



Some Cowboys Heal Broken Hearts

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Henry Keagan

Henry didn't need anyone but his family. At least, that was what he'd told himself over and over again. It didn't matter that five out of the twelve of them had found love and gotten married. They were still Keagans. They still helped the family in every way that was important.

And then one of his youngest brothers, Carter, had to go and take off. Didn't he know how important it was to have a sense of belonging? Carter should be here today. He was missing out on events and memories that he'd never get back.

All around him, his family swarmed the bride and groom. Mason had done things right. He'd ended up with the girl of his dreams and was going to start his own family.

A deep-seated ache wrapped around his heart, tightening so fully that his hand lifted to his chest as if he could stop the sensation from happening. Who was he kidding? It didn't matter how many times he told himself that he was happy. Something was missing. He refused to accept it had anything to do with wanting to get married. Marriage wasn't everything.

Henry just needed a purpose. His whole life was all about working, eating, and sleeping. There had to be more to his life than that. A hobby, maybe?

The happy couple hurried toward the tents that had been set up for their outdoor

wedding. More people than Henry had expected had shown up for the wedding. The Keagans weren't exactly the most liked in Copper Creek. This had started changing lately with all the work Wade had been putting into vamping up their reputation.

Harley's family wasn't from around here, and her uncle wasn't the most social person in town. Still, the turnout for the wedding was impressive.

Henry leaned his shoulder against the side of the barn as he watched the happy couple dance to the first song as husband and wife. Mason couldn't have looked happier than he did in that moment, and Henry was happy for him even if he felt like he was on the outside looking in.

His focus shifted to those he didn't recognize. Brielle's sisters had all shown up for the event—each and every sister. Henry had noticed the Bakers arrive, too. They weren't hard to miss, all being on the taller side. Then there were the Taylors and all their children. But beyond that, he couldn't find any other familiar faces.

Had Copper Creek grown that much since he was a kid?

"You think it's weird, too, don't you?"

Henry glanced out of the corner of his eye at his younger brother. Hudson was just a year younger than Mason. If people thought Mason was quiet, they hadn't met Hudson yet. Out of everyone in their family, Hudson was the one who could slip away into a corner, and no one would notice he was there. It was a sort of camouflage that Henry cracked jokes about. "What are you talking about?" Henry said, turning his attention to the happily married couple.

"Mason and Harley. It's weird, right? They're not very old. They're younger than you are."

“Only by five years,” Henry said. “And what does that matter? If they want to start a life together, let them be happy.”

Hudson shrugged. “I’m not saying they shouldn’t be happy. I’m saying it’s weird that they want to get married when they haven’t even hit twenty-five yet.”

“Mason’s gonna be twenty-five next year.”

Hudson groaned. “You know what I mean.”

Henry shot a look at his brother. He wasn’t sure what Hudson was getting at. Was he making a point that Henry should be the one getting married right now? He was getting closer to turning thirty. Maybe this empty feeling had more to do with finding love than he’d originally thought.

Hudson sighed, turning away from the crowd. “There are too many people here... too many people joining our family.”

Oh. That’s what Hudson was upset about. The kid didn’t like that their family was growing. When all twelve of them got married, that would make two dozen, not including when they started having kids. A smile tugged at Henry’s lips. “It’s not so bad, you know.”

“What isn’t?”

“Letting our family get bigger.”

“Our family is too big as it is. I don’t know what our folks were thinking,” Hudson muttered, crossing his arms.

“Yeah, I don’t think many of us do. If I had to guess, it would be that they weren’t

thinking.” Henry chuckled and elbowed his brother.

Hudson made a face. “I’m out. Tell Mason congrats for me, okay?”

“Tell him yourself.”

“What don’t you understand about there being too many people around here? I’m beginning to think that Carter had the right idea to get out while he could.”

Henry scowled. “You’d be smart to keep your mouth shut about Carter.”

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Hudson's expression slackened. He looked away and his skin paled somewhat.

"Just you wait. Carter is going to come back with his tail between his legs any day now. I'm telling you, it's not easy trying to make it on your own out in the real world. We were all lucky that Wade and Annabel stepped up when they did, or we wouldn't have survived. Do you know what happens to kids who don't have parents?"

Hudson still didn't meet his gaze.

"They get split up. We would have been shipped out all over the state. You realize that, don't you? This family is all we have, and Carter is an idiot if he thinks he's better off without us." At some point Henry's fists had curled up at his sides. He wasn't even aware of it until he felt the dull pain sharpen in his palms. He stretched out his fingers and turned away from his brother. "Just... go. You don't have to be here if you don't want to. The rest is just a party anyway."

Hudson didn't hesitate a second before darting off toward the house. It was probably a good thing that he ran off and hid. He needed to think about what he was saying when he spoke about their family the way he had. One day, he and Carter would wake up. Henry didn't doubt that for a second.

A strange kind of movement caught his attention, and he looked over toward the refreshment table. Eyes narrowing, he watched as a young woman picked up a plate and piled it high with food.

She wasn't dressed for a wedding. Instead of something soft and pretty, she wore a pair of overalls over a tank top. Her hair was pulled back into a messy looking bun on

top of her head. Even from this distance, he could tell she wasn't wearing shoes suitable for any kind of party.

He straightened, observing her as she retreated to an area where there was less foot traffic. He'd never seen her before, but that wasn't saying much. There were several people hanging around whom he hadn't met before.

But all those people were dressed to the nines for the wedding.

The woman was a petite, scrawny-looking thing. Strands of wispy blond hair hung limply around her face, and her skin had been bronzed by the sun. Eyes darted this way and that while she jumped to steer clear of anyone who came close to her. She was as skittish as a stray cat, probably starved like one, too, based on the way she was shoving the food in her mouth.

He straightened further. From where he stood, it was clear she had gone without food for much of her life. Henry took a step in her direction but stopped himself. The second she noticed him, she might take off. Then he wouldn't be able to help her.

Henry stepped back and leaned against the barn again, his eyes never leaving the woman's face as she continued to stare at those closest to her. She hunched her shoulders and shrank back from the crowd for the most part, but every so often she'd return to the food table. Hudson could take a page out of her book on how to appear invisible. His little brother was good, but not as good as this woman.

As the evening wore on, Henry was surprised to find that the stranger stuck around. She didn't leave like he'd thought she might. Instead, she inched closer and closer to where he stood. Whenever she glanced in his direction, he made sure to turn his attention to those on the dance floor.

When she finally got within five feet of him, Henry spoke.

“Nice party, huh?”

The woman jumped. Her eyes darted to meet his. She’d heard him, that much he knew. But she didn’t respond beyond that small reaction.

“Food’s good. Did you get some?”

Again, she jumped, but it wasn’t as noticeable. This time she smiled, but it was clearly forced. Her eyes met his for a moment before returning to the guests, who were completely oblivious of them.

It was getting too dark to be able to tell what color her eyes were, and deep down he knew if he stared at her, she’d probably claim he was being creepy and take off. Henry cleared his throat, causing her to look at him. “You thirsty? I could get us some drinks.”

The woman nodded. That was different. At least this time she didn’t jump like she’d done the first couple times he’d spoken to her. He might be getting somewhere.

Henry nodded. “I’ll be right back. You have a preference? Water? Lemonade? A soda?”

She shook her head.

“Not much of a talker, are you?”

This time she dropped her gaze and took one step away from him.

“It’s fine if you’re not. People say I talk too much. I suppose there are flaws in all of us.” He flashed her a smile, but it was one she didn’t see due to her staring at the boots on her feet. “I’ll get those drinks, then.” Henry pushed away from the barn and

wandered through the crowd toward the drink table. He nodded to a few familiar faces, and when he reached the table, he grabbed two plastic cups and filled them to the brim. Funny how she hadn't gone for the beverage table when she was done eating. She had to be thirsty.

Henry turned around to face the barn, but he couldn't see her through the crowd. She was small and nowhere near an exit. He couldn't imagine that she'd escaped that quickly. She'd probably just found a place to sit down.

He moved through the crowd again, lifting their drinks high overhead so no one bumped into them while dancing. But the second he emerged from the crowd, he froze. The beautiful stranger was gone.

Turning in a full circle, his eyes swept through the crowd in search of the overalls and the messy bun. Where had she gone? He would have noticed a person slipping out into the darkness. No cars had left the premises while he was filling up their cups. There wasn't anywhere for her to hide.

Except one place.

Henry turned toward the barn once more. The interior was lit by only a few dim bulbs, so those who had to go inside this late at night could see enough not to fall all over themselves.

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She wouldn't have gone in there, would she? There was no reason to. The place smelled like... well, it smelled like any barn around here. He took a few steps toward the entrance, then paused and glanced over his shoulder at the party. Still no sign of her.

There was only one logical place she would be—and a strange choice for a party guest to stay. Henry's brows furrowed and he moved more quickly toward the entrance. Into the darkness he ventured, pausing just inside to let his eyes adjust to the dim light.

Letting out a two-toned whistle, he strained to hear any unusual movement. "Miss? You in here?"

2

Athena

Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!

Athena should have known better than to think that the nice-looking cowboy would forget about bringing her a drink. He'd been too curious. No one had spoken to her in over a month, and she'd been unlucky enough to bump into the one guy who was willing to say more than ten words to her even though she hadn't responded.

Her face felt like it was on fire. Her skin crawled with anticipation of getting caught. The barn had looked like the perfect hiding place to camp out for the next few days, but she'd been wrong.

Maybe there was an exit on the other end of the building. She could wait until he lost interest in looking for her and she could slip out. But going that way meant she'd lose out on grabbing some food to go.

Her stomach growled despite inhaling three platefuls of food.

Athena placed a hand on her stomach and shut her eyes tight. If he heard that, he would find her. Currently, she'd managed to find a stall without a horse in it. There was fresh straw—enough she could curl up and actually get a good night's sleep. Around here, most of the ranchers filled every stall with one kind of animal or another. This had been the first one that had some room to spare.

The cowboy's voice loomed closer. "I know you're in here. There aren't many places to hide on our property. Maybe you could show yourself so I don't sound like such an idiot?"

She shut her eyes even tighter this time and shrank down lower, leaning against the stall door. There wasn't a single doubt in her mind that if he caught her, he'd send her away. It wouldn't be the end of the world, but she'd already been walking all day. She needed at least one night when she didn't startle herself awake at the sound of a broken twig.

"Come on. If you think I'm going to just walk out of this barn with two drinks in my hands, you're kidding yourself. I might not be the smartest one in my family, but I know enough to realize what it would look like to my brothers if I left like that."

Athena bit down on her lip. He was getting closer. Each footstep he took made her heart beat a little faster. She'd gotten out of tighter situations. Maybe she could reveal herself and then hide around the back of the building when he wasn't looking. No one was capable of staying interested in her for more than twenty minutes. She'd gotten the awkward silence thing down to a science.

Even as she was about to talk herself into standing up, her racing pulse and her weak legs refused to cooperate. The door behind her gave way and she fell backward with a thud. Hovering overhead, the cowboy stared down at her with what could only be described as curiosity.

Not a hint of amusement could be found in his eyes. There were two cups, one in each of his hands. He'd actually gotten them both drinks.

She blinked a few times, gathering her wits about her, then scrambled to an upright, seated position. Wrapping her arms around her legs, she leaned against the side of the stall. This was it. The moment the cowboy with curious eyes and a strong voice would request she either leave or return to the party.

Blood rushed in her ears and her hands tingled with anticipation.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed an object moving toward her face. Athena gasped, her hand flying out to stop whatever it was. Her hand connected with something cold, and the plastic cup flew through the air and landed in the middle of the concrete floor.

She blinked rapidly and stared at the fallen drink with dismay before lifting her surprised eyes to the cowboy who was now crouched beside her.

He stared at the cup on the floor for what felt like an eternity, and then he chuckled. "Well, that's one way to invite the ants to the party."

Athena blinked again, this time with shock. The cowboy swiveled his head toward her, this time lifting the other cup by a fraction of an inch. "I'm going to give this one to you. Please don't feed any more critters tonight."

He had to be joking, right? This was all a big prank that he could tell the others later.

Only, he did exactly what he said he would and slowly offered her the cup. When she didn't reach for it, he pushed it a little closer. "Come on, you've got to be thirsty. I swear I have no idea where you stored all that food you ate back there, but I didn't see you drink a drop."

Her mouth fell open. He'd been watching her. Shoot! She was getting careless. All it would take was one person noticing that she didn't belong for her to get picked up by the authorities. She'd spent her fair share of time in lockups, shelters, and other places that the government thought she belonged. It didn't matter that none of them held her for long, she still hated feeling trapped.

The cowboy groaned, shifting his stance so he was no longer crouching on his heels. "Will you just take the drink already? You asked for it, and I got it."

Athena cautiously grabbed the drink from his hand, careful not to touch his fingers. She shifted so she could sit cross-legged and held the cup with both hands in her lap.

"See? That wasn't so hard." The cowboy adjusted the way he was sitting as well, choosing a similar position on the floor beside her. He nodded to the door. "It gets overwhelming, right? Hudson—my brother—doesn't like the crowds either. I don't mind them, but I can get why people try to avoid them. I think more and more people value the quiet these days. Too much going on in the world, so sometimes we just need a quiet place to think."

Athena stared at this cowboy. He was right about one thing. He definitely talked too much. She shifted her focus to her drink, and her mouth watered. The cowboy had been right about the drink situation, too. Normally, she would have gone to the drink table first. Unfortunately, she knew she couldn't drink too much because she wasn't sure where she'd be able to relieve herself next. And filling up on liquid was empty calories. She needed her strength if she ended up having to leave in the middle of the night.

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“You can drink it. I didn’t dose it or anything.”

Her head snapped up and she stared at him again. Why would he say something like that? Didn’t he know that by simply bringing it up, now she would wonder if she was at risk? Boy, she was slipping. Athena shook her head and placed the drink to the side. There was no way she was going to drink it now. If she was thirsty enough, she’d go drink out of one of the troughs they had for the horses.

The cowboy chuckled. “You don’t trust easy, do you?”

She gave him a flat look. A cheer erupted outside, drawing her attention. If the man would just go back to the party, then she could find a better hiding place.

“Can I ask you something?”

She rolled her eyes, though he probably couldn’t see her irritation starting.

“You weren’t invited, were you?”

This time her gaze slowly met his. Yep. The man had been watching her, probably since she’d arrived. In her defense, she hadn’t eaten anything substantial in over three days. Most of what she’d been able to get her hands on had come from dumpsters behind grocery stores and restaurants.

“You don’t have to tell me. It’s okay.” The cowboy leaned back on his hands and continued to watch her.

She squirmed beneath his shrewd stare. It honestly felt like he had figured out how to unlock the defenses she'd carefully placed all around her, and now he was going through all her private thoughts and memories. This was one of the reasons she didn't talk to anyone. One sentence was all it took for someone to pass judgment on her. She couldn't afford that.

Especially not right now.

He tilted his head and a wry smile touched his lips. "You weren't going to sleep in here, were you?"

Her stomach churned to life. Now he was getting dangerously close to figuring out that she was nothing more than a drifter. She didn't have a home—no means to care for herself besides stealing and stowing away on other people's property.

"It's okay if you were."

She blinked. He was lying. No one liked the homeless.

"I just think you would prefer an actual bed to sleep in."

Now she knew he was lying. There was absolutely no way he was talking about giving her a bed—not unless he wanted something in return. Athena scowled at him, ready to spit in his face. How dare he even think he could make such a request. She wasn't that kind of girl. She had her standards.

When was this man going to get the hint and just leave? She had no intention of starting up a conversation with him and she wasn't about to sell her soul for a nice, clean, cool mattress to sleep on.

He chuckled. "What is that look for? Did I say something to offend you? Because I

can assure you, that wasn't my intention." He straightened up and then leaned closer to her, causing her to scoot back a few feet. Then he chuckled again. "Honest. I'm not going to do anything to hurt you."

Her eyes swept over him from top to bottom. She'd been duped by men like him before. Just because he sounded sincere didn't mean he was. The guy was probably like all the rest—a wolf in sheep's clothing.

The cowboy held out his hand and she stared at it like it was a venomous snake. He moved it closer, still. "Here, let me show you what I'm talking about."

Her scowl deepened, and she shook her head.

"Would it make you feel better if I grabbed my sister and she came with us?"

Again, Athena shook her head. She wasn't about to go anywhere that she didn't have a clear escape plan. Even now, she was putting herself at risk. There was no back exit in the stall. She would have to use all her strength to push past this guy to get to her freedom.

Her heart leaped into her throat, thundering against the walls like a frantic hummingbird. She needed to get out of there before he did something terrible. Athena's eyes dipped to the cup that sat untouched just outside of the stall. The cowboy already blocked her way, but maybe she could use the cup to her advantage.

Athena inched closer to him, being sure to avoid any form of contact with him. When he noticed her reaching for the cup, he dropped his hand and grabbed it. When he held it out to her, she took it. Her fingers wrapped around it firmly. There was only a brief moment of hesitation—one she hadn't expected.

What if he was telling her the truth? She might be losing out on a chance to sleep in

an actual bed. Athena shoved that hopeful thought aside. Nothing came for free. Not in this life and probably not in the next one. She swallowed the disappointment like the hard stone it was, and then with one swift motion, she tossed the contents of the cup at her assailant.

3

Henry

Henry should have seen that coming.

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He wiped the sticky liquid from his face with a swipe of his hand and heaved a sigh as he heard her quick footsteps patter down the cement toward the door. Hadn't he thought she was skittish?

He'd been watching her long enough to realize that she wasn't going to trust him. She was like a wild animal, restless and fearful. Henry wouldn't have been surprised if he found out she'd been abused or hurt previously in her young life.

Touching his cheek with his fingertips, he released a groan. This was what he got for being nice to someone. He should have just listened to his gut and walked out of the barn when he'd had the chance. Now he was covered in lemonade with nothing to show for it. He'd be the laughingstock of the family when everyone found out what had happened.

Heck, Wade would probably lecture him and remind him that he shouldn't trust her just because she reminded him of an elf from that fantasy movie that came out a few years back. He got to his feet, dipping long enough to grab the two cups he'd brought into the barn.

In the morning, he'd probably have to spray the whole place down with a hose to keep the bugs and critters from snooping around. He should have just gotten water. But no, he'd wanted to give her a treat.

Why did he have to open his big mouth and scare her off? He knew just when it had happened, too. It was when he'd joked about dosing the drink.

Another groan escaped his throat. He was an idiot.

Henry shuffled from the barn back into the evening where there were now significantly fewer guests. Of course, the mystery woman was nowhere to be found. If she had wanted to sleep in the barn, he'd stolen her opportunity simply by seeking her out. There was no telling where she'd end up now—probably behind someone's house or in a field somewhere.

He stared out into the inky darkness where the pastures were and shivered. There were all kinds of predators out there when it got late. Coyotes were just one kind that would love to sink their teeth into the soft flesh of that pretty stranger.

Henry could kick himself for the mistakes he'd made tonight. He'd likely never see that woman again, and whatever happened to her would be on his conscience.

The rest of the wedding went off without a hitch. The stranger never returned, and Henry slipped away toward the end to head to bed since he had to get up early. It was his turn to feed the horses now that Mason was no longer working their family's ranch. He'd taken on Carter's chores, too, but mostly because he'd actually advocated for Carter to be left alone. No use pushing him farther away by nagging him to come back.

Henry probably should have taken a page out of that playbook when he'd decided to push this woman to stick around.

Well, it was too late now. He couldn't exactly turn back time. Henry would just have to live with the mistake and move forward.

* * *

So much for getting any sleep. Henry spent most of the night staring at his ceiling, seeing the stranger's face no matter what corner of the darkened room he shifted his focus to. He couldn't help but wonder if she'd found some shelter or if she'd ended

up under a tree somewhere.

Every time he heard the howl of a coyote, he got even more antsy. All she'd wanted was a warm place to sleep.

Henry continued to beat himself up over these thoughts until the faint light from the sunrise entered his room through the blinds covering the window. He sat up slowly, glancing at the blinds as if he might be able to see through them and find out more about that woman.

He needed to stop wasting his time and get to work. It didn't matter how much he obsessed over her. If she didn't want to be found, she wouldn't be.

After taking a shower and getting dressed, Henry made his way out to the barn. It was cooler that morning as the fall season started to set in. The days were getting shorter, and dew usually clung to the grass. The smell of summer was nearing its end as well.

That poor woman wouldn't do well sleeping out in the elements for much longer. Winters in Colorado weren't fun, even with the best gas fireplaces running twenty-four-seven. Guilt snaked its way through his stomach. He should have chased after her. Then maybe he would have been able to see what direction she ran off to and he'd have a starting point for tracking her down.

He gritted his teeth as he thought about all the things he could have done differently. When he arrived at the barn, he moved straight toward the back where the hose was kept. The sticky spot on the floor was a testament to his experience the last night. As he stepped over the spot, a shuffling sound filled the air.

Henry froze. It couldn't be. Criminals never returned to the scene of the crime. She wouldn't have come back, would she? He inched closer to the stall where he'd found her the other night and peered over the door. The stall was empty.

For a brief moment he thought about brushing it off as some kind of wishful thinking, but then he heard it again. There was a distinct shuffling sound, and it came a little way down the aisle. Henry slowed his steps, putting all his weight on the balls of his feet.

There was a stall door slightly ajar a few feet from where he was. Keeping his eyes trained on it, he held his breath and waited to hear the sound again.

All at once, the door flung open and the woman, still dressed in her overalls, came barreling out of the stall. She stumbled, unable to catch her balance, holding her shoes in one arm. Henry's arm shot out, catching her around the waist before she faceplanted.

“Whoa!”

She squirmed as she sucked in sharply. Her eyes flew wide, and the color drained from her face. Their gazes connected, but only for a moment as she spun around in his grasp and clawed at his arm. A whimper escaped her lips, but that was the only sound she uttered.

“Hey, it's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm actually glad I found you.”

She didn't seem to hear him as she continued to paw at his arm. Not a shriek, not a scream, not a single sound spilled from her lips as she attempted to free herself from him.

Henry carefully managed to get her to face him, grasping her upper arms gently so he could meet her eyes. “Hey,” he repeated softly, “will you look at me?”

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She shook her head vehemently, tugging and attempting to pull away from him.

He gave her a firm but gentle shake. “Hey,” he said again.

Her eyes shot up to meet his.

“You’re safe, okay? No one is going to hurt you. I promise.”

She stared at him, distrust flowing freely. Her eyes narrowed, and her lips clamped down into a tight line.

“I’m going to let you go, okay? But no taking off this time, got it?”

He didn’t think it was possible, but her eyes narrowed even more. Somehow, he knew the second he released her, she’d fly out that door and he’d never see her again. He couldn’t let that happen.

“Tell you what. If you promise not to go running off, I’ll take you to breakfast. I’d let you eat here, but I get the feeling you’d think I’m just trying to trap you.”

She huffed.

“I thought so.” Henry’s hands tightened slightly. “There’s this place called Sal’s. They have the best pies around. It’s a little early for pie—unless that’s what you want—but if you stick around, I’ll take you there and get you a good breakfast. No strings attached.”

Her expression softened if only minutely. Eyes darted this way and that, before coming back to his face. She didn't seem nearly as terrified as she'd been when he'd first caught her. In fact, he could see the cogs in her mind whirring, weighing the pros and cons of letting him do what he'd promised.

Granted, there was no reason for her to trust him. She could also be making assumptions about what he might do to her once he got her in his truck—but he wasn't about to put any thoughts in her head. If she didn't give him at least the benefit of the doubt, she'd miss out on a nice free meal.

When her eyes met his again, he nodded. "I'm going to let you go now. I have to feed the animals, but after that, I swear I'll take you to Sal's and you can order anything you want on the menu."

Wade would be livid if he knew Henry planned on taking some of their stash, but he'd worked hard enough around here to take some of the cut. It wasn't like they were hurting for food anymore. In fact, they were doing pretty well for themselves. He just wanted to make sure this woman wouldn't waste away.

Suddenly, she nodded and her whole body relaxed.

Henry opened his hands, and she scrambled back a few steps. Between them sat the boots she'd dropped during her escape attempt. One sat upright and the other, about a foot away, was on its side. He dropped down to gather them both and then held them out toward her. "You're gonna want these."

Her lips curled into what could only be described as a sarcastic sneer. Was she actually mocking him? He'd never met someone with this much spunk before. Most of the folks around here treated everyone else with a familiarity that was simply lost on this stranger.

In the daylight, it was easier to observe her, and he found himself staring at her eyes. They were a kind of green that could only be found in nature. They sparked and flashed with every emotion known to man, and all in a matter of seconds.

She pulled her boots on then stared at him expectantly. Henry chuckled and jolted into action, causing her to jump backward until her back pressed up against a wall. She watched his every move, her eyes burning holes into the back of his head as he worked.

Henry whistled if only to ease the tension that had developed in the air between them. It would only take him about twenty minutes to get all his early morning work completed. Then he'd see if she would trust him enough to get into his truck.

Smiling to himself, he worked a little harder to get done sooner. Every second he got, he'd check to make sure she was still there. Henry didn't know what he would do if she took off running again, but he knew he wouldn't let her get far.

Whether she wanted to admit it or not, he was the best thing that had happened to her. He wasn't going to let her take off without getting her a few things first. By the looks of it, she didn't even have a jacket. He hadn't seen any sign that she had other clothes or shoes. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out how she'd lasted this long without a bag of some kind.

Maybe he would have to take a little more from the cash stash to get her a few things from the store. As long as he told Brielle about the purchases first, Wade couldn't get mad. His wife was nothing if not understanding when it came to stuff like that.

The second he was done, he flashed her a smile. "All set. Now, the truck is out front, but I need to grab some cash. You think you can manage waiting in the truck for me?"

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms before marching out the door in front of him. Henry hurried to catch up to her, then pointed out his truck. “It’s the blue one. And it’s unlocked. I’ll be right back.”

4

Athena

Athena had broken one of her many rules.

Never return to a place after she’d left. Her heart had been working overtime and she’d not been thinking clearly when she’d darted from the barn the last night. But this ranch was out in the middle of nowhere and she didn’t think she’d make it to the next one.

So she’d waited out by the road until the party died down and then she’d slipped back into the barn. She’d chosen a different stall, and she’d promised herself she would get up with enough time to get out of there before someone came out to do their work.

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But she'd slept in.

And now she was sitting across from the one guy she would have preferred never to see again.

He didn't have any right to be as handsome as he was. He'd taken off his hat the second they'd entered the diner and now that she could get a really good look at him, she realized just how much of a pretty-boy he was.

If there was one thing she'd learned around here, it was how many different versions of cowboys there were in this town. There were rugged ones, gruff ones, softies, sweethearts, quiet ones, and pretty ones.

This cowboy was the last on her list. He had warm brown eyes that reminded her of milk chocolate. His hair was a dusty blond color that could have put the fields of wheat to shame. But it was his boyish grin that really set him apart. He wore a short, neatly trimmed beard that allowed her to see a set of matching dimples on his cheeks when he smiled.

He glanced up at her and immediately she had to tear her eyes from him. Great. That was the fourth time since they'd been seated that she'd been caught staring.

She already knew what she was going to order, and the menu wasn't nearly as interesting as the man seated across from her—a man she couldn't quite nail down. There was no telling if he was as genuine as he appeared to be.

No, he couldn't be. No man was. No woman, for that matter. She'd run across all

kinds of people in her lifetime, and she could usually figure them out without much effort. Were there kind people? Yes, she wouldn't deny that. But even the kind folks had their limits. Those who were willing to help the homeless would only do so to boost their own egos.

Athena dropped her gaze to the menu in front of her. After breakfast, she'd have to find a way to get back on the road again. If this guy was as nice as he was trying to convince her he was, maybe she could persuade him to drive her somewhere.

Copper Creek was nice and all, but it was too small. She needed a bigger city where the public transportation was better.

"I wasn't lying, you know." The cowboy's soft voice dragged her from her thoughts, and she lifted her eyes to meet his.

He stared at her, those brown eyes drawing her in and trapping her within his warm gaze. She wouldn't have been able to look away even if she wanted to at this point.

"About the room and the warm bed. You see, we have a lot of them—beds, I mean. My family is huge. You probably couldn't pick us out at the wedding, but I have eleven brothers and sisters."

Her brows shot up. That was a huge family.

He laughed. "I know, right? Anyway, some of them have gotten married and one of my brothers moved away. Granted, there's a couple still living at home and we don't all have our own rooms... but there are a few empty beds. Hudson moved into Mason's room a couple days ago so he didn't have to share with me after the wedding, but I can make him move back. You could have your own space."

There he went again. This weirdo was trying to get her to move in with their family.

And a family with a dozen kids? Sheesh, what was his endgame?

“I know it sounds... odd, and I guess you have no reason to trust me...” His voice trailed off and he chuckled again. “I guess I’m making the offer because I get this feeling you need help.”

That statement rubbed her the wrong way and she scowled at him again.

He held up both hands. “Sorry. I didn’t mean it the way it sounded. I’m not trying to say that you can’t take care of yourself. Clearly, you’re doing okay.”

Her flat expression remained plastered to her face.

“All I’m suggesting is that you take me up on the offer for a few days. I’ll make sure you get some decent food, and you can have a safe place to sleep at night. We can even put a lock on the door.”

She huffed and turned her attention to the menu. People didn’t do things that nice out of the kindness of their hearts.

“Will you just think about it?” His soft voice drew her attention, and she peeked at him from beneath her lashes.

Would it be so bad if she accepted what he was offering her? A hot shower did sound like a dream. She hadn’t managed to get one of those since the one she snagged at a trucker’s stop. Her stomach did a flip. Hot running water. A homecooked meal. Four walls and a mattress that wasn’t riddled with strange smells and vermin. She could always slip out in the night if it wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. And despite what he was saying, she could handle herself.

Athena sighed, then lifted her eyes to meet his. She opened her mouth but then

snapped it shut and nodded instead.

With the smile that spread across his face, she would have thought she'd accepted his marriage proposal. What was with this guy that he was so persistent? Was she making a mistake? Probably. But that hot water was already calling for her, especially after sleeping in a barn last night.

The waitress arrived at their table with a wide smile. "Good morning, Henry! Who's your friend?"

Henry glanced toward her with the question in his eyes. Athena looked down at her menu, considering what would happen if she kept quiet. With the waitress and Henry staring at her, she felt so on the spot she did the only thing she could.

Lie.

"Sam," she mumbled. Technically it wasn't a full lie. She didn't actually know her real name. Every name she ever gave to people had been a way for her to hold onto a sense of anonymity. Maybe somewhere out there was a birth certificate with the name Samantha, and right now she was actually telling the truth.

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“Pleasure to meet you, Sam,” the waitress said with a large smile. “What can I get for you both?”

Henry placed his order and then they stared at her expectantly. Athena turned her menu toward the waitress and pointed to the large breakfast combo with pancakes, bacon, eggs, and toast. Then she pointed to the milk and the juice.

“I’m sorry, your meal only comes with one,” the waitress said as she scribbled something on her notepad. “Which one would you like?”

“Go ahead and get her both,” Henry spoke before Athena could decide. “In fact, make her order a double and she’ll have the second one to-go.” He retrieved both menus and held them out to the waitress. “Thanks, Hope.”

Hope nodded. “Of course, sweetie. I’ll get that going right away.”

Athena watched their waitress leave, then swiveled her gaze back to Henry. She itched to ask him why he would do something like that—get her so much—but she couldn’t bring herself to utter a single word. Speaking the least amount possible was one of her many rules. The less she talked, the safer she was.

Instead of saying anything, she clasped her hands in her lap and stared at her twiddling thumbs.

Food.

A place to stay.

This was all... too good to be true.

But maybe she could just accept it this time. There wasn't any harm in that, was there?

* * *

Athena held onto her to-go box as she stared at the house from the night before. She still sat in the truck, unwilling or unable to climb out and follow Henry inside. He'd chatted all through breakfast and the whole way back here.

And it wasn't until he stood outside her door that she started to really regret agreeing to this.

Henry knocked on the glass. "Come on, Sam. Unlock the door. You realize I have the keys, right?"

If he was so insistent, then he would have unlocked the door by now. What was holding him back?

"Will you just unlock it so I can open the door? I have more stuff to do today. I can't just let you stay in the truck all day long. It still gets hot."

She glanced at him and then down at the lock. The swirling in her stomach continued to increase and she shut her eyes tight.

