



Ride Me Reckless (Millionaire Cowboys of Lucky Ranch #1)

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Category: Romance

Description: He was the one I ran from. Now he's the only man I can't live without.

I swore I'd never come back to Lovelace. Not after leaving behind the cowboy who broke more than just my heart.

But fate has a twisted sense of humor.

A racing career that was running out of gas. A fire and a desperate call home landed me right back in the arms of Colt Bennett—the man with a brooding stare, a voice that still turns my knees to jelly, and a touch that makes me forget why I ever left.

He's a millionaire now. Rugged. Infuriatingly calm while my world keeps unraveling. And when he looks at me like I'm still his... I start to wonder if maybe I am.

But we've both got scars. Secrets. Regrets we don't dare speak out loud. Between my mama's failing memory, a surprise that changes everything, and a town full of whispers, I'm not sure we can outrun the past.

Yet every time he says my name, every time his hand finds mine—I start to believe in second chances. Even reckless ones.

This cowboy's not just back in my life... He's about to become my forever.

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Chapter One

Reckless Temptation

Colt

I'd told myself I wasn't gonna go.

Three times, maybe four, I walked past that flyer on the counter. Crumpled thing. Edges curling like it knew it had no business tempting me the way it did. I'd tossed it in the trash once. Dug it back out a few hours later like some damn fool.

There it sat now, under the glare of the kitchen lights—bold red ink screaming Tessa "Reckless" Walker across the top like she still had the right to be inside my house. Like she hadn't ghosted out of here with a trail of dust and a half-shattered heart she left in my chest.

I'd wondered, more than once, if she'd taken more than just her boots when she left. Hell, some part of me still remembered what that damn palm reader said all those years ago—drunk off my ass at a county fair in Billings.

“You’ve left something behind,” she’d whispered, eyes cloudy like fogged glass. “Something breathing.”

I’d laughed at the time. Figured she was talking about a horse. Now I wasn’t so sure.

I stared at the photo on the flyer longer than I should've.

Her dragster—a flame-red beast called Reckless —sat cocked on the line, ready to eat pavement.

Chrome shining. Tires curled with smoke.

And there she was, helmet tucked under one arm, wild ponytail whipping like she owned the wind.

She looked the same. Maybe even better. Hell, maybe that's what pissed me off the most.

I hated the name of that car.

Not because it was arrogant. Not because it suited her—which it damn well did.

But because it was the name of the bull that wrecked me.

Reckless. The same thousand-pound brute that slung me clean off his back and broke two discs in mine. That ride ended my career, sent me home too early, and turned me into a man with a limp I tried like hell to hide. And now, she was out there burnin' rubber in something named after me.

It felt like a slap.

Still, I couldn't stay away.

I grabbed my hat—a brand-new Stetson, tan with a leather band around the top. Bought it last month, but hadn't worn it yet. Seemed too nice for everyday work, too personal to waste on no one. Today, though? Seemed like maybe I needed the edge.

I caught my reflection in the glass door on the way out—collar pressed, beard

trimmed tight, jeans riding just right. I looked like a man on his way to see a woman.

And maybe I was.

Outside, the sun was low and gold, stretching shadows across the long fence line.

From my front porch, I could see the rise of Lucky Ranch, all that land I shared with my best friends and fellow Powerball winners: Rhett, Easton, and Sawyer.

Each of us had our own spread, our own barns, our own privacy.

Mine was the quietest.

Still, I liked it that way.

In the distance, Biscuit lifted her head from the grass, her ears twitching like she'd sensed my attention. Her coat shone like warm honey, and even from here, I could tell she was healthy. Happy.

She was still hers.

Tessa'd left Biscuit with me when she lit out and told me to keep her safe, like she knew she wasn't coming back. There were other things I thought she might've left behind, too. But no letter ever came. No phone call. Just silence, and the kind that knew how to cut bone-deep.

I never asked why. Never had to. A woman like Tessa didn't hand over her horse unless something inside her was looking for something more that I couldn't provide.

I stepped off the porch and crossed the gravel, boots sounding against the walkway. The air was dry and sweet, the kind of spring dusk that makes you ache for something

you can't name.

As I climbed into my truck, I looked down at the flyer still clutched in my hand.

Don't go, I told myself. Leave it alone. Let her be.

But the engine was already rumbling beneath me, and the road was waiting.

"Damn, woman," I muttered, tipping my hat low as I pulled out.

"Always did know how to make me chase her."

The place was packed with locals, shoulder to shoulder with out-of-towners, all crammed against the fence line like they were waiting for the rapture. Dust kicked up from boots and tires alike. The air smelled like exhaust, fry grease, and adrenaline.

I parked my truck out past the last row of pickups and walked in slowly, keeping to the back of the crowd. Didn't need to be seen. Didn't want to explain myself.

I found a spot near the end of the bleachers and leaned against the top rail. One hand curled over the fence post, the other curled around the thought I should've stayed home.

Engines screamed down the straightaway, one after the next, all noise and muscle and smoke. A few decent drivers. Some just loud for the hell of it.

But none of that mattered.

Because then she stepped onto the track.

Tessa.

Helmet under one arm, swagger in her hips, like she hadn't missed a day. Her car—Reckless—waited at the line, low and mean, built for speed and trouble. Its sleek curves caught the light like polished steel, sharp and unapologetic. Just like its driver.

She slid into the seat and pulled the harness tight. Ponytail flicked once behind her, like it knew it was being watched.

God help me; she looked better than she had any right to.

I clenched my jaw and looked away for half a second—just enough to pretend I wasn't affected. Didn't work.

Crowd went quiet. Lights dropped. Engine rumbled like a storm on a leash.

I didn't breathe until she launched.

I'd just started breathing again when I heard the sound that always meant trouble—boots with a purpose and a grin behind them.

"Must be fate," Rhett drawled from behind me, voice already full of mischief. "Lady Luck's still got her claws in you, huh? But I didn't take you for a stalker, brother."

I didn't answer. Because maybe she did. Maybe she never let go.

I didn't even look at Rhett. Just let my eyes track Reckless as Tessa slowed at the far end of the track. Tessa had won again—no surprise. The other car hadn't even come close. The crowd cheered like they hadn't known the outcome before it started.

"Ain't stalking if I'm standing still," I muttered.

Rhett Callahan came to lean on the fence beside me, arms folded like he had all the

time in the world.

He smelled like soap, cologne, and the kind of trouble that smiled too wide.

His pearl-snap shirt was crisp, his jeans tighter than mine had ever dared to be, and he wore a pair of sunglasses like he'd just walked off a goddamn billboard.

We'd been friends long before we'd bought that lottery ticket. Before the Powerball hit and changed everything. Now we were millionaires with too much land and not enough sense—and Rhett? He was enjoying every second of it.

I didn't turn to him. Didn't need to.

"I mean," he went on, drawl thick and lazy, "you drove all the way into town, parked where no one could see your truck, and posted up at the edge of the stands like a man who didn't want to be seen—but here you are."

"Spit it out, Rhett."

He laughed, low and knowing, and clapped me on the back. Hard. "You came all this way just to watch her eat asphalt?"

"She didn't lose the race," I said, eyes still fixed on the track.

"Maybe not on the track." His voice dropped just enough to sting.

I turned my head then. Slowly. Let my gaze cut sideways until it landed on his smug-ass expression.

His smirk faltered just a tick.

Good.

I went back to watching her. Tessa had pulled into the pit area now, popping out of Reckless like she hadn't just made the entire grandstand hold its breath.

She was all lean lines and confidence, dragging the zipper down on her fire suit like she didn't care who was watching.

But I knew better. Tessa never did a thing without intention.

That zipper was for someone. The question was, who?

"You know," Rhett said casually, "I always liked her. Hell of a driver. Too bad she had to break your?—"

"Don't."

He held up both hands like I'd just pulled a gun. "Alright, alright. You don't wanna talk about it. Got it."

I rubbed my thumb along the edge of the fence post. The wood was old, sun-bleached, and cracking from years of exposure to the sun and wind, just like the place. Just like me.

It wasn't that I didn't want to talk about her.

It was that I didn't know how to talk about her without tasting bile in the back of my throat.

Tessa looked right at me.

Or at least I thought she did.

Hard to tell with the lights and the noise and the smoke curling in the air like ghosts. But for one hot second, I swear Tessa's eyes locked with mine across the crowd, dead-on, sharp and cutting, like they used to be when she was about to tell me exactly what she thought, no filter, no sugar.

Then she turned.

Fast. Too fast.

Like I wasn't even there.

She headed toward the edge of the pit, hips swaying with purpose, helmet swinging in one hand. Her fire suit hung half-open now, exposing a black tank top stretched over those curves that still haunted me in the middle of the night.

Yet, it wasn't the way she walked or the way the crowd parted for her that caught me—it was something else. Something in her face. Like she'd seen things since me. Lived through 'em. Lost something, maybe. But Tessa Walker didn't wear grief out in the open. She buried it deep, same as I did.

She didn't wave. Didn't nod. Didn't stop.

Just kept walking.

As if I were a groupie in the bleachers, not the man who used to know her better than anyone.

I let out a slow breath that felt like it rattled right down to my boots. That look—or the lack of it—cut deeper than a clean break. It felt personal, even if it wasn't.

Hell, maybe that made it worse.

Rhett gave a low whistle beside me, his voice pitched with something between amusement and pity. "Well damn, son. That was colder than a dead snake in snow."

I didn't bother answering him. What was there to say?

He shifted his weight, folding his arms again, but he didn't press. That was the thing about Rhett—he could be an arrogant jackass, but when it counted, he knew when to shut his damn mouth.

The roar of the next heat echoed down the track, but I didn't care who was racing now.

The crowd surged with fresh energy, but my gaze stayed fixed on that silver trailer at the edge of the pit—hers.

Tessa's sanctuary. Her fortress. The place where she'd slam the door, lock the world out, and pretend none of this ever touched her.

I'd known she'd be here. I'd stared at that damn flyer until the ink bled into my memory. But I hadn't been prepared for what it would feel like to see her again.

Not like this. Not looking through me like I wasn't even dust on her boots.

I ran a hand over my jaw. Thought about the way she used to tease me about my beard. How her fingers would scrape over my jaw before she pulled me in.

That was a long time ago. A different man. A different life.

I kicked at a patch of dirt by the fence post and watched the dust scatter into the air

like it had somewhere better to be.

"Tessa," I muttered under my breath. "Still knows how to knock the breath outta me without sayin' a word."

My hat sat low on my brow, but I tipped it down tighter like it might shield me from the truth that was gnawing in my gut.

I'd told myself I wasn't coming here for her.

But the truth was—it wasn't just the race that had pulled me here.

It was her. Always had been. And maybe some part of the universe had brought her back to test what was left of me.

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Chapter Two

Hard to Handle

Tessa

The crowd was still roaring when I killed the engine and climbed out of Reckless .

My boots hit the pavement, and the air hit me like a wall—exhaust, rubber, dust, and the sweet, sharp tang of adrenaline still buzzed through my veins.

My fire suit clung to my skin, hot and damp, but I couldn't pull it off yet—not with the way they were looking at me, so I unzipped it down to my waist to get some fresh air.

The fans were pressed up against the barricades, waving ball caps, phones, and programs. Someone yelled my name, then another.

"Tessa Walker!"

" Reckless rules!"

"Queen of the damn track!"

I smiled on cue—gritty, crooked, the kind of grin that said I'd do it all over again without blinking. That's what they came for. The attitude. The edge. Tessa "Reckless" Walker didn't blink, break, or flinch just because a few men with souped-up dragsters

thought they had something to prove.

I signed a few ballcaps, posed for selfies I knew would be on Instagram before sundown, and gave a solid quote to a kid with a notepad and braces.

"No such thing as luck," I told him, voice steady. "Just grip, guts, and knowing when to hit the gas." He looked like I'd handed him the keys to a rocket ship.

The second wave came harder—an older guy wanted a picture with me "for his daughter," two teen girls wanted a video shoutout, and some big-time car blogger I vaguely recognized asked for a quick interview. I gave them all just enough. Just like always.

But as I moved through the crowd, that buzzing, hyped-up energy I usually brushed off? It started to twist inside me. A slow churn at the pit of my stomach that had nothing to do with racing.

Because I'd seen him somewhere out there—behind the stands or just past the bleachers.

Colt.

I didn't expect him to come. Thought maybe he'd moved on, married some small-town sweetheart, or buried himself so deep in ranch life that the world couldn't reach him anymore. But the second I saw that silhouette—hat low, boots planted wide, arms crossed over that infuriatingly broad chest—I knew.

It was him.

And worse—I'd looked straight at Colt. Or maybe I hadn't. Maybe it just felt that way. The moment passed too fast to be sure, but something in my gut had turned to

liquid.

That man had no business looking at me like he still remembered what I tasted like at two in the morning. No business showing up at my track, breathing my air, stirring up pieces of me I'd buried in five states and four sponsorship contracts ago.

Or like he still wondered what else I might've taken with me when I left. I used to lie awake wondering the same thing—what if I'd stayed? What if I'd told him?

But the truth?

I'd been relieved when it ended early.

Relieved... and ashamed I felt that way.

I cut through the last stretch of spectators with a nod and a quick wave, then made a beeline for the trailer. My fire suit felt like it was shrink-wrapped to my body. I didn't dare stop to fully unzip it—not until I could shut the world out.

And Colt with it.

The second the trailer door closed behind me, I exhaled for the first time since the finish line.

Silence.

Then, the dull creak of metal as I leaned back against the door and let my head thump softly against it.

Dammit.

I peeled the zipper down to my hips with shaking fingers. Not from nerves—at least, that's what I told myself. It was just the come-down. The post-race adrenaline crash. Normal stuff.

Only, it didn't feel normal.

My skin burned. My chest felt tight. And my mind was stuck—looping on a man I hadn't spoken to in five years and a look that felt like a match dropped on gasoline.

I should've been over it by now.

Over Colt.

Yet, apparently, some ghosts don't stay buried.

The sound of boots outside the trailer was my only warning before the door creaked open, and Callie Hart stepped inside like she owned the place. Which, if I were being totally honest, she kinda did. Half of it, at least.

"Well," she said, kicking it shut behind her with the heel of her boot, "if that run didn't make someone's highlight reel, I'll eat my damn hat."

She dropped her tablet, notebook, and a half-empty iced coffee onto the kitchenette counter in a perfectly organized mess, then looked up at me and squinted. One hand went to her hip.

"Uh-oh."

Callie tilted her head. "What happened?"

"Nothing," I said too fast.

Her brows lifted. "Let me guess. Tall. Wears a hat like it's part of his DNA. Makes your knees weak and your attitude worse?"

I shot her a look.

"Yep," she said, peeling off her leather jacket. "That's a Colt Bennett sighting, alright. The same guy who had you crying into a bottle of ginger ale and watching baby furniture commercials at 2 AM that one night in Denver back in your heyday."

I let out a sharp breath and rolled my eyes. "He was just standing there," I muttered, washing my face in the tiny bathroom sink. "Like no time had passed. Like he had every right to show up and look at me like..."

"Like you were still his?"

I didn't answer. I didn't have to.

Callie crossed the trailer and handed me a bottle of water from the fridge. "You knew this might happen."

"I knew it was possible," I said. "Doesn't mean I was ready for it."

She flopped onto the bench seat with a groan and kicked her feet up. "Look, I love you—but you need to decide if he's just a ghost or still got flesh and blood in your head. Because the last thing you need right now is a distraction."

"I'm not distracted."

She gave me a look.

"Fine. I'm rattled. For a minute. But I've got it handled."

"Mmhmm. Like the time you 'had it handled' in Phoenix and ran your mouth in front of that VP from Delta Edge Racing, which ended in you being disqualified?"

I rolled my eyes. "That was one time."

Callie grinned. "And this is your one ex you never really got over. Don't pretend this isn't sitting in your chest like a hot coal."

I took a long drink of water and leaned against the counter, trying to settle the tremble in my spine. She wasn't wrong. She usually wasn't.

"I didn't come back just for the race, you know."

Callie's grin softened. "Yeah," she said, voice quieter now. "Your Mom."

"Yep," I said, and the words felt thick coming out. "She's been... slipping a little more."

Callie sat up a little straighter.

"I've been getting calls from the neighbors," I said. "She's forgetting things. Leaving lights on. Last week, she lost her keys and swore someone broke in. And yesterday..." I hesitated. "She asked me how Dad was doing."

Callie blinked. "Tessa..."

"He's been gone eight years." My voice cracked—just a little. I didn't let it go any further. "You know how she always ran a tight house," I added quickly, filling the silence. "Never let a damn thing slide. But now? She just seems... Fuzzier than ever. Tired."

Maybe that's why I hadn't told Mom back then—when it all happened. She didn't seem strong enough to hold something like that. And I hadn't felt strong enough to say it out loud. Not even to Callie.

Not even when I found myself alone in that hotel bathroom a few weeks after I left Colt, staring down at two pink lines like they couldn't possibly be mine.

The silence of that room was the loudest thing I'd ever heard.

A flutter of something inside me—hope? dread?—rose before I even knew what to call it.

And then I'd buried it.

"You didn't tell me it was this bad," Callie said, her voice quiet now.

"I didn't want to say it out loud." I stared at my hands. "But I couldn't stay away anymore."

Callie nodded. No questions. No raised eyebrows. Just quiet loyalty.

"You did the right thing," she said.

But as she leaned back in her chair, her eyes lingered on me—longer than they needed to. Not accusing. Just... knowing.

Like maybe she'd always suspected there was more to the story.

"Is there something else?" she asked gently.

I didn't answer. Just picked at the hem of my sleeve and kept my eyes on the floor.

We sat in that stillness a little longer.

Then she cleared her throat and tapped her tablet, shifting gears like she always did—businesslike, no pressure. But the space between us held something new now. Something we weren't saying.

"Okay, well. While we're fixing lives and cracking hearts, let's talk about sponsors.

Because this little town's suddenly full of men with six-figure bank accounts and not enough hobbies.

I spotted three in the VIP tent tonight, and one of them asked if you were available, which, frankly, I think was about the car, not your relationship status, but either way, I'm calling him. "

I let out a small laugh. "Please tell me you didn't give him my number."

"Not yet."

She gave me a wink. "Let me work my magic first."

I smiled, grateful in a way I wouldn't dare admit out loud.

"I need this next deal," I said. "Bad."

"What you need," she said, "is to remember who the hell you are. You're Tessa freaking Walker. Reckless on the strip, cool under pressure, and sharp enough to know when a man's a distraction—not a destination."

I let her words hang in the air as I crossed to the window. The edge of the racetrack glowed under the floodlights.

"I've been thinking about Biscuit," I said.

Callie glanced up. "The horse?"

I nodded. "He still has her. I know he does. I told myself I'd figure out a way to see her while I'm back, but I don't know how to do that without..." I trailed off.

Callie filled it in for me. "Without Colt."

I didn't answer. Didn't have to.

"You want to see her?"

"More than I want to breathe."

Before Callie could say another word, there was a knock on the trailer door.

Not a tap. Not a pound. Just two raps—steady, sure. It seemed as though the person on the other side belonged there.

Callie froze mid-step.

My pulse kicked. "You expecting someone?" she asked.

I didn't answer.

She peeked through the curtain, then gave me a look that made my stomach clench. "Oh yeah. It's him."

Colt.

My breath caught. My body tensed. Like it knew trouble was standing on the other side of the door.

Callie lowered her voice. "Want me to say you're not here?"

I shook my head. "No. I've got it."

She slipped into the tiny bathroom without another word.

I opened the door, and there he was.

New Stetson, clean like it hadn't seen a full day's work yet.

The boots were still cowboy but polished—too new, like they'd been ordered from some high-end Western outfitter and hadn't yet tasted real dirt.

His shirt was crisp, pearl-snap denim rolled to the elbows, and that old belt buckle?

Still there—familiar and worn, like maybe not everything had changed.

The man wearing it? He looked like someone who owned the damn sunrise. He smelled like sun and saddle leather.

Like yesterday.

He held my gaze. "Hey."

I swallowed. "Hey."

"Didn't mean to interrupt."

"You didn't."

"You ran a hell of a race."

"Thanks." My arms crossed without thinking.

The silence crackled. He glanced past me into the trailer. "Your manager still with you?"

"She's not going anywhere."

He nodded. "Good. You always needed someone on your side."

"I've always had myself."

"Didn't say you didn't." He looked down, then back up. "Just figured backup didn't hurt."

I didn't reply. My throat was tight.

"You didn't have to come," I said.

"I know."

"But you did."

He gave a short nod. "Wanted to see you win again like you did when you were still rodeoing."

That landed harder than it should've. Quiet. Sincere.

"Dangerous," I murmured.

"What is?"

"Letting yourself want things you can't have."

His eyes sharpened. "Who says I can't?"

The air between us flared. I stepped back. "This isn't a good time."

"Figured. Just wanted to say you looked good out there."

"Thanks."

"And I'm still taking care of her."

My heart stuttered. "Biscuit?"

"Every morning. Every night."

I gripped the doorframe.

"I've been meaning to come see her," I said. "Just didn't know if it'd be... complicated."

"It doesn't have to be."

I swallowed hard. "I'll let you know."

He nodded. "She'll be waiting."

Colt stepped back, then paused. "Tessa?"

"Yeah?"

He looked at me like he still knew the parts of me I tried to forget. "You still got fire in your eyes. Don't let anyone put it out."

Then he turned and walked into the night.

I shut the door slowly.

Callie emerged with a shot glass in her hand.

I didn't ask. I just knocked back the whiskey.

The shot burned going down. Outside, thunder rumbled in the distance, low and rolling like something old had just stirred.

I didn't really believe in signs, but tonight Lady Luck had a cruel sense of humor.

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Chapter Three

Dust and Distance

A Few Days Later

Colt

I didn't mean to take the long way home. Not really.

But my truck had a mind of its own when I hit the bend past the feed store, and before I knew it, I was easing down Oak Hollow Road—slow, like a man with time to kill.

Like a fool with a ghost to chase.

Delia Walker, Tessa's mother's place, tucked behind a row of old cedars that had been leaning sideways since I was a kid. The porch sagged, the paint peeled in strips, but the place had heart. Always had, like its owner.

Parked right there in the side yard, bold as a thunderclap, was that flame-painted trailer.

Her trailer.

I let off the gas, coasting slowly, my heartbeat loud enough to drown out the hum of the tires.

Tessa hadn't left.

Hell, I'd figured she'd blow through town like always—leave some tire marks, light a few fires, and disappear. That was her way. Always had been. But Reckless —the car, not the bull—was still here. So was she.

I gripped the wheel tighter, thinking back on the last five years. I'd taken this detour more times than I cared to admit, always looking. Never seeing her. I told myself it was a habit. Muscle memory. A shortcut that wasn't. But the truth was, I wanted to catch her.

Just once.

And here she was.

I pulled over half a block past the house. Sat in Park with the engine idling, thumb tapping against the steering wheel. Could've kept driving. Should've. But my hand reached for my phone before I could stop it.

Delia's landline was still saved in my contacts, under Mrs. W. from back when I was too green to call her by her first name. I hadn't dialed it in years.

My finger hovered. Then pressed.

It rang twice.

"Hello?" The voice on the other end wasn't Delia's. It was sharper, younger, more tired.

My chest cinched tight. "Tessa?"

A pause.

"Colt?"

Her name in my mouth felt too big, too sudden. Her voice in my ear made everything else—sunlight, air, reason—fall away.

"Yeah," I said. "It's me."

Another pause. Then, cautious curiosity, cool and clipped. "Something wrong?"

"No. I was just... drivin' by. Saw your trailer."

I didn't add for the hundredth time . Didn't say hoping to catch you here . Just kept it neutral.

She didn't speak right away. I could almost hear her thinking, calculating.

"You're still in town?" I asked.

"Few more days," she said carefully.

"You free this afternoon?"

Silence again. Not uncomfortable, just heavy. Weighted with the past. With everything we'd never said.

"Depends," she answered.

I half-smiled. That was her. Always dangling the line just out of reach.

"I was thinkin' maybe we could go for a horseback ride. Catch up."

Another pause. I could hear a dog barking faintly in the background, maybe a neighbor's, maybe Delia's. I pictured her in the kitchen, barefoot, hair twisted up, arms crossed like a woman already regretting this call.

Then: "Yeah. Okay."

I straightened in my seat. "Yeah?"

"Sure. Where should I meet you?"

"I'll pick you up. Twenty minutes?"

"Make it thirty."

The line clicked before I could say another word.

I stared at the screen a moment longer. Let the silence settle before tossing the phone in the cupholder and putting the truck in gear.

She hadn't said no .

And after five damn years of watching the road behind me, that was enough to feel like a win.

Tessa climbed into the passenger seat like she'd done it a thousand times before.

Like no years had passed. Like no hearts had been broken.

She wore a simple black tank and a pair of worn jeans that fit like they'd been made

for her—dusted with road grit and confidence. Her boots were scuffed, the kind of scuffed that said she actually used them, not just wore them for show.

She looked good.

Too damn good.

She buckled her seatbelt and glanced over at me.

“What?” she asked, catching me staring.

I cleared my throat, shifting in my seat. “Nothin’. Just... wasn’t sure you’d say yes.”

She gave a half smile and looked out the window. “Me neither.”

And just like that, we pulled away from the curb, the past riding quiet between us.

She glanced around the cab—black leather seats, touchscreen console, that new-truck smell still clinging to everything like pride—and I caught the way her brow lifted just a tick.

"Fancy," she said, buckling her seatbelt. "This yours?"

I tapped the wheel. "Sure is."

She didn't say anything for a second. Just looked straight ahead as I pulled away from the curb. Her profile was the same—sharp jaw, lashes too long, a mouth that always looked like it was about to say something sassy.

"Does it come with a butler?" she asked lightly, voice teasing.

"Nope. Still make my own coffee."

"Huh. And here I thought you were just a simple cowboy."

I didn't bite. Just let the road unroll in front of us while I tried not to grip the wheel like it had wronged me.

About a mile down, I cleared my throat. "There's somethin' you oughta know."

That got her attention. She angled toward me slightly, the seatbelt creaking with the shift.

"Okay..."

I adjusted my grip. "Me, Rhett, Easton, and Sawyer—we hit the Powerball."

She blinked. "Like... The Powerball?"

I nodded once.

She leaned back in the seat. "Damn."

"That about sums it up."

A pause. Then her lips quirked. "Guess I missed the luck train by about five years, huh?"

I smirked, but my eyes stayed on the road. "You always said I'd be boring forever."

She chuckled under her breath. "Still might be. Depends on what you've done with it."

"Built Lucky Ranch."

That earned a full turn of her head. "Wait—you built it?"

"Yep. All four of us. Bought the land together and carved it up. Each of us has a house, barns, equipment, enough acreage to breathe without hearin' your neighbor sneeze."

Her brow rose. "That's... not nothing."

"No, it's not." I glanced over at her. "Last time you saw me, I was livin' in a tin can with a busted grill and a lawn full of regrets."

"Don't forget the crooked fence."

I laughed. "Never could get that thing straight."

She was smiling now, but there was something behind it. A flicker. Like she was trying to decide if I'd really changed, or if this was just a new coat of paint on the same worn-out wood.

"Well," she said, folding her hands in her lap, "guess you leveled up."

"Didn't do it to impress anyone."

"Didn't say you did."

The silence that settled between us wasn't awkward. It was loaded. Like both of us were remembering who we used to be—and trying to make sense of who we were now.

I slowed as we hit the turnoff. "You wanna come see it?" I asked casually. "The new place."

She didn't answer right away. Just stared out the window as we drove through the open gate.

"Biscuit's there," I added.

That did it. Her head turned, eyes locking on mine.

"She's really okay?"

"Still kicks the stall door if I don't feed her fast enough."

Her lips parted, and for a second, I saw something crack in her. Not weakness— care . Real, bone-deep care.

"Yeah," she said softly. "I'd like to see her."

I nodded, easing the truck up the asphalt drive, heart thudding harder than it had any right to.

And just like that, she was coming home with me.

The front gate of Lucky Ranch creaked open as I keyed in the code. Tessa went quiet.

I didn't blame her. My new place looked nothing like my old overgrown yard and beat-up trailer.

Cedar split-rail fences lined the drive. The barn was steel-roofed, wide-doored, with fresh paint and a new weathervane catching the breeze. The house behind it was

clean-cut, modern rustic with a wide porch and enough windows to drink in the view.

Tessa leaned against the door, eyes scanning everything. "This yours?"

I nodded. "Mine and the boys'. We each got a spread. But this one's where I set roots."

She gave a low whistle. "Damn, Colt. I remember when your porch was two stacked cinder blocks, a rickety swing, and your fence leaned like it had arthritis."

"Yeah, well... Powerball has a way of firming things up."

She gave me a side glance, half amused. "You don't say."

I parked near the barn. Just as I cut the engine, Biscuit trotted up from the pasture. Tessa froze.

The mare looked good—clean coat, sturdy build, that same easy sway in her gait.

She got out slowly and walked toward Biscuit like she was afraid to spook her. But the second the mare recognized her, she whinnied and stretched her neck out, nudging into Tessa's hands like she'd never left.

"Hey, baby girl," Tessa whispered, burying her face in the mare's mane. "Still sweet as ever."

I brought over a curry brush and handed it to her without a word. She took it and began brushing Biscuit in long, smooth strokes, murmuring softly like she used to.

"She never forgot you," I said.

Tessa paused, blinked fast, then kept brushing. "I didn't forget her either."

After a while, I motioned toward the barn door. "Come on. I'll show you the rest."

She followed me inside, her boots echoing on the concrete. I opened the tack room door, and she stepped in, fingers drifting across the clean saddle pads, bridles, and gear neatly hung on pegs.

"Smells the same," she said. "Leather and cedar."

"Still me underneath all the polish."

She smiled faintly, brushing her hand along a folded blanket. "You always liked horses better than people."

"Horses don't pretend," I said. "Don't twist things up."

Her gaze met mine. "Neither did I."

I swallowed that down.

"I've been training a new gelding—Windstorm," I added, needing to shift the air. "Local girl's got big plans. Kid's got potential."

Tessa nodded. "You still helping others chase dreams?"

"Gotta do something with all the money, right?"

She looked around once more, then back out toward Biscuit in the pasture.

"Nice barn," she said. "Feels like...you, but grown up."

"Million-dollar dirt still smells the same."

That got her to laugh, the sound cutting through something I didn't know I'd been holding onto.

For the first time in years, the silence between us didn't ache so bad.

I didn't plan on showing her the loft.

But when she lingered in the tack room, hand trailing over a bridle like she was brushing time itself, something tugged at me. Something old and worn but still stubborn as hell.

"Come on," I said. "There's something else."

She followed me up the narrow wooden stairs to the loft, boots creaking on each step. The afternoon sun slanted through the barn's upper vents, catching dust in the air like flecks of gold.

I crossed to the far corner and pulled back a faded tarp.

There it was. Same battered trunk I'd carried through two moves, a busted shoulder, and one long stretch of forgetting how to breathe without her.

I popped the lid.

Inside: rolled-up rodeo posters with her name splashed across the top in bold lettering.

A few old programs with her photo, mid-turn, reins tight in her fist, and fire in her eyes.

One newspaper headline—Montana State Finals, 2014.

And near the bottom, half-buried in a flannel shirt, a cracked photo frame.

Us at nineteen. Young, wild, and stupid enough to think forever was simple.

