said, with gleam in her eye. “Isn’t that so fun? I never imagined myself as a farm girl with chickens and cows or even a farmhouse. But I love it.

We're even talking about getting me a horse."

"That would be awesome." Maisie put her finger to her chin in a mock-thinking pose. "Hmm...I feel like someone was just talking about the fun you can have riding a horse." She tried to press her lips together to keep from laughing but couldn't help the grin that spread across her face when Elizabeth smiled too.

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Her friend gave her a careful hug then spoke next to her ear before she pulled away. “Just goes to show what your life can become if you’re brave enough to take a chance.”

“Thanks for the pizza,” Dodge said, clapping his brother on the shoulder.

“Glad to help.” Ford pointed to a plastic bag he’d set down next to the pizza box. “Duke sent you along another care package. I don’t know what all’s in there, but I saw him put in a some more cookies and another clean shirt.”

“Nice. I’ll text him my thanks,” Dodge said as Ford and Elizabeth were leaving.

“Text him thanks for me too,” Maisie said after Dodge had shut the door behind his brother.

“For the cookies or for sending me another clean shirt?”

She laughed. “Both.”

Dodge gave her a side-long glance as he took a couple of plates from the cupboard. “You and Elizabeth were sure having fun in here.”

“I know. I really like her. She cracks me up.” Maisie held up her empty wine glass. “And I don’t drink often, so I’m a total light weight, which might have contributed to how funny she was.”

He laughed as he opened the pizza box, slid a couple of slices onto the plates, then

passed one to Maisie. “Hope you like pepperoni.”

“It’s my favorite.” She nodded toward the living room. “You want to watch a movie while we eat?”

It took three hours, two more slices of pizza, and several cookies to get through the Avengers movie they’d agreed on watching. Maisie had finished another glass of wine, which was probably how she’d ended up with her head on Dodge’s shoulder and her eyes fluttering to stay open. She might have actually fallen asleep through part of the movie.

She only hoped she hadn’t started snoring. Or worse, drooled on the guy.

“I think it’s time to get you to bed,” Dodge said as the credits rolled on the television screen.

A thrill of heat ran through her, and suddenly Maisie was wide awake. Was he suggesting taking her to bed or taking her to bed?

Chapter Fifteen

Maisie’s heart thumped against her chest as she pushed herself off Dodge’s shoulder and sat up. She held in a yawn as she stretched her good arm up, unintentionally flashing him a sliver of stomach as her shirt lifted with the movement. She caught his quick glance at her bare skin before he shifted his body and leaned forward, which gave her a chance to admire his strong back and muscular biceps.

Dodge hadn’t come out and said that he was staying over another night, but he didn’t give any indication of getting ready to leave. And he’d thanked Ford for the clean shirt care package, which she hoped meant he wasn’t going home.

He stood and held out his hand to help her up. Which was probably a good idea since the wine and the possible nap had her a little unsteady on her feet.

“I’ll put Moose out and feed the cat while you get ready for bed,” he told her. Hmm. Not exactly the sexy line she’d been hoping for. “Holler if you need my help with anything.”

Fifteen minutes later, she’d finished her nighttime routine, brushing her teeth and washing her face. She’d only swiped on a little mascara that morning, but she didn’t bother trying to take it off. She’d managed to change into pajama shorts, but figuring out the sling with her shirt was still tricky. She got the sling and everything else off, thanks to a front clasp on her bra, and had maneuvered into a tank top, but couldn’t get the sling back on.

She came out of the bathroom, and was surprised, and pleased to see Dodge stretched out on the chair in her room. He’d taken off his cowboy boots and untucked his T-shirt, and the cat was curled up next to his legs. He had one arm stretched up and over his head while he read the paperback in his hand.

He looked up from the book as she walked toward him and gestured toward the sling. “You need help with that?”

“Please.”

He set the book down and stood up. Even without his boots, he was still well over six feet tall, and she loved the way he made her feel small—even after the three pieces of pizza she’d eaten. He deftly maneuvered the sling around her shoulder but sent a shiver running through her when the back of his fingers brushed the side of her breast as he buckled the strap.

She couldn’t tell if he’d done that on purpose, but she wasn’t complaining. She loved

having his hands anywhere on her, and he sent another surge of heat through her as his fingers brushed her neck freeing a lock of her hair from under the sling's strap.

The overhead light was already off, and the small lamp next to her bed gave off a soft glow. Pulling back the covers, she crawled into bed and patted the spot next to her. "You don't have to sleep in the chair again."

He shrugged. "It's pretty comfortable."

"I know. I've taken my share of naps in it, but still, it doesn't make sense for you to get a crick in your neck when there's a comfortable bed right next to you. We can put a pillow barrier between us if you want." She started to lift one of her pillows then laughed as the dog jumped onto the bed and stretched out next to her. "Or a Moose barrier."

He drew in a long breath as his gaze traveled from her down to the bed, over to the reading chair, then back to her again. Grabbing the pink and white blanket from the chair, he stretched out on top of the comforter on the other side of the bed and covered himself with the throw.

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Moose let out a sigh and rested his chin on Dodge's chest. Maisie held back her sigh, but wished it were her head on the cowboy's chest. She clicked off the lamp and slid down under the sheets.

Lying on her back, she stared up at the pattern the moonlight shining in from the window made on the ceiling. She tried to slow her breathing and fall asleep, but all she could think about was the handsome cowboy stretched out beside her.

She strained to listen for his breathing to even out, but he didn't seem to be falling asleep either.

She couldn't believe this was happening. Thanks to a wayward llama, a gravelly shoulder, and a tipsy trailer, Dodge Lassiter was beside her. In her bed. It seemed like a dream. But this...and he...were all too real.

And she was doing her best to try to fall asleep. What was wrong with her? Dodge was in her bed. If ever there was a chance to make something happen with the cowboy she'd been crushing on for what felt like a million years, this was it.

If only she had the courage to try.

She'd spoken up earlier, and it had earned her a kiss. And then a second time had netted a hot and heavy make out session. Which had seemed like a fantasy in itself. But she couldn't help imagining that same passion happening when they in her bed...and naked.

Elizabeth had told her that she had to take chances to get what she wanted, and she

wanted Dodge Lassiter—with everything in her soul. So, why not try again?

She took a shaky breath and tried to summon her courage to tell him what she wanted. But she had no idea how to start. She was a librarian, words were her jam, she could do this.

Just roll over and say you remind me of a library book, because I want to check you out.

Ha. No that wouldn't work. She pressed her lips together to keep from giggling.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day because you're so hot?

Geez. She needed to shut off her librarian brain and stop thinking of this as a scene from a historical regency novel or a line from Bridgerton.

Um...hello...pardon me. Would you like to get naked and ravage each other?

Why was this so hard? He'd probably be asleep before she thought of something to say. Dang it. Just saysomething.

“So...do you come here often? Would you like to?”

Gah.Had she seriously just blurted out the dirtiest line she'd been thinking?

She couldn't look at him, but she felt his body shake as he let out a soft chuckle. His voice was quiet but held a hint of amusement. “What did you just ask me?”

She covered her face with her hand. “Something I didn't mean to say out loud.”

He turned on his side to face her, and she turned her head and splayed her fingers to

peek through them at him. There was enough moonlight to see his face now, and she could tell he was grinning. “You continue to surprise me, Maisie Graham.” Then he lowered his voice to that sexy drawl of his. “Say it again.”

She shook her head and tried not to giggle. “No way. I didn’t even mean to say it the first time. I was just trying to think of something to say to see if you wanted to make out again.”

“And that’s what you landed on?”

She lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “Maybe I should have gone with the bookworm line where I said I was thinking about wanting to check you out.”

This time he laughed out loud.

She laughed with him as she finally turned on her side too. They were facing each other now, but the dog was still between them, giving her a small sense of security with the furry boundary. “I was trying to go for coy and seductive, but apparently neither of those are my forte.”

“I don’t know. I kind of like the bookworm line.” He thought for a second. “Would it make you feel better if I told you that you were like a great novel because I can’t get you out of my head?”

She laughed again, but a battalion of butterflies let loose in her stomach at the idea that he couldn’t get her out of his head. “Yes, that would make me feel less like a dorky book nerd who has zero game.”

He cracked up. “Seriously, I just never know what’s going to come out of your mouth.” His gaze dropped to her lips, and the laughter on his died as he took a slow inhale of breath.

The butterflies in her stomach burst into flames. She bit her lip, remembering the feel of his mouth capturing hers.

The dog groaned then stood and jumped off the bed.

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Her gaze dropped to the open space now between them. All she had to do was scoot into it, but her stupid bashful body wouldn't move.

Come on. This was the moment she'd been waiting for. He was already facing her—they were laughing together—and he hadn't turned away or acted like he was falling asleep from the boredom of being in bed with her.

When would she have another chance like this? Maybe never.

She remembered a moment from when she'd been in junior high. It had been a hot day at the end of the summer, and she and her mom had decided to spend the day at the swimming pool. They'd had a great time, swimming and reading, then her mom had suggested they end the perfect day by jumping off the high dive and into the deep end of the pool.

Maisie was a good swimmer, but she didn't like heights. She'd wanted to say no, but she hated the idea of disappointing her mom more. Her mom went first, and she could still hear her shriek of laughter as she raced down the diving board and leapt off. Maisie remembered the fear filling her belly as she climbed the tall ladder then the trepidation of stepping onto the divingboard, the cool gritty feel of it scraping the bottom of her feet as she inched forward.

Everything in her screamed to climb back down—to run to the safety of their chairs—anything to not have to jump off that springy board into twelve feet of sheer air.

She'd inched out a little further and peered down...way down...into the blue water.

Her mom was in the pool, laughing as she called something encouraging up to her. She'd paused for a second, her stomach churning, praying she didn't throw up—that would definitely be worse than dying in a dramatic high dive incident. She'd wanted to jump, wanted to feel that freedom that her mother had just demonstrated, wanted to have the courage to overcome her fear.

Just like now—in this moment with Dodge—she wanted to take that leap, to slide into that empty space between them.

She remembered drawing in all her courage, her heart pounding as she'd pushed away the fear, then plugged her nose and leapt off the board and into the air. She didn't recall much more than the rush of air and the splash of the water, but she remembered the feeling of overcoming that fear and taking the leap.

That's what she wanted to do now. The space between her and the cowboy of her dreams was like the water of that swimming pool and all she had to do was summon her courage and jump into it.

Taking in a breath, her stomach churning just like when she'd been a girl—although it would be a thousand times worse if she barfed on Dodge—she pulled on every bit of bravery she had, every depth of desire she had for this man, and took that leap as she slid forward into the crook of Dodge's arm and pressed herself against his warm body.

Chapter Sixteen

Maisie stared up at Dodge, so close she could swear he could feel her heart beating in her chest. She was afraid to speak, afraid that saying anything would break the spell and have him pushing her back to her side of the bed.

His hand lifted and brushed a stray lock of her hair from her cheek, and the soft graze

of his fingers sent a delicious shiver racing down her spine. His voice was soft and had a husky edge as he whispered, “You are so beautiful.”

No one had ever said those words to her, and she literally melted at hearing them. “No. I’m not. I’m plain and boring,” she whispered back.

He pressed his finger to her lips. “Don’t say stuff like that. I have not been bored once when I’ve been with you. And you are far from plain. Your smile could light up this room.”

She was dying inside, her heart soaking in his words and craving more. Her lips burned where his finger touched them, and she had a wild impulse to lick the edge of it then suck it into her mouth.

What was happening to her?

First, she was blurting out dirty come-on lines and now she was imagining sucking his finger. Apparently, years of unrequited lust were pouring out of her in crazy ways.

Which must be what inspired her to look up into his eyes and whisper, “I really want you to kiss me again.” His finger fell away, and nerves tightened her chest as she shook her head. “No. I take it back.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You take it back? You don’t want me to kiss you?”

She huffed. This was her chance, and she was getting it wrong. “No. I mean, yes, I want you to kiss me. But I don’t want you to just kiss me. Or maybe I mean I want you to kiss all of me.”

His eyes widened.

The stupid sling between them made everything awkward, but she was suddenly determined to get this out, to take this chance and tell Dodge Lassiter that she wanted him.

She reached up her good hand and lightly touched the side of his face. He hadn't shaved that day, and his whiskers scratched the tips of her fingers. "I'm no good at this. I'm not experienced, and my words seem to either get tied up in mouth or blurt out in some kind verbal diarrhea."

Seriously? Had she just used the word 'diarrhea' in her play of seduction? She was terrible at this.

She pushed on anyway. "What I'm trying to say, even though I'm doing a seriously horrific job at it, is that I want you." She drew in a long breath then her next words came out in a rush as she took another leap. "I want you, Dodge Lassiter, all of you. I want you naked and on top of me, and then I want to be naked and on top of you. I want to have your hands on me, on every part of me, and I want to touch you too. The way you kissed me today makes me think—hope—that you want me too."

She stopped talking then and waited for his response, but Dodge just stared at her. He didn't say anything, but at least he wasn't laughing at her or sneering in derision at the suggestion of them getting naked and touching each other.

His voice was shaky when he finally did speak. "I want you too, Maisie. I swear I do. Everything you are saying makes me want to strip you down and take you right now. I want to kiss you again, to touch you. It's just about all I've been thinking about today. Except when your dang doorbell kept ringing."

She smiled, a small smile, because something in her heart was starting to crack, because she could hear something in his voice. Something that had the power to destroy her and crumble all the bravery she'd fought so hard to find.

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“I think you’re amazing,” he said. “And sexy as hell. You think you’re getting everything wrong, but everything you are doing is exactly right, and any guy would be lucky to have someone like you. But I’m just not that guy. I’m not what you need.”

His words were a jumble of contradictions. Maybe she just needed to convince him. “Yes. You are.”

His expression was pained, as if it physically hurt him to speak. “I promise you, darlin’, I’m not.”

She’d come so far. She wasn’t ready to give up now.

There was something in his tone that told her he still wanted her but couldn’t let his guard down enough to take what she was offering. Maybe he was scared too. “But what if you’re what I need for right now? What if I’m not asking for anything more than tonight?”

“I don’t know.” His hand lifted, and his thumb barely grazed the edge of her jaw, as if her skin was burning hot and he was afraid to touch it. “It doesn’t seem fair to you.”

Not fair to me?

She let out a long-suffering sigh. “What’s not fair is that I have you in my house, in my bed, and I can’t do anything about it. So, why don’t you let me worry about what’s fair to me. This is my decision. This is what I want.”

He gave the smallest shake of his head, his expression still pained. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Hurt her? Did he mean emotionally because he wasn’t planning to stick around or physically because of her injuries?

Neither one mattered.

“What’s hurting me is not being able to touch you. And not having you touch me. I don’t care about all that other stuff. I don’t care about my injuries or what might happen tomorrow. I only care about right now, in this moment. If you only knew what it’s taking for me to say these things...” Her voice was shaking now, but she had to press on. This was her leap. “But that doesn’t matter. I’m not trying to make you feel guilty. I’m just being honest and telling you that I want you. And that I’m fairly certain I might die if you don’t shut up and kiss me right now.”

The hand that was stroking her jaw rose and cupped her cheek as Dodge stared hard into her eyes.

Then with a low growl, he pulled her to him and crushed her mouth in a kiss. A wildly glorious passionate kiss that curled her toes and sent waves of heat curling to her core.

She kissed him back with everything in her then moaned into his mouth as his hands were finally on her...skimming under her shirt and over her skin.

Everything in her ached for him, but she was still unsure of what to do. Apparently, her body overruled her mind, as it took over, knowing just what to do. Her hand slipped under his shirt, loving the feel of his hard muscled back as her body writhed under him.

It wasn't enough, and she pushed herself off the bed and onto him, straddling his waist as her hips pressed against his hard bulge, creating the friction she desperately craved.

He sat up, holding her in his lap as he carefully pulled her shirt over her head and around the sling then tossed her shirt to the floor. Her breasts were tight and heavy, aching for his touch as his gaze dropped to them, hunger in his eyes. He filled his hands, and his mouth, with them, lavishing them with attention as he caressed and teased then sent her into dizzying torture as he swirled his tongue around one tightened nipple, sampling the tip before sucking it between his lips.

She let out a moan as she arched her back, craving more of his attention for her throbbing breasts while still moving her hips over his.

Yanking at the strap of her sling, she pulled it off and tossed it behind her, sighing at the freedom and feeling wanton at sitting on top of him with her bare breasts now both so exposed.

His gaze traveled over her, a low growl in his throat as he flipped her over in a move that was both rough and gentle as he protected her arm. She could care less about her wrist though and splayed it out to her side, clawing the sheets with her fingers and biting back a moan as his hand slid into her shorts and between her legs. The slightest touch of his fingers made her light-headed. But she wanted more.

She arched up again, offering more of herself to him. He responded by stripping her pajamas and panties down her legs, leaving her completely naked, her body and soul bared to him. And his for the taking.

He stood and jerked his T-shirt over his head and dropped it to the floor. Then he undid his jeans, the soft whisper of the zipper sending a thrill coursing through her. He was wearing black boxer briefs, and Maisie didn't think she'd ever seen anything

sexier.

His body defied description, so much muscle and bare skin. His abs were hard and defined, and he had those little indents on either side of his hips that created a vee pointing down to the next thing she couldn't wait for him to undress.

Need and hunger filled her with a desire to touch and caress, to explore every part of this man's body she'd been fantasizing about for years.

But he was apparently just getting started with her, and she let herself sink into the feeling of being wanted and desired and hungered for as his mouth and hands roamed over her body, discovering what she liked and what made her cry out for more.

Then she got her turn, her body frantic with a need to touch and kiss, to explore and learn every part of him. And she loved the feeling she got when something she did caused a reaction in him, whether it was a moan of want or just a tightening of his grip on her.

As they discovered each other, she discovered a part of herself. A part that she didn't even know existed. Apparently, taking the leap was the hardest part, because now that she had, she reveled in the act of swimming around the pool. Some buried part of her, the part that she was too timid to reveal, was set free as Dodge's touch and attention brought out a wanton and sensual side of her.

Her confidence wavered as Dodge pulled away, then got out of bed and reached for his jeans.

"Are you leaving?" she asked, dread settling in her belly. "Did I do something wrong?"

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Dodge shook his head and sat back down on the bed. He leaned down and gave her a tender kiss. “No, Maisie, darlin’, you are doing everything exactly right. So right that I figured I needed to stop to grab some protection.”

“Oh shit,” she said, not usually one to swear, but thought this occasion called for it. “I don’t know if I have any. There might be one at the bottom of my makeup drawer, but I don’t know how old it is. Do condoms have expiration dates? Is the drug store still open?”

