

# SAWYER

*A Lucky River  
Ranch*  
NOVEL

A stylized illustration of a cowboy with a beard and mustache, wearing a brown cowboy hat, a blue long-sleeved shirt, and a red bandana with white stars. He is looking down and to the left. The background is a solid reddish-pink color.

jessica peterson

*Sanyer*

A LUCKY RIVER RANCH NOVEL

**JESSICA PETERSON**

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*For the wild ones.  
May the cowgirl in you be alive and well, always.*

# CHAPTER 1

*Ava*

## HONKY-TONK HOTTIE

“THERE'S gonna be cowboys there, right?”

I may roll my eyes at my sister Bee's ridiculous question, but I still smile. None of us have lived on our family's small ranch outside Killeen for years now, but clearly our teenage obsession with the guys who worked our cattle hasn't gone anywhere.

Despite the growing crowd that packs the sidewalks lining 6<sup>th</sup> Street, Bee is busy applying lip gloss, peering into the tiny mirror tucked into her palm. She's only a year and a half younger than me, but you'd think there was at least a decade between us for how much, ahem, *energy* she has when it comes to seeking out the opposite sex.

“You would ask that.” I loop my arm through hers and give it a tug, the two of us narrowly avoiding a run-in with a slow-moving couple absorbed in sucking each other's faces. “I haven't been in Austin in years, so I can't say. But it is a honky-tonk, so ...”

“Who wouldn't ask that?” Bee pops her lips before snapping the mirror shut with a succinct *clap*. “Cowboys are a *thing* for a reason. And that reason is —”

“They ride like the motherfucking professionals they are.” My older sister Dottie smirks. “They also look really good in hats.”

“Really good,” Bee adds, dropping her gloss and mirror into the tiny bag slung over her shoulder. “There's just something about a man who works with his hands.”

Dottie nods. “A man who knows what he's *doing* with those hands.”

“They're all yours, ladies.” I slow my steps to look up at the neon sign

glowing above a nearby door. “I’m just here for the music and the whiskey. Bonus points if we get to dance too.”

“But if you have enough of that whiskey and just so happen to see a cute guy ...” Bee nudges me with her elbow. “I mean, c’mon. Now that you’re getting back in the literal saddle, don’t you wanna get back in the proverbial one too?”

“No thank you.”

*Meh* is the word I use most often to describe my post-divorce sex life. While I have absolutely no interest in ever getting married again—being a wife once has cured me of the desire to ever do it again—I was open to having fun with someone new after my divorce was finalized a year ago.

Commitment is out. The freedom to do whatever the hell I want without worrying about a man’s needs or expectations is in.

Only the two tipsy hookups I had didn’t turn out to be very fun or liberating at all. They left me with hangovers from hell and the depressing sense that sex in my late twenties is just ... not that great.

I have no regrets ending my marriage to Dan. Just like I have no regrets about becoming a mom. I’ve wanted to have kids for as long as I can remember.

But I hoped my sex life would get a boost. By the time we separated, Dan and I hadn’t slept together in over a year.

I was *aching* for sex. And even then, it was a disappointment. I just couldn’t be myself during those brief encounters. Couldn’t find my groove, I guess.

“Whatever. Third time’s a charm, right?” Dottie shrugs. “You have to kiss a lot of frogs to find a prince.”

“I don’t want a prince. I want sleep.”

“Not even a prince in a Stetson? With a big —”

“Bank account?” Bee finishes the thought.

I laugh. “Not even then, no. I will take a shot of Jim Beam with a beer back, though.”

Dottie nods. “Let’s manifest that shit. Both the Jim Beam and the cowboy prince, I mean.”

Bee holds up a finger. “I’m on it.”

I roll my eyes for what feels like the fiftieth time today. “Y’all, please, *please* don’t.”

“We’re just fucking with you.” Wagging her brows, Dottie stops in front

of a wooden door with a big brass handle shaped like a horse head. “Or maybe we’re not. You of all people could use some good old-fashioned stress relief. C’mon, y’all, let’s go have some fun.”

Dottie opens the door, and I step inside the infamous Blue Stallion. I’m immediately hit by the scent of stale beer and cigarettes, the smoke likely drifting in from the smoking patio that’s out back. The thump of a bass line echoes inside my breastbone. It’s a Chicks cover, one the band across the room is absolutely slaying.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep inhale and smile. *Hello, lover.*

As a single mom, I don’t get out much. To be honest, I’m too tired to miss getting dressed up and going out. The lackluster sex I’ve had with mediocre men certainly doesn’t help matters. But I will always, *always* love dive bars and live music. Especially when I get to experience them with my best friends in the world—my two sisters.

Bellying up to the bar, I do notice there are lots of guys in cowboy hats here.

Lots of *cute* guys in cowboy hats.

Some of them have to be real cowboys, right? Not like it matters. I don’t want to waste a precious night of freedom on another subpar guy. I’m here to let loose with my sisters, pure and simple. If getting a divorce has taught me anything, it’s that my relationships with women are a lifeline. I have so much more fun with them than I ever did with guys.

So, no cowboys for me.

I pull some cash out of my wallet and order a round of shots with beer backs, which the bartender slides across the sticky wooden counter.

Bee holds up her glass of Jim Beam. “A toast, to my big sister Ava and the start of her new life as the best damn trainer in barrel racing history.”

“Giddy-the-fuck-up.” Dottie holds up her shot glass too. “Proud of you, A.”

Smiling, I carefully tap my glass against theirs. “Thanks. I’m proud of me too.”

I mean that. My marriage and my career fell apart not long after I had June, and I’ve been working my ass off to rebuild my life from scratch ever since.

It’s been a journey. A long, often-terrible, sometimes-chaotic journey, but I’m finally in a place where I feel excited for the future.

I finally feel like I’m giving Junie the kind of life she deserves now that I

landed my dream job as a trainer at the prestigious Wallace Ranch. June and I are moving into a cute carriage house apartment on the Wallaces' property next week. I start my job shortly after that.

Not only is rent covered as part of my compensation package, but June and I also get our first taste of freedom after being under my ex's thumb. He agreed to the move because the Wallace Ranch is somewhat close to where we all lived near Killeen.

Technically, he and I split custody fifty-fifty. But Dan agreed to only take Junie every other weekend now that I'm moving to Hartsville. I have no idea if that will change when June gets into the cute little preschool in Hartsville, the closest town to the ranch. Despite it being a teeny-tiny place, there's currently a wait list for the three-year-old class because we're applying a couple of months after the school year started back in late August.

My chest tightens. My daughter is in good hands—Mom and Dad offered to look after her this weekend so I wouldn't have to mess up my schedule with Dan—and I was long overdue for a break. But I still miss my little Bug.

I'm also really happy to be away this weekend. I have no responsibilities other than drinking the occasional water between whiskeys. Motherhood has shown me that many things can be true at once—you can love being with your kid, and you can love getting a break from them too.

"You should be proud. You're gonna kill it, Ava." Bee brings her shot glass to her lips. "Cheers, y'all."

We knock back our whiskey. I close my eyes to savor the familiar, slightly sweet burn of the liquor as I swallow. The band is playing the Garth Brooks classic "Friends in Low Places," and I start to tap my heels to the beat.

Opening my eyes, I grab my ice-cold beer, take a long sip, and keep smiling.

I'm here.

I'm alive.

I made it through hell, and now I get to celebrate in my own version of heaven.

"I don't know about y'all," Bee says, sipping her Shiner Bock, "but I think the lead singer of that band is cute."

Dottie glances over her shoulder. "Should we take a closer look?"

"I'm happy to play wingwoman," I reply.

She meets my eyes, judgment written all over her face. "Where the hell is



your main character energy?”

“June’s the main character,” I say, shrugging.

Bee gives me the same exact look, right down to the arched brow and pursed lips. “Have you ever read a romance? There can be more than one main character in a story.”

“I’m good with that. As long as one of those characters —”

“Isn’t a man. Got it.” Dottie glances out across the dance floor. “What was it that Cher said? Something like, yeah, you don’t need men, but life is more fun if they’re in it?”

“I’m here to have fun with y’all.”

I mean that. Fun was in very short supply toward the end of my marriage. Dan would *never* approve of me being out on a Saturday night to go dancing with my girls. Much less me being gone for a whole weekend.

What an idiot I was to think *that* would be my happily ever after, waiting hand and foot on a man who never took it upon himself to return the favor in any meaningful way.

If I learned anything from being a wife, it’s that commitment inevitably leads to disappointment. Men don’t carry their fair share of the load, and loving them ends up trapping you in a never-ending cycle of housework, childcare, and loneliness.

