



Riding Jamie

Author: *Nell Daniels*

Category: Romance, Western

Description: Jamie Walker broke my heart, and no matter how far I run, the pieces still belong to him.

He was my high school sweetheart,

The boy I thought I'd love forever,

And the bull rider who tore us apart.

So I left.

I thought college and distance would help me forget,

That moving on would be easy.

But his intense blue eyes, that crooked smile,

And the memory of his arms around me still linger.

Because Jamie and I? We share a history—

A love built on childhood memories and stolen moments.

It's impossible to erase.

Not even our fathers could stop us.

Not even the heartbreak could make me let go.

Not even my fear could keep me away when tragedy struck.

Now, I'm back.

And no matter how much it hurts,

I have to face the boy I once loved,

And the man he's become.

****Riding Jamie is a small-town, western, second chance, steamy romance. It is recommended to read the prequel, Breaking Oakley, first****

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

Chapter One

OAKLEY

It's still so early in the morning that the sun just barely peeks over the horizon as I pad down the stairs to the gym on the third floor of the penthouse.

My aunt and uncle have a home gym, and I've never been more grateful for anything in my whole life, because if I don't get to run, I think I'll probably never stop crying again. New York doesn't have the same quiet, safe streets that I grew up with. I don't have access to the track course like I did in high school, so the treadmill is truly a lifesaver. My thoughts never seem to quiet, and the only thing I can think to do right now is run until I collapse.

Music blasts loud enough through my headphones that my ears will probably hurt when I take them out, and my legs are stiff and sore when I tuck my ankle into my hand to stretch, but it feels better than sitting in bed. I've already scrolled through what feels like the entirety of every single streaming service my aunt has three times over, and I'm starting to go stir-crazy.

It's been three weeks since I moved to New York, and while living with my aunt and uncle is great, trying to get over breaking up with Jamie has been rough, to say the least. I'm grateful that I've been allowed to wallow for so long, but it's just starting to make things worse. The only thing that ever helps me get out of a funk like this is running until I can hardly move.

Impatience is a change from the numbness I've been wallowing in, although I wish I

could feel something that didn't make my skin seem so tight. The unending sadness is almost claustrophobic, but I don't even have the energy to try to free myself from it.

I guess it's to be expected, though. I've had a pretty good life so far, but I've never had to work my way through something like this before. I'll be the first to admit that I've lived a charmed life, but this grief is so all encompassing that it lingers unpleasantly at the edge of every breath.

Setting the speed high enough, I'm just going to skip any form of warmup and go straight into punishing spurts of movement. I barely managed two hours of sleep last night, and I hardly slept at all the night before. If I want any chance at getting a nap in before I pass out from pure exhaustion, I need to exert as much energy as I can.

Sleep has been fitful, plagued with memories and dreams of that last night with him.

Jamie leaning against the barn's outside wall, one long leg crossed over the other. Head bent, shadows from the bonfire cascading over him in flickers of black and gold and orange.

Kissing Savannah Ward.

Her auburn hair glistens in the firelight as she leans over him. No matter how hard I try, I can't pretend that I don't see that her hand isn't on the front of his favorite shirt, the one I bought him for his eighteenth birthday.

Her hands on him. The soft sound of her mocking laughter.

Jamie turning me into nothing more than dirt under his shoes. Worse, under Savannah's shoes.

It's even more upsetting to know that I'm only focusing on that stupid kiss so much

because I might have been able to forgive Jamie for it. If not for the fact that he lied to me about going on the circuit, about leaving me behind when I had been ready to give up everything for him, we could have worked through that. The kiss had just been the straw that broke the camel's back, but it hadn't been what broke us apart.

The treadmill beeps in protest as I ramp up the speed.

I don't even care anymore if he was telling the truth when I caught him with Savannah. It doesn't matter if she pushed herself onto him or if her lipstick was on the corner of his mouth because he didn't want to kiss her, or if it was there because he saw me coming and didn't want to get caught. I don't give a shit.

Being in New York with my aunt and uncle and going to college means I'll take over the logistics company. He can have a fucking blast on the circuit without me while I mope around the house in a city where I don't know anyone. At least I won't be lied to anymore.

Maybe it's because of the way my heart pumps in my chest as my feet pound over the treadmill, or maybe it's a response from the anger and frustration boiling just beneath my jaw, but I don't feel like I'm going to cry this time.

I still don't have any motivation, or even any idea of how to find some purpose in life, but I guess feeling breathless is better than feeling nothing at all.

I was hoping that NYU might be my purpose, but the campus tour was lackluster. It was beautiful, and even though I know almost nothing about architecture, the Washington Square Arch in Greenwich Village took my breath away. It loomed up into the sky like a massive doorway, an entrance into a whole different world than I've lived in up until now. When I put my hands on the cool stone and marveled up at the etchings, I swear I could feel the echoes of millions of people doing the same thing over the years.

It's probably silly of me, but I'm also incredibly relieved that there are actually trees on campus. I've kind of been imagining New York as a massive concrete sprawl, and knowing that I'll have at least a little greenery around makes me feel better. The scenery is different in the city, but it's a whole different kind of beautiful. Flashier, brighter, like everything has a life of its own and I'm just lucky enough to see glimpses of it as I walked around with the school tour guide. I know better than to expect the kind of sprawling grasses and dense forest patches of home, but even just the carefully curated rows of flowers on either side of some of the sidewalks are enough to make me breathe a little easier. If I closed my eyes and ignored the sound of hundreds of people chattering away, I could almost imagine that I'm back at home.

The classes I'll be taking sound interesting enough, too, but the idea of sinking my teeth into the coursework of finance and negotiation strategies doesn't fill me with the same excitement as it had when I sent in my application. Maybe it'll be different when I'm actually in a lecture hall full of a bunch of other excited students, but right now, it almost feels like it's just something to do rather than something I worked hard to get. Maybe then it'll be easier not to think about Jamie's face when I told him I was going to NYU. I probably need time.

Maybe.

It's fine. It'll be fine.

My uncle's business is more interesting, at least. It's not like this is my first introduction to Branson Logistics. I grew up wandering the halls of the company when my family would come up to visit over the summer. But it does feel a bit different now, knowing that the people Uncle Ricky has been introducing me to are going to be my employees one day. I like the people I've met, for the most part, and they all seem to be good at their jobs. It's a very detail-oriented operation, which I think is the real reason why I'm spending so much time shadowing my uncle as he works.

It's easier to fill my mind with shipping routes and the details of contracts than it is to relive the last time I saw my ex-boyfriend.

I snarl in annoyance as he comes to mind again, huffing and shoving the speed up another several notches. At least it's a little harder to think about Jamie when I'm worried about falling flat on my face. Maybe pushing the speed up isn't my best idea, considering the way the muscles in my legs have stopped burning and now just feel like jelly, but I just grab onto the safety bars and push myself harder. My breathing is starting to get truly ragged and sweat is threatening to run into my eyes with every step.

I've been bouncing between denial and depression, but I'm settling pretty firmly into fury now, agony and anger twining together as I sneer blindly at the wall in front of me. All I want is a moment of escape, just a second to think about something other than Jamie, but even pushing myself so hard that I'm probably going to beat my fastest mile isn't enough to clear my head. I'm so furious I swear I can taste it, heat and acid in my mouth. I can feel the heat rise in my body, anger overtaking my exhaustion while furious tears prick at the corners of my eyes. I refuse to let them fall.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

I'm done shedding tears over Jamie Walker.

Fuck him and the bull he rode in on.

He's a coward, and I can't believe that I fell for all the promises he spewed at me. It was so easy, in the end, for him to give everything up. He gave up on us, gave up on me, with hardly a second thought.

What hurts the most is how easily he let me leave.

I didn't think he'd just let me walk away like that.

Part of me still expects to wake up one morning to him trying to knock down the door and beg for my forgiveness. Even in my fantasies, I'm torn between wanting to turn him away scornfully and wanting to welcome him back with open arms.

But I've given him plenty of time. It's been three fucking weeks, and I didn't make it any sort of secret where I went.

I know I haven't made it easy on him. I blocked him on everything, sure, but when I first considered going to NYU, we talked about asking Kathy and Ricky if they'd let him stay here, too. He could ask around. It's not like we don't know all the same people back home, and I'm positive he could get my address if he tried hard enough. Phoebe doesn't say anything about him when we talk, and I'm not brave enough to ask her if he bothered to reach out to her when he couldn't get through to me. She probably wouldn't tell me, anyway, considering I told everyone to not even think about him near me, but I don't think I want to know either way.

If he loved me as much as he said he did, wouldn't he have found a way to talk to me? He could have shown up at my house before graduation or stopped me from leaving after the ceremony. If everything he said about wanting me was true, he'd have already been here, begging for me back.

Maybe I'm not giving him very many options here, but I just expected him to try harder.

Wherever we go, whatever we do, I'm going to be with you.

I snort scathingly at the memory of him murmuring those words to me. His hands had been in my hair, and I'd believed every single syllable that dripped from his lips.

Going to be with me, my ass.

Jamie Walker is never going to get another second of my time. I'm done with him.

I deserve better than a liar, better than a coward who can't even tell me that he won't pick me over the career his fucking dad chose for him.

I'm done waiting around, gritting my teeth and slamming my hand down on the emergency stop button. I grip the safety rails, forcing my breaths to come slow and steady and ignoring the way my fingers are shaking. The motor falls quiet as the belt of the treadmill slows to a stop, and I take a moment to soak in the quiet of the early morning. The only sound in the gym is the sound of my breath. I smirk because I don't sound like I'm on the verge of tears anymore.

I sound exhausted, certainly, but less drained.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror on the opposite wall when I straighten up and turn to grab my water bottle. My skin is flushed, sweat glistening under the

lights, and the bags under my eyes are so bad that they look almost like bruises. The smile on my face is uncertain, but determined.

I'm not going to be the girl that Jamie Walker walked away from. I'm not going to be the girl he left. I'm going to be the girl he lost.

My life is my own, and I'm going to kick ass at college, make new friends, and call home every week, bragging about how I'll be the youngest CEO Branson Logistics has ever seen. Jamie can wallow in his own regret when he realizes what he lost, what he gave up, and I'm not going to give it another thought.

I'm going to build my own dream, and he's not going to get to see a single glimpse of it.

Promise me, I promise you, that to you, I will be true.

The only person I'm going to be true to is myself.

It's high time I live for me.

Chapter Two

OAKLEY

"What do you say to going out for a bit today?" Aunt Kathy asks, her voice purposefully casual as she pours some coffee for the both of us. "I want to do some shopping for your welcoming party, and I figured we could have it next week, so I have an excuse to go all out for the Fourth of July."

I can tell by the look in her eyes that she expects me to have an excuse ready, but I just take my coffee from her and sip at it, sighing happily at the soothing warmth. I

shrug easily and nod, biting back a yawn.

“Sure, we can do that,” I agree. “We could make a girl’s day out of it if you want? I know you were saying something about that new brunch place a few days ago.”

The look on her face warms my heart and makes me wish I’d pulled myself out of my funk earlier. I’m serious about starting my new life here, and that starts with spending time with the people I love who live here.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“Brunch sounds perfect,” she says, her eyes bright with excitement.

After we finish our coffee, I head upstairs to shower and slick my lips with gloss. We bundle into her sleek little convertible and sing along to the radio, enjoying the gentle breeze of the late September air. Aunt Kathy knows the owner of the cute little bistro on the East side, and she talks me into ordering something unreasonably expensive off the menu and lets me sip her mimosa when the waiter isn’t looking. It’s a cute spot, and even though we’re sitting out on the patio, the traffic noise isn’t so loud that we have to shout at each other to be heard.

“So,” I ask, arching a brow at my aunt as she finishes telling me about her decoration plans for the party, “who’s even going to be there? Sounds like you’re setting up for quite the party.”

She’s already halfway through her second mimosa, and her movements are starting to get looser, the buzz of champagne making her giggly and playful. The table we’re sitting at has a bunch of little sketches engraved roughly into the wood, worn soft over time, and I trace my fingers over a few of them as she picks at the yogurt bowl she ordered.

“Oh, it’s nothing too crazy, pinky promise,” she says, grinning widely. “I’m inviting a few friends of mine. Some of Ricky’s coworkers have said they’ll stop by.”

So there’ll probably be at least fifty people, knowing her. Aunt Kathy is known for many things, but casual get-togethers are not one of those things. She loves extravagant parties and expensive alcohol, and she takes every excuse she can find to set up a party. Regardless, she’s never short of party guests to fill the penthouse with.

“You’ve already met some of them,” she barrels on as she refills her mimosa from the pitcher on the table. “You remember Shannan, the golfer? He’s in town, so I’m sure he’ll make an appearance.”

She’s excited and a little bit past buzzed, and although I roll my eyes at the way she chatters along and gestures a little excessively with her hands, it’s infectious. I find myself giggling even as I reach out to pull the mimosa from her hand before she can accidentally dump it on the concrete. She pouts at me playfully, but allows me to return it safely to a solid surface.

“And it’ll be good for you to meet the rest of Ricky’s team. I know they were out of the office last time you stopped by,” she says as she slips a straw into her glass. “Are you excited to start your internship?”

I take a sip of my drink to give myself a moment to think before I answer. I’m still nervous about everything, no matter how serious I am about making the best of it. It’s a lot of change all at once, and I’m used to life moving at a much slower pace.

“Yeah,” I answer, my voice a little shaky. “Next week!”

She smiles at me softly over the rim of her mimosa, her eyes warm.

“You’ve got nothing to be nervous about,” she tells me. “I know it’s a lot, but you’re going to do great.”

“I hope so,” I agree quietly.

I suddenly find it hard to meet her eyes, my gaze falling back to the waffles on my plate as I stab my fork through another bite and bring it up to my lips. What if I’m awful at it? What if I let everyone down and don’t have anything to fall back on? What if my plans don’t work out and I have absolutely no idea where to turn? What if

I have to go back home and face everyone? Face him?

“How’ve you been holding up, Oakie?” she asks gently, breaking me out of my thoughts.

I smile at the nickname, the easy affection taking my mind off my mounting panic, even if only for a few moments.

“It’s been hard,” I answer honestly, shrugging as I push my waffles around my plate. “It’s a lot of change, a lot that I’m not used to. I’m kind of keeping myself sane by running right now. I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

Aunt Kathy’s eyes sparkle as she laughs, and she tips her head back with an affectionate sigh.

“I’m glad someone gets use out of that gym,” she says, rolling her eyes. “Your uncle was so insistent that we get it built, and he still goes to the gym he met his trainer at.”

I chuckle along with her, taking a sip of my tea to keep myself from sighing. I’m not lying when I say that running is all that’s keeping me sane, but I don’t want my aunt to see just how rough around the edges I am right now. I don’t want her to worry any more than I’m sure she already does, and, well, I am keeping myself sane.

“That definitely sounds like him,” I say with a forced laugh. “I’m really glad it’s there, honestly. I’m trying to get used to everything out here, so it’s nice to have something familiar to keep me a little more grounded.”

“Look at you,” she sighs fondly. “All grown up.”

I look up, seeing the way her face is torn between pride and worry, and I realize that I’ve let my happy mood slip quite a bit. I do my best to shake my growing bad mood

off and take another sip of my tea, smiling widely.

“I’m really excited about the internship.” Excited, nervous, terrified. “I’m going to work my ass off.”

My words seem to have the opposite effect I intended them to, and I wince when I see the shadow of concern flicker in my aunt’s eyes.

“Just remember not to push yourself too hard while you’re at it, alright?” she asks.

“Promise,” I say, keeping my voice bright and happy as I take another bite of my waffles.

Hesitant silence falls between the two of us, and I glance around the patio, taking in the cute little string lights and the water bowls for people’s dogs tucked by one of the walls. Can I imagine myself here, in five years, bringing my purebred Chihuahua named Coco to lunch as if they’re my only companion? I’m trying to distract myself, but I know all I’m really doing is waiting impatiently for my aunt to break the quiet. She has never been the quiet type, and usually when she’s not chattering, it’s because she has something important to say.

I just don’t know if I can handle important right now.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

She reaches across the table and takes my hand, twining our fingers together and squeezing. Her face is open and soft, welcoming, and I feel myself tense slightly.

Looks like it doesn't matter if I can handle it right now.

"Look, Oakie, I don't want to pry," she says in a voice that makes it obvious that she knows she's prying, "but I know things haven't been easy recently. I called your mom last night to see if there's anything I can do, but my sister has always been good at keeping secrets." She sighs, smiling sadly at me. "I just want you to know I'm here if you want to talk about whatever's going on."

I hesitate, just wanting to forget about all of it. I got away from everything, and I wish I could just stop thinking about it entirely. There's a quote that I can never remember properly, something about going through hell and how the only thing to do is to keep going, and I square my shoulders.

One foot in front of the other.

My eyes are stuck on the plate in front of me even though my appetite flees from me, but I squeeze down on my aunt's hand as I take a shaky breath.

"Jaime and I broke up." The words tumble out rough and dry. That much is obvious, considering the fact that he's not here with me and that I haven't said a word about him since moving in, but it still feels like a massive admittance. "He decided to go on the circuit. I found out from one of his friends. And then I found him kissing another girl."

She makes a soft sound of sympathy, her fingers tight on mine as my lip wobbles. The pain still feels so fresh, the memories so vibrant.

“I wasn’t even mad that he was going on the circuit, I was just mad he didn’t tell me,” I say, a pained laugh falling from my lips. “I went to go yell at him about it, and he was kissing a girl who’d been trying to get with Bo for ages. Jamie said she kissed him, but I don’t know what to believe. It doesn’t matter either way, I guess.”

Aunt Kathy takes a breath to say something, but the words are tumbling from my lips now, and I can’t stop them. It’s like a dam broke, and now that I’m finally saying any of it out loud, it all comes rushing out.

“I still miss him,” I admit, my voice hardly more than a whisper. “We were going to get married. I just always thought we’d be together, and I have no clue what to do now that we’re not.”

She pulls her hand from mine to reach into her purse, rummaging around before pressing a travel pack of tissues into my palm. I smile at her weakly and pull one out, sniffing as I dab at my eyes.

“He’s already gotten more of your tears than he deserves, honey,” she tells me firmly. “I know it hurts, and it’s going to, for a while, but you’ll be alright. Sometimes people change over time, and this is a big period of change for both of you.”

I nod, knowing she’s right. It is a lot of change to work through, and my dad always reminded me that high school relationships almost never work out. I guess I just always thought Jamie and I would be the exception. Apparently, everyone else was right.

That doesn’t mean it hurts any less, though.

“What’s meant to be will be, and what isn’t will fade into memory,” she promises, the look in her eyes trusting and patient when I look up to meet her gaze. “You’re a tough cookie, Oakie.”

I laugh, the sound coming out watery, but I’m glad that none of my tears fall. She’s right. I’ve already wasted plenty of tears on Jamie Walker, and I’ve already decided I’m not going to give him any more.

“Thank you,” I whisper, my smile wobbly, but more honest now. “Really, I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you, kiddo.” Her green eyes are full of warmth and love, and I know she means every word. “I’ll always be here for you.”

I nod, dabbing at my eyes one last time before I reach for my tea and take a sip to soothe my throat. I feel a little better having told her about everything, a little lighter.

“And I know the change is a lot, but just remember that it’s not all bad,” she continues. “You’re in New York! You’re going to be in college for the next four years. You can turn this change into whatever you want it to be.”

It’s nice to hear the reminder that I’m allowed to be overwhelmed, but she’s right. Everything here is new. New life, new directions, new dreams.

I can be a whole new person here.

“You’re right,” I say, surprised at how firm my voice is, how easily my smile comes this time. “I’m going to live my own life here. I’m not going to compromise on what I want, not for anyone. I’m going to chase my own dreams.”

“That’s the spirit,” she cheers, her eyes twinkling with love and pride as she grins at

me. “It’s ok to let the past go, even if it hurts. You just keep your eyes on the road in front of you and have faith it’ll all work out the way it’s supposed to.”

I feel so much better about everything, and all I had to do was eat some waffles with my favorite aunt to figure it out. I still don’t have any concrete plans, but I at least have a direction to look in now. That little kernel of hope that’s been sprouting in my chest grows another spurt as I let my mind run off in a million different directions, thinking of all the possibilities at my fingertips out here.

As I pass the pack of tissues back to her, my aunt leans back over the table, grinning conspiratorially at me. I grin back slowly, knowing that look only ever leads to shenanigans of some sort.

“I think I know exactly what’ll cheer you up properly,” she says, wiggling her brows in excitement.

“Oh?” I ask, unable to stop myself from giggling at her antics.

“You need a new dress for that party,” she tells me, and I know there’s no use arguing with her once she’s made up her mind. “Let’s go shopping and make your uncle’s eyes bug out when he sees the credit card statement for this month.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

I toss my head back on a laugh, the feeling of easy joy almost foreign after having moped around the house for so long. It feels freeing.

“You’re just using me as an excuse to spend money, aren’t you?” I tease.

“Absolutely, I am,” she agrees without hesitation. “We might as well stop by the salon since we’re out, too. You’ll feel like a new woman.”

I shake my head and grin at her, but I don’t say no, letting her tug me out of my seat after she sets some cash down on the table to cover our bill.

“Come on,” she grins, wrapping her arm around my shoulders. “Let’s go have fun.”

Chapter Three

OAKLEY

“Oh, thank you so much!” I say with a wide smile, slipping my hands in the pockets of the dress and holding them out. “It has pockets!”

The woman’s pretty blue eyes crinkle at the corners as she chuckles and holds her hand out to me.

“I’m Alli,” she introduces. “I work for your uncle. I heard you’re going to be one of our new interns?”

I rush to pull one of my hands free, shaking hers excitedly. She’s taller than me, and

her hair is curled into perfect beachy waves that drape over one of her shoulders. There's an air of easy elegance about her, but the welcoming smile on her face makes it harder to be intimidated.

"Yes, ma'am," I say. "I'm Oakley. I look forward to working with you!"

"And I you," she says. "Mr. Branson told me he's planning on having you head a branch for him in Montana one day. You're in school, right?"

"NYU," I tell her proudly. "I'll be starting this semester."

She nods approvingly and takes a sip of her drink, looking over me. I don't quite feel like she's judging me, more like she's sizing me up. She seems happy enough with what she finds because the professional chill in her gaze thaws a bit, and she gives me a more genuine smile.

"Your uncle says you're a good kid, and he doesn't hand out praise lightly. Work hard, and I've got no doubt you'll go far," she says with a knowing grin. "And if you need anything at work, just let me know. I'd be happy to help out where I can."

There's an edge of competition in her gaze, but it's not directed toward me. Maybe if I do well enough to actually get my own branch of the company started back home, she'd be willing to come work with me there. At the very least, I could use some guidance from someone who's managed to find a good fit for herself in the industry.

"Thank you, Alli," I say, my smile widening.

I don't have time to say anything else before my attention is dragged away. I flinch back from the hand that's suddenly in my hair, manicured fingers laden with rings twirling a lock of hair between them.

“Oh, darling, your hair is fabulous.”

I come face to face with an older woman who’s hanging off the arm of her husband, who looks about as bored as any human being can manage.

“Uh, thank you,” I say, stepping back with a strained smile. “My Aunt Kathy introduced me to her stylist last week.”

“Oh, Ziu has magic fingers.” She laughs, leaning heavily on her husband’s arm, wine threatening to slosh over the rim of her glass. “I’ve been going to him for years. You know, with your coloring, you should really think about lowlights. They’d make your eyes really pop.”

I smile and nod, laughing uncomfortably as I share a glance with Alli. She gives me the universal look of get out while you can, and I fully intend to listen.

“I’ll have to talk to him about it!” I agree, hoping my voice is suitably chirpy and not as frazzled as I feel. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to check in with a friend of mine. It was lovely to meet you.”

She lets me go with a pat on my arm and a wobbly smile, her attention already turning to Alli.

I step away and scan the room for any familiar face. I’m not used to mingling, not like this, and the throng of people and the chatter of voices is quickly becoming claustrophobic. This just really isn’t my scene, and I have no clue how to relate to these people. My eyes catch on the bar set up on the other end of the expansive balcony, and I almost breathe an audible sigh of relief at the idea of a place to relax.

I can probably whine my way into a glass or two of something alcoholic if I ask Aunt Kathy just right, but I already have a headache brewing at the base of my skull. Fruit

punch is definitely the safer option.

And, since it's in a fancy crystal self-serve bowl, I don't have to talk to anyone in order to get it.

I pour myself a cup, taking a deep breath in an attempt to clear my head a bit. Names and faces and social niceties are spinning behind my eyes. I would kill for a quiet corner to hide in, even just for a few minutes. My room would be preferable, actually, but there's no way I'll make it all the way inside and up the stairs without being spotted, and I don't want to worry my Aunt Kathy and Uncle Ricky.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“Looking for somewhere to hide?” a warm, soft voice says from beside me.

I jump slightly and whirl to face the guy properly. It takes a few seconds of me blinking stupidly at him to get any words out.

“I—what?” I manage, hoping I sound more confused than annoyed.

Not that I’m not annoyed, mind you—I really do just want a minute to myself—but it won’t do to upset one of my aunt’s friends. Not that he looks old enough to be one of her friends...

“Sorry,” he says with a laugh, raising his hands innocently. “You just look overwhelmed. Figured we were in the same boat. I’ve been looking for a plant to hide behind since I got here, to be honest.”

I’m a little surprised by how easily I laugh at that, but it’s easy enough to blame that on being wrapped up in pleasantries. It has absolutely nothing to do with the way my brain is insistently noticing that he’s maybe, sort of, a little attractive. In an opposite-of-Jamie kind of way.

Whatever. It’s not like it matters.

The guy’s just making conversation. That’s what you’re supposed to do at parties, I remind myself.

“No, no.” I wave him off with a laugh. “You just surprised me. I didn’t see you standing there, and then you were talking, and I...I’m not used to this many people. If

you find a plant, would you be willing to share?”

His smile is sweet, and his laugh is quiet, even as he reaches out to pat a hand over my shoulder in joking reassurance.

“God, if only there was one,” he says, grinning.

He’s a little shorter than average, and he’s blond, and everything about him seems soft. His palm is smooth, no calluses across his fingertips when he takes his hand away before the touch on my shoulder lingers too long to be appropriate. He’s nothing like Jamie, all tall and rugged and loud.

I almost cringe at my own thoughts, forcefully shoving them to the back of my mind and doing my best to focus on the conversation.

The way the guy’s long lashes brush against his cheekbones when he blinks is helping.

Or maybe it’s not because as soon as I notice how pretty his eyes are, my mind is conjuring up memories of the way Jamie looks at me. Looked at me.

God, I’m a wreck, aren’t I?

“Yeah,” I say, probably a little too loudly, trying to distract myself from my own thoughts. “This isn’t really the scene I’m used to.”

He raises his glass—also full of punch, I notice—in cheers, laughing softly.

“Yeah, the city can be a lot to get used to,” he agrees. “Give it some time, though. You’ll do fine. I’m Shane, by the way, since I so rudely forgot to introduce myself.”

“Oakley,” I introduce, reaching out to take his hand in my own.

Yeah, no calluses there. It’s kind of an odd feeling because most guys on the ranch have calluses.

Before either Shane or I have a chance to say anything else, those blue eyes shift to something behind me, and Shane straightens up immediately. He looks confident, if a little nervous, and I turn to see what caught his attention only to come face-to-face with my uncle.

“Mr. Branson!” Shane greets from behind me.

“Oh, I see you two have met already,” he crows, obviously pleased as he tucks me beneath his shoulder in a single-armed hug. “That makes my job easy, then. Oakley, Shane here is my other intern, so you two will be working closely together this year.”

I glance back at Shane, surprised, and he beams at me proudly. “And Shane, you already know all about Oakley,” my uncle continues.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I gasp, turning back to Uncle Ricky with a mocking glare.

He just grins at me, his eyes twinkling with both pride and amusement. His bushy brows shift when he winks teasingly at me, and his beard twitches in time with the laugh he lets loose.

“He brags about you,” Shane stage-whispers, grinning widely at me. “A lot.”

As much as the idea of him talking about me is embarrassing—and as much as I hope the entire office doesn’t have some idea of me as a useless kid who only got this position because I’m Ricky’s niece—it’s kind of nice knowing that I won’t be doing

it all alone. And Shane seems nice enough.

“Only as much as you deserve,” Ricky corrects him. Before he has time to say much more, we hear my aunt’s voice calling him over, and he pulls me closer to squeeze me in a tighter hug for just a moment. “You two relax, have fun, get to know each other. I’ll be back to bother you when I can weasel my way out of conversation.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

I chuckle as I watch him dash off to tuck his arm around my aunt's waist, slipping into the role of the perfectly buttoned-up-socialite husband without a second of hesitation.

"Well," I say, turning back to Shane with a grin, "I'm glad I won't be fumbling my way through all this alone. Have you been interning at Branson for long?"

He shakes his head and takes a sip of his punch before answering me, glancing back at Ricky.

"This is my first year, too, actually," he tells me, his eyes shifting down toward his feet even as he grins proudly. "I didn't expect him to take me on, but I'm really excited to get a start. I'm going to NYU for business, and I really want to get my foot in the door with him."

"Oh, I'm going to NYU, too," I say, glad for some common ground.

"Well, if I'm lucky, maybe we'll have some classes together," he chuckles.

I find myself laughing again, easy and casual. It still feels weird, knowing that I'm really in a new place and making new friends, but it's less jarring than I expected it to be. He keeps the conversation going seamlessly even when my own thoughts wander, and I realize that the feeling of claustrophobia has passed a bit.

"Maybe, if I'm even luckier," he says slowly, "you'll dance with me?"