Hot shower.

Warm bed.

Safe.

Taking a deep breath, she pulled up on the lock and he immediately opened the door.

“Now, was that so hard?”

If only he knew. There were reasons for her rules. And “cruel people” was only a small part of them.

Henry held out his hand. “Come on, I’m going to take you to your room and if you want to lock me out up there, then I give you full permission.”

She stared at his hand just like the night before. Only this time, she didn’t have a glass full of liquid to toss in his face. Athena grimaced at the memory. She’d agreed to come here. He’d fed her. It was time to put aside her concerns if only for a few hours and allow herself to trust him.

But maybe only him.

Athena placed her hand in his and allowed him to pull her from the vehicle. The second her feet hit the ground, she tugged her hand free and clutched the to-go box once more.

“This will be nice. You’ll see. I mean, it’s better than it was even five years ago.” He chuckled. “You should have seen it back then. Man, we let this place go... but then what can you expect when you live with a bunch of children.”

She must have given him a strange look because he slowed his steps and faced her. “That probably sounded weird.” Henry rubbed the back of his neck. “We didn’t exactly have the best parental guidance growing up. It’s a long story, and I won’t bore you with the details.” He shifted his attention to the house. “Come on. It’s on the second floor. Let me show you around.”

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He moved up the porch steps first, and for a second, she contemplated running. But then something squashed that thought and she squared her shoulders before following him up the stairs and inside. This couldn't be nearly as bad as the time she'd slept under that bridge or the time she'd stayed a full week in the back of a truck at the junkyard.

This was a real house with real running water.

She'd be living it up like a queen. But only for a few days.

5

Henry

At least he had one thing.

He knew her name.

Sam.

Henry glanced at her out of the corner of his eye as they reached the bedroom. Funny, she didn't quite look like a Sam. Maybe it was short for something. Or maybe he had made himself believe that she had some kind of exotic name better suited for those green eyes.

He pushed open the door and gestured with a sweep of his arm. "Home sweet home. What do you think?"

She glanced at him, then back to the room.

“Still not talking to me, huh? You ever gonna say something? I’d almost thought that you might be mute until you said your name. Hope doesn’t bite. You could have talked to her.”

Sam shot him a flat look, and he chuckled as he held up placating hands for what felt like the hundredth time.

“Okay, okay, I get it. You don’t like to talk to anyone. Not even the guy who’s willing to give you free room and board.”

Once again, her gaze locked with his, and for a brief moment, something electric passed between them.

Henry moved past her into the room. “Now, there’s still some of my brother’s things in the closet. If they get in the way, let me know and I’ll throw them in a box or something. The bathroom is down the hall. Breakfast and lunch are usually a free-for-all, but we always have dinner as a family.”

Sam wrinkled her nose, and he laughed.

“I know. Another weird thing in this day and age when families don’t make time for each other, but I promise, it’s not as bad as it seems. And we’ve got a lot more space since some of us have moved out.”

She placed her food on the dresser that was pressed up against the wall, and Henry motioned to it.

“You want me to put that in the fridge? We can put your name on it, and no one will eat it.” He scrunched up his face. “Okay, maybe that’s not true. Sometimes, Caleb

takes stuff that doesn't belong to him, and he totally lies about it. But maybe if I hide it in the vegetable drawer, he won't see it."

Sam moved to the window as if she hadn't heard a single word he'd said. She wrapped her arms around herself, then took a deep breath and released it.

Henry didn't dare go any closer to her. Now was not the time to push anything she wouldn't be comfortable with. He was lucky as it was to get her on board with coming up here in the first place. "Anyway," he drawled, "I was thinking that if you wanted to, we could go to town again and get you a few things."

Her head snapped around and she stared at him with curiosity.

He flushed hot. "I noticed you didn't have anything with you. It's getting colder around here. I thought you might like to get a jacket and maybe a few other things."

Sam shook her head vehemently and then turned back to the window.

"Are you sure? Because—"

Once again, she shook her head.

"Okay," he said. "Well, I'm going to head out and get some more work done. You're welcome to get some rest or take a shower or something. I don't know where Hudson is, but I'll make sure he knows that this room is yours now. Oh, and there's fresh sheets in the closet on the top shelf. I'd offer to change the bed for you, but I can't until later." He inched closer to the door, backing up until he stood in the doorway. "Come find me if you need anything. Or you can ask anyone you bump into. I swear, we're all really nice."

Sam still didn't turn. He wasn't sure if she even cared about any of the stuff he'd just

told her. It probably didn't matter anyway. At this point, he wouldn't be surprised if she regretted her choice to stay and she ended up disappearing before he got done with his work for the day.

He'd just have to hope that she trusted him enough to stick around.

* * *

Henry didn't see Hudson anywhere when he went downstairs or outside. He might have already gone out to work and that would mean touching base with him when they came in at lunch. Then again, if Sam agreed to it, Henry didn't plan on being home at lunch. For some reason unknown to even him, he really wanted to take her out to get a few things of her own.

Already, he could tell she would be a hard nut to crack. She'd said exactly one word to anyone since he'd come in contact with her. For whatever reason, she held her cards close to her chest. But he'd figure her out.

The hours dragged on as he got the rest of his morning duties completed. Every so often he'd look toward the house as if he expected to see Sam make a run for it. But each time he did, there wasn't anything.

It probably took him slightly longer than usual to get his work done just for that fact alone. As it neared lunchtime, he finally tossed aside his work gloves and headed for the house, only to have the door slam open. Birds shot out from the nearby trees and Sam scurried from the house, followed by an angry Hudson.

Henry charged forward quickly enough to have Sam collide with his chest when she took a moment to look behind her. She gasped as her head whipped around and her green eyes met his. She blinked, then all at once dug her face into his chest.

His arms came out to his sides as his brain tried to make sense of how she was treating him.

“What is that homeless chick doing in my bedroom, Henry?” Hudson demanded.

Sam flinched, and Henry shot a dirty look at his brother. “It’s not your room. Up until yesterday, it was Mason’s.”

Hudson shook his head. “Everyone knows that I called dibs. I get to have my own space now.”

Henry snorted. “Seriously? You want to make this about getting your own space? All of us had a roommate since the very beginning. That’s what happens in big families.”

“And now that I’ve paid my dues, I get to have that room,” he insisted.

“Stop being ridiculous. There’s plenty of space for us to help her out.”

Hudson glowered. This had been the loudest he’d been that Henry could ever remember. His sour mood had only continued to increase since the family had grown. He nodded to Sam, who was still burying her face in Henry’s chest. “You didn’t ask for permission. I bet if I tell Wade, he’s gonna tell you to find some other place to put her. In fact, I bet he’s gonna tell you this was all a bad idea. We don’t know anything about her.”

“Not if I get to Brielle first.”

Hudson’s brows lifted. He knew exactly what Henry was referring to. Brielle wouldn’t allow anyone, least of all someone in need like Sam, to get kicked to the curb. Hudson’s shoulders slumped and he groaned. “Come on, man. I just want to have my own room.”

“Then trade with Caleb. I’m sure he’s bummed out with Carter gone.”

Hudson grew quiet. He glanced toward the house, then the barn and back to Henry. “Actually, that might work.”

“I know it will. Twins are notorious for wanting to have company, right?”

“I don’t know about any of that, but I bet I could convince our baby brother that he needs to move out and let me have his room.” Hudson spun around and headed for the house, leaving Henry alone with Sam.

The second Hudson was gone, Sam pulled away from Henry. She wrapped her arms around herself, not looking directly at him. Then she lifted her accusatory gaze.

Henry chuckled, lifting a shoulder as he did. “Sorry about that. Hudson is usually so tame. I didn’t think he’d chase you out of the house.”

Her lip curled and she glanced over her shoulder to where Hudson had gone. Then she shook her head and marched toward the road.

“Where are you going?” Henry chased after her. His heart hammered a little harder. “You’re not just gonna leave like that, are you?” He reached for her wrist, but she ripped it out of his grasp. “Come on, that was just a hiccup.” Henry came around to stand in front of her. “Let me make it up to you.”

Sam eyed him with that familiar disdain mingled with distrust.

Henry laughed. “What kind of girl says no to a shopping spree? You have to admit it sounds fun, right?”

Her eyes narrowed, then she looked away. “Why are you doing this?” she whispered.

He blinked with surprise. Then he moved closer. “Did you just ask me a question?”

Her arms flew down at her sides and she scowled at him. “What is wrong with you? Are you broken up here?” She tapped her temple. “You don’t know me. I could be a serial killer.”

Henry let his gaze sweep over her small frame. “Yeah, and I’m the prince of England.”

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She snorted. “Sometimes big things come in small packages.”

A smile tugged at his lips. “I’ll have to take your word for it.” They continued staring at each other until Henry couldn’t take it any longer. “Does that mean you’ll go shopping with me? You can get some new clothes, maybe a bag?”

“I’m not helpless,” she snapped. “Have you considered that I have exactly what I want?”

He sized her up again. “Okay, then just a coat. I’m telling you, if you haven’t spent your winters here, then you’re going to regret not having one.”

“Who says I’m staying here that long?”

Henry blinked. She was right about that one. He’d assumed she was sticking around, but a person like Sam didn’t appear to be the type to stay in any place very long. “Oh,” he murmured.

She glanced up at him, and for a second, he thought he could see her defenses drop. But just as quickly as that occurred, they came right back up. “Fine. A coat. And maybe a new pair of shoes. These ones don’t fit right.”

He grinned, gesturing toward his truck. “Deal.” When she didn’t immediately head in that direction, he held out his arm in a crook.

She stared at it and then lifted a single brow when she met his eyes. “No, thanks.”

At least she was talking now. He had to take every win he could get.

“I hope you know this isn’t some sort of My Fair Lady thing. You’re not going to change my clothes and my hair, put on some makeup and make a new woman out of me.”

“My Fair Lady? What’s that?”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m just saying, I’m not going to be your puppet. And I’m not your project. And I’m definitely not your pet.”

“So we’re nixing the three ‘P’ words. No puppets, projects, or pets. Got it.”

They got to his truck, and he opened the door for her. She hesitated, then met his gaze again with narrowed eyes. “You never said why you were doing this.”

He shrugged. “I guess I don’t have an answer for you.”

Sam huffed. “I don’t believe that for a second. Everyone has ulterior motives. Even handsome cowboys like you.”

Henry grinned. “You think I’m handsome?”

Her cheeks filled with color, something not even a scowl could hide. She dropped her eyes and climbed into the truck. “One trip to town and that’s it.”

He shut the door with a chuckle and hurried around the side to climb in behind the wheel. When he closed his own door, she spoke again. “And you can tell your brother he won’t have to wait long. I’m not staying.”

Henry glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. Maybe that would change.

Athena

Using her voice for the first time was a shock to her system—one she wasn't prepared for even though she'd experienced it before. Athena wouldn't have been surprised if she'd lost it all together. The tone and cadence sounded almost foreign. Thankfully her voice had been strong. She'd sounded sure of herself.

Unfortunately, the longer she sat beside him during their little ride, the more antsy she became. She stretched out her legs and stared at her shoes, tapping her toes together a couple times before she turned her focus out the window.

If she'd been honest with herself, she would have confessed that she could use some new clothes. She used to have a backpack with everything she needed, but it had been stolen one day while she was sleeping. Within it had been a change of clothes, some necessities, and what little cash she'd managed to save.

Without it, she felt naked. She wasn't sure when or if she'd get an opportunity to replace it. Perhaps this was God's way of making that happen and she'd been too stubborn to accept it. Athena shot a quick look in Henry's direction. From the looks of it, his family seemed to be doing okay. He could probably afford to help her out.

That was her pride getting in the way again. She should have just accepted his offer without brushing him off. This was just one of the many reasons why she had told herself that talking to people was a bad idea. She'd put her foot in her mouth and now she couldn't backtrack.

She hadn't planned on staying put here, but the more that she thought about it, the more she realized she didn't have any means to leave Copper Creek—not unless she wanted to resort to stealing money.

Nope, that wasn't going to happen. She drew the line at money. Technically, she didn't consider herself a thief, either. Everything she'd eaten or collected had usually been discarded. She prided herself on finding things she could use that weren't actually trash.

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Except for these shoes. These terrible shoes were the only things she'd been desperate enough to put on her feet. They kept her feet protected from the elements, but that was about it. These awful pieces of leather made her feet hurt and created issues when it came to escaping like she'd attempted to do the night before.

A nice pair of tennis shoes would do the trick. Or maybe some work boots. As long as they fit her feet and they could be broken in, she'd be happy. She'd stay one more night—two at the most—and then she'd take her things and leave. Or she'd get Henry to drop her off in the city. That was the best place for her to get some money. As long as she didn't stay on one corner too long, she could ask for donations and maybe replenish a portion of what she'd lost.

“You okay?” Henry's quiet voice pulled her from her planning, and she shot another look in his direction.

Athena nodded.

He sighed and when her brows furrowed at his reaction, he sighed again. “Please tell me you're not starting that again, are you?”

She didn't look at him. It wasn't hard for her to understand exactly what he was talking about.

“You're being ridiculous. This whole not talking when we've already spoken.”

“I don't feel the need to have a conversation,” she muttered.

“Why not?”

“Contrary to popular belief, sometimes it’s nice to just sit in the quiet.”

He laughed. “You don’t really believe that.”

“And what would you know about what I believe?” she demanded. “I’ve been living my life in a very specific way, and I run into fewer problems when I don’t bombard others with words.”

Henry snorted. “And just how exactly does staying quiet actually help? How are you supposed to get what you need? What if there’s an emergency? There’s a reason why people developed languages all over the world.”

She shook her head. “I never expected you to understand.”

“So, help me understand. How is remaining silent good for anyone?”

“Well, first of all, I don’t annoy anyone with my constant babbling.”

His eyes widened and for a moment she wondered if he’d pull his truck over and demand for her to exit the vehicle. But then he threw his head back and let out a loud laugh. “Burn! I knew you were capable, but I underestimated how ruthless you could be. You’re referring to me, aren’t you? I talk too much. That’s what you’re trying to tell me.”

Athena shrugged.

“Okay, what else? Lay it on as thick as you want, because I’ve got an argument for every single one you throw at me.”

She stilled, not expecting this turn of events. Then she turned to face him. “Okay, what about safety? The more someone talks, the more you get to know them.”

“That’s sorta the point, isn’t it?”

“Not if you’re someone like me who wants to maintain a certain amount of…”

“Intrigue?”

“No,” she drawled. “Inconspicuousness. I don’t know if you understand this, but someone in my position needs to be extremely careful about what they share and with whom. People don’t exactly take too kindly to people like me.”

“People like you? Do you mean people who have clawed their way through life, not only trying to take care of themselves but succeeding and all without a support system?”

She gaped at him. No one had ever put what she was into those words. The way he made it sound, she was some kind of hero. That description was something a person could be proud of. “Do you really think that?” she whispered so low she wasn’t sure he’d hear her.

“Why wouldn’t I? You’re not so anonymous, you know that, right? I noticed you the second you showed up for the wedding.”

He had? Of course, he had. Why else would he track her down in the barn and try to make her take a drink? He’d probably watched her scarf down all that food, too.

Athena placed both hands over her face and groaned. How embarrassing.

“It’s not a bad thing.” As reassuring as Henry made his voice sound, she couldn’t

believe him. She'd heard every name in the book. The homeless in this country were a scourge—a plague that needed to be eradicated. Ironically, most of the folks she ran into preferred the solitary and minimalistic lifestyle. Many of them chose this path.

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Now, would she like to have a home and a family to care for her? Ideally, sure. She could understand the draw something like that had. She'd seen the happily wedded couple last night. There was a reason people seemed to collide and start living their lives together.

Realistically?

Athena knew better. There wasn't a guy on this planet who would want to put up with her baggage. Getting close to someone only ensured one thing.

Heartache.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"Will you stop asking me that?" Already she could feel this connection between them strengthening as if against her will. She liked some of the things he'd said, and she wanted to hear more.

Then she had to remind herself it was nothing but an ego boost. Henry didn't care about her. He might be infatuated with the idea of helping her. He might even be a legitimately good guy. But he would never stick around or fight to be in the life of someone like her. She was a lone wolf who didn't know how to be with people.

Something soft touched her arm and she jumped, all but pressing her body against the window and away from Henry. "Don't touch me," she seethed.

Pain flitted in his brown eyes so plainly that she couldn't deny the guilt that

immediately flooded her stomach. “I didn’t mean any offense. I just thought it would be nice to get to know you better.”

“See? This is what I was talking about,” she shot back. “Talking. It ruins everything. We were having a nice drive and now you’re apologizing and I’m on edge.”

“You’re blaming conversation on what’s happening right now?”

“There’s nothing else I can blame,” she said plainly. “The second we started talking, we got into an argument. What do you think is the cause?”

His eyes darted to her a couple times before returning to the road. “I think that you’ve been on the road for so long, you’ve forgotten what it’s like to spend time with someone who might genuinely have your best interest at heart.”

She scoffed. “I’ve never met anyone who’s had my best interest at heart.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Henry said. “There has to be at least one. What about your folks?”

Athena scowled. “You definitely don’t want to look under that stone.”

“Why? Were you abused?”

“By my parents? No. And before you ask, I’ll tell you. I have no idea where they are. I have no idea why they had me. And best of all, I have no clue who they are.”

Henry’s head snapped around to stare at her, but then he was forced to return his gaze to the road. “You don’t know your parents?”

“Weren’t you listening? No. I was found on the side of the road when I was three

years old. No one knew what to do with me, so I bounced around from foster home to foster home. As a kid, I was pushed around. When I got older, I was used as a free babysitter. You can bet one hundred percent that the second I turned eighteen, I was out of there.” Athena stared out the window. Back then, her name had been Kira. She hated that name with every fiber of her being. No matter how many names she told people, she never used that one.

As far as she was concerned, that name had been given to her by the first foster family and wasn’t even who she really was. Picking her own name had been the first act of defiance she could make. Only a few select people knew her by this name, and she intended on keeping it that way.

“I’m so sorry, Sam,” Henry whispered. “That sounds awful.”

“Don’t be. You weren’t the one who caused that pain. Just be grateful you were able to grow up in a big loving family like the one you got.”

He chuckled and she stared hard at him.

“I fail to see why that statement was funny.”

Henry shook his head. “It’s not. Not really. It’s just that...” He glanced at her sideways. “My parents abandoned all of us when my baby sister was still in diapers. They just... took off.”

Her eyes widened. For the first time in a long time, she was speechless, and it wasn’t by choice. He had to be lying to make her feel better about her own situation. That was the only thing that made sense. But the longer she looked at him, the more she had to admit that he didn’t appear to be lying. She was normally very good at picking up on a person’s tall tale.

Henry wasn't bluffing.

And if he was, then he was the best liar she'd ever met.

He peeked at her and chuckled again. "I suppose we have a couple things in common. I mean, I guess I know who my folks are. I just don't consider them my parents—not anymore." His eyes got this far-off look as his thoughts shifted—probably to the memory of his folks.

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He'd been abandoned just like she had been. But lucky for him, he had all his siblings to help keep their family together.

She'd been alone.

Henry was right about something else.

They did have more in common than she realized.

7

Henry

Deep down, Henry knew there was going to be a dark origin story. He just didn't think it would turn out to be so similar to his own. If there was anyone out there who could relate to him, it would be this woman.

It was really too bad Sam couldn't see what he saw in her. She truly had the kind of strength that a regular person could only dream of having, but like most things in this world, the price was too steep.

He pulled the truck around and parked in front of a boutique that sold women's clothing. He'd heard Annabel talking about it once before. It had the coat and shoes that Sam had requested, but it also had a wide selection of clothing. He wouldn't have been surprised if they had tote bags or backpacks somewhere in the back.

Henry had already made up his mind before they got in the truck. While Sam insisted

on only purchasing the two items, he'd busy himself with finding a few outfits for her to try on as well.

She might not realize it, but the outfit she was wearing needed to be replaced. There wasn't a single doubt in his mind that she'd deny his request to get her something, but he was going to do it anyway. Sometimes, people just needed to accept the help they were being offered.

He turned toward her after he killed the engine. "That store right there will have everything you need, and if it doesn't, then we can head out and take a look at the cowboy supply store that we passed coming in. They have everything from farming equipment to clothes for us ranchers."

Sam eyed the store before them with dismay. "I don't think that's the sort of place that is going to sell me the kinds of shoes or the coat that would be beneficial to my... situation." She brought her eyes back to meet his. "I'm not some hoity-toity girl who has the luxury of staying inside all winter long. Inevitably, I'm going to have to find a place where they don't force their guests to sleep outside or in the chimney."

Henry wrinkled his nose. "No one's gonna make you sleep in the chimney."

"Okay, they might not have forced me to, but on several occasions, I've had to bring something to the front desk and the people working there asked me to clean out the fireplace so they could start using it as it got colder." A smile tugged at her lips, but she kept it at bay. "You never realize just how much you want to become the princess in the soot than when you wake up covered in it."

"How old were you?" Henry asked. "That doesn't sound like something a young girl would be requested to do."

She shrugged. "I suppose that was the time I ran away from the Hamiltons. It was that

shelter on the corner of Ash and Fifth Streets.” Her eyes shot to meet Henry’s. “Oh yeah, I had just turned fifteen. It was their way of giving me something to keep me busy and also get me started working for the man.”

He chuckled. “Working for the man?” Henry sobered when her expression didn’t match his level of amusement. “I have a hard time believing that someone would put you to work just so you could become a contributing member of society.”

“You would assume wrong.”

“Is it so bad? Helping people out? I didn’t like that I had to work my tail off at the ranch, but if I didn’t pull my weight, I didn’t get fed.”

Sam turned away from him. “That’s different. You were trying to help your family. I didn’t have any.”

That was a good point, but it didn’t change the fact that in order to get something out of this world, a person had to work for it. Even he could see that.

Based on her body language, he didn’t feel he could point out that fact. She had chosen to live her life in a certain way, and for all intents and purposes, she was happy with her choices.

Henry turned his attention toward the boutique store. “I have a proposition for you.”

Her head snapped around and she stared at him with distrust. “I’m not that kind of girl.” Her words were like a strike to the chest. Pain and mortification hit and hit hard.

His eyes cut to meet hers. “I don’t know what you think I was going to suggest, but I assure you it’s nothing that would put your reputation at risk.”

She eyed him, still not showing even an ounce of flexibility. “I’m not going to apologize for being cautious. In my experience, people simply aren’t trustworthy. I shouldn’t have to trust you just because you gave me a place to stay and want to get me a coat.”

“No, but you should be more willing to give me the benefit of the doubt. I haven’t done anything to make you feel at risk, have I?”

“No,” she murmured.

“Then hear me out before you jump to conclusions. I swear, I’m not trying to pull the wool over your eyes. I’m just trying to help.”

“I don’t need—”

He mumbled something under his breath in exasperation. “Will you cool it and listen to me? I know you don’t need my help, but maybe you’d be interested in what I have to offer.”

Sam clamped her mouth shut. Her arms were folded, and her eyes narrowed. He wouldn’t have been surprised to find that there was a piece of indestructible glass that had magically appeared between them. When she didn’t speak to him right away, he continued.

“What if I offered to take you in there, get you a couple new outfits, some new shoes, and a coat. We could get you a suitcase to put them in, too. Then I could help you get a job.”

Her brows shot up. “A job?”

“Yeah. I’m sure there are plenty of places around here that could use the help. Honestly, with two of my brothers moving out, I think we could use someone like you out at the ranch.”

Her lip curled into a sneer. “You think that with a snap of your fingers, you can change me? That you can bring me to a place like this, get me some new clothes, and just like that, I’ll be cured? My homelessness isn’t some plight that needs to be fixed.” With each sentence, her voice raised another octave. But it was when her face turned red that he realized his mistake. He shouldn’t have made the offer.

Maybe she would have been more open to it a few days down the road. But this was the first day they'd really spent together. It wasn't even that he was trying to change her. He just wanted to help.

"Take me home."

"But—"

"I said, take me—back. I'm not going to go on some shopping spree with someone who thinks they're God's gift to the world. I don't need your help. I'll graciously take the room you've offered for the night, and then I'll leave." Sam didn't look at him after that.

Somehow, he knew that even if he tried to talk to her about what he was trying to do, she wouldn't believe him. Or maybe that wasn't the problem. She believed him, but she was offended that he wanted to change her.

Whatever the reason, it didn't matter. Sam wouldn't be swayed, and he couldn't expect her to just go along with what he said because he thought it would be beneficial.

Who was he kidding? He wasn't going to just sit here and be bossed around by the likes of her. She needed help, but she was being stubborn.

Henry pushed the door open, causing Sam to jump and stare at him with wide, unsuspecting eyes.

"Where are you going?"

He grabbed his hat from where it was on the seat between them and placed it on his head. Then he pointed to the storefront. "I'm going to get a few things in that store."

You can come with me, or you can stay out here. I don't much care one way or the other." With that, he shut the door and strode to the entrance of the store.

Itching to stop and turn around if only to see whether she'd made a decision or not, Henry paused with his hand on the door handle. Then he shook his head. Looking back would most definitely make her dig in her heels harder than she already had.

Henry yanked open the door and went inside.

And immediately regretted it.

He glanced around the store that was clearly marketed toward women. He couldn't see anything that resembled what a man in this town would want to wear. There were brightly colored clothing sections. On one wall was a selection of white and cream flowy outfits. In the back, at least, there appeared to be jeans and other options better suited to an active lifestyle.

"Hi! Can I help you?" A young woman approached him with a bright smile on her face. "Are you shopping for someone in particular?"

He glanced through the window at his truck, where he could see the silhouette of the exact woman he wanted to shop for. If only she would have followed him inside. Heaving a sigh, he turned to the woman and sized her up. His gaze trailed up and down her frame, and a grin spread across his face. "You're actually pretty darn close to the same body type as who I'm shopping for."

The woman hesitated, her smile less bright. "Sounds like you don't know her size."

"I don't. But that shouldn't matter, right? If you're close enough and we get stuff that's more..." He glanced toward the flowy clothing section. "Like that stuff over there. It would work, right?"

Her eyes followed his gesture, and when she returned them to him, she nodded. “Sure, those style choices tend to more easily fit different body types, within reason.”

He marched over to the wall and started pulling off shirts and dresses. He wasn’t sure what Sam was into. She might hate everything he picked out. But for some reason, that didn’t matter. Worst case scenario, he could bring back what she wouldn’t wear.

Most of what he picked out were lighter fabrics, so they could be worn in warm or cooler temperatures. When he headed toward the back, he picked out a couple pairs of leggings and one pair of jeans. Those were the only things he worried about.

After he checked out, he tossed the bags into the back of the truck and drove toward the store where he’d be able to get a hard-shell suitcase and a coat. Neither one of them spoke a word. Sam didn’t even insist that she wanted him to take back what he got.

That was the strange part. After all her insistence that she didn’t want help, he could tell there was a part of her that was curious. Maybe she simply wasn’t ready to accept the help that was offered.

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His demeanor softened at that point. The amount of stuff she would have gone through to get that sort of mentality tugged at him in ways he wasn't prepared for. Whenever he looked at her, all he could think about was that he wanted to make sure she was going to be okay. It wasn't anything romantic. He knew better than anyone that he wasn't ready for a relationship. Perhaps this was just a way for him to give more of himself.

Sam's closed-off demeanor didn't change. Not when they stopped at the supply store. Not when he insisted she tell him what size of shoe she wore or she'd get something that didn't fit. And not when he'd brought out a beautiful sheepskin coat. That one probably cost more than Wade would have approved of. Thankfully, Brielle would think the opposite.

The rest of the way home, Sam remained the ever-stoic person he'd come to expect. When they got back, he put everything neatly into the suitcase, then lugged it out of the back of his truck and placed it at her feet. "There," he said triumphantly.

8

Athena

Athena stared at the suitcase with disdain. "What do you want me to do with that? It's not exactly traveling light."

"Whatever you don't like or doesn't fit, just give it back to me and I'll return it."

This guy seriously thought she'd want to try everything on like some kind of fashion

show? What was he expecting? For her to traipse around wearing what he'd picked out for her? He didn't know her style. What he was suggesting sounded utterly ridiculous. First, he went and spent good money on something she didn't want. Now he was saying he'd spend more money to drive back to the store and return it. For someone who had grown up without parents, who had probably struggled financially, he was being far too careless with the money he currently had.

He motioned to the suitcase again. "It's deceptively light. As long as you're not trying to run away from someone who caught you sneaking into their barn, you should be able to get around with it just fine."

Her cheeks flushed and her scowl deepened. Why did he have to go and point that out? It wasn't like she'd broken into their house and taken something. That stall wasn't being used.

Henry sighed. "Fine, if you're not going to take it up to your room, I will. Dinner is going to be in about an hour. You can join us or hide away. It's up to you." He reached for the suitcase and stomped toward the house. The guy had to be crazy. That was the only thing that made sense.

Athena marched off toward the barn. At least there, she wasn't going to be judged. She spun on her heel as she reached the doorway and darted into the shelter she'd claimed as her own the night before and nearly bumped into a pretty blond woman.

"Oh!" The woman let out a laugh and placed her hand over her heart. Her long lashes fluttered several times, and she craned her neck around to look past Athena. "I'm sorry, I don't think we've met." She held out her hand. "I'm Brielle."

Athena stared at the woman's hand. She'd heard the name and had expected the woman to be some hoity-toity sort of person. She wasn't wrong. The woman standing in front of her was trim with every hair in place. She wore a cowboy hat and fitted

jeans. Her shirt wasn't wrinkled or disheveled like most of the folks wore around here. And her smile was befitting that of a queen.

Slowly, Brielle withdrew her hand and shoved it along with the other in her back pockets. "I'd heard that the guys wanted to hire someone, but I wasn't expecting a woman. It'll be nice to have more female blood around here if you know what I mean." She winked at Athena. "What did you say your name was?"

Athena took a step back, immediately regretting coming this way. She should have known better. Of course someone would be in the barn. This was a ranch. There were cowboys everywhere.

Brielle chuckled. "I guess you're shy. Or maybe you're mute?" She tilted her head. "I suppose you wouldn't be able to tell me who did the hiring?"

Shaking her head, Athena took another step back.

"No, I didn't suppose you would. There are a lot of guys around here. Sometimes, it's hard to keep them all straight, you know what I mean?" Brielle thumbed over her shoulder. "Have they given you the grand tour yet? I can introduce you to the horses. We just got two new ones and they're getting adjusted to the place, but the others would probably like to meet you."

Athena glanced toward the rows of stalls. Horses poked their heads out of a few of them, bobbing and nickering as if they were telling her Brielle spoke the truth. Without realizing exactly why, Athena nodded.

"Great!" Without warning, Brielle looped her arm through Athena's and practically dragged her through the barn. "I don't know if they told you what happens here. We run one of the smaller cattle farms. But my husband is also working on edging into horse training. I guess we do a bit of everything. You can blame Wade for that. I

think he was trying to figure things out when he was a teenager, and he couldn't settle on just one thing." She laughed. "Wade wasn't the one who interviewed you, was he?"

Athena shook her head. She didn't know what Brielle might do when she found out that Athena wasn't here for a job. Depending on the kind of person she was, Brielle might even choose to give Athena the boot.

"This is the horse I ride most often. She's sweet as sugar. Her name is Olive." Brielle pulled them to a stop in front of a horse that stuck out its head with curiosity. She blew out a snort and then ducked back inside. "Over there are the horses that the guys like to ride. There's Barley, Cookie, Otis..."

Athena's eyes swept over to the other side, where a large black horse peeked out its head. That had been the stall Athena had slept in. Was it possible the horse had been delivered today while she was out with Henry?

"Isn't he gorgeous?" Brielle moved them closer to the black horse. "He's about four years old. Comes from a really great bloodline, but he's stubborn. The folks who had him said they couldn't train him to save their lives. He's nice enough when he's in his stall, but he doesn't like his saddle, and the second someone tries to mount him, they get tossed right back off." Brielle reached out a hand to pet the horse's nose, but he retreated. "I'm determined to make him into a star."

Athena glanced at Brielle with a question in her eyes.

Brielle smiled. "Dressage, of course. He's too pretty to be a standard workhorse. And he's not fast enough to be a racehorse." She shrugged. "So, he's gonna compete—that's if he'll humble himself to accept that he's not in charge."

