



# Near Misses & Cowboy Kisses

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**Category:** YA&Teen

**Description:** A swoon-worthy YA rivals-to-lovers romance between a Nebraskan cowboy and California girl, thrust together on the Oregon Trail.

Anything's possible under a prairie sky...

Riley Thomas is feeling stuck—she's moved from California to Nebraska, she's on a weeklong Oregon Trail family bonding excursion, and her luggage is lost. There's no one her age on the trip except a tall, dark and irksome cowboy who wrongly assumes she has zero ability to handle the great outdoors. She can't wait for this misery to end—even though going "home" isn't even possible anymore.

Lone wolf Colton Walker loves the simpler life of the plains and his family's tourism business that helps protect them. He's a stand-up guy—not a love 'em and leave 'em type like his rival, Jake. And he knows better than to take his chances with a prairie princess like Riley.

But Riley's got more sense than Colton thinks and he's not nearly as inflexible as he seems. And under a wide prairie sky of puffy clouds and bright stars, everything comes into focus including a cowboy's heart.

Katrina Emmel's *Near Misses and Cowboy Kisses* will take you on a sweeping journey across the American prairie . . . once you love a boy in a Stetson, you'll never be the same.

**Total Pages (Source):** 45

## CHAPTER 1

Riley

MIDWESTERN AIR SMACKS me in the face the minute I step off the plane onto the Jetway. It's cooler, damper, and greener than I'm used to. Back home—what used to be home, anyway—it's arid and dusty. Trudging up to the gate, I adjust the straps on my overstuffed backpack. The wisps of hair at the nape of my neck curl in the humidity.

Unlike the continuous chaos of our layover in Las Vegas, Eppley Airfield is quiet. There's a reason Nebraska is called a flyover state—you're not supposed to actually land here. And yet, here I am. In Nebraska.

The rest of my family snagged a row of seats together in the front of the plane, so they were able to disembark first. It irritated me to be stuck in the back near the bathroom, but honestly, I didn't want to sit with them anyhow. Their extra-chipper “we're going to have so much fun” attitude is grating on me. As if their positivity could make up for uprooting our lives and transplanting us to the Midwest with hardly any warning. I was supposed to be sunning myself on Huntington Beach and working some crap part-time job to save up money for college when I wasn't volunteering at the marine nature center or working on my art portfolio. Enjoying my summer before senior year with friends. Nowhere on the list of activities was “board a plane the day after school gets out to fly to Nebraska for some ridiculous weeklong family excursion to kill time while the moving company carts our stuff to our new house.”

Instinctively, I reach for my phone, but what's the use of switching it out of airplane mode at this point? Do I really want to read all the wish you were here and having so much fun messages? Or worse, what if they've already forgotten about me?

Not Quinn, of course. Quinn would never forget about me. We've been friends since kindergarten, when we were both put in time-out for lobbing fistfuls of sand at each other at recess the first day of school. But I think a text from her right now would only make me sadder.

I spy my parents by a bank of cell phone charging stations that remind me of library study cubbies. As soon as Mom makes eye contact with me and waves me over to where they're standing, she makes a beeline for the restroom. Dad takes a moment to stretch his legs. My younger brother, Caleb, hovers nearby, his fingers flying over his phone. He'll be a high school freshman in the fall, so the move is less disruptive to his plans, since he was going to start the year in a new school anyhow.

We're quiet as we shuffle toward baggage claim. The three of them walk together like a cohesive unit and I lag behind. Ever since Mom and Dad announced the big move a few weeks ago, it's felt like three against one. Traitor that he is, Caleb pounced on the prospect of a bigger room with an en suite bathroom and the promise of a game room in the partially finished basement of our new house. How he could just sit there and take the news with a shrug and a "cool" is beyond me.

Even though the airport is air-conditioned, it's still muggy. Nebraska must know I'm dehydrated, given how much moisture it's trying to force into my skin. I don't even want to think about the humidity hell I'll have to deal with for the foreseeable future. As if to prove a point, my long bangs start to curl in my peripheral vision, taunting me.

We lay claim to a little spot of tile near the front of the luggage conveyor belt and watch it slither along its serpentine loop. I pull out my phone again out of habit, but

can't bring myself to unlock it. A sharp sting of dread mixed with resignation has me slipping the phone back into my bag. I'm not sure I'll ever be ready to deal with that level of FOMO.

"The van is scheduled to pick us up at three p.m. sharp," Dad says, an excited gleam in his eye. "It's a two-hour drive to Darby and then adventure awaits."

Mom beams back at him. "We are going to have so much fun." Her eyes get misty as she wraps an arm around my waist. "This will probably be one of our last family vacations before you're off to college."

I swallow down the lump in my throat and fight the urge to remind her that I'm not going off to college next fall. If everything goes according to my parents' plans, I'll be enrolling in Alden University, where they've both accepted coveted tenure-track professorships—the whole reason why we're here in the first place. Mom's been working without a contract at the local community college for the past two years and Dad's been unemployed since his last professorship—a short-term stint to cover someone's sabbatical leave—ended. The opportunity for them both to have permanent jobs is great, but the timing just really sucks.

The screen above Baggage Carousel 2 flashes with our flight number and bags start pouring down the slide. Dad steps forward to grab Mom's purple roller bag and his navy duffel. Caleb spots his lime-green suitcase and hauls it over.

A few nondescript black suitcases glide past, a set of golf clubs, and a car seat. None of them are mine. We wait. And wait. And wait for my teal suitcase decked out with purple ribbons and butterfly patches surrounded by metallic Sharpie doodles.

Eventually, the conveyor belt grinds to a halt and the flashing light at the top of the carousel stops blinking. I glance around at the empty baggage claim area, hoping that someone might have accidentally grabbed my bag and set it off to the side, but no

luck. If this were LAX, I'd assume that someone walked off with it, but there was hardly anyone here and the vibrant bag is pretty hard to miss.

My head flops back to rest on the top of my backpack, the extra weight causing the straps to cut into my shoulders. Why is the universe against me?

Mom pulls the baggage claim receipts from her purse and scans them until she finds mine. Shoving the rest back into her purse's outer zipper pocket, she signals for me to follow her over to the lost luggage office. "I'm sure they'll be able to help."

"Doubtful," I mumble, my hands clenched around my backpack straps.

The man working behind the counter gives us a pleasant smile when we step into the room. "I take it you lost a piece of luggage?"

"Unfortunately, that appears to be the case," Mom replies in her annoyingly chipper manner. "Here's the claim ticket for the bag."

The man—Arnold, according to his employee name tag—keys some info into his computer and then frowns. "I'm afraid the bag was accidentally routed to Tampa from LAX."

Of course it was.

"It'll probably be about two days before it makes it here..."

Mom and I share a glance. For the first time since announcing the Great Upheaval, there's a chink in Mom's "everything is going to be great" armor.

"We're going on an Oregon Trail Adventure tour," Mom says. "It leaves Darby early tomorrow morning and won't return for a week."

“In that case, we can arrange for the hotel to hold your suitcase until your return,” Arnold says.

I glance down at my ballet flats, cutoffs, and Destroy the Patriarchy Not the Planet T-shirt and cringe. “I can’t wear this outfit for an entire week in the middle of the Nebraskan wilderness. All my clothes...my art supplies...my perfectly broken-in hiking boots...” My eyes get misty and I furiously blink away tears. I’ve already cried enough in the past two weeks to last an entire lifetime.

Yes, I’m overtired.

And yes, I’m emotional.

In the grand scheme of things, lost luggage is barely a blip on the “horrible things that can happen to Riley” radar, but heaped up on everything else I’m dealing with right now, it feels like the final straw.

Forced to move from California to Nebraska the summer before senior year because your parents accepted new jobs? Uncool.

Saying goodbye to classmates a whole year before everyone else has to because of said move? Uncooler.

Finding all this out two weeks before the end of the school year? Uncoolest.

And just when I thought my parents couldn’t make my life any worse, they went and reserved us a spot on a one-week Oregon Trail Adventure wagon excursion while the movers pack up and haul all our worldly possessions across five states to a house I’ve never seen that I’m suddenly supposed to call home. To add insult to injury, Dad’s been playing the classic Oregon Trail video game—and giving us running commentary of his pioneer escapades—ever since.

Mom gives me a reassuring pat on the back and I shrink away. “We’ll figure something out, Riles. You won’t have to wear that all week. I packed some extra clothes and Caleb has—”

“No way. I’m not borrowing clothes for an entire week. And what about underwear?” I hiss, completely skeeved out at the thought of wearing her mom-panties or Caleb’s boxer briefs.

Mom nibbles on her lower lip, probably creating a mental list of all the things we’ll have to purchase to get me through the next week.

Arnold clears his throat. “Given the extenuating circumstances, I can process a monetary claim. The most I’m authorized to approve is two hundred and fifty dollars, but that should at least get you a few replacement items until you and your bag are reunited.”

“That would be wonderful,” Mom says, relief easing the wrinkles on her brow. She reaches out as if she’s going to squeeze my hand but opts to brush her hair back from her face instead. “Thank you, Arnold.” She gives Dad a thumbs-up through the office window and then turns to me. “Looks like we’ll be doing some shopping tonight, Riley.”

“Can’t wait,” I mutter.

## Page 2

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### CHAPTER 2

Colton

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE the tranquility of a morning on the prairie. I roll onto my back and stretch, the scent of last night's campfire carrying on the damp morning air.

Chance whinnies at me as if to say, "You're finally awake." He swishes his tail and chomps on a giant mouthful of prairie June grass.

The trail I know like the back of my hand snakes east to west. Heading west, it goes past Devil's Gate Rock and Jack Rabbit Falls, all the way to Fort Bellows. East, the trail is a straight shot to Darby. For my family, this land is the pay dirt that puts bread on the table and grain in the stables, though I don't know how much longer the excursion business will be profitable. Operating costs continue to rise, and I worry we'll be forced to sell the land to tract developers and big-box enterprises before long.

"Let's get you a drink," I say, unlooping Chance's lead from a tree branch.

We head down to a bubbling brook, an offshoot of Tin Can Creek, and I let him drink his fill. When he's done, I splash my face with the cool, crisp water and shake off the droplets with a flick of my head.

Chance snorts like he's laughing at me.

"Easy there, big guy," I say, giving him a gentle pat on the rump.



We're on the trail by seven, traveling eastward at a leisurely pace. I tug the brim of my hat down over my eyes to block the penetrating glare of the rising sun. "Whoa," I say when we arrive at Donovan's Pass. If we continue on the same dusty road, we'll arrive in Darby by lunch. But the path here is uneven and Chance can't get up into a canter. If we take the scenic route that runs along the south edge of Broken Yoke Mesa, he might get in a good gallop.

"What do you think, boy? Want to feel the wind in your mane?"

Chance swishes his tail and tilts his head toward the wide-open plains. I cluck and tug slightly on the reins to chart our own course back to Darby.

When we ride into the stables behind the Darby Grand Hotel, windburned and invigorated, most of the crew is hard at work. Silas, our farrier, reshoes one of the oxen. Brett and Joe load rations into the supply wagon, which will follow the prairie schooner replicas—large covered wagons that feature a modern suspension system to make the ride more comfortable since few tourists want to walk alongside like the pioneers did.

After giving Chance a good brush-down and leaving him to his feed and water, I make my way across the yard to the main office with my pack slung over my shoulder. I drop it with a thud in the corner of Dad's office and grab an oatmeal chocolate chip granola bar from the snack stash on top of his filing cabinet.

"How was your ride?" he asks, setting his pen on the desk and leaning back in his office chair.

"Uneventful." I sink into the chair across from him. "We'll have to get a team over to the Cottonwood Creek area for repairs. Won't take more than a day to shore up, but I don't think we should risk it with the oxen and wagons tomorrow."

Dad nods. “Anything else to report?”

I shake my head as I chew. “Nope.”

Dad presses a key on his laptop. “Final count for tomorrow is eleven adults and eight youngsters. The Stones, the McCreadys, and Barnaby have already made their selections for Fort Bellows. You can get the rest of the parties’ info when we make camp tomorrow.”

“Good old Barnaby,” I say, grinning. An avid birdwatcher, Barnaby usually takes at least one or two wagon excursions with us every summer. He’s great to have along because he’s personable, easygoing, and has plenty of corny jokes and wise advice to go around.

“Double-check we have enough saddle blankets, sleeping bags, and mats for everyone, and check with Joe on the TP situation. Last I heard, our shipment was delayed. Oh, and could you restock the first-aid kits in the wagons?”

“On it.” I tip my hat in a salute and head back into the yard. It’s time to get to work.

I’ve just finished with the first-aid kits when Dad finds me. “Can you run these welcome packets over to the front desk?” he asks, handing me a stack of manila folders.

“Sure thing.”

Dad tosses me the keys to the truck. “There’s some chicken feed in the back.” He doesn’t ask, but I know he expects me to unload it when I get home.

I slip the keys into my pocket. “See you in a few.”

I make my way across the wagon yard to the front entrance of the Darby Grand Hotel. A girl about my age is sitting on the front steps, hunched over her phone. The wind lifts her dark hair, blowing wispy strands across her face. She thumbs in a message, sighs, and glances up at me. With her messy bun and wide eyes, she's cute, I'll give her that, but she's definitely not my type. Tourists never are.

Not that having a type matters much out here, with so few dating options. While it wasn't a one-room schoolhouse, Darby Public School often felt like it, with only two classrooms for each grade, kindergarten through eighth. Asa Porter Memorial High is slightly better, with students from six neighboring towns. But with a school population just shy of five hundred, it's not exactly teeming with relationship opportunities.

With her perfectly manicured nails and glittery shoes, this girl stands out. But I've been on plenty of excursions with girls like her, and they're nothing but a headache no matter how good-looking they are. The last time we had a high-maintenance passenger, Chance and I had to ride thirty miles from our campsite to Fort Bellows because some fourteen-year-old brat couldn't live without an eye shadow palette she had overnighted from Paris. What the hell good is makeup on the Oregon Trail? There isn't a bison in the entire state of Nebraska that would be impressed.

Even low-maintenance tourists are off-limits for me. Aside from the "no fraternizing with the passengers" policy the crew usually abides by, I'm not looking for a quick hookup. I learned the hard way my first summer on the trail that relationships with expiration dates are doomed from the start. Flings might be fine for some, but I want a deeper, more lasting connection than you can get in one week. Plus, as the son of the wagon train leader, I'm expected to toe the line in all things. Dad would have my hide if I did anything to jeopardize crew morale.

The phone in the girl's hand vibrates. "You have got to be kidding me." She stands and lifts it, twisting it this way and that. "One bar." Her eyes lock on mine. "How

does anyone send messages around here?" she asks.

"Postcards," I say.

It's supposed to be a joke, but she doesn't laugh at my dry humor. She doesn't even crack a smile.

"Right," she says with an eye roll.

I'm about to tell her the signal is much better if she stands closer to the boxwood at the end of the walkway, but a woman who must be her mother comes striding out the front door.

"There you are," she says. "Let's get going."

The girl frowns and slides her phone into her back pocket. She offers me a smile that's more of a grimace as they breeze past me on the sidewalk.

I nod and continue on. With an attitude like that, she's definitely not my type at all.

By the time I've stowed an extra sleeping bag in the supply wagon, my shirt is drenched with sweat and my throat's parched. I have just enough time to make it home to freshen up and unpack my saddlebags before heading to Frank's for the staff meeting.

When I push open the front door, Mom rushes from the kitchen to wrap me in a huge hug. "Aren't you a sight for sore eyes." She pulls back and screws up her face. "And a scent for sore nostrils. My goodness. I thought the prairie would air you out."

"I missed you, too, Mom." I press a soft kiss to the top of her head. "Something smells good."

“It ain’t you,” she says with a teasing smile.

“All right, all right. I get the picture.” I slide my dusty boots off and set them on the shoe rack between Mom’s gardening boots and a pair of my worn-out gym shoes.

Mom’s wearing a pair of dark pants and a flowery blouse under a blue-and-white striped apron. Usually she dresses more casually in jeans and a work shirt for farmette chores: gardening, beekeeping, egg gathering, and canning.

“Book club night?” I ask.

“We had to move it because Linda and Bobby joined the Wednesday night bowling league over in Duvall. It’s easier for Rachel, too, now that she’s helping out with her grandkids.”

Who knew book club scheduling could be so complicated?

The kitchen timer beeps and Mom jumps into action. She has oven mitts on her hands and a tray of snickerdoodles out of the oven before I have a chance to blink. When I reach for a soft, warm cookie, she smacks my hand away. “Hands off, buster. These aren’t for you.”

Even my best puppy dog eyes won’t get her to budge. “Still nope. And as long as you’re standing in my kitchen, smelling to high heaven, my answer won’t change. But you come back cleaned up and smelling fresh, and I just might give you this.” She slides a cookie tin in my direction but keeps it just out of reach.

“Did you?” I ask, my mouth already watering at the prospect.

“I did,” she says, waggling her eyebrows.

Mom's peanut butter chocolate chews are the stuff of legend. And they're great to have along on the trail when I'm in need of a quick bite. There's not a pantry out on the prairie, so sneaking a tin or two of Mom's treats into my saddlebag is a must.

Twenty minutes later, I'm showered, shaved, and set for the all-hands dinner. The first of Mom's book club members arrives just as I'm pulling on my boots.

"Mrs. Martinez," I say, standing to greet her.

"You get taller and handsomer every time I see you," she says, wrapping me in a warm hug.

Almost everyone's taller than Mrs. Martinez, so that's not saying much, but the ten-inch difference between us always makes me feel like the Jolly Green Giant.

"So handsome," she says again with a gleam in her eye.

Oh no. Here we go again. Mrs. Martinez's Matchmaking and Meddling Service is open for business. I glance helplessly at the kitchen, trying to send Mom an ESP message. Unfortunately, she's not answering my Mayday call.

"A young lady would be lucky to have you to herself. You aren't dating anyone, are you?" She pats my arm. "Of course not. Danielle would have told us if you were."

Mom's not the type to gossip about my personal life with her book club, so Mrs. Martinez is on a fishing expedition. I'm tempted to tell her I'm seeing someone to get her off my case, even if it's a lie, but then she'll want to know details and I don't have the time to sit here casting tales to see if she'll bite. But if I tell her I'm single, she'll try to set me up with someone, like usual.

"It's...uhh—"

“Time for you to head out, sweetheart,” Mom says, saving the day. “Dad texted. He wants you to meet the crew at the office so you can head to Frank’s together.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I press a short kiss to her soft cheek and grab my hat from the hook by the door. Settling it on my head, I give her a quick nod. “Good night, Mrs. Martinez.”

As I make my way across the wraparound porch to the old F-150 pickup in the drive, I can hear Mrs. Martinez through the screen door saying, “That boy of yours is a heartbreaker, Danielle. I have a friend whose daughter would be perfect for him...”

### CHAPTER 3

Riley

WE MAY HAVE landed in Omaha, but this tiny nowheresville town we're staying in for the night is probably not even on the map. Aside from the hotel, there's a gas station, a sad-looking empty storefront, and an auto repair shop that may or may not be operational based on the amount of rusted-out vehicles in the lot. Worse, Darby has exactly one stoplight and zero traffic, and we still had to sit through a ridiculously long red on our way into town. Unbelievable.

It's just past five local time, and I'm exhausted, hungry, and growing more and more concerned that I will have to trek across the prairie in my ballet flats, shorts, and T-shirt, washing them nightly on a rock by the river and steaming them dry next to the campfire while wrapped in nothing but a scratchy wool saddle blanket. A shudder cascades down my spine. At least Omaha had department stores. Darby probably doesn't even have a zip code.

It definitely doesn't have cell service. All three of my text messages to Quinn bounce back as undeliverable, and I would write that guy's suggestion of postcards off as ridiculous except that it might be my only chance to make contact with the outside world.

"Ready for some retail therapy?" Mom asks.

My fingernails dig into my palms as if I'm trying to hold on to the lone spec of hope doled out by Tina, the front desk clerk who checked us in. She promised us that on



the other side of town—and within walking distance—is Ranch & Rustler, a store guaranteed to stock all my shopping needs. It better, since I’m pretty sure it’s the only game in town.

Mom and I walk along the cracked and uneven cement sidewalk. It’s so quiet here, without the constant drone of rushing traffic, pedestrians, bikers, and skateboarders that seem to be ever-present in SoCal. Instead of palm trees, a few large red maples line the street, their roots causing the walkway to ripple above them. The soles of my ballet flats are so thin, I feel every bump and pebble underfoot. They were perfect for air travel, but now I’m regretting my decision not to wear sneakers on the flight.

We pass the ramshackle building that houses Frank’s Sandwich Shop, where we’re supposed to meet Dad and Caleb for dinner, and come face to face with Ranch & Rustler. The place is ginormous, in a big-box, mega-retailer kind of way. And the parking lot is far from empty. People must drive for miles to shop here.

“Oh god,” I say as I take in the row of trailers, tractors, and farm equipment on display in front of the store. “There’s no way a store like this sells anything I’d be caught dead wearing.”

Mom shrugs. “California fashion can’t be too different from Nebraska fashion.”

“Nebraska fashion,” I say, my nose wrinkling. “Is that even a thing?”

Mom links elbows with me. “We’re about to find out.”

Turns out, Tina was right about Ranch & Rustler being a one-shop-fits-all kind of place. If your shopping list has beef jerky, toilet paper, motor oil, fishing bait, nail polish, and a pack of highlighters on it, this is the place for you. There are giant canisters of cheese balls stacked on a shelf above plumbing supplies, and I nearly trip over my own feet as I gawk at a display of pantyhose capped with disembodied

mannequin legs next to assorted vermin traps.

“I’ve never seen so much flannel in one place,” I mutter, running my hand over a rack of surprisingly soft shirts. My fingers graze a navy blue and pink print with strands of silver woven throughout. The shirt is cut in a fitted style and the mother-of-pearl buttons glimmer in the store’s bright fluorescent lights. It’s a bit fancy for a prairie excursion, but it’s also something I’d wear later, when I’m not stuck on the Oregon Trail. At ten dollars, the price is way less than what I’d pay for something similar in California.

“That’s cute,” Mom says, working her way around a rack of T-shirts across from me. “Oh, check this out.” She holds up a pale green shirt with a faded image of a monarch butterfly resting on a bright orange milkweed bloom printed on it. “Five bucks.”

“Oh my gosh, that’s perfect,” I squeal, floored by the unbelievable find. For the first time since the Great Upheaval, I actually feel...excitement? No, that might be going too far.

I’m out of sorts and cranky, but I’m also a sucker for a good deal.

“Why don’t you go and find some pants and I’ll pick out more tops? Meet you by the socks in twenty?” Mom asks, pointing to the far corner of the clothing section. She slides the hangers along the rod with the practiced speed of an expert bargain shopper. It reminds me of when she used to take me back-to-school shopping every fall, back when we would laugh and talk about silly things and my goals for the year.

My throat gets cottony and I force down a painful swallow. “Sounds like a plan,” I manage. Tossing the flannel shirt into the shopping cart, I spin around and prepare myself for the daunting task of finding the perfect pair of rugged—yet fashionable and cheap—jeans.

We're laden with Ranch & Rustler bags by the time we make it back to Dad and Caleb. They've managed to nab the lone, weathered picnic table behind Frank's.

"Someone had luck," Dad says, shifting to make room for Mom.

We set our purchases down on the concrete patio, balancing them just so, careful to make sure that my new all-terrain hiking boots don't crush my new clothes and my new clothes don't crush my new art supplies. Trekking across the prairie in ballet flats would have been tough, but not having sharpened pencils and a sketchbook in hand? Near impossible.

Dad hands Mom a foil-wrapped Italian sub and slides a cardboard takeout box in my direction. Caleb hasn't even bothered to look up from his phone since we arrived. I sneak a peek to see if he has service, but he's playing some mind-numbing game, not texting. I nudge him aside to get him to make enough room for me to sit on the bench, too.

"Hey, bony elbow," he starts grumbling, but quickly changes tack when I toss him the bag of gummy bears I picked up for him at Ranch & Rustler. "You're my favorite sister. Thanks."

"I'm your only sister. You're welcome." I pull open the lid of my sandwich box and heave a giant sigh of relief. The turkey club inside looks amazing and is just what I need after today. It's also possible that this'll be one of my last decent meals for the next seven days, assuming the hotel's continental breakfast is edible. The tour my parents signed us up for promises authentic Oregon Trail cuisine, cooked in Dutch ovens and cast-iron skillets over open campfire flames, which seems sketchy at best. I can't say I'm looking forward to subsisting on salted meat, hard tack, squirrel, venison, or foraged berries.

"Ready to head back to our room?" Dad asks, collecting our trash in a neat stack.

“We should turn in soon, since we have an early start tomorrow.”

It’s not quite dusk yet, but I get the sense that daylight will fade fast here once the sun dips below the horizon. Not like in California, where the streetlights maintain a dull glow long after sundown.

Dad heads off to the garbage can, and pauses on the way back to the picnic table to chat with a tall beanpole of a man with a giant cowboy hat, broken-in dungarees (jeans just don’t do the pants justice), and worn leather boots that have kicked up more than their fair share of dust. When the man turns our way, Dad waves Mom over. Caleb, as always, is still lost in some game on his phone, barely bothering to look up as he stands from the picnic table. Sometimes it feels like I haven’t actually seen his face in years, with it always hovering over a screen.

“I’m going to head back to the hotel,” I say, gathering up my Ranch & Rustler haul. My muscles strain under the weight and I’m not entirely sure the flimsy plastic bags will survive the walk.

Mom nods. “We’ll be right behind you.”

“We’ll be seeing you bright and early tomorrow,” the man says as he tips his hat to me. “Have a pleasant night, miss.” He turns his attention back to Mom and Dad.

“You know, we’re really looking forward to a fun family adventure,” Dad says, wrapping his arm around Mom’s waist. He’s clearly in no rush to end the conversation.

The streetlights flicker on as dusk settles. A group of guys heads down the sidewalk toward me, dressed in the same style as the wagon train leader—worn-in jeans with fancy belt buckles, scuffed leather boots, and rugged, long-sleeved, button-up shirts. A few have baseball caps pulled down low over their foreheads and another has a

bandanna wrapped around his head like a pirate. The one hanging at the back of the group has his dark brown cowboy hat pulled down low over his eyes and his hands shoved in his front pockets.

I pause under a streetlight, unsure of what crime statistics look like in Middle-of-Nowhere, Nebraska. I feel like a sitting duck surrounded by my shopping bags and my eyes dart around for an escape route, just in case I need one. I glance back to Mom and Dad, and see the wagon train leader beckon the guys over with a friendly wave. A soft breath escapes me when the realization sinks in that I'm not in danger. These guys are probably locals.

When the group reaches me and my jumble of purchases, they step off the sidewalk into the street to pass. Adjusting my grip, I glance up to meet the flinty gaze of the guy who trails slightly behind their pack. He tips up his Stetson so that the streetlight and setting sun cast a myriad of shadows over his face. I recognize him. This is the guy who recommended I send postcards instead of texts. A delicious shiver runs down my spine and I take back everything I said about not being in any danger. With his firm jaw and dark eyes, he's exactly the kind of guy I always end up falling for—tall, dark, and handsome with strong-and-silent-type vibes. Perfect material for an unrequited crush and certain subsequent heartbreak. Dangerous, indeed.

Just as the spark of interest ignites curiosity in me, his expression hardens as he takes in my jumble of shopping bags. His full lips pinch together into a tight line as he turns away with a grimace, muttering something about a “prairie princess,” which leads to a round of barely suppressed guffawing from his friends.

Ouch.

Sure, I might look out of place with my California clothes and shopping spree purchases, but calling me a “prairie princess”? What the hell?

Even after the apparent insult, I can't seem to look away. When he gives me a final backward glance, his eyes go wide at the realization that I've overheard his snide comment. Tension radiates between us. One of the guys in the group whistles and Mr. Tall, Dark, and Irksome turns away. Good looks are meaningless if a guy's a complete jerk. Guess I'm safely out of the danger zone after all.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:25 am*

### CHAPTER 4

Colton

THE GUYS GIVE me crap all the way to Frank's. It's not like I don't deserve it. My molars grit together as I remember the way she stared back at me with steely resolve before her bottom lip trembled and her shoulders sagged when she turned away.

Guilt chews at my insides. If she was sticking around for a while, maybe I'd get the opportunity to apologize or at least show her I'm not a complete jerk. But she'll be out of Nebraska before I get the chance to figure out the exact shade of brown of her eyes.

I do my best to forget about the Prairie Princess as Dad goes over the trip itinerary. I almost manage it, but there's a lingering feeling of regret I can't seem to shake.

After the staff meeting and dinner wrap up, Dad and I head back to the wagon yard to finish up work for the night. Our side of the parking lot is empty except for Dad's truck, but there are a handful of cars parked in the lot behind Darby Grand Hotel. Judging from the models and license plates, most of them are rentals. Out here, we usually get two types of visitors: those who are "just passing through" on their way to Wyoming and back and those who are here for one of the Oregon Trail Adventure Co.'s excursion packages. This early in the season, we only offer the seven-day/six-night package, but at summer's peak, we might have up to four different groups out on the trail at one time.

Dad disappears into the office and I head out into the back paddock to bring Ollie in

for the night. Ollie's our old pack mule who isn't much for traveling along the trail anymore but none of us can stand the thought of parting with him. Now he spends his retirement grazing in the field behind the hotel and nipping the other animals if they get too close. He's cantankerous and grumpy, which is probably why I love him so much.

When he sees me, Ollie lets out an unhappy bray. I'm not sure he'll ever forgive me for getting us lost in Briarwood Pass when I was ten. It was my first time tagging along with Dad on an excursion, and while the rest of the party was packing up and heading to Fort Bellows, I was chasing after a cluster of monarch butterflies.

I climb up the weathered wooden fence and ease over the side. "Hey, there, Ollie," I coax, holding out a carrot I'd planned to give Chance. "I've got a nice, crunchy treat for you."

Ollie eyes up the carrot, blinks, and then gives me a nice view of his backside. It's never a good thing to be on the kicking side of a mule, so I circle around so we're face to face. "As much as I'd love to do this all night..." Digging into my shirt pocket, I pull out the only other thing that might entice Ollie to cooperate: sugar cubes.

I let him take one while I slide a halter over his head and gently guide him toward the stables. He trots along after me, occasionally stopping as if to remind me who's really in charge. Good old Ollie.

Once he's squared away, I make my way to Chance's stall, nearly bumping into Jake Harding as I round the corner.

"Whoa," I say as my boots skid over some straw.

What the hell's he doing back here? Last I heard, he'd transferred to the University of



Nebraska and had landed himself a nice internship at his uncle's wealth management company in Lincoln.

"Colton Walker," he says with an air of superiority. Some things never change. "Still mucking the stalls?"

Jake Harding, still being an asshole? He's just another conceited jerk who goes through life trying to do as little work as possible. He still looks the part of a stable hand, but he's come a long way from Carhartt and Levi's. The rhinestone buttons on his shirt and the creases on his jeans are more runway than rodeo.

Jake leans against the wall like he's a male model and gives a lazy yawn while he watches me work.

Stepping around him, I unlatch the door to Chance's stall and pull the carrot out of my pocket. Maybe if I ignore Jake, he'll go away.

Or not.

He steps into the stall behind me and kicks a clump of straw with the silver-tipped toe of his polished cowboy boot. Definitely not the kind of boot you wear to muck stalls.

"I didn't know you were back in town," I say, rolling my shoulders in an attempt to release some of the building tension.

"Just for a few days. MacKenzie's birthday is tomorrow and I wanted to surprise her."

Hearing her name doesn't pinch the way it used to, and I realize it's been a while since I've given her any thought. I guess it's true what they say about time healing wounds. Not that I was particularly crushed when we broke it off.

“Wish her happy birthday for me,” I say. And I mean it.

Bottom line is Jake and I have never been friends. We didn’t much like each other before I started dating his sister, MacKenzie, and nothing much changed after she and I broke up. I think he enjoys trying to get a rise out of me, and damn but it’s hard not to take the bait sometimes.

“Heard Andrew got thrown from his horse a few weeks ago and can’t run the Pony Express route this week. Figured I’d lend my services while I’m in town and Captain Walker took me up on the offer.”

Jake’s never been the kind to do something purely out of the kindness of his heart. Especially not work. “What’s in it for you?” I ask.

Chance nuzzles my pocket and I slip him a sugar cube. He keeps his big brown eyes on Jake as he chews, as if he trusts him even less than I do.

Jake crosses his arms over his chest and gives me a wily smirk. “Carrie Mae is working up at Fort Bellows this summer. I heard she went from sweet to sexy.”

Maybe, but she didn’t go from smart to stupid.

Before he left for college, Jake was known for being a smooth-talking player. For some reason, every girl thought she was going to be the one to keep Jake’s attention, but after a few weeks—maybe a few months, at most—he’d move on to the next best thing. He might have moved on from Darby, but his reputation hasn’t, and I can’t imagine Carrie Mae falling for any of his crap now when she didn’t before.

“You could just drive up to Fort Bellows to see her, you know.”

Jake shakes his head like I’m a helpless cause. “Anyone can just drive up to see her.

But showing up with the wagon train, dressed like a Pony Express rider with a special delivery just for her...that's how it's done."

"Right," I say, because who am I to question his methods? As slimy as they are, somehow they work for him.

Plus, he's not the one going around insulting tourists. I force away the memory of the Prairie Princess. No use in stewing over it.

"What are you planning on bringing her?" I ask.

"Does it even matter?" Jake smooths his hair down. "You're looking at the whole package and I always deliver."

The Italian beef with extra hots I scarfed down at Frank's roils in my stomach. I think I might be sick.

### CHAPTER 5

Riley

MORNING COMES TOO soon, partly because of the time zone change but also because it took forever for me to get my stuff packed up last night. I didn't quite have to sit on the duffel bag to get the zipper to close, but it was looking like a distinct possibility.

"Rise and shine," Dad says, pulling open the curtains. A pale, gray light filters in through the dusty windowpanes. "Wagons roll out in an hour and a half, and we don't want to be late."

"Or we could just stay here, in bed," I mumble, pulling a fluffy pillow down over my head.

Caleb groans and then it sounds like he's having an epic battle with his covers, thrashing and kicking so violently I'm afraid he'll make the bed frame collapse. "Ha!" he exclaims. He must have worked himself free. "I call first dibs on the shower."

"Be my guest," I reply. That just means fifteen more minutes of sleep for me—in an ideal world.

But brothers exist in the real world, so on his way to the bathroom, Caleb yanks the covers off my bed. Cold air rakes over my skin, sending goose bumps over my arms and legs. I toss my pillow in his general direction as I shoot out of bed, but it bounces

off the wall and lands on the floor.

Caleb pokes his head out of the bathroom and sticks his tongue out at me. “Missed me.”

I manage to muster enough energy to roll my eyes before flopping back onto the bed. He can be such a brat sometimes.

Mom appears at the door to our adjourning rooms, dressed in a blue, long-sleeved, moisture-wicking shirt, dark gray fitted cargo pants, and a wide-brimmed baseball cap. “Morning, sweetie. Sleep okay?”

“Meh,” I respond, sitting up and rubbing the lingering sleep from my eyes.

I’ve never been great about sleeping in any bed but my own, and I’m not looking forward to the constant exhaustion that’s sure to plague me for the foreseeable future. Maybe I’ll get lucky and the wagon rocking, mixed with the fresh Midwestern air and sunshine, will lull me into an easy, rejuvenating sleep during the day. Unfortunately, our nights on the trail will be spent in sleeping bags balanced on fold-up cots under stifling canvas tents, which is not great for my location-induced insomnia.

After hogging the hot water, Caleb finally emerges from the bathroom in a cloud of steam, and by the time I finish getting myself ready, it’s time for us to leave.

While Dad shoots the breeze with the luggage handler in the lobby, Mom checks us out of our rooms and then she, Caleb, and I head for the dining room. As much as I’d love to grab a few donuts and OJ like Caleb, I opt for a more sensible meal of eggs, home fries, and wheat toast with a side of strawberries, since I’m still not sure authentic Oregon Trail cuisine is even remotely edible. Maybe I should have picked up some more packs of beef jerky and trail mix at Ranch & Rustler. It’s too late to shore up my emergency supplies now, but that doesn’t stop me from sneaking a few

single-serve containers of peanut butter and a handful of honey packets into the side pocket of my backpack, just in case.

Mom finds us a table by the window overlooking Main Street. This early in the morning, it's quiet. Although, out here, it's probably quiet all day. I bet the most exciting thing that rolls by is a tumbleweed.

"Looks like we're in for beautiful weather," she says, peeking out at the brightening sky. A few large puff balls of clouds float off in the distance, but otherwise the sky's light blue and clear. "I'm really looking forward to this trip, aren't you?"

"Not really," I grumble.

Her fake smile droops a bit before she recovers. Part of me feels bad that I'm angry with her and Dad about everything all the time now, but I can't seem to let it go. I didn't ask them to spring all this on me at the last possible minute. I'd just gotten accepted for a volunteer opportunity at the marine nature center at Pierce Point. They only take two high school students each summer, and after three years of trying, my application was finally selected. Now some lucky alternate is going to be monitoring the indoor tide pools and assisting the staff. In the fall, I was supposed to be president of the Art Club. Now I'll be lucky if I can find a decent summer job, and there's no way I'll be able to take on a leadership role at my new school.

I set my plate down with a sigh and glance over at the giant silver coffee urn in the corner. This might be my last chance to get a decent caffeine kick before we make it back to civilization.

Mom picks through a container of single-serve preserves. She pulls out an orange marmalade and glances up. "Can you grab me a cup, too, please?"

Can you pack up only the things you really want to keep?

Can you be open about Nebraska?

Can you stop making this all about you?

Some requests are harder than others lately.

I make it to the giant metal coffee dispenser at the same time as the flinty-eyed guy from yesterday. He gives me a once-over—not like he’s checking me out but more that he’s trying to remember why he recognizes me. When our gazes meet, his eyes glimmer with recognition. I can practically hear his brain whisper, *Prairie Princess*.

He cocks his eyebrow. I square my shoulders. It’s almost like we’re preparing for a shoot-out in the Old West. Cue the theme song from *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*.

“They don’t serve venti double-shot iced maraschinos here,” he says, firing the first shot.

“What’s a prairie princess to do?” I drawl. “I guess I’ll just have to drink two cups of plain old, regular, cherry-free coffee to get my caffeine fix. Oh, the horror.” The back of my hand goes to my forehead in dramatic fashion and I flutter my eyelashes for good measure.

Tall, Dark, and Irksome’s eyebrows lift as he watches me pull two mugs from the tray and fill them. I desperately want to douse my cup with a hearty helping of cream and sugar, but I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of knowing he wasn’t that far off about my drink of choice. Even though I’d much prefer a venti caramel macchiato, I’ll drink this coffee black as the night if it kills me. To prove whatever point I’m trying to make (because honestly, it’s too early to think straight), I take a defiant sip.

The good news: it is not piping hot, so I don't have to worry about scalding my taste buds.

The bad news: it tastes like tar and charcoal had a baby and forgot to change its diaper.

