



# More Than a Little Spark (Cowboys of Stargazer Springs Ranch #9)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** A car crash. A cowboy. And a moody tween. That's how my happily-ever-after starts.

An adorable cowboy literally carries me to safety after my car flips, and that's when I feel it. The spark. Until meeting him, I always thought the spark was just figurative. Nope. Real tingles.

He's friendly and attentive but cautious, and I start to think he isn't interested. Then I get the scoop. Carson recently adopted his nephew and is learning to be a dad. To a preteen.

That only makes me like Carson more. I make that clear, and we start dating. Taking it slow, we date in secret for a while. And the little spark turns into more.

When it's clear this isn't a passing infatuation for either of us, he introduces me to Fred.

And the kid doesn't like me.

How do I get him to understand that I don't want to divide their little family? I just want to become part of it.

Is it even possible to get a tween boy to change his mind? I hope so. My happily-ever-after depends on it.

**Total Pages (Source):** 36

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Carson

Since taking custody of my nephew, I can count the times on one hand that I've gone out on a Saturday night. I don't regret adopting Fred, not in the least. But gosh, this year has been a steep learning curve. For both of us.

I think all the single-digit years in a kid's life are just training parents for the double-digit years, and I missed out on all the training.

And that poor kid had it rough before coming to live with me.

Moving added an extra layer of chaos, but that decision is one I'll never regret.

Stargazer Springs Ranch offered both a job and a place to live, but the best part is that Fred found a best friend.

He and Mason hit it off instantly, and Mason's parents, Kent and Poppy, are the reason I'm dressed in a Hawaiian shirt unbuttoned down to my navel and driving to a costume party.

I don't have a fancy red sports car, but I'm rocking a fabulous mustache.

Hopefully, this is enough for people to recognize who I'm supposed to be.

The gut hanging over my belt doesn't help.

I don't look anything like Thomas Magnum.

Maybe I should've ordered a life-size Higgins cut-out to take with me to the party.

Weeks ago, when Dallas invited us all to Rose's party, Kent and Poppy offered to keep Fred for a sleepover. And that's the day I started growing my 'stache. The finishing touch on my costume.

I may look ridiculous, but isn't that sort of the point of a costume party? I'm never going to get oohs and aahs, but I can get laughs.

As I shift into the left lane to pass a Civic on the right, a muscle car zooms up beside me and tries threading the needle. I tap the brakes, knowing he won't have enough room.

But that doesn't stop him, and he makes contact with the left rear corner of the Civic, then continues down the road as if nothing happened.

I slam on my brakes as the Civic spins, and when a tire gets off the pavement into the dirt, the car starts flipping.

It's like a scene straight out of a movie. As the event plays out in slow motion, fireworks of panic explode in my head.

Stuff like this is why I have a dash cam.

I skid to a stop on the side of the road and race back to the car that's now upside down in a ditch.

Bracing for a sight that'll give me nightmares, I drop into the dirt to check on the driver.

A woman, who is dressed as Daphne from Scooby Doo, blinks, her face and body

covered in powder from the deployed airbags. Making jokes about Danger-prone Daphne would be in very poor taste, so I keep those thoughts to myself. She's alive. That's better than the alternative.

I yank open the door and ease onto my belly. "Are you okay?"

She turns to look at me, her eyes red. "He hit me."

Fake red hair is hanging toward the ceiling, and the edge of her skirt is behaving similarly. Gravity and all that. But her seat belt is keeping most of the skirt where it covers her thighs. Not that I'm looking all that closely.

I keep my voice calm in spite of the chaos in my brain. "I saw. And hopefully the whole thing was caught on my dash cam."

She reaches for the seat belt.

"Wait! Don't unbuckle yet." I worry that moving her is a bad idea, but I can't leave her hanging upside down. I'm not even sure it's safe to stay in the car. I scan her body for visible injuries. "Can you move your arms, hands, fingers?"

Nodding, she waves both hands. "Yeah."

I reach in and turn off the engine. "Now your feet. Just want to check before I even touch you."

She moves her feet, then yelps. "Ouch! My ankle."

I can't see her feet, but given the state of the car, I'm not surprised she's injured. Hopefully, it's minor. "Okay. I'm going to get you out of here, but I'll need your help."

She bounces her head, clearly afraid. And after glancing around, she frantically tries to hold the bottom of her dress against her legs.

That's when it clicks that she's in a costume on the same country road that I'm on.

What are the chances we were headed to the same party?

That's not something I need to think about.

It doesn't matter. She's cute, but now that I'm a chubby guy with a preteen, my chances of dating are slim to none.

Women like her don't typically look twice at guys like me.

I'm a firm believer in leagues, and she's top tier.

I push up onto my knees. "We don't want you landing on your head. But if you hug my neck, Daphne, I can unbuckle your seat belt without you falling."

Twisting, she maneuvers and then wraps her arms around my neck. "Do you know me?"

"Don't hug it quite that tight. I'll be more help if I can breathe. And, no, we haven't met before. I'd have remembered. But since you're dressed as Daphne, I went with that."

"Oh." She laughs nervously and glances at her dress. "My name is Daphne. For real. But I'm not really a redhead. It's a wig."

"Never would've guessed." I think through the physics of how to pull her clear without banging her up any more than she already is. "Hang on, okay?" I click the

buckle and pull her close as I lean back on my knees.

She cries out when her foot bumps the car.

“I’m so sorry.” And now I have to figure out how to get to my feet. I clearly didn’t think this one out well.

“It’s okay. Is my skirt down?” She twists her head, trying to see behind her.

“I’ll check.” The way she’s hanging on me, it’s hard to see what’s happening with her dress, so I use my hands and fix the parts of her dress that are flipped up.

As much as other people here to help would make things easier, I’m kind of glad no one is around to see me feeling around her dress. “I think you’re good now.”

With the way she’s clutching my neck, I don’t really need to hold on to her, but I do anyway.

Dropping her would make me feel horrible.

With one arm around her waist, I grab the car with the other.

Using all the strength I can muster, I manage to work myself to my feet with her hanging on the front of me.

“I’ll put you in my truck until help arrives, okay?” Once I’m standing, I shift her to a cradle hold and walk toward my truck.

“You called in the accident?”

My first thought was to get her out of the car. Maybe I should’ve called first. Too late

to question that now. “I haven’t yet. But my phone is in my pocket. As soon as I?—”

She shoves her hand into the front pocket closest to her. “This one?”

I stop walking. “Uh, no. My back left pocket.”

She reaches down and pats the right side of my rear.

“My other left.” I’m not sure how else to tell her that she’s touching the wrong side.

She reaches down with her other hand and feels the phone. “I found it.”

This has definitely been an awkward rescue. But when the shock wears off, she likely won’t remember much of what’s happening.

I manage to work the passenger door open without dropping her. And then I set her on the seat, and she calls 911 from my phone.

“Hi, yes. Some guy in a black car hit me, and my car flipped over and ended up in a ditch. Magnum PI got me out of the car. That’s what his costume is, I think.” She pulls the phone away from her ear. “Am I right?”

I nod, thankful the costume wasn’t a complete waste.

She leans closer to me. “What’s your name?”

“Carson.”

“Carson got me out of the car. He’s just dressed like Magnum PI. From the original show, not the reboot. But he’s in jeans, not those tiny shorts. It’s too cold for that.” She’s quiet half a second. “No, I don’t think I need an ambulance.”

There was a Magnum PI reboot? And for the record, I wouldn't be caught dead in those tiny shorts. Seeing me dressed that way would make people hurl. Even the thought has me queasy.

"You need an ambulance." I say it loud enough so that the dispatcher can hear me. "Want me to talk to them?"

"Sure." She says into the phone, "I'm going to let Carson talk to you now."

I take the phone, eager to get her medical care. "An ambulance would be good. What info do you need?"

"Hi, Carson. Can you give me your location?" The dispatcher is calm and patient, which I appreciate because my heart is about to pound itself right out of my chest.

"Hi. Yes, we're on..." I open my maps app to get my location. Even after a year, I don't know the names of the roads. "We're on ranch road 27, about a mile and a half west of the junction with FM 72."

"Thank you. I have emergency services and law enforcement en route. Would you like me to stay on the line with you?"

"We're okay. I'll call back if something changes." I shove the phone back into my pocket. "They're coming, but it might be a bit since we're far from everywhere."

She nods and leans out of the truck.

I step closer so that if she falls, I can catch her. "Please be careful."

"I was just looking at my car. It's totaled, isn't it?"



“Because of the rollover, that’s probably what will happen. Often the frame gets bent, and that’s not easily fixable.”

She drops her forehead onto my chest, which makes me wish I’d fastened a few more buttons. My idea of being funny by showing off a bit of chest hair is proving to be a poor choice.

“I didn’t even get a look at his license plate.” She’s shedding tears, and they are running down my front. If they start pooling in my belly button, we’re going to have a problem.

But she’s crying, so I already have a problem. And I’m not sure whether to shove my hands in my pockets or wrap my arms around her.

“Once EMS gets here, I’ll check my dash cam. I’m hoping I have footage of the entire accident.” I opt to shove my hands in my pockets.

She shifts and cries out. Then her body goes limp against me.

Now I’m really worried. Obviously, I don’t want her to die. I’m not an awful person. Plus, having police show up when I’m holding up a dead woman isn’t exactly how I want my night to go. Or the next fifteen to life.

Thankfully, she’s still breathing, so she isn’t dead.

I run a hand down her back, checking for any injuries I may have missed. And I don’t see any blood, which I think is a positive sign. “Daphne, are you okay?” I lift her head and pat her cheek. “Wake up. Open your eyes.”

Her eyelashes flutter, and her eyes fully open moments later. “The pain.” She sucks in a deep breath and winces.

The seat belt and airbag likely saved her life, but they also probably bruised her and maybe cracked a few ribs. It's possible she passed out from pain. I'm hoping that's the reason and it's not something worse like internal bleeding. I need to focus on the positive.

"The ambulance will be here soon."

She shivers and burrows against me. "It's cold."

"Sit up a sec." When I know she won't tumble out as soon as I move, I reach into the back seat and grab my coat. "Here, put this on."

"Thank you." She stifles a sob as she lifts her arm.

"Don't hurt yourself. I'll just put it around you." I drape it around her shoulders and zip up the front, her arms tucked inside the coat. "Is that better?"

"Carson. You're my hero."

"Nah. Just doing the same as anyone else would."

She rests her weight against me again, then shakes her head. "I don't think so. Wake me when they get here."

"Oh. no. Absolutely not. You need to stay awake. Talk to me. Where were you headed tonight? Were you meeting Velma somewhere?"

Not lifting her head, she shakes it again.

"My friend is having a party. But I can't call her because I don't have my phone.

I don't even know where it ended up after the crash.

And she's not dressed like Velma." She lifts her head, and we're nose to nose.

Then she looks at my chest. "Are you cold?"

"Not right now." My blood is pumping way too fast for me to be chilly. Plus, she's snuggled against me, which is making me the opposite of cold.

Daphne's talking and coherent, and I hope she stays that way until the paramedics arrive. Once she's getting treatment, I'll call Dallas and let him know why I'm a no-show tonight. And if I had to guess, Rose might want to know what's going on with Daphne.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Daphne

Daphne

A s minutes tick by, I'm becoming more and more aware of pain, but being snuggled against Carson is cozy. Maybe not worth totaling my car, but it's too soon to make that call.

He leans back far enough that I can't lean my head on him. "Talk to me, Daphne. Tell me about your life."

"You don't want to hear it, I promise." I want my cozy spot back.

"I do, I swear. Tell me." He's looking at me with those deep blue eyes, which are super interesting because they are brownish in the middle, then transition to a dark blue.

I remind myself to take shallow breaths because that hurts less than normal breathing. "I like your eyes."

"They're weird. It's called central heterochromia." He turns his head, staring down the road. "I hope they hurry. You're hurting, aren't you?"

"A bit." I try to downplay my pain because I don't want him to worry. "But my life. Where should I start?"

"At the beginning."

I chuckle, then regret it. Note to self, no laughing. “I was born in a hospital, and I was a chubby baby.”

He blinks, then grins. “Funny. I sort of meant like where you were born. That sort of thing.”

Now that I’m talking, he isn’t leaning away.

I rest my head on his chest again. “I’m from here.

Well, not right here.” I point around me without lifting my head.

“But Texas. And after I graduated from college, I snagged a job as an admin for the CEO of a software company. A professor recommended me. That’s how I got the job, and it’s been great.

I mean, my boss is super work-oriented. Not as much now that he’s married, but I like my job. No real complaints.”

“So you live near here?” When I shiver, he wraps his arms around me but doesn’t hug me tight.

“In San Antonio.” I’m quiet while I think of what else I should tell him.

He lightly taps my back. “You have to keep talking. Any siblings?”

“Six, all younger. That’s why I moved out to go to college. My dad died when I was in middle school, and my mom worked. But when she was home, she mostly slept or stared at the TV.” I lift my head when I hear the whine of sirens.

“You parented your siblings?”

“Yeah, but I never talk about that. So like, can we rewind, and then I won’t say it?”

“Sure. Put your head back where it was and we’ll start that part over. I’ll reset us.”

My head against him, I hear words rumble in his chest.

“You have to keep talking. Any siblings?”

This guy is funny.

“Yeah, a lot of them. They’re all younger and still live in the area. Except one. I have a brother in Alaska. He’s stationed up there.”

“Interesting. Alaska would be a cool place to visit.”

“He keeps inviting me up. But I don’t really like the cold.” Now that my adrenaline rush is fading, my eyes don’t want to stay open. Snuggling against Carson is cozy, and I want to close my eyes and sleep for a bit. But he’s trying so hard to keep me awake, and I don’t want to disappoint him.

“They’re here. I’m going to back up so they can check you out, okay?” He points at the sheriff’s vehicle and ambulance parking nearby.

I reach under the bottom of the coat and grasp his hand. “You won’t leave, right?”

“No. I’ll hang around. I want to tell the police what happened so they can find the guy.” He buttons up his shirt. “And I’ll try to grab your phone. Is there someone you need me to call?”

“Rose, but I don’t know her number. It’s in my phone, so I don’t have it memorized. Are you from around here? Maybe you know her husband. His name is Dallas.” I

look down at the zipped-up coat. “Will you undo me?”

“Sure. And yeah, I know him. He was a ranch hand at Stargazer Springs Ranch, and that’s where I work.” He pulls down the zipper on the coat, freeing my arms.

My heart sinks. If Carson is a ranch hand there, then he’s married.

Because Rose told me right after she met Dallas that all his ranch-hand buddies were married.

Maybe when I tell her about tonight, I should leave out all the parts about how sweet this guy has been because I don’t want to get him in trouble.

It’s not like he did anything inappropriate at all.

I’m doing all the cuddling. He’s just being nice.

I guess the spark I felt was all in my head.

But considering my car just rolled over, I’m probably not thinking straight. I’ll blame that.

“Good, okay. Then you can call him and tell him what happened. But don’t make it sound really bad because I don’t want Rose to worry.” I flash a smile at the paramedics, letting them know I’m not hovering near death’s door. “Will you snap a picture of my car for me please?”

“Sure thing.” He moves farther away as the three paramedics gather around me.

Carson calls out, “Be careful of her ankle and foot. It’s messed up, and she winces when she takes a deep breath, so her ribs might be broken.”

A deputy walks over to Carson, and they start talking. But they're too far away for me to hear what they are saying.

One of the paramedics flashes a smile at me. "I'm Lucas. Can you tell me what happened?"

"I was driving, and some idiot hit my car as he was trying to pass me."

Lucas hooks a thumb over his shoulder toward Carson. "That guy?"

"Oh, no no no. He's my hero. I'd still be hanging upside down in my car if it weren't for him. Passed out probably."

"Did you lose consciousness?" the woman paramedic asks.

"I don't think so."

Carson moves closer. "She passed out for maybe a second or two. Woke up when I patted her cheek."

"Thanks." Lucas turns his focus back to me. "So what else can you tell me?"

"Carson saw it happen and stopped to help me. I really don't even remember rolling.

But the car being upside down kind of made it clear that I'd flipped over.

The wheels aren't supposed to be pointed up.

"I lean close to the woman, who is checking my ankle, and nod toward Carson.

"Will you see if he's wearing a wedding ring? "



I'm holding out hope that maybe Rose was wrong because Carson doesn't really act married. Is that a thing? Acting married? It is for my boss. I've met a whole new side of him since Zoe came into his life.

The paramedic grins. "I'll sneak a peek in a minute and let you know."

Lucas and the other guy step away and walk toward the ambulance.

"They're getting a stretcher so that we can lay you down. We'll try not to jostle you too much, okay?" She stands and gives a warm smile. "I'm Trudy, by the way."

"Hi Trudy. I'm Daphne. Y'all are taking me to the hospital?" I blink, hoping to clear the mist pooling in my eyes. I'm glad they're checking for injuries, but every touch hurts.

"Yes, unless you refuse, but I'd recommend you go. They'll x-ray your ankle and ribs and likely keep you overnight for observation. You had a pretty serious accident."

"Yeah. It didn't seem so bad at first, but then I saw the car and started to feel all the parts that hurt."

She glances over her shoulder toward Carson. "I'm glad he stopped to help you."

"Me too."

Lucas and his partner roll the stretcher up to the truck.

Trudy pats my hand. "I'm going to step away while they move you. And I'll spy for you." She winks.

"Thank you." I close my eyes and hold in all yelps and screams while the guys put

me on the stretcher. From the few times I've worked out, I know that the next day always hurts worse. And I am not looking forward to that. Because on a scale of one to ten, I'm at a nine. And I hate it.

"You can't sleep right now," Carson says.

My eyes snap open, and I give him a smile. "Okay. I promise."

"The deputy wants to talk to you. And my dash cam caught the whole thing. I'll send it in."

"Oh, good. They won't think I'm crazy." I motion to my outfit. "I don't always run around as a Scooby-Doo character."

He gives a courteous chuckle, then steps back, giving the deputy room to talk to me.

"Evening. Can you tell me what happened? Are you up to that?"

"Yeah."

He glances at Trudy. "Is that okay?"

"Her vitals are stable. But only a few minutes." She walks over to Carson.

After I tell the deputy my name, information, and the details of what happened, he peppers me with questions, and I answer as best I can. But it's getting harder to stay awake, and the pain is making it hard to focus on his words.

Trudy cuts in. "We should probably get her loaded."

The deputy steps back. "I'll check in with you tomorrow."

“Alright.” I pick my head up and look for Carson. When I see him, I say, “Don’t forget to grab my phone and call Rose. Okay?”

“I will.” He waves. “Feel better.”

The paramedics load me in the ambulance, and Trudy climbs in and sits beside me. “No ring, and I made sure he knew where we were taking you.”

Now irritation is distracting me from the pain. Rose lied. There is a completely single ranch hand that she just didn’t mention at all. When I see her, she’s getting a piece of my mind.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Carson

Carson

I grab Daphne's phone and purse out of the car, then check with the deputy one last time to make sure he has my info and that I have the correct email address for where to send the footage of the accident.

And once I'm back in the truck, heading to the hospital, I call Dallas.

"Carson, where are you?"

"I witnessed an accident and stopped to help the driver."

"Is everything okay? Anyone injured?"

"Injured but okay. Are you where you can talk alone?"

Dallas's tone changes. "Give me a sec." A door closes, and his end of the line is quiet. "Talk to me."

"Some guy who was speeding clipped Daphne, and her car rolled."

"Crap."

"She's okay. Talking. Alert. Amazing considering the condition of her car. They are taking her to the hospital because she might have bruised or broken ribs, and her

ankle or foot is injured. And they need to check her for internal stuff, but she seemed okay. And she didn't want Rose to worry."

"Do you know where they're taking her?"

"Yeah. I can text you the info. And I have her purse and phone. Should I take it to y'all?" I'm really hoping Dallas says no to that one.

He mumbles on the end of the line, talking to himself in a way that I can't understand. Finally, he starts speaking words I comprehend. "Could you swing by here and pick up Rose? There are a ton of people here, but I know Rose will want to go up to the hospital."

"Sure. Good idea. I'll do that. But if you need me to stay at your house and play host, I can do that too." Why am I offering an option I hope he doesn't choose?

His end of the line gets louder. "I'm going to tell Rose you're coming to pick her up. See you soon."

I end the call.

When I pull up outside the rec building on Matchmaker Ranch, Rose runs out to the truck. Her eyes are red, so I clearly did not succeed in preventing her from worrying.

Her questions start before she's buckled into her seat. "Dallas said Daphne talked to you before they took her to the hospital?"

"We had an entire conversation while we waited. She sat in my truck, and we chatted." I point to the purse and phone on the center console. "She asked me to grab her phone, and when I did, I saw her purse and snagged that too. Didn't figure it needed to go with the tow truck."

“Oh, good. I’ll give it to her. Thank you so much for driving me up there.” She flips down the vanity mirror and starts wiping off her makeup. “I didn’t even take time to change out of my Barbie costume, but I can at least tone down the makeup.”

“If you’re Barbie, was Dallas Ken?”

She grins. “Yep. He looks so cute.”

“Dang it. I can’t believe I missed that.”

“Don’t worry. I got a picture of us together before the party started.”

“I definitely want to see it.”

“I’m so worried about Daphne. How’s her car? Hopefully, it’s minor damage.”

I don’t want to describe how awful the car looked because that’ll make her worry.

“I’m sure Daphne will tell you about it.”

When we arrive at the hospital, I drop Rose off at the double doors.

She slides out and turns around before closing the truck door. “Thank you so much for the ride. Are you coming up or going back to the party?”

I want to make sure Daphne will be fine, but I don’t want to seem clingy. All the cuddling was because Daphne was scared, not interested. And I know that. But I still want to check on her. “I’ll park and go up for a few minutes. Just to make sure she’s okay.”

“Great. I’ll text you the room number.” She rushes through the double doors.

Parking really isn't an issue here tonight, which is good. Hopefully, it means the hospital isn't crowded. Before getting out of the truck, I text Kent and let him know what's going on.

And I take advantage of the hospital wi-fi and download the footage from the dash cam to my phone.

Then I reach for my coat because now that the adrenaline rush is fading, I'm feeling the cold. But my coat isn't there. It's with Daphne.

Also, Daphne's phone and purse are still on the center console. So I tuck the purse under my arm, shove the phone in my pocket and head inside.

Rose meets me near the elevator. "We can't see her right now. They are prepping her for surgery. But they won't tell me anything else because I'm not related. And she'll kill me if I call her mom." She rubs her eyes. "I don't know what to do."

"Let me think." I spot the paramedics that were at the scene. "Give me a minute, Rose."

I stride over to Trudy, hoping she'll give me a tidbit of info. "Hey. I just arrived with Daphne's stuff. Is she okay? Where is she?"

She tells the other guys to go on ahead, then pulls me toward the wall. "She had a displaced fracture in her foot. So they're doing surgery. Let me walk you up to that waiting area." She walks toward Rose. "Is that woman who looks like she's been crying with you?"

"Yeah. Daphne's best friend. She's worried." I adjust the purse under my arm.

Trudy smiles at Rose, tips her head toward the elevator, then pushes the up button.

“Carson tells me that you’re here for Daphne. I’ll take y’all up to that waiting area. And she should be fine after surgery.”

Rose presses a hand to her heart. “Thank you.”

Trudy reassures Rose that Daphne was alert and talking during the trip to the hospital, and that helps Rose calm down a bit.

After she shows us to the waiting room, she motions me to the side. “Your coat should be with her things. It was good that she didn’t have her arms in the sleeves. We didn’t have to cut it off of her.”

“That is good news. I’m partial to that coat.”

“You did a good thing today, Carson. And she appreciates it. A lot. She talked about you all the way here.”

I shrug. “What was I going to do? Keep driving on by?”

“A lot of people do.” She tips her head toward the elevators. “I need to run, but I’ll tell the nurses to let you know when Daphne is ready for visitors.”

“Thank you.”

Bouncing a knee, I send off the footage to the deputy. Then while waiting, I google foot and ankle surgeries. How long do they take? Are there lasting repercussions? How long is recovery?

Rose paces as she talks to Dallas on the phone.

After an hour, Dallas shows up. And I’m thinking this is my cue to leave.



I stand. “Maybe I should go.”

“No.” Rose grabs my arm. “They might not let me see her if you aren’t here. I heard that lady tell the nurse that you were the boyfriend, so please don’t go. I know it’s getting late.”

“I’ll stay. That’s not a problem. I just didn’t want to intrude is all.” My mind is processing the part about Trudy telling the nurse I was the boyfriend. Anyone who takes one look at Daphne will not believe that. Or maybe a purse under the arm is more convincing than I think.

Dallas shakes his head. “You aren’t intruding. We appreciate that you helped Daphne.”

So I go back to waiting and googling. I’ve confirmed that it is illegal to slash someone’s tires. And so is keying someone’s car. Even if that jerk of a driver completely deserves that and more.

After three hours, the nurse pokes her head in the door. “She’s in recovery. But only one visitor at a time.”

I point to Rose. “You go.”

She doesn’t even argue.

Dallas flops into a chair. “I really hope Daphne is okay. She’s more like family to Rose than most of her actual family.”

“It seems like maybe that’s true the other way around too.”

He shrugs. “Daphne really never talks about her family, so I have no idea. But

maybe.”

Tonight didn't go at all like I planned. If I had it to do over, I never would've changed lanes. I feel guilty about that. Not because I did anything wrong, but because if I hadn't done it, the accident likely wouldn't have happened. Or it would've been my truck that was hit.

But wondering about what-ifs just eats up time. It serves no useful purpose. That doesn't stop me from thinking of the many ways things could've ended differently.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Daphne

Daphne

When I open my eyes, Rose is leaning over the bed. "Please be okay, Daphne."

I'm about to accuse her of lying when a thought grabs me.

What if Carson is married but didn't have a ring on?

I've heard of some guys that don't wear rings because of the risk of snagging it on something while working.

And other guys don't wear wedding rings because they want the world to think they're single.

All the other ranch hands I've met wear rings. So I proceed with my accusation. "You lied to me."

She blinks. "What are you talking about?"

"You said all the ranch hands were married. But Carson doesn't wear a ring."

Grinning, she bites her lower lip. "You're okay. I'm so relieved."

"I'm not actually okay. I have tiny titanium plates in my foot, which unfortunately do not give me any superpowers."

I asked. And my ribs hurt, but I'm not having surgery for that.

Thankfully. And I'm pretty sure my car is totaled.

And the worst part of tonight was that I spent all that money on my Daphne costume but never even made it to the party. ”

“I'm so sorry. I asked Carson about the car, but he didn't tell me it was totaled. And we can have another costume party.”

“Because I told him I didn't want you to worry. As for the costume, they had to cut it off because it hurt too bad to take it off the right way. So I won't be wearing that again. Now, why have you kept Carson a secret? Is he engaged or something? He's the best thing that happened to me tonight.”

Rose shakes her head. “I don't know. He was hired to replace Dallas. I don't really know him all that well, but I think he's single. Maybe. I'm not sure. He has a son, but I've never heard him mention a wife or girlfriend.”

I try to sit up, but my muscles aren't ready for that. “Did he come to the hospital?”

“He's in the waiting room with Dallas.”

I smile and close my eyes. “Tell him he was right. I did need to get checked out. Did he grab my phone?”

“Yes. And your purse.” Rose drags a chair close and sits. “When they let you out of the hospital, you can stay with me while you heal. And I can call your boss and let him know what's going on.”

“I'll just text him when I get my phone. He prefers texts. If Austin Graves had his

way, he'd speak with no one but his wife on the phone." I chuckle, then wince. When am I going to learn that cracking myself up is a bad idea?

I tell Rose what happened and how Carson rescued me. Then I clasp her hand. "I really need to know if he's single."

"I'll find out." She gives me a funny look.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

She lifts her shoulders and stares at me. Her wheels are turning, and the strain of figuring out how to word her thoughts is nearly audible.

"Just say it."

"I'm surprised. That's all. He doesn't seem like your type. Especially since he's a single dad." She flashes an apologetic smile. "The guys you've gone out with before were... not like Carson."

"I felt the spark, Rose. And I know I'd just been in an accident, and I might be swayed because he was the one who rescued me. But I felt it. And I really, really hope he felt it too."

She squeezes my hand. "I'll find out."

"You can't tell him what I just said though. About the spark. I don't want to scare him off."

"Mum's the word." She stands. "I'm going to go and let him come in for a bit. Is that okay? He's been waiting hours to see you."

“Yeah. How horrible do I look? My hair must be awful.” I try to smooth out the tangled mess, but holding up my arms hurts.

“Daphne, you are always stunning. You could cross the street in a garbage bag and stop traffic. You look fine.”

“Anyone crossing the street in a garbage bag would stop traffic. It’s weird.”

She laughs. “You know what I mean.”

After she leaves, I stare at the door, waiting for Carson. It’s so nice that he came up to the hospital and stayed so long. My mind is muddled with thoughts, and when he steps into the room, the dumbest thing pops out of my mouth.

“You buttoned up your shirt.”

He glances down and touches the buttons. “Yeah. No one here knows I’m in costume, and walking around with my shirt unbuttoned just looks creepy. It doesn’t make people think of Magnum PI.”

“I recognized the costume. My mom used to watch reruns of that show. You know, before we could stream whatever we wanted.”

“Back in the days when it was cool for men to have chest hair.”

I laugh, then pinch my lips together. “Stop. You can’t be funny.”

“Oh. Sorry.” He shoves his hands in his pockets. “There goes my personality.”

“Stop!” I hold my sides.

“Dang it. I’m so sorry. I wasn’t trying. Honest. I just...” He steps closer and lays my purse and phone on the bed. “I brought these. But if you want me to give them to Rose, I can do that. And I have a charge cord for that kind of phone in my truck, and I might even have a brick. I’ll have to look.”

“That would be great. Thank you. I’ll keep my phone. But you can give my purse to Rose. I doubt she’s going anywhere until they let me out of here.”

“Probably not. She was really worried about you.” He moves toward the door. “Let me check my truck.”

“Okay.”

He seems like he’s in a hurry to leave. Which seems weird since he waited so long to see me.

A few minutes later, he’s back. “I have a cord but no brick. However, I’ll be back here in the morning with a charger brick. Will that work?”

“Yes.” I push my phone toward him. “Give me your number so that if I need anything else, I can text you.”

“Sure.” He holds out the phone for me to type the unlock code, then he adds himself to my contacts. “How’s the foot? Or was it the ankle?”

“The foot. Ankle is likely a bad sprain. Nothing broken in there though. And whatever they gave me for pain hasn’t worn off, so I’m not feeling bad. Yet.”

“They’ll probably keep giving you stuff for the pain, I’m guessing.” He hovers near the edge of the bed.

“When you come back tomorrow, maybe I’ll know where they put your coat. I didn’t mean to take it with me.”

“It’s fine.”

It takes active willpower not to ask about his son. I want to let him bring it up. “I hope I didn’t mess up a date or anything. You looked like you were dressed for a costume party.”

“Nah. I always run around dressed like Magnum PI. It makes me feel cool.” His eyes widen. “Crap. Sorry. I have a hard time turning off the sarcasm.”

“We both played our roles well. Daphne ended up in danger, and you solved the case with your dash cam.”

He flashes a half smile. “I sent it. But who knows if they’ll be able to find him.”

My eyelids droop, much to my frustration. I’m enjoying the conversation, but if he thinks I’m sleepy, he’ll leave.

So I ask a question. “Have you ever been to Hawaii?”

“Is that a question for me or are you dreaming?” He’s leaning over the bed.

I force my eyes open. “For you. Magnum. Hawaii. Are you hiding a red Ferrari somewhere?”

“Sadly, no. My life is not that exciting.” He touches my hand, and I can feel the sizzle.

I fight the urge to grab his hand.



He flashes a kind smile. “You rest. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“Promise?”

He nods. “And cross my heart.”

“Bye, Carson. See you in the morning.” I pat his hand, then give up fighting sleep and succumb to exhaustion and meds.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Carson

Carson

To shave or not to shave, that is the question. When I grew the mustache for the party, I fully intended to shave it off right after. Now I'm conflicted. Do I look better with a mustache?

After two minutes, I pick up my shaver. Giving this a second thought is stupid. Daphne isn't interested. It doesn't matter a lick if I have a mustache or a squirrel's tail on my face.

I trim the mustache, then shave clean.

After getting dressed, I check my phone, wondering if Daphne has messaged about anything else she might need. There are always horror stories about hospital food, so maybe I should take her breakfast.

But what if they have her on a special diet of some sort? Why didn't I get her number?

I drive through the ranch out to the main road, and just before I turn, a message pops up. So I stop.

Rose: Hi, Dallas gave me your number. Daphne's phone died just after you left yesterday. I'm sorry to text so early, but she said you were bringing a charger up to the hospital. If not, that's fine. I can run and get one for her.

Me: I'm just leaving the ranch to head that way. Any restrictions on what she can eat?

Rose: No. And if you bring her coffee, we'd all appreciate it. Lots of cream and sugar. The coffee at the hospital leaves a lot to be desired.

Me: I'll do that. Be there soon.

I stop by Sweets on the way through Stadtborg. Then armed with donuts and three cups of coffee, I drive to the hospital. The charger and brick are sitting in the passenger seat. I swung by an open-all-night truck stop late last night and bought them.

At the hospital, I walk to the information desk, my arms loaded with the goodies I'm taking up to Daphne's room.