His soft chuckle was warm against her neck. “It’s okay. I think I’ve got one in my wallet. I pray I do, anyway. That’s why I was reaching for my pants. I wasn’t leaving you.”

Not yet anyway.

The quiet thought snuck into her brain.

Stop. Don’t think about tomorrow or all that stuff he said about not being the guy for me.

Dodge Lassiter was in her bedright now—and he was naked. She needed to focus on that and the incredible feelings coursing through her body. Feelings that he had caused by touching her, by wanting her.

He found what he needed in his wallet then climbed back into the bed. She parted her legs, a silent signal of consent, but he still asked for it before ripping into the package and covering himself.

“Yes,” she told him, already aching again with tight anticipation. “A thousand times yes.”

He positioned himself between her legs and hunger burned from his eyes as he gazed down at her. His voice was raw with need as he whispered, “You are so beautiful.” Then a growl vibrated from the back of his throat as he buried himself inside her.

He moved slowly at first, then increased in tempo as they found their rhythm. She took everything he gave her and cried out for more. It was as if someone else had taken over her body, someone who was brave and wanton and knew how to get what they wanted.

Her senses were so deliciously heightened, his every movement sending a hot current of desire to her core. Then she was climbing as pleasure radiated through her, savoring the delicious torment of every single sensation that had come alive in her body.

Everything else fell away—everything except the relentless ache between her legs. An ache that built in intensity until the sensations rushed up, seizing every muscle, and her resistance shattered. She cried out, surrendering to the exquisite stirrings of pleasure that pulsed through her.

He caught her gasps in his mouth, kissing her as she broke apart beneath him, greedily swallowing her blissful moans and soft whimpers of pleasure.

Then his fingers gripped her shoulders, pulling her closer, his teeth grazing her shoulder, letting out another growl as his body tensed and shuddered as he let go with his own release.

Collapsing on the bed beside her, he drew her to him, pulling her against his chest and pressing his lips into her hair.

She had never felt like this before—sensual, reckless, wanton, awakened. And she couldn't wait for more.

But for now, she was happy to be next to him, snuggled together, her head tucked into his shoulder. As they lay there, both the cat and the dog jumped onto the bed with them and each one curled on either side of their feet.

He let out a soft chuckle as he pulled her closer.

She tilted her head up to look at him. "What's so funny?"

"I was just thinking about those literary pickup lines that you used to seduce me."

She covered her face with her hand. "They were pretty bad."

He cuddled her closer. "I kind of liked them. And I was thinking of one myself."

She laughed. "Give it to me."

"I was thinking that Charles Dickens might have given us *Great Expectations*, but you just met all of mine."

She cringed then laughed with him. "I'm not sure nerdy bookworm lines are the sexiest. But I can tell you as a librarian, I was way overdue for a cowboy."

They laughed together, and she couldn't have felt any happier. True, the bookish pickup lines were maybe a little over the top, but she still couldn't wait to see what happened in their sequel.

Chapter Seventeen

Dodge woke the next morning to a naked woman spooned against him, his arm around her and his hand cupping her lush breast. Her round ass curved perfectly into his hips, and the feel of it was making another part of him wake up.

For just a moment, he let himself enjoy the feel of this woman, let himself imagine that he could wake up to her every morning, naked and in his arms, after spending the night together. He allowed himself a moment of illusion where he got to have a life like this.

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But he knew this couldn't happen. And he shouldn't have let last night happen either. But he did because Maisie was beautiful and offered herself to him, and he was weak and couldn't resist her. Even though she said it didn't matter what happened today, he was still an asshole for letting her believe that any kind of future with him was possible.

As much as it hurt him, he knew if he stayed in this bed with her a second longer, all his resolve would melt away. She felt so good. Her skin was so soft, her curves so inviting. It was killing him to not press a kiss to her shoulder then press himself between her sweet thighs.

It took all his willpower to pull his hand away from her breast and slip out from under the covers. Moose was curled in the reading chair, and he lifted his head as Dodge picked up his jeans and padded barefoot into the living room. He pulled on his pants then let the dog out and made a pot of coffee.

Leaning against the counter, he burned his tongue as he took a sip of the hot brew. Then he thought about all the places his tongue had been the night before and knew he was in big trouble. The problem was that he really liked Maisie. She was gorgeous, and once he let himself go the night before, he couldn't keep his hands, or his mouth, off her.

"Hey Dodge," Maisie called from the bedroom, breaking into his thoughts. "Can you come help me with something?"

"Be right there," he called back, reminding himself why he was here before taking another sip of coffee then setting his cup down on the counter. Maisie had been hurt

in an accident and he was supposed to be here helping her, not helping himself to her.

She wasn't in the bedroom when he walked in. The bathroom door was open, so he crossed the room and softly knocked. "Okay for me to come in?"

"Yes," she called back.

He pushed open the door then froze as he caught sight of her through the glass door of the walk-in shower. She had just turned the spray on, and the water ran down her lush body in ways that made him jealous of the liquid.

She had a plastic bag wrapped around the splint on her wrist and was holding her arm outside the door of the shower. "I thought I could manage, but I can't figure out how to wash...well, anything. Can you please help me?"

He blinked, trying to keep his gaze trained on hers, even though his eyes really wanted to roam up and down her body. "What do you want me to do?"

"You can't do anything from out there." She put her good hand on her hip and offered him a seductive smile. "You need to shuck off those jeans and get in here with me."

He did as she said. Even knowing that this was a bad idea—that he was weak—and she was his greatest temptation. But she did need his help. And she had invited him to join her.

She handed him the shampoo bottle and turned her back to him. Her hair was already wet, and he poured a dollop of shampoo into his hand then worked it through her wavy hair. Mesmerized, he watched as the suds slid down her back and over her luscious ass. She passed him the conditioner, and he repeated the process.

As the conditioner washed out, he tipped his head forward, pressing his forehead against her wet hair. “You are killin’ me, darlin’,” he said into her ear. “Everything about you is so beautiful. And tempting as hell.”

She pressed back against him, the feel of her wet body sending waves of desire surging through his veins.

“Last night should never have happened,” he said, resisting the urge to continue running his hands through her hair. “I told you I’m not the man for you. And I never will be. But last night, I was weak. I let the wantin’ you take over, and now I feel like I might have given you false hope that this can happen between us.”

She turned to face him, and he groaned at the hunger filling his chest. Picking up his hand, she set a bar of pink soap in it then slowly circled the soap inside his palm until suds formed. That motion was seductive enough, then without saying anything, Maisie lifted his hand, with the soap cupped in it, and ran it over her body.

Starting at her waist, she moved his hand over her soft belly, then up to circle first one breast, then the other.

The lather made the soap slick under his hand, and he watched the suds slide along her creamy skin. “This isn’t fair.”

“I don’t know what you mean. You’re just helping to wash me. I can’t help it if I’m dirty.” Her voice had a flirty tone to it, but when he raised his gaze to meet hers, she burst into giggles. “That was too much. I couldn’t pull it off.”

He shook his head as he laughed with her, loving how much fun they had together. Even in this scenario, which was sexy as hell, they still were having fun.

“I do like you, Maisie. I swear, that’s not the problem.”

“Then what is?”

“Damn woman, it’s so hard to have a serious conversation with you all naked and soapy and your skin so wet and enticing. You are testing every ounce of my willpower.” The scent of the soap and her shampoo filled the steamy air around them, and he couldn’t help himself, he leaned down and pressed a kiss to her neck.

The water running along her throat wet his lips, and his hand, still holding the soap, slicked down her side. Purple bruises from where her body had slammed against the seat slashed across her chest, and he tenderly placed a kiss along each one. “I feel like I’m taking advantage of you. Your poor body is bruised and battered, and all I’m thinking about is ravaging it. Like you haven’t been through enough.”

She offered him a coy smile. “I haven’t been through nearly enough if you are considering ravaging me again.”

He grinned. “I’m trying to be serious, and you keep making me laugh.”

“Oh, I am serious about you ravaging me.” She took the soap from his hand, set it in the holder on the side of the tub, then turned back to look at him. “I told you before, I don’t care about what happens tomorrow, or the next day. I only care about what is happening now. You keep talking about temptation and willpower, which reminds me of how I go on a diet. Sometimes I’m strong and other times, I give in and eat the cake, and the ice cream, and the pizza—I totally blow it. Then I just let the guilt of blowing it go and start fresh again the next day. So, that could be how you think about this thing with us. We can just give into the temptation today then use that willpower to resist tomorrow.”

He tilted his head, considering her words. It was getting harder to refrain from wanting her and his hands itched to run over her slick wet curves. “So, what you’re sayin’ is...”

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She cut him off before he could finish his sentence. “What I’m saying is...quick talking and start taking advantage of me. This water isn’t going to stay warm forever.” She pressed her body against his and threaded her fingers into his hair to pull his head down to meet hers.

This time, she kissed him. Her lips were moist and cool from the water, but her tongue was warm as it slipped inside his mouth. She must have brushed her teeth before getting in the shower, because she tasted minty and sweet, and he couldn’t get enough of her.

His arms wrapped around her, and he hauled her against him, the motion rough but he was still cognizant of her sprained wrist. Finally able to explore her body, he ran his hands over her slippery skin, pausing to give attention to her lush breasts before sliding his hand down, over her round hips then between her slick legs.

He took his time, kissing her as his hands teased and caressed. He pulled back and watched in lust-filled fascination as beads of water trickled down her breasts and spilled off the tips of her tightened nipples. Leaning down, he captured one in his mouth, sucking at both the trickle of water and the hardened nub.

Maisie moaned as she arched into him, pressing her back and the palm of her good hand against the shower wall. He teased the tip of each nipple as he found a rhythm, stroking her most sensitive spot until she was writhing against him then crying out in release.

She sagged against him, clinging to his shoulder, her face pressed into his neck. Then she surprised him by dipping her head and circling his nipple with her tongue before

grazing the edge of it with her teeth.

The action shot a white-hot sensation of heat surging through him, and he slapped a hand against the shower wall to steady himself.

Before he could respond, her hand slid down his shoulder, over his waist, and then he sucked in a breath as she caught him in her palm. This time, his head tipped back in ecstasy as she stroked her hand along his length.

Then she shrieked as the hot water suddenly ran out and icy water sprayed across them. “Turn it off.” She yelped as she leapt out of the shower and grabbed a towel.

He laughed as he twisted the handle to turn off the spray then shook the cold water from his head, misting her with drops.

“That didn’t seem fair,” she told him, wrapping a towel around herself. “You had to turn the water off just as I was turning you on.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Yeah, I noticed. So, what do you think we should do about that?”

“I think you should help me dry off then race me to the bed to see if I turn you on again.”

Chapter Eighteen

Several hours later, after they had spent another two hours in bed, then taken the dog for a walk and cooked and eaten the lasagna, Maisie lounged on the sofa with her feet in Dodge’s lap. They were both reading, and his hand would occasionally drop down from his book and massage her arch.

She'd read the same page three times already, trying to concentrate on the words, but couldn't help sneaking glances at Dodge. She felt like she needed to pinch herself. She couldn't believe that she had spent the last night and this morning in bed with Dodge Lassiter. It felt like a dream. But her sore muscles and swollen lips testified to the fact that it had all been real.

Dodge's phone vibrated, and he checked the screen before telling her, "It's my grandpa," then accepting the call. "Hey Gramps."

Maisie tried to focus on her book, but Duke spoke so loudly, she could hear his whole part of the conversation blaring through the phone.

"How's Maisie doing?" Duke asked.

"Pretty good," Dodge told him, offering Maisie a smile. "I think she's still sore, but she's got her feet up and we're both reading."

"Sounds like a perfect afternoon for both of you."

"It is."

"Well, I hate to bother you, but I've been trying to watch television, and I was just getting into this new show and your brother's dang dog sat on the remote, and now everyone's speaking in French."

Dodge chuckled. "I'll be right out. It should only take me a minute to fix it, and I'm sure Maisie can manage for a bit on her own."

She nodded her agreement, loving the fact that Dodge was so willing to drop everything and head back to the ranch to help his grandfather, even for something as minor as a remote-control catastrophe.

“I don’t want to trouble you,” Duke said. “But I was right in the middle of a good part and durned if I can tell what’s going on now. The main character is either the murderer or has become a pastry chef.”

“It’s no trouble. I’ll be there in ten.” Dodge clicked off the call and gingerly lifted Maisie’s feet from his lap.

“I heard,” she told him. “And now I really want to watch this show. I’m dying to know if the hero murdered someone or made them a macaron.”

“Me too.” Dodge laughed but hesitated to get up. “You sure you’ll be okay on your own?”

“Yes, of course. Although, if you wouldn’t mind the company, I could come along. I’d love the chance to thank Duke for all the cookies.”

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Fifteen minutes later, Dodge turned into the driveway and drove under the arched wooden sign reading “Lassiter Ranch”.

A large rambling two-story farmhouse sat nestled against the mountains behind it. The stone and wood exterior with huge windows looking out over the ranch gave it a cabin-type feel. A long porch ran the length of the front where Gramps and Gran used to sit together in matching rocking chairs. They’d added several chairs with more comfortable cushions over the years, and his grandfather had dispensed hours of wisdom, advice, and the occasional reprimand to all three boys while sitting on that porch.

The huge white barn with the Lassiter brand painted on the front sat across from the house. Corrals extended off either side, and several of their horses stood inside, one of them letting out a whinny as if welcoming them home. White fences ran along both sides of the driveway, enclosing green pastures, and several hundred head of cattle could be seen dotting the grassland leading up into the mountainside beyond the house.

A chicken coop and his grandmother’s vegetable garden sat off to the right of the house. Although she’d been gone for five years now, his grandfather still kept up her patch of zucchini, squash, tomatoes, peas, green beans, and a little corn.

The ranch was well-taken care of, all of them taking pride in and working hard to maintain its upkeep. This place, and his grandparents, had taken in three boys that no one had wanted, and raised them to be the kind of men who would hopefully make their grandmother proud.

Maisie had her window down, and her hair blew in curly waves around her head as she leaned out and inhaled the warm country air. “It smells like freshly mown hay, wild sage, and horses. I love it.”

Dodge pulled the truck up in front of the house, his heart full with her words. He loved this place too, and it made him happy to hear that she appreciated being in the country as well.

Moose had spent the drive out smooshed on the floor in front of Maisie’s feet with his head resting lovingly in her lap. His pickup had a King-cab, and Dodge had told her the dog could ride in the backseat, but she’d insisted he was okay on the floor and that she didn’t feel squished at all. Which had to have been her just being nice, because the dog was the size of a small horse.

Dodge got out and went around to her side of the truck, opening the door for Maisie and helping her down from the cab. Moose waited patiently until her feet hit the ground, then he bounded out and ran around the small front yard, sniffing everything and marking his territory before racing up the steps to the house.

Duke met them on the porch, wrapping Maisie in a careful hug, then offering her his arm as he led her into the house.

The large living area was separated by a huge kitchen island with an oak dining room table on one side of the kitchen and a family room on the other. An enormous stone fireplace rose from the floor to the vaulted ceiling, and a large sofa faced it with two overstuffed recliners flanking either side.

Gramps must have been cooking, because the house smelled like a mixture of chocolate chip cookies, roasted Rosemary potatoes, and his trademark barbeque sauce. Dodge realized it was close to suppertime when his stomach growled as he walked into the kitchen. He got a glass of water for Maisie and himself, then snatched

a couple of cookies off the cooling rack resting on the counter.

He passed the water and a cookie to Maisie as Duke got her settled in a chair in the living room and fussed over making sure she was comfortable. He all but wrapped her in a blanket and put her feet up on a stool.

“Oh. Thank you,” she told Dodge as she accepted the glass and the cookie, then groaned as she took a bite of the chocolate chip confection. “Oh my gosh. These are amazing. And they’re still warm.”

“I know,” he said. Everyone loved his grandfather, and his cookies, and with good reason for both.

Duke was the best man Dodge knew. He was always ready with a word of encouragement or an offer of his two cents’ worth of wisdom. He was tall like Dodge and his brothers, but a little rounder in the middle—probably from all the barbeque and homemade cookies. He had thick white hair, a handle-bar mustache, and with his hearty laugh was often described as a cross between Sam Elliott and Santa Claus.

“Where’s the remote-control culprit?” Dodge asked, picking up the device and looking around for Chevy’s dog.

“Somewhere out back, probably chasing a squirrel up a tree. Not that she could catch one,” Duke assured Maisie. “But that dog takes her job of yard duty seriously, patrolling the property for vagrants, loose cattle, and those pesky squirrels who taunt her with their bushy tails and incessant chattering.”

“Are they chattering at her in French?”

Duke chuckled. “No, that’s just what she changed the language to on the television.”

“Maybe the dog secretly wishes she were in Paris,” Dodge suggested.

Maisie laughed. “Don’t we all?”

Dodge spent the next five minutes fussing with and swearing at the remote, but only managed to change the characters from speaking French to speaking Spanish.

Maisie held out her hand for the remote. “Here. Let me try. I’m always having to fiddle with the remotes at the library. People are constantly messing with the televisions in the conference rooms.”

It only took her a few minutes to figure out what the dog had done and to restore the language to English and the television to its former programming.

Duke whooped and slapped the back of Maisie’s chair. “You did it.”

“It was nothin’,” she said, setting the remote on the end table next to her. “I’m sure you would have figured it out too.”

“That’s nice of you to say, but trying to teach me about this newfangled technology is like trying to milk a bull—pointless and bound to end in a mess.” He chuckled at his own joke then put a hand on her shoulder. “And now, I insist you stay for supper as a way to repay you for your kindness.”

“Well, I don’t need to be repaid for anything, but if Dodge is good with it, I’d be happy to stay for supper. I’ve been smelling that barbeque since we walked in the door.”

“I’ve got a brisket in the smoker and my homemade sauce in the slow cooker.”

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Dodge nodded. "I'm good with it. I'm starving." He jerked a thumb toward the door. "You want to take a walk before supper? I can show you around the farm."

Maisie stood. "I'd love that."

Moose followed them outside and kept up with them as they walked around the farmyard. Dodge showed her around the corrals and introduced her to his horse. Maisie found something good to say about everything. She loved meeting his horse and was entranced by the half a dozen barn cats racing around their feet. One of the cows had recently had a calf, and she cooed endearments to it as she petted its soft forehead.

They passed the huge Quonset hut that served as both garage and workshop for their trucks and the farm machinery, and Dodge paused outside the door. "I'm not sure if you're ready for it, but we had the autobody shop tow your bookmobile trailer out here, and Ford had them put it in the shop. We can check it out if you want, or we can wait for another day when you're feeling more up to it."

