



Roughing It with the Rancher

Author: *Engrid Eaves*

Category: Romance, Adult

Description: She's the best of the worst luck I've ever had and my only hope for saving the family ranch. But there's a catch...

Reese Gunner

As the unluckiest of unlucky men, I shouldn't square up to the Craps table at the Heirloom Rose. But I'm out of options.

The last-ditch effort to save my family's ranch looks bleak until a stunning blonde walks past the table, blowing on my dice.

The ensuing winning streak is one for the ages ... and my golden-haired, good-luck charm isn't about to let me forget it.

Esmeralda Caldwell

If the handsome rancher thinks he's walking out with half my winnings, he's got another thing coming.

Angry words and empty threats transform into a proposition the ringless gambler can't refuse—a trip to the on-site wedding chapel as collateral.

What I'm really after? Access to his ranch, the starting point for a road-trip treasure hunt with sky-high stakes and a glittering prize ... if we survive.

Standalone. HEA guaranteed. No cliffhangers—just sizzling heat, fast-paced action, and one unforgettable treasure hunt.

Total Pages (Source): 42

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Chapter One

REESE

Of all the ways to lose the family ranch! Five generations of blood, sweat, and tears gone with a snap of the fingers. Or, more accurately, the roll of the dice.

“Sorry, Mr. Gunner,” the dealer at the Heirloom Rose mutters as I bury my head in my hands. He claims another pile of chips.

I stare dejectedly at the casino’s carpet, an impossible swirl of purple, orange, and yellow. The place is devoid of windows and clocks. Everything about the decor and layout is designed to herd hapless guests back to the slots and tables, an infinite loop of risk. Sadly, my current losing streak is downright monumental.

A redheaded waitress walks by with what’s got to be her thousandth offer for a free drink on the house. The booze never quits flowing for dedicated players, especially those devoted to personal ruin.

“What’ll you have, cowboy?”

I frown. “Sorry, but I don’t need to amplify my problems by being drunk and broke at the same time.”

“You think too much,” she counters.

“Probably. Not that it’s helping me any tonight.”

“This morning,” she corrects, and I glance around the large, windowless casino floor, unable to ascertain the time.

Pulling out my phone, the screen reads fifteen past seven a.m. Damn, my crash and burn has taken all night.

“Sure, you don’t want that drink after all?”

“No, ma’am. I need liquid luck right now, not liquid courage.”

A woman walks past wearing a light tan leather jacket with long fringe running down the back. It’s the kind of western outfit folks in the middle of Nowhere, Nevada, tend to make fun of. City slickers who’ve escaped to the Great Basin to live out their own glorified episodes of Bonanza.

I’m pretty sure the Cartwrights never got in this much trouble, though ...

“Sir,” the dealer eyes me, concern washing over his face. He’s got to be near retirement age, short-statured with gray hair, a smattering of age spots on his cheeks and neck, and almond-shaped eyes that narrow as he asks, “Are you in or not?”

“In?” The question sounds ridiculous at this point as my fingers play with the dwindling stack of chips in front of me. But all I need is one big win. That’s all it would take to turn everything around. “I’m at the end of my worst losing streak ever. Don’t statistics, mathematics, trigonometry, whatever you want to call it, dictate that at some point, somehow, my luck should turn around?”

The redheaded cocktail waitress, taking other drink orders around the table, puts her hand on her hip, shaking her head. “You talk too much, too.”

“Thank you for the rundown of my faults. But at present, I’m more worried about the

worst streak of luck that's ever hit me."

Her eyes narrow. "You sound and look like you're local. But I haven't seen you here before. What's your deal?"

"I'm the owner of Gunner Ridge Ranch," I answer, pointing over my shoulder as if gesturing towards it. Truth be told, I'd need a compass to find my way around this place. "Well," I add dejectedly. "At least I was."

Her forehead creases. "Then, why haven't I seen you in here before?"

"Because I hate casinos, and I hate gambling even more. But desperate times call for desperate measures."

She chuckles. "This isn't desperate. It's stupid."

If only she knew...

Between a drought that hasn't broken in a decade, the worst string of cattle luck I've ever had, and a bank tired of putting up with my shenanigans, I've hit the bottom of the barrel. Not merely for myself but every Gunner who's gone before me or who's yet to follow. The following part is looking less and less likely. After all, what woman would marry a man at the bottom of his luck, let alone become the mother to his children?

The dealer eyes me morosely, pulling me back from my sad reflections. "The only thing that math dictates, sir, is the probability that the house will win ...eventually. You should have walked away from this table hours ago."

"No, I'm feeling it. This is it. My lucky break."

The people congregating around the table with droopy eyes and yawning mouths chuckle. Apparently, they don't have the same faith.

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“You know, it’s not about statistics, mathematics, or any of that,” a sexy-as-hell voice says next to me. The kind of voice that makes me stop everything and turn around for a look.

My jaw drops at the sight of the angel before me. She may still be wearing that dumbass jacket like she walked off the set of the next Tombstone, but fuck does she have a face that could undo me ... and the body to match. Her silky, wavy blonde hair cascades over her shoulders in heavy waves that I want to lose myself in. Her face is a work of art the likes of which I’ve never seen. Symmetrical, fine-boned, and so delicate, she could make me change my ways for one heavenly touch, one sinful taste.

I’m in love, and the timing could not possibly be worse.

Her turquoise eyes sear me as she says, “What you need is a dose of good luck.”

Thirty seconds ago, that statement would’ve made me laugh until I wheezed—pathetic, sarcastic, and sad. But now, I’m all ears, knowing the best luck I’ve ever had, despite this being the worst losing streak of my life, is the woman standing in front of me.

“Luck? And are you the one handing it out?” I growl, pissed at the way my cheeks warm as she appraises me. Her eyes linger longer than they should, her cheeks warming in equal frequency to mine. Her nostrils flare, and she licks her bottom lip with an excruciating slowness that sends my head spinning and my heart free-falling.

She smiles lazily and sensually. “Maybe just this once.” Her eyes tick to the dice.

I shouldn't pick them up again. That's been the highly ineffective inner monologue for hours. But what other option do I have? Holding up my hand to show them to her, she grins seductively, leaning forward.

Better men would admire her otherworldly radiance. But my eyes dart straight to her tits. She may wear a leather jacket, but beneath it, I catch glimmers of a lacy, black blouse with a neckline that indulges my sudden thirst for a glimpse at her perky cleavage. I am not disappointed.

Yep, I'm sure she's an angel. Come to collect my dry bones after this casino trip from hell ends while offering me my last, best glimpse of paradise. She blows on the dice, and I etch every part of the moment into my mind. How her juicy pink lips round on the gesture, her eyes close in one moment of surrender, and her hot breath warms my palm. That's how I bet she looks when she comes. Fuck, if I don't yearn to be the man who takes her there.

"Well?" The dealer growls.

I shake my head, working hard to disentangle myself from my current reverie. Hot damn, that woman was put on this Earth to destroy me!

No, dumbass, you're doing that well enough on your own.

"Goodbye, cowboy," the blonde winks, wheeling around and walking away before I can even tip my head and "ma'am" her. My eyes follow the sway of her hips, desperate to see her again. But things like this are called supernatural for a reason. They don't happen all the time ... or ever.

I sigh with relief, perhaps most touched by her last mercy—walking away before I bring my entire world crashing down. She doesn't need to see a grown man cry.

The dice roll and scatter, bounding off the green felt of the table's side as time stands still. My eyes settle on the dots, counting and recounting them.

The dealer's eyebrows shoot skyward, his face animated by disbelief. "Eleven wins!"

"Dammit!" Whispers through the crowd surrounding me, my nameless compadres, jonesing for a final bloodbath. They discreetly exchange cash, betting privately on the outcome of the table. The dealer glares his warning at them.

"Yes!" I scream, jumping to my feet. My voice reverberates through the Heirloom Rose. "It's about fucking time!" The backs of my eyes dangerously sting as I sit back down, inhaling deeply to pull myself together.

As the dealer pushes a big stack of clanking chips in my direction, I do the mental math. This won't save the ranch. I need another win. My head bobs around the casino, searching for my blonde good luck charm. But the mouthwatering beauty has regrettably vanished. Maybe she really was an angel. Whatever the case, I can still feel the heat of her breath on my palm, and a weird tranquility floods me.

The dealer frowns, shaking his head. Somewhere throughout this hellish night, he's gone from service provider to financial counselor. And he's not impressed with my current decision-making path. But I'm locked in. There's no other way. I have to win and win big. I eye my palm, still wearing the angel's breath. I kiss it for good measure. Laughter rumbles through the gathered spectators as I grab the dice. My body tenses, and my heart hammers.

From my first pass line bet, I place the come bet as jeers and whispers sound around me. Fuck 'em. This is my game. I can feel it in my bones. The other players follow suit, and I do a quick calculation. A couple more big pots like this, and I'll have a fighting chance of preserving the Gunner family legacy.

“Sorry, Grandma, for earning this through sin,” I mutter under my breath, wondering how many Hail Marys I owe the priest. Thankfully, the ranching matriarch has been retired back East for a good while now, so she doesn’t have to see her ‘baby boy’ as she liked to call me, neck-deep in sin.

I roll again, my body taut as the world shrinks down to the size of two merciless cubes. I freeze, waiting for the “Craps” call, still semi-unbelieving things are turning around for me.

“Seven wins,” the dealer says, doing a double-take.

I jump to my feet, screaming. “Yes! God, yes! Please. Another win. That’s all it’ll take.” A hard-won win, though. One that’ll require more intestinal fortitude and fortune than I’ve ever mustered before.

“Come on, Angel. Do it for me one more time.”

More people gather now, attracted by my loud exclamations. I sit back down, running my hand through my hair. My cowboy hat rests on my knee. The weight of the world presses down on me as bets are placed again, and I do something downright reckless.

I bet Any Seven. The murmuring of the crowd turns to open mocking. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I get it. Any Seven means high-risk and high-payout with a gargantuan house edge. But the math supports it ...the same math I’ve been fucking up all night.

“God help me,” I pray, now more convinced than ever about the identity of the ethereal woman who walked by. I add in a whisper, “Sorry about finding fault with how you dress angels, Lord. But I’ve never seen one of your messengers before.”

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Right with the Divine, I roll, and the damn planet stops spinning on its axis. The casino goes silent, not a slot singing or a body breathing as the dice slam against the table edge. My eyes follow their trajectory toward what can only be my demise.

The dealer shakes his head, chuckling and eyeing me with admiration. “Seven wins!”

Cheers fill the casino, former critics turning into avid admirers. It’s the kind of win that’ll have casino security swarming me for a behind-closed-doors interview and a swap of the dice to make sure no hanky-panky’s going on.

“Thank you, Angel!” I yell, fisting my lucky hand in the air.

The dealer eyes me with a huge smile, suddenly ready to be my best friend. But I’m not falling for that.

I collect my chips post-haste, frantic to cash out. I’ll be happy if I never see another casino. I might be on a lucky streak, but I’m not about to test it.

Chapter Two

ESMERALDA

“Thank you, Angel!”

The casino roars with applause as a deep male voice screams above the din. The chaos stops me and everyone else in the Heirloom Rose dead in our tracks. After all, it’s seven in the morning on a Friday. There’s no reason for folks to be hollering.

I stand at the counter of the only Starbucks I've encountered in over two hundred and fifty miles—thank you, Nevada, for your stark desolation—weighing my options. I can finally get the coveted quadruple shot Americano with two pumps of vanilla and two pumps of caramel finished with cream. Or I can investigate the outbreak of chaos in an otherwise quiet casino.

Something tells me, despite my caffeine craving, that I need to see this. Raising a finger to the green apron-clad barista, I say, “Hold that thought for a moment. I’ll be right back.”

“Yes, but if anyone else comes, you’ll have to get back in line,” he calls after me.

I wend through the crowd, weaving my way to the noise. The auditory trail leads me right back to the Craps table and the handsome cowboy whose dice I blew on. He fists the air, his face elated as the crowd around him cheers. The dealer looks hellbent on finding ways to get him to sit back down.

“No way, Cowboy. Don’t even think about it,” I mutter under my breath, keenly aware half of the pot he’s holding belongs to me. After all, his luck clearly began with my breath.

How do I know this? Because I stood behind him for a good thirty minutes, watching him slowly lose his ass. I also listened to the gossip at the table, talking about how he’d been there all night, caught in the worst losing streak in Heirloom Rose history.

Such a shame because the inauspicious Craps player is otherwise gorgeous. From his towering frame and muscular build to his tanned skin, dark blond hair and beard, and rugged face. He’s got the square jawline of a man who should know what he wants in life. Not one losing it all at the tables. But I suppose it takes all kinds to keep a casino rolling.

Before I can say a thing, the man shoves his chips into racks provided by the dealer, stacking the clear plastic holders high and beelining for the cashier. I can only estimate, but his winnings have to be significant, maybe up to half a million dollars, with a handful of chips like that. The sudden appearance of security escort to the cage underscores this. I follow behind, trying to work out my next move.

In reality, I understand that he owes me nothing. But where would he be without my intervention? My argument's tenuous at best, but I learned a long time ago to let the Universe do its thing and enjoy the ride. That ride includes half this man's jackpot.

Lord knows I could use some money. Treasure hunting is no cheap venture, and this one has already taken me across multiple states. I started in Oklahoma in a beat-up Chevy Silverado that needed work in nearly every state I chugged through.

Leaks here. Bad tires there. Issues with the odometer, the engine light, you name it. I even had a daunting experience with the brakes that had me at the mechanics in Salt Lake City. To say it's a miracle I made it to Nevada is an understatement.

So, whatever it takes, I need to get this man to shower a little of the good luck I bestowed on him back on me.

I draw a little closer, pretending to loiter by some of the slot machines. The man's far too busy, his voice loud and elated as he relays everything to the cashier, to pay attention to me.

"Very nice, Mr. Gunner. What fantastic wins! Are you planning on spending any of your winnings with us here at the Heirloom Rose? You know, we treat our VIP players to free rooms, comped dinners, discounted shows with extra perks, the works."

Mr. Gunner? I lean forward, unable to believe my ears.

“Call me Reese,” he flirts with the cashier.

Reese Gunner? There’s no way.

“Alright,” the cashier giggles as she starts counting out stacks of cash. She’s a middle-aged lady with blonde hair pulled into a high ponytail.

My heart races as I scrutinize the man. I had no idea he’d be this good-looking. Or this foolhardy.

He has no social media presence, apart from owning Gunner Ridge Ranch. No photos in newspapers, either. Although I didn’t do an exhaustive search. Instead, I’ve spent the last four years learning everything I can about the treasure hidden on his property. Maybe I should’ve spent more time on the sexy man.

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What drove me desperately to this godforsaken place was twofold. News that a big developer had their sights on Gunner Ridge Ranch and my grandpa's failing health. He's in a nursing home, requiring twenty-four-hour care. So, this is my last chance to fulfill my grandpa's dream before the place gets paved over and piled high with another casino, strip mall, and movie theater complex.

"Is it normal to tip cashiers? Because I'm feeling like you deserve a little extra something for helping out a high roller." Reese hands her a couple of crisp one-hundred-dollar bills, and I gasp.

If he's going to flagrantly give away our earnings ... Well, I won't have that. Stepping forward, I exclaim, "Before you bleed money like a broken dam, we need to have a talk." I press my lips into a thin line for emphasis.

Reese steps back, removing his cowboy hat and running his fingers through his thick, burnished copper hair. His arresting jade-hued eyes look downright mouthwatering if I wasn't possessed by an even greener monster.

"Angel!" he exclaims, his eyes darkening as they inch over my face as if memorizing it.

"Angel?" I scowl. "Actually, the name's Esmeralda." I offer a hand, and he takes it. But instead of shaking with a firm grip, he turns it over, leaning forward to kiss the back. Sparks fly at the brush of his soft lips and the way he looks up at me, ulterior motives swirling behind his gaze.

"Esmeralda," he repeats in soft, dark tones. "Like the county."

I nod.

Despite the consternation in my thinking brain, all thoughts of feminism and who the hell does he think he is, my heart does a funny twirl in my chest. I'm not convinced it goes back to the same spot as before. It could be a problem except I've got bigger fish to fry.

Arching an eyebrow, I ask, "And your name?" Of course, I already know, but I'm not ready to admit why I was eavesdropping.

"Reese Gunner."

"Like the river?"

His eyes narrow, and he cocks his head. "That's right. Are you from around here?"

"Oklahoma, actually."

"So, you have a Reese River there, too?"

I shrug. "More than likely. I was referring to the Reese in Nevada, though."

"Huh," he says, leaning back on his heels and scrutinizing me. "And where did you come by so much Silver State geography?"

Dammit! I kick myself, realizing I may have already said too much. "I like Westerns."

"Old Westerns?" he replies, looking unconvinced.

"Ancient ones. Used to watch them with my grandpa." This last part's no lie, so I

speaking it more confidently. His face relaxes slightly.

“I own Gunner Ridge Ranch. In no small part thanks to you.”

His words surprise me, playing right into my hand. I grin. “I’m glad we see things eye to eye. A fifty-fifty split’ll settle it. Though Lord knows that’s generous after the losing streak I pulled you out of.”

He laughs out loud, a good-natured sound coming up from the depths of his barrel chest. “You’re smoking hot and funny? Now, that’s a priceless combination.”

I put my hands on my hips. “What makes it a priceless combination is the part you left out.”

“What?”

“The luck.”

He laughs some more, his cheeks glowing by the time he’s done. Arching an eyebrow, he asks, “What are you doing in these parts, Oklahoma?”

Exploring Western history. That’s what I’ve told people all the way out here, but I bite my tongue. It’s getting far too close to the truth for Reese Gunner. Although I can’t imagine this handsome cowboy’s much into history.

“Did you hear me, Okie? I was asking what brought you out this way.”

I shrug, trying to play it nonchalant. “Westerns. I wanted to see where some of them were filmed.”

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“Huh,” he says, eyeing me some more. “You do know most happened in Moab, Utah, and Lone Pine, California, right?”

I smile, feeling like the Cheshire Cat.

The cashier calls through the window, not remotely embarrassed to show she’s been eavesdropping, “Reese, honey, she must be talking about Bonanza.”

His face goes pensive for a moment before he adds, “And The Misfits. Hate to burst your bubble, but you’re still a way off. You have to head south to Virginia City and Dayton for those.”

“Of course,” I shrug, trying to play things off.

“You’ve got a bit more driving to do, but considering you came all the way from Oklahoma, I spose this won’t seem like any great feat to you. Are you heading out today?”

“That was the plan ... until I stumbled across you.” Obviously, I leave out the part about the ranch or the treasure, hoping a little flirting and a lot of conversation and charm will gain me access to his homestead. But I know I’m playing a dangerous game, especially with this mouthwatering man.

He swallows hard, pleasure written on his face. “Breakfast?”

“Yes, thank you.” I can’t deny the electrical charge in the air between us or how damn handsome this man is.

“Darling,” Reese says, raising an eyebrow towards the cashier. “I know you’ve got some figuring to do when it comes to taxes and all. Mind if we get a bite to eat, and I come back for my winnings?”

“Sure thing,” she says, ready to do anything for the man who tips well.

“You won’t regret it,” he says, laying on the charm and winking.

Anger wells inside me, nameless and irrational. Darling? Winking. It feels an awful lot like jealousy, but I choose to shrug it off. After all, I’m after access to Gunner Ridge Ranch, not a fool of a cowboy who stayed up all night nearly gambling away his ranch and my one shot at the fabled El Cortez treasure.

Thank goodness I didn’t realize who he was earlier while I watched him at the table. I would’ve been a freaking mess during each roll of the dice.

“Ma’am,” Reese says, offering me his arm in true gentlemanly fashion. He wears an untucked, long-sleeve, button-down brown pearl snap shirt with tiny rose patterns running in stripes vertically. It opens up onto a black, faded Eagles “Hotel California” T-shirt and a pair of darkish Wranglers that hit his thick thighs better than perfect.

I take his arm, exhaling and trying to get it together. But those pesky sparks flying between us double down in this close proximity, though our flesh doesn’t touch. I’m afraid if it did, smoke signals would rise.

He smells like spicy sandalwood, poor decisions, and everything I like about bad boys ...until the morning after.

Side-eyeing me, his cheeks glow, and he puffs out his chest, giving the impression he’s proud to have me on his arm.

My eyes gravitate towards his, getting lost in their emerald hue.

“What’s your pleasure, Angel?” He grins from ear to ear, all big, white, straight teeth

“Esmeralda,” I correct.

