



Sweet and Wild

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Category: Romance

Description: Twelve years ago, Lemon Winchester traded her cowgirl boots for Manolos and fled Red River Canyon for New York without so much as a glance in her rearview. When tragedy strikes, Lemon returns to Winchester Wild Ranch, back to the little town she left so many years ago, back to the house that holds too many memories, and back to her overbearing, madcap family. But not everyone is happy to see her.

Colton Hayes has worked Winchester land since he was old enough to ride a horse. For as long as he can remember, his future only ever involved one person—Lemon Winchester—his best friend's little sister. But it's hard to marry the girl next door when she runs off in the middle of the night without so much as a goodbye. She's back and he's bitter. They once shared a love capable of scalding even the most brutal Texas summer, but the ranch is no longer big enough for them both, especially when those old feelings begin to resurface.

Lemon is every bit as infuriating as the day he fell in love with her, but Colt knows better than anyone that you can't rope in Winchester wild. That woman will be the death of him ... assuming her brothers don't kill him first.

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CHAPTER ONE

Lemon

“It’s a pleasure doing business with you, Miss Winchester.” The art dealer shakes my hand, and I can barely keep the smile from my face.

“You too. Thank you so much again.”

He nods and straightens his tie as he walks toward the door in his sharp Gucci suit.

“Bye now.” I wave and cringe at the extra southernness in my voice. I’ve been in New York for twelve years, and no matter how I try, I still can’t drop this Texan accent. It’s ingrained in me, just like wild in the Winchester blood.

Mr. Garcia leaves, and I run over and close the gallery doors, squealing like a slapped pig.

“Honey, are you okay? Couldn’t help but notice you screaming like the South had risen again,” Ambrose—my employee of two years—calls from my office. I may pay his salary, but we have more of a casual working relationship based on the fact that we both love fine art, champagne, and everything fabulous.

“Oh my God! Ambrose, get your butt out here.”

He hurries down the staircase in that casual, I-give-zero-fucks attitude that all New Yorkers have mastered—well, all New Yorkers except me. I run to him and grab his

hands, jumping up and down. He humors me, bouncing on the balls of his feet as excitedly as I am, though he has no idea why yet. “What are we so happy about, my little southern belle?”

“That man who just left?”

“Yeah. He’s a dealer, right? Garcia someone? He charges a huge commission on behalf of his clients. What the hell was he doing here?”

“He just bought every single one of my paintings.”

Ambrose’s jaw drops, which—come to think of it—I don’t think I’ve ever seen him do. “Get the fuck out!”

“No, I’m serious. He did.”

“Who’s the buyer?”

“I have no idea. They wished to remain anonymous.”

“Holy shit. We need to go out and celebrate.”

“Actually, I was hoping maybe you could close up for me and I could go celebrate with my very handsome and very busy fiancé?”

He rolls his eyes. “Fine. But you owe me. Drinks tomorrow night, on you.”

“It’s a done deal.”

He smooshes my cheeks. “I just love it when your inner Betty-Lou Sue comes out.”

“Oh, hush.” I bat him away and put on my sternest boss face. I’ve been running this gallery for two years. It was a long, hard road to get here through art school and waiting tables, and then when I met Stavros, my life finally felt like it was coming together. I opened the gallery, he proposed, and I’ve never looked back since. “Are you sure you don’t mind closing up for me?”

“Of course not.”

“You’re an angel.” I kiss his cheek.

“I’m an angel who loves McQueen, just FYI.”

I laugh and gather my purse and keys, making a mental note to pick up something special for him. Then I head outside and climb into my Ferrari 812 GTS that Stavros bought me for my thirtieth birthday.

Stopping by a liquor store on my way to our Manhattan apartment, I pick up a bottle of Dom Pérignon. When I enter the building and wave to our doorman, he gives me an odd look. I’ve never quite won him over, sadly, which just gets my goat because I win everyone over, eventually.

I hit the button for my floor and bounce on the balls of my feet as the elevator climbs all the way to the penthouse. When I open the front door of our apartment, the scent of Chinese food and freesias fills my nostrils. My best friend, Brooklyn, must be here.

“Stavros? Brook?” I walk through the lounge, and sure enough my best friend is here—facedown on my couch with my piece-of-shit fiancé pile-driving her naked ass. The bottle of expensive champagne falls from my hands and shatters, spilling all over the Grecian tiles.

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Their stunned faces turn toward me, and Stavros jerks away from my best friend as if he's actually surprised to find me here. Brook's face is beet red as she covers herself with one of my throw cushions.

"You have got to be kidding me!"

"Lemon," Stavros says, pulling on his pants. "This isn't how it looks."

"Really? Because it looks like the two people I love the most are fucking one another on the couch I picked out."

Brooklyn finds her voice, and I really wish she hadn't. "Lem, it's ... I'm really sorry. You know Stavros and I have history."

Being lifelong family friends and ex-lovers, they have history alright. I guess I'm just the only one who thought it was ancient.

"Oh, I know all about history, because we are it."

"It was a mistake." Brooklyn slips on her dress and heels. God only knows where her bra and panties got to. "I ... thought I'd come keep Stav company because I know you're always working so late, and then one thing led to another."

"Well bless your heart, Brooklyn. You did this for me? Get the fuck out of my apartment." I turn to Stavros with a sneer. "And you?"

"Baby—"

“Don’t you dare baby me. This engagement is off.”

“Lemon, don’t be like that.” Stav’s expression is contrite and one hundred percent bullshit. His lies stink worse than the cow pats my brothers used to push me into as a kid.

I head into our bedroom and start opening drawers. I can’t be in the same room as him, and I’m suddenly regretting that bottle of expensive champagne. Stavros comes from money—big oil money handed down through generations of the Anagnos family. These past three years, I’ve been living a dream—expensive cars, designer clothes, and fancy restaurants this Texas farm girl had no right to be setting foot in—but my whole world just came to a crashing halt because not only is my fiancé cheating on me with my best friend, but I’m now homeless too. I can’t afford a shoebox in New York, with everything I earn going back into the gallery. I start pulling out drawers and tossing clothing, shoes, and jewelry on the bed.

“Baby, let’s talk about this.”

“I ain’t got nothin’ to say to you.”

“You know when you’re mad, that cute southern accent comes out. It makes me so fucking hard.” He leans down and kisses me on the neck. I cringe, because Lord only knows where that mouth has been. I turn in his arms, look him dead in the eye, and knee him in the balls. Stavros bends double and falls to the plush Persian carpet, rolling into a fetal position as he gasps for breath. “Jesus.”

“If you ever touch me again, I will castrate you. And I grew up on the finest ranch in all of Texas, so trust me when I say, I know exactly how.” A pang of longing bolts right to my heart when I think of home, when I think of him. And how my brothers would kill Stavros if they too had witnessed the horrors in that living room.

I grab the duffle bag containing my clothing and essentials. I don't bother with my purses or heels, but I do head to the bathroom and grab my makeup and skincare, because wrinkles are real, y'all.

My phone rings as I leave the apartment. I glance at Wyatt's face on my screen. My baby brother doesn't call me all that often, but when he does, it's important. I close my eyes and contemplate not answering. But I can't do that—not if Wyatt needs me—so I take a deep breath and hit the button to take his call.

“Lemon?” My little brother's voice breaks and I freeze.

“Wyatt? What's wrong?”

“It's Daddy, Lemon. Daddy's dead.” My bag slips off my shoulder and I lean against my apartment door as the ringing starts in my ears. My throat turns bone-dry, my stomach twists in knots, and my heart feels like it's just been ripped right from my chest.

CHAPTER TWO

Lemon

Thirty coffees, Johnny Cash's greatest hits on repeat, and three shitty motel stays after I got off the phone to Wyatt, I follow that white line and pull into a diner lot to visit the restroom. I'm in Marshfield, Missouri, or Springfield, or somewhere else I've never cared to visit. I should have just caught a flight to Memphis, Texas, and had one of my brothers come pick me up, but no way was I leaving my car with Stavros. It's the only possession aside from the gallery that's in my name. The clothes, heels, and expensive Persian rugs, I could take or leave. I never needed any of that stuff to be happy, but my car is my baby, and I refuse to leave it behind. I may need it yet to live in when I go back to New York.

I splash my face with water in the restroom and grimace as the huge diamond on my finger twinkles in the overhead lights. Stavros's words when he gave me this ring come floating back to me. "You're special." "Unlike anyone I've ever met." No good, cheating liar. I wish I really had castrated him. There ain't nothing special about Lemon Winchester. If there was, he wouldn't have slept with my best friend.

I know running away with my tail between my legs is not how my mama and daddy raised me, but I won't stay in a relationship with a cheater. I'm worth more than that.

I don't know what the hell I'll do when I come back to the city. Ambrose agreed to take care of the gallery for the next few weeks, but heading home to Red River Canyon wasn't in my five-year plan. Yet, here I am, driving a Ferrari across the country to the ranch I grew up on.

I leave the diner restroom, grab a couple of snacks from the vending machine outside, and head back to my car. I blast Dolly from the speakers, because like my mama always said, there's nothing a Dolly song, some elbow grease, and a little hair spray can't fix.

The sun is melting into the horizon and the day's dust is settling as I drive up the dirt road and through the gate at Winchester Wild Ranch. I park in front of the house and just sit in my car, unable to believe I didn't fall asleep at the wheel. The engine ticks as it cools, the last rays of sunlight glance off the dash, and I let out a deep breath.

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“Hi, Daddy,” I whisper, fighting back tears as I remember him sitting in the rocking chair on the front porch, whiskey in hand, condensation trickling down the glass as the heat of the day bled away into a balmy night. Now, I’ll never get the chance to see him again.

A man with a cowboy hat pulled low on his head, tight Wranglers, and worn dusty boots comes flying out of the house. “You can’t park here, ma’am. This is private property. The bed-and-breakfast is three miles down the road.”

I open my door, climb out of the car, and for the first time in twelve years, I come face-to-face with my first love. Colton Hayes. I don’t have a single childhood memory without that boy in it. “Hi, Colt.”

He tips his hat, those eyes narrowing under heavy brows as he looks me over from head to toe. The hurt on his face is evident as he whispers my name like a curse. “Lemonade?”

“The one and only.”

“What are you doing here?” he barks.

I shrug one shoulder. “I could ask you the same thing. The gate has my last name on it, after all.”

“Right.” Colt’s eyes narrow. “Well, you’ll forgive me for not knowing what you’re changing your name to these days. It seems you’ve had a few options.”

“Excuse me?”

“Where’s your husband, Lemonade?”

“It’s just Lemon now,” I bite out. I have no intention of divulging the humiliating whereabouts of my ex-fiancé.

His brow furrows but he quickly schools those perfect, chiseled features and folds his huge arms across his chest. “Well then, Lemon now, welcome home. Are you staying long?”

“I don’t know, Colt. My daddy just died of a massive heart attack, and my whole world was blown apart, so I figured I’d come home for a little while to lick my wounds. Is that okay with you?” I shake my head. I should have known this was the wrong thing to do. I should have stayed far, far away, so I never had to see that face, or those gray eyes again. “Now, if you’ll excuse me ...” I brush past his wide shoulders. “I need to see my family.”

“Right, I forgot I was never a part of that.”

I spin around and stalk closer, keeping my voice low, “You know what? I’ve been driving for several damn days straight. I just got here and already you’re startin’ in, so what is it you want from me, Colton?”

“Well excuse the hell outta me.” He laughs. “I guess you really can’t take the country out of the girl.”

“Screw you.”

“Oh, and to answer your question”—he leans into my personal space, and for half a second I think he’s going to try to kiss me, but he opens his mouth and all of the

butterflies in my stomach crumble to ash— “I don’t want nothin’ from you, least of all that.”

I pull away to see his face, and that smirk that I had always loved so much spears me right through the chest. Colt backs away, and then climbs into a truck that I remember all too well. I can’t believe I didn’t even notice it when I pulled in.

He kicks over the engine and careens out of the drive at breakneck speed, and all I can do is stand there with tears in my eyes and my mouth hanging open. If I thought Colton was rock-my-world kind of handsome when we were teens, he’s so much better now. Broad shoulders, thick arms, a toned muscled body, and tighter jeans than he has a right to be wearing, but it isn’t any of those things that drives the knife through my chest. It’s the way those steely eyes assessed me as if I were the enemy that really broke my heart, especially after he’d spent so long looking at me like I hung the moon and stars.

“There’s no place like home,” I mutter under my breath as the screen door opens and I turn to see who else has come to give me a piece of their mind. Mama, Wyatt, Wade, and West all stand on the front porch. Mama had a thing for W’s. Except when it came to me—I was special. That’s what she always told me. I silently curse her for filling my head with lies. If I’m so damn special, why did my fiancé cheat and my ex-boyfriend run outta here like the devil was chasing him the second I returned home?

My family’s faces are a mixture of relief, somber delight, and total and utter boredom from West and Wade.

“Hi.” I wave.

“Lemonade,” Mama says on a sob as she rushes toward me and engulfs me in her arms. She’s always been fit from working the land alongside my daddy, but right now, she’s skin and bone. I’m afraid to hold her too tightly for fear she might snap.

“Hi, Mama,” I say, as the floodgates open. She squeezes me tightly.

“I’ve missed my baby so much. It’s been too long since you been home, girl.”

“I know.” I sniff and pull away.

“You doing okay?”

I shake my head and swipe my tears with the heels of my hands. At least Colt wasn’t here to see me fall apart. I bet he’d just love another opportunity to rub it in.

“Alright, Mama,” Wyatt says. “Quit hoggin’ my little sister’s hugs.”

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“Little sister? I’m older than you.”

Wyatt wraps his arms around me in a hug and squeezes so tight he lifts me off the ground, managing to crack every one of my vertebrae. “Yeah, but no one really remembers that.”

“Oh my God. You actually grew into your gangly limbs.” I glance at West and Wade, still standing by the doors with arms folded across their chests—the mirror image of one another save for a little gray in West’s hair. “What have you been feedin’ them, Mama? Y’all grew like weeds.”

“That’s what happens when you leave and don’t come back for twelve years. People tend to change,” West says.

“Hiya to you too, West.”

“Come on now,” Mama says. “We don’t need no fightin’. Daddy wouldn’t want this reunion spoiled by harsh words.”

“Daddy wouldn’t have wanted his only daughter to disown her family either,” Wade says, sounding just like he took the spit out of West’s mouth.

“You bite your tongue, Wade Winchester,” Mama warns.

Wade bows his head and has the good grace to look ashamed.

“You must be starvin’ and exhausted from your trip. Dinner’s about ready. You go on

and get cleaned up. West, Wade, you bring your sister's bags."

"Mama," Wade whines. "Why us? Why isn't Wyatt helpin'?"

"Because Wyatt wasn't an asshole to his sister just now."

"It's okay. I can take my own bags inside."

"You afraid we're gonna go through your shit and you'll wake up tomorrow with your lacey underthings decorating the cow pats in the field?" Wade smirks, and I roll my eyes.

Wyatt grins. "You'd have to be unafraid to touch her lacey underthings first."

"Wait." Wade punches our little brother in the arm. "That's your worst fear, isn't it?"

"Only when it comes to the parts that are in them lacey underthings," Wyatt says coolly.

"Maybe you'd prefer to be the one wearin' them," Wade crows.

"Oh, that's real original, asshole. Did you think of that line all by yourself?" Wyatt folds his arms over his chest and leans against the front porch railing. "I tell you what, when you're ready to start dressing like a man, you come see me and maybe we can actually find you a real live girl to date. I know your hand must be gettin' kinda tired."

"What's wrong with the way I dress?"

"Alright, y'all, that is quite enough." Mama ushers me up the walk to the stairs. "I, for one, am glad to have another female in this house. It's been overrun with

overgrown men for far too long.”

Mama and I head inside as the boys carry on about carrying in my things. This old farmhouse looks exactly the same as it did when I left. It hasn’t changed one bit in thirty years. Well ... there is one noticeable difference. Daddy’s armchair sits in the living room ... empty. I stare at that faded tan leather which has seen a lifetime of dust, sweat, and love. I burst into tears all over again. I feel like I haven’t stopped crying since I got the call.

I hadn’t shed a single tear over Brook and Stavros, not one, but I fell apart completely when Wyatt called me from the hospital with horror and devastation in his voice. I had to come home. I needed to be here for my family. Part of me wishes I’d never stayed away so long. I might’ve been able to say goodbye. I might’ve seen my daddy and told him I love him one last time. Although, after my encounter with Colt and enduring the frosty reception from my two older brothers, I’m starting to wish I hadn’t come home at all.

CHAPTER THREE

Lemon

Sunlight streams through the lace curtains of my childhood bedroom and I squint and roll over. What kind of sick torture is this? People in the south need to invest in black-out blinds. I stretch and wince at the ache in my bones and muscles after several days in my tiny car. Stumbling into the bathroom, I brush my teeth, and then I throw on a light sweater before heading downstairs. The grandfather clock says midday, and I rub my eyes and stare at Mama plating up lunch.

“Mornin’, sleepyhead.”

“Mornin’. Why did you let me sleep so long?”

“Well, you had a long drive.”

From the back door, the boys all push and jostle to get into the house and be the first to the dinner table. It's like feeding time at the zoo around here.

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“Mornin’, sis,” Wyatt says.

“Hi.”

“Howdy, Lemon.” A man embraces me. I’m taken aback because he clearly knows me, and I’ve never met this guy in my whole life.

“Hi?”

My brothers chuckle and Wade says, “You have no idea who he is, do you?”

I pull away from the man and take in his square jaw and bright green eyes. His blond beard is rugged with hair to match, but the way his lips quirk into a cocky grin and the dimple in his chin give him away. “Oh my God. Cash Williams, is that you? Last time I laid eyes on you, you couldn’t have weighed more than one hundred pounds, soaking wet.”

“It’s all Mama’s good cookin’.” He winks, and pecks Mama on the cheek. Then his eyes roll over me from head to toe. “It’s mighty nice to see you again, Lemonade.”

“Still our sister, and you’re still never hittin’ that,” Wyatt warns, glancing at Cash.

“Wyatt Winchester, you bite your tongue at my table,” Mama admonishes.

My little brother hangs his head, thoroughly scolded. “Sorry, Mama.”

“It’s just Lemon now.” I sit in the seat I’ve always occupied at this table, my eyes

darting to the empty head of the table where my father sat.

“Since when?” Mama asks.

“Since I was eighteen.” I glance at her as she sets a plate in front of me. It’s piled high with roast-beef sandwich and potato chips. I wouldn’t eat this much food in two meals back home in New York, but I know better than to tell her that.

“Since you moved to New York,” West corrects as he finishes washing up in the mud room and enters the kitchen.

“Oh my God, it’s alive.” Wade, the perpetual joker, grabs my bird’s nest of hair and makes it stand on its end. I elbow him in the ribs, and he moans. “Damn, woman. You’re so skinny, you practically speared me through with your bony elbow. We gotta put some Texas meat on them bones.”

“My bones are just fine the way they are, thank you.”

I glance around the kitchen, praying for coffee but knowing I won’t find any now. The pitcher of sweet tea on the table confirms my suspicions. Mama slips a plate in front of each of the boys and they all stare like dogs salivating over a bone. I pick up a potato chip from my plate but before I can draw it closer, Mama gives me a pointed glance and I drop it just as fast. You do not mess with Lucille Winchester at mealtime.

“We haven’t said grace, Lemonade. And you know we don’t do grace unless everyone’s at the table.”

I glance at the five other bodies occupying the table and frown. “Who are we waitin’ on?”

“Sorry I’m late, Mama. I had a gelding in the stable as stubborn as Lem—”

“Uh-oh,” Wade says, biting his bottom lip like a coy little schoolgirl.

I involuntarily smooth my hand over my hair and scowl. It’s one thing for Colt to be working here, but to be eating at the family table for every meal and still calling my mama ... Mama? Oh, hell no.

“What was that you were sayin’, Colt?” Wyatt asks.

“Lemon,” Colton says through his teeth. “I wasn’t sure you’d still be here.”

“The feeling’s mutual, and I’ve suddenly lost my appetite so ...” I stand and pick up my plate.

“Lemon Emersyn Winchester, you will sit your skinny ass down and eat lunch with your family.”

“But Colton isn’t family, Mama,” I hiss as I set my plate back on the table and sit heavily in my chair.

“He is too family. Just like Cash and anyone else who’s been helping to keep this ranch working. Especially with your daddy gone, God rest his soul.”

“Yep. We’re all just one big, dysfunctional family. Only, Lemon was never makin’ plans to marry Cash,” West says.

“Maybe she hasn’t made plans yet, but give her time.” Cash smirks. “All ladies love Cash.”

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“Okay, that’s disturbing. Please never say that in my presence again.” I blow the hair off my face and stare at the ceiling. Daddy give me strength.

Colt’s eyes meet mine. “I can leave if this is too difficult—”

“Oh, don’t flatter yourself, Colton Hayes.”

“That is enough, from all of you,” Mama chastises. “Now, we’re going to eat a nice meal, as a family, and we’re damn sure going to say grace before we do it. So, Colton, why don’t you sit on down next to Lemonade and join hands while West says grace?”

Colt hesitates and meets my gaze, then he glances at Mama and nods resolutely. “Yes, ma’am.”

The chair scrapes against the floorboards as he pulls it out, and I swear you could hear a pin drop everyone is so quiet. Colt sits beside me and places his palm faceup on the table. I stare as if his flesh has the power to burn me, and when I slip my small hand into his much larger one and lace my fingers with his, my chest tightens. He squeezes my hand—crushes it, really—and slides his other arm across the table to join hands with West.

My brother says grace, but I don’t whisper, “amen” at the end like everyone else at the table. I can’t. My heart is too broken from that little touch, from all of the memories his hand in mine drudges up.

“Excuse me,” I mutter and climb to my feet before racing out of the room.

“That went about as well as I expected,” Wyatt says.

I take the stairs two at a time and shut my bedroom door, then I lean against it. This room holds too many memories—too many nights of Colt sneaking in after Mama and Daddy went to bed, too many stolen kisses took place under those covers, and too many tears soaked my pillow when our whole world shifted off its axis. I’d told Colt not to flatter himself, that I could handle lunch with him just fine. But all of the feelings I’d been running from since I was an eighteen-year-old kid came slamming back at once, and it’s clear I’m pretty far from fine. In fact, we left fine behind twelve years ago, and I’m not sure I’ll ever make my way back.

CHAPTER FOUR

Colt

Twenty years old

I exit the arena, a sweaty shaking mess. Holy shit. That bull about killed me, but coming in first place in my heat division was totally worth it. Hell, it was worth it just to see the look on Jameson Fort’s face when he saw I’d beaten his time.

“Congratulations, son.” Some old cowboy slaps my back as I pass, and I tip my hat. I’m busy looking backwards when I should be looking ahead, so I almost don’t see the two pretty girls who barrel into me until I’m nearly knocked off my feet.

“Nice work, cowboy!” Lemon shouts as she throws herself into my arms and squeezes me tightly.

“Lemon? What are you doin’ here?”

“We came to see you ride.” She smiles up at me, her hands still wrapped tightly

around my neck. Sweat soaks my shirt, and I know she can probably feel it. I just don't know why she isn't so grossed out about it she doesn't pull away.

"Zadie." I tip my hat in her direction and glance between the two of them. "How did you girls get here?"

Lemon bites her lip. "Um ..."

"Lemon," I warn, taking the tone her father and brothers so often use with this little fireball.

She leans up on her tiptoes, her breath washing across my face and smelling too much like whiskey as she whispers, "Don't worry about it, champ."

"Have you two been drinkin'?"

"Oops," Zadie says. "Busted."

Lemon giggles, throws one arm wide, and proclaims, "Tonight we're Winchester Wild!"

"Oh, Jesus. Do your mama and daddy know you're here?"

"Nope," Lemon says. "We snuck out."

Fuck. I am a dead man. I may not have had anything to do with this, but I have no doubt they wouldn't be here if it weren't for me.

"Oh my God," Zadie squeals. "Could you imagine if they knew we'd hitchhiked?"

"You ..."

I pinch the bridge of my nose, my high from the ride and from having

Lemon throw her arms around me vanishing, and replaced almost instantly with dread. “Your daddy’s gonna kill you, and then West is gonna kill me.”

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Lemon rolls her eyes. “Daddy and West need to lighten up.”

“Lemon, promise me you’re never gonna do this again? Not the sneaking out, not the drinkin’, and definitely not hitchhiking. What the hell were you thinkin’?”

“We wanted to see the champ in action.”

“Then you wait until you’re old enough to drive yourself or better yet, ask your brother to bring you.”

“Can we go? I’m starvin’,” Zadie says.

“No. I’m taking you girls home.”

“Okay, but can we eat first?” Lemon asks. “I could really murder a funnel cake right now.”

“Oh,” Zadie crows. “And cotton candy.”

“You two are gonna be eating burgers. You need something’ to soak up all the alcohol. Where the hell did you get it anyway?”

“Daddy’s liquor cabinet.” Lemon frowns and then shakes her head as she says, “Well, the whiskey came from there. The beer I bought with a fake ID.”

“You got a fake ID? And who the hell would buy that you were over twenty-one?”

“I get by with a little help from my friends.” She toys with the collar of her plaid shirt, popping one button too many so her cleavage and the black lace of her push-up bra are visible. I swallow hard as I try not to look. She strokes her finger along her collarbone and down the swell of one breast and my dick is pulsing. Jesus. This girl is diabolical. God help every man on the planet when Lemon Winchester comes of age. “I like to call them boobs.”

I bury my head in my hands. “Come on. Before you girls kill me.”

