



Rope Me

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Alexander

Growing up as the oldest of six on the Kingridge Ranch, I learned early on that giving away my heart wasn't worth the risk—especially with a mother who walked out on me before I could walk. I've kept my head down. I've built my life around hard work and staying grounded. But when Cassidy Knowles, my childhood babysitter, walks back into my life after her divorce, everything I thought I knew gets tangled in the reins.

Cassidy is stunning, strong, smart, and completely off-limits. A single mom with her hands full, she's the kind of woman I never let myself fall for. Yet, I can't seem to keep my distance. She says she's here waiting on a fresh start, but can I convince her that we could be forever?

Cassidy

Divorcing the mayor of Sagebrush Creek has cost me everything—my home, my standing in the community, and my peace of mind. The only safe space left for my son and me is the Kingridge Ranch, far from my ex-husband's reach. I need to plan our new lives, and the Kingridge brothers will keep me safe while I do it.

But what I didn't prepare for was Alexander. He's no longer the shy boy I used to babysit; he's a rugged, commanding cowboy with a heart as big as the open sky. He isn't afraid to stand up to my ex, but falling for him might be more than I bargained for. Can I risk my heart again when love could come crashing down?

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CHAPTER 1

PODCAST: BOOTS AND BITCHING

What's up, Sagebrush Creek? It's your favorite secret podcaster here with another boots-on-the-ground update. That's right, I've got my ear to the ground and my fingers on the pulse of all your small-town drama. So, pour yourself a sweet tea—or something stronger—and let's dive in.

First up, Mayor Randolph Bellcourt. Fresh off his reelection victory, and now? All he needs is a shiny new first lady who will actually stay by his side. Rumor has it he's already on the hunt. Question is, how young will he go this time? Maybe his twenty-something daughter Becca has a friend with big tits and a little ambition. We all know the mayor has a type.

Meanwhile, over at the Kingridge Ranch, the so-called “royal family” of Sagebrush Creek is keeping up appearances—or trying to. Let's not forget their humble beginnings. Pa Kingridge might run one of the biggest spreads in the county now, but six kids by three different women doesn't exactly scream blue blood. Makes you wonder if that's why none of the Kingridge boys have settled down. Maybe they're protecting their legacy, or maybe they don't know the first thing about being in a real relationship.

Either way, it's not for lack of trying on the ladies' part. The women of Sagebrush Creek have been circling those brothers like vultures over a fallen calf for years. Poor Fallon can't escape their feeding frenzy, even all the way in Europe.

Will this be the year one of the Kingridge boys finally bites the bullet? Or will they just keep playing cowboy until the cows come home? Guess we'll have to see who shows up to the Hitchin' Hearts Hoedown next week. Word is, it's going to be the event of the season. Boots, spurs, and enough bourbon to drown a horse.

Just remember folks, the barn doors swing wide open, but so do my ears. You couldn't possibly think that I'd miss this. Rest assured, I'll be there too, taking notes, sipping my drink, and watching every scandalous move.

And for those of you wondering who I am, well... that's my little secret. After all, who'd trust me if they knew? Just know I'm here, holding all the cards and spilling all the tea.

Saddle up until next time, darlings. This is your bitch with boots on the ground, signing off.

CHAPTER 2

ALEXANDER

"Jolene! Dolly! Get back here!"

The sharp, high-pitched voice cuts through the stillness of the wheat field, pulling my attention from the tractor. I glance up just in time to see two tiny furballs darting straight toward Thrusty's pen. They're so small they look like gerbils, but I suppose they're supposed to be dogs.

And they're headed directly for trouble.

Thrusty the goat earned his name for a reason—he's a predator of the most inappropriate kind.

Behind the furballs, a woman is sprinting, her skin-tight jeans leaving nothing to the imagination. Even from here, her curves demand my attention. With as long as it's been since I've had sex, it's nearly impossible to tear my eyes away from her tits as they bounce beneath her white shirt. But her second shriek breaks the spell.

I snap my head around just in time to see the gerbils squeeze under the fence into Thrusty's pen. Damn it.

With a muttered curse, I leap off the tractor. So much for getting anything done this morning.

As I jog toward the chaos, I remember I'm wearing a tie—a damned tie. Our new marketing director, Priya, insisted this would make me look approachable and professional for the VIP guests staying at the ranch's new suites. She didn't account for the realities of ranch life, like chasing horny goats in the mud.

The furballs are already in full panic mode, dipping and dodging Thrusty's harmless advances. But the woman is the bigger concern. She's halfway tangled in the fence, one boot caught in the wire, her hair spilling down her back in a wild cascade. Her perfectly round ass is directly at my eye level as I approach. I blow out a deep breath. This is going to be more of a challenge than I thought.

"Hold on, I've got you," I call out.

"They jumped out of the car! They never do that!" she cries, her voice catching somewhere between a laugh and a sob.

I can't tell which it is and it makes me freeze for a split second. Please don't let it be tears. I can't handle the sound of a woman crying. She lets out another guttural sound.

"Don't cry," I bark, sharper than I mean to. "Do not cry. You're fine. I'll get them."

“Ah! He’s humping them!” She points toward the pen, flailing and pulling at the wire. Every move she makes tightens the fence’s grip on her leg.

I glance over my shoulder. Sure enough, Thrusty’s at it again, but not with her dogs. “He’s humping the bed we threw in there for him.”

“Are you sure?” There’s a calming familiarity to her voice, but I brush it away.

“Yes.”

The furballs choose that moment to trot out of the pen, looking thoroughly unbothered. I swing the gate open and bark, “Y’all get! Back in the car.”

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The little traitors march obediently toward the Jeep. I take in the sight of their manicured haircuts. These dogs ain't made for farm life and neither is their Mama from the looks of it. I turn my attention to the mouthwatering curves of the ass suspended in front of me and try to keep it in my pants.

I may be pent-up, but I'm not a creep. I'm going to help her down like the gentleman I am. Then I'm making a note to myself to hit the bar scene somewhere outside of Sagebrush. I need sex, not another responsibility. This ranch keeps me plenty busy.

Maybe I'll head down to Findlay Farms for the weekend.

"No, don't worry about me. They can't reach on their own." She uses her one free hand to wave me away.

Her words stop me in my tracks.

"Are you kidding me right now?"

"No! They'll get lost out here." She continues to struggle to free herself and the wind does nothing to help. Her hair whips across her face. "Please, put them in the car. I can wait."

I let out a huff. Against my better judgment and the laws of nature, I march back towards the dogs. I scoop them up one by one and deposit them into the Jeep, slamming the door behind them.

When I turn back, the woman is still as stuck as ever. Her pant leg is torn and her

boot is caught worse than I thought. I pull her boot off her foot and wriggle her jeans out of the wire. “You can climb down.”

But she doesn’t move. The woman stays clutching the top of the post for dear life.

“Okay, come here.” I make the decision for her and step up behind her. Wrapping my arms around her waist I tug both of us backward. She gives in to me, but her pant leg snags when the fence finally lets go.

It twists and turns her body until she’s facing me. The force of the release sends her careening into my chest and we tumble backward onto the ground. When we stop, she’s on top of me, straddling my lap. Her long hair spills over her face and around us like a curtain. Her mouthwatering tits press together under her thin white T-shirt.

It takes every ounce of willpower I have not to bury my face right there in her cleavage. Even though I keep it under control, I know she can feel the massive bulge growing in my pants that refuses to listen to reason.

She lets out an awkward laugh as she tries to get to her feet and I can’t help but join in. But the unsteady, red, dirt beneath us doesn’t do her any favors. She manages to toss her head back, flipping her hair out of her face. When she does, her hips rock into me. Heat shoots down my spine and I put a hand to the curve of her waist to steady her. My dick twitches and strains in response. She either doesn’t notice it or doesn’t acknowledge it. Either way, I’m gratefully heading for a cold shower after this.

Then our eyes meet, and my heart stops.

“Cassidy Bellcourt?”

Her eyes widen with recognition as she scans my face. I wonder what I must look like

to her after all these years. It's been ten, maybe fifteen since I've seen her. After a frozen beat, she scrambles off me with a new motivation.

"Alexander... hi." She stands, shakily on the single boot she's got left. Her socked foot presses into her calf for balance as she attempts to brush the mud off her jeans. "You've grown up."

I push myself off the ground, taking in the sight of my childhood babysitter. Cassidy Bellcourt—or Cassidy Knowles, as she was called back then before she married Randolph Bellcourt and became the first lady of Sagebrush Creek.

Cassidy is only five, maybe six years older than me if I remember correctly. As the oldest of my siblings, I never thought I needed her to watch me back then. I do the math in my head... That puts her around forty years old. But that seems impossible. She looks exactly the same as I remember her... absolutely stunning.

"It's just Alex now," I say, brushing the dirt off my slacks.

"Right. Of course." She gives a small, sheepish smile, her full lips tugging upward. "In that case, I should tell you that it's Cassidy Knowles... again. I, uh, changed my name back after the divorce was finalized."

"Oh, I didn't know. But I like the sound of that." I run a hand across the tight muscles on the back of my neck.

"I'm surprised you didn't hear it on that damned podcast. If I ever find out who's behind it I'm going to take that stupid voice changer and..." She chatters on and I revel in being this close to her again.

Her voice stirs old memories. I was a child with no mother. In a house full of boys with an alcoholic father, Cassidy was an anomaly. As a kid, I remember her smelling

like fresh flowers. She baked cookies with us in the kitchen and read us books before bed.

As a teenager, though, things changed. She came to babysit the younger half of the Kingridge boys, but I used the time to watch her. Even without the age gap she was out of my league back then. But that didn't stop me from memorizing every curve of her body and fantasizing about what it'd be like to kiss her full lips.

Her balance wavers and I scoop her into my arms.

She lets out a shriek of laughter. "What are you doing? Put me down."

"Stop it." I chuckle as I fireman-carry her four steps to the bale of hay just outside of Thrusty's pen. "Here, let me grab your sacrificial boot over there."

"Well, thank you for rescuing me." She rolls her eyes and it's playful. I don't miss the way her face flushes pink and I wonder if it's my touch that's pulling a reaction from her or embarrassment.

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“What are you—” I start to ask as I hand her the boot, but I stop dead when I see it.

Blood seeps through the denim of her jeans, running down her thigh. My stomach clenches at the thought of her being hurt.

“You’re bleeding,” I snap, moving closer. “Come here.”

Cassidy glances down at her leg, shrugging. “It’s just a scratch. Not a big deal.”

“The hell it isn’t.” My mind flashes back to one of the only memories I have of my mother before she disappeared from my life and I spring into action. Before Cassidy can protest, I press my hand to her thigh, right above the cut, and apply pressure.

She blinks at me in surprise and her thigh slips ever so slightly away from my grasp.

“Stay still,” I growl.

She stares at me, wide-eyed, her lips slightly parted, and for the first time in years, I feel like a teenage boy again.

CHAPTER 3

CASSIDY

I press my hand softly against the rough edge of his jaw. “Alex, I’m okay.” My words are a soft balm in the intensity of the red hot heat flushing his skin. “Look at me. It might need a stitch, but probably not.”

I put a soft hand on the side of his face. Alex's huge heart has stayed the same for all of his physical changes. I see a flash of the boy he was transposed with the handsome man sitting in front of me and our shared history is jarring.

When his eyes meet mine, he lets out a jagged breath. "I know you are." His touch softens, but it takes another beat before he releases some of the pressure. "I can take this shirt off and we can wrap it around..." He trails off loosening his necktie.

The thought of Alex shirtless dances briefly through my mind. It's both completely inappropriate and impossible to stop. This is hardly the time or place. Then again, Alexander Kingridge is hardly the person.

Sure, he's spent the last ten years transforming from the lanky kid I used to babysit into a broad-shouldered, rugged rancher who looks like he stepped off the cover of a smutty romance novel. But falling for anyone right now—especially him—is the exact opposite of what I need.

Besides, isn't there some rule against babysitters hooking up with their former charges? Some kind of cougar law or something?

Still, I can't deny the way his presence gets under my skin. My stomach flutters when he's close, and a dangerous warmth pools low inside me. After years of living in a loveless marriage, the sheer thought of Alex pushing me back onto this hay bale, his weight pressing against me, is enough to set my nerves on fire. But I force myself to set the fantasy aside. I have no business thinking about him or anyone else like this, not right now.