“That may be what you go by in heaven. But to me, you’ll always be an angel. And one who showed up just in the nick of time. Of course, I spose I could call you my lucky charm. But I’d imagine everyone will end up thinking you’re a leprechaun or something.”

I snicker. “And we can’t have that.”

“Nah, you may be supernatural, and you may even hang out at the end of rainbows. But that’s where the differences end.”

“It was an okay cereal, though. At least as a kid. I imagine I’d think it was too sugary now.”

“Hell, yes,” Reese agrees, a deep booming laugh rising up from his chest again. As if eating children’s cereal is ridiculous.

“You still haven’t answered my question. What’s your pleasure?”

The way he says it, in his sexy, dark voice, undoes me in ways I refuse to admit. It’s as though my body has decided to perform a mutiny as we walk arm in arm. The new throb between my legs attests to it.

“Well,” I say, licking my lips. “I was over at Starbucks when I heard the clamor in the casino and had to check it out?—”

“Wait, they have a Starbucks here?”

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I nod, surprised by the question. After all, this man gives gambling addict vibes. He has to know his way around the place. Unless he's so hooked, he barely leaves the tables.

"Sorry," he excuses. "But I avoid casinos like the plague. Gambling, too, which makes all of this so much more fortuitous."

His words surprise me, and I stop, staring at him long and hard. "You mean to tell me you're not a regular patron of this place?"

"Not only am I not a regular patron. Apart from the occasional grocery store slot machine, I never gamble."

I arch an eyebrow. "Then, why'd you start with Craps? That's far from the easiest game to master."

He shrugs. "I watched a few rounds and figured it out. And then lost my ass most of the night until you appeared." He says the last part adoringly, his eyes grazing over me. "Aren't you hot in that jacket, Esmeralda?"

I look down, seeing his point. "I guess I kind of am, although it was downright chilly when I got in this morning."

"That's the Nevada desert for you. Incinerate you with heat stroke during the day and freeze you to death at night."

"Sounds pleasant."

“Sarcasm, too? Something tells me you and I are going to get along just fine.”

Chapter Three

ESMERALDA

“How about we start at Starbucks for whatever fancy schmancy drink you want and then migrate over to the cafe?”

“Thank you.” He seems like the kind of man who likes to please his woman. Maybe it’ll make talking him out of fifty percent of his winnings and access to his ranch a tad easier.

“So, what are you? A soy latte kind of girl or maybe one of those matcha drink lovers like some of the wives of my ranch hands?”

“Nope, plain old Americano with cream and a little flavoring.”

“Well?” he asks, listening raptly. “What kind of flavoring? Or is it a secret recipe?”

“Two pumps of vanilla and two pumps of caramel. Oh, and make it a quad venti.”

“Quad venti? For a little thing like you?” He raises an eyebrow. “You’re not playing.”

I laugh. “A non-stop solo road trip from Oklahoma to Nevada will do that to you.”

He nods, leading me towards the counter. I open my mouth to order, but he beats me to it. “The lady would like a venti Americano ... wait, what was it again?”

“A venti Americano with two pumps of vanilla, two pumps of caramel, and cream.”

“And for you, sir?”

“A venti black coffee with cream.”

“Your name?”

“Reese.”

“Like the river?”

“That’s it.”

“You can find us a table, Angel,” the cowboy drawls, noticing more people coming in.

I head to a spot in the back, looking for a modicum of privacy. The barista rings up the order, and Reese retrieves his wallet from his back pocket, lifting up his untucked shirt enough to give me impressive views of his round ass. My, my, my.

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“What’s the best place around here for breakfast?”

“Peg’s on the second floor.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll have those drinks right out.”

Reese saunters towards me, sexy and brutish as they come. He moves with purpose, power in his motions. My eyes wander to his work-hardened hands and thick fingers, desire twisting me in knots. I can tell by his natural swagger that he’s the kind of man who knows how to use those strong fingers.

“Peg’s work for you? I’ve never been there, but I figure we can give it a shot.”

“Sure. Where do you normally eat in town?”

“The Five Star Diner. Down the street a way. But I figure this’ll be more convenient and a bit of a culinary adventure.”

“I like adventures.”

“Me, too.”

“Speaking of those. How does a self-professed gambling novice who hates casinos and owns a ranch end up pulling an all-nighter at a place like this?”

“All-nighter? Do I look that tired?”

“No, but I heard a few people at the Craps table whispering about how they saw you last night when they walked by and then again this morning.”

“Believe me, it was not by design. But I was at the end of my rope. Out of choices and options.”

“And so you chose the Craps table at a casino to turn things around?”

He shrugs, grinning and revealing adorable dimples. My heart somersaults in my chest as I fantasize about reaching across the table, grabbing his cheeks, and pulling him in for a long, lingering kiss. My thumbs pressed into those sexy indentations. What in the hell is wrong with me?

“Well, it worked. Didn’t it?”

“True. But why were you at the end of your rope?”

“Not for any one reason but more like a perfect storm of events.”

I arch an eyebrow, pressing my lips together and hoping to draw him out with silence.

“One too many years of famine, wildfires, grazing and water rights fights with the federal government. And the worst luck you could ask for with cattle. Although I have half a mind to believe there was foul play involved with that.”

“Foul play? As in murder?”

“As in poisoned feed or water.”

“That’s terrible. It seems like someone really has it out for you. Why do you think that is?”

He shrugs. “There’s a big-name developer who’s got his sights set on buying or condemning the ranch to make room for a small municipal airport with an adjoining casino resort. Far bigger than this place. Maybe you’ve seen the plans in the local newspaper?”

“I’m familiar with the plans.”

“They want to transform Foxfire Valley into the next Laughlin or something. It’s a foolhardy venture and one paved in open land theft.”

“Seems silly with gambling legal in nearly all fifty states.”

The cowboy nods, dwarfing his chair.

“Reese,” the barista calls, and he jumps to his feet, sauntering toward the counter. I honestly don’t know how the big, gruff guy could get any sexier, which makes keeping my eyes on the treasure nearly impossible.

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When he returns to the table, he asks, “Shall we sit here for a few minutes, or do you want to head straight upstairs?”

“Here’s fine,” I say, trying to force my brain back into business mode. “I’d like to get back to the conversation we need to have.”

He shifts in the chair, his eyes so raptly devouring me, I wonder if he’s heard a thing I said. To my surprise, he manages, “Let’s talk then.”

“Half that pot you’re waiting on at the cashier’s is mine.”

He laughs incredulously, his eyes narrowing. Shaking his head in disbelief, he says, “The joke was funny the first time, but?—”

“It’s no joke. I stood behind you this morning”—I don’t want to say how long—“watching you crashing and burning in one of the worst losing streaks in casino history?—”

“Now, how would you know what a bad losing streak constitutes, Oklahoma?”

I straighten in my chair, reminding him, “We have casinos, too.”

He crosses his arms, his expression stuck somewhere between disbelief and amusement. “Go on.”

“So, you can either handle this like the gentleman who kissed my hand earlier and give me half my winnings. Or you can try to shirk out of the whole thing. But I warn

you. I am as persistent as they come, and I will not stop until I've made you see things my way."

He licks his lips slowly, a half-grin lighting up his expression. "There goes that angel facade of yours. What are you? A scammer who goes around casinos tailing desperate guys who've turned around their luck?"

I chuckle. Is there even such a thing? "First off, you did not look like the kind of guy about to turn around his luck. Secondly, you would've walked out of here with nothing if it weren't for me and my magic breath."

"Magic breath? Is that what we're calling it now?" His face hardens as he leans further back into his chair, getting comfortable.

I take a nervous sip of my Americano.

"Is the drink to your liking?"

"Yes, it is. Thank you. Now, back to our conversation?"

"Before we go any further with this conversation, how do I know you aren't in cahoots with the dealer or maybe somebody else at the table to rob me of my earnings?"

I laugh out loud at the suggestion. "That's ridiculous."

"Is it? Really?" The creases in his forehead deepen. "Maybe you work with the house to shake down gamblers that do too well?"

I shake my head. "Well, isn't that the pot calling the kettle black? You're the one attempting to scam me out of half our winnings, and I'm the deceitful one?"

He leans forward, pressing a big, thick finger into the table with each word to make his point. “They. Are. Not. Your. Winnings.”

We glare at each other across the table.

“Whose are they, then? As I remember, what happened at the table was a joint venture. End of story.”

“If you weren’t so damn hot when you get angry, I would’ve already left this table. Treasure, you’re wasting your time.”

“Now, I’m Treasure, too?”

He nods slowly, his eyes narrowing.

I don’t even know what to do with that nickname. Instead, I ignore it. “No, I’m not wasting my time.”

“Look,” he growls, drawing even closer so that our faces are only a few inches apart. “That winning streak would’ve happened one way or the other. You were merely a lovely distraction along the way.”

I sit back, crossing my arms and echoing his body language. Lovely distraction? Talk about condescending. It’s not even worth the breath of a response. “Half the money, and I’ll be on my way. You’ll never hear from me again.”

Except you still need access to his ranch, Esmeralda! What a tangled web. Maybe you should just level with the guy about the treasure?

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“The money’s not mine to give,” he admits with a frown, looking down at the table. “Not that you deserve it anyway, but I’ve got much bigger problems than you to deal with.”

“Like?”

“Like a bank ready to foreclose on the ranch that’s been in my family for five generations.” He shrugs. “Even when I pay off past debts, it still won’t cover future needs.” Reese buries his head in his hands. “Maybe I need to give up and let the place go. But to know I’m the one who let five generations of the Gunner family down in one fell swoop? It’s more than I can bear.”

I take in his sad body language, my heart breaking. All he had to do was continue in the same vein, arguing with me. Angry, I could persist, but not in his current state, so vulnerable and burdened down by exactly the same kind of family pressure I feel.

Only mine involves taking Gunner for everything he doesn’t even know he’s worth in the form of a fabled treasure. My grandpa would scowl at me if he saw this. I stretch out my hand to stroke the big man’s shoulder.

“It’s okay,” I say empathetically. “You’ll figure things out. At least you’re doing better than you were a couple of hours ago.” Because of me. But I keep the score-keeping, wailing inner voice to myself.

“I’m sorry,” he grumbles. “It’s been a crazy twenty-four hours, and I need to rest.”

Nuh-uh. Not until we get our finances settled. I may feel sorry for him, but I’m no

fool. I shake my head. “First things first?—”

“Are you really still on that high horse? Didn’t you hear what I said? I can’t pay you because the money I won isn’t even really mine.”

“But I’m supposed to take you at your word that if you could pay it, you would? Do I look like an idiot?”

His eyes darken, his gaze searing. “Yes, that’s the truth. If the pot I won was one hundred percent, freely my own, I would give you half. Not because you blew on my palm. I may have been that superstitious in the moment, but now that I’ve had time to reflect on everything, that was nothing more than a little respiratory support ...”

I wait, but he presses his lips together, emphasizing his sudden silence. “Well, if you wouldn’t give it to me for blessing you with good luck, then why would you?”

“Because you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. Despite your silly western wear jacket. And it’s a blessing to know you exist.”

My eyebrows fly up my forehead. “Really? Do you say that to all the ladies?”

“No, ma’am, and I mean it sincerely. I’m sorry if you’re too jaded to accept it. But how is that my fault? Alright, now that you’ve seen me at one of the lowest points in my life, I figure I better crawl away before I lose any more of my dignity.” With one fluid motion, he darts up from the table, and I follow, not about to give up.

“Tragic story or not, you still owe me.”

“I don’t owe you a thing, although if I could, I would rise to the occasion.”

“If not now, then when?”

He shifts his weight, removing his cowboy hat and scratching his head. “When I’m good for the money. Give me your contact information, and I’ll make it happen.”

“Do you think I was born yesterday? I’m going to need some collateral.”

“Collateral?” He chuckles as if my suggestion is ridiculous. “Well, apart from the money the bank will imminently devour because I refuse to let you or anyone else take my family ranch from me, the only collateral I have is a nineteen seventy-six Cadillac Eldorado convertible with a six-foot steer horn decorating the front.”

“Yuck! Seriously?”

He nods, putting his hands on his hips. “Yep, I won that about two in the morning, I’d guess, although time can really get away from you in a place like this. Too bad I lost my dually in the process.”

“You traded in a dually for the car from Dallas? I can’t even with you.”

“No, I won it after losing the dually.”

“You should not be allowed in a place like this.”

“Agreed. Now, if you want to give me some means of contacting you, I promise I will do so with half your earnings the moment I turn things around.”

“You expect me to let you walk out of here with our winnings for something tantamount to an I owe you? No way.”

“Well, it’s that or the Cadillac, although I’m going to need you to drop me off at my house if you choose the latter.”

My mind races. Even more than half his winnings, I need access to his ranch for the treasure hunt. I twist my hands in front of me, worrying my bottom lip when it hits me ...

“Marry me, Cowboy.”

Chapter Four

REESE

Marry me, cCowboy.

I lean back as if she just socked me in the face. Did I hear her right?

“Do what?” I scowl.

“Marry me,” she repeats.

I take a step forward, closing the frustrating distance between us once more. God, this woman is gorgeous. Her full, cherry-stained lips and stunning turquoise eyes could talk me into pretty much anything. Only I have my doubts about how physical she wants this tempting arrangement to be. And that’s a problem.

“Look, hear me out before you get all weirded out...”

Too late for that. Only weirded out isn’t really the right word. More like convinced by her stunning good looks and her spitfire personality. And if, indeed, she comes with a healthy heap of luck, I could use that, too.

“Nevada’s a community property state, so anything we have moving forward would be split.”

“Nah, nah, nah,” I laugh, pressing my finger to my temple. “You must think I’m some kind of dumb because that would mean you get half of my ranch and earnings. No way.”

“We could do a pre-nuptial, spell out plainly what’s yours and mine.”

He shakes his head, roaring with laughter. “I must be in a dream. That’s the only way I can explain what’s happening.”

“No, you’re not in a dream. But you need to hear me out. It’s the only way I’ll leave you alone.”

“I beg to differ. One footstep on my ranch, which is private property, and I’ll call the sheriff to haul your ass away.”

“How gentlemanly,” I bark, setting my jaw. “See, I knew you’d find a way to cheat me out of my money despite what you swore a few moments ago. I won’t accept that. Besides, this arrangement would only be temporary, a form of collateral. A way to legally hold you to your word.”

“No way. You’re trying to trick me, and the next thing I know, I’ll be drunk on bad tequila and hog-tied buck naked to my bed while you run off with the dealer and my cash. I’m not falling for it. After all, I’d make a terrible victim for a true crime show.”

She puts her hands on her hips, struggling not to laugh and tapping her toe. A few patrons pass by, eyeing us. The barista calls out, “Sir and ma’am, I’m going to need to ask you to keep your voices down or walk back into the main casino.”

We both glare at him long and hard before Okie continues in muted tones, “How dare you accuse me of such a thing. I’m a God-fearing woman who’s never stolen a thing in my life. You’re the one trying to abscond with my cash.”

“Breakfast at Peg’s?” I remind, my stomach growling. But I’d be lying if I said my hunger was all about food. The thought of this woman with my ring on her finger, and my cock in her mouth? Good Lord! “Don’t you think we should at least go out on a first date before we start discussing nuptials?”

She nods firmly, and I offer my arm. After a begrudging moment, she takes it. Sparks tease up and down my arm, and I’d give my El Camino Cadillac for a chance to feel her nakedflesh against mine. Dark, dangerous thoughts fill my mind. To hell with reason and logic. Just when I thought a bank would be my ruin, the most gorgeous woman on God’s green Earth had to show up and prove me wrong.

Five minutes later, we stand in Peg’s, scoping out the best seats. We have the pick of the place thanks to the early hour. But come tomorrow, I imagine this casino will be hopping. “How about that booth in the back?” I ask, pointing towards a dark spot in the corner with no one seated nearby. “My fiancée and I could use a little privacy,” I tease.

Esmeralda nods, and the server mutters, “Some fiancé. You’re not even wearing a ring.”

The words take me aback, though they won’t make me tip her any less. Only poor service and bad food could do that.

“Excuse you,” Esmeralda intervenes, eyeing the waitress. “Talk about nosy and judgmental. Who are you to talk about my future husband that way?”

Future husband. It’s got a nice ring to it. So does the sound of Esmeralda’s voice defending me. This woman’s all sex and sass, and I can’t get enough of it.

“Sorry,” the server says gruffly as Esmeralda nudges me forward, urging, “Come on, Honey. Let’s find ourselves those seats.”

Once we're comfortably repositioned in the booth, I observe, "Honey's not going to work for me. That's way too generic a term for a spouse. I want something more customized to my personality or what attracted you to me in the first place."

"Money?" she suggests with a frown.

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“No, I’m thinking something more like Hot Cakes or Big Boy or ...”

She belly laughs, swiping at her eyes, and I swear an oath to make her do it again before our time together ends. “Big Boy is a subjective term. Something I would have to judge for myself.”

“Well, we will be married.” I raise a flirtatious eyebrow, inviting her into the dark fantasies already twisting me.

Her lusty eyes say one thing, but her silky voice another. “Just as I thought. You Nevadans take marriage so lightly.”

I shrug. “What makes you say that?” I remove my hat, set it on the table, and run my hand through my hair.

“Well, you’ve settled into the proposition much faster than I thought you would.”

“Being playful is all, although you may be onto something. After all, in the Silver State, I can be married one day and divorced the next. Or pretty close to that. So, yeah, maybe I take it a little more nonchalantly.”

“We’re not even married yet, and you’re already talking divorce. What kind of a man are you?” she asks, knitting her brows.

I freeze, starting to wonder if I’ve bitten off far more than I can chew. Thankfully, a giggle follows. “You should’ve seen your face.”

“Well, of course,” I grumble. “It’s one thing if we’re on the same page about marriage as a form of collateral. But if you’re going to get all sentimental about staying that way. Well, that’s another thing entirely.”

“So, you’re considering my offer, then?”

“No way in hell because you’re not offering me anything.”

“What do you mean?” she asks, glaring at me. “I’m offering you time to pay me back free and clear without interest and without breaking your word to me. After all, you don’t seem like the kind of man who takes swearing an oath lightly. Or am I wrong?”

“I don’t know what kind of man I am anymore, Esmeralda, if you want the honest truth. I’ve never gambled a day in my life, except for occasional slots. So, what you saw from me last night was sheer, total desperation ... kind of like this conversation. Now, whether or not you’re ready to admit it, you owe me the truth.”

“The truth?” Her eyebrows fly up her forehead.

“Yep,” I say, rubbing my chin. “There’s a lot more to your story than you’re telling me. This conversation goes no further until you fess up.”

“Look, I would really like to level with you, but it would mean signing an NDA along with a prenup.”

“A non-disclosure agreement? Now, you’ve piqued my curiosity. How about we go with an old-fashioned handshake instead? The way people have for more than a hundred years out here.”

Chapter Five

ESMERALDA

“Alright, handshake then.” I reach my hand across the table, and he takes it firmly. Flames lick up and down my arm at the touch of his flesh, and my cheeks warm.

“And a ring and a kiss later,” he adds in dark, growly tones that set my body on fire and put a throb at the top of my legs. God, I want this handsome rancher. This is not good.

I lean towards him, whispering, “Okay, I’m trusting you to be a man of your word. This has to stay between us.”

He nods, his face sincere, though confused.

“Did your family ever talk about something hidden on your property? A cache of precious items worth A LOT of money?”

“What?” He looks completely lost.

I raise my eyebrows. “So you’re telling me you’ve never seen this?” I ask, pulling out my phone and flipping to my photos, where I keep a digital copy of the treasure map.

I push the phone across the table, and Reese eyes it for a long moment, his face unreadable. It’s obvious he doesn’t recognize it.

Swiping over the map to blow it up, he says, “You call this a map? What in the hell is this?”

His reaction doesn’t surprise me. After all, what I call a treasure map really looks like a jumble of lines, illegible handwriting, and poorly drawn structures. It’s a tick above third-grade-level art. And not by much.

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Lowering my voice, I whisper, “It’s a treasure map for a cache of Aztec gold stolen by the Spanish conquistador Juan Diego Xavier del Constanta de Lupe Hidalgo and his men during the sixteenth century and buried somewhere in northern Nevada. It went missing for centuries, its whereabouts moldering away in documents that no one read, rumors of wealth fading. But what no one knew ... what no one still knows, is that a treasure map exists. That’s what you’re looking at, and my grandpa and I have reason to believe the map starts at your ranch.”

Reese dissolves into uproarious laughter. The kind that makes his whole body shake, and his eyes tear up. Swiping the back of his hand over his cheeks, he shakes his head, laughing some more. “I have to hand it to you, Esmeralda. You are, by far, the most entertaining person that I have ever met. There’s no getting bored with you.”