“I don’t think your friend handles her whiskey too good.” I tilt my head toward Zadie, who’s wrapped in a blanket in the bed of my truck, drooling on the metal floor.

“I know. Who’d have thought she would be such a lightweight?”

“I still can’t believe the two of you did what you did. Why? You have some hot cowboy you had to meet up with?”

“Yep,” she says without elaborating. I regret the words instantly. What the hell am I doing? Fishing for compliments? She’s sixteen years old. I shouldn’t be encouraging her. Lemon Winchester don’t need no encouragement.

Still, empty food wrappers litter the floor around us and the girls are sober enough that we should be on the road already, but I can’t bring myself to move. Not while Lemon’s cuddled up to my side, a blanket over our outstretched legs and the field of stars above us.

“What about at home? There ain’t no boys your own age beating down your door for a date?”

She makes apfftingsound. “No one is even looking in my direction, Colt. Not with the

Winchester boys breathing down their necks.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes, it is.”

“I look at you all the time.”

A coy smile lifts the corners of her lips, and my heart skips a beat it has no right to be skipping. “And you’d be dead if West ever caught you. Not that someone like you would ever look at me the way I want you to.”

“Maybe you’re just not seeing things clearly.” I tuck her hair behind her ear and her brows pinch together. I’m on dangerous ground here. Lemon wasn’t exaggerating. If West knew I was here with his little sister, he’d beat the shit outta me. He’d never let me near her again.

She leans forward and presses her lips to mine. She tastes like whiskey and cherry-cola lip gloss and I can’t get enough. I cup her cheek, and she clambers into my lap.

“Whoa.” My hands frame her hips, but even I’m not crazy enough to touch her when she’s straddling me like this. “Lemon ... I—”

“I think about you.”

I press a chaste kiss to her lips and smile. “I think about you too, but, darlin’—”

“A lot.” She grinds her hips.

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Jesus. I groan. “Lemon, darlin’, stop.”

“I want you, Colt. I want you so much it hurts.”

“We can’t do this,” I say, but I ain’t convincing anyone. Fuck. I know exactly how she feels because I’ve been looking at this girl for years, just aching to touch her, to hold her in my arms, and kiss her like this.

“Do you touch yourself when you think about me? Because I do.” She nibbles my neck, her hips rocking back and forth, sliding her pussy against my dick. “I think about you all the time, Colt. When I’m at school, when I’m doing my chores around the ranch, and when I’m alone in my room at night. I want you all the time.”

“Lemon,” I beg, her grinding obliterates all my self-control. “Fuck.”

I grip her hips and move her back and forth, bucking my own up to meet hers, and drive us both closer to the edge. Lemon wraps her arms around my neck, and I shove her tiny shirt over her breast, leaning forward to suck her puckered, rosy nipple into my mouth. She throws her head back and moans, and as much as I love that sound, I have the good sense to remember we’re not alone. Zadie’s only a foot away and we’re parked in a field just off the main road where anyone could find us. The last thing I want is the police driving by and having to explain why I’ve got two underage girls in my truck after midnight. I cover her mouth and Lemon’s eyes widen, but she darts out her tongue to lick my fingers and I lose all control. I blow my load in my jeans as if I was seventeen again. My thrusting must push her over the edge because her lips part in the most delicious “O” and I feel her pussy convulse against me.

Lemon takes a beat, eyes closed, euphoric in her orgasm. I remove my hand from her mouth and trail it down her chest, pulling her shirt as I cup her perfect tits underneath. Her breaths are beautiful and ragged, and there's a wet patch soaking the front of my jeans from our combined orgasms, but I don't care about that. Her auburn hair falls around our faces as she leans forward and kisses me, and I can't help it—I roll us so that I'm on top, and I settle my weight between her legs as I kiss her so deep and so hard that I know the only thing she's breathing is me.

Am I the first she's done this with? I can't see how anyone else could have gotten close enough with her brothers acting as bodyguards all the time. But I sure hope I am, because it's not just the fact that I may have to kill some other guy if I'm not—it's the fact that I want to be her only. I want to drive her just as mad as she's been driving me all these years.

Jesus. I'm an asshole. I'm sick. Lemon is so much younger than me. She's my best friend's little sister, and now that I've had a taste, I can't let her go. It's killing me to imagine her with someone else. This is wrong, in so many ways. All the Winchester men would be well within their rights to castrate me like a young, wild bull. My daddy too. Going down this road ensures I just sharpened the knife for them, but I can't stop. Now that I've had a taste of Lemon Winchester, risking my life is worth it for just one more.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lemon

When the hum of ATVs roar to life and I know the boys are gone, I open my door and head downstairs, a little embarrassed at my outburst. I don't know what it is about Colton Hayes that turns me into a teenager again, but I never could think rationally around that boy, and I sure as hell can't think rationally around the man.

“Mama?” I say to her back as she stands cooking at the stove. From dawn to dusk, that woman prepares meals for this household and for the bed-and-breakfast guests. “I’m sorry I ran out on lunch.”

“It’s alright, darlin’. I mean, you know I have rules about anyone leaving my table before their plate is clean, but I understand why you needed to get away. I’m sorry I pushed.”

“It’s okay.”

“You know, I remember a time I couldn’t get the two of you to quit holdin’ hands at my table. Seventeen years old and you couldn’t stop touching him.”

I wince. “Things change, Mama.”

“Mm-hmm, and sometimes things change so much that we find ourselves right where we need to be.” She walks over to the counter and picks up my plate before setting it down in front of me. I bite my lip to hide my smile. Once upon a time, if you left my mother’s table without finishing your plate, what was left of your meal went to the chickens and the dogs. I lift one half of the sandwich and dig in, rolling my eyes back in my head as mustard and home-cooked roast beef roll over my tongue, and I moan. Mama grabs two glasses from the cabinet and fills them with sweet tea, then she pulls out the stool beside me and sits.

“So, Colton Hayes has grown up a lot,” Mama ventures.

“Yep.”

“He’s a fine young gentleman and he’s been such a great help around here. The ranch wouldn’t still be running without him and West.”

“Well, he always did love this place.”

“He was devastated when you left. Daddy found him drinking himself to dea—”

“That’s enough, Mama,” West booms, and we both turn to see my brother, livid as he stands in the entrance to the kitchen. I hadn’t even heard the sneaky bastard come in.

“Well, someone has to tell her.”

“Tell me what?”

“Nothing,” West snaps at the same time Mama opens her mouth. “You ran off to marry someone else. You weren’t here, so you don’t need to concern yourself with the fallout after you left.”

“I didn’t run away to marry someone else. I ran to get the hell away from ... this.”

“And what exactly is wrong with this?” Mama’s tone is icy as she turns her own livid expression on me.

I pinch the bridge of my nose to stave off a headache. It seems like every time I open my mouth, I’m jamming my foot in it. “Nothing, Mama. I just needed a change. I wanted to do something different. Something no woman in this family has ever done.”

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“Bullshit,” West growls. “You left because you couldn’t stand the sight of Colt after what happened.”

“Don’t you dare tell me what I felt. You have no idea what we went through, what I went through.”

“Maybe if you’d stayed, we might’ve. You broke a lot more than just Colt’s heart when you left. You broke ours too.”

“Well, there ain’t nothing to be done for it now, is there?”

“I guess not. So how long before you’re back to your rich fiancé and your fancy New York City apartment?”

“Geez, West. Why don’t you make it a little clearer that you can’t wait to be rid of me?”

“I’m just looking out for everyone. You ain’t just Winchester Wild. You leave a trail of chaos wherever you go, little sister. You always have. You’ll forgive me if I’m on damage control while you’re in this house.”

“That’s enough, West. Your daddy hasn’t even been gone a week and already you’re chasing away his only daughter.”

“I ain’t chasing anyone away.”

“No, because Lemon’s made of tougher stuff than that, but you’re trying for all

you're worth."

"I'm just making sure we're all—"

"Why don't you head back to work and let me worry about this family? We certainly don't need protecting from Lemon," Mama says.

"Yes, ma'am." He grabs his hat off the rack by the back door and heads out, slamming the screen back on its hinges.

I let out a sigh. "Maybe I should just stay at the cabins?"

"You'll do no such thing."

"They don't want me here, Mama."

"Then they know where the door is and how to use it." She pats my hand and I squeeze hers back. "Now, come help me with this pie. We got a lot of baking to do for your daddy's wake."

"Mama, have you even stopped since you left the hospital?"

"I'll stop when I'm ..." she trails off and for a beat, I just watch her, waiting for her to finish a sentence I must have heard her utter a thousand times before.

"Mama?"

Tears form in her eyes and she wipes them away with the backs of her hands and keeps rolling out her pastry on the counter. "I'm fine. I'm fine. You know he wouldn't want me to lie about, cryin' over things I can't change. This family ain't gonna feed itself."

“This family knows how to fix themselves a sandwich.”

She makes a tscking sound. “So, when are we getting to meet this handsome fiancé of yours? Is he flying in for the funeral?”

“Um ... we broke up.” I take a bite of a potato chip and chew, thinking about how I stormed out. “Well, it wasn’t so much a breakup as it was me kicking him in the unmentionables after I found him cheating on me with my best friend.”

“Brooklyn? Oh, Lemonade. I am so sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s only okay if you castrated him.”

I laugh. “I’m pretty sure that’s still illegal in New York, Mama.”

She shakes her head. “Well, it shouldn’t be. You want me to send your brothers after him?”

“No. He isn’t worth it.”

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“No, he isn’t. There’s never been anyone worthy of my little girl but—”

“Please don’t say Colt. Things are different now. We can’t go back to who we were.”

Mama raises her hands in a warding gesture. “Okay. No more talk of Colton.”

I sigh and try to figure out why I fell apart the second my high-school boyfriend touched my hand, but I haven’t shed a tear over walking out on the man I was going to marry. Why am I not more upset about my engagement ending? Why haven’t I cried about it? I’m not even that mad. What does that say about our relationship?

She nods and whispers, “Well, you know what your daddy always said—it’s no good cryin’ over spilt milk now, Lemonade. You just gotta do your best to clean it up.”

“I wish I knew where to begin.” I climb off the stool and walk around the counter to help Mama. I learned how to be a strong, independent woman from her, and Colt and my brothers may not want me here, but it’s clear that this family needs me now more than ever. Maybe even just as much as I need them.

CHAPTER SIX

Colton

I finish mucking out Bye Bye Belle’s stable. She’s close to foaling and irritable as all hell, so I reach into my pocket and pull out a sugar cube before offering it to her in the flat of my hand. She takes it and I rub her nose and give her a little loving because God knows she needs it right now. We both do.

Fuck.

Lemon Goddamn Winchester. I never thought I'd see her again. Especially not when her mama said she was engaged to be married. When she first left, I didn't think it was gonna stick, but as the days passed and not having her in my life anymore got worse and worse, I gave up hope of her ever coming back to me. Now I wish I hadn't prayed so hard for her return because those old wounds that I tried to stitch up just burst open, and I feel as though my entrails and internal organs are in plain view for everyone to see. Especially her.

Footsteps echo down the stable corridor and I yell at Wade to get a wriggle on. When there's no answer, I swallow hard because I know it ain't Wade who's just walked in.

"Not Wade," she says.

"No, I guess you're not."

"I could never be that annoying."

"Well ..." I pick up a brush and comb Belle's coat.

She whinnies and Lemon enters the stable and pets her nose. "You poor darlin'. Not long to go now, huh?"

"She's ready to drop any day."

"She's a little old to be foaling, isn't she?"

"Yeah. A young colt got out through a broken fence and found his way into her pasture." I duck under her neck and brush her other side. "We were worried for a while she was going to lose it."

I glance at Lemon. She ain't looking at me. She's staring at the stable across the row, two doors down from this one. "Where the hell is Sleep'n Pete?"

Shit. Lemon walks over to the stable and my eyes follow her every move. She turns back to me, her jaw set and her forehead all pinched. I swallow hard and sigh. "He was gettin' on and he—"

"No!"

"He changed after you left, Lemon. We all did. No one could ride him. No one could even get near enough to him, and then one of the ranch hands was dumb enough to try. He got maybe three yards before Pete threw him from the saddle, but Pete injured himself too. He was lame."

"No. You didn't?"

"We had to."

"Who did it—who was this ranch hand and who the hell killed my horse?"

"It doesn't matter. He's gone now. Your daddy fired him."

"When did this all happen?"

"About a year after you left."

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“Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“Because no one thought you’d come back. I mean, hell, you couldn’t even stay for me, for us. You just left and no one knew until it was too late ...”

“Too late for what?” She shakes her head. “The damage was already done. Me sticking around wasn’t going to change that.”

“It was too late to stop you,” I finish, but the point is moot. It’s clear she didn’t want me to try and change her mind. If she did, she wouldn’t have run out on me in the middle of the night.

“Where did you bury my horse?” Her voice breaks over that last word, and all I wanna do is pull her close, kiss her, and take away the sadness in her eyes. But it ain’t my job to ease her heartache anymore. She saw to that the second she left. “Colt?”

I sigh. “In the field near our tree.”

Her features crumple, for just a second, and then she puts on a brave face and leaves the stable without looking back.

I don’t know how to talk to her now. I don’t know how to open my mouth and not let all that shit pour out because the truth is, I’m full of it. I’m angry, but it’s more than that. I’m fucking broken. I’ve been bottling this shit up for years, and I can’t help but just want her to hurt too. I just need to know she feels something, anything.

All I wanna do is take her in my arms and hold her, but twelve years of bitterness and

longing means I'll never let her get close enough again. She was my whole fucking world, and she just up and left without a backward glance. Now that she's back, I need to remember that she's the one who broke us because all I want to do is forgive her. All I want is to bury myself inside her and finally find my way home. As if I'm the one who's been away all this time.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lemon

I pick two of my mama's roses from the garden and saddle up Teraway to ride out. It's been a good long while since I did this, long before I left the ranch. I chose one of the wilder horses used for roping cattle, as if I have something to prove, and head through the west pasture to a place I knew like the back of my hand growing up. The red oak stands tall in the distance, and the closer I get the more I realize that it hasn't changed a single bit. I climb off the horse and tether it to the stump Colt had fixed in place years ago. When we were teens, we came here all the time. Every spare second we weren't doing chores, we were making out at the base of this tree or whiling away long, hot summer days at the watering hole.

I take the roses from the saddlebag and frown at the bruised petals. Two crosses lay to the left of the tree, and I place a flower at the base of each. You'd think I'd be used to crying by now, but I'm surprised by the tears that stream down my face and the sobs that wrack my body.

"I'm so sorry I left you. I'm sorry I wasn't here. You were the best horse—the best friend—any girl could ask for."

The ATV cuts through my quiet eulogy and I tip my head back and close my eyes, just praying for some reprieve, for a single minute where someone's not yelling at me for leaving them.

“Lemon?” My brother’s voice is soft, softer than I think I’ve ever heard it as he rounds the oak.

“I just really need a minute, Wade.”

“Look, I’m sorry I was kind of a dick to you.”

I open my eyes and turn to face him. “Kind of?”

He nods and lifts one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. “Well, okay, a huge dick.”

“It’s fine. It’s not like I don’t deserve it.”

“Are you okay? Colt told me you didn’t take the news of Pete’s death well.”

“Why didn’t none of y’all call me?”

“Would you have come home even if we did?”

“Probably not.”

He’s right. Nothing could have pulled me back home at that stage of my life. Not even my best friend dying.

“I can’t believe he’s gone.” I’m no longer sure if I’m talking about our father or my horse. With Daddy gone, seeing Colt, and then finding out my horse died because of some idiot ranch hand is just the icing on a craptastic cake.

“That horse was never anything but wild, Lemonade. You’re the only one who could tame him.”

I glare at my brother. “He didn’t have to die because he didn’t trust other people.”

“No. He didn’t, but what’s done is done, and no amount of wishin’ is gonna undo it.”

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I nod, because he's right. I never thought I'd see a day when I'd say that Wade Winchester is right. Twice. A tear rolls down my cheek, and he pulls me to him and wraps his strong arms around my shoulders. He doesn't say anything. He doesn't have to. He just lets me cry into his T-shirt and he rubs my back in soothing circles. I'd forgotten how much I'd missed this. Family, hugs, people who know you and who've loved you from the second you opened your eyes. Maybe being home isn't so bad after all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Lemon

Seventeen years old

I walk Sleep'n Pete out of the stable and through the west pasture. It's just after midnight and I can't risk his hooves waking my daddy or brothers as he thunders away from the yard. I glance at the stars overhead and the fireflies sparking in the distance like tiny green light bulbs flashing on and off, helping me find my way in the dark.

When we're far enough from the ranch house, I hoist myself up into the saddle and nudge Pete's sides with my boots. He bolts through the west pasture, and I ride the whole way as if the devil were on my back just to get to Colt. I can make out the lanterns and the shape of his body long before I come to a stop in front of our tree, and my heart trips all over itself at the prospect of meeting him, of touching him, without the fear of anyone catching us. I slide from the stirrups, spooking Colt's horse Knieval in the process, and I throw myself into Colt's waiting arms, kissing

him like I'll never get the chance again.

He cups my cheeks with his hands and pulls away. "Hi. I wasn't sure you were coming."

"I had to wait until Daddy went to sleep. He's been staying up later than usual."

"Do you think he knows?"

I laugh. "Well, considering we're both not dead, I'm gonna go with no."

Colt shakes his head and peppers my face with kisses. "I don't like this sneaking around we've been doin'."

"I want you to make love to me," I whisper, running my hands up under his T-shirt, caressing the hard ridges and valleys of each clearly defined muscle.

"Whoa! Slow down there, Lemonade."

"Stop callin' me that. And I'm serious. I love you, Colton Hayes. I want you to be my first."

"We got time, Lemon. We've got all the time in the world—"

"Then we should be using it doin' what we love."

He chuckles and places a kiss to my nose. "I can wait. We don't need to rush into anything right now."

"I want you, Colt. I don't want to wait. This isn't something I'm going to change my mind about."

“Okay, but ... here?”

“Why not? It’s not like anyone else is out here at this time of night to see us.”

He leans down and kisses me, tender at first and then our kisses become deeper, needier, and much more insistent. He walks me backward toward the blanket at the base of our tree. I stumble into him and we sink to the ground, his lips on mine and my hands in his hair. Colt kneels as he grasps the hem of my shirt between his fingers and slides it over my body, discarding it on the dewy grass. His Adam’s apple bobs as he takes in my shirtless breasts. My nipples bead against the tepid summer breeze and I’m suddenly nervous. We’ve spent so many nights just like this one, touching, kissing, and getting lost in one another, but all of that was above our clothing and I’ve never felt more exposed. I never thought I’d like it this much either.

Colt reaches out and traces his warm fingers over my collarbone and down my chest until he’s cupping my breast in his hands. He pinches my nipple and sensation bolts through me like an arc of lighting across a black Texan sky. “You’re so fuckin’ beautiful.”

I smile coyly and bite my lip. “Your turn.”

I grab his T-shirt and yank on it. Colt removes it and tosses it aside with lightning speed. Colt’s been working my family’s ranch since he was old enough to ride a horse and lift a bale of hay—but even knowing he was all hard-won muscle, even feeling him through our clothes when we made out, the images in my head clearly didn’t do him justice.

I reach out and touch his chest. He covers my hand with his and guides it over the hard planes of his abdomen to the bulge in his pants. Together we rub him through his jeans and his free arm wraps around my body and pulls me to him. I straddle him and lean down to kiss him, rocking back and forth in his lap. Colt grabs my hips and

slides me over his dick. I gasp at the desperation in his movements. We've done this a few times now, but every time I'm this close to him, feeling his obvious desire for me against my pussy, my body is on fire. I work my hips faster, and Colt guides me with his hands on my ass. I lean forward so I'm close enough to kiss him, and he drives his tongue in my mouth as his hands slip between our slick bodies and squeeze my breasts.

Heat builds within my core. I rock against his hardness, my panties and Daisy Dukes providing a bittersweet friction. It's too much, and not enough, but I still fall headfirst into the sensations. Colt's calloused hands pinch and tease my nipples. I see stars as heat and pleasure collide within me and I cry out, but my begging is swallowed by the sweetness of his tongue stroking my own. "Oh my God!"

Colton smiles. "That was seriously the hottest thing I've ever seen."

I giggle. "Sure. I bet you say that to all the girls."

"No. I've never done that with anyone else."

"Really?"

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“Swear on my mama’s life. God rest her soul.”

I frown and stare at him, confused. “Why not? You could have any girl in this town, or in the tristate area for that matter.”

His grin is sincere and so deliciously sweet because it’s all mine. “There’s only one girl I’ve had my eye on since I was old enough to know what kissing was.”

I slap his chest playfully. “Shut up.”

“I’m serious. And I am seriously in love with her, with everything she does, with everything she thinks, feels, and says.”

“Well, you’ll have to introduce me so I can kick her ass. I can’t have my man obsessing over some other girl.”

He laughs and tugs at my Daisy Dukes. “In case you didn’t know, it’s you, Lemon Winchester.”

I grin and slide off him, unfastening the button and zip on my shorts. Then I wriggle out of them. I still have my panties on, and he’s still wearing his jeans, but Colt pulls me close to him as if he can’t bear not touching me. His hands slide between my legs, and I know he can feel the wetness soaking the thin fabric. He pushes them aside and gently caresses me, the pads of his fingers seeking out my honey and sliding up to cover my clit. He draws tiny circles around my swollen flesh and my knees threaten to give out.

“Colt.” I pant. His lips find my neck and shoulder as he intensifies his stroking. “Colt, please?”

“Come for me again, Lemonade,” he whispers against the shell of my ear, causing gooseflesh to erupt over my skin. My legs quiver and my breath comes in short, sharp pants. I’m so close to coming again that I don’t want to stop, but I need him inside me. I grab his wrist with every intention of yanking it away, but I can’t. Fireworks explode behind my closed eyelids and tremors rock my body. He kisses me as he lays me down on the blanket.

I’m a limp noodle. I’m euphoric. I’m floating, and all I can do is watch as he takes off his jeans and fishes a condom out of his wallet, tears into the foil wrapping with his teeth, and rolls it on. His dick juts out proudly, and I’ve never seen one up close and in real life, but he is perfect. A dusky rose, thick and long, and definitely hard.

I swallow and Colt glances from my breasts to my face. “Are you sure you wanna do this?”

“Absolutely,” I say with a courage I no longer quite feel.

“It’s okay to back out, Lemon.”

“Colton Hayes, do you wanna have sex with me or not?”

He grins. He freaking grins as if I’m the most adorable thing he’s ever seen. He glances down at his dick and back at me. “I think we both know the answer to that.”

“Then do it already.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He eases my panties down, then he climbs between my legs, his much larger frame lowering over mine and settling between my thighs. I wasn’t expecting

him to be quite so heavy, and I feel like I'm suffocating as his weight presses me into the hard ground. He seems to realize this because he supports his weight with one elbow as he guides himself inside. Pain tears through me, paralyzing me beneath him.

"Lemon?"

"I'm okay," I say, but the words turn to a whimper as tears roll down my face to melt into my hair.

"Shit. Darlin', I'm sorry." Colt hangs his head and tries to pull out, but I cling to him.

"Don't stop. Please, Colt."

"I don't wanna hurt you. Maybe we should wait?"

"Wait for what? Me to be old and gray?"

He chuckles and it does interesting things to my insides. A little of the excitement and heat I'd felt just moments ago arcs through me again.

"Why don't you slip your hands between us and show me how you touch yourself when I'm not around?"

I bite my lip and wriggle my hand into the space between our bodies as Colt lifts his hips. I touch my clit, the sensation so electric with the pressure of him inside me. As my hunger for him, for pleasure, and for release grows, I feel my walls start to relax. A new tension twists through my body—want, need, desire—all for him. Only for him.

"Jesus, Lemonade. I'll never grow tired of watching you fuck yourself while your pussy clamps around my cock." Colt groans in my ear, and I realize it's me who's moving. He's given me all of the control in this situation, and I'm the one bucking

beneath him, taking my pleasure from him and not the other way around. I can feel the tension in his whole body, the restraint he must be using to hold back and let me explore this new world of craving and carnality, but I want to feel him lose control too.

“Colt?” I pant.

“Mmm?”

“I ... I want you to fuck me.”

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His eyes hood over as he searches my gaze. “Are you sure?”

I nod and bite my lip, keeping my fingers circling my clit as he slides deeper and pulls almost all of the way out. His arms tremble as he supports his weight, and I draw him to me, wanting to feel our bodies connected everywhere. He kisses my lips, gentle nips at my tender flesh as he pistons his hips. Pleasure, heat, and anticipation collide within me, pulling me under like a current, sluicing through me as all of my nerve endings and synapses fray and fire. I come harder than I ever have, clutching his body to mine, my legs wrapped around his, my heels digging into his ass, pushing him deeper as he follows me into the sweet and wild abyss.

“Lemonade, we gotta wake up.” He rubs my arm under the blanket, and I mumble and bury myself deeper in the crook of his shoulder. It’s warm here and we’re naked and I don’t want to ride back to the ranch on my own. I don’t want to be without him after what we just did.

“Just a few more minutes,” I murmur.

“Okay, just a few. And then we’re going back.”

“Hmmm.” I nod, but I think he’s already asleep.

I sit bolt upright as hooves thunder toward me and for a moment, I can’t get my bearings. I don’t know where the hell I am, and then Colt stiffens beside me.

“Shit, shit, shit. We fell asleep.” He’s on his feet in a second, tossing my shirt at me as he pulls on his jeans.

“Oh my God! My daddy is gonna kill you.” I throw on my T-shirt and panties, but I’m not even sure where my shorts ended up.

“West is gonna kill me first.”

