



The Way to a Cowboy's Heart

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Category: Romance, Western, Adult

Description: On possibly the worst day of her life, British ex-pat Wall Street financial analyst EMILY QUINN, finds herself on a crowded New York City subway, holding her cardboard box of shame. It's Valentine's Day. She's single, suddenly unemployed, and her work visa's now a ticking time bomb. But a kind gesture from a handsome Montana cowboy hits her like a ray of sunshine. And later, when that same cowboy she flirted with shows up with her friends to her gourmet Valentine's Day dinner party that evening, Emily wonders if fate is playing with her.

LIAM HARDESTY's attraction to Emily is instant and feels life changing, and her food is a revelation. Their impromptu NYC weekend together becomes a long-distance flirtation. When her job hunt hits a wall, he invites her to his ranch in Montana. Natural beauty and adventures aside, they can't deny their growing feelings for each other, but know they're on borrowed time.

When her dream job in London beckons, Emily must choose between the life she thought she wanted and the new and unexpected one that calls to her heart.

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Chapter One

Emily Quinn hurried up the steep stairs from the Broadway subway station, half-running toward the Wall Street crosswalk and the offices of Bledsoe, Tamarin, and Carter. Even from here, the building that housed their offices towered over the street known for behemoths. A monument to greed made of glass, stone and ambition.

She glanced at her watch as she hurried down the street. It read 7:56 a.m.

She was late. For that, she blamed the flourless chocolate tart that had taken its own sweet time baking at the crack of dawn. But the result was worth it. It was perfection if she did say so herself.

Which put her forty minutes behind. Nate would notice. Nate always noticed. She had, however, earned a few minutes of grace. Particularly since, without any life to speak of, she never took vacations or sick days. And her weekends were inevitably spent right here, too. All of which made tonight's monthly gathering—her supper club—the thing that made it all tolerable.

There was a notable dearth of stonks—more politely known as Wall Streeters—on the sidewalk at this hour. Since the partners had called everyone back to the office to work, all or most, were safely ensconced—some would say held hostage—by seven a.m. and up to their necks in trades, shorts, or some kind of high finance. Some likely selling their souls for a bigger piece of the action.

Working in that particular hell wasn't her actual job anymore, though she had been especially good at it. Good enough to climb above all that and secure a corner office

with a view since returning after working from home. Though, her reputation for prescience in the investment world was not, in her opinion, a gift she could take credit for. Maybe it was God-given or plain luck. Maybe it was simply her path. Though lately, she'd begun to wonder if choosing that world was really a choice at all or merely accepting the inevitable.

Her father had worked in the British parliament and his father before him. Her older brother was the darling of a London think tank that specialized in environmental economics and was destined for parliament, too. So, what chance did she have, really? Six years ago, she had run away from all that, across the pond, headlong into a world that seemed to now settle over her like an ill-fitting coat. A coat for which she was both grateful and weirdly ambivalent. She'd survived, sacrificed, and bled for those years.

And even as she rushed up this canyon of skyscrapers to get to the place that paid handsomely for her life, all she could think about was that flourless chocolate cake and how it would taste tonight, decorated with tiny carved mint leaves and the snipped lavender blossoms she'd collected from her windowsill garden.

It was Valentine's Day. And with no one to send her flowers, she'd had some delivered to herself. A big bouquet of roses, lilies, and hydrangeas that her sister would be there to receive. She could almost smell the flowers as she walked.

The intersection of Wall Street and Broadway was alive with noisy traffic, a handful of yellow cabs speeding by, and the unhoused guy she knew as Pete standing on the corner, asking for money. She kept a ten-dollar bill in her pocket for him in case he was there, simply because she liked him.

As she reached him at the corner, he smiled at her through his scraggly beard, his clothes looking decidedly worse for the wear. He had a scarf around his neck and a ragged knit cap that could have been either blue or brown, but hardly seemed

sufficient against the February cold.

He wasn't old. Not even forty, she guessed. She wasn't even sure how he'd come to be here alone on the streets of New York City. She suspected he was a veteran because he always irreverently saluted her when they crossed paths. But she didn't ask about his history. It wasn't her place.

"You're running late today, ma'am." Stating the obvious was one of his talents.

"Thank God I have you to remind me," she said with a grin, slowing down long enough to hand him the money. He always seemed embarrassed to take money from her, but he did anyway. "You warm enough, Pete?"

"Sure, sure," he said, lowering his sign to touch the edge of his knit cap in a thank you gesture. "Those socks you gave me last week are sure fine. Warm. I'll buy me some coffee with this."

"Good and maybe a bite to eat," she called over her shoulder. "Don't wait too long. It's about to rain again."

"Take care, Ms. Quinn. Those shoes of yours ain't made for running."

"They absolutely are not. Cheers!" Her red, Louboutin heels were certainly not made for New York City streets nor wet February weather, but they would have to do. The light changed and she stepped into the crosswalk.

From out of nowhere, a yellow cab screeched around the corner, nearly hitting her but Pete shouted, "Watch out!" and she managed to dodge the cab in time.

Shaken, she threw her hands up in the air, with a "Wanker!" thrown in for good measure, but the driver barely glanced her way.

But Pete... Pete Frisbeed his folded cardboard sign at the cabbie's window, shouting, "Hey! You blind!? Ya'll don't see her walking here?" before finishing with something decidedly spicier.

If the driver had seen her, he didn't care. Then again, maybe she was invisible? Sometimes, in this city, she felt like she was. She pointed at Pete with a thank-you shake of her head. He did the same and waved her on.

It didn't hurt to have a guardian angel on the streets of NYC.

With two blocks to go, she looked up as a fat, wet drop of freezing rain splatted against her cheek. Then another. Perfect. Late and drenched, too.

Instead of worrying, she turned her thoughts to tonight's dinner party.

It was a bit of a symphony, all the food, the way it came together. She'd prepped most of it into the wee hours of last night, which accounted for her lateness now, but the execution required most dishes be completed on the spot. Muriel, her younger sister who was visiting from England, would have the table set up by tonight and have the apartment looking great by the time Emily got home from work.

On the menu, there were only a few touches left to do. The delicate shallot infused vinaigrette that would dress the bibb lettuce and baby greens, which would need some chive flowers cut at the last second. Halved cherry tomatoes, some shaved Parmesan cheese... and some of the croutons she'd toasted last night. She'd already sourced some organic pansies for the salad from Joseph, her favorite organic gardener, on the rooftop of their building. He had snagged several invitations for that, and his other contributions.

Then there was the seared halibut on its bed of creamy Parmesan polenta topped with broiled asparagus and capers. Milton, her favorite fishmonger down the street, had

graced her with the most beautiful, thick halibut filets, and she couldn't wait to serve them to her friends.

And for the dessert, the flourless chocolate cake drizzled with more rich, dark chocolate and a scoop of fresh whipped cream and, of course, the herbs.

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Lost in her thoughts about the food, she didn't notice—until she was almost upon her building—the dozens of unmarked sedans parked at random angles in the street and the FBI adorned jackets of the handful of people mingling outside the building's entrance.

The sight stopped her cold. What in the world? Her stomach dropped at the thought that somewhere in her office building, someone was about to hurtle down a long dark tunnel of legal woes. At the same time, a guilty pang of *ofschadenfreude* struck her, knowing that dark tunnel was surely coming nowhere near them. Their reputation was flawless and admired, one of the reasons she was still here.

Emily flashed an acknowledging smile at one of the agents who stared back at her without expression, and she hurried on to the bank of elevators and pushed the up button. Boy, this would be the talk around the water cooler for days to come. She wondered what office was involved. Did she even know them? There were maybe hundreds of offices in this building.

“Who are you?” someone behind her asked. “And where are you going?”

She turned to find a burly, rather intimidating-looking agent frowning at her. She looked around her to see to whom he was talking. But it was obvious she was alone. “Excuse me?”

“Your name?” he repeated.

“My—I beg your pardon, but I'm just heading to work and I'm running late, so if you don't mind...”

“I’ll only ask one more time.”

She sighed. “Emily Quinn.”

She watched as he slid a finger down his little clipboard list of names. Then turned the page.

“I’m sorry. What’s this all about?”

His finger stopped moving on a spot she couldn’t see. Then he nodded to a partner standing nearby she hadn’t noticed until now. “Ms. Quinn, please come with me.”

He reached for her arm, but she dodged him. “Wait.What?”

“You work at Bledsoe, Tamarin, and Carter, correct?”

Shock punched her in the stomach, and she swiveled a disbelieving look at the pairs of agents mingling in the lobby.No. Impossible.They had this all wrong. If there was something wrong—or...illegal—going on at the firm, she would know. Of course, she would know. Wouldn’t she?

“What’s this all about?” The elevator doors slid open, and he moved to hustle her onto the lift. “Please take your hands off me!”

Another man joined them. This one was tall and balding with a face lined with time. If she didn’t miss her guess, he was in charge. “Let her go, Bruce.” The man unhanded her. “We’re moving all employees of your firm into the conference room. So, if you don’t mind?”

She minded. She minded alot. She wanted to talk to Nate. Or William. Even Jacob would do, even though he was her least favorite person on the planet. Maybe Jacob

had done something. Something awful.

Not since her mother had died, many years ago, did she so desperately want to call her right now. To hear her voice. Tell her that she was scared. Not that she could help her. Or even calm her down.

But she allowed them to escort her onto the elevator and watched as they pushed the twenty-first-floor button. The steel doors swooshed shut.

Bollocks.

Her pulse whooshed against her eardrums. She felt like she might... faint. Or cry. Or lose it. None of those things was appropriate, so she did nothing but watch the floors ding past as the elevator rose. When they reached the office, it was even worse than she'd imagined. Every employee was crammed into the conference room, some sitting, others pacing. She couldn't see Nate or Jacob, but William Bledsoe, the founding partner, was sitting in his assistant's chair with his head in his hands.

Her stomach twisted. How can this be?

"I'll need your laptop and your phone," the lead agent said.

"This is all a terrible mistake."

"Yeah, and your boss made it," Bruce muttered under his breath.

"What did you say?"

"You can wait in that room with the others," the older agent said as she reluctantly emptied out her bag and handed over her electronics.

The thick smell of fear had settled over the conference room. As she walked in, everyone looked up with a haunted look of despair. These people. She'd worked with all of them for so long, knew each of them and their families. She understood that look and what all this meant for them and for their futures. Several were huddled in quiet conversation and Willam's assistant was crying softly.

Jay Needham, a long-time friend and colleague, was leaning against a wall as she approached, and gestured to the empty spot beside him.

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“Emily.”

“Jay?” she said, still in shock.

“You’re just in time.” He tilted his head back against the wall with a sigh. “Welcome to the end of everything.”

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An hour later, she stood on the curb in front of the building in the pouring rain, alongside Mitch Abrams, Rachel Dougherty, and Kendall Black, each cradling a smallish cardboard box full of their personal things—all strictly inspected by the FBI for contraband before leaving the building. No one needed to tell them it was the end of their firm, regardless of whatever the outcome of the FBI probe. William Bledsoe had been led away in handcuffs without a single glance at his employees. No apologies or explanations. Just gone.

As the rain soaked them, the three briefly hugged, knowing they’d likely never cross paths again and went their separate ways, all of them unsuccessfully choking back tears.

Emily thought of hailing a cab, but she had a better chance of being struck by lightning than she did getting a cab in NYC in the rain. So, she headed back toward the subway.

But she’d only gone a half block before she caught the heel of her useless Louboutin shoe in a sidewalk grate, neatly snapping it off. She wobbled comically trying to

catch her balance, before nearly face planting on the sidewalk. But for the box she held that spilled across the walkway, she would have done more than scrape the hell out of her knees and wrists.

She muttered another curse.

For the longest moment, she lay there, with the wind knocked out of her, and the rain soaking her, wondering what wicked thing she must have done to deserve this day. This utter cataclysm. Some karmic debt maybe? Some past transgression? All these years of hard work and this was the end? Gutted by a man she'd trusted with her life?

Her knees and palms burned as she got to her feet to collect her scattered things, her wet hair dangling in her face.

Someone reached for the shattered picture frame with a photo of her sister and her and handed it to her. Emily looked up.

Pete stared down at her with a worried frown. "Can I give ya'll a hand, Ms. Quinn?"

On a near sob, she reached for his hand, and he helped her up. "Thank you, Pete."

"It ain't nothin'. I'll get these things for you. Walk you to the subway."

"You really needn't—"

"I'm goin' that way anyway. Be happy to carry these for you."

His kindness was almost too much to bear right now. So, she simply nodded and let him collect the remnants of the life she'd lived for the past six years, all contained in a half-collapsed cardboard box. With a hostile wrench, she tore the broken heel off her shoe and tossed it in a rubbish can.

As she limped along beside him, he said not a word about the broken shoe—not as if he hadn't warned her—nor did he ask her a single thing about why she was carrying her life down the street. No doubt he and every other Wall Street patron and pedestrian had seen the FBI swarming the street like busy little bees, disassembling the lives of all of her friends.

And hers.

She wouldn't be able to buy a job in this town now. Not for months. Or maybe years. Maybe never. Her resume would now be worth approximately what these useless shoes of hers were worth, because her name would be tainted with William's ill-gotten gains forever.

She still couldn't believe it. But she saw it. They all saw it on his face. He knew he'd been caught. Busted. And he'd screwed people he knew. Loved, even. And he'd screwed his employees as well.

She wiped the rain off her face, glad that Pete couldn't see that the rain had mixed with tears. She guessed her mascara was a bloody mess by now.

Think of the chocolate tart. Or the vinaigrette.

In her mind, she poured the ingredients together into the carafe, but it all got muddled and wrong. Oh, no. Should she cancel dinner altogether? Could she now?

She wanted to call Muriel, tell her what happened, but the FBI still had her phone.

They climbed down the subway stairs to the tunnel and Pete carried her box the whole way.

When they were almost at the platform, he stopped in front of her. "You bleedin'

there, Ms. Quinn,” Pete said, pointing at the trickle of blood sliding down her leg. “Maybe we should stop and buy some bandages before you get on that dirty subway.”

She breathed a laugh. Really. She’d shredded her knees on a filthy NYC sidewalk. How much worse could it get? “I’ll be okay. Thank you, though.”

“Will you, though?” he asked sincerely.

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The concern on his face made her feel almost worse. There he was, homeless, unemployed, living off God knew what, and he was worried for her. She had plenty of money to get by for a while. She wouldn't be on the street next month. Or even next year.

She would just be...what? Deported. That was what.

"Today's just... rubbish. But I'll get through this. Don't worry about me, Pete."

"You know, most people never give me the time of day. In fact, most won't even look me in the eye. But you did. And even though I'm just a nobody, livin' on the street, I do. Worry, that is," he said, handing her the box.

"Well... thank you." For a moment, she searched his face. "If you don't mind my asking, where are you from, Pete?"

He looked at first confused by her question. "Kentucky. Originally. Outside 'a Lexington."

"Oh, I adore Kentucky."

"Yeah, me, too."

"I'm not from here originally either," she said.

He smiled at her. "You don't say, now?"

Emily rolled her eyes knowing it was quite clear to everyone she was an import. “Sometimes, I think I should just go home.”

He stared down at the floor. “Yeah. I get that. Thing is, I got nothing to go back to Kentucky for. Nobody, that is. They all gone.”

“I’m sorry.”

His face brightened a little. “I’d better let you go. I hear your train a’coming.”

She frowned for a moment. “Wait. Will you hold this for me for a minute again?”

Confused, he did, and she took out a pen and scribbled on a piece of paper, then handed it to him. “I’m having... a dinner party tonight, despite—or rather in direct defiance of—what happened today. I do it once a month for friends and even some friends of friends that I don’t know. Strangers. I do it because I love to cook, and I love to cook for people I care about and because that... well, that job I just lost, let’s just say it was not exactly a facilitator for human connection. Here. That’s my address. I’d love it if you would come.”

“Oh.” A look of horror crept to his expression. “What?No.I-I couldn’t. No.”

“You could,” she said taking the box back. “I’m inviting you. They’re all very nice people. You should come. The food will be good. I promise.”

He backed away. “I... I don’t... no. I don’t need a pity dinner. Thanks.”

“No. Not pity,” she said quickly. “Pete. You’ve always been so kind to me. You look out for me, save me from wayward cab drivers and icy sidewalks. Today wasn’t the first time. And I... I just want to say thank you.”

“That’s enough. Your thanks. That’s enough. You been good to me, too. But no. I couldn’t.”

“Okay. But you keep that,” she said, pointing at the address. “If you change your mind, I’m just up the B line. Seven p.m. And... if I don’t see you, I hope our paths will cross again one day.”

“Yeah.” He shuffled his feet, then looked up at her through his dark lashes. “Goodbye, Ms. Quinn.”

She smiled a little sadly at him. “Pete.”

“Ya’ll take care, now.” He nodded and disappeared up the steps they’d come down.

She sighed. Drat. She’d messed that up, too. Why did she even ask him that? She’d probably insulted him somehow. At the very least, angered him. Of course, he couldn’t imagine that he would feel comfortable with her friends. But he didn’t know her friends. And she’d meant every word.

There was something about him. He wasn’t a drug user. She knew enough of those to recognize the signs. He was simply unhoused and alone and whatever had happened in his life to put him there made her want to do something for him. But he’d taken it wrong.

Could this day get any worse? No, no. Don’t ask that question. Ever.

Buck up, Emily. This is your life now.

The train pulled onto the platform, and she juggled the box in her arms as she navigated the crowded doorway of the train as several people pushed past her. With her wonky shoe, soaked hair and her arms full, she was a disaster by any measure, but

she didn't care. No one and nothing could make her feel any worse than she already did.

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Except, perhaps, the glare of the psychotic-looking woman standing next to her.

With wild, graying hair and a locked-in frown, she narrowed a look at Emily. “I was here first,” the woman said, taking possession of the hand strap over Emily’s head.

Emily responded with a death stare of her own but moved farther down the crowded aisle. There were no seats. No straps left. So, she braced herself, holding her humiliating box, which she was sure everyone identified for exactly what it was.

As the train began to move, someone tapped her shoulder.

“Please. Take my seat,” said the man standing suddenly beside her—a cowboy wearing a black Stetson who had just vacated the seat near her.

He was—plainly stated—beautiful, with the most striking hazel/green eyes she’d ever seen. Eyes that matched the rain-damp, deep blue denim shirt he wore under his sheepskin jacket.

“Oh. Thank you... that’s very—” But before she could finish, a teenager with blond dreads jumped into that open seat and immediately lost himself to his phone.

The cowboy looked... chagrined? Annoyed? No, maybeshocked was the word. As if he couldn’t fathom such rudeness.

“Kid,” he said to the boy. “I was offering that seat to this lady.”

“Huh?” the kid said, not bothering to look up.

“I said—”

“It’s my seat now.” The dreadlocked kid glared up at him with a challenging grin.

She actually saw the cowboy’s impulse to physically change the kid’s mind, but she shifted her box in her arms and stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“Let him have it,” she said, and the kid gave a shoulder roll of victory. “I’m not going far. And someday, he’ll get it,” she said loud enough for the boy to hear, “but by then he’ll no doubt be fat, middle-aged, and wretchedly alone and wondering what happened to his sad, lonely life.” The boy froze in his scrolling and scowled but was definitely dug in. “But today isn’t that day,” she went on, turning her attention back to the cowboy. “And he’s definitely not worth ruining your day for.”

“Not so sure about that, actually,” the stranger said.

Emily shook her head and smiled at the man as the train rattled on, ducking through deep underground tunnels and speeding past mysterious doorways and walls so close one could almost touch them. “It was a lovely thought, though,” she said. “Thank you. I can’t honestly remember the last time anyone offered me a seat on the subway. Rainorshine.”

“Well, now, that’s a real shame,” he said, his western drawl making an appearance. “Where I’m from, it’d be a given. Not that we have subways. But still.” His jacket was sparkling with drops of rain and his shirt was damp, stuck to his rather... clearly... muscular chest with which she found herself nearly at eye level.

Curious, she asked, “Where exactly is this mythical place where men are still chivalrous? Which is, I’m afraid to say, quite politically incorrect.”

He laughed a little. “Montana.” His voice was deep and a little gritty as if he hadn’t

talked much in a while.

“Montana? You are a long way from home.”

“Another universe. Pardon my saying so, but you don’t sound like you’re from here either.”

“No, you’re right. London, originally. But I’ve been here a bit. Wait. Don’t tell me I still have an accent,” she said with a straight face.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“I’m kidding. It’s all right. I’m quite used to it. But I rather consider myself a New Yorker now. So, I do apologize for the weather. It must be spoiling your sightseeing.”

“Not at all.” A tiny frown formed between his brows beneath the brim of that hat. “From the looks of that shoe, your day’s going a lot worse than mine.” He gestured at her broken shoe and didn’t have to even mention her bedraggled appearance or the box in her arms.

She shifted her weight onto her one good shoe. “Oh, that? Honestly, that’s the least of it.” She laughed because the alternative seemed ridiculous.

“That bad, huh?”

“On a scale of one to ten?” she said. “Perhaps a minus twenty.”

“Ouch. Sorry.”

She shrugged. “That’s all right. Your kind—if neutralized—gesture did make it slightly better, though.”

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He shook his head with amusement with a glance at the brat who'd stolen her seat. "Say the word, I'll un-neutralize it."

"Tempting. But quite unnecessary."

He met her eyes with a look that said he was flirting with her. Or was she flirting with him? Good God. It had been so long since either had happened, she wasn't entirely sure. She never talked to anyone on the train. That generally seemed unwise and unsafe. Yet, he seemed... normal. Not creepy at all. And it felt almost fine to do it, here on a train, when she knew she'd never, ever see him again.

The train stopped at Canal and the car lost a few passengers and added a few more. Elbows and shoulders jostled for space. She couldn't help but move closer to him.

He smiled. She smiled back. Then both of them, at once, broke eye contact though she still sensed him staring at her before finally turning his attention to the subway route map above the windows, studying it. "Easy to get lost in this place," he said under his breath. "In this city."

"Are you?" she asked, grateful to have another chance to say... something. "Lost?"

"Not if Times Square is somewhere on this line. I am on the right train, aren't I?"

"Oh, yes. A few more stops up the line. Forty-Second Street is likely your stop."

He looked relieved. "Thanks. That sounds right."

The train picked up speed, then rolled over a curve in the tracks and she wasn't the only one to sway precariously sideways, nearly colliding with him, but the cowboy braced her elbow until the train straightened out. She got a surprisingly delicious whiff of him that close, some mixture of amber and rain that went straight to some primitive part of her brain, which sent a shiver of awareness through her. Then, he let her go.

"Ugh. How embarrassing," she said when she regained her balance. "I'm usually much better at this standing upright thing."

"These trains... they don't seem real people friendly." He shot a look back at the boy still comfortably on his phone.

"Oh, some would say that's just New York City in general."

"How about you? Would you say that?"

She sighed. "Perhaps you shouldn't ask me that on this day in particular. On the other hand, there are a few upsides to the city. Central Park—even in the winter—it's quite nice. Broadway shows. The holiday windows on Fifth Avenue. Oh, and of course, The Met..."

"The Met?"

"The Metropolitan Museum of Art. You can spend the whole day there. Especially on a rainy day like this. I highly recommend it. Not to be confused, mind you, with the Metropolitan Opera, Met. Which is also wonderful but... two totally different... Oh, I'm sorry. I'm babbling now."

"Not at all." He seemed amused, watching her as if trying to remember her from somewhere. Some little crease in his cheek kept appearing and disappearing. "I'll

sure keep those in mind.”

Well... she'd met her fair share of frogs—even toads—in NYC and even kissed a few of them. And worse. But the way he was looking at her... as if there weren't a dozen other people sandwiching them together and it was just two strangers on a train forging some kind of a connection.

Shake it off. You're never going to see him again. And, furthermore, he lives all the way across the country if you have your US geography right.

And he was definitely another type. Not at all. When she dated at all, she went for intellectual Wall Street types who pulled their weekend BMWs out of the garage and took her to Nobu or a Broadway show. Or to the Hamptons for the weekend. Or she took them. Though, admittedly, in both cases, it had been a while. So, it was, no doubt, just the sexy cowboy hat pulled down low over his eyes, or that silver buckle glinting on his belt or the way his jeans hugged his long legs or, more likely, the fact that her entire life had imploded this morning that had her stomach tumbling at his look.

But... maybe she was all wrong about her type. Maybe her type was...him.

The train slowed at Forty-Second Street, and she watched the platform slowly appear. She turned back to him. “This is you, then.”

“Right.” With a touch of his fingers to the brim of his cowboy hat, he smiled at her again. No wedding ring, at least. “It's Liam, by the way,” he said, reaching out for her hand. “It was nice to meet you.”

She blinked at his hand for a moment before taking it. His fingers were warm and callused and strong, and he didn't hold on too long. Just long enough.

“Nice to meet you, too, Liam. I’m—”

The train lurched to a stop and the doors swooshed open. Instantly, the crowd began pushing toward the exit. He frowned, trying to catch what she’d been about to say, but psycho lady shoved her from behind and knocked her a little off-balance with a hostile glare. And by the time she had caught her balance, Liam was already six seats toward the doors in the surging crowd.

Looking as if he had more to say, he held up a hand in a wave as more passengers came between them.

She waved back.

He gave a little shrug, as if to say, “Well, that’s that, then.” But as he passed the kid who’d appropriated her seat, he leaned down and whispered something in the boy’s ear that made the kid go pale, stand, and quickly hurry to the other end of the car.

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The seat was immediately taken by an elderly Hispanic woman who definitely needed it more than Emily did. Emily shook her head with a secret smile at him. He smiled back on his way out the door. And with one more touch of his hat, Liam—whose last name she would never know—disappeared into the crowded subway platform and out of her life forever.

“People who love to eat are always the best people.”

—Julia Child—

Chapter Two

“And you didn’t get her name?” Jess Brody, Liam’s host in the city and best friend from childhood, looked at him askance as they walked down Forty-Second Street after they’d met in front of the M&M store. “Your skills are a little rusty, my friend, from spending too much time with all those cattle.”

“Stating the obvious,” Liam replied, staring up at a skyscraper whose top he couldn’t see.

“Right. But you gotta remember, the city moves at a pace that makes Marietta, Montana, look like it’s standing still. You gotta jump at your chances here. No hesitation.”

He glared up at the rainy sky. “She looked like she was having a really bad day.”

“Maybe it’s just as well, then.”

But Liam didn't agree. She might have been having a terrible day, but he felt something in those few minutes with her. Something... good.

"Sorry, man. But on the upside, Carolyn's got a babysitter for tonight, because we're all invited to an event."

"What kind of event?"

Jess rubbed his hands together. "You'll like it. Trust me."

Liam hedged, tucking his hands in the pockets of his sheepskin jacket. "If you don't mind, I might just stay in tonight. I'm a little jet-lagged from that red-eye. I was thinking I'd go to bed early to be ready for the christening tomorrow."

"Hell, no. I mind. This thing? This event? It's kind of exclusive. An invite-only thing and Carolyn made sure we added our out-of-town guest to the list. My wife is a new, exhausted, housebound mom of a newborn, and believe me, you don't want to cross her." The two men exchanged smiles. "Anyway, the trick to jet lag is to go with whatever time zone you're in and just act as if it's yours."

This time zone would never belong to him. On the other hand, it felt good to be out on his own for a while. Away from the constant work and the early mornings and the aloneness.

Though truthfully, he was rarely alone, alone. There were always people around, whether it was family or construction crews. For the past year and a half, there had been a never-ending cast of characters at the ranch as the Hard Eight reinvented itself into a guest ranch. So it wasn't that there was a dearth of company on the ranch. Just... just not the kind he craved.

It was only slightly ironic that his siblings, all three of them—Will, Shay, and even

his baby sister, Cami, had lately gotten coupled up with life partners or married, when only two years ago, they'd all sworn off even the idea of that. Even his widowed mom had reunited with an old love, Ray Lane, and it looked like they were heading down the aisle soon, too.

And here he was, still single, walking the streets of New York with his old friend, who'd married the love of his life and had already started a family.

Two years ago, before his oldest brother, Will—the Hardesty's own prodigal son—had returned home to the Hard Eight ranch, Liam would have jumped at the chance to leave everything behind, move to a city like Jess had, start his life over... do what he thought he wanted to do—escape. But Will's arrival had turned everything around. Leaving wasn't what Liam wanted anymore. With the guest ranch development and reinventing his life from a beleaguered rancher to being an entrepreneur, architect, developer... He loved what he was doing. But there was something missing and it was no big secret what that something was.

Meeting that woman on the train... he couldn't say what it was about her, but it hit him like a bolt of heat lightning.

She was important. She was someone he wanted to know.

But, dammit, that wasn't to be.

It was still drizzling a cold rain as they passed a TICKT booth that claimed to sell cheap seats for Broadway shows, something he didn't expect he'd have time for. Along the way, he drew stares and looks from passersby, one of whom loudly speculated that he was the Marlboro Man.

He didn't fit in here. No denying that. He stuck out like a Guernsey in a field of Black Angus. A few steps up the street, he was almost heartened to catch a glimpse of a

cowboy hat in the crowd. But the closer he got the sight of the guy caught him off guard.

Good God.

The guy was standing, nearly naked, with only boots and a hat and a pair of tighty-whities, half-heartedly covered by the guitar he was strumming. There was a small crowd gathered around him taking pictures. He had an open guitar case in front of him and a sign that read, THENAKEDCOWBOY.

Liam rubbed a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing. The man was soaking wet from the earlier rain and had to be freezing. But he did not show it at all. There was a small, curious crowd around him taking photos with their cell phones.

“Hey, brother from another mother!” the guy shouted at him, noticing Liam was apparently one of his kind. “What brings you so far from home to the city that never sleeps?”

Jess grinned, looking expectantly at Liam as if waiting for some kind of sensible answer.

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Liam shrugged. He pointed at Jess.

“Ooohh,” the cowboy said, waggling his eyebrows suggestively, getting the crowd to join in. “ABrokeback Mountainsituation?”

This guy was playing to his crowd.

“Fraid not.” Liam pointed at Jess. “His kid. A christening.”

The guy laughed. “Just kiddin’, my friend. Congrats, Daddy, on the new kid. I support all choices here. So, feel free to donate to the cause. And that cause is me.” He strummed on his guitar, belting out “Let it Be.”

Liam did, indeed, donate to his cause, tossing a couple of dollars into the guitar case.

The cowboy nodded his thanks and moved on to another likely tourist. Jess was laughing.

“That’ll teach me to engage,” Liam said. “New York City is not Marietta.”

“No, it is not.”

“Don’t you think that guy gets cold?” he asked Jess as they walked away.

“That guy? He rakes in a hundred-fifty K a year on a bad year, I hear, so I guess he’s figured out his limits.”

Liam frowned just thinking about it as a woman pushing a baby stroller moved through the crowd toward them. It took him a moment to realize it was Carolyn and she had a baseball cap on, and her hair pulled back into a ponytail.

“Hey, you two! Sorry I’m late. Wyatt had a blowout just as we were leaving, and I had to change him all over again.”

Jess kissed her and she wrapped her arm around his.

“Liam, how are you liking our city so far? Aren’t you loving this rain? Thank goodness for stroller covers. He’s snug as a bug in there. Are we going to the museum or lunch first?”

Jess leaned toward Liam. “I never interrupt her when she’s on a roll like this.”

She punched his arm with a laugh. “You’re talking to a woman who’s been stuck at home for the last couple of months changing diapers, and if I’m excited to go anywhere, well, you’ll just have to live with it.”

“I’ll do more than that,” Jess said, kissing her cheek. “I’m taking you all to lunch at the Boathouse.”