I grab my phone, lock the screen, and frown. I shouldn’t be shocked. After all, I reacted similarly when Grandpa first showed me the map. Still, having someone laugh in my face, even a stranger, smarts a bit.

“So, like the Goonies or something?”

“Yes,” I answer, arching my eyebrow. “This map purports to lead to the fabled lost gold of El Cortez, and it starts on your property. That’s why I drove all the way out here. To find you and talk you into letting me onto Gunner Ridge for the hunt. I had no clue, not in my wildest dreams, that I’d find you in the Heirloom Rose first.”

He furrows his brows. “And what were you doing here anyway?”

“Waiting out a long night of driving. I went as long as I could, but I started dosing off

and pulled over here for food before continuing on to your place. It's been cheaper and, as you said, far more entertaining than stopping at the Motel Six."

"The Motel Six? Not in this town. That place is scuzzy. For God's sake, Esmeralda, you've got to promise me you'll stop taking unnecessary risks. It's bad enough hearing about you driving alone. Or fixing to go to a lonely bachelor's ranch all by yourself. But the Motel Six to boot? Hell, no. You're a Hilton or Hyatt girl."

"A Hyatt or Hilton in this town?" I chuckle.

"Or Heirloom Rose. But not the Motel Six."

"Are you kidding me? I don't have the money for those kinds of splurges. After all, treasure hunting is expensive." I could go on and on about my broken-down truck and everything else that's happened so far, but I spare him the details.

Reese rubs his face with his hands. "So, you really believe this bullshit?" he asks, gesturing to my phone, still resting atop the table with its screen black.

"Of course I do. Or I wouldn't even be here."

He grimaces. "I don't mean to point out the obvious, but there's no way what you just showed me is a Spanish map from the fifteen hundreds."

"Correct."

He furrows his brows.

"What I showed you is a map that dates to the turn of the century scrawled out on tracing fabric. We believe that a ranch hand at Gunner Ridge stumbled upon the treasure. We're not sure how. Honestly, that's kind of where the trail goes cold. All

we know is somebody with some level of education found it and either drew a map of its location or relocated it with the prompts I showed you.”

“And how much do you think it’s worth?”

“Every bit of what you won at the table,” I level with him.

“That would make us millionaires! But why would you consider sharing that vast a sum with me?”

“Because, as my Grandpa says, one bird in the hand is better than two in the bush.”

Reese sits back, crossing his arms as the server returns to offer us coffee. I press my lips firmly together, waiting for her to walk away before we discuss anything further.

Flexing his jaw muscles as he grinds his teeth in deep thought, he says, “So, if we hadn’t met here this morning, I would have seen you later today at my house?”

“That was the plan.”

“With this ridiculous story?” he adds, his face incredulous.

“It’s not ridiculous. Grandpa and I have verified it with enough independent sources to know we’re onto something serious ... with the potential of more wealth than you or I have ever imagined.”

“I’m starting to see a pattern here,” Reese frowns, wrapping his big, sexy digits around the white chipped coffee mug in front of him.

“And what’s that?”

“More wealth than I can imagine as long as I give you half. I mean, it is on my property, after all.”

“And you knew nothing about it until this moment,” I remind, arching my eyebrow. “Believe me, you’ll never find the treasure without me and the map. Hell, I’m not even sure we’ll find the treasure with it. Grandpa and I have obsessed over this for four years, and yet so many mysteries remain. My only hope is that finally setting foot on Gunner Ridge and looking around will jar a few epiphanies and help me fill in the remaining clues.”

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“And so that’s where the marriage comes into play? Only temporary. An act of good faith on both of our parts that when we find what we’re looking for, we’ll share.”

“Yes.”

He chuckles, emptying a couple of white cream containers into his coffee and swirling the light brown liquid with a spoon. “I don’t need to go off on some vain attempt to find an old Spanish dude’s treasure. While your wealth is written on a piece of leather signed with a hope and a prayer, mine’s the real deal waiting with the cashier.” Even as he speaks, his eyes wander back to my phone, and I can tell he’s itching for another look.

“Fabric, not leather,” I correct. “You’re intrigued, aren’t you?”

“Maybe. So you mean to tell me you drove all the way out here from Oklahoma just to reenact your own version of Indiana Jones?”

“For fortune and glory.”

“Fortune and glory,” he chuckles. “For a sassy, headstrong, down-to-earth Okie, you’ve definitely got a bit of an idealistic streak.”

“Call it optimism. And my proposition is ultimately no different than yours. After all, you’re asking me to trust in a man’s earning capabilities who nearly lost everything at the Craps table this morning. Sorry, but I’m going to need something a little more binding than your word.”

“Rose gold, yellow, or silver?” he asks, reaching across the table and taking my hand in his. His pointer finger and thumb slide over my ring finger, eyeing it. My guess is you’re a four and a half or five?”

“Rose gold and a five. Does that mean you’re in?”

Reese frowns. “I’ve done far more foolish and impetuous things tonight ... today, whatever time you want to call it,” he says, nodding toward the gaming floor. “Besides, you’re my good luck charm, right?”

Licking my lips, I add, “And you’re my ticket to Gunner Ridge Ranch.”

He uses his big, muscular free hand to rub it over his beard. I savor the uber-masculine, scratchy sound. “What else do you know about the El Cortez treasure?” My eyes trace the veins of his tanned hand down to his thick, toned forearm, my heart racing at the mouthwatering sight. What I wouldn’t give to feel his strong hands grazing over my flesh, just one time.

“According to Spanish historical documents, it’s a small, though priceless, horde of gold objects recovered from Mexico.” I scrutinize his skeptical face. “Put another way, it’s enough to secure your ranch’s future for generations to come.”

“Generations to come,” he mutters. “I work far too hard to go looking for a wife or starting a family.”

“You forget,” I tease. “You’ve already got the wife part figured out. Although, sadly for you, I don’t feel especially interested in helping you with progenitors.” My skin steams at the bold-faced lie. In my imagination, we’re already post-coitus sharing a damn cigarette. And I don’t even smoke.

“That’s a shame,” he flirts.

My cheeks burn, annoying the hell out of me.

He smiles. “No worries. Do I really look like a man cut out for a family anyway?”

I shake my head, chuckling.

“Alright, this may be Nevada, but we still have to hustle if we want to get a prenup, a marriage license, and a ceremony all in one day.”

“What I just revealed to you feels an awful lot like the guarantee you’d need from a prenup.”

“You have a point,” Reese says, nodding towards my phone. “Send me a copy of that treasure map, and we’ll call it even.”

“Deal, but promise me you won’t backstab me or try anything sneaky.

“Esmeralda, you may have yet to figure this out, but you’re the real treasure as far as I’m concerned,” he declares with a smoldering gaze.

My heart skitters around in my chest, coming back to rest in the new spot that Reese’s presence has carved out for it. This is bad. Very, very bad. But I can’t let him know he’s under my skin. “Yes, I am your treasure. Don’t forget it, husband.”

Chapter Six

REESE

Husband. Something about the way this delectable Okie pronounces the term has me falling all over myself for her. I don’t know what’s come over me. All I do know is I want far more with this blonde beauty than a fake marriage and an even faker treasure

map.

I can tell by the way Esmeralda relayed her story that she believes everything—hook, line, and sinker—her dumbass relatives have told her. How to break the news that they're a bunch of charlatans will be another matter. But I figure the process starts with sieging her heart, something I feel much better doing with my ring on her finger.

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A marriage buys me time and gives me the collateral I need to turn my angelic good luck charm into the naughty firebrand I know she longs to be. I can feel the passion pulsing beneath her cool surface, and I yearn with every ounce of my being, every cell in my body, to be the spark that ignites it.

In other words, I'm all-in for a woman I'm pretty fucking sure is still trying to scam me.

After ordering from the server, I say, "Tell me more about the actual map."

"It's nine inches long by seventeen inches wide and written in fading blue and brown ink on a piece of tracing fabric. After the death of my great-grandfather, a local judge in Fort Gibson, my grandfather found it in his private papers. Great-granddaddy never made mention to anybody about why he kept the map or what he thought about it. As my grandpa dug deeper, he discovered it was part of an indigent's personal effects, being sorted out by the court after his passing."

Her story is getting more suspicious by the minute. She comes across as smart as a whip, so how can she not see this? Maybe the same way you refuse to admit Gunner Ridge is no longer profitable and likely never has been. Family pressures and expectations can blind reason. I furrow my forehead, waiting for her to finish.

"I've had it appraised by a local museum and an antique dealer, and they both agree it's authentic and dates to the early nineteen hundreds. My granddaddy ended up sitting on the find because Vietnam came around, and his life got upturned. Then came along my father, who was always a bit of a rebel and never got along with Grandpa. Their strained relationship fractured all efforts to finally travel your way for

the treasure. So, Grandpa let things skip a generation. He's counting on me to find the treasure, but I can't do that without access to your ranch. When we learned through the grapevine that Gunner Ridge Ranch is in imminent danger of foreclosure, I knew I had to act fast."

"Laudable, I spose."

"I'm not looking for your praise, Reese. I'm looking for my gold."

"Our gold," I chime in, reaching across the table to take her left hand in mind. My flesh sizzles the moment we touch, and I watch how it undoes her gorgeous face, her cheeks darkening, her nostrils flaring, and her eyes softening and going all bedroom-y. Fuck, I can almost imagine what she'd look like begging me for her orgasm. The thought unravels me a little more inside, detaching me from anything resembling logical action or thought.

"Do we know who the hobo was and how he came across the map in the first place?"

"His name was Tyler Eldon Hayes, a very odd, very eccentric, and interesting man."

"Come again?" I scrutinize her face, unable to process her words.

"Tyler Eldon Hayes."

"Fuck me," I mutter under my breath. Maybe there is something to this map of hers.

"What is it?" She arches her sexy as fuck eyebrow, cocking her head and quirking her mouth in a way that makes me desperate for a taste of the forbidden.

"There's something I need to show you when we get back to the ranch."

“Okay. Can you explain a little more or give me a hint?”

“Nope. You’ll have to see it in person.”

She presses closer to me across the table, whispering, “There are structures on the original map along with notes and instructions. It’s difficult to see because the brown ink has faded into a faint yellowish color. But if we can find the starting point, I believe we can figure out the rest.”

“Huh.” Esmeralda’s got my attention. “I would like to see the map in person.”

“And I would like to see your ranch.”

“Fair enough. Let’s finish our breakfast, get hitched, and then head that way.” I notice her hand has melted into mine. She’s not even trying to move it away. This realization, even more than the damn map and the name of the indigent, sends my heart pinging around in my chest. Fuck if this marriage isn’t going to feel too real for comfort.

The blonde shakes her head, looking down at the table and giggling.

“What are you laughing at, Angel?”

“How fast you Nevadans move. I never thought, in a million years, you’d actually agree to a marriage. Certainly, not so quickly.”

I caress her fingers gently, my movements slow and almost imperceptible. My heart races, and her cheeks burn. I’d like to see if the rest of her body is as responsive as her pretty face.

“Ahem,” a testy voice sounds next to us, the server clearing her throat as she looks at

our joined hands. She frowns, holding two huge plates of food, making it clear she means to put them right where we touch.

Esmeralda pulls her hand away, her eyes fluttering toward mine for one brief moment. Reluctance is written in them, and it makes my whole body warm from the inside out, like I'm getting microwaved.

“Ketchup? Tabasco? Anything else?”

I look at Esmeralda, and she shakes her head. The server walks away, and my eyes drop to her plate. “You did not.”

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“What?” She asks, shrugging out of her leather jacket and revealing a V-neck, sleeveless black blouse with lace every place I need to put my mouth. Lord, I can barely think, let alone carry on a conversation. To top it off, her close proximity finally puts my nostrils in line with her feminine fragrance, all lilacs, lust, and my fucking ruin. I can’t imagine a better way to go out.

Right then and there, I decide to do whatever it takes to prove our marriage is real. I’m going to teach Esmeralda how a man pleases his woman, pushing her to heights of bliss her innocent blush never imagined. And then, only when she’s thoroughly sated and totally mine, ideally with a miniature cowboy in her belly, will I begrudgingly treasure hunt with her.

“I did not what?”

“Order the same thing as me? Steak and eggs.”

“Well, weren’t you listening when I ordered?” She eyes me curiously.

I can’t admit I was too busy staring at her mouth, so I shrug instead.

“Besides, what else are you going to eat on the first day of a treasure hunt you’ve been waiting four years to undertake?” she asks with a sweet grin.

“That’s true, Angel. You do need to keep your endurance up,” I agree with a dark grin, far naughtier exploits on my mind. She won’t remember her own name, let alone a treasure map, when I’m done awakening her.

Her face is beet-red now as a little of my real meaning sinks in. She purses her lips, begging for a passionate tasting, and it's confirmed. I'm going to turn Esmeralda's ulterior motives into the flames fueling our romance. One way or the other.

"By the way, I make a mean steak and eggs. Beef from my ranch, eggs from my coop. Butter from my dairy cows."

She swallows loudly, her eyes rounding. It's as if she hasn't thought through the domestic side of our arrangement. I, on the other hand, can't think about anything else.

Raising her chin defiantly, I watch her pull herself back together, enjoying the show. "Breakfast will be the least of our concerns once we get back to your ranch and start hunting."

"That's right," I agree, the promise of another kind of hunt devouring me whole.

Chapter Seven

ESMERALDA

"Inow pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride," the Elvis impersonator says as we stand inside the Heirloom Rose's world-famous wedding chapel, getting the full Nevada treatment.

Although I knew these words were coming, embarrassment still grips me, and I turn my head at the last minute, landing Reese's very soft, very kissable lips on my cheek. I tense in his arms, knowing to the marrow of my bones I cannot let this man kiss me.

The rancher's big, rough, work-hardened hand comes up to my cheek, palming it and turning my head. Before I can respond, he uses his other arm to pull me tightly

against his body, sinking into my mouth for the real deal.

Warning alarms go off in my head as his lips tease and feather over mine, surprisingly skilled and tender. I don't know what I had expected. Maybe a big, sloppy, awful kiss, but this is like a little slice of heaven served up on a golden plate. Sighing with shock, my lips part, and the cowboy goes from gentle to ardent, sweeping into my mouth with his warm, velvety tongue and completely undoing me. My arms come up to his neck, clinging to him as he tilts me back, claiming every part of me and igniting the blood in my veins.

Is this what it's like to have a husband? If so, I'm already in a world of trouble.

"Alright. Enough, you two. May I introduce Mr. and Mrs. Reese Gunner—" the Elvis impersonator cups his hand to his mouth, whispering next to us—"And urge you to take those hunks of burning love elsewhere."

The rancher straightens, bringing me with him. Stepping back, he eyes me hungrily, like a starving coyote catching sight of a slow roadrunner.

I pant, unable to catch my breath and wondering for the millionth time what this man is doing to me. My panties sizzle, wet between my legs. I'm going to have to change them thanks to my husband of convenience.

But damn, if I don't long to wrap my legs around him right here and let him do his dirtiest. One look at his ravenous face confirms it would be far filthier than anything I've ever imagined. God, I want him.

Sweeping me into his arms, he calls over his shoulder to the impersonator. "Thank you, sir. Please send our documents over to the cashier's booth, where I'm picking up my winnings."

“You’re the Craps guy who won so big today, right?” Elvis calls behind us.

“Yep, thanks to my good luck charm and wife.” Nothing about the way he says this statement sounds fake, and my heart throbs with treacherous delight.

Okay, Esmeralda, get yourself pulled together. Your current trajectory is a sure road to ruin and heartbreak. After all, you barely know this man.

Reese beams at me as I cling to his neck, watching the casino go by.

“Why are you carrying me, Cowboy? Isn’t that something to save for the threshold of your ranch?”

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“Maybe,” he concedes, offering no further explanation and making it very clear he won’t let me down anytime soon.

At the cashier’s booth, he sees the same blonde with a ponytail, ordering, “Darling, I’m going to need my winnings brought out to the only white, nineteen seventy-six Cadillac Eldorado convertible with a six-foot steer horn in the casino’s parking lot, along with my marriage paperwork that should be coming over from the chapel.”

“Marriage paperwork?” The middle-aged woman eyes us confusedly. “Boy, you work quick.”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve enjoyed a lucky streak, so I figure I better take advantage of it while I can,” Reese answers, grinning. Those damn dimples again. They pave the road to perdition.

“Fair enough,” she replies with a nod, her face conflicted. Leaning forward and whispering, she adds, “You do realize everything you’re asking for goes against casino protocol. If my supervisor?—”

“Help yourself and your supervisor out to a little off the top. Just leave enough cream for me and my bride.”

“Thank you, sir,” she replies, a wide grin capturing her face.

I don’t know where to start. The word “cream” has my face on fire and my heart kathunking against my ribs as though I’m about to be eaten by a big, bad wolf. One look at the rancher’s face, and I’m certain of this inevitability. But then, there’s the

matter of him passing out our money like it grows on trees ... and his continued scarcity mindset, despite the win. It's sure to put us both in the poor house if I don't correct it.

"You know, you really should let me down. You're making an unnecessary scene." I bite my lower lip, registering the gawking faces we pass.

"It's our wedding day, Angel. How can you expect me not to make a scene?"

"Fake wedding day," I hiss.

"Maybe to us, but the rest of the world has to believe it. Am I right?"

"Not at all. This is an agreement between you and me," I remind, shaking my head.

"Well, you asked me to marry you, which means you also asked me to act like we're married. This is how I would act were I in the nuptial hot tank for real. Fair enough?"

I can't even with him. Instead, I bury my head against his chest, savoring far too thoroughly the smell of his spicy sandalwood cologne. I feel searing eyes from passersby on my back. It's early afternoon, and the casino is starting to hop, which makes this dramatic walk-through all the more embarrassing.

But if there's one thing I've already learned about Reese Gunner, it's that he doesn't do half-assed, whether rolling his way to perdition at the Craps table or pretending this marriage is more than a safeguard. A shiver of desire trembles through me as I wonder what else he has in store for our fake union.

Get your head back on straight, Esmeralda! You're here for the El Cortez stash. That's it. And as soon as you secure it, you'll be divorced faster than Billy the Kid could draw a pistol.

Reese observes, his chin pressing on the top of my head and his growly voice rumbling through me, “I could get used to you pressed against my chest like this, Angel.”

It melts my heart but not my mind or my tongue. “This is only temporary, Cowboy. Get that through your thick skull.”

He chuckles. “Now, is that any way to talk to your husband, Treasure?”

I am in over my head, from his flirty remarks to the way need shuttles through me, enveloped in his warmth and security.

“Thank you,” he says as someone must open the door for him, and we step out into a blazing hot mid-June afternoon. The difference between day and night temperatures in Nevada astounds me.

“Woo, Lord,” Reese says as I finally lift my head, assuming the parking lot will hold less gawkers.

“You’re going to need that jacket back off, and I’m going to need out of my overshirt. It’s boiling out here.

It’s not even half as hot as my internal workings around this rancher. He’s gorgeous as they come, and I might delight in his embrace under any other circumstances. But I can’t let anything or anyone get in the way of the El Cortez treasure.

“Your ride, milady,” the rancher says, gently lowering me back onto my cowboy boots. My eyes bug out at the sight of the old, massive, horned white vehicle. I guess a part of me didn’t fully believe Reese, but here we are ... about to head out like we’re rocking an eighties western soap opera.

“You weren’t kidding, were you, Reese?”

He gets a lopsided grin as he opens the passenger door for me, his face stuck between sheepish and flirtatious. “You will soon learn, Esmeralda, that I’m a man of my word in all cases. Or at least I try to be. Otherwise, there’s no way you would’ve talked me into a wedding today.”

I slide into the seat, nervously twirling the ring on my left hand. “Who’d have thought a casino wedding chapel would have a mini-jewelry store attached to it.”

“Lucky thing, otherwise we’d have been at the pawn shop, sifting through junk. I figure we’ll leave your car parked here unless you have a problem with that. Nothing’ll happen to it. This town has at least five sheriff’s deputies for every one miscreant. But you will need to point your car out to me so we can grab your luggage and things.” Reese removes his overskirt, throwing it in the back.

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What I've gotten myself into with this fake marriage hits me hard as I consider staying with this man at his house. Sure, the allure of twenty-four-hour, unfettered access to Gunner Ridge Ranch remains foremost in my mind. Especially accompanied by someone who must know its landmarks better than anybody. But the wild chemistry flying between us has me wondering if I can trust myself. It's a concern that's never crossed my mind before with any other man.

