



Some Cowboys Fall for Hidden Stars

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Category: Romance, Western

Description: She's a country music star who didn't plan on staying in Copper Creek... or finding love with a reclusive cowboy. He makes it a point to trust no one. Will their romance survive when he finds out who she really is?

Emma Hart, a famous country music star, has spent years in the spotlight, but all she craves now is peace. Using her real name, Emily Hartford, she escapes to the small town of Copper Creek, hoping to hide from the world and find herself again.

Caleb Keagan, a quiet and guarded rancher, has no interest in the outside world—until Emily enters his life. He's drawn to her vibrant spirit, even though he senses she's hiding something. Despite his doubts, Caleb can't help but care for the beautiful stranger who's stirring up emotions he's long tried to bury.

As Emily and Caleb grow closer, old wounds start to heal, but Emma's secret identity threatens to break their fragile bond. She's afraid that revealing who she really is will drive Caleb away forever.

Caleb's trust has been broken before, and Emma knows that honesty is the only way forward. Can she find the courage to tell him the truth before it's too late, or will her past destroy the love she's found in Copper Creek?

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Emma Hart (Emily Hartford)

Cheers echoed in Emma's ears even though she'd long since left the venue. A wave of exhaustion crashed over her, but then why wouldn't it? Tonight had been the fifth show in half as many weeks, and every show only added to the burn-out she couldn't seem to overcome.

She wandered down the long, wide hallway at the small airport they'd found in an obscure part of New York. There were hopper flights leaving for bigger cities and private planes like hers at this particular airport, which meant she didn't have to worry about being mobbed by her fans.

Even if she'd been scheduled to leave from the larger international airport, she'd done a decent job at covering her identity. Her brunette hair was pulled up into her hat, and her oversized sunglasses covered most of her face.

Emma's steps slowed as she caught sight of a familiar plane—her private plane. She drew closer to the large windows and watched the crew prepare it for her flight. What would happen if she simply didn't board? Would they even notice? Maybe the crew would take off with the assumption that she was in the lavatory. That brought a smirk to her lips, even though she knew it would never happen. Rachel would never allow it. She was the one person on Emma's team that was too good for her job.

A sigh burst from Emma's lips. Normally she'd be excited for her flight home. She would settle down with a book, compose some more music that her lyricist would put

words to, and she'd get some much-needed rest.

That wasn't going to happen this time. Her manager had already told Emma that she was trying to get a few things moved in her schedule so her book launch and her upcoming tour schedule wouldn't clash.

Tracing her fingers against the glass, Emma once again considered turning around and leaving the way she'd come. She could call a cab and go hide away in some hotel for a few weeks.

Except Rachel would probably have her head. And as of right now, Emma didn't have any reason to run. Nothing was officially scheduled for the next three months. She was just borrowing trouble. There was no need to worry herself over what might happen when she returned home to LA.

As if thinking about her manager was enough to summon her, Emma's phone rang, and Rachel's face populated the screen. Emma groaned and then steeled herself to answer. "Rachel," she said with more energy than she'd had in weeks. "What's up?"

"Emma! Glad I caught you before your flight. I have excellent news. You're not going to believe it, but the recording studio is willing to move you up in the schedule."

Emma's heart sank. This was what she'd been expecting, and she wasn't thrilled in the slightest.

"Isn't that wonderful?" Rachel continued. "This never happens. But of course, they're willing to do anything for their favorite country music star."

"Great," Emma murmured.

“That’s not even the best of it. I spoke to your publisher. They want to bring up the release date. Instead of an end-of-the-summer timeline, they want to do it in two weeks.”

“In two weeks!” Emma stammered. “Isn’t that too soon? Don’t they have to plan for marketing? I haven’t heard anything about the book in my socials or on the radio. Are they even ready?”

“You let them worry about that. They already gave you the advance?—”

“Yeah, but that advance requires me to be at a couple signings.”

“And you get to pick which ones. It’s going to be fine. Don’t you worry your talented little head about your schedule. I’ll make sure to update your calendar with everything.”

That wasn’t what Emma was worried about. Already she couldn’t stand thinking about being in the public eye for the next three months until her next tour began. But to realize that she wasn’t going to have any time to herself at all, she was quickly finding it hard to breathe. Thankfully, Rachel had taken an earlier flight back from New York before the show last night. She’d wanted to make sure everything was ready for Emma’s arrival—food, staff, etcetera. If she were here, she’d notice Emma was spiraling, and she’d do or say something to make Emma feel like she was overreacting.

But she wasn’t overreacting. Not for the first time, she felt like she was losing a grasp on her own life. She wasn’t able to make her own decisions when it came to what cities she stayed in, what her tour dates would be, or who she surrounded herself with.

Emma turned and pressed her back against the cool glass behind her as Rachel

continued talking about how wonderful the publishers were to give her plenty of time to meet the author-signing requirements for her memoir. Shutting her eyes, Emma noted how her fingertips had gone numb. She wouldn't have been surprised if she dropped her phone. Maybe if it broke, she wouldn't be able to be tracked by anyone. She could disappear until she was ready to be seen in public again.

Her eyes flew open. That wasn't a half-bad idea. What would they do if she suddenly went missing? She was far too famous for anyone to sue her. If anything, she'd have to give back her advance or pay a penalty fee for losing her spot at the recording studio—both options sounded pretty good right about now.

She stared at her phone, then turned her head and glanced at the airplane outside. She wasn't going to get on that plane, and she already knew it. Better yet, she wasn't going to tell a single living soul where she was headed. In fact, she didn't even know where she was going, but it wasn't back to LA.

Emma hung up the phone and grabbed her carry-on luggage. She hurried to the nearest ticket counter and placed her credit card on the table with a slap. "I need your next flight out of here."

The ticket woman jumped and stared at Emma with surprise. "I'm sorry?"

"The next flight. It can be to anywhere. I don't even care if it's to the middle of nowhere in Tornado Alley. I just need to get out of here in the next thirty minutes."

"I'm not sure..."

"The cost is no issue. I simply need to go." She squirmed, not sure if she was going to get flagged by security for her request, then decided she didn't care. Emma was going to do something for herself for the first time in a long while. She pulled out her driver's license and pushed it across the counter. "I was scheduled to leave on a

different flight, but my plans have changed. Please tell me you can get me something.”

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The woman turned to the computer, her hesitation still apparent. “There’s a flight to Seattle that connects in Detroit and then in Las Vegas.”

“What if I want to change my plans when I reach Detroit?” Her mind was already whirling. Anyone worth their salt would try to track her down by looking at flights that were leaving this airport. But if she took a flight that was meant to land in Seattle, only to switch planes in Detroit and go somewhere else, that would give her some extra time.

The ticket agent’s eyes narrowed, and she leaned forward. “Any suspicious behavior is usually a red flag,” she said under her breath. “I don’t recommend doing something like that.”

“But it can be done,” Emma pushed. “I can go to a ticket agent in Detroit and change my flight?”

Her shrewd gaze grew even more so. “Ma’am, are you in trouble?”

Emma stilled. Then she nodded before glancing over the top of her sunglasses briefly. “Yes. I’m trying to hide from an angry boyfriend.”

The woman’s eyes widened. “Have you called the police?”

She shook her head. “I’m not ready for that step yet. And the judicial system being what it is...” Emma let the woman fill in the blanks. “Please tell me you can help. I just want to find a place to lay low.”

She nodded and kept typing. “In Detroit, there are a few other options. You could fly to Salt Lake, Denver, or Dallas within an hour of landing.” She handed Emma a printed ticket over the counter. “Just do exactly as you said. Find a ticket agent and ask them to change your flight.”

Emma took the ticket. “Thank you so much,” she said as she pushed her sunglasses more firmly up the bridge of her nose. “You have no idea how much this means to me.”

Over the next several hours, she sat in economy with others who didn’t pay her much attention. Why would a famous musician take a small puddle jumper from a no-name airport to Detroit? They wouldn’t, unless they either had a mental break or an epiphany.

Once she landed in Detroit, she played a game of eeny-meeny-miny-moe and landed on Denver for her next destination. She fiddled with her jewelry and her glasses, trying to make sure no one recognized her as she got into more populated areas. Once she touched down in Denver, she opted to change her mode of transportation.

Outside of the airport were several Greyhound buses, just begging for her to take one of them off to places unknown. Once again, she played her game and climbed aboard one that she had no clue where it might end up. It wasn’t until she was thirty minutes on the road that she considered turning on her phone. She was sure she had several missed calls, not only from Rachel but probably from Jessica, too.

Her sister would be livid that she wasn’t brought into the loop on this charade, and why wouldn’t she be? They were as close as two sisters could be. Emma would have to make sure to find a place that sold burner phones—ones without a GPS tracker built in. Perhaps then, she might have the ability to get the peace and quiet that she needed in order to maintain control over her mental state. She didn’t want a repeat of what had happened before. That’s why she’d hired Rachel in the first place.

Emma leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes. Colorado Springs had been mentioned, and she'd arrive there soon enough. Once there, Emma could find a hotel and make plans on how long she'd be staying. Rachel couldn't fault her for needing this break. No one could, as far as Emma was concerned. Sometimes a woman had to take control of her own destiny for a while before returning to the real world.

Emma drifted off to sleep and was only roused when bright lights turned on. She winced and opened her eyes to find the bus was clearing out. She scrambled to her feet and looked through the window. She'd never visited Colorado Springs before, but she knew it was bigger than the town she was currently looking at.

A large, lit sign outside hung over a building filled with windows. Sal's Diner looked like the perfect place to get a bite of food and figure out where she'd ended up. Then again, Emma was exhausted. Maybe she could do some exploring tomorrow. It had to be at least midnight, and eating fried food on an empty stomach wasn't going to bode well for her.

She gathered her things and hurried off the bus and into the cooler evening air. Her eyes scanned the immediate area, landing on a small motel across the street and down a block or two. It would suit her needs well for the time being. And if she didn't know where she was, then she was almost a hundred percent sure that no one else would either.

A smile touched her lips as she hurried across the street and toward the building with the word "vacancy" in bright, red lettering. Tomorrow, she would venture out. Tonight, she was going to get a much-needed reprieve from being Emma Hart.

The countryside could be both a vast, endless expanse and, at the same time, so small that Caleb yearned for something more. It wasn't the first time he'd thought about Carter and what his twin was up to. Maybe he'd been the smart one. Out of the two of them, Carter might have been the one who got what he wanted in life and all because he took a chance.

Caleb rested his folded arms on the saddle horn. There was one thing he knew he wouldn't get anywhere else but here. The sunsets in Colorado were something else. Red and orange bled into the deep purple and blue on the horizon. There was something so soothing about being out here. Even when he thought he might need more in his life, Caleb was able to stand back and accept that this was where he was meant to be. He was a cowboy, and on his family's ranch was home.

He peered back toward the house and the barn. If he were to head home, he already knew what he would walk into. Liam was celebrating his engagement to Margot. They were having a big dinner with all the Keagans, including those who had married into the family.

It wasn't that Caleb didn't like his new in-laws. They were all generally likable. No, his aversion to going home had more to do with the way he'd treated Liam when his brother had started dating Margot. It wasn't hard to see just how much on the wrong side of things Caleb had been.

In truth, Caleb was embarrassed that he'd been the only one who wasn't supportive. He could be happy for Liam and Margot's impending nuptials without wanting to be the reminder of the hardships the couple had gone through because of Caleb's trust issues.

Trust.

He still stood by his opinion that trust needed to be earned. A person who didn't

demand the truth right from the start was completely naive. The world was filled with terrible people who didn't care about anyone but themselves.

There were countless times when Caleb had seen this sort of behavior, from celebrities on television to politicians running various governments, right down to crooked salesmen who only wanted to make a quick buck.

Caleb had even seen people in his own town do things that weren't becoming of someone with morals. His own twin had made some pretty hefty mistakes.

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Those experiences were enough for Caleb to shut himself off from the world and do his best to keep everyone at arm's length. His decision wasn't made lightly. Caleb glanced once more toward home. He wanted to be able to join in with his family in celebrations like Liam's engagement party. He wanted to be able to feel like he was still welcomed as one of the Keagans, and yet all he could see himself as was an outcast.

He'd brought it on himself. Deep down he knew that. He just didn't know how he was going to be able to change it. Maybe he never would.

Caleb heaved a sigh and turned his horse toward home. If he was lucky, he'd be able to give his horse a good brush down and then slip out into the night. Maybe he'd head to Sal's. There was just something about the diner that made him feel safe, or perhaps it was more of a sense of belonging. While he would never talk to anyone but the waitresses, the whole ambiance was enough to give him some peace from the tumultuous feelings that stormed within him.

The drive to town had a calming effect. It was as if the silence could give him the hug he desperately needed. The low hum of the truck's engine was the only sound that Caleb needed right now. It was times like this that being alone with his thoughts didn't seem so bad. He didn't feel so lonely for some reason.

As the lights from the hub of town came into view, Caleb allowed his muscles to relax. No longer did he clutch the steering wheel or worry about what awaited him at his home. Liam's less-than-warm stare wasn't a problem anymore.

For the second time that evening, Caleb couldn't help but think about Carter. His twin

didn't have to deal with the judgment from their family. No one was going to lecture him about the decisions he'd made, because he wasn't here. No one could make him feel guilty about taking the money and abandoning the family.

Caleb didn't agree with his brother's decisions, but at least he seemed to have it easier. If Caleb were to leave, take off somewhere and never come back, he wondered if anyone would come looking for him or if they'd just let him have his peace.

For the first time, the temptation to do just that hit him hard. He wouldn't take the money from the family's stash. And he would go farther than his brother had. What kind of person only moved to the next biggest city to get away from family? No, Caleb would move across the country. There were plenty of places to hide from the issues he dealt with.

He pulled into a parking spot in front of the diner and stared up at the lit sign. The familiarity of this place was one of the things that held him back. At least he knew what to expect in Copper Creek. There were no surprises. Well, except for that bruhaha with Shane and his family at the club. But for the most part, nothing exciting happened around here—at least nothing that involved the Keagan household.

There were occasional rumors of criminal activities going on, but the sheriff did a good job at keeping those issues under wraps. Caleb hadn't had a whiff of scandal since he'd gotten old enough to pay attention. Copper Creek was as good as it got.

He shut off his truck engine and climbed out. The diner wasn't terribly busy, but then it was getting later in the evening. Most folks would be home with their families. Caleb moved toward the door and then stopped, seeing a familiar face inside. Mateo sat across from his younger brother Roman, and he glanced out the window at that exact moment. With a wave and a smile, he beckoned Caleb to join them.

Mateo was one of the only people that Caleb thought he could trust. He wouldn't say

they were incredibly close, but lately Mateo had been teaching him a thing or two about raising and training working ranch dogs. Caleb smiled back and started toward the door once again.

Tire wheels squealed behind him, and he glanced over his shoulder to see a car leaving a bit too quickly. At that moment, he collided with another person. Caleb stumbled back a step. "I'm sorry," he mumbled.

The woman's sunglasses skittered across the pavement, and she scrambled after them. Her long, wavy, brown hair was pulled back beneath a ball cap, and she wore a hoodie even though the air wasn't nearly cool enough to warrant it. When she stood, her green eyes connected with his. She froze, as did he.

"I'm... sorry..." he said again. "I wasn't looking where I was going."

The woman offered him a smile while she fiddled with her sunglasses. There was something almost familiar about her, but then, to Caleb, most people he met seemed to blur together. She looked away and a soft laugh escaped her lips. "I wasn't looking either, so I guess we're both at fault." When her eyes met his once more, he was taken aback by just how pretty she really was.

Nope.

He wasn't about to go there. Not here, not now, and definitely not with a person he'd never met. Not even if she was moderately attractive. Caleb noticed the to-go bag on the ground near her feet. "I hope you got something good."

She followed his eyes, and her smile brightened. "Me too. I don't usually eat out, so this is a treat."

"Technically, you're still not eating out," Caleb specified. "If you were, then you'd be

inside with all the other night owls.”

This beautiful woman shot a quick look toward Sal’s and nodded. “I suppose you have a good point there. I don’t much like crowds.”

That had to be the most telling thing she could have said to him. Nothing made sense to him more than that statement. “I know what you mean. Luckily, this town doesn’t get all that crowded.” He leaned in closer to her. “Except if you head out to the club. That place is always swamped with people.”

“The club?”

He shoved his hands in his pockets, hating himself for being annoyed at her curiosity. “Yeah,” he said. “It’s the country club. It’s got dancing, a restaurant, and therapy services for veterans.” Of course a girl as beautiful as this one would be interested in something like that. Charlie talked non-stop about how romantic it would be to go there on a first date. Then again, she was the kind of girl who liked being in the middle of the action.

“Oh.” She nibbled on her lower lip and then reached down to pick up her bag. “A place like that doesn’t seem to fit in a town like this, does it?”

He shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. I don’t go there often. Like you said about crowds. I don’t like them either, and that place is swarmed by them on a weekly basis.”

Her small smile returned. “Thanks for the warning. I suppose I won’t be heading out that way any time soon.”

Caleb’s sharp gaze locked with hers once more. She lifted her food and gave him a nod goodbye. Turning, he watched her walk down the sidewalk. He would have thought she’d go to a car or a truck that was parked along the street, but instead she

just kept walking. Wherever she was headed, it must be close by. She didn't glance back at him as the distance between them grew.

He shook his head, disappointed in himself for letting his thoughts get the better of him. She was still a stranger, and he had no business being interested in who she was or where she was going. For all he knew, she was dating someone or married.

Caleb headed into the diner and plopped down on the bench beside Mateo. Roman gazed at him curiously, but Mateo was the one who commented first.

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“Who was that?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Caleb replied, waving over the waitress.

“Sure you do. You were talking with her for a good five minutes.”

Caleb gave his friend a pointed look. “I seriously have no clue who she is. We bumped into each other; she dropped her glasses. That was it.”

“And you didn’t bother to get her name?” Roman leaned over the table. “I didn’t get to see her very well, but based on what I could see from behind?—”

He scowled at Roman. “There was nothing to see. Doesn’t seem like she’s a local. She probably isn’t even going to stay here long. I wouldn’t bother yourselves with trying to figure her out, because the second you do, she’ll be gone.”

Mateo nudged him in the side with his elbow. “Something tells me you’re more curious than we are.”

Caleb shook his head. “I have zero interest in meeting anyone new. I’ve crossed the line getting closer to your family as it is. I would rather not put my faith in someone who is only going to disappoint me.”

His friend laughed. “You hear that, Roman? Caleb thinks we’re good enough for him to befriend. We should count ourselves lucky.”

Roman chuckled along with his brother just as their food was delivered to their table.

Caleb didn't mind them poking fun at him. He knew what he was doing, and if anyone else wanted to take risks, that was their choice. For him, he'd stick with what was smart and safe.

3

Emma

Emma pressed her sunglasses up on her nose as she wandered along one of the busier streets in town. She soaked up every single cute storefront and every old-timey building. This place was so different from anywhere else she'd visited over the years. It wasn't big enough for a show, and there would be no way her manager would agree to try to book one here, but that didn't stop her from imagining the possibility.

So far, no one had recognized her. She'd nearly blown her cover her second night here, but the man she'd bumped into hadn't seemed to realize just who he was talking to. At first Emma had thought she should feel offended, but the relief of being treated like a regular person for the first time she could remember outweighed everything. That relief had stuck with her over the next couple of days, making it incredibly difficult for her to forget him.

The man's face filled her thoughts and lingered in her dreams. With how small this town was, she'd been surprised that she hadn't bumped into him again since that night.

There were several other people she recognized—regulars at the restaurant, employees at the businesses, and people who seemed to enjoy wandering through town much like she was doing at this moment. She could have seen herself living in a place like this if she wasn't a country music star. Copper Creek would be the perfect place to start a family.

But those thoughts were ridiculous. She couldn't stay here forever. Eventually, Rachel would find her, then she'd be back on her way to LA. Her responsibilities would catch up with her.

For now, the music star, Emma Hart, could disappear and return to a time when life was simpler—when she was Emily Hartford. All she had to do was be vigilant and make sure no one else got a good look at her. She'd been lucky that cowboy didn't seem to know who she was. Next time, she might not be.

Emma couldn't help smiling as she observed people going about their normal lives. They seemed so much happier than the people she interacted with in the city. They didn't need to hustle to get to a job that only weighed on them. These folks appeared genuinely at peace with who they were and the life they led. That was something anyone could value.

She slowed as she came to a shop that had several cowboy hats on display. The one she owned had left with her suitcase on the private plane. All she had in terms of keeping her identity secret was the ball cap she wore.

Tracing the glass, she contemplated whether she could afford one of these hats with the meager funds she had in a private account. Rachel handled a lot of her finances, too—or she'd hired someone to do it. Emma had no doubt that her main account was being watched for activity. The second she used the card associated with it or one of her usual credit cards, Rachel would materialize.

Knowing Rachel, she probably already had the police looking into her phone's location. It would be better for Emma to spend her money only on the necessities. She needed a phone so she could call her sister and tell her she was fine. She'd need money to pay for the motel, along with food and any other supplies she'd need while here.

“You don’t want one of those.”

Emma jumped and spun to find a woman with dark hair cut short around her jawline. She had a streak of red that peaked out from under her own cowboy hat. She was staring at the hats in the window with her head tilted slightly. Then she shook it before dragging her eyes to Emma.

“This store is mostly for tourists. Those hats are great if you’re going to put them on a shelf when you go home, but if you want to wear it on the daily, you’ll want something more conventional.” She gestured past Emma down the street. “There’s a better store that way. It’s a little hidden, but you’re going to want to check out the options over there before making your decision.”

“Thank you,” Emma murmured.

“How long are you staying?”

Emma shifted, not only unsure about how to answer the question but about whether she should be speaking to this woman at all. She was one slip-up away from her identity being revealed. What would happen if this woman found out who she really was?

“You don’t have to tell me,” she offered. “I just figured I’d ask because you look like you could use some down-to-earth kind of fun. None of this tourist nonsense.”

That caught Emma’s attention, and she peered at the woman with more curiosity. “I don’t know how long I’ll be staying. I haven’t made any official plans.”

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“Then you should come out to my family’s property. We raise sheep dogs, but we also have a lot of horses and some good trails. Have you ever been riding?”

“When I was a girl. But it’s been ages.” Emma folded her arms, a smile tugging at her lips. “I’m probably not any good.”

“You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself. You just need to get back in the saddle.” The woman snickered. “Okay, that was kinda corny. But seriously, you should come out to my place and we can go for a ride.”

Emma’s eyes narrowed behind her sunglasses. She didn’t know what this woman was up to, and she didn’t have her security team. This could be a recipe for disaster. And yet at the same time, Emma wanted nothing more than to have an adventure. She needed to get out of her slump and have some fun. Without realizing why, she nodded. “Yeah, okay. Give me your address and I’ll come by.”

The woman pulled a scrap of paper from her purse and scribbled the information on it. “I swear that I’m not some psycho,” she murmured as she held the paper out to Emma. “You just looked like you could use a friend.”

Emma took the offering, not sure how to respond to such a statement. Maybe the Lord was opening doors for her and she should give it a chance. She lifted the paper and gave the woman a timid smile. “I suppose we’ll find out.” She glanced down at the paper. “Nice to meet you, Sophia Palmer. I’m Emily Hartford.” It was the name she used whenever she was hiding her identity—the name she was born with.

“Looking forward to getting to know you better,Emily.” Sophia nodded to her before

she traipsed off down the street.

Emma stared at the paper, wondering just how much of a mistake it would be to show up at this stranger's house. She should probably get a burner phone before going off to parts unknown to meet with someone she wasn't sure she could trust. It was that little thought in her head that told her to take a chance, to allow herself to make mistakes. She'd never been one to hide away from the world. Why would she stop now?

Emma still couldn't decide if she was doing the right thing by meeting up with Sophia. There were so many risks involved, and not all of them related to her safety. But she'd already made some unwise decisions, and she'd finally come to terms with the fact that she was going to continue to do so until she returned home.

Today she was going to ride a horse with a new friend, and she would be throwing caution to the wind. If Sophia found out who she was, then that would have to be a risk worth taking.

Emma kept her glasses on her face and her head down as she headed toward the house. Before she got there, the front door opened and Sophia squealed as she hurried down the steps. "I can't believe you actually came." She pulled Emma into her arms and gave her a big hug. "I thought for sure I had scared you off." Sophia pulled back. "But we should really get to the horses before anyone else comes out. My family is great, but they ask a lot of questions."

Emma didn't have much of a chance to dissect what Sophia might mean before her new friend pulled her toward the barn.

"And you're going to have to get a different hat. Around here, we're all cowboys." She pulled the hat from Emma's head, causing her to gasp.

Her hair fell to her shoulders, only being pulled back by the hole in her cap. She touched her head and stared in shock at Sophia. This woman was just as crazy as she was.

Sophia laughed. "I have a couple you can pick from hanging up in the barn. You just need one that's going to shade your face and your neck. No need to make you age any faster, right?"

"Right." Emma found herself laughing.

They got to the barn and picked out their horses, and just when everything seemed to be going smoother, Sophia grabbed Emma's glasses. "Wow, these are nice." She placed them on her nose and posed. "What do you think? Do they suit me?"

Emma froze as she stared at Sophia. It had been a long time since anyone had been so forward with her. Touching her, taking her things, it wasn't normal, and it definitely wasn't normal for a star.

Sophia tilted her head and stared at Emma hard. "What? Do they look bad?"

Emma exhaled a sigh of relief. Sophia didn't know who she was. That made two people in this town who were so sheltered they hadn't heard of her. She reached for the glasses. "They look great. But my eyes are super sensitive, so I'm afraid I can't let you borrow them."

Sophia didn't seem fazed at all and handed the sunglasses back to Emma. "You ready for the ride of your life?" She climbed into her horse's saddle and then motioned for Emma to do the same. "Come on. Let me show you around."

Their ride started out great. The scenery grew more and more colorful as they headed into fields of wildflowers.

“We don’t do much with cattle except to train the dogs with them, so we tend to let our fields do what’s most natural.”

“I think it’s beautiful.”

Sophia squinted out at the surrounding property. “It can be. But there are critters you wouldn’t want to make friends with the farther we get out.”

Emma shot Sophia a concerned look.

“Don’t worry.” Sophia laughed. “I won’t take you out that far.” She motioned to Emma and her horse. “You’re doing really well for not having any experience.”

“I didn’t say I was inexperienced. I said I haven’t ridden since I was a kid.”

Sophia waved a hand through the air. “Same thing.” She beamed at Emma. “Either way, you’re doing great. We’re going to have to make this a regular thing.” She smacked her hand on her forehead. “Wait, I forgot. I’m not going to be here in a few days. My cousin is getting married. They live in Florida.” She groaned. “It’s going to really mess with my hair. I hate the humidity.”

“Florida isn’t so bad,” Emma said and chuckled. It was amazing how easy it had become to feel comfortable with Sophia, even though she was a little out there. “You just have to know how to prepare. I could give you some tips.”

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“Really?”

Emma nodded, but at that moment, her world tipped on its side—or maybe it was the horse doing that. Something slithered across the trail, causing the horse to rear up and then bolt in the opposite direction than they’d been heading. Emma let out a scream and held onto the reins as tight as she could.

4

Caleb

“You know me. I’m not going to just chase some girl I don’t even know.”

“But you said she was beautiful,” Mateo prodded. “And I haven’t seen you smile like that in a long time.” His knowing grin was more infuriating than anything else. He shook his head as he cinched the saddle around his horse.

Caleb brushed off Mateo’s comment, opting to focus on saddling his own steed. “It doesn’t matter if she’s beautiful. For all intents and purposes, she’s a stranger. She could even be a criminal.”

Mateo laughed. “A criminal? You can’t be serious. You don’t even know her.”

“Exactly. Why should I waste my time trying to figure out if her morals align with mine when she could be the exact opposite of what I’m looking for? It’s like you with these dogs you’re training. People come to you knowing that you will give them exactly what they want, and they don’t have to worry about getting a lemon.”

Mateo laughed again. “So, what you’re saying is that you’d rather be set up by a matchmaker.”

“No, I’m saying that why should any of us be willing to put ourselves out there when we have no idea what’s waiting? You could get lucky, or you could end up with someone who is capable of faking their death and blaming you for it.”

His friend continued to find humor in what Caleb was saying despite the fact that he spoke the truth. There were plenty of people who wouldn’t bat an eye over ruining a person’s life.

Mateo ran his hand over the animal’s neck and chuckled again. “If you keep looking at life in that way, you’re going to miss out on a lot of opportunities. What if this woman is your soul mate?”

Caleb snorted. “Soul mates don’t exist in the way you think they do.”

“Are you sure about that? Think about it. When someone special comes into your life, whether by chance or when you’re introduced through friends, it was meant to happen one way or another. And if you ignore it, you’re basically ignoring what the man above has planned for you. You owe it to yourself to check it out. Have you thought about why you bumped into that girl in the first place?”

“Yeah, we weren’t paying attention. That’s not the man above telling me that I needed to meet her. That was the man above telling me I need to pay attention to where I’m going.”

Mateo grabbed ahold of the saddle horn and hoisted himself up. “Suit yourself, but I’m telling you that it’s a bad idea to ignore fate.”

“And what do you know about fate?”

It was at that moment that Mateo gave Caleb a side-eye. There was something he wasn't telling him, but then why would he? They'd only recently started working together. Mateo didn't owe Caleb anything, evidenced by the way he urged his horse forward. "Just take my word for it. Sometimes you need to throw caution to the wind and do something that scares you. Otherwise, you might miss out on the best life you could've had."

Caleb huffed, climbing onto his own horse. "Seeing as you're not hitched yet, I find it hard to believe you're on board with throwing caution to the wind. If anything, you seem a little skittish when it comes to settling down. I've seen the way you flirt with girls but never ask them out."

Mateo glanced at him once more. "It's true. I've been burned before. I'm careful about who I let get close to me. But that doesn't mean I didn't lose out on something great."

"Okay," Caleb drawled, "but if that were true, then you'd be more open to finding love. Tell me I'm wrong."

"You're wrong."

Caleb let out a sharp laugh. "Prove it. You sit here preaching to me about how important it is to let people earn my trust, and yet you won't do the same thing. Either you're the most hypocritical person I have ever met, or?—"

"Or I have scars and regrets." Mateo's happy demeanor shifted to something a little darker. He didn't meet Caleb's eyes as he said, "Just because I don't want to share those stories with you doesn't mean they didn't happen. All you have to know is that one day, someone will come into your life who makes you feel like you can conquer the world. And there might be a chance that they hurt you. But there's just as much of a chance that they will make you feel like..." His voice trailed off, and he shook his

head. “Just don’t make the same mistakes that I’ve made.”

“But how am I supposed to know if I’m making the same mistakes as you if you won’t tell me?—”

Mateo dug his heels into his horse and rocketed down a trail, followed by two dogs that seemed to materialize out of nowhere. Caleb charged after them, unable to push aside the questions that continued to swirl in his mind. Mateo was always in such a good mood. He could be stern with his dogs, but that was to be expected.

To think that he’d been hurt by someone so bad that he’d let another love slip through his fingers didn’t give Caleb much hope for himself. If someone as nice as Mateo could be betrayed, then anyone could end up like him.

He shoved down that depressing thought and focused instead on watching how Mateo communicated, not only with his horse but also with the dogs that had come along for the ride. One was bred for sheep and cattle herding, while the other was more like a hunting dog.

Both creatures were majestic in their own right. The more they rode, the easier it became to forget about Mateo’s past experiences and Caleb’s nonexistent ones. Their friendship was still new, but Caleb could see himself getting close enough to Mateo to consider him like another brother.

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They rode deep into the property, farther than Caleb thought belonged to Mateo's family. Soon they were surrounded by trees and other shrubbery. Birds exploded from trees when they drew nearer. The hunting dog barked wildly, earning a reprimand from Mateo.

Caleb chuckled, hiding a smile as he turned his head. They pulled up into a shaded area, and Mateo turned his horse around to face Caleb. He climbed down from his horse and walked beside the dogs, who panted loud enough that Caleb was worried they needed to get them some water.

Then, as if his thoughts had been enough to make water appear, they passed by the opening in a thicket where a pond had been hidden. The dogs darted toward the water, and Caleb climbed down to walk his horse beside Mateo. He glanced at his friend out of the corner of his eye. "Why did you decide to go into training dogs?"

Mateo shrugged. "I guess I was always good with them."

"That's not a real answer."

His friend chuckled, the usual happiness returning. "And why did you start off being a ranch hand? Because you've been good at it."

"No, it's because I didn't have any other choice. My parents bought the land, or maybe it was my grandparents. Then we got it, and in order to survive, we worked it."

"Same thing," he said with a grin.

They guided their horses closer to the water's edge and tossed the reins back around the horses' necks. The only sound that filled the small clearing was that of the animals getting their fill. Caleb didn't dare bring up love or fate again. He far preferred the more optimistic version of Mateo than the dismal one.

"How about you answer your own question." Mateo's statement was enough of a distraction from Caleb's thoughts that he peered at his friend with confusion.

"What?"

"Why do you want to work with dogs? It's like we've said. Sometimes you're born into something, and sometimes you're drawn to it. So why did you call me up out of the blue?"