The older lady who is manning the desk smiles. "Hi, how can I help you?"

"I just need a quick place to set some stuff down so that I can text to get the room number."

She taps on the keyboard in front of her. "I can look it up. What's the patient's name?"

"Daphne." I'm not going to convince anyone that I'm a boyfriend or even a casual friend since I don't even know her last name. So I send off a text to Rose, asking for the room number.

The older woman blinks, still waiting. "I need a last name for the search."

"I don't know her last name. We only met last night." My helpful commentary is only confusing this woman. "I'm not the reason she's in the hospital. I didn't do anything

to her. She was in an accident, and I stopped to help her.”

She smiles. “That’s nice of you. But you should text that friend and find out the room number because without a last name, I can’t search.”

I hold up the phone. “She just sent it. Thanks for your help.” With everything balanced just so, I head to the elevators, hoping someone will be there to push the buttons. Otherwise, I’ll be using my nose.

Thankfully, someone is stepping in as I walk up. And I have no trouble making it to Daphne’s room.

The door to the room is ajar, so I tap it with my foot and call out, “Good morning. Is it okay to come in?”

“Yes!” Daphne smiles. “Hi.”

I set the coffees down before they end up on the floor, then hand her the box from Sweets. “The donut shop is kind of a zoo on Sunday mornings.”

“I can imagine. It’s so sweet of you to bring these.” She grins and points to the label on the box. “I’ve heard Dallas talking about how good these are. And it was so nice of you to bring coffee. Even one for the nurse. She’s going to love you.”

I glance around the room. “I actually got it because I thought Rose was here. But it can go to whoever wants it.”

“I sent Rose home last night after they moved me in here. She and Dallas both have tons of work to do. So I really appreciate you coming up here.” She opens the box and holds it out. “Take your pick.”

Instead of confidently choosing what I like, I say, “I will stare at the box for an hour, unable to make a choice for fear that I’d be taking the one you want most. And I’m a little hungry, so if you’d just choose your favorite, I’d appreciate that greatly.”

She picks up a chocolate-covered crème-filled donut. “These are my favorite.”

“Awesome.” I choose the one covered in cinnamon sugar and hold it over my coffee cup as I take a bite. “Oh, let me get that charger plugged in so you can start charging your phone. Rose said it was dead.”

Daphne watches as I find a place to plug in the brick and connect the cord to her phone. “We were headed to the same party, weren’t we?”

“Seems so.” I’m glad for the cup of coffee and donut that give me something to do with my hands.

“December is a funny time to have a costume party, but Dallas suggested it to distract Rose. It was the same night as the big charity event she used to do with her family every year.”

“I heard the party went well. Other than Rose leaving. And I feel bad about that. If I hadn’t changed lanes...”

Daphne shakes her head. “No part of the accident was your fault. Should I blame myself because I didn’t control the car better after being hit?”

“I wasn’t saying that at all.”

“I know. But don’t blame yourself. Okay?” She holds out her hand.

Nodding, I approach the bed, but jump back when the nurse walks in.

She says, “I’m just here to get your vitals. How’s your pain?”

“Tolerable.” Daphne holds out her arm for the blood pressure cuff. “Carson brought you a cup of coffee. Good stuff from Sweets.”

The nurse looks at me. “You are officially my new favorite person.”

I’m not even sure how to respond when someone talks that way. So I just point at the cup. “Help yourself.”

When the nurse leaves with her coffee, Daphne motions to the chair. “You can sit. But you probably have lots of ranch stuff to do.”

I drop into the chair. “I let them know I’d be out for a bit this morning.”

“You took off your costume.” She runs a finger over her upper lip.

Nodding, I question my choice. “I shaved. I only grew it for the party.”

“I like seeing more of your face.” She sips her coffee, never breaking eye contact.

“There’s a lot of it.” I pat my cheek. “Too many donuts.”

“You weren’t at the wedding.”

So far, conversations with Daphne are a bit of an adventure because I never know what will pop up next.

It’ll be interesting to see if that’s because of the accident and medications or if she’s like this all the time.

“I assume you mean Dallas and Rose’s wedding.

And no, I wasn’t there.” I stare at my cup, trying to figure out how much to tell Daphne.

Since she’s just being nice to the guy who came to her rescue, I don’t want to dump my life story on her.

But I also don’t want it to seem like I’m trying to hide Fred.

“Um, things were complicated for a while. They’ve calmed down some.

But Fred and I were out of town that weekend.

Plans were made before the wedding was scheduled. But I heard it was really nice.”

“It was. I was the flower girl.” She flashes a quick smile. “Is Fred your son?”

“Yeah, well, my nephew, but I adopted him. Like I said, complicated.”

She tilts her head, eyeing me. “So you aren’t married or engaged or anything?”

I snort laugh, but she doesn’t even crack a smile. So maybe that wasn’t a joke.

I just made a fool of myself by snort laughing for no reason. “No, there is no anything at all.”

The nurse walks in again. “The doctor wants another set of chest x-rays done.”

Daphne’s shoulders slump. “I really just want to go home.”

“Maybe tomorrow.” The nurse pats Daphne’s arm, then turns to me. “Thank you for the coffee. My patients all thank you as well. I’m a more pleasant person after a good cup of coffee. And we won’t be gone long if you want to wait.”

“I should get going. But, Daphne, you have my number if you need anything.”

She nods. “Thank you for the donuts and coffee. And the charger. You just keep coming to my rescue.”

“It’s nothing.” With a wave, I stroll to the elevators.

Nothing? That’s a lie. I’m going to spend the rest of the day trying to think of a reason to come back up here in the morning.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Daphne

Daphne

“It’s his nephew.” I push up to a sitting position as Rose sets her stuff down. “And Carson is single, not engaged, no girlfriend. Nothing.”

“That’s good, right?” She opens the lid on the donut box. “He brought you donuts? Can I have one?”

“Yes. He’s so sweet. You can grab whatever. And it’s very good that he’s unattached. Fred is his nephew. Carson adopted his nephew.” Knowing how hard it is to take care of kids, I’m amazed.

A single guy adopting a preteen isn’t an easy thing. Carson already showed what a good guy he was by stopping and helping me after the accident, but this new information makes him shine a bit brighter.

Rose eases into the chair. “Oh. Wow.”

“When he showed up this morning, I dropped hints and said a couple of flirty things. But he didn’t really respond like I thought he would. And I started to think that maybe I’m not his type or something, which is fine, I guess.”

She shakes her head. “I’ve yet to meet anyone who thinks you aren’t their type, Daphne.”

“I’m still single, so clearly lots of men think I’m not their type, but anyway, I was thinking through everything he said, hoping to remember something that might change my perspective, and I think maybe I figured it out.”

Chewing on a bite of her donut, she motions for me to keep talking.

“He said things have been complicated, so maybe because of that, he’s not wanting to shake things up or make any life changes right now, like—you know—dating.” I grab another donut out of the box.

“Could be. I’m sure having a preteen is a lot of work. And they might still be adjusting to everything.”

“For sure. And you said he’s new to the ranch. I wonder if he’s new to the area. If so, maybe he needs a friend.” I look around for a napkin to wipe my sticky fingers.

Rose grins. “Newish. He’s been there about a year, I think. But if he does need a friend, you could volunteer for the position.”

“That’s what I’m thinking.” I sink lower into the bed. “But honestly, I don’t get the impression that he’s not interested or playing hard to get. I just think he has no clue that I’m interested, which is funny. I’ve dropped some pretty big hints.”

“Not all guys get hints. What did you tell him?”

“Besides straight up asking him if there was anyone else in his life? I also told him that I liked seeing more of his face since he shaved off his mustache.”

She covers her mouth to keep crumbs from flying. “And he didn’t respond to that?”

“He made a joke about it being fat because of too many donuts.” I sigh.

“He’s cute. He’s not sporting a six-pack, but he’s strong enough to carry me.

That’s pretty cool.” I pick up my phone.

“You have to help me figure out what I need him to bring up to the hospital tonight. Or tomorrow. Oh, better yet, if they let me go home tomorrow, you could be busy. And then I’d need a ride. ”

Rose rubs her temples. “I’m having trouble keeping up. Are they sending you home tomorrow?”

“Don’t know yet, but earlier, the doctor said that I could probably go home tomorrow.”

“So am I busy or not? Because it’ll seem like I’m a horrible best friend if I’m too busy growing flowers to pick you up from the hospital.”

I clap. “I forgot to give him his coat. And it’s cold outside.” My fingers nearly tangle because I’m typing so fast. “And I won’t say you’re busy, I’ll just ask for a ride.”

Rose stands and puts her hand over my phone screen just as I’m about to hit send.

“What?”

Her lips pinch, and she takes a deep breath. “Slow down a moment and think about things. I know you felt a spark, and I get what that means. Believe me. But he isn’t a regular single guy. He has his nephew.”

“Rose, I want to get to know him. If I let him slip away without trying, I feel like I’ll regret it forever. Maybe we have coffee a few times and nada. Fine. Then I’ll know that when my car crashes, I might feel fake sparks.”

“Hopefully, you don’t plan to roll a car again.” She pulls her chair closer to the bed.  
“Did you call your mom?”

“No. She has enough on her plate.” I’m not stupid, and I know why Rose brought up my family.

After I pretty much raised my siblings during middle school and high school, college was my escape. And moving out was the best thing for my mental health. Yet I still feel guilty about it. It’s not like I cut contact with my family. I still see them. Sometimes. It’s complicated.

Rose leans forward, her arms crossed. “Just think about what you want before you rush into anything.”

“I will.” I stare at the message I typed out. “But I do need to tell him about his coat. Can you check and make sure it’s in that closet?”

Rose opens the little cabinet in the room. “It’s here.”

“Good. I’ll let him know later.” I set my phone aside. Texting Carson can wait a bit. Waiting will give me time to think.

“So I’m not busy tomorrow?” Rose lifts her eyebrows.

I shake my head. “Tell me about your flowers. What are you growing now?”

For the next half hour, she updates me on her business.

My friend has found her happily-ever-after in every way possible. That’s not saying that her life is perfect. Her parents don’t talk to her, but in my opinion, she’s better off without them. And seeing her in love makes me crave that kind of a relationship

even more.

But she's right about deciding what I want. Running in with my eyes closed will only result in my slamming into a wall. Am I willing to take on the role of mom again? Maybe it's different when it's not my siblings. Or when I don't have a mom telling me I'm not doing enough.

That afternoon, after thinking long and hard, I tap out a new text to Carson.

Me: Your coat is here. I'm sorry I forgot to give it to you this morning.

Carson: I might swing by and grab it this evening. How are you feeling? Any word on when you get to go home?

Me: Doctor just left, and he said that I can go home tomorrow. I'm sore but feeling okay overall.

Carson: If you want food other than what the hospital serves, I'm happy to bring you something.

Me: You are every girl's dream come true.

Carson: Is that a yes? Barbecue okay?

Me: Sounds delicious. Thank you.

I want to get to know Carson. And I want to get to know Fred. It'll be a bit until we meet, I'm guessing, and that's fine. But the fact that Carson has an adopted son isn't a deal breaker for me.

The phone buzzes in my hand. But it's not a text from Carson. It's my boss.

Austin: Is now a good time to call you?

Me: Sure. I'm just twiddling my thumbs in a hospital bed.

What does Austin need on a Sunday?

I let it ring twice before answering. "Hello."

"Daphne. How are you? It's hard to tell that kind of thing from texts."

"Sore but fine. I'll probably be leaving the hospital tomorrow. Did you need something?" Chitchatting with my boss feels strange.

"No. Just checking on you. Take as much time as you need before coming back to the office. I'll get someone to answer phones and figure out the rest myself. You don't need to worry about that."

I slip into my work persona. "Thank you, Mr. Graves."

"You can call me Austin, Daphne. I've told you that before." He says it with a hint of humor in his tone. "But if you need anything, please call me. Or text. Whatever's easier."

"I will. And after tomorrow, I'll know more about recovery time and such."

"Great. Will you text me the room number at the hospital?"

"Sure. As soon as I hang up."

"Very good. Feel better. Bye." He ends the call.

I'm fortunate to work for a boss who isn't a jerk.

After flipping through channels and finding nothing interesting, I pick up my phone. Thanks to sweet Carson, my phone is fully charged, and I'm not lying here bored out of my skull.

But when the vast expanse of the internet is no longer interesting, I close my eyes for a short nap.

And when I open them again, the nurse is standing beside the bed with a huge bouquet. "Someone sent you flowers."

My heart races as I reach for the card. "I have no idea who they might be from." I have hopes, but reading the card shatters those. "They're from my boss."

"Ooh, your boss?" She sets them on the nightstand beside the bed.

I don't want weird rumors to get started because of a stupid bouquet, beautiful as it is. "Nothing like that. I'm guessing his wife ordered them. He's not really a flowers kind of guy."

"And the guy who was here this morning?"

"Not my boss. He and I just met when he stopped to help me after the accident." I wince as I shift.

She checks the time. "It's time for more meds. And if you want my opinion, the rescuer is someone you want to hang onto. Donuts and a phone charger beat flowers any day."

I laugh, then clench my jaw, hating that laughter causes me pain.

“Totally right. And he’s bringing me dinner tonight.

He once heard that hospital food wasn’t good, and I’ve done nothing to change his mind.

No offense to the people in the cafeteria.

I mean, lunch wasn’t bad. But I like when Carson comes up to the hospital. ”

“I’ve gathered that.” She hands me pills and a small cup of water.

“I’m not sure he’s picked up on that though.” I recline the bed. “Either that or he’s not the least bit interested.”

“Showing up repeatedly is not a sign of disinterest.” She taps my good foot as she walks by the bed. “I’ll check on you later.”

I give her a thumbs-up. And it’s not long before the pain medication makes it hard to focus on anything. So I close my eyes.

There’s a knock, and I call out, “Come in.” I don’t even have my eyes open yet, but I’m trying to shake the fog of my late afternoon nap. Since the sun is going down, it’s clear that I slept longer than expected.

Carson walks in and stands beside the bed. “Hi. Sorry to wake you.”

“You’re good. It’s the meds. I blink and hours disappear. It’s weird.”

He holds up a bag and a Styrofoam cup. “I brought you brisket, potato salad, and a DP.”



“You’re the best.” I rub my face, then gently shift into a sitting position.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

He sets out the food on the rolling table and moves it to the bed.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” I don’t wait for an answer before digging into the brisket.

He glances at the flowers, then shakes his head, avoiding eye contact. “I can’t stay.”

“Carson.” I wait for him to meet my gaze. When he does, I say, “Those are from my boss. My happily married boss. In fact, if I had to guess, his wife probably called in the order for flowers.”

“They’re nice.”

“Yes, but I wouldn’t trade them for donuts and a charger.” I lift an eyebrow, waiting for a reaction.

A smile cuts across his face. “I just thought maybe...”

“I’m not dating anyone. So please don’t rush out because of that.”

“Well, I really do need to get home soon. Fred has been hanging out with Mason all day, which is typical for a Sunday. But I need to get him home, make sure all his homework is done, and prep everything for tomorrow morning.”

“Mondays are no joke.” The comment is meant to be lighthearted, but I want him to know I understand. The circumstances are different, but I understand the work involved in taking on a parental role.

He eases into the chair beside the bed. “Yeah, I’ve learned that this year. But as we figure each other out, life gets easier. And I want you to know that the thing you don’t talk about is okay to talk about if you ever need to vent.”

I will not cry because of how sweet he’s being. So I take a bite of the potato salad. And we awkwardly sit quietly while I chew.

“It’s been nine years since I moved out.

My relationship with my siblings, with the exception of my brother who is only a year younger, is distant.

My mom says they feel like I abandoned them, but I don’t know.

Maybe they resent me for telling them what to do when I lived at home.

I’m not sure I trust what my mom says anyway.

My relationship with her is very strained.

Who knows what she’s telling them? She still seems mad that I moved out.

” I sip my Dr Pepper, needing to wash the lump out of my throat.

“I’m sorry.” There is a kind understanding in his voice.

I wipe my eyes. “I’m embarrassing myself.

Normally, I’m not this emotional.” Talking about that period of my life is hard, but something about Carson feels safe.

I'm sure it's because of him rescuing me.

But I don't need to spew all my conflicted thoughts about my mother.

She thinks that because I'm single, there is no reason that I shouldn't be living at home, helping her with rent, and taking care of my siblings.

Carson doesn't need to know everything. But opening up is the only way he'll get to know the real me. And I don't show that side of myself to many people.

He hands me a tissue from the box across the room, then sits down again.

"My sister was eight years older than me. And she was more like a mom than my actual mom. But when I was eleven, my mom and sister had a screaming match. I don't know what it was about.

Me, probably. But my sister left." He stares at the wrinkles in the blanket.

"And I never saw her again." He meets my gaze.

"You should never feel bad about taking care of yourself. My sister didn't, and now she's gone. "

"I'm so sorry, Carson. I can't even imagine. If only more people were like you."

"I'm not sure what you mean by that last part, but if you're talking about adopting my nephew, it's a completely different scenario. I'm an adult. My sister was a kid, who had no choice in the matter. Same as you. And that's not right." He checks the time.

"I'm just all laughs tonight, huh?"

I want to tell Carson how amazing I think he is, but I'm trying not to rush things, so

instead, I say, “Fred’s a lucky kid.”

He gives a slight head shake, then rubs his jaw. “I know how it feels to lose someone important. And I have the opportunity to make his life better than mine was. He’s a great kid. I don’t regret it.”

If we continue with this conversation, I’m going to start crying again, and I don’t want that. So I point at the closet. “Your coat is in there. Don’t forget it when you leave.” I wipe barbecue spices off my hand, then reach out. “I’m very glad we met even though the circumstances were crappy.”

“Me too. But I am sorry about your foot, your ribs, and your car.” Carson squeezes my hand. “I should probably go. Heal up quick, and if you need anything, you have my number.”

I should’ve kept my mouth shut about the coat and leaving. “I wasn’t saying that to run you off.”

“I know.” After putting on his coat, he steps closer to the bed. “And I meant what I said about if you need anything. The ranch isn’t that far away.”

“Thank you.” I open my arms, silently asking for a hug.

He leans in and gently wraps his arms around me. “Have a good night.” He steps toward the door, then stops. “You know how you don’t talk about certain things...”

“Your secret is safe with me, Carson.”

He gives a quick nod. “Thanks. I appreciate that.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Carson

Carson

Walking up to Kent's door, I know what to expect. Fred will look glum because he has to go home, and then for the rest of the evening, he'll tell me all about what they did.

I spend most Sundays at the ranch and check in with him throughout the day. This weekend was different. He had his first sleepover at Mason's, and I've only gotten quick answers when I've texted Fred.

Kent opens the door. "They're over in the game room. I was just about to go get them. Parker was showing them a new game."

"I'll meet you up there. Where's Fred's bag?"

Poppy walks up to the door, backpack in hand. "Here it is. He did great. Respectful. Followed instructions. Really well behaved. Thanks for letting him spend the night. Mason was so excited. I thought they were never going to fall asleep." She laughs.

"But they were still up with the sun." Kent jingles his keys. "Be back in a few, sweetheart." He gives Poppy a kiss.

"Thanks for letting Fred stay." I hop back in the truck. As I drive to the main house, a text pops up on my phone from the ranch foreman.

Clint: Rain expected overnight. They aren't predicting severe weather, but there is a chance of flooding. Just a heads up.

He sent the message to all the ranch hands. We need rain. But too much can be a problem in some areas. Hopefully, we don't have any issues with flooding. That would be inconvenient.

Kent parks next to me at the main house. After sliding out of the truck, he glances at his phone and says, "Let's wrangle these boys and get home before it starts to pour."

"Easier said than done." I'm the first one through the door. "Fred, let's pack it up. Rain is coming, and I want to make it home without getting pummeled."

Parker stands and rubs his hands together. "Thanks for hanging out, guys."

Mason grins. "That is a fun game. Can we play again tomorrow night?"

"Not tomorrow, but soon." Parker pats his shoulder. "Looks like your dad is here too."

Mason springs up out of his chair. "Dad! This game is so cool."

"I won one round." Fred beams. "And this was my first time playing it."

I love that he's getting the opportunity to do fun stuff, enjoy time with a good friend, and have a ranch full of adults that shower him with kindness. It's the opposite of what Fred's life was like before living with me.

"That's awesome." I give Fred a high-five. "Did you thank Parker for letting you play?"

“Yeah. I did. And I told him to tell Ms. Bluebonnet thanks too. She brought us snacks.” He adjusts his ball cap and turns to face Mason. “I’ll see you in the morning. I had fun.”

Mason shakes Fred’s hand. “Me too. Let’s see if they’ll let us sleepover every weekend.”

Kent chuckles. “That is a conversation for another day.”

“Agreed.” I flick the bill of Fred’s cap. “But I’m glad y’all had fun and that Mason lives so close.”

We all walk to our trucks, then drive in separate directions.

“What did y’all do today?” I make my way to the row of houses where many of the ranch hands live.

The housing here is part of the reason I took the job.

It’s the first time for both Fred and me to live in a three-bedroom, single-family home.

After spending the majority of my life moving from apartment to apartment, living here feels like a luxury.

“Lots of fun stuff. We went fishing at the creek, and Mason taught me how to skip rocks. Have you ever skipped rocks?”

“I haven’t.”

“I’ll teach you. Bailey is really good at it, and she’s just a girl. So you can do it.”



“Just a girl?” I lift an eyebrow, hoping he realizes how his words sound.

He crinkles his nose. “She’s better at it than I am. But if I practice...” He bobs his head with determination.

“Were you kind to Bailey?” I pull into our drive and shift into park.

Bailey’s been a topic of conversation more than once over the last year. Fred came to the ranch with a strong belief in girl cooties. And having Bailey tag along has challenged his preteen beliefs.

“Yeah, Uncle Car. I was. She’s not so bad. I used to kind of ignore her, but Mason told me that it hurt her feelings. I don’t want to be mean, you know?”

“I know. Come on inside. Do you have any homework that needs to be finished?” I try to get him to tackle homework early in the weekend, but with the sleepover, things didn’t work out that way.

“A little. But I’ll do it after I shower.” He slams the door of the truck. “Where’d you go?”

“I visited someone at the hospital.”

His brow knits. “Who got hurt? Is everyone on the ranch okay?”

Concern is etched on his face, reminding me of how much the folks on the ranch feel like family to this kid. For the first time in his life, he has stability, and threats to any part of it rattle him.

I drape an arm around his shoulders. “Everyone here on the ranch is all good as far as I know. But a friend of Ms. Rose, Dallas’s wife, was in a car accident. I took some

dinner up to the hospital for her. She's going to be okay though."

"I bet Ms. Rose was worried. I'd be upset if something happened to Mason or even to Bailey." He tosses his backpack on the couch. "'Cause she's my friend too."

Raindrops splatter on the ground outside, and both of us stop to listen.

Fred grins. "We made it! I don't hear thunder, so I'm gonna shower."

"You do that." I yank the dirty clothes out of his backpack and deposit them in the hamper.

He's already had dinner, but since he is growing like a weed, I expect he'll want a snack while he works on schoolwork. So while Fred showers, I prep him a plate. And while doing so, I occasionally glance at my phone, checking to see if Daphne has texted.

When it comes to relationships, I'm far from an expert.

But even though it makes absolutely no sense, I'm thinking Daphne is kind of interested.

Maybe. And that thought makes me smile. I have no clue what to do about it.

We lead completely different lives, and it's not like we'll just run into each other in town. Sadly.

But she made a huge point of informing me that she was single, and that made me wonder if she was giving me a hint.

The next time I see her, if she's still showing interest, I'll gather up my courage and

ask her for a date.

Am I crazy for even thinking she's interested?

Likely, but it should be pretty easy to figure out. I think.

"The two holes jump-started the draining process." Kent shakes his head at the muddy mess around the stock tank. "We gotta get those fish out."

On the ranch, we keep fish in the stock tanks to cut down on mosquitoes and some of the nasty growth. Fish help keep the tanks clean.

I grab buckets out of the bed of my truck. "That's why I brought these. What are the chances I can get them all in one scoop?"

He laughs. "Slim to none. Too bad the boys are at school. We could've had them catching fish by hand. It looks like we'll be having all the fun."

Dragging the bucket through the water left in the bottom of the tank, I gather more than half the fish. Now comes the fun part. "I'll go in, and you can handle the bucket."

"Deal."

Thank goodness for waterproof boots. I climb into the tank, careful not to step on any of the remaining fish. Then I stand still, poised to scoop up the next one that swims within reach.

With a small bucket, I scoop the first few without too much trouble, and I quickly drop them in the bucket that Kent's holding. But the last two are making this way more difficult than necessary. Don't they know I'm trying to save them?

While I'm chasing the last two, Kent is using a five-gallon bucket to scoop out the remaining water. It helps shrink the area where the fish can flee, and it empties the tank.

I lunge toward the two fish with my bucket and land on my belly in the water. It's cold. And face first in cow-saliva water is not where I want to be.

Kent is trying to hold back a laugh and loses the battle when I shake my head, sending water spraying in every direction.

"Laugh. It's funny." I scoop out a bit more water, then nab the remaining fish. "Now that our residents have all been evacuated, we can start repairs."

Fish are cheap and easily replaceable, but I couldn't just leave them to dry out while we did the repair. Keeping the fish alive was worth a little extra work.

Kent sets the bucket of fish in the shade, and we start the repair. While I wipe down the sides where we'll be working, Kent gets the brush attached to the drill. Then I run the brush along the interior, cleaning everything up before we add the water weld putty.

By the time the holes are patched, Kent and I are both covered in mud.

I drop the tailgate on my truck. "Let's sit while we wait for it to set up."

Kent sits on the opposite end of the tailgate. "I was talking to Poppy last night. The guys had so much fun with their sleepover. We'd be open to having Fred over again on a regular basis."

"Awesome. I know Fred would love that. And they're welcome to stay at our place too. They could stay at your house one weekend a month and at my place another

weekend. If that works for y'all."

He nods and rubs his jaw. "We could. Or you could use those sleepover nights for going out, dates, and things of that sort."

I chuckle. "Dates? What are those?"

"After you went up to the hospital three times, I figured maybe you and that lady were—you know—planning to go out possibly."

I shrug. "Not sure. She's way outta my league. Absolutely stunning. She's Rose's best friend."

"Dallas mentioned that you rescued her."

"I felt horrible for Daphne. Some guy pulled a surprise pit maneuver on her. I'm honestly shocked her injuries weren't worse. And I'll keep your offer in mind." My phone rings, and Rose's number shows up at the top of the screen, so I swipe to answer. "Hello."

"Carson, I'm so sorry to bother you, and if you can't help me, I totally understand."

"What's up?"

"The storm that came through last night knocked out a few trees and washed out part of the road. The only way to my house right now is the back way in, which is gravel, and my car will not make it with the condition of that road. But Daphne called that they're releasing her."

"I can pick her up. Does she need me to take her home?"

“She can’t get up the stairs. I was going to bring her to my place.”

“I can do that. There are a few things that I need to?—”

Kent shakes his head. “Just go.”

“Actually, after a super-fast shower, I’ll be on my way.” I’m a little too excited that I get to spend more time with Daphne.

“Great. Thank you so much. You have her number, right?”

“I do. And I’ll let her know the plan.” After saying goodbye, I end the call. “Thanks for covering for me. I’m not sure there’s anything romantic happening, but Daphne is really sweet.”

“I didn’t know there was anything romantic between me and Poppy until I realized that every other thought was about her. Mason talked about her all the time, so that played a part.”

I choose to skip over the part about thoughts because I think about Daphne a lot.

But the second part is easy to address. “If I do ask Daphne out on a date, I won’t be talking to Fred about it.

He’s enjoying stability for the first time in his life.

He doesn’t need to meet the women I decide to date. ”

“At first. But eventually...” Kent lifts an eyebrow.

I slide off the tailgate. “I seriously doubt it will ever be that serious. As I said before,

she's way out of my league."

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Daphne

Daphne

Carson leans around me and snaps the seat belt into place. My hands work just fine, but if he wants to help, I'm not going to complain. Plus, this gives me a chance to sniff his shirt.

Do all cowboys smell this good? He smells like leather and citrus. And maybe juniper. I'm not sure how that actually smells, but I like the word. And it grows everywhere in these parts.

He pulls back and meets my gaze. "You good? Everything okay? I don't want you to be in pain while I drive."

"I'm okay. But I have a question."

He puts his hand on the top of the door, which shows off his broad chest. He's like a wall, only padded. "What's that?"

"What did you do to smell so incredible?"

Carson blinks. "I showered."

Laughing, I rest a hand on his chest. "You're so funny. And I'm definitely going to need the details of what soap you use because I like it. A lot."



“Awesome.” The apples of his cheeks rise as he grins. Then he glances down at my hand on his shirt. “I’ll, um, close this door, then walk around to my side.”

I pull my hand back. “Thank you for being my ride. I really appreciate it.”

“Happy to do it.” He gently closes the door and, a second later, slides in behind the wheel. “Any stops we need to make along the way?”

“Just the pharmacy. Other than that, I should be good. Rose bought me enough to get me through the next few days. Then hopefully, I’ll be able to go into my apartment and gather my own stuff.”

He turns out of the parking lot and navigates traffic, glancing at me occasionally as he drives. “How long until you can put weight on your foot?”

“At least two weeks. And I am not looking forward to using crutches.” I wince when he hits a pothole.

“Sorry.”

I pat his arm. “It’s fine. It’s not like you put the hole in the road.”

His grin widens when I touch him, so I’m thinking that there is a slight possibility that he’s starting to pick up the hints I’m laying down. At this point, they are flashing neon and sprinkled in glitter, but they’re still hints.

He pulls into the pharmacy lot, and I point toward the drive thru. When he gets to the window, the tech asks, “Who are you picking up for?”

“Daphne...” He turns to look at me, amusement dancing in his eyes. “They’re probably going to need your last name, and I don’t know that.”

“Emerson. Daphne Emerson.”

The tech grabs my meds, and I give my address to verify that I am who I say that I am, and Carson gets us back on the road.

“How long have you worked on the ranch? Have you always been a cowboy?”

He laughs. “Being a ranch hand is new. I’ve been working there a little over a year. And I’ve learned a ton. Before that, I worked in the oil fields. But once Fred came to live with me, I needed something different.”

“How did you end up at Stargazer Springs? Have you always lived in this area?”

Carson shakes his head. “I’m not from around here.

As for how I ended up at the ranch, it’s kind of a funny story.

” He checks his mirror before changing lanes.

“So I got the call from the social worker asking if I’d be willing to care for Fred.

Of course, I said yes because I wasn’t going to let him go into the system.

But I didn’t have the first clue about what to do.

So as soon as I got off the phone, I went to the library.

Mind you, this was in a small town a few hours from here.

And I asked the nice lady at the counter about where to find books on parenting. ”

“I bet she showed you a lot of books about babies.”

“She did, but then I explained the situation. And we got to talking.” He looks over at me. “It really is a small world. That lady at the library was Grayson’s mom. He’s one of the other ranch hands. And that’s how I got introduced to Beau Henry, the ranch owner.”

Now I know who to thank for bringing Carson to this part of Texas and into my path.

As we drive, he tells me more about the move and how Fred found a friend on the ranch. The way Carson beams makes it clear that he’s super proud of his nephew, which gives me all sorts of warm fuzzies.

When we’re almost to the back entrance of Matchmaker Ranch, he glances at me. “I didn’t mean to dominate the conversation. Tell me more about what you do. All I know is that you have a nice boss who sends you flowers.”

“A very married boss.” I clench my jaw as Carson drives over the cattle guard. Even at a snail’s pace, the bumping around makes my ribs ache. “He runs a software company. I’m his executive assistant. It’s a great job. I’ve been there since I graduated from college.”

We get to a spot in the road where the rain washed away parts of the gravel, and Carson slows to a crawl. Gritting my teeth, I clutch the armrest. I think it’s time to take something for the pain.

The road smooths out, and I sigh with relief.

“I’m doing my best to avoid what I can.” Carson’s words drip with apology.

I rub his arm. “I know. I’m not blaming you.”

When we hit the next washboard section, I grip his bicep.

“Please don’t drive over any more bumps.

Please. I can handle loads of emotional pain.

Tell me I’m useless. Fine. You think I’m ugly or stupid?

No problem. I can deal with that. But physical pain is a different story.

I can’t handle that. No more bumps. I’m begging you.

” I swipe at a tear, wishing I were made of stronger stuff.

The trucks stops, and Carson stares at me. “You aren’t useless or ugly or stupid. I don’t think that at all.”

“That’s very sweet of you to say, but please don’t drive any farther down this road.”

He lays his hand on mine. “I was trying to avoid what I could, but I’ll turn us around. Stargazer Springs didn’t get as much rain, and the road to my house is paved. What if I drive you there for now? We can figure out a new plan after that.”

I nod. “Thank you.”

“Please don’t cry.”

I flash him a smile. “It just slipped out. But I’m okay. My pain meds are wearing off. I’m sure that is a big part of it. You don’t have to take me to your house. I can probably get up the stairs to my apartment on my butt. Backward.”

“That’s not gonna happen.” He eases the truck into motion, turning it around. Then he grips my hand. “Squeeze it as hard as you need to. I can take it.”

So I do. As he drives us back to the gate, I grasp his very strong hand.