Reese gets in, and the radio blares as he turns the key in the ignition. I startle in my seat, though the open convertible minimizes the auditory damage. "It's Your Love" by Tim McGraw with Faith Hill rocks the ancient sound system as my hand instinctively goes to the dial, adjusting the volume.

"Don't turn it down too low, Esmeralda. This here's our wedding celebration, and we need romantic music."

Wedding celebration? Has the rancher lost touch with reality?

"Which one's yours?" he asks, leisurely cruising around the casino parking lot to the random jeers and cheers of passersby. "JR," a couple of people scream, and Reese tips his hat.

I shake my head, increasingly flabbergasted by this outgoing, unflappable, well-natured man. Away from the Craps table, there doesn't seem to be anything that could ruffle him. He takes everything, even an unexpected wife, in stride.

"It's the beat-up Chevy Silverado over there." I point, and he pulls up behind it.

I fumble for my keys in my purse, handing them to him, and he makes quick work of unpacking my passenger seat and piling it in the backseat of this monstrosity. Knitting my brows, I ask, “Are you sure you don’t want me to follow you? I mean, you said you won this at a Craps table? Are we certain it’s a reliable ride?”

“Started right up. I wouldn’t worry about a thing. Besides, the ranch is all unpaved roads that’ll blast sand and grit in your vehicle, and that’s not to mention the cow patties.”

“Sounds like a pleasant experience in a convertible,” I counter sarcastically.

“But if you’re not worried about your truck getting dirty, follow along. Either way’s fine with me. But do follow me. I don’t want a runaway bride on top of all my other bad luck.”

Runaway bride? Not as long as there’s treasure to be had. I cock my head to the side. “I know you’re not asking for my advice. In fact, I’m keenly aware of it. But have you ever considered that your current strain of misfortunes might stem back to the way you talk about things and what your brain fixates on?”

The cowboy’s eyes narrow. In incredulous tones, he asks, “Come again?”

“The way you talk about and fixate on bad luck. Like it belongs to you. You’re sinking your own ship without even realizing it.”

He scrunches his face. “What are you? One of those New Age guru types? Think it into being people?”

“Whether you believe it or not, you’re thinking things into being all the time.”

He shrugs.

“It’s the only thing that explains your current strain of bad luck and how it improved once you became quantum entangled with me.”

“Quantum what?”

“Quantum entangled.”

“Damn, Angel. I don’t know exactly what that entails, but it sounds pretty fucking amazing,” he drawls unrepentantly, getting back in the Cadillac and handing me my keys.

I need to put a little distance between this cowboy’s slow-spoken innuendos and the corresponding heat from my body. Cheeks scorching, I round the convertible as he watches with a shit-eating grin. Jumping into my truck, I turn the key, and nothing.

Dammit! I try again. Still a whole bunch of nothing. Of all the times for this truck to refuse to start ... I try again and again until I’m livid. Seriously?

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Reese standing on the other side of my window, his Eagles T-shirt dangerously hugging his firm, broad build. Never has a man taken my breath away more or pissed me off so thoroughly with his big, dumb grin.

“Shall we stick with the Cadillac today, Angel?” he asks, crossing his thick, muscular arms and turning my inner voice into a drooling, mindless fangirl. He uses his thumb to point over his shoulder toward the white beast. “Don’t worry. I’ve got a friend who’s a mechanic. I’ll give him a call at the ranch to see about having your vehicle towed back to his shop for a look.”

I nod, resting my forehead on my hands as they grip the steering wheel. Winner-turned-married-turned-carless, all in the blink of an eye.

“Angel?”

I take a deep breath, willing myself back together.

“Angel?” He opens the driver’s door, offering me his hand. I hesitate, a highly independent girl not used to this kind of treatment. But then, I relent. What’s the use of fighting it? After all, I’ve got gold fever on my mind.

Chapter Eight

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REESE

After staking the Cadillac in front of the Heirloom Rose's doors until the cashier rushes out with my winnings in conspicuous bags, I head straight for the bank. Holding the money like this has my stress levels through the roof. Of course, a night without sleep, a new wife who hates me, and a car I hate back aren't helping a thing.

And with my luck, God only knows what could get in the way of me settling my debts. Esmeralda accompanies me inside, carrying one of the bags and frowning. I can tell she's torn about me dumping every bit of the winnings into the ranch. But I'm out of options.

After the bank visit, Esmeralda and I shuttle down Route 14, love music blaring.

"You won't believe this," the blonde says, playing with the dial.

"Try me."

"This is the only station we can get." To prove it, she cycles through static with the occasional distant signal and garbled vocals.

"All we can get is the AM stations, huh? Spose that's because this sucker came with the original radio. Now, isn't that something?"

"And apparently, it's down to this one stupid love song station. This is ridiculous."

I chuckle. "It is fitting for newlyweds, you know."

“Okay,” Esmeralda says, laying her Okie accent on thick. “I think you’re taking this whole fake marriage thing a little too seriously.”

“You can never take marriage too seriously, Treasure, especially if we’re aiming for that coveted silver anniversary.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

I chuckle darkly. “You have no idea.”

She crosses her arms, her face sullen.

“Wonder if we can get episodes of Coast to Coast AM on this thing? Remember George Noory? Try five-seventy.”

“I have no idea who you’re talking about,” she says as she dials through the static, stopping at the apparently nonexistent station. At least on this radio.

“That’s a shame,” I counter. “Because he’s your kind of guy, tin-foil-hat-wearing and the whole nine yards.”

“I am not a conspiracy theorist,” she retorts, raising her lovely fine-boned chin in protest. If she really knew how she makes my insides simmer and my heart think extravagant, romantic things ... I would love to share these sentiments, but something tells me they wouldn’t go over so well in her current state. I hope there’ll come a time in the near future when she’s more receptive to tender overtures.

It’s just like me, on top of everything else, to fall hard for a woman who doesn’t want me. Grandma always says bad luck has a way of following me. Needing a change of conversation and mental chatter, I side-eye her, remarking, “I thought you’d be a whole lot more excited for a woman about to reach the destination she’s driven all the

way from Oklahoma for.”

“I am excited,” she counters, eyeing me with a pout.

“Could’ve fooled me. You’ve been downright morose ever since the wedding. It could hurt a cowboy’s heart if I didn’t have such a thick skin.”

She studies me suspiciously, her eyes narrowing. Like she’s trying to figure out what game I’m playing. If only she knew the feelings I keep hinting at aren’t fake or ulterior at all. “I don’t want to hurt your feelings,” she says quickly. “My mind’s just ruminating on the treasure. And today ... which is a lot to sort out no matter how you put it.”

“Don’t I know it,” I agree. “But we maybe ought to count our blessings a little, too. At least, that’s what my grandma would suggest.”

Esmeralda shifts in her seat. “Does your grandmother live around here?”

“My no. She’s wiling away her golden years on the beaches of a planned community and golf course along Florida’s Emerald Coast.”

“Smart woman,” my angel remarks, her eyes gazing off into the expansive nothing of the Great Basin.

“Most people would prefer Florida over this,” I agree. “Although I’ve spent my whole life in Nevada, so it feels right to me. Do you want to know what the secret is for falling in love with the Silver State?”

“Sure,” she says, quirking her tantalizing cherry-stained lips.

“If you can fall in love with skies that stretch forever and big, rugged mountain

ranges that do the same, then Nevada will beguile you.”

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She takes another look, appraising the secluded, vast landscape stretching in all directions. Biting her full bottom lip, she says, "It does remind me a bit of the Great Plains, though punctuated by sagebrush instead of prairie grass."

I nod as Luke Combs's "Forever After All" serenades us, putting me in a loving kind of mood. Too bad my sexy companion appears less affected by the music.

Straining her eyes heavenward, as if she's looking for the paradise she fell from, Esmeralda adds, "Clouds, too. If you like big fluffy white clouds in endless periwinkle skies. You can appreciate this lonely place."

"One of the loneliest places in the world," I confess, side-eyeing her. The sentiment hits me to the core, vulnerable and authentic. But she misses the moment completely, her mind still working too hard. I know that look because I used to have the same problem.

"So, if your grandma's in Florida, what about the rest of your family? It takes a lot of hands to run a ranch, after all."

I pause for a moment, thinking of the best way to put this. "I'm an only child because my parents weren't too especially interested in each other after the honeymoon. My father ended up running off when I was about four or five. Can't remember for sure. Chalk him up as a ranch hand who never wanted to become a rancher. So, my maternal grandfather took over the ranch once more, which is why I have my mother's maiden name rather than my deadbeat dad's. Grandpa was approaching retirement age at the time, and he worked himself to death in the deal. Found him stone-cold dead on top of his tractor."

“That’s terrible.”

I shrug. “He died doing what he loved, so I don’t feel too bad about it, though I do miss him. Especially when I’ve got ranching business I wish I could discuss. I didn’t learn nearly enough from him during his lifetime, but you never figure that out ’til it’s too late. As for my mom and grandma, they gave me the option to sell the ranch and make something of myself apart from the family tradition. I couldn’t bring myself to do that, though. Too stubborn, I spose. But you tell me, how could I abandon five generations of Gunner blood, sweat, and tears buried in this arid soil?”

“I’m the worst person to ask that question,” she replies with a chuckle.

I raise a questioning eyebrow.

“After all, I’m out here, animated by my grandpa’s dream of treasure. A different kind of family pressure but family pressure nonetheless.”

“Makes me wonder. If I had a family to call my own, you know, a beautiful wife and a mess of bratty kids, would I still feel so compelled to follow my parents and grandparents’ dreams for me?”

“A mess of bratty kids,” she chuckles. “You don’t seem like much of a family man, no offense.”

“No offense taken. After all, you’ve only seen me at my worst. But how about you, Esmeralda, do you have plans for a family someday? Or is it all treasure hunts and tin-foil hats for you?”

“I take offense to the tin-foil hat comment, first and foremost. As for the rest of your question, I wouldn’t say I want a mess of kids. But I love babies. I’d like as many as I feel like making. Mama tells me you can never know for sure until you’re in the grip

of the pain. But she also says you can never decide you want kids until you already have them, and I'm okay with that, I guess."

"I do have to say. Eve really screwed y'all with that whole painful childbirth thing. It seems unfair, in my opinion. But then, nobody's asking me."

"No different than other mammals, right?" she asks, eyeing me. "I'm sure you've helped out with your fair share of cow and horse births."

I laugh. "Goats, llamas, buffalo, and alpacas, too. We've tried everything at Gunner Ridge to be viable."

"And nobody has it harder than us ladies, despite all your experiences?"

He shrugs. "I wouldn't say that. But I don't want you to think I'd ever minimize the sacrifices a woman makes to turn a man into a daddy. It's something I'll personally never understand, but I do hope, sooner or later, to be a part of that process ... with the right woman."

"Well, I suppose that makes me the thorn in your side. Or the glitch in your program. A happy little mistake that'll be righted soon enough ... I hope."

"You know, I'm good for the money. There were other forms of collateral you could have asked for."

Guilt flashes in her eyes, and I want the accompanying verbal explanation. Instead, she observes, "No collateral was as sure."

"Okay, then," I answer, not necessarily agreeing with her. But I must concede, "In Nevada, it was the fastest way to bind our future and our finances together."

“Going back to where we were before. How long ago did your grandmother head to Florida?” she asks, bringing our conversation full circle. I don’t begrudge her for it. But damn, if I wasn’t enjoying skirting a discussion of our future babies. Whether she’ll admit it or not.

“Nearly a decade ago, and I’ve been on my own ever since, apart from a handful of ranch hands and community help on occasion. Most days, it feels like an uphill battle. Or better yet, swimming against the current. I’m honestly not sure how much longer I can do it. But I’ve reached the point where I can’t tie my own self-worth to the venture anymore. If my parents had been serious about making a go of it, my father would’ve never left, and they would have had more children to help out. Same goes for my grandparents. You don’t stop at one daughter and expect things to work out. It’s almost like Gunner Ridge is cursed, and I’m getting tired of the ceaseless struggle.”

“Could be the treasure,” my angel murmurs, somberly looking out at the high desert plains stretching before us.

“Wait? You think the treasure is cursed?”

“Could be,” she shrugs. “It was stolen, after all.”

“Sorry, but this is starting to get a little too kookie for me,” I admit, shaking my head as we turn off onto the first in a series of dirt roads that lead to the old homestead. “What else do you believe in? UFOs? Ghosts? Bigfoot?”

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She chuckles. “Alright, then, you explain away your bad luck.”

“Bad land, bad water, lack of foresight. You know, when my ancestors settled out here, they actually believed if they plowed the land, it would make it rain? Have you ever heard anything so cockamamie in your whole life?”

“I know about that, coming from Dust Bowl country.”

“That you do. But obviously, they couldn’t have been more wrong, and it’s led to more suffering than progress. At least for the Gunners,” I lament bitterly.

“I imagine you also have federal regulations against you, all sorts of environmental legislation, water rights issues, climate change, wildfires ... The West’s land wars are called that for a reason.”

“All of the above. Kind of like a perfect storm of events. Although the cattle deaths were really the icing on the cake.”

“Sounds like we need each other more than we realize,” the Okie says absentmindedly, looking out at the passing landscape.

Her words put a hunger in me that I can’t name. “That we do, Angel.”

Chapter Nine

ESMERALDA

Sounds like we need each other more than we realize. Did I really just say that to Reese Gunner?

I shake my head, pulling myself out of my reverie. “I mean, we need each other’s wealth.”

“I know what you meant.” Reese winks, the corners of his mouth turning down.

We drive in near silence, accompanied by Johnny Cash’s “Ring of Fire” and the incessant roar of gravel beneath the Cadillac’s tires, traveling one-third of the speed we did on Route 14. Reese slows at another turn, the road more torn up in this direction as he pumps the brakes, taking it easy. It feels like we’re riding on the Cadillac’s original shocks.

At the ranch house, Reese parks, grinning at me as he rounds the Caddy. “I have something I absolutely have to show you before we unload the car or head inside.”

Opening my door, he offers his hand, pulling me impatiently to my feet. “Come on,” he orders, striding towards a massive, dilapidated structure. “This is the biggest, oldest barn on the property. It’s hell of sketchy at this point, thanks to year upon year of weather damage and decay. Expect wild animals and keep an eye out for impending structural failures. All it’ll take is a right-leaning wind to bring the whole thing down.”

“Not sure I want to go in there,” I declare, crossing my arms as we stand in front of the weathered, gray wooden barn that towers over us despite a distinctive, ominous lean.

“Oh, and watch your step. Last thing you need is a rusty nail through one of your pretty feet. Are you up to date on your tetanus shots?”

I pause, trying to remember but deciding I must be. "Of course."

Reese approaches the sagging front doors, forcing one back enough for me to shimmy through. Musty, motionless air greets me, illuminated by thick slivers of afternoon sunlight.

"You okay?" he asks. I can hear him struggling to squeeze through the same thin passage.

"As long as this place isn't filled with hantavirus or something." I sneeze. I'm going to need an allergy pill after this.

He bursts into the barn behind me, stumbling over me due to his momentum. The wind is knocked out of me as I step forward, about to fall to my knees, except he wraps his big, strong arms around me, squeezing me tightly against his hard frame.

"You still okay?"

"Yeah," I squeak, feeling far more okay than I care to admit, locked in his safe, secure embrace.

"What in the hell were you doing so close to the door? I nearly ran you over, Angel." His voice sounds scolding, but he chuckles at the end, holding me even closer. I should pull away, wiggle out of his grip. But the feel of his bare inner arms on my naked outer arms is too delectable to resist. He nuzzles my neck, kissing my cheek tenderly and crooning, "Glad I didn't smoosh you. Now, why don't you let me lead? Watch your step."

Why I feel disappointed by his suggestion and the loosening of his hold, I don't know. But curiosity overtakes everything as I press back against a fallen overhead beam, letting him pass. He ducks beneath a mound of precariously balanced, wooden

debris, and I follow closely, scared to let him out of my sight. Before each step, I scan the ground nervously for rusty nails and other nasty sharp objects.

“Better keep an eye out for rattlers, too,” Reese adds, moving slowly and strategically through the tumult of wood, straw, and old junk.

“Great,” I frown. “You have rattlesnakes out here, too?”

“Nevada has six species of rattlesnakes, to be exact. The most likely around here would be the Great Basin Rattlesnake. Deadly as fuck, so don’t get bit.”

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“Well? Is that it?” I ask into the ensuing silence. “Aren’t you going to tell me how not to get bit?”

“Typically, I’d carry something like a walking stick to hit the brush in front of me when I hike. That way, the little guy can rattle his warning. But there’s a high likelihood too much movement could bring this whole barn down on us. Then, rattlesnakes would be the least of our troubles. Fortunately, we’re both wearing good boots, which snakes shouldn’t be able to bite through. But I’d watch it because you’re traveling second.”

“Traveling second. What does that have to do with anything?”

“As the leader of this little excursion.” He groans, passing under another haphazard tepee-like structure of wood. “I’ll be the one who scares the rattlesnake. As second in the party, you’ll get the bite.”

“This adventure is getting more exciting by the minute,” I grumble.

“What, you didn’t expect treasure hunting to be easy or comfortable, did you?” He arches a quizzical eyebrow.

“So, explain to me why I’m traveling second again ...”

“Because I’m the one who knows where we’re going and what we’re looking for. At least in theory. And I’m also the one who’ll suck the poison out of your leg and get you to a hospital.”

Both are sound points, although the latter is something I refuse to entertain. Catching myself in a negative thought pattern, I remember what Grandpa taught me. Stay positive, ask for what you want, and have faith in the outcome.

Under my breath, I mutter, “I am a lucky girl. The Universe loves me, and it showers me in good fortune. All the time. Even when I don’t know what to ask for, the Universe delivers.”

Reese pauses, holding up a broken slab of wood for me to pass under as we continue working our way to the back of the dark, dank, dusty barn. “Are you casting spells back there or something?”

“Nope, just reminding myself that I’m a lucky girl who has lucky things coming her way. All the time because the Universe never rests.”

Reese looks befuddled. “Huh,” he says, his eyes scanning the back wall of the structure held together by straw and a prayer. “Let’s see now. It’s been a while since I saw this. After all, the barn’s been in the midst of collapsing since at least my elementary school days. Didn’t help that I had a hand in blowing up part of it with my childhood buddy, Everett.”

“Blowing up the barn?”

Reese chuckles. “A chemistry experiment gone wrong. Be glad you’re not my f’real wife, or you’d be in for a tough time with our sons.” He winks as he says it, his lopsided grin and dimples warming me all the way to the tips of my toes.

“Your grandpa must’ve been livid,” I say, shaking my head.

“Yep, he turned the darkest shade of purple I’ve ever seen a man go, and then, he didn’t speak to me or anybody else in the family for the next month. Just stewed in

the anger, simmering like an overheated kettle.”

“Sounds like you got off easy. My grandpa was a huge proponent of finding your own switch. I learned young to behave flawlessly.”

“I better never meet that man, knowing he’d take a switch to your lovely skin,” Reese growls unexpectedly.

“It’s not like he left a mark,” I excuse quickly.

“Still, anybody laying a violent hand on you, Angel? Hell, no. It makes me sick thinking about it.”

We walk in silence. Waves of anger pour off Reese as I try to sort out my tangled ball of emotions. On the one hand, I love my grandpa dearly and very rarely had to deal with his punishments. On the other hand, my chest feels warm and melty at Reese’s passionate, protective proclamations.

“And just so you know. No person will ever lay a hand on one of our kids, Esmeralda,” he exclaims, anger still coursing through his voice. “Fake kids, I mean.”

I can’t help but chuckle at his simmering words, fully aware he’s taking the marriage thing seriously. I’d be lying, however, if I didn’t admit there’s something incredibly sexy and heartwarming about the statement. “I agree, Reese. No one better lay a hand on our fictional babies.”

“Glad we see eye to eye on that, Treasure,” he drawls lazily, stopping to help me through another nearly impassable portion of the barn, lifting me over huge, splintered beams with a mouthwatering grunt.

“This reminds me of my parents’ barn after a tornado. Cataclysmic damage.”

“Fortunately, the only thing we get around here are big-ass dust devils. Sure, they can wreak a little havoc, but they’re more nuisances than anything. The vast vertical mountain ranges running along the full length of the Great Basin break up more powerful winds.”

We continue in silence. But I want to hear him speak some more, enjoying his childhood memories. “And what about your partner in crime, Everett? Does he still live around here?”

“Nope, he’s on the rodeo circuit these days, team roping. But he and I got into plenty of trouble together as kids.”

