



Ride Me

Author: *Elsie James*

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Description: Fake Relationship, Workplace, Rancher Romance

Bowen

As the operations manager of Kingridge Ranch, my job is to keep things running smoothly—both on the ranch and within our chaotic family. Love? I've never had the time for it. But when a VIP guest walks in and threatens to upend everything, I'll do whatever it takes to protect what's mine.

Priya's here to polish our brand, but all she's done is turn my world upside down. She's brilliant, beautiful, and those curves? They're impossible to ignore. The more we fake this chemistry, the harder it gets to deny how real it feels. Now, I just have to prove to her that a cowboy like me is worth the risk.

Priya

After years of climbing the corporate ladder, I didn't expect to find myself falling for a cowboy in Sagebrush Creek. Bowen Kingridge is stubborn, frustrating, and completely wrong for me. But when my ex shows up during a high-stakes VIP weekend, I need a distraction—and Bowen is the perfect man for the job.

Pretending was supposed to be simple. But Bowen's rugged charm and steady presence have me second-guessing everything I thought I wanted. I came here to clean up a brand—not to lose my heart. Can I stick to the plan, or will one night with him change my life forever?

Total Pages (Source): 24

CHAPTER 1

PRIYA

Two Weeks Earlier

“If you’re looking for your next getaway, look no further.” I angle the camera to capture the golden wheat fields stretching into the horizon.

There’s no shortage of amazing backdrops at Kingridge Ranch. It’s like something from an old-fashioned movie. I’ve never been anywhere like it. If I wanted to disappear from the real world for a while, this is definitely the place to do it. I hold up my phone. The late afternoon sun bathes everything in a warm glow, the kind of picture-perfect moment that travel bloggers dream of.

Then, I switch back to selfie mode, flashing a confident smile. “Visit Kingridge Ranch and bring the whole family because at—aaahh!”

Out of nowhere, a furious blur of feathers and talons charges straight at me.

“Hey! What the—? Get out of here!” I flail my free hand, trying to shoo the attacker away.

But the rooster is an infuriatingly aggressive mass of beady-eyed determination. He flaps his wings wildly at me, puffing up like he owns the place. It puts me on edge. No matter how much I wave or stomp my feet, he refuses to back down. I think back to the hundreds of TikTok videos I watched on farm life.

Are you supposed to make eye contact in the event of a chicken attack? Make yourself big? Freeze? Dammit. I don't remember.

I opt for rationalizing and decide to make my voice calm and steady. "Listen, I'm just here to do my job. I'm not worried about you. You don't have to worry about me" I declare, standing my ground. "Show some respect and maybe I'll put you in the marketing video."

The rooster does not, in fact, show me any respect. Instead, it fluffs its chest once more and launches into a full-on sprint toward me, beak first. His move is half-run and half-flight but all aggression.

The sharp graze of a talon against my shin breaks me. Whatever authority I thought I had vanishes. Nope. I am not cut out for farm-life combat. With a squeal, I spin on my heels and bolt in the opposite direction.

It's my first full-on sprint in a long while and I know it isn't pretty. Thank god there isn't anyone out here. My carefully curated image as a poised marketing professional is unraveling with every panicked step.

Then witnesses or salvation, or possibly disaster, arrives in the form of a screeching white truck. Gravel spits beneath its massive tires. The truck skids to a sharp halt in front of the barn and kicks up a wall of dust in its wake. The sudden noise startles the rooster just long enough for me to put some much-needed distance between us.

"Dammit, Choke!" A deep, exasperated voice cuts through the chaos as the driver's side door flies open.

That's when I see him. A rancher steps out, and for a brief moment, I forget all about the demon rooster.

Tall, broad-shouldered, and effortlessly commanding, the dude moves like he belongs here. It's like the land itself recognizes him. He has to be a Kingridge. The six brothers who operate this place are the stuff of legends. They have a reputation for breaking hearts by the dozen and now I can see why.

His flannel shirt stretches across a strong chest. His sleeves are rolled up to reveal tanned forearms dusted with just the right amount of roughness. His jawline is chiseled, like something straight out of a country song, and topped with a hint of scruff that makes my stomach dip in a way that has nothing to do with fear.

"You okay?" His voice is rich, smooth, and laced with amusement as he glances from me to the rooster. And judging by the way he's glaring at my feathery nemesis, he's not a fan of the chicken either.

"I think so," I manage, still keeping one wary eye on the bird.

"I'm Bowen Kingridge, the operations manager. And that," he nods toward the rooster, "is Choke. You'll have to excuse him. He's got big peck energy."

I bite back a nervous smile. "I'd laugh if I weren't seconds away from being maimed by this damn bird. I'm Priya."

"Priya." He tilts his head as he rolls my name off his tongue like he's got all the time in the world. "Priya with no last name?"

I swallow back my nerves. Not one that I'm going to tell you. "I'm Priya, the new marketing director here at the ranch. I was trying to film a promotional video but—" The rooster makes another aggressive pass at me. I dance backward. "Roosters are only territorial when protecting their hens. So I don't know why he's so mad."

"Where'd you hear that?" Bowen's laugh is deep and full like I'm not currently

fighting for my life.

Embarrassment washes over me as I shimmy behind a wheel barrel. "I Googled it before taking this job."

"Perfect." He lets out another laugh, unhurried and warm. "Don't worry, I've got you covered." He tips his hat to me in some kind of old-timey move. In any other world, it'd be odd. But on Bowen, the gesture is somehow charming. His grin is lazy and confident. I feel it in every inch of my body. The passenger door of the truck swings open, drawing my attention. Another man steps out.

This one looks like Bowen, only not quite as handsome. That is saying something because I can't imagine anyone who could hold a candle to him. Together, the pair make a heart-stopping sight, and I suddenly wonder how any woman on this ranch gets a single thing done.

For a fleeting second, the thirty-three-year-old professional in me dissolves into a giddy teenage girl. The reasons I came here, building my career, and proving myself without my family's connections... they all jumble together and dull just a bit. Because right now, standing breathless in the middle of this ranch, slightly traumatized by poultry, all I can think is...well, damn.

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The distraction costs me.

Choke seizes his moment and lunges. Before I know it a razor-sharp beak meets my shin. I yelp and flail in a desperate attempt to escape. But the damn bird is relentless. I turn away from him and in a horrifying twist of fate, he tangles himself in my hair.

Oh. Hell. No.

I don't recognize the guttural sound that escapes me. "What the hell is he?!" I shriek and my limbs move on their own. It's a full-body panic taking over.

"Hold still, darlin'." Bowen and his doppelgänger stride toward me.

They exude an infuriating amount of calm that is somehow contagious. The panic in me subsides just a bit. It's like this is just another routine ranch disaster, but fighting roosters isn't something I've signed up for.

Bowen reaches me first. He grips my shoulders and steadies me. I can't deny the feeling of safety his touch brings. We lock eyes and the ghost of a smile still plays on his lips.

His twin-like counterpart expertly snatches the rooster by the talons and tucks him under one arm like a football. It's easy to see that he's done this a hundred times before. With the demon bird secured, I exhale.

Bowen's hand glides down the back of my hair, smoothing it into place. The gesture sends goosebumps erupting across my skin. Day one on the job, and I've already

been rescued by two ridiculously good-looking cowboys.

"Oh, it looks like he got you just a tiny bit." Bowen's voice is softer now, his gaze washing over my face.

Before I can respond, he reaches out, brushing a stray strand of hair from my cheek. Then, as if it's the most natural thing in the world, his fingers linger and he cups my chin. He holds me there for a split second too long and the whole world disappears around us.

It takes every ounce of self-control not to melt into his touch. The warmth of his skin sends a current of electricity zipping through my veins; it's hot and undeniable. My breath catches in my throat.

A sharp cluck snaps me out of my thoughts. The rooster puffs up in Callum's grip, chest swelling with indignant rage. I flinch at the sight of the wing flapping in my direction and it pulls me back to reality.

I'm going to have to watch myself around Bowen Kingridge. It'd be all too easy to fall for him.

"Callum, get that damn bird out of here. That isn't the way we welcome our new employees." Bowen's mouth pulls into a slow, knowing smile.

It's like the man can read my mind and I wonder if he feels our connection too.

Bowen continues with a wink. "I have a feeling Choke might be around longer than our new city girl anyway."

Callum smirks. "Doesn't that make her perfect for you, bro?"

Ouch.

The daydream shatters. I pull away from Bowen's touch just in time to keep my shit together.

CHAPTER 2

BOOTS AND BITCHING PODCAST

Things in SagebrushCreek are drier than Preacher Brown's Sunday sermon, and let me tell you—there ain't a damn thing funny about that. The drought has this town holding onto every drop of water like a toddler with the last juice box at daycare.

But you know what hasn't dried up? The gossip. And honey, today the pitcher is overflowing.

It's your favorite anonymous source for all things Sagebrush Creek—the scandals, the sweet tea, and the cowboys who don't know how to mind their damn business. We've got a lot to cover, thanks to the boys over at Kingridge Ranch always finding themselves in one mess or another. So y'all pull up a chair and let's get right into it.

Rumor has it the guys out at the ranch are scrambling after their new arrival threw a wrench in things. The mystery man lurking in the shadows for the last week finally has a name... Danner. With a D, y'all.

Now, I've always found it peculiar that the Kingridge boys were named alphabetically, well almost. Alexander, Bowen, and Callum are followed by Fallon, Geoffrey, and Holden. There's a gap where D and E are concerned, but maybe that's just a coincidence.

Oh, and here's the real kicker... Pa Kingridge has hired Danner to work the ranch

full-time. No job posting, no interviews, no nothing. Just an out-of-the-blue, full-time hire. Suspicious? You bet your boots it is.

I've been asking around, but mum's the word. The official story is that Danner is here to modernize the operation, but they'll need to spin a better tale if they think they can fool me. Please. You don't bring in a stranger to shake up a ranch unless there's something deeper going on.

So, I gotta ask—what's the real story here? Has Pa's past finally caught up with him? Because from where I'm sitting, this doesn't feel like a regular ol' business decision. This feels like unfinished business.

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And speaking of unfinished business, let's talk about this so-called ranch rebranding. The Kingridge Ranch is now Family-Friendly... Y'all, I can't even say it with a straight face.

Look, I get it. Image matters, especially when the oldest brother settles down with a sweet single mom. But let's not pretend the Kingridge boys are about to start hosting storybook hayrides.

This is the same ranch where a bachelorette party went viral for turning a mechanical bull ride into a full-contact sport. Y'all know the one. And if you don't, bless your heart—you ain't from here.

But it gets better, rumor has it the city girl they hired to clean up their image isn't telling the full truth. Word on the street is, her daddy's got deeper pockets than the Kingridge family vault. And get this—she's out here trying to hide her last name like that's gonna work in a town where the mailman knows what kind of cereal you buy.

Let me help you out, sweetheart—there are no secrets in Sagebrush Creek. It's only a matter of time before someone spills all your tea. And I'll be right here, microphone on, waiting to see how it plays out.

In the meantime, little miss no-last-name better be ready to work, because this weekend is VIP time. That's right—the big boys are coming to town for one night only. Private horseback rides, gourmet meals, and five-star service better be ready at the ranch, because nothing says rugged cowboy lifestyle like truffle mac and cheese with imported bourbon.

And who are these high-rollers? I'm so glad you asked.

Get ready, ladies—the Southern Knights of the NFL are on their way to Sagebrush. If you're wondering whether that's the same football team that cut Fallon Kingridge from their roster and shipped his ass to Europe... You'd be correct.

Oof. Can you imagine? The team that benched you now sipping cocktails in your childhood backyard while you're halfway across the world? Y'all, I don't know how I'd handle that, but I sure as hell know I'd need more than a stiff drink.

And as if things weren't spicy enough, Findlay Farms is coming in hot. That's right—just down the road, the Findlay boys are adding more guest cottages to their operation.

Hey farmers, trying to get in on the Kingridge action, huh? Bold move. But let's be real—cute little cottages aren't gonna be enough to take the Kingridge brothers down. You'll need something bigger than that to compete with our small-town royal ranch out here in Sagebrush Creek. While I'm on it, someone tell Travis to head back to his own tavern next time he feels like starting a fight.

Now, before I sign off, I keep getting the same question in my inbox— "Why do you use a voice disguise? Who are you even??"

Well, honey, let me answer that real simply. Who would trust me if they knew I held all the cards? I can't tell you. But I have some friendly advice, quit worrying about me and keep yourself out of the gossip in the first place. I don't make the news, honey... I just call it like I see it.

And on that note—this has been another episode of Boots & Bitching Podcast. I am your bitch with boots on the ground. Y'all act right with them football boys in town. I'll be watching.

CHAPTER 3

BOWEN

“Ahhh, damn you, stupid thing...”Priya mutters, yanking one corner of the fitted sheet over the overstuffed mattress.

The moment she gets it in place, the opposite corner pops free. With a frustrated huff, she stomps around the bed and tugs it back down only for the whole cycle to repeat. Again. The way she jerks the thing back toward herself, I feel sorry for the sheet. Priya isn't herself today. Hell, she hasn't been for the last few days, but I can't figure out what's changed.

I've only known her for two weeks, but she's made my world a hell of a lot more interesting. I lean against the doorway of the Pillow Plow Palace suite, watching her in silence, mentally running through all the reasons I shouldn't pin her curvy body against the wall right now.

The list is getting shorter by the second.

Everything about Priya drives me fucking wild. She's the kind of beautiful that stops you in your tracks and demands your full attention. She's poised and collected. Smart as hell, that's for sure. I can't stop thinking about what's underneath her perfectly pressed, high-buttoned, shirts. She isn't the type I normally go for, that's for damn sure.

It's like she doesn't know how to let loose. She's worried about maintaining some kind of picture-perfect image. She dresses like she's here for some kind of interview every day. But the fact that her long glossy black hair never has a strand out of place is the least interesting thing about her. It's the cracks that surface every now and then that draw me to her like a magnet.

But even with all of that pent-up need to claim her, I'm keeping my distance. Not that I have much of a choice in the matter. My track record with women isn't what you'd call stellar. Even though I'm thirty-five now my older brother Alex has made it real clear... don't fuck this up for us.

I don't know where she came from, but Priya's the kind of talent we don't often see way out here in Sagebrush Creek. With Pa getting older, it's up to my brothers and me to keep this ranch growing in the right direction. There isn't any doubt that Priya's the person who will get us there.