I swallow down a cough and cast him my sweetest smile as I head back to Mom and Caleb.

It's only after I sit down that I realize that he's here, grabbing breakfast, for a reason. He must also be taking part in this Oregon Trail adventure. Fan-freakin'-tastic.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:25 am*

### CHAPTER 6

Colton

ALL THE PEOPLE joining the wagon train adventure have congregated in the wagon yard. While Dad goes over details of the trip's itinerary, I take a moment to look over the group.

There are two families with a handful of boys, maybe middle-school age or younger. None of the kids can stand still and I know just by looking at them, they're going to be a handful. One steps on the back of his brother's shoe to pull it off, while another tries to give a kid a wet willie.

There's an older couple dressed as if they're going on safari, with matching khaki outfits and scarves tied around their necks.

Barnaby stands off to the side, polishing his binoculars.

My gaze lands on the Prairie Princess, who stands slightly behind a middle-aged couple who must be her parents. Her mother wraps her arm around the shoulder of the teen boy standing next to her. Her father leans in and whispers something into her mother's ear. Behind them, the Prairie Princess uses the toe of her shoe to scrape a shallow line in the dirt in front of her.

There are a bunch of adults and younger kids in the group, but there's no one else our age here. Worse for her royal highness, there's not another female under the age of forty. For passengers like her, the trail is a boring stretch of nothingness, devoid of

shops, salons, and semi-annual sales. With no one to gripe and commiserate with, she'll be plenty lonely. I sure hope her shopping bags were filled with enough gossip magazines and nail polish to tide her over until we get back.

She glances up and I quickly look away. Heat creeps up my neck and my conscience nags at me. I can't seem to stop making snap judgments about her. I bet she has a real fine opinion of me, too.

I shouldn't care.

There's no reason to care.

But I do.

Dad continues. "While on the trail, we'll have a number of fun activities for you to experience. You'll help us hitch up the teams, set up and break down camp, cook meals, and participate in other pioneer pastimes."

My attention drifts back to the girl. She glances around like she's bored out of her mind and pulls out her phone.

I walk over and find myself saying, "There's no cell service on the trail."

She jumps and focuses her dark brown eyes on me. "Color me surprised." She powers off the phone and shoves it into her backpack.

"I'm sure you'll survive without your phone for the week," I say. I'm trying to be friendly, but the words come out snarkier than I'd planned.

She manages a fake smile and I find myself wondering what her real smile looks like.

“Okay, folks,” Dad says. “Last chance to hit the restrooms before we depart. There will be facilities along the trail and at our overnight locations, but most don’t have running water, so I recommend enjoying plumbing now, while you still can.”

“Facilities?” she whispers.

“There are latrines or port-o-potties at each campsite. We’ll have indoor plumbing again when we reach Fort Bellows,” I say.

“I take it you’ve been on one of these excursions before?”

“Sure have. Plenty of ’em.”

She doesn’t seem surprised as she looks over my scuffed cowboy boots, faded jeans, and worn flannel.

“Restrooms are that way.” I point toward the redbrick office building. “In case you need to...um...powder your nose.”

Her spine straightens as if I’ve said something insulting. I hope she doesn’t think I actually expect her to powder her nose. It would be a shame to cover up the smattering of freckles.

“Just so you know, I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself,” she snaps, crossing her arms over her chest.

I don’t know why I decided to go out of my way to talk to her, but it isn’t exactly going well. So much for getting past the whole “Prairie Princess” comment and letting bygones be bygones. Since we’ll be stuck on the trail together for the next week, I thought it might be nice to set out on the right foot, but that prairie schooner has already sailed. The chip on her shoulder seems to be a permanent fixture. The

guilt I felt earlier ebbs.

She's wearing a brand-new shirt, judging from the folding creases that haven't been ironed out. In fact, all of her clothes, down to her pristine canvas sneakers, look like they've never been worn before. My gaze lingers on a sticker on the back of her thigh: relaxed midrise waist, boot cut. Must have come from her Ranch & Rustler shopping spree. Guess she's not used to wearing rugged, outdoorsy clothes in that big, designer world she comes from.

"Clearly," I say, giving her a meaningful nod to the sticker.

Color floods her cheeks as she reaches down to yank the sticker off. She opens her mouth like she's going to light into me, but then her jaw snaps shut with a crack and her shoulders hunch.

A woman who must be her mom walks over, a strained smile on her face. I tip my hat in greeting. "Ma'am."

"Hello." She turns to the Prairie Princess. "Riley, your dad and Caleb just went to the restroom. We should, too, before we board the wagon."

"Whatever." The Prairie Princess—Riley—spins away so fast the end of her ponytail just barely misses swiping over my nose.

"Smooth move, Romeo," Jake Harding says with a chuckle, coming up to stand next to me. "You know you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, right?"

With the Prairie Princess here, I wouldn't be too sure.

"Mind your own damn business," I say, surly at the downward spiral the morning is taking. I hope this isn't a preview of what's to come.

“Ooh, she has gotten under your skin. And I can see why.” Jake gives a low whistle. “A girl like that can really drive a guy wild.” His eyes fix on her retreating backside.

It takes all my willpower to keep my fisted hands by my sides and not launch toward his face. This kind of crap is why I prefer being alone on the prairie to being around people. “I thought you were set on Carrie Mae,” I snarl through gritted teeth.

Jake shrugs. “I like to keep my options open. Why limit yourself?” He slaps me on the back with more force than necessary and then gives me a finger-gun salute complete with a Pow, pow. “See you two when I ride out for my grand entrance on Wednesday,” he says. “Everyone just loves when the Pony Express rider shows up out of the blue. So damn heroic-like. By the time I arrive, she’ll be ready for a real man.” Jake smirks and then does that weird “I’m looking at you” back-and-forth motion with his hand before sauntering off toward the parking lot.

What a dirtbag.

Dad will tell you he’s 100 percent wrangler, but there’s some showman in him, too. He’ll lead the wagon train from his horse, Cisco, but first he’ll stir up a bit of excitement before the wagons pull through the gates. He calls down the line for us to confirm that we’re ready to roll out. “All clear?”

Behind him in line are the prairie schooners, driven by Felix and Wild Wanda, a good-hearted husband-and-wife duo full of grit. Each is loaded up with our passengers and their cargo, though Barnaby opts for a front-row seat next to Felix. He’s been on so many of these excursions, he’s practically a paid crew member.

“Alpha clear,” Felix and Barnaby call in unison.

“Beta clear,” echoes Wild Wanda’s raspy voice.

Next, Ty will drive the mule team pulling a slightly smaller supply wagon, loaded with fresh water, food, cooking supplies, camping supplies, and emergency equipment, including shovels, pickaxes, a tranquilizer gun, fire extinguisher, portable defibrillator, and other odds and ends. You can never be too prepared when you're out on the trail, as I'm sure many of the pioneers discovered the hard way. Dysentery, typhoid, and cholera might have been dangers of the past, but broken bones, snakebites, and other accidents are still very real possibilities in the present day.

"Gamma clear," Ty calls with an added whoop at the end. The younger passengers clap with glee.

"Omega clear," I shout.

I'm bringing up the rear on Chance, with two extra pack mules, Sal and Buck, loaded with supplies. They're mostly here to add a feeling of authenticity to the excursion. Plus, trips like this give them a bit of exercise to get them back in shape for future wagon trains, as they've spent most of their time in the corral since last tourist season. Most of what they're carrying in their packs is their own feed rations, although we have loaded them with a few extra emergency MREs—meals ready to eat—and first-aid kits.

Dad lets out a high-pitched whistle and trots Cisco around the caravan all while spinning a lasso over his head. It's mostly for show, because we aren't driving cattle, but being able to rope things comes in handy on occasion. Dad comes up alongside the prairie schooners, guides Cisco into a circular dance, and shouts, "Wagons ho!"

That's Silas's cue to pull open the side gate that leads past the corral and out into a narrow meadow that abuts the south side of Darby. He pulls off his hat and waves it at the passengers in the wagons as they pass through.

"Take it easy out there, kid," he says to me when I ride by on Chance in a working

walk.

A full-blown Prairie Princess.

A handful of middle-school boys.

Jake Harding.

I have a feeling nothing about any of this is going to be easy.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:25 am*

### CHAPTER 7

Riley

THE WIDE-OPEN plains of Nebraska surround us, short wild grasses and scraggly bushes waving as we meander along the rutted road. We've been rambling westward for just over an hour and have made...surprising little progress. I'm pretty sure L.A. traffic jams move faster than this.

Plodding.

Slowly.

Along.

Is there even a word to describe the extremely slow gait the oxen use to pull the wagons?

"Glacial," I whisper, shifting to stretch my legs.

Mom and Dad are seated up front, talking nonstop to the McCreadys and Stones, two older couples about my grandparents' age who are sharing our wagon. They're discussing the Great Upheaval like it's some wonderful thing we should all be excited about.

"Nebraska's such a wholesome place to raise kids."



“The air is so much cleaner here.”

“I’m sure you’ll all love it.”

I. Can’t. Even.

It’s strange, the contrast between how quiet and still the prairie is, a smooth sea of grass, and how topsy-turvy my feelings are, roiling about in my gut like a stormy ocean. The wagon’s rocking tries to lure me into a false sense of calm, but my spine stiffens at Mom’s enthusiastic addition to the conversation up ahead.

“We were so excited when two tenure-track positions opened up at the college at the same time. It was like it was meant to be.”

“And we get to go on a wagon train adventure,” Dad adds.

I glance behind us to see if Darby has finally shrunk into the horizon, but it’s still there, taunting me. The next week is going to be torture if we continue at this mind-numbing pace. As I’m about to turn back around, I catch a glimpse of Tall, Dark, and Irksome on a dark brown horse trailing the supply wagon behind us. I don’t know much about horses or riding them or pretty much anything at all equestrian related beyond what I gleaned from *My Little Pony* back in the day (Team Fluttershy forever). I’m guessing that level of knowledge won’t cut it here on the trail. But Tall, Dark, and Irksome is completely at ease in the saddle, with the reins loose in his hands and his body swaying with the horse’s slow walk.

I guess that means he’s a tour guide, not a regular old passenger. I can’t quite decide if the revelation softens me toward him a bit or just irritates me more.

He’s so stoic, it’s impossible to picture him cracking a genuine smile that isn’t tinged with sarcasm.

Oh, he irritates me, all right.

I bet he took one look at me and my shopping bags and decided I was more likely to have Starbucks delivered to our wagon than stargaze under the open skies.

As if.

“Prairie Princess,” I mutter under my breath like it’s a four-letter word as I glare at him.

His Stetson is pulled low over his forehead, but, of course, he has to choose that exact moment to look up like he heard me. He sets me with a piercing look, and for some dumb reason, my cheeks burn in response. I whip around to face forward and lean closer to the open canopy flap to let the breeze cool my skin.

Mom’s laugh filters down to me and I hate it. I hate how she can be so damn happy and I can be so utterly miserable, and we can both exist in such different spheres in the same universe. Doesn’t it matter to her that I’m not happy? Shouldn’t she be crushed that their decision has left my life in tatters?

Dad’s no better. I swear, if he tells me one more time to “buck up” or “be of good cheer,” I think I might lose my shit.

Caleb’s a traitor, too. He’s not nearly as bent out of shape about any of this as I thought he’d be, once reality sank in. Sitting across from me, with his feet propped up on the bench, he’s the picture of ease with his head back and his eyes closed. Not even a hint of angst.

Why should I be surprised? Caleb’s outgoing and easygoing, and he will waltz into our new high school on the first day like he’s been going there his entire life. It’ll be easier for him to mask his new-kid-in-town-ness, because every freshman is new.

They're all starting out from the same space.

But being the new senior in town? That's a wild card I never wanted to be dealt. Will I be shunned? Accepted? Forced to prove myself? Or will I be an interesting new display in the teenage zoo? It was hard enough navigating high school when I knew the players and the rules, but now I'll have to work on my currently nonexistent poker face in the hopes that it will help me survive the year.

"Nooning time," the wagon train leader calls as he rides up alongside our wagon. When he makes it to the end of the caravan, his light gray horse nickers at Tall, Dark, and Irksome's horse as if to say, "What are you doing all the way back here?"

I glance at my watch to find that it is, in fact, noon, but what that has to do with anything is beyond me.

The wagons roll forward a few hundred yards more and then halt at a slight bend in the dusty trail. To our left is a small thicket of scrawny, windblown trees, but otherwise we're surrounded by the endless plains. There must be a highway somewhere out here that cuts west, but I don't see any vehicles speeding past in any direction.

Our driver, Wild Wanda, comes around the wagon and unlatches what is essentially a tailgate that lowers to serve as a loading and unloading ramp. Caleb stands, stretches, and yawns, the hem of his shirt rising up over his belly button. Mom only got him that shirt a few months ago, but he must be having another growth spurt, since nothing fits him right anymore. As much as I'd love another inch or two on my five-four frame, I'm not willing to sacrifice my wardrobe for it. And I'm glad I wasn't willing to share his, because those are some nasty-looking pit stains.

We file off the wagon, squinting in the bright June sun. The air out here is slightly sweet and more humid than I'm used to in the Southern California desert. My

normally pin-straight hair curls along my neckline and my usual perky ponytail has lost its pep. Not that it matters since there's no one around I'm hoping to impress. My gaze flicks to Tall, Dark, and Irksome and I quickly look away.

Definitely not him.

“Gather 'round, pioneers,” Wild Wanda says with a toothy grin. Mom, Dad, Caleb, the McCreadys, and the Stones huddle up to stand in a semicircle before her, but I hang back. My fingers twitch and I wish I'd thought to grab my new sketchbook and a pencil before we unloaded. The soft snick of the lead rasping against the paper soothes me and helps channel my emotions. I could definitely use a creative outlet right about now.

“This here is Mather's Field. It's named for Augie Mather who is a local legend for his time spent as an Oregon Trail guide and gold miner.” She points toward the grove. “Just behind them trees there is a spring with fresh water for the animals. At just 'bout noon every day, we stop to give the animals a rest. Many pioneers learned that by observing noonin' time, the oxen are able to travel farther distances in a day, when they aren't forced to work in the hottest hours.”

“How far can oxen travel in a day?” Dad asks, stepping closer to Wild Wanda.

Oh my god.

Wild Wanda grins. “Glad you asked. Oxen travel at about two miles per hour. We get in about fifteen miles on a good day.”

No wonder it feels like we're crawling out there. I've seen babies scoot faster.

“Now, I'm gonna grab some buckets to haul water from the spring and get the team re-hy-drated. While they're resting, we'll have a picnic lunch set out for you and

you can stretch your legs. In about two, three hours we'll depart for our campsite at Hunt's Meadow." Wild Wanda strides away.

While Mom and Dad continue their conversation with our wagon-mates, I look for Caleb and find him playing hacky sack with the boys from the other wagon. It appears I'm an island unto myself.

A lonely, lonely island.

"Wild Wanda tell you about why this is called Mather's Field?" Tall, Dark, and Irksome stands beside me with his arms crossed over his chest and his gaze fixed on the horizon.

"She did not." And then, because I can't resist getting in a small dig, I add, "But I bet you're going to."

His jaw works, causing the skin below his cheekbones to grow taut. "Nope," he says. "Not unless you ask. I only tell interesting stories to interested people."

This feels very much like another Prairie Princess jab. I should ignore him, but I can't stand the thought of him gloating, thinking he was right about me. Plus, I have nothing better to do.

"Fine, I'll bite. Why is this place"—I spin around once like Maria in the opening scene of *The Sound of Music*. "The plains are alive..."—"called Mather's Field?"

"Funny you should ask," he says, dropping his arms to his sides.

### CHAPTER 8

Colton

“AUGIE MATHER WAS one of the first white settlers in this area. He built a log cabin a little ways from the spring and made his living as a tinker for the pioneers heading through: repairing wagons, reshoeing the animals, selling extra rations, making bourbon, that kind of thing.”

Riley squints over at me like she can’t believe she asked me to tell her more about Augie. If we were anywhere else, she’d probably stalk off in a huff, but out here in the middle of the prairie, there’s all kinds of space and nowhere to go.

“Anyhow, Augie was big, strong, and stubborn, and legend has it, he wasn’t one to back down from a fight. Some say he wrestled a bear for a honeybee hive. Others say he cleared out a rattlesnake den with his bare hands without so much as a bite. But here, in Mather’s Field, this is where Augie squared off against his most fierce opponent of all.” I pause and dig the heel of my boot into the hard-packed dirt. The wind whispers through the short grass and the birds call to each other as they dart after insects.

Riley lifts her eyebrows. “Which was?” Her dark brown eyes sparkle with interest, though her face is the picture of boredom.

“A land spout.”

“A land spout?” she repeats. “Isn’t that just a weak tornado that hardly ever does

much damage? I don't think they even get up to an E3 rating."

"Well, uh, yeah," I say, thrown off by her meteorological knowledge.

Riley rolls her eyes. "It's basically a dust devil."

I study her profile as she stares out at the prairie. Wisps of dark hair curl along her soft jawline, blurring most of her face. When she brushes it back, I catch the faint scent of sweet pea blossoms. Her eyes are focused on a point in the distance.

"Are you from the Midwest?" I ask.

"No," she says, like I've insulted her yet again. "Southern California."

I thought it was always sunshine and clear skies there, so how does she know so much about Midwestern weather events?

I clear my throat. Telling her this story is starting to feel like a bad idea. Honestly, I don't know why I thought it was a good idea in the first place, given our earlier encounters. Maybe it's because I felt bad for her, standing here all alone while everyone else found a group to hang out with. Usually I just keep to myself on excursions. This conversation is a good reminder why.

"Well," she says, crossing her arms over her chest. "Don't leave me hanging. What happened?"

I pull off my hat and scratch at the back of my head. "So, Augie had just whipped up a batch of his famous skull varnish—"

"That sounds appetizing." She wrinkles her nose, and I can't help but stare at the constellation of freckles there.

“It’s essentially adulterated bourbon,” I manage, trying to stay focused.

“So much better,” she murmurs.

“Back then, it was common for people to add things to try to extend batches, and Augie supposedly added molasses to the dregs of his barrels when supplies got low.”

Riley motions for me to continue.

“Augie got this batch of skull varnish the way he wanted and tried to sell it to all the pioneers passing through. A few questioned the quality of his spirits, and to prove it was safe enough, he took a long swig. Soon enough, they all got to talking and drinking. No one noticed the storm rolling in. The land spout whipped out in the distance without a warning and headed right toward Augie’s cabin. Well, in their fright, the pioneers decided to run for it and headed over toward that hill over there, hoping the depression on the other side would shelter them from the storm.” I point to a small mound of dirt that’s slightly higher than its surroundings. “They tried to get Augie to join them, but he just took another drink of his bourbon, tossed his tin cup to the ground, and put up his fists like he was preparing for a fight.”

“This better not be one of those tall tales where he supposedly wrestled the storm into submission,” she says.

“Not exactly. The land spout swept right on through, picking up Augie and all his possessions except for a broken axle and a busted wagon wheel, and no one ever saw him again. His cabin remained just over there for the next fifty or so years, until a wildfire swept across the prairie and burned it down.”

“Hmm,” Riley says, turning west to study the plains as if she can picture the mini-tornado rolling our way. Her gaze sweeps back around and finally lands on me. My heart beats a bit faster when our eyes meet. “That story has more holes in it than a



window screen.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, wondering if maybe I left out an important detail. Or maybe it was my delivery? I’m not much of a storyteller...or a talker. Wild Wanda usually tells that story on our three-day excursions and no one’s ever called her out on it, as far as I know, but maybe it’s because she uses more colorful language.

Or maybe it’s just that I’m having trouble concentrating.

“You’re telling me that Augie and all his belongings go missing after this ‘storm,’?” she says with finger quotes, “but his log cabin is sturdy enough to withstand it and last another five decades?”

“Yeah?” I curl the brim of my hat against my palm.

“There’s no way.” Riley shakes her head and starts walking toward the hill that supposedly sheltered the pioneers. It takes me a few seconds to realize she’s heading out into the prairie alone.

I jog to catch up and fall into step with her. “What are you doing?”

“Gathering facts,” she says, as if it should be clear.

“What are you trying to do? Prove the legend wrong?”

She shrugs. “It’s just a story. I’m confirming my suspicions that it’s approximately fifteen percent true.”

“That much?” I say, the words laced with sarcasm.

Riley doesn’t respond. We continue without speaking, the silence between us

punctuated by the scuff of our footfalls and the buzz of wildlife. A small animal scurries off as we near the crest of the hill. At the top, Riley puts her hands on her hips. Her elbow brushes against my abdomen, sending a jolt over my skin. She flinches and steps away.

“There’s no valley here. There’s barely even a depression. Maybe it was bigger back then, but if the storm passed right by Augie’s cabin and swept everything up, it probably didn’t suddenly change direction in such a small amount of space. It would have hit this mound head-on.”

“So?” I ask.

“So, if the land spout was strong enough to grab up Augie, why didn’t it take any of the pioneers?”

“I dunno.” The familiar clank of a cowbell echoes. “Lunchtime,” I say.

Riley nods and gazes at the wagons. “You know, there’s a much more realistic explanation.”

“What’s that?” I ask, letting gravity propel me down the three-stride hill.

Riley skids down after me. “Augie died—maybe naturally or maybe it was foul play. Either way, someone buried his body in an unmarked grave and then a bunch of desperate pioneers probably cleaned him out.”

I wonder why I never thought of that before. I guess I’ve heard the story so many times, I never bothered to really think about it. “That’s actually pretty logical,” I say.

“Of course it is,” Riley says with an edge to her voice. “There’s more to this Prairie Princess than meets the eye.”

Truth is, I'm actually beginning to believe it.

### CHAPTER 9

Riley

AFTER WE LEAVE Mather's Field, we come to a fork in the road and the wagon train leader guides us along the northern route. The covered wagon's canvas glows bright white in the afternoon sun and a few puffy cumulus clouds dot the brilliant blue sky. It's beautiful out here, surrounded by all this nature, but I just can't bring myself to enjoy it.

Back in California, I'd probably be basking in the first beach day of summer break. I reach an arm out of the wagon to feel the sun and the cool breeze on my bare skin. If I close my eyes, I can almost hear the sound of the waves lapping against the shore and see the palm trees swaying in the warm, windy gusts. But my toes wiggle in my stiff new shoes instead of the soft, sun-warmed sand. The creak of the wagons fills in for the screech of seagulls. The taste of salty air is replaced with dust. The familiar ocean brine scent fades to the foreign smell of sweaty oxen and prairie grass.

My forehead brushes against the rough canvas wagon cover and I sigh.

Mom and Dad, still knee-deep in conversation at the front of the wagon, are having a blast. Mom snaps photos with her phone while she nods and chats. I look away when she tries to get a candid of me. Dad leans back against the side wall of the wagon, his legs crossed at the ankles, and stares out the open side flaps, throwing in a comment here and there. Every so often, he gives me a thumbs-up and an encouraging nod, as if he thinks he'll eventually wear me down.

I drift into a state of numbness, my eyes glazing over at the passing vegetation as I zone out. Eventually, the wagon train pulls into a flat area that looks like every other flat area around us, and the oxen come to a halt.

“Welcome to Hunt’s Meadow,” Wild Wanda says as she unhooks the tailgate. “This, here, will be our campsite for the night. Felix and me’ll get started on cookin’ up some grub over a campfire, while the rest of you’s get your sleepin’ situation sorted. Captain Walker, Ty, and Colton”—she nods to Tall, Dark, and Irksome—“will help with pitchin’ the tents after they’ve seen to the animals. For those of you who’ll be sleepin’ in the wagons, we’ll convert the benches to beds right quick after everything else is complete.”

Colton, huh?

The name fits.

Twilight is still a few hours off, but the sun casts the meadow in a golden glow. A pair of red-winged blackbirds settle on a shrub nearby to watch us, tilting their heads curiously at the intrusion on their space. They remind me of a pair of mourning doves that used to build a nest in the eaves above the garage door every year. Sometimes I would sit on the counter next to the dryer and stare out the laundry-room window, watching them hard at work while I made quick study sketches in my notebook. I wonder if the roles are reversed now—will the red-winged blackbirds watch us humans toil to build our night nests?

Toil we do.

The McCreadys and Stones secured the makeshift wagon beds when they reserved their spots, so we—the Thomas family of four—will be bunking in tents. As we follow Captain Walker to the supply wagon to grab our things, I spot Colton chatting with an old man with binoculars. I only catch a short glimpse of his Stetson-

shadowed square-jawed smile as his soft, low laugh carries on the breeze. The minute I feel myself softening just a smidge, I remind myself that all he sees when he looks at me is a helpless tourist.

We load up with the bulky canvas tents, fold-up aluminum cots, and fiber-filled sleeping bags we've been assigned, and follow Ty to our homestead for the night—a small area across from the wagons, with a fieldstone fire ring in the center.

Wild Wanda and Felix busy themselves setting up the campfire and assembling the cooking tripod. My stomach rumbles at the prospect of food, but I'm still not convinced that the historically inspired Oregon Trail cuisine they plan to serve out here will be any good. It's not that I'm picky, and lunch was decent enough, but the pioneer diet was pretty limited and consisted largely of bacon and bread. I never realized how much I took for granted all the fresh fruits and veggies we had access to in California.

"We'll pitch our tent here," Dad says, pointing to a general area with his finger. "And you kids can pitch yours over there."

Caleb pulls open the tent bag to reveal an off-white canvas wrapped tightly around smooth wooden tent poles with metal connectors and a handful of metal stakes. This is nothing like the tents I'm used to camping in, with flexible plastic poles, a zip flap, and a lightweight nylon cover.

"Oh, wow." I cough as a billowing cloud of dust unfurls from the dense canvas. A few moth carcasses drop to the ground, too desiccated to identify their species. "This thing is ancient."

Theoretically, I know how to assemble a tent. First, erect the frame, then cover the frame with the canvas. It's the same basic principle for any outdoor shelter, and thanks to a variety of summer camps, I've built my fair share of lean-tos, wedge tents,

and, once upon a time, an authentic Sioux-style teepee. I've even spent the night in a yurt under giant sequoias. But this thing looks like it might have actually come from the Civil War era, and since it's a wedge tent, we have to flip our approach by spreading out the canvas before we erect the frame.

"Well?" Caleb asks, looking to me for answers. Out of the two of us, I'm more technical minded, especially when it comes to assembling things. I might be able to piece it together, but we'll need his brawn to get it standing. It's a good thing his once-scrawny frame is starting to bulk up with a bit of muscle.

I close my eyes and picture how the pieces fit together. My brain automatically sketches a diagram and a surge of energy flits through my fingertips. Cream-colored paper, brown ink, fine lines from a fountain pen depicting the geometric precision of the tent with scrolled lettering to identify the pieces like something Leonardo da Vinci might have sketched.

"Okay," I say, letting the plan solidify in my mind. "Help me square up the canvas."

We each grab two corners and unfurl the tent like we're spreading a blanket on a bed. Once it's square, I grab the tent stakes. "We'll need something to pound these in with."

I glance up to see what everyone else is using to set up their tents, only to find Colton striding our way with a sturdy-looking rubber mallet in his hand. When he gets closer, he gives a bro nod to my brother. "Most people don't know to spread the canvas out first," he says, tipping his head toward my parents, who are struggling to assemble their tent poles.

"Right," Caleb says, acting like he's known all along and not like he just found out five minutes ago, from me. As if he knows anything about pitching a wedge tent. I tried to convince him to come to conservation camp with me, but no, he just had to go

to basketball camp. Who has skills now?

Caleb notices the grip I have on one of the stakes and his eyes go wide. I twist the spike around the palm of my hand like Buffy the Vampire Slayer. He knows I'll never hurt him...but he also knows I binge-watched the series with Quinn last summer and I'm a bit of a wild card, forced out of my native SoCal habitat and into the wilds of the Nebraskan prairie. "I'm going to go see if they need any help," he says, hustling to our parents' aid.

Colton and I stand like we're about to engage in a high-noon shoot-out again, except instead of coffee, our six-shooters are a rubber mallet and a handful of tent stakes, respectively. He lifts his eyebrow, assessing me and my vampire-slayer stance. I roll my shoulders and step forward, holding out my hand for the mallet. "Can I borrow that, please?"

Slowly, he hands it over, as if trying to decide whether it's wise to trust someone like me with even the most rudimentary of tools. Our fingers brush during the handoff, and I jump back at the unexpected warmth and roughness against my skin.

When I glance up at Colton, his eyes are as wide as mine. His mouth parts as if he's going to say something, but instead he blinks and takes a step back.

Anywhere else, any other time, and I might be tempted to call it a moment. But here, trapped in Middle-of-Nowhere, Nebraska, with a guy who clearly underestimates and dislikes me?

No way.

Adjusting my grip on the mallet's handle, I walk around to the other side of the tent, where the air is free from his distracting scent and I can't see the depth of his dark eyes. Starting at a corner loop, I tap in the first stake and then move on to the opposite



corner, making sure to pull the canvas taut as I pound the second spike in. The ground is hard, but I channel my frustration to drive the remaining two stakes home.

### CHAPTER 10

Colton

DINNER THE FIRST night on the trail is always poultry, and tonight it's Dutch oven chicken and biscuits with a side of bacon, because the pioneers ate bacon at just about every meal. While we try to keep the excursion as authentic as possible, crabby, ill-fed passengers are not much fun. All the recipes are made with the same ingredients the pioneers would have had available to them, with the same cooking techniques, but the portions are larger and the selection remains varied, no matter how far west we travel.

The campfire crackles when Ty throws on another log, a luxury to have with so few trees around. I've spent hours chopping and stacking cords of wood, so it's nice to enjoy the fruits of my labor. Buffalo patties would be a more bona fide fuel source, but for some reason, overlanders don't appreciate food cooked over prairie coals.

Once my tin plate is heaped with a generous helping of food, I make my way over to where most of the party has congregated. With the portable picnic table full, some of the passengers sit on their bedding rolls while others lounge on small boulders or patches of grass. Barnaby has his folding stool with him and has centered himself with the other adults. I pull up a patch of earth near the other trail guides and dig in.

"Excellent first day," Dad says before taking a swig of water from his tin cup. It clinks dully against his plate when he sets it on the ground.

"It's a quiet group," Wild Wanda remarks, studying the passengers who haven't

really started to mingle yet. Barnaby is doing an excellent job of keeping the conversation flowing, and it won't be long before there's more interaction between the groups.

"For now," Felix agrees, but then he glances at the middle-school boys and gives a knowing chuckle. "This time tomorrow, I bet you'll be singing a different tune."

Wild Wanda gives a wheezy laugh. "Them boys bound to be rascals, sure enough."

"Keep an eye on 'em," Dad says to all of us, "and let me know if they start to get out of hand."

Plate clean, I rise to drop it in the dish tub when Barnaby calls my name.

"Evenin', Longspur," he says, giving me a short nod.

If Barnaby likes you, you get a bird nickname, and I count myself in the rare few who have earned that privilege. No one else on the wagon train has one, which is a sore subject for Dad, who's taken Barnaby on our Oregon Trail adventures for at least fifteen years. Only a few of our vacationers have ever been lucky enough to leave an excursion with a nickname.

"Evenin'," I reply, tipping my hat in greeting.

We take a moment to gaze out at the open prairie before us.

"How's the birdwatching?" I ask.

"So far, so good. Though I'm still holding out hope for the elusive *Centronyx bairdii*.  
"

For the sake of Barnaby's Nebraska bird bucket list, I hope he'll spot a Baird's sparrow in the Great Plains, too.

"Seems like a good mix of passengers this run," he comments, turning back toward the campfire to study the rest of the passengers. "Kids might be a bit rowdy, but you've had worse."

My gaze goes to the group of boys huddled in a circle around their tin plates. Riley's brother is the center of attention, his hands whipping around as he tells a story that leaves everyone cracking up. He's loving every minute in the spotlight.

Riley watches him from across the campfire, where she still sits alone. Light flickers over her face as she chases her food around her plate with her fork, the twilight shadows highlighting her forlorn expression as she takes a somber bite. She's definitely not having a good time. I ignore a dull ache in my chest—must be indigestion—and drag my focus back to Barnaby.

"The adults seem to be a decent sort, though the McCreadys might be a bit high-maintenance," he says. Sometimes I think Barnaby missed his calling. He would have made a better cowboy than a CPA. Although "high-maintenance" to Barnaby means preferring a daily shower out on the trail, which is not even close to the level of maintenance someone like...

I look at Riley but can't make myself finish the thought.

I watch as she sets her empty plate down on the ground beside her. She leans forward, elbows propped on her knees, and stares into the fire like it holds all the answers.

"Sad sparrow."

I must have zoned out and missed what Barnaby said, because I thought he said sad

sparrow. “What?”

“Not a what. A who.” He pulls a microfiber cloth from his pocket and starts wiping the lenses on his binoculars.

“Okay. Who?” I ask.

“If you don’t know who I’m talking about, you’re a lot less observant than I thought you were, Longspur.”

I shrug. He can’t mean Riley, can he? I survey the passengers but can’t find anyone else who looks so dejected.

“I might be old, but I was young once. And I have the eyes of a hawk. There’s no way she slipped your notice,” he says.

“The Prairie Princess?” I ask, shaking my head. “She’s definitely hard to miss, that one.”

Barnaby gives a small tsk . He folds the cloth into a pristine square and slides it back into its pouch. “Looks can be deceiving. I feel for her, poor thing.”

Poor thing? She looks like a walking credit card, with her brand-new clothes, sun-kissed highlights, and snotty attitude. I try to convince myself that it’s only a matter of time before she’s whining about lack of cell service, a broken nail, or too many carbs. Sure, she’s good-looking and smells like sweet peas and summer rain, but...

Seated beside the fire in a flannel shirt and dusty jeans, this Riley is a far cry from the put-together Prairie Princess back in Darby.

A glimmer of doubt seeps in.

“She’s a sad sparrow, that one,” Barnaby continues. “A sad, sad sparrow.”

How the hell did Riley already get a nickname from Barnaby? It took me years. “I’m sure she’ll be fine once she gets back to her skyscraper city,” I say with a huff.

“A gilded cage,” Barnaby says. “But even I can tell she doesn’t belong there.”

“She doesn’t belong here,” I say, my jaw going tight.

He gives a short hum. “Are you sure about that?”

Of course, I’m not sure, but I can hardly admit it now. Doubling down, I say, “I know you’ve seen her, but have you actually seen her?”

I glance in Riley’s direction to find her gazing out at the prairie, the end of a pencil now tucked between her teeth. She’s shifted away so that the fire casts light on her lap. After a moment, Riley looks down at a notebook balanced on her knee and makes a few scribbles before she returns her attention to the horizon. A hawk swoops overhead, and as she watches it catch a thermal to rise higher, her face softens.

Barnaby smirks. “Well, I’m looking at her right now. And she sure looks like she belongs, Longspur.”

I’m vexed to admit he has a point.

### CHAPTER 11

Riley

NIGHTTIME ON THE prairie is filled with the quiet din of insects and the breeze whispering through the grass. Back in California, it was never this quiet. Not with all the freeways constantly packed with cars and the skies full of aircraft. Plus, it hardly ever got this dark unless we were experiencing rolling blackouts, common during the hottest part of the year. Even then, it always seemed like there was a glow coming from somewhere that kept the sky from going truly black.

But out here, the sky is as dark as India ink and splattered with more stars than I could ever imagine. Even the light from the dying campfire, which sends dancing shadows over the tent walls, can't dampen the starlight. I take it all in—the cool night air sinking into my pores, the soft chirp of the crickets, the scent of burned wood, the winking constellations—and allow myself a minute of stolen magic. No one needs to know that I don't completely hate it.

I'm exhausted but I don't think sleep's in the cards for me tonight. It never is when I have to spend the night in a strange place and in a strange bed. It doesn't even have to be strange, either. It just has to be not-my-room and not-my-bed for insomnia to plague me.

11:45 p.m. Someone in the wagon behind us is snoring.

12:28 a.m. The crickets are really chirping now.

12:31 a.m. How many crickets live in the Great Plains?

12:37 a.m. It sounds like millions, and they're all saying "Go to sleep, go to sleep." I can't believe I'm being taunted by insects with wing fiddles.

12:39 a.m. How many different insect species live in the Great Plains?

I glance at my watch again. 12:48 a.m. Great.

"Riles, wake up," Caleb whispers, shaking my arm with almost enough exuberance to tear it from its socket.

Groggy, I force my eyes open. I can't believe I actually fell asleep. Or that Caleb had the audacity to wake me up. "What time is it?" I mumble, hating that it's morning already.

"Dunno," he whispers. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" I ask, glancing at my watch to find that it's only 4:47 a.m. Ugh.

We're both quiet for a moment, but all I hear is the never-ending cricket symphony and our shallow breaths.

My eyes flutter closed and I'm just about asleep again when Caleb tugs on my arm. "That. Did you hear that?"

"No, I didn't." I toss his hand off. "Go back to sleep."

"There it is again," he hisses.

I'm just about to roll over and pull the edge of the sleeping bag over my head when I



hear it too: a soft sniffing, snorting sound. It almost sounds like a quiet pig.

Are there prairie pigs in the Midwest? I suppose they'd be feral hogs, which have a reputation for being really mean. There are a few feral hog populations in Southern California that have been known to terrorize residents. I know I wouldn't want to meet one in a back alley at midnight, let alone on the Great Plains at not-quite 5:00 a.m.

"I think it's a bear," Caleb hisses.

"It's not a bear."

"How do you know?"

"It doesn't sound big enough to be a bear."

"Maybe it's a little bear."

"It's not a bear," I repeat.

"What are we supposed to do?" he asks, his voice warbling with panic.

As far as I know, we don't have any food in the tent, so I doubt we're in any real danger. Still...my brain can't process complex thoughts in its half-slumbering state. "Go back to sleep," I mumble, hoping I can cling to the threads of sleep I had managed to snag earlier.

Caleb's quiet. Maybe he's taken my advice?

"Riles."

Maybe not.

“What?” I hiss.

“I heard it again.”

Oh. My. God. I am not doing this until sunup. I grab my palm-sized flashlight, slide my legs over the side of the cot, and slip my feet into the cheap plastic flip-flops I picked up at Ranch & Rustler.

“What are you doing?” he asks, his eyes widening when I flick on the flashlight to test the beam.

“I’m going to check it out. Coming?”

Caleb snorts. “Nope.”

“Fine. Whatever.” I slide between the front flaps of the tent and point the light toward the side where the mysterious sounds are coming from.

Six beady little eyes stare back at me.

Raccoons.

A mama and two kits, based on the size difference. Frozen in the light like masked bandits, they look almost guilty for waking me up. They should be, given how long it took for me to fall asleep in the first place.

Well, now that I know there’s no danger—

“What are you doing?”

The familiar voice startles me in the dark. I give a small yelp, whirling around to find Colton standing there, dressed in a flannel shirt and jeans. He's not wearing his Stetson, and his medium-cropped dark hair is tousled like he just woke up. My flashlight hits him square in the face, and he winces, holding up an arm to shield his eyes. "Hey."

"Oh, sorry." I point the flashlight down toward the ground and look up to find the faint moonlight casting shadows on his stern scowl.

