



His Curvy Prize (Sweetheart County Fair #3)

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Category: Romance

Description: The gorgeous older cowboys been watching me for a while and Im not mad about it. But when the fair rolls into town, hes determined to win me as his ownforever!

I'm selling cotton candy at the Sweetheart County Fair, minding my business and trying not to melt in the summer sun. But when Bruno, the rugged, brooding cowboy turned mountain man turns up, everything changes.

He rides straight into the horse trials and stakes a bet that has everything to do with me. Its then that I realize I just might be the prize he's after. Bruno's twice my age, rough around the edges, and way too gorgeous for a girl like me.

He says he's going to win.

Me? I think I've already lost my heart.

Step right up! Welcome to the Sweetheart County Fair, where some of the toughest and most talented compete for the title of Champion. Youll see all kinds of contests, carnival fun, rodeo, motocross, and maybe even some pig wrestling. These blue collar heroes are about to step into the toughest arena of them all, love. Come down and have some fun with us at this years county fair, its sure to be a memorable one!

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Chapter One

EVERLY

“Everly, you're looking a little pink there, honey. Don't forget your sunscreen!” Mrs. Baptiste calls out from the booth next to mine. The scent of cinnamon, sugar, and hot oil wafts past me as she expertly flips the funnel cakes over with a long-handled skimmer.

I wipe my damp forehead with the back of my hand and smile. “Thanks, Mrs. B. I'll reapply in a few minutes.”

“Don't forget to take a bag home with you.

I have funnels comin' out of my ears...” She turns to serve a family crowding her counter.

Everyone else devours funnel cakes like they're heaven-sent.

I ate too many at twelve and spent the night hugging the toilet.

But my brother will demolish whatever Mrs. B sends home; the man's never met free food he didn't love.

Afternoon sun beats down on the Sweetheart County Fair and beads of sweat soak through my tank top. Not exactly the glamorous summer job I'd pictured when my cousin Mila asked me to run the cotton candy booth, but the pay's decent and I need

every dollar for my final semester.

“One strawberry cotton candy,” I say, handing it to a little girl with pigtails. “And one lavender rose...” Her mother hands me five dollars, and I make change from the vintage apron tied around my waist.

Mila's Meals, the meal delivery service in Snowflake Falls that my cousin started three years ago, has been successful enough that she decided to branch out with this experimental cotton candy stand. And somehow, I got roped into being the face of it.

“You have the perfect look and the perfect personality,” Mila had insisted when she offered me the summer job.

What she meant was that I'm one of the few people she knows who doesn't mind talking to strangers all day.

What she tactfully didn't mention was that I needed the distraction. This summer's been rough.

I've already fallen into a rhythm. Spin the sugar, wind it onto the cone, hand it over with a smile, repeat. There's something strangely satisfying about creating something sweet and fluffy that makes kids' faces light up. Plus, my cousin's company has a reputation for quality, and I don't want to let her down.

The fairground is a patchwork of colorful tents, rides silhouetted against the blue sky, and streams of people wandering between them.

Just beyond my cotton candy stand sits Elena Howl's mystical tent, draped in purple fabric with silver stars.

She's been there since the fair opened three days ago, offering tarot readings.

“Slow?” Elena calls over, emerging from the tent. She's at least eighty, with a mane of silver hair she wears loose down her back, long neon-painted nails, and flowing robes.

“For the next ten minutes, until the rodeo lets out.”

I tug my tank top down under the frilly pink apron. My curves have always made me self-conscious, especially after my ex's parting gift: a detailed critique of my ‘problem areas.’ Like I was his personal failed renovation project.

Movement near the test-your-strength game catches my eye.

A man stands in the shadow of the Ferris wheel; tall, broad-shouldered, wearing a cowboy hat and jeans.

Forty-something. The kind of tan earned through work, not vacations.

He watches with perfect stillness, apart from the crowd but unbothered by it.

Our eyes meet and he holds my gaze. A fizz runs down my spine, straight to my core. The noise of the fair fades away and I hold my breath; it's like we're the only two people here. Finally, he breaks the connection, and my breath whooshes out as I exhale.

“The mountain man emerges,” Elena murmurs beside me. She has a habit of appearing silently out of nowhere, like a cat.

I jump. “What?”

“Bruno Castelli,” she says, nodding toward the man. “Cowboy turned mountain man. He lives up in the mountains. Rarely comes to town, even less to social gatherings

like this.”

“You know him?” I ask, trying to sound casual as I rearrange the cotton candy cones with unsteady fingers.

“Everyone knows of him,” Elena replies. “But few know him. He was quite the rodeo champion in his day back in Texas.”

I glance back, but he's gone, swallowed by the crowd. “Why does he keep to himself?”

“Life leaves marks on us all, dear. Some scars are more visible than others...” Elena gives me one of her enigmatic smiles, waving her hand as she walks back to her tent.

I grab a bottle of water and take a long drink, bending down to put it under the countertop. When I straighten, a shadow blocks out the sun.

Wow.

Six-foot-four inches of gorgeous, rugged masculinity stands in front of me.

His cowboy hat casts a shadow over silver-streaked, dark hair that appears finger-combed.

Outdoor tan. Shoulders broad enough to shelter me from the weather.

Forearms corded with thick muscle and a long-healed scar snaking up from his elbow.

But it's his eyes that get to me. Dark brown, almost black, and so intense that I want to hide and strip buck-ass naked at the same time.

I jolt back to reality. Heat floods my cheeks.

“How can I serve you?” My voice cracks.

Does he want cotton candy? This guy looks like he survives on steak, with a shot of whiskey for breakfast. He raises one dark eyebrow and my core jolts.

I attempt to compose myself. “I mean... what can I get for you, Mr. Castelli?”

“Bruno,” he corrects, his voice a low rumble that does things to my insides. “Mighty pleased you know who I am. And I think you know what I want.”

The way he says it, with that heated look in his eyes, makes me wonder if we're still talking about cotton candy.

“I do?” I push a stray lock of hair back from my forehead. “How about the whiskey-ginger flavor? You don’t seem like a matcha green tea kind of guy...”

He laughs, a rich sound that rumbles through my chest, and tips his hat.

I grin like a fool and start spinning sugar. He leans against my counter close enough that his cologne hits me: woodsy, masculine, making me want to bury my nose in his neck.

“Big day today,” he says conversationally as I spin the sugar. “Horse trials start this afternoon.”

“Oh, are you competing?” I ask. I’ve never been comfortable around horses, not after being thrown from one as a kid.

“Mmm. Got a pretty big bet ridin’ on it.” His eyes never leave my face. I finish

winding the cotton candy and hold it out to him. Our fingers brush as I hand it over, and that brief contact sears all the way down to my toes.

“What kind of bet?”

Bruno's smile turns predatory, and my breath catches in my throat.

“The kind where winner takes all. And I always win, Everly.”

The way he says my name, like he's savoring it, sends bolts of electricity up and down my spine. Before I can respond, he's tipped his hat again and walked away.

Halfway across the fairground, realization hits.

I never told him my name.

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Chapter Two

brUNO

My blood runs hot as I stride from Everly's booth, cock hard from that single moment when her pink tongue darted across her lips while she talked. Every muscle in my body screams to go back, pin her against that counter and show her exactly what I want to order.

But I'm not that kind of man. Age has taught me patience, and Everly Parnell deserves proper courting, not to be bent over her cotton candy machine and fucked until she screams my name. Even if that's exactly what I crave. What I've been dreaming about for months

I've watched this girl longer than she knows. Hell, longer than I want to admit. I first saw her in town before Christmas, laughing as she walked with her cousin down the street. Seven months later, the sight of her still has the same head-spinning, blood-pumping effect.

When Brock mentioned his wife's cousin Everly was helping with the cotton candy booth, I made it my business to learn everything about her.

Who she was. What she likes. Her laugh. Her smile.

The way she unconsciously arches her back when she stretches.

The way her tank top strains across her full tits.

Ever since I spotted the gorgeous, golden-haired goddess, I've watched like a goddamn stalker from the shadows every single time she was back in town.

Fairs are neutral ground where social rules bend; where a mountain recluse can approach a college girl. She's way too young for me. Too sweet. But I can't stay away anymore.

I make my way toward the arena where they're setting up for the horse trials, nodding to people I recognize. I don't stop to talk.

One of the reasons I like the mountains in Snowflake Falls is that they're filled with people who don't expect you to socialize.

I sold my family's ranch and disappeared into the mountains for a reason.

I've had years of silence and space, and the kind of peace you can only find when you're truly alone.

"Bruno!"

Drake Morris jogs over, all youthful swagger and enthusiasm. He steals a glance at the cotton candy stall as he passes. Kid's talented with horses, but he's all steak and no sizzle.

"Drake." I nod. "Ready to lose?"

He flashes white teeth. "We'll see about that, old man. How about making this interesting with a little bet?"

"I already got my eye on the prize."

“You do? So what's this prize you're so confident about winning?”

I glance toward Everly's booth where she serves candy to kids, face bright with joy. That smile could bring a dead man back to life. “The prettiest girl at the fair.”

Drake follows my gaze and lets out a low whistle. “Everly Parnell? She’s more my age. I think she’s cute. Shit, Bruno, she's young enough to be your daughter.”

Possessiveness surges through my veins. I’ll break his face if he looks at her wrong. “She's twenty-two. And it’s none of your damn business.”

The steel in my voice wipes the grin off Drake's face. “Hey, man, I didn't mean...”

“Yes, you did. And you're not wrong. She is too young for me, too sweet, too good.

But I want her anyway, and I'm going to have her.” The image of Everly naked and writhing beneath me sends a fresh rush of blood south.

I picture those gorgeous curves spread out on my bed while I worship every inch of her soft skin.

He stares at me for a long moment. “You're serious about this.”

