



# Cowgirls Don't Cry (Silver Creek #1)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Ellie Brooks swore she'd never return to Silver Creek. After her family tragedy, she left the small town with big dreams, certain she was destined for more than its quiet streets and familiar faces. But dreams have a way of turning into nightmares, and when Ellie finally finds the courage to escape, there's only one place left to go—home.

Back in Silver Creek, she's welcomed with open arms, but some wounds are harder to hide. The McKinleys—her second family—offer her a place to stay at their ranch, but staying means facing their son, Colt—the man she left behind. A man who once held her heart.

Colt has spent two years trying to forget Ellie, but the moment she walks back into his life, he knows forgetting was never an option. He can see the shadows in her eyes and the bruises she's trying to hide.

As old sparks reignite and long-buried feelings resurface, Ellie must decide if she's willing to trust again. But danger isn't as far behind as she thinks, and the past she ran from may be closer than she ever imagined.

**Total Pages (Source):** 37

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

Your destination is on the right in one mile.

Finally.

I had spent the last day and a half traveling from Dallas to Silver Creek, driving straight through, only stopping for the essentials. At this point, I was surviving off Red Bulls and McDonald's french fries alone.

"Look at me now, Mom and Dad, running from my problems instead of facing them head-on like you tried to teach me to growing up," I said in my empty SUV as it inched closer and closer to my final destination. "Some lessons are harder learned than others, I suppose."

Even though my parents weren't in the car with me, I knew they could still hear me. At least that's what I chose to believe—that when people die, they are still here with us in spirit.

And that's what my parents were—dead .

The entire way here, I could feel my chest tightening, my anxiety peaking at an all-time high. That was pretty normal for someone in my situation, though.

But I was finally crossing into Silver Creek. The moment my tires passed the city limits sign, I could finally breathe again.

It was almost eerie how everything looked exactly the same as the day I left two years ago.

The endless stretch of blue sky still arched overhead, framed by the familiar rise of mountain peaks, the sun hanging high in the afternoon haze.

But I wasn't the same naïve girl who once tried to outrun this town and my family tragedy, clinging to dreams and blind hope.

I was different now—bruised, battered, and broken in ways both visible and not.

Life had a funny way of doing that to you.

My hands tightened around the steering wheel as my SUV rattled down the familiar weather-worn two-lane highway. Welcome to Silver Creek, the sign to the right of the road read as I pulled into downtown.

As I continued driving, I thought about the events of the last forty-eight hours. All the emotions inside me were trapped, like a can of biscuits ready to bust at any second.

I wanted to cry, maybe even scream. It would probably make me feel better if I let it out, but I was sick of crying. Sick of shedding tears that no one gave a damn about.

If there was anything I learned during my time away from Silver Creek, it was that I couldn't count on anybody but myself. Nobody else was going to save me.

My car's GPS came to life, pulling me from my very own pity party.

"Your destination is on the right in four hundred feet," it announced.

Gravel crunched beneath my tires as I turned into the parking lot. The sun-faded sign on the front of the brick building said Maggie's. It was Silver Creek's only diner.

I parked, opened the car door, and slowly turned my stiff body, stepping out onto the

gravel lot. I took a deep breath and stretched my back, rolling the tension from my shoulders. Hours on the road had left me aching, but I was here. That was all that mattered.

The bell above the door jingled as I pushed through the entrance. When I stepped inside, the scent of blueberry pancakes and freshly brewed coffee wrapped around me.

The diner looked like something frozen in time: checkered floors, red vinyl booths, and a counter full of regulars clutching their coffee mugs like they held the secrets to the universe. Familiar faces filled the space, one in particular turning my way.

Maggie Holt—diner owner and town gossip extraordinaire—stood behind the counter, her eyes widening. A heartbeat later, she was rushing towards me, wiping her hands on her apron as she closed the distance.

“Well, I’ll be! Ellie Brooks, back in Silver Creek! I never thought I’d see the day.”

A real smile—the first in a long time—pulled at my lips as she wrapped me in a warm hug, the scent of syrup and coffee grounds surrounding me.

“Hey, Maggie.”

Before I could say anything else, another familiar voice broke through the buzz of the diner.

“Well, if it ain’t Ellie Brooks.”

I turned to see Jace McKinley, all easy grins and mischief, sliding into the booth across from where I stood like he owned the place.

Jace had a reputation around Silver Creek—a little reckless, a little wild—but underneath all that charm, he was as loyal as they came. He was like the little brother I never had.

“Didn’t think I’d see you back here so soon,” he mused, stretching an arm across the back of the booth he was sitting in.

Sitting right across from him was Liam Carson, the town sheriff and Jace’s lifelong best friend.

“Town’s been dull without you,” Liam joked.

The old Ellie would’ve engaged in their playful banter, even shot back a joke maybe, but I wasn’t that girl anymore. I was quieter, more beaten down than the person I was when I left two years ago. I tried to return his smirk, but it felt brittle.

“Didn’t think I’d be back either,” I said with a half laugh, shrugging my shoulders. Oh well, here I am—ready or not .

Liam studied me. Curiosity sprawled across his face as if he could tell I was hiding something.

“What brings you back after all this time?” he asked .

The question hung in the air. I hesitated, gripping the hem of my sweater and tugging it down over my wrists, making sure neither of them saw the secrets hiding beneath the fabric.

“Oh, nothing,” I answered lightly. “Just a change of scenery.” I forced a small, humorless laugh. “Turns out city life isn’t for me after all.”

It wasn't a complete lie.

My parents died when I was a senior in high school.

Watching a casket that held both of your parents as it was lowered six feet into the ground changes a person.

It changed me.

The second I got the chance, I packed up and left Silver Creek, certain I was destined for something different.

Dallas had been my fresh start—a new job, new apartment, new life—1,500 miles away from everything I knew in Silver Creek, Montana.

And for a while, it had been exactly what I needed.

Then I met Jason.

I was out one night at a bar with friends when he walked up and started flirting with me. We hit it off instantly. He asked me out on a date, and the rest was history.

Shattered, chaotic history, but history, nonetheless.

At first, he had been perfect—charming, attentive, the kind of man who seemed like the real deal. Looking back now, he definitely love bombed me.

But little by little, that illusion cracked .

First, it was the sharp words and the way he isolated me from my friends. Then came the control. The bruises followed not long after.

For a long time, I told myself that leaving wasn't an option. That things would eventually get better.

But two nights ago, Jason came home drunk— very drunk.

Staggering around the apartment, he searched for his cell phone.

Violently, he pulled out drawer after drawer, all their contents crashing loudly as he flung them to the floor.

After a few minutes of destroying our apartment with no luck, he set his sights on me.

“Give it back, you stupid bitch! I know you have it!”

“I didn't take your phone, Jason. You probably left it at the bar.”

But he wouldn't listen. He grabbed my wrists and slammed me into the kitchen wall, my head cracking the drywall.

A few moments later, he found his phone in his coat pocket—surprise, surprise. Then he passed out on our bed as if nothing happened.

In that moment, I knew. If I didn't leave, I would die.

They said lightning couldn't strike the same place twice, but I was starting to disagree.

My parents were strike one. Jason was strike two. I was certain strike three would be it for me and I wasn't waiting around to find out.

The next morning, after he left for work, I packed everything I could fit in my car and

drove away without looking back .

With nowhere else to turn, I decided to come to the only place I could call home. I drove through the night, only stopping for the necessities.

“So, what’s Ellie doing on her first day back in Silver Creek?” Jace asked.

His voice pulled me back from where I’d drifted off into my own painful memories. I straightened, focusing my attention back on Jace and Liam.

“I guess I need to find a place to stay for a while,” I said nervously. In a town this small, rentals were few and far between.

“You know,” Jace said, glancing at Liam, “if you need a place to stay, the guesthouse out at the ranch isn’t occupied right now.”

My stomach twisted. McKinley Ranch.

The ranch where I had spent most of my summers, falling in love with a boy who didn’t love me back.

Jace must have noticed my hesitation because his usual teasing softened.

“The ranch is always open to you, Ellie. You’re family, you know that.”

My throat tightened. Of course, I know that .

The McKinleys were the first to take me in after my parents died. I was just a few months shy of my eighteenth birthday. The state didn’t have room to take me on as a foster child, so basically, they said you’re on your own, kid—good luck .



The McKinleys gave me a place to stay for as long as I needed it—no questions asked.

Liam placed a hand on my shoulder, his fingers grazing my bleached-blond hair. I tried my best not to jump out of habit .

“Plus, I bet Colt will be glad to see you,” Liam added.

Will he, though?

The last time I saw him was the night I left. I could still see him standing on the front porch of the main ranch house, arms crossed, his jaw set in a hard line.

“You’re really leaving, huh?” His voice had been even, unreadable. I had gripped the strap of my bag like it was a lifeline.

“Yes, Colt. I am.”

He had searched my face for a long moment, like he was trying to find something.

“Are you coming back?”

I hesitated too long before answering, and he noticed. He always noticed.

“I just... feel like there’s more out there for me, Colt,” I had said, forcing myself to look him in the eye. “Something bigger than this town.”

A saddened look had flickered in his blue eyes, but all he did was nod. That’s all he ever did.

“Then go, Ellie.” His voice had been quiet. “Go spread your wings.”

No grand declarations. No arguments. Just that one simple sentence.

I exhaled slowly, the reality of my current situation starting to settle. I was homeless, broke, and broken.

I quickly slid on my sunglasses, hoping neither Jace nor Liam would notice the tears welling in my hazel eyes.

My can of biscuits was about to bust—again .

“Well, it was good seeing you both,” I said, clutching my purse as if my life depended on it. “I should probably start my hunt for a place to stay.”

Jace leaned forward. “Ellie, come on. No need to go looking for some rundown rental when the guesthouse is open. It’s yours if you want it.”

I hesitated. “I don’t know. I don’t want to overstep...”

Liam nodded. “It makes sense. You don’t have to stay forever. Just until you find something permanent.”

I looked between them, my heart going back and forth.

Yes, no.

Yes, no.

“Okay,” I said finally, my voice barely above a whisper. “Just for a few days.”

Jace grinned. “Great, it’s settled then,” he said, clasping his hands together as if he had just sealed a business deal.

And just like that, I was heading back to McKinley Ranch—ready or not.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

The summer sun blazed high overhead, radiating across the rolling pastures of the ranch.

Heat rose from the ground in shimmering waves as sweat rolled down my neck, soaking the collar of my shirt. I guided my horse through the field, rounding up the last of the cattle for the day.

Dust swirled around the herd, their low, lazy moos blending with the rustle of dry grass beneath their hooves. Once I got this bunch moved to the new pasture, I could call it a day.

I tugged gently on the reins and wiped my brow, scanning the horizon.

This ranch wasn't just a piece of property—it was my family's legacy. Three generations of McKinleys had poured blood and sweat into these acres. Every fence post, every pasture gate, every trail worn into the dirt told a story.

Golden fields stretched in every direction, melting into the thick line of pines and oaks that stood like watchmen at the edge of the property. A well-worn dirt road cut through it all, winding past the barn with its fresh coat of red paint—a little touch of pride and promise for the future.

Near the barn, a couple horses dozed by the fence line, swatting away flies with their tails. Beyond them, others grazed in the shade. The scent of earth, hay, and sunbaked wood clung to the air—familiar, grounding.

Up on the hill, the old ranch house stood just as strong as it always had.

Its wraparound porch looked out over everything my family had built, and the oak tree in the front yard still held the tire swing my grandfather had hung years ago.

The white fence around it leaned a little more every season, but it held. Just like us.

The buzz of my phone in the pocket of my Wranglers snapped me out of my daydream.

I look down at the caller ID.

Jace.

“Please tell me you picked up the bottle-feeding supplies,” I said without a hello, picturing the weak little calf in the barn. We’d spent the past twenty-four hours helping a young heifer birth her first calf. The cow finally finished laboring, but now the damn calf refused to nurse.

If she didn’t take a bottle soon, we’d lose her. And no matter what people thought about me, burying animals—especially calves—always hit me hard. I wasn’t in the mood for it today.

“You’ll be happy to know I got what we need—and then some,” Jace said, a little too chipper.

I narrowed my eyes, even though he couldn’t see me. “Care to elaborate? ”

“She’s driving behind me. Depending on where you’re at, you’ll see us pulling in soon.”

Sure enough, a rising trail of dust caught my attention down by the entrance road.

I spotted Jace's truck first. A second vehicle following close behind—a small white SUV I didn't recognize at first.

“Jace, we don't need some buckle bunny hanging around the ranch today,” I muttered, already annoyed. “Turn her around and take her back to town.”

He laughed. “Oh, she's no buckle bunny.”

As the SUV rounded the bend and passed beneath the iron arch that read McKinley Ranch, something about it clicked.

A BMW. White. Clean. Way too out of place.

My heart skipped. I only knew one person who drove a car like that.

“What the—” I stopped myself short as realization dawned.

“Something wrong, brother? Cat got your tongue?” Jace teased. I could hear the smirk in his voice.

I stared as the SUV inched closer, following Jace's truck, dust curling around the tires. I could make out the driver behind the wheel. I'd know that long blonde hair anywhere.

“I'll be damned,” I muttered as Jace ended the call. “Ellie.”

I tightened my grip on the reins and clicked my tongue, guiding my horse back towards the guesthouse as the two vehicles rumbled closer and closer to its driveway.

By the time I reached the front of the ranch, Jace was already out of the truck, striding towards Ellie's car.

She stepped out hesitantly, her gaze sweeping over the ranch like she was trying to soak it all in. The way her eyes lingered on the pastures, the barn, the old oak tree by the fence line—it was as if she were sifting through memories, reliving every moment she'd spent here as a child.

Her blonde hair caught the sunlight as the strands swayed in the breeze, and she wore an old navy-blue sweater despite the stifling afternoon heat.

She looked different. Smaller. Tired.

When she finally finished taking it all in, she turned and our eyes locked.

Damn.

The sight of her still hit me like a punch to the gut.

She looked away, busying herself with her bags. I swung down off my horse and walked towards them just as Jace popped the trunk.

“Jace,” I greeted, sauntering up to both of them, my dirt-covered boots crunching on the gravel.

“Look who I just found at Maggie’s,” he said with a grin.

“I see that.” I kept my voice even, though my mind was spinning. “Ellie,” I said as I tipped my cowboy hat at her.

She nodded, hugging her arms around her torso. “Hey, Colt. Long time no see.”

“What brings you back to these parts?” I asked, tilting my head.

She hesitated for half a second before forcing a small grin. “City life isn’t for me after all. ”

She let out a short laugh, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

I studied her body language for a moment. The way she said it left me wondering if she was back for good or just temporarily.

Any time someone in town mentioned Ellie, they talked about how much she loved her new life in Dallas.

I even ran into one of her old friends one night at a local bar.

All they could talk about was how well she was doing—how she had moved into a great apartment in the city and had recently started dating someone.

Jackson? Jason, maybe? I couldn’t remember.

What I did remember was the way my stomach had twisted hearing that last part.

She had moved on, built a life for herself. By all accounts, she was happy.

So why was she standing in front of me right now?

“Let me help you with your bags,” I offered, reaching for her suitcase.

“Oh, no, you don’t have to do that,” she said, trying to stop me before I could grab it.

As she reached out, her sleeve shifted just enough for me to catch a glimpse of a faint bruise circling her wrist.



The moment she realized the bruise was exposed, she yanked her hand back, letting it drop to her side, fists clenched.

I forced my expression to stay neutral, jaw tight.

I knew Ellie better than anyone. Pelting her with questions now wouldn't get me answers.

Plus, anything could cause a bruise. I was probably overthinking it .

Or maybe I wasn't.

"I'm not letting you carry your own bags, Ellie," I said, keeping my tone light. "My momma would have my hide if she ever found out. Besides, you're probably exhausted from the drive."

She hesitated, like she wanted to argue, then sighed and stepped back, letting me take the suitcase.

"She said she was looking for a place to stay, so I offered her the guesthouse until she gets on her feet," Jace explained as we all walked up the steps of the wraparound porch.

"Is that so?" I asked, glancing at Ellie.

She shifted under my gaze but nodded. "Yeah, just until I figure things out."

"Well, Jace is right. You always have a place to stay here on the ranch, Ellie. You know that."

She gave a small nod.

The guesthouse looked a lot different than the last time Ellie had seen it. Before, it was outdated. No one had stayed in it for years. Now, it was cozy, warm, and smelled like fresh paint and linens.

It was one of the many projects I had worked on, trying to keep my mind from going crazy after Ellie left.

I sat her bags down near the couch and leaned against the marble kitchen counter.

“This place looks... different, but beautiful,” she said as she took it all in.

I smirked. “I remodeled it a few months ago. Some fresh paint and flooring can do a place wonders, huh?”

She looked at me, shocked.

“You did all of this?” she asked .

“Yep. On slow winter days, I kept myself busy with this remodel. Does it get the Ellie Brooks stamp of approval? Your attention to detail was always impressive—and scary,” I joked, looking towards her.

“Ha. Ha. Very funny. But if you must know, yes—yes it does,” she shot back.

Ellie crossed her arms. A hint of a smile played at her lips. It was the closest thing to a real smile I’d gotten out of her since she arrived.

Sunlight shone through the window, glinting off Ellie’s blonde hair.

The sight of it took me back to summers on the ranch with her. It was the same glow I studied every time we went to the lake or went horseback riding together.

Those were always the moments I thought Ellie was the prettiest damn thing I had ever laid eyes on.

I pushed that thought down, telling myself she was just Ellie, my best friend—nothing more.

She was high-society prom-queen Ellie Brooks. And I, well, I was just some dirty cowboy.

“Kitchens stocked with the basics, hot water works great, but if you need anything, I’m just up at the main house.”

She nodded. “Thanks, Colt. Really.”

I held her gaze for a moment longer before pushing off the counter. “Dinner’s at six at the main house.”

“Oh, I don’t want to intrude on a McKinley family dinner. I’ll just find something here or go pick up something in town if I have to,” she said.

“Are you kidding? As soon as my mom figures out you’re back, she’s going to be ecstatic. If you don’t show up to dinner, she might actually cry,” I said, half serious.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“She wouldn’t have it any other way, I’m sure of it,” I said, trying to convince her to come to dinner, half for the sake of my mom’s excitement, half for my own. “But just know, if you show up late, Jace will eat your share.”

“He’s right,” Jace said off in the distance of the house.

She smirked. “Okay, if you insist.”

I went to leave, hesitating at the door. “I’m glad you’re back, El.”

Her smile faltered slightly, but she covered it with a small nod. “It’s good to be back.”

I wasn’t sure if I believed her.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

The sun was setting as I made my way to the main house, the warmth of the day lingering in the air. I'd spent the last hour trying to gather my thoughts and figure out what to do next, but honestly, everything felt muddled.

I didn't expect coming back to Silver Creek to feel so... heavy.

Hearing Colt call me El again brought back too many memories and emotions all at once. The only people who ever called me El were Colt and my dad. One of them was never going to be able to call me El ever again. The thought shook me to my core.

Overthinking it, I talked myself out of going to dinner about a dozen times before finally deciding Colt was right. His parents would worry if I didn't show up.

As I stepped onto the wraparound porch of the main house, laughter and conversation spilled from inside.

The McKinleys had always been a lively bunch .

I never forgot how comforting it was to hear Colt's dad, Charlie, tell one of his old cowboy stories.

Or how his mom, Alice, was the best advice-giver. She always had a way of making sure you knew everything would be okay.

I took a deep breath as I opened the front door.

“Man, you should’ve seen the look on your face when you got hit by that branch yesterday,” Colt said, wiping a smirk off his face. “You looked like you saw a ghost.”

“I saw a ghost alright,” Jace shot back with a chuckle. “It was your sorry ass, just standing there watching me get smacked.”

“I thought you heard me warn you about the branch,” Colt replied, winking. “It’s not my fault you have bad hearing.”

Jace rolled his eyes dramatically. “My hearing is fine. You just never warned me.”

Colt reached for his glass of iced tea and took a sip, planting an innocent expression on his face with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

Jace wasn’t about to let it go though. He looked at me as I walked in the dining room, grinning.

“My ears may not work, but my roping hands do. You remember the cow roping situation, don’t you Ellie?” Jace asked eagerly.

“Vaguely,” I said, laughing as I remembered all the ridiculous stunts Colt had dragged me into when we were kids. “I’m not sure I ever fully recovered from the lasso disaster.”

Colt shot me a mocking glare, crossing his arms. “You’re just mad I tied up that cow quicker than you could, Ellie. ”

“Except then it broke free a few seconds later and took off after all of us.” I laughed, shaking my head.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. That was some of my best work,” Colt said,

his eyes gleaming with mischief.

“If that’s your best work, I’m scared to see your worst,” I said, rolling my eyes and laughing as I took a seat at the table.

Alice had pulled out all the stops for dinner tonight. There was a plethora of food—dishes of all kinds—mashed potatoes, green bean casserole, steamed broccoli, rolls, you name it.

As I placed my napkin on my lap, Alice carried the last dish in, setting it down with a satisfied smile.

“I hope everyone’s hungry. I made fried chicken. And for dessert, homemade cherry cheesecake.”

Jace eagerly picked up his fork, ready to dig in, but before he could take a bite, Alice snatched the fork from his hand.

“Have I taught you nothing, boy? You will not eat before we say grace.”

Jace sighed, his stomach growling in protest.

Alice turned to Colt with a warm smile. “Colt, honey, will you do us the honor of saying grace?”

Charlie and Alice joined hands, Jace reaching for mine. As I placed my hand into Jace’s, I glanced over at Colt, silently questioning whether he would do the same.

After a brief pause, he extended his hand, waiting. Taking a deep breath, I placed my hand in his. His grip was warm and steady—rougher than I remembered .

As Colt bowed his head to pray, the room settled into a quiet hush.

“Lord, we thank You for the food before us and the hands that prepared it. We ask for Your strength and guidance every day as we take on the world before us. We thank You for another great year on the ranch. Without Your guidance, we would not be here today. We also thank You for the family that You have given us around this table. Amen.”

“Amen,” everyone echoed, wasting no time digging in.

Maybe I was overthinking it, but I was sure Colt had squeezed my hand as he said the last part of the prayer.

I looked in his direction, but his expression was unreadable.

“So, Ellie,” Charlie began, his deep voice tinged with interest, “what brings you back to Silver Creek?”

I froze for half a second, my fingers tightening around my fork. There was that question again.

I forced a small smile and shrugged. “Oh, you know... just needed a change of scenery.”

Charlie’s sharp blue eyes studied me, his gaze holding the weight of someone who had lived long enough to recognize a half-truth when he heard one.

“That so?”

I nodded quickly, taking a sip of water. “City life wasn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”



That wasn't a lie. It just wasn't the whole truth.

Alice, always the kind-hearted one, smiled knowingly. "Well, sweetie, how long are you staying?"

I hesitated, pushing my food around my plate. "I'm not sure yet. Just... playing things by ear."

Jace, unaware of the tension building under the surface, grinned. "Well, you know what they say about Silver Creek. It always ropes you back in."

My throat tightened, and I swallowed hard, forcing another smile. But I couldn't shake the feeling that I was a fraud, sitting at this table, lying to the very people who had always treated me like family.

With no solid escape plan, I kept my head low, focusing on my food and not the others around me.

After what I was sure was a full twenty-four hours, dinner finally ended. Picking up his empty plate, Colt motioned me towards the back door. "Want to sit out on the swing for a bit?"

I nodded, remembering the old wooden porch swing at the back of the house.

We stepped outside into the cool night air, the porch light casting a soft glow over the yard. The swing creaked as Colt sat down, patting the spot next to him. I hesitated only a moment before joining him, sinking into the cushioned seat. It rocked gently as we settled into the quiet night.

The darkness felt never-ending, stars twinkling above us like little diamonds scattered across the sky. I pulled my knees up to my chest, wrapping my arms around them,

watching the trees sway in the cool nighttime summer breeze.

“This place hasn’t changed much, has it?” I said softly, more to myself than to Colt.

He leaned back, the swing rocking lazily as he stared out into the darkness .

“No. Feels like the years just kind of blur together out here. Same trees, same porch, same old house.” He glanced over at me, a small smile tugging at his lips.

The sharp angles of his jaw had replaced the softer lines of youth, and the way he carried himself—confident, steady—was different too.

His shoulders seemed broader, his stance more sure, like he had grown into himself in the time we’d been apart.

The scraggly brown hair I was used to was trimmed back now, making him look older and more put together.

He was much more of a man than the boy I had left—easily a foot taller than me now too—all cowboy.

That did something to my chest it shouldn’t have.

I let out a soft sigh, my fingers trailing along the edge of the swing. “I remember the nights we used to stay out here for hours, just talking about nothing. How your parents always ended up joining us too.”

Colt chuckled, the sound low and easy. “Yeah, I think my dad might’ve been the only one who could stay awake longer than us. He always loved telling a tall tale,” Colt joked.

“He has a way of making it sound like we we’re living in the middle of a western movie.”

“I think that’s just how he sees life, honestly,” Colt said, shaking his head with fondness. “Like everything’s an adventure.”

“I’m jealous of his ability to see life in that way. Seems more like a video game to me, and I’ve been stuck on the same level for the last two years, no hope of making it to the end of the game,” I said, not sure why the honesty was spewing from my mouth, but it was.

Colt was quiet at first, probably not sure what to say. That was okay by me though. Sometimes I just needed someone to listen to me ramble. I didn’t need a response, just someone willing to listen.

Another trait of mine that used to make Jason mad—go figure.

We continued to sway gently on the swing, the coyotes howling off in the distance.

Finally, Colt broke the silence.

“If you’d rather stay in the main house, you can. The guesthouse is kind of tucked away and hidden in the trees. I don’t want you to be scared by yourself.”

“I’m not kicking your parents out of their own house, Colt,” I said, laughing at his crazy idea. “Also, I’m a big girl. I’m not afraid of a few wild animals.”

“You wouldn’t be kicking them out, you’d be kicking me out,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Oh, when did they move out?”

“Dad finished their cabin last summer. They live by the lake on the back side of the property. The main house is mine now because Jace moved into his own place in town. It’s just me, myself, and I,” he said.

“In that case, pack your bags, I’m moving in,” I said playfully.

“There’s the Ellie I know, always giving me shit.”

“I’m just kidding, I don’t mind staying by myself. But in all seriousness, can you walk me back to the guesthouse? I keep hearing those coyotes howling off in the pastures—no thanks,” I said, standing from the swing .

Colt stood and put his hat back on, leading the way back.

We walked together down the path, the night air crisp and cool, only our footsteps breaking the silence.

As we walked, I thought about how easy it was to sit back down with Colt and his family after all these years. It felt so familiar—comfortable.

Too bad it was only temporary.

When we reached the guesthouse, I turned to face Colt, instinctively pulling down the sleeves of my sweater to make sure my bruises weren’t showing—something I’d practiced for the last two years.

“Thanks for tonight,” I said quietly, the weight of the day settling in. “And for letting me stay here.”

Colt’s eyes softened, and he nodded, his usual grin replaced by something warmer.

“Anytime, El. If you need anything, you know where to find me.”

I lingered for a moment, not quite ready to step inside.

“Goodnight, Colt.”

“Goodnight, Ellie.”

I waited on the porch, watching as he disappeared into the darkness, making his way back towards the main house.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

I woke up early, just like I do every morning. The sun still hadn't peaked yet.

I contemplated one hundred times whether I should go check on Ellie. She was probably fine; she knew her way around the ranch. But what if she had forgotten?

In the end, I decided against it. She needed space. No matter what brought her back, stepping foot on McKinley Ranch again had to stir up a lot of hard emotions for her. I'd give her the morning.

Instead, I headed to the barn. My goal today was simple: get that damn calf to take a bottle, no matter what it took. I'd tried again last night after dropping Ellie off, but the little thing still wouldn't latch. It was like she didn't realize I was trying to save her damn life.

As I neared the barn, I slowed my steps. A voice drifted out through the open doors. It sure as hell wasn't one of the ranch hands. They cussed like sailors and their voices sounded like grinding gears, not sweet honey .

Curious, I stepped inside, keeping quiet. The voice was coming from the back stall, low and soothing. I crept down the aisle, past tack hooks and hay bales, until I reached the stall.

"There you go, sweet girl," the voice said. "You're doing it."

I eased up to the half-door and peeked over.

Ellie.

She was sitting in the hay, her back resting against the stall wall, legs stretched out beside the calf.

Her hair was pulled into a loose braid that had mostly fallen out, and she had smudges of straw on her jeans.

The calf, curled against her side like a pup, was sucking greedily on the bottle she held.

I cleared my throat softly, not wanting to startle them but needing to say something.

Ellie looked up with wide eyes, a smile tugging at her lips. “Oh, I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Not to sound like an ass,” I said, folding my arms over the door, “but what are you doing?”

She laughed lightly. “Couldn’t sleep, so I came down to see the horses. Jace was already here. He told me about this little girl before he left to get some supplies in town. He told me I could give it a try if I wanted to. So here we are.”

She looked back down at the calf, who was still suckling like she hadn’t spent the last two days refusing everything we’d offered.

“Took a bit of convincing, but she finally latched on,” Ellie said, eyes shining with pride. “Look at her go.”

I shook my head in disbelief, a slow grin forming .

“Well, I’ll be damned,” I said. “Looks like you’ve got the magic touch.”

Ellie smiled, continuing to nurse the calf. “I think she needs a name. Don’t you?”

No, she doesn’t. I knew better. Once Ellie gave this calf a name it would become her pet, and she would be sad if anything happened to it. Then I would be sad because Ellie was sad.

“Cows don’t need names, Ellie.”

“This one does. I think I’ve settled on Bessy. What do you think?”

I knew better than to argue with her. Once her mind was set, she wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

“Bessy it is,” I said, trying not to show how happy this moment was making me.

If you had told me last week that Ellie Brooks would be sitting in my barn right now, barefoot and nursing a calf that she named Bessy, I would have said you were crazy, but here we are.

“So, besides saving stubborn calves lives and giving them ridiculous names, what other plans did you have in store for today?” I asked teasingly.

She shot me a look. Her lips curving up into a half smile.

“Well, I need to go to town and run some errands. Maybe stop by the market for some groceries,” she said. “While the guesthouse is beautifully remodeled, its lacking in snacks and my fancy shampoo.”

I rolled my eyes, laughing. Exactly like Ellie to be worried about small things like the shampoo brand we have sitting in the shower .



“Are you judging me right now?” she teased, narrowing her eyes as she stood. “I’d share, but something tells me you use a 3-in-1 shampoo.” She gave a dramatic shiver, like it was the worst sin she could imagine.

I snorted. “It’s efficient.”

“It’s criminal,” she shot back, wrinkling her nose.

I leaned against the stall door, trying not to grin. But my brain picked the worst time to betray me with a vivid mental image of Ellie in the shower, steam curling around her as I worked that overpriced shampoo through her hair. Suds slipping down her bare shoulders, down her back...

I cleared my throat and shifted my stance before things got really awkward.

“Need me to go with you?” I asked, voice rougher than I meant it to be.

She raised an eyebrow, catching something in my tone. “I’m sure you have lots of cowboy things to do today.”

“Actually, I don’t now that you got that calf to nurse. I need to go to town to get some medicine and vaccines for it anyways,” I said, shrugging my shoulders.

“Are you sure? I don’t want to get in your way.”

“You’re never in my way, Ellie.”

She paused for a moment.

“Okay, just give me a minute to put on my boots. I took them off when I sat down next to Bessy here.”

Ellie pulled a pair of pink cowboy boots from the corner of the horse stall, sliding them onto her feet. They looked expensive with rhinestones all the way around. Everything about them screamed Ellie Brooks.

“Only you would have pink cowboy boots with rhinestones, Ellie,” I teased. “Those don’t seem very practical.”

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with being both fashionable and functional, Colt. Whatever you can do, I can do just as good, but in rhinestones.”

She clicked her heels together like she was Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz.

I looked her over as she dusted the hay from her blue jeans.

Damn, she was drop-dead gorgeous.

The denim hugged her thighs perfectly, the thin sweater fit snugly around her torso, and her blonde hair fell in soft waves.

“Ready,” she declared.

As we approached my truck, I opened the door, motioning for her to get in.

I liked watching Ellie hop into the passenger seat. It reminded me of when we used to drive around as kids, the ink on our drivers licenses barely dry.

“Alright, let’s get this show on the road,” I said, trying to sound casual as I started the truck, the engine roaring to life.

As I made my way towards town, a silence lingered in the air.

“So,” I said, clearing my throat. “What do you need to get at the market?”

Ellie leaned back in the seat, pulling out a list. “Just the basics. Some bread, eggs, maybe some vegetables. And I was thinking about trying to make something for dinner tonight. Figured I should at least try to cook for myself.”

