



The Rancher's Heart

Author: *Susan Lute*

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Description: Lawyer and rancher Jonas Lohmen returns home with a plan to help save the debt-ridden ranch he co-owns with his brothers. Before he can do more than open a satellite law office, trouble in the form of a beautiful former client, who's also his law partner's sister follows him. New plan. Convince his best friend to pretend to be his fiancé.

"Have you lost your mind?" Sloane Michaels can't believe the favor Jonas wants—especially now that she's finally finished pining for him and has joined a dating app. So what if the first dates leave her bored and cold? She owns a booming car repair business and knows she can craft her own HEA and have the family she's always craved. Jonas with his wicked, sexy smile, won't talk his way around her this time.

Sloane, in her grease-stained overalls, doesn't want to pretend to be someone else, but could he fall in love with the woman she is, or is she risking heartbreak once again?

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Prologue

Jonas Lohmen ordered coffee at his favorite shop just down the street from his office. Just one more week and he could implement the plan to move his law practice, at least part-time, to Strawberry Ridge. With his brothers settling down with their own families, it was time to go home.

“There you are.” Julieann’s voice followed him to the empty table by the window, where he intended to make notes to pass on to his secretary. “I was hoping to catch up with you. Charlie says you’re leaving the law firm and moving to Strawberry Ridge. Is that true?”

This was why he regretted doing Charles the favor of representing his sister, the only daughter of a family-owned tech company, the largest in Denver, in a case against her former boyfriend. Before they broke up, somehow the guy had obtained concessions from Julieann that she should have talked over with her brother.

Motioning to the chair opposite him at the table, he nodded. “Charles is buying my half of the firm. During the transition, I’ll work remotely for two or three days a week for a month or so while my clientele grows.”

“Are you sure you want to move back there?” Her glance was wistful as she placed her hand on his arm. “I thought we had something special. Besides, you love Denver.”

They’d gone on three dates, and she probably did have feelings for him, but... his chimes were not ringing. And while he did love Denver, it wasn’t enough to stay

away from his family any longer.

Unfortunately, what Julieann wanted from the men she dated was social prestige. She'd been honest with him about her "goal," as she called it. She wanted to marry a successful attorney so she could live in a big house, drive the best car (which she already had), and make a place for herself in Denver's high society.

Jonas wasn't that guy.

He removed her hand from his arm and wrapped it in both of his. "I'm sorry, Julieann. I like you, but I don't love you like I should if I was thinking of the two of us getting married."

"You don't mean that."

"I do," he said gently, lightly squeezing her hand.

"I see." She pulled her hand free. "If you change your mind..."

He didn't stop her from leaving, mostly because he didn't want to tell her he wouldn't change his mind. Instead, he stared into his coffee.

Sloane would say... What would his BFF since junior high say? That she was proud of him for telling Julieann the truth? Maybe. Discomfort swirled in his gut. Maybe not, since there was one truth he hadn't told Sloane.

When he was a kid, he'd always believed his parents were head over heels in love, but after they passed away, his dad first, then two years later, his mom, he'd questioned that belief. Still did. He'd never been able to put his finger on why he no longer believed true love could last a lifetime, except after his dad's passing, it just seemed to him that his mom had died of disappointment.

His persistent doubt made him wonder if he felt things like other people, that maybe he'd shoved his emotions into an invisible box, so if the love of his life was no longer there to share every special moment of every day, he wouldn't have to feel lost, like his mom had at the end.

Could he even fall in love? Sloane would shake her head at him for thinking such irrational craziness, but he couldn't let go of the uncertainty.

He wasn't sure why he hadn't confessed his biggest fear to his best friend. They talked about everything else.

Finishing his notes, he took his phone out of his pocket and dialed Sloane's number.

"Hi, Jonas. What's up?" What was it about the sound of his best friend's voice that settled him right down?

"I'll be home"—for the first time in a long time—"for Blake and Malorie's wedding, and I'm wondering if you'll be my plus-one. I need a dance partner," he teased. Watching Sloane dance wildly had always made him smile. But a slow dance... now that was something else.

There was a long silence on her end of the line. "Sloane?"

"I'll be at the wedding, but I can't be your plus-one." She paused again before saying, "I won't be staying much past the ceremony." Another silence. Then, "I have a date."

Jonas tossed his empty coffee cup in the recycle bin on his way out. Stopping on the side of the sidewalk, he asked, confused, "A what?"

"A date, Jonas. Maybe you don't remember what that is." She didn't seem like she was joking.

He leaned against the brick building. “Of course I remember what that is.”

“Good. I’ll see you at the wedding.” And then she hung up.

Sloane was serious. He couldn’t remember the last time she’d turned down his request to go to a party with him. He scowled at his cell as if staring hard would make his best friend call him back to tell him it was a mistake. Of course she would be his plus-one.

When that didn’t happen, he set off at a fast pace toward his office. He had loose ends to tie up and a wedding gift to buy. There was no way he would miss Blake and Malorie’s walk down the aisle or let the fact that Sloane Michaels had turned him down ruin a good time.

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Chapter One

Jonas scanned the wedding guests from the back of the aisle leading up to the arbor, where Blake waited for his soon-to-be wife. The chairs on both sides were filled with wedding guests. The flowers bordering the seating area they'd planted after remodeling his mom's she-shed into The Wedding Cottage bloomed in riotous color. The weather was perfect.

He was happy for Blake, Malorie, and the blended family they were making with Mal's twins and Blake's Timmy. Then why was he feeling so unsettled? As if something or... someone was missing from the joyous occasion.

He scowled at his phone before putting it back in his pocket. The last time he'd talked to Sloane, she'd said she would be at the nuptials, however briefly, but so far, she was MIA. Even if she didn't want to be his plus-one, it wasn't like her to miss important family events like this one.

He'd given it a lot of thought. Of course she went on dates. His best course of action was to just ask her about the guy. Make sure she was safe. They didn't keep secrets from each other, so he was certain she would tell him everything he wanted to know... as soon as the reception got started and he could steal a few minutes from her before she dashed off to meet whoever the guy was.

"What's wrong?" Nathan asked as he joined Jonas.

There was no reason to be so disturbed just because Sloane was going out with some dude. Over the years of their best friendship, she'd gone on dates. Adventures, she

called them. “Nothing. Why?”

Not in the mood to discuss his confusing feelings with his newly engaged brother, Jonas checked his phone again. He should text her, but she’d never been one to like having her movements monitored.

“Usually, the guy giving away the bride doesn’t keep checking his phone like he’s expecting bad news.”

Jonas shrugged. “Sloane said she would be here, but I don’t see her.”

“She’s in the cottage, helping Malorie and Izzy get ready.” Nathan shoved his hands into his pockets.

His brother had been off his game after asking Izzy Payton to marry him at Blake and Malorie’s engagement party. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I never thought I’d see the day that Blake would come home and then get married right here at Mom’s place.” Nathan gave him a quick look. “Iz wants to get married here too.”

Jonas arched his brows. “When?”

“We haven’t set a date yet, but sometime after Christmas.”

Jonas clapped Nathan’s shoulder. “I’m happy for you and Izzy. You’re perfect for each other.”

“You think so?” Nathan asked, surprising Jonas. It wasn’t like his brother lacked confidence.

Jonas grinned at Nathan's sudden reversal. "I know so."

"I guess I do too. I'm just a little shocked that she said yes when I asked her to marry me."

"What was she thinking?" Jonas teased, then stepped back to avoid any retaliation on his brother's part. But not far enough.

Nathan caught Jonas in the arm. Not hard enough to hurt, but definitely with enough force to remind him they weren't kids anymore when he could tell his brothers how they should feel about things.

Nathan shrugged. "Beats me. Should we join Blake?"

Normally, he wouldn't let the kid get away with that, but they were at Blake's wedding, and besides, it was a fact... Izzy was crazy about him.

"After you." He waited for Nathan to head down the aisle.

Blake was already standing under the arbor. Jonas took his place between his brothers. Because Blake hadn't wanted to choose between them, they were both groomsmen.

The sound of the ladies' laughter coming from the cottage eased the tension gripping Jonas's shoulders. The Triple L had gone a long time without a wedding.

Blake gave a thumbs-up to Timmy and Reece, who were sitting in the first row. Jonas was glad his brothers had found their bliss with two such remarkable women. And he was just as sure he wouldn't follow in their footsteps anytime soon.

At the moment, he had other matters to attend to. Making sure, with his brothers, that

the Triple L made it over the finish line financially, and as part of that, either finding or getting Rangerbred registration papers for Duke.

He'd looked everywhere but had no luck. It was a puzzle because they had to be somewhere on the ranch. After his dad's passing, his mom insisted that Jonas go back to college to finish his law degree. In the middle of studying, he'd forgotten all about his dad's horses.

Looking back, he should have stayed and helped her sort through the old man's things and last requests, but everything had been left to his mom, and she'd seemed to be taking care of the ranch the way she always did. Full steam ahead.

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The only thing that was different was she seemed too quiet. When he asked her how she was doing, she would smile and wave him off, in her own way, basically telling him to focus on college and not what she was doing. So, reluctantly, he had.

Blake and Nathan were fifteen and sixteen at the time. Jonas had found out later that they hadn't been much help. Not that, knowing his mom and how she'd reacted to his questions, she'd let any of her sons give her a hand with keeping the ranch going.

He needed to have a conversation with his brothers. Even though they'd renegotiated the bank loan on the ranch earlier that month, it had a very short repayment period. If they couldn't pay it off in four months—three and a half now—they still ran the risk, even after all Izzy had done to pull the Triple L into the black, of having to sell off their Lohmen inheritance. None of them would let that happen.

For his part, that meant finding those lost papers and beginning the Colorado Ranger Horse Association registration process. And, if he had to, do a DNA test on their stud, Duke.

The violinist from Blake and Malorie's engagement party began to play the wedding march. The sweet, soothing melody wound around him, finally taking Jonas's mind off his troubles. His brothers straightened beside him as Andee and Izzy started down the aisle. At eleven, soon to be twelve, Andee looked very pretty in her finery. Her eyes were shining brightly as she walked down the aisle, her pink-and-blue princess gown ending at her ankles. Her hair hung in ringlets down her back. She wore dark blue ballerina shoes. He knew what those were because he'd helped her pick them out at the fancy dress store in Strawberry Ridge while Blake, Timmy, and Reece were trying on their wedding tuxes.

Behind Andee, her smiling gaze on Nathan, Izzy nearly stole the show in a dress similar to Andee's. Beside him, Nathan sucked in a breath, his eyes locked on his fiancée. Yup, his brother had it bad.

When Malorie appeared, it was Blake's turn to suck in a steadying breath. Waiting until Izzy and Andee took their places opposite Blake and Nathan, Jonas extended his arm to Malorie, and with a kiss on her temple, slowly walked her toward her groom.

"I'm honored that you asked me to give you away," he whispered in her ear. From the corner of his eye, he saw Sloane take a seat in the back. "Are you ready for this?"

Standing under the arbor at the end of the aisle, Blake grinned from ear to ear as Jonas squired his bride-to-be.

Malorie squeezed his hand and leaned into Jonas's shoulder. "I'm ready. There's nothing I want more than to be your brother's wife."

"And there's nothing I want more than to have you and Izzy for my sisters-in-law." He handed her over to Blake. "You got lucky, brother."

"Don't I know it?" Blake looped Malorie's arm with his.

As the minister started, Jonas took his place and stole a glance at Sloane. She met his gaze but barely smiled back. He'd known her and counted her as his best friend since the sixth grade. She was smart and talented and almost always laughed at his jokes. All good things to have in a best friend.

The minister had gotten to the "Do you take this man..." part of the service. Over the years, he and Sloane had gone to dances together, gone fishing, and occasionally tuned up his beloved Mustang on a Saturday afternoon. There was that time they'd spent a week at Disney World together. It was one of his favorite memories.

Blake kissed his bride amidst cheers from their close friends and immediate family. Jonas felt a rare stab of envy that after coming home, Blake had found a partner who was his equal in every way, but then Jonas discarded the troublesome feeling.

Offering his arm to Andee, he followed Blake and Malorie down the aisle and to the far side of the cottage, where tables and chairs had been set out for the reception.

“I want to congratulate Mom and BJ.” When Andee tugged on her hand, Jonas let her go and followed so he could offer his own congratulations.

When it was his turn, he hugged Malorie. “I don’t know what you see in this crazy brother of mine.”

“I love him,” she said simply.

Envy rattled him again until he sternly reminded himself that he wasn’t looking for love. After shaking his brother’s hand, he stepped back to give others room to congratulate the happy couple. Blake and Malorie were one of the lucky ones, that was for sure. He grabbed two cups of punch and stood off to the side until Sloane was done speaking to the newlyweds. On her way to join him, she pulled out her phone, checked a message, then put it back in the small handbag that matched her lavender dress.

He handed her one of the cups. “Nice ceremony, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was lovely.” She sipped her punch.

Curious, he glanced over the guests. “Your dad didn’t come with you?”

“He’s visiting his sister. Every year in August, they spend two weeks in Hawaii together.”

“That’s right. I remember.” Her brows rose quizzically. Jonas pushed on. “Since you have a date tonight, I’m guessing dinner at Luke’s Diner is out of the question.”

“Sorry.” She didn’t look sorry.

He frowned. Something was definitely wrong. He had to work hard to keep his voice level. “Anyone I know?” Probably not, but she hadn’t mentioned that she had a steady guy she was seeing.

“Nope.” She gave him the it’s-none-of-your-business look she’d perfected in high school that meant she was keeping something from him.

“Is it Evan Karlson? Didn’t he have a crush on you in the ninth grade?”

“Maybe he did. It doesn’t matter. He moved to Seattle five years ago with his wife and two boys.” Handing him her empty cup, she edged toward the cars parked along the road leading back to the main house.

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He stepped in front of her, so she'd have to go around him to leave. "You're not going to have cake before you leave?"

"I'm not hungry, and I need to head home and get ready," she said, narrowing her gaze on him.

He knew the answer, but Jonas couldn't help asking, "For your date?"

"Smart guy." With a spark he recognized in her eyes, she patted him on the chest as she edged around him until she'd put space between them and had her back to her truck.

She didn't like it when he butted into her business, something that was new in their relationship. But what the heck? They were friends. Close friends. Eventually, she would tell him what was going on. The problem was, he didn't want to wait too long to find out what had changed between them. "How about breakfast tomorrow morning? I can pick you up."

"Fine," she said before spinning on her heel. "Nine o'clock. Not a minute before."

"Okay." Jonas frowned. He was confused. Sloane was never this dismissive. He called after her, "Have fun."

He watched her climb into her truck and take off without looking back.

Nathan was sitting at one of the tables with Izzy. Jonas joined them. Breaking eye contact with his fiancée, Nathan glanced over. "You ready to give your speech?"

“Sure.” Jonas wanted to roll his eyes but kept his game face on instead. “Do you know who Sloane is dating?”

“No. Why? Do you want to take the lovely mechanic out?” Nathan asked with a sly wink.

“I can’t date her.” Jonas leaned his chin on his fist. “We’re best friends.”

“Well, then, I guess you’re going to have to get used to her going on a lot of dates. Right, Izzy?” Nathan eyed him, a grin spreading across his face that made no secret of the fact that his brother knew something Jonas didn’t.

Speculation brightened Izzy’s blue eyes. “I believe you’re right.”

Jonas straightened. “What are you guys talking about?”

Nathan leaned into Izzy. Both watched him, their lips pressed together to hold in whatever they thought was funny.

“She didn’t tell us not to tell him, did she, sweetheart?” Nathan asked his fiancée.

Izzy shrugged, humor making the corners of her lips curl. “No.”

Nathan finally cut him a break. “She signed up with one of those popular dating apps. Her first date is tonight.”

Jonas jumped up from his chair. “Sloane wouldn’t do something like that without telling me about it.” There was no way—

The teasing grin left his brother’s face. “Are you sure about that? You haven’t been around much until recently. I’m pretty sure that doesn’t give you the right to have

much say in how or who she dates.”

He had no say in who she dated? Of course, he didn't. But he could offer advice if she wanted any.

He walked in a tight circle. Nathan was right. He had no right to be surprised... or even angry. It wasn't like Sloane was his girl, or that she'd made any promises to him. For Pete's sake, other than their friendship, he hadn't committed to her either.

He had no excuse except that, over the years, whenever they could, they'd spent as much time together as possible. She'd even come to Denver occasionally to go with him to a concert or a play or to hang out for a weekend. In all that time, they'd never once talked about taking their relationship to the next level. He'd had his law practice to build, which later took up a lot of his spare time. She was busy at her family's garage. And they lived six hours apart.

He sat back down and picked up his fork. “Is the cake good?”

“It's perfect,” Izzy said, taking another bite.

Jonas shoved a forkful in his mouth and nodded. He looked over at Nathan. “Before she passed, do you know if Mom did something with Duke's papers? Maybe they're in the box with Dad's letters?” He knew she'd saved every one she'd gotten from his dad. “I can't find the box. Have you seen it?”

“The one made of oak with a heart and couple carved into the lid?”

Jonas put down his fork. “That's the one.”

Suddenly, Nathan straightened. “You know we're not looking for Duke's registration papers, but his sire, Duke's Pride's, papers, right? Duke's only five years old.”

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“What are you talking about?” Of course, Duke couldn’t have been born before their mom passed.

Pulling Izzy to her feet, Nathan said, “We’ll talk about this later. Right now, I’m going to dance with my beautiful fiancée.”

“But—”

“Later, Jonas,” Nathan said firmly, his teasing smile gone. “You have a toast to give.”

Wondering what had caused his brother to abruptly leave the conversation, Jonas pressed his lips into a straight line and walked toward Andee, who was sitting next to Malorie. He picked up a glass of champagne on the way.

“Are you ready, young lady?” he asked his new niece, sloughing off the discomfort from his discussion with Nathan.

The day before, Andee had made him listen while she practiced her speech. Nodding, she took the mic from her new dad.

Jonas stood back and let the tween take center stage. She was confident and funny, just like her mom. He ad-libbed a few words when she was done, finishing with, “To the bride and groom... May you have a long and happy life together.”

The guests erupted in laughter and raised their glasses. The toast complete, he hugged Malorie and, wishing his brother the best, shook Blake’s hand before pulling him in for a congratulatory slap on the back.

As conversations around him resumed, he made a discreet exit. He couldn't fight the feeling that his breakfast conversation with Sloane was going to be a humdinger.

Chapter Two

Sloane woke up with a profound sense of disappointment on two fronts. Jonas Lohmen had spent more time in Strawberry Ridge over the last two and a half months than he had in years and not once had he made any move to be more than her friend. He hadn't asked her out on a date, not even for a simple walk in the park. There was no quick, surprising kiss. And yesterday, Blake and Malorie's wedding, except for his surprise that she was dating another man, had been no different.

Geez. She should have known better than to expect that things had changed just because he'd moved back to town and seemed ready to settle down. She'd waited a long time to see that happen. Too long, in fact.

So why shouldn't she date? She'd had a crush on the rancher-turned-lawyer for as long as she could remember. At least from the sixth grade, when her family moved to Strawberry Ridge and her dad opened Michaels' Garage.

She'd skipped the second grade at her previous school because, even at the age of seven, she was way ahead of her classmates. By the time she was in the sixth grade, she'd figured out older kids didn't like hanging out with a younger, smarter girl, even if they were in the same classes.

Except for Jonas. He didn't care that she was smart and a year younger. He was kind and friendly and soon became her BFF. What she'd never told him was that ever since, she'd had this secret crush on the boy who'd made her young life less lonely and then become the man who always had her back, the same as she had his. At least she tried to.

If friendship was all that he wanted from her, she could do that, but the truth was, she wanted more. At the age of thirty-five, she was running out of time. It'd taken her long enough, but finally she'd come to the conclusion that she'd waited long enough for Jonas to see her as something more than his best friend. She didn't need him making a mess of her feelings now.

While he was doing his lawyer gig in Denver, she'd pushed aside how much she'd missed him and done all the things—finished a degree in mechanical engineering and taken over the garage when her dad decided to retire. Now, she ran a successful business. She'd even bought her first home in a quiet neighborhood in the town that she loved and wouldn't leave for anyone. Not even for Jonas.

And since he hadn't taken her hints about wanting more, she couldn't wait any longer. It was time to find a husband who loved her enough to spend his life with her and start a family. She'd already checked out the dateable men in Strawberry Ridge without finding the one, so if that meant she had to widen her boundaries and maybe try one of the popular online dating apps, then so be it.

After completing her research, she signed up on Perfect Match. Unfortunately, her first date last night did not go as well as she had hoped it would. Flinn Isak had looked so good “on paper.” He was a reasonably handsome guy, not that she put much stock in a man's looks. He taught history at the high school—a point in his favor because she was a huge history fan. They would have something in common. He was a widower and a little bit sad. Not exactly a mark against him. If he truly liked a woman, he might smile more. Except for his students, he didn't have kids of his own.

He wasn't Jonas, that was for sure.

Oh, for Pete's sake!

Glancing at the clock, she bounced out of bed to head for the shower.

She wasn't counting on—now that he knew she was serious about dating—Jonas waking up and seeing her as a mostly attractive lady that he might move from the friend category to a more serious possibility. He already knew that she went on the occasional date and that she hadn't clicked with any of the men. Jonas also knew she would often cancel when he showed up unexpectedly.

Well, last night, she hadn't and look how confused he'd looked when she left him behind before the reception was over. She should pat herself on the back for standing up for herself, except that it didn't feel like that much of a victory. Dressed in jeans and a tee shirt with a classic Ford pickup on the front, she sat down with her laptop to see if there were other men she could connect with on the app. She'd left her hair down and put on some lipstick, not because she wanted Jonas to be impressed—not anymore—but because being the primary mechanic at Michaels' Garage, she was often covered in grease and didn't bother much with the girly applications that most women used to attract men. In that regard, whoever she ultimately ended up with, he would have to accept her as she was. Being asked on bended knee to marry this mythical guy would be nice.

Startled from the cozy daydream by a musical knock on her door she recognized, Sloane slapped her laptop shut in the middle of deciding between Ken and Phillip.

Straightening her shoulders to get rid of the tension suddenly stacking up between her shoulder blades—which was crazy because she'd known Jonas too long for him to be a surprise—she opened the door and grinned as brightly as she could.

“Ready?” he asked, his stunning green-gray eyes sparkling.

Her heart picking up an extra beat was bad. Breakfast is nothing special, she warned herself sternly before grabbing her shoulder bag. “Yup.”

“How was your date last night?” He lingered on the front porch to let her walk ahead.

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She refused to compare Flinn Isak with the OMG! handsome rancher following her to his souped-up Mustang.

The short stubble of his beard and mustache made him handsome in a way that had most women taking a second look. She didn't want to be one of his groupies anymore. Unfortunately, she couldn't ignore how well his jeans fit. His cowboy hat and boots...Well...

No drooling was allowed since she was moving on.

There was a reason she was looking for someone else to have a forever-after relationship with.BFF, remember?

“It was fine,” she said, getting in the car.

He started the engine and asked, one brow raised, “Only fine?”

She didn't want to talk about it. Not with Jonas, anyway. “Where are we going for breakfast?”

“I was thinking about the Country Breakfast House. It's relatively new. Have you been there?”

Sloane shrugged, then straightened. She was hungry and it had been a while since a good-looking man had bought her breakfast. The last time—yup, it'd been Jonas before he moved back to town. “I read about them in theStrawberry Ridge Journal, but I haven't eaten there.”

When the silence stretched out, she asked, “How’s business going? Have you gotten many clients since you opened?”

He was a good lawyer. Folks who needed his kind of expertise—which was a little bit of this and a little bit of that—would be lucky if he took them on.

“It’s slowly picking up,” he said, not very enthusiastically.

Sloane twisted in her seatbelt to face her friend. “What’s wrong?”

“Strawberry Ridge is a small town. It’s going to take time to build up a firm here. I knew that when I decided to come home. I was hoping I could leave the Denver office sooner than I think I’ll be able to.”

He parked on River Street, one block past the restaurant. Sloane unbuckled her seatbelt and assured him, “You’ll get there.”

“I know.” He finally grinned, amping up her pulse. “I just wasn’t planning on working remotely part of the week.”

“What a cute place,” she said as a diversion, heading for the covered porch. She was supposed to be the one in charge of her heart, not the man escorting her to breakfast.

From the outside, the gold-colored building looked like an old-fashioned western restaurant and hotel. Flowering bushes and colorful plants bordered the boardwalk to the porch. Jonas held open the door so she could precede him into the restaurant.

“A table for two?” the hostess asked Jonas.

“Thank you. In the back overlooking the river if you have one open,” he requested, his charm on full display.

Sloane shook her head when Betsy, according to her name tag, smiled and led the way. Jonas certainly had a way about him.

“We have one left. The river and park are everyone’s favorite views.”

“Thanks.” Jonas pulled out a chair for Sloane, waiting while she got settled where she could see the walking path along the river.

Sloane barely refrained from rolling her eyes. Was there any woman in all of Colorado who didn’t go gaga over her best friend?

“I’ll take your order after you get a chance to look at the menu. Our breakfast special today is biscuits and gravy with thick sliced bacon.”

Jonas settled across from Sloane while she took in the wood ceilings and blue-patterned wallpaper on the walls. Lights reminiscent of an old west saloon added a touch of classical magic.

“What do you think? The place has character, don’t you think?” Jonas unrolled his silverware from the cloth napkin and flipped it onto his lap.

“Un-huh.” Sloane opened the menu, quickly deciding to go with the special, rather than spend time exploring all the breakfast options, which looked good too. “Something’s bothering you. What is it?”

Her patience with the good-looking lawyer sitting across from her was wearing a little thin these days. She’d known him so long and had a crush on him for far longer than she should have, and still, he made her heart flutter.

Maybe she should see a cardiologist, just to be sure there was nothing mechanically wrong with her primary organ. A girl couldn’t be too careful with her health, could

she?

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He looked up from the menu he held in front of him like a wall of bricks whose sole purpose was to keep people out. “What are you having?”

“The special.” She laid aside her menu and leaned on her forearms. “Come on, Jonas. Don’t be a brat. Spill.”

His brows shot up. “Brat?”

“You heard me. Why breakfast this morning? We could have talked anywhere. Even at your office.” Hopefully, his sudden need to speak to her wasn’t because she’d gone on a date to get him out of her system. A pleasant excursion, if not an event that would be repeated with that particular gentleman.

Laying his menu flat on the table, he leaned toward her, copying her posture. “Because we’re best friends?”

“Maybe, but I don’t think that’s why we’re here.” She narrowed her gaze on the man who was giving her heartburn.

When he had business on his mind, he usually dressed to impress. This morning he’d left his suit in his closet. He was up to something. She recognized the signs. The clean cut of his jeans and western shirt. His hair brushed off his forehead. He was eye-catching in his everyday rancher garb.

Betsy returned to take their order. Two specials. Coffee for Jonas. Orange juice for herself.

When the waitress left, Sloane raised one brow and stared at Jonas. Sooner or later, he would tell her what he wanted. She was pretty sure that wasn't his best friend, so she ignored the wishful thinking gnawing at her belly and kept her lips clamped tightly together.

Finally, he leaned back and asked, "Why are you using a dating app to find guys to go out with?"

Sloane shrugged. Just what she'd suspected. She wasn't sure who'd told him she'd signed up with Perfect Match... probably Nathan or Izzy since, at the moment, they were the only ones who knew. This should be good. "When was the last time you went on a date?"

It'd been unexpected when her dad retired a few years back, leaving his baby, Michaels' Garage, in her care, to realize that she loved Jonas Lohmen with her whole heart. He didn't return the feeling, so it didn't take long to figure out that she didn't need a guy, like most women did. She could take care of herself. She just wished he saw her as wife material.

"It's been a few months." His expression went blank, making Sloane suspicious. "With the move back to Strawberry Ridge, I'm too busy to give a woman the attention she deserves."

"So, you want to become a hermit like Scrooge and keep any warm feelings you might have toward your someone special to yourself? Well, I'm not too busy." She took a deep breath. "I want to find a man who will love me, heart and soul, so"—Sadly, Jonas wasn't that guy. Never had been, if she was reading him right—"if I can't have that, what I want from a lifetime partner is someone who shares the same interests. A guy who will laugh and have my back when the chips are down. And someone who loves Strawberry Ridge enough to want to raise our family here. And I'm hoping to find this fella this year."

The shocked look on his handsome face almost had Sloane laughing. But not quite. If he knew her as well as he thought he did, he wouldn't be so surprised.

"Isn't that kind of fast?"

"Look. I'm thirty-five. I don't want to wait..." She almost finished that sentence. Barely refrained. She was not going to tell Jonas how she really felt about him. "Any longer."

He locked her gaze in disbelief. "So, you're willing to settle?"

She scooted back her chair. "I'm not settling. And it's none of your business, Jonas, what I do about my personal life."

"Wait! Hang on." He held up his hand to stop her from leaving the table. "I'm sorry. You're right. I swear I only have your best interests at heart. It is your life to live. I just think you can do better than to date random strangers. You should get what you want in life."

She sank back into the chair. "Like find a man who loves me enough to want to marry me?"

"Of course. You will make someone a great wife."

"I know." Sloane stared at her best friend for a long moment. How could he NOT know?

Betsy brought their order. "Is there anything else I can bring you folks?"

"Are we good?"

Sloane wanted to say no, but it wasn't a question about their relationship he was asking. She nodded.

When Betsy went to the next table, Sloane picked up her fork. She stared at Jonas and, before she lost her courage, raised her chin and asked, "Are you applying for the job?" He choked on the bite of gravy-covered biscuit he'd put in his mouth. That answered her question. Jonas wasn't the guy.

"Don't answer that."

He swallowed a gulp of coffee. His gaze latched onto Sloane's. "We're best friends."

"I know. I'm just giving you a hard time," she said to cover up her mistaken thought that maybe, just maybe, he saw her as more than a friend. She knew she shouldn't say anything else but couldn't stop there. "Just so you know, I don't keep track of your dating habits. That also means you're not allowed to get all up in arms about mine."

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“You’re telling me to back off.” The corners of his lips twitched up. “You’re right. What was I thinking?”

Sloane finally let go and cut him a break. This was the Jonas Lohmen she knew and... liked. “I don’t know.”

She scooted her plate closer. She’d been a pushover in junior high and high school. A dreamer who kept hoping her best friend would come to his senses and like her as much as she did him. Thank goodness she was leaving that behind.

As soon as she got done with work, she would go on an exploratory mission. She was tired of playing the proverbial wallflower while she waited for her BFF to notice that she had more to give than merely being the girl he put back on the shelf when it suited him. Her next date on Perfect Match was waiting for her to find him.

“Are things improving at the ranch?”

Before making the move back to Strawberry Ridge, he’d told her that the Triple L was in trouble and since then, while they were getting his new office ready to open for business, he’d mentioned the brothers had gone to the bank to see if they could refinance the Triple L.

He had her sympathy. She would be shattered if she lost the garage her dad had grown into a viable business.