“You bet your boots I’m serious. So I hope you're prepared to lose, because there's no way in hell I'm letting anyone else win her.” Or touch her. Or even fucking think about her the way I do.

I walk away before he can respond, heading toward the registration table. Everly’s too damn beautiful to be safe out here. She’ll have suitors from all over Snowflake lining up to take their chances. I need to make a grand gesture and show’s she’s mine, even if she doesn’t know it yet.

Magnus Huckle is standing by a table, chatting to a woman holding a clipboard.

“Bruno! You and Drake are the only challengers I’m seriously worried about.

Are you sure you don’t want to sit this out?

” He grins at me, running a hand over his silver beard, his bright green eyes twinkling.

Magnus has quite a history. A former racing car driver turned architect, he’s Danish royalty with some of the best horsemanship skills I’ve ever seen.

I smile at him. “Afraid I can’t do that, Magnus. And I have a suggestion.”

“Of course.”

He laughs when I tell him my plan, but doesn’t object. Clapping me on the shoulder, he walks in the direction of the arena. “I’ll let the announcer know.”

My horse, Ranger, is already saddled and waiting.

“You ready for this, boy?” I run my hand along his glossy neck. “We’ve got a gorgeous girl to win.”

Ranger snorts and tosses his head, eager to get out in the ring. My hands shake slightly as I check his tack, adrenaline and lust making me jittery as a teenager. The thought of claiming Everly publicly, of everyone knowing she belongs to me, sends dark satisfaction through my blood.

The announcer calls competitors to register. I lead Ranger over as crowds gather. Conversation buzzes while people place informal bets. The horse trials span two

days; challengers are eliminated until only three remain. Barrel racing first, then pole bending, and finally the flag race.

“Ladies and gentlemen...” the announcer booms into a microphone once we're all assembled, “Along with the thousand-dollar prize, Bruno Castelli has proposed a winner-take-all competition with some very interesting stakes.”

I step forward to take the mic.

“I'll run the flag race blindfolded for the final round,” I say, my voice carrying easily across the arena.

A hush runs over the crowd, followed by a hum of conversation.

“If I win, I get to claim the prettiest girl at the fair as my prize. If I lose... I put up my mountain property as collateral.”

The crowd gasps. My cabin and hundred acres represent considerable money. Hell of a bet for any prize.

But Everly Parnell isn't just any prize. Having her spread naked in my bed, crying my name while I make her come? Worth every fucking acre.

“And who exactly is this prettiest girl?” someone calls out.

I scan the crowd until I find Everly, standing at the edge of the arena with her mouth open and her cheeks flushed pink. I smile.

“I think she knows who she is.”

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Chapter Three

EVERLY

It's me; the cowboy's talking about me. My pulse hammers so loud the whole county must hear it. The crowd erupts in whistles and catcalls, but those calm, dark eyes hold my focus.

Shock fades. Anger simmers in my chest. Who the hell does he think he is, betting on me like some carnival prize?

Like I don't get a say in this ridiculous arrangement?

I should march down there and tell him exactly what I think.

Or leave; my shift's done. Instead, I plant myself in the arena audience, torn between outrage and the most intense attraction I've ever experienced.

Barrel racing begins, and despite my fury, I can't look away. Bruno is magnificent. He and Ranger flow around the barrels with liquid grace. Despite my nerves at being so close to the horses, his riding mesmerizes me; the way he communicates through touch, the trust between them is almost tangible.

He isn't just good. He's incredible.

Drake Morris has talent, too. Young, cute, cocky, with the kind of reckless confidence that comes from never failing at anything important.

But watching him ride only highlights his differences from Bruno.

Where Drake's flashy, Bruno's controlled.

Where Drake seeks attention, Bruno commands it without effort.

Magnus Huckle surprises me most. The older man moves with precision earned over the course of decades. There's something aristocratic in how he handles his horse. Elegant. But I can't stop watching Bruno.

Elena materializes beside me.

"He's claiming you publicly." Approval colors her voice.

"He's what now?" I whip around, indignation sharpening my tone. "Elena, did you hear what he just did? He announced to the entire county that I'm some kind of trophy he's going to win!"

"Men like Bruno Castelli don't make grand gestures lightly. He's telling everyone you belong to him."

"I don't belong to anyone!" My temper finally breaks free. "I'm not a carnival game prize. I have the right to make my own damn choices!"

Elena's smile mocks me. "Tell that to your rosy cheeks and racing pulse, dear."

"That's not the point." But we both know she's right.

"The question is, Everly: what will you do about it?"

Barrel racing concludes with Bruno first, Magnus second, and Drake third. Four

riders eliminated, leaving six for tomorrow's pole bending. The crowd disperses. I should go home and forget this insanity.

Instead, I march toward the arena, temper leading the charge.

Bruno is talking to his horse. When he spots me approaching, his face lights with a gorgeous smile that should melt my knees. Right now, it just stokes my anger.

“Everly! You stayed to watch.”

“I stayed to tell you exactly what I think of your little stunt.” I cross my arms, keeping a careful distance from the two huge beasts in front of me. “What the hell was that, Bruno?”

His smile falters. “Well, lil' darlin', that was me winning barrel racing.”

“Don't play the fool, cowboy. The bet. The announcement. Declaring me your prize like I'm some object you can win at ring toss.”

Bruno's expression turns serious. He hands Ranger's reins to a hovering young man. “Can we discuss this somewhere more private?”

“We can discuss it right here. In front of everyone, since you love making public declarations about my life.”

“You're angry.”

“I'm freaking furious!” I correct. “You don't get to decide my future based on your riding skills. I'm not a prize, Bruno. I'm a person.”

“I agree.” His quiet admission deflates some of my rage.

“Then why...”

“Because I've been watching you for a while, wanting your attention.”

“So you chose caveman tactics?”

A rueful smile tugs his lips. “Wasn't the intention.”

“What was the intention, exactly?”

Bruno pulls off his hat. His fingers rake through his thick, dark hair, leaving it disheveled. “To show you I'm serious. That I'll risk something that matters for the chance to spend time with you.”

“Your cabin.”

“My cabin. Hundred acres of prime mountain land that's been my sanctuary ten years.”

“Which someone else gets if you lose.”

“Actually, I may have embellished that part for dramatic effect. There's a cap on prize funds. Magnus and I agreed; if I lose, the property goes to Bakersville Animal Rescue. They need land to expand their sanctuary.”

Despite myself, I'm impressed. “So you're risking your home for charity?”

“I'm risking my home for you. The charity part just shows I'm serious. If I win, I'll make a considerable donation, including the money I win at the trials.”

We stare at each other. People lean forward in the stands, straining to hear our

conversation. I want to stay angry, hold onto my righteous indignation. But it melts under Bruno's intense gaze.

“You reckon I'm just going to go along with this? Play the part of your prize if you win?”

Bruno steps closer. “I think you'll give me a chance to prove this isn't about winning a prize. It's about winning your heart.”

My pulse speeds when he gets closer. “Those are some sweet words. But I'm still not a trophy.”

“No, you're not. And if I'm lucky enough to win tomorrow, maybe you'll choose me as your prize.”

“And if you lose?”

“Then I'll find another way to convince you to have dinner with me.”

Despite everything, I smile. “Dinner?”

“Tonight. Win or lose tomorrow, I want to take you to dinner. I want to sit across from you and learn about your dreams, your fears, what makes you laugh. And convince you this crazy attraction between us is worth exploring.”

“You're assuming there's attraction.”

Bruno's smile widens. “Oh, darlin', we both know there's attraction. Question is whether you're brave enough to do something about it?”

The challenge in his voice straightens my spine. “I'm brave enough.”

“Then have dinner with me.”

I should say no. Every rational brain cell screams to walk away from this beautiful, intense, overwhelming man. But when I look into those dark eyes, what’s there makes my heart skip.

Hope.

I take a breath. “Dinner. But I’m choosing the restaurant.”

“Deal.”

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Chapter Four

brUNO

Two hours later, I'm sitting in my truck outside Della's Diner, gripping the steering wheel like it's the only thing keeping me sane. My cock's been half-hard since I left the fairground, the memory of Everly's defiant little chin and those curves in that frilly apron driving me to distraction.

Fuck, the way she stood up to me. Most women would've melted at my public declaration or run screaming. Not my sweet girl. She marched right up and gave me hell, those blue eyes spitting fire while her tits bounced with every angry gesture.

I adjust myself again and check the time. She said seven. It's 6:58.

I catch sight of her in my mirror as she drives up, parks and gets out, scanning the parking lot.

My breath catches in my throat. She's changed from her work clothes into a sundress that fits her like she's been poured into it, the fabric a soft sunshine yellow that makes her skin glow.

Her golden hair has a rosy glow in the evening light.

I'm out of the cab before conscious thought kicks in.

“You look prettier than a peach, darlin’. You came.”

“I said I would.” She tilts her head up to look at me, and the scent of her shampoo makes my mouth water. “I love this diner. Della makes the best strawberry pie.”

Inside, Della spots us and her weathered face breaks into a grin. “Everly!” She bustles over to give Everly a quick hug before turning sharp eyes on me. “And Bruno Castelli. Haven't seen you in town for months.”

“Been keeping to myself, Della.”

Her gaze bounces between us, missing nothing. “You two know each other?”

“We're getting acquainted,” I say, something possessive threading my voice that makes Everly's eyes widen.

Della's mischievous smile could light up the diner. She can read people like tea leaves. “Well, ain't that interesting. Corner booth, kids?”

She seats us in the back. We both order and Della disappears toward the kitchen. Everly leans back against the red vinyl and studies me with those bright blue eyes.

“Tell me about the mountain man hermit thing. Is it as romantic as it sounds, or do you just really hate people?”

Her question's teasing, but there's genuine curiosity underneath. I find myself wanting to give her real answers instead of the deflections I usually offer.

I wrap my hands around my coffee mug. “Bought the cabin about ten years ago, after my parents died in a car accident.”

