



Wrangle Me

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Callum

Working as the stable manager and trail guide at my family's ranch means I've always been free to do whatever I want. No strings, no commitments—just good times and wild nights. Settling down has never been on my agenda. But then Maisie shows up and all the rules go out of the window.-

She's all quiet strength and unshakable innocence. I can't look away. She doesn't belong in my world, yet I find myself desperate to protect her from it. She's running away from her past but can I convince her that I could be her future?

Maisie

Leaving behind the only life I've ever known wasn't easy, but I refuse to let my past define me. Growing up under the strict rules of the church meant I never had the chance to explore the world—or my own desires.

That all changed when I met Callum Kingridge. He's reckless, loud, and the complete opposite of everything I was raised to believe in. He made me feel things I never dared to dream about. But now, I'm pregnant, and telling him could change everything.

The Kingridge brothers are ranching royalty. But even money, power, and influence can't buy you love.

Total Pages (Source): 21

CHAPTER 1

MAISIE

“I think I’ve got it. When can we start with the galloping? I want a picture for Insta with my hair, like, billowing in the wind.”

I blow out a breath. “If you want to gallop, you’ll have to actually get on the horse.”

I’m forty-two minutes into my first training session at the Buck and Whinny Stables. So far, my new job at Kingridge Ranch is a bit of torture. This particular VIP, Peachy, has treated the horse as little more than a breathing, hay-munching prop in her personal photo shoot. He’s just a fashion accessory with hooves. As far as I can tell, I’m not ranking much higher.

Peachy smooths a hand over her silk dress. Yes, a dress and then pouts. “Do you have another saddle? The black leather is harsh, and I’m more of a boho-vibe girly. You know?” She holds her lip out, and I realize with horror that she wants an actual reply from me.

I press my tongue to the roof of my mouth to keep from saying what I’m thinking. “No, we do not. But our time will be up in about three minutes, so if you’re interested in doing more than posing, now might be the time to consider it.”

Before I can even finish, she thrusts her phone back into my hands. “Ooh, grab one with the light behind me. Come on, horsey. Come.” She claps three times at the poor horse and strikes a leggy pose.

I stare at the phone. Then at her. I'm not going to win here. So, I silently add professional photograph to my list of unofficial job duties. I can't wait for this VIP weekend to be over. According to Priya, our marketing manager, this is the last group of the season. If that's true, it can't end soon enough.

I snap a few photos with all the enthusiasm I can muster, slapping a smile onto my face. I angle the phone like a trained Booktoker and not just a new horse trainer desperate to keep the peace.

This is the kind of job I never would've dreamed of a few years ago. Hell, with the way I grew up, I didn't even know this kind of freedom existed. I came here to rewrite my story and to make up for all the years I spent trapped inside someone else's version of who I was supposed to be. But this isn't quite what I pictured.

Three painfully long minutes tick by. She finally takes her phone back, glancing at the screen with a wrinkle of her nose.

"Ugh, you got my bad side. You're okay, girl, you'll get better with time." She mutters under her breath for a moment, then saunters off in the direction of the bathroom.

As soon as she disappears, I reclaim my freedom. I step out of the stables and into the fresh air.

"Whew," I exhale, finally letting my shoulders drop.

I'm shaking my angst out through my fingertips when I realize I'm not alone. Two men are leaning against the stable wall. Both are tall and broad, but only one looks like he spends his day out on the ranch. A slim older woman stands between them... And she's full-on country. The boots, turquoise jewelry, denim, and a kind of confidence that says she's seen it all and still doesn't take crap from anyone.

The first man is good-looking enough, with a sharp jaw and easy smile. But he's not the type to derail your entire day. The second is smoldering with dark hair and brooding eyes. His arms are crossed over his broad chest, and it's hard to look away.

I wonder if these are the infamous Kingridge brothers I've heard so much about. If they're as charming as advertised, then my plan is to stay far away from them. I can't trust anyone until I learn to trust myself... and that means not overcomplicating things. Besides... I've been a virgin for twenty-five years, so what's another few? The woman waves me over, and their conversation comes to a halt as I take a step closer to the trio.

Not-So-Hot-Man leans forward, casual. "Rough session in there?"

"Yeah." I breathe out a laugh and brush a strand of hair from my face. "That woman is the worst. I don't think I've ever met a more self-centered person in my entire life. It's almost impressive, honestly." I shake my head.

Why am I so nervous?

His eyebrows raise for a moment. Then, he lets out an amused chuckle. "Yeah, tell me about it."

"I'm not even sure what she does that makes her a VIP. But she carries herself like the Duchess of Denim and Dry Shampoo. And I'm not normally a complainer, but after one hour with her, I was ready to fake my own death and flee the state."

Silence falls, and I mentally kick myself. Shut up, Maisie. It's your first day. You don't complain about the clientele on your first day.

Another beat of silence passes before the older woman breaks the tension. "Oh, bless your heart."

“Thanks! Bless yours too. I’m Maisie Reagan. I’m the new horse trainer.” I hold out my hand and she slips a frail wrist into it.

“It’s nice to meet you, sugar. I’m Patty June. I work everywhere at this ranch, always have. I’ll be seeing you around, I’m sure.” Her eyes widen a bit as she turns toward the man with the smolder. “Y’all have fun with this one. I’m gonna head back to the farm stand.”

She disappears, and the two men exchange a quick glance. It’s too quick, really, and then something in the air shifts. But before I can put the pieces together, the rhythmic click of heeled cowboy boots crunching on gravel cuts through the silence behind me.

I turn to find Peachy heading toward us with a whole new outfit, and this one has fringe. So much fringe. She’s a walking Pinterest board as she strides out of the barn. Her sunglasses perch on her head like a tiara, and a fresh layer of lip gloss shines in the sun. Yet somehow, she pulls the look off, and I think I might like her more now that I’m not trapped with her in that stable.

I smile as she approaches. “Peachy, how are you feeling after your... meet and greet with the horses?”

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But Peachy doesn't respond to me. In fact, she isn't even looking at me. Instead, to my absolute horror, Not-So-Hot-Man steps toward her and offers his hand. "Ready, babe?"

Babe?

CHAPTER 2

MAISIE

"I am. That was so exhausting. I'm ready for the spa." Peachy pauses, tilts her head ever so slightly, and looks from me to Mr. Smolder and back again. She tries to raise an eyebrow, but the Botox holds its ground. "What are we chatting about over here?"

"Oh. I... um..." I make an awkward fumble for words.

My face floods with heat. Oh, you know, I was just telling your boyfriend here what an absolute nightmare of a person you are. No big deal. My heart races at a thousand miles per minute. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out, so I press it back into a smile and swallow hard. Before I can fully melt into the dirt and become one with the gravel, Mr. Smolder steps forward. He's cool and collected.

"Maisie is our new employee here at the ranch. She was just telling us how much she enjoyed working with you today. Isn't that right, Cade?"

"Yeah, something like that," Not-so-hot-man Cade apparently responds. His voice is cool and even, but it's laced with just a hint of amusement.

I put a hand to my mouth because my jaw is literally falling open as the train wreck unfolds around me.

Mr. Smolder turns to me. “Maisie, I’m Callum Kingridge, the stable manager. We haven’t had a chance to meet. And this is Cade McAllister, our VIP guest. You may have heard of him. He plays on the Southern Knights professional football team. They’re based in South Carolina, but the last time I checked, the games are usually streamed all over the country.” He bites back a smile at my expense.

“We were in the Super Bowl,” Peachy says too loudly. She leans forward with jazz hands like she’s delivering breaking news and waits for a reaction from me.

“Right.” I let out an awkward chuckle. How the fuck am I going to get out of this one?

“We?” Callum raises an eyebrow and turns the attention back to Peachy. “Peachy, how many touchdown passes have you thrown in your life? How many yards have you rushed? Come on...”

There’s a teasing lilt in his voice that, somehow, works.

“Oh, stop. I see how you are...” Peachy’s face lights up like he just handed her an engagement ring. She grins and bats her mile-long eyelashes up at him.

Meanwhile, Cade looks like the only thing on his mind is leaving this situation... and that makes two of us. His gaze drifts off to the horizon like he's trying to manifest a portal out of here. And if it works, I’ll have to join him at this point.

But since we’re in the real world, I’m still here. Frozen in place and wondering if it’s possible to evaporate from sheer embarrassment. Okay, so I might have to resign on my first day. Cool. No big deal.

Then, just as Peachy is wrapping up her conversation with Callum, she does it. The Duchess of Dry Shampoo steps toward me with arms wide open. I don't see the hug coming. And for some reason... maybe out of panic, or guilt, or maybe out of residual manners trained into me in my childhood, I don't move toward her.

Instead, my heart jumps into my throat. I freeze, and then I flinch. But she keeps coming in hot, and I'm not sure her bony arms would even wrap around my curves. Instinctively, I take a step back, only to catch the heel of my boot on a rut in the dirt. The combination of my stutter-step combined with nerves, and sheer panic flusters me.

My arms flail wildly. My balance vanishes. And then I go down. Backside first into a rose bush.

Thorns are everywhere.

"Woah, you okay?" Callum's voice booms.

"Yep, I've got it." The last thing I want is an audience as I try to climb out of this nightmare.

Callum turns back to the VIPS and sends them off. For a moment, I don't even try to get up. At this point, lying in the dirt feels like the right call. Maybe if I stay still long enough, the ground will just swallow me whole, and I can forget all about today. I've been in Sagebrush Creek for approximately one minute, and I've already created a disaster.

"Thanks again," I catch Cade's voice through the noise in my head.

Then, Peachy's nasally tone floats back over her shoulder as she and Cade stroll toward the VIP suites. "Look at her... she's so funny."

Yeah.Hilarious.That's me.

This was a quick adventure,I think to myself.No big deal. I'll call my sister Rosalie, tell her life on the ranch isn't for me, and we'll pack up and find some new corner of the world to discover before she even has a chance to arrive. No harm done.

I'm still navigating my way to my feet when they finally disappear from view. Callum turns to me, and I brace myself. I fully expect to be fired, mocked, or maybe both. But instead, he steps forward. His eyes are soft and he doesn't say a word. He just reaches down and extends a strong, callused hand toward me.

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I hesitate for half a second, then take it... And the whole world quiets around me.

The second our skin touches, a jolt of something hot rushes through me. It isn't just a tingle of heat, it's more like awareness. It's like every nerve in my body just stood at attention, even though I'm dying of embarrassment. Callum pulls me gently to my feet. One corner of his mouth tugs into the smallest and most aggravatingly attractive smirk I've ever seen.

"You okay?" His deep voice is low and steady.

"I'm fine, and I'm so sorry. I should've kept my mouth shut. He looks like a regular guy, and she was so irregular. I'm... I didn't think?—"

He lets out a low chuckle that I feel in every part of my body. "Don't worry about it. I just feel bad for the horse that had to endure the photo shoot. Come here, you're all tangled up."

Callum's fingers reach for the chain at my neck. Before I can react, he's gently brushing a long strand of hair away from my skin. The pads of his fingers graze the curve just below my ear, trailing down to my collarbone as he works the necklace free.

The brush of his touch sends a spark straight through me. It's hot and electric. My breath catches. I'm frozen for a whole new reason. Callum has me somewhere between surprise and something that feels dangerously close to want.

He doesn't rush. His movements are slow and careful, like he's done this a hundred

times. Like he knows exactly what he's doing to me. I wonder whether he notices the way goose bumps ripple across my skin in the wake of his touch. By the time he's done, I can barely breathe.