“You’re goddamn right he is,” West says, as he comes from out of nowhere and punches Colt right in the jaw.

“West, no!” I’m half dressed, and I lunge toward them, but Wade pulls me back. I scream and buck against him, thrashing my arms and legs in an effort to get away. “Let me go!”

West hits him again but Colt doesn’t fight back.

“You’re my best friend. And you’ve been fucking my little sister.”

“It isn’t like that.” Colt spits blood on the ground by his feet.

West darts forward and sucker punches Colt right in the gut. Colt crumples to the ground and I bring my elbow up into Wade’s face. He shouts and releases me, and I dive between my eldest brother and Colt, using my body like a shield. “West William Winchester, you stop right now!”

West’s lips turn up in a sneer. “Move, Lemon.”

“No! I love him.”

West shakes his head. “You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. You’re too young to be in love.”

“You don’t know. You probably wouldn’t even know what love was if it slapped you

in the face.”

“Get out of the way, Lemon.” West steps toward me.

I throw my arms wide, and steel my resolve as I stare down one pissed-off brother.
“You wanna hurt him, you have to go through me.”

West’s eyes narrow, darting between his best friend bleeding on the ground and his half-naked little sister protecting the one-hundred-and-fifty-pound boy next door.
“How long has this been going on?”

“Long enough, dumbass.” I turn and kneel by Colt’s side, tears welling in my eyes at the sight of blood on his busted lip.

“This is all my fault,” Colt says. “I’ve been in love with Lemon for years. But I never planned to touch her. I didn’t chase her, West. I swear. It just happened.”

“You think that makes it better?” Wade shouts.

“No. If anything, you probably wanna kick my ass even more.”

“You’re damn right I do.”

“No one is kicking anyone’s ass.” I glare at West. “I was the one doing the chasin’. I came onto him, and you know what happens when I set my mind to something I want.”

“He’s older than you!” West closes his eyes and takes several deep breaths. “Four fucking years older. He shoulda known better.”

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“It doesn’t matter, West. I love him and he loves me. You wanna kick his ass, then you better be prepared to kick mine too, because from now on, Colt and Lemon are a package deal.”

I can hear more horses in the distance, and West glances down at me. “Get dressed. Daddy’s commin’.”

All my hot air deflates like a balloon and I kiss Colt, despite the busted-up lip, and scramble to find my shorts. My brothers turn their backs as I slip on the tight denim and I wrap the blanket around me because I can’t stop shaking. I don’t know if it’s fear, shock, or the early morning chill, but there’s cold deep in my bones as I glance at Colt. He slides on his T-shirt and hangs his head. I eliminate the distance between us and slip my hand in his. He won’t look at me, so I step in front of him, cup his cheek and force him to.

“West is right,” Colt says. “I shoulda known better.”

“I don’t care what West or anyone else thinks.”

My brother folds his arms across his chest and scowls.

“They’re over here, Daddy,” Wyatt says, coming around the side of the red oak on his horse. He takes a beat to assess the scene. My hand in Colt’s, the blankets, lanterns in the trees, and he whispers, “Oh, shit. Y’all are so dead.”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, boy?” Colt’s daddy is the next to stumble across the scene. His gray eyes, so much like his son’s, burn into Colt’s. He jumps off

his horse and glares at our joined hands. Colt tries to extract his hand from mine, but I hold on for dear life.

My daddy charges around the tree, looks me over from head to toe, and settles his gaze on Colt like he's fixing for a fight. "Lemon, you get yourself on home now."

"No."

Daddy's eyes narrow. "What did you just say?"

"I said no, Daddy." My voice breaks over his name and I swallow hard because I've never told my father no in my whole life. "I'm stayin'. Whatever you say or do to him, you do to me too."

"Don't test me, Lemonade."

"I don't mean no disrespect, Daddy, but I love him, and I will not leave so your conscience is clear because you don't want to give him a whooping in front of your little girl."

He shakes his head. "You're not my little girl anymore."

Tears fill my eyes and I wince, but he won't break my resolve. "You're hurt, so I won't hold that against you, but I am too your little girl. No matter how many boys I give my heart and body to."

"Go on back to the house, Lemon," he hisses. "I can't even look at you, right now."

His words sting, an arrow right through my heart, but I'm not backing down on this. "No, Daddy. I'm not going anywhere without Colt."

“What the hell were you thinkin’, boy?” Mr. Hayes shouts.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Colt says, looking first at his daddy and then mine. “I know we shouldn’t have been out here, and we shouldn’t have been sneakin’ around behind everyone’s backs.”

“You’re damn right you shouldn’t,” Mr. Hayes says.

“You wanna court my daughter,” Daddy says, stepping closer to Colt. “You come sit at my table. Don’t you ever disrespect me or my little girl like that again.”

“Daddy, this isn’t his fault.”

My father’s eyes are cold and unforgiving as he glares at me. “What are you talkin’ about?”

“I asked him to meet me here.”

“You ask him to take your innocence too? He’s older than you. He knows better than to let some little filly throw herself at him. Or at least, I thought he did,” my father says.

“I’m not some little filly. I’m not a goddamn horse, and would y’all just stop judging me for doin’ exactly what the boys have done since they were old enough to kiss a girl. I’m a young woman. I trust my head and my heart, and both belong to Colt.”

My dad winces like my words leave a sour taste in his mouth, and I step forward and grab his hand curled into a fist at his side. “I love him. And he loves me.”

“You’re too young to know what love is.”

“I’m seventeen and a half, Daddy. Weren’t you the same age when you met Mama?”

“That’s different.”

“How? How is it different?”

“Because you’re my daughter,” he bites out.

I wipe away my tears with the back of my hand and nod. “I am, and I love Colt. Nothing anyone says or does is gonna change that.”

Daddy shakes his head. “It ain’t right, Lemonade.”

“Says who? Colt’s been a part of my life as long as I can remember. He loves me, he takes good care of me, and you can tell me not to see him, but that’s not gonna stop the way my heart feels. He’s my whole world, Daddy.”

All of the anger leaves my father’s face, replaced instead by a sad sort of resignation. He shakes his head and turns to Mr. Hayes. “Best you take your boy on home now.”

Mr. Hayes nods and glares at Colt, and I worry what Colt’s daddy might do when everyone is not there to temper his anger. Colt got his heart and his sweetness from his mama, but the only similarity I’ve seen between him and his daddy is the way they look. He don’t talk about it much, but I know Mr. Hayes is harder on Colt with a belt or his hands than our daddy has ever been with us.

I clutch Colt’s hand as he passes and give it a small squeeze, and then he and Knievel are gone, along with Mr. Hayes. I glance at my own father, and then at my brothers all standing there stony-faced and full of their own sense of selves, casting judgement

on me and Colt.

“Well, are y’all just gonna stand there gawking at me, or are you gonna get back to the house before Mama feeds all our breakfasts to the dogs?”

I roll up the blanket and stomp toward Pete, then climb into the saddle and take off for home at breakneck speed before anyone else can vocalize how disappointed they are in me.

CHAPTER NINE

Lemon

I wake early, shower, dress, and apply a minimal amount of makeup—or war paint as my daddy called it—and I head downstairs. Mama isn’t in the kitchen, but she’s already served up grits and biscuits for breakfast. I don’t want to eat, and I settle instead for a strong black coffee. The mood in the kitchen is somber, and I can’t help but notice the absence of Cash and Colt. “No extended family today?”

“They’ll be at the church,” West says, pouring the remainder of his coffee down the sink and leaning against the counter.

“So how is this going to work? Shall I drive Mama?”

“I can drive myself,” Mama says, coming down the stairs in her finest church clothes.

Wyatt proclaims, “I’ll drive Mama and Lemonade in her car.”

Over my dead body.

I give him a stern look. “I can drive my own damn car.”

“Lemon, just let me drive. Please? When the hell else am I ever gonna get behind the wheel of a Ferrari?”

“Fine, but I’m not insured for anyone else but Stavros and I, so if you break it, you bought it.”

Wyatt kisses my cheek. “Thanks, Lemonade.”

“I mean it, Wyatt. Do not crash my car.”

“Never.” He gives me a willful smile as he heads to the key holder by the back door and plucks my key fob from the hook.

Mama wrings her hands. “I still don’t see why I can’t just drive myself?”

“Come on, Mama. What’s wrong with showing up in style? Daddy woulda loved it.”

She smiles sadly. “No offence, Lemonade, but your daddy would have called that car a hunk of European junk.”

“It’s a lot of money on a car. Why, I bet you could sell it and fund this ranch for several years to come,” West mutters.

“Now you hush, West William Winchester. That car was a gift, and Lemon ain’t selling it to make you happy. I’m ashamed you’d even suggest such a thing. And on today of all days.”

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West turns and leaves, the screen door slamming behind him.

“He’ll come around, Lemonade.”

“I’m not so sure.” I shake my head, staring after my brother. I don’t know why the others can forgive me and West can’t, but he doesn’t seem to be warming to his little sister any, and I don’t know if he ever will. “I’m not sure I deserve it.”

Daddy’s funeral went much the way I imagined it would go, with copious amounts of tears, and townsfolk I haven’t seen or thought about since I left offering empty platitudes and invitations to visit with them. I don’t bother telling anyone that they made my life here a living hell and the only intentions I have are to leave them in my rearview as soon as I possibly can.

Back at the ranch, I put Mama to bed and drink several glasses of wine as I heat up a casserole in the oven for the boys. I set the table on autopilot, and I lose it when I accidentally place a plate at Daddy’s spot.

Upstairs, I don’t bother changing out of my dress, but I do switch my heels for boots and throw a long cashmere wrap around my shoulders. It’s not really warm enough for the chill that settles in from the mountains overnight, but anything is better than feeling this numbness in my bones.

I don’t eat. I don’t want food—I want my daddy back, but if wishes were horses, right? I grab a bottle of my father’s whiskey and head outside, walking the stables and then the grounds for what feels like hours. Eventually, the hurt lessens, and I smile as I bring the whiskey bottle to my lips and deem myself well and truly drunk.

I cut through the pastures toward the bed-and-breakfast. I could lie to myself and say my feet carry me, but I know exactly where I'm headed. Because when I feel this way, there's only one other person on this earth I want. I take another long pull from the whiskey—it burns my throat all the way down and I raise the bottle heavenward. “I miss you like hell, Daddy.”

“Lemon?”

I sniff and turn. Colt is standing behind me. Of course he is. He's already changed out of his funeral clothes and is wearing faded jeans and a Henley. Every damn muscle can be seen through the thin shirt, and I don't mind that he's catching me looking.

His face is stern as he rolls his gaze over me, finally settling on the whiskey that I try to hide behind my back. “What are you doin' out here?”

“Lookin' for trouble.” I bite my lip and poke my finger at his chest, trailing my hand over hard, warm muscle that's practically begging to be touched. “You seen anyone who fits that description?”

He leans forward and takes the bottle from me. I try to snatch it back, but settle instead for pouting and not falling over.

“You never could handle your whiskey.”

“I handle my whiskey just fine. It's everyone else who's the problem.”

“Right.” He's stone-faced as he looks me over from head to toe and takes my hand.

I stare at his rough fingers in mine and sadness slams into me, clutching at my throat, squeezing my heart until it hurts.

“Jesus. Did you even eat today? Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“To my place.”

“I don’t think so. Nothing good ever came of you and me being alone.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Lemon. I’m not taking you back to the ranch house because your Mama don’t need to see you like this.”

I puff out my cheeks, blowing my bangs out of my eyes. “Like what, drunk and grieving?”

“That what you’re callin’ it?”

I yank my hand from his and stop dead in my tracks. “How dare you. My father was just laid to rest.”

“Yeah, and all your worst demons are coming out to play. I don’t think your family needs to see that side of you right now.”

“That side of me? What the hell does that mean?” I scowl. “And how would you know what they need?”

“Goddamn it, woman. You haven’t changed any. You’re still an obnoxious drunk.”

I deepen my scowl and throw in a pout for good measure. “And you’re still annoying.”

Colt raises a brow. “Annoying?”

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“That’s what I said.”

“Okay, that’s it.” He bends at the waist and scoops me up and over his shoulder. My stomach protests with the sudden lack of the-right-way-up-ed-ness.

“Put me down!”

“Nope.” He slaps my ass and I squeal and pound my fists against his back. Colt climbs the stairs to his cabin and opens the door. I buck and kick and he tosses me on the bed as if I weigh nothing. I’m on my feet as soon as the room stops spinning, but Colt blocks my path, his back pressed firmly against the door.

“You best get comfortable, Lemonade, because you ain’t goin’ nowhere until you sober up.”

“You can’t hold me here. That’s called kidnapping.”

“Call it what you want, darlin’. You and me are gonna be spending a long night together.”

I cross my arms and sit on the edge of the bed, eyeing the whiskey bottle like a lover he’s keeping me from. “When did you become so un-fun?”

“I don’t know, Lemon. Maybe it was around the time my girlfriend walked out on me.”

I sigh and lie back on the bed, staring up at the peeling paint on the ceiling. “It never

would have worked with us.”

“Oh, really?” He smirks and folds himself into a chair, still close enough to the door to keep me from sneaking by. “Why is that?”

“Because I was dying to get out, and you were determined to stay.”

“How the hell would you know? You never even discussed leavin’ with me. I just woke up and you were gone.”

“I couldn’t stay here, Colt. I didn’t want their pity. All those empty words, the judgement, the way they looked at me like I was something that might break.”

“No one was lookin’ at you like that, Lemon.”

“You looked at me like that,” I accuse and instantly regret it. A quiet sob tears free of my chest and I roll onto my side and close my eyes. The bed smells like him, like wilderness and sage. I press my nose to the coverlet and breathe him in because I can’t say these things to his face. “I loved you. I was so madly in love with you, I thought it might kill me.”

He laughs, but it cuts bone deep. “The feeling was mutual.”

“You said was,” I murmur as sleep beckons to me like a gentle lover. “You don’t love me anymore, but seeing you again makes it all so clear. My heart still beats for you, Colt. No matter how much I wish it wouldn’t.”

CHAPTER TEN

Colt

“What did you say?” I whisper into the quiet cabin, though I know I’m never getting an answer to that question.

Lemon’s breathing deepens and she rolls toward me. She’s a different person than the Lemon I knew from twelve years ago. Time has aged her. Lemon’s face is still just as gorgeous as it ever was, maybe more so with the faint laugh lines bracketing her luscious mouth. Her body is tighter now too, hips a little wider, her ass rounder, and her tits are much more than the handful I used to cup, but inside, she’s still the fiery Lemon I loved. New York didn’t dull that. If anything, it made her even more passionate. I stare at her sleeping form and debate my choices. I could throw her over my shoulder and walk her back to the ranch, but she’s just as likely to make a ruckus and wake everyone up, so I shoot a text to West.

Me: Don’t kill me, but your sister’s spending the night.

West doesn’t bother to reply. Instead, he calls, and I head into the bathroom and answer it on a whisper, “Hello?”

“What the fuck is my sister doing in your bed?”

“Come on now, West. You really think I’m gonna go there again? She was drunk and wandering around near the B and B. I thought it was safer to bring her back here than return her to the ranch house and wake your mama.”

West sighs into the receiver. “That’s a good point, I guess.”

“She drank a lot.”

“Wine?”

“Worse, whiskey.”

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“Shit. Lemon never could handle her whiskey.”

“I know it.”

“Okay, Wade and I are in town, and God only knows where Wyatt is. He disappeared as soon as we got home, but you call if you need us.”

“Will do.”

“I know I don’t need to tell you that if you touch her—”

“Don’t you have any faith in me as a man who knows right from wrong and who happens to be a pretty decent human being?”

“Well, let’s see. You made out with my little sister when she was sixteen, took her virginity at seventeen, and let’s not forget that you—”

“Yeah, okay. I haven’t always been the best judge of character when it came to her.”

“Colt, when it comes to Lemon, you could never tell up from down.”

“It’s different now.”

“Is it? Let me ask you something. In the time she’s been back, have you thought about picking up right where you left off?”

I let out a disgruntled sigh.

“I rest my case.”

“She’s safe with me.”

“Lemon has never been safe with you. Do you know why?”

I tense and grit out through my teeth, “I know you’re about to tell me.”

“You two are all kinds of wrong for each other, and I think you’ve been through enough.”

“Why don’t you let me worry about what I’ve been through and what I’m capable of handling.”

“Well, when she skips town again in the middle of the night, don’t say I didn’t tell you so.”

“I’ll bring her back in the mornin’.”

“See that you do it before Mama wakes and finds her gone. She don’t need any more heartache right now.”

“Uh-huh.” I end the call and bounce the phone against my palm as I exit the bathroom and stare at the woman in my bed. Lemon hasn’t moved. Her hair falls into her face and I cross the room and brush it back like I’ve done a million times before. A quiet sigh leaves her parted lips and I have to resist the urge to sweep my thumb across them and see if they’re as soft as I remember.

I may have promised her brother I could keep my hands to myself, but seeing her laid out before me, I wanna touch her everywhere. I just bet her fiancé would love that now, wouldn’t he?

Moving away from the bed, I sit in the armchair, watching her sleep. I can't sleep here and still be awake enough to work in the pastures tomorrow. And I can't go to the bed-and-breakfast because it's locked up tight after office hours. So I have no choice but to climb in beside her, but I don't like my chances of getting any shut-eye tonight. Not when the only woman I've ever loved is sleeping beside me, the way I've always wanted.

Turning out the light, I take off my jeans and leave my boxers in place as I slip beneath the covers. I yank them out from under her and she rolls into the middle of the bed. I gently try to push her over, but if I'm honest with myself, I don't try too hard. I lie back against the pillow and cover us both with the blankets as she snuggles in closer, her head on my chest and her arm draped across my waist. I ease my arm out from under her and wrap it around her shoulders, gently holding her to me.

In the morning, she'll get up and things will go back to the way they were. I'll regret ever pulling her into my cabin. I'll regret pushing the hair back off her face and holding her like she belongs to me, because the truth is, she don't belong to anyone. Maybe she never did.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Colt

Twenty years old

Several hours after I received the biggest ass-whooping of my life, I emerge from my bedroom and sit at my daddy's table. Skirt steak and potato again. He don't know how to cook nothing else, and I ain't dumb enough to complain because he's kept me fed ever since Mama died. I think that's why finding me with Lemon Winchester was such a slap in the face, because without the paychecks we bring in from Winchester Wild, we'd have no food on our table and no roof over our heads.

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We eat in silence until we're done, then my father leans back in his seat and glares at me. "Clean this up, and then you head on over to the Winchesters' and you make it right, boy," my father says.

"Yes, sir."

"Lemon Winchester is off-limits."

I nod as I collect our plates and scrape off the table scraps into the dog's bowl. I wash the dishes in record time and leave the house. My face and body hurt from the beating my daddy gave me. I didn't fight back, because I earned it. I kept Lemon out all night. My selfishness could have ruined her reputation, but worse than that, I made her daddy and her brothers look at her like they were ashamed, and I never wanted her to feel the brunt of that anger. It should all be directed at me. This is all on me.

I saddle up Knieval and ride on over to the Winchester Ranch. It's just after dinner, and I know the boys will be finishing up in the stalls as Mr. and Mrs. Winchester sit on the porch with a whiskey, while Lemon is usually up in her room doing her homework.

The Winchester boys all side-eye me as I pass on my way to the ranch house, but I don't stop to talk to them because I got to make it right with Mr. and Mrs. Winchester first. Eventually, West and I will have it out, but that's a problem for another day.

I climb off my horse and tether him to the fencepost. He whinnies and bows his head to gnaw on the lush green grass by the fence. I don't expect to see Lemon when I glance up. She's standing on the front porch, as if she just came bolting out from

inside. She takes a step toward me.

“Go on back to your room, now, Lemon,” Mr. Winchester says.

“Daddy,” she says in a warning tone.

“You mind if I visit with you a minute, Mr. Winchester?”

“You’re standin’ in my yard talkin’ now, ain’t ya?”

“Yes, sir.” I take a deep breath and try not to glance at his daughter as I address him. “I’d like to apologize for my actions. I know it was wrong of me to meet her last night, and I know I should have come and spoke to you first, but I love your daughter, sir. I can apologize for going about things the wrong way, and sneaking around behind everyone’s backs, but I won’t apologize for lovin’ her.”

“You’re old enough to be her big brother, and you’re certainly old enough to know right from wrong.”

“Yes, sir, I am. But being with Lemon doesn’t feel wrong, and I swear I ain’t ever looked at her like a little sister.”

“You broke my trust in you. You broke my trust in my little girl.” Mr. Winchester glares at me, and then he looks at his daughter, the tears streaming down her face, and something in him seems to melt. Lemon has a way of doing that to a man. All your resolve just disappears into thin air. I don’t care that my daddy warned me away from her because the truth is, I can’t stay away. Now that I’ve kissed her, been inside her, and held her in my arms, I can’t ever give her up. And if I can sway old William Winchester, I know my own father will come around.

“I could tell you to stay away from him, Lemon, but I know two things. One, you’re

Winchester wild. I told you that Sleep'n Pete was off-limits and it just made you want him more. I'm not stupid enough to believe that won't happen again here. But you're my little girl, Lemon, and while you live under my roof, you won't go sneaking out with boys in the middle of the night."

She swallows hard and nods. "No, sir."

He turns toward me. "And you come to my front door when you wanna see her."

"Yes, sir."

"You hurt my little girl, if you disrespect me, her, or the Winchester name again, I will castrate you."

"Yes, sir." I smile as it finally registers the boon he's giving us here. "I won't do nothing to hurt her or your family name."

"Oh, Daddy." Lemon throws herself into his arms and he looks taken aback, but he holds her tight and buries his face in her neck. After a beat, I clear my throat, because I don't know what else to do. I wanna be the one holding her right now, though I know I'm on thin ice.

Lemon releases her father and runs across the porch. She's down the stairs and jumping into my arms quicker than I can blink. She wraps her legs around my hips, and I'm so caught off guard, the baseball cap shifts on my head. She grabs the bill and turns it around so she can kiss me uninterrupted.

"Lemon," her father warns, and she slides down my body. I set her on her feet and lean in to kiss her cheek. She looks up at me like every word she said is true, like I own her heart, and I know that every punch from West and my father was worth it. I'd endure one hundred thousand beatings for this girl because she's my everything.

And always will be. There ain't no getting over Lemon Winchester.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Lemon

I roll over, snuggling closer to the warm body beside me. I slide my hands over hard muscle and groan, and then I sit bolt upright and stare at Colt's sleeping form.

No! Oh God, oh God, oh God. I did not sleep with Colton Hayes last night.

I take stock of my body. I'm not sore like I should be after sex, but then why the hell am I in his bed while he's buck naked? I carefully ease the cover up and take a peek, both disappointed and relieved when I discover he's not naked at all, but wearing cotton boxers. Cotton boxers that his hard on is straining against.

Oh, boy.

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“Something you need, Lemonade?” Colt’s sleep-rough voice scares me and I drop the blanket and scramble out of bed, thankful he didn’t undress me.

“Why am I here?”

“You tell me. You’re the one who was out lookin’ for me last night.”

I remember the whiskey and the longing for him, feeling like I needed Colt for the world to seem right again. In the twelve years that I’ve been gone, the ache to have him close burned so deep that some nights seemed to stretch on forever. In a city filled to bursting with people, in a bed draped in the finest silk sheets, I’d never felt so alone. I’d thought about him a lot. I was just too far from home and too stubborn to do anything about it. “I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t cause no harm. I kept you here because I didn’t want you waking Mama up.”

I quit my perusing the cabin for my boots and whip my head around to face him. Colt’s on his side, elbow propped on the pillows as he leans his head on his palm and tracks my every move. “Do you always call her Mama?”

“You know what she’s like. I wouldn’t dare go against Mama Winchester.” His brow creases and he throws off the covers, giving me another show of all of that glorious muscle and the sizable bulge in his boxers. He sits up and climbs out of bed. “It really bothers you, doesn’t it?”

For a moment, I think he’s talking about his giant erection. But the tone is all wrong

and when I snap my gaze to his, there's no humor in those gray eyes.

I shake my head, but we both know I'm lying.

"How 'bout I stick to ma'am from now on?"

"No. It's fine."

"That look on your face don't say fine."

"It just threw me, is all."

"Why? You know I've called her that since my own mama died."

A pang of regret hits my heart. Poor Colt. Here I am getting my panties in a twist about what he calls my mama, and I forgot he no longer has one to call his own. "I know. Please don't stop on my account. It's just ... waking up here, in your arms, everything's coming back to me and it's a lot to deal with. Especially after Daddy's funeral."

He grimaces and pulls on his jeans. "I get it. This is a lot for me too."

"Right. Well, I better get out of your hair and back to the house."

"Yeah, we don't want people talkin', now do we?"

A nervous laugh slips free of my throat. "No. We can't have that." I finally spot my boots over by the door and walk the few feet before leaning against the wall to slip them on. "Well, thanks again for ... you know, just being you."

"Anytime."

“And I’m real sorry I ruined your night.”

He scratches at the five o’clock shadow on his face. “I don’t know if I’d call it ruined. Laying my head down next to a pretty redhead, ain’t exactly my idea of a night ruined.”

“I suppose it depends on who the redhead is, now doesn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am, I guess it does.”

“I’ll see you at breakfast?”

“If you wanna wait while I shower, I can drive you back over.”

“That’s okay. I should go change too. I can only imagine my brothers’ faces when they see me walk in with yesterday’s clothes.”

“Well, alright then.” He nods and turns his back to me, heading toward the bathroom. I can’t help but watch him from the doorway—the thick corded muscles of his arms and shoulders as he walks into the tiny bathroom and strips off his jeans and boxers. And I know he knows I’m still here, so that last part was solely for my benefit. A thought that’s confirmed when he turns his head and winks before leaning over to turn on the faucet.