Men just don’t *care*.

The disappointment happens bit by bit. Death by a thousand paper cuts. Dan and I were head over heels in love when we got married, even if he disapproved of the free-spirited Pisces side of me. I would ask him every night how his day went. Not only that, I genuinely cared about his answer. He’d ask about me too early on in our relationship. But every so often, he’d come home without saying a word to me.

Eventually, he stopped asking me about my day, or my thoughts, or my feelings altogether. He’d tell me I was crazy for expecting that level of intimacy. Even crazier for asking him to pick up the house or make a meal. Didn’t I get that he had a big, important, stressful job as a pharmaceutical sales rep? The implication being, of course, that he made more money than me, so obviously he didn’t have to talk to me or do anything around the house. That was my job.

So was taking care of our baby. And that imbalance, along with the fact that Dan put a lot of pressure on me to tone down my fun-loving, spontaneous nature, was ultimately what led me to ask for a divorce. I could

handle all the cleaning and the cooking and the scheduling when it was just me and Dan. But add a newborn to the mix, and bam. I drowned.

I was done.

I've been single ever since. Am I open to dating? Sure. Falling in love? I'd consider that too. But I never, ever want to live with another man again, and I *never* want to marry one.

Bee shrugs. "If you say you want fun, let's go have fun. I call dibs on the lead guy."

"I'll take the drummer," Dottie replies, slipping her arm through mine. "Let's see who wins at eye-fucking, shall we?"

Laughing, I let my sister lead me to the dance floor. It's late—well, late for me, anyway, considering my bedtime is shortly after my daughter goes down at seven thirty—and the place is already packed.

But Dottie, being Dottie, cuts through the crowd and finds us a spot right in front of the stage. The music is loud here, so loud that I can't hear anything but the song and the pounding of boots on the beat-up hardwood floor.

The whiskey hits, and I throw up my arms when the band plays a rowdy version of an old Tim McGraw song. My sisters and I dance, moving with the crowd as we all sing along at the top of our lungs to Tim, and then to an Alan Jackson cover, and then a Shania Twain cover, followed by several George Strait songs.

When the band's modified version of "It Just Comes Natural" ends, Bee cups her hands around her mouth and shouts at the band, "I don't know who y'all are, but I love you!"

The lead singer laughs too. "Howdy, ma'am. My name's Hank, and this here is our band The Mighty Longhorns."

"Terrible name!" the guitarist shouts, drawing laughter from the crowd.

I turn to Bee. "We need some Johnny Cash, don't we?"

"Hell yeah, we need some Johnny Cash." Dottie digs a twenty out of her purse and hands it to me. "Ask the band to play your favorite song."

Grinning, I hold up the cash and drop it into the red plastic bucket beside the lead singer's microphone.

He leans down. "What would you like to hear?"

" 'Ring of Fire,' please."

He grins. "You got it, darlin'."

The bar erupts in cheers and whistles when the band plays the song's first thumping notes. Bee hollers. Dottie stomps her feet, the two of us shouting

the lyrics together at the top of our lungs.

Closing my eyes, I let the music guide me to exactly where I want to be—here, now. Wholly present. I focus on the feel of the smile on my face, how my cheeks hurt and my heart throbs. I sing and I dance, aware of the people around me dancing too. There's a lightness in my belly and legs from the whiskey. Bee—I know it's her from the sound of her cackle—bumps her hip into mine.

All the while, I sing Johnny's lyrics, a little breathless the longer I move my body.

*Burns, burns, burns.*

God, does the burn in my belly and my heart feel good.

*I feel good. I'm ... holy shit, I'm happy, aren't I?*

It's been so long since I've experienced happiness that I forgot what it feels like.

Thanks to Junie, my life's filled with plenty of joy. But I've learned joy and happiness aren't the same thing. To have both within reach after years of feeling trapped and miserable—well, it's the best gift ever.

Throwing my arms up again, I lean back to let out a loud yell. At the same time, Bee bumps me again, only this time she hip-checks me hard enough to send me careening into the person behind me.

My eyes fly open as I hit a solid wall of man. Beer spills everywhere, soaking my shirt as a hand—big, warm, grip firm—curls around my upper arm.

## CHAPTER 2

*Ava*

HANDSOME STRANGERS AND SERIAL KILLERS

“OH, GOD, I AM SO”—GLANCING over my shoulder, I lock eyes with a very tall, very hot guy wearing a backward baseball hat —“sorry.”

My stomach takes a nosedive at the look of genuine concern in his cobalt-blue eyes.

“You okay?” he shouts above the sound of the music.

I nod, pulse taking off at a sprint. “You? I’m so sorry.”

This guy is the kind of handsome that makes it hard to breathe. He’s sporting dark scruff, thicker along his upper lip. His facial features rival Brad Pitt’s in masculine beauty—straight nose, square jaw, full mouth.

He releases my arm before his eyes flick to my torso. A pair of indents appear between his brows. “Your shirt. Here, I have some wipes—napkins. I’ll get you some napkins —”

The way he stumbles over his words is adorable.

Also, did he just say *wipes*?

“I’m okay, really —”

“You’re soaked.” He tilts his head toward the bar. “C’mon, let’s clean you up.”

Without waiting for a reply, he heads off the dance floor. I take the opportunity to shamelessly check him out.

He’s *gorgeous*. He’s well over six feet tall, with broad shoulders and big arms that fill out his dark green checkered button-up to perfection. He’s wearing Levi’s that are somehow fitted and broken in at the same time. Square-toed cowboy boots complete the ensemble, along with that backward

hat that reads *Bellamy Brooks Boots*.

*Is he a cowboy?*

As a girl who grew up on a ranch—albeit a small one—that’s my first thought. I’ve always had eyes for cowboys. Who doesn’t? But everyone tells you they’re trouble, so I never pursued one. Didn’t help that I started dating Dan at seventeen.

Everyone, men and women, ogle this guy as he moves across the room.

Dottie appears at my elbow. “I think you’re supposed to follow him.”

“I’ll hip-check you again if you don’t,” Bee says.

I glare at her. “Did you do that on purpose?”

Knitting her brows together, she shrugs. “No?”

“Bee—”

“What? I saw him checking you out. He’s hot. You’re hot. I could tell he wanted to say hi, so I did y’all a solid and broke the ice. Remember, the more frogs you kiss —”

“Right.” My heart skips several beats.

Mr. Mustached Maybe Cowboy was checking me out? I didn’t even notice.

Dottie’s eyes bore into mine. “*Follow him.*”

I glance across the bar. Somehow my eyes find his. My stomach does that nosediving thing again. He holds up a stack of square bar napkins.

His mustache looks more prominent from far away. I like it.

A lot.

My shirt is soaked. And why not flirt a little, enjoy myself a bit? If it’s awkward or weird, I can just come back to dance with my sisters.

He is so much cuter than, well, every other man in existence.

Finishing what’s left of my beer, I head for the bar. It’s not quiet over here, but it is quieter.

Quiet enough that I can hear Mustached Maybe Cowboy say as he looks me up and down, “Aw, man, I got you good, didn’t I? I’m real sorry.”

His words drip with a honeyed drawl. I resist the urge to bite my lip. Okay, the accent is hot.

Really freaking hot.

“Don’t be. I’m the one who bumped into you.”

He holds out the napkins. I set my empty bottle down on the bar and take them, blotting self-consciously at my shirt.

“Or, really, I was pushed. Seriously, I’m so sorry about that. My

sister —”

“Is an enthusiastic fan of Johnny Cash.” A dimple pops in both cheeks as he grins. “I don’t blame her. ‘Ring of Fire’ will get anyone riled up.”

“That’s why I requested it. Although now I kind of regret that decision.”

“Regret Johnny?” He makes a *psssh* sound. “Never. I was about to drop some money in that bucket myself, but you beat me to it.”

I grin, looking up. Our eyes lock again, and my internal organs all somersault in unison. There’s an intensity to his gaze that makes the sounds and sights of the bar sort of ... fade away.

Maybe because his eyes are so, so blue? I’ve never seen a color like that before—the deep, vibrant cobalt of brand-new denim.

“That so?” I’m practically staring at this point. “What song were you going to request?”

His dimples deepen. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

I blush so furiously that it feels like my face is on fire. I still know how to flirt, right?

I sincerely hope I do.

Looking down, I notice the sleeves of his shirt are rolled up, revealing impossibly huge, deeply tanned forearms. One of them is tattooed with a line of large, elegant script—*Ella*. His mom? Maybe his kid?

