



Rancher's Strength (Flying Diamond 5, #4)

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Category: Romance

Description: Ryder Saffort thought he'd found his forever—until the woman he loved walked away without looking back.

Lexie was his everything, but when she couldn't give him the family he dreamed of, she made the heartbreaking choice to let him go. It's been three years, and though life has moved on, no one else has ever come close to filling the space she left behind.

Lexie never stopped loving Ryder. Leaving him nearly broke her, but watching him live a life she couldn't give him would've destroyed her.

She's built a quiet existence, convincing herself she made the right call—until tragedy pulls them back into each other's orbit.

Bound by a promise made long ago, Ryder and Lexie are named guardians of their late friends' children. But there's a catch: to honor the will, they must reunite under one roof—as husband and wife.

What starts as a fake marriage quickly unearths the pain, passion, and unfinished love between them.

As autumn settles over the Flying Diamond 5, danger still looms on the horizon. And when the past threatens not just their hearts but the family they're trying to protect, Ryder and Lexie will have to decide if love lost can truly be found again.

He never stopped loving her. She never stopped believing he deserved more. But maybe... they were always meant to find their way back.

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RYDER

Blinking slowly, I scanned the monitors, watching to ensure nobody had strayed onto the property during the night.

One entire wall of my office was set up with screens connected to cameras all over the ranch.

I watched the feed every morning and night to make sure no one was wandering around.

Along with my other duties around the ranch, this made for very little sleep.

I long for the days when life around this place will be simple.

Since Griff's accident, we've been monitoring the perimeter of the ranch like hawks. Rather, I was watching it like a hawk. With the setup at my place, everything was just easier, and during my sleepless nights, I wasn't staring at the ceiling—instead, I was making sure our home was safe.

I didn't miss all the chaos from being a part of the security team.

Nash and Griff could walk back into that life in an instant, and I suspect Kipp and Linc could as well, but I longed for peace.

Spending those years mainly behind a computer screen kept me out of the rougher aspects of our job.

Even though I could perform with as much precision and accuracy as the other four, I was happy to retire.

All this nonsense with Desmond Tucker unnerved me. There had to be a way to beat him without resorting to our old ways.

Reaching for my coffee cup, I leaned back in my chair too hard, causing it to balance on two legs.

My body flailed in response. Scalding coffee landed in my lap, and as if I had an eject button under me, I leapt off the chair, quickly undid my jeans, and stepped out of them.

My underwear was next because there was nothing worse than cold, soaking-wet boxer briefs.

Well, I suppose a burned cock would be worse.

Thankfully, my jeans absorbed most of the heat.

“Hey, how do things look?” I heard Linc’s voice calling from down the hallway.

“Fine, hey, give me a...”

“What the fuck are you doing in here?” I looked up as my business partner and friend walked into my office. Grabbing my chair, I yanked it in front of me like a shield.

“Spilled my coffee,” I grumbled as I looked at the mess all over the floor.

“Well, that’s better than what I thought you were doing.”

“Fuck off,” I huffed at him. “Get out of my house. Nobody was in here last night, assuming that’s why you came barging in .”

“Okay, good to know. Are you heading to town today?”

“Yeah, I’m going now.” This guy was so annoying. Did he really think I wanted to have a conversation when my cock and ass were as bare as the day I came into this world? But he didn’t move; he just crossed his arms and leaned against the doorway.

“Swing by Kristin’s place. She’s not returning my calls.”

“What’d you do now?” I asked as I shuffled toward the door, keeping the chair in front of me.

“Nothing. Why do you always assume it’s my fault?”

“Because it usually is.” Abandoning the chair, I didn’t care if he saw my ass, he could close his eyes or get the hell out of my house.

“I asked her not to ride this season.” His voice wasn’t as confident as it normally was, and I shook my head.

What a dumb thing to do. She was focused on her riding, and anyone could see she wasn’t about to give that up.

Not even for him. She was so close to a championship buckle, and she craved it.

Her final ride in Vegas a few years ago had been a disaster, and she’d dropped to third in the world.

Kristin was determined to get back on top, and Linc couldn’t stand in her way.

“You’re an idiot,” I replied as I walked back down the hallway, putting on a new pair of jeans.

“Funny, that’s what she said.” He rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Is it so wrong that I want to see her more than a few times a month?” he asked as I shoved my chair back into my office on my way to the kitchen.

“No, it’s not, but this is her life. You knew this was her career when you met her.

” Kristin was young, and I knew she didn’t have any plans to settle down yet.

Linc was in a different headspace, ready for a wife and family.

I’d been ready for a wife and family once, but in the end, here I was, divorced without a family of my own — that is not true — the four men who’d become brothers to me over the years were my family.

Linc shoved his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels.

Grabbing two mugs from the cupboard, I poured coffee into each one, handing one to Linc.

“Her competing isn’t about the money. She has her own money.

It’s about the thrill, the buckle, and at the end of the day, holding the title of world champion.

” Pulling out a chair, I took a seat at my dining room table.

“I know,” Linc sighed as he took a seat across from me. “Heard they had to take Aaron Paulson to the home last week.”

“Deflecting to my ex-wife’s family is weak.” The hot liquid burned as I took too big of a gulp. “But yeah, Helen couldn’t keep Aaron at home anymore. She’s moving to Everton so she can be closer to him.”

“How long have you been keeping tabs on your ex-in-laws? And I’m the one that needs advice?”

” He arched his brow, and I regretted waking up this morning.

It wasn’t that I kept tabs on them, but it was a small town, so I’d run into Helen occasionally.

When I found out Aaron’s health was declining, I checked in a little more often.

Just because their daughter didn’t want me didn’t mean I hated them.

And in all honesty, they were the only parents I’d ever had.

They treated me like a son, and I didn’t know how to switch that off.

“Think Lexie will come home?” He set his cup on the table, and I watched him smirk at me. I’m sure Linc was expecting me to launch myself over the table and beat the shit out of him because that’s what I usually did when people brought up my ex-wife, but I didn’t move.

“Don’t know. Strange thing about an ex-wife is she doesn’t keep me updated on her comings and goings anymore. And I don’t care what she does.” I wrapped my hand around my mug so tightly I was surprised it didn’t shatter.

“That’s why you still have a picture of her by your bed, then?” His smirk made my blood boil, and I saw red.

“Get the fuck out of my house,” I yelled as I pointed at the door.

“It was just a question. You didn’t smash my face in this time, at least. Thanks for the coffee, Ryder.” Linc stood and walked toward the door. He hesitated, and I wondered if he was going to open that big mouth of his again, but he pulled the door open and left without another word.

Linc wasn’t wrong. I did care about what Lexie did. Not in a crazy stalker way, but whenever anyone talked about her, my ears always perked up. Probably because I’m still hopelessly in love with her.

Three years ago, I signed divorce papers because that was what she wanted. I wouldn’t keep her tied down in a marriage she didn’t want, no matter how much I ached for her.

Grabbing my truck keys off the counter, I pushed the door open and walked toward my truck. I didn’t need to lock it. With so many security cameras around this ranch, I’d have an ID in a matter of minutes.

Town was quiet today, as it usually was in the fall. Kids were back in school, ranchers in the area were completing their fall work, and the farmers were busy racing against the clock to harvest crops before the first freeze or snowfall.

“Well, I didn’t expect to see anyone from the Diamond today,” Fred said from behind the counter. The balding man smiled as if I’d given him a million dollars just by walking in the front door. At one time, he was the ranch boss.

“Hey, Fred. Just needed to get away for a morning. I’m sure there’ll be a list of jobs a mile long for me when I get back.” I leaned against the counter.

“How’re my granddaughters doing?” he asked as he grabbed a cup and poured black

coffee into it.

“You were out there last night. Pretty sure they’re the same.” I chuckled. He was such a proud grandfather to all the kids running around the ranch now. It didn’t matter that only one was his biological grandchild. He had more love in his heart than anyone I’d ever known.

“I just hate missing anything. They make my life worth living.” He beamed and held out the cup to me.

“Are you talking about the girls again?” his fiancée Wanda asked, putting her arm around him and smiling sweetly.

“You know it Darlin’.” Fred’s laugh was infectious, and I couldn’t help but chuckle.

The bell above the door chimed, and we all looked to see who was coming in, causing my heart to plummet to the floor.

Her long, molasses-colored hair cascaded over her shoulders, and her brown eyes locked onto me instantly.

“Come on, Alexandra. There’s no reason to stop in the doorway,” another woman’s voice said from behind her as she popped out beside her.

“God, what’s wrong with you?” she asked before noticing me.

“Oh.” Lydia’s voice was unamused, and she just rolled her eyes.

I was good enough for backup when fights broke out or when drunk men got unruly at the bar, but I became a total outcast when we saw one another in public.

“Thanks for the coffee, Fred,” I said and tossed a five on the counter.

Turning, I walked toward the door, eyes downcast. “Lydia.” I half-heartedly nodded at her, then finally looked up again.

“Lex.” As if my hand had a mind of its own, I reached out and placed my hand on her hip as I snuck around her.

Heat penetrated my palm, and electricity coursed through my veins.

This woman had always been electric to me.

We would battle one another and make up just as fiercely.

Exiting the cafe, I heard the bell again as the door closed behind me.

Don’t look back. There’s no reason to look back, just get in your truck and leave. My brain was practically shouting as I made my way to the truck and climbed inside. But my traitorous eyes pulled me back to the café window, locking instantly on her.

Once again, my heart ripped in two. The truck roared to life when I turned the key, and I tore out of the parking spot like a bat out of hell.

The tires squealed as I sped off down the street, back to the solitude of the ranch, where I had no chance of running into her or accidentally making the mistake of touching her.

I couldn’t ignore the fact that despite other women I’d seen, she was the only woman I would ever truly let into my heart and love.

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Chapter One

LEXIE

My mind wandered back to Saturday when I'd seen Ryder in the coffee shop in Weston Gap.

God, he looked good, and the spot on my hip where he'd touched still burned with the pressure of his hand.

Even with that brief encounter, he acted like he couldn't get away from me fast enough.

That was nothing new, he acted that way around me every time we happened to bump into each other.

Maybe our sightings would become fewer with Mom and Dad moving to Everton... one could only hope.

Yelling between my client and her ex brought my attention back to the room I was sitting in.

"Okay, let's think of this logically. You have the house, right, Mrs. Tremaine?

" The woman with the perfect blonde hair nodded and slowly batted her eyelashes.

They looked so heavy with the style of fake eyelashes she chose.

“Mr. Tremaine, you’re in an apartment currently, correct?” The man nodded, his face growing redder by the second. “Well, I highly doubt you have the space for a table that seats fourteen. So, what’s this really about?” I folded my hands on the table and waited.

A knock on the door startled me, and I turned my head from the mind-numbing meditation on why this couple still loved one another and shouldn’t rush the divorce. “Come in.” My tone was short. I hated being interrupted while I was on client time.

My receptionist Faith opened the door. She had been my right hand for the last five years. Although she made a few missteps when I first hired her, she learned her job quickly and eventually stopped overbooking my days. “Alexandra, there’s a call for you.”

“Take a message, please,” I huffed, turning my attention back to the papers in my hands.

“No, this isn’t something I can take a message for.” Her voice was stern, and I looked up at her. The look on her face was a mix of fear and determination. I had to give her credit for asserting herself.

Reaching for the phone in front of me, she shook her head. “Privately.” She turned and left the door open behind her.

“I’m so sorry about this. Please excuse me for a moment.

” I smiled at my client and walked out of the room.

What could possibly be so important that I needed to take the call right now?

My mind wandered to my family. My sister Lydia never called me at the office.

..ever. I talked to Mom last night, and well, Dad didn't know who I was anymore, so it wouldn't be him.

What if something happened to him? That's the only reason I gave to pull me out of a meeting, and Faith knew that. My heart raced as I grew closer to my office. "What line?" I asked as I walked past her desk outside my door.

"Line three." She glanced up at me, then nervously looked back down at the floor. I didn't bother sitting, I wasn't going to be here long. Reaching for the phone, my hand shook as I pressed the button for line three. "Hello?"

"Hello, is this Alexandra Saffort?" the voice on the other end of the line asked in an oddly official tone.

"This is she, may I ask who I'm speaking to?"

"This is Officer Timothy Unger." A police officer? Why would a police officer be calling me? Oh, god. Had Mom or Lydia been in an accident? "I'm regretfully calling to inform you that Hank and Anita Forrest were killed in a car accident this morning."

I used all my strength to pull out my desk chair, immediately collapsing into it as if my legs had turned to Jello. "Mrs. Saffort, are you there?" the voice on the other end of the line drew me out of my haze.

"Yes, um, I'm sorry, I'm here. What happened?"

"It didn't make any sense; the weather was perfect, and it was the end of summer.

I talked to Anita yesterday. She said she and Hank were more in love than ever, but she didn't want to go to the cabin.

She wanted to stay home with the kids and veg on the couch.

“From the information we can gather, they’d been heading to a mountain cabin for their anniversary.

A freak storm hit, and a mud slide pushed their car off the cliff.

” Bile rose in my throat as the man kept talking, but I was no longer comprehending his words because the rush of my pulse was drowning him out.

“Ruby and Sawyer?” I asked, interrupting whatever he was telling me.

“They are staying at a friend’s house. They haven’t been told, but the adults there are aware.”

“Who are they with?”

“Um... let me see here.” I could hear papers being shuffled, and silence hung on the line.

“You’re telling me that you’ve got two kids out there whose parents have been killed in a horrible accident, and you don’t have a flying fuck where they’re staying? What the fuck else do you have to do in that podunk town? What could be more important than this case?” I yelled into the phone.

“Ma’am, I understand this is a trying situation, but please bear with us while we get you the information.”

“I suggest you quit patronizing me, or I’ll tie up your department for years over the inept police work. Where are the kids?”

“Right, you’re a lawyer.” His condescending tone was enough to make me want to climb through the phone receiver and the telephone lines just to wrap my hands around his throat. “They’re at Samantha Younger’s home.” My anger abated slightly, the kids would be taken care of at Sam’s house.

Anita, Sam, and I had gone to college together, and back then, we decided we’d start our own law practice.

That hadn’t happened. I met my ex-husband and stayed in Bozeman.

Sam and Anita had settled in Wyoming, in the same town.

They worked in the same office but specialized in different areas of law.

“You’re the guardian listed for the children, so they’ll be released into your care upon your arrival.” His voice softened, and I closed my eyes as I thought about the kids. “Will Mr. Saffort be accompanying you? I need to let Ms. Younger know.”

“No, Mr. Saffort won’t be with me. I’ll leave now and be there in a few hours.”

“I’ll place that call to your husband then if you like.”

“Sure, go ahead,” I half answered, my mind racing a million miles an hour.

“Once again, I’m sorry for your loss,” Office Unger stated.

“Thank you,” I mumbled and hung up the phone.

Why were Ryder and I still the kids’ guardians?

Surely Anita would’ve updated her will when Ryder and I divorced.

She wanted the kids raised in a home with two loving parents.

When we'd agreed to be the guardians, Ryder and I fit the bill.

We were madly in love, but I'd changed, and we'd divorced three years ago.

A soft knock on my door drew my attention, and I looked up to see Faith.

"What do I need to do?" She had a notebook in one hand and a pen in the other.

Moving without a word, she sat across from me and said, "I handed off the Tremaines to Rayla. She's been looped in because they're ridiculous, so she knows them. "

Being a divorce attorney had never been boring, but the number of couples I saw who were still in love had reached an all-time high lately. The Tremaines were no different; they'd been dragging their feet with this divorce, so I finally sat them down in the same room today to hash it out.

"Okay, great. I guess I need to cancel everything?" It was more of a question than a statement as I sat staring at the phone, waiting for it to ring and for someone to tell me this was a sick joke.

But silence hung in the air like a swarm of mosquitoes hovering above the surface of the pond at home when there was no breeze, and the summer heat made everything stagnant and lazy.

"For how long?"

"I don't know. A while, I would think. Anyone I have scheduled, find new representation for them.

” Marriage counseling wasn’t in my college courses, but maybe it should have been, because most of the couples I worked with needed that more than they needed to be in my office ending their marriage.

A nagging voice in the back of my mind reminded me that was all I needed, too.

“I have to go to Wyoming. I don’t know how long I’ll be there, and then I’m going to have to go to the Flying Diamond to talk to Ryder.

” Faith’s head shot up at the mention of my ex.

“You can reach me on my cell if you need me.” Standing, I smoothed down my skirt and packed up the things I would need to work remotely.

“You might as well forward everything to your house. There’s no point in you sitting here twiddling your thumbs while I figure this out.

I’ll keep paying you, as normal.” I was rambling...

I needed to leave. “Once you’re done organizing things, you can go.

I’ll call you when I know more.” Grabbing my laptop bag and purse, I headed for the door.

“I’m sorry about your friends, Lexie.”

“Thanks.” Rushing out of the office before I broke down in tears, I basically ran to my car, desperate not to have my breakdown in the middle of the parking lot.

Slamming the door behind me, I couldn’t fight the tears any longer and let my head fall against the steering wheel, allowing them to fall freely.

Wiping my eyes with the back of my hand, I glanced in the rearview mirror before backing out of the parking spot. It was two in the afternoon, and almost five hours remained until Reverence, Wyoming. If I wanted to get there before the kids were ready for bed, I needed to move.

Tears slipped down my cheeks in fits and starts, blurring the road as I wound through the mountains and crossed into Idaho. Grief sat like a stone on my chest—Anita and Hank gone, just like that. The loss hollowed out my insides, each mile echoing with memories of their laughter, their love.

I pressed harder on the gas, daring the speed limit, daring fate—almost hoping for sirens to break the silence, to remind me this wasn't just a nightmare I could wake from.

But when the welcome sign for Wyoming appeared and the plates around me began to match my destination, a breath escaped my lungs.

Not relief, exactly. Just the knowledge that I was closer.

Closer to Ruby and Sawyer. Closer to the promise I made... the promise I needed to keep.

A thought crossed my mind. I hadn't called Sam to let her know I was on the way.

When I pulled up in front of her house, I saw the curtains move, and almost immediately the front door swung open.

My other best friend stood in the doorway, her red hair pulled back off her face in a messy bun.

She usually looked put together, but given the circumstances, I didn't see a stitch of

makeup, and she wore yoga pants and an oversized sweatshirt. She ran down the front steps toward me.

Reaching for the handle, I scrambled out of my car, where she waited right outside my door. We wrapped our arms around each other, holding on for dear life. “This can’t be happening.” I sobbed.

Once we composed ourselves, I looked back at the house. “Have you told them?”

Sam shook her head, “No, I couldn’t bring myself to do it until you were here.”

“Once we explain what happened, I’ll take them home, or to a hotel. Their home? Which is just a reminder of where their parents should be—with them. What the hell am I supposed to do?” I mumbled as we walked to the house, our arms around one another.

“Ask them what they want to do. If they might want to go home. It’s all they know.

” Sam gave me a weak smile, and I nodded.

“What about Ryder?” Over the last three years my friends knew not to even bring up his name.

I’d never told them I bumped into him occasionally, and I wasn’t going to open that can of worms.

“The police were going to call him,” I mumbled. Sam squeezed me tighter.

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Chapter Two

RYDER

The day had been perfect. Griff and Elle had a beautiful ceremony, and I'd been so happy to be a part of their union.

Laughter filled the yard, and aside from the half-built barn and Griff's arm still in a sling, everything looked normal.

If Elle hadn't worked so quickly, we'd be having an entirely different kind of service.

Over the sound of the music, my phone rang, and I frowned as I looked at the number. I didn't recognize it, but something nagged me to pick it up. Excusing myself from the group, I walked around to the side of the house.

"Hello?" My voice was stiff,

"Is this Ryder Saffort?"

"It is. Who's calling?"

"This is Officer Timothy Unger I'm with the Reverence, Wyoming Sheriff's Department. I regret to inform you that Hank and Anita Forrest have been killed in a car accident. You are on their list of contacts." Slumping against the house, I was sure I heard him wrong.

“Um, I’m sorry, you said Hank and Anita?” The man on the other end of the line spoke as if he were reading a script he’d rehearsed for hours before calling me.

“I’ve already spoken with your wife, and she’s on her way to Reverence to pick up the children. They will be in your care now.”

“My wife?”

“Yes, Alexandra. She’s a ballbuster, isn’t she?” The man chuckled.

“A ballbuster?” I scoffed. The man on the other end of the line was an idiot, and I truly hoped Lexie had put him in his place. “You obviously didn’t get the full effect of Lexie.” I pulled the phone away from my ear and ended the call.

“Everything okay?” Griff asked as he rounded the corner of the house.

“No, it’s not. I need to go.” I looked up from my phone, and all my business partners were gathered around me.

“Can you have the plane ready for me at the airport?” I looked at Linc, and he nodded.

We didn’t use the plane often anymore. We didn’t need to, but it came in handy occasionally.

When we’d worked as a security team, we’d been fortunate to get high-paying clients, which had set us up for life.

We didn’t even need to ranch. We just did it to stay occupied, and it had worked its way into our hearts after all these years.

“Where do they need to file the flight plan for?” he asked as he pulled his cell out of his back pocket.

“Reverence, Wyoming.” None of them asked what was happening, they just stood beside me as I stared at my phone. Linc moved further down the porch and talked to our pilot.

“They’ll get you off the ground within the hour,” he said as he walked back to us.

“Perfect. That will give me just enough time to get to the airport,” I said as I wandered back to where the party was happening.

“You’re a beautiful bride, Elle, but I need to excuse myself and take care of some business.” I kissed Griff’s bride on the cheek and shook my best friend’s hand when he walked up beside her.

“Keep me posted,” he said quietly. I didn’t need to tell him who was in Reverence; he knew Lexie’s friends from college were there, and the only thing that would make me leave his wedding would be something horrific.

“Say hi to Lex.” Griff arched his brow, and I shook my head.

There was also the fact that I’d never been able to keep anything from him, and he knew Lexie and I were once named as possible guardians to the kids.

“I’ll let you know when I’m on my way back. I might be gone for a bit.” Turning, I headed for my truck.

Time seemed to stand still as I waited for the pilot to make his final checks before departure. I’d made it to the airport much quicker than anyone expected. “Mr. Saffort, the pilot is ready.” A young woman smiled and motioned to the door of the small

airport.

“Thank you.”

“Can I be of any service to you on this flight?” She looked up and smiled coyly at me.

“Two of my friends have been killed in a horrific car accident, and their young children are now orphans, and you want to know if I want to get my rocks off?” Scoffing, I walked away from the woman.

I knew how some private flights worked, but that wasn’t something I was into.

“I won’t need your assistance for anything, so you might as well buckle up and stay seated,” I said as I glanced over my shoulder.

“Ryder, nice to see you again.” Our regular pilot, Jackson, extended his hand. As I shook it, I stepped aside to allow the flight attendant to walk up the stairs.

“Is she crying?” Jackson looked at her as she disappeared into the plane.

“I’m sure she’ll get over it,” I said flatly, and Jackson shook his head as if he understood precisely what had just occurred.

“We’ll get you into Reverence in a few hours.

No weather to contend with, so it should be a smooth flight.

” He nodded, and we both moved up the stairs.

I tossed my small bag onto a seat across the aisle from me and flopped down.

Closing my eyes, I tried to think back to the last time I'd seen Hank and Anita.

It had been too long. I always had an excuse not to make the trip, and while they'd made the effort to come to the ranch, things had gotten awkward for Anita and me after the divorce.

I couldn't blame her, she was Lexie's best friend, and I didn't expect her to ever talk to me again. But Hank and I had always been good.

"We'll be starting our descent into Reverence, Wyoming." Jackson's voice jolted me from sleep. I hadn't realized I'd dozed off. I rubbed my face, trying to wake myself up, and shifted in the seat, attempting to regain feeling in the foot that I'd crossed over my knee at the beginning of the flight.

With a car waiting, I exited the plane and climbed right in. He already knew the address because I'd texted it to him when I booked the car. There was no small talk, just the way I liked it.

The driver made a slow turn onto Hank and Anita's street, and I could see Lexie getting the kids out of the car.

I watched the three of them intently, and judging by the way they were hanging onto her as they walked to the house, she'd told them.

Damn it, I wish I'd been there to help her through that conversation.

"We're here, sir," the man said as he looked back at me in the rearview mirror.

I shifted in the seat, pulled some cash from my pocket, and handed it to him.

Quite honestly, I had no idea how much I had given him.

But judging from the way his eyebrows shot up, it had been a lot.

I was glad to make the guy's day. Still, all I could focus on was getting into that house.

With a quick thank you, I grabbed my bag and closed the door.

Before I could move, the man pulled away, and I headed for the open door.

Her soft, sweet voice filtered out of the house, and I stood motionless for a moment as I watched her with the kids.

Despite what she thought, she was amazing with children.

My heart ached for more than just Ruby and Sawyer.

It ached for the years Lexie and I had lost, the years we missed out on figuring out what our own family could have looked like.

A traditional family dynamic hadn't been something I'd ever known, but it was the one thing she'd been fixated on.

My biological parents didn't want me, so I bounced around in the foster care system from the time I was seven.

It hurt to have memories of the people who'd brought me into the world, only for them to abandon me after succumbing to their vices.

I was a little boy who didn't understand why he was suddenly alone in the world.

When I'd gotten to a point where money was flowing freely, I lost my last excuse for

not finding them and hired someone to look into where my parents ended up.

It felt like a stab to the chest to discover that they had gone their separate ways after ending up in prison.

My mother regained her freedom and moved away, seemingly to overcome the struggles she had faced with my father.

At some point, she had three more kids, and they appeared to be a happy family.

My father, on the other hand, had been in and out of jail and never seemed to get his life together.

With a deep inhale, I made a silent vow that no matter what happened after today, Ruby and Sawyer would never know a day without love. They might have had their family ripped apart, but I wouldn't let it tear them apart like it had me and my siblings.

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Chapter Three

LEXIE

The kids clung to me as we left Sam's, and I hated making them sit in the back seat, they felt so far away and I wanted to wrap my arms around them.

Their soft sobs made my own tears silently roll down my face.

Pulling into the driveway, I looked in the rearview mirror and wondered if they were hoping this was all a dream and that when they walked into the house, their lives would be normal, and they wouldn't have just lost the two people who were their entire world.

Without a word, they climbed out of the car and clutched my hands as we walked into their house.

"Okay, are you hungry? You didn't eat much at Auntie Sam's," I asked, hanging up my coat and helping the kids take off their shoes.

"We always get pizza on Friday nights and then we watch a movie. Mom lets us eat in the living room," Ruby said before her silent tears fell again. My nose stung, and I blinked faster, hoping to stop the tears from falling.

"Well, then, pizza it is," his low voice came from the doorway as the three of us looked over at him.

“Uncle Ryder,” both kids said in unison and rushed to wrap their arms around him as he dropped to his knees.

“Hey, Lex,” he said quietly as he lifted his dark eyes to me, the kids clinging to him like he was the lifeline they’d been waiting for. He had always been good with kids, and it was the reason I’d made the decision I did.

His hair was a bit longer than the last time I’d seen him in town, but there was still so much that remained the same.

The plaid pearl snap shirt stretched over his broad shoulders, while his long muscular legs were hugged tightly in blue wranglers.

He wore a ball cap instead of a cowboy hat because he felt more comfortable in it.

I understood the inner workings of the man.

“Ry,” my voice cracked, and I nodded.

“Okay, go get your pajamas on, and Auntie Lexie will order supper.” The kids let him go and reached for one another’s hands as they moved quietly up the stairs to their rooms. I couldn’t be in the same room, the air felt like it was being sucked away from me, and my heart raced at being in such close proximity to him.

Turning, I wanted to run away, but Ryder grasped my arm and pulled me back to him.

Instinctively, I wrapped my arms around him and buried my face in his chest. He smelled the same as always.

I let out my muffled sobs—cedar, citrus, and him.

I could smell him so vividly in my dreams that some nights, I would have sworn he was in my bedroom, at the foot of my bed, watching me sleep and reaching out to touch me. But I always woke up before he did.

“Why them? They had so much to live for?” I whispered, sure he wouldn’t have heard me.

“I don’t know, it’s not fair at all.” He kissed the top of my head, and I pulled away from him.

“I need to order pizza.” The kitchen was tidy. I didn’t expect anything less from Anita. There were still coffee mugs in the sink, and it once again hit me that, in the blink of an eye, two people who thought they’d be home in a few days never would be.

The doorbell rang almost thirty minutes after I’d made the phone call to the pizza place.

I’d found the number on the side of the fridge, so I figured it must have been where they usually ordered from.

When Ryder opened the door, I couldn’t help but feel bad for the jovial pizza delivery man.

He tried to engage Ryder in conversation but didn’t get more than one-syllable answers from him.

Sawyer picked the movie, and while it should have been funny, nobody really laughed. I missed Ruby and Sawyer’s laughter. In all the dark moments after I left Ryder, when I needed something to cling to, it had been them and their innocence. But now they needed to cling to me.

“I think it’s time for bed,” Ryder said quietly, and I looked down at Sawyer, whose head was resting on Ryder’s chest, breathing deeply, his eyes closed but a quiet tear resting on his cheek.

With a nod, I helped Ruby off the floor and wrapped my arm around her.

“Divide and conquer. Good night, sweet girl. We’ll be here in the morning,” Ryder whispered as he kissed the top of Ruby’s head.

“Uncle Ry, could Sawyer and I sleep in Mom and Dad’s room?”

“Absolutely you can.” His voice was suddenly thick, and he blinked rapidly. “Auntie, Lexie, and I will sleep in there, too, in case you need us.” I hadn’t given much thought to where I would sleep tonight, but sharing the same room as Ryder hadn’t even crossed my mind.

“Thank you,” she said quietly before hugging him tightly.

“So, what are we going to do?” I asked Ryder as I quietly pulled the door closed.

I’d stayed in the room until Ruby drifted off to sleep, and Ryder stood leaning against the dresser, his arms crossed and focused on the two sleeping children in the massive bed.

He didn’t say anything, he just motioned for me to follow him.

We walked past the kitchen and the living room, making our way toward the stairs leading to the basement.

Once we reached the bottom, entering Hank’s office, Ryder opened a door and flicked on the light in the room.

“He told me years ago they keep a copy of their will in their safe.” He moved behind the desk and took down the large family photo from the wall.

Sure enough, there was a safe, and without hesitation, Ryder punched in a code.

The whirring and the thunk of the lock opening made me jump.

God, I was so jumpy today, it wasn't like me.

But then again, I didn't make it a habit of being in the same room as my ex-husband for lengthy periods anymore.

Ryder pulled out an envelope and handed it to me.

“You'll be better at reading this than I will.

” He gave me a look full of longing and took a seat behind the desk.

He'd never given himself enough credit. Ryder was smart, and he could have read this with ease.

Even in subjects he had little knowledge of, he knew what he was talking about.

“Of course, everything was organized,” I said as I skimmed the document and froze, letting my eyes drift from the paper to him.

“What is it?” he asked, the frown going deeper on his face with every second I didn't reply to him. “Lex?”

“They want us to raise the kids together.” I frowned as I reread the will. “In the same place.”

“How long ago was this will written?” It was a logical question. More often than not, people wrote a will and never changed it. In fact, I was pretty sure mine still said to leave everything I had to Ryder.

“It was updated last year.” I flipped through the pages, thinking they’d made a mistake and included a page from the old will, but they were all dated a year ago.

“Well, we agreed to be the kids’ guardians when we were together. I just assumed they’d find someone else, and Anita wouldn’t have overlooked something like that.”

“There’s a letter addressed to you and me.” I handed it to Ryder because I didn’t think I’d be able to open it, much less read it.

The sound of paper tearing made me look at the man sitting across from me. Reaching for the chair behind me, I sat and held my breath.

Lexie and Ryder,

This is a letter I hope you never have to read, but if you do, then things have gone horribly wrong.

When we asked you to be the guardians of our children, we never doubted that you were the perfect partners.

Along the way, you both forgot that you make one another whole.

We’ve seen you both navigate this divorce, but neither of you is actually the same without the other.

We request that you live together for a year to ease the transition for our kids. We don’t care where you live. All we ask is that you bury us somewhere nearby so our

babies know where we are.

If, after the year, you can't make things work together, we would like you to remain in the same town. The kids will come to rely on you as a couple, like they did Hank and me. No matter what happens, they need to know you both will be there for them.

We don't want a huge service, just something intimate with our closest friends so the kids can have some closure.

We love you both, and please let Ruby and Sawyer know that we did everything we could to return to them.

Anita and Hank

The house was so quiet that I swore I could hear it settling. I reached for the letter and read it repeatedly, hoping I'd find something different, but the words never changed.

"Now isn't a great time for me to be away from the ranch for a year, but if you want to be in Bozeman, I can make it work," Ryder said, interrupting my thoughts. I looked up at him.

"I can move back to Weston Gap. There's nothing in Bozeman for me.

The law office I'm at isn't what I thought it would be, and I can help Mom and Lydia with Dad and the bar.

Later, I can hang out my shingle and practice there.

" The words that came out of my mouth would have stunned most people, but I had already been considering moving back home.

“My place isn’t big enough for the four of us.” He ran his hands through his hair—his tell when he was feeling anxious. Making sure the kids had the space they needed would bring up things from his past he’d done his best to push aside.

“We could move to Mom and Dad’s place. Could that be close enough to the Diamond for you?”

“Yeah, I could make that work.” He nodded.

It had always been the plan: once my mom and dad were ready to move away, Ryder and I would move into the big, old, rambling farmhouse. I never dreamed we’d be moving in there after all these years apart, but nothing would make me break the last request my best friend would ever have of me.

“In the morning, I’ll call the ranch and have them prepare the plots in the ranch cemetery.” He leaned forward and rested his elbows on the desk.

“Will the guys be okay with that?”

“Of course they will be.” His answer was quick, and he nodded slowly.

“I shouldn’t have even asked. That’s just who they are.” I smiled at him, knowing it was the truth. Ruby and Swayer might have lost their parents, but today they gained four uncles.

“The girls will also be happy to help with the kids.”

“Girls?”

“Kipp, Nash, and Griff are married. Well, Griff just today, but still, he counts.” He smiled, and I looked at the man across from me.

“Nora used to work at Fred’s Cafe. Anyway, she married Kipp, and she has a son, Cooper.

Fallon came home with Josie and then had a baby as soon as she walked in the door.

Now there’s Lottie, so Nash is a girl dad. ”

I couldn’t help but smile. I knew Nora from popping into Fred’s café now and again.

I could see Nash being a great girl dad, but also maybe terrifying when it came time for them to start dating.

“Elle has Parker, and Griff is over the moon. Parker’s deaf, so we all learned ASL.

We don’t use it often, but if he has issues with his implant, we don’t have any barrier to talk to him.

” Ryder smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes, and I knew it had nothing to do with the situation we were in right now.

He wanted to be that man, and I wasn’t able to make that happen for him.

“Wow, it seems a lot has changed around there.” I crossed my arms and leaned back in the chair.

I’d made it a point not to ask about what was happening on the Diamond, and my family knew better than to volunteer that information.

Additionally, I had limited my visits to just Mom and Dad’s place to avoid the town and all the gossip.

“Julie’s seeing Phil.” The corner of his mouth turned up, and he shook his head.

“Phil? Like Phil the PI, Phil?” I asked, sitting up a little straighter.

“One and the same. They were even sneaking around for a while.” He laughed, and I felt the tension in the room lift slightly.

“That’s good. Julie deserves to be happy.” She’d loved her first husband so fiercely that I’d looked up to her and the relationship she’d had with Miller.

“Griff’s parents bought the old Christmas tree farm.” A genuine smile crossed his face when he brought up Griff’s mom and dad.

“I did know that. Griff asked me to draw up the title changes. It’s nice they’re closer for you guys.

” Griff’s parents had basically made Ryder their unofficial son.

Sometimes, I wondered if they’d wanted to adopt him and make him a Harp, but it seemed ridiculous to do that as an adult.

Part of me wished they had, because then maybe the boy who’d never belonged anywhere could be the man who did.

“I don’t need to tell you about Linc and Kristin.

I’m sure you’re up on all that.” Ryder shook his head, and I could tell what he was thinking without him saying it.

My cousin Kristin and Lincoln Felder had been on and off for years.

They were like oil and water, but they didn't seem to be one without the other.

He was right. Linc was the only one of the five I got updates about because of Kristin.

I had so much I wanted to say to him, but I didn't know where to begin.

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Chapter Four

RYDER

My back ached, and there was a crick in my neck that felt like it might last a lifetime.

I shifted on the bed, trying to ease the discomfort.

Something was cuddled up right next to my side.

I pried open my eyes and looked around, momentarily lost, unable to remember where I'd fallen asleep. Then it all came flooding back.

Sawyer was cuddled into my side, and I gently placed my hand on his back, hoping for maybe a brief moment that the boy wouldn't remember what had happened yesterday.

While he was sleeping, his world was right, but that would all change the moment he opened his eyes.

To my left, Lexie had her arms around Ruby, and a tear rolled down my ex-wife's cheek.

She wasn't asleep, but she was trying desperately to be.

I didn't move, I just stared up at the ceiling, letting my thoughts roll through my head and making a list of the things that would need to be done. The last time this had

happened, it was Kipp's dad, Miller, and Lexie had been by my side that time too.

There were more calls to make and funeral arrangements to handle.

Even though Anita and Hank were organized, someone still had to carry out their wishes, and that would be me.

I wasn't going to put it on Lexie; she would need to stay with the kids.

A warm hand moved over my arm, and I looked into Lexie's tear-filled brown eyes.

"Morning, sweetheart." There was no reason to add good to the start, as there would be nothing good about today.

I wasn't sure why I felt the need to call her sweetheart.

It just rolled off my tongue easier than her name.

When we were married, she joked she might as well change her name legally, since I never used her actual name.

I only called her Lexie if I needed her attention quickly, or if she was at work.

Alexandra was reserved for when I was exasperated or wanted to get a rise out of her.

"Morning," her voice caught as more tears fell down her cheeks. "I don't want to move," she whispered.

"I know, neither do I," I replied. Sawyer stirred, and I held my breath, but he just shifted and stayed asleep.

“I’ll take care of things today. There’s no need for both of us to go.

The kids don’t need to worry about any of this.

” I held my hand out for her, and I was sure she wouldn’t take it or that she’d slap it away, but she didn’t.

Her soft, delicate fingers wrapped around mine.

“Thank you.” The look in her eyes conveyed sincerity, and for a split second, I thought there was a hint of love, but it was fleeting, gone as quickly as it had appeared. She didn’t let go of my hand, and we continued to lay in the bed with two kids, who were now our responsibility.

Oh, god, we were responsible for these two kids for the rest of our lives.

This wasn’t a see you later when they turned eighteen, this was about being the two people who’d be there for every milestone from here on out.

I’d be the man to comfort Ruby through her first heartbreak and teach Sawyer how to tie a tie.

Did I even know how to tie a tie? I’d better figure it out.

Every milestone would remind them that Hank should have been doing all these things with them instead of me.

Something I’d never considered until now was that no matter how old they were, they would always wonder if their dad would have done things better.

All I could hope for was that I’d be enough for them and that I’d be able to honor

him.

Then there'd be boyfriends or girlfriends, engagements, and weddings.

My heart raced at the thought of how my life had changed with a phone call.

What did I know about parenting? It's not like I had any shining example throughout my life.

That wasn't exactly true, Julie and Miller had been wonderful to me when I'd shown up on the ranch with Kipp and Griff and then just never left.

Gwen and Wes didn't even bat an eye when Griff brought me home with him one time.

They gave me my own room, and Gwen made sure she had my favorite food on hand just in case I showed up at the door.

Smiling, I thought to myself, I'd be fine.

"Daddy?" Sawyer mumbled sleepily.

"No, pal, it's just me." Just me—what a sad thought. Before yesterday, I was cool Uncle Ryder, who took the kids to the ranch to ride horses and feed the bottle baby calves. And now I was just me.

"I want my dad," Sawyer sobbed as he buried his face in my side.

"I know, pal, I want that for you so much too." It wasn't a lie. I would have gladly taken Hank's place just to spare these kids the heartbreak they would have to face for the rest of their lives.