Tessa didn't say a word. Just knelt beside the trunk and picked up the photo, her thumb tracing the crack that split us clean down the middle.

"You kept all this?" she asked, her voice paper-thin.

I shrugged, crouching beside her. "Wasn't ready to forget."

She blinked fast but didn't look at me. Just stared into the past like it might tell her something she'd missed.

I stepped closer to the loft window, catching a glimpse of the winding road through the trees. "Why do you still have your trailer parked over at your mother's house? Thought you'd be long gone by now," I said quietly. "Didn't expect you to still be around."

Tessa's eyes were fixed on the photo in her hands without giving me an answer.

A beat passed before I asked, softer this time, "You never did say... why'd you name your dragster Reckless?"

She stiffened. That flicker of armor I remembered so well slid back into place.

She didn't answer that question either.

Didn't have to.

I watched her jaw flex, her eyes drop back to the photo, then to the hay-scattered floor.

I didn't push. Never got me far with her.

After a long beat, I stood and offered her a hand.

"You want to ride?" I asked. "Biscuit still knows your rhythm."

Her gaze flicked up. She hesitated, then slid her hand into mine.

Outside, I saddled Biscuit with practiced ease while Tessa brushed a palm down the mare's side, her touch soft and reverent, like she was greeting an old friend she never meant to leave behind.

Windstorm shifted under my hands, lean and restless, eager to move.

He was all fire and flash, while Biscuit was calm and rooted.

We mounted up without a word, nudging the horses through the paddock gate and out into the wide-open stretch of Lucky Ranch.

The land unfurled in front of us, lush with spring, the hills still damp from last night's rain. Birds darted from fence post to sky. The smell of fresh grass and turned earth hung thick in the air.

After a while, a low rumble rolled across the valley.

Tessa glanced toward the mountains. "Was that thunder?"

I squinted west. The clouds had gone dark at the edges, curling like smoke. "Looks

like a storm's comin' in hot," I said, watching the clouds billow like a bad omen.

Tessa lifted her chin to the wind. "Storms always find me, one way or another." Then, she smirked. "You think we can outrun it?"

I waited a beat, then grinned. "Only one way to find out."

We kicked the horses into a lope, Windstorm leaping forward like a shot, Biscuit stretching into stride beside him. Wind peeled past us, whipping Tessa's ponytail behind her like a ribbon of fire.

We rode hard across the ridge, laughter chasing us down the hill. The first drop that hit my cheek was cold and clean. Then another. And another.

By the time we reached the barn, the sky had opened wide and wild, dumping rain in sheets. Tessa slid off Biscuit and hit the ground laughing, soaked clean through, water dripping from her lashes and the curve of her grin.

I swung down beside her, boots squishing in the mud.

"You look like a drowned rat," she said, breathless.

I stepped closer. "Yeah? You look like trouble."

Her laughter softened into something warmer—something that slid between us and curled tight in my chest.

And just like that, she was in my arms. Wet but still laughing. Her hands curled into my shirt like they belonged there.

The storm raged on above us.

But at that moment, all I could hear was the beat of her heart against mine.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:00 am

Chapter Four

Reckless Hearts

Tessa

The barn smelled like wet hay, and the storm hadn't let up.

Rain still tapped steadily against the tin roof overhead, and our boots squished across the slick concrete floor.

My jeans clung to my legs, soaked clear through, and my tank top was plastered to my back.

Biscuit dripped water in thick streams, her sides still heaving from the run.

She stood patiently while I unsaddled her and ran the curry comb over her slick coat, steam rising faintly from her skin.

My fingers lingered longer than they needed to, circling behind her withers, smoothing down her flank.

Every motion felt like a memory. I didn't know if I was grounding her or myself.

Colt moved in quiet rhythm beside me, tying off Windstorm in the cross-ties without a word.

His shirt clung to every hard line of his chest, collar gaping slightly, hair wet and curling at the ends.

He didn't seem to notice the cold or the wet.

Just watched me from the side with a calm that always used to drive me crazy.

I broke the silence first.

"I leave tomorrow."

He didn't flinch, but something flickered behind his eyes. "Dayton, right?"

"Yeah. Race weekend." I focused on Biscuit's mane, untangling a knot that didn't really matter. "I've got sponsors to meet. Qualifiers."

"You sound thrilled."

I huffed a breath. "It's the job."

He nodded slowly, his voice low and steady. "You don't have to pretend it's easy to go."

My hand stilled against Biscuit's neck. "Nothing about this is easy," I said, quieter now. "Not you. Not this place. Not staying. Not leaving."

His eyes found mine. That old, quiet way of looking that made you feel seen and exposed all at once.

"Then maybe we don't overthink it," he said. "Just tonight. No promises. No expectations."

I wanted to say no. To keep my boots planted in the life I'd built far away from here.

Instead, I looked at him—really looked—and saw the boy who used to unload my horse at rodeos, who once fell asleep in the bed of my truck under a sky full of fireworks.

"Then let's not waste it," I said.

And I knew, right then, that nothing about tonight would feel small.

The rain hadn't let up. The sound filled the barn with a hush that made everything feel slower. Closer.

Colt opened the tack room door and stepped aside so I could enter first. The space was warm, dimly lit by a single bulb overhead, the walls lined with worn bridles and saddle pads that still smelled of cedar and horse sweat.

The floor was scattered with hay, uneven and soft beneath our boots. Familiar. Intimate. Too intimate.

I turned to say something—maybe to break the tension or delay it just a moment longer—but the words never came. My eyes met his, and it was like all that time we'd been apart collapsed in on itself.

I reached for him.

The kiss was soft at first. A slow press of lips that tasted like rain and five years of silence.

But it deepened fast. Colt's hands found my hips, then slid up my back like he couldn't quite believe I was real.

My fingers fisted in the damp fabric of his shirt.

I couldn't get close enough, not fast enough.

When he pulled back just slightly, his breath fanned across my lips. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. "Don't make me ask twice."

He smiled like he'd waited a long time to hear that.

Then he was pulling the saddle blankets from a low shelf, laying them out in layers on the hay-covered floor.

The scent of leather and dust curled up around us, grounding me and undoing me all at once.

I shivered—not from the cold, but from the feel of his hands finding the hem of my shirt and slowly tugging it upward.

He peeled the soaked fabric from me like he was unwrapping something fragile. His knuckles skimmed my ribs, reverent and warm. I couldn't look away from his face—how focused he was like every second mattered.

His voice was rough. "You still smell like clover and gasoline."

"And you still look at me like I'm the only damn thing that makes sense," I whispered.

We undressed each other in near silence, broken only by the soft scrape of denim and the shift of hay beneath our knees.

Colt's jeans hit the floor, and mine followed, tangled with boots and urgency.

His body hovered over mine, all heat and hard muscle, but there was nothing rushed about the way he touched me.

It was memory.

It was hunger.

It was home.

I pulled him down with a hand behind his neck, and our mouths found each other again, wetter this time, messier. The kind of kiss that left me aching even before it was over.

The saddle blankets cushioned my back, scratchy and familiar. His hands moved with purpose—calloused palms grazing my thighs, the dip of my waist, the swell of my breast like they'd never forgotten their path. I gasped his name, and it came out half-broken.

He froze, just for a breath. His eyes locked on mine like he was checking one last time.

So I said it again. Stronger.

"Colt."

That was all it took.

He sank into me with a groan so deep it rattled something loose inside me.

I arched into him, my nails pressing into his shoulders.

The tack room closed in around us—warm, close, alive.

Rain drummed on the roof. Hay scratched our skin.

And every thrust reminded me of what it had been like to belong to someone without ever saying the words.

He whispered my name like a secret between kisses. His body moved with mine like no time had passed at all.

Then, a nudge at the door.

A soft snort. A curious muzzle poking through the gap.

We both froze.

Windstorm—or maybe Biscuit—let out a breathy huff, nostrils flaring as she blinked into the room like she was personally offended.

We broke into laughter, breathless and wild.

Colt pressed his forehead to mine, still moving inside me, a grin curving his lips. "Think she wants in on the action."

"Tell her to get in line," I gasped, pulling him back down.

We kept going, chasing the rhythm that pulsed through us, drowning out everything else until the ache in my chest mirrored the electric high curling in my belly.

I came apart beneath him, clinging to his name as if it were the only truth left in a world gone hazy.

"God, Cowboy. I've missed you..."

Colt shivered. "Get it, Tess, get it with me."

His breath hitched as he filled me, a rush of heat surging through our intimate bond. I shattered alongside him—intense, electric, and utterly consuming—my body clenching around his in perfect harmony.

The tension that had coiled between us exploded in an exhilarating climax, leaving us both gasping for breath, our bodies spent and quivering from the aftershocks. I could feel the rapid thump of his heart against my skin, a primal rhythm that echoed the waves still coursing through me.

Afterward, we lay entwined on the damp blankets, our skin glistening with more than just rain. His arm draped possessively across my waist as he held me tight.

I gazed at the ceiling above us, lost in a haze of blissful thoughts while the storm outside began to settle. The raindrops danced against the window like a soft lullaby, each patter punctuated by distant rumbles of thunder that seemed to echo our shared satisfaction.

Colt shifted, brushing a kiss along my shoulder. "We were careful, right?"

I tilted my head toward him, lips curving.

"You remember us ever being careful?"

He huffed a soft laugh.

Then I added, quieter now, "I'm not taking anything. Guess I'm still a little wild and crazy."

His smile faded just enough for me to see something flicker—concern, maybe. Or something deeper.

But he didn't speak. He just kissed my forehead and splayed his finger over my belly possessively.

The ride back to my mom's house was quiet.

Not the kind of silence that begged to be broken, but the kind that settled in deep, like rain-soaked earth. The cab smelled like wet leather, hay, and something warmer. Him. Us. The echo of a moment I couldn't take back and wasn't sure I wanted to.

I stared out the window, watching the mist rising off the pavement as Colt's truck rolled slowly down the familiar road. My jeans were still damp in places, my hair curling from the storm. The seatbelt pressed against my chest, and I was hyper-aware of how close his hand was to mine on the console.

This was supposed to be closure.

One last night, one last kiss, one last time to tangle the sheets and untangle the ache.

So why did it feel like a beginning?

His fingers tapped the steering wheel—slow, steady, like a heartbeat. I didn't look at him. Couldn't. If I did, I might say something stupid like stay or don't let me leave again .

We turned onto Oak Hollow, and my breath caught when the trailer came into

view—flame-painted and still bold as ever, parked like a question I didn't have an answer for.

Colt eased the truck to a stop out front. He didn't kill the engine.

For a second, neither of us moved.

Then he shifted into Park and reached for the handle. "I'll walk you up."

I almost told him not to bother.

But I didn't.

The air was cooler now, rain-washed and thick with June. Our boots fell, muffled against the grass as we made our way to Mom's front porch. The sagging step groaned beneath our weight, just like always, just like nothing had changed.

Except everything had.

I turned to face him, arms crossed tight, trying not to shiver. Colt stood a little too close, hands shoved in his pockets, shoulders wet and glinting under the porch light.

He didn't try to touch me. Didn't lean in.

Just looked at me like I was something he didn't want to scare off.

"Goodnight, Tess," he said, his voice low. Solid. Like his hand on my back used to feel.

Something in my chest cracked open.

I swallowed. "Goodnight, Cowboy."

And for a heartbeat, my nickname on his lips and his on mine felt heavier than anything we'd done in the tack room.

Like maybe the past wasn't done with us yet.

He hesitated on the bottom step, then looked back at me in that slow, steady way he always did when he was trying not to push too hard.

"The Lovelace rodeo's in a few weeks," he said. "Figured you might wanna know. Pretty sure your mom wouldn't mind seein' you again before then."

I nodded, throat tight. "We'll see."

The screen door creaked as I slipped inside, careful not to let it slam. The house was quiet but not empty. Mom's bedroom light was off, and the door cracked just enough to hear her old fan clicking rhythmically through the silence.

The place smelled like cedar, and something simmered low on the stove earlier—maybe beans or leftover chili. The floors moaned under my boots like they remembered me. Like they wanted to whisper, Still running, huh?

I didn't bother turning on the lights.

Callie stood at the kitchen counter, digging through her purse with one hand and twisting her damp braid over her shoulder with the other.

She wore tight jeans, boots, and a fitted tank under an oversized flannel—casual, but definitely not staying in.

A hint of perfume floated in the air, floral with something sharper underneath.

"Keys, wallet, phone... where the hell—ah," she muttered, fishing out a tube of lip gloss and swiping it on in the reflection of the microwave door.

She looked over her shoulder as I stepped through the kitchen door, soaked, blushing, trying not to look like I'd just fallen off the edge of something I swore I wouldn't climb again.

One glance. That was all it took.

Her eyes dragged over me—windblown hair, shirt clinging in all the wrong places, jeans still wet and flecked with hay. She arched a brow, then smirked like she'd seen it all coming.

"Well, well," she said, slipping her gloss back into her bag. "Bathroom's open. You look like you got caught in a storm and liked it."

I shot her a glare as I passed. "Shut up."

She just laughed, pulling on a denim jacket and heading for the door. "I'm meeting the girls at Ropers. Don't wait up."

The screen door creaked and slammed behind her, leaving only the faint scent of her perfume and the flickering candle still burning on the kitchen table.

In the bathroom, I locked the door and leaned on the sink.

There I was.

Rain-drenched. Skin flushed. Mouth still tingling from Colt's kiss. His scent clung to

me—warm leather, woodsmoke, the kind of heat that didn't wash off easy.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

It was supposed to be a detour. A goodbye, not a return.

But my reflection didn't look like someone ready to leave. It looked like a woman holding a thousand what-ifs in her chest and not nearly enough breath to carry them.

I pressed a washcloth to my face.

Breathe.

Don't cry. Don't smile.

Just breathe.

Tomorrow, I'd leave again.

At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:00 am

Chapter Five

Whiplash

Three Weeks Later

Colt

Windstorm was antsy tonight with the rodeo jitters.

He danced in place while I adjusted his bridle, ears twitching, hooves dancing softly on the packed dirt. The big paint gelding always got a little wired before a run, but tonight, he felt extra wired—like he knew someone was watching.

Or maybe that was just me.

Kenzie stood off to the side, twisting something between her fingers, all dimples and lip gloss under her hat.

Her boots tapped out a rhythm against the stable floor—impatient but not nervous.

That girl had nerves like braided steel and a way of carrying herself like she was already wearing a winner's sash.

"You good?" I asked, giving Windstorm one last check.

She nodded, ponytail swinging over her shoulder. "Born ready."

Of course, she was.

She stepped up beside me and lifted her hand. A little twist of braided horsehair dangled from her fingers, looped through a silver concho. "Tied this from Windstorm's tail earlier," she said. "For luck."

I blinked. "You superstitious now?"

Kenzie grinned, eyes bright. "Only when I got something to lose."

Before I could say anything smart, she reached for my wrist. "Hold still."

I didn't move. Her fingers were quick, sure, warm against my skin as she tied the braid snugly around my wrist. It was light as air, but it felt like a brand—hot, noticeable, not something I could ignore.

"There," she said, stepping back to admire her work. "Now if I wipe out, you've got someone to blame."

I snorted. "You're not gonna wipe out."

Her gaze lingered on mine a second too long. "Good. Then maybe you'll wear that all night."

Before I could answer, I heard boots approaching behind us—slow, cocky, and far too familiar.

"Don't let me interrupt the love knot ceremony," Rhett said, tipping his hat back and eyeing my wrist like he'd just caught me with lipstick on my collar.

Kenzie laughed and headed to Windstorm, muttering something about warm-up laps.

I turned toward Rhett, already rolling my eyes. "Thought you were in the booth getting ready to announce the first event."

"Was." He cracked open a can of something cold and took a long swig. "But all that 'and she's around the third barrel' crap gets old. Figured I'd come down and check on my moody millionaire bro who's clearly flirting with the junior rodeo princess."

"She's not junior anything. And I'm not flirting."

Rhett raised a brow. "She just braided you a damn bracelet, Colt."

"It's a charm."

He grinned like he'd just won something. "Oh, excuse me. A charm. Next thing you know, you'll be making friendship bracelets behind the bleachers."

I didn't take the bait. I just rubbed the braid absently with my thumb and watched Windstorm circle slowly with Kenzie in the saddle, her posture tall and proud.

I wasn't looking for anything with her. Never had been. Kenzie was just a kid. But I had to admit—it felt nice. Having someone who looked at you like they believed in something.

Even if I didn't.

Rhett leaned against the fence post like he had nowhere to be, one boot crossed over the other, sipping his drink while the sky started bruising purple over the arena.

"You're quiet," he said finally. "Which means either you're thinking too hard or trying not to."

I didn't answer. Just helped unload another horse and kept my eyes on the dusk setting in.

Rhett let out a long breath. "She's back in town, you know."

I didn't have to ask who. My chest knew before my brain did.

"She's staying with her mom," he went on. "Callie said Delia's been getting worse. Confused. Forgetting things."

I nodded once. "Tessa told me. We've texted a time or two."

"And you told me you weren't gonna get involved." He took another swig. "Funny, considering I'm the one who sent them a Zelle."

My head snapped toward him. "What?"

He shrugged. "Callie gave me a sad-sack story. Said they were eating gas station burritos and racing on credit. I figured, what the hell."

"You bankrolled them?"

"Yep. Callie said Tessa was afraid to ask you."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "How bad is it?"

"She lost Daytona. Car's half shot. Says she's out of sponsor money, and the next race ain't for weeks. Needed money just to get home."

I closed my eyes for a beat. "So it wasn't a complete sponcership."

“Nope!”

“Tessa didn't tell me anything about it. I'm not a complete asshole,” I muttered.

"Yeah," Rhett said, "and that's the part that bothers me."

I looked at him.

"She's proud," he added. "But you think that woman would've come all the way back here, back to the memories, the ghosts, the goddamn rodeo dirt—if she wasn't desperate?"

I didn't answer.

He clapped me on the back. "Just think about it. Maybe you can help."

Across the arena, the lights kicked on. A ripple of sound from the crowd rolled up like thunder.

Rhett started heading toward the announcer's booth again. "Oh—and heads up."

I turned. "For what?"

He gave me a pointed look over his shoulder. "She's here. Just walked in behind the north bleachers. Wearing that jacket with the red zipper, like she used to."

My pulse stuttered.

I didn't look for her. Not yet.

But damn if my whole body didn't start listening for her footsteps.

Windstorm shifted beneath me as I gave the last tug on the cinch. The gelding huffed, hot breath curling in the air, ears twitching toward the clatter of hooves in the distance.

"Almost done, boy," I murmured, smoothing my hand down his damp neck.

"Colt!" Kenzie called, half-jogging toward me with her helmet tucked under her arm. "You good with the braid?"

I caught her wrist. "Hang on."

I slipped off the braided tail hair she'd tied on me earlier and looped it around her instead.

"This belongs with you now," I said, fastening it snugly.

"You've got this."

She smiled wide, nerves and fire all wrapped up in one. "Thanks, Coach."

Then—because Kenzie always had flair—she pressed a kiss to my cheek like she was giving me a special thank you.

I chuckled, swatting at her playfully. "Go before you miss your shot."

She swung up onto Windstorm with practiced ease, tightening her reins and heading for the start gate just as the announcer called her number.

That's when I saw her.

Tessa.

Leaning against the fence post like it owed her something. Arms crossed. Her old leather jacket was zipped up halfway; the red stripes on the sleeves were faded now but unmistakable.

Her eyes met mine—only for a second. No smile. No wave.

But I felt it like a punch to the sternum.

Kenzie whooped as Windstorm surged forward, thundering into the arena with a clean arc. The crowd roared.

I didn't look away from Tessa.

She did, though.

Her jaw tightened—just enough to see it. Then she turned on her heel and walked back toward the parking lot like she hadn't just seen another girl press her lips to my face.

And like it didn't matter.

But I knew better.

Because my chest was still burning from where her eyes had landed—and the part of me that still wanted her was louder than every cheer in the arena.

I barely registered Rhett calling Kenzie's time. Cheers echoed behind me, but all I heard was the sound of Tessa's boots pounding the dirt as she stalked toward the edge of the trailers.

Hell no.

I nodded to one of the wranglers who would look after Windstorm and Kenzie without a word and took off after her. She was almost to the corner, ducking into that shadowed strip between rigs and feed storage where the crowd couldn't see—where she probably thought I wouldn't follow.

She was wrong.

"Tessa."

She didn't stop walking. Didn't even flinch.

I caught up with her in four long strides and reached for her wrist.

She yanked it back. "Don't touch me."

I grabbed her hips instead.

She stiffened, but she didn't pull away. Not really. Just stood there, looking like the past had shown up in the flesh just to fuck with me.

"What the hell was that?" she snapped.

"You tell me. You came here just to glare and vanish?"

"I came here to watch a rodeo, not whatever that was." Her chin tilted toward the arena.

"Kenzie?" I barked a humorless laugh. "She's seventeen, Tess. I've known her since she was twelve."

"Oh please," she scoffed. "That little braid you slid over her wrist? The way she

kissed your damn cheek? Looked real professional."

I stepped in. Close enough to feel the heat rolling off her skin. "Why do you care?"

"I don't."

"Then why are your hands shaking?"

She looked down—and cursed. Her fists were balled, knuckles white. She tried to hide it, but I saw the truth flash across her face like lightning.

"You think I moved on?" I asked, voice low, rough. "You think I'm the one who left?"

Her breath hitched. Her lips parted like she wanted to throw something—words, maybe. Or a punch. But I didn't give her the chance.

I scooped her up in one motion—hands gripping the backs of her thighs—and she gasped, arms flailing for a second before she caught herself around my neck.

"Colt—what the hell—put me down?—"

"No."

I kicked open my trailer door and hauled her inside, letting it slam behind us. The sudden silence was deafening. No crowd. No horses. Just the sound of her breath, ragged and furious.

"You're out of your mind," she hissed, trying to shove me back.

I let her.

Her palms landed hard on my chest—and stayed there.

"You want to fight, Tess?" I growled. "Fine. But don't pretend like that wasn't jealousy back there."

"Go to hell," she whispered.

I stepped forward again. Backed her up until her spine hit the wall.

"I've been there," I said. "It looked a lot like losing you."

Her mouth parted again—this time not in anger. In hesitation. In heat.

She stared at me like she didn't know whether to slap me or kiss me.

And God help me, I wanted both.

"I hate you," she muttered.

"No, you don't."

And when I kissed her—hard, brutal, hungry—she didn't stop me.

She kissed me back like she'd been waiting to do it since the last time we said goodbye. Like maybe this was the fight.

I wasn't letting her leave again without knowing exactly where we stood.

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Chapter Six

More Than Muscle Memory

Tessa

My back hit the cabinets hard enough to rattle the dishes behind me. I didn't flinch.

He caged me in—arms on either side of my shoulders, body radiating heat, restraint coiled tight in every muscle. That old flame in his eyes had never died. If anything, it had been burning low, waiting for kindling.

I should've said something—anything.

Instead, I grabbed his shirt.

"You always were trouble," I whispered, but it came out breathy.

His lips curved, slow, and dangerous. "And you always liked that about me."

Then his mouth was on mine.

No warning, no hesitation—just teeth and tongue and too many years between us. I kissed him like I hated him. Like I missed him. Like the only way to breathe was through him.

His hands slid up under my shirt, dragging the fabric over my head and tossing it

aside without a second glance. I gasped when the air hit my skin, but it was nothing compared to the feel of his palms—rough and reverent—tracing over my ribs and back, thumbs brushing the underside of my bra.

I tugged at his belt. "Off. Now."

He chuckled, but there was no humor in it—just heat. "Bossy."

"You love it," I shot back.

He didn't deny it.

In seconds, we were a mess of limbs and denim, our boots kicked across the floor, a trail of clothes leading to the small bench seat where he sat and pulled me onto his lap like it was muscle memory. Like my body still belonged there.

I straddled him, my thighs braced on either side of his, every nerve in my body thrumming like a live wire.

"Tell me to stop," he said, voice ragged.

"I won't."

He stilled. Searched my face.

I didn't blink. Didn't back down.

"I don't want gentle," I said. "I want you. Just like this."

His eyes darkened, jaw clenched. "Careful, Reckless," he murmured. "You say that, I might not let you go this time."

"Maybe I don't want you to."

Then I kissed him again—hard—and there was no more talking.

Only fire.

I ground down onto him, slow at first—testing the limits of this moment, testing the way his breath hitched when I rocked my hips just right. His hands were everywhere—guiding, gripping, reverent, and rough all at once.

He watched me like I was a miracle.

Like I hadn't shattered his heart once and driven it cross-country with a race trailer behind me.

The bench creaked beneath us, the tight space forcing our bodies close, locked together. I braced one hand on the wall behind him, the other tangled in his hair as I moved—each thrust a strike of lightning across my nerves.

But it wasn't just the friction.

It was the memory.

Of backseats and backroads. Of motel rooms with peeling wallpaper and his mouth on my collarbone. The way he used to whisper my name when he thought I was asleep.

He grunted, low and deep. "Jesus, Tess..."

I leaned back slightly, letting him look—letting him see the mess he made of me. My hair stuck to my neck, my skin flushed and glistening, my breathing uneven.

He tightened his grip, hips rising to meet mine.

Then— smack —his hand landed on my ass, sharp and sure.

I gasped. Loud.

And then—God help me—I sobbed.

Not from pain. Not from regret.

From the way it cracked something wide open.

I didn't even know I'd been holding it all in until it flooded out—hot, raw, unstoppable. Tears slipped free as I moved faster, harder, chasing that edge like it was the last lap and the finish line was fire.

"You're beautiful," Colt rasped, voice fraying at the edges. "Messy, wild... God, you always did wreck me."

I bit down on my lip; a sob lodged in my throat. "Don't say that."

"Why?" he asked, gasping. "Because it's true?"

I couldn't answer. Not with words.

My body did it for me.

Pleasure snapped through me like a whip, sharp and all-consuming. My vision blurred. My pulse vanished into the thunder in my ears. I curled forward, forehead to his shoulder, clutching at his shoulders like the world was tilting.

He held me through it. Steady. Silent.

A few seconds later, he let go too—buried deep, a grunt pressed to the side of my neck, arms locked tight around my back like I might disappear again.

We stayed like that for a long time. Intertwined and trembling. His heartbeat slowing beneath my palms.

I wiped my cheek against his shoulder and whispered, "Sorry."

"For what?" he asked, one hand still stroking up and down my spine.

"For crying. For falling apart."

He shook his head, lips brushing my temple. "You didn't fall apart. You finally let go."

And maybe he was right.

Maybe I'd needed this more than I knew.

Not just the sex. The connection. The weight of someone seeing me. Touching me like I mattered. Like I was more than a name stitched on a racing jacket or a girl with gas station dinners and maxed-out cards.

I shifted, the sweat cooling on my back. "Colt?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm starving."

He laughed softly and kissed my collarbone. "Let me feed you, Reckless."

And for once, I didn't fight it.

Colt tugged on his jeans and padded barefoot to the little kitchenette like we hadn't just made a mess of each other on a vinyl bench.

I wrapped myself in his flannel shirt he'd tossed over a hook by the door. It smelled like him—cedar soap, diesel, sweat, and something warmer I couldn't name. My legs still shook when I stood, so I stayed put, curling up at the far end of the bench, knees hugged tight to my chest.

He pulled a skillet from a cabinet and rummaged through the mini fridge. "Eggs okay?"

"Perfect," I murmured.

I watched him move with practiced ease—cracking eggs, tossing butter in the pan, sliding toast in the little toaster oven like this was just any night.

But it wasn't.

I hadn't eaten a real meal in... hell, days maybe. A gas station taquito in Kentucky. A shared can of chili in Kansas. Half a protein bar yesterday.

The first scent of warm toast hit me, and my stomach actually growled.

Colt glanced over his shoulder, smirking. "Guess that answers that."

I smiled faintly but didn't reply. My chest still ached from earlier—for reasons I couldn't name. Maybe I didn't want to.

He set the plate in front of me and handed me a fork. I dug in like someone might take it away. It wasn't fancy—just scrambled eggs, buttered toast, a couple slices of bacon—but it tasted like a hug.

"Thanks," I said softly. "Really."

He leaned against the counter, arms crossed, watching me. "When's the last time you sat still long enough to eat something hot?"

I swallowed. "Don't ask."

He didn't push. Just waited.

Maybe that's why it all came spilling out.

"We lost Daytona," I said between bites. "Didn't even place. The engine's shot again. We've got just enough left to make it to the next race in Dallas... maybe. If we don't hit weather."

He nodded once, slowly.

I twisted the hem of the flannel shirt between my fingers. "If we don't find a sponsor soon, we'll have to sell the trailer. Use it to pay off the credit cards we've been living on."

Still, he said nothing.

Just listened.

God, I hated how good he was at that.

"I didn't come here for a handout," I added quickly, meeting his eyes. "I didn't even know I was coming until I did, and I'm leaving tomorrow."

He studied me a moment longer, then walked over and sat beside me, his thigh warm against mine. "I know, Tess."

I nodded. "It's just been hard."

"I never thought it'd be easy for you."

That almost made me laugh. "Funny. I always made it look easy, didn't I?"

"Only to people who weren't paying attention."

The quiet between us was thick, but not uncomfortable. I leaned into his shoulder, still chewing the last bite of toast.

He put his arm around me like it was the most natural thing in the world.

And somehow, it was.

Before I knew it, the plate was empty, and the edges of the night had started to blur. My eyes burned. My limbs were heavy.

I curled into his side without meaning to. He pulled a thin blanket from the top bunk and tucked it around me.

His voice rumbled low against my ear. "Sleep, Tess. Get some rest before you have to leave for your next gig."

And I did.

For the first time in a long, long while.

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Chapter Seven

The Line Drawn

Colt

By the time I finished brushing down Windstorm, the sun was sinking low over the ridge. He shifted under my hand, restless, flicking his ears toward the music starting to drift in from the house.

Kenzie's parents had gone all out to celebrate her eighteenth birthday.

A bonfire was stacked and ready, and string lights were strung like stars over the fence line.

Red solo cups were already in half the hands in the backyard, and the sound of someone firing up the karaoke machine early was deafening.

Windstorm had been stabled here for the last few weeks, ever since Kenzie's training schedule kicked into overdrive.

She needed daily access, and I figured it would be easier for everyone if he stayed put.

Normally, I'd have charged a handsome rental fee for one of my prize horses, especially one with Windstorm's record.

But hell... after hitting the Powerball, what was the point?

Didn't mean I handed over the reins completely. I still came by every day, made sure Windstorm stayed sharp, and made sure Kenzie didn't push him too hard. Not that she needed much coaching anymore. The girl had grit. Fire in her blood. But it wasn't just her riding that had me uneasy tonight.

Something about this whole damn party set my teeth on edge.

Windstorm snorted as I moved to his flank. "Yeah, I know, boy," I muttered. "Too much noise for your liking too."

The truth was, I needed the quiet. The rhythm of grooming, the scent of leather and horse sweat, the familiar feel of calluses against a curry comb—it gave my hands something to do besides ball into fists every time I thought about her.

Tessa.

Hell.

I could still see her from a week ago, straddling me in the trailer like she was riding out a storm she didn't want to outrun. But it wasn't the sex that hit me the hardest.

It was the way she'd cracked. Mid-thrust, mid-breath, mid-sob—whatever you'd call it. She fell apart in my arms like something had finally snapped loose. Like she'd been holding her whole damn self together with dental floss and denial.