“Are you asking me to body-slam you again?” I nod at the dance floor. “I know I’m hard to resist out there.”

He laughs, the sound rich and real, and a rush of warmth moves through me. “Didn’t bother me. I have lots of experience being body-slammed.”

“You do?” My turn to laugh.

He shrugs. “Four brothers.”

“Ah.”

“Being body-slammed by a girl, though ...” His eyes dance. “Way different experience.”

“Was it as good for you as it was for me?” I pluck at my shirt, holding up the beer stain.

He’s laughing again, and the warmth inside my skin notches up a degree. Mustached Maybe Cowboy is surprisingly easy to talk to.

Logically, I know not all men are moody grumps. But I was with one for so long, I think my nervous system might take some convincing.

A bartender appears, holding out a white towel and a glass of what looks like club soda. “Towel’s clean, but no dice on the Tide pen. Sorry, boss.”



Cowboy takes the towel and water. "Appreciate you checking. Thanks."

My knees get this weird, tingly feeling when he offers them to me.

I put a hand on the bar to steady myself. "What's this?"

"Told you we'd get you cleaned up. Sorry about the Tide. I usually have a pen or two on me, but ... yeah, if it's just beer, club soda should do the trick. I'm kind of an expert in getting stains out."

"Of course you are." Blinking slowly, I take the towel and club soda. My heart drums inside my chest.

In addition to being obscenely hot, is this guy also helpful? Considerate? Thoughtful? Honestly, I couldn't care less about my shirt, but this cowboy —

He definitely cares.

"Thanks." I dip the towel in the water and get to work on my shirt. "That was really kind of you."

The bartender returns with a pair of Shiner Bocks.

"Took the liberty of ordering you another beer too," Cowboy explains.

My right knee wobbles precariously. *Holy shit, am I in the midst of a legitimate swoon?* "Stop."

"Stop what?" He sets a beer on the counter in front of me.

"Who are you, and what are you planning to do with my lifeless body after your little ruse to charm and abduct me works?"

He grins. "So it is working."

"Hell yeah it's working." I grab my beer and take a long, slightly panicked sip.

Laughing, he holds out a hand. "I'm Sawyer."

I look down at the huge mitt of his hand. Look up at him and let out a little chuckle of disbelief.

He cocks a brow.

"It's just ... a nice name." I slide my hand into his, my body igniting at the warm, dry feel of his palm pressed against mine. I give it a solid squeeze and look him in the eye, just like my dad taught me, and I don't miss the way his gaze flickers when he squeezes back.

One side of his mouth kicks up. " 'Nice'?"

"Don't make me say it."

"Say what?"

I let out a huff. "Fine. It's a hot name. Like, a hot guy name."

He keeps his hand wrapped around mine. "Do I fit the bill?"

A smile, big and broad, breaks out on my face. "I'm Ava."

"Hmm."

"What?"

"Nothin'." He squeezes my hand one last time before dropping it. "It's just, yeah, a hot girl name. You definitely fit the bill, Ava."

*Oh God oh God why does my name sound so sexy when he says it?*

"Are all serial killers so smooth?" Dropping the towel, I give up on my shirt.

His lips twitch as he sips his Shiner. "You from Austin?"

"I'm not. We're in town for a girls' weekend." I point a finger toward my sisters, who are trying, and quite clearly failing, to look like they're not watching my every move. "You?"

"My brother Cash"—he points to a tall guy in a white cowboy hat—"just got engaged. We're here to celebrate."

"Bachelor party. Gotcha."

"Kinda. One of my brothers couldn't come, so ..." Sawyer lifts a massive shoulder, tucking his free hand into his front pocket. "I mean, Cash wasn't into the idea, so we pitched the trip as a team-building thing. We all work together."

"Really? That's cool. What do y'all do?"

He sips his beer. "Ranchers."

My pulse skips. "Cowboys?"

"Born and raised, yeah."

I hung out with plenty of cowboys when I lived on the ranch, and then again when I was on the barrel racing circuit in my late teens and early twenties. They can be wild, sure, but maybe ...

I don't know, maybe wild is what I'm looking for? Maybe it's what was missing from the hookups I had.

"Very cool." I tip back my longneck, trying not to gulp the beer. I need to slow down. Now is not the time to get sloppy. Not when a cute, considerate cowboy is looking at me like *that*.

Like he very much wants to know more. Do more.

"What about you?" His eyes trail down my neck and chest, sending a pulse of heat through my center. "What do you do, Ava?"

"I just got a new job, actually."

The skin at the edges of his eyes crinkles. "Sounds like that's a good thing?"

“A very good thing.”

“But you’re not gonna tell me what it is. The very good new job.”

I push off the bar, straightening so that my elbow grazes his stomach as I lift my beer to my lips. “I have to make sure you’re not going to dismember me or my family first. The less you know, the better.”

He grins. I have the sudden urge to stick my tongue inside his dimple, the one on his right cheek.

“Am I allowed to know if you’d like to body-slam me again?” He glances at the dance floor.

I blink, realizing the band is playing a Shenandoah cover, “Two Dozen Roses.” How did I miss that?

Looking up at Sawyer, I have my answer. *Right. The super-hot cowboy who keeps flirting with me.*

“Sounds kinda dirty when you say it like that.” I step forward.

He steps forward, too, so that our faces are mere inches apart. “I’ll make it as dirty as you want, Ava.”

We burst out laughing at the same time.

He runs a hand over his scruff. Is that a pink flush working its way up his neck? “Sorry. That was ... really bad, wasn’t it?”

I give him a nudge. “Bright side, I know you’re not a serial killer now. They can’t be that cheesy.”

*They can’t be that endearingly, adorably embarrassed.*

“I’m just a little rusty.” He holds up his hand and pinches his fingers together. “I don’t really go out anymore.”

“Sawyer, I haven’t been out to a bar in ... Lord, I don’t even know how long. If anyone is rusty, it’s me.”

He smiles. “So you’ll body-slam—I mean dance—you’ll dance with me, then?” He holds out his hand.

I take it. How could I not? Dan didn’t dance. He didn’t want me dancing, either. A man encouraging me to do my thing on the dance floor is a really nice change of pace.

“This is one of my favorite songs, so yeah. I’d love to.”

Without thinking, I swipe my thumb across the back of his hand. I’m not sure why I do it. I’m just ... feeling this, I guess. Feeling *us*, and touching him this way feels like a small, safe admission that I want more of whatever it is he’s giving me.

Maybe three times really is a charm. What do I have to lose?

“I’d love to body-slam you. Let’s do it.”

*Burns, burns, burns.*

My entire being burns as Sawyer leads me to the dance floor.

## CHAPTER 3

*Sanyer*

## THIRSTY

**THE SECOND AVA** takes my hand, I know I'm in trouble.

It's the good kind of trouble. I think. I hope. Been so long since I asked a pretty stranger to dance, I forget how this shit goes down.

All I know is, I fucking *like* it when she arcs her thumb over the back of my hand. The movement is quick, gentle. Barely noticeable. Except I'm a single dad who's simultaneously touched out and touch-starved, so of course I notice it.

All of a sudden, my skin feels two sizes too tight. That all it takes?

It's been a minute since I got laid. Or been on a date. Not for lack of trying. I just haven't hit it off with anyone back home in Hartsville. I always felt like there was something missing whenever I went out with a girl. Couldn't put my finger on it, but eventually I just stopped going out. Trying to date, find a real connection with someone, took too much time and energy I didn't have.

Long story short, maybe this is just some kinda, I don't know, frustration working its way to the surface. Even before Ella was born three years ago, I was never one to run around with random girls. Just wasn't all that interested in meaningless hookups.

Which is how, at twenty-five, I ended up getting one of my good friends pregnant. But that's another story for another day.

Point being, I'm not a player. But even for me, my current dry spell is bordering on epic. If I'm being honest, I think part of the reason Cash agreed to this trip is because he knew how much I needed a break—how badly I needed to cut loose.

What better way to cut loose than to dance to Shenandoah with a hot blonde?

Because Jesus *Christ* is Ava hot. The kind of hot that had half the place staring as she was dancing earlier. She's tall, with striking green eyes and a head of long, lush hair. The kind you want to dig your hands into. The kind you could wrap around your fist once, twice, three times, giving you a nice, solid grip.

Duke, my younger brother, noticed me watching her, so he took it upon himself to nudge me closer and closer until I was right behind her. I was thinking of ways to get an opening—the line I'd lean in and say when the band was between songs—when her sister provided that opening for me by giving her a hard shove.

