



Breaking Oakley (Montgomery Dreams)

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Category: Romance

Description: I've been in love with Jamie Walker for as long as I can remember.

He's devastatingly handsome and impossible to resist.

He's my highschool sweetheart,

My best friend,

and also the bull rider my dad doesn't approve of.

With my eighteenth birthday and graduation around the corner,

I'm ready to give Jamie all of me.

Heart, body, and future.

But what happens if he isn't ready to do the same?

Is the passion between us strong enough

to burn through everything that stands in our way

Or will I have to say goodbye,

And surrender myself to a broken heart?

****Breaking Oakley is a small-town, western, first love, steamy romance. It is the Prequel to Riding Jamie and is not recommended to be read as a standalone****

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OAKLEY

Holding my breath, I slip through the front door at two minutes to midnight, trying to be as quiet as I can. But, I should've known Mom would be waiting for me. She pulls her robe closer around her and greets me with a smile.

“Happy birthday, honey,” she says. “Did you have fun?”

I nod, letting her hug me as I pretend to stifle an exaggerated yawn.

“Yeah, I’m just really tired.” I’m desperate to get upstairs. In two minutes—no—one now—I’m going to be officially over eighteen. And Jamie’s waiting for me in the tree outside my bedroom window.

“Okay...” she hesitantly replies, giving me the look only mothers can give. “Are you sure you’re okay? You look flushed,” she adds, pressing a hand to my forehead.

“I’m fine, I promise. Just super tired.”

“Okay, then. Well, you should go upstairs and get to sleep. Big day later. Goodnight, darling,” she replies before kissing my cheek, and turning toward her room. The door closes with a soft click before the yellow glow of the bedroom lamp goes out.

Everything about what I’m about to do completely goes against my parents' wishes, sort of. I promised I’d keep my virginity until I turned eighteen... But the no-boys-in-the-bedroom rule—that’s about to go out the window.

With every step up the stairs, my heart beats a little faster. I've waited so long for this, and now that the moment is here... I can't keep the flutter of nerves in my stomach at bay. It isn't like we haven't done things before. I mean, hell, we've done a lot of things before, but not this.

The moment I reach the top of the stairs, I hesitate. My bedroom door looms before me, as I let out a heavy breath.

You can do this... Stop being chicken shit.

Pressing forward, I quickly step into my bedroom, glancing around at the mess of clothes I'd thrown on the floor earlier.

My movements increase as I pick them up, shoving them into the laundry basket by my ensuite bathroom, before slipping out of my panties, slick with the excitement he caused within me only a few hours ago.

Heading straight to my bedroom window, I quickly unlatch it. Jamie doesn't waste time in coming through it, one long, denim-clad leg at a time. My heart beats like the boom of thunder within my ears as my boyfriend of three years unfolds himself to his full height in my bedroom.

The gleam in his blue eyes only serves to heighten my anticipation and desire. His dark brown hair is still rumpled from me running my hands through it earlier, and that dimpled grin sends an electric bolt straight to my core.

He's so tall I have to tip my head way back and stretch up onto my tiptoes when he pulls me into his arms.

His mouth captures mine, slanting over it with that delicious salt and caramel flavor from the hard candies he's always got in his pocket.

He slides his mouth along my jaw to the sensitive spot below my ear.

The soft, playful nibbles against my skin send shivers through my body.

The erect buds of my breast are aching and hard.

The same way the sensitive bud of my core feels, throbbing with desire.

“I was worried you forgot about me,” he says into my ear, tugging the lobe between his teeth for a second as I shiver with pleasure.

“As if I could ever forget about you.”

Jamie laughs and settles his big, calloused hands on my hips. Pulling me closer, he nudges himself against my belly. He’s already hard and the sensation of his length pressing against me has my mouth going dry.

Finally, after three years, countless kisses, and doing everything two people can do without actually having intercourse...

it’s time. We’re going to have sex for the first time.

It’s all I was able to think about all day, every minute, as we went to dinner, then a movie, and then to hang out at the local diner for a few hours before I had to get home for curfew.

Along with a few other heated make-out sessions by the old barn down the road.

Midnight, and my official birthday. One that the two of us have been waiting for since Jamie turned eighteen over seven months ago.

His hands roam over my back, holding me closer as I link my fingers around the back of his neck, bringing his mouth back to mine. Greedily sucking his tongue into my mouth. I love the way he moans, but I have to pinch his side to remind him that we need to be quiet.

My room might be on the other side of the house from my parents' bedroom, but the last thing I want is for them to overhear anything.

Jamie walks me back toward the bed with quick, sure-footed steps as I claw at the front of his T-shirt, trying to pull it off. But as soon as I do, it's tossed to the floor just before we both tumble down onto my bed.

Running my hands up and over his bare, smooth chest, I'm unable to hold myself back from kissing it. Licking, sucking, and stroking my tongue along that delicious hard expanse of his flesh as I move my lips lower and lower.

I can never get enough of the way he tastes... Or the way he smells. The deep, musky scent of dirt and wood mixed with a little bit of cattle fills my nostrils. Not that I mind. It's a scent I've grown used to over the years.

"You're so beautiful," he whispers against my ear before pressing a kiss to my temple. His fingers brush down the soft skin of my shoulder before trailing down over the thin cotton fabric of my peasant dress. The sensation causes a shiver to run through me as he brushes against my nipple.

"You're such a tease," I reply, making a chuckle slip out of him.

"Perhaps," he mumbles, leaning back slightly. "But you like it."

"Maybe... Maybe not."

A squeal escapes my lips as his mouth grasps my nipple through my dress. The tug of his lips on that sensitive bud has me arching, gasping, desperate for more.

“Stop playing games, Jamie.” I softly say, my eyes gazing down at him with desire coursing through my veins. “I need you.”

At my words, a heat blazes in his blue eyes, the exact color of the summer Montana sky when twilight arrives.

Not bright, pale blue, but darker. More like indigo.

Jamie’s eyes were one of the first things I noticed about him, and I’ve often imagined that one day our children will have eyes just that shade.

“Is that so?” He replies as I pass a hand over his cheeks and chin.

“You know... I think I like you clean-shaven.”

His brow raises slightly at my words. “Is that right? And here I thought you liked it when my beard brushed against your inner thigh.”

At his words, his hands slide up my thighs which instantly part for him. His fingers dance along the most sensitive parts of my skin before a finger gently brushes against the slit of my aching core, causing his brows to fly up in shock at finding me exposed beneath my dress. “Such a bad girl...”

“Only for you.”

A shiver ripples through me at seeing how much he loves pleasing me. At how hungry his eyes get every time he touches me. Jamie has never pressured me to have sex with him. I’d even gone on birth control two years ago, just in case I couldn’t

stop myself from keeping my promise to my mother.

When it comes to Jamie... It's hard to resist wanting a piece of him.

"I want you, Jamie." My voice is low and breathy with a hoarse rasp so full of longing that I'd be mortified if anyone but him heard me sound like that.

He doesn't waste another second. His tongue slips between my lips as I suck him into my mouth. Every part of my body is on fire at his touch. Every inch of my soul, already given to him.

I moan his name softly, my voice becoming a shuddering rattle when he moves swiftly down my body to center himself between my legs. My eyes are already rolling up as my back arches under that first smooth swipe of his tongue along my slit, relishing in the sounds he makes as he tastes me.

One teasing stroke after another, he torments me.

Bringing me to the edge, only to deny me the pleasure I truly seek.

I lose myself in every searing sensation.

Bucking my hips as he expertly swirls his tongue with the perfect pressure on the core between my legs.

So much so that I splinter apart in an explosion of pleasure so fierce that all I can do is ride it out.

Jamie plants a soft kiss between my thighs as my shudders ease. My panting breaths, stifled by the back of my hand. He's brought pleasure to me with his mouth so many times, but tonight, that's not enough.

Tonight, I need him inside me, and not just within my mouth.

A surprised grunt slips out of him when I roll us over to get on top of him.

Tugging at his belt buckle, an enormous, detailed silver bull rider with the words “Pain is temporary. Victory lasts forever” engraved on it.

I attempt to free the beast within. He lets out a grunt the moment I reach inside his worn jeans to find the hot, thick length I’ve been craving.

My tongue swipes out, licking up the length of his rigid thick member before slowly swirling around its head, causing a moan to escape him right before his hand fists my hair.

It isn’t the first time I’ve done this, and it definitely won’t be the last. Though he definitely won’t be releasing himself this way any time soon.

Letting his length slide from my mouth with a ‘pop,’ I stare up at him under my lashes. The ache between my thighs grows unmanageable as I slowly climb back up his body, his hands pushing my dress up my hips before pulling it over my head and tossing it to the floor.

His large palms skate over my breasts, thumbing my nipples to taut peaks as I fall forward to offer them to his eager mouth.