“Why don’t we go find something for breakfast, and let the girls stay asleep?”

” I asked him quietly. With a slight nod, I squeezed Lexie’s hand and moved off the bed, carrying Sawyer.

He had his arms wrapped tightly around my neck, and I wasn’t about to ask him to let go.

Taking the steps to the main floor slowly, I walked into the kitchen and stared.

“Can I have pizza?” he mumbled against my shoulder with a snuffle.

“Absolutely, you can.” Who was I to say no? “Can I put you down?” He shook his head, and I couldn’t help but let out a slight chuckle.

“Okay, then you’re going to have to hang on tightly.

” I moved toward the fridge and opened it, pulling out the pizza box from last night.

As I moved through the kitchen, I managed to warm up his breakfast with him still wrapped tightly against me.

I sat down, and Sawyer finally released me, but he ate his breakfast while sitting on my knee.

“What is this?” Lexie asked as she and Ruby came downstairs not long after. I hoped the noise I made hadn’t woken them.

“He wanted pizza for breakfast,” I said with a shrug, while Lexie glared at me.

“Do you think that is the best thing he could have eaten for breakfast?” she asked,

crossing her arms and waiting for an answer.

“Well, I seem to recall you having pizza for breakfast many times over the years, sweetheart, so it can’t be that bad,” I said with a grin, wanting to laugh at the look on her face.

When she had pizza for breakfast, it was usually after a night of indulging too much or because she’d been up all night partying.

“Apparently, I can’t argue with the truth.” She wrapped her arms around Ruby’s shoulders. “Pizza?” Ruby nodded but didn’t smile.

“Come on, kid, have a seat while Auntie gets your food.” I pulled out the chair beside me and patted the seat. Ruby’s gaze never left the floor as she took the seat beside me. Glancing up, I caught Lexie’s eye and gave her a tense smile.

Once we were all seated around the table, I knew there were some hard discussions to have. The sooner we got them out of the way, the quicker we could deal with the emotions and make plans.

“Kids, Auntie Lexie and I have some big things to talk to you about, okay?” Both kids nodded, and I looked at Lexie, but she didn’t meet my eyes, so I guess this was up to me.

“When Ruby was just a baby, your parents asked Lexie and me if we’d be your guardians if something ever happened, and of course, we said yes.

Then Sawyer came along, and we said yes to him too.

And while we never thought we’d ever need to do this, here we are.

” Ruby dropped her fork and looked up at me with red-rimmed eyes and more tears.

I reached out to take her hand, and she clung to me.

“Your parents asked that we raise you in one house, the four of us together. But you know my life is on the ranch, so Auntie and I talked last night and decided we’d need to move there.

” I waited for some reaction from the kids, expecting them to say they didn’t want to leave this house, but it never came.

“Uncle Ryder, can we ride horses and see the cows?” His little voice broke my heart wide open.

“Every day if you want to,” I said as I hugged him with one arm.

“What about my friends?” Ruby asked.

“We can come back here anytime you want to see them. And there are lots of kids around the ranch, even some your age. My friend Jake has two girls, Libby and Skyla. Libby is the same age as you, and Skyla is a few years younger. Do you remember Griff?” I asked, not sure she would.

It had been a lot of years since they’d been on the ranch, but Ruby nodded.

“Well, he has a stepson a few years older than you, but I’m sure you’ll both get along well.

And Kipp has a boy named Cooper, who’s almost exactly the same age as Sawyer.

” When Nora came to the ranch and we celebrated Cooper’s birthday, it was easy to

remember since it was just a few days from Sawyer's.

"What about Mom and Dad?" Ruby asked quietly. She was eight, far too young to have to deal with funerals and death, but here we were.

"I'm also going to make arrangements to bring them to the ranch.

We have our own cemetery, and you can go there to talk to them any time you want.

"She didn't need the details, and since I wasn't quite sure of anything yet, I didn't want to say more than that, but it seemed to appease her when she nodded.

Lexie didn't look at me again for the rest of breakfast. Our tender moment in the room was over, and now it was back to silence and ignoring. This would be a difficult year.

With breakfast finished, I went down to Hank's office and pored over the paperwork.

I noted the addresses of the places I'd need to visit.

I made the phone call to Hank's workplace to notify them.

I hadn't expected his boss to break down in tears on the other end of the line, but Hank just had that effect on people.

When I hung up, I felt exhausted, glancing at my watch, I was surprised to see it was only ten in the morning.

I was sure I'd worked right through lunch.

"I thought you might need this." Lexie held up a steaming cup of coffee, and the rich

aroma wafted through the office.

“Thank you.” Taking the cup from her, I brush my fingers over hers, and she lets go of the cup, as if I’d scalded her.

“So, what’s left to do? Both kids went for a nap. I didn’t know if I should let them, but they’re so tired.” She looked tired, too, and for only having gotten up a few hours ago, this was hard, just existing right now was hard.

“I think it’s okay, and we can deal with it later if they’re wired until midnight.

But at least when they’re asleep, they can forget everything that’s gone on.

” At least, I hoped that was the case. Neither of them had talked about nightmares, but the shock of it all still might be too fresh for that to happen.

As far as what’s left, I need to go to a few places. Hank’s work said they’d pack up his things. I called about a storage locker in Everton so we can have a place to keep all the things that we might need from the house or that we shouldn’t leave here.

“Can I get your keys? I’ll go do this running around and get things lined up with movers and stuff, but I need to borrow your car.”

“Yeah, keys are in my purse,” she said without giving it much thought.

“And you just want me to rifle through your purse to find them?” I asked as I stood, gathering the papers I thought might be needed.

“Oh, right, um, yeah, I suppose not.” Standing, she left the room and almost sprinted to the hallway. Frantically she dug through her disaster of a purse. Some things never changed, I thought to myself.

“Thanks,” I said, when she plunked them in my hand.

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Chapter Five

LEXIE

Sawyer had been sitting at the large window in the front room since he woke up from his nap, waiting for Ryder to return to the house.

He'd even eaten lunch there. What was I supposed to do to help him?

Ruby curled up on the couch in Anita's robe, watching whatever was on TV.

I moved from one to the other, giving hugs and holding them for as long as they needed.

I puttered around the house, making mental notes of things that needed to come with us when we headed back to the ranch, and I found boxes in the basement to pack things up.

It was all an elaborate plan to keep myself busy, but all it did was make me cry and remember the fun times we'd had over the years.

When I lifted the lid on Anita's jewelry box, it felt intrusive, and my stomach rolled as I glanced at the belongings inside.

A piece of paper poked out from beneath some necklaces, and I pulled it out.

It wasn't paper at all—it was a picture of her and me.

As I stared at it, I remembered that day vividly.

It was the end of our first week of college.

We'd sat beside each other in our first class and had been inseparable since.

With a sigh, I sat on the floor, held the photograph to my chest, and let the tears flow freely. I hadn't cried in front of the kids today. They needed strength, not me in fits of tears.

I didn't hear him come in, but the air in the room shifted, and I knew he was there, sitting beside me, letting me cry. God, I needed his arms to hold me, but my head told me I needed to stay away. This wasn't the time to blur the lines I'd fought so hard to erase.

Why was there never a tissue when I needed one? Using my sleeve, I wiped my face and runny nose. Well, that was gross, I thought to myself before shifting to look at Ryder.

"Did you get everything done?" I asked as I sniffled again.

"Yeah, there's a few things we'll need paperwork for, but the ball is rolling.

I'll go to the bank when we get the death certificate and finish paying the outstanding bills, and we can have their accounts and life insurance put in a trust for the kids.

From the paperwork in Hank's office, there's still a mortgage on the house, so I'll take care of that if there aren't death benefits on the loan...

so there's nothing to worry about other than the kids.

” He was rambling; he did it when he didn’t know what to say.

“I can help with the mortgage,” I said quietly.

“Sweetheart, I know you can, but I won’t let you.

I’m not even going to notice that amount gone from my account.

” He held out his hand, and I placed mine in his.

I knew he didn’t need the money, but I would have felt bad not offering to help.

I wasn’t Flying Diamond Five rich, but I’d done well in the years since our divorce, and I appreciated him taking care of things.

“What does this look like?” he asked as he turned his eyes away from me.

“I don’t know.” It wasn’t a lie or a copout, I really didn’t know.

I’d spent three torturous years trying to forget him.

And when I thought I’d sorted out my feelings, I’d see him again, and the wounds would open once more.

Then he touched me at the coffee shop. It was just a light brush of his hand across my hip, but it brought back all the memories.

His tender yet demanding touch. How he’d run his calloused hands down my body when we made love.

The possessive way he’d hold my hand in a crowd or when he walked on the curb

side of the street, even though we lived in a town with fewer than five hundred people and I'd known almost everyone since I was a baby.

But he was a protector, and I knew that no matter what, during this next year, there'd be nothing we needed to worry about because he would have everything under control.

I needed to control my heart because if there was one thing about Ryder Saffort, it was that he knew how to make me forget everything except him.

My hand grew hot, and I pulled it away from his, as if it were on fire. "I need to check on the kids." Hopping up from where I was sitting, I tossed the picture back into the jewelry box and practically ran out of the room.

Why was my breathing so erratic? I leaned against the wall and pressed my hand to my chest, trying to slow my pounding heart.

A year in close proximity to that man might just kill me.

"You better know what you're doing," I whispered to Anita, wherever her spirit was, hoping she heard me.

She was probably up in the heavens, clapping her hands, kicking her feet, and squealing as she watched Ryder and me share these moments again.

"Damn you," I muttered as I turned to head down the stairs.

"So, what should we do now that Uncle Ryder's back?" I asked, my voice sounding way too chipper. Both kids turned and looked at me like I had five heads. "Well, I'm going to bake cookies." I turned and walked into the kitchen. Cookies never made anything worse.

I froze when I opened the cupboard where Anita stored the baking supplies, and that's where Ryder found me when he finally came into the kitchen.

"Lex?" His voice was quiet but filled with worry. I didn't turn—I didn't even acknowledge him. He placed his big hands on my shoulders and turned me to face him. "Lex, what is it?" His eyes were full of concern, and I shook my head.

"What do we do with all the stuff? The food, the freezer, the pots and pans?" It was something I hadn't even considered, but we were essentially packing up an entire lifetime of stuff.

"We let the moving company deal with it." A slight frown crossed his handsome face, and his brows furrowed, accentuating the line between his eyes.

I used to run my fingers over it, trying to get him to relax, but it was permanently part of his face.

"I've given them directions on what to pack and what to leave.

We don't have to do all this at one time, either.

It's a few-hour flight from the ranch. We can come back whenever we need to.

" He brushed my hair off my face and waited for me to reply. All I could do was nod.

"I promised the kids cookies." A knock on the door interrupted my thoughts, but as expected, Ryder was on top of everything and immediately went to get it. I couldn't hear what was being said, but the door closed, and Ryder walked into the kitchen with two massive platters of food.

He set them down on the table, left the kitchen, and came back with bags of

groceries. I stared at him when he left again, this time returning with boxes of soda and beer. “The law office sent it,” he said as he finally stopped leaving the kitchen.

“What are we going to do with all of this?” I looked from the table to him.

“You’re going to call Sam and her parents, ask her to reach out a few of Hank and Anita’s close friends, and we’re going to have a party for them.

” Another knock at the door made him stop talking, and he went to answer it.

More food arrived, and in a way, I was more grateful for that than flowers.

Flowers would be hard to get to the ranch, and it would be a shame to throw them out if they were still perfectly good.

“A party it is,” I nodded as I grabbed my phone from my back pocket and dialed Sam’s number.

At that moment, an idea dawned on me. “Ry, why don’t we ask Sam if she wants to move in here?

She’s only renting the place she’s in. This would be permanent, and if the kids wanted to visit, they’d be coming home.

” As I stared at my phone before dialing her number, it seemed like an outlandish idea.

“Tell her to come over now, and we can talk to her about it. I think it’s a good idea.” He gently pressed a kiss to the side of my head before heading to the living room. He sat between Ruby and Sawyer, both of whom cuddled into his side.

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Chapter Six

RYDER

“Did Sam say why we needed to stop at the office?” I asked Lexie as she climbed into the car. The kids were in the back seat, looking longingly at the house they’d called home, but now, it was just a house.

“No, she didn’t even give me a hint.” Lexie reached over her shoulder and pulled her seatbelt across her, stopping just before she clicked it. “Why are you driving my car?” The crease between her brows deepened.

“Habit, sorry. Do you want to switch places?”

“No,” she sighed as she settled into her seat.

Our drive was silent. Ruby grasped Lexie’s hand, and Sawyer had essentially climbed me like a tree, tucking his head into my neck as we walked into the law office. I’d never thought of this place as difficult for the kids to visit, but it must just be another reminder.

“You’re here,” Sam said as she came out of her office.

Her smile was sad, and I longed to see the bubbly redhead who had forced her way through my grumpy exterior and brought me into the friend group where I’d met Lexie.

Lexie wrapped her free arm around Sam. “Ryder,” she smiled at me when she let Lexie go.

“Hey, Sam.” I hugged her tightly, and I heard her snuffle against me.

“Come into my office.” She motioned down the hall, and we followed her.

I set the kids up on the couch in the office with my phone and a show before taking a seat beside Lexie.

“So, I called you both because there’s an addendum in the will you both need to know about.

” I’d always hated surprises; nothing in my life had ever benefited from them, and I highly doubted it would start now.

“There’s a clause in here that you both have to be married to take the kids.” Silence filled the large office, and Sam’s eyes darted from Lexie to me. It was as if she didn’t know how to focus on us.

“We what?” Surely, I’d heard her wrong. We’d read the letter. Lexie had seen the will. She would have seen the addendum.

“It was a clause to get Anita’s mother off her back before she went no contact. We’d always intended to take it out when the kids got older.” Sam grimaced when Lexie stood. “We’d talked about it last year but figured Shirley would cause trouble no matter what, so we left it in.”

“You’ve got to be kidding? There has to be something we can do.” She paced the length of the office. She knew there was nothing to be done. It was a legal document, and even if there had been intentions to change it, those changes were never made, so

it didn't matter.

"When would we have to be married?" I asked, shifting in my chair before I pulled at the collar of my shirt.

"You have a week from today." Sam closed her eyes, waiting for Lexie's temper.

"Who gets the kids if we aren't married?"

"Anita's mom and stepdad," Sam said quietly. "You know that's how the law works. With Anita's dad dead and Hank's parents gone also, it leaves Shirley as the only next of kin."

"Fuck that," Lexie whispered as she leaned over Sam's desk. "Do we have to be married before we leave Wyoming?"

"No, you can do it in Montana. It has to look real to everyone. If anyone was questioned, they have to be able to say you're in love with one another." Sam had lowered her voice, and I glanced over at the kids. They were so engrossed in their devices that I doubted they would have heard anything.

"Shouldn't be difficult, we've done it once," I said, side-eyeing Lexie, who glared at me.

Our first wedding was an event. We had a very selective guest list for the ceremony, as we'd gone to the lake.

It was almost a secret where it was, and we'd always wanted to keep it that way.

Marrying the love of my life in such a tranquil spot led me to believe we'd have a wonderful life.

But like everything else I touch, it crumbled to dust.

“I’m assuming we’ll have to send you a copy of the marriage license?” Lexie said flatly, pulling me from the lake, and I was firmly back in the office.

“Yes, the sooner the better.” Sam frowned at her friend. “Lexie, you have to know this wasn’t planned.” I’d never figured out how Sam could be a lawyer; her face was so expressive, and her eyes had been like a window to her soul, but she masked it all when she was in court or dealing with clients.

“Of course, I know it wasn’t planned, but that doesn’t make me any happier. Christ, you can’t even take them. You don’t even have a boyfriend.” I watched Sam’s face fall. Lexie wasn’t a bitch, but right now, you’d never know it. Throwing the fact that Sam was single in her face wasn’t helpful.

“Well at least I’m not divorced, and still in love with my ex-husband,” Sam spat back at Lexie.

My ex-wife froze, and if shooting daggers from her eyes was possible, we’d be having a funeral for Sam, too.

So, my ex-wife—soon to be my wife again—was still in love with me.

That wasn’t a shock. I’d suspected as much over the years, but it was interesting to hear.

“Girls, this isn’t helpful,” I said as I stood and moved to stand between them. “We’ll get the paperwork to you as soon as we’re married. We’ve got a long drive, Lex, so we should probably get going.”

“Don’t call me Lex,” she said through gritted teeth as she turned her hateful glare to

me. All I could do was smile, I knew from experience it would irritate her more. Looking deeper than the anger, I saw heat and passion. I couldn't help but wonder what was going on in her brain.

"We'll let you know about the service," I said to Sam before rounding her desk and hugging her. She clung to me for a moment before pulling away.

"Thanks, Ryder. See you, Lexie." She smiled tightly at her friend but didn't approach her.

"I'm sorry," Lexie said as she moved quickly to hug Sam. "I'm such a bitch."

"You are, but I forgive you. I can't lose another best friend so soon." Sam's voice cracked, and the women hugged each other tighter.

Quietly, I took the kids outside and got them settled in the car while I waited for Lexie. "Uncle Ryder, are you getting married to Auntie Lexie again?" Ruby asked, and I glanced at her through the rearview mirror, so much for being occupied with her tablet.

"Kind of looks that way, kid." I nodded and waited for another question, but none came. She just slid on her headphones and turned on her tablet.

The longest week of my life was over. Being away from the ranch had its benefits, but being stuck in a city for that long usually made me itch. Adding on the fact that it took two hours longer to get home than it should have because the kids needed to stop would take some getting used to.

There had been fewer tears today, but they flowed as we tucked them into bed.

Taking them away from their home might not be the benefit I had hoped for.

Should Lexie and I consider a move to Wyoming for a little while?

The thoughts rolled around in my head as I flopped onto the couch in my little house.

We'd organized everything in Wyoming, arranged for people to pack Hank and Anita's house, and bring it here to store everything for the kids.

Letting my head fall back, I heard soft footsteps behind me.

"Why do you have a picture of me beside your bed?" Lexie asked as she walked around the opposite end of the couch and handed me a beer.

"You weren't supposed to notice," I said as I twisted the top off my bottle and took a swig.

"Oh, I noticed." She laughed, keeping her eyes locked on me. I tried to avoid her stare but I couldn't help looking over, and when I did, I saw mischief in her gaze.

"Well just forget about it," I grumbled as I lifted my beer to my lips and reached for the remote, but my fingers grazed her knee. I froze, leaving my hand there, and she picked it up, placing it on the remote for me.

"When do you think we can move into Mom and Dad's place?

" Lexie asked as she picked at the label on the beer bottle.

"I love this place, and I'm glad you decided to build it.

But it's just so small for the four of us.

" She wasn't wrong. The two-room, timber-framed A-frame home had been our

dream when it was just going to be the two of us.

Now, with an instant family, we needed more space.

“The guys and I’ll go over there tomorrow and make sure everything is good. It’s been a while since anyone lived there, and I haven’t been back since your mom moved out.” I wanted to kick myself for bringing up her parents. We’d managed to avoid that topic all week.

“Is it true you helped her move to Everton?”

“It is, yes.”

“Why?”

“I know you didn’t want me anymore, but your parents were the first people besides Wes and Gwen, who really welcomed me into their home.

So, while you and I didn’t last, I couldn’t totally cut your mom and dad out.

They are my family.” We were just ripping all the bandages off tonight, apparently.

If I turned off the television and the lights, would she get the hint and go to her room?

The answer was no... She was like a dog with a bone, and no matter what I wanted to avoid, she wouldn’t let it happen.

“It’s not that I didn’t want you,” she whispered. Tears welled in her eyes, and while someday we actually need to have this conversation, I didn’t feel like I could pile one more thing on my brain right now.

“Lexie, I can’t deal with this right now. Let’s just not talk about it.”

“Where should I sleep?” Her voice was hushed, hurt lingering in her words. She had caused it, and I didn’t want to have to justify her decision anymore.

“There’s a bed in my office, I’ll show you.

” Setting my beer on the coffee table, I wandered to the office and flicked on the light.

Lexie froze in the doorway as she scanned the wall of screens, and her frown wasn’t quick enough to hide her surprise.

“I monitor the cameras around the ranch. We’re having a bit of trouble. ”

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“What kind of trouble?” And there she was, lawyer Lexie, ready to take on the world and ensure it was set ablaze if the people she loved were in trouble.

“Enough that it’s too much to get into tonight.” Running my hand through my hair, I shook my head and huffed out a sigh.

The last thing I wanted was to involve her and the kids in whatever issues we were facing. Each person on the ranch brought a new danger, and I’d rather die than let Lexie, Ruby, and Sawyer get caught up in it. I couldn’t endure any more months like the ones we had just finished.

“Is this about all the land titles I’ve been pulling for the guys?” She sat on the bed and fell back, resting her head on the pillow. So many things were the same, but we were different people.

“What do you mean?”

“Someone calls almost once a week asking me to fit them into my day.” She grinned as I frowned. “I don’t think they’re super happy to talk to me, but they still use me.”

“The fuckers,” I grumbled, rolling my eyes.

“That explains why it’s never been you. I’m still the ranch’s lawyer Ryder.

” She sat up and leaned back against the wall behind her.

She looked good, tired but good. Then my brain kicked in—three hundred and fifty-

some days, and this would be over.

But it wouldn't ever be over; we had two kids who relied on us.

Even after a year, when we could live separately, we'd still have to be involved with one another.

"I figured as much. We don't trust people beyond the ones who've been on the inside.

What would you have done if it had been me that called?

"As soon as the question was out of my mouth, I regretted it.

I didn't want to know the answer because it had the power to give me hope or crush me all at the same time.

"Probably would have hung up," she said lightly.

"That's why I never called."

"I would have called you back though." She looked down at the floor, and I shook my head.

"You wouldn't have. Night Lex."

I grabbed the blanket off the back of the couch and tossed it haphazardly over myself as I laid down. Sleeping on the couch wasn't new for me. I fell asleep here at least twice a week, yet I stared at the wood plank ceiling, thinking about last week and how we'd basically just survived.

A squeak from my office door made me look up, and I watched Lexie walk across the

room to me. “Thought you might need a pillow.” She held it out, and I took it from her.

“Thanks,” I said, tucking my hand behind my head.

Lexie stood by my side, and I itched to reach out to her.

If I did, would she walk away? Would she recoil at my attempt?

Sure, we’d been a team for the week in Wyoming.

But this was home, and we weren’t trying to occupy the kids’ minds.

This was going to be our life for at least the next year.

Before I had more time to overthink anything, I held my hand out, and my heart stopped as I waited for her to walk in or away. One second of hesitation passed before she walked to me and laid down beside me. Wrapping Lexie in my arms, I shifted to make more room for her.

“Can I sleep here?”

“I’d like nothing better.” My voice was far more husky than I’d imagined.

Lexie shifted and snuggled against my chest, sighing.

This was wrong. I should have said no. I didn’t need my old feelings popping up again—not when I’d finally stopped trying to make other women be her.

I’d been ready to move on and find the happiness I longed for.

But now I had her in my arms again, and it would only hurt worse when I had to let her go again.

“Do you want to talk about getting married?”

“Not really. We can go to the courthouse tomorrow and get the marriage license. Then we can get married immediately or wait until the end of the week.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I was certified to marry people. The only people I planned on marrying were Kipp and Nora, then Griff and Elle asked, but I have all the information in my head now.”

“I can’t believe Griff’s married,” Lexie said, her voice slightly lighter.

“You need to be prepared when you see him again. He’d got some scarring on the side of his face from the fire.

” My voice dropped, and my pulse raced. I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to think of that night without my heart racing.

Lexie moved her hand across my heart, and I held on to her a bit tighter.

“Are they going to be okay with all this?” They were my business partners.

Lexie had been brought in like a sister, and it hurt them almost as much as it hurt me when she’d left.

It wasn’t just the fact that she’d been a focal point of the ranch, it was also how poorly I’d taken the divorce that would have them worried.

They might still deal with her on a business level, but the personal aspect would be gone.

“Probably not, but it’s not their problem.

” Shifting slightly, I tucked her head under my chin and closed my eyes, begging for sleep to overtake me.

But the clock ticked loudly, as if mocking me.

Lexie’s slow breathing was a sure sign she was asleep.

I recalled the first time we’d spent the night together, convinced she’d died next to me—until she snored, and I was sure I’d lost five years of my life.

Was the kitchen tap dripping? When did that start? Were those footsteps? Was one of the kids up? I listened, but I must have been imagining things.

Chapter Seven

LEXIE

Breakfast was a disaster. I didn't make anything like Anita did.

Taking the kids from their home was hard, just as I had imagined it would be.

Ryder had to close and lock the door to his office because Sawyer kept going in there and playing with his computer, causing the cameras to turn off and the alarms to sound.

"Why don't we go out to the lake?" Ryder said as he pushed his chair away from the table.

"Are Sawyer and I going to have to sleep in the same bed forever?" Ruby asked as she flicked her eggs around her plate, her head resting in her palm.

"No, you aren't. We got in so late last night, and you needed a bed, and that was it. Change of plans, let's go to the new house," Ryder said as he took his plate to the sink.

"New house?" Sawyer asked, his eyes lighting up.

"Well, new to you, not to Auntie Lexie. It's the house she grew up in." He leaned against the counter, and both kids seemed to have renewed energy to finish their breakfasts.

“What’s it like, Auntie Lex?” Sawyer asked as he lifted his orange juice, but it slopped on the table because he was bouncing on his chair. “I’m sorry.” His little eyes filled with tears, and I was up off my chair in a split second.

“Lex,” Ryder said as he tossed me a towel over the kitchen island. His aim was way off, and the towel landed on Ruby’s head.

“Uncle Ryder,” she bemoaned, but then a giggle escaped. Sawyer started laughing too, and when Ryder’s deep, hearty laughter began, I couldn’t be left out. Reaching across the table, I plucked the towel off Ruby’s head and mopped up the spill.

“And that, kiddos, is why Uncle Ryder doesn’t compete in roping events at the rodeo.” Both of the kids almost fell off their chairs laughing, and Ryder moved towards me.

“Pretty sure I roped you once or twice back in the day.” God, this man made my heart flutter. I should really see a doctor about that; it might be life-threatening.

“Only because I let you,” I quipped and stuck my tongue out at him.

“We could try it again.”

“Oh, no, you don’t, not after that less-than-stellar throw. Your days of roping me are over.” Ryder continued to move toward me, and I picked Sawyer up from the chair and held him in front of me. “You have to protect me, Sawyer.”

“I’ll protect you, Auntie,” he said before he held out his hands as if he were guarding me.

“Uncle Ryder, you better stop, or you’re going to get it,” he said, and for the first time I noticed his slight lisp when he pronounced words with S.

Had Anita been working with anyone on it?

Would he be teased when he went to school here?

Was I completely overreacting because I'd never noticed it before in all the years I'd known him? Probably.

“And just what am I going to get?” He stopped advancing and waited.

“This.” Sawyer bolted out of my arms, hollering at Ryder, and ran smack into him, bouncing off.

Ryder might not have great aim, but his reflexes were spot on as he grabbed the little boy up before he hit the ground.

Ruby was laughing, and the boys were play fighting while I stood back watching them all.

This wasn't supposed to be my life.

There weren't kids in my future because I couldn't have them.

There definitely wasn't a man across the room from me who I needed to re-marry.

Life was supposed to be quiet, involving work at the law firm, occasional dating, and ultimately being a burden on Lydia as I got older.

Not this. Not an instant family, and certainly not the longing for it.

But for a brief moment just now, life was perfect.

When the giggles and play fighting stopped, it felt as if someone had let the air out of the room, and we remembered we weren't supposed to be happy. The moment was over.

"Everyone get in the truck. Let's go pick out your rooms." Ryder could sense it. I knew it, and that's why he wasn't waiting to go to the farm.

The kids ran out the door, and I slipped on my shoes when Ryder's hand slid across my back, and I tensed.

Our contact up until last night had been minimal.

I knew being with him hadn't been right, and I didn't want to make him think there was more going on here than just us needing to become parental figures.

"Sorry," he grumbled as he stepped away from me.

"It's fine," I mumbled as I headed out the door. Quickly getting to the truck, I hopped in, wondering if it would have been better to walk. At least I wouldn't have to ride over there right beside him.

Don't be silly, Lexie. You spent hours in the vehicle with him yesterday, and everything was fine, I thought to myself.

Yeah, but that was before you decided you needed to cuddle on the couch with him last night, the other side of my brain retorted.

Why had I done that? I knew it was bad. I knew it would cause problems, but I did it anyway. God, I'm ridiculous.

"Lex, you're thinking out loud. Stop worrying. I won't do it again." I didn't even

notice he'd gotten in the truck, much less that we were pulling out of the yard and heading to the farm.

My dad had always called it the farm because he didn't have cows, just some farmland that he'd rented out to Kipp's father years ago.

He would have loved to be a farmer, but his law practice had been busy, and then he'd bought that stupid bar, so any free time he had was suddenly gone.

Mom had called it a midlife crisis, but I think it was more like empty nest syndrome.

He bought it after my sister Lydia, and I became more independent and didn't rely on him as much.

It turned into his baby and my arch-nemesis.

We'd have to work there serving food and singing on occasion.

Lydia and I had always sung together. At first, it was in church, and then at the bar.

Dad needed to fill in on nights he didn't have a live band.

What polar opposite places to sing: a church and a bar.

Eventually, I stopped going to church, but Mom and Dad still went until his diagnosis with dementia.

He didn't want to see anyone because he didn't want people to pity him. So, Lydia took over the bar, and he became a recluse until Mom couldn't look after him anymore and admitted him to a care facility.

The one she'd found was nice, and it was close, but I worried about how she'd be able to pay to keep him there long-term.

I hadn't asked her about it because I'd kind of buried my head in the sand about everything and made sure I was busy with work.

That hadn't been fair to my mom and Lydia, but it was the only way I could cope.

Turning into the laneway, we rumbled over the cattle gate Ryder had installed a few years ago, and suddenly, nerves overtook me. My stomach flipped, my hands shook, and I bit the corner of my lip. This was oddly reminiscent of the first time I'd brought Ryder home.

My parents were thrilled the first time they met him, and they were even more excited when he proposed.

They absolutely adored him, and I couldn't blame them; Ryder was charming and sweet.

He was also everything I said I never wanted.

The last thing I needed was a cowboy, but find one I did.

And I might have been a little biased, but I thought he was the best one—he still was.

Our house came into view as we rounded the curve in the road. A large two-story white farmhouse appeared. It had a wraparound porch with green shutters, and the porch swing swayed slowly in the slight breeze.

It still looked like a dream. The apple orchard was a little distance from the house, and I longed to run through the blooming trees, just as I had when I was young and

carefree.

Mom's large garden plot was off to the side and appeared to have been tilled recently.

In fact, the house seemed to be a brighter white than the last time I had been here.

"Did you have the house painted?" I asked, turning to Ryder.

"Yeah, after your mom moved out, I had someone come in. They did a great job. It was looking a little rundown, and I wanted your mom to see it back in its splendor when she came back to get more of her things."

"How much did she leave?" I asked, frowning at him.

"Enough that we'll all have everything we need." He laughed, and I shook my head. Mom had always had more than she needed, and I was pretty sure that when she moved to Everton, she only took the bare minimum.

"Come on kids, let's see what we need to bring back with us, besides your things," Ryder's chipper voice cut through the silence in the truck, and the kids hopped out.

Walking up the porch steps, the kids ran ahead and went inside, while I stopped and stared at the swing.

Ryder and I had our first fight while sitting there; I didn't even remember what it was about.

But we'd also started making memories on that swing.

We used to sneak off to the barn, and I glanced over my shoulder, smiling at the red barn still standing strong across the yard.

Someone had added two chairs and a table between them under the living room window.

I couldn't help but wonder if the guys had been planning to have one of their ranch hands live here.

I probably should have felt bad about shifting their plans, but I didn't.

This was my home, and I wanted to raise the kids here.

"You coming in?" his low voice asked from the door. I hadn't even heard the screen door open—I'd been so lost in thought.

"Yeah." I smiled and walked past him, careful not to touch him because I wasn't sure I'd be able to stay away once I let myself accept his touch in this house.

"Auntie Lex, there's a room that's all pink," Ruby shouted as she was halfway down the stairs.

"Yep, that one was mine." I smiled and headed for the stairs.

It was fun seeing this house through their eyes as they dragged us from room to room.

I'd been sure Ruby would want my room, but she chose the one overlooking the orchard.

It had a window seat, and I knew that little girl was home the moment I saw her there.

She'd found a book in my room, grabbed a pillow off the bed, and ended her exploring, curled up reading.

“Maybe she gets that from you,” Ryder said as he stopped a safe distance from me.

Now, I was sorry for the way I reacted to his touch earlier because, at this moment, I should have leaned on him, held his hand, or something.

Instead, I wandered into Ruby’s room and sat on the opposite end of the seat.

“Think this one will work for you, your imagination, and your dreams?”

“I think so.” She set down her book, and I noticed the title, *Anne of Green Gables*. It kind of felt fitting that that’s the book she’d found. “Have you read this one?” she asked quietly.

“I think I read it when I was about your age.” Truthfully, I might have been a bit older, but not by much.

It was the first book I truly remember that encouraged imagination and the possibilities that come with it.

Although somewhere along the way I’d forgotten how much I wanted to be like Anne, life became hard, and work got in the way.

Maybe Ruby and I could discover our inner Anne Shirley together.

Chapter Eight

LEXIE

My body ached from the pain of the past week.

We had successfully moved into the farmhouse, and the kids seemed more settled.

I hadn't pushed them about school, but I knew they needed to get enrolled, and there were probably a million other things I was forgetting.

My dad would have known. He would have known what to do about all of this.

"Ryder, I need to see my dad." I didn't even know where it came from, but if there was one person who could make me stop and sit with this, it was him. Reaching for the frying pan, I dunked it in the water and scrubbed the burned egg off it.

"Are you sure? It's been a while since you've seen him. He's not the same Lex." Ryder's voice was patronizing. Did he not know I wasn't dumb? I knew my father's health had been declining, and I wasn't the bury-my-head-in-the-sand type of person. Avoiding the issue, yes, but I knew the issues.

Slamming the frying pan on the counter, I said, "I need to go. The same or not, I just need to see him." My chin quivered, and I was fighting tears as I looked at Ryder.

"Okay, I'll figure out where to take the kids.

” He ran his hand over my back quickly before he walked out of the kitchen.

Quickly I looked over my shoulder and looked at the kids.

They stared back at me, and I smiled at them.

It seemed to be enough for them to go back to their eggs, but an awkward silence was floating through the house.

We dropped the kids off with Julie and Phil. Ryder said they’d fussed over the kids so much and made them feel so welcome that they ran in and didn’t even look back. I couldn’t go in. Seeing all these people from my past right now wasn’t what I needed yet.

Ryder pulled the door open and followed me into the nursing home.

I was hit by the nauseating smell of cleaning products and floral air fresheners attempting to mask the reality that some of these individuals required the same care they had as babies.

Curiously, there was also the scent of freshly baked bread.

“I can’t do this,” I whispered as I stopped in the hallway, tears pricking my eyes. Too much had happened in the last week. I wasn’t sure I could handle my father not knowing me.

“You can, and I’ll be right here with you.” He placed his hand on the small of my back, and the touch made me move again. He wasn’t pushing me. He was supporting me.

My father’s door was partially closed, so I knocked and waited. A nurse walked past

and looked at us before smiling. “Go on in, if he’s asleep, just nudge his shoulder. He’ll be happy to see you, Lexie.” I looked at the nurse again and glanced down at her name tag.

“Carrie, it’s good to see you.” I smiled at the woman. We’d been in the same graduating class, and I’d forgotten she wanted to be a nurse. She was always so caring, so it didn’t surprise me that this was what she’d chosen to do.

“You too, maybe we can catch up while you’re here. I’m so sorry to hear about your friends. If you need anything for the kids just call.” Her smile was genuine, and I nodded. “Have a good visit.” She nodded at Ryder and carried on down the hallway.

The door opened with a slight squeak as I walked into my father’s room for the first time.

He sat in his chair, the same chair he’d had at home the last time I’d been there.

His hair was completely grey, and he was balding slightly.

The wrinkles on his face were deeper, and he frowned slightly as he slept.

He looked like a shell of the man who could lift Lydia and me at the same time without a grunt.

His large hands rested on his lap, but they were withered and looked like skin and bone. Bringing my hand to my mouth, I choked back a sob. Reaching out, I touched his shoulder, and he startled awake. “Hello.” He smiled, and that was the same as always.

“Hi, Daddy,” I said as I took a seat in the chair beside him. I didn’t miss the furrow in his brow as he looked at me, trying to figure out who I was. His eyes shifted to

Ryder, and I saw a flash of recognition there, but he didn't say anything and shifted his gaze back to me.

"It's been too long, Aaron," Ryder said as he extended his hand for my father to shake.

His arm trembled as he lifted it to shake Ryder's hand. "It certainly has, son. What's been happening at the Diamond these days?" My father relaxed and focused his attention on Ryder.

"Oh, not much, a lot of fall clean up and winter prep. But I didn't come here to talk shop. We'll save that for my next visit." The men laughed, and my father nodded.

"I sure like hearing about the ranch, you know. So, what's so serious that you brought this pretty lady to visit me here?" He looked back at me, and the crushing weight of my father's disease settled on my shoulders. He knew my ex-husband, but didn't know me.

My father's eyes dropped from Ryder to me, and as if the fog lifted, his eyes cleared and sparkled like I remembered.

"Alexandra, I've been longing to see you child.

" He held out his arms, and I slid off the chair and knelt in front of him as he wrapped his arms around me.

I couldn't stop the tears that cascaded from my eyes. "My sweet girl, what brings you home?"

"I came home because there's been a change in my situation." I looked back at Ryder, and his smile made me strong. "And well, that something is us getting back

together.”

“In truth, sir, I’d like to ask for Lexie’s hand in marriage again.” Ryder’s voice was strong and sure. There wasn’t a hint of hesitation in his question to my dad.

“Well, you sure know how to make an old man happy. You’ve got it, young man.” He smiled and patted my hand. “So, besides getting back together, what’s your practice been like lately?”

My father was the reason I went into law.

I’d followed in his footsteps, only for him to quit and buy a bar.

It had been the oddest thing, but as I looked back, I could see law wasn’t his passion.

He’d been a rancher’s son and grew up in a home where following in the family business wasn’t encouraged.

Eventually, the ranch he grew up on was bought by Kipp Miller Sr., and we were afforded the luxury of living in the old house.

Miller understood that maintaining a connection to family land provided stability, and even though we no longer owned the property, I had grown up in the same place as my father.

“It’s divorces, Dad, not much good about them. But I’m keeping busy.” My tone was light, but caution filled my heart knowing that at any moment he’d be taken from me again.

“Any word on making partner?” His question took me aback, because there’s no way he should know that. “Your mom told me it was a possibility, and that was why you

couldn't come home."

It hadn't been a lie, but sitting in front of him, I felt like the biggest fraud.

"Nothing new on that front. The firm is still dangling it over our heads." I didn't tell him that I'd been passed over for a man who was severely under qualified, and I'd put my head to the grindstone even more for the next time the opportunity came up, but it hadn't yet.

"Well, it'll happen when it's supposed to. Maybe you don't need it if you're marrying Ryder again. Take my old office and open up a firm of your own. Screw those city assholes who can't see your potential." He chuckled to himself.

I didn't want to tell him that mom had sold the building last year and that whoever had bought it had torn it down, leaving just a vacant lot. He didn't need to know the dream he'd once had was gone.

"I'll look into that Dad, for sure." I smiled, and as if I were watching someone being ripped from my clutches, the brightness in his eyes faded, and his generic smile filled his face again.

He nodded and looked up at Ryder. "Hello."

"I'll be back in a few days, okay, Dad." I took his face in my hands as I spoke, hoping to preserve whatever brief moment I'd had with him.

"Okay, I'd like that." There was no familiarity, but he nodded.

"See you, sir," Ryder said as he took my hand before we walked out the door.