I tilt his chin up until our eyes lock again. "I've got a massive first aid kit in my car. I'll clean it and cover it. I bet that will take care of things, I won't even need to go to urgent care."

“Okay. Right.” He exhales, his hands dragging slowly away from my skin. Goosebumps ripple across my thigh where his fingers lingered. “I don’t like to see—” he begins by way of explanation, his voice rough and low.

“Women get hurt,” I finish for him. “I remember.”

Dropping my hand to the collar of his shirt, I adjust it back into place and straighten his tie. His adam’s apple bobs beneath my knuckles as I work. The heat between us is palpable. I let my fingertips trail ever so briefly across his broad shoulders.

We freeze for just a moment, our eyes locked in a way that makes the whole world fall away. The sound of the wind through the hay, the distant cries of Thrusty the goat—it all fades as he holds me there locked in his gaze. But then his eyes flick away, breaking the spell. When he looks back up, the moment is gone. He smiles, that lopsided, devastating grin and my heart stumbles like a girl who doesn’t know any better instead of the grown, divorced, woman that I am.

“Here, let’s grab that kit.” He holds out a hand to help me down from the hay bale. “What are you doing out here, anyway? Besides getting stuck in goat pens?”

I brush hay off my pants, avoiding his eyes. “The short answer? I’m rebuilding my life now that I’m divorced. The long answer... Your ranch is the only place in town where Randolph’s reach doesn’t extend, so I thought I’d start my search here.”

He exhales as his arm loops casually around my waist, guiding me toward my Jeep. “And what exactly are you looking for?”

Family. A friendly face. A fresh start. A good fuck. There’s so much I want to say, but I settle on a safer answer and go with, “Horses.”

“Horses?” His voice is full of skepticism, His brow raises as he leans against the Jeep

door, arms crossed over his chest. “I didn’t take you for the equestrian type.”

“It’s true,” I insist, sliding into the passenger seat. “I’m an occupational therapist or at least that’s what I studied to be. I worked with horses in grad school, and they’re incredible for sensory and physical therapy. Now that I’m on my own it looks like I’ll be putting some of those skills to good use and getting my first grown-up job. I thought...”

I chatter on about all the benefits of horse therapy as Alex heads to the back of my Jeep and retrieves the first aid kit. My stomach swirls with nerves that make me keep talking. He listens with patience and interest as he returns with the kit.

There’s a quiet confidence about him that was never there before. His focus is intense and I can feel his eyes moving over me, taking me in inch by inch.

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“You’ve got something on your cheek too,” he says, his voice softer now.

I touch my face, finding a streak of bronzer. “Makeup,” I admit with a laugh.

“Why are you wearing that?” His head shakes slightly. “You don’t need it. You never have.”

His words settle over me like a warm blanket, wrapping around the parts of me that have grown cold. In my marriage, I was conditioned to strive for perfection. Looking perfect. Saying the perfect thing. Immaculate, color-coordinated outfits. Flawless was the expectation. Alex’s off-hand compliment feels different. Real.

Alex kneels in front of me, his hands firm but careful as he peels back the mud-soaked fabric from my thigh. I always felt close to Alex. He is the only Kingridge sibling without a match. From what I know, his mother was young and took off shortly after having him.

Beneath him are twins, Bowen and Callum. Their mother was around for a while. I think it was an addiction that ran her off. I rack my brain for details I haven’t thought through in years. Then a few years passed before the younger three came along. Alex was the oldest, but he somehow seemed lost in the shuffle.

There’s no way anyone would lose this man now. His rough hands hold my leg with a gentle touch that I don’t expect. I close my eyes and let myself indulge in the rare sensation of being taken care of—until his next words shock me back to the present.

“Take your pants off.”

“What?” My voice comes out louder than I intend, my cheeks flushing hot. “No. Absolutely not.”

He rolls his eyes. “Cassidy, I need to clean this properly. You don’t want it infected.”

“I don’t have anything else to wear,” I protest.

“Fine. Then I’ll take you across the ranch to my place. You can borrow something there, and we’ll clean this up right.” He stands, his broad frame towering over me and blocking out the sunlight behind him.

I glance down at the blood still rushing from my open wound. “Your wife won’t mind?”

He lets out a deep laugh. “It’s just me. Well, me, Pa, my brothers, and this ranch. That’s all I need. I can’t handle anything else.”

“So why not find a wife who can handle you?” I tease, peeking up at him through my lashes.

“You know of anyone?” His grin widens, but there’s a flicker of something unspoken behind it. He slides into the driver’s seat and adjusts it for his tall frame.

We start the bumpy path across the ranch and I take in all its glory. The spa, the trails, the animals... It’s like another world out here. Alex and his brothers have done an incredible job with this place.

“When this heals,” he says, glancing at my leg, “come back, and I’ll take you to ride as many horses as you want.”

“Oh, thank you. But I don’t think this place is going to work for what I need because

um, it's not actually for me," I stammer, suddenly and ridiculously self-conscious. "It's for my... son."

"Your son. Oh."

The oh in his reply stretches on for longer than reasonable.

"Connor is nine. He's amazing, but he's different. The way he sees the world and the way he processes things isn't typical. I think horse therapy might help. Randolph never supported the idea, but now that it's just me and Connor, I get to call the shots."

Alex is quiet for a moment, his hands gripping the steering wheel as he looks out at the horizon and I wonder if he's in shock about me having a child. Even more, I wonder why I care. Connor is the greatest thing in my life. If Alex can't see that?—

His hand moves back to my thigh. "Connor's a lucky kid."

CHAPTER 4

ALEXANDER

She's a fucking MILF.

As if my dick could get any harder for her. I don't know what kind of messed-up mommy issues I'm trying to work through, but once the image enters my mind, it won't shake loose.

Cassidy Knowles—long legs, wide eyes, and a laugh that lodges itself in my chest—sits on my couch wearing a pair of my basketball shorts. They hang low on her hips, and my brain short-circuits every time she shifts.

To make matters worse I'm on my knees in front of her. I take her leg in my hands, my fingers brushing the smooth skin as I wrap her thigh with a bandage. It isn't just having her in my clothes or even the fact that she's letting me help. It's having her here. In my home. That does something to me I can't explain.

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I need to keep it together before she decides I'm some kind of perv and disappears from my world again.

"Your son is with your ex today then?" I ask, more to keep myself grounded than anything else.

"Yeah, this morning." She sighs, sinking back into the cushions. "I'm sure he's playing an unlimited number of video games and enjoying a gourmet diet of French fries and frozen pizza."

"The meal of champions," I say with a laugh and I gesture to the freezer over my shoulder. "My palate has not changed. I've got every brand in there."

Cassidy laughs too, the sound is soft and warm, wrapping around me like a lasso. "Please tell me you're joking."

"Nope." I grin. "To be fair it isn't eating real food that bothers me, it's the cooking that gets me tripped up."

"Alex..." She shakes her head, but there's a smile pulling at her lips. "I've got to get you taken care of. Maybe some banana bread or cookies. Something homemade..." She continues on, complimenting my home and the views from the picture windows in the kitchen.

As she talks, my mind goes to work, weaving her into the story of my life on this ranch. Then my dick takes over. Before I know it I'm picturing Cassidy in a tiny apron, hair pulled back, and black heels standing in my kitchen. I shake it away.

But before it goes the image morphs into one of weasely Mayor Randolph Bellcourt wrapping his arms around her from behind. And that takes care of the half-chub trying to grow in my pants.

When they first announced their marriage I remember seeing the pictures all over our local paper and social media. Then their constant drama on our town's podcast was impossible to avoid. After a while I blocked it out, she wasn't mine. But now the thoughts are enough to make my stomach turn.

The question falls out of my mouth before I can stop it. "What did you see in him, anyway? Your ex, I mean. He's old and so... ferret-like."

She laughs but then Cassidy visibly stiffens. Her face tightens into pinched lines and she lets out an exhale. "I didn't grow up like you," she says, her voice quieter now. "You had a family. Money. As crazy as things got, you had a safety net. For me, it was just my grandpa. We barely got by when it was the two of us. And when he passed, I had nothing at all. Marrying Randolph gave me stability. Security. At the time, that felt more important than anything else. It was never love, I was a child compared to him."

Hot fury whips through me. "What an asshole."

"He is, but if I'm being honest it was an exchange. It's not like I was in love. I knew even then I was trading his money and stability for... Well, you know."

My fist balls as Cassidy's words land heavier than I expect. "You should've stuck around. Pa had his issues. But even in his drinking days, he would've helped you. Hell, we all would've."

"Hindsight," she says softly with a shrug. "That's why I'm making a new choice this time. I want to show Connor that I can build a life for him and that I can be his safety

net. I'm never going to be in a situation again where my entire world hinges on someone else. My divorce fresh start might be rough, but it'll be mine."

Her words knock something loose in me, and all I want to do is pull her into my arms. Instead, I get to my feet. "How's that feel?"

She moved her leg from left to right. "That's great, thank you. So much better."

"Then you'll get a job, save up, and buy a place?"

"That's the plan," she says, her mouth pulling into a line as she gets to her feet. "But Randolph won't make it easy. He's got his hands in every business in town. On top of that the prenup I signed as a twenty-two-year-old idiot says I have to stay within twenty miles of Sagebrush Creek until Connor turns eighteen."

My jaw tightens, the anger curling hot and tight in my gut. This guy is just looking to catch one. "The ranch counts then. We're within twenty miles. Randolph won't dare mess with you out here. And if he does..." I roll up my sleeve, flexing dramatically.

Cassidy laughs and the sound warms me.

"It's beautiful out here, always has been," she says, her voice softening. "But you're not exactly set up for kids."

"What do you mean?"

She bites her lip, and the gesture is more distracting than it has any right to be. "I mean, I can't exactly bring my son to a place with signs like 'Udder Satisfaction Milk Barn' with the girl and the tits or 'Bareback Haven Spa.' They're funny, but can you imagine the way Randolph would nail me to the wall in our next custody hearing if Connor had photos taken here?"

“We might not have advertising degrees but when the Kingridge brothers get together we can come up with some winners.” I grin, “those names are classics.”

“They’re something,” she teases with a playful laugh.

“We’ve got a new marketing director, Priya. She said something similar. She’s already working on cleaning things up. This place will be family friendly in no time with the direction she’s taking us.”

Cassidy reaches for her keys on the kitchen countertop.

“Do you want to stay for lunch?” The question comes out like some sort of weird last-ditch effort and I don’t know what’s come over me. I’ve never asked a woman to stay for lunch.

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Cassidy shakes her head. “Thanks, but I can’t.”

“Is it the frozen pizza of it all?”

She laughs and it’s a sound I could live on. “No, it’s not that. I’ve got to get my dogs to the groomer and pick up Connor from Randolph this afternoon. But I’m glad I ran into you, Alex.”

My name on those pillowy lips is mesmerizing. “So am I.”

We walk onto the porch, and Choke, our territorial rooster, scurries toward us. His chest is puffed and his wings are flapping as he struts between us and the Jeep. Cassidy hesitates, her hand brushing mine as she steps closer. The sensation sends tingles whipping across my body.

“Don’t worry about him,” I say, placing a hand on her lower back and guiding her past. “Choke thinks he owns the place, but he’s harmless.”

“Choke?” She raises an eyebrow.

“Choke the chicken,” I reply with a smirk.

Cassidy bursts into laughter, her hand flying to her mouth. “Of course. The Kingridge brothers don’t disappoint.”

When I open her car door, she hesitates before sliding inside. “Come to the Hitchin’ Hearts Hoedown next weekend,” I say. “I’ll pull a horse around for Connor. He’ll

love it.”

“He’ll be with his dad,” she says, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Then I guess I’ll get you all to myself,” I reply, my grin widening as her cheeks flush pink. “Lucky me.”

Cassidy drives off, and I watch her Jeep until it disappears. My heart rate won’t come down and I know exactly what I’ll be doing before I head back to work. Only before I step inside, I hear tires crunching up the gravel toward me.

I watch as the white truck kicks up a thick cloud of dust and I already know which brothers could be behind the wheel. Bowen and Callum insist on driving like they’re auditioning for Fast and Furious, Farm edition.