When we get to the paved road, I don’t let go. “I appreciate everything you’re doing to help me, Carson. Truly.”

“It’s been my pleasure. Not to see you get hurt or to see your car get wrecked, but spending time with you has been great.” His gorgeous blue-brown eyes twinkle when he smiles.

“I’ve enjoyed it. A lot. And I hope you know that I’d like to get to know you better and be your friend.”

His smile droops but doesn’t disappear completely. “Yeah. That’d be great.”

The second great lacked the enthusiasm of the first one, and I can tell that something shifted. Something I said doused the spark, and I don’t know how to turn back time.

An awkward quiet settles in the cab, and I shatter it by calling Rose. “Hey, friend. I’m changing the plan. My ribs hate the washed-out road, so Carson is taking me to his place.”

“Oh no. Let me call around and see what I can figure out.”

“You don’t have to do that. It’s not your fault. I can just get a hotel or something until I can go back up the stairs.”

“You are not staying in a hotel, Daphne. Give me a few minutes to think. I’ll text you in a bit.”

“I hate being a burden.” I avoid looking at Carson.

Rose gives a soft laugh. “I knew that you were thinking that, but you aren’t. You’re my best friend. Let me help you. I’m just sorry the roads got messed up. At least you’re getting to spend more time with Carson.”

“I think I messed that up.” I probably shouldn’t have said that because it’s not like I can explain to her how I messed up without Carson hearing me, and I don’t even know why he reacted the way he did.

“But you can’t talk because he’s next to you.”

“That’s why I like having you as a friend. You can read my mind.”

“Call me later.”

“I will. Bye.” I end the call and set the phone down, knowing I’ve made this drive even more awkward with what I just said.

Then I spend the next ten minutes picking apart every word I uttered. Finally, as he parks in front of his house, I realize my mistake.

I grab his bicep again. “Hey.”

“Yeah?” He lifts his eyebrows but doesn’t meet my gaze.

I wait until he looks at me. “Carson, I think maybe I chose my words poorly.”

“It’s fine. Like I said, I don’t mind helping, and I think being your friend would be great.”

The time for hints is over. “I want you to ask me out.”

His lips part, but no words come out.

“What do you think? Will you go out with me?”

He tilts his head. “On a date?”

“Earlier, when I used the word friend, I meant friend in the sense of two people who spend lots of time together. Not in the sense of two people who do not have romantic feelings for each other. I mean, it’s a little early to know for certain about the feelings part, but I’d love to explore that possibility. ”

“I thought you were trying to friend-zone me. I’m glad I was wrong.” He gives me a half smile. “I’d love to get to know you better. I don’t know when I’ll have a free night next, but as soon as I figure it out, I’ll call you.”

“I’d like that.” I give his upper arm a squeeze. “Do you mind if I sleep on your couch for a bit?”

“I do not mind at all. And whatever you need, just say the word.”

Grinning, I nod toward my foot. “I’m going to need help getting inside. Will you get my crutches for me?”

“I could do that. Or I can carry you inside. That might be easier. Because of your ribs.”

“Good idea.” So far, I’m liking how my day is turning out. Even though I could do without the pain.

Moments later, I'm in Carson's arms, feeling all the zings and sizzles like I did the other night. Before this guy, I didn't know attraction was an actual sensation, a real feeling. I thought it was just a concept.

Boy was I wrong.



*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Carson

Carson

I hand Daphne a cup of water, then ask, “What else do you need? How can I help?”

She shakes her head as she swallows her pills. “You’ve done plenty. My foot isn’t throbbing as much now that it’s propped up, and these pills will help immensely. I really just want to close my eyes for a bit.”

I glance at my phone, trying to decide if I should stay here or get some chores done while she sleeps. I don’t want to hover, but I also don’t want to leave her helpless.

“It probably feels weird to leave me alone in your house, but I promise not to snoop or anything. I’ll stay on the couch. Unless I have to go into the bathroom.”

“I got the wet towel off the floor and cleaned up a little. Your crutches are by the couch, and you have my number.”

“Thank you.” She flashes a smile as she settles her head onto the pillow I brought out.

This woman is stunning, and I’m shocked that she wants to go out with me.

I pull on my coat and head to the door. “Call or text if you need anything. I won’t be far away.”

My phone dings as I climb into the truck, and I read the message from Rose.

Rose: I'm so sorry about all this. Once Dallas gets the downed trees cleared off the main road, I'll drive over and get Daphne. Thank you so much for everything.

Me: No problem.

As I pull away from the house, my stomach growls, and I drive toward the main house because I know Ava will have a hot meal waiting.

It's rare that all us guys sit down to eat at the same time in the middle of the day.

But she keeps food hot for a couple of hours, and we take a break between getting stuff done.

Since it's close to the end of that window, I'm not sure who I'll see in the mess hall.

But I'm hoping to bump into Kent. I want to take him up on the offer he mentioned this morning.

Dating wasn't even a thought then. But that all changed because of Daphne.

I like that when she has something to say, she says it.

And now that she knows I'm not good at catching hints, we'll be able to communicate better.

I pull in beside Kent's truck. Today is turning out to be a good one.

He and Poppy are sitting alone at the table when I walk inside. Ava is in the kitchen, holding Clara. Kent and Poppy's youngest is a cutie, and she loves her grandma. That's not a surprise because everyone loves Ava.

“Carson, come on in. Everything is still hot. And dessert is at the end.” Ava waves a hand toward the counter. Then she goes back to playing with Clara, who is giggling up a storm.

“Thanks. I’m going to make an extra plate for my friend. She’s at my place.” I scan the counter, wondering if I should eat here or hurry the food over to Daphne.

Ava sets Clara down and hands her a cookie. “A friend? It’ll be a mess if you try to take the tacos on a plate. Let me get you a better container. You need two?”

The guys have all told stories about how Ava got excited when they met someone special. And now, as the only single guy, I’m seeing the same thing.

“Please. I’ll eat at the house with her.”

Ava fills two containers, then adds dessert to another smaller one. “If you want a Coke or something to take her, you know where they are. Enjoy your lunch.” She’s grinning from ear to ear.

Why couldn’t I have won the mom lottery and ended up with someone like Ava? At least I’m here now.

I step around the counter and give her a hug. “Thank you.”

She pats my back. “Anytime. And she’s always welcome. There’s always enough.”

“Appreciate it.” I gather the containers and walk to the table.

Kent and Poppy have heard everything.

Grinning, he raises an eyebrow. “Poppy and I wondered if maybe Fred wanted to stay

over again this weekend.”

“That’d be great.”

Poppy leans forward. “Rose’s friend?”

I nod. “We’re going to go on a date, but since I’m not sure how this will go, I don’t want Fred to know. At least not right now.”

She rubs Kent’s arm. “When kids are in the middle, it makes things more complicated.”

He laces his fingers with hers. “A little, but it worked for us. However, I completely get why you want to wait. Just plan on us keeping Fred Saturday evening for an overnight.”

“Thanks.” I stride out to my truck, then shoot Daphne a message.

Me: Hungry? I’m bringing you a taco plate and lemon bars.

Daphne sends a heart in response.

She’s sitting up when I get to the house.

“I know you wanted to nap, but the food was hot. Well, not the lemon bars. Those aren’t hot.”

“Tacos sound amazing. Thank you.” She pats the cushion beside her. “Come sit.”

I ease onto the couch, then set the containers aside. “You really should elevate that foot. Why don’t you put it up here on my lap?”

“You don’t want my foot right there while you eat.”

“If it means you won’t be in as much pain, then I do.” I shift her legs so that her feet are resting in my lap. Then I hand her food. “Ava tucked a fork in there for the rice and beans.”

“This is a feast. You are seriously amazing.”

“Ava’s great. She keeps us all fed. Goldie too. Have you ever met Ava? She’s what I wish my mom was like.”

Daphne gives me a knowing smile. “I met her at the wedding. She’s darling. And I know what you mean. Once upon a time, my mom was great. But she was a different person after my dad died. It was like I lost both of them that day.”

“Sorry about that. I’m glad Fred is getting to live around people like this. He doesn’t talk much about what life was like before, but it wasn’t good. That’s something I love about the ranch. It’s like a family.”

“That’s what Rose says.”

Talking about our dysfunctional families isn’t smile-inducing conversation. So I find a new topic. “How long do you have to be off your foot? And what about your job?”

“I need to keep weight off it for two weeks. So I’ll stay with Rose until I can at least put weight on it. Then I’m not sure. I wish my apartment wasn’t on the second floor.”

“I’m glad you have a place to stay. It’s good that you aren’t by yourself. Also, I’ll be free on Saturday night. Would you like to grab dinner? Or would it be better to wait until your foot can bear weight?”

“Saturday is great.” She leans forward and clasps my hand. “Did you mention something about lemon bars?”

“The best you’ve ever had.” I hand her a square. “And I’ll text you about dinner.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” She takes a bite and moans. “You aren’t lying. These are incredible.”

“They are.” I choose not to add that she is too.

I park in front of Rose and Dallas’s place and take a deep breath. It’s been ages since I’ve been on a date, and never have I gone out with someone as hot as Daphne. This still feels a bit like a dream, and I’m waiting for the part where I wake up at the worst moment.

After drying my palms on my jeans, I walk to the door. And after I knock, Dallas opens it.

“Come in.” He nods toward the hall. “She’s making her way to the door.”

“It’s great that y’all are letting her stay here.” My gaze is fixed on the end of the hall because I’m eager to see Daphne again. And I guess Dallas notices.

“She’s just as excited as you are.”

I give an awkward laugh. “I won’t keep her out super late.”

Daphne rounds the corner on her crutches. “Hey there. Dallas hasn’t given me a curfew.”

“But you’re staying here, and they care about you.” I help her slip into her coat.

Rose eases up beside Dallas. "I like you, Carson."

"He's great, isn't he?" Daphne hooks her purse on her arm, then steadies herself on her crutches. "Okay, I'm ready."

I walk beside her out to the truck. Then after helping her in, I wave at Dallas and Rose, who are standing at the door like I imagine engaged parents would be. The whole scene is funny.

"I wanted to find a place where you wouldn't have trouble getting around. Dallas mentioned a place in Keyhole, so I scoped it out yesterday. It's not fancy, but the food's good." I glance at Daphne to see her reaction.

"Sounds great to me. I just want to spend time with you."

"I'm glad it worked out so that we didn't have to wait long before getting together. And how are you feeling? Your foot and your ribs?" I have two possible settings when nervous: rambling or quiet. But tonight, I'm trying hard to find a middle ground.

"I'm pretty good. The foot is healing, and I cannot wait until I get the all-clear to put weight on it. And my ribs are better than they were. Sore at times, but not so bad that you can't be funny."

I shoot her a side glance. "Uh-oh, now the pressure's on."

"No pressure. Just be you. I think your humor comes naturally." She reaches over and rests a hand on my upper arm. "Don't think about it. Say whatever pops into your head."

"You are by far the prettiest woman I've ever been on a date with." That may have

been too much honesty out of the chute, but I did as I was told.

She grins. “Thank you for that. After having to be creative with showers because my foot can’t get wet, I don’t feel very pretty.”

“You are. I promise.” I park in a spot near the entrance, then go around and open her door. “Here are your crutches.”

She slides out and gets situated. “This place is cute.”

“Inside, the walls are plastered in signs and other décor. It’s cool. And I saw a sign about live music on the weekends. Not sure if it starts tonight or next weekend.”

“Fun! What kind of music do you like?”

I keep pace beside her, ready to catch her if she wobbles. “All kinds. But mostly I listen to country. That’s probably not a surprise.”

When we step inside, the waitress looks over from across the room. “Y’all can sit anywhere. I’ll be with you in a sec.”

Nodding to a table near the door, I ask, “Want to sit here?”

“Let’s take the corner booth. I can put my foot up.” She leads the way to the table farthest from the door.

After the waitress has taken our order, Daphne and I resume our discussion of music, and we talk about our favorite artists and most listened to songs. From there, the conversation naturally moves on to other topics.

And when the food arrives, I realize that not once since we arrived have I worried



about what to say. Talking to Daphne comes easy. I like that.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Daphne

Daphne

I 'm sad that we've finished dinner because I'm not ready for the date to end. Carson is charming, funny, and I still feel a little zing when he touches me.

After the waitress walks away to settle the check, Carson touches my hand.

"If you're feeling up to it, there is a big light display in Johnson City.

It's about forty-five minutes from here.

We took the kids right after Thanksgiving, and I was impressed.

It's really cool. But if you're hurting or need to get back to Rose's house?—"

"I'd love that." There will probably be walking involved, but I'm getting better with my crutches. And I love Christmas. Mostly.

He grazes his rough fingertips across my hand. "Awesome, and we might have to park a couple of blocks away, so if you're tired, I can—you know—help you get to the lights."

I flip my hand over and catch his fingers in mine. "Help me? Like you helped me get away from my car?"

“Yeah. Like that.” He gives me a small smile. “I’m not trying to be weird or pushy, but carrying you is an option.”

“We’ll see how I feel, but a break from the crutches might be nice.” I run my finger across his palm, and his smile widens.

The waitress drops off the receipt, and then Carson hands me the crutches and stays close as I walk to the truck.

Conversation flows easily as we drive, and I can’t remember ever enjoying a date this much. As we near the light display, I say, “Did the kids enjoy the lights? What did Fred think about them?”

I notice the muscles in Carson’s jaw tighten momentarily.

“He loved it. It was sweet to watch him ooh and ahh, but it was also a bit sad. I overheard him tell Mason that it was the first time ever seeing a Christmas light display. He’s almost twelve.

And he was with me last Christmas. We had already moved to the ranch, but I didn’t think to take him out to do that. ”

Rubbing his arm, I wait to respond until he’s parked along the side of the road. “You’re doing a good job, Carson. He won’t forget seeing the lights. And that memory will always be tied to you.”

“Thanks. It’s hard because I loved my sister, the one I grew up with.

But his mom wasn’t the sister I knew. Addiction turned her into someone else, and I can’t stand that person.

Poor Fred had it really hard for many years.

” He blows out a breath, then reaches for the door handle. “Sorry about souring the mood.”

“Don’t apologize. This is all part of getting to know each other. And I understand. I love my mom, but grief changed her, and that’s hard to reconcile.”

“Let me come help you out.”

As soon as he opens my door, I lean out and wrap my arms around his neck. “If the offer is still open, I’ll skip the crutches for this stop.”

His arms slip around me, and he lifts me out of the seat. He shuts the door with his hip, and he carries me down the block to the electric cooperative where the trees are all draped with lights.

When the display comes into view, I gasp. “It’s magical.”

“That’s what I thought. It’s pretty with all the trees completely covered in lights.”

“Like a wonderland.”

He finds an empty bench and sits me down. “If you need to elevate your foot, you can use my knee.”

“It’s okay right now. I’d rather snuggle beside you.”

His arm wraps around my shoulders, and he hugs me close. “You warm enough?”

“I am now.” I snuggle in a little closer.

Carson says, “Tell me about your Christmas traditions. What’s one gift you’ll remember forever?”

“I’ll start with the gift because that one’s easy.

One year, I desperately wanted this pony.

Not a real one, obviously. A toy. But it had to be a certain one, and every store in our area was out.

I knew because I’d drag my mom to the toy aisles any time we were in the stores.

Christmas morning, I still sprang out of bed, but I didn’t expect to find the pony because by that time I knew my parents were putting gifts under the tree.”

“But you got it?” Lights reflect in Carson’s eyes as he gazes down at me.

“I did. My dad had driven to a store two hours away to snag it before Christmas. I still have that pony, which is silly. But it will forever remind me of my dad.”

“Not the least bit silly. And funny thing, Anderson bought Bailey a real pony for Christmas one year. It was the same year he proposed to Bailey’s mom. I was shocked. I’d never heard of anyone getting an actual pony.”

“That is the sweetest. Dallas has nothing but good things to say about those guys, and I can see why.” I make a mental note to ask Rose about the pony story.

“What about the other part, your traditions? What do your Christmases look like?” he asks.

“They are very different now. My mom acts like she doesn’t want me around. Most

of my siblings barely speak to me. I feel guilty. And this year, she hasn't even called about Christmas. I need to call and tell her about the accident, but it hurts feeling like I'm a bother to my own mother."

"I'm really sorry. Sadly, I understand. The circumstances were different, but I get it. I'm glad you have your pony. And Rose. Sounds like y'all are really close."

"She's the best. Typically, I'd be at her parents' house with her for Christmas dinner. I'm not sure what will happen this year because everything is different, and they're newlyweds. I don't want to insert myself; you know?"

"I'd offer for you to celebrate with us, but..."

"He rubs his face. "Daphne, I'm having a great time.

And I'm going to be upfront with you. Because I have Fred to think about, I've got to take this slow.

He and I are in a good place. Finally. And after the life he had before, stability is important.

It'll be a while before I introduce you to him, and also, if I don't kiss you for a while, it's not because I'm not attracted to you.

I am. A lot. But it needs to be slow for me too. "

I nod against his shoulder. "I completely understand. And I wasn't saying all that to make you feel like you needed to swoop in and make my holiday merry."

"I know." He looks up at the lights. "Magical is a good word to describe this. And I don't just mean the display."

“Agreed.”

We sit in silence, watching from afar as kids climb onto Santa’s lap and tell him what they want for Christmas.

After a few minutes, I ask, “What was your favorite gift, Carson?”

“An ornament that Fred gave me last year. We were still figuring things out, so I was surprised when I saw the gift. It was one of those ornaments where people personalize it. And there were two guys, an adult and a child on it. Our names were below each person, and at the bottom it read, The Blakes . I’ll always treasure it because it symbolizes that we are a family. ”

“I love that.” A gust of wind blasts us, and I shudder.

He leans in close. “We should probably go. It’s getting colder, and we still have a bit of a drive. Hopefully, we can go out again... if you’re willing.”

I nod emphatically. “Absolutely. You have my number.”

I flop back on the bed. “He’s amazing, but I don’t want to keep you from Dallas. Go snuggle up with your husband.”

Rose perches on the edge of my bed. “My husband is out rounding up a naughty goat. When he gets home, we’ll go to bed, but I have time right now for you to tell me about the date.”

I shift to my side and prop my head up with my hand. “I’ve never met a guy who I could talk to as easily as I talk to you. Until now. Time flew by. I was sad when he dropped me off. But he wants to go out again.”

“Yay! Was there a goodnight kiss?”

“No, but we talked about that. Now that he’s essentially a dad to Fred, Carson wants to take things slow.

So there probably won’t be any kissing for a while.

I know Dallas kissed you on the first date, but he also proposed.

My situation is completely different. But just so you know, he isn’t saying anything to Fred about dating. ”

“He sounds like a great guy. I’m happy for you, Daphne.”

“Being patient will be hard, but I get why it’s important to do this at a snail’s pace. He did carry me around under the lights. That was one of those moments that I didn’t know to put on my bucket list, but wow. Talk about romantic.”

Rose laughs. “I never imagined Carson would be such a sweetheart.”

“He is. Totally. And that little spark... it’s growing.” My phone beeps, and I grin. “Carson is texting me.”

“You chat. I’ll see you in the morning. Call me if you need anything.”

Carson: I’m home, but I wanted to tell you again that I had a great time.

Me: I did too. And thank you for letting me know you made it home safely. I’m eager to see you again.

Carson: Same. We can text between dates if you want.



Me: I want.

He sends a laughing emoji as a reply.

I've never been shy, and I'm happy that my personality isn't sending Carson running in the opposite direction. But patience isn't my greatest virtue, so slow is going to be rough. I'm hoping the saying is true and that good things come to those who wait.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Carson

Carson

Fred and Mason are laughing up a storm as they toss hay off the trailer. Closed in the cab of the tractor, I can't make out what prompted the laugh, but it's fun to listen to.

My phone buzzes, and I check it in case Clint has something else he needs us to do while we're out here with the tractor.

But the text on my screen isn't from Clint.

Daphne: Good morning, Mr. Magical. I'm still smiling from last night.

I glance over my shoulder as I stop the tractor near the gate. The boys hop off the trailer and run toward the gate, and I tap out a reply to Daphne.

Me: I had fun spending time with you. And carrying you. Not sure if I'll be able to steal away again before Christmas, but I'll see what I can do.

Daphne: I do not want to interfere with any of y'all's Christmas plans. But I do want to see you again. And don't forget to send me the name of that soap. \*Sigh\*

Laughing, I flip my phone over as Fred opens the door. "Hey. Gate's open. Can we ride on the trailer all the way back? We'll be careful."

"Sure. Hold on because it gets bumpy."

“I know.” He starts to close the door, then stops. “What’s funny?”

“A friend texted me something funny.” I answer honestly but keep it very vague. To most people, the soap text might not be funny, but I can picture Daphne sighing, adding dramatic flair to emphasize that she really likes the way it smells.

Fred is still eyeing me. “One of the other guys?”

“No. Someone else.” I shift in my seat. “I’m getting hungry. We should head back.”

He nods and steps down.

I check that Fred and Mason are clear of the path before pulling through the gate.

There’s probably no harm in letting Fred know that I’m seeing someone, but I don’t want him to even worry about that.

Daphne might get tired of me after a few dates.

And since she’s close with Rose, Daphne might be around some, and I don’t want Fred to dislike her if things do go south.

If we’re still dating six months from now, I’ll consider introducing her to Fred.

Six months would be the longest I’ve dated anyone.

By about 5 months. Though I really haven’t dated much at all.

It’s not that I don’t like people. Most of the time, I do.

I learned long ago to be content in my own company, but I didn’t break out of old

patterns until Fred came along. Then I needed to for both of our sakes.

After parking the tractor, I find the boys beside the truck. Fred glances at my phone. “Thanks for letting us stay in the trailer. We’re kinda big to squeeze into the cab with you.”

Feigning shock, I nudge him. “You calling me fat?”

Mason cackles, and Fred shakes his head. “No, Uncle Car, I promise.”

I join in on the laugh, and Fred relaxes.

“Hop in. Let’s go eat. I wonder what Goldie made this morning.”

Mason and Fred buckle in. Then Mason says, “I hope she made pancakes. She makes really good ones. And she might make them because Dag loves them too, and she likes doing things that make Dag kiss her more.”

“Eww. The guys on the ranch kiss way too much.” Fred shakes his head disapprovingly.

Mason grins. “They love each other. You can ask Mr. Clint. He’ll tell you. When I first came to live on the ranch, I saw Mr. Clint kiss Miss Joji. But that was because there was a bad storm. He didn’t know that he loved her yet. They were just friends.”

“I don’t kiss my friends.” Fred wags a finger to emphasize his declaration.

I can’t say I’m not a tad relieved to hear him say that. It’ll be a little sad when he grows out of this stage. One day, I’ll worry that he’s kissing girls.

Mason sighs. “I don’t kiss my friends either. But one day, if I ever see my friend

Clementine again, I might kiss her. For sure, I'm going to tell her she's pretty because I never got to tell her."

"Did she move away or something?" I lock gazes with Mason through the rearview mirror.

He nods. "Yeah. But I didn't find out until after she left. It happened fast."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too. But since Fred and Bailey are here, I'm not as sad as I used to be."

I park outside the main house and turn around to look at the guys. "Good. I'm really glad you and Fred met. And I hope y'all stay friends for a long time."

Fred nods. "Yeah. Like forever."

They scramble out of the truck, then high-five each other.

It warms my heart to see Fred getting the kind of childhood some people only dream about.

I'm not saying I'm the best parent in the world, but here on the ranch, he has good friends and lots of people who care about him. What's not to love about that?

There's just over a week until Christmas, and I haven't had a free evening to take Daphne out again. But today, I have some last-minute shopping to do, so I figured I'd invite her along.

I don't even bother texting. Sitting in my truck, I call her.

She answers on the second ring. “Carson, hi!”

“Howdy. How are you today? Feel up to going shopping with me?” I’m amazed at how natural it feels to invite her out. The request wasn’t preceded by days of overthinking, practicing what I should say.

“Yes! I can’t drive yet, so you’ll have to come get me, but I’m doing great. I mean, I’m still on crutches. I can put weight on the foot, so it isn’t so horrible. And I miss you.”

“I miss you too, Daphne. We can get you one of those motorized carts when we’re out so that you don’t have to be on crutches the whole time.”

“Maybe. When should I be ready?” She sounds just as excited as I am about seeing each other again, and that is good for my ego.

Everything about Daphne is good for my ego.

“I’m headed out now. Are you at Rose’s or your apartment?” I start the engine and swap over to speaker, so that I can talk as I drive.

“I’ll text you an address. And don’t freak out when you get here. At the gate, just give them your name. Later, when we’re together, I’ll explain where I’ve been staying. It’s a bit of a story.”

Now I’m curious. “Can’t wait to hear it.” I check my texts and see an address in San Antonio. It’s not far from the mall where I need to shop, so that’s convenient. “I’ll be there in thirty-four minutes.” I padded the drive time with an extra couple of minutes in case I hit unexpected traffic.

When she mentioned a gate, it kind of went over my head I guess because this stone

building with a guard inside was not what I was expecting. I stop and roll down my window.

“Address please.” The man is polite but not overly friendly.

I rattle off the address that Daphne texted. Then add, “I’m here to see Daphne Emerson.”

“Can I see your ID please?”

I hand over my license and wait while he taps on his little tablet thing.

Then he gives it back. “Thank you. Have a great day.” He points to the gate, and the bar is lifting.

And off I go into a neighborhood that is way too nice for the likes of me.

When I get to the house, Daphne is waiting on the sidewalk.

I jump out and help her get loaded. “You look great!”

She runs a hand down the front of her baggy sweater. “Thanks. I’ve had to modify my jeans because of my foot. What do you think?” She kicks up her bad foot, showing off the bow framing a slit at the bottom of the leg.”

“That’s cute. I’d do that but the bows would get ratty, dirty. Wouldn’t look good.”

Hands on my chest, she leans in close as she laughs. “You’re funny. Where are we going to shop? Your timing is good because I have a few gifts yet to buy.” She buckles her seat belt.

I slide in behind the wheel and shift into gear. “Where do you need to go? We’ll start there.”

As I shift into gear, a McLaren turns into the driveway, and Daphne waves. “That’s my boss.”

“I was curious about the explanation before, but now I’m super interested in what’s going on.”

She rests an open hand on the center console, and I lace my fingers with hers.

“I stayed with Rose for the first few days, but have you ever been so bored that counting strands of hair seemed entertaining? That’s how bad it got.

It was fine when someone was around the house, but Rose and Dallas have stuff to do, and Floofy sleeps way more than I do.

I love cats, and someday when I don’t live in an apartment, I’ll get one.

But anyway, tangent. I was bored and wanted to go back to work.

” Her thumb grazes the side of my hand. “But I can’t drive, and I work really close to here, which isn’t really close to Matchmaker Ranch.

Definitely too far to walk, especially on crutches.

So I asked my boss about working out some way to forward calls and letting me work remote.

And I explained the whole situation. He and his wife offered me a guest room.



So I'm staying here for a week or two. I'll go to Rose's for Christmas. She insisted."

"Have you talked to your mom?" I give her hand a squeeze, wanting to encourage her because I know that family is a hard topic.

"I called her. She said she was sorry I wouldn't be able to make it to Christmas. Mom lives in a third-floor apartment."

Anger bubbles up inside me. How can a mother treat her child so badly? With so little care?

"That's terrible. I'm so sorry. You're amazing, Daphne. It's not right that she treats you that way." I pull her hand to my lips. "I wish things were different. For your sake."

"It is what it is. And I've learned that even if I don't get everything I want, I can still carve out a truly happy life."

"That's a great takeaway."

She shifts in her seat so that she's facing me. "You can kiss my hand like that anytime you want. I liked it. And I'm glad you aren't weirded out that I'm staying at my boss's house. I was worried that you'd—"

"Think you were too fancy for me? Worry that he secretly has a thing for you? Feel insecure about a super wealthy guy sending you flowers and offering you his guest room? Those thoughts barely crossed my mind... barely more than a few hundred times since we pulled away from the curb. The dude has an awesome car though."

"You seriously have nothing to worry about. I swear. Austin is happily married and besides that, he isn't my type."

“What’s your type, Daphne?” No one says that their type is chubby guys who make them laugh, but I’m curious about what she will say.

She shrugs. “Don’t know. I just know when someone isn’t my type.

It’s not about what a guy looks like or how much is stashed in a bank account.

I’m more interested in that spark. That little intangible something that makes my entire body light up when they come around. I don’t know if that makes any sense.”

“It does.” Prior to the night we met, that description would’ve made no sense to me. But with Daphne, it all makes sense. There’s an attraction, for sure. But also an unexplainable connection. “Now that I’ve met you.” I kiss her hand again.

Grinning, she sighs. “I’m sad that my car was completely wrecked, but I’m thrilled that we met.

And I’m not going to say that I owe the stupid driver thanks for hitting me—I’m still mad at him—because we would’ve met at the party if I hadn’t flipped my car.

I can’t tell you how happy I was when you ran up to my window.

For one, I was alive, and having you speak to me kind of confirmed it.

Also, you were so kind and funny. And you didn’t freak out when I put my hands all over you trying to find your phone. ”

“That was… a tad awkward.” I wink at her. “Definitely an ice breaker.”

Her delightful laugh echoes in the truck. “I wasn’t really thinking straight that night. I was in shock and massively attracted to you. Common sense was absent. So I’m

sorry.”

“Don’t even worry about it. It’s all good.”

For the next several hours, we make our way through stores, snagging last-minute gifts. And getting to spend time with her makes me feel like Christmas came a bit early.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Daphne

Daphne

“We’re doing what?” I reach back to make sure the bed is behind me before sitting down.

Rose glances over her shoulder. “One of Matthew’s grandchildren has a sick kid, so all the plans changed. And we’ve been invited to Stargazer Springs for Christmas Eve festivities. It’ll be fun.”

I suck in a deep breath. “It’ll be awkward. How am I supposed to be around Carson and act like he’s not the best thing since sliced bread? Because I’m telling you that I would give up sliced bread completely if I could have Carson. No questions asked. I don’t even have to think about it.”

“Please. Tandy and Matthew are going, and I’ll just be thinking about you all evening if you stay here.”

“I’ll go. And I’ll be... demure.”

My friend laughs. “Of course you will. Now, get ready. We’ll leave in an hour.”

While the situation isn’t ideal because I haven’t the least clue who knows that Carson and I are dating and I have to rein in my flirting because of Fred, I am looking forward to spending time at the ranch. I’ve heard so much about it from both Rose and Carson.

My choices are limited to what Rose has picked out from my closet, so it doesn't take forever and a day to choose what to wear.

Hopefully, this isn't a fancy shindig because I'm sporting another pair of my modified jeans and a baggy red sweater.

This is my new standard attire outside of work until I can get my foot into a regular pair of pants.

I might need to buy another sweater or two.

I do breathing exercises as Dallas parks outside Beau and Lilith's house.

"Everyone is nice, Daphne. You don't need to be nervous." Dallas turns around to look at me. "Seriously. It'll be fun."

"I'm not nervous."

Rose giggles. "She's mustering her self-control so that she doesn't tackle Carson."

"Truth." I slide out and grab my crutches. While my hobbling skills are improving, I still resemble a newborn fawn when trying to get around. But in spite of everything, I will have fun tonight. Seeing Carson is an extra treat.

I make it two steps inside the door, and my phone is buzzing in my pocket. The rhythm of the buzzing tells me that it's my brother Dane. I can't ignore his call on Christmas Eve.

"Rose, my brother is calling. Is there a quiet place I can talk to him?"

She points to a door at the far end of the living room. "Through there. On the other

side of the game room is the mess hall. It's probably empty. And there is a porch behind it if you dare brave the cold."

"Thanks." I swipe to answer, then tuck the phone between my head and shoulder. "Hey there. I'm getting somewhere quiet. Merry Christmas."

Dane chuckles. "I can just picture you on crutches walking and talking. Please don't hurt yourself."

"I'm good. I think my phone is in more danger than I am. But I'm trying not to drop it. Are you having a good Christmas so far?"

"I am. But listen, we can talk more later. I just wanted to give you a heads up. Denise is likely going to call you soon. Make sure you answer."

Startled, I grab the porch rail, and both crutches fall to the ground. "She's avoided me for so long. What did you say to get her to call me? And thank you."

"Just answer her call, okay? We can talk about everything else later. Love you, sis."

"Love you too. Merry Christmas." An incoming call beeps in my ear, and I pull in a calming breath before answering.

My sister. I haven't spoken to her in months.

Not for lack of trying, but since I moved out years ago, she pretty much only gives me one-word answers.

And she never initiates conversations. "Hello."

"Hey, Daphne. This is Denise."

“It’s so good to hear from you. Merry Christmas.” Leaning against the rail, I peer out at the stars.

“I spoke to Dane earlier today. He said you were in an accident. Is that why you aren’t coming to Mom’s tomorrow?” Worry tinges my sister’s voice.

“I’m on crutches, so stairs are hard for me right now. Otherwise, I’d totally celebrate with y’all.” I probably sound like I’ve had a bit too much spiked eggnog, but I want her to know how happy I am that she called.

Denise is quiet for several heartbeats. “You were hurt? What happened? I thought…”

“I’ll recover. I’m already healing. What were you going to say? You thought what?”

“I thought you wanted us to leave you alone. That we were a bother.” Her voice cracks on the last word.