"Goodbye, son." My heart broke. Did he remember Ryder, or was it merely what

he'd called everyone?

I looked down at the pastel speckles on the white floor and didn't raise my gaze as we walked past the nursing station and left the building.

Ryder pulled open the truck door, and I climbed in.

Letting my head fall into my hands, I didn't try to stop the tears.

Sobs wracked my body as Ryder started the truck and drove out of the parking lot.

We drove, his hand rested on my thigh, and I appreciated him for getting me out of there without asking questions.

The truck slowed, and he pulled off the road at an approach.

Shifting the truck into park, he lifted the center console, unbuckled my seatbelt, and pulled me over to him.

Throwing my arms around his neck, I cried on his shoulder until I had no more tears left in my body.

"I knew it would be hard, but I didn't think it would be that hard. He didn't even know me."

"He doesn't usually know me when I go." I sat up and frowned.

"How often do you go?"

"Almost once a week, if I can get away."

“Why?”

“For you. If I could make sure they were okay, I felt like I was helping you without you even knowing.” He grazed his thumb over my cheek, wiping away the tears running down my face.

“I’m glad they’ve had you all this time.”

“No, you’re not.” He chuckled, breaking the tension in the cab of the truck. “You would have been thrilled if they gave me the silent treatment forever. Don’t forget, I know you.” He wiped my face, then glanced down at his shoulder, where a wet spot had formed on his light blue plaid shirt.

“Sorry,” I whispered as I wiped at the spot. “And just so you know, I am okay with the fact they kept you.” He kissed the top of my head, lingering and inhaling deeply.

“Let’s get back and get the kids.” His words were quiet, and I nodded.

Those were words I never thought anyone would say to me.

I didn’t shift back to the seat by the door; I pulled the lap belt across me and stayed in my spot.

On our first date, Ryder asked me to sit in the middle seat.

I thought he would try to cop a feel, but he just threaded his fingers through mine and held my hand as we drove back to campus from where we had dinner.

His calloused hand brushed against mine, and I watched our fingers instinctively tangle with one another.

I should stop this—alarm bells were ringing in the back of my head—but if we were going to make people believe we were together, I needed to get used to being close to him again.

Chapter Nine

RYDER

I didn't let her go, but she didn't try to move away either.

Lexie fumbled behind her to get the lap belt, buckled herself in, and rested her head back on my shoulder.

I knew seeing her father was going to hurt, there wasn't any way to shield her from it.

She'd stayed away because she couldn't bear to see him like that but avoiding it had only made things worse.

Silently, I thanked the heavens that he'd been having a good day.

All I hoped was that when she went back, he would recognize her again, no matter how brief the acknowledgment was.

"We're going to have to go to the main ranch. I can't hide out at the farm for the entire time I'm here," she said softly as she looked down at our hands.

"There's no reason we have to do that today.

" If she agreed to wait, I could hide out at the farm and avoid the four men I knew would be less than thrilled about this situation.

That might be the understatement of the year—pissed, angry, furious, and probably feeling a million other emotions I hadn't even considered.

“Might as well get it over with.” She raised her head and looked out her window.

“And we need to head back to Julie's to get the kids.

” She hadn't wanted to go see her dad alone, but she wasn't sure where to take the kids.

Julie's was the only logical place. It wouldn't be overwhelming for them with a bunch of new people. She and Phil wrapped the kids in their love, and by the time I headed back out to the truck they were already making plans for a busy time together. Julie promised Ruby they'd bake cookies, and Phil was going to take Sawyer to the horses.

“Let's go then,” I said as I pulled back onto the straight stretch of road that would lead us back to the ranch.

The rest of the drive was painfully silent, and all I wanted to do was ensure she was okay. She wasn't okay. I didn't need to ask. Everything was so messed up right now, and to make matters worse, the envelope containing our marriage license sat on the dash.

“We're going to have to make them believe we're together,” Lexie said as she broke the silence when we crossed onto ranch property heading for Julie's home.

“I know,” I mumbled. Making people believe I was still head over heels for her shouldn't be an issue. Clearly, I was still crazy about her.

Pulling up to the house, I looked over at Lexie, who hadn't made a move to get out of the truck. “I'll be right back.” She nodded, at least, before I opened the door.

After quickly knocking before I opened the door, I wandered into the kitchen and found two giggling kids. It was a sound I hadn't heard much of over the past week, but it was enough to give me the boost I needed today. "Uncle Ryder, why are you back already?" Sawyer asked as he saw me walk in.

"Well, we need to head to the ranch so you can meet some of the kids," I said as Ruby moved to my side, holding a bag of cookies.

"You make those, kid?" She nodded and beamed up at me.

"Pretty sure they won't make it home. I think I'll eat them all."

"Uncle Ryder." She laughed and held the bag up. "There's three dozen in there. You'll get a tummy ache."

"Nah, gut of steel," I said as I patted my stomach.

"So, you're heading to the main house?" Julie asked as she walked over and held her arms out for a hug. It hadn't mattered that I'd hugged her when I dropped the kids off. She needed another one, and I think she knew I needed the embrace of a mother today, of all days.

"We are. Need anything taken over?"

"Nope, but I think I might pop over in about twenty minutes." Her smile said everything she wasn't saying. She was coming along and going to make sure the guys were on their best behavior and save Lexie and me if we needed it.

"Jules, you don't need to be inserting yourself in things," Phil said, shaking his head.

"Mind your business, old man. I'll take care of my boy even if he doesn't want me

to.” Julie patted my arm.

“Oh no, I want you to,” I said with a smirk. Julie was the only woman who could settle us down. Julie was the matriarch of the ranch, and there was nothing we wouldn’t do for her.

“I thought you said Kipp was your only son?” Ruby asked as a frown crept over her face.

“He is, but I decided a long time ago that Ryder was too. I might not have given him life, but he’s my boy all the same.

” My heart clenched, and I blinked a little faster.

The little boy who’d never had anyone love him ended up having more parents than he knew what to do with.

If I’d met them all sooner, maybe the trauma of being abandoned wouldn’t have hurt so badly.

“We should get going,” I said, my voice a little thick with emotion.

“Tell Lexie she’s always welcome here, she doesn’t need to sit in the truck,” Julie whispered, just loud enough for me to hear, and I nodded.

“Thanks for a fun day, Ms. Julie,” Ruby said as she hugged the woman.

“Yeah, can I come back, Mr. Phil? I had a great time,” Sawyer asked as he looked up at Phil.

“You can come back anytime you want, Sawyer,” Phil said as he swung the little boy

up for a hug.

“And how about you call us Grandma Julie and Grandpa Phil? All the other kids on the ranch do, so you need to as well.” Julie looked over at Phil, who nodded and smiled as the kids looked at one another and then hugged their new grandparents tightly.

The kids climbed into the back seat, buckled themselves in, and I pulled away from Julie and Phil’s.

We all waved at them and headed for the next stop.

It wasn’t a long drive, but the kids chattered nonstop about their morning.

Ruby’s smile was genuine, and I think Sawyer was worn out, yet he grinned too.

“Wow!” Ruby said, looking out her window at Kipp’s house.

“This is massive.” I pulled open her door and helped her out.

She wasn’t wrong; the very large log home had been added onto multiple times over the years.

It was built to house a massive family, and there’d been times over the years when it had. Not always blood, but always family.

“I used to live here. Auntie Lexie did for a bit, too.” I looked across to where she was helping Sawyer out of the truck, and she just shook her head.

We’d been dating, and she didn’t feel comfortable staying at the farm—something about sleeping with a boy in her parents’ house—so we stayed here when we came

home from college.

“Well, this is a surprise,” Kipp called from the porch, “We didn’t expect you so soon.” He smiled at the kids, but when he saw Lexie, his face fell.

“Figured we might as well get these two comfortable with everyone straight away. Ruby, Sawyer, this is one of my best friends, Kipp Miller.” They both looked up at him.

“You’re Grandma Julie’s boy... you don’t look like a kid.” Sawyer’s eyes were about to pop out of his head as he looked up at Kipp, wide-eyed but not afraid. Kipp’s size usually made kids scared of him, but not this one.

“Well, Sawyer, to Grandma Julie, I’ll always be a kid. Why don’t you and Ruby come in and meet my son Cooper and daughter Halley? The other kids will be here in a few minutes.” Just as he said it, a squeal came from the house across the yard.

Nash, Fallon, Josie, and Lottie had come out of the house, and Josie ran straight to Ruby. “Hi, you’s Ruby, I’n Josie, we be best friends.” Josie’s grin made Ruby smile at her.

“I’d like to be your best friend,” Ruby said cheerfully as Josie took her hand, and the three kids ran inside the house.

“Lexie,” Nash said as he and Fallon joined Kipp on the porch.

“Nash, Fallon, nice to see you both.” Lexie clasped her hands together so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

“What are you all doing out here? Get in this house,” Nora said from the door. She pushed the screen door open, and Nash and Fallon walked in ahead of Kipp and me.

“I’m Nora, Kipp’s wife. It’s so nice to meet you.” Nora’s voice floated easily through the entryway as she welcomed Lexie.

“It’s nice to meet you too.” Lexie’s words were timid, nothing like the cutthroat lawyer I knew she could be, but this wasn’t her courtroom, and she had baggage with almost every adult who would be in this home, except for Nora and Elle.

“Can I get you anything?”

“Nora,” Kipp said tersely.

“Got something to say?” She crossed her arms and stared her husband down.

“Not everyone in this house is rude, so either say your peace or keep your mouth shut.” Her pointed stare made him clench his jaw, and he took a seat at the table without saying another word.

She’d been in control of him since the day she came home from town with him.

Nora was a force, and if I was being honest, she’d been keeping all of us in line since she showed up.

“Thank you for the offer, but I’m fine.” Lexie wasn’t fine, and everyone could see it.

Another truck roared into the yard, and I heard three doors slam. It was Griff. I looked up at Lexie, whose eyes were glued to me, wide and full of fear. Smiling at her, I nodded, and she walked over to my side, and I reached for her hand.

The kids ran down the hallway, and Cooper pulled Parker along behind him; they were all gone again.

Griff walked into the kitchen, holding Elle's hand, and the tension was palpable.

"Lexie. I'm sorry to hear about Anita and Hank.

" There was little emotion in his words, and the hair on the back of my neck rose as the anger bubbled inside me.

"Thank you," Lexie said, but it was barely audible.

"Wow, hard to believe this is a homecoming," Linc said from behind Griff.

Pushing his way past Griff and Elle, he opened his arms to Lexie, and she walked into them for a hug.

"Welcome back Lexie-Lou, it's good to see you.

" Lexie said something to Linc, but I wasn't sitting close enough to hear it.

Linc wasn't one to hold grudges or dwell on the past, so the fact that he'd been so open to seeing Lexie again gave me hope that the others could get there too.

"There are a few things we need to discuss, so if everyone could take a seat." The nice thing about this table was that it was large enough for all of us to gather around.

"We need to make space in the cemetery if that's okay. I was going to call while we were still in Wyoming, but there was so much to get done and I forgot. Hank and Anita would like to be laid to rest somewhere the kids can go to." I glanced at my friends, and at least they all nodded in agreement.

"I can go out and do it tomorrow," Kipp said without looking up from the table.

“Hank and Anita asked that Lexie and I live together for the first year and then remain in the same town to raise the kids. So, as of right now, we’ll be at the farm raising the kids where Lexie grew up.

” There wasn’t any pushback from them because they knew they had no right to have an opinion about us living there.

“There’s also the small fact that we’ll be getting remarried.” All eyes shot to me and then moved to Lexie. “This week... so... I’d like you all to be there if you would.” The silence was deafening, and I was pretty sure I could hear the cattle chewing all the way over in the far pasture.

“Married?” Griff asked shock in his voice. I should have known he’d be the first one to say something.

“Yes, married.” I reached for Lexie’s hand. She didn’t pull away; instead, she turned and smiled at me.

“Congratulations, you two. Our anniversaries will be so close. We can celebrate it together every year,” Elle said, smiling at us and seemingly oblivious to the rising anger at the table.

“Whatever you need help with, please just ask,” Nora said as she reached over to put her hand on Lexie’s shoulder.

“Thank you both so much.” I hated how quiet she was.

There’d been a time when Lexie would have put every one of these people in their place.

How many times had she bailed Fallon out of trouble after Miller died?

And she'd been Griff's sounding board when he needed to talk about the things we'd done.

Now, they were all treating her like she was dirt on their shoes.

"I think it's time to go." I stood up from the chair, and the kids just happened to run past. "Ruby, Sawyer, we need to get going. We've got a few more places to go today.

"That was a flat-out lie, so I was going to need to figure something out.

Maybe we'd go to town and get something from Fred's, or maybe we'd just go to the grocery store and grab something for supper.

Whatever it was, I just needed to get out of here.

The kids said goodbye to one another and walked out of the house with Lexie.

Everyone followed me to the porch, but my business partners stood in a line together on the top stair.

"This is the first time I've been ashamed to be one of you.

"I glared at Kipp, Griff, and then at Fallon before walking down the porch steps and getting into the truck.

I couldn't lump Linc into that group. He'd been a little warmer to Lexie, and Nora and Elle were as sweet as I'd figured they would be.

But the others could go to hell at this moment as far as I was concerned.

If today could've gone any worse, I wouldn't have believed it. As I pulled out of the

yard, Julie and Phil drove in, and I didn't miss her frown as we drove past them. What I wouldn't give to be a fly on that wall when she got into that house.

"Where are we going, Uncle Ryder? I was having fun." Ruby's voice was sad, and it took everything in me not to turn around and knock-out some teeth.

The pastures whizzed by as I sped up on the highway, and I passed the entrance to the farm.

Maybe we were too close? We could move into another house further from the ranch.

"I've got someplace to show you, and we need to get there before it closes." She nodded, and I was glad that was all the explanation she needed because I wasn't sure I could come up with anything more.

Fred seemed to be the safest place to go. Lexie had seen him often since our divorce, and they'd seemed pleasant the last time I'd seen her there. Fred would also spoil the kids, which might take their minds off me ending their fun.

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Chapter Ten

LEXIE

We fell into a routine, and the kids were getting used to waking up with Ryder and me instead of their parents.

Sawyer and Cooper were best friends, and over time, I think Ruby and Jake's daughter Libby would become friends as well.

Ruby was shy, while Libby was outgoing, but I was sure they'd figure things out.

"Where is she?" Lydia came flying through the door, the screen slapped against the closure a few times from the force of her opening it.

"Hang on just a minute," Ryder said, as he stood and moved between me and my sister, who was moving so fast that she didn't stop before bouncing off Ryder. "What's the problem?"

"She's been here for days and hasn't set foot in the bar.

I had to hear it from the town gossips that she's back.

She couldn't even tell me and Mom what was going on.

"Lydia bobbed and weaved to look around Ryder, but he didn't let her move toward me.

Her voice rose a little more with every sentence.

“And now she’s shackled up with you, living her happily ever after.

” She lifted her hands and placed them on his chest, trying to push him away, but the solid, broad-shouldered man didn’t move an inch.

“First of all, she’s got a name, and you can start using it,” Ryder said as he stepped out of the way, pulled a chair out, and pointed for Lydia to sit. “Second, did the town gossips happen to tell you why she was back?” He stood towering over her and crossed his arms over his chest.

“They said she showed back up looking all cozy with you, and then I found out you were moved in here.” My sister slumped in her chair and glared at me.

“Ruby, Sawyer, can you please come into the kitchen?” Ryder’s voice was commanding; he had complete control of the situation. While I didn’t need him to fight my battles, it was nice not to be the one sparring with my sister this time.

With thunderous footsteps echoing down the stairs, Lydia turned her head to watch the kids land at the bottom. “Ruby, Sawyer, this is Lydia. She’s Lexie’s sister, and she’d really like to meet you.” The kids looked wide-eyed, from Ryder to Lydia.

“Are you our auntie then too?” Sawyer asked, his voice quiet as he tucked himself next to Ruby.

“Well, I guess, I could be,” Lydia stammered, as her gaze flitted from Lexie and the kids to me, waiting for an explanation.

Ryder leaned over and spoke quietly to Lydia. “These are Hank and Anita’s kids. Years ago, Lexie and I agreed to be their guardians if anything ever happened to both

of them.”

“Oh, my god,” Lydia whispered as she covered her mouth.

The kids had moved to my side, and I wrapped my arms around them as they rested their heads on my shoulders.

“Lex,” she whispered. Tears filled my eyes, and I held onto the kids a little tighter.

I didn’t want to cry in front of them, and they’d seen enough of that over the last week.

Hiding emotions wasn’t what I was aiming for either, but I wanted this house to bring happy memories for them, even in the midst of their sadness.

“Hey guys, let’s give Auntie Lexie and Lydia some time to talk.

” Ryder held out his arms, and the kids went willingly to his side.

I watched them walk out of the room, and all I wanted to do was follow.

They were reminded every moment of the day that their parents were gone, and the only reprieve they had was when they were asleep.

So for my sister to barge in here and pull this shit? My blood was boiling.

“Outside,” I said through gritted teeth as I stood.

Lydia and I’d had a somewhat tumultuous relationship growing up, but when I’d graduated and gone away, we’d been able to be friends.

However, this nonsense of barging into my house and throwing around accusations wasn't winning her any sisterly points.

"Lex, I'm?—"

"No, we aren't speaking until we're outside, well away from the house.

" I marched out the door and down the porch steps.

I didn't have to tell her where we were going.

It was the spot we'd gone to argue and fight without our parents hearing.

Dad always wanted us to present good arguments and rebuttals, and most of the time we just wanted to yell at one another without being logical.

I walked to the orchard and stopped among the green leafy trees.

Looking up, I was surprised that the trees were doing as well as they were since they'd been neglected when my dad got sick.

Preparing them for winter was suddenly on my to-do list. Maybe it was something the kids could help me with.

Ryder would be too busy to do it, and I didn't want to lose these trees we'd worked so hard for when I was growing up.

"How dare you. How dare you barge into my house and act like an absolute brat." I couldn't stand still, so I paced.

"You have no idea what's gone on in the last eight days.

I lost my best friend, those kids lost their parents, and your panties are in a bunch because I haven't come to the bar, a place I absolutely despise? ”

“Lex, I’m sorry,” Lydia pleaded. “I know you hate it, and I’m not expecting you to work there full time, but it would have been nice to know you were home.”

“Good, because I won’t be. I have clients I need to figure out what to do with, and I need to decide what my future in law looks like.

I became a mom to two kids overnight and will have to figure out where to take them for therapy because I’m sure they have some shit to work through since...

poof, their parents didn’t come home. Oh, and not to mention, we have to bury those parents still and give them some closure.

So, I’m sorry if you can’t see past the end of your nose, but I have other priorities than that bar.

” Finally, my pacing stopped, and I crossed my arms, waiting for her to say something.

“Are you going to work here?” she asked, the frown deepening across her face.

Out of everything I’d just spat at her, that’s what she hung on to.

“Yes, I’m here for at least a year. When Anita asked Ryder and me to take the kids, we agreed.

But we didn’t realize there was a caveat in the will that we had to be married.

So now we’re planning a quickie wedding before Anita’s horrible mother comes to

take the kids.

” So much for keeping all this quiet. I’d word-vomited all over my sister like I always did.

She never even pushed. All she had to do was stay quiet, and I sang like a canary. “So, I guess we’ll see if we kill one another over the next year.”

I watched her face as she processed what I’d told her, and while I anticipated outrage and disbelief, there was, instead, acceptance of the news.

“You won’t kill one another—kiss one another maybe, fuck like rabbits for sure—but not kill.” Her smirk made it clear all the anger she’d carried when she walked into the house was gone.

“I won’t be fucking him,” I scoffed.

“Wanna bet? I give it three weeks.” She wiggled her eyebrows, and I stuck out my hand. “Same as always?” she asked, popping a hip out and placing her hand on it.

“Dr. Pepper and a bag of chips,” I said, grinning as she shook my hand.

“What happened to Anita and Hank?” Her tone changed from light and jovial to sad and concerned. Plopping down on the grass, I crossed my legs and pulled at the green blades one by one.

“They were going on a getaway to some cabin way up in the mountains. That has Hank written all over it, and he probably had to twist Anita’s arm even to go.

She hates, hated the wilderness.” I couldn’t help but laugh.

My best friend was a city girl through and through, and somehow she'd basically married Paul friggin' Bunyan.

Hank was outdoorsy and would rather chop down a tree than sit in an office all day.

I think that's why he and Ryder got along so well over the years.

"They ran into a storm. Hank didn't realize how unstable the rain had made the side of the mountain, and they were pushed off in a mudslide."

"Oh, Lex," Lydia whispered as she reached out and took my hand. "I'm so sorry. What can I do?"

"Nothing right now. I need to figure out how to get the kids in school and when they'll even feel like going back, I guess.

How long do kids usually need before life starts to feel normal again?

"The silence was overwhelming, so I kept talking.

"And we have to plan a wedding and reception convincing enough to fool everyone."

"When I get home, I'll send you the name of a therapist. She's an old friend but she specializes in children's therapy. Maybe she can help." Lydia shrugged, and I leaned over, wrapping my hands around her. "As for the wedding, you're on your own. I have to get to the bar."

"I'm sorry I haven't been any help, but I'm here now." I let my head fall against hers, and we sat among the trees; the only sound was our breathing and the rustling leaves.

"Don't worry about me, I was just pouting," she said, laughing lightly.

“I’m aware.” I laughed. “How’s mom?” We talked for a while about how dad was progressing and how mom was struggling with him not at home, but the new condo in Everton was a perfect escape for her.

It didn’t have all the memories of her and dad over the years like the farmhouse had.

She was able to go down and visit him a few times every day, and she was fortunate to have a few friends in town as well, so it sounded like she was managing.

“Ryder and I saw Dad yesterday.” My voice trailed off, and I wanted to know if he knew Lydia, but part of me didn’t want to know because I wasn’t sure I could handle him knowing Lydia and not me.

“Did he know you?” she asked quietly.

“Not at first, but it clicked after a minute. Of course he knew Ryder,” I scoffed. It shouldn’t have irritated me, but I was letting it go. He was my ex-husband; he wasn’t supposed to be the person my dad knew.

“Yeah, well, I think he’s there a lot. Even after you went to Bozeman, he hung around.

I think he was hoping you’d come back, actually, but his consolation prize was our dad.

He didn’t know me when I went earlier this week, by the way, so don’t feel like you’re special.

” She bumped my shoulder, and I smiled. Oddly enough, it made me feel better.

There is nothing worse than a parent forgetting their children, both for the kids and

the parent. The person that told you they'd love you forever gradually forgets who you are. It is cruel and unfair.

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Chapter Eleven

LEXIE

We'd left this wedding until the last minute, and I could feel the wolves knocking on the door to get to the kids. But finally, it was our wedding day again.

My heart pounded in my chest as I stared out at the orchard.

This was nothing like the first time I'd married Ryder.

That wedding took place at the crystal blue lake, deep in the mountains south of the ranch.

It had been the perfect day, and if I closed my eyes, I could almost transport myself back there.

"Lexie, are you ready?" Wes' soft voice asked from the doorway.

I couldn't help but smile, there wasn't any way to have my dad here, and it only felt right to have Griff's dad walk me down the aisle.

He'd taken Ryder under his wing when Griff brought him home years ago.

While Ryder often said no place had ever felt like home, I knew Gwen and Wes' place was always his safe place.

“I am.” I nodded as he walked into my room.

“He told me what was happening. He didn’t want to, but he can’t lie to me.

I think you have the biggest heart in the world, doing this for Ruby and Sawyer.

” There were tears in his eyes, and I had to blink quickly, or I’d start crying too.

“Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.

” He winked and offered me his arm. Looping mine through his, we walked out of the house and down to the orchard.

Ruby spotted me first and beamed as she hit play on the phone she was cradling.

Music filtered through the speakers as I walked down the aisle toward him- the one man I’d vowed to love forever.

The man I’d left because he deserved a better wife, one who wasn’t career-driven and couldn’t give him the family he longed for.

And now, here we were, once again being thrust together.

He looked good. Well, he always looked good, but today in his black Stetson, crisply starched blue wranglers, and white pearl snap shirt, I couldn’t help but get lost in him.

His dark brown eyes burned into me as I moved closer.

Ryder reached out his hand to me, and I took it.

It was the same as the first time I’d held his hand: rough from ranch work, calloused

in some spots, and big.

His hand enveloped mine, and the familiar feeling of being safe when he was close washed over me.

“Who gives this woman to this man?” the officiant asked, breaking the thoughts of Ryder holding my hand.

“As a stand-in for Alexandra’s father, I do.

” Wes’ smile would have lit up the dark, and he leaned over and kissed my cheek lightly before taking his seat between Gwen and my mother.

The rest of the crowd wasn’t so happy. There were no smiles, mostly scowls, and I wondered how long the guys had tried to talk Ryder out of this.

The officiant jabbered on about love and marriage; while we’d asked for something simple, this was anything but.

“Marriage isn’t a game or something to do just for fun, it’s serious and comes from the heart.

” My heart was pounding so hard that I was pretty sure everyone would be able to hear it.

Ryder squeezed my hand, and I tried to slow down my breathing.

The last thing I needed to do was pass out on my wedding day.

“Do you, Alexandra, take Ryder to be your husband?”

“I do,” I said, my voice barely registering.

“Ryder, do you take Alexandra to be your wife?”

“I do.” Of course, his voice would be strong and commanding. It was as if he didn’t have a doubt about this at all. If a stranger walked into this orchard, they’d see a confident man and a woman shrinking under the weight of the burden on her shoulders.

“It’s my pleasure to announce you husband and wife. Ryder you may kiss your bride.” Time stopped, the crowd froze and all I saw was Ryder take a step toward me. He lowered his head, and I tipped mine up as our lips pressed against one another.

His lips were soft. Had I remembered to put lip gloss on before I walked down the aisle?

Were my lips chapped? Did I brush my teeth?

Oh god, I didn’t, did I? My breath must be awful.

God, he kisses like he always did; I could get lost in his kisses.

When he pulled away, I kept my eyes closed and wanted to beg him to come back to me, but a round of applause that made the golf clap look enthusiastic forced me to open my eyes.

Ryder offered me his arm, and we signed the marriage certificate, with Gwen and Wes witnessing it before we walked away from our ceremony.

“You look beautiful,” Ryder said as we walked up the hill toward the house.

“Thank you. You look pretty good yourself.” I turned to him. His eyes were filled with concern, not the excitement and ease of our first wedding. “How were the guys with all this?”

“Not thrilled.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. “No kidding.”

“They’re worried, and they have a right to be.”

“Well, we both know what this is. Our eyes are wide open going into it.”

“Right.” He nodded, and silence filled the air around us. An awkward, thick silence that I hated.

Tables had been set up around the yard, and people trickled in from the orchard. I couldn’t help but smile as I watched Ruby and Sawyer play with the other kids at the ranch. Ruby held onto Josie’s hand as if it were her job.

I needed a minute, so I wandered into the kitchen. It was almost supper time, and people would be getting hungry, and tempers would rise when that happened, so I started preparing things to put out.

“It’s your wedding day. You shouldn’t be in here doing all this,” a man’s voice said from the doorway. I didn’t need to turn to know it was Kipp, so I slowly dried my hands and turned to find a scowl across his face.

“Kipp,” I said politely. He’d been mysteriously quiet when Ryder had taken the kids and me to the main ranch.

“I need to say something, and then I won’t bring it up again.”

When you leave, because let's face it, you will, I won't let you near him ever again.

I don't know why he's doing this or if you're holding something over him, but we almost lost him last time, and I won't let that happen again.

"He clenched his jaw, the muscle straining against his cheek.

"You won't be the reason I lose one of my best friends.

Understood?" All I could do was nod, but I didn't understand.

What was he talking about, almost losing Ryder?

Without another word, Kipp walked out of my house.

"Kipp found Ryder at the lake," Griff said from behind me.

I hadn't even heard him come in. "We hadn't heard or seen him in days.

We knew he was depressed, but we didn't realize how bad things were until that day.

If Kipp had been five minutes later, you'd have buried your husband because the papers weren't through the courts yet.

"Griff's voice was harsh, and my heart ripped open.

I gripped the counter and closed my eyes as the tears slipped between my lashes.

His heavy footsteps approached and stopped when he moved to my side.

"We've all dealt with our feelings about that day, but I don't think Kipp will ever be

able to forgive you for what you did to him.

You were all he had. You were his family, and then, all of a sudden, you kicked him to the curb like everyone else before you.

Just so you know, I don't hate you for it anymore, but I don't trust you either.

"Without another word, he walked out the front door of the house, and I collapsed onto the stool behind me.

I didn't know how long I had sat there, and I didn't know how many tears I'd cried. "There you are," Julie's chipper voice said as she entered the kitchen. Her quick footsteps to my side stopped, and she wrapped her arms around me. "It's okay, child, get it out."

"I didn't know," I sobbed, my breaths coming in short bursts as if I were hyperventilating.

"Shh, it's okay now," Julie said over and over as she held me.

"What's going on?" Ryder's voice was filled with rage, and I looked up at the man I'd hurt so deeply.

"Nothing, just the day catching up to me."

"Julie, can you give us a minute, please," Ryder spoke calmly, but I knew that simmering beneath that calm was anger that could explode at any moment.

"Of course, I'll make sure everyone stays out of the house." She kissed the top of my head before she left.

“It’s not the day. What’s wrong?”

“I didn’t know, Ryder, I swear. If I’d known, I would have ripped up the papers and come home.” I couldn’t look at him.

“Fuck,” he spat before rounding the island and hauling me up into his arms. Involuntarily, I wrapped my arms around him and sobbed into his chest. “I need to take care of something. Come out when you’re ready.

” He was eerily calm as he let me go and stalked out of the house we now shared.

I wiped my face with the towel and ran out the door, following him.

“You fucking asshole, you had no right,” Ryder yelled before he pulled his arm back and hit Kipp with a right hook.

“That wasn’t your story to tell, you fucking son of a bitch.

” He threw another punch, this time aiming for Kipp's stomach. The women hurried around and gathered the kids ushering them to the back of the house. Phil and Wes stood from the porch swing and walked over to the stairs but didn’t try to stop what was happening.

Linc and Nash stood quietly on the periphery, watching their business partners hash this out.

“Ryder, man, come on, stop,” Griff said as he walked up as close to Ryder as he dared.

“Fuck you too, and I saw you walk out of the house just a few minutes ago. What, did you both plan this and team up on her?” The only sound in the yard was the frogs at

the creek. “You’re lucky you’re hurt, or I’d be hitting you too. So much for being my best friend.”

“Ryder.” His voice pleading, his face filled with anguish.

“No, no. I’ve had people talk behind my back all my life, but I never thought I’d have to deal with it from two of the people I trust most in the world.

Fuck you, Griff.” Ryder shook his head before turning back to Kipp, who was standing straight again.

The vein along his temple bulged the way it did when he was angry, his breathing ragged, hands clenched into fists.

But Kipp never attempted to fight back or move towards Ryder. “Both of you get off my land.”

Nora and Elle both came to stand beside me. “Nora, let’s go,” Kipp said as he turned to walk away.

“No, you were the one asked to leave, not me. You’re wrong this time, big man.” Nora’s voice was firm, and he just stood there, mouth open, before shaking his head and walking away.

“I suppose you’re staying too?” Griff asked Elle.

“Yep.” She tightened her grip on my shoulder, and I leaned against her.

“Don’t feel like you have to stay. I don’t want to cause more trouble.” I looked at the two women who I’d only met days ago but already felt a strong kinship with.

“Lexie, we don’t know what happened, but we don’t follow our husbands blindly.

They’ve caused this; they can deal with the consequences,” Nora said calmly before she turned to me and wiped the tears from my face.

“They’ll figure it out. I’m sure this isn’t the first time the five have had issues.

I swear they’re worse than women.” She giggled, and I couldn’t stop the smile from forming.

“Well, I can tell you this isn’t the first time punches have been thrown.

This might be the first time it was one-sided, though.

” Sighing, I thought back to the night they’d all gotten a little punchy, with five men sporting various frozen vegetable bags on their faces sitting in the kitchen at the main house.

I couldn’t remember what had caused the fight, but I did remember that the next day, with black eyes and split lips, they all went back to work and were laughing and joking with one another by supper time.

Chapter Twelve

RYDER

Kipp and Griff had put a damper on the day, although there hadn't been much celebrating before the fight. Everyone understood this wasn't what it appeared to be, but we couldn't risk everyone knowing.

"Uncle Ryder, is everything okay?" Ruby asked after I had tucked her into bed.

"Yeah, kiddo, it's fine." I pasted a smile on my face before I pressed a kiss to her forehead. "There's nothing for you to worry about." She nodded, but I wasn't sure it would be the end of her questions. I'd answer everyone she had, but I was hoping for no more tonight.

Quietly, I passed Lexie in the hallway and walked into Sawyer's room. "Well, little man, it's time for bed." He nodded, and I couldn't help but smile at him.

"Could you teach me to fight?" Sawyer asked as he clenched his fist and pretended to box.

"I can when you're older, but fighting should be the last resort."

"Then why'd you fight today? Was it the last resort?"

"No, pal, it wasn't, and I shouldn't have lost my temper like that."

“You going to say sorry to your friends?” His voice was so sweet, and I hated myself for what I was about to tell him.

“No, because I’m not sorry. I shouldn’t have punched Kipp, but he and Griff really hurt Auntie Lexie and me, so I think they’re the ones who need to apologize first.”

“Being an adult seems hard.” His little brows furrowed, and he shook his head. I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“It is sometimes. Goodnight pal.” He reached out for a hug, and I held him tightly before letting him go, pulling the blankets up and tucking them around him just how he wanted them.

I moved to the door and flicked off the light, leaving his door open just a crack so the light from the hallway shone in, allowing him to see if he needed to get up.

Slowly, I walked down the stairs, undoing the top few buttons on my shirt.

The couch was calling my name, and I flopped down onto it, closing my eyes as I let my head fall back against the cushions.

What a disaster of a day. I knew no one was truly happy about what we were doing, and they clearly didn’t understand why—but they couldn’t even pretend to accept it.

I didn’t need them to like it, just to acknowledge it for what it was.

“Need this?” Lexie’s voice cut through my thoughts. Opening my eyes, I lifted my head and saw her standing beside me with a beer in one hand and a bag of frozen vegetables in the other.

“Yes,” I huffed as I took them from her. She’d changed since I’d seen her in the

hallway. She wore short shorts and an oversized T-shirt. A shirt that wasn't oversized on me but was almost a dress on her. I thought she'd walk away, but she took a seat beside me on the couch.

"Why didn't I know?"

"It's not something I talk about. And since our marriage ending was the cause of it, I didn't think opening up to you was the right thing to do." Sarcasm hung heavy in my words, and I didn't even try to hide it.

"Ry."

"Lexie, I'm fine. I saw a therapist—well, I see a therapist. I went on anti-depressants, which I still take religiously to this day, and I've been fine since."

"But how can you even look at me, knowing I caused that?" Her voice was so quiet and filled with guilt.

"Lex, here's the thing: you didn't cause anything. Truth be told, I've been struggling with depression most of my life. I learned that in therapy." Shifting on the couch, I wanted to look at her to make her see it wasn't her at all. "Please don't beat yourself up over this."

"Is there anything I need to watch for?"

"No, there's nothing, as long as I stay on my meds and I keep talking to my therapist."

"How often do you talk to them?"

"Once a month now, I might make an appointment for this week; though, there's been

a lot going on.” I smiled at her, and relief filled her eyes.

“Okay.” She nodded and bit the corner of her mouth. “So not to change the subject but Ruby asked if we’d be sleeping in the same room now that we’re married.”

“I suppose we should. If anyone questions the kids, they won’t be able to avoid telling the truth.”

“That’s what I thought too.”

“Where’d the cake get to?” I asked as I leaned over and peered into the kitchen. “I didn’t get any.”

“Well, the kids got into it, but there’s a few pieces left.” When she came back into the living room, she was carrying the slab of cake that was left and two forks. Setting the cake between us on the couch, she handed me a fork and took a seat gently so she didn’t jostle the cake and make a mess.

“Do I get to feed you a piece?”

“Same rules as last time, even though I’ve cried off my makeup and gotten out of my dress.”

“Sweetheart, smashing cake in your face is disrespectful and not something I’d ever do at a real or fake wedding.

” I stuck my fork in the cake and pulled off a piece, holding it out for her.

Watching Lexie wrap her lips around my fork sent a shock wave to my cock.

I had to will it to settle down. If there was one thing we didn’t need to complicate our

lives right now, it was my desire for my wife.

“Mmm, that’s good.” She sighed and let her head fall onto the back of the couch. When she finished, she held out some cake for me to eat, and I had to agree it was one of the best cakes I’d ever tasted.

The day might not have played out as we’d thought, but right now, sitting here with a bag of frozen peas on my hand and eating copious amounts of cake with my wife, life almost seems perfect again. I definitely need to call the therapist on Monday morning.

Lexie’s eyes grew heavy, the stress of the day taking a toll on her. “Time for bed,” I whispered as I stood from the couch. Lexie nodded and reached for the cake. “No, I’ll clean this up, go get ready.”

“Thanks, Ry.” She smiled, and I watched her scantily clad ass as she walked down the hallway to the room we’d share, to the bed we’d both be sleeping in.

I methodically turned off the lights and made my way to the bedroom.

A glow from the doorway indicated that Lexie had left the light on for me, just as she always had when we were actually married.

Slowly, I unbuttoned my shirt and pulled it off as I walked past the foot of the bed.

I didn’t need to look at Lexie to know she was watching my every move.

“See something you like?” I asked as I dropped my jeans and stepped out of them before turning to the bed.

“Shut up,” she mumbled and tossed one of the small throw pillows at my head. I

caught it before it made contact and laughed. “You’re going to put something on, right?” She frowned and let her eyes drift down my body.

“Nope. This is real, right?” I wiggled my eyebrows and crawled into bed, before flicking off the lamp beside me. The heat from her body radiated over to me, and all I wanted to do was pull her into my arms.

“You’re thinking out loud,” I grumbled as I turned over and searched the darkness for her outline.

“It’s weird.”

“What’s weird?”

“We’re in my parents’ room. Together,” she whispered, and the mattress shifted as she rolled over and faced me.

“That’s not what I thought you were thinking about, but now that I know, yeah, it’s kind of weird.” I agreed. “Maybe we should move into one of the rooms upstairs. I know your old room.”

“No, that might be even worse than this room.”

“You never thought of sneaking into your old room and making out?”

“We’re not making out, Ryder,” she said flatly.

“I didn’t say we were going to. I was just asking.”

“Fine, I’ve already made out with a boy in my room. My parents weren’t home, and Lydia was with them, so we came back here and, well, made out.”

“Why do I not know this?” I whispered in the dark.

“I didn’t exactly think to talk about ex-boyfriends when we were together.” She giggled, and I reached out to brush my thumb over her cheek. The moonlight shines through the window, and I could see her soft features shimmering in the pale light.

“Because I pushed every one of them out of your mind, and you could only remember me in your life?” I asked with a hint of humor in my voice.

“Yeah, that’s it.” She pulled her arm out from being tucked in and punched my shoulder, laughing.

It was so amazing to hear her laugh. We’d been more than avoiding one another for so long, and when we stumbled upon each other, we avoided each other like the plague.

Now, here in the darkness of the room we were sharing, we couldn’t avoid each other.

“Who was it?” I asked as jealousy over her teenage boyfriend bubbled up within me.

“It was nobody.” She tried to brush it away.

“Alexandra.”

“I’m serious, Ryder; it doesn’t even matter.”

“I’ll give you one more opportunity to answer, and then I’m pulling out the big guns.” And I wiggled my fingertips at her. She hated being tickled; it might as well have been a torture maneuver for her.

“Fine, it was Kipp, are you happy now?” She grabbed my hands and slammed them down on the bed.

“How in all these years did I not know that you and Kipp had been a thing?”

“Because we weren’t a thing. It was just that one time. We made out for a while and then realized it was too weird, and it never happened again.”

“Do I have to worry about you sneaking him back into the house?” I joked.