They drive me crazy, but they work hard. It’s a trait that separates the upper half of the Kingridge alphabet— Alexander, Bowen, and Callum from the younger ones, Fallon, Geoffrey, and Holden. By the time they came along Pa was done chasing most of his demons, their mother stuck around, and our ranch was booming. They had it too easy and it shows.

“Hey, who was that?” Bowen slams the truck door as he makes his way toward me. “Heard over at the wheat fields that you were talking to someone... a woman.” He lets the last word sit heavy with innuendo.

I roll my eyes. “Word travels fast at the ranch. You remember Cassidy, right? She used to babysit us.”

“Mayor’s wife? What do they want from us? I don’t want to hear nothing about an easement or taxes, we’re square with that. I checked?—”

“She isn’t his wife anymore.” The words snap out of me before I can stop them.

Bowen holds his hands up in surrender and the corner of his mouth pulls into a cocky smirk. “My mistake dude.”

CHAPTER 5

CASSIDY

It’s been a week since I ran into Alex, and somehow, it feels like my entire life has shifted. We’ve exchanged at least two hundred texts—flirty, sweet, and on occasion, steamy. I’ve been floating through the days like a lovestruck teenager.

Still, I remind myself it’s too soon to think about getting into another relationship. I’ve been honest with Alex about that. He doesn’t seem to care. And, truthfully, he’s one hell of a distraction.

I fumble with the bag of baked goods I brought for him as I smooth down the front of my black fringed shirt. He can’t keep eating like a college frat boy. Pulling down the visor in my Jeep, I glance at myself in the mirror.

No makeup. Uneven skin tone. A few new lines around my eyes. It feels like walking into battle unarmed. Vulnerable. Naked.

“Why didn’t I just wear the damn pageant makeup?” I mutter to myself, letting out a shaky breath.

Then I glance at the backseat and force myself to rephrase my thoughts. Change is hard. New things are hard. But I’m not the mayor’s wife anymore. I don’t need to wear a mask for these people. They’ll just have to get used to it. Soon enough the white-hot spotlight will train itself on someone else.

“Connor, are you ready to go inside?” I glance back at my son, his braces flashing in the rearview mirror.

“You bet!” He gives me a thumbs-up with the kind of enthusiasm only a nine-year-old can muster.

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Randolph bailed on picking him up this morning—again. I couldn't reach him, so Connor is here with me, and I'm not sorry about it. Connor is the absolute life of any party and I adore that about him.

We park in a sea of trucks outside The Velvet Spur at Kingridge Ranch. They call it a barn, but this massive event space is more like Sagebrush Creek's unofficial town hall. Everything happens within these walls. That's why I've spent as much time as possible avoiding being here in the last decade or so. It's a fitting location for my debut as Cassidy-no-longer-Bellcourt.

As soon as I open the car door, the twang of a fiddle and the hum of a steel guitar fill the air. It's nice, but right now the sound makes me want to crawl back into my car, drive away, and never look back. Connor doesn't even hesitate. He starts shimmying his stick-straight hips, throwing in some enthusiastic finger guns and an air guitar.

"This is your jam, Mom!" He yells. "Dance with me!"

"Let's at least get inside first," I say, laughing as I take his hand.

We step through the wide barn doors, and I can't help but gasp. The Velvet Spur is stunning. It's glowing with warm, yellow candlelight that bounces off the stained-glass windows. String lights crisscross above the rafters, and the wooden dance floor overflows with people.

Before I can take it all in, Hunkleberry—the Kingridge Ranch's elderly yellow mastiff—bounds toward us. His checkered bandana flops as he goes. He might be a senior, but he's got the energy of a puppy. I crouch to pet him, feeling the weight of

curious eyes settle on me. I already know that Hunkleberry isn't the only one with a tongue that's wagging.

I hate this—the way the town stares, and whispers—but it'll pass. Randolph will find someone new soon enough, and she can carry the weight of being Mrs. Mayor.

Holding my head high, I guide Connor further into the barn. Everyone's decked out in denim, fringe, and cowboy boots. It's nothing but the Sunday best for Sagebrush Creek's event of the season.

Connor doesn't waste a second before darting to the center of the dance floor. His body flails in rigid movements, but his confidence radiates. I wish I had half his nerve.

I make my way to the bar at the back of the barn. I'm not a big drinker, but tonight, liquid courage feels like a necessity.

"I heard he borrowed the milking machine for... personal use. Bless his heart." Old Patty June's voice cuts through the chatter as I approach the bar.

Brandi Rose, Sagebrush Creek's self-appointed celebrity, doesn't miss a beat. "Men get desperate, don't they? All these boys out here, and not a single one married." The Botox on Brandi's face holds strong, but the corner of her mouth twitches as if she's attempting a smile.

"Ladies," I say with a tight, mock smile as I step between them to order my drink.

"Oh my," Brandi Rose exclaims, taking my hand in hers before I can pull it away. "I didn't even recognize you. Good for you, coming out looking like...this."

I let out a small huff. "Thanks?"

“You’re welcome, dear,” she says with a saccharine tone.

Brandi Rose starred in a few infomercials back in the day before coming home to run the community theater and helmevery charity event in town. She’s not mean, exactly—just out of touch.

“How does it feel to be a single woman?” Patty June pipes up. She’s worked here at the ranch for years, though no one seems to know exactly what her job entails.

“I’m doing well.”

She continues, clearly not satisfied with my answer. “I heard there was a new man snooping around the ranch earlier today. No one knows him. He isn’t from Sagebrush. I could get his information for you if he shows up tonight. Maybe he’d be interested in a single mom?”

“Uh, I’m just going to grab a drink for now,” I say, giving the bartender a desperate wave.

But he’s too busy flirting with a blonde in a cowboy hat. She’s stunning and around his age. I watch them banter back and forth. The pang of resentment that follows is sharp and unwelcome. I traded away my youth and now, I feel every year of those lost decades.

“A little birdy told me they saw a Jeep out on the ranch the other day. That wasn’t you was it? I said to myself, I don’t know many jeeps. Especially not women driving them. But you are progressive. Had to be you, wasn’t it?” Patty June’s question is feigned innocence at its finest.

It shouldn’t be a surprise that the comings and goings of people from Kingridge Ranch are of interest. But it catches me off guard and I freeze.”Well, I?—”

“There she is,” Alex’s deep, familiar voice booms behind me, and my heart leaps.

He slides up to the bar, pulls a drink from behind the bar, and hands it to me. His arm drapes over my shoulder with fierce protection. His warmth instantly grounds me.

“If you’ll excuse us, ladies.” He tips his hat to Patty June and Brandi Rose as he guides me away from the gossip gauntlet.

He doesn’t stop walking until we’re alone in the breezeway, the cool night air swirling around us.

“You’ve made a habit of saving me. Cheers to that.” I raise my bottle to him and take a sip of the cool beer.

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“Wow,” he says, taking me in. His hand cups my cheek, his thumb brushing against my skin. “You look stunning, Cassidy.”

I try to look away, but he gently tilts my chin back up to meet his gaze.

“I mean it,” he says, his voice soft, steady. “You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. More of this look, please.”

“Stop it,” I mumble, shaking my head, though I can’t stop the warmth spreading across my cheeks—or the way my heart skips a beat.

CHAPTER 6

ALEXANDER

Having Cassidy by my side tonight is an absolute dream. Without the layers of makeup, I can see the real her and it makes me desperate for more. Her scent wraps around me, warm and familiar. She’s the kind of woman who makes you want to be a better man.

We’re thirty minutes into the night when she leans in close and tells me that her son is here. Her words cause a strange and undeniable feeling to take root. But I know without a doubt that I want to meet her kid.

I clear my throat, unsure of why my nerves are acting up. “What do you say you introduce me to Connor and I’ll have the guys bring a horse round back?”

Cassidy's eyes light up without hesitation. "Really? Yes, he would love that. I'd bet that he's over there, tearing up the dance floor."

"Let's go." I hold out an elbow to Cassidy and she slips her arm through it.

On the way over, I grab my brother's attention and tell them to bring a horse up. I don't know if it's the shock of seeing me with a woman on my arm, the fact that the woman is their oldbabysitter, or the amount of alcohol they've consumed, but my brothers comply with no question.

But Connor isn't on the dance floor. Instead, we find Connor holding court at the dessert table. Pa and a few ranch hands stand by riveted and I decide I like this kid already.

"How do you know I'm old?" Pa's eyes twinkle in the candlelight as he calls across the table to Connor, playing along with Connor's serious expression.

Connor tilts his head as if the answer is obvious. "Your hands. The skin is thinner, and your veins are more visible. Also, your beard is seventy-three percent gray. If you tell me how old you were when it started turning, I can calculate how much you lose per year."

Pa throws back his head and lets out a cackle of laughter. "You are something, you know that."

"Connor, this is my friend Alex." Cassidy steps away from me and puts a hand on Connor's shoulder.

Connor peers up at me, his expression blunt but curious. "You're big. I like your hat. Are you an actual rancher or a person who likes to dress like one?"

His matter-of-fact question makes me chuckle. “I’m the real deal. What do you say we ditch this party and get you on a horse?”

Connor’s face lights up and for a second I see Cassidy reflected in his soft features. “Yes! I do! Can we, Mom?”

Cassidy nods and I hold out a hand for a high-five. Connor delivers. Just like that, I know that I’m going to like this kid.

Fifteen minutes later, the barn dance fades into the background. All five of my brothers trail us to the paddock, though it’s clear they’re more interested in Cassidy than the horse.

Connor takes to riding like he was born for it, spouting off horse facts while I hold the lead. His mix of offbeat humor and earnest curiosity is impossible not to like. On the third lap, most of my brothers lose interest and wander back inside, leaving Bowen to take over while I join Cassidy.

She stands nearby, her arms wrapped around herself, tears shimmering in her eyes.

“Why are you crying?” I ask softly, my body immediately on high alert. “You know I can’t take it.” I chuckle at myself.

“I’m not,” she says, blinking rapidly, then shaking away her tears. “It’s just... I knew the horses would be good for him. It was such a fight. His dad made me feel like an idiot. Like I didn’t know what I was talking about, but seeing it—seeing him thrive—” Her voice catches. “Thank you, Alex. For doing this.”

“Connor’s incredible. Funny, smart... He’s going to fit right in here. And Cassidy?” I step behind her, resting my hands on her shoulders. “You’re an amazing mom. You don’t need my help, but I’ll always be here for you.”

She leans back against me, her soft curves molding perfectly against my hard lines as we watch Connor ride. He disappears around the corner with Bowen holding the lead, but she doesn't move away from me. For a brief, perfect moment, I allow myself to imagine a life like this. I want a life where I never have to let her go.

But the sound of the barn doors slamming open shatters our peace and snaps me back to reality.

“Why is my son on a horse?”

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I turn at the voice, instantly recognizing the man who strides toward us, Mayor Randolph Bellcourt. His presence radiates unwelcome authority, and Cassidy stiffens beside me.

“You didn’t pick him up,” Cassidy says, stepping forward but keeping her tone steady. “So I brought him here. I called you this morning, Randolph. Several times.”

Randolph pinches the bridge of his nose. “I didn’t ask for your schedule, Cassidy. I asked why my son is on a horse. You know how I feel about ranchers.” His sneer is directed at me now.

My jaw tightens. “I don’t care for your tone.” I step forward positioning myself between him and Cassidy. He can intimidate her all he wants, but if he thinks this bullshit is going to work on me, he’s got another thing coming.

“Alex—” She puts a calming hand on the back of my arm.

Randolph’s gaze flicks between us, settling back on Cassidy. He rolls his eyes. “Calm down cowboy. Cass, who is this?”

My muscles clench and restrict. I hate the way he calls her Cass. I hate the way her body reacts to his presence.

Before she can answer, I step forward. “Alexander Kingridge. This is my ranch, and you’re trespassing.”

“Ah, now it makes sense, a Kingridge. If you don’t have the power anymore, you

might as well chase the money.” Randolph smirks. “It was right there in front of me this whole time, the change in lifestyle. The... rustic choices.” He motions dismissively at Cassidy.

“You have no jurisdiction here and I’m telling you, you need to leave.” If I lose my cool this dude has no chance. The rage that bubbles inside me is immediate and all-consuming. Cassidy’s hand on my arm is the only thing keeping me from lunging at this douchebag.

“Dad! Hey Dad.” Connor’s voice floats over to us on the breeze.