In the almost-dark, I'm keenly aware of my "This princess needs her beauty sleep" pajamas, which were cute in the store, before he'd dubbed me the Prairie Princess. Now it's basically a gotcha. And judging by the smirk that tugs at the corner of his mouth, he doesn't get that it's supposed to be ironic.

"Moonlight pajama stroll?" he asks, his voice gruff and low.

Does he actually think I would just get up and decide to wander off in the middle of the night wearing this? My fingers tighten around the flashlight.

"Caleb heard a noise and I came out to check. Turns out, it was raccoons." I slide the beam back to the little family, who are watching us warily. I'm kind of surprised they didn't try to sneak away while we were distracted, but honestly, I can't blame them for wanting front-row seats. Tall, Dark, and Irksome vs. the Prairie Princess. One night only. Get your tickets here.

"Do you have a weapon on you?" he whispers.

"A weapon? Like a stick or...?" I whisper back, slightly confused. What do I need a weapon for? I'm pretty sure the Great Plains is not a hotbed of dangerous activity, or Mom and Dad would never have forced us here. "I'm not packing heat, if that's what you're asking."

“Who says that?”

“Says what?”

“?‘Packing heat.’?”

“People say it,” I counter, irritation oozing over me. “I just said it and I’m people. A person.”

Colton just stares at me for a moment before giving a small grunt. “What were you planning on using to defend yourself on your moonlight pajama stroll?”

“Against some cute little raccoons?” I ask, trying to keep my voice down. “Please, they’re harmless. And this is not a moonlight pajama stroll. Yes, there is moonlight. Yes, I am wearing pajamas. But it’s more of a scouting mission than a stroll.”

He crosses his arms over his chest. “But you didn’t know it was only raccoons until you went outside. It could have been a cougar or a badger.”

“Fair point, but still...if the animal was dangerous, would it matter whether I was in the tent if the animal wanted to eat me?”

“Suppose not,” he concedes.

Aha, I got him there.

“And now that I know that it was just a few harmless raccoons, I’m going back to bed.” I turn around and take a few steps toward the tent, but my timing couldn’t have been worse. The raccoon family has gotten considerably closer to the front of our tent, and Mama Raccoon isn’t happy about how near I’ve come to her babies. When the light reaches her eyes, she launches herself toward me, snapping her jaw at my

ankles.

I leap back with a squeal and plaster myself against Colton, almost knocking him over in the process. His arms wrap around my waist while my arms windmill for balance. He takes a huge step back to absorb the shock, preventing us from going down into the dirt.

Mama Raccoon moves to her kits' side and bares her teeth, letting out a ferocious growl that sends goose bumps over my skin. Colton lifts me with the ease of someone used to doing some heavy lifting and walks us back a few steps until we're out of the immediate danger zone. The raccoons see their opening and dart around us into the darkness of the prairie. My racing heart threatens to break free from my chest and follow them.

Sucking in a shaky breath, I turn to face Colton. The moonlight accentuates his jawline and the soft curve of his lips. I'm drawn into his warmth, glad to have something sturdy to hold on to while I regroup. His muscles flex when I press my fingers into his upper arms, and my pulse shoots up again.

Colton tilts his head to the side, dipping his face down until we're eye to eye. I catch the scent of minty toothpaste and polished leather. He blinks at me and a bit of the perpetual steeliness subsides. I'm reminded of how attractive he was when I first saw him, before his haughty attitude got in the way. Standing this close to someone so good-looking is dangerous.

Maybe it's the cricket orchestra or the silvery moonlight or the lack of sleep, but I tip my head up as if there's a remote possibility that the world has flipped on its axis and there's a chance that we might kiss. My gaze slides down to his mouth, where the sharp slant of his lips has relaxed into something much more tempting. If he wasn't so disagreeable...

For a moment, I think maybe there is some actual magic in the air. The edges of his mouth curl up as his lips part. But then Colton takes a step back, slowly releasing his hold on me. My waist tingles where his fingers slide across the hem of my pajama top and I shiver at the sudden rush of cold air over my skin.

“You okay?” he asks, voice rough and clipped.

Obviously not.

Clearly, I’m not thinking straight. Given his attitude toward me, I have a better chance of being mauled to death by a raccoon than being kissed by a grumpy trail guide. Not that I want to be kissed by a grumpy trail guide.

Much.

“I’m fine,” I say, doing my best to project a cool, in-control vibe, when really, I’m a complete mess inside. What the hell is wrong with me that I’d entertain romantic thoughts about Tall, Dark, and Irksome?

He nods, running his eyes over me one more time as if to verify that I am undamaged. When his gaze goes to the saying on my pajama top, he quickly looks away. “Well, then...Riley,” he says, stepping back into the shadows. “Enjoy the rest of your night.”

I don’t want to like the way he says “Riley” in a deep, rumble almost-whisper, but I do. Too much for my own good. I cannot believe I actually have a thing for Colton.

### CHAPTER 12

Colton

MORNING ON THE prairie, before everyone else is awake, is my favorite time on the trail. The sun comes up over the fields, casting an orange haze over the grass that makes it look like fire if you catch it just right. With a tin cup of Felix's cowboy coffee and a handful of biscuits, I settle down on a rock to try to clear my mind for the day. But first: caffeine. I definitely need a hearty helping to get me through to nooning.

As I sip my coffee, everything feels off-kilter. Usually I have no problem watching the prairie awaken, but I can't focus. I try to forget the memory of my run-in with Riley at the crack of dawn, when I found her wielding a flashlight and not enough common sense. She almost scared the living daylights out of me, with that ridiculous pajama top of hers, so stark white it practically glowed in the dark. I would have thought she was the ghost of an unfortunate pioneer, if I believed in stuff like that. Who the hell leaves the safety of their tent in the Great Plains in the middle of the night, anyhow?

Inexperienced tourists who don't belong here, that's who.

My shin still smarts from when she threw herself at me. My pride still smarts from how much I liked the feel of her pressed up against me, her warm breath on my collarbone and her hands on my biceps. And her eyes, chocolate brown with a hint of gold, peering up at me with a mix of fear and trust, her hair smelling like sweet peas and summer rain—easy enough to get lost in on a moonlit night if you aren't careful.

The tin cup buckles slightly under my grip and I force my fingers to relax. Since the moment we first set out, I'd known Riley would irritate me like a burr caught in my shirtsleeve, rubbing my skin raw until pulled free. But there was no way I could have anticipated how much she'd irritate me with her glistening, dark eyes, her witty comebacks, or her ability to wield a rubber mallet.

I gnaw on a hunk of dry, day-old biscuit, working my jaw to try to get her out of my thoughts. I can't afford to be distracted by a pretty face. Out here on the trail, there are always risks, and losing focus can land you in a heap of trouble.

Washed out roads.

Inquisitive wildlife.

Unpredictable storms.

"Riley," I mumble, taking a swig of coffee so strong you could probably stand a spoon up in it. The bitter liquid burns all the way down.

Felix wakes the camp with a few sharp raps of the cowbell a short while after sunrise. I was so distracted in my thoughts, I completely missed the moment the fields are aglow, which pisses me off more than it should. I could blame it on the lack of sleep or not enough cowboy coffee, but really, it's that I can't shake Riley from my thoughts. Given all the wagon trains I've been on, I know better than almost anyone else that no good can come from "fraternizing with the clientele," as Dad likes to say. Not only does it go against corporate policy, but I'm also not a player. Unlike Jake, I'm not cut out for a fling.

But now that I've spent some time with her...

Damn.



Wild Wanda helps Felix pass out a historically accurate meal of biscuits, bacon, beans, and cowboy coffee. I snag a strip of crispy bacon on my way past the cook fire, planning to avoid the din of breakfast by getting Chance saddled up and ready to hit the trail. Today we'll stop along the banks of Bow Brook, where we'll set up camp early and then give a fishing demonstration before sending the passengers off to catch their dinner. If the brook trout are biting, we'll have Dutch oven fried fish. If not, Wild Wanda will whip up her famous fish soup or potato soup, depending on how few fish we end up with.

Just as I'm about to pull my saddle from a sawhorse, a blur of movement catches my eye. Riley's hiking northwest into the grassland toward a nearby hill, a backpack slung over her shoulders and a baseball cap pulled down over her dark hair. Her strides are measured and sure, like she's accustomed to hiking. But for a city girl, this is unfamiliar territory. She could get lost. Bit by a snake. Twist her ankle. There's no way I can, in good conscience, just let her wander off on her own.

"Son of a bitch," I grumble, dropping the saddle. This Prairie Princess is becoming a real pain in the ass.

"You really shouldn't wander away from the campsite," I say.

Riley's a fast hiker, I'll give her that. By the time I've caught up to her, she's already seated on a newspaper with her boots off and art supplies spilling from her bag.

"Not all who wander are lost. Or are doomed to get lost," she says. Her shoulders stiffen as she flips her notebook closed. I barely catch the sketch of a blade of switchgrass on the page. "I can see the wagons perfectly from here."

"There are other dangers out here," I say.

"Oh, so you're worried I might have another run-in with the local wildlife?" She

shoves her sketchbook and art supplies back in her bag.

“Something like that.” I reach out a hand to help her up but she ignores me.

“Believe it or not, I’m not a damsel in distress. The raccoons last night caught me by surprise, is all. I was perfectly safe.”

Riley stands and I catch a trace of her flowery scent. I clear my throat, remembering how it wasn’t exactly torture to have her clinging to me last night.

Her eyes narrow at me, as if clearing my throat was a personal attack. “I would have been completely fine last night without you.”

“That’s not...I wasn’t...” What is even happening here?

Last night, there was a moment when it felt like maybe we could call a truce. The way she’d looked up at me when I’d held her close, her lips parted. I’d almost convinced myself she might have kissed me. Wishful thinking, I guess.

Not that I should be thinking anything like that.

Riley slides her feet into her boots and bends down to tie them. Her fingers wrap the laces around the hooks like she’s done this many times before. I suppose there’s hiking in California.

“Why’d you come up here, anyhow?” I ask, hoping to save this runaway conversation from driving right over the edge of a cliff.

Riley straightens with an arched brow and waves an arm around regally in front of me like she’s on a float in the Rose Parade. “I was surveying my kingdom. Isn’t that what Prairie Princesses do?”

Man, she knows just how to press my buttons. “If the brand-new shoe fits,” I say, glancing down at her feet.

“Seriously?” Her face twists into a scowl. She grabs her backpack and swipes the newspaper off the ground. Her eyes are cold and piercing when she looks back at me. “Get off your high horse, cowboy. You don’t know shit about me.”

I don’t know why Barnaby thinks Riley’s a sad sparrow. As far as I can tell, she’s more of a cranky crow.

Or maybe a moody magpie?

Tempestuous tern?

A trail of dust swirls in her wake as she stomps back to camp. She’s favoring her right foot, so I bet those fancy new hiking boots are giving her one heck of a blister. Why she wouldn’t at least try to break them in before wearing them out here is beyond me.

This stuff happens all the time. People come out to the Great Plains and pretend to be pioneers for a few days, completely unprepared. Greenhorns. City slickers. Prairie Princesses. We’ve seen and dealt with them all. In fact, given my experience with other passengers like her, I’m kinda surprised she even bothered buying hiking boots. Most opt for flip-flops or strappy sandals.

Except, if I’m being honest, those other passengers were nothing like her. Deep down, I know Riley’s not really the person I thought she was—or need her to be, if I have any chance of keeping this invisible wall between us. I need that wall, because it’s starting to feel like it’s the only thing that’s standing between me and a future full of regrets.

After the dust has settled, I head back to camp. Dad and the rest of the crew have already packed up supplies and the tents have come down. While the oxen are yoked, I saddle Chance and prepare the mules.

It takes the wagon train a little more than four hours to reach Bow Brook, a winding creek with a rocky shore with a few decent pools that are perfect for fishing. After we take care of the animals, the rest of the crew and our passengers set up camp, while I head out to find bait. The soil is still a bit loose from the recent rain, so it doesn't take me long to get a decent container full of wigglers.

As I make my way back to the campsite, I predict how Riley will react to having to hook the worm. Will she do some version of "ew, gross" complete with a shudder and hair toss? If her brother is like most of the younger siblings out here, he'll do his best to up the ick factor for her by either dropping a worm down the back of her shirt or eating it.

Or will she duck my expectations again?

"Now we're going to spread out along the banks of the creek. We don't have enough fishing rods for everyone, so you'll need to team up in groups of twos and take turns. Try to find an area away from other pairs," Dad says, waving me over. "Colton, here, has bait. If you need help or you're a bit squeamish, ask one of the crew members for assistance." He points to Ty. "Grab yourself a rod and a net. Oh, and limit yourself to one fish per pair. Out here, we only take what we need."

Everyone pairs up, and soon it's just me, Dad, Riley, and a handful of worms.

Dad nods. "You two should head on down to the switchback," he says, pointing to a section of the creek I know well. It's a great fishing spot, with an embankment right over a deep pool, but it's also a bit of a hike from where we are now. "I'm going to check on the rest of the gang."

I glance at Riley's new boots and shake my head. "We can find a closer spot so you don't have to walk so far."

Riley sets her hands on her hips, a fishing rod in one hand and a net in the other. "I am perfectly capable of walking."

"With those new boots, you're apt to get blisters."

"Blisters, schmlisters. Just try to keep up," she says, shoving the net at me.

I'll give it to her; she sets a brisk pace. By the time I'm done fumbling with the net and earthworms, I have to jog to catch up to her. When we finally reach the bend in the creek, I'm breathing hard. She barely looks like she's broken a sweat. Instead of letting myself get soft, I double down. Must be all those spin classes or hot yoga or whatever the latest West Coast fitness trend is this month, I think in an effort to force myself not to be too impressed by her.

I'm definitely not impressed with her.

Not in the slightest.

Nope.

### CHAPTER 13

Riley

“THE BEST PLACE to stand is on that outcropping over there,” Colton says, pointing it out. He’s rolled his sleeves up to his forearms and I don’t miss the way his corded muscles flex under his tanned skin as he moves. “But before we head over, I’ll show you how to cast and you can practice before you attempt to get your line in the water.”

“That’s not necessary,” I say. I’ve been fishing plenty of times and I know my way around a reel and tackle box.

But, of course, Colton ignores me. He grabs the fishing rod and dives right into a lesson anyhow. He describes how the reel works and what to do when a fish is hooked. After demonstrating the proper casting technique, he hands the rod back to me. “Any questions?”

My eyelid twitches with irritation. “Can you please hand me a night crawler?” I ask through gritted teeth, holding out my hand.

Colton scrutinizes me like he expects me to be grossed out by the things, but ever since my fourth-grade class studied compost and had a red wiggler worm farm, I’ve been A-OK with earthworms. I even did an entire art series in charcoal, colored pencil, and watercolor dedicated to worms. They really are fascinating creatures.

With his mouth still hanging open like one of the poor fish we’re supposed to catch

for dinner, I don't bother to wait for him to hand the bait over. I grab one from the cup in his hand and give it a solemn apology. "Sorry about this, buddy," I say. "Thank you for your sacrifice."

The rod and reel aren't nearly as nice as the one Grandpa Bob taught me to fish with, but I expect it's significantly better than whatever the pioneers had—probably a length of string tied to a pliable branch. I find a clump of grass to press the tip of the rod into to check the action. Then I test the smoothness of the reel by spinning it. Could be worse.

There's a bit of shade by some trees along the bank, near the outcropping Colton pointed out, and I figure it's as good a place as any to stand above the pool. If I cast to the side, I should be able to get the hook in the water without catching the line in the branches.

Turns out, I'm a little rusty. My first attempt plops down into some vegetation in the muck along the creek bed. Thankfully it doesn't snare and I reel in the line. The hairs on the back of my neck rise and I just know that Colton is standing behind me, arms crossed over his chest with a slight smirk on his face.

Like my not being grossed out by a wriggler is a fluke.

Like he expects me to suck at fishing because I don't look like an angler.

Like he expects someone like me to fail.

Boy, does he have another think coming. Grandpa Bob and I did most of our fishing in the ocean near Monta?a de Oro State Park, but I've been freshwater fishing plenty of times. Ponds, lakes, rivers, streams. Once I dust off the rust, I'll have this in the bag...err, net.

I pull back the fishing rod and let the line fly again. This time, it splashes down into the pool below, sending shallow ripples across the surface of the water. I give it some slack as the bait disappears below the reflective surface.

There, I bet that showed him.

I sneak a backward glance to find him standing just as I predicted: crossed arms, slight smirk, hat tipped down just enough to hide his eyes. Clearly, my dazzling displays of baiting the hook and casting off weren't enough to prove my abilities as a fisherwoman. Just wait until I reel this sucker in.

I'm just about to open my mouth to say something—I haven't quite figured out what yet—when I feel a slight tug on the line. Instantly, my nerves buzz with a familiar adrenaline rush. I hold the rod a bit more tightly and pull the line taut. The tip of the rod bobs again. Once I'm confident I've set the hook, I release some slack and keep the rod at forty-five degrees and lined up with the fish, just like Grandpa Bob taught me.

“Reel it in a bit,” Colton advises from over my shoulder.

I was paying more attention to the fish than I was to him and he managed to sneak up on me. The last thing I need right now is him breathing down my neck, micromanaging and second-guessing everything I do. I inch toward the edge of the banking, but don't follow his advice. The fish darts beneath the water and I let out even more slack.

“No, no,” Colton says, taking another step toward me. He's totally up in my personal space bubble now. The scent of mud and freshly trampled grass is replaced with Ivory soap and leather. “You have to reel it in by winding the handle. Here,” he says, reaching toward the rod. “Let me show you.” His fingers brush over my hand, sending a cascade of tingles across my warming skin.



“I’m fine,” I say, tugging the rod out of his reach as I step to the side, away from him. My toe kicks a few pebbles loose and they skip down into the water. The fish pulls against my tug, but it doesn’t feel ready to reel in just yet. Grandpa Bob always said my gut would tell me when the time is right, and I’m not feeling it...or Colton’s know-it-all attitude.

“If you would just give me the rod,” Colton says.

“I said I’ve got it,” I insist, shifting closer to the edge as the fish gives a strong tug on the line. The tip of the fishing rod flexes, and inside, a voice in my head keeps saying, Wait for it, wait for it, wait for it...

The fish pulls against the line and then the tension eases.

Ding. It’s time.

I grasp the reel, and just as I’m about to start pulling it in, Colton steps closer and reaches out as if he’s going to pry the rod from my hands.

“What the hell,” I say, leveling him with a laser-beam glare. “I know what I’m—”

In an ideal world, I would’ve lit into Colton for being such an ass. But in reality, the words are tugged right out of my mouth as the ground crumbles from the shelf beneath us. Soon, we’re skidding down the embankment just like the pebbles from earlier. I lose my balance, slamming onto my butt just before I hit the frigid creek water feetfirst. Colton lets out an earsplitting yip when he plops down into the muddy creek bed beside me.

While startled by the unexpected dip and the fact that the wind’s been knocked out of me, I don’t think I’m injured.

I can move my toes.

And fingers.

And my head is just fine, as evidenced by the ball of anger ping-ponging in my skull.

I ease myself up to sitting, the mud squelching around my pant legs, and notice that while the fishing rod is intact, the line has snapped.

Just like I'm about to.

### CHAPTER 14

Colton

I'M SHIVERING WHEN I come up for air, clinging to my Stetson to keep it from floating away. Riley sputters beside me as she attempts to stand in the muddy creek. Her hair is plastered to her head, her face is smeared with dirt, and her clothes are sopping wet. She seems perfectly fine, other than being a bit waterlogged.

Brushing my hands over my face, I shake off as much water as I can, but it soaks into my pores and latches on.

"This is unbelievable," Riley huffs, and spins away, dragging herself toward the edge of the creek pool. She looks like a zombie as she eases her way through the muck, her hair stringy from the water and her gait uneven. I follow in my own lunging way, hauling myself toward the edge, slowed down by mud and soaked jeans.

Getting out of the water is one thing, but figuring out how to get out of the creek bed is another. There's a pretty steep slope back up no matter which way you look, and with the recent rains, it's not much better than a mud pit.

Dammit.

I can't believe this happened. I should have known better than to let Riley stand by the edge of the shelf. This is why I can't afford to be distracted out here. Someone might get hurt.

“Okay, Colton,” she says, spinning around in a circle to take in our surroundings. “Now what?”

Maybe we could swim out? But the current’s heading away from the camp, and I have no idea how long we’d be in the water before finding a suitable exit point. And what if she’s not a strong swimmer?

We could try hiking upstream in the shallows along the edge of the creek. The creek bed is fairly wide here, but it could narrow or disappear altogether farther up, leaving us in a worse situation than we’re in now.

I suppose we could always stay put and wait for someone to come find us. Although, it could be a long while before anyone notices we’re missing. Once the sun goes down, it’ll get pretty cold, especially with our wet clothes.

“Well?” she prods.

I respond with a shrug. “I’m not sure.”

“You seem sure about everything else,” she mutters.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What do you think it means?”

“Um,” is all I can manage.

She crosses her arms and stares up at the ledge. “I’m not afraid of worms, or bugs, or wildlife, like you think. This isn’t my first time fishing. Grandpa Bob would even call me a decent angler. And no matter what you think, I’m not some stupid, helpless girl who only cares about shopping or whatever it is that makes a Prairie Princess a

Prairie Princess. Probably the only thing you have right about me is that this”—she holds out a mud-coated arm and gestures in large sweeping circles—“is pretty much the last place on earth I want to be right now.”

A cold drop of water glides down my back. “For the record, I don’t exactly want to be stuck here, either,” I say, wiping some more muck from my face.

“You think I’m upset about this?” She points to the mud at her feet and shakes her head. “Why, because our little dip potentially ruined my new hiking boots?”

This feels very much like a trick question, where I’ll be wrong no matter what answer I give, so I roll my shoulders and keep my mouth shut.

“I hate these hiking boots.” Riley kicks her toe against the shoreline. “They rub against my pinkie toes, and I don’t even want to think about the blisters I’ll get now that they’re soaking wet. What I’d really love are my broken-in Salomon X Ultra hiking boots with a Gore-Tex lining, but those are wherever my lost luggage is.” She steps forward until we’re toe to toe. Hair is plastered to her forehead and there’s a smudge of dirt on her cheek that I’m tempted to wipe clean. I’m not sure I’ve ever been so captivated. Her pupils shrink as she glares at me. “I’ve done plenty of camping, and hiking, and fishing,” she continues. “But, to you, I’m just the helpless ditz from California with the new hiking boots trying to break them in on the trail because I couldn’t be bothered to plan ahead, right?”

I blink, dumbfounded.

Riley stares at me for a moment, the gold flecks in her dark brown eyes practically blazing. “You’ve got nothing to say?” She somehow manages to toss her hair like it’s not weighed down with frigid creek water. “Nothing at all?”

I sense another trap.

This is not...

I don't...

She tosses up her hands and steps back. "You really are tall, dark, and irksome," she says.

"Wait, what?" I ask, finally able to find my voice.

Riley ignores me as she attempts to scramble up the slick bank like a mountain goat. She plants her foot on the embankment and reaches to pull herself up. The mud gives way beneath her toe and she slides down a foot or so. Her second try, she makes it only a yard farther before sliding back down again.

"You should try grabbing hold of the roots," I suggest, which earns me a glare.

"Excellent idea," she says in such a sickening-sweet tone, I have to resist the urge to cringe. "Why don't you try it?"

"Fine. Maybe I will."

"Fine."

She stands next to me with her hands on her hips while I assess my climbing options. Once I have the route mapped out in my mind, I scramble up a small slope that leads to a steeper incline. I manage to make it only slightly higher than she did before I start to slip, but this time, more of the embankment gives way. Twisting, I tumble into her, tangling our legs and knocking her into the mud beneath me. My hands sink down beside her head as I try to push myself off her, but as the muck oozes between my fingers, our faces get closer and closer.

There's a moment when our eyes meet and her gaze softens, and I think maybe it could be nice to lean down and see if her lips are truly as smooth as they look. It's been on my mind since the raccoon incident. I hesitate for a moment and the hard glare returns.

"You idiot," she snaps, attempting to push me off her. But the mud acts like rubber cement and the best I can do is roll us onto our sides.

"Me? What did I do?"

That earns me an epic eye roll. "What did you do?" she asks, her pitch increasing with each word. "What did you do? As if you don't know."

But she doesn't actually tell me what I did that has her so pissed at me. It's not like I purposely caused the edge of the embankment to crumble beneath us. I didn't plan on ending up in this mud pit fit for a hog. If she's still so bent out of shape over the Prairie Princess comment, I doubt any amount of apologizing would fix it. But then again, wouldn't a Prairie Princess blame me for something completely beyond my control?

"I don't," I insist.

She winces and closes her eyes, and I belatedly realize she might be injured. "Are you hurt?"

"There is mud seeping into places mud should not go," she says through clenched teeth.

I do my best to keep from having dirty thoughts, but...mud.

Getting free of the mud is no easy feat. I struggle to my knees, then ease up to

standing, lifting victorious arms over my head when I'm finally upright.

"Impressive," she says, staring up at me from her semi-reclined position. "Nine points for difficulty and ten for execution. You really know how to stick a landing."

"Was that a joke?" I reach down to haul Riley up, and her fingers intertwine with mine. I don't miss the way our palms press together or how nice it is to hold her hand in mine.

Then I wonder if I smacked my head on the way down. I release her like she's a hot potato and attempt to brush some of the mud off my butt, but stop when I realize I'm only making it worse.

"Prairie Princesses never joke," Riley says, straightening her shoulders. But there's a bit of a smirk building on her lips and a glint in her eye. Standing there, with dirt splattered all over her face and her hair slicked back, she's prettier now than she was the first time I set eyes on her. Which makes no sense, since she's an absolute mess.

Hell, I feel like I have whiplash.

Riley brushes her hands over her arms and shivers. She turns back to the monumental hill we have to climb. Not particularly high or dangerous, but as I found out in multiple ways just now, it's a slippery slope nonetheless.



### CHAPTER 15

Riley

WE DECIDE TO make our way back up from the muddy creek bed by using broken branches as pitons. Thankfully there's a whole heap of freshwater driftwood stuck in the mud. We dig through the stack until we find the thickest branches and then break them into foot-long segments. Colton pounds the thick sticks into the banking with a fist-sized stone until only six or so inches stick out, providing grips we can use to climb to the top. He tosses the fishing rod up ahead and then volunteers to go first, insisting that if the branches can support his weight, they'll support mine, too.

Colton's progress is slow and steady. As he works his way up, he pulls sticks from his back pocket, jams them into the mud wall as far as they'll go, and then hammers them most of the way in. Eventually, he reaches the ledge and pulls himself over, boots disappearing as a few clods of damp soil roll down the embankment. A moment later, his grime-streaked face appears above me. "Good news. The fishing rod made it up okay."

Lot of good it does us right this second.

"Your turn," he says. "Take it nice and slow."

"It's just like climbing a tree," I say to myself. A slippery, muddy, unpredictable tree.

My hands wrap around the protruding sticks and the treads of my hiking boots grip the holds below me as I propel myself higher. Just as I'm about to give a final push,

the stick beneath my right foot pulls free. My leg slips out from beneath me and I battle against gravity, clinging tightly to the other sticks as I press myself into the mud. My arms tremble and my pulse pounds.

The stick beneath my left foot starts to wobble. My right foot scrapes along the slick muddy wall without finding a toehold. It's only a few yards, but the distance between me and the creek feels like a mile. Unable to use my legs for leverage, I have no idea how I'm going to make it over the few remaining feet ahead of me.

Then Colton reaches down. "Grab my hand."

The tips of my fingers graze his but I just can't reach. My left foot slips and I cling to the two handholds with shaky arms. "I can't." My voice warbles with panic.

"Hold on," Colton says. He stretches down and wraps his hands around my forearms. "I've got you," he says. "You're almost done. I'll lift while you push. On the count of three, okay?" Our eyes lock and I nod. "One. Two."

"Three," I grunt, pressing down with my left leg and heaving with my aching arms.

Colton hauls backward, his weight an efficient counterbalance. With my elbows digging into soil, I scramble up over the edge.

"Thanks," I say, before collapsing next to him to catch my breath.

Colton hasn't said a word to me since I reeled in a sizable brook trout, deposited it into the net, and handed him the fishing rod, proclaiming, "And that's how it's done." I'm pretty sure the look that flickered across his face was reluctant admiration but I don't know him well enough to be certain.

We fall into step along the path, his stride slightly longer than mine thanks to his

height and my developing blisters. Every once in a while, I catch him sneaking glances at me out of the corner of his eye. But doing that means I have to sneak glances at him, and I don't want him to think I'm checking him out.

I wish I could say there's nothing appealing about Tall, Dark, and Irksome—but even covered in grime, with a huge smear of mud along his brow line and the way his flannel shirt is plastered to his abdomen—he's got this magnetic appeal about him. Thankfully, a particularly loud flock of grackles interrupts my thoughts before I get too carried away. He might be good-looking, but he's still annoying as hell. Even if he did save me back there.

Blisters are the bane of my existence. I have plenty of them by the time we make it back to the wagons, coated in cracked mud and bits of vegetation, and chilled to the bone just as the sun passes below the horizon. The wind kicks up a bit in the twilight and I shiver, wrapping my arms around my waist to preserve what little body heat I have left. I probably shouldn't have insisted we make another attempt to fish once we reached the top of the embankment, but after everything, I wasn't about to return to camp empty-handed.

I'm startled by a loud, ear-piercing whistle. "Well, look what the cat dragged in," Wild Wanda exclaims as she steps out from behind the supply wagon. She lifts a lantern and takes us in. "You two are a sight! Do I even wanna know?"

Colton shrugs as I push a scraggly strand of hair out of my face.

"Cap'n Walker was about to send out a search party." Behind her, the campfires send shadows dancing over the wagons and the low murmur of voices echoes. Wild Wanda pulls a walkie-talkie from her belt and says, "Colton and Riley are back at base. Over."

The crackly response of "Ten-four" blares from the speaker as she returns the unit to

her hip.

“You missed dinner,” Wild Wanda says.

“We brought dinner.” Colton holds up the brook trout.

“Good thing, since all that’s left is a bit of watery potato soup. Only had three tiny fish to work with tonight.” She shakes her head and leans over the net. “Well, that one there’s a beaut.”

“Riley caught it.”

Wild Wanda grins and slaps me on the shoulder, knocking me off balance. My hip bumps into Colton’s and his arm goes behind my back to steady me. Somehow, he’s warm and his clothes are not nearly as damp as mine, and I soak in the heat he’s emanating like a turtle on a log. He drops his arm but he doesn’t step back. We aren’t touching, but he’s still close enough that I can feel his warmth.

Before I do something stupid like lean back into him and sigh, Wild Wanda lifts the lantern to get another look at the fish. “You two have the makings of a fine meal there.”

My stomach grumbles in agreement.

After significantly downplaying the incident with my parents, I head off to clean up. Thankfully, there’s enough water in the solar shower for me to rinse off the mud. Unfortunately, it’s far from being warm and, at this point, I’m not sure I’ll ever stop shivering. Given my limited clothing options, my only hope at this point is bundling up in layers and standing as close to the fire as possible without charring myself like a marshmallow.

It's almost nine by the time I hobble to the cook fire in my flip-flops, the skin at the back of my ankles and on the pads of my feet raw from blisters and pressure. I tried to squeeze them into my canvas sneakers, but that wasn't happening. The camp is quiet now that most of the others are already in bed.

Colton's got a cast-iron frying pan bubbling away on a grate over the coals, his freshly washed hair combed neatly back in barely tamed waves. He leans forward to poke at whatever's in the pan and a lock of hair falls over his brow. The golden glow of the fire softens the lines on his face, making him appear more thoughtful than judgmental. My heart does a little backflip when he glances up and tosses the hair out of his face like a rugged movie star. I'm pinned to the spot when our eyes meet, the reflection of the flames dancing across his dark irises. Heat courses over my skin—not from the fire but from the intensity of his look.

“Wild Wanda was right. You caught a good one. It'll fry up real nice.”

We break eye contact and he turns his attention back to the frying pan. I step closer to the fire and see he's got the whole fish—head to tail—breaded and cooking in oil. Grandpa Bob used to cook our catches like this when we were camping, and a sharp pang slices through my chest. Another thing to miss about California. No more spur-of-the-moment camping trips with Grandpa Bob.

Suddenly weary, I look for a spot to sit but find that the only elevated option is to share a log with Colton. I ease down on the other end, as far away from him as possible, and tuck my hands under my legs to keep them warm.

“Were your parents worried when they saw you?” he asks, breaking the silence.

“Meh. They're so used to seeing me in mud masks, they just assumed it was part of my daily facial care routine.”

“Uh?” Colton gives me side-eye.

“Kidding. They had questions but I managed to reassure them. What about your dad? Would he have really sent out a search party?”

“Not on my account.” Colton shakes his head and flips the fish with a wooden spatula. The oil pops and hisses as the other side begins to cook. “But maybe to ease your parents’ minds.”

“He wouldn’t worry about you?”

“He does, but I’m out here on my own so often, he trusts that I can take care of myself. Sometimes I’m off the grid a few days at a time, just me and my horse, Chance.”

“Sounds nice.”

As upset as I am about moving to Nebraska and being stuck out here on this Oregon Trail adventure, I can see how waking up alone in a wide-open space like this—with the birds and insects chirping their morning salutations, and the wind and sun kissing your face—can be good for the soul. Just thinking of it has my fingers twitching for a pencil and my sketchbook so I can get down a few quick sketches while the images are fresh in my mind.

“I thought you said this was the last place on earth you wanted to be,” Colton says.

“It is. It was.” I sigh. “Maybe not the last place on earth.”

“Just wait. Nebraska will grow on you,” he says with a smirk.

### CHAPTER 16

Colton

I OFFER RILEY a metal fork. She accepts it with a small smile that makes my heart thump. I use the spatula to cut the brook trout she caught in half. The fish has a perfect golden crust and the meat inside appears flaky and moist.

I slide each piece onto a tin plate and hold them out to Riley to choose from. “Heads or tails?” I ask.

“Is this a test?” Riley asks, her dark eyes narrowed with playful suspicion.

“It’s a question of preference. Or probability. Do you want heads?” I lift up the plate with the front part of the fish. “Or tails?” I hold up the other plate.

Riley grabs the second plate and sets it in her lap. “Before you even start, I didn’t not pick the one with the head because I think it’s gross. It’s just that everyone knows tail meat tastes better.”

“Right.” I glance down at the beady little fish eyes on my plate and then back at her. She gives me a mischievous grin.

Riley loads her fork and takes a bite. “Oh,” she says over her first mouthful, her expression going serious. “Wow.”

“Is it that bad?” I stab at my portion, checking to make sure it’s cooked through. It

looks edible enough.

Maybe I didn't season it correctly?

I know I added black pepper, salt, and cayenne to the flour and cornmeal. I didn't have any lemons, so I used a splash of lemonade instead. Maybe that was a mistake? I'm not much of a cook.

"This is actually really good." She takes another bite. "It might be the best thing I've tasted since we left SoCal."

A feeling of pride washes over me. "Thanks," I say, enjoying the feeling of Riley's approval. It matters more to me than I realized.

Famished, I dig in. Riley wasn't kidding. The brook trout is flaky and sweet. "I'm not used to cooking for other people," I admit. "When I cook for myself out here, it's usually something simple and mostly for fuel, not flavor."

Riley shrugs. "Things don't have to be complicated to be good."

She has a point.

As we pick the bones clean and toss them into the crackling fire, I consider how different she is from my first impression of her. I'm curious now about her lost luggage, what other sketches she's made in her notebook, and why there's such a massive chip on her shoulder. Should I apologize? Ask for a fresh start? It might be nice to have a do-over and really get to know Riley.

I'm so lost in my thoughts, I don't notice Dad approaching us until he's right next to the fire. "Colt, Riley, good to have you back at camp. Sounds like you had a bit of an adventure?"



Riley nods.

“Nothing we couldn’t handle,” I say, casting an appreciative glance in Riley’s direction.

“Good to hear.” Dad hands us each a bottle of Felix’s signature lemonade, which is sweeter than the original pioneer recipe that was guaranteed to pucker your lips. “We’ll be heading up to Bear Claw Rock tomorrow. The trail’s a bit rough in spots from the recent rains but the view can’t be beat. I’ve got an early start, so it’s time for me to hit the sack. I’ll see you two in the mornin’,” he says, tipping his hat.

“Good night, Captain Walker,” Riley says.

“Night, Dad,” I say.

Dad disappears into the shadows and it’s just the two of us again. The only sounds that break up the silence are the crackling fire and our forks scraping against our plates. We sip lemonade and stare at the flickering flames. The brook trout was good, but it wasn’t all that filling, and soon my stomach is rumbling again. “Are you still hungry?” I ask.

Riley looks down at her empty plate. “I could eat a bit more.”

I glance at my watch. It’s just past ten and it’ll take at least forty-five minutes to cook what I have in mind. The sensible thing would be to grab a quick snack and call it a night so we’re rested up for tomorrow. Riley looks over at me with wide, dark eyes and whatever sensibility I might have had blows away on the evening wind. I’m not ready to say good night to her just yet. “Hold tight. I’ll be right back.”

As much as I want to clear the air between us, I’m not sure bringing up the whole Prairie Princess comment right now is the best idea...not when there’s a tenuous

truce in place. Mom always says good food can fix a lot of things, and I'm hoping her theory holds true. It works on me and Dad, but usually that's because we're hangry and out of sorts. Not because of snap judgments and ill-timed comments. I'm hoping some dessert will help smooth things over.

Thankfully, Wild Wanda keeps all the rations organized, so it's easy enough for me to find everything I need to whip up peach cobbler. Once I've added the ingredients to a shallow cast-iron Dutch oven, I grab a lid lifter and some spoons before securing the supply wagon to keep any scavenging animals out.

For a moment, I worry that Riley will be gone when I get back. But she's right where I left her, warming her hands by the fire. Her hair has dried in soft waves that flutter in the breeze and reflect the orange glow of the campfire. She glances up at me as I approach. "Anything I can do to help?"

"Hold these?" I hand over the spoons and lid lifter.

Riley's fingers brush over mine and we both draw back slowly, like we're surrounded by molasses. The echo of her touch seeps into my skin.

She's just a pretty face from California.

But deep down, I know that's not true. Riley's more than a Prairie Princess. Or a sad sparrow. Or a pretty face. She's smart and stubborn, tough and observant, quick with a comeback and slow to open up. The more I spend time with her, the more I realize she's definitely the good kind of complicated. The kind of complicated I could want in my life.

I poke at the coals and grimace.

Even if I hadn't blown my chance with her already, it would never work out between

us. California and Nebraska are worlds apart and this expedition has an expiration date. Already, it feels as if a few more days out on the prairie with her is simultaneously too many and not nearly enough. Falling for Riley would be a huge mistake.

Too bad it's already too late.

### CHAPTER 17

Riley

COLTON HANDS ME the spoons and some weird-looking four-legged metal cooking implement, and the air around us seems to crackle when our fingers touch. It's not the fire, and he must feel it, too, from the way he slowly pulls his arm back. Or maybe that's just the flickering firelight playing tricks on me. I blink and the moment's gone as fast as it came.