And I'd held her. No questions. No fixing. Just... held her.

But it haunted me more than I wanted to admit. What kind of pain did she carry that she'd rather break in silence than speak it out loud?

I pressed my forehead to Windstorm's shoulder for a second, exhaling slowly. "Still gets under my damn skin," I muttered.

The sound of an approaching vehicle behind me made Windstorm jerk his head. I turned as Rhett's truck rolled in, country twang leaking from the open windows.

He jumped out, grinning like a man who'd already had two beers and was looking for trouble. "Don't say I never bring you anything, old man."

He tossed me a cold one. I caught it without much grace.

"Didn't ask for a party."

"You also didn't ask for Kenzie to turn eighteen, but here we are."

I shot him a look. He didn't flinch. Just popped the top off his own bottle and leaned against the stall door.

"Kenzie's not subtle, Colt," he said after a beat. "You're gonna have to figure out how to let her down easy, or she's gonna get hurt."

I didn't answer. Just turned back to Windstorm and ran a hand along his mane. The gelding flicked his tail and settled.

"She ain't Tessa," Rhett added quietly. "But that don't mean she won't try to be."

I clenched my jaw.

Kenzie was sweet. Eager. Talented as hell. But she wasn't the girl who'd kissed me with tears in her eyes and asked nothing from me but the space to fall apart.

She wasn't the girl who still haunted my nights, even after all this time.

"Let's get through the party," I finally said. "And keep your damn mouth shut."

Rhett chuckled and lifted his bottle in salute. "Your wish is my hangover."

As we walked back toward the lights and laughter, I felt that low thrum in my chest again.

Like something was coming.

Or maybe, something I hadn't finished with was already here.

The fire was crackling by the time I made my way back to the edge of the yard. Beer in hand. Boots planted just outside the ring of light. That's where I liked it—close enough to see, far enough not to be seen.

Kenzie's birthday bash was in full swing.

A couple dozen folks from the rodeo circuit, all loose-limbed and loud, circled the bonfire like it was a damn altar.

Someone passed a guitar, someone else passed a bottle.

The karaoke machine had mercifully died, but the stories hadn't. Too many lies wrapped in laughter.

And then there was Kenzie.

She was radiant tonight—tight jeans painted on, her boots kicking up dust as she flitted from group to group.

Her top shimmered under the string lights, and glitter dusted her collarbone like she'd rolled in stardust on purpose.

She was holding court, eyes bright, smile aimed to kill.

Every guy within a ten-foot radius was already a casualty.

I took a long pull from my beer, leaned against the fence, and looked anywhere but at her.

"You act like you're at a damn funeral," Rhett said, sliding up beside me with his own drink and a smirk that knew too much.

"I'm just tryin' to avoid a hangover," I muttered.

He snorted. "That ain't why your jaw's grinding like a fencepost in a hailstorm." He tipped his bottle toward Kenzie. "She's legal now, you know."

I gave him a look. "Don't start."

"I'm just sayin'. Girl's got plans—and you're in about half of 'em, far as I can tell."

I said nothing. Just stared into the fire like maybe the answer was buried in the flames.

After a beat, Rhett shifted, more serious. "Morris, Kenzie's father, mentioned something a while ago," he said, keeping his voice low. "Tessa is just scraping by in Dallas. Barely had enough to make the race. You knew that?"

My grip tightened on the bottle. "Nope."

"Well, she is. Morris loves to gossip. Lovelace is a small town, you know. Reckless needs a new tranny, and they're deep in credit card debt. Tessa's driving on fumes."

"She always was stubborn," I said, forcing indifference into every syllable.

Rhett laughed, but it wasn't mean. "You've got the loyalty of a damn hound dog, Colt. Even after she ran you over."

"She didn't run me over," I muttered.

He raised a brow. "Then what do you call leavin' without a word? You didn't even check in after?—"

"Drop it," I cut in.

He watched me for a second. Let it settle. "You're still in it, brother. Whether you like it or not. How many times have you two hooked up during her recent visit?"

"None of your business."

"You two are still stringing each other along."

I drained my beer and didn't answer.

Because he was right.

And that pissed me off more than anything.

Most of the guests had peeled off by the time I found my way back to the barn. The fire was still glowing low in the pit, and a few stragglers were laid out on lawn chairs or curled up in truck beds, but the noise had quieted down to a dull hum.

Out here, though, it was just me and the horses.

I hung Windstorm's bridle on the hook and ran my hand over his neck. He nickered softly, calmer now than he'd been earlier. The scent of leather and hay grounded me more than any of the cheap beer back at the house. I needed time to think—needed something honest.

The barn door creaked behind me.

I didn't have to turn.

"Kenzie," I said, already knowing the sound of those boots.

"Guess I'm gettin' predictable," she said with a soft laugh. "But I figured I might find you back here."

I turned then. She stood in the soft spill of moonlight and stable bulbs, her hair loose, makeup smudged just slightly from the heat of the fire and the dancing. A faint shimmer still clung to her collarbone.

"I just wanted to say thanks," she continued, stepping a little closer. "For helpin' me. Trainin' me. Believin' in me—even when I had no idea what the hell I was doing."

"You've earned it," I said. "You got grit."

She smiled at that. "I'm eighteen now, Colt."

I exhaled slowly. "Yeah. I know."

"I mean..." She rested her hand on the stall door. "I'm not a kid anymore. You see that, right?"

"Kenzie..."

She stepped toward me, voice dropping. "I think about you. When I ride. When I lay in bed at night. I want it to be you. My first."

She reached for the hem of her shirt, but I caught her wrist—gentle, but firm.

"Don't do that."

She looked up at me, confused, maybe even hurt.

"You've had a couple too many tonight," I said, trying to soften my tone. "And even if you hadn't, I'm not the one you want."

"I am sober enough to know what I want," she shot back, voice trembly but steady.

"I believe you. I just... can't be that guy."

She pulled away from my grip, arms folding across her chest, shoulders drawn tight.

"You're in love with someone else," she said, more statement than question.

I didn't answer right away. I didn't need to.

She stared at me a moment longer. "You should tell her."

My throat worked. "It's complicated."

Kenzie gave a short, sad smile. "Everything worth fighting for is. You think you're protectin' yourself by keepin' it all locked up, but you're not. You're just stuck."

I huffed, trying to laugh it off. "If you hadn't had three beers and a glittery birthday glow, you might've noticed you're too damn young for me. Tyler seemed pretty interested in you tonight."

She smirked. "Tyler's sweet."

"He's also your age."

She nodded, eyes softening. "Maybe I needed to hear that. And maybe you needed someone to tell you—go after her, Colt. Or you're gonna spend the rest of your life polishin' saddles in barns tryin' to forget what it felt like to love somebody like that."

I looked at her, this young woman who just hours ago had been a kid blowing out candles on a cake.

"Thanks," I said finally.

She leaned in and pressed a quick kiss to my cheek. "You're a good man, Colt. That's why I tried. And why you will still only be my coach in the morning."

Then she turned and walked out into the dark, boots falling in puffs of dust from the soft dirt, her silhouette swallowed by the light of the dying fire outside.

I stood there a long time.

Wonderin' why the right thing still felt like hell.

Wonderin' if maybe fate really did speak—just sometimes through the most unexpected damn lips.

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Chapter Eight

Borrowed Time

Tessa

The hum of engines and distant speaker crackle pulled me from a shallow sleep. My eyes opened to a shaft of sunlight cutting through the trailer's narrow window, catching on the chrome rim propped against the wall. We were back at it—Dallas. One more race. One more shot.

Callie was already up, clanging around like she was in a damn cooking show instead of a ten-by-twelve aluminum box on wheels. The smell of burnt coffee and motor oil filled the cramped air.

"You sleep at all?" she asked, chipper, too chipper, as she popped the microwave open with her elbow.

"Barely," I muttered, swinging my legs off the bed. My back ached from the unforgiving mattress and from carrying this whole operation on nerves and duct tape.

She turned, holding up two mugs like we were on vacation. "Today's gonna be different."

I gave her a look. "You say that every race."

"And one of these times, I'll be right."

I took the coffee, even though it tasted like burnt toast soaked in radiator water. "Transmission feels tight," I said. "We should push it while we've got the edge."

"Nope," she said, grabbing her tablet. "We baby that car today. Sponsors want consistency, not a burnout queen."

"If I baby it, we don't win."

"If you wreck it, we're done."

We stared at each other, the kind of silence settling between us when neither of us wanted to admit we were scared.

"This sponsorship only covers today," I said quietly. "If we don't win, we don't eat. You know that, right?"

I looked away and admitted, "If I weren't so damn stubborn, I'd ask Colt for help. But I just?—"

"I get it. Can't say I blame you," she said, her voice softer now, though she still wouldn't look at me. "But let's... not make today the day we gamble what little we've got left."

I set my mug down and pulled on my boots, the laces worn and frayed. Everything we owned was either patched, rusted, or barely holding together.

Callie still wore hope like a badge. But me?

All I felt was the clock ticking. Borrowed parts. Borrowed time.

The sun beat down on the blacktop like it wanted to melt every last ounce of resolve

out of me. I crouched beside the dragster, tightening the last lug nut with a growl of frustration that had nothing to do with the wrench in my hand.

"You'd better hold, baby," I muttered to the machine, brushing a hand along the polished fender. The paint was scuffed, the decals from three seasons ago peeling at the edges, but she still looked like a beast ready to bite.

This car knew all my secrets. She knew what it was like to start from nothing and scrape your way into someone's spotlight. She also knew what it felt like to fall hard and fast, leaving scorch marks behind.

"Miss Walker?"

I looked up to see a man in a crisp white polo and mirrored sunglasses strolling toward me. The temp sponsor rep. Hale Performance something-or-other. He had a clipboard and the kind of handshake that told you he'd never held a wrench in his life.

"We just wanted to confirm you'll be in lane four for the 2:15 heat," he said, glancing over his shoulder like I was a formality.

"And remember—this partnership hinges on visibility.

We're looking for grit, but we're also looking for podiums. Our branding package goes further if your car crosses the finish line first."

I offered him a tight smile. "So, no pressure."

He chuckled like I was joking, then walked off with a nod that felt more like a warning.

I exhaled, wiping sweat from my brow. Across the pit wall, a cowboy in faded jeans

and a hat leaned against the rail, arms folded. Something about his posture, the way his jaw set—it sent my heart shuttering. For one gut-shot second, I thought?—

But no. It wasn't Colt.

Just another shadow wearing the wrong boots.

I cursed under my breath and turned back to the dragster. Focus, Tessa.

Callie was off hustling God-knows-what with the other teams, trying to secure extra dollars from small donations. The noise of the track ramped up—announcers, engines, the pulsing crowd. It was all white-hot adrenaline.

I reached for my helmet, fingers closing around the edge.

That's when my phone rang.

I frowned. Only a few people ever called me on race day. I dug it out of my back pocket, my gut already sinking.

Mom.

I hesitated for half a second before answering. "Hey, Mama."

She didn't respond right away.

Then came her soft, uncertain voice. "Marge? Honey, is that you?"

My chest tightened. "No, Mama... it's Tessa."

A pause. Then a shaky breath.

"Oh... of course it is," she said, but her voice sounded far away. "You just sounded like your Aunt Marge for a minute. Isn't that funny?"

Funny wasn't the word I'd use.

"Mama," I said gently, ducking behind the trailer for a sliver of privacy. "Are you okay?"

"I can't find my Sunday shoes," she said, her voice wobbling. "And I told your daddy we'd be late for the potluck."

I closed my eyes.

Mom was getting worse.

And I wasn't there.

My fingers tightened around the phone, as if I might will her clarity back through the static. But all I heard was the rustle of her moving around the house, humming a hymn like she used to when I was a girl getting dressed for church.

"I'll call you tonight, Mama," I said softly. "Okay? Just... don't go anywhere."

She didn't respond. Then—"Love you, baby."

My throat went tight. "Love you, too."

The line went dead.

I stared down at the screen until it dimmed in my palm. Then I slid the phone into the pocket of my coveralls and leaned back against the trailer, pressing my head against

the aluminum like it could keep the ache from spreading.

I should be home.

I should be doing more.

But I needed this win. Not just for the car, not just for the sponsors, not even for me. If I didn't cross that finish line ahead of the pack today, there wouldn't be another shot. No more parts. No more entry fees. No more fake-it-til-you-make-it pep talks over cold gas station coffee.

No way to get back to Lovelace and figure out how to help her before it was too late.

The guilt crept in like an oil stain—slow and seeping. I hated that it took money to fix everything. Hated that love wasn't enough, but today, love had to wait.

I had a race to win.

The staging lights flickered yellow, flickering like the excitement inside of my chest.

I slid the helmet over my head, every breath shallow and hot. The world narrowed behind that tinted visor—just me, the track, and the ticking clock that could save or sink everything.

The dragster vibrated beneath me like a coiled beast. I nudged the throttle, feeling her hum through my bones. She wanted to run. She always did.

So, did I.

I stared down the strip, that long, straight promise stretching out like a dare. A quarter mile of judgment. A few seconds to prove I wasn't done. That I still had it. That

maybe I could keep this thing alive long enough to get home and fix what mattered most.

This wasn't so different from barrel racing.

Back when it was just Colt and me, dusty arenas, and late-night kisses behind the chutes. I used to live for the cloverleaf pattern—the way Biscuit and I became one solid blur of instinct and control.

This was the same kind of dance.

Only faster. Hotter. Louder.

I lined up, blinking at the light stack. Red. Yellow.

Green.

I hit it.

The launch slammed me back in my seat, the G-force stretching time itself. My hands were steady, feet tight. I didn't even think. I just moved—automatic, precise, ruthless.

The engine screamed like it wanted blood.

I hit second. Then third. My body was fire. My mind was ice.

Halfway down the strip, I could feel it—how good the run was. Every shift hit clean. No drift. No drag. Just speed and silence roaring louder than thought.

The finish line came up like it had been waiting for me all along.

I crossed.

I didn't even hear the announcer at first. Didn't register the explosion of cheers or Callie's scream behind the pit rail. All I knew was the number flashing on the LED board.

17.843 seconds. My best run this season. Maybe my best ever.

I ripped the helmet off and let the air slap my face. My hands were trembling. My throat burned from holding my breath too long.

But I smiled.

I actually smiled.

We'd won.

The dragster rumbled to a halt as I coasted down the end lane, the official waving me toward the return path. My heart still hadn't caught up.

This didn't change everything.

But it changed something .

Maybe enough to buy us time—to get home and finally fight for the things that mattered— before they slipped away for good.

The car clicked and groaned beneath me as it cooled, metal settling with the lazy rhythm of an engine that had given its all. I stood beside her, helmet cradled in my arm, sweat drying sticky along my spine, the Texas sun still throwing heat like it had something to prove.

Callie came barreling down the return lane, her boots skidding in the dirt. "Tess!" she shrieked, throwing her arms around me. "You did it! You freaking did it!"

I laughed and nodded. "I know. I can't believe it either."

"You smoked that lane! Girl, I swear, they're gonna talk about this run all damn week."

Her voice was loud, triumphant, but it faded as I looked past her—toward the stands, the fence line, the sea of strangers who'd seen the best of me today.

He wasn't there.

Of course he wasn't. Colt wasn't part of this world anymore. I left that behind years ago. But still... some quiet, stubborn part of me had hoped.

Maybe not for him to cheer. But just to know .

Back then, after a good ride—whether it was a perfect barrel run or just some small win at a nowhere rodeo—he used to wrap me in his arms like I'd just lassoed the moon. He'd murmur, "That's my girl," low and proud into my neck while the dust was still settling.

Now it was just me.

Me and Callie. Me and this one win.

It was enough. But it wasn't everything .

Callie tugged on my sleeve. "Tessa. Don't go all broody on me. This is huge."

I blinked the sting from my eyes and forced a smile. “Yeah. I know. I just...” My voice wavered. “He would’ve liked to see that run.”

Callie quieted. For once, she didn’t offer a comeback.

She just looped her arm through mine and nodded. “Then maybe you ought to tell him.”

The crowd noise dulled around us, swallowed by the rumble of engines and the slow return to business as usual. The moment—fleeting and raw—hung in the heat like smoke from an engine burn.

I slipped my hand into my back pocket and pulled out my phone before I could talk myself out of it. My thumb paused over his name.

Colt.

I tapped it and lifted the phone to my ear, heart thudding louder than the track speakers. It rang once. Twice.

Then came his voice. Low. Familiar.

“You’ve reached Colt Bennett. Leave it short or don’t leave it at all.”

The tone beeped.

I froze.

Then: “Hey. It’s me.” My voice cracked, softer than I meant it to be. “I, uh... I won. In Dallas. Thought maybe you’d want to know.”

I hesitated, lips pressed tight.

“I just—yeah. That’s all.”

I ended the call before I could do something stupid. Like say I missed him. Like ask if he ever thought about us.

We stood there a beat longer, watching the crew prep the next heat.

The high had slipped away. But for one second, I’d felt like I was flying.

Would Colt hear it in my voice and remember what that felt like too?

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:00 am

Chapter Nine

Ash and Grit

Colt

S unday mornings always started the same.

Coffee in a ridiculously expensive mug, black as sin. Two eggs scrambled lazy. Boots by the back door, coated in yesterday's dust. I liked the quiet. The kind that settled deep in your bones and didn't ask much from you.

Except today, it didn't sit right.

I leaned against the counter, cup in hand, watching the sun break over the hills. The TV murmured low in the background—some gospel station I didn't remember setting. It was race day in Dallas. I didn't need the calendar to tell me.

Tessa would be suiting up. Zipping into fireproofs. Sliding into the cockpit of that old beast she still called a dragster.

My fingers hovered over my phone more than once. Thought about texting her good luck. Just those words. Nothing loaded. Nothing messy. But hell, what was the point?

She didn't owe me anything. And I'd already said too much or not enough, depending on the day.

If she was ever gonna come home to Lovelace, it had to be because she wanted to. Not because I pulled her back with some half-assed text at seven on a Sunday morning.

I finished my eggs and scraped the pan clean, then tugged on my hat and headed out. I had feed to pick up before the store got crowded with weekend ranch hands.

As I passed through town, familiar storefronts blinked to life one by one.

The scent from the Lodgepole pines hung in the air, faint but steady.

It always brought back memories of being with my father, when he taught me how to ride.

As I rounded the bend past Dalia's place, something caught my eye—the roses.

Big old things, blooming wild in the side yard. Crimson and peach, curling heavy at the tips like they'd been left to grow without pruning. Her sister, Marge, planted those decades ago, back when Dalia still hosted backyard socials and kept jars of sun tea on the porch rail.

I slowed the truck just a touch. The gate was crooked again. Her blinds were still drawn. I made a mental note to stop by later just to check-in.

I pressed the pedal and moved on.

The feed store sat just off the edge of town like it always had—the sign faded, the parking lot half gravel, half guesswork. Joe's truck was already there—same spot, same old dent in the fender.

Some things in Lovelace never changed.

And some—well, some came back around whether you were ready or not.

The feed store bell jingled overhead like always—off-key, rusty at the hinge, but familiar. Smelled like molasses, hay dust, and old sweat. I took a breath of it and stepped inside.

"Colt Bennett," Joe called from behind the counter. "You're late."

"Isn't he always," Sawyer teased.

I smirked. "Ten minutes."

"Seen Tessa lately?" Sawyer asked.

I waved that off, already walking toward the coffee pot Joe kept on a hot plate next to the register. "Nope."

Sawyer clapped me on the back on his way out. "Well, nothing changes... if nothing changes. Looks like you need to make the next move."

Sawyer's words stung as Joe handed me a Styrofoam cup, no cream, no sugar—just how I liked it. "Got your standing order pulled already. They're loading it now."

"Appreciate it." I leaned against the edge of the counter, sipping. The coffee was strong enough to grow chest hair on a fence post.

Joe gave me a long look over the rim of his own cup. "Heard you were back to being local famous. Little Miss Kenzie's been runnin' barrels like her boots are on fire."

I chuckled. "She's got more drive than half the boys I used to train. Keeps me on my toes."

Joe's eyebrows arched. "That girl's been wearin' glitter since she was in diapers, and now she's got her sights on championships."

We stood in easy silence for a minute. Through the front window, I could see the younger kid from Joe's crew hoisting sacks into the back of my truck bed.

Then Joe got quiet in that way he does when he's about to say something that matters. "You heard about the new rancher moved in west of town?"

"Rancher?" I asked, taking another sip.

"Yeah. Bought up the old Miller spread. Fella's got money and ambition. Wants to raise bulls for the circuit. Good stock, too—talked about bringin' in Brahman crosses, maybe even some Mexican fighting lines."

I let out a low whistle. "Ambitious."

"Needs a consultant," Joe said. "Somebody local. Somebody who knows rodeo and breeding bulls from the inside out."

I laughed and rubbed the small of my back, feeling the old ache flare just from the thought. "Long as I ain't the one gettin' tossed again. Reckless did a number on me."

Joe didn't smile at that. "I remember. Took us a half hour to get you out of the dirt that night."

I nodded. "Yeah, well. Some lessons you only need once."

Joe leaned back against the counter. "Still. Art asked around. I told him I knew someone with the right kind of sense. Someone who understands both riders and bulls."

"You give him my number?" I asked, more out of curiosity than anything else.

"Not yet," Joe said. "Wanted to see if you were open to it."

I stared down into my coffee, watching it ripple. The thing about bulls—they don't care what broke you last time. They just want to see if you'll flinch.

"Tell him to call," I said finally. "I'll talk. No promises."

Joe smiled like he already knew that's what I'd say. "You've still got more to give than you know."

"Maybe," I said, draining the rest of the cup. "Or maybe I'm just too stubborn to quit."

We walked outside together. My truck bed was stacked and tied down neatly, bags lined up like soldiers. I tossed the cup in the trash and nodded my thanks.

As I climbed behind the wheel, he called out, "Colt?"

"Yeah?"

He shrugged. "You ever think about what it means that people keep comin' to you when they need something steady?"

I didn't answer.

Just tipped my hat and drove off.

Some things in this town never changed, but something was shifting. I could feel it.

It wasn't just the weight in my back.

I was halfway home, humming along to an old George Strait tune, the feed bags shifting just a little in the back when I saw it.

Smoke.

Not the kind that comes off a grill or a burn pile. No, this was thick, rising fast, curling black into the June sky—pouring out from the side window of Dalia's house.

I slammed on the brakes so hard that the tires shrieked. Gravel scattered as the truck fishtailed sideways, dust and panic tangling in my gut.

"Shit—Dalia."

I yanked the gear into Park and was out the door before the engine finished idling. Phone already in my hand, I dialed 911 with a shaking thumb as I sprinted toward the porch.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"There's a house fire," I said, breath already ragged. "Just outside Lovelace—Dalia Walker's place on County Road 12. Smoke's pourin' out of the kitchen window. She's likely still inside."

"We're dispatching a unit now. Can you confirm if anyone's in the house?"

"I'm goin' in to find out."

"Sir, wait for the responders?—"

But I'd already shoved the phone in my pocket and kicked at the locked door with my boot. Once. Twice. The third time it gave way, splintering inward with a groan.

The smoke hit me like a freight train—choking, hot, blinding. I dropped low, covered my mouth with the crook of my arm, and moved through the house, memory guiding me more than sight.

"Dalia!" I called, coughing. "It's Colt! Where are you?"

No answer.

Just the crackle of something burning in the kitchen and the low moan of the structure starting to protest.

I turned into the hallway and saw her, crumpled on the floor near the bathroom, gray curls fanned out like spilled cotton. Her lips were moving faintly.

I dropped beside her. "Dalia?"

Her eyelids fluttered. Barely conscious.

"Marge..." she whispered.

"Marge's been gone a long time," I murmured. "It's me. Colt. You're gonna be okay, but we gotta get out of here."

When I lifted her into my arms, a bolt of pain shot through my lower back so sharp I almost dropped her. The world tilted. My knees buckled. But I gritted my teeth and held on.

With each agonizing step, I stumbled through the smoke-filled living room, Dalia limp against my chest. Her breath was shallow and raspy, and my eyes burned. My lungs begged me to stop.

But I didn't.

Couldn't.

Outside, the air was clearer—but the sirens were still distant.

I couldn't wait.

I laid Dalia in the passenger seat of my truck as gently as I could manage, trying not to scream when the angle wrenched my spine again. I slammed the door shut and ran around to the driver's side, barely able to climb behind the wheel. Every nerve in my back was on fire.

I drove like a bat out of hell, windshield streaked with soot, one hand clamped to the wheel, the other bracing my side. My teeth were grinding, and my breath was shallow. But I kept going.

Half a mile down the road, red lights blazed in the rearview mirror. The fire crew. Too late.

I leaned on the horn as I passed them, flashing my lights. One of the firefighters recognized me—I saw his mouth form my name even as they rolled by.

"Hang on, Dalia," I muttered. "We're almost there."

She didn't answer.

But her chest still moved.

And that was enough to keep me driving.

Even if my back was screaming.

Even if the pain made the edges of my vision blur.

Even if something deep inside me already knew—this wasn't just about Dalia anymore.

It was about what happens when fate grabs you by the collar... and drags you back into someone's life, whether you're ready or not.

The fluorescent lights in the ER made everything feel too sharp—too clean. Like they were trying to scrub away the smoke, the adrenaline, the pain still curling like barbed wire in my spine.

A nurse pressed a cold pack to my lower back while I sat propped against stiff pillows on the exam table. I must've looked like hell, but I could only think about whether Dalia was still breathing in the next room.

"She's stable," the doctor finally said when he returned, flipping through a chart. "Some smoke inhalation, but she was lucky. You got her out just in time."

I nodded once, jaw tight.

"Unfortunately," he added, glancing over his glasses, "you weren't as lucky."

I gave him a look. "Doc, I've been thrown by bulls. I'll bounce back."

"You've slipped a disc. We'll do imaging to confirm, but I'd bet it's herniated." He looked almost apologetic. "You're going to need surgery."

The words hit like a quiet punch.

Not because I hadn't known. I'd felt the pop. Heard the way my back screamed on every step outta that house.

But hearing it said out loud—surgery—it meant downtime. No training. No riding. No pretending I wasn't still haunted by the last time my body betrayed me.

I exhaled slowly. "Well. That's just damn peachy."

He offered a sympathetic smile and stepped out.

The room felt too still. I leaned back and let the silence stretch, only now letting my hands tremble.

That's when I remembered my phone.

I pulled it from my pocket and thumbed it to life, expecting a missed call from Joe or Rhett.

But the notification waiting for me wasn't from either of them.

Voicemail: Tessa Walker.

My heart kicked hard in my chest.

I stared at the screen for a long second before pressing play.

Her voice filled the quiet.

"Hey. It's me. I, uh... I won. In Dallas. Thought maybe you'd want to know. I just—yeah. That's all."

The message ended.

I held the phone in my hand like it might say more if I waited long enough.

I should've called her this morning. I'd thought about it. Even reached for the damn phone.

But now?

Now life had handed me something else. Something I hadn't planned. Again.

Still, one thing was certain.

She'd reached out.

And fate... well, she had a twisted sense of timing. Because the fire, the injury, the message—it was all too close, too pointed.

Our lives were circling again.

Maybe it was a coincidence. Or the universe grabbing the reins, yanking us both back into the same damn orbit.

I didn't know how it'd play out, but one thing was clear.

Tessa wasn't done with me yet.

And I sure as hell wasn't done with her.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:00 am

Chapter Ten

The Turnaround

Tessa

I hugged Callie for working so hard to close this deal. Then we watched as the ink dried on the signature line, but the weight of what we'd just done settled a lot slower.

"There," I said, capping the pen and sliding the contract across the makeshift desk inside Hale Performance's trailer. "Signed, sealed, and officially too legit to quit."

Callie whooped behind me. "And broke no more, baby!"

Someone reached into the tiny fridge beneath the trailer counter and pulled out a dusty bottle of cheap champagne. The kind we used to joke about drinking when we finally "made it."

We both burst out laughing.

Callie poured some into the uneven paper cups and handed one to me. The bubbles frothed over the rim like they were trying too hard.

"I hope you guys pay on time," I said, holding mine up to the Hale crew.

"You can count on us," someone added, faux champagne cups held high.

The champagne was warm and tasted faintly of tires and metal, but I didn't care. For the first time in forever, we weren't running on fumes.

Hale Performance's deal wasn't huge by national standards, but it was enough to see us through the season. Enough to upgrade the trailer. Add parts we'd been duct-taping together for months. Enough to stop panicking every time we hit a gas station.

Enough to breathe.

We stepped outside into the late afternoon light. The track behind us shimmered with heatwaves and celebration, other racers toasting victories or plotting their next moves. But none of them had clawed their way here quite like we had.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Callie asked.

"That we might not have to siphon gas out of a lawn mower next week?"

She grinned. "That, and... we made it, Tess."

I nodded, but my smile faded quickly.

Because even in this high—this rare, golden win—my mind tugged at the loose thread I'd left back in Lovelace.

Mom.

"I need to call someone this week," I said quietly, running my thumb around the rim of my cup.

Callie didn't need to ask who.

"We've got room in the budget now," she said, sobering a little. "We can hire someone for your mom. Full-time care. Someone local."

I exhaled slowly, the idea as foreign as it was overdue. "Yeah. It's time."

A beat passed before Callie nudged me with her elbow, her voice softer. "Remember how she used to pick us up from cheer practice in that big old Bonneville? Always blasting Shania Twain like we were headed to a honky-tonk instead of a nail salon."

I laughed, the sound catching a little. "She'd march us into The Gloss Barn and tell 'em to give us 'something fierce.' Even when we were twelve."

"She made us feel like queens," Callie said, her smile turning wistful. "First time you mentioned Colt, she looked over her sunglasses and said, 'Watch out for that one. Quiet boys will wreck you if you're not careful.'"

"She wasn't wrong," I murmured.

"Nope." She looked at me. "But she was right about something else, too—you were born to run fast and burn bright. She knew it. So did I."

I swallowed the lump forming in my throat. No more excuses. No more pretending phone calls were enough.

Callie looped her arm through mine as we turned to head back toward our trailer.

The track buzzed behind us. The future stretched wide and paved with possibility.

And for just a second, I let myself believe I could outrun the past.

Soon, the sun was dipping over the raceway, casting shadows across the trailers and

asphalt. Everything had a hazy gold tint, like the end of a good movie. Callie and I walked side by side lost in thought.

The champagne still buzzed in my blood, or maybe that was adrenaline. We were quiet for several minutes, letting the noise of the track fall behind us, just the soft creak of metal cooling and the occasional shout from the pit crews in the distance.

Then Callie said it—soft, casual, but deadly.

"What about Colt?"

My heart thrummed in my chest, but I kept my pace even.

"What about him?" I said, tossing the words out like I didn't care. Like they didn't land heavy between my ribs.

Callie didn't take the bait. She just raised an eyebrow, lips quirking in that way she had when she knew she was pushing a bruise.

"You tell me," she said.

I blew out a breath. "I don't know. We don't talk."

"You sent him a message after the race."

"That was just..." I trailed off, shrugging. "I don't know. Habit. He used to be there for stuff like this."

Used to be.

That phrase hit harder than I meant it to.

Callie didn't say anything for a beat, then stopped walking. "Be honest. Before Hale called—before the check—was going home your backup plan?"

I hesitated. Then nodded, just once.

"Yeah."