I turn to see Bowen, horse lead still in hand. He raises an eyebrow at me then folds his arms across his chest. His mouth pulls into a cocky smirk as he eyes Randolph.

Randolph raises his voice. “Son, off the horse.”

“Ah man, I was doing so good,” Connor mumbles his protest.

“Connor,” Cassidy calls gently, “we’ll try riding again another time. It’s your dad’s day, and it sounds like you’re leaving with him now.”

Connor dismounts with Bowen’s help, his disappointment palpable.

Randolph steps forward, lowering his voice. “We aren’t farmers, no matter what little fantasy she’s indulging. But it’s nice of her to introduce you to her... companions. You know, all the men she’s spending time with.”

That’s it. Too fucking far.

“You’re done.” My voice is low and menacing.

“That’s enough.” Cassidy’s voice is cutting. “Alex let it go, you don’t know what he’s like. He’ll make your life a nightmare.”

“Ha,” I scoff. “I’d like to see him try. He just made an enemy of the wrong man.”

Cassidy continues, “Randolph, on your days with him you can do what you want, but trust that I’m going to do the same. Connor honey, I love you so much and I’ll see you in a few days.”

Connor takes a cautious step toward his mom and buries his face into her. She wraps him in a hug. Randolph stands facing me and I silently will him to make a move toward me or toward Cassidy. A single inch forward is all I need to justify the punishment I’m ready to rain down on him.

Our silent standoff is interrupted when the barn doors push open again and the rest of my brothers file out in a line. They come to stand beside me, blocking Cassidy and Conner from Randolph’s view.

“We make a formidable wall, don’t we?” Bowen lets out a humorless chuckle.

“I sure as hell wouldn’t want to come up against us on a bad night,” Holden adds.

“I was straight looking for a fight tonight.” Callum presses his palms together.

Randolph’s eyes wander across the line assembled in front of him. In a wild move, he seems to actually consider taking us on before ultimately taking a step backward.

“Connor, to the car.” Randolph barks.

“He needs to find his jacket, it’s inside. We’ll be right out.” Cassidy’s face is unreadable as she pushes past all of us and makes her way into the party with Connor.

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As soon as she's out of earshot, I lose my restraint. I lunge forward and put a hand on Randolph's shoulder. "Here's what's going to happen now. I'll bring Connor out when he's said goodbye to his mom and is good and ready. That's nonnegotiable. But I'm not an unreasonable man, so I'm going to give you a choice in this next part. You can walk to your car now or one of my brothers can help you walk out."

"Please! Whoo, damn please choose B." Callum's mocking tone echoes behind me.

"Hell no, you got to take out the last asshole. It's my turn." Holden's voice breaks through.

Randolph jerks his arms away from my grasp and he straightens. "I don't have a problem with you. I don't even know you and I'll have you remember that you don't know anything about my son."

The barn doors open and Cassidy reappears with Conor.

"He's ready, I'll see you on Monday." Cassidy's voice is clipped as Connor disappears through the gate toward the parking lot.

Randolph nods. But before he leaves, he turns back, offering his hand. I take it with caution. As we shake, Randolph leans into me and lowers his voice so only I can hear. "I don't have a problem with you, in fact, I'm envious. When she was young it took some getting used to, but now she's older and I've trained her well... She likes it rough."

I don't even feel myself move before I grab his throat in a blind rage. My brothers

spring into action beside me.

Cassidy's voice shrieks like broken glass in the night behind me. "Alex, what the hell are you doing?"

The sound stops me cold and I back away from Randolph. He straightens his collar and purses his lips. Then he turns to Cassidy saying, "Classy." Before he disappears through the gate.

CHAPTER 7

CASSIDY

My heart pounds like a runaway horse. Even with Randolph and Connor gone, the energy outside the barn seems to be climbing higher, not simmering down.

"Hell no, why do you think you're always the one who can close the deal?" Callum pulls up his shirt sleeve and flexes. It's hardly impressive—nothing compared to Alex's broad, rugged strength when he'd rolled up his sleeves just the other day.

"You don't have shit compared to this. Look at it!" Bowen barks back, flexing his own arms. "You think you can outmatch this? What a fucking joke."

"Bowen, you're old as hell now. You can't be fifty and still think you're throwing punches in a barn fight," Holden quips, tying the horse's lead to the fence.

"Fuck off. I'm thirty-five," Bowen fires back, his face reddening. "If you want to see what thirty-five can do, let's go. You couldn't even beat me at calf roping the other night. Seven seconds flat. Seven, bitch."

The Kingridge brothers gather like it's the old days, voices rising as they bicker and

taunt each other. It's a little like watching a movie from twenty years ago when they used to throw horseshoes at each other or wrestle over Monopoly rules. Everything was a competition back then, and judging by the heat in their voices now, nothing's changed. I half expect someone to pull the Kingridge Cup—a dusty, engraved beer stein that was the source of a million arguments—out of a back pocket and hold it over their head.

Under different circumstances, I might find it funny, even endearing. But tonight, I can't shake the gnawing worry in my chest about the fallout from this chaos. Randolph won't let this go. He's not the kind of man who loses gracefully. I know exactly how far his bitterness can reach, and I can already see the courtroom drama that might come next. Would he twist this into a custody battle? Use it to paint me as unfit? I can't put anything past him at this point.

My gaze drifts to Alex. He stands at the edge of the group, hands clenched into tight fists, his face flushed with anger. His silence speaks volumes. He scared me to death when he lost control. But there isn't any doubt that his heart was in the right place.

There's an unreachable glaze over his eyes as I approach him. But I reach for his hand anyway and tug him away from the chaos. "Come on."

His brow furrows, but he lets me pull him down the trail until we're away from the noise. The barn fades into the distance as we wind through the mesquite trees. His chest still heaves up and down and his skin is hot to the touch.

"Alex, what the hell were you thinking back there?" I demand, keeping my voice low but firm. "What if Connor had seen that? You can't let Randolph bait you like that. It won't end. He knows he got to you tonight, and now you've made yourself a target."

Alex's jaw tightens. "Fuck that guy. He wants to be a bully. Well, he can take his best shot at me. I welcome it."

My chest aches at the tension in his voice, at how fiercely he's carrying my burdens. "Stop. Alex, if you're going to be in my life, you need to understand something—I come as a package deal, okay? The good and the bad. That means Connor and, unfortunately, Randolph too."

We step into a clearing, and the sprawling ranch comes into view, bathed in moonlight. It's breathtaking, like something out of a dream. Alex halts, turning to face me. His eyes are dark and intense, searching mine.

"You want me in your life?" he asks softly.

I look away and then back up at him. "Of course I do." The words tumble out before I can stop them. "Alex, you're the most amazing man I've ever known. Who wouldn't want you in their life?" As soon as the confession leaves my lips, I realize my mistake.

The hurt flashes across his face before he can hide it. He doesn't need to say anything. I can see it in the tight lines around his mouth. A beat of silence passes, heavy with things unsaid.

"Can we walk to your house?" I ask, my voice gentler now.

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He nods, and we take the path toward his house. The warm night air carries the scent of wheat, a reminder of the peace this place holds and how badly I've destroyed that tonight. When we reach his porch, Alex drags out two rocking chairs and places them side by side. Instead of taking the seat beside him, I crawl into his lap.

His strong arms wrap around me, and I lean back into the steady rhythm of his chest rising and falling. His body is all strength, steady and grounding beneath me. We sit in silence, looking out over the rolling fields. The stars scatter across the sky like confetti, and for a moment, the world feels quiet again.

"You know," I murmur, "your mom... she had her demons. It isn't fair that you didn't get the mom you deserved. But think of how much worse it is for her. She missed out on you. You're an incredible man."

His arms tighten around me and his breath hitches, warm against my neck. "The last thing I remember is her crying," he says, his voice raw. "Begging me to get Pa. They were both out of it—her and him. She couldn't get up, and he wouldn't wake up. I was completely powerless. So I don't do well in situations like tonight. I can't just stand by while Randolph or anyone else hurts you, Cassidy. I won't do it."

I shift in his arms to face him, cupping his cheek. "Alex, I'm not something else for you to take care of, I refuse to be. I don't need someone to fight my battles. I want to be your partner. I want to be your... lover."

The word hangs in the air between us, bold and vulnerable. His hand tightens on my waist, and for the first time all night, the tension in his shoulders softens.

I turn to face him, straddling his lap and it ignites him. Alex's gaze drops to my lips, his fingers tightening just slightly on my waist. The night air is warm, but a shiver dances up my spine as I feel him grow hard beneath me. My hands make their way to the back of his neck.

“Say it again,” he murmurs, his voice a rough whisper.

I rock forward on his lap and his hips lift ever so slightly in response. I put my lips so close to his ear that I nearly touch him and whisper. “I want to be your lover.”

A low sound escapes him, something like a growl of desperation, and in the next breath, his lips claim mine. The kiss is slow at first like he’s memorizing me. But that doesn’t stop me from feeling the sizzle in every inch of my body.

Then his tongue parts my lips slipping inside of my mouth and taking my breath away. His hands slide up my back, fingertips tracing the shape of my spine and outlining every curve as I move on top of him. Pressing closer, I bury my fingers into his thick hair and tug just enough to make him groan against my mouth.

I have never felt more beautiful than I do when I see myself reflected in Alex’s eyes. My heart thuds in my chest and warmth pools low in me. His lips part, and the kiss deepens, hungry now. His hands land on my mounds and he plants desperate kisses across my cleavage before he slips them out of the top of my shirt.

My nipples constrict into tight eraser buds when the cool night air hits them until Alex’s mouth lands on top of them. He suckles at me until I’m drenched and the bulge between his legs is pulsating with anticipation. My walls tremble, I’m ready to give myself to him and overwhelmed with the need to be filled by Alex.

"Inside," he mutters between kisses, his hands flexing at my hips. "Now."

CHAPTER 8

ALEXANDER

Claiming Cassidy's beautiful body exposed to me is better than anything I could have ever imagined. I lift her from my lap and carry her inside. From there I don't hesitate. The front door barely closes before I press her back into the wall, and my body into hers.

I peel her clothing off one piece at a time. My hands roam—over her waist, her back, her thighs, her fucking glorious tits. I want to memorize every inch of her body. Because the truth is, with how hard I am for her, I don't know how long I can make this last.

Cassidy is the embodiment of every reckless, wild fantasy I had in my youth. She's the woman I used to dream about in the quiet hours when I was too young to understand what real longing felt like. But she's also so much more than that.

She's the person who steadies me, the one I want beside me when the world feels like too much. She's the warmth I want to sink into at the end of every hard day and the softness I never let myself need until now. She's not just desire—she's home. And I want to hold her every night for the rest of my life.

When I have her naked, I take her by the hand and lead her into my bedroom. When my own clothes are reduced to a pile on the floor, I put a hand on her chest and gently push her backward onto the bed. She lets her legs fall open for me and run my tongue along her glistening slit. I take my time, lapping at her folds and watching her body come to life. Seeing her hips rise to meet my mouth, desperate for more friction as she nears the edge is enough to make me come undone.

“Alex, I want you inside of me.”

Her breathy plea sends heat vibrating through me. I line myself up with her opening and my tip pulsates with the need to be inside of her. I part her lips to find she's already drenched and push inside in a single, earth-shattering thrust.

I steady her there with my hands on her hips as Cassidy's walls stretch around my firm length and she takes a sharp inhale of breath.

"Are you okay?" My words are a breathless growl.

A slow-growing grin spreads across her face and her voice is a breathy whisper when she replies. "Yeah, I... I want you to fuck me."

She makes me come undone and I give into the moment. Throwing my head back, I thrust into Cassidy. I slide her body up and down, bouncing her off my dick and back again. I watch the way her breasts bounce in time with my every movement and commit the sight to memory.

We move in time with each other as I worship her body. Cassidy is mine and as I claim her, she arches her back, reveling in the moment. The fiery tingles whip through every inch of me and the whole world fades away.

I blow out deep breaths desperate to hold on for as long as I can. But when she slips my finger into her mouth and sucks, I lose my composure and pound into her. Thank fucking god, Cassidy loses it too. Her body racks with tremors that have her clenching along my length as I drive her closer to the edge.

Her head falls backward and her chest swells in time with my thrusts until she lets out a guttural moan. The sound sends me exploding over the edge behind her. Every muscle clenches and everything goes blank. I thrust until hot streams of release shoot out of me. Cassidy milks me to the last drop.