I grasp the rail and drag my cheek against my shoulder to wipe away tears. “That’s not true at all. You aren’t a bother. None of y’all are. I feel bad that I didn’t even drop off gifts for you. But Mom said it was best to wait.”

“I’m sorry I’ve been distant. Mom said we needed to give you space. I thought that’s what you wanted.”

I’m not sure why my mother wants me cut off from my family. Payback for moving out maybe? But it hurts and makes me irrationally angry. “No. I miss you, Denise. And I’m really glad you called me.”

“Merry Christmas. I have my license now, so maybe while I’m out of school this week, we can go get lunch somewhere.”

“I’d love that. So much.”

“Great. I’ll text you. But I need to run. Everyone else is here now.”

“Have fun. I can’t wait to see you.” I stay on the line until she ends the call, then lean against the rail looking out at the stars.

Footsteps on the wood porch catch my attention, and I turn.

Carson smiles and reaches down to pick up my crutches. “You’ll need these. Carrying you here might give away our secret.” He rests them against the post, then wipes a tear off my cheek with his thumb. “You’re upset.” Concern twinges in his gorgeous eyes.

“It’s a mix of happy tears and fury tears.

I’m trying to focus on the happy. My sister called me.

She was really little when my dad died, and I took care of her more than my mom did.

Denise was eight when I moved out, and since then, she hardly speaks to me.

It tears me up inside because I feel guilty for leaving. I don’t want her to hate me.”

He rests his forearms on the rail next to me, and his flannel shirt brushes my arm. “But she called you. That sounds like a good thing.”

“It is. It sounds like my mom had told her that I wanted space. Told her not to bother me.”



“Ouch.”

“Yeah. But Denise suggested we meet for lunch, and I’m excited about that.”

“Good.” He glances back toward the mess hall, then leans in closer. “You look amazing tonight.”

“You’re always amazing, Carson. I hope having me here isn’t too awkward.” A gust of wind slices through my sweater, and I shiver.

“Not at all. Let’s get you inside before you freeze.” He holds out my crutches and strolls beside me to the door.

In the game room, three kids are clustered in front of a screen. The girl, who looks younger than the two boys, has a controller in her hand and is leaning from side to side, mimicking her character’s movements. One of the two boys must be Fred.

Carson stops before opening the door to the main house. “Fred, Mason, and Bailey, y’all ready to eat?”

“Yep.” Bailey sets the controller down. “Fred, you can sit by me.” She reaches for one of the boys.

He steps out of her reach but nods. “Mason and I will sit with you.” His gaze lands on me, then snaps to Carson.

“This is Daphne. She’s Rose’s good friend. Remember how I helped someone who had an accident? This is who I helped.”

The boy Bailey didn’t reach for sticks out his hand. “I’m Mason. It’s nice to meet you. Christmas on the ranch is the coolest.” He glances at my foot. “Sorry you got

hurt.”

“It’s nice to meet you too, Mason.” I extend a hand to Bailey. “Hi.”

She cocks her head and studies my foot. “What happened?”

“I was in a car accident, and I broke a bone in my foot.”

Eyes squinted, she stares ahead as if deep in thought. “I don’t know much about feet. But I’ll google it later on Anderson’s phone. He lets me use his phone a lot.”

Fred steps closer and reaches out like Mason did. “Hey. Uncle Car told me that a bad driver hit your car. Sorry about that.”

“Yeah. But your uncle was a big help that night.” I keep my tone even, trying not to gush.

Fred flashes Carson a grin. “He’s pretty cool.”

In a flash, the three of them disappear into the house.

Carson holds open the door. “And now you’ve met Fred.”

“I think Bailey might have a bit of a crush on him.”

He laughs. “Bailey loves the name Fred. And she treats him like he’s her Prince Charming. It’s amusing.”

“How cute.”

“I’m not sure Fred always thinks so, but at least he doesn’t treat her like she has

cooties anymore.” He touches a hand to my back as I hobble through the doorway.  
“Careful. Don’t trip on the rug.”

If he wants me to focus on staying upright, he shouldn’t touch me. Because the zing that travels through every nerve ending when he does is distracting. Gloriously distracting.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Carson

Carson

I hear Fred up and about two hours before sunrise and a half hour before my alarm was set to go off. I stay still with my eyes closed, mustering the energy to get out of bed. Daphne and I texted until late into the night, and lots of coffee will be required to get me through today's festivities.

Listening, I try to figure out what Fred is doing. It sounds like he's in the kitchen, but we'll all have breakfast at the main house. Ava and Goldie always have a feast laid out. One for breakfast and then again for dinner.

The coffee pot starts burbling, and I smile. The kid is making me coffee. I had no idea he even knew how to brew a pot.

I worried that he would pepper me with questions after meeting Daphne, but we must not have raised any suspicions because Fred hasn't said a word about her. And that's a good thing. If he asks, I won't lie to him, but I'm also not ready to tell him I'm dating. It's too early for that.

Having the responsibility of Fred is keeping me levelheaded. If I were all alone, I'd have flung myself into this relationship headfirst. Which often just ends with a massive headache.

But I'm hopeful. Daphne is amazing. I'm pinching myself that someone as smart, funny, and beautiful as her is interested in me.

When I hear footsteps in the hall, I yank on a shirt and jeans and sit on the edge of the bed, rubbing my face.

After a quick knock, Fred pushes open the door. “Merry Christmas. I made you coffee.”

“Thanks, bud. That’s exactly what I need.

” I take the mug and swallow down what should’ve been a first glorious sip.

It’s anything but. The kid might’ve completely skipped using water.

He somehow liquefied the beans. This stuff will add to the hair on my chest. Which isn’t necessarily a good thing. I have enough of that as it is.

Fred is staring at the mug. “Since it’s Christmas, I wanted to do something nice for you.”

Smiling, I sip a bit more. “I appreciate it.”

“I didn’t know how much to put in, so I filled that whole bowl. Hopefully it wasn’t too much.” His gaze is fixed on my hand, and I shift the mug to read the writing.

World’s Best Dad

Tears sting my eyes, and I bite my lip to keep my chin from quivering. Then I set the mug on the table and open my arms. “The mug is awesome. I love it.”

He hugs me. “Ms. Poppy took me and Mason shopping the other day, and I had money because Ms. Joji pays me when I help her on the goat farm. She’s nice.”

I nod because words aren't possible at the moment.

Fred steps back. "Mason told me that when he called Mr. Kent Dad for the first time, he cried a little. So I didn't want to give it to you in front of everyone. You know, in case it made you cry."

Laughing, I tousle his hair. "I appreciate that."

He grins, but then his expression grows serious. "I never had a dad before coming to live with you. You're a good one. I'm glad you wanted me."

I pull him close again. "I'm sorry you lost your mom, but I'm really happy you came to live with me. Never forget that I want you here."

He swallows, still serious. "Is it okay if I call you Dad?"

"I'd like that." I swipe at a tear. "A lot."

He wraps his arms around me and buries his head in my chest. "Thanks, Dad."

I hold him close and whisper, "Merry Christmas."

Because I can't think of a better gift than the one this kid just gave me. Having lousy parents was something Fred didn't deserve, but hopefully knowing that I chose to be his dad will make his life a little brighter.

The main house is overflowing with people, food, and gifts. Lilith has outdone herself with the decorating. It looks like the set of a Christmas movie. I'm not sure I've ever seen so many decorations in one place.

Lilith, Ava, and Joji offered to wrap gifts for me. All I had to do was choose what

paper I wanted them to use. So I didn't have to hide Fred's gifts in the house, and his presents will look nice before he tears into them. Living here is spoiling me. And I'm not complaining one bit.

I step into the kitchen and stand beside Ava. "How can I help?"

She wipes her hands as she turns toward me. "You can't. It's all taken care of. Enjoy yourself. Want me to make you a latte?"

"I'll make one for myself. Thanks. But if you need something, I'm willing."

Arms open, she motions for me to hug her. "You're a good one, Carson. I'm very happy you and Fred found your way to the ranch."

If I get too much more of this mushy stuff, I'm going to be a blubbering mess. "Me too."

Poppy rubs my arm as she walks past. "Hey, did Fred give you his gift?"

I nod. "And I mostly held it together when he asked if he could call me Dad. Thank you for taking him shopping. It truly was a surprise to see that mug. I'll treasure it forever."

Poppy smiles and says, "He's such a sweet kid. And you're doing a great job as a dad."

"Thanks, Poppy."

Ava gives me a side hug. "She's right. You are. Now, go make yourself a fancy coffee while I get the food set out."

“Yes, ma’am.” I wander toward the espresso machine and join Archer and Tyler.

Tyler pours froth in the shape of a heart onto the top of a latte, then steps back and whistles. “I win.”

Nodding, Archer laughs. “My heart looked more like a blob. You definitely are better at this.” He turns to me, eyebrows raised. “Want a latte? Tyler will make it pretty.”

“Sure. Sounds great.”

Tyler points to the syrup bottles lined up along the back of the buffet. “Pick your poison.”

“Surprise me.”

This is only our second Christmas on the ranch, but I look forward to many more. Growing up, I never enjoyed big family Christmases. When I was little, my sister made it special, but after she left, it wasn’t very merry.

But being here makes up for many years of missing out. I hope it’s filling Fred’s tank the same way.

Who knew a job could be life-changing?

My phone buzzes, and I slide it out of my pocket.

Daphne: My brother showed up this morning! He flew in from Alaska, and Dallas snuck off to pick him up really early. I hope y’all are having a great day as well.

Knowing how much family means to Daphne, I send a heart. I’m glad her brother flew down.



Me: Wonderful. That sure makes for a Merry Christmas. And we're having a great day so far.

I hit send and let my fingers hover over the screen a second. Then I type out another message.

Me: Fred called me Dad.

Daphne: And now I'm crying all over again. That's awesome. You're a great dad. He's a lucky kid. Really, I think you're both lucky. You found each other and made a family.

Me: We did. Merry Christmas, beautiful

Daphne sends a kissing emoji, which sends my thoughts on that rabbit trail. I haven't kissed her yet, but I sure have spent a lot of time thinking about kissing her. At first, I was waiting to make sure I had real feelings.

And I for sure feel something.

Daphne

Daphne

The last few months have been the best of my adult life. And it's not just Carson that's good. My siblings and I are talking regularly again. My foot healed, and I'm no longer hobbling around on crutches. Life is just good.

Which means I've been keeping an eye on the sky. Because whenever I have a parade, life rains on it. And because I have a date scheduled with Carson tomorrow on Valentine's Day, I'm a little extra nervous.

I tuck my purse into the bottom drawer of my desk, turn on the computer, then open the calendar to make sure I'm informed about the day's schedule. Both mine and Austin's.

Normally, I run and grab coffee, but a pop-up notification snags my attention. I open the email from Austin that has the subject Job Posting. I can hammer out a quick job listing super quick and have one thing off my plate. He hires new programmers pretty routinely.

But when I read the rest—the part I couldn't see in the pop-up—fear swirls like dark clouds overhead. The job description is a lot of the stuff I do. And it's listed as an admin position.

Maybe I do need that cup of coffee first.

As I stand, Austin pops his head out of his office. “Hey, have a few minutes to meet before everyone else arrives?”

I nod and trudge into his office, willing to bet that whatever he wants to talk about is going to douse my parade.

He points to a chair as he sits behind his desk. “You can leave the door open. This won’t take long.”

I ease into the armchair, bracing myself for bad news. “I saw the email about the job.”

He taps on his keyboard, gaze fixed on his screen. “That’s why I wanted to talk to you. This has been a few weeks coming, but I had to get a few things in order before this conversation could take place.”

I cross my arms and breathe in deeply. “Okay.”

He glances at me. “You cold? Is everything okay?” Genuine concern shows in his eyes.

“Please just say what you called me in here for.”

With a puzzled look on his face, he stares at me a second, then gives a small shake of his head. “When you were out for that week and I was covering for you?—”

“I’m so sorry about that. I tried to come back as soon as?—”

He puts a hand up. “I’m not upset about it. But I realized how much you do. It’s a lot. Marv and I couldn’t run this place without you. We barely made it through that week.” He slides a sheet of paper across the desk. “That’s the reason for the job

posting. We're hiring someone to help you."

"To help me?" I blink, processing what he's saying.

"Yes. You didn't think I'd try to replace you? I don't even want to think about training someone new. And you know as well as I do, that most people wouldn't enjoy working with me."

"You're a great boss."

Laughing, he points to the sheet in front of me.

"You can skip the flattery. The decision has already been made. Your new title is Senior Executive Assistant. The promotion comes with a bump in salary and stock options. I want you to know that Marv and I truly appreciate what you do here, and we will do everything we can to make sure you don't leave. "

I run my fingers over the words on the paper. "I'm not sure what to say. And here I thought you were upset that I took tomorrow off."

"Not in the least. You deserve time off."

"This means a lot to me, Mr. Graves, I mean, Austin. From the bottom of my heart, thank you."

He nods. "And please hire someone who doesn't chew gum. That noise makes me want to crawl out of my skin."

"I know, and I'll keep that in mind." I fight the urge to walk around the desk and hug my boss. He's not much of a hugger. Unless your name is Zoe and you look at him like he hung the moon. Neither of those are true for me.

As I walk back to my desk, the elevator dings, and a delivery guy exits carrying a vase filled with a mix of red, orange, and vivid pink blooms. I'm almost jealous of the recipient. Okay, not almost. I'm totally jealous.

Smiling, I ask, "How may I help you?" Which is a somewhat silly question because he's obviously delivering flowers.

He checks a sheet of paper in his hand. "I have a delivery for Daphne Emerson."

Surprised, I tap my chest like a dork. "That's me."

"Great. Then I don't have to keep looking." He hands over the vase. "Have a great day."

Waving, I scan for a card. Please have a card because the curiosity of not knowing who they're from will kill me. I find it hidden on the opposite side.

Daphne –

Beautiful flowers for a beautiful lady. I'm looking forward to our date tomorrow.

-Carson

I hold the card to my chest and close my eyes. This man. Of all the men driving trucks on Texas backroads, this is the one who rescued me. How did I get so lucky?

Making rash life decisions after knowing someone a few months is risky, and I have no plans to do that. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't have strong feelings for Carson. And he hasn't even kissed me.

We've only known each other two and a half months, which may not seem like a long

time to wait for a kiss.

However, I've wanted one since the day he came up to the hospital the morning after my accident.

With both our lives being busy and his pretending that he's not dating anyone, I've only seen him once since Christmas, and that was almost a month ago.

I'm really hoping for a Valentine's Day kiss.

"I can't talk long. He'll be here any minute." I peek through the blinds, watching the parking lot.

Rose laughs. "Not at all excited, are you?"

"Too excited maybe. He arranged a picnic for us. How romantic is that? But I'm also nervous."

"Nervous? About what?"

Even though it sounds crazy, I can admit to Rose why I'm waiting for the bad thing to come. "There have been too many good things and not enough to balance it out. So I'm nervous that one big, horrible thing is coming."

"Nothing bad? You mean like flipping your car or having your mom ignore your calls?"

"Okay, so maybe I'm worrying for no reason."

"You spend so much time looking at the good that you forget that everything is pretty balanced. And I am sorry about your mom. Hopefully, that situation changes soon."

I shrug. “Don’t want to talk about that right now. I don’t need to open the door with red puffy eyes.” Looking in the little mirror near my door, I make sure my misty eyes haven’t ruined my makeup. “He just pulled in. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Call me after. And let me know if he finally kisses you.”

“How do you know he hasn’t already?” Peeking out, I smile as Carson gets out of his truck.

“Because you haven’t called me squealing. I know you, Daphne.”

“Yeah. Well, here’s hoping I call you squealing later. Bye.” I end the call and yank open the door before Carson even has a chance to knock.

“Hey there.” He holds out a small gift bag. “I got you a little something.”

Ignoring the bag, I wrap my arms around him. “I’ve missed you.”

He tightens his embrace and pulls me close. “Same. I know we text or talk every day, but it’s not the same as seeing you and holding you.”

I pat his chest as I pull back. “Now, let’s see that bag. And I don’t know why you brought a gift because you already sent me those amazing flowers.” I point over my shoulder to where the bouquet is sitting.

He grins. “It’s just something small. My way of asking if you’ll be my valentine.”

“Yes!” I pull a box of chocolates and a bar of soap. “Is this your soap?”

“I haven’t personally used that bar because giving used soap as a gift is weird, but that’s the kind I use.”

I inhale the absolute delicious scent of the bar. “It’s amazing. I may just tuck it under my pillow.”

“We should head out. The food is in insulated bags, but I don’t want to risk it getting warm.” He holds out his hand. Waiting for me to clasp it.

I do. And just like always, the warmth of his hand has my heart swing dancing in my chest. “We should go dancing sometime. Do you like to dance?”

“Haven’t been dancing much. Or at all. But I’m up to try.”

Conversation flows as comfortably as always while we make our way to the picnic spot. After passing the entrance to Stargazer Springs Ranch, he drives another half mile before turning onto a dirt road.

“If I’d known we were coming to the ranch, I could have met you here. You didn’t have to drive all that way just to come get me.”

“And miss spending time with you on the way? Where’s the fun in that? Valentine’s Day is about spending time together.” He punches a code into a keypad, and the gate swings open.

“Aren’t you worried someone will see us together here on the ranch?” I don’t mention Fred by name, but it’s not hard to figure out what I mean.

“Fred’s in school for another couple of hours.

Then Poppy is picking him up. Plus, the boys don’t come to this part of the ranch.

Beau has a cabin out here, and he and Lilith are the only ones who come out this way.



But when I was talking to Ava about planning a picnic, Beau walked in and suggested this spot. ”

“This area is beautiful.”

“It is.” He parks in front of a cabin. “I figured we’d lay the blanket out over by the creek.”

It isn’t long before we have a large denim blanket stretched out. Carson sets two cooler bags on one corner, then strides back to the truck. He returns with an armful of throw pillows.

“Did you buy those just for today? Because you don’t look like the throw pillow type. Plus, you didn’t have any when I was at your house that day.”

“Guilty as charged. And if you want them when we’re done, they’re all yours. I’m not sure I’d convince Fred that I bought a bunch of throw pillows for no reason.”

“I can keep them until our next picnic.” Am I angling for another date? Yes, I definitely am. I want a lifetime of dates with Carson. It’s way too early to say that out loud, but I can think it.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Carson

Carson

Daphne holds out the last chocolate-covered strawberry. "Open up."

"You can eat it."

She shakes her head. "I want you to have it."

I open my mouth and let her feed me. The date started off great and just keeps getting better. "Thank you."

"You really made this date extra special. The barbecue was fantastic. The strawberries were amazing. But the best thing about today is the company. I've missed spending time with you."

"Trying to keep my dating under wraps makes it hard to get away, and I apologize for that."

"No need to apologize. We've both been busy." She shifts closer to me. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Uh-oh. Questions that need an introductory question are usually hard or uncomfortable." I make sure my tone conveys humor. "But yes. You may ask me anything."

Trailing a finger along the back of my hand, she says, “You’ve talked about your sister and everything that happened, but you haven’t said much about your mom. Are you still in contact with her?”

“I’m not.” My mom isn’t something I talk about because saying it out loud dredges up pain.

It’s a wound time hasn’t had much of an effect on.

But talking to Daphne is like a balm, and I decide to share the story.

“When I was seventeen, Mom got a new boyfriend. He was a lot like the others and didn’t like the fact that she had a kid.

But one thing was different. He threw a punch at me one evening for eating the last slice of bread.

I gathered my stuff and moved out that same night. ”

Her jaw drops open. “Your mom just let you leave? She didn’t stop you?”

“She said it was probably for the best if I left. She wasn’t sober when she said it. Maybe later she regretted it, but I haven’t sought her out to ask.”

“Carson, I’m sorry.”

I stand and hold out my hand. “The area out here is pretty. Want to walk a bit?”

“Sure.” She slips her hand in mine.

We walk toward the creek, birds chirping, wind rustling.

“I think about my mom from time to time. Over the last few years, I’ve looked her up a few times, but when I did, it seemed like she was still having trouble.

So I stayed away. Last I heard anything about her was when social services called regarding Fred.

The social worker made a passing comment that Fred’s grandmother wasn’t a safe option.

And I haven’t looked for my mom since then.

More to protect Fred than to protect myself. ”

“I’m sorry she wasn’t a good mom to you. And that she’s not a safe option for Fred. Not that I’d want him out of your life. That’s not what I mean. But it’s sad that she can’t be a grandma to him. You both deserve better.”

I give her hand a squeeze. “Once upon a time, I was pretty bitter about not having a good mom. But life goes on, and I sort of put those thoughts to the side. Then we moved out here to the ranch. Since coming here, Ava, Lilith, and Joji dote on me and Fred like we’re family.

After all those years of wondering what it would’ve been like to have a mom that cared, I have that now.

It’s kind of wild. Very unexpected. And Fred loves it.

For a kid with no grandparents, he’s made out like a bandit here on the ranch. ”

“That’s awesome. Rose has told me how amazing everyone at the ranch is.”

“They are.”

I step behind her as we get to the foot bridge. “Let’s cross here.”

“How old is this thing? I don’t want to get halfway across and drop into the water. It’s a bit too cold for that.”

“First of all, I wouldn’t intentionally put you in danger. The bridges are pretty new. Beau had them all built the year before last. Before that, people had to drive around to a different gate to access the other part of the ranch.”

“All right. I’ll trust you.” She reaches behind her and clasps my hand. “Do you have any questions for me?”

I’m still wondering how someone as stunning as Daphne is interested in a chubby guy like me, but I’ll table that question until later. “Do you want kids?”

She stops at the end of the bridge. “Is that a trick question?”

It takes me a half second to get on the same page. “I didn’t ask because of Fred. I’m curious because when someone spends years parenting siblings, they sometimes decide that they don’t really want to do that all over again. That’s why I asked.”

Hand in hand, we weave our way through the trees.

Daphne grazes her thumb across the side of my finger. “Even knowing how much work it takes, I would like to have children of my own. If it works out that way. What about you?”

“Before Fred moved in, I was mostly indifferent about the idea of kids. But now, I think I would like more. But I’d never want Fred to feel pushed out or replaced.”

“Obviously. He’s the one who made you a dad.”

“Right. I still get a funny feeling in my chest when he calls me that.” I stop beside a tree and wrap my arms around Daphne. “Thanks for taking the day off so that we could do this.”

“Are you kidding? This is a treat.” She shifts and looks up at me. “And I know the guys are covering so that you can be here. Tell them thanks for me.”

“I will. Parker and Kent both know we’re dating, and they handled things. I’ll return the favor when they need time off.”

Hands on the front of my shirt, Daphne inches up on her toes. “You’ve probably noticed that I’m not shy about stating what I want. I do have a filter, which may seem surprising since I let so much through. But you’d be shocked at what I don’t say. Anyway, getting back to what I want.”

“What’s that?” I tuck a lock of hair behind her ear.

Her gaze drops to my lips, then bounces back up. “It’s Valentine’s Day, and this has been an incredibly romantic date. The cherry on the top would be if you?—”

I’m not always the quickest when it comes to hints, but I’m learning to understand Daphne. So I lean in and touch my lips to hers.

Pressing in closer, she grabs my shirt in her fists.

The wind kicks up as I deepen the kiss. While I haven’t kissed a ton of women, I’ve kissed a few. No other kiss has felt like this.

Raindrops patter through the branches and slap me on top of the head. Rain? Now?

The timing is inconvenient. Last time I looked at the sky, there wasn't even a hint of rain.

I pull back. "I should get you back to the truck."

Shaking her head, Daphne pulls me back to her. "No, you should kiss me again. It's not like we'll melt."

I don't need convincing. I spin her around and lean over, trying to protect her from the pelting rain.

Our lips dance while the inconvenient cloud pounds me with rain. As the kiss continues, I forget about the rain, the ranch. Everything. It's just me, Daphne, and this electrical connection.

When Daphne breaks the kiss, I realize that the hair on my arms is standing tall.

While I can't deny the sparks between us, I think I misinterpreted the electrical connection. And I do not want to be under a tree when lightning strikes. "We need to go."

She leans up and gives me a quick peck. "But the rain stopped."

"I didn't notice. I was too focused on other things." I wink, then snap out of my attraction-fueled haze. This is not the time for flirting. "Feel the air? I think we're going to get lightning. We need to find a safe spot."

She touches her arm. "Oh! I just thought it was because of the kiss." After clasping my hand, she scans the ground. "We can pick up where we left off in the truck."

The sudden burst of rain has turned the path to mud. "Good plan. Grab my neck. I'll

carry you to the truck.” I scoop her into my arms.

Daphne sighs. “This is so romantic.”

The halt in the rain was only temporary, and it’s pouring as I hurry across the creek.

When we get to my truck, I open the door and help her in. “Let me grab the blanket and other stuff. I’ll be right back.”

“Be careful.”

I drop the tailgate and shove everything into the bed. The cover will keep it from getting any wetter. Not that it matters much because it’s already soaked.

Then I slide in behind the wheel and start the engine so that I can get the heat going. Now that I’m wet, I’m a bit chilly. Daphne must be downright cold.

She reaches over and clasps my hand. “I’ve been worried that too many good things were happening, and that life would rain on my parade. And what do you know, it rained, and I loved it. There’s a lesson in that somewhere, I think.”

“I’m going to feel bad if you catch a cold. And hopefully your new pillows aren’t ruined.”

“For that kiss, totally worth it.” She stretches across the console and meets my lips. “That is exactly what I wanted. And I’m not trying to rush you because I know you wanted to take things slow, but...” She shrugs like she isn’t sure how to finish the sentence.

“I get it. And my feelings are making it hard to maintain the slow part. I like you. A lot. Which I’m hoping is obvious. But I’m not ready for Fred to know I’m dating



anyone. It's not that I don't trust you or?—"

She presses a finger to my lips. "I get it. And I'm not asking you to rush that. Not at all. Whenever you're ready is fine with me. Sneaking around is kind of fun."

"Thank you. This is all brand-new territory for me."

She laughs. "So you're saying you don't spend every Friday kissing women in the rain?"

"This is a first." I kiss her again.

"Hopefully not the last." She grins. "And for the record, I don't care what day of the week it is."

"Noted. I'll keep tabs on the weather."

"Carson Blake, you are a bundle of green flags. Good-looking. Strong. Romantic." She pinches her lips and tilts her head. "Were you in a relationship? Did adopting Fred change that?"

I give an amused huff. "I was not in a relationship. If I had been, it wouldn't have changed my decision. And as far as still being single, I've never been the kind of guy who gets the girl. I'm just the chubby guy who keeps them laughing."

"This isn't the first time you've mentioned weight, and I want you to know that I like you how you are. Not in spite of it."

"You saying you like my spare tire? My extra fluff?"

"Yes. Having a spare tire and being good-looking are not mutually exclusive." She

squeezes my hand.

“There is a lot to like about you. I like that you make me laugh. And you make my heart flutter. And when you carry me, I turn to goo inside. Complete mush.” She meets my gaze and smiles. “You’re a catch.”

I tangle my fingers in her hair and pull her to my lips. Thunder rumbles, and rain pounds the truck.

But Daphne and I are too busy to care.

Daphne

Daphne

After months of barely responding to my texts and completely ignoring my calls, my mom is meeting me for lunch. I'm not sure what to expect, but hopefully when I leave, I'll have a better idea of why she hates me. That will at least satisfy my curiosity.

It's taken me years to learn that I can't fix every situation. Sometimes you have to live with the uncomfortable. Even when you don't like it.

She waves from a table on the far side of the room. The café is busy, which means the hum of conversations will drown out ours. But tears will be noticed. I hate that I have to think about this kind of stuff when meeting my mom for lunch. Why can't I have a normal loving relationship?

Mom stands as I get to the table. She steps toward me, then stops like she thought better of hugging me. "I'm sorry, Daphne."

I blink, trying to decide if she's sorry she came or if she's actually apologizing. "For what?"

Her chin quivers, and she leans in to hug me. "I've been horrible to you, and I hope you will let me explain. But it's in no way an excuse."

Nodding, I give her a squeeze, relishing in the warmth of a mom's hug. "I've missed

you.”

We take our seats, and she sucks in a deep breath. “I’ve been a terrible mother.”

“It’s okay, Mom.” I pat her hand. Seeing people upset makes me uncomfortable, and I want to make it all better. Most of the time.

That was not true when I went to court about my accident. The guy who clipped me cried when the judge handed down the two-year sentence. And while I hated seeing the man cry, he deserved consequences for his actions. And hopefully moving forward, he’ll make different choices.

But I don’t like seeing my mom upset. Even if her actions caused me repeated pain over the years. I just want everything to be good between us.

She shakes her head. “I don’t deserve you.”

“Let’s order, then we can talk once we have our food.” I am a firm believer that food makes lots of things better.

So we order, and until our food arrives, we chat about my siblings and what’s happening in their lives.

Then, as the waitress walks away after bringing our meals, Mom touches my hand.

“When you moved out, I had to face my grief and how it had changed me. And I focused that frustration on you. I blamed you for moving out, calling you selfish when in actuality, I was the selfish one. My frustration morphed into jealousy because Denise asked for you constantly. I felt replaced, and again, I blamed you.”

“Mom, you don’t have to?—”

“Yes, I do. I was very wrong, and I even tried to distance you from your siblings so that they’d build a connection with me. And I’m so sorry for that.”

“What changed?” I pick up my fork, but the emotions stirring inside might make it hard to eat.

“When Denise found out I’d lied about you not wanting to talk, she iced me out.

Deservedly. I took that as my cue to get therapy.

” She wipes her eyes. “Losing your dad ripped my heart out. But he’d hate that I was so heartless.

Realizing how awful I’d been was embarrassing. And I wasn’t sure you’d forgive me.”

“I forgive you, Mom. And thank you for explaining. I knew you were hurting, but I didn’t know how to fix it.”

“Sweetheart, you can’t always fix things for other people.” She squeezes my hand. “I love you.”

“Love you too.”

We eat in silence for a few minutes.

Teary eyed, Mom meets my gaze. “I’ve missed so much of your life. But I’d love to know about it.”

While we eat, I tell Mom about my job and how I ended up working for a billionaire.

“While I am in no danger of being added to a list of the rich and famous, my boss has

been generous, and I'm comfortable. Happy. I'm even thinking about buying a house. Maybe."

"That's wonderful." She glances at my hands. "You're still single?"

"Do you seriously think I would've gotten married without saying a word? I'm not married. But I am seeing a wonderful man. We've been dating about six months. But we're keeping it a bit quiet because he has a son." I don't explain about Fred being Carson's nephew. That's a story for another time.

Mom raises an eyebrow. "If he's keeping you a secret, that's a bit of a red flag."

"He's not. Several of his friends know that we're seeing each other.

And we've texted or talked every night for months.

We even have a double date scheduled tomorrow night.

With Rose and Dallas. You remember Rose, don't you?

But anyway, the situation is complicated with his son, which is why we've kept things quiet.

"I know if Mom meets Carson, she'd see that he is all green flags.

But we haven't talked about him meeting my family.

That's something I should bring up, I suppose.

He might be waiting on me to ask since meeting his family isn't going to happen.

Once lunch is finished and the plates have been cleared away, Mom checks the time. “I need to run, but can we do this again? I’ve enjoyed this.”

“I’d love that.” I give her a tight hug. “Call me anytime.”

“Love you.” She waves as she steps away.

I hurry out to my car and text Carson.

Me: She apologized for everything. I have my mom back.

He sends a heart, then my phone rings.

“Hi.” I struggle to keep my emotions in check.

“I’m really happy that she apologized. And that you have your mom back.” His voice has that same soothing tone as the night of the accident. “I was hoping things would work out.”

A pang of guilt stabs at me. It’s not fair that things have worked out with my mom, and Carson is still left without his mother. “I didn’t expect it. But the first thing she did was apologize. She’s been to therapy and she’s a little like she used to be.”

“That’s awesome. I’m glad she got help so that she could see what she was missing out on. You’re kind of awesome.”

“Sweet words are only going to make me cry right now. I can’t wait to see you tomorrow night.”

“Same. And there’s something I want to talk to you about.”

“You didn’t seriously drop the we-need-to-talk line right before I’m headed back to work. Do you want worry and curiosity to eat me alive?”

He chuckles. “It’s not a bad conversation. But I don’t want to have it over the phone.” He blows me a kiss. “I need to go so that I can find our fence-jumping bull. I’ll call you tonight.”

“Be careful. Bulls have horns and can be dangerous. Do. Not. Get. Hurt.”

“I don’t plan to.”

“Bye.” I end the call and hug the phone to my chest. Tomorrow can’t get here soon enough.

Before the waitress has even taken our drink order, Carson has all of us laughing. Because Dallas and Rose rode with us, I’m guessing whatever important thing Carson wants to talk about will wait until after dinner. And I’m trying to be patient, though I was not born with that skill.

Carson’s arm is draped over the back of my chair, and as he tells a story, he’s using his index finger to draw circles on my shoulder.

It’s a light touch, but it has my insides singing.

While sneaking around is a little exciting, I love these nights when we’re out at a restaurant with friends, and he has his arm around me. It’s so comfortable. So right.

The waitress takes our drink order, and as she walks away, Carson taps my shoulder. “Beau is hosting a Fourth of July party at the ranch again. He goes all out.”

Dallas nods. “It’s a blast. I heard they’re doing fajitas this year.”