"I'm scared to see it, but I think I need to. Just for my own peace of mind. Surely it can't be as bad as I'm imagining."

Dodge frowned. He hadn't wanted to tell her before, because he didn't want her to worry, but he didn't want to sugarcoat it now that she was ready to see it. "I have a feeling it's going to be worse. It's pretty banged up. But it's your decision."

"Show me."

He opened the door of the shop and flipped the switch for the overhead lights as he led her inside.

Maisie walked in after him then froze when she saw the camper that she'd spent so much time lovingly restoring.

Dodge's heart broke for her as she let out a small cry then covered her mouth with her hand.

He hadn't been paying much attention to the trailer when he'd found Maisie in the ditch, but he'd known then it had suffered significant damage. Since then, he'd seen some pictures Chevy had sent him, so he shouldn't have been surprised. But now, seeing the damage through Maisie's eyes, was overwhelming.

All the windows were either broken or cracked, large scrapes ran along the sides and chunks of pine needles were stuck in the trim where the trailer had toppled over in the trees. The steps leading inside had been torn loose on one side and hung at an angle to the door.

He opened the door then ducked his head as he followed Maisie inside.

She gasped and pressed her fingers to her mouth as she whispered, "Oh no."

Because the inside was worse.

Several tree branches had gone through the windows, wreaking havoc on the interior. The scent of pine still hung in the air and pine needles littered the scratched laminate flooring.

"I spent half my paycheck on that flooring," Maisie said, bending down to run her finger along a deep scratch. She lifted her head to stare at the small bookshelves that

had come loose from the walls and lay broken on the floor. “I remember the day I found these bookshelves at a thrift store. They were cheap and made from particle board, but they fit perfectly into this space between the front of the trailer and the little sitting area.”

The cushions of the sitting area must have been tossed around as the trailer tipped into the ditch. A few had been torn by the branches, but a couple looked to still be in okay condition.

Maisie gripped the shoulder of her splinted arm, wrapping her good arm around herself and her bottom lip trembled as she peered at the destruction. “How am I ever going to fix all of this in time? And not just for the competition. I’m supposed to be bringing books up the mountain to the kids on Wednesday. They already missed this week. I can’t let them down again.”

“It will be okay. I’ll help,” he said, trying to reassure her.

She turned and stumbled out of the trailer, tripping on the ruined step but catching herself before she fell. Standing with her back to him, he could see her shoulders rise and fall as she took deep breaths in an obvious effort to calm herself.

Standing behind her, he wrapped his arms around her and pressed his cheek to her hair. “It’s killing me to see you hurting like this. I swear, I would take away all your pain if I could.” She clutched his forearm with her good hand, and he felt her shoulders hitch. Turning her around, he pulled her against him. “It’s okay to cry. I got you.”

Her good arm wrapped around his waist, and she clung to his back as she finally let down her guard and cried. She pressed her forehead into his shoulder as her whole body seemed to shake with her sobs.

Every sob that tore out of her ripped a piece out of his chest. Even though he knew it was good for her to get it all out, he still hated to hear her cry.

He might not do relationships, but he could sure as hell offer comfort to a sweet woman who'd suffered a loss. And he swore right then, that he'd do everything in his power to make this right for her.

Chapter Nineteen

Maisie tried to control her emotions as she and Dodge walked back into the house, but the sight of the damaged bookmobile had torn her heart to shreds. She'd worked so hard on making it something special and now the whole thing seemed to be destroyed.

The scent of smoked meat permeated the air, and a Toby Keith song was playing through a speaker system set up all around the house. Duke was at the kitchen island, singing along with the lyrics as he sliced up a huge hunk of brisket. He wore a red and white apron tied around his waist that read, "Grillmaster: The Man, The Myth, The Legend".

Chevy was setting the long kitchen table. He looked up and frowned when he saw her. "Hey, why the sad face? Did my brother just ruin the ending of a book for you?"

She swallowed as she shook her head and forced a smile. She'd thought she was doing okay, but she'd never been able to hide her emotions. Gram had always told her she wore every sentiment on her face. "No, Dodge has been amazing. It's just tough seeing the damage to the bookmobile, and something I worked so hard on. But I'm fine," she told him, waving away his concerns.

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But Chevy was never one to be brushed off, and he came around the table and carefully pulled her into his arms to two-step her around the open space between the kitchen and living room.

His voice was gentle and soothing as he spoke against her hair. "It's going to be okay. We can fix it." He sang along with the lyrics of the chorus then pulled back and twirled her under his arm and dropped her into a dip. He grinned down at her. "And once you've tasted Gramps' brisket, I guarantee you'll forget about all your other troubles. It's like you've died and gone to barbeque heaven."

"I'm looking forward to it," she said, a little breathless from being twirled around and dipped by the handsome cowboy.

All the Lassiter men were beyond handsome, with their broad shoulders, muscled arms, and rugged good looks, but they each had their own style. Ford had that sullen loner look, and with his blond hair, he reminded Maisie of Chris Hemsworth.

Dodge was darker blond and seemed to always be in deep thought or concentration about something. Which made earning a grin from him even more rewarding. She would compare his looks to those of the young Brad Pitt character in 'A River Runs Through It'. She could imagine him in that scene where Brad was standing in the river focused on fly-fishing then turns and flashes a drop-dead grin that would make any woman, and probably some men, weak in the knees.

All the Lassiter men had Duke's crystal blue eyes and thick hair, but Chevy was the only one with dark hair. He had the strong jaw and charismatic magnetism that made her think of Henry Cavill or a young Hugh Jackman. He was a total flirt with his easy-

going grin and would be described as the quintessential rake in one of her historical novels. He just had a way of being able to take the most uncomfortable person in the room and put them at ease. Which right now, was her.

She was a terrible dancer and always imagined herself as the quiet wallflower in those same historical books, but Chevy's disarming nature had her feeling like the belle of the ball as he hauled her back up from the dip and two-stepped her around the room again until they circled back to Dodge.

"All right Fred Astaire, you can let her go now." Dodge frowned at his brother as Chevy released Maisie and flashed a mischievous grin his brother's direction.

"You jealous, little brother?" Chevy asked, then laughed as he playfully grabbed Dodge's head and hooked it under his arm to give his hair a scrub with his knuckles.

Ford and Elizabeth walked into the house as Dodge pulled loose from Chevy's grip and punched him in the shoulder.

"You two boys quit your rasslin' and finish setting the table," Duke hollered from the kitchen. "You're gonna have Miss Maisie thinking a bunch of hooligans live here."

"Versus the refined gentleman we really are," Ford said, chuckling as he hung his cowboy hat on a peg inside the door.

"Exactly," Duke answered, carrying a large tray of smoked brisket to the table. "Now you all get washed up so we can eat."

Dodge offered Elizabeth a sheepish shrug as he raked his hair back in place with his fingers. "You're the one who wanted to come out here."

Maisie just grinned, too disarmed to speak by the onset of heat watching Dodge scrub

his hand through his tousled hair had set off in her stomach.

Elizabeth's eyes lit at seeing Maisie, and she crossed the room to give her friend a hug. "How fun to see you again," she said, pulling back to study Maisie's face. "Your eye looks so much better, and I'll bet that bruising will have faded a lot more by the time you go back to work tomorrow."

"If she goes back to work tomorrow," Dodge called from the kitchen sink where he and his brothers were washing their hands. "She needs to make sure she feels up to it."

Maisie tilted her head toward Dodge. "Elizabeth's right, when I go back to work tomorrow. I'm feeling so much better already."

"I, for one, am glad to hear that, darlin'," Duke said as he brought in a large bowl of roasted potatoes and set it next to a tray of corn on the cob. "Now, let's get to eating before this food gets cold."

The food was as delicious as Chevy had promised, and Maisie ate too much as she laughed and shared stories with the group. Duke and Chevy had them all cracking up with a story about a pig who had broken out of his stall and taken them on a crazy chase around the yard that weekend.

Even as she participated in the laughter and conversation, Maisie was aware of every time her leg bumped into Dodge's thigh or his arm brushed hers.

She was stuffed but still had a slice of the homemade apple pie topped with ice cream that Duke brought to the table after supper. Every bite was the perfect mixture of warm cinnamon covered apples, cool vanilla ice cream, and buttery crust.

"This is the flakiest pie crust," Maisie told Duke as she spooned up the last bite of the

gooey apple mixture. “I can never get the crust right. You’ll have to teach me how your secret.”

“I’d be glad to, darlin’,” Duke told her. “You come on out to the ranch any time and we’ll make margaritas and have a pie-baking class.”

Elizabeth raised her hand as she bounced up and down in her chair. “Oh, can I come too?”

“Course you can,” Duke said. “I’d never turn down a chance to spend the day with two pretty girls. Maisie, you could bring your grandma too. We’ll make it a party.”

Both Dodge and Maisie tried to offer to help with the dishes, but after clearing the table, Duke shooed them away.

“I think you need to get that girl home,” Duke told him.” She needs her rest, especially if she’s planning to go back to work tomorrow.”

His grandfather was right. It had been a fun night, but he did need to get Maisie back.

He watched his family hugging her goodbye and marveled at how easily she just fit in with them, teasing his brothers, charming his grandfather, and giggling with Elizabeth. It was like she was already accepted and part of the group.

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“You’ll be back tonight, right?” Chevy asked him as he pulled on his cowboy boots. “Or do you have one more night of concussion-monitoring-duty?”

Maisie looked confused as she turned toward his brother. “I didn’t realize Dodge was on concussion-monitoring-duty?”

“Yeah, that’s why he’s been staying with you the last few days,” Chevy said. “To make sure you didn’t have a concussion.”

A hurt expression crossed Maisie’s face, just for a second, then it disappeared as she forced a smile. “I didn’t mean to put anyone out. You’ve all been so kind. I can’t thank you enough,” she told them before heading out the door.

“You idiot.” Dodge shoved Chevy’s shoulder as he went after Maisie.

“Sorry brother,” Chevy said, following him down the porch steps. “I thought she knew. I wasn’t trying to cause trouble.”

Maisie had already let herself and Moose into the truck, so Dodge turned back to his brother with a sigh. “I know you didn’t mean to. I think it was just the way it came out.”

“You know I would never try to hurt Maisie’s feelings. I love that girl.” He motioned to the truck. “Should I go tell her I’m sorry?”

Dodge shook his head. “Nah. I think that would only make things worse. She doesn’t like people to make a fuss over her. Which is why I hadn’t told her I was keeping an

eye on her for a concussion. But I'll tell her you didn't mean to upset her."

Chevy arched an eyebrow. "It seems like you two have gotten pretty close this weekend."

Dodge shrugged. "We're friends."

"Seems like it could be more. And she sure fit in seamlessly with the Lassiter clan tonight. It's like she already belongs here."

Even though he had been thinking the same thing a few minutes before, hearing his brother say it triggered something inside him. Maisie did fit in with his family. It seemed like it should be so easy to let her into his life.

They'd had an amazing time together the last few days—even with her being hurt. They got along great, and not just in bed—although she had rocked his world there too—but they had fun just making grilled cheese sandwiches together. She made him laugh. She made him feel good.

And that was maybe the biggest problem. For the first time in a long time, someone had made him feel again. And feelings were how he got hurt.

Maisie was quiet on the way back to her house. Moose was sound asleep with his head on her lap again, and the sound of his snores filled the silence of the truck's cab.

"Chevy didn't mean anything by that last crack," Dodge told her after they'd arrived, and he'd followed her up the steps to the front porch of her house. "He wouldn't ever try to hurt your feelings."

"I know," she said, pushing open her front door but then turning to face him before she stepped inside. "He doesn't have a mean bone in his body. I just wish I had

known that the only reason you've been staying with me was because you were watching me for signs of a concussion."

"That's not the only reason," he tried to say. "You were hurt. I couldn't just leave you alone."

"Well, I'm fine now. So, I guess you're relieved of your 'duty'."

He sighed and scrubbed a hand through his hair. "You're making it seem like I did something wrong by wanting to take care of you."

She took his hand as she peered up at him. "You didn't do anything wrong. You did everything right. Thanks for being here this weekend. I will never forget it."

Neither would he.

She was still holding his hand, but her gaze dropped to his chest, as if she couldn't look at him, as she whispered, "So, do you want to come inside?"

He knew what she was really asking. She didn't just want him to come into the house, she was asking him if he was planning to spend another night with her. And not just with her, but with her.

And dammit to hell, he wanted to—wanted to with everything in him. But he knew he couldn't. He'd already crossed a boundary he'd sworn he wouldn't by spending the night, and that morning, in her bed. She'd said that she didn't care about tomorrow, or the next day, but it was clear that she did.

And so did he.

Which was why he needed to stop this now. Before either of them got any more

involved.

He shook his head. "I don't think I'd better. Chevy's been covering my chores all weekend. I should probably take care of them tonight."

His chores were just an excuse. His brother would cover them for him for as long as he needed him too. But it was a good enough reason for him not to stay that didn't involve him having to tell her the real reason he was tuckin' tail and running away from her.

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She nodded slowly then pulled her hand from his. “Good night, Dodge. Thanks again. I mean it. You’ve been a great friend.” She pushed up on her toes and pressed a soft kiss to the side of his cheek before turning around, stepping inside the house, and closing the door behind her.

Chapter Twenty

That Wednesday, Maisie spent most of the morning in her office fielding calls from her insurance company and the mechanic about her car and trying to figure out how she was going to get up the mountain to her bookmobile kids that afternoon. She’d filled a tote with books and had been trying to find a car to borrow.

Her wrist was still sore, but most of the bruising had faded, and she wasn’t going to let the fatigue or the soreness in her body stop her from getting books to her kids.

Dodge must have taken her spouting off about only being together in the present to heart, because she hadn’t heard from him the past few days. Not that she had time to worry about him—things were crazy at the library with plans for an astrology program that was happening the following night and the Tuesday morning mom’s group that had been there the day before.

Oh, who was she kidding? Of course she had time to think about him. And she checked her phone constantly to make sure she hadn’t missed a text or a call.

To be fair, he had tried to call her Monday morning. She’d been in the shower so hadn’t been able to pick up, then he’d texted her with an offer to drive her to work and had asked how she was feeling. She’d wanted to call him back, but after the way

they'd left things the night before, and since he'd already messaged her, she texted him back that she was feeling better and planned to walk to and from work that day.

He'd texted back to call or message him if she needed him.

If she did that, she'd be messaging him all day, because she needed him like crazy. But he'd made it clear that he wasn't interested in a relationship. So, she did her best to leave him alone and focus on her work at the library. He knew how to find her if he needed her.

Stop worrying about Dodge and start figuring out how to get these books up the mountain.

Natalie, her favorite library volunteer, came into her office with a form she needed to sign. "How are you feeling?" she asked as Maisie scribbled her signature on the page. "Is your wrist bothering you?"

Natalie Wilson had been volunteering at the library for the last year. She was a single mom, an aspiring writer, and a voracious reader who loved talking about books and plotting future stories. She and Maisie were around the same age, early thirties, and occasionally grabbed lunch on the days Natalie volunteered, but they didn't get together outside of work or library events.

But Maisie really liked the woman. Natalie loved hiking and enjoying the mountains and had a sunny personality that Maisie just enjoyed being around.

"My wrist is fine. I'm more worried about how I'm going to manage getting these books up the mountain to my bookmobile kids. I was just getting ready to call my neighbor, Gertie, to see if I could borrow her car." She'd already asked if Natalie could drive her, but the volunteer had made an excuse about how she'd walked to work that day too.

“Before you do that, I think you should come out to the lobby. There’s something I think you should see,” Natalie told her.

“I’m sorry. I really don’t have time,” she said, trying to keep the panic out of her voice. “I’ve really got to figure this out. I need to be heading up the mountain in the next thirty minutes.”

“It will just take a second,” Natalie assured her, pausing in the doorway of her office. “I promise. Then I’ll help you find a ride.”

Maisie sighed as she followed Natalie through the library then froze as she came around the Nonfiction Diet and Exercise bookshelf and saw a tall cowboy standing next to the front door, his cowboy hat held loosely in his hands.

“Dodge,” she said, finally finding her voice as she forced her feet to move toward him. He was so damn hot, it took her breath away. “What are you doing here?”

“I thought you might need a ride up the mountain,” he said.

“Oh my gosh, how did you remember?” She wanted to throw her arms around his neck and hug him, but the fact that they’d left things a bit awkwardly the last time she’d seen him, and that she only had one good arm, stopped her from doing so. Plus, there were several people standing in the lobby watching them. Whywaseveryone watching them?

It didn’t matter. All that mattered right now was getting the books up to her farm kids.

“Give me a minute to grab my tote of books,” she told him.

He shook his head as he pushed open the door. “You don’t need them,” he said,

gesturing for her to follow him outside. “I’ve got something to show you.”

She stepped outside and raised her hand to shield her eyes from the sun. Dodge’s truck was parked at the curb with what looked like an old horse trailer hitched to the back.

“Come on.” He took her hand and led her to the back of the trailer. “I haven’t had much time to call you or stop by the last few days because I’ve been working on this. I knew it was important to you to have a way to get your books up to the farm kids today, and we haven’t used this old horse trailer for years, so I washed it out and have been fixing it up. It’s not perfect by any means, but I hope it will do.”

She could barely process all the things he’d just told her—she caught that he remembered today was the day she saw the kids and that he’d been working on something to help her—but she didn’t understand what this old trailer had to do with anything. Then he lifted the latch and opened the back doors, and she let out a gasp of surprise and delight.

The inside of the trailer, instead of holding what she imagined would be moldy straw and maybe some old horse bridles and reins, had been freshly painted white and floor-to-roof bookshelves had been affixed to one side. Cables were strung lengthwise across each shelf, holding back the rows of books from falling with the movement of the trailer.

There were a few bales of hay, but they had been arranged to form a small sitting area around a rag-tied rug.

Her gaze traveled over the spines of the books stacked neatly on the shelves. Recognizing the titles, she gasped again and blinked back tears as she looked at Dodge. “These are the books from my bookmobile.”

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He nodded. “I had Elizabeth bring them over last night and help me arrange them. So, if they’re in a weird order, you can blame her.”

“But how? Why?”

“It was important to you,” Dodge said. “I knew you didn’t want to let those kids down.”

“I can’t believe you did this.” She stepped forward and threw her arm around his neck. It was the best she could do for a hug. “Thank you. This means so much to me.”

She stepped back to a smattering of applause and whoops and was surprised to see Chevy, Ford, Elizabeth, and Duke standing on the sidewalk next to the library.

“We couldn’t help it,” Elizabeth said, as they all took turns giving her a hug. “When Dodge told us what he was doing, we had to come with him to see your reaction.”