Athena stared at the soulful eyes of the beast in front of her. While he was large, he

didn't seem quite as stubborn as Brielle let on. Then again, he was locked up at the moment. There was no telling what might happen if he got let out of his stall to roam free.

“I’m guessing they’re going to start you on the grunt work. That means feeding the horses, brushing them down after they’ve been exercised, and making sure they get blankets during inclement weather—unless you have other skills. I’m sure whoever it was that hired you told you that two of the Keagan men have recently moved out. They’ve managed to run this place without needing any extra help, but you’d be surprised at how much more work there is when two of them are gone.”

She listened to this woman prattle on, until a figure loomed in the doorway. Together, they turned toward the intrusion and Athena frowned.

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“Oh, hey, Hudson. What are you up to today?”

Hudson’s eyes met Athena’s and his frown matched hers. “I guess you’ve met Henry’s new project.”

Inside, Athena seethed.

Brielle glanced toward Athena, then back to Hudson. “You know her?”

“We met. Briefly,” Hudson muttered. “She’s gonna stay in Mason’s old room.”

Once again, Brielle turned her attention to Athena. “So, she’s not working here?”

“I don’t know. You’re gonna have to ask Henry that. It wasn’t exactly clear how long she’s staying.” Hudson brushed past them and headed toward the tools that hung on a wall. “Have you seen the socket wrench? I’m trying to fix something, and I can’t quite get to it with what I have.”

Brielle laughed. “Do I look like the kind of person who would bother messing with your tools? I’m not gonna touch anything you guys use. I learned the hard way with my dad.” She turned to Athena, tilting her head thoughtfully. “So, tell me, Henry’s friend. Did he hire you?”

Athena lowered her gaze and then shook her head.

“Interesting. Based on the fact that you haven’t said a single word to me, am I correct in assuming that you’d rather not speak?”

The heat returned to Athena's face. This woman probably thought she was being childish. Adults didn't act this way. Perhaps if they were alone... she might have been persuaded to speak to her. But with Hudson here, she'd rather not say anything at all.

"It's okay if you don't. I'm not gonna judge you for it."

That got Athena's attention.

Brielle shrugged, her smile returning. "I guess there's only one thing to say. I hope you like fried chicken. That's what Charlie wanted to make today."

"Fried chicken?" Hudson called out, making it clear he was eavesdropping and giving Athena more reason to keep her mouth shut.

"Yeah, and if you're not there on time, you're not getting a drumstick." Brielle grinned at Athena. "See you at dinner." With that, she hurried off.

Athena took one look at Hudson, then followed Brielle out. The last thing she wanted to do was be stuck in a room with Hudson again. The guy clearly didn't like her.

At dinner, Athena picked at her plate, feeling the eyes of everyone who'd come to dinner glued to her. Henry had already told them her name was Sam. No one asked about her last name. No one asked where she'd come from or how long she'd be staying. The man seated beside Brielle had to be her husband, and he was the only one who seemed to be interested in her. At least a half a dozen times Athena had caught him studying her.

With his attention weighing her down, she wasn't surprised that, for the first time in a long time, she'd lost her appetite.

“Is there something wrong with your food?” Henry leaned closer to her and whispered.

She shook her head.

“You’re not eating.”

Athena shot one final look at him and rose from her seat. Without uttering a word, she hurried from the room. It didn’t take much effort to find the front door. Once outside, she gulped in a few deep breaths as she clung to the porch column that framed the railing.

She didn’t belong here. It was time to leave and move on.

Unfortunately, something was holding her back. She couldn’t bring herself to take off like she’d planned. Athena had only been here for twenty-four hours and already she’d let herself get so comfortable that she was speaking to someone and staying in their house.

Turning around to face the offensive building, she scowled. This wasn’t like her. Never before had she felt a desire to stick around—not anywhere. What was it about this place that was so alluring?

The door opened and Henry emerged with two plates of food. He lifted both of them slightly. “Thought you might try eating out here—away from the whole crew.”

She didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry. Her stomach gurgled, drawing a smile to Henry’s lips. Athena rolled her eyes and snatched the outstretched plate. She moved to the edge of the porch and sat down on the top step.

Henry took a seat beside her. His shoulder bumped against hers and he flashed her a

smile before picking up a piece of chicken. Her eyes delved into him, trying to dissect what it was about him that made it so easy to speak to him.

“Athena,” she murmured.

9

Henry

“Hmm?” Henry took a bite of his chicken, reveling in the flavorful, crunchy texture. “What about her? Isn’t she the God of something or another?”

“The Goddess of Wisdom.”

“You know, I never quite understood what it was about the Greeks. What’s so great about having different gods represent different entities? I find it so much more realistic to have one, all-knowing, powerful being as my God.” He wiped at his mouth and swallowed his food, then snapped his fingers. “Except for that one god.” Henry continued to snap his fingers. “What was his name? He was the god of the underworld. That, I get. Because let’s face it. If you have a heavenly being who is watching over people from heaven, there has to be one... well, you know where.”

“That’s Hades.”

“Right, Hades.” Henry chuckled. “That was one of my favorite Disney movies as a kid. The blue fire for hair? Awesome.” Henry paused, then glanced at Sam. He wasn’t even sure why they were on this topic. “What were you going to say? When you brought up Athena...”

She dragged her eyes from him and stared at her plate again. “Athena,” she murmured again. “It’s my name.”

His body went cold. It was one of the strangest sensations. He couldn't have heard her right. She'd already told him her name. He'd told everyone her name was Sam. Was she messing with him?

Her eyes met his again. "Actually, I don't know what my real name is. Remember when I told you how I was found?"

Henry nodded slowly. "They found you on the side of a road."

"Right." She shut her eyes tight. "Actually, when they found me, they didn't know what to call me, so they let my first foster family name me. Legally, I'm Kira..." Clouds of darkness filled her eyes when she opened them. "But I don't go by that name anymore."

"So..." he hedged, "you want to be called Athena."

She stared hard at her plate again. "I don't usually get called anything by anyone. Up until right at this moment, I've never told anyone my real name."

Henry's lungs seemed to freeze up. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Of course this could also be a lie. Sam—or Athena—whoever she was—could be trying to manipulate him. But something inside him refused to let himself believe it. He had a chance to be there for her in a way no one else had before. He couldn't let this become a life-altering moment for the worst.

Athena let out a dark chuckle. "I don't even know why I told you. Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if you thought I was crazy. Heck, you probably already think that."

"I don't think you're crazy. I already told you... I think you're brave. And smart." Henry peered down at her, waiting for her to meet his gaze. "Athena," he whispered.

When she finally lifted her eyes, he smiled. “I think it suits you. Only someone with a name like that would have been able to survive this long.”

A tear slipped from her eye and dragged down her cheek. He hooked his finger and swiped it away. Athena released a laugh that could have been mistaken for a sob. “I don’t know why I’m crying. Something has to be wrong with me.”

“Nothing is wrong with you.”

“How do you know?” she demanded. “How could you possibly know that? I don’t even know how to sit at a family dinner without getting stage fright. All I’m good at is finding places to eat and sleep.”

“That’s more than a lot of people are capable of. Take my brother, for instance. He didn’t know where to sleep after you stole his room.”

For the first time, Athena released a genuine laugh. It was short, but the most melodious sound he’d heard thus far in his life. Henry joined in with her. “See? If you were crazy, we wouldn’t be sitting here having fun.”

She wiped at her eyes. “Who says I’m having fun?”

He shrugged. “I just know.” Henry picked up his chicken, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye as she reached for her own. He’d call tonight a win. He couldn’t explain the feelings surging inside him; all he knew was that he was doing the right thing.

They ate in silence for several minutes before she put down a bare chicken wing and turned toward him. “Thank you for the clothes, but I don’t think—”

“You don’t like them?”

She blinked. “I didn’t say that.”

“So, you do like them. Tell me you tried them on. Because I seriously don’t think I could spend another afternoon in that shop picking out stuff for a person I don’t know.”

Athena bit back a smile, clearly trying to hide it, but she failed miserably. “I tried them on.”

“And they fit?”

“Yes, but—”

Henry heaved a heavy sigh. “Good. That’s a relief. I thought for a second I’d have to explain to Wade and Brielle that I’d jumped the gun and gotten you a bunch of stuff you didn’t want.”

“That’s the thing, I don’t—”

He frowned. “You don’t want them?”

“I do, it’s just—”

“Then I don’t understand why we’re having this conversation. You like the clothes. They fit. What’s the problem?”

“Will you let me get a word in edgewise? I was trying to say that I don’t think it’s a good idea to have all of it.”

“Why not?”

“It’s too much. What happens when I...” She pulled her lower lip into her mouth and chewed it. “...leave? It’s just not practical.”

“The heck with it being practical. If it fits in that suitcase, then you can take it. People live out of suitcases all the time.” Henry gave her a pointed look. “All I’m saying is you shouldn’t just throw out a good idea without trying it first.”

“And if I want to leave tomorrow? That doesn’t give me much time to test it out.”

He didn’t know what to say to that one. “Do you want to leave tomorrow?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” she whispered.

Henry got to his feet, plate in hand. “Well, when you figure that part out, how about you let me know? In the meantime, really make sure everything fits. I’m not sure about the return policy on most of it.” He took a step toward the door. “I’m going to turn in. I get up pretty early. You’re free to do whatever you’d like.”

Was there a chance that she might take her stuff and run? Absolutely. But something told him that he was getting through to her. Athena wanted a place to call home. Why else would she open up to him like this?

“Wait!”

He stopped.

“You’re going to bed?”

A wry smile touched his lips. “That’s what I said.”

“But... it’s still so early. How can you sleep when it’s light out?”

Henry chuckled. “That’s what drapes are for.”

Athena rose to her feet. “You’re just going to leave me alone to contend with your family?” There was an edge to her voice that wasn’t there before. He could almost hear the fear creeping to the surface.

“You had dinner with everyone. They didn’t bite.”

“I don’t know. Hudson seems to be pretty ornery about my presence.”

He leaned against the railing, understanding flooding his countenance. “You’re worried that they’re going to judge you. You’re giving my family too much credit. I told you about my parents. Everyone in that house has had to deal with varying degrees of judgment from people in this town. We’ve all overcome it. If Hudson doesn’t like you here, it’s only because he really wanted that room.” Henry chuckled. “I know, that sounds really stupid, but you will never understand until you have had to be raised in a family with twelve kids. Some days it was every man for himself—at least when it came to sharing with each other.”

“I suppose that’s one thing I can be grateful for.”

He stilled. “What’s that?”

“I never had to fight for anything like that. Did I have to find ways to survive? Of course. But even when I was in the foster system, there was always a clear line drawn in the sand as to what was and wasn’t okay for me to claim.” She gave him a sad smile. “It’s probably very different when you’re fighting a family member for something versus when you’re just making sure you have enough to move on to the next place.”

“Do you like that? Moving on to the next place?” Henry knew he was playing with fire. If he pushed too hard, it wouldn’t take much for her to withdraw from him. But every little bit of information he could get from her, the better.

“I wouldn’t say I like it,” she said quietly. “It’s all I’ve ever known. If you don’t stay in one place for too long, then you don’t grow attached to anything.” Her eyes darted to meet his and then dropped. “Or anyone.”

“Is that why you might leave tomorrow?”

Athena shrugged.

“Well, for what it’s worth, I hope you stay.”

He was about to move to the door when her soft voice stopped him in his tracks.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you want me to stay? Why are you being so nice to me?”

“Is there something wrong with me wanting to do something nice for someone else?”

“No, but—”

His lips quirked upward. “Then stop fighting it, will you?” He motioned to the house.

“You’ve got a roof over your head, food in your belly, and at least one person who cares if he sees you tomorrow.” Henry tugged on the doorknob, then paused before he looked over his shoulder toward her. “Goodnight, Athena.”

Henry wasn’t sure what would happen between now and the morning. Athena could very well slip into the night. Or she could go up to her room and turn in early. There were so many variables at this point in time. For now, he was going to choose not to dwell too much on the “what ifs” of the current situation.

He deposited his dishes in the kitchen, thanked his sister Charlie for dinner, and went straight upstairs to his room. Before he was able to shut the door, Brielle called out to him from the stairs. Henry stopped and poked his head into the hallway.

When she reached the landing, she grinned at him. “I wanted to tell you that I met Sam earlier today in the barn. She’s not much of a talker, is she?”

Henry nearly told her that Sam wasn’t Athena’s name, but he thought better of it. Now was not the time to destroy what little amount of trust she’d given him. Instead, he nodded. “Yeah, she has a hard time trusting people.”

“So, she talks to you?”

He nodded again.

“That’s good.” Brielle shot a look over her shoulder and then moved closer. “I know that she’s just here visiting you. I’m not going to ask you how you met or anything, but I was thinking it might be a good idea to hire her to help out around here.”

Brows lifting, Henry stared dumbfounded at the woman his oldest brother had married.

“What? Don’t you think that’s a good idea?” Brielle said.

“No. I mean, yes. I...” He shook his head as if that would clear it. “I was thinking the same thing. I even told her the same thing.”

“That’s great! I’ll tell Wade, and he can set up a meeting to discuss what we can afford to pay her.”

He held up his hand, but she was already heading down the stairs. Brielle would find

out soon enough if Athena didn't want to work for them. Either she'd leave, or she'd turn down the offer. No sense in drawing unnecessary attention to her. She'd already had a big day.

10

Athena

In reality, Athena knew she should have slept soundly. Her current setup was better than she'd had in months, perhaps even years. She had a door that she could lock. She had access to food. The temperatures were regulated.

Ironically, there were some things she didn't like at all.

The noise, for instance. For a house with a lot of people, it had been far too quiet. She could even hear the thumping of her own heart and it was just as annoying as the dripping sound of a faucet. There were no rushing cars, no screeching strays, and the occasional argument between a set of lovers couldn't lull her to sleep like they normally did.

The soft ticking of the clock on the wall was quickly adding to her growing headache. She couldn't stay in this room much longer. The problem was that there wasn't any light coming through her window. She didn't know how early the cowboys on this ranch got up in the morning.

Athena paced at the foot of her bed, chewing on the irritating hangnail that had come free on her finger. The mild pain it caused wasn't enough to distract her from her current predicament. She glanced at the suitcase on the floor. Every single thing that Henry had bought for her was perfect. She didn't know how he'd done it, but even the cowboy boots he'd gotten her fit her like they were meant to be hers.

She'd been telling him the truth when she said she didn't want the clothes and the suitcase. The way she led her life made it nearly impossible for her to move from place to place with that much stuff. What would happen if she needed to leave it somewhere to do something? The more she had, the more likely it would get stolen.

And at the same time, she couldn't argue with his logic. People could live out of suitcases.

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Athena sighed, moving across the room toward the window to peek outside. She didn't see anyone. Maybe it was too dark to work, even for a family of cowboys. She wouldn't imagine that horses enjoyed being out in the dark. There were too many critters that could run under nearby bushes to put them on edge.

Resuming her pacing, Athena's thoughts returned to Henry and the questions he'd asked last night. Was she going to leave? She really didn't know. At this point it would be easy. She could sell some of the items that Henry had given her and that would be enough to get a fresh start.

Unfortunately, the thought of leaving this place already left a bad taste in her mouth. What was with that? She didn't have any connection to the folks on this ranch. This wasn't her home. Henry was nice and all, but even he wasn't enough to keep her here.

Liar, a voice in her head seemed to argue. Henry was the most decent guy she'd met all year. Granted he was also maybe one of two men that she'd given at least fifteen minutes of her time to.

While it would go against every rule she'd set for herself, staying was starting to sound pretty good. What if she decided to stick around just for the current season? She could get to know Henry a little better—as a friend. And maybe she'd even be able to ride one of the horses.

That black horse she'd seen the other day was definitely at the top of her list of reasons to stay. If she thought Henry was interesting enough to stick around for, then that horse was the cherry on top.

Athena stopped her pacing. If everyone was still asleep, then there was no one stopping her from going down to the barn to check out that horse. She had a feeling that if she'd wanted to interact with the black beauty, there would be plenty of pushback about her decision from the Keagan family. Now might be the only chance she had to check on that horse and see what he was really like.

She snatched her coat from the bed and shoved her arms into the holes, then hurried down the stairs as quickly as she could while at the same time making sure she wasn't going to wake up any of the residents.

The second her boots touched the ground, she took off running. In this moment, surrounded by the ranch property and only the two buildings on the premises, she could understand why people would choose to live in a place like this.

There was something about the wide, open spaces and the knowledge that if push came to shove, these people would be able to survive when they were knocked off their feet.

Athena made it to the barn and strode toward the horse she couldn't stop thinking about. Before she reached the stall, he poked out his head. She skidded to a stop and glanced toward the entrance of the barn. This horse could bite. She'd never interacted with an animal of this size.

He blinked at her and tossed his head. This big, beautiful guy didn't appear to be dangerous. Her concerns could be in her head.

She reached out with a shaky hand, and he tossed his head again, blowing out a hard breath. Athena pulled back quickly and stumbled back a step. The horse's ears twitched to the side and forward again. His nostrils flared and he blinked again.

"Hey, there," her voice squeaked as she spoke. "What's your name?" Athena took

another step forward, hand outstretched. “I’m not gonna hurt you. It’s okay.”

This time he didn’t move. She paused when she was a few inches away, her focus flitting to his mouth and then back to his eyes. Those brown eyes were so similar to Henry’s, it was uncanny. He nickered and then snorted, causing a smile to appear on her lips.

“Shh. Shh. Shh. We don’t want to draw any unnecessary attention.” Her hand gently touched the horse’s nose, and she brought the other up to his jaw. “Boy, how did you get to be so beautiful?”

He stepped closer and nudged her. She couldn’t tell, but it felt like he had relaxed slightly. It was as if the whole barn had heaved a sigh of relief.

Athena scratched and nuzzled the horse, letting all her worries slip away. The longer she stood there with this gentle beast, the more she realized that she didn’t want to leave. For the first time in her life, there was a place she wished she could call her own.

Deep down, she knew it would be impossible. Sure, she could give in to this feeling and allow herself to stick around for a little longer than she normally would, but leaving would be inevitable. It always was.

She pulled back from the horse after kissing him on the nose. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Slowly, she made her way back from where she’d come. Several of the animals poked their heads out, no doubt curious if she was here to feed them their breakfast. Someone would be out soon. Athena had expected someone to come out while she was here, but no one had showed.

She got to the doorway and glanced toward her newest friend. The black beauty had retreated into his stall, but she'd come visit him again tomorrow morning. Athena turned to leave and collided hard with a tall, firm body.

A gasp ripped from her throat as she stumbled backward a few steps. Her eyes flew to the offending silhouette and locked with none other than Henry.

His features were pinched, and he looked like he'd had a rough morning. "What are you doing out here?" he demanded.

"I..." Her voice trailed off, small and defensive.

Henry jabbed a finger toward the house. "I went to check on you and imagine my surprise when I found that you were gone! You left all the stuff I got you except that coat and those boots. I thought you'd left!"

She flinched at his hard, tight voice but forced herself to meet his accusatory gaze.

"Please tell me you didn't sleep out here. Hudson would flip if he found out that you were staying in a stall when I refused to let him have the bedroom."

Athena shook her head. Her initial surprise and anxiety slipped away, leaving behind the stubborn attitude everyone hated. "Of course I didn't stay in the barn. I came out here to be with the horses. At least they don't judge or yell at me."

His head reared back slightly. "I wasn't—"

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“Yes, you were. You were angry. I’m sorry I wasn’t aware that the room and board came with the stipulation that I have to tell you my location every second of the day.” She moved to get past him, but his hand shot out and grasped her upper arm. She stood by his side, not wanting to meet his fiery stare but finding it impossible to avoid.

Henry’s hard gaze softened if only a little. “I wasn’t angry.” There was a hint of pleading in his husky voice. “I was worried.”

She tore her arm from his grasp. “You could have fooled me.”

“Athena,” he murmured.

“You don’t have to be worried,” she continued. “I can take care of myself.”

He sighed, dragging a hand down his face. “I wasn’t worried about... that’s not what I meant...” Henry shook his head. “I didn’t want you to leave yet.”

Athena froze. She set her sights on the landscape that surrounded the barn rather than Henry as she tried to wrap her head around what he was trying to say. Was it possible that he had grown attached to her in the short amount of time she’d spent with him?

No, that was ridiculous. He didn’t know her. He had no reason to care for her. This was all just a big ego boost for him.

“Are you?” he whispered.

“Am I what?” she whispered back.

“Are you going to leave?”

Her eyes cut to meet his. The side of her that loved to be contrary wanted to tell him where to shove it. She wanted to tell him he didn’t have a say in what she did or didn’t do. Most of all, she wanted him to know that his weird interest in her was unwanted and creepy.

But those thoughts weren’t entirely true.

She liked the idea of someone being worried about her—someone who would notice if she was gone. And if she were completely honest with herself, she’d grown attached to him.

“I don’t want to leave,” she found herself murmuring. “Not yet.”

His eyes did the strangest thing. One second they were dark, flooded with concern. Then in the next second, they brightened a few shades. She’d never admit to seeing glitter in those eyes, but if she were that kind of person, that’s exactly how she would have described it to anyone who would have bothered to listen. “Really?”

Athena shoved aside those peculiar, warm, fuzzy feelings and rolled her eyes. “Don’t get too excited. I thought I’d stick around a little because I realized I sorta like... horses.”

He lifted a single brow and glanced into the barn. “You like horses.”

She nodded. “I find them much better company than humans.”

Henry’s hand flew to his chest, and he stumbled back a few steps in mock injury.

“Your words wound me.”

Athena let out an exaggerated groan and stomped off toward the house.

“Breakfast is almost done!” he called after her. “Get yourself a plate before my brothers eat it all.”

She waved a hand in the air to dismiss him, but the closer she got to the house, the wider her smile became. He’d asked her to stay. Okay, maybe not specifically, but he didn’t want her to go and that was just as good.

11

Henry

Henry didn’t think it was possible, but he actually enjoyed his work throughout the morning. Athena didn’t make an appearance when the members of his family trickled out of the house, but he figured that would happen. There was something in the way she ducked down when he was speaking to her that caught his attention.

Athena might be able to take care of herself, but she was still skittish.

And why wouldn’t she be? She’d had a hard life. From her earliest memory, she’d felt unwanted. His heart broke for her. Well, that wasn’t going to be her experience here. He would make sure of it.

The only person he had to worry about was Hudson. Why couldn’t his brother understand the delicate balance that surrounded Athena? She could easily slip into the night if she wanted to. The fact that she’d admitted she wanted to stay was the only thing that gave him a little reprieve from the worry he’d experienced this morning.

Henry shoved aside all those dismal thoughts. He didn't want to relive the moment he'd knocked on her door only to find the room empty. No, he was going to have a good day today.

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He dove into his chores, working faster and more efficiently than he could remember. Athena might not have come out of the house to join him after she had breakfast, but she couldn't hide away all day. He had plans—for both of them.

From what he knew about her, she didn't like spending time with a lot of people. He'd make sure that she wouldn't have to interact with anyone until dinner. Thankfully, Charlie was in on it and would let him know when he could pick up the lunch he had her make for them.

The closer it got to lunchtime, the more antsy he became. There still wasn't any sign of Athena when he finally finished up and headed for the house. By all accounts, he had about two hours he could spend on whatever he wanted, then he'd have to head out with his brothers to tend to the cattle in the pastures.

Henry took the stairs in two big leaps and immediately headed for the kitchen, where he could hear voices and the clanking of dishes. The only people in the kitchen were Charlie and Annabel. His sisters stood close together but didn't bother keeping their voices down as they spoke with their backs turned to him.

“Really? You think he likes her?” Charlie asked.

“I know he likes her. Henry hasn't shown interest in anything up until this Sam girl showed up. He's crushing on her hard.”

“Maybe he just wants to make her feel welcome. She probably needs a stable place to live.”

Annabel bumped her hip into the countertop and folded her arms. “Take it from me. If Henry didn’t have any interest in her, he wouldn’t have stuck to his guns when Hudson threw his tantrum. He likes her. He might not know it yet... but he definitely likes her.”

“Don’t you have some kind of meeting to attend somewhere? Those people actually like listening to your voice.”

Both of his sisters jumped, but Annabel glanced in his direction first, an irritated look in her eyes. “It’s supposed to be anonymous for a reason, Henry.”

“You probably should have thought about that before you spilled it to the whole family.”

Charlie chuckled and then turned around. “I got your lunch ready. Did you want anything besides the sandwiches and potato chips?”

Henry ignored the forced scowl from his older sister and moved closer to Charlie. “Do we have any fruit? I don’t know what she likes...”

His baby sister nodded and moved to the fridge. “We have strawberries, grapes, and apples.”

“How about a little of everything?” Henry shot a look over his shoulder. “Did she eat a good breakfast? I couldn’t eat with everyone if I wanted to get done early enough to take a long lunch.”

Charlie nodded. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone eat like she did. I know we say that Daniel has a knack for putting it away, but man, I think she even out-ate him.”

Annabel nodded. “I don’t know where she put it either. That girl is a twig.”

“Probably has something to do with being all alone,” Henry said as he reorganized everything in the pack that Charlie had set out for him. “I bet when she doesn’t know where her next meal is coming from, she figured out a way to make sure she’d survive.”

“You’re probably right.” Annabel moved closer and this time she did lower her voice. “So, how long will she be staying?”

Henry shot a quick look at her. “I don’t know.”

“You... don’t know...”

“Is that a problem? We have the space. Everyone who got married has moved out except for Wade. You’re all just here throughout the day to help with the ranch and get some of Charlie’s cooking.”

Annabel studied him like she might be able to decode everything he didn’t even know was going on inside his head. “No reason. I was just curious.”

Henry paused. There was something about the tone in her voice that threw him off guard. It was as if she knew something he didn’t. He couldn’t put his finger on what it was, but he knew it was there. Was she hinting at a bit of concern? Annabel didn’t need to worry about him. It wasn’t like he was throwing everything he had into a relationship that would be doomed from the start.

He simply wanted to help a girl who was down on her luck.

And that was what he’d continue telling himself and anyone else who bothered to ask.

He zipped the pack closed as soon as Charlie deposited the cut fruit she’d quickly

prepared. “Well, I’ll let you know when I do. As of now, I have no idea how long she’s going to stay.” He slung the brown bag onto his shoulder. “I’m taking her out to see the property.”

Annabel’s brows lifted. “You’re taking her out to see the... property. Like on a picnic?”

“How else are we going to eat if we’re all the way out by the perimeter of our land? Sheesh, Anna, when did you become so nosy?” He shook his head and left the kitchen, shrugging off the quiet chills that told him she was holding back something important.

Whatever she wanted to say, she’d either say it or she wouldn’t. He wasn’t going to waste his time waiting.

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Henry climbed the stairs to where Athena's room was located, but before he had a chance to knock, his gaze caught a small note that had been taped just above the doorknob.

"Out back" was all it said.

Henry plucked the note from the door with a smile and hurried down the stairs. Either she wanted him to know where she was, or she didn't want him to lecture her again. Regardless, she was thinking about him.

He blew past Daniel, who was on his way upstairs, and darted around Hudson, who shot him a dark look. Henry only came skidding to a stop when he caught sight of her through a window that oversaw the backyard.

Athena's blond hair hung down her back. The messy bun she'd had it in during the wedding had been deceiving, to say the least. Even from where he stood, he could tell it had a fine texture. The waves were more delicate than anything else. She could have easily been a deity in another lifetime. She still wore those ridiculous overalls, but she'd chosen a shirt he knew he'd picked out.

Her back faced him as she stared out at their property. The sunrise had long since passed, but just because it hung overhead didn't take away from the natural beauty that surrounded the Keagan house. It was strange to meet someone who had gone through so much who could take a step back and appreciate something so small as a mountain scene and overgrown brush.

His sisters were wrong. Henry didn't have feelings for her. Developing feelings for

someone he barely knew wasn't wise. But that didn't mean he couldn't like her as a friend. She intrigued him. Every time she opened her mouth, it was like she had a secret that only he was allowed to know.

Athena stiffened, then slowly turned, and her eyes met his through the window. She didn't stand up from her position on the steps of the deck, but she did offer him a small smile.

Henry waved at her and then yanked his own hand down. What was he doing? Waving was something a child did.

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, then returned her focus to the scenery around her. Henry wasted no time in darting through the kitchen. He ignored his sister's quips about his picnic plans, letting the door slam shut behind him.

Athena rose when he reached her side. She glanced at him only briefly, opting to keep her focus elsewhere. "You didn't come in for breakfast."

He shook his head. "I had some cereal. I wanted to get my work done early." His heart sped up slightly. "I thought we might share lunch together."

Another glance from her was all it took for his heart to shift into high gear. "Are they done already?" She shot a look toward the house. "Your sisters, I mean. Is lunch—"

Henry took a step toward her, closing the remaining distance between them. "No." He shut his eyes and shook his head. "What I mean is that I thought I'd take you around the property and we could have a picnic at my favorite spot."

If Athena was surprised by his request, she didn't show it. A small smile tugged at her lips, and she nodded. "I'd like that."

“Great!” he said too quickly.

“But...”

“But?” He froze. What possible argument could she have for turning him down if not to make it clear that she wasn’t interested romantically? He should assure her their picnic didn’t mean anything. He wasn’t expecting them to get romantic. But before he had a chance to clarify, she answered his question.

“I kinda want to see more of what goes on here. The animals. The jobs you do. I’ve never been on a ranch before. There’s so much...”

“You want to see the ranch?” He peered at her with confusion. “You realize that the smells alone are enough to turn away even people who grew up here.”

She laughed. It was an enticing sound, and he hadn’t even meant to be funny. Much like her name, her laugh was unique and almost magical. There was an underlying strength while also being beautiful, and it ended far too soon. “I was willing to sleep in the barn, remember? I don’t have aversions to the animals or their smells.”

“If you’re sure...” he hedged. “I guess we could have a picnic out by the barn. If you want, you could lead the way and I’ll answer all the questions you have.”

Her eyes brightened. “Really?”

“Really.”

“What’s dressage?”

He nearly choked. “What?”

“Dressage. Brielle said that word when she was talking about that black horse. What does that mean?”

“It’s a...” He tilted his head. “She wants to train the beast to do dressage?”

“Beast?” Athena laughed again. “He’s not a beast.”

Henry chuckled. “He’s definitely not going to be ready for dressage any time soon.”

“You still haven’t told me what it means.”

He adjusted the strap of his bag on his shoulder. “It’s a competition of sorts. The horse has to be really in tune to the rider—years of training and practice sometimes isn’t enough. The rider guides the horse through several movements using the slightest bit of pressure from their thighs. If you think staying on a bucking bronc is hard, then you should see the stuff these horses can do while making it look like they’re making all their own decisions.”

Athena’s gaze turned thoughtful. “Oh.”

He stared at her for a moment longer but wasn’t capable of interpreting what her eyes were only giving him glimpses of. “How about we go eat? Then you can ask me all the questions you want.”

12

Athena

Athena all but inhaled the lunch Henry had brought for them to eat. Eating fast was part of her ability to survive. It wasn’t until she looked over at Henry and found him staring with a nearly full sandwich in his hand that she realized what she’d done.

She ducked her head and blushed fiercely. If she was going to stay here for a few days—maybe weeks—then she’d have to retrain herself to slow down a bit.

“It’s... it’s really good,” she said quietly, blushing even more.

“I’m glad you like it.” Henry looked down at his sandwich, then held it out to her with a crooked grin. “You want some of mine?”

She fought the urge to scowl at him. It was sweet, actually, for him to be offering her more. Unfortunately, her innate nature didn’t want to be dependent on anyone—not even the handsome cowboy sitting across from her.

A cowboy exited the barn at that very moment, leading the beautiful black horse she’d come to love so much. The horse stomped and tossed his head. He kicked out his back legs, making another cowboy jump to the side.

Athena shot to her feet, much to Henry’s surprise. She brushed off the crumbs that had landed in her lap. “I want to see the animals.” More specifically, she wanted to find out what they were doing with the horse they’d deemed a beast. She pointed toward the cowboys with the horse. “Where are they taking him?”

Henry followed the direction of her gesture. “Looks like they’re going to do a training session.”

“Can we watch?” Athena didn’t wait for him to respond before she marched after them. The horse didn’t seem to like the fact that he was being dragged out to the corral. His ears flicked backward, then to the sides.