"There, you look perfect," he says quietly, finally loosening the knot and letting the pendant fall back into place. "Cat or dog?"

"What?" His question catches me off guard and jolts me back to the present. I can hardly think over the warmth blooming low in my stomach.

"Your paw print necklace. Is it meant to be a cat or a dog?"

I smile up at him. "Oh, don't be crazy. Of course, it's a cat."

"Hmm... Just when I thought we could work well together." He smiles, and it reveals deep-set dimples hidden in the chisel of his jawline. "You haven't met Hunkleberry yet. He's our ranch dog, and he'll win you over. I'll bring him when I come to check on you this afternoon."

"Sounds good."

Callum walks away, but I can still feel the heat of his hand on my skin. I still feel him in the butterflies flapping wildly in my stomach. And I cannot wait to head back to my apartment across the property and call Rosalie with a full report.

CHAPTER 3

CALLUM

Two Weeks Later

I've spent the past two weeks coming up with every ass-backward excuse I can think of to see Maisie. I've been checking her schedule, asking about feed orders I already know the answer to, pretending I needed help with a horse I trained myself, and bringing Hunkleberry by to watch her swoon.

I'm not proud of it, but I'm not exactly ashamed either... This is my best attempt at taking things slow, and I hate it. But today is a new low. I take a deep breath before I knock on the door to Maisie's apartment.

Showing up at an employee's place isn't exactly standard protocol at Kingridge Ranch. If my brothers find out, they'll roast me alive, especially Bowen and Alex. Ever since those two settled down with Cassidy and Priya, they've gone straight-laced all of a sudden.

It wasn't a huge shock with Alex, I guess. But I would've never thought that my twin would be by-the-book. It's like Bowen forgot about how we used to sneak out to chase girls and trouble. Rules never meant much to us back then, and they sure as hell don't now. Not when I can't go a day without thinking about Maisie.

It isn't just my brothers, there are about a million other reasons I should stay away from her. She's too sweet for me. Too kind and innocent. Hell, she's probably too young. Not young enough to keep me from knocking on her door.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

I've got a bad habit of chasing women who'll never want me the way I want them, and Maisie has my full attention.

But when the door to the apartment swings open, it's her sister Rosalie who greets me, and she looks like hell. Her eyes are sunken, her skin pale, and her hair is piled up in a messy bun that looks like it hasn't been brushed in days. She's wrapped in a

fuzzy bathrobe and holding a mug with something steaming inside. Rosalie works for me too, but she's been out for a few days, and now I can see why.

"Hey," I say, lifting a hand. "Feeling any better?"

Her eyes narrow. Then she glances down at her robe and makes a dramatic sweeping gesture like she's about to take the stage.

"Oh yeah. Living my best life," she deadpans.

I blink. "Right. Cool... Good luck with that. Is, uh... is Maisie around?"

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“Yeah, she’s in the kitchen.” Rosalie pauses for a moment, staring at me with wide eyes.

We normally get along pretty well. But today, all she gives me is a final tortured look before disappearing down the hall like a wraith. She closes the door to her bedroom with a thud. All I can think is that Dawson, Rosalie’s boyfriend? Ex-husband? I can’t keep it straight. But whoever he is, the dude has his hands full with that one.

Inside, the place is small and warm. The faint scent of lavender and something sweet lingers in the air. I find Maisie at the tiny kitchen table. She isn’t cooking. Instead, she’s curled up with a book on the bench seat against the window. Her barefeet are tucked under her, and a half-drunk mug of something is forgotten beside her.

Maisie doesn’t notice me right away. She’s too lost in whatever world she’s reading, and I want to be there with her. She’s stunning in a way that makes it impossible to look away from her. I commit the sight to memory before I grin and slide into the bench seat beside her.

Callum.” Her eyes widen, surprise blooming across her face as her lips form a soft, pouty circle. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to see what you’re reading.” I lean in, peeking over her shoulder, and it pulls a smile from her.

“No, you didn’t,” she laughs, and presses closer to me on the bench. “You came to bring me breakfast, but apparently forgot the food.” Her eyebrow raises in a flirty challenge.

“I came to take you down to the farm stand for breakfast. But now I’m intrigued.” Fire ignites in me at the feel of her soft thigh pressed against mine. “Harry Potter? And it’s a hardback, too. How old are you?”

I toss it out like a joke, letting the smirk play at the edge of my mouth. But a flicker of unease lingers underneath. Please be legal. Please.

She peers at me over the top of the book, nose scrunching like she’s mock-offended. “Only hardbacks, Callum. It’s either hardcover or ebook... nothing in between. I have standards. I’m twenty-five,” she says, snapping the book closed with a soft, definitive thud. “How old are you?”

Old enough to teach you what I like.

There it is... Another pervy thought about this woman. My own red flag waving bright in my face. She’s ten years younger. Fresh-faced and unscarred. Sweet in a way that feels too damn rare. Meanwhile, I’ve got enough baggage for both of us.

I push back my hesitation and decide to ignore her question altogether. “You’re twenty-five and reading Harry Potter like it’s your first time. Fascinating,” I say, mostly to distract myself from how goddamn pretty she looks in the afternoon light.

“It is my first time,” she says, voice softening. “I grew up in what some might call a religious cult. We weren’t allowed to read anything that wasn’t approved. No magic. No fantasy. Definitely, no wizards. Not a lot of books in general, to be honest.”

I blink. “Wait... seriously?”

She nods with a shrug. “Yeah.” Her fingers trace the cover of the book like it’s something sacred. “I’m making up for lost time now. I want to experience everything this life has to offer and read every book. Right now, I’m letting myself live all things

HP.”

“Ooh, a rebel, I like it.” I try to keep it light, but my chest tightens.

That explains so much about her. The way she looks at the world like it still holds wonder. The way she treats every moment like it matters.

“Your parents must be devastated, you've lost your way in the wizarding world.”

Before she can answer, Rosalie’s voice cuts through the hallway like a whip crack. “Actually, our parents are dead. But you know, thanks for bringing it up. I’m about to vomit again, and I’d love to do it without an audience.”

Maisie flinches as her sister shoots her a sharp, silent warning.

“I’m sorry, I know this is a never-ending sickness. Do you need anything?” Maisie asks, and Rosalie shakes her head.

I get to my feet and help Maisie up after me. “What do you say to some breakfast?”

CHAPTER 4

CALLUM

Breakfast happens in a snap. Patty June has her signature banana bread, her best friend Brandi Rose, and a gaggle of ranch hands with her at the farm stand. The room quiets when we enter. I can already feel the gossip building. They say hello and then offer to leave us to it. But this isn’t my first rodeo. I decide that a coffee and food to go is in order.

I get Maisie into my old white pickup and take her on a tour of the ranch. She slides

into the passenger seat like she's been there a hundred times, like she belongs.

The next two hours blur and burn together.

We roll past the wheat fields swaying in the late light, past the Udder Satisfaction Milk Barn, and the row of guest suites. I've driven this route more times than I can count, but with her beside me, it feels different. It's like I'm seeing it all for the first time. I can't help but take her hand across the center console.

She doesn't pull away.

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“More of my brothers...” I grumble when I see Holden and Geoffrey up ahead.

They’re leaning on the split-rail fence, and I don’t miss the way they raise their eyebrows at the sight of a woman in the front seat of my truck.

“I thought I’d met all of them already.”

“No, you’ve met my twin Bowen, and Alex, the oldest. But these jackasses are new to you.” As I say the words, I realize that I don’t want to share my girl with anyone, least of all these two.

So I slow the truck and pretend like I’m going to stop. When they get close enough, I whip the wheel at the last second. The truck bounces as we take off in the opposite direction, tires spinning, mud flying.

I check my mirror and laugh. “Ha! Direct hit.”

Maisie gasps, then throws her head back and laughs so hard she doubles over in the seat. God, that laugh. I’d bottle it if I could.

“You just—Callum, you blasted them! Brothers are so strange. Rosalie would kill me if I did that to her,” she says between wheezes.

“Ha! They can try. But I can’t have them sniffing around you. I’ve got enough competition without those two ruining everything. I see the way these dudes look at you, and I don’t like it.” My words are a growl.

Maisie blushes, but the smile still stretches wide across her face and reaches her eyes. It hits me right in the chest. She's sweet tea laced with fire, soft curves I can't stop noticing. It's this quiet strength that sneaks up and cuts you clean. She's got a mouth that makes my thoughts go sideways. Her laugh will break me open if I'm not careful...

And I'm not careful. Never have been,

I park in the back forty and we walk hand in hand. She watches everything with wide eyes and wonder. The golden fields seem warmer. The air is sweeter. Even the beat-up barn looks damn near picturesque when she points out the wildflowers blooming alongside it. She's stolen my heart, but it's animals who steal hers.

At some point, Hunkleberry comes loping up from God knows where. He walks alongside us like he's part of the official tour. Maisie coos at him and scratches behind his ears, and that smug mutt settles into her cleavage like he owns the place.

Then she meets Thrusty the Goat. When she insists on entering his pen, I brace myself because that predator has earned his name... He lives up to his reputation immediately.

As soon as I close the gate, he puts his head down. Then he approaches my leg and attempts to mount me, aiming for glory. Maisie shrieks, stumbling back, but not from fear. She's laughing too hard to care. Doubling over again, tears springing to her eyes as I haul Thrusty back by the collar and mutter a very sincere apology on his behalf.

"You weren't kidding," she gasps. "He's committed."

"We had to move his pen away from the wedding venue. There are too many photos with this dude trying to hump something in the background," I laugh, but she's already moving on, enchanted by the next creature in our barnyard zoo.

Enter Choke the Chicken.

He's a real asshole of a rooster. He was on his way to being cooked when Alex's new stepson fell in love with him and made him an official pet. Now the little bastard is here to stay. The moment he sees her, Choke puffs up like the feathery demon he is. He struts right at her, wings flapping like he's gearing up for battle. Maisie doesn't shy away. She narrows her eyes right back at him.

"Don't," I warn, grinning. "He won't lose."

"We'll see." Then she pulls her head back and clucks at him. It's loud and bold in a way I didn't see coming.

My mouth falls open in surprise. It gets Choke's attention too. He pauses mid-charge. Maisie doesn't back down. She clucks again. Louder this time. Her arms are out wide like she's about to square up for a fight. I didn't know she had it in her. Choke hesitates. Then turns and huffs away, defeated.

"Oh shit, I'm impressed," I chuckle.

Maisie looks over at me, smug as hell. "I don't back down from bullies. Not even chicken ones."

I stare at her, stunned and silent for a second. She's glowing with her cheeks flushed, hair wind-tousled, and her eyes bright... And I'm ruined.

Something cracks open in me. It's slow, hot, and dangerous. I know without a doubt that I'm in big trouble. I close the distance between us and entwine my fingers with hers on our walk back to the truck.

I ask what makes her tick. She tells me books, cats, and quiet mornings with coffee

steaming beside a hardback. She talks about the escape she found in riding horses as a child and the thrill of learning to cook for herself. I make her laugh, and it's bright and unfiltered. Something primal in me stirs.

When we reach my truck, I pull down the tailgate and lift her into the bed. I climb in beside her and look out over the ranch. The sun sinks low, and the world goes golden, quiet, hushed like it's holding its breath for us. I blow out a deep breath in one weak, last-ditch effort to stay away from her because once I plant my mouth on hers, there isn't any going back.