“He told us, too,” Natalie said from behind her. “It just about killed me this morning to see your face when I told you that you couldn’t borrow my car.”

Maisie gawked at the volunteer. “You knew he was doing this?”

She shrugged. “Not exactly this. But he assured us he’d be here on time, and with a bunch of books, to take you up the mountain.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Maisie was still in shock as she looked back at Dodge.

“You don’t have to say anything,” he told her. “Don’t make too big a deal out of it. I just sprayed on some paint and screwed some bookshelves to the wall.”

He’d done so much more than that. He was going to make a bunch of kids very happy today.

He glanced down at the watch on his wrist. “We’d better get going. If we leave now, we can still have time to grab you one of those fancy coffees you like on the way out of town.”

She couldn’t help the huge smile that broke across her face. “Just let me grab my purse and the snacks for the kids.”

She ran back into the library, slung her crossbody bag over her neck, and collected the bag she’d put together of juice boxes and snacks for the kids and the tote she’d already filled with books and the special requests the kids have given her the last time she’d been there. She’d created a notebook system to keep track of the books the kids and their parents checked out since she wouldn’t have wi-fi for her laptop, and she stuffed it into the bag too.

Everyone else had left by the time she made it back outside, the bag hanging from her arm as she one-handedly balanced the tote on her hip. Dodge had closed up the trailer and was waiting for her beside the truck. He hurried forward to take the tote and bag of snacks and loaded them into the backseat of the truck. “Dang, I thought you just had a purse. I would have come in and helped you if I’d known you were going to try to carry out half the library.”

“No Moose?” she asked, ignoring his sarcasm as she climbed into the cab.

“Gramps just took him,” he said, automatically leaning over her to help get the seatbelt fastened around her sling like he’d done the other night when they’d gone out

to the ranch.

She sucked in a breath as he reached across her, inhaling the masculine scent of him—a woodsy cologne combined with notes of leather and the cinnamon gum he must be chewing. She was already weak in the knees from him showing up with the temporary bookmobile, but the scent of him surrounding her was causing her to positively swoon.

“I wasn’t sure where all we were headed and figured it would be easier to leave him behind this time,” Dodge told her.

This time?

Was he planning to come with her for the next several weeks too? Gosh, she hoped so. Not just because she wanted to spend time with him, but because she wasn’t sure she could ask him to borrow or manage driving his truck and trailer, especially not with only one hand.

He drove slowly through town, then pulled the truck over in front of the quaint coffee shop she’d told him over the weekend that she loved.

Thankfully, there was no line when they walked in, but there was also no one behind the counter.

“Be out in a sec,” a female voice called from the back, then appeared a few seconds later with a giant stack of plastic cups in her hands. The tall stack covered her face and wobbled as she walked toward the counter.

“Whoa,” Dodge said, leaping forward to grab the cups before they toppled forward. “I got ya.” He set the cups on the counter then his eyes widened as he took in the pretty dark-haired woman who had been holding them.

She was average height and wore ankle-cuffed jeans, white sneakers, and a pink polo top with the coffee shop's name and logo embroidered over the breast pocket. A navy-blue apron was tied around her generous hips, and she had most of her long hair pulled up into a messy bun on top of her head. The bun appeared to be secured with several bamboo coffee stir sticks, and several locks of hair had come free and lay loose around her neck.

If Maisie had tried that with her hair, the whole thing would fall—her thick hair needed at least two pencils to keep it in place, but this woman's hair had that fresh Instagram-worthy look of one of those gorgeous women who looked sexy and put together no matter what they did.

She looked vaguely familiar but Maisie couldn't place her and hated the niggle of jealousy she felt as Dodge stared at her.

"Hey Leni," he slowly drawled. "Since when did you get back in town?"

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Whowasthis woman? And why did she rate one of Dodge's drawls?

The woman leaned her hip against the counter, and Maisie was a little happy to see that she offered Dodge a look that was more tired and exasperated than any kind of flirty. "A few weeks ago. I'm sure you know my sister had another baby, and I'm helping her with the shop."

He arched an eyebrow. "Anybody else know you're back?"

She shook her head as she rolled her eyes. "Not many. And I haven't been advertising it. I don't even know how long I'm staying."

He was wearing a funny grin as he turned back to Maisie. "Do you know all know each other?" he asked then introduced them when she shook her head. "Maisie Graham, this is Leni Gibbs. Leni, this is Maisie. She's a librarian."

Maisie recognized the name now. She knew Lorna Gibbs, now Williams, the owner of the coffee shop. She'd been in their class at school, and she remembered that Lorna had a sister, but she'd been a few years older, and Maisie hadn't ever met her.

"Nice to meet you," the woman said pleasantly enough—all her animosity must have been just for Dodge—then pulled one of the cups off the stack and held it up. "So, did you want to order a coffee?"

"Nice to meet you too. And yes," Maisie said then gave her their order for two iced caramel lattes.

“And a couple of those slices of coffee cake,” Dodge said, pointing inside the display case. He laid a twenty-dollar bill on the counter before Maisie had a chance to protest then didn’t say anything more as the woman busied herself making their coffees and packing up their coffee cake.

She passed Dodge several dollars in change, and he dumped them in the tip jar on the counter. “See ya around, Leni. Nice to have you back.”

“I didn’t say I was back,” she called as they left the store. “I’m just helping my sister.”

She waited until they were settled in the truck and had their coffees in hand before giving Dodge a questioning look. “So, not that it’s any of my business, but you’ve got me curious.” And jealous. “Are you going to tell me who this Leni is? Obviously, there’s some history between the two of you.”

“Nope. There’s no history between me and her. But there’s plenty between her and Chevy. She’s his ex, and she left town five or so years ago—after they broke up. I’d wager he doesn’t know she’s back.”

“Would he care?” she asked, secretly thankful that she wasn’t someone Dodge was interested in.

“Oh, he’ll care all right. She’s the only woman he’s ever really loved. And she’s the one who got away.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Dodge snuck a quick glance at Maisie as he maneuvered the trailer around another hairpin curve. She looked so happy, and it did something to his heart that his actions had caused that gorgeous smile she was wearing. She was practically bouncing up

and down in her seat. And she had barely taken a breath as she told him about all the kids and people they were visiting that afternoon.

There were five houses on Maisie's bookmobile route and one stop at West Creek, a tiny mountain town that didn't have a library of its own.

"It takes me all afternoon and sometimes into the evening because I always try to give the kids enough time to make their decisions," she'd explained. "And I never know how many people will show up in West Creek. The residents know I'm usually there between two and three, so they set up a space for me in front of their grocery store. There are a few of the folks who I text when I'm on my way, and they put out the call to any of the kids on the neighboring farms and ranches who want to come over and check out books. Most of their parents can't spare the several hours it takes to make a trip into town, but they can drive a few miles to drop their kids at a neighboring ranch. Or some of the kids just walk or ride their bikes over. I've even had a couple show up on horseback."

"Ranch kids are resourceful when they need to be," he'd said.

Knowing he was going to be spending the day with a bunch of kids had him a little unnerved, but the joy on Maisie's face seemed worth a little time of him being uncomfortable.

The first two ranches they stopped at had mostly older grade school kids and a sprinkling of teenagers, including one who, as Maisie had said, rode bareback up to the ranch on a gorgeous Palomino pony. Which worked out great for Dodge because then he got to spend the majority of his time opening up the trailer and hanging out with the kid's horse and not having to worry about being inside the bookmobile with Maisie and the kids.

They stopped in West Creek next, and Dodge had been surprised at the number of

people who had arrived in the hour they were there. Several had even been waiting when they pulled up. Including Eli Danvers, the kid who had been waiting to meet Captain Underpants, who Maisie had finally explained was a character in a popular kid's book.

No one seemed to care that the bookmobile was now housed in a makeshift trailer with hay bales for seats. They were only interested in getting the next book in the series they were reading, or the latest issue of some magazine that Maisie pulled from her tote, or another stack of romance or mystery novels to devour. But even in their haste to get new books, they all showed genuine concern for Maisie, and several of them fussed over her sling and had shown up with baked goods and well wishes for her. One woman had even made her a handcrafted satchel filled with rice that went into the microwave and was then meant to be used as a warm compress for sore muscles.

No matter whether she was talking to kids, parents, or senior citizens. It was obvious that they all loved her.

Their next stop was at Brick and Lisa Johnson's, and a whole passel of red-haired kids poured out of the farmhouse when they pulled up. They must've called every cousin within a seven-mile radius, but they all loved Maisie too. She'd made sure to bring the first book in the Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children series because she knew that Mikayla would have told her cousins what a great read it was.

The next house on their route was not one of the typical farmhouses, but a large ranching outfit. Pete Bishop was well-known in their county as a successful cattle rancher and could probably afford to just buy his kids any book they wanted. Dodge had known Pete for years, and he cut the guy a break because he also knew that his wife had left him to raise two young kids on his own when she'd died of breast cancer a few years ago.

He was a little surprised that Pete himself came out to greet them, especially because of the way he opened Maisie's door and the care he showed her helping her down from the cab of the truck.

"I'm so glad to see you today," Pete told her, after giving her a careful hug. "I'd heard you were in an accident and wasn't sure you'd show up. Did you get the flowers I sent to the library?"

Dodge noticed Maisie's quick glance at him before she turned back to thank Pete. "Yes, I did get them. They were beautiful. And so thoughtful. But you didn't have to go to the trouble. You can see I'm fine."

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“It was no trouble at all,” Pete said. “Especially if they brought a smile to your pretty face.”

Maisie waved off the compliment as she bent to hug Pete’s two kids, a boy and a girl of about five and seven. Dodge remembered their mom as a pretty blonde, she’d been a cheerleader in high school, and the little girl had obviously gotten her mother’s looks, because she was cute as a freaking button.

Dodge busied himself with opening the back end of the trailer, and both kids seemed excited as they ran into the bookmobile and started rifling through the books on the shelves. Pete seemed more interested in having a conversation with Maisie than worrying about which books his kids were choosing, but she excused herself and followed the kids into the bookmobile.

The little girl already had a stack of books picked out and begged Maisie to read one to her. Seemingly happy to oblige, Maisie plopped down on the rug with her back against a hay bale, and the little girl climbed immediately into her lap.

Seeing the little girl cuddled in Maisie’s arms tore at something in Dodge’s heart. It was in a place that he hadn’t let himself feel in a long time.

This was why he avoided being around kids.

His chest constricted, and his fingers curled into fists as a mixture of grief and anger washed over him making him want to either yell or punch something. He stepped away from the trailer and strode toward the corrals, desperate to get away from the scene of Maisie and those two kids. He leaned his forearms against the top rail of the

corral fence, looking out over the Bishop ranch as he tried to get his emotions under control.

He heard the shuffle of footsteps then Pete leaned on the fence beside him. “How ya doing, Dodge?”

“I guess I can’t complain.”

“I was a little surprised to see you with Maisie today. I didn’t know you were friends. Or are you two an item?”

“Me and Maisie? Nope. Just friends.”

“That’s good to hear. I’ve been trying to get the nerve up to ask her out.”

Dodge’s head jerked toward him. “You mean out...like on a date?”

“Well, yeah. She’s real sweet. And she really likes my kids. We’ve talked her into staying for supper a few times, but I’d like to take her out on a real date. Just the two of us, ya know. So I can make my intentions clear.”

“Your intentions?” Dodge practically choked on the word.

“Course. I’ve got two kids and a farm to manage. I don’t have the time or money to waste on taking a woman out that I’m not serious about.”

Before he could respond, not that he knew how to respond anyway, Maisie called out to him as she and the kids closed up the back doors of the trailer. “Hey Dodge. We’ve still got one more house to get to, so we need to be going.”

That was fine by him. He couldn’t wait to get out of here.

He ignored the feelings that had him striding to the other side of the truck to be the one to open Maisie's door and help her inside.

"Are you okay?" Maisie asked, offering him a questioning look.

He didn't know if was okay or not. He had too many emotions swirling through him to even be able to think straight.

"Yeah, of course. I'm fine." He heard the curtness in his voice but wasn't about to spoil Maisie's happy mood with his memories of the past that he couldn't do anything about anyway.

The last ranch was a small farm tucked back against a rocky mountainside. A harried looking young mom with a baby on her hip and three kids, who all looked to be under the age of ten, clamored out of the house from behind her.

The kids all ran to hug Maisie and squealed over their excitement at getting new books and stories to read. The oldest was a shy girl with glasses and her long brown hair in a single braid that kept flopping over her shoulder as she helped to corral her younger brothers and sisters. Dodge wondered if she was what Maisie would've looked like as a young girl.

"You are such a blessing," the young mom, who Maisie introduced as Emma Lambert, told them. "Joe's been working long hours in the fields all week, and I haven't talked to another adult in days. And of course, I know it wasn't your fault, but gosh, this bunch really missed you last week. You know how they love their books. And this one..." She pointed to the oldest girl. "Molly finished the third book in that Percy Jackson series you suggested and has been dying to know what happens next."

"I'm so sorry I couldn't be here last week. But don't worry, I brought you the next

three,” Maisie told the girl as she took the baby from Emma’s arms and cuddled her to her chest.

Emma sagged into the porch swing. Her arms, seemingly unused to holding a child, flopped onto either side of her on the seat. She raised one finger and pointed to the front door. “I made iced tea and there’s fresh brownies on the table. I’d get you a glass, but this is the first time I’ve sat down all day, so I’m just gonna tell you all to go in and help yourselves.”

“I’ll get it,” Dodge said, taking advantage of any excuse to get away from the vision of Maisie cradling the adorable toddler.

“I’ll help you,” Molly said, then followed him into the house, and proceeded to take care of everything. She placed squares of gooey, chocolate brownies onto napkins then poured iced tea into glasses for him, Maisie, and her mother, and filled small Dixie cups with water for her siblings.

“So, you like to read?” he asked the girl as he helped load the glasses and cups onto a tray.

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“Every chance I get.” She gestured to the small, crowded farmhouse, the dated kitchen, and the sagging sofa in a living room scattered with toys. “If you lived in a place like this, wouldn’t you want to escape into the magic of books?”

“I don’t know. It seems like your mom keeps this place real nice,” he said, noting the cheery blue curtains at the windows and even though the kitchen was small, the counters were still clean, and the floors looked as if they’d been recently swept and mopped. “But I get it. And I love to read, too.”

The girl’s eyes widened. “You do?”

“Yeah. I love books. Always have. I was probably a little like you, growing up on a farm and escaping into books whenever I had the chance. I’ve got a couple of older brothers who sometimes give me a hard time for being a book nerd, but I don’t care. I think book nerds are the coolest.”

She grinned up at him, lifting her chin and pushing back her shoulders. “I do, too.”

They spent close to an hour at the Lambert farm, Maisie taking extra time to give each child her attention. Emma curled onto her side in the porch swing, and Dodge was pretty sure she fell asleep for most of the time they were there.

As they were saying their goodbyes, Maisie held the baby out to him. “Can you hold her a second while I tell Emma goodbye?”

Dodge took a step back, vigorously shaking his head as he held his hands up, palms out as if warding off an attack. “No. Nope. No.”

Maisie laughed as if he were making a joke. How could she know how deadly serious he was? But there was no way he was holding that baby.

Except Maisie didn't give him a chance to refuse as she plunked the precious little girl into his arms and essentially let go, leaving him no other choice but to hold on to her.

The baby, who he guessed to be older than one but less than two, had wispy blond curls all around her head and wore tiny denim shorts and a pink shirt that read, "Daddy's little girl". She curled one arm around his neck and reached up with her other hand to rub her fingers across his whiskered cheek. She smelled like baby shampoo and animal crackers and offered him a happy grin that showed four perfect tiny teeth as she said, "Hi," in the sweetest baby voice.

"Hi," he said back, his voice raspy as he choked out the word.

The baby must have thought he was playing with her, because she let out a bubble of giggles that made her blue eyes seem even brighter. The sound, so innocent and sweet, practically ripped his heart out.

I can't do this.

His breath was stuck in his throat, and it felt like a vise was squeezing his chest. He couldn't seem to pull any air in or push any out. He swallowed at the giant lump that had formed in his throat.

This baby was so perfect—so adorable and cute—her whole life ahead of her.

She grinned up at him, and that was it—the final straw.

He couldn't take it.

Molly had come up beside him, and he passed the baby to her, handing her off as if she were a hot potato burning his hands.

Free of the child, he made a break for it, practically running to his truck and slamming the door behind him after he got inside. He gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles going white from clenching it so tightly as he waited for his heart rate to slow down. Dipping his chin, he pressed his forehead into the top of the steering wheel, swallowing hard as he fought a sense of panic.

Maisie climbed into the truck beside him, a look of concern on her face. She rested her hand on his shoulder, and he jerked away, as if her hand were a sharp knife that might cut him.

“Hey. Are you okay?” she asked, sounding worried. “What’s wrong?”

He shook his head, trying to find his voice. It came out hoarse and rough as he said, “I’m fine. I’m just suddenly not feeling very well. Are you ready to head back?”

“Yeah. Sure. Do you want me to drive?”

His gaze went from her face down to her splinted wrist and slinged arm, then back up to her face again.

“I could manage if you’re really feeling sick,” she assured him.

“I’ll be okay,” he said taking a drink from a water bottle that he had stuffed in his door. Usually his shirt sleeve, he wiped the perspiration from his brow, then started the truck and pulled out of the driveway, thankful to be leaving the Lambert farm and that adorable baby behind.

They started down the mountain, both of them quiet, Maisie still looking concerned

while Dodge worked to get his emotions back under control. He hadn't lost it like that in a long time. But that baby...she reminded him of...

Stop. Focus on the road. And breathing.

Maisie's phone buzzed in her bag, a short vibration signaling a text. She pulled it out, and Dodge looked over and caught her smile as she read the message.

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“Good news?” he asked, hoping for something that could start a new thread of conversation and take his mind off his memories.

“No. It’s just a message from Pete.”

His brow furrowed, and the green-eyed monster he’d felt before once again reared its ugly head. “Oh yeah? Did he ask you out?”

Maisie huffed. “Ask me out? Like on a date? No, of course not. What are you talking about?”

He hadn’t meant to sound so gruff. Pete was a good guy, and just the kind of man who Maisie should be with. “The guy obviously likes you.”

She shook her head. “No, his kids like me. Pete’s just a nice guy and was thanking me for coming up today.”

Dodge made a sound that was a cross between a grunt and a grumble and forced his focus back to the road.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Maisie stared down at her hands in her lap. They’d made it most of the way down the mountain, but hadn’t spoken in the last ten minutes, not since she got the text from Pete.