She rushed forward, able to catch a glimpse of his wide eyes before they closed the gate behind him. Athena climbed the fence, placing her boots on the bottom rung as she watched the men work.

Nothing they seemed to do was able to calm the beast once he was in there. He was jumpy any time one of them came close to him. They hadn’t even put a saddle on his back yet. The beast bucked and leaped around wildly. He threw his head hard enough that the lead rope fell from the hands of the cowboy who was supposed to keep him

steady.

As soon as that happened, the horse charged toward the cowboy. In less time than it had taken her to scarf down her lunch, both cowboys had jumped the fence and were standing on the other side near Athena.

“I don’t know what Brielle wants us to do. Obviously, this horse can’t do dressage. He should be entered into the rodeo instead.”

“You know how Annabel feels about that,” the other one muttered, gesturing. “Just look at him, though. You know he’d win competitions if we could just get him to calm down. Have you ever seen a coat like that one? It’s practically cobalt when the sun hits it right.”

Henry’s chuckle interrupted their chat. “I told you guys that it wasn’t going to work. That horse isn’t happy unless he’s in his stall with a big pile of oats.”

The first cowboy turned around, leaning against the rail as he crossed his arms. “That’s what I said. No one is going to teach that beast how to have manners. He’s too old for that.”

His brother nudged him in the side. “Well, I’m not telling Annabel. That’s on you.”

“Come on, Daniel. I thought you weren’t scared of anything,” the first cowboy teased. “You’re the biggest out of all of us. You were supposed to be able to show that animal who was boss.”

Athena listened to the interaction with half an ear. Her eyes remained on the horse who was still cantering around the corral. Round and round he went, but he never got close enough to their side of the corral to cause them any worry. He tossed his head, sending his mane into the air.

If the cowboys were right about one thing, it was that this beast was too beautiful to be put in an arena with men who only wanted to prove how long they could remain in the saddle. This gorgeous specimen needed to be showcased like the piece of art he was.

Without a moment's hesitation, Athena slipped her leg through the metal bars and stood just inside the corral. She marched toward the horse, her heart pounding with exhilaration. Athena paid no heed to Henry, who called after her. Instead, her eyes remained fixed on the creature she'd befriended the moment she'd seen him.

The beast slowed his steps and stared at her from his place on the far side of the corral. His ears twitched. His nostrils flared. Then he pawed at the ground.

Athena held up her hands, inching ever closer to the animal. She didn't know what she was doing. If she'd been separated from her body, she would have been yelling at herself to get back to where it was safe. Clearly this animal wasn't friendly. Just because he appeared to like her when he was caged didn't mean he would like her now.

Her head buzzed with these thoughts, weaving doubt through her brain with each breath she took. What if the beast trampled her? She wouldn't be able to leave. She'd be stuck here until she got better.

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Would that be so bad? Henry would likely make sure she was taken care of. At least that was something.

“Athena! So help me, if you take one more step—” Henry’s voice rang out over the commotion of the other cowboys and yet she still couldn’t stop her progress.

“Shh. Shh. Shh,” she soothed. “You’re okay. It’s me. Remember?”

The horse didn’t move. He remained right where he was even though different parts of him twitched.

“Hey, buddy,” she murmured, finally getting close enough that she would be able to touch him if she only reached out with her hands. “Did those mean cowboys bring you out here when you weren’t ready?”

His eyes opened a little more and then returned to normal. He snorted and bobbed his head.

She let out a soft laugh. “I know. I don’t like it when that happens either.” Athena placed her hand on his nose softly at first, then she held onto him with both hands. She scratched his cheeks and hummed a little tune. “It’s gonna be okay, you know? Wherever you came from, it’s not going to be like that here. The people here, they’re good. They’re going to make sure you’re fed and warm. They’re going to make sure you don’t get sick. But you’re going to have to let them teach you some manners.”

The horse snorted and pulled his head from her grasp. It was as if he could actually understand what she was saying.

She smiled, shoving her hands into her pockets to show him that she wasn't going to push him too hard. "You're stubborn... like me. And that's okay, too. Eventually, you're going to learn that it's easier to let yourself trust. It's too exhausting to be on guard all the time."

Her words hit her harder than she expected them to. With a glance over her shoulder, she found that several other cowboys and a few of the women who hung around the ranch had gathered. "I know it's not going to be easy, but I have faith in you. Don't listen to what they say. You're not a beast."

He blew out a heavy breath through his nostrils and bobbed his head.

Athena bit back a grin. "Yeah, maybe the name fits you better than I thought."

Beast took a step toward her, and she reached for the lead rope at his chin. With one final hoof hitting the dirt, he gave a shake to his head. She tugged on the rope and wandered around the perimeter. The closer they got to the group, the more agitated Beast became, but with her hand firmly holding the lead, his attitude remained in check.

The second they stopped at the gate, Daniel and the other cowboy carefully entered the corral. Their wide gazes shifted from Athena to the horse and back. She held the rope out to Daniel, giving him a pointed look. "Next time, go a little slower. Talk to him, tell him what's going on."

Daniel lifted a brow. "You want me to talk to the beast?"

She smiled up at the animal. "I think he'd appreciate knowing what's coming. I know I would." Athena didn't care if they thought she was crazy. She'd made a connection with the beast—a fact that none of them could say they did themselves.

Athena slipped out of the corral, blood on fire, heart racing, and breathless. She'd never done anything like that. It wasn't until she was a few yards away from the corral that she realized Henry was guiding her toward the house—and he was talking.

“I don't know what you were thinking. You've got to be crazy, or you've been holding out on me.” His tone was sharp, but there was an underlying relief to it. “I swear, if something had happened to you...” His voice trailed off, giving away more than he might have intended.

Athena avoided his eyes, pretending she hadn't been listening.

“Athena,” he said firmly, “you can't do stuff like that. It's reckless.”

She glanced up at him. “I talked to your brothers.” It was the only thing she could say. Not only had she opened up to Henry, but now she was allowing his family to slip through her defenses. Sure, she'd been talking about the horse, but she'd actually said more than two words to them. And now they knew her name.

Henry's open mouth shut tight. She couldn't be sure if it was because she'd disregarded his lecture or if he had realized what a milestone it was for her to be speaking to people other than him.

Athena took in a deep breath and settled on the porch steps to the house. “It wasn't reckless.”

He snorted. “Yes, it was.”

“I think it was amazing.” The new voice drew Athena's attention, and she glanced up to come face-to-face with someone new. The woman had pink hair and tattoos. She even had a piercing on her nose. Athena's eyes widened. This was the bride from the night she'd shown up. She looked different without the white gown. The woman

dropped down beside her on the steps, much to Henry's disapproval. "You've got something special, you know that? I think you need to harness it."

"Harness it? Harness what, Harley?" Henry demanded. "She can't just go into corrals with dangerous animals."

"She can if she has a gift, and I think she does. Mason said himself that if she wasn't there, it would have taken several guys with ropes just to get him back in his stall. She did it all on her own." Harley bumped her shoulder against Athena's. "Take it from me. If you got a gift, you need to take advantage of it. Maybe these guys should hire you—then again, maybe I'll get Mason to hire you for my uncle's farm. We don't have a lot of horses, but some of them could use training."

"Not gonna happen, Harley." Henry crossed his arms.

She winked at Athena. "Think about it, will you? Someone with your talents shouldn't be hiding them." Harley got to her feet and sauntered toward the corral where the two cowboys were fairing a little better.

"Don't worry," Athena murmured. "I'm not gonna do any of that."

“Why not?”

Her head snapped up. “Because it’s ridiculous.”

Henry shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. Do I think you should go into a corral without backup to rein in a horse like that? Of course not. But do I think that she made a few good points?” He shrugged, but his eyes clearly confirmed his statement. “Maybe you should think about it.”

13

Henry

After the incident with the horse in the corral, Athena kept her distance from Henry’s brothers. He couldn’t blame her. She was now what everyone wanted to talk about, even a week later.

He’d catch her sneaking into the barn to spend time with the horse she’d now named Beast, but making sure she slipped out before his training started. She became Henry’s shadow with the work he had to do on the ranch, offering to help every so often.

It was nice to have someone to talk to, especially since all his older siblings couldn’t find the time to hang out—not after they’d all gotten married.

Little by little, Athena continued to open up. She talked more, asked more questions, and spent more time trying to get to know him.

“Did you ever try to track down your parents?” Athena sat on a ladder that led to the loft overhead while Henry swept out the hay that had fallen loose from the bale he’d used for feed.

He glanced up at her briefly. “I didn’t see the need to.”

“Why not?”

“Because they didn’t want me.”

“How do you know?” Athena asked. “What if it was just too hard, and they were embarrassed and ended up leaving because it would be better for you?”

Henry stopped and rested his forearm on the top of the broom he’d been using. “My parents had over a decade to come back. I don’t think any amount of embarrassment couldn’t be solved in that amount of time.” He grabbed the broom with both hands and got back to work. “Besides, I don’t think any of us want to see them again. They knew what they were doing. There are twelve of us, for heaven’s sake. Who leaves their oldest child to take care of that many kids when he’s still a kid?”

“I guess you’re right.”

He paused and stared at her, hating the way her disappointed voice tugged at him. “No, you think I’m wrong, don’t you?”

She shook her head. “On the contrary, I think you couldn’t be more right.”

Henry waited. There had to be more to what she’d said. Why else would she sound disappointed about him wanting to keep his distance? When she didn’t respond, he moved closer to her and peered up at her. “What about you? Have you ever tried to find your family?”

Athena snorted.

“What?” he chuckled. “You don’t think they might have been looking for you?”

“Nope.” She said it simply and firmly enough that it sounded like she wanted the conversation to end.

“Why not?”

She climbed down from her perch. “Because I was three. I didn’t have anyone else. If they’d lost me, then they would have looked for me. Missing children on milk boxes used to be a big thing, remember? Now with all the technology, I’m sure they could have found me if they really wanted to. Besides, you said it best. There isn’t a lot that can’t be overcome in a lifetime. I’ve had twenty years of waiting. I’m not going to hold my breath.”

“But your situation is different than mine,” he insisted. “You can’t say that they didn’t want you. What’s your last name? We could look for them together. Think about it. This wasn’t a situation where they left you somewhere, saying they’d be back, and then they never kept their promise.”

Her bark of laughter was sharper than he’d anticipated, and his whole body ran cold. “How would you know? I know I don’t. My memories didn’t start until after I was placed with my first family. After that, I was bounced around from house to house. You know, it’s not always how they make it sound. Sometimes, even young children don’t get adopted. The minute I hit eight, I knew it would never happen.” She brushed past him, and he spun to face her.

“But—”

“It’s sweet that you think I could look them up and they’d accept me with open arms,

but you're wrong. And I don't want anything to do with them. Not then. Not now. Not ever."

He frowned. She was wrong, and he knew it. There was probably someone out there in the world who was looking for her and heartbroken that she'd never been found. Henry followed her from the barn, broom still in hand. "You can't tell me that there wasn't someone in your life that would want to hear from you. I heard it in your voice. You're disappointed."

Athena whirled around, her brows creased and pain in her eyes. "If I sound disappointed, it's because of this." She gestured around wildly. "You have something here. Even with absent parents, you and your family have found a place to be where you know you can count on each other. Everyone in your little fold will always have a place to come home to."

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He couldn't help but read between the lines. As much as she wanted to be alone to protect herself, she wanted a family. She wanted her family.

"You know something funny? A part of me has always wanted my name to be Kira. It sounded so normal—like if I could just be accepted into the right family I would be happy." Her brows furrowed and she frowned. "Kira Thompson." Her eyes lifted to meet his once again. "See? Doesn't get much more normal than that."

There. He had her full name. He could call in some favors with the sheriff's office and see what they could find about her past. She might not want him to do any digging right now, but she'd realize how important it was when he found something and she could finally find a connection to her real family.

"What's that look for?" Athena studied him, suspicion in her eyes.

"Nothing," he said. "I don't have a look."

Loud hollering saved him from having to give her a better excuse. They both turned.

In the corral, Beast appeared to have reverted to his old self. After a few weeks of being on his best behavior, he'd had enough.

Athena gasped, then charged in that direction without a moment's hesitation. She moved so quickly that Henry had to sprint to catch up with her. Their conversation about her past and family was easily forgotten.

"Athena," he warned, "we had a talk about this."

“You had a talk,” she muttered. “I didn’t agree to it.”

“Not in so many words, but you haven’t been spending any extra time with Beast, either. I thought you’d decided that you didn’t want anything to do with the animals.”

She stopped suddenly and stared at him. “Do you want me to stay away?”

“That’s not what I said.”

Athena continued her fast pace. “Then I don’t know why you’re acting like this is a bad idea. I’m going over there to help. Your brothers need me.”

“Clearly, they need a lot of help, but are you sure—”

“You can’t have it both ways, Henry. You said that I have a gift. You agreed with Harley about it. Now you don’t want me to—”

Henry reached out and grasped her arm. “I want you to do what makes you happy. If that means getting in the corral and working with Beast, then I want you to be safe when you do it.”

She motioned to the corral. “We’re losing valuable time. I’m going in there, and if you want to come, then come. If not, then I’m sure someone else will.” Her voice came out strong and unyielding. This was the woman he’d met when she’d snuck into the barn. It was nice to see her make a reappearance.

Athena pulled away as if she could see the decision he’d made in his head. She darted toward the corral and through the bars. He watched in awe as Beast immediately reacted to her presence.

It was more than the way she moved or the way she spoke to him in hushed tones.

Henry had the feeling that if she'd been dropped into the corral blindfolded, the horse would have calmed simply by seeing her.

Hudson and Daniel were the ones working with the animal today as others watched on. Currently, they were moving away from the animal as Athena approached. All Henry could do was watch from the sidelines.

Someone nudged him in his side, and he jumped. Annabel let out a heavy sigh. "I have a feeling that Beast isn't going to cooperate much unless Athena is there working with him."

"Good luck with that one. She seems to prefer staying out of the spotlight."

"Not when she has to come to the rescue."

They both watched the scene unfold then Annabel continued. "Do you think you could convince her to give us a session every couple of days at the bare minimum? I know the guys would appreciate it."

"I don't know," Henry said. "Sometimes I can see how much she wants to be there in the thick of it, and at other times she seems to retreat into a shell of herself."

"She's still new. Give her the benefit of the doubt. She'll come around." Annabel patted him on the shoulder and then headed toward the barn, leaving him to watch the woman he couldn't help but admire.

Athena had come from literally nothing. All she had were the clothes on her back. How could she not see the raw talent she had with animals? She was a regular horse whisperer.

With Beast settled, Athena hurried toward Henry. Her face was flushed and her eyes

were bright. “Did you see that?”

He nodded, preparing himself to tell her what Annabel had requested but was thrown off when she threw her arms around his neck.

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“I can’t believe that it happened again.” Her mouth was next to his neck and her warm words sent a wave of chills down his spine. “I thought that the first time was a coincidence. I was led more by my gut than anything else. I know it was stupid, but I couldn’t help myself. But then this happened!” She pulled back, but her hands were still around his neck. “It’s exhilarating.”

Henry’s eyes locked with hers. He fed off her excited energy. He’d never felt that way about anything. He wasn’t even sure he had a gift—at least not something like what he’d just witnessed. “You’re amazing,” he said under his breath.

Athena sobered, but she didn’t pull away. She was still breathing hard, her chest rising and falling with each pull she dragged in. At some point his arms had come around her waist, probably when she’d flung herself at him—he’d needed to keep their balance somehow.

His own breath hitched in his chest as his eyes dipped down to study her mouth. Those full lips parted, and she exhaled. Maybe they were caught up in the moment, or maybe this was the start of something new. Either way, all he could think about was one thing.

What would it be like to kiss her?

Henry’s head lowered a fraction of an inch as he returned his gaze to meet hers. Athena blinked, gasped, then tore away from him. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

Just like that, she freed herself from him.

Athena

Athena ducked behind the house, pressed her body against the siding and slid down until she sat in the dirt. She covered her face with her hands as she pulled her legs up to her chest. Her heart raced faster than her legs ever would. Her pulse roared in her ears. She'd only ever kissed one guy, and he'd turned out to be the reason she never wanted to do that again.

Until today.

Why had she run?

Her face felt hot to the touch and she couldn't make sense of what she was thinking or feeling. How could a moment feel so good and make her sick to her stomach at the same time? He hadn't even kissed her! She'd actually run away, and he hadn't done anything except lean forward slightly.

She released a groan that ended in a whimper. This wasn't how this was supposed to go. How many times had she told herself that she wasn't going to stay long enough to get attached? As days turned into weeks, she'd allowed herself to grow soft.

The old Athena wouldn't have stuck around for more than seventy-two hours, she reminded herself. She would have slipped away, taking what she could carry and disappearing into the night.

There was no reason to stay.

Except there was.

Athena leaned her head against the building and stared up at the sky. Over the last few weeks, she'd watched Henry with his family. She'd felt the comfort of being in his presence. He cared about her. While she'd managed to convince herself that he was just being a good guy, she couldn't be entirely surprised when she saw him leaning closer.

Regret doused the heat and her blood turned cold.

She'd run from him! What was he going to think now? She knew what he was going to think. He was going to assume that she didn't like him and he'd moved too fast, that's what.

Another groan slipped from between her lips. What was she supposed to do now?

Nothing, that voice in her head insisted. She couldn't do anything because if she got even more attached than she already was, she'd end up broken-hearted in the end.

And what if he turned out to be like her ex? David had been sweet in the beginning. He'd gotten her clothes and helped her find a place to stay. He'd bought her gifts and even found a few places that would give her an interview for employment.

Only, in the end, he had wanted more than she was willing to give, and when she made that clear...

Athena shut her eyes tight, warding off the memories. She couldn't think about that right now. At any second, Henry could show up and demand to know what had gotten into her. He could accuse her of leading him on.

He wouldn't be wrong. At least that's what she'd learned. If a girl gave a guy a hug, it meant she was interested. She'd opened herself up for that.

“You okay?”

Athena’s hand flew to cover her mouth and she turned wide eyes toward the porch to her left. Harley stood at the edge, her arms resting on the railing. She tilted her head slightly as she stared down at Athena. “You look like you could use someone to talk to.”

Athena swallowed the bile that had risen in her throat and set her eyes forward, ignoring Harley’s penetrating gaze. “I’m fine.”

“Mm-hmm.”

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Scowling, Athena wrapped her arms around her legs and pulled them tighter to her chest. "I don't know what you want me to say, but it's not gonna happen."

Harley snickered. "I used to be like you, you know?"

Athena huffed. "I heard enough about you to know that's not true."

Another laugh. "Have you now? What have you heard?"

"That you come from a wealthy family, and you moved out here to be closer to your uncle. He doesn't have kids and you're sorta the one who will continue his legacy." When Athena glanced upward, she noted the way Harley's lips pursed and the way she tilted her head as if considering what Athena had said.

"Not bad."

Exactly. Athena wasn't an idiot. People with money and a family would never be able to relate to her. The only ones who had come close were the Keagans and only because they had to raise themselves. But even they had each other to lean on.

"Except I bet Henry didn't tell you the whole story. He couldn't have. Mason isn't exactly the sort to share that part of my life."

Athena craned her neck to stare at Harley, her curiosity piqued.

"You see, my mother has to be the strictest person you would ever meet. She had expectations for me from the moment I was conceived. I had to go to the best schools,

get the highest grades, graduate with the highest honors, and marry someone of status.” She dipped her focus to Athena. “Bet you can guess how that turned out.”

Athena’s eyes swept over Harley as if seeing her for the first time. From her pink hair to the tattoos, to the piercings, Harley was the epitome of a woman who refused to adhere to anyone’s expectations.

Harley released a sad laugh. “We’ve come a long way since the time when she sent me out here and threatened to keep my own trust fund from me. She even tried the arranged marriage route. But in the end, I had to make my own decisions. I had to take my own risks. I had to decide if it was worth walking away from a life I knew for something that might be better.” Her eyes narrowed as she stared hard at Athena. “Does that make sense?”

Shaking her head, Athena huffed. “I have no idea what the point of that story is where it pertains to me.”

“No, I don’t suppose you would. We come from very different worlds.”

“How would you know?” Athena snapped.

“One look at you and I can tell that you push everyone away. It gets lonely, doing that, you know. At the same time, it’s terrifying to let someone—anyone—get closer to you.”

She wasn’t wrong about that.

Harley continued, squinting as she stared off at something Athena couldn’t see. “The thing is, if you want to be happy, you have to allow yourself to let people in. It’s not as bad as you think. Trusting people is hard, but the risks outweigh the benefits. Take it from me...” She leaned back, holding onto the rail as she let out a groan.

“Happiness finds you when you least expect it.” She flashed Athena a smile. “Don’t let your preconceived notions of how you think the world should be prevent you from attaining something you never thought possible.”

Athena wrinkled her nose, watching Harley disappear inside. What was that supposed to mean anyway? She might think she knew what was going through Athena’s head, but she didn’t.

Were there moments when Athena wanted to believe this could be her new home? Sure, but those moments were quickly and easily overshadowed by the fact that she would never belong. This place was filled with people who knew how to band together.

What did Athena know how to do?

Run.

Just like she’d run from that near kiss.

She sighed, burying her face in her knees. That’s all she was good for.

Athena had run from her foster life. She’d run from an abusive boyfriend. And she continued running because that was all she knew. She checked to make sure no one was around, then she rose to her feet and hurried inside. She couldn’t face Henry after what had happened. She needed a break to be able to clear her head. And that was what she planned to do.

* * *

Athena hid away in her room, fully aware that she was missing supper. As much as she wanted to join everyone downstairs, she couldn’t bring herself to leave her

official sanctuary. Henry would be down there.

She was actually surprised that he hadn't come up to check on her. If he did, she wasn't sure what she'd do. Just the thought of having to face him made her heart race all over again. This kind of vulnerability wasn't something she had ever thought she would experience. All the barriers she'd put in place had been to avoid the unknown—to avoid someone like Henry.

Maybe this was all an overreaction. Athena stared at the closed door, tempted to just go downstairs and pretend that nothing had happened. Clearly, that was what Henry was doing.

A knock on the door ripped her from her thoughts. Her whole body went stiff. Whoever it was hadn't said a word. That could only mean it was one person. No one else would just stand out there after knocking.

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When they didn't knock again, Athena moved to the door slowly so no one would hear her footsteps. Her hand gripped the doorknob lightly. Turning the knob, she held her breath. Whoever was on the other side of this door would likely insist that she join them for dinner. This was her chance. She could stop running. That's what she wanted, wasn't it?

Athena pulled the door open, then paused in confusion. The hallway was empty. She poked her head out and looked in both directions. Whoever had knocked hadn't bothered to stay—unless they were hiding in an open doorway close by. Her feet shuffled forward, connecting with something hard.

She gasped, her eyes darting down to find a tray with a plate filled with her dinner.

Emotion bubbled up in her throat and she dropped to her haunches to get a good look at it. A chicken breast, mashed potatoes, corn, and a small salad. Stomach growling and mouthwatering, she glanced out into the hallway again even though she knew that Henry wasn't going to be anywhere nearby.

He was giving her space.

Henry was a lot of things—and much too good for her.

Heart aching, she reached for the tray and retreated into her room. Seated on the floor, she picked at her food, allowing herself to take her time and revel in the flavors of everything that Henry had picked out for her.

The potatoes melted in her mouth, softer than they deserved to be. The chicken was

so flavorful that she moaned with delight. Had she been eating downstairs with everyone, she might not have taken her time to experience every nuance of the meal. Henry would never understand what he had given her by bringing her meal to her room.

Well, this was just great. There was now one more reason for her to want to stay. And this reason was the biggest one yet.

Henry.

He was the closest thing she had to a family, and he didn't even know it.

She couldn't just let this be the way things came to a sudden stop when it hadn't even gotten started yet. Her body warmed and a nervous smile touched her lips. Perhaps Henry would be the first person who could make her stop running. Perhaps he was the person she'd waited her whole life to meet.

And if he wasn't?

Then there would be nothing stopping her from leaving again. Easy as that.

Athena took in a deep, shuddering breath and released it. Now was not the time. She couldn't just track him down and tell him everything she'd realized in the last hour.

No, she'd wait until they could have a quiet moment together.

15

Henry

Henry should never have moved so fast. He stood out by the barn, unable to focus on

his work. Every few seconds he glanced up at Athena's bedroom window. It was still dark, but then of course it would be at this early hour.

She hadn't come out of her room after he'd left her dinner. He'd hoped she would seek him out, but she'd remained confined. Now he just felt stuck. There was so much up in the air right now. He didn't know whether he should ask her about what had nearly happened or pretend that it never had.

The three arguing voices in his head got to be so loud that it was all he could do to block them out, which was why he stood here in the dark wishing he knew the right answer. Two competing voices battled with each other while the third grew the loudest. There was a part of him that wanted to just wash his hands of her and the complications that would inevitably come with trying to win her over, but then there was another part that refused to let him give up so soon.

Athena was special. He'd seen it day in and day out. Did she come with her own special kind of baggage? Of course, but who didn't? This particular voice demanded that he march right up to her and tell her how it was going to be.

The loudest voice in his head was the one that had won out over the others last night. It was the one that insisted he didn't want to scare her off. It didn't matter if she stayed or left. He wasn't going to be the one to send her on her way because he was hovering.

Henry pushed away from the barn and paced in front of the door. He stared at that window, wishing the light would come on like it did most mornings as she got ready to meet him down here. He couldn't be sure that she would, but he could hope.

He brought his knuckle to his mouth and bit down on it, his pacing growing more charged by the moment. Once upon a time Henry hadn't cared if he found someone to love or if he ended up alone. Those were the simpler times of his life—times that

he'd taken for granted.

It was different now. Something had changed and he wasn't sure he was ready for it.

What if he went up there and knocked on her door just to see if she was coming?

Bad idea. She'd think he was being too clingy.

How could he get her to come down so they could just set things back to normal?

“What are we looking at?”

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Henry yelped and spun to face Athena as she lifted her eyes upward. Slowly, she brought her gaze down to meet his, one brow quirked. “Were you looking at my window?”

“No,” he stammered.

“Really? Because it sure seems like it.”

Henry crossed his arms. “Don’t blame me for wondering where you were when you not only avoided me for dinner last night, but you were also late this morning.”

A smile tugged at the corners of her lips. “I wasn’t aware that I could be late. Do I have an official job title now?”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it,” he fumbled over his words again. “It’s just that we’ve created a sort of routine, and I didn’t know if I should get going on what I was planning today.”

“Oh?” She moved a little closer to him—enough that he caught a whiff of her scent. It was probably just the shampoo that was in the bathroom they shared, but today it felt different. She tilted her head, her smile growing. “What do we have planned for today?”

Henry couldn’t put a finger on it, but something was different about her. It was as if she’d finally decided to let down all the defenses she’d put in place—every single last one of them. That didn’t mean she was inviting him to get closer to her, but it could mean that something was changing—for both of them.

He swallowed at the lump in his throat. "I have to retrieve a few of the cows that slipped out through a broken fence line into a different pasture. There are two cows and one calf. It would be easier if I had someone come with me."

Athena's smile faded. "You want me to go with you..." she hedged. "On a horse?"

"Sure."

"Sure?" she squeaked. "What do you mean? You realize that I've never actually ridden a horse, right?"

Henry did his best to hide the amusement he got from her nerves. "You're great with Beast."

"Yeah, that doesn't mean I'd be great with another horse. Beast... he and I connect on a level even I don't understand. There's no guarantee that I'd have that same connection with any other horse you guys have."

Henry moved close enough that he could take her hands in his. "Have a little faith, would you?" His soft words must have caught her off guard because she froze and stared at him like he'd told her he wanted her to go cliff jumping.

"Faith?"

"Yes, faith. If you get in the saddle and you feel like it's not going to work out, then climb down and that will be the end of it." Henry cocked his head, his gaze penetrating her as he attempted to read every nuance of her body language.

She pulled her lower lip into her mouth and chewed on it like she hadn't been fed in years. Her eyes darted all over the place, never landing on anything long enough for her to actually see it. When she finally brought them to meet his, she heaved a sigh.

“One condition.”

“What’s that?”

“I ride Beast.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “I can’t let you do that. You’ve seen the way he reacts when we put a saddle on him.”

“So?”

“So…” he drawled, “I won’t be the one responsible if you snap your neck.”

“Then I’m not going.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” Henry motioned to the barn. “That horse in there will buck you the first second he gets.”

Athena shook her head, defiance returning to her eyes. “You’re the one who keeps saying I have a talent and that I need to remember that. You keep saying that I should work with Beast so he can get ready for competition. Well, what better way to work with him than taking a ride.”

“You don’t understand. This is a ride out to a place he’s not familiar with. We’re going to be bringing back cattle—something he also hasn’t been introduced to as far as I know.”

“Then I’ll stay.”

“What you’re requesting, it’s dangerous. I swear, you’re not going to want to—”

“Will you just let me try? That’s all I’m asking. If he won’t settle down enough for me to climb into the saddle, then you can put me with whatever horse you think is appropriate.”

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Henry stared at her hard. He wasn't going to win this one. He could already see it in the way she stared right back. When she wanted to put her foot down, Athena didn't take prisoners. If he was right about his growing feelings, maybe this was the moment in his life where he considered all his options and prepared himself for whatever was to come his way in the future.

“Fine. You can try. But I'm telling you, it might not work out the way you think it will.”

* * *

“I can't believe he's letting you ride him.” Henry had stopped gawking after they reached the trails that would take them to the pasture where he'd find the cows. Still, every time he turned to look in Athena's direction, he half expected Beast to get fed up with being ridden.

And yet, Athena continued to sit tall and confident in the saddle like she'd been riding for years. It wasn't until she caught him staring that her self-assurance faded. Just like that, her shoulders slumped, and she turned her eyes toward the reins she fingered near the saddle horn.

He'd thought she might say something—several times. He'd expected her to bring up their near kiss. Heck, he'd even thought she might thank him for the dinner he'd brought her. None of that mattered, of course. He'd simply thought they would clear the air so the tension between them would dissipate.

When she didn't speak, he let out a pent-up breath. “I guess I should—”

“Remember when you asked me if my parents abused me?”

His whole world turned sideways, and his body froze. “That’s not where I thought this conversation would go. Are you saying that they did?”

“No!” She grimaced. “I know it doesn’t make sense to bring it up now. It’s just...” She fiddled with the rope again, then took a deep breath and released it in a shudder. “My parents never abused me. They might have raised me to have a different life than my foster siblings, but that’s not abuse. I still had all my needs met.”

Athena shook her head again, refusing to look directly at him when she seemed to find her center. He burned with curiosity. The information she shared with him had come in a trickle. The more he found out, the easier it would be to find her family—something he’d gotten started on last night.

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. “I feel like I should say something about... what almost happened last night.”

His throat closed up. Now he really didn’t know where this was headed. “What happened last night...” he said flatly.

“Almost kissing you and then running off.” She made a face and her cheeks flooded with a deep crimson color. “I... how do I say this so it makes sense? I didn’t run off like that because I was scared. Okay, maybe I was a little scared.” She shut her eyes tight even as her horse plodded along the trail. Beast must have trusted her implicitly for him to behave so well right now. Athena opened her eyes and pulled up on the reins so Beast stopped. He pawed once at the ground, but other than that, he remained on his best behavior.

“You don’t have to—” Henry started, but she stopped him.

“I had an abusive ex.”

A tsunami of emotion roared to life within him. Fury. Surprise. Concern. Heartache. And more blinding anger. “What?” he growled through gritted teeth. “When was this? What’s his name?”

She held up a hand. “While I appreciate—”

“No!” Henry ground out. “You don’t get to just drop a bomb like that and expect me to let it go. I want to know who this coward is so I can give him what’s due.”

“Henry,” she said softly, “that’s not the point of my story. Besides, it happened almost ten years ago. I was sixteen. I’d dropped out of school. He was the one I turned to for affection.” She shook her head and waved a hand through the air as if to dissipate the fog of memories that clung to her. “The point is, I ran because I was scared, but not because I was scared of you.” Her voice had taken on a raspy quality. “I ran because I was scared of the idea of you.”

“The idea of me?” He frowned. How did that make any sense?

“Yes. I was scared about getting too attached to you. I’ve lived my life on the run—moving around so I could remain safe not only physically, but emotionally and mentally, too.”

He didn’t think it was possible, but her blush deepened in color. She looked away, turning completely so he couldn’t see her anymore.