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Afterward, the only sound is our breathing, slow and uneven as we lay tangled in my bed. My fingers trace lazy circles along her bare spine, with my other arm tucked beneath her as she drifts off to sleep. I hold her close, the thought of ever letting go completely unbearable.

Cassidy stays for the next four days while Connor is with his father. From the moment she steps into my home, the air feels lighter like I can finally breathe again. We don't waste a single minute of our time together. I shamelessly try to cram a lifetime of happiness into these fleeting hours.

While she's here, Cassidy takes over the kitchen. She insists on cooking every meal. I linger nearby, watching her move like she's always belonged here. When the dishes pile up, I take over. Life is less of a chore and more of a rhythm we've fallen into and it's one that I never want to break.

By sundown, most of the prying eyes on this ranch have gone home for the day. So after dinner, we take to sitting on the porch together and looking up at the stars. No topics are off limits in the safety of this bubble we've created around ourselves. She tells me she's worried about Randolph, and I promise her that he can't reach her all the way out here. She tells me that she's falling for me and I tell her I'm already there. I've loved her for as long as I can remember.

On top of everything else, we fall into a nighttime routine. It starts with Cassidy slipping into one of my old shirts. The fabric hangs loose on her curvy frame and teases me with glimpses of bare skin as she moves. Then she stretches out on my bed, her supple skin glowing and begging for my touch.

I take my time, learning her inch by inch. I start at her shoulders, kneading the tension from her muscles. My fingers trace the delicate lines of her spine and the round fullness of her curves. She melts under my touch, her breath hitching when I work over a tight spot, soft little sighs slipping past her lips.

Every sound she makes fuels me and urges me on. My dick swells and pulsates, desperate for more. I work my way down the curve of her back, across the swell of her hips, and down the length of her legs until she's completely undone beneath me.

And then she turns the tables.

Cassidy moves with slow, deliberate intent, flipping me onto my back. She drops my shirt off her body and climbs up on me, straddling my waist. Her hands are magic, mapping the hard planes of my chest, pressing deep where she knows I need it most.

Then her hands drift lower. She lingers over my manhood. Cassidy presses her tits into my face as she reaches behind my head to massage the back of my neck. She whispers into my ear telling me exactly what she wants me to do to her.

Just when I think I'm going to crawl out of my skin, it happens like clockwork. Her touch turns to fire. Cassidy plants kisses against my jaw and then more at the hollow of my throat. I groan with delight, my grip tightening around her hips. From there, it's game on until we're both too exhausted to move.

CHAPTER 9

PODCAST EPISODE- BOOTS AND BITCHING

Well,well, well, Sagebrush Creek. Your favorite anonymous community servant is back doing my civic duty. I'm giving you another boots-on-the-ground update... and trust me, the gossip in this town is juicier than a rare steak at the Velvet Spur.

So grab a drink, settle in, and let's get into it.

First up, there's a new face sniffing around the Kingridge Ranch. Some out-of-towner with an interest in the land. But the real question is—what kind of interest? Business or personal?

The Kingridge boys aren't exactly known for rolling out the welcome mat, so I doubt they're offering property tours. If this mystery man thinks he's gonna slide in unnoticed, he's got another thing coming. This is Sagebrush Creek, sugar, we notice everything.

Speaking of noticing everything, rumor has it there's been a certain ex-wife hiding out on the ranch. That's right—Randolph Bellcourt's former Mrs. seems to be attempting to keep a low profile, but between the scene she caused at the hoedown, and the time she's spending out at Kingridge Ranch, it seems subtly isn't her strong suit.

The real question is... who's she bunking up with? I have my suspicions and if I'm right, it's gonna send this town into a tailspin. Stay tuned, folks.

And in completely unrelated news—mystery lingerie was found in the haystack behind the Udder Satisfaction Milk Barn after the big bash. That's right, someone left behind a little lacy something while rolling in the hay, quite literally. Who was the late-night visitor? And more importantly, who were they visiting? If you're missing a pair of red silk panties, don't worry—your secret's safe with me... for now.

Meanwhile, Randolph Bellcourt is heading back to court, but the rumor mill is spinning. Is it just another legal headache, or is he making a play for custody? And if so, is it about fatherly devotion... or control?

We've seen that man wield power like a weapon before. But maybe it's for the best

this time. The stakes are high, and if you ask me, this battle is far from over.

One thing's for sure, Sagebrush Creek—this town never runs out of drama. And lucky for you, I'll be here, taking notes and spilling tea. So stay scandalous, darlings.

Until next time, this is your bitch with boots on the ground, signing off.

CHAPTER 10

CASSIDY

Tap.Tap. Tap.

Choke scurries around the front door of Alex's house. His beady eyes lock onto me like I'm his personal enemy and I stare him back straight in the face. His feathers puff up, wings flapping wildly as he lets out an angry, throaty cluck. It's like he can sense my mood and is determined to make it worse.

"Not today, Choke," I mutter, rapping on the door for a second time before deciding that he isn't here.

I need to talk to Alex before I lose my nerve and I know he's somewhere on this ranch, so I'll just have to find him. I turn to walk back towards my Jeep and Choke darts in front of me again. This time his scrawny legs move fast, blocking my path with all the bravado of a creature ten times his size. His beak jabs at the toe of my boot like he's challenging me to a duel and in a snap I decide I'm up for a fight.

“Fuck off, Choke.”

The damn rooster doesn’t flinch. Instead, he flaps his wings harder. His clucks escalate into an indignant screech. Then the little bastard lunges again, pecking at my boot, his tiny talons scraping against the wood porch.

“For the love—” I throw up my hands. “I am not in the mood for your bullshit right now. I’ll cook you into a pot pie. How about that?”

The sound of a tractor rattling in the distance makes me turn. I find an audience of farmhands staring in my direction. “Perfect. Spread the word until it gets on the podcast.” I wave an arm in their direction and they turn away from me.

Going totally unhinged seems to work on Choke too. He lets out one final, defiant baw before finally scurrying off.

“Ha,” I call after him, taking the victory where I can.

I drive the back way around the ranch looking for signs of Alex’s truck. I didn’t want to leave his house after our nights together. It was a dream, one I never thought I’d get to live. I’ve never felt so protected, so cared for. But reality doesn’t pause just because I want it to.

I had to pick up Connor from Randolph. As soon as I stepped out of Alex’s bed, the real world came crashing back in. It started with the damned podcast.

Every week, I tell myself I’m done listening to that ridiculous robot voice talk shit

about our entire town. But after the events of the hoe down, I knew I needed to tune in. I thought divorcing Randolph would take me off the gossip circuit. But somehow, my name being tied to Kingridge Ranch has only made me a bigger target. It wasn't as bad as it could have been, but it was enough to make my chest tighten.

And then Randolph delivered the real blow.

At pick-up, he handed me yet another request to update our custody arrangement. It's another court date. Another fight I'm not prepared for. I jerked it out of his hands and gave him a tight-lipped smile. But as I read the paperwork, it hit me like a freight train—when we go back to court, I'll have nothing to show for progress. No job. An apartment paid for only with alimony. No family. No real support system.

The case is a slam dunk for a mayor with every resource at his fingertips. I let a few nights of incredible, mind-blowing sex derail my focus, and that's irresponsible. I'm a mother first. I don't have the luxury of losing sight of that.

I knew that divorce would be hard, but I didn't realize that the toughest part would be not having access to my son. It's gut-wrenching. Mom guilt swells in my stomach when I think of spending my time falling in love at the cost of missing a single additional minute with Connor.

And then there's Alex.

This man has spent the last five days texting me. He showers me with attention that washes over me like warm, golden sunshine. On top of that, he's desperate to see me again. He's everything I've ever wanted in another life, but this isn't the time.

All week I've wanted to open up to him and share everything. More than that, I wanted to drive across town and see him. But every time I picked up my phone, the weight of my world pressed down on me and kept my fingers still. I had so much to

say, but all I could give him were clipped answers that squashed back my own anxiety.

The truth is, I'm a mess right now and he doesn't deserve to be dragged into this. I let myself get swept up in a fantasy with him. Alex held me in a beautiful, intoxicating fantasy that made me forget that my life is totally out of sorts.

As long as I am sharing custody with Randolph, my life won't be simple. I have to pull it together on my own. As much as I hate it, I have to play nice with my ex because what I have on the line is... Connor.

So now, I'm here at Kingridge Ranch before I lose my nerve. I hate what I have to do to Alex. But I know it's the right decision. It's better to rip off the bandage and put a stop to this before things between us go any further.

I take a turn down another gravel road toward the farm stand. Patty June materializes out of nowhere and I let out a sigh. You've got to be freaking kidding me. She waves a wrinkled and bony wrist in my direction. I give her a wave and attempt to keep going, but she steps in front of my Jeep. I wonder for a split second what would happen if I hung a sharp right. I could tear through the cornfield beside us instead of stopping to chat. It's appealing. But instead, I roll down my window.

"Hey, girl, what are you up to?" She lingers on the last syllable.

"Just looking into options for a place for Connor to ride horses. Have a good one." I press the button to roll my window up, but she leans in and puts a hand on my steering wheel.

I let my voice slip into the accent I worked so hard to get rid of. "Patty June, get on out of my car now. There are places in the world where this would get you thrown in jail." I put a hand on hers and remove it from my steering wheel.

“Oh, I’m just trying to help. You know me.” She wraps her fingers on the top of my car door.

“Well, thank you. Have a good one.” I move my gear out of park and press the break. I try to give Patty June something I hope resembles a smile.

She leans away from the car and then puts a hand on her knee letting out a laugh. “Girl, why don’t you just tell me you’re looking for Alex? If you did I’d be able to point you in the direction of the Saddle Suites. We’ve got this VIP coming soon—shouldn’t say who, but it’s a big deal. He’s making sure the Pillow Plow Palace VIP rooms are up to snuff, you know...” She winks.

I nod in defeat. No secrets in Sagebrush Creek. “Thanks.”

“Anytime! Anytime... you are so sweet and I love to help where I can especially when I see things blossoming. These old eyes don’t miss a thing. I hope there’s no lovers’ quarrel here. That Alex is a sweetheart, didn’t have no Mama and whatnot when he was young. You know his Pa had a way with the ladies and the drinks. Bless his heart. Alex never gets much practice with women even now. So I hope things...”

She trails off and I drive away. I’ve got bigger things to worry about right now.

CHAPTER 11

CASSIDY

The second I step inside the Saddle Suites, I suck in a breath. The place is rustic, sure. But the textures and subtle patterns make it more stunning than farmy. The furniture is plush, the antique chandelier is elegant, and the massive stone fireplace makes it warm in a way that feels decadent. There's no way the Kingridge brothers designed this space on their own.

There's a woman at the front desk. She's beautiful with long, straight, dark hair that covers her nametag and cascades halfway down her back. I ask her for directions. She points me out of the sliding back doors, across the path, and into the last cabin on the right in the center of the private courtyard.

I don't know if it's just my imagination, but I see a flicker of interest pass her caramel skin when she realizes who I'm here to see. For a moment, I wonder if she could be the bot behind the Boots and Bitching Podcast. But I don't have time to worry about that right now.

I enter the cabin to find it empty, but breathtaking. My gaze sweeps over the king-sized bed draped in crisp white sheets and the huge picture windows that looks out to a private jacuzzi. "Wow, this place is practically begging for sex."

A deep chuckle rumbles behind me. "And you've come to help it fulfill its destiny."

I turn with a start. Before I can think, Alex wraps me in his arms. For a moment, I let myself sink into his warmth, inhaling the leather and cedar scent of him. It melts me. But then I remember why I'm here and pull away. I straighten my shirt and smooth a

strand of hair behind my ear.

“I’ve missed you. This is such a nice surprise.” His smile stretches from ear to ear and I hate myself for what I’m about to do.

“Yeah, I’ve missed you too.” My voice wobbles at the end.

“Is everything okay?” He slides his phone into his pocket and sits on the overstuffed loveseat across from the bed, gesturing for me to join him.

“I’m okay. I’m not staying long.” And I don’t trust myself to keep my conviction if I sit that close to you.

His smile falters, and he gets back to his feet. “Okay...” His voice softens. “Cass, whatever this is, we’ll work through it. I’ve been worried about you. You’ve been so quiet since you left the other day.”

