



Second Chances with my Billionaire Bosses

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Description: They kissed me like they owned me.

Then they vanished.

Now my three ex-military cowboys are back—rich, possessive, and ready to claim what's theirs.

I spent ten years convincing myself they never meant anything.

That one stolen night was just a reckless mistake.

But now Rhett, Arlo, and Shep are back—older, richer, and dangerously determined.

They don't just want an apology. They want me.

And when one of them growls that leaving me was the biggest mistake of their lives...

I realize my biggest mistake might be letting them back in.

I swore I wouldn't fall for them again. But when Rhett corners me in the barn, Arlo whispers dirty promises in my ear,

And Shep lays a claim for the whole town to see...

I realize walking away might not be an option this time... especially when they're ready to chase.

18+ readers only. *Second Chances with My Billionaire Bosses* is a sizzling reverse harem romance filled with rugged alpha billionaires, undeniable chemistry, and a heroine caught between the past and an unexpected future. Get ready for a pulse-pounding mix of passion, tension, and redemption—with a guaranteed happily ever after that's worth every twist and turn!

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CHAPTER 1

Maxie

Four glasses of champagne, three bottles of beer, and two paper cups of something that smelled like rocket fuel. Slice the cake, refill the punch after taking away the bowl which had been spiked, and stop Carolyn Jones from ranting about the Cowboys in front of Mark Dole. I hadn't been prepared for Nellie's surprise wedding but I'd managed. I just hadn't taken a deep breath in over twenty-four hours but I didn't need to. I'd survived for longer without. I just had to get through the rest of the reception, clean everything up, take Bob out for some exercise, and then go to bed. Was that everything? Right now I didn't have time to think about what needed to be done. I could do it all. No problem. I could do anything.

"Do you have any more of that moonshine Carl brought, Maxie?" A very, very drunk Ray Coldwell tugged my hand and grinned in my face with breath which smelled like that same rocket fuel I'd sniffed earlier.

"Let me check and I'll bring you a cup if there's any left. Okay?" I couldn't believe I was passing out illegal moonshine. I couldn't believe Mills hadn't thrown a fit about it.

Ray patted my cheek and stumbled away, probably immediately forgetting he'd even spoken to me. The older man was sloshed off his butt and definitely didn't need another sip of anything. I didn't stop to watch him safely get to his seat because I had a thousand other things to do.

Refill drinks, bake a few more of the savory puffs that were running low, check on the cattle in the north fields, clean up the mess the party left, drive anyone home who needed a sober driver. The list went on and on. There weren't enough hours in the day for everything I needed to do. There never were.

The crowd parted and I saw Nellie and Vera dancing together. They each had broad smiles on their faces and Vera's belly was so round that it looked like she could burst at any moment. Everything around me faded away except for them as I felt a twisted mix of happiness and burning jealousy. They were my baby sisters. Each of them had families and men who loved them dearly. They had the world already and I was so thankful they did. It was just...I had nothing.

Before I let my thoughts drift that way, I spun and started toward the main house. I admonished myself for letting those few moments slip by without doing anything productive. I had too many things to do to lose myself in my feelings. I wasn't paying attention, though, so when three giant figures stepped into my path, I collided into the middle one.

As big hands grabbed my shoulders to steady me, the scent of leather and pine filled my nose and I nearly gasped at the way the scent dragged flashes of memory from the deepest parts of my mind. That smell, one I'd only ever smelled when I'd been too close to losing my mind and letting go of everything, was a slap to my face. My fight or flight response kicked in and since I only had the flight option, I pulled back from those big hands and was about to disappear when the giant I'd run into opened his mouth.

"Well, hell, Maxine. I didn't think you'd be that excited to see us again." Rhett Banks, like the ghost of Christmas past, had haunted me for far longer than a single night. He seemed in pretty good spirits about everything as he laughed his rich, dark laugh and stepped closer to me.

I was a bug and they were the deadly light calling to me so I had no choice but to lift my eyes to see them. A shiver worked its way down my spine. There they were, the three men who'd single-handedly shown me that men were nothing but trouble and pain. Still just as handsome as ever, still just as full of slow grins and bedroom eyes. The only people in my life to ever call me anything other than Maxie, they were real and they were waiting on me to say something.

I was tall and I still had to lift my head to look them in the eyes. Not that I was going to do that. No, I stared just over their shoulders when I looked at them because I wasn't an idiot. I wasn't a masochist, either. I didn't want to see the laughter on their faces.

"Did you lose the ability to talk since the last time we were here, Maxine? You were never a chatterbox, but I know you could speak before." Shep stepped closer. "Cat got your tongue?"

It was his teasing tone that broke my resolve. I looked at him then, really looked at him, and I felt all the plates I had spinning in the air begin shake. Shep was even better than I remembered. He had deep green eyes which were as intense as he was and hair that hadn't changed, still falling over his forehead no matter how many times he pushed it back. He was a giant of a man, tall and broad, but he had freckles and his ears stuck out just enough to make him less terrifying. I knew from years earlier that his chest and upper arms were covered in tattoos and I could see them creeping up from the collar of his t-shirt.

I sucked in a breath that was tainted with their scent and straightened my shoulders. "Why are you here?"

Arlo's wide chest filled my vision as he eased his way ahead of Shep. "We just bought the Mays' ranch."

I snapped my eyes up to his deep brown ones and almost forgot why that upset me so much when I saw the way he was looking back at me. It was the way my sisters' men looked at them. It was enough to bring a blush to my cheeks but that's as far as I allowed it to go. I knew that look from the three of them. They'd used it once before. I wasn't as dumb at twenty-eight as I'd been at eighteen.

My stomach tightened and I swallowed. I mostly wasn't as dumb. That look still hit me a little harder than I would've liked.

"What do you mean, you just bought the Mays' ranch?"

"I mean we made an offer and bought it." He stepped closer and his worn cowboy boots filled my vision as I stared at the ground.

It didn't make sense. They couldn't have bought the ranch. My family bought the ranch. Mills, Tate, and West had sent me on enough errands to the bank and back that I knew for a fact we'd bought the ranch. I was starting work on the property the very next day. They had to be lying.

I dug my nails into my palms to keep from screaming at them as I lifted my eyes to Arlo's and shook my head.

"You're lying."

Rhett let out a soft chuckle. "Wanna bet, sweetheart?"

"I have to go." I turned and rushed across the yard. I knew my older brothers were inside, watching the party from their farmhouse styled castle. I had to hear them tell me it wasn't true.

Ray tried to catch me as I hurried past him but I couldn't even stop to politely excuse

myself. I couldn't catch my breath. My palms burned and I was worried I'd made them bleed. My lips were already raw from me biting them so every time my teeth caught my bottom lip it was painful.

It was quiet in the house when I let myself in and I found my brothers on the couch, just where I expected them. They looked up from their whiskey glasses when I came closer, each of them seemingly surprised to see another living soul.

"We bought the Mays' ranch, right?" I couldn't believe I hadn't thought to ask for any specific details. Of course, we'd bought the ranch, though. Of course.

"What are you talking about?" Mills sat forward and put his glass down on the table. "How's the party going?"

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“It’s good. Great.” I took a deep breath. “Your friends are here. They said they bought the Mays’ ranch.”

“Arlo, Shep, and Rhett are here? Tell them to come on in.” West smiled and stretched his legs out in front of him. “It’s been forever since they were here.”

I knew exactly how long it’d been since they visited Devil’s Den. I knew the exact day they’d left with no plans on returning. I hadn’t realized that at the time, though age and maturity told me they’d known the morning they left.

“Maxie? Bring them on in.” Mills frowned at me. “Everything okay?”

I straightened my shoulders and nodded. “Did we buy the Mays’ ranch?”

Tate licked his lips and frowned. “We paid a small amount to have partial ownership.”

Panic hit me hard. “And they own the rest?”

“Yeah. What’s the big deal, Maxie?” Mills stood up and shook his head. “I’ll just go get them myself.”

I was furious but it didn’t matter. It never mattered. I made sure my face was blank as I held up my hands. “No, I’ll get them. You stay here.”

West studied me. “Are you sure everything is okay? You’re still going to be managing the ranch, Maxie. We wouldn’t take that away from you.”

I swallowed around an angry lump in my throat. “Everything’s fine. I was just surprised. I’ll go get them for y’all.”

“Thanks, Maxie. You’re the best.” Mills ruffled my hair and sat back down.

I turned around and left but instead of facing the three men who’d once crushed my heart, I walked toward the barn and only managed to take my first deep breath once I was on Bob, riding away from the ranch.

CHAPTER 2

Maxie

No one would ever call me daring or bold but if they saw me ride Bob, they might’ve changed their opinion. Bob liked to run fast and I liked to let him. I rode him bareback, leaning with him as he moved with my hands in his mane. He was an abnormally large and muscular black quarter horse. More than a few times I’d been offered a hefty sum of money for him but I’d never trade Bob for anything in the world. I wasn’t sure if it was sad or not but he was my best friend. He knew my moods and he was always ready to cheer me up with his silly personality. When we ran together, though, there was nothing silly about him. He was a beast on a mission.

Bob ran full out until my thighs ached and my stomach hurt from my core being engaged for so long. He didn’t stop until we were at the creek at the far north corner of the ranch. One of the best things about riding Bob like that was that my brain shut off while we ran. It was the only time my thoughts weren’t racing. The moment I jumped off him, the anxiety came back. While he drank from the creek, I stood next to him and stared out across the property.

I’d been excited about the ranch growing. I didn’t think I’d ever have children but I wanted my nieces and nephews, however many I ended up with, to have something to

be proud of. Taking charge of the new ranch had been something I'd looked forward to. I wanted to start something on my own and prove I was stronger than everyone thought I was. I wanted to prove it to myself. Instead of that happening, though, I was going to be working for the three men who'd single-handedly convinced me I was meant to be alone.

I wanted to scream. My palms and lips were raw from fighting back the feelings that raged inside me but I knew I wouldn't say anything. I never said anything. I knew what everyone called me. Perfect Maxie. Perfect Maxie didn't scream at her brothers for screwing her over. Nope. She just smiled and did whatever they needed her to do.

I doubled over and screamed into my hands, the sound closer to a wild animal than a woman. It shocked Bob enough that he jumped and then, seeing I was fine, he neighed and nudged my butt with his head hard enough to send me tumbling into the creek. Warm water soaked through my clothes instantly and I came up spitting out dirty creek water.

"Bob!" I sliced my hand through the water, sending a wave of it at him. "That was mean!"

Sighing, I climbed out the creek and flopped down on the ground. Bob immediately settled next to me and I had to snatch my arm out of the way to avoid him crushing it. He flopped his head over on my stomach and curled his lips like he was smiling.

"You're a jerk sometimes but I love you." I stroked his big face and closed my eyes, trying to let the peace I felt while riding Bob fill me. Instead of peace, though, I felt the same tension as always. There was so much to do and hiding with Bob wasn't going to get any of it done. I couldn't force myself to get up, though. Not yet. The idea of potentially facing Arlo, Rhett, and Shep again kept me right where I was.

I could only hide from my responsibilities for so long, though. I lay there for as long

as I dared with thoughts of the party clean up and everything else I needed to do racing through my tired mind. When Bob stood, I took it as my cue and climbed to my feet. Instead of riding him back to the ranch, I chose to drag it all out by walking.

When we returned I led him into the barn and took some time to cool him down and hydrate him before letting him into one of the smaller paddocks to roam while I cleaned up after the party. Almost all of the vehicles were gone and the ranch had fallen into a peaceful silence again. The place was littered with trash, but I'd expected it. I rolled one of the trash cans over and started picking up.

The drinks table still held a few bottles of beer and something about the return of the guys had me reaching for one of them. I wasn't a drinker and I didn't like the taste but the beer went down easy when I pictured them standing in front of me. It wasn't fair that they were even better looking than I'd remembered and imagined. It wasn't fair that they were back, giving me looks which still made my body heat.

I collected the trash with anger, the bottles and cups rattling harder and harder as they went into the can until one of the bottles smashed and I forced myself to calm down. I didn't want Patrick, the garbage man, to cut himself because I couldn't keep my emotions in check. Leaning against Mills' truck, I took a few deep breaths and finished my beer. That quickly I was tipsy. It would've been embarrassing if anyone had been around to see it. I was blissfully alone, though, just the way I liked it.

The quiet voice at the back of my mind called me a liar but I was an expert at ignoring that part of myself. I pushed off the truck and went back to cleaning up. That was better than standing around, feeling sorry for myself.

I was bent over, picking up a handful of confetti someone had thrown, when Rhett's voice came from behind me and nearly sent me tumbling over. I jerked upright, clutching my chest, and frowned.

“You scared me!”

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His smile was slow as he stood too close. Deep blue eyes with long, black lashes crinkled in the corners.

“Where’d you run off to?”

“That’s none of your business.” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. I regretted them instantly and stepped back, waiting for his anger and coldness to strike.

Rhett didn’t react the way I expected him to, though. His grin widened and he stepped even closer.

“That doesn’t mean I can’t be curious, Maxine. And I am. So very curious.”

I stared up at him, my brain struggling to make sense of the man in front of me. The beer had loosened my tongue enough that it moved without much thought.

“Don’t be. And don’t call me that. My name is Maxie.”

He ran his eyes from the top of my head to the tips of my feet and back again. Leaning in even closer, he rested his hand on my waist as he whispered, “I can’t help being curious about you, sweetheart. Never could. And you used to like when we called you Maxine. What changed?”

I heard footsteps approaching over the sound of my blood rushing to my head and whipped away from his touch. I’d put a solid ten feet between us when I realized it was Arlo and Shep approaching. My brain sent out a warning to the rest of my body.

Being alone with the three of them was a bad idea.

“No one else is going to help you clean up?” Arlo shot a scowl back towards the house. “Not a lot has changed around here, huh?”

I ignored him and went back to picking up, hoping and praying they wouldn’t continue speaking to me. The beer had gone to my head and I was feeling things way too close to the surface.

Shep moved with me and I watched in shock as he started picking up trash. Then I noticed they all were. I stood there like an idiot, watching them until Arlo noticed me staring and walked up to me.

“What’s going through that head of yours?” His mouth lifted on one side in a vague smile. “I can’t say I expected the same sweet smile you used to give us but I expected something a little warmer.”

Shep joined him. “You’re going to be working under us, Maxine. We might as well go ahead and get used to each other.”

Rhett moved behind me and I felt his breath on the back of my neck. “It’s been a while but surely you haven’t forgotten how much you used to like us. We haven’t changed.”

I tried my hardest to control my emotions. “It’s just been a long day.”

Rhett grunted. “Little liar.”

I spun around to face him, my control slipping. “What is wrong with y’all? It’s been ten years and you show up, thinking I’m going to be over the moon excited to see you? Do you not remember the last time you were here? Clearly, you don’t. If you

did, you'd know why I don't want anything to do with you and you'd leave me alone."

Instead of pulling away, Rhett got closer. "We're getting right into it, are we?"

"Apparently, we have to. The last time I saw the three of you, it was after I spent the night taking care of your drunk butts and—"

Shep interrupted me. "It was the morning after you came to our camp and we kissed the hell out of you."

I blushed hard. "Yes. That. And then you told me you didn't remember much from the night before but it was a giant mistake and you left. You never visited with Mills again. So, excuse me if I don't seem eager to work under you, or spend time with you, or even look at you."

Arlo grabbed my hand and turned me to face him. "You were eighteen. We had no business touching you."

"But you did." My voice shook and shame came down on me hard. I took a deep breath and started backing away. "Sorry. I... Just forget it. I have to go."

I turned and took off at a sprint across the ranch, my flight response as healthy and present as ever. I ran straight to my small cabin at the back of the ranch and locked myself in. I wasn't sure of the last time I'd let my emotions get the best of me but I couldn't believe they'd been around for all of five minutes and my resolve had crumbled that fast. I was in so much trouble.

CHAPTER 3

Rhett

The Mays' house needed a lot of work before we'd happily call it a home but it was better than nothing. I sat in a worn recliner across from where Arlo and Shep sat on an equally worn couch. We'd have our own stuff delivered in a few days but the old furniture was good enough for sitting and drinking.

I stretched my legs out in front of me and grimaced when I felt dirt and who knew what else under my bare feet. "I'm not drunk enough to not mind the state of this house."

Arlo grunted and looked around.

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“We’ve stayed in worse.”

“Not in a very long time.” I downed the rest of the whiskey in my glass and sighed.

“Today wasn’t what we expected.”

Shep let out a bitter laugh.

“Nope. Why they didn’t tell her we were buying the ranch is beyond me. She had no fucking clue we were coming. A strong wind could’ve knocked her over when she saw us standing there.”

“There are a lot of things our old friends have done and are doing that I don’t understand. Why the fuck was she cleaning up all by herself?” Scowling, Arlo sat forward and refilled our glasses. Then he sat back and stared at the wall behind me. “I’ve never lied to either of you and I’m not going to start now. I didn’t know what to expect with seeing Maxie again but I fucking want her.”

Shep didn’t even blink. He just smiled and tipped his glass at Arlo. “Yeah.”

I couldn’t help laughing. “We came here to start a family. We had no business touching her ten years ago but she’s a grown woman now and I think we all had the same reaction to seeing her today.”

“If she’d shown a hint of interest, I would’ve gotten on my knees and begged her to come home with us tonight.” Shep smirked. “Too bad our sweet Maxine is angry with us.”

Growing serious, I drained my glass again.

“I don’t think any of us would say that what happened was our proudest moment. I never knew it hurt her as much as it clearly did, though. She was eighteen. I thought she had a silly crush and would forget us and her hurt feelings in no time.”

“I still feel ashamed when I think of that night. We were drunk and hurting and there she was with a basket of freshly baked cookies. She was our own Little Red Riding Hood and we acted out the role of big, bad wolves perfectly. She should’ve taken one look at us in our sorry state and run but she stayed to take care of us and we couldn’t keep our hands to ourselves.” Arlo stood up and paced behind the couch. “That fucking kiss... I still wake up sweating over the memory of it.”

I existed in a twisted sense of shame and hunger when it came to Maxie. Or, I had before seeing her earlier that day. Seeing her as a woman, seeing how she’d changed and grown, I no longer felt shame. I just wanted her. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt desperate, or even excited, for a woman. Yet, one look at Maxie and I’d nearly busted the zipper of my jeans.

I looked at my best friends, the men I wanted to share a woman with, and grinned. “All the other shit aside for a moment, I think we found what we’ve been looking for today. Maxie is it. Right?”

Shep’s grin matched my own. “

Yeah. For sure.”

“I don’t have any doubt that she’s the one we need. I just don’t know how we’re going to convince her to give us a chance. In all the times we visited the Hellstone ranch back in the day, I never once saw Maxie snap at someone. Everyone always talked about how docile and sweet she was. I never even saw her frown at anyone

before today. Unless she underwent a personality transplant in the last decade, I think we're facing an uphill battle with her." Arlo shrugged. "Not that I mind. I like a little fire."

"She has fire, alright." I thought of the kiss we'd shared and blew out a deep breath. "She's even prettier now. I didn't think that was possible."

Shep twisted his neck from side to side, cracking it.

"Did either of you think it would happen this fast? That we'd just show up on day one and find the woman we want to share forever?"

"No." I let a slow smile twist my mouth. "But only because I didn't know if Maxie was married already. Whatever spell she had us under ten years ago is still there. I was already thinking of how I was going to take her husband out if she had one."

"God, we're assholes." Arlo sat back on the couch and made a face when a plume of dust rose around him. "This place is disgusting."

"We'll start working on it tomorrow." I looked around. "This place might take more work than Maxie needs to warm up to us."

Shep shook his head. "I don't think so. I have a feeling that sweet little Maxine is going to give us a run for our money."

"Too bad for her we're a determined bunch of assholes. She wanted us back then; she'll want us again. We just need to remind her of how great we are." Arlo scowled when we laughed. "I'm serious. We're great. At least, I'm great."

"You're drunk." I leaned over to miss the pillow he threw at me but it hit me anyway. More dust exploded around my head and made me cough. "You know, if anyone

could hear this conversation, we'd come off as absolute psychos."

"Yeah." Shep didn't seem to mind too much.

"Why? Because we know what we want and plan to get it? Why would I go into our relationship any differently than I've gone into the rest of our lives when we've been so successful?" Seeing that I was about to insult him, Arlo rushed on. "Say what you want but it's true. We've gotten where we are in life by going after the things we want. We didn't do that a decade ago with Maxie because of her age and look at the last ten years of our love lives. Stunted, sad, and just overall depressing."

I scoffed. "Ouch."

"You disagree? Have you had a happy, healthy relationship we don't know about?"

"No. And you know that." I refilled my own glass and drained it. "I'm on board. I want her. Seeing her just confirmed what I already knew. She's supposed to be ours."

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“Now we just have to convince her of that without coming off as a bunch of creeps.” Shep yawned. “Big day tomorrow. I’m going to get my beauty rest before it starts.”

“It started an hour ago.” Arlo pulled off his watch and dropped it on the coffee table between us. “I’m sleeping right here. Have you been in those bedrooms upstairs? Nope.”

I flipped out the recliner, feeling proud of myself for choosing it until the new position revealed clumps of pet hair that’d been hiding in the folds of fabric. I gagged and stood up. “I’m sleeping in the fucking truck.”

CHAPTER 4

Maxie

Angry tears burned my eyes but I refused to let them fall. My brothers thought they could just take over everything I did at the ranch like it was nothing. They clearly didn’t think of how much I did, if they thought about it at all. I stared down at the pan of bacon I was cooking for them and chewed on my bottom lip.

“Finished yet? I thought you could take breakfast with you to the new ranch when you go. I’m betting they haven’t set anything up over there yet.” Mills stood at the island, black coffee in one hand and his phone in the other. “You better get over there before they get up and head out to the diner.”

I scooped the bacon out onto the napkin lined plate with the rest I’d already cooked and turned off the burner.

“Sure, Mills.”

He grabbed a piece of bacon and groaned.

“You’re the best, Maxie. The guys are lucky to have someone so helpful showing them the ropes.”

It was the closest I’d gotten to a compliment and I preened under the kind words. It softened the blow from the way they’d acted before breakfast. When I’d come in with my tail tucked between my legs, ashamed of the way I’d lashed out the day before at their friends, I knew I was supposed to report to the new ranch. Then they’d informed me I’d be working there from then on. When I asked about who’d take over my jobs at their ranch, they’d just laughed it off and said they would. Like I didn’t have a hand in everything that happened on the ranch.

Maybe his compliment hadn’t softened the blow all that much. I was still hurt. Everything I did was to keep everyone around me happy and I didn’t require any recognition but it seemed like they thought I didn’t do much of anything. Never mind that I fed them every day, took care of the horses and stables, and ran interference with the ranch hands, along with a million otherthings. They thought I did so little that they could just absorb the jobs without much impact.

I swallowed down the anger and hurt like always and packed a bag with containers of breakfast foods. I even packed three thermoses filled with the good coffee I’d made at the crack of dawn.

I threw the bag over my shoulder and left the house without saying anything else. My brothers were deep in their breakfast with a few of the ranch hands who stayed onsite and ate at the main house every day, so they didn’t notice me leave. They never did. That was the way I preferred it, if I was being honest. I didn’t want to have to linger and answer questions, especially about my actions the previous night. Not that they’d

noticed anything.

I was horrified I'd let Arlo, Shep, and Rhett see they still upset me. I'd acted like a bratty little kid and I couldn't do that. I wouldn't. I'd spent most of the night chastising myself about my behavior so I wouldn't do the same thing again when facing them next.

I was in control of my reactions and I was fine. Working for them hadn't been what I'd thought was happening but I could adjust to anything. I just had to keep my head down and get the job done. The idea of my brothers and everyone else finding out about my actions toward the guys kept me rigid as I walked out to the barn to get Bob.

I'd already taken care of him that morning so he was ready to go. I climbed up with some effort and then took a moment to just hug him. Tension slowly seeped out of me as Bob's big body radiated warmth and peace into my tired bones. After just a few minutes I was ready to go.

The Mays' ranch wasn't close but I needed the time with Bob to resettle myself. We went around town, over the smallest hills at the base of the Devil's Spine Mountains, and through the rusted gate that no longer held the Mays family name. Instead, there was nothing, just a bare spot where a sign had once hung.

Bob seemed interested in the property and I wasn't eager to face the guys yet so I let him lead as we inspected the land. I knew Michael Mays had held my sister in the newer barn when he'd kidnapped her so I avoided it. There was an old barn that needed a lot of love and I took note of just how much work the fences were going to need before any cattle were brought back. It looked like the Mays had held their cattle in one pasture for so long that the land was dead while the other pastures around it were overgrown and out of control.

A burning anger, different from what I'd felt before, grew in me. Michael Mays had been a disgusting, drug-running kidnapper who would've killed Vera without losing any sleep most likely but he could've at least taken care of his cattle and their home. I shook my head at the old water troughs and worn down scratching posts. Wherever the cattle had gone when the last of the Mays sold them off, they had to be in better living conditions.

Feeling a renewed sense of purpose, I directed Bob to the main house and tried to breathe in the calm and peace I so desperately needed. It was useless, though, because as soon as I saw the three big men standing just off the front porch, all reasoning went out the window. I didn't feel anything close to calm.

I stopped Bob when we were still twenty feet away from them.

"Morning."

Rhett looked like he'd just rolled out of bed. His eyes were still heavy with sleep and his clothes were disheveled at best. He walked closer, eyes on me.

"What's in the bag? Smells like bacon."

He got a little too close for Bob's liking and received a quick nip for it. Bob stomped and tossed his head from side-to-side, awarning for them to stay away. It was clear to me that Bob was picking up my energy and reading the guys as a threat.

"Whoa, boy." Rhett grinned up at me, unphased. "Your horse has an attitude, huh?"

I took the bag off and swung it to him. "Breakfast. I've seen at least a dozen things that need to be worked on already so I'm going to get started."

Arlo came closer, keeping an eye on Bob. "Why don't you sit with us and eat while

we talk about what all needs to be done here?”

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I wanted to scream and throw a tantrum but instead I nodded. I just had to be a good worker. Nothing else. I dropped down from Bob and ignored the way Rhett had tried to catch me. When I didn't tie Bob up, I noticed them all staring and waiting. "He won't go anywhere."

Shep grunted. "He's crankier than I remember. How old is he now?"

I reached up and stroked Bob's face and smiled when he turned his head into my hand and huffed. "He's twelve. And he's not cranky. He's just..."

"Reading your energy." Shep came toward me and slowly held his hand out for Bob. "It's okay, boy. I remember you. You liked me. I snuck you lots of sugar cubes. Remember?"

Seeing him be nice to my horse made me feel fluttery in ways I didn't want to. I looked away but I knew Bob well enough to know he was brilliant and had a wildly accurate memory. If Shep had snuck him sugar, he'd remember and he'd love him, no matter how I felt.

"That's right, big guy. You remember me. No more biting, okay? Your human will warm up to us soon enough and then you'll see." Shep was smiling when I looked back at him. "Isn't that right?"

I bit back a negative response. "Sure."

He frowned but it only lasted a second before he shook his head and smiled again. "Come on. Whatever you brought smells amazing and I'm starving."

CHAPTER 5

Maxie

I winced as I looked around the kitchen of the Mays' house. It wasn't great. There was a thick layer of dust and grime over everything. The cabinets had once been pine but they were all coated in what looked like cigarette smoke and grease. The table had an old phone book under one of the legs and the chairs were the old vinyl kind with more rips than vinyl left. No matter what I thought about the three men standing behind me, I couldn't in good conscience let them live with a kitchen like that.

"Maybe you should eat outside." I chewed on my lip and quickly pulled my hair into a bun. "I'm going to just wipe everything down in here."

"You're not here to clean, Maxine." Arlo spoke from directly behind me. "We'll take care of this."

A shiver worked its way down my spine at the deepness of his voice but I ignored it. "I was told to get the ranch up and running. I don't think you're going to be very productive at work if you catch your death from whatever is growing on these countertops."

Rhett moved to stand next to me, his elbow bumping mine. "Have you already eaten?"

I looked up at him and hesitated. Had I? I couldn't remember. I'd been so overwhelmed and stressed when I got up that I was surprised I was fully dressed.

"That's a no. Come on, sweetheart." Shep took my arm and pulled me away from the kitchen. "You'll eat outside with us. Then we can clean the kitchen together so we'll have a spot to sit down and make a list of everything that needs to be done around

here.”

I wanted to argue but I wasn’t going to fight with them. I was going to be as distant as possible until they got the point I wanted nothing to do with them. Distant but polite.

“Okay.”

Bob was waiting next to the porch when we came out and as soon as he saw me, he let out a huff and walked away to sniff at some grass. I sat on the porch steps and wrapped my arms around my knees, taking note of the holes in my jeans. It was past time to buy new ones but I hated shopping. I still got flashbacks of clothes shopping with my mom and her disappointed face when the size she thought I should be didn’t fit my body. She’d grown up in a time when skinny wasn’t skinny enough and my curves had been a constant plague upon her. It was one of the only things I hadn’t been able to change to be who she needed me to be.

Arlo sank onto the step next to me and studied me so closely that I had to fight the urge to touch my face and hair to make sure it wasn’t doing something weird. His eyes finally settled on mine and a smile stretched his lips.

“How are things?”

I hadn’t expected that question and I didn’t really have an acceptable answer. How were things? I didn’t know. Everyone around me seemed to be starting their lives and getting everything they wanted. That was good. Me, personally, though? I was still in the same place I’d been when they left ten years earlier. I hadn’t budged an inch. The first change I thought I was going to take on hadn’t even been real, it turned out. I still didn’t understand why my brothers hadn’t been clearer about what was happening with the new ranch.

“That good, huh?” He stared out at the land ahead of us and sighed. “What exactly

did your brothers tell you about this place?”

I watched as Rhett and Shep settled on the steps in front of us and started opening the containers of food.

“Um... I was under the impression that it was going to be an extension of Hellstone Ranch and that I’d be managing it.”

Arlo took a biscuit and split it open to layer on eggs, bacon, and cheese.

“Mills reached out to us after that shit happened with Vera and mentioned the Mays ranch would be going up for sale soon. They knew we’d been talking about moving back to Texas and starting something of our own. They wanted to make sure whoever bought the land wouldn’t hurt Devil’s Den, or their ranch.”

I bit back a wave of frustration.

“I went back and forth to the bank for them so many times. Why?”

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Shep pushed a loaded biscuit into my hands and nodded at it.

“Eat that.”

“Your brothers did put up some money. They wanted to guarantee they had first rights to the land if we decided to sell in a few years. This way, they own a portion of the ranch and we can’t just sell it to a massive corporation if we get bored. Not that we’d ever do that. They didn’t need to put any money up for us to promise them that, but they felt better about doing it legally.” Arlo chewed a bite of his biscuit and groaned. “Jesus, Maxine. Your cooking alone is enough for a man to send a man to his knees.”

I’d just taken a bite of my own biscuit and nearly choked. My cheeks warmed and I cursed my fair complexion. I was trying to come up with something to say when Rhett cursed and jumped up from where he’d been sitting.

I snorted out a laugh when I realized what’d happened. Bob had snuck over and stolen Rhett’s biscuit. Bob looked as pleased with himself as ever as he eyed the biscuit still in Shep’s hand. Covering my mouth, I tried to hide that I’d laughed at them.

“Bob! No stealing.”

He curled his lip at me and let out a dramatic sigh before turning his back on us. I thought he was going to let it go until he let out a giant fart and then walked away.

Arlo groaned and put the rest of his biscuit down.

“That horse has an attitude problem.”

Rhett looked back at me.

“How did the sweetest woman in the world end up with an asshole for a horse?”

“He’s not a butthole. He’s just...sensitive.” I fanned away the stench and stood up. “I’m going to get started on the kitchen.”

I looked under the cabinets for cleaning supplies and found nothing. The kitchen would have to wait. I turned to go back out to the porch and saw the three of them had followed me. They were standing in the doorway, watching me.

“There are no cleaning supplies. I’ll bring some from the ranch tomorrow morning.” I wrapped my arms around myself and cleared my throat. “I guess that means I’ll start outside today.”

“Why don’t we take a ride into town and buy some supplies to keep on hand here?” Rhett never took his eyes off of me. “If you need to take Bob home, we can meet you there.”

I wanted to say no and run the other way. Being alone in their truck with them seemed like a bad plan for my mental health. I wasn’t arguing or fighting with them, though, so I just nodded.

“Okay.”

CHAPTER 6

Arlo

I drove to the Hellstone Ranch with a scowl on my face. Something wasn't right about Maxie. She was being agreeable but there was a flatness in her voice and expression I didn't understand. I wanted to shake her. It wasn't a good sign that I'd been around her for less than an hour in total since arriving back in town and I already felt out of control over her. I didn't remember her being so cold when she was eighteen. She'd always done whatever anyone else wanted or needed but she'd done it with a smile on her face. The new Maxie seemed to fight every single emotion that might cross her face.

Shep tapped his fingers against his thigh over and over again, until Rhett growled and reached back to slap them. Glaring at Rhett, he crossed his arms and groaned.

"It's weird, right? Her whole attitude? I don't like it. She was on fire yesterday, wanting to scratch our eyes out, and today she's like a fucking robot."

I was glad we were on the same page.

"Let's just see how she acts around other people so we can at least know if it's us that's got her acting so strangely."

"Maybe we're reading too much into it. We just got back and we left things bad with her when we went. Maybe she's just unhappy to be around us." Rhett sighed. "I need to get that vacant stare off her face. I hate it."

I agreed. I had a vision in my head of Maxie the night we'd kissed her and she'd been so full of fire. Even when she was angry at us the night before, her face had been animated and full of life. Whatever was happening with her that morning, though, I didn't like.

Maxie was waiting on us when I pulled to a stop in front of the main house on her family's ranch. She climbed into the backseat and greeted us with a nod.

I shifted in my seat, physically uncomfortable and annoyed at the way she was acting. I wanted a reaction. Before I could say or do anything, Rhett subtly patted my arm and shook his head. Swallowing down the need to prod at Maxie, I focused on driving into town instead.

The silence in the truck stretched on until I wanted to tug at my hair. I knew I wasn't imagining the change in Maxie. We'd visited the Hellstone Ranch enough times to get to know the sweet younger sister of our buddies. She'd been kind, always had a bright smile on her face, and went out of her way to make sure we had everything we could ever have needed. Her parents had still been around then and it'd been clear she was obedient to them in ways the rest of her siblings weren't. Even when she was cleaning up after a house full of her brothers' messy friends, she'd always had a smile for us.

I understood her being angry at us and maybe even hating us for the way we'd treated her the morning after we'd kissed the shit out of her. She wasn't just angry, though. She was a wall. I hadn't seen her smile even once. Sitting next to her on the porch, I'd seen just how red and raw her bottom lip was from her chewing on it. She wasn't just angry. She was unhappy.

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I parked in front of the general store and looked back at her through the rearview mirror.

“Are you okay, Maxie?”

Her eyes snapped to mine and for a second, her mask slipped and I saw so much sadness in her eyes that I couldn’t catch my breath. As quick as it appeared, it disappeared, though.

She nodded and pushed open her door.