"And now?"

"Now I've got options," I said. "We've got options. This changes everything."

But even as I said it, the words tasted strange in my mouth. I had fought so hard for this win. For a chance to write my own damn ending. And yet... a piece of me still looked back.

"You think you can move on without ever knowing?" Callie asked gently. "Without ever finding out what's still there—or what's not?"

I hated how much that question got under my skin. I shook my head, half-laughing. "He's Colt. He'll always be there. That's who he is."

But the second the words left my mouth, I knew I didn't believe them anymore.

People changed. People left. Even the ones who swore they never would.

We started walking again. The Hale trailer faded behind us. The sun was almost gone now, just a burnished edge along the horizon.

I pulled my phone from my back pocket, thumb already swiping up.

"I told Mama I'd call her tonight," I said, more to myself than to Callie.

She just gave me a small smile. "You always do."

Callie unlocked the trailer door, balancing a box of leftover energy drinks on one hip. "She's probably sittin' out back with a glass of sweet tea, watchin' the sun do its thing."

"Yeah." I hit her contact and brought the phone to my ear, listening to the rings echo in the quiet.

No answer.

Not even a voicemail this time.

I frowned but didn't panic. "She probably left the phone inside again."

Callie ducked into the trailer. "Told you. Porch swing and sunset. She'll call when she finds it."

I stayed outside a second longer, phone still in hand, thumb hovering over the screen. The quiet was heavier now. The afterglow of the champagne toast had worn off, and something cold had crept into its place.

Then my phone lit up again.

Colt.

My heart fluttered.

He never called. Texted, sure—once or twice. But a phone call?

I answered before the second ring.

"Colt?" I said, breath hitching.

Only it wasn't his voice.

"Hi, is this Tessa Walker?" a woman asked, professional and calm. Too calm.

"Yes," I said slowly. "Who is this?"

"This is Nurse Davidson from Lovelace Regional Hospital. I'm calling on behalf of Colt Bennett."

Everything inside me went still.

The nurse kept talking, her voice like static in my ears.

"There was a house fire at your mother's residence earlier this evening. Colt found her inside and brought her to the hospital. She's stable now, resting. But Colt... he injured his back carrying her out."

My knees buckled. I dropped onto the bottom trailer step.

"He insisted we call you," the nurse added. "Refused any treatment until we got you on the line."

"What—how bad is it?" I whispered.

"He's in the ER now. They're evaluating him for a slipped disc or worse. He's in pain, but he's conscious. Very concerned about your mother. And you."

I nodded even though she couldn't see me. "Can I... talk to him?"

"We're about to take him for imaging. The doctor can speak with you in a few minutes if you'd like to stay on the line."

"No... that's okay. Just—tell him I'm coming."

I ended the call and just sat there, staring at nothing.

Callie appeared in the doorway. "Tess?"

I looked up.

She took one look at my face and put the box down. "What happened?"

"There was a fire," I said, voice brittle. "At Mama's. Colt got her out, but he hurt himself. He's at the hospital."

Callie's eyes widened. "Is she okay?"

"She's stable. He's... not great."

I stood, legs shaky but locked in purpose now.

"We're going back."

Callie didn't argue. She just grabbed her keys, and we hitched the trailer to the truck. Then, I climbed into the passenger seat without looking back—until the engine fired and the rearview mirror caught one last glimpse of the racetrack behind us.

All the noise, the speed, the thrill of the win—it felt far away now.

I turned to Callie and picked up my phone. "I'm calling Hale Performance and telling

them I'm cancelling the contract."

The season could wait.

Some races weren't meant to be run alone.

Chapter Eleven

The One Who Stayed

Colt

The edges of the world came back in pieces.

First, the weight in my limbs. Then, the stiff pull in my lower back was anchored deep and hot like someone had welded metal to my spine. My throat was dry. My head swam. The hum of machines and the occasional beep filtered in like a half-remembered song.

For a second, I thought I was dreaming.

She was there—Tessa. Sitting in the chair beside my bed, her frame curled into itself, chin tucked, eyes heavy. She wasn't crying. Just... quiet. Still. Her arm was slipped through the gap in the side rails, her hand wrapped around mine like it belonged there. Like it had never let go.

Her scent hit me before my vision fully cleared. Soft and sharp all at once—vanilla with that bite of cedar she always wore. That scent used to linger on my jacket long after she'd stolen it for the weekend. Smelling it now, here, beside a hospital bed, it just about leveled me.

I shifted, trying to speak, but a grunt escaped instead.

Her head snapped up. "Colt?"

I nodded slowly. "Hey."

Tessa let out a shaky breath like she'd been holding it since the moment she got the call. Her eyes were rimmed in red, not quite from crying—more like from not sleeping. She looked tired, older somehow. Sad. And maybe... scared.

"Your mom?" I rasped, my throat dry as dust.

She gave a slight nod, her voice tight. "Mom's stable. They're giving her breathing treatments. She's gonna be okay."

I closed my eyes for a beat, letting that sink in. Relief spread through my chest like a crack in solid ice. "Good," I whispered. "That's real good."

"And you?" I asked, opening my eyes again. I didn't mean the usual how-you-holding-up kind of thing. I meant it deeper. The kind of asking that only comes when you still remember the way someone talks in their sleep or how they stir cream into their coffee.

She gave a ghost of a smile. "I've been better."

We both knew that was an understatement.

She looked down at our joined hands like the words were hiding there. "I—Colt, I need to know. What happened? How did you even—why were you there?"

I tried to sit up, instinct mostly, but my back pulled like someone had tied a rope around my spine and yanked hard. I winced and eased back against the pillows.

"Same as every other Sunday," I said, voice rasping less now. "I went to get feed at Joe's, came back through town like I always do. Passed by your mom's and saw smoke coming out of the kitchen window. I slammed on the brakes, jumped out, and started banging on the door. Nothing."

Tessa's gaze didn't flinch. It was locked on mine like she needed the truth steady and straight.

"I kicked the door in," I said. "Ran through the house. Smoke was thick by then. Found her on the bathroom floor."

I swallowed. My chest ached with the memory.

"I picked her up," I went on. "Tried to move fast, but I didn't even make it down the steps before my back gave out."

Her lips parted, but no sound came.

"It was the old injury," I added quietly.

"You remember, back at the San Antonio Rodeo?" Tessa squeezed my hand.

"A while back, the doctor told me there was scar tissue crowding around a disk.

Guess all it took was the right kind of strain to blow it out.

" I shook my head. "Hell of a time to prove him right. "

The corners of her mouth quivered. Her fingers—still threaded through mine—tightened.

"I should've said something sooner," I murmured. "Guess I figured... if I said it out loud, it'd make me less of what I used to be."

Tessa didn't speak. She didn't have to.

Because of the way she looked at me—soft, like she was seeing the past and present at the same time—I knew she remembered who I used to be, too.

And for the first time since she returned to Lovelace for the race, I let myself believe maybe she hadn't stopped caring.

She was here.

And that had to mean something.

A soft knock preceded the squeak of the door, and a nurse stepped in, her scrubs the color of mint gum and just as cheery. She gave Tessa a kind nod before turning her attention to the machines humming around my bed.

"Good afternoon," she said quietly like I might break if her voice was too loud.

"Or whatever time it is," I muttered, wincing as she adjusted something on the IV pole.

Tessa stood and moved aside so the nurse could get a better angle. Her fingers brushed mine before she let go, and I felt the absence like a chill.

"Vitals are steady," the nurse said after a quick glance at the monitor. "How's the pain?"

"Manageable," I said. "If I don't try anything dumb."

She smiled, clearly not new to stubborn men. "We'll be upping your meds shortly. Just enough to help you rest, not enough to make you loopy again."

"Again?" I asked.

Tessa chuckled softly. "You had a name for your IV pole earlier."

I groaned.

"You called it Twinkle Toes."

The nurse laughed under her breath, then glanced at Tessa. "I saw you with your mother earlier. I'm glad you got to check on her."

Tessa's smile dimmed. "Yeah... I meant to ask—how long will she need to stay?"

The nurse's face shifted just enough to say this wasn't the first time she'd had to give this kind of answer.

"That's going to be up to Helen, our caseworker, and the doctors. A few key topics will need to be discussed, including ongoing care, safety at home, and supervision. The caseworker will speak with you before your mother's discharge is planned."

Tessa hesitated, then added, "Mom's house burned to the ground."

That stopped the nurse in her tracks. "Oh... I'm so sorry."

Tessa nodded once, her jaw tight. "We've got the trailer for now, but it's... a lot."

The nurse's voice softened. "All the more reason for the caseworker to walk through the options with you. We'll make sure she's safe."

Tessa gave a tight, polite nod. “Thanks.”

The nurse patted the end of the bed gently, like I was a good boy for not dying, and left us alone again.

Tessa sat back down and exhaled, like the weight had settled on her shoulders again now that no one else was watching.

"I tried to call you," she said quietly. "It's official. Hale Performance offered me a full-season deal. It's solid. Best numbers I've ever seen."

She paused, her fingers twisting in her lap.

"I turned it down."

That made me look at her—really look.

She didn't meet my eyes. Just kept staring at a crack in the floor tile like the truth might crawl out of it if she focused hard enough.

"I'm done, Colt," she added, barely above a whisper. "I've decided to quit. Walk away from the circuit. For good."

The words hung between us, heavier than they looked.

"That's... big," I said finally. "You sure?"

She gave a faint nod, her lips pressing into something that wasn't quite a smile. "It means I can stay close. No more hoping my mother will get better while I'm off chasing races. I need to be with her."

Still, she wouldn't look at me. And something in her voice—it didn't sit right. Not completely.

I reached out and let my fingers brush over hers.

And just like that, I felt it again.

That little twist in my gut.

The one that told me there was more coming.

And that whatever she was trying to bury—wasn't going to stay buried long.

I didn't speak right away. Just watched her. Took in every small tell.

The way she pressed her palms flat against her thighs. The way her knee bounced, like her body hadn't gotten the memo that she was "done" chasing speed. The way her eyes kept dodging mine.

"You said you're quitting," I said, keeping my voice low. "But you didn't say it like you meant it."

Her eyes flicked to me, then away just as fast.

"I meant it," she said.

"No," I murmured. "You practiced it."

That earned a soft puff of breath—more sigh than laugh. But it wasn't amusement I saw in her. It was something closer to guilt. Or maybe grief.

"Tessa," I said, her name like an anchor. To keep her here. Not drifting into that space where she shut everyone out.

She straightened, defensive now. "Colt?—"

"You love the track," I said, cutting gently across whatever excuse she had loaded up. "Always have. You live for the rush. The speed. Winning one heat at a time. Hell, you left me for it."

That hit. She flinched—just barely—but I caught it.

Her gaze dropped again as she started messing with the cuff of her jacket. "It's not that simple."

"Didn't say it was. Doesn't make it untrue."

Her hands stilled. "Some races... cost too much."

That landed deep. I felt it in my ribs like a bruise I hadn't noticed until someone pressed on it.

I could've let that be the end. Could've nodded and moved on.

But if we were ever going to be real again, I had to press just a little harder.

"You still light up when you talk about engines," I said gently. "Even now—when you told me about Hale—you didn't sound tired. You sounded alive."

She didn't respond.

So, I kept going.

"You think you're done. But it's in you, Tess. Always has been. It's in the way your hands move when you talk gear ratios. The way you still check your mirrors when you're not even driving. That kind of love doesn't just fade."

She let out a long breath as if I'd cracked something open that she wasn't ready to look at yet.

"You don't know what it's taken," she said. "To walk away."

"I know enough," I said quietly. "I know what it's like to pretend you don't need the thing you built your whole damn world around."

She finally met my eyes.

And there it was—every bit of it. The pull. The ache. The war she was still fighting inside.

She wanted to be done.

But she wasn't.

And I wasn't sure which part of that scared her more.

We stayed like that—stuck in something fragile and unfinished. Like neither of us wanted to say what came next.

Because we'd never been good at next.

Especially not with each other.

Tessa shifted, then stood, brushing her palms on her jeans. "You hungry?"

I arched a brow. "Starving. But unless this place is hiding a five-star chef behind curtain number two, I'm not exactly holding my breath."

Her mouth curved just a little. "What do you want?"

"Pizza," I said without hesitation. Then I added with a grin, "And a beer."

She rolled her eyes like I'd said something outrageous. "Not a chance on the beer, cowboy. But I'll see what I can do about the pizza."

She pulled out her phone and tapped a delivery app. Tessa could always order takeout faster than she could start a car. "Still like pepperoni?" she asked.

I gave her a look. "You serious?"

She smirked. "Just checking. People change."

"Not where it counts."

That earned me a glance I couldn't quite read. But she didn't argue.

Twenty minutes later, a kid barely old enough to shave showed up at the door with a greasy box and a single sweating cup of soda. Tessa tipped him, then turned to me with a half-apologetic shrug.

"One Coke. That's it. There was supposed to be two. Hope you're feeling generous."

I chuckled. "Just like old times."

She pulled the rolling tray table closer and popped open the box, the scent hitting me like a freight train full of memories. Greasy, hot pepperoni. Cheese that would burn

your mouth if you didn't wait. Crust that could kill a diet in one bite.

Perfect.

We dug in without ceremony with the hospital tray hovering over my lap.

I shifted just enough to grab a slice, trying not to jostle the IV taped to my arm.

Tessa sat beside the bed, close enough that our arms brushed every so often.

She handed me the Coke, then snatched it right back for the first sip with a smirk.

I didn't even protest—just held out my hand until she passed it back like we'd done a hundred times before.

"Remember that time in Billings?" She asked, around a mouthful. "We got stuck overnight after that regional rodeo and ate two large pizzas in the back of your truck."

I laughed, nearly choking on cheese. "Pretty sure you ate one and a half of those yourself."

"Please. I had to keep up with your metabolism back then."

We kept eating, trading stories, and laughing in between bites. It wasn't loud laughter—more like those soft chuckles you let out when something hits you just right. Familiar. Easy.

For the first time in days, I felt almost okay.

Almost.

Because beneath the warm crust and carbonated sugar and her effortless smile... there was still something else. Something quiet. Sweet.

She hadn't looked at her phone since the order. Hadn't checked her messages. Hadn't said what she was doing after this.

And I hadn't asked.

We finished off the last slice without speaking. She handed me the cup for one final sip, and I made a show of draining it, even though there was barely anything left.

"You always do that," she said, grinning.

"Do what?"

"Leave me nothing but ice."

I shrugged, licking sauce from my thumb. "Tradition."

She leaned back in her chair, arms crossed, smile lingering but eyes thoughtful.

And just like that, I felt the moment start to slip. Like the good parts of us were always on a timer.

Still, for a little while, we'd found it again. That rhythm. That space where we didn't have to say anything big to mean something real.

And even if it didn't last, I wasn't about to take it for granted.

Not this time.

Tessa stood and brushed pizza crumbs off her jeans, grabbing the empty box and Coke cup with the other hand. She looked lighter than when she'd first walked in—still tired, yeah, but not so tightly wound.

She moved toward the door, and something in me tugged. I wasn't ready for her to go.

"Hey, Tess?"

She turned; her fingers still curled around the doorknob.

I tilted my head on the pillow. "You ever think about going back to barrel racing?"

That made her blink. Then blink again.

I shrugged a little. "Just sayin'. Might scratch the itch. You've always been dangerous with a fast horse and a tight turn."

Her mouth pulled into a slow grin. "You trying to get me trampled, Bennett?"

"Not if you stay on," I said, smirking. "You were damn good at it."

She laughed—genuine and from the gut—and shook her head. But she didn't dismiss it outright. Instead, she gave me a look I hadn't seen in years. A spark of something... thoughtful. Curious.

Tessa returned to my bedside and leaned down, her hand resting lightly against the side rail, and kissed me.

It wasn't one of those chaste, be-good-while-I'm-gone kisses. No, this was slow and certain, with a warm press of lips that said everything she wasn't ready to voice. Sexy and sweet. Familiar in all the ways that counted.

When she pulled back, I caught her hand for half a second longer. Just enough to let her know I wasn't letting go easy this time.

"I'll be back tomorrow," she said, her voice softer now.

And damn, if that didn't sound better than any pain meds they'd given me.

I watched her walk out, the door clicking gently behind her.

She was still good at leaving.

But this time, she promised she'd come back.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:00 am

Chapter Twelve

Halfway Home

Tessa

I woke to the faint clatter of silverware and the hiss of the gas stove lighting—the smell of instant coffee filtered through the small trailer like a peace offering.

Callie was already up, tiptoeing around the kitchenette, wearing the same tank top from yesterday and her favorite flannel pajama pants with faded steer heads.

“You want first crack at the bathroom?” she asked without looking back.

“Thanks, but I think I’ll sip on my coffee first.”

She poured a second mug and handed it over. “Brave woman.”

I slipped on yesterday’s hoodie and ducked out the door, coffee in hand.

Outside, the morning air still held a chill, but the sun was bright and getting brighter.

We’d parked the trailer in Rhett’s side yard, wedged between his fancy hot tub and new barn.

He’d strung an extension cord and a hose across the grass like it was nothing—hospitality, Rhett-style.

No speeches. No pity. Just the practical kindness of a man who still remembered what survival looked like.

Callie joined me at the picnic table in the yard. We sat across from each other, sipping quietly.

“You know what’s wild?” she said after a while. “This time last week, we were in Dallas.”

I gave a dry laugh. “This time last week, we were millionaires in our heads.”

“Well, we’ve still got a few thousand. That’s got to count for something.”

It did. We had parked Reckless at Rhett’s garage, next to his antique car collection, on a trailer with wheels that hadn’t fallen off.

We have enough money left over from the prize purse to keep food on our table for the foreseeable future.

However, it was a stark contrast to the season we had envisioned.

She grinned but didn’t meet my eyes. “I applied at the grocery store yesterday. Cashier gig, just part-time until we figure out the next move.”

“You didn’t have to?—”

“Yes, I did.” Her tone was gentle but firm. “We’re not living on dreams anymore, Tessa. We’ve got to be smart with what’s left.”

I let that settle. She wasn’t wrong. I had my appointment with Mama’s case manager at eleven. Depending on how that went, everything could shift again.

“You want me to drive you?” she asked.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

We sat for a moment, sipping. Birds chirped somewhere in the trees, unaware that a block away, my childhood home was now just blackened beams and ash. Every time we drove past it on the way to Rhett’s spread on Lucky Ranch, I felt my stomach tighten like a fist.

Callie glanced sideways. “Have you stopped by the house...?”

I shook my head. “Not yet.”

She didn’t push.

Instead, she let the silence stretch, then broke it like she always did—with humor like duct tape. “Guess it’s a good thing we never bought those throw pillows off Etsy.”

It hit me sideways, that laugh. Quick and startled, right from the chest.

“Those ridiculous ones with the embroidery?”

““Live. Laugh. Lug Nuts,”” she quoted solemnly.

I snorted, and she beamed like she’d won something. Maybe she had.

We sat there a little longer, the sun climbing above the trees, warming the metal trailer behind us. For a second, we could almost pretend we were just two friends on a camping trip. No fire. No hospital. No decisions that felt too big for either of us.

But the weight was still there.

Just tucked beneath the laughter, lingering.

The hospital conference room was small, with beige walls and a round table that tried its best to feel warm. It didn't succeed. Nothing in this place ever really did.

Helen was already there, seated with a slim folder open in front of her. She stood when I walked in, offering a kind smile and a hand that was both steady and soft.

"Tessa. I'm glad you could make it."

"Wouldn't miss it," I said, though part of me wished I could've.

She motioned to the chair across from her and waited until I sat before easing back down herself. The folder remained open, a quiet weight between us.

"I'll get right to it," Helen said gently. "Your mother's recovering well from the smoke inhalation, but she has pneumonia. It's mild but enough to keep her here for a few more days."

I nodded. That much I expected.

"But there's something else," she continued. "We've run a cognitive assessment based on the symptoms you described in her chart—the confusion, the memory lapses, the repetitive stories."

My stomach tightened. I braced myself.

"She's showing signs of early-stage dementia. We can't say how fast it will progress, but her doctors are confident in the diagnosis."

I blinked. Nodded again. Tried to swallow around the ache building in my throat.

“She can’t live alone,” Helen added. “Not safely.”

I stared at the folder. “Okay. What... what are the options?”

“Well, there’s some good news,” she said, tapping the top sheet. “Your mother qualifies for a clinical trial involving a new memory drug. It’s still early in testing, but results so far are very encouraging.”

Hope flared. Thin, but real.

“She’d receive the medication, monitored here at the hospital initially, then by a certified provider wherever she’s placed. There’s no cost to you—if you’re willing to consent on her behalf, we can start as early as tomorrow.”

“Placed,” I repeated, as my head began to spin.

Helen’s eyes softened. “Tessa... she won’t be able to return to the life she had before.”

I bit my bottom lip as the room seemed to shift on its axis.

Helen grabbed my hand. “Tessa, are you feeling well? Your face just turned pale.”

I shook it off and nodded, “Yes. It’s just a lot to take in. The problem is, Mom doesn’t have a home to go back to,” I said. “The fire took it. Everything.”

Helen’s features morphed into quiet empathy. She didn’t try to smooth it over. She didn’t offer platitudes. Just let the moment hang.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah,” I whispered, blinking hard. “Me too.”

We sat there in that stillness, and for the first time since all this began, I felt the grief settle, not like a wave, but like roots wrapping around my ribs.

“I can help with placement,” Helen said. “Rehab facilities with memory care. We can start with short-term options and reevaluate as the trial progresses.”

“I wouldn’t even know where to start,” I admitted. “I don’t trust reviews on Google right now.”

Her smile was understanding. “I’ll send over a list of vetted facilities after I review availability. You’ll have a few days to think through it. Nothing’s final today.”

I nodded, and she handed me a slim stack of forms.

I signed. My name looked foreign on the paper.

By the time we wrapped up, the room felt smaller. Like the air had thickened with everything that wasn’t said. I rose from the chair, unsure if my legs would hold.

Helen walked me to the door. Her hand brushed my arm, warm and solid.

“You’re doing better than you think,” she said softly.

I gave her a nod. One of those automatic, polite things you do when someone means well.

But inside?

I wasn’t so sure. Something felt different.

I found Colt standing on his own two feet—or trying to, anyway.

Colt gripped the walker like it had personally offended him. His back was stiff, his arms tense, but he was upright and stubborn about it, which meant he was definitely on the mend.

“If you tell Rhett I look like a baby giraffe, I swear...” he muttered without looking up.

I grinned, walking over. “Too late. I already texted him. Added a photo for dramatic effect.”

He groaned and side-eyed me, but I saw the smile threatening behind it. “You’re cruel.”

“You’re lucky I didn’t add a caption.”

He shook his head with mock dismay, and I stepped closer. “Want a hand?”

He hesitated for a second—pride, probably—but then nodded. “Yeah. Thanks.”

I offered my arm, and he slid one hand over it. The contact was warm. Familiar. It sent a flicker of something sweet and sharp straight through me.

We took it slow, the two of us shuffling down the hallway like we had nowhere better to be. In a way, maybe we didn’t.

The family room wasn’t far—just past a nurse’s station, where a cluster of bad paintings hung like they might distract from fluorescent lights and antiseptic air.

Inside, wide windows looked out toward the hills. Beyond them, just barely in view,

lay the long stretch of pastureland, Lucky Ranch.

We sat, easing into mismatched armchairs that had probably been donated two decades ago. I watched the muscles in his jaw relax once he was off his feet.

“You good?” I asked.

He nodded. “Better with you here.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I let the silence bloom around us. It didn’t feel heavy. Not anymore. We were getting better at that—being quiet together.

I glanced out the window, eyes tracing the ridge of hills.

“I met with the case manager today,” I said finally.

Colt’s eyes stayed on mine. Steady. No rush.

“They’re keeping Mom a few more days. The pneumonia from the smoke isn’t too bad, but...” I exhaled. “They diagnosed early-stage dementia. She can’t live alone.”

Colt didn’t flinch. Didn’t offer empty words. Just reached across the space between us and took my hand.

I squeezed it once before continuing. “There’s a trial drug they want to try—memory stuff. Promising results, apparently. They’re hopeful.”

He nodded. “And you?”

“I’m trying to be.”

We sat like that for a moment, the silence stretching between heartbeats—quiet, but not empty. Just us, side by side, letting the weight of everything settle in.

Then he said it.

“Y’all could come stay with me.”

I blinked, unsure if I’d heard him right.

“Just for now,” he added quickly. “Till it’s sorted. You, Callie, your mom. There’s plenty of room. Hell, there’s peace.”

His voice wasn’t pushy, just gentle. Steady. Like the offer came from some deep part of him that he didn’t show often. I turned to face him fully. The look in his eyes stopped me cold.

It wasn’t just kindness—it was hope. A flicker of something he hadn’t dared speak aloud until now. And maybe it had been there for a while, quiet in the background, waiting for the right moment to rise.

It broke something in me to say no.

“I appreciate it,” I said softly, meaning every syllable. “I really do. But... she’s not ready. And everything between us?—”

I trailed off, biting my lip, trying to find a version of the truth that didn’t crush whatever fragile thread we were weaving back together.

“It’s still new,” I finished. “I don’t want to mess it up before it’s even begun.”

He didn’t flinch. Didn’t pull away. Just nodded slowly, like part of him had braced

for that answer.

“I get it,” he said. And maybe he did.

His fingers stayed wrapped around mine, solid and warm like an anchor, not a chain.

I let my head drift down until it rested against his shoulder, careful not to lean too hard. The fabric of his hospital gown was crisp beneath my cheek, but his scent caught me off guard—faint soap, a trace of pine, and something else that felt like home.

We didn’t say anything else.

We didn’t have to.

Outside, the sky was shifting. The clouds had thinned, letting late afternoon light stream over the hills like a promise.

I didn’t know where we’d go from here. How much of this mess could we actually clean up?

But at that moment, his shoulder beneath my cheek and his hand cradling mine felt like shelter. Because maybe love wasn’t always a grand gesture.

Perhaps it was this—just a quiet offer, a hand that didn’t let go... even when the answer was no.

Chapter Thirteen

Stubborn as Ever

Colt

The door creaked open just as I finished putting on the clean hospital gown the nurse had left me. Not that it made a damn difference—it was still a gown. Still open in the back, still undignified as hell.

“Mr. Bennett,” the doctor said as he stepped in with his computer tablet in hand. His expression was bland, like he’d just left a staff meeting that didn’t go his way.

I raised a brow. “Morning, Doc. You come bearing good news or more of the usual ‘don’t lift anything heavier than your attitude’ speech?”

That earned me a dry smile. “You’re healing well, actually. Vitals look good. Infection risk is low. Range of motion’s coming back quicker than expected, which is saying something given the nature of your surgery.”

I tilted my head like I was impressed. “So I’m a medical marvel?”

He didn’t take the bait. “You’ll need a few weeks in rehab—physical therapy, supervised mobility, pain management. You’re off IVs now, so they’ll likely transfer you soon. Maybe even tomorrow.”

There it was.

The official word. The system was making its plans.

I nodded slowly, playing the good patient. “Sounds reasonable.”

He glanced up at me, suspicious already. “You’re not going to do anything stupid, are you?”

“Doc,” I said with all the innocence I could fake, “what do I even have left in me that qualifies as stupid?”

He didn’t laugh. He scribbled something down on his tablet and muttered, “I’ll check in later.” And with that, he walked out.

The second the door shut, I reached for my phone.

Rhett picked up on the second ring. “Tell me this ain’t what I think it is.”

“Come after dark,” I said. “I’ve got a mission.”

He groaned. “Colt?—”

“Bring jeans, boots, my shirt, and that old Stetson of mine. The one with the sweat stain under the band. I’m not wearing the same clothes I came in with.”

“You’re really doing this?”

“Damn right,” I said, shifting to ease the pressure in my back. “They want to ship me off to some sterile rehab with watered-down Jello and motivational posters. I’ve got all the rehab I need right at home.”

There was a beat of silence. Then Rhett sighed like a man who knew better but was

too loyal to stop me. “Fine. But when this all goes sideways, I’m telling every nurse in that building you escaped on a stolen wheelchair.”

“Deal,” I said with a grin.

As I set the phone down, a familiar thrill crept through me.

I wasn’t running away from anything.

I was walking out—with my damn head held high.

And leaving my hospital gown behind like a flag on the battlefield.

Victory. Stubborn, reckless, and 100% me.

The hallway outside my room had the hush of a place that had already settled in for the night. Most of the nurses were probably doing charting or giving meds. I had about a twenty-minute window before they noticed I hadn’t asked for my nightly ice chips and muscle relaxer.

Perfect.

Rhett slid through the door. Ball cap pulled low, hoodie zipped up, and a duffel bag slung over his shoulder like he was auditioning for a heist movie.

“You look ridiculous,” I said.

He tossed the bag onto the bed. “I’m tryin’ to look inconspicuous.”

“You look like someone trying way too hard to look inconspicuous.”

He unzipped the bag, revealing my jeans, boots, plaid button-down, and—hallelujah—my battered old Stetson.

“Glad you didn’t forget my old hat,” I said, plucking it out and slapping the crown back into shape with one palm. “Man’s got taste.”

“Man’s got bad ideas,” Rhett muttered. “You sure about this?”

“As sure as I’ve ever been about anything stupid.”

I grabbed the jeans and started changing right there in the room, not caring that every muscle in my back protested. Rhett turned to face the door like a gentleman, or more likely, to avoid watching me try to shimmy into denim with a new lumbar fusion.

“Damn boots shrunk while I was laid up,” I grunted, tugging the second one over my heel.

“Yeah,” Rhett said dryly. “That’s the problem. The boots shrank.”

I glared up at him. “Keep talkin’ and I’ll make you pull ‘em off in the morning.”

With a final tug, I put on the last boot and stood up slowly. I adjusted the hem of my shirt before settling the hat on my head. I looked in the mirror over the sink.

Not exactly steady. But I looked like me again.

I grabbed the hospital gown and slung it over the back of the chair like a white flag left on the battlefield. “Thanks for the hospitality. I’m ridin’ out.”

“You look like a wanted man,” Rhett said, opening the door a crack and peeking into the hallway.

“I am a wanted man,” I said, tipping my hat. “Just not by the rehab ward.”

We slipped out like teenagers sneaking past curfew. Rhett kept glancing over his shoulder, and I had to admit, the whole thing made me feel about ten years younger, minus the fresh surgical scar and the occasional hitch in my step.

By the time we reached the parking lot, my legs were aching and my ribs felt like they’d been used as a punching bag. But hell if I was gonna let it show.

Rhett opened the passenger door of his pickup and helped me climb in.

“You sure about goin’ all the way home tonight?” he asked, shutting the door after me.

I leaned back with a grin. “Got a bed with my name on it, and not one nurse waiting to poke me with a needle.”

He climbed in behind the wheel, reached into the cooler behind the seat, and handed me a cold bottle of beer.

“For the road,” he said. “Figuratively.”

I cracked it open with a smile, and the familiar hiss of the cap sounded like music. “Reckon this is the most rebellious thing I’ve done since that midnight bull ride in Amarillo.”

He laughed and threw the truck in drive. “Yeah, and that ended with a broken collarbone.”

I took a sip and leaned my head against the cool window as we pulled out of the parking lot. The hospital faded in the rearview.

I wasn't just leaving a building.

I was taking my life back.