“The Boathouse!” Carolyn clapped her hands together in happiness. “I haven’t been there in years!” The sweet little restaurant that edged the pond in Central Park, where boats were launched by tourists, she explained, was a favorite of hers.

“That’s because we’re not tourists anymore,” he said. “And I can guarantee Liam’s never been there. It’s the ambiance. The view. And the food’s not half bad either. You up for a short walk?”

Liam grinned. “I’m starving, so I’ll follow you two anywhere.”

“He met someone,” Jess confided to his wife. “But then he lost her.”

Carolyn looked stricken. “What?”

“Ignore him,” Liam said. “It was nothing. Just a moment. On a train.”

“On the train? Oohhh, like *Brief Encounter*. I loved that old movie,” Carolyn gushed. “Trevor Howard and... oh, who was the woman? Anyway, the two of them are married to other people, but accidentally fall in love when they meet on the train. They run into each other a few times and then—”

“Have a fairy tale happy ending?” Jess said, grinning at Liam.

“No. Tragically—they’re forced apart forever. Never saw each other again.” Carolyn tipped her head sympathetically at Liam. “Oh, I’m sorry. Maybe that wasn’t a helpful analogy.”

“Not particularly, babe,” Jess agreed. “At any rate...” He considered Liam. “You okay, dude?”

“Aside from tragic Hollywood endings? Yeah. I’m hungry. Let’s go eat.”

But he was pretty sure that the way his own story with the mysterious girl on the train had already ended. Only with considerably less drama.

*

The sun was sinking past the city skyline, and the Hudson was glimmering with a pinkish cast as Emily Quinn stood at the window of her brownstone lost in thought. While preparing for tonight's meal, she'd barely had two seconds this afternoon to contemplate all that had happened today—which was, perhaps, a blessing—but as far as the office was concerned, the evening news was all over what had happened to William.

Well, not strictly to William. What William had done—to the rest of them. All of whom, she was positive, had nothing to do with any illegal accounting that he had perpetrated on their unwitting clients. Nor did she believe that the other partners were in on any shenanigans either. At least, she hoped not. After all, William Bledsoe had apparently managed to hoodwink all of them, including many family members and close friends. Including his whole staff.

It truly boggled the mind.

But the darker thought, the one that had been poking at her for most of the day, was that the rest of them could somehow be considered complicit in his actions. In her mind, she reviewed every meeting, every email, every piece of work that had passed between them in the last six months and nothing, not a thing had raised any alarms.

Which probably meant it was some Madoff-esq type Ponzi scheme that he had managed to conceal from all of them. How had she missed it?

At least they hadn't arrested her. Or anyone else for that matter. Maybe that was a

good sign that this whole mess belonged to William.

God, she hoped so.

Then... there was the man she'd met on the train. Liam. Her thoughts had drifted off to him more than a few times as she was prepping dinner.

Emily sighed. No use thinking about him or what might have been. He was water under the proverbial bridge. Or the train tunnel. And she had more immediate things to worry about. Like finding another job.

"I've seen that look before," her little sister Muriel said, wiping her hands on a dish towel. "That thousand-mile stare. And usually there's a man involved, possibly that bloke on the train? But today, I'd guess it has more to do with your immediate future than any one man. Have you called Dad?"

"No! And please don't. He'll hear of it soon enough. There'll be no keeping this a secret."

"I should think not. But what are you going to do?"

"No idea. I'm out of a job. That's all I know for sure. Nate and Jacob as much as told us. Within a week or two, the offices will officially close after they wrap up loose ends. Help clients move out their accounts. We're still not sure if Nate and Jacob will get clean of it, themselves."

"I'm so sorry, Em. It's not fair."

"I really can't think about it now. People will be here in a half hour. I need to get dressed. You've set an extra place in case Pete comes? I don't suppose he will, but still..."

“Of course. I put him beside you.”

She couldn't think of a single person coming who would not welcome him. But there were a few extras coming that she didn't know. But this was her party, and she could invite whoever she wanted.

Muriel was already dressed in her cutest outfit that she'd bought down in a SoHo boutique—a sage-green silky jumpsuit that looked fabulous with her blonde hair and gray-green eyes. Muriel had gotten all the looks in the family, that was for sure.

“Is the halibut all prepped and ready to go?”

“It's ready in the fridge. The table looks incredible. Everything is going to be wonderful. You're a magician. I'm so glad I get to be here for one of your meals.”

“You're welcome any time, you know that. I've missed you. So glad you're here today of all days.”

“Me, too,” Muriel said, giving Emily a quick hug. “I mean, not for that reason. I mean, I wish it was for a different reason. Oh! Now, go. Get ready. You've got this.”

“Right. I'm off.”

Thirty minutes later, guests began arriving.

Since she was in the kitchen, she'd given Muriel the task of greeter. And she heard a few voices she recognized. Kat and David Grimes, her friends from the old building she'd lived in before this one, had arrived. She immediately heard her friend, fashion designer Susan Tish's laugh and that of her partner, Merideth Boles. She loved them both and was excited to hear about their latest IVF journey.

She was quite sure everyone who would be here tonight had already heard about today's events, but she didn't want to talk about it. Maybe she'd make an announcement, banning the topic. Maybe talking about it was what she needed. But no. Not tonight. Tonight was about food and sharing it with friends. That was all she wanted to think about now.

There were only a few things that were last moment to cook, and she always made it a point to mingle first with a glass of wine with her guests before settling in to serving dinner. Her sommelier friend, Danel Grainier, had chosen a Cass viognier and a Gran Moraine pinot noir for tonight, which were dry and also had a note of fruitiness, that would pair with the halibut. Generally, she chose a menu that could be mostly prepped ahead with a minimum of time for her to be absent from her company, but that didn't always work. Like tonight, with the polenta and the asparagus.

Hoping they'd nosh on the nibble boards with olives, pickles, and other bits of charcuterie she'd laid out until she could join them, she pulled the salad from the fridge and decorated it with torn blossoms from the pansies she'd picked up today until the look satisfied her.

She heard the doorbell again and heard Jess Brody's voice and Carolyn's adorable laugh. She'd met Jess at a charity event four years ago and loved him and Carolyn both and they were regular invitees to her events. They'd told her they were bringing an out-of-town guest with them tonight, which was fine with her. New blood for the dinner discussion. She wiped her hands on a towel, grabbed her wine and headed out into the living room.

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She very nearly dropped her glass and did not contain her gasp of surprise. The man standing behind Carolyn, hanging back a bit at the door was—

“Em!” Jess pulled her into a hug. “So great to see you again. You don’t know how much we’ve been looking forward to this.”

“It’s been months since we’ve done anything fun,” Carolyn said. “Because... baby.”

Over Jess’s shoulder, her eyes met the cowboy’s. He appeared to be every bit as stunned as she was to find himself standing in her living room. A small, disbelieving grin tipped his mouth, and he doffed his black cowboy hat and held it in his hands, revealing his thick, dark hair that was ruffled and wavy.

“Oh. My. God,” she whispered against Jess’s ear as he hugged her.

He pulled back. “Oh, Emily, this is our friend, Liam Hardesty from Montana. I’ve braced him for an incredible meal.”

Liam swallowed hard before reaching a hand out to her. “We’ve already met, actually,” he said quietly.

His fingers closed around hers, still warm, and for the second time in one day, sent a little charge through her hand and a shiver of surprise through her.

“Wait,” Carolyn said. “You two have... met?How?”

“On a train,” they both said at once, their eyes locked on each other.

Jess turned to Liam. “This is her? Emily is the girl on the train?”

Muriel widened her eyes at Emily, hardly suppressing a look of shock. Heat crept to Emily’s cheeks, and she was suddenly speechless. First, at the sight of him, standing in her living room and second—he’d mentioned their meeting to Jess? There was no way that the two of them had randomly met on that train today, only to find themselves together tonight, here, in her home. What were the odds of something like that happening? She couldn’t even—

“He’s been talking about you all day,” Jess said. “About this girl he met on the train.”

If a cowboy could blush, Liam did just that. “I wouldn’t say all day. Just—”

“Until we walked in the door,” Carolyn finished.

Liam dipped his head and grinned at Emily. She smiled back.

Jess said, “Well, then, let me actually introduce you. Emily Quinn, meet Liam Hardesty. Liam, Emily. Dear friend, the queen of the dinner party, and chef extraordinaire.”

“No, no. I’m...I’m not a proper chef.” Emily reached for Carolyn’s coat. “I just love to cook for my friends. Of which you are officially now one,” she told Liam. “Welcome. Please, come in.”

“I can’t believe it’s you,” he said, handing her his coat, too.

“I’m a bit gobsmacked myself. I’m so happy you came. I’ll take these coats back and Muriel will get you something to drink and there’s a few nibble boards around. Please, help yourself.”

Carolyn grabbed her arm as she moved toward the bedroom and whispered, “Are you okay? I saw the news.”

Was she? Okay? Who knew? “Ugh. Yes. I’m fine. But let’s not talk about it tonight. Let’s just eat, drink, and forget all that. It’s Valentine’s Day, after all. Let’s not spoil it with talk of how the giant of finance who made me has also ruined me.”

She hugged her quickly. “I’m sorry. Okay, but you know if there’s anything I can do...”

Carolyn, when she wasn’t being the world’s best mum, was a crack defense attorney who worked for one of the best firms in town. And even though she’d promised them she’d be back after the baby, Emily knew she was torn about putting Zoe in daycare, or even with a nanny.

Emily often wondered what she would do if she ever got so lucky to even have the choice, and decided it wasn’t worth thinking about. Her career was demanding and few women survived who decided to have families. And she hadn’t even managed to find a partner, let alone consider having a family. Now, her free hours would be consumed with finding a new job and starting all over again, working twice as hard as every man in the place just to justify her existence. No time for partners or children.

After dumping the coats off in the other room, she returned, taking a gulp of wine, watching as Liam moved into the room with the graceful prow of an athlete. Or a cowboy. Though, truthfully, the only experience she had with the latter was watching spaghetti westerns with her brother when they were kids, speculating about the romanticism of the American west. She tried to picture Liam on a horse. Roping. Or galloping up a hill. And she found herself mildly overheating.

She chugged the rest of her wine and took a deep breath.

Refilling her glass, she found him standing beside her. “You know, if you and I were to randomly run into each other twice in one day in the small town I come from in Montana, nobody would blink an eye. But here? Those odds are closer to finding a four-leaf clover in a field of alfalfa. Or worse.”

“I’m quite happy it happened, though. I never really got to thank you properly for your kindness. Or to ask what exactly you said to that boy to make him vacate the train like his hair was on fire.”

Liam just chuckled. “I told him you were an undercover detective, working vice and truancy.”

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She laughed. “Ah! Quite motivational, apparently.”

He laughed, too. “Apparently.”

“Well, I hope you brought your appetite,” she said. “As you can see, there’s no shortage of food tonight.”

He popped the prosciutto wrapped grana padano cheese with fig preserves in his mouth and rolled his eyes. “Ohhh, mm-mm,” he moaned. “That’s... that’s really good.”

“It’s the fig preserves,” she said. “They never fail to please.”

“No, it’s the whole thing, all together. And... never had fig jam before. I... think I’ll need to start. And no need to worry about my appetite. My sisters spent most of my life accusing me of bein’ a bottomless pit. Or having a hollow leg. One of the two. Mostly that’s still true.”

“That’s quite graphic. You don’t, do you? Have a hollow leg?”

“Only when there’s good food involved.”

“Well, you’re in the right place, I hope. You said sisters, plural. You have a big family?”

“There’s four of us kids. Two sisters, one older, one younger. And an older brother, too. He and my older sister are twins, in fact.”

“Twins? Oh, how lovely! I have a brother who’s quite stodgy and not much fun, and Muriel, of course, who is the sunshine of every gathering. She’s here from London for a few weeks.” She took another nervous gulp of wine.

“It’s a nice place to visit. New York City.”

Or to live. She’d gotten used to this city, though it had never felt as much like home for her as London did. But having left years ago, with the intention of creating her own life, London was now more of a memory than home. And all of the people in this room made this place real.

Liam stood near her window, taking in the room. It was unusually large for a New York City apartment and rent controlled, so she’d been lucky there. But even now, as the city skyline grew dark and the lights came up in windows across town, the view from here was quite something and part of the ambiance of these dinner parties.

She watched him watching the sky darken. “Were you really talking about me all day to Jess and Carolyn?”

A smile tipped his mouth. “Well, if you want to know the truth, I was kicking myself for not getting your name. Or your number.”

“And here you are.” She pulled her cell phone from her pocket. “Have your phone? I’ll call you, then you’ll have my number.”

“Really? Oh, yeah.” He pulled out his phone and she did exactly that. “Okay, then. Thank you.”

“Well, you are already vetted through Jess. So, I know you’re not a stalker or anything weird.”

“Your number is safe with me.”

For a moment, Emily forgot there were a half-dozen other guests in the room because the way he was looking at her made her feel as if she was the only one here. His look flustered and flattered her, but also reminded her that everyone had come to eat, and she needed to get back to the kitchen. He’d probably never call her and even if he did, he lived thousands of miles away.”

“All right. Don’t go anywhere,” she told him. “The food needs my attention for a few minutes, but I’ll be back. Please, enjoy yourself.”

“Oh, I’ll be right here,” he assured her.

Jess clapped him on the shoulder and directed him over to another couple as she left for the kitchen, her knees feeling a bit shaky for no good reason at all. It wasn’t as if she didn’t interact with attractive men all day long. Or even fend off flirts. But whatever he was doing, it didn’t feel the same. Not like normal flirtation. Nor was it the same for her. There was some connection she couldn’t understand going on between them. But if anything, it seemed doomed to a temporary status. A momentary interplay between two strangers who intersected. His world was light-years apart from hers. And soon, he’d be returning to it.

Think about the food, Emily. Just the food.

*

Liam was only half listening to the conversation around him. He knew that Jess wanted him to meet the others at the party, but his mind was on her. On Emily.

Emily Quinn.

The name suited her. She was so... so British and so different from the women he knew. And with all these friends of hers here, who were all so... urbane, he guessed the word was, so... on another level from anything he was, he couldn't help but feel out of place here. Aside from the thing they were building at the ranch, he was just a simple cowboy who ranched cattle and had spent every day of his life in mucked-up boots with straw in his hair. And while there was definitely some chemistry happening between them, he suspected he was simply more of a novelty to her than anything else.

But he was all in for tasting the food she was cooking tonight—which already smelled amazing—and despite their lunch at the Boathouse today, he had worked up an appetite walking around this city.

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He was a beer guy, mostly, but he had to admit the red wine she was serving was fine. His Dallas-raised sister-in-law, Izzy, had tried to infuse some wine culture into their ranch over the last two years, but he'd resisted. Maybe he should try to up his game.

The woman named Susan was saying something to him and he dragged his attention away from the kitchen.

"Jess says you're a rancher out in Montana. Where is your ranch exactly?"

"Marietta is in between Bozeman and Billings, between the Yellowstone and Marietta Rivers. Southern Montana."

Susan, a fashion designer apparently, clapped her hands. "I adore Montana. A friend of mine bought land there near Flathead Lake and summers there. But the Absarokas. Oh! The views! The mountains!"

"It is pretty," he admitted. "We do have lots of part-timers coming to our state. Tourists, too. We actually have a little guest ranch operation about to get up and running this spring."

Jess said, "Which I can attest to being amazing, since Carolyn and I were the first guests last fall at the Hard Eight in one of their spectacular glamping tents. It's a fantastic location. Liam has done an amazing job of it."

"Not just me. It's been a team effort, for sure. But we have high hopes for it come spring. We're already getting bookings."

“Well, we’re coming back,” Carolyn said. “Aren’t we, Jess? As soon as Zoe’s ready for a trip.”

Susan gushed, “We’ll have to come as well! We adore the west.”

Muriel chimed in. “Montana sounds so romantic! The old west. Cow ranches. There’s nothing like it in England, really.”

“Get your sister to take you out there someday,” Liam said with a grin. “We’ll show you a good time.”

“Brilliant. I’ll work on that you can be sure.”

When the conversation took a turn to the IVF struggle Susan and her partner Merideth were having, Muriel leaned close to Liam, refilling his glass with more wine. “FYI, you were also the topic of conversation here as well after Em met you on the train. She was quite taken.”

Surprised, Liam glanced at the kitchen doorway where Emily was leaning over a dish, carefully constructing it.

A surge of something unfamiliar moved through him. “Yeah?”

“Oh, indeed,” Muriel said. “And to say that’s a rare thing for my sister is saying a lot. The fact that I heard about you at all is telling. Quite a coincidence that you found your way here tonight as well.” She shook her head. “Do you believe in fate, Mr. Hardesty?”

“It’s just Liam,” he said, amused by her bouncy personality. “And, well... I’ve never given it a lot of thought.”

“If you ask me—and,” she said, “clearly you’re not... asking me—but I think something quite fateful happened today between the two of you. How strangely delicious. I say ignore fate at your peril, because clearly, it seems the universe means for you and my sister to connect.”

He wasn’t sure if the universe or fate was involved, or if it was just coincidence that he’d offered Emily Quinn a seat today on a train and ended up here, but what he did know was that he didn’t want to make the same mistake twice. He wanted to get to know her better. And even though he was in town for a short time, he meant to make that happen, somehow.

There was a knock on the door and Emily hurried from the kitchen to answer it. His first thought was that the man standing in her hallway was delivering something. But at the sight of everyone in the room standing in little groups of conversation, Liam saw him back away, try to leave. But Emily caught him by the arm, insisting he come in. Reluctantly, he did.

To Liam, he looked like half the guys who rode cattle drives with him, minus the silver buckles, or the ones who hung out in the cowboy bars around town, though the man at her door was clean shaven with his hair slicked back and he wore a white shirt buttoned all the way up to his throat under his dark blue, puffy jacket. If there was anyone who felt more like a fish out of water than he himself did here, it was this guy. He was holding a small bouquet of red and yellow flowers, and he handed them to Emily.

“Pete! Thank you! I’m so glad you came,” she said. “Please. Come in. Come in and meet everyone. Everyone, this is Peter,” Emily announced. “He’s a friend of mine.”

Collectively, the group said hello and several moved to shake his hand in greeting.

Pete barely made eye contact with the others but nodded shyly. But he didn’t take his

coat off and he didn't make any move toward the group. Maybe Liam was the only one who could hear what he said to her next because the others had all returned to their conversations.

"No, I didn't come for dinner, Ms. Emily," he told her quietly. "I just came to give you these," he said of the flowers. "And to say that your invite was the kindest thing anyone's ever done for me. And I think today I didn't act as grateful for it as I should've just for the askin'."

"Oh. No. Don't be silly. Of course you'll stay for dinner. I've made you a place at the—"

He shook his head. "No, no. I thank you again, ma'am. But I gotta be goin'. I just wanted to say... I just wanted you to know, that I... I won't always be this," he told her, indicating himself, as if the person she saw before her wasn't at all the person he was. "And it was your kindness and your invite here to your home that made me believe I could be somebody again. I just wanted you to know that. And to say thank you."

Emily's eyes grew bright, and her face flushed.

She swallowed thickly as she took his hand. "I... oh, Pete... you've been a good friend to me, too. And if there's anything I can do—"

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“No, nope,” he said. “You’ve already done that. That’s all I needed to say. Sorry for botherin’ your dinner. Ya’ll have a good night now.” He started to back out the door.

“Wait. If you won’t stay, let me wrap up a plate for you. It’s all ready. Just give me a second. I’ll bring it you.”

“No, I—”

“Wait right here.” And she disappeared into the kitchen, before he could argue.

He stood awkwardly, not certain what to do. Liam took a step closer. “From the aroma coming from that kitchen, I’d say she means what she says.” He held his hand out to him. “Liam. Nice to meet you, Pete.”

“You, too.”

“Strangers,” he said. “I get it. I’ve never been real comfortable mingling with them either.”

Pete straightened and shifted his feet, taking in all the couples in the room. “You Emily’s boyfriend?”

“Me? No. We just met. Today as a matter of fact. My friends over there are responsible for my being here.” He glanced toward the kitchen, where Emily was trying to put a plate together for her friend. But it was funny he’d asked that. Funny, but not in a ha-ha way. To Pete, he said, “I’m not from around here.”

He nodded. "Me neither. Kentucky."

"Horse country. I'm from Montana. We like horses there, too."

That raised Pete's eyebrows. "My daddy was a horseman. I grew up around 'em. Kentucky horses. Thoroughbreds."

"We're mostly quarter horses where I am. But you gotta admire a long-legged Thoroughbred. They sure are beautiful."

"Yeah," Pete said with a faraway look in his eye. "They were good people. Horses, I mean. You have any? Horses?"

"We do. We have a little working ranch out there called the Hard Eight. Our ranch horses work our cattle. And we take in some mustangs from the BLM, feed 'em and watch over them for the government. Some of them get trained if they're young enough."

"Oh. Cool," he said loosening up a bit. "I was a kid, mornings, my old man used to let me warm 'em up on the track before the jockeys got there to take 'em through their paces. Nothin' too dangerous. I loved 'em."

"I can see why. And somehow, you ended up in New York City."

Pete chuckled a little sadly. "That's a story for another time. Maybe the ending to that story's about to change."

"That's what I like about stories. Their endings are always fluid. Depending on the point of view."

Pete frowned at him. "Stories we tell ourselves, at least."

Good point. “Very true.”

Emily reappeared with a tin-foil-covered plate for him and some silverware wrapped in a napkin. “Here. I hope you enjoy it,” she told him. “It’s made with love. Don’t let it get cold before you eat it. Okay?”

He nodded. “Thank you, Ms. Emily. I’ll get your plate back to you.”

She smiled a little sadly. “Happy Valentine’s Day, Pete.”

“And to you, too.” He nodded a goodbye to Liam and then to her and disappeared out the door and was gone.

Emily sighed with a look at Liam. “Thank you for talking to him. He was just nervous. That’s all.”

“That was kind of you. Makin’ him a plate.”

“I wish he’d stayed. But...”

But Liam understood why he hadn’t. “Seems like your kindness meant a lot to him.”

“As did his to me.” She smiled brightly. “Well, I’d better get dinner served up. Get yourself some more wine. I’ll be out in a minute.”

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A few minutes later, they all sat down for the meal she'd prepared. But before they ate, she stood and raised a glass of wine to the table, which was decorated with red roses in single vases clustered in the center of the table.

"As you all know," she began, "this dinner is always a labor of love for me. And you're all here because in some way you've made my time in this big city better, happier, more connected. This city can feel very lonely even if you're busy with work or family. And all of you make it feel so much less so. So, thank you. And if you're new here"—she looked directly at him—"like Liam, it's no accident. At least, that's what I believe. Welcome to the circle, Liam."

Heat traveled up his neck. Absently, he wondered if there was such a thing as love at first sight. And if it was possible to feel something like that without even looking for it. His hand tightened around his glass at the thought. No, she was charming and beautiful and all the things, but he was pretty sure what he was feeling was awe, not some teen-aged, angsty smitten-ness.

"Anyway," she continued, smiling in a way that made his heart pick up a beat, "on this day, which happens to be Valentine's Day, I thank you all so much for choosing to celebrate it with me instead of braving the reservation desks at the local restaurants."

They all laughed at that.

"Here, here!" Merideth agreed.

"It really means so much to me. Here's to friendship." Emily raised her glass and

everyone else did the same, drinking a toast to the evening. “Now. Let’s eat!”

But Muriel raised her glass again. “Wait, wait! To Emily, for all of this. So happy I could be here for tonight.”

Now a cheer went up from the table. “To Emily!” followed by a murmur of excitement for the food to come.

Liam was in no way ready for the deliciousness. The perfectly seared and baked fish with its bed of cheesy polenta, those little green, salty things Carolyn called capers. The perfectly grilled asparagus. All of it was... he couldn’t find the words. The flavors melded together like they were always supposed to be one whole thing. And the salad she served on a small, little plate wasn’t just any salad, it was a work of art with... flowers, actualflowersin it and the perfect vinaigrette dressing. But all of it was plated up with such artistry. She might have said she wasn’t a chef, but he couldn’t imagine how a chef could do it better.

He looked around the table, wondering if they were as blown away as he was.

But everyone else was just... eating her food like they weren’t the least bit surprised at how good it was while he felt speechless, savoring every bite. Granted, he was raised on good, everyday food back home. His mother was a good cook, and she enjoyed it. But she’d be the first to say she wasn’t a fancy cook. This food was like something his mom might cook but taken up to a whole different level.

He was also watching her as he enjoyed her food as she moved effortlessly between the conversations of her guests. She thought it was her sister, Muriel, who had a light around her. But it was Emily, really. Jess had told him that Emily did this dinner thing monthly, and always invited different people. They’d been lucky enough to get invited several times this year alone and made it a point to invite Emily to all of their holiday celebrations, too. They had, in fact, spent Christmas Eve together this year.

It struck him that his family was such a built-in support system that he took them for granted. They were just always there. One big, extended family, even though most of them had moved on into their own places now that they'd all coupled up. But still, there were family dinners every Sunday, and often in the evenings after a hard day. All of them were in some way involved in the building and organization of their new guest ranch.

Truth was, he wasn't alone much. He didn't even have time to think about being alone and he realized that occasionally, he wished for some space from all of them. Cattle and horses were not the best of companions. His family pushing him to come to New York, for instance at Jess's invitation, was them recognizing that he needed to get off the ranch, quit being on his own and meet some people.

He'd have to remember to thank them when he got home.

After they finished the dinner—which took its time in a lazy, lingering way—she brought out a flourless chocolate tart, shaped like a heart and divvied it up right there at the table to the oohs and aahs of her guests. It was, if such a thing were possible, even more decadent than the meal and he savored every bite.

Jess, who was sitting next to him patted his stomach and moaned in an aside to him out of the hearing of the others who were deep in conversation about the peril of the honeybee. “Didn’t I tell you?”

“You did,” he agreed. “That was the best meal I’ve ever had.”

“And she did all this on probably the worst day of her life.”

Liam frowned. “How so?”

He leaned closer, whispering, “She lost her job today and the whole firm went under

from her boss's fraud."

Oh, no. Liam shot a look at her, laughing at something Carolyn said. He remembered the cardboard box she was carrying on the train and the rain-streaked mascara on her face. Maybe it wasn't from the rain.

"But she doesn't want to talk about that, apparently, so mum's the word."

He nodded, feeling a surge of protectiveness for her. From the looks of this apartment, she did quite well at whatever it was she did. Past tense. But a place like this in New York City didn't pay for itself. If she was worried about being out of work, she hid it well.

They all stayed after dinner, talking and enjoying each other, but finally Carolyn had to get back to the baby and they had a babysitter to pay. As much as Liam wanted to stay and talk to Emily more, he found himself at the door with his coat in Emily's hands, saying good night.

"Maybe I'll see you at the christening tomorrow?" she said quietly.

"You're going?" Surprise rocketed through him. Though he shouldn't have been surprised. Jess said she was practically part of their family.

She nodded.

"Me, too. That's... what I'm in town for. Maybe," he said, "I could pick you up. I know where you live. And they've got a bunch of family coming. I'll just be in their way."

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“I—That would be... nice. I’d like that.”

“Great. I’ll come by at ten-thirty? That should give us time to make it.”

“All right. Yes. Okay. That’s lovely. Muriel’s coming as well, if that’s all right.”

“I’ll get one of those fancy yellow cabs. I think it should hold us all.” His eyes held hers for a moment, but Muriel stepped in to say good night.

“It was lovely to meet a real western cowboy, Liam. I do hope we’ll make it out to your ranch one day soon. I’ll work on getting that done.”

Emily frowned at her sister in confusion, but Liam slid his hat on and touched the brim. “You do that. Thank you, Emily, for an incredible meal.”

She smiled up at him. “Thanks for... being here.”

“See you tomorrow?”

With a nod, she said goodbye.

“Tomorrow?” Muriel repeated after they left.

But Emily just bit her lip, already thinking about what she would wear for the christening.

“Did he mean the Brodys’ thing at the church tomorrow?” her sister said.

A secret smile spread across Emily's face. "Yes, he did."

"Ahhhh." Muriel punched her arm gently.

"And you, my sweet sister, will be my wingman."

"Good food is very often, even most often, simple food."

—Anthony Bourdain—

Chapter Three

The guests at the Brodys' christening ceremony the next day for their daughter, Zoe, spilled out of the church after the event, gathering below the wide stone steps at the front. It had been a beautiful ceremony, with Carolyn's sister and brother-in-law being named as Zoe's godparents. Little Zoe had been less than a fan of the whole thing, particularly getting drizzled with water, but Emily thought she'd never seen a cuter baby in her little, white christening gown and bonnet.

As promised, Liam had picked them up on the dot and taken them to the church this morning. She admitted to feeling a little giddy being near him. Giddy, the way she'd felt as a girl, seeing a boy she was crushing on. Which was crazy. But she wasn't mistaken that she caught him looking at her during the service and she was guilty of the same.

Now she, Muriel, and Liam stood outside the church together as cabs began arriving to pick up people on their way to the reception which was taking place at a restaurant in midtown. Carolyn and Jess approached them, holding Zoe as they waited.

"You're all coming to reception, right?" Jess asked with a wink at Liam.

“Of course,” Liam said, but turned to Emily. “Aren’t we?”

“Definitely.”

Muriel bit her lip. “I’d love to, but I’ve got a deadline for a photo edit and the art director of the magazine is killing me. It’s got to be in by tonight. I’m afraid I’ll have to bail on you. I’m so sorry.”

Emily began to protest, but Carolyn hugged Muriel. “That’s all right. We’re so glad you could make it to the ceremony. It really means a lot to us.”

Muriel hugged her back. “No, thank you for inviting me to tag along. I can’t wait to see what little Zoe Louise Brody becomes in this world.” She tickled the baby’s little feet, then hugged her sister and air-kissed Liam on two cheeks. “Sorry, you two. You’re on your own. But that’s all right, isn’t it?”

“Photo edit?” she whispered in Muriel’s ear.

Muriel just smiled. “You remember, I told you, for British Vogue? I’m so behind. See you later, darling. Bye, Liam.” She flagged a cab and climbed in before Emily could say any more.

So, that was how it was. Abandoned. There was no photo edit. Her deadlines were all complete before she made this trip. It was just Muriel’s sisterly decision to leave Emily to her own devices with Liam. A deep flush heated her cheeks. Well... things could be worse than spending time alone with the man standing beside her, who looked utterly gorgeous in his dark blue jeans and peacoat.

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“She just bugged out on you, didn’t she?” he said, leaning close.

“Uh-huh.”

“Thought so. We don’t have to go if you—”

“No, of course we’ll go. It’s fine. She... she’s just being Muriel. She’s always quite concerned that I’m on my own. Notinvolved,” she clarified. “As if that makes me some kind of cat lady or something.”

“Do you own a cat?”

“No.”

“There you go then. Officially not a cat lady.”

“I could have a cat. I rather want one.”

He just smiled at her. “We have a few barn cats we can spare.”

She laughed. “That might be—” As the crowd dispersed, Emily spotted a woman carrying a microphone and being trailed by a cameraman heading her way. “Oh, no.”

“What?”

“I can’t believe this. How did they find me?”

“Who?”

“Let’s go.” She tugged his hand pulling him in the opposite direction. “Hurry.”

“Ms. Quinn!” shouted the woman who was obviously a reporter from Channel 8 News. “Ms. Quinn, can I ask you a few—”

“No!”

“But do you have any comment on William Bledsoe’s arrest? And were you involved in his bilking of millions of dollars from your clients at Bledsoe, Tamarin, and Carter?”

Emily froze. Horrified, she realized she was the subject of the stares of half a church full of people who’d turned to see what was happening.

She couldn’t quite catch her breath. Of course not! I would never, she wanted to scream, but all she could say was, “No comment.” Anything else was a minefield of trouble.