“I’m fine. I’ll just go pick up what I need.”

The three of us got out and followed her into the store, much to her displeasure. She’d tried to leave us behind but I wasn’t comfortable letting her out of my sight, not until I knew if she was okay, or not.

I caught up to her in the cleaning supply aisle and rested my hand on the small of her back. I felt her shiver and smiled as a bit of hope blossomed. Maybe she wasn’t immune to us. I wanted more of that human response. Leaning down, I lowered my voice and spoke so close to her ear that my mouth brushed against it.

“Thank you for helping with the house.”

She shuddered and her knuckles went white as she clutched a broom in her hand.

“It’s my job.”

I turned my back on the cleaning supplies so I could watch her face. She'd turned pink but I still wanted more.

"Do you want to know a secret, Maxine?"

Her eyes met mine finally, her curiosity getting the best of her.

"What?"

"I remember everything." I let the words hang in the air between us for a moment before smiling. "If you'd been a few years older, you wouldn't have gone home that night."

Her mouth fell open and gone were all signs of that colder version of Maxie. Her cheeks were darker pink and I could see her pupils dilate as I spoke.

"We were too goddamn old for you but that didn't mean you didn't fucking ruin us for every other woman who came after. You made this little moan when we kissed you that I still hear in my head." I moved closer and gripped her hip. "You want to know what I regret about that night?"

Her eyes pleaded with me to tell her everything but she was slowly dropping that wall back into place between us.

"No."

I squeezed her hip.

"I regret not taking you and knocking you up with our kid that night. We knew what we wanted ten years ago and we were too worried to take it. We thought you needed to live your life without being tied to three men who were too old for you.

Maybewhat you needed was us, though. I know that we have a lot of work to do, convincing you we're worth a shot again. No one has ever accused us of having poor work ethics, though, Maxine. Understand me?"

Her eyes were as wide as I'd ever seen them. Her mouth opened and closed a few times and her cheeks were bright red but she didn't slap me so I counted it as a win.

I could sense someone behind me and I turned around to see Nellie, the youngest Hellstone sister. Her mouth was hanging open as she looked between me and her sister.

Stepping away from Maxie but leaving my hand on her hip, I smiled.

"Hey, Nellie. We wanted to say congrats and apologize for crashing your wedding yesterday but you were gone by the time we finished talking with your brothers."

She was still staring at Maxie with her eyes bulging.

"Holy shit."

Rhett came around me and pulled Nellie into a hug.

"Hey, kid. Congrats on the wedding. Did I see a wild little kid running around who looked just like you yesterday?"

Nellie seemed to remember herself then. She shook her head and laughed.

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“Um, yeah. That’s Waylan, my daughter. What are... Why... How...”

Shep stood at Maxie’s other side and casually put his arm around her shoulders.

“I never knew you to ever be speechless back in the day, Nellie.”

“Yeah, well, I never knew my big sister was sneaking around, kissing grown men when no one was watching.” She reached forward and lightly slapped Maxie’s arm.

“Go, Maxie!”

Maxie finally came to her senses and pulled away from us. She didn’t look back at any of us as she walked away, muttering. “I just need cleaning supplies.”

CHAPTER 7

Maxie

I regret not taking you and knocking you up with our kid that night. Arlo’s words chased me through the store as I aimlessly circled until I was back at the cleaning supply aisle. I grabbed the things I thought I’d need but I couldn’t think straight. My brain had been scrambled by a giant of a man with hot hands and a gruff whisper. I could still feel his hand on my hip.

Knocking me up with their kid. That was something he’d thought about? The very idea of it made my blood run hot and my knees quiver. It wasn’t fair. My body had never reacted to anyone but them. There were times I’d managed to forget about them for a while and I would’ve sworn I was asexual. Only until the next thought of them

hit me, though.

I realized I was holding four of the same bottle of cleaning spray and groaned. Putting three of them back, I shook my head. I had to get a hold of myself if I was going to be able to work around them. I couldn't melt into a stupid puddle every time they talked to me. They couldn't just talk to me like that, though. No one ever had before. I was about as innocent as a woman could be and hearing them say things like that...I wasn't sure I'd survive it.

I sucked in a shaky breath and made my way to the front of the store. I wasn't sure I'd ever be ready to face them again so I figured I'd go ahead and get it over with, like ripping a Band-Aid off.

I didn't make it to the front of the store before I was stopped. Ryan St. John stepped in my path and smiled his large, bleached smile at me.

"Maxie! I've been hoping to run into you. How are you?"

I had an armful of things but I knew that Ryan wouldn't budge until he was good and ready to. Forcing a polite smile, I just managed to not lose everything in my hands.

"Good. I'm good. How are you? How are Josie and Kyle?"

"Josie turns ten this Friday. Can you believe it?" His smile got wider and I knew what was coming. A favor. "I'm so glad I spotted you. You know how you made that cake for Kyle's party last year? Stacey said you took care of it for next to nothing. Things have been tight since the divorce, you know, and I could really use a win with the kids right now. Could you make something even bigger for Josie's party?"

A wave of heat hit me and the top of my head tingled. It was frustration and it was a fast-moving train, slamming into my body. He wanted something bigger than a two-

tier cake, for next to nothing, within the week. Stacey had contacted me a month in advance to have me make Kyle's cake. She also brought me all the ingredients to save money. I knew for a fact that Ryan wouldn't be bringing the ingredients and offering to help like his ex-wife had.

Just when I thought I might say no to someone for a change, a vision of my mother filled my head. Guilting me, pushing me, demanding things from me so I didn't let anyone down. She always wanted more. Acts of service proved you loved someone, she'd always chant as she pushed a broom into my hands. Under her breath, she'd also add a line about it making that someone love you back.

"Okay. Do you know what she's into?"

Ryan shrugged. "I don't know. The normal stuff ten-year-old girls are into, I guess. Thanks, Maxie! You're a lifesaver! You can drop it off at my house on Saturday morning."

I watched him walk away and wondered when I was going to find time to make a cake. I added it to the list I had running through my head and felt my chest get a little tighter. Knowing I should've said no but saying yes anyway, made me hate myself. My parents had been gone for years but I couldn't seem to undo all of the conditioning they'd left behind. I couldn't seem to undo any of it. I knew what people thought of me, what my siblings thought of me. I was meek Maxie. I did anything and everything to be perfect, to be good. What they didn't understand was that I didn't want to. I just couldn't seem to stop. No matter how much I suffered, I couldn't get Mom's voice out of my head.

"Maxie?" Shep stepped up to me and started taking things out of my hands. "What's wrong?"

For a moment I thought of how nice it would feel to get everything out, to word

vomit all of my worries and fears at someone else's feet. It was the after that scared me too much to ever allow it. What would they think of me when they saw the real me? The real me was unlovable and ugly. I would feel better for a few seconds but then I'd be more alone than ever.

"Maxie?"

I pushed my shoulders back and forced one more brittle smile on my lips.

"Hm? I was going over the shopping list in my head. Sorry about that."

Shep's mouth turned down in a deep frown.

"What's going on with you, Maxine?"

"Nothing." I cleared my throat and kept my focus over his shoulder instead of on the worry in his green eyes. "Let's get this stuff and get back to the ranch. The sooner we get the house in living condition, the sooner we can get started on the ranch."

At the checkout, Abby Stone scanned my items while thoroughly eyeing Shep up and down. She'd been a few years ahead of me in school and she'd never been nice. Not even once. She ignored me completely, which I was okay with, and smiled a sexy smile at Shep.

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“You’re new in town. I would’ve remembered seeing you before.”

I took out my card to pay but Arlo appeared and shook his head at me. I started to argue that I could pay since I’d picked out everything and maybe they would’ve bought less, or cheaper, things. Before I could, though, Arlo wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me into his chest. My brain stuttered. Not my mouth, my words, or anything like that. My actual brain stuttered. It was like it shut down for a full second. His body was so hard against mine. And hot. He was so much warmer than I was. He was huge, too, his body surrounding mine like he could just hold me and shield me from anything and everything that could ever hurt me.

He smiled down at me and dropped his mouth to press a kiss to the top of my head.

“You looked like you needed a hug.”

My brain kicked back on and I peeled myself off of his chest. I could feel how red my cheeks were just as I could feel Abby’s gaze on me. She popped her bubble gum and I braced for her to say something mean.

Shep slid his arm around me as soon as Arlo moved and the look he sent my way was inappropriate for anywhere outside of a bedroom. He sank his teeth into his bottom lip and slowly released it while staring at my mouth. My brain forgot to send warning signs and instead it was doing cartwheels. My toes curled in my boots and it was like I was a teenager with a crush all over again. I would’ve given my boobs for a look like the one he was giving me back in the day.

“Let’s get home and get busy.” His voice was barely a growl and there was no

mistaking his meaning. He spun me into Arlo's arms and slapped my butt before turning to Abby. "Did you say something?"

CHAPTER 8

Maxie

Mortified. That's what I was. Absolutely, horribly, mortified. That was all I was, too. An entire line of people at the store had heard and watched Shep manhandle me. There'd been gasps, and not just mine. Mine had been a gasp of shock and horror. Nothing else. I tried to convince myself no part of me had liked his touch or the way he lowered his voice and looked at me like I was a warm chocolate chip cookie.

"You scrub that table any harder and the legs are going to buckle, Maxine." Rhett was laughing at me.

I could feel his eyes on me, waiting and watching for a response to The Great Slap. I wasn't going to give any of them a show, however. Nope. I was just going to clean their kitchen so they could use it and then I was going to go home and take a very cold bath.

Crack!

The table leg buckled and I would've gone down with it if Rhett hadn't been close enough to grab me. He set me back on my feet and rested his hands on my shoulders.

"You need to relax, Maxine. What do you do to relax?"

I wanted to kick and scream. The stupid table felt like a breaking point. A normal person would've taken a break and maybe talked about their issues. I'd just broken their dinner table, though, and I wasn't normal so I was in an instant panic about

replacing it. They were going to hate me if I didn't fix it, the voice in my head shouted until all reason was lost.

"I'm so sorry. I'll fix it. And if I can't fix it, I'll buy you a new table. I didn't mean to. I shouldn't have scrubbed so hard." I tried to pull away from him so I could get a better look at the mess I'd made but his fingers tightened. "Rhett, I'm sorry. I promise I'll replace it."

Suddenly I was in the air and spun around so he could put me down on the counter. He stepped between my legs and pressed his hands down on my thighs so I couldn't move.

"It's a fucking table that came with the house, Maxie. We don't care about the table. You don't need to replace it and you don't need to apologize."

He looked angry. His eyebrows were furrowed as he stared at me. I told myself he wasn't angry at me but it was like my mother was an ever-evolving disease infecting my brain.

"Breathe, Maxine. Breathe. Look at me. It's fine. It's just a table." Gentling his voice and face, he shifted his hands to cup my face. His thumbs stroked my cheeks as he continued to coach me through my anxiety. "That's it, sweetheart. Keep breathing. You're okay."

When my eyes tried to move back to the table, Rhett shifted to fill my gaze. I took more ragged breaths until it wasn't so difficult. The whole time, he stayed with me, stroking my cheeks. It grounded me, feeling his rough thumbs over and over. I calmed down faster than I normally would've. It didn't take long for the shame to hit after I could breathe normally again.

"I'm sorry. I don't normally—"

“Don’t lie to me, Maxine. If you’re about to say what I think you’re about to say, don’t. You just had a panic attack and the way you’re acting now, I know this is far from your first.” He was serious but his face was gentle as he slid his hands down to my neck, just holding me there. “What’s going on with you? Something’s wrong and we can all see it. Just talk to us.”

Danger. I pushed off the counter and slipped away from him.

“There’s a lot to do here. We should focus on work. I’m fine.”

I could feel him behind me, his frustration growing by the second. He gripped my waist and leaned in.

“We’re going to take care of you, Maxine. Whether you like it at first, or not. The way I see it, the sooner you stop fighting, the sooner we can help with whatever you’re going through.”

He walked away and I heard the front door slam but I didn’t budge. He said it like he meant it but that was crazy. They wanted to take care of me? They didn’t even know me. They were talking and acting like they hadn’t rejected me with the swiftness and harshness of a bullet, like they still had permission to touch me and boss me around. Ten years had passed but that didn’t seem to matter to them. I didn’t understand it in the slightest.

I heard someone coming towards the kitchen and dropped to my knees next to the broken table, needing something to focus on other than whichever one of them was coming to interfere. I saw Rhett’s boots and braced for more of a scolding.

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Instead, he knelt next to me and sighed.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be short with you, Maxine. It just feels like shit to see you hurting and not be able to do anything about it. You don’t trust us and I understand that. The way we left ten years ago was fucked up. We hurt you. What we should’ve done was stop and explain things. I can’t change that now but I wish you’d give me another chance. Even if you can’t stand the thought of us touching you again, at least let us help with whatever’s hurting you, sweetheart. We can all see that something’s wrong. You weren’t like this before. What happened while we were gone?”

I bit my lip hard and squeezed my eyes shut. How did they know? No one else knew. How could they see what my own family didn’t? It was the feeling of his thumb gently tugging my lip from between my teeth that almost undid me. The small act of kindness felt huge and how sad was that? When was the last time someone did something kind for me? Before them showing up, when was the last time someone touched me on purpose without needing something from me?

I looked up at Rhett and saw no judgment or anger in his eyes, only concern. Maybe I could tell him. Maybe I—

“Hey, where’s the—”

I jumped up at Shep’s intrusion and dusted my hands down my jeans while backing towards the door.

“I should get some air away from all these chemicals. I’ll just take a walk around the property and note down anything that needs done.”

I passed Arlo on my way out but didn't stop. I walked the property and then I kept walking. The same path I'd ridden Bob that morning, I walked the several miles without slowing down to think about the fact that I'd just left work in the middle of the day without telling anyone. I just wanted to be inside my little cabin, safe and alone for a little while before I had to face the world again.

CHAPTER 9

Rhett

"Well, she's not coming back." I gripped my hands together to keep from punching the wall. "She was so close to telling me something. I could see it on her face."

Shep held up his hands. "I'm sorry. I had no idea I was interrupting—"

"It's not your fault." I ran my hands through my hair and sighed. "A leaf could've blown across the floor and she would've panicked the same way."

I quickly told them about the panic attack she'd had and the way she'd reacted to breaking the table. She'd been afraid.

"I pushed too far at the store. It's my fault." Shaking his head, Shep crossed his arms and leaned back against the counter.

"It wasn't that." Arlo stood between us, his face tense as he spoke. "I watched her at the store. She was embarrassed but she wasn't upset. It was the same when I told her we should've knocked her up back then."

My mouth dropped open.

"What?"

His grin was just a flash of teeth and then it was gone.

“Yeah. I lost my head a bit. I might’ve also mentioned that moan she made when we kissed her.”

Shep grunted.

“And I thought I was pushing.”

“She wasn’t upset. She’s not hard to read, which is why I’m fucking floored that no one else seems to see anything is wrong. Every emotion shows on her face when she’s not being the weird robot version of herself. She was shocked but she was turned on. I saw it both times.”

“So she doesn’t run from the sexual stuff. Just the emotional shit. I asked her to tell me what happened to her while we were gone and I think she was going to. She’s as skittish as a wild horse, though.” My mind was already fast at work trying to figure out a way to show her she could trust us. “What do we do?”

“Do we let her hide and lick her wounds in peace or do we go after her?” Shep looked like he was leaning towards chasing after her.

“We want forever with her, right?” Arlo looked at each of us. “So we have time. We don’t need to chase her down right now. If she needs space, she can have it. For now.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that.” Shep frowned. “For ten years I was able to put thoughts of her aside most of the time but now that we’re back here, it’s like I’m addicted. I don’t think I’m going to feel okay until she’s here, with us, smiling a real smile. How the fuck did that happen so fast?”

“I don’t know but it did.” I patted my pocket to see if I had the keys. “I’m going to talk to Mills. Coming?”

“Yep.” Arlo held up the keys I was looking for and tossed them to me. “We need to get our shit here, including the other trucks. Sharing one truck again makes me feel like we didn’t just spend the last two decades of our lives making a good living.”

“Some might say more than a good living.” I stepped out of the house and my eyes naturally looked around for Maxie, just in case she had come back. Of course, she hadn’t.

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Shep clapped me on the back and pushed me forward.

“Come on. Maybe we’ll see her at the ranch.”

We were quiet on the drive over, each of us lost in our own thoughts. When I drove under the Hellstone Ranch sign I thought of the dozens of times I’d driven under it before. We’d been in our early thirties when we visited before. Fresh out of the service, we’d wanted to be home in Texas but it was a little too much to be at home with family all the time. Hellstone Ranch had become an escape, a place we could escape to. We’d kept our eyes and hands to ourselves until that one night with Maxie.

It was wrong. I knew it the first time I looked around the pasture and saw Mills’ little sister riding up on her massive horse. She was too fucking young. I didn’t want to look at her and see anything other than my friends’ kid sister but when she looked up at me with her big green eyes and her wide smile, I was fucked. Still, I knew better. Eighteen might’ve made her legal but it didn’t make it right. I never had any intention of acting on the attraction I felt for her. Until I did.

“There’s Mills.” Arlo broke me from my thoughts and brought me back to the present.

I parked next to our old friend’s truck and got out just as he was coming down the porch steps. Trying to pretend like I wasn’t there hoping to see his little sister, I smiled at him and shook his hand when he got closer.

“Hey, man. Weird seeing you two days in a row.”

He nodded. “Not sure I like it. You fuckers used to get me so drunk I couldn’t see straight for days. I’m too old for that shit now.”

Arlo slapped his hand away and hugged him instead.

“If you’re too old, I’m too old, asshole, and I’m not too old.”

“Where’s Tate and West? Figured you three would be connected at the hip still.” Shep slapped him on the back and then pushed him aside when Tate came out of the house. “There’s my favorite Hellstone brother.”

Mills crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head as Shep and Tate fist bumped.

“Y’all tired of ranching already?”

I snorted.

“Haven’t started yet. That house is in such bad shape that we have to focus on it first. We didn’t even have a place to sit down and plan with Maxie today.”

“What’s there to plan?” Mills gestured to the barn and I fell into step beside him, leaving Arlo and Shep to chat with Tate.

“Everything? You know how long it’s been since I’ve done anything on a ranch? Maxie’s going to have her hands full with us. She was talking about the fence needing repair and some other stuff this morning, but like I said, the house needs a little work so we all have a base. We couldn’t even eat in it this morning. We ate outside and Maxie’s horse decided to help himself to the food.”

He growled under his breath. “That horse is a fucking asshole.”

The barn was in better shape than I remembered. It was perfectly maintained and I could see everything expertly organized on the walls.

“Damn. This isn’t the barn I remember. Last time we were here we had to search for shit to ride. This is downright easy.”

“Maxie.” Shaking his head, Mills led me through to an office at the back of the barn. It was also perfectly clean and organized. He sat behind the massive oak desk and reached behind him to rub his back.

I knew all about old injuries still giving you pain. I’d taken a bullet to the stomach while we were overseas and it’d done enough damage that I still woke up hurting a few times a week.

“Heard from any of the others lately?”

“Shit. You don’t know? I can’t believe you didn’t see them yesterday. Those fuckers, Dean, Lennon, and Reed, married Vera. She’s pregnant. Looks like she’s going to pop any second.”

“No shit.” I laughed. It seemed like we weren’t the only old friends of his that were sniffing around his sisters after all. Not that I was going to tell him that. “I can’t believe you didn’t mention that yesterday.”

“I’ve accepted it but that doesn’t mean I love it and want to brag about it.” He sighed. “First Vera and now Nellie. Gray, Owen, and Keaton got married a couple of years ago. They have triplets now. With Nellie’s girl, this place is going to be full of kids if we ever have a reunion. I’m just waiting on the news that Kyle, Jamison, and TJ have eloped or knocked someone up.”

I couldn’t help myself. “And Maxie?”

He didn't blink twice and it almost made me feel like shit that he didn't think twice about us going after her.

“Maxie is Maxie. She's a good girl but I think she's going to be one of those old cat ladies.”

“The fuck?” I sat forward, unable to contain my annoyance. “Why would you say that?”

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“She doesn’t go out. She doesn’t date, doesn’t see friends, doesn’t do anything but work and ride that asshole horse.” He shrugged. “I don’t want her to end up alone but if she doesn’t get out, she’s going to.”

I had to change the subject or I was going to spill all the beans and tell him that she wasn’t going to be alone for much longer.

“What about you, Tate, and West?”

“What about us?”

“When are you going to settle down and have a few babies of your own?” I heard movement from outside of his office and glanced up to see Maxie standing in the doorway, a surprised look on her face. I raised my eyebrows at her.

Her cheeks heated but she quickly tucked her chin so she was staring at the ground.

“I’m making lunch.”

Mills watched as she retreated and shook his head.

“She didn’t have to come home to make lunch here. I’m sure someone could’ve handled it. To answer your question about kids, though... No. I don’t think any of us want kids. I know I don’t.”

I stood up, prepared to go after Maxie but his answer made me hesitate.

“You come from a massive family. Doesn’t that mean you automatically have to want ten children or something? Is that not how it works?”

He grunted. “Nope. It’s precisely the reason I don’t want ten kids. There’s always something going on and never any peace and quiet. No, thanks. What about you?”

I sat back down, hoping for a way to ease him into the idea of Maxie becoming ours.

“You know Arlo, Shep, and I want to share a wife. Hell, some of the rumors about the relationships in Devil’s Den were why we were so eager to jump on the ranch when you called us. We’re ready to settle down as soon as possible and start a family. We want kids, man. Lots of them. As many as our future wife will give us. That ranch house is a piece of shit right now but I can imagine it being full of kids. It’s big enough.”

Mills sighed and studied me.

“I don’t get it. The sharing thing, I mean. It seems to be catching around here, though, so I guess you’re in the right place. I’d say stay away from my sisters but Maxie is the only single one left and god knows she’s not going to date you three.”

I couldn’t help scowling. “No?”

“That girl is scared of her own shadow. She barely even talks to us. No way in hell would she ever go nuts like Vera and Nellie and date three men at once.” He stood up and laughed. “Thank god I have one sister I don’t have to worry about.”

I ground my teeth together. His dismissal of Maxie pissed me off. Did everyone in her family write her off like he was? They had their ideas of who she was but I knew for a fact there was a fire in Maxie that only needed to be stoked.

“I think Maxie might surprise you one of these days.”

“I hope not. I like not having to worry about her. Vera and Nellie have given me gray hairs.” He led the way out of the barn. “You staying for lunch? She always makes plenty.”

I saw that Arlo was talking with West and Tate and wondered where Shep had gone. “Sure. Sounds like a plan.”

CHAPTER 10

Shep

I stood just inside of the kitchen, watching Maxie work. She had her back to me and hadn't noticed me yet so I got the chance to watch her without her putting her defenses up. It was warm in the kitchen and she'd stripped out of her flannel overshirt and was moving around in a white tank top that was making my mouth water. Her ass filled out the worn jeans she wore so well that I had to shift my stance so my pants weren't so restricting. I moved closer, unable to stay away. I knew it was a dangerous game, getting closer to her in her brothers' house but I'd already lied to get inside by saying I needed the bathroom. I figured I might as well push the bounds and test my luck.

Maxie spun around suddenly, reaching for a towel, and flinched when she saw me standing there.

“Shep! What are you doing?”

I took her in, from the way her chest pushed the limits of the tank top to the pink flush on her face from being in the warm kitchen. She was stunning, more stunning than I could resist. I moved closer to her, watching as she backed away, until her back

hit the counter behind her. I trapped her with my hands on the counter on either side of her hips.

“Shep...” She swallowed, her throat flexing, and looked around nervously.

“I just wanted to check on you. And maybe drag you back to the ranch. But now that I’m here, I’m having a hard time thinking of anything other than kissing you.” I groaned at the way her eyes widened and her lips parted on a sharp inhale. “Do you know how hard it is to resist your lips right now, Maxine?”

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Her pupils dilated, leaving just a narrow ring of green showing as she nervously licked her lips. She saw the way my ways tracked the movement and flushed an even deeper pink.

“N-no.”

I lifted my hand and lightly grazed my knuckles over her jaw, watching the way she leaned into the motion.

“If we weren’t standing in your brothers’ kitchen I’d show you. You’re irresistible, sweetheart.”

She searched my face, looking for what, I didn’t know. The longer she watched me, though, the hotter her cheeks became and I thought maybe she was realizing just how serious I was. She looked down at her feet and let out a surprised gasp when I pinched her chin between my thumb and pointer finger to lift her face again. Her breath came faster as I slid my hand into her hair and held her there.

“I’m sorry.” The words surprised both of us. I hadn’t meant to say them at that moment, but they were on my mind. “For how we treated you when you were younger. We were wrong in how we handled that morning after. You deserved more. You still do. If you join us for dinner tonight, we can sit down and talk about it.”

She blinked a few times and I felt her shutting down on me, could see it in the way her eyes slid away and wouldn’t meet mine again.

“I make dinner here. I’m sorry.”

“Someone else can’t cook for one night?” I dipped my head to try to snag her gaze again.

Something about what I’d asked pushed a button for her, though. Tension filled her face and she slipped under my arm to get away from me.

“There’s no one else to do it. It’s dinner for more than ten people; it’s not so easy.”

I swore as I heard voices coming closer. Still, I couldn’t help myself. I pressed myself into her back and brushed my lips over her shoulder.

“After then.”

“They’re coming.” Her breath came faster and she nervously looked over her shoulder at me. The movement put our mouths close together and a wild amount of heat filled her eyes.

I hardened against her back at the heated expression. I got the feeling the added tension of being busted with me lit her fire and I let out a quiet groan.

“Say yes. Come over tonight.”

She licked her lips and opened her mouth to answer but it was too late. I had to pull away from her so it wasn’t obvious I’d been about to hump her leg like a teenager. She swallowed and turned back to the stove just as her brothers walked in with Arlo and Rhett.

“Get lost on your way to the bathroom?” West studied me with a raised eyebrow. I’d been closest to him back in the day, his laid back attitude matching my energy more than either of his brothers.

I let a slow smile shift my face into something nonthreatening, doing my best to appear like I wasn't planning on defiling their little sister.

"Do you smell the smells coming out of this kitchen? I never even made it to the bathroom. My stomach took charge."

"What are you making, Maxie?" Tate joined his sister at the stove and groaned. "Are you frying chicken? Dear god, you're an angel. Your fried chicken is the best."

Arlo leaned against the island and I watched as he struggled to keep his eyes away from Maxie's ass.

"Who's going to take over feeding you assholes when Maxie is working full time at the new ranch?"

Mills frowned. "If she can't handle the ranch and cooking, we'll figure it out."

Maxie's spine stiffened and her face was carefully blank when she looked back at her brother.

"I can handle it."

"With the cakes, too? I ran into Ryan St. John and he said you're making a cake for his kid's birthday this weekend. He went on and on about how sweet you are for doing it for Josie for free." Tate's eyes were narrowed at Maxie, his arms crossing over his chest. "Are you into Ryan?"

I wanted to break something. Whoever Ryan was, he had a target on his back if he ever even looked twice at Maxie.

"What? No. Of course, not." Maxie frowned and shook her head, the only sign she'd

shown of anything other than quiet acceptance of what was happening around her.

“Then why are you doing cakes for free? You have to be tougher than that, Maxie. You can’t give away everything.” Tate ran his hands down his face, looking exasperated. “It’s a good thing you aren’t running a ranch by yourself, kid. You’d let people walk all over you.”

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I got it. I understood where Tate was coming from. His desire to protect his little sister and his inability to read the tightness in her spine meant that he didn't realize he was hurting her. I didn't like the idea of her giving her hard work away for free, either, but calling her out for it in front of a group of people wasn't the way to go.

Maxie, in a display of epic self-control, smiled up at Tate and held out a plate of chicken.

“You're right. Here's lunch. I already have potato salad and rolls on the table.”

I shared a look with Rhett but before I could think of something to say without showing all our cards, a commotion at the front of the house drew our attention. I looked back and saw six dirty ranch hands coming closer with hunger in their gazes. I straightened, ready to fuck them up over the way they were looking at Maxie but then I realized they weren't looking at her, but the food. I watched in stunned silence as they didn't acknowledge her at all. They lined up to grab food and then settled on the table to eat. No one said thank you. No one even said hello.

Mills, Tate, and West were just as bad. With the distraction of the ranch hands, they didn't say anything else to Maxie and she just faded into the background to all of them.

I cracked my neck from side to side and blew out a sharp breath. They treated her like she wasn't there at all and for some reason, that was worse than if they'd teasingly flirted with her.

Maxie

I stood at the kitchen sink, doing my best to disappear into the cabinets. Normally no one talked to me during mealtimes. They got their food, ate it, and left. I'd already been so tightly strung from whatever Shep had been doing just before everyone came in that when Tate had given his impromptu business lecture I'd been tempted to run away. Worse still was that my new bosses hadn't left. They were staying for lunch and I could feel their eyes on me. They weren't letting me disappear.

"Are you going to sit down and eat, Maxine?" Arlo's voice called out over everyone else's conversations, his tone hard.

My face was on fire when I glanced back at him and shook my head.

"I already ate."

He stood up from the table and picked up an extra plate. Filling it, he didn't seem to care that the table had gone silent. Walking over to me, he put the plate in my clammy hands and then grabbed my shoulders. Steering me over to the table, he pushed me down in a chair between Shep and Rhett. "

Liar."

My palms burned as I dug my nails in deep. Mortification stained my entire body deep red and I couldn't imagine taking a single bite of the food without choking on it. My mouth was a desert and my tongue was a lump of meat cooking in the sun.

West broke the silent spell that had fallen over the table.

"Well, shit, Maxie. What were you waiting on?"

I glanced up and saw that they were all staring at me. My stomach twisted and I thought I might throw up but Rhett put his hand over mine under the table and laughed easily.

“Having to watch a tableful of men scarf down their lunch isn’t exactly appetizing, huh? I get it. The first time I watched Tate eat I thought someone was pranking me.” Rhett shuddered. “It was like watching a giant squirrel with anxiety. The way he just kept shoving shit in his mouth... I still get nightmares about it.”

And that quickly, the conversation turned away from me and the awkwardness vanished for everyone else. Not for me, though. I was still crawling on the inside but at least no one was watching me.

Rhett leaned closer to me and spoke in a low voice that no one else heard.

“Trade you my roll for your chicken leg?”

I jerked my head in his direction, unsure if I’d heard him right. Was he asking me to trade food like we were sitting around a school lunchroom? Sure enough, he was holding out his roll under the table with a serious look on his face. Something about it broke through the tightness in my chest and I laughed. It was probably closer to a giggle but I wasn’t sure I was comfortable admitting he’d made me giggle.

His eyes lit up as he watched me.

“Come on, Maxine. I’ll give you my roll and take over a ranch chore you hate.”

I bit my lip and looked at the platter on the table still halfway full of chicken. I couldn’t help the smile that slid over my face. It felt like slipping on a new version of my favorite shirt, the size and material were the exact same but it didn’t sit with the same familiarity. How often had I genuinely smiled in the last few years? Not often if

my smile felt foreign on my lips.

“Are you going to leave me hanging, sweetheart?”

I glanced around the table and saw that no one was paying any attention to us. Quietly slipping my chicken leg off the plate, I held it out to him under the table and gasped when he yanked both his roll and my chicken away.

“Sucker.” He took a big bite out of the chicken and grinned at me.

It was so stupid and silly but I was struggling so hard to not laugh that I snorted. My eyes went huge and I could feel a rare attack of laughter coming on but I choked it down when I felt everyone staring at me. I kept my face down and cleared my throat.

“Sorry. Allergies.”

“Bless you.” Shep sounded like he was going through his own struggle to not laugh and it made it even harder for me to keep myself together.

I didn’t let loose in front of my brothers. Or anyone. The idea of erupting into a fit of giggles in front of everyone at the table was so horrible that I decided I had to escape before I did. I pretended to see something out of the window behind Arlo and stood up.

“Jolene must need something. I’ll go see what it is and clean up when y’all are done.”

Tate looked out the same window I had and raised his eyebrows.

“Are you and Jolene sharing thoughts now?”

I nodded without paying any attention to what he said and got out of there as fast as possible. I barely made it out the front door before a strange sounding bubble of laughter erupted out of me. It had me doubled over, clutching my sides, with tears leaking down my cheeks. I didn’t even know what I was laughing at anymore but the sensation made my head buzz. I covered my mouth with my hand to try and stop it but it was like the dam had burst and I couldn’t stop.

I probably looked insane as I made my way to the barn because I was fighting the laughter but giggles kept breaking free. My face and abs hurt from all the usage.

“Holy shit.”

I jumped at the sound of Jolene's voice. My laughter turned into hiccups and I couldn't do anything more than stand in the entrance to the barn and wonder exactly when I'd lost my mind.

"Are you...giggling?" Jolene had been a friend of my mothers and was one of the best riders I'd ever known. She was a championship rider but she was even better at breaking wild horses so we could save them instead of allowing the government to kill them. She was intense, to say the least. She was also one of the only people I felt close to comfortable with because she'd been around until the end with my mom. She knew things that no one else alive did.

I tried to hold my breath to stop hiccupping but it was no use.

"I don't giggle."

She stared at me for a few more seconds and I felt like a frog on her exam table.

"Uh-huh."

I looked over my shoulder at the house and blew out a short burst of air.

"I was just laughing. It was nothing. Do you need any help?"

"Aren't you supposed to be at the new ranch? Why are you here, trying to help me?" She jerked her head towards Bob's stall. "When are you taking that asshole to the new ranch and leaving him there?"

Bob responded like he knew she was talking about him, throwing his head back and chomping his teeth at her. I pressed my lips together, determined to stave off any more laughter. But then Bob lifted his tail and let out the loudest fart I'd ever heard.

Jolene stared at me with wide eyes as I erupted in laughter again. I couldn't help it, though. It was like the rubber bands holding me together had finally snapped.

"It was only a matter of time before you snapped, kid. Just don't murder anyone and we'll be good." Jolene shook her head at me but there was a smile playing at her lips. "I guess you could murder someone if you really wanted to. Who am I to tell you what to do?"

CHAPTER 12

Maxie

I decided I would go back to the ranch after lunch but I made the choice to set up in a far corner of the property and work on the fence there first. I worked until the sun went down and then rode Bob home to my little cabin. Once I was inside and showered, I looked at my phone and saw I had missed messages from all three of my bosses.

Arlo: You still didn't eat anything, Max. I'm bringing home a plate for you.

Rhett: Where are you? We're back at the ranch and we can't find you.

Shep: You can run and hide, sweetheart, but it won't change anything. We have unfinished business.

I dropped my phone like they were somehow watching me through it and I was doing something wrong. Shep's words hit me harder than the rest, the reminder that we had business at all enough to make my core clench. If he meant the kiss we'd shared ten years earlier, what was unfinished about it? There was a ten-year gap, that meant the business was finished.

Yet... It didn't feel that way. Seeing them again and spending time with them was taking me right back to that night. I'd always been a good girl, never one to earn my parents' ire. I played every role I was supposed to. So what if I didn't have friends? So what if I spent more time on the ranch than in school? I still got great grades, good enough to get a full ride to any college in Texas that I wanted to attend. Not that I ever left for college.