And God help me, I want her.

Not just her body, though I know exactly what I want to do with that. She's sexy as hell, but I want all of her.

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The way her eyes light up when she talks about the future. That curious, open way she looks at me, like she doesn't see the wreckage I've left behind me. She's too young. Too sweet. Too untested. And she's undoing me anyway.

She pulls her knees to her chest and rests her chin on them, turning to me with a slow smile. "I like it out here. I told myself that after realizing everyone I know lied to me growing up, I'd never trust anything I didn't have time to learn on my own. But I don't know, I feel safe... with you."

I catch her chin and tilt her face to mine. Our fingers tangle, warm and tentative. But the proximity is enough to set my blood roaring in my ears.

"I don't want to mess this up," I murmur, and it's the rawest truth I've spoken in years.

Her gaze lifts to meet me. Her eyes are steady and wide open. "You haven't ruined anything."

I huff out a shaky breath. "Give me time, darlin'. I ruin things slowly."

"Maybe I need you to ruin me."

That's all it takes.

I move before I can stop myself. I'm gentle, like she might spook if I push too hard. My thumb grazes her cheek, and her lips part just a little, but it's enough to ruin me.

I kiss her.

My touch is soft at first and careful. It's just enough to taste her and set a fire raging through me. She leans into me. Her mouth is warm, sweet, and even shy. But her body presses into me, and it makes something snap loose inside of me.

There's no hope for control now. I deepen it, parting her lips with my tongue. Maisie sighs against me, and her hands slide up my chest. Her touch is hesitant and searching. It's like she's not quite sure where to land. So I pull her home. I wrap my arms around her waist, tug her into me until every curve of her fits perfectly against me.

It takes the sound of my brother's truck crunching up the gravel towards us and every ounce of self-control I can muster to pull away from her. But even three cold showers won't help me shake off the kiss.

CHAPTER 5

BOOTS AND BITCHING PODCAST

Hey, sugar. It's me, your favorite anonymous podcaster, here to give you the lowdown on who's doing what—or let's be real, who—in Sagebrush Creek. Grab your boots, 'cause it's time to get bitching, and honey, I've got more than enough sweet tea to spill today.

Now, you didn't hear it from me, but word around Kingridge Ranch is that one of our own might be cookin' up the next generation of Kingridge royalty... Or at least they're going to die trying. Let's just say, a little cowboy or cowgirl could be one spurred boot closer to inheriting the whole dang empire now that it seems like the Kingridge boys went from hard up to hardly keeping their pants on.

Let's see which brother decides to cowboy up and claim the risky business before I go naming names...

Meanwhile, over at Sow Much—bless their garden-growing, bee-saving hearts—they're keeping things plenty fertile. Staff and customers alike, if you catch my drift.

But don't let all that talk about kale and compost fool you. The real dirt is over at Findlay Farm. Let's just say they're not exactly growing what you'd call legal produce. That "cash crop" sprouting out back? Smells a little less like rosemary and a whole lot more like reefer. Sagebrush Creek might be small, but baby, we know what skunky smells like. You better keep that business away from here before the sheriff catches wind of it.

And now for the real bombshell I know all you ladies have been waiting for... Fallon Kingridge is coming home.

That's right. The elusive football-playing brother of the Kingridge clan is packin' up his cleats, hitching up his saddle, and ridin' back into town.

No word yet on what—or who—brought him back, but either his European football contract is up, or this ain't just a friendly family visit. He's got history around here, and not all of it's the kind you send postcards about. If there's a reason he's been laying low all this time, you can bet your sweet ass it's about to catch up with him.

But hold your horses—what's that rumble in the distance?

Oh, just a highway project being planned straight through the heart of Kingridge land. Mayor Randolph Bellcourt says it's for the greater good. I say he just wants to slice the ranch in half and teach his ex-wife, Cassidy, a lesson about falling for a rancher. You didn't hear it from me, but some say he's set to line his pockets in the process.

Public use, my boot-clad ass.

Between that mess and the custody rumors swirling like a dust devil around a certain Kingridge brother, it's looking more and more like open season on the whole dang family.

Stay tuned, darlins, this place is about to get hotter than a branding iron in July. Until next time, I'll be here watching. Your bitch with boots on the ground.

CHAPTER 6

MAISIE

I crackopen her bedroom door. "I'm out of here, sis. I put water on your nightstand. Need anything else?"

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“No... Thank you.” Rosalie’s been here a few weeks now, and I wish she could settle in. But the poor thing is miserable. Something about ranch life doesn’t quite agree with her, and if I had to guess, I think it has to do with missing Dawson. Not that she’d ever admit it.

I close our apartment door and make my way across the ranch. On the upside, Rosalie being sick means I’ve been volunteering to cover her shifts at the stable. That means more time with Callum isn’t exactly a hardship. When he kissed me, my whole world stopped spinning and I’ve been struggling to hold on to myself.

But Callum doesn’t make it easy. His charm is raw and magnetic. Being the focus of all that adoration is dizzying. It feels too good to be true. Since that first kiss, he’s taken every excuse to do it again.

My heart thuds like a drum every time I see him. But Callum hasn’t pushed for more. I don’t know if he can sense the virgin in me or if he’s just that respectful.

Either way, it’s probably for the best. I can’t let myself fall for him completely. Not when I know how easily I could lose myself in him. The Kingridge boys have a reputation, and I’m sure there’s a reason for it. All I have to do is train my ear to the gossip in this place or listen to a single episode of the Boots and Bitching Podcast to figure that out.

Still, I’m having a hard time reconciling Callum with the reputation that preceded him. He’s rough around the edges in all the ways that make my breath catch. But brash and arrogant isn’t the Callum Kingridge I’ve met. At least, not so far. With me, he’s kind, thoughtful, and even gentle.

Today, Callum's taking me on a trail ride. It's part training and part something else I haven't quite named. I step into the stables and he's got everything ready. We set off at sunrise.

The air is crisp, and the sky clear as we ride side by side. Our horses move in lockstep over the well-worn trail. I glance out over the land, and it's breathtaking. The site never gets old. Without the Colorado mountains I grew up in, you can see for eternity. The rolling hills and endless pasture are golden and bathed in morning light.

"Stunning, isn't it?" Callum asks, reining in beside me.

"Absolutely beautiful," I say, though I'm not just talking about the view. He's a part of this beautiful life I'm building here, and it doesn't feel real.

"C'mon, this way. We're heading off the path. There's someone you've got to meet."

I follow him without question. Caution be damned. From behind, he looks like he stepped out of an old Western with broad shoulders and worn denim clinging to strong thighs. The brim of his hat casts just enough shadow to give him that untouchable cowboy mystique.

My horse's hooves crunch softly over the dry trail as we wind through a patch of sun-dappled oaks. Callum rides just ahead, his posture is easy but confident. It's like he was born in the saddle. He swings off his horse with practiced ease and ties the reins to a post.

A little smile tugs at the corner of his mouth as he helps me off of my horse. Callum locks his hand over mine as we step inside a massive cattle pen.

"Meet Rump Roast," he says, tipping his hat toward the enormous black-and-white cow standing dead center like she owns the place. "Best cow we've got."

I blink, biting back a smile. “Rump Roast? I know that it was you and all brothers and a dad with no mother, but there wasn’t a single woman available to help you name any of these animals.”

“It’s a hell of a name for a hell of a gal.” He laughs, “She was supposed to be a steer. It’s a long story. But she’s meaner than she looks; don’t let the eyelashes fool you.”

Rump Roast lets out a disgruntled moo, as if personally offended.

“Well, I think she’s adorable... But I think I’ll give her a wide berth. Do you see the way she’s eyeing me? Talking down a rooster is one thing, but Rump Roast could do some damage.”

“I’m her favorite Kingridge brother.” Callum chuckles low in his throat and reaches out, brushing a bit of hay from my shoulder.

“The girls got good taste.”

We’re way out in what Callum calls the back forty of the property. There’s no sign of human life, and I love that it’s just the two of us. The only sounds are the distant low of cattle and the creak of the barn door as he pushes it open.

Dust floats in golden shafts of light, and it smells like hay and leather when Callum leads me inside. The moment the door shuts behind us, I know that my life is about to change. He doesn’t say anything, but the air shifts.

It’s charged in a quiet but electric way that makes every breath feel loud.

Callum turns to face me. His hungry eyes search mine like he’s weighing something important, and I silently will him to do it. Then, as if he can hear my thoughts, Callum moves. It’s slow, but there isn’t any doubt in my mind what’s about to

happen as he backs me into a stack of hay bales.

The scratchy texture catches my shirt as I lean against them. Callum's lips find mine. This kiss isn't careful or teasing like before. There's desperation in it. It's a claiming, and it comes with heat that spreads from my mouth down through every nerve in my body.

Callum's hands settle at my waist. His grip is strong and steady. He anchors me to him. Then he trails hot, open-mouthed kisses down my neck that leave tingly sparks in their wake. I curl my fingers into the hem of his shirt and pull him closer. I need more. I've never been more sure about anything in my life.

He unbuttons my jeans with a single tug and slides a hand between my thighs. A groan of desire slips out from his lips when he feels me already wet for him. He presses two fingers against me. My body goes white hot with desire.

"Callum," his name is a whisper on my lips. "I've never done this before. I've never had sex with anyone."

He pauses. His breath is hot against my skin, and he's rock hard pressing into me through his jeans. "Okay, that's okay. We're not going to do anything you aren't ready for." His words come out in a pant as his hands grip my shoulders.

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“I don’t want you to stop,” I whisper, voice barely audible over the thud of my own heartbeat.

But Callum doesn’t move. “You have me. You have all of me, and I would wait a lifetime to be with you.” He pulls away, searching my eyes with his. He’s waiting. Giving me space to change my mind. But I don’t want space. Not with him. Not now.

“Please, I’m sure.” I take his hand and slip it back underneath my jeans and then rock against him, desperate for more friction.

Our eyes meet again. This time, his eyes go dark and molten. In the next second, his mouth is on mine again. His kiss is hotter, deeper, and more urgent. One hand cradles the back of my head while the other slides up my ribcage. His movements are intentional and controlled enough to make me ache.

CHAPTER 7

CALLUM

Her perfectly untouched body makes my mouth water. I’m close enough to ruin her. For a split second, I hesitate. But the way she tugs at me and pleads for me to keep going makes it impossible to stop... So I don’t.

My pulse kicks up hard and my dick throbs inside of my jeans. My ache for her is visceral. If I’m going to be the man who worships her body for the first time, I’m going to do this the right way.

I slow things down, gently pressing her back into the hay. Then I slide my hands beneath her black shirt and trace the outline of the curves on her stomach. I savor the smooth glide of her skin under my fingertips and the way it ripples up in response to my touch as I make my way to the clasp of her bra.

When I remove it, two perky breasts spring up. I walk my fingers gently over them and draw small, teasing circles that make her body tremble with anticipation. I run the flat of my tongue over one tight, needy nipple. Then slip the tight eraser bud into my mouth, suckling at her and reveling in the gasp that escapes her lips.

It takes me no time at all to get her pants off. When I do, Maisie's cheeks flush that pretty pink I've come to crave. I watch as it crawls down her neck. Her lips curve in a soft smile that wrecks me in the best way. She's more beautiful than ever, and she's mine.