"It wasn't out of the blue," Caleb said, rubbing the back of his neck. "When Hudson got those dogs from you..." He shrugged. "I guess I got a little curious about it. Odin is some kind of dog."

A smile pulled at Mateo's lips. "Yeah, he's one of my best works. That dog is smart as a whip." He leaned against a nearby tree and cocked his head slightly. "So that's it? You were curious about what it takes to train a dog to work the land?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe? I sense there's more to this story."

Caleb turned away with another shrug. "I don't know. I guess I wasn't feeling like I fit in at my place. There's so many of us. And with Carter taking off, I just figured..."

"You wanted to find your own way."

He glanced over his shoulder at Mateo. “That’s a good way of putting it.”

Mateo pushed away from the tree and dusted off his shoulder where some bark had come loose. “You’re more than welcome to try it out. I’ll warn you though, it’s not for the weak.” He glanced once more at Caleb like he wanted to ask him something. Then he shook his head.

“What’s that look for?” Caleb demanded.

“I didn’t have a look,” Mateo replied.

“I beg to differ. You wanted to say something, but you weren’t sure about it.”

“Oh yeah?” Mateo’s eyes narrowed slightly. “If you’re so smart, then what do you think I was going to say?” There were notes of teasing in his tone, the lightheartedness returning. “I bet you won’t figure it out.”

Before Caleb could make his best guess, Mateo’s phone rang in his pocket. The sound was loud enough to give Caleb a start. Mateo reached for it and answered with a single syllable. “Yeah.”

The sounds on the other end were muffled by the device. Mateo glanced at Caleb and nodded. “I’ll be right there. Make sure you have warm water and blankets ready.” He hung up the phone and hurried toward the horses. “I have to get back. One of the dogs is in labor. She’s having a hard time, and Roman isn’t ready to do this solo. Can you find your way back on your own?”

Caleb nodded. “Sure. Do you need any help? I’m sure I can keep up.”

“Next time. I need to keep an eye on Roman, and I don’t have the patience to babysit both of you.” He playfully slugged Caleb in the arm. “If I don’t see you back in an

hour, I'll send out these search parties." He swung into the saddle, whistled for the dogs, then took off at a pace Caleb probably wouldn't have been able to keep up with.

He climbed up onto his own horse and clicked his tongue, turning her toward the trail when another horse he'd never seen before charged straight past the opening in the trees. Riding that horse was a woman screaming for her life, her brown hair billowing behind her. He shot a look in the direction that the woman had come, and far behind her was another rider hollering something he couldn't understand.

Caleb dug his heels into his horse's flanks and leaned forward to chase after the runaway horse. He stood in the stirrups, hovering over the saddle enough to make the ride less of a jolt to the senses. It took less time than he'd expected to catch up. She glanced over at him, and recognition filled her terrified gaze. Her glasses were missing, and her green eyes pleaded for him to help her.

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He urged forward just a little more, and his deep, booming voice seemed to be all it took. “Whoa! Whoa!” The woman continued to pull on the reins, albeit a little too hard—causing the horse to rear upward.

“No!” He shouted, but it was too late. She slipped off the back of the horse and landed in a patch of flowers with a thwump.

5

Emma

Surrounded by a sea of brightly colored flowers, Emma stared up at the blue sky. Nothing was more bruised than her ego. She couldn’t believe she’d let her horse get away from her so easily. Not only that, but the animal didn’t seem to care that she was the rider and it was the beast of burden.

A face materialized over the side of the flowers, staring down at her with concern mingled with irritation. This man’s attitude from the other night must be a regular thing. “Are you okay?” he said gruffly.

Emma groaned and closed her eyes.

The flowers parted, and she sensed more than saw him kneel beside her. “Does it feel like anything’s broken?” he demanded. “Tell me now before I do something stupid like move you.”

“I’m fine,” she whispered.

He stilled beside her. “Are you sure?”

There was nothing to do but laugh at this point. Emma’s laughter startled the horses nearby, but thankfully they didn’t take off running like before. She opened her eyes and turned her head so she could get a good look at the man who had probably saved her life. “Yes, I’m sure.” She groaned again as she rose up on her elbows. “These flowers cushioned my fall well enough. But I can tell you one thing, I’m not ever getting on another horse after that ride.”

He lifted a brow. “I’m sorry to break this to you, but in order to get back, you’re going to have to get back in that saddle. Do you realize how far we are from the barn?”

She sat up fully and shook her head. “I think I’d rather walk. If the horse can do it, so can I.” Emma got to her feet and brushed off her pants. She lifted a hand to her head, then gasped and spun around. “I lost my hat.”

“I’m sure there will be others,” he said, standing beside her.

She shook her head. “No, it actually wasn’t mine. I was borrowing it.” Her face flushed with further embarrassment. Not only had she lost control of her horse, but she’d lost the hat and her sunglasses. This ride had turned into something that nightmares were made of. She dug her hands into her hair and let out another sharp laugh. “I really hope Sophia isn’t going to kill me.”

The mere mention of the woman’s name was all it took for her to burst through the trees she’d likely cut through. “Emily!” she called. “Are you okay?” When she got closer, she barely sent the cowboy a look at all. She slipped down from the saddle and rushed toward Emma before looking her over from head to toe. “Please tell me you’re okay. I would never forgive myself if something?—”

Emma laughed. “I’m fine. This...” Her voice trailed off as she looked up at Mr. Grumpy. “He helped stop the horse.”

Sophia glanced toward him. “What are you doing all the way out here, Caleb? I thought you and Mateo were doing some training or something.”

“He got a call that one of your dogs is in labor.”

Sophia’s eyes widened. “Lucy? She’s having her puppies?” She rushed over to her horse. “I have to help.” Then she paused and glanced at Emma. “Are you going to be okay? Lucy was my puppy when I was a teenager. This might be her last set of puppies. I’m so, so sorry.”

Emma shook her head and waved at Sophia with a dismissive hand. “You go ahead. I’m sure I’ll be fine. Caleb has to head that way, too, right?”

He stiffened visibly and stared at her as if she’d asked him for his hand in marriage.

“See? He’s going back. We’ll be fine. Don’t you worry.”

Sophia shifted her attention to Caleb. “Really? That would be so great.”

Caleb looked as if he’d been cornered. Well, that was exactly what had happened. He’d been trapped into helping Emma get home. His shoulders slumped slightly, and his eyes darkened. “Yeah, whatever.”

Sophia was fully saddled at that point, and she took off like a bullet, leaving Emma alone with Caleb.

Emma sighed. “Do you think we might be able to go back and look for my hat?”

“Your hat—” he practically choked out. “You want to go back for a hat?”

“And my sunglasses.” She dusted off her pants and moved to walk past him, but he held up an arm to stop her.

“Absolutely not.”

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Emma placed her hands on her hips. “And why not? The hat doesn’t belong to me, and I need those glasses. I can’t just...” She swallowed back her confession. He’d think it weird if she couldn’t walk through town without them. He’d probably ask her why she was wearing them out in the evening when there was barely any light to speak of.

“You can’t what? Because I can tell you what you can’t do. You can’t go traipsing all over these acres looking for a literal needle in a haystack. It’s not going to happen—especially if you’re not willing to get back on that horse.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I need those glasses.”

“Then get some new ones.”

“I can’t.” She swallowed hard. There was a ninety-nine percent chance that someone would recognize her if she walked into a shop in town. Not only that, but she didn’t have enough money to spare for another pair, even a cheap one.

“Why not?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

She contemplated telling him a lie—that they held sentimental value to her. But the chances that they’d find the pair broken or missing a lens were pretty high as well. Instead, she opted for nothing. “It’s none of your business. I’m going to look for them

with or without you.” She attempted once more to move past him but couldn’t get around him.

“If they’re that important, I’ll give you mine. They’re in my truck, so we’ll have to head back.” His voice was firm, unyielding. He wasn’t going to budge on this front, and a pair of his sunglasses was better than no pair at all.

Emma sighed. “Fine.”

“Good. Now get on that horse.”

“Absolutely not,” she used his words against him.

He groaned. “I’m not walking the whole way.”

“You don’t have to.” She folded her arms with a grin. “I’m happy to walk beside my horse. You can ride yours.”

Caleb threw his head back and groaned. “Why are you being so difficult?”

“Am I? I thought I was just being assertive.”

He set his narrowed gaze on her. “You’re clearly not prepared to ride, and yet you got on one in the first place. You couldn’t stop her. Then you made matters worse by holding on the reins too tight?—”

“It’s not my fault!” she shot back. “No one told me that’s what a horse would do when it saw a snake.”

His brows shot up. “A snake.”

“Yeah. And Sophia definitely didn’t tell me that it would buck me off. I thought I needed to pull back on the reins to get her to...”

He was fighting a smile. She didn’t know what he found so amusing about all of this, especially when he was acting like he didn’t approve of her actions whatsoever.

Emily folded her arms tight across her chest. “Anyway, that’s why I’m not riding her again. I don’t need to. I’d rather stretch my legs anyway.”

“And you’re not going to change your mind.” His voice was a little softer this time—almost kind.

“Nope.”

“Then I guess I’m walking too.”

She was taken aback by his statement. “You don’t have to?”

“I know.”

Emma smiled. “I see that even the grumpy ones can be chivalrous.”

“No, chivalry would be to put you in the saddle and teach you a thing or two about horses so you don’t break your neck next time.”

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She snickered. “I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

“Not at this rate,” he murmured, his own charming smile starting to tug at his lips. Caleb nodded to the horses. “Get your reins. We’re going to have to get started if we want to make it back before nightfall.” They walked only a few yards before he turned toward her. “So, Emily, is it?”

Emma froze. Right. She’d given Sophia that name, and she’d used it in front of him. It wasn’t that she was tempted to give him the name she preferred to go by, but it was like there was an itch in her chest warning her that she needed to be cautious. “Yeah,” she whispered. “Emily.”

“Emily...” he drawled. “Is there a last name to go with it?”

“Do you have a last name?” she said far too quickly.

“Keagan.”

“Keagan,” she mulled the name over, liking the way it felt saying it out loud. “I like it.”

“And you? Emily, what?”

She contemplated teasing him, withholding it so she’d have more control over their conversation. But ultimately, she chose not to. Caleb struck her as the kind of guy who wouldn’t take kindly to her trying to control the situation. “It’s Hart—Hartford.” Dang it! She’d nearly given herself away. “Hartford,” she murmured again.

“Well, Emily Hartford. I wish we could have learned each other’s names under better circumstances.”

“I don’t know.” She smiled. “I kind of like the way we met.” The only thing she didn’t really like was how strange it was hearing him use her given name when everyone around her used her stage name.

They continued in silence for a while longer. She took the opportunity to glance in his direction and study him a bit more. He was handsome; she had to give him that. His jawline was the kind that would put the David sculpture to shame. The way his blue eyes drilled into her and set her on edge was another issue entirely to explore. Normally, she felt confident in every situation she put herself in.

Granted, this whole runaway-horse thing had really messed with her head. Maybe when her heart stopped racing, she’d be able to rationalize how she was feeling.

Caleb’s eyes cut to hers at one point, catching her staring, and his expression hardened. “What?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” she said as sweetly as she could. “It’s just... are all cowboys as handsome as you?”

She couldn’t help but love the way Caleb froze. He must not flirt with women often—or maybe he was already taken and now he’d have to explain to his girlfriend that a strange woman had hit on him. She bit back a laugh and turned her face away from him. “Sorry.” Emma didn’t know if he heard her apology or not. It didn’t really matter at this point. Things had grown awkward and there was no salvaging it.

By the time they made it to the barn, Emma had nearly forgotten about the glasses. But then Caleb ordered her to stay put near the entrance to the structure while he ran off toward a truck that was parked a good thirty yards away. He opened the passenger

side door, dug around in his truck for a moment, then withdrew and shut the door behind him. Caleb jogged back toward her and held out a pair of aviator sunglasses—ones that would nearly cover her whole face.

They were perfect.

Emma glanced up at him with a small smile. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“Don’t mention it.” He reached for her horse’s reins. “I’ll take care of her. You can head out. And I’ll tell Sophia about the hat.”

She blinked several times. Not only had he been listening to her, but he’d also remembered what she’d been worried about. “Thank you,” she repeated.

He pushed past her, and she spun to watch him disappear inside the barn.

6

Caleb

Something was off about that woman. Caleb didn’t know what it was, but the fact that she insisted on hiding her appearance sent all kinds of warning bells in his head. Emily. The name didn’t quite suit her. He hadn’t known what to expect her name to be, but Emily simply wasn’t it.

Didn’t matter, though. Emily wasn’t his type. He didn’t need to care what her name was. And it certainly didn’t matter that when she flirted with him, he’d been thrown off balance so much that he nearly forgot he needed to keep her at arm’s length.

Emily was still a stranger—a tourist who wouldn’t be sticking around for long. Heck, he wouldn’t have been surprised if she was on the run from something with the way

she insisted on those sunglasses.

He sighed, shaking his head as he brushed down their horses. Emily Hartford was dangerous, no doubt about it. And he would be more than happy if he never had to see her again. Besides, he wouldn't say that he had a type, but if he did, she wasn't it. She was too quiet, willing to keep too many secrets. People who had to hide their appearance when they were out in public were either in trouble or running from it.

Caleb continued to brush down his horse, his thoughts continuing to linger on Emily despite his best intentions. He found himself wondering why she needed to hide who she was. He wanted to know if she needed help, but she was buried too deep in her denial to ask for it.

Shoving aside those concerns, he reminded himself that a beautiful woman like that didn't need his help, and she wasn't asking for it. Mateo's opinion that Emily might be his soulmate was ridiculous. Just because they crossed paths in front of Sal's meant nothing.

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Though Mateo would probably give Caleb an earful if he found out that they'd crossed paths again—and even more so if he knew that Caleb ended up coming to her rescue.

Caleb frowned, his brushing slowing as he continued to dwell on that fact. Bumping into Emily had been a coincidence. But saving her from her runaway horse made everything seem a little bigger. Fate had put him in her path when she needed it most.

No.

He wasn't going down that endless tunnel. If he allowed himself to think that they were meant to be together, then he'd only continue searching for evidence to back it up. The last thing he wanted right now was to fall in love with some girl who wouldn't end up staying in town long enough anyway. That could be the stupidest thing he could do for his future self.

Emily Hartford would leave—probably within the next couple of days—and he wouldn't have to see her again. He wouldn't have to think about her bright green eyes or the way her bronze skin looked under the sun. He wouldn't have to recall that her smile made him feel things he wasn't even aware he could feel.

Caleb gritted his teeth and placed the brush on a nearby shelf with finality. He wasn't going to keep thinking about her because he wasn't ever going to see her again. That was that.

He left the barn, not seeing any sign of Mateo or the pups. They were probably inside the main house, and the last thing he wanted to do was intrude on something when

they already had enough hands to take care of it. Mateo would call him when he was ready to finish their conversation or have Caleb come back to do some more training.

At home, it was quieter than Caleb had expected. Most of his older siblings weren't home, but then it was a Friday and that meant they could go out and have some fun.

Caleb removed his hat and his boots, leaving them by the door as he moved farther into the house. From the sound of it, all his married siblings were gone. His twin was still gone. And that left only three individuals who could possibly be at home. His youngest sister was poking around in the kitchen and only briefly looked up at him when he entered.

He got himself a cup of water and tossed it back before he placed the glass in the sink. It was hard to see Charlie as anything but his baby sister, but to look at her, he wouldn't be surprised if the young men in town had already started to pay attention to her.

His chest tightened. She wasn't ready for that. If Caleb couldn't find anyone worth dating, then Charlie shouldn't be accepting invitations from men, either. Thankfully, she was an introvert and wouldn't be seeking out that kind of companionship.

She glanced at him and lifted a brow. "What are you looking at?"

Caleb shrugged. "Nothing."

"Then leave. I'm going to be trying out some new recipes, and you're going to be in the way."

"Are you going to share?"

Charlie rolled her eyes and let out a groan. "Fine. But you don't get to ask me what I

put into the food.”

That gave him pause. He didn’t know what she might be willing to slip into her food—this could turn out very bad.

“Don’t worry, Caleb,” Daniel’s low voice came from the kitchen doorway. “She’s not going to poison you or anything.”

“Can you be sure about that?” Caleb hedged. “How much do we really know about her cooking abilities? She might be slowly poisoning us already.”

Charlie gasped and flung a hand towel in his direction. “I’m not going to poison you. I just want to try out some recipes in case someone asks me out.”

Caleb froze. “Has someone asked you out?”

She turned away from him, but not before he noticed the color in her cheeks. “Not yet.”

He couldn’t deny the relief he felt hearing those two words. Caleb shot a look toward Daniel but found him missing from the doorway. Was his brother not worried about their sister? As her family, they were her first line of defense when it came to keeping her safe.

Caleb hurried out of the kitchen, ignoring Charlie calling after him. He found Daniel in the living room, a book in hand as he lounged on the couch. “I don’t like it.”

Without looking up from his book, Daniel said, “You don’t likewhat, exactly?”

“That Charlie is thinking about cooking for... someone else.”

“Someone else that doesn’t exist yet?” Daniel’s eyes flitted up over the edge of the book for only a second. “She’s eighteen. I assure you, she’s been thinking about other boys for quite some time.”

“I doubt it. She hasn’t been dating anyone. She doesn’t talk about anyone.”

Daniel chuckled. “It doesn’t really matter anyway. Officially, she’s an adult. She can do whatever she wants, just like the rest of us. Frankly, I’m surprised that she’s stuck around this long. We’ve dealt with a lot of baggage over the years. Anyone in their right mind would have left ages ago just like—” Daniel cut himself off and set his focus more seriously on his book.

“You mean like Carter.”

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Daniel didn't respond. The only indication that he'd been paying attention was the slight twitch in his left eye.

"Well, we need to be careful, especially if she's not. There are so many people coming to town lately, and there's no telling where their morals lie."

"You're overthinking this," Daniel said. "In fact, I would wager that you're projecting. You don't want her to date anyone because you're scared of dating."

Caleb scoffed. "I'm not scared of dating. I know better than to believe that people are inherently good. They're far from it. I'd rather just stick to the group of people that I know and care about, thank you very much."

Daniel glanced at him once more. "You know, d'Nile isn't just a river in Egypt."

Caleb scowled at his brother. "I get it. You all think I'm being ridiculous since that whole thing with Liam and Margot, but you should listen to me. The more outsiders we welcome into Copper Creek, the less safe it will become."

"I think the time to worry about letting outsiders into town is long past, Caleb. You're just going to have to get used to figuring out who the good ones are before you let yourself get close to them." Daniel turned the page of his book. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to get back to my book with the precious little time I have left before the rest of them come back from dancing."

Caleb huffed and headed out of the living room. He hurried up to his bedroom and contemplated slamming the door but thought better of it. Daniel might be calm, quiet,

and collected, but he was also the biggest one of the Keagans and could very well change his tune if he really wanted to. The last thing Caleb wanted was for Daniel to come tearing up to his room and give him a lecture on how to treat his things.

He collapsed onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. He'd known it would be hard to convince his family of his views—especially after what he'd said to Liam about Margot. Caleb might even be more of a pariah than his twin at this point. No one seemed to like his company lately.

Perhaps his reasoning for spending so much time with Mateo was so he didn't have to look his family in their faces and see their disappointment. It was easier to use the excuse that he was interested in raising and training ranch dogs than to accept the truth that, in a way, he'd betrayed his brother.

Caleb dragged his hand down his face and let out a sigh. His eyes drooped but then flew wide when his phone rang. He fumbled for the device and brought it to his ear.

“Caleb?”

“Mateo? How's the dog?”

“She's doing great. So are the pups. But listen, I have a favor to ask you.”

Caleb sat up on the bed. “Sure. What do you need?”

Mateo seemed to hesitate for a moment, then he sighed. “I hate to ask you, but something's come up. We were planning on leaving in a few days for the wedding, but they want us there earlier. My cousin's family is a mess, and they changed some of their plans at the last minute. Do you think you could stay at my place? Keep an eye on the animals and the puppies? The vet has all the visits scheduled, but I can't leave the pups by themselves, and I'm not sure how long we'll be gone.”

“Of course. I can be there tomorrow after I get some things done around here.”

“We’ll be gone by then. We leave first thing in the morning. But I can leave a key for you. It will be under a mat by the front door.”

“And all you need me to do is keep an eye on the puppies? Feed the dogs and the horses?”

“Yes. I’ll have Sophia write up a list for you and have her leave it on the table. It shouldn’t be too hard since you know your way around the place. I know you’ll be able to figure it all out. And if you have any issues, you can always call.”

Perhaps this was the opportunity Caleb needed. He could take a few days away from his family and let things settle a little more. Maybe then he’d be able to feel better about his relationship with them. “Safe travels, Mateo.”

“Thanks. And thanks for helping out. I’ll let you know when we’re on our way back.”

They hung up, and Caleb fell back onto his bed. Spending some time with new puppies sounded a lot better than sitting at the table across from Liam. This would be a welcome reprieve.

7

Emma

“Are you certain it’s okay? Have you talked to your family about me staying?” Emma followed Sophia around the barn. It was too early in the morning for anyone to be awake, and yet here she was, helping Sophia feed the horses and other animals on the premises.

“They won’t care. The animals need to be looked after. It’s a lot for even one person, but you won’t have to worry about that. Mostly, I just want you to look after the puppies. They need fresh food and water and changing out the pads. You think you can handle that?”

Emma nodded. “Of course. But wait, you said I won’t have to worry about the other animals? Is there someone else who will be helping out?”

Sophia nodded, but she was frazzled as she tended to the animals in the barn. “Mateo asked someone to come help out, so you don’t have to worry about the other animals. He’s also got a vet to come check on the pups in a few days. It should be easy enough.” She dusted off her hands and gave Emma a smile. “If you need anything, you can call me on that brick of yours.”

Emma held up her burner phone. Sophia’s description of the phone was more than accurate. It was a far cry from the smart device she had hidden away in her belongings, now without its SIM card. A smile tugged at her lips. The only other person who had her new number was her sister, and she’d been sworn to secrecy. “Yeah, I have your number.”

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“Good, then if there are any problems, you can call me. The number for the vet and anyone else you might need is on the kitchen table, but I doubt you will need it. I’m sorry we have to rush out like this, but the plane leaves in a couple hours. I told Mateo we should have left already, but he always takes forever. I swear, he takes more time to get ready than most women do.” Sophia laughed as they emerged from the barn. A shuttle van honked out in front of the house, and Sophia turned to her. “I really wish I didn’t have to go. But maybe you could consider staying a little longer so we can really get to know each other.”

“I still don’t understand why you’re letting me stay at your place. We’ve only just met.”

Sophia pulled her in for an unexpected hug, then withdrew enough to meet her gaze. “I can tell when I meet someone I can trust. Besides, it’s the least I can do after what my horse put you through—and you not suing us. Mateo was furious when he heard about it. He wouldn’t let me hear the end of it.” She hugged Emma once more. “And think of it this way. You wanted to have some peace and quiet to get your head on straight, right? Well, since there will barely be anyone around, you’ll get to have just that.”

Emma couldn’t believe it. Sophia was either far too trusting, or there was something she wasn’t letting on about. No one in their right mind would have given the keys to their house to a perfect stranger. Emma had no business running or overseeing anything at this ranch. And yet, here she was, accepting the offer.

Maybe Emma was the crazy one. It was entirely possible that she’d had a mental break and the few days she’d spent here in Copper Creek already were enough to

brainwash her into wanting to stay. She glanced around the property, already knowing that she'd grown accustomed to the quiet, vast expanse. The stillness welcomed her with open arms.

"I have to get going, but you're going to be okay, right?" Sophia pressed a key into Emma's hand. "And really, call me if you need anything."

Emma's eyes followed the woman with whom she was beginning to feel more of a connection to than some of the people she'd known since she was a child. She climbed into the shuttle and the white van drove off the property, leaving Emma questioning once again what she was thinking when she agreed to stay.

She had been thinking that the motel was getting expensive and she was running out of money in her small account. If she wanted to stay away from LA longer, she'd need to figure out a way to get some money and quick. Sophia's call had been unexpected, but it had also been an answer to her prayers. This would work for the next couple of days until Emma found a new place to stay.

Emma headed toward the house and entered it from the back. She checked all the windows and all the doors, then settled in. There was a piece of paper on the table with all the instructions and schedules for the animals, along with the phone numbers that Sophia had mentioned. Apparently, the person they had coming to take care of the larger animals would need these instructions. Sophia hadn't mentioned when the individual would arrive or whether Emma would have to interact with them. Thankfully, Emma still had the sunglasses in case the person who showed up might recognize her.

She busied herself by wandering through the house and checking out the rooms. She wanted to get acquainted with where everything was if she was going to be staying there.

There were five bedrooms and three bathrooms. A dining room was attached to the kitchen, and a space for entertaining was up front by the entrance. The Palmer family had an office area with plenty of books as well. The whole place was decorated in a more traditional way, as if the house hadn't been updated for two decades at least.

Emma trailed her fingers along the books and then paused when she caught sight of the computer. She'd steered clear of the internet and live television. Something had told her that she didn't want to know what was going on in the world—mostly because it might have something to do with her voluntary disappearance.

She plucked a book from the shelf. She'd never been much of a reader; perhaps that was why she struggled with writing her own lyrics. Instead, she preferred focusing her talent on composing the music she sang.

Placing the book back on the shelf, Emma swept her focus through the room again before leaving. She found herself walking through the hallway upstairs. One bedroom door was slightly ajar and she poked her head inside. It was clean and organized, but the one thing that stood out was a guitar that rested in the corner.

Her fingers tingled with anticipation as she entered the room to take a better look. It wasn't as nice as the ones she used in her concerts, but it was decent—better than one of her first guitars as a child.

Emma picked it up and draped the strap over her head. Her calloused fingers found their mark on the fingerboard, and she exhaled as her right hand strummed the strings. The acoustic sound breathed fresh life into her soul, making her no longer feel on edge. Sophia was right. Emma needed this moment—the time alone that had been offered to her.

After a couple days on their property, she would be able to open her email, make her apologies and return to the life she was supposed to lead.

Her phone buzzed in her back pocket and she jumped. There were only two people who had the number, and she doubted Sophia was already checking in on her. She pried the bulky device out and flipped it open, already expecting to hear the familiar voice of her sister on the other end.

“Emma! Thank goodness you’re okay.”

Emma laughed. “Of course I’m okay. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Gee, I don’t know. Maybe it’s because you got this new number and didn’t tell me why. And now it’s all over the news.”

She grimaced. That was one thing she hadn’t told her sister. She hadn’t exactly been clear about what was really going on.

“What aren’t you telling me? Imagine my surprise when I read online that your manager couldn’t locate you, and if any of your friends and family knew where you were, to please contact her!”

Emma groaned. She knew that Rachel would go to great lengths to try to find her, but to make a public statement like that? She’d thought she would have at least a couple weeks before Rachel got that desperate.

“Why didn’t you tell me that you were hiding out from your manager?”

“I didn’t tell you because I knew you wouldn’t approve.”

“Absolutely, I wouldn’t approve. You’re lucky that Mom doesn’t use social media and likes to steer clear of the news, because she would be all up in your business. I told her you were taking a little vacation in case she gets wind of this mess. Of course she said you deserved the break. But seriously, do you even have a plan? You’ve

never been this reckless.”

“Yeah, I know.” Emma sighed. “I just needed some space, okay? Rachel had me going from one thing to the next without a reprieve. I can’t keep going like this.”

The silence on the other end of the line was the only indication that Jessica might empathize with Emma’s situation. She didn’t speak, didn’t make any judgments, didn’t say a single word.

“I gave you my number because we talk so much, and I knew you would get worried if you couldn’t reach me. Then I took out the SIM card and shut off my phone so I could take some time to get my head on straight.”

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“Where are you?” Jessica demanded.

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does! Say porcupine if you’re in trouble.”

Emma laughed in spite of herself. “How would I work that into the conversation?”

“Fine, then cough. I need to know you’re okay.”

She sighed. “I thought I was supposed to be the protective older sister.”

“I mean it, Em. Please tell me you’re okay and that I don’t have to track you down and drag you out of the depths of despair or something.”

Emma smiled. “I’m fine. I just need a little bit of space to breathe, that’s all. I swear. I won’t get into trouble. I’m lying low. And I met a new friend.”

“Do they know who you are?”

“Not that I can tell.” Emma glanced down at the guitar. “I promise I’ll answer the phone and check in. I won’t do anything stupid. And if there are any problems, I’ll text you our code word.”

“Do you even know how to spell porcupine?”

Emma rolled her eyes, shaking her head as she got to her feet and set the guitar down

on its stand. “I’m sure I can figure it out.”

More silence followed, then it was as if the air itself had changed. Jessica’s concerned voice turned more curious. “So... what are you doing now that you have some space? Writing some songs? Please tell me you’re letting yourself have some fun.”

“I’m doing a little bit of both,” Emma said. “I think I might be able to finish putting together the melody for that song I’ve been working on. And I’ve even had a little bit of excitement.”

“Like what? You haven’t met a guy, have you?”

Her thoughts shifted to Caleb and the way they’d interacted the couple of times they’d bumped into each other. He was cute, but he was far too serious. Not only that, but she had a feeling that he wasn’t all that pleased he had met her. “No, I’m keeping to myself for the most part. I met this girl named Sophia. She’s letting me house-sit for her while her family is gone.”

“Seriously? You must be in the middle of nowhere.”

“Now, why would you say that?” Emma laughed.

“Because no one in their right mind in LA would let a stranger just take care of their house when they’ve only known them a week. People in most places wouldn’t trust a stranger to do that. Whoever this Sophia is, she’s either crazy or she’s way too trusting.”

“Maybe she’s just a good judge of character.”

Jessica snorted. “Maybe. Or maybe you’re in a town where they still keep their doors unlocked twenty-four-seven.” She went quiet again for a few moments. Then she

asked quietly, “Do you think I could come visit you? I promise I wouldn’t draw attention or anything.”

Emma shook her head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. If Rachel is already asking the world to find me, then she’s probably going to have eyes on you. It’s not a good idea for you to have anything to do with me, or someone will figure it out. I guess we’re both lucky she’s a little scared of you.”

“You’re probably right.” Jessica let out a derisive laugh. “I bet Rachel is furious right about now.”

“Yeah, she probably is.”

“And you don’t care?”

Emma thought about it for a moment. “It’s not that I don’t care. I don’t like what I’m putting her through, but I’ve also told her that I can’t handle it when she lumps all my events in my schedule like this. She needs to learn that I’m the one paying her.”

“Rachel is definitely the type of person to ignore your request. From what I understand, she’s a workaholic who needs to find a boyfriend.”

Another laugh bubbled up from Emma’s chest. “I suppose.” There was a sound farther into the house, and Emma’s heart skipped. She spun around and headed toward the top of the stairs. “Hey,” she murmured, “I don’t want to cut you off, but I have to go.”

Before she got her sister’s goodbye, she hung up.

The front door was definitely rattling, and then it creaked open.

Without thinking, she shouted, “Stop where you are! I have a gun!”

8

Caleb

Caleb froze, with his hand still on the front doorknob. He held the spare key in his right hand and contemplated slowly backing out of the house. Had Mateo left one of his sisters behind without letting Caleb know? He cleared his throat. “Sophia?”

Footsteps creaked down the stairs a little way into the house. “Sophia is gone,” the voice called out. “You’ll have to visit her later.”

Confusion washed over him. He frowned and peered into the house. There was a small fire flickering in the fireplace. A few lights were on. Someone was definitely still here. He should probably just leave and call Mateo. Maybe it was Isabelle on the stairs, though if the whole family had left for a wedding, that wouldn’t make sense.

He cleared his throat. “I’m not here to hurt anyone. Mateo asked me to stay and help with the animals.”

It was then that a familiar face emerged from the hallway that led to the stairs.

His frown deepened. “You.”

Her surprise was quickly masked into an expression of indifference. “Oh. You’re the one Sophia said would help out with the horses.”

Caleb shut the door behind him and shook his head. “No, I’m the one staying here for a few days so Mateo doesn’t have to worry about the animals being cared for.”

Emily folded her arms across her chest. “No. Sophia asked me to take care of the puppies and said a rancher would come take care of the larger animals. She said I could house-sit.”

He was already in the middle of pulling out his phone when Emily disappeared, only to reappear.

She strode right to him and shoved a piece of paper at him. “There are the instructions. See?”

Caleb glanced at the sheet of paper. There was no indication that he needed to care for the puppies in these instructions, but that didn’t mean anything. “I’m still calling Mateo.” He dialed his friend’s number and then turned away from Emily’s penetrating gaze.

Mateo answered on the second ring. “Caleb? Is everything okay? Are the puppies?—”

“As far as I know, everything is fine, but I haven’t checked on the puppies just yet.” He glanced over at Emily. “Turns out you already have someone watching over them.” He shoved the note into his pocket and took a few steps away from Emily.

“What?”

“Yeah.” Caleb rubbed the back of his neck. “Did Sophia, by chance, ask her new friend to keep an eye on the house while you were gone?”

Silence, followed by muffled voices, filled the speaker. Then Mateo got back on the

line. “I’m so sorry about this. She didn’t tell me she offered the house to Emily. She knew you were coming to take care of the horses, but that was it.”