“Fun! I imagine that will be a great party.” I don’t let my smile slip, but it’s moments like these when I wish we didn’t have to sneak. It would be wonderful to attend ranch events as Carson’s girlfriend.

He leans in closer. “I was thinking that you should come to the party. With me.”

Silent, I stare at him with my mouth open, replaying his words.

“Do you want to come?” His brow furrows. “I’d introduce you to everyone and let Fred know we’re dating. But if you’d rather not, we don’t?—”

I’m really trying not to cry in the middle of the restaurant. Nodding, I shoot a look at Rose, who is grinning from ear to ear.

“I’d like that. A lot.”

He kisses my forehead. “Awesome. That’s what I didn’t want to talk about over the phone. I don’t want you to miss out on a great party. Plus, it’s getting hard keeping you a secret. Three times last week, I nearly slipped up and said something to Fred about you. I think about you all the time.”

“Same. Not the part about almost telling Fred. But the thinking about you part.” I wiggle in my seat. “I’m so excited. This will be amazingly fun. Let me know what I should bring.”

“I’ll ask Ava.” He goes back to drawing circles on my shoulder as the waitress approaches.

And just like that, we aren’t keeping secrets anymore. I might be a smidge too excited about making the relationship public. But it feels significant.

After dinner, we drop Rose and Dallas off at their house, where my car is parked. I wait in the passenger seat until my friends go inside because I'm not ready to say goodbye.

Once the front door closes, I lean in for a kiss.

He meets my lips, then says, "Want to walk for a bit?"

"Yes." Instead of reaching for the door handle, I wait because Carson is such a gentleman and always comes around to open the door.

Hand in hand, we stroll down the path. The summer sun is low in the sky, but still spreading light across the ranch.

"What do I need to know about this party? Give me all the details." I will definitely be shopping for something to wear.

"We all gather near the pool. There's tons of food. Then when it's dark, many of us drive over to the county park to watch the display. And I'd love for you to come along for that too."

"Oh! A pool party."

He flashes a grin. "I'll be in a swimsuit, so hopefully you won't change your mind." The wink at the end makes it clear that he's joking.

A new swimsuit is on my shopping list for sure.

We stop, and Carson points at a swing hanging from the branch of a large tree. "Hop on. I'll push you."

“I didn’t even know this was here.” I sit on the swing and grab the ropes on each side.

“I drove over last week and helped Dallas install it. He called and asked for my help. I thought maybe that was your doing, but you never mentioned it.”

“I had no idea.” I hold on tight as Carson pulls me back before giving me a gentle shove forward. “Did he say anything? I mean, about us?”

“Not directly. He just asked me about eight times how things were going in general. Dallas was looking out for you, I think.” When I swing back to Carson, he gives me another push.

“But that got me thinking about the upcoming party. And I know some parents wait a really long time before introducing their kids, but I think it’s a good time for Fred to meet you.

Not just in passing, but as my girlfriend. ”

I look back over my shoulder and say, “Obviously, I’m happy about that. But if for any reason you change your mind, I’ll understand. Because nothing is more important than your relationship with Fred. I get that. That’s how it should be.”

He catches the swing and meets my lips.

And in the fading light of that June night, we kiss. Now, I have a new favorite spot. This swing. Okay, second favorite spot. That tree where we shared our first kiss still holds the top spot.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Carson

Carson

I didn't want to spring Daphne on Fred with other people around, so I suggested she come to the house before the party. That way, they can meet again without a bunch of people around.

The nervousness that has my insides in knots is likely unwarranted. At least I hope it is. Things are going well with Daphne, and life with Fred keeps getting better. I have a twelve-year-old who seems to actually like me. Can't complain about that.

Fred drops a wad of towels onto the couch. "Are we leaving soon?"

"In a bit. My friend is coming here. Then we'll all ride over together."

"Okay." He jogs down the hall. "I need my goggles."

"Aren't they in the pool bag?" I try to keep all the pool stuff in one place, but you'd think those things had legs.

When I hear the car pull up, a smile tugs at my cheeks. I'm looking forward to everyone knowing that Daphne and I are dating, and not just the handful who I've told or those who have figured it out.

I open the door as she's getting out of her car. "You made it. Any trouble finding the house?"

“Not at all. Once I made it to the ranch, it was easy to find since I’ve been here before.” She stops outside the door and whispers, “Have you told him?”

“Not yet. Come on in.” I debated about how I should do things. One option was to tell Fred I was dating someone before Daphne arrived. But I went with the alternative and waited until she was here. She’s sweet and kind, and I think that will make the news easier for Fred.

Maybe it won’t be hard for him at all. I could just be projecting because I hated it when Mom found a new guy to date. But I had reason to dislike the men in her life. They hated me and found me bothersome.

Daphne isn’t like that.

Fred runs out and tosses the pool bag on top of the towels. “Found ’em.” Then he waves at Daphne. “Hi. You were the one who had the accident.”

“Yes, I am. My name is Daphne.”

“I know. And I’m Fred, if you forgot. My dad saved you, didn’t he?” Fred’s gaze bounces between me and Daphne.

“I helped her.” I slide an arm around her waist. “That’s how we met. And we’ve been dating for a few months.”

Fred blinks. “Oh.”

This is not the response I was hoping for.

Daphne pats my arm. “I’m going to run into the restroom for a moment.” After flashing a smile at Fred, she hurries out of the room.

He watches her leave, then turns toward me. “Is she your girlfriend?”

I nod. “She is.”

“Weird.” He walks to the couch and gathers up the bag and towels.

I should leave well enough alone, but I don’t. “Why’s that?”

He shrugs. “She’s really pretty is all.”

“That’s true. Daphne is beautiful.”

Fred meets my gaze as he slings the bag onto his shoulder. “I’m just surprised someone that pretty is dating you.”

Clearly this kid knows what buttons to push. And my insecurities are through the roof. But this isn’t only about me. And it’s clear from his jab that he’s not very happy about the fact that I’m dating.

“Please don’t be rude to my guest.” I work to keep any anger out of my tone.

“I won’t. Can we go now?”

“Get in the truck. We’ll be out in a minute.”

He runs out the door, and I pick up the towel he dropped. Today will be interesting.

Daphne looks around as she steps into the living room. “Where’s Fred?”

“He’s eager to get to the party. You ready?”

She slides her hand into mine. “He didn’t seem too happy about the dating part.”

“He probably needs time.” I’m saying it out loud, hoping that it’s true.

“Maybe so.” She squeezes my hand. “We shouldn’t keep him waiting.”

Fred is waiting in the back seat, and I’m thankful he at least left the front seat open for Daphne.

Country music on the radio makes the lack of conversation less awkward during the few minutes it takes to get to the main house. And when I park, Fred jumps out as soon as I cut the engine. He didn’t even grab the bag or towels.

Daphne sighs. “I can go home if you think this isn’t a good idea.”

While I want to reassure her and say he’s just excited about the party, I can’t because I’m a horrible liar.

“Honestly, I’m not sure what to think. But I want you to stay.

There are a lot of people I’d like for you to meet.

Again. You’ve already met most of them.” I hold out my hand.

“He’s twelve, and as someone who was once a twelve-year-old boy, I can say with confidence that they can be unpredictable and even unkind at times. I know I was.”

“It’s hard to imagine you as unkind.”

“I grew up. But I’m hoping he’ll realize that our dating isn’t a bad thing, won’t upend his life. And he’ll be fine with it. That might take a little while. And lots of

reassurance.”

“You are probably right.” She leans across and kisses my cheek. “I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop, but I heard what Fred said at the house.” She runs a finger down the front of my T-shirt. “I’ve liked you from the first time I saw you. Never forget that.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Now let’s go party.” She wiggles in her seat. “And do not let me forget to put on sunscreen because I will hurt if I don’t.”

“I can help with that.” I wink as I slide out of the truck.

An hour later, Daphne and Rose are gathered with the other ladies, deep in conversation. Daphne looks happy, which is good. And it’s nice that she’s met most everyone here before today. Plus, Rose is here, and Daphne loves hanging out with her best friend.

I wander over to the cooler to grab a cold drink.

Greeting people has taken a good bit of time.

And I offered to help with the food, so I haven’t had a chance to swim.

It’s also possible that Fred’s jab is playing on repeat in my head and I’m not yet ready to take off my shirt.

Daphne’s seen part of my chest. The hairy part.

But she hasn’t seen the spare tire on full display.



Gulping down a bottle of water, I delay dealing with insecurity.

Kent walks up beside me. “You brought her. Poppy says she’s awesome.”

“She is.”

“Is Fred excited? Mason did a little dance when Poppy and I announced that we were dating.”

“There was no dancing.” I crumple the bottle and toss it into the recycling bin. “But we’ll just have to see how things go.”

“Boys this age can be...” Kent shrugs.

“Yeah. For sure.”

A stream of water hits me smack in the center of my chest, and Fred cackles from the pool, the super soaker in his grubby little hands.

I point in warning, then yank off my shirt before diving into the pool. Daphne might have me a bit distracted, but I can still recognize a cry for attention. When I come up for air, I splash Fred, then dive back under. Soon, Mason and Kent have joined the game, and we’re all laughing.

We must make swimming seem like fun because several others jump into the pool.

Bailey sits on the edge of the pool, goggles on her face and flippers on her feet. “Fred, I can swim to the bottom. Watch me.” She slides into the water and glances at him before kicking her way down.

He treads water, focused on her until she breaks the surface again. “Cool. That was

great.”

Her smile pushes up her goggles. “Can I play with you?”

“Sure. Yeah.” He scans the pool and spots Mason at the far end. “I’ll race you to the other side.”

The last word is barely out of his mouth, and Bailey is already swimming. And she’s fast, so he’ll have to work to catch her.

That’s when I notice Daphne taking off her T-shirt and shorts, revealing her red swimsuit. Dang, she’s hot.

I swim to the edge because I made a promise I intend to keep. Dripping wet, I walk over and pick up a towel. “Where’s the sunscreen?”

She grins and pulls a bottle out of her bag. “If you’ll rub it on my back, I can handle the rest.” She squeezes a dollop into my hand and turns, facing away from the pool.

I dab the lotion around her back and shoulders, then use both hands to spread it out over her very soft skin.

Once her back is fully protected from the sun, I lean in close. “Hopefully later, while everyone is distracted by fireworks, I can steal a kiss.”

Looking over her shoulder at me, she grins. “No need to steal. They’ll be freely given.”

And now I’m really looking forward to the fireworks display.

A stream of water hits me in the back.

“I’m being paged. But I’ll find you in the pool in a bit.” I spin around and stare at Fred, who is sitting on the edge of the pool. He’s laughing as I make my way toward him.

“Watch out, Dad!” He sprays me again. And when I’m only paces away, he drops the water gun and cannon balls into the water.

And I follow suit.

Today hasn’t been perfect, but overall, it’s going pretty well. Daphne has seen me without a shirt and still wants to kiss me. Fred is still calling me Dad. And the fajitas will be ready any minute.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Daphne

Daphne

“Can Mason ride with us to see fireworks?” Fred shakes his head, spraying water in every direction.

Carson steps in front of me, his chivalrous attempt to keep me from getting wet again. “Be careful. Some of us already dried off.”

“Sorry.” He peeks around Carson and repeats his apology.

“It’s okay. I don’t melt.” I like Fred. He’s a sweet kid. Even if he’s a bit standoffish.

He gives a contrite smile, then focuses on Carson again. “Can he? Please?”

“Sure. But he needs to tell his parents so that they know where he is.” Carson shoves his hands in his pockets. “We’ll leave here in about ten minutes.”

“Okay. Thanks.” Fred takes off running.

Carson turns around and his shoulders slump. “Selfishly, I was hoping Fred would want to go with Mason.”

“It’s fine. I’ve hardly spent any time with him today, so this will be good.” I inch up and whisper in his ear. “Kisses can wait until we go out alone.”

“Bummer.” He laughs. “I should probably find it disturbing that you can read my mind so well.”

I pat his chest. Meeting Fred hasn’t gone as well as I’d hoped, but if I continue to be nice, surely, I’ll win him over. I don’t want to think about the alternative.

Twelve minutes later, we’re all in Carson’s truck.

“Today was fun.” Mason leans forward in his seat. “I’m glad you could make it, Miss Emerson. Did you enjoy it?”

“You can call me Daphne. I had fun. Everyone at the ranch is so nice. And the food was amazing.”

“Yeah.” Fred nudges Mason. “The water guns were super cool.”

“Parker brought those. One time, when my dad and mom were on their honeymoon, and I was hanging out with Parker, we were chasing each other and spraying each other, but he accidentally sprayed Bluebonnet. It was before they were married. They weren’t even dating.

I thought it was really funny until she started crying.

Then I ran off and let Parker handle it.

” Mason crosses his arms. “I don’t like to see girls cry. ”

“You and me both, kiddo.” Chuckling, Carson shoots a glance in my direction.

“Dad, can Mason stay over tonight? We don’t have school tomorrow.”

Carson nods. “If it’s okay with his parents, it’s fine with me.” He reaches across the console and clasps my hand. It’s the most PDA we’ve done all day. And it’s nice to not be pretending.

At the county park, Carson backs into a spot.

Then we all pile out of the truck. He drops the tailgate and rolls back the bedcover, unveiling pillows and blankets.

They are the same throw pillows from our date that I forgot to take home on Valentine’s Day.

After that, I joked that he should keep them in case we found ourselves in the middle of nowhere with time to kill.

I’m starting to wonder if he totes them with him everywhere.

Fred climbs into the bed, and he and Mason get the blankets spread out. Then Fred plops down in the middle of the blanket and taps the spot next to him. “Come on, Mason. We can totally see the display from here. It’ll be awesome.”

Poor Mason glances at Carson, then me. I give a slight nod, encouraging him to sit with Fred. So he climbs up and sits. “There’s room up here for y’all too.” He nudges Fred. “Scoot that way so they have a place to sit.”

Fred shifts closer to Mason. “Dad, you can sit here by me. And there is room by Mason for Miss Emerson.”

“Y’all can call me Daphne. You don’t have to call me Miss Emerson.” It’s not hard to see that Fred isn’t my biggest fan, but I’m not giving up yet.

“Okay, Miss Daphne.” Mason smiles.

I turn to hoist myself into the bed when Carson steps up beside me.

“Let me help.” With ease, he lifts me onto the tailgate. “I think we’ll be too squished with all four of us up there. I’ll just stand next to the truck.” He walks along the bed as I crawl into the spot beside Mason.

During the party, Poppy told me stories about how Mason worked to get Kent and Poppy together. I’m not sure that’s how it’s going to happen with Fred. I came into this with high expectations. Her stories amped those expectations. And I’m trying not to let my disappointment show.

Carson trails a knuckle down my arm, and I’m reminded of why I want this to work. Never has anyone made me feel like he does.

A shrill whine catches our attention, and a moment later, color explodes in the sky.

I reach up and take Carson’s hand, and we watch the display.

It’s late when we get back to the house. Fred and Mason run inside, trying to decide what movie to watch.

Instead of walking to the door, I head toward my car.

Carson follows. “They have plans to stay up all night. I’m betting they don’t even make it through one movie.”

“After all that swimming, I’m guessing they’ll fall asleep pretty quick.” I open the back door and toss in my bag. “I had fun today. Thanks for inviting me.”

He moves closer. “Fred just needs time, I think. Since he came to live with me, it’s just been the two of us, so the idea of my dating someone is a big change for him.”

I bob my head. “For sure.”

His arm slides around my waist. “Are you okay? I know this wasn’t the easiest.”

“I am. Maybe Mason will put in a good word for me.”

“We can hope. Fred thinks the world of Mason. And he’s a great kid.” Carson grazes his thumb along my lips. “I’m glad our secret is out.”

“Me too.”

He dips down, and our lips meet. For a moment, all my worries and concerns are forgotten.

“Dad!” Footsteps draw closer. “How many minutes do I set the microwave for popcorn? I thought it was ten minutes, but Mason said that was too much.”

“I’ll be right there.” Carson kisses my forehead, then opens my driver’s side door. “Call me when you get home, please.”

“I will. Fred, it was good to see you again.” I wave.

He waves back, then points to the house. “Hurry, Dad. We want to start the movie so that we can watch a lot of them tonight.”

I get in and put my window down. “Have fun.”

“Go start the movie. I’ll take care of the popcorn.” Carson stands with his hands in



his pockets, watching as I back out of the driveway.

That squishy wall of a man has my heart, and today solidified that for me. But I'm worried.

Taking care of my siblings for so many years did a number on our relationships.

Only now are they getting better. But the last two years I was at home were the hardest. At that time, two of my sisters were not too much older than Fred, and they told me many times that I was their sister, not their mom. And they didn't have to listen to me.

It was hard, but we figured it out. Mostly. Sort of. It wasn't great. Keeping them fed and showing up for school were my greatest accomplishments. And that's why I eventually moved out.

Fred's coldness feels like rejection, but maybe that's all in my head. My experiences shape my thoughts. And right now, I'm thinking this isn't going well.

Carson

Carson

F red's been pretty much the same moody preteen he was before I let him know that Daphne and I were dating.

And she's come over several times. We've all gone out to dinner.

But he barely speaks to her. And he's obvious about walking between me and Daphne, arranging it so that we don't sit together. He's dropping some big hints.

And since I'm the parent, it's up to me to start this conversation. If I don't teach him communication, where will he learn?

"Fred, come on out here, I want to talk to you." I pull out the extra dessert that Ava sent home with me. Conversations always go better over sweets.

Fred trudges in as only twelve-year-old boys can do. "Yeah?"

"Have a seat. We can chat while we have dessert." I set the plates on the table. "Why so glum?"

"There's only one week left of summer. And I don't want to go back to school."

"Sorry about that. Summers always seemed short when I was in school. I tell you what. See if Mason is free one day next week. I'll get some of the other guys to cover

for me, and we can go do something fun.”

“Awesome! I’ll ask him when we finish.” He shifts in his chair as he takes a bite of the decadent Oreo dessert. “Thanks, Dad.”

“You’re welcome. And if it’s okay, I’ll ask Daphne to come along.”

Fred looks up from his plate. “That’s fine. I was hoping we could go to the Snake Farm. Do you think she’ll want to go there?”

Why do I feel like the choice of where to go was made entirely with Daphne in mind?  
“I’ll ask her, but only if you don’t mind.”

He shrugs. “I don’t mind.”

“Do you not like Daphne? When she’s around, you don’t talk to her much.”

“She’s nice.” His gaze is fixed on his plate.

“Are you unhappy that I’m dating her?”

He shovels a bite into his mouth, and then there is an awkward lull in the conversation while he chews. After swallowing, he shakes his head. “Nope.”

His words say no, but his body language says yes.

“My dating her won’t change anything about where you live or where I work. I want you to know that.” I’m hoping that by assuring him life isn’t about to upend, he’ll open up to the idea of Daphne. Because I’m getting the idea that it’s more about the dating and less about her.

“Okay.” He meets my gaze and flashes a quick smile. Then he drops his fork onto the table. “Can I go call Mason now?”

“Sure.” That didn’t go as well as I’d hoped, but at least I made some key points.

I send off a text to Daphne.

Me: Any interest in going to the Snake Farm with me, Fred and Mason next week? And maybe Bailey. I’ll have to see what Fred thinks about that idea. Not sure what day yet. It’s one last hurrah before school starts again.

Bubbles dance on the screen, then stop. After a second, they start again.

Daphne: While I am not a fan of snakes. At all. I very much like you, so yes. Let me know what day, and I’ll do my best to slip away from the office. I like Fred and Mason too. And Bailey. For the record.

Me: Great. I’ll call you later.

Daphne responds with a kissing emoji. Sadly, we haven’t done much of that recently. Thanks to a very intentional Fred.

The Snake Farm is more roadside attraction and less zoo. That’s not to say it isn’t cool. Fred and Mason are loving it. And Bailey too. She’s right there next to the boys as they ooh and ahh over the baby alligator and then gawk at the full grown one.

Daphne snaps pictures with her phone and smiles at me, but the smile is riddled with disappointment. Fred hasn’t said more than a hello to her.

“Miss Daphne, come over here.” Bailey grabs Daphne’s hand and pulls her closer to the pen. “The teeth are scary. Let’s take a selfie with the gator in the background so I

can show my mom and dad.”

Daphne squats beside Bailey. They lean their heads together and Daphne holds out her arm, moving it around a bit before snapping the photo.

“Want me to get one of all four of you?” I pull out my phone.

Daphne gives a slight head shake, then steps next to me. “Just the three of them, I think.”

Grinning ear to ear, Bailey moves so that she’s between Mason and Fred. Then I take a picture. While I’m sending the photo to Anderson because I know he’ll want it, the three of them take off.

Daphne and I nearly have to run to keep up with them. They stop at the door of the reptile center.

Fred grabs the handle. “I think we can touch the snakes.”

“Cool!” Mason steps closer to Bailey. “You don’t have to touch the snakes if you don’t want to, okay?”

“I know. Dad told me that before I left. I just want to look at them.”

Anderson warned me about Bailey’s fear of snakes. He was a little surprised that she wanted to come along. But it seems like spending time with the guys outweighs her dislike of snakes.

That’s something Bailey and Daphne have in common.

I squeeze Daphne’s hand. “Same goes for you. Don’t feel obligated to pet the snake.”

She meets my gaze, determination etched on her face. Then she whispers, “I will hold that snake if they let me.”

“I thought you didn’t like snakes.”

“I despise them, but I’m pulling out all the stops today.” She flashes a smile. “Hopefully it works.”

We step into the dimly lit building, and the snake charmer attendant motions us closer. There is a corn snake wrapped around his hand. Bailey walks backward until she backs into Daphne, who puts a hand on the girl’s shoulder.

Daphne leans down and says, “They’re kind of icky, aren’t they?”

Bailey bobs her head. “One time, I climbed a tree almost to the top to get away from a snake. Then I couldn’t get down.”

Daphne takes Bailey’s hand. “We can dislike snakes together.”

Fred nudges Mason forward to hold the snake first. I’m not sure if that is motivated by kindness. Maybe Mason is just the guinea pig. Either way, I make sure to capture the moment in photos.

After holding it a few moments, Mason hands the snake to Fred. His eyes light up in a way that makes me nervous. I am not ready to take on a pet snake. If he brings it up, maybe I can counter with the idea of getting a dog.

Then Fred marches up to Daphne and holds out the snake. Bailey jumps back, but Daphne doesn’t. Stiff, she takes the snake and holds her breath as it wraps around her hand. She looked less stressed when I pulled her out of her upside-down car.

She finally takes a breath and pushes her hand closer to the snake guy. “I think I’m done.”

“I want a turn.” Bailey marches up close to the snake and sticks out her hand. “Does he bite?”

The attendant skillfully sidesteps her question. “He won’t hurt you.”

Daphne and I are both snapping pictures, and Bailey looks as proud as can be.

Fred, on the other hand, looks dejected, and I have no idea why.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Daphne

Daphne

At Bailey's request, Carson and I did not send the snake pictures to her parents. Now, she's bouncing in her seat as we pull up in front of their place. Prim and Anderson step out onto the porch, and Bailey runs up to meet them.

Carson and I follow. He has the photos cued up.

"I want to show you something!" Bailey jumps up and down.

"What?" Prim looks at us, a mixture of curiosity and confusion in her gaze. "How'd it go?"

"We had fun. She was awesome." Carson hands the phone to Bailey.

She holds it up. "I held a snake! I was brave like Miss Daphne."

Anderson scoops her up. "I'm so proud of you for being brave."

"That's amazing, sweetheart. I'm not sure I'd be brave enough to hold a snake." Prim takes the phone and hands it back to Carson. "Will you send me those pictures, please?"

"Absolutely." He drapes an arm around me. "We really did have a great time. But please don't blame me if she asks for a pet snake."



Prim shakes her head. “We are not getting a snake for a pet. She has a pony.”

I laugh. “She held the snake longer than I did. And she looked happy about it.”

Prim gives me a hug, and then I hug Bailey. With Anderson in tow, she runs to the truck.

“Fred, thanks for inviting me. I had fun with you and Mason.” Bailey waves. “Bye.”

And off she runs into the house.

“Don’t wake up the baby, please.” Prim says to Bailey, then turns her attention back to me. “Thank you again. She was so excited to be invited. And I’m stunned she got near a snake, let alone held one. So thank you for inspiring her bravery.”

I lean close. “It was selfishly motivated. I was trying to show Fred I was cool enough to hold a snake. Not sure it worked though.”

She laughs. “Boys can be weird. Give him time.”

I’m not sure time is working, but Carson currently has his arm around me. And Fred hasn’t gotten out of the truck to pull Carson away from me, so that seems like progress.

After dropping off Mason, we drive back to Carson’s.

Fred slides out as soon as we’re stopped. “Thanks for taking me, Dad. Bye, Miss Emerson.”

“Thanks for letting me join y’all. I had a lot of fun.”

He nods, then trudges into the house. I'm getting mixed signals from him. He spoke to me, which hasn't been the norm, but he looks sad. Of course, my brain twists it so that I'm the reason for the sadness. But what if I am for real?

Once the door closes, Carson pulls me close. "Finally, we get a moment to ourselves. Don't get me wrong. I had fun today, but I'm also glad I'm getting a chance to do this." He tugs me close as his lips meet mine.

Maybe holding the snake convinced Fred that I'm not cringey and it's worth giving me a chance. Fingers crossed that's the case.

Two weeks later, Carson and I are out to dinner. Since we're not hiding, we opt for the barbecue place in town.

"We haven't done this in a while. Dinner with just the two of us." I pour sauce beside my brisket because I prefer dipping rather than slathering.

Carson nods. "He's at Mason's. I'm a little worried about him.

For a while, he wanted to do all the sleepovers at our place.

Which I'm ninety-nine percent sure that was so he could keep us from going on dates.

So I'm glad he's not doing that, but something's up with him.

When I dropped him off, he asked if I'd pick him up after my date. He didn't want to spend the night."

"Oh no. What's wrong? I'd think that if he and Mason were on the outs, then he wouldn't go over at all."

“I asked him if there was a problem. He swore things were fine. He just wanted to sleep in his own bed.”

“It sounds like he went there just so we could go out.” I’m touched by how sweet that is.

“I think so.” Carson scoops up a bite of potato salad. “Have you had this?”

“I haven’t.”

He holds out the spoon, and I let him feed me. We’ve become this cutesy couple, and I’m so here for it. When Rose and Dallas were “faking” their relationship, I was jealous. Not in the I-wish-she-didn’t-have-that way, but in the I-want-that-too kind of way. And now I have it.

And Fred seems to be on board. The future is looking brighter.

We finish our barbecue, then devour a couple of banana pudding cups.

“I was thinking we could either drive out to a scenic spot and do some stargazing, or we could go back to that swing on Matchmaker Ranch.” Carson lifts his eyebrows, wanting me to choose.

“Stargazing.” I blow him a kiss. “Is that what the kids are calling it these days? Besides, Matchmaker Ranch currently has guests, and they might be using said swing.”

“Is Rose keeping you up to date on the happenings there?”

“Yep. So far, the ranch has a one hundred percent success rate.”

“That’s awesome. How many have they matched before the current guests?”

“Two.”

“Two couples?”

“Two people.” I grin. “Hopefully the streak continues.”

We drive out to a hillside and park.

He drops the tailgate, revealing blankets and throw pillows. “There is no rain in the forecast.”

I inch up on my toes. “But there is a one-hundred percent chance of kissing.”

Carson

Carson

I 'm loading hay onto the trailer when Mason slips into the barn. "Hey there. What are you and Fred up to this afternoon?"

He sighs and crosses his arms. "I think I made Fred mad, and he doesn't really want to hang out much anymore." He hoists a bale onto the trailer. "Want help feeding the cows?"

"Sure. Now tell me why you think Fred is mad at you." I drop the last bale on the trailer. "The cows can wait a few minutes for their food."

"About three weeks ago when you and Daphne went on a date, Fred came over but was being really mokey, like he wasn't happy. I thought he was upset that you went on a date. I still think that." He puts a hand up. "I'm not upset about that. I like Miss Daphne. She's great."

"Just tell me what happened."

"I told Fred that I knew what it was like to lose a mom. He wasn't the only person it happened to, and I also told him he wasn't being fair to Daphne because he wasn't really giving her a chance. After that, he's hardly been talking to me."

Fred has been quiet, but because I'm working when he gets home from school, I hadn't noticed he wasn't hanging out with Mason. I'm surprised Kent or Poppy didn't

say something. “I didn’t know he was still upset.”

Mason shrugs. “He never said that exactly.”

“What did he say after you talked to him?”

Mason pulls a straw of hay out of a bale. “He said I was little when my mom died so I wouldn’t understand. And he told me to mind my own business. I’m sorry I said anything to him. He’ll probably be doubly mad when he finds out I talked to you.”

“I’m glad you did.” I yank off my gloves and shove them in my back pocket. “You going to ride on the trailer or in the cab?”

“Trailer. Where are the wire cutters?”

I hand them over, then climb into the tractor.

This conversation sheds a lot of light on recent events.

Since school started, Fred has had his homework finished by the time I’m done working.

He gets to it as soon as he gets off the bus.

Last year, I had to nudge and remind him to do homework.

And I feel stupid for not seeing that he doesn’t like Daphne. I thought he’d come around.

In moments like these, anger toward my sister bubbles up.

And then the anger shifts to my mom. But I'm not blameless.

I've been so wrapped up in my feelings for Daphne, I didn't notice that Fred was hurting.

That changes today. I'll do whatever is needed to make sure he enjoys the childhood I didn't get.

Mason saves me time by tossing hay while I drive the tractor. He's a kindhearted young man. And I know he cares about Fred.

When we get back to the barn, he hops out of the trailer.

"Thanks for helping."

"No problem. I should head to dinner so my mom doesn't wonder where I am."

"I'll see you over there." I get into the truck and drive to the house to get Fred. I expect he has all his homework done and is ready for dinner.

Later that night, I call Fred out of his room. "Want some dessert? Ava sent over some lemon bars."

"Okay." He drops into a chair. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Am I that obvious?"

He flashes a half smile. "Kinda."

"You seem unhappy. And I'm worried about you. I haven't seen you hanging out with Mason, and you spend lots of time in your room."

“I’m fine. Seventh grade is just a little bit hard. I have lots of homework. But I’ve been good. I get it done right after school, and I do my chores. I’m not doing anything wrong in my room. I promise.” A hint of desperation creeps into his voice.

I touch his arm. “Fred, I’m not accusing you. I’m just concerned. Is this because of Daphne and me?”

He shakes his head no, but the hurt in his eyes says otherwise. “I’m fine with it.”

“What can I do to help you? I know school is hard, but I want you to have time with your friends. You and Mason are best buds.”

He shoves half a lemon bar in his mouth and mumbles, “I don’t know.”

“Let’s figure this out. It seems like more than just school is bothering you. Is someone giving you a hard time? Picking on you?”

“No. Everything is good. If you want me to hang out with Mason more, I can do that.”

It’s obvious there is so much he’s not saying, and I’m trying to hide my frustration.

“I want you to be happy, Fred.” Pausing, I take a deep breath.

“I know what it’s like to grow up in a bad situation, and I am so sorry you lived that too.

I loved my sister, but I don’t love how her life choices affected you.

But things are different now. Is there something I’m doing that you don’t like? ”



“You don’t let me stay up late on school nights?” He gives a mischievous smirk.

“Is that what this is about?”

His smirk falls away. “No. There is no this, Uncle Car. Everything is fine. Really.” He stands up. “I’m going to text Mason and see if I can spend the night at his place tomorrow. Is that okay?”

I nod, sadness making it impossible to respond with words. Whatever needed was what I promised myself, and as much as I hate the thought, I know what I have to do.

Daphne

Daphne

I knock and wait a second before pushing open Rose's front door. With newlyweds, waiting an extra second is important. "I'm here. And please tell me you have room in your freezer because I had trouble deciding on which flavor I might want later."

Rose shakes her head as she walks out of the kitchen. "I'll make them fit. But I'm not sure why you are so sure tonight will be bad? The last time you were worried about things going south, he finally kissed you."

"I know, but Carson texted me to arrange this date. He didn't call, which is unusual.

He said he wasn't available until after dinner, so we should just meet up somewhere to talk.

And three..." I hold up three fingers so that my list has more impact.

"When I asked how Fred was doing, he replied not good."

"Okay, but you don't know it'll be bad."

"When you throw those three things into a mixing bowl, you get a breakup." I hand over the five pints of ice cream, one carton at a time as she tucks them into the limited free space. "But whatever happens, I'll be okay. I promise."

Rose hugs me. “I wish I could snap my fingers and make everything perfect.”

“You and me both.” I jingle my keys as I walk out the door. “I’ll stop by after no matter how tonight goes, and I guarantee you won’t have to ask how things went.”

“Love you, friend.” She leans on the doorframe as I walk to my car.

With my brave face on, I smile. “Love you too.”

Then I drive to the back entrance of the ranch and park on the side of the road. Carson climbs out of his truck, which is stopped inside the gate. On the keypad, he enters a code, and the gate swings open.

“Thanks for coming. I figured you could ride with me from here. If we’re near the cabin, we can tuck into the porch if it rains. But this is private so we can talk.”

“Great.” It’s also near where we shared our first kiss, but he doesn’t mention that. I file that as reason number four. I walk up to him and give him a kiss. Unexpectedly, he tugs me close and holds me against his chest.