I'm still annoyed I didn't have a Tide pen on me. Ava's shirt is probably gonna be ruined. Unless I get my hands on it, of course. In the literal and figurative sense.

Don't hate that idea. I've only known Ava for all of ten minutes, but the sharp-edged attraction I feel for her is something I haven't experienced in a long-ass time. She's gorgeous. She's also funny. Self-deprecating in a way I like.

Kind, too.

Ava stays close as I lead her to the dance floor, our hands linked. The honky-tonk gets more crowded by the minute, and I quickly give up on my mission to join my brothers and her sisters up by the stage.

People press in on us from all sides. When Ava leans into me, touching her breasts to my back in an attempt to remain close, my body pulses so hard that I worry I'm going to black out.

Immediately, I think about doing the smart thing. The practical thing. It's a knee-jerk reaction, an impulse forged in the fires of fatherhood.

*I should get her back to her sisters. Close my tab and take my brothers to that brewery we passed earlier. It's near the hotel, so we could walk home and get to bed at a decent hour. We need to be on the road by noon tomorrow, and I don't want to be too hungover when I get back to the ranch*

...

But then I remember I came to Austin to do the exact opposite of what's practical. In my life back home, I'm always thinking ahead. Always anticipating what needs to happen next so the day, and the day after that, can run smoothly. That's how my mom and dad were as parents, and our home



was a happy one because of it.

I want Ella's home to be happy too. It's work I don't mind doing, but it's still work. Some days I feel like all I do is complete task after task on a never-ending to-do list. Easy to forget to have fun when you live that way.

Which is why I'm determined to have fun while I can here in Austin. Gotta strike while the iron is hot.

While the girl you're with is hot, more like it.

Keeping her hand in mine, I turn around to face her. We're close enough that I can smell her perfume. It's a scent I can only describe as springtime, bright and flowery. She tilts up her chin to meet my eyes. The green in hers is lit up, her lips curving into a small but potent smile.

She didn't laugh *at* me when I was a dork at the bar. Instead, she laughed *with* me, making fun of herself in the process. Makes me feel safe.

Safe enough to just go for it, even if I am a rusty, awkward mess.

I guide her hand up to my shoulder, pulling her close as the band plays a Dolly Parton cover. Ava is holding her beer in her other hand, but she still curls that arm into my chest. Awareness blooms to life south of my navel, a flush of weighted warmth that moves through my abdomen and settles in the front of my thighs.

Guess she ain't afraid to put herself out there, either, because she begins to move. A slow, rhythmic swaying of her hips that has her pressing against me, her legs gliding between my own.

I really like that.

Slipping a hand around her waist, I spread my fingers on the small of her back and pull her closer. So close that our bellies are flush. I slip my leg between hers, moving my hips in time to the music. Ava digs her teeth into her bottom lip.

Aw, yeah, she definitely likes that.

We find our rhythm with surprising ease. When the song ends, Ava lets out a holler, but she doesn't take her hands off me. The band plays a Kenny Chesney song next, Darius Rucker after that. All the while Ava and I keep dancing. She finishes her beer and I finish mine, and I quickly set the bottles on a nearby ledge.

Now her hands are all over me. She runs them up my chest and circles my neck with her arms, shaking the hair out of her face before looking up at me. The happiness I see in her eyes—the little lines at the edges, the flash of heat in the pupils—makes my breath catch.

Leaning in, I brush my scruff against her cheek. “You’re a fuckin’ knockout, you know that?”

In reply, she slips her hand into the hair at the nape of my neck. My pulse seizes, a bolt of pure lust cracking down my middle as she gently glides her fingertips over my scalp.

“My wild’s not turning you off?”

“Hell no. Your wild is the hottest thing about you.”

She grins. “So is yours.”

It’s all I can do not to lean down and drag my lips over her neck. She’s pulling me closer, pressing her tits against my chest.

Speaking of wild—I wanna howl like the goddamned animal I am.

Instead, I put my hand on her back again, but lower this time. Low enough that my fingertips brush the back pocket of her jeans.

She’s got a really cute ass. I’d like to see—feel—more of it.

So I hold up my arm and spin her around, making her laugh. I really get into it, losing myself to the beat of a Brooks & Dunn song. I shake my own ass, then she shakes hers, the two of us heaving with laughter when she breaks out an adorable version of the sprinkler—one hand behind her head, the other extended in front of her, moving in time to the music. I do the shopping cart, Ava letting out a loud yell of approval as I place invisible items in my invisible buggy.

God, it feels good to laugh like this.

Grabbing her by the waist, I pull her against me again. She tips back her head and sings along to a Trisha Yearwood cover, and suddenly I’m singing too while simultaneously keeping my dick in check as Ava grinds against me.

Her forehead shimmers with sweat. My sides hurt from laughing.

I feel my brothers watching us. I keep waiting for them to come over and say something stupid. I’m glad Wyatt isn’t here, because he’d definitely pull some shit. He made some excuse about not liking “city life” in Austin, but I know he’s too lovesick over his newly returned best friend Sally to leave Hartsville.

So yeah, Cash, Duke, and Ryder shockingly leave Ava and me alone. More than once I catch Cash smiling at us. Duke too, but he’s smiling all the time now. Makes me think he’s crushing on someone new.

Not gonna lie, feels good knowing my brothers are happy for me. I feel like I’ve caused a lot of unnecessary heartache in our family over the past few years. Ella’s mom and I decided we were better off as friends, which meant I

was a single dad from day one.

I don't regret having Ella. How could I? She's the light of my life, and quite possibly the cutest fucking kid to ever exist. But if I could do it over again? I'd wait until I was settled down with the right person before having a baby. That way, my brothers wouldn't have to fill in for the wife I don't have. I'd also be able to give Ella siblings. I was one of five kids, and I loved every minute of it. Sucks knowing there's a good chance Ella won't have that same sense of belonging—of being known—that I did growing up.

My chest twists. I hope Ella went down okay tonight—Wyatt is staying at my house with her. She's been an absolute bear at bedtime. The pediatrician said it's a common enough occurrence in three-year-olds. But Lord, am I ready for her to stay in her own damn bed for more than twenty minutes at a time.

"Thirsty?"

I blink and see Ava looking up at me.

"Yeah. Another beer?" I ask.

"Sure."

Twining her fingers through mine, she turns and bends her elbow, draping my arm over her shoulders. I keep her tucked into my side as we head for the bar. The music fades, and my heart begins to pound.

I don't wanna mess this up. So far, I've managed to be decently charming. Charming enough to keep Ava around, at least. But one wrong line—one stupid joke—and she could roll her eyes and walk away.

I do not want Ava to walk away. In fact, I'd very much like her to stay. Possibly in the ridiculous suite I was upgraded to at the swanky hotel nearby.

A hand grips my heart and squeezes.

Ah. So that's what I'm nervous about. How the hell do I ask her to come home with me? She joked that she was worried I was a serial killer. It's been so long since I propositioned someone. Is it totally out of line to ask her if she wants to get out of here? I'm pretty sure she's into me, but there's a big difference between dancing with someone and going home with them.

I don't know how this works anymore. All I do know is that I'm going to be real disappointed if the night is about to end.

I see Duke hanging out at the end of the bar. I steer Ava toward the other end of the counter, but I'm too late. Duke's eyebrows pop up when he sees us.

Smiling, he saunters over. "Well *hey*, y'all."

Ava glances up at me. Her brows are pulled together in question.

“Ava, this is my younger brother Duke,” I explain.

Duke holds out his hand. “I’m the handsome one.”

“The cockiest for sure.” I roll my eyes.

Ava just smiles as she shakes his hand. “Nice to meet you, Duke. I see the resemblance.”

“Ava, the pleasure’s all mine. Your shirt looks much better. Did my brother get the stain —”

“Don’t look at her shirt.” I curl my free hand into a fist, Mom’s admonishment passing through my head. *Don’t punch your brother. You know how he bites.*

“Jesus, since when do you growl?” Duke has a shit-eating grin on his face. “I thought that was Cash’s signature move.”

I stare him down. He stares back. Why can’t he take the hint? He needs to get gone, now.

Ava watches us, still smiling. “Tell me something, Duke.”

He tilts his head, lending her his ear. “Yes, ma’am?”

“Can you vouch for your brother?” Her eyes glint with mischief as they meet mine. “I’m a little worried he’s a serial killer.”

Duke grins. “Well, now that you mention it, he does exhibit some suspicious behavior —”

“Not funny.” I’m growling again.