I swallow the lump in my throat and I know that dragging this out is only going to make it worse. I inhale. “It’s because I’ve been dreading breaking your heart and that’s exactly what I have to do right now.”

His whole body goes still. Alex’s eyebrows pull together in a tight, furrowed line. Frown lines appear deep in his forehead. For the first time, he looks his age.

The floodgates threaten to break, but I force my emotions down. “I have to build my life quickly. Being with you is a dangerous distraction for me right now because you make me believe in a world that isn’t my reality. I wish I could stay holed up with you for a million years. But that isn’t how my life works. I have a son to think about and custody battles that might not stop for a decade.”

“I can help you get your life back together and I’m sure as hell not worried about

Randolph Bellcourt.” He reaches for my hand, but I pull it away.

“But I have to be worried about him. He can make my life as difficult as he wants to and his leverage is my time with my son. I know that might not make sense to you and maybe you can’t imagine how that feels. But it’s the world I’m living in. That’s why I have to build my life on my own terms this time... alone. I can’t put myself in this position ever again. I can’t make another choice for security over independence.”

A humorless chuckle rips out of his throat. “Is that what this is to you, security? Because for me it’s love.”

It takes everything in me not to let a tear escape. “No, of course, that’s not what I meant. This is real. I mean, it was, but it can’t be right now.” My words spin and jumble in my mind. My heart threatens to beat out of my chest.

“You’re done then?” His words are matter-of-fact, but I can see the hurt in his eyes.

“I have to be and I’m so sorry.”

“All you have to do is get out of your own way. You sure don’t have to be sorry,” Alex says, his voice rough but steady. “I’m not Randolph. I won’t make your life miserable.” His throat bobs as he swallows hard like he’s forcing the next words out. “But I’ll miss you. And I want you to know that.”

The confession lands like a punch to the gut. I feel it everywhere—between my ribs, in the hollow ache of my chest, in the sting behind my eyes that I refuse to let spill over.

I don’t answer... because I can’t.

We just stand there, staring at each other as the air between us thins. The weight of

everything unsaid presses down until it's hard to breathe. A hundred words claw their way up my throat, desperate to be spoken. I want to explain, fix, and take it all back. But I can't let them escape. Alex is giving me exactly what I asked for. Anything I say now will only make this harder.

A muscle ticks in his jaw, his expression unreadable. Then, quietly, he says, "Let me walk you out."

His hand ghosts over the small of my back, barely touching, like he's waiting for permission. I already know that even now, if I give him even the smallest opening, he'll hold on. I'll be right back where I started.

I shake my head, forcing a tight, too-bright smile. "I'm okay. Thank you, but really, I'm good."

Lying has never felt so much like a betrayal.

Before he can respond, I turn and cut a direct path through the courtyard. My boots crunch over the gravel, each step echoing in my ears like a countdown to the moment I'll finally break.

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Alex doesn't try to stop me.

And I don't turn back.

The lobby is just a blur in my peripheral vision, but I feel the weight of eyes on me anyway—silent witnesses to my retreat. Judging. Pitying. Maybe just curious. It doesn't matter. I keep moving. I make it to my Jeep. Get inside and grip the steering wheel so tightly that my knuckles burn.

It isn't until I'm through the front gates of the ranch, the wide open farm road stretching before me, that I finally let myself shatter. A million tiny pieces, breaking apart in silence.

CHAPTER 12

ALEXANDER

“Come on, Thrusty, let's see you get out of this pen now.”

The damn goat eyes me, ears twitching like he's working through the logistics. His lips curl back, exposing teeth sharp enough to do real damage. But he's been thwarted this time. I've got reinforced fencing and a double latch.

I stand back and fold my arms across my chest. “Ha. His only way out now is to chew straight through the wire.”

Bowen leans against the fence. “I don't know, man. The way things are going for

you, he might just do it.”

My brother chuckles, but I can’t bring myself to join in. Instead, I shoot him a look and then get back to work.

It’s been two days since Cassidy ripped through me like a goddamn wrecking ball and I’m a fucking mess. The love of my life looked me dead in the eye and told me I wasn’t something she could afford. That I was a risk, a dangerous distraction, and a temptation she had to walk away from. I’m no better than that fucking asshole Randolph in her eyes and that’s a tough pill to swallow.

The worst part is, I didn’t see it coming.

I’ve spent my whole damn life believing love was for other people. That it wasn’t in the cards for me. But the second I had Cassidy in my arms, I knew it was right. Hell, maybe deep down, I’d always known it was her—even when I was just a kid watching her wrangle my younger brothers with the patience of a saint.

I’ve finally found the one thing I never thought I’d have and I somehow let her slip through my fingers. I lift a bale of hay over my shoulder and heave it over the gate into Thrusty’s pen. “You gonna watch me work or pick up one of them damn bales? I expect this from the others, but you standing around, that’s new.” My words are a bark and the truth is, Bowen doesn’t deserve it. But I’m looking for a fight today.

Bowen shifts beside me with a calm and collected stride. “Depends, you gonna keep moping around, or are you gonna go get your woman?”

My head snaps toward him so fast my neck damn near protests. I narrow my eyes, fists clenching at my sides. “What the hell am I supposed to do? I already told you, she wants space. I’m giving it to her. She’s got enough going on and no one listening to what she wants. I’m not joining that list. I don’t know what she’s worried about.

But I'm not a parent, hell I hardly had any parents."

Bowen chuckles. "You've got me there. Pa didn't do us any favors, but that's all the more reason not to end up like him. Honestly man, fuck space. Go get her. I know you want to and I want you to too because you're fucking nightmare to be around right now. Just fix this already, bring her back, and put us all out of this misery of having to be around you."

I lean against the gate and take a drink from my thermos. "Yeah, thanks for the relationship advice. Means a lot from a dude whose longest relationship was the chick you met on a ten-day cruise." But there's no bite left in my words.

He continues, "I've never seen you so damn happy in all my life. Now you're just gonna let it go like she didn't just walk in here and change everything? It's like I don't even know you right now."

"Would you get back to work? Damn. Didn't come out here for couples counseling with you," I scoff.

I wave Bowen off and force myself back to work, but his words won't stop rattling around in my skull. He's got a way of lodging his arguments in deep like a splinter I can't dig out. The overwhelming truth is, if it isn't Cassidy, it's not anyone. The fact burns through me, raw and undeniable.

I grit my teeth, trying to push past the thoughts. I need to lose myself in the steady rhythm of the work. I've been out here for two days straight lifting, hammering, fixing, anything to keep my hands busy and my mind from spiraling.

Then here comes my jackass brother's voice clawing its way back in and calling me out. She's already not speaking to me. I've already lost her. So what the hell do I have left to lose by putting it all on the line?

I drag a hand down my face, my chest tight with frustration. It's a longing too big to name. Every instinct in me screams to go to her. I need to shake some sense into her and make her see that we don't have to fight this thing between us. I knew I'd never get over her, but I can't let her walk away either.

I exhale sharply and resolve hardens in my gut. Just like that, I make the decision. I'm going to fix this with Cassidy no matter what the cost.

The knot around my chest loosens for the first time in days and determination takes its place. There is lightness in my step. But I don't say anything because knowing I was wrong and admitting it Bowen are two different things. So I shove it all down, grit my teeth, and keep working.

Thrusty breaks the silence by letting out a low, guttural noise. I turn to find him enthusiastically humping his new scratching post.

I glare at the goat. "Really helpful, asshole."

Bowen snorts. "Even Thrusty knows you're being a dumbass."

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“I can’t just show back up at random and say the same shit all over again. I need to show her... I need a plan.”

A smirk pulls at the corner of Bowen’s mouth. “Now we’re talking.”

CHAPTER 13

CASSIDY

“Dolly!Jolene! You didn’t see it coming. I knew it. Mom, did you see me?”

Connor’s voice snaps me out of my thoughts, and I turn with a start. He’s standing by the front door, backpack slung over one shoulder. His face is full of uncontainable energy and the dogs bounce with him, their tails wagging.

“You probably didn’t,” he continues matter-of-factly, “because I’m wearing my Flash shirt.”

“What?” I blink, still catching up.

“This shirt makes me incredibly fast—Too fast for the human eye.” He gestures at himself like a magician revealing his greatest trick. “You didn’t see me, but I zoomed right past you, and now we have three minutes until we leave, nine minutes before we arrive, and sixteen minutes before the bell rings. It’s because I ate my oatmeal in four minutes when normally it takes six.”

A smile tugs at my lips before I can stop it. “Well, Flash, why don’t you use the next

three minutes to brush your teeth before we go?”

“You won’t even see me.”

Then, in a blur of gangly limbs and boundless energy, Connor takes off down the hallway. He makes an exaggerated zooming noise as he goes. I exhale, shaking my head with amusement. I hope Randolph appreciates all the Connor-isms that bring so much joy to my world.

As soon as he disappears, I pick up my phone and get back to it. Some people stalk their exes on social media. I’ve never been above that kind of thing. But the truth is, I don’t have any exes to stalk. Not really. My entire dating life was consumed by Randolph. I never had a high school sweetheart, a college fling, or a rebound romance. It was just him.

Now that we’re divorced, the urge to check up on him doesn’t even exist. Not once have I wondered who he’s seeing or what he’s doing when Connor isn’t with him.

But Alex... has changed all that.

For four long days, I’ve been drowning in the radio silence between us. I know it’s self-imposed, but it’s suffocating nonetheless. I was the one who tore us apart and shattered us into something unrecognizable. I’ve spent all my time applying for as many jobs as possible and have been shocked to get two interviews lined up in the next week. They’re way out in Findlay, but building autonomy would be worth the drive. But none of the tasks have stopped my mind from wandering to Alex. And now, all I want to know is if he’s okay.

But he doesn’t make it easy. Alex isn’t exactly what you’d call a live online type. I don’t know what I expected. Certainly, he wouldn’t be taking selfies with his freezer pizza, but I thought he’d at least have a Facebook profile. He’s an elder millennial,

but I guess it's possible that he missed the boat by a few years.

The only pictures I can find of him on social media are marketing photos from Kingridge Ranch. Mostly they are staged shots with his brothers. They are the kind meant to sell an image rather than tell a personal story. But even through the stiff poses and grumpy expressions, I can see him. The real him.

The man who watches me like I'm the only thing that matters. The man who held me like I was something precious. I miss Alex in a way I've never missed anyone. It's like a piece of my heart is walking around without me and I ache to get him back.

My regret is a living, breathing thing that has taken on a life of its own at this point. It felt like everything was slipping into chaos around me. Since then, my resolve to keep my distance has wavered more than once.

But he's kept his distance just like I asked him to. Now I refuse to put Alex through some kind of emotional tug-of-war. If I can't be all in, the most kind thing to do is to let him go completely. Just because it's true doesn't mean it stops the ache.

"Boom. One minute until school departure." Connor's voice cuts through my spiral and his grin is infectious.

I shove everything down and focus on the one thing that has always been certain—my son. "Ready when you are, boss."

We settle into our short drive with the same playlist queued up like always. Country Roads, Take Me Home. We Will Rock You. Old Town Road. The songs play on repeat as per Connor's ritual, but truthfully I've grown to like the consistency too. Connor bounces his knees in time with the beat. But then in a change of routine, he pauses and gestures for me to turn down the music.

“Mom, are we gonna ride horses again at Kingridge Ranch?”

The question catches me completely off guard. We haven’t spoken much about the night of the Hoedown because I never want Connor to feel like he’s stuck in the middle between his father and me. “I’m not sure. Why? Did you like horseback riding?”

“Ilovedit,” he says with absolute certainty. “And I like the real cowboys there, too. They were cool. They said I could be a rancher if I wanted. I don’t even have to wait until I’m an adult. I can do it right now. Not technically right now because I have school, but from two-thirty until tomorrow morning I’m in charge of my own time.”

I glance at him in the rearview mirror, something warm unfurling in my chest. Connor tips an invisible hat in my direction adding a wink for good measure.

“Thatispretty cool,” I admit.

It hits me that Alex hasn’t taken anything from Connor. He’s only given him confidence and a sense of belonging in the short time they’ve gotten to know each other. And the more I think about it, the same can be said for me.