“What do you plan on making?” I asked curiously.

“Honestly, I was thinking chicken and dumplings. I know that’s not really a summer dish, but I haven’t had it in so long, and I’m craving it so bad.”

“That does sound really good,” I added.

“I’ll save you some. Just come down to the guesthouse after you get done on the ranch tonight. It’s the least I could do for letting me stay.”

“It’s a date.”

Shit.

It came out before I could stop it.

“I mean... you know what I mean,” I said, not sure how to save myself in the moment.

Ellie just looked at me with a smirk. “I know what you mean, don’t worry.”

The drive into town was quiet after that, except for the sound of Ellie humming a song I didn’t recognize—another thing Ellie used to do that I loved.

As we made our way into town, my eyes wandered down the familiar one-road street.

It was true, if you blinked, you might miss it. But at the base of the Montana mountains, Silver Creek was a sight to see.

Rustic wooden storefronts lined the street, their weathered signs swaying gently in the breeze. The general store stood just as it always had, its old Coca-Cola sign faded but still hanging proudly above the door.

Further down, Maggie's Cafe and the local bar—The Twisted Spur—sat side by side, as if catering to both the early risers and the night owls of Silver Creek.

A handful of locals lingered on the brick sidewalks, leaning against railings and chatting.

Beyond the buildings, endless fields of golden grass rolled towards the base of the mountains, where pine trees stood tall like silent guardians. The early morning sun painted everything in a bright yellow hue.

The familiar face of my little sister's bakery caught my attention.

The small dessert shop was tucked between the general store and the post office, its whitewashed exterior adorned with flower boxes overflowing with cheerful wildflowers.

A hand-painted sign above the door read Molly's in looping script, the edges of the wood slightly worn from years of Montana weather.

"How about we stop and see Molly first?" I asked.

Molly, the youngest of the McKinleys, had always been the sharpest of us all.

Right out of high school, she opened this bakery, and to no one's surprise, it became

an instant hit.

She always had a perfect knack for baking.

People from all over Montana came to get a taste of her creations. In the kitchen, she was unstoppable.

“I’m sure she’d love to see you,” I added with a grin. “Plus, I’m craving something sweet,” I said, winking at her.

Her cheeks flushed slightly, and she let out a soft, teasing laugh. “You always did have a sweet tooth, didn’t you?” she said, her voice light with affection.

“Some things never change. ”

We stepped inside the bakery together. The moment the door closed behind us, the comforting aromas of sugar, cinnamon, and buttercream icing enveloped us.

Molly was behind the counter, expertly frosting cupcakes with precision only she could pull off. She looked up when she heard the bell above the door, her face lighting up as soon as she spotted me.

“Well, well,” she said, setting the piping bag down on the countertop. “Look who decided to grace me with his presence.”

I raised an eyebrow, grinning. “I thought I’d stop by to see my favorite sister... plus, I brought someone you’ll probably enjoy seeing more than me.”

I stepped aside, revealing Ellie.

“Ellie!” My sister squealed, practically running around the counter to give her a bear

hug.

Ellie laughed, returning the hug.

“Colt is right, I’m definitely happier to see you,” she said pulling back slightly, her eyes bright. “I heard whispers you were back in town, but I’ve been so busy here I haven’t had time to call and see if the rumors were true.”

“They’re true,” Ellie replied. “I’m back in Silver Creek. I’m not sure how long I’ll be here though,” she added quickly.

I didn’t miss the way the last part of her sentence stung my heart a little.

“Well, as long as you’re here, why don’t you have a sweet treat. Nothing makes me happier than a fresh cupcake,” Molly said cheerfully.

We made our way over to the glass case that displayed an array of treats my sister had baked earlier in the morning—everything from cookies and brownies to tarts and cakes.

“What can I get you guys?” Molly asked, her hands resting on the counter, her eyes dancing with excitement.

“I’ll take a slice of pecan pie,” I said, leaning in to eye the sweet treat I hadn’t eaten in ages. “And for the lady, a red velvet cupcake.”

Ellie blinked, clearly taken aback by my choice.

She looked at me, her voice soft with surprise.

“You remember my favorite dessert?” she asked, her lips curving into a small smile.

I grinned, meeting her gaze. “Of course.”

Molly carefully placed the cupcake and slice of pie into a sturdy brown container and handed it to Ellie with a playful smile.

“Enjoy,” Molly said, winking. “I’ll see you around. I’m coming down to the ranch later this week to help momma around the house. I’ll stop by, and we can catch up.”

Ellie smiled as she accepted the package. “That sounds wonderful.”

Molly turned towards me, her eyes narrowing playfully as she leaned in close, her voice dropping to a whisper.

“And you, sir, make sure you take care of my girl here. I know how fond you are of her,” she said, a mischievous wink accompanying her words.

Wide-eyed, I glanced over to Ellie, who had already made her way towards the doors, completely oblivious to my sister’s comment—thankfully .

I darted my sister a what-the-hell look only for her to turn and shrug her shoulders, walking away as if nothing happened.

After a quick stop at the market for the things Ellie needed, we headed back towards the ranch.

As I parked in front of the guesthouse, Ellie turned to me.

“I’ll just grab my things and be out of your hair,” she said with a smile.

I glanced at her, meeting her gaze with a grin.

“Similar to the suitcase situation, if my momma heard I made you take your own groceries in from my truck, she’d kill me,” I replied, grabbing the two brown grocery bags from the back seat. “You can, however, bring in those delicious desserts for me.”

She rolled her eyes, grabbing the box of sweet treats as she giggled.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

After Colt brought my groceries in, he got a call from one of the ranch hands and had to go.

He promised to be back later for his share of chicken and dumplings.

Part of me was relieved when he left. The more time I spent with him, the harder it was to hide the bruises.

Another part of me was sad. Colt was one of the few people in the world I felt comfortable being around, so not telling him the full truth made me feel guilty.

With more free time on my hands than I knew what to do with, I put away the groceries and unpacked some of the boxes I had brought with me from Dallas.

I stepped into the middle of the living room, admiring my new temporary home.

The place was small but cozy—exactly what I needed for now. The soft beige walls were freshly painted, giving the space a warm, inviting glow. Colt had clearly put some work into this place. It had a perfect balance of comfort and style.

The kitchen, just off the living room, was a blend of function and charm. The wood cabinets stained a light color, and the countertops were a beautiful slab of white and gray marble.

A small dining table sat beneath the window, where sunlight streamed in, casting patterns of light across the room. The window looked out over the backyard, giving a view of the lake off in the distance, where the horses roamed nearby.

It was the kind of place you could imagine yourself settling into, making dinners, lounging on the couch with a good book, or spending lazy afternoons rocking on the back porch, lost in thought.

I stepped towards the window, looking out over the yard. The wind rustled through the trees, and I could just make out the sound of horses neighing in the distance.

It was quiet here. Peaceful.

And for now, that was all I needed.

I stood there, letting the stillness of the room settle around me.

The moment was perfect until my phone buzzed in my pocket.

I pulled it out, seeing the familiar number on the screen. My stomach twisted.

It was a message from Jason.

You can't hide from me forever. I will find you.

The peaceful feeling I'd had just moments ago shattered in an instant. I stared at the words, reading them over and over, my mind racing.

What did he want? Could he really find me ?

When I left our apartment that morning, he was at work. I made sure to leave when he wasn't home because I knew he wouldn't let me go without a fight.

I took a deep breath and put the phone down on the counter, trying to steady myself.

Part of me wondered if I should tell Colt, but the last thing I wanted was for him to worry about me unnecessarily. He had enough stress from running the ranch, and I didn't want to be a burden.

Still, the thought lingered. What if he could help? What if Jason showed up at the ranch, or at the guesthouse, unannounced?

What would he do?

No, just ignore him and he'll go away.

I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of any more of my time. I was done with him and his antics.

I tucked the phone back into my pocket, forcing myself to take a deep breath. I could handle this. Everything would be fine.

I turned away from the counter, trying to ignore the anxiety gnawing at me. I needed to do something to get my mind off of everything.

When I was a kid, horseback riding was my escape from the stresses of the world.

I remember the first time my dad took me riding. I was terrified. My eyes welled with tears, as my dad tried to calm me down.

"Cowgirls don't cry, Ellie," he had said, patting me on the back.

"You can do this, you're the bravest person I know.

" He encouraged me, leading the horse around the pasture.

After a few laps, I got the hang of it. From that day on, horseback riding was my escape from the reality of the world around me .

Ha. Look at me now Dad, running from my problems.

Reminiscing about how much I loved riding made me want to visit the stables.

I pulled my pink cowgirl boots on, secretly hoping Colt would be there to see me wearing them again.

I made my way towards the stables, surveying how much had changed since I was last here.

The old wooden beams were newly reinforced, the worn-out planks replaced with fresh lumber that still held the scent of pine. The once-faded red barn doors were bright again.

Inside, the scent of hay, leather, and horses filled the air. Sunlight streamed through the high windows, casting warm, golden patches on the packed dirt floor.

The stalls, neatly lined on both sides, were cleaner than I remembered, each one filled with fresh straw and bearing a small brass nameplate for the horse inside.

A few horses poked their heads over the wooden half-doors, ears flicking in curiosity as I passed, while others dozed lazily in the afternoon light.

Along one wall, neatly hung saddles and bridles gleamed from a fresh oiling, each piece of tack arranged with care.

The loft above still stored stacks of hay bales, though it seemed less cluttered now, more organized. A soft breeze drifted through the open doors.

I guess I hadn't noticed how much had changed this morning when I came to see the horses because the sun was still rising and there wasn't a lot of light.

"Colt?" I asked, my voice echoing throughout the barn .

No response.

I scanned the area, my eyes landing on a saddle resting on a nearby rack.

Without a second thought, I grabbed it, strapped it onto the first horse I could find—Sunflower according to the name on the stall door—and swung myself up into the saddle.

I recognized this horse as the one Colt was riding when I drove up to the ranch yesterday.

Getting on a horse that I wasn't familiar with was probably not my best decision, but I was desperate for a distraction. And any horse that Colt trusted, I could trust too.

I clicked my tongue, urging the horse forward.

With a gentle nudge of my heels, she picked up her pace, trotting towards the pasture.

I dug my heels in deeper, and she responded instantly, her powerful muscles springing into motion as we raced across the open field.

Riding a horse was just like riding a bike—you never forget how to do it.

As the horse picked up speed, warm wind rushed past me, the world disappearing into a blur around us.

This felt like pure freedom. I was a little girl again, lost in the simple joy of the ride, free from the harshness and demands of adulthood.

In this moment, nothing else mattered. The world outside of the pasture ceased to exist.

I inhaled deeply, savoring the fresh, earthy air, letting it fill my lungs as if it could cleanse every worry I'd ever had .

I couldn't help but smile, certain that if there was such a thing as heaven, I had found it right here, riding across this open field.

But then, without warning, the horse beneath me came to a sudden halt.

My eyes snapped open, scanning the open field, trying to figure out what had caused the abrupt stop.

It didn't take long to spot it—just inches away from the horse's hooves, a rattlesnake coiled in the dirt, its tail shaking loudly, warning the horse to back away.

I gently pulled back on the reins, trying to guide her away from the reptile, but the horse panicked.

With a sudden burst of speed, she bolted to the right, charging wildly. I barely had time to brace myself before she started bucking violently, her hooves pounding the earth beneath us.

I fought to stay in the saddle, but the force threw me off.

I hit the ground, the shock of the impact slamming through my body. A sharp, searing pain shot through my shoulder, and I gasped, unable to catch my breath.

“Shit,” I muttered, struggling to steady myself, the pain clouding my thoughts.

I wasn't sure how far I'd ridden before the horse spooked.

The vast, open fields stretched endlessly in every direction, and now, with no one around to know where I was, the weight of the isolation hit me.

How long would it take for someone to notice I was missing? How long before they started searching ?

The pain in my shoulder was almost unbearable, and the heat of the June sun was already taking its toll.

Sweat trickled down my skin. A couple of hours out here on my own would be more than my body could handle.

Suddenly, a sharp pain erupted in my skull, as if someone had slammed a hammer against it.

I tried to push myself up, but a wave of dizziness sent the world spinning.

My limbs felt heavy, my breath shallow. Defeated, I sank back down, struggling to hold on.

The last thing I saw was my pink boots dazzling in the sun before everything went dark.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

“Dammit, Ellie.”

That was all I kept mumbling as I charged towards her, trying to reach her as fast as I could.

I was just coming back from the main house when I spotted her saddling a horse in the stables. She had those damn pink boots on of course.

Instead of questioning her, I just watched.

She swung up onto the horse with the same ease she had when we were kids. She looked beautiful in the summer sun, moving through the pasture like she belonged there.

I followed her at a distance, not wanting to ruin her moment.

She looked so at peace, lost in the calmness of the vast open valley.

But then, in an instant, peace turned to panic. The horse reared back, bucking violently, and Ellie went flying.

My stomach dropped.

I spurred Jace’s horse forward, urging it to go faster .

Come on, damn it. I needed to get to her. Now.



When I finally reached her, I jumped down, my boots kicking up the dust.

Ellie lied there in the dirt, motionless for a second before she stirred.

She sat up slowly, a puzzled, dazed look on her face—definitely concussed.

“Dammit, Ellie,” I muttered under my breath, watching as she slowly pushed herself upright. Her fingers pressed against her temple as she winced, clutching her shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I was just trying to clear my head. That was really stupid. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Don’t be sorry, Ellie. That could’ve happened to any of us. You can’t predict when a horse will spook.”

I scanned our surroundings. There was no way she could ride back alone—not like this.

“Well, the way I see it, you’ve only got one option,” I said, leveling my gaze at her.

“You’ll have to ride back with me.”

She hesitated. “Oh, that’s unnecessary.”

She tried to stand, but I could tell the world started to spin around her as soon as she did.

She quickly sat back down, frustrated.

“Ellie, you can barely sit up on your own. Quit being stubborn and let me help you.” I stepped closer, softening my tone. “Please.”

She looked around as if assessing the situation.

“Fine,” she huffed .

I bent down, sliding one arm beneath her legs and the other around her back, lifting her slowly. As I cradled her against my chest, her body relaxed.

I carried her to the horse I had ridden out to the pasture on, guiding her good hand to the saddle horn. “Hold on tight,” I said. “I’ll do the rest.”

As she grabbed onto the saddle with her good arm, I used one hand to hold on to her hip, the other holding on to her thigh.

Gently, I positioned her safely into the saddle.

She let out a shaky breath as I swung into the saddle behind her, wrapping an arm around her waist to steady her.

“Let’s get you home,” I said, nudging the horse forward.

The ride back should have been easy, but it wasn’t.

Ellie’s body pressed closer against mine with every stride the horse took, her petite frame and perfectly round ass rubbing against me over and over.

Up. Down. Up. Down.

I clenched my jaw, shifting my hips slightly to put some distance between us—not that it helped much. If I didn’t get my thoughts under control, I’d have a real problem on my hands—or in my pants.

Focus. Just get her home.

I exhaled slowly, tightening my grip on the reins and forcing my gaze straight ahead. It was going to be a long ride back.

By the time we reached the guesthouse, the sun had dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in shades of orange and purple. I slid off first, then turned to help Ellie down .

“Just swing your leg over. I’ll do the rest,” I instructed.

She hesitated but followed my lead.

As her left leg came over the saddle, I caught her thigh, steadying her descent.

On her way down, she brushed against me, her perfume encasing me briefly.

The scent of daisies and sandalwood filled my nose, like the smell of a new spring day.

The second her feet hit the ground, I wrapped an arm around her waist and guided her inside, leading her straight through the front door and to the bedroom.

“Lie down while I check your injuries.”

She eased onto the mattress with a wince.

I went to the kitchen, searching for a pair of scissors. There was no way I could pull her shirt over her injured shoulder without making it worse.

I returned after a few moments and gently lifted the hem of her shirt. Just as I was

about to cut the first thread of fabric, she flinched, grabbing my wrist with surprising strength, her eyes suddenly going wide.

“No,” she said firmly.

I crouched beside her. “Ellie,” I said, laughing. “I’m not trying to sneak a peek at you. I just need to see how bad the bruising is and if there are any other injuries. For all we know, you broke something when you hit the ground.”

She shook her head, her breathing uneven.

“Please, Colt. I can handle this on my own. I’m a big girl.” Her voice was barely above a whisper, but there was steel in it. “Just go. ”

I clenched my jaw. “Ellie, there’s no way you can do this by yourself. Not with your shoulder like this.”

When I reached for her shirt again, she shoved my hand away with her good arm, her body tensing.

“Just leave, Colt. Now. ”

I froze.

This wasn’t the Ellie I knew. She’d always been stubborn, sure, but not like this. This wasn’t defiance—it was fear.

Still, I stepped back. Give her space.

“Fine,” I said reluctantly. “But if you need anything, I’m right down the road. I can be here in under a minute. Do not be afraid to call me if you need me, day or night.”

Her expression softened just slightly. “Thanks, Colt.”

Nervously, I turned to leave, every instinct telling me I shouldn’t.

Before walking out the front door, I saw Ellie’s phone laying on the couch. I decided I better put my number in it in case she needed to call me later.

Entering my number, I realized it was already saved in her phone as Colt .45, the emoji wearing a cowboy hat directly after it. I laughed, rolling my eyes. Ellie gave me that nickname when we were younger, and apparently, it had stuck.

As I went to put the phone back down on the couch, a notification flashed across the screen.

You can run, but you can’t hide, you little bitch. I’ll find you, Ellie.

The number wasn’t saved in her contacts, but whoever it was definitely knew Ellie .

I read the message a few more times, trying to make sense of it.

Jaw clenched, I marched back to the bedroom, wanting to know who thought they could talk to her like that.

“Ellie, who is—”

I stopped short because she wasn’t lying down anymore.

In the few moments I was gone, she managed to stand up and take her shirt off.

Just as I stepped inside the doorway, her shirt slipped from her fingers, leaving her in only a white lace bra and her denim pants. But seeing Ellie half naked wasn’t what

made my stomach twist.

It was the bruises.

Dark marks scattered across her ribs, wrists, and arms—each in various stages of healing.

Some were fresh, deep purple and angry, while others had faded into sickly shades of yellow and green. But the ones on her wrists made my chest tighten.

The distinct imprint of fingers pressed into her flesh. Evidence that someone, not something, had done this to her.

These bruises weren't from her falling off the horse today. They were days, weeks, months old.

My fists clenched at my sides. My blood began to boil.

I wasn't the one in the family with the short fuse—that was Jace—but I'd burn the entire world down to protect Ellie. Even if she didn't know it yet.

Her gaze met mine, shame spreading across her face.

Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears, her breathing unsteady.

"Colt," she whispered, stunned in place.

I looked at her bruised body, then back into her eyes, before my gaze dropped again. My chest tightened.

"I can explain," she said.

I shook my head. “Ellie, so help me if you try to lie to me. I want the truth—now.”

She held my stare for a long moment. The fight in her eyes flickered out, replaced by quiet defeat as the first tear trickled down her cheek.

Before I could say another word, she went limp.

I jumped across the room and caught her before she hit the ground, wrapping her in my arms, shielding her with my tall frame—like an umbrella—protecting her from the storm as her entire world came tumbling down.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

I sat there on the floor, sobbing in Colt's arms for what felt like an eternity.

Every painful secret I had buried, locked away in a tiny fragile box, had just shattered wide open.

He had seen everything—the bruises, both fresh and fading.

His eyes had traced, with silent horror, the places Jason had left his mark.

Day after day, I had endured his unwarranted anger, convincing myself I could keep it hidden.

But there was no hiding it anymore.

I had to tell Colt the truth, even if it changed the way he saw me forever.

Slowly, I lifted my head, swiping at the last of my tears.

He placed one hand gently on my thigh, the other under my chin, tilting my head until our eyes met.

“Please,” he whispered, his voice raw. “Tell me what happened, so I can make it better.”

I took a deep breath, searching for the right words .

“A couple months after I moved to Dallas, I met a man named Jason. At first, he was



everything I thought I wanted—the person you imagine spending forever with.”

Colt’s eyes darkened as I spoke.

“The abuse started small, with harsh words... telling me I was stupid, that I annoyed him. I brushed it off... convinced myself it was a one-time thing... that it was out of character for him to speak to me that way. Eventually, we moved in together. Looking back, it wasn’t a good idea, but that’s what we did.

Things were going good for a few months. No angry outbursts.

Then one night, we were out with some friends.

I was having a great time, laughing, enjoying myself.

But as soon as we got back to our apartment, everything changed.

In the elevator, Jason started yelling, accusing me of giving one of his friends ‘the look,’ as if I wanted to sleep with him or something.

I had no idea what he was talking about, but he wouldn’t listen.

And then... he slapped me across the face. ”

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to keep going.

“That was how it usually started—with jealousy and baseless accusations. Words turned into slaps. Slaps turned into punches.”

I lowered my gaze, ashamed.

My voice was barely above a whisper when I added, “I made excuses for him. Forgave him when I shouldn’t have.”

I took a deep breath. Colt was still watching me intently, his expression unreadable, waiting for me to finish .

“Last week, he came home drunk—again—accusing me of stealing his phone and hiding it to mess with him. I swore to him I didn’t know where it was, but he didn’t care. He grabbed me by the wrists and slammed me into the wall.” My voice wavered.

“That was the hardest hit I’d ever taken from him. In that moment, I knew it would only get worse. So, I waited until the next morning, packed everything I could, and left. I had nowhere to go, so I drove to the only place I knew I’d be safe—Silver Creek.”

I hesitated before lifting my gaze to meet Colt’s, bracing myself for his reaction.

His jaw tightened.

“So that’s why you’ve been wearing long sleeves? And why you flinched that morning in the kitchen when I put my hand over yours?”

I swallowed hard and nodded. “Yes.”

Dropping my head in shame, I covered my face with my hands.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you, Colt.” My voice cracked.

“I didn’t want you to think any less of me.

When I left Silver Creek, I was so determined to make it on my own.

I needed a fresh start after my parents died, and I thought leaving was the only way to find it.

But then... everything fell apart. And I was too ashamed to come home, to admit to everyone that leaving was the wrong decision. ”

I let out a shaky breath, the weight of my words pressing down on me. “I didn’t want to come back... broken.”

Colt pulled me against his chest, his grip firm. He radiated strength—broad shoulders, a wide chest, the solid muscle of his arms wrapped tightly around me. A vein pulsed in his neck.

Was he mad at me? Disappointed?

Just as I was about to ask, he stood, scooping me into his arms like he had earlier, carrying me to the bed.

He set me down gently, then kneeled beside me, his hands wrapping around mine.

“Look at me, Ellie.”

I hesitated, but the strength in his voice pulled my gaze to his.

“You didn’t deserve what he did to you,” he said, his voice steady. “This is not your fault. None of this is your fault.”

He said the last part like he was disappointed—but not in me.

I took a deep breath, trying to let his words sink in.

“And as long as you’re on this ranch, you’re safe, El.”

After hearing those words come out of Colt’s mouth, I started crying again.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner,” I sobbed.

“Stop saying sorry. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

He pulled me back in, holding me close. The warmth of his chest against my cheek, the way his fingers ran gently through my hair—it sent me back in time.

Back to that night. The night everything changed.

I clutched Colt’s shirt, my breath coming quicker, the memory clawing its way to the surface.

The smell of fireworks filled my nose, and the distant sound of laughter and music lingered in my mind.

I had been so happy that night—carefree, surrounded by friends, shooting off Fourth-of-July fireworks on this very ranch.

Then, the sheriff’s truck pulled up.

“Do you remember that night? When my parents died?” I asked. “It started out as such a good night. I was so happy, laughing with everyone. I still remember the smell of the summer breeze and fireworks.”

“I remember, Ellie,” Colt said, tightening his grip like he was trying to comfort me

but also himself.

“Then the blue and red lights of the sheriff’s truck flashed across the yard.”

The memory played out in my mind in perfect, agonizing detail. The way the sheriff stepped out of his truck, the somber look on his face, the way he gripped his hat like he wished he didn’t have to say what was coming.

Everything after that happened in slow motion.

“Ellie Brooks?” he asked, scanning the crowd.

“That’s me,” I said, raising my hand.

“Miss, I’m sorry to tell you this, but your parents were in a car accident tonight. I’m very sorry. They didn’t make it. They died on impact.”

The moment the words left the sheriff’s mouth, I collapsed. The fireworks were still exploding, filling the sky with staccato crackles and thundering booms—but all I could hear was the sound of my own screams.

Colt caught me in his arms that night as my world changed forever, just like he did tonight .

“I remember screaming so loud my throat burned,” I choked out. “And you—you held me, right there in the grass, until I couldn’t scream anymore.”

Colt exhaled sharply, his hand still caressing my hair. “I remember,” he said quietly. “I remember wishing I could take the pain away. Just like I want to right now.”

I stood there, letting his words sink in. Colt had always made me feel like I was one

of the most important people in his life—protected, cared for, safe.

But never in the way I truly wanted.

Never in the way I had always longed for.

I swallowed hard, pushing down the ache I had carried for him for as long as I could remember.

No matter how much I wished for more, he had never given me a reason to believe he saw me that way.

Maybe he never would.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

I was ready to find the bastard who hurt Ellie and make him regret ever crossing her path. The ranch was plenty big enough—I could hide a body and no one would ever know.

The way she looked at herself—ashamed, defeated—I never wanted to see that look in her eyes again.

When the last of her tears dried up, she finally spoke, her voice weak. “I think I want to take a hot bath and call it a night.”

I shook my head. “I’m sleeping on the couch tonight. You’ve probably got a concussion, and you shouldn’t be alone.”

She frowned. “Colt, that’s really unnecessary.”

Ellie could argue all she wanted to. I wasn’t going to budge. “I’m not taking no for an answer.” I said, my tone firm. “Go take your bath and relax. I’ll be right here if you need me. And if you start to feel dizzy or nauseous, just yell for me, okay? ”

She hesitated, but there was no point in protesting further. “Okay,” she murmured, surrendering the battle.

As Ellie filled the tub with warm water and bubbles, I headed to the linen closet, pulling out a pillow and blanket for the night. After setting them on the couch, I grabbed my phone and dialed Liam.

“Hey, Colt. What’s up?”

“I need a favor.”

“Sure, whatcha got?”

“What can you tell me about a man who lived with Ellie back in Dallas? His name is Jason.”

“I can do some digging. Why are you asking?”

“Just wondering about him, is all.” I didn’t want to betray Ellie’s trust, so I kept it vague.

“This have anything to do with the way she flinched when I put my hand on her shoulder at Maggie’s yesterday?”

Liam didn’t miss a thing. He was ex-military, sharp as hell, and had a talent for reading people. Body language was his specialty. He could tell you more about a person’s emotional state in a minute than most would catch in a lifetime.

“I’ll tell you more once I can,” I promised.

“No problem. I’ll call you when I find something,” he said before hanging up.

I let out a slow breath, running a hand over my face before heading to the kitchen. I wasn’t sure if I was actually hungry or just needed something to do with my hands, but I started looking through the fridge anyways.

Chicken, carrots, celery, one white onion, and butter were all neatly stacked together on the same shelf—the ingredients for the chicken and dumplings Ellie had planned on making tonight.



I grabbed the items and set them on the counter. I started with the chicken, cutting it into chunks and placing them in a bowl. Then I peeled the carrots, chopped the celery, and diced the onion.

After melting butter in a large pot on the stove, I added the vegetables, stirring them as they began to soften. The scent of cooking vegetables filled the kitchen as I moved efficiently from one step to the next, following the process from memory.

Once the vegetables were ready, I added the chicken to the pot, letting it brown lightly before pouring in chicken broth and bringing everything to a simmer.

I pulled out flour and baking powder, starting on the dumplings next, trying to keep my hands busy.

By the time I finished mixing the ingredients to make the biscuits and placing them on top of the pot to cook, Ellie walked in.

She wore loose sleeping shorts and a plain white T-shirt, her damp hair curling slightly now that it was wet. The shorts showed off her lean, tan legs—the hem just short enough to leave a man guessing about what lay beneath the surface.

Shifting slightly, I used the counter to cover my lap, hoping she wouldn't notice the situation stirring in my jeans.

“How was your bath?” I asked, keeping my voice steady.

“Very relaxing, actually. Just what I needed. It was kind of hard to get up and out of the bath, but I managed,” she said .

I forced a small nod, trying to keep my mind on her words and not her body.

“This smells amazing, Colt. I didn’t know you were a secret chef,” she joked, bumping her hip into mine.

The closer she got to me, the less oxygen there was in the air.

“Uhh. Well, I just kind of went off memory from watching my mom make it a bunch of times. I hope it tastes as good as it smells.”

Ellie grabbed two bowls from the cabinet, extra slow so she didn't overextend her hurt shoulder, and placed them on the counter next to the stove.

“Didn’t think my first dinner in the guesthouse would be shared with the one and only Colt McKinley, and he cooked it too. What did I do to deserve such princess treatment?”

“Well, for starters, you got bucked off a horse about two hours ago,” I said with a chuckle, trying to stay serious.

“Which leads me to my next point—you’re not allowed to get back on a horse without someone riding with you.

I know I sound like an ass right now, but if I hadn’t been watching, no one would have known you were out there, and things could have ended a lot worse.

It’s not about controlling you. It’s about protecting you. ”

She looked at me, eyes squinted. I suspected she was contemplating how hard-headed she wanted to be in the moment.

“You were watching me ride?”

Busted .

“Don’t make me sound like some creepy stalker,” I said, trying to steer the conversation anywhere but where it was going.

“Well, are you one?” she asked playfully.

“I just so happened to come back when you were leaving the stables on Sunflower. What can I say? Curiosity killed the cat.” I filled both bowls with chicken and dumplings, then held one out to Ellie.

“You’re telling me,” she said, accepting the bowl. “Fine. I won’t ride alone again.” She lifted a spoonful, blowing on it before putting it into her mouth.

Her eyes widened in surprise.

“Colt, this is so good. Like really good. I need you to write your recipe down for me, word for word,” she demanded playfully.

“As long as you promise not to give me another heart attack ever again, like you did today.”

“Gotta keep you on your toes,” she said, winking at me.

“I’m a cowboy, not a ballerina. I like my feet planted firmly on the ground,” I said, shooting her a crooked grin.

“Suit yourself,” she said, shrugging.

After dinner, Ellie went to the bathroom to find some pain medicine to take before bed. While she did that, I washed the dishes.

As I finished stacking the clean dishes on the drying rack, Ellie walked back into the kitchen.

She gave me a soft smile. “I came to tell you goodnight before I went to bed.”

“Remember, if you need me, I’ll be in here all night,” I said, heading towards the couch that would be my makeshift bed. “And I mean it. If you start feeling bad, wake me up.”

Ellie walked up to me and gave me a hug, catching me off guard. After a few seconds, I hugged her back, careful not to cause any more pain.

“Goodnight, Colt.”

“Goodnight, El.”

Falling asleep was nearly impossible. I lay on the couch for a few hours, not sleepy at all.

Everything Ellie had told me and all the bruises I had seen kept replaying in my head.

I couldn’t believe she thought I was disappointed in her. If anything, I was disappointed in myself.

Maybe if I’d told her how I really felt all those years ago—if I hadn’t chickened out that night—she would have stayed in Silver Creek, and none of this would have happened.

After several mental replays of the day’s events, I finally drifted off to sleep.

When I did, I dreamed of Ellie.

Most summers, Ellie, Jace, Molly, and I spent our hottest days down at the lake on the far end of the ranch.

But on this particular afternoon, Jace and Molly were away at an overnight summer camp, leaving just Ellie and me with nothing to do.

After a few minutes of contemplating, we grabbed two fishing poles, a quilt from the linen closet, and a picnic basket filled with sandwiches.

I was in the mood for fishing, but Ellie wanted to read her new Nicholas Sparks novel, so I lugged the fishing poles in one hand and the picnic basket in the other—Ellie’s book tucked safely inside—and we headed down to the water .

After two hours of catching nothing but frustration, I gave up and climbed back up the hill, dropping onto the quilt beside Ellie with a sigh.

“What are you reading over there?” I asked, stretching out my legs.

She glanced up, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Well, I’m only halfway through, but from what I can tell, it’s about two people who write letters to each other, confessing their love. They each lock their letter in a bottle and throw it into the ocean without knowing the other has done the same.”

I hummed, considering it. “Like a message in a bottle. Sounds interesting.”

Ellie held out the book. “You can take it when I’m done if you want to read it.”

I snorted, shaking my head. “Ellie, there’s a reason I was born a cowboy and not a poet. I’ll just take your word for it.”