That night ten years earlier had been possibly my one and only break from the strict life I led under my parents' thumb. It was late and I'd had to be up before the sun to start my morningchores but I'd seen them earlier that night, my brothers' friends and the men I had painfully inappropriate crushes on. They hadn't looked like themselves. They'd looked...broken. So I stayed up late and snuck out with a basket of my baked goods for them. I told myself that if they were already inside their cabin and asleep, I'd leave the basket and go. They weren't inside, though. They were outside, sitting around a fire, the smell of beer and liquor stronger than the burning pine.

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The three of them had looked up at me and I could see how haunted they were in the reflection of the fire in their eyes. Older than me by around fourteen years, I had no business sneaking out to see them. Once I was there, though, I knew I wasn't leaving until I made sure they were okay. I fed them from my basket and hurried around them, cleaning up the empty cans and bottles, along with the cigarette butts they'd smoked. I'd never seen them smoke before so that had shocked me. They'd stretched out by the fire, seemingly content to watch me. Until watching wasn't enough.

It was Arlo who moved first. Arlo, the most stoic out of the three of them, had cracked before his best friends and he'd done it by catching my hand when I moved past him and tugging me into his lap. I'd fallen with all the grace of a foal just out of the womb but then I was in his lap, his hands on my waist, the waist that was supposedly too big to catch a husband, according to my mom. He'd stared into my eyes for what felt like an eternity, his eyes so dark and with my body blocking the fire, they appeared black.

I should've gotten up. That's what a good girl would've done. For just five seconds, I didn't want to be a good girl, though. I wanted to be the fire that burned in his eyes. Instead of scrambling out of his lap, I moved my hands from his shoulders to his neck and leaned forward, offering myself to him. I didn't know what I was doing but I wanted a kiss. When Arlo groaned and closed the gap between our mouths, I'd whimpered. I'd never felt anything like it. His rough beard around my mouth, his tight grip on my waist, the hardness I was sitting on, it was explosive.

I struggled to keep up with his mouth, trying to mimic what he was doing to me, but he growled and nipped my bottom lip, forcing me to hesitate. Then he absolutely plundered my mouth. I was floating into the clouds overhead, my heart beating as fast

as a hummingbird's wings. They moved almost as one as Shep and Rhett moved closer and Shep pulled my mouth from Arlo's to kiss me himself. I had my first kiss on the laps of three grown men who tasted like tobacco, whiskey, and the chocolate muffins I'd brought over.

Shep's kisses had been playful but when Rhett pulled me into his lap, the play was gone. He pulled me over his lap so I was straddling him and he held my head in his hands while he kissed me out of this world and back again. He bent me backwards and I'd rocked against the hardness under me, seeking relief for the ache between my thighs, when Arlo snapped out of whatever daze he'd been in.

That quickly, the kisses were finished. I hadn't worried, though. I'd been kissed by my crushes and I was floating with the clouds. They'd gone quiet but that hadn't worried me, either. I was too young and dumb to read the meaning behind the campfire so they'd sat there, getting drunker and drunker, while I imagined what life with the three of them would be like. I wasn't even giving the dream space for my parents' disapproval. That was how much I wanted them.

When the three of them were hammered enough to pass out that night, I'd used all of my strength to get them inside their small guest cabin. I struggled with each of their massive bodies and then silently pulled their shoes off and tucked them into their beds. I'd even left glasses of water on the nightstands next to the bed, worried about how they'd feel when they woke up. I'd pressed a kiss to each of their foreheads and I'd snuck back home with the childish notion that the next morning would be the start of the rest of my life, a life I'd planned instead of dreaming that night.

They didn't come to breakfast the next morning, though. With a growing sense of worry, I'd packed another basket of goodies and rushed to their cabin in time to find them loading up the jeep they'd arrived in. The back gate was rusty and it screamed when Arlo slammed it shut, having just loaded the last of their bags. They'd been surprised to see me. Then, they'd been quiet. Quiet was bad, I quickly learned. Then

came the hit. They barely remembered the night before but whatever they'd done, they were too drunk to know any better and it would never, ever, ever happen again. They'd emphasized just how thoroughly it would never happen again until it was almost cruel and I had to bite a chunk out of my tongue to keep from sobbing. All my dreams and heart filled doodles crashed and burned.

They'd shown me once that taking risks with your heart was stupid. It ended in pain. I learned that breaking the rules and daring to dream bigger than my parents wanted me to was a bad idea. That was a lesson I learned time and time again towards the end of my mom's life. It was better to follow the rules and stay small, invisible. Do for everyone else and never complain. Veering from that meant pain. They'd shown me emotional pain but later I'd learned a different, physical pain. One that cemented the conclusion I'd come to that morning after our kiss. It was better to stay in line and do what I was supposed to.

CHAPTER 13

Maxie

I slept like crap and then woke up extra early to cook two different breakfasts. It was the morning I took breakfast to one of the local groups who'd asked me for the donation. I laid breakfast out for the Hellstone Ranch and packed up enough to carry to the new ranch for the guys. Then I loaded up the things I'd made to carry to Samantha Drury's Baptist Women morning meeting. It was too much to carry on Bob so I took my old car and drove into town. It felt like no one else in the world was awake yet and I rolled my windows down to let the chilled morning air rush in and tangle my hair. It was a close second to how riding Bob felt.

I pulled over in front of the Third Baptist Church, named that despite there being no first or second Baptist church in town, and looked at my phone for the time. I was early by a few minutes and Samantha was typically late. Movement from across the

street caught my attention and I watched Sugar Moore struggle to climb over the fence behind Steve Samson's house. From where I was parked, I could tell that Sugar looked like she was doing a walk of shame and a giddy little part of myself, way down deep, imagined what it would be like to call Vera and gossip about it. We didn't do that, though. I wasn't even sure Vera liked me.

Sugar finally made it over the fence and she stopped to look around before taking off at a sprint down the street, in the opposite direction to me. I'd heard Vera talking about Sugar and Steve and it seemed like she was right. That, or Sugar had just murdered Steve and was sneaking away after getting it done. She was a dentist, after all.

Before I could condemn the older woman as a murderer, Samantha's face appeared in my window, causing me to jump. I swallowed down a scream and got out to help carry in the food.

"Thanks, Maxie. You're a real doll." Samantha carried one box while I carried the other four. She walked ahead of me, her big hair bouncing with every step. "Speaking of... Have you heard about that club your sister started? Doll's something or another? Do you know anything about it? I'm trying to get enough information to shut it down. This town has enough dark influences; we shouldn't have to worry about women going crazy and whipping off their clothes, too."

I didn't like lying but I wasn't going to help Samantha take down a group that Vera and Nellie both seemed to love. They'd even invited me to join them. Not that I would ever, but still.

"I'm sorry, I haven't heard anything."

She shot me a look but didn't argue.

“Oh! While I have you here, I need your help with something.”

I put all the boxes of baked goods down on the entry table and subtly rolled my sore shoulders.

“What is it?”

“It’s a petition. I know we try this every year, but I think we’re going to make it happen this year. You know why?” She held out the easily recognizable petition and grinned at me. “Because we’re going to have you!”

My face paled. The women’s group Samantha was in charge of wanted to change the name of the town and all subsequent schools and mascots. They felt Devil’s Den was sacrilege and that the school mascot, the Devils, was spitting in the face of god. Devil’s Den got its name from my family, though, and I didn’t see anything wrong with it. Changing it would be expensive and a waste of time.

“The blessing of you still being single and without kids is that you have more time to donate to good causes! I know you’ve got the time, Maxie. We just need your help making baked goodies to hand out and it would also really help if a Hellstone family member joined our forces.” She grabbed my arm and squeezed. “It’s brilliant, right? I already told the girls you’d help. Of course, you’ll help. You’re Maxie. You always help.”

“Um... How many baked goods were you thinking?” How did I get out of it? I wanted to flee but the same old anxiety that told me if I walked away, she’d hate me filled me with dread. I didn’t want anyone to hate me.

“Oh, a couple hundred a day for a week or so. Nothing crazy!”

I took a step backwards and gripped my hands together behind my back. I’d moved

on from my palms to my cuticles when my palms hurt too much. Four fingers were already bloody.

“Oh, um...”

“It’s a good plan, right?! Thanks, Maxie! You’re amazing.” She patted my shoulder. “Are you staying for the meeting? It’ll probably be boring to you, since it’s just family talk. We love to complain about the husbands.”

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Her laughter was like shards of glass hitting me all over. I backed away a few more steps and bumped into the wall.

“Of course, but I should go.”

I hurried back to my car and didn't stop to let it all sink in before driving to the Mays' ranch. I parked down the road so the guys wouldn't hear me and then I snuck up to the porch to leave their breakfast before hurrying back to the section of fence I'd worked on the day before. It was a long walk but it was only after I'd tightened a few pieces of wire that I felt like I could breathe again.

The sky was dark overhead, like a storm was coming, but no one knew where I was and no one could ask for anything. I was alone. Just like always. I glanced toward the shadow of the house in the distance and rubbed at my chest. I was fine being alone. I wasn't lonely. It didn't matter what Samantha thought. It was perfectly fine to not have a husband or kids. I didn't need any of that. I had Bob and he was great.

The sky opened up over me as a summer storm rolled through. I was drenched through in what felt like seconds and wincing as the chilly rain stung when it hit my bare skin. The sun would've been barely peeking over the mountains had it not been for the storm clouds and without it, the chill in the air sank deeper and deeper into my bones.

Thunder rolled and lightning cracked across the sky but I didn't move. I stared up at the sky and let the rain prick my face over and over again until it puddled in the inner corners of my eyes and in the dip over my cupid's bow. For a second, I wished the rain would wash me away. I was tired and I had the overwhelming sensation of being

more invisible than I'd ever wanted to be. No one knew who I was. No one cared. As long as the things I did continued to get done, I could fade away and no one would notice.

Tears mixed with the rain, leaving warm streaks until the rain regained control. My entire life felt like a carefully constructed box. I felt trapped in my coffin decades before I should've been. It should've been easy to break free; my parents were gone. It wasn't easy, though. Change was so terrifying that even thinking about taking a step back from the tight box I lived in made my heart race painfully.

I never allowed myself to break for long so it was only a few minutes of thinking about the what-ifs before I got back to work. My tools slipped from my hands and I scratched myself against the jagged wire more than once but I'd finished a long section of fencing before lunch. Then, like the perfect sister I was, I got back in my car, soaking wet, and drove back to the family ranch to change clothes and cook lunch.

CHAPTER 14

Maxie

The chill still hadn't left my body, even after standing over the hot stove for half an hour, breathing in the comforting smells of chili and cornbread. I filled bowls and put them on the island just before everyone came in to get lunch. The routine was back to normal with no one doing more than grunting at me as a thanks. At least I thought it was a thanks. I stayed over the stove after everyone had sat at the table and dug into their meal, dying for more of the warmth to soak through my thick jeans and warm flannel overshirt. I had to admit I'd been stupid to stay in the rain when I couldn't seem to warm up.

A loud knock on the front door announced Arlo, Shep, and Rhett's entrance. I could

feel their eyes on me and hoped they'd let me stay invisible in my little corner of the kitchen.

"You keep showing up to eat our food and we're going to start charging you." Mills laughed easily. "Grab a bowl and join us. You can tell us about the ranch."

"Maxie didn't tell you anything?" Arlo sounded irritated. There was a tension to his voice that made me feel on edge. Especially since I felt like it was directed at me. "The ranch is fine. While we were distracted getting our shit delivered last night and this morning, your sister was hard at work repairing fencing."

I didn't look back at them. How did they know?

"She's so fast that we almost missed her. Except we worked late last night installing a security system with cameras that tracked our ranch manager working her butt off, even in the rain this morning." Rhett's voice leaned towards anger, too. "If I'd caught on earlier, I would've had her working inside out of the rain."

I pretended to stir the chili. I wanted the floor to open up and suck me down, away from the silence that stretched after their words.

"Why the hell were you working in the rain, Max?" Tate called from the dining table, meaning I had to turn to look at him.

When I did, my eyes crashed into three very angry gazes pinned on me. I cleared my throat, the feeling scratchy.

"Things have to get done. The faster the fence is finished, the faster cattle can be brought in."

"Have you eaten?" Shep moved closer, his arms crossed over his wide chest. "You

look pale.”

I swallowed down the urge to cry again and forced a smile.

“I’m fine. Grab a bowl and sit with everyone while it’s still hot.”

“You heard her, boys. Grab a bowl and sit down.” West held up his glass. “Can you bring more sweet tea over?”

The pitcher was heavier than I remembered it being as I picked it up and skirted around my new bosses. I went around the table and refilled the glasses that needed it and I was out of breath by the time I put the pitcher down on the island.

I had scribbled down a loose schedule when I hadn’t been sleeping the night before for the cake preparation for Josie’s birthday. I didn’t have much time so I took advantage of my lunch to get out everything I needed and whip together a simple white wedding cake. It was a favorite for kids, especially when I added the Funfetti sprinkles. Even exhaustion couldn’t break my stride while baking. I put everything together and slid the cake pans into the double ovens, setting timers to go with the different sizes.

I took out my list and crossed off baking the cakes. I still had so many things to do, including making a smaller cake for Janet and Frank Parris, a couple celebrating their fiftieth anniversary. I’d almost forgotten it. Cooking three meals a day at the ranch, making and decorating the cakes, and making six dozen cupcakes for the girls’ summer camp party was a lot to handle when I wasn’t supposed to be taking over a new ranch.

A heavy feeling settled over me. Maybe that was why my brothers hadn’t wanted me to take over the ranch alone. They knew I couldn’t handle it. No matter how hard I tried, I still couldn’t hide that I wasn’t perfect. They knew I couldn’t do it all. I was

going to prove them right. I knew I was. I was going to fail and—

The first timer screamed, the sound making me flinch hard enough to knock a glass off the counter. I gasped and dropped to my knees to clean up the shattered shards. The timer continued screaming. I was kneeling on broken glass, the pain in my knee sharp. I had to turn the timer off. The cakes. The cakes had to come out of the oven. If they burned, I'd have to start all over. The glass, though. Someone would hurt themselves. The timer screamed. My knee felt wet. More cuts on my hands. The timer. Oh, god—

Strong arms wrapped around me, yanking me off the floor and into their arms. I was weightless and flying through the air. My heart pounded at my sternum, asking to come out. My face felt wet. Cold. So cold.

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“Turn the goddamn timers off, get the cakes out of the oven, and meet me at her cabin.” Rhett. He was angry. At me?

I tried to open my eyes but the cold pricks were back on my face. Turning away from them, I tucked my head against the hard warmth next to my cheek and inhaled the familiar pine and leather scent. They were there. My guys. They were back.

“Jesus, sweetheart, I’m going to bend you over and spank the hell out of your ass when you’re feeling better. You haven’t been taking care of yourself. That ends now.”

I groaned and pressed my face into him harder.

“Momma didn’t spank.”

A low grunt of laughter.

“I’m not your momma, baby.”

A crack in my chest grew wider.

“Momma hit.”

Stillness and silence cloaked me and as soon as the cold pinpricks stopped hitting my face, it was enough to soothe me to sleep. The darkness felt better than the crushing weight of the world closing in on me. The darkness was a reprieve.

CHAPTER 15

Rhett

Maxie's cabin was bare. I hadn't been sure I'd brought her to the right cabin until I inhaled her scent as it filled the small space. The bed was bare. One blanket, one pillow. The desk was bare, except for one phone charging cord resting on top. The bathroom held only the barest of essentials. Shep had more shit in his bathroom. There wasn't a TV, a radio, a fucking clock on the wall, even. It was like she didn't live there at all. I didn't understand.

I stared down at her sleeping form and brushed a shaking hand over her hair. The rain had dried, leaving her mass of curls a wild mess. Her face was flushed with a fever and she'd been groaning and talking in her sleep.

Momma hit.

The broken words she'd uttered had left me reeling. She'd sounded like a scared little girl and it was tearing my heart apart for her. When she was still like she was then, I could notice more about her. The raw state of her lips, the dark circles under her eyes, the bloody crescent moons dug into her palms. Even her fingertips were raw and bloody. She was tearing herself apart, bit by bit.

There was a knock on the door and I looked up with a scowl as Mills came in. No amount of friendship or battles shared with the man could make me forgive him for the state of his little sister. He was supposed to care for her, look after her, but all he'd done was ignore her and let her work herself to the bone. I'd pried her fingers open to reveal a list of the things she needed to do and I wanted to break Mills' face. All of their faces. Everyone in town deserved a hard kick in the ass, as far as I was concerned.

“How is she?” Mills walked closer but he stopped when he saw my face. “What, Rhett? Spit it out.”

Shep and Arlo had begrudgingly gone back to the ranch to accept more deliveries and set up a room for Maxie. She was sick and she needed someone to watch over her. That wasn't going to happen at the Hellstone Ranch. That much was clear. I'd stayed, with the promise that I wouldn't shoot Mills on sight. I was regretting that promise right then.

“What the fuck has been going on here?” My voice was too sharp and Maxie whimpered in her sleep. Staring down at her, I took a deep breath and stood up. “Outside.”

Mills didn't seem thrilled but he stepped out onto the miniscule porch ahead of me and turned around in time for me to plant both hands against his chest and shove him off it. We were the same size, each solid with muscle, so it would be a fair fight if I snapped and kicked his ass.

“She's not okay. She's had two panic attacks that I've witnessed, she's been hurting herself, and she's so worn down that it didn't take more than a few hours for her system to just give up the fight after being in the rain this morning. What the fuck has been going on? She said your mom hit her. What the fuck, Mills?”

Mills ground his teeth together but he didn't swing at me. He stood in the rain, his cowboy hat keeping it from his face.

“What do you mean, she's hurting herself?”

I grabbed the front of his shirt and yanked him closer.

“Go in there and fucking look at her!”

He shoved me away and I watched him stride across the small space and freeze as he hovered over Maxie. I watched him pick up her hands and gently touch her chin. I was furious, my anger demanding a body to damage but the air was knocked out of me when Mills slowly stepped back out on the porch and looked past me, eyes shining with unshed tears. I'd known him for over fifteen years and had seen heavy shit with him at war but I'd never seen him like he was right then.

“How?” His voice broke and he stomped back out into the rain.

I couldn't stop myself from asking my own questions.

“Why haven't you been taking care of her? She does fucking everything for everyone. She feeds you and this entire ranch every single day and you never stop to look at her, to notice how brittle she is? Jesus fuck, man! What the hell happened to her? Did you know your mom abused her? If you fucking knew and you let it—”

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He swung around and shoved me into the cabin wall.

“Our mother never hit her! She never hit anyone. You didn’t hear her right. She would never say that!”

I let him pin me to the wall, both of us breathing hard as we glared at each other.

“She’s coming to our ranch with us. You’ve proven that you can’t take care of her.”

“Hey! Knock it off! Both of you!” Jolene stormed onto the porch and shoved Mills away from me. “What the fuck’s going on? Why are you two idiots out here fighting on Maxie’s porch?”

Mills backed away, hands held in the air.

“Maxie’s sick. She’s running a fever.”

Jolene moved past us, knocking into both of us as she did. I stared at Maxie’s sleeping form as Jolene bent over and checked on her. She was too still, too...far.

“You’re not taking her away from here. She’s our sister and she’s in better hands here. You don’t know anything about her. You’ve been working with her for less than forty-eight hours. You don’t get to come in here and act like you’re her protector.” Mills got in my face again. “I don’t know what’s going on with her right now but it’s for me and my family to figure out and take care of. Not you.”

Jolene stepped back out, closing the door behind her.

“She’s burning up. Would one of you like to stop dragging your knuckles around like baboons and take her to the doctor?”

I didn’t hesitate. Swearing to myself about not doing that right away, I went in and wrapped Maxie in her sad, single blanket before lifting her into my arms. She was so limp against my chest that I panicked a bit. Gently shaking her, I whispered her name, my voice harsh with fear.

She roused just enough to frown and then went limp again. It was enough to have me sprinting out of the cabin and towards my truck.

“I’m taking her to the clinic. You can come or not, Mills, but I’m taking her.”

CHAPTER 16

Shep

I met Rhett at the clinic and slipped into the room behind Mills before he could close me out. Rhett was sitting on the exam table with Maxie in his arms and she looked worse than before. Her skin was paler than I’d ever seen it with bright red splotches on her cheeks from the fever she still hadn’t broken. I felt sick. Had we missed something? Was she sick, more than just the fever? She’d been acting differently than we remembered, but was it a symptom of a bigger illness? Had she hidden something?

I inched closer, needing to see for myself the rise and fall of her chest. The closer I got, the more I noticed, though. Her lips were bruised and looked raw. I watched the doctor pick up Maxie’s hands and sucked in a sharp breath at the sight of her bloody palms. “What happened?”

The doctor looked over at me and frowned.

“Who are you?”

“Shepherd Winston. We’re going to be taking care of Maxie. What happened to her hands?”

“I’m Doctor Bianca Shawn.” She looked at Mills. “You’re not going to be taking care of Maxie?”

Before Mills could answer, Rhett cut in.

“Does it look like he’s been doing a bang-up job of taking care of her, Doctor? Maxie’s coming home with us. She’ll have someone with her twenty-four seven. Just tell us how to help her.”

I looked between Mills and Rhett and stepped closer to my best friend and brother. Whatever I’d missed between the two of them, it hadn’t been pretty, I was guessing. Rhett was right, though. Maxie had gotten as sick as she was in Mills’ care.

“I don’t have the time or energy in my clinic to entertain testosterone-driven bullshit. I don’t care who takes Maxie home as long as they take care of her. From what you told me, it sounds like she’s under a lot of pressure and is exhausted. Her immune system is probably shot, so being in the rain today was enough to wipe her out. Whoever takes her home needs to be sure to get plenty fluids in her and—”

“I’m okay.” Maxie’s voice was hoarse as she blinked awake. She looked around the room and a crooked grin lifted her mouth on one side. “Is this a party?”

Doctor Bianca cupped Maxie’s face gently and smiled.

“Sure is, honey. A party just for you. I need to ask you a few questions before I prescribe you medicine. Is there any chance you could be pregnant?”

Maxie's cheeks went even redder as she giggled. She tried to wave her hand and ended up just flopping it down on her leg.

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“Can’t be pregnant unless it’s imac-, imaccu- Oh, what’s the word? When you get pregnant without sex?”

The doctor laughed.

“Immaculate conception?”

Maxie snorted.

“Yeah, that. I’m a...”

We all leaned in.

“A virgin.” Maxie turned unfocused eyes on me. “Coulda lost it at eighteen but no one wanted it. I’m an old... Old Maid! Like the game.”

Mills swung around like there was something he wasn’t supposed to see.

“Make her stop talking.”

I wasn’t sure I remembered how to breathe. I locked eyes with Rhett and he seemed to be as shocked as I was. My stomach twisted and sank all at the same time. She was a virgin.

“Bianca?” Maxie snuggled into Rhett’s arms tighter. “Your office chairs are great. This one’s a little pokey but I don’t mind.”

Rhett's face went redder than Maxie's. He cleared his throat and brushed her hair out of her face.

"Alright. So, medicine?"

I looked up when the door opened and four more Hellstones filed in, one being so massively pregnant that she was using her brothers to keep her steady. The small room got much smaller, especially when the door opened again and Arlo stepped inside.

"Okay, this is ridiculous." Doctor Bianca shook her head. "Who even let you back here?"

"What's wrong with her? Is she okay?" Vera wedged herself closer to her sister. "Maxie?"

Maxie's head rolled back and forth on Rhett's chest. "Whoa. Did someone die? Why is everyone here?"

"We're here for you, Maxie. Tate called us and told us you passed out." Nellie held Vera's hand, both of their eyes filled with concern.

"No one comes for me. No one comes for Maxie." Maxie's bottom lip poked out, the state of it knocking a gasp from both of her sisters. She whimpered. "No one cares about Maxie."

It didn't make me feel less murderous to see tears in her sisters' eyes. They'd let Maxie feel that way. I didn't understand how but in the ten years we'd been gone, they'd somehow dropped the ball so magnificently that Maxie felt alone and uncared for with the weight of the world on her shoulders.

I moved forward, putting myself between Maxie and her family. “Just tell us what to do and we’ll take her home. To our home, where she’ll be cared for.”

“No, she’ll come back home, where she lives.” Tate shot me a dark look. “You don’t even know her.”

Rhett’s voice was quiet as he spoke, the darkness in it landing just as heavily as if he’d screamed in their faces.

“Home? To a place where everyone is so willing to take from her without giving a thing in return? That’s the home you want her to go to? The home that allowed her to get to this point? Where she’s so distraught that she’s dug holes in her palms and chewed her lips bloody? There is nothing any of you could say that would make me feel okay about leaving Maxie with you. No. We’ll take her to our home and we’ll take care of her, the way she should’ve been taken care of all along. She won’t be cleaning your house or cooking every fucking meal for you anymore. She’s not coming back there until she’s well enough to decide for herself.”

They all looked at Mills but he was staring a hole in the floor, shoulders hunched. With a deep sigh, he ran his hands over his face and shrugged.

“Fine.”

West and Tate started to argue but when Mills turned and left the room, they swore and hurried after him. Tate stopped in the doorway and glared at me.

“I want a text every other hour about how she’s doing.”

Vera looked conflicted about leaving Maxie with us but Nellie wrapped her arm around her sister.

“They’ll take care of Maxie. Maxie has her own little pack of rabid dogs protecting her now. Just like you. Just like me.”

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Doctor Bianca snorted.

“Straight people are so strange.”

Vera looked at each of us, eyes watery but intense.

“Is that right? The three of you are going to be there for Maxie? For real?”

Arlo stepped away from the wall he'd been leaning against and I could see the way his eyes scanned Maxie, looking for more damage no one had noticed.

“Maxie is ours.”

Maxie had passed out again but she chose that moment to try to lift her head. Her eyes rolled as she fought to stay awake but she was fighting a losing battle. Still, it didn't stop her from grumbling one more thing at us.

“Maxie is mine. Me.”

Nellie grinned.

“Seems that our sweet big sister is going to make you work harder than that.”

CHAPTER 17

Arlo

Maxie had been asleep for over twenty-four hours. She'd roused enough a time or two to ask for the bathroom or water but other than that, she slept. Hard. After her fever broke she didn't talk anymore or reveal anything else to haunt us. No one cares about Maxie. Rhett told us about the way she'd uttered that her momma hit. I'd known Jenny Hellstone as much as a grown man got to know his buddies' mom but she'd never seemed violent towards her kids. I knew that looks could be deceiving, though. I also knew that Maxie was the kid who'd stayed with her parents before they died. When everyone else was doing their own thing, Maxie had taken care of them. Was that when the bad shit happened?

I had a million questions I wanted to ask Maxie but mostly I just wanted her to open her pretty green eyes and look at me. My chest had been in a knot since I'd watched her go down in the kitchen. I'd seen some of the most fucked up shit overseas but somehow seeing Maxie go down was among the worst.

Shep came into the upstairs room we'd turned into her space and handed me a cup of coffee.

"Anything?"

I blew out a breath and shook my head.

"It's about time for more medicine."

He knelt next to the bed and stroked her hair out of her face. Her curls were wilder than ever and bounced right back. Cupping her face, he pressed his lips to her cheek and sighed.

"Time to rejoin the living, sweetheart."

Rhett leaned in the doorway, watching.

“I’m going to call the doctor again. I know she needs rest but maybe something’s wrong.”

“Leave the doctor alone.” Maxie’s voice was scratchy and broken. She coughed and groaned. “Need a bath.”

“I’ll run one in my bathroom.” I hurried to start the water, happy to have something I could do to help. It’d been brutal to feel so helpless as she’d lain there, suffering.

They’d already gotten her up on her feet when I went back to her room. She was unsteady and didn’t protest when Shep scooped her into his arms. He carried her to my bathroom and put her down in front of the toilet.

“Go pee, Maxine.”

She scrunched up her face.

“Are you crazy?”

I laughed, over the moon to hear her getting a little sass back.

“Let him help you get your pants down and then we’ll turn around so we don’t see you peeing.”

She was just as outraged.

“I do not need help getting my pants down. Darnit.”

I watched with my lips rolled in to stop a laugh as she struggled with her pants until finally she leaned her forehead against the wall to balance herself and then managed to work her pants halfway down her thighs. Unable to watch her struggle any longer I closed the distance between us, ignored her gasp, and pulled her pants and panties the rest of the way down. Then I promptly turned around to give her privacy.

She huffed but a second later I heard her peeing and the relieved sigh she let out.

“Where are we?”

I waited until I heard her flush to turn back around. I hadn’t expected her to be bent forward so far as she tried to get her pants off her feet. In slow motion she fell off the toilet, landing on her hands and knees in front of it in a position that would’ve had me begging if there wasn’t a toilet between her legs.

“Sonofa— Monkey’s butt. This is...” She let out a massive sigh. “Help me.”

I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her to her feet. I kept my eyes on her face as she kicked the rest of the way out of her bottoms.

“Ready for your bath?”

She was already so tired. Instead of telling us to get out and kick rocks, she just

nodded and swayed into me.

“Don’t look at my stomach.”

I didn’t understand what she meant until she lifted her arms over her head and stood there, waiting for me to take her shirt off. I let out a string of expletives in my head as I kept my eyes on her forehead and higher as I pulled her shirt off. Reaching around, I undid her bra and then held my breath as I helped her to the bathtub.

It was a cruel punishment to have her plaster her naked breasts against my arm as she struggled to get into the bath without falling. I was in pain by the time I got her lowered into the water. My dick felt like it was going to burst it was so hard but I ignored it.

“I’m okay now, Arlo.” After my name left her lips she slipped down in the tub and would’ve gone under if I hadn’t caught her. She let out a sound that was half laugh, half cry. “Don’t let me go.”

I glanced back and saw that Shep had left us alone. There was no one else to hold her up while I strangled my dick to make it go down. Instead, I swore and climbed into the bathtub behind her, wrapping my still clothed body around her so she was secure.

“I’ve got you, Maxine.”

She rested her head on my shoulder and pulled my arm to her chest, hugging it to her body. She either didn’t realize or didn’t care she was holding my hand to the underside of my breast. I realized and I cared. Too much. When I tried to shift my hips away from hers so she wasn’t feeling my erection, she grunted and pressed into me even harder.

“Just want to enjoy this for a bit longer.”

I stilled.

“The bath?”

She sighed and stroked my arm.

“The caring.”

I held her tighter.

“That won’t end, sweetheart.”

“It always ends.” I could tell she wasn’t fully back to herself with how openly she was speaking. “It always goes away and leaves me so cold.”

I couldn’t help it; I had to hold her even closer. I turned her around so she was straddling me and wrapped my arms around her so I could hold her tight.

“That’s not going to happen with us, Maxie. We’re never going anywhere and you’re never going to be cold again.”

She pressed her face into my neck and her soft breath sent a shiver up my spine.

“I don’t feel good.”

“I know, sweetheart.” I stroked my hands up and down her back. “Let me wash your hair and then we’ll get you back in bed.”

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She let out a sad whimper. “Don’t let me go.”

Rhett stepped into the bathroom and nodded at me. “I’ll take care of her hair.”

I had her tip her head back so he could wash her hair and we would’ve stopped there but she made a negative sound. I cupped the back of her neck, thinking we were straining it, but she grunted again.

“Conditioner. You have to use conditioner.” She looked back at Rhett and the motion left her chest open for my eyes.

Despite fighting the urge, I glanced down and then slammed my eyes shut. I was already hard but seeing the full globes of her breasts dipping into the water between us sent so much blood rushing to my cock that I felt lightheaded for a second. “Jesus.”

“Keep your shit together, brother.” Rhett rubbed conditioner into Maxie’s hair and blew out a sharp breath. “Alright, Maxine, let me rinse this out and then we can get you back to bed.”

She went limp and sighed.

“Okay. Whatever you say.”

CHAPTER 18

Maxie

I startled awake at the sound of a muttered curse. My head throbbed and my mouth was almost painfully dry but I was instantly in prey mode. No one should've been in my cabin. How'd they get in? When I looked around, though, I realized I wasn't in my cabin. My heart thumped harder until I recognized the figure coming towards me in the dark. Shep.

“Shit. I'm sorry, sweetheart. Did I wake you up?” He knelt next to the bed and reached up to press his hand to my forehead. “You haven't run a fever in a while so it looks like you're on the mend.”

I blinked at him, confused about what was happening. Where was— I gasped and then grabbed my head in both hands as it throbbed.

“Oh, god.”

“What? What's wrong?” He pulled me off the bed and into his arms, cupping my face in his big hands. “Talk to me, baby.”

“I have to go home! I have so much to do. How long have I been here? I need to go.” I winced. “My head hurts so bad.”

He held me in his lap and tucked my head under his chin.

“You don't have to go anywhere. You're sick, Maxine. You aren't doing anything except going to the bathroom and getting right back in bed. I'll get you some medicine for your head.”

“No, Shep, I have work to do. I have—”

“Nothing to do.” He leaned back and looked me in the eye. “We took care of it.”

My stomach sank. “What do you mean?”

“Ryan St. John got a cake from the grocery store and we made him pay for it. The cake for the anniversary couple wasn’t as good as the one you would’ve made, I’m sure, but the couple loved it apparently and want you to get well soon.” He saw my eyes go wide and smiled. “Also, your brothers are feeding themselves and no one’s died from food poisoning yet. Some of the ranch hands are threatening to quit if Mills doesn’t learn to cook more than eggs and grilled cheese.”

“I have to go and take care of it. I need to apologize to Ryan and Janet Parris. I can—”

“No.”

I snapped my mouth shut and just stared at him for a few seconds.

“What do you mean?”

He stood up and pulled me to my feet.

“I mean no. You’re not going anywhere, especially to work. You’re sick. And since you can’t be trusted to take care of yourself, we’re stepping in. You’re on house arrest until you’re healthy again. Don’t think your brothers are coming to save you, either. They know you’re here and they know we’re forcing you to stay in bed until you’re better.”

The throbbing in my head was too much. I couldn’t fight with him when I couldn’t think straight.

“This doesn’t make sense.”

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“Come on. Let’s get you to the bathroom and then back to bed.” Instead of letting me walk on my own, Shep picked me up and carried me to the bathroom.

I had a hazy memory of falling off the toilet and being naked in a bathtub with Arlo. My body flushed as I realized they’d seen me naked. I’d been too sick to recognize their reactions so I’d never known how they felt about seeing me. I didn’t love my body. I struggled to accept all the parts of me and I hated knowing they might’ve seen things they didn’t like.

“What are you panicking about, Maxie?”

I stood in front of the toilet, bladder near bursting, but I was frozen.

“I was naked.”

He frowned and nodded.

“You were. We didn’t take it lightly, sweetheart. We kept our eyes to ourselves. When you decide to show us your beautiful body, it’s going to be willingly and eagerly.”

I looked away and swallowed.

“I have to pee.”

He turned his back to me.

“Go on.”