Without knowing what his plan was, he jumped down from his horse. It was time to settle this once and for all.

Athena

Athena watched Henry as he dismounted and came to her side. Her focus remained glued to him, but it almost felt like she had left her body and was watching from a distance. He held out a hand to her and her eyes dipped to it briefly. She could take it. Athena could accept his offering right here, right now.

She could shut her eyes, take the leap, and allow herself to find some meager amount of happiness.

For the first time in her life, Athena could see a happy ending. Henry was the first person she'd put her faith in since before she could remember. She hadn't even given that part of her heart to her ex.

Time slowed, sluggish and had the taste of expectation. It was the feeling she got when she stood in the back alley of a bakery, knowing there would soon be stale bread to snack on. Only this time, her stomach wasn't growling with anticipation.

It was her heart.

And her heart was beating faster, warmer, almost out of control.

“Athena,” Henry whispered. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

She stiffened. “I know that.”

He moved his hand closer. “Will you come down?”

Heat exploded in her chest, spreading out to her hands and face.

Jump, her heart seemed to say. Take the leap. You have nothing to lose.

Athena pulled her leg around so she no longer straddled the saddle. Her hands were placed on his shoulders at the same time he grasped her waist. His touch was warmer than she’d expected, considering the heat that hadn’t escaped her body.

Henry lifted her effortlessly from the saddle and placed her on her feet.

She stared at him anxiously—though this time, it didn’t wear on her. The anxiety she felt wasn’t exactly bad. Was this the eager anticipation most women experienced when they were falling in love?

Love.

The word was so completely foreign to her—like another language she couldn’t

comprehend. Love was something only in fairy tales and movies. Love was for people who deserved the affection of others.

Henry deserved affection; there wasn't a question about that. He deserved to find someone just as good and genuine as he was. He deserved more than what she could offer. And yet, she knew she couldn't stop her heart from reacting to him even if she wanted to.

He'd made her fall in love with him. With all his sweet words, his support, the way he smiled. She was a goner, and she knew it.

Her hands were still on his shoulders. Her arms had grown weak and she didn't know if she could move them. Maybe they'd drained of blood altogether. Or maybe because she simply wanted to be near him, her brain had turned off the neurons needed to work them.

Either way, she was content to let him speak first.

When Henry remained silent, she nearly lost her nerve. Staring into the eyes of someone like Henry was more than draining. Her body was a conduit, moving energy in and out at inhuman speeds. While she itched to run, she forced herself to keep her feet planted. Henry hadn't pulled away. In fact, if she wasn't mistaken, his hands had tightened where they held her. His eyes continued to search hers. This interaction felt like it had taken lifetimes when, in reality, it might have only been a few seconds.

"You..." Henry's voice trailed off and his face flushed. It was nice seeing someone else react to the current circumstances like she had. "You are so much more than you give yourself credit for."

She moistened her lips and tore her eyes from his. Compliments weren't meant for someone like her.

He removed a hand from her waist only to push the other around the small of her back. “I know you can’t see it. I get that. With everything you’ve had to deal with in your lifetime, I’m surprised you haven’t been buried beneath all the negativity.”

Athena shook her head, “You don’t know—”

“I know everything that matters. I don’t care what you had to do to survive. That’s why it’s called survival.” His eyes drilled into hers. “I can’t say I know how you’re feeling. But I can tell you that I understand the desperation of making sure you endure whatever trials that are thrown at you.”

Chills shook her body. Henry saw her. He could truly see the person she was, scars and all. She’d never wanted to share that side of herself with anyone. Not any of her foster parents. None of her foster siblings—absolutely no one.

While she had to accept that the things he said in his little speech could fade away, today, she told herself, she wasn’t going to let the negativity in. The doors to the unknown had been opened wide and she was standing on the precipice, looking out to find that anything could happen.

Athena shivered. She took in a deep breath and exhaled, but it didn’t settle the strange things that continued to spin within her.

“Athena.”

The chills continued with his whisper.

“Yesterday when we...” He took a long breath and let it out slowly. “I really wanted to kiss you.” Henry’s nervous chuckle made her smile. He had one of the best laughs she’d ever heard. “I can’t believe how hard this is for me to say.” He shut his eyes and dipped his head so she couldn’t see his face. When he lifted his chin, his eyes met

and locked with hers, the fervor behind them impossible to ignore. “But I’m not going to do anything that will make you uncomfortable. If I have to stay a certain distance from you until you trust me, then I’ll do it. Whatever you need, I’ll be that person for you.”

This was different. In her personal experience, there were two kinds of people in the world. There were the takers and the givers. Henry was the latter. If this moment taught her anything about people, it was that she needed to give more of them the benefit of the doubt.

Her hands moved behind his neck and she locked her fingers together. “I don’t need you to stay away. I feel... safe with you.”

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“You do?”

She nodded. “You and Beast over there are the ones I know I can trust.”

One side of his mouth quirked into a half-grin. “Me and the beast, huh? I’ll take it.”

“Does this mean that we... can try again?” She murmured the question under her breath, more embarrassed than anything else that she was even asking him. She wasn’t entirely sure if that was where this conversation was going.

“Do you want me to kiss you?” Henry asked.

Athena nodded. “Very much.”

He pulled her closer, and this time she was ready for him. His mouth captured hers, so gently, so sweetly, that the tension only continued to mount. She leaned into him, craving more.

More of his touch.

More of the tenderness that he’d shown her from the very beginning.

A soft moan slipped from his lips, and he pulled back. There was a reluctance in his eyes that she hadn’t been prepared for. Pain flared to life deep, deep down where she had buried the rejection of anyone she’d wanted to get close to. Athena shoved it back where it belonged. “Was I not good enough—”

Henry placed a finger to her lips, cutting her off. “You... are... everything I have ever wanted.”

Confusion reared its ugly head. “Then why—”

He shook his head, releasing her as he took a step back. “Something about you makes me lose my head—and that’s not something I’m willing to risk.”

She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly cold. Her eyes darted away, and she nibbled on the inside of her cheek as she tried to make sense of what he was trying to say. “That doesn’t sound very good.”

Lunging forward, Henry reached for one of her hands and gently pried it away from her body. He slipped his fingers between hers and covered their clasped hands with his other one. “It’s not bad.”

It took all her willpower to meet his eyes again.

He chuckled—that familiar, nervous laugh that made her want to join in. “The thing is... I haven’t really had a serious girlfriend. I’ve dated, but I’ve never cared much to turn it into something more—not until now.”

Her brows shot up. He’d never had a girlfriend. That was a hard thought to swallow—mostly because it didn’t sound at all feasible. She didn’t think he’d lie to her about something like this, though. Henry had been nothing but honest with her. She didn’t have any reason to doubt him.

“It’s embarrassing, I know.” He tightened his hold on her. “There’s something about you that is so... irresistible. I can’t stop thinking about you. No matter how hard I’ve tried—”

“You’ve tried to stop thinking about me?” Her voice was no louder than that of a mouse.

He shut his eyes and shook his head again. “That’s not what I meant. What I want to say is... sheesh, you make me so nervous.”

Athena smiled.

“What I want to say,” he repeated, “is that you do things to me—things that I didn’t think were possible. I thought I’d never find someone who was worth spending time with. And I’m glad I was wrong.”

Her smile widened. “Really?”

He brought her hand to his lips, then brushed his lips to the underside of her wrist. “Really.” He heaved a shuddering sigh. “How about we ease into it, huh? Take it one day at a time.” He grazed her jawline with his thumb. “And maybe next time I steal a kiss, it won’t be so hard to control myself.”

Based on her past experiences, she thought he’d controlled himself quite well. While she couldn’t say she knew what he was experiencing deep inside, she would like to think she’d felt the same kind of spark that was making him feel like he was losing control.

Her heart was still hammering against her ribs, demanding to be set free like a caged bird. She couldn’t believe he was still holding her hands with how clammy they’d become. It was getting more difficult by the second to stay on her own two feet after the kiss they’d shared—and it hadn’t been nearly long enough. She needed to stop obsessing over that kiss, even though it had been the best she’d ever had.

Thankfully, there was something else she was able to shift her thoughts to.

Henry pulled her into him, holding her against his body while they each disappeared into their own worlds.

Henry thought she was enough.

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His exact words included everything.

Her heart soared to new heights at that thought alone. Henry Keagan, handsome and honorable cowboy, thought she was everything he ever wanted.

If she had been alone, she might have shouted her excitement to the sky. She would have done a happy dance like she'd done when she was a kid.

Athena had finally listened to her heart and allowed herself to do something that terrified her.

She'd allowed herself to fall a little more in love with a good man.

Her eyes closed and she hid her smile into his shoulder, inhaling the familiar scent of the soap they used in the Keagan household. The blend of sage and something floral had been strange at first, but now all it reminded her of was sanctuary.

It was time to stop running.

17

Henry

“I’m telling you. It was like something out of a movie. Athena knows what she’s doing.” Henry pulled his saddle from the back of his horse and hefted it onto a stand. “She’s got this raw talent for reading that horse.”

Hudson snorted. “Okay, but just because she can work with the beast doesn’t mean she can work with all the animals.”

“We don’t have any other animals she would have to work with. Most of our animals are well-behaved. Are you saying that you wish we had more troublemakers?”

His brother shrugged. “All I’m saying is that maybe she’s not as great as you think she is. What do we really know about her? I mean, she lied about her name. She lied about her family.”

“She never lied about her family,” Henry shot back as he took a rag to the saddle to wipe down the leather. “She just never told you about her past. I can’t say I blame her, either. You’ve been sorta a jerk since she got here.”

Folding his arms, Hudson shot a dark look at Henry. “I just don’t have the love-sick goggles that you do. I swear, she could rob us blind in the middle of the night and you’d make excuses for her.”

Henry shook his head. This was the reason he hadn’t told anyone about their shared kiss last week. He’d finally felt like he was making some headway with her. Athena had agreed to work with Beast when they were doing their training exercises. Ever since that started, the horse had been on his best behavior.

He couldn’t believe that his brother didn’t see it. There was such a thing as a horse whisperer and Athena was it. Henry would bet his life on that fact, only they didn’t have any other animals to test his theory. For now, only Beast needed the help.

“So, what comes next?” Hudson cut into Henry’s thoughts. “Is she staying? Did you clear this with Wade? I don’t think we can afford to pay her to help out when she’s only keeping one horse calm. Does she have any other talents? From what I know, this is her first time even being on a ranch.”

“We don’t have to worry about that right now.”

“Why not? Once Beast is tamed, then what? It’s not like we’ll need her forever.”

Henry’s body stiffened. It wasn’t Hudson’s fault that he didn’t know how close Henry had gotten to Athena. But the idea of her leaving already left Henry feeling hollow. He didn’t want to consider a future where she didn’t stick around.

“Think about it,” Hudson continued. “She’s a drifter. For all we know, she’ll grow tired of being here and then she’ll take off and we’ll never see her again.”

“Then I guess you don’t have anything to worry about,” Henry snapped, whirling around to glare at his brother. “You can’t have it both ways. Either you’re worried about keeping her on, or you’re worried she’s gonna take off. Which is it?”

Hudson didn’t react. He schooled his features and his eyes narrowed. Then they opened fully and he shook his head with a bitter laugh. “I can’t believe you.”

Henry froze. Hudson didn’t know anything. He couldn’t. There was no chance that he’d seen or heard anything because Henry had been so careful not to let anyone know. Straightening his back and rolling his shoulders, he kept his glare trained on his brother. “What?”

“You like her.”

“You’ve said as much before.”

“Yeah. I was poking fun at the fact that the guy who, up until this point, didn’t have any interest in the opposite gender was willing to put up such a fight to keep her here. But this... it’s different.” Hudson tilted his head almost like a predator would while scrutinizing his prey. “You like her. I wouldn’t be surprised if you two have

something going.” His eyes narrowed into slits. “Please tell me you’re not courting her.”

Henry snorted, but it came out choked and strangled. “Courting? What century are you living in?”

“You know what I mean. Are you dating her? Are you whispering sweet nothings into her ear and... falling for her?” Hudson moved closer. “Because that’s dangerous, you know.”

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Henry crossed his arms to prevent himself from shoving his brother back a step. The last thing he needed was to get in a brawl with the man. “So what if I was? It’s not affecting my work. It wouldn’t change anything.”

“But it will.”

He huffed. “Yeah? How’s that?”

“When she leaves,” Hudson muttered with a shrug. “Like I said before. She’s a drifter. You can’t deny that. She could leave at any given moment—any second now, something will get too hard and... poof. She’ll disappear into the night.” Hudson lifted his chin and a knowing smile stretched from one side to the other. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you. You’re playing with fire, and I’m not going to help you dress your wounds when you end up getting burned.” With that statement, he spun around and headed for the barn door.

Henry glowered after him. Hudson didn’t know what he was talking about. He wasn’t dating anyone. He couldn’t see what was in Henry’s heart.

Athena was easy to fall for, and Henry didn’t regret a single moment he spent with her. He wasn’t going to let Hudson get to him. This was probably all about the bedroom and his wanting to be right about letting Athena stay.

Henry brushed off the feeling of unease as effortlessly as if it had been a fly landing on his shoulder. He wasn’t worried one bit. Athena had opened up to him. She’d shared more with him than she had anyone else—something just told him that she felt the same about him as he did about her.

Which was why he needed to do something sweet for her. He wanted to show her how much he cared, and the best way to do that would be to find her family.

His heart rang like the celebration of bells at a church. She'd told him where she'd been found. She'd told him her name. He'd already made a few calls and was waiting to hear back from them. If they didn't get back to him by the beginning of next week, he'd be checking with them again.

There had to be something out there that could guide him to finding her birth parents—or discovering whether she had any siblings. He could already see the look on her face when he told her that she still belonged to someone. Something just told him that this would be the one thing to heal her past heartache.

Henry dove into cleaning up the saddle and brushing down his horse. The day was coming to a close and he hadn't been able to observe the training session with Beast, but he had a feeling Athena would share every last detail like she usually did.

He couldn't wait to see the light in her eyes. He craved hearing her laugh. If this wasn't love, he didn't know what was. Nothing could be better than the way he felt right here, right now.

When all his work was complete, Henry stepped out into the afternoon sun. He shaded his eyes, scanning the immediate area for the one person he wanted to see. He'd hoped to see her out visiting with any of the numerous people on the ranch, but he couldn't catch sight of her.

It would be suppertime soon. She might be in her room. Or she could be out back. Athena seemed to prefer the quiet after a long day and watching the sun disappear behind the mountains. Often that was where he would find her. Finding an appreciation in the world around him hadn't ever been on his list of priorities. After meeting Athena, that had changed.

Henry headed in that direction. It didn't matter that they'd shared most of their time in each other's company. His heart still thundered when he knew he'd see her again. He loved the way she would sit quietly without moving a muscle and allow herself to be immersed in the nature that surrounded them. It was getting easier for him to do the same.

Rather than walk through the house to get to the back, he made his way around. Doing so would prevent him from letting the back door bang shut upon his exit. As he turned the corner of the house, he paused. The worries of the world melted away upon seeing the profile of her face. Her eyes were closed, and her face was upturned so that the glow from the sun bathed her in a pretty golden color.

The warm breeze rippled through the overgrown grass in the back. Even after his family had taken all the time and care to fix up the house and the barn, no one wanted to take it upon themselves to maintain the back—which still looked like an overgrown meadow that belonged in a watercolor painting. They'd always had brightly colored flowers behind their house. Henry had always thought his mother was initially responsible for their appearance.

Unfortunately, they'd gotten out of hand and most of the backyard was covered in them. From bright, yellow-colored flowers that seemed to mimic sunflowers to the bluebells he'd always liked, he couldn't blame her for preferring the place back here to any other.

He took a step forward and a twig snapped under his boot.

Her eyes fluttered open for a quick moment, and then she smiled as she allowed them to close. "I was wondering when you'd show up. I saw you come back from your trip with Hudson. How was it?"

Henry moved closer to her like a moth drawn to a flame. No, that was the wrong

analogy. She was his siren, and he would do anything for her. “It wasn’t as fun as the ride we took last week.”

At that, she turned her face toward him. Her eyes locked with his and her smile deepened. “I should hope not.”

He stopped at the foot of the stairs, resting a forearm on the railing, reveling in her beauty. He still couldn’t believe all that had happened since they’d first met. “What did you do today? How did training go?”

She lifted one shoulder absently. “Sometimes I don’t see why you even want me out there. He’s such a sweetheart.”

He made a face. “You’ve seen first-hand when he’s gotten out of control. For some reason he only trusts you.”

“What are you going to do when it’s time for competition? I can’t be there in the arena with him.” She stood and moved down the stairs as if she were floating on a cloud itself. “We need to get him comfortable with the person who will be competing.”

Henry cocked his head to the side, his grin turning sly by the second. “I think that’s an excellent idea.”

“Brielle said that Wade hasn’t decided if they actually want Beast to compete. Has he even thought about who would be riding?”

“I have a few ideas.” Henry climbed one step so she was at eye-level with him.

“I hope whoever it is will treat him with care. He’s a gentle spirit. One wrong move and he’ll hold it against them.”

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“You think so?” Henry placed his hand over hers, their fingers brushing against one another. If anyone were to exit the house at that moment, there would be no hiding that they were romantically involved.

She stared down at their hands as she spoke. “I do. I can’t be certain, but I think he’s been hurt before. Maybe not physically... but something happened to turn him against the ordinary cowboy.” Her words were thoughtful and slow. They made his heart ache, and his thoughts immediately returned to that day when she’d confessed that she had her own painful baggage.

“You should do it.”

Athena lifted her eyes.

Henry continued, “The competition. You should be the one to ride Beast.”

18

Athena

Athena laughed and the only thing that caught her off guard was the surprised look on Henry’s face. “You’re not joking?” she said as her laughter died in her throat. “Henry. Please tell me this is one of your jokes.”

“I won’t do that.” His eyes confirmed his statement. “I’m not going to tell you that you shouldn’t do it because I think you’d be amazing at it. Beast would trust you to blindly lead him through fire.”

“I would never do that.”

“All the more reason you should be his rider.”

“I’m not trained.”

“Neither is he.” Henry chuckled. He wasn’t making fun of her or trying to belittle her in any way with his laugh. Strangely enough, it was comforting. He laced his fingers through the hand he’d covered and pulled it from the railing. “I think if you work with him, you’ll catch on real quick.”

“I’ve literally ridden a horse three times in my life.”

He peered at her. “You’ve ridden Beast three times.”

“Exactly.”

The peculiar look on his face said it all. He was putting it all together now. Henry couldn’t possibly expect her to do what he was suggesting. She wasn’t a cowboy. She didn’t know how to ride a horse like all the fancy people in the videos she’d watched. It was impossible.

“I think you should still try,” Henry said quietly. “You don’t know what will happen until you do.”

“Except I do.” She took a deep breath to steady her nerves. The feeling that had started to grow inside her was familiar. It was the same thing she experienced when she felt cornered. Henry wasn’t doing it on purpose. He wasn’t trying to make her feel like she needed to escape. This was the first time since the night they met that the sensation had returned.

Athena closed her eyes and found her center. She couldn't show Henry that side of her. It would scare him off. Deep down she knew he would look at her differently if she showed any kind of weakness. Hadn't he said how strong and brave she was—over and over again?

Opening her eyes, she lifted her chin. "I would lose."

Henry shook his head, understanding flooding his features. "Who cares?"

"Who cares?" she all but choked on the words. "Who cares? Your brother, for one. Maybe all of them. They wouldn't see me as someone who was a valuable member of this team anymore. They'd see the person who dragged them all down."

"You realize that the competition you'd be entering would be for beginners, right? Most of the people competing would be at your skill level. It would be for fun—to give Beast a taste of what's to come."

She wasn't surprised to note that his words weren't all that comforting. Everyone who worked the ranch regularly had certain jobs and expectations to be met—well, all except Lucas, from what she could tell. He had a knack for getting out of almost anything.

"Come on, think about it. If it turns out well, then you can say you tried something new. If it doesn't..." He shrugged. "Then you can say you tried something new."

Athena rolled her eyes.

"Don't give me that. You're trying new things all the time." He adjusted his hold on her so he could trace the back of her hand with his thumb. "You stayed here, didn't you?"

The warmth in her belly started to climb into her chest.

“You chose to talk to me when you didn’t have to,” Henry continued.

Chills were the next sensation to affect her system.

“You let me kiss you,” this time he whispered.

They both knew what that step had meant. For Athena, she was giving more of herself and learning to let someone in. For Henry? She still wasn't sure what he saw in her. On top of his endless praise regarding her strength, he didn't shy away from complimenting her features. His favorite was her eyes. While she could appreciate that he was so verbal about what he liked, it was starting to make her wonder what he didn't.

It was almost as if he was tiring of her in other ways, so he was hyper-focusing on the aspects of her that he did like. There was a good chance he hated how she still shied away from doing anything outside her comfort zone.

Why should she step out of what makes her comfortable? He'd said himself that she'd made changes. Wasn't that enough?

“Hey,” he said softly, “everything okay?”

Her eyes shot up to meet his. At some point she'd looked away. He was staring. Shoot. Had he been asking her something? Athena searched her mind for any indication she'd heard him talking even a little while her mind had wandered.

His hand tightened around hers. “It's okay. If you don't want to do the dressage thing, then don't. I just thought—”

Athena shook her head sharply. “It’s fine. I’ll think about it, okay?” So that was it. He was still pushing something he knew she wasn’t comfortable with. Well, if that was his only flaw, then it was worth moving past.

She’d never met anyone quite like Henry. He was the epitome of what a guy should be. She should probably stop fighting him on stuff like this. It wasn’t that she thought he knew better. It was that she wanted to be better because of him. She wanted to grow and change so she felt she was worthy of his affection.

Henry had a knack for doing that. He always made her want to be better without saying a word. It was just who he was. The way he was watching her would have been unnerving if it wasn’t so familiar. It was as if he could see the real her—the Athena she wanted everyone to know if she wasn’t so scared of sharing it.

He lifted her hand to his lips just as the back door swung open.

Hastily, he dropped his hand, and Athena spun around to find Harley standing behind her with a half-eaten apple in her hand. Her eyes darted from Athena to Henry before a slow smile stretched across her face. “Hi, guys. Whatcha doin? Am I interrupting anything?” The sing-song voice paired with her teasing gaze was more than enough to get Athena charging up the steps and away from Henry.

According to him, it was smarter to hide their budding relationship from his family because they were nosy. Harley wasn’t even related to the Keagans by blood, and she was showing just how right Henry was.

One more thing for Athena to appreciate about Henry. He might not know her well, but he knew her enough to help her avoid any embarrassment or being put on the spot.

Athena pushed past Harley. “You’re not interrupting anything.”

“Only that Athena wants to be considered as the dressage rider when we enter Beast into the competition coming up.”

She stopped, her hand on the doorknob.

“Really?” Harley’s voice rose a few octaves. “Have you talked to Brielle about it? I don’t think they’ve found anyone willing to get in that saddle just yet. I bet she’d consider you if you could show her your stuff.”

Face flaming, Athena turned slowly. She set her fiery gaze on the man she’d thought she could trust. He’d pushed her, and she’d been naïve to think he’d step back and let her decide. It didn’t matter that she’d all but chosen to offer herself as tribute for this ridiculous endeavor. She hadn’t verbalized it herself, and Henry should have known better.

“Uh-oh... it looks like that wasn’t supposed to be common knowledge.” While Harley’s voice was light, there was a slight undertone that made it clear she knew how to read a room. “You know what? I’m going to head inside. Don’t worry, Athena. I won’t say a word.” She twisted her finger and thumb at the non-existent opening of her pursed lips, then hurried inside.

Henry released that chuckle that Athena had been so fond of—until this moment. “See? Even Harley thought it was a good idea. You can’t tell me you didn’t hear that in her voice.”

Athena gave his shoulder a little shove, preventing him from being able to escape inside like Harley had done. “Why did you do that?” she accused.

To his credit, he appeared confused by her irritation. “Why did I do what?”

“Why did you say that? Now she’s gonna tell Brielle and I won’t be able to back

out.” Even to her own ears, her voice sounded small. Her heart rate was working double time, but not in the pleasant way it did when she was kissing him. This was different. It was her anxiety coming back in full force. “You can’t just say stuff like that without asking me first. I have to make the decision.”

“We both know you were thinking about it. Heck, I would bet my horse that you were on board but you didn’t want to admit it until later.”

“I don’t care if I was on board.” She pushed his shoulder again, emphasizing her next words. “It’s my decision.”

He frowned. “You’re really mad at me.”

“Of course I’m mad. I don’t want you making decisions that affect my life without my say-so. We might be romantically involved, but I don’t belong to you. I’m not your plaything. You can’t make me do something I don’t want to.”

“I wasn’t trying—”

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She threw her hands down at her sides and focused on her breathing. “It doesn’t matter. Like you said. I was seriously considering it. I just wanted to do a little more research on that computer you guys have. I don’t want to walk in blind to something like this.”

He was so quiet that she was forced to open her eyes to see if he was still there. When her gaze met his, she flinched. There was pain there—pain she’d caused. Suddenly, she felt so much smaller.

It took almost all her remaining energy to mutter, “Sorry I got mad at you.”

His expression didn’t change.

“I didn’t mean any of it.”

Still, he didn’t move.

Athena let out a sigh. “Can we just forget that this ever happened? We can talk to Brielle at the next training session and see what she thinks. If she thinks I would be a good fit, I’ll start training. But if she’s found someone else...” Athena shrugged. “Then that gives us our answer. Deal?”

He nodded.

Henry had never been the quiet one. It was surreal to be the one doing all the talking. Had she broken his spirit? Great. She’d snapped at him. That wasn’t okay. This was his home, his property. She’d always known that it wasn’t a good idea to overstep,

and that was exactly what she'd done. Now he was really going to get tired of her. Would he kick her to the curb over one outburst? She hoped not.

She wrapped her arms around herself and offered him a small smile. "I hear they're having pizza for dinner tonight. Do you want to steal a few pieces and sneak them out to the barn?"

His expression softened, but something remained in his eyes that she couldn't place. He nodded, drawing her attention away from that haze. "I think we could do a lot better than that. I bet we can steal a whole bottle of soda, too."

"Sprite?"

"The very one." He glanced over his shoulder briefly and then spun to face her. Without giving her warning, he pulled her into a hug. It was exactly what she needed at that moment.

And another point went to Henry Keagan.

19

Henry

Henry could see the distrust come back with full force, but that wasn't what bothered him most. All of Athena's cumulative experiences had made her who she was. He wasn't trying to change her. That wasn't what this was about.

Athena was great the way she was.

There were only a few things he wanted to do to make her life better. He could tell how much she loved working with Beast. He could see the connection they'd made,

and it wasn't like anything he'd ever seen before. Athena had a gift, and that gift could be used to do so much more.

If only she would acknowledge that she could be great in the arena. She could hold her head high and show everyone that it didn't matter where a person came from; they had a family here in Copper Creek. He didn't care what he had to do to convince her. He was going to help her see that she belonged here.

Not only did she belong here, but she belonged to someone. He'd gotten a little closer. In his email this morning, he'd gotten some information regarding a couple of children who had been misplaced around the same time that Athena had. There was a chance she had siblings.

Of course, he wasn't going to tell her any of this. She would only be disappointed if it turned out that she had been an only child. But every time he caught her watching him with his brothers, he could sense something beneath the surface waiting to be set free. She still wanted that belonging. It was more than belonging to a town. It was belonging to someone else.

He couldn't explain how he knew—he just did.

When they'd successfully gotten their food and slipped off to the barn, they snuck up into the loft to eat. He pulled out an old blanket for them to sit on, and they used a small lantern to light their little picnic.

Athena took her first bite and moaned with delight.

"You've had pizza before, haven't you?" Henry laughed.

"Sure, everyone has had pizza," Athena said absently. "But I can't remember the last time I had fresh pizza. It's always been day-old, cold, or tossed in the garbage."

He made a face, one that caught her attention and made him feel guilty for not being able to control it.

“It wasn’t like I ate pizza straight out of the garbage can. I’m talking about the stuff that was left behind in pizza boxes.”

When he didn’t respond right away, she continued.

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“That was only when I was desperate. And it only happened once... maybe twice.”

Henry continued to stare at her. The reality of what her life had been like over the last several years hit him hard. Even when food was scarce and he didn't have clothes that fit right, they always had something.

Athena ducked her head. “You probably think that I—”

All at once, it was as if Henry had woken up from his stupor. He lunged forward and grasped her hand tightly. “What I think hasn't changed.”

She studied him. Why should she believe him when he'd let her continue making excuses for a life she hadn't chosen?

He squeezed her hand tighter. “I mean it, Athena. I know you have a hard time accepting what I see in you, but I wish you could. One day. One day I swear that you will be able to see the wonderful person I do.”

A faint smile graced her lips, but her eyes didn't change. Those beautiful green eyes that could burn the world down or end a world war depending on her mood, still seemed so full of pain and uncertainty.

What did he have to do to help her see? Was Hudson right? Was it only a matter of time before she found a reason to leave him?

No. He wasn't going to think about that right now. Just because she'd gotten upset about the whole dressage statement he'd made to Harley didn't mean she'd hold it

against him. That wasn't who she was.

He lifted her hand to his lips and brushed a kiss on it. Her smile deepened, but she didn't say anything more. Instead, she reached for another slice of pizza, and they continued their meal in silence.

* * *

Henry pushed a helmet into Athena's hands. "The number one thing you need is headgear. It needs to fit right and be made of materials that the ASTM has approved for equestrian use."

Athena stared at him blankly.

"What?" Henry asked. "Is there a problem with wearing a helmet? Because I'm not joking about that."

"I just didn't know you knew so many big words. Equestrian... how long did it take you to learn that one?"

Henry rolled his eyes. "Funny."

A smile broke out on her face. "I thought so."

He shook his head, though he felt warmed that she had gotten comfortable enough to poke fun at him. "If you violate that rule, you can be penalized or eliminated, so don't forget it. Now, on to whips."

"Whips?" She held up a hand. "I'm not touching one of those. Not even if it's for show. Beast doesn't need to be hit to do his job."

Henry lifted a brow, but he knew better than to argue with her. She'd come to realize that the whips were only used as a way to define a request when riding. She'd more than likely communicate her needs via the way she was sitting in the saddle.

He folded his arms, looking at her firmly. "Whether you use it or not, I suggest that you take one. It has to have a certain amount of flexibility and it can't exceed a certain length. You realize it's not a whip that cracks the air, right? It's more like a flexible rod with a soft lash at the end."

Her demeanor shifted slightly, but still, she stood her ground. "I don't want to use one if I don't have to."

"That's fine. The one thing that's optional are spurs—"

"Definitely not."

He bit back a smile. "Noted. All right. Next, we're on to the traditional outfit. Along with your hat, you'll wear a dark-colored coat. A conservative blouse with a choker or tie, gloves, and britches."

Athena held up a hand. "You're telling me that everyone I've seen in those videos was forced to wear that stuff?"

"Yeah, why else would they be dressed the same?"

She snorted. "I thought they were all just really stuck-up rich people."

Henry chuckled. "Sorry to disappoint. We've already gone over the dressage saddle and the type of bridle you need for dressage events, so we won't go over that. The point of dressage is showcasing the physique and the talents of the horse you're riding. Beast is going to have to show that he can be calm and flexible, but also

confident and smart.” He grinned. “When he’s with you, I see all of that.”

“But how do I show that sort of thing? It’s not like I can tell the judges that he fits those requirements. We’re just going to be riding in circles.”

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“Yes,” Henry said while nodding, “but it’s more than that. You can demonstrate those skills by showing off his freedom and the regularity of his pace. How smoothly does he move? It’s like a dance. All we need to do is choreograph it. As long as he can demonstrate those movements while accepting the bridle, then you’ll be golden. We need to work out any tenseness or resistance he might have.”

“That sounds like a lot to remember.”

“That’s not all.”

She sighed. “Oh, good. I thought this was going to be too easy.” Her sarcasm still amused him. He was able to see a lot more of her personality the more time they spent together. She lifted her eyes to his after having dropped them to the floor. “What else is there?”

He stepped forward and tapped her temple. “You have to do it all from memory.”

“From memory? They won’t tell me what to show them?”

Henry shook his head. “It’s a test. You will start on one end and showcase anything they’ll be looking for.”

She groaned. “I’m beginning to regret this decision.”