Oh.

I instinctively start to say no, a million excuses rising to my mind, but he's just...waiting. He's not being pushy, and he's not getting any closer to me. He's just holding his hand out casually. It feels like he's really just asking, like there's no expectation behind it, even if I can see the blatant hope in his eyes. I wrestle with my guilt for a second, trying to decide what to say.

Part of me doesn't want to lead him on, to say yes and give him the wrong idea. But a larger part of me wants to say no because of Jamie, and as soon as the realization crosses my mind, I make my decision.

Jamie cheated on me. He dumped me for the rodeo circuit without a second thought, and he's well and thoroughly proved that he doesn't give a shit about me anymore, if he ever did.

Jamie and I are through.

I'm in New York. I'm a free woman now, even if I'm not used to thinking of myself like that. I can say yes to a dance if I damn well want to.

And Shane isn't pushing. He's just waiting patiently, smiling softly at me. At most, I'm sharing a dance with a new coworker and—maybe—a new friend. I take a deep breath, pasting on a smile that I hope is convincing enough. After all, my hesitance has nothing to do with Shane.

“Sure,” I breathe out, placing my hand in his, “why not?”

It feels like a first step forward, away from my past.

I guess the only way to see what happens is to do it. I place my empty cup down on the table and let Shane lead me out into the crowd.

Chapter Four

JAMIE

“Pay attention, Jamie!” my dad shouts.

Doesn't help much when he yells as I'm sent flying, landing hard on my shoulder in the sand and then rolling to my feet. I dash toward the barricade and pull myself over as the bull gains on me. I barely make it before the thing crashes into the metal barricade, huffing furiously behind me.

It's been two months of training, being distracted, and getting yelled at by my dad, which only serves to distract me further.

Two months without Oakley.

“You're lucky he's one of the calmer ones or he'd have had you,” my dad scoffs as he walks over to where I'm panting. “You need to get your seat, kid. If this were Poor Boy or Code Blue, you'd be dead.”

He reaches out to put his hand on my shoulder, but I straighten and move away before he can touch me. We've been on rocky terms with each other lately, and the way he watches over my shoulder while I train isn't helping. I'll admit that I'm doing a fine job of distracting myself all on my own, but hisshouts of annoyance—sorry, advice—definitely make it harder to focus.

“I know,” I grunt, rolling my shoulders in an attempt to get rid of the ache. “I'm working on it.”

“Listen, if you can't get your dismounts down, you're not going to be of any use to me in the ring.” He sighs, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at me down his

nose. “I’m not putting you in there if you’re just going to get yourself killed.”

I didn’t ask you to put me in the ring in the first place.

I bite back the snarky comment with a twitch of my jaw, breathing heavily as I stare at the wall in front of me.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“I know,” I repeat tersely. “I’m working on it.”

I watch his annoyance flare in my peripheral vision, but I don't move to look at him properly even as his brows raise and his lips thin in warning. I probably should have because the next thing I know, he's got the collar of my shirt in his hand, and he's yanking me around to face him, muscle memory failing me spectacularly.

His breath smells like cigarettes, and I sneer at him, refusing to back down.

It's his own damn fault he taught me to stand my ground.

“Your lack of focus is going to wind up with you dead, boy,” he tells me, frustration boiling in his eyes. “If you don't pull your head out of your ass and get it in the game, I'm?—”

I don't give him time to finish his sentence, my own anger coming to a boil beneath my chin and threatening to spew out.

I manage to bite my tongue before I say something I'll really regret, but I yank my glove off my hand and throw it right in his face. I'm seething with rage that I have no real outlet for, and I stalk right past him, ignoring the way he splutters out half formed shouts behind me.

My vision tints red. I'm panting. The adrenaline of getting thrown has faded, but I still can't quite catch my breath. I clench and unclench my fists, trying to rid them of the sting of rope burn. My anger mounts, and I imagine with fear and revulsion the sound of my old man's nose shattering beneath my fist.

I shake my head furiously. Fuck that.

And fuck him.

I pause at the back end of the barn, stopping to rest my forehead against the wood and try to rein my temper in. The familiar scent of wood and animals clears my head, but as soon as I open my eyes again, my frustration comes right back.

I'm still here. Still training for the circuit even though I only half wanted to. Still thinking about Oakley, still trying to come up with some way to get her to give me another chance.

And I still have no clue how to make that happen.

My fist smashes into the worn wood siding of the barn. Splinters of wood scrape against my knuckles as I yank my hand back, glaring down at the new hole in the siding.

One more thing for me to be mad at myself about.

I'll have to offer to fix it myself if I don't want to pay a fine or risk getting kicked out of the training ring. My dad would be pissed if we had to travel to train.

I whirl on my heel. My teeth grind as I try to stop myself from shouting. I don't even have anything to say, no words to describe how upset I am. I hardly even know what the hell I want to yell at.

My hand throbs, but I ignore it and do my best to focus on clearing my head, to calm myself down. It's just as futile as it's always been. As soon as I have a free second, my mind invariably turns back to Oakley. Every time I blink, I see her smiling face, hear the way she snorts when she laughs, feel her hand in mine.

I haven't stopped thinking about her since the day she left.

Hell, if I'm being honest, I haven't stopped thinking about her since the day I met her.

And now it seems like the only thing I can do about it is be mad. I'm mad at Savannah for laying a hand on me, but I'm even more furious at her for hurting Oakley. I'm pissed at Oakley's family, at Phoebe, even though I know they're only refusing to pass on my messages because Oakley doesn't want to hear them. I can't stop seething every time I look at my dad.

Every other word out of his mouth is something disparaging about Oakley, as if my whole life going to shit isn't painful enough. As if I'd ever want to hear a word against her.

"I know, Dad, but I'm only asking for a loan," I argue, holding my hands out pleadingly. "I won't even be gone long enough to miss the circuit, I just...I need to see her. I have to explain all of this, I have to fix?—"

"You don't need to do shit, Jamie," he yells firmly, staring at me disappointedly. "And for the last time, I'm not giving you money to chase after some dumb-ass girl. Get over it and move on."

My lip raises in a snarl, and I ball my hands into fists at my side. I hate when he talks about her like this, like she's something other than the most perfect person I've ever seen in my whole life.

"She's not dumb, Dad!" I shout. "She's the smartest person I know, and she's the love of my life!"

He just snorts out a laugh at me, taking a scathing glance over me.

“Maybe you're the dumb one, then,” he sighs, shaking his head. “Jamie, your life, and your responsibilities, are out here. On the circuit. You're going to stop moping around and start practicing, and you're going on tour. That's final,” he says, brooking no argument. “I'm not about to let you embarrass me by chasing after that Montgomery girl.”

I grit my teeth at the memory. I let out an exhausted sigh as I close in on the edge of the property. I used to come out here as a kid at night to watch the stars and listen to the crickets. Back then, everything was easier, but maybe the routine will calm me down now.

My whole body aches as I take a seat on one of the worn down stumps near the trail head. I groan as I settle into a more comfortable position.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

After a full workout this morning, I've been tossed off bulls all day so my back hurts like a bitch. It probably doesn't help that I can hardly sleep more than a few hours most nights, but that's not something I can really fix. I'm constantly on edge, between anger and defeat and defiant hope.

The only thing that's really keeping me going is my drive to figure out a way to get back to Oakley.

I can't rely on my dad for help, so my only real option is to win next week's entry competition. The prize money isn't great, but it should be enough to get me to New York, and I can figure everything else out from there. If I can just see her, everything will be alright again.

But for now, I just feel like I'm losing my mind.

All I can do is think about Bo's advice because as much as it might pain me to admit, the guy's right. I'm going to have to suck it up and listen to him.

If I want Oakley back, I need to man up and go get her. I was already a coward once, keeping my decision about the circuit—and my motivations for it—to myself, and look where that got me. All I've ever wanted is to take care of Oakley. I want her to see me as someone she can rely on, someone who could be worthy of her.

Right now, I don't even deserve for her to think about forgiving me.

I need to earn the right to stand in front of her and show her that I can be better, that I can be what she deserves. That starts with the circuit. I'll win enough money to get to

New York, and I'll tell her everything. I'll explain every last thought in my head and tell her how much she means to me. I'll beg her if I have to.

Nothing matters but getting her back.

And Bo is right. She'll understand. She always understands.

My dad leans against the fence and rubbing his hand over his jaw in aggravation when I march my way back out of the barn. He shoves off the fence and stomps over to me so he can shove his finger in my chest.

“Jamie Walker, if you don't get your ass back in that ring rightfuckingnow?—”

I yank the glove out of his grip and knock his hand away from my chest, staring at him with cold, distant eyes. He stops himself before he finishes his sentence, and I stalk past him without saying a word.

My head may not be any clearer than it was when I stormed off, but I'm more determined than ever. I have a show to win, and while our reasons may be different, my dad and I want the same thing. I need to be in top shape to take home that buckle.

The stakes are too high for me to lose.

Chapter Five

OAKLEY

“You looklike you could use some coffee,” Shane's voice sounds from behind me.

I jolt in my seat and turn with an embarrassed grin. Coffee sounds heavenly right now. I take it from his hand, sighing happily.

“You’re a godsend,” I chuckle, lifting the cup to my nose so I can inhale the fragrant steam.

“Just wait until I tell you I brought breakfast burritos, too,” he says, lifting a bag from the local shop I hadn’t noticed before.

I groan appreciatively as he passes me a burrito before settling into his own desk beside mine. I stayed up late last night working on homework that I got way too wrapped up in. I still got to the office before he did, but I can’t blame him for being a few minutes late when he comes bearing such wonderful gifts.

I didn’t exactly mean to finish the whole project last night, but everything still feels so new and exciting. I’ve been absolutely loving school, even my accounting classes. Obviously, the business management and financial planning courses are more my speed, but almost every class that I’m taking captures my attention and makes me even more excited for my future in the field.

My internship has been even more interesting than school. My uncle treats me like he would any other intern, pushing me and expecting me to pull my own weight, and it’s so thrilling to have someone believe in me like that.

Shane and I make a good team, too.

We’ve done a few projects for my uncle in the last month, mostly small scale operations planning, things that won’t be too big of a deal if we mess something up. He’s giving us a bit more leash with this new assignment, and I think both Shane and I are chomping at the bit to seal the deal with this contractor and really prove ourselves to him.

I’ve been glad, too, that Shane hasn’t been too pushy. I’m more interested in being colleagues first and potentially friends second, and he seems to want to prioritize our

friendship, but he hasn't really made any moves that have been too hard to fend off. He's truly just been a good friend, and I'm starting to get used to it.

"Any response on that email we sent last night?" he asks as he boots up his computer and logs in for the day.

"Nothing yet," I say, shaking my head. "They're a few hours behind us, so it might be a bit until we hear from them."

There's only so much we can do until we hear back from our contact, but with any luck, we'll hear from them by lunchtime. Until then, we decided to split up the prep work, me writing the contract while Shane gets the PR package ready, working under the assumption that they'll be happy to accept all of our terms with no revisions.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

We both go through our day, checking in on the other tasks we've been assigned and finishing off our onboarding checklists. I shadow Alli for a few hours, chatting with her about the day to day of operations and how each quarter usually progresses. We spend lunch together, and it's really comforting to have someone more experienced that I get along with so well.

I head back to my desk as the day starts to wrap up, planning to check my emails one last time before clocking out. Just as I'm about to refresh my inbox, Shane leans over onto my desk with an easy smile.

"Do you want to grab dinner together after work?" he asks casually. "There's this burger place down the street that people have been talking about in the breakroom."

It sounds reasonable. Normal. Two coworkers getting dinner. It doesn't mean anything more than the coffee and burrito he brought me this morning.

So why does it feel so wrong?

Is it just because he's a guy? The fact that I haven't known him most of my life? That he's leaning so close I can smell his cologne? The fact that he smells like aftershave and soap instead of a barn?

"I..." I say hesitantly, leaning back slightly. "Sorry, Shane, I've got a ton of work to do for school. You know how it is."

I laugh awkwardly as I turn my attention back to my computer, ignoring the fact that I finished all of the work I have for school last night. Shane shrugs, and I see him lean

back over to his own desk in my peripheral vision.

He seems like he's trying to be casual, but there's a tension in his shoulders, like he feels uncomfortable. I don't know how to explain to him that I'm just not used to any of this, but I don't want him to think that I have an issue with him. I really do like chatting with him and hanging out, and I don't want him to think otherwise.

"That sucks," he sighs, "Jesse wanted to take all the new interns out, but it'll be boring without you."

I open my mouth to apologize, but he talks over me, his eyes sliding back to meet mine. His face is just as warm and welcoming as it always is, and I can see understanding in his eyes. It makes me relax, knowing that even if he doesn't know exactly why I'm being weird about this, that he's not taking it personally.

"I mean, you have to eat regardless." He laughs, the sound easy and jovial. "I figured it would be easier to go somewhere close to work for a quiet bite so you can just focus on working when you get home. We can always hang another time, if you want."

I hesitate again, annoyed at my own inability to try new things. Shane has been nothing but sweet to me, and it's not like he asked me out on a date. He just said he wanted to grab dinner, and we wouldn't even be going alone. It's basically a company dinner.

"You're right," I say, laughing awkwardly. "Yeah, I'll join everybody. I just won't be able to stay long."

He smiles widely at me, his eyes crinkling at the corners before he turns back to his computer to clock out for the day.

“I’m glad,” he says. “I can drive us over there. I think Alli, Tracy, and Lex are going in Jesse’s car, so he’s full.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

My gut flips a little at the idea of going out in Shane’s car, but I roll my eyes at myself. It’s just dinner with my coworkers. Dinner with at least two people who I consider friends. I’m worrying myself over nothing.

By the time we make it to our seats, food in hand, I’m already starting to regret letting Shane talk me into this. It’s nothing to do with him—hell, if anything, he’s the only reason I didn’t excuse myself before picking out an insanely overpriced burger. And the place is cute, kind of halfway between a diner and a fast food joint. Plus, Shane insisted on paying for my food, and a free meal can make pretty much anything better.

Thankfully, with so many people here, the chatter isn’t focused on anyone specifically. Stories and introductions are already getting tossed around the table by the time Shane and I find our seats, and I smile at him gratefully when he offers me the chair at the end of the table. It’s easy enough to settle in and start on my food, which is surprisingly good. I answer questions when they’re sent my way and show polite interest in other people’s stories.

I wish Phoebe was here, as she’s always been better at making small talk, but I manage pretty well.

“I still feel like I’ve barely even gotten to know you,” Shane says after the conversation tapers off a bit.

He takes a bite of his burger, nudging me with his elbow teasingly. Part of me wants to deflect, but this is how people make friends, isn’t it?

“Yeah, we’ve been pretty busy at the office,” I agree with a short laugh.

“Oh, come on,” he whines around a mouthful of his burger, “no work talk. We’re off the clock.”

I shift in my seat, taking a bite of my own burger as I try to figure out what to say. I haven’t really had to make friends since middle school, and I have approximately no idea what to talk about.

“Ok, ok, you’re right,” I agree with an answering grin. “This is pretty good.”

He raises his brow and snorts out a laugh as I raise my burger in a lame attempt at conversation.

“What next, are we going to chat about the weather?”

I blink at him in confusion, but the grin on his face looks like he’s trying to joke, to tease. It’s harmless. He’s playing around, like people do with friends. I roll my eyes playfully and remind myself that being friends with Shane is exactly what I’m trying to do here. It would be helpful if I didn’t get in my own way.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“Alright, then, what do you want to talk about?” I ask, taking another bite of my burger.

Maybe if he leads the conversation, it won’t be so painfully awkward.

“I want to know about you!” he tells me, excitement obvious in his voice. “Where did you grow up? What’s your family like? Why are you out here?”

“Uh, well, Montana is home,” I start, doing my best not to think too much about memories of home. “Skyview Falls. I grew up on a ranch that my dad runs with my brother and my sister. My mom’s a veterinarian, so she takes care of all our animals and has a little clinic on the property. I moved out here to go to NYU. Nothing all that special, really.”

It hurts more than I expect it to when I talk about home. It doesn’t hurt like this when I talk to my family or to Phoebe, but telling Shane about it makes it seem like it’s all something of the past. Like I’ve really properly walked away from it all and left it behind.

The idea makes my stomach flip unpleasantly, and I take a sip of my tea in an attempt to soothe myself.

“So you moved out here and live with your aunt and uncle now, right?” he asks casually before popping a fry in his mouth. “Do they not have any kids or anything?”

I hesitate, setting my tea down before answering. It’s not like it’s a secret that my aunt and uncle don’t have kids, but it feels a little invasive to answer questions about

them. And I know Shane's just making conversation, but I still don't feel like it's something I should talk about.

"Well—I mean, no," I babble, not really sure what else to say."

"Oh, wow, I didn't realize that," he says with a laugh. "I figured you were just really close with your cousin or something. You must have a great relationship with your aunt and uncle. Lucky you, free rent."

I scratch at the base of my skull anxiously, laughing along even though I'm trying to find literally anything else to talk about. Unfortunately, I've never really been great at being subtle, and I wind up just opening my mouth and blurting it out.

"I really shouldn't talk about that with you," I say, smiling hesitantly. "It's not, like, it's nothing about you, you know? It just feels kind of weird talking about my family since they're also our bosses. I just...I want to keep that separate from work."

His brows raise in surprise, and I see his eyes widen, the pretty blue of them shining in the light of the restaurant. He looks taken aback, and I wince, hoping that I didn't come off too harsh.

"No, no, I'm sorry," he apologizes, reaching out to pat my shoulder in a comforting manner. "I didn't realize talking about that would make you uncomfortable. Totally my bad. I want to get to know you, anyway, not your aunt and uncle."

The apology makes me almost sag in relief, and my smile comes easier. I even manage to lean into the hand on my shoulder before shifting away slightly. He lets his hand fall without comment.

"Really, it's fine," I say. "You didn't do anything wrong, I just?—"

“Hey,” he interrupts, meeting my eyes with a grin. “You don’t have to explain yourself. A boundary is a boundary. I won’t bring it up again.”

I blink at him in pleasant surprise, my heart stuttering in my chest. Shane isn’t anything like Jamie, he’s confident without being cocky, reassuring without being overbearing. It’s both a breath of fresh air and so shockingly different that it almost hurts.

I try to ignore my own thoughts, reminding myself that Jamie isn’t there. He’s not part of my life anymore, and it doesn’t matter how different they are. Shane isn’t Jamie.

Besides, it’s not like this is a date. We’re just...getting to know each other. As coworkers.

As friends.

“Thanks,” I say softly.

He smiles at me, easy as can be, and grabs another fry off his plate. “Don’t mention it.”

My phone lights up with a text from Phoebe, and I wince when I catch sight of the time. I don’t actually have anything I have to get done tonight, but I was really looking forward to just vegging out on the couch with my aunt for a few hours. Plus, I already told Shane I couldn’t be out too late.

“I should probably get going,” I say apologetically. “Do you want the rest of my fries?”

There aren’t many left, but Shane gladly takes the little basket and adds the remaining fries to his own.

“Are you on a subway line?” he asks as I slip my phone into my bag. “It’s way too late for you to be walking home alone. I can pack this up and drive you home, if you want?”

My heart melts at the concern in his eyes, but I can’t quite bring myself to take him up on the offer. I want to take that step forward, but it feels so much like stepping away from Jamie, and that thought makes guilt drop like lead in my stomach. Jamie is nothing but a memory to me anymore, and even accepting a ride home from a friend still feels like cheating.

“I’ll be fine,” I promise. “I’ll get a cab.”

“At least let me walk you out,” he insists.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

I do my best to ignore the part of me that wants to shy away from even that, and I nod in agreement. My goodbyes are met with a chorus of disappointed groans and promises to see me tomorrow from the rest of the table, and I wave cheerily to them after I gather my things.

Shane and I weave our way out of the busy restaurant, passing through couples and families gathered around tables or waiting in line for their food. It's a relief to finally make it out the doors and get some fresh air, even if it's not any less crowded.

It seems like the city is always crowded.

"Thanks for dinner," I say as Shane and I make our way to the curb.

"Thanks for coming," he says with a grin. "I almost thought I wasn't going to be able to convince you."

"Yeah, well, you made a pretty good argument." I chuckle at him as I hold a hand out toward an approaching cab, watching as it starts to navigate closer to the curb. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

He smiles wide, leaning down, and I freeze. It almost feels like he's going to kiss me, and I very nearly shove him away in panic, but he just wraps one arm around my shoulders and squeezes me in a friendly hug. It barely even lasts two seconds before he's pulling away, and I'm so grateful to hear the cab pull up beside us.

"See you tomorrow," he agrees cheerfully.

I fumble with the door of the cab, yanking it open as soon as I get a good grip on the handle. Shane is still standing on the curb as I duck into the backseat, and I can feel the flush in my cheeks. I am so, so not ready for anything other than friendship, but Shane is hard not to think about. I can't stop myself from comparing the two of them even though I don't want to think about that at all.

"See you tomorrow!" I repeat, yanking the door closed between us.

He waves as we pull away from the curb, but I don't let myself look back at him. I give the cabbie my address and rub my hand over the back of my neck. I'm exhausted and confused, and all I want is to collapse on the couch with my aunt and binge watch some awful reality show with her.

Oh, and to stop thinking about both Jamie and Shane for the night. Or at least five minutes.

Chapter Six

JAMIE

I beam down at the buckle in my hand, my cheeks aching from how wide I'm smiling. My thighs are burning, and I'm still breathing heavily, but I don't really know if that's from exertion or just how goddamn happy I am.

"Knew you had it in you, kid!" my dad cheers, slapping me heartily on the back.

It's been a long time since my dad has had anything but gruff complaints to offer me. The high of proving to him that I can do this is almost enough to rival the excitement of winning.

Sure, I'm still in the junior leagues as far as professional riding is concerned, but I

finally have a buckle to my name. After the losing streak I've been suffering through leading up to the Plains rodeo, any little success feels like a massive step forward. What was supposed to be a few weeks to make money on the circuit has turned into an almost three month stint, and while I'm thrilled about the win, I'm more excited about the money that comes along with it. It's one step closer to Oakley.

"God, my legs hurt," I complain, laughing when my dad scoffs at me.

"Get used to it," he says with a grin. "That's how winners feel."

I roll my eyes at him, but it's good-natured. My mood is too good to let his plans for my future sour my thoughts. The higher divisions are starting up their rounds, but as I make my way through the crowd, people still stop to clap me on the shoulder and shake my hand.

I'm heading toward the bathroom, already planning my trip to New York, when a pair of arms wrap around my waist from behind.

I freeze immediately, my heart soaring at the thought that maybe, impossibly, Oakley might be here, that she came to watch me. My eyes close, too scared to look down and confirm what I want so badly to be true.

No wins meant no money, but if she came to see me, maybe I don't have to be so scared that it'll be too late when I finally get to New York. I can finally beg her to let me explain, go through the script I've been rehearsing for the past three months for when I finally get to see my girl's beautiful, perfect face again.

When I turn and open my eyes, my mood immediately sours. Because standing there, arms still around my waist, is none other than Savannah fucking Ward. She's in the smallest shorts known to man and a cowboy hat that's probably never seen hide nor hair of a real ranch. I curl my lip in disgust as she presses her chest against mine, her

tank top covering almost nothing.

I step away from her without a second thought, my hand twitching at my side as I watch her stumble for a second before finding her footing. I refuse to reach out to steady her, already feeling dirtier just from the knowledge that she got her hands on me again than I do from the dust and sweat on my face.

“The fuck are you doing here?” I ask, my voice sharp.

I stare down at her in disbelief of her relentless audacity but all she does is giggle at me before turning to her posse offriends. The three of them look somewhere between entertained and snide, a practiced mean high school girl look that they’ve got down to a science. I roll my eyes when they smile vapidly and wave at me.

“Guys, this is Jamie!” she introduces. “We grew up together.”

She reaches out to hug me again, but I instantly step aside. There is no way I want her hands on me. I scoff at her, raking a disgusted look over her and all her little friends. They look confused, which I can only assume is because Savannah has been doing what she does best—lying.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“Seriously?” I sigh, wanting this to be over with. I’m in a good mood for once, and I can finally start planning how to get Oakley back. I don’t want to deal with any of this right now. “What the hell are you doing here?”

I can’t believe she has the gall to show up and act like we’re friends after what she did at Oakley’s birthday. Does she think that she can just force a kiss on me, ruin my relationship, and then show up as soon as things are going well and act like everything’s good? Just thinking about that night gets my blood boiling. I know I was also to blame for how everything went down, and the timing of things could not have been worse, but everything with Savannah was entirely her fault. I know that the kiss wasn’t what broke me and Oakley apart, but even seeing her is enough to make my skin crawl.

“Oh my God, what’s your problem?” she calls after me as I turn to walk away once more.

She sounds like she thinks I’m joking, and it makes me even more furious. I ignore her entirely, fuming and doing my best to keep myself in check before I start screaming at her in front of everyone here. I’ve never hated someone the way I hate her, and my chest is bubbling with a million insults that I want to hurl at her, but I know I won’t.

Before I can even figure out how to get away from her for good, she’s talking again.

“Come on, Jamie,” she whines, following behind me. “We were on a road trip and heard you were riding. I just wanted to come see you and offer my support.”

My mouth waters with acid and hate, and I turn back around before staring her down.

“Why the fuck would I want to see you, Savannah?” I say harshly. “After everything you did? Get lost.”

Her little posse of friends shifts uncomfortably, moving closer to her like they think I’m going to hurt her. She may be a raging bitch, but I’d never lay my hands on a woman.

“Is this still about Oakley?” she laughs viciously, rolling her eyes in a way that makes me see red. “Why do you even care? I’m pretty sure y’all broke up. You know, like, explosively. In front of everyone.”

My gut flips unpleasantly, shame and anger and heartbreak rushing through me in one massive tidal wave of emotion. “I don’t give a fuck what you say and think, Savannah,” I snarl, “and no matter how hard you tried to fuck things up for me, I’m going to get Oakley back.”

She twists her lips in a mocking little pout, a scathing laugh falling from her lips in the next second.

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s going great,” she sighs, lazily checking her nails. “She hasn’t even called you since she dumped your ass, has she?”

The truth of that hits me right in the heart, even if I know Savannah is just swinging blindly. All she’s ever been is desperate. She’s only ever wanted attention and she never bothered to develop an actual personality outside of being mean to everyone she comes across, but she’s certainly had a lot of practice at figuring out exactly what hurts someone the most. Her friends seem to be practiced in the same art because they start giggling meanly and whispering amongst themselves.

Savannah lifts her hand to touch my face, but I step back, glaring at her. I need to reel myself in before I do something I really regret, but she's pressing every single button I have. Vividly, I imagine shoving her into the dirt, but I ball my hands into fists at my side and stomp down on the urge. I have fucking morals, and I can't let myself do something like that.

I wouldn't be the man Oakley fell in love with if I did that. Savannah may deserve the karma that's coming for her, but it won't come at my hands.

"Face it, Jamie," she simpers at me, "she clearly doesn't care. She's always thought she's too good for folks like us. All of the Montgomery's do. I mean, seriously, why waste your time? She's probably already dating someone else."

I'm vibrating with fury by the time she finishes her little rant, and I can tell by the sadistic gleam in her eyes that she's gotten exactly what she wants.

"Stay the fuck away from me," I grit out, my voice shaking.

I spin to give her my back once more and this time, I don't let her stop me from walking away.

Finally making my way inside the bathroom, I'm instantly grateful for the silence that greets me. It's a small space, just a toilet and a sink, but it's blessedly private, and I sigh in relief. Locking the door to give myself a moment of peace, I step up to the sink and lean my hands against it as I lower my head and take a deep breath. My hands are shaking with an unpleasant mix of anger and anxiety, and when I look up at myself in the mirror, I look like a wreck. My eyes are red, and my face is thinner than I remember it being just a few months ago, and I just look so completely beat down and exhausted that I'm almost surprised that I'm still standing.

I'm frustrated and pent up and angry. I'm proud of myself for this win, and I miss

Oakley so much it fucking burns.

Just the thought of her is enough to make my heart race in my chest, and I groan when I realize I'm getting hard. I must be the biggest mess on the entire planet. My hand moves away from the sink almost like it has a mind of its own, and my breath hitches at the first press of my palm against the growing bulge in my pants and it's enough to make my mind go blank.

I fumble with my belt, yanking it open and shoving my jeans down just far enough to bare my cock, desperate for anything good. I want things to be simple again, I want Oakley again, and all I can think about is that perfect smile on her face, the way her waist felt in my hands. My hand is dry and rough around my cock, but I don't care, focusing on the memories of Oakley beneath me. Her mouth was always so soft, and she told me the sweetest things every time we laid in bed together. It hardly takes two minutes for me to be spilling over my hand with the memories of her opening up for me playing out in my head.

I'm left panting, still hunched over the sink as my thighs shake from the aftershocks of my orgasm. My own cum is starting to dry on my hand, and I suddenly feel absolutely filthy.

I turn the tap on and wash my hands roughly, trying to cleanse myself of my own shame. My pants are easy enough to get back into place, and as soon as my belt is buckled again, I cup my hand beneath the water. I rub it across my face, hoping it'll make me feel a little less disgusting.

It washes most of the grime away from my skin, but I still feel stained. Guilt and heartbreak sit heavily in my chest, and I realize helplessly that glaring at myself in the mirror isn't going to do anything to fix that. My determination to get Oakley back hasn't wavered for even a second, but part of me is starting to doubt my chances. Savannah is right, it's been months, and I haven't been able to talk to her at all. Worse

being that she hasn't tried to reach out, not once. If she's moved on, I don't know how I'll survive it.