“The FBI is reportedly calling this a Ponzi scheme,” the woman shouted. “A lot of people find it hard to believe that those who worked under William Bledsoe were not also involved, including his partners in the firm. Do you have anything to—”

Emily ducked her head as Liam took her elbow, putting himself between her and the reporter. “You heard the lady. She said no comment.” He flagged a cab, and one pulled up to the curb. “C’mon. Let’s get out of here.”

“Ms. Quinn—” The reporter was still following them as they climbed into the vehicle. “What’s your reaction to the news that there may be others charged within this case? Ms. Quinn?”

She slammed the door and told the cabbie, “Drive! Hurry!”

“Central Park West,” Liam told the man. “Step on it.”

The driver nodded, squealing away from the church and leaving in his wake the horrified stares of a dozen people she actually knew.

Emily sank down in her seat, slamming her eyes shut. Oh, God. She’d never be able to show her face here again. And not only that, she’d be the talk of the reception, maybe ruining the day for Carolyn and Jess. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry you had to see that.”

Liam took her hand. “Shhh,” he whispered. “It’s okay now. They’re gone.”

She shook her head, actual tears sliding down her cheek. She swiped angrily at them with her fist. Somehow, she’d managed to put this whole mess at the back of her thoughts today for the service, but now the tears that had been lingering just below the surface since yesterday morning just erupted.

“I’m sorry.” She gulped back a sob. “I’m not a crier. I don’t cry. Ever.”

He rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand. “Never?”

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“Well, obviously not never. Because...” She gestured to her face.

She was about to ugly cry. Dropping her face in her hands, she turned away from him.

“Yeah, that rule is meant to be broken.”

She laughed in spite of her tears. “It’s a horrible mess. I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing. You didn’t invite them to come and assault you at a private christening. And who the hell are they anyway?”

She snorted and swiped a knuckle under her nose. “J-just the biggest news channel in the city. And she’s one of their anchors. F-frickin’ Kyria Baldwin. I’ll be all over the five o’clock news. I’ve ruined the whole day. Just... just take me home, please.”

He glanced at the driver in his rearview mirror who was taking in their conversation. He sent Liam a sympathetic look.

“I could take you home, if that’s what you really want. Or... we could walk it off in the park where no one knows you or where to find you. Get some crisp February air, look at the ducks... get a new perspective...”

She gave a watery laugh. “The ducks? And a walk? A walk won’t change anything.”

“Not how I see it. Exercise is always the answer. A good walk through a park or a ride through a meadow on a good horse, that makes everything a hundred times

better.”

They passed Columbus Circle where the horse-drawn carriages were lined up, waiting for passengers and then they entered the park. It was still cold, but not icy and the wind and rain had quit yesterday. A blue sky stretched out over the park and the trails were dotted with people who shared his philosophy. And honestly, the thought of returning to her apartment to wallow in the dilemma that had tossed her world upside down did not appeal.

She nodded at Liam, and he told the driver to pull over. He paid and the two of them disembarked onto the sidewalk of Central Park West.

For a long moment, they just stood there, watching the cab drive away. What could she say to explain herself? What must he think of her now? That she might be a criminal?

A few feet away, there was a man with a cart selling roasted chestnuts. The fragrance wafted to them on the thin, cold air.

“Look at that,” he said. “I’ve always heard about these things but never have tried one. You like roasted chestnuts?”

She nodded, giving her cheeks a two-handed swipe.

“Sold then.” He bought a small paper-wrapped cone of chestnuts, still warm from the vendor’s oven and handed them to her. “Here. Sad ladies first.”

She sputtered a laugh and pulled one out. At Christmas, when she was young, her father used to take her and her brother to buy roasted chestnuts from the cartman behind St. Martin-in-the-Fields, a church on Trafalgar Square. Maybe that explained her fondness for them. Because they were such a visceral memory of a time when

they were closer.

Liam stared at the half-opened nut. “So, you just...”

She cracked open the shell on the puffy nut and pulled out the meat. “Just like that.”

He followed her lead, then popped it in his mouth. With a frown, he considered the taste. “Different. Smokey. A little nutty. I think I like it.”

She smiled, watching him chew. He had a scruff of beard on his jaw that, instead of looking scruffy, made him look pulled together in a cowboy-ish kind of way, along with that silver buckle on his belt.

They strolled down the sidewalk without talking, in no hurry to go anywhere and eventually they polished off the chestnuts.

“Feeling better?” he asked finally.

“Quite. Thank you. I am.”

“You... want to talk about it?”

She rolled her eyes. “First you meet me in my most humiliating moment, then you rescue me from the next. I hardly think you queued up to hear my sad tale.”

“Well. I have no other plans, considering we just officially ditched Jess and Carolyn’s reception. Lemme check.” He glanced at his watch. “Oh, yeah, I can squeeze a tale of woe into my schedule.” He flashed the smile she found irresistible.

“Well, I suppose you do deserve an explanation. And the fact that we’re practically strangers, is both weird and oddly freeing. Since you and I will probably never see

one another again after you go back to Montana. While I—” she crumpled up the chestnut wrapper in her hand and tossed it forcefully into a waste bin—“while I stay here and attempt to figure out my life.”

He stopped on a small footbridge to look over the side at the water of the park’s pond. “Hey. You never know,” he said, staring at the ice forming on the edges of the water. “Life’s a bit of a choose-your-own-adventure thing, isn’t it? If there’s one lesson I’ve learned in the past couple of years it’s that expectations are a trap. Things hardly ever turn out the way we expect them to. And that’s not always a bad thing.”

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She sighed. “I suppose maybe someday I’ll be able to think of this that way. The whole in hindsight it was a brilliant mistake! thing. But right now, I’m just... I can’t quite see where I’m going.”

“That’s fair. So... tell me what happened. You could start at the beginning.”

The beginning was too far, even for her. But reluctantly, she told him the story of her downfall at Bledsoe, Tamarin, and Carter as they walked beneath the naked maple trees, past the park benches filled with old men sharing coffee, and around slips of ancient rocks that marked the paths. He listened without asking questions, slowing down when she got to the part where the FBI came in, scowling when she mentioned the extent of the crimes they’d already discovered Bledsoe had committed.

“He was my mentor for years,” she finished. “We were introduced six years ago in London at a dinner party and, honestly, I needed something of my own, unconnected to my father or my overachieving brother. I moved to New York City for this job and never looked back. But I don’t know how I could have missed what he was doing or how he hid it all this time. They say it’s been going on for more than ten years. Maybe from the beginning of the firm. It boggles the mind how he could have so betrayed everyone, including his family and friends and all of us, as well. He’s apparently taken full responsibility, claiming he did it all alone, but as you can see from that reporter’s implications, not everyone believes that. So, who knows if anyone will believe me?”

“I do,” he said, though he had honestly no way of knowing if she was telling the truth.

“That’s kind of you. On the bright side, I can only say I’m fortunate that I made it a firm rule from the start not to work with friends and family, and so I sent them elsewhere. I didn’t want to contaminate my friendships with business, especially that business. It’s much too volatile. That is one lesson my father taught me that has apparently served me well. But I’m afraid I haven’t seen the last of the reporters chasing me down with microphones.”

“Maybe you need to get out of town for a while. See things fresh.”

She shook her head. “I need another job. I’ve worked too hard at this profession to let this beat me.”

They approached an open field where a boy and his father were flying a kite, in the middle of winter. The boy was determinedly running across the field, boosting the kite while the father cheered him on. The wind was failing them, but the boy who looked to be around six or seven, seemed completely undeterred. She and Liam stopped to watch, fascinated by his determination. Finally, the kite launched into the sky and climbed above the treetops and the boy screamed with joy and jumped up and down while his father proudly watched him from a distance.

“Brilliant,” she murmured under her breath, then exchanged smiles with Liam as they continued on. “Thank you for this. I do feel better just to say it out loud. I... hope I haven’t ruined your day.”

“The opposite. And look. The sky’s still up there. Tonight, the moon will rise. We’re feeling the walk a bit in our legs—”

“Speak for yourself, cowboy,” she teased.

He laughed. “Okay. I’m feeling it. Probably just the smog.”

“Probably.”

“You know, Montana skies are blue pretty much all the time. It’s cold, but no smog. And definitely no reporters stickin’ microphones in your face. Just sayin’.”

“Is that an invitation, Mr. Hardesty?”

“Oh, it definitely is.”

Embarrassed now, she shook her head and kept walking. “You know, I’ve done nothing but prattle on about myself. That’s horrifyingly rude, really. Tell me about you. I want to know.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Well, what is it you love to do?”

“Love?” he repeated as if that question stumped him. “I don’t know. When I was younger I loved rodeo. But after one too many injuries, I gave that up.”

“The belt buckle?”

He glanced down at it as if he’d forgotten he even wore it. “Yeah. Remnants of my past. I did okay for a while. Now, I don’t know. I... I love building things. Putting this guest ranch we’ve got going together. I love a good ride across a pasture at dawn when the fog’s just rolling off the grass. Seein’ a newborn calf stand up for the first time. I love workin’ with my family. Years ago, I thought I’d do anything just to get away from that place. But now... now I love it again.”

“Why did you want to leave?” she asked. “Before. If you don’t mind my asking.”

“I think...” he said, seeming to work it out in his mind just then, “I was just stuck. Resenting that my life was mapped out for me. Not something I chose. Not really seeing the gift it was. Lonely was part of it, I guess. But like I said, life’s a choose-your-own-adventure thing. I guess I just created a different adventure out of it.”

She considered him with a sideways look, having vastly underestimated a cowboy’s capacity for insight. She supposed she’d always lumped them together with jocks or construction workers on the streets of New York whose deepest insight was to whistle at her as she walked by.

Life’s a choose-your-own-adventure thing.

Perhaps she was at some sort of inflection point in her life and now the choice was hers. But her apartment rent needed to be paid and her green card was a ticking time bomb now that she was officially unemployed. But she’d think about that tomorrow.

They walked on, talking about cattle and ranches, London and carriage rides through the park. He told her they had pretty much the same thing on the ranch only with hay instead of velvet seats and fuzzy blankets. She told him about the horse she used to own when she was a girl and the dressage competitions she would enter because her father thought it was the only civilized way to ride, unless one was on a hunt.

Eventually, they found themselves on her street, a few parked cars away from the front of her building. From a distance, they could see a bevy of reporters camped out below her window at the brownstone and media trucks parked nearby. She stopped dead, ducking back behind a tree, unsure if she wanted to brave the gauntlet.

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“I take it that’s your place,” he said.

“Yep.” She turned to him. “Bollocks. I’d better go this one alone. No need to get yourself tagged on this disaster.”

“Right,” he said, not having any of that. “Take my hand.”

“What?”

“Stay beside me.” He wrapped his warm fingers around hers and tugged her toward the entrance of her brownstone. Immediately, the reporters spotted her and swarmed in her direction. Emily covered her face and leaned into him as he shoved them away with one arm, shielding her from the microphones and the shouted questions.

“Ms. Quinn, were you complicit in the fraud your company perpetrated on—”

“Did you know what the managing partner of your firm was up to when he—”

And another shouted, “Why won’t you answer our questions?”

“Because she has no comment,” Liam barked at them as they hurried up the stone steps. Emily fitted her key in the door and shoved it open, and the pair of them dove inside, slamming the door behind them. It rattled in its frame.

Emily leaned against a nearby wall, eyes slammed shut. She was shaking. Muriel appeared in the hallway. “Oh, my God, Em. Are you two all right? They’ve been here all day. I barely made it inside myself.”

Emily nodded, looking up at Liam who seemed a bastion of calm. “Thanks to Liam. Thank you. I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“No apology needed. They’re like damn vultures out there, sniffing out the carcass of a story.”

Emily exhaled. “What they don’t know is... I don’t know anything. They’ll be hugely disappointed to learn that it was all William Bledsoe and the rest of us are simply collateral damage.”

The three of them stood there for an awkward moment before Emily invited him in. “Please come and stay for a bit.”

He swallowed hard. “I’ve got a flight back to Montana this evening and I really should try to make a showing at the reception. I should go.”

So soon? Disappointment washed through her. She wasn’t quite ready for him to disappear from her life. She wanted more time. Especially today when she felt like every fragile thread of her life that was before what happened yesterday was unraveling. It was all ridiculous, she knew, with him being from there and her from here, but still, there was something... fateful about their meeting and she’d learned long ago not to ignore that.

Muriel hugged her, then gave him a hug, too. “Thank you for watching out for my sister.” She pointed back toward the kitchen. “I’ve just got something in the oven warming up. I’d better—”

Emily nodded to her and Muriel winked. “Bye, Liam.”

“Muriel.” That delicious smile kicked in again.

When her sister was gone, Emily turned back to him. “She thinks you’re quite all that.”

“Yeah? What about you?”

She blinked. “I think... I think I quite agree. But you know... here we are about to say goodbye forever. Because the stars didn’t quite align, did they?”

He stepped closer. “Oh, I don’t know. I think they did alright, helping us find each other twice in this big pond.”

“I suppose so, yes,” she said.

He pulled his hat off and dropped it to his side. “Anyway, I don’t like goodbyes. So, let’s just say, if you’re ever in Montana... you have my number.”

“And you have mine. Is it foolish to say let’s stay in touch?”

He shook his head, a smile spreading over his face. “About as foolish as sayin’ the stars will decide if we never see each other again.”

“Then... let’s at least say we will,” she said and reached up to kiss him on the cheek. But he turned his face toward her and kissed her on the mouth instead.

If it was an accident, it didn’t matter, because neither of them tried to undo it. Instead, he doubled down with a look at her and kissed her with real intention.

His lips were warm, and his cheeks were cold, and he wrapped an arm around her back without really pulling her closer. He tasted sweet and his lips were soft, and she wanted to lose herself in his kiss. But he kept it brief, maybe because he didn’t want to scare her away or push her. Yet, it was the opposite, really. It was a farewell kiss

that felt as natural as the walk they'd just had together through the park and the inevitable culmination of their first meeting, and it had her pulse beating in her ears.

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“Mmmm,” she murmured.

“Yeah,” he answered.

He fitted his hat back on with a smile. “Until then, Emily Quinn.” He walked out her door, and reluctantly, she closed it quickly behind him.

But between the window curtains, Emily watched him deal handily with the journalists until he’d cleared the crowd and then disappeared around the corner, never once looking back. Instead, already on his phone, he was moving on.

She turned and stared down at the gauntlet of reporters just as a ding hit her cell phone. A text message alert appeared on her screen. A slow smile curved her lips.

Him: “Did I mention I can’t stop thinking about your flourless chocolate cake?”

Her: “You did, actually, mention it.” She added a heart emoji. Then, she frowned, deleted it and added a winky face.

Him: “Just wanted you to know.”

Her: “I’m glad you liked it.”

She waited as the three dots that told her he was typing scrolled across the text thread. Finally, her phone dinged again.

Him: “Liked? No, I loved it. In case you missed it, that’s my subtle way of luring you

to Montana to bake me another one.”

She bit her thumbnail, grinning like an idiot, as she typed again.

Her: “You only want me for my cake.”

Pause.

Him: “That is a close call.” Three dots blinked again. “Kidding... It’s definitely not.”

She felt herself blush again, something that was becoming routine around him.

Her: “Safe travels back home, Liam.”

Him: “...”

She waited, wondering if he was typing and erasing, too. Finally...

Him: “I’ll be thinking about that... cake and that kiss.”

She hearted his text and waited for more, but that was it.

Finally, she sat on the chair near her window and stared out past all the chaos at her window, at the city she loved so much. She was a city girl, after all, and always would be—once this chaos all died down. Still, she tried to picture Montana—halfway across America, with its cattle and prairies and jagged mountains, seeing Liam there in his element. But likely, this weekend was just a blip. An accident. A brief encounter.

She read his words again, remembering that kiss, too.

But yes. A blip. That was all it would ever be.

“A recipe has no soul. You, as the cook, must bring soul to the recipe.”

—Chef, Thomas Keller—

Chapter Four

“You’ve been distracted ever since you got back from New York,” Liam’s older sister, Shay said to him as he washed up one afternoon in the kitchen sink three weeks after his return. “I keep seeing you staring off into space when you’re usually so focused. And generally, there’s a frown on your face as you’re doing it. Is everything okay?”

Surprised that he’d been that transparent, he said, “Yeah. I’m fine.” He hadn’t told anyone about his encounter in New York City, because he was pretty sure nothing would ever come of it. His family, as much as he loved them all, could be relentless.

“Hmm.” She handed him a towel and tucked her long, reddish-brown hair behind her ear. “Because I spoke with Jess Brody the other day on the phone. He called while you were off feeding cattle.”

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A little red flag started waving in his brain. “You didn’t tell me he called.”

“He just wanted our address for a thank-you card. But... while I had him on the phone, we were just shooting the breeze—as we do—and he did mention a certain woman named Emily that—”

Liam jerked a look at her. “He did? What about her? Is she... is she okay?”

“Ah-hah! That was not the reaction I was expecting. Or maybe it was. And why wouldn’t she be okay?”

He opened and closed his mouth, then with a frown, pulled a chair out from the table and pushed it back. “No reason.”

“Uh-huh.”

“She’s just someone I met.” One look at Shay told him that answer would not suffice. “It was only twenty-four hours.”

“Which can feel like a lifetime, depending on how you play it. And during which you both apparently played hooky from the christening reception somewhere on the streets of New York.”

“He told you that?”

She nodded. “Also, that you eventually showed up, looking... bemused.”

“Bemused?”

“That’s the word he used.”

“That’s an exaggeration.”

“Which possibly explains the frowns and the thousand-yard stares. So, fill me in. Who is she and what’s going on with you?”

“You know.” He sighed, tossing the damp towel on the counter. “I hate it when you go fishing.”

“Only for information, baby brother. And look, no one’s around. You can tell me.”

But at that moment, Shay’s fifteen-year-old son, Ryan, burst through the kitchen door, along with an arctic blast of cold air.

Yanking off his outerwear as he moved into the room, he toed off his grime-coated Tacova boots with a shiver. “It’s freezing out there. I blanketed up all the horses I could catch. Of course, Nahkòhe wouldn’t have any of that. So stubborn, that gelding. But it looks like it’s gonna storm again later.”

Ryan read the look on both their faces. “What?”

“Um...” Shay slid a look at Liam. “Uncle Liam was just telling me... what a good job you’ve been doing with the horses.”

“That’s right,” Liam said. “You have.”

“Oh. Thanks.” He settled down on a chair by the island, looking like he wanted in on the conversation.

“And,” Shay said, “I was wondering if you wanted to help me make dinner. I’ve got all these potatoes to peel and—”

He jumped up. “Oh, well, I’ve got a ton of homework, so... can’t.” He headed in the direction of the stairs. “Sorry.”

“No worries, darling,” Shay called after him and they listened to him climb the stairs to his room. “So predictable.”

Liam grabbed a potato. “I’ll peel them.”

“Okay, now I know something is off. You’ve never in your life peeled a potato before.”

“I have.” He hefted the black-handled peeler in his hand and began peeling awkwardly backwards. “Once or twice.”

Shay guided him in the other direction which, admittedly, worked better. He sent her an annoyed look. “Her name is Emily Quinn. And she’s... British.”

“British!? From England?”

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“London. But she works in finance in New York. So. Yeah. It was a thing for a minute, but she’s there. I’m here.”

Shay chose another potato and started peeling it. “And?”

“And... what?”

“You like her? Wanna date her? Be in the same city as her?”

He tossed the peeled potato in the pot of water. “What’s your point? She was... yeah, I like her and if she lived here, I’d be taking her out.”

“And that’s it?”

“I mean, we’ve texted and talked a few times. But she’s going through some things back there and I’m here, doing the ranch, and the likelihood of anything happening between us is—”

“But she texts you back?”

He tossed another potato in the pot, pinning her with a look. “I suppose you’ll want to read the text threads next.”

“Oooh, can I?”

“No!”

Shay laughed. “Okay. Okay. But I’m glad you told me. Now you don’t have to keep it all fizzling inside, all alone and by yourself. Tell me what I can do.”

“Nothing. That’s why I didn’t tell you. There’s nothing to do. I’m working on her. Trying to convince her to come out here and see Montana. But she lost her job in New York, and she’s trying to find another one. And once she does, it’ll be game over. For me anyway.”

“Maybe you should go there again. Convince her.”

“Even if I did, leaving a big-city life like she has...”

“Izzy left Dallas for Will,” she pointed out. “She loves it here.”

Liam smiled at the mention of his newest sister-in-law and his big brother Will, Shay’s twin. After years away from Montana, playing football first in college, then in the NFL, Will had brought Izzy—a big-city girl—back to Montana to settle here and the pair had never been happier. Will’s return had marked the beginning of the ranch’s reinvention, and his brother had helped finance the project. But it wasn’t just the money. It was the heart both he and Izzy had put into the family and the ranch that had seemed to pull the entire family back together after their father’s death.

So, Shay was right about Izzy. But Emily Quinn was another matter altogether. Where would she find a finance job like the one she had in New York in small-town Montana? Nowhere. That was where.

“It’s not the same for Emily. Besides, we hardly know each other, really,” he said finally. “She’s good at what she does, and she can cook like nobody’s business. She’s got this whole social supper club thing going on in the city and all her people are there.”

“Right,” Shay said. “Obviously impossible. I suppose you should just give up on her. There’s no hope of anything working out. Clearly.” She side-eyed him.

“Did I say I was giving up? Again, this is why I didn’t tell you about her.”

“That’s better.” At his look of annoyance, she said, “You know Cooper and I never stood a chance, right? I mean, technically, our chances were zero. And now look. After everything that stood in our way, we made it. I’m not saying I know what’s best for you, but if she’s still on your mind and in your heart three weeks later and you can’t get her out, then there’s something there. And don’t let your worry about trivial matters like geography get in the way.”

His worries weren’t trivial, nor were Emily’s. But Shay had a point. He couldn’t get her out of his mind and that meant something. And he couldn’t let his pessimism about the possibility of her overtake him.

Their mom, Sarah, walked into the kitchen just then, carrying an armload of laundry, her shoulder-length dark-blond hair tucked into a messy bun. She looked younger today than she had a few years ago when ranch troubles and Liam’s father’s death had pressed down on her. But that was thanks, in part, to Ray Lane reappearing in her life and the relationship that was still blossoming between them. She seemed happy in a way he’d never really seen her before.

“Am I interrupting?” she asked, stopping at the doorway when the two of them clammed up.

“Nope,” they both said at once as Shay’s gaze met Liam’s.

“Oh, good. Is everyone staying for supper tonight?”

“Almost. I’m pretty sure Gus is out on a vet call, though,” Shay told her. “But Cami

said she'd save him a plate."

Sarah eyed Liam. "You've been awfully moody lately. Everything okay?"

"Why is everyone asking me that? I'm not moody. I've never been moody."

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Shay snorted, then bit her lip. “Didn’t you say you... uh, had to send someone a text... or something?”

He scowled at the two of them as he plopped the third potato in the pot of water. “Yeah. I did as a matter of fact. So, if ya’ll will excuse me?”

Shay gestured grandly at the doorway to the living room. He sent her a withering smile.

“Text,” she mouthed with a wink and a thumbs-up.

“You’re ridiculous,” he mouthed back.

“I know.” She grinned like she’d just beaten him at Battleship or something equally inane. “But you know you love me anyway.”

He did. He absolutely did.

*

Three weeks later, Emily sat in the outer office of Carruthers, Steele, and Baker waiting for her meeting with the junior partner who’d called her in. She was wearing a killer navy Dolce and Gabbana suit, and the three-inch heel of her left foot was involuntarily beating out a staccato rhythm on the polished marble floor. She pressed her hand to her knee to stop it and took a deep breath, smoothing out her pencil skirt.

Stephen Swanker, said junior partner, had been with the firm going on ten years and

had hiring power of lowly, entry-level employees when the partners were otherwise occupied. That wasn't her. However, she was hoping he could intercede for her in a meeting with the higher-ups.

They'd met two years earlier at a conference and they'd hit it off, platonically speaking—he was there with his boyfriend—and now, two and a half months after her firm fell off a cliff and she fell into the proverbial land of the unemployed, she was desperate enough to try to hit Swanker up for a favor.

Her phone dinged and she dug it out of her purse. It was a text. From Liam.

A small smile lifted her mouth. He was in the strange habit of texting her exactly when she needed to hear from him. It was never long. A few words. Or a photograph. That's what it was now. A sunrise. Against an incredibly beautiful, craggy mountain and, hidden in the center of the photo, two wild-looking pure white goats clinging to the side of the mountain on a rocky cliff.

Was that even a real photograph? Was it AI? Or did places like that really exist where he was? While England was beautiful and green most of the year outside of London, with rolling hillsides and diminutive stone walls etching the countryside, there was nothing like... likethisthere. She'd never even seen such a thing in person. Not even the rolling, ancient Adirondacks could compare.

Her phone dinged again, and his text came up again.

Him: "Morning. Hope you're having a goat day."

Emily snorted out loud, then clapped a hand to her mouth. The receptionist, ever serious, frowned in her direction.

Emily pulled a straight face and pointed her phone at her left foot, snapping a photo

of her new red heels, attached it to a text and typed, “It’s a bit of this situation just now.”

She hit send.

Him: “Stop it.”

He added a smoke coming out of his ears emoji. She had trained him in emojis.

That was so like him to make her laugh when she desperately needed one. He’d been sending her little bits like this for the past two months since they said goodbye. Not every day. Just now and then. She’d sent him some, too. A battle of the two locales in photographs. Her last one was an odd angle of the statue at the ice-skating rink at Rockefeller Center, taken at dusk. She was quite proud of it, to be honest. Their back and forth had actually inspired her to look at the city anew, and to get her phone’s camera out as she walked.

And she’d think about him as she did. About that one kiss in front of her place. She’d wonder if he meant it the way she remembered it. Or if it had been a simple goodbye. But then he’d called her. He’d said he was rounding up cattle before a storm and she could hear them mooing in the background. He’d said he just wanted to say hello. So, not goodbye. Hello. They’d talked until he got them all to the barn and then he had to go. For a long time after, as she walked along Columbus Avenue, she wondered what that call meant.

They’d talked several times since then. Often at night when she was making herself dinner or curled up on her couch, and he was putting either the cows or himself to bed where he was. Once they’d talked for hours like that, seemingly about nothing. But neither of them wanted to be the first to hang up. Maybe they just had a long-distance friendship going. Which would be fine if her stomach didn’t take a tumble whenever she talked to him or thought about him. Of his beautiful eyes and the feel of his lips

on hers. No, she was interested in more than friendship with him. But maybe her memory was playing tricks.

“Ms. Quinn?” the receptionist called, indicating Swanker standing at the open door of his smallish office.

He smiled broadly and gestured to her to come in. “Emily. How good to see you again.”

“Hello, Stephen. Thanks for seeing me.”

A slight man, though tall, Swanker’s wispy blond hair barely covered the balding pate at the back of his head, evident when he turned to take a seat behind his desk. He had a woman’s graceful hands: thin, long fingered, and delicate. But she knew he was ambitious as hell and had worked hard to get where he was in the company. Appearances could be deceiving.

“Of course, of course. When was the last time? Chicago, was it?”

“I think so, yes. It’s been a while.”

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“So...” he hedged. “I assume I know what brings you here today. Am I correct?”

“If you think I’m looking for work, then you would be correct. Yes. We might as well dispense with the small talk. You know what my company went through. And through no fault of my own or anyone else but—”

“Let me stop you right there, Emily.”

She blushed furiously, sure she knew what was coming. She’d heard the same thing all over town.

“I like you. I’ve even talked to my bosses about you. Talked you up. Everyone knows your talent. But this business... it’s about trust. Without trust, we have nothing. We are nothing. William Bledsoe broke that trust, big-time. And I think you know it’s not about what’s true or accurate. It’s about what it looks like.”

“I’ve heard that before, too,” she said. “But surely once they prove it was all him...”

“That,” he said, “could take years.”

“I don’t have years. I’m here in the US on a work visa. Which will expire soon if I don’t find a job. I’m willing to start small if I have to, Stephen. I can build that trust. I promise you, if I—”

“If it were up to me, I’d hire you. But... the partners have already vetoed it. Vetoed you. Anyone from your firm, in fact. In a few years, it’s possible things may loosen up. Or not. People in New York have long memories about this kind of thing.

What about London?”

She swallowed hard. London. She would have to go crawling back home, a failure. Ruined. And her overachiever brother would quietly gloat forever about that. Her father... well, she didn't want to imagine his disappointment or how that would play out between them. All her years of hard work, for nothing.

Her eyes stung. Ruthlessly, she shoved the tears back and got to her feet. She wouldn't beg. She'd figure something out. She had to. She had less than two weeks in this country before they made her leave.

“Thank you for your time, though, Stephen. I hope we meet again someday.”

“You, too, Emily. I'm sorry I wasn't able to help you.”

She hurried out of the building and into the sunny, April morning, holding back tears. She wouldn't cry. What was the point anyway? It wouldn't change anything. William Bledsoe's criminality had cost all of them—including his poor clients—dearly. And now they just had to face the consequences. She was getting used to this kind of rejection.

Perhaps she needed to rethink her entire life. Perhaps she needed a fresh tack.

When she was a girl, her father would take her and her brother sailing off the coast. The waters were always choppy and rough and the wind, ever changing. Managing a smallish sailboat was tricky at best, but the one thing she learned was that when the wind changed, it required you to change with it. And if you didn't, you would sink. Simple as that. Tacking the sails became a life lesson, as did most things with her father. Not fun. But still useful.

That was what she needed to do now. Rethink, shift the sails, turn the boat into the

waves.

She stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, staring at nothing.

Maybe you need to get out of town for a while. See things fresh. Come to Montana, he'd said. Maybe that was exactly what she needed.

*

They'd been through at least a half-dozen cooks, chefs, and wannabe chefs in the last month, interviewing for the position at the Hard Eight starting this spring. Shay was in charge, but Liam sat in on a few of them. They were looking for a high-end chef who would build a reputation for the guest ranch as an A-plus destination, aside from everything else they would be supplying. But finding one was proving more difficult than they'd expected. Excellent food here at the guest ranch was a critical element and they'd had to narrow down what they wanted as their list of applicants' experience was varied and unique—and few.

Babe Pratt, one of their early applicants, was a local chuckwagon cook who'd worked on several spreads in the area and trail drives Liam himself had organized. Babe's specialty was grilling beef—and more beef—over an open fire pit. Some grilled potatoes and beans likely found their way onto the plate as well. When pressed, coleslaw was a possibility.

“We were looking for a menu with a little more diversity,” Shay told him gently.

“Diversity? I do a mean chuck roast, a rib eye, my beef stew is always ate up. Then there's my ground rib-eye burgers with sautéed red onion, cooked down and smothered with ketchup and some dill pickles. None of my cowboys ever complained over my cookin’,” he argued with a twang that belonged in the Montana high country. “I can do chicken, too.” He argued. “If I have to, but all them chichi vegetables? Little

tiny portions are for the birds, and they ain't gonna see you through a hot summer cattle drive down from the mountains. No siree."

Since they wouldn't be doing any of those with their clientele, they thanked Babe and moved on.

They were excited to meet Jacque DeBris, an actual trained chef from Vancouver, Canada, who came prepared to cook them some food, which they had to admit was excellent, but a background check explained that he'd left at least five jobs in the last year because of the toxic environment he created wherever he went. His unfriendly reaction to that question proved his former employers' point. They moved on.

Over the course of the next week, they'd met a few more cooks, some just plain home cooks looking to do something different. But none of them were up to their standards. It was beginning to look like the job might fall to Liam's mother, Sarah, who had already told them she had no intention of filling that position. They resorted to another round of ads in nearby regional papers.