The last thing I need to do is sleep with her and have her leave when I inevitably fuck it up afterward. None of us Kingridge men are good at love. My brother Alex finally settled down, but one out of six isn't great odds. I've found that it's easier to get into things if I know how I'm going to get out of them.

But watching the fire in her as she wrestles with the sheet makes me think that one night together might be worth risking everything. The way the sparks fly back and forth between us tells me that she'd agree. Maybe.

The thought is driving me fucking wild. Priya climbs onto the mattress on all fours giving me a sight I'm not planning on forgetting anytime soon. I take in the round curve of her ass and blow out a deep breath. Bending her over the bed and wrapping my hands in a fistful of her hair... not an option.

I clear my throat. "Oh, come on now, darlin'. What'd that sweet little bedsheet ever do to you?"

Priya's head snaps toward me, her face flushing as she crawls off the bed. "Bowen, announce yourself, please. I'm just trying to make sure everything is perfect for our guests of honor."

I don't miss the shift in her tone. "Is it really a bunch of meathead football players that's got you all worked up?"

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“Who’s freaked out?” she snaps.

I bite back a laugh. “Clearly not you.” Stepping toward the closet, I pull out a properly sized fitted sheet and toss it her way. “Here, this one should fit. But you do know we have an entire housekeeping team who could handle this, right?”

“Thanks, but I’ve got it.” She takes the sheet and returns to wrestling with the bed.

I move to the opposite corner, giving the sheet a gentle tug to help. Priya shoots me a look but doesn’t say anything. It’s worth noting that she doesn’t stop me, either. As intense as Priya’s been, I count it as a win.

The suite is already pristine, but I stay put as Priya double-checks every inch of the space. Then, just when I think she’s done, she turns on her heel and strides out. I exhale, hopefully my girl is ready to get back to normal. Then the door flies open and she comes right back, dragging a damn vacuum behind her.

I raise an eyebrow at her, but she ignores me. Priya plugs the thing in without saying a word to me and gets to work on the already clean carpet... And that’s where I draw the line. I step over the cord and yank the plug from the wall. That gets her attention and I take the opportunity to hit her with my most charming smile.

“What are you doing?” She plants a hand on her hip.

“Come on, this is ridiculous. It’s done. I’d eat a meal off this floor.” I lean against the dresser with my arms crossed. “Walk with me down to the Buck and Whinny Stables. Callum’s over there, and he says Patty June left us a whole basket of freshbread. She

usually drops it at the farm stand, but the market isn't?—”

She shakes her head emphatically. “No, thanks. I need to?—”

But that isn't going to work for me. I close the space between us. “To what?” I rest my hands on her shoulders and turn her toward the door. “Vacuum again? Give me a break. This isn't the first or last time we've had VIPs in these suites. You're walking with me.”

“No, I'm not.” She folds her arms tight across her chest, digging in.

But she isn't in charge here. So I do the only thing left to do.

With zero hesitation, I scoop Priya up and throw her over my shoulder. She protests, kicking, squirming and even letting out a few choice words. But I don't take it personally and I sure as hell don't stop.

I stride right out of the suite, down the hall, and straight for the trail out back. My hand settles on the back of her thigh as she gives up her fight. I hardly notice because I'm in a fight of my own. It's me against the very real, very dangerous urge to sink my teeth into that sweet ass pressing way too close to my mouth.

We make it halfway up the trail before I finally set her down, her boots hitting the gravel with a satisfying crunch. Priya straightens, staring up at me in stony silence. Her expression is half disbelief, half something I can't quite place. Amusement, maybe? At least, that's what I'd like to think—except for the way she folds her arms across her chest like she's holding herself together. That doesn't exactly screamamused.

I take a few steps ahead, relieved when I hear her footsteps following. When she finally speaks, her voice is quiet and controlled. Too

controlled. Dangerously controlled.

“That,” she says evenly, “is called kidnapping. People go to jail for kidnapping in the real world. Just so you know.”

I chuckle. “You can thank me when you try Patty June’s bread. Have you met her? She’s like the ranch’s mom. She knows everyone and everything for that matter. But you’re gonna love her and the bread too.” I glance at her, taking in the rigid line of her shoulders. “But why don’t you start by telling me what’s got you so wound up?” I gesture to her folded arms and her locked jaw.

Priya exhales, and for the first time, her perfectly straight posture softens. Just barely, but it happens and I count it as a win.

“I know one of the players staying here this weekend,” she says, her fingers twitching slightly before she smooths a hand over her hair. “He’s... an ex.”

Ah. There it is.

I force a chuckle, ignoring the way my jaw tightens. “So, you had some wild night with a football bro from the practice team?” The joke feels wrong even as I say it. The truth is, I don’t like the idea of Priya hooking up with anyone who isn’t me. “It’s nice to know you’re human.”

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “It isn’t like that.” She hesitates, then lifts her gaze to mine. “You know Gunner Thompson, the quarterback?”

My stomach sinks.

“He’s my ex-fiancé.”

CHAPTER 4

BOWEN

She has my full attention now, and I stop walking. “Gunner Thompson.”

The name alone makes my stomach turn. I blink, and an image flashes in my mind—America’s sweetheart quarterback, tangled up with Priya. My gut clenches. The thought makes me sick.

More thoughts swirl in my mind. I’ve kept one eye on the Southern Knights ever since they cut my brother Fallon from their roster, but what did I read about their golden-boy quarterback? The story was everywhere. It was one of those impossible-to-escape social media sensations. But the details are hazy now, buried under a year of other scandals and distractions.

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The pinched lines on Priya's face have me proceeding with caution. But I have to know more. "Last year... this was all over social media, wasn't it? The girlfriend in the story. That wasn't you, though. Was it?"

The color drains from Priya's face, and regret slams into me.

She exhales. "It probably was. He cheated on me. Publicly. With an actress and I was the last to know." Her voice tightens, but she pushes on. "When I found out, my family pressured me to make it work and keep things together. But I couldn't do it." A humorless laugh slips from her lips. "Ending things cost me in more ways than you could possibly imagine. So, I disappeared from my own life and started over. And somehow, I ended up here."

"You could do a lot worse than Kingridge Ranch." I trail a hand down her forearm, and a surge of electricity jolts through me.

"I agree. It's beautiful out here... and quiet." She exhales, but her fingers curl into fists. "But now he's coming to ruin that. No doubt. If the tabloids are right, things didn't work out with the actress. And I've already gotten a few texts." Her eyes snap to mine, frustration flashing like a warning. "He wants to talk. I don't. Not even a little. But it's more complicated than that. He won't just let me be. He'll find a way to corner me, say whatever it is he thinks he needs to say?"

"No." My voice comes out sharper than I intend. "I'll give him a reason to stay the hell away. He doesn't have any power here. If you don't want to see him, then that's exactly what's going to happen."

Priya's lips twitch into a half-smile before she turns back toward the stables and starts walking. "That's a sweet thought. But it's okay. He already knows I'm here. I don't want to avoid him." She hesitates, her voice softening. "I want him to see that I've moved on." She swallows hard, her next words almost too quiet to hear. "Only, I haven't really."

Something tightens in my chest. I should ask her which part she isn't over. Is it the pain? The betrayal? Him? But I don't say anything. Because deep down, I'm not sure I want to know the answer.

Instead, we walk in silence, side by side, all the way to the stables while my mind races. The thought of Priya with another man shouldn't bother me. The fact that the dude is an NFL quarterback.. well that's annoying as fuck. But still, why do I care? She works at the ranch. That's it. She isn't mine to protect or defend. So why is my heart hammering in my chest?

The old wooden door creaks as I push it open. Priya murmurs a quiet thanks as she steps inside Buck and Whinny Stables. It's a name she'll no doubt want to change eventually as a part of her marketing plan. Normally, I'd crack a joke about it, but there's nothing funny about some asshole showing up here and making her feel like she doesn't belong.

On the table, a basket of fresh bread from Patty June sits untouched. We each grab a piece, making small talk with one of the horse trainers as we take slow bites. The weight of unspoken words is thick and heavy in the air.

Then the door swings open again.

"Hey." Callum steps inside and leans back against his desk. He takes a roll from the bread basket. Then his gaze bounces between Priya and me then back again and he arches an eyebrow. "Damn, dude. What the hell happened to you two?"

Priya flashes a smile, but it doesn't reach her eyes. And it sure as hell doesn't fool me. "Nothing. Thanks so much for the bread. I've heard wonderful things about it and about Patty June too. I met her on my first day, she's a chatty one..."

I don't even think before the words leave my mouth. "Priya's lying. Everything is fucking wrong right now and I can't figure out how to fix it."

Priya's eyes widen at the shock of my admission.

But I shake off her concern with a shrug. "He's my twin. He's going to know something's up. This is how we get shit done in our family. He's not going to repeat a single word."

Priya studies me for a long beat before giving a small nod of approval. So, I shut the door. With just the three of us, I lay everything out for Callum. His memory is sharp as a blade, and it doesn't take long for him to connect the dots from last year's media frenzy. Priya confirms the details as we go, filling in gaps and setting the record straight.

By the time we're done, I'm not even sure who's spilling the secrets and who's taking notes. The conversation twists through every possible scenario. Even as Priya insists she can handle it on her own, she thanks me for trying to help. I feel her gratitude in every inch of my body.

Truthfully, the more I hear the more I don't know if she can handle this on her own. I don't know if she should have to. It's not a fair fight. And there's no damn way I'm going to stand by while this asshole waltzes in and wrecks the life she's worked so hard to rebuild.

Then Priya drops the complication that changes everything... We can't cancel the VIP stay because Priya's father owns the Southern Knights. It's why she's so

desperate to outrun her past. It's probably why she never mentioned her last name. The silence stretches between us as the reality of her complications sinks in.

Callum is the first to speak, his arms crossing over his chest as he delivers his solution with absolute certainty. "We only have one choice. You need to be deeply in love with a new man in your life when this asshole arrives. That way there's no room for his bullshit. It's a built-in buffer that makes sense."

His suggestion piques my attention.

Priya scoffs, shaking her head. "That would be lovely. Just one problem—it's only me. He'll see right through it. What if the media gets a hold of it? Just imagine what a sad mess they'd paint me as for pretending to have a boyfriend."

"Okay, so I'll do it." Callum's tone is so casual it takes a second for the meaning to hit me. And when it does, it lands like a punch to the gut.

"Uh—" Priya starts, but I cut her off.

My head whips toward him. "You?"

Callum shrugs. "Yeah. Why not? I can fake being all loved up with Priya for one night." He shoots her a wink, and something hot and ugly ignites in my chest. "I'm up for it."

"No fucking way." The words rip out of me before I can stop them, sharp and absolute. "If anyone's doing it, it's me."

Callum raises an eyebrow. "Why?" His smirk is infuriating. "Your longest relationship was a three-day cruise."

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“Fuck off Callum.” I turn to Priya and take her hand in mine, ignoring Callum completely. “Let me be the man in your life this weekend. I’ve got you, I promise. We’ll make sure it’s believable. The truth won’t ever leave this room.”

CHAPTER 5

PRIYA

“Hi, Preye-yaaw—did I say that right? You’ve got one of those names I’ve never actually heard out loud before.” The girl with the pink glittery phone case checks me in for my appointment. But she looks more like she should be in class right now and I feel incredibly old.

“Actually, it’s... Priya.”

“So Ididsay it right! Knew it. I wish I had thought of that name back when my daughter was born. It’s so classy. What did you name your kids?” She rests her chin on her hand and leans across the counter.

I swallow back my surprise at her question. “Oh, I don’t have any kids. Not yet, maybe someday. There’s still time... I think.” My biological clock thuds in my chest and the pounding brings with it a ridiculous thought of Bowen. I brush it away as soon as it arrives. This plan of ours is really getting to me. I turn the conversation back to her. “How old is your daughter?”

“Girl, I’ve got three. They’re at home with Granny right now. It’s my boyfriend’s MeMaw. She’s getting up there, but she’s still okay to help watch them. She’s gonna

be forty-six this year so she's taking on all the old lady hobbies like reading and gardening."

My eyes widen and I try to keep them from making a full jump out of their sockets. "Wow, yeah, Granny and I would probably get along really well. I'll just wait over here. Thanks."

The roar of a blow dryer jolts me back to the present, slicing through the tangle of thoughts in my head as I sink into a turquoise vinyl chair by the front door. I lean back, letting the atmosphere settle over me.

For the first time in a long time, I feel an ache to call my sister. Zara would be shocked by this place, but she'd somehow know exactly how to fit in. It isn't a talent I've ever had. But I came here for a change, something drastic, and Mane Event Hair Salon is a world away from the organic hair clinic I used to frequent.

With its country music blaring, this place is all cowboy chic with not a hint of shabby. Every light fixture is a full-on chandelier, and the white marble floors gleam with so much wax I can see my own reflection. Truth is, I look haggard and between the lights and the mirrors, there's no hiding it.

The past year has worn me down in every way. I carried the weight of my breakup with Gunner alone. Loving him was never easy. Leaving him under the relentless glare of the media was even harder. And then there was my family and their expectations pressing down on me. They demanded smiles and poise even when my world was crumbling around me.

But I chose peace over privilege and I'm proud of that. I've fought for every smile since. Allowing Bowen in on the details of my last year lifted a weight I hadn't realized I was still carrying. And for the first time in a long time, I feel something close to relief. I won't let Gunner take that progress away from me by showing up

now that it's convenient for him.

Then my mind drifts to Bowen.

From the moment we met, the spark between us has only intensified, growing into something I can't quite name but feel with every glance, every touch. I knew he was handsome from the start—that much was obvious. But, what I didn't expect was the depth beneath the rugged charm, the quiet steadiness that lingers in his every word and action.

And then there was the way he stood beside me after my confession, unwavering, as if he had always been meant to be there. That moment did something to me. Trust has never come easily—I've spent too much time building walls, too much time learning the hard way that not everyone stays. But Bowen? He read me like a book, saw past my carefully crafted pages, and instead of turning away, he insisted on helping me write the next chapter.

There's something about that—about him—that warms me to my core. Not just in a fleeting, heart-racing kind of way, but in a deep, bone-settling way that feels like a promise.

And for the first time in a long time, I'm not so afraid to believe in it.

The girl behind the counter reappears. "Alright, hon, come on back. I'm gonna put you with one of our best stylists, Brynn Rose. She'll know exactly what to do with all that hair. You're just begging to get some country in there, ain't you?" She runs her eyes up and down my body.