She rolled her eyes. “Come on, Colt. I know, deep down, if you really wanted to, you could do it. Poetry—writing—it’s all about emotion,” she said, clutching her chest dramatically.

I smirked. “I’m pretty sure that’s what hell is like—writing poetry about love.”

She laughed, nudging me with her shoulder. “Oh, come on. I bet you can do it. Let’s try.”

I quirked an eyebrow and examined her face, trying to determine if she was serious or not.

“Tell me what you love most about your parents,” she said, confirming that she was .

“Well, I guess I love the way they put everyone else first. They make sure we always have what we need, even when it’s hard.”

“Great answer. Now, what do you love most about Molly and Jace?” she continued.

I paused for a moment, contemplating.

“I love that they always have my back, no matter what. I can count on them to be there when I need them.”

“Exactly. Now, last but certainly not least, what do you love most about me?” she asked jokingly, not expecting me to give an answer.

“Everything,” I said without hesitation.

She looked at me suddenly, my quick response surprising her.

I reached for one of the glass Coca-Cola bottles, popping the cap off with a pocketknife before handing it to her, trying to break the awkward moment up. I took a long sip to buy myself more time.

“You ever thought about it, though?” she asked after a moment, tucking her bare feet under her legs.

“About what?”

“Writing something down. Not for anyone else, just for yourself.”

I gave her a sideways glance. “Can’t say I have.”

“I think you’d be good at it. You don’t talk much, but I know there’s a lot going on in that head of yours Colt McKinley.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, well, I prefer to keep it there.”

Ellie just shook her head, smiling to herself as she turned back to her book .

I watched her for a second—how the sunlight caught the golden strands in her hair, the way she absentmindedly bit her lip as she read.

She always had her nose buried in a book, lost in some world that wasn’t ours.

But a sharp cry suddenly jolted me from my dream.

“Stop! Let go of me!”

Ellie.

The panic in her voice had me on my feet in an instant, heart pounding as I rushed towards her room. I shoved the door open, ready for a fight, but there was no one else there.

Ellie was still asleep.

She twisted and turned, tangling herself in the sheets, her face twisted in fear. “Please... help,” she whimpered, lost in whatever nightmare had its claws in her.

Crossing the room, I pulled the blanket back and eased onto the bed beside her, wrapping my arms around her.

I held her close, gently rocking her awake.

“Ellie, it’s okay,” I murmured against her hair. “I’m here. You’re safe.”

Her body jerked once more, then suddenly stilled. A shaky breath left her as her eyes fluttered open, wild and disoriented. Sweat clung to her forehead, her chest rising and falling too fast.

“You’re okay,” I whispered again, brushing damp hair from her face.

She blinked, her breathing still uneven as she exhaled shakily, rubbing a hand over her face.

“It felt so real,” she whispered .

“I know,” I said. “But it wasn’t. You’re here. You’re safe.”

She released another breath, slower this time, and I felt the tension in her body ease.



“Will you stay?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Yes,” I said without hesitation. She shifted her body into mine and closed her eyes.

I let out a quiet breath, resting my chin on the top of her head, and I stayed like that, holding her body close against mine until morning.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

Ellie was still asleep when the morning sun peeked through the curtains, casting a golden glow over the room. Pressed against each other, our bodies had molded together in the night—my arm draped over her waist, her chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm.

We fit effortlessly, like two puzzle pieces clicking into place, her warmth seeping into my skin.

A part of me wanted to stay, to let the world outside wait a little longer. This moment was like something from my dreams.

But that was just it... They were only dreams.

Slowly, I lifted my body away from hers, slipping out of the bedroom without waking her.

I was tired as shit, but I had already slept in and burned more time than I had to waste. I'd have to wait until lunchtime for a warm cup of black coffee and a hot shower.

My first stop of the day would be to the stables to check on Bessy.

Every time I said her name, I laughed. Leave it to Ellie to be the first person to name a calf on this ranch.

My no-fuss grandfather was probably rolling over in his grave.

Horses, cows, bulls—they were not pets, they were your livelihood. I could hear him saying it now.

As I approached the stall that Bessy was in, I could see her mom's head above the half-door. Jace had placed them together in hopes that the calf would nurse naturally now that she'd gotten a hang of the bottle.

I peeked over the half-door, watching as Bessy nursed on her mom as if she'd been doing it since the moment she was born. Heavy footsteps approached from behind.

"You look like shit," Jace said as he leaned against the stall door next to me. "Are those the same clothes you had on yesterday? Did you even sleep last night?"

"Gee, good morning to you too," I muttered, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

His grin widened as he looked me over.

"This have anything to do with why I saw your truck parked at the guesthouse last night? And how it was still parked in the exact same spot when I drove down here this morning?" he teased.

"No, it doesn't. Don't get any wild ideas."

"She's not even been here a full week, and you're already trying to sleep with her?" he joked.

"I am not sleeping with Ellie."

Not in the way he thinks, at least.

Jace smirked. "I always knew you had a thing for Ellie. It's written all over your

face.”

I stiffened. “I do not have a thing for Ellie. I stayed there last night because she fell off of Sunflower yesterday, and I wanted to make sure she was okay. End of discussion.”

Jace’s expression flickered for a second before he shrugged.

“Okay, then you won’t care when I tell you that Dusty, one of the new ranch hands Dad hired, was talking this morning at breakfast about asking her out on a date. He said he saw her spending time with ole Bessy here the other day and wants to make a real woman out of her.”

Jealousy flared across my face instantly.

“I think they’d make a cute couple, don’t you?” Jace asked, pushing my buttons like only a brother could.

“Fuck off,” I muttered, my stomach churning as I walked away.

I headed towards the front of the barn, grabbing some barbed wire and fence posts I would need later.

A lightning storm had taken down a tree last week, crushing part of a fence. I needed to fix it today before Jace moved the cattle back into that pasture.

As I loaded all the supplies into my truck, Jace watched me from the barn door. “Damn, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say my brother’s down bad for Ellie Brooks,” he said, smirking.

I slammed my truck bed closed, wanting to be anywhere but here.

“I am not down bad for Ellie. Shut the hell up and get back to work before I fire you.”

“You can’t fire me. My last name is McKinley too.”

“Okay, maybe I can’t fire you, but I can tell Dad about the time you burned half the barn down trying to smoke cigarettes for the first time when you were sixteen. Dad spent a whole summer rebuilding that barn. Smoking them next to hay was a genius move.”

Jace moved back, both hands in the air accepting defeat. “Hey, Dad believed my the-old-fireworks-must-have-just-gotten-hot-and-gone-off story.”

“Did he?” I asked, raising a skeptical brow. Dad was a teenager once too, after all. He probably knew the truth.

I hopped into my truck and headed down to the pastures, leaving Jace at the stables to conjure up his own version of last night’s events between Ellie and me.

As I walked the broken fence line, my thoughts drifted back to Jace’s words from this morning and Molly’s from the day before.

Clearly, I wasn’t good at hiding my feelings for Ellie. Everyone could see them, I guess.

Everyone except Ellie.

As I organized the new fence posts and barbed wire on the ground, my mind returned to the day Ellie left two years ago.

After her parents died, she had fallen into a deep depression. She had checked out completely—but who could blame her?

At first, I gave her space, letting her work through her emotions as she got used to her new normal.

But after a few months, I tried to convince her to do things that she used to love, hoping it would help her depression.

Going down to the lake, riding horses—nothing worked .

She wasn't the same Ellie. She was a ghost of herself.

One day, I went to her room to check on her, but she was already gone for the day.

As I walked out the bedroom door, a paper on her desk caught my eye.

A plane ticket to Dallas, Texas. One way.

In that moment, I knew—if I didn't tell Ellie how I really felt, I would never get the chance.

I ran to the stables, grabbing a piece of paper and pen on my way out of the house.

When I got there, I hid in the small office space in the corner, closing the door behind me.

On that sheet of paper, I wrote everything down I had ever wanted to tell Ellie—every feeling, every memory—I didn't hold back.

I folded up the letter and stuffed it in my pocket, ready to give it to her.

But when I got back to the house, she stepped out of her room—her bags and a plane ticket in hand.

“Are you really leaving?” My voice was flat, unreadable.

She gripped the straps of her bags tighter, looking away. “Yes, Colt. I am. There’s nothing left for me in this town.”

That stung more than I expected.

“Are you coming back?” I asked, my voice breaking slightly.

She hesitated before answering.

“I just... feel like there’s more out there for me. Something bigger than this old town. It holds too many hard memories for me now.”

Pain washed over me. “You can’t leave, Ellie. ”

“Why, Colt? Why shouldn’t I leave? Give me one good reason.”

Because I love you.

The words caught in my throat.

I wanted to tell her. Wanted to give her the letter.

But I didn’t.

Instead, like all the times before, I told her what I knew she needed to hear.

“Just go, Ellie,” I whispered. “Go spread your wings.”

As she drove away, I stood there, motionless, engulfed in her dust cloud.

Suddenly, the sound of approaching footsteps brought me back to the present.

I turned around and saw my mom walking up with a glass of water.

“I figured you’d need this soon. This heat is getting unbearable.”

I took it from her with a nod. “Thanks, Mom, I really appreciate it.”

She lingered, her eyes studying me as if debating whether to say something.

Finally, she broke the silence.

“So, where were you last night? I noticed your truck was missing from the driveway,” she said, her lips quirking into a knowing smile as she winked.

Did anyone in this family mind their damn business?

“I’m surprised Jace hasn’t already told you everything.”

“Oh, he has,” she admitted, tilting her head. “But I wanted to hear it straight from the source.”

Of course, she did .

“Perfect,” I said dryly. “Then you should already know I stayed with her because she was injured and not for whatever ridiculous reason Jace probably fed you.”

Mom hummed in response, as if considering my words. Then, with a small smile, she said, “I love the idea, you know, of you and Ellie.”

I exhaled sharply and shook my head. “Well, don’t get your hopes up, Mom. Ellie



doesn't feel that way about me."

"I'm not so sure of that," she said.

"What does that mean?" I asked, turning my head, my interest piqued.

"I don't do much of the hands-on work on this ranch but keeping up with the finances and making sure you kids are fed gives me plenty of quiet time. Time to listen."

She went on.

"One night, many years ago, while I was getting dinner ready in the kitchen and you boys were out working with your father, I heard Molly and Ellie giggling on the porch. They were gossiping like all teenage girls do. But on that particular night, I may have overheard Ellie telling your sister how perfect you were. Molly was, of course, disgusted, but Ellie kept going on about how sometimes she wished you guys were more ."

Mom crossed her arms, tilting her head as she studied me. "What do you think she meant by that, Colt?"

I stared off into the distance. I didn't have an answer .

Without another word, Mom turned and walked off, leaving me to overthink everything she had just revealed.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

Waking up this morning, I turned over to find a cold, empty spot where Colt had been just a few hours before. Every part of me wanted last night to go on forever, but as they say, all good things must come to an end.

Yesterday had been exhausting, but this morning, I felt free. No more hiding the bruises.

A weight had lifted off my shoulders—one I hadn't realized I'd been carrying.

As I walked into the bathroom, I caught my reflection in the mirror, my eyes drifting over the bruises on my body.

Stiffness settled into my shoulder. It still ached from my horse-riding disaster yesterday, but not as badly as it had at first. My head had stopped throbbing too—progress.

I figured that after taking it easy for a few days, I'd feel as good as new. That was my hope anyway.

I turned away from the mirror and let out a slow breath .

The past had taken enough from me. I wasn't going to let it steal my future too.

This was my second chance.

But even though I was hopelessly optimistic, I knew what my reality looked like.

I had no plan, no job, no way to support myself.

I couldn't stay here forever, depending on Colt's kindness for the rest of my life, no matter how much he insisted on it.

I needed a way to stand on my own two feet.

I needed a job.

Glancing at the clock, I realized it was still early enough to head into town.

It was as good a time as any to start job hunting.

Today was the first day of my new beginning.

As I drove into downtown Silver Creek, the early morning sun cast a yellow glow over the brick storefronts, stretching soft shadows across the sidewalks.

The town was already stirring to life—shop owners flipping their signs to Open, early risers strolling past with coffee cups in hand.

I pulled my car into a parking spot near the town square, cut the engine, and took a deep breath.

The coffee shop on the corner, The Daily Grind, had a Help Wanted sign taped to its window.

Here goes nothing.

The bell above the door jingled as I stepped inside, the rich aroma of freshly ground coffee wrapping around me.

This coffee shop was like something from a magazine. Exposed brick walls lined with mismatched paintings and vintage coffee-related posters gave the space a lived-in look. Warm light filtered through the large windows, casting a glow across the room.

A handful of customers sat at the rustic wooden tables, some chatting quietly, others absorbed in their own worlds with laptops or books.

Behind the counter, the barista moved with ease, pulling shots of espresso and steaming milk with a rhythm that came from years of experience.

The gleaming metal espresso machine sat like the centerpiece of the room, while shelves behind it were lined with jars of beans, syrups, and old coffee grinders, giving the space a nostalgic feel.

As I approached the counter, a woman with fiery red corkscrew curls and a bright welcoming smile emerged from behind the espresso machine, wiping her hands on a towel. Her eyes danced with curiosity as they met mine.

“Good morning! What can I get for you?” she asked, her voice full of spunk.

I swallowed my nerves and gestured towards the sign in the window. “Actually, I saw that you’re hiring. I was wondering if you’re still looking for help.”

Her smile widened. “I sure am. You got a minute to chat?”

“Sure,” I said hesitantly, not realizing I would be put on the spot so quickly.

“My name is Cassie,” she said, extending her hand.

“I’m Ellie. Nice to meet you,” I responded, taking her hand in mine .

We sat at one of the empty tables.

“I haven’t seen you around town. Are you new to Silver Creek?”

“Not exactly. I grew up here. My parents died when I was seventeen. After that, I moved to Dallas to start over. But the universe brought me back.”

“I’m really sorry about your parents, that sucks,” she said, seeming genuine.

“I’m staying out on McKinley Ranch until I can get on my feet again and find my own place.”

“Wait, did you just say McKinley Ranch, as in Colt McKinley?”

“Yes, that ranch,” I said hesitantly, not sure where this conversation was going.

Cassie leaned against the table, wiggling her eyebrows. “Well, aren’t you a lucky girl? That man is fine. He’s like a nice bottle of wine—only gets better with age.”

You can say that again.

“Are you guys dating? Is that why you’re staying on the ranch?”

“Oh no, Colt is just a friend.”

“Darn. I wanted some juicy details,” she said, disappointed. “The only McKinley brother that comes in here is Jace, and he gets on my damn nerves.”

I laughed. Something in my gut was telling me Jace and Cassie were like water and oil.

“So, you’d rather come work in my coffee shop than stare at hot cowboys all day? That’s wild,” she said jokingly.

“Well, ogling isn’t going to pay the bills, sadly.”

“So, you admit he’s cute,” she said pointing at me with a wink .

“He’s cute,” I said, trying not to admit it too loudly.

“Do you drink coffee?” she asked next.

“Uh, yes, I do. Is that one of the job requirements?” I asked cautiously.

“Of course. You can’t trust someone who doesn’t like coffee. It’s like one of the seven deadly sins, or whatever they say.”

“True,” I said, giggling.

She looked me up and down for a moment. “Well, that settles it. The job is yours. Just come in Monday at eight, and I’ll start showing you around the place.”

Wow, that was easier than I thought it was going to be .

I was sure job searching would take me all day.

“Eight o’clock on Monday, got it. Thank you so much, you’re a lifesaver.”

Just as I was debating whether it would be too awkward to hug my new boss or not, the bell on the door jingled.

“Not again,” Cassie moaned, rolling her eyes.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite barista,” Jace said, eyes glinting as he shot a teasing glance at Cassie.

He tilted his hat in my direction. “Ellie, good morning. You stop by to grab a morning pick-me-up?”

“Actually, I work here now,” I said, half-laughing.

“Is that so? I’ll have to let Colt know. I have a feeling you’ll be seeing him around here more.”

“Thank God. Does that mean we’ll be seeing less of you?” Cassie asked eagerly.

“You can’t get rid of me that easy,” he said, winking. “Speaking of, I’ve got a ticket to the hockey game tonight in Great Falls with your name on it,” Jace said to Cassie.

“Well, that sucks, because Ellie and I were just talking about having a girls’ night tonight. Isn’t that right, Ellie?” Cassie turned to me, her eyes saying, please go along with this.

I paused, contemplating what I should say next.

Cassie was my new boss. I couldn’t make her mad on the same day she hired me, right?

“Yep, girls’ night. Pizza and my famous margaritas,” I said excitedly. “Sorry, Jace.”

“No problem. I’ll invite Colt. We can make it a double date.”

Cassie stood up, obviously done with Jace’s antics.

“In your dreams. Now, get out before I kick your ass.”

“Ooh, I like ’em feisty,” he said, giving Cassie a wink. She opened the door, and he walked out, blowing her a kiss as he left.

“Thank you so much for saving me there. I can’t fathom the thought of going out with that brat.”

“Jace is really sweet once you get to know him.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m sure,” she groaned. “So, what time are we having this shin dig?” she asked excitedly.

“Oh, I’m not sure. Do you really want to hang out? I mean, I’d love to, but you don’t have to if you already have other plans,” I said shyly.

I didn’t have many friends. Well, I didn’t have any, really, but Cassie seemed like a social butterfly. She probably had lots of friends.

“I don’t have plans. Plus, while Jace is annoying, he’s not dumb. If he doesn’t see my car out there tonight, he’s going to know something’s up, and I’m not giving him any more ammunition to give me hell with,” she explained.

I contemplated for a brief second.

“How about seven o’clock? That gives me plenty of time to get everything we need from the store and tidy up my place.”

“Perfect!” Cassie squealed. “I promise I won’t judge your place. You could be a hoarder, and I wouldn’t care. But I’m warning you right now, I haven’t had a girls’ night in so long, so please don’t judge the amount of tequila I put in my margarita,”



Cassie said looking at me with a serious face.

I laughed. "I'll see you at seven," I said as I waved goodbye and headed out the door.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

Now that the fence was mended and the cattle had been moved, my day was over. I closed the tall red doors of the barn, headed back to the main house, and walked in. Jace was sitting at the kitchen island, eyes hollow, like he'd lost his most prized possession.

"Where'd you go?" I asked. His truck had been gone most of the afternoon.

"I went to the coffee shop in town. I asked Cassie out on a date, but she shot me down."

No surprise there.

"I had tickets to the hockey game in Great Falls tonight, but she was busy. She and Ellie are having a girls' night," he explained.

His last sentence had me like a fish on a hook. My mind wondered what they might be doing for girls' night. Maybe they would go out to a bar. The thought of drunk men ogling over Ellie pissed me off more than I cared to admit.

Jace must have caught the change in my expression because he smirked. "What's that look for? "

"Nothing," I said, walking over to the fridge to grab a cold beer.

"Bullshit," Jace said, leaning back on his stool. "You hesitated."

I rolled my eyes, twisting the cap off the beer bottle and taking a slow sip to buy

myself time.

“Where are they going for girls’ night? A bar?”

“Yep. Cassie told me they’re putting on their best miniskirts and heading to The Twisted Spur. She told Ellie ‘The shorter the skirt, the better.’ I even mentioned where they’d be to ole Dusty.”

I gave Jace a you-better-fucking-not-have look.

Jace tilted his head back, laughing and pointing at me. “Why the pissed-off look? Is it because you’re picturing Ellie on the dance floor right now with Dusty? I bet he has his hands all over her already.”

“Shut the hell up,” I said, glowering at him.

“There it is,” Jace said matter-of-factly. “I knew you liked Ellie. About time you just admit it.”

Busted.

I scoffed, even though he’d caught me red-handed. “No. I was just thinking, Ellie’s been through a lot. She needs space, not—”

“Not a cowboy who’d lasso the damn moon for her?” Jace chuckled. “Come on, Colt. We both know you’d move heaven and Earth for that girl. I still remember that time Mark Johnson was talking shit about Ellie at Tony Martin’s field party. I thought you were going to kill him that night.”

I clenched my jaw, glancing towards the back door, remembering the night in question .

The idea of Ellie in a crowded bar, surrounded by strangers—by men looking at her the way I had no right to—made my chest tighten.

Jace must have read my mind. “Don’t worry. I’m just messing with you,” he said, laughing. “They’re having margaritas at Ellie’s place. Low-key and definitely no Dustys around.”

I didn’t answer, but I did let out a big breath I hadn’t realized I had been holding in the whole time.

“So, what’s your plan? Sulk over Ellie all night?”

“I’m not sulking,” I shot back.

“Oh, you’re definitely sulking,” he said, laughing. “Probably because the only thing you’re getting your hands on tonight is that Bud Light.”

“If one more person brings up how I feel about Ellie today, I’m going to lose my fucking mind,” I told him.

“So, you admit you have feelings for her?” he asked eagerly.

I shot him a no-shit look.

“Hey, all I’m saying is, the first step is admitting you have a problem. And you, sir, definitely have one.”

“Hypothetically speaking, let’s say I liked Ellie, and she liked me back. Our friendship means everything to me. How do I know I won’t screw it up and jeopardize that?”

Jace sat there, thinking for a moment. “Well, there’s no way to ensure you won’t mess everything up by telling Ellie how you feel. But like Dad always says, ‘Nothing worth having was ever earned easy,’ right? ”

As I considered his words, I walked over to the window. The lights were on in the guesthouse, and a car I didn’t recognize—probably Cassie’s—was parked out front.

Jace walked up behind me.

“Come with me. I’ve got an idea,” he said, smirking.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

After I left the coffee shop that morning, I felt like I could breathe again.

Step one in the Fix My Life Playbook was accomplished. I had a job, which meant I could start saving for my own place. Funny enough, when I accomplished step one, I also checked off step two—make new friends.

I pulled away from the coffee shop and made the short trip to the market. It was quick and uneventful.

I picked up all the ingredients I needed for homemade pizza: sauce, flour to make pizza dough with, fresh pepperoni and cheese from the deli, and fresh bell peppers and mushrooms from the produce area in case Cassie wanted some extra flavor on her pizza like I did.

I also picked up some margarita mix and a bottle of my favorite tequila.

When I got back to the guesthouse, I tidied up. That took no time, seeing as I only had the bare minimum with me.

Cassie showed up right at seven o'clock with fresh cinnamon rolls in hand .

“I made an extra batch just for tonight. I always need something sweet to top off the night, and you cannot go wrong with fresh cinnamon rolls,” she said as I opened the door and gestured for her to come in.

“These smell amazing. I can’t wait to try one,” I said, taking a big whiff of the rolls as I took them from Cassie and placed them on the counter. “The pizza just came out

of the oven, and the margaritas are ready in the fridge. Let's get this party started."

I smiled, not realizing how much better a simple girls' night would make me feel. We each grabbed a slice of pizza and a fresh margarita, then, we plopped down on the couch.

"This place is really nice. Who decorated it? They have amazing taste," Cassie said as she looked around admiring the small house.

"Colt did actually. He told me he remodeled it not too long ago."

"Speaking of the devil, where is he? I didn't even get a glimpse of his pretty face as I drove in," she said, wearing an over-the-top sad face.

"Probably already off to bed for the night. He gets up early, so he usually goes to bed early too."

"What a buzzkill. I just know that man wants to get in your pants," she said nonchalantly.

I choked on the sip of margarita I had just taken.

"He does not," I said, laughing and trying to catch my breath at the same time.

Cassie cocked her head. "Oh yes, he does. I dare you to go to his house right now and crawl into bed with him. Let me know how many seconds it takes for him to get a hard-on," she dared eagerly .

I looked at Cassie, stunned. "You are out of your mind," I said giggling.

She arched a brow. "And don't give me that 'I only see Colt as a friend' bullshit

either.

I see the way you look at him. Plus, I heard about your horse-riding adventure yesterday, how that cowboy just swooped in and saved the day.

I'm sure that really helped your we're-only-friend's agenda," she said, winking at me.

Cassie was obviously really good at reading between the lines. I wasn't going to be able to pull one over on her. Plus, I had a terrible poker face.

I looked around, making sure no one had somehow walked in without me knowing.

"If I tell you something," I whispered, leaning in, "you can never, ever tell anyone. Promise?"

Cassie's eyes lit up with excitement. "Scout's honor," she said, raising her right hand.

I exhaled slowly, hoping I wasn't making a big mistake. I could feel the margarita starting to take hold of me.

"He slept in my bed last night. Nothing happened, of course. I had a bad dream, and he held me until I fell back asleep," I said, immediately second-guessing my confession.

Cassie squealed. "Ah! This is the juiciest gossip I've heard in a while. It's like something straight out of a Scott Eastwood cowboy rom-com." She giggled.

Suddenly my phone started ringing on the coffee table. I looked down at the screen—Colt was calling.

"Speaking of the devil," Cassie teased.



“Do not say a word when I answer this call,” I said, looking at her wide-eyed .

She crossed her lips with her fingers as if she was locking them shut, then tossed the imaginary key behind her back.

“Hello?” I answered hesitantly, putting the phone on speaker.

“Ellie? It’s Jace.” His voice was strained and filled with worry. “Have you seen Colt? No one can find him. He got mad and took off. Left his phone too. Is he at the guesthouse with you?”

“No, he’s not. I haven’t seen him since yesterday.”

Last night, actually. In my bed.

But that detail wasn’t necessary at the moment.

Cassie listened silently with concerned expression that probably matched mine.

“Where are you right now?” I asked, my stomach churning.

“I’m at the main house. Can you help us look for him? His truck is still here, so he couldn’t have gone too far,” he stated.

“Yes, Cassie’s here with me. She can come too. We’ll be right there.” I hung up the call, and we both jumped off the couch, springing into action. We frantically put on our shoes and headed for the door.

“Why do you think Colt got upset and stormed off?” Cassie asked as we stepped onto the porch then down the steps, crossing the flowerbeds in front of the guesthouse.

“I’m not sure. That’s not like him to—”

RAWR!

A dark figure wearing a Halloween-style mask, like the main character from the movie *Scream*, jumped out at us.

We both jumped back, shrieking like little girls .

Cassie took off, running as fast as she could, but I was pinned against the railing with no escape.

With my fight-or-flight instincts kicking in, I reared back and punched the masked man in the face, knocking him backward into the bushes.

I took off, running towards my car like Cassie had just seconds earlier.

“I don’t have the keys!” I yelled in frustration holding up my empty hands.

“Fuck!” Cassie said as we sprinted from the car to the pasture behind the house, our only hope for escape at this point.

I glanced behind us just as the tall figure pulled the mask from his face, clutching his eye in pain.

I stopped, recognizing the face.

“Colt?”

What the hell is going on?

Cassie stopped a few yards ahead, turning to see why I'd stopped running.

Suddenly, another tall figure came out from the other side of my car, laughing uncontrollably.

"Jace?" Cassie asked.

He didn't reply—he only laughed harder.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked as Cassie and I walked back towards the house, no longer terrified for our lives.

"I could not have planned this out better if I tried," Jace said between laughs.

Colt was sitting on the steps of the porch, clutching his eye, as Cassie, Jace and I made our way back to the porch steps.

"Let me guess. This was your idea?" Cassie asked, looking at Jace .

"Yes, and it was the best moment of my life. You're all welcome," Jace said, smiling ear to ear.

"It's definitely not the best of mine," Colt said, groaning in pain.

"I'm so sorry, Colt. Let me get you an ice pack," I offered, running back into the house.

He followed me, holding his eye with one hand and the mask with the other.

I searched the freezer, finding a frozen bag of peas I'd purchased from the market the day before. It would have to do.

I wrapped the frozen vegetables in a clean dish towel and placed it on Colt's cheek as he sat on one of the barstools next to the kitchen island.

"I'm so sorry," I said again, rotating Colt's barstool away from the counter, so he was facing my direction.

I stood between his legs as I assessed his injuries. There was a small amount of blood pooling around the cut where my knuckles had connected with his face.

"Let me get a warm washcloth."

I quickly walked to the kitchen sink and back. Then I gently dabbed the blood from his skin, standing on my tiptoes to get a good look at the top of the cut.

Colt was tall, even sitting down.

As I looked him over, his free hand lingered on my thigh, holding on to the side of it.

"I should've known better than to let Jace talk me into going along with one of his wild ideas," Colt said, laughing through the pain .

I gently turned Colt's face side to side, ensuring I hadn't missed any injuries.

"I don't see any other cuts on your face," I explained.

"Can you check my back? I fell into the bushes pretty hard. You've got a hell of a swing on you, El," Colt said as he pulled his shirt off, then turned, showing me his back.

The guesthouse air conditioner must have stopped working, right at that moment, because all of a sudden, a heat wave swept over my body.

Tanned, chiseled muscles stretched across his broad back and shoulders—shoulders that seemed to go on forever. His skin was darkened from long hard days working on the ranch, out in the hot sun, and the muscles beneath it were firm, yet surprisingly soft to the touch.

Electricity coursed through my body, a tingling sensation running through my veins, as I trailed my fingers along Colt's back, searching for any sign of injury.

I swallowed and took a deep breath, my mouth dry and my body on the verge of fainting.

"I don't see anything," I said quickly, hoping he'd put his shirt back on and end my misery.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

I didn't miss the way Ellie's cheeks turned pink as I took my shirt off.

I needed to know if I had cuts on my back from falling into the bushes when she'd punched me, but I could have used a mirror if I really wanted to.

After Nurse Ellie determined my back was fine, I put my shirt back on.

As I did, Jace and Cassie joined us in the kitchen.

"What were you girls up to before we scared the shit out of you anyway?" Jace asked as he took a seat on the barstool next to me. "Spilling all your dirty little secrets while sipping on margaritas?" He pointed at Ellie and Cassie's unfinished drinks, smirking.

"As a matter of fact, we were, so get out," Cassie said, pointing towards the door.

"I'm not leaving until someone gives me one of those cinnamon rolls," Jace declared, looking around for the dessert. "I can smell them. Where are they?" he asked .

"Here, I'll pack you one to go if it'll get you out of this house quicker," Cassie said as she placed a single cinnamon roll into a Tupperware container and handed it to him.

As soon as Jace received it, he removed the lid, grabbed the roll, and took a big bite.

"No need to waste a bowl, darlin'," he said. "That isn't making it out of this house before it's in my belly."

He wasn't joking. He ate it in two bites.

“This is the best thing I have ever eaten,” he said. “Can I have another one, pretty please?” he begged as he winked at Cassie.

She was not amused.

“One more, then you’re gone. I mean it,” she said as she scooped another cinnamon roll from the tray.

Jace took it from her, scarfing it down as fast as he’d gobbled the first one.

A sudden pain shot through my face, and I grabbed my eye, wincing.

Ellie moved from her spot next to the counter and stood between my legs, examining my face again.

I sat there, hoping she wouldn’t move her hand from my face to my chest, because if she did, she might feel how fast my heart was racing.

Having Ellie this close made my heart pound like I just got done running a marathon.

Her perfume settled around me, the scent sending me back to last night when I lay next to her, helping her fall back asleep.

Leaving Ellie this morning was harder than I thought it would be. Lying next to her felt so... natural .

My mind returned to what my mom had told me earlier. “ Ellie kept going on about how sometimes she wished you guys were more. What do you think she meant by that, Colt? ”

That one statement followed by a simple question kept playing over and over again in

my head as I worked through the day. Now that she was just inches from me, my mind wandered even more.

“Look who needs taking care of now,” she joked, pointing at my eye. “You should probably take some pain medicine before you go to bed or you won’t sleep well,” she suggested.

I nodded, leaning my face down and resting my head against her shoulder.

I wasn’t sure why I did it, truthfully. It just seemed right in the moment. Being next to Ellie brought me comfort. A comfort I hadn’t felt since she left.

She placed her hand on the back of my neck, rubbing away the tension that lingered there.

Jace would probably give me hell for this later, but I didn’t care.

After a few minutes, I lifted my head.

“Jace tells me you got a new job,” I said.

“It’s true. I got a job at Cassie’s coffee shop downtown. I start on Monday,” Ellie said excitedly.

“Now that I have some income, I can start looking for my own place soon.” She held up a copy of the local newspaper, open to the rentals section with some ads already circled.

Hell no.

There was no way Ellie was staying anywhere but this ranch until Liam got more



information about this Jason guy .

“You know you can stay here as long as you want to Ellie, there’s no rush,” I said, trying to convince her to stay a little longer.

“I know, but I don’t want to be a burden. Your family has already helped me so much over the years,” she said, looking down at her feet.

“You are not a burden, Ellie. If anything, my mom seems happier that you’re back. She was just talking to me today about you,” I said, tilting her face back up with my hand.

“Really? What did she say?” Ellie asked eagerly.

I hesitated, wondering how truthful I wanted to be in the moment.