Then came Petra Schwarzig, a home-trained Austrian cook who'd been cooking her way across the USA to gather up new recipes. She did, in fact, bring a great variety to her repertoire including some lovely Austrian dishes, low-country Louisiana food, and Midwestern BBQ. "There is only one demand I have," she announced in her brusque Austrian accent as they tasted her schnitzel. "I must have music while I cook. I cannot waver on this requirement, ya? You vill love it, ya?" She pressed the button on her portable CD player which blasted polka music until the pups in the next room howled.

They thanked her for coming and said they'd be in touch.

After, Shay poured them both another cup of coffee. "Why is this so hard?"

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Liam shrugged. “It’s chemistry as much as the food. If we choose the wrong person, it throws the whole operation off.” He couldn’t help but think of Emily and that night around her table back in New York. The food, the comradery... It had all seemed so easy for her. She’d even made it feel easy for him... no easy task after spending most of his life interacting with cattle. But Emily was a rare commodity, that he knew for sure. And that became even more obvious as they met and rejected chef prospects for their operation.

“Maybe we should go to a cooking school and find someone looking to make a name for him or herself? Or take a trip to Seattle to try to steal a chef!” Shay said.

“Nobody is going to give up a good position at a top restaurant to come here to this untried place in the middle of nowhere when we haven’t even opened yet. We’ve got to find someone who’s in transition. Or... unhappy where they are. Then again, I suppose polka music is still an option.”

“Noooo!” Shay said with a moan. They both laughed.

Sarah and Ray came through the kitchen door just then, back from the grocery store in town.

“What are you two cackling about in here?” she asked. “I hope it’s not about the sound my truck’s making, whose muffler just went kaput driving down our driveway.”

Liam and Shay pulled themselves together and tried to look serious. “Your muffler went bad?” he said. “What happened to it?”

“It was the weirdest thing. We were just coming home, and we passed this car with... with polka music blasting out of it and just like that, the muffler blew up.”

He and Shay cracked up again.

“What?” Sarah said, confused.

Shay patted Liam’s arm. “Let’s just say the dogs and we are sympathetic to your muffler.”

Outside, another car pulled up, a Range Rover that looked more than a couple of years old, but nice. Out stepped a diminutive man in his forties, who tucked his chef’s knife roll under his arm and headed to their door.

Shay rolled her eyes. “Maybe I have PTSD, but I am not hopeful.”

“Give him a chance. This must be that guy from Missoula. He’s the last one on our list for the week.”

“Gary Nevers,” the man said, extending his hand to Liam once inside.

He reminded Liam of Sean Astin in a weird way and not just because of his dark hair and eyes. There was a cockiness to him that kind of preceded him.

“Nice to meet you,” Gary went on. “I’m a Michelin chef—only one star, but still. Here’s my resume.” He handed over a piece of paper to Liam. “I think you’ll find it more than adequate for your needs.”

“Please, come in,” Shay said, sitting him down at the table. She sent Liam a quick eyebrow lift as she looked over his resume.

“Mr. Nevers,” Liam began. “That’s impressive, that Michelin ranking. Earning any stars at all is quite an achievement.”

“That is true. They aren’t given out lightly. Though I would have liked two.”

“We’re not looking for anything too out there for our menus here at the Hard Eight. But we do like down-to-earth innovation and creativity,” Shay told him. “But this is a family operation, and we hope to attract both families and couples here looking for good food and a ranching adventure.”

“Perfect,” Nevers said, folding his hands atop the table, directing his answers to Liam. “I’m looking for that myself. After working in high-pressure kitchens around the world, I’m wanting to return to the art of cooking and not the pursuit of yet another star. Do you understand?”

“Makes sense,” he said. “We do weddings on this property as well, which call for bigger receptions and more extensive catering. Often, people will bring in their own caterer, but in case they don’t, we want to provide that service as well. Is that something you’d be comfortable with?”

“Of course. With my eyes closed,” he said with confidence. “But I don’t expect you to hire me without tasting my food. I can arrange to cook a tasting for you if you’d like. What are your facilities?”

Shay and Liam exchanged looks. “We’ve just completed our new kitchen, which is housed in that small building just off the main house.”

“May I see it?” Nevers asked. “One must see where one might be working.”

“Of course.” Shay led the way and Nevers inspected everything from the gas stove to the water pressure in the sinks.

“This will do,” he said, setting down his knives as a kind of possessive punctuation mark to their interview. “Though the placement of the dishwashing facility... I would have moved it to that side. At any rate, when shall we schedule a tasting?”

“Would two days from now be too soon?”

“I can do tomorrow if you’d like.”

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They agreed to do the tasting but, despite his buttoned-up attitude, neither had a doubt that Nevers was the one.

The next day proved them right. His food was delicious, if a bit pretentious for their ranch. But they felt sure he would soon align with their recommendations and provide their guests with great meals.

None as great as Emily's was in Liam's memory, but... there was no help for that.

But it was the woman herself that he couldn't seem to get out of his mind. Their frequent texts and occasional late-night phone calls triggered some optimistic reflex in him that was—to say the least—rare for him. He simply couldn't work out how they could resolve the geography between them to even give themselves a fair shot at something good. Why did the one woman who made him think about a future have to be the one woman out of his reach? Or maybe, as his father used to repeatedly tell him, he only wanted the things he couldn't have. Maybe that was their allure.

But that thought only made him angry, and he pushed his late father's voice out of his mind.

At the round pen, Ryan and Cooper, Shay's fiancé, were working with a new BLM three-year-old gelding that seemed to have the potential for adoption. Though they'd only been at it for a week, the roan Appaloosa was already haltered and allowing Ryan to touch him, and just now, took a treat from the boy's hand.

"See there?" Ryan said to Cooper. "Told you so."

“You called it, Ry,” Cooper answered standing back away from the horse and boy, who already stood nearly six-feet tall and looked older than his fifteen years. Cooper leaned against the rail as Liam approached. “Maybe we should consider keeping this one,” he said to him. “If I’m not mistaken, he’s got potential.”

“Your call.” Liam watched the kid put the gelding through his paces around the pen, flicking the long whip behind him. “He’s a beauty for sure.”

“How goes the cook search?”

“Finished. We found our chef. He seems pretty sure of himself, and his food is delicious. I think we’re good.”

Cooper nodded, staring off toward the clouds moving in over the mountains. “I’m ready for spring. Not another snow flurry.”

Liam felt the same. “We have another wedding at the round barn next weekend. I know they’re hoping for good weather.”

“After years being in Texas, I do still miss the long springs there.”

Liam had never known anything but long winters, being a native here. But he wondered about them. He wondered about New York City and England, too. And Maine or Kentucky and what summers elsewhere would be like. He loved this place, so maybe it was just his own restlessness showing. Or it was him, once again feeling tethered to this place when there was a whole world out there that beckoned.

“You okay?” Cooper asked, watching him now with a frown.

“Yeah. Sure,” he lied. “I’d better be getting up to the cabin we’re finishing up today. Tick off all the bits on my punch list.”

“I was up there yesterday. It’s looking great.”

“It is. Now let’s just hope we can get it booked up for summer.”

“I have a good feeling,” Cooper said, turning back to watch the gelding. “Shay’s got the furnishings coming any day now. She’s excited to see it all done up. You should be, too. Look what you’ve accomplished in such a short time.”

“We. What we’ve accomplished. Couldn’t have done it without you.”

Before Cooper could argue with him—and he always did—Liam walked toward the cabins to the west of the main house. There were three of them fully up and furnished and this fourth one nearly done. Three were small, built for four to six people and the last was a large house designed for between eight and ten people, for families that wanted to travel together.

The smaller cabins had been booked for months now starting in late May through summer. The big cabin was more of a risk and the most expensive of the lot. Then there were the glamping tents, four of them, dotted around the property, surrounded by pastureland they’d re-dedicated to the guest ranch. All in all, Cooper was right to be optimistic. But Liam was having trouble focusing on what was to come when he couldn’t get his mind off what he’d left behind.

He was halfway through his inspection when his cell phone rang. He glanced down at the caller ID and wondered honestly if he’d conjured Emily with his thoughts. His throat tightened as he answered.

“Emily?”

“Hi.”

“Hi.I was just... just thinking about you.” He could almost hear her smile.

“Ah... You probably say that to all the girls...”

“Yeah.” Leaving the finish carpenter on the stairway, he walked out onto the porch. “If you mean all the local cattle mamas I converse with daily. I do tell them that, but it’s not a lie. They all think I play favorites, and I don’t want ’em to get jealous.”

He enjoyed the sound of Emily chuckling as he took in the April sun that had broken through the usual wintry sky, despite the oncoming storm. He could hear her breathlessness, as if she was walking somewhere. “How’d your interview go the other day?”

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She made an indecipherable sound. “Let’s just say... it went predictably.”

That didn’t sound good. “I’m sorry?”

“Yes. Well. No surprise. But I did appreciate the goat photo. And the pun.”

“A little corny, huh?” It totally was.

“It quite made me smile, despite the circumstances.”

“Well then it was worth the corn,” he said, imagining her walking in the park or some such place as they had together that day. “The press still bothering you?”

“Only when they can find me. It’s not just me. We’re all targets.”

“You’ve all been cleared though.”

“But the story... it’s too big to let go. Everyone wants to know how. How it happened and don’t we feel responsible somehow for all of it? And some find it hard to imagine he was alone in it. Which is why no one will hire me here.”

“Come out,” he said. Just two words that made her go silent for a long beat.

“Excuse me?”

“Come here for a week or two. Get out of that place, away from them. Come here and forget all that for a while. Breathe some clean Montana air and slow everything

down. Figure out what you want.”

He could almost hear what she was thinking.

But she said, “Honestly, I’d love to, but... is it a good idea?”

“You mean... for us? For you and me?”

“Exactly. I... don’t want to mess up our—what is it we have? Our friendship.”

He knew exactly what she meant. “Nothing is going to happen that you don’t want to happen,” he told her. “Do I want to see you again? Yeah. Get to know you better? Absolutely. Do I wish geography wasn’t standing in the way of all that? Hell, yeah. But do I expect anything more if you come out to figure out your next steps? No. You’re safe with me, Em. I promise you that.”

He knew that her trust meter had apparently been badly broken lately, but he wanted her to believe him. His offer wasn’t a proposition. He had no expectations. Hopes, maybe, but no expectations. And to her, he understood clearly that the ground rules were important. She needed to know them before she agreed to go.

And really. Even if she did come out, what could happen? Nothing beyond what they were. Friends. His life and hers could never merge.

“There’s something else I haven’t told you,” she said.

He didn’t like the sound of that. “What’s that?”

“My visa is expiring. I’ve applied for an extension, but things are moving like molasses in that office and I’m not hopeful. I’ve already begun packing. I’m afraid I’ve got to go by the end of the month.”

“Go where?”

“Home. Back to London.”

“London?” Damn. In all his ruminations about her, he hadn’t considered that she wasn’t actually free to be here and that her whole life here in the US depended on her being gainfully employed. “I-I didn’t realize...”

“But I do want to come to Montana. To see you. So, maybe for a few days?”

Disappointed, he shoved down the feelings of unfairness in the whole mess. “A week? We’ll put you up in one of our cabins. And if you’re here next weekend, you’ll be here for a wedding. A first with our new chef. Say you’ll come.”

“Oh, I don’t want to be in the way. Maybe this isn’t a good time, then—”

“It’s the perfect time. Please. Just tell me when and I’ll pick you up at the airport in Billings.”

“Okay,” she said, and he could hear the smile back in her voice. “Okay.”

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“Cooking is like love. It should be entered into with abandon or not at all.”

—Harriett Van Horne—

Chapter Five

She arrived on a spectacularly cold, sunny Wednesday, three days after their phone conversation. Her flight was not direct, and it was long, but as the Montana landscape appeared below the plane as it landed, Emily had to remind herself to breathe.

This whole idea of this trip was mental. Impulsive and risky. She'd convinced herself of that while somewhere over the Midwest.

Which brought her back to Liam and all the feelings he aroused in her.

As she disembarked from the plane, her heartbeat thrummed in her ears. All thoughts of Wall Street and money, right and wrong choices fled her brain as soon as she saw him waiting for her at the baggage claim, holding a small handful of fresh flowers wrapped in paper. Seeing him, she remembered feeling this giddy years ago when a boy she had liked for months smiled at her in school. Liam's slow, sexy smile when he caught sight of her told her she'd been right to come. At least they'd find out what this was. If it was anything.

“Hi,” he said, pressing the flowers into her free hand. Irises and roses with some yellow lilies in the mix as well.

“Hi.” She'd rehearsed this moment in her mind for days, imagining what she'd say or

do. But now that the moment was here, heat crept to her face and all she could muster the courage for was a kiss on his cheek. He pressed a kiss to hers, as well, and lingered there for a moment.

Finally, he pulled away, smiling. “It’s good to see you. Don’t take the flowers the wrong way. Just thought you’d need something to cheer you up after all the puddle jumper flights it takes to get out here.”

“I love them,” she said, burying her nose in the flowers momentarily. “And thank you for picking me up. I googled it. It’s a long drive.”

“You didn’t think I’d let you try to find your way there on your own? How was your flight?”

“Puddle jumper describes it. But it was fine.”

He nodded. “I wasn’t sure this would ever happen.”

She said, “Neither was I. My sister, Muriel, though, is all for it. She’s in New York, packing what’s left of my apartment for now, bless her.” She pointed out her bag on the turnstile. He grabbed it and they headed to his truck. “She’s enjoying the city while she’s doing it.”

In April, the winter snow had mostly melted, but one could still see it on the mountaintops that lay ahead. But his truck was steady and warm and as they drove, he filled what could have been awkward silences by pointing out landmarks and wildlife grazing in the meadows.

“It’s gorgeous. Brilliant,” she said, taking it all in. “The sky is so... so huge!”

“Big Sky Country. That’s what they call it here, because the land just goes on forever,

wide open to the horizon. In the city, the sky gets crowded out by the skyscrapers. But here... it's what I love most about it."

"You've never lived in a city then?"

"Nope. Country, born and bred. Our ranch has been in the family for four generations. It fell to me in the end, after my father passed, but my brother and sisters are all part of it now that we've started the guest ranch. It's still a working cattle ranch but we've pared back that operation."

He'd given her the brief and difficult history of their late father on a phone call late one night. And she was anxious to meet this family of his that, by his account, loved one another madly, though when there were that many people together, there was surely bound to be drama. Drama was her own family's middle name.

"Are you hungry?" he asked. "It's been a long day for you already."

"I had a bite on the plane. I'm more thirsty than hungry, but I could eat if you're hungry."

He pulled directly into a drive-thru coffee shop, and she ordered a fruity thirst quencher of a drink. "If you can wait until we get over the pass, I'll show you Marietta. We'll find something to eat."

"That sounds perfect."

It took nearly an hour to make the drive over the pass, but the little town of Marietta was waiting on the other side. She'd never really seen anything quite like it, though certainly it more closely resembled little villages in the Cotswolds—minus the cobblestones—with tightly packed shops and doors with bells jangling over them as people walked in.

They popped into a restaurant called Main Street Diner where the owner seemed to know him and they got sandwiches, and he ordered her a milkshake, something for which the diner was famous. And it was, indeed, delicious.

They sat in a booth by the window overlooking the street, watching people go by. The streets were quite busy, and pedestrians often stopped to chat as they passed one another. Almost as if everyone knew everyone.

“This town,” she said, taking in the western-looking store fronts and its diagonal parking slots. “It’s quite charming.”

“The town itself is. But it’s not the place. It’s the people. Watch out. People here will smile at you, look you in the eye, and even say hello.”

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She gasped in mock horror. “No!”

“Yes. Be forewarned. You might even want to say hello back.”

“Oh, I think not. We Brits living in New York are notoriously standoffish.”

“Is that right?”

The middle-aged waitress with a bee-hive hairdo whose nametag identified her as Flo appeared with a pitcher of water. “More water, darlin’?”

Emily smiled broadly. “Oh, yes. Hello, Flo. And thank you so much.”

Amused, Flo winked at Liam. “You’re welcome, darlin’.” Then to Liam, “Bout time.”

He pulled a frown, discouraging any more commentary on the subject from Flo.

“Just holler if y’all need anything more,” she said over her shoulder as she headed back to the cash register.

“That’s Flo,” he explained. “A town fixture. She’s been here as long as I can remember.”

“She seems to have a vested interest in your dating status.”

“Flo is a bit like everyone’s favorite aunt, who tries to look unconcerned while

stealthily rooting us on from the sidelines. For that, we all love her.”

Emily tried to imagine being a waitress in a diner in this small town for all these years and, honestly, couldn’t. She supposed she’d gotten used to the bustle of the city and all the pressures there. Her job, the relentless push for more... She’d become immune to all that for the most part. It felt normal. But this place—the pace and the friendly rhythm of it was like hearing a foreign language for the first time.

“So,” he said. “Your sister is packing up your apartment?”

“I’m afraid so, yes. But she’s also using the time there to show her photography book around to try to get some work. She works primarily in London and some in Paris but would love to get a foothold here. Our father, naturally, doesn’t approve.”

“Why not?”

“Beyond the art she’s pursuing? He thinks America is... well, he’s tied in deeply to his roots in England and he’s a member of the House of Lords.”

“Your father is a lord?”

“Technically, no. But that’s a title he’s addressed by now. And he’s not a peer. The House of Commons where he began as an MP is like your Congress. An elected position, but later he was referred to and admitted to the House of Lords. It’s more of an appointment. A prestigious appointment. At any rate, he considers art, and generally, America, beneath us. But Muriel is the youngest and that gives her some leeway.”

“And you?” Liam asked. “You’ve been in America for a while.”

She swallowed thickly and leaned in. “I escaped here, really. I needed to create a life

of my own without him over my shoulder constantly judging me or pitting my success against my brother. There was no winning there.”

“Your brother, Malcolm.”

“Yes. We’re what you’d call Irish twins. Eleven months apart and, from the get-go, we were set in competition with each other. He’s brilliant and ambitious and everything I thought I wanted to be. But it’s never really been a friendly competition. After our mother’s death, after Muriel, our father had no idea really how to handle us, so he sent us to boarding school separately and Mal and I became strangers, really. Which is all more than you really wanted to know about the family Quinn.”

“Not true. I want to know everything about you.” His eyes were fixed on hers.

“I’m afraid you’ll be quite bored with my secrets. I never lived up to Malcolm’s achievements or my father’s. And, frankly, Muriel has a more exciting life than mine.”

“Who says they’re the standard?”

She blinked and looked away. “You see? That’s why I came. That cowboy logic.”

“There ya go. I’m all here for it. Honestly, I get the whole competition thing. After my older brother Will left to go play college football then the NFL, I was left to inherit the ranch. But as the spare, you might say, I never really expected to spend my life here. I thought Will would run the ranch and I’d do... something else with my life. Or at least not have the full responsibility. But for a long time, that’s exactly what happened. So, were things tense between me and Will? Hell, yeah. But we got over it. Now we work together. It’s good. Maybe the same can happen with you and Malcolm.”

She nodded, looking doubtful. “And if we don’t finish up here, soon, I’ll never get to meet your famous brother.”

“Don’t worry. I suspect all of them are going to casually show up to check you out once we get back home. Even though none of them is currently living at the ranch.” He laughed. “I apologize in advance for them.”

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“If they’re anything like you, I’m going to love them all,” she said before she thought better of it. Heat rose to her cheeks. “I-I mean—”

“I know what you meant. C’mon. Let’s get outta here. You must be tired after this long day of travel. I want to get you settled in your cabin before dinner tonight, which my mom is hoping to impress you with after she heard about your skill in the kitchen.”

“Oh, please.”

He laughed as they walked out of the diner. “So... what made you finally decide to come?”

She chose her words carefully as he opened the truck door for her. “Well, there was your invitation...”

He smiled.

“And I thought, if I get back to England without seeing for myself—” She broke off before she finished the thought.

“Seeing Montana?” he asked.

“Yes. Montana. And then, of course, I needed to see for myself if you were telling the truth about your cowboy skills.” She grinned at him. “For all I know, you could secretly be a banker.”

He made a face and slyly pulled his cell from his pocket. “Oh, damn. I guess that means I should cancel my three o’clock with my branch manager.” He pretended to text. “Dead giveaway.”

She laughed. “Seriously, though. I mean, how could I face my friends if I returned from America without a firsthand proof that I met a real American cowboy? So, you see, I must see you in action.”

“Mmm,” he said around a bite of food. “That right?”

“I won’t be denied. I’ve come all this way.”

“Then, I’ll see what I can do.”

It took almost forty-five minutes to get to the ranch, but it was so worth the drive. Everywhere she looked, from the snow-capped mountains to the stands of pines and whispers of spring flowers beginning to sprout through the winter brown, reminded her of screen savers on her computer that had never been anything but faraway places she’d probably never see.

The Hard Eight ranch was settled into the lee of the Absaroka Mountains alongside the shallow, fast-moving river Liam told her was the Yellowstone—an iconic American river. And the air... she couldn’t get over the sweetness of the air. She rolled the window down and pulled in a deep breath.

He smiled at her. “It’s different.”

“Amazing. I can’t believe I’ve been in this country for so long without ever seeing this part of it,” she said. “And you just... live here amongst all this.”

“You like?” he asked.

In awe, she nodded. “It literally takes my breath away.”

“It’s a far cry from the city, that’s for sure.” He pointed up the road to the Hard Eight sign poised over the long drive to his home. “Here we are.”

She took in the huge expanse of land surrounding them. “Which part is yours?”

“All of it. Far as you can see, to those mountains over there and all the way down to the river.”

“You own part of the Yellowstone River?”

He laughed. “Nobody owns the Yellowstone. But we have grazing rights up to it. It feeds our land and waters our cattle. That and a fresh spring up in the foothills up there,” he said pointing to the mountain.

She saw those cattle grazing in the distance along with the guest cabins and glamping tents scattered to the west of the pastures, not far from the main house—a pretty log-fronted structure with a big front porch, complete with Adirondack chairs and a front-yard fire pit. It looked exactly as she’d expected a Montana ranch house to look.

Her stomach churned at the prospect of meeting his family. She had no idea how this would go.

“You ready?” Liam asked as he pulled to a stop in front of the house.

“As I’ll ever be.”

His smile made her feel like she could do anything.

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A woman who looked like she could be Liam's mother appeared on the porch, waving, and she headed down the steps toward the truck. She was lovely, really, with shoulder-length dark-blonde hair, half pulled back from her face, and hazel-green eyes like Liam's. She was one of those women, Emily suspected at first glance, who had never looked her age, but always looked youthful.

"Welcome, welcome, Emily," she said, embracing her before Emily could think to resist. Her hug was warm and quick. She pulled back to look at her. "Liam's told us all about you. And I must say, you're every bit as pretty as he told us you were."

Thrown, Emily stammered a response. "I—Th-thank you."

Liam gave the woman a kiss on her cheek. "Emily? This is my mom, in case you hadn't guessed already. Sarah Hardesty? Emily Quinn."

"I've heard lovely things about all of you as well," she said. "Thank you for having me on such a short notice."

"Of course. Of course. We're thrilled to have you. Liam told us all about your unlikely meeting in New York and, well, his friends are always welcome in our home. And, for the record, I adore your accent. Darling," she said to Liam, "isn't it just somewhere between Keira Knightly and Emma Thompson?"

Liam leaned in. "My mother is a Jane Austen movie fan, in case that got by you."

Emily laughed. "I have met Ms. Thompson. She's lovely. She and my father were in the same class together at Cambridge."

Sarah's eyes widened like a starstruck Hollywood tourist. "Oh, my goodness."

"It's my mom's dream to meet her one day," Liam said. "The only celebrities we ever see up here in Montana are the ones who come up to buy up all the prime lakefront land or build their McMansions on fallow ranch land. But we are hoping to attract a few of those Montana dreamers here on the guest ranch one day."

"From the looks of it, I'm sure you will," Emily said, taking in the gorgeous horses mingling in a nearby corral alongside a small donkey. "I mean, who wouldn't want to come here, just to... to experience it?"

An older man came out the door just then, coming down the porch stairs to greet them. Sarah hurried to pull him into their circle. His hair was gray and neat, and he seemed older than Sarah by a bit. "Emily, this is Ray. Ray Lane, my fiancé. Ray, meet Emily, Liam's friend."

Perhaps she'd been too long in the city, but the easy warmth from Liam's family reminded her that not everywhere in America was as buttoned down and unfriendly as New York, where eye contact was patently avoided. This friendly welcome was a little disorienting but, at the same time, welcome.

As they walked toward the house, she took in the beautiful front porch with its white wicker chairs and cozy outdoor rug. She could almost imagine the place decorated for the holidays and how beautiful it would look.

"Emily is going to be staying at the Bluebird cabin, and she'll be our first official guest," Liam told them.

"I'm afraid I must insist on paying my way," she said, stubbornly.

But at once, they all said, "No."

Sarah explained, “Our cabins aren’t even officially open yet, so you’re doing us a favor testing this one out for us. We still have about a month before our guests begin to arrive. You’ll no doubt enjoy having your own space and a kitchen of your own, too. Though we tend to have big family meals here to which you are welcome. Tonight, for example, most everyone is coming.”

Emily tried to keep the deer-in-the-headlights expression from her face. “Lovely.”

“But don’t worry. Promise, they don’t bite. And you’re our guest,” Sarah said. “Please, just relax and enjoy this beautiful place. It must be good to be out of the city for a bit.”

Emily inhaled deeply, feeling the edge of the city softening inside her. “It is. It truly is.”

The cabin Liam showed her to was cozy and perfect. Not too rustic nor too modern, but just the right touch for her imaginings of what a ranch cabin should be. There were two bedrooms in this one, a small kitchen with all the amenities, a cozy living room with a river stone fireplace and warm rugs underfoot, and a closeted washer and dryer. Of course, the bathroom was lux with a steam shower and a freestanding claw-footed tub.

He was proud of this place, she could tell, and all the hard work they’d all put into it. “I love it,” she told him. “It’s perfect.”

“You must be tired. I’ll let you get settled,” he told her. “Dinner’s at five. And don’t worry about my family. They’re easy.”

“They’re lovely, too.” She smiled at him as they stood awkwardly in the cabin doorway.

Close enough that the scent of him—soap and leather and some fragrance that belonged to him alone—stirred something in her belly. Good Lord, it had to be pheromones, because every time he got near her, something inside her went crazy.

“See you later?” He gave her another kiss on the cheek and left it at that, walking back toward the main house.

Shaken, she leaned back against the doorjamb, contemplating the wisdom of asking him for another real kiss.

After Liam left her, Emily sprawled on the cushy living room couch and stared at the cabin around her, taking in the woodsy fragrance and the carefully selected furnishings. Nothing was overdone and everything reminded her that relaxation was the point of this place.

Aside from the last nearly two months of unemployment where she’d been relentlessly hounding agencies for a job, she hadn’t taken an actual holiday in years. And, certainly, never one in a place like this. She’d never been camping, glamping, or anything close. But this cabin suited her perfectly, even though it was a far cry from the lux hotels she normally stayed in when traveling for business.

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She probably didn't have enough fingers and toes to count all the friends back home who would love to come to a place like this, just to chill out from the hustle of the city. She vowed to make it her mission, before leaving for England, to get the word out about the Hard Eight ranch. It seemed the least she could do.

She lay back on the couch, staring at the ceiling, thinking of Liam and the way he'd kissed her cheek. Maybe he didn't want to scare her off. Maybe a kiss on the cheek would be all she would get from him. Maybe the ground rules they'd set would stand in the way of anything else happening between them. Was that best? How could she know? She'd put herself in this situation. And the last thing she wanted to do was to lead him on. To make him think... think... what? That there was a future for them?

Arrrghhh. But what if there was or could be somehow?

No, she was moving thousands of miles away and the chances of anything long-distance happening between them was... nil. She'd done this to herself. Now she had to thread the needle with him here on his own ranch. She knew very well that his invitation here had the same motives her accepting it had. Both were curious. But more than that, she had found herself—more than once and for reasons she couldn't explain—imagining a somehow life with him.

*

Emily woke with a start a few hours later and realized she'd fallen asleep on the couch. The sun was heading down. She looked at her watch. Almost late for dinner.

Oh, no!

Quickly, she changed, splashed water on her face, and fixed her mascara and lip gloss. Then she headed out the door toward the main house. On the way there, she passed a corral full of horses, several of whom stretched their necks over the fence to say hello. She stopped at the closest, a pretty dun mare whose velvety, whiskery muzzle aimed to get a good sniff of her.

“Well, hello there,” she said softly, stretching her palm out beneath her nose.

The horse gave her palm a nuzzle, no doubt looking for treats. Finding none, the mare exhaled sharply but stretched her neck out for some scratches.

Emily happily obliged, giving the spot behind her ears special attention. “Yes, you’re a pretty one, aren’t you then? Nothing tonight, but I promise to bring you something tomorrow. What’s your name I wonder?”

“Her name,” Liam said from behind her, “is Winnie. Winnie the Wonder Horse.”

Emily turned to find him standing near, watching her interaction with the mare. “Oh, hello. I—She’s beautiful. And friendly.”

“Ryan’s been working with her for weeks now. She’s a regular teddy bear of a mare. All bluff on the outside, all soft on the inside. I think she likes you.”

“Winnie.” She pulled a hand down the mare’s jaw. “The feeling’s mutual, I assure you. I can’t get over walking out my door to... to this. Horses saying hello. Is she rideable?”

“Not yet. She’s got a few months to go before we can trust that she’s ready. But Ry has high hopes for her. She’s bonded with his other horse, Khòla, an auction horse he trained up himself last summer.” He pointed to a pretty Appaloosa horse standing near Winnie. “Winnie came in not too long ago from the BLM herd and took to

Khòla right away.”

“The BLM?”

“Bureau of Land Management. They pull wild horses off the range and instead of slaughtering them—which used to be their go-to solution—they give them to ranchers with spare graze land to keep. The bureau subsidizes them and covers their medical expenses should they have any, but we feed them and care for them, try to get them adopted out if they’re considered trainable, like Winnie here. Otherwise, they’ve got a home for life. Just not running wild anymore.”

“Lucky them. But it’s a bit sad they can’t run free.”

“Yeah. But their life is much more predictable here and they will live years longer than their wild brothers. And they’ve got lots of room to run here.”

She gave Winnie one last pat. “It is peaceful here. So peaceful I fell sound asleep on that couch. I almost missed dinner.”

“I would have gotten you. Are you ready to meet the hoard? They’re all here, anxious to meet you.”

With the barn lights shining behind him, she could just make out the anticipation on his face. She smiled at him. “Lead the way, kind sir.”

“I always say that I don’t believe I’m a chef. I try to be a storyteller.”

—Jose Andres—

Chapter Six

Liam leaned back in his chair, sipping on a whiskey rocks as the delicious meal wound down, watching Emily masterfully interact with his siblings and mom without missing a beat. He'd been prepared to run interference for her from all the questions he knew his siblings would have for her about England, New York, and their relationship. But as it happened, Shay and her fiancé, Cooper, Will and his wife, Izzy, and even Cami and her almost-fiancé, Gus, showed restraint. Instead of peppering her with questions, they plied her with funny—embarrassing—stories about him and some about each other. All of which beat the alternative—the interrogation of Emily—for which he was grateful.

From time to time, Emily met his gaze with a reassuring smile or a wink, and as the meal went on, he began to relax. Even when Will told the story of eight-year-old Liam getting his foot caught in the loft ladder and hanging upside down until Will and Shay finally found him and couldn't stop laughing.

“Yeah, it was funny unless you were upside down and the blood was rushing to your brain,” Liam allowed. “But as I recall, Will, it was you, the next week, who fell into a gopher hole up to your knee. I think you were stuck there for a good twenty minutes before I got you out.”