Before I can process that statement, she smooths a hand over the back of my hair. I can't decide whether to be flattered or mildly offended.

She continues, “You know how it is—the higher the hair, the...” She trails off, blinking at me expectantly.

I stare back at her, tilting my head with a smile and hoping the moment passes. It doesn’t. This chick is waiting for a response. Only... I have absolutely no idea what I’m supposed to say. It’s clear we aren’t taking another step until I speak, so I take a wild-ass guess.

“Right, the higher the hair... the more hairspray needed,” I say with conviction then hold my breath like I’m waiting to find out if I’ve passed the test.

She hesitates for a moment and then throws her head back, roaring with laughter. “Girl, you are too sweet. No—the higher the hair, the closer to heaven!” She shakes her head, still chuckling as we round the corner to a room full of stylists, chairs, and products. “I forgot, it’s your first time at Mane Event Hair Salon. We are Sagebrush Creek’s premier beauty destination, sugar. So don’t you worry about a thing. Brynn’s gonna take real good care of you.”

I thank her as she drops me off, still in awe of what just happened. Brynn Rose appears from behind a black curtain. She looks like she walked straight off the pages of a southern charm magazine. She’s Carrie Underwood with curves... only, you know, likable.

Brynn introduces herself and I get a close-up of her flawless, radiant skin. She’s a walking glamour shot and I’m ready to buy whatever she’s selling. All I can think is, to hell with organic shampoo. If a little chemistry can make me look like her, take my money.

I have at least ten different hairstyle ideas screenshotted on my phone, but the second she touches my hair, I abandon them all. There’s an effortless authority about her that makes me trust her completely. When she asks what we’re doing today, I don’t

hesitate to say whatever you want.

Brynn swivels the chair away from the mirror and gets to work without hesitation. She moves with the effortless confidence of someone who has mastered their craft, her hands a blur of precision and purpose. I settle back, certain that something extraordinary is happening.

Long strands of my hair tumble to the floor, and with a single sweep of her hand, Brynn dusts them away as if shedding the past. The rhythmic brush of the bristles against my scalp, the mist of something warm and sweet—vanilla and something else, something decadent—coaxes me into the moment. I exhale, letting her work her magic.

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When the scissors disappear, her laser focus softens for the first time. I shift forward instinctively, eager for a glimpse, but Brynn presses a firm hand to my shoulder, guiding me back. I don't resist.

"You can't leave now—we're just getting to the good part." She sinks her fingers into my hair, scrunching and fluffing with playful delight. Then she leans in until her cheek almost brushes mine. "Now that we've lightened you up, it's time to have some fun. We should do makeup too. You don't mind, right?"

Before I can answer, she calls out, "Kellie Anne, bring the palettes!"

The door opens and an older woman steps inside. Brynn doesn't miss a beat. "Hey, Mama. I'm gonna be a minute."

"I didn't come for anything. Just thought I'd stop in and see my girls." The old woman screams even older money and she dives into a whispered conversation with the girl behind the counter.

Chaos erupts from there. Brynn turns her attention back toward me. She sprays, brushes, paints, and waxes my face. Each movement is fast and decisive. At some point, foil clings to sections of my hair, and my eyelashes feel suspiciously weighty. I haven't dared to sneak a look in the mirror yet, but I already feel transformed.

Then, with a flourish, Brynn spins me back toward the mirror. She lifts her hands, fingers splayed in a dramatic reveal. I catch a glimpse of myself and have to do a double-take. My breath catches. I can't believe my eyes.

I run a hand through my hair. It's shorter, yet somehow still long and so silky. It's high, teased, full of life and volume. I don't look anything like my old self... and I love it. I look like I belong in Texas. I look... dare I say it? Sexy.

"So, what's the occasion?"

Brynn Rose's question jolts me back to the present, snapping me out of my spiraling thoughts. I swallow against the nerves tightening in my throat. This is the moment I've been rehearsing all night, the one that could make or break this last-ditch Hail Mary of a plan. Forcing a smile, I lift my chin and aim for casualness.

"My boyfriend is taking me out this weekend and I want to look my best."

Brynn's brows shoot up, her voice hitching with surprise. "Girl, I didn't even know you'd been here long enough to have a boyfriend. From what I heard you just started out at the ranch."

Maybe I'm imagining it, but the hum of conversation in the salon seems to stall, like the room is holding its breath.

"Well, when you know it's right there isn't a reason to wait." This rolls off my tongue and I find myself smiling at the thought of Bowen fitting right into my world, even if it is just for one night.

Brynn leans in, eyes gleaming with curiosity. "Not trying to be nosy, but I gotta ask... Who's the lucky guy?"

My throat goes dry. "Oh. Uh... Bowen Kingridge."

The name lands like a record scratch. If I had any doubt that people were eavesdropping, that doubt dies a swift death. The room practically vibrates with

collective shock.

“Have you met him?” My voice wobbles at the end, but no one answers.

Before I can process what’s happening, they descend on me. There are rapid whispers, sharp gasps, and the unmistakable glint of scandal in their eyes. A quick glance at the mirror confirms it. Frozen faces framed in pageant-perfect makeup stare back at me, wide-eyed and unblinking. Like the prettiest pack of wolves, I’ve ever seen.

The silence stretches long enough to make my skin prickle. Then, the first voice to break it is rich with Southern charm, laced with something sharper beneath the sugar. A bony, thin-skinned hand extends toward me, fingers adorned with bright red nails and a massive gold ring that looks heavy enough to leave an imprint.

“We haven’t met yet, sugar. I’m Brandi Rose, Brynn’s mama. If I look familiar, it’s probably because you’ve seen me on the evening news. I have covered all the local events and fundraisers since I moved back home from the big city. Spent some time filming out there, building my portfolio...”

“Yes, she made a commercial for hair dye thirty years ago and has been back ever since,” Brynn mutters, rolling her eyes.

Brandi waves a dismissive hand. The movement is elegant and practiced. It’s like she’s used to being the center of attention.

Before I can respond, another woman speaks up, her hair twisted into pink curlers that sit like a crown of gossip. “Have you heard much about the Kingridge boys? I’m sure you’ve heard the podcast, they’re on it every week. I only ask because I care.” The question lands soft, but the intent behind it isn’t.

“Right, thanks.” My spine stiffens at the sudden surge in attention and all I can think about is getting out of here. Bowen Kingridge is a walking red flag. That checks out. I’ve chosen walking red flags before... It’s how I got here in the first place.

“You know,” she continues, pressing a manicured hand to her chest as if she’s doing me a favor, “I’ve spent a whole lot of time out at that ranch, and you hear things.”

A second woman, seated under the soft hum of a dryer, nods—once, sharp, deliberate. “Yes, we all have.”

There’s an edge to her agreement, something that makes me sit up straighter and reach for the black cape around my shoulders. I can’t breathe. My fingers fumble at the clasp, desperate to remove it.

From the mirror’s reflection, I see the knowing glances exchanged, the barely contained smirks, and feel the weight of their scrutiny pressing against my back.

“Isn’t that something,” another woman muses, tilting her head like she’s examining a curious artifact. “All these girls trying to settle him down for years, and here he is, falling for an out-of-towner. You never know, I guess.”

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The words land like a loaded gun on the counter, full of implications I don't have the energy to unpack. But it's clear that whatever connection I feel with Bowen can never go any further than our fake relationship. If these ladies are to be believed, the man is a nightmare dressed like a daydream. That isn't something I need in my life ever again.

I stand abruptly, grabbing my bag and moving toward the register, but Brynn's voice floats above the murmurs, cutting through the thick air.

"Good luck with him." A pause, just long enough to make sure I hear it. "They aren't bad guys, but they sure as hell aren't always good either."

The chatter continues until I get out of the front door. Even then the words follow me, sticking like the scent of hairspray. I take a steadying breath and square my shoulders, but the uneasiness doesn't shake off so easily. Keeping my guard up is second nature, something I've learned to do without thinking. But with Bowen, it's different. He has a way of slipping past my defenses, pushing them down like they were never there to begin with. And the scariest part? I let him.

I can't afford to forget what a risk that is. Not now. Not with everyone watching. This is my life we're talking about. But as I head toward my car the lingering warmth in my chest tells me it might already be too late.

CHAPTER 6

BOWEN

The Southern Knightshave arrived for their VIP weekend, but I couldn't care less. The only thing that holds my attention is Priya and the idea of playing her loved up boyfriend for the next few days. Honestly, she's on my mind most of the time anyway and I can't think of anything I'd rather be doing than doting on her for a night.

And if, along the way, I happen to make a few of those self-important assholes jealous? Even better. They deserve it after cutting Fallon from their roster and shipping him off to the fucking NFL Europe like he was nothing more than an afterthought. I didn't even know they had an NFL in Europe.

Last night, Priya and I spent hours texting back and forth crafting a backstory for our relationship. Well, she did. I mostly just agreed with whatever will make her feel better. In my opinion, there's nothing hard to believe about me seeing a woman like her... brilliant, confident, sexy as hell, and deciding I was all in.

There are no elaborate explanations needed as far as I'm concerned. Any man in America lucky enough to spend this much time with her would understand. The old me would've tried to sleep with her by now. It's not like I haven't imagined it in the shower every day since we met. But I'm changing my ways and that means ignoring my inclinations and being an actual friend to her, not the kind with extra benefits.

Priya's car pulls up outside my house, right on cue. She insisted that our story had to start with us arriving together, for authenticity's sake. I rush out the door to meet her. Word on the ranch is that Choke is out and about again this morning. The last thing I need is that damn bird going after her before we even get started.

The second the car door swings open and she steps out, my heart stutters in my chest. Holy. Shit. She looks like herself, only, not. Her hair is long but bigger somehow and her eyes sparkle. There are cowboy boots on her feet. Best of all, the buttoned up shirt is gone.

Priya's got on a simple black t-shirt. It's refreshing and tight enough for me to realize her tits are a whole lot bigger than I'd imagined. She's wearing some kind of bootcut jeans with stitching on the back pockets. They look like they were painted on her body and I take in every curve.

Not acting like a horny creep while we pretend to be in love just got a whole lot more difficult.

"Wow," I breathe.

Her brows pinch together, and she smooths a hand over her hair like she's expecting bad news. "What? I don't look like I'm here to work. This is too casual. I went for a real Sandra D moment here but I missed the mark?"

"What? No. Who the hell is Sandra? You didn't miss a single beat. This is, whew..." I let out a low chuckle, shaking my head as I close the distance between us. "You look hot as hell."

A flash of something, maybe pleasure, maybe embarrassment, flickers in her eyes. But the ghost of a smile plays on her lips as she waves me away. "Stop it."

I don't. Instead, I grab her hand and spin her, my other palm grazing the curve of her hip. "Let me see the back. Damn. Damn. This is the new look, you don't need the buttons and the loafers. I like this." Maybe too much.

"Thank you, but let's just get started. I'm so nervous I think I'm gonna crawl out of my skin. I hope it's convincing."

"Listen, all of this is just for fun and I've got you." A slow smirk tugs at my lips as I imagine spending the next two days as the man in her life. It suits me.

Priya bites back a smile as I slip an arm around her waist, guiding her away from her car and toward my truck. There's an ease to it that catches me off guard. I don't expect the way she fits against me and it feels good.

We turn just in time for Choke to come flapping around the corner, all posturing and attitude. I step toward him once, and the stupid rooster scurries off with his tail tucked. Bully.

Shaking my head, I keep walking. But when I glance back, Priya hasn't moved. She's still rooted to the same spot, her expression unreadable.

"He's not coming back," I call over to her. "We're good."

She steps forward but doesn't quite meet my eyes. "It's not Choke. I mean, he's annoying, but no, it's not that." She hesitates, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "I just think we should... practice. You know, so it looks natural. Believable. You know they've already been talking about me on that local podcast. It's giving me real flashbacks of the media circus of the last year and it's freaking me out. I need to make sure people believe this."

I pause, studying her. "I don't give a shit about some local trash podcast. But what do you need? I don't know what you want to practice. I've got all the notes you gave me last night ready..."

She exhales, glancing up at me. "We're supposed to be madly in love, right? So I can't hesitate if you touch me. Or... if you were to kiss me."

Her words are careful, almost uncertain, but I don't need to be told twice. Without thinking, I close the space between us, wrapping her in a massive hug. At first, she's stiff, but then, Priya's body melts into mine.

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My hand finds her chin, just like it did the first time we met. Heat crackles in the air between us, charging the space. Then, slowly and deliberately, I tilt her face up and press my lips to hers.

Our mouths connect and even though it's gentle, the whole world fades away around us.

My whole body reacts instantly. My muscles harden and ache with wanting. My dick springs to life aching for more friction as I part her lips and slip my tongue inside her mouth.

Her fingers skim up the back of my neck, and I bury mine in her hair, pulling her deeper into me. Electricity shoots through me. I press her back against my truck, losing myself in the moment.

When we finally break apart, I'm humming with energy. It's a mix of lust and something deeper that I can't put my finger on. But it's all her.

Priya exhales a shaky breath. "Wow," she murmurs. "I don't think there's a person alive who wouldn't believe that."

"See, I'm in love with you just like that. I love you." The words slip out of my mouth so naturally I don't even have time to stop them.

A split second of hesitation flashes on Priya's face. So I follow my admission with an awkward laugh, not even sure I know where the line is between reality and fiction at this point.

“Yes, we nailed that kiss. Just for fun.” She bites her lower lip and it’s all I can do to stop myself from kissing her all over again. Her mouth curves into a small, knowing smile. “Gunner isn’t gonna know what hit him.”

And I’m definitely gonna need a cold shower.

CHAPTER 7

PRIYA

We make our way into the lobby of the Saddle Suites, hand in hand. Inside we find Bowen’s older brother, Alex, his girlfriend, Cassidy, and her young son, Connor, waiting for us.

Everything looks perfect for the VIPs tonight, the elegant setting, the excited buzz in the air, and even the illusion of my relationship with Bowen. On the surface, we’re the perfect couple. I have to keep reminding myself that it isn’t real because Bowen is impossibly charming.

Playing this game with him is like playing with fire. The spark between us is undeniable. I already know that when it inevitably ignites, I’ll be willing to risk everything I’ve built for him. That’s exactly how I got into this mess in the first place.

Still, being the woman in Bowen’s life, even if it’s all a charade, is intoxicating. I’ve never met anyone who makes me feel like every nerve in my body is awake for the first time.