“Oh, come on, Sawyer, you couldn’t be a serial killer if you tried. You’re more of an overgrown puppy. Like a basset hound with big, floppy ears and those droopy eyes.”

Ava smiles. “I see it.”

“Really?” I tease. “Ouch.”

“A very *cute* basset hound puppy,” she corrects. “Better than a murderer, right?”

I laugh, curling an arm around her waist. “Guess so.”

I don’t miss the way Ava leans into me, running her hand up my chest. Just the boost of confidence I need.

She’s feeling me. Same way I’m feeling her. Excitement blooms in my chest at the increasingly likely prospect of getting this girl naked. Hits me just how much I need the release.

Just how much I want her. The kind of want that makes my stomach hurt in the best way.

“Basset hounds are kinda slobbery, though.” Duke curls his lip.

“So are the drunk guys at this bar.” I give him a death stare.

Chuckling, he glances over his shoulder. “I best get back out there. Ava, it was a pleasure meeting you. I assure you there are no killers in our family that I’m aware of, aside from the lady-killer variety —”

“Not. *Funny.*”

My brother holds up his hands. “Fine, fine. I’ll get out of y’all’s hair.”

“He’s a character,” Ava says as we watch him disappear onto the dance floor.

“That’s one word for it.” I run a hand over my face. “Would you like another Shiner, or —”

I’m interrupted by the lead singer, telling us their set is over. The crowd claps and whistles, and a beat later Waylon Jennings starts playing through the speakers above our heads.

“That’s a bummer. They were really good.” Ava drums her fingers against my chest. “What do we do now?”

My heartbeat marches in my ears. It’s the perfect moment to ask her to get out of here. We’ve been dancing for hours. Neither of us is wrecked. I’m so turned on that I could scream.

I’ll be crushed if she says no. But goddamn it, what if she says yes?

“We could go somewhere else?” I look down at her. “Try another spot —”

“Okay.”

My pulse riots. *Okay.*

Ava just said okay.

“Any spot in particular you have in mind?” she asks.

*The bed in my hotel suite.*

I shrug, like my dick isn’t causing me serious grief right now. “I have an idea or two.”

“I like those ideas.”

“You don’t know what they are.”

“I think I do.” The frank lust in her eyes sends my pulse into a tailspin.

“You sure?”

She digs her teeth into her bottom lip. “Yeah, cowboy, I’m sure. But hold on.” She digs her phone out of her purse and holds it up to take a selfie. “I’m going to send your picture to my sisters. You chop me into little pieces, you bet they’re gonna come find your ass. Smile.”

I slide a hand into the back pocket of her jeans. “How could I not after that little speech?”

Snaking her free arm between us, she mimics the motion, dipping her fingertips into the back pocket of my Levi’s. She looks up at the screen. “Wow, we’re cute.”

“We’re hot as fuck.” I give her ass a squeeze. “Now take the picture so I can take you home.”

“Home is ...”

“The Market Hotel.”

“Fancy.”

“Yep.”

Her eyes sparkle. I smile at the screen, and so does she. The camera clicks. She texts the photo to her sisters.

Then I grab Ava’s hand and lead her out of the bar.

## CHAPTER 4

*Ava*

## **A Party: Or, Two Bottles of Champagne, Some Condoms, and a Pack of Parliaments**

**I DON'T EVEN PRETEND** to want to go anywhere but Sawyer's hotel room.

So much for having fun with my girls. That idea went out the window somewhere around the time this man showed me just how well he could dance. He's so unself-conscious, always ready with a laugh or an encouraging smile.

As for Sawyer, he doesn't pretend to slow down. Instead, he twines our fingers as we stalk out into the night, nudging me toward the inside of the sidewalk and away from the street.

I'm a little breathless from trying to keep up with him. This urgency, this *hunger*, is ridiculously sexy.

My body lights up at the don't-fuck-with-her vibe he gives off. A couple of guys check me out, and Sawyer glares at them, dropping my hand so he can grip the nape of my neck. He draws me even closer, practically curling his big body around mine.

My scalp prickles, the throb between my legs blaring to renewed, vibrant life. Is it wrong that I like being claimed this way? Protected?

No one, not even Dan, ever made me feel this safe, even though Sawyer is practically a stranger.

I feel safe, and most of all, I feel sure.

I have never been surer of anything in my life: this guy's not a frog, he's



totally a prince. One I want to sleep with. Right now. All night. Because I have a very strong suspicion he's going to be very good in bed. He's hot, he's funny. He likes my wild side. He's a great dancer. *And* he's a cowboy.

He's also not a serial killer. Really, what more could a gal ask for?

My phone keeps buzzing in my bag. It's my sisters, no doubt, freaking out—in a good way—over the fact that *I'm* the one going home with a guy. Especially *this* guy. I'll have to thank Bee later for pushing me into him.

"You see a drugstore, let me know." The deep, even tone of Sawyer's voice sends a shiver up my spine. "I need to get a few things."

"You don't have —"

"Told you I don't get out much."

The fact that Sawyer doesn't have condoms is actually kind of endearing. Makes me wonder what his story is. I feel guys who go to bars to pick up women are always prepared. But Sawyer isn't. He did say he doesn't get out much. Why not?

I'm tempted to ask him, but I don't. Part of me likes how anonymous this encounter feels. I don't know Sawyer's last name and he doesn't know mine.

This is a one-night stand, and I want to keep it that way. I want to have fun. And yeah, maybe forget my responsibilities for a little while. Pretend I really am this carefree and impulsive all the time.

I nod at the gleaming tower that comes into view. "Bet the hotel has what we need."

"Let's hope they do. Otherwise I'm about to spend a shit ton on a delivery service. Wonder what they'll think of the sinner's chest I'll order?"

I laugh. "Bet they'll think you're a lot of fun."

"Guess I am." His eyes flash when they meet mine. "But only when I'm with the right people."

My stomach dips. *God* this man is gorgeous. The scruff, his prominent Adam's apple. And that *mouth*. It's lush, all soft lips and white teeth.

Something tells me he knows how to use it.

Also, he just complimented me in a way he hasn't before. Yeah, he made me feel like a million bucks when he told me back at the honky-tonk that he was turned on by my spontaneity. But now he's saying I'm rubbing off on him—making him wild—and that just might be the best compliment of all.

That makes me feel powerful.

Alive.

*I'm not dead.* Getting divorced didn't kill me, didn't destroy my spirit,

even though the process was an eye-watering expense that nearly bankrupted me.

But I'm still here, and apparently I can still be a good time. I'm proud of that fact.

Squeezing my neck, Sawyer reaches for the door. "After you."

But a doorman beats him to it. "Welcome back, sir."

"C'mon, Bobby, how many times I gotta tell you to call me Sawyer? And y'all don't have a little shop inside, do you? Someplace I can grab some beers to bring up to the room?"

Bobby is good at his job. The guy doesn't blink as he smiles politely at us, holding open the door. "Of course. The Mercantile is just past the check-in desk. It's open until midnight on Saturdays."

"Excellent." Moving his hand to the small of my back, Sawyer gently pushes me inside. "Have a good evening."

"You too, sir. Y'all enjoy." Bobby dips his head at me as I pass.

I'm holding back a giggle as Sawyer follows me into the lobby.

"What's so funny?" Sawyer's hand is back on my nape. He's squeezing it again. "The fact that Bobby knows exactly what I'm about to do to you?"

"What are you about to do to me, sir?"

His eyes flash. "Told you I got ideas."

"I do too."

"Oh yeah?"

I dig my teeth into my bottom lip. "Yeah."

"But you're not gonna tell me what they are."

"Nope. Not yet."

"Maybe you're the serial killer, being all secretive and shit."

"Maybe I am." I wag my brows. "But think of it this way, you're gonna die happy. You did say I'm a good time."

"I did." His eyes flick to my mouth. "Let's be quick."

He keeps his hand on me as we walk into the Mercantile. It's tiny but cute, an insanely expensive convenience store covered in subway tile and filled with branded sweatshirts and fourteen-dollar cups of freshly squeezed orange and grapefruit juice.

Standing in front of the cooler, Sawyer surveys the selection. "What are you feelin'? Should we stick with beer? Try wine? They have champagne."

"The champagne is really good." The girl behind the counter nods eagerly at him.

I can't help but smile. Seriously, how did I end up with this guy? How is he taking me home when he clearly can have anyone he wants?

The only explanation I can think of is that maybe the universe finally took pity on me and sent a cowboy my way. One worth spending time with.