Caleb shot one more look at Emily, who seemed intently interested in where this conversation was headed. “What do you want me to do? I can ask her to leave...”

“No, it’s fine. If you wouldn’t mind taking care of the horses as planned, that would be great. And honestly, I don’t know what Sophia was thinking. She should have asked me first. I would rather have someone there who I trust. My sister must be out of her mind.” More muffled arguments.

Caleb lowered his voice. “Wait, you’re not saying...” He shut his eyes briefly, hating that he even had to clarify what was happening. “You don’t want me to stay here with her, do you?”

“Would you mind? I don’t know who this woman is. All Sophia keeps saying is that she’s great and we can trust her. But you and I know better.”

“Yeah,” Caleb muttered. “We do.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

Caleb hung up the phone and turned to face her. “I don’t know?—”

“He wants you to stay... to keep an eye on me, right?” Emily settled back against a nearby wall. “That’s fine. The house is big enough. I don’t think we’ll step on each other’s toes too much.” With that, she turned on her heel and headed back toward the stairs. “Sophia gave me permission to use her room. I’m sure you can figure out which space you want to take over.”

Caleb stared after her, confused and surprised that she wasn’t pushing back on this

whole situation. It just further proved his opinion that she should probably not be trusted.

He opened the front door just wide enough to retrieve the duffle bag he'd brought with him. It would more than likely be uncomfortable to spend the next couple of days in someoneelse's house with a stranger, but if he wanted to learn more about Mateo's work, this was one way to do it.

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There was only one bedroom on the lower level, and seeing as Emily had made her way upstairs, he would prefer to keep his distance. He moved into the bedroom and was more than relieved to discover it appeared to belong to Mateo. If it didn't, it belonged to one of his brothers, based on the more masculine décor.

A fur rug adorned the hardwood floor. If the muted colors and lack of throw pillows weren't enough to convince Caleb, the muddy boots by the door solidified it. Caleb tossed his duffle to the side, then froze when he heard the faint sound of music playing through the house.

He backed out of the room and strained to hear the music. It sounded like a guitar, but that wouldn't make sense. Why would a tourist bring a guitar on a vacation—especially one who packed so light? He moved through the house closer to the stairs and waited. Sure enough, the music continued. It was a melody he hadn't heard before, but that wasn't unusual. He didn't listen to music frequently enough to know what was currently trending.

The tune was pleasant, and he could imagine it being the melody of a love ballad—something his younger sister usually listened to. The music stopped suddenly, followed by footsteps.

Caleb darted away from the stairs, having nowhere else to go but toward the kitchen if he didn't want to be caught eavesdropping. He barely made it to the refrigerator before he heard her enter.

“Oh,” she murmured. “Sorry, I didn't know you were in here.”

He glanced over his shoulder toward her, his heart pounding for reasons beyond his ability to understand. Caleb swung his focus to the appliance. “I was just getting something to drink. Mateo said whatever they have stocked is fair game. You thirsty?”

“Some water would be nice.”

Caleb remained stiff, his eyes searching the shelf that had a variety of beverage options. “I don’t think they have bottled water. You’re going to have to get some from the tap.”

“That’s fine.”

She moved across the room toward the kitchen cabinets to the right of the sink.

“They’re on the other side,” he said.

Emily shot him an appreciative look. “Thanks.”

The awkward silence continued to spread between them like an oil spill. Caleb grabbed a Coke, though he wasn’t thirsty at all. He held it up in a cheers motion, then headed for the door, but her voice stopped him.

“It’s weird, isn’t it?”

Caleb froze, his back to her. “What?”

“That they’re letting us stay here. It’s weird.”

“Not really. Happens a lot around here. Ranchers can’t afford to leave their homes unattended for long. They need someone to keep up on everything. Otherwise, animals or crops suffer.”

“I guess.” The sound of the faucet running broke up her words. “Back in LA, we wouldn’t dream of letting anyone in our homes. Not even friends we trust.”

He snorted.

She continued, “Yeah, I suppose that makes sense to you. But this place?—it’s like a whole other world. I can’t explain it...” There was a sort of awe in her voice—something he hadn’t expected to come from someone who resided in a city like LA.

Caleb turned and faced her. She stared off into space, the glass in her hands close to her lips. Then those green eyes captured his, and she smiled. Caleb’s chest tightened further. He knew that feeling—the one reflected in her gaze. She liked it here, and it wasn’t just the novelty of being in Copper Creek for a week. Her gaze said so much more. She could see herself here.

He shook off the emotions that came with the admiration he held for someone who could appreciate what their small town had to offer. He didn’t know this woman. Besides the fact that she was concerned about people recognizing her and that she could play the guitar, she was nothing more than a stranger—and as such, he shouldn’t allow his heart to yell louder than his head. He knew better.

Emily tilted her head, her smile widening. “I have to say, I’m glad that if I had to share this place with someone, it turned out to be you.”

His walls came down and all he could do was give her a sharp nod. Turning, he intended on hiding away for the rest of the evening, but she stopped him once more.

“Caleb?”

Stiffly, he turned to face her.

“Would you... Do you think you could...” Her cheeks flushed. “I’m sorry. I was just wondering if you could do me a favor.”

He grunted.

“I don’t have a car. I’ve been staying in town where everything is within walking distance. Out here, I have to call a taxi or a shuttle service. I noticed you have a truck.”

“Will you spit it out already?”

Her head reared back, and she frowned. “Could you take me to town tomorrow? I realized I needed a few things from the store. I would rather not take anything without... permission.”

“I’m sure they wouldn’t mind?—”

“Even still, I’d rather take care of myself. It would be quick, and you can take me when you’re ready—anytime.”

Caleb sighed. If he didn’t agree, he likely wouldn’t hear the end of it. “Yeah, sure. We can go after lunch.” With that, he spun around and escaped before she could say anything else.

9

Emma

Emma ducked her head as they passed a group of teenagers. They were her biggest demographic of fans, and she would be an idiot if she thought they might not recognize her. They were laughing and talking loudly but with the twang expected of a group of country kids.

Caleb shot her a sharp look as she pulled her cap lower over the sunglasses she was wearing of Caleb’s. “You know, you look more suspicious when you do that than you would if you walked with your head held high. I’m sure there are several people who

are giving you a second look just because you're trying to hide your face."

"Is it that obvious?" she asked, starting to panic.

"More."

She frowned and glanced over her shoulder toward the teens.

"Well, those kids might not have noticed, but to be fair, they're more into their own world at the moment." His voice was gruff and full of irritation. From the moment he'd told her to get into his truck, he had a sour mood.

As another couple of people passed, she fought the need to hide her face. Everything was fine. No one would expect her to be here of all places. Why would a country star find herself in a town whose entire population could fit inside one of the many arenas she'd performed in?

Emma glanced at Caleb, not surprised to find that same sour look on his face as they walked along the street toward a shop he'd wanted to stop at. Clearly, he didn't like her. He probably didn't like that she was staying at Sophia's place, either. Caleb seemed to be the kind of man who didn't like much of anyone. She folded her arms and set her sights forward. "How well do you know Sophia and her family?"

He didn't even toss her a glance when he spoke. "Mateo's my brother's friend, and by proxy, he's mine, too."

She bit back a laugh, to which he gave her a startled look. Emma waved her hand in the air in an attempt to brush off what she'd done. "Sorry, it's just that I didn't expect an answer like that."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

Emma stopped short and blinked a few times. “Only that you don’t seem to be very social. It’s hard to imagine you being friendly with anyone.”

“I’m friendly,” he stammered. “I just choose who’s important to me before I decide to spend time with them.”

“And Mateo? He falls into that category?”

His jaw tightened, and his eyes narrowed. “I fail to see why any of this is important.”

She shrugged. “I was simply noticing how close everyone seems to be in this town. Sophia was so quick to trust me?—”

“That wasn’t normal,” he interjected. “Sophia isn’t exactly the best judge of character.”

“I’m going to ignore that,” Emma shot back. “As I was saying, Sophia appears to make friends easily. I didn’t meet Mateo, but I would assume he’s probably friendly, too. But you? You’re different. I haven’t noticed you take any phone calls or say hello to anyone we’ve passed.”

His expression darkened. “I don’t owe you an explanation.”

“I never said you did. You wanted to know why I snickered. That’s what I’m getting at. You’re picky. That’s the best way I can describe it.”

“And I suppose you think that’s a bad thing?”

Emma shrugged again. “It’s not good and it’s not bad. It just makes sense.”

He pressed his lips together firmly and breathed a heavy breath through his nose.

Then he turned in the direction they'd been walking. "Come on. I have a few more things I have to do back at the ranch. We're taking too long."

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The rest of their errand was done in that same disappointing silence that Caleb seemed to prefer. He didn't speak another word to her, not while he hunted down what he needed at the feed store and not while she got the few things she needed from the grocery store. They drove home the same way, and it nearly drove her mad.

By the time they got home, Emma couldn't take it anymore. She charged out of the truck and hurried inside. Her fingers itched for the guitar—a way for her to express all the pent-up emotions she'd been feeling since she'd gotten up that morning. They hadn't even been in one another's company for twenty-four hours and she was already getting stir-crazy.

So much for the peace and quiet she was supposed to be getting. There was just something about being with someone who refused to speak to her that stirred feelings of discontent within her.

Emma retrieved the guitar and focused on playing the song she'd played so much she heard it in her dreams. There were several times that she wished she could write the words that could do it justice, but each time she tried, she failed miserably.

Why couldn't she find the words for the music that came from her soul? It seemed like a cruel trick for fate to play. The more times she played, the more antsy she became. Whether it was due to her irritation with Caleb or the growing frustration she had over the song she was trying to write, Emma couldn't be certain. All she knew was that she needed to get out of the house and get a fresh perspective.

Emma found herself seated beneath a large maple tree. A breeze fanned her face, cooling the flush in her cheeks. She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. The scent

of lavender flooded her senses, calming her. There was another familiar scent coming off a nearby field, but she couldn't place it.

Her fingers found their place on the frets, and she strummed the strings. Heart slowing, growing more even, Emma was able to finally find a degree of peace. She didn't have to worry about Caleb or his cold shoulder. Nor did she have to worry about what might be happening at home.

Right here, right now, it was just her and her music.

And the incessant vibration of her phone.

Emma groaned and pulled her phone from her pocket, not at all surprised to see her sister's number. She sighed as she answered the phone. "Hi, Jessica."

"They canceled it."

Emma straightened. "They canceled what? What are you talking about?" It had only been a day since they'd last spoken. Nothing could have escalated that quickly.

"Rachel. She canceled your tour. She said without knowing where you are or what's happened, she doesn't want to risk the unknown."

Emma shot to her feet, the guitar sitting in the grass. "She can't do that, can she?"

"I'm not a lawyer, Em. I don't know what she can or can't do. But she hasn't heard from you, so what do you expect? She can't just lie to the people who are running the concerts. Now that she's let everyone know that you're missing, she has to keep moving forward with that narrative."

"And Mom? Does she know? The truth, I mean—that I'm hiding from Rachel?"

“Of course not. Rachel doesn’t know how to get ahold of her since Mom got her new number, so she’s still in the dark.”

“Good, keep it that way.”

“Em, I can’t. You know Mom will figure it out eventually.”

“Yeah, but not until I’m ready.”

“Not until you’re read...” She paused for a moment. “What are you saying? You have to call Rachel. You have to make sure she knows you’ll be back for the tour. You will be back, won’t you?”

“Of course I will.” Emma sighed. “But I plan on being ready. I’m not going anywhere until I know I’m in the right mindset. This is about feeling safe, Jessica. Can you understand that?”

“You know I do, but?—”

“Then you’ll let me do things my way. I can’t leave here, not right now. I...” She slumped back against the tree. “I just can’t.”

“I would never ask you to, Em. But this isn’t just about you. Think about your crew. Those people who go on tour with you have bills to pay and mouths to feed. I get that you need to feel safe—mentally—but this is bigger than you are.”

Emma bit down on her lower lip, gnawing on it until it tasted raw. Her sister was right, of course. She owed it to all the faithful people who made her shows happen. Something just didn’t feel right about the whole situation. Rachel would never lose such a big commission from all the venues where Emma would be performing. This had to be a way to smoke her out. She shook her head. “I promise I’ll come back

when I'm ready. I just don't know when that will be."

Jessica sighed. "I don't think I can hold her off much longer. She's been calling and messaging me. I might have to tell her something. Would you be okay if I said I heard from you? What if I made sure to say I don't know where you are or how long you're going to be gone but that you've reached out to me?"

"I don't know if that's a good idea, Jess," Emma hedged.

"I won't do it if you tell me not to."

There was no telling what Rachel would do to try to get more information out of Jessica. She wouldn't go so far as to threaten her, but she might try to get access to phone records. "Do what you feel is best. I trust you."

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Jessica remained quiet for longer than Emma expected. Then she let out a soft breath. “Okay. Just promise me you’ll tell me if anything changes.”

“I promise,” Emma murmured. She hung up and tossed the phone to the grass at her feet. Rachel wasn’t a bad person. She simply had a way of making things happen. It was one of the reasons that Emma had hired her in the first place. Emma didn’t regret making that decision—at least not until this moment. She didn’t know how to rein in her manager. Rachel wouldn’t go so far as to do something that could get her fired, but she was also one of the best debaters out there. She’d be able to spin the story to her benefit.

In reality, she probably had a plan for getting the tour back on track as soon as Emma came out of the woodwork. That was one of the biggest reasons that Emma refused to let Rachel manipulate her into returning. Emma’s mental health was more important right now. She couldn’t afford to have a mental break while on tour. If Rachel couldn’t see that, then she was blind.

Emma lowered herself down beside the tree and retrieved the guitar. She took a deep breath and released it as she plucked out a few of the notes. The music inundated her senses as she continued to play and let it take her away from her troubles.

Over and over again, she played the song that sang her to sleep.

“It’s beautiful.”

She gasped and spun around to find Caleb standing a few feet from her. Emma didn’t know how long he’d been standing there. It could have been an hour for all she knew.

Her face flushed and heat crept down her neck to her bosom. Emma watched him, waiting for him to say something else that might indicate if he'd eavesdropped on more than just the song she played.

He motioned toward the guitar. "Did you bring it with you all the way from LA?"

Emma glanced at the guitar and shook her head. "No. I found it upstairs in one of the bedrooms."

Caleb lifted his head with understanding. "Then it's probably Roman's."

Slowly, she lifted her gaze to meet his. "Do you think he'll be mad?"

10

Caleb

Caleb chuckled. "Roman? Mad? I think he'd be more upset that he didn't get to see a beautiful woman play his guitar." He froze, realizing what he'd just let slip from his lips. He shouldn't have said that. He definitely shouldn't have given her any indication of the thoughts that had started to invade his logical mind. Caleb coughed and moved closer, motioning toward the guitar once more. "I've never heard that song before."

She turned her eyes to the guitar, not lifting them again. "That's because I wrote it."

He should have been surprised, but he wasn't. Emily was a musician. She'd found a way to play even though she hadn't brought an instrument on her vacation. Actually, he was probably wrong on that last bit. This wasn't a vacation for her. It was an escape.

Caleb had only heard the last bit of her conversation with whoever was on the phone, but based on what he'd heard, she was hiding from something—seeking a refuge rather than running from the law.

His heart went out to her. He could appreciate the desire to feel safe. Wasn't he in search of the same thing? Though, his desire for security was more related to emotional struggles rather than physical ones. He couldn't be certain of Emily's struggles, but he had a feeling they were just as important.

The temptation to settle down beside her in the shade and listen to her play was almost more than he could bear. He had nothing else to do today. All the animals were cared for. Would it be so bad to sit down and rest while listening to her play?

Without really thinking about it, Caleb took a seat a few feet away. "Mind if I listen for a little while?"

A smile tugged at her lips, and her eyes sparkled more than he'd seen before. "You want to listen to me play?"

He lifted a shoulder. "Why not? Are you prone to stage fright?"

She laughed, taking him by surprise. "Hardly."

Caleb lifted a brow. "So, if you don't get stage fright, what's the harm?"

Emily pursed her lips together, then pulled them to the side. "I suppose I could play it for you." She plucked the strings and then moved to brushing her fingertips across all six of them. Her eyes closed and she swayed to the music.

"Does it have any lyrics?"

Her eyes flew wide and she stared at him, making him regret that he'd interrupted her. Emma blinked a few times, then seemed to remember that he'd asked her a question. "No. Not yet, anyway." Her eyes flitted upward to meet his. "I've been playing since I was big enough to hold a guitar, but I've never been very good at writing lyrics."

Caleb lifted up his knee and rested his forearm on it. He had a hard time believing what she said. If she could make up music, it should be simple enough to write the words in her heart as well. He himself had a knack for putting words to paper when the moment called for it. "No offense, but have you even tried?"

She gaped at him, then tossed her head back and laughed. "I assure you, I've tried many times, and each time I've failed miserably."

His brows pulled together as he recalled the music she'd been playing when he'd intruded. "Sounds like a love song."

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The corners of her mouth quirked upward, and she tilted her head to the side. “You’d be right about that.”

Caleb rubbed his jaw, the words coming easier to him the more he thought about it. “What about...Now every sunset’s a painting in the sky...” His eyes locked with hers. “And every moment with you feels like the first time.”

She blinked, her mouth falling open. Tension built between them, washing over him once again. He felt the heat flood within him, starting in his chest and moving up the back of his neck. Caleb looked away, but her words dragged his focus back to her. “Keep going. I like it,” she whispered.

He swallowed hard, searching his thoughts for what could come next. “Now every sunset’s a painting in the sky, and every moment with you feels like the first time.” His eyes met hers once again. “Darlin’, you’re the reason I believe in love again. In this dance we’re in, I can’t help wishing it never ends.”

Emily adjusted her guitar in her lap and strummed out the notes that fit his words perfectly. It wasn’t the first verse. It sounded like it might be the chorus or a stanza before the chorus. Her smile broadened as she played with the notes and adjusted the melody slightly.

But it wasn’t until she started to sing the words that he realized just how talented she was. Her voice held a richness that could have made an angel cry. Caleb gaped, unable to hide his surprise.

By the time she was done playing around with the verse, her expression had

brightened a great deal more than he thought possible. Her gaze found his when she strummed the end of the verse. She let out a laugh. “What’s that look for?”

“You... can sing.”

She laughed again. “Yes, that usually comes with musical abilities.”

“So does lyric writing,” he pointed out. Caleb shook his head. “But your voice... have you ever considered singing professionally?”

Her eyes darted away and she strummed her guitar again. “I’ve thought about it.”

“Well, apparently, not hard enough. You could really make something of yourself.”

Emily’s eyes lifted to meet his, a small smile on her lips. “And what about you? What are you doing mucking out stalls and training horses when you could be a writer?”

Caleb chuckled dryly. “Where’s the money in that? I would be a starving artist if I were to leave this place and try to make it on my own.”

“I beg to differ.” She continued plucking at the instrument absent-mindedly. “There are more opportunities out there than you think. You just need to get your foot in the door.” Her soft words were kind and thought-provoking, but he would never be able to let them take hold of him like she probably meant them to.

Caleb rose and held out a hand to her, to which she stared with confusion. He cocked his head slightly, then jerked his chin toward the barn. “How about we go for a ride?”

Emily laughed. It was a sharp bark of laughter, one that made him jump a little. “If I never see another horse, it would be too soon.”

“You can’t think of it that way,” Caleb murmured, dropping his hand to his side. “Have you ever heard the phrase?—”

“If you fall off a horse, you have to get back on? Or some sort of similar nonsense?” Emily stood beside him, the guitar firmly in her hand. “I think I’d rather head inside and fix us something to eat. I really don’t think I should get back on a horse any time soon. I was lucky I didn’t break my neck the first time.”

Caleb nearly argued with her, tempted to manipulate her into coming on a ride with him. He told himself it was for her benefit and not his own that she face this fear. But he could see it in her eyes. She wasn’t ready. It was just as well. While they had seemed to make a connection with the song, they were still strangers. He nodded sharply. “I’ll lock things up and be inside soon.”

He turned and headed for the barn. There wasn’t much he needed to do to lock up. The horses were all cared for, fed, and their stalls cleared out. Caleb didn’t even know why he’d told her that he needed to do anything. What was he stalling for? It wasn’t like she had given any indication that she liked him at all. They tolerated one another at best.

And yet here he was, pacing the aisles of the barn while he contemplated the feelings she had stirred within him. Her voice. Those eyes. Everything about her seemed to draw him in like a moth to the flame.

The words he’d put to her music had spoken to him in a way he wasn’t prepared for. It was as if those words were meant for her, but that was crazy.

Wasn’t it?

People met and experienced feelings in various ways all the time. Just because he hadn’t had any intention of developing feelings for this woman didn’t mean he

couldn't.

What on earth was he thinking?

Even if he was open to developing a relationship with Emily, it would never work out the way he'd want it to. She was a tourist. One day soon she'd walk away from this place and never look back. Any feelings that he might have would have to be shielded.

All Caleb had to look forward to was having a little bit of fun. Emily could be a distraction, but that was it.

Only a distraction.

He found his way back to the front door and paused, his hand resting on the wood. This was it. Caleb had a knack for wearing his heart on his sleeve. If she got any indication that his attraction for her had shifted, then he wouldn't hear the end of it. Caleb took in a deep breath until his lungs ached, then he released it and entered the house.

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Grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup were already set out on the table when he reached the kitchen. Emily glanced at him as he entered and nodded toward the food. “I’m not much of a cook, but my sister always asks me to fix her this exact thing whenever I come home.”

He pulled out a chair and took a seat. “If it tastes as good as it smells, I’d have to argue with your assessment.” Caleb pretended not to notice the way his statement caught her off guard. Much like himself, she couldn’t hide her reactions. Her small smile was more than enough to give him that thrill his heart sought.

Emily sat across from him, offering him a glass of lemonade as she did. “Are the animals okay?”

Caleb nodded. “And the puppies?”

“They seem to be doing just fine with their mother, but I’m not sure I’m doing everything I should be.”

“I’m guessing you’re doing fine. They’re so new that they’re not going to need much besides making sure they get enough to eat from their mother.” Caleb took a bite of his sandwich. The buttery, crispy crust crackled in his mouth. The cheese oozed warm and gooey from the sandwich as he pulled his bite away. Caleb swallowed with an appreciative nod. “You might actually be a better cook than a singer.”

Emily laughed—a sound that he’d grown to love. “I’ll make sure to tell my sister your thoughts. Once or twice she’s told me I missed my calling.”

“She might be right.” Their eyes met, and Caleb grew still. He couldn’t bring himself to look away. Why was he suddenly questioning his beliefs on trust? What was it about this woman that made him want to believe he’d been wrong?

Music was a powerful motivator, he reminded himself. Emily was a talented musician. That was the only rationale he could muster.

Emily was the first to break eye contact. She picked up her sandwich and dipped it into her tomato soup. Their meal was completed in an awkward sort of silence. Even though they hadn’t learned much more from each other, he felt he’d gotten to know her better than he knew most people in Copper Creek. That had to count for something.

11

Emma

Emma leaned back in the tall grass and closed her eyes. The guitar sat on her lap as she turned her face to the sun. If she had to return to LA today after spending the last couple of days here in Copper Creek, she would be fine with it.

Granted, she wasn’t anywhere near ready to leave. There was still something anchoring her to this town, and she wanted to know what it was.

She hummed the musical notes she’d been working on, keeping her eyes closed as she continued to mull over the words that Caleb had given her. Those words resonated with her in a way that her own lyricist hadn’t managed to do in a long time.

Perhaps she felt drawn to staying because of him—because of Caleb.

His face floated in her thoughts. His smile, his kind yet guarded eyes, and his strong

arms.

Her eyes flew open, and she heaved a sigh. She shouldn't be thinking like that. Caleb hadn't hidden the disdain he held for her. If there was one thing that she wasn't going to do, it was get attached to a cowboy who didn't like her very much.

And yet.

She turned her head just enough over her shoulder to take a look at the corral where Caleb was putting the horse through its exercises. From here she couldn't see his eyes. They were shaded too much by his hat.

But she could imagine the brooding look he sported—the same one he'd worn when they first met.

Emma smiled and turned her attention back to the fields in front of her. Why couldn't she fantasize about being with a guy like Caleb? There were celebrities who moved out to the middle of nowhere and simply made it work.

She flushed at the thought. It was ridiculous to think that way, and she knew it. Rachel would string her up by her toes if she even thought about moving away from the city. That's where everything was. LA was home.

Emma sighed, a deep and anguish-filled breath. In a perfect world, maybe. But not in the one where she currently lived. For now, she would simply have to appreciate what she had going for her. Eventually, Rachel would find her, or she'd be recognized, and she'd have to leave the peaceful place she'd come to love.

There was something about being surrounded by the vast waves of wheat and barley—or whatever it was that grew around her. Being here put a lot in perspective. What she wouldn't give to be swallowed by the quiet every once in a while.

Unfortunately, the chaos back home waited for her, and she needed to remind herself that this was all very temporary.

Emma glanced once more at Caleb as he continued to work with the horse. She got to her feet and picked up the guitar, then slowly made her way over to the corral.

His strong, low voice had a different sort of calming effect. It was like the frequency of his tone canceled out the anxious ones in her head. He didn't notice her right away, which offered her the opportunity to really watch him.

Caleb was muscular, but not in the same way as the guys she'd seen in the gym. She couldn't put her finger on what it was exactly that was different. Maybe it was seeing him move in the ways he needed in order to do his job. It got her wondering what else he did at his family's ranch. The longer she watched, the more it felt like he was moving in slow motion.

He must have felt her watching him because he grew still and slowly turned his eyes on her. Their gazes locked for what felt like an eternity. So much could be said with a look like that one. In the moments before she tore her eyes from him, he'd managed to break down every single wall she'd constructed.

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Caleb's brows pulled together—it was slight and almost imperceptible—but she'd noticed. Emma had no idea what it could possibly mean. Was he upset that she'd intruded on his work? Or could it be possible that he'd been thinking along the same lines that she'd been today?

Emma shifted her focus to the horse, recognizing it right away as the horse that had given her the ride of her life. She smirked before bringing her gaze back to Caleb. “So, she recovered from her snake scare, huh?”

He stiffened. Apparently that joke was in bad form. Thankfully he didn't point it out.

She swallowed hard, embarrassed. “Anyway... Sophia and her family... they're supposed to come back in two more days, right?”

Caleb nodded, no longer looking at her. “I haven't heard from them today, but that was the plan in the beginning.”

Emma couldn't decide if she was disappointed that their little arrangement was coming to an end so soon, or if she was relieved. The tensions had remained high since the day they'd met—but since the day he'd helped her with those lyrics, everything seemed to be changing. It was slow but noticeable, and she found herself wanting to get to know this quiet man a little better.

There was only one problem with that desire. It wasn't just the mere getting to know him that was the problem. It was the underlying reasons. Emma could already feel the attraction bubbling beneath the surface. It would be too easy to grow attached to this handsome, albeit moody, cowboy.

She picked at a splinter in the wooden fence that separated them. Emma couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so awkward. Being famous had its drawbacks, but it also had its perks. Those who knew her fell over themselves to be in her company. While it was refreshing to spend time with someone who had no clue who she was, it was also utterly terrifying.

She felt drawn to him in more ways than one. It was strange wanting to be in his presence even if they weren't going to be speaking.

He cleared his throat, and she glanced up at him, finding him watching her intently. "Did you need something?"

Emma flushed and shook her head. "No." She lifted the guitar in her hand. "I'm just going to put this inside and go for a walk."

"Do you... want me to go with you?" His offer was sweet, and she found herself wanting to accept it. But she knew better. This wasn't some romantic comedy. He had work to do, and she needed to clear her head.

Shaking her head, she forced a small smile. "I'll be back in time to fix some dinner if you'd like. But I'm going to head out on my own."

He took a step toward her, hesitation or something else hovering just beneath the surface of those dark eyes. But then he seemed to change his mind and gave her a short nod. "Take your phone."

Emma stiffened. "My phone?" Had he noticed the influx of calls she'd been getting from her sister lately? She could feel the warmth spreading in her face again, but this time she couldn't look away.

"If you get lost or hurt—call me, and I'll come help."

She bit back a smile. “How would you know where I am?”

His gaze darkened. “Don’t do anything stupid. Stay on the trails and I’ll manage.” His gruff voice wasn’t nearly as hard as those eyes. She was caught off guard by the way they seemed to penetrate right to her core.

“Yeah, okay. Fine,” she mumbled. “I’ll stay on the trails.”

It was later than she’d anticipated when she climbed the stairs to the house. Dinner wouldn’t be ready until it was dark at this rate. She’d gotten so lost in her thoughts while on her walk that she had completely lost track of time.

Thankfully, Caleb hadn’t called her to lecture her on the length of her walk. She half-expected him to come in search of her when the amount of time she’d been gone had hit two hours. It made her think that his concern for her was all in her head. He wasn’t interested in her safety any more than he would have been interested in the safety of a barn cat.

The doorknob was cool to the touch. Lights were on in the house, but she couldn’t see or hear any signs that Caleb was inside. He could be out working on something for all she knew. Maybe he got so tired of waiting for her to get back and fix supper that he went home to eat. That made the most sense.

She glanced over her shoulder toward the vehicles. His truck was here, though, so she could rule that out. Emma turned the knob and entered the house, only to be inundated with the smell of steak and seasoned vegetables. It almost smelled like he’d been cooking on a barbecue grill, but that wasn’t possible inside.

Emma moved toward the kitchen slowly, quietly. She didn’t know if Caleb was cooking for himself or the both of them, and she would rather not let him see the surprise or disappointment that would inevitably be plastered to her face.

In the doorway of the kitchen, she found him standing at a skillet on the stove. His back was to her, but there were already two steaks plated on the counter behind him. Steam rose from the plates, drawing her eye. They looked as good as if they'd been cooked in a restaurant.

“Oh, you're back.”

She jumped, finding him staring at her. “Yeah...” she mumbled. “I'm back.”

He turned fully with the pan of sizzling vegetables.

“What would you have done if I wasn't?” she asked as she stepped into the kitchen fully.

Caleb's eyes darted toward her briefly before he served up the vegetables. “I suppose I would have come looking for you.”

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Goosebumps erupted on her arms as she moved toward the table. “I’m surprised you didn’t call.”

“I didn’t think I needed to. You said you were going to be here by dinner. I figured you’d stick to your word.”

There was something about the way he said it that caught her attention. Her eyes cut to his, but he wasn’t looking at her. She didn’t know what it was about his tone or his statement, but she got the feeling it was hard for him to say.

He placed her food in front of her and muttered, “Enjoy.”

Emma stared at the food, her mouth watering. She didn’t know whether to apologize for being too late to cook for him or thrilled that he’d gone to the trouble of preparing their supper. “Thank you,” she whispered, picking up her knife and fork. “This looks delicious.” All she had to do was take one bite before she completely lost herself. She moaned at the way it melted in her mouth. Tender and full of flavor, Emma could safely say that she’d never tasted anything like it. “Way to bury the lead,” she said, causing him to look at her with confusion. “This is amazing. I think you’re the one who missed his calling.”

It was small, but she saw it. Caleb bit back a smile that clearly showed just how pleased he was with her compliment. It was these small moments that stirred the yearning within her—the yearning to have someone strong and caring like Caleb. He might be rough around the edges, but he was real. What more could she want in a companion?

Caleb glanced at her and then waved his fork at her plate. “It doesn’t taste half as good reheated. Go on. Eat up.”

She chuckled under her breath. “Yes,sir.”

12

Caleb

Caleb plucked a magazine from the coffee table in the living room and flipped through it without really looking at anything. Emily was seated near a window, strumming that guitar and humming along with the notes. Normally he would have slipped off to his room by now, but something had stopped him.

No, it wasn’t something. It was someone.

He chanced a peek at her, letting his gaze sweep over her. The concentration on her face was next level. He could probably get away with watching her for a full ten minutes before she noticed.

Never mind.

Caleb’s eyes darted away. Heat slithered up his neck, settling in his ears.

“Caleb?”

“Yeah,” he muttered without looking up from the magazine he held.

“Can I ask you a favor?”

This time he couldn’t avoid her. The way she was perched on the edge of her chair

with her head tilted just so made her look more like an inquisitive exotic bird. He waited for her to ask her favor, unable to breathe.

Before she had a chance to let her desires known, his phone buzzed on the coffee table. They both jumped and looked at the device, then at each other. Caleb reached for the phone apologetically.

“One sec.” He swiped across the screen and held the phone to his ear. “Hey Mateo. How’s everything going?”

“I need another favor.”

Caleb chuckled despite himself. “Seems that’s pretty common these days.” His gaze darted to Emily, finding that she’d returned her attention to the guitar. Her soft strums were the only sound in the room and, consequently, the reason he realized Mateo hadn’t voiced his question. “What do you need?”

Mateo still seemed to hesitate. There was some talking in the background, but Caleb couldn’t hear what was being said. “Would you be okay with staying another week? Maybe two?”

Caleb straightened. “Is everything okay?”