“They’ve arrived. Everyone’s in a room now waiting on luggage delivery. We’re off to the races and right on schedule. Some of us are on schedule,” Alex says, his tone gruff as he levels a look at Bowen.

Cassidy rolls her eyes, her smile warm and forgiving. “We’re all here now,” she says lightly.

“We had things to do on our way in.” Bowen lifts my hand to his mouth and presses a slow, deliberate kiss to the back of it.

There’s nothing hesitant about the gesture. I’m not sure if it’s meant for me or if it’s a response to Alex. But I can feel my heart race and butterflies flap wildly in my stomach either way.

Nothing like jumping in with both feet.

Cassidy’s gaze flicks to our interlaced hands, and she bites back a smile of pure joy and approval. In contrast, Alex’s expression hardens as he narrows his eyes at his brother, a silent message passing between them.

Whatever it is, I can only assume those daggers are meant for Bowen and not me. I like Alex. He’s one of the more reasonable Kingridge brothers as far as I’m concerned.

As we settle in, Alex and Cassidy catch us up on the day’s activities. It’s a whirlwind of calf roping, a private trail ride, and an elegant five-star meal planned at The Velvet Spur. Jolts of electricity keep pulsing through me with Bowen’s every touch and he doesn’t stop touching me.

Not that I’m complaining. My only worry is the love hangover I’m going to feel when I return to reality after this night is over and Bowen goes back to treating me like a coworker.

“Are you two boyfriend and girlfriend?” Connor’s question cuts through the chatter, his wide eyes blinking up at us with the innocent curiosity only a child can muster.

“You better believe we are.” Bowen grins and winks at him, tightening his grip on my hand.

“So you like to kiss her?” Connor asks, his voice both curious and unfiltered.

Heat floods my cheeks, and I’m momentarily at a loss. Before I can fumble for a response, Cassidy steps in, gently guiding Connor away.

But not before Bowen’s deep, unhurried voice answers, “Oh yeah, I do.” He squeezes my hand again, and the warmth of his touch makes it hard to breathe.

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“Gross,” Connor declares with a shrug, and I can’t help but laugh.

I glance at Connor, who’s moved on with the easy resilience of a child, and think of his father—the mayor of Sagebrush Creek, Randolph Bellcourt. Connor seems to have inherited none of his father’s stiff, awkward presence. Instead, he’s all charm. He’s a burst of laughter and life that lights up every room he enters.

Somehow, I make it through the morning without a single sighting of Gunner Thompson. Despite the lingering tension in the air, the trail ride passes without incident, and everyone on staff pulls out all the stops to ensure everything runs smoothly.

The ranch feels alive with energy, a seamless blend of activity and anticipation that helps me push Gunner from my thoughts, at least for now.

By late afternoon, the excitement has reached a fever pitch as the Southern Knights football team squares off against the Kingridge brothers for a friendly calf roping competition.

I walk out after it’s started. The air is charged with competitive spirit, laughter, and the low hum of country music drifting from nearby speakers. The setting sun casts a golden glow over the arena.

As I get into earshot, Callum walks the group through the rules and explains roping strategies with easy confidence. His voice carries across the arena. “Alright, gentlemen. Time to see if all that muscle translates to cowboy shit. Let’s see who’s got what it takes to rope like a pro.”

The football players exchange playful jabs, adjusting their hats and rolling their shoulders as they square up to the challenge. Meanwhile, Bowen and the other Kingridge brothers stand off to the side, watching with practiced ease. There's a calm confidence about them, but it isn't without bravado.

I had no idea that so much ego could fit in one arena. The thought makes me laugh.

Then I feel it. A distinct prickling of awareness makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I can sense Gunner's eyes on me before I even see him. My pulse quickens, and when I finally meet his gaze, he is ready.

Gunner flashes me a confident grin that sends a ripple of irritation through me. I force myself to respond with a tight-lipped smile but the man doesn't even deserve that much.

Never one to let an opportunity for a spectacle slip by, Gunner lifts his sleeve, flexes his bicep, and plants a kiss on the bulging muscle. He completes the delivery with a wink in my direction. His expression is full of smug self-satisfaction. The gesture turns my stomach.

If there was any question as to why the Southern Knights are here of all places, Gunner's ridiculous display solves the mystery. He's here to show off and to make sure I don't forget that he holds all the power. Now that his girlfriend is gone, he's ready for me to pick up the pieces.

There's no way in hell.

I shift my focus back to Bowen and lean into the giddiness that flutters up inside of me. He stands tall and steady with an easy confidence that Gunner will never possess.

As the first calf bolts from the chute, the competition kicks off with a roar of cheers

and applause. It dawns on me that every single woman in Sagebrush Creek is probably here... And that's fair. There's a lot of mouthwatering dudes wandering around. But none quite as charming as Bowen.

Lariats spin through the air, boots stomp in the dust, and the arena is filled with the thrill of competition. The line between athlete and cowboy blurs as both teams give it their all, determined to outdo each other in skill, speed, and sheer grit.

Pa Kingridge appears beside me with Danner. Seeing the two of them next to each other makes it impossible to not believe the gossip. Danner looks just like the other Kingridge boys. Sure the accent is missing and there isn't an ounce of Southern charm... But the genes are undeniable.

The guys haven't exactly been welcoming to Danner, but Pa isn't helping. Both Pa and Danner are insisting that Danner has come on board because of an interest in conservation and organic farming. The story has holes all over it, but I'm certainly not going to be the one to connect the dots.

"Hey," I give them a wave.

"Hi," Danner says. "First time watching calf roping. I'm ready to see what it's all about."

"Me too actually. It's been interesting so far," I let out a chuckle.

"Priya, girl, I've got a hundred big ones that say my boys take them players right down. Ain't no chance of them Kingridge boys being beat on home turf."

The old man smiles as he pulls a bill out of his pocket. "Pa, you know that's a bet I can't take. I'd never bet against Bowen, not in any arena."

Pa lets out a laugh. “I’m gonna go find that little Connor. He’ll take the bet so long as his mama doesn’t hear me. She’ll get my goat for teaching him to gamble.”

“Wow,” Danner mumbles as much to himself as to me or Pa. “I feel so bad for the calf. How is PETA not out here? This is crazy.”

An hour in and I’m swept up in the spectacle of competition all along with everyone else. I take in the sight of Bowen’s broad shoulders as he steps up to take his turn. I watch the confident way he handles the rope and feel the warmth spread through my chest as he glances my way before he launches into action. A very specific image of Bowen using that rope on me in a bedroom flashes in my mind... I don’t hate it.

As the competition wraps up, Bowen makes his way toward me and I rush to meet him. But to my horror, Gunner stops him. The two men face each other and whatever words are exchanged between them don’t look friendly. It puts me on edge and I approach them with caution.

“There she is,” Bowen takes a step toward me and plants a kiss on my forehead. He takes my hand in his and positions his body between Gunner and me.

Gunner cuts his eyes at Bowen, less than impressed. Then turns his attention to me. “We need to talk.”

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“I don’t want to talk,” I reply.

“You heard her. We’re all good here. There won’t be any talking.” Bowen doesn’t miss a beat. “But hey, maybe we’ll catch you at dinner, bud.” Bowen turns and I follow him until Gunner’s voice breaks my stride.

“So you moved to a farm and now you’re like what, a trad wife who doesn’t speak for herself? Pri, I never thought you had that in you. What a waste. I’ll let your dad know. He says he doesn’t hear much from you these days and that makes two of us. Imagine turning your back on the two most important men in your life over some cowboy.” Gunner’s voice is laced with sarcasm.

I turn back to face him. “Great, let my dad know that as it turns out, being with a real man made me into a real woman. And yeah, this guy gets anything he wants from me if that’s what you’re asking.” I return the gesture of a wink to Gunner then run my hand down the front of Bowen’s chest.

Gunner rolls his eyes and mumbles something about talking after dinner. But it’s Bowen’s cocky smile and the way his body tenses in response to my touch that has my mind racing.

CHAPTER 8

PRIYA

An hour later, Bowen and I walk toward the Velvet Spur, hand in hand. The night air is crisp, carrying the scent of fresh-cut hay and something faintly smoky from the

bonfire near the arena. I shouldn't be enjoying this as much as I am. The warmth of his fingers laced through mine, the solid presence of him at my side—it all feels too easy, too natural. A little sad, really, that this pretend relationship feels more real than anything I've ever experienced. But I shove the thought away before it can take root.

Bowen is uncharacteristically quiet, his usual easy energy subdued. The silence stretches between us, thick enough to notice.

“What's on your mind?” I ask, nudging him lightly with my shoulder.

He doesn't answer right away. Instead, he runs his thumb slowly across the back of my hand, his touch absentminded but deliberate. Then, with a sharp inhale, he speaks.

“Let me ask you something.” His voice is lower now, more weighted. “What did you ever see in that douchebag?”

I exhale sharply, shaking my head. “I don't want to get into?—”

“No, Priya. I mean it.” He stops walking and turns to face me. His grip on my hand tightens just slightly. “I want to know. Because I don't get it. That guy is a real asshole. I won't repeat what he said in that arena. But rest assured, if I hear anything like that again, he's gonna meet a different side of me.”

Bowen's usual carefree charm is gone. It's replaced by something edged with quiet fury. His jaw is tight and his expression is unreadable. The protectiveness in his voice coils around me. It's warm and unexpected, like a shield I didn't ask for but suddenly don't want to lose.

I swallow hard, the words stick in my throat. “It feels like a lifetime ago and to be honest I don't have an answer. He's the worst. I've known that for a long time.” My voice softens, almost confessional. “Thank you for helping me get through this

weekend.”

His gaze doesn't waver. “You don't have to thank me.”

I force a small, wry smile. “I do. But I also have to be careful to remember that this is just fun. You're too easy to fall for, but I suspect you already know that.”

The words slip out before I can stop them. When I glance up, I catch the flicker of his smile before it vanishes. His fingers tighten around mine for the briefest moment, like he wants to contradict me but doesn't. Something in his expression makes my heart stumble.

We reach the door to the Velvet Spur. The steady hum of conversation spills out punctuated by bursts of laughter and the twang of country music. But I hesitate. I'm not ready to be done talking to Bowen.

Before I can second-guess myself, the question tumbles out. “What about you? Why haven't you had any serious relationships?”

Bowen stops short. His fingers slip from mine as if my words startled him. He exhales slowly, then drags a hand across the back of his neck, his gaze flicking away.

“I, uh...” His voice is quieter now, rough around the edges. “The short answer? I never learned how.”

My chest tightens with a mix of curiosity and protectiveness. “And the long answer?”

He takes a breath and his shoulders stiffen before he continues. “The long answer is that I was raised by a dad with a drinking problem and no mom. Love wasn't exactly something I grew up seeing done right.” His jaw clenches, like he's fighting the instinct to say less, to keep it all bottled up. But then, his voice softens. “I think

sometimes it's for the best if I blow things up before they get too serious because I know where it's heading and I'm not in the business of hurting people."

The weight of his words lingers between us, raw and unpolished. It's not a confession, exactly. More like a quiet truth he's spent years making peace with. Or maybe he's been trying to outrun.

One million things flash through my mind. I want to tell him he's not his father. That any woman would be the luckiest person in the world to be by his side. That I trust he'd never hurt me. But I don't. Instead, I reach for his hand again, squeezing gently.

And for just a second, Bowen lets me.

Boom. The door swings open before we can step inside destroying what is left of the moment between us.

"Priya." Gunner strides out. His presence is as sharp and unwelcome as the sound of my name on his lips.

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I startle, my hand instinctively tightening around Bowen's. "Gunner, holy shit, that was a jump scare."

I let out a forced chuckle and try to brush off the jolt of unease that curls in my stomach. Bowen joins in. His laughter comes easy but it's laced with something harder. I lean back into Bowen and he drapes a protective arm over me. Gunner doesn't smile as he takes in the sight of the two of us.

Gunner's gaze flicks between us before settling on me. "Are you trying to sell me on the idea of you and this guy?"

I open my mouth to reply, but Gunner continues turning to Bowen. "I didn't want to do this in front of you, bro, but she isn't giving me a choice. You get it." He exhales sharply, shaking his head as if this whole thing is some kind of inconvenience for him. "I've decided to give you another chance, Priya."

I blink. Another chance? Wow. Okay. So he's insane. He's actually crazy.

"You were my support system," he continues. "When the opportunity came up for me to get a little more fame, I jumped at it. I see now that it wasn't the right decision." He takes a step closer and puts his hands out like he's making a proclamation "When I leave here tomorrow, you can come back with me."

There's a moment of silence. The weight of his offer hangs between us like a bad smell. Bowen leans into the hug harder. He's rock solid, anchoring me to reality. Then in a surprise even to myself, I laugh. Not the forced kind this time, but the genuine, incredulous kind. Gunner's brow furrows.

“No, thank you.” I shake my head. “I’m okay. I’m not trying to sell you on anything. This is my life now, and I’m happy.” The words come easily, and it surprises me how much I mean them.

Hearing him admit fault is nice, I guess, but there’s nothing tempting about the offer. If anything, it just confirms what I already knew. I made him my world and I was nothing more than a safety net to him. And standing here now, with Bowen wrapped around me, I realize how little that loss actually matters to me.

Gunner’s gaze flicks from me to Bowen and back again, his lips pressing into a thin line. “When you change your mind, I’ll be here. This is going to get old.”

Bowen lets out a short, amused breath. “You enjoy your night.”

Then, before Gunner can say another word, Bowen claps him on the shoulder. The gesture is firm, but just on the side of dismissive as Bowen guides me past Gunner and into the Velvet Spur. I don’t miss the tension between the two of them, but Bowen’s move is effective.

And just like that, he saves me again.

We step inside Kingridge Ranch’s world-famous restaurant, where highbrow cuisine meets a lowbrow dress code. The scent of seared steak and warm bread fills the air, mingling with laughter and the low hum of conversation.

Gone is the dust and grit from the day’s competition. After showers and fresh clothes, everyone looks almost unrecognizable—like polished versions of themselves. The testosterone-fueled rivalry has melted away, replaced with easy grins, bro hugs, and firm handshakes.

Most plates are clear and dinner seems to be wrapping up. The food here is legendary

and I'm sure the kitchen staff pulled out all the stops. The glasses are full. But still, tonight something feels...off.

From a quick glance, it seems like the whole Southern Knights team is accounted for. But one thing sticks out like a sore thumb... the Kingridge crew is missing. That includes the waitstaff.