“Alright,” he says, coming to a stop near the back wall. “If my recollection is right, we’re looking for something halfway along this wall at about chest height.”

“Manmade or natural?”

“Manmade.” He moves slowly, clearing a space for me to follow, grumbling the occasional order to avoid a nail or other sharp object. Suddenly, he stops, a low, dark chuckle rumbling through his chest. “There it is.” He points to rustic initials carved into the barn’s wood, probably with a pocket knife based on their crude outline: TE Hayes.

I squeal, pulling out my cell phone and snapping a photo. “TE Hayes. This has to be our ranch hand and resident mapmaker.”

Reese shrugs. “All I know is it’s been here for as long as I can recall. Grandpa pointed it out to me a couple of times, a bitter look on his face, always spitting and saying, ‘Former ranch hand and inveterate thief.’”

“This has to be the structure on the map in the lefthand corner,” I say, voice trembling with excitement. “Grandpa and I brainstormed back and forth what it could be. This is?—”

A great, roaring chaos fills the barn, and Reese and I look up wide-eyed. “Oh, shit!” he manages, wrapping his big body around mine as wood from the rafters slams down on top of us. Dust fills the air, thick and impenetrable, as the rancher exhales on a pained grunt.

“Reese—”

He pushes me forward, and I fall to my knees, crawling along the back of the wall

with him close behind. Sunlight pours through a hole at the bottom of the wall, and he shoves me towards it, commanding, “Run!”

Around us, splintering and popping thunder, like a house of poker cards crashing to the ground. I scramble through the hole, squeezing and clawing my way before jumping to my feet and sprinting. I only stop and turn once I know the angry swirl of debris can no longer reach me.

My mouth gapes as I take in the scene of the toppled structure, an angry mass of twisted wood.

Where is Reese?

My eyes scan the structure as tense minutes pass without a sign of movement. “Reese!” I scream into the eerie silence that follows the demolition, frantically searching for signs of life. “Reese!” My voice breaks.

I run towards the structure, tears combining with the dust plastered to my face as my heart sinks. I’m a widow within the first twenty-four hours of marriage, my husband’s last thought and action solely for my safety. There’s nothing fake about that.

“Reese!” I wail, desperation and panic coloring my voice as I sink into the tall, yellow grass of the pasture to my knees, too weak to stand.

If only I could kiss him one more time. Tell the burly cowboy how much I’ve wanted him since first laying eyes on him. Confess how his selfless desire to save me fills my heart with what can only be described as love ...

I pull out my phone, hands trembling. No signal. Still, I should be able to call emergency services. I read a while back you can do that even without service.

“Nine-one-one. What’s your emergency?” A nasally voice answers.

“Oh, thank God. My husband. My husband has been buried beneath an abandoned barn, and he’s not answering me.”

“Wait, let me get this straight. Did you say abandoned barn?”

“Yes. Please hurry. I don’t know where he is, and he isn’t?—”

A big hand clamps down on my shoulder, and I jump out of my skin. Reese stands next to me, covered from head to toe in fine, powdery dust, breathing hard. He rests his other hand on his knee, leaning forward to catch his breath. I see blood oozing through tears in the back of his T-shirt.

“Oh, my God, Reese, are you okay?”

His other hand drops to his other knee, and he looks like he’s about to double over onto the ground.

“Hello, Miss? Are you there?” the voice blares through the phone.

“Yes, but I have to go.”

“Do you still need us to send somebody out to your location?”

“I don’t know. But I found my husband, and he’s alive. I’ll call back if we need your help. Thank you.”

Ending the call, I shove my phone in the back pocket of my long denim skirt, leaning over to search Reese’s face. A big, angry cut on his forehead bleeds as he continues catching his breath, gazing up at me with his gorgeous green eyes. I won’t rest easy

until he starts talking again, ready to grab my phone at a moment's notice.

“Talk about a close one,” he finally says, chuckling and straightening slightly. I grab his big arm, wrapping it around my shoulder to support him.

“How badly are you hurt?”

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He shrugs, wincing at the movement. “Dunno. But it ain’t bad enough for an ambulance or anything. I may need help assessing whatever the fuck happened to my back, though.”

“Yeah, it’s bleeding,” I observe, a shiver running through me as I eye the debris pile, wondering how he survived.

“You may be digging splinters out of places I don’t want to even think about,” he laughs, shaking his head. “I thought for a moment I was a goner. Damn, Esmeralda. I should’ve known better, though. You’re my good luck charm and my guardian angel.”

“But where? How?” I can’t piece my words together, mind-boggled by his escape.

“After I sent you through the hole. I only had a moment to think, sprinting back along the wall and sliding through a space torn open as the structure finished its descent. I came out somewhere over there,” he says, pointing toward the far end of the barn. “In a blinding cloud of debris and dust.”

“You saved my life, Reese, without even thinking about your own,” I observe, my bottom lip quivering.

“You’re my wife, Esmeralda. Fake or real, I won’t let anything happen to you. Ever.”

His words rush through me like a spring breeze. “Don’t ever scare me like that again,” I whimper, leaning into him and planting my lips firmly on his, determined not to squelch this second chance with him.

He seizes me without hesitation, pulling me against him with a low, satisfied moan. His arms circle my waist, lips dancing over mine, ardent and tinged with the metallic taste of blood. He must have a cut lip on top of everything. I try to pull away, fearful of hurting him further, but his embrace transforms into steel bands, holding me in place as his warm, velvety tongue slips and slides me into mindless bliss.

My knees feel as weak as the moment they gave out in front of the barn, melting into his robust, safe presence. All I can think about is how I almost lost him and how desperately I need him. Though we still have so much to learn about each other.

I whimper at the rhythm his tongue initiates, my blood igniting from the crown of my head to the tips of my toes as the juncture at the top of my legs sizzles. He claims me ravenously again and again as my mind races with other naughty ways he could use his tongue.

Heart pounding against my ribs like a timpani, I'm certain he can feel it. He pulls back, his eyes pooling with tenderness and warmth. "Come on, Angel. Let's go back into the house so you can assess whether I'll need a second call to nine-one-one."

"Do you think you might?"

He side-eyes me, red-cheeked and smiling warmly. "If it were just me, no. I assure you I've been through worse without medical attention. But if you need to see paramedics and hear what they say to feel better, we'll call." He swipes a dusty finger over my jawline. "Part of being a decent husband is caring about your wife's concerns and needs. I've done a shitty job of that so far today, but I promise to do better moving forward."

"No, you haven't. You saved my life. And then, you saved me from being a widow."

He stops, his eyes narrowing. "But wouldn't being a widow leave you sitting pretty?"

This ranch all to yourself and no grumpy rancher to contend with?”

I strain upwards, kissing him again. “Don’t talk that way. You mean more to me than I can say ... though I barely know you.”

Dimples flash in his cheeks as he smiles, returning the warm embrace. “I’m glad to hear we share the same feelings.”

We start up the porch stairs into the house, heated affection growing between us, until he grimaces.

“Are you okay?”

“My knee’s a little sore.” He scowls.

Chapter Ten

REESE

“Welcome to our humble abode, Angel,” I say as I hobble through the front door, still trying to figure out what the hell’s wrong with my knee. It’s fine walking on level ground, but stairs piss it the hell off.

We stand in the large Victorian entryway with its ancient furniture and decor, an homage to the early ranching successes of my great-grandfather. If Esmeralda’s right, that all changed about the time the El Cortez treasure found its way here. I wonder if my ancestor even knew about it? Or if Tyler Eldon Hayes stumbled across the stash, reburied it, and created the map to return at a later date? All I know is I need to take a look at the original.

“I should grab your luggage so we can take a closer look at the map,” I suggest.

“No way,” Esmeralda scolds. “I need to assess your injuries first. See if you need real medical treatment.”

“I’m fine, Treasure. But my head is swimming with a thousand questions about Tyler Eldon Hayes and the map. I need to see it.”

Her face hardens, and she presses her lips firmly together. “No, Reese. I am not putting the treasure before your health. Do you have a first-aid kit somewhere around here?”

“I’m telling you I’m fine, Esmeralda. Let me look at that map.”

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Her bottom lip trembles, and her eyes water. “I understand the pull of gold. Really, I do. But please don’t be like my grandpa, becoming totally obsessed with it. It’s all that man can think about, even in the nursing home.” She frowns.

“Oh, Esmeralda,” I say, bringing my big, rough hand up to palm her delicate cheek. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have talked to you like that. It’s just this treasure-hunting stuff has a dangerous magnetism to it.”

“We had an abandoned barn fall on top of us less than fifteen minutes ago, and all you’re thinking about is gold, gold, gold. You need to get your priorities straight, and let me look at your back.”

“You’re right. I won’t let it happen again.” To prove I mean what I say, I pull my T-shirt over my head, groaning at the pain caused by straining my back muscles. I turn around, asking, “Well, what’s the verdict?”

“You have some lacerations and red spots where I imagine you’ll have nasty bruising tomorrow. It looks like you took a beam to the back to save me.” Her voice trembles.

“Felt like it, too,” I say, turning and pulling her into my arms again. “What is it about you that makes me want you so much, even though I barely know you?” I whisper as she settles into my arms, her face beaming. My lips drop to hers, my heart racing as I devour her mouth, completely addicted to the warm, deliciousness of her cherry-stained lips.

“But your lip. You have a cut on it,” she says between kisses as my tongue delves into her, rhythmically claiming her to the beat of my heart. “I don’t want to hurt it

worse.”

“The only thing that could hurt me right now is not tasting you,” I confess, thrilled at how she whimpers at my words, her tiny hands hanging onto my neck.

“But your back,” she pants as my lips descend to her neck, feathering lightly over her décolletage. “I need to wash your injuries and?—”

Her lips find mine, claiming me in return. Her juicy pink tongue dives into my mouth slowly and sensually, mating with mine until the last thing on my mind is falling barns, injured backs, or treasure maps. My hands grip her hips, grinding her against my firm arousal as tiny cries escape her lips, letting me know she likes what she feels.

Ding dong.

The doorbell.

“For God’s sake, are you kidding me?” I exclaim, reluctantly looking toward the door. I have half a mind to ignore it. Not that I get many visitors, but fuck them and fuck their lousy timing.

Ding dong.

“Dammit,” I say thickly, still so caught up in the mesmerizing flavor and feel of Esmeralda that I can’t think straight.

“Maybe you should get that?” Her warm breath teases my cheek as she speaks. I can’t help myself, finding her mouth and ravishing her again.

Ding dong.

Resigned to the damn interruption, I pull back, frowning as I take in my adorable wife's flushed cheeks. "Coming!" I scream.

I struggle back into my shirt, heading for the door.

"Maybe it's the paramedics after all," Esmeralda says behind me.

Maybe.

I adjust myself as discreetly as possible, not ready to open the door with a raging hard-on. On the other side, I stare at Nick. Motherfucker!

Crossing my arms over my chest, I grumble, "Y'all need to get the hell out of here. This is private property, and I'm well within my legal rights to shoot you."

Nick laughs. "If it ain't the cowboy with the biggest balls West of the Mississippi. How are you, man?" He wears thick tortoiseshell glasses with wavy brown locks that hang to his shoulders and a red, white, and blue Hawaiian shirt that screams tourist. From his thin khaki shorts to his flip-flops, the man's not dressed for the late-night outing he's about to ask permission for. But who am I to lecture him?

"Are you okay, Reese? You've got a cut on your forehead, and you look like shit."

"It's a damn long story."

He eyes me hesitantly. "Dude, we were heading up the road to our spot when we crested the corner, and your old barn came into view. It collapsed in front of our eyes. What's going on?"

I shrug. "Time finally caught up with it. Unfortunately, I was inside when it happened."

“Oh, man. Seriously? How in the hell did you manage to get out?”

“I had to for my wife,” I say matter-of-factly, feeling happier about that nickname for Esmeralda every time I use it. Repeating the sentiment of her earlier observations, I add, “I can’t leave her a widow on our wedding day.”

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“Wife? Wedding day? No way, man!” He peers around me, his eyes finding Esmeralda. I should invite him and his friends inside, offer them beers and food. But to hell with that. Esmeralda and I were in the middle of something too good to interrupt. And it’s not like he and the gang are here solely to socialize.

The blonde beauty glides up next to me, and I wrap my arm around her. “Nick, this is my wife, Esmeralda. Angel, this is Nick.”

She offers her hand to shake, and I feel inordinately jealous, even though I know I have nothing to worry about.

“Nick,” she says politely. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

We stand in silence for a long moment as a cooling breeze finally breaks the heat of the afternoon. “Well, just wanted to drop by and make sure everything’s okay. And get the official word that you’re cool with what we’re up to tonight?” He points over his shoulder towards the caravan of cars behind him, and I wave.

The occupants of the vehicles wave back, a strange assortment of folks, many wearing alien-related shirts and gear, including some antennae hair bands. Esmeralda shields her eyes, studying them curiously.

“Yeah, of course. Do your thing.”

“Thanks, Reese and Mrs. Reese. Do something about your forehead, dude, before you

bleed out.”

“Roger that. Good luck on the hunt.”

When the front door closes, Esmeralda searches my face quizzically. “What are they hunting for?”

“Little green men.”

She puts her hand on her hip. “Are you back to making fun of me again? No, seriously.”

“Seriously,” I say, letting her go and removing my shirt with another groan. “Nevada’s famous for extraterrestrial activity. Hell, even I’ve seen some wild, inexplicable shit in the night sky. Alright, nurse, ready to have at it?”

“Where was that first-aid kit again?”

“In the bathroom medicine cabinet down the hallway. You want me to show you?”

She shakes her head, concern still flooding her face. “No, have a seat. I’ll be right back.”

I sigh contentedly moments later as my good luck charm works her magic on my back. Her delicate fingertips brush over my flesh, igniting sparks of desperate need. She takes her time, gently working, minimizing the pain with her careful movements while ensuring clean wounds. Yearning floods me, dangerous and primal. My balls tingle at the tender caresses, my cock painfully pressed against the zipper of my jeans. I hunger for Esmeralda. My mind devolving to one primal want.

“Your forehead now,” she says, coming to sit next to me on the bench seat of the

rustic dining room table, drawing as close as she can. Our legs are in the way. I can tell it frustrates her as she leans into me, her soft breath warming my face. Esmeralda's lilac fragrance wraps around me as her fingers sensually dance over my flesh, and I come unwound from the inside out. Her lips are mere inches from mine. The air thick and heavy between us, crackling with electricity and so much fucking longing.

"There," she says, thick-voiced as she stares into my face. "I won't put a bandage on your forehead, but be careful with it."

I nod, eyes absorbing her thirstily. Her nostrils flare, and her eyes darken a whole shade, going from turquoise to teal. She licks her full, lush bottom lip, and I can't take anymore. Grabbing her around the waist, I pull her into my lap, straddling me.

"Oh," she says, a tiny puff of air escaping her lips as she shuffles forward in my lap, pressing her sex against my painful, throbbing arousal.

"How real do you want this marriage to be, Angel?" My heart pounds against my chest the way my dick throbs against the moist heat between her legs. My hands find her skirt, shimmying it over her ample hips some more, allowing her legs to part more, and her pussy to hug my need.

"What do you mean?" She stammers, her cheeks aglow.

"You know exactly what I mean, Esmeralda."

"But we barely know each other."

"I'm trying to change that," I retort, gripping and massaging her hips, grinding her against me hard.

“And we live halfway across the country from each other,” she stammers, her breath catching in her throat as I feather her neck in kisses, allowing the tip of my tongue to hungrily drag across her dusty, sweaty skin.

“That’s easy enough to fix, especially since we’re now each other’s wealth.”

Her breath catches in her throat as my hands go to her breasts, teasing her pebbled nipples through the fabric of her lacy blouse and bra. “But do we even share the same interests or wants for the future?” she whispers, her voice melting as my thumbs tease her tits.

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“We both want kids and each other. That’s obvious as fuck. We both like steak and eggs for breakfast, coffee and cream, and wild adventures. We want to find your treasure and figure out how to make this damn ranch pay for itself. And we both want to lift whatever curse that’s got cattle herds dying, droughts persisting, and old barns crashing down on our heads. Isn’t that enough?”

“I don’t know.”

“And,” I add, fingering her wedding band as I shower her hand and fingers in slow, sensual swipes of my lips and tongue. “I belong to you the way you belong to me. Let’s make it official.” I inch my head back, eyeing her face.

She opens her mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. Her eyes are locked on my lips.

“You are so fucking beautiful.” My throat feels tight, my voice in imminent danger of cracking. The backs of my eyes sting, overcome by this precious treasure. She’s more than I’ve ever wanted, more than I deserve. But it doesn’t temper my fierce need to claim her—rise to the occasion, become a better man, and do whatever it takes to keep her.

“Let me please you,” I beg. “Show you just how goddamned compatible we are. Please.”

Chapter Eleven

ESMERALDA

Let me please you. Show you just how goddamned compatible we are. Please.

Desire sizzles through me, the juncture between my legs tight and painful, pressed against his rock-hard dick. I can't think. I can't breathe, and my heart races. Every part of me distilled down to need.

"Yes," I whisper as his large, rough hand slides beneath the hem of my skirt, searing the flesh of my outer thigh. My pussy pulses, needy and demanding, impatient to feel this handsome cowboy's fingers at my pleasure center.

At the top of my thigh, he follows the crease down until his fingers dance over my moist panties. Reese groans, closing his eyes as his thumb rubs over the silky, wet fabric. "You're so fucking wet, Angel. Is this for me?"

I nod, biting my bottom lip, arms wrapped around his neck and hips sliding back and forth over his erection. My mind feels fuzzy, driven solely by hunger. Am I really contemplating fucking a man I met less than twenty-four hours ago? No, I'm considering loving the husband the Universe unexpectedly blessed me with.

"Yes, Reese. I don't know what in the hell you do to me. But I can't lie. I want you desperately. Almost losing you in the barn made that painfully clear. I don't ever want to feel regret like that again." My voice trembles, and his eyes melt.

"What regret, Angel?"

"The regret of not making my feelings clear to you."

"Fuck," he growls, pushing my panties frantically to the side and sliding his thick pointer finger through my folds. "How have I gone from the worst night of my life to the best day of my existence in less than twenty-four hours?"

“But you’re covered in cuts and bruises,” I remind him, whimpering as his finger slides back and forth, teasing my pussy lips as his thumb finds my clit, lazily circling the greedy nub. “How can this possibly be the best day of your existence?”

“It is now that I’m covered in my wife’s honey,” he answers darkly, the sound of that word “wife,” lighting up my whole body as his finger inches into my pussy, moaning at its feel.

“Yes,” I whisper, gasping as his cream-slick digit works my channel, his breath growing harder and faster. His mouth covers mine, drowning out my whimpers and tiny cries with his tongue as his finger takes me higher. He adds a second, the perfect stretch, as he finds my G-spot, curling his finger back towards himself, a delicious, delirious sliding motion that has my hips arching nearer him and my head falling back.

I gasp in ecstasy, pleasure heightened by the naughtiness of Reese simultaneously being a near stranger and my husband. There’s something so delectably forbidden about it. I can’t get enough.

“Yes,” I beg, falling in love with his intuitive, skillful touch. As if he’s reading my mind through my flesh, his eyes locked on my every reaction.

“God, Esmeralda, you feel like paradise. I need inside you so badly.”

“Yes, Reese, please. Take me.”

“Not until you drench my hand, Angel. I won’t give you this cock or make you forget your goddamned name until you cover my palm in your sweet cum.”

“But I can’t do that,” I protest through pants, my eyes closed and my body free floating. “I’ve never squirted in my life.”

His touch grows more insistent, his fingers stroking me slick and swollen and ready to explode. “Trust me, and relax.” He covers my neck in kisses, biting and nipping at me as his tongue traces desire to my shoulders and then lower.

“Lift up your blouse,” he commands, his skillful fingers pushing me closer and closer to the edge. I ride his hand unrepentantly. He uses his other to stroke my pearl. Nothing exists beyond the bliss of my husband working me into a messy frenzy. His mouth hungrily finds my nipple, biting and teasing it through the lace of my bra. His hot breath sends shivers up and down my spine as he sucks and licks the lace, teasing and twisting me between his teeth until I scream.

It echoes through the room, my pussy tightening and spasming around his fingers as the pace of his other hand increases, sliding rapidly over my nub, matching the intensity of my need with his fast-paced motions.

“I can’t wait to bury my head in your pussy, wife, and eat you the fuck out.” He pulls his hand from my pussy, bringing it to his mouth and licking his arousal-shiny fingers clean. “Just like I thought. You taste like heaven.”