"Jamie? You in there?" my dad's voice calls, following a knock on the door.

"Yeah," I answer. "Just washing my face. One sec."

Practicing my smile in the mirror, I do my best to not make it look forced when I open the door. I'm greeted almost immediately with a stack of papers being waved in my face. My dad grins proudly from behind them, already pressing a pen into my hand as he leads me away from the bathroom and toward a low bench set up by the wall.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“You caught some eyes out there,” he says, slapping the papers down between us. “You’ve got a sponsor for the next two shows in the circuit, all you have to do is sign. I already told Frankie you’d do it.”

I look between his face and the papers, pride warring with frustration. The pay is good, and it’s nice to know that I actually can manage to make a living at this, and that someone other than my dad can see that, but I wasn’t planning on sticking around. My winnings from this show would be enough to get me to New York, and all I want right now is to see Oakley’s face again. I can see from the look on my dad’s face, though, that ‘no’ isn’t an acceptable answer.

I do my best to keep my desperation at bay as I look down at the papers, scanning over the terms.

If I win both of the shows this Frankie guy wants to sponsor me for, not only will I walk away with eighty percent of my winnings, but I’ll also have more than a month’s break in my touring schedule. I only have a day before my next show, which won’t be enough time to go find Oakley and win her back, but the money from this would be enough to start a small savings for our future.

I hesitate with the tip of the pen on the paper.

This means more waiting, but I’ll be able to prove to Oakley that I’m serious about everything when I see her. I’ll be able to show my face to her as a man who loves her rather than a boy who wants her. I’ll have money in the bank, and a solid job to provide for her. I just need her to wait a little longer.

I grit my teeth and sign away the next two weeks of my life.

Chapter Seven

OAKLEY

I trail my fingers over my very own desk, the smooth, waxed wood soothingly cool beneath my fingers. I hadn't expected my uncle to give Shane and I our own offices as a reward for pushing that last deal through, but he seems so proud of us, and I have to admit that it makes me feel more like I'm doing something important to have a real workstation rather than a shared cubicle in the bullpen.

Shane is certainly thrilled. I laugh when I glance across the hall to see him waving excitedly at me through the blinds.

He gave me one hell of a high five when Ricky announced our success, and it really feels like things are looking up all around. We work really well together, and it's nice to have a partner that thinks the way I do. These last few weeks have really paid off.

I'm lucky to get to work with Shane, and to be his friend. He really is a good guy.

He brings me coffee most mornings, and he's so nice and helpful that I sometimes don't even know how to react to it. He always notices when I'm having a rough day, and he never fails to offer a shoulder or a ride home when I really need it. Everybody at the office likes him, and I keep finding excuses to spend more time with him.

And, as weird as it is to think about, it almost feels like I might have a crush on him.

Every time I think about him, I get wrapped up in misplaced guilt and thoughts of Jamie. I'm starting to think I've been the only one in the way of moving on this whole time.

Maybe...maybe it's time to try for real. Maybe it wouldn't be the worst idea to see if this thing with Shane goes anywhere. I mean, I don't know if he's even into me, especially since he hasn't been anything other than friendly, but I can't deny that I like him.

He's across the hall holding up little bits of decor to the window so I can see where he's putting everything, and it's not like I'm forcing myself to laugh. I give him a thumbs up as he hangs a plant from a hook on the wall and glances back at me for my opinion.

He's genuinely charming, and I do like being around him. Sure, the thought of Jamie still hurts, but maybe this is the first step to moving on.

When I hear a soft knock on my door, I turn, and the smile on my face comes easier than I expect it to. Shane is leaning against the door frame, his arms crossed over his chest, and he's grinning softly at me. The sight doesn't bring butterflies to my stomach or anything, but I'm genuinely comfortable with him there.

"Where's all your decor, missy?" he asks, chuckling.

I glance at the mostly empty cardboard box on my desk, shrugging.

"Oh, you know, there's just so much to do. I don't even know where to start," I say, rolling my eyes.

"Oh, yeah, with your whole two pictures and that stress ball you've beaten half to death?" he teases, and I toss my head back on a laugh as he steps further into my office. "I am going to miss working next to you."

When I catch his eyes again, there's a shadow of uncertainty there, and he smiles shyly at me.

“Well, I’ll always be just across the hall,” I promise, wondering if flirting has always felt this forced or I’m just out of practice after so long. “Look, you don’t have to say yes,” I start, forcing my words out so I don’t shy away from my own decision, “and I know there’s going to be a lunch for everyone who worked on the project, but I wanted to know if you wanted to grab dinner with me? I want to celebrate our first big win together.”

The word *together* bounces around in my mind, but I force my anxiety out of my body with a deep breath. My smile feels hopeful, and I grin widely at the way Shane’s cheeks go pink.

“Dinner sounds great,” he says, beaming at me.

I haven’t been on a date with someone new in a long time, and part of me still feels like I’m cheating on Jamie by even thinking about any of this, but I brush those thoughts aside. I didn’t even technically ask Shane out on a date. We’re just getting to know each other better.

We both wrap up for the day, and I let him drive us to the restaurant. We listen to a mildly annoying radio station on the way there, a bunch of top of the charts pop songs that all sound the same. He sings along to a few of the songs under his breath, and his voice is pretty. It’s kind of cute, but I feel anxious even just thinking that.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

Give it time, I chide myself. I can be patient.

It is a big change, after all.

But I feel like I'm making progress, even if it's slow. Dinner is fun, and he takes me to a little hibachi place around the corner. The food is good, and he doesn't ask me about my family this time. We mostly chat about work and I bask in the praises he showers over me for my hard work. He pays, and I don't argue this time. I think I see his cheeks go a little red when he hands over his card for both of us, and I don't shy away from the thought of it being cute this time. He places a few bills beneath his plate as a tip before we leave, capping off a perfectly pleasant dinner.

A perfectly pleasant date. Maybe.

Ugh, I don't even know if I want it to be a date or if I just want to be his friend, but I am genuinely trying. Kind of hard when my own head is bringing up a million memories of Jamie even still. It was never this confusing when I was with Jamie, but I guess there were fewer variables with him, too. We were kids when we met, and Shane and I work together. Maybe he's worried about ruining our professional relationship.

"I can drive you home, if you want?" he offers as we exit the restaurant, and I smile again as I turn to face him. "Or you can get a cab if you're not comfortable with that."

"No, I—I'd appreciate it, if you're ok with driving me."

I meant to say that I'd like it, but I guess I can only be so enthusiastic when I still

haven't made up my mind. The penthouse isn't far from the restaurant, and the drive is quick, but it's nice not having to walk the few blocks home or shell out for a cab.

He pulls into a parking space smoothly, hopping out and opening my door for me while I'm getting my bag from the floor. I look up at him with a warm smile, but I feel my gut sink all the same. If he was Jamie, my whole body would be alight with excitement. Looking up at him like that would make me want to kiss him stupid, but all I see when I look up is the face of a friend. He's objectively attractive, and I try to remind myself of all the reasons he'd make a great partner, but I just...I can't do this.

"Thanks for letting me take you out," he says as he helps me out of the car, his hand soft where mine rests in it. "It's nice getting to spend time with you."

My smile wavers as I pull my hand free of his, stepping to the side and moving a little closer to the doors to the condo. My anxiety from earlier is starting to make a real reappearance, and I think now is probably the time to say goodnight and head inside before this goes way further than I'm ready for it to. Maybe I'm just rushing into things too fast. If I take it slow, I'm sure Shane and I could be a really good fit.

"It was a good celebration dinner," I agree, laughing awkwardly.

I stop myself from saying anything more when he steps closer, tensing up. My jaw snaps shut and my eyes blow wide in panic when he reaches up to brush a lock of hair out of my face and tuck it behind my ear. I want to tell him that I'm just not ready yet, that I need some more time. I know he'd understand, but my mind parrots my own thoughts from earlier about getting in my own way of moving on, and I wind up freezing entirely as he leans down.

I go stiff as a board when his lips meet mine, a shocked little gasp slipping from my mouth. He doesn't push for more, keeping the kiss chaste and soft, his lips smooth and warm against mine, but my blood goes cold. I panic after a few seemingly

endless moments of just standing there and I shove him back, harder than I intended to.

I wipe my hand across my lips, trembling as my anxiety ramps up. The sounds of cars passing suddenly seems too loud, the lights of the city too bright, and I close my eyes tightly.

When Jamie kissed me, it always felt like I was coming home. Everything was easy with him, like we fit together perfectly, like it was allright.

Shane just felt like a stranger.

“God, fuck, I’m sorry,” I grit out, frustrated and horrified with myself in turn. “I’m so sorry, Shane, I just, I’m not ready. You’re an amazing friend, and I don’t want to lose you. I’m just not ready for something like that.”

I don’t know if I will ever be ready again. Maybe Jamie was it for me, and I’ll never feel like that with anyone else.

The thought brings helpless tears to my eyes, but I force them open. Shane deserves to have me at least look at him properly. I expect to see understanding in his eyes, maybe a sad smile on his face. He’s always so level-headed and gentle, and I can’t imagine he’d be anything but sympathetic in this situation.

When my eyes clear enough to get a proper look at him, he’s red in the face from embarrassment and scratching the back of his neck awkwardly.

“Ah, right, sorry,” he says with an uncomfortable laugh.. “Your ex and all, I get it. I uh, probably had too much to drink.”

I flush in shame and frustration with myself, feeling absolutely awful. The last thing I

wanted to do was lead Shane on, and that's exactly what I wound up doing. God, I should've explained everything to him at the start. I don't want to hurt him just because I can't make up my mind.

"Sorry," he says again, reaching out like he's going to pat my shoulder. He drops his hand before he touches me, clearly unsure of where we stand. "I didn't mean to—well, I did mean to kiss you, but I should have asked. I don't want to make you uncomfortable, Oakley."

All I can do is blink at him in shock as he smiles hopefully at me, and relief crashes into me. I let out a grateful sigh, smiling back at him bashfully.

"No, I should've said something," I correct him. "I do...I want to try, I think. I'm just not ready for anything yet."

"There's no rush. I'm not going anywhere," he says, the tension fading between us. "I'll see you at work, yeah?"

"Yeah, I'll see you at work."

I watch him climb back into his car and shoot me a cheery wave before he pulls back out onto the street. It's a relief that I was right about him understanding. I know being rejected can hurt, even if I didn't really reject him. He handled it much more maturely than I would have been able to.

I head inside and wait for the elevator, stepping on when it dings to announce its arrival. I press the button for my floor and slump back against the wall, disappointed in myself and glad that Shane is better at dealing with all this than I am.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

He's right, though, about me not being over Jamie. It's frustrating to admit, even to myself, but even after all this time, I can only think about him. I don't remember talking to Shane about him, but it's probably not hard to figure out why I'm such a jumpy mess when it comes to the topic of dating. And I've told Alli a bit about the fiery end of my relationship. She doesn't strike me as the type to gossip, but it's not like the walls are soundproof.

It doesn't really matter, in the end. Jamie still takes up too much space in my head, and I have no idea how to fix that.

The chime of the elevator breaks me out of my thoughts, and I step out, fumbling for my keys.

Still not over my ex, huh?

I snort inelegantly, exhausted and ready to pass out. Of course I'm not over him.

I'm starting to think I'll never get over Jamie Walker.

Chapter Eight

JAMIE

Today was the last day of my circuit contract until October. I hopped out of the ring with a new buckle and rushed straight to the airport with my hair still wet from a shower. I probably should have stayed until tomorrow morning, but I'm stepping off a plane in New York instead, and I don't really care what the consequences are.

Two weeks, two wins. I've deposited several nice, fat checks into my bank account, and I've got enough bravery to stand in front of Oakley again, even if I don't feel like I deserve to breathe the same air as her. I may not feel like I'm a man she can lean on yet, but I feel a little less like a helpless high school boy.

I've only got a little over a month off from the circuit, but I probably only have about an hour before my dad calls me demanding to know where the hell I went, and I want to make every last second count. Frank signed me on for another show at the next rank up, and I'm hoping that I'll start pulling some steady money in soon. If I can tuck a few more buckles onto my belt, maybe Oakley will see me as someone she can rely on.

The way she deserves.

My hands shake as I step out of the airport and scan the crowd of cars for an unoccupied cab. I wrinkle my nose at the scent, even if I know it's probably worse in the city. It's not even that bad, really. I'm just used to the air smelling like open land and animals, but this just smells like people, jam-packed into one shared space that's way too small for them all.

When I finally find a cab with their light on, I rush over to pull the door open and slide into the backseat, halfway to breathless. It's all finally happening.

I'm in New York, and I've got one hell of a speech planned, and if I'm lucky, I might just have the girl of my dreams back in my arms within the hour.

"Where to?" the cabbie says, starting his meter.

I fumble my phone out and read off the address that Bo sent me.

I settle back into the seat as the cabbie starts weaving his way through the congested

lines of airport traffic, trying to keep myself calm. I'm so insanely grateful that Bo decided to throw me a bone. He's been the only one willing to help me at all here. Phoebe won't give me a second of her time, no matter how much I've tried to explain everything. All she'll say to me is that I'm getting what I deserve and that Oakley wants nothing to do to me.

I won't believe she's right. Not when I'm so close to getting her back.

Maybe Oakley will laugh at me for even trying and refuse to give me a chance to talk. Maybe she'll give me that same blank, uncaring look she did the night that I lost her and tell me to leave.

Part of me thinks even that would be better than the silence I've been suffering through.

I desperately hope that she still thinks of me, that maybe she even misses me, just a little. I can't bring myself to hope that she's been as wrecked over this as I have because even if Savannah Ward is to blame for that kiss, not telling Oakley about the circuit is my fault.

My lungs go tight with excitement when I catch the name of the penthouse, emblazoned in massive, glittering letters on the top of one of the buildings. The whole city is bright and sparkling, but suddenly all of it seems dull in comparison. I do my best not to bounce in my seat like a toddler as we draw closer, and I clench my hand around the strap of my bag in an attempt to distract myself for just a moment.

I need to be calm for this. I need to be able to tell her everything that I've been thinking about since she left, and I need to give her a reason to come back to me. I need her to see that I'm someone she can trust, someone mature and capable.

Throwing up out of excitement the second I see her isn't going to cut it.

“Anywhere in particular I should drop you off?” the cabbie asks as we pull into the parking lot.

I fumble for my wallet, ready to throw him as much money as he asks for without a second thought. I feel like I can hardly even think, my heart pounding so hard that I can feel it in my throat.

“No,” I say, shaking my head, “the front door should be?—”

I cut myself off before I can finish my sentence, a million different thoughts and emotions flooding me all at once.

There she is.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

Oakley, my girl, the love of my life, just...standing there. She's on the steps leading to the lobby doors, and she's so gorgeous it's painful when I see the smile on her face. It's almost nine here, although my body still thinks it's only seven, and my heart clenches in my chest at the sight of her.

And then it stops entirely, dropping straight down to the pit of my stomach, when the tunnel of my vision widens enough to realize that she's smiling at someone. Someone who's standing too close to her, who's tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear and bending down closer to her.

Someone who's kissing her.

My mind goes blank in time with my vision, horror and disgust and earth-shattering pain slamming into me. I think I make some kind of noise, and I vaguely hear the cabbie ask if I'm alright, but I have no idea how to answer that question.

Oakley's never left me feeling like this, not even when I was watching her walk away from me that night, not when I watched her mom's car speed off, not the first time I broke down panicking with the thought that I may really never see her again. A shaky, humorless laugh falls from my lips as I stare wide-eyed at my own hands where they tremble between my knees. Throwing up doesn't sound like such a bad idea anymore.

I remember feeling this way at my mom's funeral. It's the same world-ending ache, the same desolate, broken emptiness.

The same loss.

“Um,” I choke out, uncaring of the raw agony in my voice or the tears welling in my eyes, “can you take me back to the airport, please?”

The cabbie is silent for a long moment, and I want to crumple in on myself at the thought of a stranger knowing, of being so obvious and completely ruined that anyone can see what I’ve lost. He doesn’t say anything before I feel the car start to move again, and I’m powerless to stop myself from breaking down in tears.

They burn hot lines on my cheeks, and I see the same bright lights we passed just moments ago flash over my closed eyelids. It feels like mockery, the glamor and excitement of it all.

I want to be sick. I want to lash out at someone, anyone—myself, most of all. I’m shaking, but I almost can’t even feel it. My entire body is numb, too hurt to process it. It’s like getting hurt at the rodeo, but this already feels worse than getting gored ever could, and the shock of it hasn’t even worn off yet.

I’ve been so certain that I could get Oakley back, that I prove to her that I’m worth waiting for. I’m not anything special, and I don’t have money or connections like her family does, but I swore that I’d take care of her. I swore I’d be someone she could be proud of, someone who would deserve to put a ring on her finger. Did I really lose my last chance?

Did I lose Oakley for good?

She’s probably already dating someone else.

I want to scream in pain, in fury, in heartbreak. God damn Savannah Ward, of all people, for being right. I don’t want to hear her cruel, mocking voice in my head right now, but as images of that guy leaning down to kiss the love of my life flash behind my eyes, all I can hear is those words. Oakley deserves better than some no-name

idiot who can barely even manage to win a few stupid buckles.

I don't know what to do with my life if I'm not doing it for her. Oakley has always been my motivation, the light at the end of every tunnel. There's no point in me going back to the circuit if I won't be using the money I win to take care of her, but I'm still not good at anything else.

I'll look like a fucking idiot showing my face back home, anyway. Running off after the love of my life only to come back brokenhearted and without purpose.

Oakley moved on.

She left me behind, and I'm going to be nothing more than a thing of the past for her. I'll never get over her, and she'll move on with her life. I'll be a mediocre bull rider and work on the ranch with my dad, and she'll be incredible at anything she decides to do.

I'm going to be nothing but a footnote in her history, and there won't be a day in my life when I don't think about her.

Chapter Nine

OAKLEY

"This is the prospective investor list for the Midwest expansion that you asked for," I say, sliding the stack of papers across my uncle's desk. It takes him a moment to look away from his computer screen, his glasses sliding another half inch down his nose when he shifts. The bags beneath his eyes look even worse than my own.

"Thanks, Oakley," he says with a tight smile. He flips through the papers before glancing up at me, his brows furrowed in confusion. "Did Shane look over this? I

don't see anything from him in here.”

I carefully hide my wince at the mention of his name, shuffling my feet awkwardly.

“He was busy when I tried to show him, so I figured I should just give it to you.”

The truth is that I can hardly stand to show my face in front of him since the disastrous attempt at a date. I’ve been dodging him for nearly two weeks at this point, doing my best to keep things as professional as I can manage while also keeping my distance.

It’s been...rough.

I stay as far away from him as I can manage unless my uncle is watching. It’s easier to avoid him if I close my door and my blinds, but I feel like a coward for hiding from him. He tried to apologize the day after, but I ran off with my tail between my legs, and things have been tense and awkward between us since. I don’t think either of us know how to navigate a professional relationship after I so thoroughly ruined any chance of a romantic one.

He’s been perfectly polite every time I see him, but we don’t joke around anymore. I feel like I’m waiting for him to get mad at me, even though he’s proven that he won’t take it out on me. It would be so nice if things could just go back to the way they were before, but I don’t think that’s possible anymore.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

Or at least not anytime soon.

My uncle hums thoughtfully, his face pinched in a picture of displeasure as he looks me over. He sets the papers down and leans his elbows on his desk before he speaks.

“Oakley,” he says, trailing off like he's uncomfortable, “normally I wouldn't bring this up here, but you are my niece, and I love you to pieces. You've seemed off for a bit now. Is everything ok? If you're having issues at school or here, you can always talk to me.”

Part of me wants to break down and tell him everything, but I know I can't do that. If he'd asked me at home, I might have been able to explain some of it, but I can't say anything here. I can't tell him that I was stupid and went on a date with my coworker even though I knew it could go badly and ruin everything. I can't tell him that I'm still so hung up on Jamie that I can hardly think straight some days.

I want him to be proud of me. I don't want him to regret giving me this chance. I don't want to give credence to any of the office gossip about me not having earned my spot here.

So I just paste on a smile, hoping that it doesn't look as strained as it feels.

“Everything's fine!” I assure him. The words leave a foul taste in my mouth. “It's a lot to get used to all at once. But I promise, I'm just fine.”

His lips thin slightly as he continues staring at me, but I don't budge.

The last thing I need is to make him worry about me. He's already doing so much for me. If it wasn't for him and aunt Kathy, I wouldn't have a place to stay, much less an internship and a plan for my life after school. I don't want to make it harder on him.

“If you say so,” he finally says, although I can hear in his voice that he doesn't believe me. “Get home safe, kiddo.”

I keep that bright smile pasted on my face as I head for the door, not allowing it to waver for a second.

“You got it,” I agree. “Don't stay out late or Aunt Kathy will get mad at you again.”

He chuckles softly in response as I slip out the door and head back toward my office. My smile falls as soon as I'm out of eyesight.

The light in Shane's office is already off, the blinds open to show his desk deserted even though it's barely past time to head out. When we started, both of us would spend hours after we were supposed to be done, poring over files and tossing ideas back and forth. It feels like forever ago that he would bring me coffee with a smile and make friendly jokes all day.

Our budding friendship has completely dissolved.

I barely make it to my desk before I hear a soft knock. Alli is there when I turn, leaning against the door jam. One perfectly sculpted brow is raised in worry, but I paste on a smile like I have any belief that it'll fool her.

“Heading out?” I ask.

“In a minute,” she says, stepping further into my office and pulling the door closed behind her. “Are you doing alright?”

I should probably wave her off just like I did with my uncle. It's unprofessional to blabber on about my personal life to my coworkers, but the look in Alli's eye tells me she's not going to take no for an answer. If I'm honest with myself, I really do need someone to talk to.

I haven't told Phoebe about any of this yet because I know she'll be excited about me trying to move on. The thought of moving on hurts even worse now that I know how wrong it felt when I tried.

"Hanging in there." I don't bother hiding the exhaustion in my voice, and Alli's face creases into a worried little frown. "Can I vent to you for a little? It's about personal stuff."

A soft laugh falls from her lips, and relief flashes in her eyes.

"You're more of a friend than a coworker to me," she says. "I'm all ears. And whatever you say stays between us. I know how to keep my mouth shut."

I sigh, leaning back against my desk.

"Shane and I kind of went on a date," I blurt out. "He kissed me."

Alli's brow rises just slightly in surprise, but there's no judgment on her face. She nods, looking thoughtful, and smiles sympathetically at me.

"I assume it didn't go well?" she asks.

"You could say that." I twine my fingers together, idly picking at one of my nails in frustration. "He was fine. Great. I'm...really not over my ex. I feel like I led Shane on, and I don't know how to continue being his friend or his coworker."

She hums, tapping her nails against the strap of her bag.

“You haven’t talked to your uncle about any of this?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“God, no. I don’t want to cause problems,” I say.

“You might need to,” she says bluntly. Before I get the chance to argue, she raises her hand and continues speaking. “Things like this happen. We’re all adults. If it’s not possible for you to keep working with Shane, you might want to talk to your uncle about transferring departments.”

I frown at that suggestion. This is where I want to be, but I guess the only other solution would be for Shane to transfer, and that’s not fair. He seems perfectly capable of handling himself professionally. If I can’t do the same, he shouldn’t bear the consequences.

“Or,” she adds, catching my eye and smiling comfortingly, “you could ask me for a little help. I know things like this are awkward, but if you give it some time, you’ll both get over it. If you need a hand with anything you’re working on, you can always come talk to me. I’ve got a few time-saving tricks up my sleeve, and I’d be happy to help you out, Oakley.”

The offer warms my heart, and I smile even as I shake my head.

“I don’t want to put more work on your plate,” I say. “I can handle this on my own. I think I just needed to talk to somebody about it.”

I feel a little better just for having said it out loud, but I know I still need to put in some serious work to fix the whole situation.

“Just don’t push yourself too hard. I’m always here if you need,” she says. “I’ll see

you tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Get home safe.”

She offers me one last supportive smile before ducking back out into the hallway. The smile on my face melts away as soon as she’s out of sight, and that oppressive exhaustion settles right back over my shoulders.

So much for feeling better, I guess.

I huff in annoyance as I grab my bag from my desk and bend down to turn my computer off for the day. I wish I could stop thinking about all of it, but it's been a long day and I'm more irritable than usual. Even waiting for the elevator has me on edge.

It's not even that I miss Shane, not exactly. We weren't close enough for me to be really upset at losing him as a friend, but I am frustrated.

I should have known better than to mix business and pleasure, and I should have trusted my own instincts, no matter how annoyed I am about not being over Jamie. I shouldn't have pushed myself to do something I know I'm not ready for. I just...sure, I'm not surprised that things are awkward between us, but I thought I'd be able to handle it better.

I just want to put it out of my head and enjoy the walk home, but every little thing is pissing me off.

The honk of horns seems so much louder tonight, the impatience of every cabbie and businessman on the road wearing off on me. The streets are as crowded as they usually are, but the press of bodies feels claustrophobic. I usually enjoy the anonymity of walking through the throng, but right now, I just want to get away from

it all. The chatter and the sound of motors and the flashing lights and the smells from street carts are all piling on top of each other and making my head spin.

I know I'm scowling as I shove my way through the crowded sidewalks, but I can't bring myself to care. I don't even apologize as I shoulder check someone standing still in the middle of the walkway.

I just pull my jacket tighter around my shoulders and continue stomping my way home.

It's better once I get out of the business district, but the city is still buzzing. It's the end of the workday, which means it's the start of the evening, and the party crowd is out in force. They couldn't care less what day of the week it is or about the steadily dropping temperature.

Chapter Ten

OAKLEY

By the time I make it to the penthouse, I'm starting to slide from irritated to just plain exhausted.

I almost want to cry in relief when the elevator opens seconds after I press the call button. The ride up is quick, and I gratefully crumple back against the cool metal of the wall. I wish closing my eyes helped with the headache starting to brew at the base of my skull, but it just makes me focus on it more.

The doors open again when the elevator reaches my floor, and I fumble my way into the apartment, half dead on my feet.

My breath rushes out of my lungs in a massive sigh when I finally collapse face down

on my bed. My bag is still slung over one shoulder, and I'm still dressed in my work clothes, but I don't care. The comfort of being in my bed and knowing the day is finally over is too great to care about any little details.

I take several slow, centering breaths in an attempt to release some of the tension still knotting at the base of my spine. The world slowly stops feeling like it's going a million miles an hour as I bask in the quiet.

Of course, it doesn't last long.

I groan, exasperated, when I feel my phone buzzing in my pocket. My hopes of it just being a text are dashed when it keeps going, and I pull it out before picking up the call without even looking at who it is.

“Hello?” I answer, not bothering to hide the exhaustion in my voice.

“Hey, Oaks.”

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

An easy smile spreads over my face at the sound of Bo's voice. It's been a few weeks since we've gotten to chat, and I miss him.

I miss home. I miss lazy weekend mornings and my mom's cooking and picking on my big brother.

The exhaustion of today only makes the ache of missing everyone even sharper, but getting to talk to Bo will make it easier. He may be a shithead, but my brother has always been one of my best friends.

"Bo," I say, my smile probably obvious in my voice. "It's been a minute. How's everything back home?"

"Oh, we're all good," he says, and I can practically see his carefree shrug. The thought makes me laugh a little. "Just the usual from us."

I shift slightly, settling in to chat aimlessly with him for a bit. This is just what I need for a pick-me-up, and I don't have anything else to do for tonight, so I can keep him on the phone as long as I want. If Mom and Dad are home, I'll be able to talk to them, too.

"Haven't heard from you in a while. I wanted to see if you were planning on coming home for the holidays," he says. "Mom's already planning a whole big thing, you know how she is."

"Already?" I ask, laughing. "She's still got weeks before Thanksgiving, much less Christmas."

“Trust me, I know,” Bo snorts.

I hum uncertainly, rolling over so I can set my bag on my nightstand.

“I’m not sure. I mean, winter break is coming up soon with school, but I still have work,” I say. “I haven’t talked to anyone about taking time off.”

Right now taking time off sounds heavenly. Maybe a few weeks back home would even be a good reset. I’d be able to come back fresh and forget all about what happened with Shane. If we could go back to our usual easy jokes and teamwork, it would be a flat out miracle.

“Oh, uh, ok,” Bo says, sounding surprised. “I figured you’d have made plans already.”

My brow creases in confusion, and I laugh awkwardly. Bo’s never been good at being subtle, and it’s pretty obvious in his voice that something must have happened. Did I miss a text along the line? I haven’t been great at checking my phone the last few weeks, too wrapped up in my own head.

“Oh, come on,” I joke, “I’m not that bad. Why would I have plans made more than a month out?”

He pauses, the silence stretching out between us. Shit, did I miss some big thing that happened? I’m getting ready to pull my phone away from my ear so I can put him on speaker and scroll through my texts when he finally answers me.

“Didn’t you see Jamie?” he asks, shocking me into total stillness. “I guess I just assumed y’all had made plans.”

My vision goes blurry for a long moment, and I blink rapidly at the closet door across

from me. I can feel a strange, detached tingling in my fingers, like I'm not quite actually in my body.

Is this some weird, fucked up dream? Why is Bo, of all people, bringing up Jamie Walker?

"Jamie?" I ask, my voice strained.

"Yeah?" he asks, sounding totally confused.

"Why would I have seen Jamie?"

I try to keep my voice steady, but it's shaking as awfully as my hands are. Just the thought of seeing him is enough to make it feel like my whole world is tilting, and I laugh bitterly. I'm pathetic, aren't I?

I push up from my bed, annoyance sending a burst of energy through me as I wait for Bo to answer. He's hesitating, which he never does, and it's making me jittery.