I glance up at Bowen. By the crease in his brow, I know he's seeing the same thing. Something isn't right. Movement at the back of the room catches my attention. I look again to see Cassidy, standing near the kitchen doors.

She locks eyes with me and waves us over. Her expression is unreadable, but the urgency in her gesture is enough to set my nerves buzzing. Bowen and I exchange a quick glance before following her through the swinging doors and into the kitchen of the Velvet Spur.

The scene inside stops me cold.

Lining the kitchen are the Kingridge brothers, including Danner, Cassidy and Conner, the waitstaff, and what appears to be every employee within a one-mile radius. They aren't working. They aren't bustling around like a kitchen crew should. Instead, they're all standing there, waiting.

And I have the sinking feeling that whatever's happening—it's not good.

"What is this?" Bowen drops my hand and takes a step toward Alex. His posture is tense and his tone is edged with suspicion.

Alex exhales, shaking his head. "I just got here. Look at this." He reaches for the faucet, lifts the handle, and... nothing. Not even a sputter of water. It's just silence. "We don't have any water. And it's not just the kitchen. It's the entire ranch."

The weight of his words settles over the room like a storm cloud.

“Thank goodness we got through dinner first. But they’re going to want to shower before bed... It’s not a great look.” Cassidy shakes her head. “It’s probably the drought. I know I heard something about a water ration, but this feels extreme.”

“It isn’t the drought, we’re running this place on their schedule. I’ve checked every one of their boxes,” Bowen says matter-of-factly. “This is someone messing with the waterline.”

“There’s only one person around here worried about conservation,” Holden says.

The accusation hangs in the air, unspoken but undeniable. A beat of silence passes. Then, all eyes shift to Danner. Danner, still seated, lets out a sharp breath before rising to his feet.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” His gaze flicks across the room, disbelief flashing across his face. “You really think I had something to do with this? No, I didn’t. But maybe if you invested in solar or some kind of water containment system, you wouldn’t be in this mess. For fuck’s sake.”

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Holden lets out a dry, humorless chuckle. “Thanks for the advice, I’ll be sure to tell Pa that he’s getting his money’s worth.”

Danner shakes his head and a sarcastic chuckle escapes his throat. The tension in the air crackles like a live wire as mumbled conversations bubble up around the room. We’ve got an entire team of football players just on the other side of the door and no water. These people need to focus.

“Stop.” Alex’s voice cuts through the brewing chaos like a whip, snapping every eye back to him. “We need to figure out what happened so we can get it back on. Now, Danner, respectfully, I need to ask... did you have anything to do with this?”

Danner’s face twists, his temper flaring hot and fast. “Oh, fuck off.” His voice hitches, louder than before, and then the room explodes.

The Kingridge brothers move at once. It’s an eruption of bodies tensing and fists clenching. It’s not a full-blown fight yet, but it’s damn close.

Cassidy’s hand slams down on Alex’s shoulder. “Enough.” Her words come out through clenched teeth, but it’s enough to freeze the room.

For a heartbeat, no one moves. It’s a standoff. But all parties are locked and ready to strike. In the tense silence, a small voice echoes.

"Can I tell you something funny?" Conner interrupts the tension.

I for one, would love to hear a joke right about now. From the looks on the faces

around me, I take it no one else agrees.

"Please, not now, Connor sweetheart. Give us a minute to work this out." Cassidy wraps an arm around Connor's shoulders, her voice low but firm.

Connor covers a laugh with his hand. "Okay, but... My dad turned it off."

His words are quiet but they hit the room like a ton of bricks. The air goes still, and suddenly you could hear a pin drop.

"Wait, what?" Bowen's eyes widen.

"What?" Alex barks.

Connor's face is a mix of pride and confusion as he continues, "It's not because of the drought. My dad turned off your water because he knew the football guys were coming. For real, I heard him talking about it on the phone." He finishes with a flourish, arms spread wide in a *dag* gesture. When no one laughs, Connor's eyebrows draw together. "Get it?"

"You're kidding..." Cassidy trails off, her eyes wide in horror.

It isn't the first time her ex-husband has abused his power as mayor. But from the look on the Kingridge brother's faces, I think it might be the last.

"I'm on it," Alex says through gritted teeth. "Keep these people busy, and I'll have it back on by morning." He bolts for the door with Cassidy and Connor on his heels.

The door swings wildly on its hinges as they rush out, the rhythmic creak cutting through the charged air. Then, just as suddenly as the chaos erupted, silence settles back across the room. It's a tense, expectant hush that hums beneath my skin.

“Well, I’ll accept your apologies now,” Danner announces, his voice slicing through the moment like a blade.

I gape at him, my eyes widening in disbelief. Not the time, dude.

His smirk is almost lazy, but his eyes gleam with something sharper. The look removes any lingering doubts I have about Danner being related to the Kingridge brothers.

The room tightens around his words. Every gaze snaps to him like arrows loosed from a bow. A fresh standoff crackles in the air, unspoken accusations and barely leashed frustration thickening the tension.

Then, from beyond the wall, a low rumbling rises. There’s a restless energy stirring, and it’s a reminder that this isn’t over. Not even close. The sound yanks us back to the real problem at hand.

“Okay,” I speak up. “Someone has to go out there and turn on the charm. Talk them into thinking that this is both intentional and a good thing. Spin it as a VIP experience created just for them.”

The guys nod in agreement with my suggestion.

“Now the question is, who wants to take the mic?”

The guys shoot looks at each other and mumble amongst themselves. Bowen and Callum nod back and forth using their twin telepathy to make the decision. But before they speak to the rest of us, Danner puts a hand up.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take this one. I’ll go talk to them,” Danner says, getting back to his feet.

There's a beat of wide eyed silence before Holden bursts out in laughter. "Yeah, right."

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The rest of the room erupts too. But Danner remains straightfaced.

“Oh shit, that was a good one.” Geoffrey doubles over in laughter.

The guys clap each other on the back and I can’t resist patting Danner’s shoulder. It isn’t easy being an outsider in this group. I hope he finds his way.

Callum smirks. “I think we’ve got it, thank you, Danner.”

Bowen steps forward with a sly grin on his face. “Okay, I’ll go.”

I step outside of the door and watch Bowen in his element. He turns on every ounce of his charm as he takes his place at the front of the room with a microphone.

He starts, “Go Knights!”

It’s simple enough, but it works. The team breaks into a cheering that fills the room. Bowen steps forward, his grin slow and knowing. The man is incredible.

“We’ve loved having you here with us tonight,” he says, his voice smooth and confident. “And we’ve been keeping this under wraps until we figured out whether or not we actually liked you.” He pauses just long enough to let the weight of his words settle. “But now that we see you’re one hell of a team, we’re ready to let you in on a little secret.”

His eyes flick over the group, gauging reactions and stretching the suspense. Then, with a smirk, he delivers the hook. “There’s something going on up at the barn. It’s a

special event and there are free drinks all night long.” His voice drops, teasing, daring. “There’s just one rule. You’ve got to come up now. No showers. No sleep. Just every kind of alcohol you can imagine... on the house. Whose in?”

The room hums with a new energy as whoops of agreement spread across the room. Curiosity sparks in glances exchanged. Bowen’s grin widens. I catch the genius in his invitation. It isn’t just an offer it’s a challenge and every single person in the room is ready to accept.

The problem is solved.

An hour later, the night unravels into an alcohol-fueled blur. It’s wild, unfiltered, and buzzing with reckless energy. Music pulses through the barn. It’s a thumping heartbeat that keeps the bodies moving, spinning, and colliding.

Laughter spills out over the edges and mingles with the clink of glasses. The night is punctuated by the occasional whoop from someone who’s had one shot too many.

The barn is packed. Word spreads fast in Sagebrush Creek, and tonight, we’re finally using that fact to our advantage. Locals pour in, eager and wide-eyed. They can hardly believe their luck at scoring a last-minute invite.

The barn’s floorboards creak under the weight of the growing crowd. The air grows thick with heat, spilled liquor, and the kind of electric energy that only comes from a night with no rules.

As the hours slip by, even I can’t resist the pull. Bowen pours me one drink and then another. The burn is smooth and the buzz is welcome. I’m not drunk by any means, but the alcohol makes it easy to ignore the random phrases Gunner insists on sending in my direction.

Let's try this again, he's a fucking cowboy, are you serious, and your loss, seem to be among his favorites.

The issue resolves itself when two local girls drape themselves over Gunner, giggling and vying for his attention. He meets my gaze just as they settle onto his lap. He holds eye contact with me while they take turns pressing kisses along his neck. Their lipstick smudges against his skin like careless signatures.

But the sight does nothing to me. There isn't an ounce of jealousy in me. No pang of regret... Facts that help me breathe a little deeper. If anything, the only instinct that stirs is the urge to tell them to run before it's too late. Gunner has always been a storm, and storms don't love... they destroy.

Through the night, Bowen never strays from my side. His presence is steady and grounding. Even as the room tilts with alcohol and unspoken promises, I cling to him.

In the back of my mind I try to summon all the reasons I once told myself falling for him would be a mistake. I search for the doubts. The hesitations. But they slip through my fingers like smoke. Maybe it's the whiskey or maybe it's the way Bowen's gaze stays locked on me, as if I'm the only thing worth seeing.

So I stop overthinking. I stop worrying about what happens when this night ends and when reality comes knocking. Instead, I lean into the moment and let it carry me.

I look at Bowen like he hung the moon... because maybe he did. Maybe this night will be the one I compare every other night to for the rest of my life. And if that's the case, I'm sure as hell going to make the most of it.

Bowen and I dance, spinning until the barn blurs around us. We drink. We laugh between stolen sips. And we kiss... again and again. We kiss until my lips tingle and until I forget where I end and he begins.

By the time Bowen steps outside to meet with Alex, I'm practically floating. I take the opportunity to head down to the suites and check on the water situation for myself.

CHAPTER 9

BOWEN

It takes me a half hour to find her wandering over by the suites. I hate every single minute of not knowing where she is.

“What are you doing out here?”

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Priya turns to face me. “I realize that whether or not the water stays off these guys are going to be hung over. I asked the staff to get ice chests set up along the hall, but I need to get some bottled water into each one.”

“Nah, fuck them.” I close the distance between us.

Priya lets out a laugh. “I can appreciate the sentiment. But let me get them squared away. It’ll be one less thing for them to complain about.”

“I have a better idea.” I take Priya’s hands in mine and my mouth lands on hers in an instant.

Her eyes flick over my shoulder.

“There isn’t anyone watching, this is for me.” My words are a growl and Priya kisses me back.

The noise around us fades into nothing, the distant chatter and clinking glasses dissolving as I realize I’ve got Priya all to myself in the courtyard. The world narrows to just her.

Priya has changed everything for me. She’s smart, sexy as hell, and unlike anyone I’ve ever met. There’s nothing fake about the way I want her. It’s raw, undeniable, a need clawing at my insides.

I don’t need to ask what she’s thinking. She reaches out to me and tangles her fingers in the hem of my shirt. I close the space between us in an instant. One second, she’s

standing there, lips parted, eyes dark with heat. The next, I've got her pinned against the cool brick wall, caging her in with my arms.

Her soft curves press against the hard lines of my body, and my cock twitches in response, thick with need. I run my hands up her sides, dragging her shirt with them. I commit the image of her breasts in that lacey bra to memory then rip it off of her.

The night air kisses her bare skin, pebbling her nipples into tight, tempting points that make my mouth water. I can't resist. I dip my head and take one into my mouth, swirling my tongue over the stiff peak before sucking just hard enough to make her gasp.

Priya's fingers tangle in my hair. Her nails scrape lightly against my scalp as she arches into me and presses her hips into mine. The friction sends a sharp pulse of need straight through me. My cock throbs. I ache for the heat of her and the slick slide of her body wrapped around me.

Somewhere between kisses and desperate hands tugging at fabric, most of her clothes vanish. Some of mine do too. It's an intoxicating blur of heated touches and frantic movement, until we're stumbling through the courtyard, half-dressed and hungry for more.

By the time we reach the Saddle Suites, we've left a trail of clothing behind us. I don't make a habit of sneaking into guest rooms, but right now, I don't care about anything except getting Priya beneath me. I tell Priya to wait in the darkened corridor and use my keys to open room after room.

Some erupt in squeals at the sight of my half-dressed body flinging their doors open. Others laugh. One dude tries to swing on me. But when I get to the end of the hall, I find an empty room and it's back to business.

I motion for Priya to run down the hall and it's a fucking sight I'll never forget. Her hair cascades down her back and her tits bounce as she slips inside. I don't waste any time closing the door behind her.

I push her back onto the bed and climb over her. The mattress dips beneath my weight. Priya's lips part with an urgency that sends shivers down my spine. Her eyes are heavily veiled with a burning desire as she reaches up for me.

Looking down at her, I can see everything so clearly.

Priya is the reason that no other relationship felt worth having. She's my other half and the woman who makes me the man I want to be. I'm not drunk, but she's intoxicating and all of a sudden I can see my future stretched out before me in a way I've never imagined.

I trail hot kisses down her body and trace every curve with an urgency that consumes me. When I slip a hand between her legs, I find she's already wet for me and I pulsate with the need to fill her. My desire for her is a wildfire, blazing uncontrollably, and the way her hips arch eagerly to meet my touch ignites an inferno between us.

Priya grabs at my length, wrapping her fingers around me. Every muscle in my body tense. She traces a finger over my tip and strokes me until desire overtakes me and I can't stand it anymore.

I align my throbbing length with her slick entrance. My tip pulsates with an insatiable need before I plunge inside her with a powerful thrust. My breath catches in my chest as she takes all of me. Every movement between us is charged with an electric intensity that I've never felt before.

Priya gasps sharply as her walls stretch to accommodate me, clenching tightly around my presence. I get lost in the sensation. Then I drive into her with a relentless rhythm

that obliterates everything around us, leaving only the raw intensity of our connection.

Her thick thighs envelop me and I never want to be anywhere else. I take in the curve of her mounds and they bounce in time with my movement. Each thrust sends waves of pleasure surging through my body, igniting every nerve with an electrifying intensity.

All the weeks of heat building between us. The cold showers and long nights spent dreaming of her, pale in comparison to the real thing. Priya's body trembles uncontrollably as I claim her.

Her muscles tense and release in sync with our movements. I feel each clench and release along my length and it nearly pushes me to my limit. Her cheeks are a deep crimson and beads of sweat glisten on her forehead.