I slip a hand between her legs and run my fingers along the length of her slit. I pin Maisie's wrists to the hay beneath us. She tenses for a beat. But then a soft moan escapes her lips. I can tell she's hungry for more. So I keep her there, working on her until her body relaxes. Her hips buck into my touch, and she chases the high I've been building.

Seeing Maisie laid out beneath me makes it hard to stay in control. She's flushed and wide-eyed, her soft curves waiting and it makes my cock twitch with anticipation. I can't resist for another minute.

My manhood can't get much more swollen by the time I reduce my pants to nothing more than a pile in the corner of the barn. I crawl on top of her and settle between her thighs as I line myself up with her opening.

She reaches between us and wraps her fingers around my length, guiding me towards her. I feel her grip buzz and tingle through every muscle in my body. Maisie presses

her slick heat against my firm length. Then she grinds against me until the tip catches between her folds, and a groan slips out of me.

I cage her beneath me. Every muscle in my body is tight with restraint. Then I slide my tip inside of her. It's slow and steady at first. I give her time to stretch and settle around me until Maisie bucks up and pushes it deeper. Maisie gasps as I growl into her ear. I hold still, stabilizing her through the intensity.

She's unbelievably tight, but her walls stretch around me, and she softens. Eventually, her thighs fall open even further as she takes in every inch of me. Every squeeze, every flutter of her walls around my length threatens to undo me. But I hold steady and watch her face.

Her eyes flutter closed, and her lips part with a whimper of pleasure. It's a breathtaking sight. I thrust deeper, feeling the slick heat of her wrapped around me. Pressure builds in me as I rock into Maisie, gradually picking up the pace and showing her how to move with me.

It's like her body was made for mine.

What follows is a desperate combination of hunger and reverence, all tangled together. My body and hers collide in a heat that could burn down every inch of this barn. Maisie wraps her legs around me and drags her nails down my back, gasping as her hips rise against me. She's desperate for more—and God, so am I.

She gives herself to me with a kind of trust I don't take lightly. Her body responds to every thrust. Every touch seems to unravel her. It's like she's been waiting for this her whole life. I think I have too.

I grasp her thighs tighter as she tangles her fingers in my hair and tugs. I keep a steady pace. I drink her in and memorize every soft curve and sweet reaction. When

she locks her eyes on mine and moans my name, I know I'm gone for good.

It isn't just sex. It's the way she arches beneath me, her body moving in perfect rhythm with mine. It's the feeling that we've known each other forever. The way her fingers curl in my hair, or slide down my spine just to feel me shudder under her touch.

From there, I don't hold back. I lose control of myself in the moment and give her everything I've got. It's frenzied grasping at skin. Tugging hair. Plunging into white hot bliss. It's two hearts finding each other and never letting go. It's coming home.

Then, Maisie's beautiful body racks with tremors beneath me as I pound into her. I know she's close, and I want her to let go. She clenches. I keep pushing. When release finally crashes through her, she moans my name into the rafters. I watch her come undone. It's beautiful.

She's shaking when her walls collapse and close around me. The sensation drags me with her. I groan deep in my chest as her release overtakes us. My whole world narrows to nothing but her. I shoot a fiery release into her with hot streams that explode out of me. She takes it all. Maisie milks every last drop.

It takes a minute for either of us to move. When I finally pull out of her, I wrap her in my arms. "You are... That was unbelievable." My breath still comes in hot gasps. "You are fucking perfect."

My words pull a sweet smile from her lips. I kiss her forehead, overwhelmed with the need to protect her. I keep her close. The air in the barn is thick with warmth and the scent of sweat and skin. Her head rests on my chest, and her breath is soft and steady. I don't want this moment to end.

I press a kiss to her temple. My lips linger against her skin like a promise I'm not

ready to say out loud. I will do anything for this woman. My fingers trace soft, aimless patterns along her spine while I memorize the curve of her back. I feel the warmth of her body tucked against mine and the way the whole world disappears for us.

Because I already know that this moment is the one I'll look back on as the dividing line in my life. There's my time before Maisie. It's dull and muted in comparison to everything that comes next for us.

CHAPTER 8

MAISIE

I'm curled against Callum's chest. I don't know how much time has passed, but I never want to move. I'm tucked into the crook of his arm like I was made to fit here. I've never felt more beautiful or cared for.

His heartbeat is steady under my cheek, and the rise and fall of his chest lulls me. His skin is warm. His breath is even. I think he might be falling asleep. But there's no way I can doze off now. My body has only just stopped trembling.

The shock of having Callum inside of me settles into a slow, molten, desperate ache for more. Every nerve I have feels rewired. I'm humming with the memory of him. Every time I close my eyes, I feel his hands on me and his lips on mine. I think of the way he whispered my name like a promise, and I'm ready for him all over again.

I've spent years wondering what my first time would be like. I've fantasized and built it up in my head. I wondered if I'd feel different afterward. I had no idea what to expect. Would it be like a movie with flowers? Chocolates? Candles? No. It happened in a barn, and it was more than I could have ever imagined.

Callum is raw and real. He holds me like I'm the most precious thing in the world. I could stay like this forever... half-dressed and wrapped up with him in the back of a hay barn. I close my eyes... But then I hear it.

There's a sound I can't ignore. It's faint at first. I lift my head toward the noise and

focus until I make out a tiny, scratchymeow.

I freeze. There it is again.

“Callum,” I whisper, running a finger up his rock-solid chest.

But he doesn't stir.

Then the sound comes again. It's closer now, and it's definitely a kitten. I wriggle out of his arms carefully. Just as I'm slipping my shirt back over my head, Callum's hand shoots out, wrapping around my waist like a lasso.

“No,” he murmurs, voice rough and sleep-raspy. “You're mine now. I'm not letting you go.”

God help me, that does something dangerous to my heart. I lean down, kiss him softly on the mouth. “I love the way that sounds.”

He grins, but his eyes are still closed. A smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. I hope he's already dreaming about us.

“But, Callum...” I hesitate, listening again. “There's a kitten. I think.”

That gets his attention. His eyes snap open. “What?”

I nod toward the corner of the barn where the hay is piled higher. “I keep hearing something. Little meows. It sounds like a tiny kitten. I want to go see.”

He sits up, adorably tousled and shirtless. Callum squints toward the sound. “You sure it's not Rump Roast trying to guilt-trip us?”

“She moos, Callum. This is definitely a meow,” I laugh.

Another faint cry echoes from the hay pile. We look at each other. Then, without another word, we are on our feet and tiptoeing toward the sound. He’s half-naked and I’m barefoot. We probably look like a couple of lunatics, but there’s no one in the world I’d rather be crazy with.

“It’s right back there.” He points to the far back corner.

I pull my clothes on, brushing stray bits of hay from my shirt and jeans. Then I step carefully toward the pile where the tiny sounds are coming from. My heart pounds, half from lingering adrenaline, half from the soft, high-pitched cries still echoing through the quiet barn. That’s when I catch sight of him. It’s not a clear picture, just a flash of a fluffy tail.

“Callum,” I whisper, crouching low. “I see him. He’s right there.”

Tucked between two bales of hay and barely more than a puff of fur is a kitten. His little body trembles as he presses deep into the shadows like he’s hoping I’ll just go away. But there isn’t a chance of that happening.

“Hey, baby,” I coo, keeping my voice low and soft. “It’s okay. I’m not gonna hurt you.”

I reach out a hand, trying to coax him closer. The kitten hisses in response. It’s a fierce little snarl that’s more squeak than threat.

“It’s a tiny baby,” I say, glancing back at Callum. “Oh! And look at that mark on his head. He’s a little Harry Pawter.” I stretch my fingers forward. I’m just about to touch him when he lunges and sinks his tiny teeth into my hand. I yelp, more startled than hurt, and draw back.

Callum chuckles behind me, deep and amused. “That’s no Harry Pawter,” he says, stepping beside me. “That’s Lord Pawldemort.”

I stifle a laugh even as I cradle my hand, still stinging. “Hedoes have the mark.”

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Callum moves with casual ease and lifts a heavy bale like it weighs nothing. In one smooth motion, he scoops the kitten into his big, calloused hands. The kitten flails weakly, but there's an odd pattern to his movement.

Callum holds the kitten up. I get a good look at him. He's as gray as a storm cloud but with a stark white lightning-bolt shaped patch slashing across his forehead. He's adorable despite being filthy and too skinny. His fur is matted with dust and straw. But that mark... It's uncanny.

Then Callum shifts the kitten in his hands, and something catches my eye. Tears prick the corners of mine almost instantly.

"Callum..." My voice is barely a whisper. "His leg. He's hurt. What's wrong with it?"

The kitten's back leg is twisted at an unnatural angle. His paw is bent wrong. My stomach flips. Callum's expression tightens. But he doesn't waste time with panic. Instead, he kicks into action.

"It's broken. Poor little guy's probably been stuck back here a while." He pulls a bandana from his back pocket and wraps it gently around the kitten like a sling. "We'll need to splint it. Then I'll get the vet out here as soon as possible."

I blink at him, stunned at how quickly he moves, how sure he is. "Yes, of course."

He holds the wrapped kitten out to me. I take him carefully and bundle him close to my chest like something precious. Callum is already gathering things. I turn to find

him holding a saddle strap and a piece of kindling from the firewood pile. I look down at the tiny creature in my arms, already so fiercely attached I can feel it like a knot in my throat.

Callum glances up at me, eyes meeting mine. “You okay?”

I nod, cradling the kitten. “Yes, let’s get him taken care of.”

“You’re gonna be okay, Lord Pawldemort,” I whisper, stroking his little head. “You’re safe now.”

Callum pulls out his phone and puts in a call to Patty June. His voice is low and efficient as he explains the situation. She arranges for the vet to meet us back at the main house. There isn’t any fuss or questions; it’s just small-town magic in action.

We get the horses untied, and before I can offer to carry him, Callum gently tucks the kitten into his shirt. Lord Pawldemort disappears against the warmth of his chest. He’s a soft gray lump beneath the buttons.

I glance over as we start the slow ride back. My heart tugs at the sight of him cradling the injured kitten like it’s the most natural thing in the world. A ridiculous flash of Callum as a parent crosses my mind, and I shake the thought away. Today has been a whirlwind, but I can’t let myself lose touch with reality completely.

I ride beside him in silence for a while and watch the way his hand stays close to the kitten the entire time. His touch is protective and tender. He doesn’t even seem to notice he’s doing it... It’s just who Callum is. It is impossible not to swoon over him.

“You’re gonna make it, little guy,” Callum murmurs as he adjusts the fabric around the kitten. “But you gotta earn your keep now once we get you fixed up. You’re officially on barn duty,” he tells the kitten. “Think you’re up for it? Chasing mice?”

Judging the cows? Hissing at trespassers?"

Lord Pawldemort lets out a weak but audible meow, which Callum takes as a yes.

"Good answer," he says, patting his shirt gently.

I take in every quiet kindness and every steady movement. My heart melts, pooling into something warm and unsteady in my chest.

Maybe Callum is the kind of guy who makes you trade in all your plans. Maybe I can trust him with my future... Or maybe I'm delusional because I've just slept with this kitten-slinging, rescue-mission, horse-riding, rancher in a scene straight off the pages of a Western romance.

CHAPTER 9

CALLUM

I lose myself in the weeks that follow. We nurse Lord Pawldemort back to health. He becomes my shadow... Not that I mind. The little guy is growing on me. That checks out because everything in my life looks better these days with Maisie by my side.