"Let's try the champagne, then." I grab the bottle, then laugh when I see the price tag. "Just kidding. It's a hundred and fifty bucks."

Sawyer grabs another bottle. "We'll take two."

"What the hell are we celebrating?"

"My final night on earth, of course." His dimples pop when he smiles, and I get that weak feeling in my knees again.

"You're funny."

"And you laugh at my jokes, which I appreciate."

"Just doing the Lord's work."

"Amen." Sawyer sets his champagne on the counter. He drops his hand from my neck to take my bottle and sets it beside the other one. Then he's digging into his pocket and pulling out a money clip before thumbing through a wad of cash.

"And some of those too." Briefly looking up, he nods at the box of Trojans behind the counter.

The girl at the counter blushes. "Just one box?"

"Make it two." He smirks. "One for each bottle."

The throb between my legs becomes acute. I'm smiling so hard that my face hurts.

"And a pack of Parliament Lights." I point to the cigarettes. "Only one, though."

Sawyer chuckles, a deep rumble that draws my nipples to hard points. "I like you, Ava."

"I like our sinner's chest."

The girl drops everything into a shiny plastic bag. Sawyer throws out four hundred-dollar bills and grabs the bag, telling her to keep the change.

He puts his hand on my neck and steers me to the elevators. No words. Just the sound of his boots on the marble floor, his footsteps sounding a steady, if slightly hurried, beat that coincides with my pulse.

*Holy shit, I'm about to have sex with a hot, and apparently loaded, cowboy. Only in Texas would you find a man with rough hands and deep pockets.*

What other surprises does he have up his sleeve? To be honest, I'm not

sure how much more I can take before I really do swoon. I can't remember the last time someone turned me on like this.

Then again, I don't think I've ever been out in Austin on a Saturday night with nothing to do and nowhere to be. I don't owe anyone a damn thing. Not my time, my energy. My attention. This isn't real life.

This kind of freedom doesn't exist in my world.

Except it does tonight. And that could very well explain why I'm gripped by such ferocious need.

Or maybe that's what I have to tell myself, because I've learned that insane chemistry only leads to insane complications. That's the last thing I need. I'm finally standing on my own two feet, and I have no plans to let anyone knock me down.

The elevator doors open with a ding. Another couple joins us inside, which is kind of a bummer because I was planning on attacking Sawyer the second the doors closed.

He pushes the top button, then guides me to the back of the car. He moves his thumb down the slope of my neck, applying the faintest pressure to the muscles there.

I suck in a quick, quiet breath at just how good it feels when this man puts his hands on me.

Sawyer lets out a dark, gravelly chuckle. "You're tight."

I look at him. *There's a very dirty joke in there.*

He looks back. *Oh yeah?*

"You're really going to make me say it?" I ask.

His eyes crinkle at the edges. "Yes ma'am, I am."

Laughter bubbling up inside my chest, I glance at the couple at the front of the car. "I won't do it."

"We'll see about that." He works his thumb into the knot between my neck and shoulder blade. "I'm pretty persuasive when I wanna be."

His accent gets thicker when he flirts. I love it.

I am going to devour this man. If, of course, he doesn't devour me first.

The couple rides all the way to the top of the hotel with us. They exit first, and then Sawyer moves his hand to my nape and, grip tight on my neck, guides us out of the elevator.

I like the way he leads, turning me right, then left, our footfalls quiet on the carpet. It's nice to have someone else take charge for once. He's the one with the plan, and I'm all too happy to be taken along for the ride.

We stop at a pair of doors all the way at the end of a long hall. Digging a key card out of his pocket, Sawyer waves it in front of the reader and the lock clicks.

He shoves open the door and holds it for me, nodding. “C’mon in.”

“Thanks.” I walk in and blink, my breath catching as I take in the exquisite—and enormous—hotel suite. “Wow. Wow, Sawyer ...”

“Yeah?” I hear him drop the bag and key card on a table behind me.

“Is this —”

“The presidential suite? Yep. They fucked up my reservation, so the front desk upgraded me. Pretty nice, right?”

“Nice? Sawyer, this place is *sick*.” I stare at the stunning view outside the floor-to-ceiling windows that line two sides of the room.

The state capitol building is lit up in the distance, a stoic contrast to the colorful lights of 6th Street that twinkle in the darkness. A hazy full moon presides over everything, turning the night sky a deep shade of navy.

Sawyer laughs. “Glad you like it. Make yourself at home.”

Inside the suite, there’s a massive dining table surrounded by more chairs than I can count. A lounge area occupies the space to my right, complete with a cushy-looking sectional sofa that is just begging for a good, messy fuck.

But it’s the bed I glimpse through a door to my left that makes my heart beat faster. It’s massive, a low-slung leather behemoth dressed in crisply pressed white linens. Fluffy pillows are neatly lined up against the headboard.

Walking through the suite, I notice the lighting is low. Moody. Even the room scent is sexy—sandalwood, a hint of that leather.

The suite is neat as a pin. Of course room service has tidied the room, but something tells me Sawyer was the one who carefully lined up his toiletries—an electric toothbrush, a razor—on the bathroom vanity I see just off the bedroom.

Really, who *is* this funny, filthy-mouthed cowboy who apparently always has a Tide pen on him and stays in a hotel like this?

*The kind of cowboy I like.*

I jump at the sound of a pop behind me. Turning around, I see Sawyer pouring champagne into a pair of disposable coffee cups.

“All I could find,” he explains, looking up.

Our eyes lock. My stomach somersaults for the hundredth time tonight. He’s *gorgeous*.

Dropping my purse on a nearby side table, I saunter over and take the cup

he offers me. "This is perfect. Any fancier and you might scare me off."

"I'm a lot of things." He searches my face, his full mouth curling into a smirk. "But fancy ain't one of 'em. Cheers, Ava."

The space between us thrums. I'm not sure I've ever been this turned on.

"Cheers." I tap my cup to his. "To getting body-slammed."

Bringing his cup to his lips, he laughs. "I got other plans for your body."

Heaviness gathers inside my skin as I sip my champagne. Its dry, sweet flavor bursts on my tongue in a rush of starry delight. "Care to elaborate?"

Reaching out, he curls a finger through my belt loop. "You ride, don't you?"

I can almost hear the way my blood crackles and pops inside my veins. "What gave me away?"

"These legs." He gives the loop a tug while sipping his champagne. "That ass. And the way you dance. You're strong. Quick. Graceful. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were a barrel racer."

I dig my teeth into my bottom lip. This guy pays attention, and that makes me feel some kind of way.

It makes me feel wildly ... adored.

"You're good, cowboy."

One side of his mouth kicks up. "And I ain't even kissed you yet."

"Let's get that out of the way, then." I down the contents of my cup before setting it on a nearby table. "So I can show you exactly how well I ride."

We both laugh. A wash of warm, liquid light moves through me that makes me feel like I'm glowing from the inside out.

This man really, *really* digs the Pisces in me.

"What?" I tease, wrapping my arms around his neck. "I wasn't gonna let you be the only one who drops terrible lines."

His gaze flicks to my mouth. "Kind of you."

"A little kindness goes a long way." I dig my fingers into his hair.

Sawyer's eyes darken as I trail my fingertips across his scalp. I get the feeling he hasn't been touched this way in a while. He's leaning in, practically purring with pleasure when I put a hand on his face and arc my thumb over his thick stubble.

"It does, yeah." His voice is husky. He stops, lips poised an inch over mine. Less.

My pulse throbs as the realization hits me—he's waiting for me to make

the first move. Waiting for me to give him permission. In my prior life, when I tried so hard to be the proper wife and woman Dan wanted, I would've suppressed my desire to take the reins.

Now, though, it makes me smile. There's power in having the ball in your court.

Power, and freedom.

Joy, warm and potent, fills my center. At the same time, the desire between my legs twists tighter. I can still taste the champagne on my tongue. My buzz is light. Happy.

*What a perfect fucking night.*

Closing my eyes, I lift my chin and tilt my head. Then I gently press my lips to his, praying I don't pass out from the sheer pleasure of the way his mustache tickles my skin.

## CHAPTER 5



*Sanyer*

## SOMETHING 'BOUT A WOMAN

### MOTHERFUCKER THIS FEELS GOOD.

Ava's hand cupping my face. Her fingers in my hair. Her lips on my lips, so soft and warm that my eyes roll to the back of my head behind my closed lids.

Groaning, I give her belt loop another tug, yanking her against me so our hips are flush. At the same time, I slant my mouth over hers, stroking my tongue between the slick seam of her lips.