Her expression softens immediately. “I'm sorry. That must've been devastating.”

The old pain doesn't sting like it used to, but it's still there. “Yes, it was. Drunk driver hit them head-on coming back from Houston. I needed to get away from everything that reminded me of them. The ranch they built, the town where everyone knew our family. It was too much.”

“And the mountains gave you peace.”

“They did. But...” I meet her eyes. “Lately they don’t feel the same.”

“What changed?”

You , I want to say. Everything changed the moment I saw you walking down Main Street seven months ago. But it's too much, too soon.

“I guess I'm ready to start living again instead of hiding away.”

Della brings our food, and we eat while I tell Everly about the cabin, about Ranger, about the simple life I've built in the mountains. The diner empties as we talk until we're the only two people left.

She tells me about college, about her teaching dreams, about her brother Wilder.

She makes a passing reference about needing something to distract her from a tough summer.

“Tough? Want to talk about it?”

Everly's face clouds. She stabs at her fries with more force than necessary. “My ex-fiancé decided to break up with me in as messy a way as he could. Got nasty. Told me I had 'problem areas' I should work on if I wanted to keep a man interested.”

Rage burns hot in my chest, swift and vicious. “What was his name?”

“Why?”

“So I know what to call him when I punch him in the face.”

Her startled laugh eases some of the tension from her shoulders. “Bruno. He's definitely not worth the assault charges.”

“Any man who'd say something like that to you is a goddamn fool.” I reach across the table and cover her hand with mine.

Her skin is soft, warm, and she doesn't pull away.

“You're perfect exactly as you are, Everly. Every gorgeous curve, every sweet smile, every word that comes out of that pretty mouth.”

She stares at our joined hands. “You don't really know me.”

“I know enough.” My thumb traces patterns on her palm, and I watch goosebumps rise on her arm.

“I know you're kind to everyone you meet.

I know you give free cotton candy to kids whose parents can't afford it. I know you light up when you talk about teaching because you genuinely want to make a difference.”

“How do you know all that?”

“Because I've been watching you. Every time you came back to Snowflake to visit

your cousin. At the fair. Learning about you. Wanting you so damn bad it keeps me awake at night.” The confession slips out rougher than I intended, but I don't take it back.

Everly's breath hitches. “Bruno...”

“I know what you're thinking. I'm too old for you. Too rough around the edges. Too set in my ways.” I lean forward, closing the distance between us. “And you're probably right. But I'm a selfish bastard, sweetheart, and I want you anyway.”

“You really think this is about age?” Her voice drops to a whisper. “You think that's what's got me scared?”

“What's got you scared?”

She looks up at me then, and the vulnerability in her eyes nearly brings me to my knees. “I'm scared of how much I want you back. And how I want to say yes to whatever crazy thing you're offering, even though we barely know each other.”

The admission hits me like a physical blow. Before I can second-guess myself, I'm sliding out of my side of the booth and into hers, crowding her against the window. She gasps but doesn't push me away.

“Beautiful,” I say, one hand coming up to cup her face. “Tell me what you want.”

Her pupils are dilated, lips parted. Her pulse is fluttering at her throat, fast and erratic. “I want...”

“What, sweetheart? Tell me.”

“I want you to kiss me.”

I don't need to be asked twice. My mouth covers hers, and she tastes even better than I imagined. Sweet like the cotton candy she spins, but with enough fire underneath to make my blood sing. She melts against me, one small hand fisting in my shirt while the other tangles in my hair.

The kiss starts gentle, exploratory, but when she makes a soft sound in the back of her throat, control snaps. My tongue sweeps into her mouth, claiming, possessing, and she meets me stroke for stroke like she was made for this. Made for me.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathing hard. Her lips are swollen, hair mussed up, and she's never looked more gorgeous.

“What was that for?” I ask, my voice low and rough.

“I wanted to know what it felt like before you risk everything tomorrow.”

“And?”

Her smile is slow, devastating. “Worth the risk.”

I want to take her home right now. Want to carry her to my truck and drive up that mountain road with her soft thighs spread across my lap. Want to strip that pretty dress off her and worship every inch of her skin until she's crying my name.

Instead, I force myself to behave. To take her back to her car with nothing more than another soft kiss and a promise to see her tomorrow.

But as her taillights disappear down the mountain road, one thing's crystal clear.

Win or lose tomorrow, Everly Parnell is going to be mine.

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Chapter Five

EVERLY

My sheets are twisted around my legs like I've been fighting demons all night, but the only thing haunting my dreams was a certain cowboy's hands.

I sit up and stretch, untangling the sheets.

The apartment I share with my brother Wilder is small but cozy; we found it when I decided to spend the summer in Snowflake Falls helping Mila.

Wilder landed a job here for the season, so it worked out perfectly.

My lips still tingle from Bruno's kiss. I touch my mouth, heat pooling low in my belly at the memory.

Sweet mercy, that man can kiss!

I've been kissed before, obviously, but never like that. Never with such intensity, like I was the only thing in the world that mattered. The way Bruno looked at me afterward, dark eyes burning with want, made my knees weak.

Still makes them weak.

The smell of coffee drifts from the kitchen, which means Wilder's already up.

I drag myself out of bed and into the shower, trying to ignore the way my body responds to thoughts of Bruno.

The way his hands felt cupping my face. How his voice dropped to that rough rumble when he said my name.

The barely leashed power in his shoulders when he crowded me against the booth window.

By the time I make it to the kitchen, Wilder's leaning against the counter in his work clothes, scrolling through his phone with a piece of toast hanging from his mouth.

“Morning,” I mumble, reaching for the coffee pot.

“Well, well.” He looks up with a grin that's identical to mine. “Look who finally rolled in. Where were you last night?”

“I had dinner.” I keep my voice carefully neutral.

“Uh-huh. With the cowboy-turned-mountain man everyone's talking about?”

I nearly choke on my coffee. “How do you?—”

My phone buzzes on the counter. I glance at the screen and my stomach drops.

Trent: Ev, I've been thinking about us. We need to talk. I made a mistake.

Wilder notices my expression change. “What's wrong?”

I flip the phone face down. “Nothing. Just... my ex.”

“That asshole.” Wilder's eyes narrow. “What's he want?”

“To talk, apparently.” I stare at the phone like it might bite me. “Says he made a mistake.”

“Yeah, he did. Months ago. And now he wants to talk?” Wilder sets down his coffee. “You're not actually thinking about talking to him, are you? The same guy who wanted you to lose forty pounds before he introduced you to his family?”

“I don't know. Maybe I should hear what he has to say. Get some closure.”

“Ev. You walked in glowing just now and then Trent texts and you look like someone kicked your puppy. You see the difference?”

I do see the difference. With Bruno, I felt beautiful, desired, worth risking everything for. With Trent... I just feel tired.

“Bruno made me feel like I'm enough. Like I'm more than enough.”

“Then why are you even considering what that dickhead has to say?”

My phone buzzes again. Another text:

Trent: Saw your Instagram. You look different. Happy. Miss you.

“Because what if Bruno's just caught up in some fantasy and when he really gets to know me...”

“Stop.” Wilder's voice cuts through my spiral. “Trent's an insecure little shit who couldn't handle dating someone better than him. Don't let him mess with your head now.”

“But—”

“No ifs, no buts. You want to know what I see when I look at you? I see my badass little sister who put herself through college and who's going to be an amazing teacher. And who just dated the most eligible guy in Snowflake Falls, present company excepted.” He crosses his arms.

“He's not that eligible. He's forty-three and lives alone on a mountain.”

“According to my sources, every single woman between eighteen and sixty has been trying to catch Bruno's eye for years. Man's got his pick of the county, and he chose you. That makes you either very lucky or very brave.”

“Or very stupid,” I add under my breath.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” I shove bacon from the pan into my mouth to avoid more questions.

But Wilder knows me too well. He sets down his phone, expression turning serious. “Talk to me, Ev. What's really going on?”

“Bruno scares me. Because when I'm with him, I forget that I'm supposed to be focusing on school and my future, not getting swept off my feet by some gorgeous cowboy.”

“Who says you can't have both?”

“Wilder, the man lives alone on a mountain. He announced in front of half the county that he wants to win me like a carnival prize.” My voice rises with each word. “Those are not the actions of a man looking for something stable.”

Wilder leans against the counter, studying me. “Your voice is getting all squeaky, sis. You know what I think?”

“What?”

“I think you're running scared because for the first time in your life, someone's looking at you like you're perfect, and you don't know what to do with that.”

My stomach flips. “That's terrifying.”

“Why?”

“Because what if I disappoint him? What if I'm not worth all this grand gesture nonsense? What if he wins today and realizes I'm just...ordinary?”

Wilder shakes his head. “If Bruno Castelli can't see how great you are, he doesn't deserve you. But stop running scared and see what happens.”

I spend the rest of breakfast trying to ignore the butterflies doing a workout class in my stomach. By the time I need to leave for the fair, my nerves are wound so tight I might snap.

When I pull into the parking lot and catch sight of the arena where Bruno will be competing in just a few hours, my heart is hammering in my chest. I park and walk toward my cotton candy booth, past the horse trailers and competitors preparing for the day.

Somewhere in this chaos is Bruno, probably going through his pre-competition routine with Ranger. The thought makes my pulse quicken.

Elena's voice drifts over from her tent. “You look well this morning, Everly.”

I stop and turn to find her standing in her tent's purple doorway, silver hair gleaming in the morning sun. "Thank you."

Her knowing smile makes me wince. "Mmm... the cards told me last night would be... illuminating."

"Oh Elena. You didn't do a reading about me..."

"Didn't I?" She winks and disappears back into her tent, leaving me standing there with my mouth open. She comes back, her rings glinting in the sunlight.

"The cards have been restless all night," she says, her voice taking on that mystical quality she uses with paying customers. "They're practically humming with energy about you."