She snuck a glance at Dodge. His jaw was still tight, and his shoulders were tense as

he stared at the road and maneuvered a set of hairpin curves. Something had obviously happened at the Lamberts—he'd been visibly shaken, and his face had been pale when she'd gotten into the truck with him.

She kept her voice quiet, hoping he might be ready to talk about whatever had upset him. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine," he snapped, then sighed as he must have caught her wince. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap."

"Something is obviously wrong. Why can't you just tell me what's going on with you?"

He scrubbed his hand through his hair. "It's not something I can talk about. But I can tell you that this is why I'm not the guy for you. I'm screwed up and broken, and you're way better off with a nice guy like Pete."

"Pete? What are you talking about? I don't want a guy like Pete."

I want you.

She thought it, and felt it with her entire soul, but didn't say it. Where was all this coming from? She didn't get it, and she was about to tell him so, but then her attention was diverted by them coming around a corner and the sight of the damaged trees in the ditch ahead.

This is where she'd run off the road and wrecked her car and the bookmobile.

Dodge had taken them a different way up so this was the first time she'd been back by and seen the spot.

She didn't realize she was holding her breath and gripping the armrest between them until Dodge gently set his hand on top of hers.

"You okay?" he asked in a soft voice, all traces of his earlier unhappiness gone.

She let her breath out in one long sigh. "Yeah, I'm good. I didn't think just seeing the spot I went off the road would affect me that much."

She leaned forward as she spotted something in the ditch. "Stop! Pull over."

"What's wrong? Are you going to throw up?" Dodge asked as he pulled the truck and trailer onto the shoulder.

"No. I saw something. I think it was the llama."

Dodge arched an eyebrow. "Not this again. Maisie, there is no llama."

"There's something," she called over her shoulder as she pushed open the door and got out of the truck.

She heard his door slam behind her, but she was already making her way down the gravelly side of the ditch.

"Hold on. Let me help you." Dodge hurried to catch up with her and took her arm. "I carried you hurt and bruised out of this ditch once before. I'm not aiming to do it again."

"Look." She pointed toward the fence on the other side of the ditch where there was indeed a llama.

“Well, I’ll be damned. You were right.”

The llama was light brown and cream-colored and was resting on the ground next to the fence. Its fur blended in with the dirt which must have been why Dodge hadn’t seen it at first. And probably because he’d also seemed lost in his own thoughts.

“Itoldyou I saw a llama.” Her brow furrowed as she realized the animal hadn’t moved. She took a few steps closer and realized why. “Oh, Dodge. Look. Its leg is caught in the fence.”

“Shit. You’re right.” He held out his hands and cooed soft words to it as he slowly approached the animal. “Hey now. You’re okay. Nobody’s gonna hurt you. I’m just gonna take a look at your leg.” He swore again as he got closer. “It’s got a piece of barbed wire wrapped around it’s leg, and the fencing is still connected.”

“It’s bleeding,” Maisie said as she followed Dodge’s lead and slowly drew nearer to the animal.

Dodge’s brow knit together. “I think it’s been here for a bit. It looks plum worn out and is probably a little dehydrated. There’s a couple of water bottles in a small tool bag in the backseat of my truck. Can you grab them and one of Moose’s collapsible waterdishes? We’ll see if we can’t get her to try to drink something. Actually, bring the whole tool bag. I’ve got some wire cutters in there I may need to use if I can’t get its leg free.”

“I’m on it,” Maisie said, already scrambling back up the hill.

By the time she got back with the tool bag and the water, Dodge was sitting on the ground near the animal's leg and had its head resting in his lap.

"Oh my gosh. I was only gone for two minutes, and you've completely earned its trust," she said, popping out the collapsible bowl and then unscrewing the cap from one of the water bottles.

"This is a pretty old llama, and I think it's spent from fighting this fence. It's obvious it's been around people before. It let me come right up to it. I want you to give it some water, and if it does okay with you, I'll have you try to keep it calm while I cut away the fencing."

"Okay," she said, pouring some water into the bowl. She was a little nervous, but Dodge was right about the animal seeming to be in bad shape, so her apprehension was overruled by her need to help. She slowly approached the llama, holding the bowl out in front of her then set it on the ground close to its head. "It's okay," she told it, mimicking Dodge's soothing tone. "I'm not gonna hurt you. I'm just going to give you some water."

The llama strained its head forward as she approached then stuck its mouth into the dish and sipped up some water. Maisie slowly stuck her hand out and ran it carefully down the llama's neck. The animal lifted its head and leaned into Maisie's palm then rubbed its cheek against the side of her leg before returning to the water bowl for another sip.

"Good job," Dodge said, and Maisie couldn't help but feel a small sense of pride at getting the animal to trust her. "Keep talking to it like that. It seems pretty friendly, and I'm gonna do my best not to hurt it, but be ready to get back if it gets upset."

"Gotcha," she said, smoothing her palm along the llama's neck again.

The animal tipped toward her and nudged at her hand, just like Moose did when he was trying to get her to scratch his head. She rubbed her fingertips over the llama's forehead, and it made a funny little humming sound.

"Did you hear that?" Maisie asked, her eyes going wide. "It sounded like it hummed."

"That's what they do. They make a lot of different sounds." He was talking to her, but his concentration was on the animal's leg. He'd pulled a tool from the bag and was using it to carefully snip through barbed wire then pull it away.

"It doesn't bother me, but is someone going to get mad at you for cutting their fence?" she asked.

"It's our fence." He gestured to the pasture behind him. "This is all our property. Some of our fencing got messed up with that last big storm. That's why I was up here the day I found your car in the ditch. I'd been checking for any places where the fence was downed. Then I saw you, and just hadn't made it back up here yet." He frowned at the llama's leg. "Damn, I've got most of it, but there's a couple of barbs embedded in its leg."

"Can you pull them out?"

"Yeah, but it's gonna hurt. Me and the llama."

Maisie smiled then winced as she watched him take a multi-tool from his belt, choose the needle nose pliers, and close them around one of the barbs. "It's okay," she cooed to the llama.

Dodge pulled gently and the first barb released from the llama's flesh. The second must have been set deeper because it took more effort to pull out, and the llama

jerked and let out a grunt of distress.

“It’s okay,” Dodge said, rubbing at the uninjured part of the animal’s flank. “I got it. You’re free.” He stood and kicked the rest of the fencing away.

“Its leg is still bleeding,” Maisie said.

“I’ve got a first aid kit in the truck. I can wash it out with some peroxide then treat it with antibiotic ointment. That should help. But I’m worried it’s dehydrated and could be starving.” He pointed to the patchy dirt around him. “You can see it’s eaten all the grass it could reach.”

“What should we do? We have to help it.” A few days earlier, she’d been cursing this animal and questioning its very existence, but now all she wanted to do was find a way to help it. “Is there someone we can call? Are there ambulances for animals?”

Dodge huffed out a laugh. “I’m pulling the closest thing there is to an animal ambulance. If we can get it in the trailer, we can take it back to the ranch. Then I can call Brody Tate to come take a look at it. He’s from over in Creedence,” he said, naming the next town over to Woodland Hills. “But he’s a great guy and has been our vet for years.”

“Okay. Good. But I feel like we should call someone—like its owner. Who do you think it belongs to?”

He shrugged. “I have no idea. If it were a cow, I could check its brand. I don’t recall anyone around here having llamas. But it’s on my property, so we’ll take care of it.”

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“Okay, but how do we get it into the trailer?”

“Good question. Let me fix up its leg first, then we’ll see if we can get it up.”

“How do you suggest we do that? The thing looks like it weighs more than me.”

“I’m sure it does. It’s not that big, as far as llama’s go, but I’m sure it’s a good few hundred pounds. I’m gonna grab the first aid kit, and I’m sure I’ve got some rope we can use to make a makeshift bridle.”

Maisie stayed with the llama, petting its neck and head while Dodge scrambled up the ditch then returned a few minutes later with the first aid supplies and a length of rope. The llama must have decided it trusted him, because it let Dodge wash out and doctor the wounds on its leg.

It took some doing, but using the makeshift bridle, handfuls of hay from the sitting area bales in the bookmobile, and a lot of muscle, more from Dodge than from her, they managed to get the llama out of the ditch and secured in the trailer.

It took less than ten minutes to get back to Dodge’s ranch, and they both cracked up when they opened the back end of the trailer and saw the llama sitting in the middle of the seating area, munching the hay, and appearing to peruse the choice of books.

“How do we figure out where she belongs?” Maisie asked after they’d secured the llama into an empty stall in the barn and given her ample food and water. Once she was up, Dodge confirmed she was a female.

Dodge shook his head. "I'm not sure. Like I said, I don't know anyone that raises or even has llamas around these parts. We can call around, but looking at how old she is, my gut tells me that she outlived her breeding years, and somebody probably dumped her to avoid having to continue to pay for her upkeep."

Maisie gasped. "Dumped her? What do you mean? Like some garbage on the side of the road?"

He nodded. "It happens all the time. Horses especially get dumped or abandoned when their owners can't afford to take care of them anymore. But I could be wrong about her." The llama had her head sticking over the stall fence trying to sniff Dodge's chest, and he was absently petting her as he spoke. "We can always take a picture of her and put up some 'Lost Llama' posters around town."

"Good idea," she said, taking out her phone and turning around to snap a few selfies of the three of them. Maisie cracked up as the llama appeared to pose and smile as she photo-bombed the shots.

Dodge laughed. "I meant a picture of the llama, not us. And I was joking anyway."

"Oh. Whoops." Maisie said, secretly thrilled to now have a picture of her and Dodge together, even if it did have a llama in the background. "Although, I still think that's a good idea. Not putting posters around town but posting some pictures of her on social media. And maybe sending some photos to other vets in the area to see if anyone recognizes her." She took another few pictures of the llama, getting Dodge's profile in one more.

"That's not a bad idea. I'll have Duke ask around too. He knows every rancher and farmer in this county, and several in the next."

Maisie reached out to nuzzle the animal's head. "Until then, it looks like we've got

ourselves a llama.”

Dodge groaned.

Maisie fluffed the tufts of hair on its forehead as she studied the llama’s face. “I think we should call her Phyllis.”

“Phyllis? Where’d you come up with that?”

“I think her wispy white hair kind of looks like my great-aunt Phyllis, who, I might add, is also well past her breeding years, although I’d deny it if you told her I said so.”

Dodge laughed. “She won’t hear it from me. I don’t even know your great aunt.”

“Phyllis is the younger of my grandmother’s two sisters and has a much sweeter disposition than her older sister.”

“I hope she does. I’m not sure everyone would consider it a compliment to have a llama named after them because they shared the same hairdo.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

That Saturday, Maisie had thought she was alone as she was bent over in the Quonset hut at the Lassiter Ranch sanding out one of the scratches on the exterior of the bookmobile when someone goosed her in the butt.

She let out a shriek and whipped around to find herself face-to-face with a mischievous llama.

After a few days of food, water, and plenty of attention from Maisie, Dodge, his

brothers, and Duke, Phyllis had perked up and was actually quite affectionate and playful.

Brody Tate, Dodge's vet, had checked out her leg and treated her with some antibiotics and a tetanus shot. He hadn't recognized her from any of the farms or ranches he knew but confirmed that she was probably around twenty and had sadly agreed with Dodge's theory of her being abandoned.

Even though Phyllis had already won over the hearts of Maisie and all the Lassiter men, and had made friends with half the cows, Moose, and one of the goats on the ranch, Maisie had still posted pictures of the old llama on various social media sites asking if anyone knew who she belonged to. She felt like she had to at least try to find the animal's home, just in case someone was missing her.

"Excuse me," Maisie told the llama, and noticed that Dodge was standing behind the llama and chuckling at her behavior.

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“Sorry,” he said, holding up a hand. “Gramps said you were out here, so I brought her over from the barn because I thought you’d want to see her.”

“Of course I do,” Maisie said, hugging the neck of the llama. “I just wasn’t prepared for her to touch my butt.”

“The way you were bent over like that, she wasn’t the only one who wanted to touch it,” Dodge muttered, not quite under his breath.

“I heard that,” Maisie said, laughing but secretly a little happy with the comment.

The shop was divided into three sections. One area had long workbenches and tall drawers and cabinets where they kept all the tools and did smaller projects and then a larger area on the other side where they worked on the trucks and tractors, and what looked like an old half-rebuilt motorcycle. The camper had been pulled into that area.

In between was a third space that appeared to be a mini man-cave. An old sofa and two mismatched recliners formed a semi-circle and upturned five-gallon buckets served as foot stools. A foosball table stood behind the sofa, and next to it was a round table holding a tray of poker chips and chairs around it that looked like it was set up for some type of regular poker game.

Moose had come in with Dodge and Phyllis and had run around the shop, smelling all the things, and jumping on the sofa then trotting over to get cuddles from Maisie before settling down next to the llama, who stood by the door keeping an eye on the rest of the ranch.

Maisie liked the shop. It smelled like sawdust, oil, and leather and had every kind of tool she could possibly need or imagine. Plus, there was an old refrigerator set up in the corner that was stocked with beer, pop, and bottled water, and she'd noticed that a twelve-pack of her favorite, Diet Coke, had been added over the weekend.

She'd borrowed Gertie's car and been out to the ranch to check on Phyllis and work on the bookmobile for the past three nights. Dodge had been gone for one of the nights, but the other two, they had spent together working on the little camper.

They had come up with a plan to try to fix it, but Dodge hadn't been too confident that they could get all the work done on time. She had several evening programs that she had to attend at the library, but she committed to come out to help every evening that she could.

The other two nights they'd been together, Dodge had already been in the barn with country music playing when she got there, and he just handed her a tool, told her where to start, and they'd worked for hours in companionable silence.

She wasn't sure he'd even be here tonight, but she'd wanted to get the scratches sanded out of the sides. She knew where the sander was and how to use it, so she waved to Duke when she'd pulled in then come into the workshop and gotten started.

"You're doing a great job on those scratches," Dodge told her, stepping in behind her to examine her work. The scent of him wafted around her, and she wanted to lean back into his arms and rest against his chest. "You're not overdoing it with your wrist, are you?"

She'd been to the doctor the day before, and he'd told her she didn't have to wear the sling anymore, but still needed to keep the splint on her wrist for another week.

"No, I'm being a good girl." She'd turned to him when she'd said it, and her face

heated when she caught a grin tugging at the corners of his lips. She hadn't meant it to sound flirty but liked the fact that it had made him think that way.

"I checked in at the hardware store this afternoon about the paint we ordered in the colors you wanted," he told her. "But they haven't come in yet."

She sighed. "Hopefully they all get here on time. If not, I'm sure it will be fine if it's white, but it would just be so cute if it was covered in blue clouds, and we were able to decorate it using the templates I got to create spring flowers all along the bottom of it."

As they'd inventoried the damage the first night, she'd shared her fantasy vision for everything she wanted to do with the bookmobile, from new cushions in the seating area to adding cellular capabilities and different sized shelving for oversized books and standard trade publications. She loved the idea of using the bookmobile year-round and wanted to eventually add heating and cooling elements and fix up the little kitchen area enough so the sink worked to be able to wash her hands and prepare snacks. She had so many ideas for what she eventually wanted to do and hoped that winning the grant money would allow her to be able to add more of her dream features, and more books, of course.

Although now that she saw all the damage and how long it was taking to fix even the simplest stuff, like sanding out the scratches on the exterior, she had to wonder if her hopes of being able to still enter the bookmobile in the competition were in vain.

Dodge appeared to be studying one of the scratches as he off-handedly asked, "Speaking of flowers, did you get any more today?"

His question caught her off-guard. Was he jealous?

"No. And I didn't expect any. Most of the bruising has faded from my face, and I'm

down to just this splint,” she said, holding up her arm as if to show off the knuckle-to-elbow splint. “So hopefully everyone has just forgotten about the accident all together. Frankly, it’s a little embarrassing that I put my car and the bookmobile in a ditch.”

“But now we know that it happened because you were trying to avoid hitting Phyllis.” He brushed a hand over the llama’s back.

“True” She smiled at the llama and gave her a pet as well, the edge of her fingers brushing past Dodge’s, making her heart rate speed up. “So, it was worth it, but now, I really just want everyone to forget about it and not make a fuss over me.”

Dodge shrugged. “Still, it was pretty nice of that guy to send you flowers.” They both knew who he was talking about. “I guess I was just wondering if you wish I would’ve sent you some too?”

Maisie huffed out a laugh. “Are you kidding me? Not even a little bit. A few tulips pale in comparison to what you actually did for me. Not just saving my books and staying at my house and taking care of me for an entire weekend but buying me chicken soup, and Gatorade...and let’s not forget...creating an entire freaking temporary bookmobile. No one has ever done anything like that for me before. The people who sent me flowers were sweet and thoughtful, but I can’t think of any other gift I could ever receive, that would even come close in comparison to all of what you did.”

He narrowed his eyes as he went back to studying the scratch. “Don’t make me into some kind of hero, Maisie. Anyone would have done all that same stuff.”

She took his chin in her hand and forced him to look at her. “No, they wouldn’t have. But you did. And it meant everything to me.”

He reached up to softly touch her cheek then his gaze dropped to her mouth. “You sure do make it hard to stick to my diet.”

Butterflies shot through her belly, and her heart pounded hard against her chest as she prayed he was talking about what she thought he was talking about.

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She swallowed, struggling to find her voice. “Oh, yeah?” she asked, barely above a whisper.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice low and husky as he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her close. “Just recently, I got to have this amazing dessert. It was as sweet as chocolate cake, and now all I can think about is how much I want to eat it again.”

She swallowed again as heat surged through her. “You remember I told you that it’s okay to sometimes go off your diet for one night, or even two—really, a week wouldn’t hurt—then you can always pick it back up again and deprive yourself the next day.”

As she’d talked, he’d dipped his chin to her neck and inhaled her scent. “A week, huh?” His lips grazed her skin, and she shivered as his warm breath tickled her neck when he let out a soft laugh. “Sounds tempting.”

The shop was usually warm, so after work, she’d changed into a camisole top and a loose pair of cotton shorts before coming out to the ranch. As Dodge spoke, his hand drifted down her side and over her hip. Then she caught her breath as his fingers skimmed the hem of her shorts then slid under them, teasing her with soft touches. “My willpower seems to be failing me, darlin’. The hunger seems to be eating me up, and all I can think about is tasting that cake again.”

“Mmm.” All she could get out was a small hum as his fingers slipped under the fabric of her panties, and she gripped his shoulder.

His head dipped further, laying a trail of warm kisses down her neck and into her

cleavage. “So, what do you think I should do about this craving I’ve been having?”