“So beautiful,” Jamie murmurs. His tongue strokes my naked skin as his hand slips between us so his fingers can find the sweet, tight knot between my legs. Slowly he moves his thumb in perfect circles until I can’t stand it anymore.

“Please,” I beg him. “Jamie... I can’t... I need you.”

Without taking his hand from between my legs, Jamie uses his other to guide me up, before slowly letting my body sink around the thick length of his member.

Inch by inch, accepting him inside me. I'm so wet that he slides right in with no resistance, only the most delicious friction that causes me to moan at the sudden fullness.

Followed by a small amount of pain that causes me to wince at the feeling of my tight core wrapped around his thick length. Jamie frowns.

"Oakley? You okay, babe?"

"Pain is temporary," I remind him with a small gasp. My hips roll and my head falls back as ecstasy flows through me. We're finally doing it, finally having sex...and oh God, it's so much better than I ever dreamed.

Jamie moves slowly at first, then faster as I urge him to drive himself into me harder. There's no more pain, only this pleasure that has my entire body shaking. Riding him, laughter spills out of me at the image of him on a bull. It's all perfect.

"Oh my God!" I cry out softly, the only words I can manage to form.

Everything else has become this perfect surge of desire.

Nothing else matters. My body tightens, clutching him inside me.

Forcing me to clasp a hand over my mouth to stifle my scream.

My entire body throbs and quakes as another orgasm rips through me even harder than the first, pushing me closer and closer to levels I never knew were possible.

“I can’t hold out much longer,” Jamie groans out, gripping my hips as he thrusts once, twice, and then a final time. Shuddering, calling my name in a low, urgent voice, over and over.

Falling onto the bed beside him, my breath comes out heavily matching his. There’s a lingering soreness between my thighs that aches when I move, but I feel so good that I laugh again and press my face to his naked shoulder.

“What’s so funny?” he demands, twisting to his side with amusement in his tone.

Snuggling closer, I can’t contain the smile on my face. “I’m just so...happy. That’s all.”

Our first time was magic, just like I’d always expected it to be, but it was also much faster than I’d imagined. Like fire to a puddle of gasoline, our bodies had ignited. I trail my finger down his collarbone then rest my hand flat on his tight, muscled chest.

“I want every night to be like this,” I tell him. “Only not having to be worried my parents will overhear us.”

We’ve talked about getting married, but I’m supposed to go off to NYU in the fall for school. And Jamie’s dad wants him to work for the family rodeo. We’ve been circling this without ever talking about it, without giving each other a firm answer about what we’re planning.

“Me too,” he says. “I want to be with you, that’s all I know.”

I take in a deep, sudden breath, wishing I could just flat out ask him what he’s planning to do so I can decide if I want to go away to school, like my mom says I should, or if I should stick closer to home the way my dad says he’d like me to do.

Neither one of us wants to disappoint our families. But where does that leave us? I hate that our first time having sex could be soured by this discussion.

I kiss him again, letting it linger this time. Swiping my tongue over his lips until he opens for me. Jamie fists my hair at the base of my skull, holding me as tight as he holds the reins when he's riding. My body wakes up, craving him even more than ever.

"Again," I whisper into the kiss.

Jamie's chuckle is rough. "Greedy girl."

"For you," I promise. "Only you."

It's slower this time. Better. He's on top of me, his length stroking inside me, rubbing my sensitive bud with every thrust until I come undone again, bright sparkles bursting through me. Gasping his name, I swear I can feel him throb inside me as he finishes.

"All I know is that I love you, Oakley Montgomery. Wherever we go, whatever we do, that's never going to change. I'm going to be with you." He replies so calmly that I know he means every word.

I hold up my hand, pinky out, as his eyes widen slightly and a smirk litters the corner of his lips before he hooks his pinky around mine. "Promise me, I promise you, that to you, I will be true."

It's our silly little freshman rhyme from when we were just best friends and not a couple. But it has even more meaning now. My heart thumps. The tears I feel in my eyes are happy and content, not sad.

"Shit, that's your dad," he says suddenly. The sound of heavy boots thumps in the

hallway.

In what feels like seconds, Jamie's dressed, one long leg hanging over the windowsill as I pull on my robe and kiss him goodbye before quickly closing the window with just enough time to turn around before my dad knocks on the door, causing my heart to jump.

That was close... A little too fucking close. But no matter what happens, Jamie Walker will never let me down.

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JAMIE

I'm piling two thick slices of sourdough bread high with the works when my dad walks into the kitchen.

He gives me a nod and eyes my sandwich without a word.

Pulling down a plate from the cabinet, I slide it across the kitchen island toward him.

We make mostly matching sandwiches, although his triple-decker concoction is a lot heavier on the onion and mayo, reminding me that although I'm a lot like my dad, I'm not exactly like him.

That's something I wish he could understand.

"You slept late. I thought we could get some work done," my dad says gruffly, slathering his top slice of bread with even more of the gooey white condiment.

By work, he means riding. Training. I was in kindergarten the first time he had me mutton busting. I can still smell the sheep's wool as I clung to its back while it bucked. It was nothing like being on the back of a bull, but it's how a lot of us got started so young.

All these years later, there are still times when I'd much rather be on the back of a wooly sheep than climbing up on a pissed-off beast weighing a literal ton or more.

I could never tell the old man that. It would break his heart.

Break apart our relationship, which hasn't always been the steadiest, especially since we lost Mom.

No matter how much I sometimes wish there was another way for me to go than following in his footsteps, I also know that I'm probably never going to hurt him that way. I'm not even sure what else I'd do with my life if it wasn't bull riding. It's kind of all I've ever been good at.

"I was out late last night with Oakley." There's no point in lying about it. "It's her birthday."

As soon as the words come out of my mouth, I can't stop myself from grinning like a rodeo clown. Thinking about my honey-haired angel and her gorgeous hazel eyes, there's no hiding that smile.

My dad pauses in making his sandwich.

"You know how I feel about you dating David Montgomery's kid," he says.

Slicing my sandwich into halves on the diagonal, I take my plate to the scarred wooden table by the windows and plop down in the seat that's been mine since I was a kid. My slight hard-on is hidden from view as I attempt to control myself before I make an ass out of myself in front of my dad.

After a moment, my dad slides into the chair he always uses. It's hard to miss the feeling of his eyes boring into the top of my skull as I try to pretend to be very interested in the food on my plate.

This is how it always is when he wants to discuss something.

When I finally look up at him, he's giving me a dead stare while slowly chewing his

food, letting me know that the conversation is far from over. “I’ve known her forever and she’s my girl. She’s been my girl for the past three years, Dad. That’s not going to change, so drop it, please.”

Which I know is exactly what he doesn’t want to hear.

“Watch your smart mouth,” my dad replies, his eyes narrowing, reminding me of who I’m talking to.

He takes a huge bite, chews, and swallows before adding, “You know I want you to start working the circuit. You’re not going to have time for canoodling with some girl. Besides, isn’t she supposed to be heading off to some fancy-pants school in New York somewhere?”

My sandwich tastes sour at the reminder that Oakley hasn’t told me for sure whether or not she’s made up her mind about NYU. Yeah, I know that it’s her future and that it makes sense for her to take the chances she’s been given. But that doesn’t mean I have to like it.

“You’ll be on the road six months out of nine. She’ll be far away and making new friends, having new experiences,” my dad continues calmly like he’s doing me a favor.

I frown. “Look, Dad, just because you and Mr. Montgomery had some kind of disagreement?—”

“Disagreement?” My dad sputters. “I can’t stand the guy. After what he did? The very sound of his name turns my damned guts.”

Everyone knows about the rivalry between my dad and Oakley’s dad, David Montgomery, but I’ve honestly never heard the whole story about why they had a

falling out in the first place.

Mr. Montgomery's always been standoffish to me, probably because he doesn't want his daughter dating me any more than my dad wants me to date her.

But Oakley's father has never been nasty to me, and he's never said a bad word about my dad to my face.

"What the heck happened between the two of you, anyway? I thought you used to be best buds."

"Never you mind about that," he finally replies. "Just know that I'm only looking out for you, son. I don't want to see you get your heart all tangled up with someone who's never going to be with you in the long run. Your heart, or your prick."

Heat flushes through me at his crude words.

My dad gave me the sex talk a long time ago, and so I've always figured he assumed that Oakley and I were fooling around.

He has no idea that only hours ago, we had sex for the first time.

Not that I'll tell him that, but hearing him try to make what we shared into something so basic has me gritting my teeth.

Dad catches my eye. His brows raise slightly as he wipes a blob of mayo from the corner of his mouth with a napkin, then settles back in his chair. "I don't think I need to tell you how stupid it would be for you to get yourself caught by some girl. Do I?"

Fucking hell.

“Caught?” I reply with a scowl as I stand, taking my sandwich to the trash. The further we get into this conversation, the more pissed I’m becoming. He doesn’t even fucking know Oakley, let alone know the real me.