"Elena, I really need to set up?—"

"Humor an old woman." She spreads the cards in a fan. "Draw two."

Against my better judgment, I find myself reaching for the deck. My fingers hover over the cards before selecting two from opposite ends.

Elena flips the first card: The Lovers. A man and woman stand beneath an angel, bathed in golden light.

She smiles. "A powerful connection. Two souls recognizing each other across time and space. Passion, yes, but also choice. True love requires courage, my dear."

She flips the second card and her expression darkens: The Tower. Lightning strikes a tall structure, sending figures tumbling into darkness.

She shakes her head. “Something from your past seeks to destroy what you're building. A false foundation that must crumble before truth can emerge. Beware voices from yesterday trying to poison tomorrow...”

My phone is heavy in my bag and I swallow hard. “That's oddly specific.”

Elena gathers the cards with a flourish. “The universe speaks to those who listen, dear. The question is: will you choose the poison, or will you choose love?”

I shake my head and continue toward my booth. Today's going to be a long day, and it hasn't even started yet. But as I unlock my station and start setting up for another day of spinning sugar, Elena's words echo in my mind.

I have a choice to make.

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Chapter Six

brUNO

I shower in the dark, cold water pouring over my body.

As cold as it is, it doesn't quell my hard-on.

I lean against the tiles, my hand pumping my cock.

Everly's face is right there behind my closed eyelids; I picture how she looked in the diner booth.

The way her pupils dilated when I crowded close, how she tasted like sugar and sin when she finally let me kiss her, her soft tits pressing against me.

I come hard, with a groan, the water cascading over me.

I go back inside, splash cold water on my face, then pull on jeans. My hands shake slightly as I button my shirt. Stupidly, it's not nerves about the upcoming competition, but the memory of the little sound Everly made when my tongue swept into her mouth.

I'm coming apart like a cheap saddle. I need to get my shit together.

Ranger's already fed and groomed when I reach the stables. I run my hands over his coat with more attention than necessary, checking and rechecking his tack. My jaw

aches from clenching it all morning.

“You're looking mighty pleased with yourself this morning.” Magnus approaches with his bay gelding trotting behind, that sardonic grin already in place.

“Good morning, Magnus.”

His green eyes twinkle. “Indeed, it is. Heard you had dinner with a certain cotton candy vendor last night.”

Damn small towns. I tighten Ranger's girth another notch. “Yep.”

“And?”

“And, very respectfully, mind your own business, Magnus.”

Magnus chuckles. “Defensive. The lovely Miss Parnell has gotten under your skin.”

I check the bridle for the fourth time rather than answer. The leather's perfectly adjusted, but my hands need something to do.

“Just focus on the competition today. That's what I'm doing.”

“Oh, I intend to give you a run for your money. But we both know you're not riding for the thousand dollars anymore.”

My hands rest on Ranger's mane. “No. I'm not.”

“Good man. Nothing worth having comes easy.”

By the time pole bending starts, the arena's packed tighter than yesterday. I scan the

crowd and find Everly at the front of the crowd, hands pressed to the fence rail. Even from this distance, I can see her teeth worrying her lower lip.

She's nervous. For me .

The course is set: six poles spaced in regular intervals in a straight line. Riders weave through at speed, making sharp turns around each pole before racing back to the start. It's a test of precision and partnership between horse and rider.

Drake's up first. He and his sorrel gelding explode from the starting line, racing toward the far pole.

Too fast. The horse fights the bit as Drake hauls him around the first turn, their line sloppy.

The sorrel's hindquarters swing wide around the third pole, and their lost time adds up.

Still, they recover well through the final poles, finishing with a respectable run.

“Nineteen-point-eight seconds for Drake Martinez!” the announcer calls.

Solid time, but beatable. The next rider makes it round in twenty-two seconds. Nothing for me to worry about.

Magnus is up next. I watch him settle deeper into his saddle, hands light on the reins. The bay gelding's ears prick forward, muscles coiled like a spring beneath his rider.

They're off.

What follows is pure artistry. Horse and rider flow through the poles like water, each

turn executed with mathematical precision.

The bay's hooves barely whisper against the dirt as they pivot around each pole, never losing forward momentum.

Magnus sits still as stone, letting his horse work, only shifting weight at the exact moment needed.

It's flawless.

They cross the finish line and I know, even before the time is announced, that they've beaten Drake by a significant margin. The crowd erupts in cheers.

“Seventeen-point-nine seconds for Magnus Huckle!”

Damn. That's a hell of a time. Fast enough to win most competitions outright.

Magnus trots past with that infuriating little smile. “Your turn, my friend. Don't let an old man like me show you up.”

My turn.

Ranger and I approach the starting line. The arena falls quiet. I glance toward Everly. She holds her crossed fingers up and mouths ‘good luck’.

The starting bell rings.

Ranger dashes forward, his powerful stride eating up the ground to the first pole. I sit deep, hands quiet, letting him find his rhythm. We sweep around the far pole in a tight arc, Ranger's inside hind foot barely clearing the base.

Second pole. Third. Each turn flows into the next, but something's off. Ranger's fighting me slightly, head tilted against the bit. Still upset about yesterday's warm-up, maybe, or picking up on my own tension.

Fourth pole. Precious tenths of seconds slip away with each imperfect turn. Ranger's normally fluid movement feels choppy, mechanical.

Fifth pole. We're through the pattern now, racing for home, but I know it wasn't our best. Ranger knows it too; his ears pin back in frustration as we cross the finish line.

“Eighteen-point-seven seconds for Bruno Castelli!”

Second place. Behind Magnus.

I dismount and pat Ranger's neck, murmuring reassurances. It's my fault, not his. My head wasn't in the game the way it should have been.

“Well ridden,” Magnus says as he leads his horse past. “Though you seemed a bit... distracted.”

“Mind was exactly where it needed to be.” I glance over at the crowd, where Everly is heading back to her booth.

Magnus follows my gaze. “Ah. Dangerous thing, riding for someone else. Makes you think too much instead of just riding.”

I lead Ranger toward the water trough, my mind churning. Magnus is right; I'm distracted. But it's more than just Everly's presence in the stands.

Standing here in front of hundreds of people, their eyes trained on every move I make, brings back memories I've spent ten years trying to bury.

The last time I competed publicly, my parents were in the stands.

Dad with his arms crossed, that proud smile creasing his weathered face.

Mom clutching his arm every time I took a jump.

“You ride like you've got something to prove, son,” Dad had said after I won the state championship at nineteen. “But the best riders? They ride like they've got nothing to lose. Don’t get lost in your head.”

Ranger nickers softly, nudging my shoulder. I scratch behind his ears, grounding myself in the familiar ritual.

After the accident, I couldn't bear the thought of crowds cheering, judges watching, cameras flashing.

Couldn't stand the pity in people's eyes or the way they'd lower their voices when they talked about poor Bruno Castelli who lost his folks.

The mountains became my refuge. Up there, no one expected anything from me.

No legacy to uphold. No family name to honor.

But now, with Everly watching from the stands, I've put myself right back in the spotlight I spent a decade avoiding. Made myself vulnerable again. Public.

What the hell was I thinking, making that bet?

Announcing to the entire county that I want her?

I shake my head as I remember the way Everly's ex made her doubt herself, made her

believe she wasn't enough.

What if I'm doing the same thing? What if this grand gesture isn't romance, what if it's selfishness?

Forcing her into the spotlight alongside me whether she wants it or not.

Ranger stamps his foot, impatient. He doesn't understand why we're standing still when there's work to be done.

I close my eyes and try to find that place Dad talked about; riding like I have nothing to lose. But that's the problem. For the first time in ten years, I have everything to lose.

The mountains taught me solitude. Everly is teaching me what I want. And wanting someone, I'm learning, is a dangerous thing.

I think about her laugh last night at dinner, the way she challenged me about the bet, the soft sound she made when I kissed her. The way she looked at me like I was worth something more than the broken man who fled to the mountains.

Maybe that's what this is really about. Not winning her, but proving to myself that I'm still capable of being the man she sees when she looks at me.

Ranger nickers again, and I realize my hands have stilled on his neck. Time to find out if ten years of hiding have made me forget how to fight for what matters.

The standings flash on the scoreboard: Magnus first, me second, Drake third. Only a few hours until the final flag race determines everything. The pressure has just ramped up. No room for mistakes in the final event. No room for anything but perfection.

“Hey, Bruno!”

Drake jogs over, helmet tucked under his arm, all big hat and no cattle. “Good ride. Guess we're all still in this thing.”

“Appears so.”

“Funny how things work out. Makes the flag race a lot more interesting. You sure you want to stick with that blindfold bet? Might be biting off more than you can chew.”

My hands curl into fists at my sides. “I'll manage.”

“We'll see.” There's a challenge in his voice. “In a few hours anything could happen.”

Before I can respond, he's walking away with a spring in his step that wasn't there this morning. He thinks he stands a chance. That the stakes got higher, and I'm no longer the favorite.

My mouth curves into a slow smile. There's no room for doubt. Soon, in front of the whole fair, I'll show them all exactly what I'm fighting for.

Everly Parnell is coming home with me.

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Chapter Seven

EVERLY

The afternoon drags endlessly after the pole bending ends. The flag race won't start until six, prime time for maximum crowd drama, which leaves me with four hours to spin cotton candy while my stomach churns with nerves.

Bruno came in second. Second . Which means he's not the favorite anymore for tonight's blindfolded run.

“One pink lemonade cotton candy, please.” A little girl with pigtails bounces on her toes while her mother counts out change. It’s so hot that the sky is hazy and the air seems to shimmer. I force a smile and get to work.

Sweat pools between my breasts under the frilly apron.

Families move slower than usual, seeking shade wherever they can find it.

My hair sticks to the back of my neck despite being tied up, and moisture beads along my hairline.

Even the slightest breeze would be a blessing, but the air sits motionless, trapped between the mountains like we're all slowly baking in nature's oven.