“Not particularly. But it will be. I just don’t see us coming back tomorrow, and I don’t know of anyone available to oversee the care of the animals. If you can’t do it, I’ll understand?—”

“It’s fine. I can do it.” He met Emily’s curious gaze, unsure if she would want to do the same. She hadn’t mentioned any plans to leave, but that didn’t mean she didn’t have any. “Whatever you need, just let me know. Talk to you later.” He hung up the phone and placed it on the coffee table. His gaze lingered on the phone as he

contemplated what it might be like to stay here without Emily.

He didn't want that to happen.

Furthermore, he didn't like that he felt that way. He was standing at a fork in the road while two very different forces attempted to pull him in opposite directions.

“What was that?” Emily's soft voice echoed into his mind.

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Caleb glanced up at her. “Mateo. He needs me to stay longer. They won’t be coming home as early as planned.”

She blinked several times. “Is everything okay?”

It didn’t help his situation to hear her show concern for a family she barely knew. What was it about this girl that had him questioning everything he stood for?

“I don’t know,” he stammered, still distracted by her. “He just said that something unfortunate had come up and he had to deal with it. They’ll be back in a week, maybe two.”

“Wow,” she whispered.

“You don’t have to stay if you don’t want to.”

Her eyes darted up to meet his, but she didn’t speak right away. Her expression was impossible to decipher at this point. Then she tore her eyes from him and set them on the guitar. Her fingers trailed along the smooth lacquer while her soft voice could barely be heard. “Would you want me to stay?”

Caleb couldn’t have possibly heard her right. Why would she even ask that? What was he supposed to say to something so forward? Already he could feel his body reacting to her words. His throat closed up, and his muscles tensed. If he was honest with her right out of the gate, he would tell her that yes, of course he wanted her to stay. While he had grown to despise all the people coming and going from his house at the moment, he was still a Keagan—and a twin. As such, he craved knowing he

wasn't alone.

The lump grew bigger in his throat with each tick of the clock on the wall. If he told her what his brain told him to say—which was that what he thought ultimately didn't matter—then he'd be lying to her and himself.

If there was one thing Caleb hated more than anything else, it was a liar. And he refused to become one of them.

His voice was hoarse, and his lungs burned as he whispered, "Yes."

A smile tugged at her lips. She looked relieved while at the same content with his answer. Caleb exhaled and turned back to his magazine. She moved forward in her seat. "Good," she said softly. "Because I still want that favor."

Oh. Right. The favor. He flipped through the pages again but stopped when she spoke.

"You can stop pretending to be interested in that magazine. I haven't seen you read a single thing since you picked it up."

He snorted, eyeing her as he slowly closed the oversized pamphlet. "What if I just like looking at the pictures?"

She tilted her head the way she did when she was either trying to figure him out or tease him. This time, it was the latter. Her eyes sparkled, and her grin set his insides on fire. "Oh, you're too intelligent to gain any enjoyment from mere pictures."

The heat in his stomach expanded to his chest. "And what do you think I use to find enjoyment?"

Emily shrugged. “I think you appreciate a good conversation. You have an appreciation for exquisite culinary experiences.” Her eyes narrowed. “Back to that good conversation bit—you have a flair for words that I haven’t seen in... well, let’s just say a long time.”

“And what does any of that have to do with the favor you want to ask me?” It was getting hard hearing her dissect him like that, and he needed to not feel quite so vulnerable around her.

“Oh.” Emily stood and moved across the room to sit beside him. “I wanted to know if you’d be willing to help me with the lyrics to my song. That stanza that you gave me... it was perfect. And I don’t want you to think that you’re working for free. I’d pay you?—”

“You don’t have to pay me.” He said it without thinking, but he found it was one hundred percent true. “It’s like you said. I like playing with words. I’m assuming you feel the same way with your music.”

She smiled. “Yeah, I do.” They sat there for a moment in silence before she spoke up again. “But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t get compensated for your work. If you’re writing the lyrics to a song that I perform, you should get something for it.”

He laughed, but then he realized she was being serious. “You perform music? Where? At like karaoke places?”

Emily’s eyes widened. It was short-lived, but he could have sworn she looked worried—no, she looked terrified. Just as quickly as her expression had appeared, it disappeared. She let out a strained laugh as well. “Yeah, something like that.”

“Oh. Well, I’m not going to make you pay me for it. Just give me credit or something. That’s a thing, right?”

She nodded solemnly. “Sure.”

“Then that’s enough. I don’t need anything else.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” Caleb said with a nod.

“What if you change your mind?”

“Then I’ll let you know.”

Her smile returned. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He nodded to the guitar. “Do you have the whole song ready? Can I hear it?”

She adjusted her hold on the instrument, then flashed him a nervous-looking smile. “Okay. I’m going to put the words you already gave me where I think they should go. Then we can go from there. What do you think?”

“I think you might as well start playing. We’re not getting any younger.”

He settled back as she started her song. Emily hummed along to the music, a melody that was so wrought with emotion he wasn’t sure he could do it justice. When she sang the words he’d already written, he knew he wouldn’t be able to let her down.

Caleb held up a hand, cutting her off at what he could only assume was the midpoint of the song. “That other stanza. If you make it the pre-chorus, we could do something like...” He closed his eyes and attempted to sing the melody of what the chorus could be. “It’s a new love, like a wildflower in bloom. You’re the sunshine breakin’ through the cloudy afternoon. In your arms, I found a place I can belong. With this love, we’ll write our own song.”

The room went deathly quiet. He opened his eyes and found Emily staring at him, emotion brimming in her eyes.

“What? You don’t like it?”

She shook her head vehemently and leaned forward as she placed a hand on his. “I think it’s beautiful. I think perhaps I’ll change the notes here, though.” She released his hand, the departure of her warmth triggering a shiver that traveled down his spine. Emily sang the words of the pre-chorus and the chorus with a slight change, and it was enough to really emphasize the new love he’d spoken of. “What do you think about that?” she asked when she’d finalized the changes. “Do you think it will work?”

He was embarrassed to admit that he hadn’t been paying attention. He’d been so wrapped up in listening to the music, watching her eyes as she sang with so much energy, that he forgot to pay attention to the little details. Caleb cleared his throat and nodded. “I think it works,” he murmured lamely.

“Great! Now all I need are the first and second verse. Oh, and an outro.” She grinned at him widely. “I absolutely love how this song is coming together, and I couldn’t have done it without you.” She placed the guitar to the side and faced him. “You know, it makes me wonder more about you and how you grew up.”

“There’s not much to tell,” he offered. “Big family. Abandoned by their folks. Ended up making it after pulling together.” He shifted closer to her for no other reason than because he wanted to. “What about you?”

She shrugged. “Raised in Nashville. Moved to LA. I like singing—clearly.” She laughed.

“And you came to Colorado...” he drawled. “How did you manage to end up in Copper Creek? I mean, it doesn’t really make sense, right? Nashville. LA. Those are big cities. I’d reckon that Copper Creek isn’t even on most U.S. maps.”

Emily's eyelids fluttered, and it was almost as if he could see the walls come up around her in real time. She turned her knees away from him, no longer looking him in the eye. "Simple. I needed a break. And when you close your eyes and pick a place to go, you might find yourself in a town like Copper Creek." She pressed her lips together and stared at a spot on the wall across the room. "The funny thing is that I really love it here, you know?" This time she peeked at him out of the corner of her eye. "This town is something special. It's one of those places that makes you believe in fairy tales." Her smile softened. "If I could move here..." She sighed, leaving the sentence unfinished.

"Well, why don't you?"

Her head snapped around and she gazed at him with surprise. "I can't."

"Why not?"

Emily shot to her feet and grabbed her guitar. "Sometimes people have to accept that they have responsibilities, and they can't go on living in a fantasy just because it makes them happy." She stared at her feet, then heaved a sigh. "It's getting late. I'm heading off to bed. Can you turn off everything tonight?"

"Yeah," he said, feeling more than a little off balance, "sure." He watched her disappear, wondering if his head was spinning because of her abrupt disappearance or a hangover from spending the last couple hours in her company.

13

Emma

Emma needed to rein it in—her infatuation with Caleb, to be specific. She needed to stop looking at him like he was some Prince Charming who could ride in on a white

horse and save her from herself.

He wouldn't be able to handle Rachel; that was certain.

And he definitely wouldn't want to deal with the fame that came with being in Emma's inner circle.

Not only that, but Caleb didn't even know who she was. She was an idiot if she thought she could play pretend and not get hurt. But at this rate, her heart was done listening to her head's advice.

How did the saying go?

The heart wants what the heart wants.

And Emma's heart only grew to care for him more and more with every passing day. What was she going to do? She didn't want to leave, and yet at the same time, she knew eventually she'd have to.

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Emma paced in the room where she was staying. Her conflicted thoughts were getting her nowhere. Maybe she needed to look at this in a different way. What if her feelings for Caleb weren't even a big deal because he didn't feel the same?

She groaned, unsure if she could handle knowing that he had zero interest in her. Frustration continued to mount with each passing day they spent time together. There was no going back; that much was clear. There was only one path she could see available to her and that was to simply live in the moment.

That's what she'd been doing when she came here, wasn't it? She'd gotten on that plane, then on that bus, and eventually ended up in Copper Creek with one goal.

She wanted to have fun—and not just any fun. She wanted to feel like she was calling the shots. What better way to experience it than to let herself fall for a guy who was so out of her league that she wouldn't blame him if it didn't work out?

Who was she kidding? She already knew it wasn't going to work out, and she wanted to do it anyway. It was time to throw caution to the wind. He'd said he wanted her to stay, and she'd let him know that she was pleased with his answer. What other choice did she have at this point?

“Emily?”

She yelped at the sound of his voice through the door. “Yeah?”

“Might I have a word?” Caleb hadn't spoken to her all day. They'd spent supper in an awkward silence. It would be so easy to assume she'd offended him somehow or

scared him off.

Sucking in a sharp breath, Emma moved toward the door, her nerves on fire. He could want anything at this point. He could take back his answer from the other day and tell her he wanted her out of there.

He could confess he had feelings for her—to which she would have to take action. Her heart fluttered savagely as she continued taking small steps toward the door. Whatever it was, he didn't sound upset, so she wasn't going to make a big deal out of whatever it was.

Emma reached for the knob and pulled the door open just far enough to meet his gaze. "What do you need?"

He stared down at her, his steady gaze making her feel more vulnerable than she had even a few days ago. "I think you need to get back on the horse."

She sucked in so sharply that she coughed. "What?"

"You need to get back on the horse," he repeated.

"Yeah, you said that already. What are you talking about?" She pushed the door open wider. "You don't mean literally, do you? Like... you don't want me to climb into a saddle and ride that deathtrap again."

"That's exactly what I mean." His lips twitched with amusement. "And Tilly isn't a deathtrap. She only took off because she was scared. Wouldn't you have done the same if you were startled by another animal?"

"That's different," she stammered, already feeling her resolve wavering.

“How so?” he demanded.

“Well, for starters, I only have two legs and Tilly has four.”

He snickered. “The point I’m trying to make is that you can’t live your life in fear.”

“Says who? I’m pretty sure sixty percent of the world does.” She was teasing him, but his expression turned serious.

“Actually, there was a study done. Turns out roughly four percent suffer from anxiety.”

Her eyes rounded. “What?”

“Roughly—”

She held up her hand with a laugh. “I wasn’t asking you to repeat yourself. I just... you don’t really look like the type of guy who knows that sort of thing. Facts and whatnot,” she clarified.

He smirked. “I’ll have you know it was in one of those magazines you said I wasn’t interested in reading.”

This time she laughed. “Okay, fine. I yield. I’ll go for a ride, but I’m not riding Tilly. Give me a horse that wouldn’t be able to outrun a turtle to save its life and I’ll go.”

He snorted. “I don’t think?—”

“Youknowwhat I mean. Give me a horse that’s gentle and slow. I don’t need adventure right now.”

He leaned forward suddenly, causing her to gasp and yet also unable to move. His voice came within mere inches of her own. “But adventures are what make life worth living. Excitement, getting your blood rushing—without those experiences, what would we be left with?” His whispered question hung in the air, anticipation practically oozing from it.

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She pressed two fingers to his chest and pushed him back so she didn't feel quite so suffocated from his nearness. "A long, healthy life."

He chuckled.

Caleb Keagan actually chuckled.

The man had been quiet and straight-faced the entire time they'd been interacting. Suddenly, he was smiling and flirting with her. What had gotten into him?

A better question would be what had gotten into her?

She was actually tempted to take him up on his invitation. As nerve-racking as it would be to get back in the saddle, she found she wanted to be with him more—to investigate this new version of himself he was willing to share.

He was still close to her, mere inches away. His expectant gaze drilled into her, making her heart skip in ways it hadn't in a long time. "Well? I suppose there's only one question you have to ask yourself."

"And what's that?" she whispered.

"Is it worth the risk?"

No, the question she had for herself was what, exactly, was she risking? She nibbled on her lower lip. Hadn't she just told herself to let go and enjoy the moment? She was here for the next few weeks if she was lucky. Why not? There were worse traveling

companions than Caleb.

“Fine. But you have to promise me that you won’t let the horse take off.”

He chuckled. “I can’t make a promise like that. But I can ensure one thing. If your horse decides to go off on an adventure of her own, I’ll be right behind you.” Caleb’s voice was quiet, husky, even. His focus dipped to her mouth, where she’d just released her somewhat swollen lip. Her thoughts turned hazy as she leaned closer to him for just that moment.

Then she realized what she was doing and immediately withdrew. Her eyes darted away, and she mumbled, “Deal.”

“I’ll meet you down there.” His words sounded like they were far away, traveling through a cavern and echoing in her ears. Caleb retreated out the door and disappeared.

Emma’s hands shook, but it was unclear if it was due to the upcoming ride or the fact that this whole thing felt like a date. She grabbed her jacket and phone, then slipped out of the house and headed straight for the barn.

Caleb was in the middle of hoisting the saddle on the second horse when she arrived. He flashed her a smile and all the nerves momentarily disappeared. He patted the neck of the horse as he came around. “This one belongs to Isabelle. She’s Mateo’s youngest sister. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Buttercup get skittish a single day of her life.”

Emma moved closer to the horse, her hand outstretched. She’d nearly reached the animal when Caleb took her hand and guided it along Buttercup’s neck. There were callouses on his hand—a sign of all the hard work he was likely used to doing. His touch was firm and sure. It wasn’t any wonder that the horses behaved around him.

She glanced up at him over her shoulder but found him focused on Buttercup instead of her. He was alert, patient, and reserved, all at the same time. She wanted to lean into him, to feel the steady beat of his heart and feel the strength that emanated from him. For the first time in as long as she could remember, she felt safe. She didn't have to be on her guard—always wondering if the person she was spending time with wanted to be with her or with the star they knew on stage.

In the absence of her security detail and the paparazzi, Emma had finally found her center, and it had only taken a few days to completely let her guard down.

Well, not completely. She still had her secrets.

His eyes flitted to her, locking on her as if he knew exactly what she was thinking.

Emma felt momentarily trapped but then reminded herself that Caleb didn't know anything, and he didn't have to. There wasn't a reality where he would want to come with her and spend time in LA being part of her entourage. Their story would be but a moment.

“Ready?” he said.

She nodded.

He moved her hand into his other one and guided her to the side of the horse. But rather than guide her up, he dropped her hand and grasped her around the waist. In an effortless movement, he hoisted her into the saddle. “Now, unless you want to ride sideways, I'd suggest putting your other foot in the stirrup.” His charming smile and the laughter in his eyes were enough to set her blood on fire. If she wasn't so terrified of getting completely attached to him, she would have thrown her arms around his neck in that moment and kissed him until stars glittered in the night sky.

Instead, she settled for doing exactly what he'd told her to do. He took the reins and walked Buttercup to the other horse that was tied up on a post near the door. "Are you ready for the best night of your life?"

She almost laughed, but it wouldn't come. Caleb could very well be right. So far, tonight was beating out many of the nights she would have put as contenders for the best—and all because she was going to spend it with a cowboy who was easy on the eyes. "I'm ready," she murmured.

Caleb handed her the reins, then he climbed into his saddle and led the way out of the barn. The ride wasn't much different than the one she'd taken with Sophia. They wandered the trails while Caleb shared more about his family. He didn't bare all, by any means, but it was enough for her to feel she knew him better than even some of the people she'd been on tour with.

Large family. Raised an orphan. A twin who had betrayed their family. His life could have been made into a television special, and yet he'd turned out to be the kind of guy who just needed to catch a break.

By the time they returned back to the house, the sky was lit with different colors.

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“I’ll take care of the horses. You go wash up and get ready for bed.”

She hesitated, torn between wanting to spend another few moments with him and escaping so she could breathe again. Ultimately, she nodded and scurried toward the house. There would be more time. They still had at least a couple days together before Mateo and Sophia returned with their siblings.

14

Caleb

Everything Caleb had shared with Emily was surface level, but he’d found himself wanting to give her more. The temptation had been so great that he’d had to tell her to go inside last night rather than spend more time with her.

He couldn’t scare her off. Not when he craved her company like he did. The way he saw it, there were two possible outcomes at this moment. She was a tourist. That meant she didn’t plan on staying put. But there was a chance that things could change.

People made moves across the country for less.

His heart burned for that possibility. He’d long since given up on sticking with his plan to keep her at arm’s length. Lately, Caleb had been a good judge of character. Emily might be a tourist. She might still be a stranger by some definitions. But she was real. She was genuine. Emily was the kind of person he could give his whole self to.

Caleb couldn't see any problem that couldn't be overcome. He just had to figure out a way to make sure she was on the same page. Their ride had helped him see the possibility, and he was ready for the next step.

It was strange how he'd gone from being against marriage and letting someone into his life to suddenly having the desire for it. Maybe all he'd needed was a taste of what a life with someone could be.

Living in Mateo's house with Emily, sharing meals with her, and talking about the most mundane things actually brought him joy. He would never tell Liam that. His brother would only laugh at him and throw his own words back in his face. None of his family could know what was going on. Not even Daniel, who seemed to be the most understanding of all of them.

No, he'd keep this little secret to himself and treasure it. He'd make sure to secure Emily for his own before he chanced an encounter with anyone in his family. The way he felt about Emily was his joy and his alone.

The days seemed to go faster in her company. He could usually hear her playing her guitar near the house when he was out working with the horses. The more she played, the more lyrics he'd come up with. She loved the words he'd given her already. Now she had a first verse, and all she needed was two more.

He hummed the song as he worked, his thoughts drifting to her and how much everything had changed. After Carter had left, Caleb hadn't thought he'd be able to trust anyone again. Emily had proved him wrong.

While he'd been more open with her than he had with anyone else, he'd kept one thing to himself. As far as Emily knew, he had been raised by his siblings because they were orphaned. But that wasn't even close.

The more he thought about Emily and how much he wanted her in his life, the more he realized he wouldn't be able to do that without being willing to share every last detail. There was something he'd never even told his siblings—he'd never wanted to.

Maybe now was a good opportunity.

He cleaned up the tools, feed, and supplies he'd been using in the barn and headed for the house. Lunch had been pleasant. While they'd both been rather quiet after their little date the other night, there had been a sort of comradery between them. More than once, he'd caught her looking at him. And more than once he'd found himself wanting to reach out and hold her hand.

Caleb trudged up the stairs to the house and pushed open the door. He pulled off his boots and hung his hat. Supper was ready, but then he'd expected that. Over the last couple of days, it had turned into a sort of game between them—which one of them got to the stove first.

He smiled as he moved through the house. It felt so real—this life he was leading. He could almost believe that this was his home. That she belonged to him. That they could have a future together.

When he reached the kitchen, Emily was placing the dishes on the table. She looked up with a smile. "The vet said that the puppies are doing great. They all got their shots. They're growing well. Has Mateo called about them yet?"

He shook his head. "No word on how things are going with them."

She frowned, one hand on her hip. "I hope everything is okay. I really like them."

"Yeah, me too." He pulled out a chair at the table and settled down onto the seat. She dished him up some pasta with red sauce along with some garlic toast, and then she

sat across from him as was their usual seating arrangement.

Caleb gazed at her across the table, and then, on a whim, he picked up his plate and moved around the table so he could take a seat beside her. She looked at him in surprise but didn't say anything. He lifted his nose appreciatively. "This smells great."

"I hope it's as good as it smells, then. For your benefit."

"I'm sure it will be," he said with a chuckle.

She watched him expectantly as he took a bite. Then he groaned with exaggeration, drawing a laugh from her lips. Emily shook her head. "You're ridiculous."

"And you're more talented than you realize."

Emily ducked her head, taking a bite of her own. "How are the horses doing?"

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“Fine.” He glanced at her again, so many words wanting to spill from his lips at that moment, but he landed on only one thing. “I lied.”

Her hands went still and her expression remained frozen before she looked at him with what could only be fear.

Quickly, he placed a hand on hers and shook his head. “It’s nothing bad. You see, I don’t really trust people that easily.”

“So, you thought it would be better to lie to them?”

Heat seared his face. “That’s not exactly where I was going with this.”

“What did you lie about?” She placed her fork on her plate, pulled her hand away from his, and then clasped both hands in her lap tightly. “Is it that you don’t really want me to stay?”

Caleb’s head whipped around, and he stared at her in surprise. “What? Of course not. I—” The heat intensified. “Geez, it’s not that bad. I just didn’t want there to be any secrets between us.”

Still, she looked incredibly uncomfortable. “You don’t.” It wasn’t a question. There wasn’t a degree of hope or emotion in her tone. He didn’t think she was capable of speaking so flatly.

“Of course not,” he repeated, wishing he’d kept ahold of her hand before. His tongue felt swollen and incapable of being used. Sweat dotted his brow for no other reason

than he felt like he'd intentionally tricked her. Caleb released a breath. "I wasn't orphaned."

Emily's brows pulled together. "Oh? So you weren't raised by your siblings?"

"Oh, I was definitely raised by my siblings. But my parents weren't dead at the time. I think some of my brothers believe they are now. I hired a PI to track them down and found out my dad passed away about a year ago. My mother changed her name and is living somewhere in Idaho, last I heard."

Emily didn't move. He'd expected her to tell him that she understood why he might not want to share this information. Heck, he would have loved to hear her tell him that it was none of her business. Instead, she looked sick to her stomach. Her skin had turned a visible shade of green.

"I don't know why I lied," he said. "The only thing I can think of is that I didn't want you thinking any less of me."

"Why would I think less of you?" she asked hollowly.

He shrugged. "Because you're close to your family. I know you would do anything for them, just by the way you talk about them."

"That doesn't mean I would think less of you for being abandoned by your folks."

"It's not the fact that I was abandoned. It's that I know where my mother is, and I have zero intention of doing anything about it."

Her eyes flitted up to meet his. "Why?"

"Why would I? She's the one who doesn't want me." He could hear the

defensiveness in his tone rise. That wasn't what this conversation was supposed to be about. He'd wanted to have a moment where he was vulnerable in front of her so when he told her how he felt, she'd believe him.

It looked like he was failing even worse than he'd thought possible.

"Why are you telling me this now? It wouldn't matter if you never told me."

"It might," he whispered. When she continued to stare at him with questions, he sighed. "What if one day she showed up on my doorstep and I had to explain to you why she was there? I wouldn't want to—I don't want to lie to you. Emily, you're the first person in my life that I've wanted to be completely transparent with. It doesn't even make sense, but there it is."

"You're right," she whispered.

"I am?" Hope flooded his chest, practically cutting off his air supply.

"You're right that it doesn't make sense."

And just like that, his heart dropped into the pit of his stomach. "What?"

She pushed away from the table and rose to her feet. "We barely know each other. You don't have any reason to feel this way."

He shot to his feet as well, desperation taking over that failed hope. He grasped her upper arms and peered at her, watching her intently. "My reasons don't have to make sense. My intuition is all I need. Can't you feel it? Tell me you understand what I'm trying to say." Caleb's flustered words were only making matters worse. His eyes dipped to her lips and a lightbulb went off in his head. Maybe if he kissed her, they could put the awkwardness behind them. "Emily," he whispered, moving closer,

“I?—”

“There you are.”

Both Emily and Caleb jumped at the intrusion.

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Caleb's head whipped around to find Daniel standing in the doorway. "Daniel? What are you doing here?"

His brother's focus bounced from Caleb to Emily and back again. "You said you were staying for a week. It's been over that." He shifted in the doorway, his arms folded. "Wade wanted me to check in with you."

Caleb didn't miss the way Emily ducked her head to hide her face from Daniel, so he moved her behind his back and strode toward his brother. He grasped Daniel by the upper arm, but since Daniel was the tallest of the Keagan household, he felt like a zebra leading a giraffe. "You can't be here, Daniel," he said. "Tell Wade I'm fine. Mateo asked me to stay longer."

Daniel spun to face him, a smirk on his face. "You sure that's all it is?"

Rolling his eyes, Caleb pulled the front door open. "I'm just helping out a friend."

"Who was?—"

"She's Sophia's friend, and she didn't have a place to stay. It's really none of your business, anyhow. And it's definitely none of anyone else's business either." He gave his brother a pointed look.

Daniel continued to smirk at Caleb but finally took his leave with a chuckle. "Your secret's safe with me." He shook his head as he climbed into his truck. "I never thought I'd see the day..." His voice trailed off just as he shut his truck door.

Caleb watched his brother drive away, then rushed back to the kitchen, only to find it empty.

Rats! She'd run away. Why couldn't he have said something sooner? Better yet, why didn't he lock the door before coming to dinner? At least then they could have avoided Daniel's intrusion.

He balled his hands into fists, wondering if there was anything he could salvage from their conversation.

15

Emma

Emma had never felt more like a scared little rabbit than she felt at that exact moment. She wasn't sure if Daniel had recognized her. It wouldn't take much for him to figure out who she was. All he had to do was open a newspaper or go on social media.

She shut her bedroom door behind her and leaned against it, completely ignoring the way her stomach growled at her in disappointment.

The pasta would have been so good if she'd managed to eat more than one bite. Emma could go back to the table and eat, but then she'd have to explain to Caleb why she'd run—and the truth of the matter was that she had no idea why she'd done it.

Emma could tell him she was worried that Daniel would recognize her, but then she'd be forced to tell Caleb why she was scared of that happening. After his little speech about being honest, she couldn't bring herself to tell him another lie.

She could tell him that she was scared about how close they were getting, but that

wouldn't exactly be true, either. There was a big part of her that was utterly exhilarated about the route their little romance was headed.

But kissing him? That was a whole other ball game. She wasn't sure she was ready to let him be so intimate with her. It wasn't that she'd never been kissed. Of course she'd been kissed. She'd had several boyfriends over the years, but none of them lasted long enough to be more than a blip in her memories.

Somehow, she knew that this little infatuation with Caleb was going to be incredibly different.

Her stomach knotted angrily. The hunger and the fear were ganging up on her. She would have to do something, or she might quite literally get sick.

Emma closed her eyes and let her head fall back against the door. He hadn't come to track her down yet. That could mean one of two things. He was still speaking to Daniel, or he had lost his nerve.

The disappointment over that second thought hit her hard over the head. She didn't want him to give up. But what other choice did he have when she was the one who had run?

Not only that, but he'd been so raw with her about his mother. What would he think if he knew the real her? What would he say if he found out that she wasn't Emily Hartford anymore? Would he have feelings for Emma Hart?

Emma squeezed her eyes even tighter. She had hoped that he would be open-minded about the whole thing, but the way he clung to his despair over his parents made her believe otherwise.

Caleb didn't forgive easily.

It had been almost too cute watching him struggle to get the words out about his mother. She had nearly had a heart attack when he'd told her he hadn't been truthful. At first, she'd worried he had actually recognized her. But that fear turned into a concern that he wasn't interested in her. The relief she felt over the truth was enough that had she been able to bottle it, she would have solved the world's anxiety crisis.

She took several deep breaths. What was she supposed to do now?

Wait?

Track Caleb down?

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Why couldn't the answer come to her as easily as the music notes she used to compose her latest song?

Deep down she knew the answer to all her problems. She couldn't just continue with the charade she was hiding behind. She couldn't let Caleb believe that she was just Emily Hartford. He needed to know the truth. He needed to know she was here in Colorado to hide away from the prying eyes of the paparazzi and adoring fans.

He would understand, right?

Caleb would be able to see that the life she'd led was actually closing in on her and she didn't have any other choice than to become someone else.

And once she told him, then she'd be set free, much like he'd likely felt when he told her about his mother.

Emma's eyes flew open.

The twisted, knotted, bramble-like sensation in her gut relaxed for the most part. For the first time since she'd arrived in Copper Creek, she felt at peace with sharing this side of her. Caleb had earned the right to know who she was. She could trust him.

She turned around and scrambled for the knob before yanking it open.

A squeak tore from her lips. Caleb stood at her doorway, one arm lifted over his head and resting against the doorjamb. He was staring down at the floor, his chest heaving as if he'd run a marathon. "Caleb? How long?—"

He lifted his face, and his eyes drilled into her. She could already feel the judgment coming off of him in waves—but it wasn't a bad sensation. Strangely enough, it only added to the heat emanating from her stomach. "You didn't let me finish what I was trying to say."

Emma's mouth had long since gone dry. She'd known where he'd been planning on going with his conversation. It hadn't been hard to decipher. She could feel it much like he'd been able to. The emotions and feelings that continued to grow between them had gotten out of hand, much like the vines that grew and covered old buildings.

Just like those vines, these sensations were full of life and vitality—one more reason she needed to clear the air and tell him who she was.

"Caleb, I?—"

He took a step into the doorway, his arm dropping to his side as he placed a gentle finger to her lips. "I wanted to help you understand where I'm coming from. That's another reason why I needed to come clean. My parents abandoned us so they could live out a life they thought they deserved in other parts of the country. They gambled away our money. They partied in some of the biggest cities. They weren't fit to be parents and yet they had twelve children. Living with that knowledge paved the foundation I grew up on. I don't like to give people my trust or the benefit of the doubt because they almost always let me down."

Her confession died on her lips as she continued to listen to him give his speech.

Caleb gently placed his hand on her cheek, preventing her from breaking eye contact with him. "I thought I knew everything about the world and the people living here. It takes a lot to surprise me and... well... you did it in less time than themoon takes to run through a cycle. Do you know how rare that is?"

She shook her head slightly.

“The feelings I have for you aren’t like any I’ve ever experienced before, and I’ve met plenty of other people in my life. I’ve gone on my share of dates. None of them compare to you. Emily, you’re honest. And kind. And somehow, you’re more down to earth than ninety-nine percent of the people I’ve met in my life.”

Emma’s insides tightened unpleasantly. It didn’t sound like he was describing her. At this point, telling him who she really was would be a death sentence. It would take away all the allure that he’d found and replace it with something truly ugly.

She didn’t want to be the source of his bitterness.

Besides, there was no telling where their relationship might go. What if Caleb grew tired of her after a few more days? What if he refused to move to LA? Emma definitely had to return eventually. Her fans might live all around the world, but the people of that city were like family.

If there was no guarantee of a future, then why should she hurt him? She would just have to keep her secret under wraps for the next few weeks, and that was it.

“Emily?” his quiet voice dragged her, kicking and screaming from her rationalizations.

Her eyes widened, and she stared into his hopeful eyes. “What?”

“What do you say?”

She racked her brain for any clues as to what he’d said when she’d been lost in thought. Guilt plagued her for not listening intently to every single word he’d said. It would be nicer if she just agreed with him. She had a feeling he’d been confessing his

feelings for her anyway.

Emma forced a nervous smile. Nothing bad was going to happen. She had faith, and that was all she needed. “I feel the same.”

His brows shot up. “Really? I thought—” His brows furrowed, and he shook his head.

“What?”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s just that women don’t usually admit how deep their feelings run this early.”

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Her brain plucked the memory of his words from the back of her mind as if it had been recording the whole time while she fretted over what was the better route to take. She framed his face with both of her hands and offered him a smile fitting a girl who was ready to let herself give in to the temptations that surrounded her. “I know it doesn’t make much sense. And to be honest, all of this terrifies me.”

“Me, too,” he murmured.

“But I think we’d be cowards if we didn’t take a look at all the crazy coincidences and not see that fate is pushing us together.”

The corners of his mouth quirked upward. “I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

She tilted her head slightly. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he whispered. His hands came around her waist and pulled her closer to him. She gasped, clinging to him to prevent herself from stumbling and inevitably falling to the floor at his feet. Caleb didn’t give her any warning this time. His eyes locked with her lips, and he dipped his face closer to hers. His eyebrows raised in question, and she nodded her head.

His kiss was searing. It was full of passion and like nothing she’d ever experienced before. Caleb tasted like honey and a warm sunny day. She would have never thought of it, but his kiss tasted like forever. There was no other way to describe it other than to feel like she’d been wrapped in a weighted blanket.

All sense of time and space eluded her as their kiss deepened. Emma’s back pressed

against the wall. Normally she would have felt cornered, trapped like the bunny she'd felt like before. But this time was different. Caleb was rescuing her from a life that she wasn't sure she wanted to lead. He could be the person who supported her no matter what she wanted to do with her life.

Caleb was her white knight.

Emma pushed her hands into his hair, then pulled back, lifting her face to the ceiling with a gasp. "We shouldn't..." she said breathily.

"Oh, I think we should."

This time she pulled away by taking a decided step to the side. She ran a shaky hand through her hair. "We both know this is going too fast. We need to ease into it a bit more. Get to know each other a little more."