“Yeah, caught,” he snaps, his voice raising an octave. “You know what I mean. You’re too young to be a daddy, and there’s no way David Montgomery would ever let you marry his precious little princess.”

My fists clench at my side for a moment before I force myself to loosen them.

I love my dad, but I wish he’d stop banging on about how unlikely it is that me and Oakley are going to end up together.

I’m already twisting and turning with doubts about it, no matter how much she tells me she loves me and wants to be with me.

“I don’t need you to tell me that, Dad,” I finally reply as I turn on my heel, prepared to leave the kitchen and the conversation. His voice stops me in the doorway.

“Did you tell her that you’re going to start traveling? The rodeo circuit season starts next month and there are some big bulls with your name on them.”

Slowly, I turn to face him, trying to keep my voice calm so I don’t give away the strength of my emotions. “I haven’t said anything to her yet. I was waiting...”

“For what?” Dad replies with judgmental curiosity in his tone. “The longer you wait to tell her that you’re hitting the road, the harder it’s going to be. Women don’t like it when you spring things like that on them, Jamie.”

“Don’t make it sound like you care about Oakley’s feelings.”

Shaking his head, he pushes his plate away from him. “I don’t care about the girl, son. But I do care about you. You’ve been putting a lot of work into this career. I’m counting on you.”

“Yeah,” I interrupt. “I know. You’re counting on me to win. To make you proud. I get it, Dad. You’ve been telling me that forever.”

“You have to get your stats up, son. Take your licks, get your rides in, and qualify for the big competitions. You don’t get to the real prize purses without that work.

And you’ve been slacking off.” Dad says this quietly, but with firm resolve, so I know he’s not messing around.

“Not to mention that if you’re not on the top of your game, you’re way more likely to get hurt. ”

I swallow the lump in my throat that feels like a stone wrapped in barbed wire. “I could get hurt no matter how much I train. And I might never qualify for the World Finals.”

My dad shakes his head, stabbing his finger at me. “Hush that talk. You’ll qualify. You’re strong. You’re good, you’ve got good genes. You have what it takes, Jamie, if you’d only just buckle down and give it your all. It’s a lot of money, son.”

I know he’s right. The circuit pays enough to live on if you’re lucky, but it’s the competitions where you can really make bank.

Prize purses can range into the millions.

That kind of money would go a long way to the future I’m planning for me and Oakley.

I'm not a hundred percent sure what that all might be, but I know I want to provide for her.

"It's her birthday. I didn't want to ruin it by talking about this with her. She has a big party later tonight. I'll talk with her about all of this tomorrow."

"You should do yourself, and her, a favor and just break it off with her. Make it a clean break. She's going away, you're starting your career.

It's what people do when they graduate from high school anyway, son.

She probably won't even really be too surprised.

"He sounds so convinced of this that, for a second or two, all I can do is stare at him.

"I love Oakley Montgomery, Dad," I reply, shaking my head, "and she loves me."

"What do either one of you know about love?" My dad shoots back in a rough-edged voice full of disdain. "Not a damned thing, that's what. You think you know what love is? It's commitment. It's family. It's?—"

"That's what I have with Oakley! What we do have, and what we will have! I love her, and she loves me, and there's nothing you can do about it!"

Sitting back in his chair again, he eyes me steadily. "Yeah? And will she keep on loving you when you don't have a pot to piss in?"

I grit my teeth but don't say a word.

"You're too sentimental, son. Just like your mother was." My dad shakes his head like he's ashamed.

I'm angry, sad, and embarrassed, but mostly angry.

At him. But also at myself because, deep down, I can't stop myself from believing that my dad is right.

Oakley says she loves me, but the truth is, if I can't find a way to make a success out of myself, how long would she possibly stay with a loser?

She's a Montgomery. Dad might hate them, but to everyone else, they're the golden family in Skyview Falls. The ones we all look up to and envy. When I was younger, I thought they were like something out of a movie, rich and powerful. My opinion hasn't changed much.

I can't keep this a secret from her forever. I'm going to have to leave for the circuit before she heads off to school...and she has to go to school. I can't be the one to hold her back from her opportunities just because my only path ahead is a bull rider with Walker Rodeo.

Oakley deserves so much better than that.

She deserves a man who can protect and provide for her, to keep her in the lifestyle she's used to. Professional bull riding is my shot at real success, and some real good money, too.

A heavy breath leaves me as I let my dad's words sink in. No matter how I might feel about everything, I can't deny the truth in front of me.

I'm going to have to move forward with everything, even if it means Oakley won't be happy about it. I can only hope I won't lose her in the process.

Page 3

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OAKLEY

“I don’t look any different...do I?” I ask, turning away from the mirror to face my best friend, Phoebe.

Heat creeps up my chest and onto my cheeks as she studies me.

We’ve been in my bedroom trying on different outfits for the last hour.

The room looks like a cyclone came through it, every item from my closet tossed over the bed and floor and I still can’t settle on what I want to wear.

It’s like what happened early this morning with Jamie has flustered me into being a different person.

A really sore-between-the-legs kind of person... that’s for sure.

“Still too gorgeous to stand,” she finally replies, after a shake of her head. “I should hate you for looking so good. Do you feel different?”

Do I feel different?

Thinking about that for a second, I nod. “Yeah... I guess. I mean, it’s not like we haven’t done stuff before, but last night was like...magic. Or is that corny to say?”

Having sex with Jamie felt like the last piece of a puzzle finally fitting into place.

Like the three years we have been together were only the beginning of our future life.

No matter how silly it may sound. I let a heavy breath escape me as a frown settles upon my face before I turn to the mirror again with a groan of irritation.

My fingers fight with the stubborn curls that won't stay put in the updo Phoebe says shows off my cheekbones.

I can't really explain to her how the sex changed things.

I can't even explain it to myself. It's like my body finally proved what my heart has known for three years.

Jamie Walker and I are going to be together for the rest of our lives.

"Not really," she pipes up. "But I can tell you one thing...my first time better not be with someone dumb."

"You know you get to choose, right?" I reply with a glance at her from over my shoulder. "So, don't pick someone dumb. Problem solved."

Phoebe rolls her eyes at my comment, then falls back onto my bed. "I guess I need to find a boyfriend first before I worry about whether or not he's too dumb to give my virginity to."

"Maybe you'll get lucky tonight. Bo's invited a bunch of his friends to the party."

"Great, just what I want. One of your brother's friends." She snorts with laughter. "That would be like dating my own brother. Yuck."

I can't help but laugh along with her as I finish tucking in one last curl before

smoothing out my pale blue dress.

It's cute, something that I picked up on our last shopping trip into town.

The soft material sits off the shoulder with a cinched waist that trails into a flowing skater skirt that stops mid-thigh.

I honestly can't help but feel pretty in it, and the fact that it's Jamie's favorite color is definitely a bonus.

He says it brings out the blue in my hazel eyes.

Twirling in a circle to show it off, I wait for my best friend's approval when I've finally finished touching up my mascara. "So...?"

"Perfect," she replies as she stands to her feet. Phoebe mirrors me. Her dress matches mine in style but is pink to show off her brunette bob. Her deep brown eyes narrow, glistening with tears. "But seeing us now... it kind of makes me want to cry."

"Why? We're graduating."

"That's the problem," she pouts, placing her hands on her wide hips.

Her usually prominent dimples are hidden by the obvious sadness she feels.

It's crazy to think how once upon a time the two of us were stick-thin little girls excited for school, and now the both of us are gorgeous women.

Even though only one of us came into a curvaceous body, and it sure wasn't me.

While I stayed small and petite, Phoebe has always glowed with a small waist, wide

hips, and boobs to die for.

“I can’t believe we’re done with high school.

And to top it off, you’re going to be leaving soon to go to college in New York while I’m stuck here, going to Montana State.

I’m going to be so bored without you! You need to promise to let me come visit...

I’ve been dying to see your aunt’s house for years.”

As much as I want to share in her excitement... I can’t. After everything last night—I don’t want to leave. Jamie said that all he knew was that he wanted to be with me, and I feel the same. I want to stay here with him. Tonight, I plan on telling him.

“You won’t have to,” I reply with a shake of my head. “I’ve decided I’m not going to NYU. I haven’t told my dad yet. He’ll be thrilled.”

Her lips part, eyes going wide as a soft gasp escapes her throat. “But I thought you were already accepted! Your parents had to put down a deposit, didn’t they?”

“My aunt and uncle are actually the ones paying for school,” I admit, feeling another rush of heat in my cheeks.

Embarrassment this time. My mom’s sister and her husband have been beyond generous to me.

“But I checked the deadlines for refunds, and I still have time. I can change my mind and stay here. I’ll go to MSU with you. It’ll be great.”

I wanted to get away and live in the big city for a while. Experience something

different...bigger. More . But I can visit New York and enjoy the sights any time I want to stay with my aunt and uncle. I don't have to live there.