"He went to see you, Oaks," Bo says slowly. "I gave him Kathy and Ricky's address. He went to New York to apologize."

Shock rocks through me in one sharp burst, and I stop in my tracks. My jaw drops. My brows raise. A bark of disbelieving, furious laughter forces its way from my throat.

What the fuck?

What the fuck?

I don't know what Bo is on, but I'm tempted to ask him if he has some to spare.

Jamie didn't come to see me. The asshole hasn't stepped foot in New York. He doesn't care. Not about me, not about us, not about anything but the fucking circuit and keeping his dad happy with him.

He gave me up.

“What?”

My voice sounds gravelly, even to my own ears. I'm torn between fury and hope and disbelief, the idea of seeing Jamie outside the penthouse, ready to apologize, making my knees go weak.

“You haven't seen him, then?” Bo asks after a long stretch of silence.

“No,” I scoff.

I stumble my way back to my bed, sitting down heavily. I'm frustrated and confused and so, so angry at the small part of me that's hopeful.

Bo sighs, cautious and worried. I can hear in his voice that he doesn't want to upset me, but I can't focus on that right now.

“Look, he was telling you the truth about Savannah,” he says, and I grit my teeth harshly at her name. “He's been a mess since you left, Oaks. He's been on the circuit trying to get enough money together to go see you and apologize in person. Maybe something came up before he could come see you. He was supposed to be there on the fifth?—”

“I have to go,” I say, talking over Bo.

Knowing I can't listen to any more of this, I don't wait for his response, hanging up

and dropping my hand to my side. I can't do anything but stare at the wall in front of me in shock. The fifth was when I was with Shane.

I'm shaking.

I nearly drop my phone as I fumble to pull up Jamie's contact. It's been so long since I've looked at it, and the contact picture I have saved for him makes my heart break all over again. He's smiling in it, carefree and excited, and I miss him so much I can barely breathe

Did he actually come to see me? If Jamie came to see me and I was out on a fucking date, I don't know how I'll ever forgive myself.

I press call and hold my phone to my ear, clutching at it tightly as I wait for the dial tone to sound.

The call goes straight to voicemail.

I have no idea what I'd even say, so I hang up before I can hear the recorded message. I don't know what I expected.

A sob tears free from my throat, and I toss my phone to the side so I can dig my nails into my own palms. I wanted to forget about all of this, to move on with my life and carve a new path for myself. Why does it feel like my past is dragging me backward? I just want to move on, and I can't even do that.

There's a soft knock at my door a few moments later, but I don't respond. I can't do anything but cry right now.

The door creaks open slowly, my aunt's head peeking around the corner. As soon as she sees the state I'm in, she abandons her hesitation and rushes in. She sits down on

the bed next to me, and I crumple against her side, wrapping my arm around her waist as she pets through my hair soothingly. I can't really hear her as she whispers calming nonsense, but it works nonetheless.

It takes a while for me to calm down, but I eventually manage to slow my breathing back to something reasonable.

"What's going on, honey?" she asks quietly.

I suck in a shuddering breath, my mind racing. Where do I even start?

"Bo just called." My voice is watery and I sound so fragile that it almost scares me. "He asked if I was coming home for the holidays."

Aunt Kathy doesn't stop petting through my hair, but I can feel the confusion in the way she shifts against me.

"He said Jamie came to visit me," I continue, the words tearing out of me painfully. "I never saw him. I was on a date with Shane the night he was supposed to be here, and I don't even know if he actually came or not. I don't know what to do, and I miss him so much, and I just?—"

She cuts me off, shushing me gently. I force air into my lungs, trying to keep myself from dissolving into tears again.

"I made everything awkward with Shane because I'm not over Jamie," I say miserably. "I don't know how to fix any of it."

My aunt draws in a slow, even breath, and I find myself unconsciously mirroring the action. She doesn't ask for clarification, which I'm grateful for. I don't think I could figure out how to say anything more clearly in the state I'm in right now.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“Do you want to go home for the holidays?” she asks. “A break in school is coming up soon. I could talk to your uncle and get you some time off, and we can book you a ticket home right now if you want.”

Relief slams into me at the thought of going home, which is all the answer I need.

“I don’t want special treatment,” I argue weakly.

“You’re my niece,” she reminds me, laughing quietly. “You’re getting special treatment whether you like it or not. Besides, half of the interns go home over the holidays. It wouldn’t be out of the ordinary for you to take a break, too.”

I still hesitate, feeling guilty about wanting to say yes. I signed up for this—I want this—and I shouldn’t just run away when things get hard. But if both Alli and my aunt are telling me to be gentle with myself, maybe it’s not as ridiculous as it feels.

“If things are awkward with Shane, I can talk to your uncle about moving him to a different department,” she adds.

“No,” I say firmly, shaking my head. “He didn’t do anything wrong. If I’m still uncomfortable when I get back after the holidays, I’ll talk to Uncle Ricky about finding another partner.”

My eyes are finally dry enough that I can see pride shining in my aunt’s eyes, and she leans down to press a kiss to the top of my head.

“So should we go look at flights, then?” she asks, grinning warmly at me.

I manage a passable imitation of a laugh, straightening up so I can wipe my face free of my tears.

“I should talk to Uncle Ricky before I book anything,” I say. “I don’t want to cause problems at the office.”

Aunt Kathy stands, holding her hand out to me and smiling. There’s mischief and adoration in her eyes, and I let her pull me up off the bed to stand on slightly unsteady legs.

“Your uncle will figure things out,” she promises. “You don’t need to worry about work right now. Come on, let’s go take a look. You don’t have to book anything right now, but we can at least see what’s available, right?”

I chuckle, knowing that she’ll talk me into booking something tonight anyway. Before she can lead me out of the room, I pull her into a hug, whispering my gratitude into her shoulder. She rubs down my back soothingly, squeezing me tight.

“I’ll always take care of you, Oakie,” she says. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Chapter Eleven

OAKLEY

I wakeup with a killer headache, still wearing my work clothes from yesterday. It takes me a minute to realizewhyI feel so drained. Thoughts of Jamie are heavy and slow, and I kind of want to just close my eyes and go straight back to sleep. My body feels like a bag of bricks as I try to trudge my way through my own thoughts.

The conversation I had with Aunt Kathy last night still sits heavily in my head, and I mull over the idea of going home.

It seems like the right thing to do, maybe even the only thing to do if I want to figure everything out between me and Jamie. I guess I just don't want to get my hopes up. If I go back home, there's going to be a part of me that expects Jamie and I to get back together. Maybe it would be better to be home if I find out that's never going to happen. At least I'll have my siblings and friends there to keep me sane if the shit really hits the fan.

My phone buzzes in my hand, and I glance over at it. The battery is almost dead, and I scowl as I immediately decline Bo's call. I'm not awake enough to deal with him yet. The screen stays bright, a picture of Phoebe and me at the fair a few years ago set as my background.

Phoebe.

I don't think I'm ready to talk to anyone about the whirlwind of conflicted feelings about Jamie in my head right now. I should at least tell her that I'm coming home for the holidays, though. I'm still half asleep as I unlock my phone, debating whether to call her or just shoot her a text.

If she hears my voice, she'll know something's wrong, and there will be no getting out of an explanation.

Text it is, then.

I swipe over to our messages, silently vowing to call her later, when I've got a better hold on myself.

Lake trip over winter break? I'm coming back for the holidays and I'll die if we don't

get at least a day alone.

I shoot off the text, tossing my phone back down the bed beside me with a yawn.

She's probably not awake yet—I remember her telling me that she specifically scheduled all of her classes so she wouldn't have to get up before noon. I'm sure she'll spam me with emojis and exclamation marks as soon as she checks her phone.

It'll be good to see her, no matter what else happens when I go home.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

I don't really know what to expect. I also don't really know what I want. If I show up and Jamie is waiting for me, I know I'll want to go back to him. I've started a life here. I have school and my internship and Alli, even Shane. I don't know what to do.

All I know is that I never saw Jamie.

If he came here like Bo said, why didn't I see him? Why didn't he come find me? What am I supposed to do now?

As much as I don't want to admit it, if Jamie had been at my door, I would have welcomed him with open arms. I probably would have yelled at him a bit, but he would have explained, and I would have cried and held him so tight. I've never stopped loving him, not for a single second.

I roll over onto my back to stare up at my ceiling through bleary eyes, sighing heavily.

Even if I can admit all this to myself, I still don't know what to do. I want to see him. I want to make sure he's okay, to take care of him and let him explain everything to me, but what if it's too late now?

What if he decided that I'm too difficult, too much work? What if he really did give up on me?

The realization that Jamie has always been what I want, even more than NYU, is enough to make me want to cry again. If I lose him because I refused to give him a chance to explain, I don't know what I'll do.

I let my eyes close as I swallow hard, battling with my own thoughts.

I'm not going to make the same mistake twice.

I know what I want, and it's Jamie Walker. No matter what, the three years we were together mean so much to me. He means so much to me. I can't give up, even if it may be too late. I have to at least try.

I'm going to have to figure out exactly what to do about that soon, but I know I'm not just going to give up. Not this time. I'm going to fight for what I want and I'm not going to give up until I've tried everything I can manage.

But for now, I need some breakfast, and a probably inadvisable amount of painkillers.

A girl can't get the love of her life back with puffy eyes and a headache, after all.

My thoughts are still a mess as I push myself off the bed to change. I've been wearing these clothes for far too long as it is, and cozy pajamas are a Saturday morning must. Brushing my teeth and throwing my hair into the world's laziest ponytail does make me feel a little more put-together. A little more human.

I trudge down the stairs, following the scent of bacon and coffee. Aunt Kathy's back is turned to me when I wander into the kitchen, and she's humming something softly under her breath. The sight reminds me so much of home that it makes my chest ache, and I smile softly, lingering in the doorway.

As much as she and my mom are wildly different people, they're so similar in some ways. I know aunt Kathy has always seen me as a bit of a miracle, since she can't have children of her own. When Mom had me, she was so excited to finally have a little girl to spoil rotten, and even more excited when my little sister came along. They've both been so good to me my entire life. No matter what silly thing I got

wrapped up in—whether it was keeping me out of drama at school or reluctantly reminding my dad that I could make my own decisions, even if no one else agreed, when I brought Jamie home—they’ve always had my back.

I guess she’s incredibly wrapped up in the eggs she’s scrambling because she doesn’t notice me until I’m wrapping my arms around her from behind and squeezing her in a tight hug. She jumps, laughing softly when she realizes who it is.

“Good morning to you, too,” she says, grinning. “Did you finally get some sleep after our talk last night?”

Her grin fades when I step back enough to let her turn, her face shifting immediately into a worried frown. She slides the pan off the burner and flips the stove off, focusing all of her attention on me.

I almost want to cry again, but I’ve decided that I’m done with tears—for real this time.

I can’t spend my whole life sobbing and wishing for things to be different.

“Oh, Oakie, honey, what’s wrong? Did something else happen?”

I manage to smile as she frets over me, allowing her to herd me toward the table. She ushers me into a seat and then pulls another up right beside me so she can sit close enough to keep our hands clasped together.

“I’m ok,” I promise, but I can tell by the crease of her brows that she’s not convinced. “I just...I think I do need to go back home.”

It feels almost like a guilty admission, and I see the concern in her eyes grow. I don’t want her to think that I’m ungrateful, and I don’t want her to think that I haven’t

loved the time I've gotten to spend with her and uncle Ricky. It's just different here.

I wake up to the distant sound of horns honking from several stories below, and the air is thick with smog, and everything smells like people. I miss my own bedsheets, and I miss chasing Bo around the house, and even helping my mom out in the clinic, although I'll be the first to admit that I've never had the stomach for it. It's not that I don't want to be here.

It's just that I want to be home.

"Ok," she says, her voice carefully even. "I can make the arrangements this morning and get you out on the first flight. Don't worry about a thing."

"Yeah," I say, dropping my gaze to where our hands are twined together. "We should book it for Thanksgiving, at least. Maybe Christmas, too. I don't...I don't know how long I need to go back for."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

Aunt Kathy is teary eyed when I lift my gaze to meet hers, but her smile is understanding. I'm still nervous, mostly because I don't want to hurt her, but seeing the acceptance in her eyes soothes my racing heart just a bit.

"I know how homesickness goes," she says quietly, squeezing my hands. "It's hard to leave the nest. And sometimes, you have to fly away to know that you were where you belonged in the first place."

My breath shakes a bit on my next inhale, and I bite down on my lip to stop myself from crying. No more tears.

"I only ever want you to be happy, Oakie," she says, reaching up to cup my cheek affectionately. "Me and Ricky, the company, it'll all be here if you ever want it. You don't have to decide now. All you have to do is promise that you'll do what makes you happy."

Alright, maybe a few more tears.

I'm just so grateful to have her in my life, especially right now. She's always understood, even when I didn't have words to explain what I meant. There hasn't been a single second that she hasn't stood by me, and it's a weight off my shoulders to know that I'm not letting her down.

"I promise," I say, nodding fervently.

I don't bring Jamie up again. He may be the catalyst here, but I think part of me knows that I've been wanting to go back home since I stepped foot in New York.

And I don't know where anything with him is going yet. I'll figure that out when I need to. For now, though, I'm going to do exactly what I just promised, and I'm going to chase my own happiness.

And that starts, as most good things do, with breakfast.

Can't make plans to change the course of my whole life on an empty stomach.

Chapter Twelve

OAKLEY

I grunt as Mom wraps me up in a bear hug, squeezing me just shy of too hard. She huffs out a laugh into my hair before pulling back. Her hands rest on my shoulders, and her face is set in an excited smile, the very picture of a welcoming mother.

"Oakley, honey," she croons, cupping my face in her hands. "I've missed you so much! Look at you, you're losing weight. Are you not eating right up there?"

"Mama," I say with a laugh as I extract myself from her grasp, "I'm fine. Aunt Kathy and Uncle Ricky have a home gym, I've just been running again."

There's more to it than that, but I don't want her to worry about all the stress I've been under at work. I'm just glad she's focusing on my weight and not the fact that I decided to come home for the holidays.

"How was your flight?" she asks.

"Uneventful, mostly," I say, tossing my duffel bag into the backseat and sliding my suitcase in to follow. "Minus the three hour delay, at least."

“I’m sure you’re starving. Let’s get you home, I’ll make you something to eat.”

Home cooking sounds absolutely heavenly right now, and I eagerly get in the car and buckle up. I’m still at the airport, but things already feel more right here than they do in New York.

As we pull out of the arrivals queue, I crack the window just a bit to get some air. It smells different, like home, and it settles some of my nerves.

I told Mama and Daddy that I was dropping in for the holidays, but I didn’t mention anything about my reservations toward going back once winter break is over.

My dad won’t be an issue—he always wants me within arm’s reach. The first time I told him I wanted to go to NYU, he’d nearly gone catatonic. I know it’s just because he worries about me and wants me close so he can keep me safe, but it was, at one time, overbearing and stifling. The idea of him watching my back feels a lot more comforting than claustrophobic now.

It’s my mom that I have a few more reservations about. I know she’ll ultimately support me, no matter what. I just worry that she’ll be disappointed when I tell them that I don’t want to stay at NYU.

If I decide that I don’t want to stay at NYU.

I still haven’t exactly made up my mind on that whole issue.

And it’s not like she’ll be mad at me or anything, I know she just wants me to be happy. She’s just always had so much faith in me, and she was so excited when I wanted to go off to college. After Bo decided he wanted to stay and work on the ranch, she’d been so worried that all the hard work she’d put into being able to offer us any opportunity we could possibly want would be wasted.

Besides, I just want her to be proud of me. I don't want her to think that I'm giving up. "How's everyone doing?" I ask, pulling myself out of my thoughts as Mama merges out of the mess of airport traffic.

"We're all good," she says, reaching over to turn down the radio. "I'm on my usual rampage of trying to get everyone in town to weatherproof their barns before their horses start getting sick, but you know how that goes."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

I snort out a laugh, rolling my eyes.

“You’d think after a decade of you being right, they’d start listening to you.”

“Yeah, well, you know the old heads,” she grumbles. “Bo has been driving me around and looking intimidating behind me. He’s a lot more diplomatic than you ever were.”

I flush, giggling along with the light teasing. Bo has never been particularly fond of the way most of the ranchers around talk to our mom, and I really can’t blame him.

“Maggie’s on her winter break and is mostly watching cartoons and refusing to do her homework,” she continues, both of us laughing.

“So, the usual,” I chuckle.

“Definitely. And your father’s doing his usual, breaking his damn back trying to keep the fences in check. I keep trying to get him to hire someone to help, but he’s stubborn.”

“Always has been,” I say with a chuckle.

We chatter on about this and that throughout the drive, and I try to stay focused on our conversation. My mind keeps wandering, memories rushing through me as we pass by the places I spent my whole life in before this. I do my best not to linger on the thoughts of Jamie that keep popping up. I’ll have time to figure all that out when I’m not in the car with my mom.

I finally look up when I feel the road shift from pavement to rough dirt beneath the wheels, and my breath rushes out of me in a relieved sigh when I see our house just around the corner. I've never been gone long enough to properly miss the sight, but the wraparound porch and the clumps of snow sticking to the fences behind the house make my chest go tight for a second.

My mom parks, and I hop out as soon as the truck pulls to a stop. The familiar scent of clean snow and home filling my lungs. I round the truck and reach for the tailgate, but Mom stops me, placing her hands on my shoulders and aiming me toward the house.

"Go inside, kiddo," she says. "I'll take your stuff in, just go say hi."

I grin at her gratefully, not bothering to put up even a token argument.

I trudge through the snow, lighter on the path leading up to the house, but still a few inches deep. It looks like someone cleared it this morning, but it's obvious the snow's been falling slowly all day, piling back up.

Phoebe is sprawled out on the couch munching on chips as she watches some trashy reality show. She springs up as soon as she catches sight of me, only just barely saving the chips from flying everywhere. The bag is still in her hand when she damn near vaults over the coffee table to wrap me in a hug.

I grunt at the impact, but wrap her up in my arms anyway.

"Oakley!" she squeals breathlessly, rocking me back and forth in excitement.

"Pheebs!" I squeal back at her.

We break apart, giggling, and the sight of her face is so soothing. I don't know how I

managed to go so long without seeing her.

“God, I missed you,” she says. “How are you? How’s New York? You have to tell me everything.”

I laugh at her enthusiasm, but I don’t get a chance to answer her before my little sister rounds the corner. My eyes widen in surprise when they land on Maggie, and I rush over to wrap her up in a hug.

“Maggie,” I say, squeezing her until she struggles to get out of my hold. “Jeez, you’re tall!”

“Shut up,” she groans, rolling her eyes as she wiggles out of my arms. “I’m the same height I was last time you saw me.”

She’s putting on her usual grumpy act, but I can see the smile twitching at the corners of her lips. She’s just as happy to see me as I am to see her.

“No way,” I draw out playfully. “You’ve got to be at least six feet tall now!”

She snorts and levels me with an unamused look.

“Try cutting a foot off that,” she says blandly. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

I lift my hand to my chest, playing at being wounded.

“You don’t want to see your big sister for the holidays?”

She tosses her hair over her shoulder, golden ringlets bouncing as she glances at Phoebe in confusion.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“No shit, I know you’re here for the holidays,” she says, brows furrowed. “But, like, why are you here? Shouldn’t you be checking on Jamie?”

Hearing his name out loud feels like a punch to the chest, and I’m shocked silent.

“Maggie, seriously?” Phoebe hisses. “Can’t you?—”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

My voice comes out ragged and harsh, and both of them turn their attention to me. Maggie looks a little hesitant, and Phoebe looks both resigned and annoyed. I had planned to wait until at least tomorrow to talk to Phoebe about this, but the words come tumbling out before I can stop them.

“Did you know Jamie came to see me?” I ask Phoebe.

The silence that answers me tells me everything I need to know, and I let out something between a laugh and a sob.

“I...” she trails off. “I did, but?—”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” It comes out closer to a sigh than I intend it to, but I guess that’s better than sounding accusing and angry and hurt. “I’ve been missing him for months, and you didn’t tell me that he’s been trying to fix things this whole time?”

My voice breaks on the last word, and I feel myself slipping back into the whirlwind of despair that I’ve been struggling with since Bo told me Jamie was supposed to visit

me. Did everyone know except me? Have I been wishing for Jamie to come ask for me back this whole time, not knowing that's exactly what he was trying to do?

“I tried. You told me to never say Jamie Walker’s name to you again, Oakley,” Phoebe says, her voice stern, but gentle.

My face scrunches up in pain as I remember that exact conversation. It was barely two weeks after I got to New York.

She hasn't mentioned him to me since.

“You said you were done,” she continues, softer now, reaching out to squeeze my hand. “You didn't want to hear anything about him, you just wanted to move on. He hurt you so badly, and you finally sounded like you were doing ok again.”

If I had been honest, could I have saved myself all this pain? I haven't been doing okay for a single second since I walked away from Jamie.

“I just wanted you to be happy, and I didn't want to stop you from chasing your dreams. I just thought it would be better if you could move on. When you didn't mention seeing him, I figured he never showed.”

I thought Jamie had forgotten about me. I thought he was moving on and leaving me in the dust.

“He got thrown,” Maggie blurts. “At the rodeo in Billings.”

Those words tear through me like a fucking knife, and all of my worry about not seeing him in New York vanishes immediately. The blood rushes from my face, and my skin pebbles in terrified goosebumps.

“What?” I choke out.

Both of them go silent, their eyes blown wide. I have no idea what I look like right now, but I feel feral with both fury and fear. Phoebe and Maggie glance at each other, but it’s Phoebe who answers me.

“He was on Code Blue,” she says.

Code Blue.

My whole world tumbles down around me, and I can do nothing to stop myself from crumpling down onto the floor. Billings is the last in the circuit before nationals for areason, and it’s not because it’s easy. Some of the most dangerous bulls in the entire country have a home there.

Code Blue has a nasty habit of hospitalizing or even killing his riders.

If Jamie got thrown...

I shudder at the thought, a scream bubbling in my throat. He can’t be gone. If he’s gone and I didn’t even know?—

“He’s ok!” Maggie says, shaking me.

I blearily manage to open my eyes, my head spinning from the surge of panic. She’s crouched down in front of me, Phoebe at my side.

“He got pretty beat up, but he’s alright,” she continues when she sees my eyes open. “He was unconscious for a few days, broke his arm and his collarbone and his leg, I think.”

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

I wince at the images my mind conjures up of Jamie unconscious and bleeding in the dirt. How can he be that hurt and still be okay?

“He’s at home,” Phoebe says. “He’s healing up at home. He’s ok. I...I was going to tell you tomorrow.” She flinches at the unveiled terror in my eyes, the way my hands tremble. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you when it happened. I just thought...”

She trails off as I push myself to my feet unsteadily, scrambling to keep me from tripping over my own feet.

I can barely see a foot in front of me, my vision clouded with worry, but I know these streets like the back of my hand. I could make it to Jamie’s house blind and deaf if I had to. It looks like that might be exactly what I have to do.

Phoebe is talking to me, but I can’t really make out what she’s saying, my mind so occupied with thoughts of Jamie that I can’t pay attention to anything else. I can hear Mama and Daddy and Bo all coming through the back door, but I can’t wait. I grab the keys to Bo’s truck off the entryway table and shake Phoebe off before rushing out the front door.

The Billings rodeo is in fucking October, and it’s already halfway through the first week of November.

Jamie’s been hurt and trying to heal for weeks without me. I can explain things to my family later.

Right now, I need to get to Jamie.

I need to see for myself that he's safe.

Chapter Thirteen

OAKLEY

Be cool, Oakley.

My nerves are so on edge that I can practically see them radiating off of me as I fidget on the porch. I try to convince myself that this isn't any different from any other time I've snuck into Jamie's room. The light in his dad's room is off, and there's no glow of the TV from downstairs so I know his dad is asleep.

It's just like every other time. It'll be fine.

I suck in a breath through my teeth before bending to shift the potted plant by the door aside. It's the most obvious hiding place for a key that I've ever seen, considering how bare the porch is otherwise, but his dad never bothered to add to the decor over the years.

The metal is chilly against my fingers, and I flip it over a few times in my palm before I slide it into the lock.

If I wasn't so anxious, I'd giggle as I slip in through the door, memories of the past flooding through me. I'm surprised at how much I remember, how fresh it all still feels. I don't trip over the loose floorboard or knock into the picture frame that sticks off the wall farther than the rest of them do, and for a second, it feels like nothing has changed at all.

It feels like I'm sneaking over to Jamie's on a school night because I want one more kiss before I go to bed, and that everything is the same as it was in high school.

The thought of just how much has changed in the last few months sits bitterly in the back of my throat.

The heat of panic replaces that bitterness as I take a step closer to Jamie's room and the loud creak of a floorboard echoes in the hallway. I glance down in shock, and even in the darkness, I can see my mistake. I bite back a groan at my forgetfulness, rushing toward Jamie's room as quietly as I can.

Of course I remember everything else, but manage to forget the single loudest floorboard in the whole damn house. Sure, I know from experience that his dad sleeps like the dead, but tonight really isn't the night that I want to test that.

I breathe a sigh of relief as I reach Jamie's room, fumbling in the darkness for the doorknob. His door is silent as I push it open and squeeze in. The lamp on his nightstand is on, and I don't want the light to spill into the hallway. This whole sneaking in thing is a lot harder when Jamie isn't actually expecting me.

It's almost a shock when I finally lay eyes on him.

It's silly, I know, but knowing that I'm sneaking into Jamie's house to check on him and actually seeing him, half awake and glaring at the door groggily, well, those are two very different things. My breath stalls in my chest, and it feels like I freeze in place as he blinks rapidly, his face morphing from annoyance to confusion to shock.

The silence stretches on for a tense moment, and then I force my breath out of my lungs and step forward.

"Hi," I whisper.

My eyes are probably as wide as his are, and I don't look away from him as I slip my shoes off, but I hope my poor imitation of nonchalance is enough to fool him. If the

way he's watching every movement like he's afraid I'm going to disappear if he looks away is any indication, he's probably too shocked to recognize anything other than the fact that I'm in his room.

"Oakley?" he asks, his voice rough from sleep. "That really you?"

I laugh softly as I walk closer and fold myself into the chair next to his bed. His dad probably pulled it in from the office so he can sit and keep an eye on Jamie while he heals, because I know it's not something Jamie usually has in his room. My hands shake as I tug at the zip of my jacket, suddenly feeling stifled by the heavy fabric.

"Yeah," I say, my smile wobbly as I trace the lines of his face with my eyes. "It's me."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“What are you doing here?” he asks.

We’re both still whispering, probably quieter than we need to be, but the air around us seems so fragile that I’m almost scared to move.

“Had to come check on you, didn’t I?” I joke weakly. “You’re not allowed to get hurt if I can’t play nurse.”

His chuckle comes out breathy and tired as he shifts up, and I hear the edge of a pained wheeze on his breath. The blankets slip down his chest, and as much as I know I probably shouldn’t stare, I can’t tear my eyes away.

The normally tanned skin of his chest and left shoulder is marred with expansive bruises, shades of purple and red and sickly green melding into the stark blank ink of the tattoos that litter his torso. His arm is set in a cast up to his elbow, and I feel my eyes start to well up with tears when I see the familiar green wrapping. He’d gotten the same color when he broke his wrist in high school, had picked it because it was the color of the dress I was wearing that day. I reach out to trace my fingers over the cast, biting back a sob.

He’s just as gorgeous as I remember, although his hair is a little longer than I’m used to, and his stubble is getting closer to the territory of a proper beard. It’s the pain in those stunning blue eyes that I’m not used to, the obvious worry just beneath the surface.

He’s never looked so fragile before.

“How are you holding up?” I ask, ignoring the way my voice wobbles.

He glances down at his chest and shrugs, then immediately winces as the movement pulls at his injured collarbone.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” he says.

I let out a wet laugh and wipe at the tears on my cheeks before reaching out. I intend to swat at his head in a playful reprimand, but I wind up just twining my fingers into his hair. It’s a little greasy, but I’m sure washing it isn’t easy right now. If things were different, I’d be helping him to the bathroom and leaning him over the tub so I could scrub shampoo into his scalp. The thought makes something sharp and sad twinge in my chest.

“Don’t play tough with me, Jamie,” I scold, and I can feel all the playful teasing drain from me, replaced by the gut-deep worry that’s been eating at me since Maggie dropped the bomb about his injury.

“I’m ok,” he promises, but he winces when he lifts his good hand up to cup mine where it’s still tangled in his hair.

I tug softly at the strands as tears cloud my vision again, and I don’t bother to hide them. Every ounce of fear and guilt that’s been welling up comes to the surface, and I barely manage to stop myself from wailing pitifully. I look down at him, shaking my head.

“You could have died,” I rasp out, my words harsh and desperate.

“Hey, hey, hush, it’s ok,” he soothes, squeezing his fingers around mine. “I’m a professional, it comes with the territory. But look at me, yeah? I’m alright. It’s fine.”

I pull my hand back and wipe furiously at the tears streaming down my cheeks.

“It’s not fine, Jamie!” I cry, quieting my voice immediately after. “You get thrown by Code Blue, and you expect me to believe you’re fine? Do you have any idea how worried I was when Maggie told me?”

The look on his face shifts from soothing to something more contemplative, like he hasn’t considered that I’ve been worried, and part of me wants to smack him for it. When he speaks, it sounds almost like he’s in awe of the very concept.

“I’m sorry,” he says, his voice trembling. “I’ll be careful.”

I nod, still wiping at my cheeks.

“You better,” I tell him.