He reached for her. "I know all I need to?—"

Emma placed her palms against his chest. "Just... humor me, okay? Let's... take it slow." Her heart hammered and the disappointment practically drowned her. But this was the right thing to do, and she was relieved when he nodded and stepped back.

"I'll give you all the time you need." His words made the promise, but his eyes told another story. The cloudy passion that flickered there only added to the desire boiling over within her. She placed hot hands on her flushed cheeks. "I'm going to turn in early." It was all she could do not to throw herself at him and break her own rules.

Caleb nodded. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," she confirmed with a whisper.

Caleb

Caleb whistled as he headed toward the house. He hadn't been home since he'd arrived at Mateo's place. While everything looked the same, it didn't feel that way. Change was a funny thing. Nothing was different about how the ranch was being run. Wade was still in charge. His older siblings still could be counted on to fill their roles.

Carter was still gone.

But Caleb had gone through a transformation of sorts. When he looked at the sky, it was bluer. When he breathed in deep, it was sweeter. If he'd known that this was what he'd been missing out on, he might not have sworn off women so readily.

He skipped up the steps to the house, only planning on stopping by to pick up a few things and drop off some of his laundry. Then he'd head right on back to Emily.

Emily was amazing. She had it all. The looks. The intelligence. The kind heart. Everything he could have possibly wanted in a girl, he'd found in her. He only wished he had seen it sooner.

There was only one cloud hanging over his head when it came to falling for Emily.

She was still a tourist.

They successfully avoided speaking about that. Neither one of them seemed too keen on discussing what would happen when her vacation ended. Nor did they talk about their plans after Mateo and his family returned home.

Those were subjects for another time. Emily wanted to focus on getting to know one

another, so that was what they were going to do.

He pulled open the front door and headed inside. It was midday. Lunch would be on the table, but Caleb planned on eating with Emily. If he could avoid speaking with anyone, he'd do just that.

“Caleb? Is that you?”

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He'd rounded the stairs, his boots thumping on the wood floor. If he darted up the steps, he might avoid being caught. Unfortunately, he knew better. Annabel wasn't likely to let him take off without saying hello.

Caleb heaved a sigh and turned around to head the few feet into the kitchen. He glanced around to see most of his siblings and their spouses seated at the table or hovering near the counter where fixings for sandwiches were spread out.

Annabel smiled broadly. "I thought that was you."

He glanced once more around the overflowing kitchen. "It doesn't appear that it could have been anyone else." As soon as the words left his lips, he regretted them. Everyone knew that wasn't true—but no one more than him. Carter could have come home. He was the only Keagan missing.

Caleb cleared his throat and gestured toward everyone. "Looks like a family reunion. Is there some occasion I wasn't made aware of? Someone getting married? Someone moving away?" He leaned in the doorway, his tone light. Nothing could have soured his mood at this moment.

For a moment everyone glanced around the room as if confused about what Caleb was asking. Then Wade stepped forward, clearing his throat. "We weren't going to announce this yet, but seeing as everyone is here—everyone local—Brielle and I want to share the good news." He reached an arm out toward his wife, and she stepped forward. "We're expecting."

Gasps and cheers erupted in the kitchen. The women all swarmed around Brielle, and

the men raised their glasses in congratulations. Caleb nodded toward his brother and slipped out of the kitchen. He was happy for Wade. If anyone deserved to have this kind of good news, it was him.

Thankfully, with the attention on his oldest brother, Caleb was able to hurry to his room and not be given the third degree. It didn't appear that Daniel had told anyone. Otherwise he would have been questioned about the stranger who had been at Mateo's place.

Caleb would have to remind himself later to thank his brother for keeping his secret. Once in his room, Caleb went right for his dresser and pulled out a couple items he'd be needing if he had to stay for a few more days. He shoved them into a bag and turned to leave, then jumped back, startled. "Daniel! What are you doing?"

His brother leaned in the doorway, much like Caleb had done before. A smile played at his lips—teasing him, taunting him—at least that was how it felt.

Folding his arms, Caleb frowned at his brother. "You need to stop sneaking up on people. You're lucky I wasn't armed."

Daniel chuckled. "I came to see how you are. We didn't really get a chance to chat."

"There's nothing to chat about," Caleb insisted. "Because none of what you saw was any of your business."

His smile widened. "And what exactly did I see?" He pushed himself into the bedroom and absently wandered around, examining items that were on Caleb's dresser. "Because it seems to me that you're finding yourself exactly in a predicament that you insisted you would never be."

"Yeah? And what's that?"

Daniel shot him a look. “You know exactly what I’m talking about. I’ll tell you now that you’re not exactly the best at hiding it either. The second you went upstairs, Annabel asked me why you were in such a good mood. Liam noticed, too.”

“I’d hardly say that two people asking?—”

Daniel’s pointed expression was more than enough to confirm that it was more than just two people who had paid attention. “Some of the girls think you’re in love.”

“You swore you wouldn’t tell anyone,” Caleb accused.

“And I didn’t. I didn’t say a single word. It’s not my fault you were a grump before you left to help Mateo, but now you’re like... Mr. Sunshine.”

“What?! No, I’m not,” Caleb stammered. “I’m exactly the same as I’ve always been.”

Daniel laughed. “Boy, you need to rewind the clock or something because you most definitely aren’t acting like the Caleb everyone is familiar with. You’ve been brooding and playing an excellent game of avoidance since Liam and Margot?—”

“Is there something that you wanted?” Caleb asked. “Because I’m not going to have this conversation with you—the one regarding Sophia’s friend. If there’s something else?—”

“Have you heard from Carter recently?”

Caleb stiffened. His twin had officially gone MIA. Not even Caleb could incentivize the man to return to their family’s home. Carter refused to respond to calls, messages, and emails. He had gone radio silent. For all Caleb knew, he was dead in a ditch somewhere.

Well, that last bit wasn't entirely true. Caleb had a sixth sense about his brother. If something really terrible had happened to him, Caleb liked to think he would have known.

“Hello? Caleb? You listening?”

Caleb jumped and brought his focus back to Daniel. “What?”

“Have you heard from Carter? None of us can seem to get a hold of him. I even drove all the way to Colorado Springs to see if he was still staying in that motel. But no one has heard from him in over a month.”

Caleb's gut twisted. “You're sure?”

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“I wouldn’t have brought it up if I wasn’t. I thought maybe he would have told you where he was going. You guys have a connection?—”

Shaking his head, Caleb sighed. “Not since he stole that money and took off. He doesn’t seem to want anything to do with our family. Not even me.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’ve been thinking, too.” Daniel’s shoulders slumped. “What are we going to do about it? We can’t just sit back and do nothing, right?”

“There’s nothing we can do. You heard what he said. He doesn’t want anything to do with our family anymore. You just have to let him go.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?” There was something in the way Daniel said it that made Caleb uncomfortable. It was as if his brother were judging him for giving up on his twin. That wasn’t what had happened. Caleb hadn’t given up on his brother. Far from it. He’d tried to get Carter to come back. He’d done everything he could think of short of dragging him back kicking and screaming.

And yet none of that made any difference in this moment. Caleb was the one that everyone likely expected to fix this issue. They were probably all wondering why he hadn’t tried harder.

Well, they didn’t know anything. Caleb had figured out a long time ago that people shouldn’t be trusted. Actually, he barely trusted the people in his own home. What could anyone expect, seeing that their parents had ended up doing them wrong so long ago?

Caleb frowned as he maintained a steady gaze with his older brother. He wasn't going to be guilted into anything. If Daniel wanted his brother back so badly, perhaps he should be the one to track him down and make him return. "I've got to go, Daniel. I've already spent too much time here."

"You never did give me anything to go back and tell everyone. Come on, I can't return to the table empty-handed."

"Like I said, it's none of your business. Even if there was something to tell, I wouldn't breathe a word of it to you. Let them all assume what they want."

A smile flickered across his brother's face, and he lifted his brows suggestively. "You can try to hide it all you want, but it doesn't change anything. Eventually, it will all come out."

Caleb snorted. "You don't know anything."

"I know that you've got it for this girl, and it very well could blow up in your face."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Daniel. I can't say that I really need it, though." He shoved past his brother and hurried for the front door before he got cornered by another member of his family.

For being in such a big family who didn't really like to talk about their feelings, it was starting to feel like he couldn't have anything to himself. He was really beginning to miss Carter right about now. At least his brother would have been running interference for him.

Caleb tossed the bag in the back of his truck and stared back at the house. Nothing felt the same these days. Nothing felt right.

Too much had changed.

At this point, it felt better to be out at Mateo's place with Emily than it did to be under the roof with his growing family. Carter definitely had it right. It was time to distance himself from his family if he wanted to chase the future he knew he deserved. He wasn't sure if Emily was included in that future or if she was just a stepping stone to something better, but for now, he was leaning toward the former.

He climbed in the truck, knowing that when he returned home after Mateo relieved him of his duty, he'd have more than one Keagan breathing down his neck for answers. He'd just have to appreciate the peace he could find right now.

17

Emma

Emma heard the buzzing of her phone but didn't connect that it was actually hers until Caleb glanced at her with curiosity.

"Isn't that the third time you've been called today?"

She jumped up from the porch swing and hurried toward the small table where she'd left it. Her face grew hot, and she avoided looking at him directly. "I can't remember." In truth, it was more than three. If she was correct, she'd been called at least half a dozen times. Three were when Caleb was nearby, and the other three were when she was alone. She'd only answered the first one, and the others she'd sent to voicemail.

Her sister was going to be livid with her. She didn't like it when Emma didn't pick up, and she refused to leave voice messages. The texts had all been generalized, asking Emma to call her back.

“Sounds like an emergency,” Caleb pressed. “Are you sure you shouldn’t just answer it?”

She declined the call and flashed him a smile. “Not right now. We’re spending time together, and I’m not sure how much of that we’re going to get. I would rather be with you than answering calls.”

His concern didn’t fade. Caleb didn’t even seem to appreciate that she was prioritizing him over whomever it was that called her. He glanced at the phone once more. “You know you can answer it, right? I’m not going to be mad if you do.”

“I know,” she said simply as she climbed onto the porch swing and settled in against him. “I just don’t want to talk right now.”

He wrapped his arm around her, but the feeling she got from him wasn’t quite the same as it had been before.

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Her thoughts shifted to the time when he'd told her that he knew he could trust her. Just thinking about that conversation had her feeling like she was the worst person in the world. Every phone call she'd gotten had been from her sister, and it was all related to what was going on in the news.

Rachel was really doubling down on getting people to start looking for her. She wanted to have Emma found, one way or the other—and she'd become a genius at it. She claimed it was a giveaway of sorts. Emma was hiding, and the town that found her first would get an unexpected concert added to the upcoming tour once it was rescheduled.

Emma hadn't called her lawyers because she already knew that stuff like this could happen. Rachel had wanted flexibility in making sure Emma's fame continued as long as possible. At any rate, she could hardly be blamed. Emma had likely broken all kinds of conditions in her contract with Rachel. This was just Rachel's way of showing she still had a small amount of control.

"You doing okay?"

Emma stiffened. "What?"

"I asked you a question and you didn't answer."

"Oh," she murmured. "I'm sorry. What were you saying?"

"It doesn't matter."

She sat up and stared at him. “It does matter. That’s what this is all about. I want to get to know you, and that means I shouldn’t be daydreaming. I should be listening.” Her face burst with heat again. She hated how easy it was for her features to betray her. Why couldn’t she just put on a mask like when she performed on stage?

Caleb studied her for a moment, then let out a sigh. “You know how my brother showed up here the other day?”

She nodded.

“Well, I talked to him when I went home to get some stuff. Turns out my twin is MIA. He’s not telling anyone where he is or what he’s been up to. No one has any clue how to reach him.”

Emma gasped. “Do you think he’s alright?”

Caleb leaned back against the backrest and sighed again. “He’s a Keagan. We’re survivors. I know he’s doing okay. I just don’t know where he is.”

“And you think if he wanted to be found, he would have said something.” Her words hit her harder than she thought they would. She didn’t want to be found. She’d kept open the lines of communication with her sister out of sheer need. But she didn’t tell Jessica where she was or how long she’d be here. Thankfully, Jessica was respecting her boundaries—until today.

Emma got the distinct feeling that her sister wasn’t going to play nice for long. Eventually, Rachel would get to her. Or worse—their mother would get involved.

Caleb nodded. “I really think if he wanted our help with anything, he wouldn’t have made it so hard to find him. I don’t know what he’s up to or what his plan is, but he chose to go out on his own, and he’s going to have to deal with the outcome on his

own as well.”

“You don’t think you’d help him if you knew he was in trouble?” Her voice was quiet. She wasn’t even sure she wanted to know the answer. She hadn’t exactly been honest with Caleb from the beginning. If Caleb was willing to abandon his own twin for something similar to what she’d done, then how would he react when he found out the truth about her?

“I guess I don’t know,” Caleb replied. “I suppose my decisions would be based on what he’d gone through, how much help he needed, and why he made the decisions he did to push us out in the first place.”

She rested her cheek against his shoulder, hating how the conflicting emotions within her continued to grow. Deep down she knew she needed to tell him before he found out. That would be better. The problem was that too much time had already passed between them. If she told him right here, right now, there was no telling how he would react. She couldn’t risk it.

Risk it? What was she risking, really? She didn’t live here. She didn’t belong.

But that didn’t mean she couldn’t. One day she might be able to settle down in a place like this.

She closed her eyes tight, fighting off the two voices that argued in her head. The best option was honesty. She had to tell him and pray that the consequences wouldn’t destroy the affection she’d found with him. If Emma was honest with herself, she would accept that the reason she didn’t want him to know was that celebrity always changed relationships. People were never the same after they found out that someone was wealthy or famous.

Emma couldn’t think that way. Caleb was a good man. He’d understand. She took a

deep breath, but then her voice died in her throat when he spoke first.

“You know, it’s been really hard to let myself trust anyone these days. My past experiences have always led me to a place where I am reminded day in and day out that people aren’t always good.”

She blinked a few times, then peered up at him. He was staring out at the land that surrounded them rather than at her. His eyes were contemplative, but the set of his jaw was sturdy and strong.

“It’s like with Carter. Not only did he take off, but he also stole. What kind of person does that to their own family? I guess I could understand, to a degree, that he needed it, but I know for a fact that Wade would have given him anything he asked for.”

Emma snuggled back against him, not sure of what to say. She didn’t have any familiarity with this sort of thing. Her only experiences were her own deceitful behaviors.

“As far as I’m concerned, Carter only did one thing right. He figured out before all of us that he wasn’t going to make it out in this world being chained to our family. He knew that he needed to distance himself from us in order to find out who he really is. That is the one thing I can admire about him leaving. It couldn’t have been easy to get out there on his own.”

“So, you admire him?” Her voice was somewhat hopeful—if only she could gauge where his heart would be when she inevitably told him about her own secrets.

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“Not as much as I’m disappointed in him.” Caleb’s voice darkened. “He made several bad choices—choices that affected others. We’re worried about him. We wanted to help. Heck, we really miss him. Why can’t he see that?”

She shifted so she could wrap her arms around him and give him what could only be described as an awkward hug. “I can’t say I know what you’re going through, but I’ll be here for you in whatever way you think you need me.”

He smiled down at her. It was the saddest smile she’d ever seen in her life. There was no way he would forgive her for her deception. Caleb had been hurt too many times for him to be willing to look past what she’d done. From the very beginning, she’d known he was slow to trust. Somehow her reasons for keeping her identity a secret didn’t hold any weight. She could have told him when they’d started getting along but before these feelings had developed between the two of them.

Now it was too late. She’d risked a great deal more than she thought possible. At this rate, she simply needed to cut her losses. She could tell him when she left—as a farewell. It would be her only parting gift.

Emma forced a smile, knowing how this whole relationship would end. There would be no running from it. All she could do was live in the moment and let herself enjoy his company while she still had it.

At that very moment, the warm, joyful bubble popped with the sound of her phone ringing again. She groaned, getting up from her spot while at the same time Caleb reached for the phone on the table at his side.

She snatched the phone before he could inadvertently answer it. That was the last thing she wanted him to do. Jessica might not know where she was, but if she found out that Emma was extending her absence all because of a man, she would have a royal fit.

Caleb's eyes lingered on the phone before slowly lifting his eyes up to meet hers. "You really should just see what they want."

"It's my sister," Emma blurted out.

"Your sister?"

She nodded. "You could say that we have a strange relationship as well." Another lie. For Pete's sake! Why couldn't she just keep her words to herself? This was yet another one of the reasons why she would never be able to have a strong relationship with Caleb.

Emma shoved her phone into her pocket and then motioned inside. "How about we get some ice cream and watch a movie or something?" Then, at least, she could run to her room and hide the phone somewhere. She couldn't just shut it off. Jessica would know that if her phone went straight to voicemail, then she would have full permission to call the local authorities—though Emma wasn't sure exactly how she'd do it without knowing her location.

Jessica was resilient. She'd figure something out.

Caleb's eyes darted down again to where she grasped tightly to her phone. Finally, he nodded and got to his feet. "Sure. We can do that. I'll get the ice cream, and you pick the movie."

"Deal." She darted inside before he could see the nervous look appear on her face.

Emma needed to practice a little more when it came to keeping her emotions reined in. One false move and Caleb could demand to hear exactly everything she'd been hiding from him.

18

Caleb

The number of times Caleb had heard Emma's phone ring wouldn't have been concerning if it wasn't for the way Emma reacted whenever it happened. She was hiding something; that much was clear. The only peace of mind he could gather from observing her was that he knew she was a terrible liar.

He knew it was her sister calling, and she was likely concerned about whatever it was Emma was running from. While he didn't think the caller was anyone else, that didn't mean that Emma's past wasn't coming back to get her. She'd never mentioned that she had an abusive spouse or if she'd done something that was against the law—though either one of those options frequently came to mind.

As much as he wanted to ask her outright what was happening, he knew already that she wouldn't tell him. And why would she? Her life was her own, and she was allowed to have her secrets. One day she might want to share those secrets with him.

But then that little voice in the back of his head reminded him that if she couldn't trust him now, then would she ever? The same went for his feelings. Caleb wanted to say he could believe everything she was saying, but the truth was simply that he couldn't.

Caleb pushed aside those disparaging thoughts. He didn't need to worry about that yet. For all he knew, she wouldn't want this relationship to continue when she went home—yet another disappointing possibility.

He glanced at her from across their shared breakfast. Either she was tired, or she was just as unhappy as he was. They needed to get out and do something to get their minds off what was bothering them.

Reaching for her hand across the table, he smiled. Her eyes met his and she smiled back, though it wasn't the same bright smile she'd had even a few days ago. He ran his thumb across the back of her hand and said, "I think we should do something fun today."

"You do?"

He nodded. "Don't you feel like we've been hanging around here too much? There's a lot to do out there."

"Well, yeah, but to me it feels like time moves slower here." She tilted her head, and her smile shifted into something more genuine. "I like that."

Caleb nodded. "I know. But..." He hesitated. "I don't even know how long you're going to be here—in Copper Creek."

Her smile faded. It was a truth they both had avoided discussing.

"And I want to use that time wisely."

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Emily didn't respond right away. Her eyes darted to their hands, and she pressed her lips together.

"It would be a lot easier if I knew what your plans were—like how long you plan on staying."

She pulled her hand away and placed it in her lap. "I don't know. I'd like to stay as long as possible."

"What does that even mean?"

Emily let out a sad laugh, meeting his eyes. "That means I don't have any idea how long I can stretch out my visit. Right now, things—" She cut herself off and looked away again. "Let's just say that I have a life back home that I can't completely walk away from."

"I get that. But it's not like you'll never come back here, right? It's not like you can't consider moving... out here." Warmth spread from his midsection into his chest. It was the first time he'd asked her about relocating to Copper Creek. As terrifying as it was to ask, he didn't regret it. If there was one thing he was sure of in his current state of mind, he knew he didn't want to miss out on a good thing—and that included Emily.

Unfortunately, the way she continued to look anywhere but directly at him made him wonder if this spontaneous string of events was only that.

A fling.

“Hey,” he murmured softly.

She lifted her gaze to meet his.

“I don’t want to put you on the spot or anything. I just figured that with how things are going... that it’d be nice to consider what the future might be.” He forced a smile he didn’t feel like giving. The fact was that he couldn’t shake the doubt that had started creeping into his mind. But he couldn’t let her see that. “How about we just take one day at a time, okay? This is still new, and while I feel like I can trust you more than anyone, I understand if you don’t feel the same.”

Emily’s eyes widened measurably. “I absolutely feel the same way as you do. But you’re right. We don’t know what the future might be. There are so many variables. I just don’t want us to get ahead of ourselves.”

He could understand that. She was right. Relationships took time, and if that meant trying to make something work long distance, he was willing to make that sacrifice. She didn’t have to know that, though. The last thing he wanted to do was scare her off. Caleb nodded. “So, what do you say? Should we go to town? We could get some ice cream, or maybe check out the bookstore. I could take you to Sal’s—” He raised his eyebrows suggestively. “It is where we first met, you know.”

It wasn’t hard to miss the hesitation in her eyes. Caleb couldn’t tell if it was the trip to town or if it was something else that bothered her. Instead of pointing it out, he waited. She needed to be the one to tell him if she wasn’t comfortable going.

Finally, after what felt like ages, she nodded. “You’re right. We shouldn’t stay cooped up here. I don’t know when I have to go back, but I don’t want to spend my whole vacation here. There’s a lot to be explored in this town.”

He slapped his palm on the table and let out a holler. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

Getting to his feet, he grinned at her. “You know what else might be fun? They have this country club where people go dancing in the evenings.”

Her brows pulled together, and the hesitation returned. “You mean that club you told me about that night we met?”

Caleb froze, sobering. “Oh, right. You don’t like crowds.”

“I seem to recall that you don’t like them either.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. A lot of things had changed since he’d met her. The idea of going to the club had started to appeal to him. He could already feel what it would be like to have her in his arms, pulling her along the dance floor. “I guess I changed my mind.”

Emily sighed. “Caleb, I don’t know?—”

“We don’t have to,” he hurried on to add. “We can steer clear of the crowds if that’s what you want.” Once again, he couldn’t ignore the feeling that something strange was going on. No crowds. She didn’t want to talk about the future. There was more to this; there had to be.

No. He wasn’t going to let himself sabotage what he’d found with her. There was a part of him that must not want to find happiness. Anyone would find problems if they started seeking them out.

He glanced at her once more. “How about we pick out some fixings and go on a picnic tonight instead?”

The grin that he adored so much filled her face. “I’d really like that,” she said. “It sounds perfect.”

Caleb reached for Emily's hand as they wandered down the street away from the ice cream shop. He didn't know what he'd been expecting when they were to go out—perhaps her feeling a little more secure around him—but just like before, she kept her identity hidden.

Each time she ducked her head, every time she flinched when someone got too close, he noticed. Emily didn't feel safe out in public. He wished he could change that, but he couldn't fight a monster that he couldn't identify.

Her hand tightened on his, and she glanced at him with a smile. Her eyes were hidden not only by her sunglasses but also by the hat that shaded her face. She lapped at her ice cream, and every so often he could see the carefree woman he'd gotten to know at Mateo's place.

One day she'd be comfortable here. He swore it to himself. She deserved to feel safe no matter where she lived. Caleb reminded himself to ask her if there was something he could do for her to make that happen for the remainder of her visit. If she was scared of an ex, then he would promise to keep her safe.

Caleb smiled back, tightening his hold on her hand. As promised, he led her to the bookstore. Once inside, she didn't bother removing her glasses or her hat. Compared to the sunny day outside, it couldn't have been easy for her to see much. Caleb didn't understand it.

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“I think I’ll get this one.” Emily held up a science fiction book. The silhouette of a man with a galaxy behind him adorned the cover.

He made a face. “You read that sort of stuff?”

She laughed. “What’s wrong with it?”

Caleb gave her a pointed look. “I figured a girl like you would be into romances and the like.”

Emily turned the book over in her hands and laughed again. “A girl can be well-rounded, you know. If you picked up a romance, then I would support you.”

“I wouldn’t be caught dead reading either one of those options.”

“Fine.” Emily placed the book on the shelf. “What would you recommend?”

“I don’t really like reading.”

Once again, she laughed. “You’re ridiculous. You can’t scoff at what I pick and then tell me you don’t read. If you’re going to judge me, then you have to have something to back it up.”

“I prefer writing to reading.” Caleb chuckled, knowing full well that the two usually went hand in hand.

This time she gave him a pointed look—one that said everything he was thinking in

that moment. Even with her eyes covered, he could read every nuance from the muscles in her face.

“I know.” He laughed. “You’re right. You should pick what you want to read.”

She reached for the book once more and waved it in front of him. “If I get this, will you promise to read it when I’m done?”

He lifted a brow. “You can’t be serious. That book has to be at least five hundred pages long. There’s no way you’re going to finish it while you’re here.”

Emily’s grin spread deeper. “I’m surprised you don’t have much faith in me. I would have thought you’d give me the benefit of the doubt. If nothing else, you would have agreed because you believed that it wouldn’t happen.”

“Alright, alright, I give. Sure, if you finish that book before you head home, I’ll read it.”

Emily pushed the book into his arms. “Good.”

Before he could say anything, she got a phone call.

She pulled her phone from her pocket and then sighed. “I should probably talk to her. Give me a few minutes, okay?” Emily moved to a corner of the store and answered the call, speaking in hushed tones.

Caleb watched her, trying to figure out what was being said from a distance, until his own phone rang. He answered it absentmindedly. “Yeah.”

“Caleb, it’s Mateo.”

He turned away from Emily. “Mateo. I hope everything turned out okay. Is this call good news?”

“It is. We’ve figured everything out, and we’ll be coming home tomorrow.”

“That’s great.” Caleb glanced once more over to Emily, wondering what her living situation would be when Sophia returned.

“Look, I wanted to thank you for all your help. I didn’t expect you to do it for free, so when I get back, we’ll work out a fee that is appropriate.”

“It’s fine, really,” Caleb said. “I’m happy to help. Just keep letting me shadow you, alright?”

Mateo chuckled. “Absolutely. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” Caleb confirmed.

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Emma

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The house felt both incredibly empty and too crowded after the Palmer family returned and Caleb went home. Emma didn't spend much time in the company of Sophia's siblings, mostly because she knew that the more people who saw her, the more likely she'd be found out.

Her pictures were all over social media and the news. Each passing day was like a ticking time bomb. She could already imagine what it would do to this town if someone recognized her and called the paparazzi. Coming to Copper Creek had sounded like a good idea in the beginning, but now she could see just how big of a mistake she had made.

Perhaps it wouldn't have been too bad if she'd only stayed for a few days—the reprieve she'd been planning. But she'd ended up falling in love.

Her heart twisted and knotted. Not only had she fallen in love with the town, she'd fallen in love with a cowboy. How could she have been so stupid? She'd known this was a possibility. Emma wasn't a stranger to growing attachments to the people she worked with. She'd thought she could just throw caution to the wind and not get hurt or hurt anyone in the process.

It wasn't like her, and now she was regretting every decision she'd made since that afternoon in the airport.

There was a knock on her door before it was pushed open. She sat on the edge of Sophia's bed, her legs folded, unable to bring herself to leave the room. Sophia inched inside and shut the door behind her. "You doing okay?"

Emma nodded with a faint smile. “I’m just not feeling too well.”

“Do you want me to take you to urgent care? We could?—”

“Oh, it’s nothing like that. More...” Her voice trailed off as she tried to come up with a reasonable excuse.

“Homesick?”

Her head snapped up and she stared at Sophia once more. “Yeah. I suppose it might be.”

“I get that.” Sophia moved farther into the room and sat down beside her. “I know I told you that you could stay here as long as you want to. Anyone with eyes could see that you weren’t quite ready to head home. But maybe there’s a reason that you’re feeling this way.”

Emma stared down at the floor. She knew exactly why she wasn’t feeling well. She was stuck. She’d been trapped by her own idiotic and selfish decisions. She was in love with a man who had constantly told her he had a hard time trusting people. He didn’t put his faith in humanity as easily as the next person. And she’d lied to him.

She’d lied about everything.

If she came clean now, he’d be hurt. If she didn’t tell him and he found out, he’d be hurt. There was only one way around it that she could see, and it would end up hurting both of them.

“Do you have any family you could talk to about how you’re feeling?” Sophia’s soft voice pulled her from her thoughts. Besides Caleb, out of everyone Emma had met while in Copper Creek, Sophia seemed to be the one other person who gave her any

degree of solace. It was funny because she was also in the dark about so much.

Emma nodded. “I suppose I could call my sister... though... she’s not all that thrilled with me.”

“I’m guessing it’s because you extended your stay?”

Emma stared with surprise at her new friend. She couldn’t possibly know what was going on, and yet it almost felt like she knew everything.

Sophia chuckled. “It would be understandable. Most people spend a couple days on vacation. You’ve extended your trip to two weeks by my count, and so far, you haven’t given us any clues as to when you might go.”

“If I’m outstaying my welcome?—”

“Of course not!” Sophia briefly placed a comforting hand on Emma’s leg. “You’re welcome to stay as long as you need. We’re not going to be the ones to kick you out. I mean, we couldn’t. You helped us so much. And then there’s the issue with that ride that went terribly wrong.” She released a soft laugh that seemed to be covering up her embarrassment. “Mateo was furious when he found out, you know. He said that I should have never taken you out riding—or at least given you one of our really old horses.”

“It’s fine,” Emma said. “Now I can say that I’ve been thrown from a horse. Who else can say that?”

“I’d say all of Copper Creek has had that experience at least once in their life.”

Emma laughed. “Okay, who else who doesn’t live in this town?”

“You got me there.” Sophia smiled. “Well, if you’re not feeling so great, maybe you reach out to your sister. Family can usually help in this regard. I wouldn’t be surprised if she has a bit of advice for you.”

Advice.

Now Emma really did wonder if Sophia knew more than she was letting on. Had she heard about the budding relationship between herself and Caleb? That was possible. Caleb’s own brother had caught them nearly kissing once. And even though she thought she knew Caleb well, she wasn’t willing to bet he wouldn’t share what had transpired between them.

She took a deep breath and released it with a nod. “You’re probably right. It would be a good idea to fill her in on certain updates. I’m just worried she’ll try to convince me to head home before I’m ready.”

“In my experience, when you’re not feeling up to staying, that’s the first sign that a trip needs to end.”

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Emma gazed at her friend. It was almost like she was pushing her to leave. Even though she insisted that Emma could stay as long as she wanted, maybe there was a reason why she would make such recommendations.

“I’ll leave you to it, then. I only came up to ask you if you’d like to stay for dinner or to see if you had other plans.”

Ah. There it was. Sophia was definitely trying to find out just how far things had gone between the housemates who had taken care of the animals while they were gone. A smile tugged at her lips. What would the harm be in telling Sophia that she had started to fall for her brother’s friend? There were worse secrets that could be spilled—her identity, for one.

“Actually, I have a dinner date this evening.”

“I had a feeling that might be the case,” Sophia said and chuckled. “Mateo and I had a bet going, and I just won twenty bucks.”

Emma froze for a moment, then she let out a laugh. “Don’t tell Caleb I told you. I have a feeling he likes to keep things quiet.”

“Yeah, I could see that,” Sophia agreed. “Caleb seems like a really private person. It was strange that he seemed to be so easily taken with you.” Her eyes widened, and she laughed. “Not that you’re not a catch or anything?—”

“It’s fine. I knew what you were talking about.” Emma laughed again. It felt good to find humor in things. It was exactly what she needed.

Sophia left the room, and Emma wasted no time calling Jessica. Her sister answered on the first ring, her voice hushed and bordering on anxious. “Do you have any idea how hard it’s been trying to get ahold of you? I swear! What was the point of giving me your number if you weren’t even going to?—”

“I need your advice.”

Her sister stopped speaking. “What? Are you serious? I’ve been telling you from the beginning that you need to go home. Mom knows you’re missing, but she’s not pressuring me to tell her anything. I can tell Rachel thinks I know something, but she’s not willing to come right out and say it. All this publicity is going to make you a legend one way or another, and right now I worry it’s going to drag you down in a black hole of some kind.”

“I don’t want to hear about Rachel or her stupid PR stunt. I know how I’m going to handle that when I get back.”

“You can’t keep everyone hanging like this. What if people sue?—”

“I’ll come back before that happens. I haven’t even been gone a month.”

“A month!” Jessica squeaked. “Ems, you’re not planning on staying for a month, are you? That would be career suicide! You have to tell Rachel something. I don’t know about contracts, but I’m pretty sure they can get you on some legalities.”

“Are you just going to lecture me, or are you going to listen?” Emma said with exasperation. She got to her feet and paced the small bedroom. “Because I’m feeling stuck, and I need my sister right now.”

Jessica went quiet.

Emma didn't know where to start. She couldn't just blurt out that she'd fallen in love for what might have been the first time in her life. That wouldn't go over well. Jessica had heard about Caleb, but she didn't know the extent to which it had escalated. Maybe blurting it out was her only option.

"Well?" her sister pressed.

"You remember that guy who was looking after the ranch I was staying at?"

"Caleb? Yeah, so?"

When Emma didn't respond right away, Jessica gasped.

"Emily Hartford, you didn't."