“Before you stopped laughing long enough to get me out. Payback,” he said, chuckling at the memory.

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“Boys,” Sarah said, rolling her eyes. “Do you have brothers, Emily?”

Liam saw that question trigger something in her eyes. Sadness?

“Yes, one,” she admitted. “Older than me, but quite stuffy. But... I have a sister, too. And she’s always the life of the party and the best photographer I know. I hope one day she’ll come out to see this beautiful ranch, as well.”

Shay said, “She’s welcome any time. We could use some photographs of the ranch, actually. Tara, here, is working on our website. She’s a wonder.”

Tara, the nineteen-year-old single mom the Hardesty clan had adopted over the Christmas holidays last year, blushed at the praise as she bounced her baby, Lolly, against her shoulder. “I wouldn’t go that far,” she said, brushing her blonde hair from her eyes. “I just like doing that stuff.”

“Lucky for us.” Cami, the youngest of the Hardesty siblings, gave Lolly’s cheek a brush with her fingers. “Plus, she loves to cook. I hear you’re a whiz in the kitchen, Emily.”

“Oh, that’s lovely,” Emily told her. “Good to start young. And I do love cooking, as well. It’s the thing I do to stay sane when all around me is chaos. Speaking of good cooking, Tara will have a good teacher in you, Mrs. Hardesty. This meal was delicious. And that banana pudding—I’m sorry, it was to die for.”

“Thank you, darlin’.” Liam’s raved about your flourless chocolate cake. I’ll give you my recipe if you’ll share yours with me? Because he won’t stop hounding me.”

Liam groaned. “Mom—”

Emily couldn’t help but laugh. “Of course. Besides, I promised him I’d bake him one if I came out.” She turned to Tara. “Perhaps we can make it together.”

Tara’s eyes widened with excitement. “Really?”

She nodded. “I’ll just need a few supplies.”

“I probably have them on hand. But don’t worry about that now,” Sarah said.

Will rubbed his hands together. “This is sounding better and better. Just tell us when and we’ll be back to taste test.” Everyone at the table agreed.

“Do you ride, Emily?” Shay asked, changing the subject. “Because we have wonderful ranch horses who would love an outing if you’re game.”

“I used to ride as a girl,” she said. “We had several horses, one for each of us. But I was the only one who loved riding. And horses. I’m afraid it’s been a long time for me.”

Cooper shrugged. “It’s like riding a bike.”

Sarah, who had never been a rider, shook her head. “Don’t feel pressured, dear. We have plenty of things to do without risking life and limb.”

“Oh, I’m not afraid of horses. Truly. I’d love to ride. If”—she turned to Liam—“you’ll go with me.”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” he said.

“Maybe tomorrow?”

He shook his head. “No. Tomorrow I have something else special planned.”

“Ooooh! Do tell!” Cami said, leaning forward on her hand. Emily raised her brow, intrigued.

“Nope. Then it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

“Whatever it is, can I come?” Ryan piped in from beside him.

“You’ve got school.” Liam scrubbed a hand in his hair—to which Ryan pushed him away with an embarrassed laugh. “Besides, this one is just the two of us. But when we take the horses out, you’re more than invited.”

Emily turned to Ryan. “Liam tells me you’ve been training that pretty dun out there in the paddock. I’m quite impressed by your skills. When I was your age, I was still figuring out which curry brush my horse preferred.”

Heat rose to his cheeks. “Cooper’s been teaching me. He’s the one who has the magic touch with horses.”

“And he gets none of that from me,” Cooper’s father Ray said, joking. “But I will take credit for his good looks.”

Cooper play-punched his father’s arm.

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Emily's gaze took in the family who were all focused on her. "When I met Liam in New York, so randomly on the subway, I couldn't have imagined where he came from, or what a wonderful, talented family he had here. But I'm so glad to meet you all. Thank you for the lovely welcome and the dinner."

"You're very welcome," Sarah told her. "And you must be exhausted after this long travel day."

"I think the time change is starting to kick in."

They all got up and began to clear the table. Sarah forbade Emily's help. "Guest, remember? Now go get a good night's sleep and get ready for whatever surprise Liam has in store for you tomorrow."

He walked her back to the cabin under a starry sky. The pathway was lit here and there with edging lights and string lights wound around the trunks of nearby trees here and there adding to the magical feeling of this place at night.

The night air was colder than the chilly afternoon and he put an arm around her shoulder as they walked to keep her warm.

"You were a hit," he told her as they walked. "They all loved you."

"You have a lovely family."

"A lot of personalities, for sure," he said. "But that's what makes us work, I guess."

“So, what is this big surprise you have for me tomorrow?” They reached her cabin door and lingered outside, reluctant to end the night.

“You’re gonna have to wait. But I think you’ll like it. You’re not scared of heights, are you?”

Her eyes widened. “Are we going... mountain climbing?”

He laughed. “No. Just checking.”

“Well, I did work on the twenty-first floor of our building for six years, so I’d have to say, no?”

“Good. Since you’re still technically on New York time, will ‘early’ bother you?”

She bit her lip. “How early?”

“Six am?”

“Now you’ve got me curious. Six it is. I’ll set my alarm.” She leaned back against the cabin door, smiling at him.

His gaze was on her mouth, but he forced his eyes up to meet hers. “So. Good night then.”

“Night... Hey, Liam?”

He hadn’t moved. He was still close enough she could feel his heat.

“Yeah?”

“Tonight reminded me of my favorite nights, cooking for friends back in the city. It was nice. Thank you.”

He smiled. “It was nice. Nice to have you there. Now... get a good night’s sleep. I’ll see you in the morning. Wear comfortable shoes. You have comfortable shoes, right?”

“Would I come to the wilds of Montana without them?”

His gaze continued to blaze a trail across her face.

Her cheeks heated. “You’re... not going to kiss me?”

“You want me to kiss you? Because I will.” It was more of a threat than a promise.

“So... what are you waiting for?”

“Maybe,” he said, tucking his hands around her waist, standing mere inches from her, “I’m waiting for you to say I’m not gonna scare you away with a real kiss. Or cross your boundaries. Or make you think I brought you here for some ulterior—”

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She wrapped her hand around his jacket front and pulled him closer and took that decision right out of his hands. She kissed him. Fully. Not a quick buss on the lips either. No, this was the same kiss they'd shared on her stoop in front of her house, the one neither of them had expected. The one that had been haunting her imagination since that day.

He pulled her up against him, shifted the kiss, deepening it, his lips softening against hers and she felt the tension in his shoulders relax. He tasted sweet, and she inhaled the fragrance of his skin against her cheek. Wanting that kiss to go on and on, she nevertheless felt him pull back from it and rest his forehead against hers as they each caught their breath.

“Emily—”

“You don't scare me, Liam,” she told him. “Nothing about you scares me.”

He swallowed thickly. “Good. I'm-I'm glad.”

“Good.”

“Okay,” he breathed back. “Now that we have that settled, I—”

His phone buzzed in his pocket. For a moment, she thought he might ignore it, whoever it was. But with a frown, he took it out and looked at the text.

“It's Will. Some contractor needs to talk to me ASAP. About some work that's going to get done tomorrow. I'd better go.” But there was disappointment in his voice. She

nodded at him and he said, “Get some sleep. Tomorrow will come early.” He kissed her again in a way that seemed so natural, as if he’d known her for years.

“Good night,” she said.

“Night.” He turned and walked backward a few steps, just smiling at her in the moonlight.

*

The next morning, bright and very early, Emily climbed into Liam’s truck, and they drove off to some mysterious destination in the near dark. The sky was barely lightening, and, in the distance, she could still see the moon hanging over the far horizon. The early morning sky was still awash with stars, and she couldn’t believe she was here, sitting beside Liam in his pickup truck, driving to—who knew where?

She yawned and wished for a cup of coffee. Sleep last night had been elusive as it always was the first night in someplace new. But it wasn’t just the strange surroundings, which were beautiful. It was that kiss that had her tossing and turning all night long. She replayed it over and over in her head and how it could have taken a very different direction. Was she glad it didn’t? She couldn’t say. But this morning, there was an ease between them that hadn’t been there before. Maybe because they’d gotten that kiss out of the way and they could just... be together.

Now, as she turned to watch him steer his truck down the road, he caught her smiling at him.

He smiled back. “You look fetching in the morning.”

She laughed. “Fetching. I like that word. Even though I certainly don’t deserve it this morning.” She’d done her best to look okay—a splash of cold water, a little

makeup... but her sleep-rumpled hair was impossible, and she'd pulled it back in a messy bun. "Are you going to tell me where we're going? Are you... simply kidnapping me?" The prospect of that did appeal.

"Only for a few hours. And you'll find out soon enough." He sent her a quick look. "You like surprises?"

"Hm-mm. Generally. Unless, of course, they involve me losing my job or... falling from great heights on a surprise adventure." He laughed and she tipped her head against the glass passenger window, watching him.

She liked looking at him. He was just so bloody handsome, in a very unself-conscious sort of way. And now that she could stare at him, unabashed, she enjoyed the way humor played across his expression, and she realized she'd misjudged him that first day they'd met. She had thought him more of a serious type. Kind, but all business. But getting to know him here with his family, she could see that he wasn't that at all. He was funny and sweet and intense all in the same moment. And that he'd taken time away from all his work and planned this day for her—this secret adventure—really touched her.

After a ten-minute drive, as the sun was pulling up above the horizon, he pulled his truck into what looked like a small airfield with several small planes and a pair of helicopters parked near a large hangar. Emily sat up straighter. "You are not taking me skydiving." It wasn't actually a question. More of a declarative statement.

"Nope," he said, reassuring her. "I wouldn't do that to you. Although if you want to do that at some point—"

"Uh, no, thank you. That fits comfortably into the falls-from-great-heights category."

With a grin, he pointed at the helicopter where a rather cute pilot-type guy was

inspecting the back rotor. A big, curly-haired dog sat beside him, patiently waiting.

“See that guy? That’s Jake Canaday. He’s a friend of mine. This is his company, and he’s going to take us on a little tour of the area.”

Relief filled her. “Really? Brilliant!” she said, relieved. “I’ve never flown in a helicopter.”

“Now you will. I want you to see the real Montana.”

She bit her lip, excited for what was to come. She’s flown in over the countryside from New York, but nothing like a chartered helicopter ride around these beautiful valleys and mountains.

They greeted Jake at the helicopter and Liam handed him a smallish duffel bag to stow. “Picnic,” he told her. “Jake, this is my friend Emily. Emily Quinn? Jake Canaday.”

Jake extended a hand. “Nice meet you. I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Oh, God. Should I be scared?”

“Not at all.” Jake laughed. “He’s said only good things about you. And when he told me he wanted to take you for a ride, I had to agree. You know, Liam is a hard man to say no to.”

She smiled at Liam. “Quite.”

The dog wagged his way over to her and gave her a good sniff at the knee.

“This is Monday. He’s along for the ride today.”

She bent down and rubbed behind the dog’s ears. “Hello, Monday. You’re a beauty.”

“He’s here for the compliments,” Jake joked. “His favorite thing is riding along. Besides, I have some business up the mountain with my uncle, and he loves it up there. So, Liam’s timing was perfect. I was hoping my wife, Olivia, would be here by now, so she could meet you, but she’s dealing with the kids this early, and I guess she couldn’t wrangle them. You two ready to go?”

“As we’ll ever be,” Liam told him, clapping him on the shoulder.

“All right then,” Jake said and climbed into the pilot’s seat. “Let’s go!”

A few minutes later, they were flying over the valley Liam called Paradise Valley where the land stretched out before them toward the rising sun like a golden wave. Liam had put Monday in the back with him and her up front in the copilot’s seat with

the best view of the landscape. It was, in a word, exhilarating.

Through their headsets, Jake pointed out the land features as they flew past—the Yellowstone River that snaked across the prairie, here shallow and full of little ruffled rapids and icy edges and there, pocketed by deep, dark pools. Behind them was Copper Mountain and in the distance, the towering Absarokas, with their craggy mountainsides covered with pine and what she imagined were aspen, though they were naked from winter and only hinting at budding green. The stands of trees were slashed by massive granite cliffs that started and stopped with dangerous suddenness, and she thought of that photo of the mountain goats clinging to a mountainside that Liam had sent her that day of her last interview. The one she'd had trouble imagining seeing as real. But there they were. Jake pointed them out a few minutes later, scurrying along the steep side of the mountain, spooked by the sound of their chopper. There were a half dozen of them, and a little baby goat, as well. Emily almost squealed with delight at seeing them.

Everywhere she looked was the topography of that old Brad Pitt movie, *A River Runs Through It*, but seeing Montana firsthand was a revelation. They flew across landscape without roads, where one could only get to by hiking nearly impossible territory. But she was grateful to be able to see it from the air. She could almost smell the sharp tang of pines as they flew past them.

She pointed at the sight of a moose standing near the river that cut through a canyon. “Look!!” she told Liam through her headset, who just smiled back at her and nodded. “It’s enormous! I thought they only lived in your Alaska.”

Jake laughed.

Liam did, too. “We’re lucky to see them,” Liam told her. “But they keep pretty much out of sight in the forests and willow fens nearby that flood in the spring.”

“Incredible.” She nodded, peering down through the bubble of glass at her feet, hoping to see more.

“Ready for a little thrill?” Jake asked her.

She gripped her seat. “Um... Am I?”

His answer was to dive the helicopter sideways and swoop into a thick-sided canyon, following the path of the river that flowed from somewhere above them on the mountain. Emily held her breath, her eyes wide as he skimmed the surface river closely and then suddenly climbed as the canyon opened up to a higher meadow where touches of winter still clung.

In the distance, she saw a home perched in the middle of nowhere, all glass and wood and quite beautiful, tucked into a mountainside looking as if it had just sprung out of the rock itself.

“What in the world?” She forgot she was speaking into the mic.

“That’s my uncle’s place,” Jake told her. “He’s a bit of a hermit. But a very... wealthy hermit. He’s a technology wiz, inventor, and one of my favorite people. Anyway, I promised him I’d deliver him some supplies from town this morning. See? There he is.”

Indeed, there was a middle-aged gentleman standing near a landing pad waving at them. Two dogs were by his side, wagging their tails. With graying hair and wearing an old cardigan and shlumpy-looking khakis, Jake’s uncle might fit in perfectly with half of the pub-goers in the Cotswold villages back home. As unpretentious as they came. A bit of a grandpa vibe.

“He lives all the way up here on his own?” she asked.

“He’s got his birds and his dogs. That’s enough for him. He’s not unfriendly. He just prefers his own privacy. Every now and then, we talk him into town for a celebration of something or other. Otherwise, we come to him. He’s also part owner of my aviation company.”

“Birds?” she asked.

“Falcons,” Liam told her. “We’ll see them later if he has time.”

Falcons? This was turning out to be a fascinating outing. Once they landed, Liam’s uncle came and helped her out of the helicopter. Monday bounded out to greet his furry cousins.

“You must be the Emily I’ve heard so much about,” Jake’s uncle said, extending a hand. “I’m Deke. Deke Lassen.”

How in the world had he heard about her all the way up here? Liam winked at her.

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“So lovely to meet you, Mr. Lassen. What a fabulous place you have here!”

“It’s my little sanctuary. Welcome. And Liam?” He shook his hand. “Good to see you, too. I’d say you two had better hurry if you plan to catch some of those trout down at the river though. It’s been pretty good fishing down there lately. Spring is here early, though we might still get another snow this year.”

Liam grabbed the duffel bag he’d brought from the helicopter. “Thanks, Deke. We’ll strike now while the trout are hungry. Emily here is going to learn how to fly fish this morning.”

“I am?”

“You wanted the full Montana experience, didn’t you?”

“But... fishing? Me?”

“Not fishing. Flyfishing. It’s a whole other world. You’re gonna love it. You need any help off-loading this stuff before we go, Jake?”

“No, we’ve got it. You two have fun. See you in a couple of hours.”

Emily supposed she was game for anything this morning, even—a shiver ran through her—loading squiggly earthworms onto fishhooks. Her father was not an outdoorsman, aside from shooting trap with political cronies now and again. But she imagined that Liam had grown up on these rivers, fishing with his father or his siblings on lazy summer days.

In spring, this high up, the air was still chilly as they hiked down to the river to a place that was out of sight of Deke's house and the Yellowstone still had lacey traces of ice along its banks, but the water was running swiftly, save a few deep pools that sat beneath the branches of the willows along the shore.

"They'll be hungry now that the river's thawed," Liam said, pulling his disassembled fishing rods from the pack.

"Please don't tell me we have to dig earth worms before we can fish."

"You'll be happy to know there are no worms involved at all. Fly fishing uses flies. Hand-tied to look like insects. Like the ones that land on the water or hover above."

"Ah."

He handed her an assembled pole and started on the other one. "Fly fishing is really more about teasing the fish than waiting for one to take the bait. You've really never fished before?"

She shook her head, eyeing the nearby dark water with suspicion.

"Don't worry. I'm going to show you how. You'll see. It's fun."

Or a way to embarrass herself by being completely out of her depth. Ah, well. Failing around Liam was becoming her modus operandi. So, what did she have to lose? She was here for an adventure of her choosing. And here she was having one!

The water was too cold to go standing in the river, though he told her that was his method of choice. But they stood together on the shoreline, and he showed her how to cast the fly across the water with a rhythmic one-two-three motion, releasing the line a little more with each forward bow of her rod. It was definitely easier said than done.

“That’s it,” he told her, showing her by example with his own line. “Easy, easy motion. One, two, three release.” And off his fly would go, stretching out across the water where it would float as he tugged it back in jerky little motions that imitated actual flies.

It took him all of two minutes to snag a fish, a pretty, strong rainbow trout that fought him all the way in. But after admiring the shimmery color of him, Liam set him free and released him gently back into the dark pool.

“Too small,” he said, though he looked good sized to her.

But being the softie she was, she was glad he released the fish. For the next half hour, they cast lines out over the river. He caught a few and kept them in his creel, floating in the river. She snagged nothing but a tree behind her, a log near the shore, and her own jacket once.

“I am not a quitter,” she told him finally, “but this is impossible.”

Setting his pole down, he came to her side. “Here, let me help you.”

He stood behind her, pressing her back up against his hard chest and covered her right hand on the rod with his, showing her the motion and feeding the line out as he went. Emily momentarily forgot all about the fishing and could only think about how close he was and how much she wanted to turn in his arms and kiss him.

He smelled like... like soap and fresh air, and if he was wearing any scent at all, it was his own, a scent that had stirred her dreams at night after that one kiss on the stoop of her apartment in New York.

Focus, Emily.

She wanted to figure this out. To impress him. Wanted to make him proud of her—from some foolish, deep-seated feeling of insecurity, she was sure. Some need to prove herself to the men around her. But it wasn't Liam putting that pressure on her. She was doing it to herself.

She let herself flow with the feeling of his arm on hers. Back and forward, back and forward. And the fly at the end of her line sailed on the air currents effortlessly until it landed with a plop yards and yards away in the middle of the stream.

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“That’s right,” he murmured beside her ear. “Now, slowly reel it back in, giving it a little tug now and then, make it jump across the water.”

“Like this?”

He let go of her hands. “Exactly like that.”

Emily smiled, getting the feel of it now. She reeled and tugged, then—it pulled back!

“Oh! Oh! I think—I think I got a bite!”

He laughed and nodded, talking her through how to reel it in. The fish was much stronger than she’d expected, and it fought her the whole way. Liam grabbed a net and met the trout at the water, scooping it up in a single swish.

It was a beauty of a trout, much bigger than his—maybe a two pounder—and sparkling in the morning light. Liam high-fived her and set about removing the hook from its mouth.

“Wait,” she said, pulling her phone from her back pocket. “I need a photo of this. No one will believe me!”

“Then you should hold the fish. Here, give me your phone.”

She handed it to him and struck a cheesy pose with the fish dangling beside her face.

But Liam’s expression changed with the suddenness of the Montana sky. “Emily.

Come here. Don't turn around."

"What?" She made a face. And, of course, she turned around.

She immediately regretted it. Her heart nearly jumped in her throat.

Not twenty feet away, prowling in the bushes behind her was a bear. A very big, very brown bear. And not ten feet away from her, another very small bear, waddling in her direction, curious, looking adorable and instantly—with a dread that crawled up her skin—she knew that was not good. She couldn't seem to make herself move. She was frozen to the spot. "Oh. My. God."

"Animals are my friends, and I don't eat my friends."

—George Bernard Shaw—

Chapter Seven

"Don't run. Donot scream. Give me the fish," Liam told her quietly, pulling her toward him by the wrist. "It's okay. Give me the fish." He pulled the hook out of the fish's mouth and held it in his hand as they backed away. "Now. We're just going to move away from her cub. Right up that way." He pointed behind them. "We're going to leave all this gear behind and move right up there." He pulled her along the bank of the river, keeping his eye on the mother bear who was suddenly standing up on her back legs as her cub ran back to her.

"Nice bear," Liam said softly. "Good bear. Your river. We're leaving. See?"

The mother bear dropped to all fours and started toward them with a low growl.

Liam yelled, "Hah! Get back!" which momentarily stopped her. He tossed his creel

half-full of fish onto the ground to the left of them. He and Emily edged up the riverbank, but the bear followed in a halting, angry prowl.

“No. No. Here you go. Here’s a big, juicy one for you.” Liam tossed Emily’s trout toward her. The fish flipped and flopped on the grassy bank drawing the bear’s attention.

“Don’t turn around,” he told Emily. “Back up away. Keep going. I’m right behind you.” He pulled a can of bear spray from his belt. “I’ll use this if I have to.”

“Liam—” she whisper-screamed.

“Go!”

She did as he said and backed up the bank, keeping her eye on the bear. She was huge. Bigger than Emily could have even imagined a real bear to be. Her claws looked four inches long. Emily had heard stories about grizzlies killing people in the wild—wasn’t that in Montana?—though she wasn’t sure if this bear was one of those man-eating kind of bears. She didn’t much care at this point. All she could think about was how close that animal was getting to Liam.

The cub ran to explore the willow creel he’d thrown, and the mother bear bounced on her front feet with a final warning growl at them, before turning her attention to their fresh catch. At which point, Liam made his way up to Emily and the two of them backed away from the best fishing spot on the Yellowstone, relinquishing it to its proper owner.

Once out of sight of the bears, they breathed a sigh of relief and hurried fast up the hill toward Deke’s home, with an eye behind them to be sure the bear wasn’t following them. Just as they reached the edge of his property, two huge birds flushed out of the tree near Deke’s porch and flapped heavily toward them, checking them

out, before climbing toward the trees by the river.

Her scare meter tilted again.

Out from behind the house came Deke and Jake with concerned looks. “Was that a bear down at the river?” Jake asked. “Emily, you okay? You’re pale as a ghost.”

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Deke's dogs and Monday crowded around them, wagging their tails.

"Um... well... I believe so, yes." Her voice was shaky.

"It was a griz," Liam told them, holding Emily's arm. "I think we better get her inside. I'm sorry, Em. That wasn't exactly the fishing trip I'd planned."

But she shook her head. "I'm okay. Really. When I saw that baby bear and then the mother bear, I thought... well, quite frankly, I thought we were goners." She gripped his hand a little too tightly. "But thanks to you, we're still here. Alive. My God. You're not going to see anything like that in New York City. Or London. Who knew bears were that enormous?"

The men all looked at one another like, Yeah, we did.

"Throwing her the fish was brilliant. W-wait until I tell Muriel what... what happened..."

Her breath was coming hard and fast and, suddenly, she threw her arms around him and her breath came in shaky sobs. "Thank you."

*

Liam held her against him. Her body was quaking. Like him, the spike of adrenaline brought on by that encounter was crashing. There was a buzzing in his ears. Probably because his own blood pressure had skyrocketed down by that river. In all these years in Montana, that was the closest he'd come, ever, to buying it by a bear. The fish was

simply a last resort effort to distract the sow. Emily was properly scared, but they'd come closer than he'd wanted to admit to disaster. If anything had happened to her...

"Lucky you didn't need to use your gun," Jake said as they walked onto the deck of the house. "You do have a gun?"

He brushed Emily's hair out of her eyes as she released him. "You mean the pistol that's still in the bag down by the river? That gun?"

Jake and Deke exchanged looks.

"I don't go anywhere here without one." Liam ran a hand down his face. "But I didn't want to get it wet if I had to go in the river. Lesson learned."

"Well, at least you had bear spray," Jake said.

"Yeah. Didn't have to use it," he said, not wanting to make matters worse for Emily by admitting that sometimes bear spray worked and sometimes it simply enraged an attacking bear.

And the last thing he wanted to do was spray a bear with a cub for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. He cursed himself for being unprepared because things could have gone much differently.

Deke explained to Emily, "This is the time of year bears are emerging from their dens, hungry from a long winter and dangerous as hell when their cubs are with them. Lucky for you, hunger won out and you had the trout to give them, which was no doubt why they were heading to the river in the first place. But glad for the heads-up. We just sent the girls out for a little exercise. And we were going to see if you were catching any fish."

“The girls?” Color was finally returning to her cheeks, but she was still clinging to Liam’s arm.

“The falcons,” Jake said. “If not for you two showing up, we probably would have interrupted that very grizzly and her cub, fishing for her lunch.”

“Glad to be of service.” Liam led Emily inside as Deke blew a high-pitched whistle for the falcons.

“You okay?” Liam asked her quietly once they were in the living room that overlooked the valley through a huge picture window.

She nodded. “Thank you.”

“Thank you for not panicking.”

“Oh, I was panicking, all right. I’ve just learned to hide it well.”

He smiled. “Could’ve fooled me.”

She turned to face him with a grin. “What you did out there? I must say, aside from the sheer terror of it?” She pulled a finger down his shirtfront. “I must admit it turned me on a little.”

He couldn’t help the smile that curved his lips. “Yeah?”

“Mm-hm. You were rather hot fighting off that bear.”

He liked this flirty side of her. This playful, flirty side. And despite what had happened, it gave him hope that maybe this day wouldn’t be a complete bust after all. “And here I was, regretting exposing you to the Montana wilds.”

“Regret, I find, is an awful waste of time. Besides, how else would I have the full wild west experience? Or the story to take back to my oh-so-tame city-dwelling friends whose most dangerous outing is walking through midtown at night? But really. Today has been amazing. I learned to fly fish, and I even caught one! The bear got it, but still...”

“There’s your fish story.”

“Quite.”

Deke was holding the falcons when he and Jake walked in. Emily stared at the birds in awe. “Ah. They’re magnificent. They come when you call?”

“They’re pets now,” he told Emily. “Both of them were injured when I found them, and I nursed them back to health. But they both have issues still. Kind of ruined them for being in the wild. But we have a symbiotic relationship. They hunt rabbits and squirrels and bring them back home. We share the bounty. They come when they’re called and don’t miss a meal. It’s a win-win for them and company for me.”

She blinked. “You eat... squirrel?”

“No. I let them fight over the squirrel. To be honest, aside from a rabbit or two, I grow most of what I eat here. Can I interest you in a little early lunch?”

Jake leaned in. “You two will hit it off. Deke’s a gourmet cook.”

“Are you then?”

“My cooking is pretty basic, and I only have to please myself most of the time. But good food made with care is essential, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely. I’d love to see your kitchen.”

Deke beamed at that. “Let me put the girls in the aviary and I’ll show you around.”

The pair walked off together and, even after spending the morning with her, Liam couldn’t take his eyes off her.

“I’ve seen that look before,” Jake mused aloud. “Just never on you.”

Liam chuckled. “Yeah. She’s something. Meeting her in New York was like... it was like getting hit with a thunderbolt. Knocked me sideways.”

“We talking the real deal?”

“Maybe. If it were up to me,” Liam said. “But she’s a city girl and she’s heading back there after this short trip.”

“You sure about that?”

Liam found the leather sofa and slouched down into it. “Pretty sure. That’s the ground rules anyway.”

“My mind, rules are meant to be broken.” He sat down across from Liam. “Livvy took her sweet time letting go of some of her past to see clear to marry me. But I knew long before she did. I knew when we were just kids.”

Liam nodded. “Just now, when that bear came at us, the thought that I could’ve gotten her killed today just about broke me. She’s a city girl, like I said. She doesn’t have a clue about things like bears and wildcats.”

Jake ran a hand through his hair and leaned back. “She doesn’t look like a wallflower to me. She handled it all pretty well, for a city girl. And even city girls can learn to love the country. And cowboys who’ve been hit by a thunderbolt should be ready for

the storm, but never underestimate their need for the rain.”

*

Emily and Deke ended up making lunch together, and he filled her in on the fascinating sci-tech work he was researching alone here in the mountains, from solar road technology to advanced aviation technology that had been inspired by his birds. By the time they'd all eaten lunch in his beautiful glass-surrounded atrium, she was in awe of him and wishing she could get to know him better.

She'd shaken off the scare with the bear, but Liam was strangely quiet during the meal. Now and then, he'd meet her eye and the distance in his stare would narrow in on her. She wondered if it was the bear he was still thinking about and how close they'd come to disaster. But, to her, this day had turned out to be practically perfect. A fully exciting, out-of-the-box kind of day, which was exactly what she'd had in mind in coming to Montana. Well, perhaps not the bear, but even that, with Liam acting all take-charge, protecting her, keeping her calm? That was all incredibly attractive and at the same time, confusing. Not because she hadn't expected him to do just that, but perhaps, because that was exactly who he was. She'd just never met anyone quite like him.

And most likely never would again.

After they retrieved the things they'd left down by the river once the bears had gone, they said goodbye to Deke and flew back home. Jake's dog, Monday, who had played relentlessly with Deke's dogs, moped in the back seat with Liam, unhappy to leave his best doggie friends, but ended up on Liam's lap, staring out the window.

The ride home took on a different tone though as each of them seemed lost in thought about the day's happenings. For her part, Emily watched the beautiful landscape slide by, realizing that all the firsts she'd experienced today were also, no doubt, lasts.

She'd be leaving Montana all too soon and once she returned to London, would likely never be back. Never see this incredible countryside again. Never get close enough to a bear to meet its eye. Never feel Liam's strong hand, holding hers. Protecting her.

But that was how things were, and she had to accept them. Time was ticking away on her visa and, all too soon, she would be back in her father's world again, an even smaller fish in a pond that was quite out of her depth.

Stop now. Don't focus on what will happen. Focus on the now. If it all has to end, enjoy it while you can.

Those words resonated and she repeated them like an affirmation. She would enjoy this time, despite what loomed ahead. She'd come to leave all that behind her and to savor this moment in time with Liam—a man she hardly knew yet felt closer to than men she'd known for years. How was that possible? She'd only experienced that kind of connection in her life with women, insta-friends who'd become friends for life. But men? Never. Not until him.

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He stopped at her cabin, getting out to open her door. She wasn't ready to part with him but knew he had taken a big chunk of his day to entertain her, and she'd have to let him go.

They walked up the pathway to her cabin, and she pressed herself playfully at his side, smiling at him. "Aschoose your own adventuresgo, today was one I'll never forget. Your Montana cool being at the top of the list of things I'm grateful for."

"I'm grateful we came out of it alive."

"You are not giving yourself enough credit for getting us out of there in one piece."

He shook his head. "It sure as hell wasn't the picture I wanted to paint for you of Montana our first day out. All I could think was I might get you killed."

They reached her door, and she opened it, leaning against the doorjamb facing him. "If you think that spoiled the day for me, you still don't know me. Have I not mentioned my years of swimming with sharks on Wall Street? A daily exercise in survival and, dare I say, constant terror? That bear was scary, yes, but you knew exactly how to handle her. And here we are. At the doorway of my adorable cabin on your beautiful ranch. Nothing is spoiled. As I said, it's given me stories to tell for years to come."