I wanted to shove him out of the bathroom but I didn't have the energy. I gave up and peed, blushing the entire time. I felt like I'd been dropped into a different world and I was confused. I could feel things scratching at the edge of my conscience, demanding attention, but I couldn't get there in my current state. As I finished up and struggled over to the sink to wash my hands, I did my best to make sense of things.

“Where are we?”

Shep pressed into me from behind, grabbing a towel to dry my hands.

“Our house. We cleaned out the cobwebs and put together a few things to make a space for you. Are you hungry?”

I was too overwhelmed with the feeling of him at my back to answer. My stomach wasn't as easily distracted, though. It growled loudly and Shep laughed.

“Let's go see what we can find.”

I stayed silent as he picked me up again and carried me down the stairs and into the kitchen. Arlo and Rhett were sitting at a brand new kitchen table, a pie from the diner between them.

“Look who's up!” Rhett saw me wince and lowered his voice. “Sorry. Headache?”

I nodded as Shep put me down. Before I could answer, Arlo pulled me into his lap and held me there. I squeaked and looked over my shoulder at him.

“What's happening?”

His grin was devastatingly handsome.

“Hungry?”

I took a deep breath and nodded.

“I have to go home.”

Shep clicked his tongue at me.

“I’ve already told her she’s on house arrest.”

“There’s nothing for you to worry about right now, Maxine. Everything is taken care of. All you have to do is rest and get better.” Arlo stood up and handed me off to Rhett. “We bought a bunch of different soups for you. You want tomato? Chicken noodle? Vegetable?”

Rhett cradled me to his chest and I got lost for a moment, feeling babied in a way I’d never been before. I closed my eyes and willed the emotions to go away. All my defenses were down and I felt like I was being attacked on all sides with their attention and charm.

“Pie.” I muttered the word and nodded to the pie on the table. I wanted sugar.

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Rhett held me as he leaned forward and pulled the pie closer. He used one of the forks already sticking out of the pie pan to cut off a bite and offer it to me. When I took the bite, he grunted and shifted me on his lap. I wasn't sure why until I felt it. He was hard under me. I was sitting on his erection.

I must've stiffened because Rhett immediately fed me another bite of pie and whispered into my ear.

"Ignore it."

I wanted to snort. Easier said than done. I'd never sat on a man's lap and felt an erection grow against my butt. It was natural to shift, to try to adjust the hardness under me, but I didn't dare move. I wasn't sure I was even breathing. He felt so big. And hot.

"She's gotta eat something more nutritious, too. Pie isn't going to help her get better." Arlo pulled a plastic to-go container from the new fridge and read the label. "Chicken noodle soup from the diner it is."

I paused. "From the diner? They don't sell chicken noodle soup."

His grin was mischievous. "They do if you ask them very, very nicely."

I'd asked for chicken noodle soup once and I'd been told to order off the menu like everyone else. For some reason, it made me want to pout that Arlo had managed to order off the menu. He was brand new to town. I'd lived in Devil's Den my entire life.

“Are you pouting, Maxine?” Shep knelt in front of me, his smile bright. “That’s adorable.”

CHAPTER 19

Maxie

The next time I woke up in their guest room, I knew where I was and I felt mostly human again. I sat up and looked around, noting it was dark out. My stomach clenched with nerves at how much time I’d been asleep. I’d missed so much that I could feel peoples’ disappointment oozing over me. I had commitments I was blowing off and the longer I slept, the worse it was. I’d never taken so much time to just sleep. When Mom was sick, towards the end, I’d learned to operate on less than five hours of sleep a night.

I stood up on shaky legs but after a second, they were fine. I went to the bathroom and even found an extra toothbrush and toothpaste waiting on the counter for me. Looking at myself in the mirror, I couldn’t help wincing. I was a mess. My hair was matted at the back and sticking out everywhere else like I’d stuck my hand in a bathtub while holding a toaster. Despite all the sleep I still had dark circles under my eyes. I was in a t-shirt that was at least two sizes too big for me and, I nearly swallowed the toothpaste, no panties.

Where the hell were my panties?

I looked around both rooms I’d been in and found no other clothing. The t-shirt went to the middle of my thighs but I’d never been so exposed in someone else’s house. I was scared to leave my room for fear of flashing someone. Except I had to leave because my stomach felt like it was eating itself.

Slowly creeping out of the room, I tripped over Shep’s stretched out legs. I would’ve

gone down hard but Shep managed to reach up and catch me. With his hands on each of my thighs, he lifted his brows at me.

“Falling for me?”

I stepped away from him, letting his hands fall back to his own legs, and tried to awkwardly stand so the shirt was covering more of me.

“I just need some food. Then I can go home and get out of your way. Why are you here anyway?”

“I was making sure I was close enough to hear if you fell. But now, I’ll switch to chef duty. What would you like?” He stood up and lightly gripped the back of my arm. “You seem a little clumsy so I’ll help you down the stairs.”

I wanted to ask for my panties. I wanted to call one of the two cabs in Devil’s Den and go home to my cabin. Mo’s Yellow Taxi was so slow I could’ve walked home faster but Rudy’s Uber had banned all Hellstone’s after a particularly drunken night shared by my older brothers, Gray, Owen, and Keaton. I thought maybe Rudy would make an exception for me but I wasn’t sure enough to risk it.

“The inside of your head has to be as loud as a tornado siren, sweetheart. What are you thinking about?”

“Leaving.” I nearly choked trying to get the word back in my mouth. I hadn’t meant to say that out loud. “I mean... I’m sorry.”

He led me through the darkened house and into the kitchen where he sat me down at the table before turning the light over the oven on. It cast the kitchen in shadows and made Shep seem even larger.

“Why are you sorry?”

I sat up straighter and winced as my back ached. Just how long had I been in bed? I called on all my manners and tried my best to put some distance back between us, despite the fact that I wasn't wearing panties.

“Y'all have been taking care of me and I'm really grateful for everything. I didn't mean to come off as rude or unappreciative. I do need to go back home as soon as possible, though. I have to get back to work.”

Shep remained silent as he put a bowl in the microwave and waited for it to heat up. After enough time passed for me to start feeling itchy with nerves, he looked at me over his shoulder and shot me a devastating grin.

“What don't you understand about house arrest?”

A flush worked its way up my neck.

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“That was a joke, obviously. I’m a grown woman. You can’t decide to lock me away.”

He grabbed what turned out to be chicken noodle soup from the microwave and brought it over to the table with a spoon and a bottle of ginger ale. He spun a chair around and sat on it backwards, a little closer to me than necessary. Resting his forearms on the back of the chair, he nodded to the soup.

“Eat.”

I wanted to argue but the smell of the soup reached me and I decided I could argue later. After one bite I decided I wanted to sue Devil’s Diner. How Don Doler could rationalize giving the best soup I’d ever eaten away to the new guys in town after denying me, made zero sense. I inhaled it and it was only the scrape of my spoon against the bottom of the bowl that slowed me down.

“Want more?”

I thought about them seeing my bare stomach and shook my head.

“No. I don’t need it.”

Shep scowled and then went about getting me a second bowl. He put the second bowl down a little harder and pinched my chin between his fingers to lift my face towards his.

“I’m willing to bet that I wouldn’t like what’s going on in your head right now.”

I pulled away and ate the second bowl slowly, taking my time to appreciate it and enjoy the warmth it filled me with. It was safer to get lost in that rather than whatever was happening with the guys. I felt like I'd missed a lot while I'd been asleep and I wasn't sure where to start untangling it all.

"While you're finishing that, you can listen to me and let me explain a few things." Shep's tone was serious as he watched me. I'd never heard him sound as intense, as he was typically the relief between the three best friends, from what I'd always seen anyway.

"We talked about it and we've decided that we can decide to lock you away. You're fucking brilliant, Maxine. You're a hard worker, you're a talented cook and baker, you're kinder than anyone should ever be, but you're shit at taking care of yourself."

I sucked in a noodle when I gasped in indignation. I was more than a little flattered at the kind things he'd said but I chose to focus on the last part.

"I'm an adult and I've been taking care of myself for a very long time, Shep. I do it just fine."

"Bullshit. You worked yourself half to death, Maxie. You were so sick that you probably don't remember half the shit you said to us. You've slept on and off for three days straight. You've been exhausted for a long time, I'm betting. It's not in my nature to overstep and tell someone what to do because I've never enjoyed having it done to me, but I'll be damned if I sit back and watch you kill yourself for a bunch of goddamn assholes who don't even take the time to properly thank you for all that you do." He was breathing hard by the end of his speech, his face foreboding in the shadows of the kitchen. "Until you're healthy, by our standards, you're staying here. You're not taking care of anyone else or working on a fucking thing."

My blood ran cold.

“What did I say to you while I had a fever?”

He let out a loud sigh and looked away.

“It doesn’t matter right now, sweetheart. What matters is that you get better.”

“What did I say, Shep?” I held so many things inside that the idea of spilling any of them made me want to scream.

When he looked back at me with pity in his eyes, I knew. I knew what I’d said before he even spoke the words.

“You said your mom hit you.”

I stood up so fast that my chair tipped over.

“I was lying.”

He stood up and faced off with me.

“No, you weren’t.”

Panic clawed at my throat and stole the oxygen from the room. When I tried to dig my nails into my palms, Shep was there, stopping me. I needed the sharp bite to remember I was alive, though. I needed the pain but he wouldn’t let me have it.

“That’s done. You’re not hurting yourself anymore, Maxie. We’re taking care of you now and we’re not going to sit by and leave you in whatever pain you’re in.” He held my hands so I couldn’t get to my palms and lowered his voice. “Breathe, sweetheart. Everything’s fine. I’ve got you. I’m right here and nothing’s going to hurt you.”

“She didn’t!” I gasped the words out, more desperate to get my secrets back inside than I was for breath. “She didn’t hit me!”

“Shhh, Maxine. Just breathe for me.” Shep gripped both of my hands behind my back with one hand and held me tight with his other arm. “In and out, baby. In and out.”

CHAPTER 20

Rhett

I hadn't been sleeping very well but it wouldn't have mattered if I was in the deepest sleep ever; the pained cry coming from down the hall would've had me up and running to see what was happening. I got tangled in my sheets and nearly ended up in a pile on the floor but I caught myself and rushed out, colliding with Arlo as I did.

“What's going on?”

He grunted and pushed past me.

“I don't have a fucking clue.”

He made it to the room a few steps before me and whatever he saw made him freeze in the doorway. I shoved him out of the way so I could get inside the room and instantly understood why he'd stopped cold. My breath caught in my lungs. There was nothing that could have prepared me for the sight of Shep holding Maxie while she sobbed. I quickly saw that he wasn't just holding her. He was sitting on the ground, wrapped around her in a way that kept her hands open and away from each other. He looked as panicked as I felt but his voice was soft as he gently spoke to her.

“You're okay, sweetheart. We're here for you and nothing's going to hurt you ever again. I swear to god, Maxie, you're safe now. Just breathe for me. In and out. That's a good girl. Do it again, just like that.” He looked up at us and I could tell he had a lot he wanted to say but he couldn't with Maxie in the state she was in.

I sat down on one side of her while Arlo took the other and we each held her hands, keeping her nails away from her still healing skin.

“Hey, baby. It’s good to see your pretty eyes again.”

Arlo stroked her hair out of her face.

“Yeah, it is. Look at you, Maxine. Stuck with us for a few days and we’ve already pushed you to tears. Are we that bad?”

She looked up at me with such large eyes filled with tears that I would’ve promised her the world if it meant she’d stop crying. Her bottom lip trembled and she let out a sound that was part laugh, part sob. It was painful to hear her in so much pain.

“We had soup downstairs and then I accidentally made her cry... I thought if I could get her into bed, it would be better. I didn’t mean to wake you guys.” Shep tipped his head back and looked at the ceiling. I could see how overwhelmed he was and I felt a bolt of fear that maybe it was proving to be too much for him. I should’ve known better, though, because the next thing he did was hold Maxie even closer and bury his face in her hair.

“I’m not letting you go, sweetheart. I’ll hold you all night and all day if it makes you feel even a little bit better.”

Maxie finally went limp in his arms, her tears falling silently as she refused to look at us. Her shame was so evident that it might as well have been as real as me or Arlo sitting beside her. I hated to think about her beating herself up about anything, much less being filled with anxiety, when it was something that couldn’t be helped without therapy and time.

I sat back against the bed next to Shep, Maxie’s hand still tight in mine.

“For a while when we returned to civilian life, I had panic attacks. It was fucking awful. The first one left me shaking for days. I felt so weak. I thought I should’ve been able to handle the things we saw at war, I thought I was handling it until suddenly I wasn’t. It fucking sucked to accept that I wasn’t some hardened manly man who just ate that shit for breakfast and kept it moving. I only started therapy to shut these two assholes up but it was the best thing I could’ve done. I learned a lot of coping skills. I also learned a lot about myself and how I needed to be easier on myself.”

Her hand tightened on mine.

“Do you still have them?”

It was a kick in the chest to hear just how shaky her voice was.

“I haven’t in a long time. I think talking about the shit in my head got me halfway to feeling better. And then time and these guys got me the rest of the way.”

She swallowed so loud that the sound filled the room.

“I don’t want to be like this.”

“Like what, Maxine?” Arlo pushed her hair behind her ears. “How do you think you are?”

“I think I’m broken.” She tried to bite her lip but Arlo gently pulled it free from her teeth. She sighed and rested her head on Shep’s shoulder. “I have things to do and I should be able to do them. It’s pathetic. I need to be better. I need to prove that I’m good enough.”

I sat forward and cupped her face in my hands.

“Good enough for who, Maxie?”

Somehow her eyes grew even wider. She clamped her lips shut and shook her head. She'd said more than she'd meant to.

“Good enough for your mom?” Shep's question was barely audible but it made Maxie shake even harder than before.

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“Nothing was good enough for her.” With a long sigh, Maxie forced herself out of our holds and stood up. “We should all get some sleep. We still have a long way to go before the ranch is operational.”

Arlo was fast to his feet and he immediately tugged her into his chest.

“You’re not doing anything until we know you’re healthy again. You need more rest and that’s the only reason we’re not going to push you to tell us more.”

She looked like she wanted to argue but she managed to hold it in.

“Okay.”

Shep stood up and stretched.

“Which one of us do you want to sleep in here with you?”

Her head snapped around to face him.

“What?”

“One of us is going to stay in here with you to make sure you’re okay. I won’t be able to sleep if I can’t stop worrying about you, sweetheart.” He saw her start to argue. “Humor me? Please, Maxie.”

She visibly gave up, her shoulders sinking. Looking around at the three of us, she shrugged and then pointed at me. Her cheeks were already red and splotchy from

crying but they went even redder.

“I’m okay, though.”

None of us felt the need to argue with her. Arlo and Shep both kissed the top of her head before leaving me alone with her. I could tell she was uncomfortable and didn’t know what to do with me staying in her room with her so I gently took her hand and pulled her to the bed. I knew I was probably pushing my luck but I couldn’t imagine being in the same room and not holding her. I stretched out on top of the blanket and held it up for her to climb in.

She let out a soft sigh but she slid under the blanket, staying as far from me as she could. When I wrapped my arm around her and tugged her into my side, she gasped.

“What are you doing?”

I smiled into her hair.

“Holding you. It’ll make me feel better.”

“Why?”

“Besides the fact that you’re a beautiful woman and holding you would make any man feel like a million bucks? I want to hold you, Maxie. Maybe it won’t make everything better for either of us but it’ll feel fucking nice anyway.” I held her even tighter, bundling her and the blanket in my arms. “I should’ve held tight ten years ago. I’m sorry I didn’t, sweetheart.”

She was quiet for a long while and I eventually thought she’d fallen asleep. Then, in a soft, shy voice, she spoke.

“Maybe it’ll make some things better.”

CHAPTER 21

Maxie

“We need fucking curtains.”

I opened my eyes and winced at the hot sun pouring in through the six-foot-tall windows. Had I been sleeping through that amount of sunshine every morning? How many mornings? My brain struggled to get started but as I processed what had woken me up, Rhett’s voice, it kicked my brain into overdrive. Rhett was in my bed. Technically, it wasn’t my bed, I guessed, but he was in the bed I was sleeping in.

I slowly rolled my head to the side and the sight of him stretched out next to me was a lot for my poor mind to handle. On his back in just a pair of flannel pajama bottoms, Rhett had his arms folded behind his head with so many arm muscles on display that I felt my mouth water. Even the small tufts of hair in his armpits were somehow attractive. His eyes were still closed tight so I had the chance to check out the tattoos covering his upper chest and arms.

I recognized traditional Navy tattoos, not unlike the ones my brothers bore, and several I wanted to trace with my fingertips to find where they ended. The crisp black lines were beautiful over his tan skin and I wondered for a moment what I would look like with a tattoo. My mother hated tattoos. Even her golden boys, Mills, Tate, and West, hadn’t escaped her harsh judgement for the tattoos they’d brought home. The tattoo I’d want came to me instantly, and no matter how much I knew it would never happen, I couldn’t help picturing the art I’d want of Bob’s handsome face. He was where I felt the safest. He would be the only thing I’d want on my skin forever.

Bob. I sat up with a gasp and already had one leg out of the bed when Rhett’s arm

snapped out and wrapped around my waist to tug me closer to him. He only seemed satisfied once I was half ontop of him. His eyes stayed closed but his lips were tipped up in a sexy grin.

“It’s too early for you to start worrying about things, Maxine.”

I braced myself with my hands on either side of his head and he didn’t hesitate to adjust me so that I was completely on top of him, my knees on either side of his hips. I sucked in my stomach and arched my back so I wasn’t resting my weight on him.

“Rhett!”

Like he could sense what I was doing, he wrapped his arms around my back and tugged me down. Once I was fully splayed out on top of him, he grunted and kissed the top of my head.

“That’s more like it.”

I chose to ignore the pulsing need exploding between my thighs and focused on not crushing him.

“Rhett, stop. I don’t want to hurt you.”

His eyes popped open and squinted against the sun. He scowled at me even as his hands settled on my hips and held me firmly against him.

“How the fuck are you going to hurt me?”

I swallowed, suddenly very nervous. I was straddling him in a bed and I could feel him harden against my core in a way that felt both terribly taboo and terrifically erotic. It all felt like a prelude to something bigger.

“Fuck this.” Rhett moved so fast I barely had time to panic before I was spread out beneath him, the blanket that had separated us tossed to the floor. He settled his weight between my thighs and tangled his hand in my hair.

“You don’t get how beautiful you are, do you? Not just beautiful, though. You’re

painfully sexy, Maxie. Ten years ago, I kept it in my pants because you were too young for us. You're not too young for us anymore. You're making it very hard for me to play nice and keep my dick in my pants. Especially when all I want to do is spread you out and lick you from head to toe."

He was very hard between my thighs and pressing against me in just the right way to make my toes curl. My arms were limp against the bed over my head but I couldn't touch him. I slowly brought my hands to his shoulders and ran my fingers over them. I heard his soft intake of breath and looked up at him, intrigued by just how wide his pupils had gone.

"You want to touch me, sweetheart?" He waited until I nodded to roll us over so I was on top again. "Then touch me. I'm yours, Max."

I sat up and stared down at him, amazed by the man beneath me. He had no idea how intoxicating his words were; he couldn't. I'd dreamed about him being mine for too long, even when I hated myself for it. I knew he wasn't, not really, but that didn't stop me from touching him like he was.

I started by slowly running my fingertips over the designs of his tattoos. When one of the lines took my finger past his nipple, I heard the way his breathing changed and moved back, wanting that sound again. Stroking my finger around his nipple and then over it, I glanced up at his face and saw his jaw was tight and his eyes were squeezed shut.

"I'm sorry. I... Does it hurt?"

He grabbed my hand when I tried to pull away.

"It doesn't hurt."

It seemed like he was in pain but I selfishly didn't want to stop touching him. I moved to his other nipple and gasped when he rocked his hips, nudging his hardness against the bundle of nerves that seemed to be driving me that morning. I liked that feeling. A lot. I rocked my hips forward and back again, chasing it.

"Don't stop, Maxie." His voice was strained as his hands landed on my hips and squeezed. "Don't you dare stop."

I changed my movements so I was rolling my hips over him and I pressed my flattened hands against his chest hard as I found the spot he'd teased again and again. Shivers went up and down my spine as I tipped my head back. The feeling was bigger than anything I'd ever felt before. I'd secretly touched myself a few times but it'd never felt like how I felt right then, like I was flying across open land on the back of Bob, the silence in my brain only outdone by the happiness and sunshine filling me from the inside out. Riding Bob was cathartic and freeing. Riding Rhett, and I accepted that that was exactly what I was doing, was wild but I felt more secure than I'd ever felt with his hands grasping my hips so tight.

"Fuck, Maxie." Rhett reached up and grabbed my hair, using his grip to pull me down so our foreheads were pressed together. "Come for me, sweetheart."

"I don't think—"

"It's not up for debate, baby. Come on me." His growl of a command and the way his normally bright blue eyes were practically black made me feel like I was on top of a beast barely hanging onto its grip on humanity. It should've scared me. It didn't.

I sucked in a sharp breath and held it as the wildness inside me grew larger, strangling out everything that wasn't pleasure. It consumed me little by little until I felt the first twitch of an orgasm tighten my muscles. It was wrong. It was bad, what I was doing. I needed to stop. The quiet voices were no match for the loud moan that

escaped my lips and filled the room. I gripped handfuls of the bedding under us as my body went stiff and then melted all in the same second.

“Fuck!” Rhett bucked against me as the muscles in his neck pulled tight. His grip on my hip was bruising but I didn’t care. Everything felt too big, too good to think of bruises or other consequences. My world had narrowed to just him and the way he’d made me feel.

My body turned to goo as the pleasure turned from a scream to a whisper and I collapsed on top of Rhett, unable to move even if he’d shouted that I was crushing him. It was impossible when my bones had melted.

Rhett panted under me as his pained expression turned into one of bliss. His big body went soft under me, everywhere but where I’d just ridden him. That part was still very much hard.

“I’m gonna marry you one day, sweetheart. You know that right? You just made me come in my fucking pants like a boy and the only way I’m going to get past that is if we go ahead and commit to forever.”

My heart pounded even harder.

“Shut up.”

He groaned.

“If you try to leave now, I’m going to be forced to crawl after you on my hands and knees. Shit, sweetheart. Being inside you is going to kill me.”

I still managed to blush, even after what I’d just done. I couldn’t admit I was a virgin. It was humiliating. I also wasn’t going to be stupid and let myself believe that one soft moment with him meant they cared about me or would stay. That had nearly destroyed me the first time but I was ten years smarter. At least I hoped I was.

It took longer than I thought it would for the shame to hit. When it didn’t hit as fast or as strong as I expected it to, I felt more shame over that. I had my mother’s voice in my head, chanting at me that no one would buy the cow if the milk was free. She’d loved to say that and then laugh like her calling me a cow was an inside joke between the two of us.

I scrambled to climb off Rhett and then stared down in horror at the mess I’d left on his pajama bottoms. The wet spot was like a beacon of my shame, lighting up and flashing that I’d done something horrible. Before I could flee the room, Rhett was there, grabbing my upper arms and holding me still.

“Stop.” He nodded down at his pants, making me cringe. “That’s a fucking badge of honor. I turned you on enough for you to soak me. I feel like a fucking god. I’m going to wear these until I have to change for work because it’s sexy as fuck that you came for me like such a good fucking girl. I don’t know what’s going through your mind right now but you need to knock it off and accept that what’s happening between us is normal. You just made my entire week with that little joy ride, Maxine,

and you're not going to dirty it up with whatever bullshit shame your mother forced on you. You're a goddamn virgin, Max. There's nothing dirty about you. You don't need to feel anything right now but pleased that you just came and caused a grown man to come in his pants."

My mouth dropped open. "How...?"

"You told us at the clinic while confirming that you weren't pregnant." He slid his hands up to cup the sides of my neck. "You need to shed whatever shit your mom put on you. Let us help."

"I need fresh air." I ran as soon as he let me go and didn't stop until I was in the middle of the driveway, chest heaving as I tried to make sense of how fast my life was changing.

CHAPTER 22

Arlo

I paced outside of her bedroom door, silently cursing doors and locks and everything else that kept me away from Maxie. She'd been in the bathroom for hours. I was more than a little tempted to break the door down to get to her. I just wanted to make sure she was okay.

Rhett told us what happened between them that morning and I was both jealous and furious that he might've pushed too far, too fast. I went back and forth between knowing she wasn't ready and wanting to demand she get her bitch of a mother out of her head so she could own her pleasure and every other magical thing about her.

I wasn't going to back down. She needed to shake off whatever shit she had hanging over her, weighing her down, and she needed to do it fast. I couldn't sit back and

watch her suffer. I wouldn't sit back and watch her work herself to the bone. Those days were over for her. If I had to get a little bossy to make it happen, then so be it. She'd forgive me eventually.

Before I could kick down her door, she opened it and looked up at me, the mask of coolness back in place. I was instantly even more pissed.

Her smile was plastic as she slipped past me.

"Thank you for taking care of me while I was sick. I know we have a lot to do, though, and I'm ready to get back to work."

I scowled and caught her arm.

"Hang on a second. Don't do that. Don't put on that fake bullshit with me, Maxine. We're past that."

Shep called up from the bottom of the stairs.

"Everything okay?"

Maxie kept her face perfectly blank as she stared up at me.

"I'm sorry you're upset, Arlo, but I'm not being fake. I'm just ready to focus on work again. I've fallen behind on everything I need to do and I'm ready to catch up. I was thinking I'd put in a few hours of work here this morning and then slip on over to make lunch for everyone at the Hellstone Ranch."

She was pushing my buttons in a way that no one other than Shep and Rhett knew how to. I wanted to throw her over my shoulder and spank her until she knocked the shit off. I wasn't a brute, though, not yet, so I ground my teeth together and shook my

head.

“You’re not cooking meals for them anymore.”

A flare of annoyance cracked through her facade but she was quick to clamp it down.

“Of course, I am.”

I let out a bitter laugh.

“No. You’re not. We should get something clear right now, Maxie. We might’ve fucked up ten years ago but the night you let us kiss you, you gave us something we’re not going to let slip away twice. You. I understand that maybe you don’t get it yet but you’re ours. I know you feel it, too, based on the way you came for Rhett this morning. One thing about us, Maxine, is that we take care of our things. If you think we’re going to let you go right back to burning your candle at both ends, you’re nuts. You’re on a short leash until we know you’re not going to abuse yourself until you collapse again.

“Your days of doing everything for everyone are over. If you’d rather work at your family’s ranch for now, that’s fine, but you’re not going to work both ranches. I refuse to watch you pass out again. If you’re working full time on the ranch, you’re not going to be taking fucking pro bono cake orders for assholes who love to take advantage of your kindness. You wanted us ten years ago, sweetheart, and now you’ve got us. Until we can trust you to take care of yourself, we’re going to do it. Even if it pisses you off. I hope it does because at least then you’ll show us the real you and not this watered down version that you think makes you more palatable. Whatever your mom filled your head with is bullshit. If I could revive the old hag, I’d do it just to shove her back in her grave because I’m sure the things you’re not telling us about her are more horrible than I’m imagining, if the way you live now is any indication.”

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Maxie's hand didn't move so fast that I couldn't have stopped it but I didn't want to. I welcomed the burn left behind after her slap. Her chest heaved with anger and then horror as she stared at her hand.

"Oh, my god... I'm sor—"

I grabbed her and gently shook her.

"Fuck no. Do not apologize. That's what I want. I want the fire, Maxie. I want you. I'm not going to stop until I get what I want, either."

She struggled between fury and shame, I could tell. Her eyes burned with indecision but her hands were fisted at her sides.

"I want you to think about what your mom did to you and ask yourself which one of you was the problem. Then I want you to think about being big and round with our babies. Are you going to be your mother? Are you going to raise our kids the same way she raised you?"

Fire. Her entire being went up in flames as she jerked away from me and went up on her toes to shout at me.

"Don't! You don't know what you're talking about. None of you do. No one was here so no one gets to speak about any of it. Everyone left me here, doing it all, and now you think you can come in and take over? No! No, you don't get to do that! You don't get to talk about the imaginary kids we'll never have. And if you knew anything about me and my relationship with my mother, you'd never think twice about raising

a child with me. It'll never happen. I will never be a mother. I will never risk turning into her. You may as well look somewhere else for whatever fantasies you're inventing."

Her words knocked me back a step. What the fuck had her mother done to her?

"There's a cattle auction coming up soon and there's plenty of fence that still needs mending. I'm going to work." She stomped down the stairs, all signs of the broken doll and the robotic woman gone.

Shep stared up at me after the front door slammed.

"Did that go the way you wanted it to?"

I rubbed my hands down my face.

"I don't fucking know. At least she's not practically comatose anymore."

Rhett walked up next to Shep and frowned at me.

"What was that?"

I made my way down the stairs, my head already throbbing with a headache.

"I don't know. If I have to push her to get her out of that robotic state, then maybe it's worth it. Anything to make the real Maxie come out. We have a lot more of a shot with the real version of her than the cold version her mother left behind."

Shep blew out a deep breath. "Maybe."

"I'm going after her. The least I can do is help with the fucking fence now." I

stormed out the front door, miserable with how everything had gone. I wasn't a cruel man. I didn't want to push Maxie, not when it was clear the trauma she'd endured still had a hold on her.

I closed the front door behind me and grunted when a soft weight hit me. The sweet scent of Maxie filled my senses as her hands clenched in my hair and dragged my mouth down to hers. She kissed me hard, sinking her teeth into my bottom lip and sucking before I had a chance to grab her and hold on. She danced away from me, her eyes burning with an erotic mix of anger and desire. I pressed my fingers to my mouth and stared at her, confused and turned on beyond belief.

She glared at me as she steadily backed away.

"You don't own me."

A slow smile stretched my lips. As fucked as things felt, she'd kissed me.

"No? What if you own us?"

CHAPTER 23

Maxie

What if you own us? Arlo's question banged around in my head as I worked on the fence in spurts while my energy lasted. After being sick for days, it seemed I'd have to build back up to my normal stamina. As it was, all the resting time was giving me too much time to think about the infuriating men working beside me.

They were workhorses, never slowing down. They'd each lost their shirt, content to work in front of me shirtless and sweaty. It was a lot of sweaty, tan, muscled man to just look past. And, thanks to Arlo, my defenses were shattered. I couldn't manage to

engage my Stepford shields. They left me burning up and slipping back into that icy place wasn't something I could do.

I took a long drink of water and tightened my ponytail. The end of it stuck to my sweaty neck and I had to stop to lift it from my skin before I decided to cut it off. I stared out across the land and blew out a long breath. I was a mess. Emotionally. It was embarrassing to admit it but I was. I felt like I couldn't hold myself together anymore and I knew it was the presence of Arlo, Shep, and Rhett that was threatening the carefully constructed life I'd built. I held myself together by holding everyone else away. It was easier not to feel the disappointment and anger that had once threatened to smother me with every breath. I knew if I let those emotions take over again, I'd never be able to drag all of the bullshit in and button it back inside.

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“Is that your horse?” Shep grunted as he looked towards the house. “How the hell did he get here?”

I gasped as I saw Bob jump over a section of fence like it was nothing and charged towards us. I took off at a sprint towards him, my heart swelling with the peace of his familiarity.

“Bob!”

He let out his own excited call and stopped just before plowing me over. He nuzzled his face into my neck and shoulder, chattering the way he always did when he hadn’t seen me in more than a few hours. I felt him chewing on my hair but I didn’t even care about that as I wrapped my arms around the parts of him that I could.

“How’d you get out, Bobby? Huh? Did Jolene let you out? Were you driving her nuts? Huh?” I rubbed his face and peppered kissed over his nose when he bent down for me. “I missed you, Bob. You’re so handsome, aren’t you? Who’s the best boy ever? You are! That’s right!”

“Anyone else want to be a horse right about now?” Shep’s dry remark made me laugh but I didn’t pull away from Bob.

“Well, shit.” Rhett sighed. “Looks like it’s not just Bob here to cock block.”

I shot him a wide-eyed look before looking behind Bob. There was my brother, Mills, marching towards us like the hounds of hell were nipping at his heels. I held onto Bob a little tighter.

“Why’d you let him follow you, Bob?”

“Isn’t this a pleasant surprise? What can we do for you, Mills?” Arlo stepped forward but Mills was focused on me.

He closed the distance between us and slapped Bob’s back flank before looking down at me with haunted eyes.

“I’ve done my best to give you time to heal, Max, but I need to know what you meant when you told these assholes that Mom hit you.”

Rhett growled like a giant guard dog and stepped closer.

“Don’t upset her.”

“Tell me, Maxie. I can’t stop thinking about it and I need to know you were just having a fever dream or something. Tell me that you didn’t mean it.” He gripped his hair and tugged hard. “Tell me!”

I flinched but I didn’t allow myself to cower. Maybe I was done being meek Maxie. That didn’t mean I would be cruel, though.

“Go home, Mills. Have you been sleeping? Eating okay?”

He grabbed my shoulders and shook me.

“Tell me, goddammit!”

Arlo shoved Mills away from me and planted himself between us. I could see him vibrating with anger as he stared down his friend and my brother.

“Do not fucking scream at her.”

“Get out of my way! That’s my sister!”

“I don’t give a fuck who she is to you. You aren’t going to scream in her face!”

I couldn’t handle the shouting. I wasn’t sure how they heard me but I knew they did when they both went silent.

“Stop it. If you want to know the truth, Mills, I’ll tell you.”

The sky was such a brilliant blue and the sun was so bright and warm that it felt wrong to dirty it with the truth but one thing I’d accepted was that I couldn’t keep everything inside. It felt like there were millions of fleas jumping around inside me, looking for the last raw spot to latch onto to suck whatever peace I had left out of me. My insides crawled with the secrets I kept.

“Mom... Mom wasn’t nice to me, Mills. She...” I took a deep breath. “She was angry so much of the time. Dad, too, but he died before he could become cruel. Mom hung on, though. She just wasn’t nice, Mills. I don’t know what else to tell you.”

“She wasn’t nice? That’s all you can say? She was rotting away with cancer, Maxie! You wanted her to be nice?”

I saw Shep scowling and stepping closer to Mills and held up my hand to stop him.

“She wasn’t just not nice. She was mean. If you want to know everything, that’s too bad. There are things I’ll never say out loud for as long as I live. She hurt me. She always hurt me. In the end, though, it changed from fat jokes and comments about how no one would ever love me to hitting me if her soup was a few degrees too hot or cold. It changed to admitting things, like the truth about Nellie’s father,

because she knew it would eat me alive to hold that in.”

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“No.” Mills shook his head hard and glared at me. “That’s not true.”

“She used to love to tell me you were never coming home. I was scared when you were overseas. I worried about you, Tate, and West. If I missed a spot while sweeping, she would taunt me and tell me she hadn’t heard from you in several weeks and she expected a few Navy officers to show up to announce your deaths any day. She wouldn’t stop until I cried. She recited a list of dead soldiers to me every time I took too long to bring her whatever lost thing she demanded I find instead of sleeping at night. She’d slip your names in while reading and then laugh when I broke down.”

“Maxie...” His face had gone pale.