My phone buzzes in my apron pocket. I ignore it until the mother and daughter walk away, then pull it out with sticky fingers.

Trent: Everly, don't ignore me. I saw on Instagram you're at that hick fair. This whole cowboy thing isn't you. Call me.

My stomach clenches. Mila's put up some photos and a story with me in it on her company Insta account. I had no idea Trent was following it.

Another buzz:

Trent: You're making a mistake. I know you better than anyone. This is just rebellion because of our break-up.

"You look like you've seen a ghost." My brother approaches carrying a paper plate piled high with funnel cakes, powdered sugar already dusting his work shirt.

"When did you get here?" I shove my phone back in my pocket.

"Twenty minutes ago." He takes a massive bite, closing his eyes in bliss. "Mrs. B outdid herself today. These are like little pieces of heaven."

"You know you can't live on fried dough, right?"

"Watch me." He polishes off half a funnel cake in three bites. "So point out the cowboy who's got my sister all twisted up?"

"Bruno's preparing for the final event."

He studies my face. "You look like you're about to throw up. What's wrong?"

I pull out my phone and show him Trent's texts. Wilder's expression darkens as he reads. "This little shit just won't quit, will he?"

“He says he saw fair coverage online. What if he's right? What if this is just some kind of rebellion phase?”

Wilder shakes his head and picks up another funnel cake. “He’s just trying to get inside your head, Ev. Delete those texts and focus on your cowboy.”

But as the afternoon wears on, Trent's words echo in my head. This isn't you. You're making a mistake.

What if he's right? What if I'm just caught up in the fantasy of being someone worth risking everything for? What happens when the adrenaline fades and Bruno realizes I'm just ordinary Everly?

By five-thirty, the arena is packed beyond capacity. In the distance, thunder rumbles across the mountains, low and ominous. The oppressive heat presses down even harder and the crowd is restless as they wait.

“Never seen a turnout like it,” Mrs. Baptiste says as she fans herself. “That Bruno’s put the whole county on the map.”

“No pressure.”

Wilder, who's now eating an ice cream, nudges my shoulder. “Stop spiraling. He's going to be fine.”

“You don't know that.”

The announcement crackles over the loudspeakers: “Ladies and gentlemen, competitors to the gate! The flag race begins in fifteen minutes!”

My heart speeds up as I spot Bruno near the competitors' entrance, checking Ranger's

tack one final time.

Elena appears at my side as if summoned by magic. “Time to take a break, dear. Everyone will be watching the race. I’ll cover for you.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know if I can watch...”

Elena's voice is gentle but firm. “Have a little faith. That man isn't just riding for you, Everly. He's riding for both of you. For the future you could build together.”

Wilder and I make our way to the arena.

“Three riders remain,” the announcer booms. “Magnus Huckle, Drake Morris, and Bruno Castelli... but as you all know, Mr. Castelli has raised the stakes considerably!”

Bruno’s changed into a black shirt that emphasizes his broad shoulders, his jaw set in determined lines. When he swings into the saddle, he sits like he was born there.

My phone buzzes again. I don't look at it.

“The rules are simple,” the announcer continues. “Riders race to collect seven flags placed at increasing distances, then return to the starting line. Fastest time wins. But Mr. Castelli will be attempting this course completely blindfolded!”

The crowd applauds. Beside me, Wilder squeezes my arm.

Drake goes first, his sorrel charging toward the flags with controlled aggression. He collects all of them cleanly, his time flashing on the board: thirty-one-point-four seconds. Magnus follows, his bay flowing through the course like liquid. Twenty-eight-point-two seconds.

Then it's Bruno's turn.

He appears at the gate leading Ranger, and the arena falls silent.

The judge approaches with a black blindfold, and my heart threatens to beat right out of my chest. Above us, the sky darkens ominously, thick clouds swallowing what's left of the evening light as if nature is holding its breath along with the rest of us.

“You sure about this, Bruno?” Drake calls out.

Bruno's response carries across the stillness: “Never been more sure of anything in my life.”

His eyes find mine across the crowd, and even from this distance, the focus of his stare makes my knees weak. He touches the brim of his hat and then accepts the blindfold. As he ties the black fabric around his eyes, I delete Trent's unread message without looking at it.

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Chapter Eight

brUNO

The judge approaches with the black blindfold, and the arena falls silent. This is it. Everything I've worked for, everything I want, comes down to the next thirty seconds.

“You ready, Bruno? I can take off the blindfold...” the judge asks quietly as I dismount.

“I’m sure.” I take the blindfold from his hands and tie it around my eyes, the world disappearing into darkness. For a moment, panic claws at my chest. What the hell am I doing?

Ranger stands perfectly still beneath me as I settle back into the saddle. His ears flick back, listening for my cues. Fifteen years we've been partners. If there's any horse that can do this, it's him.

“You ready, boy?” I murmur, stroking his neck. “Time to win our girl.”

The starting gun fires.

Ranger explodes forward into complete darkness, and I have to trust everything to him. Trust his instincts, his training, his heart. The thunder of hooves fills my ears as we race toward the first flag, and I count strides in my head, feeling for the rhythm that tells me when to reach.

The fabric of the first flag slaps into my palm.

One down.

Ranger wheels toward the second flag without breaking stride, his body language speaking to me through the saddle. Slight lean left, the bunching of muscle beneath me that says he's adjusting course. My hand stretches out into nothing, and for a terrifying second I think I've missed.

Then fabric fills my grip. We weave around the course, moving instinctively as I gather the other flags.

Six down.

The crowd noise fades to a distant roar as we approach the final flag. This is the hardest one, positioned at the far end of the arena and requiring the sharpest turn. Ranger's breathing changes, becoming more focused, and I know he can sense the target ahead.

We take the turn at full speed, Ranger's hooves barely maintaining their grip on the packed earth. I lean into the turn with him, feeling his powerful hindquarters drive us forward. My hand reaches out into empty air, stretching, straining...

The flag snaps into my palm just as Ranger straightens for the final sprint home.

Done.

The race back to the starting line is pure magic. Ranger stretches into the longest stride he's got, eating up ground like his life depends on it. Wind whips past my face, and even through the blindfold, I can sense the finish line approaching.

We cross it in a thunder of hooves and the roar of the crowd, and I rip the blindfold away to see the timer.

Twenty-seven-point-eight seconds.

I won.

The arena erupts around us, but all I care about is finding Everly in the crowd.

She's pressed against the fence rail, tears streaming down her face, hands pressed to her mouth in disbelief.

I dismount and hand Ranger's reins to the groom, never taking my eyes off Everly as I vault the fence rail.

The crowd parts around me, voices calling congratulations that I barely register.

When I reach her, I take my hat off and place it on her head, scooping her up into my arms and kissing her over and over.

“You won.” Her voice comes out breathless, eyes wide with wonder.

“Come home with me.”

She nods, and the tightness in my chest finally releases. “Yes.”

The drive up the mountain crackles with tension. Everly sits with her thighs pressed together, stealing glances at me while I navigate the winding road. Every few minutes, her tongue darts out to wet her lips, and my cock strains against my jeans.

The sky overhead churns with dark clouds, finally releasing the pressure that's been

building all week. Thunder rolls across the peaks, still distant but getting closer, and the first hint of cooler air stirs through the open windows.

“Feel that?” Everly murmurs, tilting her face toward the breeze. “The heat's finally breaking.”

“About damn time,” I growl, but I'm not just talking about the weather.

Halfway up the mountain, I can't take it anymore. I pull into a scenic overlook and kill the engine. Lightning flickers in the distance, illuminating her face as she turns toward me.

“Bruno, what...”

I'm across the cab and kissing her before she can finish the question. She melts against me immediately, her hands fisting in my shirt while I devour her mouth. When I break away, we're both breathing hard.

“I've been thinking about this all day,” I growl against her throat. “About getting you alone. About all the things I want to do to you.”

Her breath hitches. “Like what?”

Instead of answering, I slide my hand up her thigh, pushing her sundress higher. “Tell me you want this, Everly. Tell me you want me to touch you.”

“Yes,” she gasps. “Bruno, yes.”

My fingers find the edge of her panties, already damp. “So wet for me already. Such a good girl.”

I stroke her through the fabric until she's squirming in the passenger seat, little whimpers escaping her throat. When I finally push the cotton aside and touch her properly, she moans.

“Good girl. That's it...” I encourage her, working her swollen clit with skilled fingers. “Louder. I want to hear how good I make you feel.”

She spreads her legs wider and moans as I slide a thick finger inside her tight pussy.

Increasing the rhythm of my fingers against her clit, I watch as her thighs tremble and her whole body tenses.

She comes apart in minutes, her body shaking as she cries out my name.

When she finally opens her eyes, they're dazed.

“Bruno...” she breathes.

“We're just getting started.” I bring my fingers to my mouth, tasting her salty sweetness. “You taste like heaven, sweetheart. I could spend hours between your thighs.”

Her cheeks flush, but her eyes never leave mine. “I want that. I want everything with you.”

“Then let's go home so I can give it to you properly.”

The rest of the drive passes in a haze of anticipation. Everly keeps touching me; her hand on my thigh, fingers tracing patterns on my forearm. By the time we reach the cabin, I'm harder than granite and about ready to take her on the hood of my truck.

My cabin sits nestled between towering pines. The approaching storm makes the air electric, charged with energy. But I barely give her time to admire it before I'm pressing her against the front door, my mouth crashing down on hers with desperate hunger.

Thunder rumbles overhead, closer now, as I grind my hips against hers so she can feel exactly how much I want her. "Been wanting to do this since the moment I saw you," I growl against her lips. "Do you have any idea what you do to me?"

Her hands fumble with the door handle behind her back. "Show me."

Once we're inside, I lift her onto the kitchen counter, stepping between her thighs and pushing her dress up around her waist. Lightning flashes through the windows, illuminating her face as she spreads wide open for me.