“Oh, and one more thing.”

“There’s more?”

“Don’t click your tongue or talk to him. You lose points that way. You just have to show what Beast is capable of with pressure from the way you’re riding or squeezing him with your legs.”

“And you seriously think I can do this?” The hesitancy in her voice said it all. She didn’t believe she could do it. That, or she didn’t know if he did.

He grazed her cheek with his thumb, trailing his touch down until he was gently cupping her chin in his hand. “I know you can. It feels like a lot. I get that. But we have time. We’ll work on technique first, and then we’ll move into the boring stuff like rules and regulations.” He made a face. “Because who really likes to have to follow rules?”

“That’s how you win.” Harley materialized behind him, causing Athena’s demeanor to completely shut down. She stiffened and her lips pressed together. While Athena would speak here or there about Beast, she didn’t engage in small talk with the others, and if she did, he wasn’t privy to it.

Harley nodded to the helmet. “So, you’re gonna do it, huh? Are you nervous?”

Athena shook her head.

“Good. Because I’m sure the animals can sense it, and by that, I mean the judges.” Harley snickered, glancing from one to the other. Athena’s flat expression said more than words ever could.

Henry chuckled. “But seriously, the judges can be sticklers. They see a thousand horses every season. If you want to win, you’re going to have to do the work.”

Harley nudged him with her elbow. “Who says she has to win?” She set her eyes on Athena and winked. “I say have fun. If it’s not fun, it isn’t worth it. That’s why I got

this.” She pulled her collar to the side to show off a Carpe Diem tattoo she had just below her shoulder. These days she wore more T-shirts than she used to. Henry couldn’t tell if she’d finally settled down from the person Mason had described when he first met her, or if she was doing it to make Henry’s brother happy.

Mason was more reserved, which made their pairing that much stranger.

Athena glanced at the tattoo and then lifted her gaze to Harley. “I know I’ll have fun.”

“Then there’s nothing to worry about.” Harley grinned. She nodded to them both, releasing her T-shirt collar, then moved past them into the barn.

They both watched her disappear inside then Henry turned to Athena. “She’s right about one thing. I don’t want you to do this if you’re not going to have fun.”

It was small, nuanced, in fact. Athena’s eyes darted to his and for a millisecond he thought he could see some irritation hiding in the depths of the forests behind her gaze. Then just as quickly as it had appeared, it disappeared. She adjusted her hold on her helmet, turning her focus to it as she spoke. “I thought you wanted me to do this because it’d be good for me to get out of my comfort zone.”

“That too,” he hedged. “It’s always good to try new things. You’ve been doing that since you got here.”

“And what about you? Have you been trying anything new?”

He hated how much he was thrown off by her question. What was he doing to better himself? He couldn’t think of anything big. She was right. After all his insistence on making changes for the better, he hadn’t done much for himself.

“That’s what I thought.” Athena said it under her breath, but it was loud enough that he caught it. She didn’t even give him a chance to form a rebuttal as she immediately slipped into the barn and headed for Beast’s stall.

20

Athena

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Athena squeezed her thighs, but apparently it was a little too much. Beast bolted forward and Athena nearly fell from the back of the saddle. It wasn't that Beast was skittish with her. She wouldn't even say he was being bad.

If anything, he was too sensitive to her touch. She was so aware of his spirit—the way he wanted to connect with her.

“Easy!” Brielle called. “You need to focus.” She jumped out of the way just as Beast leaped past her.

“That's what I'm trying to do,” Athena muttered through gritted teeth. “He's not paying attention.” She gripped the reins tighter in her hands. “Come on, Beast, you're making me look bad.”

“This is just as much about you as it is about him. You have to show him that he can trust you!” Brielle called out to her as she made another round in the paddock. “You're not thinking this through.”

Athena shot a dark look at the woman. As far as she was concerned, Brielle didn't have enough of a background to be bossing her around like this. She'd mentioned that she had competed in dressage when she was younger, but she wasn't exactly young anymore.

Brielle matched Athena's scowl with one of her own and then shot a look at Henry, who had somehow managed to show up out of nowhere. “She's making this harder than it has to be. You said she wanted to do this.” She didn't even try to prevent Athena from hearing her. Didn't she understand that Athena had never ridden a horse

before she showed up at the Keagan's family ranch?

She let out a growl and pulled on the reins a little sharper than she probably should have. Beast reacted much like Athena would have expected him to. He tossed his head and pawed at the ground. He wasn't going to put up with her attitude, and he was making it known.

Athena closed her eyes and breathed deeply. This wasn't supposed to be that hard. She had felt so in tune with Beast before. The only thing that had changed was that now there was something on the line.

Harley had told her to have fun.

Well, if this was fun, then she wanted no part of it.

Unfortunately, not even her deep breathing was enough to mend her frayed nerves. She could already tell that she wasn't going to be any help today. With eyes still closed, she shook her head. "I can't do this."

"What do you mean you can't do this? You signed up for this, remember?"

"Brielle," Henry said softly, drawing Athena's attention, "Give her a minute, okay?" He gave his sister-in-law a pointed look and then jogged over to Athena. "Hey," he said softly, placing a hand on her knee. The warmth from his touch had more of a calming effect than it probably should have. "You can do this, remember?"

She shook her head. "I can't. I don't know what I'm doing. This is our third practice, and I still can't get him to do what Brielle is requesting."

He laughed, but not in a way that made her feel mocked. "Three days? Sweetheart, three days isn't enough. You have plenty of time to get ready for this competition.

You're going to be competing against other beginners. You have to learn to breathe."

"I am breathing!" Her defenses shot up again. This was how it always went. Henry would find something he wanted her to improve and he'd point it out. Where was the guy who had told her that she was brave when they met? Better yet, where was the guy who could put her at ease with one look? She wanted that Henry back.

"It doesn't look like it." Henry chuckled again.

Athena leaned closer to him, her gaze more severe than before. "I told you I want you to stop trying to make me into something I'm not. If I say I can't do this, then—"

He held up both hands and took a step back. "You're right. I'm not going to push you."

Her eyes widened as she watched him literally retreat. Suddenly, she was unsure of herself. Why did she now want him to return to her side and tell her what he was going to say? When did she become a person who cared so deeply about what someone thought? It wasn't healthy—even she knew that.

She thrust those disappointing thoughts down where she wouldn't be pushed around by them. Instead, she stared at him with her lips pressed tightly together. "I am breathing," she said more evenly this time.

Henry nodded. "I see that. There's only one thing I can think of that might help."

"And what's that?"

He lifted a brow. "You're not going to bite off my head again, are you?"

She gritted her teeth. "I can't make any promises." Taking advice seemed to be

getting harder with each passing day. It was an acquired skill—one she hadn't perfected—and one that Henry would probably lecture her about improving.

To his credit, he laughed. "Fair enough." He moved closer to her, this time his hand wrapped around the one holding the reins. "Do you remember the night you showed up?"

She stiffened. "Yeah." There were so many things about that night that she would never be able to forget—meeting Henry still being the highlight of it all.

"Do you remember when you first interacted with Beast?"

Athena glanced down at the horse, noting his ears flicking around. "Yeah," she said softer this time.

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“And what about the connection you’d felt to him right from the start? You were the only one he was willing to trust. Remember that?”

Emotion boiled up in her throat. This time she couldn’t even muster a verbal acknowledgment to what he’d said. All she could do was nod.

Henry’s soft smile melted the ice that had grown on her heart while she’d been getting flustered over this training session. “Okay. The best thing you can do right now is listen to that instinct. You were able to ride him without thinking much about it.”

“Yeah, but I was able to use the reins more.”

He shook his head. “It’s more than that. As both of you continue to ride together, he’s going to notice little nuances in the way you put pressure on him, the way you lean, even the way you hold yourself. You two are connected in amazing ways. I’ve seen it.”

Henry’s little pep talk worked. She didn’t want to admit it to even herself, but his words had helped to put everything into a better perspective.

Goodness gracious, she wanted to be angry with him for it.

It wasn’t fair.

Henry had it all. He was handsome. He was a hard worker. He was kind, and sweet... and the list went on for miles.

Why in the world was he interested in her? No wonder he wanted her to be better. He needed someone who could keep up.

Unless this was about finding someone he could fix. She'd heard about those kinds of men. No. That wasn't Henry. She refused to accept that. His goodness was overwhelming.

Henry released her hand and took a step back. "Now, let's go show Brielle what you're made of." He put more distance between them, preventing her from asking quietly why Brielle was the one training her.

Athena would have to ask him that question later.

Right now, she had more important things to worry about. "What do you say?" she whispered to Beast's flitting ears. "Are we going to let the outside world die away so we can understand each other better?"

At first, Beast didn't move. Not even his ears flicked forward. Then he pawed the ground and tossed his head, bringing a smile to Athena's face.

"Good. Then let's try this again."

"Remember, you can't talk to him. Not even clicking your tongue is permitted," Brielle called out.

"I know!" Athena shot back at her. "And everything before we get in position doesn't count either."

Brielle blinked and then stared at Henry with confusion.

He shrugged before turning his grin to her. All it took was a wink and she was able to

let everything he'd said wash over her.

Athena could do this. She could become one with the animal that everyone thought was a beast. She could help him prove them all wrong, just like she could prove to everyone that she was a valuable asset to the Keagan family ranch.

They came to a stop at the far end of the paddock and Athena got into position. While she didn't have the full outfit, she wore the gloves, the boots, and the hat. The whip was in her hand, but she made sure not to let it touch Beast even when she felt she was losing control and might fling her hand around.

She settled better into the saddle and held the reins where Brielle had told her would make the biggest difference. Then she closed her eyes and took in the oxygen her lungs craved. Willing her heart to slow its frantic pace, she told herself that this was it. This was her shot. Her eyes opened and she ignored the craving she had to look in Henry's direction.

He was watching her. There wasn't a doubt about that.

Athena tightened her thighs, only not quite as firmly as she had last time. The back of her heel tapped Beast's flank, and he stepped forward. His movements were more measured this time. They hadn't worked on transitioning from walking to a trot yet. According to Brielle, they needed to perfect the act of walking the perimeter of the corral at an even pace. She wanted smooth steps and an even curve. This would demonstrate that Athena could indeed control the direction and the arc of Beast's trajectory when in an enclosed space.

Brielle had also been insistent that it should appear that Beast maintained some control to give the illusion of his own freedom—whatever that meant.

“Good!” Brielle called out. “Do you think you can move him into a trot? Don't forget

to adjust your stance so you're not being flung around the saddle."

She bit her tongue because otherwise, she would have told Brielle off. They were doing well this time, and there was no reason to complicate things.

But one look at Henry and Athena knew she couldn't ignore the request. She tapped her heels against Beast and without missing a beat, he moved into a faster pace. Initially, Athena was able to match Beast's flow of movement. But then she lost the beat in her head and her rump hit the saddle in an awkward thud.

After that, everything unraveled.

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Athena pulled Beast to a stop and stifled the groan that had built in her lungs. “I didn’t want to do that transition. Why couldn’t we perfect what we were doing first?”

Brielle’s expression didn’t change even a smidge. “Because you need to be challenged. The way you led Beast through the rounds was near perfect. I can’t have you getting bored and then making mistakes.”

“But I made a mistake! I lost my rhythm.”

“Not right away,” Brielle corrected her. “You are doing better than I thought was possible this early in the process. I think you’ve earned a break.” She patted Beast’s neck with her hand. “Both of you.”

Beast blew a harsh-sounding breath out his nostrils. It might have appeared harmless, but the tension between Brielle and Beast had only grown. Brielle glanced warily at Beast once more, then nodded to Athena. “Good work today. Same time tomorrow.” She walked away, only to be replaced by Henry.

He grinned at her. “That was...”

“Good?” She eyed him, bordering on exhausted.

“No,” he drawled, “that was remarkable.”

“I bounced around in the saddle.”

Henry shrugged. “Not at first. Do you know how long it took me to understand a

horse's gait? You're catching on at an astonishing rate." He continued to grin up at her. "I think this calls for a celebration."

21

Henry

Time was running out, but Henry knew Athena would continue to improve. Brielle had them working on perfecting their turns and Athena almost had them nailed. Watching her work with Beast had become one of his favorite ways to spend his time, and he wasn't the only one.

As more of his family heard about Athena's progress, they started to gravitate toward the corral where Brielle worked with the two of them. Even Hudson seemed intrigued.

He caught his brother's eye and gave him a nod. Hudson turned his attention back to the practice without much of a reaction. Apparently, just because Athena was interesting didn't make her welcome. Henry couldn't believe his brother was still angry about Athena taking the room he wanted.

Hudson would just have to learn that he didn't always get what he wanted. There were simply times when they had to do something for someone else who needed it more.

Henry turned his gaze to Athena again, and at that very moment, her eyes locked with his. She smiled and everything felt right. These were the moments he lived for, because heaven knew that life wasn't perfect. The handful of arguments Henry had with Athena had been easily overlooked. They'd come out on top.

"Okay, Athena. Now I need you to try to get Beast to do something different. We

need to focus on moving his back inside leg closer as you change his gait.”

“How do you expect me to do that?” Athena pulled Beast to a stop. “I don’t even know what that means.”

Brielle snapped her fingers toward one of the guys watching. “Grab me Cocoa.”

Elijah nodded and headed toward the barn.

Brielle moved closer to Athena. She grabbed the end of the whip in her hand and lifted it for emphasis. “This is a tool. You can’t shy away from using it when needed.”

“I already told you. I’m not—”

“You’ve felt it. The end isn’t going to bother him. His tail swishing flies away would probably give him more of a sting than this. You’re basically using it to tap him where your boot can’t.” Brielle stared hard at Athena, but she stared right back.

“I’m not going to use it.”

“You’ve tried all the other options. He’s not reacting to your guidance. Here, hand it to me.” Brielle took the whip and climbed into the saddle of her own horse. She sat tall and graceful—more so than Henry had ever seen. Most of the time Brielle’s face was covered in smudges as she joined Wade in all the work they needed to get done.

With her sitting atop the saddle like that, he could see her Callahan upbringing shining through. That family had been the top of the totem pole for as long as he could remember. He’d never been to any of the dressage events when he was younger. But he wouldn’t have been surprised to find out that she was an excellent competitor.

Clearly, she knew what she was doing and not just because she'd watched the events.

Brielle spoke with a loud, clear voice as she turned her horse into the steps she was trying to get Athena to do. She pointed out the gait of her horse and when the transition needed to take place. "Here is where you need to alert Beast to move his leg slightly more forward so that it appears seamless to the judges. Most horses don't do this—and Beast definitely won't because he's new. It's not a big deal, but you're going to have to be more flexible when it comes to using this." She stopped in front of Athena and held out the whip so Athena could grab it. "You're not whacking him with it. You're guiding him. Trust the process."

Henry couldn't tell if Athena was willing to do as Brielle had instructed. This could very well be the moment that would dictate the outcome of the upcoming competition. Everyone watched, waiting for Athena to cave.

But she didn't.

She looked down at the whip and then shook her head. "I don't care if it helps or if it's required, I'm not going to use it."

There was a rustling of murmurs through the spectators. All eyes turned to Brielle as if she'd do or say something. But all she did was sigh as she climbed down from the saddle. "I've helped you as far as I can. Everything else is something built upon what you already know. Ultimately, it's up to you. It's part of the equipment, but if you choose to use it as decoration, so be it. Practice is done for today." She grabbed the reins of her horse and marched toward the gate.

The group watching dispersed—everyone except Henry. Athena didn't look in his direction, but he could tell that she knew he was hovering. She fiddled with the whip, and without looking up, she finally spoke. "I'm not using it."

He chuckled. "I think you've made that quite clear."

"I mean it. I'm not going to subject Beast to it."

Henry moved closer to her. "I don't know why you're being so stubborn about it. Clearly, this is just how things are."

Her head snapped around at him, eyes blazing. "Do you even hear yourself? That's what is wrong with the world. How many times do we just shrug our shoulders and say that something is okay because that's the way it's always been done? How often do we have to watch a broken system because no one is willing to enact change?"

The more she talked, the more he realized she wasn't just talking about her work with Beast. She was dealing with deeper scars.

“Do you know why I never stick around long in any one place?” Her eyes still drilled into him. “It’s because of the people. I have never found a place that has more goodness than evil. Even the good ones have flaws that aren’t worth sticking around for. That’s how it is. But everywhere you go, there will always be disappointment, right? There’s not enough of us to make a difference. Too bad one person sticking up for something like this isn’t enough. Too bad none of you can see how far Beast has come without the use of tools like this one.” She said the word with deep bitterness.

Unfortunately, the only thing he heard from her rant was how easy it was for her to leave. He hadn’t thought about that for a long time. Sure, in the back of his mind, he knew that there was a chance she might bolt. She had a history of doing so. Heck, she’d even attempted it that night he’d caught her.

There was a strong possibility that his keeping her here was like putting a wild animal in a cage. What would happen if he opened the door and gave her the freedom to choose? He didn’t want to think about that right now. He wanted to believe that they’d come to a good place and that she’d officially decided this was where she wanted to stay for the long haul.

Athena was still learning. She wouldn’t be able to grasp all the nuances of living in a place like this one—not to mention learning the skills of riding horses. His role would be to help guide her so she knew what to expect.

“You’re wrong,” Henry said as non-confrontationally as he could.

“I’m sorry?” she snapped. “You think I’m wrong? What part?”

He shrugged. “A lot of it actually. The world isn’t as dark and dreary as you suggest

it is. There's a lot to be grateful for. There are a lot of good people out there who are doing the best they can. And if you let one bad relationship sour your outlook—"

She snorted. "One bad relationship? I know you're not talking about the boyfriend who hurt me. Because that would be going too far."

Henry grimaced. He hadn't meant to bring that part up. The words had simply slipped from his lips like they had a mind of their own. "You know I didn't mean it that way. I was talking in general. A bad experience with a specific person doesn't mean everyone will be like that. And people have bad days. What if someone you met made a bad first impression but they were having an off day? Then you're the one to blame when you didn't get to know them better."

He couldn't tell if her silence was a good thing or a bad thing. The way she was staring at him made him think it was the latter. Her eyes grew cloudier by the second while her mouth tightened further. He'd be lucky if she spoke to him at all.

Athena huffed, climbing down from the horse as she did. Once her feet hit the ground, she didn't look at him, but rather, she grabbed the reins and strode straight for the gate.

"Athena," he said, "don't just storm off like that again."

She whirled around to face him. "You don't have any idea what you're talking about. You were sheltered, living here with a family who loved you. While you were able to come home to brothers and sisters who supported you and told you that you'd all make it together, I was stuck with families who viewed me as nothing more than the help. There wasn't anyone who had to love me unconditionally. I couldn't share my secrets with anyone, and I didn't have anyone build me up when I was broken. Your experiences in this world differ vastly from my own. Don't you dare tell me that I'm wrong when you don't know what I've gone through." With that last statement, she

hurried away.

There was a small chance she was right. For a moment during her lecture, everything made sense. She still felt alone. No one here in Copper Creek had to love her. No one here would pick her side in a fight. While she got along with nearly everyone, she didn't feel secure.

What kind of boyfriend was he that she still didn't feel like she had an advocate in her corner? Guilt and shame filled his chest. He watched her leave, not knowing what he should do or say.

It would be wrong for him to tell her that he was sorry and that he didn't mean it to come out the way it had—mostly because he didn't think he was in the wrong. Athena had several different experiences than he had; she was right about that. But her bad experiences just weren't enough to prove the world was as bad as she thought it was.

He needed to find her family. That was the only thing that seemed to make sense. If she had even one blood relative, then maybe Athena could see she wasn't alone. He couldn't explain what it was about this feeling he had. All he knew was that he needed to do something to show her that she mattered. Not just to him, but to someone else.

More specifically, to someone who was family.

Hopefully, the emails he'd sent out would be responded to, and very soon. Henry didn't know how much longer Athena would be able to last. Her volatile outbursts were coming closer and closer together. One of these days, she might actually throw her hands in the air and give up.

He couldn't let that happen.

Athena

Athena couldn't believe that Henry could be so callous. She'd thought he was better than that. Out of everyone, he was supposed to be the one who would accept her for who she was and what she'd gone through. He knew her darkest memories, and he still wanted to insist that the world wasn't as dreary as it truly was.

It was moments like this one when the doubts she fought so hard to keep buried were unearthed. Their views were so different. He was still a baby when it came to experiencing the world. How could she date someone who wasn't willing to acknowledge there was so much more out there?

Athena hated the way she felt right now. She hated how whenever Henry spoke to her, he always had some form of criticism or argument against her. Why couldn't he just be supportive and tell her she was more than capable of making her own decisions?

She made it to the barn and started taking everything off Beast. He stood patiently while she removed the harness, saddle, and blanket. He continued to exude his own kind of peace as she brushed his hair and mane.

Not once did he fidget or indicate he was stressed, which surprisingly aided in calming her down. Athena slowed her movements and allowed herself to breathe a little deeper. She shouldn't be upset with Henry. This wasn't about him. This was about her own insecurities. He wasn't trying to change her; he was trying to help her see that there was a kinder world out there.

Gritting her teeth, Athena shook her head. If she wasn't careful, she'd alienate the one person who seemed to believe in her.

Athena was definitely the problem. She was the one who couldn't seem to help herself when she got defensive. Why wasn't she able to think clearly when Henry was around? It didn't seem fair.

Once she was done with Beast, she slipped out of the barn, praying no one would stop her. The last thing she wanted was to have someone else tell her she was wrong about the whip. She didn't need anyone else pointing out that she didn't belong. She'd had enough of that to last a lifetime.

What she needed to do was figure out a plan to help her fit in better around here. Maybe she needed to meditate.

Athena grimaced at that thought as she wandered the trail she'd worn from the back of the house to the barn. Meditation was for the weak or those who wanted to act like they were better than the rest. People who couldn't handle what life threw at them needed to find their center more frequently.

That wasn't her. Athena could find her center. She just needed to do it in a way that didn't throw her in the middle of an argument with Henry.

She collapsed in the grass in the backyard of the house. It was quiet this time of day as everyone else finished up their work before supper. She could usually count on having this space all to herself for a good thirty minutes.

Athena reclined in the grass, spreading out her arms to her sides as if she were making a snow angel. She closed her eyes and listened to the wind rustle through the trees and the foliage nearby.

The ranch was the closest she'd ever come to finding a place that felt like home, and it was more than the people that made a place special. Here, she felt like she could be herself. It was the horses and nature all around her.

Everyone seemed to tolerate her much like she expected—except for Hudson, who still had a chip on his shoulder. Henry was the one she thought she could turn to for anything. But if there was one thing that made her want to stay here—to put down roots—it was the ranch in and of itself. And Henry was the cherry on top.

Now, if only she could let down her defenses whenever he gave her his opinion on how she should view the situation. It took all of ten minutes just lying in the grass for her to finally rid herself of her instinct to leave. That was happening a lot more often these days. It was her fallback solution to conflict, especially when she didn't want to be the one to get hurt.

The residual ache in her chest flared to life once more, but only briefly. It was as if the grass and fresh air had healing properties. She could do this. She didn't know how, but she knew she had to try. And if she failed? Then she'd say her goodbyes and be on her way.

“You're improving.”

The male voice ripped Athena from her quiet reverie, and she shot up from her place. Athena whirled around and stared at Hudson as he stood on the porch behind her. He wasn't looking at her. His eyes were actually staring off at what appeared to be nothing in the distance.

Hudson's brows creased and his eyes squinted. “I've never seen anyone take to riding like you. Granted, you probably wouldn't be able to handle riding out with the cattle or anything, but you're doing better than most city folk I've seen.”

That was probably the biggest and only compliment she'd ever get from Hudson. He wasn't a big talker, and when he did, it was usually to complain about the people who came to this area as tourists. Athena hadn't bothered looking into it, but there was a country club that boasted dancing, a restaurant, and therapy for veterans.

If there was any substance to what Henry had said the other day, that country club seemed to be proof that he could be right about the good in the world. Unfortunately, that meant more people would continue moving to this town and force it to get a little bigger. She could sympathize with Hudson on that front. He had a good point.

More people meant more problems. It was too bad that someone couldn't just come in and buy up a bunch of land to keep the place from growing too fast.

She'd been quiet for too long. To tell Hudson thank you for his compliment now would make her appear even stranger than she was. So, she turned her attention back to the scenery. After a few moments, she heard the back door open and shut. Hudson had left, and she was alone again. If Hudson could start accepting her, that would add to Henry's argument.

Athena lost track of time as she watched the sky change colors and felt the cool air waft against her skin. No matter how long she stayed here, she would always enjoy the peace that the quiet could bring.

The back door to the house opened and shut again, but Athena didn't bother looking to see who had joined her. It was more than likely Henry. He had a knack for making sure she was okay—that they were okay.

She wrapped her arms around her knees as she pulled them to her chest, and then she rested her chin on top.

"I don't know why you're so against the whip, but I can respect that you're sticking

to your guns.” It was Brielle.

Athena would have recognized that voice anywhere after all the time they’d spent practicing. She rubbed her nose into her knees and then turned her cheek to rest it where her chin had been. “It doesn’t matter. You made several good points about it.”

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“You know, there are several people even around here who dislike competing with the horses. Doesn’t matter if it’s dressage or the bronc riding at the rodeo. There are folks who think that the animals should only be used for work—that we show our love and respect for them rather than turning them into a show.” Brielle settled beside Athena in the grass and a soft smile touched her lips. “It’s similar to how people feel about entering little girls into pageants.”

“I take it you don’t feel that way?” Athena said.

Brielle shook her head. “Well, I don’t feel that way about dressage. I do feel that way about the bronc riding. Some of the things they have to do to those horses to get them mad should be outlawed. But dressage?” She sighed. “It’s more than just a competition. It’s more than showing the judges who’s boss. It’s about the connection we have to our horses. It’s like... you’re having a conversation with him. Or like you’re dancing with him.” Brielle turned to face Athena. “And if you can accomplish that without using the whip, then do it.”

“Then why are you pushing me to use it so much?” Athena demanded. “If you think it’s possible for me to do it without, then help me teach Beast without using it.”

“That’s just it. I can’t.”

“What do you mean, you can’t?”

Brielle pressed her lips together tightly. “I used to do dressage when I was a teen. I was pretty good at it, too. Won my share of national events. But I utilized every tool they offered me. I never had the kind of connection you have with Beast. You’re

going to have to figure out a way to get him to understand in a way that makes sense for the two of you.”

Athena peered at the woman she barely knew. She’d figured that Brielle had a past working with horses and possibly competed, but the truth was far more impressive than she’d thought. “Why did you stop?”

Brielle laughed. “I became somewhat of a rebel. If my father wanted me to do something, I fought against it. If he didn’t want me to do something, then that was next on my bucket list. My father was a very strict man.” Her expression sobered. “I made several foolish choices that I’m not proud of and all because I didn’t want anyone to tell me what I could and couldn’t do.”

That sounded familiar. “And how did you fix it?”

She laughed again. “Sweetie, that’s not something you can fix. It’s part of who you are. You just realize that you have to prioritize certain things. When you can do that, then everything else falls into place.”

“You make it sound so easy,” Athena said. “What if it doesn’t? Fall into place, I mean?”

“Then I guess that’s not where your life is meant to be. There are paths we’re supposed to follow and those that we want to but that are meant for someone else.”

Athena hadn’t thought of it that way before.

“Anyway,” Brielle continued, “whatever you decide to do with your training is up to you. But I suggest that you do your own research. Maybe dressage isn’t something you can do. Perhaps you should consider being a middleman for someone who wants to take Beast as far as he can go. He’s calmed down a lot since you got here.”

Why did Brielle have to bring up someone else riding Beast? Even though Athena knew Beast didn't technically belong to her, some part of her felt they belonged together. They were connected on a level that no one else would be able to replicate. She wasn't just going to let someone else take the reins.

Athena shook her head. "I'm good."

Brielle smiled. "Well, I look forward to seeing what you can do with him. Just keep in mind that we're running out of time. We have to register in the next couple of weeks, and I don't want to do that unless I know you're ready." She got to her feet. "Good work today. Keep it up."

Athena watched Brielle leave, somehow feeling worse than before Brielle had shown up. If Brielle was right and Athena needed to step down, would she be able to do it?

She didn't know if she could.

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Henry

Henry stared at the message on his screen. Blood rushed to his face as he gasped. His hands went clammy and tingly all at once. He nearly dropped his phone, and he would have if he hadn't glanced up and noticed Brielle had taken a seat beside Athena.

He'd wanted to check on her to assure her that he still cared about her. She needed to know that they were still just as strong as ever. From the looks of it, Brielle was doing a good job of helping Athena come to terms with what had happened earlier in the corral.

Now, he had even better news.

Athena had a sister.

Her name was Rachel.

Henry glanced up to find Athena alone. Her back faced him, making it difficult for him to gauge her current mood. At the moment, he thought this news might be just the thing that could turn everything around. Athena had a family—a sister who had been looking for her. She had someone she could call her own.

He took a step toward Athena and then hesitated, a memory coming at him like a swinging bat. She hadn't wanted him to look for her family. He couldn't remember the reason, but he did remember that she'd made him promise.

Yes, he'd gone against his promise, but that was because it had been ridiculous to keep it. They didn't know if she even had family, so what was the harm in looking? If he'd found out that she was alone, he wouldn't have said a thing.

But he'd found someone.

Surely Athena would want to know that she had a sister. She couldn't be upset with him for breaking a promise when the outcome ended up being something so wonderful.

He nodded to himself. This was a good thing. It had to be. If he'd found out that his parents had actually wanted to be with their family, but something had kept them apart, he would have wanted the same thing.

Henry charged forward with determination. Finding Athena's sister was a good thing. No one would be able to convince him otherwise. If she got upset, she only had to read the email he'd received. She'd have to admit that she was just scared that she wouldn't find anyone who was related to her.

Or even worse, find someone that was related to her that didn't care.

Athena didn't move when he took a seat beside her. The thoughtful expression on her face said it all. She'd come out here to be alone. She didn't even glance toward him when she spoke. "Have you ever felt like you didn't belong?"

"You belong here, Athena," he blurted.

A faint smile hid behind her stoic expression. "I wasn't asking if you thought I belonged here. I was asking if you felt like you didn't belong somewhere. That no matter how hard you tried, you couldn't seem to find a place where you fit. Like you were a square peg surrounded by round holes."

He hated that he didn't know where this was going. But more than that, he hated that he couldn't understand what she was trying to express to him. If she thought she was an outcast, she couldn't be more wrong. "You belong here, Athena," he tried again, this time taking her hand in his. "I don't want you to worry about that."

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter how many times you say that. It won't make it true for me. I'm just... not like everyone here."

"Neither is Harley."

Athena snorted. "Harley isn't a homeless street urchin who has run away from every situation she's ever been in."

Henry chuckled. "I don't think you are allowed to make assumptions about Harley. From what I understand, she's never really belonged with her family either."

"I doubt that." Athena let out a heavy sigh. "Even people like her who think they don't fit with their family can be wrong."

Oh, how he wished he could see into her head and know what this was all about. He'd thought he'd done right by her. He'd welcomed her into his home, into his heart. What more could he do?

Athena glanced at him and then looked away just as quickly. The frown on her brow deepened, and she pulled her hand from his. "It's just that when I look around at everyone here, they all have their place. They all have someone who's looking out for them."

"I'm looking out for you." Henry's voice was getting desperate. He had to rein it in, but how could he do that when he felt like she was slipping through his fingers as they spoke? This wasn't fair. He had to do something to stop her from leaving.

“It’s not the same.” She gave him a smile that could only be described as patronizing. “You’re sweet. You make me feel like there might be more to my future than just moving from town to town. But there would be nothing stopping you from walking away.”

“Walking away?” he sputtered. “Who says I’d walk away? I’m not the one who runs.”

She flinched, and he immediately regretted the words that had spewed from his lips. Shoot! This wasn’t going the way he wanted it to. “I didn’t mean that—”

“Yes, you did. And it’s okay. That’s my MO. I’m a runner. When things get hard, I run.”

“Are they hard now?”

She didn’t answer right away, which was all the answer he needed. They were getting difficult, but in what way he couldn’t be certain.

“What can I do?” he asked quietly.