Right?

I try to remain positive, but I know she can see right through me by the way her face softens. She takes a step toward me. "You're not putting your life on hold for him, are you? You know that he wouldn't want that."

"I'm not," I reassure. Though it's technically a lie. I know he would want me to go, but the thought of leaving him isn't something I'm prepared to do. "I just don't want to leave you both."

"Don't use me as an excuse for you to throw away a great opportunity. It's what you've been saying you wanted to do since...well, since forever. We both know you'd be staying for Jamie. Not me."

"You don't think I should." I quickly stand and pace. "Do you think I'm being stupid about this? I mean... shit I don't know what to do."

Phoebe and I have been friends for too long for her to lie to me. Even when her honesty annoys me, I know I can always count on it.

"Oakley," she says, sighing softly. "You've been talking about how much you want to get your business degree since we took that business class sophomore year. Most everyone else hated it, but you couldn't get enough."

Phoebe's right. I've known since the tenth grade that the best way for me to be part of the Montgomery Ranch would be if I went and got my business degree. Learning all I can about how to make our family business better. Putting my skills to work to grow the family's income.

I'd always planned to go off to school and find a way to come back home, only now the thought of leaving has my stomach tied up in knots.

"I can get a BBA here at the local college," I tell her stubbornly.

Phoebe tosses up her hands. "Right. Because a BBA from NYU isn't a much better opportunity for you. Not to mention a free ride? Your aunt and uncle probably won't be thrilled if you decide to stay here for school, will they?"

She isn't wrong about that...

"They'd want me to be happy," I protest. I know my Aunt Kathy has been looking forward to me coming to stay with them ever since I first said I was considering NYU.

She and I have always been super close. I don't want to disappoint her...

But I'm sure she'll understand. And even if she doesn't, I have to do what I know is best for me.

"Don't let Jamie's magic you-know-what distract you. As your bestie, I have a responsibility to say that."

Before she can say anything more, a soft rap at the door reveals my mom as soon as it opens.

Her sandy blonde hair is pulled back into a loose ponytail to keep the hair off her neck while her white tank top and jeans are decorated with her favorite beige apron.

It never ceases to amaze me how dedicated she's always been to the farm and her clinic.

This is why I made a point a long time ago to get a degree in something that could also benefit our family. She was my greatest inspiration.

“Girls? Are you ready?” she asks in a sweet-as-honey kind of voice. Her smile stretches across her face, showing off the whites of her teeth. “The guests are arriving. I’ve sent your brother down to make sure they know where to go.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I hug her quickly, pressing our cheeks together.

“You’re so grown up, both of you,” she replies, glancing over at the two of us as she pulls away from me. “It feels like just yesterday that Heather and I were dropping the two of you off for kindergarten together. I’m so proud of you both!”

Our parents have been friends since they were in kindergarten. So to see her get this emotional over my best friend doesn’t surprise me. Phoebe has always been like another daughter to her. Like a sister to me. Built-in besties.

“We’ll be down in a minute. Don’t let Dad scare anyone away, please.”

My mother laughs at my comment, knowing full well what I mean. He’s never been quite okay with Maggie and I growing up so quickly. So, having strange boys on the farm that he doesn’t know doesn’t quite sit well with him.

But in the end, my mom always gets the last say in our house.

With Mom disappearing with soft laughter, Phoebe and I finish up our last touches to hair and makeup before we put on flats that will make it easier to dance in.

The barn we’re using is the old barn at the far side of the property.

The original barn my dad had built when I was a baby, and the start of his company.

Over the years, with him growing the business, he built new structures and grew his enterprise.

But one thing he could never bring himself to do was to tear down the old barn where it all started.

So instead, it became our party hangout or event location for the town if my parents were helping to host something.

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“Wow,” my father’s thundering voice says as we reach the bottom of the stairs. His usually dark eyes are calm and watchful when he glances over at me and Phoebe. “You both look beautiful.”

Phoebe gives a little spin while I roll my eyes and step in to give him a small hug. “Thanks, Dad. We better get going.”

“I know, I know,” he replies, walking with us toward the door. “I just hate knowing that you’re going to be leaving the ranch soon. I wish you would reconsider and go to the college nearby. I don’t want to part with you yet.”

Phoebe's eyes meet mine for a moment, brow raised as her lips part. But I quickly shake my head before turning to my dad with a smile. “Yeah... Well, my education is important. I’ll be able to come back and help on the ranch in all kinds of ways.

He mumbles something I can’t hear as he holds the door open for us to walk through. “You girls go have fun... stay out of trouble, though.”

The moment we step outside, the cool Montana air hits me in the face.

The setting sun casting orange glows across the sky as the sound of laughter and music drift toward us from the far end of the property.

“Oh my god, there are so many people here,” Phoebe exclaims, a smile stretching across her face.

“I know... I wasn’t sure how many people were coming.”

Despite the amount of people here, there is only one person I'm ready to see.

As we make our way toward the old brown barn with a silver tin roof and yellow-strand lighting that stretches from the double doors out the makeshift patio, I contemplate how things are going to change.

A pleasant shiver of heat tickles up and down my spine when I spot the place where Jamie and I had parked to make out last night.

His hands running all over me, our mouths open, tongues stroking.

What we have is so much more than sex, though. It's love .

And I don't want to give it up just to go far away from home for college.

I'll miss Jamie, but also my family. My best friend, Phoebe.

I love visiting my Aunt Kathy and Uncle Ricky in New York City, but as exciting as the big city can be, I'm always ready to come back home.

Can I really survive at NYU for four years?

"Happy Birthday, Oakley!" A few girls from school shout as Phoebe and I approach the barn. Their smiles radiate across their faces as they compliment our dresses and tell me how awesome it is my parents allowed me to have this party.

More like my mom... My dad didn't have much of a choice.

While the girls all chat amongst themselves, I take the time to scan the barn's big open space.

Strings of fairy lights and balloons in gold and black decorate the entire area, along with long tables that are set up at the barn's far end, groaning under the weight of the platters of food.

My mom, of course, went overboard, as she always does.

Her motto has always been: "If you go home hungry—that's your own fault. "

At the forefront of it all is a DJ, already pumping dance tunes while a few people line the outside of the makeshift dance floor in the middle of the barn.

But no matter how hard I look, I can't find Jamie. My friends are all here, though. So's Bo, sent by my parents to "keep an eye" on us all, but he's probably going to be the one getting us in trouble.

"Staying out of trouble?" he asks, sliding up to me as he knuckles my arm like the annoying big brother he's always been. His tall looming figure overshadows me as it always does. He got his over-six-foot height from our father while I got my petite nature from our mother.

"I always stay out of trouble," I reply, rolling my eyes.

"Not what I heard."

Darting my gaze to him, wide and in shock at his words, I gasp. "What the hell have you heard?"

He doesn't know about last night... Does he? I mean... we weren't that loud.

Oh god, were we?

Laughter flows from his lips as he wraps an arm around my shoulder, pulling me in close with a shake of his head. “Things are going to be different with you gone.”

“Why do you say that?”

Stepping away from me, he shrugs before turning his smile on me once more. “We’ve always done everything together, and now you’re leaving for New York. Guess it means I have to find a new wingman.”

“Come on guys, let’s go dance.” Then he’s off to greet some of his friends, pulling a random girl onto the dance floor as the party starts ramping up.

My friends and I follow as we take to the dance floor, music blaring and laughter as people join us.

It’s exactly how I wanted my night to go.

Until I’m sweating from all the fun, and taking to the drink station to rehydrate myself.

“Happy Birthday, Oakley.”

Turning, I smile at Chet Johnson, a guy from my brother’s grade who looks like he should be on the sunny beaches of California with his shaggy blonde hair and board shorts.

Since Bo and I are only thirteen months apart, a lot of my brother’s friends are kind of like mine too.

Hugging me, he gestures at the decorated barn.

“Another great Montgomery family party,” he says. “I think I saw Bo around, right?”

Tipping my chin back toward the long table piled high with bowls of chips and drinks and party platters, I grin. “By the food, obviously. Help yourself. Mom went overboard with it.”

“Oh, hey,” Chet says almost like an afterthought, stepping away but stopping himself. His faded blue eyes narrow for a moment as if lost in thought. “I just wanted to say, it’s pretty awesome how cool you’re being about it all.”

“The...party?” I ask, furrowing my brows in confusion. It isn’t like we’ve never thrown a party out here before, and I know for a fact that he’d gone to those.

Chet laughs, shaking his head. “Nah, about J. The circuit? Me and him go way back, you know, and I think it’s great that you’re not hassling him about it.

My girlfriend is losing her mind. She thinks I should quit, go off to school or something, but I told her that bull riding is my future. J’s, too.”

“What are you talking about?” I question, brows furrowed in confusion.

“About you supporting J joining the circuit, of course!” He laughs, shaking his head. “Bo said you were the smart sibling.”