“Just how much fun you and Molly had on the ranch as little girls. She said you guys always loved sitting on the back porch, swapping secrets with each other,” I said, settling on a vague version of the truth.

Ellie laughed, nodding her head in agreement.

“We were like each other’s living diaries,” she explained. “Molly and I pinky promised one night to never tell each other’s secrets, and now, the rest is history.”

What Ellie didn’t know was that I knew one of those secrets, thanks to my mom’s expert hearing abilities.

If Jace and Cassie weren’t standing just a few steps away, I probably would have told Ellie what I knew, but that conversation would be better at a different time.

So I changed the subject.

“I better get Jace out of here before he eats the entire pan of cinnamon rolls and Cassie kicks his ass,” I joked .

“He doesn’t seem to be her favorite person,” Ellie whispered, although Jace and Cassie could still easily hear our conversation.

I hopped down from the barstool, accidentally bumping into Ellie on my way down, almost knocking her over.

I grabbed her before she could lose her balance, pulling her into me.

Not even a piece of paper could fit between our bodies now.

She sucked in a quick breath, her eyes wide, studying mine, our lips just a few inches apart.

There was no way she could miss how fast my heart was racing now.

The angel on my shoulder said to gently let her go. The devil on the other side said to kiss her.

In the end, the angel won.

I let her go slowly, making sure she recovered her full balance.

She stood there for a few seconds longer, clearly taken aback by the moment we just shared.

Jace coughed, as if to remind us there were other people still in the room.

“We should probably take off,” he said, his eyes darting between Ellie and me as if he wondered what the hell he just witnessed.

I nodded in agreement, heading towards the door.

“Well ladies, it’s been fun, but Colt and I have to be up early. Enjoy the rest of your night,” Jace said tipping his hat at each of the girls. “But if you get bored and decide to play seven minutes in heaven, just give me a holler,” he said winking at Cassie as I pushed him out the door .

On our short drive back to the main house, Jace gave me hell about the moment Ellie and I had in the kitchen, as I suspected he would.

Instead of antagonizing me with his words though, he connected his phone to my Bluetooth radio and started playing “Kiss the Girl” from The Little Mermaid .

“Seriously?” I said, looking at him in the passenger seat. “You’re ridiculous,” I muttered, but I didn’t turn the song off.

He had a huge grin on his face, on the verge of busting out laughing.

“Is this supposed to be some kind of subliminal message?” I asked.

He didn’t answer. He just started singing along dramatically.

I shook my head, fighting a smile as he continued his over-the-top performance the entire way home.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

As my alarm blared next to me on the nightstand, I rolled over, exhausted. I had tossed and turned all night, worried about how my first day of work at the coffee shop would go.

I hit the dismiss button, pulling the covers off my body, dragging myself off the mattress reluctantly.

As I made my way to the small closet on the opposite side of the room, I tried to think of what I should wear. Something casual made the most sense, but I was second-guessing myself, of course.

I searched through the rack of clothes multiple times before settling on a pair of blue jeans and a simple graphic tee with my white Converse.

A short drive later, I pulled into a narrow parking spot in front of the coffee shop and shifted my car into park.

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, trying to calm my nerves.

“You can do this, Ellie. It’ll be easy. How hard can making coffee be?” I said, reasoning with myself out loud .

“Hey, Mom and Dad, Ellie here. It would be super cool if you could watch over me today. You know, make sure I don’t make a complete fool of myself on my first day, okay?” I said as if they could hear me.

I hopped out of my car and marched to the coffee shop door.

As I walked in, the smell of freshly ground coffee and espresso settled over me.

I walked up to the counter cautiously, as if I were approaching a baby bear alone in the woods.

Cassie looked up, smiling.

“You’re here just in time,” she said, throwing a black apron at me. “The morning rush will be here any minute. Put that apron on and come back behind the counter, so I can show you the ropes. Trust me when I say we have no time to waste,” she said in a hurry.

I wrapped the apron around my waist, making my way behind the counter.

It didn’t take long for Cassie to show me all the coffee equipment I’d soon be using.

First, she gestured to the massive espresso machine, its silver knobs and levers gleaming under the warm café lights.

“This is where the magic happens,” Cassie said. She tapped the steam wand. “You’ll use this to froth milk. Just watch your fingers—it gets hot fast.”

Next, she pointed to the grinder. “Fresh beans go in here. Just press this button to grind them for espresso shots.”

Farther down the counter, she motioned to the syrup pumps arranged neatly in a row. “Vanilla, caramel, hazelnut—you’ll get to know these by heart soon enough.”

Finally, she patted the register. “And, of course, this is where you’ll ring people up. Don’t worry, it’s pretty simple once you get the hang of it.”

I nodded, taking it all in, already feeling the weight of the morning rush ahead.

But before I could overthink my job choice, the bell above the door chimed, signaling the first customer of the day.

It was an elderly man with white hair. He wore blue jeans and a button-up shirt, completed with suspenders. He made his way to the counter, looking up at the chalkboard menu.

“I’ll take a black coffee, two creams, two sugars, and a croissant to-go, please,” he said.

Easy enough.

“Coming right up,” I said, maybe a little too cheerfully.

I quickly grabbed a paper cup from the counter, filling it with hot black coffee, adding two creams and two sugars, just like he ordered. I secured the lid tightly on his cup before grabbing his croissant, handing both items across the counter with a polite smile.

“Have a great day, sir,” I said, looking up, already preparing for the next customer.

Cassie gave me an encouraging pat on the back, smiling. “You’re a natural,” she said before heading to the second register to keep the line moving.

We fell into a steady rhythm of taking orders, making drinks, warming pastries, cleaning, and doing it all over again .

After the morning rush, Cassie explained we’d have some downtime. That was when she liked to get the pastries ready for the next day.

She led me to the back, where trays of croissants, muffins, and strudels sat waiting to be prepped.

“We restock everything now so we’re not scrambling in the morning,” Cassie said, handing me a pair of gloves.

I watched as she carefully arranged the pastries on baking sheets, covering them to keep them fresh.

“We’ll bake some in the morning, but most of these just need to be set out in the display case.”

I followed her lead, stacking flaky croissants in neat rows and refilling the glass case with colorful strawberry cream cheese Danishes. The café was quiet now, a stark contrast to the chaos of the morning rush.

As I organized the baked goods, the front door creaked open, the bell above it signaling we had another customer. I looked up, and a familiar face stared back at me.

“Good morning, sir,” I said, trying to maintain my professionalism.

“Ma’am,” Colt said, tipping his black cowboy hat.

He wore a pair of Wrangler blue jeans, cowboy boots, and a cream-colored button-up shirt. His outfit more formal than his usual ranch attire, but still casual at the same time.

Damn, he looked good all cleaned up, there was no denying it.

My palms started to sweat, and I wiped them dry using my apron.

Seriously? He's just a guy, Ellie, calm down .

"What can I get for you today?" I asked, smiling while ignoring my body's stupid reaction to Colt's presence. "You seem like a black coffee kind of guy," I said, laughing.

"I can't tell if that's a compliment or if you're picking on me," Colt said, eyeing me.

I giggled, knowing it was definitely the latter. But before I could pick on him any further, Cassie walked up with a black coffee in hand.

"Hey, Colt," she said, pushing the cup across the counter towards him. "Checking on your favorite barista on her first day?" Cassie asked, elbowing me in the side playfully.

Colt smiled and picked it up, handing me cash to pay with at the same time. "Something like that," he said, taking a sip of his coffee.

"Don't worry, she's doing great. She's a natural. And she only got hit on a couple of times," she said.

It wasn't true, but Colt didn't know that.

His smile disappeared, and his warm demeanor quickly turned cold as his grip tightened around his cup. His jaw tensed as he looked me over, like he was searching for any sign that someone had bothered me.

I rolled my eyes and nudged Cassie. "Really? You're just trying to stir up trouble."

She smirked, unfazed.



“Did anyone make you uncomfortable?” Colt asked, his voice lower now, edged with aggravation.

I shook my head, laughing softly. “No, Cassie’s exaggerating. Everyone has been perfectly nice.”

He studied me for a moment before finally exhaling, his shoulders relaxing. “Alright. But if anyone does— ”

“I’ll handle it,” I said, giving him a reassuring smile. “Promise.”

Cassie grinned, clearly enjoying his reaction. “Relax, Colt. She’s tougher than she looks.”

Colt took another slow sip of his coffee before continuing.

“What time do you get off?” he asked, glancing at the clock on the wall.

“In a couple hours. Why?” I asked, narrowing my eyes in suspicion.

He hesitated for half a second before meeting my gaze. “Come get dinner with me.”

Cassie nearly dropped the ceramic coffee mug she was holding in her hand. “Ohhh, now this just got interesting,” she said, grinning as she looked between us.

I blinked, caught off guard. “Dinner?”

Colt smirked. “Yeah, you know, food.”

I crossed my arms. “I know what dinner is, smarty pants. I just didn’t expect you to ask.”

He shrugged, playing it cool. “You’ve been on your feet all day. I figured you wouldn’t want to cook tonight, and I could use some company.”

Cassie leaned in and whispered, “Say yes.”

I rolled my eyes at her as Colt watched, waiting for my answer.

“Alright,” I said, pretending to be nonchalant.

Colt’s lips curled into a slow grin, as if he half expected me to say no.

“It’ll be low-key, nothing fancy. I’ll pick you up at six o’clock.”

“You know where to find me,” I said .

As Colt turned to leave, Cassie leaned in again, her voice barely above a whisper. “You do realize this is totally a date, right?”

I turned to face her, wide-eyed.

“No, it’s not,” I said, walking off before she could press me any further on the subject.

By the time my shift was over, exhaustion had settled deep in my bones. I was pretty sure my feet had never hurt this badly in my life.

Colt was right, I definitely didn’t feel like cooking anything tonight.

As I untied my apron and stretched my sore shoulders, Cassie leaned against the counter with a knowing smile. “Survived your first day, huh?”

I let out a tired laugh. “Barely. Do your feet always feel like they’re about to fall off at the end of each day?”

“Oh, absolutely,” she said, tossing a rag onto the counter. “You’ll get used to it. Well, kind of.”

I sighed, glancing around the buzzing cafe. Despite my exhaustion, there was something satisfying about finishing my first day at a new job.

“You can have all the tips from the jar,” Cassie announced. “You worked your ass off today. You definitely earned them,” she said as she pulled the dollar bills out, handing them to me. “Now go have fun on your date with Colt,” she said, waggling her eyebrows playfully.

“It’s not a date,” I said, correcting her.

She winked at me. “Right.”

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

As I knocked on the door to the guesthouse, I felt like a teenage boy all over again—heart racing, anxiety through the roof—as if I were going on a date for the first time ever.

This technically wasn't a date, but I was always nervous around Ellie regardless of the circumstances.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

“Coming!” Ellie yelled from the other side of the door.

After a few seconds, I could hear the click of the lock unlatching, then the door opened.

Fuck me, she was beautiful.

Ellie had on a pair of blue jeans that looked like they had been painted onto her body. Her pink blouse displayed the most skin she had dared to expose since she'd arrived, and her blonde hair fell in waves over her shoulders.

“Come in, I'm almost ready,” she said. “I just need to get my purse, and we can head out.”

“Take your time,” I said as I walked into the living room, admiring her curves from behind .

She turned suddenly, looking around for her purse.

I quickly averted my eyes, hoping she wouldn't notice the way they'd been tracing her body.

"Does this outfit look okay?" she asked with genuine concern, as if she wasn't drop-dead gorgeous.

"Are you kidding me? You look amazing," I replied before I could stop myself.

Her cheeks turned pink, and she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Oh, um thank you," she said, clearly caught off guard by my comment.

I walked ahead of Ellie as we made our way towards my truck, ensuring I had enough time to open the passenger door for her.

"And they say chivalry is dead," she joked as I helped her climb inside.

Sitting in the driver seat, I turned the key in the ignition, bringing the truck to life. As we drove along the two-lane highway into town, I thought about the text Jason had sent Ellie the week before.

"Have you gotten anymore messages from Jason?"

She paused, caught off guard by my question.

"No, I haven't, actually. I blocked his number that night, though, so he doesn't really have a way to contact me anymore," she explained.

"Good. He doesn't deserve to take up space in your life," I said.

She nodded slowly, her fingers clutching her purse tighter. "I know. It just... still

feels weird to have it be over, you know?”

“I get that,” I said. “But sometimes closing a door is the best thing you can do.”

She released a breath, her shoulders dropping slightly. “Yeah. Maybe it is.” She was quiet for a moment. “I just wish people understood how hard it is to actually leave,” she added.

I stayed quiet, letting her speak.

“People say things like, ‘Why didn’t you just walk away?’ like it’s that easy.

Like you haven’t spent months—years even—convincing yourself it wasn’t that bad or that maybe it was your fault.

” She swallowed, shaking her head. “I used to tell myself he hadn’t always been that way.

That maybe if I tried harder, if I didn’t upset him, things would go back to the way they were in the beginning.”

My hands gripped the steering wheel, knuckles turning white with the effort. The thought of Ellie blaming herself for someone else’s cruelty made my stomach turn. “You know none of it was your fault, right?”

She gave me a small, sad smile. “I do now. But in the moment... it wasn’t so clear.

And the worst part is, unless someone’s been through it, they don’t really get it.

They don’t understand how deep it runs—the fear, the guilt, the way they make you believe you’ll never be able to leave. Or worse—that you don’t deserve to.”

I shook my head, my chest tight. “You deserve so much more than that.”

She let out a shaky breath, her eyes meeting mine. “I think I’m finally starting to believe that.”

As the words left her mouth, we pulled into the parking lot of Maggie’s. The neon sign flickered against the dark sky. The place was busy with cars scattered across the lot, their windshields reflecting the buzzing light.

I killed the engine and glanced over at Ellie. She was staring out the window, lost in thought, her fingers nervously twisting in her lap.

“You okay?” I asked gently.

She blinked, as if snapping back to reality, and offered a small smile. “Yeah. Just... thinking.”

I waited, giving her the space to say more if she wanted to. After a beat, she sighed and reached for the door handle. “Come on. Let’s eat.”

As we stepped inside, the familiar scent of greasy cheeseburgers and fresh pies engulfed us. We slid into a booth near the window, and before we could even grab the sticky laminated menus, a familiar voice called out from behind the counter.

“Well, well, look who finally decided to stop in,” Maggie said, a grin spreading across her face as she wiped her hands on her apron. She was in her sixties but had the energy of someone half her age, her silver-streaked hair pulled up into a messy bun. “You two hungry?”

“Starving,” I admitted, glancing at Ellie. “What sounds good?”

She scanned the menu briefly before setting it down. “Cheeseburger and fries,” she said, confident in her choice.

“Make that two,” I added.

Maggie smirked. “Coming right up. And you picked a good night—trivia starts in ten.”

I raised a brow. “Trivia?”

She cocked her head towards the corner where a small microphone and a pile of question cards sat on the counter. “Monday night tradition. Winner gets movie tickets and a free slice of pie.”

Ellie chuckled. “I haven’t played trivia in forever.”

I grinned. “Then I guess we better win.”

She met my eyes, a smile spreading across her face. “Let’s do this.”

As our burgers arrived, the diner started to fill with a low buzz of excitement. A few regulars moved closer to the front, settling in for trivia night, as Maggie grabbed the microphone.

“Alright, folks! You know the deal—answer right, rack up points, the winner gets pie and two tickets to a movie of their choice at Silver Creek Theater. Let’s see who’s the smartest in the room tonight.”

I nudged Ellie playfully. “You ready for this?”

She smirked, picking up a fry and pointing it at me. “I hope you know random facts,



because I'm not carrying this team by myself."

I held up my hands in mock offense. "Hey, I'm full of useless knowledge. Prepare to be impressed."

The first question was not my forte—a pop culture one about recent rom-com movies. Ellie answered before I even had a chance to think.

"Okay, show-off," I teased. "Let's see how you do with history."

As the game went on, we leaned in closer, heads nearly touching as we whispered, discussing our answers. Sometimes we were right; sometimes we were hilariously off.

"What's the capital of Finland?" Maggie read.

Ellie hesitated, glancing over at me. "Uh..."

I grinned. "It's Helsinki. "

By the final round, we were tied for first place with an older couple who looked like they came to trivia every week. The final question would decide it all.

Maggie grinned as she read it aloud. "What is the only letter not used in any US state name?"

My mind blanked. I turned to Ellie, searching her face.

She bit her lip, eyes sparkling. "It's Q," she whispered.

"You sure?"

She nodded. “Trust me.”

I did.

We wrote it down, giving our final answer to Maggie.

She walked back to the platform, reading each teams answers out loud.

“Quiztopher Columbus said the letter Z. However, Espresso Yourself said the letter Q. And the correct answer is... Q!” Maggie announced happily, looking our way.

Ellie threw her arms around me with a victorious cheer. I hugged her back, not sure what to do in the moment.

“You are officially my favorite teammate,” she said, grinning.

“I’m your only teammate,” I said, looking around as if there were someone else playing with us the whole time.

She laughed, swatting my arm. “Details, details.”

Maggie slid two movie-ticket vouchers onto our table along with two slices of her famous huckleberry pie .

“Fresh pie for the winners, and looky there. Now you two have got yourselves a second date already planned out,” she said.

“It’s not a date,” we both said in unison.

Maggie ignored us, walking off as if she didn’t hear anything we said.

Ellie just brushed it off, grabbing the two tickets and smiling, holding them up as if they were winning lottery tickets.

I liked seeing her this way—light, unburdened. If I could give her more moments like this, I would.

Her eyes met mine, catching me watching her. “What?”

I shook my head, smiling. “Nothing. Just glad that you’re havin’ a good time.”

Ellie’s expression softened, and for a moment, neither of us said anything. The noise of the diner buzzed around us, but all I could focus on was the warmth in her eyes.

On our drive home, Ellie suddenly turned up the radio, recognizing the song that came on.

“Oh my gosh, this is one of my favorite songs of all time!” she squealed before singing the chorus to Strawberry Wine, using her cellphone as a microphone.

Everything about this moment was perfect, and I couldn’t help but laugh as she belted out the lyrics, completely unbothered by how off-key she was.

“You’re really going for it, huh?” I teased as she swayed in her seat, eyes closed like she was performing on stage.

She peeked one eye open, grinning. “Obviously. It’s a classic. ”

Her eyes lit up as I sang the next line with her, our voices blending—badly—but neither of us cared. Our concert continued until we reached the driveway of the guesthouse.

After pulling in, I jumped out of the truck, making my way towards Ellie's side and opening the door for her.

We made our way onto the wooden porch, pausing at the door. Ellie turned to face me, her keys dangling loosely from her fingers.

"Tonight was really nice," she said, her voice softer now, almost hesitant.

I nodded. "Yeah, it was."

For a second, neither of us moved. The night air was cool, crisp.

The glow from the porch light cast a golden hue over her face, highlighting the warmth in her eyes, and her lips parted like she was about to say something but thought better of it.

She shifted, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"I—I can't remember the last time I laughed as much as I did tonight."

"You should do it more often," I said smiling, my voice low.

Ellie's gaze flickered to my mouth.

My pulse kicked up, my breathing felt shallow, and before I could stop myself, I leaned in. Close enough to catch the faintest trace of vanilla and something sweet on her skin.

I pinned Ellie against the door, my arms on both sides of her body.

She met my eyes, her breath hitching, but she didn't move away .

It would be so easy to close the distance, to let this moment turn into something more.

Her hands made their way up my shirt, her fists clutching the fabric for dear life.

My brain was telling me to stop, but the way her body pressed against me, the way her lips hovered just beneath mine, made every part of me want to keep going. Her breath was warm on my skin, her hands trembling as they traced the edge of my jaw.

Heat radiated from her, the pull between us so strong that I couldn't think straight. The weight of the moment hung heavy in the air, thick with the tension of everything unsaid.

I wanted this—wanted her. But even in the charged haze of it all, a part of me knew it wasn't the right time, that it wasn't the way I wanted to start something with her.

“Ellie,” I whispered, my voice low, filled with the struggle. “Tell me to stop.”

She froze for a second, her hands stilling against my chest, her eyes searching mine, vulnerable and intense. Her breath was shallow, and I could see the conflict in her eyes.

“What if I don't want you to, Colt?”

Everything inside me screamed pull her closer, to let the kiss I had been holding back finally happen, but I forced myself to take a step back.

“We can't,” I said softly.

Her gaze dropped, a flicker of disappointment shooting across her face before she stepped back, breaking the closeness between us .

We stood there for a moment, just looking at each other, both of us trying to catch our breath, to settle the storm of emotions swirling in the air.

“Goodnight, Ellie,” I said finally, my voice thick, as I turned away to head for my truck.

“Goodnight,” she replied, her voice barely audible over the distance growing between us.

I didn’t look back as I drove away, but I could feel her presence lingering, the weight of what almost happened heavy on my chest.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

The days after my not-a-date with Colt were hazy. I did everything in my power to avoid him and avoid reliving the heart-shattering ending to last Friday night.

A week had gone by, and somehow, I had managed to completely avoid Colt. I woke up each morning, went straight to work, and after my shifts at the coffee shop, went straight home. My theory was, the fewer places I went, the less of a chance I had of running into Colt.

It seemed to be working.

I was positive that looking him in the face after Friday night's events would break me.

That night, I was sure he was going to kiss me—that he'd finally tell me he had the same feelings for me that I have for him.

But that's not what happened.

At first, I was hurt. After a few days of sulking, my hurt turned to frustration .

How could he string me along until the very end, then back out like that? And what did he mean by we can't ?

Why the hell not? We're both consenting adults. It's not like one kiss would have ended the world as we know it.

None of it made sense.

I'd let my guard down, certain that if any man in the world could love me the way I was meant to be loved, it would be Colt.

Guess I was wrong.

As I walked into The Daily Grind, I took a deep breath, trying to push all these thoughts from my mind.

Today was Friday. I had one more shift until I'd get to enjoy my weekend, and I was committed to making it less of a disaster than last weekend.

I tied my black apron around my waist, clocking in for my shift at the kiosk on the counter.

Cassie hurried over and started interrogating me before I even finished typing in my ID and password.

"Ok, I can't take it anymore. You've been quiet all week. What's up?" she asked, carrying a large bag of fresh coffee beans, ready to be ground up and served to eager customers.

"Nothing, I'm fine," I said, trying to sound as convincing as possible.

"You have a terrible poker face, Ellie," Cassie said, laughing as she tilted her head, not convinced at all.

"It's nothing really," I said, making one final attempt to get her off my case .

"This have anything to do with your night out with Colt last week? Word on the street is that you and Colt had a great time during trivia night, and by word on the street, I mean Maggie told everyone within earshot," she said, laughing.



I groaned, hiding my face behind my hands, thinking about how well the night had started out and how disastrous it had ended.

After a few seconds of wallowing in self-pity, I let out a deep sigh and turned to Cassie.

“Colt almost kissed me,” I blurted.

Cassie looked at me for a few moments, her brain registering the painful secret I had just set free.

“Define almost.”

“Maggie is right, we were having a great time. Trivia Night was more fun than I’ve had in a long time.

We were on fire, winning round after round.

When I didn’t know the answer, Colt did and vice versa.

We were the perfect duo. On the way home, Colt sang along to 90s country music with me.

He walked me to the door like something right out of your favorite romance movie,” I said, biting my lip as I recalled the moment.

“When we got back to the guesthouse, something came over him. Colt pinned me against the door, trapping me like I was a fresh piece of meat and he was a lion about to devour his meal. I can still smell his cologne. The whole moment was steamy. I was so sure he was going to kiss me,” I said, pausing.

“But...” Cassie added.

“But then, at the last second, he backed off, said ‘we can’t,’ and told me good night. That’s the last I heard from him. But to be fair, I’ve been avoiding him all week.”

I started cleaning the countertops with a washcloth, doing anything to keep myself distracted.

“That jerk. I’m going to kick his ass,” Cassie said.

I sighed, running the washcloth over the counter in slow, deliberate circles. “There’s no need. Colt and I, we’re complicated, always have been. Always will be apparently.”

“It doesn’t seem that complicated to me. If he likes you, he needs to tell you instead of pulling crap like that, then ghosting you,” she said, her tone sharp.

“It’s clear he doesn’t think we should be together, so lesson learned. I should’ve known better than to go jumping into the arms of another man so soon.”

“What do you mean?” Cassie asked.

“Uh...” The realization hit me that I’d never told her my real reason for moving back to Silver Creek.

She looked at me, waiting for an explanation, but I wasn’t ready to give her one.

The only reason Colt found out was because he had stormed into my bedroom at the right, or wrong, moment.

Heat filled my face as I hesitated. How could I tell someone like Cassie what had

happened to me? She was so strong. If a man ever laid a hand on her, she would probably hit him right back, maybe even harder. There was no way she'd be going down without a fight.

So why hadn't I fought? What would Cassie think of me? She'd probably have questions I didn't have the answers to yet .

The universe must have heard me spiraling, because at that exact moment, a customer dropped their coffee cup. It hit the tile floor with a sharp crash, shattering into pieces and yanking our attention from the conversation.

Whew. Saved by a coffee catastrophe.

Cassie grabbed a washcloth and broom, hurrying over to the mess.

"I'm so sorry," an older woman said, her voice tinged with embarrassment.

"Oh, honey, it's completely fine. Nothing a rag can't fix. And trust me, I've got plenty of them," Cassie said as she soaked up the spilled coffee and swept the shards of ceramic into a dustpan with practiced ease.

Remembering what the woman had ordered just minutes earlier—black coffee with four creams and two sugars—I prepared another and brought it over to her.

As Cassie crossed my path, headed towards the trash can with shattered ceramic in tow, she leaned into me.

"I'm ready to listen when you're ready to talk," she whispered.

Then, just like that, she kept walking, the crisis resolved, as if it had never happened.

I turned back towards the counter, but before I could fully settle in, the soft chime of the doorbell signaled a new arrival.

Instinctively, I started preparing my best What can I get for you today? —but then I saw who it was.

“Molly! ”

She grinned as she stepped inside, bringing a gust of warm summer air in with her. “Hey, stranger. Thought I’d swing by to see you since I haven’t been out to the ranch yet. I’ve been so busy at the bakery.”

Cassie emerged from the back just as I stepped out from behind the counter. Her eyes flicked curiously to the newcomer.

“Oh! Molly, this is Cassie, she owns this place,” I said, motioning between them. “Cassie, Molly. She owns the bakery just down the street. She is also the youngest of the McKinleys.”

“Nice to meet you,” Cassie said, shaking Molly’s hand. “Your brother, Colt? Amazing specimen of a man. Jace on the other hand? No comment.”

Laughing, we slid into the booth by the window, the one with the chipped paint on the tabletop and the crooked sugar jar.

“Speaking of those devils, I’m actually here to talk about them. Well, Colt mostly. I heard about the ending to your date last weekend,” Molly said, looking at me sadly.

“Let me remind everyone, it was not a date,” I said. “Furthermore, how do you know the way it ended?” I asked, directing my attention to Molly now.

“Colt told Jace, and Jace told me,” Molly explained.

“But no worries, I know just the cure for getting over my stupid brother,” Molly said, eyeing Cassie and me.

“And I don’t mean a rom-com and a pint of ice cream.

What I’m actually thinking is The Twisted Spur.

Music, dollar drinks, and guys who think they can dance.

Tonight. Cassie, you can come too. You seem like a good time. ”

Cassie smiled. “I’m flattered, and I’m so in. ”

I looked at each of them hesitantly. “I’m not sure.”

“You’re coming,” Cassie said. “We’re doing this.”

Molly’s face lit up with anticipation, waiting for my answer.

I smiled. Their excitement was contagious. “Alright, fine. I’m in.”

Molly lifted the sugar jar as if it were her drink. “To spontaneous friendships and shots that we’ll probably regret.”

Cassie clinked the mug she had in her hand against it. “And to seeing who ends up riding the mechanical bull first.”

I laughed. “Here goes nothing.”

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

“You did what ?” Molly asked, looking at me like I just told her I murdered someone.

Apparently, Jace opened his big, fat mouth and told her about my almost-kiss with Ellie, so she wanted me to explain myself. And that’s exactly what I did.

I told her how I almost kissed Ellie Friday night, how instead of going in for the kill, I chickened out, how I basically said we can only be friends, and how I left without looking back. In Molly’s eyes—or any woman’s eyes, really—that’s just about as bad as murder.

I’ve had all week to think about it. Like a toddler in time-out thinking about what actions got me put there in the first place and what I would change next time so I didn’t land myself in the clinker again.

Except there would be no next time. I had fucked it all up.

Ellie was never going to forgive me. She’d been ignoring me all week. She didn’t so much as look my way when I was out working on the ranch when she pulled into the guesthouse driveway every afternoon.

I was definitely getting the cold shoulder. Not that I didn’t deserve it.

Even though I was older now, I was apparently still that scared teenage boy, too chickenshit to open up and express his feelings.

Kissing Ellie meant diving into the deep end of my emotional pool with no idea how to swim and no lifeguard in sight.

Even if Ellie felt the same way as I do and kissed me back, there was no guarantee I wouldn't fuck it up somewhere down the line.

Then I'd lose her again, and losing Ellie almost broke me last time. I can't do it again.

"So let me get this straight. You took Ellie out on a date—you're not fooling anyone, we all know it was a date.

Then you had the best time you've had since before she left, winning trivia night at Maggie's.

You took her home and almost kissed her, but you backed out at the last second, tucked tail, and ran?

"Molly asked, looking confused by the entire situation.

"Yep," I said, taking a step back, fearing what Molly would do or say next.

"Told you he's lost his damn mind," Jace said, standing next to both of us in the living room of the main house. Big-mouthed Judas.

"Colt, the next thing I say, I'm saying because I love you," Molly stated. "You're a piece of shit for doing that," she deadpanned.

I deserved it .

"I know, trust me. I've been replaying the entire night in my head for seven days straight. I wish I could go back and redo it, but I can't."

"What idiotic man-logic made you think handling that situation in that way was the right thing to do?" Molly asked, taking a seat on the couch.

“There was no logic, Molly. It was a heat-of-the-moment decision. Ellie’s taillights leaving me in the dust flashed across my memory again and the spell I was under faded fast. Now she’s ignoring me, and you two are in my living room scolding me, so here we are.”

“How do you plan on fixing this one, oh wise brother?” Jace asked.

“Yes, do tell,” Molly said.

“I have no idea, you guys, okay? I’m not even sure this is fixable.

Ellie probably hates me now. She’s been going through so much, and I went and hurt her already-shattered heart.

She’s been ignoring me all week. She won’t even look my way when I see her out on the ranch.

So no, I do not have a plan to fix this if you guys couldn’t already tell. ”

Molly grabbed her bag, heading towards the door, frustrated with the entire situation. She left without another word, borderline slamming the door behind her. Jace turned his attention towards me.

“Lucky for you, I know just the thing to solve your problem. I’ve got a brand-new bottle of Maker’s Mark back at my place that we can bust open,” Jace suggested eagerly.

“What is that?”

“Bourbon, duh. ”



I rolled my eyes, turning to look out the window into the back pasture. The sun was sitting just above the tree line, signaling that the day was just about over. I didn't have much time to finish my ranch tasks for the day.

"I will not be joining in on that. I have stuff to do before the day's over. You need to get back to work too. That new herd of cattle is not going to vaccinate themselves," I said, brushing past Jace and heading out the front door.

After putting all the horses away for the night and tidying up the stalls, two hours had gone by. It was almost dark now, and I was exhausted, both mentally and physically.

Mentally because of my situation with Ellie. Physically because the only way I know how to keep my mind off hard things is by keeping my hands busy. It's a recipe for disaster when it comes to the health of my body, especially in situations like my current one.

After finally calling it a day, I stepped outside the horse stables, heading to my truck.

As I approached it, I could hear laughing in the distance. When I turned, I found Ellie standing on the porch of the guesthouse with Molly on her left and Cassie on her right.

I was just far enough away to make out their faces but still stay hidden in the shadows.

Ellie was wearing a short black leather skirt, her pink cowboy boots, and a jean jacket. Her hair fell in soft waves down her shoulders, and she looked as if what happened last Friday wasn't phasing her nearly as much as it was me .

One by one, each girl loaded into Molly's car, excited for whatever lay ahead for them tonight.

Curious where they were off to, I called Molly, testing out my best detective skills.

“Hello?” Molly answered after one ring.

“What’s my favorite sister up to tonight?” I asked, trying to not give away the fact that I had seen her leave the ranch just seconds ago.

“Lonely with nothing to do on a Friday night, huh?” she asked.

“Something like that,” I replied.

“Well, if you must know, Ellie, Cassie, and I are going to The Twisted Spur. In a few minutes, we’ll be riding a mechanical bull and taking shots that all the men trying to get in our pants have purchased for us tonight,” she said mischievously.