"I didn't mean to."

"No one means to fall in love, Em." She muttered a curse. "Does he know who you are? The real you?"

Emma bit down on her lip and then sighed. "I haven't exactly had the opportunity?—"

"You've been there two weeks. You've had plenty of time to tell him. If you haven't, it's because you don't want to." Her sister was probably right about that. There were so many reasons she didn't want Caleb to know. His possibly hating her was but one at the top of the list. "You want to know what I think? I think you need to get your little behind on a plane and just go home. Rachel is going to find you one way or another. This Caleb guy is going to figure everything out. And it's all gonna blow up in your face. Either you tell him, then come home—or you break it off and come home. There are no other options."

“I’m scared.”

There was silence on the other end for what felt like an eternity. “You’re being selfish and immature, Em.” Jessica’s statement stung more than Emma would have liked to admit. But once again, she was right. “If you really care about this guy, then you have to make a choice.”

“And what if he hates me for keeping it from him?”

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“Then he wasn’t really yours to begin with, was he? Look, he’ll either forgive you or he won’t. What do you really want out of all of this? You have a life in LA. You have a career and people who count on you. He can either accept it or not. You can’t control that.”

Already, Emma knew the answer. She had to tell him. There was no avoiding it. When she saw her future, it was with Caleb. But that future didn’t have a chance if he didn’t know what they would be up against. She nodded. “Thanks. I needed a swift kick to get myself in gear.”

“Happy to help. Does this mean you’re coming home?”

“Might be sooner than you think.” Emma sighed. Hopefully not sooner than Emma was ready for.

20

Caleb

Caleb lay beside Emily, his hands behind his head as they stared up at the night sky. She’d been awfully quiet since he’d picked her up. All he wanted to do was ask her what was bothering her. He wanted to tell her that even though they’d only known each other for a short time, he felt like they’d known each other for much longer.

Hours felt like weeks. Days felt like decades. Did he know every little detail about her past? No. But deep in his heart, he cared for her. He wanted to spend his life with her. All she had to do was let him in.

Turning his head, he gazed at her. It was dark, but not so dark that he couldn't see the outline of her face. Even her silhouette was beautiful.

Think. Come up with something to say to break the tension. What could he talk about that would get her mind off whatever was bothering her?

He lifted his head onto his hand as he turned to his side. "You'll never guess what I heard today."

She didn't turn toward him. Her eyes remained on the sky overhead. "What's that?" she murmured.

"My little sister... Charlotte—but we call her Charlie—anyway, she was telling me about this singer."

Emily turned this time, making it difficult to see her eyes now that they weren't reflecting the stars. "A singer?"

He nodded. "There's this singer who's from LA. Turns out she's been missing for like a week or maybe two, I can't remember. Anyway, she's gone missing, and her manager is trying to get the public's help in finding her."

Emily swallowed audibly. "Why wouldn't they get the police to help?"

"That's what I said." He chuckled as he dropped back and shifted his focus to the stars. "Can you believe it, though? Some famous music star has up and disappeared. I bet you anything something happened to her."

"Why do you say that?" she asked quietly.

He snorted. "Think about it. She's rich. She has everything she could ever want in her

life. She's got the wealth, the power, the popularity, adoring fans... Why would she want to risk all of that?"

Emily went quiet, and he turned to face her again, only to find her staring at the sky.

Caleb inched closer to her and shifted his arm beneath her head to cushion it. "People like that don't just walk away from what they have. They're selfish beings."

"Have you met one before?" Her voice almost sounded tight; then again, he couldn't get a read on her expression, and he was probably assuming something that wasn't there.

"No. I can't say that I have."

"Then you don't know."

He laughed. "I do know. I've watched enough people to get a good feel for why they do things the way they do. Think about it. If you went through all the trouble to claw yourself to the top, would you risk losing it all?"

"Maybe she had a good reason."

"Like what? There's nothing more she could want. I'm telling you, that woman, bless her soul, is probably in a whole lot of trouble. Someone took her or she's running from something. One thing is for certain. It's not of her own free will."

Emily went quiet again, making him wonder if he'd offended her.

He could feel his desperation kicking in, and he grew restless. "Let's say that the news reports are right," he said. "This Emma Hart they're looking for decided to run away for personal reasons. If that's the truth, then she won't want to be found. She's

got the money and the fame to believe she can do whatever she wants without suffering the consequences.”

“What consequences?” Emily mumbled.

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“I don’t know. Job security, maybe. Or legal recourse. There are a lot of people who count on her—it’s not the job I would want, but she’s hired people. Either way, she’s either in a lot of trouble or she is the trouble. Neither option is a good one.”

“And what does your sister have to say?”

“Oh.” Caleb chuckled. “She can’t stop talking about it. She thinks that it’s a big publicity stunt for her next tour. She says she wishes that the singer was here in Copper Creek so we could get the concert. But I had to remind her that we’re not built for a gathering that big. It could very well destroy our town. Can you imagine? There are already too many people coming and going because of Shane’s equine therapy services and his country club. If people got word that a famous star came here to get away from it all, then Copper Creek would never be the same.”

“I suppose you’re right,” she said quietly.

“Have you ever heard of her? Emma Hart?”

“I think I’ve heard her music on the radio,” she said even softer.

“Anything I might know?”

She twisted her head around and stared at him. He couldn’t see her eyes, but he could feel them. It was almost like she wanted to say something, but she wasn’t sure she should. Caleb nearly told her to just spit it out, but he didn’t. She was clearly dealing with something, and she wasn’t ready to share it with him. He couldn’t even blame her for that.

A change in subject would have been nice, but if pop culture gossip wasn't enough to distract her, then nothing would.

As it turned out, being alone and unable to trust anyone was just as hard as finding someone he did trust but not knowing how to help them when they were struggling.

He pulled her tighter against him, allowing her to rest her cheek against his chest. His thoughts continued to spiral as he considered his options. What could he say that wouldn't scare her off? How could he bring up that he wanted to be there for her?

Caleb cleared his throat and shifted beside her. "So... Sophia is letting you stay with her a while longer."

Emily nodded.

"That's nice of them."

"It is."

"Do you know when you plan on heading home?"

She fidgeted and sat up. "I don't."

"I've never met anyone who could take a vacation and have it be so flexible. What did you say you did for work?"

"I work remotely." She pulled her legs to her chest and rested her chin atop them. "I've been able to work all over the country."

"Oh. I didn't realize..." Caleb sat up beside her. "That must be nice for when you want to visit places like this, huh?"

She turned her head and rested her cheek on her knees as she gazed at him again. “Yeah. It’s nice to meet new people.”

He frowned, then schooled his features, thankful for the cover of darkness. If there was one thing she didn’t seem to like, it was meeting new people. “What’s the best part about your job?”

Emily turned her face away from him, focusing on something out in the darkness. “I guess the best part is that I love what I do. Not many people can say that. Most of the country has to go to work every day dreading it. You know the phrase work to live, don’t live to work?” Her voice softened, and even from her profile he could see a small smile form. “I had thought I was overwhelmed, and maybe I was. But the truth is, even if I wasn’t getting paid my current salary, I would still want to do it.”

“You’re right. Not many people can say that they have their dream job.”

She took a deep breath. “No, they can’t. The thing is, jobs aren’t supposed to be perfect one hundred percent of the time, are they? They’re supposed to be hard sometimes—otherwise they wouldn’t be worth it. You need to have the bad so you can appreciate the good. And looking at the bigger picture is what we have a hard time doing.”

As her words sunk in, Caleb realized he’d been doing the exact same thing when he thought about his family and the way things were changing. He had only been focused on the bad rather than all of the good things that he’d experienced. He’d dwelt on every betrayal and let it poison him.

Emily had been the one person who had managed to break that cycle. He reached for her hand and laced his fingers within hers before bringing it to his lips and brushing a kiss across her knuckles.

She glanced at him, and not for the first time did he wish there was better lighting. If there had been a full moon, he might have been able to see exactly how she felt in this moment. For him, he'd never felt closer to a person—more in tune with who they were deep down.

That was how it had always been with Emily. The more he thought about it, the more he simply had to accept that she'd been put in his life for a reason. She was here to teach him a lesson about trust and gratitude. He only wished he could do something just as good for her.

He'd get to her one way or another. Whatever it was that hurt her—that made her feel unsafe even in a small town like Copper Creek—he'd fix it. Emily needed someone to make her feel whole, just like she'd helped to heal him.

But not tonight.

She was still struggling, and something told him she wouldn't be open to such an intervention. He'd give it a couple more days. He got the distinct feeling that she was nearing her rock bottom. She hadn't been this despondent since they'd met. Perhaps she'd had that much-needed conversation with her sister that she'd been avoiding.

That made the most sense. Whenever she'd gotten a call from her sister, her demeanor had shifted. He hadn't missed the fact that she hadn't brought her phone on their little stargazing venture. While it had been nice not to be interrupted by the constant buzzing sounds, he couldn't help but wonder what had transpired.

Another time, he reminded himself. Tonight would be just for the two of them.

He tugged her back down onto the blanket he'd spread out in the bed of the truck. "Let me show you my favorite constellation."

She snuggled against him and let out a sigh. "I thought you didn't like to read."

"You don't have to read to know the constellations," he grumbled.

There was a smile in her voice. "No, but it helps."

Caleb rolled his eyes. "I learned in school and from..." His voice caught in his throat.

"And?"

“My brother.”

“Which one?”

He didn’t answer right away. The cool air grew even colder.

She sat up and stared down at him in the darkness. “Your twin?”

A lump formed in his throat. “Carter always liked astronomy. He could tell you every story there was about every constellation. It was actually really annoying.”

“And yet it was something you two enjoyed together.”

The lump in Caleb’s throat grew larger. He’d been the poet, and his brother had been the astronomer. As cowboys, they hadn’t exactly fit in. But that didn’t stop them from pursuing the things that made them happy—even when that happiness came at a cost. He cleared his throat. “It’s ancient history now.”

She didn’t move. Her gaze remained locked on him, though he couldn’t tell if she could see much. Then, without warning, she brushed a kiss to his lips. Caught off guard, he froze. Her kiss warmed him, pulling him in. Slowly, his arms wrapped around her, holding her closer. He kissed her with a newfound desperation—reveling in the connection they’d found together in this moment.

If his life as he knew it ended right here, right now, he would die a happy man. Thankfully, he didn’t have to think about that. Whatever it took, whatever price he had to pay, he’d do it. He’d crawl over hot coals if it meant a life with her.

Emma couldn't have been more wrong. She knew that now. Even her sister could see where Emma had gone wrong. There would be no salvaging her relationship with Caleb. While she'd had hopes that he would understand her situation and forgive her for her secrets, it was clear his judgment of who she was would be too hard to overcome.

So, she'd kept quiet.

Their date didn't have to be ruined.

This didn't mean she wasn't going to tell him. She intended on doing just that, but first she had to figure out a few things. On second thought, maybe telling him didn't have to happen either. What if she broke up with him and called it a day? If she was really lucky, he'd never make the connection.

Emma stared at her phone—her real phone—the one that Rachel would have most assuredly tracked if it had remained connected.

She didn't know if she wanted to turn it on right now and put the SIM card back in, knowing full well that there would be loads of voice messages from not only her manager but from friends and family, too. Her mother might have called and begged her to return her messages.

The guilt that currently plagued her was wrapping tighter and tighter around her neck like the noose it was. The consequences she'd thought wouldn't matter were knocking at her door, ready to be let in so they could suffocate her.

Perhaps Caleb was right about that. She'd come here without thinking about the consequences of her actions. She'd figured a short trip wouldn't hurt anyone. Geez, she hadn't even stayed long enough that she could have predicted the chaos that had followed. How had she managed to become so delusional?

Emma thought she'd been smarter than this. She'd thought she'd considered all the outcomes, and yet now as she stood staring at the device, she knew she'd miscalculated everything. She couldn't even expect anyone to have pity on her. After what she'd done, she wouldn't blame anyone for hating her.

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Caleb was only the tip of the iceberg. She had to worry about what Sophia might think. She had to face everyone back home.

And what about her fans.

Of course, Rachel would spin this in a positive light, as if it had all been planned to end like this from the start. Hadn't Caleb's little sister thought as much? It could easily be brushed off as some big PR stunt. And Emma would get away with a slap on the wrist. That was probably why Rachel had avoided getting the police involved. It was all starting to make sense.

But everyone behind the curtain would know. She'd be looked at differently unless Rachel had an explanation for her disappearance. Right about now, Rachel was Emma's only hope.

Emma eyed the phone like it was a viper, ready to strike. The poison would enter her bloodstream, and she'd end up writhing on the floor as it took root in her system. She closed her eyes briefly, and when she opened them, her eye caught on the book she'd been reading. She was nearly done with it. What else could she do when she couldn't sleep? Reading was the only escape from her racing thoughts.

Taking a deep breath, she snatched the phone and held down on the power button. There was no time like the present. She just had to make the call and pray that Rachel was in a good mood.

As soon as the phone turned on, she pushed the SIM card into its slot. It took only seconds for it to start beeping and buzzing. Notifications burst through the speakers.

Chirps, bell trills, and other sounds from various social media apps. Rachel was definitely going to hold this against her for the foreseeable future.

What was it she'd told Caleb the other night? She didn't do this for the fame. She was a singer because she loved it.

Emma pressed the screen where one of the missed call notifications from Rachel popped up, and it immediately rang through.

“Emma? Thank heavens. What on earth has gotten into you? Where have you been? What were you thinking? I swear that if I didn't believe your sister knew you were alive and well, I would have sent out the National Guard looking for you. We couldn't find any information on what happened to you after you flew to Detroit. Are you still there? Please tell me?—”

“You don't have to trace the call, Rachel. I'm ready to come home. But there's one condition.”

For the first time in Emma's memory, Rachel seemed to be speechless.

“I don't want you sending anyone to my location. You're going to meet me in Denver. I don't want any attention drawn to the town I'm staying in. Do you understand?”

“But—”

“No buts. If you can't guarantee it, then I'm throwing my phone away right now and finding my own way back. But if you agree to my terms, then you can turn this into whatever PR stunt you want. We can do a special concert in Denver and make it bigger than we've made anything else. We can announce a new single, too.” That was if Caleb was okay with her using the lyrics he'd written. But she'd deal with that

later. Right now, Emma just wanted to get Rachel to swear she'd follow every direction Emma gave her. "Do we have a deal?"

"Emma, sweetheart?—"

"Do we have a deal?" she demanded again.

"Of course, but?—"

"I will fill you in on everything, but I have a few things I have to figure out before I can do that. I have to say some goodbyes, and I have to find a way back to the city."

Rachel clicked her tongue. "You know we can send a car?—"

"No attention, remember? I don't want a single soul in this town to know who I am."

"No one recognized you?"

"Not so far." Emma raked a hand through her wavy brown hair. It had been a miracle that Sophia hadn't figured it out. That would likely change as soon as Caleb learned the truth—a possibility that made Emma feel sick to her stomach. "Just make sure that my cards are working and won't be declined. I'll get a bus or rent a car or something. And you make sure that there's a private jet waiting at the Denver airport."

Her manager went quiet. It wasn't like her to be so calm. Then again, it was likely only a matter of time before she blew up and really made Emma feel guilty for all of this.

"Well?"

“Well, what, Emma? What do you want me to say?”

“I know you’re mad.”

“Oh, that doesn’t begin to cover it. You don’t even know the strings I had to pull in order to make this work out for us. I had to call in several favors. We had to move your schedule around and pay some extensive fees?—”

“You’ll get a raise. Will that fix things?”

“I—well—I suppose that would put a nice dent in things.”

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“Fine. I’ll speak with my financial advisor and we’ll work something out. Is there anything else? Do you think you can handle it from here on out?”

“Are you going to shut off your phone again?”

“Not if you don’t track me here,” Emma warned.

“I already have your location, sweetie. But I’ll keep my word. We’ll meet you in Denver in, let’s say, twenty-four hours?”

“Make it forty-eight. I don’t know how long it will take to wrap up everything I have going on.”

“What could you possibly have going on?”

Emma pinched the bridge of her nose. “It doesn’t really matter, now does it? You got what you wanted out of all of this. I might possibly be even more famous. You’ve had your fifteen minutes in the spotlight. We will be able to schedule another show. What do you have to complain about now?”

“I suppose there’s nothing left. See? I’ve trained you well.”

As much as Emma cared for Rachel and respected her, there were moments like this one where she couldn’t help but realize the biggest reasons she’d made her escape. Well, that escape was behind her now. There was a very important meeting that needed to take place, and she didn’t know if she was going to be strong enough for it.

Emma hung up the phone and tossed it on the bed. At least her phone call with Rachel hadn't been as bad as she'd imagined. Rachel almost sounded like she knew it was coming. She'd planned on tracking Emma down even if she hadn't wanted to be tracked.

Was Emma so predictable? She didn't want to think about that—right now, she had to think about what she would tell Caleb. There were two options before her. She could tell him exactly who she was, or she could let him find out on his own. Either way, she needed to break things off with him because she was leaving.

Her hands shook and her legs had long since gone numb. She wasn't sure if she could handle him yelling at her or telling her she was just as bad as he'd thought she was. She didn't want to see the pain in his eyes. Those were some of the consequences he'd insisted she was going to free herself from.

In this situation, maybe he was right. She didn't have the strength to suffer those consequences, and she might use her fame and fortune to be free from everything. It would be so much easier to tell him they couldn't work because she was returning to LA and the distance simply wasn't something she could overcome. To see his disappointment regarding that outcome seemed at least a bit more manageable, even if it did make the sickness growing in her gut turn more sour by the second.

The ride to Caleb's home went by in a blur. She'd gotten the address from Sophia and borrowed her car, insisting that she didn't want to put her out. In reality, she didn't want Sophia to witness the end to what could quite possibly be her first true love.

Emma hated the irony that she'd fallen for someone while pretending she wasn't who she was to the general public. Bad decisions brought on even worse outcomes. Now she'd sacrifice what she cared about and all because she'd been selfish.

She strode up the steps to the house and froze on the welcome mat. The home was

modest for having housed such a large family. Emma couldn't believe that it used to be as worn down as Caleb had mentioned. She let her gaze sweep over the building, imagining a young Caleb and his siblings playing out in the yard or working with the animals they had on the property. She could almost hear their childlike laughter.

It wasn't any wonder that she'd been drawn to this small town. If she had a family, this would be the first place she'd want to settle down. Too bad she'd gone and messed up any possibility of that.

She heaved a sigh. The clock was ticking. She only had so much time to say her goodbyes, and this one was going to be the hardest one of all. Lifting her hand, she poised it to knock. Before she could connect with the wood, it swung inward. A young woman stared at her with wide, bright blue eyes. The recognition in her gaze was unmistakable.

Emma bit back a curse. She had been so focused on telling Caleb that she had completely forgotten to grab her glasses and her hat. It would do her no good to duck her head and hide her face. There was no rewinding time. Charlie had seen her, and all she had to do was let out a squeal to get anyone's attention.

Emma held up both hands in an attempt to prevent her from doing just that, but she did so a little too late.

"Emma Hart! At my door! I can't believe it!"

Movement behind her caught Emma's attention and she glanced up to see Caleb standing a few yards away. His confusion was short-lived as the realization hit him hard. His face reddened, and he scowled as he moved toward her with hurried steps.

"Caleb, I?—"

And just like that, he pushed past her and strode down the porch steps faster than she'd ever seen him move.

22

Caleb

Caleb could feel the contents of his stomach swirling and churning, threatening to make an appearance if he wasn't careful. He stormed toward his truck, crumpling the scrap piece of paper in his hands as he did.

He didn't want to believe what Charlie had said. In fact, he'd nearly corrected her, but then he went over everything in his head and it all suddenly made sense. Her name. Her disguise. Her appearance in Copper Creek coincided with the disappearance of the singer. Emily Hartford was none other than Emma Hart, and he was a complete idiot for not seeing it sooner.

Caleb shook his head. He couldn't believe he'd been so distracted that he hadn't even bothered to do a little digging. Charlie had talked nonstop about Emma since he'd returned home from Mateo's. All it would have taken was for him to glance at the news articles that his sister had been reading.

And this Emma Hart—she was probably laughing at him the whole time.

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He yanked open his truck door only for it to be pushed shut. Caleb whirled around and glowered at Emily—or was it Emma? He didn't know anymore. "Don't," he warned.

"Let me explain."

"No," he shot back. "You don't get to explain. You had all the time in the world to tell me who you were, and you chose to deceive me."

"I didn't have a choice," she said quietly.

He let out a bark of laughter. "That's rich."

"I'm telling the truth."

Caleb leaned closer to her, his voice lowering to a hiss. "In my experience, people who lie about one thing, lie about a great deal more."

She flinched, and for a moment he forgot himself. His instincts were to pull her into his arms and shield her from what threatened her. But then it all came slashing back at him, and those claws of truth were razor-sharp.

"Manipulation. That's all this was. You manipulated me from the start."

"That's not what this was," she said with desperation. "You were never supposed to get hurt."

“Oh, is that the lie you’re telling yourself then? You weren’t supposed to hurt me? Tell me, Emily—Emma—whatever your name is?—”

“Legally, it’s Emily. But Emma is what everyone calls me.”

“I couldn’t care less what your name is. You could be the Queen of England at this point.” His head pounded like it was being hammered by a mallet. Any second it could shatter into a million pieces—and that was if his heart didn’t take that route first. His breath was sharp and uneven, making him dizzy. Was he actually having a panic attack? Caleb leaned against his truck and shut his eyes as he focused on his breathing.

“Caleb,” she whispered.

“Don’t!” he said. “Don’t you dare try to make excuses. As far as I’m concerned, you don’t belong here, and you never will.”

She didn’t argue. At least they could agree on that front. When he opened his eyes, he was surprised to find her still standing there. Tears streaked her blotchy, pink cheeks. Her green eyes seemed more vibrant as if the tears had turned them from a typical green to something resembling a sparkly seafoam. Her lower lip quivered, but she didn’t speak.

“You want to know the worst part?” he whispered. “You actually had me believing I was wrong about people. You had finally made me wonder if I’d been too harsh in my judgments of those around me. I was beginning to think that there were some decent people in this world and I had found one of them.” He released a raucous laugh. “Oh, I was so wrong about that. And I only have myself to blame.”

“Don’t you even want to know why?—”

“I don’t want to know a single thing more. The fact is, I was right about you—about everyone. I knew that strangers couldn’t be trusted. Heck, most of the people I grew up with in this town shouldn’t be trusted. Everyone is out for themselves around here. No one is genuine anymore. You can’t even trust your own family not to turn on you. I’ve learned that not once, but twice. So, it really doesn’t make a lick of sense why I’m surprised that you weren’t any different.” The bitterness in his voice only made her shrink away from him.

Good. She needed to understand what she’d done. Hadn’t he spoken about consequences?

Fury built up inside him again. He’s shared so much with her. He’d poured out his heart and soul to her. And she’d gone and stomped on it just for kicks. “I need you to leave,” he whispered. “I need you to get in that rental car of yours right now and leave.”

“Caleb—” desperation oozed from every word she breathed.

He held up a hand, his own voice breaking. “Why can’t you listen?”

She reached for his forearm, momentarily stunning him much like a tranquilizer might do for a large animal. “I needed an escape,” she said through her tears. “Everything was pressing down on me. I felt like I couldn’t breathe.”

He tore his arm away from her. “That doesn’t mean you lie about who you are.”

“It was the only way I could think of to get out from under all that pressure. I only planned on staying long enough to catch my breath.”

“Then why drag it out?” he demanded, venom in his voice. “Why string me along and lie about who you were? Why make me believe we were something more?”

“It wasn’t a lie,” she choked out. “Everything I told you was the truth.”

“No, it wasn’t,” he said. “Don’t try to gaslight me. From the moment we met, you lied. You lied about your name. Who you were. Where you were from. What you were hiding from. Heck, that’s just brushing the surface of everything we talked about. Were you even telling the truth about not writing your own lyrics? Because I have a hard time believing that, too.”

“I was telling you the truth. Words don’t... come easy for me.”

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“Well, they sure seemed to come easy when we spent all that time talking. And what about our conversation last night? The one where you said you loved your job? Well, if you loved it so much, then you wouldn’t have had the need to escape it.”

She shut her eyes tight, and tears spilled down her cheeks. His heart crumbled even more, turning into dust within his chest. What he wouldn’t give to be able to tear down the wall that had shot around him at the moment he’d realized who she was. He wished he could wrap his arms around her and tell her that everything was going to be okay. Still, after she’d betrayed him, he wanted to protect her—even if it meant protecting her from himself.

But he couldn’t.

“I know it doesn’t make sense, but if you’d let me explain.”

“There’s nothing left to explain.” Caleb felt numb. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t feel any part of his body. It was as if he was floating with nothing to rein him in. “You wanted an escape from your life, and you got one. You came to my town—my home—and got to play pretend for a few weeks. You got to experience what it’s like to be a real cowgirl—none of that country singer nonsense. And now that you’ve got your fix, you can turn right around and go back to that life.”

“Caleb, please don’t?—”

He shoved the crumpled piece of paper at her, suddenly remembering that it was in his hand. “I finished the song for you. Do whatever you want with it. I don’t want it anymore.” Caleb pulled open the truck door, and this time Emma jumped out of the

way to allow him to get inside. He started it and rolled down his window. “I’ll ask you one more time. Why did you drag it out so long? Why not tell me that first night when we...” His voice was lodged in his throat, and he couldn’t bring himself to mention their kiss or the intimate moments they’d shared.

Dang it! There was still a part of him that wanted her—not that it would do her any good. He’d washed his hands of her the moment he’d realized the truth. Even still, he wanted to hear her say it—to hear her confess that she had feelings for him that ran deep, just like his.

She didn’t meet his gaze. Her eyes were locked on the paper she held, her fingers rubbing the edges as she stood before him looking beaten and defeated.

“Well? What do you have to say for yourself?”

Emma shook her head, her breath shuddering when she took in a deep one before she exhaled. “I don’t know.”

Caleb hated the way those three words stabbed at him, gouging him in ways that he had never thought possible. She couldn’t even admit that she didn’t have feelings for him. Not only was she a liar, but she was also a coward. She was every bit the person he’d claimed her to be when he hadn’t realized who he was speaking to. His anger and frustration returned, and it took all his strength to shove it down into the darkest part of himself.

“If I were you, I’d get going. As soon as I’m gone, I would wager that my little sister is going to come out here and demand an autograph or something. Seeing as you were so careful not to get caught before now, I’m guessing you’ve decided your trip is over.”

“I’m leaving in two days,” she said quietly.

“If you ask me, that’s not nearly soon enough.”

She flinched.

“I suppose that’s it then.”

Emma lifted her tear-filled eyes.

“You came here to break things off with me.” It wasn’t a question. Somehow, he’d known this was going to happen, but he simply couldn’t have foreseen these exact circumstances. He’d imagined that she’d come to him and tell him it was a fling but that her old life called back to her. He’d thought that she might even break up via text message. He’d considered all sorts of scenarios—stressed over them until he’d lost so much sleep that he couldn’t see straight the next morning.

Nothing came close to this revelation.

“I don’t ever want to see you again,” Caleb bit out.

“That goes for both of us.” Emma’s fist tightened around the crumpled paper, and she stomped off toward the car she’d driven.

He watched her through his mirror, waiting for her to start the car and drive away. Before he had a chance to make his own mistake and change his mind, Charlie materialized at his window. She tapped on the glass, her expression so gleeful, she looked younger than her nineteen years of age. She hopped from one foot to the other, and he groaned before rolling the window down once more. “What do you want, Charlie?”

“That’s who you’ve been so gaga over? Emma Hart? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I didn’t know.”

“How could you not know? She’s everywhere.”

“Apparently, I live under a rock,” he snapped, causing his baby sister to jump back in surprise. He dragged a hand down his face. “I hate to break it to you, but she’s not staying long. She came here to break things off before she headed home.”

Charlie’s disappointment was almost more heartbreaking than the conversation with Emma had been—almost. Her frown deepened as she turned back toward him. “Are you okay?”

Momentarily taken aback, Caleb couldn’t answer right away. Then he gave a short nod. “I’m fine.”

She nodded too. “Okay. I’m going to go back inside now.”

While he watched her, his hatred continued to grow. Emma was leaving more disasters in her wake, and there was no way to make her repair them.

23

Emily

Emma hurried inside, ducking her head so none of the Palmer family could see just how upset she was. Already, she could tell she was a complete wreck. Her skin felt tight and dry from all the tears. Her eyes itched with every movement.

On the way home, her chest hurt so much she thought she might be having a heart attack and she'd pulled over on the side of the road. When she'd confirmed it was just a pain she'd never experienced before—the pain of losing someone she loved—she'd forced herself to finish the drive back to Sophia's home.

It had taken a good ten minutes to get up the courage to go inside. She knew she'd inevitably bump into someone in Sophia's family. And just like the revelation when she'd met Charlie, Emma knew it wouldn't go over very well.

There was a very real chance that Caleb would tell Mateo. Emma didn't know Sophia's brother well enough to gauge whether she'd be safe here after that. If Mateo had a similar outlook as Caleb, she might be on the road a lot sooner than she'd planned.

Emma made it to Sophia's room and shut the door as quickly as she possibly could. All she had to do was hide away for the next twenty-four hours, then she could catch

the bus in town and leave.

Twenty-four hours. That was the soonest she'd be able to leave this place and all the bad memories it held behind.

Leaning against the door, she listened for any sign that she'd been followed up to Sophia's room. The only one she expected was Sophia herself. And since they'd been sharing a room since her friend had returned home, Sophia was bound to notice something had changed. It was only a matter of time.

When Emma was no longer worried about an intrusion, she walked across the room and picked up her phone. The temptation to go through her notifications wasn't nearly strong enough that she was willing to put herself through that sort of trauma—not after what she'd already gone through.

Already, she knew that more than half of them would be frustrated or angry messages from people whose lives she'd upended.

Tossing the phone on the bed once more, she leaned over. Elbows on her knees and head in her hands, she sucked in several deep breaths. That interaction with Caleb had been ten times worse than she had planned. She'd known he was going to be upset—but to that degree?

The worst part was that she couldn't blame him. He had every right to be upset, and she knew it. Caleb had been nothing but upfront about his views on trust and people who lied or manipulated others. Even with that information, she'd kept so much from him. She really was the villain in this story.

Her hands grew wet as more tears fell. Her sniffles became more frequent by the minute and loud enough that she didn't hear when the door opened. The first indication that someone was in the room with her was the mattress compressing at her

side.

Emma gasped, jumping up and away from the bed only to find a very concerned Sophia staring up at her.

“What’s the matter?” she asked quietly.

Emma shook her head vehemently. “No. I can’t. Not you, too.”

Sophia stood slowly. “You can’t what? What happened when you went to visit Caleb?” She frowned, her brows pulling together and her eyes flashing with anger. “He didn’t hurt you, did he?”

Shaking her head again, Emma turned away from her friend. “He didn’t do anything.”

“Your tears beg to differ. I mean it, Emily. If you need me to, I’ll send Mateo over there?—”

Emma whirled around, her voice sharp. “No!” When Sophia stilled, surprise replacing the anger, Emma’s voice softened. “No, he doesn’t have to do that. I’m fine.”

“Again, it sure doesn’t look like you’re fine. Does this have anything to do with the fact that you’re Emma Hart?”

Blood drained from Emma’s face. Her legs weakened so dramatically that she stumbled back a few steps to lean against the doorway. She gaped at Sophia, unable to find the words to ask her when or how she’d found out.

Caleb. That had to be the only way. Or maybe Charlie. Either one of them could have called and alerted the Palmers to the fact that they were housing a fugitive.

Sophia rose to her feet, her hands shoved into her pockets. “You’re wondering how I know, aren’t you?”

Emma nodded.

She offered Emma a smile. “I’ve been listening to your music since you were singing covers on YouTube. I would have recognized you if you dyed your hair red and wore purple contacts.”

This wasn’t the revelation Emma had been prepared for. Sophia hadn’t given Emma any clues that she recognized her—not from the first moment they’d met all the way to this moment in time. “But your brothers and sisters?—”

“Oh, yeah. They know too. But I swore them to secrecy.” Sophia tilted her head, and her eyes danced with amusement. “Wasn’t easy, either—especially when your manager lady was trying all sorts of stuff to smoke you out. Man, she must be something else for you to go to such lengths to get away.”

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Emma squeezed her eyes shut and took in another shuddering breath. “Rachel is great. She’s the best at her job.” When she opened her eyes, she wasn’t surprised to find Sophia studying her. “It’s just that sometimes she can be a bit... much.”

“That tracks.” Sophia lifted her shoulders, then let them drop. “So, what now? I take it you told Caleb and it didn’t go over all that well?”

“You could say that,” Emma muttered bitterly.

“What happens next?”

She shrugged. “What do you think happens? I’m going home. I have a lot of things I need to set right and a lot to put back into motion.”

“You mean with your tour.”

Emma gave her friend a double take. “I keep forgetting that you knew this whole time and didn’t say a single word.”

Sophia grinned. “I could tell you needed to feel normal for once. If I admitted to knowing who you were, then there was no chance you would have trusted me.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Okay, so you’re going home.” Sophia shifted, then got to her feet and wandered through her room. “You’ll go home, and you’ll forget all about us.” There was a disappointing lilt to her voice. She didn’t seem thrilled with the notion.