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Alex has lifted me up, not held me back. He's made my life better, fuller, brighter. I pushed him away because I was afraid of losing myself and getting caught up in something I couldn't control. But that was a huge mistake and I can see it so clearly now. My heart rate ticks up.

Before Connor gets out of the car, we do our secret handshake. It's the best part of our morning routine. Before he disappears into the school building, I remind him that tomorrow he'll be back with his dad.

Connor barely reacts to the news. It doesn't bother him. Not the way it bothers me. It gives me hope that maybe things with Randolph will smooth out after a while. Maybe there is a world where Connor could have two sets of loving parents.

I drive home with my to-do list still burning a hole in my pocket. There are a million things I should be focusing on. Finding a job, building a community of support for Connor, and taking care of myself all compete for my attention. But one thought keeps floating to the top.

Building my life could mean creating a world with Alex. Maybe I don't have to choose. Maybe I can reach my goals and love Alex too. It seems too good to be true. I know that kind of happily ever after happens for other people, but maybe it could happen for me too.

I take the pups for their morning walk. By the time we get back home, I'm overwhelmed with a desperate need to talk to Alex. I want to apologize. I've been a coward, I can see that now. I'm done letting fear dictate my choices. I can create security for myself, the interviews have proven that. But right now, I choose love.

I don't bother putting on makeup or changing out of my worn-in jeans and hoodie. It feels good and natural. The best part is that Alex won't care either way. He isn't in this to impress anyone. He loves me for who I am and it's time for me to tell him that I love him too.

Just as I reach for my phone, it vibrates on the kitchen table. My heart leaps into my throat when I see the name on the screen. It's him. The message is short but it sends my heart thudding in my chest.

Alex: We need to talk.

My hands tremble as I type out my reply, my fingers moving faster than my thoughts can keep up.

Me: Yes we do. I want to see you.

A pause stretches on for what feels like a lifetime and I hold my breath. Three dots appear, disappear, and then finally?—

Alex: Meet me at the stables.

CHAPTER 14

ALEXANDER

In Cassidy's absence, I've had nothing but time and I've sure as hell made the most of it.

Since I made the decision to win her back I've poured every minute of that time into this project. I also called in every favor I could wrangle from my brothers. They came through for me. That's one thing about the Kingridge boys, we fight, but when it

comes down to it we show up for each other. Standing back and looking at it now that it's finally done, I can say the blood, sweat, and late nights have paid off... I think. But of course, none of it matters if this doesn't end with Cassidy back in my arms.

Cassidy pulls up the gravel drive. Her Jeep rolls to a stop in front of me and my chest goes tight at the sight of her. She's stunning with her hair pulled back in a simple baseball cap and an old sweatshirt. My heart hammers, an odd mix of anticipation and something deeper. It's the chokehold Cassidy has had on me since the day she walked back into my life.

I open her door before she can get it open herself because I have to touch her. Having her this close again ignites me and all I want is to pull her into my arms.

She steps out, eyes searching mine, raw and unreadable. "Thank you for wanting me here," she whispers. "After the way I ended things..."

Her voice cracks, and her eyes go glassy. But this time, the sight of her tear-filled eyes doesn't gut me. These tears feel different somehow. There's hope in them and I wonder if they mean that she's changed her mind about us. I wrap my arms around her and pull her close. The moment her body molds to mine, the world tilts back into place. I know without a doubt that this is where she belongs and I never want to let her go.

She tilts her head up, her gaze locking onto mine with a raw intensity that makes it impossible to look away. Her breath trembles as she exhales, her hands tightening into fists at her sides like she's bracing herself.

"I'm sorry, Alex," she says, her voice thick with emotion. "For the way I handled things. For pushing you away when all you ever did was show up for me. I was scared, and I was totally out of line. I was wrong."

A single tear spills down her cheek, but she doesn't flinch, doesn't blink it away. She stands her ground, vulnerable and unguarded, the way she's never let herself be before.

Her chin lifts slightly, her throat working as she swallows. "I know now that you aren't some dangerous distraction. And I hate myself for saying that to you. I know it must have cut deep, and I can't take it back, but if I could, I would." She steps closer, the warmth of her body radiating into mine. "You are the man I want by my side. Not because I need you to build a life for me, but because I want you in it. Because with you, everything feels possible."

Her words land with the force of a storm I've been waiting my whole damn life to be caught in. Emotion surges through me—fierce, overwhelming, undeniable. Every wall I've built to protect myself from disappointment, from the fear of not being enough, crumbles under the weight of her honesty.

I cup her face, my thumb brushing away the tear tracing down her cheek. "Cassidy," I murmur, my voice low and rough, "I love you." The words come easy because they're the truest thing I've ever known. "I have loved you for longer than I've even let myself admit. And I will never stop being here, never stop helping you reach your goals, never stop believing in everything you are."

I press a lingering kiss to the top of her head, breathing her in, grounding myself in her presence. Then, with my hand firm around hers, I take a steady breath. "There's something I need to show you."

I take her hand, lacing my fingers through hers, and lead her toward the stables. With every step, my pulse pounds harder. I want this to be right. I want this to be everything she deserves.

As we round the corner, the new sign comes into view. Gone is the old Buck and

Whinnyplaque. In its place, bold and unmistakable is a new one that readsConnor's
Club: Horse Therapy.

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Cassidy stops short. Her breath catches. Her hands fly to her mouth, her eyes wide, luminous. “What...what is this?”

I squeeze her fingers. “This is your business. It’s a place to bring your dream job to life and use that degree you worked so hard to get. You own it, not the ranch and not me. You’re just renting the space here. Of course, the rent is a little unconventional.” I pause, watching her expression shift between shock and disbelief. “One loaf of banana bread a month.”

A soft, choked laugh escapes her, trembling on the edge of a sob. The sound wraps around me. It’s been too long since I’ve heard it. Then her lips curl into something unguarded and real. Her smile falters and then the dam breaks.

“Don’t cry,” I tell her.

But tears spill freely down her cheeks anyway. They shimmer in the soft light, but they’re filled with relief, gratitude, and maybe even joy. And right there, paired with them, is her breathtaking smile that hits me harder than any punch ever could. She looks at me like I make her world go around and it’s intoxicating.

Cassidy has a way of wrecking me in the best possible way. My knees damn near buckle under the weight of it all. The combination of her emotions, my emotions, and the sheer intensity of this moment is dizzying.

“Cassidy,” I whisper, my voice barely more than air, thick and strained from everything I’m holding back.

She shakes her head, pressing a hand to her chest as if trying to contain the overwhelming rush of feeling spilling out of her. “I can’t believe this,” she breathes. “I can’t believe you did this for me.”

I reach for her, my hands settling on her waist, grounding us both. She clings to me.

“I’d do anything for you,” I murmur, my voice raw with truth. “You can plan your occupational therapy workdays around your time with Connor. And he can ride anytime he wants, of course.”

Cassidy turns to me, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears, her breath catching in her throat. She presses a trembling hand to her lips as if holding back the tidal wave of emotion threatening to spill over.

“Alex,” she whispers, voice thick with disbelief. “Oh my God... you’re—” She shakes her head, exhaling a shaky breath. “You’re incredible. I don’t even have words. This is... it’s unbelievable.”

Her gaze sweeps over the space, awe-struck. It’s like she’s afraid to blink and find it all gone. But I’m not going anywhere and neither is this place. She steps forward slowly. Her fingerstrail over the polished wood of the office desk and then move across the shelves.

I bought adaptive saddles in every size and the pads to go with them. She touches the therapeutic weighted blankets and grooming kits. It’s like she wants to commit every detail to memory. But she doesn’t need to, it’s hers now for as long as she’ll have it.

“I got every tool the internet said you’d need,” I murmur, needing to fill the silence, my voice rough with emotion. “Probably some you won’t. But I wasn’t taking any chances.”

She turns slowly, her lips parted. Her expression is so raw it damn near knocks the wind out of me. Her lip trembles and for a split second I worry I got it all wrong. Until finally, she says, “Thank you, Alex.”

I finally exhale. “You’ve worked incredibly hard to gain the independence you have now. That’s something to be proud of. But I’m asking you to let me in. I want to be a part of all you are trying to accomplish.”

Her gaze locks onto mine. Her eyes are deep and unwavering. She pulls me into something far bigger than just this moment. A flurry of emotions passes between us— trust, understanding, and peace. But most of all, I feel her surrender. The space between us disappears in a heartbeat.

Cassidy steps forward and her fingers curl into the hem of my shirt. She grips it like she needs something solid to hold on to and I keep her steady. It’s a role I’ve hoped to fill all my life. When her skin brushes mine, heat ripples through me. Then she pulls me down to meet her.

Her breath is warm against my lips and her curvy body presses flush against mine. Before our mouths lock, an explosive heat sizzles through me. I part her lips with my tongue and sink into the kiss. My hand tangled into her hair while the other presses into the small of her back and anchors her to me.

There’s no hesitation when I finally claim what’s mine. This kiss is years of longing crashing into the present. Cassidy melts, sighing into my mouth. The sound sends heat surges through me, curls low in my gut, and sets my pulse on fire.

CHAPTER 15

BOWEN

I push through the back doors of the lobby, balancing a stack of crisp, freshly laundered towels as I make my way toward the Pillow Plow Palace suite. There's not much time left before our VIP guests arrive, and in my opinion, the place is already set up just fine.

But our new marketing director, Priya, has me jumping through every damn hoop imaginable. Normally, I'd push back, but if you saw her, you'd understand why I don't. I make it through the courtyard in five minutes flat and shove the door open without a second thought.

"Hey! Get the hell out of here!" Alex's voice booms through the room, sharp and unyielding. It makes me jolt mid-step.

"Man, you get the hell out of here," I fire back, annoyed and confused. "I've been calling you all morning. What the hell are you even—" I reach for the light switch, flip it on, and instantly freeze.

Alex stands in front of me, completely naked. This isn't the picture of my big brother I want to hold in my mind.

"What the actual fuck man? Why is your ass a solid three shades lighter than the rest of you? Why am I going to have to go to my grave with this picture of you in my head now? At least you have the decency to face away from me, but why are you naked... what's wrong with you?"

The sight of a comforter moving behind him draws my attention. I realize that Alex isn't alone. I look again to catch the sight of Cassidy wrapped in nothing but the plush comforter from the bed. As we lock eyes her face turns a shade of hot pink that I didn't know was possible for a human. Then her head slowly disappears beneath the blanket. Realization dawns and a deep, uncontrollable roar of laughter rips out of me before I can stop it.

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“Close the damn door!” Alex barks, his face a mix of rage and sheer panic, but I don’t budge.

I shake my head, grinning with no intention of letting this go anytime soon “Alex, I honestly can’t decide which version of you I liked better—the broody, hard-up loner, or this.” I gesture toward him, still laughing. “I mean, you’re definitely nicer now, but at least before, I never had to see your damnass.”

Cassidy groans from her hiding spot on the bed.

“Welcome to the family, sis,” I call out through my laughter.

Alex is still shooting daggers in my direction when he bends over to pick up a shoe. The sight is like something out of a fucking horror movie. Then he chucks it at my head hard enough to put a hole in the door. He’s agile for a big dude.

I hold up my hands in surrender. “Alright, alright, I’m leaving! If you damage this place before the big arrival Priya’s gonna kill both of us. And Alex, when you’re, uh...done, the guys and I are meeting over at The Velvet Spur. It’s important. We’ll wait for you.”

Another shoe flies in my direction, and I barely manage to duck as I pull the door shut behind me. As I head down the hallway, I can’t help but grin. It’s good to see Alex settled. The dude deserves it. Cassidy deserves it too.

She’s like the older sister I never had. As a bonus, she comes with a kid who is funny as hell. He’s smart too. They’ve both brought something to this place. And since I’m

not planning to settle down anytime soon, it's been nice having a little family around.

By the time Alex makes it up to The Velvet Spur, the rest of us are already gathered, drinks in hand, waiting. All except for Fallon of course, that dude isn't slated to be home for another few months still. I've kept the discussion under wraps, but there was no way I could resist spilling the other tea.

Alex shoves the door open. His eyes sweep the room like he's already expecting trouble.

"Hey, man. You look... relaxed." Holden flashes Alex an enormous grin.

Alex's expression darkens. His gaze locks on Holden and then he cuts his eyes in my direction. "You fucking told them."