“First of all, you’re my sister, that’s gross. Secondly, if a man hits on Ellie at the bar tonight and even thinks for one second that he’s taking her home, you’d better call me,” I said with a serious tone.

“You no longer get that option, Colt. Remember? You and Ellie are just friends, nothing more. Friends don’t worry about how many times their platonic friends get hit on at the bar or who they sleep with for that matter. So, enjoy your night, Colt. Don’t wait up!”

And with that, she hung up.

In a weird way, it was like the universe was giving me a taste of my own medicine.

I ran my hand down my face, letting out a deep sigh.

There was no way I could sit here alone all night without going stir-crazy. The longer

I sat in the silence, the more my brain was invaded with thoughts of Ellie going home with some drunk loser from the bar.

I stared at my phone for a few seconds before ultimately deciding to dial Jace.

“Miss me already, huh?” he teased.

“Does your offer of a guys’ night still stand?” I asked, hoping for a yes.

“Before I tell you my answer, what made you change your mind?” Jace asked, amused.

“Our sister took Ellie out to the bar tonight, and I watched her get in the car dressed in the shortest skirt I’ve ever seen her wear,” I answered, defeated.

“Oof, that’ll do it,” he said. I could tell he genuinely felt sorry for me. “You stay put, and I’ll be there with alcohol to fix your inside boo-boos in a few minutes.”

“Just get here before I lose my damn mind,” I begged.

“10-4, little buddy,” Jace said as he hung up the phone.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

I almost talked myself out of going to the bar with Molly and Cassie at least ten times before I even finished getting ready. And I changed outfits just as many times.

First, I tried to keep it low-key—leggings, a comfy tee, and my sneakers. Casual. Effortless. But one glance in the mirror told me I was playing it too safe. I didn't look like someone ready for a girls' night out. I looked like someone ready to binge a crime doc and eat cereal on the couch.

So, I changed into dark jeans with a flowy blouse, something cute but classic. As I rummaged through my closet for shoes, my hand brushed against an unopened cardboard box shoved in the back. I'd forgotten it was back there.

Curious, I pulled it out and peeled back the flaps. Inside, neatly folded, was the black leather miniskirt I'd splurged on a month ago. The tag was still attached. I ran my fingers across the smooth material. It was soft, sleek. Bold .

Ten minutes later, I stood in front of the mirror, wearing that black miniskirt, the pink cowboy boots Colt had teased me about (which only made me love them more), and a low-cut black top that definitely flirted with the edge of showing too much.

But tonight wasn't about modesty. Or Colt. Or anyone else, for that matter.

Tonight was about me.

I curled my hair, swiped on some lip gloss, and blinked at my reflection. Damn. I looked good. Confident. Hot. If I had worn this on my not-a-date with Colt, he definitely would have kissed me.

But he didn't. So screw him.

As if on cue, the doorbell rang. It was Cassie and Molly, right on time and ready for whatever the night held.

"Let's go, hot stuff!" Cassie called through the door. "I swear, if you come out in leggings after you made us wait, we're turning around."

I laughed as I opened the door, grabbing my purse and bedazzled jean jacket on the way out. Cassie and Molly both let out exaggerated gasps.

"Dang, girl," Molly said, looking me up and down. "Look at you."

"You're lucky I wore heels," Cassie said, "because you're not outshining me without a fight."

"Let's go cause some trouble," I said, locking the door behind me. As I stepped into the warm night, my pink boots clicked against the wooden planks of the front porch with every confident step.

I was ready for anything.

The Twisted Spur was everything you'd imagine in a smalltown dive bar—only better. It was one of those neon-lit spots where the music thrummed in your chest, and the drinks were always a little too strong.

The place had a slightly retro vibe—half honky-tonk, half dive bar—with weathered wood walls, string lights zigzagging across the ceiling, and a jukebox in the corner that still took quarters.

A faded mural of cowgirls on horseback stretched across the back wall behind the

bar, and the scent of lime, sweat, and spilled whiskey clung to the air like perfume.

Around these parts, The Twisted Spur was famous for two things: dangerously strong tequila and a mechanical bull that had bruised more egos and tailbones than most could count. And that's what we came here for—the drinks, the dancing, and the bull.

Cassie led the charge to the dance floor while Molly flagged down shots from the bartender like she was on a mission. We raised our shots, toasted to the night, tossed back our tequila, and hit the floor, dancing like no one was watching.

“Alright,” Cassie said after our second round, eyes gleaming. “It's bull time.”

Molly groaned playfully. “I knew that tequila was a setup.”

Speaking of tequila, the effects of the shots were already taking over my body. My arms and legs were becoming wobbly, and my attitude about riding the bull had changed from hesitation to determination.

Colt would probably think I was being reckless. But Colt wasn't here.

Cassie and Molly hollered and clapped as I marched up to the roped-off area, a woman on a mission. The guy running the bull gave me an amused smirk.

I climbed on with surprising ease, locking my legs around the padded saddle.

The bull jerked once, then twice, and off it went, bucking, twisting, and spinning.

I rode it like a pro with one hand high and the other gripping the strap, my hair whipping through the air as I leaned into every buck and twist.

The crowded bar went wild, almost startling me. Even the bartender paused for a

moment to whistle.

I was on top of the world.

When I finally fell off—gracefully, I might add—I stood and curtsied like I’d just finished a Broadway performance.

“And that, ladies, is how you ride a bull.”

Cassie whooped. “Ellie-freakin’-Brooks, you made that bull your bitch!”

Molly handed me the tequila shot she’d been saving. “To being a badass.”

We clinked glasses, laughter spilling over as easily as the tequila. It was stupid. And perfect. And exactly what I needed.

Making our way back to the front, Cassie, Molly, and I sat at the bar, the bartender asking what we wanted next.

“I’ll take a vodka cranberry,” I said, craving something tart.

“I’ll have a Michelob Ultra,” Cassie said.

“Make that two vodka cranberries,” Molly added after a beat.

As the bartender placed our drinks in front of us, a guy in a red flannel shirt slid onto the barstool next to mine .

“Hello, darlin’,” he slurred, leaning in a little too close.

“Hi,” I replied, keeping it polite but distant.

“What brings you out tonight?” he asked, swaying slightly, his breath warm and too close.

“Girls’ night. And actually, I should get back to it,” I said, turning to leave.

Before I could slide off the barstool, his hand clamped around my wrist.

My eyes widened. Fear bloomed in my chest—not just because a drunk stranger was grabbing me, but because the way his hand wrapped around my wrist yanked me straight back to the night Jason slammed my head into the wall.

I froze for a moment, then I yanked my arm away. The man didn’t have much strength in his drunken state, but something told me that if he were sober, he might not have let go so easily. That thought made my stomach churn.

Cassie and Molly were beside me in an instant, placing themselves between me and the drunk guy.

“Touch her again and I’ll kick your ass,” Cassie snapped, her voice like a whip.

He blinked at her, clearly stunned. I doubted he was used to women standing up to him.

“You heard me, douchebag. Get lost,” Cassie said, not backing down.

“Easy there, Red. Your bitch friend’s not worth it,” he muttered, turning his back on us. “She’s probably a lousy lay anyway.”

He turned to face the row of TVs above the bar, dismissing us like an afterthought .

Cassie stepped closer to him, not ready to let go of the fight, but before she could say



anything else, the guy was violently knocked off his barstool.

Someone with broad shoulders and a cowboy hat pinned him against the bar top, wrapping a hand around the man's neck.

“Speak about her like that again, and I'll break your fingers one by one—and smile while I do it. My best friend is the town sheriff. I could murder you and get away with it.”

I recognized the voice instantly—Colt.

Jace stepped in next, grabbing the guy's wrist and twisting it while Colt still held him by the throat.

“And don't call her Red ever again. Got it?”

“Got it,” the man choked out, his face turning purple.

Jace and Colt let go at the same time. The guy stumbled backward, clutching his neck and gasping for air before disappearing into the crowd.

The rest of us just stood there, stunned.

“Where the hell did you guys come from?” Molly asked, breaking the silence.

“Boys' night was turning into a dud, so we decided to come here,” Jace said. “What a coincidence seeing you guys.”

“I don't believe in coincidences,” Cassie shot back, calling his bluff.

Colt turned to me, gently taking my hand and turning it over, inspecting both sides of

my wrist.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine, I promise,” I said, rubbing my wrist, trying to erase the feeling of what had just happened .

After Colt finished looking me over, a slow George Strait song started playing over the speakers.

He looked around the bar, then back at me. “Dance with me.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Here?”

He nodded his head up and down laughing. “Yes, here, Ellie.”

I glanced over at Cassie and Molly who were both giving me a what the hell are you waiting for look.

“Uh, sure,” I said, extending my hand.

Colt took my hand and guided me onto the dance floor. As the song played, he pulled me in close. After a few seconds, I laid my head against his chest. His heart was beating faster than normal. Probably because of the bar fight he almost got into over me.

I was still mad at him about not kissing me the other night, but the last few minutes had brought a lot of my anxiety to the surface, and Colt being around was the only way I could calm my nerves—even if I was still pissed off at him.

“You didn’t need to defend my honor back there,” I said, lifting my head to meet his

eyes.

“I don’t have to. But I want to, El. There’s a big difference.”

“What made you want to come to the bar tonight?”

“The short answer? Jace dragged me here. The long one?” Colt paused, releasing a long breath.

“I watched you guys leave while I was finishing up some work down at the stables, and it annoyed the hell out of me, the thought of drunk guys staring at you all night. So, when Jace came to the main house for a guys’ night, he got tired of all my sulking and forced me to come down here and check on you. Said it’d make me feel better.”

“Did it?”

“I feel better now that you’re dancing with me and not some stranger.”

I looked up at him, unsure how to respond.

What was he trying to say?

Was he admitting he was jealous? Of other guys looking at me? Dancing with me?

“I didn’t dance with any strangers tonight, you know. It’s just been Cassie, Molly, and me.” I paused, shaking my head. “Not that it’s any of your business anyway. You made that clear the other night.”

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He didn't respond right away. He just kept swaying with me, his hands steady as he moved us side to side. I'd spoken a little bitterly, sure, but it was the truth.

"It's hard for me to explain, Ellie," he said quietly. "Please don't do this to me."

"Well, you're the one slow dancing with me and defending my honor by getting into bar fights," I shot back. "Sorry if I'm a little confused."

He leaned his forehead against mine, locking eyes with me.

"I lost you once already, El. If I lose you again, I won't make it out alive this time."

The song ended just as the last words left his mouth. He kissed my forehead, then turned and walked away, leaving me alone in the middle of the dance floor, surrounded by people swaying to the music, completely unaware of what had just happened.

I was stunned. I couldn't think straight .

When reality caught back up with me, I chased after Colt, spotting him pushing through the entrance doors of the bar. Cassie, Molly, and Jace watched in silence as I passed them, my pace quickening.

I burst outside.

It was pouring rain.

Squinting in the downpour, I could barely see ten feet in front of me.

“Dammit, Colt,” I muttered. “Where did you go?”

Off in the distance, I saw the haze of truck lights coming to life. Marching closer to the source of light, I recognized Colt’s truck.

As he backed out, I stepped in front of the truck. Blocking him, I threw my hands up in the air.

Colt put the truck in park and jumped out.

“What the hell are you doing, Ellie?” he asked, marching towards me, his voice barely audible above the pounding rain.

“I could ask you the same thing,” I said, a little louder this time.

“I’m trying to go home.”

“I’m sorry, but you don’t get to make that kind of confession to me and just walk away. That’s not how life works.”

“Crazy how you’re scolding me about walking away, because that’s exactly what you did two years ago,” he said, stepping closer.

“I had to leave, Colt. I felt trapped in this town, and I had no one to turn to.”

“You had me!” he said, holding his arms out.

“How was I supposed to know? It wasn’t like you were open about your feelings for me. You weren’t then, and you still aren’t now. One second, you’re slow dancing

with me in a bar, and the next, you're running from me. You haven't been straightforward with me about your feelings, well, ever really."

We were both drenched, the rain unrelenting. Colt's white shirt was see-through, the muscles in his torso flexing and the vein in his neck coming to life.

"You wanna know the truth, El? The truth is, when you left, it broke something deep inside of me. I've thought about you every single day since that night.

Not a single day has gone by that I didn't think about picking up the phone and calling to check on you.

But everyone in town always talked about how much you loved your new life, so I decided to let you go.

To let you live your life in Dallas with no regrets—even if it meant losing the one person in my life who has ever made my heart skip a beat by just walking into the room.

It was always you Ellie. And it will always be you, no matter what," he said, pausing as he ran his hand through his hair. "Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"Colt..." I was stunned.

"How did you get here?" he asked, ignoring the huge confession bomb he'd just detonated.

"Molly drove us. Why?"

"Get in the truck, I'm taking you home."

“I’m not ready to go home,” I argued.

“You are not going back into that bar drenched from the rain. There’s not much left for a man’s imagination now that you’re soaked, and I don’t feel like getting into another bar fight tonight. Besides, we’re not done talking about this.”

“You don’t get to tell me what to do, Colt. I’m a grown-ass woman. ”

“Ellie.”

“Colt,” I said, standing my ground.

“Get. In. The. Truck.”

I didn’t respond. I just crossed my arms, ready for battle.

“Fine. The hard way it is,” Colt said, coming towards me as the rain continued pouring down around us.

Before I realized what he was doing, he slung me over his shoulder, marched towards the passenger side of the truck, and launched me into the seat.

“You can’t kidnap me!” I argued, as he hopped into the driver’s seat.

“I think I just did.”

Colt put the truck in drive, leaving the parking lot of The Twisted Spur in record time.

I sat there, too mad to speak. The longer we drove in silence, the faster my emotions swirled inside of me. It felt like fire was going to start coming out of my ears.

When we pulled onto the dirt road that led to the ranch, Colt decided to end the stand-off.

“El, I’m sorry,” he said, looking over at me, putting the truck in park. His voice gentler now.

“For what?” I asked still pissed off because he’d kidnapped me—kind of.

“For putting all that on you back there. I should’ve told you how I felt all along, instead of keeping it in and throwing it all on you like that. And I’m sorry for chickening out that night after Maggie’s. You deserve better than that.”

I stayed silent, replaying Colt’s apology a couple more times in my head .

“What can I do to fix this, El?” he asked, his eyes filled with regret.

I don’t know what came over me. Somebody must’ve been controlling my body, because a second later, I was on Colt’s lap, pressing my lips against his.

I wasn’t sure how this was going to fix anything, but I didn’t care. It felt like the right thing to do. I wanted Colt so badly, and something told me that no matter how hard he was fighting it, he wanted me too.

He pushed his hands under my shirt, the heat from his skin on my back, warming me, driving away the cold from the rain.

Our lips crashed together as he pulled me closer. His hands traveled higher up my back, stopping at the base of my bra.

Colt changed the trajectory of his lips from my face to my neck, trailing kisses down and across my collar bone. Goosebumps appeared all over my body.



“Don’t stop, Colt, please .”

He granted my wish, planting kisses down to my chest, my shirt exposing the top of my breasts. As Colt began to kiss them, a moan escaped my lips.

“Colt.”

“Dammit, Ellie,” Colt whispered against my skin. I was sure this night could only end one way. But after a few moments, he leaned back against the seat, trying to catch his breath, stopping the traction we had going.

“I want more than anything for this night to never end, Ellie, believe me, but I want to take you on a proper date at least once before we go any further,” he said .

Damn. If Colt was anything, he was a gentleman, the exact opposite of what I wanted him to be right now.

I pulled back, catching my breath.

“Break the rules, just this once,” I said, trying to persuade him.

“You deserve it all, El. The flowers, the kind gestures, laughs over a fancy dinner. That’s what I want to give you—first.”

I climbed off his lap and dropped into the seat beside him, huffing in frustration.

“Fine,” I said, crossing my arms with a playful scowl.

“Does this mean you’re not mad at me anymore?” Colt asked nervously.

“I’m not mad at you anymore, don’t worry.”

A relieved smile spread across his face. Colt drove the short distance to the guesthouse while I sat silently in the passenger seat, wondering—for the hundredth time—why the universe seemed to hate me.

When we pulled into the driveway, Colt hopped out and opened my door, offering his hand to help me down.

“Be ready tomorrow night at eight,” he said.

As I walked away, I turned back to look at him over my shoulder. “It’s a date,” I said, winking.

“It’s a date,” he echoed, shaking his head with a laugh.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

Last night with Ellie felt like whiplash. One second, I was sulking, the next, I was dancing with her in the middle of a bar. Then, a few seconds later, we were arguing in the rain, after that we were making out in my truck.

I couldn't control the future—nobody could—but I was sure of one thing: This time, I had to get things right with Ellie.

This second chance? It might be the only one I'd ever get.

And it started with taking her out on a proper date.

I was driving towards the guesthouse now with flowers tucked safely in the passenger seat.

As I made my way from one of the back pastures on the far side of the property, my phone buzzed against the dash of the truck.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Colt, it's Liam. I've got an update on that guy, Jason.”

“What were you able to find? ”

“His record's clean. Just your regular speeding tickets here and there. According to his social media profiles, he works at a marketing firm in downtown Dallas. For the most part, he's just some normal city slicker.”

“I feel a but coming.”

“But,” Liam continued, “when I did some more digging, I found an old restraining order against him. It’s from a few years ago and isn’t active anymore.

According to the affidavit, Jason got into an altercation with an old girlfriend at a bar.

Got in her face and threw a drink across the room.

Never laid hands on her, but she still feared for her safety and filed a restraining order against him.

The judge approved it for a year, so it’s expired now. ”

I huffed. I wasn’t surprised. Something told me Ellie wasn’t the first girl he’d ever laid hands on. I was sure there were more out there: girls who never went to the authorities.

Part of me wanted Ellie to press charges, but it would just be her word against his which would probably be more traumatizing than helpful.

“Thanks for the help,” I said.

“No problem. Call me if you need anything else,” Liam said before ending the call.

I set my phone back down, trying to shift my focus from Liam’s update to the night ahead with Ellie.

I pulled into her driveway, grabbing the flowers from the passenger seat before heading to the front door.

I stood at the door, shifting my weight from one foot to the other, fidgeting like a nervous teenager—unsure what to do with my hands, how high to hold the flowers, or what to even say when she opened the door.

“Pull it together, man,” I muttered under my breath.

A few seconds later, Ellie opened the front door, stopping me from spiraling any further.

Breathtaking as always.

Her blonde hair fell in soft waves around her shoulders. She wore a light-blue denim miniskirt that frayed at the bottom, and a white blouse with tiny flowers hand-sewn into the fabric.

I held out the bouquet, trying to act calm. “I got these for you,” I blurted.

She smiled, taking them from my grasp. “Did you pick these yourself?”

I nodded. “I remembered how much you liked wildflowers, so I figured you’d enjoy these more than the store-bought ones. I made sure to throw in a couple of sunflowers, since I know those are your favorite.”

I searched Ellie’s face for any sign that I’d gotten it right.

“That was so thoughtful of you,” she smiled, lifting the flowers to her nose to breathe in their scent. “Let me put these in a vase really quick before we go,” she said as she made her way into the kitchen.

Ellie filled a vase with water, sinking the stems into the liquid before placing the flowers in the center of the dinner table.

“Where are we headed?” she asked as she grabbed her purse off the entryway table on our way out the door .

“I was thinking about taking you to dinner in the city and then going to see that new rom-com Molly’s been talking about. She said it has some hot cowboy in it, so I think you’ll like it,” I said teasing her.

“You think I have a thing for cowboys, do you?” she asked, winking at me.

“Hopefully just one cowboy in particular,” I said pulling her into me as we made our way to my truck.

“His probationary period hasn’t ended yet,” she teased. “I’m still trying to decide.”

“Then I guess I should be on my best behavior tonight, huh?” I said, opening the door for her.

“Guess you should,” she said as she settled into the passenger seat and closed the door.

Challenge accepted , I thought as we drove away, eager to get the night started.

We pulled into one of the nicest restaurants Great Falls had to offer. Scoring a reservation was nearly impossible, but Liam had pulled a few strings for me. He knew the owners, and I wasn’t above cashing in a favor.

I hopped out of the truck and rounded to Ellie’s side, opening her door and helping her out. She took my hand without hesitation, the soft click of her heels echoing against the pavement as we made our way inside.

The restaurant was quiet, intimate, with low lighting and soft instrumental music

playing in the background. The waitstaff wore all black, moving gracefully between tables draped in crisp white linens with perfectly arranged silverware.

The hostess greeted us with a smile. “Do you have a reservation tonight? ”

“Yes. McKinley,” I replied.

“Right this way,” she said, leading us through the dining room and into a private room in the back. Inside was a single candlelit table with another small bouquet of wildflowers arranged at its center.

Ellie’s eyes widened. “Colt, this is beautiful.”

I smiled, pulling out her chair and helping her settle in. “I told you I wanted our first date to be special, and I meant it.”

I made my way to my seat directly across from hers. After a few minutes, the waiter came to take our order. Ellie chose the salmon; I went with a ribeye. As he walked away, taking our menus with him, I turned my attention to Ellie.

“So,” I said, watching the way the candlelight danced in her hair, “what are your plans? Do you think you want to stay in Silver Creek?”

It was a loaded question, but selfishly I wanted to know the answer.

Ellie tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, looking down at the rim of her wine glass. “Honestly? I’m still trying to figure that out.”

I let out a soft sigh. Her answer wasn’t a yes, but it wasn’t a no either. I was trying my best to look at the glass half full, even if it still sucked.

The rest of our dinner consisted of random small talk and laughter. After paying, I helped Ellie to my truck, heading to our next destination.

As I pulled my truck into the drive-in movie theater, I could tell Ellie was confused. She looked around, trying to figure out where we were.

“Wait... It’s a drive-in movie? Like, we stay in the car? ”

I nodded.

“I didn’t know these still existed,” she said, staring at the huge white screen in front of us.

“Once a month. It’s one of the traditions Silver Creek Theater refuses to give up, I guess.

I heard about it through some guys that work on the ranch.

But we can go to a regular movie if you’d rather do that.

The tickets we won at Maggie’s are good for either one,” I said, not sure if Ellie was interested in the drive-in movie.

“No, this is perfect,” she said, turning towards me smiling.

She moved into the middle seat. I put my arm around her, pulling her closer as the screen came to life in front of us, signaling the beginning of the movie.

After silently watching the movie for a while, Ellie sat up.

“This movie is really cute. I think Cassie would love it,” she said, turning towards



me.

The light from the screen was glowing just enough for me to see Ellie's outline. Even in the dark, I could tell how beautiful she was.

I gently put my hand on her cheek, rubbing my thumb across it gently.

"You know, you're the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on," I said softly, meaning it.

She smiled and looked down shyly, holding my arm in place with her hand.

I turned my body towards her, pulling her in even closer.

"You're my favorite movie. Watching the way you laugh at corny jokes, how kind you are to complete strangers, and the way you don't let your hard days win. I get to watch you take life by the horns every day, and it's the most amazing thing I have ever seen," I admitted.

"Colt, you have an amazing way of making me feel seen, even when I feel like no one understands what I'm going through," Ellie whispered.

I was trying my best to control myself, but I wasn't going to last much longer.

Hell, I didn't care anymore either.

I gently laid Ellie back against the bench seat of my truck, my hands trailing along her sides to the bottom of her shirt, my lips peppering her neck.

"El, I want it all with you. Late nights talking on the phone. Takeout on the couch at the end of a long day. Horseback riding into the sunset. I want the good, the bad, and

the ugly, and I don't care what I have to do to earn it.

Please, let me go all in," I pleaded as my thumb left circles against her stomach, my eyes staring down into hers.

"I'm yours Colt, in every way," she whispered, sliding her hand up my shirt.

Her chest was rising and falling faster now, her breasts begging to break out of her blouse at any moment. I kissed them through the soft fabric.

"Tell me to stop, Ellie, and I will. No hard feelings, no regrets, I promise," I said, giving her one last out before I dove into the deep end with her like I'd only ever dreamed of doing.

"Don't stop, Colt, please, " she whimpered softly.

I wanted this just as bad as she did, but I needed to make sure she felt safe first .

Gently placing a hand on either side of her shoulders, I pushed her back, just enough for her to see the seriousness in my eyes.

"El," I said, taking a deep breath, "your past doesn't define you, but it makes me understand how important it is for us to be on the same page about sex.

I never want to do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable.

Whatever your boundaries are, I will honor them.

I just need you to tell me what they are. "

Ellie hesitated for a moment, contemplating how to respond. She shifted in the seat,

sitting up straight.

“Honestly? I don’t really know what my boundaries are. Jason and I never explored sex that way. He usually just used it as a tool to make up for what he had done wrong. But I feel safe with you Colt, even exposed and vulnerable like this. I never got that feeling when I was with him.”

She looked up at me, her eyes searching for the right words. I could tell she had more that she wanted to say.

“Will you help me explore what my boundaries actually are?” she asked softly, hesitation in her question.

“Ellie, sex is meant to be special, not used as a tool to control you. I will never do that to you. What happens when we have sex is up to you. You call the shots. You control the narrative. Do you understand?”

She nodded weakly.

“Do you want to explore tonight?” I asked hesitantly, not wanting her to feel pressured.

The tips of her cheeks started to blush.

“You’re safe with me, El. Just tell me what you want. ”

“I like to be spanked, biting turns me on, and I don’t mind being told what to do when we’re having sex, but my boundaries are choking, hitting, and being belittled, okay?”

I repeated back what Ellie had just said to me, letting her know I understood her boundaries explicitly.

She shifted her body, so now she was on top of my lap.

“Shall we continue?” she teased.

My heart was pounding so hard in my chest, I was sure it would stop beating altogether any second.

Slowly, I lifted her denim miniskirt, exposing her completely. She wasn't wearing any panties.

“No panties, El? Someone had a plan all along,” I said, gently kissing her neck, and opening her legs as I stroked her inner thigh. “You're already glistening, and I haven't even touched you yet,” I said as I continued rubbing her thigh, stroking a bit higher each time.

The closer my hand got to her center, the more her back arched, anticipation running through her body.

“Are you scared, El?” I asked, sitting up and looking over her body one last time before making her mine.

She shook her head side-to-side, her chest rising and falling in a frantic rhythm.

“Don't worry, tonight is about you and your needs. Tell me what you need, baby. Whatever you want, I'll give it to you.”

“Everything aches—”

Before she could finish, I slid two of my fingers across her wet core .

“Does this make the aching worse?”

“Yes,” she said exhaling frantically.

I leaned down, whispering in her ear, my fingers sliding along her slick entrance.

“How about I help you with that?” I said, gently pushing my fingers inside, pulling back, then in again, a little deeper each time. Ellie’s back arched as she moaned in pleasure.

“You have to be quiet, baby. Someone might hear you.”

The hardened peaks of her nipples strained beneath her shirt. I pulled it the rest of the way down, exposing both breasts. As my fingers continued to work her core, I nibbled at her breasts, biting her nipple as Ellie cried out in ecstasy.

“Colt, I’ve never orgasmed just by someone’s fingers before,” she said, taking in deep breaths of air each time.

Her body clenched my fingers—signaling she was close to her breaking point.

“Tonight is all about you, El. Do you think you can take more?”

She nodded.

I added a third finger. Ellie moaned in pleasure as a result.

“Colt, I—”

“You can do it Ellie, open your legs wider for me. There you go, baby.”

I used my thumb to gently rub her clit. Within seconds, Ellie was yelling my name, her muscles contracting around my fingers. A smile spread across my face as I

watched her come undone on top of me .

As she came down from her high, I sat in the driver's seat while Ellie lay there collecting herself. I put the truck in drive.

“We’re going home.”

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

Every minute it took to get back to the ranch was agonizingly painful. Ellie lay in the passenger seat the entire time, moaning and begging for more. I rubbed her clit gently as I drove down the dirt road to the entrance of the ranch.

“We’re almost at the guesthouse, Ellie. And when we get there, I promise to satisfy every need you have. You’re mine, baby girl, all night.”

I sped into the driveway, slamming the breaks, not wanting to spend a second longer without Ellie’s body against mine.

I hopped out of the truck and turned to grab Ellie’s legs, pulling her towards me across the bench seat. I hoisted her over my shoulder, her ass hanging out from beneath her miniskirt.

She squealed as my hand made contact with her velvet skin in a playful slap.

As we reached the front of the guesthouse, I pushed her against the door, pinning her legs open as I held her up in the air. I grabbed onto each of her thighs as if my life depended on it .

She ran her fingers through my hair, moaning into my mouth as I deepened our kiss. Her skirt was completely up around her waist now. She was completely exposed under the blanket of dark starry sky.

Ellie

Colt kicked open the door of the guesthouse, sending it flying back. He strode across

the living room and into the back bedroom, staring deep into my eyes as he carried me. I was sure he could see into the deepest parts of my soul.

He tossed me onto the bed, my chest rising and falling, partly because I was out of breath and partly because I was barely keeping it together, trying to anticipate what Colt would do next.

I got my answer pretty quickly, as he spread my legs open, exposing my aching wet center.

A primal sound came out of his throat, as if he had finally found the one thing that would keep him alive forever.

Colt flipped me onto my stomach in one swift motion, giving my ass another quick smack as my stomach hit the quilt. Every time he did that an electric sensation went straight through me, making me ache for him even more.

“You’re so wet Ellie. Do you like when I spank you?”

I nodded, lost in a haze of need and lust.

Grabbing my waist, Colt shifted my ass higher, exposing all of me to him.

“Tell me you want this, Ellie. Tell me you want this just as bad as I do,” he begged.

“I want this, Colt. I want you .”

He shoved two fingers deep inside me. The sensation of being stretched—even with just his fingers—sent a shiver up my spine. I bit my bottom lip, trying to ground myself.



“What’s wrong, Ellie? Am I leaving you speechless?” he teased before flipping me onto my back and leaning down to whisper in my ear. “That’s okay, baby. I know what you want, even if you can’t tell me right now. Now, spread your legs. I want to taste you when I make you come again.”

Without wasting another second, he swiped his warm tongue across my clit. My core ached even more now, which I didn’t think was possible.

Colt licked and sucked as he pushed his fingers deep inside me. First two, then three, stretching me in a way that somehow made me both ache and feel relief at the same time.

I tried backing away, the sensation overwhelming.

“That’s so sensitive Colt. I don’t know if I can take it.”

“You can do it, baby. Take a deep breath and relax. Then let me taste you while you climax.”

I did as Colt instructed, spreading my legs wider and running my hands through his hair, trying to hold on for dear life.

He continued licking my clit as his fingers stretched me wider and wider.

A warm sensation rushed through me, pleasure erupting from my core in a way I had never experienced before.

I screamed Colt’s name, all the nerves in my body suddenly on fire .

“Let go, baby. You’re doing so good. I love watching you like this,” he said as the waves of pleasure surged through my body.

Once my high had subsided, Colt turned me over, lifting me onto my knees.

“Your pussy is glistening, Ellie. Tell me what it needs next.”

I arched my back, spreading my legs wider.

“I need you deep inside me. Not your fingers— you .”

He squeezed and massaged my ass, then he gave it a quick smack.

“Yes, Colt—harder.”

He responded by smacking me on the ass again, once, twice. I moaned as the mixture of pleasure and pain sent a heatwave over my body.

“Let me grab a condom from my truck.”

“Forget about it. I’m on birth control. Please don’t stop now,” I begged in ecstasy.

“Ellie, are you sure? I’ve never been bare inside anyone, so I know I’m clean, but is this what you really want?”

“Yes. Now , Colt.”

Without another thought, he shoved his cock deep inside me, giving me exactly what I’d begged for.

He slid in and out, hard and fast, pulling my hips back, ensuring I took every last inch of him.

He reached his hand around to my clit, rubbing gently, heightening every sensation.

With his other hand, Colt kneaded my lower back, as if to relax my body.

“Take it, baby. I know you can take all of me. Your body was made for me. ”

“Colt –,” I moaned in pleasure.

“Lose yourself, Ellie. Go over the edge, I’ll go with you.”

As if my body could hear him giving me permission, heat rolled through me, my nerves sending waves of ecstasy through my body again.

I screamed Colt’s name as he found his release deep inside me, my walls clenching around his pulsing cock, begging for every last drop of his hot seed.

“ Fuck , El,” Colt said gasping for air.

I fell onto the bed, exhausted and sated.

Colt laid gentle kisses along my back, using his fingers to make sure every last drop of him stayed inside me.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

After spending the weekend with my head in pink clouds of lust, Monday arrived, and with it, the return to reality.

As I got ready for a long day at the coffee shop, I thought about how I could keep my weekend with Colt a secret from Cassie.