After pulling back, he blows out a breath. “Thanks for coming.”

I clasp his hand as we walk to the truck. “You okay?”

“Let’s bookmark that thought for now. How are you? Good day?” He opens my door, then slides in behind the wheel.

Trying to lighten the mood, I tell Carson about my day. “Okay, I should warn you that this story is a little gross. And you may decide you don’t like me after hearing it. And that would be totally understandable.”

“Sounds ominous.”

“So I ordered coffee on the way into work. And because I’m lactose intolerant, I always order my stuff with oat milk.

Everyone is safer on the road when I’m not driving around focusing solely on not soiling my car.

” I stop when he shifts into park, then get out before he has a chance to open my door.

He laces his fingers with mine, and we walk toward the creek. “You’re lactose intolerant? But you talk about eating ice cream. A lot.”

“I love ice cream. And I eat it when I have time to live with the consequences. My morning commute is not the time for that.”

He chuckles.

“Anyway, I’m drinking my coffee without really noticing that it tasted way better than normal.

But then my gut started talking to me. By the time I made it into the building, I was almost in panic mode.

I needed a bathroom. But the restrooms on the first floor were locked.

I didn’t have the luxury of time to ask why, so I got on the elevator and went up to the floor where I work.

” I’m being a little extra dramatic with my telling because he looks like he needs the laugh.

“I hurry into the ladies’ room, and every stall is taken.

Every. Single. One. So I do what any woman moments from pooping their pants would do.

I walk into the men’s room with a hand over my eyes and lock myself in a stall. And I made it just in time.”

“Were there any guys in the bathroom?”

“Based on the few shouts directed my way, I’d say yes.”

“Yikes. I’m sorry.”

“The worst part? When I walked out of the men’s room, I ran into my boss who was headed in. That’s how my day started out.”

He sighs. “Daphne, I’m sorry, but I don’t think what I’m here to say is going to make your day any better.”

I tug him to a stop and face him. “Talk to me, Carson.”

He pulls me to his chest like he did earlier. “These last ten months with you have been amazing. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I’d meet someone like you. But I made a commitment when I adopted Fred, and it’s obvious that my dating is upsetting him.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “I’ve tried to get him to like me. I’m sorry.”

He pulls back and shakes his head. “Don’t blame yourself. I don’t think it’s you. But these last few weeks, since the snake farm, he’s pulled away. Not just from me. And

last night, he called me Uncle Car.”

Blinking, I will my tears to vaporize. “Oh, Carson. I’m sorry.”

Nodding his head, he pinches his lips, regaining his composure.

“So like I said, I need to focus on Fred and being his dad even if it means giving up something I...” Gazing at me, he lets the sentence dangle.

But the silence speaks volumes. After an inhale, he finishes. “Want. Something I really want.”

He may not have said the word love with his voice, but that’s what is in his gaze. And we both know that. I love him too, but this isn’t the time to tell him that.

“I understand. Your priorities are exactly what they should be. And I’m not mad at you or Fred. The poor kid finally has stability, and he’s afraid of losing it. I can’t blame him for that.” I rub Carson’s arm. “You’re amazing. You know that, right?”

“If I were amazing, I would’ve figured out a way to make everyone happy.”

“Sometimes that’s not possible.”

Raindrops slap the ground, and Carson grabs my hand. “We aren’t that far from the cabin.”

“Wait. Can we...” I’m thankful that the rain is masking my tears. “Can we share one last kiss? Something to remember me by.”

“There is a zero percent chance that I’ll ever forget you, Daphne.”

“Please let me pretend for a moment that the world is perfect. You know, like in those old movies where she kisses him as he’s shipping off to the war.”

“I’m not going to war.” An amused smile contrasts with the tears in his eyes.

“Are you sure? Because I’d heard that parenting teens can be brutal.” I rest my forehead on his chest. “I could wait for you. You know, until Fred grows up.”

He lifts my chin, desire blazing in his eyes. “You want a family. I won’t ask you to wait. I can’t do that. Go live your life.”

“As if I could ever find anyone like you. I’m going to miss you, Carson. So much.”

His lips meet mine. With one hand around my waist and the other in my hair, he makes it clear how much he wishes tonight were ending differently. All the words left unsaid are being clearly communicated with his lips.

I love you too.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Carson

Carson

Since it's no secret that I only tackle hard conversations with sweets, I buy a half dozen donuts before picking up Fred from Mason's. He's quiet on the short drive through the ranch.

When we get to the house, I show him the box. "I want us to chat about something, so I bought these."

He grabs his duffel bag. "Okay. I'll throw this in my room first. Did I do something wrong?"

"Not at all." I make myself coffee and pour him a glass of milk.

Milk makes me think of lactose, which has me thinking about Daphne.

Again. She's in my thoughts constantly, but with time, that'll change.

Hopefully. It's not that I don't want to think about her.

I actually like it. The ache that accompanies it is what I don't like.

He eyes me as he drops into a chair. "What are we going to talk about?"

"Did you have fun at Mason's?"



“Yeah. I did. I guess I kind of missed hanging out with him.” Fred chooses a donut covered in sprinkles. “Did you have fun on your date?”

“We broke up. That’s what I wanted to tell you.”

He blinks, then sets the donut down. “Because of me?”

I don’t want to lie to him, but I also don’t want him to carry blame. He doesn’t need that. “It was complicated. You aren’t to blame.”

He tears off a chunk of donut and pops it in his mouth. “Are you okay?”

“Oh yeah.” That’s a lie. I am far from okay, but I’ll get there eventually. “And because she’s friends with Rose and Dallas, Daphne might be around the ranch at parties. When she is, be nice to her, okay?”

“Did she break up with you?” Fred pulls his shoulders back, a defensive edge in his voice.

I pick up the lemon-filled donut. “That’s not what happened.”

“But you liked her.” Fred is not letting this go.

The truth needs to be said. I meet his gaze. “You kept saying you were fine, but it seemed to me like you weren’t happy that I was dating. You are important to me. And I ended the relationship with Daphne because being your dad is more important.”

Tears brim in his eyes, but he doesn’t say a word. He finishes his donut in silence. Then when his glass is empty, he gets up and shoves his hands in his pockets. “Thanks for the donuts.”

“You’re welcome. Do you and Mason have big plans today?”

“We were going to help you with chores, and maybe go fishing after that.”

“Great. I’ll head for the barn in about five to ten minutes.” I gather the dishes and walk to the sink.

Behind me, Fred whispers, “I love you, Dad.”

I turn around to respond, but he’s gone.

Clint is assigning duties for the day as we have breakfast. And I’m watching the clock so that I can have Fred at the bus stop on time.

Clint points at me. “After the kids get off to school, I want you and Kent to ride the fences on the other side of the river. Parker will get horses ready for y’all. We’ll be moving the herd across the river in the next day or so, and I’d rather not have to chase them all over everywhere.”

“Alright.” I slug down the rest of my coffee.

It’s been three days since I saw Daphne, and I’m faking being okay pretty well. Working makes it easier. It’s the nighttime that’s the hardest.

Poppy motions for the boys to go to her. “I’m headed into town, so I’ll take you to school. Fred, do you have your bag?”

“It’s at the house.”

“We’ll run by there. Mason, you ready?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He swings around and waves at the rest of us. “Bye.”

A chorus of goodbyes rings out as they leave the mess hall.

I text Poppy a quick thank-you, then clear my plate. “Kent, want to ride with me to the horse barn?”

“Sure. No sense in taking up two spots over there.” He grabs his hat off the rack near the door.

I don’t have to wonder if he knows about the breakup because as soon as we’re in the truck and rolling, he says, “Fred told Mason that you and Daphne broke up. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah.”

He shoots me a side glance. “Was it because of Fred and his mood shift?”

“I need to focus on being a dad right now.” Of all the people out here, Kent should understand. At least I hope he does.

His brow furrows. “When Poppy and I had a falling out—I can’t even call it a breakup because we were just friends—I was a mess on the inside but tried to hide it from Mason.

Keeping up a brave face is exhausting, so whenever you need a break or a listening ear, call me.

I’ve been where you are. Circumstances were different, but the thoughts constantly on repeat in your head, wondering if things would be different if you’d done this or that are the same, I’m betting. ”

I nod. “There’s been a lot of wondering. Mason clearly loves Poppy, and I was hoping that Fred would see that too and be open to the idea of Daphne.”

“It’s hard to know what festers in those guys’ brains sometimes. And it’s hard waking up one morning and taking on the role of Dad. You’ve done a great job.”

“I don’t really feel like I have. If he trusted me, dating wouldn’t be an issue. But whenever I tried to talk to him, he kept saying everything was fine when it clearly wasn’t.”

We pause the conversation when we get to the barn. Parker has two horses saddled and ready. And Kent and I start riding toward the bridge.

“Mason was happy to have Fred over again.”

“Fred missed him. I’m glad he’s not isolating himself as much.” I scan the fence line, looking for any damaged posts and broken wires. “How’s Clara? She’s a bundle of energy these days.”

“So busy. She’s a mini of Poppy, which I love.

And watching how good Mason is with her sometimes makes me want to cry.

As silly as that sounds. When I took a job at the ranch, I expected to be alone forever.

Life did not work out that way.” He points at a stretch of wire that’s come detached from the posts.

“How things are today might not be how they are in six months.”

I mark the spot in my map app. “True, but I’m trying to live in the present and not

just be hoping that things will be different in the future.”

“Makes sense.”

During the rest of the ride, we’re focused on the fences. And Kent doesn’t say anything more about Fred or Daphne.

Daphne

Daphne

It's nearing midnight, and the office is dark except for the set of fluorescent lights above my desk. Work is what keeps me from dissolving into a puddle of tears most days. With a task list, I can hold back my sobs and pretend that my world didn't shatter.

Whoever said that it's better to have loved and lost might be right, but I'm not anywhere near ready to admit that.

The elevator whirs as it approaches our floor, and I stop. Who is here at this time of night?

Zoe, my boss's wife, steps out of the elevator and waves. "Hi. Austin sent me."

"Does he need something? It's no big deal to pause what I'm working on. It's not due until sometime early next year. I'm just getting a head start."

"The security guard called and told him that you've been up here late every single night this week.

As soon as Austin heard that, he grabbed his shoes to come up here.

Then the security guard added that he'd seen you crying.

So Austin asked me to come with him. He's downstairs.

I'm supposed to text him and let him know if there are tears. "

"He's probably allergic to tears."

"Absolutely." She pulls a chair close to my desk. "I don't want to pry, but I do want to know if you're okay."

I nod, tears burning my eyes. "Just a breakup. I'm in the do-anything-to-avoid-lying-in-bed-awake stage. And I'm sharing my location with my friend, so someone knows where I am at all times." I snag a tissue out of the box and dab my eyes. "I thought he was the one."

Zoe opens her arms, and I accept a hug from her, even though I really don't know her well at all. I do my best not to blubber all over her shirt.

"Work gives me something to do. That's why I've been so productive."

"Don't make yourself sick, though. Your body needs sleep. Even if your heart and brain are against the idea. I've been there. I know it's hard."

"Tell Austin that I'm okay. I'll pack up and go home. But I can't promise that I'll sleep."

"I'll tell him. And don't set an alarm." She waves as she walks back to the elevator. "Don't be shocked if our car is in the lot when you go down. Knowing Austin, he'll want to be sure you get into your car safely."

"I won't be long." I shut down my computer and gather my things. I guess drowning myself in work is no longer an option. Tomorrow, I'll have to get ice cream. And

some Lactaid.

It's been three weeks since that last kiss in the rain, and progress has been made. I'm sleeping again. Finally. And I no longer fight the urge to text Carson every time I look at my phone.

But Carson has been on my mind all day, so I give in to my impulse and send off a text.

Me: Hi. I was thinking about you. I hope things are better with Fred.

Dots dance on the screen. Then stop. And so does my breathing. I should not be this invested in a text.

Carson: Things are better. He didn't snap back to his old self overnight, but over the last couple of weeks, he's opened up more. Almost back to normal.

Me: Great to hear. I hope you're doing good.

He sends a thumbs-up.

As much as I want to send another text and prolong the interaction, I don't. Carson is still getting over the breakup, just like me. And making it harder for him isn't my goal. Besides, knowing that Fred is better only confirms my fear. I was the problem.

I dive back into work. Then promptly at five o'clock, I shut off my computer and grab my purse. I'm meeting Rose and Dallas for dinner in Stadtburg, and I need to change before heading that way.

When I pull into the parking lot at the restaurant, the first thing I see is Carson's truck. It's a small town. And this is the most popular place to eat. But normally, he



has dinner at the ranch.

I stare through the windshield, deciding whether or not to go inside.

Dallas's truck turns into the lot, and I get out of the car. Avoiding Carson is silly. We're both adults. I can be friendly without throwing myself at him. Or sobbing. Although that second one will be harder.

There is a large group from the ranch, and when the guys see Dallas, a couple of them wave. Parker shifts, then points to seats next to him.

Great. We'll all be sitting together.

Dallas, Rose, and I get our barbecue, and we wander over to the table. I give Carson a friendly wave, but thankfully, he's sitting far away from where the vacant seats are. But unfortunately, I end up sitting right across from Fred. It's not that I mind, but I've probably ruined his dinner.

As soon as I sit down, I realize that I didn't fill my cup. "Rose, I'll be right back. My cup is empty, and I didn't grab any silverware."

Fred jumps up. "I'll get stuff for you. What do you want to drink?"

"Sweet tea. Thank you so much." I try not to look at Carson because I can feel him watching as Fred walks back to the table. "That was really kind of you."

"You're welcome." He stares at his tray and stabs at a slice of brisket. "How are you?"

"I'm okay. How about you? Are you liking school?"

“Meh.” He crinkles his nose and flashes a smile. “Math is hard. English is boring, but history is cool.”

“Have you and Mason had any big adventures lately?” He glances at Carson, then looks back to me.

“Yeah. Mason isn’t here tonight because he’s doing something with his mom and dad.

And his sister. But soon, Mason and I are going to build a tree house.

We have permission. We’re thinking that on the ground, we’ll have a fort, and then there will be stairs that go up into the tree. ”

“That’ll be really cool.”

He grins. “Yep.”

This is the most talkative he’s ever been with me.

And it hasn’t gone unnoticed by my friend because Rose has nudged me three times.

I can’t look at her right now because I know there will be hope gleaming in her eyes, and I can’t go there.

Fred is happy to talk to me because I am no longer dating his dad, uncle, or whatever.

He tolerates me when I’m out of the picture.

I will not hope that this is a shift. That my happily-ever-after is within my grasp.

He takes the lid off his cup of banana pudding. “I’m sorry to talk your ear off. You probably came to spend time with your friend.” He waves at Rose. “Hi.”

“You can talk as much as you want.” Rose points her fork at Fred. “You aren’t bothering us. Not one bit.”

Fred is chatty throughout the rest of dinner, and I enjoy the conversation. But I resist the temptation to glance at Carson to see his reaction to these events. I deserve a gold star for the amazing amount of willpower I used to keep from staring at Carson.

That night, I check my phone several times, wondering, hoping Carson might send me a message. Something simple, friendly. But no text ever pops up. I still manage to fall asleep, which only shows how far I’ve come.

For the last two weeks, Rose and I have rehashed that dinner repeatedly.

All the talking hasn’t garnered us any revelations, and I’m tired of thinking about it.

It was a dinner. Fred was nice. He doesn’t hate me.

But he also doesn’t want me dating Carson.

The fact that I can’t fathom what his reasons are doesn’t make them any less valid. I guess.

I even talked about it with my sister, but she didn’t have any advice. No one wants to blame a scared kid who grew up in an abusive environment. I get that. Totally. But none of that makes the situation any less awful.

After having dinner with my sister, I head home. Tomorrow is Friday, and I’m ready for the workweek to be over.

I shower, then get into pajamas. With my hair still wet, I crawl in bed.

It's kind of lame to be in bed at eight o'clock, but such is my life these days.

I really should consider moving so that I can get a cat.

I think it's less lame to be in bed this early if you have a cat or two.

Or eight. I think that's the city's legal limit.

After an hour of scrolling on my phone, I'm dozing. Then a text pops up.

Carson: Can you meet me at the donut shop tomorrow at 4? It's important.

Me: Yes, of course. Have time to chat on the phone?

Carson: No. And don't call or text me because I don't want Fred to see.

I stare at the phone, confused. What is up with Carson? He sounds weird. This isn't how he normally texts, and the whole thing about not calling or texting is strange.

Me: Okay. I'll see you tomorrow.

He sends a thumbs-up. That part seems like Carson.

So much for sleeping. I'm going to spend all night wondering what he wants to talk about. If he asks about clandestine dating like we did at the beginning, I'm not sure what I'll say. Now dating in secret would feel deceitful. I don't want that.

I text Rose.

Me: Carson texted. He wants to meet tomorrow at 4 at Sweets. Slim on details, but I'll update you tomorrow afternoon.

The phone rings.

"Tomorrow my foot. Did he change his mind?" She sounds way too excited.

I rein in my hopes. "Nothing in his texts indicated that. But if he wants to meet to say that he made the right choice when breaking up, at least I'll be at the donut shop."

"No you won't. Sweets closes at two. Surely Carson knows that."

"I guess not. We'll just meet outside the shop, I guess."

"Or you could call him and figure out a new meeting spot."

"No. He said not to call or text because he didn't want Fred to see." I'm starting to wonder if this is some sort of scam. Was Carson's phone hacked? Are his contacts being targeted?

"Weird. So I have to wait until after four for an update?"

"Yes. Because that's how time works."

"Phooey. I want the happy ending now."

I flop back onto my pillow. "Please, Rose, let's not talk about happy endings right now. I can't get my hopes up."

"Alright. I'll keep those thoughts to myself. But please call me tomorrow. Don't let me die of curiosity."

“You aren’t a cat, Rose.”

“True, but I did buy the coolest cat suit. It’s actually a leopard costume. Cami, a friend of Tandy’s, was getting rid of a bunch of stuff. I can’t wait to show Dallas.”

I shake my head. “I’m hanging up now.”

Laughter echoes through the line. “Love you. And call me.”

After ending the call, I set my phone aside. What does Carson want to talk about?

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Carson

Carson

F red is showered and dressed without any prompting from me. He's growing up, and I can't say I'm sorry about that. It definitely makes mornings easier.

"Can I hang out at Mason's tonight? I'll just go straight over there after school."

"That's fine. I'll text Kent and make sure?—"

"Mason already asked them. They said it was cool if I stayed." He bobs his head, emphasizing their approval.

"Sure. Why don't you pack a bag right now, and I'll drop it off this afternoon."

"Okay." He takes off for the bedroom.

I yank on my boots, then reach for my phone. It's not in my pocket. Have I even had it at all since waking up? I start the hunt for my phone. It's not on my nightstand, which is where I normally keep it during the night.

"Fred, have you seen my phone?"

He walks out of his room, with a duffel bag slung over his shoulder. "Not since last night. It was in the kitchen."

And there it is, plugged into a charger on the counter. But I have no memory of putting it there. My fitful sleep is making me lose my mind.

We have breakfast in the mess hall. Then Poppy takes the boys to school. That's become a Friday routine, one that I love because it makes life easier all around. And Fred loves it because she treats them to donuts.

I tackle assorted chores before lunch, and after lunch, Kent and I spend the afternoon mending fences. We don't talk about my dating life, or lack thereof. When we're finished, we climb into my truck.

"On the way to your place, I'm going to swing by my house and grab Fred's bag since he's staying with y'all tonight."

"I hadn't heard about that, but sure."

I make a mental note to talk to Fred about the importance of having the parents' approval before arranging sleepovers. "Sorry. He said y'all knew."

"Maybe they talked to Poppy."

When we get to Kent's, I walk with him to the door.

Poppy pulls it open. "Hey, y'all. Can I get you coffee and something to hold you until dinner?"

"Coffee sounds great." Kent hangs up his hat, then leans in for a kiss. "Carson brought Fred's bag over since he's apparently spending the night."

Poppy freezes. "He's not here. I thought he went to y'all's place."



My heart starts pounding. “You haven’t seen him?”

“Mason!” Poppy hollers down the hall.

Two seconds later, a very pale Mason is standing in front of me. “Yes, Mom?”

“Where’s Fred?”

Staring at his mom, he shakes his head. “I don’t know. He didn’t get on the bus, but he said he wouldn’t tell me where he was going or who he was meeting because I wouldn’t be able to keep a secret. He’s right, though.” Mason turns to face me. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you he wasn’t on the bus.”

Panic coursing through my body, I wrestle the keys out of my pocket and run to the truck. I’ll start at the school and retrace his steps from there. And if I can’t find him, I’ll involve the police. I swallow back the sour taste in my mouth.

I’ve shown that I’ll do anything for the kid. Why would he run away? There has to be another explanation.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Daphne

Daphne

I show up to Sweets at ten minutes until two.

I buy a donut, then sit in my car, waiting.

Playing a game on my phone, I watch the clock, scanning the parking lot every few minutes for Carson's truck.

Getting here two hours early means I have loads of time to wonder what this is all about.

It also means I can wonder while eating a donut or two.

It's nearly four when Fred walks up to the shop and tugs on the door. When he realizes it's locked, he looks around.

That's my cue.

I get out of my car and walk over. "Hi. Was it you who texted me?"

He nods. "I needed to talk to you. And I was hoping to get a donut. When Dad wants to talk about serious stuff, he always has something sweet for us to eat."

"Does he know you're here?"

He shakes his head. “But he’s not worried because I told him I’d be at Mason’s house.”

“Think we could talk while eating banana pudding?” I point across the street to the barbecue restaurant.

“Yeah. Can I ride with you?”

“I’m not letting you cross that busy street, Fred.” I text Carson before starting the engine.

Me: Fred’s with me. We’ll be at Rueben’s, the barbecue place.

Carson: Thank God. I’m on my way.

Me: Don’t speed. He’s fine.

Carson sends a thumbs-up.

Fred buckles his seat belt. “I already crossed that road once, and I was fine. I’m not little. I just turned thirteen.”

“You definitely aren’t little. But I would feel horrible if anything happened to you, so perhaps, I’m being a bit too protective.”

“Miss Poppy is like that. She lets Mason do lots of stuff, but sometimes she worries when we climb trees or play in the river.” He stares at me as I drive across the road.

“Would you rather talk in the car?”

“No. Let’s go inside. I’m just thinking about what I want to say.” He jumps out and

runs around to the driver's side and pulls open the door. "I do have a question."

"What's that?"

"Are you going to marry him?"

"Your dad and I aren't dating anymore, Fred. Really. I've only texted him once just to see how y'all were."

He yanks open the door and stands aside for me to enter. "But you love him." It's more of a statement and less of a question.

I give a slight nod. My love for Carson hasn't faded in the weeks since our goodbye, but it feels very strange admitting it to Fred before saying the words to Carson.

"I think he loves you too." Fred picks up three banana pudding cups. "Want one or two? It's my treat. I have some birthday money."

"One is plenty for me."

"Cool. I'm definitely going to need two." He pushes the tray up to the register and pays for our treat.

Then we take a seat in the far corner of the restaurant. Taking tiny bites of my pudding, I wait for Fred to speak his mind.

He's bouncing his leg, which is making the entire table shudder. "I didn't have a good mom. I mean, she loved me, I think. In her own way. And I never really had a dad until..." He stares into his pudding, then shoves a bite in his mouth.

"Until Carson?"

Fred gives a small nod. “I should’ve been nicer to you, but I was scared that everything would change. I wasn’t sure if you’d try to send me away.”

“I’d never do that, Fred. Carson loves you. I never wanted to come between you.”

“Like I said, I was scared. And when you held the snake that day, I knew I’d lost. I mean how was he not going to fall in love after you held a snake for him?”

I slap a hand over my mouth to hold back my laugh or sob.

At this point, I’m not sure what’s about to bubble out of me.

“I held the snake, hoping that it would make you like me. That you’d think I was cool.

” I roll my eyes at how stupid that sounds out loud.

“And it wasn’t a competition. It wasn’t about winning or losing. ”

“I know that now. But I was pretty upset about it, so I tried to be a really good kid so that I wouldn’t bother him. Then Mason gave me a hard time for moping, so I stopped hanging out with him. Mason kept telling me to give you a chance.”

I pinch my lips, trying not to cry.

“Uh-oh. Here comes my dad, and he looks upset.”

Carson rushes across the restaurant and stops beside us, his chest heaving. “I went to Mason’s, and you weren’t there. Why did you lie to me?”

Fred points at me. “I wanted to talk to Daphne without you knowing, so I texted her

from your phone and planned all this. I only told you I was at Mason's so that you wouldn't worry about me."

Carson shakes his head and pulls Fred into a hug. "Please don't ever do that again."

"I didn't mean to scare you. I promise." Fred hands his unopened pudding to Carson. "You can have this. But you should sit next to Daphne."

Carson slides onto the bench, then leans in and hugs me. "Thank you for texting me. I was out of my mind with worry."

"I figured that might be the case." I allow myself to melt into his arms for a second before pulling away. "Fred was telling me why he's been upset."

Fred sighs, then tips his head back. "I was mad because Daphne won when she held the snake. But then I kind of won when you broke up with her. Except I didn't win. You always loved me. And you tried to tell me that."

"Like I said, you are a priority for me, Fred. Not because I promised to take care of you. Not because you're my nephew." Carson taps the spot over his heart. "In here, you're mine. And I'm here for you."

It's a good thing they have rolls of paper towels on the table because I can only hold back the blubbing for so long.

Fred pushes his half-eaten pudding out of the way and leans forward. "You love her too, don't you?"

Carson laces his fingers with mine under the table. "I do."

My phone buzzes, Rose's picture plastered on the screen. She'll have to wait.

Carson's answer doesn't seem to surprise Fred, but it has my insides all a flutter. I mean, I knew he did, but he said it. Out loud. To Fred. In public.

I'll remember this moment forever.

Fred turns his focus back to me. "If you marry him, will you make us leave the ranch?"

He keeps talking about my marrying Carson, which Carson and I haven't talked about. And then we broke up. But Carson loves me and is holding my hand, so I'm pretty sure we're undoing the breakup.

"Are you kidding? I would never take you away from the ranch. That place is awesome." I squeeze Carson's hand.

Fred's gaze drops to the table. "Most of the time when Mom got a new boyfriend, we'd have to move. Sometimes it was to a different part of the city. A few times, it was to a different state. I hated losing all my friends. And her boyfriends weren't nice. Not to me or to my mom."

"I'm not going to ask y'all to move. I will never try to replace your mom. And most importantly, I won't ever ask Carson to send you away. I'm not sure what the future holds..." I swallow down the lump of emotion stuck in my throat. "But if I marry Carson, we'll be a family, all three of us."

Carson's thumb is grazing the back of my hand, but I don't look at him. If I do, I will burst into sobs, and I'm trying not to make a scene in a restaurant we frequent often.

"Okay." Fred crinkles his nose and flashes a smile. "I have another important question."

“What’s that?”

“Are you allergic to cats? Because I really want a cat, but I was waiting to ask Dad about getting one.”

Carson’s attention snaps to Fred. “I had no idea you wanted a cat.”

“Like I said, I haven’t asked. But I’ve wanted one for a long time.”

I’m really glad I’ve already mentioned wanting a cat to Carson so that he doesn’t think I’m just going along with the cat thing to be nice. “I’m not allergic. I’d love to have a cat, but my apartment complex doesn’t allow pets.”

Fred jumps up and runs over to grab a spoon. “Here, Dad. For the pudding.”

Carson uses his free hand to remove the lid. “What changed? Why’d you do this?”

“Dinner that night. I saw how you were looking at her. After y’all broke up, you acted like everything was fine, but you weren’t really.

I could tell. Plus, talking to her that night, I realized that Daphne’s actually nice.

And pretty. But not too pretty for you. At the pool party, I heard some of the ladies saying y’all were really cute together.

I just said that to you out of meanness, and I’m sorry. ”

“I forgive you.” Carson looks down at me. “I’m still not sure I completely agree, but I’m happy either way.”

“Then, after the dinner, I talked to Mason about it. He said that I had to choose what I



wanted to do, but he liked seeing his dad happy. Poppy made him happy. I hadn't thought about it like that. I really do want you to be happy, Dad."

"Thank you." Carson looks from me to Fred. "You arranged all this to get me and Daphne back together?"

"Yeah. I'm the reason you broke up. So I felt like I needed to figure out how to get y'all back together." Fred scoops out the rest of his pudding, then eyes Carson's. "Are you ever going to eat that?"

Carson pushes it across the table. "What was your plan? Because according to what you've said, you didn't think I'd show up here."

"I was going to have Daphne drop me off at Mason's, then go to our house and wait for you. And she was supposed to have donuts, but I didn't know the shop closed before school let out."

"That was your plan, huh?" Carson chuckles. "I was just going to walk into the house and see Daphne waiting for me and everything would be magically better?"

He nods. "Romantic, isn't it? Mason said that his dad flew to New York and showed up at Poppy's hotel. But neither of y'all have a hotel." Fred focuses on me. "Will you care if I don't call you mom?"

"I'm fine with that. You can call me Daphne."

"Cool. I might change my mind, but my mom is still my mom. Even if she wasn't great."

"She'll always be your mom, Fred. Forever." I reach across the table and pat his hand.

He wipes his face. “Y’all can drive me to Mason’s house now.” His eyes widen. “Mason didn’t get in trouble, did he?”

Carson shrugs. “I raced out of there, so I’m not sure. Poppy was pretty upset.”

Fred yanks out his phone and taps on the screen. “My plan wasn’t all that great.”

“It’s the thought that counts.” I blink, trying to clear mist from my eyes, and tears slide down my cheeks.

Carson brushes them away. “I’ll park your car in the lot across the street. We can ride out to the ranch together. If you have time to come to the house.”

“I have time. Shoot, I’ll make time.”

He kisses my forehead. “I’ve missed you.”

“Same.”

Fred clears his throat. “Could you drop me off before y’all do that stuff? Please.”

Carson tousles Fred’s hair. “Let’s go.”

I slide my hand into Carson’s. “I’ll drive across the street, and y’all can pick me up. It’ll give you two a chance to talk without me around. And it’ll give me a chance to update Rose. She’s been blowing up my phone.” I have five missed calls from my friend.

“Sounds like a plan.” Carson walks me to my car and opens the door.

I fight the urge to give him a quick peck. “Fred’s been watching you. When I drove

him over here from across the street, he rushed around and opened my door. It was sweet.”

“Glad to hear it. But you should get in the car because I’m a heartbeat away from kissing you, and that might embarrass Fred. And I’m trying not to do that. Besides, I really want to get to the house because we have quite a bit to talk about.”

I run a finger down his buttons. “You mean about what Fred asked you?”

“Yes. That’s definitely part of it. I’m hoping that since you held my hand and want to come to the house, it means that you’ll give me another chance. That’s what I want to talk about.”

“I absolutely will.” Once I’m buckled in and the engine is running, I call Rose on speaker. “Hey. Sorry it took me this long to give you an update.”

“I was losing my mind!” She laughs. “Calling five times might’ve been a bit excessive, but I had a good feeling about today. Did Carson profess his love and tell you he wants you back?”

“Not exactly like that, but in a roundabout way, yes.”

“And Fred is okay with this?”

“It was his idea. I have a wild story to tell you, but it’ll have to wait because I’m going to ride with Carson and Fred to the ranch. Carson and I have things to discuss.”

“Things!” Rose squeals. “Call me after. No matter how late it is. Actually, if it’s after eleven, just text me. I don’t want to wake Dallas.”

“I’ll text you.” If I have my way, I’ll be at Carson’s until very late. After more than a

month apart, I want nothing more than to be snuggled in his arms for hours. Talking. Laughing. Kissing.

Definitely kissing.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Carson

Carson

F red climbs into the back seat. “I’ll sit back here, and Daphne can ride shotgun.”

I start the engine, then turn to look at him. “I appreciate the trouble you went to setting this up, but please don’t ever scare me like that again. When Mason said you weren’t going to tell him where you were headed, I thought you’d run away.”

He starts bouncing his leg. “Living with you is the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I’d never run away.” He drags a sleeve across his eyes. “Sorry I scared you. I just needed to talk to Daphne alone. To know if she was only being nice to me when you were around.”

“I’m sorry life was hard for you. It’s not fair. You didn’t deserve that.” I watch as Daphne pulls out of the lot. “Why didn’t you talk to me instead of saying everything was fine?”

“I didn’t want you to be mad at me. Or wish I’d never come to live with you.”

“First of all, I’d never wish that. I’m glad you live with me. Plus, you living with me is the reason I came to the ranch, which is pretty great. And I never would’ve met Daphne back where I lived before. So, don’t ever think I’m quietly regretting the choice to adopt you. It’ll never happen.”

“Okay.” He tips his head, motioning across the street. “She’s going to wonder what’s

taking us so long.”

“We’ll just tell her we were talking about our feelings. And before we stop talking about the mushy stuff, I want to say that I love you, Fred.”

He glances out the window, then meets my gaze and swallows.

He’s never told me to my face that he loves me, only whispered to my back. So, instead of waiting and making him uncomfortable, I shift the conversation. “Should we go?”

“Yeah.” Fred sighs. “Talking about feelings is exhausting. Hopefully Mason wants to play video games. You don’t care if we hang out in the game room for a while, do you?”