I slink out of the cabin and close the door, leaning my forehead against the hard wood as I breathe, trying to resist the urge to join him under the hot spray and give our bodies what they’ve been missing all this time.

“Lemon Winchester?”

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I turn and find Cash exiting the cabin a few doors up. His smile is wide and a gorgeous woman wrapped in a sheet stands in the doorway, placing the hat on his head. “Well, didn’t expect to see you here slinking out of Colt’s room before sunup.”

“It’s not at all what it looks like.” I walk closer so I won’t draw any more attention.

Cash’s gaze rolls over me and the smile deepens. “And wearing yesterday’s clothes too?”

“Leave the girl alone, cowboy,” the woman says. “Hi, I’m Carla.”

“I’m Lemon. Nice to meet you, Carla. Where are you from?”

“California.”

“Oh, nice. I spent a weekend there once with my fiancé,” I say. Carla raises her brows and Cash too looks a little taken aback. Seems not all news has traveled to every corner of the ranch. “Ah, myex-fiancé.”

“Girl, good on you for getting back on that horse. I always say the best way to get over a man is to get under another.”

“Is that what you say? Well, giddy up, darlin’.”

I shake my head. “Oh, it’s not like that. Colt and I didn’t sleep together.”

“Mm-hmm,” Cash murmurs. “You wearing yesterday’s clothes says otherwise.”

I roll my eyes and choose to ignore that statement. “Well, I hope Cash has been showing you some of the South’s finest hospitality.”

“Oh, he’s shown me everything the South has to offer.”

“I really do not doubt that, but if you need anything at all, you just holler, okay?”

“Thank you so much. Though you might come to regret that. I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to stay in a place more.”

“Well, we could always use more women on the ranch. Who knows, maybe we’ll find a way to keep you after all.”

“Uh-oh. That’s my cue to hightail it on out of here.” He winks at Carla and jumps off the stairs. “You want a lift back to the ranch house, Lemon?”

I glance at Colt’s cabin, praying he doesn’t come out right now and make this all one hundred times worse. “Sure. That would be great.”

“Alright then. I’ll see you later, L.A. Woman.”

“Bye. Good to meet you, Lemon.”

“You too, Carla. Hopefully we’ll see one another around.”

“Hopefully,” Carla says with a sly grin, and I have to wonder whether everyone on this damn ranch isn’t in on some big joke that I’m not privy to.

I climb into Cash’s truck. “Don’t say a word, and wipe that damn cocky grin off your face.”

He frowns and points to his toothpaste-commercial-worthy teeth. “This grin?”

I stare out the window just waiting for him to bring it up. Three, two ... one. “So, you and Colt?”

“No. There is no me and Colt anything. Nothing happened. I got drunk and he took me back to his cabin.”

“Well sure, but what were you doing out drinking anyway?”

“Daddy’s funeral was yesterday, or did your night with the Jessica Rabbit lookalike knock all the brain cells from your head?”

He makes apfftingsound, as if that’s not even remotely possible, but Cash wouldn’t be the first man to be struck dumb when it comes to a woman’s lady parts. “I didn’t forget. Just find it interesting that you found yourself back in the arms of your ex.”

“Okay, for a start, no one was in anyone else’s arms.”

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“If you think anyone on God’s green earth is gonna believe that the two of you could be alone in a cabin for an entire night and not screw one another, you’re not as smart as I thought you were, Lemon Winchester.”

“Believe what you want, but Colt and I know the truth.”

“Which is that you boned all night long.”

Rolling my eyes, I open my door before he’s even pulled the truck to a complete stop. I climb out, stomp up the path, and take the front porch stairs two at a time.

I yank the screen door back on its hinges and come face-to-face with Mama.

“Mama! Jesus, you scared me.”

“You watch your language in my house, Lemonade.”

“Sorry, ma’am,” I mutter, trying to inch past.

“And just where do you think you’re going?”

“Upstairs to shower?” My response comes out like a question because it’s always better to play it safe where pissing off Mama is concerned.

Her scrutinous gaze rolls over me from my boots all the way up to my messy bed hair, and I smooth my hand over what I’m sure is an unruly nest fit for chickens to roost.

“You’re still wearing your funeral clothes.”

Cash walks through the front door and greets my mama, but it’s the deep gravelly voice that follows his which has my skin breaking out in gooseflesh. “Mornin’, ma’am. Lemon.”

I turn and glare at him just in time to see him tip his hat. He moves on past us and Mama’s bright blue gaze narrows on me. “You had better start talkin’, girl. I mean, I know you’re going through a lot with your breakup with Stavros, but ... Cash?”

“Cash?” I screw up my nose in distaste. Not that Cash isn’t gorgeous to look at, but that whole cocky cowboy thing was never something I could fall for. “Mama, I didn’t spend the night with Cash.”

“Oh, thank heavens.” She sighs in relief. “Wait, that means you spent the night with Colt?”

“It wasn’t even like that.”

A slow smile spreads across her face and her eyes twinkle like string lights at Christmas. “Well, this is a new development.”

“What’s a new development?” West asks, coming in from outside.

“Nothing.” I make a beeline for the stairs, but Mama grabs my elbow and spins me around to face the kitchen.

“Breakfast in this house is six a.m. sharp. If you’re not at my table, you don’t eat.”

“Okay, fine. I’ll shower and head to the Buttermilk for a bite to eat. They’re still doin’ pie happy hour twice a day, right?”

“You will do no such thing. I will not have any child of mine eating breakfast at the diner and the whole town talkin’ about how I don’t fill their bellies before I send them off into the world.”

I let out a deep breath and stomp toward the kitchen before sitting down heavily in the seat next to Colt.

“Mornin’, Lemon.” Wyatt grins at me.

Which of course forces Wade to look up from the biscuits he’s scoffing down his throat and frown at my clothing. “Looking a little dressed up for breakfast aren’t we, Lemonade?”

“I think I’ve seen this ensemble before,” Wyatt says as he leans his elbow on the table and dissects my wrinkled dress and disheveled hair, “but I just can’t for the life of me figure out where.”

I roll my eyes and place a biscuit on my plate. I don’t do much more than just pick at it while everyone continues to pick at me.

“I could really go for some whiskey in this here coffee,” West says with the hint of a smile. “Know where I can find any, Lemonade?”

I stand and throw my napkin on the plate. “Y’all about done? Yes, if you must know, I drank too much and spent the night at Colt’s. And no, nothing happened. He’s a gentleman, unlike most of you.”

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“I thought I was the enemy?” Colt murmurs under his breath, and I glance at him wondering what the hell he means by that.

“Come on, Lemonade. We’re just giving you shit. We don’t mean nothin’ by it,” Wyatt says.

“Language, Wyatt.”

“Sorry, Mama.”

“Not that my sex life is any of y’all’s business, but Colt and I aren’t slipping back into our old ways. And the next time I do decide to sleep with someone, I’ll be sure to call June Baker—the town crier—so all of y’all get the message.”

I stomp toward the door as Wade says, “What’s she talkin’ about? June Baker’s been dead for ten years.”

Titters erupt behind me and I stalk up the stairs and slam my door, then lean against it for a beat to calm my damn temper. Whether I’m here for a little or a long while, that family down there is gonna be the death of me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lemon

Thunder cracks outside and I sit bolt upright in bed. It’s been a long time since the noise of the city hasn’t drowned out a storm and as the shutters bang against the

windows, I glance at the clock on the nightstand. 3:03 a.m. I know there's no getting back to sleep just yet, so I throw on my robe and head downstairs to make a warm cocoa. It's bucketing down outside, and as I stand in the kitchen staring out on the ranch bathed in moonlight and lightning, the light from the barn catches my attention.

Colt's been sleeping on a cot in the barn so he doesn't miss Belle's foaling. He must be freezing out there. I grab another mug from the cabinet and pour a little more chocolate and cocoa into my saucepan, and fire up the old gas stove. When the cocoa is hot, I pour it into the mugs and race upstairs to change. Then I take another blanket from the linen cupboard and tuck it under my arm before placing the mugs on a tray with a couple of Mama's homemade double chocolate-chip cookies. I grab an umbrella from the stand by the back door and head on out.

Rain beats down on my umbrella and I'm glad I changed from my robe into jeans and boots as mud splashes my calves. As I approach the barn, I start to think this is a bad idea, but as Mama always said, it costs you nothing to be nice. So I forge on, knowing I may be shooting myself in the foot.

A horse whinnies as I pass and Belle releases a grunt, the closest a laboring horse ever gets to screaming. Colt glances at me and then turns his attention back to the mare, cooing, "It's okay, Belle."

"Hi."

"What are you doing here?" he says gruffly.

"Couldn't sleep. The storm woke me. Made you some hot cocoa."

I offer the tray and Colt takes it carefully before setting it on the ground by the cot.

"Oh, and I brought you another blanket. It's freezing in here. How's she doing?"

“She’d be better if you stopped rambling,” he says, and then turns to me with an apology in his gaze. “I’m sorry. I’m an asshole. I’m just running on no sleep.”

“It’s okay. You’re right. I am rambling.”

“Thanks for the blanket, and the cocoa.”

“No problem.”

“You should stay. She ain’t gonna be long.”

I must have seen twenty foalings or more growing up, but it always was my favorite thing about being on the ranch. When I was a teen, Daddy and I used to be the ones sitting out here waiting for a foal to make it safely into the world. It’s funny how everything’s so different now.

“Maybe I will.” I stoop and pick up both mugs of cocoa and hand one to him. Colt takes it and blows on the steaming drink as the storm batters the stables. I lean against the stable wall surrounding Belle’s pen and watch her. She’s lying on her side, rolling back and forth in the hay to shift the foal into position.

“You remember when you and your daddy used to camp out here?”

I give him a wistful smile. “I was just thinkin’ about that.”

“After you left, I started staying out with him.”

“Really?”

“Yep. I’ve been here for every foal since.”

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I swallow the lump in my throat and smile, despite the way my heart is aching. Any one of my brothers or the other ranch hands could have done that, but the fact that it was Colt to carry on that tradition cuts me to the core. Colt did it because that's who he is. He did it because he knew Daddy would have spent that time alone, wondering where I was, and why I wasn't coming home. I bow my head and discreetly wipe away my tears before I can even think about responding. "I appreciate that."

"It's not like I had much else to fill my nights."

"I find that hard to believe," I say before I can stop myself.

I dare a glance at Colt, his jaw is set, and he grinds his teeth. "Well you're wrong."

"I wouldn't blame you."

"You wouldn't have a right to blame, but here's the difference between you and me, Lemonade, when I give my heart to someone, I don't take it back."

He walks by me, through the stable and then out into the storm. I close my eyes and just breathe, wishing being near him didn't hurt so much. I wish those old memories wouldn't squeeze and suffocate the breath out of me.

Belle whinnies and I open my eyes and remember why I'm here. Allantoic fluid gushes from her sex as she lies in the hay, and the foal's front hooves slip out. "That's it. You're doing great."

I don't move so as not to spook her. We'll always try to let a horse deliver on her own

here on the ranch and step in if intervention is required, but thankfully it's usually a quick and easy process.

"You got this, mama."

She nickers in response. The foal's head and hoof are stuck. Shit. I glance at the barn doors, and back at Belle. I don't know if Colt's coming back and we don't have time to mess around. I lean over and open the stall gate. Belle rolls, swishing her tail agitatedly, and I crouch down and slowly approach, making clicking sounds with my mouth so she knows I'm here and doesn't kick me right out of the stall.

"It's okay. I ain't gonna hurt you."

I carefully ease forward and give the foal's hoof a gentle tug. It's enough to free up his muzzle, but after several more minutes, he doesn't move any farther. I take hold of both front legs, tugging as gently as I can. The foal eases out a little more and I'm just about to step back when I slip on the allantoic fluid and go down in a heap. My head hits the stable wall, pain radiates up my back and the damn foal slides right out of Belle and into my lap. I'm covered in gunk, blood, and one tiny horse who looks more alien than animal with the amnionic fetal membrane covering it. I clear it from the head and ensure the baby's nostrils are free of fluid.

"What the hell happened?" Colt says.

"She was struggling. The foal was stuck."

"You saved her."

I shrug my shoulders and slump against the stable wall, glancing at the foal in my lap. Fluid drips from my hands and I grimace and wonder how long it might be before this damn horse gets off me and I can go shower.

Colt's lips quirk up in the corner. "Just like ridin' a bike, huh?"

"Something like that." I laugh and sit up, gently easing the baby off my legs, inch by inch and closer to its mother. I'm gonna have bruises for days after one-hundred pounds of hooves, hair, and muscle just fell into my lap.

"Colt or filly?"

I lean over and lift the foal's tail, checking for sex organs. "Filly."

"Well, what are you gonna name her?"

Bittersweet pride swells in my heart. Naming the foals on this ranch was always my daddy's job. I helped, of course, by picking out names of racehorses who'd lost their lives on the track for the sake of people's greed. I clear my throat and ignore the sting of saltwater in my eyes as I say proudly, "Stellar. Stellar Collision."

Colt nods. "I like it."

Belle shifts beside me, likely attempting to get to her feet and check out her foal. "You wanna give me a hand here?"

He holds out a hand and I take it, letting him pull me to my feet, but I slip on the mess of fluid and straw under my boots and almost go flying. Colt draws me close to him, our bodies touching, the fabric of my jeans and sweater soaking his clothing, but that's not all I notice. His warmth emanates through our filthy clothes and I look into those gray eyes of his. Even now, they have the power to drag me under. Even covered in gunk with the scent of birth in the air, all I can smell is that same combination of soap, wilderness, and sage which is all inextricably Colt. My fingers itch to paint him, to trace the peaks and valleys of each hard-won muscle and leave their mark on something other than a fresh canvas. But I gave up that right a long

time ago.

“Sorry,” I whisper breathlessly.

He inhales through his nose, his tongue darts out to wet his lips, and he glances at my mouth before locking eyes with mine.

“Colt?”

He releases my shoulders and clears his throat. “You best get cleaned up before your mama sees the mess you made.”

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Why does it feel like he's no longer talking about Belle's birth?

I give him a tight smile and nod. "Yeah, I guess so."

I head out of the stable and step into the cold rain beating down on my clothing, washing me clean. For a long time, I just stand there, letting the water sluice my sins away, wishing it would take what's left of my ruined heart too.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Colt

I roll over in bed and stare at the clock. I've been awake for hours just thinking about her, and it's likely gonna kill me in the pasture today. I shower and dress, hoping I can get in and out of the main house and avoid seeing Lemon at all. I could do without breakfast, lunch too if needed, but I cannot live without my morning coffee and it's a well-known fact that Mama Winchester makes the best coffee in three counties.

I slide on my boots, then I place my hat on my head and close the door behind me as I leave. Daisy-Mae runs the bed-and-breakfast and she's delivering a fresh set of towels to the single female guest in cabin three. She has a real look about her—pinup style with tattoos, perfect makeup, and the kind of vibrant, ruby-red hair that you see in cartoons.

I tip my hat at them both. "Howdy, ma'am. Daisy-Mae."

“Morning, Colton.” Daisy-Mae gives me a wave and turns back to her guest. “Can I get you anything else, Carla?”

“Yeah, who’s the cowboy?” the redhead whispers loud enough to be heard at the main house.

“Oh, that’s Colton Hayes. He’s one of our ranch hands,” Daisy says conversationally. “But ... he don’t date.”

“Figures. I’m always chasing the boys who are never available.”

“Girl, tell me about it. My husband was so unavailable, he had his secretary break up with me before they ran off to Dallas together.”

“Oh God. I’m so sorry.”

“It is what it is. Nothin’ for it now, I suppose.”

“Wait, that’s the infamous Colton?” Carla asks. “No wonder Lemon was sneaking out of his room yesterday at first light.”

“Lemon Winchester Lemon? Are you sure she was sneaking out of his cabin?”

I chuckle as I continue on to my truck and climb in. Carla’s a California girl who’s been eyeing off Cash since she got here, and I’m sure she don’t mean no harm. She’s definitely a looker, and maybe if I were a different man I might even use this opportunity to throw another woman in Lemon’s face. But I’m not a different man, and there’s never been anyone for me but my childhood sweetheart. Shame it ain’t the same for her.

I start the engine and peel out of the drive, taking the main road and then the service

path where I pull up in front of the house. The sun is shining and it's a glorious day. I try to focus on these things as I climb out of my truck and take the stairs two at a time. I don't bother knocking because this place is more my home than that cabin I rent, but I do wipe my feet because Mama Winchester ain't real fond of dirty boots on her clean floors.

I head to the kitchen, and I'm surprised to find everyone awake and already seated. "Mornin'," I say, taking off my hat and hanging it on the hat rack just inside the kitchen.

"You're late." Mama points a spatula at me, and I walk over and kiss her cheek even though I'm not late at all. Breakfast is at six. I don't mention this to Mama, though, because I'm not a crazy person.

Mama hands me a plate and I accept it gratefully and stare at the occupants of the table. A full house. All of the Winchester children are sitting at the table scoffing down pancakes from their plates, all except Lemon. She's just scowling at me.

"Colt, honey. Why don't you sit by Lemonade?"

"I'd love to," I reply, but inside I don't feel as cocky as I'm making out. I'm supposed to be mending fences with West today, so why then do I feel like Mama Winchester is trying to force the same between me and her daughter?

Lemon scowls but quits leaning on her elbow pushing the food around on her plate and sits up straight, discarding her fork for her coffee cup. She wraps both hands around the ceramic and presses her mouth to the lip. A hundred thousand memories come back to me of kissing that mouth, listening to her sing quietly to me in the dark under a cover of stars as I blanketed her body with my own and kissed every inch of flesh she had to offer.

I shake my head and snap out of it as I sit beside her. I can't be losing my mind around her like that. When I glance up from my plate, everyone is staring at me. Everyone except Lemon. She looks like she's trying her best to ignore that I even exist. I guess it's really not that hard for her and she's well practiced at that, because she ignored my existence for the last twelve years.

"What?" I say to Cash, whose smile is smug.

"Nothin'."

"Then quit starin' at me."

"Only if you quit starin' at Lemon."

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“Shut up, Cash,” Lemon and I say at once. I glance briefly at her and then lean across the table in front of her to grab the pepper.

She snatches up her plate and stands. All eyes turn toward hers and her cheeks pink up as she looks at her mama. “Excuse me.”

“You’ve barely touched your plate.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Cash frowns as he stares at me. “Is it just me, or does Lemonade lose her appetite every time you walk into a room?”

It’s not just him, but I don’t say that because he’s being a goddamn asshole. Everyone is pushing and pulling us like weeds, and it only drives Lemon further away. That’s always been the one thing that’s driven her away, and it seems to be the one thing that draws me closer. I guess that’s where we went wrong. I tried to hold onto a woman who didn’t want to be held and she ran so far in the other direction, she got engaged to another man. Though, come to think of it, I haven’t seen a ring on her finger since she got back.

Cash kicks me under the table and I scowl. “I don’t know what the hell you’re playing at, Cash, but if you don’t stop kickin’ my shin with your boots, you and me are gonna have a conversation outside.”

“Y’all sit and eat your breakfast. If you wanna fight, you do it on your own property and your own damn time,” Mama Winchester says.

“Apologies, ma’am.”

“Sorry,” Cash says glancing at Mama. “I don’t mean nothing by it, ma’am. Just givin’ Colt a good ribbin’ because that’s what friends do.”

“Mm-hmm, friend’s also kick one another’s ass if they don’t shut their damn mouths.”

Lemon scrapes her plate clean and sets it in the sink. “Well, as fun as this was, I’ll see y’all later.”

“Where are you off to? Goin’ to town to get your nails done?” Wade says.

Lemon frowns. “No. I was going to town to do some banking, but I can totally give you a play by play of my day, if you’d like?”

“Bankin’? What the hell do you need to do that for?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Wade, probably because I’m trying to keep my gallery afloat.”

“Gallery?” West says.

“Yeah, you know if you guys bothered to read an email or text at some point, you might know that I sent you all an invite to my grand opening. Three years ago.”

“Hey, I showed up,” Wyatt protests.

“You did, and you were the only one.”

West growls. “Some of us couldn’t leave because we had work to do here.”

Lemon sets her hands on her hips. Fuck. West is in for it now. “Chasin’ cattle around the pasture and mending fences? Like you would have any idea what running an actual business is.”

“Alright all of y’all, that’s enough,” Mama says.

“A real business?” West’s chuckle is dark and more warning than humorous. “Who the hell do you think has been running this ranch for the last five years? Or did you forget we actually live, work, and breathe this land, unlike those who leave?”

“I lived and breathed this land as a kid just as much as you ever did, so don’t you dare get up on your high horse, West Winchester.”

“Oh, darlin’, I never got off it. I never had time, ’Cause I never left. Which is more than I can say for you.”

“You wanna put me to work?” Fiery tendrils spring free of her loose braid, framing her face as she leans closer to her brother. God must have known Lemon Winchester needed a warning label, it’s why he gave her all that fucking stunning red hair. And it’s always been my weakness. Even now, I want to sink my fingers in those curls and pull her to me, devouring her hot little mouth just to shut her up. “Fine. Put me through my paces and see what I can do when tested, you go right ahead and name the place and the day.”

“You wouldn’t last a second out there.”

“Try me.”

“Not that you ever stuck around anywhere long enough to know what you’re made of,” West bites out.

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As much as I'm enjoying seeing Lemon all fired up again, I'm also hating every second of this because I can feel just how deep West's thoughtless words cut her to the core.

"That's enough, West," I say.

West turns his blue gaze on me, so much like his sisters. It's bittersweet looking at my closest friend, because every day I see those eyes staring back at me, it reminds me of what I lost.

"You're taking her side now?" He shakes his head. "Alright then. You wanna prove yourself, Lemon? Well, since you and Colt are so damn close these days, why don't you join him on fence maintenance?"

"Wait," I say. "What did I do?"

West ignores me and addresses Lemon while he wipes his face on his napkin and rests it on the plate. "There's a few fence posts that need mending before we can let the cattle back in to feed in that pasture. After that, we need to rope a couple steers who got mixed up with the neighbor's herd, and then I need you to—"

"Fine. Whatever."

"You might wanna head upstairs and change out of them fancy clothes, princess," Wade says.

"Shut the hell up, Wade," she says and heads upstairs anyway.

“Well, that went well. Why don’t you be a little more of an ass, West?” Wyatt shakes his head and throws his napkin on his empty plate.

“Screw you.”

“Now, you see here, West,” Mama Winchester says handing him his packed lunch. “I just got that girl back, and I’ll be damned if I let you chase her away from her home.”

“Mama—”

“I ain’t done talkin’, boy, and I know your daddy taught you better than to raise your voice to a woman, especially your mama.”

“Sorry, ma’am.”

“You go easy on her today.”

“Pfft. I ain’t going easy on her.”

Mama turns to me as I finish with my plate. She takes it from the table and places it in the sink. “I expect you have some unresolved issues with my daughter.”

“I’m not gonna make her life hell for leaving me, if that’s what you mean?”

Mama Winchester sighs and hands me my own packed lunch. I find it a little strange that she makes us all lunch and sends us off like we’re school children and not grown men who can fend for themselves. But you don’t argue with Mama Winchester, and you definitely don’t turn down her meals. You’d be an idiot if you did.

“You look out for her today.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I take the bag from her hand and place my hat on my head before turning to leave. “Thank you for the meal, and for lunch.”

She waves the gesture away and turns to Wyatt as I walk outside and head for the stables.

It takes eight minutes for me to have Knievel out of the stall and saddled up. That horse doesn’t do anything he doesn’t want to. From the second I saw him in the breaking pen at eighteen, he had murder in his eyes—my daddy called him fuckin’ evil so the name kind of stuck—but wild or not, I knew that horse belonged to me. Everyone else gave up. Not me. I sat for hours with him as a young colt alongside Lemon, and by the end of that summer, Knievel had joined up and that made him all mine.

I lead him outside and climb into the saddle, resting my hands on the horn as I wait with the others. A few moments later, Lemon comes into view, striding from the house in a pair of tight jeans, boots, a straw hat, and a plaid shirt that looks like it fit her as a teen but can no longer accommodate her great fucking tits.

“Holy shit,” Cash says under his breath.

I let out a long, slow sigh and adjust myself in my saddle. I knew I shoulda worn my other jeans. These ones are feeling just a little bit too restrictive.

“Maybe I should work with Lemon today,” Wyatt says. “We don’t want Colt suffering from blue balls.”

“No,” West orders. “If she wants to be part of this family and this ranch, she’s gotta be able to work with any one of us.”

“Oh, I get it.” Wade laughs and slaps his thigh, as if this is all some kind of joke.

“You’re making her work with Colt because you think she won’t be able to hack it.”

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“Jesus. You really are slow as molasses flowing uphill,” Wyatt says.

“Fuck you.”

Wyatt climbs on the ATV. “It’s clear which Winchester children got all the brains. And which didn’t.”

“Yeah, well, at least one of us got the balls.”

“Enough!” West chimes in.

“You remember how to saddle a horse, darlin’?” Cash calls out.

“I think I got it.” Not two seconds later, Lemon strides out of the barn with Teraway in tow and hoists herself up.

She looks so at home in the saddle. But I suddenly wish I’d bowed out of this one and let Wyatt take my place because Lemon in that shirt and those jeans, with her tits all trussed up and bouncing with every step her horse takes, forces all the blood to drain from my body into my dick.

“Good luck,” Cash says, leaning over to clap me on the shoulder as his horse passes mine.

I roll my eyes and glare at West. “You want us to begin in the east pasture?”