“I tried to leave. Everyone else was gone, except Vera, and she was always having fun with her friends in town. I wanted to run away like I thought Nellie had. Mom told me she’d kill herself and make sure Vera found her body and the note blaming me for pushing her to it. She would just look at Vera sometimes and I knew she was imagining doing the same thing to Vera that she did to me. I couldn’t leave Vera to that. So I stayed and I took it all. I took it until the day she died. She was weak enough to lose her battle with the devil that day but not too weak to force me to wear loads of makeup and sunglasses to her funeral.

“Her knuckles were so sharp in the end, Mills. They didn’t just bruise.” I sucked in a sharp breath and frowned at the sky when I felt drops of what I thought were rain falling on my face. It wasn’t rain. I was crying. Again. I sucked in a painful lungful of oxygen and let out a shaky laugh while wiping my face.

“I hate her. I hate who she made me. This weak, pathetic shell of a woman who can’t

say no without fearing she'll die alone and unloved. I hate myself because of her, Mills. I want to be bold like Vera and Nellie. I want to be able to believe I'm worthy of the things they have. Instead, I have our mother's voice in my head, living there like she never died."

He took a step closer but I shook my head. I didn't want to be held. I didn't want his pity. I just wanted a different reality but no one could do anything to make that happen so I'd rather just be left alone.

"I never meant for this to come up. I was happy to take it all to my grave and let everyone keep believing that our family isn't just as fucked up as the Mays." I saw him flinch when I swore and it sent a shiver of something close to power up my spine. "I don't think I'm going to come back to the ranch for a while, Mills."

His eyes widened. "What? No, Max. Come home. I'll make it right. I'll figure out—"

"No. I've barely existed there for so long. I'll be thirty in two years and I don't have anything to show for it. No matter how much work I put into the ranch, you never appreciated it. I'm invisible to all of you. Just mousy Maxie fading into the kitchen cabinets. I don't want to let Mom keep me there anymore. I don't owe that ranch anything I haven't already given it. I don't owe you anything I haven't already given you. I don't want to but I think a part of me hates all of you for leaving me to rot with Mom. I just need a break from the family."

"You don't mean that, Maxie. We love you. We'll make it right. You can't just stay here. This isn't your home." Mills tried to step closer but Arlo was there, blocking him. "Get the fuck out of my way, Arlo."

"I think it's been a long time since I've had a home, Mills. Maybe it's time I accept that and figure out where to go from here. Thank you for bringing Bob. I'll have Jolene help me move him back and forth until I get a space set up for him here. Or

wherever it is we land.”

“Here.” Rhett came forward and gripped the back of my neck. “He’ll stay here. So will you.”

I was all out of fight. I shrugged and looked down at my feet.

“I think you should go, Mills.”

For the first time, the numbness I always tried to exude wasn’t just an act. I felt cold to the bone as I went back to the fence and started working. I didn’t know when Mills left or when the guys started working beside me. I just knew that I’d been wrong. A part of me had believed if I ever had a chance to tell someone what happened to me that I’d be free of it. I wasn’t free of anything, though. I was as much a prisoner to my mother as I’d been before she died. Her cold grip just got a little tighter, if anything.

CHAPTER 24

Shep

I walked Mills to his truck, feeling genuinely sorry for the man after the brutal reality check he’d just gotten from Maxie. I knew he wasn’t a bad guy, just an oblivious one. Even when he pissed me off, I still knew he was a good man deep down and I hated the haunted look on his face as he relived his life with the new angle that his mother was a monster. There was nothing I could do for Maxie right then. I’d seen the mask settle over her face. I figured if I couldn’t do anything for her, I’d try to help Mills as much as I could.

His face still hadn’t gotten its color back, despite the sun beating down on us. He stopped next to his truck door and stared out at nothing, his eyes blank.

“Did you know?”

I sighed. “No. I mean, I had an idea of something but nothing like all that.”

“How? How did I not know? How did I not see her?” He turned around and slammed his fist into the side of the truck. “What the fuck is wrong with me?”

I gave him his privacy and kept my eyes towards the pasture where I could just barely see my family. I didn’t answer him. I couldn’t beat him while he was already so low but inside, I was furious at him. I wanted to demand to know what the fuck was wrong with him, too.

“Y’all planning on keeping her?” He finally turned to face me.

“And if we are?”

He shook his head.

“Who the fuck am I to judge? You’re doing a better job than me at taking care of her. Maybe it’s best if she stays far away from that ranch and the poison she suffered there.”

I didn’t know what else to say, I was so shocked by his willingness to accept our intentions towards Maxie. I watched him get in his truck and drive away without another word. My chest ached for him, no matter how angry I was. I couldn’t imagine the shit going through his brain. I was struggling enough as it was and Maxie hadn’t just eviscerated me like she had him.

I took my time walking back to where she was, confused about how to help the woman I truly believed belonged with us. I wanted to make it better for her but I didn’t know where to start, especially when it only took one look at her face to know

she'd retreated somewhere deep, deep inside herself.

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I couldn't think of another time in my life when I'd felt more out of control. I didn't like it. I didn't like just sitting back and watching Maxie suffer. That wasn't acceptable.

Bob hovered behind his human constantly, keeping his big body between Maxie and the rest of the world. He leaned down and nibbled at her every so often, reminding her that he was there. Not even Bob was able to pull her out of herself, though. I had the sinking feeling that if Bob couldn't get to her, the rest of us didn't have a chance in hell. Lucky for Maxie, though, I was a stubborn sonofabitch and I wasn't going to give up on her.

We worked in silence while I thought about what to do. Eventually I gave up trying to come up with the perfect plan and just decided to go with what felt natural to me—being an idiot. Arlo looked at me as I approached Maxie and shook his head but it was too late. I was determined to get through to her.

Bob huffed at me when I got close but I just patted his side and stretched out of his way when he got bitey. I was just about to throw Maxie over my shoulder when a shout grabbed all of our attention.

Mills was back, his voice panicked as he shouted at us.

“Vera went into labor! She's at the clinic!”

I wasn't sure what to expect from Maxie after she'd announced she wanted nothing to do with her family for a while but I should've known she was too good and kind to not show up for her sister. Instead of letting us help her, though, of course she proved

just how little she depended on anyone by grabbing Bob's mane and jumping up on his back. With a subtle click of her tongue she set Bob off at a breakneck pace and I nearly shit myself when she leaned into his giant body and held on while he jumped the fence and kept going, faster than I would've been comfortable with, even if she wasn't riding bareback.

"Jesus. Let's go." Rhett threw his tools down and took off towards the trucks. "She's going to give me gray hair before I'm ready for it."

Mills was already speeding away when we got to the driveway. Arlo jumped behind the wheel and we sped toward the clinic, chasing Mills and Maxie.

"Either of you have any ideas about what to do about Maxie?" Arlo slowed down to go through town and swore when a fucking cow crossed the street in front of us with a kid chasing it. "What the fuck?"

I leaned forward. "I don't have a clue. About the cow or Maxie. I didn't expect it to be so fucked up."

When the cow and the kid finally got out of the way Arlo drove the rest of the way to the clinic in silence. We were all lost in the details of what Jenny Hellstone had done to her sweet, kind daughter. He parked next to all the other vehicles that I was betting belonged to the rest of the Hellstones and their partners, and we all froze as we watched the door to the clinic fly open. Maxie was a blur as she left the clinic and effortlessly climbed back on Bob. They were off again before any of us could react but we'd all seen the devastation on her face.

"What do we do?" I rubbed my chest as pain radiated through my body for Maxie.

"If she needs space, we give her space." Rhett didn't sound like he liked the plan anymore than I did. "It doesn't feel fair to push her right now when she's just bared

her wounds in front of us. I'm going to run in and check on Vera and then we go home."

Arlo slowly nodded his head. "We'll be there for her, no matter what. Maybe in a few days she'll be ready to lean on us a little more."

CHAPTER 25

Maxie

Vera's baby was a week old when I climbed in the back of Arlo's truck and left for Dallas. The cattle auction was outside of the city and it wasn't going to wait on me to feel better. The fencing around the pastures we'd use for the next month or so were all fixed and the ranch wasn't going to go anywhere else until we got cattle in. I told myself I wasn't sad about not seeing the baby or talking to any of my siblings. I had work to do. I couldn't stop what I was doing to check on them. It wasn't like they needed me anyway. I mostly doubted they'd noticed my absence.

I wasn't sure how a week of feeling so cold had also felt like hell somehow. I'd been miserable. Maybe even more miserable because the guys just let me exist however I showed up. They stopped trying to win me over or cheer me up and instead just worked beside me and were there. I didn't know what it meant that they weren't trying anything with me. None of them had tried to sleep in my bed and while they still touched me, it was how I imagined normal families touched each other. There was no heat behind the touches.

I'd shut them out so I knew it wasn't fair for me to be upset with them but I was. I wanted them to demand I feel things again. I wanted them to make me feel better. I wanted to shed the ice that had taken over my heart. I mostly wanted to take it all back and go back to the morning I'd woken up in bed with Rhett. I'd gone from feeling on fire in bed with him to feeling so frigid after the confrontation with Mills

that I shouldn't have been surprised by the tornado of crap that kept cycling through my brain.

All through the auction I sat perfectly still while the guys bid on cattle. They looked to me for my opinion each time and it made a layer of ice crack. When they suggested we have dinner at a bar afterwards I made up my mind. We were in another city, no one knew me or who I was supposed to be. I needed to feel warmth again. If my guys no longer wanted me after seeing just how damaged I was, then I'd find someone else to burn me alive.

The bar was packed with ranchers from the auction and I knew that no matter what I looked like I wouldn't be able to throw a rock without hitting at least one cowboy as desperate to feel something as I was. I sat at a table with Shep, Arlo, and Rhett and looked around, wondering who would make the cold go away, if not my roommates. Even as I saw men looking back at me, though, the cold just settled deeper in my bones.

"What can I get y'all tonight?" A pretty blonde woman with three-quarters of her boobs on display, smiled prettily at the guys. "All you cowboys coming in from the auction?"

"Can I get a shot of whiskey?" I couldn't force my lips to turn up into a smile for the woman flirting with my guys. "Make it a double, please."

Arlo stared at me with wide eyes for a moment before gathering himself and nodding to our waitress. "Same for me. Burgers all around, too."

I held his gaze while Shep and Rhett ordered and I knew there were no other cowboys taking me home that night. Arlo's gaze had turned hungry, the desire evident even to a sad virgin like me. Finally, I thought with a wave of relief.

As soon as the whiskey showed up at our table, I threw it back and fought to suppress a cough as it burned all the way to my stomach. Standing up, I pushed my curls out of my face and looked around the table.

“Who wants to dance?”

Arlo stood up first and his eyes darkened as I slipped out of my flannel. The tank top I had on under it was thin but it was hot in the bar. Gloriously hot and I wanted to feel it on my skin.

I didn't wait for him. I made my way to the middle of the dancefloor and closed my eyes. I didn't want to see anyone else. I just wanted to feel. I gasped when a thick arm wrapped around my waist and yanked me into a solid wall of muscle.

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“You’re playing with fire, sweetheart.” Arlo’s voice was a growl against my ear.
“What’s going on?”

I trailed my hands up his chest and locked them behind his neck.

“What if I want to get burned? What if I’m tired of you three treating me like I’m your little sister?”

Letting out a harsh laugh, he pressed his hips closer to mine and let me feel his hard length pressing into me.

“Does that feel like I have any kind of brotherly feelings about you? We’ve been trying to give you time and space, Max. Did we fuck up?”

I looked into his eyes and decided it was better not to talk. I stood on my tiptoes and stretched up to press my mouth into his. I only had their kisses to go by but I gave him all that I could. I tried to tell him exactly what I wanted with my tongue against his. His hands gripped my hips tight and he growled against my lips.

He wasn’t kissing me back the way I needed. Then he wasn’t kissing me back at all. He tugged me from the dance floor, barked at Shep and Rhett to get our food to go and meet us at the hotel. He dragged me across the parking lot to the hotel we were staying at for the night, his long legs forcing me to all but jog to keep up.

I was confused about what was happening but I held out hope that he was going to throw me down as soon as we got into the room and make me forget everything else but him. That didn’t happen, though, and all the ice came rushing back over me,

threatening to freeze everything in me until I shattered.

CHAPTER 26

Maxie

Arlo pushed me down in the stiff lobby chair and sat across from me, his elbows on his knees and his eyes hard as he stared at me.

“Talk to me.”

I crossed my arms and scowled at him.

“This makes twice that I’ve kissed you and you’ve rejected me.”

“I’m not fucking rejecting you, Max. I’m trying to make sense of what’s going on with you. You’ve been shut down even more than usual for the past week and suddenly you’re damn near humping my leg on the dancefloor of some shitty bar?”

I’d wanted heat but I hadn’t expected it in the form of shame.

“If you don’t want me just say it and I’ll go find some other cowboy to take care of me tonight.”

“The fuck you will.” He grabbed my chair and yanked it closer to him, ignoring the dirty look the front desk employee gave him. “That’s what I’m talking about, Maxie. You’re a virgin and you’re dealing with a lot of shit and suddenly you want to get drunk and fuck whoever wants you? I’d be an asshole if I just fucked you without making sure you’re okay first. I’m not just some cowboy who’s going to bend you over and fuck your virginity down the drain. I care about you. Same as Rhett and Shep.”

“Shut up.” I didn’t want to hear that they cared about me. I just needed to feel their heat. What didn’t he get?

“You’re hurting, Maxie. I can’t take advantage of that. I want you more than I want my next breath but you’re not a stopping point on the trip, baby. You’re the fucking destination.”

Tears burned my eyes but I blinked them away, relieved for a moment when Rhett and Shep joined us, bags of dinner in their hands. I looked away from them and took a deep breath. I didn’t want emotion. I wanted to forget.

“Do either of you want to fuck me?”

I wasn’t sure if it was the language or the offer but Shep dropped the food. He sat down on the coffee table next to me and cleared his throat.

“I think I was drugged at the bar because I thought you just asked me if I wanted to fuck you.”

“What happens if we fuck you tonight, sweetheart?” Arlo wasn’t backing down. “You get what you need tonight to forget for a few hours and then you wake up full of shame and disappointment because you still don’t feel better? I would do anything for you. I need you to know that. I would—”

“Anything but fuck me!” I didn’t care that people heard me and were staring. “You would do anything for me but what I need!”

Rhett bent down and grabbed my face, holding me still while he glared at me.

“You are not some stranger to be fucked and forgotten about. We are not going to hurt you by fucking you when it’s not what you really want or need. You’re hurting

and you need to feel something other than that pain but it would make us unworthy of you if we fucked you just because we wanted to and you were willing. This is more than sex for us. This is what we want for the rest of our lives, Maxine.”

I flinched like he’d hit me.

“You don’t mean that.”

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Shep brushed his knuckles over my cheek.

“Yes, we do. This last week has been hell and I’ve missed seeing even your fake smile. I want you back more than anything but not like this. We’re not a means to an end, sweetheart. We are the end. You’re ours and we’re going to take care of you for the rest of our lives. That means there’s no rush. We can wait to fuck you until you’re okay again. It doesn’t matter how long it takes.”

“Stop saying that!”

“What don’t you get? We want you, Maxie. We want everything with you. The ranch, the house, the sex, the babies, all of it. Not until you really want us and not just to feel better for an hour or so.” Arlo saw my eyes widen and he blew out a breath. “Maybe we should just eat our dinner and go to bed. It’s been a long week.”

Babies. They thought I was going to give them babies? Hadn’t they heard the things my mother had done to me? Didn’t they understand I could never be that person for them? I wasn’t meant to be a mother. I didn’t know what a mother was, not really. I would never curse a child to have me as their mom. Not in a million years.

“Maxie?” Shep rested his hand on my knee and squeezed but I felt no warmth.

My voice shook as I spoke.

“I will never give you children. I would rather die than force a child to endure me.”

The shock on their faces hurt. They didn’t see me as the threat I was, it was obvious.

They would let me bring their children into the world. They meant it. They were blind. I hated that their belief in me was just too late.

I stood up and exhaled a slow breath.

“I’m sorry. I think you’re all right about tonight not being a good night. I’m going to go to my room and get some sleep.”

I hurried away from them, suddenly desperate to wash away their touches, knowing I would never truly have them. Even if I was cruel enough to chance becoming my mother to an innocent child, I couldn’t risk playing family with them. Even if they cared about me right then, as soon as they saw the real me, the me that my mother had carved into a lonesome, broken woman, they’d realize just how far away they really wanted to get from me. Then what? I’d lose them again and still somehow go on breathing? Impossible.

I locked myself in my room and turned the TV on to drown out the suffocating silence. My mind still raced. I was embarrassed and so sad that I couldn’t take a full breath in. I could feel a panic attack starting and it scared me so deeply thinking that I could get stuck in it forever, all alone, that I did the thing I said I wouldn’t do. I called my family.

CHAPTER 27

Maxie

Nellie answered on the first ring. “Max? Maxie, are you okay? We’ve all been messaging you and calling. I wanted to come see you but Mills said you needed some space.”

I didn’t know what to say for a few moments. I’d never really known how to talk to

my siblings. I'd been a pawn for our mother as soon as I was born, her first daughter. I'd never been allowed to be my sisters' equal. My voice cracked when I finally found the words I needed to say.

“Do you—do you ever worry you'll turn into our mother?”

Nellie gasped and stammered as she tried to answer.

“W-what? Are you serious, Maxie? God. Of course, not. She was... She was a monster, Maxie. She was the true devil in Devil's Den, sitting back and breaking her daughters like it was her favorite game. I look at Waylan all the time and I don't understand how our mom was so fucked up. I could never hurt Waylan the way she hurt us, the way she hurt you. Mills told us. He told us and I'm just so sorry, Max. I had no idea.”

“I saw Vera's baby last week and I felt this overwhelming sense of bitterness and jealousy. You both found your families and I'm jealous. I'm jealous and alone and the first thing I felt when I saw that beautiful baby was evilness. What kind of person does that make me? I should've been so happy for Vera but instead I was angry that it wasn't me. I'm our mother, Nellie. She broke me and whatever chance I had at being normal and loved.” I sucked in a gasping breath and forged on, my words coming faster and faster. “I have these men here who are telling me they want more with me, they want babies. They said babies, Nellie, and I'm too fucking broken to give them that. I'm too broken to risk breaking a child the way our mom broke me.”

“No! Dammit, no, Maxie.” Nellie said something to someone in the background, one of her men, and I could hear her moving around. “Are you at the new ranch? I'm coming to you. I need to look you in the eye when I smack some sense into you.”

“I'm in Dallas. The cattle auction...”

“Shit.” Letting out a string of curses, Nellie stopped and growled. “You could never be our mother. She hurt you but she didn’t fucking break you, Maxie. No one could break you. You’ve been living on that ranch with Mills for years and if you didn’t murder him in all that time, you’re unbreakable. Our mother was a bitch and if I could see her today, I’d end up in jail. You are not her. You are kind and generous to a fault. You give so much of yourself constantly that your men literally had to kidnap you and put a stop to it. I heard they threatened Ryan St. John within an inch of his life if he ever tried to get you to work for free ever again. You would be the most amazing mother, Max. I’d be jealous of that kid. Lord knows we didn’t have the warm and fuzzy mom you’d be but you’d still be that.

“It sounds like you have three men who see you for who you are and want to start a life with you. Don’t let Mom continue to hurt you from the grave, big sis. You deserve to be happy.” She sighed. “And I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t jealous when I saw Vera’s baby, too. There’s nothing wrong with you, Maxie. Not a single goddamn thing.”

I sniffed and wiped at my eyes.

“Thank you.”

“No more hiding. I get needing space from Mills, Tate, and West, but I’m your sister. You don’t need space from me. When you come back home, I expect an invitation to your new ranch.” She lowered her voice. “You could also always come to Doll’s Club with us. I know everyone would freak out to have you there.”

I blushed at even the idea of attending their sex toy club. Instead of shutting down the idea like I had the first few times I’d been invited, I decided to be brave.

“Okay.”

Nellie squealed.

“Yes! I can’t wait to tell Vera. She’s going to bust a stitch. Come home soon, Maxie. I love you. We all love you.”

I hung up and sat on the edge of my bed, letting her words sink in. She didn’t think I was our mother. She had faith in me. Nellie had been treated like shit by our mother, too, and if she didn’t look at me and see the woman who’d hurt us both, maybe that meant something.

I still didn’t think I could risk bringing a child into the world to be raised by me. If Nellie was wrong, a child would suffer because I was too selfish to not risk it. The longer I thought about it, the more sure I was that I wasn’t meant to be a mother, no matter if I was doomed to repeat the sins of my mother or not. I would never be able to give the guys the family they wanted.

They would be amazing fathers. I knew that without a doubt. The way they’d taken care of me without a single complaint, no matter how much I fought to leave, proved that they were the type of men who deserved kids. They deserved a family to raise and love.

I raided the mini bar and choked down little bottles of vodka and tequila while staring blankly at the TV, desperate to knock myself out so I could stop thinking and overthinking everything. Only I still wasn’t drunk enough to shut my brain off after taking out all the little bottles of booze. My mind was still racing.

I was stretched out sideways in the bed, still staring at the TV without really seeing

anything, when the storyline of the reality show playing snagged my attention. In a horrid act of betrayal, a man cheated on his wife with their surrogate. The surrogate was doing a lot of confessionals about how she couldn't help falling for the husband when she was growing his baby. Screwed up story line aside, I couldn't stop thinking about surrogates.

I should've realized exactly how drunk I was when my brain lit up like a firework, as if I'd finally solved a puzzle that had been plaguing me for decades. I would be a surrogate. I could give the guys what they wanted and deserved but I wouldn't curse a poor child to a life of suffering. I'd have the guys for a while and that would be enough to last me through the rest of my years. It was perfect.

It also didn't occur to me just how unstable I was on my feet as I left my room and felt my way along the wall to the room next door. Nothing seemed like a bad idea when I knocked and it seemed even less like an issue when Arlo opened the door, looking a little wobbly himself.

In an act that could only be described as messy, I threw my arms open and shouted at him.

"I'll give you your baby!"

CHAPTER 28

Maxie

There was a lumberjack hacking away at my brain. That was the only thing that would explain the excruciating pain I was in. A wave of nausea hit me hard but I couldn't get up. I tried to lift my head but it weighed a thousand pounds. God, when had my head gotten so big? I felt like I was dying. I had to be. I'd never felt so awful in my entire life.

“Hell. I’m in hell.” I gagged and then there was an angel picking me up and flying me to a sparkly white toilet.

I tossed up what felt like everything I’d ever eaten and clung to the toilet with my face resting just inside the rim. I still hadn’t opened my eyes and when I tried to, I understood why. Even more pain cut through my brain. That stupid lumberjack needed to take a break and let me breathe.

“Not feeling so good, huh?”

I peeled one eye open and saw Shep grinning down at me. I wanted to punch his perfect teeth out for a second as another wave of nausea hit. How could he look so perfect when the world was clearly ending?

“Go away.”

He leaned down and rubbed my back.

“Not a chance, baby.”

I groaned and lifted one weak arm to try to push him away but it was useless.

“I’m dying. Did we at least have sex last night? I don’t want to die a virgin.”

Shep choked and stared at me with wide eyes.

“Are you serious? First of all, you came over here, agreed to give us a baby, and then passed out. Second of all, we aren’t creeps who would ever touch you while you were unconscious. Third of all, if we’d have fucked you last night, you’d damn sure remember it.”

It was annoying that I could still blush after the way I'd just puked up my guts in front of him. I jumped when he flushed the toilet and picked me up to put me down on the counter. I could feel myself pouting but couldn't find it in me to care. I'd already broken so many rules that would've made Mom climb out of her grave and if she hadn't already done it, I doubted pouting would be the thing that got her blood pumping again. Besides, I knew of at least two people who were willing to shove the mean old woman right back into the grave.

Shep put toothpaste on a toothbrush and handed it to me.

“What's that smile about?”

I held the toothbrush and looked up at him through my eyelashes.

“Even if I do enough bad things to raise my mom from the dead, I have people who'd shove her right back down. I've never had that before.”

His eyes warmed.

“You have three men in this hotel suite who’d fight over who got to her first to shove her back to hell.”

I studied him while I brushed my teeth and saw he was doing the same to me. Something felt different. Ifelt different. There was something about deciding to take life by the horns, even if I’d made the decision while drunk, that made me feel stronger. I had more of a plan for my life than ever before. I was going to have lots of sex with the men I lived with, give them a baby, and then move on. It sounded so easy and mess-free when I thought of it like that. Without being tied to either ranch, I would be able to go wherever I wanted after having their child. I’d never thought about going anywhere and I wasn’t sure I liked the idea of leaving but maybe it would grow on me.

It would have to. I knew I wouldn’t be able to stay in Devil’s Den and watch the family I’d never have grow without me. No, once I had the baby, I’d have to leave. There was no other way I’d survive.

“How about we get breakfast before we get on the road?”

I frowned.

“You don’t want to...”

“Want to what?” Shep grinned as he watched me blush and motion to my body with both hands. “Fuck you?”

I nodded. I'd made myself clear the night before. I'd give them their babies. That meant sex.

"How else am I supposed to get pregnant?"

He tilted his head and his eyebrows pinched together. Before he could say anything, Arlo groaned his way into the bathroom and frowned when he saw us.

"Unless you both want to watch me piss, you should go."

I started to slip off the counter but Shep didn't budge. He held my gaze as he grasped my chin.

"You should see part of what you're getting yourself into."

He turned my face towards Arlo and gripped my thigh with his other hand, sending sparks of electricity to my core. I wanted to look away, embarrassed about the idea of watching Arlo do something that felt so private. Never in my life had I considered the act of watching someone else pee. I was curious, though. I did want to see Arlo. I'd wanted to since I first felt him harden against my thigh ten years earlier.

Arlo reached through the flap of his boxer briefs and pulled his shaft out, his big, tan hand taking away nothing from the size of his dick. My mouth fell open. It was alarmingly big. I was also alarmingly interested in it. The veins running the length of it, the pretty pink color of it, the bulbous head... I wanted to get closer and see how it felt to the touch. It looked like velvet from where I sat.

I tried to press my thighs together to ease the sudden ache between my legs but Shep was in the way. I shifted on the counter and gasped when Arlo started peeing. I flushed hot and tried to look away. It was too private. I wasn't supposed to see that.

Shep leaned in and pressed his mouth against the side of my face while his hand on my thigh moved closer to my sex.

“We’re all big men, baby. Are you sure you’re in a hurry to start this? Are you going to be comfortable walking out of this hotel looking like you just rode a horse for forty days and forty nights straight? Or would you rather we wait until we get home to spread you out and eat you whole?”

I whimpered when one of his fingers brushed against me through my pajama bottoms. I didn’t know what I wanted. I was on fire. I couldn’t even remember what cold felt like.

“When you scream for us, I don’t want another soul to hear it. No one else gets to hear that. Just us.” Arlo flushed and then walked closer to wash his hands. He glanced down and saw Shep’s finger brushing back and forth over me and smiled. “Although I think we could give you something to put in your mouth to keep you quiet.”

I squeaked. It wasn’t my best look but I was suddenly very nervous and the idea of losing my virginity in a hotel no longer sounded right.

“Home.”

Shep scooped me off the counter and growled.

“Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 29

Maxie

The ride back to the ranch was silent. It was as if we’d all decided that any more

talking was just useless sound. We all knew what we wanted and we were on our way to make it happen. Sitting in the back with Rhett, I was a ball of nervous energy. Seeing Arlo had shown me that I was definitely in over my head but I was determined. I wanted them. I was ready to shed some of the old Maxie, the one curated to please my mother. I wanted to please me.

I kept my eyes down as we drove through Devil's Den. I didn't want to see anyone or anything that would creep in and make me doubt what I was about to do. And I was about to do it. I didn't care that my hands shook or that I was pretty sure my body would never recover after taking Arlo inside. I was ready for them. I'd been ready for them. It was time for me to do what eighteen-year-old Maxie had been bold enough to want.

As soon as Arlo parked the truck I jumped out and hurried up to the porch. Stopping at the front door, I looked back over my shoulder and saw the three of them approaching me like three starving wolves. A streak of fear tore through me but it somehow enhanced the arousal building in me. The anticipation was nearly suffocating.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:18 am

I kicked off my boots in the living room and shrugged out of my flannel shirt on the stairs. Hopping down the hallway upstairs I pulled off my socks and then hesitated. My room was on the left and Arlo's was on the right. I wasn't sure where they—

“My room, baby.” Arlo's deep voice was closer than I expected. He let out a low growl when I jumped. “Take the rest of your clothes off if you don't want them ripped off.”

I gasped but didn't bother looking back to see if he was serious. I knew he was. I had my jeans unbuttoned and halfway down my thighs, standing just inside his room when his big hands settled on my hips from behind. I could feel his hard length pressing into me, settling between my butt cheeks in a way that made my face burn with both embarrassment and need.

“Bend over and take them the rest of the way off, Maxine.” Still holding my hips, Arlo groaned when I followed his order and the motion opened my body so he could press even closer. His fingers dipped into my hips harder as his shaft spread my butt lewdly. It pressed the cotton of my panties into my body and caused even more liquid heat to leak from my core.

I reached out to brace myself but Arlo's grip held me secure as I pushed my jeans the rest of the way off. When I stood up again, the way his hardness spread me open made me moan. It was dirty and I couldn't deny how much it affected me.

Rhett moved to stand in front of me and wasted no time in grabbing the bottom of my tank top and dragging it over my head. His eyes held mine for another few beats and then he took his time looking at my body. I felt his eyes stroking over me as real as a

pair of hands. They left goosebumps in their wake. Arlo unhooked my bra and pushed it off my shoulders. Rhett's eyes grew darker as I let the bra fall away.

“Fuck, sweetheart. You're stunning.” He cupped my cheek and held my gaze again while letting his hand trail lower. Down my throat, over my chest, between the valley of my breasts. His fingertips gently danced over the heavy curves, circling my chest without ever touching my sensitive nipples.

Arlo's grip on my hips shifted forward until he was playing with the top edge of my panties. His fingers dipped under the band just enough to make me gasp and then slipped out again. Over and over until I wasn't sure if I was still breathing. His lips brushed the shell of my ear.

“We've been denying ourselves for a decade, Maxie, but no more. After this, you're ours.”

I didn't bother clarifying the time limit. I thought we all knew that even after it was over, I'd still be theirs. Once I gave myself to them, there'd be no going back. It made my breath catch with fear but it was too late. I could already feel a new part of myself unfurling under their gazes and the promise of the pleasure it'd bring was too great.

Shep joined us at my side and I saw he'd taken his shirt off. His bare chest called for my hands and I had to fight the urge to fall back into old Maxie. I wanted to touch him so I was going to. It was that simple. Pressing my hand over his heart, I sank my teeth into my lip at how warm he was. The dusting of chest hair was soft but when I imagined it brushing against my nipples, I let out a whimper. I needed to know what it would feel like.

Arlo and Rhett stepped back as I turned to Shep and they watched me put my hands on his shoulders before stretching higher so I could press my chest against his. Against my nipples, the hair felt coarser and the sensation was so erotic that I

squeezed my thighs together to feel the pressure against my core.

“Let me help you, baby.” Rhett pressed into my back and cupped my breasts. Lifting them, he slowly dragged my nipples back and forth until I was breathing hard and my toes were curling. “Your nipples are sensitive, huh, sweetheart? Lean back against me and let Shep take care of them.”

He didn’t have to tell me twice. I leaned into him and my world shifted as Shep lowered his face and rubbed his stubble over me before opening his mouth and taking my nipples into his mouth, one at a time. He flicked his tongue over them and sucked until I cried out and locked my hands in his hair. When he raked his teeth over the sensitive buds I opened my mouth to say it was too much but then Rhett’s hand slid into my panties and cupped my sex.

The heat of his palm against my lower lips was enough to make me dizzy. I held Shep’s hair tighter as he continued to nip and suck at my nipples, leaving them a deeper and deeper pink each time he shifted to the other one.

“Spread your legs, Maxie.” Arlo’s voice drew my gaze and I cried out when I saw that he was sitting on the edge of his bed, stripped naked, stroking his big shaft. “Let Rhett see just how wet you are for us.”

I widened my stance and Rhett slid his fingers through the mess I’d made. I was so wet that his fingers easily bumped into my clit and then stroked down to my opening. When he pressed the tip of one finger against me, I rocked my hips forward, trying to get more.

“What do you want, Maxie?” Arlo gripped the base of his length and tightened his grip. “Tell us.”

I searched my head for the words, trying to find ones less...crass, but I was too far

gone.

“I want to be filled. I need something to ease the ache. Please.”

Rhett cupped the front of my throat with one hand and speared his finger into me with the other. He slid in easily because of how wet I was but it was still a tight fit. I went up on my toes but Shep kept his mouth on my nipples, refusing to let me get too far away. Rhett quickly added a second finger and began to twist them around inside me. It felt strange and delicious all at the same time.

“Come here, Max.” Arlo’s voice left no room for argument and with Rhett and Shep letting me go, I moved eagerly to stand in front of Arlo. He brushed his knuckles over my nipples and met my gaze.

“On your knees.”

CHAPTER 30

Maxie

It should’ve scared me more than it did. I’d never seen a penis so close before, much less taken one in my mouth. I’d heard whispers over the years and I knew that a lot of women didn’t like it. Once I was on my knees between his spread thighs, though, I couldn’t feel a single trace of unease or disgust. I was amazed by the heftiness of his shaft and I wanted to explore everything about it.

“Have you ever sucked a cock before?” Arlo tucked his finger under my chin and lifted my face so I was looking at his face.

“No.” I licked my lips and glanced down again. “But I want to.”

He groaned.

“Don’t use your teeth. Other than that, whatever you do with your mouth is going to feel like heaven to me, baby.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:18 am

“Spread your knees, Maxie.” Rhett barely gave me time to even process his demand before he was doing it for me. I looked down and choked on a gasp when I saw his face appear between my thighs. Wrapping his arms around my thighs, he tugged my body lower until I was nearly sitting on his face. “You’re going to ride my face, baby.”

My grip on Arlo’s thighs tightened. No one had ever—my mind imploded as I felt Rhett’s tongue on my lower lips. Wet heat flicking over my sensitive skin before pressing deeper to capture my clit consumed me until I wasn’t sure how women weren’t walking around talking about it constantly.

Arlo tangled his hand in my hair and pulled my face forward.

“Suck my cock, Maxine.”

I wrapped my hand around the thick base, amazed when my fingers didn’t touch. I’d been right about him feeling like velvet, too. He was so hot and hard, but still silky smooth between the ridges of veins. Even as I moaned from what Rhett was doing to me, I opened my mouth and stuck out my tongue. Unsure of what I was doing but letting my instincts lead me, I tilted my body forward so I could taste him.

Without any guidance, I took long, slow licks between trying to breathe through Rhett’s oral prowess. I felt the veins under my tongue and tasted his slightly salty skin. I loved it immediately. Lifting my face, I flicked my tongue over the tip and lapped up the pearl of fluid there. Rhett paused his magic for a moment and it was enough for me to get my mouth over Arlo’s thick penis. I looked up at him as I did and the fire I saw burning in his eyes spurred me on. My tongue never stopped

exploring, stroking the parts of him that I could with how stretched my mouth was. He filled me and then some. I tried to take more but Rhett closed his lips over my clit and sucked at the same time he pushed two fingers in me.