He’d come back to Strawberry Ridge, part-time, for the time being, and rented the Iverness Building—without mentioning that he was interested in pursuing a more

serious relationship with her—that was when she'd decided that waiting for Jonas Lohmen was like trying to spit into a gale-force wind. Useless and would not get her what she wanted.

“We still have a way to go, but things are getting better.” He sent her a half smile and went back to his meal.

After finishing her biscuits and gravy in silence, Sloane tried again. “I heard that the Triple L is going to be a sponsor at the rodeo.” She'd bought her banner for the garage, not because she needed the business, but it never hurt to remind folks where they could get the best car repair service.

“That's something Nathan and Izzy are working on to bring the ranch more attention, and hopefully, business too.” He pushed aside his empty plate.

“Are things really that bad?” She shouldn't ask, but hey, if he couldn't confide in his best friend, who could Jonas talk to about his troubles?

Jonas settled back in his chair. “Let's just say we're working hard to keep the Triple L in the family.”

The implication wasn't good. She didn't realize things had gotten that bad. What kind of friend did that make her?

“I have some money—” she blurted, then sat up straight. Most of her life, the Lohmen family and the Triple L were inseparable, connected in ways that bound them and the ranch together through two and now three generations.

Jonas waved her offer aside. “No need, but thanks. We have some things in the works and if I can figure out Duke's pedigree records, we'll be fine.” A frown pulled his brows together, quickly replaced with the tenaciousness she'd come to expect from

him. She shouldn't be surprised. "Guys in this town must be lined up around the block to take you out."

"You would think so, wouldn't you?" she said, barely keeping the irony out of her voice. She hadn't seen him getting in line.

"They just don't know a smart, pretty lady when they see one." The corner of his lips lifted as the smile finally reached his eyes.

Sloane's sarcasm eased. There was no point in wanting to clobber the man. This was just Jonas being Jonas.

Dang it. She took a breath, pasted on a smile, and stood. "I need to get to work. I can walk from here."

He followed her after leaving cash on the table for their meals and Betsy's tip. Holding the door open, he was still with her when she hit the sidewalk. "We should date the old-fashioned way."

"What are you talking about, Jonas?" Sloane was confused and maybe a little insulted.

"You could go on a date with me."

And now suspicious. "Why? You don't love me."

"Maybe not in the way you're thinking, but we've been friends for a long time. If you want to go on a date, I'm here for you."

That did it. "You're here for me? If I'm hearing you right, you're offering to take me on a pity date?"

“No—”

What the man needed was a splash of the unvarnished truth. She took his hand and said clearly, “I understand why you think you’re too busy to give a woman the attention she deserves. Sort of. But I want something you’re not willing to give. I want more than a single date or two because you don’t think I can find a guy on my own. I want love and kids and to do all the things a family does together. Someday, you may regret growing old alone. Not me. I’m going to keep looking for the right guy until I find him.”

Especially since the man staring at her didn’t want to be that guy.

Breaking their connection, he pushed his hands into his back pockets. “I won’t be alone. I may not have immediate plans to look for romance, but my brothers are making families as we speak.”

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“Of course, you won’t be completely alone. But there’s a difference between hanging out with Blake’s and Nathan’s families and having a wife and kids of your own to go home to every night.” She wished she could make him understand. She stopped trying. “I’ve got to get going.”

“Wait. I’ll drive you to the garage.”

With a sense that she’d finally taken charge of her future, Sloane looked over her shoulder. “Not necessary, my friend. I’d rather walk. It’ll give me a chance to plan my next dating adventure.” Which would not be Jonas.

Chapter Three

I want something you’re not willing to give.

Jonas couldn’t get Sloane’s words out of his mind. Someday, you may regret growing old alone.

She had his intentions all wrong. He should have told her, but he wasn’t sure he understood himself. Except there had been tension between his parents before his dad passed, and he couldn’t forget how sad and lonely his mom was when his dad was gone. He should have been able to forget, but he couldn’t. He wasn’t planning to grow old alone, but for now and for the foreseeable future, not getting involved in a romantic relationship suited him. And hoping to make sense of what had happened between them, he was focused on what he could do for the ranch, which included searching the attic, which was filled with old furniture and boxes of the things they’d left behind.

It was quiet, almost too silent. Sunlight filtered through the windows on either side of the room. Specs of dust floated in the air.

He didn't know what he was looking for, only that Nathan had surprised him when he'd mentioned Duke's Pride. It was a long time ago, but he remembered their dad had a stud with that name. And if he was correct, the horse was sold, along with one hundred acres of the ranch, just before his dad's death.

At the time, he'd thought it strange because Duke's Pride and the land were the center of his father's Colorado Ranger breeding program. He didn't have many conversations with his dad about it after he started college. All he had on his mind back then was passing his classes so he could get his law degree. He loved his home, but he never questioned what his dad did with the ranch. He had his own life to get started.

Slowly he made his way through the boxes and furniture that was all that was left of his parents' lives, except, of course, the Triple L, which he and his brothers were doing their darndest to save.

Sloane thought he was a man who had nothing more to look forward to than a cane and no one to make him happy in his old age. That wasn't true. A thriving ranch was what he was looking forward to.

Someday he might change his mind about his bachelor status, but not soon. The last thing he wanted to do was leave the woman who held his heart in the palms of her hands behind to suffer the profound loneliness that filled his mom's last two years. Could history repeat itself? He didn't know but didn't want to take the chance.

Jonas didn't like how he'd been reduced to questioning his future, but he was man enough to admit that maybe, on occasion, he'd taken advantage of his best friend's sweet generosity. She'd always been there for him when he needed someone to have

his back. He was the one who had stepped away when his feelings for her threatened to morph into something more. Especially after his mom died.

It shouldn't make him crazy that Sloane was using a dating app to find the love of her life. But it did.

His heart rate bounced in alarm. He respected that she didn't want to remain single forever. Most people wanted to grow old with someone. He hadn't given it much thought, but Sloane had, and now that she had painted that picture for him, he was beginning to think he should too.

Tired of his thoughts getting stuck in a Friday-the-thirteenth loop, Jonas texted his brothers to come for a family meeting. They couldn't wait any longer to figure out what to do about Duke's papers.

While he waited for them to show up, he went down to the front pasture to check on the ladies he'd added to Nathan's small herd. He leaned on the fence. Rosie, Grace, Angel, and Bella were in the front pasture. Duke had his own paddock.

Bella's foal's pedigree papers were locked up at his law office in town. The sire was a registered Rangerbred. If they were lucky, they would be adding a filly to the herd in March.

The thing he could do to help the ranch recover was restart their dad's breeding program. The results wouldn't be as immediate as Blake's and Nathan's efforts, unless he could get Duke registered with the Colorado Ranger Horse Association. The time it would take to get through the paperwork, offset with what he could donate from his law practice, and including his brothers' contributions, they should turn the ranch around. Once that was done, they would have no problem paying off the existing loan and then setting up a fund to cushion any future setbacks. Nathan came from the barn and leaned on the fence beside Jonas. "They're beautiful, aren't

they? I can see why Dad fell in love with the breed.”

Hoping to unravel the missing papers mystery, Jonas asked, “Why didn’t you follow in his footsteps and revive his breeding program?”

Before Nathan could answer, Blake pulled up and parked in front of the barn.

Nathan shoved his hands in his jeans pockets. “We can discuss it in the house. I have cold drinks in the fridge.”

“All right.” Jonas would agree to anything to get his usually prickly brother to start talking.

“What’s going on?” Blake asked as he joined them. “Jonas texted we have to talk?”

“We have some things to decide,” Jonas said briskly, turning toward the house. The brothers walked shoulder to shoulder with Blake in the middle. Nathan didn’t say anything. Yet. Jonas asked Blake, “Do you remember Dad’s stud, Duke’s Pride?”

“Barely. I had girls on my mind back then.” Blake took the porch steps two at a time.

Just as Sloane drove through the gate and parked in front of the guesthouse, Jonas followed them into the main house.

“What’s up with Sloane?” he interrogated his brothers.

Nathan carried three bottles of cola to the table. “She’s doing a girl thing with Izzy. Drying flowers from the garden, I think.”

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Jonas couldn't let the bone go. "What I mean is, what's with her using a dating app?"

"I don't know, brother." Nathan gave him a stern side-eye. "You could ask her, but my guess is that she's looking for someone she can spend the rest of her life with. Maybe it's easier than going to the bars to meet someone. She's not getting any younger, you know. And neither are you."

Sloane wouldn't appreciate being told she was approaching a use-by date.

Jonas narrowed his gaze on the garden. Sloane and Izzy didn't come out.

Nathan sent a calculating look in his direction. "If you're so worried, you should ask Sloane out, though I don't think she would go on a date with you."

"Did she say that?" All he got was a grin and a shrug from his ornery brother.

After his last conversation with her, he wondered what Sloane would say if he asked her to go on a date. For dinner or a movie. They could even go to the zoo in Durango. She'd had breakfast with him without too much fuss. Internally, he made the argument—that had to prove she didn't object to him too much, right?

However, she'd accused him of not being willing to give her love and kids and to do all the things a family did together. He could give a woman all those things, he argued. It was just that now wasn't the best time to start a romantic adventure with anyone. And especially not with his BFF.

So, why did he care if she was using a dating app to find a guy, anyway? Sloane

wanted all the trimmings. Somewhere out there was a guy who could give her that dream right now.

He should let her go for it. She was a grown woman who'd always known her mind, even when she was a kid.

Taking one of the colas, he sat at the table. "What's the deal with Duke's Pride and his registration papers?"

That wiped the smirk from Nathan's face. With a heavy sigh, he sat. "It's never been my story to tell."

"We're listening." Whatever secret Nathan was keeping, it couldn't stay hidden any longer.

Grabbing the remaining cola bottle in both hands, Nathan frowned. "A month before he died, Dad sold half the ranch and Duke's Pride to pay off a poker debt."

"That was a lot to pay." Jonas studied Nathan intently. "I don't remember him ever playing for money." Jonas turned to Blake. "Did you know about this?"

"I knew he had monthly poker games, but he never talked about them. It upset Mom too much." Blake sat straighter, watching them both.

Nathan rose to pace around the kitchen. "I didn't know until I read Mom's letters. After he sold Duke's Pride, feeling guilty that he'd lost so much, Dad burned his breeding records, including Duke's Pride's pedigree and registration papers, and stopped his breeding program altogether."

Stunned that he'd known nothing about this, Jonas stood and faced Nathan. "Mom wrote letters? When?"

“About six years ago, a bill came for Mom from the Equine Reproduction Laboratory for two straws of frozen sperm.” Before Jonas could interrupt, Nathan held up his hand and pushed on. “I couldn’t find any mention of an account for ERL in the ranch books, so I went looking in Mom’s bedroom, which I’d moved into a few months before.”

Jonas asked quietly, “And you found letters?”

“Mom’s treasure box. The one she kept all of Dad’s letters that he wrote to her in.”

Jonas nodded. He also remembered he hadn’t wanted to go into her and their dad’s room to clean things out after she was gone. So, he’d pulled his disappearing act.

“It was on the top shelf in her closet. I’d pushed it into a back corner because I didn’t want to have anything to do with their things. After Dad died, she wrote letters to him. Before he let Duke’s Pride go, she talked him into taking two sperm samples and freezing them. After Dad was gone, she paid for ten years of storage in advance. Other than the name of the facility, she didn’t say who bought the stud, the land, or if she had copies of Duke’s Pride’s papers.” Finally, Nathan came back to the table. The look on his face was one Jonas readily recognized.

When Nathan was determined to do something, it took an act of the Almighty to change his brother’s mind.

Blake came to stand next to Jonas, his expression as shocked as Jonas felt. “So, what did you do?”

“I took what money I could scrounge up and bought a Rangerbred mare. I had to use both straws for the pregnancy to take. She didn’t have papers, but I thought after her foal was born, I would figure out how to register her. Then the mare died giving birth to Duke and everything else started to fall apart. Since there was nothing more I could

do but try to keep the Triple L afloat, I let it go.”

“And you didn’t think to tell us?” Jonas couldn’t keep the disbelief out of his voice.

Blake reminded Jonas, “He couldn’t tell me. I wasn’t here.”

“Yeah, but later, when we were trying to figure out a way to save the ranch—” Jonas insisted, rare resentment boiling in his gut.

How could his dad do that to his mom? Get so far into debt gambling that he’d nearly lost their dream?

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He and his brothers were still paying the price.

Nathan crossed his arms across his chest. “Like I said, it wasn’t my story to tell. I haven’t told anyone, not even Izzy. And I didn’t want either of you to feel bad about the folks or blame them for—”

“For what?” Jonas’s anger faded as quickly as it had flamed. “Being human? We all make mistakes, Nathan. We just have to decide where we’re going from here.”

Blake clapped Jonas on the back. “Exactly. You don’t have to be the one carrying this load, Nathan.”

Nathan let his arms drop. Sucking in a shaky breath, he said softly, “I’ll leave Mom’s box on the table so you can read the letters if you want to.”

“I don’t know if I will, at least not right now,” Jonas said. “I’m going to be busy working on getting Duke, the younger, DNA tested and registered with the CRHA.”

“And I’m heading back to my wife, who’s packing for our honeymoon.” Blake grinned. “We’re leaving tomorrow morning.”

Jonas frowned. “Who’s watching the kids?”

“Izzy,” Nathan said, the tension fading away. “I’m her backup.”

Blake was out the door before Jonas could blink. He should have paid closer attention to their honeymoon plans, but... well, he didn’t have a good excuse. “Where are they

going?”

“A little town on the Oregon Coast. Angel Point. For five days, I think,” Nathan said as he put their half-empty drinks on the kitchen counter. “I’ve got to get going. Izzy’s making lunch.”

Sloane would be there too. Suddenly, Jonas wished he’d been invited. He immediately dropped the idea. “In case you’re thinking of butting in, I don’t have time to date. And I’m not worried at all about who Sloane dates.” Okay, maybe that was an exaggeration, but Nathan didn’t need to know that. His brother could get into all kinds of trouble if given the opportunity to stir the pot. “She can go out with whoever she wants.”

“Coward.” Nathan laughed as he headed for the door. “Come on. I know the hostess. I’m sure I can get you an invite to lunch.”

He shouldn’t turn down a chance to spend an afternoon with Sloane. Especially if he wanted to convince her that no matter what she thought about his current bachelor status, he was still her friend and would do whatever he could to help her achieve this dream of having a family that would stick with her through the good and bad. After all, he had experience. He’d learned a lot of how to do that from his brothers.

“After you.” Jonas shoved his hands in his pockets, not wanting his brother to know he’d just made his afternoon.

Nathan smirked. “I thought you’d be interested.”

“Why?” Jonas stared at his brother’s back.

Nathan tossed a wink over his shoulder at Jonas. “Just a good guess.”

Before he could challenge Nathan's assumption, his brother was knocking on the cottage door.

Brothers. They were a real pain in the—

His future sister-in-law opened the door. Nathan leaned in to kiss his fiancée. A pang of envy washed over Jonas until he let it roll off his back.

Over Nathan's and Izzy's shoulders, Sloane stared at him. Her lips twisted, but not into a welcoming smile.

So, he was still in the doghouse. He'd better fix that quickly. His best friend abandoning their friendship was not how he wanted to start his new life in Strawberry Ridge.

Nudging the happy couple aside, he made his way to Sloane, where it looked like she was setting up a workstation at the table. Keeping his eye on Nathan and Izzy to make sure they were adequately distracted, he said softly, "I'm sorry I was rude yesterday."

"So, you admit you were rude?" she asked, as if his determination to corner her about how she was dating was something he did every day. The starch left her shoulders as she braced her hip on the table.

Determined to do better, he simply confirmed, "Yeah, I was."

Before he realized the happy couple was done being distracted, Izzy was beside him, Nathan's arm draped around her shoulder.

"Please tell me you weren't telling Sloane who she could date, Jonas Lohmen," Izzy teased.

Jonas arched his brows at Sloane, appreciating she was having trouble keeping a smile reined in.

“He was fine.” Sloane moved to the other side of the table, putting too much space between them. She smirked. “I can handle Jonas.”

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He silently moved his lips. “You can handle me?”

She grinned. His pulse took a tumble.

“I’ll bet you can.” Nathan laughed, then said to the women, “I invited this oaf for lunch. I hope that’s okay.” Nathan nudged Jonas’s shoulder and, under his breath, treated him to some unwanted brotherly advice. “You snooze, you lose, bro.”

“You’re more than welcome to join us, Jonas.” Izzy had slipped from under Nathan’s arm and gone into the kitchen. She pulled a plate from the fridge. “I hope you like egg salad sandwiches.”

“I love egg salad sandwiches. Can I do anything to help?”

Sloane shook her head, but Izzy smiled sweetly. “You can set the table in the backyard. We’ll eat out there. Here, take these.” She handed him plates, napkins, and silverware, and Sloane the plate of sandwiches.

The table sat in the shade of a giant oak. Their friendship wasn’t a hugging one, but after seeing Izzy wrapped in Nathan’s arms... and the smiles on both their faces... maybe it should be.

“So, how does your Perfect Match app work?”

“Why? Do you want to sign up?” Nathan asked behind Jonas.

Sloane’s brows shot up. A smile curved the corners of her lips. “I would love to see

your profile.”

“It’s just a question,” he said firmly as he sat next to her. “Not a pledge to check the app out.”

“You bring up a good point.” Izzy settled on the far bench. Even though she’d taken the job offered by the mayor to manage Strawberry Ridge’s community revitalization grant, she couldn’t let go of being involved in bringing the Triple L back into the black. Being engaged to his brother kept her in the thick of things. “Maybe it could be a moneymaker for the ranch. We could offer matched couples a weekend of camping or riding lessons at a reduced price. What do you think?”

Nathan sat beside her and took her hand, raising it to his lips. “How about I take you camping, and we talk about it?”

“Who do you think will win that discussion?” Sloane whispered, leaning into Jonas’s shoulder.

Distracted, Jonas wasn’t sure who he would bet on. His future sister-in-law made his brother happy. From where he was sitting, it was clear that Nathan had found the one woman who would walk through fire with him for the rest of their lives. He whispered, “I’m betting on Izzy.”

“Me, too,” she whispered back. “They’re cute together, don’t you think?”

Cutewas a girl’s word. Her breath brushing his neck short-circuited his brain until Jonas admitted, “Um, yes. Very cute.”

Sloane laughed, patting his arm. “You should see the look on your face. I think you’re just figuring out what love looks like.”

“Maybe,” he agreed slowly. Or maybe he just liked to hear his best friend laugh.

That had not changed from the first day they met in sixth grade and became study partners. He needed help with reading. She’d advanced a year before moving to Strawberry Ridge and was a reading champion. Even better, she didn’t cut him any slack when he wanted to give up. To repay her, he didn’t let the other kids bully her because she was younger and smarter than most.

She still liked to take charge. Most of the time. So did he, which made for some interesting conversations. Especially since she didn’t mind ruffling his feathers when she thought he was on the wrong track. He had to admit, he appreciated that Sloane knew her own mind.

“How long do you have to keep going back and forth between Denver and Strawberry Ridge?” she asked, reaching for a sandwich. “Are you getting enough new clients?”

“It’ll be a while before I build up a substantial client list here. In any case, for now, my primary client is the Triple L.”

Her brows snapped together. “Does the ranch need a lawyer? You’re not being sued, are you?”

“No, but we need a standard contract if we decide to host weekend camping or trail rides. There’s also The Wedding Cottage contract and filing for an LLC. And I’m investigating putting the ranch into a trust fund.” He shrugged. “Then there’s the horses and riding lessons. Anyway, there’s a lot to keep me busy for a while. In between, I can fit in paying clients.” He grabbed the other half of Sloane’s sandwich. Undeterred, he said, “Your turn. Why a dating app?”

He didn’t know why over the years he hadn’t told her he thought she was beautiful. Maybe because he was afraid of what that would do to their friendship, which

surprisingly, he needed, probably more than she did, especially once they graduated from high school. By the time he realized he might have stronger feelings for his best friend, she was dating a bronc rider, and he was heading off to college. Then his parents died. After that, he was a city boy, and she was a country girl. He'd considered inviting her to stay with him in Denver—as his best friend—when he opened his office there, but Strawberry Ridge was her home, and working in the garage with her dad was more important than following him to the big city. He completely understood. By that time, even though he wondered what it would be like to take their friendship to something more romantic, he didn't want to rock the boat. So, he left things as they were. He'd missed his chance, so he'd stayed in touch with Sloane as much as his work allowed and buried himself in building his law firm.

Her gaze met his. “If you must know, I want to get married and have a family. I'm determined to find my Mr. Right this year. Hanging out in bars doesn't do it for me, and since no one in Strawberry Ridge has struck my fancy, I'm trying out Perfect Match.”

He almost said, I live in Strawberry Ridge, but yeah, at the moment, he wasn't looking for a wife.

“What if this guy doesn't live in town?” He had to ask, right?

She shrugged. “He could be from anywhere, but hopefully once he sees Strawberry Ridge, he'll want to move here.”

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He loved... er, liked... how she did that, a gentle up and down of her shoulders. Despite being a heavy metal mechanic, she had so much grace. Once he met Sloane, this mysterious guy would move heaven and earth to live in her town.

BFF, remember?

“You guys ready to cut flowers?” Izzy butted in.

For the second time in his life, Jonas felt completely unsettled. The first time, he’d watched his mom slowly slip away, only to find out he was helpless to relieve her grief or stop her passing. He’d thought burying himself in his work would make things better, and it had for a while, but the distraction didn’t last long. It took moving back to Strawberry Ridge and spending time with Sloane for him to realize how mistaken he was.

Being single had suited him just fine. Now he was starting to wonder. And not just because Sloane had decided to find herself a husband. The ranch and the chance to pick up where his father had left off with the Triple L’s Rangerbred horses called his name. And it wasn’t just that. Spending more time with his brothers and their families had become more important than being a high-powered lawyer in an uber-successful firm with clients who paid well in Denver.

He stood. “This has been fun, but I have some of that pesky paperwork to get done at the office.” He put his hand on Sloane’s shoulder. “Maybe now that I’m living in town, we can go fishing or something.”

Jonas winced. He wasn’t intentionally pointing out that he was a Strawberry Ridge

guy. Shoving his hands into his jeans pockets, he said to Nathan and Izzy, “I’ll see you later.”

On the way to his office, after realizing that if Sloane was serious about the dating app thing—and it seemed that she was—then she wouldn’t stop just because he argued against it. Not until she got what she wanted out of the endeavor, which was, as she hadn’t hesitated to tell him, a husband and family.

Pressing his mouth into a straight line, he turned the music up loud enough to drown out his growing disappointment.

Chapter Four

Two days later, Sloane had been on another date, and like her date with Flinn Isak, there was no spark with Ken Williams, a chef from a popular Italian restaurant in Durango. And after a pleasant evening spent with him telling her all about his life in his hometown, if things worked out between them, she was certain he wouldn’t want to give up the position he’d worked so hard to achieve and move to Strawberry Ridge where his commute wouldn’t be ideal.

As her dad had told her just that morning when he called, she had to try on a lot of shoes to find the one that fit her the best. It was just that the whole dating process was wearing on the nerves. Serial dating, it turned out, wasn’t her thing. But if she wanted to find a husband this year who would adore her and who she could love back, socializing was what she had to do. It was just that she’d gotten spoiled by having Jonas Lohmen for a best friend all these years. He was easy on her senses. Always there when she needed him. Good-looking. Strong in a way that made her the envy of her friends in college.

She rolled out from under the Silverado she was working on and wiped the grease from her hands on the rag hanging from her pocket. Leaning into the car, she started

the engine. It purred like a happy cat. Sweet.

She'd been working on cars with her dad for as long as she could remember and loved it. Even after they moved to Strawberry Ridge. Looking back now, she recognized that he worried about her because she was pretty solitary as a kid and didn't make friends easily after her mother, Tracy, left them. She was in the first grade then and hadn't heard from her mother since.

It didn't matter. Her dad loved her and let her work with him as much as she wanted, which was basically every day. When he retired last year, she inherited the garage.

Over the years, her dad had set an example for what kind of parent she wanted to be. Never would she leave her child behind. Not for a million bucks or whatever it was that had motivated Tracy to leave them behind.

She moved the car into the fenced parking lot next to the garage. Turning off the engine, she shrugged off her memory of the woman she rarely thought of these days. As long as she had any say in it, her kids would have a mom and dad who would always be there for them, no matter what. Maybe that was why she'd hung onto her crush on Jonas for so long. She'd always believed he would be that kind of parent. Even after he'd kicked Blake off the Triple L, he'd kept an eye on both his brothers—though from afar.

It didn't matter. She had a lot of love to give, and she'd waited long enough to find someone who would appreciate that. Even with her rocky start, she was confident Perfect Match was the answer. As long as she could stop comparing the guys she dated to Jonas Lohmen.

Closing up for the day, she smoothed back the strands of hair that had worked free, more than ready to go home to her bungalow, put her feet up, and take another pass at finding someone who would take her mind off you-know-who. A sleek turquoise

Mercedes pulled up out front. The woman who emerged was just as trim as her car, in form-hugging black slacks and a brown flowing top, cinched in with a double-wrapped belt at the waist. Her brown hair flowed straight past her shoulders.

“Can I help you?” she asked when the woman got close enough that Sloane didn’t have to shout.

The woman held out her hand, then saw the rag Sloane was wiping her hands with and let her hand drop. “Yes, I’m looking for Sloane Michaels. Is she here? I understand she owns this garage.”

“She does. I’m Sloane.” Squirting hand cleaner onto her palm, she grabbed a clean towel and motioned toward the Mercedes. “Nice car. Does it need some work?”

The woman looked over her shoulder at the Mercedes. “Oh, no. She had a tune-up in Denver last month.” The woman swung back around. “Do you have a moment to talk? My name’s Julieann Vincent. Maybe Jonas Lohmen mentioned me?”

Sloane shrugged. “Not that I recall.”

“He’s mentioned you. You’re his best friend, right?” Julieann asked, her sharp gaze taking Sloane in from messy hair to well-worn booted feet. “Is there someplace we can go and talk?”

“Um. Sure. The Strawberry Ridge Coffee Company is next door, but—”

Julieann smiled. “That’s great. I could use a cup of good coffee.”

Okay, she wasn’t going home to relax. Not yet. Sloane glanced down at her grease-smeared coveralls. “Let me get cleaned up first.”

“I can wait.” Julieann took a step farther into the garage and looked around.

In her office, Sloane closed the door. Luckily, she kept a change of clothes in the bottom drawer of her file cabinet for when unexpected situations came up. Going to the bathroom, she washed up and replaced her coveralls for black stretch pants and a green, bohemian-style top. Letting her hair down from the ponytail she kept it in when she was working, she pulled the long lengths over her shoulder and gave it a good brushing.

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Julieann was waiting for her on the sidewalk. Unless a person was interested in fixing vehicles, there wasn't much to see in the garage. She locked up. "I'm ready."

They ordered their coffee before Sloane found a table in a corner where they could have a semblance of privacy. "How do you know Jonas?"

"We dated for a while."

"I see." She frowned at the other woman. She figured Jonas dated, but he wasn't a date-and-tell kind of guy, and she wasn't curious enough to ask. She just figured it was none of her business. Julieann must be pretty determined if she'd driven all the way from Denver for a chat with his best friend.

Julieann turned her cup in slow circles before glancing up at Sloane. "I'm hoping you'll do me a favor. You know, girl-to-girl? I thought if we talked and you got to know me, then you wouldn't mind—"

Julieann's chin went up. She didn't like asking for favors, Sloane guessed. Probably with her chic style and obvious bravery in coming all this way, she'd never had to before this.

"I can't promise anything," Sloane said cautiously. Especially since it was clear this had something to do with Jonas.

"I know this sounds a little strange, and you have every right to turn me down, but well..." Julieann took a dainty sip of her coffee. Sloane waited. "It's just my brother, Charlie, and me. Charlie is Jonas's law partner until the sale of Jonas's half of the

practice to my brother goes through. I'm in marketing. Our parents live in Switzerland..." She leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. "The thing is... I'm in love with Jonas and I want to marry him, but he says he's not interested in getting married. Someday, I think he could even be the Governor of Colorado."

The Governor of Colorado? Jonas? Of course he could. And he would need the kind of wife who could keep up with his status if that was his ambition, though Sloane wasn't convinced it was.

"I'm not sure how I can help you. He's telling you the truth. He's not looking to get married that I know of." Sloane was done with it now, but she had spent a lot of time wishing he would ask her to walk with him down the aisle.

Julieann tapped her manicured nails on the table. "You're his best friend. You could put in a good word for me. He would listen to you."

"I don't think he would." Sloane wouldn't do that to Jonas. For a lot of reasons, but primarily because he deserved to pursue whoever he wanted, if he wanted a romance that went beyond friendship, not someone she took up the banner for. "You talked to Jonas about this?"

"Yes, but—"

Sloane's cell rang. Surprised at the number on the screen, she said, "I need to take this. I'll be right back."

"Sure." Julieann nodded, frowning as if unsure how to finish her sentence. It was that "but" that had Sloane worried.

Outside, keeping her eyes on the other woman, Sloane picked up the call. "Hi."

“Hi,” Ken said. “I thought I’d call and see how you’re doing.”

Julieann began tapping her fingers again.

“I’m doing fine.” Shocked was a better word and confused that a girl who had dated Jonas was asking for her to approach him on her behalf. What a pickle, as her dad would say.

“Good.” Ken sounded unreasonably pleased. “I wondered if you want to go on another date.”

“Um...”Huh.This was getting weirder by the minute. “I’m kind of in the middle of something. Can I call you back?”

“Of course. No worries. I was thinking. Maybe we could go on a picnic.” Pans banged in the background. “I’d better go. The dinner rush is starting.”

“Okay. I’ll call you later.” She disconnected. Maybe the dating app was paying off after all, though she wasn’t sure Ken Williams, chef extraordinaire, was the guy for her. Still, she wouldn’t mind another date to find out.

Heading back to Julieann, her footsteps slowed. Maybe a second chance for Ken or Julieann wasn’t such a good idea. She sat before she could make her excuses and run as fast as she could in the opposite direction.

“What do you think?” Julieann gave her a practiced smile.

Sloane countered, “What did Jonas say when you talked to him?”

“He said he liked me”—she huffed—“but he doesn’t love me. Or something like that.”

“I think you have your answer, then.” Sloane rested on her elbows. She wasn’t the only woman who had feelings for her best friend. “I don’t know what I would say that would change his mind.”

“Won’t you at least try? I’d be good for him. I’m easy on the senses, I think, and could help him get more of the right clients. I will support him in whatever he wants to do with his career.”

“Even if he wants to move his law practice to Strawberry Ridge?”

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Julieann's brows arched. "Why would he do that? Denver is a great city to be a lawyer in."

So, she wasn't as flexible and supportive as she thought. "I'm sorry, Julieann, but I can't."

A pink flush colored the other woman's cheeks. "Why not?"

Good question.

The silence built between them, stretching out until Sloane finally found the right words. "I just think if you want to change Jonas's mind, you should talk to him yourself."

Not only that, but if she helped Julieann with her Jonas problem, she would be doing what she always did. Sitting on the sidelines while everyone around her went after what she wanted.