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Our eyes meet, and the world stops as I claim his mouth, tasting myself on his soft lips. His hand slides between us again, filling my swollen channel as he finds the spot, stroking and caressing me until I pant like I'm hyperventilating. My pussy squeezes him as I yell, drenching his hand and milking his fingers.

"Yes," he growls against my nipple, licking, lapping, and working me through my orgasm until I collapse in his embrace, still straddling his hard rod.

"What else can I give you, Angel?" he asks darkly as my breathing slows, still lost in the grip of heady satisfaction.

"I need your cock, Reese. I need you so badly I can't even think. What are you doing to me?"

"The same thing you're doing to me," he confesses, his hands struggling to unbutton his Wranglers. The whir of his zipper awakens dangerous, desperate needs. He slides down his boxers, and I steal a glance at his huge, taut cock. Straight and thick, an angry-looking vein runs down the side, his head dripping with pre-cum. I want so badly to taste him, but I'm still rubbery and jointless from coming so hard, and he clearly has other things on his mind.

One large hand grips my hip possessively while the other guides his silky, smooth head through my folds. "I'm clean, and I have condoms ... if I can get my head on straight enough to remember where they are or how to use them."

"I'm clean, too, and I'm on the pill. So, unless you feel like straightening your head, you don't have to."

Reese's expressive green eyes search mine. "Just so we're clear. It's been a long, long time since I did this. And sex isn't something I take lightly. Neither is being married to you, though I know you say it's all about collateral. But once I bury my cock in your juicy pussy, especially raw, I'm claiming you, Esmeralda. So, if you're feeling something else, you need to tell me now."

Tears sting the backs of my eyes as I palm his square-cut jawline, fingertips dancing over the soft, silky hair of his beard. My mind is a whirlwind, mystified at how fast all of this is happening and feeling down to my bones the rightness of it. "I want a husband, not a lover. A father to my children, not a good time. It's been ages for me, too. And I never in my wildest dreams saw this coming. But, yes, Reese, I want you to claim me. Make me yours."

Grabbing my hips with both hands, he slides me over his rod, inch by inch, filling me until I gasp for air.

"Goddamn," he grunts, squeezing my hips and waist until I'm sure they'll bruise, his head cocked to the side in concentration. "You feel way too good. Fuck, I can barely—" He breathes hard, burying his head at the nape of my neck, his hot, moist exhales sending delicious tremors of want up and down my core.

He lifts his head, his eyes meeting mine, and I grip his neck firmly, raising my hips before sliding back down over his thick perfection. He groans, his eyes rolling back in his head as I work my hips back and forth, playing with the depth and the angle as his muscular hips thrust up into me. His cock feels huge, stretching me to the point of a delectable pain. It drives my hips downwards as he guides my motions with his massive hands.

"You're so warm and wet, and you want me so fucking much. I can feel it the way you're gripping my cock, and how your pussy walls flutter around me. Like you're trying to suck me in."

“Yes,” I whimper, exhaling sharply as I lower my hips over him again, cock stretching me taut, as my breath shudders beneath the weight of our building tension.

The burly cowboy’s eyes pool as he catches my gaze, swirling with lust, tenderness, and devotion. Spitting on his hand, he finds my clit, circling it with his slick thumb. My hips buck, and my channel convulses, my focus centered on the feel of his fingers inching me toward total surrender. The kind that’ll have me sharing his bed, home, and heart for as long as I breathe. I didn’t know feelings like this could prove so powerful or so sudden.

“Come for me,” he urges, deep-voiced and powerful. “I need to feel you shatter around me, and I need to fill you up to the brim.”

“Yes, please,” I beg, sliding over his slick girth. He angles my hips with his free hand so that his head stimulates my G-spot with every pass until I orgasm so hard my screams echo through the ranch house. Grabbing my shoulders, he thrusts into me hard, growling and bestial, his movements charged with desperate desire.

“Angel,” he yells, releasing into me. As warm waves of cum flood me, he grips my back, burying his head against my shoulder. Locked in his steel grip, I tremble as his cock continues throbbing his release. I melt so completely in his arms that I no longer know where I end, and he begins.

“Damn,” he says, an ear-to-ear grin on his face as he caresses my back, wrapping his arms tightly around me and squeezing me against his chest. “Is this real or a dream? Because if I’m somehow unconscious, imagining all of this, don’t ever wake me.”

“No, it’s as real and as raw as it gets, Reese. But that doesn’t mean I can wrap my head around it any better.” I shake my head, still marveling at the wild unfolding of today’s events, as I eye my wedding band, my thumbs happily covering his dimples.

“Is that enough collateral for you?” he asks gruffly, eyeing me. “Because I just gave you everything I have to give.”

“It was incredible, Reese. I loved every single, blissful second of it.”

“Good, because that’s your new daily norm. So, you better get used to it.”

My fingers dip down over his back, and he inhales sharply. “Oh, shoot, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hit your hurt places.”

“It’s okay. But it’s got me thinking about this unbelievable day. Angel, we could very well both be dead beneath the rubble of the barn right now if it wasn’t for two back-to-back miracles—you finding one hole to escape through and me another. Both perfectly sized for our bodies. Talk about mind-boggling shit.”

“I know.” I rub my hands over his beard, soaking him up with my eyes, really allowing myself to absorb his handsomeness for the first time without my shields up or anything between us. I giggle as realization hits me. “You are filthy dirty, and so am I. We need to clean up badly.”

He nods, grinning. “I’ll get your luggage from the car and then show you upstairs to our bedroom and bathroom. I hope you’re okay with a joint shower because I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

“You read my mind, husband.”

Chapter Twelve

ESMERALDA

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:22 am

I awaken with a start, lying in bed for one unfamiliar moment before my mind reminds me where I am. Gunner Ridge Ranch, sleeping in my husband's bed. Husband. I still can't wrap my head around that amazing word.

Memories of Reese wash back over me. Of his burnished copper hair, his simmering emerald eyes, his deliciously kissable lips, and those hands that made me a believer. In the kitchen, in the shower, in his big bed. Never have I had so much mind-blowing sex in my life. Never have I lost count of my orgasms.

I stretch, feeling the yummy sore muscles I'd almost forgotten I have. Remembering how I got them makes my cheeks sizzle. Straddling him bare-chested on the kitchen bench. His thick cock deep in my pussy, unraveling my pleasure as I gripped his neck, screaming his name. And in the shower, when he dropped to his knees, eating me out from behind until I begged him to fuck me.

He stood, wrapping my hair possessively around his hand, tugging it lightly as he slid into my swollen channel. He railed me until I could barely breathe or think, heart racing behind my ribs.

But nothing beat the bedroom when he kept his promise, burying his head in my pussy until I flew among the stars. After so much over-the-top ecstasy, he turned tender. Wrapping me in his robust arms, he made love to me slowly and ardently, drawing me into a kind of intimacy I didn't know was possible.

Greedy, needy, and already throbbing at these naughty thoughts, I reach for my sexy cowboy in the big California king. Only his side is empty and cold.

My stomach twists as I wonder if his injuries are worse than he admitted. Maybe the pain's too much for him. Clicking the lamp on the nightstand on my side of the bed, I rub my face with my hands, yawning. Gliding out of bed, I sort through my suitcase, finding lacy hot pink panties and a lightweight Juicy track set. I hurry into the clothes, surprised yet again by the chill of a high desert night.

Pulling on soft, pink, fluffy socks, I pad downstairs, finding the cowboy in the kitchen, bent over the treasure map sprawled on the table.

His eyebrows arch as I enter the dining room, a contented smile capturing his face. "Trouble sleeping?"

I hug myself with my arms. "Only after I woke and realized you weren't there."

He leans back, looking touched by my words. "You have no idea how long I've waited to have someone care about whether I'm in bed."

"Me, too." I sit down in his lap, and he wraps his arm around me, kissing my cheek.

"Can I get you warm milk or something?"

"No, just your warm body, Cowboy."

"Done," he says, rubbing his eyes. "But first, I've got a few things I'm puzzling over with the map."

I savor the warmth of his skin as I rest my head on his shoulder. His spicy sandalwood cologne wraps around me, and I feel safer and more secure than I ever have before.

His eyes rove over the map, keeping his fingers a few millimeters from the fabric,

never actually touching it. He points to a portion in the upper lefthand corner and the initials 'TEH.' "See this cube-looking thing next to the letters? That has to be the old barn that tried to kill us."

"That's right. Now it makes sense why there are no windows."

"Right, and there are few structures apart from this house and that barn that would've been around when Hayes was a ranch hand here. So, we've got that part figured out. Call it the beginning of the treasure hunt." He traces a line made in words, adding, "See where it says 'Ortus ad inferos S— C— stock'?" I nod against his chest. "I'm assuming this leads to the next part of the hunt. But what in the hell does that mean?"

Staring up at his handsome face, I answer, "'Ortus ad inferos' is Latin for 'sunrise to hell.'"

"Sunrise to hell." He frowns. "Well, that sounds ominous."

"I know."

"So, you mean to tell me part of this map's in Latin? For God's sake. What kind of treasure hunt is this?"

"A real one." I squint, drawing closer to the map and the part he intensely regards.

"Sunrise to hell? What could it possibly mean?"

"Grandpa and I could never figure that out. Maybe something to do with the heat of the day?"

"Maybe," he says, puzzling over the fabric, his finger still hovering. "But that doesn't get us far."

I scrutinize the map, willing it to unlock its secrets as I've done a thousand times with Grandpa. It doesn't work, and for once, I realize I don't care. In fact, I honestly feel a little jealous of how Reese is obsessing over it instead of resting warm and sexy by my side.

I lick my lips. "We've never been able to figure it out. Maybe it says 'Santa Claus stock'? Or 'Santa Clara'? That's my grandpa's and my best guesses."

Reese grimaces. "Nope, not Santa Claus or Santa Clara. Hold on." He slides me gently off his lap onto the bench seat and jumps up, beelining for the kitchen. Rifling through what appears to be a miscellaneous drawer, he retrieves a pair of black-framed glasses. "Don't make fun of me for wearing these, Angel. They make me look like a goddamned geek."

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He puts them on, and I couldn't disagree more, hungrily eyeing him and licking my bottom lip. "I think they make you look like Clark Kent."

Leaning forward to scrutinize the map and wrapping his arm back around me, he grumbles, "You can be my Lois Lane any time." Squinting, face serious, he asks, "Could it be 'Saint Croix stock' maybe?" He draws even closer, his nose almost touching the fabric.

"Grandpa and I have tossed around so many ideas at this point ..."

"Not Croix, Crispin. C-R-I-S-P-E-N. It's spelled wrong, though. Look that up on your phone, Angel."

"C-R-I-S-P-E-N," I repeat.

"Saint Crispin, with an 'i' instead of an 'e.'"

I Google it, and my eyes scan the results. Sure enough, he's right. "How did you know the spelling was off?"

He shrugs. "I'm the backslider in a long line of devoted Catholics. They've got all their saints and stuff. So, believe me, I've seen the name before."

"I'm impressed, Mr. Gunner," I remark, eyeing him.

He chuckles. "There's a lot you still have to learn about me, Angel. I'll try to make sure it's all good. Now, how about those results?"

I summarize them as I read out loud. “Saint Crispin and the Crispinians. That’s a mouthful. They were Christian martyrs and patron saints of leather workers, cobblers, and shoemakers. Huh.”

Reese’s head pops up. “Come again?”

“Christian martyrs?—”

“No, the last part. Did you say, shoemakers?”

“Yes, and there’s also a reference in here to Shakespeare’s Henry V,” I add, feeling like I’m grasping at straws.

“Nope, the shoe part. That’s it.” His eyes glow with an uncharacteristic excitement that makes my heart race.

“What is it, Reese?”

“Shoe stock. Shoe lumber. Shoe wood, maybe?”

My pulse increases, heartened by the progress.

“There’s something I have to show you.” He runs his hand over his beard, producing a scratchy masculine sound that makes me clench my legs together. Will I ever get enough of this rugged cowboy?

Surging to his feet, he paces back and forth. “Stock can be wood, right? And wood can be a tree?”

I shake my head, uncertain what he’s talking about. “What do you mean stock like a tree?”

“Like the stock of a gun made from the wood of a tree. Oh, Esmeralda, you’re going to love this. We have to go. Now.”

“What?”

He continues pacing, the dining area’s wood floor squeaking as his cowboy boots hammer to and fro. “This map keeps getting better and better. Motherfucker. To think generations of Gunners sat on a treasure without even knowing it. This is wild.”

In an instant, the exhausted-looking cowboy transforms into a revitalized man driven by a disease that’s long fueled grandpa and me—gold fever.

“We have to get a move on if we’re going to make it there before sunrise,” he mutters under his breath. “Angel, would you mind packing us some provisions and drinks for a little road trip?”

“Right now?”

He nods firmly. “Yes, I’ve got to show you this.” He beams, glancing at the map again. “Think camping-type stuff. I’ll work on all the tools we need: shovels, a pickaxe, a tent, sleeping bags, all of that.”

Elation thrills through me. Shovels? Grandpa and I only ever dreamed of being close enough to dig. My heart races, and I wish I could call him with an update, but a quick glance at the clock reveals it’s only a little after three a.m. West Coast time. Too early for the nursing home, apart from emergencies. Curious beyond measure about what Reese wants to show me, I open the fridge, grabbing things to pack.

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The cowboy strides purposefully back into the room, setting a cooler on the ground next to me. “Here you go, Angel. There should be ice in the freezer you can use to keep everything cold.”

His mouthwatering face radiates excitement as he leans down to kiss me. “Just so we’re clear, and no matter what we find today, Angel, you will always be my greatest treasure.”

My eyes follow him back through the kitchen and living room out the front door, devouring his round, tight ass in a pair of Wranglers, his back muscles bare and straining with no shirt and only the bandages I secured earlier. Fanning myself, my mind wanders to our earlier delights, understanding exactly what Reese means by the last statement. Gold or not, I’m here for this sexy, amazing man.

Chapter Thirteen

REESE

“No luck finding Coast to Coast?” I ask as Esmeralda turns the dial through thick auditory waves of static back to our station. Elvis’s rich, dark voice croons “Can’t Help Falling in Love.”

“Nope, it appears we’re still stuck on love songs.”

“Perfect. After all, you’re about to fall head over heels for me, Treasure. Just you wait and see.”

I side-eye Esmeralda, watching her forehead knit as she puzzles out my words. “After the kitchen, the shower, and the bed? This is what you think will make me fall for you?” she asks breathlessly.

I chuckle, reaching over to grab her hand. Bringing it to my mouth, I kiss and lick each finger with care, spending extra time on the one holding my band until a little moan escapes her lips. “Would it really take that much to fall in love with me?” I counter, raising an eyebrow.

Her cheeks burn, and she quirks her adorable, kissable mouth. I’m ravenous again for this little, tantalizing wife of mine. “Let’s just say there’s nothing on that treasure map that’ll outdo your earlier performances.” Her voice sounds lazy and seductive.

“You have no idea. That was just a taste of the ways I plan on claiming and pleasuring you,” I promise with a wink.

Her breath catches in her throat, and I’m right back to the kitchen bench with her straddling me, buried to the hilt in her sweet, juicy pussy. This woman will be my fucking undoing. And every moment will be well worth it.

She crosses her legs, shifting uncomfortably and squeezing her legs together, her cheeks burning.

I chuckle, knowing my little angel is ready for more devilish things. Too bad we’re hurtling through the dark of a Nevada night into the middle of nowhere.

“You know, there are some amazing hot springs on this property. How do you feel about skinny dipping?”

Esmeralda smiles languidly, her big turquoise bedroom eyes simmering. “Hot springs sound good with the chill in the air, although I don’t know how I feel about being

naked. Especially after you gave those UFO hunters permission to be on your property.”

“Shit, I almost forgot about that. We’ve packed so much into less than twenty-four hours that I can’t keep it all straight. But don’t you worry, Treasure. Those extraterrestrial people always hang out in the same damn spot. Far away from the hot springs. You’ll see.”

“I’ll see?” She shifts again, eyeing me curiously. “Tonight?”

“More than likely. Although three’s pretty late—or early, depending on your perspective—for them. I’d wager we’ll only see them if there’s been strange activity in the skies.”

“So, that’s really something you see a lot of around here?” she asks, a shiver in her voice.

“Yes, ma’am, along with the occasional cattle death and mutilation. ’Course, the mass die-off I told you about before was likely related to the developer, not little gray men. But I wouldn’t totally discount those motherfuckers. They’ve caused enough trouble to have men in black out here a couple of times.”

“Men in black,” she huffs. “Now, I know you’re lying. Are tall tales the norm for you?”

“There isn’t a rancher in Nevada without his fair share of tall tales. But I swear to you, Angel, that’s the honest truth. I don’t mean to scare you, but you asked.”

“Do you think the UFO activity has anything to do with Area Fifty-One?”

“Dunno.” I shrug. “That’s pretty far from here. All I can say is this has been the

reality on our ranch for as long as I can remember. But don't worry, wife, I'll keep you safe. No matter what."

She smiles, her face relaxing, and I feel like the toughest guy on the planet. I could get used to this.

"Enough of the spooky stuff," she says, shaking her head. "Back to the treasure. I'm dying to see what you want to show me. I just hope it's not a nothing-burger. Grandpa and I have had too many of those to count on the trail of the El Cortez treasure."

"I don't think it's a nothing-burger, but we'll see. That said, I am kicking myself for the whole gambling my dually thing. What in the hell was I thinking? I could've thrown the cabover camper on the back, and we would've been perfectly comfortable tonight."

Esmeralda eyes me. "I still don't get how you gambled vehicles at a casino table anyway. I thought that kind of stuff only happens in private poker tournaments behind closed doors."

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“A lot happens that probably shouldn’t late night at the Craps table in rural Nevada. Obviously, you’re betting against the house with the game. But then, the spectators at the table indulge in private bets about potential outcomes. At some point, vehicle keys ended up in the mix.”

“I know you say this kind of behavior isn’t normal for you, Reese. But as your wife, I won’t put up with it. You were downright reckless last night, and I could never live like that.”

“Angel, I couldn’t agree with you more,” I say, leaning forward and slowing the vehicle as the road grows rougher and bumpier. I haven’t been looking forward to this part of the trip in the old Caddy. “I about gave myself a stomach full of ulcers last night. But I’ll never regret it because how else would we have met and married so quickly?”

“You have a point,” she says, smiling affectionately and raising her hand to stroke my bearded cheek. “But never again. Promise?”

“Promise.”

“The same goes for rifling through dilapidated barns about to crumble around us,” she adds, still palming my cheek. I lean into her hand, turning my head to kiss her soft flesh.

“Oh, come on, Treasure, are you really going to cramp my style like that?”

“Yes, I am,” she proclaims, though her lips still hold their tantalizing smile, warming

me from the inside out.

“Good thing I put the top up. It’s chilly out here tonight.”

“Yes, it is. But I bet the top down would afford impressive views of the stars right now,” she says, craning her neck to look out the passenger window.

“Just wait ’til you see where we’re going, Angel. I bet you’ll have clear views of your home from the summit.”

Esmeralda chuckles, “Clear views of Oklahoma? Now I know you’ve lost your mind.”

“No, of heaven,” I flirt, sliding my fingers between hers, savoring every moment of invading her space and feeling her warm flesh on mine. What is it about this woman? Even the most innocent gestures make me feel more alive than I ever have before. She magnifies my senses and emotions, bringing the world to vibrant, startling life.

“Heaven? Alright, it’s official. You have lost your mind,” she snickers, her cheeks glowing.

“No, ma’am, but I have lost my heart to the most beautiful woman to ever walk this planet.”

Her fingers caress and make love to mine. “You silly man,” she cheerfully scolds.

“You better get used to my verbal adoration because it’s not going away anytime soon,” I warn.

“I suppose I could learn to live with it,” she retorts, trying to make her voice sound begrudging and failing miserably.

My mind wanders back, still struck by so many blessings in so little time. “Do you realize that at this time yesterday, you still didn’t know I existed?”

She shakes her head. “You’re right, and now all I can think about is your existence and how much you already mean to me.”

Her words turn my insides warm and gooey, like a fresh-baked batch of fudge. I’m not used to this kind of constant tenderness and affection, but I’ll do my darnedest to acclimate to it ...and deserve it.

Whitney Houston’s “I Will Always Love You” blasts through the radio, and Esmeralda and I both laugh. This matchmaking radio station.

Suddenly, it hits me. “Have you noticed how there are absolutely no ads on this station? Just endless songs?”