His hand was stroking her in the most delicious way, but she finally found her voice, because she knew she might die if he stopped. “I think you should screw your diet and have the dessert. Every last bite of it. And please, for the love of all that is holy, please eat the damn cake.”

With a growl, he hauled her against him, then lifted her up and carried her to the sofa in the middle of the shop. Setting her down, he didn’t bother to pull her top over her head, instead he pulled it and her bra down, and her breasts spilled over the top of the lacy fabric. Filling his hand with one, he bent to nip and sample, skimming his teeth over one nipple before sucking it between his lips.

His other hand was down her pants again then he jerked her loose shorts and underwear off, leaving her exposed on the sofa, naked except for her camisole that was off her shoulders and now around her middle, the lacy fabric of her crumpled bra pushing her bare breasts up as if in offering to Dodge.

And he was taking full advantage of their offer. The sensations of his mouth teasing her nipples rivaled the thrum his hand was causing as he caressed and stroked between her legs. Finding a rhythm, he drew her up and up, sending flames of heat shooting straight to her core.

Her slim grasp of control was slipping as she pressed against his palm, her body aching for more. Her breath came in short pants of need as he took her up and up, her frenzied nerve endings begging for release.

Then with one last stroke, he sent her over the edge. She cried out, clinging to him, her thighs trembling as she rocked against his hand, riding the waves of pleasure.

After, she collapsed back against the sofa, her good arm flung over her head as she

tried to catch her breath. “That was amazing,” she gasped.

But Dodge wasn’t finished with her yet. His voice was husky as he drawled out, “Haven’t you ever heard the saying about having your cake...and then eating it too?” His head dipped to her belly, and her nerve-endings tingled again as his lips grazed over her belly button.

Then he spread her legs, and she gasped again at the rough scrape of his whiskers on the delicate skin of her inner thigh.

Oh. My.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Afterward, they lie naked together on the sofa, Dodge partly on his side with his back against the cushions and Maisie curled into the crook of his shoulder.

She looked up at him, a coy grin on her face. “So, how was your dessert?”

“Worth every damn bite. Best cake I’ve ever had.”

She laughed with him then narrowed her eyes as her voice took on a more serious tone. “I know we’re teasing, but you really are the best cake I’ve ever had. And I’ve been dreaming about someday getting to have this particular cake for years.”

He shook his head as he furrowed his brow at her. “Why? I don’t get it. I was a nerdy kid in school—too tall, too skinny—mostly too shy to even talk to girls. What did you possibly see in me?”

“Oh gosh. Everything. I loved that you were shy, instead of cocky and arrogant like a lot of other high school boys. And you were so cute. I didn’t think you were skinny

either. I thought you seemed strong, and you already had broad shoulders, and I loved how tall you were. But I loved the little bit of nerdy part about you too. It was obvious by your answers in English class that you had read the book, and I practically swooned over that. Plus, you sometimes had a paperback stuffed into the pocket of your jacket, and I thought that was so sexy that it made me weak in the knees.” She paused to offer him a coy grin. “Well, I thought it did—until the past week when I realized what it really meant to be weak in the knees.”

He chuckled softly, and the sound resonated in her chest. “I can’t believe you really thought all that stuff about me. Why didn’t you ever tell me? Or at least talk to me?”

She huffed out a laugh. “Are you crazy? You wouldn’t look twice at a girl like me. I was so shy I spent most of high school staring down at my shoes. I got so nervous and tongue-tied around you, I could barely form a sentence. One time I tried to ask you what you thought of the book we were reading in class. But apparently, I must’ve spoken so quietly that you thought I asked if you had baked any bread lately. I was so embarrassed I thought I would die of humiliation.”

“That’s funny. I actually do remember that.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, but just because it was so weird. I’d never had a girl ask me if I’d baked bread before. I thought maybe it was some kind of code, like Netflix and Chill is now, that I just didn’t get. I even asked Chevy about it, but he just thought I was making a dumb joke and said he didn’t get it.”

“Oh my gosh. Now I’m even more embarrassed. And the worst part is that even as an adult, I’m still just as dorky. I ran into you at the grocery store earlier this year and wanted to strike up a conversation, so I followed you for three aisles rehearsing questions in my head about how your cattle were doing and what the

weather was like. Then I thought about complaining about a recent snowfall and decided it was better to talk about how much we needed the moisture instead. Everybody in Colorado always talks about how much we need the moisture, right?”

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He laughed. "I don't remember even seeing you in the grocery store or at least not a time in particular when we discussed the level of moisture we needed."

"That's because I chickened out. And instead of casually running into you and starting a fascinating conversation that might eventually lead to you asking me out for coffee, I came around the corner too fast, accidentally rammed into your cart, then blurted out something about how I hoped your cows enjoyed all the snow we gotten. And then basically ran out of the grocery store. I left half a cart of groceries behind. I was too embarrassed to go back into the store just in case they knew it was me. Then I ended up shopping for groceries in Creedence for the next two months until I thought they'd forgotten about me, or until I'd convinced myself that no one thought enough about me to even remember something stupid that I'd done."

"Now that you say it, I do remember you crashing your car into me at the store one time. I was trying to think of something cool to say, but then you ran off before I even had a chance."

"What a pair we make." She felt him stiffen. "Not that we're a pair now. I didn't mean that. I just meant that we both were so shy. But you don't seem to be shy now."

"Neither do you."

"Oh, I still am."

He drew back his head as he looked down at her. "Not like back then. You can totally talk to me now. You've saidhito me when I've seen you at church and at plenty of town functions. And we had some great conversations when we were helping Ford

and Elizabeth paint her house.”

“Yeah, we did. And I loved that. But I think it was because I was focused on the painting and could chat away without having to look at you. You’re so ridiculously good-looking that I still get tongue-tied sometimes when I try to talk to you.”

“Unless it’s about books or what you’re reading. Like when we’re in our secret book club,” he said. “You always seem confident when you’re talking about books.”

A smile curved her lips. “I like that you think that about me.”

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I like the things you think about me too.”

“I can’t help but wonder what would have happened if I had gotten the guts up to talk to you back then. Maybe we would have rescued a llama and eaten a bunch of cake much sooner.”

He laughed. “Or maybe we would have talked books, and both still been too shy to make a move on each other.” He ran his hand along her side and gently squeezed her ribcage. “Or you would have realized what a goofy dork I was, gotten over me, and gone on to marry some nice guy who would have given you all the things you want—the house, the kids, the white picket fence.”

She couldn’t help her wistful tone as she told him, “I do want it all—a husband, a house full of kids, a couple of dogs, Sunday dinners with the family, and all the grandparents in our lives. The white picket fence isn’t a deal breaker, but I’d still take it if it was part of the offer.”

She could feel Dodge tensing and shifting behind her.

Shoot. Why did she say all that? She'd gotten comfortable for a minute and just started blabbing away.

He let out a heavy sigh. "I guess we'd better get back to work. That camper isn't going to fix itself."

She turned her body to face him, trying to keep him from leaving the sofa. "Dodge. Wait. I don't want all those things, but I don't have to have all those things. All I really want is to spend time with you. And I will take whatever you can give me. Whether that is time spent here in the shop or in my bed at my house, or just a brush of your hand against mine when I run into you in the grocery store. As long as I know that you feel something for me, that's enough."

She watched his throat move as he swallowed, but the hardness was back in his eyes, and he pushed up to a sitting position. "That shouldn't be enough. You deserve more than that."

She wanted to say something more, but it was too late. He had already climbed off the sofa and was reaching for his pants. "I think we can get the sanding finished tonight, and I was going to try to see if I could repair the floor." He got dressed as he spoke and pulled his cowboy boots back on while Maisie looked around for her shorts, suddenly self-conscious of being naked in the middle of the shop.

What if one of his brothers had walked in? Or Duke?

She would have died of embarrassment. Although it would have been worth it. Anything was worth it—even these weird hot and cold mixed signals she got from Dodge—it was still worth it, just to be with him.

So, she'd find her clothes, and work by his side, and pretend he hadn't just rocked her world and that no matter what he said, she would never have 'gotten over him'.

And she didn't think she ever would.

The next Tuesday night, Dodge pulled up in front of Maisie's house. He had the book she'd loaned him and wanted to return it. Which he could have just as easily done at the library when she was at work. But he wanted to talk to her, and he didn't think she'd want to have this conversation in front of her coworkers or the patrons of the library.

He'd texted to say he was going to drop by, so he wasn't surprised to see her open the door as he walked up the steps. Or the beaming smile she wore, just for him.

Too bad he was about to wipe that beautiful smile away.

"Hey Dodge," she said, stepping onto the porch to give him a hug.

He took it, the bastard that he was, because he wanted this one last moment of holding her to him, of feeling this sense of affection that he hadn't felt from another woman in so long. He knew what it was, just had a hell of a time sayin' it. But he knew she was in love with him.

And he was probably halfway in love with her too. Or maybe, more than halfway.

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Which was why he needed to end this now. Before either of them got in so far, that they'd both be completely shattered when it was over. And he knew it would be over, eventually. It always was with him.

He pulled her closer, then...what the hell...he leaned down and kissed her.

Once more, then never again.

Her lips were soft and pliant, and she pressed her lush breasts into his chest, making him only ache for her more as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

The plastic splint brushed his shoulder, reminding him of the accident, and of another accident, and that memory was enough to have him pull away.

He held up the book. It was already the fourth one they'd read together, and even though he'd never imagined he would be in a secret book club with a two-person membership, he would miss their literary discussions. "I brought this one back for you."

She eyed him, as if she could already tell there was something different in his mood. "So, you're here for book club?" she asked as she walked back into the house.

He followed her in and set the book on the counter as she poured him a glass of iced tea from the refrigerator. "No, not really." He took a big gulp of tea. This was going to be harder than he thought.

She leaned her hip against the counter, and he couldn't help thinking about the way

his hand curved around that same hip, drawing her closer as her legs wrapped around his waist.

Speaking of harder.

Maybe he should forget this stupid idea and just carry her into the bedroom and adore her for the next three hours. He could make her see reason another day. And then, this day, all he would have to make her see were stars.

Her forehead creased with concern. “Everything okay?”

He drew in a breath. “No, not really. I think we need to talk.”

Her eyes widened. “Uh oh. This doesn’t sound good.”

“No. It’s not.” Stop stalling and just spit it out. “It’s just that I’ve been thinking about what you said last weekend, when we were in the shop, you know...after...” Oh dang, don’t start thinking about that or he’d never get this out. “You were talking about how you wanted it all—the husband, the kids, the white picket fence.”

“Not the white picket fence, and I said I didn’t need any of those things...” she started to say, but he held up his hand.

“Just let me get this out. It’s hard enough as it is.” He took another gulp of his tea then set the glass back on the counter. “You may not think you need them, but you damn sure deserve them. You deserve everything you want, and more. And you shouldn’t be settling for someone like me because I’m not the guy who can give all that to you. And this just isn’t fair because it feels like I’m leading you on when I know that I’m never going to be that guy.”

“I’m sorry I said all that. I told you I don’t care about that stuff.”

“But don’t you see, I want you to have all that, and I don’t want to be the one that stands in the way of you getting it. So, it just seems easier to make a clean break now rather than draw this thing out any longer. Especially when there is another guy—a better guy—ready to step in and give you everything you want.”

He tried to ignore the pain in her eyes—pain that he put there—as she asked, “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about Pete Bishop. He told me last week that he’s serious about you. He’s been trying to get up the nerve to ask you out. He’s a good man. He runs a successful ranch, and he’s already got kids, so you could have a ready-made family. And they probably already have a dog, or I’m sure Pete would get you one. He can give you all those things, all the things that I can’t. I don’t want you wasting your life or your sweet heart on someone like me.”

“Does it matter what I want?”

He’d expected her to be sad, but he was surprised at the hint of anger in her voice.

“You already told me what you want. And I can’t give you those things. Pete can. And he recognizes how great you are. He told me that he thinks you’re pretty and smart and good with his kids.”

“Well, gosh, it sounds like you and Pete have just got this all figured out.”

Yeah, she definitely sounded mad.

“I’m just saying, he’s a good guy, and I think you should go out with him.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, her mouth set in a tight line. “Is that really what you want?”

No.He really wanted to pretend he'd never started this damn conversation and that they could go back to kissing.

He nodded.

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“Okay. Fine. Then maybe I will go out with Pete.”

“You should.”

She pulled out her phone and scrolled to Pete’s contact information. “Maybe I’ll just call him right now and ask him to go out with me.”

“Good. Do it.”

She thought she was calling his bluff, but as much as it was killing him—and make no mistake—the thought of Pete Bishop’s hands anyone on her was killing him, but he knew Pete could give her what he couldn’t.

“Fine. I’m doing it.” She tapped the phone and pursed her lips as she stared daggers at him. Then she forced a smile as the rancher must have picked up. She tapped the phone again to put the call on speaker. “Pete? Hi, it’s Maisie Graham.”

“Well, hey there, Maisie. It’s good to hear from you. Everything okay? You know I’m here if you need something.”

Dodge pointed at the phone. “See,” he mouthed. “Good guy.”

Maisie glared at him but kept her voice pleasant. “I’m fine. Thanks.”

“You’re still planning to come out to the ranch tomorrow, aren’t you? I know the kids and I are real excited to see you.”

“Yes, I’m still planning on coming tomorrow. But that’s not why I’m calling.”

“Oh? Something I can do for you then?”

“Yes. Actually, I was wondering if you’d be interested in taking me out to dinner?”

“Heck yes, I would.” The smile was evident in his voice. “You just name the time and place, and I’ll be there to pick you up.”

“Oh, well...” She glared at Dodge again as if she hadn’t expected him to say yes and now it was his fault she was in this predicament. “How about Saturday night? Say...six o’clock at the Tippy Pig? And you don’t need to pick me up, I’ll just meet you there.”

“You sure? I’m glad to swing round and get you.”

“I’m sure.”

“All right then. I’ll see you Saturday. I’m looking forward to it. And to seeing you tomorrow, too.”

“Me, too. See you soon.” She tapped the phone to disconnect the call, then planted her fist on her hip as she scowled at him. “You happy?”

No. He wasn’t happy at all.

But he nodded anyway. “I swear I only want the best for you, Maisie.”

“It sounds like the best is Pete Bishop. I’m sure we’ll have a real good time on our date this Saturday.”

“I hope you do. Take care, Maisie.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

What the heck have I gotten myself into, Maisie thought as she walked into the Topsy Pig that Saturday night.

Pete Bishop was a nice guy, but she didn't want to go out with him. She'd only set up the date to spite Dodge. And because she thought he'd eventually stop her.

But he hadn't.

And she hadn't heard from him all week.

She'd gotten her hopes up when she saw his truck and the temporary bookmobile pull up in front of the library that Wednesday, but her heart fell when she saw Duke was driving.

Not that she didn't enjoy the day spent with Duke. He was great company, and she loved hearing him tell stories about the boys growing up as they maneuvered the winding mountain roads. And he was great with all the kids.

But he wasn't Dodge.

"Dodge is a good man. But he has trouble seeing the good in himself and believing anyone else does either," Duke had told her when he'd dropped her back off at the library at the end of the day. "I think he'll come around. Just give him some time."

"That's the trouble, Duke," she said with a sigh. "I've already waited over a decade. How much more time do I give?"

She waved as she spotted Pete at a table on the patio. He stood as she walked over and leaned in to kiss the side of her cheek. But there was no buzz of electricity, no flash of heat that made her heart race when his lips brushed her skin.

She studied him as he pulled her chair out and held it while she sat. He really was a handsome guy, and he smelled amazing. His cologne was obviously expensive and so was his dress shirt, which looked like it had been professionally pressed and starched. He wore jeans and nice cowboy boots, clearly putting in an effort but still recognizing that they were meeting at a barbeque joint, not a fancy steakhouse. He had classic good looks—thick dark hair, square jaw, gorgeous brown eyes and stood well over six feet. He was polite and well-spoken too.

Dodge was right. He was a great guy.

They ordered house margaritas and an appetizer of rib tips and fried mushrooms. For their entrees, Pete got the beef brisket and baked potato, and she chose a western burger and fries, realizing too late that a messy cheeseburger might not be the best choice to eat with only one hand.

They talked easily all through the meal, chatting about the kids, the shared people they knew from high school—he was a few years older than her—and several of the current issues facing the town like the dreaded potholes by the feed store and if they were going to have enough cars to have a demolition derby at the fair this year.

She asked him if he'd read anything good lately, hesitant to bring up any of the books she and Dodge had just read. Was Pete the kind of guy who would indulge her in a two-person secret book club? She didn't think so, considering the last thing he said he'd read was the Colorado Weekly Cattle Auction Summary and latest Farmers Report on the price of beef.

"I hate saying this to a librarian, and I'm awful glad my kids love it, but I just don't have time to read," he told her.

She shrugged. "Neither do I. But I make time." She hoped her comment didn't come out sounding snarky, although she'd half-meant it that way. But Pete hadn't seemed to notice.

"So, are you hoping to have kids of your own someday?" he asked.

She almost spit her drink out. "Oh, um, yes, I mean, probably. Why do you ask?"

He shrugged and finished the last of his margarita. "Just curious, I guess."

She was pleased to see that he switched to water after one drink and didn't pressure her to have another, as several of the dates she'd been on in the past had—most likely in an attempt to get her drunk and improve their chances of getting lucky. She wasn't much of a drinker, so it had never worked.

But Pete was the picture of politeness. He asked her about her job and how things were going with the repairs on the bookmobile. Which just brought her thoughts back

to Dodge.

Not like they hadn't been there most of the night already.

Dodge had said that Pete had been wanting to ask her out and that he thought she was pretty and smart. The handsome sweet rancher seemed perfect.

So, why couldn't she just forget about Dodge Lassiter and enjoy being out with a hot guy who was actually interested in pursuing a relationship with her?

Because even though Pete seemed perfect, he wasn't perfect for her.

There was only one guy she wanted. Too bad he didn't feel the same.

What am I doing here? Dodge thought as he stood at the bar of The Tippy Pig waiting for his takeout order.

He knew what he was doing there, even if he didn't want to admit it to himself. He'd made plans to hang out with Ford and Elizabeth that night, offering to help his brother change the oil in his truck, in an effort to keep his mind off Maisie and her dang date with Pete.

Then he'd been the one to suggest picking up burgers from The Pig. He wasn't spying on her. But he'd noticed her the second he'd walked in. She was sitting on the patio with Pete wearing sandals, dark jeans, and a flowy pink top that she'd told him she wore to work because it covered her bruises. Her hair was down, and it cascaded in soft curls around her shoulders, making him think about how soft and silky it felt resting against his skin.