Julieann was a perfect example. She was bold. Knew what she wanted. Had no qualms about going after the prize—in this case, Jonas. And she'd sized Sloane up within five minutes of their meeting, figuring out she would do whatever she could to make her best friend happy. Even if that meant making a case for the other girl.

She sat up straight. She was not without skills.

She stood and hoped her smile rang true. "Good luck to you. Have a nice drive back to Denver."

Leaving the coffeehouse, she mentally crossed her fingers that Julieann didn't linger long in town. Grabbing her bag from the office, she got into her truck and sat there for a long moment before turning the key. The engine she kept perfectly tuned roared to life.

Instead of heading for the quiet comfort of her home, she followed the road that led to the Triple L. She was hungry. One good turn deserved another in return, didn't it? The least he could do was cook her dinner. After all, she may have just pulled his ass out of the fire.

As she parked in front of the main house, the sky turned the color of blue that happened when the sun was ready to set for the day. The outdoor lights came on. Dark mountains reached for the sky beyond the pasture. She could see Jonas living here for a long time, whether he shared his life with someone other than his brothers and their families or not.

The guesthouse was dark. Izzy was staying at Malorie's while Blake and his new wife were on their honeymoon. That was too bad. She could use some girl time after she talked to Jonas.

And speaking of the man. He rose from the bench on the porch as she got out of her truck. "Hi. What brings you out here?"

"We have to talk." Sloane brushed by the man she wished she could ignore, only to stop once she was in the house. The door closed softly behind her. She spun to face Jonas. "Have you had dinner yet?"

His brows shot up, but he headed for the kitchen. "I was just about to make this thing I call a nacho stack. It shouldn't take long. Do you want something to drink while you're waiting?"

Holy smokes, her lifelong friend was a good-looking man. Walking toward her. Walking away from her. Her girly Spidey-sense stood up and took notice. Today, with his jeans, he wore a forest-green linen shirt with snapped cuffs rolled up to his elbows, and matching green socks. Over the years, she'd seen him in his lawyer's garb, too, but as usual, this view stole her breath away.

Shaking herself free, she followed him to the kitchen.

"Water will be fine. Can I help?" She had to do something to calm down enough to gather her thoughts.

"Sure." He pulled out a deep casserole dish from a lower cupboard, then handed her a frying pan. "Grab the hamburger and grated cheese from the fridge. You can fry the hamburger."

She put the meat into a pan, breaking it into small pieces, while Jonas returned from the pantry with taco seasoning, a can of refried beans, and a bag of tortilla chips.

He put the ingredients on the counter. "Something's bothering you. What is it?"

Sloane covered the sizzling meat with a lid before facing Jonas. No more playing Miss Nice Lady. "Who's Julieann Vincent?"

"My law partner's sister," he said, watching her closely. "Why?"

For the first time, she didn't care how he would react. Deciding not to beat around the bush, she said, "She came to see me today."

He scowled. "What did she want?"

"She knows I'm your best friend and asked me to talk to you and put in a good word

for her. She wants to marry you.”

He stirred the seasoning into the sizzling meat. “And what did you say?”

“I told her I couldn’t. That she should talk to you herself.”

He let the meat simmer and turned to her, placing his hands on her shoulders with a twist of his lips into a small smile. “Thank you. Smart lady. This is why I’ve always liked you. I don’t understand why she thought that you taking her side would change my mind.”

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Liked. That said it all, didn't it?

The man could be so clueless. "Maybe she thought I had some influence with my best friend."

"You do, but I don't know why Julieann would think that."

That was surprising. "I do." Girls helped each other that way, but it just so happened that Sloane couldn't get in the middle of whatever was going on between Jonas and Julieann.

He shrugged and went back to his cooking.

Finished layering the nacho stack, he popped the covered dish into the oven. He grabbed two bottles of water and opened them before leading the way to the living room, where the light coming in from the outside windows was dimming. The comfy sectional couch facing the stone fireplace called her name. She'd had more than enough work at the garage and with Julieann showing up with her request, well... It'd been a long day.

Jonas handed her one of the waters, then made himself comfortable in one of the overstuffed chairs, his expression taking on his courtroom mask. "What do you want to know about Julieann?"

Good grief. "I'm not judging you." Nor was she letting this slide. "I'm just curious why she thinks I could be her champion?"

“We dated a few times after I finished her court case for Charles.” Jonas shrugged. His eyes started to sparkle. “I probably mentioned you a time or two, hoping she would catch on that I wasn’t available on the marriage market.”

“Jonas!” What in the world? “Why would you do that? You probably confused the poor woman.”

“There’s nothing ‘poor’ about Julieann. She can take care of herself.”

The sparkle in his eyes spread into a smile that tempted Sloane to smile back. “We’ve known each other so long, there were lots of stories to tell.”

“I can’t believe you.” This was not funny. She put the water aside.

He nodded, his expression sobering. “Yeah, not my finest moment. My only excuse is I was missing you.”

Sloane went to stand next to the fireplace. He missed her while he was in Denver? That was hard to believe. Something was off-kilter.

Jonas came to stand next to her and claimed her hand. “I don’t have the kind of feelings for her that I should have for a woman I want to spend the rest of my life with,” he said softly. “I’ll talk to her and make sure she doesn’t bother you again.”

Not for the first time, frustrated with the dude, she pulled her hand free. “Just to be clear, I don’t want to get tangled up in your problems with other women.” She stopped her headlong explanation and then admitted, “I just felt sorry for her.”

He didn’t want to marry Julieann, who was very attractive and would be appealing to most guys, Sloane thought. And he didn’t want to be more than her pal. So, what was left?

“But you don’t feel sorry for me?” A smile worked its way into his gray eyes.

She shook her head in disbelief at Jonas. “Nope.”

Grinning, he reached for her hand again, this time lacing her fingers with his. “Forgive me for causing so much trouble?”

The sizzle that ran up her arm should have been annoying. She couldn’t think straight when he held her hand as if she were precious china. She wasn’t happy with Jonas, but more than that, she was upset with herself. When was she going to stop wanting him to be her last date instead of someone else’s first?

“I guess,” she agreed.

Straightening to her full height, she finally managed to tug her hand free. “Jonas, we’ve been best friends practically all our lives. I honestly believe you’re living the exact, single life you want. So, convince Julieann you’re not available, and I’ll go back to looking for someone I can live happily with for the rest of my life.”

His brows crammed together as he released Sloane. He started to say something, but before he could, her cell rang. She glanced at the caller.

“Who is it?”

“Ken Williams.” Sloane saw no point in hiding who she was dating. Especially after their current discussion. “I’m supposed to call him back tonight. He wants to go on a picnic.”

Jonas leaned against the fireplace. “That’s not an impressive first date.”

“It’s not our first date. Even if it was, it works for me. I’ll call him back later.” She

slipped the phone back into her pocket and let the call go to voicemail. “I suppose on a first or second date, you would take a girl to a concert or museum or something.”

“A concert is too loud to talk and get to know the woman. I would take her on a wine-tasting tour, if she was into wine and cheese at all.” A grin spread across his handsome face. “You could tell this Ken whatever his name is that you can’t go out with him because you forgot you promised to help me clean out the horse stalls.”

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Only Jonas, or maybe Nathan, would come up with such a... laughable excuse. “Smart aleck,” she labeled him succinctly.

The oven buzzer went off. Sloane followed Jonas into the kitchen, searching for a good comeback. Didn’t happen.

After slipping on oven mitts, he pulled the dish out of the oven and placed it on the hotplate. He grinned at her. Sloane shook her head and gave up. He’d been getting his way from the time he’d first stepped in to protect her from boys who were bigger and very intimidated by her grades. She wasn’t going to change him now.

His nacho stack was delicious. Of course. She spent the whole meal letting the tension in her shoulders go while he told stories of clients, each one funnier than the one before. She told him about some of the cars folks brought in for her to fix and her idea of offering her part-timer, Dean Quillan, more hours to take care of things like oil changes and the like while she focused on restoring classic cars, which she loved.

One point in Jonas’s favor—he certainly made eating at home fun. If he asked her out on a real date, would she go? It would definitely be interesting, but it wouldn’t keep her teetering heart safe.

By the time they’d cleaned up the kitchen and she was heading back to town, Jonas watching her leave from the porch, she’d forgotten all about calling Ken. She’d have to call him in the morning.

That was the problem. How, or maybe the better word was when, was she ever going to find a guy she could talk to like she could with Jonas, and who made her heart sing

with the profound feeling that she'd found someone who made her heart feel like she'd finally come home?

Chapter Five

Smart aleck. That was why Jonas counted Sloane as his BFF. She would give him that knowing look and then bam! knock him over with the truth. She always gave it to him straight. He could only say that was one of the things he loved about his best friend.

Suddenly, his enjoyment of spending an amazing evening with Sloane faded away. She was the best mechanic in town—in the whole state, probably—and she led with her heart until she sympathized with Julieann. Lucky for him, even if she didn't know why sometimes, she gave him more grace than he deserved most of the time.

Remembering the one celebratory kiss they'd shared when they graduated from college, a small part of Jonas wondered why he hadn't tried that again. That kiss had been such a surprise, along with the Fourth of July sparkle in Sloane's brown eyes when they drew apart.

He'd been so stunned that he'd put the skids on fast. He'd already accepted a job at a prestigious law firm, and she was headed back to Strawberry Ridge to work at the garage with her dad. She would never have been happy staying with him in Denver.

Having recently lost his mom and then kicking Blake off the ranch, Jonas had been empty, with nothing left to give Sloane or any other woman, for that matter. So, he'd let her go home, and he bought a condo in Denver.

If Sloane wanted to use a dating app, he needed to leave her be. It was more troublesome that Julieann had followed him to Strawberry Ridge.

Frowning, he pushed his keyboard away. Best friends didn't often get the chance to

rise to the top of a girl's most eligible bachelor list, did they? He shouldn't even think about it. He still didn't have time to start a romantic relationship with Sloane. He also didn't want to make the mistake of interfering with her plans to find a guy who could fit into her life much better than he ever could.

Coward. Nathan's voice echoed in Jonas's mind. He wasn't a coward, just cautious.

Sloane might know him better than any other woman, but what she didn't know was that it gave him hives to think he could follow in his father's last footsteps.

Needing to conquer his sudden restlessness, Jonas grabbed his keys and headed back to the ranch. As soon as he got there, he went looking for his mom's letters. Nathan had moved the box to the sideboard in the dining room. He took them to the couch, but even before he sat down, he couldn't bring himself to read about his parents' private lives, so he put them back. Maybe someday he would come back to them, but not tonight.

When his mother passed, he'd been convinced she'd died from loneliness. He still thought that. Staring out the window at the expanse of the yard and parking area illuminated by the light that automatically came on at dusk, he was glad to be home, even though he wasn't ready to uncover his parents' potential secrets. It was after his dad's sudden death and becoming the 'man' of the house that he started to play the cautious card, making it a point to never make a mistake he couldn't fix.

That was what his best friend didn't know.

*

The next day, Jonas was back in the office, sorting through the growing number of cases waiting for his attention.

Everywhere he looked made him think of Sloane and the conversation he should have probably had with her a long time ago. Except, he couldn't have told her what he didn't understand.

She'd done a great job helping him decorate, bringing in the view from outside the big picture windows. Sunlight dusted the soft-blue walls. She'd had the furniture upholstered in a woven fabric that blended blues, greens, and a bit of brown. Paintings by several local artists hung on the walls.

Before he texted her, he had another matter to attend to. Grabbing his cell, he dialed the number he found online for the Colorado Ranger Horse Association. The home office was in Pennsylvania. The lady who answered explained the process to get Duke registered as Jonas followed along on the website that he'd pulled up while the phone was dialing. At the end, she gave him instructions for completing a DNA profile and the name of an equine research center to send the sample to that would confirm if the tested horse qualified as the offspring of a given stallion and mare.

It would take time to get the testing done and the paperwork reviewed by the CRHA.

But that wasn't the Triple L's biggest worry. The main obstacle was the limited time he and his brothers had to fix the ranch's cash flow problem. At least Duke's DNA testing was a step in the right direction.

After leaving the office early, he stopped in at the Strawberry Ridge Coffee Company and picked up a spiced chai latte, Sloane's favorite. He found her in the garage, her legs and booted feet emerging from under a newer Wrangler.

She probably had her earbuds in, listening to one of the podcasts she favored. He nudged the foot closest to him. "Hey, friend. I brought you a thank-you gift."

"A gift?" she asked, rolling out from under the Jeep. "What for?"

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He waited until she cleaned her hands, then handed her the latte. “For keeping me on the straight and narrow. And being the best friend a guy ever had, no questions asked.”

“So, I didn’t scare you off?” She grinned, took a long sip of the spiced chai, and closed her eyes, very clearly savoring the drink.

A switch flipped in his chest as Jonas watched her delight. That was one thing he could say about the girl he’d known most of his life. She enjoyed everything to the fullest. How he hadn’t fallen head over heels with her from the beginning, he couldn’t explain. Most likely because he was determined not to.

“It would be a mistake,” he said under his breath.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Speaking of keeping you on the straight and narrow... have you been in touch with Julieann?” She watched him closely as she took another swallow.

“Not yet, but I’ll contact her as soon as she gets back to Denver. When I talked to Charles, he said she was visiting friends in the area. What are you doing tonight?”

Dinner and a movie would be a good time to explain his lapse in good judgment.

“I have another date with Ken tonight.”

“Ken? The picnic guy?” Jonas shoved his hands in his pockets.

She finished the drink he’d brought her. “He’s going to take me to a movie instead. Knight and Day, with Cameron Diaz and Tom Cruise, is playing at the Blue Moon.”

The theater had been around for as long as Jonas could remember. Nathan had mentioned the building was on Izzy’s list for restoration, sooner rather than later, in her new role as manager of Strawberry Ridge’s revival.

“I haven’t seen that one.”

“No?” Sloane glanced at the shop clock hanging on the wall. “I have, but I don’t mind seeing it again. If I want to be ready when he picks me up, I’d better get going. See you tomorrow?”

“Sure. Why don’t you come out and help me with the horses?” he said as she shoed him toward the bay doors. “I’ll want a report on the picnic guy, anyway.”

“Ken.”

He gave in and smiled. “Fine... Ken.”

Jonas enjoyed teasing her and igniting that fighting sparkle in her dark eyes. How had he not noticed their sweet chocolate color before this?

She snorted and pointed firmly toward the door, breaking the spell that held him immobile. He shook off the disconcerting feeling and waited outside as she closed up shop before he climbed into his Mustang.

He didn’t start worrying until he was halfway back to the ranch. Maybe he should

check out this Perfect Match app. His friend was a smart lady and not easily fooled. Still, it wouldn't hurt to do a little investigating.

He made a pizza and while it was in the oven, he sat at the table with his laptop and searched for Sloane's dating app. It wasn't hard to find. According to the reviews, it was the best one around. That, at least, was reassuring.

He'd just pulled up the home page when the front door opened and his brothers, in a heavy discussion about Duke, walked in.

"If he hasn't been busy with his law practice, Jonas should have called the association by now," Nathan was saying.

Uh-oh. His brothers—he could guess which one—were not in a good mood. Before he could close his laptop, Nathan was looking over his shoulder. "What are you doing, big brother? Is that the dating app Sloane uses?" Nathan punched his shoulder. Not hard, but firm enough to jar Jonas slightly.

"It is," Blake said behind him. "I heard the girls talking about it this morning. I'm sure glad I didn't have to compete with a thousand guys looking to date my girl."

Jonas managed to close his laptop and stand before his brothers crowded him even more. "Don't be an idiot. Your wife loves you."

"Of course she does," Nathan agreed. After they'd found him checking out Sloane's dating app, there was no way they would let him get away with a distraction. Not unexpectedly, Nathan scowled. "What are you doing? Spying on Sloane?"

At that first glance, it'd looked like he'd have to create an account and log in before he could search for Sloane's profile. It was probably a good thing Nathan and Blake had barged in and interrupted his momentary lapse in judgment. Interfering in

something that Sloane would be the first to tell him was none of his business was not a good idea.

Instead of answering Nathan, he pushed through the wall his brothers made and led the way to the kitchen. “I made pizza. You boys hungry?”

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“I’m starving. What did you expect to find on the app?” Nathan asked, following closely.

The truth? Or a half-truth? “I wanted to make sure the app is legit.”

“Sloane’s not going to like you checking up on her.” Blake got colas from the fridge. “You don’t think she’s in trouble, do you?”

Maybe. “No,” Jonas said after concern crept into his brothers’ expressions. “She’s a smart lady. I’m sure she thoroughly investigated the app.” So far he hadn’t seen anything that raised the hair on his arms.

“Did you call the association about Duke?” Nathan asked, taking a seat at the table. Blake followed suit.

“Yes.” Jonas was grateful for the change of subject as he placed the pizza and napkins in front of his brothers. It was embarrassing to be caught sneaking around Sloane’s back. “I got all the information we need to move forward on the DNA testing and registration once we get the results back.”

“How long will all that take?” Blake grabbed a slice and a napkin.

“Under normal circumstances, seven to ten business days after we get the kit. So, maybe two to three weeks?” It was a good thing Jonas was a just-in-case kind of cook. “The lady I contacted at CRHA said we can send a sample of Duke’s hair for genetic testing to Gluck. I’ve already contacted them and had them overnight the kit.”

“You know”—Nathan started, after finishing his first slice in silence. His gaze was thoughtful, then brightened with a familiar mischievousness as he studied Jonas—“you should sign up for Perfect Match. When was the last time you went on a date? Sloane could probably show you the ropes.”

“I like that idea,” Blake said in agreement.

Jonas straightened. “I am not asking Sloane to coach me on how to use a dating app.” Brothers could be a pain in the backside, but at the end of the day, they were his brothers. He pointed his half-eaten pizza at Blake. “How was the honeymoon?”

Blake responded with a ready grin. “It was great. Angel Point is a cute little town. They had their centennial celebration while we were there. Malorie loved it.”

“Sloane’s on a date tonight,” Nathan said out of nowhere. Clearly, he wasn’t ready to drop the subject.

Jonas rolled his eyes. “I know. She told me.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?” Blake asked, looking at Nathan, brows raised.

“Nope.” Jonas took the last slice. “Why should it?”

“You guys have been friends for a long time.” If Nathan thought his usual stubborn push would change Jonas’s mind, his brother needed to rethink that strategy.

“Exactly. We’re friends. Good friends. Look, you guys, just because you’ve found sweet women who are willing to overlook your faults, and who want to spend the rest of their lives with you doesn’t mean I’m ready to follow you down the aisle,” Jonas informed the brats.

Or was he? For a second, he could see him and Sloane standing under the arbor at the cottage. Would she wait for him to get all his ducks sorted out? The last thing he wanted to do was disappoint his best friend.

“Why wouldn’t you want to marry a woman as wonderful as Sloane?” Nathan demanded. “She’s put up with your crap since you were kids.”

Jonas stood, his hands balling into fists before he could control his exasperation. “Are you suggesting I’ve been hard on Sloane?”

“No.” Nathan rose to face Jonas, his expression fierce. “I’m saying you haven’t always realized how lucky you are to have a best friend like Sloane. Over the years, she’s cut you a lot of slack.”

Jonas’s annoyance slipped away as quickly as it had sprung up. He took the empty pizza pan to the sink. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“Okay. Be that way.” Nathan put up his hands in surrender. Jonas was pretty sure this wouldn’t be the end of the conversation. “We’re just trying to help.”

“I know.” Maybe he should reconsider what Nathan was saying. The more Jonas thought about it, the more he wondered. “I can take care of my relationships without any interference from you boys.”

“And what relationship is that?” Blake asked, then also backed away with his hands raised.

Jonas rinsed the pizza pan, then stuck it in the dishwasher, wishing his brothers would find someone else to annoy. Grabbing his laptop, he headed for the stairs that led to the bedrooms. When he hit the landing, they were still there, huddling together, talking softly.

“Hey, I’ll let you know when I get the results of Duke’s DNA test,” he tossed at them, hoping to move them along. He knew that huddle from when they were kids. They were up to something.

Shrugging, he continued up to his room, where he had a desk and workspace. Whatever they were plotting, he didn’t want to know. They were grown men, according to their ages, anyway, and he had issues to sort out of his own. Including figuring out if he should consider asking Sloane to forget that Ken guy and go on a real date with him.

The last time he’d asked, because at the time he’d only been half serious, it hadn’t worked out that well. Maybe a better idea would be to get her help with the horses until he worked up the nerve to ask again.

Chapter Six

Sloane almost called Jonas to tell him she wouldn't make it out to the ranch. He'd want to talk about Ken, and she didn't have much to say about her movie date last night. And since it was nice but wouldn't win any awards for best date of the year, she didn't want to have another conversation about the two of them going out, either.

I wonder why?

Rolling her eyes, she closed up shop. The garage was only open until noon on Saturdays and closed on Sundays, a schedule her dad had established when he first opened. A single father, Ron Michaels liked his weekends unencumbered, he said, so that he could spend quality time with his young daughter. After he retired, Sloane had kept to the same schedule.

She climbed into her truck and started the engine. The older F-150 purred to life. After rolling down the window to let a breeze filter in, she pointed it toward the Triple L. The nights were cooling down as they headed into fall, but the days were still warm, calling her to get out of the garage and stretch her legs.

She would continue to date, not Jonas, of course, but she'd try some things outside her comfort zone, like mountain climbing, skydiving, or maybe glamping. She was certain a guy out there liked to do those things. She just had to find him.

She loved fixing cars, but working ten, sometimes twelve-hour days, and half a day on Saturday, was getting old. Folks talked about work-life balance. She had none. It wasn't something she'd worried about until Jonas came back to town and wasn't

interested in becoming more than friends.

It had weighed heavily on her mind and was one of the reasons she'd signed up for Perfect Match. She didn't want Jonas to figure out she'd been waiting around for him all these years. If she wanted to move on from her crush on her best friend, she should take a chance on the dating market and at least open her life to new possibilities. And it made sense to widen her dating pool.

Jonas wasn't the only guy around. His suggestion that he be her backup date was... infuriating. It'd taken him a long time to decide she was maybe more than his best friend. Did he feel sorry for her? Was that what was going on? If it was, then that wasn't going to fly.

Her biggest problem dating anyone else was trying not to measure them against the guy she couldn't stop caring about. If she kept looking, surely, she would find a man who made her heartbeat go faster than her BFF. Someone who shared the same likes and dislikes, and whom she could see having a fulfilling future with. She just had to keep looking.

She parked in front of the barn. The horses were in the pasture across the driveway. Jonas stepped out of the barn. "Hey, you made it."

"I almost didn't. I had a lot of work to do." And a lot of thinking to do on how to get Jonas to keep his distance from her personal business.

His grin was contagious. "How did your date go?"

She knew he wouldn't forget. "The movie was great. It was just as good as the first time I watched it."

"And did Ken like the movie?" Jonas led the way back to the barn, where Duke was

still in his stall.

The horse stretched his nose out and nickered at Sloane. She scratched him between the ears. “He thought it was good.”

“Only good?”

Sloane ignored Jonas’s question. “What are we doing with the horses?”

“I need to take a hair sample from Duke’s mane for DNA testing. You get to hold his head still for me.”

Sloane moved her scratching fingers to under his jaw. “You’re a good boy, aren’t you?”

For a moment, she could see the two of them building up the Rangerbred breed on the ranch and working with the horses.

“All done.” Sloane watched Jonas seal the hairs he’d collected in a small paper bag and put it in his shirt pocket. He patted the horse’s neck. “So, what does Ken do for a living?”

Any ideas she might be harboring that she and this man her heart was hanging on to could perhaps make a happy-ever-after future together were dispelled.

“Actually...” She was going to tell him it was none of his business but changed her mind. There was no reason not to tell Jonas about the guys she was dating. In any case, she wasn’t asking for his opinion on the gentlemen or for his approval. “He’s the head chef at the Starry Night Grille in one of the historic hotels in downtown Durango.”

Jonas's brows drew together.

She almost laughed. "What?"

"He wanted to take you on a picnic." He fed Duke a carrot when the horse butted his shoulder.

Making sure Duke had moved out of the way, Sloane punched Jonas's arm. Payback for him thinking she couldn't pick a good man, even on her worst day. "I like picnics. And Ken is a nice man."

"I'm sure he is," Jonas said, rubbing his arm as he took a step out of reach.

She tapped her booted foot. "You said you wanted help with the horses. So, what's next?"

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“We could go on a picnic,” he said, his scowl disappearing into a teasing smile.

Sloane shook her head.

“No? Okay, then—” Jonas’s cell pinged. He pulled it out of his pocket and read the message. “Nathan and Izzy are on their way. He’s giving her barrel racing lessons and wants to know if we can saddle up Duke and Rosie.” His fingers were already moving across the face of the phone. “We can do that.” He handed her a lead rope. “Do you want to bring Rosie in from the pasture?”

“Sure.” Unable to tamp down her sudden excitement, Sloane went to get the horse. She loved the Triple L. Loved the horses. Whenever Jonas would come from Denver, she’d sneak in a visit at least once during his stay.

That all stopped when he moved back because she didn’t know how to hide her overwhelming feelings for her best friend. At thirty-five, she was getting too old to be hanging around the barn, hoping a certain rancher would notice that she was more than his convenient friend. The sad news was... the more she spent time with Jonas Lohmen, the less she was interested in dating other guys.

How dumb was that?

She hooked the lead to Rosie’s halter and led her back to the barn. If she didn’t straighten up, she’d have to face the fact that she’d managed to give her heart to the wrong guy. She already knew that, but she wasn’t about to let it be the final caption on her life.

“Here we go, sweet girl. Let’s get you ready for some barrel practice.” Pasting a confident smile on her face, she patted the mare’s neck.

Jonas was already grooming Duke. Sloane got busy with Rosie, prepared when he asked the question she knew was coming. “When’s your next date?”

“I haven’t decided.” She wasn’t sure it was fair to go out with Ken again. He seemed interested, but there was just no spark on her end.

Jonas hefted the saddle and positioned it on the stud’s back. He pulled on the cinch. “While you’re thinking about it, do you want to help me set up a Rangerbred pedigree record for the Triple L?” He glanced at her over the saddle as he cinched the strap to hold it in place. “I’d like to get started on the groundwork. And since you have business experience with bookkeeping—”

“I’ll be glad to help. We can set up a spreadsheet on your computer and back it up to the cloud. That way, unless you intentionally delete it, you’ll always have the information.”

“That’s exactly what we need.” Jonas helped her finish saddling Rosie. “What do you want for dinner? I have steaks ready to barbeque.”

She didn’t know who was the better cook, the chef or the lawyer. All she knew was that Jonas made great steaks on the grill. “That sounds wonderful.”

Was it bad that, of the two, she was rooting for Jonas?

“Good. I’ll get them started, and then we can work on the horses’ pedigrees.” The grin he shot at her made it hard to think about arranging another date with Ken.

They were tying Duke’s and Rosie’s leads to the stalls flanking the arena when

Nathan and Izzy came into the barn, holding hands, talking about where they wanted to live after they got married.

“We can live in the main house, depending on what Jonas has in mind,” Nathan was saying as he leaned in to kiss his fiancée on the cheek.

Jonas stepped around the stud, informing his brother, “Once the ranch is back on its feet, I’m planning to build a house just beyond the pond.”

Sloane held her breath, waiting for their usual chiding disagreement, but it didn’t come.

“I can be on board with that,” Nathan said instead. “Blake wants to build his and Malorie’s house on the north forty. So, what do you say we make solid plans as soon as the dust settles at the bank?”

The boys might have their disagreements, but they were family, and it was clear that in the end, despite their different approaches, that seemed to matter most.

Wasn’t this what Sloane wanted? A family close, surrounding her as they planned their future? She was an only child. The family she could draw close to was her dad and whatever family she made when she found the perfect guy.

Jonas is the perfect guy.

No, he isn’t, she contradicted quickly. Jonas Lohmen didn’t want the same things she did.

“The horses are ready.” The man of yesterday’s dreams bumped her shoulder, gently nudging her in the direction of the house. “We’re going to grill steaks and work on setting up records for our little band of Rangerbred. Do you want to join us?”

“You guys go on. We have other plans.” Nathan slanted her a speculative look. “There’s ice cream in the freezer for dessert if you want it.”

Izzy grinned at Sloane, a knowing look in her eyes. “We’ve got dinner reservations in Durango. You guys have fun.”

Nathan and Izzy’s hints weren’t very subtle. Nathan gave her a cheery wave on their way out. Sloane shook her head. Somehow, the newly engaged couple must’ve gotten the idea that there was something more than friendship between her and Jonas.

Jonas waved Nathan and Izzy off as they walked the horses into the arena. He gently wrapped his hand around her arm and said softly, “I’m not sure what that was all about. Pay no attention to them.”

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“No worries.” She knew exactly what the two lovebirds had on their minds. And she didn’t need Jonas feeling sorry for her. “Hey, did I tell you I’m going white water rafting?”

“But you hate extreme sports,” said the man who knew her better than anyone else.

Hate was a gentle word to describe how she felt about barreling down a raging river in a fragile raft. She shivered. It was worth the risk if it kept Jonas from figuring out how over the moon for him she was. “I should try it at least once, though, don’t you think?”

“I suppose.” He didn’t look convinced as he turned them toward the house.

She raised her chin. It wasn’t her who didn’t have more to give than pleasant company.

The steaks were on the counter. Sloane grabbed the platter. Once they were cooking on the grill, Jonas led the way to the office, sat her behind the desk, and turned on the computer. As he hovered at her shoulder, all she could think about was how close he was standing.

Clearing her throat, she suggested, “Grab a chair, and I’ll explain what I’m doing as we go along.”

He settled beside Sloane. He never wore cologne, but he smelled good. Like fall, horses, and high desert, all wrapped in one. “Do you have records we can use to start with?”

“We do for the girls, but not for Duke,” he said, finally breaking the tension that kept her still beside him.

He seemed out of sorts. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“I’m fine. My brothers get under my skin.” He leaned back in the chair, replacing his grievance with a smirk.

“Nathan likes to stir the pot. But you’re lucky to have brothers. I always wanted to have a brother or sister.”

“You have your dad. I always envied how close you two are.” He pulled out a folder filled with the pedigree information on the horses, pointing to the information she needed. “Let’s start here.”

While he watched, she made the spreadsheet.

“Name, CRHA Registration number, male/female, dam, sire, identifying marks, DNA test number,” she muttered, then looked at Jonas. “Anything else?”

“That should do to start with. I’ll check with the registration form later to see if there is any other information the association needs.”

She started to fill in the columns. “I always thought you were close to your dad. I was jealous that you had a mom and dad and this whole ranch to explore.”

“I thought we were close, too, but—”

She glanced at him. “But?”

“I’ll tell you about it later.” His smile didn’t reach his eyes, making Sloane pause her

typing.

She wondered what had happened to change the memories he had of his dad. “My memories of your dad are all good ones. He was a great guy. Remember that time he was moving part of the herd to the corral by the barn, and he told me to stand toward the back fence and wave my arms so they couldn’t escape anywhere but into the arena?” For a split second, she was frozen. “But I waved my arms and shouted like your dad said to.”