Each moment with her is better than the last. I'm all in with this woman. Nothing else matters. I'm caught in a haze where pressing Maisie's curvy body against every surface of this ranch becomes my favorite pastime.

We violated the tack room and the hayloft. Then we take over the kitchen counter at her apartment when we can get rid of Rosalie for a few minutes. If there's a flat surface, the chances are we've already tested its weight limit.

Every time I touch her, the world falls away. The noise. The pressure. The past. It all

quiets the second my hands find her skin. There's something about the way she gives herself to me, with so much trust, that leaves me drunk with want.

She doesn't demand anything from me, but she's got this way of pulling out the best in me. I want to be the man she thinks I am. I'm putting it all on the line to make it happen. But tonight is a test of just how far I've come.

Maisie's getting a true Kingridge indoctrination. Game night at Pa's house is nothing short of legendary. Beer pong is basically a full-contact sport for us... and my dumbass brothers are pushing every button I have.

Alex assigns her a team, but Maisie opts out of the madness. Instead of playing, she chooses the safety of the porch swing, where she sits between Priya and Cassidy.

It's getting late. Maisie has lasted this long despite the fact that she wasn't feeling well earlier. I take that as a good sign. Then I hope to God she doesn't have whatever it is her sister's got.

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Seeing her here in the middle of everything settles something in me. All night, I do everything I can to help her feel welcome, checking in with every glance. Maisie belongs with our pack, and I hope she can see that.

But now, I'm just as many drinks in as my brothers are, and all the good intentions in the world can't keep my temper in check.

"Y'all are lucky Fallon ain't back yet. That loss of yours would've happened even quicker." Geoffrey raises an eyebrow at me.

"Fuck you, man. You started before he said go," I snap, stepping up to the table and locking eyes with him.

"Are you serious, bro?" He fires back at me, slamming his fist against the table like it's a gavel. An almost-empty Red Solo cup tips over. It splashes beer on his jeans.

"For fuck's sake." Alex's voice booms from across the patio. He's exasperated when he cuts his eyes at my side of the table. "Can you just accept that you lost that round because you aren't as good as us and let's move on?"

"That's it. Let's go, old man," I snap and square up to Alex from across the table.

The insults sling back and forth as voices rise. I wait for someone to throw the first punch because that's exactly where this game always leads. It's getting late, and we're loud enough to wake the cows. But none of us Kingridge brothers know how to walk away from a competition.

Losing gracefully has never been our thing.

Pa's back porch is thick with testosterone and stubborn pride. There's enough spilled beer to fill a trough out here. But somewhere behind me, I catch Maisie's laugh. It's light and untouched by the brewing chaos. It's a relief. At least she knows what she's getting into with this group.

"Enough." Bowen's voice booms over the rest of us. Then, his words drop an octave. They come out calm and measured. "Enough of the bullshit. Let's call it what it is. Geoffrey, Alex, Callum... y'all got here early enough to swipe the lucky stool. It's on your side, and that's why you're winning. Like the cheating little bitches you are."

A beat of silence passes. It's just long enough to register the insult.

Then—Swipe.

Geoffrey's hand cuts across the beer pong table. He sends every last Solo cup flying and beer sloshes. Ping pong balls scatter and roll across into the pool. It's game over.

And just like that, all hell breaks loose. We're shoving, laughing, and dragging each other into half-assed wrestling holds. Holden ends up in the pool, fully clothed, with a string of profanity pouring out of his mouth. I get Bowen locked up in a shoulder grip that I'm not sober enough to properly execute.

Ding dong.

The sound stops us mid-scuffle. A doorbell coming from inside Pa's house? All six of us freeze.

Alex squints. "Since when does Pa have a doorbell?"

“And who the hell would use it?” Geoffrey mutters.

We look at Pa, but he doesn’t even flinch. He just mutters something under his breath and shuffles inside like it’s nothing. We all stand there, breathing hard, half-tangled in each other, and listen to the footsteps.

Alex does a quick headcount. “It’s not one of us, we’re all accounted for besides Fallon. Well, and...”

Pa reappears, and he’s got Danner at his side.

“And fucking Danner,” I grumble.

“Oh, hell no,” Bowen groans.

“There goes the night,” Holden mutters.

CHAPTER 10

CALLUM

Danner just grins like he was born for moments like this. It’s like the dude feeds off the chaos he just walked into. And I swear, I can already feel round two brewing.

He showed up a few weeks back, uninvited, unexpected, and apparently unbothered by the welcome he didn’t get. No one’s come right out and said it, but we’ve all silently filed it under the same unspoken truth... Danner is probably the result of some long-forgotten night between Pa and a mystery woman.

Not that any of us are in a position to judge.

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Most of us Kingridge brothers don't share the same mother anyway. That's just part of the patchwork family tree we were born into. But still, there's something about Danner that makes him hard to swallow.

It could be that he didn't grow up with the rest of us. Or possibly it's his laid-back California attitude. It could be the ever-present baseball hat he wears like it's a crown. But if I had to put money on it, I'd say it's the way he carries himself. It's like he's already earned a seat at the table without having to prove a damn thing.

We haven't made it easy for him, not by a long shot. But Pa sure has, and the guy keeps showing up. He doesn't flinch. Doesn't fold. And I'll admit, quietly, in the privacy of my own thoughts, he's tossed out a couple of solid suggestions for the ranch. Though I'd never tell him that.

Alex and Bowen mutter their hellos and try to play it cool. Like forming some sort of tentative alliance might make the whole situation less awkward. But a head nod is as good as it's gonna get from me, at least for tonight.

Meanwhile, Pa, Cassidy, and Priya flock to him like he's the guest of honor. Pouring drinks, making conversation, and laughing with him like he's been here for years. What the hell do they see in him? Can't he tell that charming the women on this ranch isn't any way to make strides with the men?

But Maisie hangs back now, watching the scene unfold. Her face pinches in a way I'm not used to seeing. In an instant, I'm by her side, before the chaos swallows us whole.

“Hey, beautiful.” I slip an arm around Maisie’s shoulders.

The familiar warmth of her sinks straight into me. Even after weeks of being wrapped up in her, I still get lit up by the simplest touch. With her sobriety staring me straight in the face, I realize I’m a little more tipsy than even I realized.

“Sorry about my brothers,” I add with a lopsided grin.

“I’ve been waiting to see this side of the infamous Kingridge brothers. That was sure a sight,” she laughs, soft and breathy.

Damn if all I can think about is kissing the smile right off her lips. “Didn’t scare you away, did it?”

“No, actually, I loved it,” she says, eyes drifting back toward the porch where Priya and Cassidy are still chatting. “But I got some interesting news earlier today, and I think I’m going to call it a night.”

“Oh, don’t do that,” I tilt my head toward her. “We’ve still got at least two rounds of beer pong rematches left in us.”

“I know, I want to stay, but honestly, I’m not feeling great, and it’s getting pretty late.”

“I’ll walk you back,” I offer without hesitation. “What’s the news? Is everything okay?”

“It’s Rosalie... She’s pregnant. At least it’s Dawson’s, her ex-husband. But she’s leaving now, you know, to talk to him about it, and it’s kind of chaotic in the apartment.”

“Pregnant?” The word bursts out of me, and it’s loud enough for my brothers to hear.

Their comments drift to us on the breeze. Who’s pregnant? Uh-oh Callum. Time to step it up.

“Shut the hell up, it ain’t me. Her sister’s knocked up by her ex-husband,” I shout back at them with a drunken chuckle.

“Hey.” Maisie snaps, elbowing me in the ribs hard enough to make me straighten. “What the hell?”

“What?” I shrug, slurring a little. “There aren’t any secrets here anyway.

My brothers laugh in the distance and fall in line with the ribbing. But Maisie stiffens beside me, and I know I’ve messed up.

Her voice is quieter now, more distant. “I want to head out.”

“Okay, let’s get you home.”

Maisie says her goodbyes to Pa, Danner, Cassidy, and Priya, then gives my brothers a tight-lipped wave. They’ve earned it. But even the tension can’t keep their comments from spilling out of their mouths, and it’s infuriating.

Whatever mistake I’ve made by telling them is becoming so much worse with each poorly timed joke.

“Night night Callum, and congrats on dodging a bullet.” Alex’s drunken slur is annoying, but coming from him, there’s no bite to it. All Alex has ever wanted is to be a father.

“Yeah, poor dude,” I mutter, leaning in. “He’s saddled for life now.”

Maisie stops in her tracks. Her head whips around toward me, and even through the beer buzz, I can feel the air shift. My blood runs cold. That was the line, and I didn’t just cross it; I’ve jumped over it.

The look in her eyes is sharp, disappointed, and guarded. I’ve seen it before, but never trained on me. Yet somehow, I know exactly what it means. I sober up real fast because this night just took a turn for the worst.

CHAPTER 11

MAISIE

“He’s saddled with her for life?” I can’t hide the contempt in my voice. I don’t bother to try. “What the hell, Callum?”

He shrugs like it’s no big deal. “Come on, sweetheart, you know what I mean. No man wants to get the surprise news that his ex-wife’s knocked up. Right?”

The casual way he’s trying to get out of this makes my stomach turn.

“So this is the Kingridge brother vibe I’ve been so heavily warned about,” I snap. “It isn’t a fight over beer pong, it’s this that makes women weary. Good to know who I’m dealing with.”

Callum frowns but doesn’t back down. “You know I like your sister. I feel like I already know Dawson too, with the way y’all talk about him. I’m sure he’s a good enough dude if she likes him so much. She’s been moping around here for weeks. He just needs to get Rosalie in line. Tell her they’re going to be a family now. She’ll be okay.”

Get her in line.

I stop cold, turning to glare at him like I’m seeing him for the first time. That phrase punches through me like ice water down my spine. I’m so outraged, I can’t think of a single thing to say to him. So I don’t. I fold my arms across my chest and walk the rest

of the path in silence.

He walks me to my door, quiet now, maybe sensing just how far I've pulled away. I step inside and put a hand up when he tries to follow me. Tension crackles between us like static, and my fists stay clenched at my sides.

"I'm not staying?" His forehead wrinkles in surprise.

"No, you aren't staying, Callum. I'm going to let you go before you keep digging that hole you're in. We can talk when you haven't been drinking." It takes everything in me to bite back what I really want to say.

"Hey—" He reaches for me, his voice softer now. "I'm sorry. I'm being a jackass."

But the damage is done. "Good night, Callum."

I force a smile I don't mean and close the door. The moment the door clicks shut behind me, my knees nearly buckle. My mind is spinning too fast to land on a single thought. His words echo like warning bells.

Get her in line.No man wants to hear that news.Saddled for life.

They aren't just comments. They're devastating blows. It's true that I'm not feeling well. But it has nothing to do with the conversation and everything to do with the truth sitting heavy in my gut.

Rosalie is pregnant... But I am too.

I just found out this morning. I had every intention of talking to him about it right away. But tonight wasn't the time or place. I stayed late at the stable working with our new mare. When I got to Pa's, Callum had already had too much to drink.

He was joking too loudly and leaning too far into his brothers' banter. There was no way I could bring it up. Now, after what he just said about Rosalie, I'm questioning everything I thought I knew about him.

What was I thinking? I knew better than to let my guard down. I've fought too hard for my freedom to hand it over now, not to Callum, not to anyone. And now it matters more than ever because it's not just about me anymore. I have a baby to think about.

And that changes everything.