He leaned a hand above her on the jamb. "You... constantly surprise me, Emily Quinn."

She took the front of his shirt in her hands. "Well... I've always been

underestimated.” She pulled him close and kissed him.

He smiled against her mouth, and she suddenly knew she wanted more than just a kiss. She wanted all of him. There was no disguising the fact that he wanted the same as he deepened the kiss, dragging her hard up against him and taking things to a whole other level.

But then he stepped back, taking off the hat she’d knocked out of place and taking a deep breath.

Her own breath came in small gasps, as well. Lord, he could kiss.

“You’re right,” she said. “We should... we should slow it down.”

“That’s not what I was thinking,” he said, his voice gravelly with desire.

She searched his eyes. “What were you thinking?”

With a twinkle in his eye, he said, “I was thinking... you’d better watch out. Between the way you kiss and your chocolate cake, I might never let you go. I might just have to marry you.”

Marry me?Despite the twinkle in his eye, the way he was looking at her made her heart race.

“Ha-ha,” she said, “you jest. Better save your enthusiasm for my second attempt at that cake. I might disappoint you.”

She could almost see him editing his response to that. “Doubtful.” Then, he pressed his lips to the top of her forehead. “Hey, you like to dance?”

The change of subject made her head spin. “Dance? Like dance, dance?”

“Like... line dance.”

“I-I’ve... never done it.”

“So, add it to your bucket list ’cause tonight you’re gonna get the chance. Right now, I’ve got a bunch of chores to catch up on, but tonight I’m taking you to dinner at Grey’s Saloon. On Wednesday nights there’ll be dancing. If you don’t know how to line dance, they’ll teach you.”

“A saloon? How very John Wayne sounding. I love it.” Liam was full of surprises today.

“Pick you up at six then?”

“It’s a date.”

*

Will and Liam finished the last of the fencing repairs they’d found on their rounds on horseback through the north pasture and headed back toward the house. The weather this week was a glorious break from the dreary winter that had socked-in the ranch with bad weather for the past few months and gave them hope that spring and summer would be equally beautiful.

Liam was quiet—conspicuously quiet—for most of the afternoon, thinking about his conversation—and that kiss—with Emily. Thinking about the events of the morning and the ever-slimming chances that things might work out for them. Oh, he knew her intentions. She was heading back overseas and couldn’t really see anything stopping that. And maybe she was right to keep her distance. To keep things from getting

serious. The government kept tabs on things like work visas and foreigners overstaying their time here.

But when he'd blurted out that idiotic thing about marrying her, he could see that scared her. And he cursed himself for saying it. He'd only meant it partly in jest as she'd said, but partly on the square, too. Because he could see himself marrying her. Living a life with her. And he'd never thought that about any woman before.

But could someone like her ever be happy in a place like this? Without the hustle and bustle of the city, and Wall Street and her career there? That look in her eye said no.

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“She picked a good week to come,” Will said as they were riding back, broaching the topic that had been rolling around in Liam’s head all day. The one he’d been avoiding with his brother all afternoon. “We got good weather for her first time here.”

“Yup.”

“She seems nice.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And apparently handled the bear situation pretty well.”

Liam burned a look at him.

“What?” Will said, all innocence.

“You obviously have something to say.”

“Just making conversation.” He shrugged. “About Emily.”

Liam reined in his horse. “Go on, then. Ask.”

“Ask... what?”

“What everyone wants to know. Apparently.”

“You mean if it’s serious between you two? I’d never ask that. That’s none of my

business.” Will straightened as if to deflect any blame.

“That’s true.”

“I mean, is it? Serious?”

Liam groaned and pulled up his horse. “There, you see? You just asked.”

“Okay, but all of us are just looking out for you,” Will said, pulling up beside him.

“Thanks, but I can look out for myself. And what does serious even mean? Do I like her? Yeah. Maybe like her a lot? Yeah. But she’ll be here for a minute then she’s moving back to London. How serious can it be?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Pretty damn serious from the way you look at her, I’d say.”

Liam nudged his horse forward. “Yeah. Well... I almost got her killed today.”

Will followed. “That’s ridiculous. You know that. That could’ve happened to anyone.”

“Could it? Bring a city girl out here to the middle of nowhere and she has no idea what’s here. How dangerous it could be? What could happen? Put a grizzly bear ten feet from her face and—”

“But you handled it.”

“We were lucky.”

“Because you handled it. And, on the subject of dangerous, exactly how dangerous do you think it is just walking around a big city like New York or... or London?”

Muggings. Robberies. And I mean... the traffic alone—”

“What’s your point?”

Will sighed and stared off at the mountains in the distance. The sun was lowering in the sky. Days were still relatively short, but they were all looking forward to summer.

“Do you remember that conversation we had when I first came home? The one about you wanting a life? The one where I thought you might break your hand on my face?”

“I remember. I believe it was about wanting a real life, not one just tied to feeding cows all day long, isolated from the world. Anyway. I believe I apologized for that. Deserved or not.” He slid Will a brotherly grin. “And now I have a life. I’ve got this place, the guest ranch ready to go. More people around... a little more freedom. A life.”

“Right.”

Liam frowned at him. “What?”

“You know the old saying, you can fool all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time but—”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, I do not fall into the all-of-the-time category. You think I don’t know—that I’m not aware—that all of us, everyone in this family has paired off in the last year and a half except—”

“Me. I know. But thanks for pointing it out.”

“And did you think that invitation to the Brody’s kid’s baptism in New York City fell out of the sky?”

Now he turned to Will in shock. “What?”

“No, I mean you were out driving cattle or something that day when I happened to talk to Jess when he called the house and he wanted you to come to the baptism, but he didn’t imagine you could drag yourself away from the ranch. I told him, yes, you could. And you’d love to come.”

“Wait. You got me invited?”

“No. Not at all. But we all wanted you to get outta here. Out from under all the work you’ve been putting in. See what’s out there. Outside of this place. And look what

happened.”

He burned a look at his brother. “Next you’re gonna tell me meeting her was a setup.”

“No, no. That was... a total—what do they call it? A kismet thing. But taking you to that dinner at her house was Jess’s wife’s idea. She adores Emily and thought... why not?”

Either way, it seemed the universe—and his family—had conspired for them to meet. His head was spinning.

“All I’m saying,” Will went on, “is don’t put imaginary roadblocks in front of you and her. Like what might have happened this morning, or her not beingcountryenough for this place.”

“An expiring visa is not imaginary.”

“Minutia. That could be overcome with a job.”

“A job she can’t get here. And you’re one to talk about roadblocks, after you and Izzy nearly broke up over the roadblock you put in front of her, lying to us about your real relationship.”

Will sent him a grin. “This is one of those big brother ‘do as I say not as I do’ moments. Or maybe it’s a learn what I had to learn the hard way. But you and Emily... I say keep open to what’s possible. And if you want her, little brother, fight for her.”

*

“Don’t hate me,” was the first thing out of Emily’s sister, Muriel’s mouth when Emily

answered her cell phone after saying goodbye to Liam. “It wasn’t exactly my fault.”

Emily’s heart sank, imagining the worst. “You’ve flooded the apartment?”

“Um... no?”

“Set fire to it?”

“Not that either.”

She didn’t like the sound of this. “Don’t make me guess. What have you done, Muriel?”

“Do you want the really bad news or the qualified good news first?”

“Let me have it. Bad first.”

She heaved a sigh. “I... may have mentioned to Malcolm that you might have... possibly fallen in love with a... a cowboy. And that you’ve gone to Montana to find your happily ever after.”

Emily clutched her forehead. “Oh, Muriel—”

“I know. I know. But in my defense, he goaded me into it. And I got carried away by the romance of your whole adventure. Because Mal was ragging on you to me as usual, and I was trying to defend you and... oh, it really was an accident.”

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“Anaccident? For God’s sake, Muri...” Both of them knew full well that Malcolm, with the smallest bit of information, was like a sidewinder snake who sniffed prey in the desert.

Mostly because he had their father’s ear. And once that story reached Lord Quinn... well—

“You know how Mal is,” Muriel went on. “He’ll wheedle things out of you and before you know it...”

She knew exactly how Malcolm could be, and Muriel—being the baby of the family and the peacemaker—was particularly vulnerable to his methods of manipulation.

“I’m so sorry,” her sister said. “Please don’t hate me.”

“Shhh,” Emily shushed. “I don’t hate you. What did he say?” She could only imagine the gears clicking in her brother’s pointed little head at the thought of passing along this delicious bit of gossip.

“He laughed. He actually laughed and said—” She stopped and silence stretched on the line.

“He saidwhat?”

“He said he was hardly surprised after you ruined your reputation with that firm in New York that you would slink off with someone as... as unreputable as a... acowhand—”

She shot to her feet. Unreputable? Cowhand? The words almost made her laugh out loud. Liam Hardesty wasn't the man Malcolm would ever be, in every possible way. As for cowhand, pph-hffff! She'd like to see Malcolm's reaction to what Liam had built here. And what Malcolm would have done in the face of that grizzly bear this morning. Now that was a hilarious thought! Or imagine him ever kissing a girl until her toes curled the way Liam had. Or made her feel like she was the best thing that had happened to him in years.

The thought nearly made her gasp. Was she falling in love with Liam? Could she possibly be falling in love with a man who was so objectively wrong for her? Or maybe the truth was, he was objectively absolutely right.

Muriel's next words forced her to tune back in to what she was saying. "And that our father would certainly have something to say about this. And he was right."

She wanted to scream. "He called you? Father has literally nothing to say about my life. I've been gone all these years, and he still thinks he can control me?"

"He's aware of your visa issues, of course."

"And that I'm moving in with you?"

"I didn't tell him that. But, Emily, this is the qualified good news. He's privately arranged for a position for you with Garrett Falkner, who works at Footsie. It's above your last position and working directly for him. It's truly your dream job."

Emily swallowed her shock. Footsie, the informal name for the FTSE 100 Index, the UK's best known stock market index. She, of course, knew of Garrett Falkner, a legend in the UK stock exchange and a billionaire fund manager who'd become one of the primary leaders in Footsie four years ago. Of course she knew him. Everyone did. But the idea that he could be considering her for a position after all that'd

happened—

“That’s impossible,” she told Muriel, and began pacing around the house like a madwoman.

“Apparently, it’s not. I checked with our newest stepmother. Tabitha was positively giddy at the prospect of your coming home to London for good to work for Garrett. She said, ‘It will make Owen so proud of her.’”

And there it was. Her father’s conditional approval, love, pride. The thing she’d sought her whole life without even understanding what a Sisyphean task that was.

Suddenly, the whole idea of London sat like a sour pill at the back of her throat. True, a job like that only came around once in a lifetime. But taking it would make her beholden to her father. Just one more string attached to their tenuous relationship.

She shook her head and sat down hard on the sofa in the living room. It was a dream job. Not in New York, but still. And certainly, nowhere near Liam or Montana. But she’d known all along she’d be forced to leave this beautiful country and move home. That didn’t make what she was starting to feel for him any less complicated.

Her head felt like the center of a hummingbird battle and all of it was a blur. “Muri—I... I can’t think about this now. I’m on vacation. The first vacation I’ve had in years. I’m having fun, and I’m enjoying my time with Liam. I won’t let Father or Mal ruin it for me. So, let’s pretend you did not tell me this and I know nothing about it. I’m turning off my phone after this. And if Father asks, tell him that I’m unreachable. All right?”

“All right. But about the job... what if it goes away?”

“Then it does. I’m here. I want to be here now.”

“Hmmm. That sounds suspiciously like a seventies’ self-help book title.”

“Yes, well I’m trying to help myself, aren’t I?”

Muriel sighed. “I do hope you know what you’re doing.”

Emily certainly did not. And she had no inkling when she would.

“The only real stumbling block is fear of failure. In cooking, you’ve got to have a ‘what-the-hell’ attitude.”

–Julia Child–

Chapter Eight

“Guys? This is Emily,” Liam said by way of introduction as they arrived at a table in Grey’s Saloon where several other couples were already seated at a table drinking cocktails. “You’ve already met Jake, obviously. But, Em, these are some good friends of mine. This is Trey Reyes and his wife, Holly. And here’s the elusive Olivia, Jake’s wife.”

“Hello, then. So, nice to meet you all,” Emily said, shaking hands with his friends who were beaming at her from behind their cocktails.

She hadn’t expected a crowd but was secretly glad for it to take the pressure off her and Liam. And to distract her from Muriel’s phone call.

Olivia was as adorable as her husband only prettier, and she reached to give Emily a kiss on her cheek. “Jake told me all about you and how brave you were this morning. I think I would have fainted dead away on the spot at the sight of that bear so close.”

“Bear?” Holly repeated. “Oh, do tell. This sounds exciting.”

“This is a bit of a sore topic,” Liam said. “Maybe we can just get her a drink first?”

“I’d love one, to be honest,” Emily told him as they scooped into the booth beside the others. There was a band playing in the corner and a handful of people dancing on the dance floor, opposite the tables. It was, naturally, a local country band, Liam told

her, but everyone's favorite. They were playing a cover of a Morgan Wallen song and the crowd at the bar was singing along.

The cocktail waitress danced herself over to their table and took their orders. "And can I just say," she added before heading back to the bar, "I just love your accent. I had a second cousin twice removed who went to school in England for a while," she told her. "And when she came back home, I swear she sounded just like you. It was the funniest thing. We never let her live it down. But you're the real deal, right?"

Emily blushed at the unwarranted attention. "Um, yes. I suppose I am. I don't really hear it myself. But I guess I do still have an accent."

Holly reached across the table to Emily after the waitress left. "Don't let that bother you. Your accent is perfectly lovely. The thing about America is that we have crazy different accents wherever you go, and nobody thinks a thing about it. But someone from Boston tries talking to someone from the Louisiana bayou and they might just need a translator."

A collective laugh went up from the table.

"True in the UK, as well," she admitted. "But we're really all more alike than different, aren't we?"

Liam took her hand under the table and gave her a squeeze.

A photographer was walking around the restaurant, taking photos of couples and made it to their table.

"A photo for the memory book?" the photographer, who also sounded British said. "I take the photos for free. You can decide later if you want to purchase."

The other couples posed and smiled for the camera and so she and Liam went along. Honestly, a keepsake of this night together might be wonderful to have. Afterward, the photographer wandered off to shoot other couples, and Emily forgot about him as the talk turned to the morning and the excitement with the bear.

Between cocktails and the meal—which was surprisingly good—Olivia and Holly amused everyone with tales of their daughters’ exploits together on the preschool playground and how the three-year-olds had hatched a plan to corner their favorite little boy behind the monkey bars to kiss him. Luckily for him, the teacher rescued him before they could fully execute their devious plan. But it was all for naught, as the little boy in question sought the girls out later and kissed them on his own. The teacher caught it in a photo which, obviously, made it to their Instagram stories.

Emily had sat dinners like this with her married friends, feeling like an outsider as they discussed their kids, their lives together, and all that came with it. In fact, she’d hosted many of those dinners. Tonight, with Liam sitting beside her though, it felt all right. Like she belonged. Which she certainly didn’t. But they welcomed her into their circle without prejudice and seemed equally invested in hearing about her life working on their exotic idea of Wall Street.

The others goaded Trey into telling the story about a case he’d investigated for a Wall Street banker’s wife, who was living part-time in Montana, and whose cheating husband turned out to be a Russian spy and how Trey’s investigation had led to an entire FBI probe and scandal.

That story felt a little close to the bone for Emily, but she said nothing about the scandal that had shut down her firm. Instead, the other couples at the table were all-in on hearing the subway story of how she and Liam had met. And the crazy meet up after. Liam told that one.

“Your supper club sounds amazing,” Olivia said. “Please, please, please invite us to

one when you get back to the city?”

Liam flicked a look at her but said nothing.

“I’m afraid my supper club days are over in New York. Sadly, I’m... I have to move back to London in a couple of weeks.”

Disappointment rumbled through the table and all eyes turned to Liam.

After a beat, he got to his feet. “So, I promised you a line dance.” He offered her his hand and pulled her to her feet. “Who else is with us?”

Leave it to Liam to drag the fun back in. As a group, they joined others on the dance floor where a pretty little blonde was teaching line dance to the uninitiated. While the band took a quick break, she broke down the steps in the dance, which technically required cowboy boots—sadly lacking for her—for the boot-scoot part, but for which her own shoes sufficed perfectly well for the boogie part.

Of course, she was the only one who had no idea what she was doing, but Liam stayed with her, teaching her the steps along with the adorable dance instructor. As the band cranked up again with a cover of “Friends in Low Places,” the dance floor was suddenly crowded with people doing this amazing dance in unison. It didn’t matter if she got the steps wrong. Because they laughed through it all and, eventually, she got the hang of the rhythm of the thing. And it was fun.

Almost as fun as watching Liam dancing from behind, at the way his body moved, and the way his jeans hugged his butt and watching him just enjoy himself. The dancing seemed to liberate something in him as it did in her, as well. All thoughts of her brother and her father disappeared, and she gave herself over to the music. Soon, she was line dancing like a pro—well, that might be an exaggeration—but she felt confident and happy. She did not want this night to end.

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They danced and danced and, sometimes, the songs were slow, and couples paired off and did the two-step around the floor.

“This one is definitely above my pay grade,” she whispered to him as he took her in his arms.

“Not to worry. Just follow my lead.”

She did. She tried. And mostly succeeded. But being in his arms, dancing close together, was a revelation. Resting her cheek against his strong shoulder, she smiled, feeling happy.

“Who knew you were such an expert dancer?” she murmured against his ear as they turned on the floor.

“Far from expert. But when you grow up in a place like Marietta, unless you’re riding bulls or cutting horses, you find your fun where you can.”

“Bulls?When you mentioned the rodeo, I thought you meant roping or bronc riding.”

He grinned down at her. “You’ve seen my buckle, haven’t you? With the bull on it? I’ve worn it just to impress you.”

His wink made her laugh. He wasn’t wearing it tonight, but she did remember that buckle from that day in New York. She’d been clearly distracted looking at him instead of the buckle. “Butbulls?Gad.I admit to watching an event once or twice on the TV. But—good God, Liam. And that’s how you hurt yourself?”

“Everyone hurts themselves,” he said with a chuckle. “And eventually, everyone gives it up. Like I did. But I still think about it. Sometimes, I even dream about it. Olivia’s brother-in-law, Finn Scott, made a good living at it, till he lost a kidney. But now he breeds bucking stock. He’s one of the best and does very well for himself.”

“They breed bulls to be good... buckers?”

He laughed. “Absolutely. They understand the assignment. They’re athletes. Pure and simple. And treated as such. There are world-class bulls pulling in seven figures.”

Impressive.

She held him a little tighter as the song played out, thinking about him on the back of one of those monsters with horns. The thought of it made her shiver. But that was the city girl in her talking. Here, girls swooned over the men who rode bulls, risking life and limb. It was, she reminded herself, a different world. There was so much she didn’t know about him and so much he didn’t know about her. But the more she learned, the more she wanted to know.

He pressed his lips against her hair and inhaled deeply as the song ended. The simple gesture curled low in her belly. He held her hand on the way off the floor and joined the others at the table. The witching hour for babysitters was approaching and Holly and Olivia, along with their husbands, needed to call it a night. Several, including Liam, collected the photos at the front of the restaurant that had been framed with a paper matte. It was a good photo of them and now she wished they had two of them.

“Will we see you this weekend at the Kowalskis’ vow renewal at the ranch?” Olivia asked her as they were leaving.

“Oh, you’re going?”

“They’re old friends of our family. I think everyone here is going.”

“I’m not sure I’m... invited...”

Liam put his arm around her. “You absolutely are. Plus, you get to enjoy an event here at the ranch. Our new chef’s first big shindig.”

That she was looking forward to. A Michelin-star chef catering a wedding? Yes, please.

She leaned into Holly. “This really was such a fun night meeting all of you. I look forward to seeing you all then.”

“Ditto.” Holly kissed her on the cheek as they headed to their trucks and whispered in her ear. “He’s one of the good ones,” she said. “And I can see he’s crazy about you. Hope it all works out for the best.”

“Thanks.” She hugged Holly back and waved goodbye to Olivia.

She could imagine friendships with all of the women she’d met out here in Montana. They were a special breed. There was no competition, no angling for position. Just... friendship. She loved that. But it had been one of the most surprising things since coming here.

As far as things working out with Liam? The pounding dread of her father’s disapproval still loomed at the back of her mind.

But she’d resolved to push it away until she needed to face it. That time would come soon enough. But not yet.

As she and Liam walked back to his pickup, he took her hand in his. Warm and

strong, his fingers curled around hers. “Did you have fun?”

“It was brilliant,” she said. “Lovely. I adore your friends.”

“I think the feeling was mutual.”

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The air was crisp and a little cold at this time of night and when she looked up, the sky was awash with stars. She'd really never seen anything like it before.

A shooting star flickered in an arching trajectory over the mountains and disappeared. "When I was little," she told him, leaning against the fender of the truck, "in England, the stars were nothing like this. Lots of cloud cover and the sky was small compared to yours. But I do remember sitting on my mother's lap and her telling me that wishing upon a star was something I should always do. That it was real. That's just come back to me now, watching this sky."

Liam leaned against the truck beside her, looking up. "She was not the pragmatist in the family then?"

"No. That belonged to my father, who drummed such far-fetched ideas out of our little heads early on. I'm afraid there is still a tiny bit of dreamer alive in me, though. Don't tell my father."

"I had one of those, too," he said. "My old man had no patience with dreamers. He was a man of action, whose actions often got him into trouble. Life has been better since he passed. That's awful of me to say. But for all of us. Especially our mom."

"I love your mom. Everyone should have one like her."

"Agree. She's fond of you, too."

"She and Ray seem happy."

“Yeah. That’s a long story. One that nearly turned our family inside out. But they’re madly in love and now that his cancer is finally in remission, things are even better for them. She’s happy after many years of... happiness being elusive. I think they plan to get married someday. But they’re in no rush. With Cooper, Shay, and Ryan living out on Ray’s old ranch now and Ray moving in with Mom, it feels like everyone is finally where they’re supposed to be.”

“And what about you?” she asked.

“Me?” He swallowed thickly. “I’m standing here watching the stars with you. What else could I ask for?”

She rolled toward him and wrapped her arms around him, and he did the same to her. She inhaled his scent deeply. Etching this memory in her mind, she knew full well that their time together was short, and they would likely never get the chance to find whether they were supposed to be. The same universe that had thrown them together was intent on separating them. She couldn’t work out the logic.

But this was the reason she’d come. This, right here. Maybe it was only meant for her to taste this kind of a feeling, not to keep it.

He was, she feared, meant to be an escape, not a landing place.

*

Morning light filtered through the window curtains, aiming a beam at Liam’s left eye. He rolled sideways and blinked, his gaze coming to rest on the soft flow of Emily’s hair on the pillow beside him.

A slow smile tugged at his mouth. She was still asleep, her face turned toward him, hand curled under her chin. She looked... as if she’d been painted there in the

morning light with her lashes shadowed against her cheeks, skin pale with sleep. Her lips—those same lips he'd gotten lost in last night—were pursed with sleep as she dreamed about something. He wanted to touch her, reach out his hand and wake her for more of what they'd shared last night, but he felt almost content to watch her sleep.

The memory of last night was still fresh, but somehow felt like he must have dreamed her pulling him into her cabin last night with a kiss that didn't end until they were on her bed and tugging off their clothes. They'd had more than a few drinks at Grey's. But no. Clearly, that had really happened. He remembered pausing to watch her strip off her blouse and skirt, his gaze devouring the sight of her half naked until she reached for his shirt and tugged it over his head. Staring at the shape of her breasts filling the black bra she wore and the pique of her nipples as she made her intentions clear.

"Keep up, cowboy," she teased, reaching for the buckle of his belt to undo it with a flick of her wrist.

He kicked off his boots and shed his black jeans, leaving them in a puddle on the floor before pulling her down beneath him, sprawled on her bed together exploring her skin with his mouth with his last bit of restraint. She tasted... like honey. Like dropping his nose into a bed of clover on a hot summer day. And every inch of her was soft and willing and delicious.

"Em," he whispered against her neck as she arched her back under him. "I can't get enough of you."

She met his gaze then, kissing him into silence, dragging a hand down his back, exploring the crescent-shaped scar her fingers found there. But she didn't question it. She merely traced it with her fingers until he distracted her by pushing aside her lacy bra to access that nipple with his mouth. Her response was a shaky breath, exhaled

slowly.

She murmured, “I used to imagine you doing this sometimes when we were on the phone together.”

He laved her nipple with his tongue, then, “Stop. You’re gonna make me lose it.”

“Sometimes,” she persisted, smiling, “I’d have to resolve that situation myself.” She curled her fingers in his hair as he moaned softly against her breast. “But I must admit, this is... better.”

He smiled against her breast, his hand trailing down the back of her hip until he’d cupped her ass up close to him. “If I’m honest... same. I’ve wanted you since the moment I laid eyes on you. That sounds bad, right? Like... stalker bad?”

She shook her head. “I believe it was I who dragged you into my bedroom, sir.”

“That’s right. You did.” He palmed the skin of her thighs, moving up to the spot between her legs, enjoying the tremor that caused against his hand. “And I’m grateful for that. ’Cause I didn’t want to push you.”

She took his earlobe between her teeth and gave it a little tug, sending a shiver of heat through him.

“Shhhh,” she whispered. “You and I? We won’t apologize for this. We’re past doing that. I don’t want to think about tomorrow or the next day. I only want to think about now. Right here. With you.”

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He wanted the same, and he knew, full well, that he couldn't keep her. That she was going to be gone all too soon. But they would have tonight. They would have this. And he wanted to make it good for her and etch it in his memory.

She turned the tables on him, tossing her leg over his and climbing atop him to discover him the way he had her. She tortured him slowly with her tongue, her teeth, and her hands until he couldn't take any more. He rolled her over and took her with all the tenderness he could muster, until there was no more restraint or holding back.

They made love long into the night, unable to get enough of each other. They moved together as if they'd been designed that way, until they both came in shattering climaxes and lay, exhausted beside one another. And then they lay talking quietly, the way they had across the phone lines, but now, looking into each other's eyes, sharing things he never thought he'd say to another person.

She talked about her family and the time before her brother became the enemy. When they'd had a semblance of a relationship the way the Hardesty clan had. And Muriel, whom she loved, was separate from that, but caught in the middle sometimes and how Em wished that wasn't true. And he told her about his troubles with Will and how they'd let all that go finally, but how he wished he could still resolve things about his father who was gone and hardly missed by any of them.

They talked and made love and finally slept and he dreamed about her walking through his meadow beside a little girl—not Lolly, somehow, he knew that—but a child that looked like her but with his eyes that sparkled as she chased butterflies beside Em.

Now, as he stared at her in the morning light, he reached over to brush a strand of hair off her cheek. Her eyes fluttered open and she smiled.

“Hi.” The word was groggy and sweet.

“Morning,” he said, still unable to take his eyes off her.

She reached over to brush the hair from his eyes as well. “Did you sleep at all?”

“Some.” He grabbed her hand and pressed a kiss against her palm.

“Mmm. Me, too. Do you suppose they’ll all guess what we’ve been up to?”

“Since my truck is still parked outside your door... probably. But I don’t think anyone will be surprised.”

She blushed a little. Then her eyes widened. “What time is it?”

He reached for his cell phone and the screen lit up. “Almost nine.”

She jumped up, dragging the sheet with her from beneath his blanket. “I promised your mom I’d teach her how to make that flourless chocolate cake this morning! Look at me! I have to shower and—”

He sat up and grabbed her hand, pulling her to him for another kiss. “Don’t worry. It’s fine. She won’t say a thing. I promise.” He patted her on the bottom. “You shower, I’ll make coffee. And something to eat.”

“Thanks.” She stopped and turned back to him, clutching the sheet to her. “Last night? It was... wonderful.”

He grinned with a quick nod. It was. “Go.”

*

Liam, bless him, didn't want her to face his mother on her own, so he walked over with her to the house. Tara and Sarah were in the kitchen, going over something on Tara's laptop while Lolly sat under a mobile on her play mat. One of the dogs was lying beside her, following her every move with a protective eye and occasionally nuzzling her.

Sarah straightened. “Oh, good morning, you two.” Her smile was a little overbright to be subtle.

“Morning,” Liam said, giving her a quick buss on the cheek and a warning look close-up.

“Hey, Tara. What are you two up to this morning?”

With a sideways look between Emily and Sarah, she said, “Tweaking the website is all. Your mom had some great ideas about the font and the branding.”

“Did she?”

“Yes, I did,” she said proudly. “At least Tara thinks they're good ideas. Emily? Hope you're well rested after your adventure with the bear yesterday. We heard all about it.”

Neither of them looked well rested. “I feel great. Don't you, Liam?”

“Never better.” He sent his mother a narrow warning look.

“And the bear,” Emily went on, “was quite terrifying, but your son is the reason we’re still standing today.”

“The reason we’re still here is that you didn’t panic,” he said. “Pure and simple.”

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“Whoever was responsible for you two standing in my kitchen this morning, I am grateful,” Sarah told them, reaching out to take Emily’s hand.

“It was an incredible day,” Emily said, “meeting Deke and his birds, flying around the mountains in Jake’s helicopter...”

“That is on my bucket list. A helicopter ride with Jake. He was a helicopter pilot in Afghanistan, you know, and probably one of the best pilots out there,” Sarah mused aloud.

“He did take a couple of years off my life zooming down those canyons,” Emily admitted.

“You’re serious, Mom? I’ll arrange it. Whenever you want,” Liam said, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

“Really? You are my favorite child,” she teased.

“Yeah, yeah.” Unconvinced, Liam laughed. “Now, you all have fun doing your chocolate cake thing. I’ve got to do some work out at the small cabin this morning, then we’re heading up to the round barn to finish the decorations for the Kowalskis’ vow renewal on Saturday.” He gave Emily a secret touch on her backside. “See you later?”

She nodded. “You will.”

“One cannot think well, love well, sleep well if one has not dined well.”

–Virginia Woolf–

Chapter Nine

Emily, Sarah, and Tara made side-by-side versions of her flourless chocolate cake, because it had always been her theory that simply talking one through about a recipe was nothing like making it yourself. Both enthusiastically dove into the experiment, and they decided, if the cakes turned out, they would divvy up the slices between family members to save them all the temptation of wolfing down a million calories alone.

While they worked, Emily talked them through the steps of melting the chocolate, adding the eggs and vanilla and the rest. While Sarah was an old hand at making cakes, it was Tara who Emily kept her eye on. She measured each and every ingredient precisely then took notes in a little notebook she carried with her. She was also a natural, folding the whipped cream gently into the chocolate mixture with impressive technique that turned this cake into a cross between a brownie, a torte, and chocolate mousse.

They carefully cut out circles of parchment paper to lay in the pan bottom before scooping their cake mixture on top.

As they worked, they talked about Emily's supper club back in the city and how she and Liam had met. Tara listened quietly, but rarely offered a comment of her own.

Emily remembered years of silence as a teenager herself, always feeling outside of everything, with her brother and father constantly giving the good-old-boy pat on the back to one another and leaving her out. She supposed this habit of silent observation had served her well as she got older, working in the industry she did, but it made things considerably harder socially.

She'd heard Tara's story from Liam at the fishing hole as they were casting for fish—about how she'd nearly been forced to give up her baby because she was alone in the world without support.

Knowing Tara had been through a difficult life of foster care—only to end up being taken in by the Hardestys, alongside her baby, made Emily want to hug her. Tell her everything would be better when she got older. But, of course, that was her life, not Tara's. And now that her own life had just literally exploded, perhaps she wasn't the one to be doling out rainbow and unicorn advice to anyone.

As they popped the cakes in the oven, Sarah poured coffee for Emily and tea for Tara, and they sat at the kitchen table to wait for the timer to go off. Lolly woke then and Tara was about to excuse herself to go breast feed.