She nods. “Endless love songs. It’s as strange as it gets. If I didn’t know better, I’d say the car is attempting to matchmake us.”

“That’s exactly what I was over here thinking.” I chuckle. “I thought only VW Bugs could do that.”

“Oh, Herbie! I haven’t thought about the love bug in forever.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you. Do you always go by Esmeralda, or do you have any nicknames?”

“Apart from Angel and Treasure?” she teases. “Well, Grandpa calls me Snickers, but I never want to hear that come out of your mouth. It’s something dumb from my childhood.”

“Snickers? Why?”

“Because I used to snicker at all of his jokes, no matter how silly, and I also couldn’t get enough of the candy bar.”

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“And do you still like Snickers?”

“Absolutely. It’s my favorite candy bar.”

I add, “Which logically means your favorite DQ Blizzard is Snickers, too, right?”

“Yep, you’ve figured me out. How about you?”

“Snickers are fine. I pretty much love anything with chocolate and peanuts. But the caramel can be a little much. So, I’m more of a Reese’s Pieces kind of guy. No pun intended. And I can get behind the peanut butter cups, too.”

“Every time I think about Reese’s, my mind jumps straight to E.T.,” she confesses. “And now you. Did your parents name you after the candy?”

“Hell, nah. We’ve already been over this. The river.”

“I know. I know.” I laugh. “But I couldn’t let that coincidence go without asking.”

“Fair enough. By the way, E.T. was one of my favorite movies as a kid, and it didn’t feel too far off being out here in the middle of Nowhere, Nevada. You see weird stuff sometimes. Things you can’t account for. Stuff that gets your mind questioning whether we’re the only critters in the universe.”

Esmeralda looks pensive for a moment. “I think there must be tons of other lifeforms out there. But I’m not sure if or when we want to actually meet them. Or maybe more accurately, if or when they want to meet us.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“So, do you have any nicknames I need to know about?”

I chuckle, weighing in my head what I want her to know about me. That said, she told me her silly childhood nickname, so I might as well confess mine. “Well, Grandpa called me Buster. So did a lot of people around Foxfire. It refers to my flawless childhood record as a Mutton Buster. But as with Snickers, I never want to hear it come out of your mouth.”

Esmeralda arches her eyebrows. “So, you participated in the rodeo as a kid?”

“Sure did and went on to compete in some local events as an adult, too. Still do on occasion, but I’ve got a bum knee.”

“Did you hurt it rodeoing?”

“Yep. Came off a horse wrong for steer wrestling, and the joint’s never been the same. The barn this afternoon didn’t help it. How about you? Is there any cowgirl behind your fancy jacket, boots, and hat?”

“I can ride, if that’s what you mean. And sometimes, I used to participate in rodeo parades with my mother. But I never really got into barrel racing or trying for rodeo queen. Not my thing.”

“Well, you’re my rodeo queen,” I croon.

“And you’re obviously my hopeless romantic.”

“Guilty as charged ... but only for you.”

I stroke his beard, loving this side of the rugged rancher. “Back to the whole rodeo queen thing. I’ve always been a bit of a Tom girl, really. Pushing boundaries, trying to keep up with the boys. That kind of thing. I have three older brothers, which encouraged that fixation. And then, once I got older and Grandpa enlisted my help for the treasure hunt, I became an avid reader and researcher.”

“Tell me more about how you and your Grandpa researched the map.”

“Well, the hardest part was finding Gunner Ridge Ranch. I can’t tell you how long and arduous that research was. Atfirst, we thought there was no hope. After all, nothing else in my great-grandfather’s papers identified the location. But as I dug deeper into Tyler Eldon Hayes’s past, I uncovered his birth certificate, death certificate, and a newspaper article from theFoxfire Valley Chronicleabout a bar fight involving him.”

“Foxfire Valley Chronicle? Never heard of it.”

“It’s long been defunct. Anyway, from there, it wasn’t too hard to piece together which ranch Hayes worked at. There were less than a handful back then. Once we had a general location, Grandpa and I poured over historic newspapers and maps to identify locations and landmarks. That’s about the time I ran across a real gem. Discussion in theChronicleabout the fabled El Cortez treasure with mention of Hayes. He may have been a ranch hand on your family’s homestead, but he was also involved in various archaeological digs as a shovel bum. Seems like he was looking for his golden ticket. But what clinched Gunner Ridge Ranch as the spot were a couple of fascinating topographical anomalies that we found noted on old WPA maps.”

“Angel, it sounds like you and your grandpa have already done more than enough work for the both of us. That’s impressive.”

“That. Exactly. I haven’t even mentioned the research that went into better understanding the El Cortez treasure and what it might include. I learned Spanish online, pouring over historical documents from North America’s earliest explorers. But even then, I had to hire a translator to assist with an obscure document located in Mexico City. One of the many books banned by the Vatican in the sixteenth century and burned en masse. Fortunately, one original copy survived. It’s the only document I’ve found, apart from the newspaper article, that mentions the El Cortez treasure by name. Otherwise, it’s as if the trove was wiped from history.”

We pull up to the spot, still swarming with UFO hunters. I park the car next to a monstrosity that can’t be done justice by the black of night, rounding the car to open the passenger door just as Esmeralda clicks and opens it on her own.

“Hey, hold it, wife,” I scold. “That’s my job.” I stand in front of the door, doing my best to look upset until she closes it again. “Thank you,” I smile, opening it for her and offering her my hand.

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“You really take this gentleman stuff seriously,” she mutters, trying to sound annoyed. But the smile on her face tells me she enjoys the treatment.

Nick clamps a hand on my shoulder as he and his crew surround us. “Didn’t expect to see you and your lovely bride out here. Isn’t this your honeymoon?”

“Yes, it is, which means I need to kindly ask you to wrap it up for the night, so me and my wife can have a little privacy.”

“Sure thing, man. We were already packing up.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Not much activity tonight?”

“It got real interesting for a while. Lots of strange stuff. But the sky’s been quiet for at least a good hour now.”

I can’t help but notice how Esmeralda’s face relaxes at the end of his statement.

“Are you UFO-watching, too?” Nick asks, his voice incredulous.

“Nope, just looking for the perfect spot to watch the sunrise.”

“Nice,” he says, nodding. “You couldn’t have picked a better location. Be sure to look out that way.” He points. “As the sun comes up, you’ll get quite a show.”

“That’s what we’re counting on. Need a hand with anything?” I ask.

“Nope, we’ve got it covered. A few more minutes, and we’ll be out of your hair.”

Chapter Fourteen

ESMERALDA

I watch curiously as the UFO hunters pack their gear, Reese chatting affably with them about things they’ve seen in the night sky recently, then sports, and finally ranching and livestock-related stuff. Rodeo figures predominantly in their talk of sports as I admire my towering husband, likable and begrudgingly kind to everyone.

“Bye, y’all. Have a good night and a safe drive.” Reese waves as the caravan of vans departs. Turning to me, he wraps his arms around me, resting his chin atop mine. “How are you holding up, Treasure? Staying warm enough?”

“Yes, husband. But I still don’t understand what we’re doing out here.”

He chuckles. “You’ll know at sunrise. Now, how about we get back in the Caddy and see about making it as comfortable as we can for the rest of the night? If we recline the seats, it should help. I’ve got a couple of sleeping bags we can share. We can zip them together, making one big enough for the both of us because for my part”—he leans forward, whispering against the shell of my ear—“my plan for tonight is to stay warm inside that lovely pussy of yours.”

“Mmm,” I moan, the juncture between my legs throbbing at his words. I don’t know how my hunger for this man can be so insatiable. “As long as my body’s pressed against your warm flesh, with your big, strong arms around me, I know I’ll stay toasty.”

“That’s right, wife,” he whispers, sending shivers down my spine and need to my lower core as his lips brush over my ear and neck, followed by naughty swipes of his

tongue. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to get enough of you,” he confesses as I bring my hand up to palm his cheek, giggling as his tongue descends to my décolletage. My nipples pebble with anticipation.

“Treasure, wake up. You have to see this,” Reese’s deep voice urges next to me.

I snuggle deeper into the sleeping bags, not ready to wake up.

“Esmeralda, you don’t want to miss this?—”

I stretch with a grumpy little moan, not ready to wake up yet.

“Esmeralda, you’re going to miss sunrise if you don’t?—”

I sit up next to the handsome rancher, shocking him into silence with my sudden movement. “Sunrise?” I ask, my mind jolting to life. “I haven’t missed it yet, have I?” I crane my neck to look out the window.

My breath catches in my throat as the towering black form that we parked near last night comes into full view, illuminated by the light of early dawn. “Oh. My. God.”

Reese laughs.

“Oh my God,” I repeat, shaking my head and rubbing my eyes. “I can’t believe this.”

“Yep,” the rancher says with a grin so wide I can hear it in his voice. “Get dressed and come outside. I’ve got coffee ready, sweetened with sugar and cream, although I don’t have all those fancy syrups you like ...yet.”

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I speed into my clothes, jacket, and boots. Scrambling out of the Cadillac, I stare dumbfounded at a massive dead cottonwood, its branches filled with pairs of shoes tied together by the laces and thrown over the branches.

“Are you kidding me? An actual shoe tree. Seriously?”

“Yes, ma’am. Or ‘St. Crispin stock,’ as your mapmaker put it. Now, we just have to figure out what ‘sunrise to hell’ means.”

“It sounds ominous,” I say, a shiver running through me.

Reese hands me a thermos of coffee. “Guess we’ll find out soon enough.”

As the sky brightens and the last strains of darkness flee from the sun’s rays, it emerges brilliant and glowing, warming every inch of the land it crawls over. My eyes dart to the spot Nick pointed out last night, wondering what’s so special about it. I see nothing, still shrouded in darkness.

“So, I have to ask this question for the sake of due diligence. How long do you actually think the shoe tree has been here? I mean, lots of that footwear looks relatively new.”

“Fair question,” Reese says. “Long as I can remember, and Grandpa had a couple of funny stories from his childhood about it. All I can say for sure is that it’s been dead a long time, and people still make pilgrimages here to throw their shoes in the branches.”

“But why?” It seems like a lot of effort for no reason.

He shrugs, wrapping me tightly in his embrace. I can feel his deep voice vibrating through me. “Tradition, I guess. As the legend goes, the first shoes were those of dead pioneers abandoned in the Bonneville Salt Flats. Scavengers and traders coming through would find and leave them in this tree in case any passersby could use them. There used to be a funny little trading post and pony express station out here, too, though it’s long since been buried by time and decay. Of course, those are recollections of my grandpa, so take them with a grain of salt.”

“Sometimes anecdotal information is the best,” I counter. “Especially local knowledge. After all, you’ve got to figure right or wrong, if it’s been believed for a long enough time, it informed the map that Tyler Eldon Hayes made.”

“Maybe, and I imagine this was a well-known legend back then.”

I continue to watch the sun’s rays creeping over the land, lighting it up in brilliant shades of gold, pink, and orange. The valley behind the shoe tree glows like it’s on fire. All of a sudden, light hits a section of the sagebrush, lighting it up like a glittering, shining beacon of a thousand fractured pieces.

“Look at that,” I whisper.

“Wow,” Reese exclaims on an exhale. “That’s right where Nick was pointing last night. The old ghost town of High Water. What you’re seeing sparkling and shining in the sunlight are thousands of pieces of glass from the old settlement. Everything from window fragments to colored shards from old bottles and medicine containers. Never thought trash could look so pretty.”

The glittering spot transfixes me as Reese’s words slam into me. “Wait, did you call that place High Water?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Sunrise to hell ...” My thoughts race. “Reese, what if the map means ‘sunrise to hell or High Water?’”

“Shit,” he exclaims, excitement edging his voice. “You’re right.” He kisses my cheek exuberantly, letting go of me. “We’ve got to hurry to get down there. It’s at least an hour’s drive by the only roads that access it. And there’s often a crowd down there, so we better get a move on.”

“Another crowd? What are you talking about?”

“Ghost hunters. They swarm rural Nevada like flies, looking for the next Goldfield.”

“Ghost hunters? For a secluded, lonely desert, Foxfire Valley seems to be hopping with people.”

Reese chuckles at my pronouncement, already working to put out the fire where he heated the water for our coffee. He shrugs. “Normal desert rats, you might say. Wait until August when the Burners arrive.”

“Burners?”

“Yeah, the Burning Man Festival. Ever heard of it?”

“I have. But isn’t that more westerly from here?”

“It is,” he confirms. “But Foxfire’s located on one of the direct routes to the Black Rock Desert. So, we get lots of eclectic folks around these parts. Strange costumes, decorated RVs, odd public art displays, fantastic tribal music.”

I chuckle. “Those Burners have nothing on our love song station.”

“Never, Treasure. That radio channel’s all ours. We’ll blare it all the way to Hell or High Water in search of our loot.”

“Deal,” I say, racing towards the convertible to unzip and roll up our sleeping bags.

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“I can pop the top for you, if you’d like? It’ll make your job easier, but it still might be too chilly to travel that way.”

“No need. I agree with your assessment about the chill factor. But later today, I can’t wait to go back into convertible mode and get another load of those expansive Great Basin skies.”

“See,” the rancher observes in rich tones. “You stick with me much longer, and you’ll fall in love with this place. And maybe, by extension, me.”

“Do you think what we did last night and early this morning looks like anything other than the L word?” I tease, my face burning. I’ve never said the word in a romantic sense to anybody before, but I’m shockingly close to it as I eye my handsome husband.

“I know it is for me. But truth be told, Esmeralda, falling for you happened the second time I laid eyes on you.”

“The second time? What about the first?”

“I was too busy processing your over-the-top leather jacket.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “So, you’re telling me my jacket ruined our chance at love at first sight?” I put my hand on my hip.

“It is a lot to take in, even though I love it now like everything about you. But don’t go tricking me into saying something you’re not ready to hear.” His face is serious as

he says it, his eyes dropping to my burning cheeks.

It's on the tip of my tongue. But those words feel sacred to me, something I've never bestowed on anyone. I eye the gold band on my hand as I pack up, and Reese shoves everything in the trunk or back seat. "Has any woman ever worn your ring before, Reese?"

He pauses, eyeing me curiously. "No, Mrs. Gunner. Not a one. Never even looked at an engagement ring before."

"So, this is a first for you?"

"Absolutely, and I hope it's a last for me, too," he intones, his voice warm with emotion.

Chapter Fifteen

REESE

As we drive, Esmeralda holds the map in her lap, scanning it carefully. I glance in her direction expectantly a couple of times before asking, "What do you see, Treasure?"

The Supremes' "Baby Love" plays in the background.

Quirking her mouth, her face stiff with focus, she says, "After the part about the shoe tree and High Water, it says 'donatio mortis causa.'"

"More of that funny Latin stuff?" I scowl.

"Yes, and this part of the map has always scared me."

“Why, Angel?”

“Because it translates as ‘the gift of death.’”

“Uh oh,” I growl under my breath, letting the words sink in. After the brush with the barn, I don’t feel too good about pronouncements like that. “Well, the death part aside, a gift is usually a good thing. Right?”

“Right, but?—”

“Nope, don’t finish that thought. After all, you’re the one who keeps emphasizing the importance of positive thinking. Instead of focusing on what might go wrong, how about more of those positive affirmations or whatever you call them.”

“You’re right,” she replies with a long, anxious exhale that doesn’t match her words. I choose to ignore it. “I’m a lucky girl who the Universe loves. Money comes freely and easily to me. Treasure finds me. So does love.”

My cheeks heat as I point out, “See, what I mean? That’s got to be part of how you found me, right?”

“Right.” She smiles, straightening and throwing her shoulders back with more confidence. “Positive thinking.”

“You know, after we get all this treasure stuff figured out, what would you say about coming off those pills and working on a family together?”

Her eyebrows fly into her hairline at the suggestion, and my stomach knots. I’ve finally taken things too far.

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“But that would make our marriage permanent,” she observes breathlessly.

The words take me back a bit. After all, I kind of assumed after last night and this morning that we were well past the whole temporary thing. “Would it upset you if we started taking our marriage seriously, Esmeralda?” I ask, scrutinizing her face out of the corner of my eye.

She quirks her mouth. “No, but it’s a pretty big move, having kids with someone.”

I nod, teasing, “Are you afraid we wouldn’t make good-looking babies together?”

She laughs. “My no. They’d be adorable with those dimples of yours.”

“Well, they would be if they all looked like you. God help the daughters who take after my side of the family.”

“Daughters, yes. They don’t need facial hair and rugged jawlines. But our sons? I’d want everyone to look like you.”

“Everyone? How many are we having, Treasure?”

“Like I said before. As many as my body feels like making. Could be one. Could be ten. I’ll have to decide as we go along.”

“Fair enough.” I grin, reaching over and squeezing her hand.

Our eyes lock for one heart-stopping moment before she goes back to the map,

concentrating hard against further distraction.

“Here we are,” I say as we pull up to what looks like an empty ocean of sagebrush. I get out, rounding the car quickly to open her door. Esmeralda steps out, immediately noticing the glittering broken glass beneath our feet.

“This is High Water,” I say grimly, putting my hands on my hips. “Or at least what’s left of it. Mind your step again. There are rusty old nails everywhere.”

“Should I worry about rattlesnakes, too?”

“Always in rural Nevada. Sometimes in the suburbs, too.”

“Alright then,” she sighs, choosing her steps carefully.

We spend hours looking through the ruins of the former ghost town, finding more remnants of a settlement the further we walk. Besides pieces of glass, there are empty cans, parts of tools, and even discarded car parts from the earliest days of automobile history. But no sign whatsoever that could match up with the ominous phrase: the gift of death.

By early afternoon, the place swarms with ghost hunters, many of whom I recognize. They snap countless photographs, murmuring in low voices about tragic happenings that could explain a haunting. I talk with a few of them, eavesdropping on their conversations, desperate for anything approaching a clue.

“Hey, Ralph,” I greet, approaching a familiar face wearing a Ghost Hunter shirt. “How’s the paranormal activity today?”

He shrugs. “We’ll have to review our photos and audio later. But apart from a few orbs caught on my digital camera, we’re not finding much.”

“Did you do much research on High Water before heading out here today?”

A gray-haired woman wearing a hot pink shirt and denim shorts chimes in, “I’m Cynthia. I know all about this place and the families who lived here.”

“Have you ever heard of anything that the phrase ‘the gift of death’ might allude to?”

They stare blankly at Esmeralda and me as the blonde slides up next to me, and I wrap my arm around her waist.

“‘The gift of death,’” Cynthia repeats, shaking her head. “Maybe try the cemetery?”

“Which way?” I ask sheepishly, feeling the embarrassment of not knowing my own property better. But I’ve never been much of a ghost town fan, and the cattle grazing is poor here.

“That way,” she points.

“Thank you, ma’am.” I tip my hat.

Esmeralda and I scan the distance to the spot where the woman pointed, squinting and making out a few bone-colored tombstones against the tan and mint of the earth and sage.

“I’m not sure how far the Caddy will make it in that rough terrain, but let’s see how close we can get.”

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A half-hour later, we park on the flattest spot I can find, and Esmeralda and I comb the cemetery, walking out in larger circles with each pass. Looking for anything that sticks out. Anything that could point to the treasure.

“Reese, come here!” Esmeralda calls from a distance, and I bring my hand up to cover my eyes, straining against the sun to see her in the distance.

“Should I bring shovels and gear?” I ask, knowing we won’t be able to get any closer with the car.

“Yes, bring all your gear. I think this is it!”

My heart races as I unlock the trunk, pulling out as many digging implements as I can manage and stuffing a backpack with food and beverages. Just in case she’s right, and we’re out here for a while.

Closing the distance to Esmeralda, excitement grips me as I see what she’s found. An ancient mound of dirt with a weathered, dark brown wooden tombstone covered in toys, cars, costume jewelry, stuffed animals, books, and every other gift you can imagine. There are even a couple of bras hung over the tombstone.

“Could this be it? The gift of death?”

I shrug, setting the shovels and pickaxes down along with the backpack. “What say we have an ice-cold beer and snacks before we start digging?”

“Wait, are we really going to dig up a grave?”

I eye the distant ghost hunters, wondering what we can get away with out here. Shifting my weight, I furrow my brows. “We’ve come this far. We can’t give up now.”

“Yes, but exhuming a body? Won’t that make us grave robbers?”

“Treasure, I’d wager you all my winnings that there are no human remains beneath this swatch of soil. Just buried Aztec gold. But we’ll never know until we dig.”

Esmeralda nods, her face tight with resignation and concern.

As we dig in, Esmeralda strains to break the ground. “This soil is rock-hard. Like concrete.”