My dick thickens. I press it against her and she makes a little sound, a moan of encouragement.

I don't waste a second. I suck her bottom lip into my mouth, and she curls the fingers she has in my hair, giving it a gentle pull. My pulse spikes when her tongue finds mine.

The kiss falls into a deep, steady rhythm, my stubble catching on her chin, her cheeks. I tilt my head one way, then another, Ava following me without missing a beat as our lips and tongues tangle, taste.

Her kiss has a definite flavor—champagne and sex. Her eagerness, the tenderness of her touch, is so fucking sweet. But the heat of her mouth, her hunger, is pure lust.

The combination—the juxtaposition—is a mindfuck.

I wanna fuck this girl so bad that I'm practically shaking.

But Ava won't be rushed, and I *like* that. She takes *my* bottom lip between her teeth and gives it a gentle bite. She kisses my chin, the dimple in my left cheek. She's dropping one hand to my chest, hooking her thumb into the top button of my shirt.

I never want the sensory overload to end. Warmth spreads in every direction—from my center outward, from my skin inward. The head-on collision of all this heat is overwhelming.

Can already tell I'm gonna need a cigarette after this.

Many cigarettes.

I bite down hard on her lip, making Ava yelp. But before I can ask if it's too much, she's shoving the button through its hole and then reaching for the hem of my shirt.

I'm wearing an undershirt, a plain white T softened by countless cycles in the washing machine. But my body rings at the contact nonetheless, my abdominals contracting when she slips a hand inside the shirt.

"Wow," she murmurs into our kiss. "You always run this hot?"

"Yep." My turn to feel her up. As I glide my hand inside her shirt, I nearly bite off my tongue at the soft, smooth feel of her skin. "What about you?"

"Only when I'm riding."

I chuckle, my heart flipping when she captures the sound in a quick, hard kiss. "But you're not riding."

"Not yet." She slowly moves her hand higher, caressing my stomach and side with her fingers. She stops to admiringly explore my skin, my hair. Muscles and bones.

I grit my teeth. "You best not be playin', pretty girl."

"I'll play with you all I like, cowboy."

"Oh yeah?" I mirror her movements and glide my hand higher. "Fuck," I say when I discover she's not wearing a bra. Her breast is the perfect handful, aching soft. She makes that delicious little sound when I thumb her nipple, drawing it to a taut point. "*Fuck.*"

She leans in to whisper in my ear, "But only if you'll play with me too."

Ava don't have to ask me twice.

Kissing her mouth one last time, I put my free hand on her hip and spin her around. I roughly pull her against me, her back to my front. She lets out a breathless laugh, the sound catching in her throat when I sink my teeth into her neck.

Jesus Christ, I've known this woman for all of two hours, and she's already turning me into a fucking vampire. She doesn't seem to mind, though. She reaches back and digs her fingers into my hair again, just how I like.

She paying attention too?

She want this to be good for me too?

I wonder if that's what makes our attraction so intense—the fact that it's ardently, unequivocally reciprocated. It feels like lightning. We're not hooking up because we're bored and it's convenient.

We're on fire, and the only way to put it out is to surrender to the wildness between us.

*This.*

*This is what's been missing.*

Pulse hammering, I glide both hands inside her shirt and cup her tits. I play with them, kneading their softness, thumbing her nipples. Ava arches her back, burying her ass inside the cradle of my hips.

My dick surges. I work my mouth up her neck. Back down, stopping to press a lingering kiss on the place where her throat slopes into her shoulder.

"Oh, Sawyer," she breathes. "I like that."

"You smell like heaven."

She's smiling. "It's the beer. And the sweat."

"Apparently"—I rock my hips, pressing my dick into the small of her back—"I dig the combination."

Reaching back, she cups me through my jeans. "You're kidding."

"Not one fucking bit."

"I'm talking about *this*." She moves her palm up my length. "You're hot. You can dance. *And* you have a big dick?"

My turn to laugh as I scrape my stubble against her throat, giving her nipples a quick, hard pinch. "I didn't see any lube downstairs. I can look for some —"

"Don't. I'm ... yeah, I'm definitely not gonna need it."

"Really?"

She scoffs. "Really."

"Show me."

She turns her head and glances at me over her shoulder. "Okay."

I bite back a curse when she takes my right hand and guides it down. Eyes locked on mine the whole time. When we hit the fly of her jeans, she presses my fingers against the button. I take the hint and work it through its hole. Her zipper moves south as she pushes our hands inside.

Her green eyes go a little hazy when, together, we move our hands inside her panties. I feel the wiry warmth of her pubic hair before she guides our

hands even lower. I don't wait for her to guide me here. I can't. I use my first and third fingers to part her. I can already feel her heat. Then I gently guide my middle finger inside.

She. Is. *Soaked*.

So swollen and slick that my fingertip glides easily through her arousal. I give her a soft stroke front to back. Back to front, pausing to circle her clit.

Her whole body jerks. "Oh, yes. Yes."

The oxygen in the room must evaporate, because suddenly I can't breathe. "For me. This is —"

"All for you." Her eyes bore into mine, all earnestness. "C'mon, Sawyer, I told you you were hot."

I puff out my chest a little, knowing I have that kind of power. Me, the guy who twenty-four hours ago couldn't beg, borrow, or steal his way into convincing his three-year-old to get dressed for school.

Me, the guy who hasn't felt wanted like this in ... a long-ass time.

*Me.*

I don't think. I don't hesitate.

I just give her clit one last stroke of my fingertip and say, "Arms up," and then I'm pulling off Ava's shirt, tossing it onto the nearby couch. I make a mental note to soak it in the sink later. That fucking stain is gonna bug me until I get it out.

Grabbing the open bottle of champagne, I spin Ava back around to face me with my other hand. "Now open your mouth."

Her eyes flick from the bottle down to my dick and back up again. "What are you gonna put in it, cowboy?"

"Oh, you best believe you'll be tasting this, too." I take her hand and crudely press it to my cock. "But first, we got a bottle to finish. Open that fucking mouth, Ava."

Running her tongue along her bottom lip, she looks me square in the eye and does as I told her.

"Good girl." I tip the bottle and pour a little champagne into her mouth. I watch her throat work as she swallows.

She's good at sucking dick. I just *know*. She's gonna swallow me just like this, eyes on fire, smile on her lips.

I'm literally growling as I bring the bottle to my own mouth and take a long pull. I never drink champagne—hell, I hardly drink at all anymore—but I like this shit. It's cold, crisp. Gives me just enough liquid courage to start

backing Ava toward the bedroom.

But then she surprises me by grabbing the bottle out of my hand. Keeping her eyes locked on mine, she grins and pours it over her chest, gasping when the golden liquid hits her skin. It drips down her breasts, gathering in little beads around her nipples.

Can't help it. I smile. This *woman*. I love how playful she is. How bold.

"Apparently you're good at cleaning up messes." She holds out her arms. "Bet you wanna clean me up, too, don't you?"

Shaking my head, I bend my neck. Suck one nipple into my mouth, using my tongue to lap up the champagne. "Yes ma'am." Licking her breast clean, I move to the other. "I do."

Looking up, I watch her throw her head back and laugh.

"Delicious," I murmur, nipping her nipple with my teeth. I notice goose bumps are breaking out on her arms and belly. "Lemme warm you up, pretty girl. To bed. Now."

She takes another sip from the bottle as I straighten. Then she loops an arm around my neck. "Who made you boss?"

"You like it." It comes out less a question, more a statement.

She pulls me in for a messy kiss, the champagne mingling between our mouths. I can feel her smile against my lips.

"Yes sir, I do."

I kiss her back, licking into her mouth. If laughter had a taste, this would be it.

Then there's the flawless delivery of her clever line.

The feel of her bare tits pressed to my chest.

The thrill of having the whole suite—the whole night—to ourselves.

If there's a heaven, this. Is. *It*.

Her playfulness must rub off on me, because next thing I know I'm bending down. I'm scooping her into my arms, delighted at the happy yell she lets out, and I suck on her neck while I walk the five steps to the bedroom.

My mind races. *What do I do first? Eat her pussy? Use my fingers to make her come? Edge her, then make her shatter on my dick? Put my dick in her mouth? She seemed to be into that idea.*

And then I remember we really do have all night. No need to rush. The relief I feel at being able to take my time for once is real. Back home, I'm always running from one task or appointment or crisis to another.

Here, I can go slow.

I set her down on the bed carefully so she doesn't spill the champagne. I don't know what I wanna do first. All I know is, I gotta get her naked.