The quiet that falls between us is broken only by my sniffing. We both just stare at each other for a long moment, neither of us quite sure what to do now. I don’t feel like I can walk away from him any more than I did when I got here, and I open my mouth, not sure what I’m going to say, but knowing that I need to talk. I can’t just freeze this time.

“Bo told me you came to New York,” I say, almost surprised at myself for picking that as the first thing to bring up.

Jamie shifts on the bed, gritting his teeth as he shifts his eyes away from me to glare at the wall in front of him. I feel the loss like it’s a physical touch.

“Why didn’t you come see me?”

My voice is weak and pained, and I flinch a bit when Jamie looks at me again. The

soft joy that had been on his face is all but gone, a mask of indifference just barely covering the hurt etched into the lines of his face.

“I did,” he says bluntly. “All I got to see was you kissing some blond guy outside of your apartment. It was pretty obvious I wasn’t welcome so I went back to the circuit.”

My heart drops immediately, and the sour taste of panic rushes back into my mouth. I feel guilty enough about what happened with Shane. I can’t let it ruin this, too.

I won’t.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“Wait, Jamie, no!” I rush out, leaning closer in desperation. “That’s not what it looked like, I swear.”

He scoffs at me, an ugly sneer curling his lips. He’s refusing to make eye contact with me, and when I reach out for his good hand, he yanks it away like my touch burns. I feel kind of like I want to pass out and kind of like I want to throw up.

“Please, Jamie, I’m telling you the truth,” I insist. “He’s one of my colleagues, I’ve never thought of him like that, I swear. I shoved him off. He kissed me, I didn’t kiss him.”

That hurt curl to his lip doesn’t falter for a second, and the laugh he lets out is entirely unamused, pain obvious in the way his voice shakes.

“That sounds awfully familiar, doesn’t it?”

My confusion only lasts me half a second before my mouth drops open in pure shock.

It feels like my whole world is rocked onto its side because he’s so right that it’s painful to hear. This is exactly what happened with him and Savannah, and I didn’t even give him the chance to explain himself that I’m begging for right now. The panic coursing through me right now is probably exactly how Jamie felt that night, and I just walked away and left him to stew in it.

“Oh, my God,” I whisper in horror, my hand flying up to cover my mouth as I stare at him, my eyes blown wide and already brimming with tears. “Jamie, I—oh, my God, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry, I just—after hearing about the circuit, I couldn’t think

straight. I was so upset and I didn't even listen." I have to bite down on my lip to stop myself from completely breaking down again, and I clench my trembling hands in the sheets to stop myself from reaching out to him. I don't deserve to touch him, not right now. "I shouldn't have doubted you, Jamie. I'm sorry."

My voice breaks on the last word, and my tears finally fall, following the tracks that have yet to dry on my cheeks. He looks hesitant when he meets my eyes again, but I feel his hand shift, just close enough for our pinkies to brush. It drags another sob free from my throat, and my focus narrows to the heat of his skin on mine before he starts speaking again.

"I understand why you did, Oakley. It's not easy to see something like that," he says tightly. "It hurt more knowing that you didn't trust me."

I know it doesn't change anything, but all I can think to do is shake my head. I never thought about things like that because, I realize, I do trust Jamie. This whole time, I've been doubting myself. I've been doubting whether I'd ever be able to move on from him, even after seeing Savannah press herself somewhere she didn't belong.

"I trust you," I say, hoping he can hear just how sincere I am. "We were together for too long for me not to trust you, Jamie. I just...I made a mistake. I want to fix it. I want to fix us."

That's what this has all been about, really. Through all of it, I still want Jamie.

Chapter Fourteen

OAKLEY

The hesitance in his eyes shifts to something closer to hope, and it's the most relieving thing I've ever seen. His hand moves to cover mine, and I shake as I twine our fingers

together, too scared to blink in fear that this will all disappear.

“I fucked up worse,” he says raggedly. “I should have told you about the circuit as soon as I decided. I was scared about how you’d react, but I only wanted to go because I wanted to be able to support you. I’ve only ever wanted to build a life with you, Oakley.”

It’s probably not the most appropriate response, but all I can manage to do is laugh. It’s weak and watery, and I’m pretty sure I look a complete mess. He’s not any better, though he’s a bit more restrained about the tears slipping from his eyes.

“You’re shivering,” he says, rubbing his hand up my arm.

“It’s cold out,” I tell him, laughing softly.

It all feels so simple, so right, that it almost breaks my heart.

“Come here, baby,” he says.

There’s not a single part of me that wants to argue, every last bit of my brain desperate to be pressed up against him again. He’s always been the only person who can calm me down with a single hug, and all I can think about is feeling taken care of like that again.

“My jeans got wet from the snow,” I say, but it’s not a way of saying no.

They’re just words, just something to fill the silence as I strip my jeans down my legs because I’m scared if I let the quiet stretch on too long that it’ll shatter this whole illusion of everything being okay.

And then I’m sliding beneath the covers, my legs tangling with his, and everything is

still alright. The only sound in the room is our breathing and the shift of the sheets, and Jamie's skin is so warm against mine, and it finally feels like I'm home. He holds the sheets up so I can curl around him, careful to avoid the bruising on his left leg. Jamie has never been known for his patience, and he only gives me a few moments of trying to arrange myself carefully around him before he wraps his good arm beneath my waist and hauls me closer.

I gasp, my hand landing on his stomach, and he grins down at me smugly as he lets the blankets fall over our hips.

"You need to be careful," I scold him.

"I'm not made of glass, sweetheart," he argues.

And, yeah, I can very much feel that in the way his sculpted muscles shift under my hand and my leg, but now is not the time for me to get distracted by thoughts of the last time we were in a bed together.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“You’re injured, Jamie,” I say, trying for stern and falling flat.

He leans down, his lips barely an inch from mine, and my breath hitches in my throat. His hand is broad and warm at the base of my spine, and his eyes are heated and possessive.

“I’d break every bone in my body if it means I can hold you like this again.”

I should tell him that he’s absolutely not allowed to do that, or something to that effect, but I just wind up kissing him instead. My hands find their way into his hair, and I tug harder than I mean to, moaning something that’s supposed to be an apology into his mouth. He still tastes exactly like I remember, sweet tea and spearmint gum, and I have to force myself to pull back before I lose myself completely.

“I missed you so much,” I whisper, leaning in again to kiss along the scruff of his beard and down his throat. “I love you, I love you so much.”

“God, Oakley,” he groans as I nip at his earlobe. “I love you, baby, please. I need you.”

I’m too worked up to say no to him until I see the way he tries to force back a wince as he rolls his hips up into my thigh. He’s already hard, and the thought of having him again after so long is making my thoughts fuzzy, but I pull back and shake my head in worry.

“You’re hurt,” I say.

It's not a no, and the look in his eyes tells me he knows it. He drags me back down for another kiss, his tongue tangling with mine and forcing all hope for thought out of my mind.

"Don't care," he gasps between kisses. "Need you. Need to know you're real, Oakley, please."

I don't know if there's a single thing in the world that can break me as fast as Jamie begging can, but I'm helpless. I giggle indulgently against his mouth, nodding my agreement. He's always taken such good care of me, loved me so much even when I didn't feel like I deserved it, and I don't think there's been a second since I met him where I didn't know he would always be it for me. I revel in the knowledge that it's finally my turn to take care of him.

He deserves it.

"Ok," I whisper. "Just lay back and let me do the work, honey."

He grins wolfishly up at me, his hand on my hip guiding me to a comfortable position on top of him as soon as I manage to shuck my panties off. He's only wearing his boxers, and I moan quietly against his lips as I feel the hard length of him press up against me.

"I'm going to go slow," I tell him as I fumble at the hem of his boxers. "Tell me if I hurt you."

He nods in easy agreement, his fingers gripping my hip tightly as I shove his boxers down just far enough to free his cock.

"Not going to last long," he warns me.

Whatever I was going to say is lost on a moan as I feel his cock against me, bare and hot. I can't think past my own need, and I settle myself over him, rising up just enough to take him in hand. He groans at the first touch of my palm, his hips jolting up instinctively. He hisses in pain at the sudden movement, and I lean down to distract him with a kiss as I line him up.

"Relax," I whisper. "Let me take care of you for once."

I'm already dripping by the time I get his cock angled properly, and I have to cover my mouth with my hand to muffle the moan that tears from my throat as he slides into me. His breath comes out on a harsh sigh, and he bites his lip hard, eyes flashing with overwhelmed heat. I rock my hips slowly over him, working the length of him deeper, a slow, steady rhythm. He's so gorgeous, even bruised up and restraining himself so much, and I let out a shocked little whimper when I finally reach the base of his cock.

It's been so long, and he's so thick inside of me. My mind goes blank for a long moment, everything narrowed down to the stretch of him.

"Fuck," he rasps out.

He's staring up at me, breathing shallowly, his fingers clenching over my hip.

"Are you ok?" I ask, equally as breathless.

He laughs, pulling me slowly down so he can kiss me, slow and lazy.

"Never better," he chuckles. "I'm really not going to last long. You feel so fucking good."

I grin against his mouth, lifting my hips and lowering them down in a slow roll. I

stutter halfway through the movement when his cock rubs up against the spot inside of me that makes my whole body go liquid and hot.

“I’m not going to last either,” I assure him.

Something between a groan and a growl rumbles out of his throat, and he smiles adoringly up at me.

“Take what you need. Ride me, sweetheart,” he tells me. “Show me how much you missed me.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

I whimper against his lips at the instruction, helpless to do anything but obey. Neither of us last long after that, both of us desperate for more, clutching at each other as I grind down onto the length of him, gasping his name into his mouth. My movements aren't as smooth and flawless as I'd like them to be, but he feels so good inside of me, and he looks like he's in heaven beneath me, so I keep chasing my pleasure, racing toward the edge. Jamie spurs me on, whispering filth and adoration in equal parts against my lips, his good hand helping keep me steady.

"Oak—fuck, so close," he gasps out.

All I can do is nod, moments away from my own climax.

"C'mon," I gasp out.

He squeezes his fingers down on my ass, and my hips stutter as I feel the crash of my own orgasm overtaking me. My whole body tenses up on top of him, and I just barely manage to keep myself from crashing down onto his chest when he grits out a moan of my name.

All my strength leaves me the second my climax fades, and I slump over onto my side, panting into his shoulder as I allow him to pull me in closer.

"Missed you," he mumbles before pressing a kiss to the crown of my head.

I hum happily, exhaustion taking hold of me now that I've done what I set out to do. I've been strung tight with nerves the whole time I've been in New York, and now that I'm home, in Jamie's arms, back where I belong again, I'm so tired I can't keep

my eyes open. I don't need to worry about staying awake, though. I can relax and not worry about anything, even if it's just for a little bit.

I've got Jamie to take care of me.

Chapter Fifteen

JAMIE

It's more than a little unreal to wake up and see Oakley in my bed. The morning light is soft, resting on her cheek and making her hair shine. She's tucked into my side, still dozing, and I reach up to drag my fingers through her hair disbelievingly.

My shoulder twinges at the movement, immediately reminding me of the bitter truth.

This isn't how all of this was supposed to go. I got my girl back, sure, but I'm a fucking mess. I don't have a career anymore—hell, I probably have to find something completely new. The doctors all told me I most likely won't ever be able to get on a bull again because of the damage to my leg and shoulder. I have no way to support myself anymore, much less build a proper life for Oakley.

Fuck, I wasn't good enough for her to begin with. Now, I'm nothing but a washed up ex-circuit rider with no clue what to do in life.

Oakley lets out a quiet huff, her head twitching as she flutters her lashes against the sunlight. She wakes up slowly, just like always. A long yawn rises from her as she stretches, and then she shifts onto her side to shy away from the light. I smile down at her, torn between frustration with how my life has turned out and pure bliss at having her in my bed again.

“Morning, princess.”

Her smile is lazy and so full of love that it almost hurts to look at, and she lifts her hand to trace over the stubble on my chin.

“You look sad,” she says quietly, gently following the line of my neck down to my shoulder, just petting across my skin.

It feels so good to have her hands back on me that I can almost forget my worries. Even if I could, she’d still know something is bothering me. I’m just...not ready to talk about it. I want to bask in the happiness for just a little longer.

“How about I take my girl out to breakfast?” I say. “Ruby’s should be open. We can get you some waffles.”

She brightens instantly at the mention of waffles, and I see her concern fade into excitement. We’ll have to talk about this all eventually, but I think both of us just want some time together again.

“You know I can’t say no to that.”

We crawl out of bed in between kisses and lingering touches. Oakley helps steady me without me even having to ask for it, and I wish I could be touched by her thoughtfulness. She’s always done everything she can to make me happy, and now I can do even less to repay her for it. I try not to let my gaze linger on the bare skin of her stomach as she pulls her shirt back over her head, but the temptation is too much to resist.

“We should probably stop by my house before we go out,” she says as she buttons her jeans up. “I’d rather not wear the same clothes I showed up in.”

I snort out a laugh, but don’t argue with her. It was after dark when she got here, and I doubt she ran into too many folks on the way home from the airport, but folks will

have enough gossip to fuel the fires just with us getting back together. No need to give them anything more to work with.

“I’m sure your dad will be thrilled to see me.”

She winces a bit at that, huffing out a sigh. I meant it more as a joke than anything—his reaction to seeing me now can’t be worse than the last time he laid eyes on me.

“It’s already eight,” she says. “He’s probably out working already.”

I pull her in for one more kiss before we head downstairs. It’s somehow even better than every time before, the morning light soft around us, her hair tousled from sleep. My body aches, but that’s something I’m starting to get used to. It’s not as bad as it was in the beginning. And with Oakley in my arms again, I think I’d be able to handle any agony life can throw my way.

That idea gets tested before we even make it out of the house.

As soon as we reach the bottom landing of the stairs, my dad rounds the kitchen corner. A steaming mug of coffee is in his hand, and his face is set into a disappointed grimace before he even meets my eyes. It stings, the staunch reminder that if I can't ride the circuit, he wants nothing to do with me, but it's the way he looks at Oakley that gets my blood boiling properly.

"You're here, then."

He drags his eyes over her in annoyance and disgust, and I feel her go stiff behind me. Her fingers tighten around mine in anxiety. I shift protectively in front of her, drawing my dad's attention back to me. All he does is snort indifferently, shaking his head as he stomps his way out to the barn.

Oakley flinches when the door bangs shut behind him, then sighs in shaky relief as the tension slowly fades from the air.

"And we were worried about my dad," she jokes weakly.

I don't tell her that that's more than he's said to me since I got thrown. I take a moment to unclench my jaw and relax my hand from the fist it curled into before turning back to her with what I hope is a convincing smile.

"I think breakfast is calling our names," I say. "Let's get some food in you."

The promise of waffles is always enough to get her moving, and we make our way to

the car in no time. The drive to her house is a short one, but we spend it in uncharacteristic silence. It's never been hard to find something to fill the quiet with around Oakley, but there's so much to catch up on that neither of us can find the words to start.

It's actually a relief when Oakley's house comes into sight.

Well, it's a relief for about five seconds.

Oakley reaches for her seatbelt to unclip herself, a warm smile on her face.

"I'll be right out," she says.

The front door slams open just as she leans over the center console to kiss me.

Both of us jolt apart from each other as her dad storms his way down the driveway. I can't hear what he's saying yet, but I can tell he's cursing a blue streak.

"Shit!"

Oakley jumps to exit the car, the door slamming closed behind her only seconds after her feet touch the dirt road. I curse under my breath as I struggle with my own seatbelt, my entire chest aching sharply when I try to move too quickly. By the time I make it out of the car, Oakley and her dad are already halfway into a screaming match.

"I'm not going to stand for that good for nothing?—"

"Shut up!" Oakley shouts, cutting her dad off entirely. "I don't care what you'll stand for! I love Jamie! I've loved him this whole time, and I'm not giving him up for anyone!"

Her chest is heaving, her cheeks flushed pink with anger. It's rare to see her get so worked up over anything, and knowing that she's standing up for me has me a little lightheaded. I haven't done anything in my life to deserve her.

The look in her dad's eyes tells me he knows that just as well as I do.

Oakley turns on her heel and marches right back to the car, positively fuming. I'm only barely out of my seat, standing half a step away from the open driver's side door.

"Get in the car, Jamie," she says sharply.

I glance back at her dad, shock obvious on his face, but he's not looking at me. I may not be the brightest, but I know better than to ignore my girl when she's like this, so I obediently fold myself back into the car. David firmly ignores the awkward nod I send his way as I back out of the driveway.

I love Oakley to hell and back, but her dad isn't wrong, even if I wish he was. I am good for nothing with no idea what to do with my life.

I reach over to grab her hand, twining our fingers together in an attempt to soothe both of us. She clutches onto me, digging her nails into my skin. It's grounding, knowing that she needs me as much as I need her.

"I love you," she whispers into the quiet.

"I love you, too."

It's not the first time we've said it, not by far, but it feels a little like something new. This time is different, and I don't exactly know how.

“When are you going back to school?” I ask.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

It's an awkward change of subject, but the air between us is so heavy with a million unspoken things, and I suddenly desperately need to know how long I have left with her. Even if her leaving this time won't mean the same thing, I just...need to know.

"I, uh." She cuts herself off, laughing weakly as I turn into the parking lot. "I don't think I'm going back."

I damn near crash the car pulling into a parking spot. I only barely remember to stomp on the brakes through my shock, my head whipping to the side so I can stare at her, eyes wide.

"What do—what?"

She lets out a nervous chuckle, glancing around the parking lot, and I realize there are cars behind us, waiting for me to shake off my stupor and get out of the way. I pull into an empty spot, trying to make my brain work again.

"I'm staying here," she says. "I'm transferring to the state university with Phoebe. I want to stay here. I...I want to stay with you, Jamie."

The look she gives me is hesitant and hopeful, and I won't deny that a part of me is rejoicing. Mostly, I just feel guilty. I can't let her throw everything out for me.

"You can't do that, Oakley," I stammer out. "It's not like I want you to go, but you can't just stay here."

Her gaze shifts from excited to entirely unimpressed, and she unbuckles her seatbelt

without a word. She steps out of the car as I scramble to explain myself, but she pays no attention to the words falling frantically from my lips. I rush to turn the car off and unbuckle my own seatbelt, but before I have the chance to spring out to chase after her, my door opens.

Oakley is standing there, looking somewhere between amused and exasperated, and she holds her hand out to me expectantly. I hesitate before taking it and allowing her to help me out of the car. My leg twinges in protest at the movement, but I power through the discomfort.

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do.” Her voice is firm, but affectionate, and she leans up to press a chaste kiss to my lips. “I know you think I’m too good for anything but Harvard, but I’m going to be happier here than I was in New York. My mind is made up, Jamie.”

I know that arguing will only upset her, but I can’t help myself. It’s a waste of her potential, and she’s got too much going for her to throw it away just to be here with me. I open my mouth to disagree, but before I get a proper chance, an insufferably nasally voice interrupts us.

“Oakley Montgomery!” Savannah crows, all fake sugar and disdain. “Didn’t expect to see you back here. What, New York not good enough for the perfect little princess?”

Oakley turns slowly, blinking in outraged surprise, but the frigid smile on her face doesn’t waver for a second. Her hand is squeezing mine so hard it hurts. I can see the tension in her shoulders. Her voice is bitter and caustic in a way I’ve never heard before.

“Savannah,” she says drily. “I came back for the holidays. People usually spend them with their families and people they love.”

She leans back against my chest pointedly with that statement, and I feel affection well in my heart. I wrap my good arm around her waist, glaring disgustedly at Savannah.

Savannah's face flames with embarrassment, but it's replaced by a nasty smile seconds later.

"You two are back together? That's so cute," she drawls sarcastically. "Jamie, you'll call me when she dumps you after the holidays, right?"

Oakley and I stiffen with rage together, and her nails dig into my arm possessively.

"You wretched littlebi?—"

"Oakley, baby," I cut her off, holding her tight against me as she struggles to go after Savannah. "She's not worth it. Ignore her."

"Get lost," Oakley spits. "Looking at you is ruining my appetite."

Savannah rolls her eyes and storms off, raising her middle finger at us as she retreats.

We both stand there, frustrated and raw at such a blatant reminder of the night we lost each other. I almost expect Oakley to ask me to take her back home, and I'm trying to think of ways to convince her that we can make things work. She just grabs my hand and steps toward the front door of the diner, glancing back with a relieved smile.

"C'mon, I worked up an appetite dealing with all this bullshit," she says.

I laugh, following behind her obediently. She walks slowly, careful not to stress my injuries, and I'm filled with so much affection that I can't help stopping her before we step inside. She looks back at me, but doesn't have a chance to say anything before I

wrap my hand around the back of her neck. I pull her forward and lean down to take her lips in a kiss.

She smells like my sheets and she's so soft against me. I smile into the kiss, and she meets it with her own grin.

"You know," I murmur against her lips, "it's kind of a turn on to see you get all worked up like that over me."

She snorts out a laugh, tapping her hand in a playful hit against my uninjured shoulder.

"Shut up," she says with a chuckle. "Stop getting in the way of me and my waffles."

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

I grin, so in love with her that I can't find the words to say it, and pull the door open for her.

"Yes, ma'am."

Chapter Sixteen

OAKLEY

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but it's good to see you two back together," Bo says.

I glance over at him with a grin, watching Jamie navigate his way back to us with a cup of punch in his hands. He's healing every day, and he's even stronger than he was a week ago.

"Never thought I'd see the day where you approved of Jamie Walker," I tease.

"Kid grew on me, unfortunately," Bo grumbles.

I toss my head back on a laugh. It feels so good to be back home. Jamie and I are together again, I have my family right here, Phoebe and I spent a ridiculous amount of time getting ready for this party and absolutely trashed her room trying on a million different outfits. Neither of us are close with the guy who decided to throw the party, but I'm pretty sure he and Jamie were friendly in high school. Most of the big parties we went to in high school were at this abandoned barn, so it's a familiar scene.

Things finally feel right again, and my heart is light.

Jamie is wearing a dark green shirt that almost matches the color of my glittery mini dress, and his legs look miles long in his tight jeans. Phoebe's hair is in perfectly set waves, her makeup flawless and vibrant as always. She ran off to go to the bathroom a little while ago, so I'm sure it'll be at least half an hour before we see her again. I've been inundated with people wanting to say hi now that I'm back in town, too. Bo isn't wearing anything special, no surprise there, but he actually looks like he's enjoying himself for once.

It finally feels like I'm where I'm supposed to be.

"Out of lemonade, sorry, baby," Jamie says, holding out a cup. "They had tea and punch, I figured you'd want the punch."

I grin fondly, taking the cup of punch from his hand and leaning up to catch his lips in a kiss. He knows better than almost anyone just how huge my sweet tooth is.

I see the bright blue of Phoebe's dress seconds before she comes crashing into my side like a giggly tornado. There's a red cup of some strong-smelling alcohol in her hand, and her cheeks are flushed pink.

"Oh, y'all aren't going to believe who I just saw," Phoebe says breathlessly, leaning heavily against my arm as she laughs.

My stomach tenses in anxiety for a second. I swear to God, if she says Savannah is here, I'm leaving right the fuck now.

"Spit it out, Pheeb," Bo says, pulling the red cup from her hand and downing the contents himself.

She frowns at him, but doesn't outright argue with him. He's not a ball buster about it, but he doesn't let either of us drink if he's around. I'm sure he's not dumb enough to believe that neither of us have had a drink or two at a party before, but I won't deny that it makes me feel safer, knowing he's watching out for us both.

"Your sisters are arguing with some guy out front," she says.

I glance at Bo in confusion for a second before I realize that Phoebe is looking at both me and Jamie. For fuck's sake.

Maggie is bad enough on her own, but her and Penny together are an unstoppable force of teenage brattiness. I tug at Jamie's good arm, already marching toward the open barn doors. The last thing I want to deal with is our little sisters causing trouble, but at least it's something I'm used to.

I hear Maggie's voice before we even make it outside, and I roll my eyes at the sass dripping from her tone.

"Magnolia Melody Montgomery!" I shout.

Maggie's head snaps to the side, and she greets me with the most disinterested sneer I've ever seen on a sixteen-year-old, which is saying a lot. Her hair is set in perfect ringlets, tied up in flouncy pigtails, and she's wearing a skintight black dress I'm pretty sure she stole from my closet.

Little shit.

"Penny, I swear to God," Jamie says as we close the distance.

Penny at least has the decency to look ashamed, but she's half hiding behind my sister, ready to follow Maggie's lead.

The boy in front of them looks a second away from fainting, his face flaming in embarrassment. He's got enough brains in his head to make a dash for it when Jamie gestures for him to get out of here. Smart kid. The smart ones aren't usually Maggie's type.

"You two abusing some poor kid?" I ask, thoroughly unimpressed.

Maggie scoffs at me, crossing her arms over her chest.

“He was hitting on Penny,” she says with a sneer. “I told him to fuck off.”

I grab Jamie by the wrist to stop him from immediately hunting the boy down and giving him the standard set of big brother threats. I’m sure the guy has been thoroughly warned off by now. Bo comes sloping over to join us, a fresh beer in his hand. He drapes his arm over Maggie’s shoulders, ignoring her attempts to shake him off.

“Language,” Bo warns lazily.

We all know he’s only saying it to annoy her, but Maggie makes a face at him anyway.

Before I can add my own scolding to the conversation, my eyes catch on a head of blond hair set into a style that seems much too familiar.

Shane?

I blink in surprise, an unpleasant thread of confusion wrapping around my gut as I turn. I arch up onto my tiptoes in an attempt to see over the crowd, but there are too many people milling around to find him again. Why would Shane be here?

“Oakley?” Jamie asks.

He sounds confused as he wraps his arm around my waist, and I realize I was

completely ignoring the conversation. I flush, laughing awkwardly, and toss my hair behind my shoulder.

“Sorry,” I say, leaning into his side. “I thought I saw someone.”

I hesitate a bit on the last word, and I hope neither Jamie or Bo notice anything. Neither of them call me out immediately, and I throw one last glance over my shoulder, just to soothe my curiosity. There’s absolutely no reason for Shane to be here, and it’s not like he’s the only blond guy with a shaggy haircut in the whole world.

“Listen, uh, Oakley and I were going to head out. I promised to take her stargazing,” Jamie says, drawing my attention back. “It was good to see y’all. Penny, if you’re not home in half an hour, I’m calling Dad.”

I shoot him a glance, a grin tugging at my lips, but I don’t say anything. He didn’t say anything about going stargazing earlier, but Jamie does have a habit of surprising me.

Bo raises his beer in a lazy salute, his arm still slung over a sullen Maggie’s shoulders. Penny stands to the side of them, looking down at her boots in embarrassment. Maggie’s always been the more outgoing of the two of them, even if Penny gets them into more trouble.

“Drive safe,” he says.

“Always,” Jamie promises, squeezing my waist affectionately.

“We’ll see you guys later, I guess,” I say. “Get the two of them home safe?”

She rolls her eyes at me and scoffs, trying to shrug Bo’s arm off her shoulders.

“I’m not akid,” she says with a sneer on her glossy lips.

Bo and I make almost identical sounds of disbelief, and Penny tugs on the sleeve of her shirt and shoots her a look. It’s cute to see, and it reminds me a bit of how Phoebe and I used to be when we were sneaking out to go to parties at their age.

“We’re getting in the car right now,” Bo says, ruffling a hand through Maggie’s hair.

She sneers at him, yanking free of his hold to fix her hair, but she doesn’t argue.

“Have fun, you two,” he adds as Jamie starts to pull me away.

His tone makes my cheeks flush, but I know he’s just being an annoying big brother. He’s a little too good at it, if you ask me.

“So,” I drawl, falling into step at Jamie’s side as he leads me toward the truck, “we’re going stargazing?”

“We are,” he says, grinning down at me. “I’m taking you out to our spot. I haven’t been there in forever.”

There’s a twinge of pain in his voice, and I wrap my arm around his waist as a reminder that I’m here now. We found the little creekside clearing when we were still freshman, and we used to spend hours out there at night, fighting off bugs and telling each other dumb jokes. He probably hasn’t been there since we broke up, and I suddenly want to be nowhere else.

I glance up at the sky, chuckling when I realize the clouds are still hanging low and covering most of the stars.

“It might not be a great night for stargazing,” I say, nodding up. “Kind of cloudy.”

“I’m sure we’ll figure something out,” he says.

The teasing heat in his voice sends warmth pooling in my gut, and I swallow hard, leaning against him. We pick up our pace, winding through the haphazardly parked cars that litter the wide expanse of open grass. I’m glad that we parked closer to the road, because it makes pulling away and getting on the road a million times easier. Our spot isn’t far from here, and my blood hums under my skin as we get closer and closer.

I scoot across the bench seat in Jamie’s truck to lean against him as he pulls onto the narrow trail that leads to the clearing. We usually just sit in the cab and chat—or make out for hours on end—when we come out here, so it’s a surprise when he parks and reaches for the door.

“We’re sitting outside?”

“I brought blankets and pillows,” he says with a proud smile. “I wanted to get some fresh air and have time alone with you.”

His smile is sweet and a little shy, and I can never say no to him when he looks at me like that. I steal a kiss from him before following him out of the truck.

True to his word, there’s a pile of blankets and pillows folded neatly in the bed of the truck. He pulls the tailgate down and clambers up with a wince. His leg has been bothering him less the past few days, but I still cringe at the reminder of how seriously he was injured. I climb up after him, helping settle the pile of blankets into a cozy little nest for the two of us to curl up in.

It's one of the most romantic dates we've ever been on, even though the stars aren't out, and I snuggle into his side. I pull the corner of one of the spare blankets over my bare legs, wanting to fight off the chill for as long as I can, but Jamie immediately slides it out of the way, replacing the cotton with his palm.