Rolling my eyes, I shrug off the last of his comments, trying to contain my emotions. “Speaking of Jamie... have you seen him anywhere?”

“Yeah, for sure,” he replies, glancing around as if searching for him before his eyes meet mine again. “I think I saw him back there somewhere when I came in. Out near the bonfire. But hey... gotta catch up with your brother. You two don’t have too much fun!”

As I watch him walk away toward the table Bo's currently at, I can't help but shake with anger, my mind going numb at the thought of him lying to me. Was he just waiting for my birthday to be over? And out of all the ways... I had to learn it from Chet.

Fury consumes me. I want to shriek or pound my fists against the old barn floors until my hands are full of splinters. Just this morning, we'd been together, and he hadn't said a word about finalizing his decision. Now I find out from someone else that he's signed up and is leaving in a few weeks?

When was he going to tell me?

In all the years we've been together, Jamie and I have hardly ever had a disagreement, much less an actual fight. I don't want to fight with him now, I just want to know if he's decided something so important without me.

Chet has to be wrong, right? Jamie would never do this to me. Once I tell him I've decided not to go to NYU, we'll work all of this out and things will be perfect again.

My friends reach for me, trying to pull me back into the circle of dancing.

Ducking them, I weave through the group here to celebrate and head out the barn's double back doors.

Scanning the area by the bonfire, my eyes take in the lights strung along the outside of the barn that is supposed to make all of this look beautiful and magical.

I wish everything back here was in the pitch black, though, because what I see is something worse than any nightmare I've ever experienced. Worse than finding out he lied to me about the circuit.

Chet was right. Jamie's back here. Leaning against the barn's outside wall, one long leg crossed over the other. Head bent, shadows from the bonfire cascading over him in flickers of black and gold and orange.

Kissing Savannah Ward.

Her auburn hair glistens in the firelight as she leans over him.

No matter how hard I try, I can't pretend that I don't see that her hand isn't on the front of his favorite shirt, the one I bought him for his eighteenth birthday.

The girl who's been after my brother for years has her hands all over my boyfriend.

Still spinning, the entire world beneath my feet flies out from under me. I stagger back into the shadows so he can't see that I'm watching. I can't look at this anymore. Her hands on him. The soft sound of her mocking laughter. Tossing her hair, she leans over him to press her mouth to his.

I'm going to be sick. I'm going to scream. I'm going to allow the ground to swallow me whole, let it fill up my eyes and mouth, covering every part of me so I can become nothing more than dirt.

Because that's what Jamie has just made me. Nothing more than dirt under his shoes. Worse, under Savannah's shoes.

Turning to run back through the barn, numbness rushes in and consumes me, until I can't see, hear, or feel anything except the sound of my heart breaking.

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JAMIE

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Savannah?

” Gripping the redhead’s wrists, I push her off to hold her at arm’s length.

Turning my face as she keeps dipping closer, her lips seeking mine.

Shuddering, I push myself away from her, but the wall behind me stops me from getting too far. “Are you drunk? What the hell?”

Savannah tosses her long red hair over one shoulder and gives me a smug smile that churns my stomach. She’s always been trouble, but, until tonight, it’d been directed at other people. Not me.

“Awww, J, you know I’ve always had a crush on you,” she says.

This is the first I’ve ever heard of it. I didn’t smell liquor on her breath, but she has to be messed up to try this. “Okay, whatever, but why the hell did you just try to kiss me? You know I’m with Oakley.”

“I like an audience, what can I say?” Winking, then glancing over her shoulder, Savannah laughs.

My stomach twists and sinks as I move her out of the way, already knowing what I’m going to see. “Oakley! Wait!”

Savannah grabs at my sleeve as I try to run after my girlfriend. “Let her go. I promise you’ll have a much better time here with me than that stuck-up Montgomery princess.”

Ignoring her, I pull my sleeve from her grasp and chase after Oakley. She’s almost through the barn doors, but I catch up to her in a few long strides, praying to god that I can make her see reason.

My fingertips skate along the bare skin of her shoulder as I grab for her. Oakley whirls away from my touch. Crying and shaking, she puts her hands up like she’s trying to shove me away. “Don’t fucking touch me.”

“Oakley,” I say helplessly. “Baby, please. It wasn’t what you think. She kissed me . I didn’t want her to.”

“Fuck you, Jamie Walker.”

Flinching, I take a step back from the fierce sound in her voice. I’ve never heard her talk to anyone that way, much less me. I take a deep breath and soften my voice, trying to make her listen to the truth. My head whirls with dismay, like I’m drunk, although I haven’t had a drop.

“I was waiting for you—” I begin, only to be quickly cut off.

“To do what? So I can catch you making out with that bitch?” Oakley snaps, face twisted in a sneer as hysterical laughter escapes her. The sound reminds me of bottles breaking.

“I wasn’t making out with her!” I snap. My voice raises slightly louder than I want it to be. I glance around praying that no one is listening to our conversation. Taking a step closer to her, I reach out to touch her again, but she pulls back. “Please, baby.

Can't we talk about this?"

"Oakley?" Phoebe must've come looking for her best friend, and now she's stepping in between us with her hands up. "Jamie, back up. What happened?"

Listening to the muttered explanation coming out of Oakley's lips, I realize how bad it all sounds. How terrible it must have looked. I want to explain that I'd just been minding my own business, but as I start to protest, Phoebe jabs a finger at me.

"Why don't you just shut up, Jamie? You're only upset because you got caught," Phoebe accuses. Putting her arm around Oakley, who won't even look at me. "How long have you been cheating on Oakley with Savannah?"

"I haven't been! Tonight was the first...shit, the only! Damn it, I wasn't making out with her! I would never cheat. Oakley, baby. You have to believe me." Desperate to get her to look at me, I try to get past Phoebe.

It's useless.

Oakley's best friend is fiercer than any guard dog. The two of us have always gotten along, but her loyalty is to Oakley, not to me. She won't move, and of course, I'm not going to shove her out of the way. Though I sure as hell want to.

My shoulders sag as I accept that this night has gone totally off the rails.

There's nothing I can do right now to get her to believe me.

And of course, Savannah is watching with pure amusement as the entire scene unfolds.

Her voice carries through the night air as I turn to see her talking to one of her friends

about what happened.

Only to give me a small wave once she sees me looking.

Fucking spiteful bitch.

When I turn back to Oakley, my heart breaks.

Watching the girl I love with tears streaming down her cheeks is the hardest thing I've ever had to witness.

Every part of me wants to pull her in, comfort her, and apologize like crazy, but it won't help.

Nothing's going to fucking fix this shit hole of a mess I've fallen into.

"Do you really want everyone at the party to hear this?" I quickly ask Phoebe when I notice too many eyes turning in our direction. "At least let's step off to the side back here. And keep your voice down."

"You don't tell me what to do, and she doesn't owe you anything." Phoebe spits out. "You fucked up Jamie... Like royally fucked up. And after?—"

She stops mid-sentence, but the way her eyes widen into a glare as her nostrils flare and her lip curls back into a sneer, I realize what she's referring to.

Without a word, Oakley turns and goes around the corner of the barn, away from the bonfire area. The shadows are deeper here. The sounds of the party are quieter. I can still hear laughter and music, but at least here we'll have some privacy.

Or, at least we would if the guard dog, Phoebe, left us alone.

Muttering, she keeps herself between us.

It's clear she has no intentions of abandoning her friend.

A stab of anger sinks into my heart. I've never given Phoebe any reason to think I'd betray Oakley, but obviously, she's more than ready to believe I would.

Oakley stays behind her. Still not looking at me. Ducking her head, her shoulders heave with the sobs that slice me over and over again.

"Baby." I sound like an idiot, and that's how I feel. Like the biggest asshole to ever live.

How did I end up in this situation? Minding my own business, going over in my head how I was going to convince Oakley that she had to leave Skyview Falls and go to New York City, even if she didn't want to.

I was planning out the words that would let her know I'd love her no matter what, but I couldn't let her give up the chance to make something of herself.

I would have told her that my way out was to travel the circuit, but that it didn't have to mean we'd be apart.

I was so caught up in my thoughts that I didn't even notice Savannah sidling up to me, not until she practically had her tongue shoved down my throat.

"I'm sorry, Oakley. You have to believe me," I say, my voice helpless and broken.

The moment I say the words aloud, I realize that I've fucked up again. Big time. Oakley hears that apology and thinks it's an admission of guilt when all I was trying to do was tell her how much it hurt me to see that I caused her any harm.

“You should be,” Phoebe grits out while Oakley remains deadly silent. “Everyone knows Savannah Ward’s been doing her best to become a buckle bunny forever!”

Wincing at the unflattering slang term, Oakley finally says something. “Pheebs. Stop.”

“Not until you get him to admit it,” Phoebe snarls. “Chet just told me all about Jamie joining the circuit. You deserve to hear the truth right out of his ugly mouth!”