I frown, running a hand over my forehead. “Nevada dirt. If you can really call it that. That’s why my digging tool of choice is a pickaxe. Why don’t you step back while I give it a few swings to loosen up the ground.”

A few swings turn into hours of intense labor as the sun beats down on us, putting perspiration thick on my forehead and back. The work is punishing, straining the injuries from yesterday. After removing my shirt, Esmeralda gasps. “Your back looks so angry and bruised, and you’ve reopened some of those lacerations by digging. You’re bleeding. You need to take a break.”

“But we’re so close,” I say through gritted teeth as I hammer away at the ground, noticing that it softens the deeper I go, making the work easier as I continue busting through layers.

“You’re starting to sound like my grandpa again. So caught up with this treasure you can’t think about anything else.” She delivers the words in an exasperated tone, concern written on her face. “I’ve watched one good man obsess over what might

honestly turn out to be a curse. Please don't make me watch another." Her lush lower lip quivers.

I drop my pickaxe, sauntering towards her and wrapping her in my arms. I reassure her, "It might look like I'm obsessed with this treasure. But what's really driving me is making you happy. If this treasure really exists, I'm hellbent on finding it because it means something to you. And I can't stand the thought of seeing you disappointed. Especially because of something I have control over."

Esmeralda's large doe eyes water as she takes me in, her mouth parting slightly. I lean in to kiss her, drawn by the call of her delicious mouth as my hands run up and down her back. "Truth be told, I'd rather be in the Caddy, showing you the skill of my tongue."

Her eyes sear me.

"But we're so close, and you've come so far, Okie. We can't stop now."

"But Reese, this won't change anything between us. Whatever we do or don't find, right?"

I chuckle, stroking her delicate jawline. "I've said it all along, and I'll say it again. You're the real treasure. And if I have my way, I aim to keep you forever. What do you think about that?"

"I think I love you, Cowboy."

My heart dances around in my chest at her unexpected words, my eyes swirling with moisture. "Well, I know I love you. Known that ever since you decided to impart a little of your luck on me. How about you work on that again now?"

“Okay,” she says, straining on her tiptoes to kiss me. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, husband. No matter what happens, finding you is the luckiest strike I’ve ever had.”

Through layer after layer, I bust the thick gray ground until the pickaxe hits something hard. I continue digging and scraping, the metal making a hollow sound against the wooden structure the work reveals. “Shit, Esmeralda.”

“What is it?” she asks breathlessly, headed in my direction.

I put up a hand to stop her, eyeing the baby coffin I’ve uncovered. The last thing my woman needs is to see something grisly. “Stay back, Angel. This may not be for your eyes,” I warn, my heart sinking as I lean down, feeling the cool of the smooth wood. I’m not especially fond of the idea of grave robbing, either. But I’ve come too far not to find out.

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The lid feels stuck, and I groan, straining to open it. I pry at it until my fingertips are sore, making no headway.

Desperate to reveal the contents, I take the pickaxe to the wood. It feels like desecration, my stomach churning with each hollow thud the pick axe makes until I break enough from one edge to pull back to the lid. My heart drops like a heavy weight as I eye the contents.

Chapter Sixteen

ESMERALDA

My hands go to my mouth as I watch Reese's head and shoulders bob back up. He's dug down a good five feet at this point, and his ominous words fill me. The last thing I ever wanted to do is dig up dead bodies. But what do you expect when you start shoveling away in a cemetery?

A bag appears in his right hand, which he plops on the ground above him. With both hands planted on the side of the hole, he pulls himself out with one vigorous move, jumping to his feet on the ground above. His face looks grim as he walks towards me, sweat pouring from his rippling muscles.

"I don't think this is anybody's remains. Too heavy for that. But I can't be sure. Do you want me to look first? Or do you want to? After all, this is your treasure hunt."

"No, it's our treasure hunt." I inhale, steeling myself. "We'll look together."

The cowboy nods, his face covered in sweat and dirt from hours of labor. “Alright, Angel.”

Holding the dusty old bag between us, he opens the top, and we peer inside.

“Oh my God,” I whisper as sunlight glints off a tantalizing golden glow.

“Motherfucker,” Reese laughs, his eyes going to my face. “Are you happy, Angel? Is this what you wanted?”

I’m too busy staring at the contents of the bag to speak. A glittering trove of small, golden Aztec objects greets me, shining in the sunlight. Tears flood my face. Not so much for finding the treasure but realizing, after so many years of tireless work, that it really exists.

Reese’s brows furrow as he appraises my face. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I whisper, covering my mouth. “I just can’t believe we finally found it. That it really exists.”

“I’m no expert on Aztec artifacts, obviously, but that looks ancient to you. Right?”

“Absolutely. And it looks expensive, too.” I pause, shifting my weight, so much effort culminating in this moment. A moment I never thought would happen. A moment I’m entirely unprepared for. “What do we do now?” I ask, staring at the rugged rancher, his smile still ear to ear.

“Well, let me double-check to make sure there’s nothing else. And then we better get out of this hot sun. We could both use something to eat and drink, and I’d love to get you back home where we can take a slippery, soapy, sexy shower together. Then, you can drape yourself out on the bed while I indulge in the only meal I’ve really been

dreaming about all day.”

“That sounds unbelievably amazing. All I want.”

Reese cocks his head. “Even more than this loot?”

“Far more. It’s not even a contest.” I long to sink into my husband’s loving embrace, surrendering my body and my heart to his wicked pleasures.

Grabbing a shovel, I head in his direction, setting the bag down beside the hole as Reese finishes searching it. Vaulting himself out again, he says, “On second thought. It’s way too hotto be out here. We’ve got all the time in the world to fill the hole later. Let’s head back to the Cadillac.”

I couldn’t be happier as we march in that direction. Reese carries the heavy bag of gold, a shovel, and the pickaxe. I carry two spades.

The rancher eyes my grin happily. “You look pleased, wife.”

“More pleased with you than any other part of this adventure,” I reply.

“Really?” he asks, scrunching his nose.

“Really.”

“Then, maybe you won’t think what I have to say next is so crazy ...”

“And what’s that?” I ask, eyeing him as our pace picks up, the Cadillac in sight.

“This treasure has me feeling uneasy, Esmeralda. Like real uneasy. There’s something off about it. I don’t know how to explain it, but holding it, touching it.

Well, I'm convinced now that it's cursed. Just like you said. But what do we do about it?"

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I try to focus on his words. Really, I do. But my mouth waters for an ice-cold beer and the cool shade of the Cadillac with its top up as we reach the vehicle. Reese reaches out to unlock the driver-side door ...

Suddenly, the ground crumbles beneath us, great dust clouds rising. We both scramble backward, watching in horror as a sinkhole swallows the vehicle whole.

I blink a couple of times, unable to process what we witnessed. Reese stands next to me, his mouth hanging open.

“What in the ...” I hear the words come out of my mouth, almost like they’re disembodied.

My eyes dart to Reese, taking in his stony face. “Mineshaft cave-in,” he says in oddly calm tones. “Dammit! I should’ve known better than to park there. This whole site is one big honeycomb beneath the surface.”

“Really?” I ask, my eyes surveying the ground nervously. Sure enough, I see a few other strange sinkhole-looking spots.

“Fuck!” Reese laments. “See what I mean about bad luck?”

I feel shell-shocked, staring dumbstruck at the gaping maw where our vehicle should be. This can’t be real. This has to be a nightmare.

“Well, there goes our ice-cold beers, our water, our food, our damn love song radio station. Two vehicles lost in two days? This is a blow, Esmeralda. This is a real

blow.”

“But ...” I’m still trying to understand what happened. “Did the car really get swallowed by a mine? I don’t get it.”

“Yep,” he says bitterly, pointing off into the distance and other sunken areas. “I knew better than to drive and park out here. I’m sorry, Angel.”

“I can’t ... I can’t even. Falling barns, UFO hunters, ghost hunters, graves filled with treasure, now car-swallowing mine shafts? What is wrong with this place?”

“The ghost hunters!” Reese exclaims. “Quick, we’ve got to get their attention. See if they’ll give us a ride back to the ranch. Watch your step, wife.”

I haven’t thought about those folks in hours. As we sprint off across the desert with Reese in the lead, a sickening realization hits me. They’ve all vanished. The crowds are gone. The cars are gone. It’s me and Reese alone in the middle of Nowhere, Nevada.

My husband drops his tools, rubbing his hand over his forehead, and limping slightly as he slows. His knee must be acting up again. “For God’s sake! Is there anything else that could go wrong?”

We both look at the bag in his hand suspiciously. “Maybe you’re right about the treasure,” I say, a visceral, dark energy radiating from it. “But what do we do?”

Reese’s mouth draws into a firm line. “We give it back.”

“Give it back?” I hiss. “After all we’ve been through? No way.”

“I hate to break this to you, Angel. But if we don’t, I’m afraid the next grave digging

will be for us.”

“But how do I break this to my grandpa? And what about your ranch? You may have enough money to save it, thanks to the Craps table, but what about future expenses? You were counting on this, too.”

“We’ll find a way, Angel. Besides, you’re my good luck charm.”

I shake my head, feeling dejected.

“And your grandpa will understand once we explain everything. I mean, can’t you feel the bad juju oozing from this shit?” He holds up the bag.

“Maybe a little.”

“And from the barn to the car, this road trip treasure hunt has taken one unlucky turn after the next. I can only imagine the consequences of knowingly keeping the gold. If the ranch’s poor luck is any indicator ... Angel, it needs to go.”

I cross my arms over my chest, pressing my lips tightly together. I don’t know what to say. Hell, I don’t even know what to think.

“Come on,” he urges. We walk in silence, the sun beating down on us. “We need to find shade and rest. Conserve our energy and our hydration. Dammit! That Cadillac was packed with water. Now, we’ll be lucky if we make it out here.”

“But you mentioned hot springs on your property. Are we anywhere near those?”

He shakes his head. “Bad water. We can’t drink it.”

I frown, trying not to cry. The last thing I need to do is waste precious water.

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“Let’s head to that tree over there. It won’t provide much shade, but it should be enough. And then, we’ll keep our fingers crossed that someone stops by who can give us a ride. Otherwise, we’ll be walking all night.”

My stomach drops at his prediction. “Walking all night, I can do. Even without water, I think.”

“We still won’t be to the ranch house by then. But if we’re lucky, we’ll happen upon a cow along the way.”

“And we can drink its milk, maybe? Or follow it to a watering hole?”

“More like drink its blood, Esmeralda. But let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. For as beautiful as Nevada can be, it’s also merciless and unforgiving.”

I shiver at his words.

After reaching the tree, we sink down beneath it, Reese pulling me loosely into his arms so we stay close but don’t overheat. “We’re going to get through this together, Esmeralda. There’s no way the Universe put you in my path only to turn around and take you away. But we could use a little more of your luck. In the meantime, let’s try to get some rest until things cool back off.”

“Maybe the ghost hunters will return when we wake up.”

“A high probability. They love combing through this place, especially at night.”

“You hear that?” Reese asks, raising his head from the ground where we lie together, soaking up our thin patch of shade.

“That booming?”

“Yeah,” he says, biting his bottom lip. “Almost like polka music.”

Chills run up and down the length of my body as my ears strain to the sound, catching snippets of it on the wind. The faintness has a ghostly quality that puts goosebumps on my arms despite the heat.

“It’s getting closer,” Reese says, excitement in his voice. He sits up, and I join him, eyeing the dirt-covered, tanned cowboy. He’s got his shirt back on, but I can see the muscles straining against the fabric.

“Yes, it is getting closer,” I agree, clapping my hands together.

“Let’s head down to High Water,” he says, pointing towards the mounds of debris and glass where this day started. “Hopefully, they’re visitors and are planning on staying awhile. But just in case they’re neighboring ranchers or some other locals, we better be ready to flag them down. Nevadans travel these dirt roads at wicked speeds.”

Jumping to our feet, gifted with a second wave of energy, we race toward the ghost town, moving as fast as we can so that we don’t miss whoever’s blaring music. As we draw closer, a gaudy caravan of vans arrives painted with bright murals.

My eyes make out the words Mariachi Sol as tears flood my eyes. Thank you, Universe, for another round of fortune! Reese waves his hands in the air, screaming as men in extravagant costumes pile out of their rides.

“Thank heavens!” he hollers, not stopping until he gets their attention. I follow close behind, only realizing how hot and red I must look when I stand next to Reese, doubled over and fighting to catch my breath.

“Where in the hell did you two come from?” a large, jovial, mustached man with a thick Hispanic accent asks.

“It’s a long story.” Reese chuckles. “Mind if we get a lift from you?”

“Of course. But you’ll have to eat lunch and drink beer with us first.”

“That sounds amazing. A godsend,” the cowboy says.

Chapter Seventeen

REESE

As some of the mariachi musicians tour the ghost town site while others work on beer and food, I straggle out a way to send a couple of texts. It occurs to me that my lovely bride has yet to enjoy a reception, cake, dancing, or any of the usual nuptial norms.

Enlisting everyone in town that I can think of, from the baker to the UFO hunters, ghost hunters, and my few remaining ranch hands, I come up with an action plan that should align perfectly with our arrival back on the ranch after lunch and whatever the bandmates would like to do in High Water.

As the vans open and more men pile out in their flashy costumes, they work quickly to put up a couple of shade tents before pulling out foldable chairs and turning up the booming music.

“Please have a seat,” the jovial man offers, gesturing to Esmeralda.

“Thank you, Manuel.”

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I grab a couple of cold beers another performer offers me, sauntering toward Esmeralda and offering her one. I stand next to her, soaking up the shade from the tent as my shoulders finally relax. Thank you, God, for this blessed turn of events!

“So, what are you two out here doing? And why does the lady have a ring, and you don’t?” Manuel asks, raising his eyebrows.

“Treasure hunting. We’re newlyweds. Like yesterday, so I don’t have a ring yet.”

“No wedding band? Well, did you at least find the treasure?”

“We did,” Esmeralda says, eyeing me. I’m shocked at her willingness to admit this. “But I’m afraid it’s cursed.”

“Me, too,” I add.

Manuel furrows his brows, a disbelieving look on his face.

She explains, “It’s Aztec gold stolen by a Spanish conquistador way back in colonial times. Ever since we’ve gone looking for it, there’s been no end to our bad luck.”

“That’s right,” I add. “Although, in all honesty, I was on an unlucky streak before my angel showed up.”

“Aztec gold?” Manuel exclaims, eyeing the bag in my hand. “I would be careful with something like that. A curse is almost inevitable.”

“Yeah, and I think it’s the reason behind my ranch’s century-long curse, too. But what should we do with it?”

“My cousin is a curator at the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. I could ask him?”

Reese eyes me quizzically. “Angel, would you be okay with that?”

“Yes.”

I sigh with relief, the vision of the Cadillac disappearing into the ground still fresh in my mind, along with the awareness that if Mariachi Sol hadn’t showed up, this could very well have been the end for us. As much as Nevada’s always been my home, I don’t want to decorate the Silver State with my skeleton.

A thousand thoughts race through my head as Manuel gets on the phone with his brother in Mexico City, and Esmeralda speaks with a few of the mariachi performers. She looks relaxed, her face no longer beet-red, though there’s still enough sun glow that she’ll be happy for the Aloe Vera gel I keep in the fridge.

Manuel waves me over. “Would you like to speak with my brother? Get his recommendation for what to do with the gold?”

I nod, taking the phone and speaking with a man who introduces himself as Emiliano. His English is flawless as we go over the details of the find. To my amazement, he recognizes the El Cortez treasure almost immediately. His voice fills with awe as I fill in the details, striding over to Esmeralda and putting the call on speaker so that we can all talk.

Emiliano says, “I’m an academic, a university professor, so I can’t say that I believe in superstitions or curses. It’s hard to collect empirical data on such matters, and yet

the anecdotal evidence is also difficult to deny. With Aztec artifacts, not unlike Egyptian ones, curses are highly likely. Especially if, like the El Cortez treasure, it was originally acquired through nefarious means.”

Esmeralda’s face hardens, and I wonder what my beauty’s thinking. Speaking into the phone, she asks, “If it were you, Emiliano, what would you do?”

Without hesitation, the professor and curator answers, “Repatriate it back to Mexico as fast as I can. I know you may think I’m saying this because of my nationality and position at the museum. But that is the only way I’ve seen curses related to treasure end. I would also contact a local shaman to cleanse the ranch of any bad energies.”

This all sounds woo-woo as fuck. But I’m determined to do whatever makes Esmeralda feel better and ensures a happy future together. She’s my only priority, and I want to give her everything wonderful, abundant, and plentiful. I want to be the good luck charm for her that she’s been for me despite everything.

“Then, that’s what we’ll do,” she says, her face relaxing into a smile.

“I will help you in any way that I can with the process, and obviously, you can trust my brother, Manuel, with the treasure. I will confirm with a communication from the museum when it is safely in our care.”

“Wait. What?” Manuel exclaims. “You want me to travel with a cursed Aztec treasure all the way from northern Nevada to Mexico City? Have you lost your mind?”

His protest both assures me that we’re not getting scammed and makes me feel sorry for the guy. After all, a quick trip around the ranch in pursuit of the El Cortez treasure nearly got Esmeralda and I spectacularly killed twice.

“It will be fine. As long as you’re returning it, you shouldn’t experience any trouble.”

“Shouldn’t,” Manuel mutters under his breath.

I contemplate Esmeralda’s lovely expression, crouching carefully next to her chair to keep from exacerbating my bum knee. “What are you thinking, wife?”

“Ruminating on our wild treasure hunt and what it nearly cost us. I mean, you had your hand on the driver’s side door handle. How did you not get sucked into the sinkhole?”

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I chuckle, still not ready to reflect too much on it. “Well, I did let go of the handle, which I imagine was fairly helpful. But yeah, a close call for sure. All I can say is things have been looking up ever since my guardian angel and good luck charm arrived. Although I’m personally ready to be done tempting fate. Instead, it’s time to focus on healing the land and starting a life together with lots of gorgeous babies and the woman I’ve been in love with since the second time I laid eyes on her.”

Esmeralda’s eyes pool as she regards my face, whispering, “I love you, too, Reese.”

I raise my hand, palming her face and staring deeply into her turquoise eyes. “Something’s still not sitting right with you. Tell me what it is.”

She shrugs, looking a little defeated. “My grandpa. This was really more his dream than mine. How am I going to tell him I gave it away? “

“I understand how you feel, the weight of trying to please family even when it’s impossible. But I truly believe this is for the best for you and me, this ranch, and your grandpa. No telling what that treasure might do if it traveled back east. How about we take a bunch of photos to prove it’s real and send them his way?”

I have something else in the works, too. My thoughts going to one last thing I need to negotiate with Manuel and his brother, Emiliano—a trip to Mexico City later for Esmeralda and her grandpa to see the treasure safe and secure in an exhibit.

The moment we turn down the long driveway to the ranch, Esmeralda realizes something’s up. “What are all these people doing at Gunner Ridge, Beefcake?” She eyes me curiously.

“Beefcake?”

“Yes,” she says innocently, fluttering her eyelashes at me. “I finally figured it out. Your customized nickname.”

“But why Beefcake?”

“Because you’re a cattle rancher with muscles for days, and all I can think about is eating you whole,” she whispers against the shell of my ear, filling my body with delicious waves of anticipation.

“Can’t argue with that.” My cheeks glow as the air-conditioned caravan parks, and we get out. People crowd around us, and Esmeralda’s jaw hits the ground. We make the rounds, and I introduce her to everyone, explaining my recent change in good fortune and marital status.

My wife’s eyes fill with tears when she sees the kitchen table decorated with a large cake and cupcakes, along with flowers, cards, and small gifts. Foxfire Valley outdid itself again, a community I can be proud of. One that wholeheartedly welcomes my new bride.

As the mariachi music rolls late into the evening and people dance outside, I savor the sensation of my wife snuggling in my arms, swaying gently to the music. “I don’t know where you came from, Angel, although I have my suspicions. But you’re without a doubt the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“Despite the barn?”

“Blame that on the treasure.”

“And the hurt and bruised back?”

I nod.

“Despite the Caddy?”

“The only thing I miss about it was our radio station.”

“You’re a goner for me, Reese. That’s obvious.”

Drawing her tightly against me and whispering in her ear, I promise, “And you’re going to be a goner for me after everyone leaves.”

“Oh, yeah? What happens then?”

“I’m going to spread you out on the kitchen table like that fancy cake and devour you whole. Every naughty inch of you—especially the frosting—because you’re the luckiest flavor I’ve ever tasted, wife, and I can’t get enough.”

“I like the sound of that, husband.”