“Yeah. That fence is down near the watering hole. Sheriff Adams called late last

night, found some kids parked in their trucks. He reckons they ran right through it.”

I raise my brows, surprised he didn’t mention any of this at breakfast. Then again, he probably didn’t want to pile any more stress onto Mama Winchester’s plate. “You gonna press charges?”

“Nah. I told him to let them go with a warning,” West replies. “We were kids once too, doin’ stupid shit that kids do. Besides, half of our hometown has some real fond memories of that swimming hole. Wouldn’t be fair to take that away from the generations to come.”

I glance at Lemon, her eyes lock with mine and I know she’s remembering the summers we spent there, letting the water wash away the fever heat as we kissed and touched like we may never get the chance again.

“Are you two gonna work, or are you just gonna sit there all day making googly eyes at one another?” West asks, but he’s clearly not waiting on a reply because he nudges Blinkin’ Impressive forward and the horse breaks into a trot.

“Asshole,” Lemon mutters.

“Think you can keep up?” I ask, but she doesn’t bother replying either. She just digs her heels into the sides of her horse and takes off as Wyatt and Wade rev the engines of their ATVs.

I kick Knievel and we head out after Lemon. She’s flying down the dirt road and into the pasture and I give Knievel a little nudge, urging him to break into a canter. She’s riding Teraway though, and there’s nothing that horse loves more than to run. Knievel here, he practically comes to a screeching halt that might’ve thrown me from the saddle if I wasn’t already hanging on.

“What was that you were sayin’ about catchin’ up?”

“I forgot that I know better than to bet against Lemon Winchester.”

“Yeah, well. It looks like you’re the only one.”

We slow the horses to a much more manageable pace for everyone, and even though it hurts to glance over at her and see the autumn breeze stirring her wild, red hair under that hat, there’s something so right about it too.

“Don’t mind West. He’s been in a mood since before your daddy had his heart attack. Everyone knew it was coming, that one day William Winchester would be too old to ride and he’d hand the reins to West, but I don’t think anyone was quite ready for it to be so soon. Between you and me, I think your brother’s terrified of letting your folks down.”

“He’s not alone in that.”

“Lettin’ them down? How could you possibly be a disappointment to your parents, Lemon?”

“Well, let’s see. I did run off in the middle of the night without a damn word to anyone. There’s my engagement to a man they’d never met—a man who didn’t ask my daddy for my hand. There was not coming home when Daddy had his first heart attack, and then coming home now and feeling like no one wants me here.”

“That ain’t true.”

She laughs, but there’s no spark to it. “Isn’t it? You didn’t exactly roll out the welcome mat.”

“Even with your daddy passin’, you were the last person I ever expected to see pulling into that drive,” I admit. “You caught me off guard, is all.”

She arches a brow. “And every second we’ve shared a room since?”

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“It’s gonna take a little getting used to.”

A slow smile plays on her lips. “Well, would you look at us, finally agreeing on something.”

“We used to agree on everything.”

“We were different people back then.”

“I guess we were.” I let out a bone-weary sigh and decide it’s time to change the subject. “The fence is just up over this rise.”

“I remember.” She flicks the reins and Teraway races off, disappearing from sight.

A beat later, we climb off our horses and get to fixing the fence posts. The sun beats down on us as we work. After more than an hour of manual labor, I take off my hat and wipe my brow. Down the embankment, sunlight shimmers on the surface of the water, taunting us with the promise of a cool dip.

Lemon’s gaze follows mine and she grins. “Think we have time for a sneaky swim?”

“Nope.”

She screws up her little button nose and folds her arms over her chest, then she surprises me by smiling. “God, how I missed this place.”

“Bet there ain’t nothing like it in New York.”

“No, sir. There is not.”

I head to my horse and slip the thermos from the saddlebag before pouring a cup of sweet tea.

I offer it up and she takes it from my hands, bringing the cup to her lips. Before she drinks, she pauses and says, “You’re not tryin’ to poison me, are you?”

I roll my eyes and snatch it back, downing the liquid in one go. I pour another cup and thrust it toward her. “No poison.”

“I was kidding ...” She shrugs and looks away sheepishly. “Mostly. I wouldn’t blame you, ya know?”

“For poisoning you?”

“For being angry.” She leans up against the fencepost and stares at me.

“I’m not angry,” I lie. “I’m not anything anymore.”

“Right. Me too.”

Jesus. Why are we lying to one another like this? I’m fuckin’ livid, but she’s moved on. She was going to marry someone else, and what I feel, what I want doesn’t matter anyway. She’s back home to bury her father and then she’ll be gone again. Back to New York. Back to her life that doesn’t involve me. “So, what’s this fiancé of yours do?”

“He’s an oil tycoon,” she mutters as if on autopilot, and then shakes her head. “Was.”

“He’s no longer tycooning oil?” I say with a forced grin. I don’t wanna know this

shit. If I had my way, I'd strangle the asshole. But I don't know how else to talk to Lemon, and I can't handle the silence between us when we used to have so much to say.

"No. He is, or his family is. Stav just sits around board meetings pretending to give a shit. But ... he's ... no longer my fiancé."

I glance up at her then. Flaming hair and cool blue eyes meet mine, and all I want is to remove the distance and years between us. "Why not? You skip out on him too?"

"No. He cheated."

I whistle. "I bet that went over well. I know how you feel about cheaters."

"With my best friend."

"Ah, hell. I'm real sorry to hear that."

She cants her head to the side and studies my expression. "Are you?"

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“Just said I was, didn’t I?”

“Sorry. These days I’m having a hard time separating what’s true and what’s not. I know you’ve never had a malicious bone in your body.”

“Well, you’ve been gone a long time and I’m a different man now, but I still never want to see you hurtin’.”

She smiles at me, the barest hint of her lips turning up in the corners, and with that one look she drives a dagger right through my heart. As angry as I am that she left, that she didn’t give us a chance, what I just told her is true. It killed me to see Lemon broken all those years ago, and the idea of being the one to hurt her now, cuts me right to the core.

We ride back to the stables. The others are all there, sitting on lawn chairs, drinking beer, having finished their work early. Lemon gasps as she climbs off her horse and slowly leads Teraway into the barn and then her stall respectively. She whimpers, and I turn to glance at her over the stable wall. “You okay?”

“Mm-hmm. Just fine.”

I study her face and slide my gaze over her body, or as much of it as I can see. She’s moving so tentatively she must have pulled a muscle on her dismount. And then it hits me—for the last twelve years, Lemon’s been living in the city, riding the subway or cabs, or driving her fancy car to work. I bet she hasn’t so much as even seen a horse, much less been on one since she left this ranch. I don’t know what it’s like to not ride for twelve years straight, but I’m betting she’s feeling every inch of the

ground she covered on that horse today.

“You know I can do that for you, if you wanna head on up to the house?” I offer.

She turns and glares at me with her brow arched. Oh, shit. That’s not a happy face.
“I’m just fine where I am.”

“Still as goddamn stubborn as ever, huh?” I say and finish currying Knieval. I send him into his stable with a light smack on the ass that I wish I could deliver to Lemon instead.

She practically snarls at me and I throw my hands up in the air and walk away before I can say something I’ll regret.

Outside, West offers me a cold beer. And I accept gratefully and take the fourth armchair beside Cash, falling into it harder than a two-hundred-pound cowboy probably should.

“Rough day?” West asks, raising his beer to me.

“No thanks to you, yeah.”

“I gotta say, I’m amazed she didn’t quit.”

“Well, if there’s anything I know about Lemon Winchester, it’s that she’s twice as stubborn as the number of brothers she has.”

West nods and takes another pull from his beer. “She make you do everything? Maybe we should be paying you for two days’ work?”

“I wouldn’t say no to the extra cash, but I meant it when I said she hasn’t gotten any

less Winchester in the time she's been gone. She wouldn't let me do anything alone."

"Not even jack it?"

"Don't be an ass," I snap at Wade, and Lemon uses that opportunity to exit the barn. She takes one look at the beer in my hand, walks over to me—though I can see the pain in her face with every step she takes—and she snatches the bottle from me.

"Hey," I protest, but she just downs the rest of the beer in one go, and passes back an empty bottle.

"Thanks, I needed that."

The boys laugh.

"Winchester wild," Wyatt crows.

"Yeewhaw!" Whoops and whistles go up as Wade dances about and pretends to spank an imaginary pony.

Lemon shakes her head and turns toward the house.

"Come on, sis?" Wyatt calls. "You don't wanna stay for a beer?"

"Nope. I'm good."

West chuckles. "I'm surprised you lasted so long."

"Anything you can do." She throws over her shoulder, and ambles away. All six of us burst out laughing because Lemon is walking bowlegged all the way to the ranch house.

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“Jesus.” Cash tilts his beer in her direction. “Are we sure she’s not walking funny because she was riding more than a horse out in that field?”

All eyes turn to me, glaring, suspicious, and accusatory. I roll my eyes and sigh heavily. Leaning back in my seat, I place my hat over my face and close my eyes. “Not even if she begged me.”

“Right,” West says gruffly, and the others offer up their opinions that I don’t even have the energy to debate.

I may not like spending time with her, I may not trust the woman anymore, and I may even just hate her a little because seeing her after all these years lets me know I’m never getting over her. But I know one thing for certain—I’m never betting against Lemon Emersyn Winchester again either. Because she never loses. Not when she’s backed in a corner, not when it comes to a battle of wills, and not when it comes to my heart.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lemon

The bell above the door jingles as I enter and every set of eyes in the Buttermilk Café turn toward me.

“Well hell, as I live and breathe if it ain’t Lemon Winchester.” A woman in a waitress uniform stands behind the counter, hip popped, coffee pot in hand, and I take off my glasses and do a double take.

“Zadie?”

“In the flesh. Girl, where you been?”

I take in her gorgeous mocha skin and deep brown eyes. Her hair is no longer natural but instead worn in brightly colored box braids. She’s every bit as stunning as she was in high school, and I am still just as jealous of her beauty as I always was. Zadie never had to bother with a ton of makeup and perfectly set hair like me. She could have been a damn model if she’d had any inclination to get out of this one-horse town.

I take a seat at the counter in front of her and set my purse on the stool beside me. “I’ve been in New York. I have a gallery there.”

“Yeah, I think I heard that from your brothers, actually. They’re real proud of you.”

I laugh, because I’m not sure we’re talking about the Winchester boys. With the exception of Wyatt, I doubt they’ve missed me all that much, and I guarantee they have no idea what I actually do in New York City. “You mean Wyatt’s been singing my praises, right?”

She purses her full lips. “Nope, West and Wade too.”

I frown, not entirely sure what to make of that information.

“You know I was real sorry to hear about your daddy. I would have been at the funeral, but I had this place to run.”

“Oh, it’s okay. I ...” I’m not really sure what to say. I didn’t just run out on Colt and my family twelve years ago. I left my best friend without a word too. “It’s been a long time, Zadie. I’m real sorry I never returned your calls. I just ... I needed a clean

break.”

She gives me a wistful smile. “Broke a lot of hearts when you left, Lemon Winchester.”

I glance at the diner patrons still eyeing me warily as they pretend not to listen in our conversation. “I’m startin’ to see that.”

“I get it. What happened to you and Colt was just awful.”

I give her a tight smile, but I have no words. What happened between me and Colt was awful. Maybe we would have gotten through it or maybe we wouldn’t have, but now we’ll never know. I took that away from us. I broke us into a hundred thousand tiny little pieces, and it seems like me coming back made us shatter into a million more.

“I always thought wild horses couldn’t tear you two apart.”

“Yeah, well, now we can’t stand to be in the same room as one another.” I sigh and shake my head. “Enough about me. What have you been doing since high school?”

“Oh, nothin’ much. Just bought myself a diner, is all.”

My eyes grow as round as saucers. “The Buttermilk?”

“Yes, ma’am. I figured it was time to pay them back for all of those milkshakes and fries we ran out on without paying for as kids.”

I laugh. “Oh my God. I’d forgotten all about that.”

“Well Betty hadn’t. She almost wouldn’t sell me the damn place.”

I chuckle and turn to glance at the corner booth we always occupied in our teens. Irene Bennett glares back, and leans in to whisper to Wilma Withington over their coffee and pie. Looking over the rest of the diner's patrons—several sets of eyes dart to their food or out the window abruptly. Some things never change. I was the talk of the town as a wild seventeen-year-old, and now that I'm a grown woman who has made something of herself, people are still damn talking.

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I roll my eyes and turn back to Zadie before picking up my menu. “So, what’s good here?”

“Girl, you know everything is good here. You’ve been away too long.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lemon

Eighteen years old

I pace the floor of my tiny bedroom and stare at the object in my hand. Positive. I squeeze my eyes tightly closed and sit on my bed.

“Lemonade?” Wyatt bursts into my room. “Mama says ...” He frowns, staring at the expression on my face and then his eyes slide to the pregnancy test in my hands.

“Oh, fuck!” For a minute he just stands there and stares, and then I start to cry and he closes my bedroom door and comes to sit by me on the bed. “What’s it say?”

“I’m pregnant.”

“Holy shit.”

“I’ve barely finished high school. I got plans for college.”

Wyatt frowns and pulls away. “What?”

“I got a scholarship for art school in New York.”

Wyatt shakes his head. “You’re leavin’? Since when? Do Mama and Daddy know about this?”

I shake my head. “No one does. I didn’t even know how to tell Colt.”

“But ... you’re not leaving now, right? I mean, you can’t move to New York now that you’re pregnant.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know, Wyatt. I don’t know what the hell to do.”

“Lemonade?” Colt calls from the stairs, and Wyatt jumps to his feet.

“Shit. What do you want me to tell him?”

I wipe the tears from my cheeks and stash the pregnancy test under my pillow.

“Nothing. He’s gotta find out sometime, right?”

“Wait, you’re gonna tell him with Mama and Daddy on the front porch?”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not stupid, Wyatt.”

“You’re righ—”

“Lemon?” Colt calls from the other side of the door and opens it wide. His smile dissolves instantly. “Darlin’, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Let’s just go.”

“Lemon?”

“Bye, Wyatt.” I jump up off the bed and grab Colt’s hand, leading him down the stairs. “Come on, before Daddy changes his mind about letting us go to the fair.”

We head out to Colt’s truck and I pull him toward the vehicle before Daddy can stop us for another lecture. As if he can read my mind, my father calls, “Not a minute after ten.”

“Eleven,” I counter.

“Lemon,” he warns.

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“Please, Daddy?”

“Fine. Colt, you have her back at eleven on the dot.”

“Yes, sir.”

We pile into the cab of the truck but I don’t smother him in kisses the way I normally would, and worry etches itself into the muscles around Colt’s mouth. “Lemon, you gotta tell me what’s going on.”

“I will. I just ... I wanna have fun tonight. I just want to eat too much funnel cake and ride the Ferris wheel.”

“I don’t know if I can have fun when you’ve clearly been crying your eyes out all afternoon.”

“I’m okay. Would you please just get me out of here before someone else comes to stall us?”

Colt frowns. “Yeah, sure.”

He starts the engine and gives my folks a wave as he peels away from the house and floors it. We don’t talk much on the drive. I couldn’t even hold a conversation right now. The only thing going through my head is that little plus sign on the pregnancy test. How am I gonna explain this to Daddy? I’ve just celebrated my eighteenth birthday and I’m pregnant right out of high school. What will everyone say?

I chew my lip. My thoughts send me spiraling. Colt places his palm faceup on the bench seat of his truck—an invitation. I slip my hand in his and interlace our fingers. How does he know without saying a damn word just how to make me feel better? How do I tell him he’s going to be a daddy at twenty-two years old?

We go to the county fair, but we don’t stay long. I can feel the tension in Colt when he pulls me close and I’m a giant ball of anxious energy too. The sights and scents of the fair are making me dizzy and nauseous.

“You wanna get out of here?” I whisper in his ear. “Go somewhere quiet?”

“Yeah, I’d like that.” He takes my hand and leads me out of the fair to his truck.

We drive to the town reservoir, a place we often hang out, and when we’re alone at the top, all the way above our little town with its lights twinkling in the summer breeze, he grabs my hand. “Are you finally gonna tell me what’s going on with you?”

“I don’t know how to say this ...”

“Just say it.” He draws my hand to his lips and presses a tender kiss to it. “Whatever it is, everything will be okay. Just tell me, Lemonade.”

I take a deep breath and blurt, “I’m pregnant.”

All the blood drains from Colt’s face and I start crying again as he pulls his hand free of mine and drives them both into his hair. He stares as if he’s looking right through me and shakes his head in disbelief. “How? We used protection.”

I shrug and a sob escapes me. “Apparently not enough.”

“Your daddy’s gonna kill me,” he whispers. I cry, huge ugly sobs that wrack my

whole body and Colt pulls me close. “Hey, don’t cry. It’s okay.”

“How? How is this okay? I’m barely eighteen, Colt. You’re twenty-two. We’re both just kids as it is.”

“I don’t know, but we’ll get through it.”

“It’s a baby, Colt. It’s not a rough patch with no light at the end of the tunnel. I’m carrying a human being inside me. My whole life is ruined.”

“No. No it’s not. I love you, Lemon, and I’m here for whatever you want. Whatever decision you make. I ain’t ever leaving you. I ain’t ever gonna stop lovin’ you.”

“You don’t know that.”

He cups my cheeks. “It’s the only thing I know.”

“I’m scared, Colt.”

“I know, but whatever happens, you have me. You’ll always have me.”

When we pull up to the house, Daddy is waitin’ on the front porch. He’s always waitin’ up when Colt takes me on a date, but I know by the bottle of whiskey beside his rocking chair and the stoic look on his face that he knows.

“Oh, God,” I murmur. I’m gonna kill Wyatt.

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Colt shuts off the engine and looks at me. “Lemon?”

“He knows, Colt.”

“What? How?”

“Why don’t you come on out here, son?” Daddy calls from the porch.

I glance at the lights on in every room in the second story of the house. Lights that should all be off, being a Friday night. My brothers are home, and I know they had plans to meet girls at the carnival. I grip Colt’s hand as he turns to open the door with his free one.

“Everyone knows.”

He swallows and gives my hand a squeeze, but I can feel how he’s shaking.

“Let’s just go,” I blurt. “Just you and me. We’ll take your truck and we’ll just leave, make a life somewhere new.”

He gives me a sad smile. “As much as I love that idea, we can’t. If I don’t look your daddy in the eye and promise to take care of you and our baby for the rest of our lives, then I don’t deserve you, Lemonade.”

“At least you’d be alive.”

“We’re not runnin’, Lemon. We made our bed, and now we gotta lie in it.” He

releases my hand and opens his door before stepping out onto the lawn. Colt crosses in front of the truck, comes around to my side and opens my door. He takes my hand and helps me from the cab, and then we walk toward the front porch. I'm already crying just anticipating my daddy's disappointment in us both.

We climb the stairs and then the screen door bangs back on its hinges and West comes flying out of the house. "You dirty fucking bastard."

Colt backs us up a step and lets go of my hand as he shifts me out of the way, and not a second later, West slams into him, tackling him to the ground.

"West. No!" I shout, pummeling my brother's back as his fist connects with Colt's cheek over and over.

"You got my sister pregnant," West roars. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

"West," Daddy warns.

"Daddy, do somethin'," I beg, staring at my father. He just glares right on back. Wade and Wyatt have joined him on the porch and all three of them just watch on as West beats the father of my child to within an inch of his life. Just like the time they found us by the red oak tree, Colt doesn't fight back and I know he thinks he deserves this punishment. "Help him!"

"William Winchester," Mama reprimands from the doorway. "What the devil is the matter with you?" Mama is down the steps and yanking West off Colt's prone body by the ear.

I burst into tears and run to Colt's side. Kneeling over him, I press my hand to his bloody cheek. His eyes meet mine. There is so much shame in that one look he gives me, that I crumble inside and lay my head on his chest. His arm comes around my

body and he holds me tight as if I were the one who'd just been beaten.

"Shame on both of you," Mama says, and for a moment I freeze, thinking she's talking to me and Colt. But when I turn and glance at her, she's addressing Daddy and West. "On all of you," she continues, pointing her finger at Wade and Wyatt too. "Standing there while Colt is beaten bloody in front of her. Stress is not good for the baby."

Daddy and the boys have the good sense to look chagrined, but Daddy merely sits in his rocking chair and swigs his whiskey straight from the bottle. There are two things I know for certain about my daddy. One, it's never good when he has nothing to say. And two, he'd do just about anything my mama asked of him, including forgiving his only daughter who got herself knocked up fresh out of high school.

"Come on inside now, you two. Let's get you cleaned up," Mama says holding out a hand to help me stand. "Then we're all gonna talk this out. West, you help Colt to his feet."

West shakes his head and he opens his mouth to protest, but Mama shuts down the remonstrance before it can even begin. "Don't make me tell you twice, boy."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Colt

Friday nights mean dinner and beers with the boys at Earl's. It's the one night Mama Winchester doesn't bother cooking a big meal, and instead curls up with a good book, fully taking advantage of an empty house. So we all head out to the local bar to blow off some steam. The cheap meal and even cheaper drinks make up for the fact that it's the shittiest run-down bar in all of the Lone Star State.

I'm already in town sorting out a new bit for my horse so I agree to meet West and Wade at seven. What I don't expect to see as I slide into a booth is Wyatt, Cash, Lemon's best friend from high school, Zadie, and Carla—the woman who's been staying at the B and B—playing a round of doubles in snooker. I'm just about to get up and join them, when she walks over with a tray full of drinks. Short skirt showing off shapely legs, boots she's been kicking around the ranch in all day, and a skimpy little top that has my teeth grinding with the way everyone else here is looking at her. Lemon Goddamn Winchester.

Everywhere I fucking turn, she's there. Wyatt steps in front of her and leans in to whisper in her ear. When he moves, Lemon's eyes lock onto mine. A smile tips up the corner of her mouth and she raises her shot glass to me in a toast. The amber liquid sloshes out the sides—whiskey.

Goddamn it, Lemon.

“Colt?”

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I flick my gaze to Alexis. I wasn't even aware she was waiting on me.

"Hi." She gives me a flirty smile, but I can't keep my eyes from Lemon for long.

"Can I get you somethin', hun?"

"Beer," I bark.

"Any particular kind?"

"Nope," I say, and then I feel bad because my folks raised me better than to speak to a woman in anger, especially one who's done nothin' wrong. "Just whatever you find first will be great, thanks."

"Okay, I'll be right back." She follows my gaze to the others. "Or, did you want me to take it to table seven?"

"Here's fine. Thanks."

"It's pretty wild about Lemon Winchester coming home, huh? I mean, I know her daddy just died, but I honestly never expected to see her again. Especially after she ran out on yo—"

"I'll take that beer now, Alexis. Thanks."

"Oh, sure thing." She blushes and struts away. I don't watch her go because I got my eyes on one woman and one woman only.

Cash and Carla hit the dance floor, but Lemon, Wyatt, and Zadie keep throwing back shots like it's happy hour on spring fucking break.

Alexis returns with my beer and I nod and down the thing in one long pull. I'm not sure if I should have another considering the amount Lemon and Wyatt are drinking. I didn't see Lemon's car parked in the lot, but one of them drove here because it's not like we can just call an Uber in these parts.

"Can I get you anything else, Colt?"

"Steak, medium rare."

"Sure. You want fries or mash with that?"

I don't answer because they're throwing back another round of shots and some kids who look like they're fresh outta high school have joined them. The boys are just a little too close to Lemon for my liking.

"Okay," Alexis says. "I'll just give you mash."

I grunt a non-reply and she scurries off again. West and Wade enter the bar and make a beeline for my table. I don't even think they've realized their other siblings are here drinking too much and making asses of themselves.

West slides into the booth seat opposite me and Wade follows suit. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself," I mutter.

West frowns. "What's eating your ass?"

Wade looks around the bar and squawks like a fucking idiot. "Uh-oh. I think Lemon

is what's eatin' Colt's ass."

"What?" West leans around my head and chuckles. "Is it Lemon, her outfit, or the guy she's cozying up to that's pissing you off so much?"

"He's a fuckin' kid. Probably wouldn't even know what to do with that little twinkie between his legs."

"Weren't you a kid the last time you were with her?"

"Shut the fuck up, Wade," I snap.

"Well, fuck you too. I think I'll go say hello to my baby sister."

"Wade," West warns.

"What?" He throws his hands up in a gesture that says he could do no wrong. "Lemon Winchester, is that you?" he crows at the top of his lungs so every man in the room who wasn't already looking turn their heads in her direction. Lemon throws her arms around Wade and they rock back and forth on the spot.

"She's just havin' a little fun. I get the feeling Lemonade don't let her hair down much these days."

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“I always liked her hair up better.”

West rolls his eyes and Alexis returns to take his order. “You know, you could always beat her at her own game.”

“I don’t play games.”

“Maybe that’s your problem.” My buddy shrugs and tilts his chin toward his sister.

Lemon hits the dance floor with one of the young bucks and I lose my shit altogether. I’m up on my feet before I can even register what the hell I’m doing. “Move,” I say to the kid, but it’s more of a growl than words I’m actually speaking.

“What the fuck, man?”

“Well, if it ain’t my ex-boyfriend.”

“Come on,” I say to Lemon. “We’re leaving.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“The hell you aren’t.” I grab her wrist and tug her through the crowd.

“Hey.” The kid yanks Lemon’s other arm so hard, she jerks toward him. “What the fuck do you think you’re doin’, old man?”

“Trust me,” I growl. “You’re gonna wanna walk away.”

“Or what?”

“Or someone’s gonna be IDing your body in the morgue tomorrow.”

He gulps and steps back. I might’ve laughed if I weren’t so fucking pissed.