She, Molly, and Jace had all witnessed me chase after him Friday night at the bar. They would want answers, and I was a terrible liar.

As I walked to my car, trying to come up with a game plan, Colt pulled up in his truck.

“Howdy, ma’am.” He tipped his cowboy hat, a mischievous glint in his eye.

God, that voice. Swoon .

“Good morning, sir. To what do I owe this honor?” I arched a brow, my curiosity piqued.

Colt tilted his head out the window of his truck, motioning for me to come over.

“I figured I’d drop by and see you off before you go to work. Also, I wanted a kiss. But you better do it quick if you don’t want someone to see. I can’t go twenty-four hours without kissing you,” he admitted, making me laugh.

His southern drawl made everything sound charming, and I couldn’t help but smile. The heat of the morning sun was nothing compared to the fire burning inside me

whenever Colt was around.

I grinned, fighting the heat creeping up my neck. “One quick kiss before I head out,” I said.

As our lips connected, I placed a hand on his cheek, holding him in place a few seconds longer. Colt knew what that meant.

“Don’t get me started,” he warned, a playful edge creeping into his voice. “You’ll be late for work, and I won’t feel a bit bad about it.”

His intense gaze made my pulse quicken. He meant every word, and part of me wasn’t sure I wanted to avoid the temptation.

Off in the distance, the rumble of heavy machinery broke through the quiet morning, followed by the sharp bark of men shouting orders to one another.

The sounds snapped me back to reality—we could get caught at any moment. Reluctantly, I pulled away, not letting things go any further.

Colt caught on immediately, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“What’s the matter, darlin’? Afraid someone’s watchin’?” he teased.

I rolled my eyes, but the grin on my face gave me away.

“I need to get to work before I’m late and Cassie gets suspicious,” I said, dreading the idea of leaving him. “Will I see you tonight? ”

“Definitely. I’ll come up with some excuse to head down this way. Expect me around seven,” Colt said, grinning.

“Got it,” I replied, pulling my keys from my purse and heading back to my car.

I glanced over my shoulder with a teasing smile. “If you’re good, maybe I’ll make you some homemade pecan pie tonight.”

Colt let out a low whistle. “I’d do bad things for your homemade pecan pie,” he said, his voice rough as he tilted his head, eyeing me like a predator sizing up its prey.

I laughed, continuing my walk to the car, knowing I’d better leave before he proved it to me.

“Have a good day, Colt,” I said with a wave, and with that, I drove off to start my day.

I pulled into the parking spaces in front of the coffee shop with not a minute to spare, barely throwing my car into park before dashing through the front door. I scrambled to grab my apron, praying I could get it on before the first customers walked in.

“Somebody’s in a hurry this morning,” Cassie said, eyeing me curiously from behind the counter.

“Sorry,” I said, giving her a half smile and tugging my apron over my head, trying to avoid the conversation that was coming.

“You just gonna stand there and stare at my pretty face, or are you going to tell me what the hell happened after you and Colt left the bar together Friday night?”

Poker face, Ellie. You can do it.

“Nothing. He apologized for what happened that night after Maggie’s. I accepted his apology, and we’re good again. Nothing else to report,” I said, attempting to keep my

tone light and casual.

She eyed me closely. “I’m not sure if I believe you,” she said, crossing her arms and shifting her weight to one hip.

Right on cue, the door chimed as our first customer walked in, forcing us to get to work.

Cassie and I fell into our usual rhythm, working in sync as we handled the steady stream of orders. Standard lattes. Easygoing customers. Routine tasks.

But no matter how busy we got, it was nearly impossible to wipe the silly grin off my face. My mind kept returning to Saturday night at the drive-in theater. The way Colt had touched my body. Where his lips had left their marks on me. A shiver went down my spine—the good kind.

“I’m going to the back to make some Danishes for tomorrow,” Cassie said, wiping her hands on a towel. “If you need anything, just come get me.”

“You got it,” I said, repositioning my apron on my waist.

The shop was quiet with no one in line, and I found myself drifting over to the front window, staring out at the sleepy street beyond, letting my mind wander where it wanted. And of course, it drifted to images of Colt.

Maybe he was riding one of his horses right now, sweat glistening on his skin as the summer sun beat down. His muscles pulling tight against his T-shirt, boots caked in dirt from a hard morning’s work, blue jeans hugging his muscled thighs.

Goodness, what a sight that would be .

I bit back a smile, shaking my head. I was hopeless, but in a way I hadn't felt in a long time. Colt was slowly making me feel like myself again.

"Hey," Cassie said, her voice cutting into my thoughts, making me jump.

"Jesus, you scared me," I said, laughing, my heart pounding harder than it should've been.

But Cassie didn't laugh back. She looked at me, her face etched with concern.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, a knot forming in my stomach.

She hesitated. "Well... some guy just called, asking if you worked here. I didn't say yes or no. I told him it was none of his business who my employees were. After that, he got agitated. Started yelling. So I hung up."

She didn't ask me any direct questions, but it was written all over her face—she wanted answers.

"Did he give you his name?"

"No. Just asked if an Ellie worked here, and when I wouldn't tell him, it all went south," Cassie explained, looking thoroughly confused.

I crossed my arms over my chest, trying to hold myself together as my mind raced.

Could it have been Jason? How would he have figured out where I worked? There was no way he could know... right?

Cassie must've seen the panic flicker across my face, because she stepped closer, resting a hand on my arm.



“Ellie,” she said softly, “please tell me what’s going on. ”

I sank down at one of the tables, grateful we didn’t have any customers at the moment.

“Do you remember that day I said I wasn’t sure if I should start something with Colt? That it might be too soon to jump into another man’s arms?”

Ha. Look at me now , I thought bitterly.

“Yeah,” Cassie said, watching me closely.

“Well, that’s because until about a month ago, I was in a year-long relationship with another man. Back in Dallas.”

Her face twisted in confusion, but she stayed quiet, letting me talk.

“I came back to Silver Creek because I was running from him,” I said, feeling the lump rise in my throat.

Push through, Ellie. You can talk about this.

“I left because he was abusive—very abusive. It kept getting worse, and I knew if I didn’t leave... I wouldn’t survive much longer.”

Cassie’s eyes widened, concern flashing across her face.

“I didn’t tell you,” I continued, my voice trembling slightly, “because you’re so strong and self-confident—something I wish I had more of when Jason was hitting me. That’s his name, by the way.”

Cassie reached across the table, squeezing my hand.

“Ellie, you’re strong too. You left and didn’t look back. Do you know how much courage that takes?”

I looked up, shocked at her honesty.

“Who else knows?” she asked gently .

“Just Colt,” I said quietly. “He saw the bruises when he was helping me after my horse riding accident. There was no hiding it then.”

“Do you think Jason would come to Silver Creek?” Cassie asked cautiously.

“I don’t think so,” I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt. “We don’t even know for sure it was him who called. It could’ve been anybody.”

But the uncertainty still hung in the air.

Cassie didn’t look convinced. Her brow furrowed as she chewed on her bottom lip.

“I think you should tell Colt,” she said finally.

“He already has so much on his plate with the ranch,” I argued, shaking my head. “I don’t want to make him worry, especially over something that might not even be what we think it is.”

“I’m not going to tell your business, Ellie,” Cassie said firmly, “but I really think you should tell him.”

“I’ll think about it, I promise.”

The front door chimed, a customer walking in as I moved behind the counter, thankful for an end to the tense moment.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

I was exhausted. Everything that could possibly go wrong today did—and then some.

First thing this morning, Jace and I found out the cattle in the back pasture had somehow busted through the fence. We spent what felt like forever chasing them down and corralling them.

Before we even had a chance to catch our breath, the hay baler broke down while Dad was out in the field.

We fought with that stupid machine until we finally got it working again, only for Mom to call and tell us the water line under the kitchen sink at the main house had busted.

So, we had to drop everything, drive into town for parts, and patch it up.

By the time I finally dragged myself back home, I felt like I'd been chewed up and spit out twice over.

But finally, I was on my way to the guesthouse—to Ellie.

The closer I got, the more the butterflies stirred in my stomach.

Get it together, man .

As I stepped onto the front porch, the warm, sweet aroma of fresh pecan pie wrapped around me.

Jackpot.

I knocked on the door, heart pounding, the anticipation of seeing Ellie just about killing me.

She opened the door, sticking her body out halfway.

“Sorry, sir. Whatever you’re selling, I’m not interested in it,” she teased, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“What if I’m a cowboy selling kisses?” I bargained back, leaning against the doorframe, giving her my best cocky grin.

“Mmm... I might be interested,” she said, swinging the door open wider.

“That’s what I thought.” I closed the space between us, wrapping Ellie’s tiny frame in my arms, pressing a kiss to her soft lips.

“Get in here before someone sees you.”

She grabbed my arm, yanking me through the door and into the house.

“You know they can still see my truck parked out front, right?” I teased.

She rolled her eyes. “What excuse did you use to get away?”

“I told them you made me a homemade pecan pie and I was just coming by to pick it up,” I said, smirking.

“And what made you so confident I would actually make you one?”

I grinned, tightening my arms around her just a little. “Because, darlin’, I know you love any chance to test your baking skills, which are amazing by the way, and a McKinley never forgets a promise, especially when it comes to pie.”

She laughed, the sweet sound causing my pants to fit just a little tighter as the seconds ticked by.

“Well, lucky for you,” she said, turning and walking towards the kitchen, “I just pulled it out of the oven about ten minutes ago.”

I followed, captivated by the sway of her hips as she moved. “Smells better than anything I’ve had in a long time,” I said, and I wasn’t just talking about the pie.

She glanced over her shoulder, catching my eyes on her body, her cheeks flushing pink.

“Behave,” she warned playfully.

“No promises,” I murmured, closing the distance between us again.

Before she could protest, I pinned her gently against the kitchen counter, my hands braced on each side of her body. Her breath hitched as she stared up at me.

“Colt...” she whispered.

“Just one more kiss,” I said, my voice low and rough, before I dipped my head and captured her mouth with mine—slow, deep, claiming.

She melted into me, gripping the front of my shirt like she couldn’t get close enough. I groaned against her mouth, sliding my hands down to her waist and pulling her flush against me.

Every part of me ached for her. It had been since the second I watched her drive off this morning.

I didn't make it to the table.

I grabbed her by the hips and lifted her onto the counter, stepping between her legs and claiming her mouth again, deeper, rougher this time. Ellie gasped into the kiss, running her fingers through my hair and tugging just enough to drive me half-crazy.

I slid my hands up under her soft T-shirt, feeling the heat of her skin, the dip of her waist, the curve of her back as she arched into me.

She tugged at my shirt, desperate, pulling it up over my head and tossing it somewhere behind us without a second thought. Her palms roamed over my chest, nails lightly scraping and leaving a trail of fire in their wake.

"God, Ellie," I muttered against her lips, my voice breaking on her name.

"I missed you today," she whispered back, threading her fingers through the belt loops of my jeans, pulling me even closer.

I kissed a path down her neck, savoring every hitch of her breath and every little sound she made. My hands slid lower, gripping the backs of her thighs, pulling her tight against me, needing her to feel exactly what she did to me.

I kissed her like a man starved—like I'd spent the whole damn day thinking about this moment. Because I had.

Ellie's fingers dug into my shoulders, anchoring herself as I pressed her against the kitchen counter, my body fitting perfectly between her legs.

I grabbed the hem of her shirt, pulling it up over her head in one swift motion, my hands running up her bare sides, memorizing every inch of her soft skin.

She shivered beneath my touch, her breath coming out in a shaky gasp as I dipped my head and traced kisses along her collarbone, down to the swell of her breasts.

She was beautiful—flushed and breathless.

She was mine.

I fumbled with the button of her jeans, desperate to get them off, to feel more of her. Ellie lifted her hips in silent permission. I stripped them down her legs, leaving behind nothing but a tiny scrap of lace that had me cursing under my breath.

“You’re killing me, El,” I growled, my hands sliding up her thighs, spreading her open for me.

“Then do something about it,” she whispered, her voice wrecked and needy.

That was all the invitation I needed. I pulled her off the counter, spun her around, and pressed her body forward, leaning her over the marble slab.

I hooked my fingers on the lace thong, ripping it off before tossing it aside. I undid my jeans next, my hands shaking.

I shoved my body against hers, sliding my cock along her slick welcoming heat, notching the head at her entrance.

I pushed in slow, inch by inch, gritting my teeth against the urge to lose myself completely. Ellie held onto the counter with both hands, her head falling forward with a soft cry that just about undid me.



“Colt,” she whimpered, pushing her hips back against mine, making her take me deeper.

The counter creaked under the strain of our movements, but I didn’t care. All I cared about was Ellie—the way she felt, the way her body moved in sync with mine, the way she looked at me like I was the only man in the world .

“You’re so damn beautiful,” I panted against the back of her neck, thrusting deeper, harder, unable to hold back anymore.

Her body jerked in small spasms, clamping down on me, her release inching closer and closer to the edge.

“I’m right there, baby,” I ground out. “You can do it, El.”

With one final thrust, we shattered together, Ellie crying out in pleasure as I groaned my release.

I held her close, her body trembling against me. My heart thundered in my chest as I pressed kisses to her hair, her forehead, and every part of her I could reach.

And then, like a movie reel playing behind my eyes, images I’d never dared to imagine before flashed through my mind.

Ellie barefoot in our kitchen, laughing as she baked cookies, flour dusting her nose.

Ellie glowing in a white dress, twirling in slow circles at our wedding.

Ellie cradling a tiny baby against her chest, swaying gently, singing a soft lullaby.

Damn.

I was so far gone for this woman. Ellie had no idea how fast and how hard I was falling.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

I leaned against the counter, catching my breath, my legs barely able to hold me up. My body was buzzing, every inch alive and humming from Colt's touch.

He hadn't let go of me yet. With one strong arm wrapped around my waist, his forehead rested against mine like he wasn't quite ready to step away.

Neither was I.

I closed my eyes and let the moment settle between us.

If I could bottle up the way Colt made me feel and keep it forever, I would.

Home. He made me feel like I was home.

Eventually, he pulled back just enough to kiss the tip of my nose before tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

He grinned—that devastating cowboy smile that could probably bring a woman to her knees if he wasn't careful—reaching down to hand me my shirt that he'd thrown across the room in our frenzy of lust.

“This yours, ma'am? ”

“Why yes, it is. How kind of you to give it back,” I joked.

“Now for the thing that tastes almost as good as you—this pie,” Colt said, turning towards the counter by the oven where the pecan pie was cooling on a wire rack, his

grin never leaving his face.

He looked back over his shoulder at me, his eyes twinkling with mischief as he pulled a fork out of the drawer.

“Sex and pie. What a combo,” I said.

“I’d argue it’s one of the best in the world,” Colt said as he scooped a big bite from the center of the pie into his mouth, smiling.

I rolled my eyes, unable to hide the grin creeping across my face. “You really know how to sweet-talk a woman, don’t you?” I teased, leaning against the counter, my hands still shaking slightly from everything that had just happened.

Colt took another bite of the pie, his eyes never leaving mine. “Why talk when I can just show you?” He winked, clearly enjoying the playful banter. “So, how was work today?” he asked, his voice low and casual.

I hesitated, the familiar knot in my stomach tightening. The memory of my conversation with Cassie replayed in my mind, tugging me in two directions.

The angel on one shoulder urged me to be honest with Colt, to tell him about the mysterious caller at the coffee shop today.

The devil on the other whispered in my ear, telling me it was probably nothing. That it wasn’t serious enough to drag Colt into .

I opened my mouth, but the words felt stuck. I wanted to tell him everything, to let him in, but the thought of making him worry about something I wasn’t even sure of myself seemed unfair.

“It was fine. Same old, same old.”

Looks like the devil wins this time.

“Well, I went down to the co-op today to grab more feed for the chickens, and I noticed a sign for the county fair this weekend. I was thinking, if you don’t have any plans, we could go together?” Colt said, looking at me expectantly.

“Won’t people get suspicious if they see us there together?” I asked.

“Probably,” he admitted, shrugging. “But I don’t care, Ellie. And you shouldn’t either. Who you date and how soon after you have a break-up is nobody’s business. Besides, the only person who knows about Jason is me.”

“And Cassie.” I caught myself before I said too much. I couldn’t explain how she knew. Only that she did.

“How’d she find out?”

“Girls’ night. Too many drinks, that’s all,” I said, brushing it off, hoping he wouldn’t press further, and my not-so-great poker face wouldn’t give me away.

“So, a night at the fair, just the two of us. What do you think?”

I studied Colt’s face, reflecting on his words.

He was right. Who I dated was nobody’s business. But as I thought about it more, I realized what was truly bothering me.

Going all in with Colt would put him in the crossfire if Jason really was trying to find me. And I didn’t want to put Colt in danger, even if it meant facing my problems

alone.

Colt eyed me, waiting on my answer. Those soft blue eyes got me every time. I couldn't resist.

"I'll only go if I'm promised one funnel cake and a front-row seat to watch you win me the biggest stuffed animal they have," I said with a grin, raising an eyebrow. "You up for that, cowboy?"

"Every time."

The moment was abruptly interrupted by a knock at the door.

We jumped, both suddenly remembering we were half-clothed.

Colt moved towards the door, already pulling on his jeans and slipping his T-shirt over his head as he made his way across the living room. It gave me a moment to admire the muscles rippling across his back—peaks on peaks, like a beautiful mountain range.

He peered through the peephole.

"It's Jace," he whispered, shooting me a look.

"What's he doing here?" I hissed.

Colt shrugged. By the time he opened the door, we were both fully dressed.

"I heard a rumor there's homemade pecan pie somewhere around here," Jace said, strolling in like he owned the place.

“The rumors are true,” I said, laughing. “Help yourself.”

Colt stepped between him and the pie on the counter.

“She made it for me and only me,” he said, voice flat enough that I couldn’t tell if he was joking or not. Was I really about to watch two McKinley brothers fight over pie?

Cassie would be furious if they did and she missed it.

“Now, now,” I said, grabbing a plate and cutting a slice from the side where Colt hadn’t stuck his fork in. “There’s plenty to go around.”

Jace took it eagerly, sticking his tongue out at Colt like a five-year-old who’d just won the last turn on the merry-go-round.

Jace – 1.

Colt – 0.

“So, what are you two even doing over here?” Jace asked, glancing around. “Far as I can tell, there’s not shit to do in this old house.”

“We’ve just been talking,” I said, barely suppressing a grin, knowing full well that talking hadn’t exactly been our top priority.

Colt shot me a look, smirking.

Jace wandered into the living room, giving us a moment alone. Colt moved in close, leaning down to whisper in my ear.

“You and I both know we were doing a whole lot more than just talking, you little

liar.”

He grabbed my waist, tugging me flush against him. Hard and ready, he pressed against my backside, the heat sparking between us.

Then, just as quickly as he grabbed me, he let go and stepped back, making his way to Jace who was now on the back porch, leaving me wanting and alone.

After taking a few seconds to collect myself, I joined the boys outside. Each of them sitting in a matching rocking chair. I leaned against the wooden railing, facing them.

“So, Ellie, what’s it like working for Cassie. She seems like a real ballbuster,” Jace said, taking another bite of his pie.

“She’s wonderful actually. We talk all day. It makes the time go by fast. Who knew you could get along so well with your boss?”

“Not me,” Jace said, his gaze turning to Colt.

“I’m not your boss,” Colt said, laughing.

“You sure like to act like it,” he teased.

“If anyone’s a ballbuster, it’s you to Cassie,” I said, eyeing Jace. “Talk about not being able to take no for an answer.”

“It’s the red hair,” he said longingly, like he’d thought about it every day since he met her.

“She seems like she’d rather die than depend on a man,” I said.



“I just need her to give me one chance,” Jace said.

He looked like he genuinely meant it.

“I’ll keep putting in a good word for you,” I joked, trying to keep his spirits up about the whole situation.

He got up from his chair, winked at me, then turned his attention back to Colt.

“Y’all seem like a bundle of fun tonight, truly, but I have to head home. I’ll take one more piece of pie for the road, though.”

Colt narrowed his eyes at him, as if to say hell no .

Jace knew what he was doing. He loved getting under Colt’s skin, and he did it effortlessly.

“Before you protest, I’m willing to trade. One piece of pie to go and I won’t tell everyone why I suspect your shirt’s on inside out,” Jace deadpanned.

Shit.

Jace – 2

Colt – 0

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*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

Our plans to go to the fair this weekend came to a screeching halt when Colt called this afternoon.

One of the cows was struggling to deliver her calf.

Colt needed to stay until she was out of the woods, which meant he'd be tied up for at least a few hours and wouldn't be able to take me to the fair downtown after all.

I was bummed that I wouldn't see Colt tonight, but there was no way I'd let my cute outfit and perfectly applied makeup go to waste. So, I called Cassie to see if she was up for a night of carnival rides and fried food.

As expected, she was more than eager to join me. Something about how she was hoping to find herself a cute cowboy under the twinkling stars.

As I walked through the entrance of the fairgrounds, the scent of funnel cakes and popcorn hung in the air, and the distant screams from the Tilt-A-Whirl made me smile.

I spotted Cassie near the ticket booth, chatting with a group of guys in ball caps with farmer's tans. She was wearing denim shorts, tennis shoes, and a white T-shirt with the words BBQ Stain on it.

As soon as she noticed me, she beelined towards me, leaving the guys she'd been talking to in the dust. "Thank God you're here," she huffed, "those guys were so boring. I thought I was going to fall asleep standing up."

I rolled my eyes, laughing.

“What should we do first?” I asked, looking around.

We quickly agreed our first stop would be the Ferris wheel. The old nuts and bolts creaked as we stepped into the swinging gondola, settling into our seats while the attendant latched the door shut.

As we rose higher and higher, the lights below blurred into a kaleidoscope of color. The cool June breeze slid between the strands of my hair, and the sound of laughter played like a vinyl record in the distance.

“I wonder how many people have had sex on one of these things,” Cassie said, interrupting the quiet moment while doing silent math on her fingers as if calculating an actual amount.

“Probably way more than you can count on your fingers,” I said, nudging her shoulder and laughing.

“Too bad Colt didn’t bring you tonight. You could be making out with him instead of sitting next to little ole me,” she teased.

“Might I remind you, we were only coming as friends,” I said, doing my best to sound casual.

Cassie turned towards me. “Quick question. Do I have stupid written across my forehead? ”

“No,” I said, chuckling, “but it does say best friend who’s sworn to secrecy .”

“I knew it!” Cassie said excitedly, clapping her hands. “How? When? Where?” she

asked with a playful wink.

“Next girls’ night, I promise to give you all the juicy details, but not right now. This town’s so small, I swear Maggie could hear me even from all the way up here.”

Cassie laughed. “That woman can hear gossip from a mile away. When I grow up, I want to be just like Maggie Holt.”

We made it to the top, the ride stopping for a few moments as someone at the bottom got off and a new couple got on.

As I looked around, taking everything in, I spotted a familiar red and blue Texas Rebels baseball cap next to one of the food trucks.

The man beneath the hat stood stiffly, scanning the area with his head down and shoulders hunched.

I watched as he took slow, deliberate steps towards the Ferris wheel line.

My breath caught.

The walk.

The frame.

The posture.

It looked just like Jason.

“Ellie?” Cassie nudged me. “You okay?”

I blinked, snapping out of it. But when I looked again, the man was gone. Like a ghost, he'd vanished into the sea of faces below.

I forced a smile. "Yeah... yeah, I'm fine. Just spaced out for a second."

Cassie raised a brow but let it go, launching into a debate about which snack we should get after we got off the Ferris wheel, a salty pretzel or a sugary funnel cake. As we descended, we decided on a funnel cake first.

After getting off the ride, I scanned my surroundings for the baseball cap I'd seen moments ago. If I could find the man, I could confirm that it wasn't Jason and calm my nerves.

No matter how hard I searched though, I couldn't find the man anywhere.

Cassie tugged on my arm, asking if I wanted strawberries on my funnel cake.

"Uh, yeah, strawberries are fine," I answered, trying to look around without her noticing. I scanned the crowd, again and again, but I didn't find anyone close to the same build and appearance of the man I was searching for.

After a few minutes, Cassie handed me my funnel cake, directing me towards an empty picnic table she'd spotted just a few feet from the food truck where we'd purchased our funnel cakes from.

On our way to the table, a blue and red ball cap caught my attention.

My stomach dropped as I stared at the face of the man beneath it.

This time, I was sure.

Jason.

He stood near the lemonade stand, scanning the crowd with that cold, calculating stare I knew too well. His eyes hadn't landed on me yet, but it was just a matter of time. Panic gripped me like a hand around my throat, and I did the first thing that came to mind—I ran.

“Ellie! Wait—” Cassie yelled as my strawberry dessert hit the gravel. Her voice trailed off behind me, swallowed by the music and noise.

I pushed through the crowd, heart hammering against my ribs. I had to get out of here before Jason saw me.

Why was he here?

How did he find me?

Was he chasing after me?

This was no coincidence. He wasn't in Silver Creek by chance. Jason didn't have any family nearby, let alone in Montana.

All these thoughts rushed through my head, like a speeding freight train, as I kept running with no planned destination. I needed to get as far away from Jason as possible. If he spotted me, there was no telling how he'd react to me leaving him.

Maybe he'd try begging me to come back. Or maybe he'd try forcing me to come back. I wasn't sticking around to find out.

My heart pounded in my chest as I ran past the carnival rides and into the darkness beyond. As I turned to see if anyone was following me, I collided with something

hard, almost knocking me off my feet.

I quickly realized it wasn't something I'd run into—it was someone . The unknown wall of muscle grabbed my wrists.

“Let go of me!” I screamed, hoping someone would hear me over the music and the large crowd .

I tripped over my own feet as I tried to turn and run in the opposite direction, but the strong arms steadied me, not letting go.

In a final attempt, I tried to jerk my arm away, but it didn't work.

Terrified Jason had found me and would force me to return to Dallas with him, I lifted my head to meet his eyes.

“Ellie, what's going on? You look like you've seen a ghost.”

Relief rushed through my body as I realized the person holding on to me wasn't Jason—it was Colt.

“He's here! He's here!” I shouted, barely able to breathe.

“Who's here, Ellie?” Colt asked confused, searching for someone in the crowds off in the distance.

“Jason,” I said, gasping to catch my breath with my hand on my chest as my heart rushed beneath it.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m positive it was him,” Ellie said.

I immediately dialed Liam’s number. No way in hell was I letting this piece of shit get away with stalking Ellie.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Calling Liam. He’ll know what we need to do.”

I could see the worry in Ellie’s eyes. She was scared of what came next, and truth be told, I didn’t have the answers either. But honestly, I didn’t care what her options were. If the law couldn’t protect her, I would.

As I got off the phone with Liam, Cassie walked up, looking thoroughly confused.

“What the hell was that about?” she asked Ellie.

“I saw Jason in the crowd. I thought I saw him when we were on the Ferris wheel, but I wasn’t 100 percent sure it was him until we got off and I saw him by the food trucks. I’m positive it was him. I panicked and ran.”

Just as Ellie finished, Liam walked up .

“What’s going on?” he asked, looking around concerned.



“Ellie, you have to tell Liam what’s been going on. He can help you,” I said, trying to calm her nerves. I knew this had to be hard for her, for more people to know what had happened to her.

Ellie took a long, deep breath, then started from the beginning.

She told Liam about the reason she left Dallas, Jason’s threatening text messages, and the events of the last hour.

She also mentioned how he had possibly called the coffee shop a few days ago—something I hadn’t known about, but that wasn’t the point.

Liam listened, jotting things down on his notepad as Ellie spoke. When she finished telling him about the events of the past month, she looked defeated. I pulled her to my chest, rubbing her back to comfort her.

“What are my options?” she asked reluctantly.

“Well, the first thing you need to do is file a restraining order against him. Once a judge signs it, Jason won’t be able to come near you or contact you. If he tries, he’ll go to jail. You need to do that first thing Monday morning at the courthouse.”

“But, honestly,” Liam continued, “a restraining order can only go so far. It would be best for you to stay with someone until we’re sure he’s gone back to Dallas. I can put a patrol car outside of your house and the coffee shop for the time being.”

“Oh, that’s really not necessary, Liam.”

“I’m afraid it is, Ellie. Until we can find Jason and serve him with the restraining order. ”

“I can sleep on the couch at the guesthouse for the next few nights until he’s gone,” I offered.

“And if Colt gets too busy with the ranch one night, you know my door is always open,” Cassie added.

“I’m fine guys, really. I don’t need babysitters.”

“This isn’t about babysitting you. It’s about protecting you. You can fight us all you want, but I’m not taking no for an answer. I’ll sleep on your front porch if I have to, your choice, El. Either way, I’m going to be there,” I said, trying to make her understand the gravity of the situation.

She paused, as if searching for the words to her rebuttal, but they never came.

“Fine. Can we leave now? I want to get as far away from here as possible,” she said as she walked towards the parking lot.

Ellie

It didn’t take long for us to get to Colt’s truck. The air crackled with tension as we pulled onto the road and headed towards the ranch. Colt gripped the steering wheel tighter than usual. I could see his white knuckles even in the dark of night.

As if he could read my mind, he abruptly pulled over onto a gravel patch on the side of the road. He put the truck in park, turning in my direction with hurt in his eyes. The muscles in his jaw flexed, and the vein in his neck bulged as frustration radiated off him.

“Why didn’t you tell me, Ellie?”

“Tell you what? ”

“About Jason calling the coffee shop. There’s no telling how long he’s been stalking you.”

“I didn’t want you to worry about me, Colt. I wasn’t even sure it was him at the time. Plus, you’d be putting your life in danger, and for what?”

“For you!”

“I’m not yours to protect, Colt,” I said, trying to remain calm.

“The hell you’re not, Ellie,” he said, his voice strong.

“I’ve seen every part of you, present and past—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

I’ve held you while you cried over your dead parents.

I’ve felt every inch of your body against mine.

I’ve marked you in ways no other man has.

So tell me how you’re not mine to protect. ”

“Nothing happened, Colt,” I said, trying to reason with him.

“But it could’ve , and that’s what I’m upset about. Ellie, I...” He ran a hand down the scruff on his jaw, exhaling through his nose like he was holding something back. Either I was going crazy, or his eyes were starting to glass over.

“I’d never forgive myself if something happened to you, El. I wasn’t there to protect

you last time, and I'll be damned if I'm not there this time. You mean everything to me, and I'll do anything to protect you, even put myself in danger."

The weight of Colt's confession left me speechless.

Without another word, he pulled back onto the road, traveling the rest of the way in silence.

By the time we reached the guesthouse, the tension in my chest felt unbearable.

Before Colt could say anything, I opened the truck door and slipped out, hurrying inside without looking back.

I locked myself in the bedroom, landing on the bed with a mixture of exhaustion and frustration deep in my bones.

I felt guilty about not telling Colt about Jason calling the coffee shop. I hadn't said anything about it, because I thought I could handle things on my own. I didn't want to be anyone's burden. But after what Colt revealed in the truck, I knew I'd never be a burden to him.

If anything, this moment showed me that I meant more to Colt than I had even realized, confusing me even more. The soft tread of boots on the hardwood followed by a gentle knock on the door pulled me from my internal spiral.

"Ellie," he said, voice low, "I know tonight's been a lot. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have gotten upset in the truck. If you don't want me here, I can call Cassie to stay with you tonight instead of me."

I was confused about a lot of things right now, but the one thing I was sure about was wanting Colt with me tonight—not Cassie, not anyone else.

I peeled myself off the bed and opened the door before he could dial Cassie's number.

Colt was standing there with his hat in one hand, shoulders tense, eyes sad.

"I don't want Cassie," I said, my voice quiet. "I want you."

He lifted his eyes to meet mine as I reached for his hand, gently tugging him through the door frame. Colt followed without hesitation, closing the door behind him.

I rose onto my toes and kissed him as he slid his hands around my waist, pulling me closer. I threaded my fingers through his hair as he deepened the kiss, backing us towards the bed. His body pressed against mine, familiar in a way that made me ache.

He was trying to be gentle, but I was tired of everyone treating me like a glass doll, ready to shatter at any moment. I wanted Colt in ways I had never wanted any other man.

Without stopping to talk myself out of it, I unbuttoned Colt's pants.

His hard length pressed against the fabric of his jeans.

I slipped my hand in, cradling his cock as I lowered the zipper before shoving his jeans and underwear down around his thighs.

His length sprang free, the vein along his dick proof he needed this moment just as much as I did.

I knelt before Colt, tucking my blonde hair behind my ears and looking up at him, determination in my eyes.

“Ellie, you don’t have to do this if you’re not comfortable,” he said.

I didn’t respond. Instead, I licked along his shaft, from bottom to top, proving to him I was more than comfortable taking him in more ways than one.