As Rhett's truck rumbled down the long back road, the sky was already purple at dusk. My legs ached in that deep, familiar way—like they were waking up after a long sleep—but I didn't complain, not with the mountains in front of me and the hospital in the rearview mirror.

We crested a slight rise, and there it was.

Dalia's house.

Or what was left of it.

Blackened beams. The crumpled shell of the roof. Ashes where a porch used to be. Even the mailbox had twisted like it couldn't take the heat.

Rhett slowed the truck out of respect, but neither of us spoke at first.

Then I said it, low. "I offered Tessa my place. Told her all of 'em could move in. Just for a while."

"And she said no?" Rhett asked, not surprised.

I nodded. "Didn't say it to be mean. She's just... not ready. And it's all still new between us."

Rhett scratched at the back of his neck, eyes still on the road. "You know what you oughta do?"

I waited.

He looked over at me. “The old double-wide. It’s still on your family’s property, right? Decent bones. Doesn’t need much.”

I blinked, caught off guard. “Haven’t thought about that place much since we hit the Powerball and we bought Lucky Ranch.”

“Well, think about it now,” he said. “Barn is in good shape, too. You move Biscuit back there, and suddenly it ain’t just a busted-up trailer on some land—it’s home to Tessa.”

I turned to stare out the window again as we passed the last scorched debris.

“She wouldn’t take it for herself,” I said slowly.

“No,” Rhett agreed. “But she might take it for that horse and her mother.”

I laughed under my breath, because damn if that wasn’t the truth.

“She’s stubborn.”

“She’s a woman with pride,” Rhett said. “Same as you.”

We rode in silence another few seconds before I pulled my phone from my pocket and tapped in the number. Carlos answered on the second ring.

“Bennett,” he said, his voice familiar and half amused. “You back from the grave already?”

“Better,” I said. “I’m out early.”

“Lucky for the hospital.”

I grinned. “Listen, I’ve got a job for you.”

“Oh no. What did you do now?”

“I need the old double-wide cleaned out and fixed up. Check the plumbing. Replace what needs replacing. Clean up the barn, too. Move Biscuit over. She’s gonna need hay, feed, and her tack.”

There was a pause. “You movin’ in again?”

“No. Not me,” I said. “I need it livable by the end of the week.”

Carlos whistled low. “That a deadline or a death wish?”

“Deadline,” I said. “I’ve got a girl to win over.”

Another beat of silence, then Carlos chuckled. “I’m on it.”

I hung up just as Rhett pulled into my drive. Home.

I reached for the door handle, but paused, watching the light spill across the front porch like it was waiting for me.

Rhett looked over. “You sure about this?”

“Nope,” I said, pushing the door open and wincing as I swung my legs out. “But I ain’t lettin’ Tessa and her mom freeze in that tin can trailer through a Montana winter. And now, you can try to sweet-talk Callie into your bed.”

Rhett grinned. “That’s the Colt Bennett I know.”

I tipped my hat low and stepped out into the evening air. Victory tingled in every sore muscle.

For the first time since Tessa left, I felt like I had a purpose again.

And hopefully, a second chance worth fighting for.

My back was on fire when I reached the porch steps, but my pride was riding high.

The front door opened with a little more effort than I remembered—but damn, it felt good to be home. Not a hospital beep in sight. No scratchy sheets or nurses tapping at the door before sunrise.

Just the soft thud of my boots on hardwood and the scent of pine cleaner Millie must’ve used before she left yesterday.

I limped through the living room and dropped into my recliner like it owed me money.

Heaven.

Until my phone rang.

I groaned, fished it out of my pocket, and saw the hospital’s number glowing back at me. Of course.

“Colt Bennett,” I answered, already smirking.

The voice on the other end was brisk and female. “Mr. Bennett, this is Megan from

the hospital. Just calling to inform you that you are, as of now, officially discharged.”

“Well, that’s good news,” I said, stretching my legs out a little farther.

There was a pause. “Dr. Benson is… not amused.”

I chuckled. “He’ll get over it.”

Another sigh. “He said, and I quote, ‘Tell him he’d better keep that stubborn hide out of trouble if he wants to avoid round three on my table.’”

I smiled. “Tell him I said thank you.”

She hung up without a goodbye, which, all things considered, was fair.

I laid the phone on my chest and stared at the ceiling for a beat, just letting the quiet wrap around me.

Then I picked it back up, thumb scrolling through my contacts until I landed on her name.

Tessa.

I didn’t call. Didn’t text.

Just tapped the last voice memo she’d sent, back when I was still in that stiff hospital bed pretending not to count the minutes between her visits.

“I’ll stop by tomorrow. Don’t do anything dumb, okay?”

Her voice was soft. Warm. Just a little teasing. But there was something behind it.

Something to look forward to.

I smiled, even as a fresh wave of pain tightened across my spine.

“I’m home,” I muttered to no one.

Outside the window, the horizon was dark and wide, and the stars were just beginning to scatter across the sky like loose hay. Somewhere past that barn, in a camper parked on borrowed time, the girl I’d once let go was deciding if she’d let me try again.

She said no once.

But I wasn’t done offering.

Chapter Fourteen

Second Chances

Tessa

The trailer was still and hushed when I woke, the kind of morning quiet that felt like the whole world had taken a breath and forgotten to let it out again.

Callie was already gone. She'd caught a ride with the supermarket manager who lived up the road—her first shift started early, and we'd agreed she would leave the truck so I could visit Mom later.

For the first time in weeks, I had the place to myself. There was no background hum of racing engines, no hospital monitors beeping, just the whisper of the wind outside and the occasional creak of the trailer adjusting to the day.

I pulled a sweatshirt over my tank top, feet bare against the cool floor, and padded toward the bathroom. The coffee maker clicked on behind me—Callie had set the timer like always. Thoughtful. Dependable.

The hot water in the tiny shower beat down harder than I expected, stinging my skin in a way that felt... honest. I leaned into it, let it chase the tension from my shoulders and neck, eyes closed, palms pressed to the cheap plastic wall.

And then, just like yesterday, the world tilted sideways.

It wasn't dramatic enough to make me instinctively reach for the grab bar. The steam blurred everything. My stomach turned. My knees went soft for a second before I planted my feet wide.

"Okay," I whispered, my voice rasping against the tile. "That's enough."

I shut off the water, stepped out slowly, wrapped myself in a towel, and sank down on the edge of the toilet lid. Drops of water clung to my knees and trailed down my calves. I braced my elbows on my thighs and rubbed a hand down my face.

It wasn't stress.

It wasn't the hospital.

And it definitely wasn't nothing.

My mind started cataloging symptoms like flashcards flipping through the air: lightheadedness, bloating, sore breasts. I'd written all of it off as anxiety. As tight-fitting fire coveralls. As grief. As exhaustion.

But now...

I swallowed. Hard.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a period. Maybe six weeks ago. Or was it more like eight? I'd blamed the chaos. The racetrack. The gnawing worry.

But the truth was—I knew this feeling.

I'd felt it before.

Denver.

The name hit like a slap. Outside the city in a rundown motel where I'd spent a few days hiding from everything—Colt included. I'd just found out. I hadn't even told Callie. I was still trying to decide what to do when my body decided for me.

That night, I'd doubled over in the hotel bathroom, the cramps so sharp they stole my breath. Blood. Silence. Tears I never let anyone see. I cleaned up the mess, flushed the toilet, and told myself the pregnancy wasn't meant to be.

And I never told Colt.

Not then. Not ever.

Because I was moving on. Because I thought I had something to prove to the world. Because the guilt of never telling him was easier to carry than the weight of his disappointment.

I pressed the towel tighter around me and whispered, "God, don't let this be another goodbye."

This time—if it was true—I wouldn't just ignore it.

I stood slowly, staring at my blurry reflection in the mirror above the tiny sink. My cheeks were pale. My eyes were wide and cautious. But somewhere in the middle of all that fear... was something else.

Something that felt a lot like hope.

The drive into town was short, but my fingers clenched the steering wheel like I was navigating black ice instead of two clean lanes and a speed limit that barely broke

forty.

Main Street looked the same as always—Cooper’s Hardware with its faded red awning, the little bakery that still put out cinnamon rolls at ten, and the pharmacy tucked between the bank and the diner like it was afraid to take up too much space.

I parked around back and cut the engine. For a second, I just sat there.

Breathe in. Breathe out. You’ve done harder things.

As I pushed open the pharmacy door, it creaked loudly. The fluorescent lights emitted an overly loud hum, reflecting off the linoleum floor and giving the place a stark, clinical vibe.

I moved quickly, head down, not making eye contact with the cashier at the front. The box was right where I thought it would be—same blue branding, same whisper of a promise in cursive font: Know for sure.

God.

I snatched it off the shelf and turned down the pain relief aisle, pretending to browse, waiting for a clear path to the checkout.

And that’s when I heard it.

“Tessa Walker? That you?”

My stomach dropped.

I turned slowly, forcing a smile. “Hey, Laney.”

Laney Fisher—now Laney Givens, if the ring on her finger meant anything. We'd graduated together. She always had a quick smile and quicker gossip, the kind of girl who could braid your hair in homeroom and turn your breakup into lunchtime entertainment.

"I thought that was you. Haven't seen you since..." she trailed off, eyes flicking to the box in my hand before bouncing back to my face with polite interest.

"Just picking something up for Callie," I said quickly, lifting the box and offering a shrug that felt too practiced.

"Ah," Laney said, dragging the word out. "Tell her I said hi. Y'all staying with Rhett, right?"

I nodded. "Just for now. Taking things one day at a time."

"Well, good to see you," she said, smiling like she wasn't already mentally filing this moment away for later. "Take care of yourself, Tess."

"You too."

I paid in cash and left fast, my cheeks burning.

Back at the trailer, I locked the door behind me and pulled the shades without thinking. The walls felt too thin, the silence too loud. I sat on the closed toilet lid and peeled the box open with fingers that didn't feel like mine.

The instructions were familiar. Too familiar. I didn't need to read them. But I did.

Just in case.

A few minutes later, I sat with the test in my hand, my heart beating too fast.

One pink line appeared first. Then another.

Positive.

I stared at it like it was lying to me. Like if I blinked hard enough, it would disappear.

But it didn't.

That tiny plus sign might as well have been carved into my chest. A future, etched in plastic and ink.

I wrapped it in toilet paper—slowly, methodically—and pushed it to the bottom of the bathroom trash can. Then I stood there, hands braced on the sink, staring at myself in the mirror.

My reflection didn't look pregnant.

Didn't look brave, either.

I leaned in, close enough to see the faint freckles across my nose, and whispered to the woman looking back at me.

“Not telling anyone. Not yet.”

Not Callie. Not even Colt.

Not until I saw a doctor. Not until I had a plan. Because this time, I wasn't going to lose it. Not because I was scared. Not because I was selfish, but because I waited too long to care.

I took a deep breath, shoved my keys into my purse, and glanced back at the trailer. Time to face whatever came next. No more stalling. No more hiding.

When I arrived at the hospital to visit my mom, it seemed to be quiet for a weekday. Maybe it was just me—my nerves, my brain buzzing with everything I wasn't saying aloud—but even the beeping monitors and distant footsteps felt muted like the world was giving me space. Or waiting for me to crack.

Mama's room was dim when I stepped inside, the blinds drawn halfway. She was curled on her side, facing the window, one thin arm tucked under her chin. Her breathing was soft but irregular, the kind of shallow that made me want to count the rise and fall just to be sure it stayed steady.

I didn't call her name. Didn't try to wake her.

Instead, I pulled the chair close and sat down, letting my hands settle in my lap.

It took a minute before I could really look at her.

She looked... smaller somehow. Not just from the hospital gown or the IV taped to her paper-thin skin.

It was something in the way her body curved in on itself.

Her hair—usually pinned up in a perfect coil—had gone flat against the pillow, wisps of gray and silver brushing her cheek.

The woman who once chased me down the street with a wooden spoon for sassing her at thirteen now looked like she might blow away with the wrong breeze.

My throat tightened.

I reached out and laid my fingers over hers. Cold and fragile. Bones like twigs.

“Mama,” I whispered, not to wake her, just to fill the space. “I’ve got news... big news.”

She didn’t stir.

I smiled faintly, even as the ache pressed deeper into my chest. “But I think I’ll wait to tell you. We both need to get a little stronger first.”

I let that sit there between us, like a prayer without an amen.

Then I lifted my hand and ran my fingers through her hair, slowly, carefully, the way she used to do to me when I was sick. It felt foreign and familiar all at once. We weren’t the type to do this... softness. But maybe it was time.

Perhaps, we both needed it.

The monitor blinked in the corner. Somewhere down the hall, a phone buzzed and was answered with a clipped hello. Life was going on as it always did—messy, relentless, hopeful.

I stayed a bit longer, holding her hand and just breathing.

By the time I got back to the trailer, the afternoon light had dulled into a flat gray that made everything feel colder than it was.

I kicked off my boots at the door, pulled on the oversized hoodie I kept for days like this, and curled up on the bench seat with my laptop propped open and my inbox glowing.

Helen had followed through. The email sat there, polite and clinical, with a list of care facilities and a short note: Let me know if you'd like help arranging tours.

I clicked the attachment and scrolled through the names. Some were local, some were hours away. A few had familiar logos I'd seen over the years, but none felt like a place you'd take your mother when everything else had already fallen apart.

Too clinical. Too far. Too expensive. Or maybe just... too final.

I pulled a throw blanket over my lap and opened a new browser tab, trying to search for reviews, then closed it again just as fast. Every paragraph sounded like a brochure or a warning.

I sat back, the cursor blinking like it was mocking me. My fingers froze over the keys but didn't move. My brain was too full to sort anything else.

When my phone buzzed next to me, I nearly jumped.

Colt.

For a second, I just stared at the screen. I hadn't heard from him since yesterday in the family room. We'd left things... gentle. Quiet. Like we both knew, there was more to say, but not yet.

I swiped to answer.

"Hey, darlin'," he said, his voice warm and smug. "I may or may not have... staged a little hospital jailbreak."

I sat upright. "What?"

“I’m fine. Really. Got Rhett to drive me home. Figured I’d reclaim my dignity before they tried to teach me how to crochet.”

I rolled my eyes, but the laugh still escaped. “You’re impossible.”

“True. But upright and impossible, so that’s a win. Listen, Millie’s makin’ dinner. Nothing fancy, just something hot and probably way too buttery. Thought maybe you’d come over? Eat a real meal? Sit for a spell?”

I hesitated.

My eyes drifted to Helen’s email. Then, I reached down and laid a hand on my belly—not because I felt anything, but because something in me already knew it was real.

I had a secret now. One I hadn’t told a soul. And the idea of walking into Colt’s house with it tucked in my chest felt heavier than I expected.

But then he added, softer this time, “We could both use somethin’ warm tonight.”

And I heard it—tucked beneath the invitation, nestled in that gravel-soft drawl I knew like breath.

Hope.

I didn’t let myself think too long.

“I’ll be there in twenty.”

Chapter Fifteen

Just a Whisper

Tessa

I pulled up the long driveway just as the sun dipped behind the line of pines that rimmed the western edge of Colt's property.

The place looked like something out of a country music daydream—wide porches, deep eaves, the stone chimney spilling smoke into the late afternoon chill.

I'd been here once before, weeks ago, when everything felt too raw to register. Back then, I was so busy trying to act fine and not fall apart that I hadn't taken in a single detail.

But tonight, with a little more clarity and a whole lot more to carry, I really saw it.

The house was... beautiful.

I stepped onto the porch, where a pair of rocking chairs flanked an old whiskey barrel table and a lantern glowed low in the corner. When I knocked, I heard the sound of a boot heel and the soft click of a latch before the door swung open.

Colt stood there, leaning heavier on one side, but grinning like a man who hadn't just staged a hospital escape.

“Come on in. Millie just pulled cornbread from the oven, and I swore I smelled butter beans.”

I laughed and stepped inside. “You do know how to tempt a girl.”

The air inside smelled like slow-cooked roast and sage.

The walls were a soft cream, the floors dark hardwood, and overhead beams gave the place a timeless, grounded feel.

Everything was warm and quiet, from the low hum of something classical playing in the background to the faint clinking of dishes in the kitchen. Millie, no doubt.

“Did you decorate all this yourself?” I asked, running my fingers along the curve of a carved banister that led to the upstairs loft.

He nodded, easing himself down onto the arm of the leather couch. It took many months. “Obviously, I had help with the structure, but I picked everything out. Every door frame, light fixture, and wood plank. You like it?”

“I love it,” I said honestly. “It feels like you. Solid. Lived in. Not trying too hard, but somehow perfect.”

He flashed me a crooked smile. “Well, I’ll take that.”

I moved farther in, trailing my hand along the back of the couch. A framed photo on the mantel caught my eye—Colt as a boy, wild-haired and barefoot, sitting on the back of a steer like he belonged there.

“Hard to imagine you not wanting to ride again,” I teased, nodding toward it.

“Harder to imagine my spine surviving it,” he said. “Which is why I struck a deal with Art Whitson this morning. Gonna consult on cattle for his bull riding program. Still get the dust without the damage.”

“You better not try to get back in the chute.”

He held up a hand. “Scout’s honor. I like walking too much these days.”

I laughed, but something inside me softened too. The man had finally figured out how to keep his boots in the dirt without breaking his own back in the process.

“You want the tour again?” he asked, rising slower than he used to. “Last time, you looked like you were seeing through a fog.”

He wasn’t wrong.

I nodded, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear. “I’d like that.”

This time, I was ready to actually see it—not just the house but also the man who built it.

Millie had set the table with quiet grace, like she’d been doing it for decades.

The roast sat in the center, nestled in its pot with carrots and potatoes, steam curling into the air like an invitation to let go.

A basket of golden and warm cornbread rested nearby, along with a small dish of honey butter that looked like it had been whipped by hand.

Colt waited until she stepped back into the kitchen, then gave me a look. “Go ahead. I know you skipped lunch.”

He wasn't wrong.

I spooned a little of everything onto my plate and took a bite of the roast. It melted in my mouth, rich and tender. Millie really was magic.

"This is..." I started.

"Yeah," he said with a lazy smile. "Millie doesn't miss."

We ate quietly for a few moments. Not the awkward kind of quiet, but the kind that settles in when you don't feel the need to fill every second with noise. I glanced up once and found Colt watching me—not in that old, fiery way, but in something softer. Curious, grounded. Present.

He reached for a slice of cornbread, then leaned back in his chair, wincing just a little as his back adjusted.

"You think you'll rebuild your mother's house?" he asked.

I wiped my fingers on my napkin and leaned back. The question had been floating in my mind for days, bumping up against all the others for which I didn't have answers.

"I haven't called the insurance company yet," I admitted. "Feels like as soon as I do, it's real. But... yeah. I hope we can rebuild. Something more modern. Safer for her. New wiring and safe stairs. Maybe something smaller, with a decent porch and no damn carpet."

He smiled, and for a moment, I could almost see the blueprint forming in his mind.

"She'd like that," he said. "Your mom deserves something solid."

“She does,” I agreed, though I didn’t add that I wasn’t sure she’d accept it. Not yet. Not with how much of her life she’d already lost in the fire.

We fell into silence again, chewing slowly, the kind of meal where nothing’s rushed because everything matters.

Then Colt spoke again, gently this time, like he didn’t want to scare the words away.

“You never answered me the other day when I mentioned you starting to barrel race again.”

I didn’t look up right away. I just pushed a piece of roast around on my plate and watched the gravy trail behind it like a slow tide.

“Not yet,” I said quietly. “Maybe later. I’ve got other things to focus on.”

He didn’t argue. Didn’t try to sell me on it again. He just nodded and reached for another slice of cornbread, like he understood there were things I wasn’t ready to say out loud yet.

And there were. So many.

But somehow, sitting across from him like this, in the warm light of his kitchen, I didn’t feel quite so alone.

Colt glanced down at his boots like they might suddenly rebel against him. “I know from the last time that walking is important. Keeps things loose.”

I pushed back from the table and smiled. “Then let’s walk.”

He gave me a look—half gratitude, half amusement—and stood with a slight grunt. I

stepped beside him, our arms brushing as we made our way to the door. Millie handed him a jacket without a word, then disappeared again like a ghost with manners.

The air outside was crisp and golden, the kind of late-afternoon light that softened everything it touched. Hand-in-hand, we started down the long driveway, moving slowly, Colt leaning slightly to one side.

“I’m not gonna win any footraces,” he said with a crooked smile.

“You could always beat me even when you gave me a head start,” I teased.

He chuckled, and it was nice to hear. Real, low, warm.

We walked in silence for a few minutes, the kind that didn’t need filling. I could hear birds in the trees and see a hawk circling far off in the sky. It felt like Montana was breathing around us—steady, grounded, familiar.

“How’s Callie liking her job?” Colt asked, finally breaking the quiet.

“She called me on her lunch break and told me she likes it,” I said. “She explained how the manager’s already letting her shadow in a few different departments. And she’s got that sparkle back in her eyes, you know? Like she’s finding her rhythm.”

He nodded. “That’s good. She’s a strong gal.”

“Too strong sometimes,” I murmured.

We talked a bit more about my mom—how the doctors think her pneumonia is almost gone, and that the memory clinic Helen recommended had a spot open if we could act fast. But even that conversation faded into silence as we reached the end of the drive.

Colt stopped at the wooden fence post, resting his hand there as he took in the view.

The land sloped away in soft curves, golden fields stretching toward the horizon.

A few birds dipped low, wings catching the light just right.

It looked like the whole world was made of fire and forgiveness for a second.

I leaned beside him, both of us watching without speaking.

“I haven’t felt safe in a long time,” I said, not meaning to say it out loud.

But he didn’t flinch. Just reached down and laced his fingers through mine. “Me neither. Winning the Powerball made it worse. Had to tell if folks are your friends or just grifters,” he said softly.

We stood like that for a while, hand in hand, our shadows long across the driveway.

He took it a little slower on the walk back, and I didn’t rush him.

“You ever think about the old swing?” he asked.

I glanced at him, surprised. “All the time.”

“This swing just started creaking, too,” he said, giving the swing a light nudge as we approached. “Had this one made to match the old one. Couldn’t bring myself to leave those memories behind.”

I smiled, running my fingers along the smooth armrest. “It’s almost identical.”

He looked over at me, something unreadable flickering in his eyes. “Some things are

worth keeping. Even if you have to rebuild 'em.”

I sank down onto the swing beside him, letting the silence settle around us like a blanket. “Yep, maybe even us,” I said after a long moment.

The porch swing creaked beneath us, the sound familiar and oddly soothing, like a lullaby wrapped in wood and rusted chains. The evening air had cooled just enough to make me grateful for the warmth of Colt’s shoulder brushing mine.

We didn’t say much at first. Just let the rhythm of the swing carry us, the breeze tugging softly at my hair, the hush of dusk folding around us like a secret.

Then he turned slightly, just enough for our eyes to meet in the half-light. “You could stay,” he said, voice low and steady. “Just tonight. Don’t expect a rodeo, though. My back’s all bark and no buck.”

I laughed, the sound catching in my throat. “We can take it easy,” I said softly, brushing a finger along the side of his cheek. “Let me do the work.”

His breath hitched—just a little—and I leaned in. The first kiss was gentle, testing. The second one wasn’t. It was slow, full, and lingering, like we’d both been hungry for it and finally stopped pretending otherwise.

When he pulled back, his lips hovered near mine. “You’ve always been the naughty one.”

I snickered and answered with another kiss.

Inside, our steps were slow and sure as I helped him toward his bedroom.

The lights were dim, the room smelling faintly of cedar and laundry soap.

I eased off his shirt, then his jeans, folding them over the chair without a word.

When I reached for the waistband of his boxer briefs, he caught my wrist gently.

“Not tonight,” he murmured. “I don’t want to push it. Not with my back—and not with us.”

Something tender and fierce bloomed in my chest. “Okay,” I said, nodding.

I pulled on one of his old T-shirts that hung loose over my hips and slid beneath the covers beside him. The fancy mattress dipped in just the right places to support Colt’s back, and I curled into him, one hand resting lightly over his chest.

We didn’t need more.

Not tonight.

We lay there in a tangle of quiet limbs, breaths synced, hearts open, the hush of the house folding around us like the swing had.

And in the silence, something new was beginning.

Something real.

His breathing slowed. I could tell he was drifting. The steady rise and fall of his chest had settled into that peaceful rhythm only sleep could bring.

But I stayed awake.

The words swelled behind my ribs, heavy with meaning and fear, but needing to be said. So I leaned in, close enough that my lips brushed the curve of his ear.

“I’m pregnant,” I whispered, barely louder than my breath. “With our child.”

He stirred slightly but didn’t respond, already deep in sleep. Maybe that was for the best.

I rested my forehead against his shoulder, letting my eyes slip shut at last.

Tomorrow, I’d say it again.

But tonight, just saying it out loud—to the dark, to him, to myself—was enough.

It had to be.

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Chapter Sixteen

Breathing

Colt

The first thing I noticed was the quiet. That thick, early-morning kind of hush where the house hadn't yet remembered to wake up.

The second thing was the warmth.

The sheets were heavy, and the faint scent of lavender clung to the pillow where her head was resting.

Tessa.

I didn't open my eyes right away. Didn't need to. The ache in my back was still there, low and persistent, but it was quelled by something—something bigger, like the world had tilted a little overnight and hadn't quite settled back.

Then I heard it again. Not with my ears, but in that space just behind them.

“I'm pregnant with our child.”

The words rippled through me, soft as a breeze and sharp as a spade. I held still, like moving might shatter the memory. Or confirm it.

Had she really said it? Or was it just some dream stitched together from the leftovers of hope and pain?

But no—my chest knew before my brain caught up. Knew it in the way her body had curled into mine, the weight of that whisper brushing against my damn ear like it had been carried on a prayer. Or a dare.

I finally opened my eyes, blinking into the light spilling through the window. It cast long lines across the ceiling, golden and quiet. The kind of light that didn't rush anything. The kind that waited for you to understand the moment you were in.

And I did.

I've always known, hadn't I? Deep down, beyond logic, timing, and fear. Even when she left all those years ago, a part of me wondered. Even when she returned and I told myself not to expect anything.

But last night, everything I'd been pretending not to want became real in that one breath of truth.

I wasn't scared.

I wasn't running.

I was right here.

And this time, we were going to do it right.

The house was still wrapped in that lazy hush when I made my way to the kitchen, each step stiff but a little steadier than the day before. My back still had plenty to say, but I told it to hush up long enough for me to get the coffee started. Priorities.

The smell hit first—rich and warm, like the promise of a better morning. I leaned against the counter as it brewed, watching the pot drip with the kind of reverence some men reserved for holy things.

Behind me, the floor creaked, soft and sure.

She walked in barefoot, wearing my old T-shirt like it had been made for her. Hair still sleep-tousled, skin kissed with leftover dreams. She glanced around the room, squinting toward the empty hallway.

“Is Millie here?” she asked, voice still gravelly from sleep.

“Nah,” I said, pushing off the counter and crossing the kitchen. “Gave her the day off. Figured we’d earned a little peace and quiet.”

She raised a brow, suspicious. Just as I slipped my hand under the hem of the shirt—slow and easy, fingers finding the curve of her thigh—she swatted me with a smile.

“Pretty sure we’re safe,” I murmured, “with you wearin’ my scandalously short T-shirt.”

“Sit,” she ordered, shaking her head with mock exasperation. “Before your back revolts and I have to haul you to the ER.”

“Bossy,” I muttered, but I let her guide me to the chair.

She moved through the kitchen like she belonged here. No hesitation, no holding back. Watching her rummage through the cabinets, barefoot and beautiful in a shirt of mine from another life... it knocked something loose inside me. Some mix of ache and gratitude.

By the time she set a plate of scrambled eggs and toast in front of me, the coffee was hot, and the kitchen had taken on that glow—quiet and golden, like the world had finally stopped spinning long enough for us to breathe.

We ate in silence. Not awkward—just thick with expectation.

Then she set her fork down, barely touched her food, and looked at me like she was steadying herself on the inside.

“Do you remember what I told you last night?” she asked.

I nodded. “I do. And I ain’t stopped thinking about it since.”

She stared into her coffee like it might give her permission. Then, finally, she spoke so quietly I almost missed it, “That wasn’t the first time. I have a lot to tell you—get you caught up.”

I didn’t speak. Didn’t blink.

“After I left Lovelace,” she said, slow and raw, “I found out I was pregnant. Just a few weeks in. Barely long enough to get used to the idea.”

Her voice caught, but she didn’t stop.

“I didn’t tell you because I wasn’t sure what to do. And then... I lost it. Quiet. Alone. Like it was never even real.”

Her gaze lifted then, braver than I’d ever seen it. “I carried that guilt for a long time. For not telling you. For chasing something else instead. And yeah... for feeling relief that you didn’t have to know.”

I sat there, cup halfway to my mouth, fingers curled tight around the handle. Then I set it down and let the silence stretch, not to hurt her, but to hold it. All of it.

“I always wondered,” I said, my voice low. “And I wanted answers. So, there was this rodeo down in Billings... you know, a palm reader with a stand near the beer tent. The woman looked at me—dead serious—and said, ‘You left something breathing behind.’”

Tessa blinked, like she didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“I figured she meant the horses,” I went on. “Or one of the heifers I forgot to check on. But a part of me... a quiet part... it wondered.”

She reached across the table, fingertips brushing over mine before settling in the spaces like they’d never left.

“It’s weird how fate works, isn’t it?” Then, without waiting for an answer, she looked into my eyes and said, “I want this baby, Colt, but I need to make an appointment. I need to know everything’s okay this time.

I need to know I... I don’t have anything wrong with me. ”

Her voice cracked at the end, and I squeezed her hand tight enough to promise something without words.

“You won’t go through this alone,” I told her. “Not ever again.”

She let out a breath, and I could see it—the armor she always wore, softening.

“I always hoped,” I said, my thumb stroking across her knuckles. “Hell, we were always reckless. I mean, let’s be honest—our idea of birth control was mostly timing

and cowboy optimism.”

That made her laugh, breathy and real, the sound of it soaking right into the bones of the house.

“I know,” she said. “But back then... I don’t know. I told myself if it happened, it happened. I wanted to believe fate would know better than I did.”

I leaned back, still anchored to her hand. “I love you, Tess. Always have. But I’m not gonna crowd you. Just don’t ever shut me out. Not from our kid. Not again.”

She stared at me for a long moment before nodding, something like hope flickering in her eyes.

“Would you come with me?” she asked. “To the doctor?”

“Damn right I would.”

She didn’t hesitate—not even for a second. She pulled out her phone right there at the table, scrolling for the clinic number with her thumb trembling slightly. “Done. Our appointment is set for next week.”

And I just sat there, memorizing her all over again—barefoot, determined, fierce in her softness—and I knew without a doubt:

This time, I wouldn’t miss a single heartbeat.

Tessa disappeared down the hallway, her hand trailing along the wall like she belonged there. The sound of water started a moment later, soft and steady behind the closed door.

I leaned back in the kitchen chair, still holding the mug she'd filled earlier. Coffee had gone cold, but I didn't care. My body was tired, my heart full in that achey, stretched-out kind of way that didn't hurt so much as hum.

That's when my phone buzzed on the table. Carlos.

I swiped to answer.

"Mornin', boss," he said, wind whipping through the line behind him. "Double wide's coming along nice. I should have the roof patched and the wiring done by Thursday, maybe sooner."

"Good," I said. "Appreciate it."