"Don't go on my account," she told her. "You certainly won't offend me if you stay."

Tara looked at Sarah for permission, then sat down at the table to feed Lolly.

"I think Tara is a natural cook," Emily told Sarah. "She's got that folding technique without any coaching from me."

"Tara is a natural at many things, not least of all, being a wonderful mom to Lolly."

Tara's cheeks colored. "I'm grateful to have this place and these people. It could have worked out much differently. For both of us."

Emily sipped her coffee. "I know how that feels. When I left England for America, I really had no idea if it would work out. I was alone in a strange place with only my wits and a few US dollars. But I managed to find a place to settle, make friends, and find a job. But it was really the friends who sustained me. The job made me money. But my friends, and the supper club... that was my refuge when things were hard.

You'll find your way."

"I do like to cook, when I get the chance. Like now," she said quietly. "I've been kind of watching Mr. Nevers, the new ranch chef, secretly—but he doesn't like me to be in there while he's cooking. All the same, I think he might need a sous chef. He's kind of a nervous cook. Not like you, Emily."

"Nervous, how?" Sarah asked.

"Just a feeling. He kind of... talks to himself. And not in a nice way." She bent her head down to the baby and kissed her head. "I could give him a hand if you want me to. You know, chopping things up for him? Maybe take some of the pressure off him?"

"I think that's a great idea. But I'd have to pass it by Mr. Nevers. And Emily, what about you? Will you keep cooking for your friends in New York City?"

She explained her visa situation and how soon she'd have to leave the US.

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“I’m sorry to hear that. But if the visa wasn’t an issue, say, and you could do anything you wanted, what would that be?” Sarah asked.

At Emily’s wide-eyed look, she quickly said, “Oh, I’m sorry, that was quite nosy of me.”

“No, no.” Emily touched her arm gently. “It’s not. It’s a good question, actually. Not one I usually give myself permission to consider. If nothing stood in my way, you mean? My first thought is a Wall Street job. Like the one I had. Only better. It’s what I’ve been working so hard for so long. But when I take a step back and think about how... unhappy that job made me, well...” She leaned in. “Secretly, I’ve always dreamed of starting a kind of seasonal supper club with other women who love cooking, too. Where we’d make elevated food, experiment with recipes. Invitation only and use the best ingredients. It’s been done, I think, uniquely, but... yeah... that’s just a silly dream.”

Sarah toyed with her coffee cup. “It’s only silly if you don’t truly believe in it. Or try it. Right?”

“I suppose. I’ve never actually told anyone that before. But it’s neither here nor there. I have to return to London. And there, my father would never approve.”

“I see.”

Emily laughed sadly. “I know how that sounds. I’m a grown woman. But you don’t know my father. And that sort of thing just isn’t done in our family.”

“My dear,” Sarah said gently, “life throws a thousand choices at you all at once. Sorting through all of them is the hardest thing we ever do.”

She decided she liked Sarah, more than just because, clearly, she was a good mother—with all four of her children still close to her—but because she was a kind person. Nonjudgmental in a way Emily could only imagine her domineering father could never be.

They sat and sipped their coffee, talked about the Montana spring about to bloom outside the window and the number of cattle that were dropping calves in every pasture. Tara said how she had adopted a shivering barn kitten and brought it into her apartment out at the barn on a particularly cold night, and now it had settled itself onto her pillow beside her at night. She seemed quite pleased with the arrangement. And Emily remembered Liam talking about all of their barn cats.

Lolly had finished nursing and Emily stared longingly at her.

“Do you want to hold her?” Tara asked.

“Oh.” She hadn’t expected that. “May I?”

“Of course.”

A bit awkwardly, she took the baby in her arms, and Lolly folded herself against her shoulder as if they were old friends. She was warm and wiggly and she smelled—Emily inhaled deeply—delicious. “Oh,” she groaned, “My ovaries...”

Sarah and Tara both laughed sympathetically.

“Hello, little darling,” she murmured against Lolly’s hair. You are enough to make a girl rethink her entire existence.

Lolly burped loudly and Emily laughed. She had to admire Tara for doing this whole baby thing on her own. Single parenting was not for the faint of heart. But the sweet smell of Lolly alone was enough to tempt Emily to imagine it.

Then again, she simultaneously—and out of the blue—imagined having a child with Liam. She could almost picture him as a dad, a doting, wonderful father.

Stop. Just stop, Emily.

She thought of the half dozen of her girlfriends in New York who'd had babies in the last few years, complete with baby showers, brises, and birthday parties. Emily had attended them all with all the onesies, rattles and gift boxes of diapers she'd bought. But she was an outsider to all that. Removed, in a way. The old adage was true that friendships shifted when children came, and she'd found herself pulling away from all that, diving deeper into work, out of... what? Self-preservation? Determination to prove she didn't need to have a child to prove she was worthy? And worthy to whom?

She stroked Lolly's velvet-soft cheek.

It wasn't that she'd always put children at the center of her life goals. She hadn't. She was career first, children maybe someday. But as she got older, as she did things like this—holding Lolly against her and getting doused with that baby smell, her little fist holding her finger, Emily wondered if something was shifting in her as well. Maybe someday meant the clock inside her had begun to tick and soon, she'd have to choose which side of the fence she would plant herself on. Maybe someday might mean the world did not, in fact, revolve around her own struggle to climb the ladder, but in opening herself to moments like this. Places like this. People who mattered.

But all this... it was only a moment. It wasn't real life.

A rush of emotion threatened to erupt from her eyes, and she shoved that image right

out of her mind. This, right here, was the danger of holding a new baby. It shoved reason and practicality out the window.

She handed Lolly back to Tara. “She’s perfect. Thank you. Now... I’d better check on those cakes.”

In the end, it was the Goldilocks scenario of cakes. But they all looked delicious and the whole house smelled of chocolate. They oohed and ahed over the cakes for a moment.

“I believe,” Emily declared, “my job is done here. You are both officially hired as chocolatiers.”

As Tara stared in awe of her finished product, Ray appeared from the living room, following his nose.

“Tell me we get to eat whatever that amazing smell is coming from,” he said, kissing Sarah on the top of her head.

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She hugged him back. “You not only get to eat it, you get to eat it whenever you want because Emily has taught us how to bake it!”

“Bless you, my child,” Ray said, kissing his fingertips and blowing her a kiss. “Not that Sarah isn’t already the best cook I know.”

“Oh, you!” she teased, hugging his arm. “That’s only because you have nothing to compare it to. I can see now why Liam came back from New York, raving about Emily’s food.”

Ray chuckled, kissing Sarah warmly on the cheek. “Yes, he did. But it wasn’t only all about her food.”

Emily blushed and Tara put a finger to her lips in a silent signal to Sarah and Ray.

“She’s right.” Sarah straightened. “We are not here to influence. Only... encourage. Right, Ray?”

“Correct.” He looked at his watch. “Darling, you know we’re supposed to meet with the happy couple, Sue and Gerald in twenty minutes, right?” He raised his graying eyebrows in a comically wiggly way. There seemed to be a twinkle in his eye as well. “Our old friends, Sue and Gerald Kowalski, who are renewing their vows here this weekend.”

She gave Ray’s hand a squeeze.

“Don’t worry,” Tara said. “I’ll clean up here. You two go and take care of your

friends. Maybe they'd like some cake."

"Yes," Sarah said, "because if I eat it all, I'll never fit into my—" she stopped as if remembering something—"my maid of honor dress today at Lisa's Married in Marietta. So, you all are on your own for the afternoon."

Tara glanced sideways at her. "I think we can manage. Unless you want a second opinion picking out a—"

"No, no. They're all picked. Just fittings. Anyway," she went on, hugging Ray's arm, "we're off to meet with the Kowalskis. Thanks again for the lesson, Emily."

"Of course. And I should get back to my place, too."

Ray smiled and winked at her before they left the room and Emily turned to Tara.

"That was weird," Tara said. "Did you find that weird?"

"I... don't really know them well enough to say," Emily told her. "But they are quite adorable together, aren't they?"

"Adorable. And weird. Maybe it's just because he's feeling so much better now that his chemo is done and he's fully in remission. That must be it."

Ray, she had heard, had left prison with cancer. And it had taken some convincing to get him started on new treatments. He had given up on himself and any hope of fixing things with the woman he'd quietly loved for more than a decade, Sarah Hardesty. But she'd been widowed while Ray was in prison, and now they'd put past troubles behind them. Or so Liam had said. There was some other complicated past regarding the whole relationship that she wasn't privy to, but perhaps it was none of her business. They looked happy. That was all that really mattered.

“Anyway,” Tara said. “You go on. I’ll clean up here.”

They had made quite a mess in the kitchen. “You sure? I can—”

“Definitely.”

“But perhaps I can take a bit of this cake back with me? Would that be alright then?”

“Of course. It’s all yours.”

She gave her a hug and packed up a large piece of cake in a Tupperware container.

“Brilliant. Thanks, then. See you later. Cheerio.”

“Uh... Rice Krispies!” she shot back with a grin.

Emily laughed as she headed outside in the cool Montana afternoon.

*

Shay and Liam were in the round barn, putting the finishing touches on the lights for the wedding vow renewal ceremony for the Kowalskis. Shay had done her usual magic with the place, despite the couple’s request to keep it simple.

They had spent most of the fall remodeling the round barn, an old, historic structure on the ranch that had been converted into a wedding venue, complete with a loft and staircase for brides to descend. But the rusticness of the barn remained, with beautiful beams and insulated cream-colored plaster walls. There was a new kitchen designed for catering and their new chef was in the kitchen, preparing some food already for tomorrow’s reception.

“I wouldn’t have taken Sue Kowalski for the simple type,” Shay noted as she strung

the last of the mini lights around the stairway rail. “She seems more like give-me-all-the-bling type.

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Sue and their mom, Sarah, had been best friends for years—more sisters from another mother friends. They'd been through thick and thin together and Sue's marriage had held together far better than Sarah's had. They had a home in Las Vegas and one here in Montana that she spent springs and summers in, though they were returning for this ceremony early.

Liam lifted the last of the folding white chairs into place for the ceremony before starting with the covers. "Maybe all that Vegas bling has gotten old. Maybe she just wants a real Montana ceremony."

"I guess." Shay side-eyed him. "What about you? I saw your truck parked outside her cabin this morning. Got anything you want to share with me, little brother?"

"Nope."

She nodded, expecting as much. "Whatever. I'm happy for you. For now."

He flinched at her words. "I'm working on it."

"Better work fast is what I hear. You know, if it's just the green card that's messing things up, I've heard of people marrying for them."

He straightened the aisle of chairs with more than adequate precision. He didn't want to talk about this with Shay. Or anyone besides Emily. He'd woken this morning feeling as if waking up beside her was the most natural thing in the world. But he also knew she was determined to go back home, find her life again in England. A quickie green-card marriage was not what he wanted with her.

“I haven’t told anyone yet,” Shay said, bringing the first armload of chair covers over to lay them on a nearby chair. “But Cooper asked me to marry him. I said, what took you so long?” She pulled the pretty diamond engagement ring attached to the gold chain around her neck from under her blouse.

“What? That’s fantastic, Shay. I’m really happy for you both. No surprise to anyone, however. Seriously. We all knew it would happen from day one.”

“No, you didn’t. Cooper and I hardly spoke for the first few weeks he was here.”

“Only because you’re so stubborn.”

She shrugged. “True. But... I had Ryan to think about and this ranch.” She sent him a bittersweet smile. “It all worked out in the end. But I wish it hadn’t taken us ten years.”

“Timing is everything. Things work out when they’re supposed to, I think. But why the secret?”

“It’s not really a secret. But I have a feeling Ray is going to propose any minute to Mom, and I don’t want to steal his thunder. We’re just waiting until the time is right. That’s all.”

They heard the sound of an electric golf cart stopping outside the barn and looked up to see Emily walking through the door. As if their conversation had conjured her.

“Hey—” he said, unable to disguise his pleasure at seeing her.

“Hi, yourself. I hope I’m not interrupting you or getting in your way. Hi, Shay.”

“Hi, Emily. We were just talking about you.”

“Oh? Were you hoping I was going to bring you a piece of the flourless chocolate cake I just whipped up in your mom’s kitchen?” She proffered the Tupperware container and popped off the top.

“Stop it.” Liam’s mouth watered.

“Uh, yes, please,” Shay said. “I can find a knife.”

Then, like a golden retriever following his nose at the scent of food, Gary Nevers poked his head out of the kitchen, pulling his earbuds out of his ears with annoyance. “All this chatter in here is distracting me.”

They all went quiet, unsure what to say. Finally, Emily held up the Tupperware. “We’re sorry. Cake?”

Nevers narrowed a look at her, then at the cake. “Yours?”

She nodded.

“Well... since my concentration is already blown... I might as well. What’s the harm now?”

“I don’t think you’ll be sorry,” Liam said, cutting the cake and sliding pieces onto paper towels to serve.

“Inelegant,” Nevers complained. “Presentation is ninety-five percent.”

“Oh,” Liam said, “I think you’ll find it’s the other way around.” He took a bite and moaned with pleasure. It was everything he remembered and more. It practically melted in his mouth. “Wow. Mmm-mm.”

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Emily smiled.

“Wha—” Shay moaned around a bite. “This is—Oh my goodness!”

Nevers took a bite and Liam watched Emily hold her breath. He considered it as he chewed, tilting a nod, but his face remained neutral. “It’s not... bad.”

“I think you mean it’s excellent, don’t you?” Liam faced him.

Nevers frowned and took another bite. “I’ve had worse. No, it’s quite good. But a little raspberry coulis and whipped cream would—”

“Oh, you’re quite right about that,” Emily said. “I would surely do that if I were serving this at home. But I’m afraid it’s just the bare, naked essentials today. He’s quite right.”

Nevers glanced at the Hardestys, both of whom were daring him to say more. “No, it’s well done. Good technique. Where did you train?”

“Train? I... I didn’t. I’m just a cook. Self-taught.”

“And one of the best I’ve ever tasted,” Liam said. “Her cake just hints at how good she is at everything else.”

Emily, far from looking chagrined, was not intimidated by this guy. At all.

“In fact,” he went on, “she made one of the best meals I’ve ever had in my life in

New York.”

“I’m no Michelin-star chef though,” she said. “I can’t wait to taste your food, Mr. Nevers.”

He polished off the last bite and crumpled up his paper towel. “Forgive me. It’s an old habit of mine to be critical of others’ work. Your cake was as fine as any I’ve made. I do hate to admit that.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Now, I’d better get back to what I was doing, if I can reclaim my concentration. That cake should help.” He flashed her a quick smile and retreated to the kitchen.

The three of them barely contained their chuckles once he was gone.

“There you go,” Liam said. “High praise from a real master chef. Even if we did have to wring it out of him.”

“I’m perfectly fine with what I do, and I honestly didn’t need his approval. But thank you for doing the wringing. Your chef seems a bit like the Tin Man in need of a bit of lubrication.”

“Or a drink. But thank you for the cake. It was as incredible as I knew it would be. What did you think, Shay?”

“What? Oh. Excuse me. I might be slipping into a chocolate coma. It was that good.”

“Hey,” Emily said, “if you need help with the seat covers, I’ll be glad to give you a hand. Especially if that means you’ll take me horseback riding before dark.”

“That can be arranged. But you don’t have to—”

“I want to. Let’s just knock it out.”

Shay glanced sideways at him and gave him a wink.

*

They rode up to the Yellowstone River as the afternoon light began to fade, but they left in plenty of time to be back before dark. He’d put her on a paint gelding named Shawnee, who seemed to know the trail by heart and followed behind Liam’s horse without a problem.

The ranch was just as beautiful from the ground as it had been by air, and they took their time, wandering along the banks of the river until Liam pulled up and they dismounted near a stand of winter-bare aspen and willow trees.

Down this low, the river had thawed completely and in the deep pools they could see trout swimming just below the surface. As the horses cropped up the grass sprouting through the dead winter thatch, she and Liam sat on the sun-warmed rocks overlooking the water.

“Just checking,” she said. “You did bring the bear spray.”

He patted the can attached to his belt. And the pistol on his hip. There was even a rifle tucked in the scabbard on his saddle. “I come prepared for all the things.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her against him. “You handled Nevers well. I was getting ready to fire him.”

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“What? For a critique? No, I’ve dealt with lots of male egos in my time. His is nothing special.”

“You think I have one?”

“I would hope so. You’re just more discriminating on how you display it. An ego is a healthy thing. But there are limits to its power.”

“You have anyone in mind when you say that?”

“Oh, I can name a few.” Her father. Her brother... “Take... for instance... that hawk up there.” She pointed to the red-shouldered hawk sailing on an air current about the ruffling water. “He knows he’s well equipped for catching those fish in the river. It means his survival. He’s got the claws and eyes, the wings, and even his mastery of the air. He doesn’t really doubt any of that. It just is. But put another hawk in his airspace, and all that confidence turns into something else. Possessiveness. He’s suddenly irrational, defending his territory. His hunting prowess. And when two hawks collide, they often get locked into a death spiral, unable to disentangle themselves from one another. Maybe they fall in the river and drown. Or die hitting the ground. Mr. Nevers was merely protecting his territory. Mistakenly, since I have no intention to invade.”

“You could probably cook circles around him.”

She laughed. “We are two very different sorts of cooks. My food has always been more about love than... achievement.”

“Yeah? Love?” He rubbed his fingers against her shoulder.

She tipped her head against his. “It really was my only motivation. Love for my friends. Love of food and making it. It was never about competing, which was a very nice break from what the rest of my life looked like.”

“Do you miss it?”

“Wall Street? I suppose I do. Not at this moment. But I was good at what I did there. And it made me a lot of money. But it’s mostly the people I’ll miss.”

He got quiet then and stared out over the water. “I wish...”

She nudged him. “What?”

“I wish we had more time.”

“I know.” She wished there was more time as well. But the clock was already ticking away.

He got to his feet and pulled her up beside him. He kissed her with the sun sinking slowly behind the mountains and she felt her heart sink along with it.

It was then she noticed the truck parked up on the road a quarter of a mile away with a man sitting inside, watching them. She could have sworn she saw him pointing something out the window before tucking it back inside when she saw him. A gun? A... long-lensed camera? But then, she probably just imagined it, because the truck pulled away a moment later.

“Did you see that?” she asked Liam.

“What?”

She stared after the retreating truck. “Nothing.”

“We’d better get back before dark.”

She nodded and they got back on the horses and headed home.

“Cookery is not chemistry. It’s an art. It requires instinct and taste rather than exact measurements.”

–Marcel Boulestin–

Chapter Ten

The next day, Emily spent the morning puttering around the cabin after Liam had gone, enjoying the quiet time with a book she’d been saving for a time like this. The family was all occupied with last-minute preparations for the ceremony and reception, and Liam was busy with the BLM horses up in the west pasture.

She had just curled up on the sofa and cuddled up with the yummy throw there when she heard a knock on the cabin door. Hoping it was Liam, she jumped up to answer it.

It was Shay—with a panicked look on her face. “It’s bad,” she said.

Emily’s heart dropped. “What? Is it Liam? Is he all right? Has he been hurt—”

“Oh, no, he’s fine. It’s Nevers. It’s a disaster, Emily.”

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“A disaster? What do you mean?”

She stepped back from the doorway. “Could you come? I’m begging you.”

“Begging is wholly unnecessary. Of course I’ll come.” Grabbing her purse, Emily followed Shay and hopped into the golf cart beside her.

In the kitchen of the round barn, Nevers was nowhere to be found. The food, half-prepared, lay scattered on the countertop. The smell of something smoking in the oven wafted to them and Shay hurried to pull it out before the smoke filled the kitchen.

“Where is he?” Emily asked, not seeing any sign of him.

Shay pointed to a desk on the other side of the room and Emily walked hesitantly over there. She bent down. There, under the desk, Gary Nevers was curled, chugging from a bottle of wine and turning a desperate look at her. His face was covered in sweat, and he was breathing as if he’d just run a mile.

“I can’t,” was all he managed to say.

“What?”

“I... I can’t.”

She crouched down beside him, reached out, and touched his arm. “I can see that. What is it, Mr. Nevers? Are you quite unwell?”

He nodded, then shook his head. "I'm... unable to cook."

"Should we call a doctor? Perhaps wine isn't the—"

"It's my nerves. It's a... a p-p-panic attack."

"Oh, dear. What can I do? A paper bag, perhaps? Can you slow your breathing down?"

He just took another swig.

Shay was beside her then.

Whispering to her, she said, "Our guests will be here in two hours. I'm freaking out."

"Don't you freak out, too. We can handle this. I'm sure of it." She turned back to Nevers. "Perhaps if you had some help? I could help you. Tara's offered as well. We could just turn things around here. Get it all under control."

He wiped his face with the back of his white chef's coat sleeve. "I-I-I don't know."

"I know you're feeling a little bleak right now, but I promise, it will be all right. Try to get your breathing back to normal."

He nodded, trying.

She held out her hand to him. "Come out from under there, Mr. Nevers. Come on, now. We'll fix this."

He reached for her hand. His was clammy and damp with sweat.

He climbed out and stood before her, setting the mostly empty bottle on the counter.
“What you must think of me now.”

Facing Emily, Shay rolled her eyes in confirmation.

“I’m a loser.”

But Emily shook her head and patted his arm “I don’t think anything of the sort, Mr. Nevers. You are not the first person to deal with anxiety, with panic attacks. And you won’t be the last. All I think is that we had better get this going now so it’s ready in time for the reception. Shay, perhaps Tara would be free to help us?”

“I’ll go get her right now.”

“Wonderful.” She took Nevers by the arm and led him back to the prep area. “Now. Deep breath. Let’s go.”

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By the time the ceremony was to begin, Emily had the reception food all in hand and Nevers had mostly pulled himself together. Liam rescued her from the kitchen, leaving Tara and Nevers to handle the rest as they waited for the minister to arrive.

There were nearly forty people there, almost everyone they knew, mutual friends of the Kowalskis, and Liam looked around the room as he held Emily's hand. Will and Izzy sat beside them, and Gus and Cami had just arrived. The Canaday family were all here and the Lassens. Sage and her husband from the Chocolate Shop were here as were Trey and Holly Reyes. Several other couples that his parents and the Kowalskis had known for years filled out the other seats alongside the Kowalskis' kids.

The piped-in music began and Liam wondered if the minister was late. He was nowhere to be found. Instead, Gerald Kowalski walked up the aisle to the front, situating himself where the minister should have been instead of off to the side to wait for his wife. He wore a big smile on his face, and one by one, he met the eyes of the Hardesty kids. His wife, Sue, walked up the aisle next, carrying a small bouquet of flowers and she took her place to the left of Gerald and turned back to the open barn doors.

Confused, Liam, Shay, Will, and Cami just looked at each other as if nothing made sense anymore, and they were about to have their first actual disaster of a wedding. But through the barn door, came Ray and their mom. Sarah was dressed in a short, cream-colored gown of lace and she was carrying a larger bouquet. Ray was beaming, wearing a tux and had never looked better.

"You've got to be kidding me," Will murmured to Liam. "It's their wedding?"

Liam could only laugh. Of course, this was how they'd do it. No fuss, no muss, a surprise wedding after everything they'd been through. It was... perfect.

As they reached Gerald and Sue, who could hardly contain their excitement, Sarah handed Sue her bouquet and took Ray's hands in hers.

Gerald cleared his throat. "I bet you're all wondering right about now"—the crowd laughed out loud—"what the heck I'm doing standing up here instead of down there, and who is going to marry these two today? Well, the answer to both questions is it's me. I'm the minister. It's me."

Laughter and applause that this had caught the whole audience off guard broke out.

Gerald waved the audience down. "I went on the interwebs, you see and got myself a legal ordination to marry folks. And while renewing my vows to my darling Sue might come someday soon, we thought these two right here are the ones in need of a ceremony today. And I'm proud to do it. So here we go. We are gathered here today in this big ol' round barn to marry up this man and this woman who have loved each other for more years than there are rafter spokes on this barn roof. And I think it's about time. Don't you?"

Everyone applauded the surprise, and Will could only laugh and shake his head as Liam exchanged looks with his mother who was clearly thrilled they'd pulled this off. Gerald did the usual build up to the vows with his own country flair, talking about their long friendship and the struggle they'd had this past year, but it was when his mom began to speak that it really hit home for Liam.

"My darling Ray," she began. "What a journey this has been. If I could go back in time and take away all those years we missed together, I would. But then those years forged us both like steel, forcing us to get stronger so that when we finally found each other again, nothing could tear us apart. You, dear, are the love of my life. I've

known that... it feels like forever. It just took what it took for us to find one another and walk through what we had to, to reach one another. And I'm not letting you go. I will fight whatever comes our way to keep you. In sickness and in health, for richer and for poorer, till death us do part. You are my partner in this life and probably in the next. Here's hoping."

Beside him Emily was pushing a tissue beneath her eyes.

Ray's turn was next. "My beautiful Sarah, I guess we should have compared notes, because you basically said the vows I wrote for you." He crumpled the paper in his hand and took her hands in his. "But here's my truth. All those years without you only made me know how much I needed you, wanted you. Loved you. And nothing will ever break that bond for me now. Not even cancer could. You've brought us, me and Cooper, into your beautiful family and made us a part of it. What a blessing. We finally both have our lives back, fully and completely. You gave me a reason to fight for my life. You will always be my reason. I love you, Sarah. Forever and always. Till death us do part."

Gerald closed his bible. "Then with the authority granted to me by the Universal Life Church, I now pronounce you, at last, husband and wife."

Ray took her in his arms then and kissed her, tipped her backward and kissed her some more. The audience went wild.

There was nothing but happiness on Sarah's face as they walked down the aisle together, reaching out for her children's hands as she passed them. Liam had tears in his eyes, as well, and Cami was already bawling.

It was a good surprise. The best surprise. And Liam turned to look at Emily and saw tears streaming down her face. She quickly swiped them away and smiled at him. She waved him off, embarrassed by her tears. "And I hardly know them," she said.

“They pulled off the surprise of the year.” He looked around the room at all of their friends and family on their feet applauding them as they made their way down the aisle together. “How did that get by us? Were we the only ones who didn’t know what was happening?” he asked Cami.

“Nobody knew. I think only Sue and Gerald were in on it.”

“She told me nothing,” Shay said, leaning over toward him. “They were totally conniving.”

“In a good way,” Will said.

Izzy was watching Lolly for Tara who’d been called into Mr. Nevers’ kitchen to help. On Izzy’s hip, Lolly seemed to take the whole thing in stride as usual.

Sarah was tickled and happy as she worked her way down the aisle, shaking hands alongside her new husband. Their new stepfather.

Liam turned back to Emily. He loved looking at her. At the way her hair fell on her shoulders and the way her eyes sparkled, even when she wasn’t crying. And he suddenly couldn’t imagine not having her here. Or being an ocean apart from her. It wasn’t just the romantic rush of what his mother had just done with Ray. It was more than that. Maybe this desperate feeling in his gut that said, don’t lose her. If you do, you’ll regret it every day of your life.

Sarah and Ray had wasted half their lives with quiet lies standing between them—even though Liam knew Ray had lied to protect her. And all of them. Now they had to make up time. But there really wasn’t any making it up. It was gone. They’d lost that time and would never get it back.

He didn’t want to lose it with Emily.

“I’d better run back to help Chef Nevers,” she said. “Since the wedding cake was a disaster, I whipped up the fastest thing I could, wedding cookies. But I’d better go oversee what’s happening back there. Make sure Chef isn’t under the desk again.”

“You’re our hero, you know that, right?”

She dragged a finger down the front of his chest. “I believe heroine is the proper term, but actually, I’m neither. I’m just a girl, standing in front of an oven, hoping the cookies don’t burn.”

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He chuckled. “Either way, you rescued Mom’s reception. You go. Let me know if you need any help.”

“I think we’ve got it under control.”

He tapped her discreetly on the butt as she turned toward the kitchen and she tossed back a sassy grin at him, then disappeared into the kitchen.

*

The food was delicious, and no one was the wiser about the near disaster in the kitchen. Emily had finished the dishes she had begun with Tara and Chef’s help, and by the time they were ready to plate everything, Chef Gary had gotten his nerves under control and cranked out the assembly line. Both Tara and Emily served it up to a grateful reception full of friends and Sarah and Ray were thrilled.

Sitting beside Liam, finally, after the food service, she had to admit the dishes had come out particularly well and Chef Gary’s hand in that was undeniable. His talent was every bit as good as his Michelin star advertised. He was very grateful for her help and for her calmness in the face of his own personal calamity. His fate here wouldn’t be up to her, thankfully, and to be honest, she had learned a lot from him in the space of those couple of hours they’d worked together. Yes, he was a bit of a mess, but he was also brilliant and weirdly funny, and his chicken Milanese was a revelation. She had managed the creamy mashed potatoes and roasted baby veggies that went alongside it. And the cookies. But no one complained. Everyone was happy.

It made Emily happy, too. Not just helping Chef Nevers pull this meal off but feeling part of it making this family celebration work. There was a rush that came with cooking a meal that people enjoyed, something inexplicable really. Maybe it came from being raised in a boarding school where meals were churned out cafeteria-style. The rush of feeding the people she cared about nurturing. Delicious food was the antithesis of what happened at her day job, and that dichotomy was something with which she was only just beginning to come to terms.

Liam had asked her if she missed it. Wall Street. Did she? The chaos. The egos. The fragility of it all. Really, she didn't miss it. Not here, being with him. Was she falling in love with him? Yes. Could she make sense of that? No. Was she deluding herself? Maybe.

It couldn't happen this fast. Not in real life. Oh, she'd heard of it happening, but those were just stories. In real life, love took time. It was hard. There was negotiation, arguments, tears.

Maybe that all would come, and it was too soon to know if she'd found the one. But what if he was the one? What if they'd just accidentally stumbled across one another on that subway that day, and on any other of a thousand and one days, they would have walked right by the other one and never noticed? Was life that random? Or that intentional?

Now, Liam took her hand under the table and gave her a squeeze, as if he'd heard her thoughts. She just smiled at him, wishing she wouldn't have to leave him in a few days. Wishing she could believe the universe would sort things out for them.

But the job in London wouldn't wait, nor would her expiring visa. So, she would be here with him now. And let tomorrow be what it would be.

Sarah and Ray approached their table as the cookies were served, and Sarah leaned

down to kiss her cheek. “Emily, we heard what happened. We cannot thank you enough for what you did pulling the dinner together. You are a rock star!”

“No, no. It really was all Mr. Nevers’s recipes except for the cookies, and we did it together. He just had a little setback is all. And he probably needs extra hands in the kitchen.”

“You’re too modest. Tara told us it was ninety percent you this afternoon. And here you are, our guest. If I didn’t know you were a high-powered Wall Street guru, I’d say you should be the one cooking for our events.”

Beside her, Liam gave his mom a subtle head shake which Emily didn’t miss.

Shay didn’t either. “Mom, the wedding was fabulous, and I think we were all lucky Emily was here to save the day for the reception. But let’s just let her be our guest! And Emily, these cookies!”

Emily was happy to not be in the middle of this conversation. “Thanks. They were an old receipt of my gran’s that I found last time I was home.”

Ray was still munching on his second helping of those. “Would it be presumptuous of us to get the recipe for those as well?”

“I’m not a recipe secret keeper. I’m happy to share with you, Sarah.”

“I knew I liked her,” she whispered to Liam with a kiss on his cheek.

After they moved on, Liam leaned close. “Sorry about that. They’re just buzzed.”

“As they should be.”

“Though, if I thought there was a chance in hell that I could persuade you to actually do that—step into Nevers’s shoes—I’d hire you in a heartbeat.”