I tried to go higher on my knees to escape the overwhelming sensations but his arms locked around my thighs and held me down, forcing me to ride out the stretch from his fingers and the suction from his mouth. I moaned around Arlo's length and sucked harder, not really sure if that was the right thing to do but Arlo just growled and locked his fingers in my hair.

The pressure building between my thighs just kept growing bigger and bigger until I couldn't breathe. My muscles contracted, clenching around Rhett's fingers until with one more pull from his mouth, everything released. Like warm rain washing over my body, the orgasm started out almost peaceful, a relief from the pressure. Until Rhett pushed a third finger into my pulsing core and flicked his tongue over my clit like a fiend. Then it grew frenzied and I shook as it just kept going, the warm rain turning into bashing waves that threatened to drown me.

With no other choice, I threw my head back and let Rhett take me to another dimension with his mouth and fingers. Blood rushed through my ears so loudly that I didn't realize I was crying out loud enough to wake the dead until he finally took his mouth off of me and let me catch my breath and my mind.

Rhett lifted me long enough to crawl out from under me and then I sank to the floor between Arlo's legs, his thighs holding me up. His big hands stroked my hair and he made soothing sounds, murmuring words to me that I couldn't understand. Still in a state of shock, I saw Arlo's still hard cock next to my head and moved just enough to take the head of it into my mouth. I sighed and gently sucked, feeling a ridiculous sense of peace from it.

I wasn't sure how long I sat there between his thighs, warming his cock with my

mouth, but when I sat up again, the three of them were all undressed and watching me. Somehow, another strong pulse of need left me feeling empty. Looking up at Arlo, I took him deep in my mouth, as deep as I could, and then forced myself to take just a bit more. I gagged and pulled back to breathe but the heat in his eyes sent me right back down. Bobbing up and down on his shaft, I couldn't help pressing my thighs together as the sounds turned me on. It was dirty. The wet sounds of my sucking, the gagging, the drawn out moans muffled by his cock stuffing my mouth... It was erotic.

“Up, sweetheart.” Arlo swore when I didn't listen to him. I took him deep once more and made an unhappy sound when he pulled me off. Dragging me into his lap, he pinned me to his chest with his wet cock pinned between us. “You like sucking my cock, baby?”

I blushed and looked down but that only gave me a view of the head of his shaft peeking up at me. Licking my lips, I nodded.

“I want to keep going.”

Shep moved to stand behind me and pulled my hair into a knot he wrapped around his fist. The sting of the pull when he tugged me off of Arlo's lap was something I'd obsess over later but in the moment, it made me moan.

“On the bed, Maxie. Hands and knees. We're going to see if you like sucking my cock as much as Arlo's while Arlo fucks your virgin pussy. If you're a good girl, we'll let you suck Rhett's, too.”

I no longer felt like Meek Maxie. I felt sexy, starved for their attention, and eager to please them while taking all the pleasure they could give me back. I had no idea what I was doing but it felt right. Giving them my virginity, having them take it like they were, it was right.

Scrambling to my hands and knees on the bed, I faced Shep and dug my fingers into the bedding as he came closer. I licked my lips as I stared at his shaft. Just as thick and long as Arlo, my men had been blessed. Or maybe I had been blessed. Looking over my shoulder, I could see Rhett was just as impressive. A flicker of fear floated through me like debris from a bonfire. They would rip me in two. Before that flicker of flame could take hold Shep gripped my face and angled it up at his.

“Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

I felt feral for a moment, like I’d claw them if they tried to stop. Holding his gaze, I reached forward to grip his erection and pulled it up to my mouth. Slowly dragging the tip over my lips, I smiled before letting the head slip inside. Hoping that answered his question, I focused on taking his cock deeper.

“Jesus. Are you sure you’re a virgin, baby?” He grabbed my hair again and tugged. “Look at me. Let me see those pretty eyes while you suck my cock, Maxie.”

I held his gaze, even as I felt fingers sliding into me from behind. The new angle made them rub against a brand new, magical spot inside me. Before I could fully appreciate the pleasure, though, the fingers were gone and then I felt it. Arlo’s blunt cockhead was notched at my entrance, ready to take my virginity.

“Just keep breathing, baby.” Shep pulled my head closer, forcing more of his cock to the back of my throat. I gagged and felt my core being stretched at the same time. The dual sensations made me dizzy. Shep didn’t let up, pushing my head down on his shaft while Arlo got another inch inside. He was so big and it pinched but I just wanted the pain over with.

Yanking my head back, I looked over my shoulder at Arlo and bared my teeth. “Just do it!”

Shep pulled my head back around and sank his length straight to the back of my throat at the same time Arlo thrust deep, not stopping until I could feel the foreign sensation of his balls pressing into my lower lips. I screamed. It hurt. The sound was muffled with Shep's cock in my throat. They were too big. I was never going to be able to take them all. My poor—

Rhett's fingers found my clit and stroked. He cupped my breasts and teased my nipples with his other hand, taking away from the pain until the pain faded.

“Such a good girl. Look at you, taking two of us like you were made for this.”

Arlo gripped my hips and then cupped my ass, squeezing my cheeks and playfully slapping them. It was like they were going to take me through everything I'd ever thought was taboo in one night.

“Your pussy feels like a goddamn better version of heaven, baby. You're so tight and hot. And so fucking wet. You're dripping for us. You love this, don't you?”

Shep pulled out of my mouth long enough for me to catch my breath and answer.

“God help me, I do! Don’t stop!”

“It would take a better man than me to stop after feeling you, Maxie.” Sliding out, Arlo growled against my back and then thrust deep again, knocking me forward on Shep’s cock.

They rocked me back and forth between them, letting me adjust to them both, and then they took me the way they wanted. I could only hang on as they both thrust deep at the same time, pinning me between them. That same pressure started building again.

CHAPTER 31

Shep

There was no way we should’ve been as rough as we were being with our little angel but the way she responded was an electric kick to the brain, demanding more. Maxie arched her back and worked her hips to meet Arlo thrust for thrust. He took her hard, riding her with no control. Each snap of his hips forced his cock deep in Maxie but she just screamed her pleasure around my dick as she choked on it. She gagged but she didn’t pull back. If anything, she tried to take more of my cock down the back of her throat. All while staring up at me with her big green eyes wide with what looked like wonder.

Arlo spread her ass and spanked her again, growling as he fucked her even harder.

“I can feel your pussy clamp down on me every time I spank you, little one.”

Rhett gathered some of her sweet wetness and reached back to smear it over her asshole.

“One day, this virginity will be ours, too.”

Maxie stopped breathing as a deep red flush colored her body. She tensed so hard between us that even her throat turned to steel around my shaft. I pulled out before I came and instantly Maxie let out a husky moan.

Arlo slapped her ass harder and then shouted her name as he thrust deep once, twice, three times more. He froze and Maxie melted. She screamed and her arms slipped out from under her, sending her face first into the mattress while Arlo came deep inside her freshly claimed pussy.

Maxie came like a freight train. I hadn't expected anything specific, more than the fact that we were going to make her come again and again, but the intensity of her orgasms surprised me. She'd been hiding a lot of fire for a very long time.

Mewling like a little kitten as Arlo pulled out and sank to the bed beside her, Maxie stayed like that, with her face down and her ass up. Rhett shifted so he was behind her but instead of immediately plowing into her, he met my gaze and quirked an eyebrow. I knew he was wondering the same thing I was. How far could we take our little angel's pleasure.

He slid three fingers into her and I knew he'd curled them to find her g-spot. At the change of her tone, he grinned and then finger fucked her fast and hard, riding that special spot with a focus that left Maxie shaking and crying out for us, then mercy, and then us again. Her head snapped up after just a minute and the way her body bowed tight was the only sign of her orgasm before it hit and her come squirted out, wetting Rhett's hand, her thighs, and the bed beneath her.

He fucked her through it and I stroked my cock as I watched him demand one more squirting, screaming orgasm from her before he positioned himself behind her and thrust his cock in deep. Maxie's eyes were glazed as she looked up at me but I saw her lips tip up in a smile that made my blood run even hotter for her. The little minx.

She reached for me and I was so amazed by her that I dropped to my knees in front of her and took her mouth in a fierce kiss. Rhett didn't make it easy as he took her from behind but I had to kiss her. She moaned into my mouth and panted my name against my lips.

Rhett was a demanding bastard and he didn't hesitate to reach under her to find her clit. He stroked it fast, shoving her towards another powerful orgasm.

"You're going to come again for me, baby, and then I'm going to fill you with my come. Be a good girl and come for me now."

Her face pinched in pain as she stiffened but just like each time before, when she finally came, it was like her entire body melted into peacefulness. She struggled to keep her eyes open and on me as she rode out Rhett's final few thrusts.

I knew I wasn't going to last long after watching her all night so as soon as Rhett pulled out, I flipped Maxie onto her back and settled between her thighs. Gripping her hands in one of mine, I held them over her head and swore when she wrapped her legs around my waist, opening her body up for me. My painfully hard dick slid through her wet folds and I gripped it tight to rub her clit with my tip until she was breathless and rocking her hips faster, trying to get more. Just as she started to stiffen, I lined our bodies up and slid home.

Her body really did feel like home. She gripped my dick so tight that I knew I'd never last. I was a slave to my needs as I took her rough and fast. The new angle showed me her bouncing tits and it was instantly my favorite. Leaning down, I sucked at her

nipples until she screamed my name. The feeling of her body clamping down on me, milking the come from my body was unlike anything I'd ever felt before. Lifting my head, I watched her face pinch as she came again and that was all I needed to fly over the edge and come deep inside her.

I didn't want to pull out and one day soon I knew that I wouldn't. I'd hold her and have her sleep with her body warming my cock all night. She'd be sore and I didn't want to make it worse. Pulling out, I sat back on my haunches and kept her thighs spread wide so I could watch as our mixed come slowly leaked out of her swollen pussy.

Arlo leaned over, as enticed by the sight as I was. He scooped some of the mess up and pushed it back inside, earning a low moan from Maxie. I knew my best friends and I knew that they were both thinking the same thing I was. There was no way we hadn't just knocked Maxie up with the amount of come we'd filled her with.

I wanted to raise her hips so every drop stayed inside and took hold. I wanted her swelling with our baby as soon as possible. There were other steps to take first but I was a selfish asshole and I wanted her tied to us.

Maxie seemed content to lie there as she was, letting us stare into her core and push come back inside her as it leaked out. Her breathing finally returned to normal and then it evened out and grew deeper.

Rhett grinned as he gently stroked her hair out of her face.

"She's out."

I pressed her thighs together and stretched out beside her, holding her tight.

"That was a lot for her first time."

Arlo pulled a blanket over her.

“Too much?”

Rhett stood up and went to the bathroom, returning with a washcloth.

“I don’t think so. I think our sweet, special Maxine is a kinky little thing. I just wonder if she knew that or if she was as surprised as we were.”

She groaned in my arms when Rhett spread her legs and pressed the cloth to her core, cleaning her but also letting the warmth hopefully ease some of the ache that’d surely be there. Maxie turned her head until her face was pressed into my chest.

“Sleep time.”

Rhett grinned.

“Of course, baby. I’ll get the light.”

It didn’t matter that it was barely afternoon and we still had a full day’s work to finish prepping for the cattle delivery we’d have arriving in a few days. We’d taken our baby hard and she needed rest.

“Rhett and I will go get some things done while you stay here with her.” Arlo pressed a kiss to Maxie’s head and took a moment to just smile as he studied her. “She’s fucking perfect, isn’t she?”

I held her tighter.

“That’s putting it mildly.”

CHAPTER 32

Maxie

“Come on, baby. Time for a soak.” Shep’s low voice brought a smile to my face.

I was happily floating in the land between being asleep and awake, content to let him do whatever he wanted to do. I wasn’t sure that I’d ever felt more relaxed than I was right then. I didn’t even think I’d been so relaxed as a little kid. It was like I was a ball of goo, limp and fantastically sated.

“It’s going to be a little hot.” Shep hissed a second before I felt the nicest, most toasty water engulf me. He settled me in his lap and wrapped his arms around me. “Too hot?”

I sighed. “Not at all. This is so nice. My cabin’s water doesn’t get this hot. I’m getting spoiled.”

Giving into my need to see him, I left sleep behind and gained a delicious view of a ruffled looking Shep and a fair amount of soreness between my thighs and at the back of my throat. I blushed as I thought of why my throat was sore and my voice husky.

“I’ll give you fifty bucks if you tell me what you’re thinking about right now.”

“My throat hurts.” I felt wildly feminine in a way I never had before. My body felt softer, silkier, even sexier as I turned in Shep’s arms to straddle him. I’d never felt sexy before but I was the woman who’d made the three hottest men I’d ever known

lose control. They'd lost their minds over me. "Because I... I..."

Shep settled his arms around me with his hands on my butt.

"Because you sucked cock like a fucking dream?"

I ducked my head and looked at him through my lashes.

"Yeah?"

He glanced down at where his hard length was growing against my stomach.

"Ignore him. He's remembering the way you tried to choke yourself on him."

I grinned and then bit my lip. Reaching down, I wrapped my hand around him and squeezed.

"What if I don't want to ignore him?"

"Fuck, baby. You're too sore for another round. I don't want to hurt you." Even as he said the words, his hips shifted against me. He tugged my lip free from my teeth and tipped his head back against the back of the tub. "Leave those lips alone."

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I didn't know what I was doing but it wasn't hard to figure out how to press Shep's thick length against my core and then sink down on it. I winced when he stretched my achy body but the pleasure was worth the slight pain. Once I was sitting on his thighs again with his cock buried inside me, I wrapped my arms around his neck and let out a shaky breath as I smiled.

"Is this okay?"

He laughed but it was strained.

"Yeah, baby, it's okay. It's more than okay. You feel so fucking good around me. You can sit here like this all night as long as you're not hurting."

I studied his face and stroked my fingers over the parts I was just getting to notice. The freckles across his nose, the few streaks of silver in his beard that I could only see up that close, the way his green eyes were so much deeper than mine. Tracing his ears, I did something I'd wanted to do for too long. I leaned forward and ran my tongue along the shell of his ear before gently biting the lower lobe. He had the best ears that stuck out just enough to be called cute.

He shuddered under me and gripped my butt tighter.

"What are you doing to me, Maxie?"

I kissed along his jaw and finally reached his lips. Running my tongue over the seam of them, I moaned when he opened for me and flexed his hips. I explored his mouth, running my tongue over his teeth and twirling it against his tongue. I took my time

doing things I'd only ever imagined as a desperate teenager dreaming of the same man impaling me with his cock.

His bearded chin and jaw tickled my mouth as I kissed down to the tattoo of the ship on his strong upper arm. Tracing the outline of it with my tongue, I looked up at him and watched as I moved over and scraped my teeth over his chest. His nostrils flared and his hands moved to my waist, gripping me tight.

“You’re close to getting yourself fucked hard, sweetheart.” His voice was full of gravel as he stared me down. “A man can only take so much.”

Moving my hands to his lower stomach, I braced myself as I rolled my hips. Rolling them back let a few inches of his long cock slide free and then I took them all back inside when I rolled forward again. The movement rubbed my clit against his stomach and made my eyes roll with pleasure. I couldn’t help sinking my teeth into my bottom lip as I watched him through heavily lidded eyes.

“You’re going to kill me, Maxie. Jesus, you shouldn’t have this much power as a newly deflowered virgin.” Grasping my breasts, Shep rolled my nipples between his thumbs and pointer fingers. “Make yourself come using my body, baby. Get off on me.”

Moaning, I did just that. I rode him in short, jerky strokes until I came with his name on my lips. Before I caught my breath, Shep had me suspended over his hips by my waist and he was power thrusting into me from below. The force shook my body and all I could do was hang on as he took me the way he needed. Water sloshed over the edge of the bathtub but the splashing was covered up by the breathy whine he fucked from me. I reached a desperate hand down and stroked my tender clit until I was coming again. Shep followed me over and then we both sank into the cooling bath water, breathing hard and still moaning as our bodies continued to rub together from the force of the sloshing water.

He lifted his foot and kicked the hot water on.

“Fuck, Maxie.”

I let out a breathy laugh.

“I had no idea I could orgasm so many times.”

He groaned.

“Don’t tempt me to show you just how many more you can have.”

I rested my head on his chest and slowly stuck my tongue out to lick water droplets from his skin.

“This is fun. I think I’m going to enjoy letting myself live a little.”

“If this is you living just a little, we might be in trouble if you ever decide to really let your hair down.” He reached over and grabbed a bottle of shampoo. “Now I’m going to do what I came in here to do. I meant to take care of you and make sure you’re not too sore. Instead, I fucked you again.”

I groaned when he tipped my head back, gripping the back of my neck with one hand to support me and pouring water over my hair with the other. He brought me back up and then slowly massaged the shampoo into my hair.

After he washed and conditioned my hair, he used a washcloth and took his time washing my body. It seemed to go on forever and I was in heaven. Not even riding Bob had ever managed to get me to that state of relaxed.

“I don’t know what made you change your mind last night, Maxie, but I’m fucking

glad you did.” Brushing his mouth over my throat, Shep slowly pulled out of my sore body and helped me to my feet. “You’re meant to be here with us, sweetheart.”

I frowned as he dried me off and pulled a massive t-shirt over my head that smelled like him. Changed my mind?

“What do you mean?”

CHAPTER 33

Arlo

I exchanged a concerned look with Rhett as we charged upstairs towards the sound of arguing. We’d left Shep in bed with Maxie. How the hell he’d managed to end up in a shouting match, I had no clue. I pushed the door open just as Maxie shouted at Shep.

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“I said I was going to give you a baby! I’m sure I told you the rest of my plan! I’m going to be a surrogate!” She tugged at her hair and growled. “How did you not hear that?!”

Anger flared hot in me.

“What the fuck did you just say?”

Maxie spun around to face me.

“Tell Shep you heard me say I’d be your surrogate last night!”

“The fuck you did! You came over, said you were going to have our babies, and then passed out drunk. You told us you were going to have our babies! What the fuck are you talking about surrogacy for?” I glared at her as I moved closer. “This had better be some stupid joke.”

She threw her hands up.

“I meant surrogacy! I told you last night that I can’t be a mother. What did you think happened when I went to my hotel room? Did you think I suddenly forgot all the horrible lessons my mom taught me?”

“So, explain this plan to us. The one you didn’t explain last night.” Rhett’s voice was deceptively calm. “Please clue us in.”

She looked at him and proved how well she already knew us when she took a nervous

step back.

“I figured we’d do...this...and I’d get pregnant. And then I thought we’d keep doing...this...until the baby was born. And then...”

“And then what?” He stepped closer.

“And then I thought I would give you the baby and I’d leave...” I watched her throat bob as she swallowed. “I thought it would give us both what we wanted.”

“You’d be okay with carrying our baby while fucking us and living with us for the next nine months and then just handing off that little girl or boy?” I knew her better than that. Her heart was too big for that ever to work out. “Get real, Maxine.”

She crossed her arms and pouted.

“It sounded really good in my head last night. I want you three and you three want a family. I can give you that.”

“We wantyou!” Rhett closed the distance between them and grabbed her shoulders. “Kids, dogs, and fucking pancakes every Sunday morning sound amazing but it’s nothing without you, Maxine. Don’t you get that?”

Her bottom lip quivered.

“You don’t understand.”

“I understand that you’re scared. That’s no excuse for making a plan to leave us in nine months. If you think your plan works for us, you’re wrong. You don’t get to leave us.” Shep shoved his feet into his boots. “You try to walk away from us in nine months and we’ll follow you, baby. Whether you knew it or not, you made a

commitment to us this morning. You're ours. We're yours. Get used to it because it's not changing."

"What? You can't just make that statement. My plan is flawed but I'm not cut out to be a mother. If y'all can't agree to my plan then we can't sleep together. It's not too late. The chances of me getting pregnant after—"

"After the way you took our come this morning? You're definitely knocked up already. So this?" Rhett gestured back and forth between them. "It's a done deal, baby."

Shep nodded. "As far as I'm concerned, nothing has changed. You're ours, sweetheart. And as much as I'm fucking overjoyed to have you, I need to get some air and space from you because the idea that you could walk away from our kid and us is making me want to break shit."

"I'm serious! You can't just tell me that I'm going to stick around with you. I just won't sleep with y'all again. We'll go back to a working relationship only. It's fine."

I pinned her with a hard stare.

"We all saw the way you came alive in our arms this morning, sweetheart. You don't want to stay away from us."

She followed after us as we went downstairs.

"You have to accept my choice. This isn't something you can just argue against. It's not up for debate."

I spun around and grabbed her face, slamming my mouth down on hers. Kissing her until I had to pull away to avoid dragging her back upstairs and fucking her made my

head spin. I turned and left the house before I could say or do anything I'd regret. With no clue where I was headed, I just stomped down the steps and out toward the pastures.

Shep and Rhett were ahead of me, waiting for me to join them. Rhett gestured to the house with an angry slash of his hand.

“What the fuck?”

I shook my head.

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. She’s not our goddamn surrogate. She’s our woman.”

“She’s going to be the death of me.” Shep ran his hands over his face and shook his head. “She’s nuts. Absolutely, bonafide nuts. All that quite sweetness and cold aloofness was a farce. Our surrogate? Our fucking surrogate? Like we were going to fuck her, get her pregnant, continue to fuck her while she grows our baby, and then just let her leave? I’m not sure if I’m more offended for us or for her. Does she think so little of us that she thinks we’d take the baby and just wave her away? Or does she think so little of herself that she thinks that would ever be possible? That she could just slip away and it wouldn’t end us?”

The front door slammed and a few seconds later Maxie came stomping around the side of the house. She spotted us and put her hands on her hips.

“You can’t just kiss me to shut me up and then walk away!”

Shep was worked up and he didn’t hesitate to march towards her.

“You wanna bet, you sexy little nutcase?!”

Maxie gasped and backed away.

“I’m not a sexy little nutcase! That’s so offensive! Don’t try to kiss me, Shep! I mean it! Shep!”

Shep wrapped his arms around her hips and picked her up with his hands full of her ass. She braced herself with her hands on his shoulders and glared down at him but he didn’t care. He pulled his hand back and slapped her ass hard enough that the sound echoed over the empty pastures.

“You are a little liar. You know that? You pretended to be so sweet and innocent but you were hiding that you can also be a stubborn pain in the ass. You think I’m going to let you walk away after you grow our baby, woman? Never. Never in a million years.”

Maxie’s eyes heated and when he slapped her other ass cheek her mouth popped open on a slight whimper. Blushing a deep red, she changed tactics and gripped Shep’s hair and tugged his head away from her chest.

“You have insulted me so many times in the last ten minutes, Shep Winston, and I’m starting to get mad!”

“Good! Get mad! Get fucking angry and fight me, baby, because this is it. You’re looking at your future right here and now, so you’d better get fucking used to it.” Shep turned his head and nipped at her wrist. “There’s not a goddamn thing you could do to make us change our mind about you. We’re not going anywhere. Do your worst.”

After slapping her ass one more time Shep put her down and then leaned down and kissed her forehead. She stumbled back a step, her face a mask of confusion.

“Time to get to work. I’m going to tackle that dead plot of the pasture. The tiller finally came in.” Shep grinned at me and Rhett once Maxie couldn’t see his face.

“Ranch isn’t going to work itself, Maxine. Let’s go, sweetheart.”

CHAPTER 34

Maxie

Two days. Forty-nine hours and fifteen minutes if I was being specific. That was how long it’d been since I’d lost my virginity. A little less since the last time I’d had sex with my bullheaded roommates. I wanted to strangle them or mount them but I wasn’t sure which I wanted more. They’d lit a fire in me that I couldn’t manage alone and then they’d just cut off the water supply. I was in a constant state of arousal, thinking of all the ways we could have sex instead of working. After being a sheltered, sexually constipated husk of a woman for nearly three decades, my body was awake and it needed more.

After Shep spanked me and told me to do my worst, they hadn’t touched me again. I could feel their eyes on me, always on me, but they kept their hands to themselves. They were punishing me for not accepting what they wanted as law. It felt like they were waiting on me to come crawling to them on my hands and knees telling them I’d been wrong. It wasn’t going to happen. The same way they’d awoken my sexual desire, they’d awoken the fight in me.

Shep wanted me to do my worst? I would show him just how bad my worst was. He was acting like we were married but I’d show him that he didn’t really want me. Not for keeps. I’d show them all and then they’d get over their tantrums and we could get back to the good part. I just needed them to accept that I wasn’t their forever. I had a thousand lessons from my mother banging around in my mind, all of them of her, telling me all the things I did that would stop anyone from ever loving me. I had the playbook on how to show the guys they were confused and didn’t really want me.

I wanted a few months in the warmth of their arms before I left and they were

impeding that with their flighty dreams of me being the mother to raise their children. The sooner they accepted that I was temporary, the sooner I could find their heart again and settle into it for a while. I wasn't so blind to my own feelings that I didn't know I felt the same fanciful things they felt but I knew the end already. My heart would be shattered into a million pieces just like the first time. I just it shattered wanted it to be under my own terms.

Once upon a time, I'd had little ideas here or there about things I wanted or didn't want. I'd never been brave enough to think past that first initial thought because I'd always known what Mom would say. In my attempt to be perfect and not rock the boat, those little ideas had faded until I thought they were all gone but something about Shep demanding I do my worst had triggered a landslide of those ideas.

At the back of my mind, it felt silly and childish. I was a grown woman finally thinking of doing things most teenagers did to rebel against their parents. I also recognized it was twisted to try and make my mother's abuse a self-fulfilled prophecy. I was planning on doing the things she said would make me unloveable, to make me unloveable. Making her right? It made my stomach hurt and my head throb but only if I actually thought about what I was doing.

My first act of rebellion was the easiest. My clothing had always been more about coverage and convenience, even if that meant wearing a flannel to cover my chest in the middle of the summer. I couldn't do much about parts of my clothing because there was no way I was riding Bob in a dress but I gathered up all the flannel shirts I owned and tossed them in a trash bag. They went to the back of my closet and sat there with whatever dust bunnies had been left over from the Mays.

Without my flannels, my tank tops were a little more scandalous. My curves weren't easily hidden in just a tank top. I put my new uniform of choice to the test when a team from the auction house showed up to unload the cattle we'd purchased. Too nervous to attempt having breakfast with the guys, I'd stayed hidden until it was time

to help with the cattle. The guys saw me for the first time that day at the same time as the four men who'd arrived in two semi-trucks.

I felt the energy shift as I approached and a strange beat of arousal hit me. The things I was learning about myself and couldn't begin to understand were unlimited since sleeping with the guys. My body, or my brain, seemed to find a lot of things appealing that never would've crossed my mind before. Like walking towards a group of men in a tank top that clung to my chest, while the men I wanted watched with dangerous scowls on their faces. A part of me wondered if Mom had been right about me because knowing I was making them mad sent an excited shiver down my spine. There had to be something wrong with me.

Instead of Mousy Maxie I pushed my shoulders back and greeted the new guys.

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“Thanks so much for transporting the cattle for us. I’m Maxie Hellstone. I’ll help set up the run and then we can get these girls to their new pasture.”

A lanky younger guy stepped forward, taking his hat off as he did, and stretched out his hand to shake mine.

“Ma’am. I’m Lestor—”

A strong arm wrapped around my middle and lifted me off the ground. I yelped and looked over my shoulder to see Arlo glaring at the poor guy before turning that hard gaze on me. Fury tore through me and instead of clamping it down until my teeth hurt, I let it out.

“You put me down right now, Arlo. I have a job to do and you’re not getting in my way.” I tried to elbow him but he locked his other arm around me, too, trapping my arms as he marched me towards the house. “Dammit, Arlo!”

He pressed his mouth to my ear and growled.

“You want to get that little shit killed? Let me tell you, baby, if he’d managed to actually touch even the tip of one of your fingers, I would’ve ripped his fucking arm off. You can’t come out there without a shirt on over this. No fucking way.”

I grunted and tried to kick him but he flipped me over his shoulder like I weighed nothing and jogged up the stairs, the motion leaving me breathless as his shoulder bounced into my stomach. That didn’t mean I lost any of my fight, though. As soon as Arlo carried me into my room and tossed me on the bed, I was up on my knees

glaring at him.

“You can’t tell me how to dress. There’s nothing wrong with this. I’m completely covered but you’re acting like I stripped down to my bra and panties to parade around in front of those men.” A shiver of pleasure worked its way down my spine at the look on his face.

“I can appreciate you getting more comfortable but I’ll be damned if some fuckers from Dallas are going to get to look at you. This is for us only, baby.” He gripped the door so tight that I thought I could hear the wood cracking. “Put a shirt on before you come back outside unless you want those men to lose their eyes.”

“You’ll be lucky if I don’t strip down to a freaking bikini before coming back out.” Did I own a bikini? Nope. Did he know that? I doubted it. Especially judging by the way his face turned red with anger. “You three don’t seem to want me anymore, so maybe I’m on the hunt for a few men who will give me what I want without demanding the world for it.”

Too far. I knew it the moment the words left my mouth but it was like I’d removed the filter between my brain and mouth. I was shocked by my own words but I did my best to play it off. Arlo didn’t seem to care if I’d scandalized myself or not. He didn’t seem to care about anything in that moment besides getting his hands on me.

He slammed the door shut and locked it before yanking his shirt over his head and coming at me. I panicked and tried to crawl to the other side of the bed but he was too fast. He grabbed my ankles and yanked me to him.

“You think you have it all figured out, don’t you?”

CHAPTER 35

Arlo

I knew she was pushing for a fight and I couldn't help rising to the bait. She didn't think we wanted her? I'd show her just how wrong she was. I'd fuck some sense into her and then maybe I'd be able to think clearly again without seeing red like a fucking bull over the idea of another man seeing her in a fucking tank top. I knew I was being ridiculous but just the thought of Maxie looking elsewhere for pleasure because we wouldn't accept her insane surrogate plan made me crazy.

I straddled her body and yanked her arms over her head with one hand, pinning them there so I could grasp her face with my free hand. I saw her start to shout at me and pushed two of my thick fingers into her mouth. Rubbing them over her tongue, I growled as I watched her pupils blow out with desire.

“You need some attention? Is that what this was? Are you feeling neglected while we've given you time to think and recover from how hard we took you? Well, sweetheart, you got my attention and I never want to leave you feeling neglected.” I pushed my fingers deeper and felt the sharp sting of her teeth sinking into them. It just made me burn even hotter. Yanking my fingers free, I bent down and kissed her hard. It wasn't a sweet kiss in any way. I took her mouth roughly and didn't give her time to catch up.

I needed both of my hands for what I wanted next so I sat up and looked around for something to use to get her hands out of my way. I noticed just how little she had in the room and made a note far in the recesses of my mind to remedy that. Seeing nothing, I yanked at my belt instead.

Maxie's eyes widened. “What are you doing with that?”

Ripping it free from my pants, I pulled the leather end through the buckle and slipped the loop over her arms before pulling it tight. She struggled but she was no match for

me. I leaned over her and roughly tied the belt to her headboard. If she yanked hard enough, it'd come free, but the sight made me realize I wanted to buy a set of real restraints to use on her.

Maxie tugged at her hands and glared at me.

“Let me go, Arlo!”

I pulled out my pocket knife and watched her face as I lowered it to her tank top. I didn't want to scare her, no matter how far gone I was. Instead of fear, though, I saw a wildfire staring back at me. Cutting her top and bra off, I closed the knife and threw it away from us.

I closed my mouth over the top curve of her tit and sucked until I knew she'd be marked. She shifted her hips under me but she wasn't trying to get away. She was doing her best to rub herself against me. Her nipples were hard little dark pink buds waiting for me to taste but instead I pinched them, rolling them between my fingers until Maxie cried out. I was still angry, still boiling over the idea of another man seeing her.

“Please, Arlo.”

I gripped the top of her jeans and ripped them open, sending the button flying.

“Please, what? What do you want, little one? You want me to stop and untie you so you can go down there and find a man who will never be able to fuck you like I do and who will never feel for you an ounce of what I feel for you? Is that what you want?”

She lifted her hips for me when I jerked her jeans down her legs.

“No!”

I threw her boots across the room and followed them quickly with her jeans before grabbing the front of her simple cotton panties and ripping them off.

“Then what?”

She moaned when I roughly spread her thighs and held them to the bed, leaving her exposed and open to my starving eyes. She was so wet already that her pussy shined for me. She tugged at her arms harder and tried to twist her hips.

“I need you, Arlo. Please!”

Pressing one hand into her lower stomach to hold her down, I moved the other to her wet lower lips and smeared my fingers with her juices before pressing them against her mouth.

“Open and suck them clean. Taste just how needy you are for me.”

She sucked my fingers and rolled her tongue over them while making soft little moans until I pulled them free. Her head lifted to follow my hand but I growled and she dropped back to the bed.

“I need you, Arlo.”

“Say it. Say what you need.” I wanted to hear her sweet lips utter filth. “Tell me, Max.”

“I need you to...fuck me. I need you to fuck me, Arlo. Please!” Her face and chest flushed red as she said it but her eyes were locked on mine, making it clear just how much she wanted and needed me.

“Just as long as you realize that this body is mine.” I was being cruel, pushing for more than she was ready to openly give, but I was starving for her life as much as I was for her body. I wanted everything. I let her watch as I opened my jeans and pushed them down enough to free my cock. Then I stroked myself over her as she watched.

“Tell me what I need to hear, baby.”

Licking her lips, Maxie’s gaze flicked from my face to my cock until finally she let out a desperate cry and nodded.

“I’m yours. I’m yours, Arlo.”

Wedging my hips between her open thighs, I held her gaze as I thrust my full length into her. Her wet heat squeezed my dick so hard that I lost my breath.

“Fuck, Maxie. You’re mine. You belong to us. We own this pussy. Do you hear me? Tell me. Say the words right now.”

Maxie’s back was arched deep as she strained between her bound hands and my cock impaling her. Her tits swayed as she took shaky breaths and blinked away tears. Her voice shook as she gave me what I wanted, using words I was sure she’d never uttered in her sweet life.

“You own my pussy.”

My cock jumped inside her, the words so dirty and perfect.

“Again.”

She wrapped her legs around me.

“You own my pussy.”

I moved my hand to press my thumb over her clit.

“Louder.”

She let out a frustrated cry and then screamed at me.

“You own my pussy! Please, Arlo! I need you to move! Please!”

A dark satisfaction filled me at the idea of the men outside hearing her scream for me. It drove me like the hounds of hell nipping at my ankles to give her what she wanted. I moved. Pulling out until her core clamped down on just my tip and then thrusting so deep and hard that the bed creaked. Bracing my arms on either side of her head, I watched her face as I fucked her hard. It was rough but I couldn't stop. I needed to hear her scream and I needed to know she knew as well as I did that she was never going anywhere. She was home.

Maxie came hard once, twice, and a third time before I couldn't keep up the brutal pace. The headboard rammed against the wall over and over and that sound mixed with her cries of pleasure filled my head until I was hanging on by a thread. My balls tightened painfully and I was so close to coming that my entire body clenched as I held off. I just needed one more thing from her.