"I was thinkin'... you want me to get started on furniture? It's pretty bare bones in there. Figured I could pick up a few things—bed, couch, table. Nothin' fancy unless you say so."

I hesitated, my gaze drifting toward the hallway.

She hadn't said anything about needing a place yet. But it didn't take a genius to see where this was heading. Her mama would need care. The hospital bills would add up. And now, with a baby on the way... hell, she'd need a soft place to land.

And I could give her that. Quietly. Steadily. No strings, she wasn't ready to get tied up with me yet.

"Yeah," I said, voice low. "Get what you think it needs. Real livable. Comfortable. Nothin' that'll spook her or make her feel boxed in."

"You got it," Carlos said, no questions asked. "I'll send some pics later today."

When we hung up, I set the phone down slowly, carefully, like it was sacred. Then I looked around my kitchen—her mug still warm, the faint echo of her laughter still clinging to the air.

It wasn't a proposal.

Not yet.

But it was a start.

And I'd never been one to leave a job half done.

Chapter Seventeen

A Brighter Tomorrow

Tessa

The hallway smelled like the usual hospital cocktail of bleach and something vaguely cafeteria-like, but today it didn't weigh on me the same way.

I passed a nurse with a cart full of tiny cups and smiled at her, because for once, I felt like smiling.

The path to Mama's room, one I could walk in my sleep by now, didn't feel heavy today.

It felt... promising.

Helen stood near the door with her tablet in hand and that polished, professional smile she always wore when decisions were coming. I used to dread that smile. Today, I reminded myself it was just part of the process.

"Tessa," she said warmly. "Mind if we chat for a second before you go in?"

I gave a slight nod and hugged my purse a little tighter, more out of habit than nerves.

"She's doing well," Helen began, swiping through her screen like she already knew what it would say.

“The pneumonia’s cleared completely, and her vitals have been stable.

Dr. Maxwell’s pleased with her labs, and he’s agreed to keep her here through the end of the week while we monitor her response to the trial meds. ”

That part wasn’t new, but something in her tone felt lighter. Like we’d made it through the hard part.

She looked at me with quiet sympathy. “But we do need to start thinking about the next step. Medicare won’t approve an extended stay based on dementia alone.

The good news is her supplemental coverage will fully support a memory care facility for the next few months—longer, depending on the location. ”

Memory care.

The words still stung a little, but not like before. Because this time, there was a plan. A way forward. Not a goodbye—just a change.

“I emailed you a list of options,” Helen added, softer now. “Some are right here in Lovelace. A few in Billings and one near Kalispell. You don’t have to decide today, but some of them do have waiting lists.”

“I saw the list,” I replied, voice steadier than I expected. “I’ve started looking. I just...”

She reached out, her hand light on my arm. “You’re doing a great job. I know it’s a lot. But you’re not alone in this.”

For the first time in a long time, I believed that. And it made all the difference.

Inside, Mama was asleep. Her face was softer than it had been on the last few visits. The angry confusion had melted into something calmer. Peaceful, even. I moved to the chair by her bed and sat slowly, the vinyl cushion squeaking beneath me.

Her hands looked smaller these days, but there was something different in her features today—like someone had dusted off the light behind her eyes.

She stirred.

“Hey,” I said quietly. “Morning, Mama.”

Her lids fluttered open, and for a second—just one clear, soul-piercing second—she looked right at me. Not through me. Not past me.

At me.

“Tessa,” she said. Not confused. Not questioning. Just a mother saying her daughter’s name.

I blinked hard and reached for her hand.

“Yeah. It’s me.”

She smiled and glanced down at my hands. “You still bite your nails.”

I let out a half-laugh. “Yeah, well. Some habits die harder than others.”

She looked toward the window, eyes a little watery now. “My roses will be blooming soon, won’t they?” She seemed to question herself.

I swallowed past the lump in my throat, unable to tell her that her beloved roses were

no longer there. “They already have.” I opened the photo app on my phone and showed her a picture I had taken last year of her tending her flower garden.

“Ah, yes,” she said, touching the picture as if the flowers were real.

Her gaze flicked back to mine. “You’re going to be leaving here soon,” I whispered, brushing a piece of hair from her forehead. “And that’s good news. But I think I’ll wait to tell you more until later.”

She didn’t answer. Her eyes drifted closed again, the moment passing like fog over the sun.

Still, I held her hand and sat there until the aide came in to bathe her. Until things got brighter with the kind of light that hurts when you’ve been in your head too long.

As I stood to leave, my phone buzzed.

Callie: Hey, you busy later? Meet me at Roper’s? Feels like we could both use a drink.

I texted back:

Me: Sure. I’m starving. And you’re right. We could.

I pocketed the phone, took one last look at Mama, and told myself I had a few more days. A few more hours to make the impossible feel manageable.

And maybe figure out where I’d go from here.

I pulled onto the main road, the hospital shrinking in my rearview. The late afternoon sun filtered through the windshield, streaking gold across the dashboard as I tapped

the gas, heading toward the one place that hadn't changed much since we were kids.

Ropers sat on the edge of town like it always had—half roadhouse, half bar, all attitude.

It used to be the backdrop for every wild Friday night and hungover Saturday.

If the walls could talk, they'd whisper secrets about first kisses, bad decisions, and big dreams made on cheap beer and even cheaper digital jukebox tunes.

As I passed the familiar weather-beaten sign and pulled into the parking lot, I spotted a little white hatchback parked neatly in our usual spot—Callie's rental. The one her new boss had arranged for her.

I hadn't said it out loud, but I was relieved when she mentioned it.

We still technically co-owned the truck, just like the trailer, and sharing it had started to feel like one more tightrope to walk.

Now I didn't have to feel guilty about using it whenever I needed to, especially with everything going on.

I parked our truck next to her, but instead of getting out, I sat there for a second, the engine ticking as it cooled. The truth sat heavy in my chest.

I was going to have to tell her.

My best friend. The one person who still felt like home in a life that had been blown to hell and patched together with duct tape and stubbornness.

I closed my eyes, and for a moment, the years peeled back like the pages of an old

scrapbook.

We were twenty-one, packed into a corner booth with three other girls from our rodeo circuit days.

Someone had smuggled in cupcakes for Callie's birthday, and the bartender had let it slide, mostly because Callie smiled at him like he hung the moon.

We drank too much, danced like fools, and made loud promises about where we'd be in ten years.

I would be a top-tier barrel racer with my own rig and sponsors.

Callie wanted to open a floral shop called "Petals menus flipped open, though we didn't need them. We both knew what we'd order before we even parked.

A waitress came by, young and tired looking. She chewed on a piece of gum like it owed her money.

"What can I get y'all?"

Callie grinned. "Two burgers, double cheese, no onions on hers, extra pickles on mine. Fries, not the curly kind. And—" She turned to me, eyebrow raised. "A beer?"

I hesitated just a second too long.

"Water's good," I said, trying to sound casual. "Lemon, if you've got it."

Callie's expression didn't change, but her eyes flicked up with the sharpness of someone who knew me better than anyone else alive.

“One beer,” she said to the waitress. “And a water with lemon.”

When we were alone again, she leaned forward, both elbows on the table. “Okay. You gonna tell me why you passed on a cold beer at Roper’s, or do I get three guesses?”

I huffed out a breath, running a hand through my hair. “I was gonna wait until after we ate.”

She crossed her arms. “That bad, huh?”

“No,” I said softly. “That big .”

Her eyes searched mine, and I watched the moment it clicked.

“No shit,” she whispered, eyes going wide.

“No shit,” I repeated, smiling despite the anxiety churning in my gut.

Callie leaned back in the booth like I’d hit her with a shockwave, then slapped a hand to her chest. “Colt?”

I nodded.

“Well damn,” she breathed. “Did you plan it?”

I laughed. “You know better than that. Do I look like I planned it?”

Callie gave a soft chuckle and shook her head. “No. You look like someone who’s about to throw up. But I know you well enough that you don’t hate the idea.”

“I don’t,” I said honestly. “I’m scared out of my mind, but I want this baby. I want something that’s mine. Something real.”

The waitress returned with our drinks, but instead of leaving, she smiled and nodded toward the bar. “By the way, your tab’s covered. That cowboy in the expensive boots said to put it on him.”

We both turned. At the far end of the bar, Easten Maddow leaned against the counter, all lazy charm and expensive denim, boots polished enough to blind someone. He tipped his Stetson in our direction, then went right back to flirting with the bartender like he had all night to kill.

“Great,” I muttered under my breath. “Let’s just hope he doesn’t come over here and start snooping around in my business.”

Callie smirked. “He always that subtle?”

“So, let’s get back to the important stuff,” she said, wrapping both hands around her beer like it was an anchor, “what now? You moving in with Colt? Gonna raise little cowboy junior together on that fancy-ass ranch of his?”

“Slow down,” I said, sipping my lemon water. “I haven’t agreed to anything. The case manager is pushing me to pick a memory care place for Mama. I’ve got... a week, maybe.”

“I thought she gave you options.”

I nodded. “She emailed me a list. Helen’s pushing the one out by the lake. Says the views are calming and the staff is stable.”

Callie scrunched her nose. “That place smells like old coffee and despair.”

“I know. That’s the problem.”

There was a beat of silence before Callie said, “What about Heartland Estates? It’s local. We used to visit your uncle there, remember? He loved the place.”

“I thought about it,” I admitted. “It’s just... hard to picture her anywhere that isn’t her house.”

“Then don’t think of it as forever. Just think of it as a breather. For both of you.”

I nodded, grateful for the practical wisdom beneath Callie’s sass.

“And besides,” she said, lips curling up, “I might not be your roommate much longer.”

I blinked. “What? Why?”

Her smile widened. “Matt. My boss. He’s hinting that he is about to ask me to move in with him.”

My eyes nearly popped out of my head. “Wait—didn’t you just meet him last week?”

Callie shrugged, but her smile was pure trouble. “Technically, yes. But when you know, you know, right?”

“Callie,” I said slowly, setting down my drink. “You’ve known this guy for, like, seven days. That’s barely enough time to learn his coffee order, let alone if he leaves his toenail clippings on the nightstand.”

She rolled her eyes and pulled out her phone. “Oh, ye of little faith. Look.”

She tapped around for a second, then turned the screen toward me.

The picture wasn't even filtered—just Matt, standing beside his truck, sleeves rolled up, one hand in his pocket, and looking like he could model for a ranch supply catalog. I hated how easy the “wow” slipped out of me.

“Okay,” I admitted, “he is hot.”

Callie beamed. “See? You get it.”

“I get it,” I said, taking another bite of my burger. “But just promise me you’ll make him prove he’s not secretly married or living in a doomsday bunker first.”

“No doomsday bunkers,” she promised. “Just a killer smile, good manners, and the best hands I’ve ever seen. And not in a creepy way, I swear.”

I shook my head, grinning despite myself. “I swear, if I end up raising this baby in your empty trailer because you ran off with Mr. Six-Pack, I’m gonna haunt you.”

Callie raised her beer. “Then you better start taking Colt up on his offer. Rhett told me you turned down staying with him.” She took a sip. “He loves you. You know that, right?”

I nodded and grinned. “It’s just—things are moving so fast.”

“Fast. Like five years, fast?” Callie smirked.

“Don’t make it sound worse than it is,” I teased, rolling my eyes.

Then, quieter, I added, “I love him too.”

The words slipped out before I could second-guess them. Hearing my own voice say it gave me pause, like naming it made it more real.

Tangible. Permanent.

When our burgers arrived—hot, greasy, stacked like always—I let myself breathe a little easier.

Because yeah, everything was changing. I didn't know what tomorrow held. But tonight, with my best friend across the table and Colt's baby growing inside me, I felt the edges of something I hadn't in a long time—hope.

Messy, complicated, stubborn hope.

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Chapter Eighteen

All In

Colt

I pulled up and parked next to Tessa's little camper. It looked the same from a distance—still tucked under the shade of a couple of stubborn oaks—but as I stepped out, I noticed a few new touches.

A strand of faded fall garland was draped around the awning, and a shiny copper wind chime twisted in the breeze, catching just enough sunlight to flash like fire. It clinked gently, that hollow, melodic sound that made me pause for a second. It was peaceful, even hopeful.

I looked up. The trees were already starting to shift—amber and gold creeping into the green.

A handful of leaves danced to the ground as if reminding me winter was on deck, just waiting in the wings to blow in hard.

And no matter how tough she was, there was no way Tessa could ride out a Central Montana winter in this damned tin box.

Subzero temps, sideways snow... Hell, even the wind here had a mean streak in April.

I walked up the makeshift steps and knocked gently. The door creaked open just a

few seconds later.

“Hey, cowboy,” she said, smiling.

She looked good. Tired, yeah—but she’d pulled herself together. Jeans, boots, a soft cream sweater, and her hair braided over one shoulder.

“Well, would you look at you,” I said, sliding my hands into my pockets so I wouldn’t do something stupid, like reach for her. “All polished up and ready for the doc.”

Her smile widened, and she tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “You’re late.”

“Five minutes,” I countered. “You try drivin’ with the donut shop’s coffee bouncing around in your cupholder like it’s got a death wish.”

She stepped out, pulling the door closed behind her. “You brought me coffee?”

“Only if you’re nice to me... and it’s caffeine free,” I teased, offering her the to-go cup with a smirk.

She took it and sipped, closing her eyes like it was the best thing she’d tasted all week. “I’ll consider it. You’re off to a good start.”

We stood there for a beat longer than necessary. The breeze caught her braid and tossed it over her shoulder, and I swear I forgot how to breathe for a second.

“You ready?” I asked finally, tipping my head toward the truck.

She nodded, and as she climbed in, I caught myself staring at the trailer again—at its

thin walls and lack of foundation other than two small tires. She was hanging on, but just barely.

That was the thing about Tessa—she was built tough, like the cars she raced. But even the best engines needed fuel, shelter, and someone to tune them up now and then.

I opened the driver's side door, climbed in, and made a silent vow as I turned the key in the ignition.

She wasn't going to go through this winter alone. Not if I had anything to do with it.

The cab of my truck was warm, the heater already pushing out air that smelled of new leather. Tessa buckled herself in without a word, cupping her coffee like it was the only thing tethering her to the earth. I didn't rush her. She'd talk when she was ready.

We pulled onto the main road, tires humming over asphalt. The cottonwoods lining the ditch were flashing yellow now, tossing leaves like confetti every time the breeze swept through. We had about twenty minutes till we hit Lovelace, give or take, and for once, I didn't mind the drive.

"How you feelin' today?" I asked, glancing over.

She shrugged, but it wasn't the heavy kind she used to give me back when she was barely holding it together. This one had more weight to it—more purpose. "Better," she said. "Less like I'm spiraling. More like I've got my hands back on the wheel."

I smiled at that. "What are you going to do with Reckless?"

Tessa laughed—soft and short, but real. "Actually, we might be saying goodbye to her soon."

I raised a brow. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” she said, blowing on her coffee. “Callie and I have a buyer. Serious guy. From Billings. Runs a restoration shop and wants to get Reckless into exhibition races—nostalgia drags. Says he’ll keep the name and everything.”

I whistled low. “That’s a hell of a legacy. You okay with lettin’ her go?”

Her jaw tightened just a hair. “Not really. But we need the money, and honestly... It’s time.”

I nodded. I didn’t pretend to understand what it felt like to part with something that defined you for so long. But I could tell this wasn’t just about selling a car. It was about closing a chapter.

“Got the insurance company comin’ this week,” she added. “They’re finally sending someone out to appraise Mom’s place.”

“Think it’ll be enough to rebuild?”

Her voice wavered a little. “I hope so. But even if it is... I don’t know if she could handle it. That house was her life. Everything in it. Pictures, keepsakes, Dad’s old rodeo trophies... all gone.”

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel. “That’s hard. But you’re doing everything you can.”

She turned her head, looking out the window. “I picked a place in town for her. Memory care facility. It’s not fancy, but the staff seems kind, and they’re used to handling... well, you know. The confusion. The wandering.”

“You mean the scary stuff,” I said quietly.

She nodded. “Yeah. That.”

“You made a good call, Tess.”

“I don’t know,” she murmured. “Feels like all I do lately is make decisions I’m not sure about and hope something sticks.”

“You’re makin’ the best calls you can with what you’ve got,” I told her. “That takes guts.”

She looked at me then. Really looked. And whatever she saw in my face must’ve reassured her, because her shoulders relaxed, just a little.

“I just don’t want her to feel like I’m abandoning her.”

“You’re not.”

I meant it. If anyone was carrying more than her fair share, it was Tessa. And here she was, sitting next to me, not complaining, not running—just facing it all head-on. I didn’t know how she hadn’t burned out by now.

Most people would’ve cracked. Hell, I might’ve cracked.

The road curved, and I eased into it, glancing her way again.

Whatever this was between us... it wasn’t casual anymore. Maybe it hadn’t been for a while. I wasn’t just here to play chauffeur. I was here because I wanted to be.

I was in this whole damn thing, for real.

All in.

That meant showing up for the little things, too—even the ones that made my stomach twist with nerves.

The exam room smelled like something between baby powder and disinfectant. Tessa sat on the edge of the padded table, the paper beneath her crackling with every nervous shift.

The nurse had already been in and out, cheerful and chatty, cracking a few jokes that actually got Tessa to laugh. I played along—couldn't help it. Anything to take that crease out of her forehead.

Now it was just the two of us again, waiting.

She was quiet, fingers twisted together in her lap. I could tell her mind wasn't here—not really. It was back somewhere else. Somewhere darker.

“You okay?” I asked gently.

She gave a short nod, but it didn't come with a smile this time. “Yeah. Just... kinda nervous.”

I knew what she meant. She didn't have to explain.

Before long, the door opened again, and Dr. Jensen came in. He was wearing a soft blue shirt under his white coat and a tie with little storks on it. He looked like the man who'd delivered half the babies in the county.

“Morning, Tessa,” he said, pulling up his stool. “Colt. Good to see you both.”

I offered him a polite nod, but my eyes stayed on her. She straightened just a little, trying to look composed and brave.

Dr. Jensen glanced at the screen on his laptop. “Looks like you’re about eight weeks, give or take. First prenatal, right?”

Tessa nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“All right, first thing—we’ll get some bloodwork done today. Then we’ll schedule the ultrasound so we can confirm the due date and check on how the baby’s doing.”

He spoke as if this were all routine. Easy. But I saw Tessa’s shoulders tense.

“Doc,” she said quietly, “I had a miscarriage a couple of years ago. Around the same time, maybe even a little sooner.”

His face softened instantly. “I’m sorry, Tessa. I know that leaves a scar, even if no one can see it.”

She blinked fast and stared at her hands. “I just... I need to know. Is there something wrong with me? Should I be doing something different this time? Eating differently? Lying flat? I keep wondering if I did something wrong before...”

“Hey,” I murmured, reaching over to cover her hand with mine. She didn’t pull away.

Dr. Jensen leaned in a bit. “Miscarriages are more common than we talk about—one in four pregnancies, statistically. And most of the time, it’s not anything the mother did or didn’t do.

It’s just nature, chromosomes, things we don’t always control.

But I'll do every test, every check, to make sure you're supported every step of the way. "

Tessa swallowed, her voice barely audible. "So you think I can carry this one?"

"I do," he said without hesitation. "I think this baby has every chance in the world. And I think you're stronger than you know."

Her lip trembled, but she held it together. I didn't know whether to wrap her up in my arms or just hold her hand tighter, so I did the only thing I could—stayed right where I was, steady as I could be.

"I'll send in the ultrasound technician," he added gently, standing up. "I want you to see that everything is going well. All right?"

Tessa nodded, wiping a tear quickly with the back of her hand.

When the door closed behind him, the room went quiet again, except for the low hum of the wall vent.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "I didn't mean to cry."

"Don't be," I told her. "You're allowed to feel whatever you need. I've got you."

The technician came in and helped her lie back, adjusting the monitor and wheeling over the portable ultrasound machine. I stayed seated beside the table, watching as Tessa pulled up her paper gown and exposed a patch of pale skin. I took her hand without thinking.

"You ready?" the technician asked, spreading the cold gel across her belly.

“Yeah,” Tessa whispered.

The machine buzzed softly as the nurse moved the probe. Static. Then a blurry black-and-white swirl. And then?—

“There it is,” she said softly. “That little flicker, right there? That’s the heartbeat.”

I leaned forward, squinting at the monitor. It looked like nothing and everything. Just a tiny, bean-shaped figure in a sea of gray, pulsing with the softest of rhythms.

“Can you hear it?”

The technician smiled and turned a dial.

And then we heard it. That fast, steady whoosh-whoosh-whoosh, like tiny galloping hooves echoing off the inside of my mind.

Tessa’s hand tightened in mine. Her eyes filled instantly, but she didn’t look away from the screen.

“That’s your baby,” she said, quieter now.

Tessa nodded, tears spilling over. “I didn’t get to hear it last time.”

I swallowed hard, feeling like I was holding my breath in a church pew. Sacred didn’t even begin to cover it.

“Everything looks perfect for this stage,” the woman added. “Strong heartbeat. Good placement. We’ll print out a picture for you to take home.”

“Are you sure you’re alright?” I asked, hugging her shoulders.

She turned to me slowly. “That was real. I heard it.”

Outside, I opened the truck door for Tessa and climbed in behind the wheel. She turned to me, still a little dazed. “How do you feel?”

I just grinned and cranked the engine to life. “Peachy,” I said. “We’re goin’ for a little ride.”

She narrowed her eyes. “To where?”

I pulled onto the road and tapped the steering wheel like it had a secret.

“You’ll see soon enough.”

And as we rolled down the road, wind tugging at the last gold leaves of fall, I smiled to myself.

Everything was going exactly the way I’d planned.

Next stop: the big sell.

Time to show her the double wide.

Chapter Nineteen

Back to the Beginning

Tessa

“I haven’t been down this road in a long time,” I said.

As soon as Colt flicked on his turn signal and veered off the main stretch, my heart stuttered. I knew these trees—knew the way they arched over the lane like a canopy in the fall, their leaves brushing gold across the windshield. But something was different.

The gravel was gone.

Instead, smooth black asphalt curved ahead of us, still crisp around the edges like it hadn’t been poured all that long ago.

I glanced at him. “This road’s paved now?”

He just gave a small, secret kind of smile and kept driving. No explanation. No teasing. He always wore just that infuriating calm when he was about to do something that knocked my breath out.

My throat tightened as the trees parted, and the house came into view.

It looked nothing like I remembered. And somehow... exactly the same.

The siding was fresh and clean. New gutters trimmed the roof, and the porch had been painted a soft cream color, making it look bigger and brighter.

Neat flower beds lined the walk, planted with mums and fall pansies.

The lawn had been cut recently—edges trimmed sharp, the kind of care that didn't come from a rushed Saturday morning chore.

But what really got me—the part that made my breath catch—was the old porch swing. Still there. Hanging from new chains on that familiar beam. The cinder blocks we'd used to prop it up when the post started sagging had been replaced with real supports, solid and level.

I opened my mouth, but the words caught in my throat.

The barn had a new corral around it, and white fencing stood out bright against the green pasture beyond. Everything was cleaner, neater, and steadier.

He pulled into the driveway, parked, and shut off the engine. The truck went quiet, and I could only hear the wind rustling through the trees.

"I... I don't understand." I turned to him slowly. "What is this?"

He didn't answer right away. Just looked out at the house, hands resting on the wheel like he wasn't in any rush.

"This place needed a little love," he finally said. "Figured I owed it to the land."

I gave him a side-eye. "Colt, this isn't just 'a little love.' This is a damn renovation. You didn't just mow the yard. You overhauled it."

That smirk twitched again. “Come on. Let me show you.”

He opened his door, hopped out, and rounded the truck before I could even undo my seatbelt.

I stepped out slowly, my boots hitting the fresh gravel edging the drive.

The air smelled like cut grass and warm cedar, and suddenly my head was spinning with old memories—nights on that swing with a blanket across our legs, Colt fixing that busted gutter with a splint and duct tape, the fight we had in the kitchen over his muddy boots.

This place had been ours once. And now it looked like someone had taken the bones of that life and rebuilt it with purpose.

But why?

“Colt...” I said softly, walking toward the porch, my fingers brushing the smooth railing. “You planning to rent this out? Sell it?”

He stopped beside me, then turned to face me full on.

“No.” His voice was gentle, but steady. “It’s not for that.”

I searched his face, but he didn’t flinch. Didn’t look away.

“It’s for you,” he said simply. “And your mama.”

A lump rose in my throat, sharp and sudden. I looked back at the house. At the porch. The barn. The fresh welcome mat at the front door.

“You did all this... for me?”

He didn't answer with words. Just held my gaze, quiet and sure.

That's when I knew—this wasn't just about giving me a place to land. This was about giving me a soft place to fall. Even if I didn't stay forever. Even if he wasn't sure what came next.

But something in his eyes told me he might be hoping I'd stay longer than just a little while.

Colt didn't say a word as he led me toward the barn. The sun slanted through the trees now, casting golden light across the fresh white fencing and long shadows on the stone path.

It wasn't just the house he'd fixed. The barn, too—fresh paint, new gate latches, the air clean and sweet like cedar shavings and hay. The kind of barn that didn't just house animals. It welcomed them home.

And then I heard it.

That soft nicker. Low, familiar.

I froze.

He opened the stall door, stepped back, and out she came—Biscuit.

My Biscuit.

She trotted right toward me, ears forward, her dusty coat gleaming in the last rays of sun. And just like that, I was gone.

I opened my arms. “Oh my God... girl—hey, hey—look at you. You’re back home,” I choked out, burying my face in her neck as she came right up and nudged me like she did the last time I saw her not long ago.

She smelled the same. Felt the same. Warm and steady and safe.

I pressed my cheek against her mane and just let the tears come.

It wasn’t graceful. It wasn’t pretty. But it was real. And I didn’t care that Colt was standing there, probably watching me fall apart.

I stroked Biscuit’s neck, my words barely making sense. “Thank you. Thank you.”

“One of the reasons I kept her close was that I hoped she’d be back with you one day.”

I turned slowly and my vision blurred with tears. Then, I crossed the space between us without thinking. I threw my arms around his neck, pulling him in like I needed his heartbeat next to mine, like it was the only thing holding me together.

He caught me easily, his arms sliding around my waist. One hand went up to cradle the back of my head like he used to, fingers tangled in my hair.

We just stood there for a moment, the barn behind us, Biscuit snorting softly nearby, the world going still.

Colt pulled back slightly and gave me that sideways grin that always made my chest tighten. “Well,” he said, “I’m real glad to see where your true love lies. Didn’t even get a glance before you were off running to that horse.”

I laughed through the tears, wiping my cheeks. “That was the warm-up, cowboy.”

“Oh yeah?”

I leaned up and kissed his cheek—soft, slow, lingering. “I saved my best hugs...”
Then another kiss, this one at the corner of his mouth. “...and kisses...”

I pressed my lips fully to his, finally, like I meant it. Like we were still standing in the ashes of everything we lost, but something new was growing there. “...for you,” I whispered.

He hummed against my lips, then stepped back just enough to let his gaze roam over my face.

“I knew you’d come home someday,” he said. “I just didn’t know if I’d be smart enough to fix it when you did.”

I didn’t have the words. I just nodded.

Because this wasn’t just a house.

This was a new beginning.

And I could finally feel it.

Colt reached for my hand as we stepped onto the porch, his thumb brushing gently across my knuckles like he couldn’t help himself. The wood beneath our boots felt smooth and new, but not cold, like it had been broken in just enough to feel familiar.

The screen door released a soft creak, and we were inside.

I stopped in my tracks.

It wasn't just redone—it was reimagined. The place looked nothing like the scuffed-up double wide we'd once shared during those messy, passionate years when we were too stubborn to admit we didn't have it all figured out.

Now, the space was warm and open, with cream-colored walls and woven rugs layered over dark wood floors.

A new leather sofa sat across from a stone-look electric fireplace, soft light flickering behind the glass.

The windows had real curtains—linen maybe—and the whole room smelled like fresh paint and vanilla.

And yet, some pieces tugged at my memory. A vintage lamp I'd once rescued from a flea market sat in the corner, its base still chipped in the exact same spot. The bookshelf Colt had built with crooked shelves—it was back, only now sanded and stained rich walnut.

But the real gut-punch was the photo on the mantle.

It was a picture of us. Young and sun-kissed, standing beside Biscuit after a barrel race, my arms around his waist, his hat cocked low as he smiled like he already knew the world belonged to him as long as I was in it.

I stepped closer, fingertips brushing the frame.

“You kept this?” I asked.

Colt stood behind me, hands in his pockets. “Couldn't make myself toss it.”

I swallowed hard, blinking back a new wave of tears. “You renovated the whole

house and didn't even move the mantle."

He gave a small smile. "Some things still work just fine the way they are."

I turned away before I got too emotional again, eyeing the sofa. "Well... you might know how to fix a house, but your furniture placement still sucks."

He barked a laugh. "Excuse me?"

I pointed. "The couch needs to be angled toward the window, not away from it. What's the point of all that landscaping if you can't enjoy it from inside? And the bed—let me guess—you shoved it in the corner like some bachelor cave."

He raised a brow, like it was a dare. "You wanna come supervise?"

"Absolutely."

We moved into the bedroom, and sure enough, he'd plunked the gorgeous new bed—soft quilt, wide headboard—against the wall that had always made the room feel boxed in. I gave him a look, then dropped my purse on the dresser.

"Let's rotate it," I said, already walking to the far end to grab a leg. "Window view, so I can watch the sunrise. Or the snow."

Colt chuckled but followed my lead, gripping the other end of the frame. "Bossy."

"You like it," I said, grinning over my shoulder.

"Damn right I do."

We got the bed moved, and he shifted the nightstand like he was taking mental notes.

I could tell he was watching me—not in a lustful way, not yet—but like I was putting something back into place he didn't realize he'd been missing.

Then I opened the door to the second bedroom and stopped.

A second bed—full-sized, neatly made with soft sage bedding and a fluffy pillow. A small oak dresser sat beneath the window, and a simple wooden frame was resting on top. I stepped closer, heart catching in my throat.

It was a photo of my mom on horseback, taken years ago at the county fairgrounds. She was laughing, reins in one hand, sunshine on her face, looking like she hadn't a care in the world.

"I found that in that trunk you left behind," Colt said from the doorway, voice low. "Figured she deserved a space of her own. Even if it's just for now."

I turned to face him, throat thick. "You made her a room."

He gave a small shrug. "She's part of the package. Always was."

There wasn't anything more to say—at least not out loud. So I didn't try.

I just took one more slow turn around the room, fingers grazing the quilt, the frame, the smooth corner of the dresser. Every detail had been chosen with care. Not flash. Not pity. Just quiet, steady thoughtfulness.

This wasn't just about fixing up an old house.

This was about Colt making room—for her. For me. For a new kind of life, however temporary it might be.

And even though he hadn't said it outright, I felt it in the way he looked at me. In the way he'd brought me here without pressure or expectation.

He was hoping I might not just settle in.

He hoped I might stay until things were finalized with Mom before the baby came.

And deep down, even if I wasn't ready to admit it yet...

I was starting to hope the same thing.

Chapter Twenty

Where We Belong

Colt

I heard her before I saw her.

A soft rustle of a drawer sliding open. The metallic clink of silverware being rearranged. The quiet hum she didn't even realize she was making—that same low, distracted melody she used to sing under her breath when she was organizing something or lost in thought.