"Jamie, it's cold," I scold him with a giggle. "I thought we were supposed to be stargazing."

He grins at me, incorrigible as ever, and ignores my attempts to pull the blankets back up over the two of us. The air isn't that cold, and the warmth of Jamie's hand on my thighs combined with the excitement of it all is making my blood sing in my veins.

"I'll keep you warm, baby," he says, a wicked smile on his lips. "And I'll have you seeing stars one way or another."

The heat in his voice makes me shiver, and I shift slightly atop the blankets as his hand slides up higher. His fingers tease their way beneath the hem of my dress, the rough slide of his calluses just as perfect as I remember.

Even with all the blankets Jamie laid out for us to stargaze, the bed of his truck isn't the most comfortable. It's easy to forget about as he kneels between my legs, though.

His mouth is demanding on mine when he steals my lips in a kiss, and I moan when his tongue tangles with mine. He wastes no time pushing my dress up around my waist, his fingers tugging at the hem of my panties as soon as he gets hold of the fabric. I arch up into his touch helpfully, looping an arm around his good shoulder for stability as he strips them down my legs. The cool air is a shock against my bare cunt, but Jamie doesn't let me suffer for long.

His fingers map their way up the inside of my thigh toward my clit with no hesitation. My breath comes out on a stuttered moan at the first touch, and I feel him grin against

my mouth.

“Lay back for me, princess,” he says as he pulls back from the kiss.

I can barely think straight as he rubs maddeningly slow over my clit, my legs jolting with every shift of his thumb. He rearranges me like a doll, and I offer no resistance. Sluggish, lazy pleasure is warming me from the inside out, and I let him spread my legs and hook them over his shoulders happily.

I gasp at the feeling of his mouth on the inside of my knee, watching raptly as he traces a slow line up my thigh with lips and teeth and tongue.

“Jamie.”

My voice is weak and warbling, soft in the quiet of the night air. I don’t know what I even want to say, but I think he understands anyway. I raise a hand to his head, scratching my nails over his scalp as I twine my fingers through his hair, and he eagerly pushes into the touch.

“Let me take care of you,” he whispers.

His breath is warm against the crease of my thigh, and there’s a wealth of thought in that statement, but all I can do is nod. He’s all I’ve ever wanted.

I want to be taken care of, but only if it’s by him.

“Please.”

He doesn’t make me wait, replacing the chill of the November air with the warmth of his mouth. It immediately drives every thought out of my head.

This is how it's always been with Jamie—overwhelming and perfect and so intense it leaves me shaking. I fall into the bliss of his touch, letting him bring me up and over the edge over and over until I can hardly breathe. I muffle my noises into the pillows, my cheeks flaming in both embarrassment and arousal.

By the time Jamie takes mercy on me, my vision is blurry and my chest is rising in frantic, gasping breaths. He's hard in his jeans, but he doesn't make any move to take his own pleasure, and I'm too overstimulated to form words as he pulls my dress back down.

“Look at that, the stars are out,” Jamie says, tugging one of the blankets up to cover us.

I glance up at the sky, a laugh bubbling up from my lips.

“You're ridiculous,” I say, giggling.

How did I ever think I could want a life without this man by my side?

Chapter Seventeen

OAKLEY

Let the record show that I am not one for Black Friday shopping.

Shopping in general? Totally fine, even fun for the most part. But wading through crowds of people ready to fistfight over the latest smart toaster? Not really my scene.

Actually, I don't really think that my mom or Maggie are all that excited about it, either, but it's better than being at home right now. Dad is...less than pleased with my choice to get back together with Jamie. Thanksgiving was a chillier affair than usual because of that, not to mention that Maggie is still in trouble for sneaking out the night of the party.

So, no matter how much we didn't care about stalking the sales, when Mom suggested we head over to the next town over to go shopping, both Maggie and I jumped at the opportunity.

At the very least, we can get lunch at that little Mediterranean place Mom loves so much.

"Maggie, don't you think this would be nice for school?" she asks.

She's holding up a striped sweater that both Maggie and I can agree is atrocious,

which says a lot, because I think her fashion sense is insane. She makes a disgusted face and turns away without even answering Mom. I swat her on the side of the head lightly for the attitude, but I can't help laughing.

"Maybe let's go for something that a history professor wouldn't wear?" I suggest, taking the sweater from my mom and putting it back on the rack.

"Maybe let's go for a store that doesn't smell like old lady perfume?" Maggie tosses over her shoulder archly.

My mom sighs, but there's a twinkle of affection in her eyes. I hope I was a little less of a brat to her when I was Maggie's age, but I doubt it.

"Alright, kiddo, lead the way."

Maggie almost immediately takes off toward the door, leading us straight out of the store we're in and down the street toward somewhere that's pumping loud music and reeks of bad cologne. My mom and I both wrinkle our noses, making a silent decision to stay outside and find something else to look through while Maggie winds through the crowds in there.

"What about you, honey?" my mom asks as we idly browse through a rack of gaudy dresses outside a boutique a bit down the road.

I hum inquisitively, burying my attention in the rack so I don't have to look her in the eyes.

"Do you want any new clothes for school? I know Kathy said she took you shopping a few times, but I want to make sure you have everything you want," she says. "I'm sure the fashion out there is a bit different from here."

I snort at that, shaking my head in amusement.

“Trust me, I have no interest in dressing like most New Yorkers my age do.”

She grins at me, a relieved light in her eyes. I’m perfectly happy with being comfortable at home and presentable at work. I like clothes that look good on me and are a reasonable price, not clothes that make a statement, or whatever the fashion nerds in New York say.

“That’s good to hear,” she says with a teasing grin. “When are you going back?”

I swallow hard, pulling a dress out to look over it consideringly just to give myself a moment to figure out what to say.

“Uh, not until after Christmas,” I say brightly. “You’ll have me for the whole holiday season.”

My eyes are a little too wide and my voice is a bit tight, my smile wobbly. Thankfully, my mom is busy looking at a rather nice leather jacket that’s discounted heavily.

“That’s good to hear,” she says. “Spring semester doesn’t start until after New Years, right? You should stay for that, too.”

“Yeah, I can do that.” I put the dress back, debating whether I should tell her now or wait until we’re back home and I can break the news to everyone. The impulsive part of me wants to blurt it out, but that’s probably not the best idea. “I’m actually still waiting to figure out my spring semester schedule, so I’m not really sure on dates yet.”

That’s as close to the truth as I can bear to get right now.

My mom raises her head, a confused light in her eyes. She's opening her mouth to say something when my eyes slide past her and land on a face I don't expect to see.

“Shane?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

It's not a mistake this time, Shane is really on the other side of the street, looking down at his phone. His head whips up at the sound of his name, and his eyes widen in first shock and then excitement when he sees me. He raises his hand in a thrilled wave and bounces across the street, a wide smile stretching his cheeks.

"Oakley, what are you doing here?" he asks, wrapping me up in a hug.

I go stiff immediately, but force myself to pat his back before pulling away.

"What are you doing here?" I ask with a baffled laugh.

Maggie rejoins us at that moment, shoving her way in between me and Shane rudely. She's laden with bags and absolutely stinks of the perfumed air from that store, but I'm grateful to have her acting as a barrier nonetheless. I'm totally unprepared to see Shane here, and a little distance is definitely a good thing.

Does this mean that I actually did see Shane at the party last week?

"They didn't have the sweater I wanted in my size," she says, raking her eyes over Shane with a sneer on her face. "Who's this guy?"

I stomp on her foot as subtly as I can, flashing her a look that begs her to behave for once. She meets that look with one of her own, full of disdain and disapproval. My face flames when she glances between Shane and I suspiciously, her brow twitching in an unspoken question.

"Shane is my coworker," I say firmly, my face set in a warning when I look at

Maggie. “We’re both interns with Uncle Ricky.”

“Right,” Maggie drawls.

Shane’s lips twitch in a confused grin, and he looks from me to Maggie and back again.

“Just coworkers?” he asks, raising a brow.

Panic rips through me like fire, and I’m terrified at the thought that he’ll bring up the single awkward kiss we shared. It’s still kind of a tender subject between Jamie and I, and the last thing I need is for Maggie to bring it up to piss him off.

“I thought we were friends, Oakley, that hurts.” He grins as he says it, and reaches out to rap his knuckles against my arm in a teasing punch. “You’ve only been gone a few weeks, did I really mean so little to you?”

I laugh anxiously, scratching at the back of my neck. I know he only means it jokingly, but both my mom and Maggie are looking at him intensely. I don’t like the looks on either of their faces. Maggie’s brows are scrunched up in suspicious reproach, and I’m starting to think she’s going to bring Shane up as a genuine concern rather than just a way to piss Jamie off, which is about a hundred times worse. My mom, though, is all sparkly eyed and asking him about school and shooting me curious glances.

“I’ve got some family around here,” Shane says, smiling warmly at my mom. “I didn’t realize Oakley lived so close, we didn’t talk much about where we came from.”

Mom snorts out a scolding little huff in my direction, grinning nonetheless.

“Well, we’re all getting together tomorrow night for dinner, why don’t you stop by?” she asks.

My eyes blow wide and my mouth drops open in total shock. I know I didn’t tell her anything about Shane and I, but this is absolutely the worst idea she’s ever had. Putting him and Jamie in the same room is going to be nothing short of catastrophic.

Before I have a chance to find a reason to protest, Shane’s smile blooms and he nods excitedly.

“I’d love to!” he says. “Oakley always talked so highly of you and her dad, it’d be a pleasure to get to know the two of you.”

My mom titters a laugh, color high in her cheeks. She’s obviously charmed by him, and I’m just standing here, blindsided, with no idea of what to do.

“I mean, only if you’re okay with it, Oakley,” he says, his brows raised guilelessly. “I don’t want to crash your holiday.”

I stumble over my words, but I just don’t have a reasonable excuse to say no to him. I force my face to settle into a warm smile, shaking my head.

“No, it’d be nice to have you come by,” I insist.

The words sound fake even to my ears, but Shane smiles brightly at hearing them. Maggie shoots me a confused look, and I’m sure she’ll shower me with a million invasive questions that I don’t really have answers to as soon as we get home.

“I’ll see you guys tomorrow, then!” Shane says, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “Oakley, can you text me the time and address? I have to get back to my cousin.”

“Sure,” I agree, raising my hand to wave as he steps away.

“It was great to meet you all!”

He fades back into the crowd, but my head is still spinning. I’m pretty sure I mentioned being from Montana at least once. Surely he would have said something if he’s from here, too? He even texted me saying he hoped I had a good holiday trip. If he knew I was from here and he had plans to come back, why didn’t he say anything?

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

Maybe I just forgot. It's not like I didn't have plenty to think about while I was in New York.

Regardless, this is going to go badly. Like, really, really badly. I should probably tell Jamie tonight when we get back home, but he's not going to be happy about it.

God forbid I have a relaxing holiday season.

Chapter Eighteen

JAMIE

Oakley texted me about seeing that scumbag when she was out shopping with her mom and Maggie. I didn't take it well, which is seemingly exactly what Oakley expected.

It's partially a desire to prove to her family that I can be a rational adult that has me standing from the couch when I hear a knock on the door. I won't deny that it's at least half because I want to get a good look at this piece of shit and make sure he knows how this is going to go. Oakley is washing her hands as I head to the door, and I ignore it when she tells me to wait for her.

I pull the door open with what I hope is an intimidating scowl, raking my eyes over the guy standing on my girlfriend's doorstep. His blond hair is combed into loose waves, his eyes strikingly blue and staring straight through me like I'm not even there.

I hate him instantly.

Shane pauses when I hold my hand out, but takes it in a firm shake.

“Sean, right?” I ask, squeezing down harshly on his hand.

“Shane,” he corrects, squeezing right back. “You’ve got quite the grip on you.”

My nostrils flare in annoyance at the thinly veiled mockery of what I used to be. He probably doesn’t even know, but it’s a painful reminder. I pull my hand back, not offering him my name. Oakley rushes up seconds later, smiling widely at Shane. It looks a little strained as she glances between the two of us, but she shakes it off to make introductions.

“Shane, this is my boyfriend, Jamie,” Oakley introduces, smiling awkwardly as we stand in the doorway. “Jamie, this is my coworker, Shane.”

“We just met,” Shane says, a million watt smile lighting his face. “But you know I’m really here for some home cooking. My aunt’s specialty is tv dinners.”

Hearing Oakley laugh at his stupid joke makes a muscle in my jaw tick, but I swallow back the vitriol I want to spew at him.

“Come on, I’ll introduce you to everyone,” she says, waving him inside.

Hailey and David poke their heads around the corner at the sound of voices, and I stand back to watch as they welcome him in. It’s all warm and smiles and easy trust, nothing like they’ve ever treated me. They’ve seen me as a pest and a bad influence from day one, my father’s son through and through. Shane is syrupy sweet and charming toward Oakley’s mom and respectful to her dad. Both Bo and Maggie give him a wide berth, Bo watching the introductions idly from the kitchen with a bottle of

beer in his hand. Maggie looks like she swallowed something sour, turning a sneer toward Shane when he holds a hand out to her.

My estimation of her raises several notches, even if she is a bratty teenager.

Everything is a whirlwind of questions and chairs scraping against the floor as we sit down to dinner. Shane is, of course, from a great family and his parents are both doctors. He's loaded and gets perfect grades and I have to clench my fist under the table as I listen to Hailey coo over what a wonderful young man he is.

It's like they're replacing me while I'm still sitting here.

Shane is bragging about how good Oakley is at her job and how everyone in New York just adores her, and her parents are lapping it up. The light in his eyes when he looks at Oakley is way too familiar and affectionate for my taste, and I catch him staring for a few seconds too long every few minutes.

It takes a lot to stop myself from kicking him beneath the table.

I focus on my food and the fact that Oakley is sitting next to me, not him, but every word that comes out of his mouth tests my resolve.

"These last few weeks have been rough without you around," Shane says, turning a smile Oakley's way. "It'll be good to have you back in the office after the holidays."

I've been clenching my jaw so hard my teeth are on the verge of cracking, and the sight of him aiming that look at my fucking girl is enough to make me explode.

My fork snaps down onto the table with a crack. Oakley immediately reaches for my arm, digging her nails in through the fabric of my flannel as she forces me to stay in my seat.

“I’m sure you’ll manage on your own,” she says to Shane with an awkward smile. “I’ve actually decided to stay here. I’m transferring to the state college with Phoebe so I can be closer to home.”

Silence falls over the table like snow, bit by bit and then so heavy it’s impossible to move through. The clatter of cutlery slows to a stop as the air fills with shock and tension. Anger flickers over Shane’s face, but he masks it too quickly for anyone else to catch. It makes my lip curl up in a sneer.

“Oakley?” David asks, glancing between her and her mother with wide eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“What are you talking about, honey?” Hailey asks tightly, an uncomfortable laugh coloring her tone.

“I just don’t think New York is for me.” Oakley is trying hard to sound casual, but she’s gripping my thigh beneath the table. “I’ve been thinking a lot while I’ve been there, and I’m just happier at home. All of my friends are here, and I know you didn’t want me all the way out there alone, right, Daddy?”

A million different emotions flit over David’s face, but Hailey answers before he gets a chance.

“You’re not alone.” Her lashes flutter over golden eyes as she blinks in confused frustration. “Kathy and Ricky verykindly offered you the spare room in the penthouse.”

Oakley’s cheeks color with embarrassment, and her fingers go slack on my leg as she struggles to find the right words.

“Yeah, and it’s been really nice, but?—”

“Why don’t we talk about this later, Oakley? Just the family.” Her mom’s eyes linger on my face before she picks her fork back up. “Let’s finish enjoying dinner, hm?”
hmm?

Her words hold the kind of finality that there’s no arguing with, and I swallow down all the words I want to say. Nothing I have to add will help right now, and Oakley can speak for herself.

Conversation slowly picks up , but it's stilted and uncomfortable. Hailey tries to make small talk with Shane, and he does a pretty good job of it, but I can see the annoyance under the surface of his calm facade. Everyone clears their plates rather quickly, the air thick with tension. There's no offer of dessert.

"Thank you so much for dinner," Shane says, a wide smile on his face. "I've got a bit of a drive to get back home, so I should get going."

"Of course," Hailey says. "Can I send you home with leftovers?"

"That's so sweet of you! I think I'll get in trouble if I bring home food that's better than my aunt's cooking, though."

Hailey laughs, charmed, as she stands and starts piling plates up.

"Alright, then, you just get home safe," she says. "Kids, help clean up, would you?"

Everyone jumps at the opportunity to escape the still-awkward atmosphere, and soon Shane and I are the only two without a platter of food to help pack up.

"I'll walk you out," I offer, my smile all teeth and danger.

Shane meets it with a wide grin, a red flag to a bull if I've ever seen one.

"Sure thing, buddy," he agrees. "It was lovely to meet you all! I look forward to getting to know you better sometime."

Hailey tosses a goodbye and a wave over her shoulder as she and the rest of the family picks up the table. Oakley waves, too, but no one else answers him, and I wrap my good hand around his bicep as I practically drag him to the door.

“Awful kind of you to walk me all the way out to my car,” Shane says as the door closes behind us.

“Yeah, well, someone needs to make sure you actually fuck off,” I snarl. “You might have fooled her parents with your little golden boy act, but I see right fucking through you, buddy.”

His perfectly sculpted blond brows raise as he laughs right in my face. It takes every ounce of self control to stop myself from plowing my fist into his pearly white teeth.

“I’m sure you do, man,” he says with a chuckle. “I’m not doing anything but being a good friend to Oakley. If you think she’s going to stay with an ex bull rider without a penny to his name, you can believe that. I’ll be here when she realizes she deserves better.”

Fury flashes through me like wildfire, and I step right up into Shane’s face. My teeth are bared like a wild animal, and I can feel my muscles bunching, gearing up for a fight. He doesn’t flinch back, leveling me with an unimpressed glance.

“Fuck you,” I spit. “You have no fucking clue what Oakley wants. Stay the fuck away from her.”

Shane shrugs and steps back to pull his keys from his pocket. He reaches out to pat my arm, clapping his hand down on my bicep. Pain shoots down from the bruising to where the rest of my arm sits in the cast, but I refuse to show it. He shakes his head, looking at me with something that might pass for pity if not for the grin on his face.

“I’m not going to do that, Jamie,” he says. “I’m going to keep coming around until Oakley or her family tells me to leave her alone. And, well, I don’t want to be that guy, but I think her family likes me pretty well. Don’t think you can say the same, bud.”

He sounds so goddamn smug, but it's hidden under a veil of casual nonchalance.

I curl my hands into fists as he climbs into his car and pulls out of the driveway, shooting me a cheery wave. There's no any way for me to calm myself down right now, and I know what he said is true. He may be a fucking asshole, and I don't trust him as far as I can throw him, but there's a thread of truth in his words.

Oakleydoesdeserve better, even if she insists that I'm what she wants. And her parents have never approved of our relationship.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

Shane would be a perfect Prince Charming to come riding in and take her away from me.

But like fuck will I let that happen again.

I lost Oakley once, and I only got her back by the skin of my teeth. I'm not letting my girl go again, come hell or high water.

"You trust the kid?"

I whirl to see Maggie leaning against the porch railing, her arms crossed over her chest and a pout on her perfectly glossed lips.

"What?"

"Blondie," she says, nodding her chin toward the driveway with a sneer. "I don't like him."

I laugh when I realize she was referring to someone five years older than her when she said kid. My gaze travels down the driveway, the vision of Shane waving at me with a wide smile on his face still seared into my mind.

"Yeah," I say with a sigh. "He's a dick."

Maggie rakes her eyes over me, looking like she's waiting for something else. She sighs when I don't elaborate and turns back toward the house.

“I think he’s up to something,” she tosses over her shoulder. “I have my ways. If you don’t find out what it is, I will. I’m not going to let anyone fuck with my sister, Walker.”

Well, that makes two of us.

Chapter Nineteen

OAKLEY

I wakeup to Jamie’s tongue between my thighs.

His hand lays loosely over my mouth, muffling my moans as I shift into his touch. He looks up when I gasp out his name, a wicked grin on his wet lips.

“Morning, princess,” he says, shifting to crawl up my body. “Sorry, I couldn’t wait for breakfast.”

I laugh, pulling him into a kiss and groaning at the taste of myself on his tongue. He ruts his hips down against mine, grinding his cock in a slick slide against my cunt.

“You’re awful,” I tease. “Don’t make me wait, Jamie.”

He chuckles against my lips, but he doesn’t drag out my desperation. My breath hitches as soon as I feel the head of his cock start to slip inside, and I roll my hips up against his, groaning quietly at the feeling of him filling me. He always stretches me out so fucking perfect, and I shake beneath him as he slides the last inch in.

I find his lips in an effort to stop myself from begging for more. He’s still healing up, and I don’t want to push him, but I’ve been craving his touch the entire time I was in New York.

Sue me, I'm greedy for it now.

I arch against him, slowly starting my own rhythm beneath him as he drives in and out of my body. His good hand is on my breast, toying with my nipple in a way that's making my mind go blank, and it only takes a few long, deep strokes to make me see stars. Pleasure washes over me, so perfect it almost hurts, and I cling to Jamie as I chase the wave of it. My nails dig into his back as I fall from the edge, my orgasm slamming into my me so hard it leaves me trembling.

He follows me over almost immediately, whispering my name against my lips as he pumps me full.

We lay together as we come down, clinging to each other and basking in the afterglow. I hum happily as I listen to the steady beat of his heart. Mine is almost perfectly in sync with his.

He pulls out when we both stop shaking, slumping down on top of me again with no grace.

"I need to go home," I say with a laugh, pushing at his good shoulder. "I have to talk to my parents about school, and I promised Phoebe we'd get lunch."

Jamie groans theatrically, but lets me hop out of bed so I can get dressed. I had the foresight to bring a change of clothes over last night, so I don't have to go back home in dirty clothes.

"Want me to drive you?" Jamie offers.

I glance out the window at the blanket of snow on the ground with a laugh.

“Please,” I say.

He drags himself out of bed and gets dressed, too. His arm doesn’t seem to be bothering him as much, which soothes my mind.

We head downstairs, thankfully not running into his dad on the way out. The ride over to my house is quiet for the most part, the silence filled with idle chatter and exhausted yawns. He pulls into my driveway a few short minutes later, and I take a deep breath.

Time to face the music.

I lean over the center console to steal one last kiss before hopping out of Jamie’s truck.

“I’ll text you,” I promise. “Drive safe. I love you.”

“I love you, too, princess,” he says.

He pulls away as I climb up the porch steps. I knock the snow off my boots before unlocking the door and stepping inside.

“I’m home!” I call out.

I’m met with tense silence for a minute, but then my mom’s voice sounds from down the hall.

“We’re in the kitchen.”

I round the corner and head for the kitchen, smiling at the sight of my dad wolfing down a sandwich. He’s covered in half melted snow and dirt, and I’m sure he’ll be even filthier by the time dinner rolls around. My mom is washing dishes in the sink, her back to the room.

I share a nervous glance with my dad, biting back a grin at the thought that I feel like a teenager missing curfew again.

“Can we talk, Mama?” I ask, taking a seat next to my dad.

She slings the rag over her shoulder with a sigh and joins us at the table. My dad looks a bit like a deer in the headlights, and I have to stop myself from laughing as he slowly sets his sandwich down and tries to look serious.

“Is this about school?” my mom asks.

I nod hesitantly, more than a little scared to meet her eyes.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier.” I knew I was going to stay home as soon as I made the decision to come back, I just wasn’t ready to admit it out loud yet. “I know it’s important to you that none of us waste the opportunities we get, but I’m just not cut out for New York. I belong here, with all of you.”

A long sigh falls from her lips, and I can hear both the frustration and acceptance in the sound. She glances over to my dad, who is trying to hide his excitement at the prospect of me coming back home and doing a pretty shit job.

“You know I never wanted you to go so far from home,” he says, failing to keep a grin off his face. “I’ve got no complaints about you coming back home, Oakley. I just

want you to be sure that you're coming back home for the right reasons."

I grimace, shifting uncomfortably in my seat. Part of me hoped that he would leave the whole thing with Jamie alone, but I should have known that was too much to ask.

"I'm coming back because I want to."

"As long as it makes you happy, I want you here, kiddo," he says. "I just want to know that you're coming back for yourself, and not for some boy things will never work out with."

The words cut deep, and my mouth drops open in shock and hurt. I know my dad doesn't approve of Jamie, but hearing it so bluntly makes acid curdle in my stomach. Does he have so little faith in my decisions? What kind of life will Jamie and I be able to build together if this is how he's going to be forever?

"Don't talk about Jamie like that!" I swallow harshly, forcing myself to calm down. "This isn't about him."

My dad's frown deepens, but my mom thankfully steps in.

"She's right, David. This isn't about the Walker boy," she says firmly. "Oakley, if you want to come back home, I'll support your decision. I'm not going to force you to do something you don't want to."

My frustration takes second place to a swell of guilt. I know how hard my mom worked for us to have everything we could ever want, and I don't want to let her down.

"You won't be disappointed in me?" I ask, my voice small.

She smiles warmly at me, standing and walking around the table to wrap me up in a soft hug.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“Honey, I’m so proud of everything you do,” she says. “I’m glad that you tried something new, even if it didn’t work out the way you planned.”

Hearing her say that takes the weight of the world off my shoulders, and I let out a shuddering breath as I wrap my arms around her waist. We stay there as I fight off grateful tears. When she pulls back, I see genuine happiness on her face, and it cements my decision. I’m doing the right thing.

“Thank you,” I say softly. “I promise I’ll work hard, and I’ll talk to Uncle Ricky about starting a branch out here once I graduate.”

My mom ruffles my hair, grinning, as my dad tucks back into his sandwich.

“Let’s start with filling out an application before we talk about graduation,” she chides me, laughing.

“I’m actually going to meet Phoebe for lunch and then head back to her place so I can put my application in before the deadline for next semester.” I stand, pressing a kiss to my mom’s cheek and then to my dad’s before heading for the door. “I’ll see you tonight for dinner?”

“Be home by six!”

“Yes, ma’am,” I promise as I grab my bag and keys from the hook by the door.

My mood is light as I hop into Bo’s truck, and I roll the windows down for the drive into town. The air is crisp with the cool of winter. I sing along to my favorite songs

from high school, enjoying the comfort of being back home again.

The streets are pretty quiet, but it's the middle of the day, so that's to be expected. I pull into a parking spot on the street about half a block away from the diner, planning to get some fresh air and enjoy the scenery.

Almost as soon as I step onto the sidewalk, Shane pops around a corner. His face splits into a wide smile, and he pulls me into a quick hug.

"Oakley! I just texted you asking to meet up, what a coincidence," he says, laughing as he releases me from the hug.

"Oh, sorry, my ringer isn't on," I say. "I'm actually on the way to meet my best friend for lunch, but let's hang out another time?"

Shane waves my words off with one hand as he reaches into his backpack with the other, rotting around.

"I won't take your time up, promise, but I wanted you to have these." He pulls out a stack of papers, handing them over to me. "My aunt Tammy is a lawyer, she deals with blackmail and fraud. I told her I had dinner with you and your parents and your boyfriend, and she was upset to hear you were still with Jamie."

I stare at Shane wordlessly, so confused I don't even know what to do. What does his aunt have to do with any of this? He presses the papers into my hand, smiling sympathetically.

"I thought he seemed like an alright guy, but I guess his dad and your dad have issues," he continues. "Anyway, she pulled these up from when your dad was considering pressing a case against him, and it was worse than I expected. I just...I thought you should see it. I don't want you getting wrapped up in anything

dangerous.”

My brows cinch together in pure bewilderment, but I glance down at the papers. I know my dad and Jamie’s butt heads a lot, but neither of them have ever made it seem like there was serious bad blood between them. I’ve never heard anything about blackmail, or a criminal case being pressed. There are more pages than I expect, and I rifle through them awkwardly on the sidewalk.

My confusion mounts as I skim over them, anger bubbling in my gut. I may not understand everything, but what I do know is that it doesn’t fucking look good.

Does Jamie know about the kind of shit his dad gets up to?

Does he know about all of this?

“I—sorry, I have to go,” I choke out, disoriented and furious. “Thanks for this, Shane.”

He calls something out behind me as I turn tail and dash back toward the truck, but I’m too focused to pay any attention to what he says. I shoot Phoebe an apologetic text telling her that I have to bail, promising to explain everything later.

I need to get back to Jamie’s place and get some answers about all this, fucking now.

Chapter Twenty

JAMIE

I ignore the sound of the front door slamming open. My dad has been in a rotten mood since he realized my injuries would wind up with me retired instead of in a coffin. There was about a day where he was glad I was alive, and then it shifted to cold,

sniping anger since I can no longer ride the circuit.

I damn near jump out of my bed when my bedroom door is pushed open so hard the hinges squeal in protest.

“Oakley?” I ask, baffled. “What’s wrong? I thought you were going to lunch with Phoebe?”

I hiss in a pained breath as I push off the bed, the muscles in my shoulder twinging. Oakley is red in the face and shaking, staring at me like she’s never seen me before in her life. I step forward, holding my good arm out to her.

“Oakley, baby, what?—”

“What the fuck is this?”

The words are accompanied by a stack of papers that get shoved into the center of my chest. The impact forces a wheeze from my lungs, and I stumble back in surprise. Guilt flashes in Oakley’s eyes for just a second as I reach up to fumble for the papers, but her anger returns quickly.

I stumble for words, trying not to let the papers fall, but much more concerned about whatever’s going on with my girl.