“Yeah, couldn’t you tell from our earlier interaction there’s a fiery passion we’re dying to explore?” She pushed me, causing me to roll over onto my back as I laughed.

“Ryder, are you really okay?” She whispered her question, immediately changing the feeling in the room. And lying here beside her, I felt more vulnerable than I had in a very long time. Old me would have lied, trying to pretend everything was fine.

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“I’m okay, Lex, but I know I need to talk to someone who isn’t involved in my life.

There’s been no suicidal ideations since Kipp found me, and to be honest, I don’t know if I even would have gone through with it.

I just hurt so much because you hurt so much that it felt like the only thing you could do.

” My words were soft, but the power behind them was enough to make her sigh and move into my arms.

“How can you even stand to look at me?” She buried her head under my chin, and all at once, the world seemed to stop and speed up all at the same time. I was too vulnerable to tell her I was still in love with her, but I was also no longer into hiding things.

“There’s no way I could keep my eyes off you,” I said, wrapping her hair around my fingers.

Ruby screamed from her room, “Mom! Mommy.”

“Shit,” we said in unison as we flung the blankets off us. Lexie ran out the door first, and I hopped down the hallway, pulling on my pants before bolting up the stairs.

“Hey Ruby, it’s okay. You were just having a nightmare,” Lexie crooned as she pulled Ruby into her arms. What an understatement. It was a nightmare Ruby couldn’t wake up from.

I took a seat on the opposite side of her, and she turned her head toward me. “Do you want to tell us about it?”

“I was dreaming about the wedding, and I thought I saw her in the trees. But when she saw me looking at her, she walked away.” Her tears dripped off her cheeks and ran down my side.

“I ran after her, calling out to her, but she didn’t stop, and I’d followed her so far I was lost.” Ruby crawled over to where I sat and wrapped her arm around me, and I shifted so I could hold onto her tighter.

“I was so happy to see her, but it was like she didn’t even know who I was.” Lexie shifted on the bed and moved to sit right beside her. Lex looked up at me, her eyes filled with tears and fear. She was looking to me to make things right, and I didn’t even know what to do.

“You know, dreams are just our brain’s way of working through things we don’t want to think about while we’re awake.

So today, you’ve been pretty preoccupied with being happy, and maybe somewhere in your brain, you were feeling bad about that.

” I looked over at Lexie, whose face was filled with awe, and I grimaced because I couldn’t shrug.

Lex smiled and nodded, and I hoped that meant I was saying the right things.

Ruby’s breathing was smoother, and her tears had stopped, yet she still clung to me.

“There’s no reason to feel bad about being happy.

Here's a secret people never tell anyone.

"She tipped her head up, and her puppy dog eyes stared at me.

"You don't have to be happy or sad, you can feel both emotions at the same time. There's nothing wrong with that."

"It feels wrong to be happy and having fun," Ruby whispered.

"Do you know your mom's biggest wish for you?

"Lexie asked as she ran her hand over Ruby's light brown hair.

The girl shook her head no. "She wanted you to have the happiest life possible. Now, we've hit a pretty big wall, but I know for a fact your mom and dad don't want you to be sad forever.

And like Uncle Ryder said, you can be both, but we hope your happy times start to become more frequent as you grow here with us.

"My heart pounded when Lexie said us. It had been so long since there had been an us, and now the us needed to be stronger than ever for Ruby and Sawyer.

"Do you think you can go back to sleep, or do you want to talk about this more?" I asked as I tilted my head to look at Ruby.

"I think I can sleep." She scooted back down, put her head on her pillow, and both Lexie and I moved off her bed.

"How about Auntie Lexie and I sleep in her old room so we're closer if you need us?" I asked, avoiding Lexie's gaze for fear of bursting out laughing.

“That would be good,” Ruby said as her eyes drifted closed, and she took a deep breath and fell asleep. We moved quietly out of the room and pulled the door almost closed, leaving it open just enough to hear her easily if she woke up again.

Lexie’s room hadn’t been touched since she left for college, and when I flicked the light on, I stared at the trophies and ribbons on the large shelf above her bed. “That’s dangerous, you know,” I said as she climbed under the pink frilly comforter.

“Well let’s hope it only falls on your head because you do the chivalrous thing and push me out of the way.” She touched the lampshade beside her, and the light flickered on. I turned off the big overhead light before moving to the bed and climbing in.

“You know I’d save you first.” Flopping down, I wished I’d had the pillow from the other room rather than this flat one.

“You really liked pink.” I tried to suppress a laugh, but as I looked at the bubble gum pink walls, the celebrity posters still hanging around the room, and the fake roses in vases, it was hard to believe that my minimalistic wife once lived here.

“It was a phase, and when I grew out of it, Mom said I couldn’t change it because I’d signed a contract with Dad that I wouldn’t repaint it when I hated it. They tried to talk me out of the pink for months, but I was stubborn.” She laughed and turned onto her side to face me.

“No, not you, that’s shocking.” I missed her reaching over to slap me until the sound and sting of her hitting my chest vibrated through me. I grabbed her hand before she could pull it away and kept it pinned to my chest. Lexie didn’t attempt to move it either.

As I stared at the shelves above my head, I knew the trophies were for school sports,

the buckles were from barrel racing, and the ribbons were from academics. I knew everything about this woman, and lying beside her, I almost felt like she was a stranger again.

“The day the papers showed up, I was at the ranch alone. For a long time, I just stared at them on the table with the tabs that needed my initials or signature. It was all so black and white, technical and impersonal.” I don’t know what made me start talking, but I knew her, and she’d be worried about me until I opened up to her.

“I left before the others returned from town, but I’d left the papers sitting on the table and taken a horse.

I needed to get away from the guys. The papers and home still held too many memories of you, so there was no way I was staying there.

” The bed shifted beside me, and Lexie rolled onto her side and took my hand.

“We don’t have to do this tonight,” she said softly.

“I know, but I need to, and you deserve to have the entire story.” I rolled over to face her but didn’t let go of her hand. If I was going to get through this, I would need an anchor.

“Where did you go?” Lexie asked, her question filled with concern. In the dark, I felt safe talking to her, with only the light from the moon illuminating the room.

“To the old winter cabin, which burned down a bit ago,” I added, trying to lighten the mood.

“Why are you guys having so much trouble?”

“It’s a long story, one we can save that for another bedtime.

” She nodded, and I continued. “I didn’t realize how many days I’d been gone.

One turned into another, and to be honest, I was drunk or passed out for most of them.

When the alcohol ran out, the memories flooded back, missing you became unbearable, and I found myself on the back of my horse, riding to the lake.

In my mind, I thought if I went there, you might feel me and come too.

” She squeezed my hand tighter, a tear slipping down her cheek.

“I sat there all night, not caring that I was cold or hungry. I just wanted the hurt to end. For hours, I sat there with my rifle. First, it was just out of reach, then I moved it to my side, then I laid it across my lap, and then I picked it up.” I didn’t want to talk anymore, but this wasn’t where I needed to stop.

“That’s when Kipp rode up. He grabbed the gun and flung it as far as he could into the lake.

He didn’t say a word; he just stood me up and helped me get back on Doc.

We rode all the way back to the main house in silence.

Step for step, Kipp was at my side, never taking his eyes off me.

” I’d told this story to my therapist and didn’t feel any emotion, but tonight, a tear dripped from the corner of my eye and ran across my nose.

“When we got back, they warmed me up, got some food into me, and kept a twenty-four-hour rotating watch on me for a month. Once they decided I wasn’t a harm to myself, they let me sleep alone, but someone was with me all day, working me to exhaustion.

” My bones still ached from those days when I worked so hard.

“Julie found me a therapist that would come to the ranch. I’m pretty sure she paid a pretty penny to do it.

The first few times she was out, all we did was sit in silence.

I didn’t know what to say or if I wanted to say anything.

But gradually, she’d gained my trust, and we talked about everything from being an unwanted kid to the divorce to the lake.

” My mouth was dry from all the talking, and I wondered if this was a place where we could stop for the night, but a nagging feeling told me I needed to keep going.

“Those sessions, and the ones since, have taught me a lot about myself. I’ve realized the pressure I put on both of us to have a perfect life and family, trying to compensate for the one I didn’t have growing up.

I owe you an apology because I know I didn’t make you feel like you were enough.

But you were. Oh god, Lex, you were more than enough.

You were my everything. I wish I could start over or take it back, but all I can do is tell you I’m sorry—for everything.

” My voice cracked, and Lexie moved into my arms.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” she whispered, holding onto me tightly. I don’t know how long we stayed wrapped up in one another, but eventually, we let go and returned to our own sides of the bed—which wasn’t what I wanted, but I needed to respect her boundaries.

Chapter Thirteen

LEXIE

Something beneath me was breathing. Arms were wrapped around me, fingers fluttering over my shoulder, and my leg rested against something hard. Oh. My. God. My eyes flew open, and sure enough, my body was flung over Ryder. Oh. My. God.

I used to wake up like this every morning when we were married. It usually led to a lazy love-making session, and the familiar wanting tingled between my legs where I was pressed tightly against him.

“Good morning.” His sleepy, husky, intoxicating voice shot straight to the spot I was trying to ignore. “It’s been a while since I woke up like this.”

“Can you let go of me?”

“Sweetheart, you’re the one that rolled over on top of me about six seconds after you fell asleep, so this is on you.

” The rumble in his chest as he spoke was not helping my situation.

The fact that I hadn’t slept this well in years also irritated me.

One night in the same bed as this man and I slept like I didn’t have a care in the world.

“Auntie Lex?” Sawyer called from the hallway.

“In here,” Ryder replied.

“He called for me, not you, ya big oaf,” I said as I pushed myself up, putting pressure on his cock, and my pussy. Rolling off him, I sat up, leaned against the puffy white headboard and fluffed the blankets around me, my face on fire. Sawyer ran into the room and launched himself onto the bed.

“How was your sleep?” Ryder asked as Sawyer settled into the narrow space between us, wiggling until he was stuck behind our shoulders.

“Good. Do you think we can go to Cooper’s today? He said we’re in the same grade and that we get to be in the same class.” Sawyer sounded excited, and my heart flipped at the sound.

“I’ll call Kipp in a while and see if you can go over.” Ryder nodded. If there was one thing I knew about Kipp Miller, it was that no matter how mad he was at Ryder or me, he wouldn’t take it out on the kids.

“Good morning.” Ruby walked into the room, rubbing her eyes as she climbed onto the bed.

This was my family now, for however long it needed to be.

Glancing over at Ryder, I noticed his eyes were locked on me as the kids fidgeted and started to fight.

“I think it’s breakfast time.” He laughed as Sawyer rolled over him to get off the bed.

Ryder quickly got out of bed and moved down the hall with the kids following

behind.

As soon as I reached the kitchen doorway, he looked up and asked, “How long can you be away from the law office?” He grabbed the frying pan from the cupboard, spinning it in his massive palm, making the kids giggle.

“Well, I took bereavement leave and explained the situation to the partners, but I don’t know if I want to go back.” Leaning against the counter, I crossed my arms and glanced into the living room, where the kids were watching television.

Ryder froze and turned to look at me. “Why? Your career has always been important to you. Why are you willing to give it up?”

“I was in the running to make partner. I really thought I’d get it, but when it came down to it, I didn’t get the position because they gave it to a man.

” I picked up an egg out of the carton and rolled it around in my hand.

I was tempted to crush it, but then I’d have a mess to clean up.

“He had years less experience, messed up so many divorce proceedings for his clients, and they still gave him partner over me. You want to know what their reasoning was?” Ryder reached over, took the egg out of my hand, and tapped it against the edge of the frying pan.

“I have a feeling I’m not going to like it.” His voice was flat, and I knew that tone well. I had to smile.

“Oh, you’re going to hate it. They thought I should get married and start a family. They still wanted me to work, but felt it would look better for the firm if I settled down.”

“You’re fucking kidding me,” he growled.

“So, while I can wait for another opportunity, it’s never going to happen. There’s no family in my future, but I don’t want them to know that.” Crossing my arms, I waited for his response. He grabbed the towel and wiped his hands before placing them on my shoulders.

“Sweetheart, I’m going to tell you something I’ve told you more times than I can count, but I need you to listen this time.

” He looked me straight in the eye, and in that moment, I knew the man in front of me was the same one I’d fallen in love with the first time I saw him.

“A family doesn’t have to be from you and a willing partner—preferably me being the willing partner.

” He winked, and I couldn’t fight the smile.

“We’ve been given an opportunity to create our own family. So, while we didn’t get to have a blast making it, you, Ruby, Sawyer, and I are a family. You can go back to those assholes in Bozeman and show them how big a mistake they made, or you can stay here and do whatever you want.”

“We’re a family for a year Ryder.” I didn’t want to get his hopes up that we’d stay together, but I wondered if I was trying to convince myself more than him.

“If you think I’m letting you go after a year, you really haven’t been paying attention .” He spun me around and wrapped his arms around me just as a knock sounded at the door.

“Come in,” he yelled, but didn’t let me go. I supposed whoever it was needed to

believe we were a couple, so being this close wasn't out of the question.

"Morning kids." I thought it was Griffin's voice, but as he came around the corner, I realized it was Linc.

"Morning Uncle Linc," the kids said in unison. I looked up at Ryder, who shrugged.

"Newlyweds." He nodded as he wandered over to the coffee. Nothing changed around this place, apparently. Linc had always made a beeline for the coffee when he came over in the morning.

"So, did they send you over to take the temperature, or are you here to make sure she's not drafting papers to let me out of the company?" Ryder arched a brow and grabbed a knife from the block to cut the ham and veggies for the omelets.

"Haven't talked to anyone this morning. Kind of have my own issues going on." His face was drawn, and no matter how chipper he pretended he was, his eyes were sad.

"Linc, what's wrong?" I asked, taking a seat at the island and pulling out a chair for him. He watched Ryder chopping vegetables and took a sip of his coffee. Glancing up, I caught Ryder's eye and could tell he was more than concerned.

"Kristin's gone." His shoulders slumped, and he let his head droop.

"What do you mean gone?" Ryder asked, sniffing and wiping his eyes as he chopped the onion. The smell was potent, and I had to blink to avoid crying with him.

"I went to her apartment this morning, and her truck was gone. Mrs. Johnston told me she'd been clearing out over the last few days. Then I went to the stable, and her horses and tack were gone too." His voice trailed off, and my heart ached for my friend.

“Oh, Linc,” I said, putting my hand on his arm. “I wondered why she wasn’t here yesterday.”

“Did you know she was leaving?” Ryder asked as he set his knife down, and Linc just shook his head.

“I saw her a week ago, and she asked for space, so I gave it to her. But then I had a note on the windshield of my truck when I went out this morning.” He rooted around in his pocket and tossed the piece of paper toward Ryder.

I watched Ryder’s face as he read the note and didn’t need to know what was on it by the sadness that filled his expression.

“Guess I fucked up for good this time. Sorry. The kids.” We looked in the living room, but the kids seemed oblivious.

“I thought we’d be forever.” He shifted on the stool and pulled a diamond ring from his pocket.

As he tossed it, Ryder grabbed it before it could fall to the floor.

“Don’t give up. You never know what will happen.

” I looked up at Ryder, who arched his brow.

Linc nodded, but it wasn’t convincing, and if I knew Kristin, she’d be hell-bent on getting as far away from him as possible because he was her weakness.

Apparently, my cousin and I were more alike than we ever thought.

The men of the Flying Diamond Five had a crazy pull on us.

“What are you doing about work for the time you need to be here?” Linc asked, changing the subject.

“Nice deflection,” Ryder mumbled as he flipped the large omelet in the pan.

“Just making conversation. Do I get breakfast too?” Linc asked, picking up a fork and spearing a piece of green pepper that had fallen out onto the pan. Ryder shook his head and I rolled my eyes.

“Of course you can stay. I can’t kick out my favorite cowboy.” Flinging my arm around Linc’s shoulders, he puffed up his chest, and I felt like his mood was lifting slightly.

“Hear that? I’m her favorite cowboy.” He grinned at the chef across from us, who glared at the two of us. “Don’t take it personally. We’ve always known it was me.” Linc laughed and turned to me, waiting for my answer to his question.

“I’m going to open an office here. I suppose I need to find a place to use.”

“There’s a building for sale across the street from Fred’s. I noticed the sign in the window the other day. We should be able to get it for a song.” He lifted his cup and took another sip of coffee.

“It might not hurt to check it out,” I said, waiting for Ryder to say something.

“We’ll go look at it, but I want this to be something that doesn’t include the Diamond. You won’t get caught up in the mess that is Kipp and Griff’s feelings, if they can’t get their heads out of their asses.”

“Ryder, you know why...” Ryder held up his spatula and pointed it at Linc.

“They were absolute mother fuckers, and whatever happens, this is my family. If they can’t accept that, then there’s no place for me here anymore.”

“I get it, and I respect it.” He held his hands up while Ryder put breakfast on plates for the kids before making another one.

“Kiddos, breakfast,” I called as I set their plates on the table. I moved my coffee over, and Linc followed me.

“Uncle Linc, how many horses are at the ranch?” Ruby asked. “Uncle Ryder said lots, but I need to know how many.”

“He’s not wrong, there are lots. As for a number, probably about thirty.” He shrugged, and I wasn’t sure if he was making it up or if he actually knew how many there were. “That’s tame horses, including Elle’s. If we add the wild horses Griff takes care of, it’s probably closer to seventy.”

Well, there was one thing that hadn’t changed. Griff still had to care for the wild horses.

I’d gone out with him once to check on them, and that’s when I first saw the lake. This country had been my home my whole life, and I had no idea such a beautiful spot was only miles away.

“Then I can have one to ride?” Ruby avoided looking up from her breakfast, and I saw the look of pride flash between Linc and Ryder. If there was one thing they’d always encourage, it was a kid finding her horse.

“Absolutely,” both men said at the same time.

“Me too?”

“Yes, you too, Sawyer,” Linc said as he ruffled the little boy’s sandy blond hair.

“Thanks, Uncle Linc,” he replied with a mouth full of eggs.

“How did you become an uncle so fast?”

“We had a chat at the wedding yesterday,” Linc answered as if we knew all about it.

“Ruby and Sawyer were on the porch trying to figure out who everyone was, and I just happened to walk by and help them.”

“Yeah, and Uncle Linc said he was basically your brother, so that makes him our uncle, like you’re our uncle.

” Ruby’s explanation might have been lost on some people, but all I could think about was that these two kids had more people who already loved them, and they’d help them through whatever they were going to deal with in the future.

“Well, brother , get eating. We’ve got horses to pick out.” Ryder set a plate and fork in front of Linc. “Linc and I will bring in a few that we think would be good for you both, and then you can decide who you bond with.”

“Bond?” Sawyer asked.

“There’s a heart horse for everyone; you just have to spend some time with them to see if you’re a fit,” I replied, smiling at the thought of them finding their heart horses.

“Auntie Lexie, do you have a heart horse?”

I stared into my coffee, thinking about all the fun Ryder and I’d had picking out my heart horse. "I haven’t had a horse for a few years."

“She still has them. She just hasn’t seen them,” Ryder said as he set my breakfast before me. “They’re all at the ranch, just waiting to see you. I’ve kept them trained and ridden, but I do have to admit I think you’ve lost Doc.” He said quietly into my ear.

“To whom?”

“Me.” He grinned and took a seat at the head of the table. I could almost see him sitting tall in the saddle atop my big grey stallion. I’ll give him a hard time, but I think they were meant to be together.

“We’ll see about that.” I rolled my eyes as he took a seat at the table.

Chapter Fourteen

LEXIE

After Ryder and Linc got the horses brought in for the kids, the four of them spent the morning wandering through the options.

Every time I looked out at the corral, I couldn't help but smile.

Ryder was so good with both of them. He was meant to be a dad.

A pang of guilt washed over me, and I had to push it from my mind.

His words fluttered through my brain. It doesn't matter how it happened, but we have a family now .

He was right; I never wanted a family this way, but I was glad we'd been able to work together to make it happen.

"Lex, we should go look at that building," Ryder called from the porch. "We can get the kids a doughnut from Fred and take a look at it." The kids cheered, and I knew I didn't even have an argument to stay home. We were going to town.

Walking around the small building, I admired the dark wooden trim and the large windows along the street as I wrapped my arms around myself.

The view from these windows looked out onto the vacant lot where my father's law

office used to stand.

A sudden guilt surged in my heart for not being willing to come back here to practice when I was done school.

“So, what do you think? Could you be comfortable working in this building?” Turning, I looked at Ryder. The heavy footsteps of the kids in the room above us made me smile.

“I think it would work just fine. Having two offices means I’ll be able to keep clients private. The reception area looks great. Not that I have anyone that I can get to do that.”

“What happened to Faith?” he asked, glancing at the ceiling. I wondered if he was thinking the same thing I was. How long would it be until one of them came running down the stairs complaining about the other one not playing fair?

“She’s still with the office in Bozeman. I wish I could open this office with her.”

“Call her, see if she’d be willing to come here.” He shrugged as if it were the easiest decision in the world.

“I can’t ask her to relocate.” I shook my head and turned my back on him as I wandered around the large conference table.

“Why not? You two are a great team. Is she seeing anyone? Or married?” I’d almost forgotten he hadn’t seen Faith for three years.

She’d been a huge part of our lives when I went back and forth to Bozeman weekly.

Faith had kept me organized and made sure Ryder knew what my schedule was and

when I needed him to show up out of the blue.

It had taken me a while to catch on, but once I did, I didn't let her know I'd figured out her plan.

"No, she's single. Her family's still in North Dakota."

"Call her, " he encouraged. Reaching into my purse, I fumbled around for my phone. After dialing her number, I waited.

"Hi, Lexie." Faith's chipper voice made me smile. No matter how bad my day was, Faith knew how to fix it—sometimes before I realized I needed help.

"Hi. So, this is going to seem like it is out of the blue, and please know you can absolutely say no, but... I was wondering if you'd come here and help me open a practice." I spoke so fast I wasn't sure she would understand me, stumbling over my words in a rush to get them out.

"Okay, back up a sec. You're starting your own firm?" She sounded surprised—but not shocked, which honestly felt like a win.

"I have to be here for the foreseeable future, and the partners aren't exactly thrilled about it... so I'm quitting. Ryder found me a building that will work perfectly for an office."

"Wait, I think I need to sit down. Ryder helped you? As in, you let Ryder help you?" Now she sounded actually shocked.

"I just saw you a week ago." Her voice was incredulous, the memory fresh—she'd been in the office when the call about the accident came in.

“Yeah, well... we’re kind of re-married.” Would it ever get easier to explain this to people who knew us?

“Kind of, Alexandra? You’re either married, or you’re not, so which is it? Never mind. I’ll be there in two days, and you can tell me then.”

The line went dead, and I lowered the phone from my ear, staring at it.

“Well?”

“She’ll be here in two days.” I smiled as I glanced at my phone.

“Told you, all you had to do was ask. And when did you decide to quit your firm?”

“As I said it.” I shrugged. “If we’re going to raise these kids together, I can’t have one foot in Bozeman and one foot here. They deserve better than that. And I want to be here for them.”

“I’m glad. So, you want me to buy this building?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning against one of the doorframes.

“I don’t need you to buy things for me.”

“Yeah, I know. But I can, so I will. There’s no point in you starting with a mountain of debt.

Who knows how many people you’ll actually see at first?

Please let me do this for you.” He stepped closer and placed a gentle hand on my back.

“There’s an apartment upstairs that Faith can use free of charge.

Please, Lex.” I nodded, and he kissed the side of my head as he pulled his phone from his pocket.

He wandered into one of the office spaces, and I could hear him talking, but I didn’t pay much attention.

“Fine.” I huffed and moved out of his embrace.

“Good, because I’ve already done it.” He grinned, and I shook my head, turning my back to him.

“Wait, what do you mean you already did it?” Spinning on my heel, I frowned as I looked at him.

“While you were on the phone, I was too. I’ll have my attorney look over the contract before I sign it, but other than that, this place is yours.” He winked.

“And just who is this attorney?” I asked, crossing my arms, ready to argue with him about why he needed a better lawyer.

“She’s five foot seven. She has dark brown hair and eyes that are usually black because she’s mad at someone.

Quite often, it’s me, and I get to sleep with her.

If she’d just let me sleep with her, life would be perfect.

” His boyish smirk was almost enough to do me in.

So many things were my undoing with him, but this air of knowing he outdid himself was kryptonite.

“What about school for the kids?” I asked, purposely changing the subject. I should have said thank you, but this was overwhelming and a lot of change for me in a short time. The last time I made decisions this fast, I’d left him, and look how that turned out.

“I don’t think that’s all that complicated.” He shrugged. “Probably just forms to fill out. You could call Elle; she’ll be the one to know since she enrolled Parker when they came here.”

“That’s a good idea. And a therapist.” Just then, the kids came thundering down the stairs and made laps around the table and us before heading to the other office. It might have been a bad idea to have the treats from Fred’s before we looked at the office.

“Jake’s the one to talk to for that. They’ll need a family doctor, so it won’t hurt to talk to him.”

“Do you have an answer for everything?” I crossed my arms and turned as I took the first step to the second floor of the building.

This rise was enough to look him in the eyes.

His dark eyes, which had drawn me in from the first time I’d seen him, put me under a spell and bewitched me.

Call it what you will, but I think he knew he had magical powers over me, and he’d always used them to his advantage.

“Well, I don’t know if I have an answer for everything, just most things.” He smirked. I watched his tongue glide across his lower lip. “See something you want to taste?” His voice is husky. He’d taken a step closer to me, so there was only a breath between us.

“Asshole,” I whispered before I turned and walked up the stairs.

Was there something I wanted to taste? Hell yes.

Kissing Ryder had always been earth-shattering.

The quick kiss on our wedding day had ignited something I’d pushed to the back of my mind.

But there was nobody here to impress or fool, so it was a line I couldn’t and wouldn’t cross.

No matter how much my body was begging me to.

We quickly surveyed the apartment. It was in decent shape but needed a deep clean and some furniture.

There wasn’t enough time to move my things from Bozeman, so I’d have to start fresh for now and deal with the rest later.

Either way, I had a lot of work to do if I wanted this place to be livable in two days.

“I’ll call in the troops, and we can get this cleaned up tomorrow.”

“And just who are the troops?” I called as I walked into the apartment's kitchen.

“Julie, Gwen, and the girls. I bet if I called your mom, she’d come too.”

“Leave my mother out of this.”

“Lexie, she deserves to know you’re back for good. You can’t hide from her and Lydia forever.”

“I’m not hiding,” I scoffed and rolled my eyes.

“No? You only saw your mom because she was at the wedding. If Lydia hadn’t barged through the front door of the house, I’m not sure you’d have seen her at all. What’s the deal?”

“There’s no deal, and I just don’t feel the need to include them in every moment of my life.”

“That’s not it at all. You can lie to some people, but not to me. But keep your secrets, I won’t pry them out of you.” He held up his hands and moved down to the main floor.

Of course, he wouldn’t pry. He never did.

Chasing after him, I ran face-first into his chest as I turned the corner, going back into the office area.

“I can’t stand the way they look at me, okay.

It’s like, there goes poor Lexie; she can’t have kids.

Look, there’s my faulty daughter Lexie, and there are no grandchildren from her.

Then there's Lydia, who can have kids but doesn't want them, ever.

"I couldn't fight the emotions bubbling through me, and tears ran down my cheeks before I could stop them.

"Most days, I don't even feel like a whole woman." I sobbed as Ryder pulled me into his arms. He didn't say anything. He just stood strong like he always had. Ryder held onto me tightly with one arm and brushed his big hand over the back of my head until my crying stopped.

I looked up at him, my eyes still flooded with tears, but his soft face told me everything I needed to know.

It was all I ever needed to know and the reason I'd left.

He didn't care that I couldn't have kids.

On more than one occasion, and probably more like a hundred occasions, he told me it didn't matter in the slightest to him.

He'd always been supportive, and I'd loved him for it, and I'd let him go for the same reason.

"I think you need to talk to someone who can help you with this. You don't need to get over it.

I get it. It's unfair, but it cripples you, and I don't think it has to.

You're the most amazing woman I know, and that has nothing to do with being able to carry children or not.

” A slight smile crossed his face as he gazed down at me.

“There is nothing wrong with you... you’re perfect in every way that matters to me. ”

“Kids, let’s go,” he called, and they ran out of the other meeting room. Ryder locked it up again and handed me the key. Staring down at the silver, jagged piece of metal, I had to smile. This was mine.

Sawyer grabbed my hand while gripping Ruby’s, who was holding Ryder’s hand, as he walked us down the street. Ryder stayed close to the curb, and I glanced over the kids to him. He turned and winked at me.

Chapter Fifteen

RYDER

She stood at the table with her hands on her hips, staring as if she had a world of things to figure out.

“What’s up?” I asked as I walked in the door.

“I’m sure I’m forgetting something.” She bit the corner of her mouth and frowned. I stood beside her and looked at the table.

“Lex, it’s your mom and sister, not the King of England.”

“This is the first time they’ve been here since the wedding, and back then I had people around to act as buffers. And you started a fight, so things were different. This is just them staring at me, judging me.” She let her voice trail off.

“Lexie, they aren’t judging you; they’re your family. You’ve known them your entire life, and they just want what’s best for you.”

“Yeah, I’ve known them my entire life. That’s the problem,” she said with an exasperated sigh.

A knock on the door broke her out of her internal panic. “Well, you can stop worrying now. They’re here.” Gently, I kissed the side of her head and went to welcome my in-laws to our home.

I opened the door and waved them in, and they made their way to the kitchen. No one said much as we moved to the table and sat down, the tension already thick in the air.

“What’s the problem, Lydia?” Lexie snarled as she stared at her sister across the table. Her gaze trained on her like she was stalking her prey, just waiting to pounce.

“Nothing at all,” Lydia snarked back.

Lexie throws her napkin down and crosses her arms over her chest. “It’s always something, what is it?”

“You’re sitting in this house, all high and mighty. You made sure to make mom’s favorite meal, fussing over everything. All the while, I’m sitting here worrying about the bar and what’s happening there and pretending we’re one big happy family.” Lydia shook her head.

“Kids, why don’t you go out and make sure your horses have water and hay in the feeder? I’ll be out in a minute,” I said softly when I looked over at the kids whose eyes were wide and full of fear. They nodded and ran out the door as if their tails were on fire.

When the screen door slammed shut, I turned my attention to Lydia and Lexie.

“If you two ever decide to pick a fight with one another at this table again, I’ll toss you both out of this house.

” I spoke through gritted teeth, and my hands were clenched into fists so tightly that my knuckles turned white.

I was desperately trying to control my anger.

“Those kids shouldn’t have to listen to you both argue like a couple of teenagers.

Whatever issues you have, work it out or get over it.

” My gaze shifted to Lydia, and I narrowed my eyes before taking a deep breath.

“This is my home, and this is my family. If you can’t respect it, you won’t be welcome again.

Ruby and Sawyer need people around them who love them unconditionally, not putting the idea in their heads that we aren’t a family.

If you need to get to the bar, then go, nobody’s begging you to stay. ”

“I’ll sell the bar,” Helen said before she sipped her wine. “It has been nothing but trouble from the moment your father bought it. It’s driving a wedge between you two, and I can’t have that.” She looked up from her plate and let her eyes dart from one daughter to the other.

“Mom, it’s Dad’s legacy,” Lydia said quietly.

“No, it’s not. You and your sister are his legacy. The bar was a dream. A dream that put us in financial ruin.” She reached over to me and took my hand. I wasn’t sure if it was for support or because she was about to spill secrets...secrets I’d known, but the rest of the family hadn’t.

“When he bought the bar, he sunk a lot of our savings into renovations, kitchen upgrades, and other things. But the money wasn’t coming in like it was going out, and soon, we had almost nothing left.

That’s when we went to the Diamond and asked if they wanted to buy the farm.

” Helen took a deep breath. “You girls know how that went, and I don’t regret for one minute that we did it.

But as part of the deal, Ryder demanded a financial audit of the bar and that we hand the finances off to him.

” Lexie turned and glared at me for a moment.

“No, dear, it was the best thing to happen to your father. I don’t have to tell you Ryder’s good with money, so when your father wanted to spend frivolously, he’d put a stop to it or put it on hold until the bar produced that money.”

“You’re who I send our financial reports to?” Lydia asked, finally turning to acknowledge me. I nodded and looked over at Lexie, who I couldn’t get a read on. That was a first. I’d always been able to read her like an open book.

“He’s also a silent partner. Your father added him when he got his diagnosis.” Helen let go of my hand and waited for the fallout. Lydia didn’t say anything, just nodded, but Lexie left the table. Helen started to stand, and I shook my head.

“I’ll go.” Slowly, I stood and walked out onto the back porch.

As I suspected, Lexie was pacing the porch.

When she was frustrated with something, she paced to work it through her head, but this walk was different.

It was purposeful, angry, and slightly terrifying.

I leaned against the support column and crossed my arms, making sure I wasn’t the one to speak first, I waited for her to say something.

“What else are you keeping from me, Ryder? Seems like there’s a lot of secrets when you’re involved.” I winced. I couldn’t pretend that didn’t sting.

“I didn’t want to keep it from you, but your dad thought it would be best.” I crossed my ankle over the other and gazed out at the land that was ours, which had been in her family for generations. It had only remained that way because I’d intervened to make it happen.

“You don’t think maybe a dementia diagnosis overrode his wishes?” She threw her arms out from her sides in exasperation.

“Just because your dad has dementia doesn’t mean I don’t take my business deals with him seriously.

He asked me to be his partner to ensure you three had something when he was gone.

There wasn’t anything nefarious about it.

” Slowly, I walked over to her, shoving my hands in my pockets because if I touched her, I was sure I’d lose my hand.

“He got his diagnosis after we separated.”

“Divorced, but yes,” I clarified, earning a stinging glare. “Listen, the bar is doing well; Lydia manages it well and keeps things running smoothly. If your mom wants to sell, I won’t stand in the way, and she’ll likely get over double what they paid.”

“Right, and some of that goes to you, so she doesn’t get it all.” The roll of her eyes and the snottiness in her voice made me want to take her over my knee and redden her ass.

“Actually, Little Miss Know It All, I don’t take a dime.” Silence hung between us, and there weren’t even any birds chirping or frogs croaking. It was as if they could sense the tension and thought it was better to remain quiet.

“That’s bad business, Ryder,” she said as she finally turned to face me.

“Well, I don’t know if you’re aware, sweetheart, but I don’t need the money.

” I winked at her and grinned. “So, when I bailed out your dad, I didn’t ask for anything back.

I don’t need it or want it. Your mom’s going to need that money if she decides to sell.

” I couldn’t deny that there was a part of me that felt good to have finally caught her with something she didn’t know.

“Wait, who’s paying for Dad to be in that home? My parents can’t afford that place.” She stepped toward me, and I took a step back out of fear. “Are you paying my dad’s medical bills, Ryder Saffort?”

“Yes... I am.” I braced myself for an outburst and backed up again as she came closer. But instead of yelling, she wrapped her arms around me, pinning mine to my sides so I couldn’t hug her back.

“We don’t deserve you,” she whispered.

A lump formed in my throat, and I tried to clear it, but nothing worked. I had done it all for her; to make her life easier so she wouldn’t have to worry about anything and to avoid leaving Helen with horrible medical debt.

“Uncle Ryder, can we go back in the house now?” Sawyer asked from the bottom of

the stairs, his eyes wide and a smile on his face.

“Yeah, pal of course you can. I think we still have cake to eat.” I chuckled as the kids flew up the stairs and into the kitchen.

“We have cake,” Sawyer yelled, and I could hear Helen and Lydia laughing.

“You don’t have to fight her, Lex. Ask Lydia what she expects from you, and I think you can come to an agreement.” She nodded against my chest and sighed.

“Sweetheart, you have to let me go. We have cake.” She didn’t step away from me, and we moved toward the door together. Reaching for the screen door, I pulled it open and she finally let go of me, took a deep breath and put her mask back on.

Lexie cut the cake she’d gotten from Fred’s and placed it down in front of everyone.

“Lydia, how can I help?” Lexie grabbed her napkin, placed it on her lap, and waited for her sister’s reply.

“Don’t worry about it,” Lydia replied without looking up from the crumb of cake she was moving around her plate. God, these two fought because they were the same, both fierce and stubborn.

“No, I’m here, I can help.” Lexie’s voice softened, and Lydia finally looked up at her sister.

“Can you work a shift Saturday night? I’m short servers.” Lydia’s shoulders slumped, and Lexie gave me a questioning glance. Nodding, I waited for her to say something.

“I can be there. What time?” She lifted a piece of cake to her mouth and waited for her sister to respond.

“If you’re there by six, I’m sure that would be fine.” Lydia sat a little straighter, and the tension in the room began to dissipate.

“What time is that shift supposed to start?”

“Four-thirty,” Lydia said, grimacing slightly.

“Then I’ll be there at four-thirty,” Lexie said with a hint of attitude.

“Lex,” I said quietly, and she shifted her eyes to me, arching her brow as if challenging me to say more. Like a smart man, I shoved a forkful of cake in my mouth and stayed silent.

Chapter Sixteen

RYDER

The house was quiet, too quiet, in fact. I'd gotten used to the kids being kids and Lexie puttering around the house, and I missed it. Two weeks— that's how long we'd been living like this, and for the first time in years, I'd been truly happy.

My phone buzzed on the table, and I picked it up to see a text from Griff. We hadn't said much to each other, so I quickly opened the message.

Griff: You might want to get to the bar. Your wife is getting manhandled.

A photo pops up on my screen of Lexie sitting on the lap of some local scum. She was leaning away from him as he puckered his lips.

Me: On my way.

My headlights illuminated the road ahead of me as I slammed my foot on the accelerator.

Taking the turn into the bar parking lot faster than I intended, gravel sprayed and tinged in the wheel wells as I slid to a stop.

With a quick flick of my wrist, I turned the truck off, got out, and marched into the bar.

People were milling about, laughing and talking to one another, and then I saw it. Some guy had his hand on my wife's ass. She tried moving away, but he grabbed her arm, pulling her so she sat on his lap. Lexie squirmed, and he laughed as he held on to her tighter.

"Hey asshole, take your hands off my wife," I hollered as I pushed through the sea of people that had parted when they saw me barreling toward the table.

"She ain't got no ring on. Looks like she's fair game.

" He looked at his friends, and that was his mistake.

He took his eyes off me. Pulling my arm back, I watched Lexie lean ahead, and I punched the man square in the jaw.

He instantly let go of Lexie, and she jumped off his lap as he tumbled to the floor.

The other men at the table with him stood up and peered over him as he groaned and rolled around on the floor.

When their gazes returned to me, they were all staring murderously at me.

In one instant, they all blanched and held up their hands.

I didn't have to look, I knew the four people who were closest to me now stood behind me, ready to fight if they needed to.

Even if we weren't really on speaking terms currently, they had my back.

"I don't take kindly to people man-handling things that belong to me." I saw red and was going to hit him again, but Lexie grabbed my arm as I cocked it back.

“Get him out of here and never come back,” Lydia said to the group of men.

“Come on, Lydia. This is the only place in town where you can get a good drink.” the man whined as he bent down to pick up his friend from the floor.

“Guess your buddy should have thought of that before he put his hands on my sister.” She slammed her hands on her hips and glared at the fool.

“Awe fuck,” the man on the floor groaned. Once he stood up, he looked at me and shook his head, then smartly walked away rubbing his jaw.

“Back to your evening, everyone. The show is over,” Lydia said as she stared at me. “Lexie, deal with your husband.” She clenched her jaw and went back to her place behind the bar. As if on cue, my friends backed away, leaving an angry Lexie staring at me.

“Belongs to you?” She arched her brow and glared.

“Did I lie?” I shrugged. Lexie snarled at me, and all I could do was laugh.

“You can’t go around hitting people.” Lexie sighed, exasperated.

“He was touching you, and you obviously didn’t like it. You instantly relaxed when you saw me coming for him. Can you explain that?”

“I knew the guys would have my back. It wasn’t like I was in danger.

How did you even know I was being harassed?