The room explodes into laughter.

"I mean, how could I not?" I shrug, barely suppressing a smirk. "The desecration of the Pillow Plow Palace suite by you of all people? That's legendary."

Holden claps a hand on his chest. "Our boy's all grown up. Finally getting some."

Alex mutters a curse under his breath, but there's the ghost of a smirk tugging at his lips.

"I'm just glad you're blowing off some steam," Holden chimes back in, raising his beer. "I was starting to worry you'd forgotten how."

"Enough already. What the hell is this meeting about?" Alex grumbles.

I lean forward, my grin fading. "That guy from the hoedown. The one poking around

where he shouldn't be. He's been back a few times wandering around the ranch. I couldn't track him down myself, but you know how people talk. Patty June says he was out back today the last time she checked." I tip my chin toward Alex. "Before we had to wait on you to, uh... finish up your business. I thought maybe we'd catch him roaming."

Another round of laughter ripples through the group. Alex exhales sharply, his amusement vanishing.

"What the hell does he want?" Geoffrey demands, leaning forward.

"No clue," I admit. "But I figure it's time we find out."

Alex doesn't hesitate. "Let's go see if he's here."

Before I can make a move, Alex grabs a set of keys and swings himself into the driver's seat of one of our work trucks. It's probably for the best—because as soon as I hop into the passenger side, the rest of the guys pile into the back like a damn clown car. If I had been driving, we'd have lost a few before we even hit the gravel road. We take the long route, circling the bottom of the ranch near the stables before heading up toward Bareback Haven Spa.

That's when I see him.

A tall, broad-shouldered man leans against the backside of the spa. He's got a camera in hand and appears to be snapping pictures of the fields beyond the split rail. On the surface, he looks harmless enough. But he's hiding out on our ranch and that isn't going to fly.

I don't like it. Unfortunately for him, neither do my brothers. It's not just his presence, there's something about the way he carries himself that sets me on edge.

Alex doesn't hesitate. Without a word, he slams his foot on the gas, and the truck lurches forward. We come to an abrupt stop just three feet from the guy. I commit the chaos to memory for use the next time Alex gives me shit about my driving.

Gravel kicks up around us and the tension is thick enough to cut with a knife. Any normal dude would be pissing his pants right about now. But this guy doesn't look bothered and that's one more reason not to like him.

I hop out first, but the second my boots hit the ground, I hesitate. There's something unsettlingly familiar about this man. I've never seen him before, I'm sure of it. Alex must clock the same thing I do because he hesitates.

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Alex lifts a hand, silently telling the guys in the back to stay put. But they climb out anyway, filing in behind us like a damn wall of muscle. The man finally turns to face us. But he hardly makes the effort of putting his camera down. Instead, his gaze sweeps over our lineup of broad shoulders and clenched jaws. He doesn't flinch. Something like amusement flickers across his face.

“Wow,” he says, scanning each of us like we're a puzzle he's just figured out. “So it's true. Yeah, I can see it. Interesting.”

One thing is for certain, this dude ain't from around here. Not with that West Coast accent.

Alex steps forward and his tone goes from neutral to lethal in the span of a breath. “Are you here on behalf of Mayor Randolph Bellcourt? Because if you are, I've got a message you can take back to him.”

The man holds up a hand, shaking his head and he lets out an airy chuckle. “No, no. I'm not here on behalf of anyone but myself.” He waves Alex off like he's unbothered by the way we're closing in around him.

The sheer nerve of this dude is unreal. If I wasn't so worried about him being here, I might actually be impressed.

“I'm interested in Kingridge Ranch. Not in buying it or anything—just the history, the roots, that kind of thing.”

I cross my arms over my chest, my jaw tightening. “And you are?”

He grins and it's as casual as can be. Then he extends a hand like we're at some kind of meet-and-greet. "Oh, I'm Danner. Nice to meet you."

Behind me, Holden snorts. "Tanner?"

The guy shakes his head. "No—Danner. With a D." His expression sobers slightly. I see the first inkling of hesitation creeping into his features. "I, uh... I don't know much about my father. But I do know he was insistent that my name start with a D."

I take a dizzying step backward and shoot a look at Alex. It can't be. It isn't possible. Holden and Geoffrey use my silence as an opportunity to start peppering Danner with questions, but I can't hear them anymore. I take him in again. The broad shoulders, the strong jawline, something familiar in his eyes.

The pieces shift into place and it clicks. I feel the ground move beneath me.

Alexander. Bowen. Callum.

Danner?

CHAPTER 16

PODCAST EPISODE- BOOTS AND BITCHING

Well, well, well, y'all come in and pull up a rocker. The tea is sweet today and I'm ready to start pouring.

A little birdy told me that Patty June's prize-winning peach cobbler may owe its success to her secret baking partner... Pillsbury. Scandalous, I know. I hear she's been sneaking in a pre-made crust from the general store. If that's true, well... let's just say the county fair judges are gonna have some thoughts.

And if it isn't our very own former Mrs. Mayor Bellcourt and the Kingridge Ranch Royal playing house. And trust me, darlings, they aren't exactly keeping things low-key. They've been spotted canoodling all over the ranch, and I do mean all over. Seems like Cassidy's milkshake brings all the rich boys to the yard—except this one knows how to rope.

Now, it'd be easy to tie this up with a pretty little lasso, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. The boys out at Kingridge Ranch have made an enemy of the mayor, and something tells me he's not the forgive-and-forget type. And let's not forget about the mysterious out-of-towner still poking around. I've asked, but mum's the word on him... for now.

Who is he? What does he want? Can't say yet, but you know I've got my boots on the ground, and I will find out.

It seems the mysterious drones have made it all the way from the big city to Sagebrush Creek, at least according to the ladies down at Mane Event Hair Salon. One blurry camera phone image can't convince me. But those gals ain't known for their brains.

Oh, and I've heard the whispers about yours truly, so let me put this to rest. I'm not revealing my identity. There's a reason I keep my voice disguised, sugar. The best secrets come from the shadows and trust me, you'd rather not know who's holding the cards.

But let's shift gears to something a little more fun, shall we?

It seems like Kingridge Ranch is rolling out the red carpet for a very high-profile guest. A professional football player is coming to town, and they're sparing no expense. We're talking a Weekend VIP Getaway Package—private horseback rides, gourmet meals, and five-star service. It's the kind of treatment reserved for royalty

and, apparently, quarterbacks. This means the Kingridge boys are gonna have to step up their game if they want to prove who really runs this town.

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

EPILOGUE: ALEXANDER

The house is too quiet. Between Connor's near-constant chatter, the beeps and whirs of his video games, the two little yappers Cassidy still tries to convince me are dogs, and her pop music drifting through the house, silence is rare these days. And if I'm being honest, I wouldn't have it any other way.

After Cassidy and I got married, Randolph decided to drop his request to take my wife to court. My guess is the man didn't like the idea of a fair fight. He still pokes his nose into our lives from time to time, but Connor's home is right here with us and that's all that matters.

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I glance around the living room, taking in the decorations. Balloons bob gently against the ceiling. A lopsided banner reads HAPPY BIRTHDAY CASSIDY/MOM and stretches across the doorway. Connor insisted we include both names and there's something so perfectly Connor about it. This is Cassidy's first birthday as my wife and I'm determined not to mess it up.

Our dining table is set. Patty June's famous cake takes center stage thank god. There isn't a person on the planet who wants to eat a cake I bake. It sure as hell wouldn't look anything like the thick, chocolate-frosted masterpiece in front of me. Everything is in place and it feels good to take care of the woman who makes my world go around.

I nod approvingly at my partner-in-crime. "Connor, my man, it's looking top-notch in here."

He grins, braces flashing. "Yeah, she's gonna cry."

I swallow hard. "Let's hope not." Because if she does, I'm done for.

I've somehow gotten worse since the wedding. Seeing her float toward me in the white dress sent me into overdrive. Seeing Cassidy tear up does something to my insides. It twists me up in ways I don't know how to handle... A fact that amuses my brothers to no end.

Dolly and Jolene weave between my boots, yipping like tiny drill sergeants herding me into submission. I swear, those little demons have taken years off my life, tripping me up every damn day. And yet, even they're starting to grow on me.

I hear tires rattle up the drive followed by a furious BWAAHHK!

Before I can get to the front door there's a yelp. Then a thud.

I sigh. "Damn it. Choke's at it again."

Connor chuckles. "Come on, he's just doing his job."

"His job is going to ruin your mom's party."

I yank open the front door and Choke, our own personal attack rooster is puffed up. He's looking every bit like the feathery bouncer from hell he is. His wings are flared and his beady eyes are locked on his prey.

Flat on his ass in the dirt, a bewildered delivery guy blinks up at me. His face is pale. His hands still clutch an overturned bouquet. Crushed petals scatter around him like battlefield carnage. This is exactly what happens when your dumbass brothers mow the wrong field, and you have to call a florist even though you live on a farm that produces flowers.

"You okay, man?" I ask, offering a hand.

He hesitates before gripping my wrist and letting me haul him upright. "Uh... I've got flowers for Cassidy?" His voice wobbles, his gaze darting between me and the still-fluffing Choke.

I sigh. "Choke, stand down."

Choke does not stand down. If anything, he squares up like I'm next on his hit list. I'd like to see him try. But the flap of a wing is enough for the delivery guy and he panics. The bouquet gets shoved at me like a man making a hostage exchange before

he bolts for his truck.

Connor watches no less than twenty YouTube videos and somehow turns the smashed flowers into an arrangement that looks halfway decent. I didn't have a vase, but I have the Kingwood Cup and there isn't a piece of glassware more valuable. The old beer stein passes back and forth between my brothers and me as a prize for winning game night. I kicked their asses in horseshoes last Sunday and for now, it's mine. Using it to display Cassidy's flowers feels right.

Ten minutes later, the front door creaks open.

"Mom! Happy birthday!" Connor launches himself at Cassidy before she can even step inside, wrapping his arms around her waist.

She laughs, hugging him tight. "Aw, thank you, baby." Then her eyes sweep the room, taking in the decorations, the cake, and finally—me. "Wow, it looks amazing in here. You guys did all this?"

I jerk my chin toward the porch, where Choke stands, still watching the horizon for his next victim. "We had help."

Cassidy rolls her eyes with a laugh. "Of course, we did."

She settles onto the couch, eyes widening at the mountain of gifts piled in front of her. I shift, suddenly unsure if I overdid it. But hell, I'm still figuring this out. I'm new at this husband thing and there were so many things to consider— what she likes, what makes her feel special, what she actually wants. So I covered my bases. Thoroughly.

She glances up at me, amusement flickering in her gaze. "There are so many presents."

“That’s right! We had no ideas. Well, I did, I got you the book in the purple wrapping paper. It has facts about fossils, and I know you’re going to love it. Alex got the rest.” Connor gives me a pitying look that makes me chuckle.

“Well thank you. Both of you, I feel so special today. That spa was enough of a present on its own. I’m so relaxed.”

I have a sudden image of myself crawling into bed with a relaxed and oiled-up Cassidy. It makes my mouth water.

Cassidy makes her way through the mountain of presents while Connor gets elbow-deep in cake. By the fifth gift, he loses interest altogether and opts to retreat to the video games awaiting him in his room.

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As soon as Connor disappears down the hallway, I step toward Cassidy. Curling my fingers around her hand, I tug her up gently. She barely has time to react before I wrap my arms around her and pull her close. She's soft, warm, and smells like vanilla. I don't know how I got so lucky.

I kiss my wife, slow and deep. I take my time and let her know exactly what she means to me without saying a damn word. She melts against me and I swear, I could live in this moment forever.

When we finally pull apart, she looks up at me, her eyes shining with that mischievous glint that always means trouble. But just as I'm thinking about all the ways I plan to end this night, Cassidy leans in. Her voice is low and teasing against my ear.

"I have a present for you, too."

I arch a brow. "I hope it's in the bedroom."

She smirks. "Well... that's how we gothere."

Then, Cassidy takes my hand and presses it low, settling it against her stomach. My breath catches in my chest as realization dawns. The room tilts slightly.

"It's going to take about nine months to get here," she whispers.

My brain stalls. My heart slams against my ribs. I open my mouth, but the words are gone. "Are you?" I finally manage, voice rough.

She nods, and just like that, my entire world shifts. “We’re having a baby.”