Emma moved across the room toward her. “I don’t think I could forget about Copper Creek even if I tried. This place? This whole town? I love it here.”

Sophia nodded. “It’s pretty great. But that doesn’t mean you will ever come back.”

“Says who? I know where this place is. I know how to get here. Maybe one day in the near future I’ll get tired of my life, and I’ll just leave it all behind.”

They both knew that wasn’t going to happen. She would never walk away from her career—the one she spent so many years creating. There was zero chance of that happening. Even if she decided to take a step back from all her public appearances, she’d still want to write music and perform occasionally. It was where her heart was.

Emma swallowed hard. “I will come back,” she promised. “I don’t know when, but I will make sure I come back. When I do, we’ll have to try going on that ride again.”

Sophia laughed. “I don’t know if I’m willing to believe that.” She pulled Emma into a quick hug. “I’m so glad I got to meet you.”

Pulling back, Emma frowned. “You’re really not upset about me lying?”

She scoffed. “Technically you didn’t lie. You gave me your name. You’re not a criminal. Why would I be upset?”

“Because—”

“Hey,” Sophia hushed her, “don’t listen to what Caleb said. You don’t owe us anything. We were strangers when we met, and I didn’t need your life story to know that you needed help.”

Tears stung Emma’s eyes. She couldn’t seem to get past all the emotions that

threatened to overtake her. She closed her eyes, but it didn't help the burning sensation subside. Sophia wrapped her arms around her again.

“Sophia!” A deep voice from the first floor called up to her. “We have a problem!”

Emma withdrew and shot Sophia a concerned look. “What do you think that's about?”

“I'm sure it's nothing,” she assured her. “I'll go check it out and be right back.”

Emma nodded, hovering in the doorway as Sophia hurried downstairs. There were hushed, anxious voices—more than just Mateo and Sophia. Emma couldn't hear a thing, even with how much she strained to listen.

Footsteps raced up the stairs and a very worried Sophia materialized. “There's a reporter at the door.”

Emma gasped. “A reporter?”

She nodded. “Do you think Caleb...?”

Emma shook her head. “I don't think he'd do something like that. He might be really mad at me, but I don't think he'd intentionally try to hurt me. What about Charlie?”

This time Sophia shook her head. “The Keagans might be a lot of things, but they wouldn't intentionally hurt anyone. I doubt this has anything to do with them.” She moved to the window and stared down at the front yard. “Mateo is out there talking to him. He said he'd tell him to leave and that you're not here. Does anyone else know?”

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Emma couldn't think of anyone who would have recognized her. On top of that, Caleb and his family were the only ones to know that Sophia had let her stay.

Then her thoughts came to a screeching halt and her heart hammered against her ribs with the strength of war drums.

There was one person who might know.

Emma's eyes lifted and she glanced in Sophia's direction. "My manager," she whispered.

Sophia turned around, her concern deepening. "You don't think she would do that, do you?"

"I think Rachel is capable of anything as long as she thinks she's going to get something out of it. If she thought that some good publicity would dredge up interest in an otherwise dull news segment, she'd send someone." She moved across the room and stood beside Sophia.

"Do you recognize him?"

Emma shook her head. "But that doesn't mean anything. They all look the same. They all hold a camera in my face and steal pictures. It's their job. If there's only one, then it's likely she's got him in her pocket. He won't tell anyone else because he wants the story." Emma groaned. "I can't believe she did this. I told her I was coming home."

“It’s like you said. She’s doing this because she thinks she’s got your best interest at heart.”

“Yeah,” Emma said. “And I think it’s about time she suffers the consequences for going against what I’ve asked. Her contract is going to be up soon. As much as I appreciate what she’s done for me, I’m going to make it perfectly clear she will no longer be my manager if this is what I have to look forward to.”

“That sounds fair to me,” Sophia said. “Someone who works for you has to toe the line, you know?”

“Exactly.” They watched Mateo and Ruben march the reporter to his car. The man wasn’t happy about it, but at least he didn’t linger. “I think I’m going to have to leave sooner than I planned. I don’t want him drawing more attention.”

Sophia’s look of understanding was all Emma needed.

24

Caleb

Six months later

A good day was when Caleb didn’t have to interact with anyone—including his own family. Daniel, and even Charlie, had stopped asking him about Emma, but even if they hadn’t, he wouldn’t have given them anything. It was none of their business if he was in communication with Emma.

Still, that didn’t stop Charlie from telling him any update she got about Emma. Spring turned into summer and then fall. The days were shorter, colder. If Caleb had his way, he wouldn’t have heard a single thing about the tour coming to a close. From the

sound of it, there were only a couple more concerts coming up. Maybe when the tour was over, Charlie would finally drop her fascination with Emma Hart.

He sat in the quiet living room, thankful for the chance to be alone. Everyone else had gone out to the fall festival that was taking place in the square. Well, everyone but Daniel. His older brother remained the aloof man he'd always been.

But what did Caleb expect? Daniel was the giant of the family. He was big and burly, and those who didn't know him might even have been a little scared of him. Ironically, Daniel was probably the kindest of the lot of them. He was what Caleb considered a gentle giant.

The only people he spoke to out of turn were his own family, and that was because he knew them best. He was the one Caleb knew he had to avoid if he didn't want to get an earful about how he lived his life.

He'd already shared his opinion of Caleb's situation regarding Emma. And he only continued to dig his heels in whenever Caleb refused to listen. Eventually, he'd lose interest.

Or at least Caleb hoped he would.

The door burst open and Charlie entered, followed by some of the sisters-in-law. "Can you believe it? I thought for sure that when she announced her new album, she wouldn't have it ready until next spring. But she said it will come out at her last concert during this tour." Charlie's excited chatter filled the entryway. Her eyes locked with Caleb's, and she looked away.

Margot laughed. "It sure sounds like you've become her biggest fan."

Charlie waved a dismissive hand. "I'm definitely not her biggest fan. I just really like

her music.”

“She doesn’t even write her own lyrics,” Caleb said as he got to his feet. “What is there to like about someone like that?”

Charlie scowled at him. “You realize a lot of singers don’t write their own music. That’s normal.”

“And a lot of singers write their own stuff, too. So who’s to say what’s normal and what isn’t?” He shook his head as he left the room. He didn’t have any reason to be mad at his kid sister. She hadn’t done anything to hurt him. And yet with her insistence on sharing every single tidbit of information about Emma, he’d grown to resent her.

It was her interest that had him digging for information on his own. When it was dark and everyone had already gone to bed, he’d pull out his computer and type in her name.

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Her pictures were all over the internet. He'd felt like such a whopping idiot for not realizing who she was. Emma was the number one female country singer of the year, from the looks of it. She was everywhere.

After realizing what he'd been up against, Caleb snapped his computer shut. He wasn't going to go looking for updates. They only angered him further.

Caleb marched out of the house, the congestion of the family returning home already overwhelming. Instead, he went out to the barn. At least the animals didn't want to gossip about a country music star. Even if they did, he wouldn't be able to understand them.

He entered the barn and immediately leaned against the wall. Six months had gone by since he'd last seen her. Six months after listening to her make excuse after excuse as to why she couldn't simply tell him the truth. Six full months and he hadn't managed to figure out a way to get over her.

It wasn't normal.

"Thinking about Emma, huh."

Caleb jumped and turned toward the source of the voice. Daniel stood in the doorway of one of the stalls, a brush in hand. He glanced over at Caleb with that knowing, quiet look that Caleb had grown to hate. "It's none of your business."

"You're right. It's not."

“Then don’t talk about it.”

Daniel shrugged. “Suit yourself. But I know it’s better to talk about something like this than to ignore it. Nothing is going to be fixed by running from it.”

“I’m not the one running.” He pointed out the door as if Emma were right there. “She’s the one who was running. She ran from everything from the very get-go. What kind of person runs from her job? From her future? From her family?”

Daniel gave Caleb a pointed look. “You know better than most how often that happens.”

“Our parents don’t count. They weren’t right in the head. They couldn’t be. There was too much responsibility, and they would have only messed us up.”

“I dunno’ I feel like we’re all a little messed up anyway.”

“We turned out okay. Look at us. None of us have run from our obligations.”

Daniel lifted a brow. “And Carter? What about him?”

“That’s different.”

“Is it?”

Caleb scowled. “Yes, it’s different. Our folks. Carter. None of them had what she had.”

“And that makes it okay? Look who’s making excuses now.”

Heat flashed beneath his skin and he charged toward his brother. “I don’t care what

you say. Emma was a coward when she didn't have to be. How hard would it have been for her to tell me who she was, huh? She could have said it that first night we were staying at Mateo's. She could have told me when she started playing that guitar. There were so many opportunities for her to just say something!"

"Think about what you're saying, Caleb, and then think about how you treated her in the beginning. I don't see you offering her your trust right out of the gate. Why expect her to? She had a lot more to protect than you had. What would have happened if you learned who she was and then told someone? Do you think people would have just left her alone? She would have been fighting off the paparazzi right and left."

"I wouldn't have breathed a word, and you know it," Caleb spat. "No one wants to keep Copper Creek free of that sort of thing more than me. If I had my way, we'd prevent people from moving here and make it our own little paradise."

Daniel chuckled. "Then you would have never met her."

"Maybe that would have been for the best," Caleb said. He didn't have to look in Daniel's direction to know his brother was judging him. He spun around with the intention of leaving the barn to find some solace elsewhere when his brother's voice stopped him.

"You have to forgive her, Caleb."

"I don't have to do any such thing," he shot back, turning to face Daniel. "She didn't ask for my forgiveness, and even if she did, I wouldn't have to give it."

"That's where you're a little misguided."

Caleb groaned. This was what he'd been trying to avoid. He didn't need a sermon

from his brother. There was a reason he'd kept to himself and tried to avoid people. He'd wanted to stop his heart from being torn to shreds by someone who was only going to betray him. That's what most people did. And Emma was no different.

It didn't matter that she hadn't meant to hurt him. What mattered was that she'd hurt him, and she could have avoided dragging it out.

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“God wants us to forgive those who trespass against us. You don’t have to forget what she did, and you don’t have to trust her to not make the same choices, but you should allow yourself to forgive her for your own heart’s sake. You’re poisoning yourself.”

Chills crawled down Caleb’s spine at his brother’s words. He shoved aside the discomfort from the experience and folded his arms. “Like I said, I don’t have to forgive her if I don’t feel it in my heart. I’m permitted to live my life the way I see fit. If that way helps me to protect my own self-interests, then I’m going to do it.”

“Suit yourself. But I’d wager it’s going to weigh on you eventually. It’s harder to get up in the morning. It’s harder to find joy. When you’re burdened by the past, you might find that you can no longer exist in the present.”

Another groan escaped Caleb’s throat, and he spun around to march out of the barn without looking back. Daniel was all talk. Sure, he might have some valid points, but that didn’t mean Caleb should just throw out his own instincts.

He clenched his fists and relaxed his fingers several times before he made it to the house. For a brief moment, he considered heading inside, and then he thought better of it. If Charlie was still anywhere nearby, she’d want to talk about Emma. Why couldn’t she just get the hint that he wanted nothing to do with the girl he’d given his heart to?

Caleb crumpled into a seated position on the porch steps and rested his forearms against his knees. He should probably just go to his room. At least he’d be able to find a little peace and quiet in that space. Charlie and Daniel wouldn’t dare venture

into his private quarters. Unfortunately, it felt almost too cold, too empty. The walls echoed with the sounds of Emma's music that she'd played on her guitar even though she'd never actually visited inside his home.

Ironically, the only place he could get some peace was in nature. He could close his eyes and focus on the breeze that tugged at his clothes, his hat, and his hair. He could listen to the critters scurrying in the brush. He could ignore his racing thoughts and pay more attention to how the cold soaked into his skin and settled into his bones. Summer was over. All evidence of Emma would be gone soon, and a fresh new year would begin in just a few months. Maybe his heart would be better equipped after Christmas.

The front door to the house burst open and Charlie released a frustrated groan. "I can't believe it!" She stomped her foot like she was a teenager.

Caleb took a deep, calming breath. If he remained quiet, then she might not see him.

She stomped across the porch only to settle beside him on the top step. "Can you believe that Wade won't let me go to Emma's concert?"

Caleb nearly told her that was because Wade was smarter than all of them and knew better, but he kept his mouth shut instead, hoping she'd leave.

"Emma finally announced where her surprise concert is going to be, and for the first time in my life, I'm close enough to go."

He stiffened, finally glancing in her direction. The look of surprise must have been written all over his face because she continued.

"I know, right? I had my suspicions that she'd come to Colorado after that day she showed up to talk to you. But I never would have dreamed they would make it work

in Colorado Springs. Denver, I would have understood. But Colorado Springs! That's not even very far! And Wade said that I can't go alone."

Caleb turned his attention out to the barn. "It's for the best, Charlie."

"It's not fair, is what it is. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I'm going to miss it. Tickets are going to sell out faster than apple pie at Sal's Diner. They go on sale next week and then, poof, they'll be gone."

He glanced at his sister, grateful that she wasn't begging him to take her. Getting to his feet, he muttered, "I'm going to bed."

25

Emily

A drop of sweat traced down Emma's temple. Her breathing was hard, and her heart pounded with the adrenaline only a live performance could offer. She stared at herself in the mirror lined with lights, hardly recognizing the person she'd become since returning home from Colorado.

She was happier. She'd taken more control over her own career, and she was better for it. Emma could finally say she felt like she was at the helm, guiding the ship to her final destination.

Rachel wasn't all that thrilled, but she'd stuck it out and agreed to the new contract that Emma had written up. Her manager had far less pull when it came to what Emma wanted to schedule, which left Emma open to fill her time with ventures she was more interested in—ventures like the black mare she'd purchased and the stable at her place to go with it.

Emma reached for her makeup case and pulled out her lipstick to retouch before she made her way to the limo out front. Tonight was a good one. The crowds had gone crazy over her announcement of the song that would top the charts the second it was released. She'd played the melody but didn't sing. She wouldn't do that until she reached Colorado Springs.

That concert crowd would be the first to hear the completed song—Caleb's Song. No one knew the name of her album and definitely not the title of that specific song. Rachel had insisted that she couldn't title it that—something about Caleb coming back for all kinds of royalties. Emma didn't care. He'd earned every bit of money he wanted from the lyrics he'd written. Just because he hadn't come asking for anything yet didn't mean it wouldn't happen, and she welcomed the possibility.

There was still a small part of her heart that prayed he would reach out to her—and that hope was the only reason she still had her burner phone from Copper Creek.

The dressing room door opened and Rachel slipped inside, her clipboard at her hip. "Everything is ready for your concert in two weeks. For the life of me I don't know why you've insisted on only selling tickets one week in advance."

"I told you already. I wanted that one to be a surprise." Mostly, she'd clung to the idea that Caleb might have forgiven her by the time it was announced, and he might come to the concert to see her. It was a long shot, but the best one she had at seeing him again.

"No, I mean why did you pick Colorado Springs? Denver had a much better arena for us?—"

Emma sighed. "We've been through that, too. It's close enough to where I was staying without actually being there."

“Sweetie.” Rachel shot her a flat look. “Even if you’d wanted the concert hosted in that small town, you wouldn’t have been able to do it without a huge financial loss. We would have been responsible for prepping a huge field with a stage, equipment, and facilities for the concertgoers.”

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“You know money wasn’t the reason, so stop pretending it was. No one is going to know about Copper Creek if I have anything to say about it.”

Her manager’s fake smile said more than her words ever could. It wasn’t that she didn’t understand Emma’s choices; it was that she refused to try to understand them. All she wanted was to see the dollar signs.

Turning toward the mirror, Emma adjusted her hair, tucking a stray strand behind her ear. “Is there anything else?”

Rachel flipped through the documents in her hands, then shook her head. “That’s it.” She brought the clipboard to her chest and stared hard at Emma’s reflection. “I do want to know one thing, though. After this last concert, when can we start planning for the next tour? There is so much buzz about your new album, and people are already demanding more appearances.”

Emma shrugged. “I don’t know yet. I’d like to take some time to write some more music without my schedule breathing down my neck.”

Her manager sighed. It wasn’t the answer she’d wanted, but it would be the answer Emma gave her every single time she asked. If Rachel didn’t like what was going on, she could go find a new job.

Rachel slipped out the door, and Emma pushed away from the counter, preparing herself to go through the crowds of people who were backstage when the door opened again. It shut in a flurry and Jessica spun around. “Do you have any idea how hard it was to get back here?” she demanded.

Emma laughed as she swept her little sister into a big hug. “I didn’t think you were going to make it.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t miss it for the world. But sheesh, what’s a girl gotta do to get backstage and see her sister?” She held up the backstage pass. “I think you need to have a new one of these designed. This time make one just for me and have it say something like ‘Sister to the Star’ or some other nonsense. I literally had to show the bouncer guy a picture of you and me together in order for him to let me through.”

Laughing again, Emma shook her head. “You didn’t.”

“I did! The guy didn’t believe me when I said that we were related. He insisted on proof.” Jessica pulled Emma toward the small loveseat to the side and tugged her into a seated position. “Okay, so you have to catch me up on everything. We never really got to catch up after you spilled all the beans about Caleb. Has he called you? Have you called him? Any news?”

Emma frowned and looked away. “Unfortunately, no.”

“Toeverything? Come on, Em. There has to be something. I know there has to—especially now that you announced you’d be going back to Colorado Springs. He has to know you picked that place because of him, right?”

Emma shook her head. “I don’t even know if he’s been keeping tabs on me. He didn’t know who I was to begin with. Why would he be inclined to pay attention now?”

“Because he fell in love with you! That’s why. He fell for you and you fell for him. There has to be a happy ending in this mess somehow.”

Emma had thought that very thing for the longest time. She’d wished and prayed that Caleb would reach out and ask to see her. If he had, she would have flown right back

to Colorado just to get a coffee with him. But that wasn't going to happen. She'd been the one to break his heart, and she was going to be the one to carry the burden.

Jessica nudged her, forcing her to meet her sister's eyes. "Maybe you should just send him some tickets. I bet that would get his attention. He couldn't ignore you then."

"Oh, yes, he could. I don't think it would matter if I delivered the tickets via a flying pig. He would probably tear them up the second he got them."

It was Jessica's turn to be completely disappointed. "Geez. I didn't think it was that bad. I thought that there was still a little hope."

"Me, too," Emma said.

"But what if you're wrong?"

"What do you mean, if I'm wrong? Caleb hasn't reached out. If he wanted anything to do with me, he would have by now. And honestly, I don't blame him."

Jessica took Emma's hands in her own. "What if he shows? Wouldn't you want to know? Wouldn't you want to make some grand gesture like call him up on stage and have him be there when you sing him his song?"

Emma bit down on her lower lip to prevent herself from crying. Nothing would make her happier than knowing he'd decided to come to her show and hear the song she'd finished with his words. She still had the crumpled paper with all the lyrics he'd scrawled on it. In fact, she'd framed it and hung it in her apartment. "I would love it if he came," she rasped, "but eventually we all have to accept that no one is free from the consequences of their decisions."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Jessica asked. "You didn't do anything wrong."

“Yes, I did. Everything I did can be rationalized, for sure. Everything can be explained away as a mental break or trying to protect myself, but that doesn’t change the fact that I lied to him for weeks on end for my own selfish reasons.”

Her sister went quiet. They’d had this conversation several times before. No matter how many times Emma tried to convince her sister of the truth, Jessica wouldn’t accept it. Perhaps it was because they were sisters. Or maybe it was because Jessica wanted so badly to believe in happily ever afters. Either way, a fairytale ending simply wasn’t in the cards for Emma. She’d come to accept it, and she was just waiting for her sister to do so as well.

Emma took a deep breath and forced a smile. “I’m glad you came, though. What was your favorite song?”

“You should call the box office at the venue.”

“Jessica.” Emma groaned. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

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“Think about it. If he does get a ticket...”

“That’s a big if.”

“I know. And if it happens, then you can upgrade his ticket.”

Emma pressed her fingers to her temples. “It’s not that easy. I can’t just?”

“You’re Emma Hart. You can do anything. All you have to do is make a few calls. Actually, get Rachel to do it. All they need to know is Caleb’s name. And maybe the name of anyone who might go with him. If you know his phone number, they could confirm it with that, too—just in case there are more Caleb Keagans who live in Colorado.”

She stared at her sister with mild disbelief. “You really think there’s a chance that he could just show up?”

“I do. I heard how you talked about him. I read those lyrics he wrote for you. Even if it’s a small chance, I think you should allow yourself to believe it’s possible.” Jessica leaned closer. “Love like that doesn’t just disappear.”

Emma’s heart had been barely hanging on by a thread. She thought she’d gotten over him. She’d told herself that if she could make it to the next concert, then the pain wouldn’t be nearly as bad. But it was Jessica’s words that caused every fiber holding her heart together to unravel.

Tears stung her eyes, and she shot to her feet to avoid letting her sister see just how

much she'd been affected. "Fine. I'll call the box office. But I want to make it clear that I don't think he's going to show. I'm doing it for you."

"That's fine," Jessica offered. "Just so long as you do it. If he doesn't show, I'll drop it. I won't bring him up ever again."

"Good," Emma said. "Look, I'm happy you're here, but I have to get going. You can come out with me, or you can wait for the crowds to die down." She reached for the doorknob, waiting for her sister's response.

"I drove, so I'll head out after you're gone."

"Okay," Emma said. Before she opened the door, she glanced over her shoulder. "Jessica?"

"Yeah?"

"Will you come? To the show in Colorado?"

Jessica grinned. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

26

Caleb

Atop his horse, Caleb searched the horizon as if it would give him all the answers he needed to move on from the betrayal he'd experienced. An unexpected hurdle came in knowing that his brothers didn't agree with his sentiment, though he could tolerate their opinions. It was Charlie who was the worst of them. She thought he'd been too quick to judge Emma.

What's in a name anyway? That's what she'd asked him. Emma. Emily. Both were the same person. Just because the world knew Emma as one person and he knew Emily as another shouldn't matter.

There would be no convincing her. If anything, Charlie loved Emma even more knowing that her brother had dated her—sort of.

He huffed and turned his horse around to head home. He could only spend so much time out in the pastures. His horse grew restless, and he knew he was missing supper. That was just as well. He'd just pick at the leftovers that got put in the fridge.

He nudged his horse forward into an easy walk, and that was when his heart started revolting against his mind.

Caleb wanted to believe that he was wrong; he really did. He wanted to try to accept that Emma was only doing what she did in order to protect herself, but there was just too much he could argue against.

From the beginning, he'd been careful. But after getting to know her a little better, he'd allowed himself to start trusting her. The truth was that she hadn't trusted him.

That was the question he continued to ask himself, over and over again. What had he done—or failed to do—that prevented her from giving him the benefit of the doubt?

Frustration continued to grow, festering like an infected wound deep in his soul.

Trust was everything. She'd broken his. And she wasn't willing to give him hers.

Those were the points he made when he got himself into this argument. Even if he wanted to get her back, they simply wouldn't work. A relationship where the two people couldn't have faith in one another was doomed from the start.

There was barely any light left in the sky when Caleb made it back to the barn. The porch lights glowed from the house, and the exterior lights on the barn had turned on. A soft light from inside the barn emanated—mostly for the sake of anyone who needed to make a quick trip inside or so they could find the main light switch.

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The second he entered the barn, he could sense something was off. The horses shuffled restlessly in their stalls. A couple of them poked their heads out of their stalls and tossed their manes before nickering and retreating.

Caleb dismounted, alert and on edge. The hairs on the back of his neck lifted. Whatever was spooking the horses was inside. It could be anything. With the temps dropping, prey was harder to find for the larger predators. There could be a coyote or a wolf somewhere inside the barn.

Maybe it was the change in the weather. Sometimes the animals got antsy when a storm was on its way. Though he knew better than to believe that rationale. He'd just been outside and there wasn't even a cool breeze to speak of.

He cleared his throat and lifted his chin, wishing for the first time he'd carried a shotgun with him on his rides. "Hello? I know you're in here. The horses don't lie." He worked his jaw, his eyes darting from one side to the next. "You might as well come out, or I'm getting my brothers and when we find you?"

"Geez, Caleb, will you chill out?" A familiar figure emerged from an empty stall. The beard on his face only momentarily threw Caleb off.

"Carter?" he whispered. He took a step forward, then he ran toward his twin and grabbed him close into a bear hug. Their hold on one another was constrictive and yet more comforting than anything Caleb had experienced in a long time. He didn't realize he had tears in his eyes until he pulled back and gave his brother a once-over.

Carter had a black eye. His hair was disheveled and mussed, and his beard needed a

good trim. The T-shirt and jeans he wore were torn and filthy. It looked like he'd come straight from a bar fight.

Caleb shook his head. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing." Carter looked away as he stepped back. "I shouldn't have come back."

"What? No. You're not leaving again in your condition." Caleb's hand shot out and grabbed Carter by his upper arm.

His brother jumped and yanked his arm out of Caleb's grasp. He glowered at Caleb, then blew out a harsh breath as he raked a hand through his hair.

"Hey," Caleb said, quieter this time. "You can tell me. Whatever it is, we'll help. That's what family does."

Carter continued to scowl, but this time he turned his fury to the ground. "Yeah? And does family steal? Does family threaten to run away and take steps to never be found again? I think it's safe to say that I've lost the privilege of being called family."

Caleb wanted to reassure his twin. He wanted to tell him that he was wrong. But how could he tell him any of that when he'd been preaching his whole life that honesty and loyalty are the most important things? If he wasn't willing to hear Emma out and offer her forgiveness, then it didn't make sense for him to tell Carter that he'd be welcomed with open arms.

A lump formed in his throat, and he felt sick to his stomach. Wade would argue. Most of his siblings would likely tell Carter that there was a path back from what he'd done.

"You want to know something ironic?" Carter asked, finally looking up to meet

Caleb's gaze. "You were right."

"About what?"

"Family."

Caleb's brows pulled together, creasing. "What about it?"

"It's everything. Family is the most important thing in this world. I didn't see it. I didn't acknowledge it. Our family is one of the biggest in town. You would have thought that if two people were willing to create a family with twelve children, they would love them. But we were abandoned, Caleb. Our parents didn't want us."

They'd talked about this before, but usually it was Caleb who was venting about the pain he felt over their loss.

Carter shut his eyes and a tear slipped down his cheek, disappearing into his facial hair. "And even with that terrible start, we made it. We had Wade and Annabel. We understood that our family was what kept us strong and safe."

Caleb listened in silence. His heart ached for his brother. Or maybe he was actually feeling the ache his brother experienced. Either way, the tightness in his chest had become unbearable.

"Then I had to go and ruin it. I had to break the bond I had with the people who actually cared about me. What kind of person does that?"

"You're right," Caleb said.

Carter flinched.

“The people in your family are the only ones you can trust—or should be able to trust. But we’re human. Even family can betray you.”

Another tear slipped down Carter’s cheek. “That’s why I can’t... I won’t go in there and face them.”

It wasn’t hard to understand what he was trying to say. He didn’t think he could talk to their family. Caleb understood that feeling to his core. Hadn’t he done wrong by Liam? He’d been judgmental to the point of tearing Liam away from Margot.

They were quite a pair.

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“You don’t have to go in there and face them—not if you don’t want to.”

Carter shook his head. “I don’t think I can. Not with what I did.”

“They’ll trust you again, in time. You just have to earn it back.”

“They shouldn’t have to be put in that position. I should have never?—”

Caleb reached out and placed his hands on his brother’s shoulders, giving him a little shake. “Carter. Listen to me. There’s a reason why you came back. I don’t know what it is. I don’t know what happened. But I do know that you listened to your gut, and this is where it landed you. Don’t ignore that.” His stomach churned as his thoughts shifted to Emma. Was he following his own instincts when it came to his feelings for her?

If anything, he was pushing them away.

He searched Carter’s eyes. “You don’t have to do anything you’re not ready for. If you want me to get you a motel room for a little while before you get up the courage to come back?—”

Carter shook his head. “No. You’re right. I should stay. No more running from my problems.

Caleb glanced at Carter from across the living room. While the family reunion had been tense, and the air around them still was, Carter had taken the first step. It was more than Caleb could say for himself.

He couldn't stop thinking about Emma. He'd been so focused on convincing his brother to listen to his heart that he'd let himself forget about his own heartache. It was difficult not to draw some parallels to his own situation. The worst part was that Emma's trespasses weren't nearly as serious as what Carter had done.

Caleb couldn't help but feel like a hypocrite.

Charlie settled onto the couch beside Carter and held up her phone, acting as if Carter had only gone out for groceries and not disappeared for a couple years. "Tickets go on sale in one hour. Can you believe it? Emma Hart is coming to Colorado Springs! And she's debuting a new album!"

Carter offered a smile. "That's cool, sis."

"You want to know what's even better? She was here! She was in Copper Creek. You totally missed it."

He lifted his brows and glanced at Caleb, who only rolled his eyes.

Charlie scooted even closer, and her voice lowered conspiratorially. "Wanna know something even better?"

"It gets better?" Carter chuckled dryly.

"Caleb dated her."

Carter shot a surprised look at Caleb.

"It's true," Charlie squealed. "He did. And what's ridiculous is that no one will go with me to the concert. Not even Caleb. Wade says I have to go with someone because it's safer. Jokes on him because I'm an adult and I'm going to do what I

want.”

Carter’s head whipped around to look at her. “You shouldn’t do that,” he said.

“Why?” Charlie demanded. “Wade isn’t the boss. We’re all adults. Just because we still live here?—”

“Because he’s trying to keep you safe,” Carter interrupted. He glanced at Caleb. “We should go with her.”

Caleb stiffened. “What? Why?”

Charlie squealed at the exact same time Caleb argued.

“Because she needs someone to go with her, and she’s not going to listen to anyone who tells her she shouldn’t. You know Emma?—”

“Absolutely not! What Charlie didn’t tell you is that Emma lied the entire time we were... involved.” He sat up a little straighter.

“Yeah, and she tried to apologize,” Charlie cut in. “She only lied about her name because she didn’t want the paparazzi to know where she was, but Caleb didn’t want to listen.”

Carter frowned. “That doesn’t seem so bad.”

Caleb looked away. “It doesn’t matter anymore.”

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“He still loves her,” Charlie teased, causing his gaze to swivel back.

“What? No, I don’t.”

“Sure, you do,” Charlie sang. “Everyone can tell. You haven’t stopped moping for the last six months.”

Carter’s gaze delved into Caleb’s, studying him. “We should go.”

“What? Why?” Caleb repeated, shooting out of his seat. “She probably doesn’t even want to see me. There’s no point.”

“Because if there’s even a small chance... and if your instincts are telling you to do it...” Carter offered him a wan smile. “Then what do you have to lose?”

27

Emma

The lights surrounding Emma’s mirror blurred when she stared off in thought. Tonight was the night. Up until thirty minutes ago, the VIP passes hadn’t been picked up. She wanted to hate Jessica for convincing her to make the request, but she couldn’t.

Instead, she hated herself for getting her hopes up. She’d wanted so badly for Caleb to show up and give her another chance.

Boy, her wishes reeked of desperation. At least now she had her answer. All Caleb had wanted was for her to be honest with him, but she'd been too much of a coward to give him that. It was her own fault, really.

She sighed as she placed her head in her hands.

A knock on her dressing room door was quickly followed by it creaking open. "Em?" Jessica's voice broke the strained silence in the dressing room.

Emma sat up and turned to face her sister. They'd decided to come to the venue together so Jessica wouldn't have as much trouble getting backstage. She wore her own VIP pass around her neck, though she didn't need it this time, as Emma had made sure the security guards knew who she was.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

Emma shook her head, fighting the emotion that burned like flowing lava—threatening to escape out any way it could. "I don't know what I'm going to do, Jess."

Jessica closed the door behind her and moved into the room. "Are you getting stage fright?"

Emma snorted. "I don't think I'm capable of getting that anymore."

"Then... is it... Caleb?"

Emma waved her fingers at her face in a last-ditch attempt to keep the tears from ruining her makeup. "Yeah."

"He didn't get the tickets." Her expression said it all. She was just as disappointed as

Emma had been. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “That’s a bummer.”

“Yeah,” Emma’s voice choked in the back of her throat. “It’s a huge bummer. How am I supposed to go out there on stage and sing his song? How am I supposed to tell everyone about him when I know I won’t ever see him again?”

This time a tear did get through. It dragged down her cheek and jumped off the edge of her chin. She lifted her eyes to the ceiling and focused on her breathing. “I don’t know that my heart will be able to take it. I think there was a very small part of me that had held out hope that he was going to come.”

Jessica launched across the room and wrapped her arms around Emma. “Me too,” she whispered. “I should have never told you to?—”

“It’s not your fault,” Emma insisted. “I could have?—”

“Don’t do that.”

Emma gave her sister a sharp look.

“You can’t blame yourself, either.” Jessica’s sad smile did little to make Emma feel better about any of this. “Not every love can be like a sunset.”

Emma let out a devastatingly sad laugh. “It was with him.”

“I know,” she whispered. “And you’ll always remember it.” She hugged Emma tighter. “You’ll get through this.”