Colton clears his throat and turns away.

I shouldn't be surprised or disappointed—not with the amount of disdain he has for me—and it's not like I was expecting some giant apology or profession of feelings from him. And yet...

I didn't exactly mind the way his arms wrapped around me when Mama Raccoon attacked. The way his face hovered over mine as we sank into the mud. The way his hands gripped me securely to pull me up over the ledge. Or how he regarded me with a heady mixture of respect and sheepishness when I reeled in dinner.

Things between us have certainly changed, but how, exactly?

The back of his shirt pulls tight over his shoulders as he tends to the fire. When he glances over, the flickering light accentuates his strong jawline and dark eyes. He belongs out here in the middle of the prairie, with his rugged good looks. For a moment, I wonder if I could belong out here, too.

My gaze moves to his mouth. To his lips pressed together in concentration as he adjusts the lid on the Dutch oven. My skin warms and I force myself to look away into the cool darkness that surrounds us.

I don't want to be attracted to him, nope. Not with all his tall, dark, and irksome ways. What's even the point of wanting to kiss someone who's not interested? Never mind how tempting that quirk of his lips might be.

Colton kneels down in front of the fire and nestles the Dutch oven right into the coals. He grabs the shovel lying next to the emergency water bucket, stands, and scoops glowing embers over the top of the pot until the lid is completely hidden beneath. "Should be ready in about a half hour or so," he says, setting the shovel aside.

Wiping his hands on the back of his pants, he glances over at me. The wind tosses my hair and I tuck it behind my ears in a futile attempt to keep it out of my face. Even though the fire is keeping my front side warm and toasty, my back is exposed to the cold night air. I stifle a shiver and run my hands over my arms, the spoons chattering together like they're colder than I am.

"You got anything warmer to wear?"

I glance down at my flannel shirt and jeans, which are the warmest things I purchased at Ranch & Rustler. "Not really, but I'll survive." It's hardly close to freezing.

Colton tosses another piece of wood on the fire, sending up a cascade of sparks. They flicker into the night sky before disappearing like mini-fireworks. "It can get chilly out here when the sun goes down."

"Same for the SoCal desert," I say.

My pulse jumps when Colton sinks down on the log next to me, his knee bumping

mine. He tilts his face to me and says, “I figured it would be completely different in California.”

“It is. And it isn’t.” I’ve spent most of my time thinking about how horrible Nebraska is since the Great Upheaval, but I haven’t stopped to consider any of the positives. “I actually thought I’d hate it here more than I do. No offense.”

Colton clears his throat and glances at me out of the corner of his eye. “Is that a backhanded compliment?”

“Maybe?” I look up at the clear, midnight blue sky. “I’ll admit, it’s beautiful out here, with all the rolling hills and wide-open vistas. I love how you can see so many stars from dusk to dawn. And how the air is always fresh and clean. There’s no traffic, no congestion. How can there be, with so few roads? It’s so quiet, with only the hum of the insects and the chirps of the birds.”

I turn my attention back to the fire and study the vibrant oranges and yellows flickering over the occasional blue and green hot spots that remind me of the early evening Nebraskan sky. “I wish I had my watercolors with me so I could capture the brilliance of the sunset behind tufts of switchgrass...” My hand curls as if holding a paintbrush, and I force my palm flat on my thigh. Hopefully I can remember every detail so I can get it down on a sheet of hot pressed paper once I’m reunited with my good art supplies, packed in one of the myriad boxes of my things. My fingers twitch at the thought.

When I look up, Colton’s studying me with an amused expression.

“What?” I ask, suddenly unsure if all that babbling was too much.

“You don’t hate Nebraska at all.” He smirks.

“I hate the idea of Nebraska,” I amend. “Mostly I hate that it’s not California.”

Colton uses a poker to rearrange the coals. “Is California really that great?”

“It’s not terrible.”

His laugh comes out as a low rumble that sends a trail of warmth down my spine.

“Not exactly the glowing recommendation I was expecting.”

“Yeah, well.” I sigh. “I never expected this.” I wave my hand around.

“It’s not terrible,” Colton says with a grin.

“Not exactly the glowing recommendation I was expecting.” It’s been so long since I’ve laughed—weeks at least—and it feels unexpectedly good. Maybe there’s a chance I could find a bit of happiness here. Do I even dare to hope? “So, what’s the best thing about living in Nebraska?”

Colton narrows his eyes in thought. “I love that I can just saddle up my horse and disappear into the prairie whenever I want to get away. Just me, Chance, and the open range.”

The campfire pops and crackles in the silence that settles between us. After a few minutes, Colton stands. “Can you hand me the lid lifter?”

“That’s what this is?” I ask, holding up the four-legged contraption for him to take.

“Technically, it’s a multi-tool.” He splays the legs so that they all form right angles. “You can use it as a cook stand or a lid stand, or”—he pushes the legs together—“you can use the curved ends to lift the lid or the bail.”

“Bail?”

“That’s what the handle on the Dutch oven is called.”

His tone is softer than it was earlier when he tried to mansplain fishing to me. Instead of showing off like a know-it-all, he’s honestly trying to teach me something I don’t know.

Colton uses the multi-tool to lift the Dutch oven’s lid. He peers inside and then turns to me with a grimace. “Damn. I must’ve lost track of the time. It looks a bit overdone.”

“Is it still edible?” My stomach growls.

“Probably.” He sets the lid back down and uses the multi-tool to brush off the coal and ash and then hooks it under the bail. “If you’re feeling adventurous.”

“Adventure is my middle name,” I say, holding up the spoons.



### CHAPTER 18

Colton

“IT LOOKS WORSE than it tastes,” Riley says, reaching her spoon in for a second bite. She pulls it out and holds it up to her mouth to blow on the piping hot fruit.

I haven’t ever burned Dutch oven peach cobbler before. Until tonight, I wasn’t even sure it was possible to overbake it. But sure enough, there is a thick mass adhering to the bottom of the pot that’s not quite a charcoal brick, but not exactly cooked perfectly golden, either.

It’s impossible to look away as she slides the spoon out of her mouth. The way her lips press together has me wanting to lean forward and steal a kiss. I shouldn’t do it, let alone think about doing it, but what I should do and what I want to do are two very different things.

Dad would have my head if he found out I was messing around with her instead of doing my job. Plus, she’s heading back to California when this is over. What’s the point of starting something I can’t finish? And that’s assuming she’s even interested, which is doubtful given the whole *Prairie Princess* comment, which I should go ahead and apologize for but it seems too late now and—

“You really should try it.”

Every nerve ending in my body seconds the idea, but I’m pretty sure she’s talking about the peach cobbler while I’m thinking about a kiss. I swipe my spoon into the

pot and shove it into my mouth.

Mistake.

“Hot, hot, hot,” I sputter around molten peaches. I open my mouth to try to cool it off, but the damage is done. I’ve seared off the roof of my mouth and most of my pride.

“Oh no,” Riley says, placing a hand on my arm. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I mumble, looking away so she can’t see me blinking back the tears in my eyes. Holy hell, that was hot.

“I always burn my mouth on pizza,” she says, wrinkling her nose. “It’s like I think the tomato sauce won’t be the same temperature as the sun. Every. Single. Time. I never learn.”

She peers up at me with those wide, dark eyes of hers. Her lips part. As if I need any more temptation. Somehow, we’ve shifted even closer. Close enough that I can count every eyelash in the firelight. Close enough that I can feel her warm breath on my cheek. Her tongue darts out to swipe over her bottom lip. If I leaned forward a few inches, I could close the gap between us.

I could.

But I don’t.

“I owe you an apology,” I say.

Riley blinks and leans back. “Just one?”

“Not gonna make this easy on me, are you?”

“Should I?” Her eyebrows quirk.

“Suppose not.” I dip my spoon back into the peach cobbler and hold it out to cool. “I made a snap judgment when we met, and it wasn’t fair and it wasn’t even close to being right.”

“Guess I’m not your typical run-of-the-mill Prairie Princess, then?”

“Not even close.”

“Well, you’re not as irksome as I thought, so I guess we’re even.”

I’m not sure what she means by that exactly, but I’ll take it. “Friends?”

There’s a long pause as she studies me. Her face remains blank but I catch a short flash of disappointment in her eyes before she nods. “Friends,” she says, and bumps her shoulder with mine.

I thought clearing the air would help, but as we finish the rest of the peach cobbler, I keep thinking I made the wrong move.

Even if it was the only move I could make.

Morning comes at me fast. I feel like I’ve only just pulled the wool blanket up to my chin when I’m awoken by someone shaking me awake. When I open my eyes, Riley’s standing over me, her hair tucked into a baseball cap and a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. The world is colorless in the breaking dawn.

I must be dreaming.

I close my eyes and sink back into my sleeping bag, the thin pad beneath me

providing just enough comfort that I won't wake up stiff and sore from a night on the ground.

She shakes my arm again but doesn't let go this time. The warmth of her fingers seeps through my thermal. "Grab your boots," she whispers. "And hurry or we'll miss it."

"Miss what?" I mumble, but she's already on the move.

I pull my blanket around me like a cape and slide my feet into my boots. Even with her blisters, she hustles around the wagons and up a hill to the northeast of camp. I plod along behind her, my eyes bleary, catching up to her just as we reach the crest. Before us, the plain stretches for miles, waves of grass lapping at the scrub brush that dots the prairie. The horizon is tinged in a yellow so pale, I wonder if I'm imagining it.

Riley tosses her blanket on the ground and spreads it out like she's preparing a picnic. But instead of pulling food from the backpack she had hidden beneath it, she pulls out two pads of paper and a rectangular box. "Sit," she says, patting a spot next to her.

"What are we doing?" I ask, my voice dry and raspy from our late night.

"I wanted to come up here before we roll out and you've expressed concerns about me being out here alone. You're my...trail guide." She doesn't quite answer my question, but I don't know her well enough to tell if she's being deliberately evasive or if she thinks wanting to come up here at the butt crack of dawn is a good enough answer.

"Okay," I say, settling down beside her. "But why did you want to come up here?"

She flips open one of the sketch pads to a blank sheet of paper and balances it

horizontally on her knee. “I haven’t seen a proper Nebraskan sunrise yet.”

Riley pulls open the box and runs her fingers over the crayon-shaped pieces inside as she gazes up at the skyline. Her hand stills over the pale yellow piece and she pulls it out. She runs it over the paper, adding different shades and layers. As the sunrise builds, so does her artwork. Slowly, the field before us comes into focus. The sun’s rays highlight the few clouds dotting the sky. Her fingers smudge and blend the reds and oranges until it almost looks like she’s captured the sunrise on paper.

“That’s amazing,” I say when she pauses. “You created that with a bunch of crayons.”

“Thanks,” she says. “These are actually pastels. I found them in my bag with this old sketchbook the other day. I thought I’d packed them in my luggage.”

“You’re really into art, huh?”

“I want to be a scientific illustrator someday.” She glances over at me. “You know those sketches and diagrams in textbooks and magazines? I want to do that.” She blinks and looks away.

“Can I see some more of your sketches?”

She flips the book open to the first page and shows me studies of various plants, animals, and the occasional person. “This is a sagebrush lizard,” she says. “Their underbellies are this amazing shade of bright blue.”

“I think we have them in Nebraska.”

She grins. “I love watching them do push-ups. And here’s a desert tortoise. He was rescued by a local wildlife preserve.”

“These are amazing.”

“Thanks. I’m trying to put together a portfolio,” she says.

“The only thing I can draw is water from a well,” I joke.

Riley’s eyes sparkle when she turns to a blank sheet of paper and hands me a gray pastel. “Show me.”

I shake my head. “I wasn’t talking about art. I was being literal.”

“I know,” she says, tapping her foot against the side of my leg. “I was just teasing. Although...” Scooting over until she’s kneeling right beside me, she wraps my fingers around the pastel and then places her hand over mine. “Relax your arm. The trick is to stay loose. Let it flow onto the page.”

A bit of her hair tickles my cheek when she leans forward to guide my hand across the paper. My pulse skyrockets at her touch, and I hope to hell she can’t feel it. Or hear it, based on the heartbeat stampede ringing in my ears.

I swallow and try to concentrate on the pastel and the page and the lines and whatever it is she’s trying to explain to me, but all I can seem to focus on is the soft curve of her cheek, the way her lips press together in concentration, and her pastel-smudged fingertips.

“All done,” she says, dropping my hand.

Riley’s shoulder presses against mine and I resist the urge to wrap my arm around her and pull her into my side. When I look down at the paper, I see that we’ve created a rough sketch of an old stone well with a water-filled wooden bucket sitting on the edge.

“Now you can draw water from a well, both literally and figuratively.” She glances up at me with warm smile.

Our eyes lock and it feels a lot like the time I accidentally grabbed ahold of the Marshalls’ electrified fence. All my nerves are rattled and tingly. “Thanks,” I manage. “I definitely couldn’t have done it without you.”

Riley blinks and pulls away. “That’s what...friends are for.” She clears her throat.

The way she says friends feels more like a weapon than a reassurance. I can’t help but wonder if some rules—like not getting involved with the passengers—are meant to be broken.

### CHAPTER 19

Riley

THE CASCADING HILLS grow more pronounced as we make our way westward. In the front of the wagon, Mom and Dad continue to chat with the McCreadys and the Stones. How can they possibly have so much to talk about with a group of strangers? I'd complain about it to Caleb, but I can't, since he bailed on our wagon and stowed away with the other group so he could hang out with his new friends.

Colton's dark, focused eyes stare up at me from a page in my sketchbook. I've captured them perfectly, with his lashes reflected in the lenses, the lines of the cheekbones below softened in the sunrise. A lock of his hair falls across his brow in soft waves, just like it did at the campfire when he was frying up the brook trout. But no matter how hard I try, I just can't seem to get his mouth right.

Worried I would ruin the page by over-erasing, I begin sketching his lips on a piece of scratch paper. His mouth pursed in a grimace after he ate the piping hot peach cobbler. His lips curved up at the edges when he talks about life out here on the prairie. The small part between his top and bottom lips that opens just before I think, Finally, he's going to kiss me. But of course, he doesn't, because we've established that we're friends.

I flip the sketchbook closed and tuck it away into the safety of my backpack, determined to do something other than moon over Colton. I've practically convinced myself that the only way I'll ever be able to render an accurate likeness of his lips is if we kiss. I pull the zipper shut with a quick flick of my wrist, as if I could lock away



my thoughts as well. I've already spent way too much time today thinking about his mouth and lips and kisses, and definitely not in the artistic sense.

The wagon train slows to a stop for nooning. There's a thick mass of dark clouds building to the west and I really hope this doesn't mean we're in for inclement weather. Rain is a rare treat in Southern California, so a light Nebraskan shower might be nice to experience, but I'd rather not deal with high winds, hail, lightning, or a twister.

It feels good to stretch my legs after being cooped up in the wagon all morning. I've swapped out my hiking boots for the pair of cheap canvas sneakers I'm dying to customize as soon as I can get my art supplies unpacked. It would be a perfect project to distract me from dissecting every interaction I've had with Colton so far. If only I had a permanent marker.

When I round the supply cart, I come across Ty and Felix. Maybe they can help me out. "You wouldn't happen to have a Sharpie, would you?"

Felix shakes his head. "Ain't got much use for them out here."

Ty shifts around a few crates. "I bet Barnaby's got one you can borrow. He's always using one to mark off his bird sightings in that book of his."

"Thanks." A flicker of hope sends my fingertips tingling.

When I finally locate Barnaby, he's got his binoculars pressed to his face and his sights set on a clump of bushes a few hundred yards away. "Hello, Sparrow," he says, giving me a nod. "Enjoying the trail so far?"

"I guess. It's not quite what I expected."

“It never is,” he says with a sage smile. “But I generally find that the trail always serves up exactly what you need.”

“If what I need is a healthy dose of confusion, frustration, and uncertainty, then you’re spot on,” I mumble.

“You’re a skeptical sparrow today, I see.” He regards me out of the corner of his eye. “Give it time.”

“How long does it usually take?”

Barnaby shrugs.

I pull a blade of grass from a tuft of switchgrass and press it flat between my thumbs before blowing across it to make it whistle.

“I haven’t done that in ages.”

I twist around to find Colton standing a few feet behind me, spinning his Stetson in his hands. His hair is matted down with a few stray wisps doing their own thing. His jeans are dusty and the tips of his boots are coated in mud. With his cotton shirt unbuttoned at the collar, he looks like he belongs on the front page of a Ranch & Rustler ad—the perfect combination of rugged cowboy and Prince Charming. I don’t hate it.

My pulse flutters and I look away quickly.

“I have those maps you asked for,” Colton says, handing Barnaby a slim stack of folded yellowed papers.

“Captain Walker never disappoints.” He takes the bundle from Colton and slips them

into his back pocket. “Thank your dad for me, will ya?”

“Sure thing.” Colton slides his hat back on. “Got a minute?” he asks me.

Out here, I have nothing but time and a burgeoning crush.

Colton leads me past the covered wagons and the cook fire. Past the adults who are having a typical “kids these days” conversation. Past the kids (including Caleb) who are the root cause of the conversation.

We pause at the supply wagon so Colton can grab a large canvas sack. He tosses it over his shoulder and leads me away from our rest stop.

“Where are we going?” I ask, glancing up at the sky to see if it still looks like rain. Thankfully, the clouds coming in from the west are now white and puffy, surrounded by plenty of blue sky.

“One of my favorite places along the trail,” he says.

We wade through prairie grass and hike up two hills that are deceptively steep before we come to a sloping valley covered with white and orange blossoms. For a moment, it looks like some of the blossoms are floating, but then I realize the field is full of butterflies.

“Are those monarchs?”

Colton nods as he works to unknot the canvas sack. “Practically the whole field is milkweed.” He sets a section of a newspaper down on the ground for both of us to sit on and then passes me a bottle of Felix’s famous lemonade.

“It’s incredible.” I settle onto my square of newspaper and watch a butterfly zigzag

past us, darting over the tops of the flowers until it stops for a sip of nectar. “How did you find this place?”

Colton unlatches a mess tin to reveal bacon, biscuits, two small red apples, and the most adorable container of honey I’ve ever seen. “A few years ago, lightning sparked a wildfire here. It wiped out most of the meadow. Chance and I discovered it on a ride one day.” He pauses to gnaw on a strip of bacon. “Some of the local conservation groups have been working to restore native plants to the prairie. I thought this might be a good place to plant some milkweed, so they supplied the seed and I sowed it.”

“You did this?”

He looks almost bashful as he studies the last bit of bacon in his hand. “Mother Nature did most of the work.”

“But still, it had to have taken you hours to spread the seed.”

“A few sowing sessions,” he says, gazing over the field. “Chance and I would ride up here on the weekends and I’d strap a bucket over my shoulder and walk back and forth, tossing handfuls of seed mixed with rice hulls and sand. I can’t tell you how disappointed I was the following spring. Hardly any milkweed germinated.”

“But look at it now.”

His eyes sweep over the meadow. “Some things are worth the wait.”

### CHAPTER 20

Colton

WE ARRIVE AT Bear Claw Rock a little after 5:00 p.m. A cool breeze blows in from the north, pushing out some of the stifling sunbaked air that has hung around for most of the day. Dad always calls this “good sleeping weather,” which is a bonus to have on the trail, where there aren’t any fans or AC to keep you cool. The worst is when it’s hot and humid and a stifling breeze provides little relief.

The passengers set up their tents or wagon accommodations while it’s still light enough to see. Tonight, Wild Wanda will be cooking her famous bison, beans, and rice casserole with potato pudding, berries, and cream for dessert. She already has a roaring cook fire going and is hard at work supervising Felix, who’s assembling the Dutch oven tripod for her. A few of the adults gather around for a cooking lesson and to assist with the preparations.

Dad walks through the camp, lending a hand or some helpful advice. He gives me a nod as he passes the portable animal enclosure, where I’m almost done getting Chance and the mules settled in. He meets Ty at the back of the supply wagon to check the latest National Weather Service report using a satellite phone, like they do every night. The sky looks clear enough now, but weather on the plains can change quickly, and it’s always best to be prepared.

On my way to dinner, Dad catches up with me. “If we’re lucky, the weather should hold out until we reach Fort Bellows, where we could be in for a shower or two overnight.”

That's a relief. Fort Bellows has a stable for the animals and plenty of buildings for us to shelter in. The guests usually enjoy spending the night in one of the boardinghouse rooms above the saloon or in the hotel, where they can enjoy a mattress, electricity, and indoor plumbing.

"But there's a different storm brewing," he says, tipping his chin toward the group of younger boys. "They're hungry and bored, and Wanda can't cook fast enough. Think you can provide a distraction?"

"I could give 'em an ax-throwing demonstration," Felix says as he walks past with a burlap sack full of potatoes.

Dad grunts. "We don't carry enough insurance for that."

"An ax goes wild one time....," Felix murmurs.

There's still a huge gouge in the side of the supply wagon. Thank goodness no one was hurt.

"How about a lasso lesson?" I suggest.

Dad nods. "You can have 'em practice on the sawhorses."

Thirty minutes later, everyone under the age of sixteen is testing out their roping skills. Some are having more luck than others, and I'm surprised to find that the youngest of the group, ten-year-old twins Marcus and Lucas, are doing better than anyone else.

"Yeehaw," Marcus says when he manages to drop the lasso around the sawhorse for the third time in a row.

Riley's brother, Caleb, and the other boys—I haven't gotten everyone else's names down yet—lose interest in the lasso lesson pretty fast. After a few minutes of half-hearted tosses, they decide it would be more fun to play tug-of-war. They divide up into two groups, and right away, I can tell it isn't gonna be a fair fight. For starters, it's five against two and the teams aren't evenly matched. After watching two rounds of Caleb and his team annihilate their smaller, scrawnier competitors, I lift my fingers to my mouth and let out an earsplitting whistle.

“First things first,” I say, once I have everyone's attention. “If you're going to do this, you're going to do this right. Let's even things up a bit. Marcus, Lucas, you join that team.” I point to the side with fewer players.

One of the kids on Caleb's team mumbles that it isn't fair that the other team has one more player than they do now. Funny how that wasn't a problem for him when the roles were reversed.

“You don't think it's fair,” I say. “Okay. How about seven against one?”

“All of us against you?” Caleb asks.

I nod and a few of the guys snicker.

“You're going down,” says a scrawny kid with bleach-blond hair.

Tossing my hat onto the sawhorse, I unbutton my cuffs and roll my shirtsleeves up to my elbows. “We'll see.”

The old, faded red bandanna in my back pocket tears easily. I tie one-third at the center of the rope for the midpoint, and the other two pieces on either side, about three yards back. Then I take the heel of my boot and drag it across the ground. “Gentlemen, the battle line has been drawn.”

Once the middle marker is lined up to be perpendicular to the center line etched in the dirt, we take our places on our respective sides. The other team has opted to line up from shortest to tallest. Unfortunately for them, they're going to get whooped.

"Ready?" I reach down and grab a handful of dirt to dust my palms.

"Wait," Lucas says. "We need a judge."

"On it." Caleb darts off behind the wagons. He returns a moment later with Riley. When she catches sight of me and the rest of the group, her lips twitch with amusement.

Caleb joins the rest of his team and Riley walks over to me. "So, I hear you need a tug-of-war referee?"

There are some muttered grumblings about "a girl" and "what does she know about tug-of-war?" which has her glaring in her brother's direction. He quickly shushes the others and she spins back around to face me. Her eyebrows disappear below her bangs. "Are we waiting on your teammates?" She looks around to see where everyone else is.

"I am the team."

She gives a sharp laugh. "And they say there's no I in team." She looks over at her brother's team once more and frowns. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?" she asks, leaning closer so I know she's talking to me.

"Don't worry about me," I reply while flexing my biceps. "I've got this. This isn't my first rodeo."

"If you say so," she murmurs. "Except this is tug-of-war, not a rodeo, so..."



“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” I tease, lifting my arms over my head and knitting my fingers together to stretch my shoulders.

Riley clears her throat and quickly looks away. “Don’t worry about me. I’ve got this.” She smirks. “This might be my first rodeo, but I’ve had plenty of experience with tug-of-war thanks to summer camp.” She straightens her shoulders and walks to the center point I’ve carved into the ground. “Okay, everyone, here’s how it’s going to work. The first team to pull the other team’s bandanna over the center line wins. No locking, touching the ground, or wrapping the rope around your hands. If you fall on your butt more than once, you’re out. No tugging until I say pull. Everyone ready?”

I plant my feet shoulder width apart and nod.

“Pick up the rope...take the string...pull.”

My boots dig into the dirt, my muscles burning as I lean back into my heels and hold the rope steady in my hands. It slides over the pad of my left hand and I tighten my grip, grateful for all my hard-earned calluses. I’m tempted to pull back on the rope and end it now, but I don’t want to be a jerk. It’s nothing to let them think it was a fair fight. For a little while, at least. Slowly, the middle marker on the rope eases toward their side. An inch. Two. Three. But there’s still plenty of rope left between the line in the dirt and my bandanna marker.

Riley looks over with a worried frown but then offers up an encouraging grin. The other team is stronger than I expected, but there’s no way I’m going to let them win. Not with Riley watching all this go down.

“Told you we could take him.”

“He’s done for.”

“Let’s show him how it’s done.”

“Thinks he’s a pro.”

“What a chump.”

They might have a solid chance at besting me if they spent more time coordinating their efforts than trash-talking. But each snarky comment has them losing focus. Already, I feel them easing up on the rope. I squat down low and the middle mark creeps back toward center, but they’re so busy being confident, I don’t think they notice.

“Let’s end this now.”

“Finish him.”

Riley bites her bottom lip, which sends another rush of power through my muscles. I lean back a little more and the middle marker bobs toward me. The guys grunt and struggle.

“Pull,” someone hisses.

“I’m slipping.”

On the other side of the campsite, a cowbell clangs, signaling dinner. It also means it’s time to end this battle. One. Two. Three.

I yank the rope toward me while leaning back at the same time. The unexpected movement throws them off balance and their piece of bandanna crosses over the center line.

The smaller kids release the rope and run off toward food. Some of the older kids grumble that I cheated. Only Caleb comes over to congratulate me before he heads off for sustenance.

“That was quite the victory,” Riley says.

I shrug and coil up the rope. “The older kids needed a fair fight.”

“Seven against one is hardly fair.”

“Unless those kids start tossing hay bales, lugging cattle feed, or roping steers, I think I’ll have ’em beat. I’m co-captain of Darby’s tug-of-war team, county fair gold medal champions for the fifth straight year.”

“Impressive.”

“If you think that’s impressive, you should see my lasso technique,” I say with a confident grin. “County solo champion in the eighteen and under category three years running.”

Riley studies me from behind lowered lashes. “Oh really?”

“Really.”

### CHAPTER 21

Riley

“HOW DOES ONE become a county solo lasso champion?” I ask, trying not to stumble over the mouthful of words.

“Well,” Colton says, gazing out at the horizon. “There’s the calf-roping, trick roping, and freestyle events.”

“Freestyle?” I snort. “Is that like fancy jump roping? Dance lassoing? Macramé?”

“That’s not a thing.” His eyes narrow at me as if he’s trying to catch me in a lie.

“What’s not a thing?”

“Macream.”

I laugh and slap Colton’s arm playfully, loving the way his soft flannel shirt feels against my skin. “I’m not sure what word you just said, but macramé is too a thing. Well, it was in the seventies.”

Dark, glistening eyes meet mine and the edge of his mouth quirks up. “Freestyle is mostly lasso hula-hooping with some fancy flourishes added on to earn more points with the judges.”

“That sounds both ridiculous and incredible. Show me?” I ask.

Colton glances around. “Now?” He reaches up and tousles the long wavy strands atop his head.

“Why not?”

“It’s dinnertime?”

I dismiss the suggestion with a wave of my hand. “Dinner can wait. This I have to see.”

Colton gives a short nod, like he’s resigned to be a show pony. He reaches around me to pick up his Stetson where it rests on the sawhorse. His arm brushes against my side, leaving a trail of warmth behind. He fixes his piercing eyes on me as he settles it on his head. My heart skips and for a moment, neither of us move.

His lips part. He leans forward, closing the distance between us. My breath catches in my chest. Colton’s face hovers in front of me, so close I can just make out a small scar above his lip.

Then Colton blinks and the moment’s gone. He grabs the dark brown rope that was coiled around a sawhorse and steps back.

Disappointment quickly replaces anticipation. I take a fortifying breath and brush my hair back from my face. What is my problem? With that Prairie Princess comment, Colton’s made it clear I’m not his type. Plus, he was the one who established that we’re just friends.

And yet...

Colton strides away confidently and then turns to face me. Maybe the light is playing tricks on me, but it looks like his cheeks are flushed. “Here goes,” he says, planting

his feet shoulder width apart.

He starts out slowly, as if he's getting a feel for the weight of the loop and the rope, but then he picks up speed. The loop gets bigger as it twists and turns around in front of him like it's dancing. He lifts his twirling arm and rotates his wrist so that the loop is horizontal over his head. It gets larger and larger and then he lowers it so that it forms a wide circle around his waist. After a few rotations, he raises it over his head again and flicks his wrist so that the rope sails out in front of him and lands squarely on the sawhorse next to me.

I applaud. "Well done, cowboy."

Colton's eyes glisten and he takes a formal bow. "You wanna try?"

"Me?" I ask, pointing to myself and glancing around as if he could possibly be referring to someone else.

"Yeah. You missed the lasso lesson earlier, but I could give you a quick how-to." He holds out the coiled rope, like he expects me to take it. So I do.

"This is called a maguey rope," he says. "It's made from agave fibers and is good for trick roping. It's easier to learn to lasso with nylon or polyester ropes, but they don't look as authentic as natural fibers, so we mostly have hemp or maguey ropes on the trail. Most people don't realize that pioneers would have probably used a rawhide lariat for roping, but they're heavy and can have weak spots."

Before, when he lectured me, it was obnoxious. But now it feels less like a lesson and more like he's sharing a bit of himself.

Standing in front of me, Colton wraps my left hand around the coil and puts the looped end in my right hand. The lasso is smooth and sturdy. His hands are worn and

gentle.

He peers down at me and I feel my face warm when his gaze flickers over my mouth. He clears his throat and steps back. “Now, with your right hand, just practice spinning the loop. Make sure you hold on to the loop and the lead rope at the same time.”

I rotate my wrist and the rope spins in lazy circles beside me.

“Good, now let’s make the loop a bit bigger.” He helps adjust the rope and I practice swinging it again.

Colton nods his approval with a swift dip of his chin. The brim of his Stetson casts a shadow over his face, which gives his jaw a more pronounced and swoon-worthy line. “Next, let’s try a toss. You want to release the loop but keep hold of the lead rope.”

“Like this?” I spin the loop three times and then release it. Instead of sailing through the air like Colton’s toss, it plops down on the ground beside me.

Colton shakes his head. “Not exactly.” He picks up the rope and rewinds it. “Hold this part, but release this part,” he says, pointing.

My second attempt is as much a dud as the first.

“It just takes a little practice.” He shoves his hands in his front pockets and gives an encouraging smile. “You’ll get it.”

My third, fourth, and fifth attempts are no better.

“I don’t think I’ll be roping steers anytime soon,” I say, my shoulders sinking with

defeat.

“Maybe not, but we’ll have you roping sawhorses before you know it. Here,” he says, closing the distance between us. “We’ll do it together so you can get a feel for it.”

Colton’s left hand is rough and warm. The calluses on his palm drag over my skin, leaving a delicious trail as he wraps his hand around mine.

“Don’t worry about the coil right now.” His breath rushes over my cheek.

What coil?

His right hand brushes mine. “You want to hold the loop like this.”

What loop?

Colton gently eases my fingers into the correct position and then cradles my hand with a soft squeeze.

The back of my knees tingle at his touch. Breathe, I remind myself, which I regret a moment later when my nostrils are assailed with his familiar leather-and-Ivory-soap scent. If I was an android, I would have short-circuited by now, but instead, I do the human equivalent: my nerve endings send out tiny, invisible sparks.

It’s not that I intentionally lean back into him for some much-needed support (thanks, weak knees), but somehow we end up nestled together, his big spoon to my smaller one. His soft breath tickles the hair on the nape of my neck as he says, “Swing the loop like this and then let it fly while turning your palm.” He guides me through the motions. “Now this time, loosen your grip on the coil and let the loop go when I get to three.”



My mouth is parched but I manage to force out a weak, “Okay.”

“One,” he counts, rotating our hands to make the rope swing. “Two.” He leans forward, the warmth of his chest radiating through the layers of clothing that separate us. My blood pounds through my veins. Colton twists our hands. “Three.” The lasso flies horizontally through the air and lands with a solid thump on the sawhorse.

Success sends a surge of excitement through me. “We did it!” I exclaim, twisting around to find Colton’s face mere millimeters from mine.

His nod of agreement brings his face even closer. The brim of his hat brushes the top of my head. Our eyes meet beneath its shadow and then his darkened gaze dips to my lips. His hands find my waist.

Kiss me already, my brain screams. My eyes flutter shut.

His breath is soft as a feather on my cheek. “Riley,” he whispers. “Can I—”

The thunderous beat of hooves drown out the rest of Colton’s question. Startled, I look over to see a uniformed rider bearing down on us atop a galloping horse, a thick cloud of dust billowing behind them.

### CHAPTER 22

Colton

JAKE HARDING.

I didn't like him much before.

I like him a whole hell of a lot less now.

Riley's eyes pop open and go wide as she watches him ride up, all decked out in his fancy Pony Express uniform, the hero in his own period Western action-adventure movie, slowing his horse from a full-out gallop to a slow trot. I half expect him to pull his mount up into a rear, which can be dangerous for both the horse and rider, but thankfully he doesn't attempt the stunt. Instead, Jake guides the horse into a showy twirl before having him bow while he pulls off his hat and flourishes it in the air. He gives Riley a practiced wink-and-grin that charms almost everyone he uses it on.

She eases away from me and watches as he pulls the horse into another spin in front of her. My hands grasp nothing but air where her waist used to be and I drop them quickly to myside.

"Whoa," Jake says, but it's not quite clear if he's signaling his horse to stop or if his comment's directed at Riley. My knuckles pop from how tight my fists are at my sides. "Evening, miss." He plunks his cowboy hat back on his head. "Colt," he says dismissively.

With everything that's happened over the past few days, I totally forgot Jake was filling in for our usual Pony Express rider and was scheduled to meet the wagon train out on the trail. The memory of our conversation about Riley sinks through me like a lump of lead, settling heavy in my stomach.

"You're early," I say.

Jake's not scheduled to show up until tomorrow afternoon, just before we're scheduled to arrive at Fort Bellows for our overnight there. If he'd just stuck to the plan...

"No one ever complains that the mail's early, Colton. That's why we Pony Express riders have such a stellar reputation."

I snort. His reputation is anything but stellar.

By now, a few of the other passengers have noticed Jake's arrival. They make their way over as he dismounts. The younger kids stare in awe at his swagger and poise. The men look on as if reliving a boyhood dream.

Once he has everyone's attention, he sets his leather-gloved fist over his heart and says in a theatrical voice, "Neither rain, nor snow, nor gloom of night can keep us from our duty." He flashes another suave grin at Riley.

Give me a break. That's not even the Pony Express's motto; "The mail must go through" is. He isn't even carrying mail in the mochila slung over the horse's back.

Jake locks gazes with Riley and gives her his "I only have eyes for you" look that's totally slimy, but for some reason, girls our age seem to love it. "We should meet up later."

Jake lifts an eyebrow in what's supposed to be an enticing way, but really it just makes me cringe at how cliché it is. Jake might be playing a Pony Express rider today, but he would have been a great snake oil salesman in the 1850s.

All eyes are on him as he struts over to the gathered crowd, playing up his bow-legged swagger. Shoving his thumbs into the front pockets of his almost-too-tight replica sackcloth pantaloons, Jake puffs up his chest and dives right into the monologue he usually delivers in Ketcham's Tavern.

"Good evening, fine overlanders. I've been carrying mail for the Pony Express since May 1860..."

I've heard the same speech at least a hundred times—have recited it myself a time or two—and I'm in no mood to stand here and watch Jake dazzle the crowd and make eyes at Riley.

Causing a scene isn't my thing, but if I stay here much longer, all bets are off. Moving away from the group, I gather up the lassos and sawhorses, and when I pass by on my way to the supply wagon, I catch a glimpse of Riley chatting with Jake.

It shouldn't bother me as much as it does. After all, Riley is free to spend time with whoever she wants. I've always known my odds with her were slim if I chose to throw caution to the wind and take a chance...and for what? A four-day fling on the trail? As much as I hate it, it's better that we were interrupted before I had a chance to kiss her. If it's a fling she's looking for, Jake is the one for her.

Except he's not, dammit.

I toss the lassos onto a hook in the supply wagon and grunt.

Jake doesn't know her like I do. He only sees another pretty face to kiss and ditch,

when, really, she's this incredible artist who's determined and smart, and full of surprises and enough witty comebacks to keep me on my toes.

Riley's too good for a player like Jake. I hope she realizes it before it's too late.

Dinner's cold by the time I finally sit down. Wild Wanda had set aside a plate for me, and while the food fills me up, it doesn't settle the hollow ache in my stomach.

Across the campsite, Riley, Jake, and a few of the older kids are seated around the fire. Jake is about as outgoing as they come, and he's telling some story that has everyone busting out laughing. Sometimes I wish I could be as extroverted as he is, but it seems way too exhausting. I'd rather be out under the stars, alone, than a source of nighttime entertainment along the trail.

Some of the adults wander over to gather their kids for bed. When Riley's parents pass by me, Mrs. Thomas turns to Mr. Thomas and says, "I'm glad she's finally starting to enjoy it out here. It's nice to see her smile."

I look over to find her beaming at Jake and I hate that he's the one who gets her dazzling smile tonight, not me.

A low rumble in the distance draws my attention away. So much for the weather forecast. Looks like a storm's rolling in tonight after all. I hurry to finish dinner, then head off to check on the animals. The horses, mules, and oxen are fine, though a bit leery of the incoming weather. Grumbling, I retie Jake's horse with a breakaway tether so it can get free if things go south. You'd think, after all his years working on a farm and riding horses, Jake would know how to safely secure his horse, but he's never quite cared enough about anything but himself to make the effort. He's already broken enough hearts; I'd hate to see an animal come to any harm from his carelessness.

With the rain coming in, I can't sleep under the stars like I usually do, and there aren't any spare tents now that Jake's claimed the extra. I grab a tarp, my bedroll, and a cot, and set up under the easternmost prairie schooner, hoping that the one parked beside it will provide a bit of a weather-break.

The rumbles grow louder, with flashes punctuating the sky in steady bursts. Suddenly, rain pelts down in buckets. Great for the prairie, which is experiencing record drought conditions, but bad for anyone caught unawares. A few surprised shrieks echo through the camp as people scramble for shelter.

I turn just in time to see Jake grab Riley's hand and pull her toward his tent. She tips her face up to the sky and laughs as the rain pours down. I hate that I've never made her laugh like that. I hate that she's sheltering in Jake's tent—the tent that should have been mine.

Most of all, I hate that she's with him, not me.