“Nothing.” She swallowed and shot a smile in his direction. “This is something I have to work out on my own. There’s this emptiness inside that I can’t seem to shake, and it doesn’t matter that I’ve found a place that makes me feel safe. I thought that maybe it was finding someone who I could love.” Her smile deepened but then faded away. “I’ve even found a purpose... working with Beast. But there’s still this cavern inside me that I can’t fill.”

Henry straightened. This was it. Here was his moment to show her exactly what she was missing. “I know what it is.”

Her eyes cut to his, and the hopefulness there nearly shattered him.

“Family.”

The dim light he’d seen in her gaze went out. “Henry...” she started, but he cut her off.

“I know you said I shouldn’t go poking around, but—”

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“Henry, you didn’t.” The edge in her voice returned. “You promised me you wouldn’t go digging up my past.”

“I know, but this was different.”

Athena shot to her feet and glowered down at him. “When I told you to leave it alone, I meant it.”

“But that hole—that emptiness, I know what it is. You feel like you don’t have anywhere you belong. Well, that’s because you never felt like you fit in with your foster families.”

Her face turned bright red, and her hands clenched at her sides. “I don’t want to know anyone who would have allowed me to spend my whole life living the way I had to live. Anyone who could stand by while I moved from foster family to foster family doesn’t deserve for me to turn to them and greet them with open arms.”

“I don’t think that’s what they want you to do. I think—”

“I don’t care what you think!” she yelled. “I told you I didn’t want to know about them. You promised me, Henry. You swore that you would drop this subject months ago.”

He scrambled to his feet, feeling his own anger bubbling to the surface. “Will you just listen to me? You had a rough life. I get it. But guess what? A lot of people go through the wringer these days before they get to win a few. My parents abandoned my whole family—all twelve of us. They knew exactly what they were doing when

they left. They knew that my older siblings would have to figure things out or else we'd all get split up."

"At least you had siblings who were willing to band together." Athena pointed a finger toward the house. "At least you had people who would have done anything for you when you were little so you were able to learn what a real family should be like. I had nothing. No one wanted me. No one cared if I took off."

"What if there is someone?"

She sneered at him. "It's been twenty years, Henry. Anyone who's finally figuring out how to get ahold of me isn't someone I want to waste my time on. And if you knew me better, you would have known this was a terrible idea."

"Aren't you the least bit curious?" Henry moved closer to her, but she stepped back and held up both her hands to keep him distanced. He tried not to take it personally, but how could he not when he'd only been trying to help in the first place? He scowled at her, his voice lowering. "Don't you want to know who I found? Wouldn't it be interesting to finally get the truth about what happened when you were a kid? People don't just leave children on the side of the road."

Athena let out a sharp, painful bark of laughter. "Why wouldn't they? People leave children at fire stations. The world is a harsh place, Henry. No one looked for me then. Why should I care if anyone is looking for me now?"

Henry couldn't believe they were having this argument. There was nothing wrong with finding out more about where she came from. "You're wrong," he snapped, much harsher than he'd intended. "You're wrong about people being inherently bad, and you're wrong about your family."

"My family?" Her brows shot up. "That's rich. I don't have a family, or do I have to

remind you that I don't even know my last name? I don't know who my parents were, and frankly, I couldn't care less."

"You're the one who said you felt like something was missing," he accused. "You're the one who said you didn't know what it was you were looking for. Well, what if I figured it out?"

"So now you know more than me?" She laughed again, but it didn't sound like a laugh he'd ever heard before. "You know what the problem is with you? You think you're so much better than me just because you have a home and people who care. You think you're God's gift to the world because you took in a poor girl who didn't have anything but the clothes on her back. Well, guess what? I'm done being your pet project. I'm not going to let you parade me around like you've made me a better person. News flash, we're not playing out some My Fair Lady nonsense. I didn't need you when I showed up, and I don't need you now." She stormed off toward the front of the house, leaving him to stand alone in the backyard.

Henry's whole body felt like it was on fire. What was wrong with her? He hadn't dated many women, so he didn't have much to compare it to, but this didn't feel right. Sure, he'd gone back on his promise, but it had been a ridiculous thing to make him agree to.

He stared off at where he'd last seen her, itching to chase after her and make her see reason. This time, he knew better. She needed to cool off. When she did, she'd see he was right.

But what if she didn't?

No, Athena was smart. She'd realize he was trying to help. She had to.

Athena

Hot, flustered, and completely thrown off-center, Athena blindly charged toward the front of the house. She couldn't go in the back. By now people were likely eating. To run through the kitchen feeling the way she did, people were bound to notice.

It would be worse if she went that route and Henry followed her. The last thing she needed was to make another scene.

Why was she still here? There had been too many instances where she knew staying would end up hurting her. Why hadn't she just listened to her instincts and left when it would have been easier?

Because of Henry, that's why.

Henry and Beast were the only ones tethering her to this ranch. She could hang out at any ranch in the area, hiding and sneaking food from garbage cans. She could dumpster dive in town and still get access to everything she loved about nature.

She'd just been stupid enough to grow attached.

Athena hurried inside and up the stairs, successfully avoiding bumping into anyone. The biggest problem with staying was that she knew Henry wouldn't change. He was always going to do what he thought was best for her without consulting her first. Hadn't she told him she didn't want the clothes? They'd agreed that he wouldn't go digging into her past. He'd given her his word.

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How could she have been so stupid to let every little dig at her preferences slide? She couldn't have been clearer in the beginning.

When she made it to her room, she shut the door quietly and leaned against it. This was it. She had to leave. Staying would only end up hurting them both more than was necessary. Heck, if she stayed, there wasn't any guarantee that he would leave her ex out of it. For all she knew, he'd already tracked the monster down and planned on paying back the guy for what he'd done to Athena.

While she did derive a small amount of pleasure thinking about how that confrontation would go down, she knew it wasn't realistic.

Worse still, the longer she stayed, the more Henry would try to change her. He had very strong opinions. It was his way or the highway. When would he understand that his opinions were just that? They were opinions. She wasn't going to let him push her around any longer. She'd been a puppet before, and she wasn't going to be one ever again.

Her eyes swept through the room, landing on everything she'd accumulated over the last several weeks. There were clothes, shoes, a hat, work gloves, a nice pair of boots... and that silly suitcase that Henry had insisted on getting her.

On top of the gifts he'd bought her, he'd made sure she'd been paid for the work she'd put in on the ranch, and now she had several hundred dollars to her name.

For a split second, she hesitated. This was more than she'd had in a long time. She wasn't used to owning so much. What if she couldn't fit it all in that suitcase? Could

she just leave it behind?

Athena shook her head to clear it. Of course she'd leave it. Only the essentials. She wasn't about to be weighed down by things that didn't mean anything to her. If she started packing now, she'd be able to sneak away as soon as it got dark.

She pushed away from the door and grabbed the suitcase from where she'd left it near the far wall. Flinging it open, Athena gripped the sides and took a steadying breath. Her heart was pounding. It wasn't from her running up the stairs. Nor was it from the argument she'd had with Henry.

This was different—and yet all too familiar.

Fear.

Anxiety.

Worry about the unknown.

Her future was now a blank slate. Once upon a time this situation would be thrilling. She used to look forward to starting fresh somewhere else. She could create a new identity. There would be new people to watch and try to figure out. While observing those around her, Athena could write stories in her head about the people who passed her on the street.

Athena lifted a hand to her racing heart. All those feelings were gone. They'd been chased away by something stronger and nerve-wracking.

What if this was the wrong decision? What if she left and realized that the hole in her chest was exactly what Henry said it was? Scowling, Athena shrugged off that thought. Henry didn't know everything. He was only trying to be a hero again. If

there was one thing she didn't need, it was a hero.

She pulled away from the suitcase and grabbed a few of the clothing items that would work well for her no matter where she ended up. The cowboy boots were an obvious choice to leave behind, as she doubted she would find work at another ranch.

Athena froze in the middle of putting a pair of jeans into the suitcase.

A job? She wasn't going to get a job. What good would a job do her? She'd made it this far with little to no money, and she'd be able to do it again. People in her situation didn't need to depend on anyone but themselves.

And yet, as she continued to put her clothes into the suitcase, she could already feel her heart shifting to that thought process again. Okay, well maybe she'd look around, and if there was anyone needing help, she'd apply. But only if they needed help. Athena wasn't going to be a charity case. She'd simply offer her services to those who wanted it.

With a short nod to no one but herself, Athena finished packing her suitcase and then shut it. She was ready. As soon as the house got quiet, she'd slip out the front door and leave this place. It didn't matter how far she needed to go; she'd get there.

As long as she didn't have to see Henry again.

A heavy, sharp pain shot through her chest, causing her to stumble a step as she wandered to the window. Athena clutched her shirt just above her heart and closed her eyes. There was only one time before today when she'd felt this ache. It had been when she'd lost a close friend in high school. The ache left her feeling even more empty than before.

This time, it didn't make sense. She wasn't losing a dear friend.

Henry is your friend—more than that, he's your boyfriend. Athena shoved the merciless thought away.

You can't just leave without telling him goodbye. Great. Now she was getting lectured by her heart. Of course she could leave. She'd told him when they were arguing that she was done, hadn't she? He knew it was a strong possibility that she wouldn't stick around. Henry wasn't so blind that he wouldn't be able to see this coming. He had to know better.

After all their arguing, there was no way he didn't understand that she was leaving. As for slipping out under the cover of darkness—well, she would rather not have to say awkward goodbyes. It wasn't just Henry she wanted to avoid; it was everyone else. She could just see the way Harley or Brielle would look at her after all the effort they put into befriending her.

The only one who probably wouldn't care was Hudson. He'd be thrilled.

Athena rubbed that spot on her chest again. She was doing the right thing. She didn't belong here. These people were like a majestic herd of wild horses, and she was a mule that was trying too hard. Leaving simply made sense.

Then why are you trying so hard to convince yourself?

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“Will you shut up?” Athena blurted aloud. She clapped her hand over her mouth and listened for anyone who might have been walking past her room at that very moment. Thankfully, the hallway was quiet.

Sighing, Athena moved to the bed and fell backward onto it, collapsing into the soft comforter. She stared at the now familiar ceiling. Tonight would be the last night she could stare at it and make invisible drawings from the textured surface.

She’d miss this part, too. If she were truly honest with herself, she’d admit that staying in a house with running water and the security of four walls would be something she’d remember fondly.

Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if she did find some work and was able to put some of her money down on a deposit for rent.

Her eyes closed and she folded her arms over her chest, allowing herself to drift to sleep. Just because she was leaving didn’t mean she had to return to the exact lifestyle she’d had before. She simply needed to get out of there, specifically because she knew she didn’t belong. It was more than being an outsider.

Athena didn’t fit. She was a square peg trying to be shoved into a different shaped hole. She’d never belong, and she had made her peace with it.

* * *

A door shut down the hall and Athena shot up from where she’d fallen asleep on her bed, still fully clothed. The clock on the dresser said it was nearing breakfast time. No

one had come to get her last night or this morning so far, but surely they would be up and wandering the halls. If she wanted to sneak out before Henry cornered her, she needed to do it now.

Athena grabbed her suitcase handle and then quietly pushed the door open. She poked her head out the door and glanced down the hallway both ways. No signs of anyone who would want to stop her or ask her questions.

She ducked back into her room and grabbed her hat, then stepped out into the hall and nearly collided with Hudson.

His shrewd gaze dipped to her suitcase and then lifted to meet hers. Before she could try to explain what was happening, he shook his head and muttered something under his breath before heading down the stairs.

No comment. No demands. He wasn't going to stand in her way and sound the alarm so Henry could tell her to stay? She must have far overestimated his love for his brother. There was no other reasonable explanation for it.

A small fire burst to life in her stomach. This only proved that she was right. Not even family was required to care about each other. Hudson hadn't been supportive of her or the relationship she had with his brother. He'd never hidden that he despised her, and they both knew it.

She was tempted to chase him down and tell him he needed to be better. Henry deserved a brother who was able to help bolster him and what he wanted out of life, not tear him down for falling in love with someone like her.

But she couldn't.

Athena didn't have the strength to go after Hudson and lecture him. Out of nowhere,

her heart had started to crumble. There was a small part of her that wanted someone to be there, telling her that she shouldn't go. Not even Henry had told her to stay last night, which was further proof she was doing right by him by letting him go. She couldn't bear to live in his shadow, and she was too stubborn not to speak her mind about it.

He'd be better off finding someone who he saw as an equal and who could accept his criticism with grace.

That wasn't her, at least not yet.

Maybe one day that could change.

25

Henry

Henry stepped from the barn for the third time that morning and stared at the house. Athena hadn't come out yet. Apparently, she'd been madder than he thought. She'd come out eventually. She couldn't stay holed up in that room forever.

That was what he kept telling himself, except there was one issue.

This was Athena. She'd been growing increasingly more antsy lately—more prone to getting defensive.

Something had shifted in the air. Henry didn't want to admit it, but he could sense something different. Maybe he was in denial. He needed to get his mind onto different things until he knew for sure. And he wasn't up for checking on her himself.

Hudson was headed this way from the supply shed, a toolbox in one hand and a box

under his arm. He glanced toward the house and then back to Henry. “She’s gone.”

Henry stiffened, his focus shifting once more to the house. “How would you know?”

His brother adjusted the strap from his tool bag. “Because I saw her sneak out this morning.”

Henry charged toward Hudson, fury building inside. “You saw her leave and you’re only telling me now?”

“You didn’t ask.”

A groan burst from his lips. “I didn’t ask now.”

“No, but you were watching the house like a puppy that got kicked out for chewing on his owner’s shoe. We all know what you’re doing. You can’t tell me that you didn’t at least suspect this was coming.” Hudson stopped and stared at Henry expectantly. “Come on, you didn’t think she was gonna stay forever, did you? I thought you were smarter than that.”

Henry’s jaw tightened like a vise. He couldn’t afford to get Hudson worked up again. Not when they’d fought so much about Athena staying. Now that she was gone, it would look like he was just trying to get into a fight with him.

His hands clenched into fists, something Hudson didn’t miss. His eyes dipped to Henry’s sides and lifted again. Henry expected his brother to smirk, to rub it in, to do anything that would make it perfectly clear that he could say “I told you so.” But he did none of that.

Hudson’s shoulders dropped and he sighed. “I know it’s not what you wanted. I almost thought that she’d stay too. But sometimes, we have to accept that people leave. It’s what they do.”

“This isn’t the same thing that happened with Mom and Dad,” Henry ground out. “This is completely different.”

“I know. But that doesn’t mean it hurts any less. You tried. That’s all you could do.”

Henry’s heart trembled. No, it was his whole body. It was as if his very soul was

being shaken by an earthquake, except everything around him was remaining the same. He shut his eyes to push the sensation out. “Why didn’t you stop her?”

Hudson snorted. “That’s not my job.”

“Then why couldn’t you bother to come get me?” Henry opened his eyes, his words coming through gritted teeth. “You could have at least let me know so I could talk to her.”

His brother almost looked sad. “I know you don’t want to hear this, but I think you need to. You can’t force people to do what you want them to. It wouldn’t matter how many conversations you might have with her—if she wanted to leave, that’s what she was going to do.”

Henry shook his head. “You’re wrong. If I had told her that I loved her, she would have stayed.”

Hudson’s brows shot up. Shock flickered behind his eyes, followed by something more accusatory.

That’s right, Henry hadn’t been open about his relationship with Athena. They’d kept the whole thing quiet. No one had known for certain if they were together, even if they’d suspected it. Shoot!

Henry lifted his chin and scowled at his brother. “I don’t care what you think. Judge me all you want. I love her, and I could see myself possibly being with her forever.”

Hudson frowned. He was definitely judging Henry; it was clear in his eyes. He wouldn’t have had to say a single thing and Henry would know exactly how he felt.

“We were working things out. Was it difficult sometimes? What relationship isn’t?”

Still, his brother stared at him like he'd committed a crime. "And yet she slipped out before most of us were awake. What does that tell you about the strangers you let into our home?"

Henry took a step toward him. "She wasn't a stranger. She was good at what she did. I'm still not convinced that Beast will be completely calm for the next person who tries to ride him. Athena belonged here just as much as any of us."

His brother snorted. "Until she's married to one of us, she doesn't belong anywhere on this property. She was a thief and a trespasser. She didn't care about you or anyone else. If she did, she would have gotten to know us better."

"That's hilarious coming from you," Henry said. "You don't let anyone in. You would rather shut out the world than let anyone see you for who you really are."

Hudson's scowl deepened. "More people means more problems. It all started with that country club. It's beyond me why everyone worships the ground that Shane guy walks on, but he's the one responsible for all the extra traffic. People come here for therapy and then end up moving here. Have you noticed how busy it's getting? There's talk of putting in a new subdivision over in that area."

"Good!" Henry snapped. "This place could use more people who can appreciate what it's like living in a small town like Copper Creek. Maybe if there were more of them, you'd finally be able to brush that chip off your shoulder and accept that Colorado doesn't just belong to you."

They were now within inches of each other, having gotten closer and closer with each argument they spewed. Henry had a feeling that the only reason fists hadn't gone flying was because Hudson still held the box and the tool bag.

Hudson might have been younger than Henry, but he was the same height and that

leveled the playing field far more than Henry would have preferred. But at this point, he had far too much pent-up energy with nowhere to put it. A little scuffle might be just what he needed to get these feelings under control.

“Henry! Hudson! Get back to work.”

They both jumped and glanced in the direction of the barn. Brielle stood with her arms folded, her eyes sharp. She might not have grown up here, but she was the one they couldn’t help but respect. She’d weaseled her way into the hearts of every Keagan and then won them over. No one dared cross her, especially since she married Wade.

Her eyes flashed with warning. “I’m not going to waste half my day breaking up a fight and stitching you two up. If you want to have it out, wait until Sunday.”

Henry shot Hudson one last angry look, then shoved past him and headed for the house. He didn’t care if he had chores left unfinished. He couldn’t keep his head on right, and none of it would get done well anyway.

* * *

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A few days had passed, and it felt like it had been an eternity without seeing Athena. Henry couldn't spend more than five seconds near Hudson without wanting to rip his head off. His brother had made it perfectly clear where he stood. To make matters worse, everyone else had discussed her absence ad nauseam, and they all agreed that Henry had overstepped. Well, except for Harley. She thought he should have chased after her—a lot of good that would have done him.

For the first time in his life, Henry felt cornered. None of his excuses could sway his family to his side. It didn't matter that he'd gone in search of Athena's family for her own good. Since she'd requested that he stay out of it, then he should have done just that.

Henry didn't miss the smug look on Hudson's face when this topic had finally burned through to its end. His brother got everything he wanted. Athena was gone and he finally had his own room.

And on the other end, Henry lost everything he cared about.

Athena.

His choices had sent her away, no matter how right he felt he was. Hudson was right about one thing that Henry could agree on—Athena had the agency to choose what she wanted to do and there was nothing Henry could say to stop her.

Coming to that realization didn't prevent Henry from obsessing over every agonizing detail of his relationship with her. He couldn't help but wonder if giving her less direction would have made her feel less judged? If he'd opened up the conversation

about finding her family, would she have listened to reason?

There were too many what-ifs in this scenario, and they only contributed to the detrimental state of his heart.

He spent most of his days avoiding his family, if only to prevent a conversation from starting up again. That's what happened when there wasn't anything interesting going on, and Harley was the worst instigator. There wasn't a single conversation she had with him that didn't end in her telling him to track her down.

Such was the conversation he found himself in currently as she prevented him from entering the house. "I'm sure you could find her. You'd just have to ask around. How far could she go?"

"I'm not going to chase after someone who doesn't want to be caught," Henry muttered, pressing fingers to his temples.

"How do you know she doesn't want to be caught? Sometimes, that's exactly what this means."

Henry glowered at her. "That's not Athena. And if it were, I wouldn't be interested in her, because I don't play games."

Harley folded her arms. "All I'm saying is that if you never told her that you loved her, you don't know how she would react. Sometimes, that's all it takes for someone to realize that you're meant to be together."

"Will you just drop it? I get that your life is just like a fairy tale. Lucky you. But you know whose life isn't? Mine. This isn't some story where I can wave a magic wand and she will pull up in a bright red sports car to tell me she was a princess in disguise, and this was all a dream."

Harley made a funny face and then smirked. "I think you've got your stories all twisted up and knotted like a ball of yarn."

"I. Don't. Care. Will you just..." His voice trailed off as Harley's gaze locked on something behind him. He didn't dare hope because doing such would only cause his heart to break further if it wasn't her.

The sound of a soft engine filled the air, causing his curiosity to win over his resolve. He turned to find a bright red sedan driving up the road toward the house.

Harley laughed. "Maybe this is a fairy tale after all."

"It's not her," he said.

"Maybe it is."

He spun around to face Harley. "Don't you have someone else you could pester? I'm sure your uncle could use an extra handout at your place."

She shook her head with glee. "This is definitely more interesting."

Henry huffed and headed down the porch stairs toward the car. He reached the driver's side just as the door opened and a woman stepped out. She was familiar, but he wasn't sure why. Something about her eyes and her nose threw him off guard. "Can I help you?"

She smiled warmly, shutting the door behind her. "I sure hope so. I've gone to at least three different properties so far today. I'm looking for someone named Henry Keagan?"

He stiffened. "That's me."

Relief flickered across her features. “Oh good.” She held out her hand toward him. “I’m Rachel. You emailed me a few weeks ago about finding my sister.”

26

Athena

Living on the street wasn’t going to cut it anymore. That much was certain. As Athena’s gaze swept from one side of the street to the next, she no longer viewed the dark corners and dumpsters as hiding places. She could no longer see herself sleeping under the stars.

The Keagans' ranch had ruined her.

Athena adjusted the backpack strap on her shoulder and slowed as she stopped in front of a small country store. Sundance was the next town over and was about as big as Copper Creek. She would have come to this town next if Henry hadn't convinced her to stay.

If she hadn't gotten so used to Copper Creek, she would have thought she was in the same town—except for one thing. In the middle of this town was a large statue of a bronze horse. She turned toward the country store window and peered past the help wanted sign to the displays and advertisements.

Mostly, there were signs and pictures. Who would want their food to be in the sunlight for most of the day? Regardless, the pictures alone were enough to make her mouth water. It had taken her two days to make it to this town. The first night, she'd slept beneath a tree in a field, which was the reason for the crick in her neck.

She heaved a sigh, knowing full well that she wouldn't be able to get anything of substance until she had the money to pay for it. Her days of scrounging in garbage bins were behind her. She never thought she'd miss the warm bed or the people she had come to think of as her family.

Athena shut her eyes tight and turned away from the window. She wasn't going to think about that anymore. She'd left for a reason. If anyone didn't belong on that ranch, it was her. She couldn't stick around when she could tell she wasn't good enough.

Maybe one day that could change.

Until it did, she would move forward in whatever way made the most sense. That meant she was going to look for a job. Athena opened her eyes and found the help-wanted sign again. She'd never worked in a place like this. The handful of jobs she'd had when she was younger were mostly retail. It couldn't be that different, could it? Granted, it wasn't as good as the job she had working with Beast, but this would be a start.

She shifted her backpack once more and then headed inside. While it was quieter than she expected, it was about as busy as she thought it would be for a small town like this one. Athena hovered by the entrance and hesitated. She didn't know what to say or who to ask for. She hadn't exactly applied for the job she had at the Keagan property, and she had no references to speak of.

Athena nearly backed out of the store, but an older, plump woman came around an aisle and stopped. Her eyes swept over Athena, and she smiled. "I don't believe I've met you before. Are you new? Or just passing through?"

Her throat closed up. Too many years she'd spent unwilling to speak to anyone she didn't know. It had taken a lot to open up to Henry's family. But she was a new person—smarter and stronger. Athena clasped her hands together, then nervously pointed to the sign in the window. Fidgeting wasn't a good look, but it was better than remaining silent. "I saw that you needed some help."

The woman glanced toward the sign and then frowned. "I'm so sorry, hun. We just filled that position."

Athena didn't think she'd ever feel disappointed about losing the opportunity to work. The thought of sleeping out on the street made her feel sick inside. She blinked, hating the way her face filled with fire. "Oh, okay. I'm sorry—"

“But Christopher Billings is looking for some help around his farm. It’s a small one, but his ranch hand just moved to the city.” Her smile returned. “Do you have any experience with animals?”

She nodded quickly. “Yes. I do. I just left a job working with animals.” The heat in her face remained. The woman probably wanted to know why she wasn’t still working for them. “I left because it was time to move on. It wasn’t anything bad.”

The woman chuckled, and that’s when Athena realized she was oversharing. Shoot! Why couldn’t she find a happy medium? Either she couldn’t talk, or she was overdoing it. The woman held out a piece of paper on which she’d scribbled the address. “He’s getting on in age, but he’s still able to do enough to keep it running. You’d probably only be needed to help with day-to-day chores.”

Athena nodded again. “I can do that.” She held up the paper with a smile. “Thank you.”

“Of course, dear. Good luck!”

Someone halfway through the store called out, “Penny! The produce guy is out back and needs you to sign for the delivery!”

Penny thumbed behind her. “That’s my cue. Maybe we’ll see you again.”

“I hope so,” Athena said. She watched Penny walk away, then glanced down at the paper in her hand. She grinned. This was a lead. And if she knew anything about farms around here, the people were more willing to offer a place to stay. Whoever this Christopher Billings was, he was her shot at finding her new normal.

* * *

Two weeks later, Athena trudged into the barn leading a large, brown chestnut mare. She still couldn't believe she had been hired. She got to spend time with the animals. Her boss was the nicest old man she'd ever met. And she'd even been given access to a one-room cabin out by the barn. Everything had worked out.

Well, almost everything.

There was a hole in her heart that she couldn't fix. With each passing day, it seemed to grow a little bigger. Each beat of her heart felt more hollow than the last, and she knew exactly why that was.

The horse nudged her from behind when she slowed her steps, urging her forward. Athena stumbled and shot a warning look at her. "You'll get your treat when you're all brushed down and not a second sooner."

"Hazelnut's giving you a hard time again, huh?"

Athena glanced up at the low voice to find Christopher sauntering toward them. He held his cowboy hat at his side, revealing his full head of white hair. She smiled and said, "I have a feeling you've spoiled her."

"That may be," he said with a chuckle. "But what do you expect?" He stepped aside when Athena moved forward. "You do really well with her."

"Thank you." She beamed at the compliment. "She's a good horse." Athena pushed open the wooden stall door and guided Hazelnut inside, then worked at taking the saddle off so she could give the horse a good brushing. She sensed more than saw Christopher hovering near the doorway as she worked, and she glanced up at him with curiosity. "Do you have anything else you want me to do today?"

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He studied her—more than usual. His gaze was something else—deeper somehow. She couldn't remain still under his watch and ended up shifting her weight several times before he finally spoke. "You said you worked for a ranch out at Copper Creek?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"I haven't been out there myself, but Penny has. She was curious who it was you worked for."

Athena swallowed hard. She'd been prepared for this question when she'd arrived at Christopher's address. She'd figured he'd want her references. But now that she had the job and he was starting to look into it more, she wasn't sure she wanted him to know. "Their last name is Keagan. I don't believe they have a name for their property. But they probably will eventually. They're growing."

Christopher rubbed his jaw. "Keagan does sound familiar."

"I wouldn't be surprised if you heard about them. They're a fairly large family. Close, too." She smiled. "It's like nothing I've ever seen before. They stick together no matter what. You would really like them."

"Sounds like you liked them, too." Christopher tilted his head, still watching her as if he expected to catch her in a lie or something similar. "Remind me why you chose to leave."

Her heart stuttered. This conversation was not going the way she thought it would.

When Christopher had hired her, he'd only asked a few non-intrusive questions. What was with this third degree? "I'm sorry," she said quietly, stopping her work. "Is there a problem? Do you want me to leave?"

Christopher chuckled. "Heavens, no." He returned his hat to his head and leaned one side of his body against the wooden stall door. "You don't have to answer me if you don't want to, but I can't help but get the feeling you're not supposed to be here." His expression grew more pensive by the second. "It's not that I don't want you here. You're a wonderful employee. The question is, do you want to be here?"

She stiffened as her defenses skyrocketed. "Haven't I done everything you asked? Didn't I prove I was more than capable of—"

He held up a hand. "I'm going to stop you right there. This isn't about your capabilities. You clearly have a gift with animals. I have never seen Hazelnut take to someone as quickly as she took to you. Clearly, you've discovered your calling."

"Then why—"

Before she could get her full question past the edge of her lips, he cut her off again. "I've been around the block once or twice, so believe me when I tell you that I know when a person is running from something. It might take me a little longer to figure out if what they're running from is actually dangerous to them or if it's something they need to face."

She dropped her eyes, now understanding what he was trying to say. He knew her heart was somewhere else. Somehow, he'd figured out that she couldn't stop thinking about the Keagans, but more specifically, she couldn't stop thinking about Henry.

When she arrived, she only briefly mentioned them. She told herself that Christopher didn't need to know how much they'd managed to get past her defenses. To him, they

would forever remain a reference if he chose to contact them. Thankfully, it didn't appear that he'd done that because she had a feeling if Henry knew, he would have been out here by now.

"Athena, if deep down there is somewhere else that you feel you belong, then there is no sense in running from it. Eventually, everything catches up to you." Something in the tone of his voice caught her off guard. The way he said it was almost as if he'd been through the wringer and back.

Christopher hadn't been overly forthcoming about his own past when he'd hired her. He kept to himself much like she did. Most days, they didn't say more than a few words to one another. It had been nice not to feel pressured into forming anything more than a working acquaintanceship. Unfortunately, now her curiosity had been piqued. But no way would she ask him to share—mostly because she didn't want to do any of that herself.

The man in front of her tilted his head. "I want you to know that there will always be a place for you here. It might have only been two weeks, but it's safe to say that I feel a connection to you." The smile returned to his face. "It might be strange, but that's how it is." He straightened, lifting his chin as he appraised her. "This will be the last and only time I bring it up. If you feel you have some unfinished business elsewhere, I will not fault you for going back there to figure it out. Stay. Go. The choice is yours. Just promise me you'll listen to that little voice telling you where you think you belong." He gave her a short nod and then turned and strode toward the barn entrance.

Athena stared at him, feeling as though another spirit had entered her body to poke around before taking off without explanation. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling. It was more like a light had been turned on in a dark room.

Was he right? Could she return to the Keagans' ranch and pick up where she left off?

Probably not that. She had left the premises without telling Henry goodbye. With how close they'd been getting before she'd left, he deserved more than to have her stop by and expect him to forget what she'd done.

Athena needed to apologize. She needed to get closure if that was where this was heading. How could she start a new life if this guilt and pain continued to hang over her head like a rain cloud?

The answer was simple. She couldn't.

She let out a shaky sigh. Well, that was just great. Now she had to tell Christopher that she wasn't going to stick around. Hopefully, he was as understanding as he had made it sound. And at least she knew she had a place to go if Henry chose to push her out of his life permanently.

27

Henry

Henry stood at the back window and stared at the lone figure in his backyard. From behind, Rachel looked a lot like Athena. They had similar builds and hair color. Even their bone structures were so close he wouldn't have been able to tell the difference—except he'd traced Athena's face in his dreams every night since she'd left. The nuances of her features were forever etched in his memories.

Hudson sidled up beside Henry and motioned through the window. "It's been two weeks. When is she going to give up?"

Henry scowled at his brother. "This is the closest she's come to finding the only member of her family. She gets to stay as long as she wants. Maybe if you bothered to talk to her, you'd see she's not so bad."

Hudson huffed, shaking his head. “Haven’t spoken to her yet, and don’t ever plan on speaking to her. She’ll give up when she realizes it’s a lost cause and she’ll leave. Then we’ll all be better for it.”

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Fists tightening, Henry fought the urge to throw down with his brother. The bitterness he harbored had only gotten worse lately, and Henry couldn't figure out why. He shot a dark look at his brother out of the corner of his eye, then turned his attention back to the window. "I don't care if you don't want to talk to her. You're going to be respectful even if she can't hear you. Rachel is a decent person."

Hudson snorted, turning his back to the window and folding his arms for good measure. "Just because you've been getting to know her over the last couple of weeks doesn't mean you know her. Athena was here for a couple months, and you didn't see her departure coming."

That was it, the straw that broke the camel's back. Henry turned and shoved his brother with both hands, forcing him to stumble and lose his balance. Hudson's hat left his head and dropped to the floor, and he landed a few feet from it with a thud. He turned wide, angry eyes up at Henry.

"What did you do that for?"