I tug on Lemon’s arm, but she digs in her heels. “On second thought, I think I want another drink.”

“Lemon,” I growl through clenched teeth.

She grins up at me like a naughty school girl and I lose all fucking patience with this woman. I bend and wrap my arms around her legs and then I hoist her over my shoulder and carry her out of the bar toward my truck.

Lemon kicks and screams, thrashing over my shoulder. “Put me down, Colt!”

I slap her ass. “I’m gonna put you down—right in the front seat of my truck.”

“Colt!”

Zadie chuckles. “You two haven’t changed a bit.”

“I guess I’m driving your car home,” Wyatt says, snatching Lemon’s purse from her hand.

“No! Wyatt, you are not driving my car.”

“I’ll drive it,” Wade says.

“No one is driving my car.”

I open the passenger-side door and hurl her in.

“West, tell him he can’t do this.”

West leans against the car door. “Sorry, sis, can’t quite hear you.”

I glance at West, wondering why he’s helping me when he very well could have taken his sister’s side.

He shrugs. “You owe me.”

I nod and climb in the driver’s seat. “Buckle up, Lemonade.”

“You can’t do this to me. It’s humiliating.”

“No more humiliating than you letting that frat boy grind all over you.”

“Screw you, Colt. Just because you’re celibate, doesn’t mean I plan to be.”

“Jesus. Do you hear yourself? When did you get so damn self-righteous?”

“I’m not self-righteous.”

“Bullshit. I bet if I looked that word up in the dictionary, Lemon Winchester would be smiling right back at me from the page.”

“What are you more pissed about, Colt? That I was dancing with some frat boy or that I dared to have any fun at all when you’re clearly still so miserable.”

Ouch. Well that fucking stings. Am I really that much of an asshole? My eyes dart from the road to her and back again. “You think I’m miserable?”

She sighs and shakes her head. “Will you just take me home, please?”

“No. You and I are gonna talk this shit out once and for all.”

“Fine.”

“Good.” I tighten my grip on the steering wheel, thinking about how every fight we ever had in the past ended up with us kissing like crazy and loving each other well into the night. That ain’t gonna happen this time. I know it, but it don’t stop the fist in my gut.

“Great,” Lemon says, because she just always has to have the last word.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lemon

Colt shuts off the engine and stalks toward his cabin. I sit and watch him through the windshield. I’m pouting, and I can’t avoid this forever, so I open my door and I climb out before following him past the other cabins. At least Carla is out at Earl’s, so we don’t have to worry about waking her.

I stomp up Colt’s front steps and wipe my boots before heading inside. He comes in behind me, and I close my eyes as I feel the warmth from his body, so much bigger than mine, so close, so ... Colt.

“You gonna move, Lemonade, or you just gonna stand in my doorway all night?”

My nipples bead as his hot breath washes over my neck. Goose bumps break out across my flesh and I shiver. Maybe Colt sees it, maybe he just can’t help but pause because he feels this too—this spark, this connection. The close proximity of our bodies shakes up all of my senses. He hasn’t even touched me yet and all I can do is stand here like an idiot because I’m too afraid to move—I’m too frightened to break this spell.

“Lemon,” his voice is a raspy growl. It does wicked things to my insides and I dart out my tongue to moisten my lips. Colt’s hand wraps around my waist tentatively and he lowers his lips to my neck.

A breathy moan slips past my lips and I cover his hand which is resting on my waist and guide it to my breast. He squeezes hard as he walks us forward and bends me over the bed. Colt pushes my skirt up my hips and slides a rough hand over my ass. He rears back and spanks me, hard and startling, as if I’m a naughty girl whom he has reached the end of his patience with. I gasp and he slides a hand over the seam of my pussy, shoving my panties aside and driving two fingers into me so hard I pitch forward. Colt snaps my thin lace panties at the side seam, and they slip down my legs to pool on the floor. He grabs my ankles and I widen my legs to give him better access. He sinks to his knees on the floor and presses a kiss to my pussy. I inhale sharply but it quickly turns to a moan as he separates me with his thumbs and licks at my honey, sliding his tongue deep inside me. He buries his face in me, licking and sucking, devouring me the way no other man ever has.

I reach behind me and sink my fingers through his hair, making sure he doesn’t go nowhere, but this is Colt we’re talking about, and he’s never satisfied unless I am.

Something about that forces me to grip tighter, move faster against his mouth, and my orgasm hits me out of nowhere. “Colt!”

I collapse face-first into the bed and he leaves me, but a moment later his warm hands are coaxing my hips up off the mattress and he plunges inside. The movement is so hard and so hot that a shocked cry leaves my mouth and all of the breath rushes from my lungs.

“Wait, wait,” I whisper as he drives in faster.

“You wanna talk now, Lemonade, or you want me to fuck you so hard you see stars?”

“Oh,” I cry. “I want you to fuck me, but condom?”

“Yeah, despite what everyone in this town thinks, I ain’t stupid.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:45 am

“No one thinks you’re ... oh, God.”

He pulls out and a whimper tumbles from my mouth. Colt chuckles as he turns me onto my back and climbs on the mattress. Holding my wrists above my head with one hand, he dips his hips between my legs and his cock butts up against my pubic bone. He grinds against me, teasing my clit with the thick head. He guides himself inside me, and I’m struck with familiarity, and the headiness of it all.

Colton Hayes is inside me and he hasn’t kissed my lips in twelve years.

It’s all I want, in this moment, with this man—I need him to kiss me. I need to feel as close to him as I possibly can. I lean up and try to close this distance between his mouth and mine. A slow smile plays on Colt’s lips, and for a beat I think he’s not willing to kiss me, that it’s a different level of intimacy that he doesn’t want. But then his eyes hood and he moves a fraction of an inch closer, teasing my bottom lip with his tongue. Electricity bolts through me, from my lips to my clit, creating tiny showers of sparks inside me everywhere his body touches mine. Colt’s tongue drives deep into my mouth, as deep as his thrusts, and I don’t want this feeling to ever go away. He grips my wrists, lowering the rest of his weight on top of me. I wrap my legs around his hips, using my heels to drive him deeper. Heat builds in my core, spreading to each delicious nerve ending as I clamp around him, and he fucks me so hard I really do see stars.

“Who fucks you like no one else?”

“You,” I say breathlessly. But he’s never fucked me like this before. This is a whole new Colt, and as he slows his pace, coaxing more pleasure from me despite the fact

that I just came, jealousy spears me right through the heart. Has he taken other women this rough? Or is it only me who brings out this anger and passion in him? “Only you.”

“All this time and that pussy still comes for me. Did you think of me when you fucked your fiancé? Did you see my face when he ate your pussy? Did you imagine it was my back you sunk your nails into?”

“Yes,” I pant.

Colt’s hands work me faster. “Did he touch you like I do? Worship your body the way I do?”

“No. No one ever has.”

“No one even came close?”

I shake my head and swallow hard, wishing he’d just pull me over the edge. Whatever this is—it ain’t making love—it’s making up for years of anger, resentment, sadness, and maybe even a little hate.

“Did you think of me at all when you said yes?”

I stop moving, tears instantly springing to my eyes. Colt releases my arms and yanks off the condom, discarding it on the nightstand. He strokes his hard dick as his fingers work inside me, faster, more expertly, until I’m clenching around him again, falling over the precipice into sensation, love, and desire, despite how my heart is breaking. He pumps his cock faster against his fist, and those grey eyes watch me possessively as he comes all over my pussy.

I wait until Colt is asleep and I carefully slip out of bed. It takes a minute to find my

clothing and boots, and I quietly ease them on and exit his cabin. Outside, it's freezing. There's a soreness to my body, a languidness in my limbs that begs me to go back and snuggle into his bed, his warmth, but I can't. We should not have done this. We should have had that talk we've been needing for the last twelve years now, and I can't fall into bed with him again without talking out all the hurt we've been through. If I'd stayed a minute longer, I would have fallen into Colt's arms and never left. I can't do that. I don't even know if he wants that, and as for me? Well, my life is in New York. Or at least, it was. I'm not sure where I'm supposed to be now.

When I'm home, there's a part of me that feels like this is where I belong, amongst my family, in the arms of my first love, the boy next door. And when I'm in New York, I'm a girl from small-town Texas, who made a life, and a career in the big city. I'm more than just a farm girl, a rancher's daughter, and a farmhand's wife. Can I leave my life in New York for the only man I've ever truly loved? The bigger question on my mind is, will he ever forgive me for leaving him, or is he just content to punish me over and over for wasting twelve years of our lives?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Colt

I roll over and reach out for Lemon. My hands come up empty, and as I open my eyes and stare at her side of the bed—vacant—I start to wonder if maybe I dreamed the entire thing. Then I sit up and see her ruined panties discarded on my wooden floors and I flop back on the mattress. She ran out on me. Again.

I shake my head and tug my hands through my hair, replaying everything I did to her last night, everything I said.

I was a cold asshole, and I'm not sure I know any other way to be around her now. It ruined me when she left, and I still fucking love every little thing about her. But I

have to harden my heart against the onslaught of Lemon Winchester. Because if I thought her leaving me at twenty-two-years old ruined me, her leaving after I've loved her and lost her, and finally got her back again, is going to destroy me completely.

I shower and dress before heading out to the ranch house.

Lemon isn't at breakfast when I walk in, which should give me time to eat without being on edge, but I am. When she scurries down the stairs and sees me watching her in those tight jeans and plaid button up, she turns for the coffee pot, and I get up and rinse my plate in the sink right by her.

"Mornin'," she says quietly over her cup.

I don't respond, and she glances nervously in my direction. I reach around her and grab the pot. "You don't mind if I have some of this, right?"

Her brow creases. "No. Of course not. Go right ahead."

"Well thanks, darlin'. Don't mind if I do."

She leans in and murmurs, "Is there something wrong?"

"Nope. Why would anything be wrong?"

"I just thought after last night ... it ..." She swallows, and I have this insane urge to wrap my hand around her delicate throat and stroke the tender flesh, but I can't do that here in front of her brother and her mama. When it comes to Lemon, I need to relearn the word restraint.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:45 am

“It what? Would be different?” I say with a grin, and lean in a little closer to whisper in her ear. “See, I thought the same thing, but it seems you can’t keep from runnin’ out on me in the middle of the night, Lemonade.”

“Okay, what on earth is so interesting about that coffee pot? Y’all have been crowded around it whispering sweet nothings for the last five minutes now.”

I turn and wink at Mama. “No one makes a cup of joe like you, Mama.”

“Colton Hayes, you best not be flirting with me in front of my daughter, or I might end up getting chewed out as all y’all say.”

“Nah. She don’t mind. Lemon couldn’t give two cow craps what I do, or whom I do it with. She made it crystal clear a long time ago that she don’t feel nothin’ for me.” I set my cup in the sink and head for the door, grabbing my hat off the stand. “Have a mighty good day, ma’am.”

“Wait. I haven’t finished packing your lunches yet.”

I cringe. Nothing like trying to make a point with your hasty exit and having it shot to hell because Mama Winchester reminds you to take your packed lunch like a little boy. I turn back and place my hat on my head, tipping it in front. “Work waits for no man, ma’am.”

I exit the house, the screen door slamming just a little too loudly as I make my way to the stables. I’m just tacking up Knieval when Lemon runs into the barn. “Colt, we need to talk.”

“I’m on the clock, Lemon. Some of us have work to do around here.”

Her shoulders sag, and I feel like shit. I grab the reins and lead Knievel from his stall. She stands in the way, arms folded across her chest in indignation. “So that’s it. You fuck me and you don’t even have the balls to talk to me about what happened last night?”

Cash is rubbing down his horse a few stalls away, and I know he heard every word by the smug smile on his face.

I pull Knievel to a stop and lean in closer to Lemon. “Why don’t you go public with that shit?”

“It’s not like everyone doesn’t already know.”

“See, no one actually knows because your brothers haven’t beaten the shit outta me this morning, but you can bet the entire ranch is gonna be talkin’ by the end of the day.”

“So let them talk.” She throws her hands in the air. “Who cares? It’s none of their goddamn business who I have sex with.”

“You wanna know why I don’t have anything to say to you? It’s because last night meant more to me than just a quick, hard fuck, and I thought we were finally on the same page. But then I woke alone in bed this morning and there was barely any trace that I hadn’t just dreamed it all.”

“I’m sorry. I just ... I had a lot on my mind. I didn’t think—”

“No, you didn’t, did you? Seems you never do think about me.” I know it’s a low blow, drudging up ancient history and throwing something in her face that we said as

teens, but I find myself all kinds of petty these days.

“Colt, that isn’t fair.”

“No, it’s not.” I urge Knievel forward and out through the main stable doors. Once outside, I take a beat to breathe. The sky overhead is the pale blue of a Texas morning, despite what they predicted on TV about wild weather. Right now, there’s a fucking hurricane in my heart, tearing down the walls I put in place when she left me, shaking the foundation from the ground up, and laying waste to the ruin of my soul, and her name is Lemon Goddamn Winchester.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Colt

Twenty-two years old

Driving a head of cattle across the eastern pasture is long, backbreaking work. With over 300,000 acres, Winchester Ranch is the largest working cattle ranch in Red River county, so getting from one end of the property to another is sometimes an all-day experience. I pull the hat from my head and wipe the sweat from my brow with my red bandana. It’s hot as Hades out here, and I’d give anything to be sitting on that front porch swing with Lemonade, her feet in my lap, a sweet tea in one hand as I rub her swollen ankles with the other.

Her daddy might still wanna kill me—West too—but little by little they’re coming round. Just last month we shook hands on a deal that would tie me to this land forever—my own slice of heaven right here at Winchester Wild. And though Lemon don’t know nothin’ about it, the three of us have been working hard on getting things sorted for her and the baby.

I'm making it right, doing right by Lemon and her folks, trying not to tarnish the family name further. This town don't make it easy though. She's just finished high school, and if her peers talking behind her back weren't enough, she's gotta face the judgement of every Betty Lue Sue in town looking down on her. Sometimes I wish we could trade places, because it's so much easier for men. I'm older, I'm the one who got her pregnant, I'm the one who should have known better, and yet she's the one who's forced to carry all the shame of our situation along with our unborn child.

Part of me wonders whether staying in this town is the best thing for her, but where the hell else would we go? Our family is here, our life is here, and I can't imagine ever leaving.

Miguel Ángel—a ranch hand who's stayed back at the stables to keep everything running smoothly at the house—crests the rise at a bolt on Mulk, a horse who hasn't run for ten years now. They both look flustered as he yanks on Mulk's reins.

“What in the world are you doin', Miguel?”

“Mr. Winchester, you and Colt need to come quick. It's Lemon.”

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“What happened? Is the baby okay?” I shout.

“West,” Mr. Winchester shouts. “Get this head of cattle through the gate on the north side.”

“We can just herd them back into the west pasture until tomorrow, Pops.”

“No. I need ’em moved today.”

“Okay.” West nods and he glances at me. “I got it. Just go.”

I glance at Mr. Winchester, half expecting him to order me to stay, but I dig my heels into Knieval’s side and take off for the house at a full tilt.

Thirty minutes later, I enter the yard and jump off Knieval. I don’t have time to take off his tack, curry his coat, or hose him down. I tie him to the fence post and run to the house. I yank open the front door and storm in without mucking off my boots—a punishable offence in Mama Winchester’s house.

“Lemon!”

I take the stairs two at a time and burst into her room. It’s empty, but the bright red stain in the middle of her sheets tells me everything I need to know. I holler and slam my fist into the door, leaving a hole in the solid oak wood. “Fuck!”

“Colton!” Mr. Winchester comes up the stairs, panting like he’s just covered 100,000 acres in a sprint and not his horse. “Where is she?”

“Hospital is my guess.”

“Come on, then. I’ll drive.”

“If it’s all the same, sir, I’d rather drive myself.”

“Why? So you can break the speed limit the whole way and end up dying before you get there?”

“I’m afraid, sir.”

“I know it, but you gotta pull yourself together and be strong for her. You understand me?”

I nod, though I don’t feel strong. I feel as if I’m falling apart. Please, God, let my woman and my baby be okay.

I follow Lemon’s daddy down the stairs, my nerves shot to hell. And I climb into his truck, though it takes everything in me not to just drive myself. But I can’t stand the thought of leaving Lemon to do this alone, and forcing my child to grow up without a father.

When we finally get to the hospital, I race inside while Lemon’s daddy finds a park. I’m led upstairs to the maternity ward, and through the viewing window inlaid into the door, I see the love of my life sitting on a bed in a white hospital gown, her normally tanned face almost as pale as the robe she’s wearing. Her mama is talking to a doctor, and I enter the room and rush to Lemon’s side.

“Colt,” she sobs.

“I’m here, darlin’. What happened?”

Mama Winchester excuses herself from her conversation and comes to stand on the opposite side of the bed from me. “Why don’t you come outside and I’ll fill you in.”

“No, don’t leave—” Lemon’s words are abruptly cut off by a sharp gasp, and she clutches her stomach.

“Lemon, what is it?”

“You’re okay, sweetheart,” Mama Winchester says as she rubs Lemon’s back. “Just breathe.”

“Do something!” I yell at the doctor, who looks a little taken aback.

“Sir, we’re doing everything we can. We’re waiting on the OB-GYN to assess Miss Winchester’s sonogram.”

“Lemon?” Mr. Winchester says from the doorway, no doubt feeling the same shock I did at seeing Lemon so defeated.

“Daddy,” she sobs. “It hurts. It hurts so much.”

Her father’s long legs swallow the distance between them, and I move out of the way so he can comfort his daughter. I rub my own arms to ward away the chill. The woman I love is in pain and there’s nothing I can do for her, and my baby’s life is at risk. I know that. I might be a kid preparing to be a dad, but I know bleeding and blinding pain like this ain’t a good thing. We’re losing our baby. I see that now. I just pray to God that I don’t lose them both because I can’t handle a world that doesn’t have Lemon Winchester in it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Lemon

After calling and checking in with Ambrose at the gallery, I spend the day manning the front desk at the B and B. It mostly just consists of playing solitaire on the outdated PC because it's quiet at this time of year and I already helped Mama clean and restock the cabins yesterday. The door opens and Daisy-Mae Buchanan races in holding her hand over her pregnant belly. "Hi."

"Well, hi there."

She sets down her purse, puffs out her cheeks, and her blond bangs go flying. "I'm so sorry you had to fill in for me today."

"It's really not a problem. How's the baby?"

"Just Braxton Hicks, I think. Though it's still a little early, my doctor doesn't think this little man is gonna wait for his due date."

"Wow. That's ... great," I mutter, and then force a smile I don't feel. "About the Braxton Hicks, I mean ... not the coming early."

Daisy's responding smile is tender, and she touches my arm in a compassionate gesture that forces my eyes to prick with tears. "Sorry. I know this must be weird for you, what with your ... situation."

I pull away and grab my phone from the counter, pretending to scroll it absentmindedly before tucking it in the back pocket of my jeans. “Not at all.”

“I never told you this—I guess I just didn’t know what to say—but I was real sorry about your little one.”

Daisy might’ve gone to school with Wade, but she was forever making eyes at my older brother West. Her and I have never been close, though she was sweet to me when a lot of people weren’t. She didn’t talk shit behind my back like some of the other girls from high school, and in Red River Canyon, you don’t forget that kind of loyalty.

“It was a long time ago,” I say quietly.

She gives me a tight smile. “So, are you planning on visiting with Colt? He’s the last cabin on the lot, but I suppose you already know that on account of you spending the night.”

I frown. Oh my God. Did Cash tell everyone about mine and Colt’s sleepover? Rodeo riding seems to have knocked the sense clean out of him, and I’m going to squeeze out any remaining brain cells by ringing his damn neck. News never travels quite as fast or as far as a scandal in a small country town, or even worse ... on a ranch.

“No. We’re er ...”

“Messy. Oh, I know. It can’t have been easy going through what y’all went through.” Her shoulders deflate. “Still, it’s just so sad that the two of you couldn’t make it work. We all thought you were a done deal—Colton and Lemon forever. You know?”

“Yeah, well. Life doesn’t always go to plan.”

“No, ma’am. It does not.” She smooths a hand over her belly and my eyes follow the movement. It can’t be easy being a single mom in a small town, but being a single mom with a husband who ran off and left you for his secretary? Well, that’s gotta be tough around here.

“I better get back to the house,” I say. “See if Mama needs help with dinner.”

“Of course. Thanks again for covering for me today.”

“No problem. I’ll see you later.” I smile and head for the door.

“Lemon?”

I turn and see Daisy chewing her bottom lip. “He never really dated anyone else. Colton, I mean.”

“Ooo-kay.” I draw out the first syllable for far too long.

“I just thought you should know. My friend Annie tried, but she said it was like he was just going through the motions.”

“I don’t know why you’re telling me this, Daisy-Mae.”

“Because I think some loves are forever, you know?” She glances at her wedding ring and tucks her hand away. “I mean, not all of them, obviously, but ... I don’t think he ever fell out of love with you. Plus, he has that big old house that he’s never even spent the night in, and—”

“What big old house?”

“Oh. I ... um ... I thought you knew about it.” She grimaces and watches my face

closely. “But I can see I’ve opened my big mouth when I shouldn’t have.”

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“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, but I’m pretty sure that Colton Hayes wouldn’t spit on me if I was on fire.”

“I don’t believe that.” Daisy shakes her head. “And I don’t think you do either. Not really.”

I sigh and head toward the door. “Good night, Daisy-Mae.”

“G’night.”

I leave the bed-and-breakfast and close the door. For a moment, I just stand there, trying to ignore her words, and then movement from the cabin at the end of the row catches my eye. Colt stands on his front porch, sipping a beer, his boots crossed at the ankles as he leans his muscular body against the railing. He watches me intently as I walk the paved path toward the cabin.

He doesn’t move, just scrutinizes me with one brow raised as I come closer. “You need somethin’, Lemonade?”

“Why are you livin’ here?”

“What’s that now?”

“Why are you livin’ here?” I say slowly, as if he were hard of hearing. “What happened to your daddy’s house?”

“I sold it when he went into care. Look, I don’t know why you’re ridin’ my ass all of

a sudden, but we ain't together anymore. I'm a free man, so I don't think I need to tell you anything."

"I just ... it can't be the money, because the last time I looked at the ranch's books, we're making more than enough to cover all of the staff, keep the animals in feed, and build a nice little nest egg for me and my brothers. Which means with the money from your daddy's house and your salary, you must be doing okay for yourself. So why aren't you livin' in town?"

"I like the quiet." He takes another sip of his beer and arches a brow. "It's usually very peaceful here."

"At a bed-and-breakfast?"

He shrugs. "My neighbors are different every week. You know what they say about a change being as good as a holiday. What more could I possibly need?"

"Oh, I don't know. A nice quiet house that's all your own."

His eyes turn mercurial. "Why do you care where I'm livin'? Seems you gave up any say you had in that the second you left town."

"Are you chasin' Daisy-Mae?"

He dang nearly chokes on his beer. "Daisy-Mae?"

"She said you'd never dated anyone after, well ... me."

"Daisy needs to learn to keep her mouth shut, but it's sweet you were asking about me."

“I wasn’t asking. She volunteered the information, just like she mentioned you maybe have somewhere else you can go besides my parents’ bed-and-breakfast.” I get closer, climbing up his porch steps so he has no choice but to retreat or meet me head on.

Colt doesn’t move. “Can I show you something?”

“I’ve already seen whatever you want to show me, Colton Hayes.”

He laughs humorlessly and leans into my ear. “Come on, Lemonade. Let’s you and me go for a ride. No funny business. Or do you suddenly not trust yourself with me?”

I swallow hard, glaring into his eyes so full of anger and indignation. I also see a challenge in them too, and he knows I don’t ever back down from those. “Fine.”

He pulls a set of keys from the pocket of his jeans and gestures for me to go first. I stomp my way over to the faded blue truck and climb in without being told twice. Colt slams his door harder than necessary, but I don’t give him the satisfaction of acknowledging his temper.

He pulls out of the lot and joins the main road. Five minutes later, we’re cruising the edge of my family’s property around the perimeter of the west pasture when he takes an unmarked dirt road I don’t ever remember being there. The road cuts through the pasture and over the rise. A two-story contemporary home comes into view. That definitely wasn’t here before, but if this is the house that Daisy-Mae was talking about, then why the hell would my daddy let Colt build on Winchester land? None of this makes any sense.

Colt cuts the engine and looks down at the keys in his lap. He doesn’t make any attempt to get out, but I scramble from the cab and run across the yard to the front door. I glance back at the man sitting in that blue truck which holds too many memories, and he climbs out of the car, torturously slow, and eats up the ground

between us with his long strides. Colt slides the key in the lock and pushes the door open, gesturing for me to go first. I enter the space and walk through to the open-plan kitchen and dining. It's beautiful—sleek, modern surfaces that I can't imagine Colt picking out. Beyond the kitchen sits a spacious living room. The house is fully furnished and unused appliances sit on the countertop still wrapped in their plastic. "What is this place?"

"Yours." His voice cracks over the word and he clears his throat, his tongue darting out to wet his lips. "It's yours."

I turn and stare at him. "What?"

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“I built it.” He drums his fingers on the counter beside him while he studies my reaction. “With help from your daddy and West.”

“When?”

“It was gonna be my wedding gift to you.”

I run my hands over the hewn oak mantle and say quietly, “You never asked me to marry you.”

“I didn’t get the chance.”

I swallow hard and glance around the room, my eye catching the familiar painting on the far wall. Unease prickles down my spine. “How do you have that painting?”

“I bought it.”

“No.” I shake my head and walk from the lounge into the hall. Several more canvases decorate the walls, and as I pass, every room holds more and more of my art. I come to the master suite and open the door, and there above the bed is my painting of this ranch, one I almost couldn’t part with. “You’re the private collector?”