“That was before—” Jonas didn’t finish. This time Sloane didn’t push him. “He was very fond of you. I think he thought of you as the daughter he never had.” He got up. “You finish here, and I’ll go tend to the steaks and make a salad.”

Sensing he’d wanted to say more, she watched him leave, then went back to filling in the document she was making for Jonas. He would tell her what happened between him and his dad when he was ready.

Ever since they’d met, they’d told each other everything. There was his first kiss with Angela Woolsey in the seventh grade. Her fear of snowboarding the first time they’d gone to Silverton Mountain with his parents. He’d stayed right with her and encouraged her until she stopped falling every few feet. There were times he’d sneak out of the house to go to archery practice with his buddies. His parents didn’t know, but she did. And she—She had so many memories like that.

Finished with the preliminary document, she went looking for Jonas and found him on the back deck. The table was set up buffet style, with Adirondack chairs facing the mountains. He’d poured wine and made the salad he promised.

There wasn’t a better sight in all of Strawberry Ridge—the mountains rising straight out of the ground on the backside of the ranch, jutting into the blue sky, a single cloud hovering close to the peaks.

He placed a bottle of beer and a plate with a steak and salad on the TV tray at her elbow. She didn't think there was anything Ken could cook that would smell better. Cutting a small bite, she closed her eyes as she chewed slowly, then swallowed. "Thank you. This is so good."

"I'm glad you like it." His deep voice made Sloane open her eyes. The gray-green shimmer of his gaze was focused on her face, snagging her awareness. Jonas Lohmen was an intensely handsome guy.

"Um—" She gulped down some wine. "You gave me details for the mares, but nothing about Duke. Is there a story there?"

His gaze stayed on her mouth, warming her up from the inside out before he looked away. "It's my parents' story, really."

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“You don’t want to talk about it,” she said gently. He didn’t respond. “I understand.”

He put his knife and fork down. “I only recently found out—” Jonas stared off at the mountains before he finally shifted to look at her. “A month before he died, Dad sold half the ranch and Duke’s sire to pay off a gambling debt. And then he closed down his breeding program and destroyed all his records, including withdrawing the record that was at the association. We have to do DNA testing on Duke to get him registered as Duke’s Pride’s progeny. He wasn’t the great guy you remember.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. He was always kind to me.” She leaned forward, elbows on her knees. “Who’s reinstating your dad’s breeding program?”

“I will, with Nathan’s help. We’re entering Duke and Rosie in the Strawberry Ridge Rodeo barrel racing category. If they do well, it will go a long way toward introducing our Rangerbreds to the breeding community.”

“So, you’re going to put the Triple L back on the map?” She knew about the ranch’s financial crash because Strawberry Ridge was a small town.

“That’s the plan.” He raised his beer bottle to Sloane. “We still have the breeding shed that Dad built that we can use.”

She raised her beer. “Here’s to success. It would be very sad not to have the Lohmen brothers on the Triple L. If there’s anything else I can do to help—”

“I’ll let you know.”

Sloane knew he wouldn't accept, but she had to ask anyway. Dragging her feet, she helped Jonas clean up the dishes. Just about to leave, Sloane faced her friend, staring straight into his shuttered eyes. She wondered if he felt like he'd revealed too much, but she was glad he had.

"I have some money put away. You could pay me back when you're able—"

"No, Sloane." Jonas stood too close. He ran his knuckles gently down the side of her face. "It's very sweet of you to offer, my friend, but we can't take your money."

Friend.

She narrowed her eyes at the man. Refusing her help was dumb. Especially when the future of the family and the ranch were at stake. "Why not?"

"I just can't." He kissed her temple, then stepped back. "Text me when you get home."

Fine. "I will."

Screw Jonas and his kiss on her temple. If she was a woman whose temper flared hot when she got frustrated, she would have stomped every step to her truck. But she didn't. She had other ways to take out her annoyance.

When she got home and after she let Jonas know—only because he'd insisted she text—that she'd made it without any trouble, she deliberately texted Ken to see if the more accommodating guy would like to have dinner at his restaurant.

He responded immediately. "How about tomorrow afternoon? I'll make you a special meal."

“That sounds wonderful,” she texted back. If it was so wonderful, then why was she still irritated with Jonas? Because he didn’t want her help financially? That was his prerogative.

After sleeping only in fits and starts, Sloane got out of bed the next morning, knowing she couldn’t keep dating Ken. It wasn’t his fault. She just had to be honest with herself and face the fact that he wasn’t Jonas. One day she would find her ideal guy. But for now, she would stay on course.

Later, dressed in her favorite summer dress and comfortable flats for courage, her hair pulled into a high ponytail, and a bit of gloss on her lips, Sloane found her way to the Starry Night Grille in downtown Durango, a picturesque town that she loved to visit. If she didn’t already have deep roots in Strawberry Ridge, she could live here.

Inside the restaurant, the tables were half-filled. She told the hostess who she was and that she was meeting with the head chef. The older woman led her to a table set back under a built-in canopy on the side of the room. The place was fancy, with its leather seats, wood spindles, chair rails, and stained-glass windows that divided the main seating area. It probably hadn’t changed much from its frontier beginnings.

“I hope you like trout,” Ken said as he joined her. Waiters followed with their food on large round trays.

She drank in the delicious smell of freshly grilled fish. “I love it. Thank you.”

Ken talked about the Starry Night and the cuisine he specialized in, as if they were his babies. Sloane was glad for his enthusiasm—more than he’d shown her on their previous dates—but she struggled to find an opportunity to tell him that she wouldn’t be seeing him anymore and why.

Jonas didn’t want to date her. She didn’t want to date Ken, a man who checked most

of her boxes.

Before she could bring the subject up, Sloane heard her name.

“Sloane! What a surprise.” Julieann was looking at Sloane.

“Hi, Julieann.” Durango was a long way from Denver. “Ken, this is Julieann Vincent. Ken’s the head chef here.” Sloane made the introductions, finally asking, “Do you want to join us?”

“That’s okay. I’m meeting someone.” Julieann flashed Ken a smile. “It was nice meeting you.”

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“Same.” Ken’s gaze followed Julieann as she walked farther into the restaurant and took a seat at a table with a guy in a suit. The blond guy seemed happy to see her.

By the time they finished their meal, Ken didn’t mention where they might go on their next date, and neither did Sloane. “I’d better go.”

“Of course.” He walked her to the door and hugged her briefly before she left.

It was on the drive back to Strawberry Ridge that she realized her hunt for the perfect lifetime companion wasn’t over. It wasn’t Ken Williams, but it also wasn’t Jonas Lohmen, either.

Chapter Seven

Three days had passed since Jonas told Sloane he couldn’t take her money to help restore the Triple L financially. All he’d heard from her since was crickets. He’d texted her earlier with no response. Four hours was long enough to wait, wasn’t it?

He tried again. “Is everything okay?”

This time, she shot a reply right back. “I’m working, Jonas.”

Yup, his best friend was not in a good mood. No matter what was going on, Sloane didn’t get her feathers ruffled easily. That she seemed mad at him worried Jonas. He didn’t like it when their relationship... er, friendship wasn’t, well...friendly.

Unlike his best friend, he could be as hotheaded as his brothers. He just hid it better

than they did. That was what the older brother was supposed to do, right? Play the good guy, who had his emotions well under control? Since he'd come home, keeping his cool hadn't worked so well. Maybe in the back of his mind, he'd known about his dad's gambling habit. He just didn't want to acknowledge the problem or that he'd left his mom to deal with the fallout alone.

After mailing the sample from Duke's mane as directed on the website, all they could do was wait, which left Jonas with too much time to think about the kiss he'd left on Sloane's temple. He'd been aiming for her lips but at the last minute, changed direction. All he could remember was the softness of her skin, how she'd felt like she belonged in the arm that he wrapped around her shoulders, the whisper of a night breeze ruffling the ends of her hair, and how he suddenly wished—

What excuse could he use to get her to go with him to Luke's on her lunch break? Apologize for so abruptly refusing her sweet offer of financial help? Explain that saving the ranch on their terms was something he and his brothers had to do? Say he was sorry for not telling her about Julieann?

His phone rang.

And speak of the angel. "Hi, Sloane. I was just about to call."

"I had a feeling." She sounded distracted. "So, why do you want to talk?"

"I want to apologize—"

"I don't think we can be friends anymore," she said at the same time.

"Why? No matter what, we'll always be friends," Jonas blurted, a spark of something he wouldn't admit was panic growing in his chest. "Let's meet at Luke's for lunch and talk about this."

“I can’t. Work is stacked up today.”

“Dinner, then.” He leaned back in his chair. He’d come to his office in town to organize his cases. Now, that was the last thing on his mind.

“I don’t think so.”

“We’ve been best friends since the day we met,” he insisted. “What’s changed?”

The rolling of the creeper she used to get under the vehicles sounded in the background. Silence stretched out, then finally, “I don’t want to talk about it, Jonas.”

“We have to talk about it,” he pressed. “Is this because I can’t take your money?”

“Not really.” Her sigh came clearly across the phone. “I... um... don’t want to be friends out of habit.”

He held the cell closer to his ear. “I swear to you, I’m not your friend because I should be. My god, Sloane, after all this time, how could you think that?”

How did he convince her? “Listen, I’ll bring pizza, or something else if you’d rather, to your place tonight.” He held his breath, waiting, hoping she wasn’t making a complete break. “Come on, kiddo. Let me explain.”

“I probably won’t be fit company. There’s too much to do here. Anyway, I won’t be home until after six.” The creeper rolled again.

The bell over the door in his reception area jingled. She hadn’t exactly said he couldn’t come over. He didn’t give her the chance. “I’ve got to go. I’ll see you at six fifteen.”

He hung up and went to see who'd come into the office when what he'd rather do was go to the garage and fix whatever the problem was. The reception area was empty.

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He was thinking whoever had been about to enter had changed their mind as a harried woman rushed in, carrying a photo. She thrust it at Jonas. “I’m looking for this girl. Have you seen her?”

His mind still on Sloane, he gave the picture of a twelve, maybe thirteen-year-old girl, with blonde hair hanging to her shoulders, a quick glance. She looked sad.

Out of the corner of his eyes, the very tip of a tennis shoe disappeared farther under the reception desk. What now?

“I haven’t seen her,” he said truthfully, handing the picture back to the woman. “Is she a runaway?”

He’d handled more than a few court cases that dealt with kids who ran from bad homes. He preferred not to start by panicking. He had enough on his plate to panic about as it was. Besides, what were the chances that her girl and whoever was attached to the shoe were the same person?

“Her mother and Clara are my neighbors. Tracy was recently killed in a car accident.”

Tracy? That couldn’t be a coincidence.

“I work for CDHS—Department of Human Services. Since I know the family, she’s been staying with me the last few days while we are looking for someone to foster her. When I got up this morning, she was gone, along with her clothes.” She looked around. “I saw a notation for Strawberry Ridge on my computer desk, so I came here. I thought I saw a young girl run in.”

“Do you have ID?”

She handed over her driver’s license and a business card. Nora Owens. “Her name is Clara Randell.”

“What makes you think she came to Strawberry Ridge?” he asked, keeping the business card, but giving the license back.

“It’s logical. Her mother lived in Strawberry Ridge before she moved to Greeley. And I know Clara got on a bus heading in this direction. She could be looking for family—”

If that was Clara hiding under his reception desk, Jonas knew he should turn the girl over to Ms. Owens immediately. But if his hunch was correct and this Tracy was Sloane’s mother—she would want to know about the teenager as soon as possible. As far as he knew, she hadn’t heard from Tracy since the woman left Strawberry Ridge.

He was taking a risk, and except for a gut feeling that rarely operated under an abundance of caution, he didn’t know for sure the person under his desk was the runaway the CDHS social worker was looking for. He knew how these situations worked out. He’d represented enough of these cases in court. And with the way things were with Sloane, if the kid was her sister, he didn’t dare turn her over to social services without getting answers first. Not that he would anyway.

Tapping the card against his fingers, it took a second more to make up his mind. “If I see her, I’ll let you know.”

“I’ll be in town for another day.”

Sloane might not want to be his friend right now, but he sure as heck would never stop being hers, which meant he would follow through on this new development and

any other one that came along and try not to get into hot water with the state while he was at it.

He held the door open for the woman and watched her walk down the street, glancing into each of the businesses on the way. When she'd crossed to the next block, he locked the door before planting himself between his guest and her only escape route. "You can come out now."

Slowly, the girl in the photograph emerged, surprising Jonas with how much she looked like Sloane when his friend was the same age. The only difference was that Clara was taller.

She eyed him suspiciously, putting as much space between them as the reception area allowed. "How come you didn't tell Nora I was hiding under the desk?"

"I wanted to see what you had to say before I made up my mind what to do."

The girl glanced over her shoulder, no doubt looking for an exit.

"There's no back door. This is the only way out." He crossed his arms and leaned against the glass that had Jonas Lohmen, Attorney at Law, etched into it. "I'm listening."

He watched the young teen struggle with how much to tell the stranger standing between her and whatever destination she had in mind. He wouldn't want to be forced into revealing his secrets, either.

"My mom—" Clara bit her lip, then scowled as she duplicated his stance. It all came out in a rush "—died in a car crash. The people at DHS told me I had to stay with Nora while they decided who I could live with. I don't want to live with strangers. I've heard stories from kids at school. I went through my mom's things and found a

letter to my sister she'd written when I was born. I didn't know I had a sister—"

Jonas interrupted. "What's your sister's name?"

If Clara didn't have Sloane's brown eyes, straight blonde hair, and slender build, Jonas would be more suspicious. Kids would go to great lengths to stay out of the foster system.

She pressed her lips together. Jonas waited patiently. Clara had that same stubborn look on her face that Sloane got sometimes when she was determined not to tell him something. Like blurting out she'd decided they couldn't be friends anymore without talking to him about whatever the problem was first.

Finally, she fisted her hands at her sides. "Her name is Sloane Michaels."

"Why do you think your mom didn't mail the letter?" Jonas let his arms drop and pushed his thumbs into his front pockets.

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“I don’t know, but that’s how she did things. She forgot a lot.” Clara eyed him warily. “CDHS wants the names of family members. I want to check my sister out and see if I can like her.”

“Well, it turns out you’re in luck.” It was a small world, and didn’t fate have a funny way of poking its nose in when least expected? “I know Sloane. Did you bring a bag with your clothes and things?”

Clara stared at him. To trust or not to trust. Wasn’t that always the question in this kind of situation? He’d handled enough of these cases, pro bono, to know if he didn’t follow the rules, it could all go sideways.

“I left them at the bus station.”

“Okay.” He pulled out his phone. “I have to let Ms. Owens know you’re here.”

“You can’t make me go with her!” Clara backed up. “You’re not the boss of me.”

He arched his brows. She reminded him so much of Sloane at that age. “Of course I’m not. But I am a lawyer, and I have to do things the right way, or you will end up in foster care. Is that what you want?”

“No!”

“Okay, then. Believe me. Sloane will want to meet you.”

Clara’s chin lifted. “How do you know?”

“She’s my best friend,” was all he said, even though that was currently under debate. His gut twisted in a knot. It didn’t matter if they were siblings. Sloane would never turn her back on a young girl who needed a home. He held out his hand. “My name is Jonas Lohmen.”

Clara shoved her hands in her jeans pockets.

All right, then. “We have to make sure Sloane is your sister.” For Sloane’s sake, and for the teen scowling at him. He didn’t want either one to be disappointed if it turned out the two weren’t half-sisters.

Clara perched her hands on her hips. “The letter was addressed to Sloane Michaels at Michaels’ Garage on Main Avenue in Strawberry Ridge.”

Yup. That was his Sloane Michaels.

“How old are you?”

“Thirteen.” She stacked her hands on her hips. “How old are you?”

Jonas snorted. Clara would get on famously with his brothers. And with Sloane too. “Thirty-six.”

“You’re kind of old.” Yup, the kid spoke her mind, just like Sloane.

He dialed Sloane.

Clara watched his every move. There was no trust there. Jonas didn’t blame the kid. Hopefully, he could change that.

Legally, he was obligated to let the social services worker know as soon as possible

that he had her runaway in custody. So to speak. He also knew Sloane would want to see the girl, and after their last conversation, he would be in bigger trouble than he already was if he gave the teen back to CDHS before Sloane could see Clara.

She picked up immediately. “Jonas, I don’t want to—”

“Don’t hang up,” he interrupted. “This is important, Sloane. I need you to come to my office. Right away.”

“Why? What’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine. Something’s come up that I think you should know about.” He didn’t want to tell her over the phone that he was sheltering a kid who, according to all the info he had so far, could be her sister.

Fortunately, she didn’t ask questions. “I’ll be right there.”

“She’s on her way.” He shoved his phone back in his pocket and smiled at Clara. “Not nervous, are you? She doesn’t bite.”

“What if she doesn’t like me?” Clara asked weakly as she dropped into the chair in front of the desk.

“Do you kick?”

“No.”

“Do you get in fights at school?”

She hesitated. “Only when I’m being bullied.”

“You’re bullied? By who?” Jonas didn’t like that.

The kid shrugged.

“Okay. How do you do in your classes?”

“Okay, I guess.”

“Then I think she’ll like you, but how about we wait and see?” Being caught between meeting a sister you didn’t know and being taken into CDHS protection had to be frightening. Crossing his mental fingers that he wouldn’t have to wrestle the teen to keep her here until Sloane arrived, he said, “Don’t move. I have to call Ms. Owens now. If we don’t do this according to the rules, it could jeopardize your stay with Sloane.” And his license, though that wasn’t his primary concern at the moment.

Sitting up straight, Clara narrowed her eyes at him.

“I know. I’m not the boss of you,” he said calmly and dialed the number on the card.

“Hello?”

“Nora Owens?”

“Yes.”

“This is Jonas Lohmen. We met just a bit ago in my office.” He wished he could have this conversation without Clara watching him so closely as she held her breath. From the obstinate look on her face, if the kid could bolt, she would.

“The lawyer. Did you find her?”

He could try to keep her location to himself for another few hours, at least until after Sloane and Clara met, but from experience, he knew that wouldn’t end well. “She’s here.”

“I’ll be right there,” Nora said.

He met Clara’s shuttered gaze. “Listen, Nora. She’s here to find her sister. I’m pretty positive I know who she is. She’s on her way here now.” He nodded at the teen in an attempt to reassure her. She had to have someone on her side. “You know when runaways are forced into a foster home, where they don’t want to stay, they run, and many of them become homeless. We have a chance to connect these two sisters. Isn’t that what CDHS wants?”

There was a long silence on the other end of the phone. Then, “I could get in trouble for this, but okay. We’ll play it your way, Mr. Lawyerman. But I need to see her tonight to make sure she’s okay, meet this sister, and call my boss.”

“We can do that. We’ll meet at Sloane’s house.” He gave Nora Sloane’s address and then hung up.

Just as he did, the door behind him rattled, and a hand slapped on the glass as Sloane

tried to get in.

“Here’s Sloane.” Jonas unlocked the door and stood back.

Maybe he should have alerted his friend to what she was about to walk into. It was too late now. Hopefully, she wouldn’t clock him on the arm, which she didn’t hesitate to do when he overstepped.

“What’s wrong—”

Jonas had backed up to the point that Clara was hidden behind him. She peered around his back. Sloane’s brown eyes widened before she looked at him, more than one question shooting his way.

“Sloane, this is Clara. She showed up at my office a little while ago—”

Her gaze returned to the teen. Her eyes round with her own questions, Clara dug into her pocket and pulled out a wrinkled envelope. Circling Jonas, she held it out to Sloane.

Sloane sat on one of the chairs that lined the window wall. Glancing at Clara, who said nothing, she opened the envelope and took out a sheet of paper. Her brows pulled together as she began to read.

Clara stayed next to Jonas. He put an arm around the girl’s shoulders and edged her over to sit beside Sloane.

Sloane looked up, her eyes shiny, and asked Clara, “Have you read this?”

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Clara twisted her fingers together in her lap and nodded.

“Tracy says you’re my sister. How do you feel about that?” Sloane asked gently.

“I don’t know you,” Clara said, a note of anger in her voice.

Her gaze steady on Clara’s face, Sloane took a breath and reached for her sister’s hand. “Then I think we’d better get to know each other, don’t you?”

“I suppose so.”

Jonas kept his distance.

“I would be okay if you wanted to live with me. At least give it a try.” Sloane took Clara’s hand in both of hers. “We could be a family.”

If the kid agreed, Sloane would be getting exactly what she wanted.

Something broke open in Jonas’s chest. This was his Sloane. Always leading with her heart. Why hadn’t he realized...

He would do everything he could to help her and Clara stay together.

“I’ll have pizza delivered to your house.” Too absorbed with the newness of having a real sister, neither responded.

Not for the first time since she’d told him they couldn’t be friends, his heart beat

harder. Watching the sisters together, he knew there was nothing casual or out-of-habit about what he felt for Sloane Michaels. He'd always known that. As soon as the dust settled with this new development in her life, he was going to make sure she knew it too.

Chapter Eight

She had a sister.

Sloane was sorry her mother was gone, killed by a driver who fell asleep at the wheel, but she was sorrier Clara had been left behind at an age when a girl's mother was vitally important. It brought back all those memories of feeling lost when Tracy left her behind.

Tracy never wanted to be a mom. She made sure Sloane knew it. Wouldn't let her call her "Mom," insisting instead that she use her given name. Probably not as punishment, but because she didn't know what to do with a young child.

So, she'd clung to her dad. At six, when one day Tracy was suddenly gone without saying goodbye, she was relieved to be left with her dad. To this day, Sloane thanked her lucky stars. Who did Clara have to cling to?

When she turned around from putting Tracy's letter in the top drawer of the china cabinet that had once belonged to her dad's mother, Clara watched from the living room where she hovered by the coffee table. The bags they'd picked up from the transit center were at her feet. "Come sit down." Sloane indicated the table in the dining room. When Clara sat in one of the chairs, Sloane reached out to cover the teen's hand. "This must be as strange for you as it is for me."

Clara pulled her hand away. "You won't let Nora take me back, will you?"

“No,” she told the girl, probably for the fifth time. “We’ll talk to her, tell her our plan. And Jonas will submit whatever papers she needs tomorrow.”

She’d been shocked when the words came out of her mouth, telling him they couldn’t be friends anymore. It was how she’d started feeling, but saying it out loud, and then to his face... It surprised her... and him too.

Despite that, he’d called the minute he realized Clara could be her sister. Maybe she’d been too hasty. Just looking at him, dressed in black slacks, a white button-down shirt—though slightly wrinkled—and his favorite black, polished cowboy boots, her heart took a serious, unwelcome tumble.

She could not be doing this every time he did something nice for her. Making sure she got the chance to meet Clara was more than nice. It was... amazing... even heroic. At least, that’s how it looked from her side of the fence she’d erected.

Giving them time to get acquainted, he set the table with plates, napkins, and slices of the pizza that had arrived a few minutes ago. The man loved his pizza, but after what she’d said to him, she was surprised he decided to join them for dinner. Ex-friends didn’t hang out together after they broke up, did they?

Maybe he made an exception because of Clara. They needed him to get her paperwork sorted, and he was aware of that. All she could say about that was she was glad. She didn’t want to mess up her chance to have her sister stay because she missed filling out a needed form.

“Dinner’s ready, ladies,” Jonas announced.

Watching Jonas with Clara was an eye-opener. She’d never thought to see him with a child that didn’t belong to his brothers. He was good with Blake and Malorie’s Andee, Reece, and Timmy. And the kids loved their uncle. It’d never occurred to

Sloane that the man who said he wasn't ready to get married would have such a natural affinity for a teen in trouble.

Clara was her responsibility, not his. For the first time, Sloane understood what it meant that her dad had filled the hole Tracy had left by becoming both her mom and dad all those years ago.

"Do you want to go see Duke and his mares tomorrow?" he was asking as Sloane sat with them at the table.

Swallowing the bite she'd already taken, Clara's eyes went round as saucers. She looked at Sloane. "Can I?"

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Sloane nodded. How could she say no?

“We have to get the okay from Nora,” he advised them both.

Clara’s shoulders slumped.

It was the little things that mattered. Spending the day with her new sister at the Lohmen ranch was one of those things. Sloane promised, “I’m sure she’ll say yes.”

Clara flashed Sloane the biggest smile yet. Jonas grinned, nodding in agreement, like he always did when they were working together to solve a problem. She’d missed that.

Jonas started telling Clara all about the Triple L. A knock sounded at the door.

“That must be Nora Owens,” Jonas said and started to stand, but Sloane put her hand up to stop him and went to let the social worker in herself. Clara was hers to fight for now.

Ms. Owens was on the tall side. She wore a pantsuit and briefly smiled at Sloane but, other than that, the woman was all business. “Ms. Michaels?”

“Yes.” She stepped aside to let the social worker in.

“My name is Nora Owens. I’m here to collect Clara.”

That was not going to happen. Sloane would do whatever she had to so that her sister

could stay. Losing a mother was a hard thing. Being taken away from her only known relative would be the worst thing to do to the child. “I’m hoping it won’t come to that. I have papers that prove I’m Clara’s sister.”

She retrieved them from the older desk—her birth certificate, her mother’s birth certificate, the letter Clara had given her. She could get whatever other documentation Ms. Owens needed.

“You’ve met Jonas Lohmen, our attorney.” Since she hadn’t asked him to represent them yet, she glanced at him, but Sloane did not doubt for a second that he would be there for Clara. She turned back to Ms. Owens. “Please have a seat, Ms. Owens. Can I get you a cup of tea or something else to drink?”

“Green tea, if you have it. And please, call me Nora.” The social worker sat at the table with Jonas and Clara.

That was a good indication she wasn’t going to insist on taking her sister away immediately. There would be some negotiation, but Sloane was down with that.

She put water on the stove to boil, then sat down with Nora to go over the documents she’d gathered.

“Thank you for being prepared,” Nora said, studying the papers carefully. “I think this will be enough to do an emergency certification, but I must ask Clara... do you want to stay with Ms. Michaels?”

“Yes, I do,” Clara said firmly.

Her sister was a girl of few words. Sloane liked the honesty of that.

“I want her to stay. She’ll have a room of her own. And we have a lot of catching up

to do,” Sloane told the social worker so the woman wouldn’t mistake her resolve.

The kettle whistled on the stove. Sloane brought a steaming cup and a green tea packet to Nora. “Are there any other papers you want me to fill out tonight? Or we can meet at Jonas’s office tomorrow?”

“Let me talk to my supervisor. If you’ll excuse me.” She let the tea bag dangle in the cup and pulled her phone out of her handbag before going into the living room.

Sloane was too restless to sit down while Nora spoke with her superior. She rubbed Clara’s shoulder. “It’ll work out. I’ll make sure of that.”

She raised her brow at Jonas and glimpsed a flash of interested approval in his hazel eyes. Not surprising, she liked seeing it there when he looked at her. Her pulse raced. Her skin flushed.

Nora rejoined them. “My supervisor says we can do an emergency certification tonight.” She pulled a form out from her satchel. “I’ll have you fill out the application and take copies of your documents. On Friday, I’ll come back and see how you’re both doing.”

She would have to reschedule her customer appointments for the next few days. Sloane took the papers Nora handed her.

It was an hour before the social worker said goodbye and that she would see them in two days. Sloane let out her breath after closing the door.

She really did have a sister, and that sister was staying with her.

They cleared the table. Clara yawned.

“I’d better get going.” Taking Sloane’s hand, Jonas tugged her toward the front door.

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“Wait,” she said, pulling her hand free. She went back to Clara. “Your bedroom is the second door on the right. Across the hall is the bathroom.” She rubbed the teen’s arm. “As soon as I lock up after Jonas, I’ll check in to see if you need anything.”

Clara followed the directions to the spare room. Sloane returned to Jonas. He gave her a concerned smile. “Are you okay? It’s a big job taking on a teenage sister you didn’t know you had.”

“I know I said you were our lawyer, but you don’t have to represent us. I can find another attorney.” One who she wouldn’t always be thinking about making a forever relationship with.

“Don’t even go there,” he practically growled at her, startling Sloane.

“All right.” Sloane winced before rushing on. “I’m guessing we’ll sleep in tomorrow, and I have to reschedule several customers at the garage, so if it’s okay, I’ll bring Clara out to the ranch to see the horses, maybe about noon. She might want to take a tour of Strawberry Ridge on the way too.”

“Good. I’ll be waiting for you.”

For a second, with the house quiet and dark descending outside, Sloane could have sworn his eyes closed a little as his gaze stayed on her face. She swayed toward him slightly before she caught herself, then stepped back. “We’ll see you tomorrow.”

What did he mean, he’d be waiting for her?

Startled by his reaction and what felt like a near kiss, Sloane stared at the door. Had he been about to kiss her? Mr. I-don't-want-any-obligations? No. Of course not. But for a moment there, she'd been more than willing to kiss the rancher.

Picking up Clara's bags from where the girl had dropped them in the living room, she carried them to the room that wasn't the spare room any longer. The house had three bedrooms and two baths, large enough for the two of them. The third bedroom she used as a home office since it was a lot more comfortable than the crowded cubby hole she had at the garage.

Clara was stretched out on the bed, already asleep, still in the clothes she was wearing when Jonas brought her to the house. Putting the bag down quietly by the dresser, she retrieved a blanket from the closet and gently covered her sister.

Her sister. Sloane didn't know if she would ever get used to that. Putting on her pajamas, she brushed her teeth, then buried herself under the covers while she debated whether to call or wait until her dad got back from Hawaii to tell him about Clara. He still had a couple of more days to enjoy his time with his sister.

She decided on sooner rather than later. Between them, they'd never kept secrets, even when she wasn't sure what his reaction would be. Like when she'd turned down an opportunity to work with one of the major car manufacturers so she could be near him and stay on at the family business. He hadn't been pleased, but he'd been supportive. And when she bought her house, he'd argued it wasn't necessary, insisting she could live with him for as long as she wanted. But he'd understood that it was time to move out of her childhood room.

Would he be happy about Clara? He'd been a good dad to Sloane, even though he'd spent most of his time working at the garage. She'd helped him whenever she could.

Turning on her side, she stuffed the pillow under her head, pulled the blankets up to

her chin, and felt again the brush of Jonas's lips on her temple. She'd wanted to kiss him properly when they said good night. Not one of those cheek-to-cheek kisses one gave their best friend, but a kiss that involved more than a brief touch of lips.

Mistake. Big mistake.

*

The next morning, they got a late start. While she waited for Clara to surface, Sloane rearranged her workload at the garage. Her part-timer, Dean Quillan, could handle some of the work. He'd started at the garage when she went to college and then decided to stay on part-time when her dad retired, so she didn't have to move too many customers.

Leaning against the counter, she watched the coffee brew. Just because she got distracted by Clara and making sure her sister settled in properly did not mean she had forgotten that she'd told Jonas they couldn't be friends. He'd argued against breaking up their long friendship. It didn't escape her that as soon as the words were out of her mouth, she was already missing him. So, she hadn't stood her ground.

Sloane shook her head. Her usual calm, practical self had disappeared. And here she was, taking Clara out to the Lohmen ranch. To visit the horses, not Jonas.