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Another knock on the door drew their attention. It opened and a gal wearing a headset leaned inside. “Thirty minutes to curtain, Miss Hart.” She withdrew, then leaned in once more. “Oh. You said you wanted an update on those VIP tickets you requested at the box office?”

Emma froze, then her eyes darted to Jessica and back to the woman at the door. “Yes,” she rasped.

“I believe they were picked up five minutes ago.”

Jessica spun around with bright eyes and a sharp laugh. “You hear that? He got them.”

Emma’s whole body shook. Her heart pounded erratically. “It doesn’t mean anything,” she whispered. “It could be anyone.”

“Anyone named Caleb Keagan.” Jessica grabbed Emma’s hands and jumped up and down. “He’s here, Em! He came. That has to mean something.”

Emma pulled her hands from her sister’s grasp. They were still trembling, and she couldn’t tell if she was breathing. Maybe she was dreaming. Still, she couldn’t allow herself to believe what she’d been told. The woman was long gone, so she couldn’t get any additional details. Emma shook her head again. “Don’t you think there could be another Caleb Keagan in a hundred-mile radius? Maybe it’s a more common name than I thought.”

“But you gave them his phone number to have them verify.”

She was right.

Emma's legs tingled with a more intense numbness. She was quickly losing control of her faculties. This was her chance—the one she'd been praying for.

Caleb was here.

She closed her eyes and took in a shuddering breath. As much as she wanted to believe he was here to see her, she had to be realistic. There was still a very good chance that Caleb had only come because his sister wanted him to. He might have come to get additional closure.

Would she be able to handle it if he bought tickets only to tell her that he didn't want her using the song he wrote?

Her stomach lurched with a new kind of anxiety. She shot out of her seat and shook her hands as she paced. "What if he doesn't care for me anymore?"

"What are you talking about? He came to see you."

She spun to face her sister. "But what if he only came to tell me he doesn't want anything to do with me or the song? What if he wants to claim copyright for the music? I already have it in the album that's releasing tonight."

"Would he do that?"

Emma didn't think so, but anything was possible. She couldn't predict anything at this moment. She shook her head. "I don't know."

"Then don't worry about it," Jessica insisted. She stepped toward Emma and took her hands to stop Emma's pacing. "All you can do is go out there and sing. That's what

everyone is here to see anyway, right? You can do this.”

Emma nodded. Her sister was right. Whatever was going to happen would happen. She had a team of lawyers at the ready if there was a problem. She closed her eyes briefly, took in a deep breath, then nodded as she opened her eyes. “Okay.”

Bright lights flooded the stage. Fans screamed. Everyone backstage hustled and spoke through their headsets. Beneath the floor of the platform, Emma sat on a simple stool, her acoustic guitar in hand.

Caleb’s Song was originally planned for the second half of the concert, but Emma made the change at the last minute. If Caleb was here, she wanted him to know how she felt. It took everything inside her to push aside all the feelings of self-doubt and get on that stool.

Any second now she’d be lifted onto the stage and the lights would go down with only one shining on her. She wouldn’t be able to see him, she knew that. All she could do was hope that he was paying attention—and that he was there for her.

Emma wouldn’t have been surprised if her mic picked up her pounding heart. For the first time in a long while, she was nervous. So many scenarios played in her head, but there was only one that could bring her peace, and that was the one she latched onto.

“Okay, Miss Hart,” a voice said in her earpiece. “You’re on in five... four... three...” The floor beneath her lurched upward. Screaming voices and cheers reached her as the ceiling overhead split open and she was bathed in light.

She stared out into the dark expanse of the audience. For a brief moment, she had to focus on taking a deep breath. Then she shoved aside all the thoughts that threatened to drag her down and she put on her smile. “Hello, Colorado Springs!”

The crowd went wild. Phone camera lights flickered through the waves of people. Shouts and screams filled the air. Emma waved a hand, and they quieted down.

“The last couple of months has been quite a wild ride, hasn’t it?”

More cheers.

“I know!” She laughed, but on the inside she wished she could see him, know where he was. “There was some craziness a few months back. I don’t know if you heard about it.” She glanced around at the silhouettes of those in attendance. “Let me tell you, those few months I was MIA were some of the best I’ve had in my entire life.” Her voice grew solemn. “I met some of the very best people I could have ever hoped to meet. One in particular...” Her voice broke. “He stole my heart.”

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Emma had never heard the audience go quiet so fast. She could have heard a pin land on shag carpet for how silent it was.

A tear formed at the edge of her eye and she wiped at it with the crook of her finger. “But that’s how you Colorado men are, isn’t it? You’re a different breed. And let me tell you. I was the luckiest woman alive when I was with him.” She let out a sad laugh. “Enough about that. I came here to debut my new album, and the first song I’m going to sing... well, he put the words to some music that I’ve been composing for quite some time.” She scanned the crowd, then adjusted her hold on the guitar.

Fingers in place, she took a deep breath and plucked out the intro. Here went nothing. “This is called ‘Caleb’s Song.’”

I was driftin’ like a tumbleweed, through a world I never seemed to need. Then you turned my world upside down, and I’m walking on clouds since you’ve been around.

Now every sunset’s a painting in the sky, and every moment with you feels like the first time, Darlin’, you’re the reason I believe in love again. In this dance we’re in, I can’t help wishing it never ends.

It’s a new love, like a wildflower in bloom, You’re the sunshine breakin’ through the cloudy afternoon. In your arms, I found a place I can belong. With this love, we’ll write our own song.

From the moment our eyes first met, I knew there was somethin’ I couldn’t forget. With your laughter like a melody, You’re the rhythm to this heart of mine, set free.

Now every sunrise is a promise so true, with every kiss, darlin', I fall deeper for you.
In your love, I've found my home sweet home. In this journey together, we'll never
be alone.

It's a new love, like a wildflower in bloom, You're the sunshine breakin' through the
cloudy afternoon. In your arms, I found a place I can belong. With this love, we'll
write our own song.

Let's take this road, hand in hand, Through the valleys and across the golden sands.
With you by my side, the future's bright and clear. In this brand-new love, I'll hold
you near.

It's a new love, like a wildflower in bloom, You're the sunshine breakin' through the
cloudy afternoon. In your arms, I found a place I can belong. With this love, we'll
write our own song.

So take my hand and hold on tight, Through the stars and the fireflies, we'll ride. In
this country love song, you're my melody, Forever and always, you're the one for
me.

Emma let the last note echo into nothingness, nearly forgetting that she was
performing live. But then the audience roared with applause. She opened her eyes and
let out a little laugh. She got to her feet, and a stagehand retrieved her stool. The rest
of the performance went as planned. She peppered some of her classic songs with
those in her new album. With each new song, her anticipation of seeing Caleb grew.

When the show had ended and she'd left the stage after her encore performance, she
returned to her dressing room. Jessica threw herself into Emma's exhausted arms.
"That was so good! You did it! You made it through."

Emma laughed to keep herself from crying. "I did, didn't I?" She glanced toward the

door, her nerves getting the better of her.

“Don’t worry, he’ll come,” Jessica assured her. “Just be patient.”

28

Caleb

Caleb stared at the door as if doing so hard enough would allow him to see inside. In that room, Emma would be waiting.

Well, maybe she wouldn’t be waiting to see him. She could be waiting for her security team to whisk her away into one of the waiting limos outside. She could be waiting for any number of fans who paid for a backstage pass in order to meet her. Maybe she wasn’t even in there at all.

Carter nudged him. “Are you going to knock or what?”

He shot his brother a dark look. The fact that his brother and sister convinced him to come at all still didn’t sit well with him. As much as he’d wanted to come to satisfy that gnawing ache he had in his chest, he was equally terrified that she would take one look at him and tell him to get lost. “What if she doesn’t want to see me?” he whispered.

Charlie rolled her eyes and let out a groan. “Who else would have upgraded our tickets? Who else would have thought to confirm us with your phone number? I don’t know of anyone on her team who would have done that, do you?”

“She’s right,” Carter said.

“And did you hear the way she sang your song?” Charlie punched him playfully in

the arm. “If that wasn’t her proclaiming her love for you, I don’t know what is.”

“Right again.” Carter nodded. “You know what I don’t understand? You’ve been moping around since she left, clearly not over her. You sit there half-angry and half-lovesick. Pick a side and stay there. You can’t live your whole life trying to make everyone play by your rules. That’s not how life works. They get to decide how they feel and what they want to do.” The way he said it made Caleb wonder what actually happened while Carter was gone, but his brother refused to acknowledge any of it.

Caleb’s eyes lingered on his brother, then shifted to Charlie.

She groaned again. “If you don’t knock, I’m going to. You can’t just stand out here.”

“Why?” Caleb huffed. “Because wishing doesn’t do any good without action?”

“No...” she drawled. “Because we don’t know how many other people have VIP passes. What are you going to do if a hoard of them shows up—which could happen at any moment, by the way. Then you’ll lose your shot.”

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“Will you just knock on the blasted door already?” Carter said.

Caleb glanced at the only barrier that remained between him and Emma. They were both right. He couldn’t drag this out any longer. He held his breath, then rapped his knuckles on the door.

Shuffling sounds followed by voices, then the click of the doorknob followed in succession. The door opened and an unfamiliar face materialized. She took one look at him and blinked. “Caleb?”

He glanced at his brother and sister. “Yeah.”

She shut the door and more muffled sounds followed.

Caleb released a disappointed breath. “I guess that’s that, then. See? She doesn’t want to see?—”

The door opened again, and the woman he didn’t recognize slipped out. “Hey. I’m Jessica, Emma’s sister. She wants to talk to Caleb alone for a moment, and she asked that I take you two to the refreshment table.” She motioned to Carter and Charlie. “There’s loads of junk food. You’re going to love it.” At Charlie’s defeated expression, she laughed. “Don’t worry. We’ll come back, and you’ll get an autograph and a picture and whatever else your heart desires.”

Caleb watched with dismay as his entourage disappeared and he was once again standing in front of a door he wasn’t sure he was ready to pass through. He knocked once more, then reached for the doorknob, but the door opened before he had a

chance to touch it.

Emma stood in the doorway, just as stunning as ever. No amount of makeup or costume could cover up her natural beauty. Caleb sucked in a sharp breath and choked on it. He pounded his chest and glanced at her with embarrassment. “Hi, Emily—Emma... Emma,” he repeated. “You look...” Why was this so difficult?

“Do you want to come in?” She stepped back, holding the edge of the door as she motioned for him to enter. “I’m not sure how long my sister will be gone.”

He chuckled. “If Charlie has anything to say about it, we probably only have a few minutes.”

She laughed along with him. “Then I suppose we should make this quick.”

Caleb nodded, moving past her. The room was smaller than he’d expected. There was only enough room for her vanity and a loveseat. A coffee table was positioned in front of the latter, and a vase of red roses was placed in the middle. He stared at them, his heart crumbling just a little. He was too late.

Emma stood beside him after shutting the door. Her eyes dragged to the flowers, and she smiled. “They’re beautiful, aren’t they?”

“They’re... roses.”

“Yeah,” she said. “My mom sends them to every show.”

He stilled, sweeping his gaze back to meet hers. “Your mom.”

Emma nodded. “Yep. She’s probably my biggest fan. She can’t make it to all my shows, so she does what she can to support me.” Her fingertips traced the petals, and

she appeared to be deeper in thought. “Anyway...” Her voice trailed off.

“I was wrong,” he blurted.

She glanced at him, startled.

“I should have never pushed you away.” He raked a hand through his hair and paced the small room. “I’ve made so many mistakes, and I’m regretting every single one of them. I don’t know what got into me.” His grief and distress over his current situation burst from him like a volcanic geyser. It didn’t matter that he knew he was going to hate himself for this outburst later. He needed to tell her exactly how he felt before he lost his nerve. “I shouldn’t have let you leave—especially with the way things were.”

Emma blinked, her mouth dropping open. He couldn’t tell if she was simply surprised or if it went deeper than that. He prayed that this wouldn’t make her pity him. His control over the situation was completely forsaken. It was as if a dam had burst after holding it all in for the last six months.

Well, it was too late to take any of it back now. He just had to move forward, or he’d regret it for the rest of his life. “I know I haven’t shown it, but I love you, Emma. I think I fell in love with you that day you fell off your horse. I didn’t know it then. It developed slowly, quietly... it snuck up on me until I couldn’t deny it any longer. That was when I finished that song for you. Every word, every lyric... they’re written in my heart.”

His heavy breathing and his uneven heart rate did nothing to help. The only thing worthy of his relief was that he’d finally told her how he felt. Caleb nearly pleaded with her to give him a second chance. He would have been willing to get on his knees at that very moment and beg her to take him back.

But by the way she was standing—unmoving for so long, he could tell no amount of

groveling would bring back what he had said. He'd made a mistake in coming. She could have just as easily gotten a text message or an email.

Caleb's shoulders slumped, and he looked down at his hands. "I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have come?—"

"Caleb," she whispered emotionally, her hand reaching for his and stopping him from escaping. "Were you not listening to a single word I said on that stage?" Tears filled her eyes, but she was smiling. Emma moved closer to him, taking his other hand in hers so she could hold onto him more securely. "I think we both have a habit of getting too much into our own heads sometimes. I never thought someone like you could want me... forme."

He frowned. "What are you talking about? You are one of the most amazing people I've met. You could have your pick of any one of the guys in that audience tonight... and you pick?—"

Her hands squeezed his, and she whispered, "I pick you."

His stomach felt like it dropped to his knees. It churned like a tempest in the ocean—out of control and wild. Even though his ears had registered what she'd said, his heart and his head were still trying to figure out what it all meant. Was this actually happening? All his worry and agony had been for nothing.

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Emma moved a little closer. Her face was inches from his, and her smile tugged flirtatiously at the corners of her mouth. “You won’t be able to comprehend how much I’ve missed you even if you lived a thousand years,” she murmured, her breath soft and delicious against his face. “There is no one I want to be with more. No one I feel I can trust to take care of my heart better... than you.”

Caleb exhaled, unable to hold his breath any longer. She continued before he had a chance to speak.

“I want you to know how much I’ve agonized over what I did. I’m so sorry I was dishonest with you. There really weren’t any excuses that warranted the sacrifices we ended up making after you found out the truth.” Tears slipped down her cheeks, and she brushed them onto her shoulders. “If you want to try again, I swear that I will never lie to you. Anything you want to know, I’ll tell you.”

That promise was more than he could have asked for. It was better than he had hoped. He nearly told her she didn’t need to make such a promise when she inched even closer to him.

“Can we... start over? Maybe... go on an official date?” She released one of his hands and brought her fingers up to feather them through his hair. “My treat.”

He opened his mouth to respond but was cut off by the door bursting open.

“He says yes!” Charlie announced.

Both Emma and Caleb turned toward the intrusion. Their siblings stood in the

doorway, a mixture of expressions. Charlie was understandably thrilled. Jessica looked more apologetic. And Carter's pain was being covered up by a flat and yet unreadable expression. Only Caleb could see just how hard it was for him to be there.

Emma turned back to Caleb and tilted her head. "Well?"

Caleb chuckled, and for the first time in half a year, it felt normal again. He didn't have to force the sound. He didn't have to pretend he was okay.

This was so much better.

"You heard the girl. How can I turn down a request like that?"

"You can't," Charlie interrupted again. "Because it's Emma Hart. No one could say no to her."

Caleb slipped his arms around her waist. "No, they can't."

29

Emma

Flashes of light. People shouting her name. Emma's security team guided her out of the venue between hordes of fans and paparazzi.

"Emma! Emma, is that Caleb?"

"Have you found your true love?"

Caleb winced with the flashes, then glanced at her, eyes wide.

She squeezed his hand. All she could do was offer him an apologetic smile. This was her life. This would be what they would have to deal with if they were to stick it out.

Oh, how she hoped that could be her future.

Behind them, Jessica, Charlie and Carter stayed close until they were all ushered into a limousine. The second the door shut, Charlie let out a whoop.

“Whoa! That’s a rush. Is it always like that?”

Emma settled into her seat and rested her cheek against Caleb’s shoulder. “A lot of the time, yes.”

Charlie turned in her own seat to stare out the windows where the last remnants of camera flashes faded away. She practically buzzed with energy, bouncing around in her seat. Then she stilled and whirled around to face everyone. “What about Caleb’s truck? We can’t leave it there.”

Emma smiled. “We can come back for it in the morning. What do you say we hang out in my hotel room tonight? It’s huge. Everyone will have their own bed.”

No one complained. Carter was quiet, solemn. Emma watched him with curiosity, vaguely aware of Jessica scooting over to sit beside Charlie.

Caleb’s quiet question was the only thing that drew her from her thoughts. “I don’t know how you deal with all of that. How do you manage?”

She turned to him with a shy laugh. “I couldn’t, remember? Eventually, there was a breaking point.”

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“I’m so sorry.” His brows creased, and he stared at their intertwined hands. Brushing his fingertips over the back of her hand, he said, “I get it now. I can understand what you were trying to do.”

She placed her free hand over his, drawing his focus. “You don’t have to apologize. If I hadn’t gone through any of that, I wouldn’t have met you.” Emma leaned closer to him and brushed a kiss to his lips. The old, familiar thrill shot through her and the warmth flickered to life. When she pulled back, he smiled. It wasn’t one that reached his eyes. There was still a sadness—or maybe it was something deeper. There was no way of telling until he chose to share it with her.

Leaning against him once more, she let out a contented sigh. “You know what I want to do?”

“What’s that?” Caleb released her hand and draped it around her shoulder. His fingers trailed up and down her arm, painting new goosebumps along her skin.

“We should find an ice cream shop.”

He chuckled. “It’s the end of September. You’d be better off looking for something warm.”

“Then a hotdog. I could really go for one of those with mustard and sweet relish.” She craned her neck around to peek at him, still reeling from the reality of what had taken place. If she were to die right here, right now, she would die happy. She’d done what she’d come here to do—sing his song and tell him that she was in love. Nothing could be better than this.

“Then let’s find us some hotdogs.”

“But we’re going to the hotel,” Charlie reminded them.

Caleb gave his little sister a look that only an older brother could give.

Emma laughed. “How about anyone who wants a hot dog can get out when we find one. Then the rest of us will be taken to the hotel, and we’ll all meet up there?”

Even Charlie couldn’t argue with that. They drove for several miles until they reached the heart of the city and Emma had the limo pull to a stop. When Caleb glanced out the window, he frowned. “I think you might be confused. That’s a taco truck.”

She pushed the door open and tugged him to come outside with her. “Tacos. Hot dogs. Either way, I get to eat.”

Caleb laughed, and she ducked her head back inside. Her eyes shifted from Jessica to Charlie to Carter.

“Anyone else want to join us?”

They all shook their heads.

“Your loss.” She shut the door, reaching for Caleb’s hand as the limo pulled away.

“How close is your hotel?”

“Only about two blocks from here. The driver will drop them off and Jessica can let them in. I figure we’ll have about twenty minutes to ourselves.”

Caleb's flirtatious look only added to his husky voice. "I can think of a lot we can do in twenty minutes."

She flushed, unable to respond except to stand on her toes and kiss him. This one was deeper than the one in the limo. She slipped her hands around his neck and clung to him like it could be the last kiss they shared. Everything in her being wanted to revel in this moment—memorize it so she never forgot it. From this point forward, her life had two directions. She could continue on a path with him, or without him.

If it was up to her, she'd never risk losing him again.

"What can I get you two?" A gruff voice broke through their kiss, and Emma laughed as she pulled away. The man's eyes bugged out of his head, and he leaned through the small window. "You're Emma Hart. Didn't you have a concert tonight?"

She nodded. "I did."

"My wife and daughter went to see it! They're going to be so mad when they hear that you came to our truck tonight. Can I get a picture with you?"

Emma gave Caleb a quick look and nodded. "Of course. Anything for a fan."

He fumbled with his phone and held it out to her to take a selfie with him in the background. She took a few different ones, then handed the phone back. He flipped through the pictures, a wide smile on his face. Shaking his head, he chuckled. "They're never going to believe this." His eyes darted down to her once more. "What can I get for you? It's on the house."

She shook her head. "Oh, you don't have to do that. I'm more than happy?—"

"My pleasure." He gestured to the menu. "Anything you want."

Emma felt Caleb's arm take position around her waist, and she leaned into him again. She would never tire of his touch or his warm presence. "I'd like two carne asada street tacos, please."

“Same for me,” Caleb said.

The man nodded with excitement and darted back inside the truck. He put together their order quickly and then handed them each a to-go carton. “Emma Hart. I can’t believe it.”

She laughed with embarrassment. It was one thing to let Caleb witness the chaos at a concert. It was a completely different story to have him here watching her get treated like this on the street. When the man wasn’t looking, she pulled out some money from her jacket pocket and placed it in the tip jar, not missing how Caleb took note.

“You realize you tipped him fifty bucks, right?” he whispered.

Emma shrugged. “He gave us excellent service.”

A smile tugged at Caleb’s lips. “Yes, he did.”

They wandered down the street until they found a bench to sit on and enjoy their food. Every so often someone would recognize her and request a picture. After the third person left, she glanced at Caleb. “Sorry about that.”

“What do you have to be sorry for? I’m beginning to realize why you were so insistent on your sunglasses and hiding your hair. Sheesh, it’s a lot, isn’t it?”

She grimaced. “It’s too much, right? I can’t expect you to want to date someone who will draw this kind of attention.” Her hope started to fade away, quickly getting eaten up by the concern about Caleb. He hadn’t been shy about discussing his dislike for

crowds. How could she ask him to be with her when this was going to continue to happen?

He reached for her hand and brought it to his lips. “You want to know what I think? I think that people adore you, and they do for a reason. It’s not just the music or the performances. It’s the way you treat people. It’s the way you make everyone feel special instead of pointing out that they’re acting a little crazy. I admire that. It can’t be easy.”

Emma stared at him with surprise. “Really?”

He nodded. “I don’t think I’ve had to deal with anything nearly that difficult. The human race, in general, leaves much to be desired. Occasionally, there’s a good one in the lot, but most of the time...” He made an exaggerated sour face.

She laughed. “You’re so sweet. And I... I love you, Caleb.”

He sobered. “I love you, too.” He looked away, peering out into the night sky. “You can’t really see as many stars here, can you?”

“No... I think Copper Creek has this place beat,” she whispered.

“Do you think you would ever consider going back?”

She turned and studied him, not daring to hope he was saying what she thought he might be saying.

“To Copper Creek, I mean.” He turned to face her again. “Would you ever consider making it your home? I know that you have a life in LA, and you travel all over the world... but would you?—”

“Yes.”

He blinked. Then he blinked again as if he wasn't sure he'd heard her correctly.

She bit down on her lower lip. It wasn't like he was proposing to her—though with the way she was feeling, she probably would have given him the same answer. Hot, white heat seemed to explode inside her. She wouldn't be surprised if she looked like a ripe strawberry right about now. As much as she wanted to look away from him and focus on anything else, she couldn't. “I think Copper Creek would be the perfect place to build a life.” She nearly told him that she could see herself building a life with him, but she thought better of it. No need to scare him off when she'd only just gotten him back.

“It would. Copper Creek is the best place to...” His voice trailed off, but she still caught what he murmured under his breath. “...raise a family.”

Emma tore her gaze away from him. Tensions continued to mount. There was so much she wanted to say, and yet she couldn't. As hard as she tried, she simply couldn't bring herself to add to what he was alluding to.

“When... do you think that would be possible?” he asked. “Because I'd understand if you're too busy. And with winter setting in, I bet it wouldn't be easy?—”

Her head snapped up, and she stared at him in surprise. He wasn't talking about sometime down the road. He wanted her the soon. Tears of happiness burned behind her eyes, threatening to escape. She'd cried far too much for her own good in the last twenty-four hours and even more over the last six months.

Emma moved her food to the side and framed his face with both of her hands, stopping him from his continued stammering. She stared him straight in the eye. “I would find out how to move mountains if you asked me to.”

One corner of his lips quirked upward. “I think we need to work on your poetic prose.”

She threw back her head with a laugh, and when she brought her eyes back to him, she was thrilled to see that adoration she’d grown used to when she’d been in Copper Creek. Emma captured his lips with her own, kissing him with every ounce of her own heart. When she pulled back, albeit reluctantly, that look of unconditional love remained.

Those were the eyes of a man who didn’t want to live without her. Those were the eyes of the man who wrote her a love song. And those were the eyes of the man she would marry.

He just didn’t know it yet.

EPILOGUE

Two Months Later

Caleb

“That turkey smells delicious, Charlie, I think you’ve outdone yourself this year.” Caleb stood in the doorway of the kitchen and glanced around the crowded space. “I think we’re going to have to move this party somewhere else next year, though. There’s hardly enough room for us to breathe.”

“Yeah? And where would you suggest?” Wade called out from where he sat at the head of one of the two tables they now had set up.

“I don’t know. But we’ve nearly doubled in size. Don’t you think it would be a good idea to figure something out?”

Margot pushed past Caleb with a pan of scalloped potatoes. “I kind of like how crowded it is. Makes it feel homey.”

“Or suffocating,” Carter muttered behind Caleb.

Caleb turned and frowned at his brother. He looked completely exhausted. “Still not sleeping well?”

His twin gave him a dirty look. “What do you think?”

“You want to talk?—”

“Don’t ask me that. I told you. I’m putting all of that in my rearview. I’m not going to talk about what happened or why.” He spun around and headed away from the kitchen toward the stairs. These days it was hit or miss with him. Carter’s poor view of their large family seemed to be lingering. He might be able to understand the importance of a support system, but he still didn’t seem to like it.

Caleb frowned. No one knew better than him how hard it was to rewire his brain and way of thinking. He wished he could help Carter figure it out quicker. Watching his brother struggle was tearing him up in its own way.

Emma materialized from around a corner, holding a casserole dish of what could only be stuffing. She grinned at him like she’d just won the lottery. “Look what I made. Jessica said that it’s even better than my grilled cheese.”

“Well, with that recommendation, who could turn it down?” He reached for her, but she sidestepped him.

“Careful! It’s still hot.” She held up the dish, holding it with two potholders. “Let me put this in the kitchen, and then you can kiss me to your heart’s content.” She winked at him and hurried into the kitchen.

Caleb’s gaze drifted to Jessica, and he offered her a smile. “All done helping Emma move in?”

She nodded. “My mom’s not thrilled that I’m spending Thanksgiving here, but I promised I’d be home for Christmas, so she can’t be too mad.” She glanced into the kitchen and made a comedic grimace. “You weren’t kidding when you said it would be crowded. Maybe you should consider moving this party to Emma’s place next year.”

He gave her a strange look. “A year’s a long way off. What if we’re not even together by that point?”

Jessica’s blank expression made him give her a double take. She ducked her head, a smile spreading across her face. “You’re right. What am I thinking?”

Caleb watched her with confusion. Did she know something he didn’t? He preferred not to count his chickens before they were hatched. While he would like to think that his relationship with Emma would last, there simply was no telling how things would go.

Emma returned to his side and wrapped her arms around his neck. “I can’t wait for you to come visit. I’ve already got lots of plans for my new place.”

“Oh yeah?” he murmured. “Like having my family over for Thanksgiving dinner next year?”

Emma frowned and her eyes darted away. “Did Jessica?”

“She might have said something.”

“Well, my place is pretty big,” she drawled. “And so is your family.”

Caleb chuckled. “True. I still can’t believe you closed so quickly.”

Emma tilted her head, her eyes dancing. “One of the nice things about having money and fame is that certain things move a little faster.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I guess you have a point.” He had to keep reminding himself that she wasn’t exactly like him. In fact, she was in a completely different universe when it came to finances. Thankfully, she didn’t flaunt it or use it to be manipulative. “I’m

sure the folks who sold their place were pretty happy with the price you paid.”

She nodded. “From what I understand, it was a blessing for them as well. Win-Win-Win.”

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He lifted a brow. “What’s the third win?”

Emma smirked. “As far as I’m concerned, you won, too.”

“Did I?” he teased.

Emma gasped playfully. “I don’t know of another human being who would just up and move to a place like this because of a boy.”

“And you didn’t,” Caleb bantered back. “I seem to recall that you moved here because you couldn’t get enough of this town and all the people in it.”

Her mouth dropped open, though she still smiled. “Exactly. The people. One in particular.”

He feigned surprise. “Are you talking about me? I’m flattered, really.”

Emma whacked him in the arm with her fingertips. “You better be careful, or...”

“Or what?” He chuckled. “I’m going to regret it?”

She turned serious, and he nearly choked on his amusement. Emma slipped her fingers within his. “Come with me.”

“Emma—I was just joking—I wasn’t?—”

Glancing over her shoulder at him briefly, Emma whispered, “Will you be quiet? I

don't want to draw any attention."

Caleb snapped his mouth shut, letting her drag him from the house. Crusted snow covered the ground. It was already getting dark outside and he had no idea where she wanted to take him. He shuffled after her, only barely catching up to walk at her side when she all but pushed him into the barn.

"Emma, what?—"

She placed a finger on his lips. "I need to say something, and I want you to listen."

"Okay..." he mumbled beneath her finger.

"Really listen," she insisted.

Caleb nodded. "I'm listening."

She took a deep breath, her voice shaking slightly when she let out a soft, indiscernible sound. Emma paced a bit in front of him, and his eyes followed her as she moved back and forth. "I can't believe I'm doing this," she said under her breath.

"Emma?"

She spun to face him, shooting him a warning look. "You promised."

He stiffened and pretended to zip his lips.

Emma closed the distance between them to stand directly in front of him. "I don't normally make rash decisions."

He chuckled. "Technically, you made a rash decision when you flew to Colora... do."

Caleb ducked his head and pressed his lips together. “Okay, okay.”

Emma took his hands in hers, and then slowly she lowered herself to the ground. His eyes widened, but before he could pull her to her feet, she spoke. “I wouldn’t be kneeling here if I didn’t believe in what I was doing. I wouldn’t have moved here, bought that house, or even come to Thanksgiving dinner if I didn’t know exactly where I wanted to be in ten years—in five years—or even next year.” Her eyes filled with moisture that reflected in the dim light of the barn. “I love you so much, and I want to spend my life with you. I need you to know that.”

“I know, Emma.” He attempted to pull her to her feet, but she resisted.

“If you asked me to marry you, I wouldn’t hesitate for a moment. So that’s why I’m here—kneeling before you. I don’t want to live without you in my life—or without the promise of having you forever. You don’t have to answer me right now. You can take time to think about it if you?—”

Caleb shook his head. “I don’t need to think about it.” He gave her a wry smile. “I would have liked to have been the one doing the asking... but I suppose our relationship has never really been traditional.” He tugged her to her feet, relieved when she allowed him to pull her close. He brushed her hair from her face. “I have never loved anyone more than I love you. Everything you said... I feel the same.” He cocked his head slightly. “I would marry you tomorrow if I could.”

“Then let’s do it.”

His brows lifted. “What?”

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“I have a plane. You want to get hitched. Why not?”

He laughed. “Because?—”

Emma held onto him tighter. “Let’s get married tomorrow. Just you and me. Then we can celebrate with our loved ones later. I want to be yours.”

He studied her, a mixture of disbelief and exhilaration washing over him. “Okay.”

Her eyes brightened. “Okay?”

Caleb nodded. “Okay, let’s do it. Tomorrow. We’ll fly to Vegas and get hitched.”

She let out an excited laugh, then threw her arms around his neck. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Caleb’s mouth crushed over hers, stealing a kiss that would only be the start of many.

Shortly after, they walked hand in hand toward the house but slowed as they neared the front porch. There was a car parked out front he didn’t recognize. He glanced over to Emma, who shrugged. “Do you know anyone who might want to visit?”

He shook his head. “I can’t think of anyone.”

There were a couple figures on the porch, and Caleb peered more intently at them. Then recognition flooded Emma’s expression, and she dropped Caleb’s hand. “Bailey! What are you doing here?”

The woman turned in that moment, and that was when Caleb noted Carter standing in the doorway as stoic as ever. Caleb headed up the steps after Emma and motioned that he'd go inside. He glanced at a small girl and flashed her a smile before he went inside with Carter.

Shutting the door behind him, he glanced at his brother, finding him watching him.

"Who was that?" Carter asked.

Caleb shrugged. "I dunno."

"Emma knew."

Caleb chuckled. "She's only been back in Copper Creek for a couple weeks. But maybe she already made a new friend."

Carter moved to the window and stared outside. "Oh." He watched for a few moments longer than necessary, then turned toward the kitchen. "I think dinner is ready. You don't want it to get cold."

The front room got really quiet and a little cooler without his brother there. Caleb stepped up to the window and watched the two women speaking. Bailey's name seemed familiar, but he couldn't place it. He waited until Emma said goodbye and entered the house.

She jumped when she noticed him as she shut the door. "You waited for me?"

He held out his hand toward her. "From this point forward, I'm not going anywhere without you."

Emma smirked. "How romantic."

He nodded toward the door. “Who was that?”

“Oh, Bailey? She’s my realtor. Turns out she forgot to give me one of the keys to the barn.”

“Can’t forget that.”

“Nope.” Emma leaned up and kissed him. “That’s where we’re going to put all of our horses. I’m thinking we’ll need six... maybe ten... What do you think?”

He grinned. “I think that sounds like music to my ears.”