The sight of her on my counter, panties soaked and clinging to her pussy, makes my mouth water.

"Look at you, gorgeous," I breathe, running my hands up her soft inner thighs. "So perfect. So ready for me..."

The storm builds outside as I hook my fingers in her panties and drag them down her legs, dropping to my knees before she can protest. The first crash of thunder coincides with the first swipe of my tongue, and she cries out loud enough to compete with it.

"Bruno, oh...oh..."

"That's right, sweetheart. Say my name." I work her with my mouth and tongue, alternating between gentle licks and firm pressure until she's writhing against my face. Rain begins to patter against the windows, gentle at first but getting harder.

“You taste so fucking good.”

I add my fingers to the mix, curling them inside her while my tongue works her clit.

The storm rages outside now, rain lashing against the windows and thunder shaking the cabin.

She comes with a scream that echoes through the rooms, her thighs clamping around my head as waves of pleasure crash over her.

“Please,” she gasps when she can finally speak. “I need you inside me. Now.”

I'm on my feet in an instant, lifting her off the counter and carrying her toward the bedroom. Lightning illuminates our path through the cabin, rain hammering on the roof.

The bedroom is my favorite room in the cabin; a huge king-sized bed facing those same western windows, now dark with approaching night. I set her down beside the bed and reach for my shirt, but she catches my wrists.

“Let me,” she says, her voice husky.

Her fingers shake slightly as she works each button free, pushing the fabric off my shoulders. When her palms flatten against my chest, I have to lock my knees to keep standing.

“You're so warm,” she whispers, tracing the muscles of my stomach with her tongue.

“So solid.”

I catch her chin and tilt her face up to mine. “Your turn, sweetheart.”

I reach for the zipper of her dress, dragging it down slowly while my mouth works her throat. The fabric pools at her feet, leaving her in nothing but a pale blue bra that showcases her curves perfectly.

“Fucking beautiful,” I murmur, unhooking the clasp and letting it fall. “Every inch of you.”

I back her toward the bed, my hands and mouth mapping every curve, every sensitive spot that makes her gasp and arch against me. When I take her nipple between my teeth, she cries out and her nails dig into my shoulders.

I lay her back on the bed and work my way down her body with deliberate slowness, kissing and licking until she's trembling beneath me. When I spread her thighs and settle between them, she tries to close her legs.

“Don't you dare hide from me,” I command, holding her open. “I want to see all of you. Every gorgeous inch.”

I worship her with my mouth until she's sobbing my name, her hands fisted in the sheets. When she comes for the third time tonight, I finally allow myself to shed the rest of my clothes.

“I haven't been with anyone since I moved here. That's over a decade ago. I want this to be good for you, sweetheart...”

Her eyes are dazed as she looks up at me. “I'm on the pill. And I had a full check when I split with Trent.”

“Look at me, Everly,” I say, positioning myself at her entrance. “I want to see your face when I claim you.”

Her eyes lock with mine as I push inside, inch by inch, until I'm fully inside her. She's so tight, so perfect, and I have to grit my teeth to keep from losing control immediately.

“You feel like heaven,” I groan, starting to move. “Like you were made for me.”

I keep it slow, wrestling with my self-control, wanting to give her the maximum amount of pleasure.

“Harder,” she gasps, wrapping her legs around my waist. “Please, Bruno.”

I give her what she wants, increasing my pace and driving into her with long, powerful strokes that have the headboard slamming against the wall. She meets me thrust for thrust, her nails raking down my back. Each flash of lightning and crash of thunder spurs us on.

“That's it,” I reach between us to stroke her clit. “Come for me again. Let me feel your sweet little pussy squeeze my cock.”

She explodes around me with a scream, her walls clamping down on my cock like a vice. But I'm not done with her yet. I pull out and flip onto my back, gripping her hips. “Your turn to ride, cowgirl.”

Rain pounds against the windows as she straddles me, sinking down slowly until I'm buried deep inside her again. The sight of her on top of me, golden hair cascading over her shoulders, soft tits bouncing as she finds her rhythm, is pure perfection silhouetted against the storm-lit windows.

“That's it, sweetheart,” I groan, hands gripping her curvy ass as she moves. “Show me how a good girl rides her cowboy.”

She turns around without dismounting, giving me the most incredible view as she continues to slide up and down my cock.

“Fuck. You look so good like this.” My hands roam over her back, her hips, anywhere I can touch. “Such a fast learner. Such a perfect little rider.”

She throws her head back, moaning as she finds the angle that hits just right. The storm seems to echo her pleasure, thunder rolling across the mountains. “Bruno, I'm going to...”

“Do it,” I command, reaching around to stroke her clit while she rides me. “Come all over my cock. Let me feel how good I make you.”

She comes again, and the sensation of her tightness pulsing around my length finally triggers my own release. I spill inside her with a roar that mingles with the thunder outside, both of us crying out in unison.

Afterward, we lie tangled together, sweat cooling on our skin.

“Was it worth it?” she asks softly, tracing patterns on my chest. “The risk you took today?”

I tilt her chin up so she has to look at me. “Everly, you're worth everything. The cabin, the land, my heart... all of it. You're the most precious to me. Without you, I have nothing.”

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Chapter Nine

EVERLY

Consciousness comes slowly, like I'm rising to the surface after diving into deep water. The storm has passed, leaving the cabin bathed in soft morning light. My body aches in the most delicious way, muscles I'd forgotten I had making themselves known.

Bruno's side of the bed is warm but empty. I stretch against the rumpled sheets, still naked, still dazed from everything we did last night. The memory makes heat pool between my thighs all over again.

“Good morning, beautiful.”

His voice, low and rough with sleep, makes me open my eyes. Bruno stands beside the bed wearing nothing but jeans that hang low on his hips, a length of soft rope in his hands. The sight sends a warm wave straight to my core.

“What's that for?” I ask, though the predatory look in his dark eyes gives me a pretty good idea.

“Something I've been wanting to try with you.” He sits on the edge of the bed, fingers trailing up my bare arm. “But only if you want it. Do you trust me?”

After everything we shared last night, after the way he worshipped my body like I was something precious, the answer comes easily.

“Yes.”

His grin is devastating. “Put your hands above your head.”

My pulse quickens as I obey, stretching my arms up toward the headboard. The position arches my back, pressing my breasts up toward him. His gaze darkens as it travels over my exposed body.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmurs, looping the rope around my wrists with practiced ease. “My perfect girl.”

The rope is secure but not too tight. When he finishes, my arms are bound to the headboard, leaving me completely at his mercy. The vulnerability should terrify me, but instead it sends arousal coursing through my veins.

“How does that feel?” he asks, testing the bonds.

“Good,” I breathe, surprised by how much I mean it.

“That’s my good girl.” He traces one finger down my throat, between my breasts, over my stomach. “Now you can’t hide from me. Can’t push me away or cover yourself. You’re all mine to play with.”

The possessive words make me clench around nothing. “Bruno…”

“Shh.” His finger finds my lips. “No talking unless I ask you a question. Those are the rules. If it gets too much, you say ‘I’m out’. Understand?”

I nod, already lost in the game.

He starts slowly, worshipping my body with his hands and mouth while I strain

against the ropes. Every touch is deliberate, calculated to drive me wild. He spends long minutes on my breasts, sucking, licking and biting until I'm writhing beneath him.

“Look at you. So responsive. So eager.”

His mouth travels lower, pressing kisses to my ribs, my hip bones, everywhere except where I need him most. By the time he settles between my thighs, I'm desperate.

“Please,” I gasp, forgetting his rule about talking.

He pulls back immediately, his face stern. “What did I say about talking?”

“I'm sorry, I...”

“Now I have to punish you.” But his tone is playful, not angry. “Spread your legs wider.”

I obey without hesitation, and he rewards me with the lightest brush of his tongue against my clit. The sensation is maddening; enough to make me gasp but nowhere near enough to satisfy.

“You taste so good,” he says, then pulls away again. “But you have to learn to follow instructions.”

For the next few minutes, he teases me mercilessly. Light touches, gentle kisses, his breath against my heated skin, but never enough pressure or consistency to push me over the edge. I pull against the ropes, desperate for more contact, but he keeps me right on the precipice.

“Please,” I finally sob, unable to stay quiet any longer. “Bruno, please, I need...”

“What do you need?” he asks, lifting his head to look at me. “Tell me exactly what you want.”

“Your mouth. Your fingers. Your cock. Just make me come, please.”

His smile is wicked. “Since you asked so nicely...”

When he finally touches my clit, the orgasm tears through me, made more intense by the restraints that keep me from moving away from his relentless tongue.

I scream his name, past caring about anything else.

He doesn't stop there. While I'm still trembling from the first climax, he slides two fingers inside me and finds a spot that makes me see stars.

“Again. Come for me again,” he commands.

I'm helpless to resist, my body responding to his touch like it was made for him.

The second orgasm builds quickly, cresting and breaking over me in waves that leave me gasping.

He moves up my body slowly, leaving a trail of kisses until his face is level with mine.

When he kisses me, I can taste myself on his lips.

"Ready for more?" he asks, positioning himself at my entrance. He slides his hands under my ass, kneeling as he supports me.

“Yes,” I breathe.

He slides inside me slowly, letting me feel every inch. The angle with my arms bound above my head hits something deep that makes me cry out in pleasure.

“That's it,” he says, starting to move. “Let me hear how good it feels.”

He sets a steady rhythm, each thrust pushing me higher. The ropes prevent me from touching him, from pulling him closer, and the helplessness is intoxicating.

“You're mine,” he growls. “Say it.”

“I'm yours,” I gasp. “All yours, Bruno.”

The words seem to break something in him. His control snaps, and he thrusts into me harder. I can only hold on, bound and helpless beneath him as he claims me.

I come again and he follows seconds later, his hot seed deep inside me, groaning.