Priya gasps my name and her voice is a mix of urgency and longing. The sound is electric, reverberating through me. It takes everything in me to hold on as I drive her toward the edge.

I grip her tightly, picking up the pace and guiding Priya closer to the brink when I feel the tension build in her. When she releases, her body shudders with waves of relief. I'm more than ready to cascade right alongside her.

Finally, when I'm about to lose it, her muscles tremble and convulse as she collapses. Thank fucking god because I want her so bad I can't last another second. I pound her through her release and let go right alongside her. Shooting into her until everything disappears into white-hot bliss.

She melts against me, her body still trembles and her breath comes in soft, uneven pants. A warm glow lingers on her skin, the aftershocks of what we just shared

humming between us.

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I run my fingers along the curves of her body, tracing lazy patterns against her damp skin, but I don't let her go. I can't. Everything feels different now—sharper, more real. It's like the world shifted on its axis, and I'm only just realizing that this is where I was always meant to be. With her.

Priya isn't just a moment, she's my forever. And the thought of anything or anyone hurting her makes something primal stir inside me. I'm overwhelmed with the need to keep her close and protect her at all costs.

The urge is too strong to ignore. I roll her beneath me again, swallowing the soft gasp that escapes her lips. I take her once more, slower this time. It's less frantic and more certain. It's a claiming... a promise.

And when the words spill from my lips again, I don't try to stop them. "I love you."

But this time, neither of us laughs.

CHAPTER 10

PRIYA

Bowen is fast asleep with his massive arms still locked around me. His warmth cocoons me and the moonlight creates a soft glow in the suite. The steady rise and fall of his chest beneath my palm feels like peace.

I've never felt more beautiful than I do when I see myself reflected in his eyes. Being with Bowen is pure magic. Having him inside of me filled something deep and

undeniable that I didn't even know I was missing. There isn't a single thing fake about the way I feel for this man.

I lay in peaceful silence, memorizing the details of him. I note the way his lashes fan against his cheek. I see the slight furrow in his brow even in sleep, it's like he's still half-protecting, half-claiming me even now. I trace the line of his jaw and the muscles of his shoulder. His body is perfect and the contrast of his hard lines pressed against my round curves melts me.

But a sound in the hall pulls me back to the present. It's footsteps.

Suddenly reality encroaches. I realize I'm at work in suites reserved for guests... And I'm naked. My clothing is scattered somewhere between the hallway and the lobby. I listen more intently. The sound of boots against the hardwood floors makes their way toward the cooler. The lid opens and then closes again.

Dammit.

I lost myself in my night with Bowen. never moved the rest of the water bottles over. The guys are going to wake up hungover and it will be another thing for them to complain about. Meanwhile, I'll be freaking naked. I can't have that getting back to my parents.

I glance back at Bowen, debating whether to wake him, but the deep, even breaths leaving his lips make my decision for me. Instead, I carefully slip from his grasp, easing out of bed without disturbing him.

The night air kisses my bare legs as I tug on the first thing I find. I pull Bowen's shirt over my head. It's oversized and soft against my skin. The fabric carries his scent, and for a second I consider crawling back into bed beside him. But the thought of the sun coming up on my naked body and the waterless coolers propels me forward.

I'll be quick.

I wait until the footsteps fade down the hall, then slip out the door, moving as quietly as possible. The dim glow of the overhead lights cast long shadows along the walls as I make my way down the corridor, scanning for any sign of my discarded clothes.

A wad of denim. Maybe a shirt.

Then I spot my lacey pink bra just outside the door in the courtyard. It's tangled together with a branch and my shirt where we carelessly left it in the rush of last night. Heat creeps up my neck at the sight. But there's no time for embarrassment. Moving quickly, I tiptoe down the hall, push through the glass doors, and scoop up my bra and shirt in one swift motion.

Just as I step back inside, a voice cuts through the quiet. "Ha. That sounds about right."

It's deep, loud, and oblivious to the concept of privacy. I'd recognize it anywhere and my blood runs cold. Gunner. Of course.

"You know, Pri, this really hurts my feelings," he drawls, his voice thick with mock injury. "You wanted me to find you half-naked. And all I wanted was to talk to you. So, you get what you want... again. And I've just gotta deal with it."

I stiffen, my grip tightening around the wad of fabric in my hands. "This isn't about you, Gunner. I'm sorry to break it to you, but not everything in my life revolves around you." I square my shoulders, meeting his gaze head-on. "Besides, I never wanted this. You cheated on me, remember? Or are you confusing the story you fed the press with reality?"

His smirk falters for half a second before he recovers. "Come on, don't be like that.

It's complicated."

"No, it's really not." I let out a humorless chuckle and take a step away from him.

Then I hear voices and it stops me in my tracks. They are loud and close. My stomach turns.

"Someone's up," I whisper.

Gunner glances toward the hallway, his cocky grin faltering. "It's just the social media crew. Don't worry, I'm sure they won't take pictures now. It's so late."

His words are casual, but his eyes widen as the voices get louder. I think I might be sick. There's no way I'll make it back to my suite without them seeing me and we both know it. I'm standing in the middle of a dimly lit hallway, wearing nothing but Bowen's shirt, my hair a tangled mess, my bare legs completely exposed. A flash of panic hits me as I imagine news of this getting back to my parents.

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Gunner must see the panic on my face because he sighs dramatically and reaches for the handle of his hotel room door. “Come on, I don’t hate you that much,” he says, pushing it open. He jerks his head toward the inside. “Step in and put your clothes on. Unless you’d rather end up on every tabloid’s front page first thing in the morning.”

I hesitate. My eyes dart from the suite where Bowen’s waiting for me. It’s so close, but too far, and then back to the door behind where the voices grow louder.

Gunner watches me, then smirks. “Oh, come on babe. It’s not like I haven’t seen you naked before.”

My jaw clenches and my stomach turns. But so does the handle on the door with the voices. The door across from us opens and I catch a glimpse of blonde hair coming out of the room before I step inside of Gunner’s suite. He closes the door behind me.

Gunner seizes the opportunity like a man who’s been waiting for it. He tells me he’s made mistakes. No shit, buddy. He tells me he’s sorry. That he’s learned. That he still believes in us. He believes we have a real shot at going the distance if we just give it one more try. It’s gross.

Every sentence out of his mouth paints me in shades of uncomfortable, making me acutely aware of how incredible Bowen is in comparison. Every word Gunner says only solidifies what I already know, I can’t wait to get back to Bowen.

I let Gunner talk because, really, what choice do I have? But as I stand there, arms crossed, holding onto my clothes like a lifeline, I realize something. He can’t get to me anymore. His words roll off me, powerless, empty. I barely hear most of them.

My focus is on the door. My body hums with the urgency to get out. I lean slightly toward it, straining for the sound of silence so I can make my escape. At some point, Gunner realizes I'm not biting and offers to go find my pants in some last-ditch effort to be a gentleman.

But then Gunner turns back toward me. His voice takes on that smug, self-important tone that makes my stomach churn. "Priya, you don't realize how hard the media spotlight was on me too? All those expectations, being America's sweetheart, the perfect fantasy man every woman wanted—it's a heavy weight. We both had it rough and I'm not sure anyone else can understand what we went through."

That does it. The floodgates burst open. The words I should have said a long time ago rise up inside me and burn through my throat like fire.

"Gunner, you let them attack me."

He blinks, taken aback. He opens his mouth to speak, but I cut him off.

"You stood by and didn't say a fucking word while the entire world ripped me apart. I didn't have a voice. I had no one. And you didn't give a shit. That was your choice. Take some accountability for once in your life."

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Sharp, deliberate knocks at the door make my words catch in my throat. Gunner doesn't hesitate. He rips the door open, exposing me before I can even react. And there, standing in the doorway is Bowen.

His gaze sweeps over me. The oversized shirt, the bundle of clothes in my hands, my bare legs. His jaw ticks. Then his eyes shift to Gunner. Bowen's eyes darken and his stare is fierce. Sharp enough to cut.

Gunner doesn't back down. He squares his shoulders, meeting Bowen's glare head-on, his trademark smirk curling at the edges.

Bowen speaks first, his voice low and controlled. Too controlled. "Priya," he says, steel laced through my name. "What is this?"

"We were just talking," I say quickly, my heart hammering against my ribs.

"Yeah," Gunner drawls, stepping just a little too close to me. "We were just talking. And I was about to head out to find her pants and underwear." He grins. "You know how she gets wild."

My mouth falls open and the air in the room shatters.

Bowen moves faster than I can process. One second he's standing there, the next, he lunges at Gunner, grabbing a fistful of his shirt and slamming him against the door. The impact echoes down the hall.

My stomach lurches. One by one, doors creak open. Sleepy, curious faces peek out, eyes widening at the scene unfolding before them. Each one feels like a laser beam burning into my skin.

"I wouldn't do that, cowboy," Gunner grits out, jerking against Bowen's grip.

I drop my voice and put a hand on Bowen's arm. "Stop it, he's got a whole team of big dudes. It's not worth it. This isn't a big deal."

Bowen turns to face me, his eyes widen as he takes in the scene all over again. "Oh, I see. I should stop. Am I wrong here?"

"I'm just saying that this isn't your fight." My words come out choppy and clipped,

but they take the wind out of him.

Bowen deflates. His face pinches into tight lines. He runs a hand through his hair. “You aren’t mine to fight for... That’s right, I forgot. This is just fun and that’s perfect actually. I didn’t want to break my three-day record anyway.”

A half hour later the chaos around me dissipates into nothingness. Gunner retreats to his suite with some kind of sick victory under his belt. Bowen disappears with Callum before I can stop them. The Southern Knights and their Sagebrush Creekconcubines go back behind their closed doors. All that’s left for me to do is go home.

I lay down to a sleepless night knowing the scene that unfolded is over but nowhere near forgotten. I feel sick about the assumptions Bowen must have made when I close my eyes. I toss and turn for hours. The weight of the world is on my shoulders.

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Regrets wrack my body and flood my mind. I should have taken Bowen's face in my hands and promised him that he is the only man I want in my life. I should have told him that he and I are so much more than just fun. I shouldn't have played with fire when I felt the spark between us from the moment we met.

My eyelids grow heavy as the sun comes up and I finally give in to the sleep I desperately need. Tomorrow I'm going to have to throw everything I've got at fixing things with Bowen.

CHAPTER 11

BOOTS AND BITCHING PODCAST

Well,well, well. And I do mean well. As in, it's drier than a preacher's handshake out here, y'all. I stepped outside this morning, and I swear the devil himself was sittin' on my porch, fanning himself with a church bulletin and askin' for a glass of ice water.

But let me tell you, there's one place in town you don't want to bother stopping by for a sip... and that's Kingridge Ranch.

Now, I don't mean to gossip. Okay, that's a damn lie. I absolutely do mean to gossip, because this here is the Boots and Bitching Podcast, where we sip the tea, spill the tea, and occasionally drown ourselves in it. And speaking of drowning—or the lack thereof—Kingridge Ranch ain't got so much as a trickle to its name.

That's right, folks. While the rest of us are gettin' by with a little water rationing, praying our hydrangeas don't shrivel up like Aunt Patty's Sunday roast, Kingridge's

well done went and gave up the ghost. Zip. Zilch. Zero. The place is bone dry.

Now, if this had happened in, say, December? That'd be one thing. But in the middle of a Texas summer? With the Southern Knights Football team in town? Lord have mercy.

The NFL team came to Sagebrush Creek of all places. If they were expecting a taste of small-town hospitality, they had another thing coming. I'm talking no showers and a whole lotta dust out in those VIP suites.

And before y'all go blamin' Mother Nature, word around town is, this ain't exactly an act of God. Nope, rumor has it that someone shut that water off on purpose. And if that ain't the most desperate, schemin', bless-your-heart move I ever heard, then I don't know what is.

Now, maybe it's part of the city-wide conservation effort. Maybe somebody forgot to pay the water bill. Or maybe—and this is just a hypothetical, for my legal team's sake—Kingridge is broke. Like, 'turn off the lights and hope nobody notices' broke. Like, 'serving powdered eggs and calling it gourmet' broke.

But that just don't sit right with me. I've been around far too long to buy that Pa Kingridge gambled his ranch away.

Hear me out here, maybe this has somethin' to do with that new fella in charge. Word is, Danner is real big on conservation—y'all know, reducing, reusing, and all that jazz. Now, I respect a good effort to save the planet as much as the next gal, but listen. This is real Texas, honey. We keep that kinda thinking in Austin.

And the worst part? The Kingridge boys are tryin' to keep it hush-hush. But let's be real—you can't hide an entire town suddenly smelling like they've been campin' out for a month straight. Not when folks have noses, and definitely not when the

Southern Knights media frenzy is sniffing around.

Speaking of football royalty, there were fireworks last night at the ranch. But to understand what happened, we have to talk about why the team is even here in Sagebrush Creek. It ain't exactly on their usual circuit. Could it have something to do with a certain new marketing director? Oh, hi, Priya Platt—you didn't think we'd connect those dots? I gave you time to come clean, but honey, the jig is up.

Girl, we know your daddy bankrolls the team. We know he pulled some strings to land you that cushy position out at the ranch. And let's not pretend it's outta the realm of possibility that he slipped a little incentive Bowen Kingridge's way too. Because how else do we explain his sudden change of heart? A man like Bowen doesn't just wake up one day and decide to rewrite his entire playbook.

But Priya, that isn't even the real secret, is it?

No girl, the real tea is about the heart you stomped all over before you waltzed into Bowen's world. You might be keepin' quiet, but Gunner? Oh, sugar, he sings like a canary. It's a miracle the man can still throw a football after the way you left him. And rumor has it, the two of you had yourselves a little drought-defying reunion before you made your grand exit the other night.

So tell me Priya, have you gone from breaking America's Sweetheart quarterback to breaking our small-town royal rancher? I hope not. Here's the thing, sugar, even your new hair don't make you a local. We don't take kindly to heartbreakers around here. Especially not ones who blow into town with a silver spoon and daddy's checkbook.

Now, I'm nothing if not fair. I know there's a chance I might have gotten things wrong, rumors being what they are. If you wanna clear things up, just spread the word out at the ranch. I'll hear about it. And who knows? Maybe I'll even give you a little airtime of your own.

But, credit where it's due, those Kingridge folks sure do keep things entertaining. And personally? I'm grateful. This podcast wouldn't be nearly as much fun without their creative attempts at keeping the town afloat, figuratively speaking, of course.