God, I'd missed that sound.

I leaned against the hallway wall for a second, letting it wash over me. It didn't take much to imagine her in there—barefoot, sleeves pushed up, brows furrowed because I'd committed some kind of unholy sin by putting the spoons where the forks belonged.

I smiled to myself.

Of course, she couldn't resist making this place hers. That was the whole damn point.

But it was more than the sound of her voice or the rhythm of drawers sliding open. It was something else. Something hotter. Deeper.

The kind of heat that stirred low in my gut when I thought about her, pregnant with my child, standing in my kitchen like she'd never left. She was glowing in a way I hadn't known I needed to see again.

And damn if I didn't want to feel her beneath me.

I pushed off the wall and headed toward the kitchen.

Tessa stood at the counter, facing away from me. The soft blue top she had worn all day hugged her curves as if it had been made just for her. She was muttering under her breath as she sorted forks from knives. Didn't hear me come in.

I stepped behind her, swept her hair off her neck, and leaned in.

Her skin was warm where I kissed her, right beneath her ear.

She gasped softly. "Colt."

"Keep workin'," I murmured, voice low.

She started to turn, but I placed a hand gently on her hip. "Don't stop."

I reached around her and unbuttoned her jeans, the fabric giving way easily beneath my fingers. Her breath caught when I slipped my hand beneath the waistband, sliding under her panties until I reached her most sensitive spot.

As I touched her, I could feel the tension leave her body, replaced by something softer—something needier. She leaned forward slightly, her hands gripping the edge of the counter as I pleased her, slow and steady.

Her groan hit me like a jolt.

“God,” she breathed. “Now that I’m pregnant, everything’s more sensitive. I wasn’t expecting...”

I didn’t let her finish. I dropped to my knees just long enough to pull her jeans the rest of the way off. Then I stood, kissed her ass cheek, and boosted her onto the counter.

She reached for me, breathless, pulling me closer.

But I wasn’t done re-discovering her.

I slipped her blouse over her head, letting my hands explore the soft curve of her waist and the new fullness of her breasts beneath her bra.

“You okay?” I asked, thumb tracing the edge of the fabric.

She nodded quickly. “Better than okay. I just...”

“You want to see if the sensitivity thing applies here, too?” I teased gently, already assuming the answer.

I unclasped her bra with a knowing smile, slid the straps down her arms, and let it fall.

Then I took my time.

With my tongue and my fingers, I pleased every new inch of her. Every soft gasp. Every sharp breath told me she was already close.

Her skin was like silk beneath my touch, and I reveled in the way her body responded to each gentle caress and teasing flick of my tongue. Her back arched, her fingers

tangled in my hair, urging me on. Her moans were symphonies of need, echoing in the intimate space we shared.

I traced patterns down her stomach, feeling the tremors that rippled through her as I explored further.

Her thighs quivered under my touch, parting willingly as I coaxed every ounce of desire to the surface.

Her intoxicating and sweet scent filled the air, mingling with the heat of our shared breaths.

By the time she came apart beneath me, head thrown back, hand fisting in my shirt, I was the one breathless. The sight of her unraveling, the raw vulnerability, and the uninhibited passion was a vision I wanted to capture forever.

And I still hadn't had nearly enough. Each moment promised more to come, each touch a vow to enjoy every inch of her until we were both lost in the depths of our desire.

Her breathing was ragged as I trailed kisses back up her neck, her fingers tangling in my hair, pulling me closer as if she feared I might vanish.

"You good?" I murmured, brushing a sweat-damp strand from her face.

Her cheeks were flushed, her skin glowing like heated bronze, eyes half-lidded with desire—and something softer, deeper.

She nodded, lips parting. "I want more," she whispered, voice thick with need.

"Yeah?" My own voice came out husky, as if I hadn't spoken in hours. "You sure?—"

She silenced me with a feather-light kiss. “Don’t ask. Just take me.”

That was invitation enough. One arm slid under her thighs, the other cradled her back, and I carefully lifted her from the countertop. She laughed, breathless and bright, her fingertips tracing my collarbone. “Colt,” she said, pressing a hand to my chest. “Your back?—”

“My back is fine.” I carried her down the hallway in a few effortless strides. “I’d carry you across the world.”

Her smile sent a jolt through me—this was more than lust. More than reuniting when she returned to Lovelace. It was the ache I’d carried since the moment she’d walked away so many years ago.

In the bedroom, I laid her gently on the new quilt.

Soft afternoon light filtered through the curtains, casting a golden haze over every curve of her body.

She looked like my angel, as though she belonged to a dream I’d almost forgotten how to imagine.

Real or not, I wanted her more desperately than the air I breathed.

She reached up, tugging me down until our mouths met, and in an instant, my clothes were shed aside—slow, deliberate, fierce.

Her hands roamed my shoulders and chest, mapping every ridge and scar, while my lips explored the valley of her collarbones, the hollow behind her ear, and finally the peaks of her breasts.

She arched into me, nipples taut under my tongue, a low moan vibrating through her body.

I pressed my fingers between her folds again, feeling how slick she was, how ready, how needy. With one finger, then two, I teased her gently, curling inside her until she shuddered beneath me. She gasped, and I lifted my head to watch her chest rise and fall, her eyes shining.

“I love the way you feel,” I murmured, sliding closer until only the tip of me brushed against her wetness.

Then I sank in fully, slowly, filling her with every inch.

She cried out my name, wrapping her legs around my waist, pulling me deeper.

Her walls clamped around me, hot and welcoming, and I felt like we were two halves finally made whole.

We moved in tandem—rocking, thrusting, matching each other’s rhythm.

Her nails scraped down my back, leaving a trail of fire.

My hands gripped her hips, guiding, lifting, holding her close.

The fragrance of her hair, the taste of her skin, the soft symphony of our mingled breaths and moans drove me mad with love for her.

Tessa shifted beneath me, pressing her thighs tighter, rolling her hips up to meet each of my strokes. I leaned forward, kissing her open-mouthed, tongue dancing with hers, tasting her pleasure and giving it back. Her answers were urgent, needy, sweet—each whisper of “Colt” like a benediction.

I slid my hand lower, curling my fingers around her bud, circling it in slow, precise strokes.

Her hips bucked, her back arched, and she cried out again, louder this time, begging for more.

I matched her urgency, increasing speed, letting every motion be an affirmation of how deeply I cared, how much I'd missed our intimacy.

Her arms coiled around me, pulling me closer until there was no space between us. With one final, slow plunge, my release washed over us, and I buried my face in the crook of her neck, breathing her in.

We stayed like that, entwined, hearts pounding in perfect sync. She stroked my hair, and I kissed her ear tenderly. "I love you," she whispered, her voice raw and emotional.

"I love you, too," I replied, and the words felt as sacred as a vow.

Over and over we repeated them, each time more certain, more alive. In that moment, it wasn't just a reunion. It was a new beginning—two souls rediscovering each other, forging a bond far stronger than what had been broken.

I knew, without a doubt, this was something worth keeping forever.

We lay tangled together on the bed afterward, limbs still warm, hearts still racing, skin damp from the weight of everything we'd just shared. Her head rested on my chest, one leg hooked over mine, fingers tracing lazy circles near my ribs like she memorized my shape again.

The room was quiet except for our breathing and the hum of the ceiling fan above.

The sky outside had turned indigo, the first stars blinking into view. Somewhere in the distance, an owl called low and lonely, but in this room, everything felt full.

Complete.

She shifted slightly, lifting her head just enough to look at me.

“Do you ever think about baby names?” she asked softly.

I smiled, brushing her hair off her cheek. “You mean besides Colt Junior?”

She laughed, soft and surprised, and it made my chest feel like it might split in two.

“Try again,” she said, swatting my side.

“All right, all right. Something strong, maybe a little classic for a boy. And something wild but sweet for a girl.”

“Got anything better than Colt Junior, cowboy?”

I paused, then gave her a lazy grin. “We’ve got time. No rush.”

She nodded, eyes drifting shut again, her palm flattening over my chest.

“I don’t want to know,” I added quietly.

She blinked up at me. “Know what?”

“The gender. I want it to be a surprise. I want to look down the second they’re born and just... find out.”

There was a pause, and then she smiled again, softer this time. “Me too.”

I tightened my arm around her and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

Outside, the moon was climbing higher, silvering the edge of the mountains in the distance. The world was settling into its quiet rhythm, and so were we—two people who’d finally found their way back to the place they were always meant to be.

Sleep finally pulled us under. We were wrapped in each other, in a bed that Tessa was already making her own.

And I was ready to welcome what the morning might bring for the first time in years.

Chapter Twenty-One

No Easy Answers

Tessa

I woke to the sound of a spatula clinking against a skillet and Colt's low whistling drifting in from the kitchen.

The smell of scrambled eggs filled the air.

Real ones, not the powered ones from a box that Callie and I used to eat.

I just lay there for a moment, wrapped in warm sheets and the unfamiliar sensation of feeling safe.

The morning light poured in through the thin curtains, soft and golden, warming the bedroom and my bare legs. I shifted to sit up, slowly, one hand automatically going to my stomach.

My belly had definitely changed.

I ran my palm over the little bump. It still felt strange. Not in a bad way, just... unexpected.

Was I showing already?

I didn't think you were supposed to until later. But I had no frame of reference—this was my first time to get this far, and everything about my body felt like it had its own plan. Maybe I was bloated. Maybe I was just out of shape. Or maybe this little bean was growing faster than I expected.

I slid out of bed carefully and padded toward the kitchen, the floor cool against my feet.

Colt was barefoot too, in flannel pajama pants and a fitted T-shirt that hugged his shoulders just right.

He stood at the stove, spatula in hand, humming softly and off-key, like a man with nowhere else to go.

His hair was still tousled from sleep, and the way he looked over his shoulder the moment he heard me, like he was already smiling before he saw me, made my chest ache in the best way.

“Hey there, sleepy head,” he said. “Perfect timing. Breakfast’s almost ready.”

“Is that real food I smell?” I teased, rubbing at my eyes.

“Only the best for you. No more powdered eggs or drive-thru hash browns.”

He turned off the burner, scooped fluffy scrambled eggs onto two white plates, and carried them to the new dining nook—a wood table with clean lines, soft gray seat cushions, and chairs that didn't wobble when you sat down.

The windows were framed with breezy curtains that Colt had probably pretended not to care about but chose anyway.

It didn't feel like a rental or a stopgap.

It felt like he meant for me to stay.

Without a word, he grabbed my orange bottle of prescription prenatal vitamins from the windowsill, twisted the cap off, and set one next to a tall glass of milk at my place at the table like it was already part of his rhythm.

I took the pill, washed it down with a long sip, and eased into the chair. The air was warm, and the smell of eggs and toast was comforting and familiar. But even with the calm around me, something in my chest felt tight.

Colt sat across from me and picked up his fork, but he kept glancing at the clock on the microwave. I could feel it coming. "We should get a move on," he said finally. "The adjuster said ten sharp at your mom's place. And you know how guys like that are—always early when they've got bad news."

I nodded, already feeling the weight of it. "You're probably right."

I picked at the edge of my eggs, not really tasting them now, just moving them around my plate while my mind replayed what the fire had left behind. The teacups. The staircase. The place I once called home.

Colt didn't rush me, but I could tell he was watching, waiting for the moment I gave up trying to pretend we had time to linger.

"I'm almost ready," I said, as I changed my clothes and grabbed my sweater from the hook by the door.

The morning had started softly domestic, almost sweet.

But now it was time to step into the ashes of the past.

The air around Mama's property smelled like old smoke and wet earth.

Even after all this time, the ashes still clung to the ground in streaks, dark smudges where the foundation had cracked.

We stood near the truck, watching as the insurance adjuster—a square-shouldered man in khakis and wraparound sunglasses—took slow steps across what used to be my mother's front porch.

Colt stood beside me, arms crossed, jaw tight. He hadn't said much since we pulled in, and I appreciated that. I didn't need words right now. Just presence.

I took a few steps away, my boots crunching over scorched gravel and bits of broken siding. The place was unrecognizable, and yet... I saw everything.

The outline of the living room was still visible in the concrete slab, the space where Mom's old armchair used to sit.

The front window had collapsed inward during the fire, but the frame still stood, charred black.

I could almost picture her there on a Sunday morning, sipping coffee, her hair twisted up in a messy bun, the sunlight pouring in.

My chest tightened as I stepped through what used to be the front door.

The stairs had been there, just to the left. Now all that remained was a shadow in the soot where the wood had collapsed. At the top had been my room—the walls had been covered in magazine clippings and old ribbons from barrel races when I was just

a kid.

I walked deeper into the skeleton of the house.

Here, the alcove where Mom kept her teacups—each one picked up from a flea market or garage sale, all mismatched and chipped, but displayed like fine china.

And there—the old window seat. I used to curl up there with a book and a blanket, pretending I lived somewhere more exciting.

Back then, I couldn't wait to leave.

Now, all I wanted was to bring a piece of it back.

“You alright?” Colt's voice broke through gently behind me.

I nodded without turning. “I just needed to see it.”

The adjuster called out that he was finished, and we walked back together to the truck.

He flipped through a thin stack of papers clipped to a metal clipboard. “Ms. Walker, I've submitted the final report to the office, but I wanted to go over the numbers with you in person.”

I braced myself.

“Your mother's policy was significantly outdated. The coverage will fall short based on the square footage, current material costs, and location. I'd estimate you'll receive a payout that's maybe—maybe—half of what you'd need to rebuild something comparable.”

I swallowed hard. “What about the land?”

He shook his head. “It’s remote. No city utilities. No existing structures now. It holds some value, sure, but not a lot. You could try to sell it, but I doubt you’d get more than a few thousand.”

Colt asked a couple of practical questions—about additional paperwork, timeline for payments, things I couldn’t make my brain hold onto.

When the adjuster finally closed his folder and said he’d be in touch, I thanked him politely, nodding like a woman who hadn’t just been gut-punched.

He drove off in a puff of dust, and I stood there staring at the empty space where a home used to be.

“I thought it’d be more,” I said quietly.

Colt slipped his hand into mine. “You weren’t wrong to hope.”

I nodded, blinking hard. “But it doesn’t change anything, does it?”

He squeezed my hand. “No.”

I looked out across the land, flat and scrubby, with a few tired cottonwoods leaning against the sky. It wasn’t much. It never had been. But it was hers.

“It’s not about the house,” I whispered. “It’s about what she remembers. And what she’s already forgotten.”

Colt turned toward me then, his voice steady but quiet. “Tess... I know it’s not what you want to hear, but we could sell it. Put the money toward something she could use

now. A place with care staff. Somewhere close. Comfortable.”

I shook my head slowly, not angry—just... not ready. “Not yet.”

He nodded, like he expected that answer. Then added, “If she does want to rebuild... I’ll cover the rest. Whatever the insurance doesn’t pay—I’ve got it.”

I blinked up at him, stunned for a moment. “Colt...”

“I mean it,” he said. “If it matters to her—if it matters to you —then that’s all I need to know.”

The tears hit faster this time. I threw my arms around his neck, holding on tight. “Thank you,” I whispered. Then I pulled back just enough to smile through the mess on my face. “Look at you. Flashing your millionaire card like it’s no big deal.”

He smirked. “You make it sound like I carry it in my boot.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “Still hard to believe. But honestly... I don’t even know if she’d remember it. The house. The rooms. The porch swing. Some days are better than others, we’ll see...” I trailed off, letting the words hang.

“Then we wait,” I said softly, threading my fingers through his. “No rush. We see what she needs. What she can handle.”

He nodded, and I leaned into him again, resting my forehead against his chest. His heartbeat was steady, grounding me.

“I missed you,” I whispered.

His hand slid up to cradle the back of my head, and for a second, we just breathed.

“Leaving might’ve been the best thing that ever happened to me,” I admitted.

“Because now I see what I didn’t before.

Who you are. What you were always trying to be.

And now, you’re not just some man with a checkbook or a fancy truck or a big spread.

But you are the same you . Colt Bennett.

With your big heart, stubborn loyalty, and eggs that always come out fluffy. ”

He chuckled into my hair.

“I love you more now,” I added quietly. “Millionaire or not.”

Colt just kissed the top of my head and held me a little tighter. “Let’s get our shopping done.”

After we finished shopping and stepped into the parking lot, heading toward the truck, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out, already guessing what it was before the screen lit up.

Upcoming Appointment – OB/GYN: Second Ultrasound Tuesday · 10:15 AM

My fingers hovered over the notification for a second before I dismissed it.

I knew the time. Hadn’t stopped thinking about it.

This was the appointment where they’d measure things.

Check development. Maybe even catch glimpses of little hands or a heartbeat stronger than the flutter we saw last time.

Colt was loading the last two grocery bags into the truck when his own phone rang.

“Yeah, this is Colt,” he answered, tucking the phone between his ear and shoulder as he arranged the bags on the back seat. He paused for a beat, listening, then pulled the phone back to glance at the screen. “Hang on—I’ll put you on speaker.”

He tapped the button and leaned against the truck.

“Colt? You there?” came a voice on the line—deep, a little rushed.

“I got you. What’s goin’ on, Art?”

“Look, I know it’s last minute, but I could use a favor,” Art Whitson said. “I’m flyin’ out to Dallas for the big fall sale this weekend. Couple bulls I’ve had my eye on. But I’m green as hell at cattle auctions, and you know how those guys are—fast talkers, full of show.”

Colt chuckled. “Yeah, and if you don’t know what to look for, they’ll saddle you with a problem and charge you like it’s a prizewinner.”

“Exactly,” Art said. “You’d be doing me a real solid. You’d just have to be there one day, Tuesday. I’ll have the plane back that night.”

Colt met my gaze, then gave a small nod I couldn’t quite read. “Yeah. Tuesday? I’ll let you know.”

“Appreciate it. I’ll text you the details for you to consider,” Art said, then hung up.

Colt slipped his phone into his back pocket and turned toward the cab.

“That’s the day of the ultrasound,” I said quietly, still standing by the open passenger door.

He stopped mid-step and looked at me. “It is?”

I nodded as I turned to grab a bottle of green tea, fingers grazing the paper bag like I needed something solid to hold onto. “It’s the one where they check... everything.”

The truck was quiet. The parking lot buzzed with the faint sound of tires and idle engines, but for a moment, I couldn’t hear anything but my pulse in my ears.

Colt didn’t speak right away.

And somehow, that silence told me more than any yes or no ever could.

I didn’t ask him to stay.

I just sat there, hoping he’d say it on his own.

Chapter Twenty-Two

What Matters Most

Colt

The road home rolled out before us, familiar and sun-warmed, but I barely noticed the hills or the way the afternoon light filtered through the pines.

My thoughts were still back in that grocery store parking lot, where Art's voice came crackling over the speakerphone with that damn tempting offer.

Jet to Dallas. Full expenses covered. Quick turnaround.

It should've been easy to say yes.

"I could tell you were tempted," she said, voice gentle, cutting through my thoughts. "Back there with Art."

I kept my eyes on the road. "It wasn't just the offer. It was the trust behind it. Guy, green as spring grass, buys a ranch and he comes to me for help. That means something."

"I know," she said, not judging—just... understanding.

I glanced at her, then back at the winding road ahead. "My daddy would've told me to get my butt on that jet. You commit, you show up. Don't matter if it's a branding, a

handshake, or a million-dollar bull.”

“But your daddy didn’t have a pregnant girlfriend with a heartbeat check on the calendar,” she said, her lips twitching into a small smile.

I huffed a dry laugh. “No. No, he didn’t.”

She shifted slightly in her seat, angling toward me. “Colt, I heard the whole call. I know you didn’t commit yet. So, let’s figure it out together.”

I glanced over, surprised by her calm. “You’re not mad?”

“I’m practical,” she said. “Besides, you’re not just some ranch hand anymore. You’ve got options. And Art seems like the kind of guy who’d understand if you’re honest.”

“I was thinking,” I said slowly, “if he sends photos and videos of the bulls ahead of time—before the sale—I can give him a read. Build, movement, how they handle in the pen. Might even spot a bad attitude or a limp from here.”

She smiled. “That’s exactly what I was hoping you’d say.”

I exhaled slowly. “I want to help him. I do. But I’m not missing that ultrasound of our child.”

Her hand found mine on the console between us, warm and steady. “Good. Because I need you there, but more than that, I want you there.”

I gave her fingers a gentle squeeze. “You sure about this? I mean, he offered good money.”

She snorted. “Colt, you’re already a millionaire. It’s not like it used to be for us,

scraping for every dollar. You really gonna miss our baby's first close-up for a few thousand bucks and a hotel bar in Dallas?"

That pulled a laugh from deep in my chest. "You make a strong case, darlin'."

"Damn right I do."

We fell quiet again. The turn signal clicked as we turned into the driveway.

"I'll call Art back after we unload the truck."

I cut the engine, but neither of us moved right away. We just sat there, the kind of quiet that didn't ask for filling.

Then Tessa turned toward me with a lazy smile. "You gonna carry all these groceries inside yourself, or should you let the pregnant lady pull her weight?"

"Absolutely not," I said, throwing the door open. "You're on light-bag duty only."

She rolled her eyes as she climbed out. "That's gonna get old real fast."

We worked in sync, side by side, hauling brown paper bags up the steps and through the front door. Biscuit watched from the corral with mild interest, her tail flicking at the occasional fly like the world didn't hinge on how many boxes of cereal we'd grabbed.

Tessa handed me a box of herbal tea and wiggled her eyebrows. "This is for you."

I glanced down. "Chamomile?"

"Yep. To keep your blood pressure down before the baby comes. I figure we start

early.”

I gave her a look. “What exactly are you expecting this kid to do to me?”

She grinned. “I heard rumors about how you were as a young boy. I’m just covering our bases.”

I barked a laugh and dropped the box onto the counter beside the bread and produce. “Damned good to know I’m already being pre-treated.”

She leaned against the fridge for a second, watching me sort apples into the bowl. “Hey, about Art...”

I paused, not quite tensing but not relaxed either. “Yeah?”

“If he gets you the right footage before the auction kicks off—videos, good photos, maybe even a walk-around—do you really think you could coach him through what to look for?”

I leaned one hip against the counter and nodded. “Sure. There are a few things you can’t fake in a picture. Hoof placement is one. A good bull’s feet ought to point straight, no splay or pigeon-toe. You want symmetry in the walk, too. Smooth, no limps, no short stepping.”

Tessa folded her arms, nodding slowly, like she was committing it all to memory. “What about their eyes? You always said animals show more in the eyes than people give credit for.”

“Exactly. Clarity, confidence, no dullness. If a bull’s eye looks glassy or shifty, that’s a red flag.

And how he responds to being haltered and led?

Huge. A breeder bull needs a steady temperament.

You don't want him spooking at every noise or dragging handlers around like he's king of the mountain. ”

She grinned again, softer this time. “I love when you talk cowboy.”

I chuckled, then gave her a quick side-eye. “You're mocking me?”

“Only a little. But mostly I'm just glad we can still help him. And,” she said, brushing her fingers along the hem of my shirt, “I don't have to be the only one crying in that doctor's office if they say something ridiculously sappy.”

I reached for her hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “I hope they have Kleenex in the office.”

She laughed, and the sound filled the kitchen like sunlight.

We went back to unpacking, but something had settled between us—something sure and simple. We weren't just figuring out how to balance work and parenthood and grocery budgets.

We had learned how to do this together.

I finished loading the last of the eggs into the fridge and wiped my hands on a dish towel.

Tessa had perched barefoot on the arm of the couch, sipping a glass of ice water, and flipping through a brochure for that memory care place in town.

Her brow was furrowed, but not in that way that meant something was wrong. Just thinking. Planning.

Hell, didn't that feel like a gift?

I grabbed my phone and gave her a little nod toward the couch. "Sit with me for this?"

She looked up, surprised, but nodded. "You calling Art back?"

"Yep." I sat down and patted the cushion beside me. She settled in close, shoulder brushing mine, and I could feel her watching me as I thumbed through my recent calls and hit redial.

Art picked up on the first ring. "Whitson here."

"Hey Art, it's Colt. I wanted to talk to you about the auction trip."

"Yeah? Something up?"

I shifted back, one arm draped across the top of the couch. "Yeah. I won't be able to make the flight. Tuesday's a big day for me—and my fiancée. She's expecting our first child."

There was a pause, then a low whistle. "Fiancée, huh? Congratulations."

"Thanks," I said, grinning. "By my book, we've been engaged about five years, give or take."

Tessa looked up and nudged my arm with her elbow. "Is that your version of proposing?"

I didn't even skip a beat. "If it works, sure."

She laughed, that soft, familiar laugh that hit me low in the gut. "Then I guess I say yes."

Art chuckled in my ear. "Sounds like you've got your hands full."

"Yeah, but it's the good kind." I cleared my throat, getting back to business. "Here's the thing—I still want to help. If you can get me photos and a few videos of those bulls before bidding starts, I'll text you what to look for. I'll send notes. Real-time if need be."

"That could work," Art said thoughtfully. "Won't be the same without you there, but I trust your eye. I'll have Gavin take some footage, make sure we get everything you need."

"Appreciate it," I said. "I want you to get the right stock. But I can't miss this. We've got our second ultrasound that day."

"Say no more," Art said, sounding like a man who knew exactly how important that was. "Tell your fiancée congrats for me."

"I will." I ended the call and turned to Tessa, who was biting her lip in that way she did when she was holding back a grin.

"So," I said, sliding my phone onto the coffee table, "how do you feel about being engaged? It always seemed to me we already were... then you left."

She tilted her head, teasing. "Well, you never actually asked me before. Maybe if..."

I leaned in, brushing a kiss to her temple. "Maybe I should have..."

“I don’t know, Colt. I think fate knew we had some growing up to do.”

“I suppose so. Anyway, I want you to know I will get around to proposing with a ring and all. It’s just that we have been kind of busy.”

“You better,” she said, nestling into my side. “Because I’m holding out for fireworks.”

I held her tighter, both of us quiet for a beat.

Tessa had curled into the corner of the couch beside me, flipping through the memory care brochure again, legs tucked under her. My hand rested on the curve of her belly, and for a breath or two, I let myself believe that maybe the hardest parts were behind us.

Then her phone rang.

She blinked down at the screen, mouth pulling into a tight line. “It’s Helen.”

I sat up straighter as she answered, her voice calm but clipped. “Hello?”

A pause. Then her expression shifted—shoulders going stiff, the brochure slipping from her lap onto the floor. “I see. So... that’s final?” Another pause. “Okay... yes. We’ll be there.”

She ended the call with a soft sigh and looked over at me. Her eyes were clear, but her voice carried a weight that hadn’t been there five minutes ago.

“They’re releasing her. The insurance denied continued care. She’s being discharged tonight.”

The smile I'd been wearing slipped, just a little. Not out of frustration. Out of empathy.

"That soon?" I asked gently.

She nodded, already rising to her feet. "They gave her a sedative for the ride, but they said we need to be there by six."

I stood too, catching her wrist before she could head for the bedroom. "Hey. You okay?"

"No," she admitted. "But I will be. I have to be."

There it was—Tessa shifting into fix-it mode. The woman who never flinched when life turned sideways. And just like always... I'd follow her there.

Every damn time.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Just Like Mama Said

Tessa

The sky had gone that dusky lavender color, the kind that slips over the mountains like a hush before night falls. Colt drove with one hand on the wheel, the other resting on the console between us, his fingers drumming a slow rhythm that matched the quiet tension in the cab.

I leaned my forehead against the cool window, watching the roadside blur past in a wash of pine trees and old wire fences.

We hadn't said much since pulling out of the driveway.

The silence stretched long enough that my thoughts started to rise to the surface, like pebbles dropped in still water finally hitting bottom.

"What if she doesn't remember the trailer?" I said softly, not turning my head.

Colt's fingers paused mid-tap. "You mean the double-wide?"

"Yeah." I straightened up and looked over at him. "I mean, it's been years since she was there. And even then, her memory was already going. We changed everything—new furniture, new layout, new smell, even. What if it just... confuses her more?"

Colt glanced at me, his eyes thoughtful beneath the brim of his hat. “You don’t think it might comfort her? Being in a familiar place?”

I sighed. “Maybe. Maybe not. And what about the house? When do we tell her that it’s gone? What if she asks to go home?”

He didn’t answer right away. Just flicked the turn signal as we came up on the last stretch before the hospital road. The rhythmic clicking filled the truck cab.

“I keep running that moment over in my head,” I added, quieter now. “The fire. Seeing her like that. It’s like she’s already lost so much—how do we take more from her?”

Colt shifted in his seat, glancing at me again. “We don’t take anything, Tess. We tell her what she needs to know, in the kindest way we can. And if tonight’s not the night, then we wait.”

I nodded, grateful for his calm disposition when mine was all over the place.

“But you know evenings are harder,” I murmured. “Sundowning. It’s a real thing. She used to get so agitated when the light started to fade. Like her brain couldn’t sort out the pieces anymore.”

“Then we don’t expect too much,” he said. “We just bring her home.”

I looked down at my hands folded in my lap. My belly pressed tight against Colt’s old flannel shirt, which I’d pulled on before we left. It didn’t even feel like my body anymore—like I was watching all this from a step, looking through a window at myself.

“She might not even know who you are,” I whispered. “She used to love you, you

know. Said you had the kindest eyes.”

Colt chuckled under his breath. “Let’s hope she still thinks so.”

I glanced at him, and in that moment, something settled. The way his jaw was set, the lines around his eyes soft in the twilight, reminded me of every reason I’d ever trusted him. Of every time I’d felt safe just because he was near.

He reached out and took my hand across the console, weaving his fingers through mine.

“Whatever happens,” he said, his voice low and sure, “we’ll face it together.”

And somehow, that was enough—for now.

The automatic doors slid open with a soft whoosh, and the sterile scent of floor cleaner and hand sanitizer hit me like a wall. I braced myself—emotionally, mentally, in every way a daughter can when she doesn’t know what kind of mother she’s going to get.

But then I spotted her.

There, parked at the front desk in a hospital-issued wheelchair, sat Mama—upright, alert, and dressed head-to-toe in one of the floral blouses and khaki pants I’d picked out for her last week at the outlet store.

Her suitcase sat neatly by her side, zipped and ready to go.

She had her hair combed; lipstick carefully applied in the way she always used to do it—just a touch of coral pink. And she looked... good. Really good.

I stopped walking.

Colt nearly bumped into me, but I couldn't move. I just stared.

"Mama?" I said cautiously, not wanting to break whatever spell had settled over her.

She turned her head, those warm brown eyes searching my face—and for a heartbeat, I saw it. Recognition. Clear as day.

"Well, it's about time," she said, lips twitching into a smile. "I was starting to think you forgot about me."

I hurried forward, nearly tripping over my own feet as I crouched beside her. "Mama, we didn't forget. They told us six."

"They told me five-thirty," she sniffed, like it was the greatest of indignities. "But that's all right. I kept myself busy."

The nurse behind the desk handed me a small paper bag and a clipboard with forms. "Here are her prescriptions—memory medication, same dosage. No notable improvements, but no major declines either. Some lucid moments, some fog. Standard for her stage."

I nodded, heart thumping. "Thank you."

Mama turned her head slightly, and her face lit up when she saw Colt standing there. "Well, Bob," she said warmly, reaching for his hand. "You always were polite. Mowed my yard every Tuesday without fail, even in the heat."

I sucked in a breath, trying not to laugh. Colt didn't flinch—he just bent down, gently squeezed her hand, and said, "Yes, ma'am. Always happy to help."