Afterward, he unties me carefully, massaging my wrists and pulling me close. I curl against his chest.

“How was that?” he asks softly, stroking my hair.

“Incredible. I never knew I could feel like that.”

“We're just getting started, sweetheart. There's so much more I want to show you.”

The promise in his voice sends another shiver through me. Whatever he has planned, I know I'll say yes. With Bruno, I'm completely safe.

We drift back to sleep tangled together. When I wake, Bruno's gone, but he's moving around in the kitchen, the smell of coffee and bacon drifting through the cabin.

I pull on his discarded shirt from last night and pad barefoot toward the kitchen. He's standing at the stove wearing just his jeans, and the sight of his muscled bare back makes my core clench.

“Smells amazing, cowboy. You can cook too?”

He laughs. “Just about. It’s nearly ready.” He turns, looking me up and down. “You look good in my shirt.”

“I look good out of it too.”

His laugh rumbles through his chest. “Ain’t that the truth. Don't tempt me, or breakfast will get cold.”

We're just sitting down to eat when the sound of tires on gravel makes us both freeze. Bruno's immediately on edge, moving to the window.

“You expecting someone?” I ask.

His voice is grim. “No. Stay here.”

But I'm already moving toward the window, instinct driving me forward. A red car sits in Bruno's driveway, and my worst nightmare unfolds as the driver's door opens.

Trent.

He looks exactly the same; perfectly styled blond hair, designer polo shirt, that smug expression that always made me feel small. But seeing him here, in this perfect little bubble Bruno and I have created, makes my blood run cold.

Trent takes off his sunglasses. “Everly! I know you're in there. We need to talk.”

A muscle in Bruno's jaw twitches. "Who the hell is that?"

"My ex. Trent." I whisper.

The look that crosses Bruno's face is murderous. "Stay inside. I'll handle this."

But Trent's voice rises again, more demanding now. "Everly! Don't make me come up there. You know I will."

And I do know. Trent never takes no for an answer, never backs down. He'll stand out there all day if he has to, making a scene, ruining everything.

The magic of our perfect morning crashes down around me. How did Trent find me? How did he know where I was?

"I have to go out there."

"Like hell you do."

"Bruno, you don't understand. He won't leave. He'll just keep..."

"I don't give a damn what he'll do." Bruno's voice is deadly quiet. "He's not welcome here."

But even as he says it, I worry that there's doubt creeping into his eyes. The questions. What kind of woman has her ex show up at a man's cabin the morning after? What kind of drama am I bringing into his peaceful mountain life?

Trent's presence is like poison seeping into our sanctuary, ruining everything beautiful we've built in just one night.

It's my fault. I've ruined everything.

Chapter Ten

brUNO

Everly's face when she sees that red sedan tells me everything I need to know. The color drains from her cheeks, and she looks like she's about to throw up. Whatever this Trent bastard put her through, it was worse than she let on.

I grab a shirt. "Stay inside. I mean it, Everly."

But she's already shaking her head, pulling on her sundress from last night with trembling fingers. "You don't understand. He'll make a scene. He'll..."

"Let him try." I button my shirt with controlled movements, every muscle in my body coiled for a fight. "He's trespassing on my land, harassing my woman. That gives me all the reason I need to remove him."

Her eyebrows shoot up at the words 'my woman,' but before she can respond, Trent's voice cuts through the morning air again.

"Everly! I drove six hours to get here. The least you can do is talk to me."

The fucker tracked her down and drove through the night to get here. The possessive rage that surges through me is primal, dangerous.

"How did he find you?" I ask, my voice deadly quiet.

“I don't know.” Everly's hands shake as she looks for her clothes. “Maybe social media, maybe he asked around town. It was pretty obvious we went up here together. Trent doesn't give up when he wants something.”

The implication hangs between us. He wants her back. And he's arrogant enough to show up to get her.

“Well, he's about to learn what happens when he messes with what's mine.”

I stride toward the door, but Everly catches my arm. “Bruno, please. Let me handle this. If you go out there looking like you want to kill him...”

“I do want to kill him.”

“That's exactly why I need to go first.” Her big blue eyes are pleading. “Just... let me talk to him. Get him to leave. Please.”

Every instinct I have screams against it. The thought of her anywhere near that piece of shit makes my teeth clench. But the fear in her eyes stops me.

“Five minutes. Then I'm coming out there whether you want me to or not.”

She nods. “Five minutes. I can do this.”

I watch from the window as she steps onto the porch, her spine straight and shoulders back. My beautiful, brave girl facing down the demon from her past.

Trent's standing beside his car like he owns the place, arms crossed and that smug expression firmly in place. He's everything I expected; pretty boy looks, expensive clothes, and the kind of entitled attitude that comes from never being told no.

He clears his throat as he eyes her up and down. Slicker than snot on a doorknob, this guy. “Looking good, Ev. Mountain air agrees with you.”

“What are you doing here, Trent?” Everly's voice is steady, but her shoulders are tense.

“I came to talk. You won't answer my calls, you blocked me on everything. What choice did I have?”

“You had the choice to respect my decision and leave me alone.”

Trent laughs, and the sound makes my hands clench into fists. “Come on, babe. We both know you're just acting out. This whole thing...” he gestures toward the cabin, toward me watching from the window “...it's just a phase. You're trying to prove a point.”

“The only point I'm proving is that I'm better off without you.”

“Are you? Really?” His tone turns mocking. “From where I'm standing, it looks like you're playing house with some old cowboy who's using you for a quick fuck. You think he actually cares about you? You think this is real?”

The words hit their target. Everly flinches, wrapping her arms around herself.

Fuck this. Five minutes or not, I'm done listening to his shit.

I'm through the door and down the porch steps faster than a jackrabbit in July. Trent takes one look at my face and steps back toward his car.

“You must be Trent,” I say, my voice steady.

“And you're the rebound guy.” His recovery is quick, that smug smile sliding back into place. “Don't worry, I'm not here to cause trouble. Just came to collect what's mine.”

The words 'what's mine' send murderous rage through my veins. “Funny thing about that. Far as I can tell, nothing here belongs to you.”

“Everly and I have history. Two years together. She was my fiancée. Will be again. You really think one night in bed is going to change that?”

Everly steps between us, her hand on my chest. “Bruno, don't. He's not worth it.”

But Trent's not done. “Tell him, Ev. Tell him this is just a phase. Tell him you're coming home with me where you belong.”

“I am home,” Everly says quietly.

Trent's face twists with anger. “Stop it, Everly. You're not some mountain man's plaything. You're better than this. Better than him.”

I step around Everly, putting myself between her and this piece of shit. “You're wrong. She's not better than me. She's better than you. Which is why she left your sorry ass and ended up in my bed.”

“Bruno,” Everly warns, but I'm past caring.

“You want to know what she told me about you?” I continue, moving closer to Trent. “How you spent two years tearing her down, making her think she wasn't good enough, critiquing her body like she was some project you were working on. Real manly of you, targeting a sweet girl's insecurities.”

Trent's face flushes red as a beet. "You don't know anything about our relationship."

"I know enough. I know you're the kind of coward who shows up uninvited because you can't handle being told no. I know you're standing on my land, harassing my woman, after she made it clear she wants nothing to do with you."

Trent laughs, but there's no humor in it. "Your woman? You've known her for what, a week? I was with her for years. I know her better than you ever will."

"If you knew her at all, you'd know she deserves better."

"And you think you're better? You're twice her age, living alone on a mountain. What kind of future can you offer her?"

The words hit deeper than I want to admit. Because he's not wrong. I am twice her age. I do live alone on a mountain. What the hell am I offering her besides good sex and a place to hide from the world?

But then Everly's hand slips into mine, her fingers intertwining with mine, and the doubt evaporates.

I stand to my full height. "I'll offer her whatever she wants. And be damn proud to do that."

Trent throws his hands up. "This is ridiculous. Everly, you can't seriously be choosing him over me? Over what we had together?"

Everly's grip on my hand tightens. "We didn't have anything together, Trent. You had me, and I was too young and stupid to realize I deserved better. But I know now."

"You're making a mistake."

“The only mistake I made was wasting two years on you.”

Trent's composure finally cracks completely. “Fine. Make your choice. But don't come crying to me when this fantasy falls apart and you realize you threw away something real for a summer fling.”

He gets in his car and slams the door, gunning the engine as he backs out of the driveway. Gravel sprays from his tires as he speeds down the mountain road.

I turn to hug Everly, expecting relief on her face. Instead, I find tears streaming down her cheeks and something that looks like doubt in her eyes.

I cup her face in my hands, thumbs brushing away her tears. “Hey, beautiful. He's gone. It's over.”

Her voice is small, broken. “Is it? What if he's right? What if this is just a fantasy? What if...”

I tilt her chin up so she has to look at me. “Stop. Don't let that bastard get in your head.”

“But he's not wrong, is he? We barely know each other, and already I'm causing drama in your life.”

“You're not causing anything. That was all him.”

“Because of me. Because I brought this mess into your world.” She pulls away from me, wrapping her arms around herself. “Let me give you some space to think about whether this is really what you want.”

Panic claws at my chest. “Like hell.”

“Bruno—”

“No. You're not running away because that piece of shit got in your head. You're not letting him win.”

“This isn't about winning or losing. This is about being realistic. About facing the fact that maybe we're moving too fast, maybe this is all just?—”

I crush my mouth to hers in a desperate kiss. When I pull back, we're both breathing hard.

“Does that feel like a fantasy to you? Doesn't that feel real?” I demand.

Her lower lip trembles. “I don't know anymore. I don't know anything anymore.”

The defeat in her voice nearly brings me to my knees. “Come inside. Let's talk about this properly.”

But she's already shaking her head. “I think I need some time. Some space to think.”

“Everly...”

“Please, Bruno. I just... I need to figure out what's real and what's just me running away from my problems.”