He shrugs, but there’s one missing. One I simply titled Cowboy. One that holds Colt’s likeness. That one really did break my heart to sell. I walk past the en suite and walk-in closets to another door and turn the handle.

Natural light filters in through the huge doors opening out onto the deck. There are

easels of all sizes lining the walls, and cabinets filled to bursting with paints and brushes, but on the one wall hangs my painting, my Colt. I absently reach out to touch it, and think better of it. Not just because the oil from my hands will destroy the paint, but because he's here, watching me, waiting for me to say something. Out the window, there's a clear view of our red oak, and the sight of that tree and the graves that rest beneath it cause my heart to shatter completely.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Colt

Waiting on her reaction are some of the longest seconds of my life. Will she be angry? Call me a stalker? I'm suddenly not so sure I should have brought her here. What fucking good does it do either of us except rub more salt in the wound.

Lemon turns to me and her eyes are bright with tears. Well, hell. Here's a reaction I didn't anticipate.

"You did all of this?" Her voice is shaky as her eyes meet mine. "You made me a studio off our bedroom, bought this land? Off my father?"

"Not right away. He was letting me work it off."

"For how long?"

"The last twelve years."

"Colt. Why? He would have let you out of that deal."

"I know, but I don't break my promises." I clench my jaw and stare up at the ceiling, exhaling slowly. "I'm sorry."

“It’s okay.” She shakes her head. “It’s not like it ain’t true.”

“I don’t know how to be around you anymore without being mad.”

“Once upon a time you were just madly in love with me.” I swallow, and when it’s clear I don’t know how to respond to that, she says, “I don’t understand. If y’all built this house, finished it beautifully, then why are you still living in that run-down cabin by the B and B?”

“I thought about it. I come by every few weeks to clean it up, but I couldn’t move in here, not without ...”

“Me?”

I glance at her baby blue eyes and look away just as fast. “Yes, ma’am.”

“You should live here, Colt. It makes no sense to have this big old house that you worked so hard for sitting here empty.”

“I’m already livin’ with the ghost of you everywhere I go. I don’t need it haunting these empty halls too.” I have no fucking clue what more there is to say, and it’s clear she’s speechless too, so I set the keys on the counter. “I don’t know how long you’re home for, if you’re stayin’ for good or heading back to the city, but these keys belong to you.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t accept this.”

“You do whatever you have to. Keep it, sell it, hire it out for holidays as an Airbnb. Move in if that’s what you want. I don’t care what you do with it, but it’s yours now. It always was.”

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“Colt.” She walks toward me and pulls me into her arms. I’m stiff as a board. I don’t embrace her back. I can’t. If I do, I’ll never let her go, and we both know I can’t give her what she wants. “I’m so sorry.”

“Me too,” I grunt, my voice tight.

She releases me, and I walk out before I can do anything else that I’ll spend my life regretting. I don’t count on Lemon following me.

“Colt, wait.”

“We don’t have nothin’ else to say to one another, Lemon.”

“So, what? You’re just going to ignore me forever?”

“That depends.”

“On what?” she shouts.

“You stayin’ forever?”

Before she can grasp what I’m doing, I stalk toward her. I cup her face and I press my lips to hers, because I’m a man dying of thirst—I’ve been dying of thirst for twelve goddamn years, and she’s my oasis. She always has been. I drive my tongue into her mouth and she opens to me, kissing me back with a fervor that matches my own. I back her up toward the pillar at the front porch and her hands on my chest turn from grasping me closer to pushing me away. “Wait, Colt.”

“That’s what I thought. You wanna know why I can’t live in that house, why I can’t be around you, why I got nothin’ left to give you? It’s because I’m always gonna be in love with you, Lemon. There’s never been another woman for me, and it fucking tears me up inside. I hate this. I can’t be friends with you. I can’t pretend to see you, to sit next to you every day and not want to sweep everything off your mama’s breakfast table and fuck you right there to show you exactly what you’re missin’.”

She blinks up at me, startled by the brutality in my words.

“Not such a gentleman now, am I?” I shake my head and walk away, furious with myself for losing my temper. Pissed that I brought her here and that I just laid it all on the line for her like a fucking chump, and she still can’t meet me halfway. I climb in the cab of my truck and I start the engine, peeling out of the drive. I can’t sit beside her right now. I can’t share the cab of my truck with a woman I can’t trust myself to be a gentleman with. There’s too much hurt and history between us.

I pull over once I’m on the main road and I call West.

He answers on the third ring. “Yello?”

“I need you to go get your sister.”

“She ain’t here. She hasn’t come back from the B and B yet.”

“She’s at the house.”

“Wha—”

“Herhouse. Jesus, West, keep up.”

He laughs. “Let me guess, you showed my little sister the house you built for her and

she didn't take it well."

"Just go get her, please?"

"So help me, Colt, if you hurt her."

"Of course I fucking hurt her. I showed her a glimpse of the future we might have had if she'd just stuck around. She may not love me anymore, but you don't dig up history like that without feeling something."

"Well, if there's one thing I know about my sister, it's that she has a killer poker face—even when she's dyin' inside, she'll never show you."

"Are you gonna go get her or not?"

"Yeah, I'll get her. You're gonna owe me though."

"What is it with you Winchesters riding my ass today?"

West chuckles. "At least someone's gettin' ridden."

Fucking Winchesters. They're all gonna be the death of me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Lemon

The sound of an engine roars through the late evening, and I wipe the tears from my cheeks and stare in surprise at West's shiny red truck coming up the drive and kicking up dust in his wake.

Great. Of course Colt would call the brother who hates me.

I evaluate my options—walking all the way through the west pasture back to the house, or enduring a five-minute car ride with my brother while having to listen to yet another lecture. I don't make a move toward the truck, but West surprises me by cutting the engine and climbing out.

His long strides eat away the distance between us and he sits beside me on the front porch steps. "So, he finally had the balls to show you the house."

"I think I kind of forced his hand." I laugh and close my eyes. Everything I've ever done when it came to Colt was push. Maybe that's been our problem all along. "Did you and Daddy really help him build it?"

West doesn't answer for a beat, and then he looks out over the front yard. "You remember when Colt, Daddy, and I were gone for those three days camping out on the property to check on those longhorns that'd gone missing?"

"I remember being not so thrilled that he was leaving me."

“We poured the slab and built the frame that weekend. I put up that tire swing in that oak tree there, hoping my niece or nephew would play in it someday.”

My eyes prick with tears and I blink them back, but they fall anyway. Aside from Daddy’s funeral and that fateful week when I lost everything, I don’t think West has ever seen me cry. And it’s clear from the muscle popping in his jaw and the way he shifts on the stoop that he’s not real comfortable witnessing it now.

“You two had the odds stacked against you from the very beginning. I know I’ve never told you that I don’t blame you for leaving, but I don’t.”

I frown at him.

“And I haven’t given you a lotta reason to believe that, but it’s true. My whole life I knew I was gonna be married to this ranch. There was nothing else in my blood, but you ain’t like that, Lemon. You were born with fire in your veins, a light nothing and no one could smother. I knew you weren’t gonna stay forever. It broke my heart when you left, not just for Mama and Daddy or Colt. Not because I was never getting out, but because I knew this place would be darker once that light of yours was gone.”

“I think that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

He laughs and bumps his shoulder to mine. “Don’t get too used to it.”

“It broke me to leave all of you too, you know?”

“I know, and I get why you had to go.”

“Then why were you such an asshole when I came back?”

He chews his lip and angles his body, looking at the house behind us. “Because I wasn’t sure we’d survive you coming back and then leaving us all again. I don’t know if you belong in New York. I won’t pretend to know anything about your life there, but I do know you and Colt were meant to be forever, at least that’s what I thought. He would’ve followed you to that big city, but it would have broken him to be away from all of this. And it might’ve broken you if you’d stayed.”

“You know this isn’t really helping.”

“I’m not sure this is supposed to be an easy decision to make.”

“Well, Colt made it clear he had nothin’ more to say, so I guess he made the decision for me, now didn’t he?”

“Darlin’, you could put Colt through just about anything—torture, humiliation, cheatin’—and he’d still rip the heart from his chest just to keep yours beating. He’s hurtin’. He’s been hurtin’ since the day you left, but he ain’t ever gonna stop lovin’ you.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Look around you, Lemonade. He finished this house, furnished it just the way you would have, and he did it all for you. He did it all knowing that one day you’d come back, and he’d finally get to show you that he never gave up on the two of you.”

I draw my knees in tight and lean my chin against them. “You didn’t see his face when he drove away.”

“Nope, I didn’t. But I heard the panic in his voice when he phoned me to come pick you up. That man ain’t done lovin’ you. He’s never gonna be done lovin’ you.”

I stare at the first stars flirting with the evening sky and wipe away my tears as West stands and holds out a hand to me. “Now come on. Mama made cobbler, and I got a feeling Wade’s gonna be claiming yours and mine if we don’t get on back.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Lemon

Eighteen years old

Four days after I left the hospital, I'm sitting in my room alone when Mama comes to get me cleaned up. I haven't moved from my bed since I came home. It isn't the pain of my salpingectomy keeping me here. I have no desire to do anything. I'm lethargic—and while my body aches—on the inside, I'm numb. Yet, I can't stop crying. I didn't even know it was possible for one person to produce so many tears.

Daddy's been good about giving Colt time off to grieve and take care of me, but I don't know what to say to him, so I push him away by telling him I'm tired. It's not a lie. I am exhausted. We should be grieving the loss of our baby, but I'm grieving the loss of so much more than that. With one surgery I've more than halved my possibility of ever falling pregnant again and the truth is, I felt both relieved and saddened by that news. I'm eighteen years old. I'm not ready for a baby, yet one was coming whether I was ready or not. Now that I'm no longer pregnant, I have so much guilt, so much pain, and so much anger.

What kind of person is relieved when her pregnancy is ectopic? What kind of person cries for the baby she lost one minute and is grateful for the weight that was lifted off her shoulders the next?

And Colt? Colt is so broken, so unsure. I've never seen him this way, and I realize things were so different for him. Sure, he wasn't expecting to be a dad at twenty-two, but he took it in his stride. I could see his love for me and our unborn child growing by the second, and all I could think was that I was never going to get off this ranch. I

was never going to see the world and go to school in New York. I was never going to amount to anything more than someone's wife, someone's mother.

I let my mother fuss and preen over me as she helps me shower and blows out my hair. The truth is, it's nice to have someone pamper me when I'm still so fragile. "Mama?"

"What, baby girl?"

"Am I a bad person?"

"Honey, no. Why would you say that?"

"Because, as much as I would have loved that little baby, a part of me felt relieved when I realized I was losing it," I admit on a sob. "I wasn't ready to be a mama. I could never be what you are to me and the boys."

Mama squeezes my shoulder tightly. "Oh, honey. No mother has it all figured out ever, and you're barely eighteen. No one would blame you for not being ready."

"Colt was ready, and now I don't know if I can ever give him that again. I don't want to try again, at least not now, maybe not until I'm thirty."

"Sweetheart, Colt loves you." She gives me a wistful smile. "You didn't see him when they rushed you into surgery. He was terrified for you. No one is expecting you to want to try again. Maybe someday, when the two of you are married, there's still a chance you could get pregnant without medical intervention. If that's what you want."

"What if I can't ever give him that?"

“Lemon Emersyn,” she coos as she tucks my hair behind my ear. “The only things certain in life are taxes and death, but I do know this one thing—you and Colt are forever. Whether you choose to have children down the road or not, that boy would follow you into the fires of hell if he thought it would make you happy.”

“He shouldn’t have to settle because I only have half my baby-making organs.”

“Honey, only a foolish man would believe a life with you was settling, and that boy of yours has all his wits about him. Trust me on that.” She chucks me under the chin. “Now come on. Put on a nice dress and your church boots.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere.”

“I know, but you’ll never forgive yourself if you miss this.”

Colt drives so slowly it would almost be quicker to walk, but every bump his truck goes over pulls at my insides. It’s agony, and a part of me relishes the pain because it’s better than this numbness I’ve felt.

My family are gathered around our tree, all dressed in their church clothes, and I finally realize why we’re here.

We come to a stop and Daddy opens my door and helps me out of the truck. My brothers all hug me, careful not to squeeze me too tight. West hands me a small wooden box, and I frown and burst into tears, confused. There’s no baby for us to bury, just a fetus that was likely thrown out as medical waste with half of my reproductive organs.

“Colt made it.”

I shake my head, looking at Colt. “What is it?”

“It’s just some of things we bought for our Jellybean. I thought we could bury them at the base of our tree, so we’ve always got somewhere to come and visit.” His voice breaks over the last few words and I hold him tightly.

“That’s really beautiful.”

“Your daddy made the headstone.”

I bite my lip to keep from falling apart, but the fact that Colt and Daddy went to so much effort to give us a place to visit with our Jellybean, it opens the floodgates, and they don’t stop as every member of my family says a few words in eulogy.

A little of the numbness I felt since learning I lost a baby I didn’t even want vanishes. It hurts like hell, and it’s just a taste of what’s to come. Because I know now that I have to leave Colt to save him from a life with me, in order to give him the kind of life he deserves.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Lemon

Colt didn't show for breakfast at six, and he isn't here now for Mama's hot lunch like the rest of the boys. I take my seat and sip my sweet tea, but I really only pick at the food on my plate. I know he's angry and I try not to be upset about it, but I've been playing that scene yesterday over and over in my head, and I don't know where to begin. He kissed me and I kissed him back. I wanted to keep kissing him, I wanted to do a lot more than kissing, but one of us has to start thinking clearly. As much as I cherish what happened that night after Earl's, we can't just pick up where we left off twelve years ago. There's a whole lotta hurt under that bridge, and I don't know if either one of us can make it right.

"I can only assume Colt not being here all day means someone dang wore him out yesterday." Wade winks at me, Wyatt chuckles, and I see red.

I try not to take Colt's absence personally, but it cuts me to the core. Of course, it isn't helped by my brothers giving me and the empty seat beside me sidelong looks. I'm used to them poking fun, but today, I've had enough.

"Would you two grow up?" I demand, standing so abruptly my chair hits the floor with a clatter.

"Lemon Emersyn Winchester," Mama scolds.

I swallow hard and whisper, "Sorry, Mama."

Before I can mouth off at Wade again, West punches him in the arm. “Knock it off.”

Wade’s brow creases and he looks at our older brother like he just drove a knife right through his chest. “What? I was just—”

“You’re just gettin’ on everyone’s last nerve,” West chides. Wade opens his mouth to protest, but West shuts him down. “From now on, no more ribbing Lemon and Colt. They got some things to sort out, and until they do, they don’t need none of y’all makin’ things worse.”

Wyatt raises his brows and locks eyes with me. He’s usually the first one I talk to, so I’m not sure whether he’s more shocked or insulted to find that I’ve been talking to West about this mess.

“Y’all hear me?”

The boys—including Cash—all bow their heads and murmur their acquiescence, but it seems West isn’t quite done. “Now, apologize to your sister.”

Wade and Wyatt both glare at him and then a quick glance in Mama’s direction sees them following orders. “Sorry, Lemon,” they mutter.

Cash just sits opposite me with a huge grin on his face. Carla’s right. He really is a cocky cowboy.

A horse whinnies in the stable and a beat later the sound of thundering hooves retreat from the house. I stand and walk away from the table, out through the back door, and into the yard and stable beyond. I tack up Teraway and pull her into the yard. Climbing up into her saddle, I take the reins and dig my heels into her sides before I really have the chance to reconsider what I’m doing. She takes off in the direction of the west pasture, but she’s resisting. I don’t know if it’s my mood or the gray clouds

above that have her in a temper, but I give her a gentle nudge with my boots and she breaks into a loping, graceful canter.

The clouds grow darker the longer we ride, and I have half a mind to turn back, but I can't. I need to see him. We need to talk this out. Twenty minutes later, the sky overhead opens up, and I slip in the saddle as I crest the rise and see Colt working on the fence in the western pasture.

The earth has that sickly green look about it right before a nasty storm hits.

"Colt!" I shout against the wind and rain as I pull the reins on Teraway and my horse comes to a grinding stop. I climb down and stomp toward him. Colt's fixing a post and seems to be a little hard of hearing today. "Why the hell won't you talk to me?"

He continues slamming the fence post into the ground, the thick muscles in his biceps distracting me for a beat from my anger.

"Colt!"

"Go home, Lemon. I already told you I got nothing to say to you."

I didn't want to do this, but I put my hands on my hips so he knows I ain't fooling around. "Fine then, maybe you can listen for once."

"Listen? Me, not listen?"

"That's what I said, ain't it?"

"I listen. I've listened to every goddamn word that's ever come out of your mouth, and even heard the ones you weren't saying out loud. I think I've listened enough." He turns back to his work and begins banging again, but the rain makes the task that

much more difficult and his hands slip on the handles.

“Fine. You might not want to talk to me, but I got things I need to say to you.”

“Then maybe you shoulda stuck around twelve years ago instead of runnin’ out on me.”

“You’re right. I should have,” I say, and he pauses slamming the post into the ground to look at me. Wet hair falls into his eyes and the horses neigh. I turn and glance at Teraway, she rears up but behind her the sky is black as midnight, and the storm front is moving fast.

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Colt notices too—he stalks toward me and grabs Teraway’s reins. “Get on the horse, Lemon.”

“Are we getting a tornado?”

Colt glares and I scramble to do as I’m told because it’s been a long time since I’ve come face-to-face with weather like this. If Colt is compelled enough to take action, then that’s all the fuel I need to light a fire under my ass too.

Rain falls in my eyes and the wild wind whips my hair around my face as I turn my horse in circles. Colt unties Knievel and climbs up, placing a hand against the frightened stallion’s neck. They trot toward us but a deluge of rain and ice-cold hailstones fall from the sky, and I can’t see a thing in front of me. “Colt?”

“Lemonade!” he shouts back, and I dig my heels into Teraway’s side. She charges forward. The hail beats down so hard it stings my skin.

Colt shouts over the ruckus, “We need to find shelter, let this storm pass!”

“Where?” I scream back. “The house is too far?”

“Wyatt did up that run-down shack in the west pasture. It won’t do much in a tornado, but it should be dry at least.”

“Okay.”

He heads for the shack and it takes some coaxing, but Teraway decides to try and

keep up and bolts after Colt's horse. My saddle is slippery and my boots struggle for purchase in the stirrups, but after several minutes of beating rain and hail upon our backs, the cabin comes into view.

I'm freezing as I sling my leg off the horse and Colt's hands encircle my waist to help me down. I don't need no help dismounting a horse, I've been riding as long as he has, but I appreciate the gesture and the little bit of warmth his hands provide because I'm shaking so hard my teeth are rattling in my head.

"I'm gonna send the horses back," Colt shouts over the thunder and rain.

"Will they find their way in this?"

"They'll be safer out there than here."

I nod and wait, shivering in the rain while he slaps both of the horses asses and sends them on their way. In the distance, tornado sirens wail in town, and my blood turns as cold as the hail falling from the sky. Please, West, get everyone in the shelter. I reach for the handle, try the lock, and find it stuck.

"Colt, it's not opening."

"Goddamn it, Wyatt." He shoulders me out of the way and jiggles the handle. Colt moves to the picture window and tries to lift it, but it won't budge. Then he shocks the hell out of me by grabbing the hem of his shirt and lifting it over his head.

"What are you doing—you'll freeze," I shout against the wind.

"I gotta bust open the window." He wraps his shirt around his fist and punches the small windowpane closest to the door. It shatters and he clears away the rest of the glass before sliding his arm through the gap and unlocking the door. He gestures for

me to go first, because even though he hates me, he's still a gentleman about it.

Inside, the tiny shack isn't much warmer, but it's dry and there's a fireplace in the corner of the room that I rush toward. Colt gets there first and begins stacking kindling in the small hearth. "Look for something to burn, will ya?"

"Okay," I say through chattering teeth. I glance around the small space. There ain't a whole lot lying around, but there is a bed, an old armchair which Mama threw away years ago, a bathroom, and a tiny kitchenette. I open the drawers and begin looking for a book of matches and paper to burn.

"Bless your heart, Wyatt Winchester," I say, as I come across a Playgirl magazine and a book of matches from a gay club in Austin, Texas. I cross the small cabin to Colt and hand over the matches first and then the magazine.

Colt glances at the naked man on the cover and raises an eyebrow. "Jesus Christ. I guess now we know why the door was locked."

"You can use it right?"

"Well, yeah, but ... are you sure you don't want to go in the bathroom and take a little look first. Might warm you up some."

I laugh and shove his shoulder. "I'm sure. That kind of flashy beefcake was never my thing."

My eyes roll over his half-naked body crouching by the fireplace and I bite my lip. Colt may not be what I'd consider beefcake, but he sure is fine. Every inch of him is tanned, hard-won muscle from working my family's land, and one hundred percent centerfold worthy.

He smirks and takes the magazine, opening to the centerfold and ripping it right out as he shakes his head. “I guess it never was, was it?”

I hop from foot to foot, hugging myself to generate heat. “Can you hurry up, please? I’m freezing.”

“Sure thing, darlin’.”

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“Don’t you sass me, Colton Hayes.”

He adds a log to the fire and the pop and crackle of dry wood soothes my soul, even though the window is still letting a considerable amount of wind howl through the open pane.

I take the rest of the magazine and place it up against the window frame, searching for something to hold it down when a roll of duct tape peeks out from under the bed at me. “Oh my Lord, Wyatt. I could kiss you right now, but y’all need Jesus.”

I grab the tape from the bed and head back to the window. I tape up the magazine, but a bloom of bright red blood against the painted frame catches my eye. “Colt, let me see your hand.”

“It’s fine,” he grunts and stands in front of the fire, shaking. I finish taping the window shut and draw the curtains to keep the heat in. It makes the cabin that much darker, but the sky outside is just as black, so right now I’d rather the warmth and safety of these four walls. My teeth chatter as I step toward him. “Let me see.”

“I said it’s fine.”

“Please?”

He sets his jaw, but his eyes are already resolved. Colton Hayes never could win when it came to betting against me. He offers his hand for inspection and I take his wrist and glance at his knuckles. They’re bloody and all busted up.

I suck in a sharp breath. “You’re hurt.”

“I’m okay.” He pulls away and turns back to the fire. “It’s just a scratch.”

“Yeah, with glass in it. Sit down. I’m gonna find something to clean it with.”

“There’s a gallon of Fireball whiskey on the counter.”

“Well, that’s a start.” I head to the bathroom. I don’t find much in the way of bandages but there is a salve in the cabinet and paper towel in the kitchen, so I gather my supplies and walk back over to Colt, who hasn’t moved from the fire.

“You’re soaking wet, Lemonade. You shouldn’t be looking to patch me up until you’re out of those clothes.”

I smile, because I know he didn’t mean anything by it, but even when Colt is trying to be a perfect gentleman, there’s always something just a little rugged and dirty about him. “You haven’t said those words to me for a long time.”

“Nope, I guess I haven’t.”

“It’s okay. I won’t take them to heart.” I smile up at him and set my materials on the counter. “I’ll make you a deal. Let me fix your hand, ’cause you can’t keep that glass in it all night, and I’ll take all my clothes off to dry out when I’m done.”

“You’re still just as big a tease as ever.”

A bold smile steals across my face. “I know.”

“Fine. Deal,” he grunts. “I don’t wanna sit on the bed and make it wet.”

“Okay, let’s do this in the bathroom then.” I take the bottle of Fireball and screw off the cap, sipping it on the way to the bathroom. Warm whiskey slides down my throat and sparks in my chest, settling in my belly. I wince as I remember the long nights we drank this stuff in the back of Colt’s truck, the tailgate laid down. Drunk and in love, we were untouchable then. Until we weren’t. Until our whole world fell apart and we hit the ground so hard we shattered.

I clean his hand over the sink and fish out what little glass I can see. He doesn’t need stitches, but he should probably still get it looked at tomorrow. Assuming we make it through the night and don’t kill each other first.

When we leave the bathroom, Colt grabs the bottle of Fireball and I head to the kitchenette, hoping like hell Wyatt had the forethought to stock the cabinets with snacks.

“Alright, Lemonade. It’s your turn. Take your clothes off.”

I frown and continue my perusal of Wyatt’s shelves. Granola bars and a pack of gum is all I come up with. “Nothing’s changed it seems.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“You’re still trying to get me naked.”

“Woman, the way I remember it, I never even had to ask. You were always shedding clothes at the watering hole, at our tree, or in the back of my truck where your brothers or your folks could have found us.”

I shrug and grab the box from the pantry before walking across the room and setting them on the floor in front of the fire. “I liked taking my clothes off in front of you.”

“Yeah, I remember.” Colt’s soft laugh causes my insides to stir. “You particularly enjoyed trying to get me killed.”

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There's a blanket box at the end of the bed and I'm almost afraid to open it because I have seen *Fifty Shades*—and based on the duct tape, the nonperishable snacks, and the salve in the bathroom, I'm pretty sure my brother is the gay equivalent of Christian Grey. I have no desire to freeze to death in the middle of a tornado though, so I open Pandora's box. A literal dick-ton of sex toys stare back at me. Yep. Wyatt is one kinky fucker. There are blankets though and I pull them out and toss one to Colt. "I'm game if you are."

"I never had any problems being naked around you, Lemonade."

"I remember."

He raises a brow and his hands fly to his belt buckle. He unbuckles it and his eyes glide to mine. "You gonna watch?"

"Maybe."

"What if I said you lost the right to watch me undress when you walked out on me?"