As I took him into my mouth, I swirled my tongue around the tip, lapping the salty liquid pooling at the top before sucking him deeper. I looked up, keeping eye contact as he watched me take him deep inside my throat.

Colt grabbed a fist full of my hair and guided me along his shaft, over and over again, moaning in pleasure.

“Ellie, baby...”

He didn’t get the chance to finish his sentence, because three more long sucks, and he exploded in my mouth, his cum sliding along my tongue and down my throat.

I kept sucking until I swallowed every last drop. Colt’s thighs shook as he coasted down from his high.

He grabbed my shoulder, lifting me onto my feet. Picking me up gently, he placed me on the bed, climbing on top to lavish my breasts with kisses.

After a few minutes of sucking my nipples and biting the skin along my neck, he shoved his cock deep inside me, ensuring he reached the right spot, again and again, giving me the same high I’d given him a few moments earlier.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

The rest of the weekend with Ellie hiding out in the guesthouse was like a fever dream. We spent almost every moment under the sheets, pleasuring each other until neither of us had anything left to give.

When I was with Ellie, I didn't care about anything else in the world. Everything else could wait. I didn't care if the ranch was on fire, if Ellie needed me, I'd always put her first.

That scared the hell out of me.

It made me think about long-term things with Ellie. Stuff I'd only ever dreamed about and never imagined would actually come true.

But today wasn't about me and my worries. Today was about Ellie.

This morning, she was going down to the courthouse to file a restraining order against Jason, and she would need my support.

Jason put her through hell—physically, mentally, and emotionally.

The fact that he still had any kind of grip on her life, even from hundreds of miles away, made me want to drive to wherever he was and end it myself.

He'd dimmed Ellie's smile. Stolen the light from her eyes. And I hated him for it. But after today? That sorry piece of shit would finally be nothing more than her past.

Ellie met me at the courthouse since she had to head straight to work afterward.

When I pulled my truck into the lot, I spotted her right away, waiting by the bottom of the courthouse steps. She was wearing a simple white dress that hit mid-thigh, her hair curled, half of it pinned back.

The image of Ellie wearing white tugged at something deep in my chest.

Focus, Colt.

As I walked up, the anxiety rolled off her in waves as Ellie clenched the strap of her purse like a lifeline.

“You ready to get this over with, cowgirl?”

“More than you’ll ever know,” she said.

Inside, we approached the front counter, the clerk greeting us with a warm smile.

“What can I help you with today, honey?” she asked.

Ellie hesitated for a moment. “I... I need to file a restraining order.”

“I can help you with that,” the clerk said kindly, sliding a clipboard across the counter.

“You’ll just need to fill this out. Be as detailed as you can about why you’re requesting the order.

Include any specific incidents or threats with dates if possible.

If you have any evidence, like text messages, emails, or photos, we can submit that too.



There's a small waiting area right around the corner where you can sit down if you need some time to think about what you want to write.

Take as much time as you need, sweetheart. ”

I could tell this wasn't the first time this woman had handed someone that kind of paperwork.

Her voice was gentle, straightforward, and clear, without being cold.

She didn't talk down to Ellie or flood her with information.

It was as if she knew exactly how heavy that clipboard felt in Ellie's hands.

In the waiting area, Ellie lowered herself into the chair beside me, the clipboard resting on her knees. She mumbled something under her breath that sounded like “cowgirls don't,” but I didn't catch the rest of it.

She picked up the pen and started writing, her hand trembling just enough for me to notice.

I reached across the seat and put my hand on Ellie's thigh, gently stroking it with my thumb to calm her nerves. She paused, her eyes flicking up to meet mine.

“I'm right here,” I said, voice low. “You're not doing this alone.”

She gave a tiny nod, biting her lip before turning back to the form and writing again.

Word by word, she wrote it all down—every horrible moment, every threat, every time Jason made her feel small or afraid.

After writing for a few minutes, a tear trickled down her cheek landing on the paper.

Fuck , this was going to kill me. I put my arms around Ellie, pulling her close to my chest as her tears flowed .

“I’ve got you,” I whispered, one hand cradling the back of her head, the other wrapped tight around her shoulders.

After a few minutes, she pulled away and wiped her face, done crying.

“Believe it or not, this isn’t hard because I have to write everything down and relive the horrible moments,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “It’s hard because I’m finally admitting that I need help. That I can’t solve this problem on my own. And that’s really hard for me.”

I sat there for a moment, studying her—every freckle, every line—before finally, breaking the silence.

“You’re not weak for needing help, El,” I said quietly. “You’re strong for asking for it.”

She gave me a small smile.

“You’re something else, you know that, Colt McKinley?” she said before placing a gentle kiss on my cheek. “I think I wrote everything down,” she said, standing and reading over the paperwork one last time.

We walked back to the clerk’s desk where she was typing away at her computer.

“All done, honey?” she asked as Ellie handed her the clipboard.

“Yes ma’am.”

“I’ll submit this to Judge Donaldson today,” the clerk said gently.

“Once he signs it, it’s active. A sheriff will serve him with the restraining order as soon as they locate him.

After that, any contact from him becomes a criminal offense.

If he tries to call, text, or show up anywhere near you he goes straight to jail. ”

“Thank you so much for all of your help today,” Ellie said, her voice steadier than before. She gave the clerk a grateful nod before turning and walking towards the exit.

I followed a step behind, silent, giving her space but staying close. As soon as we pushed through the courthouse doors and stepped into the sunlight, Ellie exhaled like she’d been holding her breath the entire time we were inside. She blinked up at the sky for a moment, then looked over at me.

“It’s done,” she said softly. “I actually did it.”

“You did,” I said, smiling at her. “I’m proud of you, El.”

We walked in silence across the parking lot. When we reached her car, she turned to face me, keys in hand.

“Do you think he’ll really stay away this time?” she asked, fumbling through the set of keys in her hand.

“If he doesn’t, he’ll learn why my nickname is Colt .45.”

Ellie's eyes widened.

"I'm serious. I won't let anything happen to you, Ellie. Over my dead body will he get near you again."

She nodded, then stepped closer, wrapping her arms around my waist and resting her head against my chest.

"Thank you for coming with me."

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be. "

I watched as she got into her car and pulled out of the lot, another piece of the weight she carried left behind in that courthouse.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, pulling me out of my thoughts. It was Jace.

"Hello?"

"What's my favorite brother up to today? Definitely not helping me with chores, I know that much. I'm out here baling hay by myself in this damn heat," he said.

"Yeah, my bad. I had to take Ellie to the courthouse this morning. She—" I stopped myself, not wanting to spill Ellie's business without her say-so.

"Don't worry, Cassie already told me. She didn't give details, said 'it's girl code' and all that, but she mentioned Ellie needed to file a restraining order. Left it at that. I saw her this morning at the coffee shop and asked where Ellie was."

"I'll be back at the ranch in just a few. I can take over the hay," I offered, remembering we'd planned to start cutting and baling the pasture on the left side of

the property this week.

“Take your time. No rush. Ellie needs you right now. I get it.”

“Thanks, man.”

There was a pause before Jace asked, “So how much longer are you two gonna pretend you’re not a thing?”

I blinked. “What?”

“I mean, come on, man. I don’t take random girls to the courthouse to be their emotional support buddy. I sure as hell don’t sleep on their couch multiple nights in a row to give them peace of mind.”

Right. I was definitely sleeping on the couch .

“Uhh, I—”

I started, then stopped, knowing Jace could smell bullshit from a mile away, and that’s exactly what I was about to hand him.

“Listen,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck and sighing, “as much as it pains me to say this, you’re right. Ellie and I are a thing. But keep it on the down-low for now, alright? She doesn’t want a lot of people finding out. Especially Jason. I want to respect that.”

“No worries, man. I get it.” Jace’s voice softened.

“Congrats, though. I know how much she means to you, even if you never wanted to admit it. You always looked at her different,” he said.

“Even back in high school. You were quieter around her. That’s how I knew it was serious. You never shut up otherwise.”

I chuckled. “Thanks for the subtle insight, Dr. Phil.”

“Just calling it like I see it.”

There was another pause between us. Not the awkward kind, just that comfortable kind of quiet we’d grown up with.

“She’s been through a lot,” I said finally. “More than I realized.”

“And she’s still standing. That says something. But I think she stands a little taller when you’re around,” Jace said, his voice steady.

My chest twisted at that. A good kind of twist. The kind that makes you want to do right by someone. Every damn day .

“Alright, enough with the feelings talk. Let’s stop before you make me cry in the tractor,” Jace said with a grin in his voice.

“Appreciate the pep talk,” I said. “I’ll be out there in about an hour.”

“No rush. Seriously.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

It had only taken a few days for Liam to track down Jason and serve him with the restraining order. According to Liam, he took it as well as someone could when getting served with a restraining order.

Jason was staying in some run-down motel in Great Falls, which was weird, considering he usually refused to stay anywhere that didn't have five stars, room service, and a bar—but I guess desperate times called for desperate measures.

Liam had assigned a guy to track his whereabouts, and after a few nights in the motel, Jason left Great Falls headed south.

Good riddance.

I had to admit, it did feel a little better having a small blanket of protection when it came to Jason and his antics. Like I was finally putting that part of my life behind me.

Summer was settling over Silver Creek now that it was July. The sweet floral fragrance of blooming honeysuckle permeated the air, and the cicadas hummed at the end of each day .

When I was a little girl, summer was my favorite time of year. It meant freedom from school with long days of playing outside, nights chasing fireflies, and sticky fingers from melting ice cream cones. The world felt wide open, like anything was possible under the endless blue sky.

But after my parents' death, summer turned into a painful reminder of my new reality. Hearing fireworks outside my apartment window in Dallas each year just sent

me back to that fateful night.

When the day came, I put on my headphones, sank into a warm bubble bath, and tried to relax the painful memories away with music.

Being back in Silver Creek this year would make the anniversary of my parents' death even harder to face. How would I cope? I hadn't let myself go there yet.

There was so much I felt unsure of when it came to summer and everything it would bring, but all I could do was take it day by day, moment by moment, and trust I'd get through it.

Today's task was a simple one that I could accomplish without worry: Go to the farmers market downtown and get some fresh baked goods and veggies for dinners this week.

I started visiting the farmers market when I first moved to Dallas. There was something so peaceful and refreshing about being there. Talking to all the people, listening to their stories. Endless things to look at and little trinkets to buy.

I think I enjoyed going so much because it reminded me of Silver Creek. It was like being in a small town again. Now that I was back in Silver Creek, I could have the real deal.

The farmers market here might've been smaller, but it had that same easygoing energy.

Booths lined the sidewalk with everything from local honey to homemade jams, wildflower bouquets, and hand-sewn aprons. After walking past each booth a couple of times, assessing all my options, I filled my tote with fresh corn, tomatoes, and a loaf of sourdough that was still warm from the oven.



As I finished up at my last booth, a soft whimper caught my attention. I looked around, searching for the source.

The flash of golden fur in the sunlight at the next booth gave me my answer.

A young golden retriever, maybe a year old at most, sat beside a folding chair near the edge of the booth, gazing up at me with the biggest brown eyes I'd ever seen.

Her tail thumped the ground as soon as our eyes met.

A handwritten sign was taped to the chair: FREE TO A GOOD HOME—LOVES KIDS, NEEDS SPACE TO RUN.

“She’s a sweetheart. Her name’s Sadie. My youngest has allergies, and we just don’t have the room for her anymore,” the woman beside her said, smiling.

I crouched and scratched behind Sadie’s ears. She leaned into me instantly like we were already best friends, jumping and licking my face over and over again.

“Who’s a sweet girl?” I said, rubbing behind her ears, which she clearly enjoyed. “It says you like kids, but what about horses?” I asked as if she could give me an answer.

I hadn’t planned on getting a dog, but now that the opportunity was right in front of me, I considered it. She could keep me company when Colt wasn’t around. With everything going on lately, I didn’t like being alone as much as I used to.

“She seems to really like you,” the woman behind the table of homemade breads said.

An hour later, I pulled into the driveway of the guesthouse with Sadie riding shotgun as if she’d done it her whole life. I smiled at her. “Well, girl, let’s hope Colt doesn’t totally freak out.”

Sadie trotted happily towards the porch, tail wagging. I opened the front door and followed her inside, glancing around like I was smuggling a bear into the house, instead of a golden retriever.

I set the groceries on the counter and was about to take Sadie on a quick tour of the house when movement outside the window made me freeze.

Colt.

He was walking up the path, a cold beer in one hand.

“Crap,” I whispered, grabbing Sadie’s collar. “Come on, girl.” She followed me into the back laundry room without protest, settling on the cool tile like she knew the drill.

“Just hang out here for a second,” I said, scratching her behind the ears. “Let me break the news gently.”

I shut the door, smoothed my hair, and tried to look like I hadn’t just snuck a dog into Colt’s guesthouse without permission. He knocked once before pushing the door open.

“Hey, I saw you pull in. Thought I’d stop by and see if you needed help unloading,” he said.

I smiled, heart pounding. “Hey Colt. Thanks, but I got it all handled.”

He stepped inside and kissed my cheek. “Smells like fresh bread in here. You didn’t buy out the whole market, did you?”

“Not the whole thing,” I said, laughing nervously. “Just... enough.”

Colt rubbed the back of his head like he was turning something over in his mind but couldn't quite figure out how to say it.

"So, uh... I was thinking. Now that Jason's gone, I can go back to staying at the main house. If you want me to."

Sleeping next to Colt every night had become my new normal. Having him here made the guesthouse feel more like a home. Thinking about him going back to the main house just made me plain sad.

"What if I don't want you to go back?" I asked.

He looked up, clearly caught off guard.

"The main house is always busy. If you move in here with me, you'll have more privacy. We'll have more privacy," I said, giving him a playful wink.

A slow smile spread across his face.

"Does that mean you're staying in Silver Creek?" he asked, his eyes searching mine.

"You wanna know what I realized that night at the fair?" I asked, not giving him an answer yet.

"What? "

"That night, when I thought Jason had found me, you didn't hesitate to call Liam. He didn't hesitate to show up. And Cassie made sure I wasn't alone when you couldn't be there. That's when it hit me. You gave me something I thought I'd never have again. My freedom."

Colt shook his head. “No, Ellie. You took your freedom back the moment you left Jason. You did that. All I did was help.”

“Well, your help meant the world to me,” I said, holding his gaze. “Silver Creek isn’t just a refuge—it’s my home.”

Colt crossed the room in a flash, scooping me up and spinning me around before pressing a long, loving kiss to my lips. I wrapped my arms around his neck, deepening the kiss.

A loud crash from the back of the house broke the moment.

Then came a bark.

Uh-oh.

Colt looked at me, eyebrows furrowed. “Did I just hear a dog?”

“Uh... yeah, about that.”

As soon as he sat me down, Sadie barreled around the corner with one of my pink boots in her mouth.

“Sadie!” I shouted, chasing after her. “Put that down right now!”

Colt blinked. “Did I miss something? When did you get a dog? And her name’s Sadie?”

I snatched the boot before she could start chewing. “This morning. At the farmer’s market. This sweet family was trying to find her a new home. They had allergies and didn’t have space for her to roam and... well, there’s plenty of space here. So, she

kind of became mine before I even realized it.”

I gave Colt my best puppy-dog eyes. “Can I keep her? Please?”

He grinned and pulled me close, his hands settling on my waist.

“Baby, you can have a hundred dogs if it means I get to see your pretty face every morning.” He cupped my face, planting a kiss on my forehead. “But I came down here to let you know my mom cooked a big dinner and wanted me to invite you. Are you up for it?”

“Of course, I’m starving,” I said, meaning it. I had barely eaten all day.

“Sadie can come too. My dad loves animals. He’ll probably have her doing circus tricks by the end of the night.” Colt said, rubbing Sadie’s head.

We walked down to the main house, hand-in-hand. Sadie trotted along behind us. When we stepped inside, Charlie was dancing to 90s country in the kitchen while Alice added the final touches to her homemade chocolate pie.

Everything smelled delicious. It was like the world’s best potluck sitting right in front of me. Jace and Molly were here too, setting the table when we walked into the dining room.

“Theres the happy couple,” Jace said, smiling.

I looked at Colt, not sure how to react.

“Don’t worry, he knows. And since Jace can’t keep a secret from Molly to save his life, I suspect she knows as well,” he said .

Molly was trying to hold back a smile. After a few seconds, she cracked and started giggling. She walked over to embrace me.

“Having Ellie as my sister-in-law is a dream come true,” she said as she hugged me.

Colt went wide-eyed. “We’re not married, calm down.”

“Yet,” Molly said, giving him a playful wink and punch to the shoulder.

Right then, Charlie walked in.

“Why is there a dog on the front porch?” he asked, breaking up the awkward moment.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I forgot to tell everyone. That’s my new dog, Sadie. She’s very sweet but watch your shoes so they don’t become chew toys. She still needs to work on that.”

“I wonder if she can do any cool tricks,” Charlie said.

Colt turned to me and smirked. “Told you.”

“I’m not sure. I’ve only had her for a few hours, but so far, she fits right in.”

“Well, I think she’s precious,” Alice said. “Charlie always talks about getting a dog to roam the ranch. Something to keep an eye on these boys while they’re out there working.” She placed her final dish on the table. “Alright, y’all, let’s dig in.”

After saying grace, silence settled over the table as everyone ate.

“Should I take the quiet as a sign that the food is good?” Alice asked looking around

smiling.

“Yes ma’am,” I said. “Can you teach me one day how to make a few of these things? I’m always open to adding new recipes to my cookbook. ”

“Of course, sweetie, I’d love to. I’m sure Colt would appreciate it too. I noticed a few of his things have disappeared around here. Wonder what that’s about.” Alice said, playfully.

“Speaking of that, I need to tell you guys something,” Colt said.

Everyone looked up from their plates in curiosity.

“I’ve decided to move into the guesthouse with Ellie. Since, you know, we’re together now. Like as a couple.”

Well, that wasn’t awkward at all.

“Congratulations, you too,” Charlie said, giving me a big smile.

Jace reached his hand out to Charlie, palm up. “I’ll take my money now.”

Charlie pulled his wallet out of his jeans pocket.

Huh?

Colt looked around just as confused as me.

“When Ellie here showed back up a couple months ago, I bet Dad you two would be a thing by the end of summer. Looks like I’m fifty bucks richer. Thanks, guys.” Jace grinned, folding the bill and tucking it into his pocket like he’d just won the lottery.

“What the hell?” Colt said, shaking his head and laughing.

“What?” Jace held up his hands. “I mean, come on. You moped around this ranch like a sad puppy after she left. When she came back, I knew exactly how this was gonna go.”

At the word puppy, Sadie perked up from her spot on the floor next to the table, her golden ears twitching. She locked eyes with me and tilted her head, clearly thinking she’d just been summoned. She gave her best puppy-dog eyes, hoping for just one person to give her a little nibble.

“Not you, Sadie,” I said, trying not to laugh. “Stay down.”

She rested her chin back on her paws, clearly disappointed but still hopeful.

From across the table, I caught Charlie trying to stealthily slip her a piece of fried chicken under the table.

I didn’t call him out. I just smiled.

There was something about this moment—sitting around the table, laughing, joking, everyone at ease. For the first time in a long time, I felt like I belonged somewhere. Like I had a family again .

And just as quickly as that warmth filled me, it drained away.

The weight crept in slowly, tightening my chest, pressing down like a silent reminder.

I was just days from the anniversary of my parents’ death.

Grief didn’t knock anymore. It just walked in, sat down, and made itself comfortable.



No warning, no grace.

I pushed a piece of dessert around my plate with my fork.

Would it always feel like this? Would there ever come a time when the date didn't crush me from the inside out? I'd been told it gets easier. That time softened the edges. But right now, it felt just as sharp as it had that first year.

Colt's hand found mine under the table and gave it a small squeeze .

I didn't look up. I didn't have to. He already knew, but that didn't make it hurt any less.

## Page 29

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

Over the past few weeks, Colt and I had been busy moving his things from the main house to the guesthouse. It was a lot of work—hauling boxes, rearranging furniture, finding places for his boots and flannels.

I enjoyed the mundane tasks because they gave me something I needed—a distraction. Keeping my hands busy helped hold back the wave of grief I'd been dreading all week.

But today was the day.

The anniversary of my parents' death.

The day the universe ripped them away from me.

This morning, I woke up overwhelmed, my chest tight before I even opened my eyes. I hadn't said a word, but Colt knew. He always seemed to know.

So, to make me feel better, Colt started the day with breakfast in bed.

"One order of French toast," he said, smiling as he sat the tray across my lap, "with fresh fruit and a cup of coffee—extra cream, just like you like it."

I sat up slowly, a soft smile tugging at my lips. The plate held thick slices of golden toast, topped with the berries I'd picked up at the farmers market earlier in the week. The coffee smelled perfect, too.

It was simple. Thoughtful. Full of love.

And completely unlike anything Jason had ever done for me.

The last two years, he never even acknowledged the day.

The first year, I'd almost been grateful for that. Pretending it was just another day felt easier than facing the storm of memories waiting for me.

But the second year, I knew better.

He wasn't protecting me. He was avoiding me.

Jason went to work like it was any other day. He came home, barely looked at me, and spent the evening on the phone with his friends, laughing at whatever inside jokes they had before going to bed without saying goodnight.

As if I wasn't sitting there, crumbling quietly.

As if I wasn't reliving the worst day of my life.

I looked down at the breakfast Colt had made me—at the perfect golden slices of French toast, the drizzle of syrup, the fresh fruit arranged with care. And then I noticed the whipped cream, shaped like a heart.

My chest tightened in the best kind of way.

It wasn't just breakfast.

I took a deep breath, trying to hold back the happy tears.

“This is amazing Colt. So thoughtful, truly.”

He leaned in and kissed me on the cheek before turning to Sadie. “Come on, girl. Let’s get you ready for your morning walk.”

Colt headed into the kitchen to find her collar, while I began eating my breakfast.

When I finished eating, I slipped into a fresh pair of jeans and a simple tank top. I paused at the mirror, brushing a wrinkle from my shirt before locking eyes with my reflection.

You can do this, Ellie.

You are loved.

You have everyone on McKinley Ranch standing beside you.

This year will be different.

Maybe I didn’t fully believe it yet—but I wanted to. I whispered the words out loud this time, like saying them might help me believe them more.

“I can do this,” I said again. “I will do this.”

A moment later, Colt walked in with Sadie right behind him, tail wagging.

“You ready?” he asked. “I figured after the walk, we could swing by the main house and grab the last couple of boxes.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” I said, managing a smile.

As we made our way towards the main house, Colt held onto Sadie’s leash while I cradled my cup of coffee between both hands. I didn’t care that it was the middle of

summer. Nothing kicked off a day quite like a warm cup of coffee.

The morning sun filtered through the trees, casting dappled shadows across the dirt path. Sadie trotted happily ahead, her tail swishing like she was just as excited to be outside as we were.

“So,” Colt started, glancing over at me, “later I was thinking about taking you somewhere. Nothing fancy—you don’t have to dress up or anything. Just thought it might be nice to get out of the house for a bit.” He paused, then added with a grin, “But it’s a surprise.”

I raised a brow. “Should I be scared?”

He smirked. “Don’t worry, I ran the idea past my mom, Molly, and Cassie. They all signed off on it, so I think you’re safe.”

“Oh great,” I said, nudging him lightly with my elbow. “You really know how to build suspense. Now I’m even more intrigued.”

“We can head out after we get the last of the boxes,” Colt said as we made our way up the steps of the main house.

“Well, let’s get this party started then. What do we have left?” I asked.

“Just what’s left in my closet,” Colt said, opening the front door that led to the entry way. “It’s only a couple small boxes of old pictures and my baseball card collection.”

“Easy peasy,” I said with a grin, heading towards his old bedroom while Colt unclipped Sadie’s leash.

“You be good now. No chewing,” I heard him say, as I walked away.

The closet was mostly empty now, the clothing rods bare, and cubbies cleared out, making it easy to spot the boxes he was talking about. I crouched, reaching for the one closest to the door. I figured I'd double-check the contents before hauling it out .

Lifting the lid, I found a small black binder inside. From the outside, it looked like an old scrapbook, but when I flipped it open, it was full of baseball cards—the ones Colt had been talking about. Each card was carefully tucked into its own protective sleeve.

I flipped through a few pages, smiling at how meticulous Colt had been with his collection. I didn't know much about baseball cards. One of these could have been worth thousands, and I'd have no clue.

“You good back there?” Colt called from the kitchen.

“Yeah, I'll be right there!” I replied, still turning the pages.

On the last page, one of the sleeves didn't have a baseball card inside. Instead, tucked behind the clear plastic was a folded piece of paper. Behind it was a picture of me in my high school prom dress.

What in the...?

The paper was worn at the creases, like it had been opened and refolded a dozen times. I unfolded it gently, careful not to tear it.

It was a letter.

Dear Ellie,

If you know me well—and you do—then you know that writing my feelings out is easier for me than actually saying them. Honestly, both are hard for me, but here goes

nothing.

As I've watched you these past couple of weeks, consumed by your grief, I've wanted so badly to fix everything for you—to take away the pain you're feeling.

If this experience has taught me anything, it's that life is short. These last few months have shown me just how much sunshine you bring into my life. You light up every room you walk into. Your laugh is infectious. Each day that goes by without talking to you makes my heart break a little more.

You have always been special to me. But I think the moment I realized just how special you were was the night of senior prom.

I know you begged me to go—as friends, of course—but getting dressed up in a suit and tie just wasn't my thing.

After you left, a little birdie (and by little birdie, I mean Molly) told me you were going to win prom queen.

I knew how much that moment would mean to you, so I snuck in through the back door of the school gym and hid behind the curtains.

I remember watching you—the shocked look on your face as they called your name, announcing you had won.

When they placed that tiara on your head, you looked like a real-life princess.

Beautiful, inside and out. I took this picture, so I would never forget the way you shined that night—your red dress like a ruby dazzling in the disco ball light.

That was the moment I fell in love with you. In that moment, I realized you were

more than a friend to me. You were my forever. Wherever life took me after high school, I didn't care as long as you were there next to me.

I know I should've told you all of this sooner, but I could never find the right words. Until now.

I want you to know that you don't have to fight this battle alone. You deserve to be loved and happy again. You always turn my darkness into light.

Please let me be your light.

Your cowboy ,

Colt

The letter was dated nearly three years ago. Colt had written it back when we were still in high school—right after my parents died.

I read it twice. Then a third time. My heart swelled and ached with every line.

I couldn't believe he'd written something this beautiful and never given it to me.

Holding the letter in trembling fingers, I walked into the kitchen, wanting confirmation this letter was real.

"Did you write this?" I asked, as I walked up behind Colt.

Colt turned, his brow furrowed. He took the paper from my hand and slowly unfolded it. It didn't take long for recognition to cross his face.

"Yeah," he said softly. "I wrote it."



I stood there, waiting—for more, for anything—but when he didn't continue, the question slipped out before I could stop it.

“Why didn't you ever give it to me?”

He paused, thinking.

“Because, Ellie,” he stepped towards me, his voice low, “if you'd stayed on this ranch after your parents died, you would've never had the space to breathe.

You needed to go figure out who you were again, to grieve in your own way.

And I knew if I handed you that letter, it might've made you stay.

For me. And I couldn't do that to you—not then. ”

He paused, then added, quieter this time, “So I let you go. Even though it crushed me.”

Tears blurred my vision. My throat tightened as I tried to hold back the sob pushing its way up .

“I prayed every night that you'd find your way back home,” he continued. “And you did.”

I closed the distance between us, jumping into Colt's arms. He caught me easily, as I cupped his face with my hands and kissed him fiercely.

“That is the sweetest note anyone has ever written me. The sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me, really,” I added. “I'm so sorry you carried that alone all these years,” I whispered against his lips.

“You were always worth it, El.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

Ellie and I carried the final boxes back to the guesthouse, Sadie trotting along behind us, sniffing anything and everything in sight. It was mid-afternoon by the time we got the last box unpacked and put away.

We were officially both living in the guesthouse now—our house.

As the sun started its afternoon descent, we were finally in the truck, headed to Ellie's surprise.

"So, where are we going?" she asked excitedly for about the tenth time. "Please tell me. Pretty please."

"We're almost there, actually. Put this blindfold on, I want it to be a surprise," I said.

"Oh, you're really going all out, huh." She placed the blindfold over her eyes.

"No peeking, I mean it." I said, squeezing her thigh to let her know I was serious.

After driving a few more miles, we arrived at our destination.

"We're here. I'll help you out of the truck. Don't take off the blindfold yet," I instructed.

"The anticipation is killing me," she said, giggling.

After making my way to the other side of my truck, I held her hand as she slowly got out. She was wearing a sleeveless red dress that was cut low enough in the front to

show some cleavage—not a lot, but just enough. The hem ended at her upper thigh, making my mind wander from the task at hand.

Focus, Colt.

With my hand resting gently on her back, I guided her to the spot. When she was standing exactly where I needed her to be, I paused and took a breath.

“This day hasn’t been easy for you the past few years. You’ve walked through hell and back, Ellie. But you made it. You survived. And you didn’t need anyone to rescue you— you saved yourself. I know they’d be so damn proud of you. Wherever they are, they’re watching... and they’re proud.”

I slipped the blindfold from her eyes.

Her breath caught as she looked ahead—at the headstones of her parents.

“I knew coming back here would be one of the hardest things you’ll ever have to do. But I also knew you needed to, because healing starts here. And I didn’t want you to face that first step alone.”

She stared at their headstones in silence. After a few moments, she kneeled in the grass and trailed her fingers across the front of the etched stone.

I stood a few steps back, giving her space—but ready to be there if she needed me.

“Hey, Mom. Hey, Dad,” she said finally, her voice barely above a whisper. “Long time no see, huh?”

She bowed her head, releasing a shaky breath .

“A lot’s happened since you left. But I’m guessing you already know if you’re really up there, watching over me.” Her hand paused on the stone. “I hope you’re proud of me. Even if I didn’t always make the right choices along the way.”

Her voice trembled as she fought back tears. I wanted to swoop in and hug her, but I also wanted to give her space at the same time.

She let out a long, deep breath. “I miss you guys more than anything in this world. I’d give anything to see you just one more time.”

As her eyes locked on the etched images of her parents, two red cardinals fluttered down, landing on top of the headstones—one on each.

Ellie froze.

The cardinals didn’t move. They simply watched her—calm, still—like they were waiting for her to understand.

I wasn’t a spiritual man, not really. But those birds looked at Ellie like they had a purpose, like they knew her.

Tears welled in her eyes, spilling down her cheeks. She didn’t bother to wipe them away.

“I love you guys,” she choked out, her voice breaking. “So much.”

I stood back, watching as she took it all in.

I hadn’t been sure if this would be good or bad for Ellie, but after talking with my mom and Molly, we all agreed she’d probably want support the first time she went back.

And if I knew Ellie, she'd come up with excuse after excuse not to go.

But I also knew her well enough to know she needed this moment more than anything in the world .

After a few more minutes of talking, the cardinals still sitting on top of the stone cutouts, Ellie stood up, dusting off her knees. Both birds tilted their heads as she stepped back.

She pulled me in for a hug, standing on her tiptoes as she wrapped her arms around my neck.

“You’ll never know how much this moment means to me and how much it means that you were the one to give it to me,” she whispered in my ear. I could feel the wetness of her tears against my skin.

“The nights still young,” I said, reciprocating her tight hug. “I have one more thing planned for you.”

“I don’t think I have any more tears left to cry, Colt,” she said jokingly as she wiped her eyes and face.

“I promise this one won’t make you cry—I think.

” I took her hand in mine and led her back to the truck.

“It’s just down the road. There’s this spot Jace and I used to go to as kids.

It’s right in the middle of Silver Creek on the bluff, so it’s the best seat in the county to watch all the fireworks shows at once. ”

I had something set up in a little patch of grass surrounded by wildflowers. It was almost dark, so we needed to get there before sundown.

As I drove down the narrow, overgrown dirt road, Ellie rolled down the window and leaned out slightly, her hair catching the breeze. She smiled, soaking in the warm summer air and the last golden sliver of sunlight.

I slowed the truck as we neared the spot. When Ellie was in the shower earlier, I called Jace and Cassie, directing them where to go. I had given them specific instructions on how I wanted everything set up to surprise Ellie. So help me if they fucked it up.

“Right this way, my lady,” I said, taking her hand as she stepped down from the passenger seat. I guided her towards the open patch of grass.

Her eyes scanned the little setup: a quilt stretched out over the soft summer grass, pillows scattered across the top, and tea lights arranged in clusters along the sides.