“Nope. Stay out of trouble and make sure at least one parent knows where y’all are.” I cross the street and stop next to Daphne’s car. “But you should make sure it’s still okay for you to go over to Mason’s.”

“Yeah. Either way, I need to apologize to Miss Poppy. I think I scared her too.”

“You did.” I jump out and open the door for Daphne.

Her eyes are full of twinkles as she looks at me before getting into her seat. After buckling in, she turns to face Fred. “Thank you for giving me a chance.”

There’s a spark of admiration in the smile he gives her. “It was pretty cool when you held the snake. And Bailey thinks you’re super awesome. She’ll be happy that you’re dating my dad again. Because she kept asking about you. And every time she did, Mason would just look at me.”

I stifle a laugh, imagining the expression on Mason's face when he offered his silent judgment. It's funny that his friends had a hand in this all working out. "It's kind of awesome having such good friends living so close, isn't it?"

He bounces his head in agreement. "Mason is awesome, and even Bailey is kind of cool. For a girl."

Daphne laughs. "She is pretty cool. That day, she was telling me all about her cactus collection."

Fred rolls his eyes. "She loves cactus so much."

When we stop at Mason's, Fred asks, "Will you go to the door with me?"

"Of course." I give Daphne's hand a squeeze. "I'll be right back."

"No hurry." She picks up her phone. "I'll update Rose a bit more."

Fred and I are halfway to the porch when he tugs on my arm.

"What's up?"

Staring at the ground, he kicks at a rock, then looks up at me. "I love you too."

I wrap the kid in a bear hug, trying my best not to embarrass him with my tears.

He pulls back and wipes his eyes. "You can go. I'll tell them what happened."

"Why don't I just wait here? I'll leave once y'all go inside."

"Okay." He walks to the door and knocks.

Poppy opens it not even a second later, which makes me think she's been standing near the door and probably watched our little scene. "Fred Blake, do not ever do that again. Do you know how scared your dad was? All of us were worried about you."

He hangs his head. "Sorry. I was just trying to fix things with Daphne since I messed everything up."

Poppy embraces him. "You're a good kid. Come on in. Mason is gathering snacks to take to the game room."

I give Poppy a wave, then climb back into the truck and head to the house. Daphne holds my hand as we drive.

"You okay?" Daphne asks, her voice low. "I only ask because you have tears in your eyes."

"More than okay. He told me he loves me. And that's not a common occurrence. It's only the second time I've heard those words. The first time he's said it to my face." I park and slide out.

She waits, knowing I'm going to open her door.

Now that we're finally alone without a teen to embarrass, as soon as I open her door, I lean in and kiss her.

She grips my shirt and presses closer.

I'm the only thing keeping her from toppling out of my truck. When I break the kiss, I rest my forehead on hers. I'm sure she can feel my breath as I speak. "About the question Fred asked?—"



“He asked me the same question before you arrived, and I wasn’t going to lie to him, but I’m sorry I told him before telling you.”

“I knew. That’s what made breaking up so hard.”

She leans back and cups my cheek. “But it was absolutely the right decision. Fred needed to know that you’d do anything for him. He needed to feel chosen and loved. And he does. And because he feels safe, he’s open to change.”

Carson nods. “Kent told me how Mason would crawl in Poppy’s lap for story time. But Fred is a teenager in every way, so I’m not sure how warm he’ll be. I can’t even picture story time.”

“We’ll figure it out. I know Fred kept talking about us getting married, and while I would love for that to happen someday, I don’t think this is the right time.”

“I agree.” I scoop her out of the seat. “Let’s go inside. There is no reason to have this conversation out here.”

Laughing, she grabs her purse, then hugs my neck. “You know how to sweep me off my feet.”

“You were sitting, not standing. So I guess I swept you off your butt.” I wink.

She grabs the knob and opens the front door. “I have something for you in my purse.”

I set her on the couch. “For me?”

She pulls out a Matchbox car. A red Ferrari, then taps the package.

“I saw this one day and bought it because of your costume the night you saved me. It

was in my purse the day we broke up. And it's just been sitting in there.

I couldn't make myself get rid of it. Or even take it out of my purse. Hope springs eternal, I suppose."

"I love you, Daphne. For so many reasons. You're amazing. You love me. You gave me grace and space when I was trying to figure this out as a single dad. And you never gave up hope. For us."

"When you pulled me out of that car and I felt a little spark, I was so excited because it had never happened to me before. I'd never felt that way. Then I got to know you more, and it became so much more than a little spark. I love you, Carson Blake."

Daphne

Daphne

I snuggle up next to Carson on the couch, and Fred flops into the overstuffed chair. Carson and I still go out alone some nights, but most of the time, we choose activities that Fred can do with us. It's giving me time to get to know him a little more.

And on movie nights, we always let Fred pick.

He cues up the movie, and I stifle a laugh. Tonight's movie is Scooby Doo! Camp Scare .

Carson pokes my arm. "You want to run home and get your costume?"

"That dress was destroyed at the hospital that night. I don't have it anymore."

"That's a genuine shame." He winks.

Fred cocks his head. "I'm not sure I want to know what y'all are talking about."

Carson laughs. "The night I rescued Daphne, we were both headed to a costume party, and she was dressed as Daphne."

"Daphne Blake? Like the character?" Looking at me, Fred points at the screen.

With an arm draped over my shoulders, Carson brushes a thumb along my arm.

It's been almost a year since that night, and in all that time, I haven't thought about the character's last name. "Yes. I had a full costume. Red wig, purple dress. All of it."

"Cool." Fred shifts sideways and hangs his legs over the arm of the chair. "Ready?"

Carson and I nod, and the movie starts. But through the whole movie, part of my brain is thinking about the coincidence of the name and wondering if asking Carson to do a couple's costume for Rose's second annual party is pushing things.

The movie ends, and Fred slides out of the chair. "I told Mason that I'd go fishing with him really early, so I'm going to take a shower and go to bed."

"Night." I'm thankful for the new ease in the relationship with Fred, but I'm still working on figuring out how much to say and when to keep my mouth shut.

Carson drops a kiss on my temple before standing. "I'm going to chat with him for a moment. Be right back."

They disappear down the hall, and I wait.

I shoot off a text to Rose.

Me: Tonight was our third movie night. Fred chose Scooby Doo. Now I'm thinking about the party.

Rose: Y'all are coming, right?

Me: I think so. We haven't really discussed it.

Rose: Then discuss it already!

Rose: Dallas and I are doing another couple's costume this year. He's going to be Woody the cowboy. And I'm trying to decide between being Little Bo Peep and Jesse, the cowgirl.

Me: Bo Peep for sure. You'll rock a dress like that.

Rose: What are y'all coming as?

Me: Not sure. I'll ask him about the party in a bit.

Rose sends a thumbs-up, and I tuck my phone away when Carson comes back into the living room.

He sits down beside me. "I wanted to make sure he didn't hurry off because he thought we wanted to be alone."

"I hope he doesn't think that. I'm enjoying our movie nights. And getting to know him more."

A smile brightens Carson's expression. "Well, he didn't leave because of that. He just has more sense than I did at the same age. And he's going to bed early because of the fishing."

"Good. I don't ever want him to feel run off." I shift. "Rose's party is coming up soon. Do you want to go?"

He nods. "I do. We'll need costumes."

"I have an idea. You could grow out your mustache and go as Magnum PI again. And I could wear my hair up, slap on a fake mustache, and put on a suit. We'd be Magnum and Higgins."

Carson snorts out a laugh. “Funny, but let’s hang onto that idea for next year.

How about I get you a new Daphne costume?

And I’ll go as Fred. Think I’ll look good in an ascot?

” He laces his fingers with mine. “Originally, I was going to dress up as Scooby, but since Daphne and Fred were kind of sweet on each other, I changed my mind.”

“I love that idea. But I can buy my own Daphne costume.”

“Ok then. It’s a date.” He pulls my hand to his lips. “I like these nights where we all spend the evening together.”

“Me too.” It’s a glimpse of my possible future, and I really want life to turn out this way.

I check the time, intent on finishing work early. I want to stop and get some snacks for tonight. It’s been a year since Fred got me and Carson back together, and movie nights have been a consistent thing. But tonight, instead of a movie, we’re playing a game.

Fred made the request, and I’m excited.

My cell phone buzzes just as I’m wrapping up a project for my boss. And I nearly let it roll to voicemail, intending to check messages after I finish. But Poppy’s name on the screen catches my attention. She has never called me at work.

“Hello.”

“Hi. This is Poppy. Carson asked me to call you. Well, he told Kent to ask me to call

you.”

“Did something happen?” Between the edge in her voice and the pit in my stomach, I know something isn’t right.

“Carson had an accident while he was repairing a roof. I don’t know many details. Kent said that Carson was talking when they loaded him into the ambulance.”

I yank my purse out of the bottom drawer and shoot off a speed-typed email to my boss, letting him know I’ll finish the project remotely this evening. “What hospital? I’m on my way.”

She rattles off the name of the hospital and sighs. “It’s been chaos today. I’m supposed to pick up Fred, but the baby just threw up. Mason is home today with a tummy bug. And now this. Anyway, Carson wanted you to know that he was fine. Well, not fine, but very much alive.”

“I’ll pick up Fred. What time does he get out?” I’m walking toward the elevator as Poppy gives me the time and pickup location. If I leave now, I’ll just make it. “Does Fred know about the accident?”

“No. I was planning to tell him when I picked him up. That’s what Carson suggested.”

“Okay. Thank you so much for calling me. I truly appreciate it.” I end the call as I step onto the elevator and then focus on breathing.

Carson is alive. He asked Poppy to call me, so he’s at least alert enough to think of that. And I have to be calm for Fred. I don’t want the poor kid to panic.

When I pull up to the school, I roll down the window and wave.

Fred gives me a quizzical look and walks toward my car. He stops and looks in the window. “Hi. I thought Poppy was picking me up.”

“Hello. Clara has the tummy bug now, so I offered to pick you up.” I successfully avoid sounding like I’m on the verge of panic. “Hop in.”

He opens the door and drops into the passenger seat. “Thanks. I’m glad I don’t have to ride with Clara because I don’t want the bug. Being sick is no fun.”

“You’re very welcome. I’m happy to help.” I take a quick breath, then spew the next part. There is no way to cushion the news well. “Also, your dad had an accident today and is at the hospital.”

Fred’s eyes widen in fear.

“I’m not sure what his injuries are, but he asked Poppy to call me, so I know he’s alive.” I reach across the car and squeeze Fred’s hand. “I assume you want to go to the hospital with me.”

“Yeah.” He bobs his head.

“Do you need me to grab you some food on the way?”

“No. Let’s just go straight there.” He’s bouncing his leg, clearly worried.

As I pull away from the school, Carson calls my phone, and I answer on speaker. “Hello?”

“Is Fred with you?”

Fred leans forward, tugging on the seat belt. “Hi, Dad. We’re on our way to the



hospital.”

“They’re transferring me to a hospital in San Antonio. Y’all can meet me there. I’ll text y’all the name. But you definitely have time to stop and get food because it’ll take a while to get there. And you don’t need to worry about me. I’m okay. My leg isn’t, but they’re going to fix that.”

Fred visibly relaxes. “I was worried about you.”

“I figured you would be. And, Fred, be brave for Daphne because I think she’s probably a little worried about me too.”

There is a hint of strain in Carson’s voice, which makes me think he’s in pain.

But his delivery is calm, which is typical for him.

And he’s giving Fred a distraction from his worry while letting me know he cares about how I feel.

Carson better be okay because the chances of finding two men who are this funny, kind, and good-looking are zilch.

“I will.” Fred flashes a determined smile. “We’ll go eat, then meet you at the hospital.”

This is not the bonding experience I wanted.

“Sounds good.” Carson talks to someone on his end of the line. “I need to go. But I’ll see y’all soon. Love y’all.”

The call ends, and I change lanes so that I can hit the highway and drive into San

Antonio. “What kind of food do you want?”

Fred shrugs. “Anything is fine.”

“You have to help me decide. All my brain power is focused on driving right now.”

“I’ll google restaurants that aren’t far from the hospital. He sent the name of it to both of us.”

“Thank you, Fred. That is helpful.”

He directs me to a Vietnamese restaurant, and I now somehow like this kid even more.

“This okay?” He opens the door to the restaurant and motions for me to go in first.

“This is great.” We sit at a table near the front window and look over the menu. And we’re both quietly checking our phones every couple of minutes.

By the time our food arrives, we’ve relaxed a bit. He’s asking questions and steering the conversation, trying to distract me from my worry. He may have only been around Carson for a few years, but he models some of the same behaviors.

One day, some girl will be very lucky.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Carson

Carson

I open my eyes and see Fred and Daphne standing next to my hospital bed. “Hey.”

She slips her cool fingers into my hand. “The doctor stopped by. He said that everything went well, and your leg should heal completely. It’ll just take some time.”

Fred crosses his arms. “I’ll help you, and I was also kind of thinking that maybe for the first few weeks while you need extra help, maybe Daphne could stay with us.”

Tears brim in her eyes. Nodding, she turns to face Fred. “I can absolutely do that. And I have some leave, so I can take off a few days when you leave the hospital.”

I squeeze her hand. “Daphne, you don’t have to take leave. Having you at the house would be a big help if you can swing it. I don’t want to interfere with your job though. And save your vacation days for fun stuff.”

“Okay. Fred has been great at helping me stay calm during the surgery. When we got here and found out it was happening, I was concerned.”

“She was freaking out a little bit,” Fred says with a subtle grin.

She bumps her shoulder against his. “Thanks for ratting me out.”

Fred is no longer distant when Daphne’s around. He’s not just being polite for my

sake. He seems to genuinely enjoy having her around.

“I’m okay. Pain meds are working, so I feel great right now. But I don’t want to keep y’all out too late. Daphne, even though it’s a bit of a drive, do you mind taking Fred home tonight?”

“Dad, I want to stay with you.” Fred’s facade of calm is cracking.

I motion for him to come to the other side of the bed and hold out my hand.

He grips it. “I’ll be quiet and let you sleep. And if you need anything, I can get a nurse. I can help you, Dad.”

“Listen. It’s a school night. You don’t need to be missing school because of this. I’m okay. They’ll probably let me go home tomorrow. As soon as I find my phone, I’ll see who doesn’t have the tummy bug and see if you can stay with them.”

He nods. “Beau and Lilith texted me that they are coming to see you. I can go home with them. That way, Daphne can stay with you. I don’t want you to be alone, Dad.”

I squeeze his hand. “We’ll see if it works out for her to stay.”

“It totally works out.” Daphne raises her eyebrows. “I’ve already taken tomorrow off, and don’t tell me to save vacation days for something fun. Fred, if he doesn’t go home tomorrow, I’ll pick you up after school and bring you here, okay?”

Fred walks around the bed and wraps his arms around Daphne, burying his head in her shoulder.

She hugs him and rubs his back. “Thank you for helping me stay calm today. I was really worried about your dad.”

Fred nods into her shoulder. When he picks up his head, he wipes his eyes. “You’re welcome.”

He’s in the middle space where he’s growing up but there is still a little kid showing through from time to time. I’m trying to keep his life as normal as possible through this mess because the stability is good for him. And I’m extra thankful for Daphne right now. For both of them, honestly.

Beau and Lilith knock on the open hospital door before stepping inside. He is holding a massive basket that’s full of snacks. “Glad you’re okay. I’m going to have to put you on desk duty for a while.”

“What kind of desk duty does a cowboy do?”

Beau chuckles. “That sounds like the lead-in to a joke. But to answer your question, I’m not sure yet. We’ll figure it out as we go.” He hands the basket to Fred. “Lilith wanted to bring you flowers, but I’ve been in the hospital. You need food. Flowers aren’t good eating.”

Fred pokes through the basket. “Can I have something out of here?”

“Sure thing.”

Lilith rolls her eyes at Beau. “This man always has one thing on his mind.”

He steps behind her and slides an arm around her waist. “Not true. I also think about?—”

Her elbow to his ribs ends his sentence. But he’s grinning, so I’m pretty sure he isn’t hurt.

“I’m sorry about what happened,” Beau says. “It took me a bit to settle Ava. It helped that you weren’t on a ladder when it happened. Now she doesn’t want us on any roofs. But how are we supposed to fix them if we don’t go up there? She was on her porch, pacing. And I was keeping my distance.”

Lilith pats Beau’s arm. “Ava would be up here if she weren’t sick. And I feel horrible about what happened.”

“Not your fault I found the rotten spot in the wood.” I shift and wince. “I’m just thankful it was just my lower leg that broke through and not all of me.” I tighten my hold on Daphne’s hand. “I’ll heal.”

Fred tears open a bag of beef jerky. “Mind if I ride back with y’all?”

“That’s absolutely fine.” Lilith nods. “I’ll fix up the guest room for you, and we’ll get you to school in the morning.”

“Thanks so much.” I love that we have support on the ranch.

Lilith focuses on Daphne. “Are you staying up here tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Need us to get anything for you?” Beau’s gaze bounces between Daphne and me.

“I’m good.” I grin because that sounds ridiculous coming from someone in a hospital bed.

“I have an overnight bag in my car. I’ll run out and get it, and I’ll be fine. Thank you, though.”

Lilith pats Beau again. “Well, we don’t want to keep you. We just wanted to make sure you were okay. Kent felt bad that he couldn’t meet you over here, but with both his kids sick, he needed to get back to Poppy. That stomach bug has lots of people sick on the ranch.”

“I don’t want to catch it.” Fred sets the basket on a side table.

“Me neither.” Beau points at Fred. “But if we keep our distance from the infected, we should be okay.”

Lilith shakes her head. “The infected. You make them sound like zombies.”

“I’ll feel like a zombie if I catch it.” He feigns a shiver, acting like the thought scares him.

“We should go. Beau is getting loopy.” Lilith hugs me. “Please let us know if there is anything we can do.”

Beau shakes my hand. “Heal up. And what she said. Anything at all, okay?”

“Will do.” I hold out my hand to Fred. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He hugs me. “Love you, Dad.”

“I love you too.”

When the three of them walk out of the room, Daphne lets go of my hand long enough to pull a chair close to the bed. “You fell through a roof?”

“No. My leg went through a roof. The rest of me stayed on top of it.”

She kisses my hand. “I was so worried. And poor Fred was working so hard to keep it together. He did because he was trying to be strong for me.”

“I tried my best to let y’all know I was okay.”

“We could hear the pain in your voice.” She has my hand sandwiched between hers. “You aren’t great at hiding stuff or lying.”

“Two qualities every woman wants in her man.”

She laughs. “True.”

“I love you. Thank you for dropping everything and rushing to help.” I motion for her to get closer.

She leans in for a kiss. “When you or Fred need me, I’ll come running.”

“Driving is faster. You should keep that in mind.”

Shaking her head at my dumb joke, she laughs, then kisses me again.

I knew a year ago that I wanted to marry her, but I was waiting to see if Fred was comfortable around her. If this mishap has taught me anything, it’s that she’s the real deal and Fred likes having her around.

Now I just have to wait on this stupid leg to heal.

Hobbling around without crutches feels like an achievement unlocked. It’s been four weeks since my injury, and healing feels really slow.

Daphne hands me a cup of coffee when I reach the end of the hall. “Please be



careful.” She gives me a quick peck. “I have to run. I’m already late.”

She’s been living in the guest room since my accident. In the mornings, she helps me by laying out my clothes and making sure my crutches are beside the bed. But I’m now at a point that I can do most things on my own.

Even though I like having her here, I feel bad that it adds to her commute. “I’m getting around pretty good. You don’t have to stay on my account. I know the drive is longer.”

She rolls her eyes. “The drive isn’t bad if I leave on time.”

I tug her close and kiss her properly. “Have a great day.”

“Thanks.” She hurries toward the door. “Bye, Fred. See you tonight.”

Fred hollers from down the hall. “Bye.”

I’ve just taken a sip of coffee when he walks into the kitchen a few minutes later, his hair dripping wet.

“Are you waiting until you can get down on one knee?”

I choke, desperately trying not to suck coffee down my windpipe. “What?”

He raises his eyebrows, giving me a look only teenagers can perfect. But he doesn’t actually utter the word Duh . “It’s pretty obvious that you want to marry Daphne. And I was guessing about why you’ve waited. If it’s because of me, I like her.”

“I would like to be able to get down on one knee. But it’s reassuring to know you are on board with that idea.”

Fred drops into a chair. “Also, I was talking to Mason. When I found out you were in the hospital, I was really worried. About you and worried about what would happen to me if I couldn’t live with you anymore.”

I drop into the chair beside him. “While I don’t intend to let anything happen to me, we should probably have a plan for that.”

“Mason said that if something ever happened to his dad that he’d live with Poppy. Do you think Daphne would let me stay with her?”

“I do.” I pat his shoulder. “Part of what I love about Daphne is that she cares about you as much as I do.”

“It’s been nice having her here all the time.

I know she has to go back to her place, but I was thinking about that.

” He slides his phone across the table with a picture of a tiny kitten on the screen.

“Can I get her a cat for Christmas? It would have to live with us, which would give Daphne a reason to come over a lot. You’d like that, right? ”

“That’s a cute kitten. Are you willing to help take care of it?”

“Totally. I’ll fill the food and water bowls. And I’ll scoop the litter box.”

“Then I think it’s a great gift idea.” I’m prepared to keep the kitten if for some reason Daphne doesn’t want it. And it’s clear that Fred really wants it.

“Awesome.” He jumps up and runs down the hall. “I’ll be ready to leave in five minutes.”

If my desire to propose is obvious to Fred, I'm guessing the entire world knows how I feel. I'll ask her on Christmas. Even if this darn leg won't allow me to get on one knee.

I've waited long enough. We both have. I want her here all the time.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Daphne

Daphne

I take my place in the pickup line at the middle school, excited and nervous for the planned shopping adventure.

For December, the day is too warm. But I'm not going to let that dampen my holiday spirit.

Fred asked if I'd take him shopping for Carson's present, and I heartily agreed. It's a bit of a Christmas miracle.

We're even getting dinner together. Just the two of us. Which is a first. Actually, the second, but the first was during a stressful situation and not planned ahead of time.

It's been more than a year since Carson and I got back together. And Fred's been friendly, kind. Even warm some days. The three of us have gone to dinner, had movie nights, and once went on a horseback ride through the ranch.

But this is the first time he's requested an outing alone with me. And that's why I'm both nervous and excited. Things shifted when Carson was in the hospital a couple of months ago. Fred and I drew a bit closer. I guess realizing that we both love the same person had something to do with that.

He opens the back door and tosses in his backpack.

And I hold my breath, hoping he isn't planning to sit back there on our drive into San Antonio.

The distance between the seats would make me feel like a chauffeur.

But if that's what he's comfortable with, I'll adjust. But I doubt he will because he's ridden in the front seat before.

After digging around in his backpack a second, he closes the back door and gets into the passenger seat. "Thanks for this. I hope it didn't mess up your schedule."

"Not at all. I'm really glad you asked."

Grinning, he buckles his seat belt. "I already know what I'm going to get you."

"We haven't even left the parking lot, and you're teasing me." I give a comically dramatic huff.

He laughs. "You'll like it. A lot."

As I drive, he talks about his school day and which teachers he likes and doesn't like. And soon, my nervousness dissipates. One conversation leads into another, and we talk and laugh until we get to the mall.

When I park, he glances at his backpack and then at my door.

"Grab your backpack. You don't have to get my door." I pat his shoulder. "But I like that you thought about it."

He flashes a smile. "One day, when I get a girlfriend, I'll open the door for her. Like Dad does for you."

“Anyone particular in mind?”

“Not right now. Mason says that when you meet someone, you’ll just know. And that’s what happened with you and Dad, so I guess I just haven’t met her yet.”

“Well, you’re fourteen, so you have lots of time.”

“Yeah.” He points toward the bookstore as he climbs out. “Let’s start there. I want to get a book and some chocolate for Dad’s stocking.”

We shop for hours. And by dinnertime, our arms are loaded down with bags.

“Let’s put all this into the trunk, then find a restaurant.” I’m carrying far fewer bags than he is. At his insistence.

“Cool.” He strides along beside me.

We’re about the same height right now, but it won’t be long before he’ll be looking down at me. He’s grown up so much in the last year, and most of the time, there isn’t much of the moody teen left. I’m sure it’s not gone for good. But the reprieve has been most pleasant.

While we load bags into the trunk, he clears his throat. “My school is doing a breakfast thing called Muffins with Mom, and I know you aren’t my mom, but you could...” The question dangles, and after a few moments of staring at the bags, he looks at me. “If you wanted.”

“Text me the day and time, and I’ll be there. I’d be honored to go to Muffins with Moms with you.”

“Poppy will be there, but she’s Mason’s mom, and I could ask some of the other

ladies on the ranch. They'd totally show up if I asked, but I'd really like it if you came. I know you work, and if you can't, I understand."

"I can go in late one day. I'll just let my boss know that I have something important to do." I flash a smile and will myself not to cry. "Let's go eat. I'm starved. How does a steak sound?"

"Amazing." He drops into his seat.

I'll be riding this high for weeks. All the people who said that Fred just needed time were correct. And I love this young man. I'm not going to say that out loud right now because I'm not sure how he'll react, but I'll know when the time is right.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee wafts down the hall, and I make my way to the kitchen. I'm extra thankful I stayed in Carson's guest room last night.

Carson gives me a quick kiss before handing me a mug. "Merry Christmas. You ready for presents? Fred is. And I think he's as excited about giving you your gift as he is about opening his."

I lean in and give Carson another kiss, one that can't be labeled a peck. "This is my present. The holiday has been perfect. I celebrated with my mom and siblings yesterday. And I'm with y'all today."

He slides an arm around my waist and tugs me closer. "And in a bit, we'll go to the main house for more gifts and a Christmas breakfast. It's a million times better than how I grew up, and something I never dreamed would be my life."

Fred clears his throat. "Um, I'm ready. Can y'all do that mushy stuff while we open gifts?"

I laugh at the feigned exasperation in Fred's expression, then hug him. "Merry Christmas. Let's go open presents."

"Can I have a cup of coffee, Dad?"

"Not yet. When you're taller than me, I'll let you have coffee."

At the rate Fred is growing, that might be a few weeks. That's an exaggeration, but I think he's grown an inch since he and I were out shopping just weeks ago.

The three of us sit on the floor around the tree.

Then Fred leans forward and grabs a package. "Daphne, you need to open yours first." He sets the rather large box in front of me.

"No, you go ahead—" The box meows, and I look from Carson to Fred.

Both are wearing pleased-as-pie grins.

I tear away the paper and open the box. Inside is a fluffy black and white kitten. I'm overjoyed and sad, all at once.

As I lift her out of the box, Fred shifts the cardboard and paper out of the way. "She needs a name. I kind of like Oreos, but she's your cat. And before you say anything about the apartment not allowing pets, I thought of that." He hands me a card.

Cradling the kitten in one hand as she bats at my hair, I read the card.

Daphne, I wanted to get you something you'd really, really like.

And I knew when I saw Oreos (or whatever you name her) that she was the perfect



gift.

And because she can't live in your apartment, she can live here, and you can visit her a lot, and I'll help take care of her. (I already asked Dad about this.)

I hope you like her.

Sniffing, I lean over and hug Fred. "This is the best gift. Thank you."

He beams. "I know it's not the same as having her in your apartment, but I can't change that part."

"I might just have to find a new apartment when my lease is up." I give Oreo a scratch. "She's adorable. Aren't you, Oreo?"

Fred and Carson exchange a look that makes me curious. But I will not spend the day overanalyzing every glance and reading into every gesture.

She wriggles. And when I put her down, she immediately pounces on the wrapping paper.

Fred slides his hand under the paper, and a battle commences.

I lean back against Carson. "Thank you."

While Carson and I have talked about marriage in the general sense, he hasn't mentioned a proposal.

I'm hoping it comes up soon. Giving me a kitty that lives here seems like a step in that direction.

And the look they shared makes me wonder what else they've been planning besides giving me a kitten.

Carson kisses the top of my head. "Weeks ago, Fred showed me her picture and told me his plan. We picked her up two days ago, and he's handled everything."

"Mind if we save my gift to him for last?"

"Sounds good to me." He leans in and kisses me before reaching for another present.

Paper piles up beside the tree, and Oreo treats it as her personal playground, hiding and pouncing until she's used up all her kitty energy. Then she climbs into my lap.

Fred reads the tag on the last gift under the tree and smiles at me. "Last one."

I might have gone a bit overboard with this gift, but I did check with Carson first.

While Fred is tearing paper off the box, Carson drops a kiss on my neck. "Later, we should spend some time, just the two of us."

Stroking the kitty, I nod, but my gaze stays fixed on Fred.

He opens the big box, and his eyes widen. "A PS5!"

"I was a little tricky and put it in a bigger box so that you wouldn't guess from the package. I know there are consoles in the game room, but?—"

He gives me a tight hug. "This is awesome. You don't care if I set it up in the game room, do you? This is newer than what we have in there."

"That's totally fine." I love seeing the utter delight on Fred's face.

He's acting like a fourteen-year-old, but he has a little-kid grin on his face.

He jumps up. "Are we headed to the main house soon, Dad?"

"Yep." Carson laughs. "Let me bag this trash. Then we can go." He holds out a hand to help me up. "And I already talked to Beau about bringing Oreo over. He said it was fine."

"Yay! I'm glad I don't have to leave her all alone." I set her on a throw pillow, and she snuggles in. "I'm going to change. But I'll be quick."

"We all go in our pajamas," Fred says, without a hint of deceit in his expression.

"For real? Y'all aren't pranking me?"

Fred crosses his heart. "I'm going in mine."

Carson yanks on his boots. "You saw what I was wearing most mornings when you were here after I broke my leg. I'm only wearing these plaid flannel pajamas because of the tradition."

"This is so fun. And y'all look adorable, by the way. Maybe we can get a picture later. Just the three of us."

"That'd be cool." Fred scoops up the kitty. "I'll carry Oreo."

Decked out in pajamas, we all head to the main house for food and merriment.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Carson

Carson

“I’ll call you when I’m ready to go home.” At least he's acting like that's what he'll be doing.

“Have fun!” Daphne waves. “You sure you’re okay taking care of Oreos?”

“Yeah.” He gives a thumbs-up. “Y’all have a good time.”

It should probably concern me that he’s such a good actor. Based on his performance alone, Daphne would have no clue that I’m about to propose. But my sweaty palms might give it away. Or the thudding of my heart.

Christmas has been magical. Last year was great, like the year before. But this one has been the best yet.

After dragging my hand down my jeans, I clasp hers. “Thanks for sneaking away with me for a bit.”

“Happily.” She squeezes my hand.

If she has any idea what’s coming, she doesn’t let on.

Holding her hand, I drive to the back entrance of the ranch. I intentionally waited until sunset to steal away. More romantic that way.

“I know you didn’t want to leave Oreo.”

“She’s just so cuddly and cute.” Daphne grins. “And watching Fred playing with her warms my heart.”

After entering the code, I drive down the road and stop not far from the cabin. “Even though it’s chilly out, I thought we could walk a bit.”

“How’s your leg? It isn’t hurting, is it?”

“My leg is good. Pretty much back to normal.”

“Are we going to our tree?”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“Perfect. I love that spot.”

I take her hand, and we walk down the trail and across the river. Before rounding the bend and walking toward our first-kiss tree, I pause and pull her close. “This has been a good Christmas.”

“The best.” She inches up and presses a kiss to my lips. And I can almost see the wheels turning in her head as she says, “You know I love you. Oreo is just an added excuse to visit. But while we were opening presents this morning, I just...” She rests her head on my chest.

Waiting, I rub her back.

She lifts her head, tears glistening in her eyes. “Y’all feel like family. Not just you. Fred too, and I love it.”

That sums up why this Christmas is the best. “Same. This felt like a storybook Christmas. Minus the part where Oreo snagged the breakfast sausage off my plate.”

“She’s so fast. And now we know not to set plates down when she’s anywhere around.”

I nod and rub my finger, the battle scar incurred when fighting for my breakfast. “For sure. But I agree in every way. It’s been an almost perfect day.”

“Almost?”

I tug her forward and start walking again. “I think we can make it even better.”

Mason, Fred, Kent, and Anderson came out earlier and using the ladder Beau insisted they bring along, strung up twinkle lights in our special tree and two others close to it.

And they’re all lit up. Three trees glowing in the darkness.

Daphne gasps.

I was intentional about staying where she could see me most of the day, which likely has her wondering how I pulled this off. It’ll mean a lot when she learns that Fred helped.

“It’s beautiful.” She walks to our tree and rests her back against it. “I’m not sure how you did this.”

I cradle one side of her face with my hand. “Elves helped.”

She leans her cheek into my hand. “I love it.”

“I love you, Daphne. Everything about you. And I wanted this to be perfect. A moment we’d never forget.

But because it’s December, I didn’t order rain.

Didn’t want us to be cold.” I give her a quick peck, then get down on one knee, a move I practiced in private a hundred times this week. “Daphne Emerson, will you marry me?”

Wiping tears, she bounces her head up and down. “Yes.” She hugs my neck as I stand.

I lift her off her feet, and when her lips meet mine, a cheer goes up as friends and my family pop out from their hiding spots.

“Carson, I am beyond surprised. I mean, I was hoping for a proposal, but having everyone here is amazing. How did I not see them?”

“Fred and I almost slipped up a few times this morning.” I glance at Fred and motion for him to join us. “And I waited until after the sun went down. Twinkle lights look better at night. It’s also much easier for people to hide.”