Emily stuffed the last of her cookie in her mouth. “Shall we secretly abscond? Go back to my place?”

“What a good idea.” He took her hand again and, together, they snuck out the back door.

*

They retreated back to her cabin and spent the rest of the night in each other’s arms. They made love, then they stayed up late watching a classic old black-and-white western movie—Shane. Emily had a good cry out of it, releasing something she didn’t even know she’d been holding while Liam held her, feeling for the protagonists in the film and bracing himself for the time that would come only too soon when Emily would leave him behind as Shane did that boy.

That night they slept hard and woke to the sound of rain on the roof. It was pouring actually, and a cold front had moved in from the north.

Liam made her a breakfast of scones and coffee and they ate together, watching the storm clouds roll over the mountains.

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“I’d better go and check the cattle,” he said at last. “Check there aren’t any babies in trouble out there in this storm. Sometimes the thunder spooks the new mothers.”

“Can I come?”

“You want to go out there in this?”

“Why not? It’s only rain. I’m a Londoner, remember?”

“London doesn’t have Montana mud.”

“I’m no shrinking violet, in case you hadn’t noticed. I can look for calves in the rain, as well as you.”

“Then come on. I can always use a second pair of eyes.”

Indeed, the mud was no joke, and Liam packed some supplies in the Gator, and headed up the fence line, looking for calves. Beside him, Emily kept a sharp lookout, but they found no calves in their sweep of the pasture. They did, however, near the river, find a cow that had just calved, but there was no calf in sight. She was bawling piteously.

“That’s not good,” he said under his breath.

“Do you think the calf was stillborn?”

“Possible. Wouldn’t be the first.” He stared out at the landscape, at the river running

past their property line. He'd seen cows give birth in awful places before and also calves get into trouble trying to get to their feet the first time. But seeing the river so close gave him a bad feeling. The mama cow mooed loudly.

"I'm going to go walk down along the bank. You stay here. I don't want you anywhere near that water."

"I'm not afraid of a little—"

"You can drive the cart. That'll help most." He walked away, leaving her in the shelter of the Gator as the rain intensified. Slowly, she followed him as he inspected the river's edge. The mama cow followed at a distance, bellowing for her calf. Liam walked a good five hundred feet before he threw his arm up in the air.

"Found it!"

She pulled up next to him and jumped out. "Is it alive?"

He slid down the steep embankment of the river, muddy from the rain. "Well, it's not dead. Yet."

The poor newborn calf had somehow ended down the riverbank, half in the freezing water. A bad look, indeed. Liam scooped the baby up in his arms and attempted to climb the bank. But the mud made it too slippery. He tried two more times before he gave up.

"See that rope in the back of the Gator?" he called over the sound of the rain. "Tie one end to the Gator and throw the other end down to me!"

She did as he asked—rather proud of herself for managing a good knot—and after a few moments wrestling the rope around himself, he picked the half-frozen calf back

up and instructed her to back the Gator up.

Slowly, she did and, finally, he climbed over the riverbank safely. They wrapped the calf up in a tarp stowed in the back of the cart and Liam held it as they headed back to the ranch. The mama cow trotted along behind, bawling the whole way. As for Liam, he was covered in mud from head to toe. She was soaked through and sure she didn't look much better.

"Best we get them into the barn and warm this one up or it won't make it in this rain. You okay?"

"Is it a boy or a girl?" she asked.

"Heifer. Girl."

The calf's black nose stuck out of the tarp and twitched a little. "Poor little thing." They pulled into the yard with the cow following them at a good clip. He blocked her from leaving the pasture until he could settle the calf, which they did finally in the warm straw of a stall in the small barn. Liam rubbed her down with a blanket and left her wrapped there as he went for the mama cow.

It wasn't until Emily stepped to the doorway of the barn again that she spotted the black town car parked up by the house. Assuming it was one of Liam's brother Will's town cars, she gave it little thought, starting toward the cattle gate to help Liam. That was until she saw the door open, and her father and brother stepped out into the rain.

"To have a basic ingredient that can be prepared a million different ways is a beautiful thing."

—Alice Waters—

Chapter Eleven

Standing beneath a pair of umbrellas, Lord Quinn and her brother, Malcolm, stood sizing up Emily and Liam, who were covered with mud and soaking wet.

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Liam stopped dead in his tracks at the sight of them. “Is that... who I think it is?”

She swallowed thickly. “If you think it’s my father and brother, you would be sadly correct.”

He glanced back at her. “What’s this about?”

“Me. What else?”

The pair was walking toward them. Her father stopped a few feet away. He was the picture of British aristocracy. Tall and thin, white hair, and a prominent nose he could handily look down. “Emily?” His address to her was at least as cold as this rain.

“Father? Montana is a bit out of your wheelhouse, isn’t it then?”

“It’s a bit off the beaten track.” His gaze slid down Liam’s and her muddy clothes. If looks were lethal, Liam would already be bleeding.

Still, he extended a hand to her father. “Mr. Quinn? I’m Liam Hardesty.”

Her father hesitated at the muddy look of Liam’s hand before taking it. “Ah. Mr. Hardesty. You must be the cowboy.”

“Father—” Emily warned.

“And it’s Lord Quinn,” her brother corrected. “I’m Malcolm Quinn. Emily’s older brother.” He didn’t offer his hand.

Malcolm was everything Liam had imagined. Tall, unathletic-looking, and condescending, due to the very long stick up his ass.

“He knows who you are,” she told them. “What is it you want?”

Her father’s gaze took in the ranch in the pouring rain. “Oh, I think you know.”

“Maybe they just happened to be in the neighborhood,” Liam suggested.

A snort of laughter escaped Emily but the flash of lightning that streaked across the sky seemed a reflection of the anger in her eyes.

Malcolm gestured at their muddy clothes. “No, but it’s quite worse than even we imagined.”

Lord Quinn shot a silencing look at his son.

“Oh, you mean the mud?” Emily asked. “It’s a ranching thing. Would you like to see the newborn calf Liam just saved from the river? Oh, but Malcolm, maybe you would have preferred to think the calf out of that situation.”

“Funny, Em.” Malcolm looked longingly back at the shelter of the town car.

“This has gone far enough, don’t you think?” her father said.

“What has?”

“This little... fling. We both know you’re better than this, Emily.”

The hairs on the back of Liam’s neck stood up, but she stayed his anger with a squeeze on his arm.

“Better than what, Father? Montana? Muddy clothes? A man who cares about me? Who doesn’t treat me like an afterthought?”

Under his breath, Malcolm muttered, “Acowhand.”

“It wouldn’t matter to me if he was simply a cowhand. Which he certainly is not—” she began, but Liam leaned in.

“No, no, that’s... in the ballpark,” Liam countered. “But since we’re assuming here—we are, aren’t we?—I assume you know how amazing your daughter is, Lord Quinn. How talented she is. How kind. And that she’s a woman with a mind of her own. But maybe you don’t know, since it’s been a while since you noticed her. But I noticed.”

Her father’s expression didn’t warm. “Forgive me... Mr.... Hardesty. This is between myself and my daughter. If you wouldn’t mind?”

“I kind of do, but, again, that’s up to her.”

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Emily squeezed her eyes shut, and he could imagine her silently counting. “You can stay, Liam. And Father, you should go.”

“All right, then. We’ll do this in front of him. I don’t know what you were thinking, following this fellow out here from New York, but according to Muriel, you’re apparently smitten with the idea of a... a cowboy.”

“Oh, she told you that, did she?”

“She did,” Malcolm said, seeming to enjoy this too much.

“I think that’s a lie. Muriel would never say that. Shall I call her and check?”

“For God’s sake, Emily—” her father said.

“And none of that is any of your business anyway,” she went on. “I can’t imagine what inspired this visit, unless—”

Malcolm eagerly jumped in. “You made quite a splash in the British tabloids. Photos and everything of you kissing up your muddy cowboy here.” He swept a hand through the rain, declaring, “Lord Collum Quinn’s daughter, caught up in a Wall Street scandal, hiding out in Montana. Hooks up with a rough and tumble American cowboy. What’s next?” “Seriously, Emily. It’s embarrassing.”

Horried, she met Liam’s confused look. The photographer. In the restaurant. He was a plant. And the man on the road who saw them kissing? Same bastard journalist. The British press was relentless and constantly digging up dirt on those in power.

Somehow, he'd found her here. Never in her life had she been paid any attention by the press. And she had every right to be here. To travel where she wanted, to hook up with whomever she wanted. And the only man she wanted was Liam.

"So," she said. "Suddenly my private life is important to you when somehow it never mattered to you before?"

"Our father has never been part of the Lords' Chamber before," Malcolm said. "And I'm on the brink of running for MP. Think, Emily. Think about someone besides yourself."

"The right people will pay little attention to all that," her father said, taking a step toward her, to which she took an equal step back. "Emily. Please. You've had your fun. Now it's time to come home. There's an excellent job waiting for you back in London. I went to a lot of trouble to procure it for you. I called in a lot of favors. And all this fuss is unnecessary."

"No one asked you to do that."

"I thought you'd be grateful. Considering that you're apparently persona-non-grata in New York."

"Did you honestly think I'd be grateful for you coming here to humiliate me? To collect me as if I were some five-year-old? To save me from myself?" To Malcolm, she said, "Blame me for keeping you out of politics?"

"That... is certainly not our—"

"Well, you've accomplished it, as usual. And by the way, for all these years, the press has had no reason to follow me for my own sake. But only because of you two, who have literally left me alone all this time. So, tell me why I should care?" Behind the

gate, the mama cow bawled for her calf. “Now if you’ll excuse us, there’s a calf that needs warming.”

“You’ll lose the job,” he warned. “If you don’t come back with us now.”

She turned back to him, rain dripping off her soaking hair, thunder rumbling across the sky. “Oh, you mean the job I had no part in getting? The one no one has even spoken to me about directly? The one that’s a grand favor to you?”

“The job that’s everything you’ve always wanted, Emily? Yes. That job. It’s respectable. It’s on a partner track. A partner, Emily. With all the benefits that comes with. It’s a dream package. The money? It’s quite good. And Garrett Falkner has already said he will not hold what happened in New York against you. He hired you because of all you accomplished in New York, because of your reputation. I simply opened that door for you and asked him to consider you. Yes, as a favor to me, but in the end, you got the job. But he won’t hold it for long. He expects you on Monday. And they’re going to deport you anyway. You can’t stay.”

Liam watched what her father said register on her face. Steal some of the anger from her expression. He watched the possibility of that good life far away from him seep into her eyes.

Emily shot a hopeless look at Liam.

“Or you could marry me,” Liam said impulsively. “You could stay here. Marry me. They couldn’t deport you.”

Shocked, she grabbed his arm. “Liam.”

“No, I mean it. Stay. Stay here with me. You don’t need to go.”

“I—” Tears suddenly filled her eyes, but she shook her head.

“There it is,” Malcolm told his father. “Well done, Emily. You managed to wrangle a proposal from the man for a green card. I told you that was her whole point in coming here. One way or another, to stay in this country come hell or high water. But even I never—”

She gasped and slapped Malcolm hard across the cheek. “Sod off, Malcolm.”

He reeled backward, grabbing his cheek, then he bared his teeth at her with an ugly laugh. “Ahhh. She doth protest too much.”

“Malcolm, for God’s sake. Shut the hell up!” Lord Quinn scolded. “Emily—”

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Liam stepped between them, wanting nothing more than to take her bastard brother to the friggin' ground for what he'd said, and he met her hopeless pleading gaze darkly. Almost instantly, he knew he'd made a mistake. Because she took his look as confirmation that he believed her brother somehow. Or at least doubted her.

She turned and ran blindly in the rain toward the cabin where they'd shared the past few nights making love.

"Emily!" Liam called after her, but she didn't turn. "Emily, wait!"

She didn't stop.

He stalked back to the uninvited pair who'd just upended everything and took Malcolm by the shirtfront, shoving him backwards along the muddy ground. Malcolm's eyes widened and he scrambled to keep his balance—not such an ass with someone his own size—then Liam shoved Malcolm backward, away from him. He stumbled to catch himself from falling in the rain.

"You come here, to my ranch and talk to her that way? What kind of family are you anyway? Who the hell does that to someone they supposedly love?"

"Mr. Hardesty, I—" Lord Quinn began.

Liam cut him off and, between clenched teeth told him, "Not interested in an answer."

"You can't possibly know her well enough to—" Lord Quinn began.

“Oh, I think I do. I think I already know her a hell of a lot better than either of you two, because it would appear that neither of you has ever bothered to even ask her what she wants. What she aspires to. How she wants to live her life.”

“Not with a cowhand, clearly,” Malcolm muttered to his father.

“Yeah, about that. This ranch and everything as far as your eye can see belongs to me and my family. And it’s been ours for generations. Built on the backs and the sweat equity of every Hardesty for a hundred and fifty years; from the ones lying in that small cemetery up the hill to the family that still lives here and works it. And, so you know, it’s no shoestring operation. And now that we have that settled, I suggest you two get the hell out of here. Now. Because if you don’t, I’ll be forced to physically remove you from my property. And you won’t like that. Because it happens, I am a cowboy and I can wrestle eight-hundred-pound yearling steers to the ground just for the hell of it.”

“B-but—” Malcolm sputtered.

“Nope. You had your say. So, both of you, get in that fancy car of yours and get the hell out of here. Now. Oh, and one more thing? I do plan on marrying her. But don’t expect an invitation to the wedding. She’s gonna have all the family she needs right here in Montana. Right here on this American ranch that happens to hold more possibility, more love, more family than you two will ever know in your sad, lonely lifetimes.”

Sarah appeared then from the house holding an umbrella, walking toward them with a worried expression. Will was right behind her.

“What’s happening here? Is everything all right, darling?”

“Nothing to worry about, Mom,” Liam told her. “They were just leaving.”

Lord Quinn frowned at Malcolm, contemplating his very limited choices.

“Who are they?” Will asked.

“I’m Emily’s father,” Quinn said. “And this ass is her brother.”

“Father!” Malcolm complained, looking wounded.

Damn, the man was like a freaking eight-year-old. What a frightening prospect it was to see him running for office anywhere.

Quinn said, “That’s accurate, I’m afraid. And I’m apparently guilty, too. Your son has... invited us to leave.”

“Ordered,” Liam corrected.

“Oh, dear,” Sarah muttered under her breath, but she was not about to argue with Liam.

Will walked to his brother’s side in solidarity, looking equally imposing. “You heard him.”

Quinn grabbed his son’s arm and shoved him in the direction of the town car. “It’s quite possible I underestimated the situation here. Underestimated you, sir. And for that, I apologize. For both of us. Please tell Emily that we’ll be at the local airfield until eight tonight with the private jet if she changes her mind.”

Liam said nothing in reply, only watched them walk through the muddy track to their car and then watched the car pull away.

“Good God, what the hell was that all about?” Will asked.

A muscle in Liam's jaw worked. "That was Emily's past." He cursed low under his breath. "I need to go talk to her. There's a newborn calf in the barn that needs warming and that cow that's bawling over there is her mama and needs in as soon as you've got her settled."

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“Got it. But, hey, Liam. Are you... is everything okay?”

He didn't answer. Because he honestly didn't know.

*

Emily had thrown her clothes haphazardly into her suitcase, but she couldn't really see straight from the tears streaming down her face. In the bathroom, she shoved her cosmetics into a small traveling bag, then caught sight of herself in the bathroom mirror.

She looked a mess. But worse than that, she felt like the ground underneath her had slipped away. She felt gutted. All of it. From her brother's awful words to the look on Liam's face when he heard Malcolm's accusation that she had somehow plotted, manipulated... wormed her way into Liam's life for a... a green card and a marriage of convenience?

Good God, she would never—

His proposal was simply a knee-jerk reaction to her brother's words. He was just doing what he had done since the moment he met her—protecting her. And God knew, she was grateful for that. Glad she'd slapped those words right out of Malcolm's hateful mouth. But an arrangement like Liam was proposing would never be the right thing. Not for her or for him. Because she loved him.

She loved him. She knew that now. She had accidentally lowered those walls that had kept her from looking too hard at her life—a life filled with little besides work and

survival—and she'd let him in. And now, her heart felt like it was breaking.

What had she done?

But now that vicious little seed had been planted. Now, he would always wonder. Did she come to blag her way into his life? Could it be true? Was she that devious? She'd seen in his expression that he doubted her.

So, there was only one thing to do now. Go. She couldn't stay another minute. She would not go with her father. No, she would go back to New York, close out her apartment, and relocate herself to London. But nowhere near her family. And that job would also not be hers. She would find some other way, because being beholden to her father in any way now was impossible. She would never forgive him for coming here today. Or Malcolm. Especially Malcolm.

When had he come to hate her so to do what he'd done just now? When had their father's approval overridden any brotherly feelings he'd once had for her? He'd become small and petty, jealous and possessive of their father. Well, he could have him. She was done.

A knock on the door of the cabin froze her in her thoughts. She had nothing to say to her father or Malcolm.

"Go away!" she shouted at the closed door.

"Em, it's me. Let me in."

Her heart dropped. It was Liam. Emily scrubbed at her cheeks with the backs of her sleeves. At least she owed him a goodbye. None of this was his fault.

Slowly, she unlocked the door and opened it.

He stood on the doorstep, his expression unreadable. “Can I come in?”

“If you want. But I’m leaving,” she told him, then turned back to finish packing.

He followed her inside. “Emily, stop. Can we... can we just talk?” He hovered near the end of her bed—the bed they’d lain in together, making love—looking for the first time since she’d met him, awkward and uncertain.

“There’s really nothing to say, is there?” She threw some more clothes from the dresser into her suitcase.

“You don’t actually believe I bought what he was selling, do you?”

She turned her face away from him so he wouldn’t see her tears. “Don’t you?”

“No. Not for a second. It was them my anger was directed at. Not you.”

She balled up a bunch of socks and threw them in. “But you wonder now, don’t you? You’ll always wonder if my motives were—”

“Were what?”

“To trick you into...” Tears erupted from her eyes again. “It doesn’t matter now.”

“That’s your brother talking. Not you. But you still haven’t answered my question.”

She sniffed, looking up in confusion. “What question?”

“The marry-me question. You kind of left me hanging out there.”

She shook her head. “I know why you said it. To protect me—”

“No, that’s not—”

“Because that’s just who you are. But I can’t... I can’t marry you, Liam.” She closed the lid of her suitcase and zipped it with a sound of finality. “Malcolm had it all wrong. That’s not who I am. I would never put that on you. To lie for me just so I could stay in this country.”

A muscle in his jaw worked.

He took her by the upper arms, forcing her to look up at him. “Lie? What part of I’ve fallen deeply and crazy in love with you would be the lie?”

She blinked up at him, afraid to believe what he was saying. “What?”

He brushed the strand of wet hair from her cheek. “Before I sent the two of ’em packing, I told your old man I was going to marry you whether he liked it or not. Which isn’t exactly the foot I wanted to start out on with my maybe future father-in-law. But I meant it. I’m in love with you, Em. I mean, flat out, I can’t picture my future without you in it. And I don’t want to. Yeah, maybe people will say we should take more time, do the usual dating thing. But we don’t have time. So, let’s skip to the good part. Me? I don’t give a damn what it looks from the outside. I don’t care what anyone else thinks about you and me; about how long we’ve known each other, or how much we still have to learn about each other. It’s crazy, but I feel like I’ve known you forever, and I’ve never felt this way about anyone before. I just know I want to spend the rest of my life getting to know everything about you. I want to

sleep beside you every night and wake up with you in the morning. I want to teach you about all the things I love about this place, and I want to make a family with you.

“Look, I know it’s asking a lot of you, to give up that life you had back in New York or in even London, to be here on the ranch with me. But we can travel. Get off the ranch when you want to. Whenever you want. But... if you can tell me that you don’t feel the same... that you can’t picture a life with me, then you can pack that suitcase up and go. Back to New York or London, or that job your father got for you. It’ll kill me, but I’ll let you go. Your father and Malcolm are at the airfield until eight tonight.”

It took her a moment to be able to speak but she grabbed his hands in hers. “Oh, Liam, I-I don’t care about that job. Or London. Or even New York. Once upon a time, I would have done anything for a job like that, but I’ve realized something coming here—it’s never made me happy the way I am with you. I’ve been as gobsmacked as you by our connection since that first day on that subway. Since you rescued me on the street that day in New York and walked me home. I couldn’t get you out of my head and my heart when we were two thousand miles apart. I admit, it was daft of me to come here, knowing I couldn’t stay, knowing we never really had a chance, but I couldn’t leave this country without seeing if I was right or wrong about you.”

A smile tipped his beautiful mouth. “And?”

She brushed the mud off his cheek with her finger. “I was right. I was very, very right about you. I love you, Liam. I love everything about you. I love you muddy or clean, here or in New York, catching cattle or simply watching you enjoy my tarts. But—”

“But?”

“What about your family? I couldn’t bear it if they judged me for—”

“For loving me? You know they’re already crazy about you. Believe me. They won’t.”

She shook her head, pulling him close and resting her head against his chest. “Is this—what’s happened between us—even possible? How can we even explain it? I feel like... I feel like I’ve known you forever.”

“Same,” he said, brushing her hair back gently. “You are the last thing I expected when I stepped on that subway train in New York City. But I think we were... meant to meet there? And thank God we did. But no one needs an explanation for it. No one, but us.”

She turned her face up to him, tears gathering in her eyes. “Then... yes.”

“Yes?”

She nodded. “Yes. I’ll marry you. Yes! Let’s see what this crazy life has in store for us. Together.”

He picked her up and twirled her in his arms, releasing a huge sigh of relief.

She laughed. “And I’ll make you flourless chocolate tarts for the next... oh, fifty years.”

He kissed her on her lips, and they both ignored the mud and the damp clothes because none of that mattered. He dropped his mouth against her neck, teasing her there. “Mmm-mm. Okay, but you might get tired of making chocolate tarts. Someday.”

“Oh, I won’t,” she assured him. “But I have a whole raft of receipts you’ve never even tasted.”

“Oh yeah?” With a wicked kiss under her ear, he said, “I’ll be your official taster. And you could... start that supper club back up right here in Marietta if you wanted to.”

She bit her lip at the thought. “You think?”

“I know a few hundred people who would love it. There’s a whole life here, Em. One you never imagined. One I never expected to share.”

“I think,” she said, kissing the edge of his jaw, “that you’re an undercover romantic, Liam Hardesty. Do you mind much if I swoon in your arms?”

She felt him smile against her hair. “If you do, I’ll catch you. Because I’ll be right here. You can count on that.”

“Then kiss me, cowboy, before I start bawling.”

And he did. He kissed her well.

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“A recipe is a story that ends with a good meal.”

–Pat Conroy–

Epilogue

Four years later

The anniversary celebration of the opening of the Hard Eight Guest Ranch was well under way with every cabin and glamping tent booked, as had been the case the entire summer. Chef Gary Nevers was manning the barbeque grill as the guests mingled amongst the tables and the central fire pit where a half-dozen children were roasting hot dogs on long metal forks over the fire. The hot dogs were specially made by Nevers and a big attraction for the little ones as the adults indulged in his gourmet offerings. The party soundtrack played country songs from the outdoor speakers and later, Cami's brother-in-law, Luke, had promised to sing some cowboy songs by the campfire.

Another handful of younger children climbed on the wooden play structure poised a hundred feet away where swings and monkey bars, zip lines, and slides kept them entertained while their parents sipped on beers and cocktails. Tara and Gus and Cami's daughter, ten-year-old Eloise, were at the play yard, watching the little ones.

Standing around the long table that would seat most of the family, the Hardestys had gathered to celebrate the continued success of the operation, which had seen a profit this year and last, recouping their initial investment. Will and Gus were standing near their wives, nursing Coronas, while Shay and Emily were running fresh drinks for the

coolers placed strategically around the yard.

But none of that mattered to the three-year-old little girl with long blond curls who pushed her way through the crowd of adults toward the Hardesty table. Eloise chased along behind her. “Clover—” she called after her. “Wait for me!”

But Clover collided with Cami’s legs in a hug. Cami reached down for her, scooping her up in her arms. “Mmmmm-whaaa!” she said, kissing the toddler on the top of her head. In return, Clover hugged her tightly. “Aunt Cami so loves your hugs, Clovie. Where are you off to? Are you looking for mommy?”

Clover nodded.

Eloise said, “Tell Aunt Cami what you found, Clovie.”

But Clover held something tight in her fist, refusing.

“Oh. It’s a surprise for your mom? Well, I think I saw her somewhere around. Shall we go look?”

The little girl nodded again. Halfway across the yard, they met Izzy, who was heavily pregnant with her and Will’s second child and due any minute.

“Look who I found!” Cami said, allowing Clover to lean in for an Izzy kiss.

“Clover!” Izzy kissed her on the nose. “My little blossom! Where’s Lucas? Did you leave him over at the swings?”

“Yep,” she said as Cami caught her by the bare foot.

“Tara is watching Lucas,” Eloise told Izzy. “He’s having fun.”

“Oh, good. But where’s your mommy, Clover? I thought I saw her here just a minute ago.”

“I did, too,” Sarah said, approaching from the far side of the long table. “Come here, darlin’. We’ll go find her.”

“Oh, Grandma wants a snuggle,” Cami said, handing her over.

Of all the grandkids, Clover owned the reputation as best snuggler and rarely refused a hug, unless she was on a mission, which she apparently was.

She opened her fist to show Sarah what she’d found. “See?”

“What’s that? A rock?”

Clover shook her head. “A fish.”

“A fish?”

“Look.”

Sure enough, there was a fossil embedded in the rock. A tiny, fossilized fish.

“Wow! You did find a fish. Let’s go show your mom.” But from behind her came Liam’s voice.

“What about me, Clover Blossom?”

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“Daddy!” Clover practically leapt out of Sarah’s arms and into his.

He wrapped his arms around her, burying his face against her curls. “There’s my girl. Now what’s this fish I’m hearing about? And did you get a hot dog yet?”

“No, but look.” She held up her rock proudly.

“Oh, man, Clover. It’s a beaut. We might have to send that to the museum. It’s quite a specimen. What do you think?”

She shook her head. “No. He’s mine!”

He laughed. “Fair enough.” Clover had his green eyes and Emily’s beautiful face, and he was as besotted with his daughter as he still was with her mother.

“Daddy?”

“Yeah, honey?”

“I’m hungry.”

He settled her down near Eloise with a hot dog and got one for Eloise as well. “Anybody see where Emily went?” Even as he said it, he spotted her heading their way with a heavy trayful of sodas.

He told Clover, “You wait here with Eloise. I’ll be right back.”

A few moments later, he was snatching the heavy tray from Emily's hands as she headed toward the Hardesty table. "I could have gotten that," he said.

"I know," she said. "Thanks, love."

He shook his head. "Clover's been looking for you."

The smile that broke over her face was something he would never get used to. Since Clover arrived, almost a year to the day after they married at the courthouse, surrounded by his family, Emily seemed to be in her element. Motherhood suited her and was, perhaps, her biggest surprise. He couldn't be more in love with her than he was, just watching her love their daughter.

Shedding the city had been easier than she'd expected, and she had built a big circle of friends here and had even started up her supper club again, once a month. If things worked out the way she hoped, she would expand that supper club to a weekly event dinner with limited seating over the summer, right here at the round barn. It had been her dream, and he meant to make it happen.

"I thought Clover was blissfully happy playing with the big kids over at the adventure park," Emily said. "Really, it's all she's talked about doing for days now, hearing that Eloise, Lucas, and Lolly would be here."

"Oh, yeah. But she wants to show you something she found." He set the drinks down and they began unloading them into the Yeti tubs that were filled with ice. "Get ready for it to be all about a fish now."

"A—what?"

"You'll see."

“Mommy!” Clover arrived at Emily’s side; collided, perhaps would be a better description. Her mouth was smeared with ketchup. “Look!”

Emily properly oohed and ahhed over the fossil then washed both it and Clover’s ketchup mouth clean with some bottled water. After, the tiny fish fossil stood out even more. Delighted, Clover took off at a run with Eloise to show Lolly her find.

Liam nudged Emily and jerked his chin in the direction of her father, who was deep in conversation with a guest from Canada who worked in the government. “He’s feeling right at home, it seems.”

She smiled. “He is trying, isn’t he?” It wasn’t her father’s first time back since they’d married.

Unexpectedly, he’d come for Clover’s birth after he and Emily had mostly mended fences between them during that visit. He was, in spite of everything, a doting grandfather, calling Clover once a month on Zoom much to her delight. Malcolm was still a no-show, but deep down, Liam knew Emily hoped for a reconciliation one day.

The smoke from the grill wafted over to them and Liam inhaled the savory fragrance. “Smells like Nevers is going to nail it again. I’m starving.”

Chef Nevers had gotten his anxiety under control and had proven to be a wonderful addition to the Hard Eight ranch. His food was one of the ranch’s great attractions, and Liam was glad they’d listened to his wife and kept him on years ago after a rough start.

Beside him, Emily wrinkled her nose, waving the smoke away, moving out of its path. She looked a little green, suddenly.

“What’s wrong? You okay?” he asked.

“Sort of.”

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He pulled out a bench seat and made her sit. “You look a little pale. Here, have some water.” He handed her a bottle. She sipped a little.

“I’m fine. Really. It just hit me, that smell.”

“The steaks? They smell great—” His eyes widened. “Uh-ohh. What?Em. I can only think of one other time when that smell made you—”

Emily bit her lip, trying to hold back a smile. “I was going to tell you after the party, but...”

“Oh, my God, Em. Really?”

She nodded. “Are you happy about it?”

He pulled her into his arms, laughing. “Am I happy?” His voice clogged up suddenly and all he could do was hug her.

“You know Clover’s been desperate for a brother or sister. I can’t wait to tell her, but we should wait a bit.”

“How far along are you? How did I miss this?”

“Far enough to know. I saw the doctor today—are you ready? Maybe you should sit down, too.”

He frowned. “What?”

“There’s two... it’s... twins.”

He literally gasped. “Twins?”

“Shhhh!” She quieted him with her hand. “We shouldn’t tell everyone yet.”

He glanced guiltily around them and lowered his voice. The shock and weight of her words hitting him like a punch of joy and fear and disbelief all at once. “Okay, okay. But what? Twins? Em.”

“I know.” She bussed his mouth with a quick kiss. “They do run in your family, don’t they then? I’m so happy. And a bit scared, too. It’s a lot. But I couldn’t wait to tell you.”

He stared down at her in wonder. “I’m so... you are... a rock star. I love you, babe.”

She kissed him again. “I love you back, cowboy.” She straightened the collar of his denim shirt and smoothed her hand down the front as she always did in a little gesture that always gave him the feels.

“Now what do we do?”

“Now,” she said, “I’m going to find our current only child and push her on that swing as I promised her all day that I would. And pocket her little fish fossil, so he doesn’t disappear.”

“Good plan. Meltdown avoidance.”

“Right. See you after?”

“I’ll be right here.”

Smiling, he watched her walk away, watched Clover gallop up to her, grab her hand, and walk together toward the sinking sunset that was casting the Montana sky with reds and purples. It reminded him then of the dream he'd once had of that same little girl with the hazel-green eyes who was theirs now, walking with her mama.

He'd never been a big believer in fate, or premonitions, but what else explained how he had gotten so lucky? That he'd listened to that small voice that had told him to offer her that seat on the subway, and later, when all seemed lost, told him not to let her go.

He took a deep breath.

For that matter, five years ago, none of this had seemed possible. And now look. Everything had changed. Changed for good. He stood at the center of the Hard Eight, surrounded by family and friends, all gathered tonight together to celebrate the life they'd—each of them—built here. He had Emily now and Clover and—he swallowed hard—two more on the way... it was a life he could never have imagined.

And it was a blessing he knew he would never, ever take for granted.

The End