In the center, sat a picnic basket stuffed with goodies courtesy of Mom, who was more than happy to help once she found out it was for Ellie.

Jace and Cassie had set everything up exactly as I’d pictured it in my head. It was, without a doubt, the most romantic thing I’d ever done. Hell, I was more surprised than anyone that I’d managed to pull it off. But here we were.

“Colt,” she said, her voice breathy and full of wonder. “This is like something out of a movie. It’s beautiful. You said I wouldn’t cry, but I think I’m about to cry again.”

I pulled her into a bear hug. “Please don’t cry, El. It physically hurts my chest when I see you cry.”

“Don’t worry,” she said with a soft laugh. “These would be happy tears—but I think I managed to stop them. For now.”

She pulled back and sat on the quilt, hugging a pillow to her chest. I settled down beside her and opened the picnic basket.

“Mom said she packed all your favorite snacks in here. Molly added a slice of fresh red velvet cake from the bakery, just for you. I figured we could sit here and watch all the firework shows together. ”

“This definitely beats sitting in a tiny apartment alone all night.”

My jaw tightened. Ellie liked to joke through her pain, but it pissed me off that she’d ever had to feel that way. As long as she was mine, she’d never be alone on the nights she needed me the most.

There were a lot of nights when she was gone that I’d felt hollow, trying to fill the emptiness with anything I could—mostly work. But even then, I’d held onto the hope she might come back.

Ellie didn’t have that same kind of hope. Her parents weren’t coming back. That kind of loss changes a person, and during a time when she should have been healing, she was dealing with a douchebag like Jason.

She must’ve sensed I was getting in my head, because she shifted, scooting directly in front of me. She grabbed my hands and wrapped them around her waist, leaning back against my chest as I instinctively pulled her closer.

Just then, a loud bang echoed through the air in the distance—the first firework of the night.



It burst high in the sky, scattering across the dark canvas above us with flashes of red and gold, sizzling out as the next one spiraled upward. This one was bigger than the last, blooming into three separate bursts—green, blue, and white—each trailing glittering sparks as they fell back to earth.

Ellie let out a soft breath. “These are so pretty.”

I didn’t say anything. I was more focused on Ellie than I was the fireworks. The way she felt in my arms, how perfectly we fit together, how I’d been waiting for this moment since the day she left .

Ellie was in my arms, and she was healing. That was more important to me than anything else in this world.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

As I sat in front of Colt, watching the fireworks explode above the bluff, a strange, unexpected sense of peace settle over me. It didn't erase the ache of losing my parents—nothing ever would—but in this moment, the sharp edge of pain dulled a little. I hadn't thought that was possible.

I leaned back against Colt's chest, and almost immediately, his lips found the curve of my neck. He kissed me there, slow and soft, over and over again, until I let out a low moan and pressed against him.

He responded by wrapping an arm around my waist and tugging me closer. His hard length against my lower back was a silent message I was more than ready to answer.

I twisted around to face him, straddling his lap in one smooth movement. Colt's hands slid down to my thighs, then up again, gripping my ass.

"Fuck, Ellie," he groaned, voice thick with desire. "No panties again? You're gonna be the death of me. "

I smirked and leaned in, kissing him deeply. Our tongues tangled as the fireworks crackled above, lighting the sky like our own private show.

His hand slid between my legs, finding my clit and rubbing in slow, deliberate circles. I gasped into his mouth.

"Is this what you want?" Colt murmured, lips brushing mine. "To be fucked right here in the open? Where someone could come by and see?"

I bit my bottom lip and nodded, shocked by how true it was.

Colt growled, then reached for the straps of my dress, pulling them down to reveal my bare breasts. The night air licked across my peaked nipples, sending a shiver through me.

“Let them watch,” he said, voice rough. “Because no one will ever touch you the way I do. Isn’t that right, baby?” He teased my nipples with one hand while he circled my clit with the other.

“Yes, Colt,” I whispered, eyes fluttering shut as he rubbed me harder. I was close—so damn close—from just his fingers alone.

Desperate for more, I reached between us, unbuttoning his jeans with trembling hands. I needed him. Now.

Colt leaned back on his elbows, lifting his hips as I pulled down his pants, a cocky grin tugging at his lips. “I want to watch you take every inch of me.”

I wrapped my hand around him, guiding him to my entrance. Slowly, I sank down, taking just the tip. The mix of anticipation and need hit so hard, I couldn’t stop—I slammed my hips down, letting him fill me completely.

“Fuck,” Colt hissed, his head falling back. He gripped my hips tight, helping me move. “That’s it, baby. Ride me.”

The fireworks above were nothing compared to what was happening between us. I moved faster, driven by adrenaline and something deeper—something reckless and raw.

Off to the side, the bushes rustled. Maybe an animal. Maybe a person. I didn’t care.

“Don’t stop,” I gasped, riding him harder, chasing the high.

Colt’s grip tightened, his nails digging into my skin, sending a jolt of pain and pleasure through me.

“Why are you so fucking wet right now, Ellie?” he asked, smirking like he already knew the answer.

He smacked my ass—hard. The sharp sting of his palm against my skin sent me reeling. Pleasure and pain tangled together as I cried out, grinding down on him harder, chasing every last drop of release.

Colt clenched his jaw and gritted his teeth as his body stiffened beneath me. He spilled inside me, hot and deep, each pulse crashing through me as he groaned.

My body trembled, breath shallow, as I gasped, trying to pull air back into my lungs. My heart, still racing from the high.

I slumped forward, chest heaving, my forehead resting against Colt’s as we both tried to catch our breath, tangled together under the night sky, the echo of fireworks still cracking in the distance. Colt wrapped his arms around my waist, holding me close like he wasn’t ready to let go .

“You okay?” he murmured, voice low and rough against my skin.

I nodded, unable to speak just yet. My body still trembled, but not from the sex. From the way he held me now—like I was safe. Like I was his.

“I’ve never...” The words caught in my throat.

“What?” Colt asked, brushing my hair out of my face. “Talk to me, Ellie.”

I swallowed hard. “I’ve never felt anything like that. Not just the sex—it was everything. You. Me. All of it.”

His eyes searched mine, then he leaned in and kissed me—not rushed or wild like before—but slow and deep, like he wanted to memorize the taste of me. I sank into it, letting the world fall away. Just for now.

Eventually, I collapsed on top of him, our bodies sticky and still tangled. He chuckled softly, brushing his fingers along my spine.

“Reckon this bluff’s never seen a show like that before,” he said.

I laughed, muffled against his bare chest. “Poor trees. They’ll never be the same.”

We lay there for a long time, wrapped up in each other, the fireworks fading and the stars taking their place. And for the first time in a long time, I didn’t feel broken. I didn’t feel lost.

I just felt... alive.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

The day had come and gone—a weight lifting off my shoulders as I woke up this morning. I'd faced one of my biggest fears head-on, and it didn't end in disaster. In fact, it was quite the opposite.

Colt had done everything he could to make one of the hardest days of my life feel... perfect. No one had ever gone out of their way like that for me before. Everything about last night made it clear just how deeply Colt loved me. He cared in a way no one else ever had.

Colt always put everyone else first. That wasn't the kind of man I was used to.

Being with Colt was like taking a deep breath of fresh, salty air at the last possible second—right after you'd nearly drowned in the deepest part of the ocean. After work today, I planned to come home and show him how much he meant to me.

A few days ago, I'd done a little online shopping and found something that immediately made me think of him—black lace lingerie with matching thigh-high stockings that clipped to a barely-there thong. The top, though calling it a top was generous, was more of a whisper of fabric than anything else.

This morning, after Colt left for work, I tried it on. The way it hugged my curves and lifted my cleavage had me feeling sexy in a way I hadn't in a long time. I couldn't wait to wear it for him tonight. More than that, I couldn't wait for him to take it off me.

As I changed back into my work clothes, my phone buzzed on the nightstand.

It was Cassie.

“Hello—”

“Oh my goodness. Are you on your way yet? Sorry, that sounded kind of jerkish. I didn’t mean for it to come off that way.

Anyway, we’re down to our last sack of sugar, and the delivery guy just called to say he won’t be here until later this afternoon.

There’s no way in hell that one sack is going to last us all day.

Is there any chance you can stop at the market before you come in and buy every bag of sugar they’ve got?

I’ll pay you back, of course. I’d go myself, but I’ve already opened the shop, so I can’t just kick the customers out.

But seriously, what the hell is a coffee shop without sugar, you know? ”

She said it all in one breath. I was pretty sure she was going to pass out if she didn’t inhale soon.

“I’m heading out right now,” I said, laughing. “Mission: Sugar Stockpile is a go. I’ll buy every bag they’ve got.”

“Seriously, you’re a lifesaver. I owe you big time.”

“No worries. See you in like thirty minutes.”

We both hung up after saying our goodbyes .

Before heading out the door, I fed Sadie and kissed her forehead goodbye. She gave me her best puppy-dog eyes, then lay down, knowing I had to go.

As I cruised down the two-lane highway into Silver Creek, a rush of positivity surged through me.

I was definitely high on life. After a few miles of driving, I turned up the radio as an early 2000s pop song played over the speaker, one I hadn't heard in years.

Something about not looking back after a bad breakup.

Perfect timing.

I belted the lyrics like I was headlining my own sold-out concert. I was off-key, but it didn't matter—no one was around to hear me anyway.

As I drove, I rolled the windows down to let in the still-cool summer morning breeze. The air smelled like fresh-cut grass and wildflowers, and for a second, everything felt light and easy.

But as I neared the edge of Silver Creek, a truck approached from behind me—getting closer. Fast.

It was speeding like a racecar chasing a checkered flag. I figured once it caught up, it would pass me. But instead, it stayed glued to my bumper, revving its engine again and again, way too close for comfort.

What the hell?

My stomach tightened, and I eased off the gas, hoping they'd take the hint and go around.



They didn't.

They stayed put, riding my tail like they owned the damn road.

Out of ideas and more than a little freaked out, I grabbed my phone and hit Colt's number, trying to ignore the unease crawling up my spine .

"Good morning, beautiful," he said, his voice instantly making me feel just a little bit better.

"It'd be a better morning if this jerk wasn't riding my bumper like his truck's horny and trying to mount my SUV," I muttered. "Seriously, if I have to brake, even a little, he's gonna slam into me."

"What kind of truck is it?"

"I'm not sure. I don't recognize it. It's dark blue and looks brand new, actually. I can't see the person driving. The tint on the windows is too dark." As I described it, the truck started to edge into the lane next to me. "I think he's finally going to pass me. Thank goodness."

The engine roared as it moved into the oncoming lane, crossing the double yellow line. It accelerated—now side by side with me. Out of the corner of my eye, the passenger window lowered.

"He's rolling down his passenger window, Colt," I said, my voice tighter now, nerves buzzing.

I tried to focus on Colt's voice, but it was getting harder. My attention was splintered—torn between listening and the growing dread crawling up my spine. I turned my head, just enough to sneak a glance at the driver without making it

obvious.

He was yelling, shouting over the roar of wind and tires. I knew better than to roll down my window, but curiosity and fear mixed like gasoline and fire. I turned more fully, just to see the face of the man who thought he could scream at a total stranger—a woman—like this.

I gasped.

The air was sucked from my lungs .

The phone slipped from my trembling hand and hit the floorboard, ending my call with Colt.

The man's screams were clearer now. "You'll never get away from me!"

The truck slowed, dropping back until it hovered near my rear bumper. My eyes flicked to the rearview mirror.

He swerved right—alongside me—and slammed into the side of my car.

The impact jolted me sideways. I gripped the steering wheel tight, trying to steady it, fighting against the skid. After a few seconds, the wheels aligned again. I was back on the road.

My whole body shook. I fumbled along the floorboard, searching for my phone.

I needed to call 911.

I needed to call Colt and tell him Jason had found me.

Before I found the phone, he hit me again—harder this time.

The world tilted.

My car flew off the road, slammed into the embankment, and went airborne.

They say your life flashes before your eyes when you're about to die.

They're right.

My SUV tumbled in the open field, rolling again and again, as my core memories played like a film reel.

Meeting Colt in elementary school.

Riding horses on the ranch, the summer sun warming our backs.

Late-night gossip with Molly .

The night my parents died.

Laughing with Cassie at the coffee shop.

Colt kidnapping me in the bar parking lot, the rain drenching us.

Making love to Colt for the first time.

It all blurred together—memory and reality, blood and glass, spinning and screaming.

Shards tore across my face.

Blood smeared the steering wheel.

Where was it coming from?

My car had landed right side up, and the sun was shining through the broken windows. I was dazed, but still conscious. Pain shot through every inch of my body. My head, chest, stomach, legs—every nerve burned like it had been lit on fire.

I needed to find my phone—my life depended on it—but no matter how hard I tried, my arms wouldn't move, like they were cemented to my sides.

Tears spilled down my cheeks as defeat settled into my bones. I wasn't getting out of here alive. Jason had found me, and one way or another, he was going to kill me.

## Page 33

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

I drifted in and out of consciousness. I was in a vehicle again, but not mine. This one felt different.

The lights were too bright—harsh and sterile. Fluorescent.

Voices floated around me, muffled and scattered, like I was underwater.

I tried to open my eyes, but even the smallest effort sent pain searing through my skull. Everything hurt.

“She’s coming to,” a voice said, sharp but far away.

“Let the ER know we’re two minutes out. Two-car collision. We need all hands on deck. This one’s bad.”

A low moan escaped my lips before I could stop it. I wasn’t even sure if I meant to speak.

“Hang in there,” someone said near my head. “Just stay with us.”

I wanted to ask if they had found Jason, or if he had gotten away again, but I couldn’t form the words.

Darkness pulled at the edges of my vision, thick and heavy.

I gave in.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

“Colt, you need to get to the hospital now—its bad.”

Thats all Liam said when he called to let me know Ellie had been in an accident. One minute she was talking to me on the phone, and the next, the call dropped.

I tried calling her back, over and over again, until finally, I got a call from Liam.

I rushed through the automatic sliding doors of the hospital entrance, shoving my body through the smallest of openings as it slid open.

I looked around, frantic.

Where was Ellie? Was she okay? She was nowhere in sight.

A few steps behind, everyone followed me inside—Jace, Molly, Mom, Dad, and Cassie too.

I rushed to the front desk, the receptionist’s eyes lifting as I approached.

“Can you tell me where Ellie Brooks is? I’m her...” I hesitated. “Family. ”

“Just one moment, I believe she arrived not too long ago on the air ambulance. The doctor will be out shortly to give you an update. I’ll let him know you’re here,” she explained.

I turned to look at everyone’s expressions: confusion, frustration, sadness, anticipation. Those same emotions twisted in my chest.

A few agonizing minutes later, a man stepped through the glass doors from the emergency room bays, where patients were being assessed. According to his white coat, his name was Dr. Andrew Tate.

“I’m looking for the family of Ellie Brooks,” he said, scanning the room.

“That’s us,” I replied, turning towards him, eager to hear how Ellie was doing.

“Hi, I’m Dr. Tate,” he said, addressing us.

“I’ve been treating Ellie since she arrived.

I’ll get right to it. Ellie has extensive bruising and internal bleeding,” he explained.

“The seatbelt caused some internal bleeding on her left side, and the airbag left her with several broken ribs. She’s in a lot of pain, so we have her sedated to let her body rest. We’ve stopped the bleeding for now, but the next twenty-four hours are critical for both her and the baby. ”

The what?

“Did you just say the baby?” I choked out.

“Yes,” the doctor said, nodding. “Ellie’s pregnant—just a few weeks along.

It’s possible she didn’t know yet, depending on what symptoms she might have been experiencing.

We did an ultrasound on her stomach when she first arrived, looking for the internal bleeding.

That's when we discovered she was pregnant. ”

If I thought my emotions were reeling before, they definitely were now.

“As far as we can tell, the baby is okay. Its heartbeat is strong. But with Ellie's current condition, we can't say for certain how her body will respond. We're monitoring her closely. I'll give you another update as soon as I have one. For now, no visitors—her body needs as much rest as possible.”

He walked off without saying another word.

I put my hands on my knees, trying to gain some semblance of control. The room spun violently around me, like the air itself had turned hostile.

My mom's hand gently gripped my shoulder.

“Colt, honey, it's going to be okay. Take a deep breath. We're all here for you, whatever you need.”

But I couldn't breathe. I couldn't process a single thought. None of it made sense.

I turned as a commotion to my left snapped me out of my daze. Liam was walking a man out of the hospital—someone with a large white bandage over his head and blood splattered across his clothes.

“You're under arrest for stalking and the attempted murder of Ellie Brooks,” Liam said, his voice cold.

Realization hit me like a punch to the gut.

It was Jason. And he looked exactly like I'd imagined a piece of shit like him would.



“You have the right to remain silent,” Liam continued.

Rage flared in my chest. I wanted revenge—for Ellie. I wanted him to feel every bit of pain she was in right now, while she carried our child.

“Anything you say can and wi— ”

I lunged forward, driven by every raw, pent-up emotion. My fist shot out, slamming into his face with a sickening thud. He didn’t see it coming.

Bones crunched beneath my fists as they hammered down, again and again, blood splattering across my knuckles as his skin split open.

He’d pay for everything he’d done to Ellie—for every time he hurt her, screamed at her, manipulated her.

For every damn time he crossed a line and thought he could get away with it.

“Colt!” Molly screamed. “You’ve done enough. Get off him! Let Liam handle this!”

But I couldn’t stop. Not yet.

I kept punching. Kept taking my revenge.

“This is for every time you put your fucking hands on Ellie. She’s lying in that room because of you, you piece of shit.”

A few seconds later, someone was pulling me off him, yanking me back. Jace’s face came into view, his strong hands gripping my arms, dragging me away.

“This isn’t what Ellie needs right now, Colt,” he said, his voice firm but urgent. “She

needs you to stay level-headed. She needs you more than ever. They need you.”

“Code Blue, Room 3. Code Blue, Room 3.” The hospital intercom blared overhead.

I watched through the glass doors of the emergency room, numb, as nurses rushed into Ellie’s room. The doctor who had just given an update was pulling silver paddles from a cart beside her bed .

Mom started crying, her body shaking as she buried her face in Dad’s chest. Cassie and Molly stood frozen, their hands covering their mouths, tears trickling down their cheeks.

Jace stood next to me, arms crossed, eyes fixed on Ellie’s room, waiting for what would happen next.

My world stopped spinning—complete stillness. Silence.

Ellie, our baby , everything I’d ever wanted was in that room, and it could slip through my fingers any second.

I dropped to my knees and pressed my hands together in a desperate prayer. My voice, cracked and hoarse, whispering to God, pleading with everything I had left.

“Please... save them. I’ll do anything. I’ll give anything...”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

Flat on my back. Eyes sealed shut.

The steady beep of machines cut through the hum of hospital equipment.

Pain radiated through every limb, every muscle aching like I'd been shattered—broken in a hundred different ways.

How did I get here?

Distant voices, faint but familiar, rise above the mechanical hum.

Molly's: sharp and frantic, yelling, pleading.

Jace's: low and steady, trying to calm someone down.

Their voices reached me, but everything else stayed dark. I tried to open my eyes, to focus, to make sense of what was happening—but it was like being trapped in a dream I couldn't wake from.

Suddenly, light broke through the darkness behind my closed eyes—a ray of sunshine, almost tangible, streaming across my vision. It was soft and warm, like something calling to me from the sky .

Then something appeared—a baby? Drifting down from the light, peaceful and innocent, wrapped in a soft blanket.

What's happening?

My heart raced.

Pain tore through me—like a thousand needles driving into every inch of my body. I tried to scream, but nothing came out. With every wave of agony, the light slipped farther away.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the light faded—dimming to nothing.

And I faded with it.

Colt

They shocked Ellie’s heart. Each time, her chest jolted violently, electricity surging through her body.

Once— Nothing.

Twice— Still nothing.

“Ellie! Ellie, please come back to me, baby!” I shouted from behind the glass doors in the ER waiting room, helpless as she lay motionless on the other side—arms limp, dangling off the sides of the hospital bed.

I couldn’t take it anymore.

Screw what the doctor said.

Screw waiting.

Screw every rule and every person telling me I couldn’t be with her.

If I didn't have Ellie, nothing else mattered.

I shoved through the sliding doors and into her room. The monitors were eerily silent—a flatline .

I stopped at the foot of her bed, then dropped to my knees. My hands trembled as I reached for her foot, as if touching her could somehow tether her back to me.

“Ellie, please come back to me. I can't lose you again,” I whispered, my voice breaking.

The machine beside her still continued its relentless high-pitched tone.

“One more shock,” the doctor said, voice sharp but steady as his eyes swept the room.  
“Clear!”

Shock.

I held my breath.

Waiting.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

“She's back,” the doctor said.

Air whooshed from my lungs in one heavy breath, like a hundred pounds had been

lifted from my chest.

“I want her moved to the ICU immediately,” the doctor ordered. “If she crashes again, we need to be ready.”

The nurses moved quickly, unhooking machines and IV lines. Within seconds, they were wheeling her down the hallway.

“Can I go with her?” I asked quietly, catching the doctor’s eye.

He hesitated for a second. Then nodded.

“Only one visitor,” he said. “That’s it.”

It didn’t take long for the nurses to settle Ellie into the ICU. Once the last one left and the room finally quieted, I pulled the stiff hospital chair closer to her bed and reached for her hand .

It was cold.

I wrapped mine around it gently, thankful she was still here with me.

I didn’t know if she could hear me, but I started talking anyway.

“Ellie, I’m so sorry I wasn’t there to protect you. I need you to come back to me. I need you both to come back to me.”

The weight of it all settled heavy in my chest. Ellie was pregnant. With my baby.

I laid my hand gently on her stomach, rubbing small circles with my thumb. The steady beeping of the heart monitor was the only noise in the room.

After a few hours, the doctor returned to check on her.

“We’re going to start weaning her off the sedation soon. After that, it’s up to her. Based on the medication we used, she could wake up within an hour, or it could take several. Her body makes the call.”

I nodded. “Do you have any updates on the baby?”

“We can take a look now, if you’d like.”

“Uh...sure.”

I wasn’t sure how I felt about seeing our baby for the first time without Ellie. But not knowing—that was worse.

The doctor wheeled the ultrasound machine to the bedside, pulled up the small screen, and squeezed a line of gel onto the doppler wand. He lifted Ellie’s gown, careful to keep her covered, and pressed the wand against her lower belly .

A soft woosh came through the monitor. He adjusted the wand, angling it slightly, and then a different noise emerged from the speaker.

A whooshing sound.

My throat tightened.

“There it is,” he said gently. “Strong heartbeat. Good growth for this stage. Based on the measurements, I’d say Ellie is about four weeks along, maybe more. Everything looks good though. We won’t be able to tell the sex until closer to twenty weeks, but this little peanut is healthy.”

I stared at the screen. At my baby. Our baby.

I did the math in my head. Ellie must've gotten pregnant the first time we were together.

She'd said she was on birth control, but even I knew that wasn't foolproof.

Not that it mattered. I would give Ellie the world—and that included every child she wanted too.

The doctor ripped a strip of pictures that had been printing from the machine, and handed it to me.

I stared at the tiny blob in the middle of the ultrasound images. All I could think about was the tiny life growing inside of Ellie—this life we'd created together.

I reached for her hand again and brought it to my lips.

“You hear that, El?” I whispered. “That’s our baby. Strong, just like you.”

I wanted her to come back to me so badly.

To open her eyes.

To see what we had created.

But just like all those times before, only Ellie could save Ellie.

I just needed her to do it one more time.



## Page 36

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

Someone was holding my hand.

Machines were beeping around me—calmer than the last time I heard them.

Shockwaves of pain no longer coursed through my body. A stiff soreness had settled in its place.

I could open my eyes now, but barely.

As I tried, the blurry outline of a figure sitting next to me came into view. I turned my head, trying to open my eyes wider, but it was like a magnet kept pulling them shut.

Footsteps entered the room. I couldn't see who it was, but the voice was unmistakable. Jace.

“What did the doctors say?” he asked the figure sitting next to me.

“He said she'll wake up in her own time. We just have to wait and see what her body wants to do.”

Colt.

I tried to move my hand towards him, to signal that I knew that he was there—but nothing happened.

His voice cracked. Raw. Grief-strained. Colt had been crying .

Hell, maybe he still was. Hard to tell.

“It’s going to be okay, man. Ellie is strong as hell. She’ll wake up soon. You know she’d never go down without a fight.”

“I love her so much, Jace. More than anything in this world. If I lose her, it will break me.”

He was definitely crying now.

I tried to so hard to wake my body, to make it do something. I drew in a deep breath, willing my heavy limbs to respond, to move something—a finger, my hand, anything. Even the smallest twitch would tell Colt I was still here, still fighting. That he’d never lose me, not like this.

After a moment of concentration that felt like an eternity, I managed to move my fingers, then my hand, then my wrist. I wrapped my fingers around Colt’s hand where it rested on the blanket over my stomach.

Even drifting in and out of consciousness, I could feel his thumb tracing gentle circles there.

Colt’s hand twitched when I wrapped my fingers around it.

“Ellie?”

My eyes weren’t as heavy as before; I could open them a bit more—progress.

Colt’s blurry outline stood and leaned in, his face just a few inches from mine.

“I’m right here, Ellie. You can do it baby, please wake up for me.” He pressed a soft

kiss to my cheek. “Show me your beautiful hazel eyes.”

I struggled to lift my heavy eyelids. A few long seconds later, they fluttered open, my vision still a little blurry, but starting to focus on everything around me .

Nurses entered the room, each heading to a different machine as if they’d done it a hundred times. I could see Jace’s outline as he left the room to give them more space.

Colt’s hand rested on top of my head, trailing his fingers through my hair. His other hand was on my stomach, his thumb still massaging a gentle circle.

I gripped his forearm, wanting to hold on forever.

“What happened?” I asked. The events of the past twenty-four hours were coming back to me in puzzle pieces I couldn’t quite put together.

“Jason tracked you down and ran you off the road.”

The heart monitor beeped faster. Colt immediately placed his hand behind my neck, squeezing gently.

“It’s okay, Ellie. They found him, and he’s going to jail for the rest of his life.”

A deep breath escaped my lungs as the machine went back to a normal rhythm.

I looked down, my gaze catching on Colt’s knuckles—raw, red, caked with dried blood.

“What happened?” I asked, my voice hoarse.

I brushed my thumb across his knuckles, wanting to erase the pain.

“When the doctors released Jason and Liam arrested him, I couldn’t hold back anymore. He almost took you guys from me. I was ready to kill him with my bare hands, but Jace pulled me off him.”

You guys?

The moments leading up to the crash were still hazy. I didn’t remember having anyone in the car with me .

I mentally retraced my steps, replaying each memory one by one from the start.

I’d gotten into my car at the guesthouse. Traveled down the highway on my way to work. Called Colt when an aggressive driver tailed me. Dropped my phone when I realized it was Jason.

I’d been alone in that car. I was pretty sure of it.

After a few more seconds of remembering, I was positive. No one had been in the car with me.

“You guys ? Was someone in the car with me?”

Colt sat beside me on the bed, looking at me like he never loved me more than he did now.

He pulled something from his back pocket, unraveling it and holding it up. A row of pictures. They were black and white and very fuzzy, not like pictures from a camera.

“Ellie, I need to tell you something.”

Colt held the wide strip of paper, pointing to a small gray spot in the middle of one of

the images.

“You’re pregnant.”

My mind shifted back to the vision—or whatever it was—that I’d had when I first arrived at the hospital. Everything had been dark. There’d been yelling. Then a soft, warm light had broken through, and a baby had come down, wrapped in a small blanket.

I studied the ultrasound pictures a few moments longer, letting Colt’s words settle into my brain.

I’m pregnant.

Was Colt happy about it or not? His tone gave nothing away, and that terrified me. I wanted to cry, but I must’ve been too shocked, because despite everything, the tears never came .

Colt stared at me, waiting for my response. And I realized I hadn’t said anything.

I wasn’t sure what to say.

What if Colt never wanted kids? What if he wasn’t happy about the baby?

We had never spoken about that aspect of our future. Hell, we just moved in together. What if this was too much, too fast?

“Colt, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to trap you like this. I swear, I took my birth control like I always do. I don’t know...” I shook my head.

In one quick motion, Colt knelt beside the hospital bed and held my hand.

What if he's about to try to let me down easy? Tell me this is too much for him.

My stomach roiled, and I thought I might throw up, but I don't.

"Ellie," he said, meeting my eyes. "Don't you even think for one second that this changes my mind about you or anything else." He took a deep breath, then continued.

"I know I haven't told you this yet, but I love you.

Gosh, El, I love you so damn much. And sitting here knowing you're growing our baby inside of you?

Well, that makes me the happiest I've ever been, and I'll spend the rest of my life making sure you and this baby never have to want for anything.

Whatever you want, whatever you need, just say the word and I'll give it to you, Ellie. "

Tears streamed down my face, and relief coursed through my body as he said those beautiful words.

"Colt," I said, wiping my eyes. "Coming back to Silver Creek... It made me realize all I've ever needed was you. You're it for me, Colt, forever. I love you, too."

Colt rose to his feet, bent over to kiss the tears from my cheeks, then placed another gentle kiss on my stomach.

As he did, Jace walked in, looking back and forth between Colt and me. He clapped his hands together in excitement, wearing the biggest grin.

"Hell yeah. I'm gonna be an uncle!"

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:05 am*

Ellie hunched over the hospital bed; her contractions had gotten much stronger in the last hour. They came fast and hard. We barely made it to the hospital in time. As soon as we got here, they told us Ellie was already dilated to seven centimeters.

When the doctor told her it was too late for the epidural, I thought she might strangle him—but she didn't.

The past nine months, watching Ellie's belly grow as she carried our baby inside her, has been an out-of-body experience. She wanted to keep the gender a surprise until the baby arrived, so that's what we did. Today, we'd find out if we were having a boy or a girl.

Every time Ellie stepped into the shower, I studied the curves of her body, and the way she rubbed her stomach to soothe herself.

I held up her belly any chance I could, trying to give her some relief.

Every night before bed, I massaged her feet too.

She said it felt like heaven when I did that, but I was sure what heaven really felt like was lying beside her with my hand on her belly, feeling our baby kick beneath my palm.

Now, she was gripping the edge of the bed, knuckles white, breathing in short, jagged bursts.

"Breathe, El. Just like we practiced," I said, pressing my hand to her back. She leaned

into my touch like it was the only thing tethering her to Earth.

Another contraction slammed into her, and she cried out in pain. It tore my heart open. I'd take every ounce of her pain away if I could.

She straightened slowly, face slick with sweat, hair clinging to her jaw.

"I can't do this," she whispered.

"Yes, you can," I said firmly, cupping her face. "You are doing this. You're the strongest person I know."

She buried her face into my chest as another contraction started to build.

I held her tighter.

The room smelled like antiseptic and adrenaline. Nurses shuffle in and out, checking monitors, calling out numbers I couldn't focus on. All I saw was Ellie.

"You're doing so good, baby," I said, brushing damp hair from her face. "I'm right here."

She nodded with a clenched jaw, too focused to speak.

And then—in between contractions—her eyes locked onto mine.

This beautiful, remarkably strong woman was about to bring our child into the world with nothing but grit and pure love. I didn't know how I got lucky enough to be hers, but I'd spend every day trying to deserve her.

The next contraction hit, and she groaned, from low and deep in her chest. I gripped her hand tighter.



“Almost there, baby. Almost there.”

A second later, the doctor knocked on the door, putting on blue medical gloves as he made his way into the delivery room.

“It’s time to see how much progress you’ve made,” he said, as Ellie lay back on the hospital bed.

After checking her, the doctor told Ellie it was finally time to push.

She released a long, exhausted breath as she approached her limit, but if anyone was strong enough for this moment, it was Ellie.

The nurses helped her into position, and she started pushing. She was giving it everything she had, and the muscles along her entire body contracted as she focused all her effort into pushing our baby out in the world.

“This is the last push, Ellie. Give me everything you’ve got,” the doctor instructed.

Ellie screamed through the contraction, through the pain and pressure, and everything else her body felt. As she bore down, her grip tightened on my hand, bones protesting, but I held on, desperate to ease her through the final contraction.

“Keep going, keep pushing, Ellie. Go, go, go,” the doctor said one last time.

She pushed with everything she had, our baby entering the world as she did.

A high-pitched cry filled the room, and I finally released all the air I’d been holding in my lungs .

Relief washed over me, knowing the cry meant the baby was healthy.

Ellie fell back into the hospital bed, her chest rising and falling as she tried to catch her breath.

“You did it, El. You did it,” I said, kissing her forehead, over and over again, as the nurse placed the baby on Ellie’s chest.

“Congratulations, you two. It’s a girl.”