He thrummed his fingers on the countertop, impatient to pick up his food and get out of the restaurant before Maisie spotted him.

Glancing back toward the patio, he caught her laughing at something Pete must have said—probably some clever antidote about his hundreds of head of cattle or his adorable children. She was leaning forward, engaged in their conversation, her eyes sparkling as she told him something, trying to use her hands to talk, but hindered by the splint.

It seemed like she was having a good time. And that she liked him.

Good.

That was exactly what he'd wanted.

Right?

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“Pickup for Lassiter,” the bartender called loudly as he came out from the kitchen.

Dodge had been watching Maisie and saw her head whip in his direction as she must have heard the bartender call out his name. He ducked his head, grabbed the food, thankful he’d already paid, and hurried from the bar.

He’d hoped she hadn’t seen him, but then remembered he’d parked by the patio, not realizing she was sitting out there when he’d pulled up. He kept his head down as he strode toward his truck and got in as quickly as he could. He tossed the food into the seat next to him and started the engine but couldn’t help glancing toward the patio one more time.

Maisie was staring right at him. She raised a hand to wave and started to stand from her chair.

Ignoring her, and the sharp stab of pain that sliced through his chest, he wrenched the truck into gear and pulled out of the parking lot.

What the hell? Maisie fumed as Dodge sped away. Clearly, he’d seen her. And ignored her feeble attempt at a wave.

What was he doing here? Was he spying on her?

The phone had been on speaker when she’d made the date, so Dodge knew she was meeting Pete tonight at this restaurant at six o’clock. He had to have known they’d still be here. It couldn’t have been a coincidence that he was here at the same time.

A small frisson of hope bloomed in her chest. Was he jealous? Did he say she should be with Pete, but still wish she were with him?

She didn't know, but she was going to get some answers.

Just as soon as this date ended.

She declined dessert and tried to call Dodge from the bathroom while Pete settled the bill but got no answer.

She'd gotten her Subaru back from the shop the day before and was a little nervous as Pete walked her to her car. What if he tried to kiss her goodnight? It felt wrong letting another guy kiss her when all she could think about was Dodge.

But Dodge wasn't thinking about her. This date had been his idea.

She made up her mind that if he tried to kiss her, she would let him. Maybe there would be a spark, even a tiny glimmer of attraction or desire that might make her want to go on another date with the handsome rancher. That might help her to forget the only man she'd ever really loved.

"I had a really good time tonight," Pete told her as they approached her car.

"Me, too," she said, turning to look up at him. "Thanks for dinner. It was nice." She meant it. Dinner with Pete had been nice. But he still wasn't Dodge.

Pete leaned in. "I'd really like to kiss you. Is that okay?"

She liked that he asked for her consent and didn't just assault her with his mouth and jam his tongue down her throat. She'd almost gagged when one of her past dates had tried that.

She nodded up at Pete, determined to at least give him a chance. He reached up and cupped her neck with his hand. Drawing her closer, he leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to her lips.

It was a nice kiss. Sweet. But didn't cause any fireworks or surges of heat to race through her veins. That's how everything about the date with Pete had been. Nice, but no fireworks or surges of heat.

Pete looked a little shaken as he pulled away.

"You okay?" she asked, resting her hand on his arm.

He nodded. "Yeah. I just haven't dated, or kissed, many women since my wife died. In fact, I've only gone out with one other person, and she kissed me at the end of the night."

Maisie squeezed his arm, feeling compassion for him as well as friendship. She did like him. "Thank you for everything, Pete. I'll see you next week."

She got into her car and pulled out of the driveway. As she approached the one stoplight in town, she pondered her decision. Go right and head home, take a bath, read a book, and forget about Dodge Lassiter. Or go left, toward the Lassiter Ranch, and try to talk to the man who she'd just be thinking about anyway. Why had he come to the restaurant? Did he still want her?

She lifted her blinker and turned left.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Maisie pulled up to the ranch but was disappointed not to see Dodge's truck. Maybe she'd gotten it all wrong, and he'd been on a date himself and was just picking up

burgers to go.

This was a dumb idea. He had told her that he didn't want a future with her. Why was she out here? And still pining after the same man she'd been fantasizing about for the last decade of her life?

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Except in the last few weeks, her fantasy had finally come true. Dodge was in her life, in her bed. They'd laughed together, eaten together, had ravaged each other's bodies, and done one of her most favorite things...sprawled on the sofa and read together. They had discussed books, and he'd even taken her up the mountain and helped with the bookmobile. Although he had wiggled out a little that day, getting angry at the Bishop Ranch then having what seemed like a panic attack at the Lambert farm.

But none of that mattered, because he'd told her that it was easier to make a clean break than to draw this thing out any longer. A clean break meant he didn't want to see her anymore.

She put her car in reverse to turn around but stopped as she saw Chevy come out onto the porch and wave to her. Turning off the engine instead, she got out of the car and called up to him. "Hey Chevy."

"Hey Maisie. Dodge isn't home but why don't you come up here and sit on the porch with me a spell?"

She couldn't deny his easy-going charm. Even though he was a little older, Chevy had always been a friend. And she was pretty sure she could use one of those right now.

As she reached the top step, he pulled her into a hug and she let him engulf her in his arms, pressing her face into his chest as her emotions pinballed through her. She pressed a hand to his chest as she sucked in a deep breath. "I am not going to cry."

“You can if you want,” Chevy said. “My shoulders can take it. And you can even blow your snot on this shirt. It’ll wash.”

She laughed and slapped him playfully on the arm. “I don’t care how hard I cry. I will not be blowing my snot on your shirt.”

He shrugged. “Offer stands.” He led her to the porch swing and passed her one of June’s quilts that had been folded on the arm of the swing. “Duke made a pecan pie and I’ve got milk, tea, water, or bourbon to wash it down with. Or I’m happy to run out to the shop and get one of those Diet Cokes my brother stocked up on just for you.”

She laughed. “You don’t have to do that. I’m happy with water. And I can help.”

He shook his hand. “I got this. You sit. I’ll be back in a sec.”

She sat and pulled the quilt over her lap, warding off the chill of the night air, as she looked out over the ranch. It was lovely here. She could smell the scent of hay and the cedar of the logs that formed the front porch posts.

Chevy came out a few minutes later, balancing two glasses of water in one hand and two small plates in the other. She stood and took the plates from him, and he set the glasses on the table in front of the swing. He took a fork wrapped in a napkin from his front pocket and passed it to her.

The plate held a warm piece of pecan pie with a big scoop of vanilla ice cream melting on top of it. The whole thing was drizzled with caramel, and Maisie inhaled the scents of nuts, molasses, and brown sugar.

Chevy sat next to her, and they ate their pie in companionable silence as he gently pushed the swing back and forth with the heel of his cowboy boot against the porch.

“That was amazing,” she told him when she’d finished.

“My gramps knows his way around a pie crust,” he said, reminding her of the first day she’d been out here with Dodge and Duke’s offer to teach her his secret to a flaky crust. Chevy took her plate and set them both on the table in front of them then handed her one of the glasses of water. He took the other then leaned back in the swing. “I’ve been sitting here contemplating if I should tell you about Dodge or not, and I think I’ve decided that I will. He’ll probably consider punching me in the face when he finds out, but I think that’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

He had her curiosity piqued. “Tell me what about Dodge?”

“Not what, but why he is the way he is. The reason he’s afraid to commit to anyone or trust that he’s worth staying for.”

It hurt her heart to think that was how Dodge felt, but she understood. “I’m assuming it’s because his dad rejected him then his mother abandoned him, too.” She winced as she realized who she was talking to. “Sorry. I just realized that’s the same thing that happened to you.”

“It’s okay. It’s true. Although my daddy was a gambler, Ford’s was just a drunk, and Dodge’s daddy loved the rodeo more than anything else in life. Our mother was your standard narcissist who only cared about herself, but she had a drinking problem too. I think we all know that the best thing she ever did for us was abandon us here, with our grandparents. Gramps and Grandma were more like our parents than any of those assholes ever were.”

“Still, I’m sorry if what I said was insensitive.”

“It’s fine. And you’re right. Having our momma and his daddy abandon him did do a number on our little brother, but that’s not what broke him.” He took a drink of water

then let out a shaky breath as he stared at Maisie. “Aw hell. I guess I’ve already decided to tell you, so here goes. When Dodge was a junior in college, he met a woman named Julie. She worked at the campus bookstore, and I don’t want to hurt your feelings because I know how you feel about the guy, but he fell pretty hard for her.”

“It’s okay,” she told him, although the idea of Dodge falling in love with someone else tore at her heart. “It was a long time ago.”

“It was a long time ago, but I think sometimes it still feels like yesterday to Dodge.”

“What happened? Did she break his heart?”

“In a sense, yes, but what happened with her broke him completely. He and Julie were together for his last two years of school and they were planning to get married the summer he finished. But the weekend after his graduation, Julie was in a car accident, hit by a drunk driver in a head-on collision and was killed in the crash.”

Maisie covered her mouth with her hand. “Oh no,” she whispered.

Chevy swallowed, and his voice trembled as he continued. “But she wasn’t alone. Julie was a single mom of the cutest two kids, a boy and a girl, four and two. Their dad had abandoned them too, and Dodge was planning to adopt them after he and Julie got married.”

Tears filled Maisie’s eyes, and her chest ached as she feared where this story was going.

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“They were in their car seats in the back of Julie’s little compact car, but the guy who hit them was driving a semi-truck.” He choked as he rasped out his next words. “They never had a chance.”

A cry escaped Maisie’s lips. “Oh no,” she whispered again. “They all...died?”

Chevy pressed his lips together as he nodded then swiped at his cheek with the side of his arm. “It just about killed my little brother. He was beyond torn up, blaming himself because he hadn’t been there and blaming God for letting it happen. After the funeral, Ford and I went down to Fort Collins and brought him home. He didn’t speak the whole drive up the mountain, and I don’t think he ate or left his room for the first two weeks he was home. My grandma was the only one he’d talk to at first. Then the pastor came out a few times and did some grief counseling work with him. Eventually, he came out of his room and talked to all of us, but it was a rough summer and a hard couple of years for him.”

“How did I not know about this?”

“Nobody really knew. Julie didn’t have much family to speak of, and it all happened in Fort Collins. Dodge is a pretty private guy, and he didn’t want people to know, so we didn’t say anything. He’d always been a homebody anyway, so he mainly stuck around the ranch those first few years, throwing himself into physical labor during the day so he’d collapse exhausted into bed at night. I don’t think he even read much those first few years. It was a bad time for him.”

Maisie didn’t know what to say. She understood now why Dodge was so upset at the Lambert’s farm when she’d practically forced him to hold the baby. And why he’d

gotten quiet after Jacob had stopped by with the offer of popsicles and a pet frog. And why he was reluctant to commit to a woman who had told him she wanted kids and a family.

Chevy wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and they leaned back together against the rungs of the swing. “I still don’t know if I just did the right thing by telling you, but it happened a long time ago, and you’re the first woman he’s been interested since then. The last few months, after that time we were at Ford and Elizabeth’s, he started mentioning you more often, then after your accident, he started talking about you all the time.”

“Oh my gosh. My accident.” She remembered the terrified look in his eyes when he’d found her in her car and the panicked way he’d carried her out of the ditch. “That explains why he was so upset.”

“And why there was no way he was leaving you that first weekend.”

“And why you and Ford brought him food and clean clothes.”

Chevy nodded. “We knew he had to have been reliving the accident with Julie and the kids, and we were all pretty worried about him. Dropping off food and clothes gave us a chance to make sure he ate and that he was okay. Duke was ready to come over and camp out on your sofa, just to keep an eye on Dodge and make sure he didn’t spin out.”

“But he didn’t.”

“No, he didn’t. Instead, I think he really fell for you. And that scared the hell out of him. He’s been running from any kind of commitment for so long now, I’m not sure he knows what to do now that he has a chance to be happy. But I really thought he could do it.” He squeezed her shoulder. “I’m sorry, Maisie. I was really pulling for

you two. We all were. I want you to know we all think you're a sweetheart, and the only reason I'm telling you all this is because I know how you are, and I didn't want you thinking that the reason Dodge left was because of anything you did or didn't do. I guess he's just not ready."

She stared at Chevy. "So, you're telling me to just give up on him?"

He nodded. "I hate that I am, but yeah, I guess that's what I'm saying. You deserve to be happy and to have someone who can give you everything you want. And I'm not sure Dodge can do that. Not right now, anyway."

"You sound like Dodge. He's been saying the same things."

Chevy shrugged. "Maybe it's time to listen."

"But I've already waited for him for over a decade."

"I know. And I love my brother. He's a great guy. But you're great too. And I just don't want you to waste another decade waiting for someone that may not ever be able to give you what you deserve. I'm not sure he'll ever want children, and I've seen how awesome you are with kids. He's in a tough place, and I'm just saying that if he's telling you that it's over, it might be time to walk away."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Sunday morning, Dodge was in the bookmobile, ripping the flooring out and hurling the torn pieces out the camper door.

"Whoa there," Duke's voice came from inside the shop. "What did that piece of laminate ever do to you?"

“Sorry Gramps. I didn’t know you were out there.”

“You got a minute?” Duke asked. “I brought you a breakfast burrito.”

Dodge sighed and threw down the crowbar he’d been using. His stomach growled at the mention of food. He wasn’t sure when the last time was that he’d eaten. He hadn’t been hungry the night before—not after seeing Maisie and Pete having such a good time on their date. He’d dropped the burgers off with Ford then driven out to the lake to pitch rocks into the water for an hour before coming back to the shop and getting back to work on the bookmobile.

He stepped out of the camper and took the offered burrito from his grandfather.

Duke handed him a travel mug of coffee too before wandering over to the sofa. He looked down at the wrinkled blanket and arched an eyebrow. “You sleep out here last night?”

Dodge shrugged. “Not much. I was working on the camper most of the night then finally crashed out on the sofa for a few hours around two.”

Duke tossed the blanket over the back of the cushions before sitting down and patting the seat next to him. “Take a load off. Just while you eat.”

Dodge recognized his grandfather’s ‘let’s have a talk’ tone and facial expression. He sighed again as he slumped onto the sofa next to him. Duke studied the camper, giving Dodge a few minutes to wolf down the breakfast burrito.

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“Thanks for this,” Dodge told him, wadding up the empty aluminum foil and taking a sip of the coffee. “I was hungrier than I thought. And the coffee’s good. I’m grateful for the caffeine.”

“You seem like you can use it.”

“Thanks.”

“Just speaking the truth. You kind of look like hell.”

Dodge leaned back against the cushions. “I kind of feel like hell.”

“Wanna talk about it?” Duke asked the question casually, but Dodge and his brothers all knew that question was a really a statement meaning, “We’re gonna talk about it.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Dodge scrubbed a hand over his dirty hair. “I really blew it with Maisie.”

“Yeah, it seems like you’ve gotten yourself into a fine pickle. Maisie Graham is a sweet girl. Seems like she deserves to have you be honest with her.”

“I know.”

“I think she’s been sweet on you for a long time now. It doesn’t seem quite fair to string her along if you’re not able to commit.”

“We’ve only been seeing each other a couple of weeks.”

“Yes, but I think she’s been waiting for you for years. And it’s been years since I’ve seen you laughing and smiling with a woman the way you do with Maisie. I love you son, but you’ve been punishing yourself for years too. Maybe it’s time you come out of exile and let yourself be happy.”

“I know.”

“You keep saying you know. So then, what’s the problem?”

“The problem is that I’m pretty sure I’m in love with her, and I want to be with her. I want to prove to her that I’m worthy of someone like her. But I’m so damn terrified that she’s either going to leave me...or die...that I’m struggling to take a chance on us being together.” He hung his head, his chin practically touching his chest. “Women don’t stick around for me. They leave or they get taken away. I don’t know if I can survive something happening to Maisie because of me.”

Duke rested a hand on his grandson’s shoulder. “Come on now, son, you know that’s just a load of horseshit. Julie and those kids didn’t die because they were with you. They died because some ass-wit idiot made the decision to get piss-drunk then get behind the wheel of a ten-ton semi-truck. What happened to your family was not your fault. I know they will always be with you, and rightly so, but you have to let the guilt of you somehow being able to save them go.”

“I know. I’m trying. For the first time in a long time, I want to try. But I think I already blew it. I told her I didn’t want to see her anymore, and then I all but forced her to go out with Pete Bishop. I told her he was a better man and better suited for her than I ever could be.”

Duke let out a rumbling laugh. “I’ll bet she appreciated that. Women always love it when you tell them what they should think or how they should feel.”

Dodge shook his head. “Yeah, she said about the same. It was an idiot thing to do. Then she called my bluff and rang up Pete and asked him out to dinner.”

“So that idea backfired.”

“In a big way. And all on me. I knew they were having their date at The Pig last night and I’m ashamed to admit that I went over to pick up some takeouts. I wasn’t flat out spying on them, but I was curious, I guess.”

“Curious or jealous?”

His grandfather did not mince words.

“Maybe a little of both. Because the hell of it was that they seemed to be having a great time. They were talking and laughing. And she looked amazing. I already know that Pete’s interested in pursuing her, and I just went and handed her to him on a silver platter.”

“I’m guessing Maisie has her own say in all this.”

“I know she does. And at first, I thought she was just going out with him to spite me. But I’m telling you, Gramps, she was having fun with that guy last night. She looked happy.”

“So, what are you going to do about that? Are you just going to let her go?”

“Hell no. I’m going to fight for her. That’s why I spent all night out here and why I’m planning to spend all day and tonight out here too—whatever it takes to fix up this bookmobile. This is her dream, and she wanted to win this competition and the grant money so bad. If I can give her that, maybe she’ll give me a chance to win her back. I’m just praying it’s not too late.”

Dodge clapped his hands on his knees. “What can we do to help?”

Dodge eyed his grandfather. “You serious?”

“Course I am.”

“There’s a lot to do. I want to replace the scratched-up flooring and put in some custom shelving and more lighting. I need to repaint the outside, and she made these flowers stencils and blades of grass that she wanted painted along the sides. I picked up a small air conditioner unit, and I need to install it. I built her a little desk to do check-outs at, and I’ve got a ton of wiring to put in so that she can have wi-fi and use her laptop.” He checked the items off his fingers as he thought of them. “She wanted it to be more ADA compliant, so I bought some handrails to install on the door to help go up the steps, and asked Elizabeth to order a bunch of large print books. I also made a portable shelving unit that she can roll around outside of the camper. Maisie also wanted to get the sink working, so I was going to try to run down to Camping World and get the parts for it and also pick up an awning to install so the kids could have shade while standing in front of it, but I don’t think I’m going to have time now. And then we still need to put in the books.”