### CHAPTER 23

Riley

LAST NIGHT HAS left me full of impossible-to-answer questions like:

Was Colton actually going to kiss me?

Why did I have to get stranded in a tent with a self-obsessed narcissist like Jake?

Why is thunder so loud/why is rain so wet/why are storms so stormy?

Colton was going to kiss me, right?

You'd think that being stuck in a small tent with rain pouring down and only a hot boy and a cot for company would be a good thing. And maybe it is 99.9 percent of the time. But I drew the short 0.1 percent straw, and being trapped with Jake and his long monologues about how wonderful he is in a leaky tent is far from romantic.

The whole time, I endured lectures on how Jake charms girls to write papers for him for his college courses, how great an equestrian he is and how many awards he's won, how fantastic his sense of humor is, and how lucky I am that he arrived to save me from the boredom that's certain to plague me on the trail.

To add to the torture, the whole time he was droning on and on, I was thinking of the moment—the possible almost-kiss—Colton and I might have shared at the end of our lasso lesson, if Jake, the self-proclaimed God's gift to girls, hadn't shown up when he

did.

Thunder booms in the distance.

Lightning flickers across the sky.

And I continuously correct Jake's unyielding attempts to lecture me with incorrect information about thunderstorms. (Sorry, Jake, lightning can strike the same place twice. And, yes, if you can hear the thunder, you're within the strike zone.)

Thank goodness he was only obnoxiously conceited and not handsy.

Eventually, I was able to emerge/escape from his tent. My first thought as I crawled into my own cot was that I hoped Colton was warm and dry. The damp air sank into my pores and I tucked my blankets tightly under my chin. My next thought? That I would've much rather spent the past few hours in his company, even if we'd ended up soaking wet. Again.

I love Colton's slow smile. His restrained sense of humor. The way the calluses on his fingertips feel on my skin. Being around Colton almost makes up for not being in California. I don't hate it here nearly as much as I did when we first arrived and I no longer feel like I'm missing out on something better back home.

It might not be what I'd hoped for or imagined, but I'm starting to think I could...like?...being here. Nebraska would be a whole lot more palatable with Colton in my life. Which is a big ask, especially since we've known each other for all of three days.

The rainstorm freshened everything up overnight. The prairie seems to stand taller, with raindrops glistening on the tufts of grass in the rising sun. The air is crisper without all the dust motes, and the big puffy clouds look as soft as cotton balls.



It might be a shiny new day, but I'm full of just as many questions—if not more—as I was when I fell asleep last night.

Felix cooks breakfast this morning, flipping golden yellow pancakes and whistling “Wild Mountain Thyme.” The fire crackles beneath the cast-iron skillet and hot oil sizzles and snaps as it cooks the batter inside.

“Mornin’, sunshine,” he says, sliding a steaming cake onto a tin plate for me. “Johnny cakes this morning, made from a secret family recipe passed down from my mother’s side of the family. Now, will you be wantin’ moh-lasses or gravy with it?”

“Um...”

Felix looks left and right before whispering, “Wanda’ll tell you that moh-lasses is the way to go, and as far as you, me, and the rest of the world are concerned, she is one hundred percent correct. But between just the two of us? I recommend the gravy. I’m not one for sugary breakfasts and it sticks to your ribs better.”

“Your secret’s safe with me.” I mime zipping my lips. “I think I’ll try the gravy, please.”

Felix gives an appreciative nod and ladles thick brown gravy over the johnny cake.

“A rasher of bacon?” he asks.

“Yes, please.” He’s cooked it just the way I like it, crispy but not brittle.

Felix sets a few strips of bacon and a fork on the plate before handing it over. “There you go.”

“I’ll have what she’s having.” Colton sidles up beside me, hair mussed and sporting a

faint shadow of facial hair on his jaw. He's adorable with his just-rolled-out-of-bed look.

"Hey," I say, resisting the urge to reach over and adjust the collar of his flannel shirt to make it sit right at the nape of his neck.

He scratches at the stubble on his chin. "Hey," he says gruffly, not even looking my way. Felix hands him his plate and Colton steps away with no more than a terse, "Thanks."

Before I can talk myself out of it, I fall into step beside him. "Thanks for the lasso lesson yesterday."

Colton nods and sits at the portable picnic table that Ty assembles and disassembles at every campsite. I slide onto the bench across from him and take a deep breath to steady my nerves, which are suddenly jangling beneath my skin. Maybe if he wasn't acting so cold and rigid, this would be easier, but he practically has rejection written all over him and I haven't even asked my question yet. "So, anyhow. I thought roping—er, lassoing—that stuff you taught me yesterday was kind of fun. And I thought, well, I was hoping maybe we could pick up where we—"

Before I can babble my way to asking Colton for another lesson, Jake jogs up to our table and hops onto the seat beside me. "There you are." His arm wraps around my back as he gives me a side hug, like we've been pals for years. Heat rises to my face from the unwanted attention and Colton's scrutinizing look. His disapproving gaze flicks to Jake, who grabs my fork and cuts himself a huge slice of my johnny cake like we frequently share meals from the same plate. "I've been looking for you everywhere."

"You found me," I say, squirming out of Jake's awkward heavy-armed hug to put some much-needed space between me and the overpowering cologne he has on. I

stifle a cough and sip my coffee to wash the taste of Axe body spray out of my mouth. When I glance up, Colton's shoving food into his mouth like he's the star contender in an eating contest and he's got only twenty seconds left on the clock. A solid chill settles over the table, and it's not from the steady breeze coming in from the north.

The awkward silence is killing me, especially since I'm not sure why Colton's gone all moody and broody and Jake's acting like we're best buddies.

"I'm glad the rain finally passed," I say, hoping to get conversation flowing. "Those cumulus clouds are a good sign."

Jake gives me a pity-the-poor-soul look. "Haven't you ever heard the saying, 'Cumulus at morning, pioneers take warning, cumulous at night, pioneers delight'?"

"Um, I don't think anyone's heard that saying," I reply, looking to Colton for some backup. He glances up at the sky but refuses to make eye contact.

"Well, you see," Jake says, settling into what I've quickly come to discover is his mansplaining posture, "cumulus clouds form from ice crystals in the upper atmosphere."

I shake my head. "You're probably thinking about cirrus clouds. Those are the ones that look like wispy horsetails."

"Nope. Cumulus clouds are puffy, low-lying, and full of rain."

"How can they be low-lying if they're in the upper atmosphere?" I ask.

Little does Jake know, I spent an entire month studying clouds for my eighth-grade science fair project. It took me hours to painstakingly depict each type of formation

using recycled materials, modeling paste, acrylic paint, and cotton candy. One lesson I learned from that experience: spun sugar is tasty but it doesn't hold up; cotton balls are a better choice. Another lesson: the small, puffy, fluffy clouds are low-lying cumulus, which hardly ever produce precipitation.

"Right, that's what I meant," Jake says. "Upper atmosphere. Lots of rain."

"That sounds like nimbostratus clouds," I say.

"Nimbostramous." Jake laughs. "You're hilarious. Isn't that a character from that new movie about the fortune-telling wizard from the old days?"

"Um?" Nostradamus? What is even happening here?

"Oh, you were being serious," Jake says, patting my hand like he feels bad that I could possibly have it so wrong. On the third pat, Jake's hand sinks down on top of mine. Before I can register what's happening and attempt an extraction, Colton's gaze flicks down at Jake's hand resting atop mine on the table. His left shoulder droops a fraction of an inch, and now I'm even more confident that he really did try to kiss me last night. We definitely need to find a quiet moment for just the two of us to chat without Jake crashing the party.

I pull my hand free and try to catch Colton's eye to convey that what's happening on this side of the table is, well, very much one-sided, but he's studying the food on his plate like he's cramming for a final exam.

Of course, Jake's oblivious that he's a squeaky third wheel. "Based on the cloud cover, I suspect we're in for some rain before we reach Fort Bellows. But don't you worry," he says. "The wagon's canvas coverings will keep you nice and dry while us Pony Express riders are out battling the elements."

“You’re the only Pony Express rider,” I say, patience seeping away.

“Speaking of...don’t you have some mail to deliver or something?” Colton shoots Jake a thinly veiled glare. Guess he’s fed up with Jake, too. Although, it seems a bit extreme for the current situation; I wonder if there’s some history between them I don’t know about.

“Nah, I’m all good. But that reminds me—” Jake pulls out a phone. “I do have some digital messages to get to.”

“Wait, you have cell service out here?” I ask.

“It’s hit-or-miss,” Colton says.

“Mostly miss,” Jake says. “But a guy’s gotta do what a guy’s gotta do.”

“Are Pony Express reenactors even supposed to carry phones?” I ask. “Doesn’t that ruin the whole living history experience?”

“Not really.” Jake shrugs. “It’s cool as long as I don’t get caught.”

Colton grips his coffee mug with white knuckles. I’m pretty sure that when he finally releases it, there will be impressions of his fingers in the tin.

“But...we caught you.” I wave my hand back and forth between me and Colton.

Jake looks up briefly. “It’s not like you’re going to narc on me, babe.” He doesn’t even bother acknowledging Colton. “This is one of the few places where you can sometimes get signal on the trail before we reach Fort Bellows.”

“I’ve got to go pack up my things,” Colton says, pushing himself up from the table.

I stand, too. “Do you have a minute?” I ask. “I was hoping we could—”

“Maybe later.”

Colton’s words say one thing, but the tone of his voice makes it clear that if he has his way, there won’t be a later.

My butt hits the bench with disappointment. As I watch him retreat to the other side of the campsite, I stab at what’s left of my johnny cake in frustration. Not only has Jake eaten most of my breakfast and ruined my appetite, but he’s made things weird between Colton and me.

“I’ll always have a minute for you, babe,” Jake says, glancing up from his texting to flash me what he thinks is a disarming smile.

The problem is: one minute with Jake is one minute too many.

### CHAPTER 24

Colton

AFTER TAKING CARE of the mules, I lead Chance out into the prairie to let him graze on some prairie June grass, buffalo grass, and blue grama. He nuzzles his head against my shoulder and swishes his tail, happy for something other than the grain and hay we brought for him to eat.

Sinking into the solitude, I take a deep breath. It's easier to think out here, away from the wagons and the hubbub of packing and loading and getting ready for another day on the trail. Away from Jake, who always manages to needle my last nerve. Away from Riley, who's somehow managed to get swept up in Jake and his antics. After everything we've shared these past few days, I expected her to see past his bullshit. After all, she saw through mine.

And now she's lodged up under my skin like a splinter—a smart, sharp, sweet splinter—but a splinter that'll take a fair amount of poking and prodding to work loose.

If only I could forget the way her hands felt tucked under mine, soft and warm and right. Or the way she bites her bottom lip when she's concentrating on a sketch in her notebook. Or the way her dark brown eyes go wide just before she laughs at one of my jokes, as if she's not quite sure if I'm being serious or if I have a stealth sense of humor tucked away under my Stetson.

A red-tailed hawk soars in a wide arc above us. Her shriek is loud enough that

Chance pauses his chewing for a moment but not quite interesting enough to get him to lift his head from his meal. My eyes trace her gliding circle, the tips of her feathers barely fluttering. She eases lower, her wings slightly angled to slow her descent. Just before she disappears into the prairie grass, her talons extend before her. Her hunt must have been successful, since she doesn't reappear to take to the skies.

Before Riley, moments like these were just part of being on the trail. I didn't exactly take them for granted but I definitely wasn't awed by them, either. Being out here alone used to be refreshing. But now that I know how it feels to share moments like this with Riley, the space beside me feels hollow without her in it.

The sound of boots crunching toward us has both me and Chance turning our heads. He snorts when he recognizes Jake sauntering over with his fake bow-legged cowboy swagger.

"?'Sup, dude," Jake says with a nod.

I return the nod but tension radiates outward from my spine, causing my fingers to flex at my sides.

"So, what's the deal with Riley?" He brushes his hand across his nose and shifts his weight, not because he actually has an itchy face or an uncomfortable stance but because he thinks it makes him look cool.

"Deal?" I ask.

"She's cute and all. But is she, like, single? Down to mingle?"

The fact that Jake actually talks like this on a daily basis never ceases to amaze me.

"You'll have to ask her yourself."



“C’mon, man, help me out,” he says, lightly punching my shoulder. “You’ve spent a few days with her. There’s gotta be something you can tell me to give me an in with her.”

Hell would have to freeze over before I help Jake get with Riley.

“Sorry, man.” I shrug, gathering Chance’s lead. “I really don’t know much about her. You’re on your own.”

“Wait.” Jake crosses his arms over his chest. “Why are you holding out on me?” He leans back with a smirk. “Don’t tell me you’re into her, ’cause that would be awkward.”

I can’t resist taking the bait. “Why would it be awkward, Jake?”

“Well, there’s two of us and one of her, and it’s obvious who stands a better chance at sealing the deal, unless...” Jake narrows his eyes at me. “Did something happen between you two?”

A few intense moments.

An almost-kiss.

A handful of fractured possibilities.

“Nope,” I reply, shoving my hand into my front pocket so I don’t deck Jake. I’m not one for violence, but he has me seeingred.

“Phew,” he says, mock wiping his brow. “For a moment there, I thought this was going to be a Kylie situation all over again.”

He's referring to Kylie Taylor and the time we both asked her to the Harvest Dance. She said yes to me first, but ended up going with him. Not gonna lie, my pride took a massive hit that day.

"Or Livie St. Joseph."

Ninth-grade homecoming date who blew me off to dance with Jake.

"Or Anna Dresden."

Rebound date for the winter formal who also dumped me for Jake. He's really not pulling any punches. And if he hadn't done the same thing to almost all the other guys in school, I would have thought he had it out for me and my dating life. But honestly, Jake did me a favor. I'd rather be single than be with someone always looking out for the next best thing.

I think back to Jake's arm draped across Riley's back. Him eating from her plate. His hand resting on hers. She wasn't throwing herself at Jake, but she wasn't batting him away like a pesky fly, either. And the way her cheeks grew rosy at his attention? How she spent the better part of the night in his tent? She doesn't seem to be hating his company. Aside from Carrie Mae, I haven't known a single female in a fifty-mile radius who's been able to resist Jake's "charm" for more than a few minutes.

Still, I underestimated Riley before. I don't plan on making the same mistake again.

I think back to breakfast again, but through a different lens this time. Riley didn't flirt with him. She didn't offer him food. She wasn't initiating contact. Could she have been blushing from embarrassment? If I'm being objective, she seemed way more interested in talking to me than him.

Crap. I hope my sour mood didn't screw everything up wither.

“One thing’s for sure, Jake,” I say. “This situation is completely different.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Back in Darby, you’re in your element. But out here on the trail, you’re in mine.”

As we make our way toward Clark’s Sod House, our nooning point, Chance shifts uneasily under my weight. I force myself to take a deep breath and loosen up. He doesn’t need to be skittish because I’m only now realizing how stupid it was for me to tip my hand when it comes to Riley.

But Jake isn’t exactly creative when it comes to pursuing his targets. His MO is to use the same old lines. Pull the same smooth moves. He had a standing weekly order for the same damn bouquet of flowers at Nan’s Floral Shop. I bet he has a similar arrangement with a florist in Lincoln. Jake’s a one-trick pony. He’s perfected his method and it works for him, but after spending time with Riley, I have a sneaking suspicion she’s going to be a lot harder to impress.

“We really going toe to toe, man?” Jake asks, slowing his horse to a walk beside me.

I’d thought that our conversation this morning would have been enough. Seems that instead of getting Jake to back down, knowing I’m interested in Riley is spurring him on. Jake loves the thrill of the chase too damn much to let an opportunity like this pass. Even better for him if he thinks he can rub my nose in it.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, keeping my eyes fixed on the prairie before us.

Usually, I ride at the back of the caravan to keep an eye on the mules, but with all the rain we had last night, I’m traveling ahead of the wagons to make sure the trail is clear and passable. Since I’m riding up here, he’s supposed to be back with the

supply wagon, helping Ty with the mules, but as always, Jake does what Jake wants, everyone else be damned.

“You can play dumb all you want, Walker, but we both know I’m talking about Riley.”

He must be feeling competitive, if he’s calling me by my last name. I hazard a glance in his direction. The top button of his Pony Express uniform is unbuttoned, his posture is slouchy, and the expression on his face is beyond arrogant.

His mouth curls up into a sneer. “You don’t stand a chance with her,” he says.

Chance nickers at his name as if to say, “Says who?” I run my hand over his mane and give him a short pat on his neck to acknowledge that I know he’s got my back.

“It’s not a competition,” I say, setting my jaw. “Riley’s not a trophy.” Or a prize. Or a notch on a hitching post.

“Now, see, I think it is a competition. You’re interested in her. I’m interested in her.”

“But you’re assuming she’d be interested in both of us.”

Jake narrows his eyes at me. “Be realistic, Colton. Out of the two of us, who stands the better chance?”

Based on our history, he does. But I’m not about to admit it.

“She’s only here until the end of the week and then she’s back to California and you’ll never see her again. You and I both know you aren’t the love ’em and leave ’em type,” he says.

Jake's right again, but I can't stomach how willing he is to treat Riley so casually. Unlike local girls, she doesn't have a clue about his reputation. I know she's smart and strong and can make her own decisions, but leaving her in the dark on this is like leaving the barnyard door open when you know there're wolves in the hills.

"Riley and I are friends," I say, wondering if maybe I'm getting all worked up for nothing. It's possible I misread things last night. It seemed like she was into me, but then I think back to our conversation by the campfire, after we finished the peach cobbler.

"Friends?" I'd asked.

"Friends," she'd replied.

Maybe friendship with me is all Riley's interested in. But mixed signals or not, friends look out for each other.

"That's why," I say, "I'm asking you, as a friend, to leave her alone. Like you said, she's only here a few more days."

Jake smirks. "Exactly. We mess around and go our separate ways with a clean break and I don't have to worry about her leaving me voice mails or sliding into my DMs. This is exactly why she's perfect for me."

She's all wrong for Jake, but some of what he says resonates with me, since I'm starting to believe Riley's actually perfect for me. "Riley deserves better."

He snorts. "You? No offense, Colt, but you aren't exactly a hot commodity. I saw you two last night, with your little lasso lesson. The opportunity was right there, and you couldn't even make a move. Bet that goes over real well with the ladies."

My blood boils. A minute longer with this guy and they'll be pulling me off him. "Some of us have work to do," I say, tapping Chance's sides with my heels. He speeds up into an easy trot and we leave Jake and all his sliminess behind.

I never liked him before, but now I downright despise JakeHarding.

### CHAPTER 25

Riley

THE PRAIRIE GOES on for miles, seemingly endless in all directions. You'd think with all this space, it would be easier to avoid Jake. But no, he manages to pop up at every turn, offering an array of overused movie quotes, cheesy pickup lines, and saccharine compliments. I smile and nod and do my best to ignore him while attempting to look as busy as possible. I need to shake him so I can talk to Colton alone, but damn, he is persistent. If chasing me were an Olympic sport, he'd probably manage to sweep the standings and take home gold, silver, and bronze.

Unfortunately, Colton is as difficult to track down as Jake is to circumvent. While Wild Wanda and Felix whip up lunch and everyone else settles in for our daily nooning, I make two complete rounds of the caravan, but Colton and his horse are nowhere to be found.

By the time lunch is ready, I give up looking. With a tin plate piled high with vegetable fritters, baked beans, and a slice of bacon, I sink onto a picnic table bench and prepare to dig in. As I'm about to take my first bite, a horse appears on the ridge to the west. I can tell from the way the rider sits in the saddle that it's Colton. He zigzags the horse down the incline and then dismounts in the middle of the grass. Every so often, he stoops down to grab something. Down, up, down, up, like he's picking seashells off the beach.

Jake's about to sit next to me, but he must spot Colton, too, based on the way his gaze lasers in on the same patch of prairie. He mutters, "Oh, it's on," and slaps his tin plate

on the table. A few beans fall off his plate, roll to the end of the table, and disappear over the edge. The raccoons will be happy tonight.

Jake turns to me with his mouth set in a determined line. "I'll be right back, babe. Don't go anywhere."

Where does he think I'm going to go? We're literally in the middle of nowhere.

Then he grabs my hand and brushes his lips over the back of it. I yank my hand back and wipe it on my jeans as he tosses his hat onto the seat beside me. He stares out at Colton with narrowed eyes and then rushes off in the opposite direction.

What the hell is going on?

I finish my lunch and pull out my sketchbook to draw the covered wagons. I'm just about finished when I look up to find that Colton has Chance tethered to a wagon and is making his way over, his Stetson tipped low on his brow and shadowing his face. In his hand is a small bundle of something wiry and green. As he gets closer, I realize it's a collection of prairie grass, each one a different species.

"I thought you might like these," he says, holding the bundle out to me. "There's some prairie June grass, western wheatgrass, quack grass, prairie wedgescale, plains bluegrass, and woolly sedge. I can tell you more about them later, if you'd like."

My heart dances a jig in my chest at the gesture, which is both extremely sweet and pretty romantic. I force down a swallow over the lump in my throat. "I would like that. Thank you." I reach out to take the grass, but just as I'm about to wrap my fingers around it, Jake skids to a stop beside me and drops a handful of random flowers and weeds in my lap.

"I picked you a bouquet," Jake says like he expects a gold star for his effort.



“Flowers, not hay.” He sneers at the grass in Colton’s hand.

I have zero interest in Jake. Or the “bouquet” of flowers he picked so hastily that he ripped out the entire plant, roots and all. What the hell am I going to do with them out here? I doubt the supply wagon has a vase.

Colton’s collection of prairie grass, on the other hand, is perfect. The fact that Colton skipped lunch to pick out something specifically with me in mind makes my insides melt. I’m not sure anyone’s ever understood me so well before. Not only that, but I’ve also been wondering what my next art study subject should be, and filling a page or two of my sketchbook with features of the different prairie grasses out here would be just the thing.

“It’s grass, not hay,” I reply.

“Whatever. It’s boring. Colt should have stepped it up and gotten you flowers like I did.” Jake smirks at Colton. “When it comes to romance, you snooze, you lose, dude. Oh, wait. That’s right, you’re only interested in being friends with Riley.”

Wait, what? Did I totally misread the almost-kiss and the handful of grass spikes, or...

Nah, Colton’s actions speak way louder than any of Jake’s empty words. I pick up the pathetic pile of stems Jake tossed in my lap. The unopened black-eyed Susans seem to wither under my scrutiny. Jake didn’t get me the flowers out of the kindness of his heart, selecting each one because he knew which ones I’d be interested in. He didn’t even pick them to be sweet. The only reason I’m holding on to this sad bundle of vegetation is because he was trying to outdo Colton.

My eyes flick to where Colton was standing, but he’s gone. Damn. Now I’m going to have to try to hunt him down again.

“Can you even name one species in this ‘bouquet’?” I ask, flexing my fingers in air quotes on the last word.

Jake shrugs. “Meadow bloom flower.”

“That’s not even...” I close my eyes and count to five. “What’s one thing you know about me?”

“You’re, um...from California.” He squares his shoulders with pride.

Way to be observant.

“I can’t accept these flowers, Jake.” I hold them out for him to take.

“But I got them for you,” he says, as if he can’t believe I don’t want them.

“No. You got them for you,” I say, tossing the flowers at him. Jake scrambles to catch them as I dash off to where Colton tethered Chance, but neither horse nor human is there.

Once everyone finishes lunch, Captain Walker asks us all to gather round in front of Clark’s Sod House, an authentic reproduction of a prairie dwelling, to give us a lecture on the homes white settlers built as they moved to the prairie. I should pay attention, but I can’t focus on a lecture right now.

It’s pretty clear that there’s something between me and Colton. If Jake hadn’t shown up, I’m sure we would have kissed by now. But that will never happen if he keeps vying for my attention. What I really need is a few quiet minutes alone with Colton.

I look for him in the group congregating around Captain Walker, but don’t spot him. He’s probably off working. To clear my head, I pull out my sketch pad and a pencil.

Sinking down onto a log, I let my pencil travel across the page. Lines become shapes that blend into a figure atop a distant hill. A cowboy on his horse.

Colton.

“Now, tonight we have a special treat planned for all of you,” Captain Walker says.

My ears perk up. Who doesn’t like a treat?

“Tonight, we’ll arrive at Fort Bellows. And to really liven up the experience, you’ll all be wearing historically accurate pioneer clothing. Everyone’s outfit has been selected based on the preferences you noted when you checked in back in Darby.”

He’s joking, right? This is not okay. I turn to my parents for answers but neither look my way.

Captain Walker continues. “Wild Wanda and Felix are available for any necessary wardrobe adjustments. We’ll be heading out in a little over an hour, so go on inside the sod house and get changed when Ty calls your name.”

“I did not sign up for this,” I mutter, flipping my sketchbook closed. For a moment, I consider disappearing into the prairie, but Caleb finds me. “Mom and Dad are looking for you. Comeon.”

“Did you know about this?” I ask Caleb in a harsh whisper as we make our way across the clearing.

“Nope,” he says, completely unfazed by the fact that he’s about to don some wool trousers. “But it could be cool.”

“On what planet?”

He doesn't bother to answer.

Ty calls our family up next.

"Ladies first," Dad says.

Mom and I step into the sod house. Inside is a changing screen, full-length mirror, shoe rack filled with worn leather boots of all different shapes and sizes, and a rod full of pioneer clothes that have been selected for each participant on the Oregon Trail Adventure excursion.

Mom searches through the tags until she finds our outfits. In one hand, she holds up a brown wool dress with a white apron. In the other hand, she holds a calico nightmare with petticoats and pantaloons and a giant bonnet.

I reach for the brown option but she hands the other one to me. "This one's yours," she says.

### CHAPTER 26

Colton

WHILE ALL THE passengers take turns getting dressed in their pioneer costumes in Clark's Sod House, Wild Wanda and Felix prepare a list of supplies we'll need to restock at Fort Bellows. Meat, eggs, butter, bacon. With a lot of preteen and teen boys on this excursion, the staples are being used up faster than usual. Dad's asked me to ride ahead and call the order in to our team back in Darby, who'll load up a truck with the supplies and have it to the fort by morning.

"Hey, wait up, Colton," Riley calls out. She catches up to me just as I'm about to boost myself into Chance's saddle.

I pull my boot from the stirrup and turn around, only to come face to face with the upper edge of a giant white bonnet.

"Please don't laugh," she says, stepping back with a grimace.

I have to dip down just to make sure it's her under the brim. Her cheeks are rosy and her hair is pulled into two braided ponytails that rest on her shoulders. "That is some hat."

"Tell me about it. This whole outfit is ridiculous." Riley brushes her hands across the beige apron tied over her tan flower-print dress. A pair of scuffed black boots are visible beneath the ankle-length hem. "I can't believe I'm being forced to wear this. I can't believe pioneer girls were forced to wear this. And get this," she says with

mock seriousness. “It doesn’t even have pockets.”

“Pockets are important?”

Riley sets her hand on her hip. “Pockets are essential. Guys are so lucky. You never have to worry about pockets. I mean, look at you.” Riley steps back and runs her gaze over me from top to bottom. I suck in my abs and try to stand up straighter under her scrutiny. “Your pants have two front pockets and two back pockets, and there are two more on your shirt. Six pockets. Think of all the things you could carry in your pockets.”

“Like what?” I ask.

“Oh, I don’t know. A map. A compass.”

“Art supplies?”

“Exactly.” Riley smiles.

“Maybe you could shove some of that stuff up under your bonnet. It’s big enough,” I tease, reaching over to tug the end of the bow so the ribbons come loose beneath her chin.

“Very funny,” she says, slapping my arm playfully.

Her lips are soft and rosy pink. Our gazes meet and we drift closer together until our hat brims brush. I bend my knees and tilt my head, my heart racing. The wind kicks up, sending Riley’s skirt rippling against my shins and the ribbons of her hat dancing between us. Reaching up with my free hand, I pull my hat off, but just before I lean in to kiss her, the McCreadys, the Pinskis, and their passel of kids head our way. Riley drops her hand and we ease apart.

I clear my throat.

Riley bites her bottom lip. She blinks and glances away, watching as the others head to their wagons. I force down the disappointment of another missed opportunity as I resettle my Stetson on my head.

“You know, this whole getup is not exactly fit for a Prairie Princess,” Riley says. “I might have to speak with management.” She grabs the bottom corners of her apron and swishes it around.

“At least you haven’t lost your sense of humor under all that calico.”

“Who says I’m joking?” she asks, though the corner of her mouth twitches like she’s fighting off a smile. “I look like an extra on the set of Little Horror on the Prairie. And for your information, there is a linen shift, three layers of petticoats, and a pair of bloomers under all this calico. Not that you need to know about what’s going on under all this calico,” she adds, her cheeks getting even rosier.

It isn’t easy, but I manage to pull my attention away from what’s going on under all that calico. “All that and no pockets,” I manage.

Totally worth it for her surprised laugh. “You know, if I had to wear this for more than a day, I’d figure out a way to add pockets.”

“And miss out on all that underutilized space under your bonnet?” I give her ribbons another playful tug.

She reaches over and catches my wrist between her warm, soft fingers. “Colton Walker,” she says, breathing my name out in a way that makes my spine tingle. “You’re impossible.”

I don't miss how her hand lingers. Or how my fingers twitch at the thought of holding her hand.

For a moment, I picture myself sweeping her up onto Chance and riding off into the prairie with her. Somewhere away from prying eyes and constant distractions and Jake.

"Do you have to wear a costume tonight, too?" she asks, tapping the toe of her boot against mine.

"No."

Once we get to Fort Bellows, the folks there are in charge of the evening meal and entertainment, so the rest of us can get a night off to enjoy a warm shower and comfortable bed in the crew's private quarters.

Riley's face droops into a playful pout. "Bummer."

"Would you like it if I did?" It's not often that I join in on dinner at the tavern, but for Riley, I'll make an exception. Plus, I do have a pioneer costume on standby just in case I need it.

Riley nods. "It seems only fair."

"Okay, then." Guess I'll be dusting off my outfit after all. "But you might not recognize me in my costume when you get to Fort Bellows."

"Well, you shouldn't have any problem spotting me," she says, pointing to her bonnet. "They can probably see me from the Space Station, this thing is so big." Her hand brushes against mine as it drops to her side.



I resist the urge to reach out and twine her fingers through mine. “For what it’s worth, for a pioneer out here on the dusty trail, I think you look nice.”

Riley lifts her chin and looks up at me from under dark eyelashes. “Thank you,” she says.

“I...um.” I cough. “I think you always look nice.” My chest grows tight at the admission and I rub a hand over it to get it to loosen up.

“Even covered in mud?”

“Not everyone can pull off that look,” I say.

Riley bites her bottom lip and glances down at her boots for a moment before looking up with a wary expression. “I was actually hoping we could spend some time alone together, away from Jake and everyone else. I think we should talk.”

“I’d like that,” I say. “And we should, but unfortunately, I’m about to ride out to Fort Bellows. I have a few things to take care of before the wagons arrive, and they can’t wait.”

Her face falls. “Oh, right. Sure. Maybe later?”

“Definitely later,” I say, brushing my thumb along the soft curve of her cheek. Before she can react, I twist away. My boot slides into the stirrup and I hoist myself into the saddle. Chance swishes his tail and does a little dance to let me know he’s ready to stretch his legs. I tip the brim of my hat to Riley and grin. “I’ll see you and your bonnet at Fort Bellows.”

### CHAPTER 27

Riley

MY EARS ARE bleeding.

Or, at least, they feel like they could be. Jake hasn't stopped talking since we left Clark's Sod House, which is actually pretty impressive since I'm riding in the wagon with the canvas pulled all the way down and he's on the opposite side on a horse.

"So then the bronco bucked and twisted to the left and I went flying off. Broke my arm in three places. I still have the pins. Oh, here's a funny one for you. One time me and some guys decided to..."

Jake drones on as I flip open the magazine I borrowed from Barnaby to an article about the sandhill crane migration, which apparently occurs from February to mid-April in Nebraska. I had no idea sandhill cranes are a prehistoric species. I wonder what the pioneers thought of hundreds of thousands of them descending on the Platte River in noisy flocks. Maybe next year I'll try to get to Fort Kearny to see them, I think, surprised to find I'm not nearly as disappointed by that thought as I would have been a few days ago.

Immediately I think of Colton, who's a big reason for my sudden change of heart. Not only has he helped me see the beauty in Nebraska but he's also opened my eyes to the possibilities. I don't want to put the covered wagon in front of the oxen, but I can't help but hope that maybe he could be a part of my new life out here.

As a friend.

As more than a friend.

My skin warms at the thought and I press my hand to my cheek. If I close my eyes, I can almost feel the soft pressure of his thumb, rough against my skin, as he traced the side of my face. He's so different than he first seemed. Definitely not so irksome anymore.

Jake, on the other hand...

"...Dave's in the middle of the garden, pretending to be a scarecrow when..." Jake starts laughing to himself. "This is the best part. A whole flock of crows swoops in and lands on his outstretched arms. There must have been ten of 'em, at least. Scared Dave so bad he started jumping and waving his arms around, and damn near gave Joe McTavish a heart attack. Hilarious, right?"

Um...sure?

"Right," I mumble, because what else can I say when the humor isn't just lost on me, it's hidden like buried treasure I'm not about to hunt for.

"Hey," Jake says, his shadow nearing the tent. "I can borrow a set of wheels tonight. Want to go for a late-night drive?"

"I think I'll pass."

"But I haven't even told you where we're going yet."

It really doesn't matter, because the only place I want to be tonight is with Colton. Still, I'm curious. "What did you have in mind?"

“Well, um, there’s the overlook at Silver Lake. Or we could drive out to Cattleman’s Pass.”

“Are the views any different than what we’ve seen on the trail so far?”

“No.”

“Is there anything particularly special about them?”

“It’s where everyone goes,” Jake replies.

“I think I’ll hang back at the fort,” I say, flipping the page to find a gorgeous pen-and-ink illustration of a meadowlark, its breast tinted a vivid yellow with watercolor. The image is so lifelike I half expect the bird to hop right off the page and take to the skies.

Jake keeps talking, but I’m finally too distracted to pay him any attention. I turn to the accompanying article—a story about the artist, Marybeth Shelton, who runs a bird sanctuary and rehabilitation center in Kansas. I get lost in the details: how she was always into science and nature, spending her school days creating drawings in the margins of her notebooks; how she majored in biology and minored in art; how she started selling portraits of the birds she takes in to help fund the sanctuary. Now she sells pieces on commission.

Commission.

A girl can dream.

The next page is a spread of more of her artwork. Like me, she switches between pencil, ink, pastels, and paints. Some of the images are simple, like an American kestrel in flight, the quick pencil marks blurring as the bird dives across the page.

Others are more complex, filled with fine brushstrokes and masterful shading, like the great horned owl with golden eyes that practically pierce the page.

Her feature gives me hope that I can find a way to meld my love for science and art, too. Now I just have to convince my parents that minoring in art is a viable career choice and not a waste of time. At least the whole waste-of-money part of the equation won't be relevant in that discussion, since tuition isn't a concern anymore now that I can attend Alden University for free. Maybe I can subtly leave the magazine open to this article on the bed in their room tonight to soften them up to the idea.

The wagon shifts around a corner and a whoop rings throughout the caravan. "Fort Bellows ahead."

Dad does an excited wiggle in the front seat. "Isn't this great?" He glances over Mom's head to find Caleb snoozing away.

When our eyes meet, I offer a reserved smile. This is me testing the waters to see if I can float the truce wagon across the raging river between us. Dad beams at me in return. There's still a ways to go to make it to the other side, but at least I have oars in the water.

I loosen the fastenings of the canvas window flap and roll it up so I can get a better view. Jake leans forward in his saddle and tips his hat to me. "There you are. I missed seeing your beautiful face."

I'm sorely tempted to drop the canvas back down just so there's something to separate us again, but I catch a glimpse of the fort out of the corner of my eye.

It's not that I was expecting a scale model of a fort or anything, but this place is way bigger than I imagined it would be. It's practically the size of a small village. A thin

cloud of smoke rises behind the giant wooden posts that separate the buildings inside from the surrounding prairie.

“Do you know how Fort Bellows got its name?”

Jake settles his hands on the pommel, reins tucked loosely underneath, and begins.

“Alfred Bellows owned this land all his life. He was descended from some of the first settlers to come this way, and this particular spot had been in his family for generations. Before his untimely death...”

Jake keeps right on talking while I lean across the wagon’s aisle and poke Caleb in the side. He swats my hand away.

“You’ll probably want to wake up to see this.”

“Is it an all-you-can-eat cereal buffet?” he mumbles.

That’s oddly specific and not at all enticing, but then again, my brother’s always had a thing for sugar-coated grains and milk.

“No.”

As the wagons roll closer, two giant wooden doors open inward to reveal a dirt lane leading into the fort. Buildings line both sides of the street like they do in old Westerns, with hitching posts out front and a raised platform for pedestrians to walk on. Or, in this case, congregate on, since people are gathered to greet us—some wearing modern clothes and some dressed like pioneers. We roll under the carved wooden sign bearing the fort’s name and I adjust my bonnet to get a better view. My eyes search the crowd for Colton, but I can’t spot him. My heart sinks a bit that he’s not here to greet me.

Our wagon eases to a stop in front of O'Connor's General Store and whatever building is on the other side. Caleb's still sleeping and I'm not about to crawl over him to lift the canvas.

Up front, Mom, Dad, and their new besties, the McCreadys and the Stones, are oohing and aahing.

Jake turns to me with a grin. "Civilization at last. Running water, electricity, high-speed internet if you know the Wi-Fi password, which I might be willing to share."

"Cell service?" I ask.

"Sometimes."

For the first time since we left Darby, I pull out my phone and power it on. It takes a moment to search for a signal. The bars fluctuate between none and one, and then, like a miracle, two bars. I grip the phone tight, expecting it to suddenly shake like I'm holding a mini earthquake in my hands with all the notifications coming in.

Dr. Michaelson's office: Don't forget to schedule your six-month dental cleaning.

Avondale High School: Please remember to return all outstanding library books before July 1 to avoid penalty.

Quinn: Hope you had a good flight. Miss you! Call me when you can.

It's not nearly as fantastic as I thought it would be to have service and I'm surprised to find I'm not disappointed with the lack of messages. Who needs cell service when you're out on the prairie with a cute cowboy? I look up and spot a pair of familiar dark eyes fixed on me.

Colton.

I barely register powering off my phone and sliding it back into my bag.

“How about I show you around, give you a behind-the-scenes tour?” Jake waggles his eyebrows.

“I’m all set,” I reply as I take in Colton in his pioneer costume.

He was right. I almost don’t recognize him in his rugged outfit. He’s dressed in dark brown trousers hoisted high up on his waist with a pair of black suspenders. His loose-fitting shirt is a dark green cotton, open partway down like a popover without the buttons and the sleeves rolled up to the middle of his muscular forearms. Instead of his Stetson, Colton wears a black felt hat with a wide brim and his modern work boots have been replaced by a dusty and scuffed pair that look like they’re at least a hundred years old.

Not gonna lie, it’s a good look on him. A very good look. Maybe too good, given how the tween girls in front of the general store are eyeing him.