After pouring her coffee and adding milk and sugar, she dialed her dad. He answered right away, as he always did when she called. "Hey, kiddo."

"Hi, Dad. How's your trip going? And Aunt Dorothy? Are you having a good time?"

"We always have a good time here." Here was Oahu's north shore and the bungalow they always rented in Haleiwa. "Dorothy is fine. She wants to stay another week."

Sloane wouldn't be surprised if they did. But she'd procrastinated enough. "I've got some news."

"You found a guy on that dating app you're using?" He didn't come right out and chuckle, but he might as well have. He wouldn't use a dating app himself, but he was quietly pushing for grandchildren, so he wasn't opposed to his daughter giving it a try.

Sloane rolled her eyes. "No luck so far." An image of Jonas protecting Clara from the big, bad social worker flashed through her mind. "Um, the reason I called... I have a half-sister," she blurted. And got crickets. "Dad? Are you still there?"

"Yeah. How did that happen?"

She suspected he was still a little in love with Tracy, but as far as she knew, he'd never tried to find her.

"Tracy died in a car accident a week ago. Clara—she's thirteen—found a letter that Mom had written to me when she was born. It never got mailed." Sloane still didn't understand how that happened, except Tracy had never been good at following through.

"Clara ran away from the social worker and came to find me. Long story short, Jonas found her hiding in his office and he contacted me."

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t want her to end up in a foster home with strangers—”

“Of course not,” he interrupted. “You have plenty of room in your house for the girl. Do you need any help? I can keep my original flight back and work for you at the garage or take care of Clara while you work. Whatever you need, kiddo.”

“I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too, kiddo.” He used the nickname he’d given her when it was just the two of them.

“Jonas is handling the paperwork, and Dean has the garage covered.” She considered the options. Ever since Tracy left, her dad had been there for her every minute of every day. He deserved an easy retirement. “Stay with Aunt Dorothy for as long as you like. We’re working out the details here.”

“I’m proud of you, baby girl.” He paused before continuing. “I think I’ll come back when I originally planned to, anyway. I can’t wait to meet Clara. If she’s anything like you, she’s very special. Remember, you don’t have to pick me up at the airport. My car’s in long-term parking.”

“You’ll text when you board the plane?”

“Yup.”

She wanted what was best for her dad, but this time she had to admit, she was glad he decided not to stay longer in Hawaii. "I'll air out your house."

"Thanks. I'll see you soon." When she put her cell down, Clara was watching her from the living room.

No point in beating around the bush. "That was my dad. He's excited to meet you. I think you'll like him."

"Tracy had boyfriends, but I never met my dad," Clara said indifferently as she sat at the table.

"Do you miss her?" It was better that her sister talk about how she felt than keep it all bottled up inside.

Clara shrugged. She laid her head on her arms.

Even though Sloane let her feelings for Tracy go a long time ago, it still made it hard to speak to realize this was her final goodbye.

"I'm sorry she died." Pulling a chair close to Clara, she rubbed slow circles on her sister's back.

Tears spilling down her face, Clara threw her arms around Sloane's neck. "I took care of her the best I could. Made her breakfast and stuff," she hiccupped.

"Shhh..." Sloane held the girl close, her heart aching for her sister... and for herself. "You couldn't keep her safe or make her act responsibly. Neither could Dad and I. When she left, we had to let her go."

"I know, but I didn't want her to die."

“Of course you didn’t. Neither did I.” Sloane got them napkins to wipe their faces. She brushed her thumbs on Clara’s cheeks. “How about we make breakfast?”

Grabbing one of the napkins to wipe her nose, Clara nodded. “I can help.”

“What do you like?” she asked the girl, who didn’t have the childhood Sloane’s dad had given her. “I have enough eggs for cheese omelets.”

Scrubbing her face with both hands, Clara got up and rifled through the fridge until she got all the ingredients she wanted while Sloane found the omelet pan and placed it on the stove.

After taking her first bite, Sloane smiled gently at Clara. “You make a mean omelet. This is very good.”

The teen blushed, looking down at her food. “Most of the time, breakfast was the only thing I could get Mom to eat.”

“I told Jonas we would stop by the ranch this afternoon if that’s okay with you.”

“I guess—”

“You can see the horses, and on the way, I’ll show you Strawberry Ridge.” Sloane was glad to see that perked Clara up.

Sloane didn’t want her to run again. Somehow, she had to convince the teen that Strawberry Ridge and the family she had here were her home now.

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Opening her texting app, she handed Clara her phone. “Will you text Jonas and tell him we’ll be there in a little while?”

The teen’s fingers danced across the face of the cell. She hesitated a second, then—“He says he’ll be there.”

Sloane wasn’t surprised. She knew he would be. He’d only ever let her down by not taking her hints that she would welcome more from him than friendship. While she disagreed with him, he may have made the right decision. With Clara in her life now, she didn’t have time to try to figure Jonas out, or go on dates, or spend her energies looking for the perfect guy. She should probably close her Perfect Match account too. Making a home for her sister was more important than finding a guy who would hang around forever.

After they cleaned up from breakfast, Sloane helped Clara unpack her things. The girl spent more time looking out the window at the back garden than she did talking. Sloane hoped to change that.

When they were done, she said, “Your room is kind of plain—” It felt cozy, but it was a guest room, not a young girl’s sanctuary. “Should we liven it up a bit with new sheets and a comforter, and some colorful curtains? We can look online and see what you like.”

“I’d like that.” Sloane put an arm around her sister’s shoulders as they stood just past the doorway and took in the room. Clara leaned into her, whispering, “Will you always be my sister?”

“I will always be your sister,” she said, tilting Clara’s chin up. “No matter what.”

“Even when I do something stupid?”

“Like what?” Sloane was curious about what the girl considered stupid. Something as crazy as having a crush on her BFF for more years than she wanted to admit, then deciding to find someone else on a dating app? Nothing could be more foolish than that.

“I’m not good in school.” Before Sloane could reassure Clara that was an easy thing to fix, she rushed on, staring down at her hands. “If I hang out with my friends and don’t tell you where I am. Or have a boy in my room, even if he’s just a friend.”

“Well... I’ll help you with your schoolwork, so that’s not a problem. When you’re out with your friends, you have to tell me where you’re going, with no exceptions. And you will not have boys in your room, even if all you’re doing is homework or watching a movie. You can do that in the living room. Can you live with that?”

Clara looked up at her, a look of guarded hope in her brown eyes, and nodded.

Could she be a good parent to her sister? That was the question. The kind of parent the kid needed? Love was not the issue. Sloane already loved Clara more than she’d ever thought she would love a sister if she’d had one. It was all the other parenting skills she had to acquire.

“Good.” Sloane gave Clara a quick hug. “If you ever wonder if something you’re doing is right or wrong, just ask me, and we’ll talk it out.”

Clara stepped out of the hug. “Do you do stupid things?”

“On occasion,” Sloane confirmed with a tiny frown, admitting, “I’ve never been a big

sister before.”

“If you ever wonder, you can talk to me,” Clara repeated with a contagious sparkle in her eyes. “I’ll tell you if you’re making a mistake or not.”

Sloane laughed. “I bet you would.”

Clara wasn’t saying out loud that her life with Tracy had been problematic, but Sloane figured it had. Her dad had let her mom go because she’d had a hard time always being there for her husband and daughter. It wasn’t unusual for Sloane to come home from the first grade—even after they moved to Strawberry Ridge—and most of the time find Tracy gone. That much, she remembered quite well.

Clara deserved more. Sloane silently promised to do better. “Are you ready to see Jonas’s ranch?”

Clara almost smiled back. “I’m ready.”

And off they went.

Sloane rolled her eyes. Would her heart ever stop madly pumping every time she got a chance to see Jonas Lohmen? Having him for a best friend had always... mostly, until recently... been a good thing. Maybe she should think again about calling their friendship quits?

Chapter Nine

When Jonas wasn’t at the office following up on Clara’s paperwork or working for his other clients, he helped Nathan with the horses, making sure he and his brothers didn’t skip a beat while preparing to establish a new Triple L Rangerbred breeding program.

He'd spent the morning investigating the Colorado Department of Human Services rules and what had to be done to ensure Clara's placement with Sloane, and he finished up the guardianship papers without any hiccups. He did not want any mistakes on his end.

He'd mostly practiced intellectual property and corporate law in Denver, but what appealed to him most was the pro bono work he did in family law. Now that he was setting up his practice in Strawberry Ridge, he wanted to do more family cases, much like he was doing for Sloane and Clara. Solving family problems and helping them put the pieces of their lives together gave him more satisfaction than anything else he'd done since law school. The only thing that came close was keeping the ranch afloat.

It was a direction he hadn't seriously thought of taking until now... the ranch, his brothers and their new families, Sloane—not his best friend anymore, if he believed her, which he didn't—and Clara, a kid who needed a family who cared about her. In the short time since he'd met Sloane's sister and gotten to know her a little bit, his future suddenly became very clear. The trick was convincing Sloane he wasn't the same guy who was focused only on his work.

Family. That was the most important thing. The kind of work he could do by moving his practice to the smaller town, while on the side, reestablishing his dad's breeding program, and getting acquainted with the grown men Blake and Nathan had become was the only motivation he needed to make his permanent home on the ranch and put all his disparate pieces together.

So, here he was, waiting for his ex-best friend and her newly discovered sister to come and spend the afternoon with him on the ranch. He'd made a mistake when his mom passed. He should never have let his grief and anger take control when he ordered Blake to leave and never come back. It didn't take more than a few days before he regretted those actions. By then, it was too late. Blake was not in

Strawberry Ridge, and it was many years before he was able to locate his brother, and many more after that, before he took the bull by the horns and brought him home again.

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They were family, and because of his inability to keep it together, they'd lost sixteen long years. Jonas didn't want that to happen to Sloane and Clara. They deserved to be stars in each other's lives. Whatever he had to do, he would. Especially with CDHS hovering over their shoulders.

As he'd expected, with her heart as big as the moon, she was making room in her life for Clara, a kid who hadn't had the benefit of growing up in a stable home. Sloane had her dad. And if nothing else, until his parents passed, he and his brothers had a family and a home that wrapped them in comfort and love. Sloane wanted that for her sister. So did he.

Nathan called from the front door. "Sloane's here. And she has a kid with her."

"Her sister," Jonas said, joining his brother on the porch.

He hadn't had time to tell Nathan and Blake about Clara. It was movie night at the guesthouse where Izzy was staying. And with Izzy's new job keeping her very busy, Nathan spent most of the free time he had with his fiancée. Blake was working on his latest Timmy, the Superherobook. Malorie had been at work at the hospital.

In any case, Clara was Sloane's news to share. Unreasonably, a small part of Jonas was envious. Kind of like building a forever home, Blake and Nathan were making forever families. It was ridiculous to be bothered that he wasn't riding the same horse since he had a different plan he was following. It didn't count that he was about to toss that plan aside. Sloane and Clara needed him and that was more important than any idea he had of putting off settling down until he was good and ready to take that step.

“There’s a story there,” Nathan said as they watched Sloane and Clara get out of the Ford.

“Yup,” Jonas agreed. He headed down the steps. Nathan followed. Sloane and Clara met them halfway. “Hi, ladies. Are you ready to take a tour of the ranch?”

“Yes.” Clara nodded, then asked, “Can we see the horses when we get back?”

“We can see them right now. Duke and his girls would like that.” Jonas led the way to the pasture, where the horses were enjoying the sun.

Clara brightened. “Who’s Duke?”

“He’s Nathan’s horse.” Jonas clapped his brother’s shoulder. “Clara, this scruffy guy here is my brother, Nathan.”

“I’m not scruffy, am I?” Nathan asked Clara and held out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

She hesitated but then shook her head and took the hand he offered. “How many horses do you have?”

“All together?” Nathan scratched his chin, pretending for a moment to be thinking about it. “Five. Duke and four mares. Bella is pregnant, so, counting the foal, we’ll have at least six next year.”

There would be more if Duke’s DNA sample came back with the information Jonas was looking for.

While Nathan gave Clara the lowdown on the horses, Jonas went to the garage and got the Mule. By the time he parked the utility vehicle alongside the barn, his brother

already had the girls helping him lead the horses out to the pasture.

“We have a hundred acres,” Nathan was answering a question from Clara.

The sight of his prickly brother taking to Sloane’s sister without his usual bluster was a bit surprising. Jonas was impressed at how easy Nathan seemed to be with the kids. He’d changed since he’d fallen for Izzy Payton, a woman who had no trouble keeping up with his brother and would make a good father.

Jonas leaned on the fence and bumped Sloane’s shoulder, saying softly so only she could hear, “Nathan and Clara are getting along pretty well.”

He knew how difficult it was to lose one’s mother. Even though it was a long time ago, he still missed his mom, remembering the times they spent together in her garden, planting vegetables, and canning the results with her.

“Nathan has always been easy to talk to,” she whispered back, shading her eyes as she watched Clara, who was on the other side of Bella from his brother.

Jonas faced Sloane. “You’re kidding, right? Of the three of us, he’s always been the angriest.”

“You think so? I never noticed that.” She smirked, a twinkle in her eye that usually only showed up when she was giving him a hard time. It meant that he still had a chance to change her mind about breaking up their friendship. “Perhaps you’re right, but he’s always been good to me.”

Briefly, he wondered if somewhere along the way he’d missed a spark between his BFF and brother. Silently, Jonas chided himself for being a bonehead. He would have known. And now, his brother’s heart was completely captured by Izzy.

He went to the barn to grab a grooming kit. Back at the pasture, he asked Clara, “Do you want to help me groom Duke?”

The stallion was in his paddock, leaning over the fence that separated him from the mares.

“Can I?” Clara looked at Sloane, the most excited he’d seen the teen since finding her hiding in his office.

Sloane nodded. “Go for it. Just be careful. He’s a big animal.”

“I will,” Clara agreed. “Which one is Duke?”

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Jonas pointed. “The black horse over there with the white spots on his back.”

“He’s pretty.” She stayed close as he introduced her to the star of the Triple L.

“What kind of horse is he?” Clara stood back while he held out carrots to Duke.

“He’s a Colorado Ranger, what we call Rangerbred.” Jonas patted the big guy’s neck as he practically swallowed the small carrots whole. “Come give him a scratch, so he can get to know you.”

Sloane had followed them as Nathan disappeared into the barn. When Jonas figured Clara was comfortable with the stallion, he gently eased them both through the gate and into the paddock.

Handing her one of the brushes, he began grooming Duke’s back. “Watch what I do, okay? Then you give it a try.”

It took her a minute to get her courage up, but finally, she got close enough to reach out and run the brush down Duke’s side. The stallion stood still. He loved his grooming.

“Are you ready to see the rest of the ranch now?” he asked Clara when they’d finished grooming Duke. She started to circle behind the stallion. “Clara! Stop!” His heart climbed into his throat. Startled, she abruptly went still. He forced himself to speak calmly. “Always come around in front of a horse, not behind. You don’t want to get kicked.”

Clara flushed and backed up. “Sorry.”

“You didn’t know.” Taking a breath, he gestured for her to come to him, then pushed on Duke’s chest to get the horse to back up so Clara could maneuver around the animal safely. Wrapping an arm around her shoulders, they left the paddock. “Horses instinctively kick to protect themselves.”

When he looked up, Sloane was hovering just outside the paddock.

He reassured her, “She’s okay. Duke would not purposely hurt anyone. Clara just has to learn the rules.”

“Of course she does. I do too.” Her voice was a little shaky.

He needed to do a better job of getting back into Sloane’s good graces. “How about I put away the grooming supplies and then meet you in the kitchen? We’ll pack a lunch, then go check on the garden at The Wedding Cottage. You’ll enjoy that, I think, Clara.”

Nathan came from the barn and attached the lead lying over the fence to Duke’s halter. “I’ll take these. Duke and I need to train in the arena on the barrels, anyway.” He grinned. “The three of you have fun.”

The three of them? Exactly what Jonas needed to think about.

In the house, he pulled out peanut butter, jelly, and bread. “You girls make the sandwiches, and I’ll pack up the rest.”

As he packed their lunch, it felt so much like more was happening than friends spending an afternoon going on a picnic together. Sloane had never tried to talk him out of his single status. So, he hadn’t suspected that she was unhappy with their status

quo. He frowned. Now that she'd said something, he had to do something about it, but he wasn't sure what. "Ready?"

Clara nodded. A rare grin lit up her young face.

Sloane smiled at her sister's enthusiasm. "It looks like we are."

"Off we go, then." He loaded them into the utility vehicle and took the meandering dirt road to the cottage while he listened to the girls talk about Duke and his mares.

"Can you teach me to ride?" Clara asked, wiggling in her seat.

She was such an engaging kid. Sloane cast him a curious look. Jonas couldn't say no. Not that he would, anyway.

"How about Saturday?" He turned his gaze back to the road. "I can pick Clara up in the morning. Blake, Malorie, and their kids will be here, and Nathan and Izzy. We're having a family meeting about the rodeo and a barbecue. You can join us when you're done with work, or I can get Blake to drop her off on his way home."

"Can I?" Clara turned to Sloane. "Please?" The teen had only been with her sister one day, and already she was settling in as if they'd grown up together.

He could feel Sloane's assessing gaze on his face before she said, "I guess that will work. When is the rodeo?"

What was she thinking?

"In a couple of weeks." Clara's interest in horses might give him the opportunity he needed to include the teen in his family events.

And Sloane, too. But would going on dates with guys she met on Perfect Match keep her too occupied and away from the Lohmen family activities? He would see about that.

That's where he drew the line. All of his memories included Sloane. His life back then, and even now, would have been empty without his BFF.

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Jonas stopped in the parking area near the cottage. His mom's she-shed, converted into a busy Wedding Cottage business, stood tall and cozy in front of the mountains. The sunshine was warm, and the sounds of summer and the still-blooming garden slowed his thoughts.

The tables and chairs from the last wedding had been put away. Carrying their picnic basket to the garden area, he spread out a blanket beside the beautifully scrolled bench. His eyes on Sloane, he asked Clara, "What do you think?"

"It's so pretty," Clara said softly as she wandered off to smell the roses and investigate the raised beds filled with colorful plants.

Glad to have this moment alone with Sloane, he handed her one of the sandwiches. "Blake and Nathan did a good job of turning the shed into a wedding sanctuary," he conceded. "Mom would have approved."

"All of you did a great job," she said, unwrapping her sandwich and taking a bite.

He had to start somewhere if he was going to salvage his relationship with Sloane. "I know I haven't been fair about you using a dating app. Give it to me straight. How user-friendly is it really?"

"It's fine. Not hard to use." Her brows arched. He took that as a good sign. He'd always been able to smooth over their rough spots by admitting when he'd stepped over the line. She shrugged one shoulder. "But so far, it's a bust."

Jonas wanted what was best for Sloane. He couldn't help where his thoughts took

him. That might not be him. “What happened to Ken?”

She put her sandwich down on the napkin he’d given her. “I haven’t heard from him lately. How about you? Are you dating anyone new?”

That was one of the things he liked most about Sloane. She gave as good as she got. “No. I’ve been too busy with the ranch, moving back to Strawberry Ridge, and making a case for you and Clara to stay together.”

“I don’t think I thanked you for that. Thanks for taking our case.” The stiffness left her shoulders.

“No thanks needed. It’s what friends do, right? Help each other?” Glad that the distance between them seemed to be shrinking, he reached for her hand and felt like he’d won a victory when she didn’t pull back. “I’m just happy you didn’t hire another attorney.”

Her brown eyes filling briefly with regret, she reclaimed her hand and picked up her sandwich. “Tell me about your plans for the rodeo.”

She was right. He always had a plan. After pulling a sandwich out of the basket, he unwrapped it, determined to keep her talking.

“Nathan and Izzy are planning to enter Duke and Grace in the barrel racing category. If Duke can make the fastest time, he’ll be a champion. Even if he makes a good showing, and if we have his DNA results, and we get him registered with the Colorado Ranger Horse Association by then, the Triple L’s financial problems should be on the road to recovery.”

She finished her sandwich. “What’s next? Can we help with anything?”

He hesitated. Almost immediately, he realized it wasn't the right thing to do. Her brows pulled together.

It wasn't that he didn't want her help. In fact, the more time he spent with her, the more he wanted to see her every day. It was just that saving the Triple L was something he and his brothers had to do...

And then he remembered how much Malorie and Izzy had helped. He would never live it down if he kept Sloane out of the game. "All we're doing right now is waiting to get the DNA results back."

"Friends let their friends help, you know," she informed him quietly, as if he didn't already know.

"You're right," he agreed gently, leaving out the part that it was time for him to stop being a dunce. "As soon as there's more to do, you'll be the first one I contact."

"Can we go to the rodeo?" Clara plopped down next to her sister.

Sloane immediately let go of his gaze to look at Clara. "That would be fun, wouldn't it?"

"I've been thinking." Clara took the sandwich Sloane handed her. "If I had my own phone, I could take pictures of this garden"—she made a sweeping gesture with the hand holding the sandwich—"and the horses, and the rodeo."

The teen had spunk, that was for sure. She was almost as adorable as her sister.

Suddenly, Jonas was on shaky ground. Sloane came with a plus-one. And Clara deserved her own family, not just a guy who was considering taking a chance and pursuing a more serious relationship with his best friend.

“Not yet, kiddo. Let’s see how it goes with Ms. Owens tomorrow. Maybe we can think about getting you a phone when you’re fourteen.” Sloane patted Clara’s arm.

“Okay.”

For the rest of their picnic, Sloane seemed lost in her thoughts. There was a time when she would have told him what was on her mind.

When they were ready to return to the main house, he pulled Sloane aside and said gruffly, “I know it’s painful losing your mother, even though you haven’t seen her in years. It’s hard on you and Clara. I just want you to know I’m here for you. For both of you.”

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“I wish I’d had a chance to watch Clara grow up.”

“Tracy might not have told you about Clara, but she didn’t throw the letter she wrote to you away, either. She left it where someone would find it if something happened to her. Maybe that was her way of making sure Clara would find her sister—” He put an arm around her shoulders.

She didn’t answer. Instead, she climbed into the UTV and sat close to Clara.

Taking the long way home, he drove them around the ranch, showing Clara all his favorite places, ending up at the pond with the tall grasses edging the north side. Sloane tried to keep the conversation going, giving him a chance to tell Clara stories of when he and his brothers were kids, helping their dad and mom around the ranch, but he could tell her heart wasn’t in it.

There had to be something he could say or do to make her heart lighter. She caught him glancing her way when he could take his eyes off the road.

“I’m okay, Jonas... really.”

He had to take her word for it.

At the house, she followed Clara. “We’d better get going.”

“Can’t we stay a little longer?” Clara asked.

Sloane shook her head, her gaze glued to his. Before he could ask her to stay for

dinner, she cut him off at the pass. “We have a lot to do to get ready for our meeting with Nora. We’ll see you tomorrow at your office?”

“Sure. I’ll make the arrangements. Say ten in the morning?”

Her chin dipped once. “Perfect. We’ll see you then.”

He didn’t have an argument that might persuade Sloane to stay, so he watched as they loaded into her truck and drove away without her usual wave goodbye.

It was dark by the time he helped Nathan put the horses in their stalls for the night, then checked his notes for the next day when they would meet with the social worker. From everything he’d researched, unless another relative came forward, and he couldn’t see who that would be, Clara would remain with Sloane.

The last thing he checked was his email, where he found a notification from Perfect Match. He arched his brows and opened the email titled Your Profile is Complete.

What did they mean his profile was complete? He hadn’t signed up for the dating app.

Take advantage of our three-day FREE trial.

The message had come into his personal email account. Only his brothers and Sloane used that address. Had Sloane signed him up on the app? Before he could think about deleting the email, he followed the link to a profile with his picture. The name on the page was Jonas Adam.

What the heck?

Sloane wouldn’t have set him up on Perfect Match. Not without asking him. It wasn’t

how she rolled. He would ask her after they finished their CDHS business tomorrow, but he already knew what her answer would be.

That left his brothers and what they'd been whispering about the other day. Blake and Nathan were up to their usual mischief.

Women responding to his profile was not what he needed. No Sloane finding out he had a page on Perfect Match was the last thing he wanted to happen. Not if he was determined to put things right with his former best friend.

Chapter Ten

Clara ending up in a foster home was not going to happen. Before she could concentrate on the meeting with Nora Owens, Sloane had to first decide what to do with her feelings for Jonas. She'd thought she was done with them, but when he'd put his arm around her shoulders and was so understanding about Tracy—more than she'd ever been—her heart had fluttered like a butterfly.

Had Tracy meant for Clara to find the letter that had brought the teen to Sloane?

She'd wanted to break up their friendship because she couldn't stand by and only participate in Jonas's life from the sidelines. Now, she wasn't so sure that's what he was asking her to do. His arm holding her securely to his side, and the sympathetic compassion he'd cocooned her in felt like a door opening, inviting her back in.

Her relationship with Jonas had been easy before he moved back to Strawberry Ridge. She saw him once in a while when he came home or when she went to Denver. For the most part, all she had to do was pretend she didn't have unnerving feelings for the rancher. They would spend a day or two doing the things they both liked. Then he would go back to Denver, or she would return home and the routine of her days, and she would forget, or at least try to forget how much her heart thumped

when they breathed the same air and she daydreamed about what it would be like to kiss her best friend. On the lips. His arms locked around her like unbreakable bands. The more time she spent with him, liking Jonas was a very vanilla way to describe the emotion that was growing in her chest.

She had to put that aside now because what was more important was to make sure she made a home for her baby sister and that Clara knew she was loved.

“You don’t have to tuck me in,” Clara said, biting her lip, an uncertain frown pulling her brows together when Sloane followed her into her room to do just that.

“But I want to.” Sloane put a glass of water on the nightstand. “Is that okay?”

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“I guess so,” Clara relented. Someday, her sister would want to abandon the ritual, but remembering how her dad had folded the covers around her shoulders at bedtime, Sloane intended to hang on to the nightly good night as long as she could.

She sat on the edge of the bed. “Did you have fun today?”

“I had so much fun.” Clara sighed happily, her eyes closing as her breath started to even out.

Sloane leaned over, kissed her temple, and whispered, “Good night, sweet girl.”

“Good night,” Clara whispered back.

Sloane stopped before pulling the door closed to watch Clara slip further into sleep. Jonas would do everything he could to make sure the kid was safe. For that, she would always be grateful. His steadfastness only made her love him more.

The next morning, when she woke up, Sloane was more than ready to fight for what she wanted. For Clara, if not for Jonas. She called the garage to make sure Dean had everything under control.

“Don’t worry,” he said in his gruff way. “We’re good here.”

“I’ll be back to work tomorrow.” She’d told him about Clara when he agreed to fill in while she was gone.

“No rush. You just take care of that young one.”

“Thanks, Dean.”

That’s how it was in Strawberry Ridge. Everyone looked out for each other.

“Are you nervous?” Sloane asked her sister. She’d been too quiet since crawling out of bed and getting dressed.

Clara nodded.

“There’s no need to worry. Jonas is a very good lawyer. He’ll make sure we can stay together.” Sloane had always wanted a sister, and there was no doubt in her mind that Jonas could block any obstacles.

Clara looked up from her cereal. “I like him.”

“He’s a good guy,” Sloane agreed, as bells—the good kind—went off in her head.

Clara pushed her empty bowl away, a smile putting a mischievous spark in her eyes. “Did you ever date him?”

“No!” Sloane almost choked on her coffee. “We’re just friends.” Or were, anyway, if he’d been listening at all.

“But he likes you. I can tell.” Clara was thirteen. What could she possibly know about liking a boy or having stronger feelings for a guy she’d known most of her life?

Sloane took their empty dishes to the sink and when she came back, she said, “Of course I like Jonas. We’ve been best friends since we were in the sixth grade.”

“I can’t believe you never dated.” The kid was too persistent for Sloane’s comfort.

“We went to school dances once in a while, but that was a long time ago.” Sloane looked pointedly at the clock. “We’d better get going. We don’t want to be late.”

At least for now, that was enough to distract Clara and end the conversation. Sloane sighed with relief. Somehow, she didn’t think discussing her likes and dislikes about a certain man was a conversation she should be having with her teenage sister.

Clara grabbed her backpack. They arrived at Jonas’s office right on time. Papers were spread across his desk.

Nora was already there. “Can I talk to Clara for a moment?”

“It’s part of the process,” Jonas said to Sloane before turning back to the social worker. “We’ll be right outside.”

Sloane nodded and hugged Clara, so there would be no question in the teen’s mind that she was wanted. Then she followed Jonas. When the door closed behind them, she faced the man she was counting on to make sure her sister stayed with her in Strawberry Ridge. “I don’t like this. It doesn’t feel right leaving her with Nora on her own.”

He took her hand. A snap of attraction raced up her arm and settled in her chest. “Don’t worry. Nora hasn’t suggested that she’s planning to take Clara back with her. She just wants to make sure Clara won’t run away at the first sign of trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” Sloane broke free, stopping herself from leaning into Jonas just in time. She’d watched the brothers together before they went their separate ways. Family was messy. There would probably be times when she and Clara had difficulties, but that wouldn’t stop her from mending their fences like Jonas and his brothers had.

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He looked at her, his eyes more green than gray. “She might not like your rules or have a hard time adjusting to a new school or have difficulty making new friends. She could feel like she doesn’t fit in.”

Even kids that grew up together ran into trouble. Look what happened to the brothers when their parents died. “So, what’s next?”

“We’ll petition the court to get kinship guardianship. Are there any other family members who might want custody of Clara?”

“Not that I know of. Tracy was an only child. I don’t know anything about Clara’s father. He’s not listed on her birth certificate.”

“That will simplify things for the court.” He rubbed the back of his neck before saying, “There’s something I want to ask you, but now’s not the right time—”

Sloane glanced through the glass door at Nora and Clara. They were still talking.

Old habits were hard to break. Frowning, she looked at Jonas. “What is it?”

“I’m wondering if—” He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at Sloane.

He didn’t get to finish. Nora opened the door. In his office, Clara’s smile stretched from ear to ear.

“Everything’s in order. That leaves signing the rest of my papers, and then I’ll be on my way,” Nora said, apparently happy with the outcome of her conversation with

Clara. “It’ll be up to you to petition the court for guardianship.”

“I’ll take care of that,” Jonas agreed firmly.

All Sloane could think about was that her sister had a home.

They finished up the formalities. Nora shook their hands. “Good luck. If you have any questions or need any help, give me a call.”

“We should celebrate,” Sloane said, the fear that had been riding her shoulders all morning finally sliding away. “How about ice cream at Sally’s?”

Clara wrapped her arms around Sloane’s waist. “I would love that.”

The teen hugged Jonas next. “Good.” He patted her back. “Let’s take the Mustang.”

Clara practically skipped toward the door. “Can I drive?”

Jonas met Sloane’s glance and shook his head before holding the door open. He asked her sister, “Do you have a driver’s license?”

“No, but Mom let me drive all the time. When she wasn’t feeling good, you know?” Clara’s enthusiasm went from high volume to low. Which meant Tracy had been using again.