Fred walks up beside us, then spins around showing Daphne the kitty backpack and a very excited Oreos. “I didn’t leave her alone. She got to share in the moment. And I’m really glad you said yes.”

Daphne wraps her arms around Fred. “I love you, too. And I am excited to be your stepmom or whatever it is you want to call me.”

“Not sure what to call you yet.” He leans closer and whispers, “Love you too.”

I wave my arms for everyone to come closer.

Daphne's mom takes halting steps toward us until Daphne opens her arms. Then she hurries in for a hug.

Rose is bouncing up and down, squealing. And Dallas is smiling.

We are surrounded by all our friends, who feel very much like family.

After several minutes of congratulations and celebration, everyone heads off toward the main house, leaving me alone with my fiancée under the twinkle lights.

"You made the day so much better." Daphne runs a hand down my shirt.

I sweep her off her feet and cradle her in my arms. "Once upon a time, I thought you were too pretty for me. That someone like you wouldn't even look twice at a guy like me.

But meeting you and getting to know you changed my life.

I don't want to even think about life without you.

I tried it, and it wasn't fun. Because of you, I'm more confident in who I am. Thank you for that."

She pushes on my chest. "Don't carry me. Your leg."

"Is fine. If it starts to hurt, I'll put you down."

"Are you sure?" She wraps her arms around my neck when I nod. After kissing my cheek, she says, "My happily-ever-after started the moment you pulled me out of the



upside-down car. That wreck totaled my poor car, but because of it, I met you. And I cannot wait to marry you.”

I carry her down the trail and to the truck. “Big wedding or small?”

“Big enough so that all our friends and family have a place to sit. But not so large that it takes ages to plan.” She reaches out to open the passenger door. “I want to be your wife.”

I’m looking forward to that so much that it’s hard to express with words. “I want you too.”

Delight and desire sparkle in her eyes, and she slips a hand inside my shirt. “I love you.”

I’m hoping Lilith has connections that can help us plan a wedding in short order because I’m eager to be married to Daphne. “Did you know that Oreó slept in Fred’s bed the last two nights. When you move in for real, you can sleep in mine. It’s only fair.”

Laughing, she pulls me to her lips.

We spend the next several minutes kissing. At this rate, it’s going to take us an hour to make it back to the main house, where everyone is waiting to celebrate with us.

My phone dings, and I check the message, then turn the screen so that Daphne can see the text from Fred.

Fred: There’s cake, and we all want some. Can you maybe kiss after we celebrate?

I give her one more quick peck. “We should get over there before our teenager dies of

cake starvation.”

“Absolutely. That would be the worst.”

“Wait! I forgot something important.” I reach into my pocket. “I’m not sure it’s official without a ring. I was so focused on what to say that I completely forgot the ring.”

She holds out her hand, and I slide the ring into place on her finger.

“I love it. And my answer is still yes.” She holds the solitaire under the dome lights, and glow refracts throughout the cab. “It’s gorgeous.”

“Like you.”

Hand in hand, we drive back to the other side of the ranch. Daphne is beaming, and I’m happier than I ever thought possible.

She makes me believe in fairy tales.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Fred

Fred

After six unsuccessful attempts at knotting this tie, I knock on Dad's door. "Can you help me with this?"

He yanks the door open, and it's obvious he's nervous.

"You look sick in your suit, Dad."

He contorts his face. "Sick?"

"It's good, Dad. You look great. Daphne's going to love it."

A smile stretches across his face, and his shoulders relax. "Good. I'm a tad nervous."

"I never would've guessed." I hold out the tie. "I have watched three YouTube videos, and I cannot figure this out."

Dad gets it around my neck, then stands behind me, and ties it, walking through it step by step.

Then he looks around like he's making sure he hasn't forgotten anything. "Are we ready?"

"I am." I tap my pocket. "Rings are right here. And I want you to know that it means

a lot that you asked me to be your best man.”

He wraps me in a hug. “Don’t make me cry today, Fred. I’m one breath away from bursting into happy sobs.”

It’s funny seeing him like this.

My job until the wedding starts is making sure Dad stays calm. And to have the rings there. That’s important too. I’m still a bit shocked he’s trusting a fourteen-year-old with the rings. But I won’t let him down.

The next couple of hours are a bit of a blur, but finally we are at the front of the chapel. Daphne and Dad are getting married. And I’m really happy about it. I didn’t think I’d cry, but seeing tears on Daphne’s face and hearing my dad’s voice crack during the vows is making it hard not to.

Bailey waves at me, and I look away from her, focusing on the ceremony. She always wants to hang out. Maybe I should be nice and ask her to dance. But I won’t tell her that she looks pretty because that might make her think I like her.

We’re friends. I don’t want it to be weird.

When Mad Dog, the pastor, asks for the rings, I spare Dad my joke of pretending I can’t find them. He might not think it’s funny right now. When Dad turns around to get the rings, I see the tears brimming in his eyes. So much for not crying.

I sniffle and blink, hoping I can control my emotions.

And I’m thankful when Mad Dog says, “You may now kiss the bride” because it’s easier not to cry when cheering.

They walk down the aisle, arm in arm. Then I hold out my arm to escort Rose out of the chapel.

She leans in closer as we walk. “You look really handsome, Fred. And I think someone else agrees with me.” Rose nods toward Bailey, who is enthusiastically waving at me.

I flash her a smile and walk a bit straighter. “Thanks.”

Once the reception starts, Bailey finds me. “You look handsome, Fred.”

“You too.” I stare at my feet. “Well, not handsome. Pretty. Your dress is pretty.”

She watches as Daphne and Carson make their grand entrance, then turns to face me. “When I get married, I want my bouquet to be made of cactus.”

I laugh. “That’s one way to find out how desperate your friends are to get married.”

“Huh?” She cocks her head. “I don’t get it.”

“Daphne is going to throw the bouquet. And the person who catches it will be the next to get married.”

Bailey shakes her head. “That’s just silly. I plan to catch her flowers, and I’m way too young to get married.”

“Why do you want to catch them then?” I’m not sure I’ll ever understand Bailey.

“They’re pretty. Duh. Girls like pretty flowers.” She points to a table. “Want to sit by me?”

“Sure.” That’ll make it easier to ask her to dance later.

On the days Daphne works from home, she picks me up from school. And it beats riding the bus. Especially on hot days. Like today. There are only two weeks left of school, and I’m ready to be done.

Next year, I’ll hopefully be driving to school. I’m almost sixteen, and I already know how to drive. I have my learner’s permit, and Dad and Daphne have both been teaching me.

When Daphne pulls up, I nudge Bailey, then shout at Mason, “My mom’s here. Let’s go.” I open the door to the back seat, and Bailey slides in.

Running toward the car, Mason shouts, “Shotgun.”

I roll my eyes and sit in the back seat. Every time Daphne picks us up, he and I try to get the front seat. Today, I just forgot to call it.

But sitting with Bailey isn’t bad. Not at all. Mason and I will always be best friends, but Bailey is on that same level. And lately, she and I have been hanging out more. She’s fun to be around.

The three of us are quiet as we buckle our seat belts, and that’s when I hear Daphne sniffle.

“What’s wrong?” I’m a little worried. She doesn’t really cry a lot, and this is probably the third time this week.

She looks at me in the rearview mirror. “You called me your mom.”

Now I feel like I’m going to cry. “Yeah. Cuz you are.”

She wipes her face. “I’m sorry for crying. I just... I had my window down and heard you, and I can’t make it stop.”

Bailey leans forward in her seat. “That’s okay. My mom cried all the time when she was pregnant with my brother.”

Daphne freezes.

Mason whips around to look at me. “You’re going to be a big brother!”

I stretch across so that I don’t have to shout at Daphne. “If you want, Mason can sit in the back seat. You can sit in the passenger seat, and I’ll drive us home. I can even stop by the store on the way if you need anything.”

She reaches for the door handle. “That’s a good plan. And the store is a good idea.”

I point at my friends. “Do not breathe a word of this to anyone until I say so.”

Bailey grins. “I can keep secrets.”

Mason slaps a hand over his mouth, then laughs. “I won’t say anything. Not even to Mom or Dad.”

“Thank you.” Daphne buckles her seat belt. “Make sure you adjust your mirrors.”

“I will.” This is the first time I’ve driven with both my friends in the car, so I pay careful attention to the road. I want them to be impressed.

After a stop at the store, I drive back to the ranch. Once I’m home, I close myself in my room to get my homework done. I mostly stay in my room so that Daphne has some time to herself. What if Bailey is right?

Mason loves his little sister, and Bailey talks about how fun it is to have a younger brother. I find myself hoping that Daphne is pregnant. And I'm grateful I didn't keep Dad and Daphne apart. I liked it when it was just Dad and me, but this is so much better.

A while later, Daphne knocks before pushing open the door. "Instead of going to the mess hall, we'll eat here. I made spaghetti."

"Yum."

I'm sitting in the kitchen when Dad gets home. He sniffs the air and looks at Daphne. "You cooked."

"I've been craving spaghetti, so I made that tonight. I hope it's okay."

Dad better say yes because a no will have her in tears, and I am not prepared for that twice in one day.

"Of course it's okay. I love spaghetti." He glances at me, then steps closer to Daphne and lowers his voice. "Craving, huh?"

She nods, then wipes her eyes. "And Fred referred to me as mom when talking to Mason and Bailey, and I've been crying on and off ever since." She buries her face in his chest.

Dad looks at me, and I shrug.

"That's a good thing, right? That he referred to you as mom?"

"Very good. It makes me happy." She picks her head up. "And there's something else I need to tell you."



Little crinkle lines appear around Dad's eyes as he smiles. "What's that?"

"We're going to have a baby." She drops her head against his chest again. "I'm so happy."

Dad is beaming. "I can tell. All the tears make you seem really happy." He looks at me, eyebrows raised, and I know he's gauging my feelings on the revelation.

I give him a thumbs-up.

Having a baby around can't be too much worse than taking care of a kitten. Oreo was a handful when we first got her.

"Can I tell my friends?"

Daphne nods against Dad's chest.

I take a step toward the hall, then decide that sharing the news can wait. I stand next to Daphne and Dad. "Love you, Mom. And I'm excited about being a big brother. I'll even babysit sometimes."

She wraps one arm around me, pulling me into their hug. "I love y'all."

We stay that way, all huddled together until the fire alarm starts screaming.

Daphne runs to the oven. "The garlic bread!"

Dad grabs the pan and carries it out the back door. "I hope you weren't craving the bread."

Mom laughs. "Just spaghetti."

I shoot off a message to Bailey and Mason, then take a seat at the table. I love our awesome little family.

Keep reading for a BONUS epilogue that gives a peek at all the ranch hands many years down the road.

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

Many Years Later

Sutton

“ I vy, are you ready to go?” I reach up to make sure the little buttons on my collar are fastened, then stop.

She’ll handle that. She always does. And I like it when she gets all up close and personal.

Ivy steps out of the bedroom. “Does this look okay?”

“You look great.” I take an extra minute to appreciate the beautiful woman in front of me.

She stretches up to kiss me. “I like when you do that.” Then she slides the tiny buttons into place. “Did the boys make it there without issue?”

“Yep. Lucas drove. No accidents, no tickets. The drive was smooth sailing.” I grab the keys off the hook near the door.

“I shouldn’t be so worried because we’ve already gone through this milestone twice, but...” She clasps my hand after I lock the door.

“But he’s your baby.”

Life with teens is a whole other ballgame, and I’m loving this new stage where they

are all driving. It's like someone has created extra hours in the day, and I get to spend a lot of them alone with Ivy.

She nods. "We're getting old, Sutton."

"Yeah, but I can still do this." I pick her up and hoist her over my shoulder.

She squeals and laughs, then pats my backside. "Easy there, cowboy."

I shift her so that I'm cradling her. "I haven't done anything resembling cowboying in years."

"I know, but you'll always be a cowboy to me." She presses a kiss to my cheek. "How is it possible that Bailey's getting married? I remember the first time she showed up at one of our backyard gatherings and how she shadowed Anderson all evening."

I open the passenger door and set her in the seat. "And it's making you more aware of how quickly our boys are growing up."

"Yes." She cups my cheek. "And one day, we'll be preparing for their wedding. I'm not ready for that yet. But they've grown into wonderful young men, who are a lot like you."

"Hopefully they don't break down anyone's door." I wink. "I better hurry. I'm supposed to help Grayson with the burgers."

Grayson

Daisy rubs my back as she eases up beside me. "You look cute in your apron. But I can't ignore what it says." She inches up and kisses me.

“Hi. Considering you handed me the apron twenty minutes ago, I think this is a setup.”

“Totally.” She kisses me again. “Ivy texted that they are on their way. And I’m going to tell you something so that you aren’t caught off guard, but you can’t panic. Okay?”

“Just tell me. I’ll choose whether or not panic is warranted.”

“Lucas asked Dawn to be his girlfriend. And they are currently tucked around the side of the house, making it official.”

I reach for the strings on the back of the apron and give them a tug. That only gets them knotted. “Undo me.”

“They’re only kissing. You know, like we did multiple times on our first date.”

“I wasn’t sixteen.” I fiddle with the strings.

She rubs my back again, then reties the apron. “I’ll keep an eye out. But you might want to talk to Sutton, quietly, about what boundaries they’ve set up now that Lucas is driving.”

I grab the spatula, giving myself a reason to clench my fist. “All those people who told me that it gets easier as they get older were totally lying.”

“They’re good kids, Grayson. And you didn’t worry about our son like this.”

“You’re right. But she’s my little girl. She’s just not so little anymore.” I exchange the spatula for the charcoal rake and shift the coals. “Wait. Lucas? Isn’t he the shy one?”

Daisy grins. “Yes. And he’s never been anything but a gentleman with Dawn.”

“I’m shocked he managed to ask her. But I’ll talk to Sutton.” I slide an arm around Daisy’s waist and pull her close. “But thank you for telling me.”

“Give me a kiss, and then I’ll grab the burgers and hot dogs.”

I drop the barbecue tool and kiss her, lifting her off her feet. Even after all these years, she still makes my heart pound like it did the night of our first date.

The kids splashing in the pool make gagging noises, so I extend the kiss a few extra seconds.

When her feet touch the ground again, Daisy sighs. “I want more of that tonight.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Sutton strides up. “Sorry I’m late. Ivy is a bit emotional about all these kids growing up.”

I nod. “Speaking of, when did Lucas start driving?”

“He got his license yesterday.” Sutton glances around. “He should be here already. Have you seen him?”

“Not personally, but I hear he’s tucked away, kissing my daughter.”

Sutton grins. “He spent all week pacing through the house, rehearsing what he was going to say to her. But don’t worry. I made sure to establish expectations and ground rules.”

“I appreciate that.”

Daisy walks up, carrying a platter.

I take it, then blow her a kiss. “Thank you, darling.”

“Anytime.” She winks, then walks away.

“Could you maybe not flirt when I’m standing right here?” Sutton lays the sarcasm on thick.

Tyler

The parking area outside the main house on Stargazer Springs is much larger than when I first started working here. Beau had more gravel laid to accommodate large functions like this. They don’t happen often, but it’s clear that he loves it when they do.

As soon as I park, Jasmine unbuckles her seat belt and leans down, searching the floorboard. “I dropped my earring.”

“I’ll get it.” I run around and open her door, then scan around her feet.

“Do you see it?”

I press a kiss to her ankle. “Not yet.”

She laughs. “Because you’re distracted.”

“Yeah. By this sun dress.” I lift the hem. “And these gorgeous long legs.” I dot kisses on her calf.

She runs her fingers through my hair. “If people pull up, they are going to wonder what you’re doing.”

I search in earnest and find her earring. “Here you go.”

“Thank you. Has Wyatt texted? What time does his plane land?” She clasps my hand and slides out of the truck. “Oh, don’t forget the bag with the fixin’s for s’mores.”

“Late. And I’m not sure if we are supposed to pick him up. He said he’d let me know. But we have plenty of time. We’ll visit and eat. Then you can lick a s’more out of my hand.” I wiggle my eyebrows.

“You are never going to quit bringing that up.” She puts an arm around me.

“It’s one of my favorite memories. You trusted me before even knowing my name.”

“I did. That seems like so long ago. Time passed by so quickly. I’m excited about seeing everyone together.

I wonder if we’re on standby for pickup because Clara is planning to do it.

” She grins. “Poppy gives me updates since Clara shares more with her mom than Wyatt shares with us. Our two could be next to walk down the aisle.”

“It’s hard to believe we’re old enough for that. But I guess time flies when you’re living the dream. Taking a job at Stargazer Springs is the second-best decision I ever made.”

Jasmine squeezes my hand. “And what’s the best?”

“You, of course.” I give her a kiss. “I’m going to see if Sutton and Grayson need any



help.”

“Have fun.” She kisses my cheek and heads inside the mess hall.

Kent

Standing on the mess hall porch, I check my texts, wishing Mason would give me an update.

Poppy runs a hand down my back. “He’s probably still driving. He’ll be here in time. There is no way he’d miss Fred and Bailey’s wedding.”

“I know. But I’m worried about him, and Clara is driving into San Antonio late to pick up Wyatt. How am I going to sleep tonight with both my kids on the road?”

Poppy inches up on her toes and whispers in my ear. “I’ll just have to think of something that will distract you from your worry.”

I hug her to me. “I am completely on board with that plan.”

She pats the label on my Wranglers. “I’m going to go talk to Ava.”

“Hang on.” I scoop her into my arms and carry her around the corner, hoping for a moment of privacy.

But we intrude on another much younger couple’s moment of privacy.

Poppy bites back a laugh. “Sorry. We were just...”

She may not want to finish that sentence, but I will. Not much embarrasses me these days. “We were going to do the same thing y’all are doing. But we’ll do it someplace

else.”

Lucas flashes a sheepish grin. “Thank you, sir. And we weren’t going to... you know... do anything we shouldn’t.”

Dawn is as red as a barn. “We’re just kissing.”

Poppy waves at the teens. “Behave.”

Then I carry her into the trees so that we’re out of view. I want to enjoy a few minutes alone with my wife. “You’re as beautiful as the day I met you, Poppy.”

She slips a hand under my shirt and up my chest. “This wedding has you all sentimental.”

“It does. But it doesn’t make what I said any less true. Mason and Fred are almost the same age. How are we old enough to have children who are marrying age?”

“Time warp maybe.” She plants a kiss on my neck. “We should join the others. Because I want to see Dag’s reaction when he sees Parker.”

“Why?”

“Because Davy, Parker’s oldest, just started dating Carolina.”

“I was not aware. I can barely keep up with who our kids are sweet on.”

Poppy grabs my shirt. “Is Mason dating someone?”

“No. I mean, not that he’s told me. He’s focused on the band right now. But he did mention that there was a woman with him in the rental car. They were both headed to

this area, so it made sense.”

“Who?” Poppy bounces on her toes.

“I don’t know. He didn’t say her name.”

She waggles a finger in my face. “Next time, I get to talk to him.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I pull her in for another kiss before carrying her back toward the pool.

Parker

The twins unbuckle their seat belts before the Suburban stops moving. And then they are out the door like a shot. Davy is right on their heels.

Bluebonnet grins. “He wants to see Carolina.”

“Seems that way.” I lean over and kiss her.

“Y’all can at least wait until I’m out of the Suburban.” Patrick slides out of the back seat. “Should I close this so that y’all have privacy?”

I lean my seat all the way back. “Yes please.”

After rolling his eyes, he closes the door. My guys are used to my antics. But when I do stuff like this, it makes my Bonny Blue blush. Still.

“Our poor children.”

“Our poor children know that I love their mom. Often and always.” I wink.

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:13 am*

She leans over and gives me a kiss. “We should be out there in case Dag arrives. He’s a tad protective of his girls. And now that Davy has a crush...”

I jump out and run around to her side to help her out. “You’re right. But Dag better be nice to my kid.”

“Calm down, cowboy.” She holds my hand as we walk toward the pool. When it comes into view, Bluebonnet grins. “Almost everyone is here. Only a few are missing. Hopefully, they’re on their way.”

“Anderson said that everyone was coming. Look, even Tandy and Matthew are here.”

“They are so stinkin’ cute.” She trails a finger down my arm with her other hand. “I’m going to go find Joji. She’s been asking about breeding horses. I guess goats aren’t entertaining enough for her.”

“Clint doesn’t seem to mind. Look at them, and my kids say that I’m embarrassing. He’s got Joji sitting in his lap.”

“They’re adorable.” After a peck, we part ways, and she heads toward the lawn chairs.

I head toward Grayson but make a stop at the cooler and grab enough drinks for all the guys standing around the grill.

Dag

I'm eager for the gathering. Some of us still work at the ranch and see each other often. But it's rare that we're all together in one place like this.

After parking, I turn around and give the girls the same lecture I give when I let them loose anywhere. "Have fun. Your mom and I will be around. But you know the rules. No drugs. No alcohol. And no kissing."

"We know, Dad," Carolina says.

She is so much like her mom. I probably don't even need to give her rules, but Isabella is more like me, and that has me worried.

Isabella giggles and bumps Carolina's arm. "No kissing, okay?"

Goldie gives Isabella that warning look. She started using it on me, and by the time we had kids, she'd perfected it completely.

"Sorry." Isabella jumps out of the truck and runs toward the group.

I look back at Carolina and then at Goldie. "Is there something you need to tell me?"

Carolina clears her throat. "Davy asked me to be his date to the wedding."

"He invited you to a wedding? For a first date?"

Goldie rests a hand on my arm. "You know Davy. He's like family."

Carolina grimaces. "Mom, please don't say it like that."

I choke back the laugh. "I don't mind if you go with Davy. But if he's not respectful?—"

“I know, Dad. If a guy doesn’t treat me right, I should walk away.”

“Good girl.”

“Can I go now?”

Goldie nods. “We’ll be over there in a minute.”

I take Goldie’s hand. “I’m really glad you didn’t follow the advice I give our girls.”

“Except I did. I walked away. Then you figured it out.”

“And I started treating you right.”

She trails a finger through the gray whiskers of my beard. “One day, our girls will meet someone who makes them feel like I felt when you said, ‘She’s mine.’ For Carolina, it might not be Davy. They’re young. But you never know.”

“Having Parker as an in-law wouldn’t be so bad.”

“Don’t marry her off yet. She’s seventeen.”

I laugh. “I know. But sometimes I need a reminder of her age. Do you ever look at her and see that little girl swinging the pinata stick? I do. All the time. How can she be seventeen already? I feel for Anderson. He must be a nervous wreck about the wedding.”

“I think he’s excited. Fred is crazy about Bailey. We’ve all known that for years.”

“Yeah. And all the people falling in love on this ranch is putting crazy ideas in our girls’ heads.” I slide out of the truck and open Goldie’s door. “I’m kidding. Sort of.”

She presses a kiss to my lips.

“You know what makes me really happy?” I lace my fingers with hers.

“What’s that?”

I lean close and make my whisper sound like a growl. “You’re mine.”

Goosebumps erupt on her arms, and her cheeks turn a warm shade of pink. “Oh, Dag, I love you.”

Archer

Mateo and Tillie jump out of the truck as soon as I roll to a stop, and Lettie laughs. “They’re excited.”

“Yeah. I am too. It’s been a while since we’ve all been together like this. I’m glad Anderson had the idea of doing this barbecue. Kent said Mason probably wouldn’t make it today. Something happened and he ended up driving instead of flying.”

“I hope he makes it.” She takes my hand as we walk away from the truck. “It tickles me that Fred and Bailey are getting married because it reminds me of us. They met when they were so young.” Lettie tears up. “It’s sweet.”

“Just like us, they were meant to be.” I give her a kiss.

She smiles. “Following you to Stadtborg was one of the best decisions I ever made. We reconnected, which of course I love, and our kids got to grow up with this massive group of friends.”

“Life has a way of working itself out, I suppose.”

She nods. “True. I’m sure Carson would say the same thing. How old was Fred when they moved here?”

“Like eleven or twelve, I think.”

“They really are a lot like us.” She squeezes my hand. “I’m going to find Lilith and see if she needs any help with last-minute wedding tasks.”

“Alright. I’m going to join the guys by the grill.” I tug her close for a kiss. “Hopefully, we have a few years before we’re hosting a wedding.”

“Agreed. I’m not ready for that yet.” She laughs before walking away.

Anderson

A last-minute run for ice has me late to the barbecue, but a backyard party in summer without ice isn’t a good thing. I smile as the sounds of people enjoying themselves fill the air.

We don’t all work at the ranch anymore, but we all still live in the area. Busy lives make it harder to get everyone together. The upcoming wedding seemed like the perfect reason to gather since all the kids were returning to town.

I carry the cooler full of ice to the mess hall.

“Thank you. Just leave it right there. I’ll have Mad Dog move it for me if I need it somewhere else.” Ava pats my arm. “Primrose is looking for you. I think she’s in one of the guest rooms.”

I’m not sure what has her off by herself, but I wander into the house, looking for her. She’s sitting on the bed in a guest room, wiping her eyes.



“What’s wrong?” I rush across the room and kneel in front of her.

She taps the bed beside her, sniffing.

I take a seat and rub her back. “What’s going on?”

Prim shifts into my lap and buries her face in the curve of my neck. “I’m being a ninny. Seeing all the people is making this real, Anderson. Bailey is getting married. I’m so happy for her. Really and truly. But gosh. A wedding seemed so far away until it wasn’t.”

I brush my thumb on her cheek, wiping away tears. “People always cry at weddings. You’re just getting a head start. A two-day head start.”

She laughs. “I don’t know why I’m so emotional about this.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You aren’t pregnant, are you?”

“Oh no. Hopefully not. I am not ready to start over with diapers.” She wipes her face.

“Prim, sweetheart, have you eaten today?”

She looks up at me, her brow pinched. “I had coffee seven hours ago.”

I stand, still holding her. “I know why you’re emotional. I mean, I get all the extra feelings about the wedding. Last night, I woke up in a panic because in my dream it was time to walk down the aisle, and I couldn’t find my pants.”

Prim laughs. “I’ll make sure you show up with pants.”

“I appreciate that.” Carrying Prim, I walk through the house. “When did you know

they would end up together?” I’ve replayed memories, trying to figure out when I first noticed a spark between Fred and Bailey.

“That summer he left for college. That’s when things shifted, and I started to wonder. They’d always been friends. Years ago, when he moved onto the ranch, she instantly wanted to be his friend because?—”

“His name was Fred. That part of this story should surprise no one.”

Prim grins. “Right?”

“It started with a cactus and ended with a fiancé.” I stop beside the game room door. “But it wouldn’t surprise me in the least if one day, there is a little Fred Jr. running around.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. But I won’t bet against you.” She grabs my beard and tugs me to her lips. “I love you, Anderson. And I love the life we’ve built.”

“Think anyone would miss us if I snagged you some food and we snuck back into the guest room?”

“Yes, our absence would be noticed. Besides, I think Fred needs you to reassure him that Mason will make it in time for the wedding.”

“Alright. You go eat something, and I’ll try to calm Fred. Or maybe I’ll just find Bailey and have her talk to him.”

Dallas

Rose trails a hand down my arm as I drive. “Lucy is sending me pictures from Tandy’s phone. She’s so excited about the barbecue. She’s taking selfies with anyone

who will indulge her. Poor Tandy is going to have a full camera roll.”

“She’s loving every minute.” I’m close to my aunt now. Working together is a big part of why. I think meeting Rose had a hand in it too.

“I love how Tandy and Matthew are grandparents to Lucy.”

For eleven years, Matthew and Tandy have doted on our little girl.

Rose’s dad is around, and Lucy loves having two grandpas.

But it’s clear Lucy has a special place in her heart for Tandy.

“I just pray that Lucy doesn’t start asking boys to take their shirts off.

I am so not ready for that. Honestly, I’ll never be ready for that. ”

Rose laughs. “I’m not either. Not at all. But the barbecue is at Beau’s, and if you recall, he has a pool. The kids will likely all be swimming.”

“And guys will have their shirts off. Dang it.” I pull her fingers to my lips. “Hopefully, my eleven-year-old doesn’t care about stuff like that yet.”

“She’s just happy to see everyone. She’s the baby of the group, and they’ve showered her with attention since she was tiny. Of course she loves these gatherings.”

After I park, Rose shows me a photo of Tandy and Lucy. Their cheeks are pressed together, and they’re smiling for the selfie.

“All these years, and people are still taking pictures of themselves.”

Rose laughs. “I guess some things never change.”

As we walk around the house, she pats my hip. “Am I still the only one who knows about your tattoo?”

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“Unless you’ve mentioned it. That’s need-to-know information, and you’re the only one who needs to know.” I wink.

“Tandy knows you have one. I asked her about it when we were broken up. But I never mentioned it to her after that. I kinda like our little secret.”

Cheers and hollers emanate from behind the house, and I say, “It sounds like a party.”

“It does. I never lived on the ranch like so many of the others. When we met, you were already working for Tandy part of the time. But everyone here welcomed me like I belonged. All because of you. And I love this place almost as much as I love Matchmaker Ranch.”

We stop, and I point to the pool. “See that crowd of people? They’re all here because of Beau, Clint, and Ava. Those three were and still are the heart of the ranch. Garrett and I had lunch the other day, and we were talking about that.”

Garrett has taken over most of the day-to-day operations that Beau handled, and Kent is now foreman.

Clint still helps out from time to time, but he spends most of his time with Joji and whatever new project she dreams up.

And Ava spends more time with Mad Dog than she does in the kitchen these days.

Goldie is in charge of meals and cleaning, but she has a crew to help her.

Rose turns to face me. “Mindy stopped by when I was refilling the buckets with bouquets the other day. She said Jeffrey is bringing desserts to this party. That should be good.”

“Yeah, and I heard a rumor that Steph and Blake were bringing some of the beer they’ve been brewing. I’m looking forward to that.” I kiss her forehead. “Beautiful wife, great kid, good friends, and an ice-cold beer. Life is pretty good these days.”

Carson

Sitting in the game room, I shoot off an SOS text to Daphne.

Ever since Fred found out that Mason is driving here for the wedding, he’s been a nervous wreck.

I thought we’d talked it through and all was good, but seeing everyone gathered together has him wound up again.

And he’s currently in a recliner with his head buried in his hands, probably thinking through worst-case scenarios. He is related to me.

Daphne hurries in with Bailey in tow. “I brought help.”

Bailey lifts his head, moves his hands to the side, and straddles his lap. “Look at me, Fred. You can’t worry about this. He’ll be here. Mason is your best friend. Nothing will get in the way of his standing beside you at the ceremony.”

Fred wraps his arms around her. “I just keep thinking of all the things that could go wrong.”

She gets nose to nose with him. “Stop doing that.”

Daphne tugs me toward the door, and we slip into the house, leaving Bailey to work her calming magic.

“She’s his person. And she always seems to say the right thing to him.” Daphne guides me through the house and out the front door.

“Are we leaving? I thought we were cohosting this shindig.” I follow her to our truck.

She drops the tailgate and turns to face me. “We aren’t leaving. I just want to talk for a minute. Will you help me up?”

I lift her into the bed, then laugh at the old throw pillows piled in the back. “How long a minute were you wanting to spend out here?” I reach for the buttons on my shirt, trying to draw a laugh.

And it works. “If you do that, we’ll be unfashionably late. And we’ll likely embarrass both of our kids.” She sits at the edge, letting her feet dangle. “Those are for later. Alice is staying the night with Lucy over at Matthew and Tandy’s, and I thought we might drive out to our spot.”

“I am on board with that idea.” I sit beside her and snake an arm around her waist. “What’s up? Why are we out here away from the party? Is something bothering you?” I pause, then look at her. “Are you pregnant?”

“No. I’m not pregnant. Two is perfect.”

“Three if you count Oreos.”

“Even as old as she is now, she thinks she’s a baby.” Daphne rests her head on my shoulder. “I hope Mason makes it in time. I didn’t want Fred to get any hint that I was worried.”

“He’ll be here.” Enough people are concerned that adding my worries won’t make a difference, so I hand out assurances instead.

“How are you doing? It’s hard to believe that gangly teen is now a grown man who’s about to get married.”

“I blinked, and years zipped by. Seeing the way he and Bailey are together makes me appreciate this place even more. When Fred and I moved to Stargazer Springs, we had no way of knowing that we’d both find love here.

Ours was an instant attraction. Theirs was a friendship that grew into something more. ”

Daphne grins. “Remember that August when he was leaving for school, and Bailey came to see him off? When he hugged her for so long before finally getting in the truck, I knew.”

“There was definitely a little spark that day. And when he came home for Christmas?—”

“Then it was more than a little spark. And they’ve been together ever since.”

I pull her into my lap. “Are you ready for your mother-son dance?”

“I think so, but hopefully he doesn’t expect me to do it without tears. Because crying is a given.”

“Fred wouldn’t have it any other way.” I kiss her forehead. “Thank you for being a great mom to him.” I run my fingers through her hair. “And to Alice, but she’s not getting married right now. Not for a long while, hopefully.”

“I’m happy, Carson. Really happy.”



“I can tell.” I brush a tear off her cheek. “I’m happy too. Life turned out to be way better than I deserve.”

“Phooey. You deserve all of it. You’re amazing, and I love you, Carson Blake.”

Thanks for reading! Catch up with Mason and read about his unexpected road trip in *More Than a Coincidence* .