“What’s what?” I ask, glancing back and forth between the pages and her face.

It looks like chat messages, something from an old internet messenger that probably doesn’t even work anymore. My brows furrow in confusion when I see my dad’s email linked to half of the messages. The others are listed as coming from David Montgomery.

I blink in shock, bringing the papers closer to my face as I read through the exchanges. They’re marked up with someone’s handwritten notes, dates and legalese that doesn’t make any sense littered around the text. What does any of this have to do with blackmail? Our dads don’t get along, but I’ve never heard anything about the reason behind it. My dad’s always said that David was a thief, but everything here points at my dad being the one who was trying to extort Oakley’s dad.

“I—where’d you even get these?”

She laughs humorlessly, her hands curling into fists at her sides.

“So youknew?” she accuses. “You knew what your dad did this whole time, and you’ve just let me believe that they had some random feud we’d never get the story behind? What the fuck, Jamie? I can’t be with someone who’d keep something like this from me! How am I?—”

“Whoa, whoa, this is the first time I’ve ever seen this!” I cut her off, trying to stop myself from shouting. “I don’t know anything about—about fuckingblackmail. Jesus Christ, Oakley, do you think I’d keep something like that from you?”

The dull ache of my still healing muscles has nothing on the way my heart cracks open in my chest every time she looks at me like that.

She doesn’t answer me, her face twisting into something conflicted and angry. I feel the loss of her eyes on me like a physical blow when she turns her gaze to the wall on the other side of the room.

Is it just going to be like this, over and over? Will I ever get her to trust me?

“Oakley, where did you get this?” I keep my voice even, setting the papers down gently on my bed. My frustration is mounting, but letting myself explode isn’t going to fix anything.

“I ran into Shane,” she admits, still not meeting my eyes. “He said his aunt is a lawyer and she was helping my dad a while back. I guess he decided to drop the case.”

Or he was blackmailed into dropping it.

“Shane?” I scoff, taking a step back from her as the frustration in my gut boils over

into full blown fury. “Your little boyfriend from New York gave you some weird fucking papers, and you just believed him?”

Oakley turns hurt eyes onto me. Her mouth drops open in shock and anger, but I can’t bring myself to regret the words.

She doesn’t really trust this guy more than she trusts me, does she?

“Are you fucking serious?” Her voice rises closer to a shout with every word, and she advances on me to press a finger into my chest. “This is about us! You’re really going to try to make it about Shane?”

“You don’t know him, Oakley! You don’t know anything about this guy!” I shout. “What, his random aunt who we’ve never heard anything about just so happens to have paperwork from a case that she never even tried? And she decided to give it to him because, what, he fucking asked? You can’t just jump to conclusions like this!”

My chest heaves with the force of my breath as I try desperately to calm myself down. I don’t want to yell at her. I don’t want to fight with her in the first place, especially not about this. All I want is for things to be easy again, for us to trust each other like we did in high school, to have each other’s backs and never waver for a second.

There are tears in her eyes, and I want nothing more than to wrap her up in my arms and promise to fix this. I know that this isn’t something I can fix on my own.

“There’s something off about this whole situation,” I say, glad my voice is a little steadier. “There’s something off about Shane, too. You have to see that.”

Her face crumples, and my heart shatters at the sight of a tear streaking down her cheek.

“Leave Shane out of this, Jamie. He’s my friend. He may have feelings I don’t return, but he’s proved that he likes me as a person, not just because he wants to date me,” she says staunchly. “No matter what you think about him, the paperwork doesn’t lie.”

I have to turn away to stop myself from shouting in anger, frustrated and hurt and trying to get a grasp on myself. My shoulders shake with agony and defeat, and the realization that all I can do is give up hurts so much more than I thought it could.

I already lost her once. I swore I’d never let it happen again, but here I am.

All I can do is step back, now, isn’t it?

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“The paperwork doesn’t make sense,” I say, still facing the wall. “It came out of nowhere, and we don’t know anything about it. We should at least talk to our parents about it.”

Oakley is quiet behind me, but I doubt I’d be able to hear her even if she had anything to say. My heart is beating so loud I can hear the blood rushing in my ears, and I want to throw up and collapse into a pile on the floor.

“It doesn’t matter what I believe, about this or about Shane,” I continue. “I love how loyal you are, and how you don’t let anyone talk you out of a decision after you’ve made it, but that’s the problem here. You’ve already chosen what you believe, and you’ll always stand with your dad and with your family.”

It’s a harsh thing to say, especially considering I haven’t done anything to stand up to my dad about his opinion of my relationship. When it comes down to it, I’d pick her over my family in a second. I know she wouldn’t do the same, and that probably makes her a better person than I am, but it doesn’t make it hurt any less.

“Wh—Jamie, what is that even supposed to mean?” she asks. “What are you talking about?”

Her voice is wobbling, and when I turn to face her again, I see the guilt in her eyes. I probably look the same, just as destroyed and guilty and angry at myself.

“I’m never going to be good enough for you, Oakley.”

The words come out of my mouth like shards of broken glass, jagged and raw. I

slump back against the wall behind me, all of the fight draining from my body. My energy dissipates with it, leaving me feeling shaky and like I'm seconds from falling to the ground and sobbing.

"You don't get to make that decision," she says sharply.

Panic is creeping around the edges of her eyes, lingering on the edge of her words. I never thought things would go this way, but I can't keep holding her back.

I want my girl to be happy, and if she can't trust me, she'll never be happy with me.

"Okay," she says, stepping back and taking a deep breath. "Let's just—how about we take a break? We're both upset. Let's sit down for a minute."

I wish I could agree, but I find myself shaking my head before I can even think about it. It's like ripping a bandaid off, I guess. That's never hurt this bad, but I can't back out now.

Oakley deserves a better life than I could ever give her.

"Look at me, baby," I whisper, my voice shaking as I try to hold my tears back. "I'm barely out of highschool, and my career is already over."

She shakes her head, tears streaming down her face.

"Don't say that, Jamie," she begs.

"Your life is just beginning. You're going to do amazing things, Oakley." My words sound so hollow, even though I believe them with my whole heart. Maybe it's just because I feel like an empty shell. "I wanted our lives to be together. I just—I can't give you that anymore. I have no idea who I am, I have no idea what I can do. I can't

take care of you, I can't support you. I have no income anymore, and I have no idea what else to do. The circuit was the only thing I knew how to do, and it's gone now. I'm not worth it."

Trying to stop myself from crying proves futile, and the image of Oakley goes blurry as my vision fills with tears. Panic rears its head at the thought that she'll eventually be nothing more than a blurry memory, and a sob tears free from my throat.

"Wait, Jamie, don't..." Oakley sounds just as distraught as I feel, struggling for words and choking on the lump in her throat. "That's not true! I don't need you to take care of me, but there's so much you can do. There's so many things you're good at, you'll find something. We can find something."

My eyes are glued to the carpet, the thought of looking her in the eyes right now utterly unbearable.

"You should...you should go back home, Oakley."

She sucks in a pained gasp, the sound lancing straight through my heart.

"Are you breaking up with me?" she asks raggedly.

An agonizing breath sears down my throat at hearing those words out loud, but I don't say anything. I can't look up, can't find the words to make her understand that I only want the best for her. All I can do is stand here silently, listening to the love of my life cry, knowing that I'm the reason she's hurting. It makes me want to vomit.

"Go home."

The sound of papers crumpling in her hands as she grabs them off my bed followed by her footsteps stomping down the hallway doesn't register for a long time.

When it does, all I can do is slide down the wall, collapsing under the weight of my own guilt and pain, and finally allowing myself to properly cry.

Chapter Twenty-One

OAKLEY

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

Once again,I've made a mess of things.

I slam my hands against the steering wheel, sobbing violently as I sit in the driveway. There's no way I can go inside like this, but I can't put this off forever.

The thought of explaining what happened to my parents makes me burst into a fresh wave of tears.

All of this is my fault. I'm impulsive and rash and I didn't give Jamie a chance to explain before I went off on him. He's not the reason our relationship fell apart.Iam.

I keep pushing Jamie away, and he hit the nail on the head as to why. I've never done anything to really stand up to my family about how they see Jamie, and it's been poisoning our future. My complacency has been slowly eating away at the foundation of the life Jamie and I were trying to build together, and I've done nothing but turn a blind eye to it.

I can't keep doing this. Everything was easier in high school, but this is real life. This is my future that I'm watching slip away.

I won't let it go without a fight.

I kill the engine, yank the keys from the transmission, and grab the papers in my fist. There's no use trying to wipe the tears from my face.

All I can do right now is try to clear this whole thing up. I'm going to get some real answers from my dad, the whole story from start to finish. I'm going to get him to

change his mind about Jamie. I refuse to live my life without him, and I refuse to lose my family over it.

I don't bother to kick the snow off my shoes before heading inside, too keyed up to stop until I reach the kitchen. My mom turns around in surprise at the sound of my footsteps, her brows rising in shock when I slam the papers down on the table. I'm sure I look a mess, tears on my face and determination in my eyes, but I don't care.

“Where's Daddy?”

My mom hesitates, looking like she wants to ask a million questions, but she nods her head towards the back door.

“In the barn,” she says. “Want me to go get him for you?”

“Please.”

I've always appreciated my mom's ability to know when to ask questions and when to let me explode. I got my temper from my dad, but I learned how to control it from her. I take as many deep, calming breaths as I can while I wait for her to come back. The papers are a mess, so I focus on smoothing them out and organizing them.

Two sets of footsteps sound up the steps, and the door swings open moments later.

“Oakley?” my dad asks, rushing in with a look of panic on his face. “Are you alright, kiddo?”

I stop him from pulling me into a hug, holding his arms as tight as I can with shaking hands.

“I need you to explain all this, Daddy.”

He glances back at my mom in confusion, but all she can offer him is a shrug. I take a step back and reach for the tissues on the table.

“What is all this, Oakley?” he asks slowly, looking between me and the papers.

“That's what I'm asking you.” I dab at the streaks of mascara under my eyes, smudging the tears away. “I need to know what happened between you and Greg Walker. I won't take no for an answer.”

The air in the room goes heavy and still, and the worry on my dad's face is replaced with frustration. He grits his teeth, huffing out an exasperated sigh.

“This paperwork makes it look like he blackmailed you,” I say, shoving the stack closer to him. “I need to know what happened, Daddy.”

The bubbling anger shifts into confusion, then, and my dad finally actually looks at the papers. His brows knit together as he leafs through them, and he does the last thing I expect.

Helaughs.

“Oakley, where'd you get all of this?” he asks, baffled.

“Please just tell me what's going on, Daddy,” I insist. “Was Greg blackmailing you? Were you trying to sue him?”

“I—Jesus, no, I wasn't suing him,” he says, laughing awkwardly. “I haven't even seen these chats in years. How did you get into my old email? Are these your notes?”

I'm confused beyond words at the sudden change in his demeanor, glancing between him and my mom in shock. She shakes her head in exasperation, rolling her eyes as

she heads back into the kitchen to finish with the dishes.

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“What? No, I got these from Shane,” I say. “He said his aunt Tammy was a lawyer, that these were from a case she was putting together for you a long time ago.”

My mom turns, concern written across her face.

“Shane?” she asks. “Your coworker?”

“I—yes. Why does that matter?”

She shoots a look at my dad, but he’s too busy poring over the papers to catch it.

“What did you say his last name was?” she asks carefully.

I stare at her, my mouth dropped open in confusion and annoyance. There are more important things to talk about than Shane, for fuck’s sake. Why does everyone keep bringing him up?

“Wallace, I think?”

My dad’s head swings up at that, and the confusion on his face shifts to anger. He and my mom share a look that holds the weight of a million words.

“You said Shane’s aunt was named Tammy, right?” he says slowly.

I nod.

“I think we need to have a conversation with your friend.” His voice is caustic, his

face screwed up in a scowl. “Did he tell you he’s the nephew of the financial advisor I fired when you were young?”

A befuddled, shocked laugh falls from my lips. Why would Shane have any connection to my family at all? Peter Wallace is a scumbag who got chased out of town for embezzling money from several people. His lawyer wife covered his tracks. But Wallace isn’t that uncommon of a last name, right? It’s just a coincidence.

“His uncle is why we almost went bankrupt, Oakley,” my mom says, her voice dark and heavy. “Whatever he’s trying to do, it’s nothing good.”

Understanding falls like a sack of bricks when I remember how my parents met Peter Wallace in the first place. His best friend is Mark Ward, another man who used to spend a lot of time—and money—at the rodeo.

Mark Ward, Savannah Ward’s fucking father.

Oh, that wretched littlebitch.

Was she even trying to go after Jamie, or was she just trying to break us up so Shane would have a shot with me? Rage fills me like fire, and I have to bite down harshly on my tongue to stop myself from screaming.

There’s still other things to figure out.

“But what about these?” I ask, clawing for something that I can actually understand.

“These are just old emails between Greg and I,” my dad says, sitting down at the table to look at the pages more closely. “Half of them aren’t even in here, but I never tried to sue him. He may be an asshole, but he never did anything illegal.”

“So what even happened?” I ask, annoyed and desperate for a real answer. “You and Greg Walker have been at each other's throats since I was a kid. If it wasn't blackmail, what was it?”

My dad puts the papers down, sighing heavily. He won't meet my eyes, and he's tapping his knuckles over the table the way he always does when he's anxious.

“You tell her or I will,” my mom says bluntly, not turning around from where she's drying plates.

He blows out a breath and scratches at the back of his head, but he finally answers me.

“We made a bet,” he says, waving his hand in the air in annoyance. “I lost a lot of money. He would never admit that he rigged it, and we fell out.”

“Abet?” I swear to God, if we've been playing this family feud game for so long over something stupid, I'm fit to walk right out. “What was it even about?”

My dad waves the question off, pushing up from the table. He has the papers in his hand, and I stand, following him as he heads into the kitchen.

“Look, Oakley, it was a long time ago.” He pulls a bottle of whiskey down from the cabinet, and my suspicion piques immediately. “It's not important.”

I snag the bottle from his hand and take several steps back holding it out of his reach. I'm getting answers one way or another.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“That's enough!” My mom’s voice rings out sharply, and both my dad and I jump as she slaps her palm down on the counter. “This whole thing has been absolutely ridiculous, and I'm done entertaining the charade.”

My dad’s face flushes and he glances off to the side. She waits a beat before sighing and turning to me.

“Your father and Greg used to make bets on the circuit, back when Greg trained a lot of the riders,” she says. “You know Chuckles?”

I blink in confusion, slowly nodding my head. Everyone in town knows Chuckles. He's an old drunk that performs as a clown during rodeo season and drinks his liver half to death for the rest of the year. To be fair, if I had been hit by bulls as many times as he had, I'd probably drink, too.

But what does a rodeo clown have to do with any of this?

“Your father bet Greg that Chuckles would get hit by a bull, like usual. Bet him five grand, even though I told him not to,” she adds, glaring at my dad. “It was the only show that Chuckles managed to get out of the ring in time. He wasn't drunk for once, and he jumped the fence.”

I stare at her in absolute shock, trying to wrap my mind around this.

A clown. My dad has been a dick to Jamie this whole time over a fucking clown?

“The fucker rigged it,” my dad says with a scoff. “He told Chuckles not to drink that

night so he could win the bet.”

“He offered to give you your money back!” my mom argued, throwing her hands in the air. “You’re just too damn prideful to admit you lost.”

My dad goes to respond to her, and I can tell they’ve had this conversation a million times, but I hold a shaking hand up to stop them. My whole world is spinning off center right now. I have to be misunderstanding something.

“Your issues with Jamie’s dad are because of a bet that you lost about Chuckles?” My voice scrapes up my throat, raw and disbelieving. “You spent year trying to discourage my relationship with Jamie because of a fucking clown! Do you have any idea how crazy that sounds? I love Jamie! I love him like you love mom, and I’ve been so scared that I’ll have to choose between him and you one day. You have to understand how this affects me, too!”

I’m shouting by the end of it, my hands balled into fists at my sides. I’ve harbored so many doubts, so many worries about if the relationship between our families can ever be fixed so Jamie and I can be together.

“Now, listen Oakley?—”

“No!” I shout. “You listen! You figure out a way to fix this, now! Apologize to Greg, go have a beer and refuse to talk about your feelings, I don’t care! I know you’re a prideful man, Daddy, and I know you don’t like to lose. But you have to fix this, or the next thing you lose will be me.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

OAKLEY

I leave my dad shell shocked and silent in the kitchen. Everything feels shaky and out of focus, my breathing shallow and fast. I make it out to the tree line at the edge of the property before breaking down entirely.

The snow is deep enough that it trips me up on every other step, but I pay it no attention, crumpling down onto an old stump in an attempt to calm myself down. I need to get my heart rate under control and calm my spinning thoughts. That seems like such an impossible task when everything I know just got thrown on its head.

I just found out that my dad has been fueling the dumbest fight I've ever heard of for years, my boyfriend maybe broke up with me, which was finally the push I needed to actually stand up to my dad about his attitude toward my relationship. And the cherry on top is that one of the only friends I made in New York has apparently just been using me.

I don't even know what Shane's goal is. Did he think that I'd never find out? Is his family lying to him about all this, or has he known all along? Would I ever be able to trust him after this, even if he's just a pawn in someone else's game?

Part of me wants to call him and demand answers, but I don't think I'd believe anything he says right now. I just wanted a friend when I met him. How did it turn out like this?

I pull my phone from my pocket with trembling hands, seeing several texts and a few missed calls from Phoebe. I'll have to text her soon, but for now I ignore the notifications and search Shane's name. Nothing much comes up, a few different social media profiles—all private, and none of them have profile pictures that look like him. But when I search for Peter Wallace, a veritable flood of information crosses my screen.

Skyview Falls is a small town. We all know that Peter was suspected of embezzling

money and got chased off, but it happened when I was a kid. My mouth drops open in shock as I scroll through the articles detailing the cases that were brought against him. I always thought he'd managed to walk away with a few grand in his pocket, but everything that I'm seeing is implicating that he funneled millions into offshore accounts, relying on his wife to get him off on technicalities.

Our ranch was one of the businesses he hit hardest, skimming almost ten million off our profits before he disappeared. He's the sole reason that my parents had to work so hard when I was a kid, the sole reason they're still working.

I feel sick.

I stumble across one of his social media profiles, scrolling through pictures and posts detailing his life.

My dad was right, all the way through.

Shane is his nephew. Shane's dad died when he was a kid, and Peter Wallace apparently stepped into the role of a father for him. His mom lives in New York and frequents a bar hardly two blocks from Branson Logistics.

I want to fucking throw up. How could I have trusted Shane? How could I have questioned Jamie and my parents?

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

I shove up from the stump, not even bothering to wipe the snow from my jeans as I march through the woods toward Jamie's house. I don't usually bother taking the shortcut, since it doesn't really shave off that much time, but I feel so exposed and bare right now. The cover of the trees feels like it's all that's keeping me from imploding.

My head spins as I make my way down the familiar path, trying to figure out what to say. There's no easy way to explain this, to apologize, but I have to figure something out.

I've never been upset that the walk to Jamie's house is so short, but I still feel so unprepared when I step out of the woods into his backyard.

I feel even less ready when I find him sitting on the back porch, his head in his hands. I freeze on the edge of the trees, suddenly scared that I'm going to make things even worse. That's just a risk I'll have to take.

Jamie looks up in surprise when he hears the crunch of my footsteps on the snow. His face goes through a million different emotions in the course of a second, but it settles on pure apathy.

The sight plunges a knife straight into my chest and twists it cruelly.

I pick up my pace until I'm damn near running to clear the distance between us. I'm breathless when I skid to a stop in front of him, tears already welling in my eyes.

"I was wrong," I blurt out immediately. "I talked to my dad. The paperwork is

bullshit. Shane's a liar, or at least his family is using him. I was so, so wrong, Jamie."

He just stares at me.

There's a palpable weight of sadness resting on his shoulders, but it's not the kind I'm used to. Jamie is fiery, explosive, passionate. He doesn't shut down like this. He doesn't...he doesn't give up.

Please tell me he didn't give up.

"Our dads made a stupid fucking bet about Chuckles, and my dad got mad he lost, and they got in a fight and never forgave each other," I say, hoping he'll react. If I just keep talking, there has to be something he'll react to. "Shane's aunt is married to my parent's old financial advisor, the guy who got run out of town for embezzling money from a bunch of people when we were kids. Peter Wallace. He's Savannah's fucking uncle. I don't know why, but they've been trying to fuck with us this whole time, and I kept jumping to conclusions and making it easy on them."

He's still silent. A sigh falls from his lips, but it just sounds tired. There's no anger in his eyes, no frustration. It's all just exhaustion. My desperation mounts, fear climbing up my throat along with it.

"Fucking say something!" I shout.

He finally meets my eyes, but there's still no emotion on his face.

"What do you want me to say?"

I gape at him, so scared I can't find words. I want to be angry, to yell at him, but all I can come up with is terror. Is this how it ends? Has the well of feeling in him just dried up completely?

“Did you hear what I just said?” My voice shakes with the trembling of my lip. “I was wrong. You were right, Jamie, about everything. I stood up to my dad and told him that I wouldn’t let him make me choose between the two of you. I—I’m sorry it took this long, Jamie, but I love you. We can fix this. Can’t we?”

We have to be able to. There has to be a way we can move past this. I can’t lose Jamie.

“Oakley...” He trails off, and my heart shatters at hearing him say my name so plainly. There’s no warmth, no love. It’s like he’s filled to the brim with pure emptiness. “I’m glad you figured this out, okay? I’m grateful. But that doesn’t mean that what I said earlier isn’t true. I’m still a good for nothing idiot with no idea what to do with my life. You’re still too good for me. That’s always going to be true.”

Freezing tears slip down my cheeks, and I shake my head furiously.

“I don’t care,” I say staunchly. “I don’t care if you never have any idea what you want to do with your life. I don’t care if you’re a billionaire or if you don’t have a penny to your name.”

“I do!” he shouts, pushing up from the porch step. “I fucking care, Oakley. I don’t deserve you! I don’t have anything to bring to the table!”

A heartbroken laugh tears from my throat. I want to grab him and shake him, but my body refuses to move.

“I don’t care what you bring to the table, Jamie,” I say, my voice brittle and small. “I didn’t fall in love with you because you were a bull rider, or because you were going to take care of me. I fell in love with you because you’ve always seen me for the person I really am. You know me where it matters. I fell in love with you because you’re Jamie Walker, not for anything else.”

His face crumples into something so pained that I can't even look, my heart aching in my chest as I watch him clench his fists at his side and shake his head.

"I love you, Oakley." The words sound agonized, like he's forcing every syllable out around barbed wire. I never thought hearing him say that would make me care. "I love you more than I can ever say. But I can't watch you waste your time on me when we both know you deserve better."

"Fuck you!" I shout, my anger finally breaking free. "I know exactly what I fucking deserve, Jamie! I know what I want! You don't get to make that decision for me any more than my dad does. I choose you, over and over, no matter what. I know I fucked up, okay? I know I hurt you, and I'm sorry, and I swear I'll fix it. I can't lose you, Jamie. I—please."

A tear slips down his cheek, his nostrils flaring the way they always do when he's trying not to break down. My chest feels like it's about to cave in as he shakes his head.

"I just need to figure this out for myself, Oakley," he whispers, almost as quiet as the snow that's falling around us. "Just give me some time. Please."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

The words hit me like a physical blow, and I stagger a step back. The snow beneath my feet crunches, breaking the silence around us, and both of us flinch. The thought of the world continuing on around me without Jamie at my side is enough to make me sick on its own. Seeing the agony of that same thought on his face makes me want to pass out.

“Okay.” I don’t even know if I’m speaking loud enough for him to hear, but the agreement breaks my heart into pieces. “I’ll be here. I’ll always be here, okay? Figure it out and come back to me.”

That’s all I can ask for. If he comes back to me, I can always keep moving forward. If he comes back to me, I can make it through anything.

The first step I take away from him feels like I’m tearing myself in half. I ignore the tears that drench my cheeks and the way I’m shaking. All I can do now is turn and walk back to the woods, back to the safe shroud of trees where I can collapse away from prying eyes.

I hear Jamie’s breath come out on a bitten off sob as I walk away, and it stalls my own breath in my chest.

Please don’t let this be the last time I walk away from him.

Chapter Twenty-Three

JAMIE

“Dad.”

He’s sitting in front of the TV with a can of beer in his hand, feet propped up on the ottoman. If he wasn’t so goddamn stiff, I might believe he was actually relaxing.

He looks over at me, his eyes lingering on the bright green of my cast before he raises them to meet mine. All I get in response is an arched brow as he sips at his beer. I have to take a deep breath before walking forward, doing my best not to crumple the papers in my fist. They’re already wrinkled and half ruined from Oakley dropping them in the snow as she left and from how many times I’ve looked through them, but they’re still legible for the most part.

“Tell me about Peter Wallace and Chuckles,” I say, holding the papers out to him in a trembling hand.

That finally gets his attention.

He stares at me in shock, almost dropping his beer on the rug. His face shifts to a mask of cool indifference, but his nostrils flare wide in anger. Part of me is surprised that he doesn’t start shouting at me right off the bat, but it looks like he’s so surprised that he can’t find words.

“Oakley gave me these,” I say, tossing the papers in his lap. “Peter Wallace’s nephew is trying to fuck with her family. The paperwork makes it look like you were blackmailing David Montgomery, but she said you two made a bet about Chuckles and he lost. I need to know the truth. I need to hear it from you.”

He looks down at the papers in his lap, but makes no move to touch them. He still has his beer in one hand and the remote in the other. The silence stretches on for so long that I almost expect him to ignore me entirely, but he lifts the remote and turns the TV off.

His hand is shaking when he lifts his beer to his mouth and finishes off the can.

“The Montgomery girl gave you these?” he finally asks.

“Oakley,” I say firmly. “Oakley gave them to me. She talked to her dad about all of it. It’s our turn now. Tell me what happened between you and David Montgomery.”

I’ve never been this blunt with my dad before, never flat out told him what to do. It feels like the right thing to do right now.

“Exactly what she said,” he says. “David and I were friends. We’d make stupid bets on the circuit, low stakes. He won a scratch off for five grand one night, and we made a bet about Chuckles. I picked what I thought was going to be the losing option. It was supposed to be harmless fun.”

My dad looks like a completely different person. He’s usually frowning, or flat out glaring at someone or something. Right now, he looks contemplative and almost soft, like he’s going back to a time in his life when he was less weathered, less weary.

“So what happened?” I ask.

“I won,” he says simply, shrugging. “Chuckles didn’t drink that night, and he made it out before getting trampled half to death for once. David was pissed he lost, got his ass up on his shoulders about it. We argued, and it just snowballed. Never managed to be friends again, and it’s just been too long to fix it now.”

I bite back the argument that immediately springs to my tongue. My dad has been lonely and angry since my mom died, and if his beef with David is as childish as he’s making it out to be, I see no reason that they couldn’t fix it. Sure, they’re both stubborn, crotchety old men, but if they actually gave it a shot, they could make it work.

“What about Peter Wallace?”

His face twists up into the scowl I’m so used to, and he finally picks up the papers in his lap, rifling through them.

“These from him?” he asks. “They’re conversations between David and I, but they’re all cocked up. Half of this isn’t even from our emails.”

“Oakley is—was—friends with his nephew. She doesn’t know if he’s being used by his family or if he’s in on the whole thing, but he’s the one who gave them to her,” I say. “I don’t trust the asshole, but we can’t do anything if we don’t know the whole story.”

He sighs, rubbing a tired hand over his face, and nods.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“I’ve still got stacks of paperwork from Peter Wallace that no one can make heads or tails of,” he says, shaking his head. “We’re all pretty damn sure he put all the money into accounts offshore, but he was careful with it, and his wife’s a big-shot lawyer. None of it ever even went to court because she got the cases thrown out. Bastard’s still walking free, and there’s nothing any of us can do.”

My brows crease in frustration, and I clench my jaw. It can’t just be something none of us can even try to fix. I can’t accept that.

I won’t.

“You still have the paperwork?” I ask. “Can I look at it?”

My dad looks up at me in surprise, but he pushes out of his chair and heads toward his office nonetheless.

“If you want,” he says. “Don’t know what you’re going to do with ten year old bank statements, but go for it.”

He rounds his desk and opens one of the cabinets on the back wall. File after file makes its way onto his desk, and I stare in shock as the pile grows steadily larger. All of this, and still no one can find anything to pin on the guy?

I pull one of the files closer to me. The folder it’s in is stiff with age and probably about a year from crumbling into dust along with the pages inside. I leaf through them carefully, frowning as I check dates against deposit amounts and withdrawals.

“Jesus,” I huff, shaking my head as I reach for another folder. “He really made a mess of this, didn’t he?”

“Yeah,” my dad says gruffly. “He was good, I’ll give him that. Even David was confused about whether or not he authorized some of those withdrawals. They were in a tough spot with money, and Peter was supposed to be taking care of the books so David could keep the farm running. He fucked with a lot of good people.”

My lip curls in a sneer, and I trace down one of the lines, scanning through the account numbers. Surely, he had to fuck up somewhere. I can’t just give up and let the guy get away with this, especially if he’s still trying to meddle with Oakley’s family.

“What’s this account?” I ask, tapping at one of the lines.

The account number doesn’t match any of the ones in the other file, and it’s not on the other pages in this file, either. Only one deposit was made into it, but it was for nearly ten grand. It’s in the middle of a bunch of other transactions on the same day, seemingly innocuous other than the amount. My dad leans over my shoulder, a look of confusion on his face.

“I don’t know what any of them are really,” he says. “I closed most of them after he left town in case he had access to anything. There’s a list of all the accounts here somewhere, let me see if I can find it.”