Wait, where are the kids?” She frowned and crossed her arms over her chest, pushing her tits up so they almost spilled out of her shirt.

I wanted to pluck out the eyes of every man who might be staring at her.

“Griff’s dad picked them up on his way home from getting Parker.

Said they needed some grandkid time.” Lexie’s eyes immediately softened, and I wondered if she was going to cry.

She wouldn’t want to cry in this sea of people, so it was time to piss her off again.

“And Griff texted me saying that some guy was feeling you up, and you are my wife. We filled out the paperwork, remember?” Arching my brow, I waited.

Her dark eyes flashed almost black, and she grabbed my belt buckle as she walked past me and pulled me behind her.

Getting closer to the table that was always ready for us, she pushed me into a chair and leaned over, whispering in my ear.

“Listen, I don’t need you fighting my battles.

On paper, we’re married, that’s it, and if you even dare to think of ordering anything stronger than a soda tonight, I’ll be your worst nightmare.

Sit with your friends and behave yourself.

Now, what can I get you?” It was deliberate on her part; it looked intimate enough to make people talk, and others would believe it was a wife whispering sweet nothing into her husband’s ear, thanking him for saving her.

“We used to be your friends too,” Kipp said flatly, challenging Lexie, and she immediately looked at him.

“Used to be.” She nodded but didn’t finish her thought.

The look they gave one another made me take a second glance at them.

She still hadn’t forgiven him for what he did on our wedding day, and I’m not sure she ever would.

If there was one thing about Lexie that would never change, it’s that she’s stubborn.

“Drink?”

“Cola, please, Lex.” I grinned, and she rolled her eyes before spinning on her heel and walking away.

I watched her ass sway and marveled at the sight of the short skirt swishing back and forth.

It had always been a toss-up which part of her I liked watching more—the subtle sway of her perfect ass or the jiggle of her tits.

Even with a bra on, she could still render me speechless.

“She’s going to kill you when you get home,” Griff said as he slid a beer down to me. Reaching for it, I brought it to my lips and took a pull.

“Yeah, she probably will, but at least I’ll go out looking at her gorgeous face.” I smiled widely as Griff laughed, and Elle shook her head but kept her thoughts to herself.

The crowd thinned out, but we all stayed at the table, and Lexie brought another round of drinks. “That’s the last one. I’ll be ready to take some of you home as soon as I get this place cleaned up.” She looked at everyone around the table but didn’t

make eye contact with me.

“Yep, you really made her mad. I’d place bets on the ‘belonging to you’ comment rather than the fight you almost got into,” Kipp said as he reached for his last beer.

“I have to say, you do make a nice couple,” Nora said as she took Kipp’s drink from him, taking a sip herself. “You’re both in that big house, alone after you put the kids to bed. I bet you two are using that time constructively after all the years apart.” She wiggled her eyebrows and smiled.

“After the kids go to bed, Lexie grabs a book, and I head to the cabin to check on the cameras. By the time I get back to the farm, she’s in bed, and I’m exhausted.

” It had been more than I’d intended to say, but my filter around my friends had been worn away years ago, and I found it exhausting keeping them outside of all of this.

“Sounds like you need to move the monitors to where you’re living now, so you don’t have to spend so much time away from your wife.

I bet she’s pissed that she has to go to bed alone.

” Fallon said without looking at me. A drunk Fallon had loose lips and no filter, so I was surprised she didn’t say anything more.

With a quick look at Griff, he shrugged, and I knew he was saying, “why not?” Over the years, we didn’t need to talk; hand motions and grunts sufficed for us most of the time. We’d worked so closely on the security team that we’d almost developed our own language.

After the stragglers walked out, the lights came up to full brightness. While the bar looked decent when fully lit, you could tell there were some things that needed work.

“Lydia, got a hammer?” I asked when I wandered to the bar.

“Yeah, back storage room, why?”

“You’ve got some fence that needs to be fixed.” I nodded to one of the decorative posts on the wall that was leaning to the left. “I’ll take care of it.” Without waiting to hear if the woman would complain, I walked to the storage room like I’d done daily for my entire life.

I pushed on the door, but it wouldn’t move, so I gave it a quick nudge with my hip and it popped open.

I flicked on the light, and to my surprise, was met with a pair of eyes I knew intimately well.

“Trying to get out of clean-up?” I asked as I wandered over to the workbench along the back wall.

The hammer was easy enough to find, but the nails were a little more difficult.

“Why are you back here?” Lexie asked, still rubbing her toes.

“A few things need some attention out there, so I’m going to get started until you’re ready to go.

Of course, sitting here won’t get that done any faster.

” Finally, I found the bag of nails and turned to head back out to the bar.

“Has the big city lawyer forgotten what being a waitress was like?” I crouched in front of her and set my tools on the floor.

My large hands wrapped around her feet, and I pressed my thumb into the pad of her foot.

The moan she let out made my cock spring to life.

“I’d forgotten how good you were at this.” She closed her eyes and leaned back against the shelf behind her. She sighed again, and my cock was painfully pressed against the zipper of my jeans.

“I’m still good at other things, too,” I mumbled. Lexie shifted, and I could tell she was sitting up again, and I couldn’t help but smirk.

“That doesn’t surprise me. I’ve heard you rarely leave the bar alone when you come here.” She crossed her arms and hunched over.

“Keeping tabs on me, wife?”

“No, god no. But people who’ve been drinking like to talk. And they all had loose lips tonight.”

“You found that out tonight?”

“Of course, I’m an anomaly being back in town, so everyone wanted to catch up and update me on what’s been happening. And what’s happening is you getting busy, apparently.” Her brown eyes flashed almost green, and I wanted to make it happen again.

“Are you jealous, sweetheart?”

“Nope. I’ve got nothing to be jealous about.”

“Really? Because I know exactly what you look like when you’re jealous, and sweetheart, you’re there.”

“Let go of my foot.” She shook my hand off her foot and stood up.

Lexie slipped her foot back into her shoe and pushed me over as she walked past, causing me to crash into the shelf as bags of something pelted me from above.

Her laughter reverberated through the hallway.

Standing, I grabbed the hammer and nails before tossing the supplies back onto the shelf and leaving the storage room.

My friends laughed at their table, their buzz evident in the decibels of their chatter.

Nobody paid me any attention, and I was more than okay with that.

Fixing things in the bar I now not so secretly owned wasn’t unusual.

Having Lexie here while I did it was different tonight.

I watched her as she methodically went through closing routines and visited with Lydia.

I couldn’t help but feel like an unwanted observer.

Lexie and Lydia had a strained relationship when it came to this place.

Lexie had focused on law, getting her degree and making partner, while everyone expected Lydia to remain here and take over the bar.

I often wondered if she had a dream that didn't revolve around this place, but after the divorce and Lexie leaving Weston Gap for Bozeman full time, it became none of my business.

"All right, everyone get out of my bar," Lydia shouted, and Lexie turned to her and raised her eyebrow. "Have something to say, sister?" Lydia crossed her arms and waited.

"Nope." Lexie smiled, but I'd seen that smile before. It was her 'I won't engage in this behavior smile.

"See you at home," I said quietly as I walked up behind her and set down the hammer and leftover nails.

She turned abruptly and frowned at me. Lexie was nothing if not predictable; she was pretending to be mad at me. "I'm going to drop Griff and Elle off, then I'm going to Lydia's for the night since the kids aren't home." Her smirk, as if she had one-upped me, was cute.

Lydia yelled as she wandered into the kitchen, "Like fuck you are. I have a date."

"A date? With who?"

"None of your business," she said as she walked through the swinging doors.

"It's almost two in the morning. Who would wait for a date this long?" Lexie scoffed.

"Someone who wants to spend time with me, and that time will not include my sister in the room down the hall." Lydia pulled the towel off her shoulder and flicked it toward Lexie.

The humph that escaped Lexie made me step back from her. “I’m your sister. We tell each other everything.” She slammed her hands on her hips and stared Lydia down.

“We used to, but now I hardly know you. So when I want to tell you, I will. Until then, it’s on a need-to-know basis.” Lexie’s brow furrowed, and sadness washed over her.

Gently, I placed my hand on her back and whispered in her ear, “Like I said, meet you at home. I’ll take Griff and Elle; it will save you a stop.” Without thinking, I kissed the side of her head and gathered my friends.

Chapter Seventeen

LEXIE

I t had been years since I'd driven drunk people home from a crazy night at the bar, but here I was, my SUV full of couples who looked at one another as if they had hung the fucking moon.

My stomach rolled, and I wondered how I could be the only one in this car who felt nauseated.

Pulling up to Kipp and Nora's, not one person had realized we'd stopped.

"You've arrived at your destination," I said in my most pleasant robotic voice as I turned in my seat. The two couples I was chauffeuring looked out the windows.

"So, we are. Thanks for the ride home, Lexie, even though we don't like you anymore." Fallon grinned before she reached for the door handle. Trust that woman always to say what's on her mind, especially when she was drunk.

"Feeling's mutual, Fallon, can't say I was very happy with you when you ran away." The words spilled out of my mouth, and she froze, half in and half out of the car. She didn't say anything; she just nodded.

"Night, Lexie," Nora said, smiling sweetly.

"Thanks for bringing us home." I liked Nora; she was a good person, and if I were

truthful, I did like Fallon too.

She'd hurt many people when she left here in the middle of the night, but I understood why she had to go.

Her life might not have turned out like she'd planned while she was away, but it brought her home, and she and Nash seemed to be very happy.

But my leaving apparently caused just as many hard feelings, so it's not like I could pretend I was morally superior.

I watched to make sure they all got into their houses. What kind of taxi service would I be if I didn't make sure they were safe? With a flick of his hand in my direction, Kipp walked through his front door, and I was alone again.

Thankfully, the drive to the farm wasn't long, and I turned into our laneway and sighed.

Relaxing back into the seat, I waited for the yard light to glow through the darkness as I pulled into where we always parked.

I smiled when I saw the porch light on and Ryder sitting on the rocking chair waiting.

I couldn't let him know how much I liked seeing him there.

"Lock yourself out?" I hollered when I got out of the car.

"Come here." His voice was low and thick and made me wet instantly.

Not one to ignore his demands, I walked slowly to the porch and up the stairs.

The tendrils of smoke from the cigarillo between his fingers danced in the air.

A bottle of whiskey and two glasses beside him, amber liquid already poured into them.

Ryder held out his big hand, and I slid mine into it.

He easily pulled me down onto his lap, which I didn't fight.

He lifted his hand to his mouth and took a few puffs of the cigarillo, then exhaled and sweetness with a hint of tart overcame me.

"Cherry," I said as I smiled. It was a weird thing to get nostalgic about, but when we'd started dating he used to smoke them constantly, and even though I hated it, it smelled better than a cigarette.

"Haven't had one for years, but I had a craving tonight." The low rumble of his voice against my ear. "It won't become a habit, I gave them up years ago." When Ryder made his mind up to do something he did it, and I didn't have any concerns he'd start smoking them regularly.

"You must have found Dad's stash in the liquor cabinet," I said, my voice light and oddly relaxed. I didn't know a night when he and Mom hadn't sat on this porch, enjoying the evening together, just like Ryder and I were now.

"That's exactly what happened," he chuckled and I took a sip of the whiskey. It burned as it slid down my throat, and I relaxed into him.

"How are your feet?" He asked.

"Sore." I let my head fall back against his shoulder. Ryder wrapped his arms around

me. “I was jealous,” I whispered.

“Tell me something I don’t know.” Ryder’s laughter rumbled in his chest, and I slapped his arm.

Neither of us said another word again. We listened to the crickets singing in the grass and the frogs croaking down at the pond.

He tamped out the cigarillo, and took my glass, setting it beside his on the table.

My heart raced, and I couldn't control my breathing.

Ryder moved his hand to my hip and then dragged it up my side. His touch burned through the thin fabric of my shirt. I should tell him to stop. This was already blurring lines that were getting far too fuzzy.

“Do you want to stop?” His whispered words did nothing to break the spell I was falling under.

“No, I don’t want you to stop.”

“Thank fuck.” He moved his hand, cupping my breast in his big palm.

Electricity sizzled through me, and I shifted on his lap.

Needing more, I turned my head and pressed my lips to his.

It still wasn’t enough. When I pulled away, stood, and turned, the question in his eyes—his furrowed brow—told me he thought this was over.

I leaned over and pushed his legs together, then straddled him and sat down again.

The frown morphed into a grin, and he grabbed the back of my head, crashing his mouth to mine as the need between us built to a combustible frenzy.

Ryder slid his hand up my shirt and flicked the clasps of my bra with expertise. It loosened, and he moved his calloused hand over my sensitive nipple. Grinding on him, he let out a moan, and I put more pressure on his lap.

“Sweetheart, you’re going to make me blow my load in my jeans,” Ryder said without pulling his mouth away from mine, so it was more like a mumble.

“Well, you’ve done it before,” I said, smiling against his mouth.

“You said you’d never bring that up again.

” He looked like he was going to pout. It was one of our first times together, and I was pretty sure I’d never hear from him again after that night.

We’d been making out in his truck, and I was sitting on his lap between him and the steering wheel.

One thing led to another, and he couldn’t hold back when I shuddered around his fingers.

It was so hot to know he’d wanted me that badly.

Letting my forehead rest against his, I giggled. “I think it was a night just like this, actually.”

“Stop talking, or I’ll leave you to finish this yourself.” He let his hands fall away from me and pulled back. Ryder didn’t take teasing well, and I didn’t like seeing him go back to those days, so it was time to change the subject.

“Well, I wouldn’t have to imagine being in the same room as you this time.” I shrugged.

“Does that mean you think of me a lot when you’re having alone time?

” The man smirked; I hated it when he smirked.

He did it when he knew he’d gotten to me, and while I always liked the outcome, it wasn’t fair he could read me so well.

My arms were wrapped around him, and for a second, it was just the two of us again, like nothing had ever come between us.

“Only every time I use my toys—maybe even when I was with someone else. I might be a little hung up on you,” I said with a shrug.

“Really? I’m shocked.” His mockery made me want to wring his neck. Instead, I punched him in the shoulder. “Okay, well, how about I give you the real thing tonight?”

He reached up and grabbed the back of my hair, pulling my head away from him.

His face had changed from content to almost angry in seconds.

“And Lex, don’t ever fucking talk about someone else when you’re grinding your pussy against my cock, understand?

” His low tone sent a shiver through me, and I nodded and bit my bottom lip.

“You were mine then, and you’re mine now.

Don't ever forget it." This was the man I remembered and the one I needed desperately.

Ryder crushed his lips to mine, and it felt as if he sucked all the air from my chest; all I could do was sigh into his mouth, letting my body melt into his.

He was so take-charge, consistently trying to protect me.

Now, the part of him I thought I had lost all those years ago was coming back into the light, and I wanted to show him exactly how much I appreciated him.

Slowly breaking the kiss, I whispered into his lips, "Sit down." He grinned as he slowly sank into one of the rocking chairs, and I immediately dropped to my knees in front of him.

His eyes stayed on me as I undid his belt, and he lifted his hips off the chair to slowly slide his jeans and boxers down to his ankles, freeing his massive cock.

He was primed and ready, a bit of pre-cum leaking from his tip that I immediately licked off, tasting his saltiness before sliding my fingers around his shaft.

I kept my eyes on his as I slid my mouth over his cock, flicking my tongue against his shaft as I pumped my fist and sucked in the same motion.

His eyes fluttered closed as he let out a groan.

I loved it when he gave himself to me and let me feel in control.

But I knew it was always short-lived with Ryder.

He gripped the back of my head, forcing me to meet his heated gaze. "Lexie, if you

keep doing that, I'm going to come, and I need to taste this sweet pussy first.”

In one fell swoop, he stood, hooking his hands under my legs and lifting me effortlessly.

The movement pressed my core against him as he carried me to the railing and set me down.

Grabbing my shirt, he made quick work of removing it from my body, and the cool night air made goosebumps ripple across my skin.

My bra was off faster than my brain could process it, and then Ryder's mouth was on me.

He sucked and nipped at my nipple, pulling a moan from my lips as my head tipped back.

If I was being honest, I'd imagined this more times than I could count—days, nights, even the occasional afternoon—and now, here we were, together again.

This was only going to complicate matters, but I didn't care. I needed this man.

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He pulled his mouth away from my sensitive nipple, and the cool night air blowing over it made a shiver run down my back. Ryder was on his knees in front of me, his hands on my thighs as he slid them underneath my skirt, my panties already soaked just from sucking his cock and his hands on me.

With expert hands, he lifted my legs so my ankles hooked over his shoulders.

I gripped the railing so I wouldn't topple backward into the flowerbed.

He leaned over, pushing my dress up so the only thing between us was the silk of my panties.

He quickly pushed them aside before hooking a finger inside of me.

I bit down on my bottom lip to keep from crying out, my body ready for so much more.

With an almost sinister smile, he dipped his head low, running his tongue along my wet slit. His eyes never left mine as he dove in, adding his tongue along with his swirling finger.

My hands aching from holding onto the railing, I moved them to the back of his head for support.

I tried to keep myself steady, but his touch was almost too much, my whole body shaking as pressure built in my spine, and I gave into my orgasm that came hard and fast. "Ryder, oh, god," I cried out as I shuddered again around his fingers.

He didn't say a word. He just chuckled against my pussy, and the vibration almost sent me into orbit.

When he'd wrung me out, he lifted his head, my wetness shining on his chin in the moonlight. I expected him to lift me off the railing, but he didn't stop; he kept going, adding another finger as he lowered his head again and sucked hard on my clit, lapping up every bit of my arousal.

It didn't take long for another orgasm to build, sparks shooting through my body as I gripped his hair tightly, the intense pleasure he was giving soaring through me.

Just as I thought I'd finished coming down from my high, Ryder's lips were on mine, letting me taste my salty sweetness as he pulled me closer to his hard body.

In a flurry of kisses, we peeled the rest of our clothes off as I grabbed the blanket off the bench and flipped it out onto the porch floor.

"Ryder," I moaned as I pressed his head closer to me.

"I need to be in you," he mumbled.

"Then get at it, sweetheart." Reaching for his hand, I sank to the floor, pulling him down with me until his massive body hovering over mine, his cock pressing against my wet pussy that I so badly wanted to feel him inside of me.

He fumbled with his jeans, trying not to break our kiss as he pulled a foil packet from his pocket.

"Do you always have that in there?" I asked breathlessly, trying not to sound overly jealous, but I was.

I hated every woman he'd had in the three years we were apart, and I hated myself for letting there be other women.

"Well, I was hoping I'd get to use this one with you tonight," he said with a smile before opening the packet and sliding the latex over his massive cock.

He teased my wet entrance, only putting the head of his cock in and then pulling it out.

I groaned in frustration, and he laughed.

"You want more of this, Lexie?" he asked as he knelt back, and I felt the absence of his closeness.

"Yes, please." Looking up at him, he towered over me, dark hair scattered across his chest, leading down his stomach like an arrow pointed at his cock.

"Anything for you, sweetheart," he said with a grin before filling me to the hilt.

I gasped at the familiar fullness that I'd missed so much, gripping his shoulders as he slowly rocked against my hips.

But I knew neither of us wanted it slow.

It had been too damn long, and we both needed the release.

"Fuck, just like I remember. Lex, I'm not sure I'll be able to last long; this is the only thing I've dreamed of for the last three years." He groaned in my ear.

I wrapped my legs around his back, and he pulled me up so I was sitting on his thighs. We never separated, and I wasn't sure how he got into this position, but I

wasn't about to obsess over it. I pressed my breasts against his warm chest, and his hands gripped my ass cheeks.

Digging my nails into his back, I let my body relax into his as my orgasm shattered through me, leaving every part of me shaking.

"Ryder," I cried out into the night as my orgasm overwhelmed me.

The world went quiet. My pulse pounded in my ears, and there was nothing except him and me, as close as two people could be.

"That's it, Lexie. Give it to me. I want to feel you come hard around my cock again. Let me feel you," he growled, ramming harder against me. "Lean back." He ordered, and I loosened my grip on him. He slid his hands up my back and took the weight off me.

"Fuck, Lexie. That's a beautiful sight," he murmured, thrusting harder as he watched my tits bounce.

A deep, tingling sensation formed at the base of my spine.

I'd never needed anyone like I needed this man.

My legs began to shake, and I ground my clit against the hand he'd slipped between us as I came to a shattering climax.

"I'm coming, oh god, Ryder, please," I begged as another orgasm rolled through my body, and I spasmed around his cock.

"That's it, sweetheart. Rid me. Take what you need." He thrust into me and roared as he emptied himself. Even through the condom, I could feel him spilling, filling it up

with everything he had. He rests his head on my shoulder as he tries to slow down his ragged breathing.

We crashed down onto the blanket, barely able to move as my breath came out slow and shallow. My fingers danced along his back. “That was amazing,” he whispered into the shell of my ear, our bodies still connected as he held me close.

“It really was,” I managed to breathe.

Again, I wrapped my arms around his neck and clung to him like he was the only lifeline I had.

Maybe he was. Would tonight change things between us?

Would letting him in completely do irreversible damage?

Even if it did, we had to be there for the two kids who had been left to us, so however long this thing lasted between us, we had one goal.

“God, I’ve missed you,” he mumbled into my neck. “Not just because of the sex, I’ve just missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too,” I whispered as I let go of him and placed my hands on his cheeks. Lowering my head, I kissed him tenderly, exploring his mouth and just reacquainting myself with this man I’d know absolutely everything about at one point in time.

I could have fallen asleep right here; the sex workout was exhilarating. But being in his arms was a dream I didn’t know I’d been missing. I knew we’d have to get up, get dressed, and head inside soon, but for that moment, I just wanted to stay lost in his touch.

“I need to deal with the condom. I’ll meet you inside,” he said before he lowered his head and kissed me as he pulled out.

He wrapped the blanket around me and headed into the house.

Even though I’d just been fucked to within an inch of my life, I missed his closeness. Like a moth to a flame, I needed him.

“Sweetheart, are you going to lie out there all night, or do we get round two on the bed?” Rolling over, I looked at him, holding the screen door open, leaning against the doorjamb in all his naked glory. Damn, that man was a sight.

Scrambling up as fast as I could, I let the blanket fall and walked over to him, pulling his head down for a kiss. He lifted me up, and we headed down the hallway to our room.

Ryder dropped me onto the bed and looked down at me with a smirk. “On your hands and knees,” he demanded. My eyes went wide, but I did as he said.

Chapter Eighteen

RYDER

When the night started, I hadn't imagined us being here, Lexie's round ass in the air waiting for me to plunge back into her sweet pussy.

Reaching out, I ran the tips of my fingers over her back and leaned over her.

She arched her back, waiting for me to plunge into her, and while that's all I wanted to do, I needed permission to take her bare. "Do you want me to use a condom?"

"No," she whimpered. "I haven't been with anyone for six months and was tested after my last one." She let her words trail off, no doubt thinking back to me telling her not to talk about another man while we were intimate.

"I'm good too. You're the only woman I've ever taken raw." I growled, and she looked over her shoulder at me.

"Seriously? When you've got me on my hands and knees, you're going to say that to me?" She arched her brow.

"Did you just sass me, Alexandra?" I asked, letting out a sigh. "You do remember what I do when you sass me?"

"No, I don't think I do," she answered sweetly as she batted her long lashes at me. That look made me instantly hard, not that I wasn't already, but when she decided to

be a brat, it always made me rock solid.

She'd always understood what I needed and gave me complete control willingly. I hadn't realized how much I craved it or how much I'd missed having someone submit to me. "You don't get to come," I said as I dragged the head of my cock through her wetness.

"Ryder, that's not fair," she whimpered as she let her hips drift back, pressing against me.

"I'm going to bring you to the edge of ecstasy, and then I'm going to stop until you're begging me to come," I explained as I slammed my cock into her. Lexie cried out and let her head fall between her arms.

Taking her like this was one of my favorite positions because I loved watching her ass move.

She'd always made sure to make a bigger show of it, circling her hips and meeting each thrust of mine with her own force.

"Fuck, Lexie, that's a beautiful sight," I murmured, thrusting harder as I gripped onto her ass.

The bed screeched as it moved slightly across the hardwood floor. We were going to have to fix that.

She didn't say anything, but her ragged breaths indicated she was close, so I pulled out of her. "Ryder," she cried out, her voice sounding like she'd been possessed by something.

"I wasn't joking, Lex. Punishing you is a favorite of mine." I chuckled when she

grabbed a pillow and flung it across the room in what I suspect was an attempt for it to hit me. Watching her breathing slow, I slid back in, and Lexie arched her long back, changing the angle of her hips.

Closing my eyes, I slowly moved in and out of her. This was torture for both of us, but I wanted it to last as long as possible. How long until she came to her senses and said no more? I ached for this woman for three years, and there was no way I wanted this to be over.

Lexie's arms were beginning to shake from holding herself up.

"Lower onto your forearms, and rest your head on the bed," I commanded, pleasantly surprised when she followed my directions.

My wife was at my will. My wife. I'd longed to say that about her, and while we both knew why we'd done this, my entire world shifted in that moment.

None of this was fake for me, but I'd have to wait and reveal that in time.

"Ryder," she begged, and I stopped moving, leaving us connected but wanting her to fully give in to me. "Please, please let me come. This is agony."

"You think it's easy for me?" I huffed out. "God, I just want to empty into you, fill you with my cum so it drips out of you for the rest of the night." I couldn't hold out any longer, so I pulled out of her abruptly.

"No, Ryder. Please. I need you in me." The whine of her voice almost made me shoot all over her back, but I grabbed her hips, flipped her onto her back, and pulled her to the edge of the bed.

Lifting her legs and putting them over my shoulders, I lowered myself into her; this

wasn't going to last long.

"Oh, you're needy and desperate for me, aren't you?"

Come for me, sweetheart," I said as I fought my own opportunity at bliss.

Lexie threw her arms out to the side and gripped the bedspread in her hands as she arched her back and shuttered around me.

I was a goner, watching her writhe on the bed as pleasure rocketed through her.

One more thrust and I... "Lex," I shouted as I dumped into her.

Shuttering, I moved her legs off my shoulders and laid down beside her.

Neither of us spoke; our breathing slowed as we matched one another, breath for breath.

Lexie's hair was plastered across her face, and I reached to brush it away, tucking it behind her ear.

"We need to remember to put your hair up next time. It's going to be a tangled mess."
"She let her gaze drift to me.

"Does that mean this isn't just a one-time thing?" I was immediately thankful we'd left the light on; otherwise, I would have missed the hope in her eyes and the uncertainty on her face.

"Baby, if I can have this every night thing, it still won't be enough.

"Leaning onto my side, I pressed my mouth against hers.

As I dipped my tongue between her slightly parted lips, she nipped my bottom lip and giggled against my mouth.

Wrapping my fingers in her hair, I rolled on top of her and kissed her until she whimpered.

I ripped my mouth from hers and watched the corners of her mouth turn up. “Every night might kill me, Ry, but at least I’ll go out satisfied.” I wasn’t sure what to say to that, so I just let the silence overtake us.

My eyes roamed her naked body until I stopped at a tattoo on her hip. It was thin, black ink, and I was very familiar with its design, but I had never seen it on her. I reached across her body and ran my thumb across the ranch's brand. “When did you get this?” Emotion filled my throat.

“Three years ago.” I tore my eyes from it and searched her eyes for an explanation. “I got it to keep you close. It was all I could think of doing.” Lexie closed her eyes and sighed.

I sat up and pointed to my ribs. At a quick glance, it was just the profile of a dark-haired woman, but to anyone who knew, it was the picture of Lexie from our first wedding.

The photographer had just happened to capture her staring out at the crystal-blue lake.

She looked so content, and it was my favorite picture from that day.

“Ryder, that’s me.” She sat up and reached out to run her fingers over my ribs.

“Yes. It is. I needed to keep you close.” She was only inches from me, and I wanted to kiss her again, but she pulled back and looked at me.

“What did we do?” Her shoulders slumped as she looked at me. And there it was—the regret. Sitting naked on the bed, it hung heavy in the room.

“Don’t do this, Lexie. Not again. Please.” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. “This was too perfect to regret. Please don’t.” I let my head hang, waiting for something, anything, other than her overthinking this.

Her warm hands cupped my cheeks and lifted my head, and I opened my eyes just in time to watch her climb into my lap and wrap her legs around me.

“It’s not regret, Ryder. I swear to you.

” She looked me in the eyes, “Every intimate moment with you is always a highlight. I have no idea where this is going, but I don’t want to stop. ”

“Please don’t pull away from me.” I looked at her, pleading, and suddenly my heart raced, forcing me to slow my breathing.

“I’m not. I swear to you. I’m here and I’m not going anywhere.” She rested her forehead against mine, and we sat together in silence. My pulse slowed, and I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her tighter against me.

“You need to clean up. I’m slacking on taking care of you.” Lifting my head, I kissed her forehead and moved her off my lap, heading for the bathroom.

Flicking the light on, I placed my hand on the cold marble countertop and looked into the mirror.

Closing my eyes, I thought of everything except the woman lying in the bed.

Her touch made me jump, but it didn’t deter her.

She slid her arms around me and pressed her hands to my chest. I shifted and placed one hand over hers, and we stood there together for a few moments.

“Lex, I’m fine. I swear.” Opening my eyes, I looked at her in the mirror. Her face was relaxed, and she smiled at me.

“I know you are, but I want you to know I’m here.

” She kissed my shoulder, and my dark thoughts began to leave my mind.

I should have told her, confided in her, but in some way, she knew.

This didn’t happen often, and I was concerned that it was occurring now of all times.

It wasn’t fair to her, but tonight, I didn’t need this; I just wanted to hold her in my arms.

“Let me get you a warm cloth. Sit on the edge of the tub.” She nodded and moved across the room.

Letting the water run so it was warm, I grabbed a cloth and soaked it.

“Open your legs for me again.” Lexie licked her lips, and I laughed as I knelt between her legs.

Lifting the cloth to her thighs, I cleaned up the mess I’d created by not taking care of her right away.

That was a failure on my part, but one that wouldn’t happen again.

I rinsed out the cloth and moved to her core.

Her sweet sigh of appreciation made everything else disappear.

“I don’t know the last time I’ve been so sore but felt so good.

” She let her head fall back, and my cock wanted to go again.

“No, that’s not true. I do remember.” She sat up straighter, and I tossed the cloth into the laundry hamper before I helped her stand.

“Do I want to hear this story?” I asked flatly as we walked back to the bed. Flipping back the covers, she climbed in, and I tucked them around her. I flicked off the light and climbed in beside her.

“It was five years ago.” My ears perked up at that, and I reached for her hand.

She intertwined her fingers with mine and continued, “It was almost this time of year, as a matter of fact. We were out bringing the last bunch of cows in; it was just you and me. Well, and a hundred head of cattle.” She laughed and rolled over onto her side.

“Do you remember?”

“I do, quite fondly, actually. You screamed so much I was sure the herd would scatter all the way down the valley, and we’d have to round them up all over again.”

We both laughed.

“But I also remember how amazing that night was together. We’d moved into the main house early for the winter and had to be quiet, but out there, we could throw all caution to the wind.”

We'd been able to be wild and do whatever we wanted.

"I do recall you asking me to throw you over the back of the horse like you were dead because it hurt to ride the next morning."

"Oh god," she groaned as she buried her head in my chest. "I was so mortified when the guys asked why I was riding bareback when we showed back up with the cattle. And your stupid grin told them exactly why." She slapped at my chest, and I gripped her hand and held it there.

I'll never forget the confused look of the other four when we showed up just before dark, hours late, and Lexie without a saddle.

They thought she'd been hurt and hovered around her as she slid off the back of Chestnut. Even in the dimming light, I could see her cheeks flush with embarrassment. Then Kipp looked at me, and all their worry faded, one by one, as they realized what had happened.

"You're thinking about when we showed back up at home, aren't you?" she asked.

"No," I scoffed.

"Liar." She tried to pull her hand from mine, but I held on tighter.

"It was a good memory, Lex. From start to finish."

She nodded against me, and I tried not to think of that night because if I did, I'd be right back in her.

Chapter Nineteen

LEXIE

“ O kay, it’s Grandma Julie night, all kids get in the van.” Julie’s clear, strong voice cut through the noise of the house, and all the kids headed for the door.

Ruby turned to look at me, her eyes full of concern. Other than when she was at school, we’d been with her and Sawyer constantly over the last two weeks. “Hey, it’s okay. I can go home with you if you want.” I whispered as I crouched down in front of her.

“You and Uncle Ryder will come back, right?” Her small voice ripped my heart out.

“Oh, my girl, of course we will.” I wrapped my arms around her, and she clung to me. The room went quiet as I watched everyone usher their kids out of the room. “I know this is hard, and like I said, we can just go home.”

“I want to go with everyone, but I just got worried for a minute.”

“It’s completely fine to have those feelings, honey,” Ryder said as he gently placed his large hand on Ruby’s back.

“We have to talk about them, so I’m happy you said something.

” We’d been going to therapy since we’d gotten back to Weston Gap.

The kids had their own time, and then we had time as a family.

Most of the appointments were spent encouraging the kids to share what they were feeling and to open up to us no matter what they needed to say.

“Can I text you?”

“Of course, you can,” I said as I smiled up at her.

“Okay, I want to go with Julie.” Ruby’s smile was cautious, but the fear had faded from her features.

“How about I text Julie when we get to the restaurant?” Ryder said as he took Ruby’s hand and headed out of the room.

“That would be good.” She nodded and then looked up at him. Shifting, I sat on the couch; the worry subsided slightly.

“Ryder’s a good father figure,” Elle said as she took a seat beside me. Griff and Ryder were best friends, so I wanted to get to know Elle better. She was lovely and easy to talk to, and I was sure that in time we’d be best friends too.

“It’s the reason I divorced him the first time,” I said quietly.

Turning, I saw the confusion on her face that she was trying to hide.

“I can’t have kids. I’ve known it all my life, and I came to terms with it when I was younger.

Then I met Ryder, and he assured me it didn’t matter, but I saw him with kids, and I knew it wasn’t fair to keep him tied to me when being a dad and having a family was

all he'd ever wanted.

"My voice trailed off. It wasn't easy talking about this to anyone.

"So, I drew up divorce papers and pretended to move on. I'd hoped Ryder had found someone he could be happy with and have the family I know he'd always wanted."

"And I told you, the only person I've ever needed was you."

His husky voice filtered through the living room, and I turned to look at him.

"So, do you think we can move on from this now?"

I smiled tightly at him and looked at Elle, who was grinning from ear to ear.

"Let's go to the bar. Crazy things happen there." Elle said, with a huge grin on her face.

"Yeah, like your husband starting fights." Ryder scoffed.

"Griff got into a fight at this bar? That couldn't have gone over well with Lydia." I laughed at the thought.

Elle laughed and shook her head. "It didn't. She kicked Griff out, and I thought Ryder was going to hit on Lydia."

"Yeah, he's not really my sister's type.

"I looked at Ryder, and he shook his head.

My sister came out to me years ago, and I became fiercely protective of her.

For a long time, she tried to ignore her feelings, and she'd had a few boyfriends over the years, but they were just to stop rumors.

When she finally admitted it to everyone, nobody was overly surprised, and anyone who mattered in her life was supportive.

The rest we all cut out of our lives, which was for the better.

"Well, I didn't expect that, but good for her," Elle said, smiling at me.

Music blared from inside the bar, and I wondered if this was a mistake, maybe we should have just stayed home. Nora pulled the door open, and we all walked in, heading straight for their table. "I'm going to check in with Lydia, I'll be there in a sec," I called out as I split off from the girls.

"Hey Lex, what can I get you?" Lydia asked.

"Dr. Pepper and a bag of chips," I called down to her. She frowned as she let go of the beer tap and slid the glass of beer down the bar. As if she'd suddenly figured it out, she slapped her hand on the bar and looked at me wide-eyed.

"Get your ass to the office. I'll be right there." She glanced down the bar, and I followed her gaze to where Faith sat. Lydia held up a finger, indicating she'd be gone for a minute, and Faith nodded.

"You didn't even make it three weeks," she said as she let the door close behind her.

"How long have you and Faith been a thing?"

"We're not a thing, and we're talking about you and your ex-husband, husband."

“Faith’s been here for two weeks. Was she your date the other night?”

“You first.”

“Fine. After I left here the other night, he was waiting on the porch for me.”

“Oh god, did you have porch sex? I’ll have to use the back door from now on. I won’t be able to look at the porch again without thinking of that.” She gagged, and I grabbed the pen that was on the desk and threw it at her.

“We did, and I’ll make sure the back door is locked so you have to use the front door.” I stuck my tongue out at her, and she gagged. “Faith? Spill it.”

“It just kind of happened. I came to the office looking for you, and she was there. And there were vibes, you know.” Lydia shrugged. “So I asked if she’d like to hang out, and, well, we hung out for the rest of the weekend and every night since.”

“You’re why she keeps turning me down to come to the house for supper.” I pointed at my sister and watched the red hue creep up her neck and over her cheeks. “This is good, Lyds,” I almost squealed as I clapped.

“Back to you, how was it?”

“Perfect. The same. New.” I sighed and leaned back in my chair.

“Why do you look sad?”

“The end doesn’t change.” I shrugged. “I can’t give him what he wants most.”

“Why are you the only one that can’t see the only thing he wants is you?”

Fine, you can't give him kids that exit your body.

But you have two kids now, and through very bad circumstances, you've given them to him.

Anita was your friend, you four were friends because of you.

Would you please stop selling yourself short because you can't eject a kid?

"She got up from her chair and walked in front of me.

Lydia took my face in her hands and made me look at her. "Stop blaming yourself."

Was my sister right? Of course, she was, but I wasn't going to admit that. I had brought these two kids into Ryder's life, and he was the perfect fill-in dad, just like I knew he would be. But was it enough to prove to myself that I was a woman?

"I kind of want to go stare at a girl, so if we can wrap this up, I'd be really happy."

"Lyds, thanks." I wrapped my arms around her.

"I wish it was me instead of you." She whispered in my ear. It was something she'd told me over and over. She'd known all her life she didn't want to carry a child and would say nature had messed things up. My nose stung like it always did when she said it, and I held her tighter.

We walked out of her office just as the band finished a song.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I think we have the opportunity to have a revival of L&L, the Fencepost's most requested duo.

” I stopped in my tracks and looked at Lydia.

Dad used to make us perform once a month so he didn’t have to pay for a band.

When I left for school, I put it behind me and tried to forget those years.

I shook my head and started to walk back to the table where the girls were, but the chant began from the back of the room: L&L, L&L, L&L. Looking through the haze, I saw Ryder, Nash, Kipp, Griff, and Linc standing on their chairs, leading the request. Glancing at Lydia, she shrugged.

“I will if you will.” She smiled, but I couldn’t say no to her. Marching up on the stage, I grabbed the mic from Weston.

“Fine, but the fuckers from the Diamond better get their asses up here and back us up.” I stared out at the five fools still standing on their chairs, who had frozen mid-cheer.

“Come on, boys. We might as well make it a worthwhile show tonight.” I watched as the girls at the table egged their men on, and they reluctantly made their way to the stage.

The band handed over their instruments, and we all huddled in a group.

“What are we doing?” I whispered.

“Making fools of ourselves, apparently,” Lydia chimed in flatly, and I rolled my eyes.

“What are we starting with?”

“I’ve got it.” Ryder started picking the strings on his guitar, and I shook my head.

“Come on, sweetheart, sing it.” He grinned, and I looked at my sister as the rest of the guys took their places.

Walking to the microphone, I took a deep breath, and as if someone else had taken over, the first notes of “Girls Night Out” flowed from my mouth.

Lydia and I had always started with The Judds because we could make our vocals sound close to theirs.

The guys fell into sync with us, and by the end of the song, the jitters were gone and we were L&L backed by the Diamond 5 again.

The guys seemed to remember our set better than I did because they rolled right into another song.

I pulled the mic off the stand and belted out “Eighteen Wheels and a Dozen Roses” like I’d sung it yesterday.

Turning, I looked at Ryder and winked at him as he played.

Effortlessly, his hands played chords and picked like he’d practiced every day.