"I'd tell you it's a little late for that, isn't it? Or did you forget about the night in your cabin after you dragged me kicking and screaming from Earl's."

He nods like I've made a fair point. "I could never forget," he whispers. "But I tell you what, Lemonade, why don't you start? Ladies first and all that."

"Oh, is that how we're playing now?"

“Once a gentleman, always one.”

Okay then. If he wants to play dirty, I’ll show him how wild Lemon Winchester can be. I start on my sopping wet button-down, and slowly undo all of the buttons. Then I peel off the wet fabric and let it fall to the floor. It makes a wetsplosh against the worn floorboards and I stand there in my jeans and bra. Colt doesn’t turn his eyes away. He studies every inch of me from my toes to my head and everything in between. Those gray eyes bore into me, and I suddenly feel hot in all the places his gaze touches.

I toe off my boots and unfasten the button on my jeans, then I slowly slip them over my hips, thanking the good Lord that I took the time to put on matching bra and panties this morning. What I didn’t count on was how sheer they were. You can see everything through the soft pink lace.

“Jesus,” Colt mutters under his breath and his Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows audibly.

I grab the blanket and wrap it around my shoulders, then I sit on the floor by the fire to watch him undress the rest of the way. Outside, the wind howls and batters the weathered cabin. Inside, the storm is just as fierce.

Colt removes his jeans and his hard-on pushes against the thin, wet fabric of his boxers as he covers himself from view and grabs the blanket to wrap himself in. He sits before the fire, his large frame dwarfing the lower part of his body.

“You know we should huddle together to generate more warmth,” I suggest.

Colt smirks.

“I mean, purely by survival standards, that is.”

“You know what will generate more heat?”

“What?” I wince as the word comes out breathier than I intended, and Colt’s face almost looks pained.

“Whiskey.” He hands the giant bottle to me.

I sigh. Well, he’s not wrong. I press the lip to my mouth and take a hearty gulp. It burns on the way down but the warmth it produces low in my belly slakes the hunger within me. Some of it, anyway.

I hand the bottle back to him and we sit in silence as we eat our granola bars. The wind outside makes me wince and I bite my lip. Colt catches the action and says, “We’ll be okay.”

“I’m more worried about Mama and the boys.”

“They got the cellar. They’ll be fine. They’re more protected than we are.”

“Well now I am worried.” I laugh. Colt shakes his head and hands me the bottle of whiskey. I swallow another mouthful and relish the buzz as the whiskey warms my throat.

“We’ll have to get Wyatt to build us a tornado cellar.”

I chuckle, the whiskey and adrenaline going straight to my head. “How many men do you think he’s brought back here?”

“A few.”

“How safe do you think that mattress is?”

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“I’m thinkin’ maybe we might be safer out there with the storm.”

“Poor Wyatt.”

“Poor Wyatt? At least he’s getting laid.”

“Oh, come on. Tell me every single woman who comes through those doors of the B and B aren’t falling all over themselves to spend the night in your cabin?”

“They could fall all over my big, fat cock and I still wouldn’t be interested.”

I shiver at the crassness of his words, liking this dirtier, grown-up side of Colt. “Why wouldn’t you be interested?”

“Because I don’t want just another piece of ass.”

“So, what? You’re just gonna stay single forever?”

“Maybe.”

“That’s kind of sad, isn’t it?”

“You tell me—is it any better than agreeing to marry a man you don’t love?”

I swallow hard and glower. “I never said I didn’t love him.”

“You didn’t have to. I know you when you’re in love, Lemonade. Nothing on God’s

green earth could hold you back, yet you skipped town the second things got rough.”

I frown. Is he talking about my ex now or him? Either way, I decide a subject change is in order. “Why didn’t we ever think to restore this shack?”

“Because we didn’t care who we were kissin’ in front of. Everything back then was sweet and wild, and we didn’t even notice we were burning alive.”

I sip the whiskey and pull the blanket tighter around my shoulders, shifting closer to the fire. “Do you ever wonder where we’d be if I hadn’t lost the baby?”

“We.”

“What?”

“If we hadn’t lost her. We both lost her.”

“You don’t know that it was a her.”

“You don’t know she wasn’t.”

I nod and stare into the flames licking at the stone walls of the fireplace.

“And no. I try not to think about what might’ve been. There ain’t no sense in that.”

“I do.” I swallow hard and meet his gaze. “I think about the two of us, what might’ve happened if I hadn’t left you. We’d probably have eight adopted children by now, all just as stubborn as their daddy.”

“Me, stubborn?” He arches a brow, trying to make light of the mood, but there is no making light of us. We were never light. We were fire and heat, and it engulfed us,

razed us to the ground. “And what do you mean adopted?”

“Why don’t you think about that?” I frown, changing the subject, wanting more from him than he’s obviously willing to give. “Did your hate for me consume any love you had left?”

“I never hated you, Lemon. God, I never stopped loving you. You left me, and my heart shattered into a hundred-thousand pieces. I didn’t have a hope in hell of putting it back together.”

“Then why didn’t you come find me?”

“And say what? You took off in the middle of the night. You made it pretty clear that you wanted nothing more to do with me.”

“I was wrong. I was a dumb kid, and I was scared. I brought shame on my family, Colt. Everyone in town looked at me like I was worthless, and after I lost the baby, I couldn’t stand the pity in their eyes. ‘There goes Lemon Winchester. Such a shame that girl was so wild.’”

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Colt shakes his head. “No one was looking at you like that, and even if they did. Who cares? Aren’t you the one who always told me just to let them talk, they didn’t matter?”

“I thought I wanted more for my life than just being some rancher’s wife. I just ... I needed to get out. If I didn’t, I was going to get pregnant again, we’d be married, and I wanted more for my life than that.”

“You wanted more than just beingmywife. Let’s be honest here.”

I shake my head. “I grew up the daughter of a third-generation rancher’s wife.”

“I know how you grew up,” he says through his teeth. “I was there for every goddamn step of the way ... before you left me, that is.”

“That wasn’t my future. I needed to find myself. I needed to make my own mark on the world.”

“And how’s that working out for you, Lemonade?”

All the wind leaves my sails and I sigh. “Pretty terrible actually.”

“I woulda given you everything. If you’d told me that’s what you wanted, I would have followed you to New York and washed dishes to keep a roof over our heads while you went to art school, but you never gave me the chance.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. The idea of Colton Hayes living in New York is as

unfamiliar as a fish out of water ... it's as foreign as me living in New York. I never belonged there. All the noise, the city lights, the confined apartments and traffic drove me mad, and still I stayed because I wasn't sure I deserved this. I wasn't sure I deserved to come home. Now I know there's no place else where I'll ever belong quite like Winchester Wild Ranch.

"I didn't want another baby, Colt," I blurt, and then I wet my lips and soften my tone, because I know this must be hard for him to hear. "Not then. I knew you'd want a whole football team of kids you could teach to ride and work the land. I didn't know if I could give you that. I still don't." I swipe my tears away with the back of my hand.

His brow furrows and those deep gray eyes of his turn mercurial. "You left me because you thought you couldn't get pregnant?"

I nod.

"Why the fuck wouldn't you tell me that, Lemon?"

"I made a mistake."

"You're goddamn right, you did." He rakes a hand through his hair and picks up the whiskey. "All this time, wasted, because you got it in your head that I wanted to use you like a brood mare. Is that what you thought of me?"

"Will you shut up and let me speak, please?"

He gives me a sidelong glance that says he's losing his patience, but he nods and gestures with his whiskey that I should 'take it away.'

"I screwed up. I didn't know how to deal with everything that happened, with losing

that little baby. I was scared and I ran, and this whole time I've been runnin' in the wrong direction."

"I don't know if it's the whiskey talking or the pollution you've been breathin' livin' in that big 'ole city that's messed with your head, but I don't know what the hell you're getting' at."

"I'm sayin' I still love you, Colton Hayes. Some days I hate you too, but for the most part my heart still beats for you, for only you."

Colt's lips turn up in a sneer and he crawls toward me, but I don't budge. I ain't afraid of him.

"You still love me?"

"Yep," I whisper. "Pretty much that's what I just said."

"What about your life in New York?"

"I don't have a life there. I never did." I shrug. Ambrose has been holding down the fort just fine without me, and being here inspires me to paint like the city never could. "I always felt like I was walking in borrowed shoes. Ambrose can run the gallery for me, and I'll send my paintings via courier if I have to. I don't want to give up on something that I worked so hard for, but I also don't want to be without you, Colt. I suppose the real question is—do you want me?"

"All the time." He reaches out and draws me to him, pressing his body against mine. He's hard all over and I'm no longer so worried about my panties being wet. "I want you all the goddamn time. There's never been anyone else but you, Lemonade. There never will be anyone else but you."

Colt lowers his head and leans in. His hand strokes the back of my neck while the other slides over my hip to cup my ass cheek. I smile because he always was an ass man. He presses his lips to mine and the second our mouths meet we both lose control. My hands are in his hair, he grabs the globes of my ass and squeezes. I moan as my fingers explore the hard planes of his muscled body. His hard-on pushes against my stomach and we fall back on the worn floorboards. I no longer care about the bed, or the fact that this cabin may not survive the storm. I only care about his hands on my body, his lips on mine, and him inside me.

I slip my hand into his boxers and take his heavy cock in my palm. He groans as I slide from base to tip. Colt makes light work of my bra, slipping it off and cupping my breasts in his huge palms. He pinches my nipples. Pleasure arcs through me. I grab the waistband of my panties, desperate to get them out of the way. But Colt places his hands over mine and pulls away from my lips. "When you give a gift to a man, Lemonade, at least give him a chance to unwrap it himself."

I giggle and let my hands fall by my sides. He hooks his forefinger into the elastic and draws me closer. I stumble into him and Colt steadies me. Then he glides my panties over my hips and thighs, following them down. He lifts one ankle and slides the thin fabric off my heel, then follows suit with the other. I expect him to stand and lead me to the bed, but in one swift movement, he grabs hold of my ankle and throws it over his shoulder, burying his face in me.

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I gasp and jerk back, but he holds me firm and pulls the other leg over his shoulder, stands, and shoves me up against the wall. The wood is rough and cold at my back, but it makes the warmth of his mouth and breath on me so much more potent. I slide my fingers through his hair as he eats me out. My whole world just explodes as he licks and sucks my clit, and then I come so hard I see stars.

With trembling limbs, I climb down with Colt's help, and he has to hold me to keep me from toppling over because my legs have turned to Jell-O.

"You taste just as sweet as you always did, Lemonade."

"And you kiss even better than I remembered," I whisper breathlessly, and I try hard not to think about all of the women he might've practiced on since he first went down on me. Daisy-Mae said he didn't date, but that doesn't mean he didn't find solace with other women, just like I tried to with Stavros.

"Shit."

"What?"

"I don't have a condom."

I huff. "Seriously?"

"I don't carry my wallet when I ride. It'd just be nailing me in the ass every time I bounce in the saddle."

“Good point.” I glance up at the ceiling and roll my head to the side. A big blue box catches my eye, and I chuckle.

“What’s so funny?”

I reach under the bed and pull out the object in question—a jumbo box of condoms. “Thank God for kinky brothers who prepare like Boy Scouts.”

Colt’s lips turn up into that crooked smile I love so much, and he takes a condom from the box and tears the package open with his teeth. Then he sits back on his knees and rolls the condom on. “Get on up here and ride me, cowgirl.”

I crawl toward him before climbing into his lap. As I slowly lower myself onto his hardness, I wrap my legs around his hips, my arms over his broad shoulders, and stare down into those stormy gray eyes. There’s nothing but love and need reflected back at me now, and after so many years of unrest, I finally feel like my soul is slowly stitching itself back together. Here in this moment, I’m finally home.

Colt buries his face in my breasts, licking my nipple before sucking it into his mouth. I rock my hips back and forth, enjoying the exchange of power. Colton is a gentleman everywhere but in bed, and in the past he might’ve waited for my consent, but immediately afterward he always took the lead. I like seeing him powerless and submitting to my will for once. He leans on his forearms, clearly appreciating my tits bouncing with each rotation of my hips. I grab his hat off the floor beside us and place it on my head. It’s soaked through, but I don’t care.

“Jesus, woman. Every fantasy I ever had with you in it just came true.”

I ride him like the bulls I saw him conquer in our youth, wild and rough, nothing sweet about it, just animal instinct and a hell of a lot of moaning. I’m sweating and my whole body shakes when Colt begins bucking underneath me, pushing his cock

deeper, driving me closer to the edge. I clench around him, crying out his name as my orgasm sluices through me.

“Enjoy the ride, missy?” He ducks his head beneath the brim of the hat and whispers against the shell of my ear. His breath is hot and fiery like whiskey.

I giggle as he kisses my neck. “Yes, sir. But ... I think I’d like to go again.”

He chuckles and plucks the hat from my head, tossing it on the ground. He devours my neck in kisses. “Well, if you climb in the saddle, you best be ready for the ride. Hold on, cowgirl, ’Cause we’re about to get wild.”

I squeeze my arms and legs tightly around him as he stands and deposits me on the table, he enters my body in one hard thrust that forces me to see stars. Colt grabs my ankle and lifts it so my foot is pressed flat against his chest, he dips his head and bites my flesh. I squeal and try to get away, but he grabs my hip and yanks me closer, his cock thrusting into me that much deeper. I slide my hand between my legs and stroke my clit.

“Fuck.” Colt’s eyes hood and he darts out his tongue to wet his lip as he watches me. My tits bounce with the violence of his thrusts and I stroke myself in time, bringing us both closer to the edge. “Come for me, Lemonade. Show me how much you missed my cock.”

I come undone, unravelling slowly, little by little as Colt shifts the angle of his thrusts. His hands grip my breasts, the trimmed nails pinching my nipples and opening me up to a whole new world of pleasure and pain. My core tightens and I pulse around him, coming for him just the way he demanded.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” Colt whispers as he runs his hands over my body, his eyes following my taut curves and quivering muscles. He pulls free and helps me to

my feet, kissing me so deeply I lose my mind. Too soon Colt pulls away. I frown, wondering why he's depriving me of kisses now that we've literally kissed and made up. He grins as he pulls off the condom and discards it on the floor. His hands grip my hips, and he turns me to face the rest of the room. I almost lose my footing, but Colt steadies me with a hand splayed against my back. He pushes me forward, over the table, and he lifts my hips so that I'm standing on my tiptoes as he slips inside me.

He's no longer wearing a condom, and the feeling of his skin against mine, entering me, and driving so deep inside that he hits my cervix causes my breath to catch. "Oh God."

The sensations are so different without a condom, everything so raw and hot. Why the hell weren't we doing this all along?

"Fuck! You're so fucking hot for me, Lemon, so wet. I love feeling your velvet walls squeezing my dick."

He pounds into me—fast, hard, and completely unapologetic. I scream just as loud as the wind outside as Colt keeps up his punishing pace and I fall over the edge. Colt pulls out, and a beat later hot cum spills onto my ass. I'm delirious as I chuckle. He grabs a handful of cheek and squeezes, making all the nerve endings in my body fire to life with desire again. The need I have for this man is insatiable. I can barely keep my eyes open, I'm so exhausted, body trembling as sweat cools against my skin, and yet I still want more. Colt uses one of the blankets to clean the mess he made from my backside and helps me up.

Turning me in his arms, he cups my face in his hands and places a kiss to my forehead. "I missed doing that."

"I don't think we ever did that."

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His grin is wide as he leans in to kiss my lips. “No, I guess we didn’t. But we’re gonna be doing a lot more in the future.”

“Well, there ain’t nothing wrong with making up for lost time.” I wink and lead him over to the bed. We’re not going anywhere until this storm blows over, and there’s no place else I’d rather be than right here in Colt’s arms.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lemon

In the morning, I wake to the sound of horse hooves thundering toward the cabin, and a beat later, West busts through the door. His jaw drops open as he takes in Colt and I in bed, naked but covered by blankets, and several condom packets littering the floor.

“Oh my God, West!” I protest, clutching the blanket tightly to my chest. “Doesn’t anyone knock around here anymore?”

“You gotta be fuckin’ shittin’ me?”

Colt’s sleeping face down on the pillow but he stirs and opens his eyes. The cutest smile I’ve ever seen slips across that delectable mouth of his and I smile right back. That is, I’m smiling until Wyatt, Cash, and Wade come stomping through the front door of the cabin.

“Oh, gross. You’re doin’ our sister again?” Wade complains.

“What the hell happened to my window?” Wyatt demands before finding the open bottle of Fireball. “What the fuck, you guys drank my Fireball?”

“Do y’all mind?”

“Nope,” Cash says with a grin, staring me up and down.

“Oh my God, get out!”

“We thought you were dead,” West says straight-faced. “Now I see that maybe that logic was preemptive, because I’m gonna fuckin’ kill you for screwing my sister when we thought you’d been killed by a damn tornado.” West lunges forward and pulls Colt from the bed, jumping on top of him—despite the fact that Colt is naked—he pounds his fist into Colt’s face.

I wrap the blanket around my body and jump on my brother’s back, pummeling him with all my might. “West William Winchester, you get off the man I love. Right now!”

The whole room freezes. The whole room except Wyatt. He picks up my discarded panties and wrinkles his nose. “What the hell are these?”

“Alright all of you, out!”

“What the fuck is going on here?” West says. “You better start talking, Colton Hayes, or I’m gonna drag your naked ass out into the pasture and kick it all the way to Austin.”

“You will do no such thing!” I chide and stand, straightening my hair as I address the room. “All of you listen up ’Cause I’m only gonna say this once. Colt and I are together now.”

“We are?” Colt says with a shit-eating grin, and I give him a look that says he better shut his damn mouth before I take him out to pasture and kick his ass.

“We are. No one is kicking anyone’s ass. If you don’t like it, too damn bad. I left him once and it was the biggest mistake of my life, so I ain’t ever letting him go.”

“Jesus.” Wade rubs the back of his neck. “When did she get to be just as scary as Mama?”

“Hasn’t she always been like that?” Wyatt whispers back.

“Now,” I continue. “Y’all are gonna march your butts outside and ride on back to the ranch. Colt and I are staying a little while longer.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Colt says, pressing his fingertips to his bloody lip.

West looks as mad as a cut snake, but he and the boys all file out one by one, and shut the door behind them.

“And leave us a damn horse!” I shout.

Colt groans from the floor and climbs to his feet. “I am not ashamed to say I am so fuckin’ hot for you right now.”

“Well good, because you’re not the only one who gets to wear the Wranglers in this relationship.”

He tucks his fingers into my blanket dress and pulls me closer. “Don’t I know it.”

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“You’re not freaking out that I just ordered you to be with me?”

“Not in the slightest. There’s no one else I’d rather be ordered around by.”

“Good, because I plan on bossing you for a long time.”

Colt screws up his lips and then winces—likely from the pain.

If Colt can’t kiss me properly, I’m gonna kill West.

“Are you ruining my chance to ask you to marry me, Lemon Winchester?”

“Nope.” I shake my head and wrap my arms around his neck as he grips my ass through the scratchy wool. “I know you like to keep to tradition, but I’m just sayin’, don’t go plannin’ the rest of your life without me, Colton Hayes.”

He leans in and presses his forehead to mine. “There is no rest of my life without you, Lemonade.”

EPILOGUE

Lemon

Wyatt grins at me as I stand outside the barn, fidgeting. “What?”

“Nothin’, just ... you look happy, Lemonade.”

“Well, that’s because I am. The man I’ve loved my whole life is standing on the other side of that door—he is standing on the other side of that door, right? I’m not walking into a room without a groom, am I?”

“Honey, Colton Hayes’s been waitin’ to marry you since the first day he laid eyes on you.”

“How would you know—you weren’t even alive then.”

“Maybe so, but I’ve seen it in his eyes every day since.”

I shove my bouquet at him while I fan away the tears that are threatening to ruin my makeup. “I can’t believe I’m getting married.”

Wyatt frowns. “Me either. Are you sure you don’t wanna run? We could have a horse saddled up in five minutes and be riding off to the airport with those tickets of yours to Barbados. Drink a little rum, meet some cute men?”

“No offense, Wyatt, but none of those cute men could even compare to who’s waitin’ at that altar.”

“Alright then. You ready?”

I smooth my dress and take back my bouquet. “I’ve never been more ready.”

After the first dance, Wyatt steps up to the microphone and I frown, holding my husband’s hand. “What in the world is he doin’?”

He taps the microphone and it echoes through the barn. “Howdy, everyone. For those of you who don’t know me, I’m Wyatt, the youngest of the Winchester children. I happen to be the best speaker out of the bunch so, you know, I get the fun job of

announcing this special moment.”

“Did you know about this?” I whisper to Colt.

“Yeah, I knew.”

“As you all know, our daddy is no longer with us. God rest his soul. But it wouldn’t be right for our little Lemonade to have to sit out a daddy/daughter dance on her wedding day.”

“Oh my God.” I cover my mouth and try to fight back the tears that are threatening to spill over my lashes. I’m gonna kill them for making me cry in front of everyone on my wedding day.

“So, if y’all wouldn’t mind clearin’ the dance floor, we Winchesters are about to get wild,” Wyatt says with a wistful grin.

“Winchester wild!” West and Wade both answer the call by hollering the way only we Winchesters know how.

I shake my head at them, and Wyatt clears his throat. “We love you, Lemonade. And I know I speak for everyone when I say we’re so happy you and Colt worked your shit out. I don’t know how much longer this town could stand to see him moping.”

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Colt grins as he wraps his arms around me. "I did not mope."

"Yes, sir, you did," West says as he claps a hand on his new brother-in-law's shoulder. "Mind if I dance with my little sister on her wedding day?"

"You can have a dance," Colt says, placing my hand in my brother's. "Just remember, I want her back as soon as this song's done."

West nods and takes me in his arms as the first strains of "Dance with Me" by Morgan Evans fills the barn. "You look perfect, Lemonade."

I laugh through my tears. "I'm pretty sure we both know I'm far from perfect."

He shakes his head. "Not to me."

"Why are y'all determined to make me cry today?"

He chuckles as I pull him in close. "Because we figured it was the only day we could. You'd kick our ass any other time, but not while you're all prettied up."

"Shows what you know." I pull away and lift my skirts. "I still wore my shit-kickin' boots."

"Of course you did." He laughs and draws me closer to press a kiss to my hair, then he twirls me into Wade's waiting arms.

"Well, howdy, sis."

“Let me guess, this was your idea?”

“Nope. It was West’s.”

“Oh, then I’m definitely kickin’ his ass afterward.”

“As long as you’ll let me get it on tape,” Wade says. “I’m so proud of you, darlin’. And Daddy woulda given anything to be here for this.”

A startled sob escapes me and I lean my head against his chest. “I would have given anything for him to be here, but this comes pretty damn close.”

“Nah, you’re just saying that so our feelings aren’t hurt.”

I shake my head. “I’m really not. You boys raised me just as much as Mama and Daddy did. Colton isn’t the only reason I’m staying at the ranch. As much as you boys drive me crazy, I can’t stay away from any of you.”

“Well, the feeling’s mutual, sis. If you hadn’t come back from New York, we were planning to come get you.”

I smile at Wade and wipe away my tears. Wyatt cuts in and twirls us around the floor. He dips me and I can’t help but laugh. “I swear to God, if you make me cry the way the others have ...”

“And ruin that pretty makeup? Not on your life.”

I hold him close and sway in time to the music.

“You know, even if Daddy was here for this, I think he would have insisted that we all dance with you anyway.”

I stare up at his sea-green eyes. “You think?”

“Yeah, I do. But even though he ain’t here, he’s not the only one giving you away today. You’ll always be our Lemonade.”

“Yes I will.”

My husband steps up beside us and Wyatt squeezes me tightly before letting me go. “You’re a lucky bastard, Colt.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“I know I don’t need to tell you that if you ever hurt her—”

“You’ll castrate me, I know.”

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Wyatt chuckles darkly and pats Colton's chest. "I was gonna say I'll hold you down while she does it."

"Jesus." Colt grimaces and then sweeps me into his arms. "Then I better just work every day at keeping her happy."

"You better," I warn.

After several more dances and not nearly enough to eat, I gather all of the women together for the bouquet toss. I stand on the dance floor and turn away from the room as I kiss the bouquet and hurl it over my shoulder. I turn around to see who the lucky woman is, and I'm met with a silent room. All eyes are on Cash, who's staring wide-eyed and holding my flowers as if someone just threw a newborn in his lap.

"Oh, hell no," he says, and thrusts them at the gorgeous redhead by his side.

"I think you just ensured the end of that relationship, Mrs. Hayes." My handsome husband slides his arm around my waist and pulls me close.

"I have to disagree, Mr. Hayes. I bet Carla and Cash will be married within the year."

Colt chuckles and then sips his whiskey. "No way."

"Colton, what happens when you bet against me?"

He grimaces. "I lose."

“Exactly. Cash is smitten, and those two are getting married, which makes Carla my new best friend. God knows this ranch could use some young blood.”

“I take offence to that.”

“You can take offence to whatever you like, it don’t make it any less true. Now, let’s do one last spin on the dance floor and then you can take me and the baby home to bed, cowboy.”

He narrows his eyes and stares down at me. “Baby?”

I nod. Colt shakes his head. “Are you sayin’ what I think you’re sayin’?”

“Fifteen weeks along.”

A slow smile spreads across his face and he lowers his lips to my ear. “I didn’t think this day could get any better, but you’ve just made me the happiest man alive.”

I grin up at my husband and wonder how I got so lucky. I let him go once, I left them all—the love of my life, my family, this ranch searching for something I would never find any place else but these 300,000 acres. Ranching is in my blood, raising cattle is in my DNA, and I can’t believe I ever dared to call any place but in Colt’s arms home.