Jake sneers down his nose at Colton, which he can only do because he’s atop his horse. On the ground, Colton has about three inches on him. “Nice hat, man.”

“You can pick up one just like it at O’Conner’s,” Colton says. “Tell Jim I sent you, and you might get the friends and family discount.”

Jake balks. “I’d never wear a hat like that.”

“Your loss,” I say. “Maybe with a hat like that, you’d be the center of attention.” I give a pointed glance to the giggling tweens and grab my backpack.



Colton's eyes glisten when I turn to him. "Welcome to Fort Bellows. Meet you at the back of the wagon?"

### CHAPTER 28

Colton

“THESE PIONEER DRESSES are a health hazard,” Riley says, shaking part of her skirt at me. “I almost tripped getting into the wagon. I had visions that I’ll face-plant trying to climb down.”

“We can’t have that.” I reach out a hand to help Riley step down the wagon ramp. “Although I’m pretty sure your bonnet would break your fall.”

“Is that what this massive brim is for? It all makes sense now.” Riley hoists her backpack over her shoulder and then takes my hand. I flash back to how it felt to hold her hand in mine during the lasso lesson—her soft skin against my rough and calloused palm. I wouldn’t mind that sensation again. Her gaze meets mine and I swear she’s thinking the same thing.

“Thanks,” she says once her boots hit the ground.

Despite the chaos around us, an awkward silence settles between us.

“So,” I say, feeling the need to fill the void, but not quite sure where to start. No one can accuse me of being much of a conversationalist.

“This place is bigger than I expected. Are you up for giving me a tour?” she asks.

“Sure.” I grin at her. “As soon as I’m done unloading the wagons and getting the

animals settled. That'll give you enough time to drop your stuff off in your room."

"I am so looking forward to sleeping in a real bed," she says wistfully.

"What if I told you I arranged for you and your brother to have separate rooms that adjoin your parents' suite?"

Her eyes go wide. "Are you serious? A room to myself?"

"I might have pulled some strings and got your family into the Claim Jumper Suite at the hotel."

"You're my hero," she says, grabbing on to my arm and pulling me close.

Her fingers wrap around my forearm, soft and warm on my skin. My pulse buzzes in my veins like a swarm of bumblebees that have discovered a field of fresh clover.

"I...um...have some work to do before I can give you a tour, so I'm going to need my arm back," I say. "Unless you want to carry suitcases for me?"

"Oh, right," she says, releasing her hold. I'm tempted to reach out and grab her hand, just to prolong the contact, but now isn't the time or place. Not to mention, I'm not entirely sure what's happening between us. It's definitely not one-sided, but Riley also wants to talk and she's heading back to California when the excursion is over. Even though it means going against company policy, I think I'm willing to see where this leads, but is she?

Jake's shoulder bumps hard against mine as he maneuvers between the wagon and our private conversation. He mumbles an apology, but he's about as sorry as a weasel in a chicken coop. It's a stupid attempt at a power move, a way to remind me that he's here and he's competition.

Riley lifts the brim of her bonnet and watches him cross the street, her lips pressed into a thin line. “Is there an outgoing mailbox anywhere around here? Someplace I can mail a postcard?” she asks.

“Right over there.”

Her eyes follow the path my finger points until she spots it. “Post office or Pony Express?”

“Both.”

“Explain,” she says, turning her attention back to me.

The edges of her bonnet flutter in the breeze. There’s a faint blush on her cheeks and an energetic glint in her bright brown eyes. When she lifts her eyebrows to prompt me to get on with it, I swear my heart does a front flip in my chest.

I clear my throat. Force a breath. What was the question?

“Um, the, uh, post office is what you think it is. The Pony Express part is more of a hands-on exhibit. There’s some old-fashioned writing paper and pens and inkwells for tourists to write their own versions of pioneer letters to family back East.”

“Dearest Mama and Papa,” she says with a dramatic flourish. “We have just arrived at Fort Bellows, and from here, we will continue on to Chimney Rock. We’ve passed through the most beautiful rolling prairies and grasslands. Recent rains have kept everything verdant, though the mud and muck weights down my hems. Our provisions are holding out for now. Thank goodness for bacon.”

“You know, you’re pretty good at this whole pioneer thing. You look the part. You sound the part. I bet you could get a job here.”

Riley's eyes sparkle. "You think?"

I nod. "Or at least write a convincing letter."

"The paper, pens, and inkwells do sound interesting. I wonder..." she says, chewing on her bottom lip in thought.

I know I should, but I can't force myself to look away.

A hearty laugh echoes across the street. Riley turns her head toward the tavern, where Jake and Carrie Mae—who works as a member of the waitstaff there—are having a conversation. Jake's propped against a thick wooden post that supports the slanted roof over the tavern's entrance. He leans into Carrie Mae, who's unable to scoot away because of the crowd of tourists around her, gawking at the wagons.

Jake laughs again and glances back in our direction, as if hoping his antics will inspire a bit of jealousy in Riley that might work in his favor.

As far as I can tell, the plan backfires. The line on Riley's brow softens and she looks away. She seems relieved that Jake's turned his attention elsewhere, at least for the moment. Still, I better strike while the iron's hot.

I tug on her bonnet's ribbons to get her attention. "Meet me outside your hotel in twenty minutes?"

She opens her mouth, as if she's about to say yes, but then she hesitates. "I want to say yes, but..."

Here it comes. My stomach starts to sink. The look on my face must give my thoughts away, because she reaches out and gives my arm a reassuring squeeze.

“Do you think we could make it thirty? I’d like to freshen up a bit.”

“Sure, no problem,” I say, relieved that she didn’t turn me down.

Riley wanders off to locate her parents in the crowd and I get to work pulling suitcases down from the storage compartments. Jake saunters over with a big ol’ smirk plastered on his face.

“Guess she doesn’t want a private tour from you either?” he says.

I shrug and tug a hard-shell Samsonite from the wagon bed.

As usual, Jake crosses his arms and watches me. While unloading the baggage is technically not part of the Pony Express rider’s duties, standing around doing nothing while the rest of the crew toil away is a jerk move. Not that I expect him to lift a finger, but he could at least put in an appearance at the post office and make his speech, like he’s supposed to do on arrival.

“Well, you know what they say: the harder the chase, the sweeter the taste,” he says.

“Who says that? Stalkers?”

Jake waves a dismissive hand. “Stop being a poor loser.” His eyes brighten and a sleazy smile tugs at his lips. He straightens up and steps forward as Riley materializes beside me. She slides a folded piece of paper into my hand.

“See you in a few, Colton,” she says with a smile.

“I’ll see you soon, Riley,” I say, calling after her.

I unfold the paper and glance down at the quick pen-and-ink sketch she’s made of a

monarch butterfly on a milkweed flower.

Who's the loser now, Jake?

### CHAPTER 29

Riley

OUR SUITE IS at the end of the hotel, with one side overlooking the main avenue and the other overlooking a large, well-tended vegetable garden, beyond which is the tall wooden wall that separates us from the wild prairie. I let the thin cream-colored lace curtains fall shut and wander around my room, which isn't large by any means, but it's definitely more hospitable than the tent Caleb and I have been sharing.

The double bed has a shabby-chic green and white quilt and a thick pillow that I can't wait to try out later tonight. It's not my bed, but it definitely holds the promise of a better night's sleep than a cot, which I'll gladly take. If these circles under my eyes get any darker, people will mistake me for a raccoon. On the dresser is a ceramic pitcher and washbowl set on a white linen table runner, and a long rectangular box wrapped in brown paper with my name on the manila tag.

I sink onto the bed, which has Goldilocks-level firmness, and ease the twine over the corners, pulling the lid free. Inside is a small prairie flower bouquet—more of a posy, really—that eclipses the rooty tangle that Jake tried to foist on me before. Each stem has a tiny paper tag tied on with a piece of white thread, the common names of the flowers written in what must be Colton's jagged penmanship. A damp paper towel in a plastic baggie is wrapped around the cuttings and secured with a rubber band. Beneath the bundle is a handwritten note in identical rough scrawl on thick, creamy stationery: To Riley, for inspiration. C.W.

My fingers twitch, anxious for my notebook and pencils to get started on some



sketches, but it'll have to wait until later. I grab a glass of water from the bathroom and place each bloom inside the makeshift vase, taking care not to get the tags wet.

Yarrow

Blue false indigo

Beebalm

Spiderwort

Beardtongue

False sunflower

Colton's handwriting is a lot like he is: no-nonsense on the outside, but if you dig a bit deeper, you can see the earnestness and perceptiveness. This bouquet is as sweet as it smells, even more so because of the extra effort he went to in putting it together. He probably doesn't have a clue how much it means to me that he understands me enough to know what I want and what I need. Now, more than ever, I know I'd like to have him be a part of my new life out here. I should tell him I'm staying in Nebraska.

Mom knocks on the adjoining room door and pushes it open.

"All settled in?"

"Yeah."

"Dad heard a rumor that there might be a computer that we can use to check our email," she says. "We're going to check it out. Want to come with us?"

It's funny—before we climbed aboard the wagon and headed west, I would've been all about checking email and scanning social media to see what I was missing out on. But now...

"No, thanks. I'm good," I say.

I'm supposed to meet Colton soon and I don't want to be late. I glance longingly at my suitcase, with my comfortable modern clothes, but decide against changing. It wouldn't be fair to Colton, since he was such a good sport about wearing his costume for me. Instead, I decide to rearrange my hair into a more practical style to tuck under this massive bonnet. I knot the bonnet's ribbon into a large bow under my chin and finish getting ready.

Mom's sitting on the couch by the window when I enter the living room that serves as the central hub for our suite of rooms. She glances up from a coffee table magazine. "Maybe we could do something together tomorrow as a family? They have a cloth-dyeing course that might be fun. Or your dad's been talking about a blacksmithing class."

"Oh."

Mom picks up on my hesitation. "Riley, sweetie, I know you're still upset—"

Am I? I'm really not sure how I feel about Nebraska anymore. But I do know I don't want to be late meeting Colton. "Mom, I'm fine, okay. I've gotta run."

The hem of my dress swishes around my ankles as I rush from our suite, the door closing with a solid click behind me. My boots thud down the timeworn wooden stairs, bowed in the center from the passage of feet and time. A strong gust of warm wind greets me when I pull open the hotel door.

Colton's out front waiting for me, just like he said he'd be, leaning against a post, his arms crossed over his chest and his legs crossed at the ankles. As always, he seems so comfortable in his skin. He straightens up when I approach and tips his hat to me. "Afternoon, Miss Thomas."

"Afternoon, Mr. Walker," I say with a giggle. I glance around to find we're the only people on the porch. "Is there a reason why we're being so formal?"

Colton winces and scratches at his stubble. "Employees are supposed to stay in character at all times when we're in costume to provide the best pioneer experience to our guests and the visitors to Fort Bellows."

"It sounds like you're quoting an employee manual."

"I am. Page three," he says.

"Don't tell me you have it memorized," I tease.

"It's only four pages."

Now I understand why Jake's phone bothered him so much that morning at breakfast. He was all decked out in his Pony Express uniform, so he was going against company policy using his iPhone. Not that there's much service out here, but still...

"You don't seem like the type of person who'd be into this kind of thing." From what I've seen, Colton's more of a down-to-earth straight shooter, and pretending to be something or someone that he's not, even if it's a pioneer...I just can't see it.

"I'm not an actor and I don't like the attention. To be honest, this is only the second time I've worn this outfit. Ever." He offers me his elbow, and I hook my arm through as he leads us down the stairs. We nod to a passing family of four and turn left behind

them onto the dirt street.

“I feel honored. And in the spirit of full disclosure, this is the first time I’ve worn this outfit.”

Colton’s eyes crinkle when he laughs. “Fair enough.”

I lean closer and catch a whiff of Ivory soap and leather. “I have to say, your pioneer costume suits you, though. Have you considered changing up your wardrobe a bit? Swapping out a few pairs of jeans for some fancy wool trousers with suspenders?”

He tips his head closer so that the brim of his hat brushes against my bonnet. “I can’t tell if you’re serious or teasing.”

“Maybe a bit of both.”

“What about you? Planning to add some calico to your wardrobe?” He reaches out and tugs at my sleeve.

“Calico? More like, calic-no.”

Colton guides us past the post office/Pony Express station where I sketched the picture for him earlier.

“I loved the monarch and milkweed,” Colton tells me with a lopsided smile that sends my heart billowing like the dust we leave in our wake. “Your art is amazing.”

From the tone of his voice, I can tell he really means it. “Thanks,” I say, my chest swelling with pride.

We take a right down a quiet lane, where Colton and I meet a group of tourists with a

handful of elementary school-aged kids.

“Excuse me,” says an older man. “Would you mind taking a picture?”

“Sure,” I say, thinking he wants me to snap a photo of the group in front of the post office. Turns out, he wants me and Colton to pose with the kids.

“Are we supposed to pretend that we don’t know what a camera is? Or that we’re worried that we’ll lose our souls if we have our picture taken?” I whisper to Colton.

“What?” he asks, giving me side-eye.

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “We visited a living history museum on a family vacation once when I was ten, and the people there pretended they didn’t know what a camera was. Are we supposed to do that, too?”

Colton shakes his head. “Most pioneers would have at least known about cameras. They weren’t often taken on the trail because of the rough conditions, which is why there aren’t very many pictures, but they probably would have seen one or heard about them before they departed.”

“Oh, right. That makes sense.”

The children gather around us and we smile and say “cheese curds.” Just as we finish up, Colton pulls his phone from his pocket. “Would you mind taking one of just the two of us?” he asks the man.

Before I register what’s happening, Colton’s arm wraps around my back and we lean into each other for the photo.

“All set,” the man says, handing Colton back his phone. He slips it into his pocket

like it's no big deal.

After the tourists walk away, I gasp dramatically. "You just broke character," I say, surprised that Colton Walker—mister straight as an arrow—might not be as inflexible as he seems. "How lawless and brazen of you."

The corner of his mouth twitches. "It's not against the law to have a phone while dressed as a pioneer; it's just frowned upon."

"Such a rebel," I tease, bumping my shoulder against his.

"If you like that," he says, grabbing my hand, "just wait until you see what I have up my sleeve next."

### CHAPTER 30

Colton

“ARE WE SUPPOSED to be here?” Riley whispers, glancing around like she’s afraid we’ll get caught.

We’re in the museum, having just walked through a door marked Employees Only .

Even if we weren’t supposed to be here, we wouldn’t get into any trouble. Everyone around here knows me and I’ve spent plenty of time in the back rooms of the museum helping Deborah, the head curator. This place sometimes feels like a second—well, maybe third if you count the prairie—home to me.

I tip my head back. “We’re not not supposed to be here.” It’s not like the museum is off-limits. It just happens to be closed for the day.

Riley rolls her eyes but a smile plays at the corner of her mouth. “Double negatives are only positive in math.”

“Fair point,” I say. Sometimes the door to the main exhibits is unlocked during the day, but the handle doesn’t turn when I jiggle it. I pull a key ring out of my pocket and search for the one that opens this door. Unfortunately, nearly all the keys in this place look identical and I’ve never gotten around to marking which is which, since I rarely ever need them. After I try three different options unsuccessfully, I joke, “You don’t happen to know how to pick a lock, do you?”

“No. But I do have a bobby pin.” A pause. “This isn’t a heist, is it?”

“No.” I laugh at the suggestion. “Not today. We’d have to go in through the roof for that, and I left all my rappelling gear at home.”

“Some thief you are,” she teases.

The next key slips into the lock. I push the door open and step into a hallway. On the left are storage rooms and offices for Deborah and the docents. To the right are the rooms housing the items that aren’t on display, are undergoing preservation, or are being studied. We follow the hallway straight ahead through an unmarked door and end up on the museum floor in the middle of the “Wagons of the West” exhibit, featuring a reproduction wagon much like the prairie schooners we use for excursions, and taxidermic oxen, horses, and mules like the ones that were used to traverse the Oregon Trail.

“Whenever I’m in an exhibit like this, I always expect the display to come alive and move,” she says, wandering over to a giant bison along the “Native Animals of the Plains” wall.

“I think that only happens at night, once everyone’s gone home.”

“I guess we’re safe, then.” She glances over at me. “Good thing, too. These things are huge.”

“That bull probably weighed close to a ton.”

“I can’t even.” Riley shakes her head.

I’ve seen stampedes, but thankfully I’ve never come face to face with a bison. They are some of the most dangerous animals out here when provoked.



“It’s hard to believe there used to be millions of them out here two hundred years ago,” I say.

Riley gets a faraway look in her eyes. “I think I’d like to sketch one, but from a safe distance.”

“Which reminds me. I have something I want to show you,” I say, grabbing her hand to guide her through a room honoring Pawnee history and an exhibit on shelter construction. We pass scale models of a log home, a sod house, and a teepee before coming to a roped-off room with a sign that says Room Closed. New Exhibit in Progress .

I glance left and right just in case someone else is here, and after verifying the coast is clear, I unhook the velvet rope, usher Riley in, and fasten it shut behind us. The room is dark because the lights are out, and it takes a few minutes for the light bulbs to warm up after turning them on.

“What is all this?” Riley asks, surveying the folding table in the middle of the room, covered in random paints and brushes, rollers and rulers.

The floor is covered in a tarp and blue painter’s tape lines the molding around the windows and doors.

“Welcome to what will eventually be an exhibit called ‘Surviving the Seasons.’ Each wall will be painted with a mural of how the prairie looks in the spring, summer, autumn, and winter. In the center of the room will be displays about the challenges each season brought to the local Native American populations and to the pioneers on the Oregon Trail.”

Riley spins around and I can tell she’s picturing how it would all come together. “Sounds interesting.” Her finger glides over a can of white paint and she brushes the

dust on her apron. “This stuff’s been sitting here awhile.”

“A little over a year.”

She glances at the walls, which have been patched and repaired from previous exhibits and could use a coat of primer. “What’s the holdup?” she asks.

“Talent. Well, lack of talent’s more like it. The museum had a few muralists submit proposals for the work, and even had one lined up to get started a few months ago, but it just never panned out. There’s not exactly a ton of artists in the area and trying to convince someone to either make the drive or stay over as an artist-in-residence hasn’t been easy.”

Riley settles her hands on her hips and nibbles her bottom lip as she stares at the blank wall across from the window. “All this blank space. There’s so much potential here.”

“Picturing what you’d do if this was your canvas?”

She lifts her eyebrows and gives me a slight smile. “Am I that transparent?”

I shrug and move to stand beside her. Our arms brush and I glance down at the top of her bonnet, which shields her face. “How would you do it?”

“Hmm.” She sighs. “I think I’d make each of the seasons blend together so it’s almost like a continuous calendar as you walk through the room with January here,” she says, stepping forward, “next to the door.” She pivots and points as she outlines her idea. “It would be cool to paint what’s happening underground, too. Show roots and burrows, that kind of thing, maybe a foot up from the floor. Oh, and the ceiling.” She tips her face up and the bonnet swoops back, falling to hang by the ribbon against her back. “It would be fun to have clouds and birds around the edges so it would feel

more immersive.”

Riley practically radiates sparks of creativity. She turns and her boot catches on the edge of a drop cloth, sending her stumbling toward me. I reach out and catch her around the waist. Her hands brace against my forearms. Her dark brown eyes focus on mine.

I know I should drop my arms and step back, but Riley isn’t exactly pulling away. In fact, she inches closer until her skirt brushes against my ankles.

“I think your ideas sound amazing,” I say. What I really want to say is that she’s amazing, but the words get caught in my throat.

“Thanks.” Her cheeks grow rosy and she eases closer, her gaze flicking down to my mouth and then back up again.

“I bet you’d do an amazing job.”

“You think?” she whispers.

All I want to do in this moment is kiss her, so I lean forward, watching to see if she’s okay with it. She doesn’t move away and her eyelashes flutter shut, her hands warm and steady on my arms. Our noses brush and just as I’m about to make contact, all I hear in the back of my mind is Jake warning me that Riley is only in Nebraska for a few more days. It’s a valid point. Damn him for living rent-free in my brain and causing me to second-guess myself.

Riley’s eyes open and she gazes up at me with such a tempting look that before I can talk myself out of it again, I press my lips against hers. She leans in, her mouth warm and sweet. Her hands trail up my arms to my shoulders, and then she twines her fingers behind my neck.

Just when I think I might be getting a bit light-headed from our kiss, Riley pulls back and draws in a deep, shaky breath. Her eyes glisten. Her lips are swollen.

A smile plays over my mouth and I drag a hand through my hair. “That was...” My voice comes out husky.

“Mmm,” she replies.

Clearly, we’re not operating at full capacity here.

Tentatively, I reach out and twine my fingers through hers, feeling a jolt when we touch. Riley’s stunning when she’s flushed and breathless, and it’s even better knowing it’s kissing me that has her like this.

I can’t wait to do it again.

Obviously, she’s thinking the same thing. Her gaze drops to my mouth and then back up to my eyes.

My heart races and fireworks explode in my veins. “So...” I push a strand of hair over her cheek and tuck it behind her ear. “We should probably have that talk now, huh?”

“Probably,” she says.

But talking isn’t what either of us really wants to do.

This time, it’s her mouth that finds mine first. She reaches up and presses her hands against my chest and I feel my heart hammer beneath her palms. My hands gently cup the sides of her face as I deepen our kiss.

When we both come up for air, Riley leans back in my arms and grins. “Who knew

that kissing Tall, Dark, and Definitely Not-So-Irksome would be so incredible?”

That’s it.

I’m completely done for.

### CHAPTER 31

Riley

BY THE TIME dinner is served in Ketcham's Tavern, Colton and I have wandered to every corner of Fort Bellows. We never did get around to having that talk. Much like the main characters in a period piece, we've been reduced to quick grazes of our hands as we walk along the dirt lanes and stolen kisses in the stable when we went to check on Chance. He didn't seem to mind, since we bought his silence with a handful of carrots.

After we make our way into the tavern, it takes a moment for me to spot Mom and Dad deep in discussion in the back corner. Colton and I start toward their table, but something about the seriousness of their expressions brings me up short. My legs go leaden and it's like my feet have been superglued to the rough wooden floorboards.

"Is everything okay?" Colton glances down at me with concern.

My gut says no, but what am I supposed to say? I've got a weird feeling that my parents are about to drop yet another huge bombshell on me.

Paranoid much?

I swallow down the discomfort. "There's only one empty seat at the table." I look around to see if maybe there's an extra chair we can drag over so we can sit together. Colton would be the perfect buffer between me and my parents. Unfortunately, it seems that every seat in this place is already taken.

“Oh, right.” Colton nods. “I forgot that everyone’s assigned a spot at a table, since I hardly ever come to these things. It’s hard to shift things around. I’ll just grab dinner over there with the rest of the staff.”

So much for thinking that we could eat together. My heart pangs with disappointment.

“Or we could go? You could show me how to forage for wild edibles in the prairie. How far away is the nearest fishing spot? Maybe I could teach you a thing or two,” I tease, taking a step backward toward the door.

Colton stops me by cupping my elbow. My skin sizzles under his touch.

“And have you miss out on Chef Ignatius’s authentic 1850s-style homestead cooking?” He gives me a playfully stern look and drops his hand. “That would be a real shame.”

I glance over at my parents, debating whether to bail on dinner, when my mom turns to face me. The minute we make eye contact, I know I’ll have to stay and tough it out. She waves me over while flashing a plastic smile. I hold up a hand to let her know I’ll be a minute.

Or two. Or five.

I wonder how long I can stretch it out.

Colton’s big brown eyes sparkle. “Aren’t you even a little curious about what’s on the menu?”

“Okay, fine,” I say, rolling my eyes. “I’ll stay. But please tell me there’s no bacon involved. Don’t get me wrong, I love bacon as much as the next girl, but I’m starting

to get the arteries of an eighty-year-old man.”

“Bacon is a way of life here.”

“Well, it’s also the way to an early death in the quantities we’ve been eating out on the trail.”

“True.” Colton tips his head toward my family’s table. “You should probably get going.”

“Do you have a place to sit?”

“There’s an employee table next to the kitchen.”

It’s hard to force my feet to move. My hand reaches out and grabs Colton’s. He gives it a reassuring squeeze before dropping it quickly.

“I’ll see you after dinner?” I ask.

“I’d like that, but…” Colton shrugs. “I still have some work to do. I need to check on Chance and the other animals again, and see if Dad’s got anything for me to prep for tomorrow. Leave your window cracked and if I can stop by before it gets too late, I’ll holler up?”

“You could always toss pebbles.”

“I might be a horrible shot. What if I wake your parents? Or the Stones, who are right next door?”

“And you think hollering up at me like Romeo is going to be any better?” I give his arm a playful smack. “If you can toss a lasso, you can chuck a few pebbles, Colton



Walker.”

There’s a flash of heat in his eyes. He leans in until he towers over me and says, “I’ll be seeing you again real soon, Riley Thomas.”

It’s pointless to fight the grin. “You better.”

Mom and Dad are unusually quiet throughout our dinner of chicken, rice, and some sort of garden green that could have started out as spinach or kale, but after extended sautéing is now a lumpy mass on my plate. Caleb has spent most of our meal swiveling back and forth in his seat to shove food in his mouth and then turn away to chat with a few of his buddies who are conveniently at the table behind him.

Now I know something’s up with our parents, because they would have been all over him for bad manners any other night of the week. Not gonna lie—I’m curious to know what has Mom and Dad so quiet and somber, but after almost a week of avoiding them, it feels weird to ask.

After tentatively poking at the green glob, I scoop up a bit on the tip of my fork and try it. It’s not as bad as it looks, but I still can’t tell what it is. Colton would know and would probably have a story about how the first Nebraska settlers survived on dandelion leaves, foraged wild onion, and cattails, and how Chef Ignatius’s recreation was featured in Traditional Cuisine of the Midwest.

Given the weird vibe at this table, I really wish Colton were here to offer up one of his comforting nods or one of those half-smiles that are starting to grow on me. If I tip forward and lean to the right, I can just barely make out the top of his head from all the way across the room.

When I sit back in my chair, Mom is looking at me with a half-pained, half-sympathetic look.

“What?” I ask, shifting in my seat.

Mom shakes her head as if clearing away a thought and forces a smile. “We got an update from the movers. Our stuff should arrive Monday.”

“Okay.”

“Oh, and the painters will be available a week earlier than expected. Your dad and I were thinking of painting the house a neutral color throughout. This weekend, we can head to the paint store and look at samples for your room. You can pick any color you want. Lavender. Teal.”

“Black like your heart,” Caleb chimes in.

My foot connects with his shin under the table.

“Ouch.”

“Thomas family,” Dad says in a warning tone.

Mom continues. “Maybe you could do one of those cool geometric pattern things, with painter’s tape? I saw it in a magazine.” To anyone else, I’m sure she sounds enthusiastic and authentic, but there’s just a little too much brightness to her voice and the smile she has pasted on doesn’t quite make it to her eyes.

I glance over to Colton’s table, but he must have ducked out early to finish his chores so he could meet up with me later. I tug at my suffocating high collar and force in a breath of stagnant air. I get that there was no AC back in the day but would it have killed someone to install a ceiling fan or a hidden ventilation system or something?

“I need some air,” I say, pushing back from the table.

“I’ll come with you,” Mom says, hurrying after me.

The outside air is only a few degrees cooler than in the tavern. My skirt swirls around my heels and it occurs to me that this ridiculous dress is the problem. I stride toward the hotel, determined to get out of this monstrosity ASAP.

Mom doesn’t say a thing as we trudge up the stairs. She’s silent as we push open the door to our room. She doesn’t even make a peep as she sits on the edge of my bed, watching me pull a pair of shorts and a T-shirt from my duffel bag.

“So, we just found out there’s a bit of a hiccup with your school registration,” she says.

I pull off the bonnet and toss it onto the bed next to her. My matted hair is itchy against my scalp and I run my hands over it for some relief. “Like, my transcripts didn’t arrive?” I’m still hotter than hell, so I pull up the sash on the window to try to get some airflow going.

When I turn back to face her, Mom presses a finger to her temple and sighs. “No, they arrived. Unfortunately—”

Here it comes. My breath catches in my chest.

“Some of your classes won’t transfer for credit, because the graduation requirements are different in the school district we’re moving into.”

“Okay. How many classes are we talking?” I say, cautiously waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Three.”

I think about the classes I selected and what my schedule was supposed to look like senior year, already packed full with science classes and art electives. A seed of panic takes root in my lower abdomen but I force myself to stay calm. “I’m not sure how I can fit in three more classes this year, even if I drop my electives.”

“You’re right.” Mom nods. “You can’t. If you want to graduate on time, you’ll have to enroll in summer school.”

My ears are ringing so loudly, I couldn’t possibly have heard her correctly. “I’m sorry. Did you just say summer school?”

“Yes.”

“School that happens over the summer?” I say.

“Yes.”

All the breath leaves me like I’ve been sucker punched.

“The summer semester starts in two weeks,” she says. “You can take the three classes you need and maybe an art elective for fun, and then you’ll be on track to graduate with the rest of your class in June.”

“That’s not fair,” I say. I start to shake uncontrollably. I hate this. I hate how Mom can sit there so calmly and tell me I’m being punished yet again because she and Dad decided to uproot our family and move to Nebraska. “I was forced to give up an internship at the marine center and spending a last carefree summer with my friends. Basically, my entire life. And now you expect me to go to summer school?”

“Riley,” Mom says. “You don’t need to be dramatic. We all knew there would be challenges going into this, but your father and I felt that this was too good an

opportunity for our family to pass up.”

“I’m not being dramatic,” I say, tossing my hands in the air. “You’re the one who decided to move us to Nowhere, Nebraska, with next to no warning. Maybe if I’d known you and Dad were considering a move, it wouldn’t have hit so hard. I know that it’s a great opportunity for you. But it’s also a bunch of lost opportunities for me. No one asked me what I wanted. You wouldn’t even consider letting me stay in California. And now you tell me the rest of my summer is destroyed.”

I had just started to come to terms with the move. I thought maybe I could spend the summer with Colton. Maybe apply for the artist-in-residence at Fort Bellows. Work on my art portfolio. But with three classes, there won’t be time for any of that. My breath comes in shaky gasps. My heart aches for all my ruined plans, new and old.

I pull out the application I picked up at the museum and stare down at the words. They blur as tears fill my eyes. The paper crinkles into a tight ball in my hands.

“How could you do this to me?” I rage as I toss it into the trash can.

### CHAPTER 32

Colton

“CARRIE MAE’S STILL holding out on me.” Jake leans against the wood planking in Chance’s stall and crosses his arms over his chest. He drags the heel of his boot across the floor in a slow arc.

“Hard to believe,” I mumble as I run a brush over Chance’s flank. It’s impossible to feel bad for a guy like Jake, who rarely strikes out with anyone and who skips around from one girl to the next like a frog hopping across lily pads. “You have more luck with college ladies?”

I don’t miss the way Jake cringes at my question, and I wonder if the women there are more discerning. In Darby, Jake was always the big fish in the small pond, but his new pond is a lot larger. He doesn’t answer my question. “Riley seems to be sweet on you, though. You gonna go for it?” he asks, changing the subject.

My response is a short grunt. I’m not about to kiss and tell, especially not with him.

“I’m surprised,” he says, apparently deciding that my grunt meant “yes” and not “leave me alone.” “Her being a tourist and you being a townie and all. How’s that going to work?”

Jake’s always been good at swirling up a dust cloud with me, and most of the time I have to hold myself back because he isn’t worth losing my cool over. This time, it doesn’t even register on my radar. I’m the one Riley was kissing this afternoon, not

him. And that's enough for me.

I gather up my grooming tools, say good night to Chance, and head out into the central aisle of the barn. The tack area smells like oiled leather and grain. While I put away my tools, Jake leans against a saddle rack and watches me.

"A few days with her really enough for you, Romeo?" he asks, still trying to get a rise out of me.

I shrug. I'll take as many days as I can get. "Seems to be enough for you," I say.

Jake laughs. "We both know you're nothing like me, Colton."

Thank god.

"Three more days by my count," he says.

"What's it to you?" I ask, curiosity getting the better of me.

Jake pushes off from the saddle rack and rolls his shoulders like he's exhausted from all the hard work I've been doing. "Nothing, man. Nothing, at all."

I make a quick pit stop at my bunk to freshen up and change into my regular clothes. They aren't much cooler than the pioneer costume, but at least they're clean and don't smell like abarn.

There are a few people milling about, but the daytime tourists have left for the day and most of the overnight guests have headed to their rooms for the night. With the sun set and the fort descending into darkness, there's really not much to see unless you're into stargazing.

In order to keep things as authentic as possible, only a few of the buildings have obvious electricity: the museum, Ketcham's Tavern, Jenkins Cottonwood Hotel, Meg Flander's Boardinghouse, and the ticket booth. Of course, the staff-only areas are full of modern-day conveniences that run on electricity: televisions, coffeepots, computers, refrigerators, and AC—we don't tell the guests about the last one, or one of these days, when it's 100 degrees and 80 percent humidity, someone might start a riot.

Riley's light is on when I finally make it across Fort Bellows to the hotel. Since there's only one main road and a few smaller alleys at the fort, there's really no need for formal names like Main Street or First Avenue. Heck, I'm not even sure this dirt road qualifies as a street or avenue.

Tonight, a few lamps flicker along the lane. Back in the day, they would have been oil lanterns, but for safety reasons, Fort Bellows uses electric versions designed to look authentic. Moths flutter around the dim, yellow light.

I dip in and out of shadows on my way closer to the hotel. Hopefully I haven't kept Riley waiting too long. My nerves are abuzz as I stand below her window, wondering what tonight will bring. Walking? Talking? Kissing?

I consider hollering up for her, but it's so quiet out here, I worry that I'll draw too much attention. Maybe I should try throwing a pebble like she suggested. I dig around in the dirt with the toe of my boot until I find a small stone that'll work. Palming it, I pull my arm back to toss it up, but before I can release it, Riley's angry voice filters down from her partially open window.

"How could you do this to me?" Her tone is cold and hard, with a definite edge of simmering anger.

Someone else in Riley's room responds, but their voice is farther away, so it's hard to



make out who it is.

“And that’s it?” Riley throws up her hands. “You’re just going to shrug and be all, too bad, so sad, sucks to be you?”

Mrs. Thomas steps into view. “Your father and I are trying here.”

“Trying what exactly? To ruin my life? ’Cause from where I’m standing, it looks like you’re succeeding.”

The muggy night air hangs heavy around me. I drop the pebble back to the ground where it lands silently and rolls away, chasing a cricket into the shadows.

Now’s definitely not the time to grab Riley for our after-dinner meetup, but I don’t feel great about bailing on her either. She might need someone to talk to after this epic blowup with her mom.

“I don’t understand why you can’t just accept it and make the best of it, like Caleb.” There’s a hint of exhaustion in her mom’s voice.

“Caleb?” Riley shakes her head. “Caleb is perfectly content to put up with all this because his life isn’t ruined.” Riley’s silhouette darkens the window, with her back facing me. Her arms punch the air as she talks. “Here’s a newsflash, Mom: I hate Nebraska. I hate this stupid pioneer outfit with its stupid giant bonnet and this stupid immersive excursion experience and trying to sleep in a stupid tent in a stupid cot and pretty much everything else about this stupid, miserable excuse for a summer. There’s not a single thing that could make me want to spend another day in this hellhole. Nothing.”

Riley’s mom says something, but I can’t hear it over the pounding of my heart, which thunders in my ears. It’s not that I expected to be her one-and-only reason to like

Nebraska, but her words still come at me like a left hook I wasn't prepared for. Here I was thinking that maybe there was something between us, but now I wonder if I was putting too much stock into what kissing her meant. Maybe I was just a convenient way to pass the time while she's stuck here.

See, this is why I prefer solitude to people. You can always trust that the prairie doesn't have any ulterior motives.

I drag my heel back, but before I have a chance to slip away into the shadows, Riley's face appears at the window. Her tearstained eyes go wide when they land on me.

There's a moment when time stands still. I could lift my arm and smile and pretend that I haven't heard a thing. We could walk and talk and probably kiss some more. But I'd still be a nothing to her in this Nebraskan hellhole she clearly despises.

Dinner churns in my stomach as my gut tightens. I always knew getting involved with Riley would be bad news, but I never expected anything like this. Sure, it would never last, but at least the break would be clean. She'd fly back to California and I'd move on.

Thing is, Jake's an asshole, but he's right: I'm not the kiss-'em-and-dismiss-'em type. I was a fool to think I could get involved and then walk away so easily.

My head swivels side to side. Riley's face drops. She knows I've overheard everything.

"Wait, Colton," she calls, shoving the window up as far as it'll go. "I can explain. Please."

But I don't need her explanation. Rationally, I know the fight wasn't about me, but I still feel like I've been reduced to nothing. I reach up to massage my jaw as I turn

away.

“Aargh,” Riley growls before the sound of the sash slamming down on the windowsill echoes off the building across the street.

### CHAPTER 33

Riley

I SPENT MOST of the night staring at the ceiling and crying, and now I have a horrible headache that pounds against my skull when I drag myself out of bed. Unfortunately, it was impossible to sleep in this unfamiliar hotel bed, so when I hear roosters crowing just after 5:50 a.m., I take it as a sign to give up trying.

I pull out a sketchbook and pencil and lean back against the headboard. Most everything feels outside my control, but is there any way I can fix things with Colton? I'm not sure what he overheard, but there's plenty for him to be upset about. I wish I'd told him more; maybe then he'd understand.

Almost subconsciously, my hand moves the pencil across the paper, the soft scratching sounds accompanied by birdcalls and the hush of the wind pressing against the windowpanes.

On the page, the prairie sky is clear and goes on forever and ever. All that space to fill with hopes and dreams. A figure emerges in the foreground. Her hands are stretched out by her sides, the blades of grass tickling her palms. Her bonneted head is tipped up to the sky, and her skirts billow in the breeze that sends the field rippling around her. She is adrift in a prairie-grass sea.

My hand stills.

I am her.

She is me.

There's a soft knock on my door.

"Come in."

Mom eases the door open and steps inside. "Couldn't sleep?"

I shrug.

"I couldn't either. Can I sit?"

Pulling my legs up to my chest, I make room for her at the end of my bed. She straightens the comforter and then sits, her hand resting on my toes.

Mom sighs. "I've been doing a lot of thinking after our conversation last night. And I realize that your dad and I should have gone about all this differently." She lifts her hand and swirls it around. "We really thought that it would be less disruptive to you if we held off telling you about the move until the end of the school year."

"How long have you known?" I ask, my voice coming out dry and raspy over the lump in my throat.

"Only since April. It seemed like such a long shot back when we applied in October. Then things got busy with the holidays. And there were such long periods of silence throughout the interview process, Dad and I didn't think we'd get one job offer, let alone two." Mom shrugged. "When we accepted the positions, we didn't think it would be that big a deal for you. You've always been up for an adventure, and it's only a year until you start college. In a way, it's like a practice run."

It's not quite an apology, but at least she realizes they messed up. I suppose it's a

start. Still, it's completely unfair that no one asked for my opinion.

"I had plans, Mom. Nebraska wasn't part of them." My eyes well with tears but I blink them back.