I couldn’t even pretend I was hating this.

The song ended, and the crowd erupted with applause.

“How about a slow song? Pair up y'all.” The dance floor filled, and I looked over at Lydia, who nodded. Turning to Ryder, I mouthed the words “Meet Me in Montana,” and he took his spot beside me so we could use the same mic. We belted out the love song, and I couldn’t take my eyes off him as he sang.

The way his eyes lingered on my mouth, the way I leaned into him, would surely make the crowd talk when they left here, but I didn't really care.

It's what we wanted if anyone were to ask about our relationship.

I caught the eye of a blonde woman at the bar, who looked like she wanted to eat Ryder but kill me when her stare shifted my way.

Before I could second-guess myself, as the last of the chords were played, I grabbed Ryder's shirt and pulled him to me.

His guitar was stuck between us, so he slung it back out of the way, and I pressed up against him.

Reaching up, I grabbed the back of his neck and dragged him to me.

Our mouths crashed together, and his free arm wrapped around my waist, lifting me off the floor.

His tongue slipped between my lips, and I melted against him.

The hot spotlight didn't matter. It was just him and me in this moment.

Even the crowd cheering barely registered as I took in the softness of his lips, the passion of his kiss, and his secure grip on me.

Public displays of affection weren't my style, but nobody was going to take my man from me.

My man—the thought sent electrical shockwaves through me.

I realized that no matter what, he was mine, and I never wanted to let him go.

This entire county needed to know I was back.

When our kiss ended, I slid down Ryder's body, and the catcalls and hoots from the crowd made me bury my head in his chest.

"Well, Lex, I think you made a statement," he said softly in my ear.

"All right, let's get back to the regularly scheduled band. I'm not paying them to drink all the beer," Lydia said, and we all walked off the stage.

The blonde at the bar stood, and I stopped in front of her. "There a problem?"

"He's mine."

"No honey, he's mine. Always has been." I winked and caught up with Ryder and the guys, but I slipped my hand into my man's back pocket just to be clear.

Chapter Twenty

RYDER

Getting ready for winter always meant long days and taking advantage of every moment of sunlight we had. There were fences to fix, bales to stack, barns to prepare, and, on top of the work needed for the riding arena and stables, it was exhausting.

It had been almost a week since I had supper with my family, so I decided it was time to call it a day.

We had all taken turns getting down a little earlier so we could be there for our kids, but I was missing Ruby and Sawyer fiercely.

I longed to hear about their day, their laughter at the table, and honestly, their fighting.

Me: I'm heading out.

Linc: Say hi to the kiddos for me.

Griff: Have a good night. I'll come out and help you finish that fence tomorrow.

Nash: See ya.

Kipp: Yep

I was going to have it out with that asshole again if he didn't pull his head out of his ass, I fumed as I got into my truck and slammed the door.

Making the short drive home wasn't enough time to brush off the anger I felt regarding Kipp, but everything melted away when I saw Ruby sitting on the porch steps, her head tucked into her arms and resting on her knees.

"Hey, what's this all about?" I questioned as I sat beside Ruby, quickly realizing she was crying. Nudging her leg with my knee, she finally looked up at me.

"I got scared." She shrugged and lowered her head back into her crossed arms.

"How come?" I gently rubbed her back and waited for her to talk. If there was one thing I'd learned in therapy, and something the kids' therapist also encouraged, it was the importance of not pushing for answers. They would come when the person was ready.

Ruby was quiet for a moment and then turned her head in my direction. "You've been gone so much, and I haven't seen you. Auntie Lexie said I didn't need to worry, but I couldn't stop thinking." She managed to get out through her sobs.

"Tell me what you were thinking, Ruby." Was that an open-ended question? No, that wasn't even a question; it was more of a demand. I hoped I wasn't messing this up. "Only if you're comfortable," I added quickly.

"I was so worried you wouldn't come home like my mom and dad." Tears streamed down her face when she looked up at me again, and my heart broke open for her.

"Oh, my girl." Quickly, I pulled her onto my lap, and she flung her arms around me as I held her tight.

“I can’t promise I’ll always come back, that’s not for me to know, but what I can tell you is that I will be fighting with everything I have to get home to you, Sawyer, and Auntie Lexie.

I know losing your parents is awful.” How was I supposed to make sure she knew I was here for her no matter what happened?

I wanted to tell her I’d always come home, but that wasn’t realistic, so I hoped the words I told her would be enough.

“You don’t know how it feels,” she mumbled into my shoulder.

“Actually, I do sweets, only I lost mine in a very different way.” Talking about my parents wasn’t something I did often or, quite frankly, at all. It was part of my past that I liked to keep in its place, but I wondered if Ruby needed to know I was aware of her feelings.

“You don’t have a mom and dad either?” She sat up, her blue eyes wide and waiting for me to talk.

“My parents did some bad things when I was about Sawyer’s age.

They just didn’t come home one day. My older brother tried to pretend everything was okay, but one day, when we went to school, we weren’t allowed to go back home.

” My older brother. I hadn’t thought about Luke for years.

I wondered where he was and whether it was time to track him down.

“Where did you have to go?” Ruby’s soft voice brought me back to this moment.

“I went to a place called foster care. My brother Luke and sister Natalie were sent to different places than me.” I hated thinking about this, while I was pretty good at pushing it to the back of my mind, there were times of the year when it was impossible to ignore.

“Where are they?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “I saw them a few times when I was little, but it’s been more years than I can remember since I’ve seen them.

” That wasn’t the total truth. I’d tracked Natalie down to Louisiana years ago, but I didn’t have the desire to let her know I was there.

She seemed to be doing well and had a good life, so I didn’t want to upend the proverbial apple cart by showing up unannounced. But that had to be eight years ago now.

“I’m sure glad you and Auntie have Sawyer and me. My life would be over if I lost him too.” Her tiny voice cracked, and I pressed a kiss to the side of her head. “So, what happened to your mom and dad?”

“Well, my dad passed away a long time ago. I hadn’t seen him again, but I found out years later.” I didn’t just stumble upon it; I found it when I was combing through information, trying to find any scrap I could hold on to when I was younger.

“Like mine,” she whispered. Not quite like hers. Mine was shanked in a prison brawl and bled out before they could get him to the infirmary, but she didn’t need to know that.

“As far as I know, my mom lives somewhere in Florida with a new family.” I shrugged, and it was as shitty as you might think. Part of me was glad she’d cleaned

herself up, but there was still a part of me that was bitter that my siblings and I weren't good enough to come back for.

"She just forgot about you?" Ruby scrunched up her face, and I could tell behind those eyes was a brain working full force to make sense of this.

"Seems that way."

"I don't like your mom," Ruby said, a frown across her sweet little face.

"You're amazing, and she just forgot you.

Well, she can't have you back, even if she begs.

I won't let her. Sawyer and I belong to you now, so she can stay away; we're your family.

" With a curt nod, she ended the conversation and managed to heal something I'd thought I'd put behind me years ago.

Right here on these steps, I had the same conversation with Lexie's dad, Aaron, years ago. And Ruby's words were almost exactly the same as his. "We're your family now and that's all there is to it."

A strange car pulled into the yard. It was flashy and expensive.

Both doors opened, and a man and woman got out.

The bleached blonde hair I'd know a mile away.

"Ruby, go in the house, get Sawyer and Auntie Lexie, and go up to your room. Stay

there until I come to get you. Understand?" I said, my voice firm.

She nodded quickly before running into the house.

Standing, I walked down the porch steps and met Violet and Desmond Tucker before they had an opportunity to get to the sidewalk.

"What do you want?" I asked roughly.

"Oh, come now, Ryder, we're just here to offer our congratulations," Violet said in her fake sing-song voice. She smiled and batted her eyelashes up at him.

"We don't want your congratulations." Folding my arms across my chest, I glared at the man standing opposite me.

"Now, Ryder, surely we can be civil. Vi was just being neighborly," Desmond drawled in his exaggerated Southern accent.

"I know all my neighbors, and you're not one of them."

The crunching of the gravel made me turn to see who else had decided today was a good day to drop in for a visit. The silver half-ton belonging to Lexie's mom turned the corner and came to a stop beside the shiny black car.

"Get the hell off my property, you dirty cunt." Helen was barely out of the truck before she started yelling. She didn't bother shutting the truck door, so she flew to my side.

"That's no way to talk to an old friend," Violet huffed, placing her hand on her chest in mock embarrassment.

“Don’t see any friends, old or new, here.” Helen was barely over five feet, but right now, I swore she stood as tall as I was. “I think I told you to leave.”

“This isn’t over,” Desmond said as he pointed at me. “How are those kids doing? Their actual grandmother sure misses them.” His smug smile made my blood boil.

“They don’t have any other grandmother, so I don’t know what you’re talking about.

I suggest you put us, and Weston gap in your rearview mirror.

It would be best for you.” I took a step closer to him, and he backed up.

He finally got in the car, and I turned my attention to Violet, who was looking at Helen with such sadness it almost hurt to watch.

“What did she want?” Helen asked as she turned to look up at me.

“Offer their congratulations.” I shrugged. “Want something to drink?” Heading into the house, I pulled the pitcher of sweet tea from the fridge and poured us glasses.

“Ryder? Hi, Mom,” Lexie said as she came down the stairs and noticed Helen in the kitchen. “What’s going on? The kids are terrified, and all I know is Ruby said we had to go up, and she dragged Sawyer and me to the room.”

“Shit.” Racing out of the kitchen, I took the stairs two at a time.

Opening the door to Ruby’s room and finding it empty wasn’t what I’d expected.

I checked Sawyer’s room as well but found the same thing.

There was only one more room, so I opened the door to Lexie’s childhood room and

found both my kids huddled under the covers.

“Hey, you two. You can come down now.”

“Are you sure?” Sawyer asked.

“Yeah, I am. Grandma Helen is here to see you both.” They flung the blankets off them, bounced off the bed, and ran to find Helen. Pulling the sheets back up, I tucked them under the pillows and turned the lights off.

Helen stayed for supper, and the kids regaled us with tales of their day, which led to more laughter than eating.

The bus ride to and from school, which seemed to be nothing but a chaotic nightmare, dragged Helen out to see their horses.

"Dragged" wasn't the right word. She suggested it because she could tell Lexie was chomping at the bit to ask what was going on.

“Spill it, Saffort.” She tossed the dish towel at me, and we both stood at the sink.

“Violet’s husband has been causing some trouble around town. No, not around town. It has to do with the ranch.” I reached for the plate she’d just put in the sink and dried it off before placing it in the cupboard.

“What kind of trouble?”

“He wants the ranch,” I said flatly. There was so much more to this story, but we didn’t really have time to get into it tonight.

“Well, good thing you’ve got a great lawyer on your side, and she’s made every deal

you've ever done ironclad." She looked over at me and popped her hip out.

"And she was sexier than fuck when she did it." I took a step close to her, wanting to touch her, but just as I was about to, the screen door screeched and the kids came flying into the house.

I never realized how much of a cock block kids were.

I chuckled and pushed those thoughts away, giving the kids my full attention as they dove into their stories again.

Chapter Twenty-One

LEXIE

A chill ran through my body as I rolled over and found the spot beside me empty.

I placed my hand on the pillow, and it was cold, so Ryder had been gone for a while.

Saturday should have been an easy day, but of course, he would be out working already.

This week had been a win; the kids had settled into school fairly well, and I was able to go with Ryder to their therapy appointments, thanks to Faith holding everything down.

Life seemed to be moving forward with anxiety-riddled ease.

Fresh coffee wafted from the kitchen, and I was laser-focused on the machine. A note sat beside my cup, telling me Ryder was out in the corral. Pouring the steaming elixir into my cup, I walked to the window and looked out at him.

Why was this man so sexy? Had he always been this way?

I watched him move around the corral with hypnotic expertise as he tended to the few head of cattle that needed attention.

Of course he had always been attractive—it was the first thing I noticed about him

when he walked into my father's law office to sign some documents.

As if something was pulling me, I moved out to the porch and kept my eyes on him.

He hadn't changed much in the last ten years.

Maybe a little grey dusted through his hair, but he still made my heart beat a little faster when I looked at him.

The hardest thing about our divorce was the fact that I was in love with him, but he deserved to have a family, to be a dad, and I couldn't give him that.

"Like what you see?" he called out to me. I jumped, not realizing he could see me from where I was standing. "Get down here for a minute."

Taking a quick glance back into the house, I noticed everything was still quiet.

Ruby and Sawyer were still asleep, and judging from the clock on the wall, they would be for a bit longer.

I hadn't been up this early since I was married to Ryder, but the man didn't know how to be quiet, so I was just thankful that the kids seemed to not mind his stomping around in the mornings.

"Need something?" I asked, holding my coffee against my chest to warm myself from the cold bite of the wind.

"Yeah, that." He reached out, took the mug from my hand, and took a swig of my coffee.

"Hey," I grumbled but didn't protest much. He set the cup on top of the fence post

and shrugged out of his jacket.

“Put this on.” He swung his coat around my shoulders, and I slipped my arms into it. His scent enveloped me, and the warmth of the coat took the chill away almost instantly. “Remember how to work the head gate?” he asked, pointing to the lever that opened the doors.

“Kind of a simple thing to forget, isn’t it?” I arched a brow. Ryder took a half step toward me and reached out, grabbing his coat and pulling me toward him.

“Sass like that’s going to get you in trouble,” he said as he lowered his head. His eyes locked on my lips, and I was sure he could feel my heart hammering in my chest.

“It always did like to get into trouble.” My reply was barely above a whisper, and I smirked. What was I doing? Egging Ryder on hadn’t been on my list of things to do today, but here we were.

“Alexandra,” he croaked. It sounded like both a warning and promise. We were pressed against each other now, the cold metal of the cattle chute at my back. I hadn’t even realized we’d moved. “God, I’ve never stopped wanting you.”

Just as I opened my mouth to ask what was stopping him, the long, loud bellow of the cow behind me broke the trance we were in.

“Guess I should let her out.” I smiled and reached for the lever that opened the gates.

However, I wasn’t able to get it open given how I was standing, because Ryder hadn’t moved away from me.

Without breaking eye contact, he reached up, wrapped his hand around mine, and pulled down.

The cow bolted, and the chute rattled, bumping me into Ryder.

“I should get to work,” he said as he finally stepped away from me. “Ready?” he asked, reaching up to let the next cow out of the pen. Slamming the gates closed, I nodded, and the next beast thundered up the alleyway. Whatever was happening was over now, and we were back to all business.

With minimal discussion and no small talk, we worked the twenty head of cattle and managed to let the last one out just as Ruby called from the porch.

“Auntie Lexie, Uncle Ryder, where are you?” Her little voice was full of panic.

My heart broke, and Ryder and I both sprinted toward the house.

His long legs covered ground faster than mine, and he bounded up the stairs, scooping her up in his arms and twirling her around.

Her giggles floated through the air, and I stopped at the bottom of the steps, watching the two of them.

The panic was gone, and she looked adoringly at Ryder. “Why’s Auntie Lexie wearing your jacket?” she asked between giggles.

“She came out to help me and didn’t wear a coat. I guess she forgot it was fall, so she stole my jacket.”

“You gave it to me,” I grumbled, while Ryder shook his head and Ruby leaned over to look at me.

“I think it looks better on you, Auntie,” Ruby whispered, cupping her hands around her mouth.

“Well, maybe she should keep it,” Ryder said as he turned to look at me, arching his brow.

“I think I still have one at my house in Bozeman,” I said as I shrugged out of it and held it out to him.

“I should get it next time we go. Then you can have yours back.” I hadn’t thought about my house in Bozeman at all since I’d gotten the call from the police.

I didn’t want to think about what was rotting in the fridge.

Well, let’s be honest. It would be some sort of takeout in a cardboard container.

I didn’t cook much because I’d spent all my time focused on my career, which in reality was just something to do so I didn’t have to think about him.

“Well, since it’s not here, keep it, sweetheart.” Ryder set Ruby down but held on to her hand.

Ruby burst out laughing, “You called her sweetheart. That’s weird.

” She shook her head, and I looked up at Ryder, thinking, Not all that weird.

When we’d been together, I could have sworn he’d forgotten my actual name.

He called me “sweetheart” all the time and hearing it again, after what happened in the corral, shook me to my core.

“Auntie Lex, are you coming in for breakfast?” Sawyer asked through the screen door, his big eyes looking up at me.

“Yeah, I’m coming.” I smiled and pulled the screen door open. Sawyer wrapped his small hand around mine. My heart squeezed as tightly as the grip he had on my hand.

Chapter Twenty-Two

LEXIE

“ I t’s so nice to see there’s a lawyer in this backwater town.” The man’s voice shattered the quiet oasis I’d managed to find this morning.

“Good morning. How can I help you?”

“Are you here alone?” His beady eyes bore into me, and my skin crawled.

“No, I’m not. My receptionist is in the back.” Smiling tightly, I held back a flinch as he looked around.

“She must be extremely quiet.”

“How can I help you today?”

“I have a request for you; now, it might sound kind of odd, but I’m looking for the person who owns these land locations.” He reached inside his well-tailored suit and pulled out a piece of paper. Unfolding it, I stared at the list of numbers.

“May I ask why you’re interested in them?”

” I lifted my eyes from the page to the stranger.

He didn’t fit in here. Nobody wore a suit, ever.

Not even on their wedding day. My father didn't wear one unless he had to actually go to court, and then it was just a western suit jacket with his best pair of black wranglers and cleanest boots.

"I'm interested in talking to the owner about purchasing the land."

"Well, I can tell you that these parcels of land aren't for sale."

"How could you possibly know that?"

"I know the former owner, and in the condition of the sale to the current owner, there was a clause that they can't be sold to anyone other than the original family. So, I'm sorry you've wasted your time stopping in today." I smiled sweetly but didn't miss the flash of anger shoot through his eyes.

"Don't you go blabbing about this conversation. Confidentiality and all."

"Confidentiality only applies to paying clients, and you, sir, are no client of mine. And you never will be. Please see yourself out."

"You might not want to be here too late at night. This building's old and doesn't look safe—faulty wiring and such. I'd also hate to see anything happen to the lovely woman who lives here." His eyes scanned the old building, and a cold chill ran through my body.

"Are you threatening me? Because I will have you know I've faced down far more powerful men than you and survived.

Plus, I don't really think my friends will take too kindly to that threat.

" Taking a step toward him, I crossed my arms over my chest. "They aren't the kind

of men that take threats to a woman lightly.

” My voice was low, menacing, and much more forceful than I felt right at the moment.

“No, of course I wouldn’t threaten you.” He held his hands up and backed away from me. Before he said another word, he turned and left the office. Glancing out the window, I grabbed the keys off the desk and left the office.

“Well, look at you.” A woman’s voice chimed from behind me. I turned and smiled at Mrs. Patterson, my twelfth-grade history teacher. “I heard you were back in town. I’m sorry to hear about your friends.” Her eyes grew misty as she reached out to hug me.

“Thank you. It’s really good to be back.”

“I hear you and Ryder moved into your parents’ old place,” she said when she let me go, and we continued to walk down the street together.

“I’m so glad it has a family in it again.

That big old house used to be the envy of the county.

Oh, I know everyone thinks the Miller mansion is the goal, but that wraparound porch and the view from your place made many hearts pitter-patter over the years. ”

I couldn’t help but smile. I’d always known the house I grew up in had been the talk of the county.

When my great-grandfather built it, nobody around had a house that large, and it had been his intention to fill it with kids.

But my great-grandmother died in childbirth with their second baby, and he didn't remarry or have any more children.

When my grandfather and grandmother married, they decided on only two children, and it seemed that had been passed on to my parents.

"Yeah, we figured it would be the easiest place to raise Ruby and Sawyer. It's close enough to the ranch for Ryder to be home for supper, even when he's busy, and has enough room for the kids to be content."

"Well, it's a beautiful spot to raise a family." She beamed. "If you need anything, you let me know. I need to duck into the pharmacy." She pointed to the building we'd stopped at.

"I will thank you. It was wonderful to see you."

"Don't be a stranger. You are always welcome to take your mom's place in the book club." She grinned as I nodded, while she pushed the door to the store open.

The book club was a cover for late-night gossip sessions with some of the local women in the community.

Lydia and I used to be jealous of Mom's nights out, and it might be fun to catch up with all the ladies.

With a quick glance at my watch, I needed to get to the county building before they closed for lunch.

The heavy wooden door creaked as I opened it, and I was immediately hit by the familiar musty smell of the building.

Marble floors stretched before me, and my heels clicked as I walked into the rotunda.

Looking up into the stained-glass dome, I couldn't help but smile.

I used to sneak away from Dad's office and lie in the middle of the floor staring up at the beautiful colors, and the floral details that circled around the top of the dome.

"Alexandra Saffort, you're too old to be lying on the floor, so don't even think about it," an older woman's voice said from my left, and I couldn't stop the smile that crossed my face.

"I'm pretty sure people wouldn't just step over me anymore." I laughed.

"They'd call the Sheriff and tell him you'd lost your mind." Her voice was light and teasing, but she probably wasn't wrong. "What can I do for you?"

"Mrs. Kell, I need one of the big land location maps of the county for my office." The woman turned and walked into the large office behind her.

Half of the building was the county office, and the other half was the local library.

That was the real reason I'd spent so much time here as a child.

I probably read every book on the shelves.

Some weren't approved by my mother, and I had to hide them, but I still managed to get through them.

"You're the second person asking for one today.

I can go months without someone needing one of those maps.

Especially since most of it just says Flying Diamond 5 on it.

” She shook her head and opened the big filing cabinet behind the counter.

“I’m sure glad you decided to come home and practice law.

It will be nice not having to drive to the city for everything.

” She flipped through the files and pulled out a large piece of paper.

“Who else was in here asking for one?”

“Oh, that husband of Violet Powers. Well, I guess she’s not a Powers anymore, but why split hairs.

That man gives me the creeps.” She shook her head, placed the paper in front of me, and rolled up the map.

“I just can’t imagine why they want to hang around here.

She has nothing to do with Nash’s girls, and she hates Fred, which baffles me.

She’s the one who left—if anyone deserves to be hated, it’s her.

And that husband walks around town like he’s king ding-a-ling.

I’d like to run him over with my car one of these days.

” She shook her head and wrapped the elastic around the tube.

“He doesn’t seem to be very well liked, that’s for sure.”

“That’s the understatement of the year. We all think he was behind the abduction of Griff’s stepson.

” She leaned over the counter and made a beckoning motion with her finger.

“He was behind Griff’s barn burning down too.

Almost lost that man.” Her words were whispered, but they were also matter-of-fact.

Ryder hadn’t said much about Griff’s troubles, but I’d pieced enough together to know the barn was new and that Griff had significant scarring on part of his arm, neck, and the side of his face.

“How much do I owe you?” I questioned as I pulled my dry wallet out.

“For you, nothing. You’ve brightened an old woman’s day. But if I find you lying on that floor, I’ll make you pay fifty dollars.”

“I promise I won’t take up my regular position today. Thank you.” I smiled at the woman, and she waved as I headed out the door.

“So, Desmond Tucker, what are you up to?” I asked myself as I headed back to the office. Unlocking the door, I peered inside before I committed to going in. I would need to have Ryder set up security tomorrow.

“Are you all right?” a man’s voice asked from behind me. I jumped ten feet in the air as I screamed, dropping the map. It made a hollow ping-pong sound as it bounced off the floor. I turned around and was relieved to see Fred Powers.

“Are you trying to kill me, Fred?” I yelled as I put my hand over my pounding heart.

“No, not today. I brought you lunch.” He held up a paper bag with Steam’n Sugar’s logo on it. “Saw Tucker over here and wanted to make sure you were okay.” His eyes were locked on me, and I was pretty sure there was no way I could brush off the fact that I was jumpy.

“Wait, did Ryder tell you to spy on me?”

“No, he asked if I’d keep an eye on you until he got the security cameras set up.” He closed the door behind him as we finally crossed the threshold of the building. “So, what’s up? What’s with the fact I nearly had to peel you off the ceiling?”

I bent down and picked up the map. “Desmond came in here asking for information—about my land.” I unrolled the elastic from the tube of paper and moved to the bulletin board in the conference room. As I was stabbing push pins into each corner, Fred walked up behind me and stared over my shoulder.

It didn’t take him long to point out the location on the map while I was searching for it. Most the land was owned by the Diamond, but there was a section that wasn’t. As I leaned in, I finally saw the names on the four quarters: Alexandra and Ryder Saffort.

“I thought the five bought out everything mom and dad had?” Turning, I looked at Fred, who just smiled.

“Ryder bought that section on his own. He wanted you to have something to come back to if you ever needed it.” Fred shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth on his feet.

Suddenly, it made more sense that Kipp and Griff didn’t push back when Ryder kicked them out the day of the wedding.

He’d said my land, not our land, and if it had been theirs, they wouldn’t have had to

leave.

“You’ve never noticed before?” he asked innocently, and I shook my head.

We had old maps in Bozeman, and like Mrs. Kell had said, it was just expected that the Diamond owned everything else.

“Well, you know they never change names on the home quarter. Everyone those five have ever bought out still keeps those, along with any land that has their outbuildings, in their names.” Fred pointed all over the map where people who’d sold to the Five still had property in their names.

“But they own the land. I’ve drawn up all the paperwork. See, where the Dicksons live, I know the home quarter deed traded hands.” It was the most recent purchase they’d made.

“Right, but when the guys buy people out, it’s not because they just woke up one day and wanted the land.

They buy out people who are about to lose everything.

So, when they have to save people from ruin, they make sure there’s a little dignity left and never kick anyone out of their home.

If those people are willing to keep an eye on the cattle, they are welcome to stay and keep their herds on the land, too.

” Fred’s chest puffed out with pride. Even during the despair of his divorce, he’d been so proud of Nash and the life he’d managed to build for himself.

“I didn’t know that,” I mumbled as I stared at the map. These men I’d spent so many

years among all had hearts of gold. Each one of them would do whatever they could for their neighbors, and my heart swelled with pride to know that I was a small part of it.

“Even after all these years, they can still surprise you.” He moved to the table and sat, apparently not needing to return to the coffee shop. “So, what do you think his game is?”

I followed him and took a seat across from him, sliding the bag of food closer to me. “I don’t know. You’d think Tucker would know that section belongs to one of the five. It’s not hard to figure out who they are. I think he was rattling my chain, feeling me out to see where my alliances are.”

“Did it work?”

“Did you almost send me through the roof when you walked in?”

“True.” Fred nodded, chuckling. “So, who else will he go after?”

“Maggie and Kane,” I said as I turned to look at the map. They were the last people not bought out by the guys, and aside from my section of land, they were the easiest way to cause trouble. “Maggie won’t ever sell the land. It’s been in her family longer than you or the Millers have been here.”

“That’s true, but what if there was a way to bring her in, and she wouldn’t lose the land?”

Quickly, I reached into the bag and pulled out the sandwich Fred had brought over for me. Taking a bite of the delicious food, I almost moaned. Fred’s was hands down the best coffee house I’d been to, and my office being across the street was going to be dangerous.

I mulled over scenarios in my head. Nothing makes sense right now. Mid-bite, I stopped and looked at the man across from me. “They have to make her a partner,” I said with a mouth full of food.

Fred nodded, sliding the napkin toward me as he reached across the table and stole one of my potato chips.

“It doesn’t have to be on everything.” Setting the delicious BLT sandwich down, I grabbed the napkin and wiped my mouth.

“It can just be on that land. Maggie could have the backing and security that comes with the Five, and she’d still have control of the land.

Hell, the map doesn’t even have to change.

” I jumped up from my chair and returned to where I’d pinned the map.

“A little scare and a good sandwich might be all the stuff good lawyers need.” Fred chuckled as he stood and left the conference room.

“Thanks, Fred,” I replied as I followed him out. “I need to call a meeting, I guess.”

“Sooner than later, if I know anything about my ex-wife’s new husband.”

“I’ll go now.” I nodded. “Thanks, Fred.” I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him.

“Any time. I’ll bring you lunch tomorrow. Any requests?” I shook my head, and he pulled the office door open and headed across the street, waving at someone out of my view. Fred Powers was a wonderful man, and I was more than happy to see that the town recognized it again.

Chapter Twenty-Three

RYDER

My phone buzzed, and I smiled when I saw Lexie's name. Upon opening the text, my blood ran cold when I read the message.

It was the code that the five of us used whenever we needed to gather quickly. I had never kept secrets from Lexie, so she knew everything, including the codes. She had been the only woman around back then, and I hated lying to her. She also needed to know in case she ever had to bail us out.

And judging from the pings as replies came in, I wasn't the only one who received the text.

Kipp: I'm here.

Griff: On the way.

Linc: Give me five, and I'm there.

Lexie: I'm just leaving town.

Ryder: WTF Lex?

Lexie: I'll explain when we're together.

Walking into the large log house that had been my sanctuary after she left me, I kicked off my boots and headed to the kitchen, where the commotion was coming from.

“Anyone know what this is about?” I asked, grabbing a cookie off the plate Nora had set in the middle of the island, and all the guys shook their heads.

Minutes ticked by, and I wanted to hurl the large clock out the door. We were all a little on edge. These kinds of moments were becoming a bit too frequent again. The shrill ring of my phone sliced through the silence. Grabbing it from my pocket, I answered.

“Ryder, I’m being followed.” Lexie’s panicked voice sent ice through my veins, and my mind went completely blank.

“What do you mean?” I stuttered.

“I don’t know, Ryder, how many ways can a person be followed?” Her fear had turned to sarcasm, and I couldn’t help but smile. There she was—the woman I was married to wasn’t someone to cower in fear; she faced it head-on.

“Your sass isn’t helping, sweetheart.” She groaned, and the guys shook their heads. “Any idea who it is?”

“It’s a red sports car, not from around here. I can’t see the plates but it’s impractical for these roads. It doesn’t fit—doesn’t make sense.” Her voice trailed off like she was trying to work through her thoughts.

“We’re on our way,” I said quickly.

“Hurry,” she whispered, and my heart shattered. If anything happened to her, anyone

involved wouldn't have a safe place. I waited for her to say more, but the line was quiet. Fuck, she must be in the dead zone between here and town. At least that gave me a location for her, and she wasn't far.

"Someone's following Lex," I said as I bolted out of the kitchen to my truck.

Each of us climbed into one of the black trucks and tore out of the ranch.

We didn't have to talk. We knew what needed to be done.

Slamming my foot into the accelerator, my tires screeched, and gravel flew as I turned onto the highway.

When her vehicle came into view, Kipp and Nash each slowed down and pulled off to the side. In the rearview mirror, I saw both trucks turn and wait for her to get closer. I pulled off and turned my truck so I could drive beside her while Griff and Linc followed behind.

Lexie slowed as she pulled up alongside me. The fear in her eyes made me want to rip out the throat of whoever was following her. I pointed ahead, and she nodded as a tear rolled down her cheek.

"Call Lex," I said into the air, and I watched her frown when her phone started ringing. She hit the button on the steering wheel to answer.

"Hey sexy, what's happening?" My voice was much lighter than my soul felt as I watched her crack a smile.

"Oh, you know, just out taking a leisurely drive." She kept her eyes focused on the road.

“We’ve got you.”

“Never doubted it.” She turned and smiled tightly at me.

“Want me to stay on the phone with you?”

There was no way in hell I was hanging up this phone.

“Yes,” she whispered. We drove side by side in silence. I slowed to let her fall in line behind Nash as we turned into the ranch. I hadn’t looked behind to see if the red car was still there; my eyes were locked on the woman ahead of me.

Pulling to a stop, I flung the truck door open and reached Lexie’s car before she had even opened her door. I reached in, pulled her out of the car, and wrapped her in my arms. “Are you okay?” I whispered.

“I’m fine, thanks to you. I think it was Tucker.” She buried her head in my neck and relaxed against me.

“It was,” Linc said as he walked past us.

“Let’s go talk.” Letting her go, I slid my hand around hers and smiled when she didn’t seem to care that she was walking into the lion’s den holding my hand. She just held on to me tighter.

“So, what caused all that?” Kipp asked as he took a seat.

“When I opened this morning, Desmond Tucker walked into the office.” She told us about interaction, and I wanted him dead even more than I had when he was just following her.

“I’m going to agree to the cameras. I can’t have Faith living and working there with this psychopath out there wandering around. ”

“I’ll come in and do it tomorrow,” I said as I stared at her while she nodded.

“I know you’ve all been at a loss regarding what to do with Maggie’s land.

She’ll never sell, but she’s going to be in danger.

I’m not sure even Kane will be able to keep her safe.

” Lexie’s eyes darted around the table. She and Maggie had gone to school together, and before life happened, they’d been best friends.

“So, what are we going to do?” Nash asked as he leaned back in his chair.

“Well, your dad helped me with that. What if you make a subsidiary company to buy out Maggie and Kane but make them part of the company.”

“You want us to go from five to six?” I asked, staring at her.

“Just for Maggie’s place. It will tie up the loose end and give her and Kane the backing and safety of you.

” She pointed at us as a group. I looked to my business partners, and nobody looked appalled by the idea.

Still, we’d need to approach it strategically.

Kane had helped us plenty since he arrived, and bringing him into the circle made sense.

“It’s not something we’ve ever thought of, but it makes sense,” Kipp said as he shifted his gaze from Nora to Lexie. “Would we have to actually buy her out, or could we do everything without money changing hands?” He crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair.

“I don’t think money would have to change hands. She’d be brought into the company, and her assets alone would be enough.” Lexie never broke eye contact with Kipp. It was like a showdown, and whoever looked away first would be the weaker one.

“Let’s do it. Can you draw up the paperwork? We’ll go talk to Kane and Maggie tomorrow.” Kipp turned to us, and I didn’t miss the slight smirk on Lexie’s face that indicated he broke first.

“Well, I’m going home,” Lexie said as she stood up from the table.

“I’ve got some things here that need to be finished up. Will you be okay at home alone?” I followed her back out to her vehicle.

“I’ll be just fine.” She gently placed her hand on my cheek. “Thanks for coming to get me.”

“Always.” I smiled before leaning down and kissing her.

Walking up the stairs hurt, breathing hurt, actually. Pulling open the screen door, I kicked off my boots, and dirt fell out of them. I should have done that before getting in the house, I thought to myself.

“Uncle Ryder, you look awful,” Sawyer said as he glanced at me.

“Thanks, bud.”

“What happened?” Lexie asked as she walked into the living room from the kitchen.

“Got thrown.”

“Doc?” she asked in a panic. Of course, she’d be worried about her horse first—not about me standing there in crippling pain. Okay, maybe not crippling pain, but I sure wasn’t about to do a jig tonight.

“No, a new one we’re trying to break.”

“You don’t get thrown, what really happened?”

“Started thinking about the sexy woman at my house,” I whispered as I gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. She whipped me with the towel in her hand before going back to the kitchen.

Grabbing the blanket off the back of the couch, I placed it over the cushions and flopped down. “What’s the movie for tonight?” I asked, and that started off the argument of the century. I didn’t even care, I let my head fall back onto the sofa cushion and listened to the kids.

“Okay, did we pick one?” Lexie asked as she brought in the plates for the kids. She set them on the coffee table, left, and returned with ours.

“You don’t have to wait on me but thank you.” I took my plate, and she sat next to me.

“If we waited for you to hobble to the kitchen we’d be eating cold pizza.” Her smirk was everything in that moment.

With the movie over, the kitchen cleaned, and the kids in bed, I walked to the

bathroom and found Lexie sitting on the edge of the tub in her robe as it filled. She grabbed the lavender bath salts and some bubble bath and dumped them in, and the small space filled with the calming floral scent.

“What are you doing?”

“Take your clothes off.” She smiled.

“You first,” I replied. She arched her brow, and I knew there was no use arguing.

I pulled my shirt open, shrugged it off, and watched as she frowned.

I kept my eyes on her; I didn’t need to know what I looked like.

The fall was bad, and I was pretty sure I was lovely shades of black and purple.

Dropping my jeans, I quickly discarded my underwear and socks.

“Get in,” she said before walking out of the bathroom.

Hot water scalded my skin as I lowered myself into the tub.

Christ, this woman was trying to burn me alive.

Steam rose around me, and I let myself relax back against the inflatable pillow.

The soft closing of doors in the hallway made me smile.

She was fierce and determined when she needed to be, but there was no stopping her once Lexie slipped into caring-for-everyone mode.

You'd have whatever she thought you needed—probably before you even realized it yourself.

“How’s the water?” Lexie’s soft voice from behind me calmed the thoughts in my mind.

“Scalding.”

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:12 am

“Perfect. Sit up.” I groaned as I pulled myself up.

When I glanced back, I watched Lexi shed the robe she was wearing—and did a double take when I realized she was naked.

The water around me rose as she stepped into the tub.

I moved forward as she settled behind me, draping her legs over mine.

Gently, she put her hands on my shoulders and pulled me back to rest against her.

“Can I just say, I never thought we’d be doing this again?”

I said as I ran my hand along her long, toned leg.

On cold nights when I’d been out checking cows or after long days of riding, she’d always draw me a bath, and we’d just lay in it together.

Sometimes, we’d talk, but more often than not, we’d just be.

An ache formed within me, and suddenly, I leaned forward. She was too close. Space wasn’t what I needed, but I just needed to breathe.

I winced as Lexie’s delicate fingers traced over the scars on my back.

They didn’t hurt exactly, but they evoked memories of things I never wanted to remember—most of them from wounds I’d carried all my life.

I'd left things out when I'd told Ruby about my family, things I prayed every night she'd never have to know.

And I wasn't a praying man, but she'd never know what I'd been through.

But Lexie had always known. I'd bared my soul to her the first night we'd made love.

I was sure she'd run, but she grabbed a bottle of lotion off her nightstand and rubbed my back for what seemed like hours.

I can almost still hear her quiet words: "Vitamin E will help with the scarring. It might be too late, but it won't hurt anything.

We need to do this every night." Lying with my face buried in her pillow, her scent washing over me, I wasn't about to argue.

"Who did this?" she asked, and I had the sense she'd go after them.

"Doesn't matter now; that part of my life is over, and the best is about to begin." How naive I'd been that night. It had been a perfect life until it wasn't.

I needed to let her know that no matter what had happened between us before, this was it now.

It was her and me, and I would never let her go again.

However, I didn't know how to express that.

I wasn't the best with words and feelings like that.

So, letting her touch the most vulnerable parts of me was the way I knew how to

communicate my feelings.

Her lips pressed gently against each scar, her hands moving from my shoulders down across my pecs, her fingers slippery from the bath water.

I leaned into her, letting my eyes drift closed as I gave in to her touch.

My cock already at attention as she traced her slender digits down my abs before lightly tracing my head, now bobbing out of the water and leaking pre-cum at the tip.

Her mouth continued moving down my shoulders, her tongue sliding along my sensitive skin as she lightly squeezed my shaft as if asking for permission before she continued. I groaned, pushing my hips forward, letting her know she had all of me. That she always did.

I usually wasn't one to give up control, but with her hand pumping my cock and lips tracing my shoulders, I closed my eyes again, relishing in the feel of her touch.

But I could only go for so long as she picked up the pace, my balls constricting; I was already ready to come for her.

To give into everything she was giving me.

But I wasn't ready yet. Not until I had her good and satisfied. I needed her to know how much she meant to me. And to have her come for me. Multiple times.

Turning my shoulders toward her, I caught her lips with mine, our tongues tangling together as I kissed her deeply, giving her everything that words couldn't say.

With our mouths still together, I gripped her waist, pulling her onto my lap and making water splash over the side of the tub.

Her hips straddling mine, so her pussy pressed right against my hard cock, and neither of us cared about the mess we were making in this bathroom.

I wanted nothing more than to take her right there, to watch as I filled her to the hilt.

But I knew she needed warming up first. And I wanted to feel her come all over my fingers before I filled her with my cock.

I broke our kiss only to trail my mouth from her lips down her chest, swirling one of the hardened buds of her nipples with my tongue.

She gasped, bucking her hips into mine as if she couldn't wait to get some friction on her swollen pussy. I smiled onto her chest, looking up to see her eyes at half-mast. I knew what she wanted, but not yet. I needed to make sure she was nice and ready to take all of me.