Frowning, I face her. “Admit what? I already said I wasn’t?—”

“Savannah’s been hanging around the rodeo circuit long enough.

There’s no way you didn’t know she’d be ready to step up the second you left.

Did you think you’d just be able to trade Oakley in for someone new while you’re off traveling all over the place?

Was she just supposed to sit at home and wait for you? ”

Oakley’s eyes finally meet mine and my heart sinks. This isn’t how I wanted her to find out. That’s why I was so distracted that I’d let Savannah even get that close to me.

It’s clear by the sadness in Oakley’s gaze that she already knew.

I broke her heart more than once tonight. I knew it was going to be hard to make her see how important her future is, and how going on the circuit would be best for us in the long run. I never pictured this look on her face, how she thinks I’ve betrayed her.

“Pheebs, I need to talk to Jamie alone,” Oakley says finally.

There's no relief for me in those words, though. Her voice is distant, not a hint of warmth or love the way she usually sounds when she says my name. Speaking like a robot, emotionless and dead inside... Because of me.

"I'm not leaving you alone with this asshole."

"Please." Oakley's brows knit, twisting her expression just enough that Phoebe lets out a heavy sigh of reluctance

"Fine, but I'm waiting for you right inside those doors." She points, giving me a long, hard look that promises me a world of hurt if I so much as breathe the wrong way.

Glancing backward over her shoulder, Phoebe makes her way toward the barn doors and disappears inside.

And as much as I'm glad she's gone... It doesn't settle the uneasiness inside me. My eyes shift back to Oakley as I wait for her to speak first. Though I'm not sure I have the words I need to reply to her.

"I thought you said you weren't going," she finally says. Her voice surprises me with an edge of calmness that I wasn't expecting.

"I never said," I tell her, admitting at least one level of dishonesty. "I just let you think it."

Her shoulders go up. Her jaw sets. This is the Oakley I've only seen a few times, determined and angry and ready to kick up a fuss.

I've seen her brother Bo get her that riled up, and a few times her little sister Maggie, too.

I've even known Oakley to vent a little bit in private to me when her dad was particularly stubborn about something...

But she's never turned that furious expression on me.

I'd admire it if it didn't scare the shit out of me.

Watching her mouth work as she starts to find her voice, I brace myself for what's coming. Because it's going to be bad. Really bad.

"You should wipe off your mouth," she says with a sneer. Her eyes skating over my face like she's looking at a pile of cow shit. "I'd never wear that ugly shade of lipstick."

Heat floods me as I scrub at my mouth with the back of my palm. It comes away stained with red and churns my guts. I'd jerked my lips away from Savannah's the moment I felt them touching me, but apparently, not fast enough.

"How could you?" Oakley holds up her hand before I have the chance to reply. Voice breaking. Whispering. "Never mind. I don't want to hear your stupid excuses. I just can't believe you'd lie to me, Jamie."

"I didn't lie," I start, trying to make her hear me.

"Letting me believe that you weren't going is the same as telling me you weren't... Same as telling me you l-loved me... When obviously that was a lie!"

I want to take her in my arms and cradle her against my chest. Wipe her tears away. Kiss her lips until she smiles again. But there's no way she's going to allow that.

"I do love you, Oakley. And I didn't lie to you. I didn't tell you that I'd decided for

sure about the circuit because I didn't want to ruin your birthday."

"Well," she says with a wobbly, tear-streaked smile, "I'd say you certainly managed to ruin it, anyway."

After that, I'm not sure what there is left to say. We stare at each other, neither of us speaking. My throat hurts from trying not to scream that I was only trying to do the right thing.

Instead, I keep my voice as soft as I can. "I've never lied to you, Oakley. No matter what you think. But what about you?"

She looks at me, eyes narrowing slightly as she shakes her head. "What about me?"

"You've never told me what you finally decided, either.

"I hate myself for sounding so mean, but I can't help it.

This night has been turned upside down and inside out.

Just like my entire life. "What Phoebe said. About you waiting around for me. Did you decide for sure you weren't going to New York? "

Despite everything I've told myself about how important the chance is for her, I can't hide the hope in my voice when I start to think that maybe she decided not to go.

But by the way her chin goes up, lips pressed together in a thin, grim line, I realize that she isn't going to tell me what I want to hear. The girl I love is gone, replaced by a robot that looks like her but could never be her.

"I'm going to NYU," she finally replies. Her voice is cold and distant as she lets out a

heavy breath. “And I never want to see you again.”

Before I even have time to process what she’s said, she turns on her heel and stalks away from me as if everything we shared over the last three years meant absolutely nothing to her. As if I meant nothing to her.

Eight seconds is all we get on the back of a bull... It took even less time than that to end things with the only girl I’ll ever love.

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OAKLEY

Have I slept, even for a few minutes? It doesn't feel like it. I'm not sure if I was even able to fully close my eyes. They're so swollen and sore, aching from all the tears I shed over the situation with Jamie.

If I did sleep, I tell myself, maybe that means everything that happened last night was nothing more than the worst of nightmares. But as soon as I wake up, it all crashes down upon me again.

Rolling onto my back, I stare up at my ceiling. Counting the seconds that tick along to the metronome of my heart. Hardly able to believe it hasn't simply stopped, too broken to keep beating.

There is a real, harsh pain in my chest. I press my fingers to it and imagine bruises forming on my skin. Pulling down the neckline of my pajama top to check, I find only my bare and freckled skin. No physical evidence of my shattered heart.

Though it's there, broken and dying in a million shards scattered around my chest.

How many tears can I possibly shed? Every bit of moisture in my body feels like it's been squeezed out of me. My mouth is so dry that I can hardly swallow. My tongue feels thick. My teeth, slimy, and my eyes are gritty from lack of sleep.

Phoebe had wanted to come up with me last night, insisting that I shouldn't be alone.

I loved her for that, and for the way she'd come to my defense with Jamie.

But I couldn't let her stay. Couldn't face listening to her call him names and being unable to defend him, knowing that everything she said about him was turning out to be true.

All the years of trust vanished faster than I can blink.

I might have been able to forgive him kissing Savannah, maybe even convinced myself that his claims were true and she'd forced herself on him.

She was the sort of girl to do something like that, if only so she could cause a rift between us as revenge for me warning my brother away from her.

Seeing her paw at my boyfriend—correct that—ex-boyfriend, was enough to make me want to puke, but it was the deeper truth lurking that really kept me tossing and turning all night.

Jamie had decided he was going on the circuit, and he let me think he wasn't.

He'd left the decision of me going to school totally on my shoulders, knowing that I thought he'd be staying behind.

The love of my life had done his best to make it easy for me to leave him.

Maybe that was why he'd let Savannah kiss him. He couldn't have known I was there to see it, but he might've given in to her as an excuse for why we should break up. I start sobbing again and pound my fist into the pillow. Over and over, until a feather drifts free and I fall onto my back.

What a coward! He's made every moment we've shared over the past three years into nothing but a foolish dream that, apparently, I was the only one believing in. If he wanted to end things with me, he should've just done it, not made it so I had no other

choice.

I think I could never be less hungry than I am right now, but then the wafting scent of fresh waffles tickles my nose. My stomach growls in response. I'm surprised by how suddenly ravenous I am.

I guess crying all night burns a lot of calories.

Taking a quick shower, I make sure to scrub away as many signs of my restless night as I can.

What doesn't wash away in the shower I cover up with makeup.

Under-eye concealer, a touch of eyeliner and mascara, a slick of lipgloss.

I shudder at the memory of that red stain on the corner of Jamie's mouth.

Not dead center, but to the side. Exactly where a kiss would land if someone was trying to turn his face and keep a pair of treacherous lips off of him. Shaking my head, I shove away those thoughts. It doesn't matter who kissed who first.

I'm going to New York University. I'll be majoring in Marketing and Management and will get my Business Administration degree. I'm going to live with my Aunt Kathy and Uncle Rick and enjoy the best of New York City society. Fulfill my dreams. Make my family proud. Make myself proud.

And I'll leave Jamie Walker in my past.

My throat closes up again and I must fight off a fresh wave of tears. Downstairs, in the kitchen, I find my mom hovering over the waffle iron. She smiles as she greets me, but there's a shadow of concern in her bright blue eyes.

“Morning,” she says.

With her sandy blond hair tied in a ponytail over one shoulder, my mom could almost pass for my older sister. I look more like my Aunt Kathy than I do my mom. Mom and I share the same smile, though. Mine doesn’t quite make it to my eyes today. I can feel her studying me.

“Soo,” she says while sliding a waffle onto a plate, gesturing for me to sit at the table. “Would you like to talk about what happened last night?”

When my two siblings and I were little kids, Mom always seemed to know when one of us had gotten into something we shouldn’t have. We never figured out her secret, only that she always found out. Which has obviously transitioned to my current situation.