Rosalie is already gone. No matter how old I get, she's always going to be my big sister. I know exactly how she'd respond. She'd drop everything, forget whatever's going on with Dawson, and come running to stand by my side. That's just who she is, and I love her for it. But I'm not going to do that to her. Not this time.

Not even Lord Pawldemort is here for me to talk this through. He isn't a fan of my apartment, preferring to spend his days following Callum around the stable. So, I'm truly alone when I crawl into bed with the weight of the world on my shoulders.

I lay awake for hours, staring at the ceiling. The silence is loud... too loud. In it, at first, all I can hear is my own doubt. But somewhere between my own worst nightmare and the sunrise, I feel something solid settle in my chest.

I reach a decision.

This time, no one's going to rescue me. I'm not going to lean on my sister or a church community that has its own vested interest in my decisions. I can't wait for this storm to pass.

I've been down that path before. I've lived under other people's rules, tiptoed around their tempers, and molded myself into whatever version of me made their lives easier.

But all of that is behind me.

This time, I'm going to put my head down and do my job. I'm going to make a plan... for myself and my child. I'll figure out the logistics, the finances, and the support I need. I'll map it all out.

And then, I'll tell Callum. He can be as involved as he wants to be. But I need to know I'll be okay with or without him. The only way around that fire is through it.

CHAPTER 12

BOOTS AND BITCHING PODCAST

Hey,y'all. Sagebrush Creek, I've got some extra sweet tea for you today. It's your favorite secret podcaster, back with another boots-on-the-ground update. You know the drill—I've got my ear to the ground and my fingers on the pulse of this town's messiest secrets. So pour something with a little kick, sugar, because this one's bigger than the Texas sky.

And when I say big, I mean... baby big.

That's right, folks. Following my last report, the rumor has only grown. Word is there's a new bun in the oven right here in Sagebrush Creek. The only problem is, I don't have all the details just yet. And you know me, I'm not one to gossip...

But here's what I do know. There's a little cowboy—or cowgirl—on the way over at Kingridge Ranch. And the two names floating around? None other than those new horse-training sisters... Rosalie and Maisie.

Now, I don't have confirmation on which of these lovely ladies is about to become a mama, but let's just say the evidence is piling up. Rosalie's been keeping a low profile ever since she rolled in from Misty Mountain, Colorado.

Then there's Maisie... Let's just say she's been skipping the bourbon at The Velvet Spur. My money's on the older one,Rosalie. Some of us were around during her first rodeo at the ranch, and honey, it's gonna take more than a few years to make those

memories fade into the sunset.

Now, I know some of y'all are yawning because technically, the Reagan sisters ain't from around here...

But the daddy? Oh, the daddy just might be.

That's right. This baby might be the next heir to the ranching throne. Could it be one of the Kingridge brothers? Because let's be honest—those boys have been dodging commitment like a bull in a rodeo arena for years.

But lately? Lately, we've seen some lassos flying. Or maybe—just maybe—someone else in town is about to get the surprise of a lifetime.

I've asked around, and mum's the word... for now. But think about it, sugar. There ain't too many cowboys in this town who are smooth enough to knock the holy boots off the Reagan sisters. If the whispers are true, this could be the biggest scandal to hit that ranch since Pa Kingridge's third divorce.

If I were a betting woman, I'd keep my eyes locked on Kingridge Ranch. After all, nothing says legacy like an unexpected heir.

One thing's for sure, Sagebrush Creek—this little secret won't stay hidden for long. And you know I'll be the first to spill the tea when it all comes out. I'll be watching. And trust me, so will the rest of this town.

Until next time, darlins... this is your bitch with boots on the ground, signing off.

CHAPTER 13

CALLUM

It's been two days since I messed things up with Maisie, and it's killing me.

I've seen her in passing at the stables. We've even shared space and exchanged a few words. I've apologized one hundred times for my brash comments, and she seems to accept it, but something is off.

I feel it in the way she won't quite meet my eyes. In the way her voice sharpens when she talks to me. It's clipped and professional, like we're just coworkers again and nothing more. I don't know what to make of it, but I fucking hate it.

Her sister is gone, and maybe that's part of it. I know they're close. Maybe she's worried about Rosalie, or the shift in their routine could've thrown her off. But this feels like more than that. Like whatever changed is personal.

Every time I reach out, she keeps it short and all business. She's still herself, but there's no warmth. No spark. Worst of all, there's been no alone time. Maisie is always busy and always somewhere else before I can get a real read on her. She's avoiding me while being right next to me, and I'm going to put a stop to it today.

By the time I bring my group back from the trail ride, the thought's been gnawing at me all morning. I don't even bother heading back to the lodge. Instead, I tie the horses, make sure the guests are taken care of, and then lean against the fence outside the stables and wait. This is where I was the first time I laid eyes on her. Now it's where I stand to lose her. The irony makes my chest tighten.

I know her schedule by heart. She'll be finishing her training session any minute now. And I'm not leaving until we get to the bottom of this, for better or for worse. I've fallen for a few who didn't fall back over the years. I've misread the signs. I hoped for things that weren't mine to have. But this thing with Maisie doesn't feel like any of those situations.

Maisie is different from anyone I've ever known. She's the first woman I've ever looked at and seen not just a future but my home. I don't know what's pulling her away from me, but I'm not letting it happen without a fight.

I'm not going to lose her before we even get a chance to start.

Finally, the family filters out of the stables, making their way toward the front of the ranch. I spot Maisie in the mix, walking a few steps behind them, murmuring something to the staff as they peel off one by one.

I bide my time. When she turns back toward the stables, we lock eyes, and there isn't any avoiding it now. I move toward her before I can second-guess it and reach for her hand.

"Hey," I say gently. "I've been missing you. Is everything okay?"

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She blinks, surprised. “Oh. Hey. Yeah, I’ve, uh...”

Her voice trails off as her eyes start to shimmer. They’re glassy and uncertain. The sight makes my heart stutter in my chest.

“Come here.” My voice lowers. “What’s wrong? I said that I was sorry, and I meant it. I was out of line with my comments. I should’ve put that information in the steel trap.”

Every muscle in my body tenses at the sight of the pinched lines around her mouth. The way she’s holding herself—tight, closed off. Like if she lets go, she’ll fall apart.

“I know, Callum, it isn’t about the comments.” She draws in a shaky breath. “It’s just that I need some space. This isn’t working for me,” she says quietly. “I don’t ever want you to feel like you’re stuck with me out of any sort of obligation. And there are a lot of moving parts in my life right now. I’ve got to figure a few things out, and I think it’s better if we take some space for a while.”

My heart fractures clean down the middle as the bottom drops out. Not this again. How could I have been so damn wrong about something that felt so right?

I search her eyes for more truth. Her words are careful and measured, but her body betrays her. Her arms are crossed like a shield. Her jaw clenches like she’s holding back everything she’s not saying.

“I don’t think you’re telling me the truth. If you are, fine. I’ll walk away. But this is bullshit and I think we both know it. Don’t you think I deserve an honest answer?”

Everything is fine, we have one off night, and now this. That isn't you."

I hit a nerve because the floodgates burst clean open. Though she doesn't lose her posture, she can't stop the tears from falling down her cheeks. "I'm pregnant, Callum." Her voice wobbles. And then she meets my eyes. "Don't worry, I'm not going to force you into anything. But this isn't what I had planned. And it's obviously... hard. And life-changing. I need time to make a plan. Figure things out for myself."

My jaw drops open and I can hardly breathe. I step closer, my instinct kicking in, and reach toward her stomach. I already ache to protect something I barely understand. She pulls back before my hand can settle.

"No," I say, firm and sure. "You're wrong. You don't need to force me into anything. This is a shock. But it's also... It's amazing. I'm having a hard time wrapping my mind around it, but sweetheart, I love you. I want to do this with you. We can get married right away, and I swear, Maisie, I'll take care of you. Of both of you?"

I stop when her eyes go wide, like I've just suggested chaining her to a burning house.

"What?" She breathes and shakes her head through her tears. "Callum, don't be crazy. We're not doing some kind of shotgun wedding just because I got pregnant. I'm not giving up this freedom I've only just found."

I shake my head, frustrated and desperate to make her understand. "I don't want you to give up anything. But I'm not the kind of man who's going to let you go through this alone. Sorry, but I'm here. For good."

Her expression hardens. "You can't use this baby to control me."

“Control?” The word snaps out of me before I can stop it. “I’m not your family, Maisie. I don’t want to control you. Give me some goddamn credit.”

She flinches. Her arms cross tighter. Her whole body folds in on itself like a door slamming shut. “This is too much right now, and I’m telling you I need time. And space. Please respect that and don’t make it harder than it already is.” Her voice is clipped.

There’s a finality to it that shatters something in me. For a second, everything tilts. My feet feel unsteady. The stable, the light, even the cat beside me... it all swims in a haze of disbelief.

In my life, I’ve loved too hard and too fast. Usually, I’ve loved people who didn’t stay. Starting with my own mother. It’s a pattern I swore I’d outgrow. And yet here I am again with my heart wide open for someone who doesn’t want to hold it.

But even through the sting, I can see it—this isn’t rejection. Not really. Maisie doesn’t look cold. She looks scared to death. She’s not overwhelmed by me. She’s overwhelmed by everything. I take a long, slow breath, forcing the burn in my chest to settle.

I nod, even though it guts me. “Okay,” I say. “I get it. We’re gonna need to talk this through, but... I can give you some space.”

Her mouth tightens. Her shoulders drop just a fraction. “Thank you.”

Just two clipped and distant words are all it takes to break my heart.

CHAPTER 14

CALLUM

Later that night, I find myself on the back porch at Pa's house. I push up from my chair and head toward the cooler set up in the corner of the porch. The wood creaks under my boots, and the sound is familiar and grounding. I pop the lid, grab a beer for myself and a water for Pa. When I hold it out, he takes it with a nod.

It's been a long time since it was just me and the old man. But tonight, there are no brothers and no accompanying chaos. It's just two chairs, a cooler of drinks, and the sound of cicadas humming through the Texas night.

It feels good and steady on this porch. It's like breathing deeply after holding your lungs too tight. I promised Maisie space, and I meant it. But giving it to her might kill me.

I've had the day to talk myself through the reality of fathering a child with a woman I love who wants nothing to do with me. There are some pitfalls I've got to avoid. But I've settled on the thought that space doesn't mean silence. And it sure as hell doesn't mean surrender.

Just because I'm not standing next to her doesn't mean I'm not still fighting for her. It doesn't mean I'm not already making a plan. So I'm here with Pa, biding my time until I get my girl back. The silence between me and Pa stretches out. But it isn't heavy or awkward... It's easy and familiar.

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Pa leans back in his rocker, slow and methodical. His eyes are on the fields, but I know he sees more than just crops and fences. He's looking at legacy. At the life he built. At the parts that still ache. The old man's always been quiet, but when he speaks, it counts.

We both stare out at the land while the whole ranch sleeps under the stars. I swear, it's easy to see the life that should be unfolding between Maisie and me. The future we could still build is so clear in my mind. All I have to do is convince her that I'm the man she thought I was.

The moon casts soft silver across the pasture. I can hear the distant moo of a cow and the rustle of dry leaves in the breeze. It's quiet out here, but not empty. It's the kind of silence that invites the truth. I head for another beer, then hesitate. It seems strange to drink with someone who had such a long road to find sobriety.

But Pa doesn't miss a beat.