"Mmmm, do you like that, Lexie?" I murmured, moving my mouth to her other nipple before meeting her heated gaze. Her eyes slowly closed, and I moved my head back, forcing her eyes to pop open as she looked down at me, her gaze widening.

"Eyes on me, Lexie. I want to watch your face as I make you come," I commanded before slowly circling her nipple with my tongue.

She nodded, her mouth forming a perfect O as she let out a small gasp, her eyes at half-mast.

"That's a good girl," I growled as I traced my fingers from her breast down her stomach until I reached her swollen pussy nestled against my cock.

She spread her legs wider, giving me access to brush my fingers against her clit before hooking a finger inside of her.

Her moan was louder this time, breathier, as she shivered against my touch.

“That’s it, Lexie, spread yourself for me. I want you to come all over my fingers before you take my big cock,” I murmured, adding another finger inside of her.

Her hips moved in the same rhythm. I pumped my fist, and I knew she was close, her breathing quickening as she struggled to keep her eyes open. But I needed her to watch me. I wanted to stare at her beautiful gaze as I made her come.

Pressing my thumb against her clit was all it took for her to cry out, her whole body shaking around me as she came hard, gasping as she rode out the aftershocks of her orgasm.

She had barely come down from her high when I gripped her waist and pressed my thumb to her swollen clit.

“You ready to take my cock?” I asked, already knowing the answer as I slid my fingers out of her, unable to ignore the little whimper escaped her lips—like she already missed being full. But I was about to give her more.

She nodded, sitting up on her knees as I grabbed her waist, letting her pussy slide over me, taking in each inch by exquisite inch. Fuck, she was so warm, so inviting. Being inside of her was like coming home, and I wanted to be there over and over again.

“Are you gonna come again for me, Lexie? You gonna let me feel you soak my big cock?” I asked, gripping her waist harder and guiding her movements as she thrust with me.

“Yes... yes... YES,” her body shuddered on top of me as she cried out.

I had to hold on tightly to keep her from falling as I crashed down soon after, filling her with every last drop of my seed. She collapsed, her head resting on my chest, our hearts beating together in the same rapid rhythm.

We lay there, not saying a word, our breathing in sync as the water grew cold around us. In that moment, I never wanted to leave her. I knew Lexie was mine again—and this time, I wasn't letting her go.

We had a few long days ahead of us on the ranch, but I didn't care. She was worth every exhausted morning I would have.

Chapter Twenty-Four

RYDER

“Damn, sweetheart, I forgot how you looked in jeans and boots,” I whistled, a grin spreading at the corners of my mouth as she sashayed into the barn to get her horse.

My eyes slowly trailed down her body, drinking in the swell of her breast and the roundness of her hip.

“Don’t get me wrong, the skirts and heels have their purpose, but this.

” I licked my lips and bit the corner of my mouth before reaching out and grabbing her arm, pulling Lexie to me.

Lexie wrapped her arms around my neck and ground her hips against me.

“You better not keep that up, or we’ll be trying to catch up to the rest of the group.

” I moved my hands down to her ass and grabbed it as I rocked against her, my cock coming alive from the sight of her and having her against me.

“It’s not going to be very easy to ride with that little issue.”

“Well, get away from me, and I won’t have this issue.

It’s not little either.” I winked, and she let her head fall back, laughing.

She tried to push me away, but her arms were still locked around my neck.

“No, I’ll still have a problem because I’m going to watch you in the saddle and wish I was under you. ”

Someone cleared their throat from the door, and I froze as Ryder looked over my shoulder. “Morning Linc.” He nodded. A slight twinge of guilt rocketed through me as I stood here happier than I’d been in ages while he was dealing with his own heartbreak.

“Morning, you two,” Linc said gruffly. “It’s been a while since you’ve done this Lexie, you up for it?” He leaned against the stall wall and looked at me.

“It’s riding a horse. I’ve done that all my life.” She shrugged and tried desperately to be nonchalant about it, even though she knew she was going to be in over her head. The fact of the matter is, Linc wasn’t wrong; it had been years since she’d been on the back of a horse for this long.

Leading our horses out of the barn, I spotted Ruby and Sawyer standing by the round pen, watching the other kids get ready to ride.

“Hey, what’s up? It’s round-up day, and you both look sad.

” I knew they probably wanted to ride their horses, but this was going to be a long day in the saddle, and I didn’t feel confident that they were ready for this yet.

“They all have the same scarves. Even you and auntie have them.” Ruby looked at the ground and kicked at a small rock, sending it bouncing along the ground. That was not what I expected to hear.

“They’re called wild rags. Can you tell me what you think they mean?” I crouched

down between them and waited for an answer.

“Because if Sawyer and I have one like the rest of you, it means we belong here. Everyone that belongs here has one, but me and him.” Her little eyes welled with tears, and my heart broke again for these two kids that didn’t feel like this was their home yet.

The lump that formed in my throat almost made me choke.

“Ruby” Josie called, jumping up and down as my girl ran to hug her.

“Are you ready to go get the cows?” Josie asked excitedly.

Josie was Nash and Fallon’s oldest daughter; she’d turned three a few months ago, and she thought Ruby was her best friend.

Ruby was like a little mother, making sure Josie was where she was supposed to be and keeping her safe.

“Well, it’s about time you showed up, ready to go?” Kipp said as he walked out of his house, his words strained, but I was pretty sure Nora would have told him to be on his best behavior.

“We’ve been here for half an hour, and our horses are ready to go.

I’m pretty sure I saw yours in the stall munching on hay,” I shot back at him.

Cooper pulled Sawyer down the stairs, and they ran toward the fence.

The boys were the same age and in the same class in school.

We were already counting down the days until they would get into trouble.

“Any idea where the ranch wild rags got put?” I asked as I walked toward the porch steps. “And a new jacket.”

“In the attic, I think. Where we’ve always kept them,” he replied, nodding as he looked over at Lexie. “Come on, let’s see what we can find, and I guess you need a new one also.” I didn’t need Kipp to guide me to our merch, but I knew he’d have questions.

We walked silently up the hand-hewn wooden steps.

This part of the main house was the original home that his great-grandfather had built.

Pulling the string on the light, it sizzled to life.

I moved to the far wall and looked for the boxes that came from our supplier.

“What’s the deal?” Kipp asked as he crossed his arms and leaned against the wall.

“Ruby wants to know she belongs here and thinks that having a wild rag will make that happen. I’d never actually considered them anything but work wear, but if it makes her and Sawyer feel like they have a place here, I’m damn sure going to get her one.

” I looked around the attic for the boxes we kept them in, and Nash handed me three of them.

They had Ruby and Sawyer’s names embroidered on them, along with the ranch logo.

I looked up at him, my mind racing, but words weren't forming.

"Fallon ordered them the day you showed up here with the kids and Lexie. She'd been so mad that they were delayed, but they got here last week. There's a box for each of them." Nash's eyes softened, and I looked around at the men who'd been my friends and saviors when I'd needed them most.

"And how'd you lose your jacket?" Kipp arched a brow and tossed me a new one.

"She helped me work those cows the other morning and was cold. Apparently, it's hers now." I shrugged. It truly was that simple.

"Look, we've all been walking on eggshells since your wedding, and none of us are real happy about it. This isn't how we operate, so let's do this right now," Kipp said as he bounded over to the top of the stairs, blocking anyone from leaving.

"I thought she was your mortal enemy? And now you've up and re-married her out of the blue.

Ryder, something isn't adding up here. Dad saw your interaction only months ago, and he said if she'd been in the middle of the street, you probably wouldn't have stopped," Nash spoke first, crossing his arms and waiting for my answer.

"She was never my enemy," I grumbled as I grabbed another jacket in my size. "Look, things are different, okay." I grabbed the sheet and slung it back over the rack. "This time's different. We have a family now."

"We're happy for you, don't get me wrong, but you went through a year of hell after she left, man. We just really got you back," Kipp said, the pain in his eyes cutting me to my core.

“I get that you’re worried about me, but I’ve got this,” I said as I tried to push past the wall they’d built in front of me, but none of them moved.

“Fine, have it your way. I never stopped loving her, I shouldn’t have to tell any of you that.

So, when we were forced back together for the sake of the kids, I took it as a sign.

And you know I hate that bullshit, so it must have been meant to be.

I don’t know what this life will bring, but I do know I never dreamed that she’d be back, and we’d have kids to raise. ”

The guys all knew that Lexie couldn’t have kids.

It wasn’t something she’d brought up right away, but there was teasing about ranch babies one night, and she blurted it out to shut the guys up.

They all felt absolutely awful, but that was the end of the discussion about kids.

My four best friends were also fiercely protective of her, and when some well-meaning woman or nosy man would ask, they’d change the subject or flat-out tell people they were rude for asking.

I waited for someone to speak, but nobody did, they just cleared a path to the stairs. However, I did see a little more understanding in all their eyes.

“Ryder, we can see how happy you are with her and the kids, but you can’t blame us for checking in. And we are all really glad you’re both there for Ruby and Sawyer.” Kipp slapped me on the back, and I looked at the others.

A lump formed in my throat, but I wasn't about to let any of these fuckers see me emotional, so I headed for the stairs.

None of them moved to follow me, and I didn't care.

If they wanted to say more, I didn't need to hear it, because if they thought I didn't have the same worries about her leaving a million times a day, they were dumber than I thought.

"Ruby," I called as I walked out the front door.

The little girl came running, her blonde hair flying wildly around her.

Falling to my knees, I held up the scarf, and her eyes went wide as she saw her name on it.

"This is where you belong, no matter how you ended up here, I'm so proud you're here, and you're ours now.

"I tied it around her neck, and she wrapped me in a hug.

"Thanks, Uncle Ryder," she whispered.

"You need to thank Fallon; she got the ball rolling before I even thought of it." Ruby kissed my cheek before running over and wrapping Fallon in a hug. As I watched them, I caught Fallon's eye and could have sworn she had a tear in it.

Sawyer stood in front of me next, and I repeated the process. I'd barely even tied his tie, and he was on his way to Fallon. Standing, I brushed my knees off and held Lexie's out to her. "Can I get mine back?" I smirked, not letting on that I had another one tucked into my jacket pocket.

“No, I think I like yours more than mine.” She smirked, and I tied the one with her name around my neck.

“Now I belong to you.” I leaned over and quickly kissed her before she spun away from me.

“I have to go thank Fallon too.” She winked and walked away. Lexie held open her arms, and without hesitation, Fallon embraced her. They’d been cool to one another since the night Lexie drove her home from the bar, but I was hoping maybe the ice around this ranch was about to break apart.

The guys walked up beside me, and Griff shook his head. “Didn’t think it was possible for you to be more gone for her than you were the first time, but I guess I was wrong.” He slung his arm around me and grinned. “It’s good man.” All the others nodded in agreement.

“Took you fuckers long enough to come around,” I said as I pushed Griff off me. “But thank you. As much as I hate to admit it, I needed you all to be the ones to keep things in check these last few weeks.” I didn’t look at them and just waited for a response.

“Yeah, like any of us could have done that.” Nash laughed as he slapped me on the back and headed toward his wife.

Chapter Twenty-Five

LEXIE

“ A ll right, let’s head out,” Kipp yelled as he turned in his saddle to look back at everyone.

“Auntie Lexie, how often does this happen?” Ruby asked, leaning back against me.

Sawyer wanted to start the round-up with Ryder, while Ruby hoped to ride alongside Josie and Jake and Tayla’s daughters, Libby and Sky, on the ATV.

But riding on horseback held more appeal for her.

I promised Ruby she could ride with Josie anytime she wanted.

“Round-up only happens in the fall, when we bring the cows closer to feed through the winter. But we’ll have to trail some to spring pastures, so there’s always something happening,” I explained.

“Good, this is going to be fun.” I tightened my arm around her, hoping she was right. These days were long and often tense, but usually fun.

The Five rode side-by-side, nudging their horses as they made their way up the road. This round-up was officially underway.

Ruby chatted about everything we passed.

“Auntie Lex, did someone plant all these trees? Is that a lake? Can we go swimming there sometime? Wait, where’s Josie?”

Oh, there she is.” Ruby waved to her friend.

“I want to ride with her now. Is that okay?” she asked.

I nodded, pulled on the reins to stop my horse, and dismounted before helping her down.

Wes stopped, and Ruby climbed in beside Josie after giving Gwen a hug.

Griff’s parents had tagged along for the day. They’d head back in the early afternoon, but we figured it would be easier on the kids to have somewhere for them to be other than the back of a horse. “Be good.”

“I will,” she giggled, and I headed back to Doc, who was patiently waiting to keep going. Settling myself in the saddle, I softly nudged his sides, and we were on our way again.

“Seriously, is there anything hotter than the Five leading the way?” Nora said as she rode up beside me, grinning like a lovestruck schoolgirl.

“They are something,” I laughed. To be honest, I was thinking the same thing.

“What’s so funny?” Elle asked, joining Nora and me.

The thing about this group—it wasn’t some organized trail ride.

In all the years I’d helped, we rarely rode in a line.

If someone wanted to let their horse run, they did, catching up later.

Today was going to be a long one, and conversations on horseback had always been one of my favorite parts.

“The Magnificent Five, up there. It’s hot,” Nora said, pointing ahead as she replied to Elle.

Elle burst out laughing, and for a second, I thought she might fall off her horse.

“Fallon, get up here!” she yelled over her shoulder.

Fallon rode up beside Elle, and just like that, she smiled. Not the forced kind either—the real thing. I hadn’t seen that in a while.

“Look at them, showing off, pretending they’re a posse. We need to show them how it’s done, I think.” Elle shifted her gaze between all of us.

“Go,” Fallon said, and we all kicked our horses into a run.

We were a good distance behind the guys, but they’d be able to hear us coming.

They all turned to watch us ride together, and we split apart as we got close to them.

Fallon and Elle went left, and Nora and I went right.

I caught Ryder’s eye and gave him a wink as I rode past.

Wind whipped through my hair, and I was glad I’d pushed my hat down low on my head before we moved, or Gwen would have had to pick it up on the way past. When we were around them, we formed a line again and slowed our horses.

The urge to turn and see what they were doing was strong, but none of us looked back; we just slowed and laughed with one another.

“You still ride better than I do, Lex,” Fallon laughed as she leaned ahead to look over at me.

We competed for years on the local rodeo circuit.

If it wasn't her at the top of the leaderboard, it was me, but she had more passion to keep going.

Once I finished high school, I was done, and she continued because she was a few years younger than me.

“I highly doubt that. It's been a long time since I've ridden all out like that.” Hell, it's been a long time since I rode, but I didn't mention that.

“Lex, I owe you an apology,” Fallon said as she switched places with Elle and rode alongside me. “I had no right to say the things I did.” She held out her hand, and I took it. We didn't stay like that long because the guys rode up behind us, and Ryder nudged his way between us.

“Everything good?” he asked quietly, and I nodded.

“Yeah, damn, Ryder, what did you think I was going to do? Pull her off her horse? Men are so dramatic,” she said, leaning forward and rolling her eyes.

“Are you going to have to work at the bar often?” Nora asked as we all shifted back to boys separated from the girls.

“I shouldn't have to. I don't love it, and Lydia respects that, so I'll just help her out

when she needs it.” I hated personal questions, but this one was an easy one.

“What about kids? Will you and Ryder have any of your own?” Elle asked.

She was so sweet, and from the tone of her voice, it was a completely innocent question.

Glancing over at Ryder, who was still behind me, I was sure he’d heard the question.

With a slight nod, which unless you were looking at him, you would have missed, he gave me the strength to answer her honestly.

“I can’t have kids. I’ve known it since I was sixteen.”

“Oh, Lexie, I’m sorry. I’m such an ass for even asking.” Her brows furrowed, and I wasn’t quite sure if she was going to start crying.

“It’s taken a bit, but I’ve come to terms with it.

” Nodding, I smiled as her worry eased slightly.

But I was a big liar. I hadn’t come to terms with anything.

Ryder was right, I really needed to talk to someone, but I wasn’t sure I had it in me.

I avoided looking back in Ryder’s direction because I didn’t want to see the pain in his eyes that I knew would be there.

The rest of our ride went well, and the tension finally eased after Elle’s question. Ryder finally stopped staring holes into my head as we got closer to the cattle.

While the guys took care of the horses, the girls and I set up camp and chased the kids all over the meadow. They'd been tired after a long day on the trail, so they were happy to be able to run around. Wes and Gwen headed back to their place. We'd see them in a few days before we headed back.

"I can't believe how good Ruby and Sawyer are doing," Nora said as she and I set up the area where we were keeping the coolers of food.

"It's like they've been here their entire lives.

Cooper absolutely loves having Sawyer in his class.

He comes home and tells stories of their day, and I'm pretty sure that teacher is ready to pull her hair out at the end of the day. "

"You couldn't pay me enough to be in that classroom," I agreed, because if there was mischief to get into, you could be sure Sawyer and Cooper would be leading it.

"I'm glad you're here, Lexie. I don't know what went on before, and I'm sorry that Kipp's being such an ass, but I'm glad to have you as a friend." Her warm, genuine smile made me take a deep breath before I smiled back at her.

"I appreciate your friendship, Nora, and as far as Kipp goes, he kind of has a right to be that way. There's a lot of things I need to do before I earn back his trust." I shrugged.

This was Ryder's story, and maybe one day he'd be willing to tell it, but I certainly wasn't going to be the one to share it with everyone.

And as angry as I'd been at Kipp, I can totally see his point.

If I had to witness the pain my best friend went through, I'd be pretty mad too, I think.

Chapter Twenty-Six

RYDER

We rode through the valley in groups to make sure the cows looked good.

Sawyer hopped up with me, and Linc took Ruby with him.

Laughter never stopped with these two kids, and I loved watching them explore all the things I'd taken for granted after all the time I'd been doing this.

Tomorrow was going to be a long day, with an early start and a late night by the time we got the cows back home.

But these were the days that created lasting memories.

A blazing fire crackled and popped, sending sparks shooting into the air, and I watched them fall as I waited for Lexie to come sit with me.

The night had cooled off more than I'd expected, but the fire managed to keep the chill away.

Lexie took a seat beside me and reached for the cup I'd poured whiskey into.

"Kids go down?" I asked quietly as I wrapped my arm around her shoulders, and she snuggled into my side.

“Yeah, they were exhausted. We’ll be lucky if they’re up on time tomorrow.” She laughed quietly. Stealthily, she reached over, took the cup from me, and sipped the amber liquid. With her face illuminated by the fire, I couldn’t help but chuckle at the not-so-innocent look on her face.

Stories around the fire were one of my favorite times during the fall roundup. You’d think we’d been together so long that we’d know all of them by now, but the guys still managed to pull out some new ones.

“She still does it,” Linc said with a chuckle as he looked at Lexie and me.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, tightening my arms around my wife.

“You were telling a story. She snuggled into you and fell asleep almost instantly.”

“I’m not asleep,” she mumbled as she shifted closer to me.

“And it’s really hard not to when I’m so cozy.

” Laughter filtered around the fire. Something had changed over the last few days, and the guys were much more at ease around Lexie.

It was closer to how it had been the first time around when they’d welcomed her with open arms. Kipp and Nash had grown up with her, and I knew how they treated her when she came back hurt.

Whatever happened earlier in the ride between her and Fallon had melted the ice that had formed between them. This was how life was supposed to be.

“We never made it through anything without her falling asleep,” Nash added, glancing over at Fallon and smiling at her. “Lex, what was your excuse for always

falling asleep?” he asked, trying to hold back his laughter.

“I told you I’m too cozy. And I mean, who wouldn’t be?

I’m wrapped up by this big bear whose body temperature runs fifty degrees too hot, and when he puts his arm around me, I’m at home.

” My heart stopped as she said the words, and I felt her hold her breath.

Had she just said I was her home? Was it part of the act, or had she really meant it?

“It’s one of the things I missed the most while we were apart.

” Lexie looked up at me through sleepy eyes and smiled.

I leaned back against the log, pulling Lexie to me.

When the day caught up with everyone and they slowly wandered to their tents, it was just the two of us in the glow of the fading fire. “Since we’re alone now,” she whispered as she moved out of my arms and shifted to straddle me. Lexie sat on my lap and wrapped her arms around my neck.

Slowly, I dragged my hand up her back and tangled my fingers in her hair as I brought her head toward mine.

With a slight tilt of her head, she brushed her lips against mine and then smiled as I kissed her.

Wrapping my arm around her waist, I shifted her body so she was flush against me.

But I couldn’t help letting my fingers go lower, feeling her firm ass beneath her jeans.

She squealed, then quickly bit down on her lip, looking up at me. “Ryder, we’re in public.”

I laughed but kept my voice low as I whispered in her ear.

“Sweetheart, there’s no one else around.

I don’t force anyone to leave their tents.

” I didn’t wait for her response as I took my free hand, trailing it up on her shirt, feeling the lace of her bra underneath my fingertips.

She gasped as my thumb brushed over her nipple, already peaking and ready for me.

“Ryder,” she breathed but didn’t stop me.

I used one hand to rub her full breast, the other still tangled in her hair, but slowly freed my hand from her tangled hair and ran my fingertips over her shoulder, down her breast, cupping it in my palm before dragging my hand to the front of her jeans.

I could feel her warm pussy even through the fabric, and I popped open the button on her jeans.

I’d never been so glad she didn’t wear a belt.

She kissed me hard, moaning into my mouth as she pushed her pussy against my hardening cock, as if she couldn’t wait to get off on it.

I was ready to oblige my needy wife, but it would be my fingers first. Unzipping her pants and slipping my hand between her skin and panties, my fingers found an already very wet pussy. She gasped into my mouth, trying to keep quiet but failed

miserably when I pressed on her clit.

I grinned, giving her one last quick kiss before removing my hand and lifting her off my lap.

Pulling her jeans down, I needed more access than leaving them at her knees.

“Take them off,” I whispered huskily. There wasn’t any need for acknowledgment other than her standing and stepping out of her pants.

Shifting, I lay flat on the ground and motioned for her to approach me. “Sit on my face,” I growled.

“No, not out here,” she whispered.

“Wife, I told you to sit your fucking pussy on my face. Now.” I snapped my fingers, and she looked around into the darkness, realizing I wasn’t joking.

Even if someone walked out of their tent, we’d be ignored.

Not a single word would be said to her about it.

Now, if it was just us guys, I’d never hear the end of it—but I didn’t care. I was about to eat out Lexie.

Lexie stepped over my legs and lowered herself onto her knees. “God, I love when you kneel for me,” I said as I ran my hand up her bare legs and helped her shift above me. I knew she wanted this as much as I did.

I wrapped my arms around the back of her legs and opened her wet folds. “Ryder,” she gasped but didn’t stop me, her fingers going to my hair, tugging it lightly as I

blew over her clit, just before my lips met her warm pussy.

I started sucking gently, but this wasn't going to last long, I wanted to devour her and taste her on my lips for the rest of the night.

“Ryder, you need to stop, I heard something.” But her words were in direct contrast to her body.

She lowered herself further onto my face and moaned.

God, the sounds she makes have my cock hard as iron—and being confined is getting more painful by the second.

Lexie might have wanted to stop, but once I hooked a finger inside of her, rolling my tongue in the same rhythm, all of that went out the window as she bucked her hips to meet my awaiting face.

She arched her back and shifted her pelvis, trying to get closer to me.

She struggled, trying to hide her moans so we didn't wake everyone else up, but as her thighs shook around me, I knew she was close to exploding.

Quickly, I pulled away as she let out a deep breath.

“What are you doing?” she asked, almost growling with frustration.

With a quick movement, I moved her off me and stood up before offering her my hand.

Pulling her up to my side, I gave her a lingering kiss.

She'd confessed to me one time, years ago, that there was nothing hotter than me lazily kissing her after I'd had my mouth on her.

So, I drew the kiss out as her racing heart pounded against my chest. "Let's get in the tent so I can fuck you properly."

She bent down and grabbed her jeans, panties, and boots as I pulled her toward the tent.

We fumbled in a flurry, throwing our clothes off between kisses.

Thankfully, she didn't have much left on, but I made the rookie mistake of not taking my boots off before I pulled down my jeans, and now I was stuck, ready to topple over.

Ripping my mouth from hers, I pulled off my boots and freed my legs.

Lexie lay on the sleeping bags while I tried to get undressed.

Neither of us turned on the lantern. When I stood over Lexie, the glow of the moonlight came in from the slightly open tent door, and she looked even more beautiful this way.

The light highlighted her smile and her gorgeous breasts as she waited for me.

"Spread your legs," I demanded, and she slid them across the nylon material, allowing me access to her wet pussy. Dropping to my knees, I leaned over her, my cock pinned between us, making me ache to make the small shift and dive deep in her.

Gripping onto her hips, I guided myself inside of her, letting her get adjusted to my

size as she moaned softly, her hands on my chest to steady herself.

Her beautiful tits were right in my face, and I couldn't help letting my tongue swirl around one hardened bud then the other.

She moaned, thrusting against me, moving so perfectly.

“Did you actually mean you were home?” I asked while we both remained still.

“What are you talking about?” she asked, trying to wiggle her hips, but I held her firmly.

“Out at the fire, when you were in my arms, you said you were home. Did you mean that?” Grinding into her, I needed to know her answer.

“Yes, Ryder, you're my home. You've always been my home. The kids, you, me, and all of us together are where I'm meant to be. Forever.”

Forever. She was mine. I looked into her smiling face and grabbed her ass, guiding her movements—slow, then fast— as I leaned down and circled my tongue over her peaked nipples, keeping time with the rhythm of her hips.

With every thrust, a piece of my heart mended. The hurt between us floated away like the embers from the fire drifting toward the sky before burning out.

“I'm trying to be quiet, but you're making it hard,” she whispered.

“I can't help it when you've made me so fucking hard,” I growled, my fingers digging into the meat of her ass as I spread her cheeks, letting her fully take my cock.

She gasped again, looking down so our eyes met in the moonlight.

I kissed her, swallowing her moans as I fucked her harder, taking every inch of her wet pussy.

The sound of our sex echoed in the tent, and I thought she would stop me, but instead, she kissed me harder as her body shook hard, her wetness dripping down my balls. Fuck, I loved when she did that.

I sat up slowly, pulling her so she sat on my lap, her breasts bouncing between us as I continued thrusting in her, using my grip on her ass to move her beautiful body against mine.

“Oh, Ryder,” she moaned into my mouth.

I loved the beautiful sounds she made for me. I could have fucked her all night long. Being connected with her was so fucking beautiful. Hearing her say my name over and over drove me wild, sliding her down so her back was on the sleeping bags, our bodies still connected.

I didn’t even have to say a word, and it was like we knew each other’s next moves as she lifted her legs, pressing her ankles against my shoulders.

“Fuck, baby,” I murmured, sliding my hand between us to massage her clit with my thumb as I rocked my body against her.

“That’s it. I feel you, come for me again. Come all over this big cock,” I growled.

She grasped the back of my thighs as I slammed into her, filling her up to the hilt as she practically melted into the sheets.

I wanted to hear her cry out my name again. I needed it.

“Come on, sweetheart. Say my name,” I murmured, leaning as close as possible to her.

“Ryder...Ryder...RYDER,” she practically screamed, clamping down hard on her bottom lip as she came all over my cock, the wetness soaking into the sleeping bags below us.

“Fuck, Lexie,” I growled, only taking a few more pumps before I spilled into her, her wet pussy milking every last drop before I collapsed onto her sweaty chest, peppering her nipples with light kisses.

We stayed together like that, our bodies still connected as I continued to give her lazy kisses over her sweaty skin. It could have been minutes or hours before Lexie finally spoke. “Do you think the others heard us?”

I laughed. “I hope so. Then everyone here knows that you’re mine.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

LEXIE

“Where are Ruby and Sawyer?” I yelled as I ran back to the fire, the sun peeking above the mountains around us.

“They were just in the tent,” Kipp said as he stood brushing the dirt off his pants.

“Well, they’re not there. Oh god. I’ve lost them.

We haven’t even had them for a month, and they’re gone.

We had to fake this marriage just to get them, and now they’re missing.

And even though it was supposed to be fake, I’m completely in love with my husband, and all I want to do is tell him, but I’m afraid, and oh my god, why am I still talking?” I rambled as I collapsed on my knees.

Kipp knelt down beside me and put his heavy hand on my back. “They can’t have gone too far; we’ll find them.” He helped me stand and turned me to face him, bending over so he could look me in the eyes. “As far as the marriage goes, you have to tell him how you feel.”

“You don’t even like me.”

“This you, I like. The honest you and the one that has figured out that he’s worth it no

matter what you think life should look like.”

“Kipp, I’m so scared.” He hugged me tightly.

“Let’s go find the kids,” he said softly as we turned toward the tent they should have been sleeping in.

“What’s wrong?” Ryder asked as he rode back into camp and saw Kipp and I saddling our horses.

“Ruby and Sawyer. They’re gone.” I looked up at him and watched his face morph from worried to terrified.

Kipp, go wake up the others. Someone needs to stay here with the other kids, but we need to fan out.” He threw his leg over the saddle and hopped off his horse. Ryder grabbed me and held me tightly as I cried into his chest. “We’ll find them.”

His words should have calmed me, but they didn’t. How did we even start looking for them in this huge area? They could be anywhere. “I can’t lose them Ry.”

“I know, sweetheart, we’ll find them.”

Kipp came back with Nash, Griff, and Linc all in various states of undress, but they went straight to their horses and got ready to ride.

“Elle will stay behind with the kids,” Griff said as he looked over his shoulder at his pregnant wife.

It was probably smarter for her to stay rather than ride into god knows what.

Even though she was great on a horse, this might end up too dangerous.

“We’re ready,” Nora and Fallon said as they put their hats on their heads and mounted their horses that the guys had gotten ready.

“Stay with Elle. Fire two shots if they come back, so we know to turn around. The sound will echo through this valley, and we’ll hear it,” Ryder said as he cupped my face between his hands.

“No, I want to come with you.”

“I need you here in case they just wander back, and Elle needs someone with her.” I glanced over at the woman who’d become one of my best friends and nodded.

“I love you,” I said quietly.

“God, sweetheart, your timing could have been better with that one. I love you with all my heart.” He leaned down and kissed me. It was far too quick and felt like hours all at the same time.

“Bring our kids home.”

“I will.” He took one last, slow, lingering kiss before mounting his horse again, and the eight of them rode away. I stood there watching them until they were mere specks on the horizon, wrapping my arms around myself.

“Come on, all we can do is wait. Do you know that they had to find Parker when he was taken?” I turned to Elle and shook my head.

“Want to know why the Hays brothers aren’t a problem around town anymore?

” She smirked, and I nodded. That family had caused my father more grey hair over the years, with people wanting to press charges and then retracting them.

They hadn't been missed, and in all actuality, I'd almost forgotten about them.

Arm in arm, we walked back to the fire and sat down in the camping chairs we'd brought along.

Elle chatted away about how Griff had found Parker, and she had no doubt the crew would find wherever Ruby and Sawyer had wandered off to. A branch cracked behind me, and I turned and peered into the bush, but I couldn't see anything, so I returned my attention to Elle.

"How did you justify what The Five did while being a lawyer?" Elle asked as she handed me a cup of coffee.

"Mostly, I tried not to think about it. It helped that I wasn't in criminal law, even though I would have been the first one to step up to defend them.

"Letting my head lull against the back of the chair, I looked over at the woman who had accepted me without hesitation.

"They never went after good people, so I told myself one more scumbag gone didn't matter.

Saying it out loud now, it sounds like a pretty weak excuse—but at the time, it's how I justified looking the other way"

"Were you ever scared?"

"Only every time they went out for a job." I took a sip of coffee and thought back to all the times Ryder left a note on the pillow or woke me up with a kiss to say he was leaving.

During our first marriage, we spent so much time apart.

Now I found myself wondering how it would work with him home all the time.

“Ryder was good at checking in with me, so I didn’t worry as much.

It’s funny, but I think I worried less about him when he was out doing the security stuff than him being up in the mountains checking cattle.

“I call it super spy shit.” Elle laughed, and I joined in. “Griff wound up in my bedroom without me even hearing him when we first got together. Scared the crap out of me.” She shook her head and took a drink of coffee.

“That’s a good name for it,” I agreed.

“Too bad you two cackling hens didn’t pay more attention to those men of yours.” A man’s voice spoke up from behind me. Launching myself out of my chair, the chair toppled over, and immediately, Elle stood by my side.

“I’m sure the Montana State Bar will be more than delighted to hear you allowed your husband to conduct illegal activity. Or I guess I should say your fake husband since your marriage is a sham.”

“What’s he talking about, Lexie?” Elle whispered, and I shook my head. Now was not the time to get into it.

“Nothing about my marriage is a lie. Ryder and I are happily married.” My voice didn’t waver, and while we might have gotten married to satisfy Hank and Anita’s will, it was just the push we needed to get back together.

I think Anita knew we were both too stubborn to admit we’d made a mistake and

forced us to see it.

“That’s not what I overheard you tell the boss man earlier. And it’s not what those kids said when we asked them.” My blood ran cold at the mention of the kids.

“Where are they?”

“On their way back to the woman who should rightfully have them. Anita’s sweet mother will pick them up shortly.” He glanced at his watch, and I saw something move in the bushes this time. Ruby’s pink hoodie. They weren’t gone. I needed to get word to the five, but how could I do that?

My gun was tucked into the holster at my side, and he obviously hadn’t noticed it. Pulling it out, I raised it in the air and fired two quick shots before pointing my weapon at Desmond Tucker.

“Sweet mother, my ass. She’s a tyrant. I’ll ask you again: where are my kids?” There was a hitch in my voice, and I hated that he caught. His eyebrow shot up, and a slimy grin spread across his face.

“You caused a lot of trouble for me showing up here, you know. I had everything in my grasp, one stupid rancher to buy out and I’d be well on my way to making this entire place a tourist town.”

“Guess it’s a good thing I came home,” I said, snarkiness filling my words.

Desmond fumbled as he tried to retrieve his gun from wherever he was keeping it, but I never lowered mine.

If he wanted to go out this way, I’d be the one pulling the trigger first. I might have been a city girl for the last three years, but I’d been trained by the five; there wasn’t

anything I couldn't hit.

"Rufus, bring them out," he barked, and a man stood up from the bushes, pushing Ruby and Sawyer ahead of him.

"Auntie," Ruby cried when she saw me.

"Hey, my girl, everything is fine. We've got it under control.

"I looked around Tucker and saw Sawyer clinging to Ruby.

Off in the distance, I could hear thunder, not from a storm, but from seven riders galloping full speed back to camp, who would rain down terror if I could hold this man off long enough.

As the seconds ticked by, I stood in a showdown with the man who'd caused more problems for a lifetime around this county.

"Ruby, Sawyer, please go and stand with Elle." I said, keeping my voice eerily calm. When the guys rode back in, I didn't need them anywhere near Tucker or his man.

Tucker moved his weapon in their direction. "I don't think they should move." Blinding rage flowed through me as I took a step closer to the man, and for a split second, I saw the fear in his eyes.

"Kids, do as I say." My voice didn't sound like mine, and they both ran toward Elle, who pulled them over to the tent where the other kids slept. I took more steps toward the man who'd terrified my kids until the barrel of my gun was pressed against his forehead.

"Give me one reason I shouldn't put you down right now like the sack of shit you

are?”

“He’ll kill you before you can get to him.” Tucker gestured to Rufus behind him.

“Don’t count on it.” Elle’s song-like voice came from behind me as she loaded her rifle and pointed it at the other man, who was suddenly taking steps backward.

This was obviously not what he had expected.

“Kids are in the tent with Parker. He’ll keep them in there until we tell him to come out.

” The calmness of her voice should have terrified me, but it only made me more determined to end this nightmare.

Shouts broke out all around us, and I saw a flash of silver before searing pain ripped through my arm and my side. Stumbling back, I lowered my gun for a brief moment. Tucker seized the opportunity to press his gun to my head.

I was in trouble.

At that moment, a large gray horse sped by, and a man leaped off, tackling Tucker and sending his weapon flying. As I sank to the ground, Nora was behind me, breaking my fall.

“Fallon, get the kit,” Elle yelled as she ripped my shirt open. “I need to lay you down, Lexie.” Gently, she lowered me to the ground and pulled open the snaps of my shirt while pressing her hand against my ribs.

Fallon skidded to her knees beside me and opened a red bag. The men shouted, and someone lifted my head and set it in their lap. “I knew you’d hear it.” My words were

weak, and I thought I smiled, but I wasn't sure.

"Sweetheart, you have to fight. Ruby, Sawyer, and I need you. We've finally got a family. This isn't the time to leave us, understand?"

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm just in so much pain." Grimacing as Fallon pressed on my shoulder, I let out a groan when Elle pressed on my side.

"Medevac is its way. ETA fifteen minutes," someone shouted.

"Nora, I need you to grab that bag of saline, spike it, and run it through the tubing. Make sure there are no air bubbles, and hold the bag higher than the end of the line." When I opened my eyes, I watched Elle rip open a package with her teeth and put another gauze pad on my side.

How lucky this group was to have a nurse now, I thought as I gazed up at the blue sky.

Ryder ran his hand over my hair, gentle like he was petting me, and the world fell silent around us. I could hear the murmurs of people talking, but I couldn't make out what they were saying.

"Lexie, for the love of god, stay with me. I can't handle another person on this ranch needing CPR." Elle's voice was clear, and I looked up at Ryder, whose eyes were filled with fear and tears.

"I'm not going anywhere. I told you that already." Ryder leaned over and kissed my forehead. "I don't think it's that bad." I tried to sit up, but he gently pressed a hand to my good shoulder, guiding me down against him.

"Pretty sure your law degree doesn't override my nursing one," Elle said without

stopping what she was doing.

“Are you saying it’s bad? Guess we should have asked Jake to come with us.

” I glanced over at Elle. “Since he’s a doctor and his degree would override yours and mine.

” I smiled when that made her stop whatever she was doing and glare up at me.

A rough chuckle escaped me, and even though it hurt, I got Elle to crack a smile.

“You got lucky, and I think you’re just in shock, but I really don’t want you moving around until the medevac gets here, okay?”

“Told you it wasn’t bad.” I looked up at Ryder and smiled.

“But if it’s okay with all of you, I’m going to pass out shortly.

” The adrenaline in my body was waning, and I was acutely aware of the pain along my left side.

There was a buzzing in my ears, and I could hear people talking around me, but it was muffled.

As I looked up at Ryder, the rest of the world faded to black except for his face.

I relaxed back into Ryder, and the world went quiet.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

RYDER

“I’d really like to stop having to come to this place,” I grumbled as I paced the small waiting room of the hospital.

The lights in the waiting room were harsh, and I thought back to being here only months ago with Griff.

Thankfully, this situation didn’t seem as dire; all we had to do was wait for the surgery to be over.

“Son, you need to eat something,” Griff’s father, Wes, said as he put his hand on my shoulder and led me back to the chairs. “There’s nothing you can do, pacing the floor wearing yourself out.” With a slight nudge, I dropped into the chair and took the sandwich Gwen handed to me.

With the cattle still out in the meadow and the camp still set up, I’d jumped in the helicopter with Lexie. Kipp had contacted Phil, and he was on his way with the ATV to get Ruby and Sawyer. I glanced at my watch and hoped they were on their way here.

The sandwich tasted bland, and I wasn’t sure if it was because it was hospital food or the fact that nothing would feel right until I knew she was safe.

“Ryder?” Lydia said as she and Lexie’s mom ran into the waiting room. Dropping my

sandwich back into the container, I stood, and they both ran into my arms. Hugging them tightly, I tried to find the words to tell them what was happening, but I didn't have any.

When I let them go, Helen embraced Gwen, and we all took a seat.

Fumbling through the explanation, I watched Helen's color drain from her face, while Lydia looked like she wanted to burn the world down.

Those two sisters might have their issues, but they'd take on anyone who dared to hurt the other.

"Where's Tucker?" Helen asked, her voice low and so reminiscent of Lexie's when she was arguing a case. Maybe she didn't get her tenacity just from her dad after all.