“Dang. That is a lot. And you’ve obviously put a lot of thought into this.”

Dodge shrugged. “Some of those things were Maisie’s ideas of what she hoped to eventually be able to add, and some were my ideas. It’s amazing what you can come up with when you’re trying to distract yourself from thinking about a woman.”

Duke chuckled again. “I can imagine. And it sounds to me like we’re gonna need more help. Why don’t you get Chevy out here, and I’ll call Ford and Elizabeth.”

“Do you really think they’d want to pitch in?”

“Hell yes, I do.” He clamped his hand on Dodge’s shoulder. “We love you, and we all care about Maisie. We want you both to be happy. And we want our town to win this grant money and have this bookmobile as a community service. So, call your brother and let’s get to work. You’ve got a girl to win back, and we don’t have much time.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

On Monday afternoon, Maisie threw herself into her work at the library and tried not to think about how disappointed she was about pulling her entry for the bookmobile contest and the grant money.

She could have gone out to the ranch the day before and tried to fix up what she could, but the hard truth was just that there was too much to do, and with the way it looked now, it didn’t stand a chance of winning anyway. She’d talked to Natalie that morning and told her to call the judging team and let them know they didn’t have an entry so they didn’t need to waste a trip up here.

There would always be next year. And then she would have time to really fix up the bookmobile and have a better chance of winning.

She sighed.

The bookmobile felt like one more thing that she’d planned that didn’t work out like she’d hoped and prayed it would.

Natalie had said she’d take care of calling the judges so Maisie wouldn’t have to think about it. But she’d still spent the morning thinking about it and trying to get over the frustration and regret of not having an entry because she’d wrecked the bookmobile into a ditch. That is, when she was thinking about Dodge Lassiter or Pete Bishop.

Pete had texted her that morning to tell her what a nice time he'd had and asked her if she'd like to get together again.

She hadn't heard from Dodge since he'd left her house the Tuesday before.

She also kept thinking about what Chevy had told her, and the fact that she'd heard from one man and not the other should have helped her to make up her mind. She needed to just let Dodge go.

She liked Pete. He was a good man, and they'd had fun together. Dodge had told her right from the beginning that he didn't want to be with her, so she needed to forget about him and start moving in the direction of someone who actually wanted to be with her.

She'd wasted so much time waiting for Dodge Lassiter. Then when it finally seemed like they had a chance to be together, he'd rejected her and told her he didn't want to be with her. Well, to be honest, he'd told her that he wasn't the kind of man she needed. And that she was better off with someone like Pete.

She did like Pete, and maybe they could have something together. She wouldn't know if she didn't try. And if she didn't try to move on with someone new, she might as well stay home and start shopping for more cats. April would love that—the ornery cat would probably puke in her shoes.

She hadn't texted Pete back, but she picked up her phone now and opened her messages. Her heart might be wounded and limping along, but at least by messaging Pete, she would be walking forward...toward something instead of living in the past and hoping for something that wasn't ever going to happen.

Before she could open her phone, Natalie came into her office.

“I think you need to come out front,” the volunteer told her. “Dodge Lassiter just pulled up outside. With the bookmobile.”

“Why is he here?” Was he just dropping off the wrecked-up camper to tell her one more time that he didn’t want her in his life? Was this like the part of the breakup where one person drops off the toothbrush and all the things the other left behind at their place?

She looked at her watch. It was three o’clock—the time that the judges were supposed to arrive. Perfect.

“I don’t know,” Natalie said as they walked through the library. “But we should probably go out there, in case he wants to drop off the keys or something.”

Maisie walked through the door and gasped at the sight in front of her.

Natalie should be up for an acting award, because once again, the volunteer had misled her into thinking there was something bad outside, when in fact, there was something wonderful.

The bookmobile was parked at the curb in front of the library. Or what used to be the slightly beat-up but still cute camper that used to be her bookmobile. The camper that sat there now looked completely different—and it was amazing.

The outside of the camper had been painted a light blue to look like the sky with her vision of fluffy white clouds floating across the top of it. Along the bottom of the camper were painted tall stalks of green grass with flowers blooming up from between the stalks. Little butterflies with book-shaped bodies floated among the petals.

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A new mint green and white awning had been attached to the side of the camper and was now unfurled and provided shade over a big outdoor rug spread out in front of it. The door of the camper stood open, and an ADA accessible bar was affixed to it to provide support when climbing the stairs.

Maisie walked slowly toward it, marveling at all the changes. From where she stood, she could see new shelving filled with books inside. And the shelves were lit. There was also a new light fixture with a small fan attached to the ceiling.

She turned her head to see Dodge leaning against the side of his truck, looking ridiculously handsome in jeans, boots, a pressed shirt, and gray felt cowboy hat. He pushed away from the pickup and walked toward her.

What was happening? She didn't understand.

She folded her arms across her chest as Dodge approached—a small action of defense, but still a way to keep herself guarded.

“What do you think?” he asked, gesturing to the new and improved bookmobile. “We worked all yesterday and most of the last two nights trying to get it ready. Wait until you see inside. Elizabeth arranged the books, and we bought and donated a bunch of new ones, including some large print editions. And I redid the floor and even added an air conditioner.”

“Why?”

His brow furrowed. “To keep it cool in there during the summer.”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t mean why did you install an air conditioner. Why did you do all this? Did you just want my camper out of your shop? Did you bring this here so that now I will be fully out of your life?”

“No, Maisie. I did this for you. I wanted to—”

His words were cut off by the arrival of a silver SUV that pulled up to the curb, and three people, a man and two women holding clipboards got out and walked toward the bookmobile.

The judges.

Maisie whipped her head toward Natalie.

The volunteer offered her an innocent shrug. “I might have forgotten to call them to tell them not to come.”

“Wow, this is really nice,” one of the women said, poking her head into the bookmobile before reaching a hand out to Maisie. “Hi, I’m Carmen Martinez. I’m a librarian in Jefferson County and one of the judges of the competition.” Maisie shook her hand as Carmen introduced her to the other two judges.

“This is a really impressive bookmobile,” one of them told her. “Did you renovate this camper and create this all by yourself?”

“Um...yes...I mean...no...well, I did some of it myself but got help with some of it too.” With both Dodge and the judges standing there, Maisie was suddenly tongue-tied and nervous as sweat popped out in the middle of her back.

“It was a group effort,” Elizabeth said, coming up behind her. “The community really loves what Miss Graham has created with her bookmobile project, so several of us

pitched in to make sure it was ready for the competition.”

Maisie smiled over at her friend, only now realizing that the rest of the Lassiter men were standing on the sidewalk behind her. She pressed her lips together, overcome with emotion that they all must have worked on it.

“I love the artwork on this outside,” one of the judges said, making a note on her clipboard. “Those book butterflies are really clever.”

Elizabeth leaned toward Maisie and spoke in a low voice. “Those were Dodge’s idea. And so was the ADA stuff and the awning. He’s barely slept the last two nights trying to get this ready for you.”

Maisie looked over at Dodge but then was distracted as one of the judges asked her if it was okay that they go inside.

“Yes, of course,” she told them.

“Per the rules, the judges go in by themselves, acting as normal library patrons,” Carmen told her. “You, as the librarian, can then come in and answer questions and walk us through your normal check out and returns procedures and what kind of outreach activities you’re doing in the community. We’ll be rating your bookmobile as we look at the following criteria: Innovation and Creativity, Accessibility, Community Engagement, Technology Integration, Mobility and Logistics, and Outreach. Do you have any questions?”

Maisie shook her head and pressed her hands against her legs to keep from wringing them together.

“Then let’s begin.”

Elizabeth gave her arm a reassuring squeeze as the judges went inside. “You got this,” she mouthed.

“Thank you,” Maisie mouthed back.

“Thankhim.” Elizabeth tilted her head toward Dodge, who was back to leaning against the side of his truck. The front window was down, and Moose was sticking his head out to rest it on Dodge’s shoulder.

For the next thirty minutes, Maisie answered questions and did her best to show the judges the features of the bookmobile, even the ones that were new to her. Had Dodge really built the little reception desk that fit perfectly in the front alcove? She noticed the new wiring and the little sign on the wall with a code for wi-fi and was so excited when she turned her laptop on and was able to easily sign into the library’s system.

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Pride overflowed in her as she caught some of the judge's murmured comments about all the innovative and fun features inside the bookmobile. And she knew her own excitement shown through as she described the rural farms and ranches she served and all the wonderful kids who looked forward to the bookmobile visits.

For the first time in weeks, and thanks to Dodge, and the Lassiter family, she felt like she actually had a chance again at winning this thing.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Dodge was bursting with pride as the judges walked through the bookmobile and he listened to Maisie talk about all the ways that it had impacted the community. He was so proud of all the things she did for the kids in the rural areas and the ideas she had for how to bring books to more people in their county.

She worked so hard, and he wanted her to get the recognition she deserved. He really thought she had a great shot at winning this thing. If she did, he knew she would take the grant money and put it to great use in their community. And it made him happy to know that he'd played a small role in helping to make her dreams for her vision of what this bookmobile could do come true.

When the judges finally drove away, all he wanted to do was cheer and pull Maisie into a hug and swing her around. But he could tell from her crossed arms and the cool reception he got earlier that she might not be ready for that.

He just needed some time to get her alone—to talk to her—to tell her how he felt.

She was standing in front of the bookmobile, her smile wide, as Gertie gave her the big hug that he'd wanted to. He'd wanted Maisie to know she was surrounded by family and friends who cared about her, so he'd called his former Sunday school teacher and asked her to be there for the competition today, too.

Maisie had on a short floral print dress, a light green cardigan and wore low top olive-green sneakers. Her hair was pulled up into a twist on top of her head, the knot held in place with a couple of number two pencils. She looked casual and gorgeous all at the same time and his heart overflowed with emotion for her.

He saw his chance to catch her as she turned away from Gertie. "You got a minute to talk?" he asked as he walked toward her.

"Um...yeah...sure," she said, her expression uncertain.

He hated that he'd done that—put that uncertainty into her eyes.

Until a few days ago, when he'd completely blown it, she'd only looked at him with tenderness and affection. Now he prayed he could get that look back.

"In here," he said, gesturing to the bookmobile. As she walked up the steps in front of him, he glanced back and caught Gramps giving him an encouraging smile and a thumbs-up before he pulled the door shut behind them.

"I'm so proud of you," he said, wanting her to know that first, above sharing his feelings for her.

"Thanks, me too." Her smile was filled with pride but still a little timid. "The judges seemed to really like everything they saw. I think we actually have a shot at winning."

“I know you do. But I just wanted to tell you that even without this competition, the people in this town and all the kids on your route are the real winners. You’ve created something amazing that you built with heart and hard work, and this community is lucky to have you.”

“That’s nice of you to say.” He earned another small smile, but he just caught it as she ducked her head. She stood by the reception desk, shifting from one foot to the other, obviously not knowing what to say now. “Did you really build this desk?” she finally asked.

He nodded. “Yeah. I watched a bunch of YouTube videos of what features were in other bookmobiles, and most of them had a little check-out desk toward the front. That spot seemed the best place for it, so I built something that fit there. I didn’t have time this weekend, but if you want, I can add some drawers to it later.”

Her voice was quiet but appreciative. “This was really thoughtful. I can’t believe you watched videos and did research on bookmobiles.”

“I wanted to make it amazing. And really, most of the ideas were yours. You told me all the things you wanted for this bookmobile—I just made them happen a little sooner than you’d planned.” He wanted to show her everything he’d done. “Hey, did you see this?” he asked, pointing to the small sink and counter area he’d created in one corner.

He flipped the tap and loved seeing her smile as water poured out. “It’s got a ten-gallon tank, so you have to refill it, but at least you’ll have a way to wash your hands and make snacks. I also painted and retrofitted an old cupboard we had in the shop to make these small cabinets above and below the sink.”

“It’s all incredible. I love everything.” She crossed her arms again as her expression changed to suspicion again. “But I still don’t get it. Why did you do all this for me?”

“It sure as hell wasn’t to get you out of my life like you said before. It’s just the opposite, I did this to try to win you back. I don’t want you out of my life. I want—no, I need you in it.” He took a hesitant step toward her. “Maisie, I was a complete idiot for pushing you away, and especially for telling you to go out with Pete Bishop.”

Her expression wavered for a second, but her brow stayed creased. “You were right though. Both that you were an idiot, and that Pete is pretty great.”

He swallowed. Damn. He knew she’d hit it off with that guy. Now he just hoped he wasn’t too late to prove he could be a great guy too.

He took a deep breath.

Here goes nothing. And everything.

“I have spent years guarding my heart and keeping anyone who tried to care about me at arm’s length. I have been afraid to let anyone in, to trust that a new relationship wouldn’t also end in grief and pain. But with you, it feels different. For the first time, I see a future like I never thought would be possible for me. And frankly, that scared the hell out of me. I know Chevy told you about the car accident and about Julie...and the kids. I almost throat-punched him when he admitted that he’d told you. But now I’m glad he did.”

This time Maisie took a step toward him. “I’m so sorry, Dodge.”

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He nodded, fighting the familiar lump that formed in his throat whenever he thought about the family he almost had. “I appreciate that. The accident almost broke me, and since then, I’ve tried to avoid spending time with people...and especially kids, as much as I could. The memories and the grief were just too much for me.”

His pain was reflected in her eyes. “If I would’ve known, I never would’ve asked you to hold the Lambert baby.”

“I know. And I guess you can see now why I got so upset. And why I couldn’t talk about it, but I don’t want my life to be all about the scars I’m carrying. I’ve spent so much time running away from anything good and thinking that falling in love was just another way for life to disappoint me. But being with you has changed all that. You’ve shown me that love doesn’t have to be about losing someone or being abandoned, but instead, it’s about finding someone. Someone who stays and refuses to let go.”

Her eyes were round now and brimming with tears.

“I told you that I couldn’t give you all the things you deserve, but when I saw you with Pete, something inside of me knew that, for the first time, I wanted to try.” He took another step toward her and picked up her hand. This next part was hard, and he needed to be touching her to get it out. “I kind of already come with a big family and a dog, but I’m ready to go all in on the other things too, hanging with the grandparents, the white picket fence...” He took another deep breath then let it out slowly, releasing the tightness in his chest as he did. “Even the kids.”

Maisie let out a small gasp and squeezed his hand tightly. “Oh.”

“That’s why I let them all help with this.” He nodded to the bookmobile. “And why I brought them and Moose with me today. To show you that I want to be the one to give you all those things. I love you, Maisie Graham, and I want to build a life with you, one that isn’t about running from something but running towards something. Together. I want to give you a life where you never doubt how much you’re cherished or how much you’re loved.”

“Oh, Dodge. I’ve waited for so many years, wishing and praying to hear you say that. And now, I almost can’t believe it’s true. The past few weeks, having you in my life, I’ve done things, said things, that I never thought I would have the courage to say or do. All the things I feel for you, and the fear of being left behind, scare the hell out of me, too. But I don’t want us to be afraid anymore. Like taking that terrifying leap off the high dive and into the pool, I’m ready to jump in, and to face whatever comes our way. I want to be the person who stays for you. I love you, too, and I will never leave you.”

He grinned, her words filling an empty space in his heart. And what he thought was once broken beyond all repair was starting to heal again. He hauled her against him and crushed her mouth in a kiss.

She was still holding his hand and she squeezed it tighter, seeming to pour ten years of wanting him into the way she kissed him back.

When she finally pulled away, he hugged her to him. “I don’t want to think about being with you as denying myself anymore, always trying to resist temptation, and only getting an occasional taste of something sweet.”

She smiled up at him. “I agree. Let’s forget this stupid diet idea, and let’s just indulge in the sweetness we have with each other and savor every moment together.” Her grin turned coy. “And let’s eat cake every day.”

Epilogue

Two weeks later, Maisie and Dodge were spending their Saturday afternoon sprawled on the sofa, their feet tangled together as they each read copies of the same murder mystery, the latest choice in their Secret Society of Book Nerds club.

Maisie's phone rang, and after a few minutes of listening to the caller on the other end, she hung up, unable to keep the broad smile from creasing her face.

"We won!" she cried, flinging herself into Dodge's arm. "We won the bookmobile competition! We get a trophy and they're going to send the grant money next week."

"Yes," Dodge said, fist-pumping the air. "You did it!"

"We did it," she told him, her smile growing even wider.

The back door of her house was open to let the late summer breeze in, and Moose came racing in and pounced on them, eager to see what all the excitement was about and no doubt, hoping treats were involved.

Clopping hooves sounded on the hardwood floor as Phyllis followed the dog in, and Maisie laughed as the llama tried to poke her nose into the space between them. She rubbed her face against Dodge's then cuddled into Maisie's shoulder. They'd found that every time they went to leave the ranch, Phyllis had done her best to try to climb into the truck after Moose, so Dodge had built a small enclosure in Maisie's backyard so they could occasionally bring her to town with them and she wouldn't miss them so much.

Duke had found out through his connections that the llama had been abandoned. She was one of several who had been left on a rundown farm where they'd been breeding them and selling the baby crias. They weren't sure how Phyllis had strayed so far away, but they were thankful they had found her, and she was now theirs to keep.

So, even though Maisie had said she wanted a couple of dogs—instead, she'd ended

up with a somewhat pretentious cat, a beast of a mutt, and a playful and loving llama. Which felt perfect to her. Especially since she and Dodge were already talking about trying to adopt one of the other llamas who had been rescued from the farm.

Her grandmother, Ruby had arrived home the week before, and been amazed at all that had changed while she was gone, most especially that her granddaughter was now in a full-on relationship and was keeping a llama in her backyard.

Maisie looked over at Dodge, the handsome cowboy who had told her he loved her every day for the last few weeks, and she couldn't believe this was her life.

For so long, she'd felt like the wallflower in one of her books, hanging back from the group, too shy to join in while everyone else was out on the dance floor. But now, that had all changed, and she finally felt like the adventurous heroine in her own story, facing the challenges and getting the hot hero.

She loved that Dodge loved to read, loved their quiet moments found while sharing a book, feeling like their hearts beat in sync with every turn of the next page.

"What's that smile for?" Dodge asked her.

"I was just being a literary dork. And thinking about how lucky I am that I found a fellow book nerd who loves to read as much as I do."

"I don't know if anyone likes to read as much as you do." He laughed as he teased her.

"But I'm glad too."

They were figuring it out, this new life together, splitting their time between her house and the ranch, between reading in bed and ravishing each other, but it was working, and she had never been happier.

Now, every day felt like a new chapter waiting to be read, waiting to see where their

next adventure took them, and she knew she never wanted their story to end.

So...Not The End...