From experience, Sloane knew it would take a while for the sharp pain of Clara losing her mother to wear off and even longer to realize it was Tracy’s lifestyle that kept her separate from her girls.

“Don’t worry about it, kid. I’ll drive.” Jonas gave a quick tug on her ponytail, then took out his keys.

Clara was quiet, compared to her earlier excitement, but she still had questions about the horses. He parked on the street in front of the ice cream shop. Sloane hung back while her sister checked out all the flavors.

Jonas lingered with Sloane. “You’re worried.”

“Clara doesn’t know Blake and Malorie’s kids. Maybe she won’t be comfortable meeting them tomorrow.”

“We’ll figure it out. Those kids never meet a stranger. She’ll be safe with them. They won’t leave her out.”

We’ll figure it out?As in the two of them? Sloane’s heartbeat picked up.

They got their cones and found an empty table. Jonas had said he would take care of petitioning the court for them. And knowing him, he would make it as easy as possible for her and Clara.

He’d be their guardian. Sloane rolled her eyes at that crazy notion. Clara already had stars in her eyes as the two of them continued their conversation about the Triple L. Jonas told her about Timmy, Reece, and Andee, and how all three loved the pond and how they’d disappeared and had been found there when Timmy had gotten the wrong idea about his dad and him not being able to stay on the ranch.

“They ran away.” Clara straightened. “Just like me.”

“You could say that.” Jonas finished off his ice cream just before Sloane polished off hers.

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Not convinced that running away had been one of her sister's stellar ideas—anything could have happened to her between Greeley and Strawberry Ridge, even while taking the bus—but Sloane was very glad Clara had found her. The three of them, having a treat together like a real family, made her stomach flutter as she realized that there wasn't anything she would like better.

“We'd better go.” She patted her sister's arm. “I thought we could ride the train that goes from Durango to Silverton.”

Clara's eyes grew wide. She quickly asked Jonas, “Can you come too?”

“Sorry, kiddo. I would love to, but I have several clients to see this afternoon. I'll see you tomorrow morning, all right?”

Glad that Jonas was busy, Sloane leaned close to her sister. “I'm looking forward to having some girl time together. I have a LOT of questions to ask,” she exaggerated, hoping that would bring back Clara's excitement for their adventure. “And it's a beautiful ride up the mountainside. I have a spare camera at home you can use if you want.”

“I'd like that.” Her disappointment seemingly forgotten, Clara grinned at Sloane.

“We'd better get going.” Sloane bussed their table. “We'll walk back and get out of your hair. It isn't far.”

“I can drive—”

“That’s okay. We’ll see you in the morning when you pick Clara up.”

Jonas confused her—something that was new. She didn’t know if she should welcome this new side of the man with open arms or keep the distance they had grown used to over the years. She mostly trusted him, but that wasn’t the point. The point was... the more Clara spent time with Jonas, the more she would be forced to, as well. From the day they met, he was the one she didn’t want to take her eyes off of. And the one she couldn’t wait to see every day. The boy she wanted to tell all her exciting news to.

Until she’d signed up on Perfect Match, she’d hidden her feelings well. Maybe too well. She hadn’t told Jonas how she felt. And she hadn’t asked him out on a date. She’d been there for him when he needed her, which, before moving back to Strawberry Ridge, wasn’t often.

Jonas had put his time in with his brothers. He shouldn’t have to feel responsible for Clara too. And there was her biggest fear. Once Clara’s newness wore off and he finished filing her court papers, would his work for other clients take over again, so that he no longer had time for her sister?

They stopped at the house briefly, grabbed the cameras, and took off for Durango.

“What’s your favorite class in school?” she asked, to keep Clara from fidgeting.

Clara turned away from the window. “I like to write stories and draw.”

“So Creative Writing and Art?”

Her sister nodded.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” It was better to get that out in the open right now, rather

than wait for a boy to show up on her doorstep.

Clara wrinkled her nose. “No! They’re all kind of dorky, you know?”

Sloane did know. “Jonas was a geek when he was thirteen. He already knew he wanted to be a lawyer. And he didn’t like to dance. But he didn’t want to miss out on the proms, either.”

“Did you go with him?” Clara had twisted in her seat to look at Sloane.

She didn’t like to go to dances and the proms alone, either. She was glad that Jonas felt the same way. “Yeah, I did.”

“Is that when you started liking him? I can tell you like him a lot,” Clara informed her, a little too smugly.

Sloane stared at the road ahead of her. If she wanted Clara to be open with her, then she had to be open as well. “The first time I realized I liked Jonas, oh man, was... when we were in the seventh grade. We were in the same class and every time the boys called me ‘smarty pants’ or ‘four-eyes,’ he’d step in and tell them to leave me alone.”

“But you don’t wear glasses.”

Sloane tapped the side of her eye. “Contacts.”

“So, then what happened?”

She shrugged. “Nothing.”

“You didn’t ever tell him you liked him?” Clara sounded skeptical.

“Nope.” Amused that her sister was so quick to hit the proverbial nail on the head, Sloane tossed the conversational ball back in her lap. “Have you ever told a boy you liked him?”

“Yuck! No!”

“And there you go. At the time, I thought it was yucky too.”

“But you’re old now. You should tell him before it’s too late.”

“Older. I’m older.” And maybe it was already too late. Sloane laughed, even though Clara had a point about running out of time. “It just wouldn’t work out now. I have the garage, and he has the ranch and horses to make something of. And I also have you. You’re way more important than having some silly boyfriend.”

“That’s dumb.” Clara frowned. “He’s not silly.”

No, he wasn’t. He was... Jonas... her lifelong heartthrob.

“You’re right, but that’s the way it is,” Sloane said steadily, keeping her thoughts to herself.

“I still say you should tell him,” Clara insisted as they pulled into Durango and easily found a parking spot.

Her sister was going to be hard to keep up with, but that didn’t put Sloane off. She grabbed the cameras. “I don’t think so. Let’s get our tickets.”

Clara didn’t argue, thank goodness, just stared at Sloane, looking like her mind was working up a plan to get big sis in trouble with a certain suddenly very friendly friend.

When they found their seats, she pulled out both cameras and taught Clara how to use the older model. The teen was an eager learner and picked up the complexities of photography fast. They took lots of pictures of the train snaking around the bends in the rail, the natural canyons they scooted by, the engines pulling the cars behind them. It was a perfect outing with her sister.

By the time they returned to the station, they were both exhausted, but they'd had fun and hadn't talked about Jonas once. That was all that mattered in Sloane's book.

On the way home, they grabbed tacos for dinner. After they finished eating, Sloane locked up and turned out the lights. Clara went to bed.

"Did you have fun?" Sloane leaned on the doorjamb.

"Yeah..." The kid fell asleep almost before her head hit the pillow. The next morning, Sloane was awakened by an insistent noise coming from the front of the house. She was still in the same position she'd fallen asleep in. The knock came again, louder this time. She glanced at the clock and jumped out of bed.

"Holy moly!" She was late. Pushing her hair off her face, she hurried to the door.

Jerking the door open, as she expected, she found Jonas, his hand raised to knock again. Catching her off guard, he looked perfect in his jeans and short-sleeved shirt that showed off his strong arms. His usual cowboy boots finished off the picture of an incredibly handsome rancher.

Not about to let him see how tempted she was, she spun away from the amusement lighting his eyes and headed back to her room. "Sorry. We slept in." She flung her hand in the direction of the kitchen on her way. "The coffee maker is ready to turn on."

And then she looked down. Oh dear!

It wasn't the first time Jonas had seen her in pajamas. It's just that the older, tatty ones she'd grabbed in the dark last night didn't leave much to the imagination, dang it. It would be nice if she owned a robe, but they made her too hot. If he was going to make a habit of showing up on her doorstep so early in the morning, she should reconsider that and put it on her birthday list.

Heat washed over Sloane, head to toe, as she poked her head into Clara's room. "Clara! Jonas is here. It's time to get up—"

She pushed the door all the way open. Clara's room was empty, her bed made. Sloane checked the bathroom. "Clara?" Dear God! Her heart climbed into her throat. "Jonas!"

"What?" He met her in the hallway. "What's wrong?"

Sloane forgot about her infamous pajamas that didn't leave much to the imagination. Her heart thumped, almost breaking free from her chest. "It's Clara—She's gone!"

Chapter Eleven

Taking Sloane by the hand, Jonas helped her search the whole house. It didn't take long to determine the teen was not there. Sloane was shaking, and he wanted to toss the bacon and eggs he'd eaten earlier.

Back in Clara's room, he wrapped his arms around Sloane and held her tight. "We'll find her, I promise. She couldn't have gone far."

"Maybe she left a note." Sloane pushed out of his arms and found a long shirt to put over her lacking pj's. They were adorable but now was not the time.

Clara hadn't left a message saying where she'd gone.

"I'll check outside." Quickly, he circled the house, front and back, before heading back inside. Sloane was staring out the kitchen window into the backyard. "She's not here."

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“We have to call 911.” She grabbed her phone from the table just as Jonas dug his from his pocket. Her fingers were faster than his. “Hello? I want to report a missing child.”

Tears streaked down her face. Jonas leaned his chest against her shoulder. He didn’t understand it. Clara had been so happy to be with Sloane. Why would she run away?

“She’s thirteen, blonde, has brown eyes—”

Behind him, the front door creaked open. Jonas turned. Clara was standing just inside, her smile fading as she took in her frantic sister.

“She’s here! Thank you! Yes. Thank you.” Sloane put her phone down on the table and marched over to Clara, choking out, “Where have you been?”

Jonas gave them space, figuring the kid’s explanation had better be good. He wasn’t the one she should be worried about, but his heart was still thumping. He hadn’t been that scared since he couldn’t find Blake after he’d told him to never come back to his home.

“I went to get donuts. I thought—” Clara held up a white pastry bag.

Finally, he moved, wrapping his arms around Sloane from behind and saying, close to her ear, “Shh... she’s okay.”

“Why would you go without leaving a note?” Sloane’s voice was watery, but she was starting to calm down. Jonas didn’t release her, wanting her to know he was there if

she needed support.

Clara crossed her arms, the bag bumping against her belly. “On the weekends, I got donuts for my mom for breakfast. It was the only thing I could get her to eat.” The kid switched her gaze to Jonas. “I thought Sloane would want some.”

Sloane stiffened in his arms. “Where did you get the money?”

The teen looked from Jonas to her sister. “Your wallet—”

For the first time, he noticed the small backpack Sloane used for a purse on the couch, her wallet half out.

“Breathe,” he said softly to the woman in his arms.

She must’ve heard him through the panic he could feel starting to ebb. Breathing in, she held out her hand to Clara. “Come sit with me.”

“I’m sorry—I didn’t mean—” Clara took her sister’s hand. Sloane pushed her purse aside. They sat together, knees touching.

“I’m not mad at you. You just scared me to death. And Jonas too.” She glanced at him and then turned back to the teen. “We have to have rules.”

Listening, he went to the kitchen and filled two glasses with water. He put them on the coffee table in front of Sloane and Clara.

“No leaving the house without telling me. And ask before you get into my wallet,” Sloane finished softly.

Clara stared down at her hands. “Mom always needed me to take care of her.”

“That was very grown-up of you, but you don’t have to take care of me.” Sloane gently tilted her sister’s chin so that their gazes met. “All you have to do is be a good kid. Okay?”

Clara nodded.

Sloane held her tight, then picked up the pastry bag and peered inside. “Let’s see what kind of treats you brought home.”

*

Jonas sat on the fence of the outdoor training arena and watched Blake as he gave riding lessons to all the kids, including Clara. The kid was quiet, but seemed to have recovered from her mistake that morning. A natural on horseback, she was riding Angel, a white-spotted chestnut mare, as if she’d been riding all her life.

He hadn’t recovered. If anything had happened to her—His heart was still in his throat. Sloane had done a good job of smoothing out the crisis, but he knew she was in the same place he was. How did they convince Clara that she was the child and they were the parents?

His whirling thoughts came to a dead stop. They were the parents.

Sloane would make a great mother. His mom and dad had been the best, giving their boys the run of the ranch for as long as they could. But when left with Nathan and Blake to take care of, he hadn’t done so well.

Nathan, Izzy, and Malorie joined him. Malorie took pictures with her phone, while Izzy, their marketing guru, snapped photos with a high-end digital camera to get what she wanted to add to the website.

“They’re doing great,” Nathan said, his arms folded on the top rail. “Next year, if they want, they’ll be good enough to compete in the youth events at the rodeo.”

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Jonas was ready to assist in case Blake needed help, but his brother had the kids well in hand as usual, only letting two of them circle the arena at a time. “The rodeo is coming up fast.”

“Will we have Duke’s results by then?” Nathan smoothed out his close-cut mustache and beard.

“It’s going to be close,” he admitted.

In the meantime, all he could think about was Sloane wrapped in his arms as worry tore her apart. Now he understood how his brothers had fallen in love. It was a given that raising a teenager wasn’t always easy, but he didn’t want to see her go through that alone again.

He glanced at his watch. Sloane hadn’t wanted to go to work, but Dean needed her help. From where he sat, he could see the last stretch of the drive leading to the Triple L that ended in the parking area in front of the barn.

“I don’t suppose you know anything about my profile ending up on the same dating app that Sloane uses?” he asked Nathan.

“Yup.” Nathan didn’t bother to hide his grin. “Look at Timmy go. He’s getting better every time he rides, don’t you think?”

He’d known it had to be his brothers. Jonas pressed his lips together. “What are you and Blake up to?”

Nathan turned toward him, one arm stretched across the top rail of the fence. "It's your turn, big brother. Don't think that we didn't notice how you played matchmaker with us. You weren't that subtle." Before he could admit the accusation was true, Nathan stopped him. "Don't get me wrong. We wouldn't change a thing, but what comes around goes around, dude, and you are not headed in the right direction."

"What are you talking about?" Jonas drew his brows together, half afraid he had an idea where this conversation was heading.

Sloane's truck was barreling down the road. Nathan saw it too. He gestured toward the Ford. "I don't understand why, but that woman loves you."

"No, she doesn't." Jonas straightened. Nathan didn't know she was on the fence about being friends. "We're just friends."

Her reliance on him that morning made his chest swell and was a good indication that she might have changed her mind. Unknowingly, she'd shown him what he'd been missing all these years while he was pursuing a law career that had taken him away from Strawberry Ridge.

"I didn't know you were that blind, Jonas. Before you talk yourself into believing you're only friends, maybe you should take Sloane on a real date, with candlelight and all the trimmings that go along with it. End with a kiss when you drop her off at the end of the night. You'll be surprised to find out how you really feel about your friend." The conviction in his brother's voice surprised Jonas.

Nathan should know. Until he met Izzy, he'd been a loner who preferred his own company.

Duke stopped beside him in the middle of Nathan's speech. He looked up to find Blake leaning toward them with his arm on the saddle horn. "I couldn't have said it

better.”

“So, you boys colluded and set up a profile for me?”

“It wasn’t hard,” Blake admitted. Nathan nodded.

He was too old to be brawling with his brothers. Suddenly curious, he asked, “What do you suggest I say to Sloane?”

“How about, will you go out with me.” Blake proposed with a grin that said Jonas was well and truly caught.

The slam of the truck’s door stopped him from telling his brothers what they could do with their interference. Sloane finding his profile on her dating app would probably not be good.

She joined them, a little breathless, as though she’d been in a hurry. Her gaze latched onto Clara. She took a deep breath. “Hey, guys. How’s the riding lessons going?”

“Great,” Blake said with a smirk at Jonas, then pulling the reins to the side, guided Duke back to his students.

Jonas got down from his perch on the fence and asked quietly, “You doing okay?”

“I’m fine.” She struggled to smile but got there finally.

He nudged her arm, distracting her from watching Clara on Angel. “How about we get the barbeque started?”

“Okay.” She waved at her sister, who waved back before returning her attention to Blake and the instructions he was giving.

Clara was used to being the parent to her mother's needs. It would take a while for her to become the kid in her and Sloane's relationship. If he could, he wanted to help with that transition.

They walked toward the back of the house in silence, with his arm draped over her shoulder, until Jonas couldn't stay quiet any longer. "Everything at work okay?"

"Busy," she said, her mind clearly somewhere else.

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Hoping to get her to talk, he snugged her closer under his arm. “I could live without going through this morning again.”

“Me too,” she said emphatically. “I understand what Clara was thinking, but I’m going to have nightmares about not being able to find her for a while.” She pulled him to a stop, her cheeks turning pink. “I’m glad you were there.”

“I’ll always be here for you,” he promised, in case she’d forgotten. It was time to change the subject. “Did Clara like the train ride?”

“She had a good time using my old digital camera. She took more pictures than I did.” Sloane spun around and walked backward a few steps, but he knew she couldn’t see her sister in the corral on the other side of the barn. She reminded him, “You started to ask me something, but then Nora was done talking to Clara.”

“I got my answer, so it doesn’t matter now.” On the back porch, he got the grill started.

“What answer?”

Jonas shrugged. What the heck? If his name popped up in her inbox, it wouldn’t be a secret much longer. He wouldn’t put it past his brothers to send the first message. “Blake and Nathan put my profile on Perfect Match.”

She studied him for a stretched-out minute before her confusion cleared. “You thought it was me!”

“No.” Her brows shot up in disbelief. Dear Lord, she was quick. “Not for long, anyway. You wouldn’t do that behind my back.”

Her hands balled into fists. “You’re right about that, buddy.” She sputtered for breath. “I’m not that desperate.” She caught her breath. “I can’t believe you thought it was me.”

“It was dumb, I know. Nathan and Blake think we’d make a good couple. They’re happy, so they want us to be happy.” No way was he about to tell her that Nathan thought she was in love with him or that he was starting to hope she was. Still—“Would it be terrible if we went on the occasional date?”

“Why?”

At least she didn’t immediately say not going to happen.

“We’ve known each other since the sixth grade. What more do we need to find out?” She slipped from beneath his arm and slid her hands into her back pockets. Except for that morning, she didn’t trust his motives anymore. He was starting to think... rightfully so.

Before he could answer, Malorie and Izzy came from inside the house, carrying paper plates, cups, napkins, and plastic silverware. They put everything on the picnic table that had already been covered with a flowery tablecloth.

On the way back into the house, they gave him matching cheeky looks. So, they were in on the Perfect Match thing too.

As he took care of cooking the meat, the table filled up with all the things that went along with hamburgers and hot dogs. Jonas tried not to appreciate how well the three women got along. Sloane fit into his family like a familiar, warm glove.

After they filled their plates, the adults sat around the fire pit while the kids occupied the table.

“What happens if we don’t have Duke’s DNA results in time to register him with the association before the rodeo starts?” Blake asked, his fork hovering over a mound of potato salad.

Given the amount of time and money they had left to keep the Triple L in the family, they’d already taken on all the side hustles they could. Restarting their dad’s breeding program with Duke as the primary stallion was not their last hope, but almost.

“Then we’ll come up with another plan.”

“Clara and I can help too,” Sloane said, giving him a look that discouraged him from excluding them.

He got the message. He’d been there for her. She had every intention of being there for him. That was not a point he would argue with her. He nodded. The truth was that he was beginning to feel like he was the desperate one. The woman was something else. How was she still single? Wondering if he could steal a kiss, he rose and walked toward Sloane with nothing but that one goal in mind.

As he reached her, someone came around the side of the house.

Jonas did a double take. Julieann? What was she doing here?

“Jonas. I thought I’d try to catch you at home and heard voices—” She stopped, taking in the family gathering.

He pulled Sloane to her feet. “I heard you were heading back to Denver.”

“Not yet. I wanted to see you first.”

He looped Sloane’s arm through his. She tried to break free without making a big show of it, but Jonas only smiled and tucked her closer. “Julieann, I believe you’ve met my fiancée.”

Julieann’s eyes narrowed briefly before she lifted her chin and smiled brightly back. “Yes, we’ve met.”

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“What are you doing?” Sloane hissed between her teeth so only he could hear.

He leaned close and whispered in her ear. To his uninvited guest, it would look like he was taking a little nibble. “Trying to get Julieann to go away?”

“I’ve come at a bad time. Charlie has a proposal he wants me to present, so I do have to head back.” Julieann spun on her heel and disappeared the way she’d come. A moment later, he heard the sound of a car speeding away.

“Ow!” Jonas moved away from Sloane’s pinching fingers. “Why did you do that?”

“As if you don’t know, Jonas Lohmen! Ooh, I could kick you in the shins!”

“Please don’t,” he asked sincerely and then couldn’t resist grinning at the spunky woman.

She retreated to the house. When he went to follow, she held up both hands like stop signs. “I do not want to talk to you right now.”

Usually, it was a good day when a man asked a woman to marry him, except he hadn’t asked Sloane to be his wife. It probably would have been better to check in with the angry lady storming away from him before he announced to his family and the world at large that they were engaged.

He would have followed her, anyway, if Nathan hadn’t slowed him down by slapping him on the shoulder. “You had us worried for a while, big brother. Never thought you’d have the guts to ask Sloane to marry you.” Nathan leaned around him to watch

the screen door bang behind Sloane. “Doesn’t look like she took it well.”

That was putting it mildly. The question was, could he convince her his strange way of asking wasn’t about making sure Julieann knew his heart was already taken, but really about realizing that he wasn’t sure he could live without having his best friend in his life every single day?

That night, after everyone was gone, the house was quiet. Nathan and Izzy had gone to the old Blue Moon Theater. For a distraction, Jonas sat at his desk, checking email and the online news.

Sloane had left without speaking to him, and before he could catch her. He was definitely in the doghouse, but he wouldn’t change a thing about pretending that Sloane was his fiancée. The shock on her face was priceless. Unplanned, it had been a long time since he’d surprised the startling woman. It gave him an idea.

He checked out Sloane’s profile on Perfect Match. Jonas didn’t know how many responses she’d gotten, but... her picture... was sweet and sassy at the same time. What man could resist?

I’m a girl who’s a mechanic. I know, right? Not normal. I love classic trucks. I live in small-town USA. I’m not interested in a short-term commitment. And I’m more of an experimental cook. If you like lengthy conversations over a surprise dinner, long walks in the mountains, and spending time with family, reach out. Let’s see if we’re a potential match.

...holy moly!

He quickly switched to his profile to see what his brothers had written.

The picture was one he didn’t remember, which meant Izzy probably took it. It didn’t

make him look like the old man he'd been feeling like lately. That, at least, was something.

Rancher, horse breeder, loner, looking for a woman who wants more than to climb up the social ladder.

Loner? Was that how his brothers saw him? Good grief. He was about to edit the not-so-flattering description when he decided to leave it. He wasn't looking for dates. He just wanted to reach out to Sloane and prove he wasn't a dud. That a pretend engagement could perhaps lead to the real thing. That hadn't been his plan originally, but now it was all he could think about.

He returned to her page and typed in the message box. I like lengthy conversations over dinner, long walks in the mountains, and spending time with family. Would you like to meet at Aaron Park at the food cart that sells pizza by the slice? You name the date and time, and I'll be there ~Jonas.

There was no point in hiding that the message was from him, since she could simply look at his page and figure it out.

He sank back into his chair, uncertain that she would be intrigued enough to look past the fact that she already knew the good and bad about who he was.

She would make some lucky guy the perfect wife. The image of her holding hands with a stranger, rushing home to have dinner with the man, having babies with anyone else but him—It tied his gut in knots.

Since they were already engaged, so to speak, maybe his lifelong friend would give him a second chance if he promised to love her to the end of their days together.

Chapter Twelve

Sloane decided they would take the next day off to get Clara ready to start school. And to ease her nerves. Jonas pretending they were engaged, on top of thinking her sister had run away, was almost too much.

All these years, she'd waited for him to notice they had something special. Something more than just being BFFs. So, what does he do? Present her to Julieann and his family as his fiancée without even asking.

What the heck was he playing at? She'd said goodbye to his brothers and their families, but not to Jonas. She needed a break from the rancher. Today was that day.

Her dad called, for a moment taking her mind off Jonas's shenanigans. He'd gotten on the plane in Hawaii to head home as planned. He should arrive late afternoon to meet and spend some time with Clara.

Her sister was uneasy about meeting Sloane's dad. To take her mind off her worry, Sloane took Clara with her to air out his house. Back home, she had Clara set up his favorite board game, suspecting the two would get along just fine. Her dad was one of those guys who never held a grudge—in any case, not against Tracy for breaking up their family and then ghosting them for all the years since she left. He certainly wouldn't hold their mother's problems against the teen.

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“Do you think he’ll like me?”

Tugging her sister into a hug, Sloane reassured the teen, “He’ll love you!” She held her away at arm’s length. “Anyway, you’re fun. Easy to get along with.” Clara’s lips twitched. “And he’ll think you’re charming.”

Clara snorted. “Jonas is charming. I’m just me.”

“Well, Just Me. I love you”—She did!—“and I’m glad you’re staying here with me.”

“I’m glad too,” Clara whispered, a faint blush rising to her cheeks. “You’re not mad at me about yesterday?”

“Absolutely not. Already forgotten.” Almost, anyway.

If she could get Jonas off her mind... She’d watched him with the kids yesterday, how he joined in their fun and made them laugh. He’d moved so fast when it looked like a horseshoe was about to hit Timmy on the head.

The man was impressive. And handsome. And gads... so hard to forget. He blended in with his brothers and their growing families as if he’d never left Strawberry Ridge to become a lawyer. And then he ruined everything by pulling that stupid stunt.

“What do you think about checking out the school’s website to see what you’ll need? We can go shopping before Dad gets here,” she suggested as she whisked eggs for scrambled egg sandwiches.

“I’d like that.” Clara nodded. “Can I help make lunch?”

“Sure. You tackle toasting the bread while I scramble the eggs.”

It was late by the time they got home after scouring Strawberry Ridge for school supplies. She’d gotten her sister everything on their list, including some clothes. It turned out Clara loved vintage, secondhand outfits. Even Sloane had found a thing or two she liked.

They beat her dad to the house by twenty minutes, just long enough to put their purchases away.

Sloane answered the door and was wrapped in a big, bear hug before he leaned back, asking, “So where’s this little sister I’ve been hearing so much about? I want to meet her.”

“Hi,” Clara said shyly from behind Sloane. She was wearing her favorite of the clothes she’d gotten, a tee with patchwork lace down the front and on the capped sleeves and jeans that Sloane thought could use a patch or two, but that her sister liked just as they were.

Her dad held out his hand. “I’m Sloane’s dad. You can call me Ron if you like.”

Her dad had never met a kid he couldn’t win over, and true to form, so it went with Clara. By the time they’d finished the taco salad she made for dinner, her father knew everything there was to know about her sister. They were laughing as if they’d been choosing letters for their Scrabble game for years.

“Come play with us, Sister,” her dad invited.

“You two go ahead without me. I want to clean up the kitchen and take a moment to

water the plants out back.”

Clara jumped up. “I’ll help you.”

“That’s okay. You play Scrabble with Dad.”

For a second, the room went silent as they both realized what she’d said. Clara looked at Ron, her slender shoulders slumping.

As usual, her father saved the day. “You can call me Dad if you want. I would like that.”

“Really?” Clara straightened, hope flashing across her young face.

He winked. “Really. Now come sit down and see if you can beat an old man at his favorite game.”

“You’re not old,” Clara declared.

Laughing, he said, “We’ll see if you still think that when we’re finished with this game.”

Clara’s only response was a disbelieving snort that warmed Sloane’s heart.

This was exactly what she wanted, not the pretend fiancée gig Jonas had sprung on her. A family that cooked together played games in the evening after dinner. Generations that would rather spend time together than do anything else was what made her happy.

Her dad won the Scrabble game. He always did. Clara graciously conceded and hugged him as he left.

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“Are you ready for school tomorrow?” Clara nodded and yawned. Sloane went around, turning off the lights. “Off to bed with you, then.”

“Good night.” Clara paused before hugging Sloane. “I had fun today. Will you tuck me in?”

“Of course.” When she had her sister sandwiched in like a burrito, Sloane kissed her forehead. “Good night, sweetie. I’ll see you in the morning.”

The house quickly went quiet. It’d been a long day. Tomorrow would be even longer, with the teen starting school and the busy schedule at the garage. Her dad had easily been roped into picking Clara up after school.

Thinking about closing her dating profile—she just didn’t have the time, or the inclination, to keep dating right now while having to learn parenting skills and before she broke off her pretend engagement with Jonas—she decided tonight was the time.

Booting up her computer, she pulled up her profile. About to delete her page, she noticed she had a message from someone named Jonas. Her heart skipped a beat before she firmly put her foot down. There had to be more than one Jonas in the world, and even in Colorado.

She clicked on the message.

I like lengthy conversations over dinner, long walks in the mountains, and spending time with family. Would you like to meet at Aaron Park at the food cart that sells pizza by the slice? You name the date and time, and I’ll be there. ~Jonas

Her breath caught. Sloane stared at her screen for a long time before moving her hands to the keyboard, then pulling them back again. At the ranch, she vowed never to speak to the man again. That included chatting with him on a dating app.

She clicked on his page and fell into Jonas's intense hazel gaze. Swallowing hard, she went back to his message.

She stared at the words on the screen.

What did it say about her that after she'd spent years pining for the guy with no acknowledgment of anything personal from Jonas other than friendship, she was now his pretend fiancée, so he could convince the other woman he wasn't available? She'd been dreaming about him for so long and what it would be like to go on a real date with Jonas. Could she say no? She wasn't ready to stop being mad at the dude. So, yeah, she could say, no thanks!

She quickly typed the words.

With her cursor hovering over the delete button, for some crazy reason, she couldn't click the mouse and be done with it. Closing the app instead, she shut down her computer without deleting her profile.

The next morning, still wondering what she was going to do about Jonas, she took a nervous Clara to school, where they found Andee and Reece waiting for them at the front of the school. Her sister's nerves wore off while Malorie's kids stayed with them through the enrollment process and then promised to meet up with her for lunch.

Relieved, she put all the craziness behind her and went to work. It was good that Dean was there to help with the overflow they'd packed in from the day she'd taken off.

She was almost done replacing a faulty starter in an Explorer when he tapped her elbow. “Sloane, there’s a lady here who’s insisting that she knows you. She wants to talk to you.”

Sloane put her tools down, and pulling the rag from her back pocket, wiped her hands. She had a feeling and hoped she wasn’t right... “Where is she?”

“In the customer reception area.” He leaned under the hood. “I can finish this up for you.”

“Thanks.”

She found Julieann where he’d left her. The socialite was like the proverbial bad penny that kept coming back. Sloane tried for polite interest, but her words didn’t come out that way. “Weren’t you heading back to Denver? Dean says you want to talk?”

Julieann held out a cup of coffee. “I’m headed back today. My brother wants my help with his pet project. Is there somewhere private we can talk?”

Thinking about the line of vehicles waiting for repair, Sloane looked at the roomful of waiting customers. The sooner she got Julieann on her way, the sooner she could be done with Jonas’s silly charade and get her life back to normal. Whatever that looked like these days.

“Come into my office. It’s not much, but it is private.” Taking the coffee Julieann held out, Sloane led the way, then cleared the spare chair so her visitor would have a place to sit. She leaned against the door after closing the noise from the garage out. “What’s up?”