So what do y'all think? Did Kingridge bite off more than they could chew, or is there somethin' even juicier behind this dry spell? Call in, send a message, or hell, just yell it across the county line. I'll hear you.

Till next time, keep your boots dusty and your tea sweet. And remember, I'm always watchin'. Your favorite bitch with boots on the ground.

CHAPTER 12

BOWEN

I slam my laptop closed. There's a reason I don't listen to that damn podcast. The coward behind the robot voice has made a full career out of talking shit about my family. But I hardly slept and when I woke up before the sun, something told me to tune in.

The visit from a professional football team, the mayor cutting off our water... I knew the gossip would be too good to resist. But I didn't expect them to drag Priya into it and I'm fucking furious.

I don't know who the host is, but I'm about ready to find out. Hearing Priya's name on that show sent me down a rabbit hole I never intended to go down. One episode turned into two, into three. Before I knew it, I'd listened to more hours of Boots and Bitching than any sane person ever should.

But maybe that's the point. Because the more I listen, the more the plan starts forming in my mind. One piece at a time, clicking into place. And when it's all there,

clear and sharp, I know exactly what I have to do.

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Last night, Callum yanked me away from the Southern Knights before the fireworks inside of me could ignite... It pissed me off.

The memory of the smug look on Gunner Thompson's face makes my blood boil and my fists twitch at my sides even now. If I'd been given even a second more, I don't know if I could have stopped myself from swinging at him. Maybe I wouldn't have even tried.

Maybe I should have gone for it. Taking a few swings on those jackasses would've felt good. But I knew even in the moment that he was right to do it. Knowing something is for the best and accepting it are two different things.

But my brothers have a knack for coming through for me when I need them the most... And I needed them. The night whipped from good to bad so fast I didn't see it coming.

I had the highest of highs when I held Priya in my arms. Being with her and having her naked body against mine was beyond anything I could have dreamt. The sex was mind-blowing. All of that pure, unadulterated bliss between us last night shattered into something unrecognizable in a fucking instant.

Waking up alone was one thing. It was an unwelcome surprise at best. But finding my girl in a room with her ex and without her clothes was a fucking punch to the gut. The thought makes me sick even now as I flip open my laptop at my kitchen table.

Things with Priya have never been fake, not for me. She's different. She changes the way I see things, the way I see myself. And now, with her gone, everything feels

wrong. It's time I stop falling back on my usual bullshit excuses. I'm not serious about any of this. I don't care. None of it really matters. Because it does.

I've spent so long convincing myself I'm not built for long-term love, that I'm not capable of it. But Priya and I have the kind of connection you can't move on from. That's why moving on from Priya isn't a part of the plan. But I'd be kidding myself if I didn't recognize that I've got a lot of ground to cover if I'm going to keep her in my world.

Knock. Knock.

Three hours and a full pot of coffee into my morning, two sharp taps rattle my front door. I don't bother getting up. Whoever it is isn't as important as what I'm working through. My fingers furiously click across my keyboard.

Knock. Knock.

I let out a frustrated sigh at the distraction. I hope it's Priya.

"Hey man, get your pants on, we're coming in." Callum's voice outside of my door pairs with the sound of my door handle turning.

It's not Priya.

"What the hell are you doing?" I bark as Callum strides inside like he owns the place.

Before I can throw him out, Alex, Geoffrey, Holden, and Hunkleberry, our farm dog, file in right behind him like the damn Scooby-doo gang. This is the last thing I want right now.

"Damn, why not bring fucking Danner too at this point." I'm on my feet in an instant,

hands out in full protest. “Y’all need to get the hell out. I’m working on something.”

“Relax,” Alex says, rolling his eyes. He pulls out a chair across from me and has the absolute audacity to put a hand out and close my laptop. “If you’d shown up for work, we wouldn’t have to stage a damn rescue mission.”

Holden opens a cabinet and pulls out a mug. Then he helps himself to the last cup of my coffee. “Thought you were dead,” he adds with a muffled laugh.

I ignore the coffee crime in a deliberate decision to be the bigger man and turn back to the scene at my kitchen table. Alex and Geoffrey sit across from me while Callum throws his big-ass body down on my recliner. These dudes have got to fucking go. I don’t have time for this. Hunkleberry lays on the couch with his head resting on the arm staring out of the back window. He’s the only one with any damn sense around here.

“Dammit Alex, I sent you a text. People take days off. I’m taking one of my probably four thousand accumulated sick days. Truth be told, I’d like to get back to it right about now.” I wave them off then return my attention to my screen.

But Alex continues with the kind of arrogant bravado I’ve come to expect from my older brother. “You’re just gonna hide in here and?—”

“I don’t remember giving you any pushback when Cassidy came around and you decided that having Cassidy on your lap was more important than getting shit done around the ranch,” I snap, and even as the words leave my mouth I know I’ve gone too far.

Alex’s eyes flair at the mention of Cassidy’s name and I watch the muscles in his jaw clench. I realize he might hit me in my own kitchen and I brace myself for the impact. If he does, I’m fine with it. In fact, I’m looking for a fight right now. Then his eyes

pan from me to Holden and Geoffrey, and back again. He hesitates and then I watch the heat in him dissipate.

“Bowen, I’m trying to be patient.” Alex’s words come out through clenched teeth.

He is trying to be patient.

“Yeah, what the fuck dude?” Callum puts a hand on my shoulder and I shrug him off immediately. “Listen, we aren’t trying to blow up your pity party. We came here because you need to get out of your own way and fix this with Priya. You’re an idiot if you don’t. She wasn’t doing nothing with that dude last night. He’s an asshole that took advantage of a situation.”

I drum my fingers across the table as Callum regales me with conclusions that I already fucking came to on my own.

Callum continues, “Just suck it up and find a way to get things back on track.”

“I know,” I snap right back at him and the words erupt out of me. “What the hell do you think I’ve been doing all morning? In fact, I was halfway to fixing this damn thing before y’all showed up in here. Now I’m watching this jackass sip my last cup of coffee while y’all take up all my thinking space and put your damn boots all over my carpet. Get out so I can do this. Leave the dog.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:29 pm

My words evaporate the air in the room and when I look up, they're all staring at me like I grew a second head.

"What?" I huff. "You think I don't know? I'm not an idiot. I know exactly what I have in Priya. I'm not about to let that slip away. I don't have any options, you don't get two chances at a woman like that. I can't fuck it up." Saying it out loud takes all the bite out of me.

I choose Priya and I'm going to fight for her with everything I've got. This is me running straight into the fire instead of slinking away because she's worth it. I can't control how she reacts, but I can damn well make sure she knows I'm not the one going anywhere.

The guys exchange glances with each other. I note the raised eyebrows and the way Holden mouths the word wow at Callum. A full minute of silence echoes and something unspoken passes between the guys. It's Alex who stands first, tugging at the fabric of his jeans.

"Well, yeah. Okay then. I think we've made it clear." He bites back a smirk. "In that case, we'll leave you to it. Y'all come on, we've got work to do."

"Great, yeah. If y'all will excuse the fuck out of me, I'd like to get back to work too." My words are laced with frustrated sarcasm. They are burning up my time. I stand and pull my front door open gesturing for the guys to walk out. "Y'all wanted to blow in here like the damn Paw Patrol, let's see that speed on the way out too. Here we go. Right this way."

“We got it, damn.” Callum lets out a chuckle and I can’t help but join in.

They mean well even if they drive me crazy.

Alex’s brows knit together like he’s debating whether to push further before he steps out. “Do you need anything from us?”

“No.” The word comes out on autopilot before I think better of it. “Maybe...”

The guys freeze and I close the front door with the whole gang still inside my house. “What the hell do we know about this damn podcast host?”

Silence hangs for a beat. Then, Geoffrey lets out a low whistle.

“Boots and Bitching?” Alex asks, crossing his arms.

I nod.

Holden cracks his knuckles. “You looking for a name, an address, or something a little more... persuasive?”

I shake my head, jaw tight. “I just want to know who the hell I’m dealing with. If they’re running their mouth about Priya, I’m not about to sit back and let it happen.”

Callum watches me for a second longer, then nods. “We’ll find out.”

CHAPTER 13

PRIYA

My heart slams against my ribs as I search the ranch for Bowen, my pulse a frantic

drumbeat of urgency. The stables—empty. The Saddle Suites—quiet. The barn—nothing. Each place I check, each familiar space where he should be, only feeds the gnawing dread in my gut.

I need to find him.

I need to fix this.

The memory of the shattered look on his face guts me. I can't believe I let things end the way they did. The best man I've ever known, and I threw it all away. For what? Fear? Stubbornness? Sheer stupidity?

I was a fool to pretend our fake relationship was just that—fake. Because it wasn't. Not for me. It was the best thing I've ever had, the one thing that felt real in a year that nearly broke me. And I don't want to walk away from Bowen. Not now. Not ever.

I love him.

The realization slams into me with the force of a runaway horse. I love Bowen, and I don't care who knows it. I'd relive every nightmare of this past year, suffer through every heartache all over again if it meant I could end up right here—with him.

My stomach swirls. With no other choice, I head up to the chicken coop. Choke might attack me, but there's someone with even more power who hangs out there and if I want to find Bowen, she's my only hope.

I round the corner and Choke postures at me. But he's actually behind the fence for a change and I take it as a good sign.

"Patty June," I say, my voice thick with desperation. "Where is he?" My voice comes

out tight, edged with urgency. I'm vibrating with anticipation, my nerves stretched thin. I need to fix things with him. I need him to know I'm all in, for as long as he'll have me.

Patty June fluffs her silver-streaked hair with a bony hand, sighing like she's got all the time in the world. "You know, sugar, can't say I know. But I've got a guess." Her mouth pulls into a slow, knowing smile, the kind that usually comes before a long-winded story I don't have time for.

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I clench my teeth. “Okay, if you had to guess, where would he be?”

“Well,” she drawls, tapping a finger against her lips like she’s savoring the drama. “Yesterday, one of the ranch hands mentioned he’d be out back by Thrusty’s pen. You know that damn goat can’t stop himself. He’s pounded right through the bale of hay. But then, he and Alex were talkin’ about makin’ some changes up at The Velvet Spur. Turns out Alex has had little Connor out there working with Thrusty. Bad idea if you ask me. But they tried Connor out in the milk barn and old Rump Roast nearly kicked him. Poor kid doesn’t want to go back inside, not that I blame him. And—now, you didn’t hear this from me—but word is Fallon’s contract with the NFL hasn’t been renewed. He’s comin’ home.” She leans in conspiratorially. “And if that’s true, sugar, things are about to get real interesting around here.”

I blink, trying to sift through the tangled web of town gossip for the one thing that actually matters. Bowen. “So, he’s at The Velvet Spur? Or the stables?”

Patty June just chuckles. Her eyes twinkle with amusement. She loves a good story, and loves drawing things out... but I don’t have the patience for it right now.

A sharp sigh pushes past my lips. “I’m sorry, but I don’t have time for this.” Frustration hums beneath my skin, thick and unrelenting. “I’ll catch up on the latest town drama on the damn podcast. Right now, all that matters is finding Bowen.” My voice cracks on his name and I don’t even care. “I have to go.”

I turn to leave, my boots kicking up dust, but Patty June’s voice stops me in my tracks.

“He’s over at the farm stand.” Her words are casual like she’s not just handed me the key to my entire world. “Got a little thing set up in the back.”

I freeze mid-step, my pulse skittering. Slowly, I turn back to her. “The back of the farm stand?”

She waves a hand, dismissing my urgency like it’s all so simple. “Mmhmm. Got some fresh bread back there too. It’s sourdough. You can help yourself. I make it for all my kids out here on the ranch.”

Her warm, steady, tone is laced with the quiet affection of someone who sees more than they let on. She offers me a kindness I don’t expect and it hits me like a tidal wave.

I swallow hard. “Thank you.”

She just nods, already moving toward Choke’s pen. The massive bird doesn’t so much as blink at her presence, as if he, too, knows that Patty June belongs everywhere and nowhere all at once. But I know exactly where I belong. I turn and take off toward the farm stand, my heart hammering with every step.

I make it to the farm stand in record time, barely aware of my own breathless pace. The wooden door swings open under my forceful grip, creaking on its hinges as I step inside. The scent of fresh produce and warm bread fills the air, but I don’t stop. I weave past the counter, ignoring the cashier’s attempt at small talk with my pulse pounding in my ears.

I push open the door to the back office, and there he is, Bowen. My heart stutters then threatens to burst right out of my chest at the sight of him. But something’s off.

He doesn’t look like himself. He’s wearing massive headphones. His broad frame is

hunched slightly as he sits in front of a glowing computer screen. It's jarring and unnatural. Bowen belongs on horseback in the sun, not tucked away in some dimly lit back room with wires and buttons.

He turns at the sound of the door, his sharp gaze locking onto mine. A flicker of something unreadable passes over his face before he leans away from the microphone, covering it with one hand. His lips curve just slightly.

"Perfect timing," he whispers.

Before I can process what that means, he reaches for me, pulling me onto his lap with an ease that makes my breath hitch. His arms tighten around me, and for a split second, I just let myself sink into him. A warm calm wraps around me and I know without a single word being said that Bowen and I are going to be okay.

Then I see it. A blinking red light makes my stomach drop. My eyes dart to the screen in time to read **ON AIR**. I freeze, my mind scrambling to catch up.

Bowen clears his throat, his grip on me firm as he leans into the microphone. And just like that, I realize whatever happens next, the whole damn town is about to hear it.

Bowen exhales sharply, then leans into the microphone, his voice steady but edged with something raw. "This isn't my kind of thing," he starts. "Figuring out how to get on a podcast I hate—one run by a host who sounds like a damn robot—wasn't exactly easy for a man who spends his days working the land. But this? This is important. So here we are."

My jaw drops. I slap a hand over my mouth, my heart slamming against my ribs.

Bowen's hand finds my thigh and his grip is firm. He's grounding me. It's like he's silently telling me to trust him. "I've ignored this podcast for years. Ignored the

accusations it's thrown at me, my father, my brothers, and damn near everyone else in my world. But a few days ago, y'all took things too far. And I refuse to sit back and let the Sagebrush Creek community tear down a woman I love without standing up for her and setting the record straight."

A woman I love. The words punch the air from my lungs. My fingers tremble against my lips.