I nod, turning my attention back to the pages. I pull several more files toward me, now searching for that account specifically. I find it in three separate files, all of the records showing large deposits being made in the middle of the day.

My dad breaks my concentration by shoving a page beneath my nose before I can continue scouring through the other files.

“This should have all the account details.”

I snag it from his hands, my blood pumping hot in my veins. I don't know what exactly it is, but I feel like I'm stumbling closer and closer to something important. There's the business account for the circuit training my dad does, his personal account, a few savings accounts that have been opened and closed through the years, and my account.

My account?

I never opened a bank account that was associated with my dad. And the account number doesn't match mine, either.

I look over to the date it was opened, my eyes blowing wide when I see it.

“Dad.” My voice is shaky, whisper-quiet, and my hand trembles as I trace the line of text. “Dad, this...I don't know what it is, but this isn't right.”

He leans over my shoulder, his frown deepening in concentration.

“What's wrong with it?” he asks.

I dig my finger into the date, black and white print on a brittle piece of printer paper. My heart pounds in my chest at the prospect of finding something new.

“Look at the date,” I say. “This account is in my name, but it was opened when I was six.”

He looks up sharply, blinking in confusion.

“I didn't open an account when you were a kid,” he says. “Neither did your mom.”

My heart rate triples in the course of a second, and my vision goes blurry for half a second as I force myself to suck a breath in. It can't be this easy, but maybe this is a step toward uncovering something. Even if it doesn't put Peter Wallace in jail, maybe it'll be enough of a threat to keep him away from Oakley's family.

"I only went through five of those files," I say, nodding toward the stack of papers on the desk. "Just from the deposits I saw, there's almost seventy grand in that account. Who knows how many more deposits there are in the other files. What if he was hiding in plain sight this whole time? I bet if I look through the Montgomery's paperwork, there'll be an account in one of their names that isn't theirs, too."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

His brows climb up toward his hairline, a shocked laugh falling from his lips. He opens his mouth, closes it, laughs again. His hand claps down heavily on my shoulder, and I almost tear up at the pure pride I can feel in the gesture.

“Hell, kid,” he huffs. “Maybe we’d have been better off sending you to school for finance than trying to get you in the ring.”

Astonishment pours through me at that statement, and I blink at him incredulously. I didn’t hear that right, did I? Is this just because I may be on to something, or does he actually mean it?

“You always said I was made for the circuit,” I say questioningly. “You said it was what I was good at.”

“Look, son, I’ve been hard on you,” he says, not quite meeting my eyes. “I wanted you to live the life I wanted, and I didn’t think about what you wanted. You were never happy on the circuit.”

I wasn’t. Not for a second.

“I...Dad.”

“It might be too little too late, but let your old man try to fix things, would you? I didn’t give you a chance to find anything else you were good at.” His voice is still rough, but there’s a twinge of a smile on his lips. “Go to school if you need. Start your own business if you want. The town could use a new financial advisor. You’d be good at it. You could take care of your girl.”

Goosebumps break out over my entire body, and I stumble for words uselessly.

“I’ll go talk to David. We’ll clear all this up, and we’ll take everything we can to the police,” he says. “Don’t lose Oakley over this. Your mom wouldn’t ever forgive me.”

I have no idea what to say, so I don’t say anything. All I can think to do is grab him with my good arm and yank him in for a hug. It squishes my arm between us, but I don’t pay attention to the pain.

“Thank you, Dad,” I whisper. “Thank you.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

OAKLEY

“Get out of bed,” Maggie demands, shoving her way into my room.

I shoot her an acidic look from my desk, snapping my journal closed. I’m fucking exhausted, and I have absolutely no energy to deal with my bratty little sister right now, no matter how much I love her. Figuring out how to get Jamie to trust that I know what I want even if he doesn’t think he’s good enough is kind of taking precedence over everything else.

“Magnolia, I’m really not in the?—”

She cuts me off by shoving her phone under my nose. I jerk back, ready to shout at her to leave me the hell alone, when I catch sight of what’s on her screen.

All the blood rushes from my face, and I yank Maggie’s phone out of her hands. If I could think, I’d realize how serious this must be for her to let me take her phone from her.

The camera work is shaky, and the edge of Maggie's sweater keeps cutting off half the frame, but I can see plenty. I can see Shane's artfully styled hair and his blinding smile, and then the camera shifts to the person sitting across from him.

Savannah fucking Ward.

I see red, every hope I had of Shane being a good person vanishing in an instant. And then they started talking.

The audio is shitty, but I can hear everything I need to.

"They'll break up soon. I gave her the documents...Aunt Tammy. That Walker kid...hopeless...he'll never convince her to stay. Then I just...save the day, she'll eat it right up."

"Serves...right. Montgomery Princess deserves it...could've saved herself the trouble if...didn't come between me and her stupid brother."

My hand clenches into a fist on my desk, anger rising up viciously. It's bad enough she'd do this to me and Jamie, but thinking about what would've happened if I didn't steer Bo away from her makes me sick.

"All that money...ours soon enough, kiddo...won't be long before I can propose."

An angry snort falls from my lips at hearing that. Good fucking luck trapping me in a sham of a marriage. I'm Oakley fucking Montgomery, and no one fucks with me and gets away with it.

"Mags, where did you get this?"

"Penny and I saw them at Ruby's when we were out shopping," she says, shrugging

carelessly. “Guess they didn’t recognize us with our hoods up.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

God, she's such a little shit. I can't help but be proud.

“Can you send that to me?”

My voice is about as shaky as my hands are, but Maggie just snorts and shoots me a knowing look as she takes her phone back.

“Already did, genius,” she says.

There's a lot less acid in her voice than usual, and her eyes are almost affectionate. She doesn't pull me into a hug before she leaves, but she does linger in the doorway for a long moment.

“Don't let that fucker ruin the things you've going for you.”

Standing, I rush over to my bed, fumbling on my nightstand for my own phone, as she slips back into the hallway. I've had enough of letting anyone ruin things—including myself. I'm not going to worry about the right thing to do this time.

I know what I need to do.

I force myself to focus on pressing the right buttons instead of the feeling of bile starting to burn up my throat. So much for Shane not knowing. I wanted to believe that he wouldn't use me like that, and to know that he planned to do so much worse makes me sick.

The video is almost two minutes, and it takes forever to send, but it finally shows as delivered. My dad will be shocked, but with such undeniable proof, he'll have no choice but to believe it. Once he gets over his shock, he'll be pissed.

David Montgomery is not a man to take a threat to his family lightly.

Swiping over to my text thread with my aunt, I send her the video, too. Shane proved, loud and proud, that he doesn't deserve any of my sympathy. We'll see how he likes getting what he earned.

I know it's a big favor, but can you make sure he doesn't have a job when he gets back to New York?

I don't even have to wait for the length of the whole video to get a response.

Oh, Oakie, I'll make sure of that and more.

I can practically hear the vindictive venom in her voice, and it brings a grin to my face. Good. Let the fucker regret every second of my time that he wasted.

My hands have finally stopped shaking, and there's only one thought in my head now.

Jamie.

He has to see this, and I have to show him the proof he was right about all of it. Maybe it won't change anything, but he needs to see it. I grab my phone and a jacket before dashing down the stairs, not bothering to tell anyone where I'm going. This feels like the most important thing I've ever done in my life, and I can't wait a single second longer than I have to.

Jamie's beat up old truck rolling up the driveway causes me to stop halfway down the porch steps.

The arm in the cast hangs out of the driver's side window, and I can see the nerves on his face, but he's trying to be casual. A smile splits my face when he raises his hand in a lazy wave. I should probably be annoyed with him, but something in my heart is telling me to just get in the truck. Somehow, looking at the shy warmth in his eyes, I know everything is going to be just fine.

"Hey," he says as I walk down the stairs, careful of the snow. "Want to go for a ride?"

I don't answer him. I stalk straight toward the truck, not hesitating for a second. He looks nervous, and he tries to shift back when I step right up to the window, but I don't let him. I reach in and wrap my hand around the back of his neck, yanking him forward.

His lips are chilly and chapped against mine, and he stiffens in shock, but I don't let go. My eyes are still open, and so are his, waiting for each other to do something.

It's him that moves first, his mouth curving into a smile beneath mine, and he presses closer, taking my lips in a proper kiss. The whole world goes silent as I try desperately to pour a million apologies and explanations into the action. I think he understands, because he tangles his hand in my hair and pulls me closer, desperate. The metal of his truck is cold even through my jacket, but I'm so full of warmth that I can hardly feel it.

"Yeah, let's go for a ride," I say when we separate, both of our faces flushed. "I've got something to show you before we leave."

Before he has a chance to really respond, I pull away, feeling more confident than I

have in a long time. I finally feel like I know what I'm doing.

I climb into the passenger side, immediately scooting across the bench seat to sit directly beside him. He watches me, confused, as I pull my phone out from my pocket and pull up the video. His attention shifts to my phone when I hold it out and press play.

His face goes sour when he recognizes Shane, and then complete shock overtakes that when the video shows Savannah sitting across from him. He watches it in silence, confusion shifting to surprise shifting to anger as it plays. When it ends, I lock my phone and replace it in my pocket. Nerves are finally starting to crawl up my spine, some of the confidence that filled me as soon as I saw Jamie draining away.

He doesn't say anything for a long moment, and I can't tell what's going on in his head when he finally looks at me.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“Want to go out to the barn?” he asks.

I want to ask a million questions, but I can’t find the words for any of them right now.

“That sounds nice,” I say.

We spent a lot of time at the barn on his property when we were in high school. It was always quiet there at night, and there was no one out there. It made for a perfect spot to hide from our parents when they were particularly annoyed about our relationship.

There are a lot of good memories in that barn.

Jamie starts driving, the roads familiar and dusty, and I sit quietly beside him as the scenery passes by. We’re almost halfway there by the time he says anything.

“I talked to my dad,” he says. “He has a lot of paperwork from Peter Wallace. It looks like the guy was funneling money away in a fake account under my name. I’d be willing to bet he was doing the same to your dad. I can take a look at any paperwork he has if he wants me to.”

I blink in surprise. That’s the last thing I expected him to bring up right now, but I guess it’s important to know.

“I’ll let him know,” I say as we pull onto the narrow access road.

“Did you show that video to your dad?”

“I sent it to him. And to Aunt Kathy,” I say. “She’s going to make sure he gets fired.”

Jamie snorts, glancing over at me with a vindictive grin on his face.

“I think once our dads both get their hands on that video, he’ll be lucky if he doesn’t wind up in jail,” he says.

That’s probably true, now that I think about it. His aunt is a big shot lawyer, but with video proof of conspiracy to commit fraud, I don’t know if there’s any way she’ll get him off. I grin at the thought.

Serves him right.

Jamie pulls up to the back entrance of the barn and parks, then kills the ignition. He sits silently before turning to face me. His eyes are hard and determined, his shoulders set firmly, like he’s bracing himself.

“Oakley,” he says, reaching out to take my hand in his. “I kind of wanted to figure out a whole big speech, but that’s not really my thing. Instead, I’m just going to say what I know is true.”

I squeeze his fingers tightly, both nervous and unshakably certain of the outcome of this. There’s only one way this could ever go, really.

“I love you.” He squeezes my hand back, finally meeting my eyes. “I’ve loved you since I fucking met you. I’ll always love you. I’m never going to think I deserve you, and I’ll never think I’m good enough. So I’m going to ask you to do me a favor, ok?”

I want to promise him the entire world, but all I can do is smile and nod.

“I want you to trust me,” he says. “I want you to trust that I love you, and that it’ll

always be you for me, no matter what. If you can do that, I can trust that you'll pick me every time, even if I don't think I'm worth it."

Tears spring to my eyes, and I suck in a shaky breath. This was always the only outcome, but I didn't think it could ever be this easy.

"I promise." The words are heavy, and I realize that I've never meant anything more. "I trust you, Jamie. I will trust you. I love you."

The air is suddenly thick between us, and I do the only thing I can think of. I launch myself at him, clambering into his lap as I steal his mouth in a frantic kiss. It's messy, nothing but desperate kisses and frenzied hands. He half-rips my jacket off and yanks at my shirt, shoving it up over my breasts and immediately dropping his head to dig his teeth into my skin. His hands grip my hips hard enough to bruise, and I moan, tossing my head back in pleasure.

I jerk at his belt until it unbuckles, ignoring the sound of one of his belt loops tearing. Having him inside me is more important than anything else.

He seems to be of the same mind, groaning against my skin and grinding his hips up. He presses me back against the steering wheel, and I've never been more grateful that his horn doesn't work. Even with one arm in a cast, he makes quick work of my sweats, yanking them halfway down my thighs as he mouths at my nipple.

I can hardly form a coherent thought, overwhelmed and straining for any contact. The air is chilly against my bare cunt, and I can't wait a single second longer.

As soon as he manages to free his cock, I push him back, taking hold and guiding the head to my entrance. A shiver wracks his frame, and he watches me with dark, hungry eyes. They go lidded when I take the first few inches, and my whole body shakes at the initial stretch.

The angle is awkward, and I can hardly spread my legs enough to get a good rhythm going, but it still feels so good I can hardly breathe. I collapse forward against his chest, my lips going straight to his neck. He moans as I work a mark into his throat, sucking and biting as I ride him sloppily.

“Fuck, Oakley,” he murmurs, wrapping his good arm around my waist to help me as we both approach our end. “Fuck, I love you. I love you so much, baby.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

“I love you,” I gasp, tossing my head back when he hits a spot that makes me see stars. “Fuck, right there, Jamie. God, I love you.”

I press my forehead against his as he hammers into that spot, watching pleasure wash over his face, and when he pulls me in for another kiss, I shatter.

He falls over the edge with me, holding my shaking body as I ride him through my orgasm. His moans echo in the truck, even though he muffles them into my shoulder, and I laugh breathlessly, my entire body buzzing with pleasure.

“I fucking love you,” I whisper, pulling his head up so I can kiss him.

“I fucking love you, too,” he answers me with a grin.

Yeah, this is the only way my life will ever feel right. With Jamie Walker at my side.

Epilogue

OAKLEY

I wave to Phoebe as she heads off to her next lecture, more than ready for a break in my own day. Community college is both different and more of the same. I’m still studying business, so most of my classes are similar, and Aunt Kathy and Uncle Ricky have made it very clear that they still want me to open a branch of Branson Logistics out here if I want to. My class schedule is a little less rigorous, and it feels nice to be surrounded by people who are more on my level.

I liked NYU, don't get me wrong, but people feel a little more real.

Maybe it's just because I'm closer to home. The scenery is more familiar, the pace of life a little slower, a little calmer. I'm only an hour from home, and Jamie and I go back most weekends.

Now that our dads have made up, family dinners are a hell of a lot less awkward. Took them long enough.

As I wander down one of the sidewalks looking for somewhere to relax and get some studying done when my phone vibrates in my pocket. A smile stretches my face when I see Jamie's name lighting up the screen. I tap to accept the call and press the phone to my ear.

"Hey there, handsome," I say, stepping off the path to lean against one of the aspen trees.

"How's my girl?" Jamie asks, his voice warm with affection. "You out of class?"

"I'm good, just looking for a place to study for a bit. I've got a break for a few hours," I say. "I thought you had an Econ test?"

Jamie's been taking college surprisingly seriously, especially considering how little he cared about high school. It seems like the finance courses he's taking are suiting him really well. I never expected numbers to be his thing, but all of his professors sing his praises.

"I finished up early, Seilinski said we could take off when we were done. Think I could take you out to lunch?"

"Are you asking me on a date?" I tease, grinning widely.

I jump when I hear his voice in my other ear, my head snapping to the side to see him peeking around the tree with a playful grin

“I most certainly am.”

I laugh, turning to smack him playfully on the chest. He chuckles, wrapping an arm around my waist and pulling me in for a kiss. He tastes like the bottled sweet tea he’s become fond of and spearmint gum, and I sink into his arms.

“I’m also taking you out to celebrate,” he says.

I raise my eyebrows in curiosity, giggling as he rocks me back and forth.

“Oh?” I ask. “And what are we celebrating?”

He pulls back, reaching into his pocket for his phone. I lean against his shoulder as he scrolls through his text messages. He clicks on the thread with his dad and shows me the most recent message.

It’s a picture of our dads together in front of the courthouse, both of them grinning widely.

Just watched Shane Wallace get dragged in for arraignment!

“His whole family cut ties and is claiming no involvement, so he’s making his plea without any help from that big shot lawyer aunt of his,” Jamie says, grinning vindictively. “Didn’t have enough dirt on anyone else to file charges, but it’s a start.”

I laugh, both surprised and thrilled. Dad told me last week that they’d filed charges and were waiting to hear anything back, and Uncle Ricky sent him his official termination notice the same day. I just didn’t expect him to get in front of a judge so

quickly.

Page 56

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

That is something to celebrate.

I grin at Jamie, pulling him in for another quick kiss.

“Let’s get something fancy,” I say.

“Whatever my girl wants.”

Want to know how Jamie and Oakley’s story started? Turn the page for a sneak peek of Breaking Oakley!

About Breaking Oakley

I’ve been in love with Jamie Walker for as long as I can remember.

He’s devastatingly handsome and impossible to resist.

He’s my highschool sweetheart,

My best friend,

and also the bull rider my dad doesn’t approve of.

With my eighteenth birthday and graduation around the corner,

I’m ready to give Jamie all of me.

Heart, body, and future.

But what happens if he isn't ready to do the same?

Is the passion between us strong enough

to burn through everything that stands in our way

Or will I have to say goodbye,

And surrender myself to a broken heart?

Chapter One

OAKLEY

Holding my breath, I slip through the front door at two minutes to midnight, trying to be as quiet as I can. But, I should've known Mom would be waiting for me. She pulls her robe closer around her and greets me with a smile.

"Happy birthday, honey," she says. "Did you have fun?"

I nod, letting her hug me as I pretend to stifle an exaggerated yawn.

"Yeah, I'm just really tired." I'm desperate to get upstairs. In two minutes—no—one now—I'm going to be officially over eighteen. And Jamie's waiting for me in the tree outside my bedroom window.

"Okay..." she hesitantly replies, giving me the look only mothers can give. "Are you sure you're okay? You look flushed," she adds, pressing a hand to my forehead.

“I’m fine, I promise. Just super tired.”

“Okay, then. Well, you should go upstairs and get to sleep. Big day later. Goodnight, darling,” she replies before kissing my cheek, and turning toward her room. The door closes with a soft click before the yellow glow of the bedroom lamp goes out.

Everything about what I’m about to do completely goes against my parents' wishes, sort of. I promised I’d keep my virginity until I turned eighteen... But the no-boys-in-the-bedroom rule—that’s about to go out the window.

With every step up the stairs, my heart beats a little faster. I’ve waited so long for this, and now that the moment is here... I can’t keep the flutter of nerves in my stomach at bay. It isn’t like we haven’t done things before. I mean, hell, we’ve done a lot of things before, but not this.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

The moment I reach the top of the stairs, I hesitate. My bedroom door looms before me, as I let out a heavy breath.

You can do this... Stop being chicken shit.

Pressing forward, I quickly step into my bedroom, glancing around at the mess of clothes I'd thrown on the floor earlier. My movements increase as I pick them up, shoving them into the laundry basket by my ensuite bathroom, before slipping out of my panties, slick with the excitement he caused within me only a few hours ago.

Heading straight to my bedroom window, I quickly unlatch it. Jamie doesn't waste time in coming through it, one long, denim-clad leg at a time. My heart beats like the boom of thunder within my ears as my boyfriend of three years unfolds himself to his full height in my bedroom.

The gleam in his blue eyes only serves to heighten my anticipation and desire. His dark brown hair is still rumpled from me running my hands through it earlier, and that dimpled grin sends an electric bolt straight to my core.

He's so tall I have to tip my head way back and stretch up onto my tiptoes when he pulls me into his arms.

His mouth captures mine, slanting over it with that delicious salt and caramel flavor from the hard candies he's always got in his pocket. He slides his mouth along my jaw to the sensitive spot below my ear. The soft, playful nibbles against my skin send shivers through my body. The erect buds of my breast are aching and hard.

The same way the sensitive bud of my core feels, throbbing with desire.

“I was worried you forgot about me,” he says into my ear, tugging the lobe between his teeth for a second as I shiver with pleasure.

“As if I could ever forget about you.”

Jamie laughs and settles his big, calloused hands on my hips. Pulling me closer, he nudges himself against my belly. He’s already hard and the sensation of his length pressing against me has my mouth going dry.

Finally, after three years, countless kisses, and doing everything two people can do without actually having intercourse...it’s time. We’re going to have sex for the first time. It’s all I was able to think about all day, every minute, as we went to dinner, then a movie, and then to hang out at the local diner for a few hours before I had to get home for curfew. Along with a few other heated make-out sessions by the old barn down the road.

Midnight, and my official birthday. One that the two of us have been waiting for since Jamie turned eighteen over seven months ago.

His hands roam over my back, holding me closer as I link my fingers around the back of his neck, bringing his mouth back to mine. Greedily sucking his tongue into my mouth. I love the way he moans, but I have to pinch his side to remind him that we need to be quiet.

My room might be on the other side of the house from my parents’ bedroom, but the last thing I want is for them to overhear anything.

Jamie walks me back toward the bed with quick, sure-footed steps as I claw at the front of his T-shirt, trying to pull it off. But as soon as I do, it’s tossed to the floor just

before we both tumble down onto my bed.

Running my hands up and over his bare, smooth chest, I'm unable to hold myself back from kissing it. Licking, sucking, and stroking my tongue along that delicious hard expanse of his flesh as I move my lips lower and lower.

I can never get enough of the way he tastes... Or the way he smells. The deep, musky scent of dirt and wood mixed with a little bit of cattle fills my nostrils. Not that I mind. It's a scent I've grown used to over the years.

"You're so beautiful," he whispers against my ear before pressing a kiss to my temple. His fingers brush down the soft skin of my shoulder before trailing down over the thin cotton fabric of my peasant dress. The sensation causes a shiver to run through me as he brushes against my nipple.

"You're such a tease," I reply, making a chuckle slip out of him.

"Perhaps," he mumbles, leaning back slightly. "But you like it."

"Maybe... Maybe not."

A squeal escapes my lips as his mouth grasps my nipple through my dress. The tug of his lips on that sensitive bud has me arching, gasping, desperate for more.

"Stop playing games, Jamie." I softly say, my eyes gazing down at him with desire coursing through my veins. "I need you."

At my words, a heat blazes in his blue eyes, the exact color of the summer Montana sky when twilight arrives. Not bright, pale blue, but darker. More like indigo. Jamie's eyes were one of the first things I noticed about him, and I've often imagined that one day our children will have eyes just that shade.

“Is that so?” He replies as I pass a hand over his cheeks and chin.

“You know... I think I like you clean-shaven.”

His brow raises slightly at my words. “Is that right? And here I thought you liked it when my beard brushed against your inner thigh.”

At his words, his hands slide up my thighs which instantly part for him. His fingers dance along the most sensitive parts of my skin before a finger gently brushes against the slit of my aching core, causing his brows to fly up in shock at finding me exposed beneath my dress. “Such a bad girl...”

“Only for you.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

A shiver ripples through me at seeing how much he loves pleasing me. At how hungry his eyes get every time he touches me. Jamie has never pressured me to have sex with him. I'd even gone on birth control two years ago, just in case I couldn't stop myself from keeping my promise to my mother.

When it comes to Jamie... It's hard to resist wanting a piece of him.

"I want you, Jamie." My voice is low and breathy with a hoarse rasp so full of longing that I'd be mortified if anyone but him heard me sound like that.

He doesn't waste another second. His tongue slips between my lips as I suck him into my mouth. Every part of my body is on fire at his touch. Every inch of my soul, already given to him.

I moan his name softly, my voice becoming a shuddering rattle when he moves swiftly down my body to center himself between my legs. My eyes are already rolling up as my back arches under that first smooth swipe of his tongue along my slit, relishing in the sounds he makes as he tastes me.

One teasing stroke after another, he torments me. Bringing me to the edge, only to deny me the pleasure I truly seek. I lose myself in every searing sensation. Bucking my hips as he expertly swirls his tongue with the perfect pressure on the core between my legs. So much so that I splinter apart in an explosion of pleasure so fierce that all I can do is ride it out.

Jamie plants a soft kiss between my thighs as my shudders ease. My panting breaths, stifled by the back of my hand. He's brought pleasure to me with his mouth so many

times, but tonight, that's not enough.

Tonight, I need him inside me, and not just within my mouth.

A surprised grunt slips out of him when I roll us over to get on top of him. Tugging at his belt buckle, an enormous, detailed silver bull rider with the words "Pain is temporary. Victory lasts forever" engraved on it. I attempt to free the beast within. He lets out a grunt the moment I reach inside his worn jeans to find the hot, thick length I've been craving.

My tongue swipes out, licking up the length of his rigid thick member before slowly swirling around its head, causing a moan to escape him right before his hand fists my hair. It isn't the first time I've done this, and it definitely won't be the last. Though he definitely won't be releasing himself this way any time soon.

Letting his length slide from my mouth with a 'pop,' I stare up at him under my lashes. The ache between my thighs grows unmanageable as I slowly climb back up his body, his hands pushing my dress up my hips before pulling it over my head and tossing it to the floor.

His large palms skate over my breasts, thumbing my nipples to taut peaks as I fall forward to offer them to his eager mouth.

"So beautiful," Jamie murmurs. His tongue strokes my naked skin as his hand slips between us so his fingers can find the sweet, tight knot between my legs. Slowly he moves his thumb in perfect circles until I can't stand it anymore.

"Please," I beg him. "Jamie... I can't... I need you."

Without taking his hand from between my legs, Jamie uses his other to guide me up, before slowly letting my body sink around the thick length of his member. Inch by

inch, accepting him inside me. I'm so wet that he slides right in with no resistance, only the most delicious friction that causes me to moan at the sudden fullness.

Followed by a small amount of pain that causes me to wince at the feeling of my tight core wrapped around his thick length. Jamie frowns.

"Oakley? You okay, babe?"

"Pain is temporary," I remind him with a small gasp. My hips roll and my head falls back as ecstasy flows through me. We're finally doing it, finally having sex...and oh God, it's so much better than I ever dreamed.

Jamie moves slowly at first, then faster as I urge him to drive himself into me harder. There's no more pain, only this pleasure that has my entire body shaking. Riding him, laughter spills out of me at the image of him on a bull. It's all perfect.

"Oh my God!" I cry out softly, the only words I can manage to form.

Everything else has become this perfect surge of desire. Nothing else matters. My body tightens, clutching him inside me. Forcing me to clasp a hand over my mouth to stifle my scream. My entire body throbs and quakes as another orgasm rips through me even harder than the first, pushing me closer and closer to levels I never knew were possible.

"I can't hold out much longer," Jamie groans out, gripping my hips as he thrusts once, twice, and then a final time. Shuddering, calling my name in a low, urgent voice, over and over.

Falling onto the bed beside him, my breath comes out heavily matching his. There's a lingering soreness between my thighs that aches when I move, but I feel so good that I laugh again and press my face to his naked shoulder.

“What’s so funny?” he demands, twisting to his side with amusement in his tone.

Snuggling closer, I can’t contain the smile on my face. “I’m just so...happy. That’s all.”

Our first time was magic, just like I’d always expected it to be, but it was also much faster than I’d imagined. Like fire to a puddle of gasoline, our bodies had ignited. I trail my finger down his collarbone then rest my hand flat on his tight, muscled chest.

“I want every night to be like this,” I tell him. “Only not having to be worried my parents will overhear us.”

We’ve talked about getting married, but I’m supposed to go off to NYU in the fall for school. And Jamie’s dad wants him to work for the family rodeo. We’ve been circling this without ever talking about it, without giving each other a firm answer about what we’re planning.

“Me too,” he says. “I want to be with you, that’s all I know.”

I take in a deep, sudden breath, wishing I could just flat out ask him what he’s planning to do so I can decide if I want to go away to school, like my mom says I should, or if I should stick closer to home the way my dad says he’d like me to do.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:37 pm

Neither one of us wants to disappoint our families. But where does that leave us? I hate that our first time having sex could be soured by this discussion.

I kiss him again, letting it linger this time. Swiping my tongue over his lips until he opens for me. Jamie fists my hair at the base of my skull, holding me as tight as he holds the reins when he's riding. My body wakes up, craving him even more than ever.

"Again," I whisper into the kiss.

Jamie's chuckle is rough. "Greedy girl."

"For you," I promise. "Only you."

It's slower this time. Better. He's on top of me, his length stroking inside me, rubbing my sensitive bud with every thrust until I come undone again, bright sparkles bursting through me. Gasping his name, I swear I can feel him throb inside me as he finishes.

"All I know is that I love you, Oakley Montgomery. Wherever we go, whatever we do, that's never going to change. I'm going to be with you." He replies so calmly that I know he means every word.

I hold up my hand, pinky out, as his eyes widen slightly and a smirk litters the corner of his lips before he hooks his pinky around mine. "Promise me, I promise you, that to you, I will be true."

It's our silly little freshman rhyme from when we were just best friends and not a

couple. But it has even more meaning now. My heart thumps. The tears I feel in my eyes are happy and content, not sad.

“Shit, that’s your dad,” he says suddenly. The sound of heavy boots thumps in the hallway.

In what feels like seconds, Jamie’s dressed, one long leg hanging over the windowsill as I pull on my robe and kiss him goodbye before quickly closing the window with just enough time to turn around before my dad knocks on the door, causing my heart to jump.

That was close... A little too fucking close. But no matter what happens, Jamie Walker will never let me down.