"I know. And believe it or not, Dad and I considered what this move would mean for you. We knew you'd have to change a lot of your plans. But even with in-state tuition, it would have cost more than we can afford to send you to college in California. Now both you and your brother will be able to go for free and we won't have to worry about trying to pay the mortgage, homeowner's insurance, and tuition bill."

I open my mouth to speak but Mom doesn't give me a chance. "Not having to work a job to put yourself through school or take out student loans is a huge advantage. Plus," she says, glancing down at my sketchbook, "I hear the Alden art department has lots of great classes."

"They do?"

Mom nods. "Maybe we could schedule a tour after we settle in? See what options they have for a double major?"

My head snaps up. "Really?"

Some of the weight drops from my chest, making it easier to breathe. I wish we'd had this conversation before, but at least we're having it now. "I'd like that," I say.

"As for the whole summer school thing, I'm going to call the district office on Monday to see if there's anything we can do about the graduation requirements. Having to take three summer school classes is a lot. I really don't see why your oceanography class can't count as earth science or why your Intro to Shakespeare

class doesn't count as an English course. It may be a bit more complicated trying to get your first-aid class to count toward health ed, but I'll see what I can do."

"That would be great." She opens her arms for a hug and I lean in. "Thanks, Mom."

"I love you," she whispers. When she pulls me in tight, something crinkles in her pocket.

"Oh," she says, dropping her arms. "I almost forgot. I think you'll be needing this." She fishes a wrinkled, folded-up piece of paper out of her pocket and hands it to me. "You should apply."

It's the artist-in-residence application I tossed in the trash last night during our fight.

"I dunno," I say, smoothing it out. "I'm just a—"

"Talented artist waiting to be discovered? Maybe it's a long shot, but you won't know unless you try. What's the worst they can say?"

"No," I mumble.

"Exactly." Mom squeezes my hand. "But no means you tried, and it's so much better than 'what if.' Plus, there's always a chance they'll say yes."

She has a point.

"It says I need to submit some sample sketches and a design plan. I don't have enough material in my sketchbook to work with."

Mom glances at her watch. "The wagons aren't scheduled to leave until two...Think you have enough time to work on it now?"

It only takes me a moment to pull on a pair of not-yet-broken-in jeans, a plain cotton scoop-neck tee, and the soft flannel shirt with silver threading throughout the navy blue and pink plaid. I slip on a pair of socks and slide my feet into my new hiking boots, slightly more comfortable to wear after a few days on the trail.

Pencils. Charcoal. Pastels. Sketchbook. Once I've gathered all my art supplies, I toss them in my backpack along with some snacks.

Mom waves goodbye from the couch, a coffee table book splayed open on her lap. No one else is awake yet, so thankfully, the rubber soles of my boots are quiet as I tiptoe my way to the door. I race down the stairs and push open the front door. Down the porch steps and to the right, I duck behind the hotel. It's light enough to see, but the sky is still an icy, pale blue and Fort Bellows is cast in various shades of browns and grays.

Now that I'm outside, I take a deep breath. The air is cool and fresh, with a hint of dew and damp earth. Birds chatter above me. I'm not feeling inspired by the fort, but I know I'll find what I need out on the prairie. I make my way toward Fort Bellow's side gate, where the wagon train rolled in yesterday.

Only yesterday? It seems like a lifetime ago.

It doesn't look secured, but when I push against it, the door doesn't budge. I try pulling it inward, but no luck. The gate is probably locked to keep people out until the ticket office opens for the day. Trying to slip out the employee entrance is too risky. I rack my brain, trying to remember if I saw another exit while Colton and I were wandering around. My heart squeezes when I remember the cold, hard, and hurt look in his eyes after he overheard the fight with Mom, so different from the warm, soft, and hopeful look when we kissed.

I want to make things right, but I'm not sure how. Somehow I'll find a way.



A donkey braying snags my attention. The corral.

Right after we checked on Chance, Colton showed me the fenced area where the animals are allowed to roam and graze during the day. If I can get inside the barn, I can get to the corral, and then I can get to the prairie, where there's plenty of space to think and create for a few hours. At least until it's time for the excursion to head out again.

### CHAPTER 34

Colton

CHANCE STARTS OUT at a slow walk to get warmed up, but as the sun's rays grow stronger, even behind the thick blanket of clouds, he moves faster across the rutted terrain. Soon we've reached a steady trot over the dusty lane leading west.

It's tranquil out here, with only Chance and Mother Nature for company. Usually I like being alone with them and my thoughts, but not so much this morning. Not even the strongest cowboy coffee could wash away the bitter taste of regret and disappointment.

Chance and I follow the muddy creek bed around the base of a hill until it turns north. We keep on until we reach the edge of the long paved road that leads from the highway to Fort Bellows. It's quiet now—not a car in either direction—but traffic will pick up once the main gate opens.

The ride back to Fort Bellows goes more slowly. Maybe it's because I'm tired from a restless night of tossing and turning on a lumpy bunk mattress. Or maybe it's because I'm not looking forward to having to face Riley after overhearing the argument with her mother. Either way, I don't coax Chance to go any faster than his current plodding gait. At this rate, it could take hours.

When we're about halfway back, I see another horse and rider heading for us at a pretty good clip. From the way the rider slouches in his saddle, I know it's Jake Harding. What thehell is he doing out here? Come to gloat?

“Colton,” he calls, spurring his horse forward to close the distance between us. “You’re looking extra grumpy today.” He circles around and pulls his horse parallel to Chance. His gelled hair is an artfully windswept mess and his chest heaves beneath his partially unbuttoned shirt as if he was the one doing all the running to get here instead of his horse.

“I didn’t get much sleep.” My voice is gravelly and clipped.

“She kept you up all night, huh?” he says with a knowing smirk.

“I’m not sure how that’s any of your business,” I growl.

Jake holds up his hands. “I just want to know where things stand with you two. I’d hate to get accused of poaching if she’s still on your scorecard.”

My molars clink together as my jaw snaps shut. “There’re so many things wrong with that statement, I don’t even know where to start.”

Chance paws the ground, picking up on my tension. I brush a hand over his neck to let him know I’m all right.

“You know what I mean, bro,” Jake says. I’m sure if we weren’t on horseback, he probably would have elbowed me in the ribs in that pretend buddy-buddy way of his that really pisses me off.

“Do I?” I ask through clenched teeth, my hard stare focused on his face. My fingers grip the reins, but I’m careful to keep my posture relaxed for Chance’s sake.

Jake must sense he’s walking a fine line with me, because he’s the first to break eye contact. “I just didn’t want to step on any toes.”

“Not my toes you should be worried about. Riley’s her own person.”

As much as I’d like to add that she’s free to make her own choices and that her choice yesterday was me, clearly, it’s a hollow victory, at best. It hurts to know that I’m not enough to make Nebraska even slightly bearable.

“What are you doing out here, anyhow?” Jake asks, wisely changing the subject.

I’m in no mood for his bullshit today.

“Clearing my head.” The polite thing would be to ask what Jake’s doing out here, but I don’t feel like being polite.

“I was just heading back to Fort Bellows myself,” Jake says with a lazy grin. “Had a late night with some buddies over at the quarry. We were having so much fun, you should have been there. My phone died, though, so I completely lost track of time.” And all sense of responsibility, apparently, since staff members aren’t supposed to just wander off in the middle of an expedition. “What time is it?”

“Just about noon,” I grunt.

“Cool,” Jake says. “Plenty of time to grab lunch at the tavern before the wagons roll out.”

I urge Chance into a walk and Jake and his mount follow alongside. The sun is high when we come up over a low rise, and we get a decent view of Fort Bellows and the surrounding area. The prairie stretches out around us for miles and miles. On the far side of the fort, close to where we’ll catch the trail back toward Darby later today, a group of bison graze. There are maybe thirty animals in the herd.

“You never lose track of time, do you, Colton?” he asks, pulling my attention away

from the bison.

“It’s hard to do when you can tell time from the location of the sun and the stars,” I reply.

Jake laughs like I’ve just told a hilarious joke. At our current pace, it’ll take another half hour or so to get back to the fort. With his constant barbs and comments, it’ll feel more like two hours, and I’m not sure I can handle it. Not today. I’m tempted to urge Chance into a gallop, but I don’t want to overwork him, since we’ll be heading out on the trail again soon.

A sharp crackle echoes across the prairie.

“Was that a gunshot?” he asks.

“Sounds more like firecrackers,” I mumble.

Another crackle sends a flock of birds whirling into the sky.

“Oh shit,” Jake says, pointing to a cloud billowing up near the herd of bison. I can barely make out a group of boys darting back toward the fort as the herd paces in agitation. Bison aren’t usually spooked by loud noises, so hopefully they won’t stampede. But bison can be fast and aggressive, especially in the spring, when there are calves or the males are rutting.

My eyes are on the herd when Jake smacks me on the arm.

“Hey, isn’t that Riley?” he asks.

Jake points toward a lone figure hiking back toward the fort. She’s probably a few football fields away, closer to us than the fort. Her eyes are focused at the ground in

front of her, the majority of her face shielded by the brim of her baseball cap.

Before I have a chance to answer him, a loud boom cuts me off, followed by a series of at least five others. That wasn't a firecracker. That was a Roman candle. Smoke billows from the middle of the herd and then all hell breaks loose. Jumpy, agitated animals bump into each other and suddenly the whole herd is in motion. Clods of dirt and clouds of dust rise behind them. At first they head away from the fort. But then the worst thing happens. The stampede suddenly changes direction.

"They're heading right for Riley," I say, spurring Chance into a gallop. "Shit."

### CHAPTER 35

Riley

A LOW BOOM echoes across the prairie like thunder. It was overcast when I hoofed it out here, but the clouds weren't the kind that bring rain or thunderstorms. Still, I've read weather can change quickly out here in the Midwest. When I glance up, I see that instead of dark, fast-moving storm clouds, the cloud cover has thinned and there are bits of blue peeking through. Weird.

I pause to grab a sip of water. To the east of the fort, a huge flock of birds takes to the sky in a mini avian-tornado. And then everything goes quiet. It's like someone reached over and turned down the volume of the world. Eerie.

Slipping the cap back on the bottle, I suppress a shiver and tuck it back into my bag. The hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention, and I look behind me to see if I can identify what has me so spooked. There's nothing there.

Then the ground beneath my feet trembles. It reminds me of a Southern California earthquake, but it's too shallow. It's not the kind of movement that rolls and makes you semi-seasick. And it's not the teeth-chattering jolter kind either. It's more like a giant eighteen-wheeler driving by. Strange, I never thought of Nebraska as being prone to tremors. Not that it matters now, because clearly this isn't like any earthquake I've ever experienced.

The constant drone builds in intensity, slowly, with a subtle rhythm. Low-flying helicopters? A battalion of tanks? I don't remember seeing any military bases on the

map, but it's so off the grid out here, maybe there's a secret operation. Area 51's cousin, Area 52?

And then I see it. A dust cloud rising and blotting out the eastern entrance of Fort Bellows. The billowing cloud grows larger the closer it gets, and with it, the rumbling grows louder. I pause midstep, my gut telling me something's not quite right, but I can't get a good look since I'm in a small dip in the land. My calves burn as I jog to the top of a nearby hill. What is it? I blink, and then my heart stops when I take in the giant brown creatures headed straight for me.

Bison stampede!

Spinning around to get a sense of the prairie, I realize there's no shelter out here. No place to hide. Animals as big as bison should not be able to move as fast as they do, but they seem to hurl themselves at me like a giant freight train arrow and I'm the bull's-eye. With a yelp, I dart down the hill, the heels of my hiking boots skidding along the grass as I fight for footing. I try to position myself so that I'm moving perpendicular to the animals, hoping that I can make it out of their path before it's too late.

My hiking boots slip and slide over the ground and my backpack slams into my lower back. I grip the straps to help hold it in place while dodging prairie dog holes, rocks, and uneven ground. I stumble when my foot gets caught up in a tangle of vegetation, and I wrench it free with a grunt.

The thunder of hoofbeats grows even louder until it sounds like the bison are right on top of me. I don't dare look. I just put every last bit of energy I have into running as fast and as far as I can.

People in near-death situations always say their life flashes before their eyes, but the only things flashing before my eyes are the endless blades of grass and regrets.



I could have been sunning myself on the beach.

I could have been illustrating science placards at the marine center.

I could have spent more time with Colton.

“Riley.”

Adrenaline must be playing tricks on me, because I swear I heard his voice the minute I thought of him. But there’s no way.

I glance to my right and, holy hell, I’m really bad with approximating distances, but the bison are close.

Really close.

Close enough to see the sweat and saliva dripping from their mouths.

Oh my god.

Every slam of my foot into the ground echoes through my bones. The blood rushes through my ears, nearly drowning out the drum of the hoofbeats as they grow louder and louder. It’s almost impossible to keep my balance as the ground shifts beneath me and just as I’m about to topple forward, something rams into my backpack, hooking the top strap and yanking me off my feet. I’m jerked sideways while my feet circle in the air, scrambling for the earth, and I let out a half-choked scream.

This is it.

I’ve been tossed into the air by some massive bison horn and my poor, fragile body will soon be trampled by creatures that weigh at least a ton, maybe two. I can

practically feel my bones shattering as I tense, preparing for impact.

But the split second of midair weightlessness is over sooner than I expect. I land hard on my tailbone and yelp, my eyes flying open as a viselike grip settles on my waist to keep me in place.

“Hold on,” Colton calls over his shoulder.

Instinct takes over, and I wrap my arms around his waist and grasp him for dear life. He pulls his arm away, untwisting it from its awkward angle, and leans forward in the saddle.

Now I know I must be dead or on the verge of it, because there is no way I’m riding a galloping horse across the Nebraskan prairie having just been lifted onto said horse by Tall, Dark, and Irksome as we’re being chased down by a herd of stampeding bison. As if to prove to myself that none of this is real, my fingers splay over his muscular abdomen, the fabric of his flannel shirt soft against my skin. His back presses into my chest when he adjusts his weight as we veer around a pile of stones. Thing is, he feels too warm and real for this to be a hallucination.

The sound of thunder grows louder still and I peek over my shoulder to find the stampeding bison bearing down on us. With their pointy horns and foamy mouths, they look furious. I lock my arms even more tightly and whimper.

Colton tips his head to glance behind us. “Shit, they’re following us.” He lets out a low growl that I feel all the way down to the tips of my toes. “C’mon, Chance. Fly.”

We race across a dry creek bed, littered with pebbles and small stones. Chance’s rear hooves slip and for a moment, I think we’re going down, but somehow he manages to find his footing.

Colton's arm wraps around mine to keep me from lurching back and we burst forward, scrambling up the dusty wash. The bison are closer—near enough that I can hear their heavy breathing over the sound of their hoofbeats. I shudder and press myself as close to Colton as humanly possible.

We come upon a racing brook, at least fifteen feet wide and deep enough that you can't see the bottom. We speed alongside in a straight path as the water snakes along its banks. A bison pulls alongside us and Chance veers away as the giant beast tips his head in our direction. I swear I feel the whisper of its horn pass by my elbow.

I suck in a shaky breath, my lungs tight with fear, exertion, and the musky scent of the shaggy, sweaty beasts out for blood. Colton's hand wraps around mine and he leans us to the left as we race toward the brook.

"Hold on," he says as Chance darts down the embankment and straight for the rushing water.

With a giant splash, the horse dives in. Droplets rain down over us, trickling down my face. I brush my forehead on the back of Colton's shirt and glance down. The water comes up to our ankles and soaks into my hiking boots. The shocking cold of it has me gasping for air a moment later.

I'm alive.

Blood pounds through my veins and I shiver, tightening my grip on Colton. When I look back over my shoulder, I see that the bison have opted to stay on dry land. Some of the herd flow away from the water and back toward the prairie, while a few others stand along the edge of the embankment and toe the ground while they keep a watchful eye on us.

Turning to face forward, I slump against Colton. He's warm and steady. His thumb

traces a slow circle over the back of my hand as he coaxes Chance across the brook. “Good boy,” he says.

Chance slows in the current but plods forward until we reach the bank on the other side. The minute we’re on dry land again, Colton tosses one leg over the horse’s head and slides off. He reaches up to help me down, and I brace my arms on his shoulders as he guides me to the ground. My knees wobble and Colton tightens his grip.

“Are you okay?” he asks, running his worried gaze over me from the top of my head to the toes of my boots.

I nod because I can’t find my vocal cords.

Colton pats my arms like he’s looking for broken bones or reassuring himself that I’m really standing here in front of him. His palm cradles my face while the fingers of his other hand tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

“I lost my baseball cap,” I say.

For a moment, we just stare at each other, and then Colton lets out a giant laugh. The look of relief in his eyes sets something loose in me, and I join him. The laugh pulls at my sides and sends tears to my eyes.

I puff out a trembling breath. “Did that really just happen?”

Colton’s forehead rests on mine as he takes a step closer. “Yeah.”

“You saved me.”

He shrugs. “I was just in the right place at the right time.”

### CHAPTER 36

Colton

“WALKER TWO, THIS is Mack. Go ahead. Over.”

I take a deep breath and run my free hand over Chance’s flank. “Mack, we have a situation. Over.”

“Go ahead, Walker Two. Over.”

“We have a bison problem. Over.”

I move to Chance’s other side and take a quick glance back across the brook, where the bison are still milling around, eyeing us suspiciously. They don’t look to be in any rush to move on, which isn’t great, especially since the day is already half over. If we could wade across the brook in the next hour, we might be able to make it back to Fort Bellows before dinner. But with the bison on edge and keeping a wary eye, we’d have to follow the water upstream or downstream for a ways before finding a narrow enough crossing point, and then we’d have to pick our way across the prairie, soaking wet and exhausted. Chance has already been pushed to the limit today. I don’t want to risk a serious injury.

“Walker Two, just now hearing of a stampede. Are you secure? Over.”

“Mack, we are secure. The bison gave us a run but we forded Broken Yoke Brook. Riley Thomas, a member of the expedition, is with me. Over.”

“Roger, Walker Two. I’ll notify Walker One. What’s your location? Over.”

My brain calls up a mental map of the area around Fort Bellows. We’re somewhere south of the old Templeton place and north of Mack’s favorite fishing spot and far enough west that roads are few and far between. Even if they send out help now, it would be hours before they could make it up to Pleasant Crossings, double back on Hog Wash Road, and then attempt to cut across the prairie to us, with no trail to follow. If I factor in the time it’ll take to send a truck and trailer from Darby, the earliest anyone would get to us would be at least six p.m., and that’s being optimistic. It would be a rough ride in and out with a horse trailer and only headlights to light the way once twilight falls. Too risky. Since none of us are injured, it’s probably best if we just stay put until daybreak.

“Mack, we’re just behind the herd, but they don’t look like they’re going anywhere anytime soon. We’ll overnight here and reassess in the morning. Over.”

I take the brief silence to check over Chance’s front legs to make sure he isn’t hurt. His weight is evenly distributed and his breathing has returned to normal, which is a good sign.

“Roger, Walker Two. Stay safe out there. Over.”

“Affirmative, Mack. Over and out.”

I power off the radio to conserve the batteries in case we need them and slide the handheld back into the saddlebag, before pulling the bag down from Chance’s saddle. After unhooking the saddle, I pull it and the sweat-soaked saddle blanket off. Chance shifts as if stretching his back, and I don’t blame him. He hasn’t been ridden that hard in a while and not with so much weight.

When I glance over at Riley, she’s squatting down in front of the contents of her

emptied backpack, everything lined up on the ground in a neat row: a small first-aid kit, water straws, energy bars, beef jerky, an apple, a half-filled water bottle, a few single-serving packets of honey and peanut butter, a pocket flashlight, insect repellent, a poncho, a Swiss Army knife, flint, and a pile of art supplies. She tears a few pages of paper from her sketch pad and sets it aside, placing two energy bars, the water bottle, and the apple atop them. She slips the flint into her front pocket and then shoves everything else back into the bag. Pushing up from the squat, Riley glances out into the prairie with a determined look on her face.

I glance away quickly before she catches me staring. While I do a more thorough job of checking Chance over, Riley comes over. “Can I give him this apple? I think he’s earned it.”

“Me too,” I say, nodding.

Chance devours it quickly and then nudges her with his nose, as if asking for more.

“Sorry, buddy,” she says, running her hand down his neck. “I owe you more than an apple, but that’s all I’ve got.” Riley holds out a protein bar and the water bottle to me. I hesitate before taking them, not quite sure where things stand with us. When our fingers meet, heat travels along my arm all the way to my heart, which tightens into a ball in my chest. Her hand lingers for a moment until I pull away, conflicted. Clearly, there’s something between us, but I didn’t just rescue Riley from a bison stampede to have her trample on my heart, either.

Riley nods and brushes her hands on the back of her jeans. “I’ll start gathering kindling.”

“You look surprised,” Riley says, glancing up at me from her spot in front of the campfire. It’s not a big, roaring bonfire by any means, but the little blaze she has going is well-constructed and throws off plenty of heat.

“Not surprised,” I say, settling down on the saddle blanket beside her. “I’m impressed.” Not only has she cleared a wide swath of area around it to prevent the nearby brush from catching fire, but she’s also managed to stockpile a bunch of dried branches and kindling to keep it going.

Riley tosses a small stick into the fire and watches the smoke curl up. A few of the brightest stars have made their appearance, just barely visible in the pale gray sky.

“I owe you an apology and a thank-you, but I’m not sure which should come first,” she says. “I was thinking maybe I should go in chronological order, but I wouldn’t be here to apologize if you hadn’t ridden to my rescue, so thank you for saving my life.” She wipes the back of her hand over her cheek and sniffs. “How did you pull me up?” Riley turns to me with watery eyes, and it takes everything I have in me not to reach over and hold her tight.

“Besides roping competitions, Chance and I compete in the Rescue Race at the county fair. It’s basically what happened out there. You have to pick someone up and toss them onto the horse behind you while you ride by, but in a much more controlled environment.”

“No raging bison?”

“No.” My foot bumps hers. “But sometimes the rodeo clowns get a little wild.”

“I bet you won all the gold medals.” She glances over at me beneath damp eyelashes.

Riley’s faith in my abilities is flattering, but wrong. “Not exactly. I never could manage to get the timing right for the judges.”

“Well, I bet if they’d been here today, you would’ve scored a perfect ten. If you hadn’t gotten to me when you did...”



I don't even want to think what might have happened if I hadn't been there.

Riley reaches over and squeezes my hand, her fingers wrapping around mine for a moment. "I think your timing was perfect." My skin tingles when she draws her hand back and I clamp my fingers into a fist, hoping it will make the sensation go away, but instead, it just amplifies it.

Our eyes lock and I want so badly to lean over and kiss her. To somehow rewind the clock to yesterday afternoon, when it was just the two of us standing in the museum with empty walls of possibility stretching out before us instead of these thick, protective, invisible walls that separate us now.

Twilight settles over the prairie and everything around us is cast in shadows. The brook babbles behind us, while the crickets and frogs call to each other. Every so often, a bison grunts, reminding us that we're still very much under their watchful eye.

I stand and stretch, my body sore from the heavy riding and exertion of the day. Even though I ate a protein bar not too long ago, my stomach feels as hollow as my heart. I might not be able to fix the latter, but I can do something about my hunger.

A peanut butter and honey sandwich is smooshed inside my saddlebag, but it's still edible. I grab it, my mess kit, and a few other provisions, and head back to the fire.

"How's our water supply?" I ask, handing Riley her half. But what I really want to know is How can you hate everything in Nebraska when you haven't really given me a chance?

### CHAPTER 37

Riley

COLTON HANDS ME a steaming tin cup and then takes his place on the blanket beside me. My mouth is still thick from peanut butter and honey sandwich residue and everything that's been left unsaid between us, but the first sip of warm, rich, liquefied chocolate loosens everything right up.

"Hot chocolate?" I sigh, savoring the comfort in cup. "Where did you get hot cocoa?"

"I always carry an emergency stash in my saddlebag."

"You're kidding."

Colton shakes his head while he fiddles with his pocket knife. "Nope."

"It's incredible." I take another sip and let the warmth fill me up.

I know I need to explain about what he overheard last night and tell him I'm staying in Nebraska, but I'm not sure where to start. "I was really pissed off at my parents last night," I say. Because where else is there to begin? "I've been frustrated with them for a while, and last night things got even more complicated and I said some things in the moment that weren't completely true."

Colton looks at me with an unreadable expression. "They weren't completely false, either." He watches me from above the rim of his tin mug as he takes a sip.

My jeans are stiff from dried brook water and I shake out the bottoms to ease some of my restless energy. “I don’t hate Nebraska. It’s just that I had all these plans and now they’re ruined and I’m still coming to terms with it. Even though it’s selfish, lately it’s felt a lot like the whole world is against me. As soon as we arrived in Nebraska, I found out my luggage was lost. There’s no cell service, so I couldn’t even call my best friend to vent. And then I’ve had to contend with militant raccoons, mud baths, and murderous bison. It’s a lot.”

I tip my head back and look up at the vast, darkening sky, peppered with tiny twinkling stars. High above us, the lights of a commercial airliner arc slowly across the sky. “It feels like my life is constantly being disassembled and reassembled, piece by piece, and I have zero say in any of it.” I sigh. “Quit this, pack that, move here, go there. It’s like I’m not allowed to be upset or angry or feel anything at all. Yesterday, when we were in the museum, it was the first time since I arrived when I felt like maybe it would be okay.”

Colton refreshes my hot cocoa and sets his hand down on the blanket next to mine. The tips of our pinkies touch. It’s almost like he’s tossed out a lifeline, and I focus on the sensation of his skin on mine as I forge on. “I had such a great time with you yesterday. I was hoping...maybe there could be more days like that, with you.” My pinkie curls around Colton’s and I’m relieved when he doesn’t pull away.

Colton scoots closer and wraps his hand around mine.

My heart stutters and my fingers give his a tentative squeeze. When I glance at Colton, his unreadable gaze is fixed on the fire.

“What exactly did you picture?” he asks.

I take a sip of the now-lukewarm cocoa and set the mug down on the uneven ground. “We’d come out here and you’d show me more of your favorite places on the prairie.

You'd teach me about the different wild grasses and spin some tall pioneer tails. We'd hike and fish. I'd work on study sketches and you'd do your silent, broody cowboy thing."

"That's not my thing," Colton says, tipping the brim of his hat back so he can look me in the eye.

"That is so your thing," I say, bumping my shoulder into his. Instead of pulling away, I lean into him, letting his solid warmth prop me up.

Colton lifts our joined hands and studies our linked fingers, glowing gold in the firelight. "Last night, it sounded like there was nothing here for you. It made me wonder, if I was just...convenient."

"Jake is convenient." I rest my head on his shoulder, the flannel soft and warm against my forehead. "But I'm not looking for convenient."

"So what are you looking for, then?" His voice is a low murmur in my ear.

"Something more than stale pickup lines and practiced smiles." A cold gust of wind whips across the prairie, and I snuggle closer. "I really like you, Colton. You're the one person who's made any of this bearable. You understand me. You make me feel special and seen. You've helped me to see the possibilities. Hell, you saved my life. I...I wish we could have more time together than just this week."

This is it. This is where I tell him I'm staying in Nebraska. That we have a chance for more than just this week.

I open my mouth, but Colton reaches out and brushes his finger over my lips to get me to stop talking.

Colton's lips are soft and warm when they settle over mine with just enough pressure to make me forget what I'm thinking but not so much that it feels forced. I shiver, partly from the way my spine tingles from his kiss but also because the breeze carries a chill. He wraps his arms around me, pulling me into his chest, and I melt into his warmth as his familiar leather-and-Ivory-soap scent envelops us. My fingers trace the rough stubble along his jawline.

When we finally pull apart, the sky is midnight blue and speckled with so many stars it's like someone took a brush, dipped it in silver paint, and flicked it at the heavens. "It's beautiful out here."

"It is," Colton says, his voice a low murmur that makes my skin blaze.

The fire casts a warm golden glow that highlights the sharp planes of his face. My fingers itch for a set of oil pastels and my sketch pad. I want to capture Colton in this moment, where he's the perfect mixture of rugged and soft, strong and tender.

"What?" he asks, his forehead creasing.

"I was just thinking about the colors I'd use to sketch you." I reach up and trace over his cheek. "Vermilion, bright yellow, and golden ochre with a hint of scarlet lake." Down the bridge of his nose. "Indigo, brown, and cobalt blue." Along the side of his face where it's cast in shadow. "Ivory black and intense blue."

He reaches up and wraps his hand over mine, pressing my palm into his cheek. "What about my lips?"

I pretend to think for a moment. "I'm not sure," I say. "I'll have to study them a bit more to make sure I get it right."

Burnt madder.

Orange lead.

Venetian red.

The colors flash behind my eyes the moment our lips meet. This kiss is less tentative. The pressure builds and my hands rise to cradle his face. We twist onto our sides on the saddle blanket. Colton's arm cushions my head while his free hand tangles in my hair. I flex my toes and they brush against the tops of his boots.

"How much studying do you think you'll need?" Colton mumbles as his lips move to my jawline. He makes his way up to my earlobe, then dusts my cheek with light kisses before returning to my mouth.

"I'm not sure," I say. "I'm a pretty slow learner. It could take a while."

Colton leans back and grins. "It's a good thing we've got allnight."

### CHAPTER 38

Colton

I SHIFT AND tuck Riley closer to my side. She settles her head on my shoulder and sighs. “Can we just stay here forever and never go back?”

Her voice is teasing, but there’s a hint of seriousness in her eyes.

“You can’t avoid your problems forever.”

“I know,” she says, linking our fingers together. My thumb traces circles on the back of her hand. “But I like this part of the excursion best.”

“Me too.”

“Don’t tell my parents, but I’m glad they made us go on this Oregon Trail adventure.”

I kiss the top of her head and whisper, “My lips are sealed.”

Riley shivers and I wish I’d been more prepared for a night in the prairie. Back at Fort Bellows, my sleeping bag and foam pad are wrapped in a tight roll, completely useless to us now. It would have made for a more comfortable evening, especially now that the dampness is seeping up through the ground and settling over us from the air.

In the distance, a coyote howls. Riley tenses. “That sounds a bit too close for comfort.”

“Sound travels pretty far out here at night. But I don’t think the coyote will mess with us, not this time of year. There are plenty of smaller animals out here for them to eat.”

A chorus of yips and barks echoes across the prairie. “It sounds like there’s a whole pack of them,” she says.

“It’s probably just two or three. They don’t form large packs like wolves or anything.”

Riley presses her hand on my chest and leans over me, her hair cascading down to brush over my cheek. “Wait...do we have to worry about wolves, too?”

“We should always worry about wolves,” I say, reaching up to brush the hair out of her face.

Her eyes go wide. “How worried?”

“Well, even though they’re not endangered anymore, I don’t think we should stop conservation efforts. Wolves are an important predator in the food chain.”

Riley shakes her head and gives me a playful smack on the chest. “Not funny.”

“Not funny at all. Without wolves, the prairie would be overrun with deer, and that really messes with the local ecosystem.”

“Colton Walker,” she says with an exasperated sigh. “Are there any animals on the prairie that pose us a threat?”



“Besides the bison?”

She nods.

“That depends,” I say.

“On what?”

“How you feel about Jake?”

“Jake?” Riley narrows her eyes. “Do you seriously consider him a threat?”

I shrug. “He might be under the impression that we’re competing for your attention.”

“How’s that even possible? I think I’ve made it pretty clear I’m not interested in him. It’s not even a competition.”

My heart soars. “It is to him. Once he found out I was interested in you—”

“Have you been crushing on me this whole time?” she asks with a smirk.

“Not the whole time,” I admit. It’s hard to pinpoint the exact moment that I started falling for her.

“Fair enough. I didn’t like you very much at first, either.”

“Ouch,” I say, laying a hand over my heart.

“Please.” She rolls her eyes. “You thought I was a spoiled Prairie Princess.”

She has a point.

“It wasn’t fair for me to make that assumption.”

“And I assumed you were an inflexible, know-it-all jerk with no sense of humor.”

I force my mouth into a playful scowl. “I think irksome was the term you used.”

“We were both wrong.” She leans forward and kisses me softly. “I’m glad.”

Her smile falters. She takes a deep breath, as if she’s going to tell me something, but the coyotes howl again, reminding me that I can’t just lie here kissing Riley all night, as much as I’d like to. “I should tend the fire,” I say, easing my arm out from under her.

“Will it help keep them away?”

“I don’t think so. But it will keep the chill away. It’ll get even colder out here before the sun comes up.”

Riley watches me as I toss a few handfuls of sticks and branches on the coals. Although she gathered quite a bit, at the rate it’s burning, it won’t be enough to get us through the night.

I grab a small hatchet from my saddlebag and slide it into my belt loop. “I think I saw a dead tree over by the edge of the creek. Would you mind helping me drag it over?”

“I’ll grab my flashlight,” she says.

When I wake a few hours later at dawn, sore and cold, Riley’s curled up against me, her face buried in my shirt. My arm tingles with pins and needles. I try not to jostle her awake as I shift, hoping to find a more comfortable position that doesn’t involve stones poking into my back. She shivers and I tuck the aluminum blanket tighter

around her shoulders.

Chance flicks his tail and puffs out a greeting. Thankfully, he and I have spent enough nights on the prairie that he's used to being out in the elements. Still, yesterday's run was taxing on him, and I'm sure he'd like something more filling to munch on than prairie grass and an apple. When I checked him over yesterday, it didn't look like he'd torn any ligaments or gotten hurt, but I might have missed something. We'll have to take it slow on our way back to Fort Bellows and then Mack can give him a more thorough checkup.

Riley stirs and opens her eyes. She blinks up at me. "Morning," she says, letting her forehead flop against my chest.

"Morning."

"This is going to sound screwy, but that was the best night's sleep I've had since leaving California."

"Seriously?" I ask, brushing the hair back from her face with the tips of my fingers.

"Seriously. I have this thing where I have trouble sleeping anywhere that's not my own bed. It usually takes me hours to fall asleep." Riley stretches like a cat beside me and then sits up.

Right then, my stomach lets out a low, hollow rumble.

"Do you have a monster in there?" Riley pokes me in the belly.

I grab her hand and weave my fingers through hers. "No, but I'm starved."

"Do you have anything else to eat in that saddlebag of yours?" Riley asks as she

stands. The dawn is still dark gray and it's hard to make her out in the dimness. A moment later, coals spark as she stirs them up with our poker stick before tossing on some kindling to get the fire going again.

"I have a little more hot cocoa mix and not much else." My joints creak as I stand. I shake my legs out and twist my torso to stretch.

"Cocoa's not a bad way to start the day, although I could really go for a venti triple shot caramel macchiato," she says.

"Prairie Princesses," I tease. "I'll buy you a venti shot triple caramel maraschino when we get back."

Riley grins at me. "First off, it's a date. And secondly, let me do the ordering when we get to the coffee shop, because what you just said"—she shakes her head—"makes no sense. A twenty-shot caramel cherry isn't a thing."

"It could be a thing. We could make it a thing."

"That can never be a thing."

"It could be our thing," I say, grinning back.

Riley walks over to her backpack and pulls open the zipper. "I have six protein bars, four packets of peanut butter, and a handful of honey packets I nabbed at the hotel breakfast. Oh, and two MREs."

"You have MREs?" I ask, surprised and impressed by her again. Out of the two of us, she was way more prepared for our predicament than I was. And here I was, thinking she was a complete greenhorn when we first met.

“It was a total impulse purchase. I spotted them in the checkout line at Ranch & Rustler, displayed next to giant tubs of udder cream and travel sized cans of WD-40. I wasn’t entirely sure what the food situation was going to be like on the excursion, so I grabbed a few to make sure I wouldn’t starve. I wish I’d tossed more than two in my backpack yesterday. I have a bunch more in my luggage back at the fort.”

“You’re pretty awesome,” I say, wrapping my arms around her.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” she replies.

### CHAPTER 39

Riley

THINGS I HAVE discovered in the past fifteen minutes:

Riding a horse is not as easy as it looks.

I may have underestimated the awesomeness of bacon.

Colton Walker's strong, silent-type vibes are genetic.

While my feet and I were initially relieved to see Captain Walker riding to our rescue with a pair of horses to carry us the rest of the way, my butt and thighs would much rather I had walked. Aside from Colton's Rescue Race move yesterday, this is only the second time I've ridden horseback and it's painfully uncomfortable. Here I am bobbing about in the saddle, while next to me, Colton and his dad are smooth and relaxed riders.

I gnaw off a bit of the bacon Captain Walker brought for us and savor the satisfying mixture of crispy meat and fat. I'm not sure if it tastes especially good because I haven't eaten anything remotely delicious (besides Colton's hot cocoa) in almost twenty-four hours or if it's because my body needs a hefty dose of salt, protein, and fat. All I know is that it's satisfying. No wonder the pioneers ate this stuff all the time.

Captain Walker hasn't said much since he met up with us. Like Colton, his chiseled

jaw is perpetually tensed and his eyes are watchful and serious. I'd like to believe that underneath his stony exterior, he has hidden depths like Colton. Do they share the same wry sense of humor and knack for telling tall tales?

"Mack will meet us out in the corral as soon as we arrive to evaluate Chance." Captain Walker turns to me. "We'll meet up with your folks, get you a quick bite to eat, and then load you up in the wagon for our return trip. Wanda has everything packed and ready to go."

While Colton and his dad discuss the best alternative routes back to Darby, I try to memorize the prairie from this vantage point but it's next to impossible to focus. I shift in the saddle, hoping to find a more comfortable position, and catch Colton looking at me. "Are you okay?" he mouths.

I nod and grab hold of the pommel to keep from lurching right out of my seat.

I'm fine.

Everything's fine.

Everything's not fine.

Okay, that might be a tad melodramatic.

But still, everything feels off the minute we arrive at Fort Bellows. Similar to our first entrance in the wagon train, spectators line up along the sides of the main road to watch us enter. This time I recognize some faces. The McCreadys standing in front of the general store. The Stones and the Pinskis outside the tavern. Caleb and his buddies messing around in front of the post office. Up on this horse, I feel more on display than I did before. Maybe it's because I'm not hidden under yards of calico, with a giant bonnet concealing my face.

I glance over at Colton, wishing I could hold his hand. Or at least have him right by my side for moral support. When I catch his eye, he shrugs and gives me a look that I interpret to mean, “I don’t get what the big deal is.”

Exactly.

We weren’t missing for days.

Neither of us is fatally wounded or even slightly injured.

We’re hungry, thirsty, and in dire need of a warm shower, but who isn’t after a night on the trail?

After what feels like an eternity, we make it through the welcome gauntlet and ease to a stop in front of the stables. A squat man with a crooked grin walks over and tips his hat in our general direction, his gaze focused on Chance. “Is he limping? Any gait problems? Shying away?”

Colton glides out of his saddle, landing lightly on his feet. “Not that I can tell, Mack.”

The man nods and takes Chance’s lead. “I’ll give him a thorough go-over and call in Dr. Vitello if I need to.”

“I’ll join you in a minute,” Colton says.