He waves me off and settles deeper into his rocker. "Go on. Have another. It don't bother me none. It's been a long time since I went looking for answers at the bottom of a bottle." He pauses. Then he takes a slow sip of his water, and his head tilts ever so slightly. "When are you gonna come clean about what the problem is?"

I let out a dry chuckle. "What, I can't show up to sit with my dad for the night?"

He snorts. "Y'all can. But you don't. You come here to throw darts, get in stupid-ass fights with your brothers, and raid my fridge. Since none of that's happening tonight, why don't you just tell me what's going on?"

I take a long drink and let the cold burn settle in my chest. The words roll around in my mouth for a beat, then slip out before I can second-guess them. “Maisie’s pregnant.”

The words land between us like thunder. But I don’t regret saying them. Instead, hearing it out loud makes my chest swell with emotion. It’s equal parts fear and pride, yet I still can’t believe it’s real. Pa doesn’t flinch at the weight of my words. Instead, he trains his steady gaze on mine.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he says, a slow smile forming. “Is that right?”

“Yeah, I think it is. I just found out today.”

He reaches across his rocker and claps a hand on my shoulder. His touch is firm and grounding. In our family, this is as close as I’ll get to a hug, and it is comforting.

“Congratulations, son. You’ll do one hell of a job.

“Thanks, Pa.” I look down at my boots, scuffed and dusty like everything out here. “Only... I can’t even get her to talk to me about it. She’s freaked out. She totally shut down and pushed me away.”

“Then convince her not to be,” he shrugs. “No matter what it takes. Don’t you let her go, Callum. You’ve got a good head on your shoulders. A better one than I ever had, and you don’t want that kind of regret.”

“Yeah, I know.”

We let it sink in for a beat. The silence grows deeper and heavier now.

“You’ll do better than I did. I’ve got more regrets than I know what to do with. But

not you, you'll figure out how to give her what she needs."

"You did alright, Pa," I murmur. "Worked out in the end, didn't it?"

He huffs a breath through his nose, half laugh, half something else. "You think so?"

I glance at him and let out a chuckle. "Six out of seven ain't bad... Are you ready to come clean about Danner?"

He doesn't even blink. Instead, he just waves me off. "Didn't think I needed to. The world's already figured it out. The boy looks just like the rest of y'all."

It's as close to an admission as I'm going to get, at least for now. It's nothing I didn't already know, but hearing him confirm it unsettles me. "Nah, he's not nearly as good-looking as the rest of us."

Pa grunts, but it's laced with a touch of amusement.

I smirk. "It was the D name that gave it away. Alexander, Bowen, Callum, Danner, Fallon, Geoffrey, Holden..." I tilt my head toward him with a laugh. "Hell, we'll name the baby with an E. That way, we can round out the alphabet you never quite completed."

His jaw ticks. His eyes narrow just slightly, like I've struck something deeper than I meant to. "I wouldn't worry about that."

That gets my attention. I straighten. "What does that mean?"

But Pa waves me off again with that same old evasive flick of his hand I've seen a thousand times. It means not tonight, not now, or maybe, fuck right off.

“Go fix things with your girl,” he says, getting to his feet. “That’s where you ought to be right now.”

I stare at him for a long moment, knowing our conversation is over. It’s times like this that makes me remember that Pa is just a boomer doing boomer shit at his core. He’s made peace with whatever it is he isn’t saying, even if I haven’t.

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That's okay because I know I have a lot of work to do if I'm going to bring Maisie back into my world.

CHAPTER 15

MAISIE

I wake up to another brutal morning with my head hanging over the toilet. I dry heave until there's nothing left in me but regret. Even then, my stomach churns. But it's not just the hormones. I'm sick about the way I left things with Callum.

Walking away from Callum the way I did was reckless and cruel. I told myself I needed space, but in truth, I was scared. Scared of what it would mean to lean on someone. Scared of letting him in. The distance I forced between us aches, sitting heavier on me than anything physical ever could. Now I'm heartsick over him.

I make my way to the kitchen for a cup of tea and press a hand to my stomach. It's still flat and quiet. It's strange to think that there's a future tucked inside me when I feel so utterly unsure of my own footing right now.

It settles me. I lay on the couch with heavy eyelids. As I drift off, I try to picture myself as a mother, but the image that comes to mind doesn't feel quite right. I don't know how to do this. The only version of motherhood I've seen was built on fear and control. It was shame dressed up as love, and that's a pattern I'm determined not to repeat.

I don't have a blueprint, so this is going to be trial and error. But I will not bring a

child into a world of smallness, silence, and limits. This baby will grow up with room to breathe and space to dream. Even if I have to build that world from scratch.

Even though it scares me, I know Callum is going to be at the center of that world. The truth is, I want him there. He's only ever tried to do the right thing, even when I didn't make it easy. I can see that now; it's all much clearer now that it doesn't feel like everything is closing in around me.

An hour passes while I'm crashed out on the couch. When I wake up, the nausea has dulled to a hum beneath my ribs, and my thoughts finally feel steady. I get the clarity I didn't have before.

I need to find Callum and apologize before I lose him for real.

The morning air is cool against my skin as I head across the property to Callum's place. Thankfully, it's too early to run into guests on my way over. But I pass all the usual suspects: Patty June, Pa, and Thrusty the goat.

Cheers to making another unforgettable appearance on that damn podcast.

My heart is in my throat by the time I arrive at Callum's place. It's a tiny ranch tucked right in the middle of the old employee cottages. It's simple, tidy, and with Lord Pawldemort patrolling the porch, it's unmistakably his. I knock once. The old door creaks open beneath my hand. It's unlocked, and I announce myself as I step through the threshold.

Inside, I find Callum sitting at his kitchen table. His shoulders are hunched, and his laptop is open in front of him. Empty mugs clutter the table, and there's a tired sort of energy around him. I wonder if his body gave up trying to rest the same way mine did. Has he been sitting here all night?

But the second he sees me, he's on his feet and moving toward me with open arms.

"Maisie." His voice is hoarse with exhaustion and something softer. He crosses the room in two strides and stops just short of touching me. "Are you okay?"

I nod, unsure what to say, my throat thick.

"I've been up all night," he says. "Trying to figure this out. I think... I think I finally did."

"Wait, figure out what?" I ask, wary.

"Here... Take a look."

He turns his computer to face me. On the screen is a grainy but detailed mockup. It's a blueprint with lines and digital renderings. They are grainy but detailed.

"It's a pole barn," he explains. "They come in a million different styles, but this one has everything you need. Or at least, what I think you need..."

He clicks to the next image and continues. His eyes are lit with something quiet and determined. "I talked to Alex. We could get it up fast, real fast. I'd want a big master suite and the nursery just off of it. I figure we can make it as easy to hear the baby at night as possible. You know?"

My breath catches. I open my mouth to protest, but he holds up a hand.

"I know what you're going to say, but hear me out. Those things are what I want. But, if they aren't what you want, there are other options. Take this one, it has a completely separate entrance. I won't lie to you, Maisie, if you don't want to live with me, that's gonna break me. It'll kill me not to wake up with you. But at least I'd

be close enough to see my kid every day. You could have your own space. Your own freedom. No pressure. No strings.”

He pauses, finally turning to face me fully. His jaw clenches like he’s holding back emotion. “I’m not trying to trap you or fix everything overnight. I just—I want to be a father. I want to be there for you and for the baby. Whatever that looks like for you.”

I stare at the screen, then back at him, my chest aching. Tears prick the corners of my eyes because I don’t deserve this incredible man, and here he is, showing up for me.

Even after everything.

“I’m so sorry I ever doubted you, Callum. I’ll never do that again.” I take a shaky breath, blinking fast. My heart is raw and open and still somehow intact in his presence. “This is such a beautiful plan, but all I really need is you.”

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He wraps his arms around me. I don't miss the tears that prickle down his cheeks. I can't imagine walking into this next chapter with anyone else by my side.

CHAPTER 16

CALLUM

My hands shake...not from nerves, but from pure disbelief.

How the hell did I get so lucky?

Just a few weeks ago, Maisie told me that she didn't want anything to do with getting married. But since then, we've grown as a couple and made plans that work for both of us. And now she's walking toward me down the makeshift aisle we threw together this morning with wildflowers, hay bales, and the help of a few overly enthusiastic brothers. And damn, she looks like an angel draped in white.

The golden Texas sun sinks low in the sky, casting a soft glow across every inch of the ranch. It catches the edges of her hair, her smile, and the silhouette of her curves. The way her eyes lock onto mine like there's no one else here but us makes me weak in the knees.

I've never been more sure of anything in my life. This woman is it for me. She's the one. The calm in my chaos. The soft to my rough. Maisie is the only future I've ever wanted. When she reaches me, I take her hands in mine. Her fingers are warm and steady, even as mine tremble like I'm the one about to be swept off my feet.

“Not too shabby for a shotgun wedding,” I murmur, leaning in close and grinning against Maisie’s temple.

She laughs that sweet giggle before we say our I do's in front of a sun-drenched grove on the edge of the property. The breeze catches the hem of her simple white dress and carries her laugh straight to my chest. And just like that, I make the easiest promise of my life, to love this woman with everything I’ve got, for as long as she’ll let me. We seal it with the sweetest kiss.

Originally, today was supposed to be just the two of us. She wanted something simple, quiet, and drama-free. But a chorus of whoops and cheers erupt from behind us as the pastor pronounces us husband and wife. We didn’t send out invitations. Hell, we didn’t even tell anyone. But they’re all here anyway, and the truth is, I’m glad for it.

My damn brothers insisted on coming which means Pa’s here too. He made a case for inviting some of the ranch hands we’ve worked with for years. Then, of course, Rosalie came back to town with urgency when she heard the news and brought Dawson with her.

I catch Dawson’s eye and tip my head in silent appreciation. My brothers and I had a little incident with him a few weeks back. We gave him a hard time, the usual stuff. But I’m not sure he appreciated it. I’m glad to see him here. Maisie and Rosalie are due around the same time. He and I have a lot of shared family time in the future.

Maisie’s fingers curl around mine, and I can feel her pulse fluttering through her palm. She leans into me, warm and soft, and I press a kiss to the side of her head.

“My wife. My wife. It feels so fucking good to say that.” I kiss her again, cupping her face in my hands as she smiles up at me. “Are you ready for our reception, sweetheart?”

Her brow furrows. “Our reception?”

I wink. “Yeah. I thought you’d appreciate it. I know you didn’t want to live in the pole barn, so... I turned it into something else. Something for you. Thought now might be a good time to give it to you.”

Her eyes widen, and a disbelieving grin spreads across her face. “You didn’t.” She shakes her head. “When? How did I not know?”

I slide my hands around her waist and pull her close. “You’ve been a little distracted growing a human and planning not to plan a wedding. Besides, I had help. Alex kept you busy, Priya played decoy, and Cassidy promised not to let you anywhere near that side of the ranch.”

She laughs, resting her forehead against my chest. “Callum, you never stop surprising me.”

We walk hand in hand across the ranch. We’ve only got about fifteen minutes before all our guests burst through the door behind us. I want to make sure I show her every detail before then.

The sun dips low enough to paint the sky in soft golds and bruised purples. The pole barn looms ahead, just like it has for weeks now. But tonight it looks different. It’s all dressed up in white lights and wildflowers.

Maisie’s steps slow as we near the doors. She tilts her head, eyes narrowing with suspicion. “Wow, what did you do? This is stunning. Look at the flowers.”

I pull the barn doors open and gesture for her to step inside.

“Welcome to your library, Mrs. Kingridge.”