The corners of my mouth turn down as I stab my fork into the waffle. Golden syrup oozes out of the pitcher as I pour it. It makes me think of Jamie. He always drowned his waffles in sticky sweet goodness. And the reminder only makes eating breakfast that much more irritating and painful.

I stuff my mouth with a syrupy waffle and chew as fast as I can. Glancing up to see her staring at me as I swallow the bite and lick my lips, pretending to have no idea what she’s talking about. “Nothing happened last night.”

“I know that isn’t true,” she says gently, without scolding me for not telling her the truth. “Bo told me about it. Not the details. Just that something happened with you and the Walker boy.”

“J-Jamie,” I say with a catch in my voice. “Don’t call him the Walker boy. And... No, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Did he try to...pressure you, Oakley?”

Alarmed, I look up. My jaw drops into a startled “O.” My mom has no clue and I don’t aim for her to get one. I fight the heat in my cheeks. “No. Nothing like that, Mom. It’s just that we had a fight, that’s all. I’m... I’ve decided that I’m going to NYU.”

Mom turns back to the stainless steel mixing bowl in her hands. Her voice is light and deceptively unconcerned. “Oh? I thought that was already decided. Kathy told me just yesterday that she has your room all ready.”

Mom’s blue gaze rises to pierce mine. “She’d have been so disappointed to find out you weren’t going to use it.”

I swallow the lump in my throat that feels like it will never go away. Taking my plate, I head for the French doors to the back patio before pausing in my step to shake my head. “Nope. Can’t wait. I’m going out back to eat at the patio table. It’s such a nice day.”

It’s a horrible day. The worst. I hate the bright June sunshine. The sound of birds doing their stupid singing. I hate the scent of freshly mown grass. The far-off lowing of cattle.

Closing my eyes, I manage to stop myself from bursting into tears, but only barely.

“Morning.” Bo yawns, stretching his arms over his head as he steps through the back door to the patio in nothing but a pair of loose basketball shorts. “You look like you got hit in the face with an ugly stick.”

“Screw you, Bo.” My voice holds no heat, but my face probably shows my clear irritation.

“Whoa.” He exclaims. His brows rise to meet his hairline. “Shit. Are you okay? You guys really broke up last night, huh?”

“I don’t want to discuss it with you,” I reply, stabbing my waffles hard enough to clank my fork on the plate beneath it. Glaring at him, my eyes narrow. “How’d you know about that?”

Not that I should be surprised that he knows.

Bo looks wary. He scrubs his hand through his thick dark hair as he takes a seat in a chair next to me before cupping the back of his neck. The older he gets, the more he looks just like our dad, right down to the crease in his forehead that appears when he’s worried about something.

“Chet said there was some kind of argument with you and J. That’s all I heard,” Bo says, shifting in his chair, squeaking it on the flagstone pavers.

I can tell by the way he cuts his gaze from mine that he’s not telling me the entire truth. He’s trying to save my feelings, maybe. Covering for Savannah? No. My brother knows she’s a conniving manipulator. He wouldn’t take her side for anything.

“Did everyone hear about it?”

Now I’m imagining everyone talking about us, the golden couple splitting up. It makes me want to sink right into the pavers and disappear. I let out a heavy sigh and fight back a sob. Bo frowns. Angrily, he pushes away from the patio table.

“You should’ve known better,” is all he says, getting up. “I mean, Oakley, he’s a Walker.”

I’ve been listening to my dad talk about Jamie like he’s bad news for years. Dad hates

Jamie's father, Greg. Neither one will share what started the rivalry, only that it's been going on for years. But this is the first time I've heard my brother talk about my boyfriend in that tone of voice.

My ex-boyfriend. I guess I have to call him that now.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I demand, shoving away my plate.

"C'mon. You know what it means. His family's always going to work the circuit, same as ours runs the ranch. If you ever thought Jamie was going to give up bull riding and traveling, you were being stupid."

Stupid. Hearing him say that to me is like a stab to my already shattered heart.

Recoiling, I force myself not to scream at him. Keeping my voice steady and measured. I can't risk raising it, or else I'll burst into tears again. "We were talking about it. About what would be best for us. I just thought he'd decided not to do it. Turns out, I was wrong."

Bo sighs and scrapes his hand through his hair again. Before letting his head hang, he keeps his voice low. "Oakley, I decided months ago that he wasn't going to give it up. He's known for months. Everyone has. I told you he couldn't be trusted."

"That's not true," I argue. "You never said?—"

"I did," my brother interrupts quietly. "Back when you two first got together. I told you not to mess around with a bull rider."

I want to deny what he's saying, but I can't. I do remember that conversation more fluently than I should. "That was three whole years ago. Jamie's never done anything to break my trust in him!"

Bo says nothing. I hear my own words echoing in my head. I am exactly what he just called me.

Stupid.

Because maybe Jamie hadn't broken my trust in him until now, but what happened last night was all he ever needed to do.

"Look." Bo scowls and shakes his head. "You warned me off Savannah back when I thought she was really into me. You told me she was getting close to me so she could get into the family since hers was having money trouble. I trusted that you had my best interests at heart, Oakley. I guess I'm asking you to trust that I have the same for you."

The pain in Bo's voice is real. He might not have loved or even liked Savannah Ward the way I loved Jamie, but it still had to suck to realize Savannah was using him. He hadn't really talked, per se, to anyone about being more than a friend since then.

We might fight sometimes, but I do know that my brother loves me. That he wants the best for me, as I want that for him.

"You can't waste your life on a bull rider, Oakley," he finally says. His voice is a little more sad than I expect to hear from him. "You need to do what's best for you."

"Don't worry, Bo. I'm not going to spend another second on that piece of trash. I'm going to NYU," I tell him, watching a small spark of a smile litter the corner of his lips.

I expect my voice to tremble with emotion, but it's surprisingly steady. Maybe because even though I've said it a bunch of times already, this is the first time I've actually managed to convince myself I mean it.

I'm done with Jamie Walker.

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JAMIE

I haven't been able to eat or sleep for days. Not since the fight between Oakley and I. No matter how many times I promise myself I'll get over it and start to move on, so far, all I've been able to do is stare out the window of my bedroom. Or drive in endless circles for hours.

Every time I look over at the passenger side seat, all I can see is her smiling at me. Wind tossing her hair as the hem of her skirt slowly rises along her leg. My fingers tickling her knee as she playfully swats at me, before telling me to keep my eyes on the road.

Scraping both hands through my hair, not caring if it stands on end or that I look like I've been through a cyclone—as my mom would've said—I'm suddenly desperate to talk to her.

To my mom, that is. To sit down and tell her how badly I fucked up and how desperate I am to make things right with Oakley.

I lift my phone and swipe to bring up her number.

But a part of me knows that it's useless.

She hasn't answered the dozens of calls I've already made.

Though, just like every time before, I call anyway, praying that this time she'll answer.

But as usual, my call goes straight to voicemail, yet again.

Anger boils through my veins like a hot flame as I throw my phone onto the table with a clatter, not caring if I shatter the screen. I can always get another phone.

She won't respond to calls, texts, or even emails. I've tried reaching out to her through every social network I could find, but she's unfriended, unfollowed, and blocked me everywhere. I even showed up at her house. Her mom turned me away.

I guess I should be lucky it was her mom and not her dad who answered the door.

Mrs. Montgomery looked sympathetic, at least. She'd shaken her head when I asked if Oakley was home.

Told me it would be best if I left without making a fuss.

Of course I had, but now I regret that I didn't stay, didn't climb the tree next to her room.

Thrown pebbles at her window. Done whatever it took to show her that I wasn't going to settle for her ignoring me.

I'll never be able to replace Oakley.

How can you beg someone to give you another chance when they won't even see you?

My dad was happy when I told him that I'd committed to the circuit, but he's pissed off at me now because every time he's asked me to go practice, I've turned him down.

Ignored his subtle, then blatant attempts at guiltning me.

His threats slide right off me, slick as oil.

I think he's starting to get a little afraid I'm going to back out on him.

Hell. Maybe I will.

I don't even know if I want the circuit anymore. The only reason I was considering doing it was to save up money for me and Oakley. Everything I do is for her, but now with her gone, what's the point?

My dad might lose some money, but I think it's his reputation that he's more worried about.

Walker Rodeo is all he's cared about since we lost Mom.

It's like, once she died, he poured every spare emotion he had into the business.

Sometimes I wonder if he wishes me and my sister Penny would just up and disappear so he could spend all of his time working instead of having to worry about us and how we're turning out.

Regardless, even if I'm old enough to be out on my own now, Penny's only sixteen.

She still needs him, and his blatant disregard for her most of the time is irritating.

Granted, Dad doesn't pester her about taking up bull riding, of course.

Sometimes I envy that, but other times, I'm glad that I at least have the option.

Without riding, Penny's stuck doing the grunt work for the business.

Billing and stuff like that. I know she hates it. But, like me, she feels stuck.