“Tell me you'll stay.”

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Her eyes filled with tears but it didn't stop her from coming again. She sobbed my name as she shook with the strongest orgasm yet. I fought against my release even as her pussy squeezed and pulsed around my cock. She didn't say the words I needed to hear.

I let out a frustrated growl and pulled out. My cock was coated in her come and was an angry red color but I gritted my teeth and shoved it back into my jeans. I quickly freed her hands and checked them to make sure they were okay before backing away.

She sat up, her eyes wide.

“You didn't...”

I grabbed my shirt and yanked it over my head.

“No. And I won't. You want something from me? Well, I want something from you, too. I don't accept that you want to leave us. If you're telling me right now that you're willing to stay until you give us a baby, I'm telling you that I'm not coming in your sweet little pussy again. I'll hold onto you for as long as I can, no matter the cost to me.”

Her mouth dropped but I didn't give her a chance to respond before I unlocked the door and left. I went straight to my bathroom and locked myself in for a long, ice cold shower. It didn't help the pain in my balls or the ache in my chest.

Maxie

“I want you to cut it off.” I stared at my reflection and sat up straighter. Ava Pearl stood behind me, one hand on her hip and a pair of shears in the other that she pointed at me. I’d never been to Pearly Things to have my hair done before but I was pushing my boundaries again. “And I want you to dye it like this.”

Ava’s eyes widened as she looked at the picture on my phone. “Honey, you okay?”

No, I wasn’t. I couldn’t get Arlo’s gravel-filled voice out of my head, demanding things from me, things I couldn’t give him. He’d left my room in pain and I felt like maybe I’d managed to push him a little bit farther away. It just didn’t feel like a win. It felt like nails scratching me from the inside out.

“Yeah, I’m good.”

Nellie sat in the chair next to me, her eyes just as wide as Ava’s. Ava had fit me in between her last client of the day and the Doll’s Club meeting that I was going to. Nellie had insisted on coming with me to make sure I didn’t chicken out of the meeting but I didn’t think she was having any more concerns after seeing the hairstyle I wanted.

“Maxie, this is a big change...” Nellie cleared her throat and leaned closer. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. It’s just hair.” I clenched my hands in my lap under the rainbow cape Ava had clipped around my neck. “I’ve always wanted to do something different. And my long hair has always been a pain while working on the ranch. Mom just never would let me cut it. She said it wasn’t ladylike to have short hair.”

Nellie’s face darkened. “Let’s cut your fucking hair off then.”

Ava met my eyes in the mirror and grinned. “You’re going to be hot, Maxie. Are you ready to handle all the male attention coming your way?”

I snorted. “Again, it’s just hair.”

“She’s got plenty male attention anyway. Isn’t that right, big sis?”

I turned bright red but I smiled. I had nothing to be ashamed of.

“Something like that.”

Ava cheered and then swung my chair around.

“Alright, honey. Let’s do this.”

Nellie wiggled in her seat.

“I just have one thing to say before you go through with it... Jenny Hellstone was a bitch of the worst kind and you’re going to live the life she never wanted you to because she was a bitter old woman full of anger and jealousy. I hope she’s rolling over in her grave.”

“I want to get a tattoo!” I blurted the words out and then laughed. “I’m not done doing the things I always wanted to do. If I’m going to haunt her afterlife I want to do it right.”

“I know a guy!” Ava gripped my shoulders and squeezed. “I’m sure he’d do it tonight. If we moved the meeting there, he would probably even do a few piercings for free. He loves a rowdy bunch of women.”

My heart raced but it felt like I was soaring on Bob. I was excited. Nodding eagerly, I

glanced back at my reflection and said goodbye to the old Maxie one last time.

“Let’s do it.”

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The next time I saw myself I almost didn't recognize the woman staring back. Mousy Maxie was dead. Instead, I looked...bold and happy. I looked like the woman who went to bed with three sexy men and had amazing orgasms. The long curls were gone. My new hair was short, just above my chin, and the curls were even bigger and bouncier without the extra weight. They spiraled around my face in the most beautiful dusty pink color.

"Wow." I touched the curls and grinned when they felt like silk under my fingertips.

"Holy shit, Maxie." Nellie stood up and stared at my reflection. "I mean... Holy shit. You look hot."

"Look at those cheekbones. And I swear that shade of pink makes the color of your lips pop. And your eyes!" Ava pressed her hand to her heart. "You're going to break some hearts."

My eyes did pop without the thick curtain of hair hiding them. I turned my head from side to side and let out a small laugh. "Wow."

"You broke her!" Nellie smiled and wrapped her arms around my shoulders. "Still want that tattoo?"

I stood up and looked down at my tank top and jeans.

"Yes, and I want to buy a dress on the way."

"Lord have mercy on the men you cross paths with, honey." Ava looked up as the

bell over the door rang and Sugar Moore strode in with several other women, all ready for the meeting. “We’re taking a field trip, ladies! Maxie needs a dress and then we’re getting tattoos!”

Nellie paused. “We’re getting tattoos?”

“What better way to honor our club?” Ava looked at my body and snapped her fingers. “I think I know who to call for that dress.”

She did. I saw a different side to Ava that night, a side who got stuff done and didn’t take more than a few minutes to do it. I was wearing a new-to-me white sundress which hugged my curves and stopped much higher than I normally would’ve been comfortable with in under twenty minutes. Half an hour after that, I was lying back on a plastic wrapped leather table with a man named Big John setting my thigh on fire as he tattooed a beautiful picture of Bob’s face on me.

Nellie stayed by my side, her phone held high as she video chatted with Vera. The noise in the makeshift tattoo parlor was at an all-time high as Sugar passed around several flasks and everyone got drunk. Big John, true to Ava’s word, really did seem to enjoy having a bunch of crazy drunk women hanging around. He was all smiles as he finished with my thigh and then told me to roll onto my side.

Vera’s face filled Nellie’s phone screen and she screamed. “I want my thighs back! Look at you! I’ll trade you a screaming newborn who only wants her daddies for those thighs, Maxie.”

I grimaced and reached for one of the flasks as Big John worked on the second tattoo, the small pink heart at the top of my hip that every one of the women were getting.

“Did you know tattoos hurt? Like, a lot?”

“Oh, come on! It can’t be worse than losing your virginity to three men hung like horses!” Vera giggled when I blushed and Big John threw his head back and cackled. “Oops. Was that okay?”

I’d maybe had a few more sips from the flask than I’d planned and I’d blurted out a lot of things. A lot, a lot of things.

“I don’t like you very much right now.”

Big John put a second wrap over the smaller tattoo and helped me sit up.

“Young lady, you lead an exciting life. Good for you.”

I couldn’t get the smile off my face as I moved aside so Sugar could get her tattoo. Looking down at her, I grinned and wiggled my finger.

“I hope that doesn’t hinder your movements when you’re climbing over Steve’s back fence next time.”

Everyone who’d heard howled with laughter as Sugar’s face turned bright red. She stammered out a few syllables for a moment and then just gave up.

“Just tattoo me, Big John.”

“God, I like this new version of you, Maxie.” Nellie hugged me tight and then burped. “Uh. I might’ve taken too many drinks from whatever Sugar’s hiding in that flask.”

“It’s moonshine, baby.” Sugar let out a yelp as Big John started her tattoo. “Oh, sweet Jesus. Why the hell are we doing this again?! Maxie Hellstone, I think you might just be a bad influence!”

CHAPTER 37

Shep

I sat on the front porch in one of the new rocking chairs we'd had delivered and listened to the sounds of the cows chattering in the distance. They seemed to be happily adjusting to their new home. I might've been adjusting just as well if we weren't currently locked in a stalemate with Maxie. For a woman who'd been so afraid to rock the boat when we first got to town, she sure was coming into her own in being stubborn and defiant. If it didn't mean I had blue balls and an ache in my chest for the woman, I would've been damn proud of her.

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My fingers tapped the arms of the chair as I kept my eyes on the road. It was late and Maxie still wasn't home. I had no clue where she'd gone and I was starting to get antsy. I'd learned that I didn't like her being out of my sight. I liked looking at her. I also liked knowing she was safe. Neither of which I could do when she was off galivanting somewhere.

Rhett and Arlo were doing their best to be unbothered, both of them sitting in the living room watching a baseball game. I could feel their anxious energy, though.

"Fuck it." I stood up and reached in my pocket for my truck keys. "I'm going looking. I'll be back."

Their laughter through the screen door was fair. I would've laughed at them, too.

It was dark out as I drove into town but I craned my neck back and forth anyway, thinking I'd spot Maxie's pale skin at any moment. My heart thumped a little faster until I saw her car parked on Main Street. Thinking she was inside one of the storefronts, I parked and waited. As much as I wanted to see her to make sure she was okay, I didn't want to ruin her plans if she was busy with friends. That attitude changed after half an hour, though. She still hadn't come out so I decided I was going in after her.

I only made it to the back fender of her car when someone called out from the other side of the street. The man looked like he was in a biker gang but I recognized him as one of the cops in town. Seth, I thought. Or maybe Henry? I changed directions and met him in the street. With no traffic to be seen, it wasn't an issue.

“Seth. You looking for Maxie?” Seth frowned even as he shook my hand. “I’m assuming she’s with Nellie and the rest of the women they hang out with. Normally I pick Nellie up at the salon but they’re not there.”

“Shep.” I looked back at the salon and felt my mouth turn down in a scowl. “Where the hell are they then?”

“That’s what I’d like to know, too. They’re trouble when they’re all together. I can’t imagine they’re up to any good wherever they are.” He crossed his arms just as his phone rang. “Speak of the devil.”

I didn’t hide that I was listening to his call. I wanted to know where Maxie was. Pronto.

“Where the hell are you, Nellie?” He listened and I watched his jaw tighten. “We’ll be right there.”

I followed him as he stomped down the street.

“Where are they?”

He groaned and when he looked back at me I saw he didn’t look all that put out. He actually looked like he was enjoying hunting down his woman. Maybe I needed to take a page out of his book. Seth pointed down the street.

“Big John’s. He’s a tattoo artist.”

I laughed. “Why the fuck are they there?”

“I’m hoping they just took a fun field trip but judging by how drunk everyone in the background of that call sounded, I’m sure bad decisions are being made.” He grinned.

“I think I even heard Maxie in the background.”

“No way.” I was having a hard enough time imagining Maxie at a tattoo shop, period, but drunk at a tattoo shop? Not a chance. “I’m sure she’s taking care of everyone else.”

I wasn’t prepared for just how wrong I was. The front door of a shop at the end of Main Street opened and a flood of women poured out, all of them seemingly drunk. I searched for Maxie but didn’t see her at first. It was only when I noticed Nellie pointing and gesturing wildly at the woman next to her that I realized the woman with wild, pale pink curly hair was my Maxie.

My jaw dropped. She was dressed in a figure hugging, short white dress and her long, long legs were on full display. Her full breasts weren’t exactly hidden, either. Everywhere I looked, there was something new and fun to see. Her eyes looked even bigger and greener than normal and her lips looked so damn pouty that my mind immediately went to an image of them wrapped around my dick. She looked like a completely different version of herself but it somehow fit her like a glove.

“What do you think of your new lady?” Nellie was grinning like a loon. “Isn’t she hot?!”

Maxie put her hands on her hips when she stopped a few feet in front of me. The cocky move couldn’t hide her nervous gaze.

“Well?”

Maybe I should’ve reacted like a gentleman. Maybe I should’ve used my words. It was hard with my brain shutting down and my blood all rushing to my dick. I let out a loud growl and threw her over my shoulder, my hand landing across her ass hard before staying there to keep her covered.

She screamed as all the other women laughed and cheered.

“Shep! What are you doing?!”

“I think you know what he’s doing, big sis!” Nellie cackled. “Good luck walking straight tomorrow!”

Maxie wiggled like she wanted to get off so I spanked her again. Her response was to spank me back but she didn’t have the leverage or upper body strength that I did. I spanked her every time she spanked me and by the time I got to the passenger side of my truck, her poor ass was hot under my palm.

I flipped her into the seat and laced my fingers through her short hair.

“You are fucking beautiful, Maxine Hellstone, and I need to be inside you. I want to kiss you but if I touch you more than this, I’m going to end up fucking you right here and now. Understand?”

Her chest rose and fell faster and she licked her lips.

“Yes.”

I jerkily buckled her in and raced around to my side. I was racing away from town before I finished putting my own seatbelt on. I looked around for access roads once we were out of town and as soon as I found one that wound through a grove of trees, I pulled off the main road and parked the truck out of sight. I barely got the truck in park before yanking off my belt and reaching for her.

CHAPTER 38

Shep

Maxie met me in the middle of the truck, our teeth knocking together as we hungrily kissed each other. I could taste alcohol on her breath and something sweeter that was all her. Yanking her into my lap, she hissed in pain and I froze.

“What? What’d I do?”

She grabbed the hem of her dress and pulled it up. When I only looked at her pretty pink panties with the damp spot that told me just how much she wanted me she squeezed her thighs around my hips and grunted. “Look.”

I followed her gaze to her upper thigh and felt my eyes so wide. “Is that a tattoo?”

She lifted her dress even higher and showed me a second one higher on her hip. They

were both covered but she was clearly proud of them. Her smile was warm as she traced the outside of the protective covering.

“Yep. Two of them.”

I wasn't sure what to feel first. Jealous and angry that someone named Big John had gotten his hands on my woman. Or so turned on that I felt like I'd erupt in flames at any second. I slowly lifted my gaze back to hers and licked my lips.

“Unbutton my pants, Max.”

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth and smiled.

“You like my new look?”

I wound my hand in the back of her hair, loving the way the short silk strands felt, and tugged her head back.

“I love your new look. And I love that your hair is still long enough to pull.”

She shuddered in my arms and blindly reached for my pants. Her moans of pleasure grew louder as I leaned forward and nipped at her throat. I grunted when I felt her hands on mycock through my jeans. She struggled with my belt and then the button before finally getting the denim unzipped.

“God, Shep. Could you have worn harder clothes to strip off?”

I laughed and ran my knuckles over the wet patch in her panties.

“I'll take it into consideration for next time. I'm a big fan of you in a dress, baby. This easy access is fucking glorious.”

“I’ve never had sex in a vehicle before.” Tugging her head away from my grip, she looked down as she struggled to get my pants down. She growled until I lifted my hips and helped. “I want to be bad, Shep. I want to do everything I’ve never allowed myself. Starting here.”

I swore as her hand wrapped around my cock and pulled it free. In a move that left me near drooling, she pushed her fingers into her mouth to get them wet before stroking my length. A wave of heat burned through me. She wanted to be bad? I could do bad.

“Spit on it, Max.”

Her cheeks flushed but she lowered her head and did as I said. Her hand was tight and hot around me, her strokes fast just the way I liked.

“On your hands and knees, baby. On the seat like that, yeah. You’re going to suck my cock down your sweet little throat while I take my time playing with your pussy.” I watched her hastily get into position and felt precum leaking from my tip. “Lick me, baby. You want to be a bad girl? Then lick my cock like it’s your favorite lollipop.”

She moaned and lowered her mouth. We both shuddered when her tongue lapped up my precum. Looking up at me, she blushed even as she opened her mouth and took the head inside. She didn’t stop there, though. She took more and more down until I felt the back of her throat.

My spine tingled as she gagged and pulled back. Reaching under her, I shoved her panties aside and slid my fingers through her wet lips. As she took me deep again, sucking for all she was worth, I pushed two fingers deep into her. Her moans vibrated my dick and I had to count to ten to stop from coming way too fast.

“Fuck, baby. Your mouth feels so good.” I coached her into tormenting me even

more. “Take me deep again and then I want you to swallow. Fuck! Just like that. You’re a dirty girl, aren’t you? My perfect little naughty girl.”

I finger fucked her harder as she gushed for me. Her head jerked up as I found her g-spot and rubbed it.

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“Oh, god! I need you to fuck me, Shep. God, please fuck me!”

“I love hearing you beg, baby.” I snatched her off the seat and pulled her into my lap, holding her high enough for her to grab my cock and position it at her core. “That’s it, baby. Sink down on my dick with that tight pussy.”

She made a frustrated sound as she shoved her panties to the side and then impaled herself on my cock in one swift move. She threw her head back and shouted my name while digging her fingers into my shoulders.

“Oh, god. Oh, my god. Fuck me, Shep!”

I didn’t need to be told twice. I gripped her waist and held her up so I could drive my hips into her from below. Her cunt squeezed my cock so tight that my pulse buzzed in my ears, blocking out everything but her moans.

“Fuck, Maxie. I love your pussy.”

She moved my hands so she could settle fully on my dick and then she started riding me with an insanely hot roll of her hips. Her gasp when I gripped her hair was intoxicating so I gripped harder and pulled her mouth to mine. Kissing her hard, I nipped at her bottom lip and growled as she shoved me closer and closer to my release.

She beat me over the finish line, coming hard with a long, drawn out groan. I didn’t give her a chance to recover before I pulled out and pushed her mouth down to my cock. Her eyes flashed up at mine and I could tell she was into it. She opened her

mouth and took me deep, tasting herself on my length.

“Fuck, baby. Suck me hard. Yes! I’m going to come and you’re going to swallow every drop.” I shouted as I came hard, filling her mouth with my seed. I watched her struggle to swallow it all but she didn’t miss any, even licking my cock clean before slumping back into the seat behind her.

She landed with her head on my thigh, her warm puffs of breath keeping my dick hard.

“You didn’t come in me.”

I ran my fingers through her hair. “You have to commit to us first, baby. As soon as you agree to be ours, we’ll pump you so full of come that you’ll be pregnant by the next sunrise.”

She sighed.

“I wish it was that easy.”

Tugging her back into my lap so I could hold her, I kissed the top of her pink head and sighed back at her.

“It is. You’re meant to be ours, Maxine. This chemistry isn’t normal. I’ve never touched another woman who affects me the way you do. Sex has never been so intense but also... I just like you, Maxie. I like spending time with you. I feel shit for you it would terrify you if I admitted that already.”

“Still? Even with my hair and tattoos?”

“Are you kidding? Let me make this clear for you, baby. I care about you. Nothing

you do can change that. If you suddenly become every single thing your mom warned you about, I'm still going to want you. Keep pushing if you need to. You'll see."

She lightly dragged her fingernail around the tip of my cock.

"I want you to come in me. I don't know why but it makes me feel closer to you."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

"Get out of the truck and bend over the seat, Maxine. I'll show you just how close we can get."

CHAPTER 39

Maxie

"What the fuck, Shep?!"

I jerked awake at the angry shout and gasped when Shep was yanked out of my bed. I twisted around to see what was happening but was instantly hit with the worst headache and nausea. Groaning, I covered my face with my hands and whimpered. I was never drinking again.

"Who the fuck is that? How the fuck could you bring someone else home? To Maxie's bed? Are you fucking kidding me?" Arlo sounded like he was seconds from murdering Shep.

"That is Maxie, jackass!" Shep sounded just as cranky as Arlo. "Jesus. You really think so little of me?"

"What do you mean?" Rhett was the only one speaking at a normal volume, bless his

heart.

Slowly sitting up, I shoved my new hair out of my face and grimaced at the three men staring at me.

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“Hungover. No yelling. Need pain relievers.”

Shep was the only one of them to respond. He jumped into action while Arlo and Rhett just stared back at me. Through the hangover pain I was hit with a large amount of doubt. I’d wanted to be different and not as tolerable as the normal Maxie but what if they hated the way I looked? My stomach clenched as I waited.

Arlo’s mouth was hanging open. He blinked slowly as he looked at me, his eyes wide. Finally, he moved closer.

“You have no goddamn right to look this fucking sexy when I’m trying to keep my hands to myself.”

I flushed at the compliment.

“Shep didn’t keep his hands to himself.”

Rhett knelt in front of me and brushed my hair out of my face. His eyes searched my body, finally landing on the sliver of plastic sticking out from the lowered blanket. His mouth tightened as he pushed the material lower and saw my tattoos.

“Who touched you?”

Even feeling like crap, I wanted to push him.

“Lots of people.”

His jaw clenched.

“You need to clean it.”

Shep came back with a glass of water and pills I immediately gulped down. He saw Rhett looking at my tattoo and huffed.

“Apparently a bunch of the women in town got shitfaced and went to a guy named Big John last night. Nellie was there, too.”

“Big John?” Rhett’s scowl turned deadly.

Seeing his hair-thin trigger I reached out and rested my hand on his shoulder.

“He was professional. And maybe a saint. He was happy to welcome all of us into his place last night and he didn’t even mind that we were drunk and loud.”

I felt my face burn even hotter when I thought of how much the man had heard the night before. Including all about my relationship with the three of them. I was pretty sure I’d even talked about my plan to be their surrogate. Humiliation struck hard and hot but I tipped my chin higher, refusing to wallow in it.

Rhett caught my lip and tugged it free from my teeth.

“No more of that. Come on. I’ll help you clean your new tattoo. I’m hoping to find my name after I pull that plastic off.”

He carried me to the bathroom counter and put me down next to the sink. I watched him move as he gently peeled the plastic off and shook his head when he saw the tattoo of Bob.

“Fucking horse. It’s a good picture of the jerk.”

I hissed at the sting from the warm water he used to clean both tattoos.

“Are you over me now?”

Rhett’s head snapped back like I’d punched him. His reaction made me feel like an idiot for voicing my thoughts. He looked at me like I’d grown a second, and third, head.

“Are you serious? You think dying your hair and getting a tattoo would make me want you less?”

I bit at a piece of skin on my inner lip and winced when it tore away.

“I thought maybe you were interested in the meek version of me. Mom barely thought I could attract a man when I followed all of her rules. So...”

He patted my thigh and hip dry before straightened to his full height and looking down at me.

“Your mom was a bitch. A bitch who knew nothing about men, I’m willing to bet, because you’ve been a temptation since the first time I laid eyes on you. When you were tiptoeing around everyone and their needs, when you decided to stop that and speak up for yourself, and now that you’re this bad girl version of yourself...You are the sexiest woman I’ve ever seen and my dick is perpetually hard for you. For your looks and for your attitude, Maxine. You couldn’t make yourself unattractive to me if you grew a beard and stopped showering.”

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I crinkled my nose and made a face.

“You’re nuts.”

“For you.” He bent down and kissed the skin next to the picture of Bob. “Still convinced you’re going to give us a baby and leave?”

I wasn’t. I was stubborn, though.

“Yes.”

He sighed and moved away.

“That’s too bad.”

Arlo straightened from where he’d been leaning in the doorway. Walking over to me, he tangled his hand in my hair and tipped my head back until my throat was stretched and exposed. His teeth were sharp against the sensitive skin as he nipped me. I felt him marking me but I was wanton for it. I pressed my hips forward, seeking relief and finding none.

“Old Maxie, new Maxie, future Maxie... They’re all ours. No matter what you say, you’re ours, Max. We’re not letting you go and we all know you don’t want us to. If you thought this new look would force us to decide we didn’t want you, your plan backfired. If anything, I just want to fuck you harder and leave my mark all over your pearly skin so every man who lays eyes on you knows that you’re owned. Fight all you want for now, baby, but I’ve broken harder horses and won bigger battles. And I

didn't care about those half as much as I care about you."

His words made me want to shout that I'd changed my mind. Maybe some women wouldn't have liked his need to own me but it did something to me. I shuddered and gripped his shirt in my fists.

"Now get ready for the day, sweetheart. We've got a ranch to run." He lightly patted my tattoo and grunted. "Next time, it'll be our names."

I gasped as he strode out of the bathroom and left me sitting in shock while Rhett laughed. Glaring at him, I shook my head.

"He's not serious."

From outside the bathroom Arlo calmly called back.

"Be careful or I'll do it myself."

I should've been horrified. I wasn't.

CHAPTER 40

Arlo

I leaned against the porch railing and watched Maxie as she brushed out Bob's tail. He kept flicking it back and forth, swishing it out of her hands, while doing what could only be called laughing. He kept throwing his head back with every single tooth in his head showing. Maxie struggled through it, talking to the big horse the whole time. From where I was, I couldn't hear what she was saying but damned if I wasn't tempted to get closer so I could.

“She’s beautiful.” Rhett stood next to me, his mouth full of a muffin Maxie had baked. “And talented. This muffin tastes amazing.”

I couldn’t tear my eyes away from her. The pink hair, the short cut, it suited her in a way that made my mouth go dry. She was stunning. I’d nearly driven a nail through my hand earlier when she’d walked out in just a tank top over her jeans, no bra in sight. The sway of her tits, the way her nipples made the ribbed material pucker, I’d been lost.

Shep came out onto the porch and grunted.

“Never thought I’d want to be a horse so desperately.”

“At this point, I’d put on a saddle and pretend if it meant she paid me that much attention.” I realized I’d shocked them and had to laugh. “What? The woman is driving me crazy. I just—”

“What the hell?” Rhett stepped forward and scowled as we all watched a truck speeding down the drive.

I jumped over the railing and ran to Maxie, wanting to put myself between her and whoever the hell was heading our way like a bat out of hell. Bob tried to bite me when I got closer but I slapped his flank and growled at him to behave.

Maxie looked over her shoulder to see what I was scowling at and groaned.

“That’s Mills’ truck.”

I relaxed enough to reach over and tug a strand of her hair.

“Think he heard about your new style?”

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She smiled up at me and for a moment my breath caught. I couldn't imagine anyone ever saying a bad word to her. Her smile was so innocent and sweet, a show of her heart. She was good and she deserved to be cherished. I swallowed the wave of emotion and brushed my thumb over her lips.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" She tried to duck her head but I held her steady.

"I love you, Maxine."

Her lips popped open as she gasped. Hell, I was as shocked as she was. I hadn't meant to say the words, no matter how much I knew them to be true. It wasn't the time or place but I couldn't regret telling her, not when I meant it with everything I was and would ever be.

Before she had a chance to say anything Mills' truck slid to a stop and he was out, coming at me. His face was red with anger as he kicked up dirt with every stomp.

"Surrogacy?! I held my tongue and okayed the three of you going after my little sister and you want her to be yoursurrogate? You think you can just use her like that?"

He swung and I let it happen, sensing he needed a win. The man had been ripped raw by Maxie not that long before. Still, his hit made me stumble back a few steps and it hurt like hell. I rubbed my jaw and spit out a pool of blood from a split in my lip.

Maxie screamed and didn't hesitate to jump on her brother's back, tightening her arms around his neck.

“Don’t hit him!”

Mills didn’t even seem to notice her attempts at choking him.

“She isn’t some tool you can use to have your fucking kid! She deserves a hell of a lot more than that from you three and if you can’t give her that, I’m going to beat the hell out of you until you change your mind!”

Rhett plucked Maxie off of Mills’ back and easily held her to his chest while grinning.

“You’ve got things a little mixed up, buddy. Although I’m interested in how you heard about your sister’s plan.”

Mills stilled.

“What?”

I wiped blood from my mouth and raised my eyebrows at him.

“Yeah. The surrogacy is your sister’s shitty plan. A plan we’re refusing, by the way. We’re not accepting anything but everything from her but she’s stubborn as hell.”

Swinging around on his sister, Mills threw his arms out to the side.

“What the hell, Maxie? Why would you want to be a surrogate? And what the fuck happened to your hair?”

I let out a low growl.

“Careful. She’s beautiful and you’ll do yourself a favor by not acting like she’s

anything but.”

“It’s none of your business, Mills.” Maxie had the nerve to act haughty while being held like a child. She tipped that stubborn chin up in the air and crossed her arms. “And I like my hair.”

“I think it is my business. Especially since I got no less than five calls this morning about you being a surrogate. Apparently, people are horrified, thinking these guys wanted it. There’s a group preparing pitchforks over the idea of someone possibly hurting you by not promising you forever.”

I grinned at her.

“Look what you did, baby. You’ve incited a crowd to violence against us.”

She huffed and finally pushed at Rhett’s hands so he’d put her down.

“I mentioned it in passing last night to the girls. We were drinking and I was... Yeah, I mentioned it but I thought I’d made clear that it was my idea. I’ll fix it.”

“Why do you want this, Maxie? I might not love the idea of these three sharing you but they’re good men. You could do worse.” Turning on me, Mills blew out a rough breath. “Hit me back.”

I shook my head.

“No, for once we’re on the same page. If you can talk some sense into her, I welcome it. She’s convinced she’ll be your mother and she doesn’t want to put a kid through it.”

Maxie glared at me.

“Arlo!”

“Are you serious? Maxie...” Mills rubbed his face, suddenly looking twenty years older. He gently took his sister’s shoulders and leaned down so they were eye to eye. “I’m still coming to terms with what our mom did to you but even still, I know you’ll be a hundred times the mother she ever was. You’re a natural caretaker, Maxie.”

She swallowed and looked away.

“I can’t risk it.”

“Then don’t have kids. These men care about you and they’ve protected you more in a few weeks than I have in all my years. Be with them.”

“They want kids!” Maxie pulled away from him and walked over to Bob, swinging her body up and onto his back with little effort. Bob knew the score. He didn’t wait for her command to take off.

Shep held up his hands.

“We’d take Maxie without kids, you have to know that. This whole idea that she’d be a bad mother is ridiculous, though. She wants kids. She wants a family. She’s just being hardheaded. We’re not letting her go, so she’ll come around eventually.”

Mills rubbed his hands over his head and gripped the back of his neck. Sighing

heavily, he watched Maxie riding away with emotion burning behind his eyes.

“I feel like I keep getting sucker punched.”

I snorted.

“Really?”

He blew out a harsh breath.

“Yeah, sorry about that. I’m so fucking high strung these days that I’ve already had two ranch hands quit. Jolene has threatened to murder me a dozen times. I just don’t know what to do. All this shit happened under my nose and my sisters suffered while I treated them like they were just a pain in the ass. Or like they were a servant. Maxie... I don’t know how to make it right. I can barely look at her without fucking hating myself.”

Shep looked at me and then at Rhett.

“You need to let go of some of that shit, man. If you can’t do it on your own, I might have an idea.”

Rhett grunted.

“Black Canyon?”

Shep nodded.

“We visited a place about thirty minutes outside of town a few times back in the day. It’s a club.”

“You’re telling me about a club?” Mills frowned. “Do I look like someone who goes to clubs?”

I shook my head.

“Not that kind of club. It’s a private club, a place for rich assholes to play.”

“Are you talking about a sex club?” Mills looked like he wanted to hit me again.

“You could call it that. The only reason we know about it still existing is that we got an invitation from one of the owners. He heard we were back in town. I’m going to send it to you.” Shep tapped at his phone and then slid it back into his pocket. “It’s for an event that’s coming up this weekend. I suggest you go and work out some of your feelings before coming back here and facing everything.”

“You’re telling me to go to a sex club.” Mills pulled his own phone out and his eyebrows climbed higher. “An auction? Are you serious?”

“Man, you need to live a little. Take your brothers and try to remember what fun is. It’s for charity so you can even bid on our dime.” Shep shrugged. “Go or don’t go. Your choice. Just figure something out before you have a stroke.”

“I came here to yell at the three of you.”

I pointed to my mouth.

“You hit me. Does that help?”

“Fuck, no. I just feel like a bigger asshole. Jesus.” Running his hands through his hair, he swore. “I’ll think about the club. For now, I’m going to stop the riot from heading your way.”

Rhett laughed.

“Let ’em come. We’ll tell them the same thing we told you. Maxie is ours and we’re planning on keeping her forever.”

CHAPTER 41

Maxie

No matter how far and fast I rode Bob I couldn’t find my state of peace. Between Mills showing up and Arlo telling me he loved me, I couldn’t settle my mind. Mills thought I needed to start a family with the guys. Arlo loved me. Mills thought I’d be a good mother. Arlo loved me. It was a cyclone of thoughts I couldn’t escape from. Before I could tire Bob out, I rode him back to the ranch and went through the process of brushing him down and leading him into the paddock while still frustrated that I couldn’t relax.

I was torn. I was mixed up. I was drowning in need and hunger for the men I was trying to convince myself I didn’t love. I dug my nails into my palms as I walked into the barn. I was going to hang Bob’s brush up on the barn wall but I dropped it when I was grabbed from behind and yanked into a hard chest.

“You normally look a little less angry when you come back from riding Bob.” Rhett wrapped his arms around me and held me steady. “What’s going on in that pretty head, baby?”

I pressed my hands over his arms and just held on.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?”

I rested my head against his shoulder and closed my eyes.

“There’s just a lot going on in my head.”

Nuzzling his mouth along my neck and shoulder, Rhett blew out a slow breath over my bare shoulder.

“That makes sense. A lot of things have changed for you in a very short time. You’re not alone anymore, though, Maxine. You have three men who’d slay dragons for you.”

“I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. My mom’s voice is still there, in my head. She was great at convincing me I didn’t deserve good things and I wasn’t good enough to have them. So this, the three of you, feels delicate. Too delicate. I’m holding my breath, waiting for Mom to be right.” I was glad he wasn’t forcing me to face him while I said what had been sneaking under my skin. “I don’t want to be a surrogate. I’ve wanted the three of you since I was eighteen. I’m just scared. Scared of everything and no amount of pink hair dye or tattoos is going to change that.”

He gently pulled my hands away, one at a time, and ran his finger over the crescent shaped indentations from my nails.

“I’m willing to spend the rest of my life arguing with your mother’s voice, baby. I’ll do whatever I have to do to make you see that I’m never going anywhere. Including telling you a million times that you’re brave, Max. And strong. You were ready to conquer this ranch all alone. You’ve carried the world on your shoulders for your entire life and you never complained. As far as being our surrogate? Not going to happen. We’re not letting you go. And on the days you doubt yourself, or who you’ll be as a mother, we’ll be there, believing in you enough for all of us.”

“Everything is just such a mess in my head. I can’t think straight.” I turned in his arms and looked up at him. “Usually I can shut everything out with a fast ride on Bob but it didn’t work today.”

“What do you need, baby?”

I licked my lips and watched his eyes trace the move.

“You.”

“What do you need from me?” He was already slowly walking me backwards, deeper into the barn.

“I need you to fuck me and clear my head.” I yelped when he turned me around and pushed me over a bale of hay. Staring back at him, my breathing sped up as I watched him yank his shirt over his head with a hungry gleam to his gaze.

“I heard you liked getting spanked last night.” He slowly pulled his belt free and sent me a wicked grin. “Lucky for you, Max, I’m willing to suffer to get you out of your head. If I have to redden your ass, I will.”

I didn’t know whether to laugh, be mortified, or squirm with arousal so I did a little of everything. My breath caught when Rhett folded his belt and snapped it, the sound

echoing through the barn. When he pulled back and then brought it down across my butt, I screamed. It wasn't that it hurt, but the shock of it stunned me.

Rhett reached around and quickly unbuttoned my pants and shoved them and my panties down my thighs. He growled and spanked me with the belt again.

“Grip the bale and don't let go, Max.”