She walks in slowly, cautiously, until the full view unfolds around her. This place is not a home. Maisie never wanted a house built for her—she's had enough of being handed roles and expectations she didn't ask for. So we'll figure that out together. But this place is already done, and it's all for her.

Windows stretch floor-to-ceiling, framing the wheat fields beyond like landscape paintings. The shelves are stocked to the brim with books. Warm light spills across polished wood floors, catching on the deep walnut shelves that line every wall. There's a spiral staircase that curls up to a lofted reading nook, and beneath it, a plush window bench made for rainy days and good books.

Maisie gasps, her hands flying to her mouth. "Oh my... This is unbelievable." She rushes forward, stopping at one of the shelves and trailing her fingers across the spines. "This is for me? I can't. Wow, Callum, thank you. You have outdone yourself."

She pulls down a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, runs her hands over the embossed cover. "Hardbacks," she breathes, her voice thick with emotion.

"Hardbacks only," I echo, giving her a flirty wink.

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Lord Pawldemort stretches lazily from his perch beneath the front window. Then he lets out a contented meow and curls back into himself like he owns the place. Which, in some ways, he does. He's been in on the secret all along, keeping watch while we built it out, claiming his favorite sunspot and leaving fur on every damn cushion.

Maisie wanders through her new escape, taking in every detail with little gasps of excitement. Then she turns to me, and I see everything I hoped to find on her face: surprise, wonder, and peace.

Then she circles back around to me and drapes her arms around my neck. "It's perfect. Thank you for loving me in exactly the right ways."

I close the distance between us and brush my thumb along the line of her jaw. Her skin is warm, and her eyes shine.

"It isn't your home, not unless you want it to be. But it's your escape. Your space. Yours, completely. I never want you to lose yourself."

CHAPTER 17

FALLON

"Cheers, man. Congratulations."

Bowen lifts his beer toward Callum, Alex, and me. I notice they are all drinking from crystal steins. I raise my beer bottle to them, clinking the neck like we're at some upscale vineyard instead of standing on a dusty patch of ranch land.

I squint at their glasses. “Nice mugs. Real classy. I leave for a few years, and y’all are soft now. It’s like I don’t even know you anymore.”

Bowen just grins, shrugging like the domestic life settled around him without a fight. “You’ll catch up.”

Alex claps a firm hand on my shoulder. “Give it a minute. This place has a way of bringing you back down to earth.”

I nod but don’t respond. Instead I take it all in as they shoot the shit back and forth. Coming home after a whirlwind tour with the NFL Europe isn’t the triumphant homecoming people might think.

Sure, I’ve got abs you could serve a drink off and a bank account that’ll outlive me, but none of that prepares you for the hollow thud in your chest when you step out of first class and realize you don’t know where you belong anymore.

The setting sun through the windows casts long golden streaks across what should be a barn, though the place looks like some kind of museum. You don’t get sunsets like this anywhere else in the world.

Since I’ve been gone, I’ve pictured this place frozen in time, just like I left it. Instead, it moved on without me.

The ranch has changed in a million ways I didn’t expect. Half of my brothers are settled. Nurseries are being built and weddings are popping up like wildflowers. Yet somehow, I feel like I showed up late to the party and missed the best parts.

I tune back in and find that the conversation has drifted to more familiar grounds. There are insults, jokes, and plans for tomorrow’s fence repair. I polish off my beer and excuse myself to grab another. I thought I was chasing a big, important dream,

but now I'm not so sure that it was the right decision.

Around the room, the usual cast of characters is assembled. Most have made their way to greet me sometime in the two days since I got back. The Welcome-Home Committee of Sagebrush Creek is alive and well... And apparently deeply invested in my dating life, if the podcast is any indication.

On my way back to my brothers, Patty June and Brandi Rose circle like buzzards with business cards. They say their hellos and each drops a list, an actual list, of daughters, nieces, second cousins, and family friends who are just perfect for me. I shove the scraps of paper in my pocket. I've seen résumés with less detail.

I don't need a list. There's only one woman I want to see, and she's made herself damn hard to find. That is no easy feat in Sagebrush Creek. Especially when I know she still works at the ranch.

Anny.

Her name sits on my tongue like a secret I don't know what to do with.

I haven't seen her since I got back. Not even in passing. Not at the barn, not at the café, and not even hiding behind the feed aisle at the general store. And I've looked.

She's avoiding me, which is fair. Probably smart, too. The last time we saw each other, I had a plane ticket in my back pocket. There wasn't enough room for all our baggage where I was going.

I had the arrogance to think I could come back and everything would just... wait. But now I'm here. And she's sure as hell not. I slip back in with my brothers and try to disappear. For the first time since my cleats hit the dirt, the silence is starting to sting.

“Hey, brother. Welcome back.”

A man steps into our little circle, and there’s something familiar about him, though I’m sure we’ve never met. He’s tall and solid. But it’s the jawline and stubborn Kingridge brow that gives him away.

“How was footballing, bro?” His voice is easy, confident, like he belongs here. “Glad you're back. You run our security, right? I’ve got some thoughts about solar cameras.”

I don’t like him.

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The man rambles on, and I lean back to shoot a look at Bowen and Callum. “Who the fuck is this?”

Alex winces slightly but doesn’t miss a beat. “Right. Uh... yeah. So, this is Danner.”

The guy sticks out a hand, completely unfazed. “Danner Kingridge. I guess my reputation didn’t precede me.”

Kingridge.

I stare at the outstretched hand, then at him again. My eyes narrow. Same dark eyes. Same build. Hell, he even stands like a Kingridge. He carries himself like the ground should be grateful he’s walking on it.

I glance around at my brothers, silently checking their faces. Callum gives me a slow shrug. Bowen’s doing his best not to laugh. Holden just nods like this is the most normal thing in the world.

Holy shit.

I lean back, letting out a slow exhale. “Looks like I’ve missed more than I thought.”

Danner grins. “You’re not wrong. But give it time.”

Alex claps a hand on Danner’s shoulder. “It’s been an adjustment.

I consider my options and finally take Danner’s hand, giving it a firm shake. “Well,

damn man, welcome to the chaos.”

Danner gets off easy tonight, because I don’t have time to unpack his bullshit. Not when I’ve got my own issues looming. I can’t deal with anything else until I talk to Anny.

CHAPTER 18

BOOTS AND BITCHING PODCAST

“Hey,y’all. Wasn’t that a sweet little party over in the library barn at Kingridge? Hope you brought your reading glasses and your drama goggles... because the only thing thicker than the books was the tension.

It’s your favorite voice-disguised podcaster back at it again with another boots-on-the-ground update straight from the dirt roads of Sagebrush Creek. And honey, today’s episode is more tangled than a mess of white string lights after two bourbons.

Now, we’ve been talkin’ babies lately, and let’s just say—Kingridge Ranch is startin’ to look more like a daycare than a cowboy compound. That family tree’s sprouting faster than the zucchini at Findlay Farm. If you ask me, someone needs to start handin’ out condoms with those welcome baskets.

With all these Kingridge boys knockin’ up women left and right, it’s time we knock down the door on what’s really goin’ on.

We’re down to the final bachelors, folks. The last of the unclaimed Kingridge crop: Holden, Geoffrey, and of course—our mystery nut from the West Coast—Danner. And let’s be real, sugar. Those nuts? A little tough to crack.

But if you ask me, the real prize just stepped back onto American soil...

Fallon Kingridge is home.

Yep. He's the man of the hour. Fresh off a contract overseas and back in town with a new haircut and a heavier wallet. Word on the hay bale is that Fallon may have left more than just cleat marks behind when he skipped town. But what's the point in digging up a grave again?

If y'all ask me, I'd say let sleeping dogs lie and see what else floats your boat. Because the Farm to Table Dinner Gala & Auction is practically here, and there ain't a soul in this town that won't be at The Velvet Spur.

That includes Mayor Randolph, who'll be sniffin' around for a photo op and a second plate of brisket... And maybe mapping out a path for his new highway while he's at it.

And guess who else will be there? Yours truly.

That's right, sugarplums. You can bet your best pair of boots I'll be watchin' it all unfold—quiet as a whisper and sharp as a tack. You can catch me, sweet tea in hand and ready to spill every drop.

Until next time, darlings.

EPILOGUE: MAISIE

SEVEN YEARS LATER

“There we go. Number three of three is officially up.”

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Callum steps back, arms crossed over his still-unfairly broad chest, admiring his handiwork like he's just installed a monument instead of a free little library. The late afternoon sun glows gold across his stubbled jaw, catching the faint lines that have deepened over the years—the kind earned through laughter, late nights, and a lot of love.

“I’ll leave it to you to fill it up,” he says, shooting me a grin that could still derail my entire day. “Hardbacks only.”

I look up at him in awe. Callum, my husband, my lover, he's my whole world. He's the safest place I've ever known. He took all the shattered, unsure, sharp-edged pieces of my past and helped me build a life that I can't believe I get to live.

“I love it,” I say, voice quiet but sure. “It's perfect.”

The newest free little library stands proudly at the edge of our front yard. It's painted in cheerful blues and soft cream, with hand-stenciled wildflowers dancing across the sides. This is the final piece in a project Callum started the day our son read his first book cover to cover without help, or bribery, I might add.

Now there's one at Kingridge Ranch, one downtown in Sagebrush Creek, and this one—right here, where bedtime stories are sacred and bookmarks are everywhere but where they're supposed to be. Each little box is a promise: Take a book, leave a book. No judgment. No due dates. Just stories, shared freely.

It's a small thing. But it means everything to me.

It's Callum's quiet way of keeping his promise that our children would grow up in a house full of wonder and drenched in knowledge. We want them to be free to ask questions and loud enough to demand answers.

And with four kids between Rosalie and me, this little library is going to see more turnover than a pie stand at the state fair.

Callum also managed to talk his brothers into investing in the strip of land that connects our home to Rosalie and Dawson's. We built our home way out on the far edge of the ranch. It took some sweet-talking, but in the end, it was the best decision we ever made.

The fences are gone now. The land between our homes is open and well-worn. A trail cuts through it, packed with the pounding of sticky feet and barefoot summer sprints. The kids run wild and free back and forth between our houses, dragging popsicles, pool towels, and inside jokes in their wake.

We didn't build a family. We grew one. It's wild and unruly, but it's rooted in so much love. And it's everything I never dared to dream of.

Callum's laugh still gets me every time. His rough hands are still the ones I reach for when the world feels too loud. And his kisses still melt me. The man might've traded rodeo boots for dad duty, but he hasn't slowed down one bit. Not when it comes to the bedroom... or, let's be honest, the laundry room, hayloft, or that one time in the barn shower.

He's the kind of father I wish every child had. Patient. Protective. Goofy in the best way. He can wrangle toddlers and livestock with the same calm authority, and when he reads bedtime stories, he does the voices. Callum has built us a home filled with safety, silliness, and so many books that even the walls feel like they're whispering stories.

As I watch him walk back toward the porch, one of our sons barrels toward him at full speed. His light hair is wild and sticky with lemonade. Callum scoops him up like he weighs nothing and spins him around while he shrieks with joy. He giggles and clings to his neck, and I swear, I fall in love all over again.

Watching Callum with our children, I feel that same flutter I did the first time I saw him. That smirk. His steadiness. That quiet strength that unraveled me and built me back better all comes rushing back. Once the kids are tucked in tonight, I plan to remind Callum exactly how much I love him.