"Dead, out in the meadow." I shrugged. "I'm sure the guys have dealt with him and his lackey." I shouldn't have said anything, but we weren't trying to hide this. The piece of shit kidnapped two kids, my kids, and shot my wife. There was no way I was letting him live.

"Good," she said flatly. "Do we need to go after Violet also? How is she tangled up in all this?" Helen leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees. Damn, I didn't know she'd had this side to her.

"I think I'll let Nash figure that out."

"We used to be best friends, you know." She leaned back in the chair, frowning as she shifted.

"Vi and I were inseparable—until she got together with Fred. Then it was the three of us, with Fred always tagging along. Someone in town even asked once if he was

dating both of us, since we were never apart.” Helen looked out the window, and I imagined she was lost in those simpler days, back when life wasn’t so tangled and she still had her best friend.

“I never forgave her for treating Fred and Nash so poorly. Then when she left them, I washed my hands of her.” Helen stood and paced around the room.

“Those men didn’t deserve her leaving. They did everything she demanded of them, and she turned into a woman I didn’t know.

She brought this on all of us, and I’ll never forgive her.

” Helen stared into my soul, and I wondered what more she knew about all of this.

“Mr. Saffort.” Hearing my name startled me, and I jumped to my feet and basically ran to the doctor standing in the doorway.

“Your wife was very lucky, whoever shot at her had very bad aim, and she was lucky there was a nurse on scene. One of her arteries was nicked, but Elle dressed her wounds and got the bleeding stopped, I would guess, before the helicopter even got her.”

He looked down at the clipboard in his hands before looking back at me. “She’ll be sore for a while, but she’s got a clean bill of health.”

“Thank you, doctor.” I extended my hand, and he shook it.

I really hope I won’t have to see anyone from the Diamond for a while. You lot are giving me more grey hair than I can handle.

“Well, I have a feeling this is the last of it.” I replied just before he walked away,

nodding.

“She’s going to be okay,” Helen sighed from behind me, and to be honest, I’d forgotten she’d been standing there. When I turned, I watched Lexie’s mom sink into the chair behind her, and Lydia wrapping her arms around her.

“How is she?” Faith asked as she ran toward Lydia. The two women embraced, and Lydia broke down in tears. “Shh, it’s okay, she’s strong, she’s going to be fine. I know it.” Faith tilted her head, and questions filled her eyes.

“She’ll be fine. It will be a few weeks recovery, but she was lucky.” I watched relief fill Faith’s face. Moving to where Helen sat, I took the spot beside her as she observed Lydia and Faith together.

“I have Hank and Anita to thank for that, too.” She reached for my hand and held it tightly. “Both my girls are happy, and it’s because of them.” I closed my eyes and sighed. Helen wasn’t wrong. Thanks to them, I had Lexie back, and Lydia had a budding relationship with Faith.

“My heart breaks for Ruby and Sawyer, but it’s also at ease with my girls home again.

And you back with the family like you should have been all along.

” Her sweet smile made me anxious, which was a strange reaction to her comment.

My leg bounced, and I felt the need to get out of this enclosed space, but I couldn’t leave until I saw her. I needed to see her.

She was my future, my past, and everything in between.

I wanted to make love to her every night for the rest of our lives.

We needed to be able to wander the farm at night after the kids went to bed or walk through the orchard when the trees were in bloom.

Thanks to everything falling into place today, we'd get that opportunity.

"I need to take a walk. Lydia, text me when we can see her, please." I abruptly let go of Helen's hand and headed for the hallway.

"Ryder?" Lydia called from behind me.

"I'll be in the building; I just need to move." Whatever look I had on my face just made her nod, and I walked away.

It seemed unfair that the sun was still high in the sky. This day had already felt like it should be almost over. To my left was the chapel, and to my right, the nursing station. I'd never felt drawn to chapels, so I walked into the outpatient unit and waited at the desk.

"Mr. Saffort, can I do something for you?" the woman said, smiling but still looking rather uncomfortable. When she turned her full attention to me, her face blanched as she looked at my shirt. Shit, I had Lexie's blood all over me.

"This isn't mine." I didn't need to tell her that.

She knew Lexie was in surgery. She's the one who got me to sign the papers.

It wasn't exactly the truth but explaining that to her would have been way more than she wanted.

“Is there any way I could talk to someone? Not a doctor, just someone?” Talking to someone who wasn’t my usual therapist would have been a hard no for me, but I could feel the darkness hovering just in the background.

“I think we do. Just let me check.” She smiled sweetly and typed on her keyboard. “Give me five minutes, and the social worker will be right up.” She smiled sweetly, and I nodded my thanks. Pacing the hallway, had five minutes always taken this long?

“Mr. Saffort,” the woman spoke and smiled at me, my disheveled clothing not making her flinch. Let’s talk.” I followed her into an office, and she pointed at a chair before she grabbed her pen and notepad. I stood and waited for her to take her seat. I might be in a spiral, but I was a gentleman.

“Start whenever and wherever you want,” she said softly.

I hesitated for a moment, and then the last two months flowed from me.

Even though I’d been talking to my regular therapist, I felt like I needed to get it all off my chest again.

Bottling things up wasn’t going to make things easier, and this story seemed like it needed the full explanation.

The social worker didn’t say anything; she just let me talk.

“Everything was perfect last night,” I said quietly. “She was home. Finally home—with me. She told me she loved me while we were looking for the kids. And then this.” I paused, jaw tight. “Why is it that disaster happens when everything seems to have fallen into place?”

I ran my hands through my hair and stood, staring out the window. We were high up—no one could see in—but I stared out at the mountains anyway, needing the distance. “I keep wondering if we have a future. If she’s really going to be okay.”

The woman’s voice was calm. “Earlier, you mentioned an all-consuming darkness. How does the darkness feel now?”

“Less than when I walked in,” I said with a nervous chuckle.

She nodded, scribbling something down before glancing back up at me. “My suggestion? Talk to your regular therapist more often—maybe even twice a week—until this darkness dissipates. And I hope it does, once life calms down for you.”

She paused, meeting my eyes. “Your family is very lucky, Ryder. You’re willing to do the work it takes to make you the man you want to be for them. That’s commendable and not an easy step for most men.”

I’d never thought of asking for help three years ago as something commendable, but I’d seen too many men ignore their mental health to the detriment of themselves and their families.

I had a family now. I had so much to live for⁷.

And if talking to someone was what it took to hold onto that, I’d do it for the rest of my life.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I almost forgot why I’d been there.

“I hate to bolt, and please don’t take it personally, but my wife’s awake.

” We both stood and shook hands just before I rushed out of her office.

It was only then that I realized I'd missed six texts from Lydia.

I was shocked she hadn't tracked me down, to be honest.

Running through the hallway, I dodged people and pushed open the set of double doors with such force that they bounced off the door stoppers.

Of course, her room was at the end of the hall.

I didn't think running would be appreciated, but my long strides cleared the distance in no time.

I opened the door to her room and stood there, looking at my wife's dark brown eyes staring back at me.

"Where have you been?" Lydia demanded. "We've been trying to reach you for half an hour."

"Lydia, leave him alone. He never left my side." Her voice was soft, and she sounded exhausted.

"Lexie, you can't be serious. He's been gone."

"Lydia, I'm warning you I will get out of this bed and kick your ass into the middle of next week if you don't drop this.

" She'd basically ripped her eyes from me and glared at her sister.

"Actually, everyone out, I need to talk to Ryder," Lexie demanded.

Lydia's mouth gaped open like a fish, and Helen grabbed her hand and dragged her

out of the room.

“You were talking to someone.” It wasn’t a question. She knew exactly what I needed to do.

“Yeah.” I nodded before taking a seat on the edge of her bed.

“And did it help?” She brushed her fingers over my hand.

The intravenous tubing was looped over her hand, and there was Betadine on her chin, likely from them having to deal with her shoulder.

Lexie looked exhausted, even though she’d had what would likely have been a great sleep, and she was worried about me.

“It did. I wasn’t sure about talking to someone new, but yeah, it was good.”

“I’m glad.” Her smile told me all I needed to hear.

“Sweetheart, I’m sorry I wasn’t here.” I leaned over her gently and brushed my lips across hers. She reached up and cupped my cheek.

“Never say that to me again when you’re healing yourself.

I don’t need you backsliding into darkness,.

I need you strong by my side, and if that means you have to take off and talk to someone, you better damn well do it, Ryder Saffort.

You’re no good to me and the kids if your demons win.

” She had no idea how much I needed to hear these words from her.

Lexie validating my feelings made any regrets I had about not being here vanish.

“I love you... more than you’ll ever know.” Lifting her hand, I turned it over and kissed her palm.

“I love you husband.” She smiled a sleepy smile and fought to keep her eyes open with every blink. “Are the kids here?”

“No, when all hell broke loose, Kipp called Phil, and he went to get all the kids. They’re at Julie and Phil’s now.

I think Gwen and Wes were planning to pick them up and take them to the farm.

All the grandmas figured it would be better for them to sleep in their own beds tonight.

” I chuckled and leaned back in the chair.

“Your mom said she’d go stay the night with them.

I think she’s looking forward to being back in her house for a few nights. ”

Lexie’s eyes flew open. “She can’t stay in our room, Ryder. We’ve done things in there.”

“Is this the drugs?” I asked as I looked at Lexie, whose eyes were looking a little hazy. “Because I’m sure she and your dad did things in there first.”

“We have to burn the house down and start over. That’s all there is to it.” She was so

serious as she shook her head.

“Look, I love you, sweetheart, but I think you need to quit fighting sleep.”

“What are you a doctor now?” Her attitude was cute, but from experience, when she was overtired, this is what happened.

“Lex, sleep,” I whispered, and she finally gave in.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

LEXIE

I 'd had more visitors at the hospital than I could even remember.

It seemed like everyone in town had filtered through.

But the one constant was Ryder. If he slept, I never saw him, and I didn't think he'd even left my side.

Mom had agreed to stay with Ruby and Sawyer, and she'd bring them up after school.

I loved hearing about their day and seeing what they'd done in class, and art projects hung on almost every surface of the room I was in.

Mom had even taken them to see Dad. Thankfully, his good days were frequent right now, but that didn't stop the kids from asking questions.

Mom handled them like a champ. She was in her glory being a grandma.

A soft knock on the door made me look up from my e-reader. "I hope I'm not interrupting." A lovely woman was standing at the door with a pen and legal pad in her hand. "I'm Doctor Walton, the psychiatrist. I hear you want to talk to me."

"Please come in." My heart raced, and I wondered if I'd made a mistake asking to

talk to someone. She closed the door and took the seat beside my bed. “I don’t know where to start.” I shrugged with my good shoulder.

“Where we start doesn’t matter, just go with it and see where it takes you.” She crossed her legs and waited for me to begin speaking.

An hour passed, and I’d lost count of how many times she’d flipped her paper over, but I’d spilled everything that had been weighing me down.

From my infertility to leaving Ryder, Anita and Hank’s death, my dad’s illness, what it might mean for me down the road, and what happened out in that meadow.

“I think you should enter into therapy for a while. This is a lot to work through in an hour. And I understand the challenges of getting somewhere, so if you’d like, I can set up Telehealth meetings for us.

” She flipped the papers back over and waited for my answer.

If my big, burly rancher could be vulnerable enough to know when he needed help, I could too.

“That would be wonderful.” I nodded as she placed her card on the bedside table.

“My receptionist will call you to book a time in a few days. I know you’re on your way home in a few hours, so we’ll let you get settled and be in touch.

” She stood and left the room. Laying my head back on the pillow, I felt more wrung out than I had after surgery, but at least I wasn’t drowning with what was rolling around in my head now.

“Hey sexy, are you ready to swap this bed for mine?” His husky voice in my ear

made me smile.

“As long as your bed involves lots of pillows and ice cream. Oh, and a bell so I can call you when I need something.” I held up the call bell that had been tied to the railing within arm’s reach.

“I wonder if this thing is like what they use on Jeopardy?” I stared at the red button on the end of the control and tried not to laugh.

“I’ll take Sexy Men for one thousand, please, Alex.

The answer is, the sexiest man on the planet.

” I hit the button and said, “Who is my husband?”

“How long ago did you get pain meds?” Ryder asked flatly, as if I weren’t funny—let alone hilarious.

“Thirty minutes ago, in preparation for her trip home,” a voice said from the doorway. I looked up to see the nurse standing there with a bunch of papers in her hands. “Ready to go?” she asked, arching a brow and smiling.

“She’s playing Jeopardy, badly. You tell me,” Ryder said flatly as he looked at the nurse. The nurse started laughing and turned to me.

“So ready.”

She went over all my discharge instructions and informed us that my prescriptions would be ready at the pharmacy in Weston Gap.

“I talked to Jake. He’s going to get them and bring them out to the house. He wants to

check you over after the drive home,” Ryder said as he bounced his attention between me and the nurse.

“All I need is for you to sign here, and your chariot awaits.” She pointed to the corner of the room.

Shakily, I signed the discharge form, and I was pretty sure that signature wouldn’t hold up in court because it looked nothing like mine, and I was high as a kite.

“Sure is going to be a lot more drab in this room again now that you’ve taken all the art down.

” She smiled as she looked around. Ryder had taken everything down and packed it in a bag because I wanted to save everything the kids did.

They’d even drawn pictures for the nurses’ station, and I was excited to see them hanging up every time I made a lap around the unit.

“Thank you for everything,” I said as she gently helped me into a sitting position on the side of the bed. Ryder moved the wheelchair close, so all I had to do was turn and sit down. He would have made a great nurse, I thought to myself, and stifled a chuckle, mostly because it hurt to laugh.

Once I was in the truck and we were out of Everton, I took a slow deep breath for what felt like the first time in years.

Ryder’s hand was possessively resting on my thigh, and I gently let my hand rest on his.

I couldn’t help but stare at the rings on my hand.

Ryder had slipped them back on after surgery, and I think I remember vowing never to take them off ever again.

A pothole apparently jumped out of nowhere, and I groaned. “Do I need to stop?” Ryder asked, his voice filled with worry.

“Nope,” I groaned as I shifted in the seat. “Maybe just try to miss the others?”

Turning onto our road, I smiled at the balloons on the rail fence. “Your mom helped the kids with that,” Ryder said, his tone slightly unimpressed.

“Call one of the guys to get them so they don’t end up in a pasture causing issues for the cows.” I knew exactly where his mind would go. Besides Ruby, Sawyer, and me, his next worry was always about the cows.

“I’m pretty sure Kipp was behind me, and he’ll get them.” My relationship with Kipp still felt as though it wasn’t on firm footing, but I hoped that as time went on and I proved that the only place I wanted to be was at Ryder’s side, he’d warm up to me again.

“I didn’t want to tell you at the hospital, and I’m not sure that now’s the right time either, but Violet’s gone.”

“What do you mean gone?” I turned slowly to look at my husband. “Like The Five dealt with her gone, or gone from town?”

“Gone as in went back to Kentucky.” He frowned and shook his head.

“Can’t blame me for asking, with you five you can’t be too sure,” I said as I let my head rest back against the seat.

“She tried to come crawling back to Nash, hoping he’d take pity on her.”

“Are you serious? She basically led that man to the doorstep and stood by while he terrorized her son’s family and friends. That woman’s lucky she’s gone or I’d be the one going after her.” Rage boiled out of me—today’s therapy appointment hadn’t helped one damn bit.

“She tried to go to your mom also,” Ryder said with a hint of laughter in his voice.

“Her fucking husband shot me twice, and she thought my mom would be sympathetic? Come to think of it, she probably had better luck with Nash.”

“Want to know what your mom did?” His grin spread wider across his face, and when he took his eyes off the road, they were beaming with pride.

“Umm, yeah.”

“She grabbed the gun out of my truck and threatened to put her down just like we’d done to her husband. Lex, don’t cross your mother. She’s terrifying.”

“All these years, you thought she was so sweet and kind. Well, now you know the dark side of Helen Paulson. That’s the woman Lydia and I grew up with, not the sweet person she makes everyone think she is.

” Him seeing her like that made me feel vindicated.

I was going to have to tell Lydia that our mother’s sweetness and light mask had slipped.

Ryder laughed, and I looked out the window as we pulled into the yard.

My kids were standing on the porch, looking like they were ready to leap off it and come running to me.

Mom stood behind them, with her arms around their shoulders, making sure they didn't leap on me.

Lydia and Faith were also there, smiling and holding hands.

Tears filled my dry eyes as I looked at my sister, smiling and, for the first time in ages, looking at ease.

"Come on, let's get you in the house," Ryder said as he opened my door and helped me out of the truck. Helped wasn't actually the word since he lifted me out and carried me, cradled in his arms, into our home.

"Ryder, I can walk," I grumbled as we entered the house and walked down the hall to our room.

"Auntie Lex, I'm so glad you're home," Ruby said as she gingerly hugged me. Sawyer crawled up on the bed with me and snuggled next to me.

"You saved us," he sighed as he took my hand. Tears ran down my face as I looked at the little boy, whose eyes were filled with awe.

"You're my kids; there's nothing I wouldn't do to keep you safe," I said as my voice cracked, and they both gently cuddled up next to me.

I didn't know how long they'd stayed beside me.

I fell asleep almost immediately and didn't wake up until Jake came in to help me get settled.

He seemed happy with how my healing was progressing.

Tayla had offered to take the kids for the night, but I couldn't bear to have them away from me just yet.

Ruby and Jake's oldest daughter, Libby, had become fast friends, and I imagined they'd be trouble if they were anything like Tayla and me when we were together.

I dozed on and off most of the afternoon, and when I woke up, Ryder was sitting in the chair at the foot of the bed.

"You know you don't have to watch me sleep.

There's work you probably need to catch up on.

"Shifting my shoulders made him jump from his chair and help me fix the pillow that had moved so it wasn't under my arm anymore.

He grabbed the bottle of pills Jake had left beside my bed and gave me two and a sip of water.

"There's four other people to get the work done, six if you count Phil and Wes. Just so you know, Faith isn't a bad cowgirl. The ranch might just have to steal her from you," he said as he sat on the edge of the bed.

"She grew up on a ranch in North Dakota, and I'm not surprised a bit about her abilities." Smiling, I ached for him to lie beside me. A knock on the door stopped me from asking him to do that.

"I hope you don't mind, but I need to tell you both something." Kipp stood in the doorway, his hat in hand, avoiding eye contact with both of us.

“You really think this is the time?” Ryder asked, annoyance dripping from his voice.

“Ry, it’s fine. Come in, Kipp. I just woke up, and my pain meds haven’t kicked in yet. Which is too bad for you because I’m hilarious when they do.” I snorted as I laughed, trying not to laugh harder.

“I think they’re kicking in,” Ryder said dryly, and that made a smile crack on Kipp’s face.

“Lexie, I owe you an apology. When you returned with Ryder, I was angry that he’d let you back in so easily after everything.

” He shuffled on his feet and raised his eyes to look at me.

“What I see now is that you two make one another whole. There’s a light in his eyes that’s been gone for a while.

I’m sorry, what I said at your wedding wasn’t my place.

And I’m glad you’re back, for good.” He smiled awkwardly, and I shifted, trying to sit up.

“There’s a lot of things I could say about my wedding day, and I can’t believe I’m even going to say this —but thank you.

Hearing your words wasn’t easy, but I’m not sure I would have ever been privy to the information if you hadn’t.

” I shifted my gaze to Ryder. Because if I knew my husband as well as I thought I did, he would have carried that to his grave just to save me from the hurt.

“Your timing sucked, but I needed to hear it.” I held out my hand and was overjoyed when he took it.

“Okay, now that we’re all happy, I just want to say if I ever catch you upstairs in this house with my wife, I’ll punch you again.” Ryder stood from the bed and crossed his arms, glaring at Kipp.

“You told him?” Kipp slapped his cowboy hat against his leg.

“Yeah, I did. It seemed to be a night of confessions.”

“Did you tell him it was weird as hell and awkward, and we never did it again?”

“Yep.” I shrugged with my good shoulder and fought off laughing.

“Well, pal, I assure you I have no interest in kissing your wife ever again.” He shivered like the thought repulsed him, and I couldn’t blame him. The feeling was mutual. “No offense,” he added quickly.

“None taken. I feel the same way.” I grinned and smiled at Ryder. “Sorry, I ruined round up.” Kipp was organized, and I’m sure the mess put him days behind.

“Nah, nothing to be sorry for. We’re out of the shadow of that man, and life will be back to normal. God, it seems so long since that was even a possibility.”

“Not so normal. We’re going to have to deal with Linc and Kristin,” I said, the pain meds definitely kicking in now—my head felt heavy.

“Yeah, well, I think he just needs space. Who knows, maybe someone new will wander into the Fencepost and make him forget,” Kipp said, his words not at all convincing.

Something had shifted in the last few days, and it was like everything was right in the world again.

The threat to the ranch was over. Our friends in the community were also safe from someone trying to take them over.

My unexpected little family was together, and I hadn't ever been happier, even with two bullet holes in me.

There was an ache in my heart that my dad wasn't a part of any of this, but there was nothing I could do to change it. We'd just have to make sure we saw him no matter how hard it was.

Chapter Thirty

LEXIE

Weeks passed, and I was getting stronger every day, thanks to the excellent care I'd been receiving.

Mom and Ryder had moved Ruby into my old room.

They'd taken down the trophies and medals and made it their own.

She was bound and determined to have bunk beds so she could have sleepovers, and I loved the idea.

We'd had the rest of the kids' belongings sent out from Wyoming, but Sawyer decided he'd like to start with something new, so Mom took him to Bozeman, and they picked out everything he'd need for a new room.

They'd also stopped at my house and took care of things there.

Mom had organized movers to come and pack the house and a realtor to sell it.

I wavered back and forth about selling it because it was convenient if we were in the city, but it also felt like I was keeping one foot there and one foot here when the only place I wanted to be was right here.

"I feel like it hasn't just been the four of us in this house for months," Ryder said as

he climbed into bed beside me.

“I know, it’s strange not having Mom around,” I agreed.

“Yeah, but having her here so long wasn't great. I could hardly touch you, knowing she was sleeping above us.” He ran his hand up my thigh, and I swatted his chest playfully. Then he caught my fingers, interlacing them with his before brushing his lips along my knuckles.

“Seriously, Lexie, there is no one else I’d rather be doing this life with than you.” He sealed his words by leaning over and lightly kissing my lips, but we both knew just a small kiss wasn’t going to do. Especially when he turned, pressing the hard lines of his body against mine.

His tongue grazed the seam of my lips before I opened for him, letting out a sweet sigh as he deepened our kiss.

“I love when you make those little noises for me, sweetheart,” he murmured, his hand going between us and flattening against my pussy, already wet even beneath my sleep shorts, the only fabric separating us besides his boxer briefs.

I gasped again as he palmed me over the fabric, and I bucked my hips forward to meet the friction of his fingers.

“That’s my girl,” he said with a laugh, kissing me hard as he dipped his fingers below my waist. He pushed aside the fabric of my pants, his thumb pressing on my clit, while he slid two fingers inside of me.

Moaning, I pushed closer, my hands immediately going to his cock, already hard and popping out of his boxers as if he was ready for me.

I loved that I could make him instantly hard.

It had always been that way, though. Ryder's desire for me had never waned when we were together.

There were so many nights we didn't even make it to bed.

As long as I was with him, where we made love didn't matter.

"Not yet," he growled, moving his hand from my mound. I whimpered at the loss of his touch, my eyes widening as I looked up to meet his grin.

"I need to taste you first," he murmured, flipping me onto my back before he nestled between my legs, pulling my pajama shorts off so I was bare to him.

He dipped his head low, just his nose grazing my most sensitive area. "So, fucking, perfect." Slowly he traced my slit with his tongue before his lips wrapped around my clit, sucking hard as he moaned.

My hands fluttered forward, gripping his hair as I pushed my hips closer to his awaiting mouth. I really was a greedy girl for him, and when he thrust a finger inside of me, pleasure ripped through me, arousal dripping down his chin as he devoured every inch of me.

Just as I thought I was coming down from my orgasm, my legs shook, another one already building. Ryder moaned, his lips vibrating against me as he added another finger.

Our eyes met, his gaze was fiery as he lapped me up, and I couldn't hold it back any longer. Gripping hard onto his hair, I pushed my hips forward, thrusting out my orgasm as I saw stars burst into my vision and felt them ricochet through every part

of me.

I didn't think it could get any better, but the way he claimed every drop of me before kissing up my stomach, had me trembling, my body tingling as he pressed against me.

His cock was right at my wet center, but he didn't enter me right away.

Instead, he took my face in his hands and met my hooded gaze.

"Kiss me, Lexie. Taste yourself on my lips," he murmured, not waiting for my reply as he pressed his mouth to mine, his tongue parting my lips.

I'd never thought I'd like the taste of my arousal, but on Ryder's tongue, it was intoxicating and something I couldn't get enough of. I swirled my tongue with his, sucking it hard and feeling his cock stiffen against me as he moaned into my mouth.

"Are you ready to take my cock, Lexie?" he murmured into my lips, his eyes locked on mine.

"Yes, please," I breathed.

He pushed up onto his hips, his hands spreading my legs wider for him as he slid just the head of his cock into my wet folds—teasing me, making me whimper. Did he want me to beg? I would. I wasn't above it for him.

"Ryder, please." I moaned as the tip of his hard cock sloped over my clit.

"Are you sure you're ready for this? It hasn't been long since you were hurt." What an ass. He knew full well we'd waited as long as we'd needed to make sure I was healed. Now, after two mind-blowing orgasms, he was edging me.

“I swear, Ryder. I’ll flip you over on this bed and take your cock myself if you don’t hurry up.” Gnashing my teeth together, I was on the verge of another orgasm, but I wanted him in me when it happened.

“Oh, you’re becoming very demanding, Mrs. Saffort.” He laughed.

“And you’re a tease, Mr. Saffort,” I huffed as I reached between us to grab his shaft, but as soon as my fingers brushed it, he thrust inside me.

“Fuck, baby. You feel like heaven,” he moaned as he slowly filled me to the hilt, and I cried out at the sensation of being one with him. We didn’t move right away as I gripped onto his shoulders. Our eyes locked together as if we could have a whole conversation just by looking at each other.

His movements were slow at first, letting my body adjust to his massive size.

But I didn’t want slow. I wanted more. It had been too long since we’d been us.

Everything that once held me back from him was gone.

It was just the two of us again, like it had been in the beginning—before I started making decisions for both of us, before I convinced myself I wasn’t enough.

But I knew better now. I was enough for him. I always had been.

Lifting my legs, I wrapped them around his waist, pulling him as close as he could get to me. He laughed into my lips. “You always did need me.”

“Always. All yours,” I managed to pant, the friction building between my legs already.

“You going to come again for me, sweetheart?” he growled, sliding his hand between us.

His thumb went to my swollen clit as he rocked his body in the same slow motion he circled my nub.

“Yes, like that,” I panted, keeping my eyes on his hooded gaze as my breathing quickened. I was so close, so damn close, and he knew it, adding just the right amount of pressure as I gripped harder onto him. I grabbed his forearms and hung on for dear life.

My orgasm hit me hard, my whole body shaking around his as I held on hard to his shoulders, afraid I would burst right there.

I cried out, but he muffled the sound with his mouth, dipping his tongue against mine.

“You’re going to have to learn to be quiet, like the old days,” Ryder muttered against my mouth.

He was right, and while I’d enjoyed trying not to get caught, I also enjoyed making sure he knew how much pleasure he brought me.

“I can feel how hard you came for me, sweetheart, and you’re soaking everything. Fuck,” he murmured, his thrusts harder as the aftershocks of my climax rocked through my body.

“Do you want me to come for you, Lex? Are you going to take all of my cock?” he growled, circling his hips against mine.

“Yes, come for me,” I panted, my legs like gelatin as I tried to keep them gripped around his waist, thrusting my hips up to meet his over and over again. He slammed

hard into me, and I cried out as he spilled inside of me, the warmth flooding my already heated body.

I collapsed back onto the pillows, and Ryder gently followed, resting his head on my chest, my heart beating wildly against him.

I reached up, running my fingers through his hair, relishing the time we'd just shared together.

We didn't say anything for a while, with only the sound of our labored breathing filling the air.

Then, finally, he looked up, his eyes almost glowing in the moonlight. He smiled, "I love you, Lexie."

"I love you too, Ryder," I said, sealing my words with another kiss.

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Three Years Later

Lexie

The wind blew softly across the open prairie, and I turned my face into it, loving the feeling.

Hoots and laughter from the kids playing on the bales made me smile.

I should be telling them to stay off and not get their good clothes dirty, but I didn't even care today.

Life was good, and we needed to find joy in it.

Ruby and Sawyer had worked through a lot of their feelings in therapy, but we'd decided they would keep going until they wanted to stop.

My dad had passed away about a year after Ryder and I got married. Mom was lost for a while and miserable in Everton, so one day, Ryder went there and packed her up, moving her back to Weston Gap. He'd bought her a cute little house, and she was back in the book club with her friends.

Lydia and Faith were still going strong, and I secretly hoped Lydia would find the courage to ask her to get married. The town had embraced Faith, and they saw how good she and Lydia were together, so life had been kind of idyllic for them in the small, backward town.

A big, warm hand slid over my back, up my shoulder, and gently rested on my neck. “You smell good,” I said as I leaned against him, letting his cedar and citrus scent fill my nose.

“Better than I was smelling.” He softly chuckled. Ryder had been up most of the night dealing with calving issues, and I wished he could’ve rested a bit, but we didn’t have the time today. “We have five kids. Who’d a thunk it.” Shifting, I wanted my arms around him and held him tightly.

“I’m glad we could keep them together. They’ve been through so much.

” I watched the five kids run around the yard and couldn’t keep the smile off my face.

“Are you ready to make them permanently ours?” I looked up and watched his eyes mist over, and all he could do was nod.

The pain in his eyes was a remnant of his childhood surfacing.

He wasn’t one of the kids who got chosen, and being able to make that dream come true for three siblings was his true calling.

“The social worker called while you were in the shower. He’s got a fourteen-year-old boy needing placement.” I let my head fall back onto his chest.

“When’s he coming?” he asked, his low voice rumbling in his chest.

“Doug said he can’t get him here until tomorrow.”

“What office is he out of this week?” Ryder asked and I could already hear the gears turning in his brain.

“Bozeman.”

“Looks like we’ve got a stop to make after going to the courthouse.”

“Good thing that’s what I told him. I don’t want that young man to have to stay someplace he’s not wanted anymore. Even if it’s just one night.” Tightening my hold on my husband, he held me tighter, too.

“Okay, Saffort kids, get in the truck,” Ryder called, and all five kids froze and looked at us before running full speed to the large SUV we now took everywhere rather than Ryder’s pick-up.

“Okay, Dad,” Ruby shouted, and I watched Ryder freeze mid-step. Slowly, he turned to me.

“I heard it. You’re not hearing things.”

“Ry, if she’s comfortable calling you that, then I think she should.

” Ruby was eleven now and had vivid memories of her parents, whereas Sawyer’s were fuzzy, so he’d started calling Ryder dad all the time about a year after they’d come to us.

It wasn’t something we’d ever talked about having them do.

They had an amazing mom and dad, and while they were gone, we didn’t want to replace them. We were just filling in.

“I’m Dad,” he whispered, pride radiating through those two words.

“Yes, you are.” Turning my head, I kissed his cheek and smiled up at him.

This man, who I’d walked away from once because I didn’t think I deserved him, had made all my dreams come true again.

Loving this man once had been a gift. Getting to do it again was something I'd never take for granted.

He was my strength, and life wasn't complete unless my cowboy was by my side.

I didn't think anything would go wrong; we'd shown the courts that we were fit and that the kids were safe and well cared for.

Money wasn't an issue. We had a support system like no other.

The only thing that might cause an issue was the divorce, but I would share my truth as to why it happened, and I wouldn't hide how much I've regretted it.

I lost three years with the man who was my soulmate, and while I couldn't get that time back, I was going to show him every day how much he meant to me.

As we left the farm, it was like a parade. Trucks fell into line behind us, and I looked in the side mirror and smiled. The entire Flying Diamond Five Ranch was accompanying us to Bozeman for the hearing.

"We should have rented a bus," I joked, and Ryder looked in the mirror. With the exception of Jake and Tayla, every truck had a Diamond logo. There wasn't a question about where we came from.

"A bus might not be a bad idea," Ryder agreed before taking my hand and lacing his fingers through mine.

"Where did Linc take off to? He wasn't at supper?" I asked and saw the muscle on the side of Ryder's jaw tense and his brow furrow.

"Said he'd gotten a call for a job, and he needed to go." Ryder's words were hushed, and there was a bit of fear in them.

“Like a job, job?”

“Like a five job, yeah.” As far as I knew, the last job they did was taking care of Fallon’s ex-husband.

Besides the day out at the meadow, but that wasn’t done in secret.

Every law enforcement department handled that, and legal proceedings were needed to make sure there wasn’t any trouble afterward.

“Why is he going alone? You’ve never gone alone?” I quickly said, a little louder than anticipated, but the kids all seemed occupied in the back.

“I’m not sure. I’ve got Phil looking into it.” Ryder turned to me and gave me half a smile. I knew it was to reassure me, but it didn’t. In fact, it made me worry even more about what he was doing.

Ryder

“Why do you live in the middle of nowhere?” the young man asked as he kicked at a rock.

His sneakers looked like they’d seen better days, and the holes in his jeans were because they were threadbare.

My heart plummeted when I’d seen him sitting in that office.

He wouldn’t look me in the eye, just kept his gaze sternly locked on the floor.

His belongings were tossed haphazardly in a garbage bag he’d slung over his shoulder.

These kids relied on everyone else to make decisions for them, and they didn't even get a bag to put their belongings in.

It made my blood boil that so little had changed over the years.

"Well, kind of hard to ranch in the middle of a city," I said with a chuckle, and the boy nodded before I shoved my hands in my pockets.

We'd been gone most of the day, so the sun was beginning to set, and the sky was a beautiful pink.

Normally, Lexie and I would sit on the porch and watch the kids play as the sky darkened, but tonight, this was where I needed to be.

"Why did you say yes to me? Nobody ever comes to get me. They just make whatever worker I'm with drop me off like I was a bag of trash." His voice seemed far away, but I'd remembered that feeling and opening up to anyone wouldn't have been something I did.

"It's what we do." There was no other answer. Lexie and I had decided when we'd opened our home that no child who passed through it would be treated any less than one of our own.

"Yeah, but you got your own family. Why'd you want me?"

"Wyatt, this is my family now, but it hasn't always been this way.

You see, Ruby and Sawyer lost their parents in a car accident.

Their mom was Lexie's best friend, so we were guardians for the kids.

Sara, Andrew, and West were in the foster system, and we took them in about a year

ago.

Their mother signed away her rights, and we adopted them so they could stay together.

So, this family has come together in many different ways.

But I don't really think that answers your question. "

I had this talk with other kids who had come through our door, but this felt different. I wasn't sure what it was about Wyatt, but I knew he'd be fitting into our family, and I wasn't sure we could let him go. "I was a foster kid. Back in those days, it was a pretty shady business."

"Still is," he mumbled.

"I can't deny some people aren't in it for the right reasons, but I hope Lexie and I are.

I didn't want any child to feel like I did growing up.

There was no welcome for me in any of the homes I was in.

Nobody made me feel like part of their family, so I want to do things differently.

" Leaning back on the bale, I crossed my leg over the other and hoped my words were what he needed.

"You're more than welcome here for as long as you want. If you're still here when you age out, this will always be a place for you to call home. We won't kick you out on the dawn of your eighteenth birthday either."

"Is that what happened to you?"

“No, I split when I was sixteen. There’s probably still paperwork somewhere saying I was a runaway.

Thankfully, I was smart, earned scholarships, and got out on my own.

Then I met my friends, and Lexie and I decided not to let being a kid in the foster care system define who I was anymore.

Did I ever think I’d open my home like this?

Nope, but life has a funny way of playing out.

I also never dreamed of six kids.” I frowned, and it made Wyatt smile, well, a half-smile, but it was something other than the anger radiating off him.

“So, while you’re here, you’re part of this family. You’ll work with us like you’ve been here all your life. But you’ll also be welcome like you’ve been here all along.” I reached out and gently put my hand on his shoulder.

“What will make you send me away?” Six words that made him sound like a lost little boy, and my heart broke for him.

“Writing a checklist?” I asked, trying to lighten the mood slightly.

“No.” He shook his head. “I just need to be prepared.”

“I’ll make you a deal, just don’t burn anything down or make the cattle stampede, and you’ll never be sent away. Hell, you could probably make the cattle stampede, and I still wouldn’t get rid of you.” Moving my hand from his shoulder, I held it out for him to shake.

Wyatt looked at my hand like it was on fire, but he finally shook it. He didn’t let it go

when I thought he would have. It was like he was clinging to me, so I pulled him to me and wrapped him in a hug. With his free hand, he wrapped his around me, and I held him as he sobbed quietly.

“Why does nobody want me?” he cried into my shoulder.

“Son, we want you. You just took a bit to find your place.” Tightening my hold on him, I needed to make sure he knew he was home.

When he finally let me go, I nodded over to the bales, and we went and sat on them.

As the sun set, he told me about the last few homes he’d been in, and while there hadn’t been any abuse, the treatment was you versus us.

I couldn’t remember how many homes I’d filtered through that the attitude was the same, and it killed a little piece of me every time.

“Hey, boys, are you coming in tonight? I’m not sure I can keep these five away from the surprise.” Lexie yelled from the porch. Looking up, she’d wrapped her arm around the post and was leaning her head against it.

“I suppose we should get to the house,” I said as I put my hand on Wyatt’s shoulder, but all he did was nod.

Lexie’s eyes were filled with concern, and the slight crease between her brows gave away her worry. However, I smiled and nodded at her. “Okay, you have to keep in mind I didn’t do the decorating. The kids did it,” Lexie whispered as she fell into step with Wyatt.

I opened the door and motioned for Wyatt to go first. “Welcome to the family!” The kids cheered, and Wyatt’s face went red as he surveyed the state of the living room.

Balloons hung from the ceiling, a big welcome home banner hung crooked on the wall, with a few letters missing.

Streamers lined the staircase, and a cake sat in the middle of the coffee table.

“Okay, you’re going to have to learn sign language ‘cause that’s how Parker talks,” Sarah said matter-of-factly.

“He only needs that when he doesn’t have his implant in,” Ruby said with a sigh.

I glanced over at Lexie and arched my brow.

Did my daughter have a crush on my best friend’s stepson?

Oh, we were going to have a chat about this.

Lexie smiled sweetly at me, and I knew it was true.

“Don’t worry, we’ll help you,” Ruby added, and she brushed it off like it was nothing.

“Then there’s the babies, but we’ll show you all their pictures so you know who they are,” Sawyer said with a grin. Andrew and West nodded in agreement.

“And then there’s this.” Lexie held out a ranch wild rag that we’d had Kipp bring to the hearing.

He also stopped off at an embroidery place and offered them far above their rush fee to interrupt what they were doing and put Wyatt’s name on it.

Tomorrow morning, Fallon will order more to keep on hand for him.

“In this little family, or not so little family, we decided to welcome new people by giving them a personalized wild rag. So, for as long as you wear it, you’re part of the Saffort family and the Flying Diamond Five Ranch.

If you go away from here and eventually wander back onto this ranch and have this in hand, you will be welcomed with open arms, no questions asked.

” I held the fabric out, and Wyatt hesitated to take it.

Maybe night one wasn’t the best time for us to have done this.

He reached out and took the wild rag from me with a shaking hand. “You belong here, Wyatt,” Lexie said quietly as she wrapped her arm around mine and stood close. “There’s an entire massive ranch of people that will love you like their own if you’ll let them.”

“Thank you,” the young boy whispered. Lexie walked over to him and wrapped him in a hug.

“Welcome home, son. We’re so happy you’re here,” Lexie whispered just loud enough for me to hear.

This life hadn’t been easy, but with the ranch, the strength I gained from it, and my family, I knew there was nothing that could beat us down.

We’d always get up, and we’d always have one another.

At one time, I thought this ranch was my strength, but now I knew it was Lexi, and the family we’d fought together to have.