No place to go but Walker Rodeo.

The Skyview Falls High School graduation ceremony starts in just over an hour. I'm supposed to be there, graduating with her. To cheer Oakley on as she gets her diploma, then hear her voice when I get mine. Pose for pictures with her in our caps and gowns.

Hell, start our adulthood together. But now it's all just gone.

I've spent the past three years of my life picturing how we'd live once we got out of school, and never once did I imagine that we wouldn't be together.

"You ready?" My dad knocks on my doorframe. Sounding gruff, he's wearing a tie and shirt. It looks weird on him. I'm used to him in jeans, a flannel shirt and cowboy boots.

"I don't really want to go. Might just skip it. It's just a bunch of speeches that last too long." I shrug.

Dad frowns. Narrows his eyes at me. "Too bad. You're going. Your high school graduation is a big deal. You can't let some silly breakup stop you from taking your honors. Your mom... She'd have been so proud."

I think about asking if it's too much for him to admit that he's proud, too.

But, in the end, I don't bother. I don't have the energy to fight with him about anything more.

Though, the more I think about it, it would be the perfect opportunity to finally speak to Oakley.

She's going to be there, and there's no way she can avoid me then.

The moment we arrive at the field, I take my place among my classmates.

I scan the assigned seats for any sign of her, then deflate when I realize that I won't be able to tell where she'll be sitting.

So, instead, like a zombie, I suffer through the ceremony.

My heart nearly stops when she crosses the stage to get her diploma.

Listening as they rattle off the long list of her accomplishments, everything she's worked so hard for over the years.

A sense of pride sweeps over me, filled with nothing but love for my girl.

As the ceremony finally ends and the crowd disperses, I look for her.

She won't be able to run away from me without making a scene, something I know she won't want to do.

I do my best to avoid the rest of the Montgomery family, but they seem to be everywhere I turn.

Her brother, Bo. Little sister, Maggie. Her dad.

All of them block her off from me, and when they're not, my dad drags me around to meet someone he wants to brag to.

If I didn't know better, I'd think it was some kind of conspiracy to keep Oakley and me apart.

When I finally get a moment to break away from my dad, I try to look around for Oakley again, only to realize that she's nowhere in sight. I spot Phoebe standing with

a bunch of our classmates taking selfies, so I push through the crowd to get to her. “Where’s Oakley?”

At first, Phoebe clearly doesn’t want to answer. Then, she shrugs. “I guess it doesn’t matter if I tell you. She already left.”

My heart twists. Frowning, I clench my fists at my sides to stop myself from raking them through my already messy hair. “For home?”

Phoebe hesitates, looking wary. I pace in front of her, then stop dead center to look her right in the eyes. “Where. Is. She?”

“She left as soon as graduation was over. She and her mom went home to change, then they’re leaving for New York.”

“Tonight?” My heart stops. My stomach twists and turns like I’m on one of those spinning rides at the carnival.

Phoebe shrugs. “They might already be on the road.”

“No.” That single word drops out of my mouth, heavy as a stone. “No. She can’t. Without even saying goodbye? I don’t believe it.”

“You really hurt her,” Phoebe replies, staring at me with a look that shows nothing but disappointment. “What did you expect?”

“I don’t know!” I shout. Frustration fills me as people around us begin to look on. “Not for all this shit to happen though. Not for her to...leave! Not without a chance to earn her forgiveness.”

Stepping forward, I meet Phoebe’s gaze, silently pleading with her to do something to help me, but, deep down, I know she can’t. “If you hurry...” she says, “you might be

able to catch her.” She lets out a heavy breath. “Maybe.”

All I need is a maybe.

Without wasting another moment, I rush through the crowd in search of my dad. My heart beats rapidly with the anticipation of getting to her. In convincing her not to leave with the way things are.

The moment I spot him talking to the hardware clerk from town, I catch his eye and shout from a distance that he’s going to have to ride home with someone else.

Laughter escapes his lips for a moment, seeming to think that I’m joking.

But he must quickly realize that I’m serious by the way I swing the keys in my hand.

I’d driven to this place, and now—I’d be driving out.

I peel out of the parking lot and drive like a bat out of hell to the Montgomery Ranch, tearing up the long driveway, all the way to the main house. I screech to a halt in front. Gravel sprays everywhere. I jump out of the truck, the engine still running.

“Oakley!” I yell, taking the steps two at a time as I scale her front porch. “Oakley! Please, don’t leave like this!”

It’s too late, though. The sound of tires on gravel perks my ears. My feet rush around the side of the house as I leap over the porch railing just in time to see Mrs. Montgomery’s car pulling out from the shorter driveway at the back of the house.

There’s no way that she didn’t know I was here. She knew, and regardless of that—she left.

Head hanging, I finally stop. Tears brim my eyes as I trudge back toward the house.

Defeated.

I'd tried everything to get her to see me... To listen to me and potentially forgive me.

And she refused. She refused to give me the time of day.

By the time I reach the front of the house, Bo's standing by my truck, which isn't running anymore. His eyes narrow in my direction as his arms crossed over his chest, completely dissatisfied by my presence.

I wonder what he sees in my expression since he looks like he's squaring up. I'm suddenly too furious to hold back. "Call her," I demand. "Tell them to come back."

"No, man." He scoffs, standing up so that his arms fall to his side. "That's fucking stupid. You need to get over yourself and let her go."

I don't care. "Call her. Tell her I'm here. She'll want to say goodbye. She can't leave without...without..."

"Let her go," Bo says again, a little more firmly. "She's better off without you."

At that moment, I'm a bull and Bo's the red flag. All I see is red. I'm not even sure how I end up crossing the distance between us, only that my fists are swinging, and Bo clocks me square in the jaw. Sending me back spinning, only to put my head down and come at him again.

He ducks out of the way. "Cut it out, J! She'd hate this!"

Panting, I face him. My face hurts, but not as much as my pride. Or my heart.

"What did you think would happen when you took up with Savannah?" Bo says, shaking his head. "You can't think my sister would stand for that."

“I didn’t take up with that fucking whore. Shit, why would I? I already had the most perfect girl in the world! That stupid bitch tried to force herself on me on purpose!”

Bo looks startled for a moment. His eyes widen before his shoulders sag slightly with a nod of his head. “I should’ve known better than to believe anything that girl says. But, J, man, that’s not the only reason you chose the circuit over her.”

“I don’t give a fuck about the circuit. I was only doing it to make sure that I had money saved to take care of her. To make sure our future was set. I’d never fucking leave Oakley. My life is nothing without her.”

Before Bo can open his mouth again, the sound of the screen door slamming against the house echoes through the air, turning both my and Bo’s attention to the house behind us.

David Montgomery storms out of the front door.

The man is nothing but pure intimidation with his six foot seven linebacker-built physique, and dark narrowed eyes that are staring straight in my direction.

“What the hell is going on out here?” he snaps, glancing at his son. “Bo? Is this jackass coming at you?”

Despite the man having more graying hair than most men his age, he isn’t out of shape. I know better than to piss off David Montgomery, but I suppose that did go out the door the moment Bo told me to get lost.

“He held his own,” I reply, running a hand over my jaw. “I didn’t even get in a punch.”

“Good. Because if I found out you’d put a hand on my son, your ass would be in jail so fast your head would spin. Now get out of here,” Mr. Montgomery says in a

steady, flat voice.

I can't figure out why it sounds so familiar. Then it hits me. It's how Oakley had sounded when she told me she was going to New York.

My chin tips up, my voice solid and steady with the same icy chill as his. "I came to say goodbye to Oakley."

"I know what you came here for, and I'm glad she left before she had to be subjected to you.

To...this." Mr. Montgomery twists his hand in Bo's direction, then at me, face creasing with disgust. "I should've known you'd behave like this.

Any son of Greg Walker's can't be trusted to know how to behave right. "

"I know you've never liked me," I tell him steadily.

"That's right. I never have. Never will. You're not good enough for my daughter. Are you happy I finally said it out loud? You will never be good enough."

His words hit me harder than they should. I knew deep down that he felt that way, but hearing him say it out loud is a slap in the face that I'm not prepared for. Regardless, if a part of me wants to let him see how much his words affect me, I don't.

"Yeah. Now that she's not here to hear it and argue with you," I tell him.

"But you should know something. You can hate me from now until the cows come home. That's fine with me since I guess right now I'm not such a fan of yours, either.

But, with all due respect, sir, I love your daughter and I will never let her go. "

I turn on my heel and climb back into my truck, then drive off, unwilling to look back at the one place that held so many memories between me and Oakley. Away from Montgomery Ranch, filled with people who despise my presence.

People who will eventually be eating their words when I finally make Oakley Montgomery mine. Because one thing I'm sure of more than anything, she will be mine.

No matter what it takes to make that happen.

THE END

Jamie's and Oakley's story will continue soon in Riding Jamie.