She won't look at me as she gathers her things. Won't let me drive her and calls a taxi. I stand in my driveway watching the taillights disappear down the mountain.

I don't know if she's coming back. And for the first time since my parents died, I understand what it means to lose something you can't live without.

Chapter Eleven

EVERLY

I've been staring at the ceiling of my apartment for two days, and I still can't get Trent's words out of my head.

Wilder's given up trying to talk sense into me. After the first day of my moping, he switched tactics to bringing me increasingly ridiculous comfort foods. Yesterday it was chocolate ice cream for breakfast. Today he's threatening to show up with a full turkey dinner if I don't snap out of it.

But I can't. Because what if Trent's right? What if I am rebelling against my safe, predictable life? What if Bruno is just a fantasy I've built up because he's so different from everything I've known?

My phone buzzes for the hundredth time today. Bruno's been calling, texting, even showing up at the apartment, but I can't bring myself to face him yet. Not when I'm this confused. Not when I might just hurt him more than I already have.

The latest text is simple:

Bruno: Please talk to me

I set the phone aside without responding and pull the covers over my head.

That's where Mila finds me an hour later, after Wilder lets her in.

“Everly Louise Parnell,” she says, yanking the blankets off me. “What are you doing?”

“Hiding,” I mumble, trying to grab the covers back.

“From what? That gorgeous cowboy who's been calling me asking if you're okay?”

My heart clenches. “He's been calling you?”

“Him and half the town. I hear the sheriff's ready to arrest your ex if he shows his face in Snowflake Falls again.” Mila sits on the edge of my bed, her expression softening. “What happened, honey? You looked so happy when you left the fair with him...”

So I tell her. Everything. About the perfect night and morning with Bruno, about Trent showing up, about all the doubts that are eating me alive.

“And you think Trent might be right?” Mila asks when I finish.

“I don't know. Maybe. We barely know each other, Mila. It's been less than a week.”

“Honey, I knew Brock was the one the first time I saw him. Sometimes you just know.”

“But what if I'm wrong? What if I'm just caught up in the romance of it all? What if?—”

“Why don't you stop asking 'what if' and start asking 'what do I want'?” Mila interrupts. “Forget everything else. What does your heart tell you?”

Before I can answer, there's a commotion outside. Hooves beat on the street outside,

followed by voices raised in excitement.

Mila and I rush to the window, and my heart stops.

Bruno sits astride Ranger in the middle of Main Street, his cowboy hat tipped back on his head.

“Everly! I know you're in there, and I've got something to say.”

“Oh my God,” I breathe, my hands pressed to the glass.

“Two days ago, I didn't fight hard enough to make you understand what you mean to me.”

Tears are already blurring my vision.

“Everly, I know you're scared. This all happened faster than green grass through a goose. I know there are a thousand reasons why this shouldn't work.” He pauses, looking directly up at my window. “But there's one reason why it should. Because I love you.”

Love. He loves me.

“I love that you're brave enough to try new things, sweet enough to worry about everyone else, and strong enough to walk away from people who don't deserve you. Including me, if that's what you decide.”

He reaches into his jacket and pulls out a small black box.

“But before you make that decision, I want you to know that this isn't a fantasy for me. This isn't about rebellion, a summer fling, or an old man trying to recapture his

youth. This is me, asking the woman I love to spend her life with me.”

He dismounts Ranger, then starts walking toward my building. My heart hammers against my ribs as his footsteps echo up the stairs. There’s a firm knock at my door.

Mila’s grinning at me as I leave my room and I pass Wilder, who’s grinning like a fool in the doorway. They both nod encouragingly.

With shaking hands, I open the door.

Bruno fills the doorframe, more handsome than any man has a right to be. The black box sits in his calloused palm.

“Howdy there, beautiful...” he says.

“Hi.”

“Can I come in? I promise I’ll leave if you ask me to. But I needed to say this to your face.”

I step aside, and he enters the apartment. It feels tiny with him in it, but also somehow complete.

“Bruno—”

“Let me go first. That bastard was right about some things. I am older than you. I do live alone on a mountain. We haven’t known each other very long.”

My heart sinks, but he continues.

“But he was wrong about everything that matters. He was wrong about this being

fake. Wrong about you not knowing your own mind. Wrong about me not being able to offer you a future.” Bruno steps closer, close enough that I can smell his cologne, see the dark shadows under his eyes.

“Because I want to offer you everything, Everly. My heart, my home, my name, my future. All of it.”

He drops to one knee right there in my tiny living room, opening the box to reveal the most beautiful ring I've ever seen. It's vintage, with a center diamond surrounded by sapphires that catch the light like stars.

“My grandmother’s ring. She always said it was meant for the woman who would love a Castelli man completely and forever.”

Tears stream down my face as I look down at him. This gorgeous, strong, incredible man on his knees for me.

“Everly Parnell, will you marry me? Will you let me spend the rest of my life proving that what we have is real? Will you come home with me and build something beautiful together?”

Despite the short timeline, despite the age difference, despite every logical reason this shouldn't work, I know.

“Yes! Of course, yes!”

Bruno's face breaks into the most beautiful smile I've ever seen as he slides the ring onto my finger. It fits perfectly, like it was made for me.

He stands and crushes me against his chest, spinning me around my tiny living room while I laugh and cry at the same time.

“I love you too. I love you so much it scared me. Still does.”

He covers my face with kisses. “Don't be scared. We're going to be okay.”

A squealing noise makes us break apart. Wilder and Mila are clapping as they jump up and down.

This is real love, the kind worth taking risks for, even if it scares me. I've found exactly where I belong. In his arms, by his side, in this life we're going to build together.

Forever.

Eighteen months later

I've faced down angry bulls, ridden broncos that wanted to kill me, and was nearly run over by a cattle stampede. But standing at Snowflake Falls Community Church, waiting for my bride, has me more nervous than all of those combined.

"Quit fidgeting with your tie. I promise you Bruno, she'll be here soon." Wilder murmurs from beside me, straightening his own groomsman suit.

"I know it." I adjust my grandfather's cowboy boots under my dress pants, the worn leather a comfort against my calves. "Doesn't make the waiting any easier."

The church is packed. Half the town showed up, along with Everly's parents who flew in yesterday.

Her father had been skeptical when we first met, but after seeing how I've set up the cabin for his daughter, expanding it with a proper study for her teaching materials and lesson plans, he'd given us his blessing with tears in his eyes.

Elena Howl holds court in the front row, resplendent in purple silk and enough jewelry to stock a store, nodding beadily at everyone who passes.

After that day Everly said yes to my proposal in her tiny apartment, everything changed. She transferred to a university near Snowflake Falls to finish her education degree, moving into the cabin with me while she completed her final year of coursework.

Watching her transform our mountain sanctuary into a real home has been one of the greatest joys of my life.

She kept my books and photographs, but added her own touches; colorful prints, plants that somehow thrive despite my best efforts, and a reading nook by the big windows where she grades papers while I whittle.

Her first year teaching third grade at the elementary school has been everything she dreamed of.

The kids adore her, and she comes home every day with stories about their latest adventures.

I've built more bookshelves and craft storage than I ever imagined possible, but seeing her face light up when she talks about her students makes every single splinter worth it.

I've been teaching her to ride, gently coaxing her onto Ranger's back first of all. She trusts him and is now able to take him on a slow trot around the corral.

The organist begins the wedding march, and I have to swallow a couple of times, my throat suddenly dry.

Mila appears first, dressed in a peach-colored dress, followed by Everly's college roommate who made the trip to be a bridesmaid. But when the church doors open fully and Everly steps into view on her father's arm, everything else disappears.

She's radiant in white lace and tulle, her veil crowned with tiny wildflowers that her students brought her yesterday. The nervous energy I've been carrying all morning evaporates at the sight of her smile, which is full of pure joy and love directed right at me.

This is the woman who challenged me at the fair, who stood up to me when I acted like a caveman, who chose to build a life with me despite every logical reason not to.

The woman who makes coffee almost as strong as mine, who talks to Ranger like he's a baby, who fills our cabin with laughter and light.

When she reaches the altar and her father places her hand in mine, everything makes perfect sense.

“You look beautiful,” I whisper as the preacher begins the ceremony.

“You clean up pretty well yourself, cowboy,” she whispers back, and I have to fight not to grin like a fool.

The vows pass in a blur of promises and rings. But when the preacher pronounces us husband and wife, when I kiss my bride for the first time as her husband, it's like I can suddenly see for miles.

Later, at the reception in the church hall, I watch my gorgeous wife laugh with our guests, her sparkling wedding ring catching the light as she gestures. She's changed out of her formal gown into a shorter cream dress, but kept the veil with its crown of wildflowers.

When the song ends, Everly makes her way back to me, slightly breathless and glowing with happiness.

“Dance with me, husband,” she says, and the word sends satisfaction through my chest like a shot of good whiskey.

As we sway together to the soft music, our friends and family around us, my heart swells with happiness. The evening winds down and we prepare to leave for our honeymoon cabin in the mountains.

“Are you ready to go home, Mrs. Castelli?” I ask as we walk to my truck, now decorated with white ribbons and trailing tin cans courtesy of the fire department.

Everly squeezes my hand. “Wherever you are, that's my home.”

As we drive up the familiar mountain road toward our honeymoon retreat, her hand finds mine across the center console. Her wedding ring clicks softly against mine, a sound that will never get old.

I glance over at her. “Thank you for saying yes. For taking a chance on a stubborn mountain man who didn't know he was lonely until he met you.”

She gazes back at me, her blue eyes wide. “Was it a good bet?”

I bring her hand to my lips, pressing a kiss to her knuckles as the cabin comes into view, lights glowing warm and welcoming in the gathering dusk.

“Best bet I ever made. Winner takes all, right?”

She winks at me. “And you did!”

Read Everly’s cousin Mila’s story of how she met her firefighter here: [His Flame](#)