“I just wanted to say I’m sorry for barging in on your engagement party and to offer

my congratulations.”

Sloane straightened. “Thanks.”

Before she went through the door, Julieann took Sloane’s left hand and rubbed her ringless finger before she could snatch it away. “I’m surprised Jonas is engaged. You don’t seem like his type.”

“Why? Because I’m a mechanic and he’s a lawyer?”

“No. It’s nothing like that.” She let go of Sloane’s hand. “I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but he likes his women sophisticated and on the fast track.”

“I see.” Okay, that wasn’t her. She’d never met one of his women, so she couldn’t judge his type. “Thanks for stopping by.”

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“Good luck,” Julieann said, and left.

Sloane sighed heavily. Troubles typically came in threes, so she shouldn't be surprised by Julieann's visit. First, it was thinking that Clara had run off. Then, Jonas pretending they were engaged. And now Julieann, doing... what? Trying to warn her?

Jonas likes his women sophisticated and on the fast track.

No wonder they'd only been friends all these years. Sophisticated and on the fast track were not words that anyone ever used to describe her. And if the worst that anyone could say about her was that she wasn't sophisticated or on the fast track, that wasn't so bad.

She might have feelings for the man, but that didn't mean she had to try to be someone she wasn't. Between Julieann and Perfect Match, she was definitely batting zero.

So what? She had a life to live with her dad and Clara, and live it she would, without apology.

No more dreaming of what it would be like to marry Jonas. No more thinking they would be perfect together. Her heart was NOT broken.

From now on, she would start living life on her own terms.

The next day, she got a message from Jonas on her profile. “Change your mind?” She didn't answer, hoping he would get the hint and go away.

The day after that, after school and when she was done at the garage, her dad cornered her in the kitchen as they watched Clara planting the strawberry plants in the backyard he'd helped her pick out.

"She's settling in nicely," he said, laying his arm across Sloane's shoulders. "But you're not happy. What's going on?"

"I'm fine," she said, leaning her hip against the counter. Her gaze lingered on her sister, and she wished she could find the same peace of mind Clara seemed to have found after coming to live with her in Strawberry Ridge.

Her dad turned her to face him. "Fine isn't good enough for my little girl. Talk to your old man."

"I'm not your little girl anymore, Dad." It was nice to have him worrying about her, even though he didn't need to. She would figure this out. "I love you, Dad, but there's nothing to talk about."

"Okay. I'm here if you need to use me as a sounding board."

That was the problem, wasn't it? The only sounding board she wanted was the one man she'd decided she couldn't have. She'd spent the last few days trying to figure out how to get past the fact that Jonas hadn't offered her the real thing. There was only one way to deal with that. His announcing their fake engagement only confirmed what she already knew.

After her dad left and Clara had gone to bed, she pulled up Perfect Match and answered Jonas's second message. "Sorry, I have too much work at the garage, and there's Clara too. Oh, and by the way, Julieann stopped in at the garage. She's going back to Denver, so you can break off our engagement. See you around."

She hit send, then deleted her profile and went to bed, pretty sure a good night's sleep was completely out of the question.

Chapter Thirteen

Unable to shrug off his disappointment or make sense of Sloane's "See you around," Jonas stared at the computer screen. What if he didn't want to break off their engagement? Okay, supposed engagement?

He'd been momentarily out of his mind and rash when he'd taken the bull by the horns and announced to everyone that he and Sloane were engaged without first asking the lady if she would be willing to play along. His excuse—not a good one—had been to get Julieann to accept there was no him and her. Thinking back on his reckless action, the only thing on his mind was keeping Sloane... and Clara... close and under his wing, so he could take care of them.

Sloane was so independent, she wouldn't have gone for that. The only time she'd let him help her was when they thought Clara had run off.

He loved Sloane, but if he told her that, she was mad enough after his stunt not to believe him.

Jonas focused on the screen. She couldn't possibly mean she didn't want to see him at all. If that was true, how could he change her mind?

Frustrated, Jonas stepped away from his computer and went down the stairs to grab a soda from the fridge. He couldn't risk losing Sloane. For the first time since the sixth grade, it felt like they weren't on the same page. Had he missed something along the way?

A note waited for him on the kitchen counter by the coffee maker.

Blake is joining us for breakfast tomorrow morning to talk about our plans for the rodeo. It starts in a week. He'll be here at eight. ~Nathan

He tossed the piece of paper back on the counter. If he wanted to maximize every reasonable opportunity to save the ranch, he had to keep to the plan. If they could pull off a win in the barrel racing event, Duke would make a name for himself, and they could count on getting other ranchers raising Rangerbred horses to show an interest in the Triple L's breeding program.

After all this time, it had to be Sloane who made his heart ache. How could he have not known that she was just as important as the ranch?

He rifled through the mail Nathan had left next to the note, checking to see if he'd gotten a response from the DNA lab, and came up empty. They couldn't register Duke with the Colorado Ranger Horse Association without DNA proof that he was a direct descendant of one of the two foundation stallions, MAX#2 and/or PATCHES#1. And without his sire, Duke's Pride's, pedigree papers, the only route of proof open to them was the DNA results.

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He had a backup plan. His brothers wouldn't like it, but he had a suspicion that Blake did too. Nathan's plan was Duke. Always had been. Or maybe Bella and Duke's foul if it was a colt. The problem with that was the little one wouldn't mature fast enough to save the Triple L.

That left the rodeo competition and the DNA testing and somehow merging them.

His dad had given up a lot when he let his gambling debts become more than he could handle. Jonas stared out the kitchen window at the ranch he loved. He would never risk everything like his father had.

That included Sloane and Clara. He'd made his mistakes along the way—not understanding that his feelings for Sloane ran deeper than mere friendship, not staying when his mother needed him to be there for her, kicking Blake off the ranch, then taking sixteen years to bring his brother home. That was not any different from his dad's gambling habit. Both caused the people they loved pain.

He'd thought his brothers were crazy for being slow about acting on their feelings for the loves of their lives. And now, here he was making a mess with Sloane.

He slapped the mail on the counter where he'd found it and took the stairs two at a time up to his room. He would fix that. All he had to do was come up with the right words to change her mind.

Turning on his computer, he went straight to her profile page... and got an error message. He tried again. It was still gone. She'd deleted her page.

From experience, he knew that once Sloane's temper fired up, it took a whole lot to bring her around. Like the time when he'd promised to take her to a musical play for her thirtieth birthday. He'd been busy with a case and somehow forgotten what day it was. When she got there, she'd walked into the middle of a pop-up poker game at his apartment. She'd turned right around and headed back to the hotel she usually stayed at when she came to Denver.

Nothing he said could stop her. He remembered her disappointment as she stared at him and said, "It's not so much that you forgot, Jonas, it's just that... maybe one of these days you'll get your priorities straight."

It had taken a bunch of her favorite flowers delivered the next morning and trading the tickets in for the next night to get into her good graces again. This time, he probably needed more than daisies and tickets to a play to make things right between them.

Priorities. Six years later, he still didn't have it together. The same way that his dad hadn't been able to keep on top of his impulses. He was just like the old man, something he never wanted to be. Yet, here he was.

He did not sleep easy that night.

See you aroundsounded too dang final, but it could also mean that he could show up unexpectedly, bearing her favorite chicken burrito from the food carts. If Sloane wouldn't come to him, he would go to her, bearing gifts she couldn't refuse.

And there was Clara. Sloane hadn't said he couldn't be friends with her sister or that he couldn't still handle the kid's court case. That, at least, was something.

Before starting breakfast for his brothers, he texted Sloane. "What are you doing today?"

“Working.”

Okay. “I’ll bring your favorite burrito for lunch.”

“Thanks, but I won’t get a lunch break today. Too many cars to fix.”

Before he could text back, Nathan and Blake came in, and their breakfast meeting was on.

They were halfway through the stack of pancakes he’d made when Blake said, “I got an offer on the Sedona house.”

“You’re not thinking of selling it, are you?” Nathan asked, laying his fork on his empty plate, the tines swimming in the maple syrup that was left.

“Maybe. We”—Blake indicated the three of them—“can use the money.”

Blake’s backup plan. Since they were going there, now was the perfect time to disclose his own. Nathan wasn’t going to like it. “I’m putting my condo in Denver on the market.”

“Let’s take this discussion into the living room.” As Jonas expected, Nathan pressed his lips into a disapproving line. Carrying his coffee, he led the way and sat in the overstuffed chair closest to the fireplace. “I don’t approve of you guys pouring tons of money into the ranch. If we had no other choice, I guess that would be one thing. And yes, the Triple L is still teetering on the edge of financial viability, but we’re getting close to making the ranch pay for itself.”

Knowing that all three of them were their mother’s sons—decisive, fiercely independent and loyal, tough enough to fight their way through the worst—Jonas hadn’t been able to tell Blake and Nathan before he moved back to Strawberry Ridge,

especially Nathan while he was healing from his injury, that he'd intended all along to sell all his assets in Denver if that's what was required to keep the property in the family. He would have had a humungous fight on his hands.

Moving property was typically too slow. Selling real estate wouldn't necessarily be the immediate answer to their cash flow problem, depending on how much they came away with, but it was a place to begin.

He couldn't force Blake and Nathan to use the money he might make from the sale of his condo. He knew his brothers. They would insist on matching him dollar for dollar. If he were in their boots, he would feel the same.

He made his argument, anyway. "Consider this," he said to Nathan. "All the years when Blake and I were gone, you were here, working the ranch. I sent money when I could, but you can't tell me it even came close to being a living wage for you. You never took a salary. You just made do."

"I've done okay," Nathan said in a defensive tone that did not encourage any argument. He grumbled at Blake, "You need the Sedona money for your family."

Blake came right back. "Don't you worry about my family. We're fine."

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Nathan had already sunk every penny he could find into the Triple L. Jonas didn't want to poke at his brother's slow-simmering anger by suggesting he and Blake bail them out. Mostly because there was no guarantee he and Blake, even with his current offer, could sell their property in time to pay off the bank loan.

Blake leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and stared at Jonas. "What are you thinking?"

He sighed heavily, eyeing his brothers steadily. "I don't want to leave the Triple L." Despite everything at the end, he would bet their dad hadn't wanted to sell off parts of the place, either. "And I know you guys don't want that, either. We're awfully close to pulling the ranch out of the hole. If we let it ride for now and stick to the plan, we could come out of this with the Triple L above water. But if our plan doesn't work, Nathan, you have to promise you won't let your pride get in the way."

Nathan gave a sharp nod. "We won't lose the ranch. We've come too far to lose it now."

"I agree," Blake inserted. "What's next?"

"We wait to hear from the lab," Jonas said. "We probably can't rush them, but I'll call tomorrow to see where they are in the process."

Blake rose to lean on the fireplace mantel. "And if we don't get the results by the time the rodeo starts?"

"We'll hang in there." Jonas joined him and clapped his brother on the shoulder. "We

agree, then. We hope that Duke and Grace place well in the barrel racing competition, and we spread the news that we're in the process of starting a new Colorado Rangerbred breeding program."

"That's taking a big risk," Blake reminded them.

"Maybe," Nathan agreed. "But the idea is sound. Izzy is making flyers to give out before and at the rodeo, promoting the Triple L, The Wedding Cottage, and all the riding and training lessons the ranch has to offer. It wouldn't be too hard to add a paragraph about breeding Rangerbreds."

"Are you going to have the kids pass out the flyers? I can ask Clara to help."

Blake nodded. "Good idea."

His brothers took off. Jonas had a week before the rodeo started to get back on Sloane's good side—time enough to draw up a petition to the court in Durango. CDHS had already approved physical custody. He didn't think getting kinship guardianship for Clara would be a problem. Like all legal things, it would just take time for all the steps involved.

He'd let Sloane know once he submitted the petition. In person. Hopefully, on a day when she couldn't use being busy as an excuse to hold him off.

At the office, he called the lab. They assured him the results would be in the mail by the next Monday, only two days before the rodeo started. The worst-case scenario would be that the results didn't get to him until the barrel competition was completed. He would deal with that if it worked out that way.

Filing Sloane's petition for kinship guardianship was a little more complex, but the bottom line was that from the time of filing to the hearing was usually three-to-five

weeks. Good news he couldn't wait to share with Sloane. He missed his easy relationship with his best girl. He wanted that back and more.

After filing the petition, he took a break and walked the few blocks to Wolfe River to clear his head. The river ran west to east through Strawberry Ridge. An empty bench drew Jonas into the park that bordered the river's edge. The late summer months' temperature was perfect, and the sun bright overhead. Ducks quacked for scraps of bread, while delicious aromas from the food court just down the way made his stomach rumble.

He'd been mad at his parents for leaving him in charge of his rowdy brothers when he was barely twenty-one. Hard to admit, but it was true. Then, he failed his first test right out of the gate when he sent Blake away for a mistake that any of them could have made. He told his brother never to come back. Fortunately, Blake had met Timmy's sister, and together, they'd made a life before she'd passed too. And then he met and married Malorie. He was happy.

He and Sloane could be happy too. If he could convince her to talk to him.

He got in line at the Burrito Shack and ordered two chicken burritos. Women loved flowers, holding hands while they talked, and promises from their guy that everything would be okay. If he did nothing else, Jonas vowed to make sure that Sloane would know she could trust him, even when he did something crazy, like pretending they were engaged. No more taking the low road when the high road was just as accessible.

He checked the time on his phone, and as he was about to let her know he was on his way, he changed his mind. Better to surprise her and insist she take a break for lunch. Once she saw her favorite food, she wouldn't be able to make excuses not to join him.

He'd always wanted to be her friend first and anything else second. It was time to put a stop to that.

He picked up his Mustang at the office and drove the short distance to Michaels' Garage. Sure enough, Sloane had a vehicle in the air, working on he didn't know what. Other than maintenance, car repair was Greek to Jonas.

"Hi. I brought lunch." He held out the bag he carried. "Your favorite. Chicken burritos."

"I'm not talking to you, Jonas." She stared at him for a long minute, then waved her hand at the hybrid truck she was working on. "I have a lot to do on this one. I don't have time to stop for lunch."

"You have to—" He was about to say she had to talk to him because they were best friends, but that wouldn't earn him a conversation. "Fifteen minutes, I promise. You don't want to burn out. And you can munch on what's left for the rest of the day."

Wiping her hands on the ever-present rag, she reluctantly gave in, probably not because of his winning smile, but... he heard the growl in her stomach and smothered a victory smile. "Okay, fifteen minutes, that's all."

"Let's eat at the table in the back garden." He handed Sloane the bag of burritos, then poked his head into the waiting area. "Dean, I'm taking the boss out back for a lunch break."

Phone pressed between his shoulder and ear, Dean waved him away.

When she was in high school, Sloane had taken a horticulture class. Her dad had encouraged her to put what she learned to use in a patch of grass behind the garage. He caught up with her at the round table under the cover of a gazebo that had been

added since. Potted plants bloomed all around.

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Sloane had their lunch out of the bag and sat, staring at the still-wrapped burritos.

He sat across from her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” she said without looking at Jonas.

A sharp jab hit him in the chest. Now was not the time to back off. If he didn’t get her to open up, he had a sick feeling she wouldn’t give him another chance. “It doesn’t look like nothing.”

“I’m mad at you, okay? Is that what you want to hear?” She didn’t shout. Instead, she pasted a smile on her face that didn’t make him feel any better.

“I know. And I’m sorry. I acted without thinking it through or understanding how you would feel. I won’t do that again.”

“Make sure that you don’t.” She met his gaze. “So, how’s your day been so far?”

He unfolded the wrap around his burrito. “I had a breakfast meeting with my brothers—”

“You cooked?” She took a bite of her food, and after he nodded, said, “That sounds delicious.”

“I checked on Duke’s DNA test. And—”

“Any news?” she asked, putting her burrito down and leaning toward him on her

elbows. She had a stain of oil down one shoulder of her coveralls. The faint smell mixed with the Mexican scent from their food and the bouquet of her flowering garden.

At least she was talking.

“The results will be mailed sometime next week.” He mirrored her posture. “And I filed the petition for your kinship guardianship of Clara.”

Finally, her beautiful dark eyes lit up as their conversation lost its strain. “That’s great. How long do we have to wait?”

“A court appointment is usually scheduled three-to-five weeks after the petition is submitted, so until sometime in late October-ish.” Along with moving him to Strawberry Ridge, bringing Sloane lunch had been his best idea in a long while. “Listen, I need some help.”

Picking up her burrito, she leaned back and took another bite. Her brows came together. If she said the words out loud, they couldn’t have been plainer. Helping him was no longer on her I’d-be-happy-to list.

He plowed ahead, anyway. “The rodeo starts in a week, and Izzy is making up flyers highlighting what the Triple L has to offer in the way of a wedding destination, horse riding lessons, and breeding opportunities for those looking for stud services. Blake and his family are going to pass out the flyers. I’m hoping you, your dad, and Clara will help too.”

“I don’t know.” Dropping her gaze to the table, she wrapped up what remained of her burrito. “I have to check with Dad and Clara to see if they don’t already have plans.”

“You’ll let me know?” He frowned. Instinct and all the years of being her friend told

him there was more than his ill-advised charade going on. “Something’s wrong. What is it?”

After letting the silence drag out, she finally said, “When Julieann stopped by the garage after... you know...” She lifted her chin. “She offered her congratulations but was surprised you were engaged. She noticed I didn’t have a ring—not that I want one—and she said I wasn’t your type. She was quite clear. You go for sophisticated, on-the-fast-track women.”

“She said that?”

“I’ve got to get back to work.” Sloane walked away without looking back, not giving him a chance to dispute Julieann’s assertion. He swore under his breath. Why hadn’t Sloane told him sooner?

Chapter Fourteen

The next day, Sloane dropped Clara off at school on her way to the garage. She’d finished work on the first vehicle scheduled for the day, wondering the whole time she worked on it why it had taken her so long to tell Jonas what Julieann thought of their engagement. In the old days, they would have laughed over the socialite’s impression. It was a pretend commitment, and Sloane didn’t care what the other woman thought. That’s what she kept telling herself.

She was pathetic. But just because she didn’t want to see confirmation in his eyes that he’d known all along that she’d been crushing on him practically from the first day he’d stood up for her, that didn’t make her a weakling. It just meant she was a cautious woman when it came to pursuing the man she loved.

So, she loved Jonas. Surprise, surprise. He was everything and more that she wanted in the man she hoped to spend the rest of her life with.

You're not his type. He likes his women sophisticated and on the fast track.

Not his type? What did that even mean? And how did a stranger see that when she couldn't? Although she'd been his best friend long enough, she should have seen that glaring error in her thinking somewhere along the way.

If it was true that he liked a more sophisticated, fast-tracking woman more than a homegrown girl who preferred heavy metal, classic vehicles, and a garage full of tools over sitting behind an office desk, then it was true. She wasn't Jonas Lohmen's go-to woman.

So, why had he announced she was his fiancée in front of his family? He said it was to make Julieann go away. She had to believe him, didn't she?

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There had to be something unremarkable about her that had Jonas keeping her in the friend category. She wasn't about to magically become stylish, and she'd never been a fast-climbing kind of gal. Those were things about herself she would never change.

"Your next customer's here," Dean said as she closed the hood of the Wrangler.

She moved the Wrangler out of the bay.

So much had happened. Signing up for Perfect Match. Dating. Getting the sister she'd always wanted—it had taken two seconds for Clara to burrow into her heart. Dealing with social services. Getting engaged, even if it was for a nefarious reason on Jonas's part.

She pulled in the next car, a Ranger whose owner brought the truck in like clockwork for routine checkups.

She had everything she wanted, excluding a man she could grow old with. When she signed up for Perfect Match, she'd set out to find... well... her perfect mate. For so long, she thought that guy was Jonas. She was wrong on both counts.

Perfect Match was a bust. She would be old, old, old before she found a love match there, even though Jonas had left her a message requesting her to meet him for lunch. That didn't count, even though putting his profile on the dating app hadn't been his idea. It was embarrassing that his brothers thought they needed a push in the direction of matrimony, but Jonas didn't.

Cleaning her hands, she grabbed her phone from her pocket and texted her pretend

fiancée. “You have to tell your family you’re breaking off our engagement.”

“Not yet.” He responded so quickly, she was certain he must have been waiting to hear from her.

She dialed his number. When he answered, she demanded, “Why not?”

“It would be suspicious if we were only engaged for a couple of days... that we’d made a mistake.”

Sloane couldn’t believe Jonas. “Says who?”

“Are you planning to tell Clara we’re not engaged?”

That was not playing fair. Her sister had been so excited about them supposedly getting married, she’d talked about nothing else. Sloane didn’t know if she could break Clara’s happy bubble. Not without Jonas being there to back her up.

“I’ll tell her after you tell your family. And you have to be there too.”

“Let’s meet after work and we’ll talk to her together.” Before she could agree that would work, he said, “I’ve got to run. See you tonight.”

When she got home earlier than she expected, dead beat from chasing her thoughts and wondering what Jonas was really up to, her dad was in the kitchen with Clara, scrambling a recipe the teen wanted to make. Dinner hash. She used to make it for Tracy, so Sloane made sure she had all the ingredients on hand.

“There you are.” Her dad gave her a long hug. “Clara tells me congratulations are in order—”

Sloane looked over Clara's shoulder as she stirred the hamburger in the pan.

"I told Dad you and Jonas got engaged." The kid practically did a two-step in her excitement.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you right away." How did she get into this crazy mess? Jonas didn't really want to marry her. "Things got a little out of hand."

He pulled her into the living room. Sloane glanced over his shoulder to make sure her sister's attention was adequately engaged with the meal she was preparing.

"I figured you'd tell me when you got a chance. I ran into Nathan and Izzy at the hardware store. They told me the good news." Grinning, he cupped her hand in both of his. "So, the boy finally proposed. It took him long enough."

"Not exactly." About to tell her dad the whole story, she was interrupted by a knock on the door. "That's Jonas. He said he would stop by." She opened the door. "Uh, hi."

"Look who I found pulling up at the curb," Jonas said, ushering in Nora.

"I'm here for a home visit." Nora left her bag on the couch. "Is Clara here?"

Sloane led the way to the kitchen. "Did we have an appointment?"

"No. I just stopped by to see how you two are getting along."

Surprise.Great. Sloane didn't think she would tell Nora about Clara disappearing the other day. Her sister's intentions had been innocent enough.

Clara put the lid on her skillet. "Jonas and my sister just got engaged," she said, grinning from ear to ear.

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Sloane wanted to slap her hand against her forehead.

“Congratulations,” her dad said to Jonas and held out his hand.

If she thought he would clear things up, she was greatly mistaken. Instead of telling a funny story about how their engagement had come about, after shaking her dad’s hand, Jonas slung his arm around Sloane’s shoulders. “Thanks. We’re very happy, aren’t we, sweet girl?”

Sweet girl? Since when?

He grabbed her hand and held on tight before she could pinch him again.

Nora added her congratulations. “I won’t stay long. Clara, could you show me your room?”

“Sure.”

Breathe.

True to her word, Nora left soon after.

Squeezing Sloane’s hand, Jonas wasn’t far behind. Stopping him at the door, she hissed, “I thought we were going to tell Clara the truth.”

“We will, but I promised Timmy I’d play him a game of checkers before he goes to bed. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Jonas dropped a kiss on her temple. He seemed to linger,

but then was gone, leaving her feeling more bewildered than ever.

She and her dad cleaned up after dinner, while Clara disappeared into her room. Homework, she said. On a Friday night? Okay...

Her dad sat on the couch beside Sloane. “Are you happy?”

“Confused.” She couldn’t tell him that getting engaged to Jonas wasn’t her idea. At least, not the way it had happened.

He patted her hand. “That’s to be expected. It’s a big change, getting engaged. Marrying someone is a whole new adventure.” Adventure. That was one way to put it. Anymore, anything having to do with Jonas was an experience. “I’d better go, kiddo. I need to give Dorothy a call. We’re going on a bike ride up the mountain tomorrow.”

After all was quiet—even Clara was asleep—Sloane surfed the net, wondering if adventure, not love, was what she was craving. At least she could see what jumped out at her during her search.

Backpacking. For beginners. That was it. She’d always wanted to try. More research showed there were a lot of challenging places to hike around Strawberry Ridge.

Saving the page, she shut down her computer, got ready for bed, and climbed in, pulling the covers to her chin.

The next morning, after a restless night, she put the idea on the back of her mental shelf. If she presented it right, it might be a sport Jonas could add to the Triple L’s list of side hustles.

“Can I go to the ranch today?” Clara asked as Sloane put a bowl of oatmeal on the

table and all the extra things her sister liked to add. “Timmy, Andee, and Reece will be there. Nathan wants to talk about how we can help at the rodeo.”

Sloane didn’t have a problem with her sister making friends with the Lohmen family. She should care. When she and Jonas broke off their engagement, Clara would be heartbroken. She was already growing too attached to Jonas.

“I’ll drop you off on my way to the shop.”

“Dad said he would take me.” From the moment Sloane’s dad had suggested it, Clara was on board.

Sloane had no complaints. They were her family. “I’ll pick you up after work, probably about one.” She watched Clara add raisins, brown sugar, and yogurt to her oatmeal before asking, “What would you say if I told you I’m thinking about taking a backpacking course for beginners?”

Her sister glanced up from her cereal. “I’d ask if I could go with you.”

“And I’d say—” Sloane teased, arching one brow. “I was hoping you’d ask.”

Grinning, Clara finished her oatmeal.

By the time Ron arrived to pick up Clara, Sloane was dressed, the kitchen was clean, and she was on the way out the door, too, happy that it was Saturday and her half day. She didn’t want to ruin her sister’s day, but she should probably corner Jonas so they could have that “talk.”

The sun was bright and the weather warm, but not too warm. The town was getting dressed up for the rodeo, with banners hanging from the old-time lampposts. More than the usual number of folks on foot wandered in and out of already busy shops.

The day promised to be a good one. Perhaps her talk with Jonas would be good too.

Sloane rushed through her morning and locked up, heading toward the Triple L. She shouldn't be this eager to see Jonas. Sure enough, it wasn't a happy guy who greeted her when she parked in the drive.

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“I hear you and Clara are planning to take backpacking lessons,” he said as he opened the driver’s side door with a frown.

Ah, Clara. Well, it wasn’t a secret. “And I’m hearing your feet dragging instead of you telling your family that you made a mistake. Did you tell Clara this morning that we’re not really engaged?”

“Backpacking can be dangerous. Especially with a thirteen-year-old,” he said, ignoring her question.

So, that would be a no.

Sloane wasn’t sure what to tell him except—“It’s just an introductory class for beginners. You’re welcome to join us if you’re brave enough.”

“Being brave has nothing to do with it.”

Who was he kidding? Sloane arched a brow at Jonas.

“Okay. We’ll go to the class together.”

Together? The three of them?

He took the bag containing her change of clothes and walked with Sloane to the main house. Her pulse did that funny little dance it did when she had his complete attention.

“If you find you like backpacking, it could be a nice addition to the services you offer visitors.”

“The cost of insurance would be too high.”

“You sound just like Nathan.” That brought him up short. Got ya. “You could have the participants carry their own insurance and have them sign a waiver when they sign up for the hike. No overnight stays.”

There it was. That spark of cautious interest Sloane was looking for.

“I’ll think about it,” he said.

“You do that, Jonas Lohmen. I’ll check when I get home to see when the next class is scheduled, and I’ll sign us up.” If he wanted to continue this farce of an engagement, they may as well do things together—the three of them.

His brows shot up. She took her bag from him and headed into the house. She changed and put her clothes bag back in her truck. The kids were in the barn, taking turns grooming Duke and Rosie.

Nathan and Izzy were braiding the horses’ manes while Nathan explained what they’d be doing at the rodeo. “Your jobs will be to pass out the flyers Izzy’s making and then rotate and take turns staying with the horses until it’s their turn to race. We rented a table near the ticket booth. An adult will always be with you there and in the stalls, so there will be no wandering off,” he said firmly.

Sloane smiled at his protectiveness. He sounded like the responsible uncle. Her dad could help keep an eye on the kids too.

Nathan caught her eye. “Is that okay with you?”

“Sounds good. I’ll be there to help wherever you need me to.”

Izzy touched his shoulder. “They’ll be okay.”

“I know, but it doesn’t take much for teenagers to find trouble,” he reminded them with a smirk. Shifting his shoulder, he trapped her hand next to his ear.

Izzy laughed. “You don’t have to worry. There are enough adults to keep an eye on them.”

See? This superpower, a close, intimate two-step that couples completely in love shared, was exactly what she was looking for. Her gaze drifted to Jonas. He sat on a hay bale outside his family’s circle while he cleaned halters.

He wasn’t making much of an effort to tell his family the truth. It pulled on her heartstrings, but it didn’t stop Sloane. If he wouldn’t tell them, she would. “Hey, guys. There’s something I want to—”

“Yeah,” Jonas cut in. “We—Sloane, Clara, and I—we’re taking backpacking lessons. If it works out and makes sense, we may recommend adding it as one of the ranch’s activities.”

Sloane gave him the look that should have stopped this craziness. Why was he stalling?

He patted the bale next to him.

Two could play this game. Sweet as sugar, she asked, “Do you want my help?”

“Of course.” He winked.

Huh. Maybe that wasn’t a surprise after his ongoing attempts to stay engaged in the eyes of their families.

Handing her one of the bridles from the stack beside him, Jonas showed her how to take it apart and clean the leather straps with saddle soap. Flushing under his gaze, she followed his directions as he demonstrated. As she expected, he didn’t stay silent long. “You deleted your profile on that dating app.”

“Yeah. I did.”

“Why?”

“Obviously, I can’t date while I’m engaged.” She slanted him a snarky look. “Right?”

“That’s noble of you.” He lowered his voice. “Can we stay engaged until after the rodeo?”

“Jonas!”

“Shhh... I know it’s asking a lot, but everyone’s happy we’re engaged, and I don’t want to make them feel bad during the rodeo if we break up before that. We have a lot riding on the results.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “What are you up to?”

“Nothing.” He raised his hands. “I’m just trying to keep everyone happy.”

She wasn’t sure if that sounded lame or if Jonas was making a good point. Sloane didn’t want the family to be disappointed during the rodeo, either. “Promise?”

“Promise.” Jonas went back to cleaning the bridles.

Sloane watched the kids take turns on the horses. She was confused. He didn’t want to marry her. If he did, he would have asked her to marry him properly, instead of announcing their engagement as if it was the score of a game.

“Why didn’t you ask Julieann to marry you? She’s certainly more than willing.”

He stared at Sloane. “She’s not my type.”

“That’s hilarious since I’m not your type either. Who is your type, Jonas?” Sloane blurted before she could stop herself.

Swiveling to face her, Jonas put aside the halter he was working on. “I’m still working that out.” His lips twitched, making Sloane wonder.

If she wanted to be his type, which she kind of wished she was, he would have shown an interest before now. “Julieann’s right, though, isn’t she?”

“We’re engaged,” he said, his anger dissipating.

“But not for real.” She stared into his beautiful eyes, not sure what she was looking for.

“You’re right,” he agreed before picking up the halter he’d put down. He worked saddle soap into the leather, quiet for so long Sloane was certain their conversation

was over. When she was ready to give up poking at the mystery that was Jonas Lohmen—but only for the time being—he finally said, “After we break up, I could help you find a husband.”