I dug my fingers into the hay and cried out as he spanked me again and again. The slight sting went straight to my clit and I could feel my wetness starting to trail down my thighs. Between the sound of the belt moving through the air and Rhett growling, I couldn't hear anything else. My brain went beautifully silent. That wasn't good enough for Rhett, though. He wanted everything.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:18 am

I was more shocked by Rhett pressing his tongue into me from behind than I had been by the belt. I jerked upright just to have Rhett spank me with his hand, the hardest one yet. I could feel the burn of his handprint on my butt as I bent over again and panted. He gripped my inner thighs and tugged outward in a way that spread my core open lewdly. He didn't let my flesh see much light before burying his tongue deep again.

He had to grip hold me down when he ran his tongue over my virgin backside and I tried to get away. He forced his tongue past the tight pucker of skin and I saw stars. It was dirty, filthy, and when he brushed his fingers over my clit, I came hard.

He licked me through my orgasm and then stood up and pressed into me from behind. He'd managed to get his cock free and didn't wait to thrust into me.

"I'm going to take you there one day, baby. You're going to beg for me to fuck your ass like a good girl."

His hands wrapped over mine, intertwining our fingers, as his big body curled around mine. I turned my head and he was there, mouth waiting to devour mine. He kissed me slow and deep even as his thrusts were fast and hard.

I sucked on the tip of his tongue while moaning from the way his cock was rubbing against my g-spot with every stroke. He was everywhere around me, in me, and I came hard again, shaking under him.

"Hold on, baby." It was the only warning I got before he let go of his control and rode me harder. Pinned to the hay bale, I could only cry out his name and take the

punishing thrusts. One orgasm barely ended before another rolled over me.

“Rhett!” I shook and screamed as pleasure rocked me. I could feel Rhett closing in on his own orgasm but right before he came he pulled out and spilled his seed on the heated flesh of my butt. A surge of frustration had me growling into the crook of my arm. I wanted them inside me. It felt like a punishment that I couldn’t have them.

Rhett kissed his way across my back and used his discarded shirt to clean me.

“As soon as you agree that you’re ours and not some surrogate, you’ll get all the come you could ever want, sweetheart.”

I slumped over the hay bale and was about to lodge my complaints when I finally heard the sound of a female voice outside of the barn.

“Oh, god!”

Rhett jerked my pants up my hips, swearing when I cried out at the feel of the denim over my tattoos. He quickly kissed my shoulder and pulled away to shove his cock back into his pants.

“I’m sorry, baby. I’ll check it later and take care of you.”

He cringed as he pulled his shirt over his head and I couldn’t help laughing at him. I’d just gotten my pants buttoned when Nellie, Vera, and their men stepped into the barn. Vera had her baby in her arms and Nellie’s daughter, Waylan, was sitting on Woodrow’s shoulders. It only took one glance for my sisters to burst into a laughing fit.

CHAPTER 42

Maxie

I doubted I'd ever been redder in my life. I was so embarrassed that any politeness or etiquette I'd ever had was just gone. I just stood there, mouth agape, until Reed cleared his throat and took his daughter from Vera.

"I think us men folk will go to the porch and try out those rocking chairs." He looked at Rhett and grinned. "I'd ask if you were coming but..."

I buried my face in my hands and groaned.

"Go away, all of you. Except Waylan. And the baby."

Rhett pulled me close and kissed the top of my head.

"Enjoy your sisters, baby."

I groaned as he walked away with the other guys. Waylan took one look at me and hurried after the men, leaving me alone with my sisters and the baby.

"I'm mortified."

Vera came at me then, her laughter gone. Without any preamble she pushed her baby into my arms and then settled on the hay bale I'd just desecrated.

"We need to have a little chat with you. First of all, you look hot with that hair. It's no wonder your man had you bent over in a barn. Second of all, I'm so jealous. I'm still under strict instructions not to have sex and it's killing me. I write sex scenes all day long and I'm a horned-up mess. Third of all, how dare you insult yourself by saying you think you'd become our mother."

Nellie took over.

“I thought you were joking about the surrogacy thing last night. If you think we’re going to stand by while you abuse yourself, you’ve got another thing coming. You’re going to be the best mother ever. No amount of abuse from our mother could’ve damaged your soul that fully, babe. You’re good. Like, goodgood. Angelic, even. You’re going to tell those men you were joking about surrogacy and then you’re going to get knocked up and give me more nieces or nephews.”

Tears filled my eyes. After having my brain silenced by Rhett, I was having a hard time bringing back the negative crap that made me shut off from my sisters usually.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:19 am

“The surrogacy is off. They wouldn’t accept it. They said no.”

Vera grinned.

“Thank god. I knew I liked them.”

I stared down at my baby niece and some of the ice around my heart cracked away. She was so beautiful, her big green eyes staring up at me with so much interest.

“I still don’t think I can be a mom. Look at her. She’s so amazing. She’s so fragile, though. I don’t think I can take the chance of hurting my child.”

Vera shocked me with a snort.

“I almost dropped her yesterday. I was horrified, don’t get me wrong, but that’s how parenting is, I’m discovering. It’s just one bump in the road after another. Anyone can hurt their children, Maxie. Abusive parents, or not.”

“Amen. I don’t even want to talk about how often I fucked up with Waylan in the beginning.” Nellie shuddered. “One time, when she was still just a baby, I was so tired from being up all night long that I didn’t remember where I’d put her down. I ran around the house panicking for a solid ten minutes before realizing she was right there in her crib. I almost called the cops.”

I cradled my niece tighter.

“Arlo told me he loved me. I think they all do.”

“That’s amazing, Max. Right?” Vera watched me with worried eyes. “You look like a scared deer about to book it, babe. What’s wrong?”

I let out a watery laugh and sank down on the bale next to her.

“Nothing? Everything? I don’t even know. Things just feel too good. I’ve never… I don’t know how to be happy.”

Nellie burst into tears and hugged me around the baby.

“Oh, god, Maxie. I’m just so sorry. I’m so, so sorry. We should’ve known. We should’ve helped.”

Vera wiped her eyes as she cried, too.

“Oh, man, we’re a mess.”

“What the hell happened?” Shep’s voice was full of concern as he walked into the barn. Seeing me, he rushed over and cupped my cheeks. “What’s wrong, baby?”

“Nothing.” I let out an embarrassed laugh and sniffed. “I just—”

“Do you love our sister?” Vera stared up at Shep with a hard look on her face.

“Vera! You can’t—”

“Yes.” Shep answered without any hesitation. When I snapped my head around to face him, he smiled. “You didn’t know that? Of course, I love you, Maxine.”

Nellie squealed a little too loud and the baby started to cry. She winced and apologized to Vera.

“Shit. Sorry!”

“Will you take her to her daddies, Shep? Pretty please? I’d like to talk with my sister a little more.” Vera waited until Shep took my niece from me and held up her hand.

“Look at him, Max. He looks good with a baby in his arms, doesn’t he?”

He did. He really, really did. His smile when he winked at me was warm and full of love. And I could see it so clearly after hearing him say it. He loved me.

“Maxie looked good holding a baby, too. Just saying.”

Vera barely waited for him to walk off to grab me and shake me.

“He loves you! No more playing games. No more letting our mother control you. You need to go change into something sexy and tell those men you love them. Because it’s so obvious you do. I refuse to have a sister of mine acting so foolishly when it comes to hot, hot men. Do you understand me?”

I frowned at her.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:19 am

“You know I’m the big sister, right?”

“And?” She tipped her chin up. “I write love stories for a living, Maxie. I know love when I see it. Get your head out of your butt and start your life with those bad boys.”

“We brought a gift to help you along. It’s on the porch.” Nellie grinned. “Compliments of the Dolls.”

“You can’t just bully me into a relationship.” At least I didn’t think they could.

“We’re not going to leave you alone, Maxie. Not anymore. We’re your sisters and we’re here for good, to help take care of you and to help you make the right choices for yourself. Those guys are the right choice for you. Or...if they’re not, walk away from them. Now. Today. You can move in with us and start selling your baked goods full time, like you should’ve been doing all along anyway.”

I stood up and crossed my arms over my chest. The idea of moving away from the guys didn’t sit well with me. I couldn’t leave them.

“That’s what I thought.” Vera laughed heartily and stood up to hug me. “We arranged for you four to have a private date at the diner tonight. There’s a dress and shoes waiting for you with the basket of toys we brought.”

I stammered.

“Basket of toys?”

“Welcome to Doll’s Club, babe. Where the women are wild and the toys are wilder. There’s a vibrating butt—”

Nellie and I both shouted Vera’s name to get her to stop talking. Nellie sighed and shook her head.

“That’s my cue to go home and get away from you two.”

I started to panic.

“Wait. I can’t just... A date? That’s crazy. I’ve never been on a date.”

There was a growl from behind me that made me jump. I turned to see Arlo standing a few feet away.

“You’ve never been on a date? We’re going to fix that.”

Vera fanned herself.

“I cannot wait for these six weeks to be over. I am ready to start humping the walls. I have to go. Have fun, Max. Be good to my sister, Arlo. I know you will be.”

“Love you, Maxie. Have fun tonight!” Nellie linked arms with Vera and they both strolled out of the barn like they hadn’t just shaken my world onto its head.

I looked up at Arlo and took a deep breath.

“We don’t have to—”

“We’re taking you out. It’s a crime that we haven’t already. Let’s go get ready, sweetheart.”

CHAPTER 43

Maxie

I wasn't sure if I wanted to kiss or smack my sisters. The dress they'd left for me was nothing I ever would've picked, not in a million years. The tiny black dress dipped low in the front and back, meaning I couldn't wear a bra with it, and it also stopped several inches above my knees. The black heels they left were going to be the cause of my death, I was sure. When I looked at myself in the mirror I didn't know if I wanted to scream or strut through town. My curves were on display in a way they'd never been before.

Between the dress, the heels, and my new hair I looked like someone completely new. I looked daring and bold, even sexy. Okay, maybe I wanted to kiss my sisters for leaving me the world's sexiest dress. As nervous as I was about the idea of accepting forever from my guys, I was thankful I could go into our date feeling like I was on their level.

I stopped before leaving my room, taking a moment to think about what I was doing. Going on a date with them felt significant, like I was agreeing to what they wanted. No more talk of surrogacy, which I could admit had been a stupid idea. How I thought I'd be strong enough to have their child and then walk away was beyond me. There was no way. Was I ready to take a chance with them, though?

I looked at myself in the mirror once more and saw a stronger woman staring back at me. I'd already taken a chance with the guys, hadn't I? I'd opened myself up to them and let them in. I'd faced a lot of crap with them at my back. They loved me. Enough to openly tell me without fear of being rejected.

No more running scared from the truth. I took a deep breath and stopped chewing on my bottom lip. I was ready.

The guys were waiting at the bottom of the stairs for me and when they saw me I wasn't sure we were going to make it out of the house. The looks on their faces were primal. They wanted me. I'd never truly felt powerful in my femininity before but they made me feel like a goddess.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:19 am

“You look...Jesus, Maxine. You look beautiful.” Shep pressed his knuckles into his mouth and shook his head. “Goddamn.”

“Come here, baby.” Arlo came up a few steps to reach me but Rhett pulled him back.

“No. If any of us touch her before we get out of this house, we’ll never make it to our date.” Rhett groaned and slapped Arlo on the chest while pulling him away. “Walk your sexy ass out to my truck and climb in. It’s the only way we’re not dragging you straight to bed, sweetheart.”

I giggled and rushed past them, nearly falling over in the heels I wasn’t used to. I managed to catch myself and then hurried out to the truck with them hot on my trail. The pained sounds they made lit me on fire. Knowing how much I affected them made me feel so alive.

Arlo opened my door for me before I could do it myself and looked at me with so much heat that I blushed.

“If you put that dress on with the idea that you were still planning on leaving us eventually, you’re sadly mistaken. There’s no way we’re letting you go, no matter what, but after seeing you in this dress? Baby, you’re ours. Forever.”

I hesitated before slowly raising my hand to brush my fingertips over his cheek. I wanted to tell him I was done fighting but I couldn’t make the words come out. Not yet. Instead, I smiled shyly and then gasped when he grabbed me and put me in the backseat. His hands immediately released me and I missed them desperately.

Shep climbed into the backseat with me and slid his hand over to hold mine.

“I’m going to send your sisters flowers. And maybe jewelry. This dress is something else.”

I ran my free hand down my bare thigh and rolled my eyes.

“I think they were dressing me for a night out in the city. I’m not sure Devil’s Den requires all this.”

“They were dressing you in hopes of getting you knocked up, I’m pretty sure.” Rhett glanced at me in the rearview mirror and smirked. “They had that scheming look about them.”

“They were angry about the surrogacy plan.” I looked out the window and watched the mountains in the distance. “It seems like everyone knew it was a stupid plan but me.”

Shep’s hand tightened around mine.

“And now? What do you think of it?”

I looked back at him and smiled.

“It was a stupid fucking plan.”

Arlo let out a bark of laughter from the front of the truck and shifted so he could look back at me.

“There’s something magical about hearing you curse, sweetheart. That hold over you gets a little looser day by day, huh?”

A sly smile was my answer. Truthfully, I heard Mom's voice less than ever and still less and less daily. For all the bad she'd pushed on me it didn't seem to be strong enough to handle all the good the guys gave me.

Rhett parked in front of the diner and I let out an astonished laugh when I saw the sign on the door that proclaimed that it was closed for a private event. In my entire life I'd never seen the diner closed for anything of the sort.

Arlo opened my door for me and helped me out, using his body to block my not so graceful dismount from view. He looked down the front of my dress once I was standing in front of him and stepped closer. He tucked his finger under my chin to lift my face and then he gently pressed his mouth to mine. Speaking against my lips, he kept his voice low.

"As soon as we get home tonight I'm going to push this dress up and eat you until you can't take anymore."

I leaned into him and trailed my mouth up to his ear.

"Want to know a secret?"

His hands gripped my hips hard.

"From you? Always."

"I couldn't wear panties with this dress." Who was the siren who'd taken my place and decided being a seductress was the best idea ever? I didn't know but I appreciated her taking control of my mouth.

He pinned me to the side of the truck and kissed me so intensely that I lost my breath. His tongue stroked past my lips and teased mine before the sound of someone

clearing their throat drew us apart. He glanced over his shoulder and sighed while slowly pulling away.

“Ma’am?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:19 am

Samantha Drury from the Baptist women's group was standing a few feet away from us, her eyes narrowed.

"Sir, this is a respectful town and we don't make out in the—Maxie?"

I could feel her judgment raining down on me heavily. The woman who normally didn't look twice at me, not for longer than it took to tell me what she wanted, gaped at me. Her upper lip curled higher and her nose wrinkled as she scowled.

"What in the world happened to you?" She looked down at my dress and clutched her imaginary pearls. "Maxie, is something going on with you? I think you need to get away from that man. You look like—"

Rhett put his hands on his hips and stepped closer to me.

"I'd be careful how I finished that sentence if I were you."

I waited to see if I was going to be crushed by her thoughts of me but instead, I just felt annoyed that the woman who used me for free baked goods for years was daring to look down on me.

"Your family would be horrified to see you right now, Maxie. I'm sorry, but I knew your mother and I can't sit back and not say anything." Samantha scowled. "I can't have you involved with the women's group if this is how you're going to carry yourself."

I put my hand on Rhett's arm as he growled.

“It’s fine, guys. If Samantha doesn’t want me to do all the free baking for her church group because she doesn’t like the way I’m dressing, then I can’t help that. I’ll just have to be understanding of her choices and respect that she doesn’t want me to donate hours of my time every week to keeping her group stocked with treats.”

Shep laughed out loud.

“Come on, baby. Let’s have dinner and then I can tell you just how hot I find this new sassy side to you.”

Samantha stammered and flushed.

“I wasn’t trying to be mean, Maxie... I—”

“No, it’s okay, Samantha. I understand. You have your morals and I respect that you’re sticking to them, no matter the cost to your snack budget.” I smiled sweetly and reached out to gently pat her arm. “You’re a good woman and I’m sure the other women in your group will understand. Now I have a date to get to. My first ever, if you can believe it. Have a good night.”

“No, wait, Maxie—”

“Oh, by the way!” I cut her off and smiled even wider. “After thinking about your petition to change the name of Devil’s Den, I have to sit it out. I imagine all of the Hellstones will, since it was our ancestor who named the town. Good luck.”

Arlo wrapped his arm around my waist and led me into the diner.

“God, that was fucking hot. You’re amazing, Maxine.”

I let out a shaky laugh and felt embarrassed I couldn’t hide that confronting Samantha

had affected me. I wanted to be the person who could stand up for herself without her voice shaking but I wasn't there yet.

"It really clears up my time..."

Marlie James welcomed us into the diner, her eyes bright and happy as she motioned around her at the candlelit room.

"Welcome, y'all. We have a special table for you in the back."

Arlo kissed the side of my head.

"Lead the way, baby."

CHAPTER 44

Maxie

I pushed my plate away and sighed happily.

"That was the best chocolate cake I've ever had."

What I didn't say was that it was the best dinner I'd ever had, though it had nothing to do with the food. Being on a date with Shep, Rhett, and Arlo was something so different from what I might've expected. They were always attentive to me and they never missed a chance to take care of me but being on a date with them showed me what our future could be. The way they watched me, anticipating every need I had before I even knew I had it, the way they touched me as much as possible, like they couldn't get enough. Even the way they talked to me so openly about their pasts, it was enthralling.

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I hadn't had a single drop of alcohol but I felt drunk. Without the barriers I'd erected to keep myself safe from them, I couldn't help but experience how much happiness they brought me. It was a hard pill to swallow that the eighteen-year-old me had known better than the twenty-eight-year-old me. She had, though. She'd known the joy she felt when she was around the guys. She'd been open to it. She'd recognized a home in them that she hadn't felt anywhere else.

I looked up and found all three of them staring at me, watching and waiting. Without them having to say it, I knew what they wanted. I took a long drink of water and gripped my hands together in my lap. I was petrified of what could go wrong but I didn't want to live my life so cold and numb for a second longer. I wanted them and the fire they brought to my life. I wanted the acceptance and love I felt from them, no matter how I looked or acted.

"I'm still not sure about what kind of mother I'll be. I know what kind of fathers y'all will be, though, and that's enough to make me believe this is possible. I want to give our children everything I felt like I didn't have growing up, all the love and support they can stand. If I fail, each of you will be there to help me. As long as you don't expect perfection, I want this. I want to make a family with you." I swallowed around a lump in my throat and kept my eyes down. "I've wanted this since I was eighteen and I don't want to let the decade between then and now get in our way. I think I've loved all of you since I was a teenager and I don't think it's ever going to change."

Arlo gripped the back of my neck and turned my head to face him.

"It'll never change. We'll never give you a reason to fall out of love with us, baby. We know we're the lucky ones here and we're going to make sure we work to be

good enough for you for the rest of our lives.”

“We love you, Maxine. Whether that means the old Maxie or the new Maxie, we accept you no matter what. We want you for every part of you, from the hidden attitude to the insane sweetness that never seems to quit. You’re ours, sweetheart.” Rhett reached out and stroked my cheek. “And we’re yours. This is it for us. You’re our home for the rest of our lives and into the afterlife if we have anything to say about it.”

Shep grinned at me.

“I can’t say it better than that. I love you, Max. I loved you before I should and I’ll love you more and more until I’m no longer a thought in this world. What I feel for you will never fade. Believe me when I say you’re stuck with us, one way or another.”

Mom’s voice had no room left in my head, not with their love and support filling me so thoroughly. I felt peace and I suddenly wanted to lock them into forever with me. It was crazy and out of the norm and maybe they wouldn’t appreciate it but the words were spilling from my lips before I could overthink it.

“Do y’all want to marry me?”

Arlo’s mouth dropped open. Rhett’s eyes went as big as I’d ever seen them. Shep, though? Shep took everything in stride. He just kept grinning, a knowing look settling in his eyes.

Arlo let out a string of swears and then stood up so fast his chair tipped over.

“You did not just propose to us.”

Shep laughed.

“She did.”

“No!” Rhett stood up and dragged me to my feet. “I mean, yes, but no! You don’t get to ask that question. We do the asking. Not because we’re old fashioned, even though maybe we are, but because we want you to know how insane we are for you, how in love we are. Take it back, woman.”

“I refuse to acknowledge that you asked. No. You’re not stealing our thunder, Maxine Hellstone. Not a chance in hell. Get your sexy ass out to that truck and buckle in. As soon as we get you home, I’m going to bend you over and spank you until you take it back and let us do the asking.” Arlo didn’t wait to slap my ass as he pushed me toward the door. “I can’t believe you. Doyouhave a ring? Because we do.”

I looked at Shep with wide eyes as he tossed several bills down on the table.

“Help!”

“Oh, no, baby. You insulted their pride by jumping the gun and stealing their moment. You’re in big trouble now.” He winked. “I think you’ll like it, though.”

When I didn’t move fast enough Arlo picked me up and carried me out. I laughed and flailed to keep myself covered but I should’ve known I had nothing to worry about. Arlo made sure I wasn’t flashing anyone as he carted me out. “Arlo! I take it back! Wait! You have a ring?”

Rhett growled. “Yes, we have a ring! We’ve known you’re our woman for long enough to know what we want. You were going to get it tonight but I don’t know now.”

Arlo put me in the truck and leaned over to buckle me in. His eyes were alight with mischief as he leaned in. “Maybe if you’re really, really good you’ll still find yourself with a ring by the end of the night.”

Tears filled my eyes as I cupped his face. “Y’all were going to ask me to marry you?”

Rhett looked back at me from the driver’s seat and bit his lip as he slowly nodded. “Still might.”

Knowing how much they loved me and how much I loved them, I wasn’t worried. They’d ask. I knew before the night ended I’d be the future Mrs.- I gasped. “Wait. Whose name will I take?”

Shep’s laugh was teasing. “You’re making big plans for a woman who hasn’t been asked anything yet.”

CHAPTER 45

Arlo

“Upstairs, Maxie.” I pushed her toward the stairs and watched as she giggled over her shoulder at me before kicking off her heels and taking off. “Go to my room and bend over my bed, little girl.”

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Rhett stood next to me and rubbed his jaw.

“She’s going to be the death of us, isn’t she? I can’t believe she fucking asked before we could.”

Shep slapped us both on the shoulder and stopped at the base of the stairs.

“Really? Because at this point, I’d believe anything that came out of that woman’s mouth. She’s never going to be boring, that’s for sure.”

“You have the ring?” Rhett looked to make sure Maxie wasn’t listening and then glanced back at me. “Obviously we’re still doing it tonight, right? I can’t wait much longer to have our claim on her marked in every way possible.”

I pulled the ring box out of my pocket and opened it to show them the simple diamond engagement ring we’d picked out. It was bigger than Maxie would probably want to wear but she deserved everything and more. She’d have to deal with us needing to pamper her a bit.

“Tonight’s the night. We’re just going to ignore that she asked us first. And never tell anyone.”

Shep gripped the banister and shot up the stairs two at a time.

“You girls want to keep talking, that’s fine, but I’ve got a woman to ruin.”

I barely looked at Rhett before chasing after Shep. Taking Maxie was always fucking

amazing but taking her while knowing she'd agreed to forever with us was going to be even better. I made it to the bedroom a few seconds after Shep and I felt my dick lengthen at the sight of Maxie bent over my bed.

She stood with her legs straight and her forearms braced on the bed so her ass was beautifully presented to us in her tiny dress. I strode across the room to her and yanked the dress over her hips, baring her bottom half to our starving gazes. With my first slap to the full curve of her ass, she gasped. The second made her moan.

“Are you ready to give us all of you, Maxie?” I lowered my voice and landed both hands on her warm cheeks so I could squeeze them and pull them apart. Her virgin asshole was perfectly on display and I couldn't resist leaning down to run my tongue over it.

She squealed and twisted her top half around to stare at me.

“What are you doing?”

Shep sat on the bed next to her and ran his thumb over her lips. “He's getting your ass ready for us, baby.”

I flicked my tongue over the puckered skin again and growled against her ass when she let out a breathy moan. Our sweet angel was far kinkier than I ever could've imagined. I kept my focus on her ass, tonguing her until she was rocking her hips back into me and letting out muffled moans. I saw Shep had pushed two of his fingers into her mouth and she was sucking them eagerly.

Rhett let out a devious laugh as he noticed the box I'd snuck up to my room earlier. The impressive collection of sex toys left for Maxie by her sisters was going to come in handy. He grabbed a bottle of lube and a beginner butt plug.

“You’re going to take all three of our cocks beautifully, baby, but we need to get you ready first.”

I took the plug from him and ran it through her lower lips, coating it with her juices. She moaned as the hard plastic bumped into her clit and that moan turned into a shocked cry when Rhett poured the lube over her asshole and used a single finger to push it inside. I didn’t want to give her time to panic so as soon as he pulled his finger out I hit the button to make the plug vibrate and pushed it against the tight ring of muscle fighting to keep her final virginity.

“Relax your ass, baby. That’s it. That’s a good girl. You’re taking your plug so prettily.” All four of us let out moans when the widest part of the plug slipped inside and left just the pink handle snuggled into her crack. The sight was too good. “You’re going to take our cocks so well here, aren’t you? You’re going to love having us fuck your ass. Say it, baby. Tell us that you’re going to love having us fuck your ass.”

It was clear that saying the filthy things I wanted her to say still flustered Maxie but she licked Shep’s fingers one last time as he pulled them free and then gave me what I wanted.

“I’m going to love having you fuck my ass.”

Rhett groaned.

“Next size?”

I nodded and slowly fucked the first plug in and out of Maxie’s ass, fucking her with it. She arched her back and shifted forward but Shep grabbed her shoulders and held her steady. She dug her fingers into the bedding and panted. When Rhett added more lube, I took the larger plug from him and used it to fuck Maxie. She cried out and begged, for what it wasn’t clear. At least not until she reached down and rubbed her

fingers over her engorged clit.

I pushed the plug deep just as she came with a scream. I had to taste her, had to lap up the juices running down her thighs. I let Rhett take over the plug while I lowered my face and devoured her. Fucking her with my tongue and then sucking her clit drove her higher and higher until she came again with another scream. I didn't stop, though. I ate her like a starving man until she came again and when I pulled back, I saw that Rhett was fucking her harder with the plug.

"She's ready for us." Rhett pulled the plug out and tossed it away and we both watched as her asshole gaped for us, eagerly waiting for what we would give it next.

We stripped and tore Maxie out of her dress, past the point of no return with our control. I stood behind her and poured lube over my cock before pressing the blunt head into her ass. She tensed at first but when Shep sat on the bed in front of her and moved close enough for her to take his cock into her mouth, she relaxed enough to let me inside. The instant squeeze around my cock was almost too much to take. I growled and fed it into her inch by inch until my thighs were pressed against hers and I was as deep in her ass as I could be.

"Suck it deep, baby. Show me how much you love me, sweetheart." Shep gripped Maxie's head and worked it lower on his shaft. "Fuck, baby. Yes!"

Rhett sat on the bed next to us and reached down to stroke Maxie's clit.

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“Are you ready to be fucked, Maxie? Are you ready to come with a cock shoved deep into your ass?”

She lifted her head from Shep’s dick long enough to answer.

“Yes, please!”

I spanked her cheeks one at a time until they glowed and then I took what I needed. Gripping her waist, I pulled out and then slammed home again. I was instantly obsessed with the little grunts she made when I thrust deep so I chased those sounds, fucking her ass hard and fast.

Rhett pushed two fingers into her pussy, preparing her for what came next and it pushed her over the edge again. She came with a gurgle around Shep’s dick.

“I have to get inside her, Arlo.”

Knowing we were all too close to the edge, we didn’t waste time. I flipped her over and lay on my back with her spread on top of me so Rhett could shift between her spread legs and thrust deep into her pussy. I had to clench every muscle in my body to keep from coming at the feeling of her ass squeezing me even harder. I could tell Rhett was feeling it, too. Shep moved closer and stroked Maxie’s face before pushing his cock past her lips again.

Maxie hung onto Rhett’s shoulders and let us ride her hard. She let out a steady low moan that was only disrupted by Shep’s cock hitting the back of her throat. Even pinned between the three of us, the little minx still managed to roll her hips,

demanding even more.

Rhett and I lost any rhythm we had and both drove into her like men lost. We took her hard and rough, our hands biting into her skin and leaving fingerprint shaped bruises. Rhett dipped his head and sucked at her nipples while growling, dragging higher pitched cries from Maxie. Shep had his hands full of her pale pink hair, using it to work her mouth up and down his cock.

I felt Maxie's body tense and I could feel it was going to be a bigger release than the rest. She vibrated between us, cried out louder, and then went as stiff as a board. Her ass clamped down so hard on my cock that I froze and immediately shot my come deep inside her with a loud shout. I heard Rhett growl out her name and felt him thrust deep one more time before he came.

It set her off and she came so hard I felt her juices pouring down my cock and balls, puddling beneath me on the bed. Shep came then with the feeling of her screaming massaging the come from his balls. He filled her mouth and then collapsed on the bed beside me, breathing hard.

Maxie continued to shake and clenched down on our dicks. I reached around and pushed her into another, quick, orgasm by rubbing her clit hard and fast. She sobbed her pleasure as she thrashed between me and Rhett and then she went limp on top of me. I could feel her heart beating through her back on my chest and wrapped my arm around her, hoping she'd feel secure and loved, no matter how dirty the sex had been.

Rhett pulled out and flopped onto the bed on my other side.

"Fuck."

I didn't want to push Maxie's ass harder than I already had so I eased out of her as gently as possible but I still earned a whimper from her. As soon as I was out she

tossed her body around so she was clinging to me, her stomach pressed to mine. Holding her tight, I stroked my hands up and down her back.

“You’re all ours, baby.”

It took a while for our breathing to even out but when Maxie was relaxed on top of me, she finally lifted her head and looked at me with an expectant gaze.

“Now?”

Shep laughed and rolled off the bed to grab the ring box from my pants.

“You really want to marry us, huh?”

“I really, really do.”

“Then what are we waiting on?” I took the box from Shep and held it open to her.

“Marry us, Maxine. Marry us and let us love you the way you deserve.”

Epilogue

Maxie

One Year Later

“If you don’t get out of my kitchen, Shepherd, I swear I’m never going to suck your cock again.” Even though I whispered the words at my husband, I still blushed at the idea of someone else overhearing. No matter how filthy my men and I got, I still couldn’t shake all of the fear of judgment. Just most of it. “You’re dirty from the ranch, you smell like sweat and...”

“Sweat and what, baby?” Shep closed the distance between us and yanked me against his chest. He knew me so well, too well, and he knew he’d already won. “Yeah, I know my baby. You like your men a little dirty, don’t you?”

God help me but I did. The smell of them after a long day of work just got to me. They smelled like man in the best way possible. I melted into his arms and smiled.

“Fine. You can have one cookie and blow jobs are back on the table.”

“I’ll have two cookies and blow jobs were never off the table.” He kissed me hard and growled. “Fuck, woman. I’m goddamn proud of you and the bakery but I miss you at home.”

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He was being silly. With their help and encouragement, I'd opened my dream bakery in town. With a new baby in the picture, though, I only opened the bakery three days a week. Eventually I'd do more but our son, Hank, demanded and deserved most of my attention. I still spent plenty of time at home on the ranch with my men but it was never enough for them. I knew if they had it their way, they'd keep me strapped to their chests, not unlike the way Arlo had Hank strapped to his chest right then.

We were having a small birthday party for Rhett at the bakery and all of our friends and family were in the tiny storefront on the other side of the wall from where I was standing in my kitchen with Shep and Arlo. I was trying to put the finishing touches on Rhett's cake before he got there but Shep had insisted on distracting me.

I planted a kiss on Hank's head after pulling away from Shep and gave his daddy a kiss on the mouth before going back to Rhett's cake.

"Is he coming soon? Do you think he knows we were planning something for him?"

Arlo snorted.

"Yeah, baby, you're not exactly the best at keeping secrets. You've been grinning and staring at him like a loon for days."

"Did you tell him?!" I spun on Arlo with an icing bag in my hand. "If you told him, Arlo, I'm going to—"

"He didn't tell me, sweetheart." Rhett stepped into the small kitchen from the backdoor and came straight to me. He picked me up and spun me in a tight circle.

“You did. You’ve been talking in your sleep about my party for days.”

I wrapped my arms and legs around him and scoffed.

“No way. I’m a vault. No secrets leak past these lips.”

“I beg to differ.” He kissed me deep and put me down on the counter next to his cake so he could deepen the kiss while running his hands under the dress I had on beneath myPinkie’sapron. When he didn’t find any panties in his way, he pulled back and growled. “Happy birthday to me?”

I shuddered and nodded.

“Happy birthday, Rhett. I love you.”

He’d just slipped his fingers through my wetness when Nellie popped her head in from the front. She didn’t see or didn’t care that we were being inappropriate.

“Hey! You’re supposed to come in through the front so we can all shout surprise at you, asshole.”

Rhett groaned.

“Come on, Nellie. I don’t want to be shouted at.”

I giggled at the way they acted like siblings. We’d all gotten closer in the last year and Nellie and my husbands really did feel like a pack of feral siblings some days.

“I’ll send him out the back and around, Nell.”

She grinned at me and then turned on Arlo.

“And you. Stop hogging my nephew.”

Arlo growled when she reached for Hank but Nellie didn't back down. She scooped the chunky little boy out of his carrier and held him to her chest, letting his butt rest on her swollen belly.

“Heaven. I swear you gave birth to an angel, Max.” She turned and left the kitchen without another glance back at us. She'd gotten what she wanted, her nephew.

Arlo pouted.

“I'm starting to think we're all too close to your family. Maybe we should move. To Australia or somewhere else where Nellie won't find me and take Hank from me.”

I pushed Rhett away and burned with desire when I watched him suck his fingers clean. Whatever I was going to say to Arlo went up in smoke as I swayed into Rhett.

“So hot.”

He laughed and pinched my chin to lift my face to his.

“If I go out and come back in that front door, you owe me tonight.”

I nodded with a goofy smile on my face.

“Sounds fair.”

He grunted and pulled away.

“You’re lucky I love you.”

Shep smiled.

“We know that we’re the lucky ones.”

I remembered the cake and pushed all of them away.

“Out of my kitchen so I can finish this not so surprise cake! Go, go, go. I love you all, but you’re all terrible for business.”

They left on a trail of laughter, Rhett slipping back out the door he’d entered while Shep and Arlo went out the front. I could hear Arlo arguing with Nellie as I put the finishing touches on the cake and then I heard everyone shout surprise way too fast for it to have been Rhett. Even if he’d run around the building, there was no way. The hush that fell over the room right after didn’t make me think it was Rhett, either.

Feeling a budding sense of nosiness, I walked to the kitchen door and looked out. Standing just inside the front door was a beautiful woman with raven black hair and the bluest eyes I’d ever seen. She wasn’t what had me gasping, though. The baby in her arms with the two different colored eyes was. The tiny boy, probably no older than Hank, had eyes like our big brother, Gray, but the scowl on his little face was Mills through and through. It was like staring at the baby version of my oldest

brother.

The woman looked up as I pushed into the room and smiled but it was shaky. With everyone staring at her, all of us seeing the same thing in the baby in her arms, she looked overwhelmed and ready to run. She didn't, though. She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin.

“I’m looking for Mills, Tate, and West Hellstone.”

Well, shit.

The End.