"Priya Platt came into my world on her own damn merit," Bowen says, his voice fierce. "She's incredibly smart, talented, and the best damn marketer I've ever met. There was no backdoor deal, no exchange of money to get her here. And once I met her?" He lets out a breath that crackles with emotion. "I sure as hell didn't need a reason to fall in love with her."

My breath catches. The silence stretches across the room, thick and electric. I can't move.

Bowen shakes his head, his grip on me tightening. "Y'all, when you meet a woman like her, you don't stick to the same old playbook. You change the damn game. She's all that matters to me and I won't tolerate the hate towards her. If there are concerns, you can bring them directly to me or keep them to yourself." Bowen pauses, his voice dipping into something almost deadly quiet. "I love that she isn't from here, and she doesn't owe you a damn thing when it comes to her past?—"

I lift a hand, stopping him gently. Then, without breaking eye contact, I slide the headphones off his ears and place them over my own. The warmth of them, the weight, the significance of what I'm about to do—it all crashes over me at once. His brows furrow, but I catch the slight curve of his lips.

"You don't have to give them anything," he murmurs, his voice low, protective. "I've got you covered, darlin'."

I swallow hard. He does have me. Bowen has been in my corner from the moment I met him and now it's my turn. My stomach is twisting with nerves. "I know," I whisper. "But I want to."

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Bowen studies me for a long second, then nods, his hand brushing against mine before I turn toward the microphone. I take a deep breath, steadying myself.

“Hi,” I say, my voice stronger than I expected. “I’m Priya Platt.”

A pause. I can almost feel the weight of thousands of ears tuning in, waiting, ready to dissect my every word. But I don’t let it shake me. “I want you to know that I understand why you’re protective of Bowen Kingridge. He’s the most incredible man I’ve ever met, and I don’t take that for granted. It’s easy to love him.” My heart pounds as I glance at him, watching the way his expression softens.

“I want you to know that I do love him,” I continue, voice thick with emotion. “With all my heart. And whatever spotlight, whatever speculation comes with that—it’s worth it to me.”

I swallow hard, my grip tightening on the edge of the desk.

“You can make what you will of where I came from or the people I’ve dated in the past. That’s your choice.” I lean in closer to the mic, my voice steady and unapologetic. “But don’t you ever doubt that I will give all of myself to building a future—for Kingridge Ranch, for Bowen, and for us.” I take a breath, letting the truth settle in my chest. “That being said, I’d like to remove myself from the narrative here going forward. But if that isn’t possible, your judgment won’t change the way I live or love. I’m in this for good.”

The knot around my chest loosens. The weight of the whispering voices of doubt fade. For the first time in a long time, I feel like I can breathe. And then Bowen

reaches for me. His fingers thread through mine and his grip is strong. It steadies me.

He leans into the microphone, his voice dropping into that low, firm drawl that leaves no room for argument. “We aren’t coming back on this damn podcast. I don’t know who the host is, but rest assured, it’s mostly because I haven’t cared enough to find out.” He pauses a slow, deliberate breath. “You don’t want me to find out. I suggest that you leave us to our life.”

And just like that, he ends the recording.

The silence that follows is thick, charged with something neither of us needs to put into words. A wave of emotion crashes over me. It’s joy, relief, and love all tangled together in a rush so strong it nearly knocks the breath from my lungs.

Tears prickle at my cheeks as I shift in his lap, turning to face him fully. His hands settle on my waist, firm and familiar. I wrap my arms around his neck and press into him.

“I love you so much,” I whisper, emotion thick in my throat. “And I’m sorry for the way I let you believe?—”

Bowen doesn’t let me finish. Instead, he cups my face. His thumb brushes away a tear and he smiles. “I love you, sweetheart. And there isn’t a damn thing you could do to stop me.”

CHAPTER 14

PRIYA

“How’s that look, sweetheart?” Bowen’s voice drifts down to me from atop the scaffolding, where he and Callum are hoisting the massive wooden sign into place.

Sunlight filters through the morning haze, catching the sheen of sweat on their foreheads as they balance the weight between them.

I step back, tilting my head, and narrow my eyes at the front of the stables. Something's off. The sign isn't as straight as it could be—not drastically crooked, but enough to nag at me. And of course, not a single level exists in any of the toolsheds on this entire property. Once this sign is up, it's permanent, and details matter.

“I think it's too high. Can you bring it down? Just a hint,” I call up to them.

“A hint?” Callum grunts, shifting his grip. “How the hell far is a hint?”

The old, weather-beaten Buck and Whinny Horse Stable sign is finally getting the upgrade it deserves. Now that it's been taken down, a modern, sleek replacement is ready to take its place—Kingridge Stables. The ranch's logo is centered in bold relief, crisp and professional, and just thinking about the final result sends a thrill through me.

“Take your time, darlin’,” Bowen says, his patience as steady as ever.

“No, fuck that. Don't take your time,” Callum huffs, struggling to hold his corner steady. “This thing is heavy, and let me tell you, it is not funny. Kingridge Stables. Come on.” He shoots me a scowl, but there's no real heat behind it.

I can't help but laugh.

“Hey, watch your tone,” Bowen barks, but there's a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“We're good,” I laugh, holding my hands up in surrender. “It looks amazing.”

Callum exhales sharply, rolling his shoulders as he steps back from the scaffolding and shakes his arms. “At least I won’t have to cringe every time I hear a parent awkwardly explain the old name to their kid before a trail ride. Small victories I guess.” He swipes his hat off, raking a hand through his hair before popping it back onto his head. “I’ve gotta head out.”

“Looks great,” Bowen says, his voice warm and sure. He looks at me like I’m his favorite person. “You love it, then I love it.” He winks before running a hand across the back of my jeans. It’s a lazy, possessive touch that sends heat curling low in my stomach.

I can’t help the way my lips pull into a smile as I look up at him. Bowen was easy to fall for and somehow, he’s even easier to love. Steady. Certain. Home.

“Damn, dude,” Callum snorts, shaking his head as he watches Bowen with a mix of amusement and exasperation. He lowers his voice, but not enough to stop me from catching it. “Pussy whipped much?”

“Fucking jealous much?” Bowen fires back without missing a beat.

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The two fall into a familiar rhythm of muttered jabs. Their words are low and indecipherable, but the energy is unmistakable. It's the kind of brotherly banter I've gotten used to, even if I'll never quite understand it.

A part of me wonders if all the back-and-forth between Callum and Bowen could be solved by Callum meeting the right woman. Callum wears the wild-and-free act like a second skin. The dude is all swagger and sharp edges. But in the last few weeks, I've come to know better.

Beneath that easy charm and reckless grin, there's a man who would fall hard—impossibly hard—if the right person came along. Truth be told, we could use some more women on this ranch. I love Cassidy, but she's in a totally different place in her life than I am. She, Alex, and Connor are a perfectly established family. It's like they've been together for a lifetime.

For all of Pa's shortcomings when he was raising his kids, one thing is undeniable. All of the Kingridge brothers are loyal to a fault. There's an unwavering devotion that doesn't budge once they give their hearts away.

Underneath all that bravado, Callum is a tidal wave of emotion and intensity. It simmers just beneath the surface, waiting for the right person to pull him under. And when Callum finally does fall, whoever captures his heart will be damn lucky, just like I am to have Bowen in my life.

Bowen's voice raises, puncturing my thoughts. "Fuck right off dude."

"Yeah, you gonna make me?" Callum snaps back. "You choose. Here or outside."

Let's see you hurt yourself. You're soft."

"Let's fucking go then!" Bowen's voice has an edge to it that I've come to recognize as a push-and-shove dynamic reserved only for his brothers.

I step away with a chuckle and let the two of them have their moment. Two grown men are ready to roll around tackling each other over a comment. My sister Zara and I never fought like this. She and I have disagreed over the years of course, but I've never yelled at her let alone asked her to take things outside. But then again, we aren't cowboys.

When I first walked away from my old life, there was a stretch of silence between us. For the first time ever, months passed when we didn't talk. It wasn't for lack of trying on her part, I just wasn't ready. But in the last few weeks, we've started catching up, and it's as if no time has passed.

She might even come out to the ranch for the Fourth of July celebration this summer. The thought of my little sister parading around the ranch with her ring light and short shorts makes me laugh. I don't know if these guys are ready.

Truth is, I don't know what life on the ranch will look like a year from now. Hell, I don't even know what next month will bring. But I do know where my life will be and that's here, with Bowen.

CHAPTER 15

BOOTS AND BITCHING PODCAST

Well, well, well. Would you look at that? Finally, a little gossip that doesn't have Kingridge Ranch stamped all over it. But don't you worry sugar, we'll get to the tea on those boys in a minute. Y'all put your work up and come by. You don't want to

miss this.

Word around town is that Misty Jo Parker—yes, the same Misty Jo who swore off men after her second divorce—was caught in the back of Cowboys Feed & Supply getting real cozy with none other than Deacon Randy. And not in a let's pray on it kind of way.

Now, I'm not saying Pastor Brown's right-hand man was laying hands in the biblical sense, but when Jolene Randy came storming in with a sack of chicken feed, it sure wasn't to pick up supplies. Sounds like they could all use some Jesus in their lives if you ask me.

Now let's mosey on over to the SOW Much Farmers Market, where Patty June is up to her usual tricks. This time she's peddling goat milk that supposedly has healing powers. That's right, folks—one sip and suddenly your bum knee is brand new, your sciatica is cured, and your ex's bad decisions don't haunt you at 2 AM.

Now, I'd call it a crock of cow patties, but the out-of-towners? Oh, honey, they're lining up like it's the fountain of youth in a glass bottle. And if I see one more influencer trying to bottle-feed themselves on the courthouse steps, I'm gonna need a refund on my faith in humanity.

But hey, if you witness someone hobble in with a cane and cartwheel out, you just let me know. I'll be the first in line with my money. Until then, I'll keep my dignity and that's more than Patty June can say, ain't it?

Speaking of spending too much on things that may or may not be worth it—the Farm to Table Dinner Gala and Auction is just around the corner.

If you haven't bought your formalwear yet, you'd better hurry before all that's left are dresses fit for a saloon girl with poor judgment. And before you ask, yes, Mayor

Bellcourt will be there, and no, I don't think it's just to enjoy the braised beef.

Word is, he might finally make an announcement about the new easement. You didn't hear it from me, but it's awfully close to the ranch that his ex-wife and young son now call home... I don't like to gossip but speaking of the mayor and his favorite group of ranchers... I have a little tea to follow up on.

As it turns out, the water shortage incident out at the ranch was a gift from Mayor Randolph Bellcourt to the guys. My guess is that it was a personal thank you to Alex for taking his ex-wife and son in. Maybe the mayor's got that jealous streak out of his system now, but I wouldn't bet on it with the size of that man's ego.

And that brings us to the main event—the boys of Kingridge Ranch.

For those keeping score at home, Alex and Bowen are officially off the market. But don't despair just yet, darlings, because that still leaves five very eligible cowboys roaming the land. Or six, if you believe the stories about Danner. But let's focus on the ones we know are in the line of inheritance.

The remaining Kingridge boys are wound tighter than Thrusty the goat, and it's only a matter of time before one of them cracks. So ladies of Sagebrush Creek, who's next? Who's gonna be the lucky lady who ropes herself a royal cowboy? Priya's sweet, bless her heart, but I think it'd be nice to see a true hometown girl take the crown next time. Just my opinion and since y'all don't know who I am, you can take it with a grain of salt.

That's all for now, darlings. But don't worry—I'll be here, watching. Because there's always more to the story. Until next time, your bitch with boots on the ground.

EPILOGUE: PRIYA

One Year Later

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Our final group of the season departs, following Callum up the winding trail. Their horses move at an easy pace as they disappear into the golden hues of the setting sun. I linger for a moment, watching the dust settle in their wake and a peaceful warmth fills my chest.

I can't take credit for the idea behind Kingridge Ranch's family camp summer sessions. Alex and Cassidy dreamed it up. But it was Bowen and I who worked hard to bring the program to life.

Seeing families unplug from their screens and immerse themselves in nature, laughter, and adventure makes every ounce of effort worth it. There's something special about knowing we're helping people make real, lasting memories. The best part is, there is no media required.

It's been just over a year since I arrived at Kingridge Ranch. Somehow this place gets more stunning by the day. Everything about my life here with Bowen feels like a dream. Of course, the outdoor adventure and cowboy boots took some getting used to. It's nothing like I imagined for myself. This life is imperfect, messy, and absolutely beautiful. I wouldn't change a single thing.

I can't say the same for Bowen. He's asked me to marry him nearly every single day. I keep saying yes. But neither of us are in a rush to make it official. We know where we stand and I'm okay with leaving the world guessing for a little while longer. This relationship is just about us and we are impossibly in love, no contract is needed.

Turning toward the ranch, I take a deep breath of the crisp evening air. It's time for my favorite part of the week. I head to what's quickly become my favorite place on

the ranch... my recording studio. After my appearance on the Boots and Bitching Podcast, the idea for Stories from the Ranch wrote itself.

When you want to shape the narrative, you tell the story yourself. This podcast is exactly what Kingridge Ranch needed. I think I needed it too. There's something about speaking my truth into the mic that feels like freedom. Each episode gives me a chance to share the magic of the ranch. I interview employees who know the history of the land and occasionally we spill a little of our own tea.

I walk past the stables formerly known as Buck and Whinny and keep going until I reach the door to my office studio. I step inside and find Bowen is already there. He leans casually against the desk with his arms crossed over his broad chest and my heart skips a beat at the sight of him.

"Another episode in the works?" Bowen asks, his voice low and teasing, the familiar rasp melts me like a warm embrace.

"You know it." I grin and close the space between us. "I have to get as many loaded up as possible before this baby comes and ruins all of our best-laid plans." A soft giggle escapes me as I press a hand low against my growing bump.

"I hope she wrecks them all." Bowen stands and wraps his arms around me.

I relax into the embrace. Being pressed against him feels like coming home. I look up at him and his eyes flicker with deep, unshakeable love. He rests his warm palms against my stomach and then plants a gentle kiss on my forehead.

From the moment I found out I was pregnant, Bowen hasn't left my side. He's been there through every wave of nausea, every midnight craving, and every whispered fear I was too afraid to say out loud. He's the ever-present, doting dad already. The man watches over me like it's his life's purpose and I'm starting to think that maybe it is.

Bowen loves me just the way I am and I will never stop being grateful for all the joy he brings to my world. I lace my fingers with his. “I love you and I can’t wait to see you become a dad.”