He strides over to me and reaches up to help me down from my horse. Instead of landing with a graceful bend to my knee, my stiff joints wobble and I nearly fall over. His hands brace my waist, holding me upright, while I find my land legs. All the muscles in my body hum from exertion. If I listen carefully, I can hear every bathtub and hot tub in Nebraska calling my name.



Riiiiiiilllleeey.

Colton leans down and whispers, “I really want to kiss you right now, but my dad is right there.”

I take a step back and nod. “Colton, there’s something I need to tell you.”

Before I can say anything more, my parents wrap me in a crushing hug.

“I’ll catch up with you later,” Colton says, backing away to give us space.

“Oh my gosh, Riley, you gave us a scare,” Mom says, holding my face in her hands and twisting it to the left and right as if to make sure I’m truly fine.

“We’re so glad you’re okay.” Dad rubs his hands in a small circle on my back.

“You must be exhausted.”

“And hungry.”

They spin me away from the stable and wrap me between them, like I’m the creamy vanilla filling in their Oreo cookie sandwich. I catch a glimpse of Colton disappearing into Chance’s stall at the back of the barn before they guide me onto the main avenue and back to our hotel.

It’s slow going for me, with everything from my gluteus maximus to the tip of my big toe aching from the effort. Colton has to be impossibly fit to sleep on the ground and then ride for a few hours and not waddle like a duck because of it.

Captain Walker catches up with us as we make our way up the hotel’s front porch stairs. “Wagons depart in an hour. I wish I could give you more time, Riley, but we’re

a day behind schedule and need to get things back on track as soon as possible so we can get everyone back to Darby on time. If you don't want to continue with the rest of the excursion," he says, looking to my parents for guidance, "we can always call the office and have a van sent for you when you're ready to head back."

And miss spending more time with Colton? "Hold up," I say. "Dad's been dying to go on a trip like this for ages and there's only two more days left. No one has cholera or dysentery or a broken bone, so at least we've got a chance to beat the game by making it to our final destination," I say.

Mom doesn't look convinced. "You've had a rough few days."

"Riding in the wagon is a lot of sitting. It won't be any more taxing than riding in a van, and at least I can enjoy the scenery better. Being stuck in a hotel room for the next few days would be even worse."

Dad squeezes my arm. "I have been looking forward to the sing-along."

"You can't miss that," I say.

Dad nods and turns to Captain Walker. "That's a kind offer, but we'll continue on the trail."

"Understood," Captain Walker says. "But the offer stands if you change your mind."

When we arrive at the departure point, it's a chaotic jumble of passengers, crew, and gawking onlookers. Wild Wanda and Felix take our bags and Tetris them into the cargo holds in the wagon. Ty fiddles with one of the mule's saddlebags. Captain Walker and Barnaby stand near the gates, staring out into the prairie while they discuss whatever has them looking so serious. I glance around, hoping to spot Colton, but there are too many people milling about and I'm sure he's busy preparing for the

return trip.

I slide my backpack onto the floor and ease into my seat. Mom hovers beside me while Dad plops down next to the Stones at the front of the wagon. “Did you want us to sit back here with you? Your father and I don’t mind.”

“That’s okay,” I say. She and Dad have been treating me with kid gloves since I got back, and while it’s a nice break from the constant headbutting with them, it’s stifling.

“Okay,” she says, brushing my bangs back from my face. “We’ll be just up here if you need us.”

“I’m seventeen, not seven,” I want to say. But deep down, it’s nice to know that in spite of all our disagreements and fights lately, she still cares.

Caleb leans forward in his seat across the aisle and drops his hands onto his knees. “Just so you know, I wasn’t involved with the firecrackers. I told Kyle and Mark that it was a bad idea, but they didn’t listen. I was worried that one of the bison might charge at them, so I went to find someone. By the time I found Captain Walker, they had already set off the second detonation. And, well, you know what happened after that.” His fingers tighten on his knees. “If I’d thought you’d be in danger, I would have tried harder to stop them.”

“Caleb,” I say, reaching over to settle my hand over his. “It’s not your fault. There’s no way you could have known what would happen.”

“Doesn’t make me feel any less guilty.”

“Did you purchase the firecrackers?”

“No.”

“Did you light the firecrackers?”

“No.”

“Did you toss the firecrackers?”

Caleb winces. “No.”

“Then stop blaming yourself. There are plenty of other things that you’ve done to me—let them plague you with guilt instead.”

His eyes light up with defiance. “Like what?”

“Are we really going there?” I ask. “Okay. How about the time you launched my entire My Little Pony collection into the neighbor’s yard with your slingshot?”

“I was five,” he grumbles.

“How about the time you ate the cookies I’d spent the entire weekend baking for the seventh-grade field trip fundraiser?”

“I was hungry.” He smirks.

“How about the time—”

“Okay, fine,” he says, holding up his hands. “I get it.” The smile slides from his face and he grows serious again. “Are we good?”

“We’re great,” I say, doing my best Tony the Tiger impression.

“Oh, man, now I want Frosted Flakes,” Caleb says. “I haven’t had a decent bowl of cereal since we left Darby.”

“Have you had any cereal since we left Darby?”

Caleb’s answer is drowned out by a loud whistle and a shout. Our wagon rocks as someone settles into the driver’s seat and then, with a sharp lurch, we’re rolling.

But unlike when we started this journey, things are looking up. Bright blue skies. Sweet, crisp air. A fluffy cushion under my butt. The only thing that’s missing is Colton, but I’ll see him soon enough, when we stop for the night.

### CHAPTER 40

Colton

“HEY, MOM,” I say, tucking the phone receiver between my shoulder and my ear.

“Colton Mitchell Walker, you scared the bejesus out of me. Riding into a stampede, of all things.”

“I didn’t have much of a choice, Ma.” My hip rests against the desk in the operations office, which is scattered with bills, inventory lists, and reservation info. “It was either that or watch Riley get trampled.” My voice hitches when I say her name, the dread of what could have happened sending my heart thumping around in my chest. I cough, hoping Mom didn’t pick up on the tell. I’m not ready for her well-intentioned, yet completely awkward, questions about Riley just yet.

“Riley?” Mom says, her voice dripping with piqued interest.

“She’s one of the passengers. Ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Papers rustle on the other end of the line. “I have the manifest right here. Riley Thomas, seventeen, no known allergies. There’s a note in here about lost luggage. Poor girl’s having a tough time of it this week.”

“You have no idea,” I say.

“Sounds like she found a friend in you.”

“You could say that.” I’m pretty sure I’m securely out of the friend zone at this point, but Mom doesn’t need to know that just yet.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Mom,” I warn. “She’s a passenger. And she lives in California.”

“Okay, okay,” Mom sighs. “Just tell me, does she make you smile?”

The corners of my mouth lift automatically. “Yeah.”

“All righty, then.” I can picture her clapping her hands together.

“Mom, I’ve gotta run. But I love you and I’ll see you soon.”

“I love you, too, Colton. No more stampedes.”

I set the phone back into the cradle and glance at my watch. Mack should be just about finished looking over Chance. In the meantime, I have some paperwork to finish up in the office.

Twenty minutes later, I stride into the barn with my saddlebag slung over my shoulder. There’s a definite spring in my step, which can be directly attributed to a steaming hot shower, fresh clothes, and the prospect of spending two more days on the trail with Riley.

As I near Chance’s stall, I make out the murmured voices of Mack and...“Dr. Vitello,” I say, stepping inside.

This can’t be good.

Dr. Vitello glances up from her clipboard, where her pen is poised over a veterinary chart. “Howdy, Colton.” She gives me a firm handshake. “Heard you and Chance had quite the adventure yesterday.”

“You could say that.” I scratch at my stubble and try to sneak a peek at the notes she’s written in his file.

Mack leans against the far wall, feet crossed at the ankles. “I noticed a bit of tenderness in his right flank when I was checking him over. Doesn’t seem to be anything worrisome, but I thought it would be good to get a second opinion,” he explains.

“He’s not favoring it and doesn’t seem to be in any real pain,” Dr. Vitello says. “So I don’t think he has anything more than a slight muscle strain, which is nothing a little TLC can’t cure.”

Just then, Dad pokes his head in. “Can I borrow you for a second, Colt?”

I duck out. “What’s up?”

“Wagons are rolling out in about fifteen minutes. Are you and Chance up for hitting the trail?”

“I am. But he’s not.” I frown. “It’s nothing serious, but it looks like I’ll have to bring him home in the trailer.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Dad says, patting me on the back. “Dr. Vitello knows her stuff. I’m sure Chance will be fine.”

It stinks that time with Riley will have to wait, but I can’t just leave him here while I ride off with the excursion. I’ll have to catch her before the wagons depart to explain



everything.

“I’ll call your mom to let her know what’s going on,” Dad says. “See you soon, son.”

I nod and enter Chance’s stall, my good mood deflating fast. “How long will he need to rest?” I ask.

Dr. Vitello runs her hand over Chance’s flank and bobs her head in thought. “A few days, most likely, but I’d give it a week before saddling him up, to be on the safe side.” Chance nuzzles her arm as she packs up her veterinary bag. “It doesn’t seem to be bothering him now, without a saddle or extra weight, but if he starts limping or shows signs of discomfort, we can get him on some muscle relaxants or set him up for an acupuncture appointment. Who’s his regular vet?”

“Dr. Freeman.”

“Want me to give him a call?”

I brush my fingers through Chance’s mane and shake my head. “Nah. We’ll keep an eye on him. I’m sure he just overexerted himself.”

“Good to see you, Chance,” she says, slipping him a sugar cube. “Colton.”

I tip my hat to her. “Thanks for coming.”

The door to Chance’s stall latches closed behind her. Dr. Vitello’s laugh echoes through the stable as Mack walks her out to her truck.

I brush my hand down Chance’s muzzle and rest my forehead against his. “I’m sorry you got hurt saving Riley, but thank you for being there for me. I owe you big-time.”

Chance sniffs at my hands, looking for more treats. When I flip them over to show him they're empty, I happen to glance at my watch. It's already 2:00 p.m. Dr. Vitello was here longer than I thought.

Oh crap.

It's two o'clock.

"Be right back," I call to Mack as I race past him on my way out of the stable. My heavy work boots thud against the dusty lane that leads toward the center of Fort Bellows. I dart between two groups of tourists, dodge a stray chicken, and twist out of the way to narrowly escape a collision with a wobbly toddler. Dad's high-pitched whistle pierces the air just before I round the corner.

My boots skid to a stop in front of the general store. There are more tourists and little kids here now than when Riley and I rode in a little over an hour ago. Where did they all come from?

As if to answer my question, a woman to my right holds up a bright orange flag and says, "Junior Adventurers Troop Eight, eyes on me."

I bob and weave through the crowd, but I don't seem to get any closer to the wagons. Or to Riley. With growing frustration, I watch the supply wagon pull through the open gates, the caboose of our wagon train. My lungs burn in my chest from sprinting here from the stable but also from the sinking feeling that Riley has just slipped through my fingers.

"Dammit," I huff, kicking up a cloud of dirt.

### CHAPTER 41

Riley

I PULL A Caleb and doze off during our trek across the plains. Exhaustion from the past few days has finally caught up with me and the gentle rocking of the wagon lulls me off to a deep sleep. Mom rouses me when we reach our campsite for the night.

“Riley, sweetie. We’re here.”

It’s hard to pry my eyes open, but when I do, I find Mom standing beside me, studying me. “Maybe we should’ve taken a van back to Darby,” she says, running her hand over my forehead as if she expects me to be running a fever.

“I’m fine, Mom. Just tired.” My mouth is cottony. “And thirsty.” I scoot to my backpack, pull out my water bottle, and take a long swig.

She nods. “Let’s get your tent set up so you can tuck in early.”

I’d rather sleep out under the stars, with a roaring fire to keep me cozy and Colton to keep me company. Warmth creeps into my face at the memory of his arms tucked around me as we kissed in the midnight blue darkness last night.

Mom presses her hand to my forehead once more. “You do feel a little hot...”

And a whole lot bothered, but there’s nothing medically wrong with me, I’m sure of it. What I have is a bad case of Colton Walker and only he can cure it.

“I’m sure it’s just from the nap and riding under this thick canvas cover. Not a lot of airflow in here,” I say, wishing I could splash a little water on my face to cool it down.

Caleb pokes his head back into the wagon. “You two coming? Dad’s got our tents and stuff.”

The air outside is cool and refreshing. The breeze instantly blows away what’s left of my post-nap grogginess. I glance around, hoping to spot Colton, but he must be off doing something work related.

Mom and Dad insist on helping us pitch our tent, but Caleb and I end up doing most of the work since they still haven’t quite got the hang of the process. Then they cajole us into helping them set up theirs. By the time the Thomas family’s rustic overnight accommodations are set, Wild Wanda rings the dinner bell.

We meander to the cook fire with the rest of the passengers and form a snaking line. Any lingering doubt that Caleb’s buddies were behind the stampede are quickly put to rest when I spy them whispering and staring at me. When I catch them gawking, they look away quickly, trying their best to appear innocent.

“Your friends are punks,” I whisper to him.

“I know,” he says with a shrug.

I grab a tin plate and cutlery and step up to get my helping of dinner. Wild Wanda grins at me. “Good to see you lookin’ no worse for wear, honey.” Wild Wanda slaps a giant helping of barbecue beans and a pork chop down on my plate, and uses tongs to deposit a biscuit beside them. “I ain’t never seen them get all riled up like that in all my years out here. But as my pa use’n to say, ‘You can take a bull by the horns, but a bison’ll take you by the horns.’ I’m mighty glad you an’ Colton made it out of

that stampede unscathed. Now go on and eat while the food's still hot."

"Thanks," I say.

I step aside for the next person in line and look around for Colton once more.

There's definitely a spark between us. But what kind of spark is it? Is it the kind of electric spark that's always there every time you flip the switch, strong and steady and constant? Or is it more like the kind of spark you get when you smash two rocks together, quick and fleeting and only obtained under pressure? I wonder if things will feel different between us now that the shock has worn off and we've spent some time apart. Plus, we still need to talk.

I'm sure my dinner tastes better than my lip, but here I am, chewing on it. As I make my way over to my parents, someone calls, "Riley, hold up a sec."

Automatically, I stop and turn. "Jake."

"Hey," he says, shoving his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. "Yesterday was wild, am I right?"

I nod, my eyebrow lifting as I wait for him to get to the point.

"When we saw those bison heading for you, man, I just couldn't believe it. Colton took off toward you without a second thought." He swallows and glances away with a grimace. "I, uh, don't have the guts to do what he did. Stampedes are..." Jake shudders. "Colton really cares about you. He risked his neck for you. I know I give him crap and all, but he's a good guy. So just, be careful with his heart, okay?"

Jake's the last person I would have expected to go to bat for Colton. But it also helps dispel any lingering doubts about Colton's true feelings for me. Obviously, they're

strong enough and clear enough to make even the most seasoned and persistent player step aside. I definitely need to tell him that I'm moving to Nebraska.

I nod. "I really care about him, too. Do you happen to know where he is? I haven't seen him since we got back to Fort Bellows."

Jake reaches up and scratches the back of his neck. "Didn't you hear? Chance has a muscle strain from all that rescue riding, so Colton's got to take him back to Darby in a trailer."

My heart plummets. "Oh my god. Is Chance going to be okay?" With all my preoccupation with Colton, I hadn't even thought about how Chance might be doing. Knowing that he might have gotten injured while rescuing me eats away at my insides.

"I didn't catch all the details, but stuff like that is usually minor. Chance is a young, healthy horse and they have a good area out at their farm where he can recuperate. I'm sure he'll be riding through stampedes again in no time." He offers a reassuring smile. "Colton wouldn't want to leave his horse, though. I'm sure he stayed back at Fort Bellows to arrange everything."

I can't blame him. Even if the injury is only minor, I'm sure Colton's worried. Hell, I barely know Chance and I'm worried.

And disappointed. I was looking forward to a few more days...a few more nights...a few more stolen kisses with Colton. Maybe I should have stayed back at the fort to catch a van ride back. At least that way, I'd be with Colton now, able to lend him some moral support.

Even though my heart aches, I force myself to smile. "Thanks for letting me know."

Jake nods. "I'll see you around, Riley."

"See you around, Jake," I say, and then turn back to my parents with my now-lukewarm dinner. Without Colton by my side, it's going to be a long, lonely trip back to Darby.

### CHAPTER 42

Colton

MOM ARRIVES WITH the trailer late in the afternoon. Dressed in faded blue jeans and one of Dad's old Henleys, she jumps from the truck cab, kicking up a cloud of dust with her scuffed up work boots.

"There's my boy," she says, rising on her tiptoes to kiss my cheek.

"Thanks for coming," I say, wrapping her in a hug.

"Sorry I didn't get here sooner. The trailer had a flat. I had to swap out one of the tires. And then there was a jackknifed semi on the highway just past Pine Junction. How's Chance?"

"He's doing all right. He doesn't seem to be in pain, but I won't be able to ride him for a while."

Mom frowns. "Poor thing. Want to get him loaded up?"

I do, but apparently my stomach has other ideas. It lets out a low rumble.

"When's the last time you ate?" she asks.

I think back and realize I haven't eaten anything since Riley and I got back to Fort Bellows. "It's been a while."



“Why don’t we go grab a bite to eat while you tell me exactly what happened out on the trail. And then we can see to Chance.”

I suppose there’s no rush, and I’m no good on an empty stomach.

We head over to the tavern and grab a seat near the bar that serves only sassafras tea, sarsaparilla, cowboy coffee, and iced tea.

Mom always worries I don’t eat enough on the trail, but she seems satisfied with my order of a French dip sandwich with fries and a side of coleslaw. When her house club on wheat and my French dip arrive, we dig in. She listens as I tell her about Riley and recount the relevant parts of the incident. When I’m done, she reaches over and squeezes my hand. “As your mother, I’m not wild about the risk you took, but I’m proud of you for saving that girl’s life. Seems to me, she’s pretty special to you.”

“She is.” I drag a hand over my face and sigh. “And she’s probably wondering where I am right now. I didn’t have an opportunity to tell her about Chance before the wagons rolled out.”

“I’m sure she’ll understand, once you explain the situation.” Mom swirls a fry through a dollop of ketchup and pops it in her mouth.

“I know, you’re right. It’s just...what if I don’t see her again before she leaves?”

“If she means a lot to you, you’ll find a way to keep in touch.”

I lean back in my chair and groan. “I don’t have her number.”

“You can’t let a little thing like that stop you,” Mom says. “You’ll figure it out.”

“And to make it worse, Jake’s out there,” I grumble. “He thinks we’re competing for

Riley's attention. If I'm not there, he'll take it as an open invitation to swoop in."

"From what you've told me, Riley sounds like the type of girl who'd sweep him right back out again." Mom's fork hovers over my coleslaw. "Plus, unless I'm mistaken," she says, shaking it at me, "it's you she's been kissing, not him."

My hand immediately goes to my neck. Do I have a hickey I don't know about? I can feel the heat rising to my face.

Mom smirks. "I might be old, but I was a teenager, too, once upon a time. Your father had the same glassy-eyed expression for a whole week after our first kiss. It's a trait all Walker men share."

I drop my hand to the table and press my palm down flat. "I guess you can't fight genetics."

"Look on the bright side," she says. "At least you didn't inherit Grampa Bill's hairline."

After our meal, we load Chance into the trailer. I'm thoroughly exhausted by the time I finish latching the door. He didn't flinch or show any signs of discomfort, which is a good thing. Hopefully the ride back in the trailer won't exacerbate anything.

The sun has already dipped below the horizon, and twilight is falling fast. A crisp breeze kicks up, sending little dust spouts across the prairie flats.

"Give me a few minutes to grab my things and then we can head out," I say, fully expecting to ride back with her.

"You're not coming with me," Mom says. "I can take care of Chance just fine on my own. You need to get back on the trail." She pulls a duffel bag from the cab and

tosses it over to me. “Here, I brought you some nicer clothes. You might want to freshen up a bit more before you see Riley again. I hope she likes corn bread.”

Mom’s convinced that anyone who doesn’t like corn bread isn’t right for me. Granted, it is a weird coincidence that all the girls I’ve dated so far haven’t liked corn bread. But it’s not exactly the kind of question that’s easy to work into conversation before a first date. Hey, how do you feel about corn bread? ’Cause my mom has this theory...

“Thanks, Mom,” I say, sliding the carrying strap over my shoulder. “But I don’t see how I’ll be able to catch up with the wagons without a horse.”

“You can take the mules,” she says as if the answer’s obvious.

“What mules?”

“Sal and Buck,” Mom says. “With you staying back, Dad wasn’t sure they’d have enough hands on the trail to deal with them. Jake’s not exactly the best with mules and you know how skittish they get with Wanda. Mack agreed to stable them and he’s got an old buckboard wagon you can borrow.”

I’m confident I can handle Sal and Buck, since I helped train them, but I’m not sure about the wagon. Without having a feel for how it handles, I’m not keen on testing it out in the growing darkness. I glance down at my watch. It’s already 6:00 p.m. By the time I get the team hitched...

“You don’t have to leave tonight. Get yourself a good night’s rest and head out at dawn. Sal and Buck are fast and you can shave some time going through Horsethief Gulch. You should have no trouble catching up to them by dinner tomorrow night.”

I pull her in for a bear hug. “Thanks, Ma.”

She squeezes me back. “Oh, I forgot to tell you. Mrs. Martinez called earlier today. She’s already making lists of possible dates for you for the Harvest Dance. She’s still going on about introducing you to her niece. Or her cousin’s niece. Someone’s niece, anyway.”

I groan. “Mom, Mrs. Martinez has to be stopped. There’s no reason a sixty-year-old woman should be that invested in my love life.”

Mom laughs. “I told her you’re already spoken for.”

“This isn’t the 1900s. Who uses the term ‘spoken for’ anymore?”

“Mrs. Martinez.” Mom grins. “She used the term at the quilting bee yesterday.”

I roll my eyes. “Riley won’t even be here for the Harvest Dance.”

“Mrs. Martinez doesn’t need to know that,” she says with a wink. “I should head out.”

“Drive safely.” I kiss the top of her head. “Take good care of Chance for me?”

“Always.” She leans up and kisses my cheek. “Be safe out there, sweetheart.” She pulls open the driver’s door and pauses with her foot on the running board. “You really do like this Riley girl, huh?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I really do.”

### CHAPTER 43

Riley

DAWN brEAKS ON our last full day on the trail and I'm filled with a restless energy. If Colton were here, I'd be able to draw from his calm, centered nature. But right now, I seem to share the same wild and unpredictable energy as the flock of red-winged blackbirds Barnaby is studying through his binoculars.

At nooning time, I settle down against a wagon wheel and flip open my sketchbook to a blank page. With Colton on my mind, it's no surprise that he's the subject of my latest sketch. I draw him as I remember him from two nights ago, looking up at the stars, his Stetson tipped back on his head. His lips are slightly parted, as if he's about to speak, the reflection of the campfire brightening his eyes. The glow of the firelight softens his chiseled features, but the stubble along his jawline keeps him looking more rugged than boyish. My pencil glides over the paper as I sign and date the sketch.

This Colton is so different from the Tall, Dark, and Irksome first impression I had of him. This is the Colton hidden beneath the watchful, careful, by-the-book outer layer that felt like an impenetrable wall until we kissed. This is the Colton who challenges me to coax him into a rare smile. Who offers up dry humor and keen insights when least expected. Who's managed to stake a claim on my heart.

I flip to a fresh page and start a new sketch of the surrounding landscape. While I might not get picked to paint the mural, I'm excited to have some new pieces for my art portfolio. Coming to terms with my new life in Nebraska is going to be a process,

but I think I can find a way to accept it and be happy. Now I just have to find a way to tell Colton everything and trust that good things are possible.

We continue east along the trail at a slow, steady pace and reach our campsite by midafternoon. Once everyone's settled, Wild Wanda gives a natural-cloth-dyeing lesson while Captain Walker and Felix make dinner. Beans and rice, bacon, and biscuits, with potato pudding for dessert.

Dusk falls and Ty pulls out a harmonica. He puffs up his cheeks and starts blowing, the wheezy chords cutting through after-dinner conversations. Felix picks up a fiddle and joins in. Soon I recognize "Sweet Betsy from Pike."

"I love this one," Dad says, slapping his hand on his knee.

Wild Wanda grabs a washboard and wooden spoon and adds some percussion while leading the passengers in a sing-along.

"One evening quite early they camped on the Platte..."

When the song is over, Captain Walker stands. "Tonight, we celebrate the last night of our Oregon Trail adventure, which has certainly been more adventurous for some"—I feel his eyes on me—"than others. Hopefully you've all enjoyed what the Nebraskan prairie has to offer and have come away with a new perspective on the Oregon Trail. Music was a big part of the pioneers' celebrations out here and we like to keep that history alive today. Feel free to sing along, and, if the mood strikes, kick up your heels for our very own Oregon Trail Adventure Company hoedown."

Soon, the three-piece band strikes up "Skip to My Lou." The McCreadys and the Stones, the only couples without kids on the excursion, decide to brave the impromptu dance floor. Clearly, the Stones have participated in some sort of organized dancing, given the square dance moves they're doing. What the

McCreadys lack in rhythm, they make up for in exuberance.

Mom looks over at Dad. “Want to give it a whirl?”

His eyes light up like he’s just been told he was selected to appear on Jeopardy! “You know it.”

They wander off and Caleb abandons me for his friends, who are busy chowing down on penny candy they picked up at the general store in Fort Bellows. At least there’s no sign of any more pyrotechnics. I’ve had enough excitement these past few days.

Wild Wanda sings about little red wagons, jay birds, and a cat in a cream jar, and the whole song ends on a fiddle flourish and hoots and shouts.

“This next one’s called ‘Irish Washerwoman,’?” Felix calls out before another dance number starts up.

Jake makes his way over. “Care to dance?” he asks, holding out a hand.

I hesitate. Is he asking as a friend or is he making another play at me?

He senses my reluctance to take him up on his offer and draws his hand back. “You looked lonely sitting over here, is all. I doubt any of those guys would ask you to dance, and Barnaby’s too old. I wasn’t planning on asking you, either, to be honest, because I know you aren’t interested in me. But as I was sipping my lemonade, I thought, ‘What would Colton do if the situation was reversed?’?” He shrugs. “Colton would ask you to dance and make sure you had a good last night on the trail.”

That actually sounds about right.

“Just friends?” I ask.

“Just friends,” Jake confirms. “Although, you should probably know I’m a much better dancer than Colton. He’s too stiff.”

“I have a hard time picturing Colton dancing,” I say, rising from my seat by the fire. The cool Nebraska air rushes over my skin as we walk toward the other dancers.

“Colton dancing is a local urban legend. Few have seen it, and those who have are scarred for life.”

“He can’t be that bad at it.” Even though I can’t quite picture it, Colton seems proficient in everything he does. I doubt he’d be loosey-goosey on the dance floor, but I bet his rigid posture and serious composure would make ballroom dance judges sit up and take note.

“The Harvest Dance is coming up in a few weeks,” Jake says, pulling me into a spin. “If you were still around, you could find out firsthand just what kind of a dancer he is then.”

Unexpectedly, someone taps me on the shoulder. “Or maybe you could find out what kind of dancer I am right now.”



### CHAPTER 44

Colton

I'M WEARING MY best flannel shirt and newest jeans, the ones Mom brought for me when she met me at Fort Bellows. They might not have rhinestones or creases like Jake's, but they aren't patched up or stained. After hitching up the team and driving across the dusty trail, they aren't as clean as they were when I left this morning. I look presentable enough, I hope. I tug on the stiff collar, anxious now that it seems like everyone's eyes are on me. I didn't expect my return to the wagon train to garner so much attention. But then again, I did just walk out into the middle of the makeshift dirt dance floor.

Riley's hand goes to where I tapped her on the shoulder and she steps away from Jake. He nods in greeting and steps away. As she turns to face me, I pull off my hat and drag a hand through my hair.

"Colton?" A brilliant smile lights up her face and she drifts closer until the tips of her canvas sneakers brush the square toes of my cowboy boots. "You're actually here."

"I am."

Flickering light from the torches along the dance floor perimeter casts a soft glow over us. I can just barely make out the dusting of freckles across her nose. For a moment, we just stare at each other as the last few lines of "Oh Shenandoah" die away.

“I missed you,” Riley says, reaching out to twine her fingers with mine.

“I missed you, too,” I say.

Felix, Wanda, and Ty start playing a lilting cowboy waltz. I pull her closer and lift our linked hands to my chest. We sway to the music as other couples spin around us.

“Are you okay?” I ask. I’m still pretty sore from yesterday, so I imagine Riley’s feeling it, too.

“Better now that you’re here.” She blinks up at me with glistening eyes. “Is Chance okay? I’ve been so worried about him since Jake told me about his injury,” Riley says.

I nod and rub the back of her hands with my thumbs. “He’s going to be fine. He just needs a few days’ rest and then he’ll be back on the trail in no time.”

“I’m glad it’s nothing serious. When you weren’t with the wagon train yesterday, I thought maybe something bad happened.” She shifts closer and rests her head on my shoulder.

“I’m sorry I missed seeing you off.” I breathe in the scent of fresh air and sunshine that clings to her hair. “I worried I might not see you again before you left Nebraska.”

Riley peers up at me from under her dark eyelashes. “There’s something I need to tell you. I should have told you before but...” She takes a deep breath and my heart stops.

This was just a fling.

There’s someone back home.

“I’m not heading back to California,” she says.

“You’re not?” Something dangerously close to hope and exhilaration mingle in my chest.

“Nope.”

“For like, a few more days? Or a week?”

“I’m not sure when I’ll be there again,” she says with a shrug. “But when I go back, it’ll only be for a visit. My family’s moving to Nebraska. That’s why we’re here.”

“So, you’re staying here?”

“Well, not here, here,” she says wryly, glancing around at the dirt dance floor. “My parents bought a house in Clearview.”

“Whoa, hold up.” It takes me a moment to process everything. “You’re moving to Nebraska?”

“Yeah.”

My feet shuffle forward, closing the distance between us again. “Clearview, Nebraska?” I say.

She nods.

Clearview is only twenty-five miles or so from Darby, which is a whole helluva lot closer than California. Maybe hoping for something more with Riley isn’t so unrealistic after all.

“I should have told you before, but at first, I was still in denial. And then things were so uncertain between us, I wasn’t sure it mattered. Then when I realized there was something between us, every time I tried to tell you—”

“I’m really glad you told me now,” I say, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

“You aren’t upset?”

“How could I be upset that you’re staying in Nebraska?”

Riley slides her hands up to my shoulders and twines her hands behind the nape of my neck. “I’m really glad you’re here.” She glances around. “Wait. How did you get here?”

“The pioneer way,” I reply with a grin. “I took mules.”

“You’re a pretty good dancer after all,” Riley says as we finish our second dance. “Jake had me worried I’d lose a toe or two.”

“I’m not that bad,” I say. “I just needed the right partner.”

Riley grins up at me. “We do make a great pair.”

We do, which is why I need to square things away with my father sooner rather than later. I take a deep breath and drop my hands from her waist. “Save me the next dance?” I ask. “There’s something I need to take care of.”

“Hurry back, cowboy,” she teases.

As if I needed the extra motivation.

Dad's at the supply wagon when I find him. "Colton," he says. "Glad you made it." He hands me two bottles of lemonade before securing the latch.

"Thanks for leaving Sal and Buck for me."

"How was the ride?"

"A little bumpy. That old buckboard wagon isn't as smooth as our prairie schooners."

Dad grunts as he cracks open a bottle of lemonade. "I figured you'd rather join us on the trail than have a cushy ride home in the truck, considering the little lady who's caught you're eye."

"Riley." My chest grows tight. I don't need his permission to date her once we get back to Darby, but out here on the trail, it's more complicated. Not only does our relationship go against corporate policy, but also as the wagon train leader's son, I have to live to a higher standard. If I flout the rules, it could undermine his position with the rest of the crew.

"I like her. She's got gumption. I think she's good for you. It's a good thing she'll be living close by."

"You already knew?" I ask. "I only just found out a few minutes ago."

He takes a long pull from the bottle and squints over at me. "I'm the wagon train leader. It's my job to know." There's just enough light from the campfire to see the weathered wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. "And you should know that relationships between staff and passengers are against company policy. Thing is," Dad continues, his eyes fixed on the prairie, "I saw you two dancing back there. Definitely not something you want to see between staff and passengers."

“Dad,” I start to say, but he holds up a hand to stop me.

“You two have been through some pretty extenuating circumstances, I get that. And no one here is faulting you for your feelings. But you can’t go breaking the rules just because they’re inconvenient.” He turns to look at me with a stern expression. “So you just can’t be part of my crew.”

“Whoa.” I take a step back and let out an uneasy breath. “Are you firing me?”

“Hell, no,” Dad says. “It might be against corporate policy for staff to date passengers, but there’re no rules about passengers dating passengers. As far as I’m concerned, you’ve more than earned yourself some time off.”

“Like a vacation?” Living on a farm, there’s no such thing as a day off, let alone a vacation.

“Sure. For a few days,” Dad says, clinking his lemonade bottle against mine. “Oh, and another thing.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“There’s no policy that says a passenger has to stay with the wagon train. You’ve got yourself a team and a wagon. Might be a good time to find your own trail home.”

Riley’s dancing with Jake again when I get back, but they’re about as awkward as a couple at a middle-school dance. Clearly Jake’s trying to show me that he’s not trying to put moves on her, but he’s overcompensating. You could drive a prairie schooner through the space between them.

She catches my eye and waves. “Welcome back.”

Jake offers me a fist bump before wandering away.

“Is everything okay?” Riley asks.

I pull her close and let my chin rest on the top of her head. “Better than okay.”

It feels so good to hold her in my arms, our feet shuffling in slow circles to the music. Barnaby teaches everyone steps to an Irish reel. Riley giggles as I spin her, the firelight setting her hair aglow. We join in on a square dance called by Mr. Stone and fumble our way through a country two-step. Pretty soon, Riley and I are the only ones left on the dance floor.

“Time for us to call it a night,” Felix says.

“We should probably turn in, too,” Riley says. “The wagons roll out early here.”

“About that,” I say.

### CHAPTER 45

Riley

WHEN I STEP up into the wagon, excitement courses through me. It doesn't have a canvas cover or cushioned seats, but it does hold a picnic basket and the promise of open-air adventure.

The mules flick their tails. A red-tailed hawk screeches overhead. The air is crisp, the sun is pale on the horizon, and the prairie spreads out before us like a golden-green ocean.

The wagon rocks as Colton hoists himself up into the seat beside me. His leg presses against mine. "Ready?" he asks.

"Cowboy, take me away," I say.

Colton grins over at me and grabs hold of the reins. "Get up, Sal, Buck," he says with a flick of his wrist. The mules start forward in a slow, ambling walk. He lifts his Stetson and swirls it over his head.

I adjust my bandanna, tied over my braided pigtails, and give a formal wave like a Prairie Princess in a wagon parade.

Even though we plan to meet up with everyone else in Darby later today, all the passengers and crew have gathered to see us off. I wonder if this was how pioneers bade farewell to fellow travelers on the trail.



“Have fun,” Dad calls.

“Love you,” Mom says.

“Riley and Colton, sittin’ in a tree,” sings Caleb, like he’s four, not fourteen.

Are little brothers ever not annoying?

Colton chuckles and grabs my hand. “I don’t know of any good climbing trees around here, but I know a place where we could kiss under a tree.”

“That’s kind of the same thing,” I say.

“Trot, team, trot.” Colton urges the mules into a faster gait and soon the cool wind is rushing over my heated cheeks. It’s different sitting up here, at the front of the wagon. Birds dart and dive around us. A prairie dog scoots across the trail. Instead of watching the world pass by, I’m facing the prairie head-on.

The wagon bumps up over a small rise, and Colton slows the mules. “Easy, Sal. Easy, Buck.”

The view of the rippling, rolling hills around us takes my breath away. “It’s beautiful.”

“You asked me once what I thought was the best thing about living in Nebraska,” he says.

“You said something about saddling up Chance and riding out in the open range.”

“This right here,” Colton says. “This is it.” He wraps his arm around my back and tucks me into his side. “I’m glad I get to share it with you.”

For a moment, I daydream about a summer with Colton out here on the prairie. Of him showing me all the midsummer flowers. Of Fourth of July fireworks and Saturday-night stargazing. Of kissing my very own cowboy. It might take a while to let go of some of the anger and resentment I've been holding on to, but I'm feeling good about the possibilities.

"Are there fireflies out here?" I ask.

"Not now, but there will be."

I picture a field at dusk dotted with glowing, twinkling lights. It must be like magic. "Will you teach me to catch them?"

"Of course."

We continue down into the slight valley and make our way toward a distant grove of trees. Little by little, the trees grow in size until our wagon pulls into a shady spot beneath them. Yellow and white flowers dot the blades of grass around us.

"This is Plum Grove," Colton says. "I thought we could stop here for a rest."

"Are these the trees you wanted to kiss me under?" I ask, batting my eyelashes at him.

"Maybe," he says, brushing his smiling lips over mine.

Colton ties up the mules and then helps me down from the wagon. He grabs the picnic basket and a blanket from the cargo bed and leads me deeper into the grove of plum trees. There's a small clearing with dappled light filtering down through the branches. "In a few weeks, the plum trees'll be covered in bright white flowers that smell like grape Kool-Aid."

“No way.” Nebraska is full of surprises.

Colton unpacks the basket. He hands me an apple, some bacon, and an aluminum-foil-wrapped loaf. While he cuts the apple into wedges with his folding-knife, I unstopper a bottle of lemonade. Then I unwrap the loaf and break off a chunk.

“Oh my gosh. This corn bread is so good,” I say, brushing a crumb from the corner of my mouth. “You should try it.”

“You like corn bread?” Colton asks, his smile going wide.

“Who doesn’t?”

We laze on the blanket and stare up at the sky through the branched canopy. After a while, I pull out my sketchbook and flip it open. A frothy-mouthed bison stares back at me.

“Not nearly as scary as the ones from the stampede,” he says.

While I’ve had to resketch the bison’s face multiple times to give him less of a murderous expression, I think I’ve reached a happy medium where the drawing won’t give me flashbacks but does convey just how massive and powerful the creatures are. In fact, I think this has been a great form of art therapy, having to face my fears and tame them.

“I’ll never forget that day,” I say.

Colton leans in. “Or that night,” he whispers, sending shivers over my skin.

I drop the sketchbook and turn to face him. He’s covered from head to toe in a fine layer of dust, with darker smudges lining his face along his hairline. I reach up to brush away a streak of dirt on his cheek.

“I’m really glad you’re here,” he says, brushing a feathery kiss over the side of my hand.

“Me too.”

I wasn’t sure I’d like living in Nebraska, but now I know this is exactly where I’m meant to be.

My hands wrap around the back of his neck as I pull him closer. Colton kisses me, his lips soft but firm. His hands settle on my lower back, hugging me tight. My mouth tingles under the pressure, my breath catching in my chest. I sink into him, letting his warmth wrap around me along with his familiar leather-and-Ivory-soap scent.

They say home is where the heart is, but I never really understood what that meant until now. My heart has gone all in on this kiss—comfortable, warm, safe. This is a kiss, but it’s no ordinary kiss.

This kiss is a homecoming.