I bit my lip to keep from smiling too big. He didn't correct her. Didn't even blink. Just went along with it like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Mama beamed. "Such nice manners."

As we gathered her things, I glanced over at Colt. His eyes met mine, and he winked.

It was such a small gesture, but it carved a warm space into my chest. After all the unknowns I'd braced for over the last weeks, this little flicker of clarity felt like a gift.

"Let's get you home, Mama," I whispered.

She patted my cheek. "I thought you'd never ask."

The ride home was quiet, but not tense—just soft, like the hush that falls over the world when the sun begins to slide behind the hills.

Mama hummed a little to herself, some old hymn I hadn't heard in years.

Colt glanced over at me once, a question in his eyes, but I just nodded.

Let her have it. Let her be wherever her mind had taken her for now.

As we turned down the road toward the double-wide, the last bit of pink sun streaked across the mountains like a fading promise. The porch light was already on—Colt must've set the timer before we left.

When he parked and hopped out to open her door, Mama squinted through the windshield at the house, shielding her eyes with one trembling hand.

Then she whispered it, with a breath so full of conviction it made my heart ache.

“Praise the Lord. I’m finally home.”

Colt and I exchanged glances, but neither of us said a word. We didn’t want to disrupt the moment. We just wanted to get her inside while that spark was still burning bright.

Mama stood in the center of her new bedroom, one hand resting lightly on the edge of the dresser like she wasn’t quite sure if it was real. She scanned the space slowly, thoughtfully, like her memories were reaching out and brushing across every surface.

Her gaze settled on the framed photo Colt had set out earlier. A picture of her from years ago—healthy, bright-eyed, grinning, sitting on Methuselah, her horse, after winning an event at the county fair.

She reached for it with trembling fingers. “That’s me...” she whispered, eyes glistening. “I remember this day.”

She turned toward me, her voice still soft but steadier than I expected. “You and Colt used to live here... but...”

I stepped forward and gently touched her shoulder. “And now all three of us will live here again. Just for a while. Until you’re strong enough to do whatever you want next.”

She blinked at Colt then. Really looked at him.

Her brows drew together as something clicked behind her eyes. “It was you,” she murmured. “It was you that pulled me from the fire.”

Colt didn’t say a word, just nodded once. Solid. Quiet.

Mama's shoulders sagged a little. Her eyes filled again. "My house is gone, isn't it?"

I reached for her hand, squeezed it, then looked at Colt.

"Tell her the truth."

He stepped closer, his voice low and gentle, the way he spoke to horses when they were spooked. "Yes, ma'am. It was a total loss. But you're here. You're safe. And we're gonna take care of you. All of us."

Mama nodded, slowly. A tear slipped down one cheek, and she brushed it away without a word.

Then, after a long pause, she lifted her chin.

"Well," she sighed, "I could use some sweet tea."

I stood at the counter, pouring the boiling water through the loose tea leaves and over the sugar like Mama always used to do. Colt hovered nearby, pretending to organize something on the kitchen island, but I could feel his eyes on me. He wasn't fooling anyone.

The house felt warm, not just from the heat of the water, but from Mama's presence in it. She was humming faintly from her seat at the table, the same tune she used to sing when folding laundry or shelling peas. I hadn't heard it in years, and it almost broke me in two.

I turned to open the fridge to get some ice when I felt her behind me.

Her hand settled on my stomach, gentle and certain.

I froze.

“Well,” Mama said, her voice dry but amused, “did you forget to tell me something, sweetheart?”

Heat rushed to my cheeks. I fumbled for words, completely caught off guard. “Mama, I—I didn’t know how to?—”

Her gaze drifted to my left hand. Bare. Her brow furrowed. “And when exactly is that cowboy planning to marry you?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again, utterly flustered.

“We’re... sort of engaged,” I said, lamely.

Mama didn’t look convinced.

Then Colt disappeared down the hallway without a word.

“Mama, I didn’t tell you because I wasn’t sure you’d—” I stopped, swallowing the rest of the sentence. Because what I meant was: I wasn’t sure you’d remember. And if you did, I wasn’t sure you’d approve.

Colt came back holding a small box. The leather was cracked along the edges like he’d carried it for a long time. He walked straight up to me, knelt on one knee in front of the sink, and looked up with that crooked, hopeful smile that used to undo me back when we were just kids.

“Figured it was time I made it official,” he said.

I opened the box.

Inside was a simple, delicate ring—just a small diamond set in a band that was clearly chosen with care. Not flashy. Not trendy. Just right.

My throat tightened.

“You had this?” I whispered, blinking down at him.

He nodded. “Had it for years. I bought it soon after you moved in but kept putting off closing the deal. After you left, I kept hoping that maybe I’d get the chance to use it someday.”

I burst into tears.

“Yes,” I managed, choking on the word. “Of course, yes.”

Colt slid the ring onto my finger, his touch shaking just enough to make my heart ache. Mama clapped once and grinned, looking entirely too pleased with herself.

“Took you long enough,” she said. “Now, get me that tea, Tessa Rae. You should’ve married that boy years ago.”

As she sipped her tea, calm and content, Colt leaned into me at the counter. His shoulder bumped mine, and I rested my head against it.

I looked down at the little diamond glittering on my finger, twisting it slowly, memorizing how it felt.

Maybe this wasn’t the big, fireworks-in-the-sky engagement I used to dream about. No candlelight or perfect dress or sweeping speeches.

But it was honest. It was real.

It was us.

“You know,” I murmured, still admiring the ring, “you’ve got excellent taste, cowboy.”

He grinned. “I’ll buy you a bigger one later.”

I shook my head. “No way. This is the one. This is ours.”

And in that small kitchen, with Mama sipping sweet tea and Colt beside me, I knew I didn’t need anything more.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Every Morning

Colt

The smell of coffee hit me before I even opened my eyes.

It wasn't the fancy kind, either—no cinnamon syrup or whipped cream nonsense. Just old-fashioned, percolated brew, the way folks around here liked it. I stretched, scratched the back of my neck, and padded out to the kitchen, still tugging a T-shirt over my head.

Dalia sat at the table, already dressed for the day in a soft pink blouse that Tessa must've picked out for her. Her Bible was open in front of her, glasses perched on her nose. She looked up as I entered.

"Well, morning there, Bob," she said brightly, then blinked and tilted her head. "No. Colt. It's Colt, isn't it? I'm getting better at that, aren't I?"

I smiled as I made my way to the counter. "You sure are, ma'am."

She beamed, proud of herself. "Names are funny things. Sometimes they stick, sometimes they float away."

I opened the cabinet for a mug and poured myself a cup. Then, mostly out of habit, I checked the coffee pot since Dalia was the one who had made it. There were no

floating grounds. The coffee was not too light, not watery, just right.

“You nailed the coffee,” I said, lifting the mug toward her in a silent toast.

“Well, thank you.” She tapped the page in her Bible like she’d just read something worth remembering. “Did you tell Tessa you loved her yet this morning?”

That caught me off guard. I lowered the mug slowly. “Uh... no, not yet. She’s still sleeping.”

Dalia’s expression softened as she looked out the kitchen window, past the screen and into the hazy pink sky. “Then you best not waste the moment. Jack told me he loved me every morning. Rain or shine, tired or not. Last words he ever said to me, too.”

She didn’t tear up. Didn’t sniff or get misty. Just smiled like the memory was a favorite song she hadn’t heard in a while.

I stood there, holding that cup of coffee like it weighed fifty pounds.

“I won’t forget,” I said quietly.

“You’d better not. That girl of yours, she needs to hear it. Every single day.”

I nodded, throat tight, and took one last sip before heading down the hall.

“Thanks for the coffee, Dalia.”

She waved me off. “Thank the Lord. I just followed the instructions.”

I stepped back into the bedroom, the morning light just starting to push through the slats of the blinds. The covers were tangled around Tessa’s legs, one arm flung over

her pillow, the other curled beneath her cheek. She looked peaceful—soft, warm, and mine.

I crossed the room quietly and leaned down to press a kiss to her bare shoulder.

“I love you,” I whispered, letting the words linger just above her skin.

She blinked slowly, stretching as her lips curved into a sleepy smile. “That’s a nice way to wake up.”

“I figured I’d take some advice from your mom,” I said, brushing a strand of hair from her face.

Her eyes fluttered all the way open at that. “She been giving you marriage tips again?”

“Yep,” I said, sitting on the edge of the bed. “Told me your father never missed a morning. Said ‘I love you’ every day.”

“She’s not wrong,” Tessa murmured, rolling onto her back. “Keep that up, and I might keep you.”

“Might?” I placed a hand over my heart in mock offense. “Woman, I just pledged eternal devotion at seven-something in the morning. That oughta at least earn me some bacon.”

She laughed, that throaty, half-awake sound that always knocked something loose in my chest. “If you’re wanting bacon, you’d better start cooking.”

“I was thinkin’ hot tea for you first.”

“Mmm.” She stretched again and yawned. “If you bring it to me while I shower, I’ll love you forever.”

I raised a brow. “That easy, huh?”

She cracked one eye open. “Don’t push your luck, cowboy.”

I leaned in for another kiss. “Hot tea, coming right up.”

“And toast.”

I stood with a groan. “You drive a hard bargain, Tessa Rae.”

“Yeah, well,” she called as I headed toward the kitchen, “you’re the one who said ‘I love you’ first.”

The sound of an approaching vehicle filtered through the window above the kitchen sink. I glanced up from buttering toast and saw a car pulling up the drive.

Tessa stepped beside me, holding her cup of coffee with both hands. “That’ll be Callie.”

I leaned to kiss her temple. “Yep, five minutes early.”

By the time I got the door open, Callie was bounding up the porch steps with a brown paper sack in her hand and a grin that could brighten a stormy day.

“Hope y’all are hungry,” she said, waving the bag. “Muffins from the bakery. Still warm if you don’t waste time.”

Dalia had moved to her favorite patio chair with a throw blanket around her shoulders

with her Bible in her lap, and clapped her hands. “You’re an angel, Callie.”

“You’re lookin’ good this morning, Miss Dalia,” Callie said as she handed her a muffin and settled into the rocker beside her.

“Good?” Dalia scoffed, tearing off a bite. “I look fabulous—at least until the sun gets too high and shows all my wrinkles.”

Tessa and I stayed back, watching through the screen door as the two women laughed like old friends catching up after years apart. The breeze lifted a few strands of Dalia’s hair as she sipped from her coffee mug.

“This Bob sure makes a yummy breakfast,” she said, loud enough for me to hear.

Tessa covered her mouth with her hand to keep from laughing. I pushed the screen door open and leaned a shoulder against the frame. “Well, ma’am, I do my best,” I called out.

Dalia gave me a regal nod. “Don’t get cocky.”

Callie laughed. “She’s definitely sharper today than I’ve seen her in a while. It’s kind of amazing.”

Tessa stepped outside and joined her on the porch. “The doctor said the new meds might help stabilize her memory. But I think being home is doing more than the pills.”

“Home and love,” Callie added, giving me a look. “She’s got both now.”

I joined them on the porch. “You’re sayin’ I’m the secret ingredient?”

Dalia held her coffee aloft like a toast. “You’re something, all right. But I wouldn’t call you an ingredient.”

I caught Tessa’s eye as she beamed at her mama. Callie was right. It wasn’t just the medicine. It was the porch, the coffee, the company. The little rituals that made people feel like themselves again.

And for the first time since we brought her back, I let myself believe she was indeed improving.

I checked my watch—9:22.

Tessa was still out on the porch, cradling the last sips of her tea while Callie and Dalia shared a quiet laugh over the muffins.

As much as I wanted to linger and watch her smile in the morning light, we had someplace to be.

I just hoped Art wouldn’t call needing my input on the bulls while I was getting my first look at my kid.

I rapped my knuckles against the doorframe. “Alright, mama-to-be. We should probably get this show on the road.”

Tessa glanced over her shoulder, her grin lazy and warm. “Bossy this early? You must really want to see that baby again.”

I chuckled. “I do. But mostly, I don’t want to be late and give them a reason to mark us down as a ‘no-show’.”

She grabbed her purse, kissed Dalia on the cheek, gently squeezed Callie’s shoulder,

and joined me at the truck. The sky was wide and soft above us, early fall colors brushing the trees like a sigh.

Once we pulled onto the highway, a peaceful quiet settled in. Tessa rested one hand on her bump, absently smoothing her thumb across it.

“It’s wild,” I said, keeping my eyes on the road. “Thinking about how different everything’s gonna be.”

She turned to me with a soft smile. “I know. But I’m not in a hurry to change what’s working. Mama is happy. I’m not waking up in a cold sweat from worry anymore. The three of us—we’re finally finding our footing.”

“I get it,” I said, nodding. “I really do.”

I reached over and let my hand settle over hers. She didn’t pull away. If anything, she leaned into it.

“But sooner or later...” I added, “it’s not just gonna be the three of us.”

She looked out the window for a beat, then back at me with something steady in her eyes. “One step at a time, right?”

“Right.”

I gently squeezed her fingers and then added, “Maybe in between those steps, we should talk about planning a wedding.”

She let out a dramatic groan. “My idea of a dream wedding went out the window a long time ago.”

I smirked. “Good. That means you’ll be thrilled with whatever half-decent plan I cook up.”

Her laugh softened the air between us, and I focused on the road ahead, already wondering what the next step might look like.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Double Blessing

Tessa

I should've been used to the smell of air freshener and floor wax by now, but the second I stepped into the clinic's waiting room, my stomach tightened like it was auditioning for a Cirque du Soleil routine.

Colt leaned over and kissed my temple. "Relax, darlin'. You're glowing."

I gave him a flat look. "I'm sweating."

"Same thing," he said with a wink, lacing his fingers with mine.

The ultrasound tech—the same one we'd seen last time—popped her head into the waiting room and smiled. "You two again. Let me guess, he's nervous and you're pretending not to be?"

I laughed despite myself. "You've got a gift for reading a room."

Colt muttered something about this being more stressful than branding season, and we followed her back into the exam room.

"You still wanting to keep the gender a surprise?" she asked, tapping at her tablet as I climbed up onto the table.

“We are,” I said quickly, shooting Colt a look. “Right?”

He nodded. “We made it this far. Might as well ride it out.”

The tech pulled up the machine, slathered on the gel, and started moving the wand over my belly. The familiar whoosh and thump of the baby’s heartbeat filled the room, and I felt my whole body soften with relief.

But then she paused.

Not long. Just long enough for me to catch Colt’s jaw clench.

“Hmm,” she said.

I squinted at the screen, seeing nothing but gray blobs and fuzzy shapes. “Hmm, what?”

“Mind if I have you turn a little onto your left side?” she asked, keeping her voice light. “Just want a better angle.”

I shifted, heart ticking faster. Colt leaned forward in his chair, eyes sharp. “Is something wrong?”

The tech grinned, one hand still on the wand. “Not wrong. Just... double.”

“Double?” I echoed.

She tilted the monitor toward us and pointed. “That’s baby number one. And that—” she slid the wand slightly—“is baby number two.”

Colt made a noise like the air had been knocked right out of him. I couldn’t stop

staring at the screen.

Two tiny shapes. Two flickering heartbeats.

Twins.

“Oh,” I breathed, a strange laugh bubbling up, “that explains why I’ve been feeling like a barge before the second trimester.”

The tech chuckled. “You’re not crazy. You’re just extra blessed.”

I glanced at Colt. His mouth was still open.

“Colt,” I said softly, reaching for his hand. “Are you feeling like I’m feeling?”

He blinked like he’d just come back from space. “I mean... We were expecting one tiny human. Not a matched set.”

I squeezed his fingers. “I guess Lady Luck figured we needed a little more chaos.”

“Or perhaps she’s making up for what we lost,” Colt grinned.

The door opened, and the doctor walked in, already smiling. “Heard the good news.”

We nodded like kids caught sneaking candy.

“Everything looks healthy, but twin pregnancies come with more strain,” he said. “You’ll need to pace yourself, eat a little more, rest a lot more.”

I gave a breathless laugh. “Does chasing after my mom count as cardio?”

He shook his head. “This is not the time for cardio. I suggest you get domestic help. I know that shouldn’t be a problem for Mr. Bennett.” Dr. Jensen smiled. “Now, have some fun. Go shopping, plan your nursery. Just don’t overdo it.” He patted Colt on the back. “See you in a month.”

And just like that, he closed the door behind him. Giving us some time to process the news.

Colt stood when I sat up, gently helping me off the table and grabbing a towel to wipe the gel from my belly.

“Twins,” I whispered. “That’s... a lot of diapers.”

“That’s a lot of love,” Colt said, looking at me like I was the only person in the universe who’d ever done something this brave.

And for the first time, I believed it too.

The ride back to the double-wide felt like floating.

Colt kept glancing over at me like I might vanish, one hand resting protectively on my thigh the whole drive. Neither of us said much. We were still processing it all—the two fluttering heartbeats, the weight of responsibility, the sudden doubling of everything we thought we knew about the future.

By the time we pulled into the driveway, the sun was high in the sky. The house looked the same, but everything inside me felt different—bigger, heavier, and brighter.

We stepped onto the porch, Colt opening the screen door for me like always, but this time he paused and murmured, “Let’s tell them together.”

I pushed open the front door and stepped inside, the cool air greeting me like a sigh of relief after the drive.

Callie sat curled up on the loveseat, a throw blanket tossed over her lap and a rerun of some baking show playing quietly on the TV.

Across from her, Mama was dozing with her chin tipped slightly forward, her Bible still open in her lap.

A small, soft snore drifted from her as the scent of lemon muffins and coffee lingered in the room.

Colt followed me in, carrying the manila envelope with the ultrasound prints like it held the Holy Grail.

“Hey,” Callie whispered, turning the volume down. “How’d it go?”

I exchanged a quick glance with Colt before crossing the room and pulling up a chair beside her. He handed me the envelope, and I passed it over with a smile that felt too wide for my face.

She pulled out the photo, stared for a second, and then squinted. “Wait a minute?—”

“There’s two,” I said, barely holding in a laugh.

Callie blinked. “Like... two arms? Or?—”

“Two babies,” Colt said, grinning from where he leaned against the kitchen counter. “We’re having twins.”

Callie let out a shriek that startled Mama for a second, but she just snuggled deeper

into her blanket with a smile. Callie bounced on the loveseat like a teenager, hugging the photo to her chest.

“Double the baby smell. Double the tiny cowboy boots,” she said, shaking her head. “Y’all. That’s wild.”

“We’re still a little stunned,” I admitted. “But it’s starting to sink in.”

Callie’s smile softened, her excitement settling into something quieter. Wiser. “Which is why I need to say something. And I’m not trying to ruin the moment, I promise.”

Colt raised a brow. “That sounds like a setup.”

She gave him a playful look, then turned her attention to me. “You two have done something beautiful here. You came back from heartbreak, from fire—literally—and you’ve built a foundation again. But now... it’s time to finish the job.”

I frowned. “You mean?—”

“I mean this double-wide has served its purpose, but it’s not where you raise twins. Or care for Mama long-term. You’ve got options, Tessa. Colt, you’re a literal millionaire with a ranch house that’s got more space than this entire lot.”

I glanced at him, and Colt’s jaw tensed, but not in resistance. More like... recognition.

“I know Mama’s doing well,” Callie continued, her voice gentle. “And I know you’ve made this place feel safe, Tessa. But the next season of your life needs room to breathe. You need help. You need ease. You need deeper roots than this place can provide.”

Colt crossed the room and pulled up another chair, sliding his hand into mine.

Callie leaned in a little. "You've risen from the ashes. But maybe now it's time to take off and fly."

I didn't say anything at first. I just stared at the photo she'd laid on the coffee table. Two little profiles, curled in tandem like commas. A matching pair of tiny heartbeats.

She wasn't wrong.

The crickets had just started their song when Colt stepped outside with a glass of sweet tea and lemon water for me. He settled down beside me on the porch swing. Mama was inside watching TV as the cushions sighed beneath us.

The folded ultrasound printout rested in my lap, edges curling where my fingers had gripped it too tightly. I looked down at it again—two tiny figures, side by side like they already had secrets to share. Twins. Still felt surreal.

"You've been quiet," Colt said gently.

I took a sip of water and exhaled. "Trying to soak it all in, I guess. I thought one baby would change everything. Two? It's like the whole map of our lives just redrew itself."

Colt nodded, stretching his arm along the back of the swing. "We're gonna need more of everything. Cribs. Diapers. Patience."

I let out a soft laugh, resting my head against his shoulder. "And maybe more square footage."

"Not today," I added quickly. "I know Callie means well, but I like it here right now."

Mama's doing better. It feels safe."

He didn't argue. Just sipped his tea and let the silence settle comfortably between us.

"I get it," he said at last. "This place saved us, in a way. Gave us space to heal. But we both know it's not where we stay. Not with two babies on the way. The doctor made that clear to me."

I turned toward him, my fingers absently brushing the folded photo in my lap. "You're thinking about moving back to your house."

Colt nodded once. "Yeah. I always thought I built that place for myself. Big space, open kitchen, pasture out back for Biscuit and the other horses. But maybe... I was building it for us. You. The twins. Even Dalia."

I blinked, caught off guard by how right that sounded.

"I'd like her to have her own quarters—close by but comfortable. Something private with her own little porch. She deserves that," he said.

"She'd love that," I whispered. "She keeps calling your house 'that fancy ranch house with too many windows.' But I think she'd love waking up to those views."

He chuckled. "We'll bring Biscuit back, too. I bet before long, you'll be leading her around the yard while the kids learn to ride."

Tears burned the backs of my eyes, but they didn't fall. They didn't need to. This wasn't grief or fear—it was the weight of something good.

"I just didn't picture it this way," I murmured.

“No fireworks?” he teased.

I shook my head with a smile. “Nope. No fireworks. Just soft light and the sound of you breathing beside me. And babies on the way. And my mama safe. It might not be the dream I had when I was seventeen, but it’s everything I didn’t know I needed.”

Colt kissed my temple, his hand closing over mine again.

The porch creaked. The breeze whispered. And in that fading light, with Colt beside me and our future tucked safely in my lap, I knew we’d find our way.

The double-wide was our past, and Colt’s home on Lucky Ranch was our future.

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Bet on the Long Game

Several Months Later

Rhett Callahan

Which, of course, I had.

The place looked good. Real good. All that land, white fence stretching wide across green pastures, a proper wraparound porch with a couple of rocking chairs that looked brand new. Guess love really does make a man settle down and start landscaping.

The smoker was going out back, and the smell of slow-cooked ribs hit me like a freight train.

Kids were running in the grass. Women sipping iced tea and wearing sandals chatted near the steps.

Someone had strung up lights along the fence posts— Colt's doing, no doubt.

Funny thing was, none of it felt like a show.

It just looked... right, like this was always where things were meant to land.

I made my way up the paver pathway, nodding at a couple of neighbors I half-recognized from back in the day before we won the Powerball. Colt hadn't just built a

house out here—he'd built a life. And damned if it didn't suit him.

I spotted Tessa first, barefoot on the porch, cradling one of the twins like it was the easiest thing in the world.

Her hair was down, her laugh soft and real, like she hadn't had a hard day in months.

Colt hovered nearby, holding the other baby like it was made of glass and gold all at once, shoulders tense like he'd body-check a bear if it got too close.

Tessa glowed like a woman who'd finally found her safe place. Colt looked like a man who knew damn well how lucky he was.

They'd gotten hitched a couple of months back. No crowd, no fanfare—just vows under the old oak tree near the fence line, Dalia crying into a hankie, and Colt looking at Tessa like she was the only thing keeping him standing.

Probably was.

Sawyer and Easton were there too, quiet and respectful, both in starched shirts and looking more polished than usual. It wasn't their story being written that day, but you could tell they knew how much it mattered.

I watched the love birds for a second too long before adjusting my shades and rolling my shoulders back.

Happy endings weren't really my style. Not because I didn't want one. Just never figured out how to stick the landing.

I pulled a beer from the cooler by the steps, twisted the cap off, and raised it in their direction as Colt caught my eye. He grinned, nodded once.

Yeah. The cowboy finally found his way home.

I took a long drink and leaned against the porch rail, playing it cool even as something a little too honest twisted in my chest.

Couldn't shake the feeling that maybe—I was getting tired of playing it cool.

I barely had time to finish my beer before Tessa walked over with one of the babies bundled up in a soft yellow blanket.

"Here," she said, already placing him in my arms like it wasn't a potential catastrophe waiting to happen.

"This one is Wyatt. We figured we'd ease you in with the chillist twin. "

I blinked down at the kid, who stared right back like he already knew all my secrets. Then—just like that—his tiny fist shot out and wrapped around my finger. Firm little grip, too. For a second, I couldn't breathe.

"Well, hell," I chuckled. "I think I need something stronger than another beer."

Tessa just smiled, proud and radiant. "He likes you."

"Dangerous taste," I said, but I wasn't joking. Not entirely.

Charlotte Ann—Charlie, they said—was snoozing in Colt's arms across the way, her pink hat slightly askew. Her tiny nose favored her mama's already, and Colt looked like he hadn't slept in three days and didn't care one bit.

"You got lucky," I told Tessa, eyes still on Wyatt.

"I know," she said softly. Then she leaned in a little closer and added, "It's good to

see you behaving yourself, Uncle Rhett.”

I huffed. “You wound me. I’ve always been a paragon of virtue.”

That earned a snort from behind me as Colt strolled up with Charlie balanced like a football in the crook of his arm. “Only thing Rhett’s good at is circling women like a buzzard. Just ask Callie.”

I shot him a side-eye. “Real funny, Bennett. You’re lucky your baby can’t understand words yet.”

“She’s smarter than she looks,” he said, brushing a kiss over Charlie’s fuzzy head. “She’ll know to stay away from trouble when she sees it.”

I handed Wyatt back to Tessa with more care than I knew I had in me. He gave a sleepy sigh, still holding tight to my finger until the very last second.

Colt chuckled. “Guess he likes you too.”

I watched as they both tucked the babies into matching bassinets on the porch, Dalia appearing behind them with two warm bottles and a smile on her face that said peace had finally returned to her world.

And damn if that didn’t hit somewhere deep.

I took a long, slow breath, then looked at those twins again—one already dreaming, the other blinking up at the sky like he couldn’t wait to take it on.

Hell, if this ain’t the jackpot, I don’t know what is.

I wandered off to the edge of the back pasture, where the scent of fresh-cut lumber drifted on the evening breeze. A skeleton of a structure stood just behind the main

house—new framing, a pile of siding waiting its turn. It wasn't hard to guess what it was.

Guest house.

I took a slow sip of my second beer. Usually, I would have been on my third or fourth by now. But with those damn babies around I was taking it easy out of respect. Then, I let my gaze drift back toward the porch.

Dalia sat in one of the rockers, feet tucked under her, a sleeping baby monitor resting in her lap like it belonged there.

She was smiling at something Tessa said, and I could see her nodding along, fully present, fully herself.

Every now and then, someone would stop to chat—a neighbor, someone from the old days—and she lit up with recognition like her mind was stringing the pieces back together again.

That woman had walked through hellfire and came out steady on the other side.

Colt wasn't just building her a guest house. Hell, no. He was building her peace. Putting up walls she could lean on when memory got slippery—giving her something permanent in a world that had taken too much.

I respected the hell out of that.

Most guys throw money at problems and call it love. Colt built homes. Held babies like glass. He watched Tessa like she was his North Star and didn't mind who saw it.

That kind of loyalty... it stuck with a man. Made him take stock.

I ran a hand down my jaw, the rough edge of stubble catching on my palm, and let the moment settle.

Maybe I wasn't built for that kind of devotion. Or maybe... I just hadn't found the right reason yet.

I spotted her the second she stepped out of the house—could've been the sun catching that copper hair, or the way those jeans fit like sin stitched in denim. Probably both.

Callie Hart.

Talking to Art Whitson about his newest bull like she didn't have a care in the world. Laughing a little too loud, standing a little too stiff. Like someone told her to play happy and she'd damn well win an Oscar doing it.

I let the crowd drift between us for a minute, sipping my beer, playing it cool.

But then she looked my way.

Didn't smile. Didn't frown either. Just that unreadable Callie expression I'd known for years—the one that always made me want to get closer, figure out what was going on behind those eyes.

So I walked over, all swagger and ease.

“Well, look what the wind blew in,” I said, tipping my chin. “You sure cleaned up nice since the last time I saw you. Even wore those heartbreaker jeans.”

She raised a brow. “You mean the ones I was wearing when you nearly set my trailer on fire, making moonshine in a crockpot?”

I grinned. “That was one time. And technically, it was an electric pressure cooker.”

Callie snorted. “You’re lucky Tessa didn’t string you up for that.”

I leaned in slightly to make her aware of how close I was without stepping over that line. “You didn’t let me near that trailer again before you sold it. Makes a man wonder what kind of grudge you’re holding.”

She rolled her eyes, crossing her arms. “That’s because I moved in with a real man.”

My grin didn’t falter—but something inside me did.

“Right. Matt, the manager.” The words tasted sour coming out.

She didn’t respond right away. Just sipped her tea like it had something stronger in it.

“How’s that working out for you?” I asked, tone easy, but eyes locked on hers.

She gave me a tight smile that didn’t impress me as sincere. “Peachy. Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

And just like that, she turned and walked away, hips swinging, jaw set like steel.

I didn’t move. Just stood there watching her disappear through the screen door, wondering how deep the lie went.

Callie Hart might be stubborn, but I’m patient. And damn persistent.

If Matt were the real man she thought he was, she wouldn’t be hiding behind half-smiles and fake laughs. And if he wasn’t... well, then that bastard was gonna learn the hard way not to screw over someone Rhett Callahan gave a damn about.

I drained the last of my beer, and the glass bottle thudded against the metal trash can when I threw it in.

Yeah. Trouble was coming.

And for once, I wasn't the one who started it.

The sky had turned that late-summer gold, all hazy edges and slow-fading heat, when Colt ambled up beside me with two glasses of something brown and strong. He handed me one without saying a word, then leaned against the porch post like he wasn't still walking around in his happily-ever-after.

We both watched the yard in comfortable silence. Tessa swayed on the porch swing, holding baby Charlie in her arms. Dalia smiled beside Callie, who rocked side-to-side holding Wyatt with a burp cloth over her shoulder.

Colt took a sip and finally spoke. "She still stringing you along?"

I smirked, swirling the ice in my glass. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

He huffed out a laugh. "Ain't said it was easy. Just said it's worth it."

I nodded once, letting his words settle in.

The truth was, I'd never minded the chase.

But Callie Hart wasn't just another beautiful distraction.

She was whip-smart and battle-tested. She'd been burned before—still smelled the smoke.

And I had a feeling that manager of hers was about to fan those flames.

I'd be damned if I stood by and let her get singed again.

“You chased your girl,” I said, tilting my glass toward the swing. “Now it’s my turn.”

Colt followed my gaze, then clinked his glass against mine with a knowing grin. “Better bring a fire extinguisher.”

I chuckled. “Hell, I am the fire.”

He rolled his eyes and walked off to claim one of his squirming kids, leaving me alone again with the hum of crickets and the growing dark.

I took one last look at Callie, laughing now with Dalia, her smile softer... but her shoulders still too tight.

Some bets you take just for the thrill. Others you place because something deep down tells you it’s worth it.

Callie Hart?

She was the kind of gamble I’d spend the rest of my life trying to win.