Henry hovered over him, his hands balled up and ready for a fight. "I don't know what your problem is. I could understand that you weren't thrilled about a stranger coming into our house. I could even understand when you felt we were overcrowded. But—" He jerked his finger toward the window. "Rachel is Athena's family. And as far as I'm concerned, that makes her our family too. If you don't like it, I suggest you find somewhere else to live."

Fire shot from Hudson's eyes, sparks igniting and burning out between them. He got to his feet and swiped his hat from the floor before placing it on his head. "You're an

idiot if you think she's coming back. She didn't belong here, and she knew it. Neither one of them does. They're outsiders. They didn't grow up here. Look at what Shane has done with this town. Do you think any one of those city folks cares about Copper Creek? I guarantee if they didn't have some of the amenities here, they'd be long gone. Living out here isn't supposed to be a trend. It's a lifestyle choice that even our parents didn't want to pick." He didn't bother waiting for a response before he stormed off.

So that was what bothered Hudson. It came back to their parents abandoning them. Henry almost felt bad for the fight he'd allowed himself to join. He couldn't believe he'd allowed himself to get so caught up in his concern for Athena that he'd gotten physical with his brother.

He groaned, dragging a hand down his face. Two weeks was a long time for Athena to be gone, with no apparent sign of coming back. He'd expected her to show up again. He'd even gone out looking for her around town so he could tell her about her sister, but no one had seen or heard from her.

Athena had left Copper Creek, and there was no changing that. She didn't have a phone, and she'd left no way to contact her. For all intents and purposes, she was a ghost.

Maybe Hudson was right.

Maybe Rachel needed to cut her losses and accept that Athena wasn't someone who wanted to be found. He glanced toward the woman who he had gotten to know a little over the last couple of weeks. She was kind and yet cautious. It was like she'd been taught how to act in public, but she remained guarded. He didn't know what sort of secrets she was trying to keep, but it didn't matter. As far as he was concerned, her past could remain private.

There was probably a lot he hadn't discovered about Athena, and he had a feeling that knowing those secrets wouldn't have helped him keep her here.

Rachel glanced over her shoulder toward the house, and Henry froze. The way the light was shining at the house, he wasn't sure if she would be able to see him spying on her. At this rate, he should just assume she knew he was there, especially with the noise he and Hudson had made.

She smiled and then turned around once more. He didn't know what it was about watching her, but he got the distinct impression that she wanted him to join her. His heart thundered as he moved toward the door. His feet had a mind of their own. Did he want to discuss the woman he cared about with this stranger? Absolutely not. But keeping what he knew to himself wasn't the right thing to do either.

When he reached her side, she glanced at him before motioning for each of them to take a seat in the grass. "I've always liked the feel of cool grass," she said softly, her hands floating above the blades. "There's just something about being out here with nature that's good for the soul, don't you think?"

Henry nodded.

She cocked her head and her eyes locked with his. "Did Diana—" She shook her head. "Athena. Boy, that sounds strange to me." She let out a soft, sad laugh. "Did Athena like it out here? In nature? I never thought this would be where she would end up."

His throat closed up. Technically, it wasn't where she ended up. She'd been on her way through town. He'd told Rachel as much. Athena didn't like staying in one place. He hadn't told her a lot of details despite the woman staying in the room where Athena had been. Everyone else didn't seem to mind sharing what they liked about her sister. But for Henry, it had been too hard. When Rachel made it clear she was

willing to wait for an answer for however long it took, he swallowed down the lump in his throat and nodded. “Actually, she spent a lot of her time out here. She liked to watch the sunset.”

Rachel smiled. “We have that in common, then.” She didn’t turn to face him as she stared out at the sun slowly dipping behind the mountains. “Brielle said that Athena was really good with horses. Can you tell me about that?”

Boy, Rachel was getting chatty all of a sudden. So many questions. He turned to look at her, unsure of what she wanted to hear or what she expected him to say. “There’s this horse we have. He’s a wild one—or rather, he was when he got here. But he took to Athena like a fish to water. I don’t think I’ve seen an animal react to a person quite like he did to Athena. They had a connection that I don’t think will ever be broken.”

The smile faded from Rachel’s face. Her clear eyes shifted as if a wall had come down, showing the pain and disappointment she must have been harboring since she found out that Athena had slipped away. “Do you think she’ll come back?”

There it was. The question he’d been anticipating since she’d arrived. He couldn’t fault her for asking it despite him insisting that Athena would return. The truth of the matter was that he had no idea. For how much he’d gotten to know Athena, he didn’t know her well enough to say for certain that she would return. All he could do was hope.

Rachel turned to him. “I get the feeling that she’s not coming.”

His stomach weighed down with his own disappointment. “I think you might be right.”

She nodded, her eyes brimming with emotion, but then she blinked hard and forced a sad smile. “Well, it was worth a shot. I figured I’d give her a few days, and I made it

two weeks. I can't sit around here forever waiting for her." She rose to her feet and stretched.

He got up as well, heart pounding. If Athena did come back and found out that her sister hadn't waited for her, that could destroy her. "You're leaving?"

She gestured around them. "There's nothing here for me. I came to find my family. She wasn't here. I can't sit around waiting for her to come into my life again. It's up to me to find her." She took a step toward the house, but he stepped in her way.

"What if she comes back?"

"Then you have my number. You have my email, too. I trust that you'll do the right thing." She moved to get past him once more, but he wouldn't let her, causing her expression to darken. "It's been nice to get to know a little bit about my sister via your family. But there comes a time when a person has to stop waiting around for what they want and just go for it. Will you kindly move so I can gather my things?"

He didn't know what it was that prevented him from giving her what she wanted. He was a gentleman. He couldn't force her to stay if she wanted to leave. And yet, that was exactly what he was doing. "Don't go," he muttered.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Don’t leave. Not yet. Give it a few more days. I’m sure she’ll show up again. You just have to have a little faith.”

“Henry,” she said softly, almost patronizingly, “I’ve been putting too much faith into finding her already. It’s time I actually do something.”

“What do you mean?”

Rachel shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe I need to hire a private investigator. At least I have a starting point. But the longer I wait, the harder it’s going to become to find her again. I can’t waste any more time here, hoping she’ll show up. Deep down, I think you know that.” Her brows creased and she reached out to touch his forearm. “I get the feeling that there was something between the two of you. I mean, why else would you come looking for me?” Her empathetic smile tore him to shreds. They both cared about Athena. They both wanted her back safe.

He nodded, unable to speak.

“If I find her, I’ll let you know.” She patted his arm once more, then turned toward the setting sun. “It was nice to see one more sunset where my sister once sat. Maybe I’ll come back to visit again. This place really grows on you.” She gave him one more smile and then brushed past him to head for the house.

That was that. No more Athena. No more Rachel.

Yes, there was a chance Rachel would find her sister. But if Athena didn't want Henry to find her, then what else could he do but let her be?

28

Athena

“Well? Are you going to go up there? That's the house, ain't it?”

Athena remained glued to her seat despite Christopher urging her to get out. All her belongings were in the truck just in case she was welcomed back. Never before had she thought she'd feel like she could be compared to the prodigal son. And yet here she was, fighting her reckless ways to come back to the only place that had felt like home since before she could remember.

“You won't figure out if you're welcome if you don't knock on that door.”

“I know,” she said quietly.

“Then you might as well get out of the truck. I can't sit here all day. I have a hair appointment.”

Athena let out a sharp laugh and looked at the man who had managed to weasel into her heart in such a short amount of time. “I cut your hair last week.”

“That's why I need it done again. You did a shoddy job.”

She gasped. “I told you I didn't know how to cut hair.”

He chuckled before turning his gaze to the house. “It's not quite what I expected. You said twelve of them live here?”

“Some of them have moved out. It’s hard to keep track,” she said softly, following his gaze. “It’s bigger than it looks.”

Christopher pressed his lips together, the creases in his face deepening as he seemed to consider her words. “Well, if this is home for you, the only way you’re going to get it back is by taking those first steps.”

“I’m gonna do it, sheesh!” Her eyes darted to meet his. “But if they don’t want me—”

“I’ll be just down the street. You don’t have to worry about that. I’ll wait for thirty minutes, and if you don’t come, then I’ll know to go.”

Thirty minutes didn’t seem nearly long enough for her to make amends and ask for her room back. These people might feel like family to her, but she was nothing more than a stranger to them—except for Henry. She’d shared so much of her life with him that she couldn’t think of a single thing she hadn’t told him. The only things he didn’t know, she also had no clue about.

There was only one bit of her past that he had access to that she’d refused. Her family.

Her real family.

Athena took in a shuddering breath, but it didn’t do any good. She couldn’t get a handle on her nerves. While she thought she knew Henry well enough, she couldn’t say for certain if he would take her back. The others would take cues from him—maybe not Hudson. He didn’t seem to care if she left or if she stayed. He just didn’t want her to string his brother along.

She could barely breathe as she reached for the door handle. Pausing before she pushed the door open, she glanced over to Christopher. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“For everything.”

His warm smile was the only thing that made this moment feel less intimidating.

“You’re going to do great.” Then he jerked his chin toward the back seat. “I gave you a little extra with your wages this week. I hope it helps you get off on the right foot.”

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She blinked back tears. “You didn’t have to—”

“It’s not much, but I hope if you ever find yourself needing some help, you’ll know where it came from and that you’re always welcome to come back.”

Her emotions continued to overflow. Twice in the last several months she’d come across people who would willingly give her the shirt off their own backs. All her life she’d been so jaded and so angry with the people around her. Was it possible that by shutting out those she didn’t trust, she’d been shutting out the possibility of finding people she could trust?

Athena reached over and wrapped her arms around Christopher. “Thank you so much.” She pulled back and hurried from the vehicle before she lost the strength to do what she’d come here for.

She retrieved her bag in the back and watched Christopher drive away. Her pulse roared, her palms were clammy, and she couldn’t feel her feet. Slowly, she turned to face the house, only then noticing that a car she didn’t recognize was parked right up by the garage.

Her eyes lingered on it as she moved toward the house. But then the sound of the door opening tore her focus from the car, and she stopped dead in her tracks.

The woman at the top of the stairs standing beside Henry looked a lot like her. The similarities to herself were uncanny. No, they weren’t identical, but she could see herself in this woman.

The stranger glanced toward Henry. His mouth moved but Athena couldn't make out what he was saying. The woman turned toward Athena and put down the bag she had in her hand. She took a step forward, then paused.

Neither one of them seemed capable of making the first move. Not even Henry had stepped forward to introduce them, though Athena knew instinctively that this woman was family.

Heart pounding, Athena moved forward. She'd been alone for so long. She hadn't allowed herself to believe that there was someone else out there related to her. That wasn't true. She'd thought maybe one or both of her parents were still around somewhere, but this woman was too young to be her mother.

There was only one option. This woman was her sister.

Her sister's expression broke into a relieved sob. She darted down the stairs and threw her arms around Athena. "I can't believe I found you."

Athena found Henry's eyes. He stared at her, his gaze unreadable. She couldn't tell if he was happy to see her or upset that she'd come back. It could go either way. At least one person was happy to see her. And her grip was like a vise.

Slowly, Athena wrapped her arms around the woman clinging to her. "Me too." She wasn't sure what made her say those words. She didn't know this woman at all, and yet there was something inside that told her they had a connection that couldn't be broken.

Her sister pulled back, placing both hands on either side of Athena's face. "You don't know how long I've been looking for you."

Athena stared at her, wondering just how this woman even knew she existed. Her

eyes drifted toward Henry, surprised to find him missing. He must have slipped back inside to leave her and her sister to get to know one another better.

“Henry told me you go by Athena now.” She smiled. “I think it suits you. I’m Rachel.”

Athena’s head continued to spin with each statement Rachel made. Even as they wandered off toward the trails that would lead them through various pastures, Athena couldn’t bring herself to ask a single question—not that she would have been able to get a word in edgewise with how much Rachel talked.

“We were in a car accident. Our parents and us. You were three, and I was only one.”

Athena’s eyes widened. “You were one?”

Rachel nodded. “I was strapped in tight. They thought you were dead—the people who found the car. There was no sign of you. They sent out a search party but never found you. I only learned about you from our great-aunt.”

This was all too much.

Rachel stopped and faced Athena. “After the accident that killed our parents, I was put into foster care and then adopted. Since they thought you hadn’t survived, no one looked for you...”

“Except you,” Athena said in amazement.

Her sister nodded. “I just knew you were out there somewhere. I—it’s like I could sense you. I can’t explain it. But when I turned sixteen, there was just this feeling that you were out there somewhere, and I needed to look for you. The problem was that if you were alive, then there was a chance you didn’t know who you were. You could

have had amnesia. You might not have known your last name. If they put you into the system, then I couldn't look for my sister, Diana McKune." Rachel placed a hand to her head. "It's a miracle that Henry found me. I don't know how he did it. Pure luck."

Athena's stomach churned. She had told Henry to leave it alone—that there was no point in finding someone who didn't want to be part of her family. But Athena had been wrong. They had loving parents who were ripped from their lives too soon. Athena had a baby sister who had refused to give up looking for her. "Diana..." Athena said.

"Hmm?"

"My name. It was Diana?"

Rachel smiled. "That's what Great-Aunt Tina said."

"And she didn't want to raise you?" Athena couldn't help but feel a little miffed by whoever this aunt was.

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“Honestly? I think it was for the best. She was too old to be chasing after a kid. I got adopted by a lovely couple. They didn’t have any other children, which is probably one of the reasons I wanted to find you so badly.” Rachel grinned. “And I finally did.”

“They were okay with you looking for me?”

Rachel reached for Athena’s hand. “My folks wanted me to be happy. They understood how important it was for me to find you. I’m just glad that you seem to have found your own family.” Rachel motioned to the pastures around them. “This place is absolutely beautiful.” Her face scrunched up into a frown. “Henry thought you left because you were upset with him, though.”

Athena looked away. She took a step backward, but her sister wouldn’t let her get too far. “I have... a lot of baggage I’m working through. I think I needed some space to realize what it was I would be losing if I didn’t come back.” She stared at her feet, hating how bad that sounded. Rachel probably thought she wasn’t a good person now.

“I get that,” Rachel said quietly. “He didn’t tell me much, but he did tell me that you had a rough upbringing. That sort of thing can do some damage.”

Lifting her gaze, Athena was surprised to find only empathy in her sister’s gaze. “You... are you always this... nice?”

Rachel laughed. “I hope so. But between you and me, I’m not much of a sharer—well, except with you. I prefer to keep my life private. Henry seemed to think

we had that in common. I didn't tell him much—just that we were separated when we were children and I got adopted by a nice couple. There was no need to tell him much more than that.”

“Does that sort of thing matter?” Athena asked.

Her sister shrugged. “My parents are very wealthy. I think it's one of the reasons I was able to find you. I had more resources at my fingertips.”

“And you didn't tell Henry that...”

She shook her head. “Like I said, there's no need. Money changes people. Everyone I've met who knew about my family's wealth has tried to get something from me. It's just easier if I don't tell people about it, you know?”

They had two very different lives. Rachel had everything given to her, while Athena had nothing. And yet they'd both felt isolated and alone in this world. They continued walking to nowhere in particular. Athena glanced toward her sister. “Well, I hope you know I won't be one of those people.”

Rachel smiled more to herself than anything else. “It wouldn't matter if you were.” She stopped and faced Athena. “You're my sister. I'd give you anything. You just have to ask.”

Athena couldn't believe her ears.

Her sister glanced around them once more. “I've been here for two weeks, and there's one thing I think I've realized.”

“What's that?”

“I think I understand why you decided to stay.”

“I haven’t—”

Rachel gave her a pointed look. “You came back. I think that speaks more than you realize.” Her head tilted and she grinned. “It’s Henry, isn’t it? He’s the one who knew the most about you. He clearly has a thing for you. Did you know that?”

Athena flushed. She knew that Henry cared for her. Even with all the comments he’d made about her. The problem was whether or not he’d forgive her.

“Yep. I figured as much.” Rachel sighed, placing both hands on Athena’s shoulders. “You know what I think? This place feels like home.”

Athena’s brows shot up. “You think this place feels like home?”

“I’ve waited my whole life to meet you, Athena. I don’t want to lose you. And I’m not willing to take you away from the place you feel safe. Maybe I’ll stick around a little longer. I’m sure I can find a place to rent.”

“You’d... do that?”

Rachel pulled her in for another hug. “That’s what sisters are for.”

29

Henry

The floorboards creaked beneath Henry’s feet as he paced just inside the front door. On the other side of that wall, Athena was talking to her sister. There was no telling what they were discussing or if Athena would be willing to speak to him when they

were done.

He itched to yank that door open, march down those stairs, and tell her they had unfinished business. She'd left him without so much as a word. He deserved to know where they stood.

But then he had to remind himself that she'd chosen to leave. There was no clearer message than that. She wanted him out of her life, and he should just learn to accept it. He stopped his pacing and strode toward the window nearby. The two of them were gone.

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His heart dropped and he hurried to the door to open it. Once out of the house and on the porch, he could see two figures wandering through a nearby pasture. The yearning he felt to go to her, to confess all his feelings to her was so strong that he thought he might not be able to contain himself.

Athena had come back. That had to mean something. She hadn't known that Rachel was here. Did that mean she'd come back for him? His head was taking him in so many different directions that it was making him dizzy. For the first time in a long time, he didn't know what he should do.

Hudson materialized around the house, whistling a tune until he noticed Henry. He stopped and his relaxed demeanor shifted in the opposite direction. His frown appeared before the rest of his expression followed suit. "What's the matter now? Please don't tell me you fell for the girl's sister. Did she leave?"

Henry glowered at his brother. "No, she didn't leave. And why would you even ask me that?"

"Ask you if she left?" Hudson mumbled as he headed up the stairs. "Because—"

"No. Why even ask me if I like Rachel? You know I have feelings for Athena." Henry's gaze never left the two women as they continued to shrink from view. "I want her back."

"Back?" Hudson laughed, finally reaching the top step. "You guys weren't a couple. I mean, I could tell you guys liked each other. But you weren't together." His eyes searched Henry's, and he froze. "You're kidding."

Henry ignored the derisive tone in his brother's voice. "She's back, you know. Athena came back."

Hudson spun around and stared out at the field where Henry had been keeping an eye on them.

"Rachel was just about to leave, and... she was just... there." He placed his hands on the railing, hoping that doing so would keep him balanced. He still didn't know what he was going to do when they came back. He couldn't let her leave without talking to her, yet he didn't want to push her away again.

His brother hadn't uttered another word, though he remained by Henry's side. The two of them watched the interaction, which was so far away neither one of them had a prayer of knowing what was going on.

"Do you think... she might have come back for me?" Henry needed someone to pull him off the ledge. He needed someone who could look at the situation without bias and tell him whether or not he was dreaming.

"Maybe," Hudson said.

Henry gave him a hard look. "If she wants to stay, I don't want you to say a single word to her about it. As far as I'm concerned, she's part of this family."

Hudson rolled his eyes. "Just because she came back doesn't mean I'm going to like her."

"I didn't say you had to. I said you don't get to make any snide comments about the way she left. Do I make myself clear?"

"Whatever. I don't care. It's not like she's going to stick around. That's the way she's

lived her life up to this point. Old habits die hard. I would bet her sister tells her they can go off and be a family again, and we never see them again.”

Henry’s head whipped around to watch the girls once more. He hadn’t thought about that possibility. Athena might not want to stick around here now that she knew there was a place where she could belong again.

His hands tightened on the railing, the square edges digging into his hands. He could only hope at this point. That was all he had left.

Hudson patted him on the back. “Good job, brother. You reunited a family. Maybe they’ll be smart and realize they don’t belong out here in the country. Clearly, they’re bred for the city, and we all know how well that turns out.”

“What are you talking about?” Henry muttered with derision.

“I’m talking about a city girl and a country boy. They just don’t mix. Oil and water, you know?”

Henry spun to face his brother, catching him off guard and making him stumble back a few steps with a nervous laugh. “Hey, I didn’t make the rules. I just notice them.”

“Will you just get out of here?” Henry demanded. “It was so much nicer when you weren’t hovering.”

Hudson lifted both hands with a laugh. “Fine. I’ll go. One condition. If Athena stays, her sister isn’t allowed. We’re not a home for lost souls. And as far as I’m concerned, they’ve worn out their welcome.”

Henry took a threatening step forward and Hudson hurried back another two steps. “I’m just saying, is all.” With one more chuckle, he disappeared inside, leaving

Henry to deal with his worries all on his own.

* * *

Henry couldn't bring himself to go inside again after Hudson left. The girls only wandered back to the house when it got a little too dark to see them anymore. They stopped by Rachel's car, speaking in hushed tones.

He remained standing on the porch, his sharp gaze watching their every move. This was it—the moment of truth. Athena could get into Rachel's car and they could drive away together without her saying a single word to him.

His whole body felt like a coiled spring, ready to dart out at a moment's notice so he could speak to her one last time. His body ached with the tension that went from his shoulders all the way to his toes. The dull pounding in his head hadn't abated since Hudson left him in peace.

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Athena reached out to hug her sister and then they pulled back. Rachel glanced toward him and gave him a little wave, to which he nodded. They spoke again softly, and then Rachel opened the driver's side door. Athena stepped back as the car started and pulled away from the house.

Rachel's taillights shrank with the growing distance between them, and Athena didn't turn toward the house. It was too dark for her to walk anywhere. She hadn't gotten in the car with her sister. That meant only one thing.

As if Athena could hear his thoughts, she turned to face him. Even in the shadow of the night, she was beautiful. The porch lights cast a soft glow on her face, but he couldn't read her expression.

Athena wrapped her arms around her middle and stared at him, not saying a word. It was familiar, the way she watched him—much like when they'd first met. Henry couldn't help but smile at the memory as he pushed himself away from the house and moved toward the edge of the porch.

"I take it that you two hit it off," he called out to her.

Athena shifted her weight from one foot to the other and then looked off into the distance. "Rachel is..."

"She's pretty amazing."

Her eyes met his again. "Yeah. She is."

He moved down one of the steps and stopped so she would be able to see he was giving her space. “She’s been looking for you a long time.”

“Yeah, I know.” Athena squinted, though there were no bright lights. It was as if the pain caused her features to do that. Either pain or guilt. Then again, he could be entirely wrong.

“Where did she go?” Henry asked, coming down another step.

Athena gazed at him again. “Henry, I need to tell you something.”

Once again, he stopped, frozen on the stairs. He wasn’t brave enough to move closer nor ask her to continue.

Her brows pulled together, creasing deeply between them. “I was wrong.” Athena shook her head and tightened her arms around herself. “You were right to go looking for her, and I was mistaken to think that she would be like all the people I’d met in my life who did me wrong.” Her voice broke, and his heart right along with it.

Henry shook his head and hurried closer to her. “You didn’t know. How could you?” Without thinking, he pulled her into his chest. His arms wrapped around her so firmly that neither of them would be able to escape from his embrace. “There was always a chance that you were right. But we never know until we do the work to find out.”

She buried her face into his shoulder and her voice grew muffled. “I should have listened to you.”

He chuckled. “That’s where you’re wrong. I should have listened to you.” He pulled back and her chin tilted upward so she could look at him. “I should have respected your boundaries. Trust takes time to build, and I didn’t listen to you. I should have done more to open a discussion with you before I sent off that message.”

She blinked several times, releasing a tear down her cheek. “That wouldn’t have helped. I know it deep in my soul. I was too stubborn, and I know it.” She smiled through her tears. “I’m so glad you found her.”

He watched her closely, praying that wasn’t the only thing she’d stuck around to say. He couldn’t push her. He knew better than to do that now. So, he waited and sent another prayer heavenward.

Athena nibbled on her lower lip and looked away as if his gaze was too much for her to bear. It felt like an eternity for her to finally meet his gaze again. When she did, her face blushed a deep scarlet color. “I’m so embarrassed.”

“About what?” he whispered.

“About the way I left.” She said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “I shouldn’t have left the way I did. I should have said something to you. I should have—”

He placed a finger on her lips. “I’m just glad you’re back.”

“You are?” she whispered.

“More than you will ever know,” he whispered. “If I had known where you went, I would have come after you. I would have begged you to come back. I would have told you—” Henry cut himself off. The words were on the tip of his tongue. He could tell her now, tossing aside his worry for any consequences. Or he could wait and give her the space she might need. Henry swallowed hard. This had to be the hardest thing he had done thus far.

“You would have told me what?” she pressed.

Henry shook his head. “There’s plenty of time for that. Right now, all you need to worry yourself about is that I’m glad you’re back and I don’t want you to leave again.”

A small smile touched her lips. “I’m not going anywhere. That is, as long as you’ll have me.”

“Where else would you go?” he questioned. “This is your home.”

Her smile warmed him from the inside out. She leaned into him once more, resting her cheek against his chest. “Actually, I met someone.”

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He stiffened. She'd met someone new? He'd lost his chance already?

“His name is Christopher Billings, and he lives one town over. He gave me a job and a place to stay, and—”

“I love you, Athena. And I can't hold it in any longer. I don't want you to leave because I'm madly, deeply in love with you, and these last two weeks have been torture.” Henry pulled away from her so she could see his eyes. “I don't want to lose you again, and that's why I'm telling you this.” He held his breath. This could go either way. What would it be? Would she run, or would she stay?

Athena's eyes drilled into him—the wait far more painful than his confession had been. Then she stood on her toes and her mouth captured his in a firm, unyielding kiss before it softened into something more sensuous. “I love you, too, Henry,” she murmured against his lips. “I think I always have.”

His heart soared in that moment. Nothing else in his life would compare to this.

Athena loved him.

EPILOGUE

Six months later

Athena

Spring was setting in nicely. There were often colder mornings which made climbing

out of bed to get to work that much harder. Athena had grown soft. That was what she told herself as she wrapped a wool blanket around her shoulders while she sat on the front porch and waited for her sister to show.

They'd been going out on morning rides for the last couple of weeks, and Athena couldn't be happier about it. This was the kind of happiness she'd never thought was possible. From the time when she was a little girl to this very moment, she'd thought she'd be one of those people always chasing something she knew nothing about.

Well, now she knew what happiness was.

It was family.

It was the love of her life.

And it was Beast.

She'd been training the horse all winter long, and they were getting ever closer to signing up for the spring dressage events. She couldn't wait to show the town of Copper Creek the kind of talent she had.

None of it would have been possible without Henry.

The door behind her swung open with a loud creaking sound and the heavy footfalls of a familiar pair of boots echoed across the fog-covered fields.

"You're not going out in that, are you?" Henry dropped down to sit beside her as he held out her coffee cup. "What if you get lost? Then you're gonna freeze."

She rolled her eyes. "I've been here long enough to know my way around. I doubt that anything will happen."

“I don’t know,” Henry said as he lifted his mug to his lips. “I really don’t like that you want to go out there. Maybe you should let me come along.”

“Nope,” she shot back. “This is sister time. But we’ll be back in time for lunch.”

“Lunch!” Henry said louder. “You can’t take a ride that long in this weather.”

“It’s just fog,” Athena laughed. “By the time the sun is fully up, it will have burned off the fields. We’ll be fine. I promise.”

“You can’t promise that when you’re riding Beast,” he argued.

Athena gave him a pointed stare. “That horse is probably the most reliable one we have around here. I’m taking him, and I’m not going to hear another word about it.”

Henry’s side-eye would have been hilarious if it weren’t for something behind his gaze that caught her off guard. She took her mug from her lips and peered at him with a more concentrated fervor. “What’s wrong?”

He shifted, then shrugged. “No one said anything was wrong.”

“You didn’t have to. I can tell when something is up, and something is going to the moon right about now.”

The fidgeting continued, which drew her laughter.

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“Come on, Henry. You can tell me. Whatever it is, I’m sure we’ve worked through harder.”

His jaw tightened. She could see the warring thoughts battling it out in his head. Whatever it was, it must have been important.

Slowly, Athena put her mug to the side. “What is it?” she said with more seriousness. “Is something wrong with the ranch? Is Beast—”

“I want to marry you,” Henry blurted, turning his dark brown eyes toward her. “I’m terrified because I don’t want you to... leave.” His whisper couldn’t have been more disheartening if he’d yelled it in anger. She’d done that to him. She’d made him believe that running would be a possibility.

Since she’d been back, she hadn’t done anything that would make him assume she wanted to leave, but she couldn’t deny how hard it must have been to tell her right now what he was worried about. His parents had left. She’d left. Those he cared about didn’t stick around.

Athena’s breath caught in her throat. No words would ever be enough to heal that scar completely. All she would be able to do was spend each day proving to him that she was here to stay. She placed a hand on his forearm. “I’m not going anywhere—not without you.”

He gave her a smile, but the happiness only masked his fears. “I know. And I trust you, I really do.” Henry stood up and shoved his hand into his pocket, while she watched on. When he withdrew his fist, he opened his fingers to reveal a simple rose

gold band. There were no stones on it—not that she wanted any. Her life had always been simple, and that was how she wanted it to remain.

She gasped, staring at the ring that so perfectly embodied her personality. It was so unassuming and yet just as beautiful as a traditional wedding ring. Her eyes flicked up to meet Henry's as he slowly lowered himself to her level.

“I meant what I said. I want to marry you.”

“You don't have to marry me to make sure I stay—” It was the first thought that escaped her lips, and she immediately regretted the words. She was supposed to tell him yes. But before she could finish her thought, he stopped her.

“I don't want to marry you because I think it will make you stay. Marriage is a piece of paper. The ring is just a way for everyone else to see that we're promised to each other. I want to marry you because I want to call you mine. I want to be yours. I want us to spend the rest of our lives together, making a promise to be true to one another before God and everybody. You're all the family I could ever want.”

A happy tear slipped from her cheek. “That sounds too good to be true.”

He chuckled, pulling her left hand from her lap and poising the ring so it would easily slip onto her finger. “I started believing in the impossible the night we met.”

Athena laughed. “Now you're just being ridiculous.”

“Will you stop changing the subject? You can't leave me hanging like that.” His expression sobered. “I meant everything I said, and there's a lot I chose not to say—mostly so I didn't embarrass myself.”

She shook her head with another laugh as she framed his face in both of her hands. “I

love you, Henry Keagan. And I always will. I thought you'd never ask."

A brief look of surprise flickered over his face. "You wanted me to ask?"

"Of course I did. You were the first family I claimed as my own."

He pulled her left hand from his cheek, kissed her palm, then bestowed the ring on her. "You never cease to amaze me," Henry murmured as he met her gaze again. "And I hope that never ends."

His kiss was deeper, more exquisite than she'd experienced. Within it was a promise that no matter what happened to them, they'd overcome it together. She wrapped her arms around his neck, clinging to him as she gave him her whole heart. The kiss could have gone on for a millennium and she wouldn't have noticed the time passing. Unfortunately, the sound of someone clearing their throat cut their kiss short.

Athena laughed as she pulled away from Henry and stared at her sister, who had her hands on her hips and was giving them that look. "Am I interrupting something?"

Henry exchanged a look with Athena, then pulled her left hand out to show it off.

Rachel gasped and rushed toward them. "It's about time." She released a sound that was more of a squeal than anything else. "And I get to be here when it happens!"

"You'll have to renew your lease."

Rachel grinned. "Or maybe find something more permanent."

Henry looked between them. "Does that mean what I think it means?"

Athena looked toward her sister.

Rachel shrugged. “I thought I might look into getting a place and staying permanently in Copper Creek.”

This time, Athena squealed. “That’s amazing!” Athena gave Rachel a big hug before returning to Henry’s side.

“That’s terrific news!” Henry said.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:08 am

Athena couldn't believe how much her life had changed. She stood on the porch of her new home, holding her future husband's hand and smiling at her sister.

This is what she called a true happily-ever-after.

However, there was one person who might not share their enthusiasm.

"What's all the commotion about out here?" Hudson inquired, stepping outside onto the porch.

Rachel couldn't contain her excitement and blurted out, "They're getting married!"

Athena joined in, unable to contain her joy as well, "And... my sister is moving here permanently!"

Amidst the congratulations and well-wishes from Hudson, Athena couldn't help but notice a brief scowl on her future brother-in-law's face when she mentioned her sister's permanent stay in Copper Creek.

Hopefully, Hudson would find his true love one day too. Then he wouldn't be so moody.

For now, she wouldn't let his opinions about her sister dampen her excitement and happiness. It was still the best happily-ever-after she could have dreamed of.

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