“I’ve changed my mind about finding a husband. Before I invite a guy to be part of my family, I want to make sure Clara is settled and happy.” Sloane had no problem filling the role of single parent. She was raised by one. And now that she knew for certain that she wasn’t one of his priorities, she was happy to let Jonas know what hers were going forward.

The silence between them got thick. “That could take a while.”

“I’m not worried about how long it will take.”

“You don’t want to get married anymore?”

“Oh, I do. Eventually. When the time is right,” she said decisively, no question in her mind. “I want it all. Love. Commitment. Happy-ever-after. Family. More children. A home filled with happiness. When the time is right.”

He nodded and returned to his halter. “I think I knew that about you.”

Jonas had known all along that she wanted to marry and have a family, and still he hadn’t proposed? Not really. Julieann was right. She was not his type. The sooner she stopped wishing for the impossible, the sooner she could let go and move forward without dreams of her and the rancher sharing their hearts plaguing her.

Starting now. But life didn’t always turn out the way a person wanted it to. Especially if that person didn’t fight for what she wanted.

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“Just out of curiosity, who’s this guy you want to marry me off to?” If she were a classic cartoon, steam would be rolling out of her ears. Even though she was already moving on, it was insulting and made her heart ache that Jonas didn’t have a clue that man should be him. “Hey, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”

He started to speak, but she interrupted. “What would you look for in a woman IF you were looking? Not sophisticated and on the fast track, I’m guessing, since you sent Julieann on her way fast enough.”

What was she doing? Did she want to move on or not?

He put aside the finished harnesses. Catching her gaze, he rubbed his short beard. “She has to be smart. Independent. Have her own dreams. Be a hard worker for the important things, like her family. Be willing to play as hard as she works. She has to love adventures and puppies...” The corners of his eyes crinkled. “And kids, and road trips with the family, and of course, horses and the ranch.”

“That’s a long list.” And sounded just like his sisters-in-law, but not Julieann, from what Sloane had noticed during the brief time she’d spent with the other woman.

He shrugged, but the humor in his eyes didn’t go away.

“You’re teasing, aren’t you?” This was the BFF she remembered. He’d slipped back into Jonas’s body when she wasn’t looking.

“No—” He laughed. “But someday.”

Jonas wasn't talking about her, but at this point Sloane didn't care.

She jumped up. "We have to go."

Clara didn't want to leave, but Sloane insisted. She'd had enough. They picked up tacos on the way home. Tonight would not be a cooking at home night.

"We're still going, aren't we? I'm supposed to help with the horses and passing out flyers," Clara said when Sloane parked in front of the house.

Sloane worked up a smile. "Of course we're going."

After showers and a quiet dinner, Clara talked her into a game of Scrabble. Wasn't she most of the things Jonas had described as his ideal woman? How did he not see that?

Clara took Sloane to the cleaners, beating her by too many points to count. "I won!" She danced around the living room, arms pumping. "I won!"

Saying good night to Clara, Sloane sat down at her computer and looked up backpacking lessons.

Finding what she was looking for, she was pleasantly surprised to find that a group of backpackers were offering a free introduction class for beginners at the rodeo on the first day. The barrel races were on Thursday, so there was no conflict. Clara would like that, and maybe her dad would join them. She signed Jonas up too. That would show Jonas how adventurous she could be. She sent him the link.

Chapter Fifteen

Sunday morning, Nathan cornered Jonas in the kitchen. His brother poured coffee

from the pot, his scowl deepening. “I don’t know what game you’re playing, but when Sloane left yesterday, she was upset. I’m going to tell you the same thing you told me—Don’t be an idiot. If you don’t stop screwing around, you’ll lose her, big brother.”

“I didn’t say you were an idiot.”

Nathan’s brows shot up. “Same thing as.”

“If I remember correctly, I told you not to let Izzy get away. If you did, you would regret it for the rest of your life,” Jonas set his brother straight.

“If you let Sloane get away, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life. But I think you already know that,” Nathan threw his words back at Jonas. “What is there to fight about, anyway? You just got engaged. The honeymoon phase can’t possibly be over.”

“None of your business. I have a plan.” He hoped.

Nathan did not give up. “Who was the woman you were talking about? I would swear you were describing Sloane.”

Yes, but did Sloane get that message? “Don’t worry, little brother. I’m not letting Sloane get away.”

The minute he introduced her to Julieann as his fiancée, he knew after all the years they’d been BFFs that Sloane was the one. Nathan was right. He’d been an idiot not to recognize that truth sooner. He just had to convince her their pretend engagement was just the beginning, not a fool’s mistake.

Nathan clapped him on the shoulder. “Though I must say, you’re slower than the average bear in the catching-on department, you were right. Life is too short to turn

your back on love when it punches you in the face. I'm so glad Izzy is willing to put up with me for the long haul."

"Dad almost threw everything away," Jonas said quietly, leaving his breakfast dishes in the sink. "I don't intend to make the same mistake."

Nathan stared at him. "What are you talking about? Dad loved Mom more than life itself."

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“Then why did he almost throw it all away and then have to sell off half the ranch and his prize stud to make things right?” When Nathan looked like he wanted to keep telling him how wrong he was, Jonas grabbed his hat from the table and headed out the door. “I’m going to ride up to the cottage.”

Sloane was his very best friend. The disappointment mixed with anger that flashed at him from her brown eyes when she told him what Julieann had said about Sloane not being his type said it all, stabbing him hard in the gut.

He didn’t blame the socialite for pointing out what she saw as the flaw in his and Sloane’s engagement. It was his own damn fault for not seeing the real truth sooner. He could have saved Sloane all the hurt he’d inadvertently caused her if only he’d just been honest with himself.

Grace, her white coat covered with small chestnut spots that gleamed in the sunshine, her long white tail swishing as she nudged his shoulder when he finished saddling the mare, was ready to go. He pointed her toward the cottage.

He didn’t need his brother, or anyone else for that matter, to tell him to watch his step with Sloane. He knew what he’d done wrong. Like the time he’d taken her to the Denver Botanic Gardens for her birthday. They were having an orchid showcase, and she’d been so excited that he’d almost kissed her right in the middle of all those colorful, arching stems, but he’d caught himself in time. Their lifelong friendship was as rare and hard to maintain as the plants surrounding them.

Instead of kissing her, he’d put up a wall neither of them could breach. He’d known it was the wrong move, and he’d tried his best to make it up to her, but his efforts didn’t

get him the results he wanted. Which was what exactly?

He didn't know until she stomped into the house after he had backed her into a role she didn't want to play or at least hadn't expected. He still wondered what would have happened to them if they had kissed in that beautiful garden, surrounded by color and light.

Jonas hadn't been fooling around when he offered to find her a husband. Or not exactly. He was trying to figure out if he could be that guy, but she turned the tables on him, so he finally told her the truth—except, Nathan was right—the woman he'd described was Sloane.

As he topped the hill, the front of The Wedding Cottage came into view. When he and his brothers had worked on it together, they'd preserved as much as they could of what their mother loved about her special getaway place. They'd also enclosed the front porch in a way he knew she would appreciate.

He remembered that when he returned home from college that she took solace from spending time in the shed her husband had built for her when she needed to break away from three rambunctious boys.

Except for Blake and Malorie's wedding, he hadn't been back since the reno was completed. In the clear sunlight, the light gray-green color of the cottage blended into the calming landscape. The flower garden off to the side. Imposing mountains rising in the near distance.

The sounds of late summer welcomed Jonas. He understood why his mom loved it here. The whole place was... warm... and peaceful. It wasn't surprising the cottage had been consistently rented out for weddings since opening for business.

He dismounted, and on the backside of the cottage, looped Grace's reins around the

rail placed near a small trough for the occasions when horses needed watering.

The garden reminded him of all the ways his dad had shown his mom how much he loved her, and their boys—the house he'd built for them, each Rangerbred horse they bought together, getting his boys to help design the Triple L sign that was erected over the entry to the ranch just for their mom. Jonas remembered it all.

Ending up in front of the heart carved into one of a pair of giant aspens, he finally gave up his anger at his dad's arrogance that he didn't have to be careful about something as fragile as his love for Zelda. Adam had been so sure he could fix anything—his gambling, his failing ranch. He'd risked too much.

Jonas hadn't fallen far from the father tree. His high-handedness was worse, since at least his dad hadn't pushed the love of his life away, putting himself in a box his mom couldn't unlock.

A loves Z. "Mom... how do I fix this?" Jonas skimmed his fingers across the carving. He didn't need to ask. He already knew.

Still, he thought he heard her comforting voice. "You can do this, son."

Taking out his phone, he texted Sloane. "We're more than friends, right?"

She didn't answer right back. Impatient, he mounted Grace and rode back to the ranch. By the time he got to the high ground, where he had the best view of the house, barn, and ranch yard, his cell pinged a message.

"We've been friends for a long time."

"We'll always be close, won't we?"

She was quicker this time. “Of course.” The shortness of her response wasn’t very reassuring.

“Can we talk?”

After stabling Grace and removing her saddle, he brushed her down, but had still heard nothing from Sloane. He nudged her. “Sloane?”

“I’m sorry. I’m busy at the garage for the next two days. Clara will be in school. And we’re planning to spend some time with my dad. The rodeo starts on Wednesday. We promised Blake and Nathan we’d help with the flyers.”

If he was a swearing man—“I’ll catch up with you at the rodeo, then.”

“Okay. There’s an introductory backpacking class on Wednesday. I emailed you the link.”

He accepted her challenge. At least she hadn’t given up on him completely, but she wasn’t happy. For a man who preferred to control all aspects of his life, he’d sure made a mess of things. First, by not making Julieann understand that he was truly unavailable before she followed him to Strawberry Ridge. And then by taking his friendship with Sloane too much for granted. Or really, not understanding it wasn’t just being friends he needed. He wanted Sloane’s love.

Patting Grace on her shoulder, he went into the house. Nathan had moved their parents’ letters to the sideboard and stacked them neatly on the shelf just below his mom’s china. Making a pot of strong coffee, Jonas took a steaming mug, along with the letters, to the chair next to the fireplace and started with the letter dated just before his dad’s passing. By the time he finished all the letters, it was dark outside.

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He leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

When his mother passed, he convinced himself that no matter what was put on her death certificate, his mom had died from loneliness as well as a profound grief at losing the love of her life. According to the letters, he was wrong. She hadn't told any of them that she'd been diagnosed with kidney disease and decided not to have any treatment. But she'd told his dad and was determined to leave the ranch in the best shape she could for their boys. She'd lived two years after her original diagnosis.

Maybe she could have lived longer if any of them had known. They could have helped her get to dialysis or whatever treatment they could talk her into. Zelda Lohmen was strong-minded, decisive, loving, and tough. She didn't want any treatment that would not improve her quality of life. And her doctor hadn't been able to change her mind.

His mom and dad were partners. She didn't die of loneliness. She passed when she was satisfied that she'd done what she could do to finish what they'd started.

He should be so lucky. He wanted that kind of lasting partnership with Sloane. Despite what she'd been told, she was exactly his type. And he loved her with every ounce of his being.

*

The next day, Jonas went to his office with a plan in mind. He had two days before the rodeo began to convince Sloane he was her guy. He went through Clara's file to make sure he hadn't missed anything in his filing. Everything looked to be in good shape.

Now they waited.

It was the same for Duke's DNA results, except their waiting game should be done by the end of the week.

The next step in his plan? Tilting his chair back, he called a local florist.

"Old Town Florist. How can I help you?" asked a cheerful voice.

"I would like to order a bouquet. One with lilies, daisies, and hydrangeas."

"I can take care of that for you. Where do you want them delivered?"

He thought for a minute. It was Monday, so she was at work. "To Sloane Michaels at Michaels' Garage on Main Avenue."

"Perfect. What do you want the card to say?"

He didn't want to give too much away. The last thing he needed was for Sloane to tell him to take a hike because she thought he wasn't being sincere. "I can't wait to go backpacking with you. ~Jonas"

"They'll be delivered this afternoon." He gave the florist his payment information and hung up.

Staying busy with a couple of walk-ins the rest of the day wasn't enough to take his mind off Sloane and all the ways he could prove to her that he loved her.

Before he headed home for the night, he called her, and when she picked up, he asked, "Did you get the flowers?"

“Yes. Thank you. They’re pretty.” She broke off.

Just pretty?He would have to do better next time.

“I’m glad you like them. Thanks for signing me up for the backpacking lessons.” He kept his tone casual. He didn’t want to make her more skittish than she already was.

A door closed in the background. He glanced at the clock. She must be closing for the day. “No problem.”

“I’d love to show my thanks and take you to dinner tonight.”

“Sorry.” She didn’t sound all that sorry. She sounded delighted to be missing out on his old-fashioned courting. “I have to get home to Clara. Dad’s coming over, and he’s bringing a friend.”

It’d been a toss-up that she would accept his invitation. He just had to try harder. “Okay... well... I’ll see you at the rodeo on Wednesday.”

“See you Wednesday.”

That, at least, was something to hang his hat on. Leaning back in his chair, he grinned. Then, a minute later, locking the door behind him, he drove home in the dusk as the sun began its slow descent.

At his desk, Jonas tapped his pen on the wood surface. Not wanting to waste time, he called Stephanie’s Inn and made reservations for Wednesday night. If he had reservations, she couldn’t say no, could she?

Since he didn’t have any appointments the next day, when Nathan came down for breakfast, he suggested, “Why don’t you and Izzy spend the day together and plan

your wedding?”

“That’s a great idea, except she’s working, and I’ve got horses to tend to.” Nathan eyed Jonas with his usual suspicion, although since getting engaged to Izzy, that had eased up some.

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“I’ll take care of the horses. I’m sure you can talk your lady into taking the morning off.”

“Maybe.” Nathan folded his arms across his chest and stared at Jonas.

Jonas grinned. “Do I have to pull the big brother card to get you to take some time off?”

“No, I guess not,” Nathan relented, his brows arching as he pulled his cell from his pocket. “You’re up to something.”

“I’m feeling generous.”

Nathan smirked and walked out of the kitchen, his phone to his ear.

“Be sure and tell my future sister-in-law that you guys spending the day together was my idea,” he called after his brother.

Now if he could get Sloane’s cooperation that easily.

Waiting for Nathan to leave, he took his coffee into the office, sat at the desk, and pulled up the pedigree record he and Sloane had put together. It was a good start, but someday, he hoped to have the breeding program back to the herd that his dad had developed.

Nathan stuck his head in the doorway. “I’m out of here.” He frowned. “Do you want me to put Duke and the ladies in the pasture before I leave?”

“Nope.” Jonas came from behind the desk. “I’m on it. Now get out of here. And hug sister-in-law for me.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Nathan said and yawned as if that was the most tiresome thing he’d heard all week.

Shooing his brother out of the house ahead of him, Jonas watched from the barn while his brother waved and took off. He was happy. Jonas was glad. Both of his brothers deserved to have what their parents had—the kind of love that would bring them peace and purpose for all the years to come.

Peace and purpose. He could use some of that too. With Sloane. Waking up next to her every morning. Raising horses—and, hopefully, kids—together. The years they would spend side by side stretching into the far future.

He brushed down the horses and put them out to pasture, then cleaned out the stalls before inspecting the apartment over the barn. It could use a light dusting but otherwise would work when they had to hire hands to help with the horses as their numbers grew.

Checking the time, he went back to the ranch house and placed a DoorDash order from Luke’s Diner to be taken to Sloane. She wouldn’t take a break until she was too hungry to keep going. And if she wouldn’t agree to a meal with him, then he would send one to the stubborn woman. At least, she would know he was thinking of her, and perhaps she would clue in that he was offering something more than just their everyday friendship.

Showered, he returned to the office and the pedigree record. He had nothing more to add for now, so he pulled out a sheet of copy paper and spent the rest of the afternoon drawing plans for the house he wanted to build on the north side of the pond for him and Sloane and Clara. Since he wasn’t building a home just for himself anymore, he

hoped Sloane would want to live on the ranch after they were married.

Married. He hadn't even kissed the girl yet.

His phone pinged an incoming text. "Thanks for lunch."

He stared at the words on the screen, then texted back. "You're welcome."

He put the drawing aside, unable to entertain the idea that she wouldn't want to live there with him. Until she told him to his face that she wouldn't marry him even if he was the last guy on the planet, he would remain hopeful.

Jonas shook his head. It would serve him right for fooling himself—and Sloane—all these years.

Restless the next morning, stopping to check the mail on his way to the rodeo grounds, he shifted through the stack when he got back into the Mustang, throwing all but one into the front passenger seat. It was from the lab. Holding his breath, he opened the envelope and quickly read through the pages, his grin growing as he came to the pedigree at the end.

He hit the steering wheel with the palm of his hand and whooped when he got to the results. "Hot dog!"

They'd done it! They could register Duke with the CRHA and get started on their breeding program. Finances would be a little tricky while they put the Triple L on its feet, but they could stop worrying about losing the ranch. And if Duke won his class in the barrel racing competition tomorrow, that would be the cherry on top of the icing.

Jonas laughed and turned up the music as he drove to the rodeo grounds. He couldn't

wait to tell Sloane. And his brothers, of course.

He found his family, Sloane, Clara, and her dad, Ron, manning a table near the ticket booth. Stepping up in front of Sloane on the other side of the table, he held out the letter from the lab. “Look what I got in the mail this morning.”

“What’s this?” Cautiously, giving him only a glance, she took the letter.

He stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Read it.”

He watched as her pretty eyes scanned the pages. Her lips twitched into a smile.

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“Jonas! This is wonderful. Congratulations!” She handed the letter back, came around the table and hugged him, then quickly stepped back.

Nathan looked over his shoulder. “Congratulations for what?”

Jonas just handed his brother the letter without pulling his gaze away from the flush on Sloane’s cheeks.

“Well, I’ll be darned. I’m not sure I believed the DNA testing would give us the results we needed.” Nathan headed for Blake. “Look what came in the mail today.”

After Blake read the letter, his brothers did a high five and then gathered their women close.

As good news as it was, Jonas had something more important that he had to do. He maneuvered until he stood next to Sloane. “Have dinner with me tonight. Just you and me.”

“I don’t know.” She gave him a dubious look. He hoped that meant he’d be able to change her mind. She glanced at her watch. “It’s time for Dad, Iris, Clara, and me to head for the backpacking class.”

Gathering up the others, she took off. Jonas caught Nathan’s eye and waved his hand at Sloane’s disappearing back. “I’m going with them.”

Nathan gave him a thumbs-up. Jonas hurried to catch up to the woman who had amazingly claimed a spot in his heart. It would be a challenge, but he had to convince

Sloane that they were more than BFFs.

When he caught up with them, he whispered close to her ear, “I have reservations.”

Chapter Sixteen

I have reservations.

Well, dang it. Jonas sat next to her as they claimed seats in the open room in the activity center set aside for the introductory class. The activity center was near the main arena where the riding events would be held. Chairs were set up down the middle of the room and a table had been placed in front.

Her dad, and his new friend, Iris Booker, a retired school principal, Carla, Sloane, and now Jonas, took up half of the third row.

Her dad and Iris laughed as he told her about his last Hawaii trip. Sloane hadn’t seen him this happy in a long time.

Clara looked around Sloane to say hi to Jonas.

Was this a game he was playing? Sending flowers and food from Luke’s Diner to the garage?

Sloane refused to look at him. If he thought trying to get her attention at the eleventh hour was a good idea, she didn’t want to play. She’d never—well, hardly ever—been one to agree that better late than never was acceptable.

“Why are you here?” she hissed in a desperate whisper, leaning toward him but keeping her gaze on the front of the room. She’d known he was coming, of course, but had hoped he would change his mind at the last minute. It wasn’t that she didn’t

want to have him there. It was that she just didn't know what to do with all the feelings being close to him aroused.

Being in love had turned into too much work. She was better off giving up now instead of continuing to ache over Jonas's choices. At least until she and Clara were more accustomed to each other. Maybe in three, or four, or ten years down the road.

He leaned toward her until their shoulders touched and whispered back, "I'm taking this class with you."

Right. He couldn't wait to go backpacking with her. Sloane shook her head.

He laced his fingers with hers, starting an avalanche of prickles that skidded straight to her toes. "Come to dinner with me tonight, and I'll tell you everything."

"About what?"

He smiled into her eyes. So, this is what it felt like to have Jonas's full attention. "About you and me and our future."

"We don't have a future. We're breaking up, remember?" she asserted.

"Not tonight. I'm hoping we'll be celebrating."

She sucked in a breath. "I don't get you."

"I know. That's okay. We'll straighten everything out." He squeezed her hand, and dang it, she liked the feel of his hand engulfing hers.

Edging away from Jonas, Sloane turned to Clara. "Jonas wants to take us to dinner." If her sister went with them, whatever he planned to say would be one conversation

she could avoid.

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“I can’t. I’m going with Dad and Iris to the library to check out books on horses and rodeos.” Clara gave her that thirteen-going-on-thirty look she was so good at. “But you should go.”

Closing her eyes for a moment, she swiveled back to Jonas. “I’m tired, Jonas.” In more ways than one. Her heart was exhausted.

“Let me take you to dinner. I won’t keep you out late.” He kissed the back of her hand and her mind forgot all the objections she was about to make.

She finally gave in. “Okay.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming to this introductory class. Today we’re going to give you an overview of being a backpacking enthusiast and the club’s activities. And we’ll review what it takes to become a good backpacker and hiker. Tips for beginners. At the end, we’ll hand out a flyer with an equipment list and our contact information. My name is Tony.” He indicated the woman beside him. “And this is my sister, Rachel.”

Sloane leaned forward, elbows on her knees, so she could concentrate on the speakers and not on the man sitting next to her, his thigh brushing hers. An hour later, when Tony and Rachel stopped talking, Clara was practically bouncing in her seat and Sloane was ready to leave the meeting.

“I’m going to sign up,” she said to Clara, hoping to put off dinner with Jonas as long as possible.

“Me too.” Clara got in line behind her. Her dad and Iris followed suit.

She lost sight of Jonas, hating that she’d had a jab of disappointment that he didn’t want to take the class with her. Just as she got to the head of the line, he joined her.

She let out the breath she was holding, which was ridiculous. She either wanted nothing to do with the man or had to see if there was a future for the two of them.

“Our reservation at Stephanie’s Inn is waiting.” The man could move mountains when he wanted to. Stephanie’s was always packed.

Outside the room, Clara, her dad, and Iris waited. Clara hugged Sloane. “Thanks for letting me take the lessons. I can’t wait.”

“It’ll be fun,” she admitted. And something different that she could do with her sister, even though Jonas had signed up right behind her. Surely, he would find an excuse to drop the class after the first hike or two. Going with his best friend and her family wouldn’t be that exciting for the lawyer who’d spent so many years in Denver’s hot spots.

“Dad said he would show Iris and me the arena, then we’re going to Luke’s Diner on the way home.” Clara leaned close and whispered, “Have fun with Jonas.” Then louder, “I’ll see you later?”

Sloane snorted. First off, after all the years of wanting to go on even one real date with her friend, whatever was going on with Jonas right now made her nervous. Second, her sister was too young to be urging her to go to dinner with the one person who had never given her any hope that he thought the two of them were a good idea.

Sensing her hesitation, Jonas asked, “Do you want a tour, too, before we go?”

“No. That’s okay.” The sooner she got this dinner with Jonas over with, the sooner she could put all her focus on her sister. “What time is our reservation?”

“When we get there. I know the manager. They’re setting up a table on the balcony for us.” His Mustang was parked next to her truck. “We’ll come back for your truck later, if that’s okay.”

“You don’t have to go to all this trouble, Jonas.” Was this what it would be like to be Jonas Lohmen’s girl? No wonder Julieann had followed him to Strawberry Ridge.

He started the engine. She loved how the sound was more of a roar than a gentle purr.

“It’s no trouble. I just wanted a quiet place where I could set things straight between us without a bunch of interruptions. I don’t want you to think I intentionally took advantage of your sweet nature.”

So, that’s what this was all about. Not a real date. A clarification. She should have known. A tiger didn’t change its stripes overnight. Still, he knew exactly what to say. “You think I’m sweet?”

“You’re the sweetest-tempered person I know.”

Huh. She wouldn’t call their friendship sweet, especially since he’d returned to Strawberry Ridge. What he meant was that she was a pushover.

It didn’t take long for them to reach the inn. Stephanie’s sat on high ground near Garfield Park and overlooked the promenade along a bend in Wolfe River. “I’m not dressed for going to a restaurant that fancy.”

“You look beautiful.” His gaze swept from her ruffled tank to the jeans she’d paired with her newest boots. Heat rose to her cheeks. “Every guy in the place will be

jealous that I'm the lucky guy having dinner with such a pretty lady."

She pulled away from Jonas. "What's going on with you?"

This flirty man was not the standoffish guy she'd spent so many years crushing over.

He studied her face intently. "I had a recent epiphany."

Jonas was right. Getting everything out in the open wasn't a bad idea. There was no way they could live in the same town and manage to avoid each other.

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Their table on the outdoor balcony, with the sun sparkling off the water, and where they could take in the view of the river and promenade, was ready—a white tablecloth, a short vase of flowers in the middle of the table, a candle already lit, and flowery ceramic plates and cups.

Pulling out her chair, Jonas waited until she settled into the seat.

Once they had placed their order, she broke the silence. “You didn’t need to bring me to a fancy restaurant or send me flowers or DoorDash to make it easier to break up.”

“I think I’m insulted, Sloane Michaels.” He didn’t sound insulted. He sounded amused. Further confusing her, he reached across the table. Jonas took her hand and played gently with her fingers. “I brought you flowers and lunch that I knew you would eat and brought you to this fancy restaurant because I’m trying to show you how much I love you. I don’t want to break up with you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Sloane’s pulse skittered. It wasn’t possible, was it? “I don’t understand.”

“I love you!”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m very sure.”

“How? Why?” She was afraid to hope they were finally on the same page.

“My dad made a mistake that cost him half his ranch and most of his stock. My mistake was not telling you before now how much you mean to me. I won’t lose you because it took me almost too long to be honest with myself. The last thing I want is to let the arrogance I inherited from Dad to keep me from being the man you need.”

Turning her hand over, holding on, palm to palm, her heart soared. “The man I need?”

He nodded, his charming smile crooked.

“You’re not your dad, Jonas.”

“I’m starting to understand that. I love you, Sloane Michaels. To the ends of the earth and back.”

Her breath caught. “For how long?”

He knew exactly what she was asking. “It seems like it’s been forever. But I really knew when I told the family we were engaged. A light went on in my heart.”

The setting sun cast a golden glow over the balcony. Before she could blurt out that she loved him too, their meal came.

“Is there anything else I can get for you?” their waiter asked.

Jonas kept hold of her hand, keeping his gaze on her face. “We’re fine, thanks.”

He moved his chair around the side of the table so that their knees touched and raised her hand to kiss her knuckles. “I should have asked you to marry me a long time ago. If it’s not too late, what do you say?”

Sloane blinked, her heart thumping as if she was racing for the gold. “I love you, Jonas. I think I’ve loved you since I was in the sixth grade.”

“Stupid me,” he said, dropping to one knee and pulling a small box from his pocket. “Sloane Michaels, will you marry me?”

“Oh yeah.” Without hesitation she threw her arms around his neck. All Sloane’s uncertainty vanished as she looked down at the open box and whispered, “You have a ring.”

“It was my mother’s. She left it to me in her will, hoping I would find the perfect girl to wear it. I have.”

Sloane’s heart turned over. Jonas was everything she wanted. “It’s beautiful.”

Slipping the ring with its bold diamond surrounded by delicate silver filagree on her finger, he wrapped her in his arms and kissed her breath away as he promised, “You are my best friend and the love of my life. I give you my heart. I’m yours forever.”

Sloane leaned against his chest. “And I am yours.”

Their meal completely forgotten, Sloane got down to the serious business of showing Jonas just how much she wanted to spend the rest of her life with her BFF, interrupted only by two flutes of champagne brought by their waiter and the round of applause from the other patrons on the balcony.

*

One month later...

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“Mom and Dad would be proud,” Nathan said, as Jonas leaned on the pasture fence with his brothers, watching the mares in the field.

Duke, his head lifted high, mane waving in the gentle breeze, called to his ladies. The mountains seemed taller. The sky was a victorious clear blue. In his mind’s eye, Jonas could see his mom and dad walking in the field with the mares.

“Duke’s DNA results and registration with the Colorado Ranger Horse Association came just in time.” It was good news but not nearly as great as Sloane agreeing to become his wife. “I got a call from two ranchers back east who want to breed their mares with Duke. Dad’s breeding program is back in business.”

“The Triple L broke even this month,” Blake added. “I’m happy to say the ranch is well on its way to being out of trouble.”

“It doesn’t hurt that Duke placed first in the barrel racing event at the rodeo, and Rosie second,” Nathan said, beaming.

Jonas had to give his brothers kudos. Despite their past difficulties, they’d worked through it all and saved their parents’ dream. “We make a good team.”

“Yup,” Nathan said at the same time Blake agreed, “You bet we do.”

The year had started with the family and ranch in dire circumstances, but they’d pulled together and become the close family they were meant to be.

“Congratulations, Blake. I notice your latest Timmybook made the New York

Timeslist.” Jonas was putting together a scrapbook for Blake and Timmy. And one for Nathan and Duke for their rodeo successes. He planned to give them as gifts to his brothers for Christmas.

He couldn’t ask for more, except...

Sloane, with Clara in the front passenger seat, parked in front of the barn. Malorie, Andee, Reece, and Timmy were right behind her. At the same time, Izzy came from the guesthouse, where she was staying until she and Nathan got married in the spring.

Jonas grinned. “We have company, boys.”

“Speak for yourself, big brother. Malorie and the kids, they’re my family.” Blake wrapped his arms around his wife, watching with pride as the kids climbed the fence beside them to watch the horses.

“Yeah,” Nathan agreed, as he pulled Izzy close, her back to his chest as they turned to watch the horses too. “I can’t wait until we get married.”

Too impatient to wait for Sloane and Clara to reach him, Jonas met them halfway. “How are my girls?”

Clara grabbed a quick hug and then ran to join the other kids on the fence.

He wrapped his arms around Sloane. That night at Stephanie’s, he’d been afraid she wouldn’t give him a chance, but he was the lucky one. He couldn’t get enough of holding her next to his heart. She rose on her toes, kissing him on the lips. He couldn’t get enough. When he finally let her go, it was to whistles and clapping from the fence line echoing the marathon racing in his chest.

“I know it doesn’t leave much prep time, but what do you say we get married the week before Thanksgiving?” He rested his forehead against Sloane’s. “It’s not like

we need a lot of time to get to know each other. We can get married at The Wedding Cottage. I checked the calendar. There are several open dates—”

Sloane placed her hands on each side of his face, her eyes shining brightly. “I think mid-November will be perfect.”

He turned to his brothers and their families. “Did I mention that I think I might have found who bought Dad’s hundred acres?”

That brought them all to their feet.

Yup. He was one lucky cowboy. His heart had finally found home.

The End