She's sitting up. Sipping the champagne. Smiling at me as she licks her lips. The skin on her neck and tits is already red from my mouth and stubble.

Now that I can really see her body, I know she's an athlete. Her arms are toned. So's her belly. Her thighs fill out her jeans just right.

And yeah, I can't wait to bite that juicy ass.

Leaning down, I lift one of her legs and tug off her boot. When I drop the boot to the floor, my chest twists when I see that it's a Lucchese. Same brand my adopted father figure Garrett Luck wore before he passed last year. My older brother Cash inherited Garrett's favorite pair, and it's all he wears these days.

"You got good taste," I say, removing her other boot.

The camel-colored leather is worn but well cared for. She's been able to wear these for a while because she clearly takes good care of them.

That idea also makes my chest twist.

"Thanks. My parents gave them to me for my eighteenth birthday. I think I've worn them almost every day since."

I take off her socks. Then I hook my fingers into her jeans and panties and pull, working them down the long, lean expanse of her legs.

Ava laughs when I literally growl. Not sure that's a sound I've ever made before.

Then again, I've never seen these fucking *legs* before. Her thighs flex as she lifts them to help me take off her pants, creating a soft valley between the bone and muscle on the sides of her legs.

I notice she has a tiny tattoo on her left ankle. Looks like some kind of heart? Two hearts, maybe. Wonder what it means.

"Wow." It's the only word I can manage. Dropping her jeans and panties to the floor, I lift one leg and press a kiss first to the inside of her knee, then to the outside of her thigh in that sweet little valley. "You got some legs on you, pretty girl. These thighs"—I kiss my way north, silently cursing at the gorgeous view I have of her pussy—"bet they'll look mighty fine wrapped around me, yeah?"

"Yeah." Ava's eyes flash. Bringing the bottle to her mouth, she takes a long sip before holding the bottle out to me. "Show me, cowboy. I wanna see."

## CHAPTER 6



*Sanyer*

LONG-LEGGED SLAYER OF MEN

**I TAKE THE BOTTLE.** Take a swig, then set it on the bedside table.

Reaching for the back collar of my shirt, I undress quickly. Button-up, undershirt. Boots, jeans. Briefs.

I don't miss the way Ava's eyes flash again when they land on my dick. I'm rock hard, my tip already leaking.

I take myself in my hand and give my shaft a hard, slow tug, working my wrist to curl my palm over my head. Sensation rockets through me as a renewed rush of blood courses through my dick.

I hiss. Ava's lips part.

Chuckling, I gather my pre-cum on my thumb. "You want a taste, don't you, greedy girl?"

"I am greedy." She sits up straighter so she's seated on the edge of the bed. "Give me what I want. Do we need a condom for this, or —"

"Ava, you got nothin' to worry about. Negative across the board."

"Good. Really good. I'm negative too. I still wanna use some protection when we —"

"Right. Just to be safe."

"Just to be safe." Her gaze burns. "Now *give me what I want*, Sawyer."

Of fucking course she's into this.

Of fucking *course* she ain't afraid to say what she wants. To show me what she's into.

Reaching down, I use my thumb to smear my cum on her bottom lip. Her tongue darts out to taste it, and I must black out because the next thing I

know I have my thumb in her mouth and my other thumb on her clit.

Her legs fall apart as I touch her there, her lips spread around my finger. Sucking on my thumb, Ava lets out a deep, satisfied moan, rocking her hips.

I see stars.

I circle her clit with the pad of my thumb. Pressing. Teasing. I glide it south and dip it inside her, thrusting both thumbs in a smooth, easy rhythm. She's tight and hot and perfect everywhere.

"Tell me how I taste."

Ava gives my thumb one last quick, hard suck. "You taste like I want you inside me. Now."

I smirk and repeat her line back to her. "Who made you boss?"

"You really wanna see who's boss?"

"I do, yeah."

She digs her teeth into her bottom lip. Leaning in, she purses her lips and presses a warm kiss to the tip of my dick. I do that growling thing again. She opens her mouth and works her lips over me, eyes flicking to meet mine the second before she sucks my head all the way into her mouth.

My balls contract. Need shoots up my length.

Yeah, we definitely need to use condoms. I'm not gonna last two seconds without one.

"Fine." I suck a pained breath through my teeth. "Fucking fine. You win. You suck dick like you mean it. You greedy fucking *girl*. I'mma give you what you want. You want me to put this dick everywhere, don't you? You want me to fuck your pussy, and then you want me to shove my dick down your throat. Bet you'd like me to fuck your tits, too, yeah? Come all over you?"

*Who am I and since when do I do dirty talk like this?*

I blame Ava. Honky-tonk queen. Barrel racer. Long-legged slayer of men.

Hollowing her cheeks, she takes me a little deeper before slowly—*Christ almighty*—pulling back, a string of saliva and pre-cum drawing taut between my tip and her mouth.

And then the woman *grins*. "Supposedly greed is good, isn't it?"

Without thinking, I ram my hand into her hair and fist it. Ava doesn't flinch.

Instead, she says, "Condoms. Now."

I've never run so fast in my life. A handful of heartbeats later, I'm tearing

open a box of Trojans and tossing a foil packet to Ava.

I climb onto the bed and kneel beside her, holding my dick in my hand. “You want it so bad, you wrap it up.”

“Yes sir.” She peels open the packet.

My breath comes in hot spurts as I watch her pinch the tip of the condom. She rolls it onto my length with tender, short strokes of her hand. My head falls back.

She laughs. “What?”

I blink up at the ceiling. *I’m about to die, that’s what.*

Gathering the few shreds of self-control I got left, I look down. “On your back. Show me how pretty that pussy is.”

Eyes on mine, Ava falls back onto the small mountain of pillows set up against the headboard. The light from the nearby table lamp catches on her tits, and I notice silvery, barely-there scars on the underside of each.

Before I can ask about them, though, Ava reaches for me, bending her knees so she’s spread wide.

My dick surges. Her pussy is pink. Soft-looking. I wanna sink inside her tight heat so fucking bad that it’s killing me.

Falling onto my elbows, I put my palms on the insides of her thighs and push them a little wider. Looking her in the eye, I lean in and lick her slit, flattening my tongue against her. She arches her back when I press my tongue against her clit. I tease her there, moving with the kind of slow patience she showed me when I was in her mouth.

“Sawyer,” she breathes, rolling her hips against my mouth. “You’re good at this.” She digs her fingers into my hair, tugging my head a little higher. “I like it there. Right—yes, cowboy, *there*.”

The pressure in my core spikes. I like how she guides me. Tells me what she wants.

I maintain eye contact as I eat her out. I suck on her clit. Dip my tongue inside her. When her thighs begin to tremble, I wet my thumb with her moisture, then reach up to slather it on her nipple.

I pull back.

“Sawyer, please, don’t stop. I’m close —”

“Here’s the deal, pretty girl,” I growl. “You don’t come until I’m inside you. Greedy as you are, I know you want me to fill you up with my dick first. You want that, don’t you?”

Her eyebrows curve upward, like she’s in pain. “Yeah.”

“Say it. Exactly what you want.”

“Sawyer—”

“Fucking say it, Ava.”

Her eyes flash. “I want you. All of you. That gorgeous dick—give it to me. Right now.”

“There she is.” I smile. “My greedy girl.”

I climb over her and suck that nipple into my mouth. She gasps, hands finding my shoulders, knees finding my hips. Her finger traces the line of Roman numerals I have tattooed on my left pectoral, back and forth, back and forth.

Planting my elbows on either side of her head, I kiss her lips, opening them with my tongue. She lets me in easily, kissing me back with a messy fervor that makes my blood riot.

Her hands move over my shoulders and onto my back. She digs her nails into my skin, trailing them over my shoulder blades.

I bite her lip. She reaches for my dick. I yank up my hips, staying out of reach.

“You said you wanted to ride,” I pant into her mouth, “so you’re gonna ride.”

Shaping her waist with my hands, I roll over onto my back and bring her with me. She half gasps, half laughs as she adjusts to the new position, her knees straddling my hips. Her hair is everywhere, and she uses her hand to pull it back from her face.

“Show me how good you can sit on my dick.” I hold her by the hips, my grip firm. “Bet you can’t take all of me.”

Ava arches a brow as she pushes up on her knees. “That a challenge, cowboy?”

“Fuck yeah it’s a challenge.” I squeeze her tit. She’s fucking *gorgeous* from this angle, hair a mess. Thighs flexed. Eyes on fucking fire. “You take all of me, and I’ll let you swallow my cum. Deal?”

Seriously, *where* is this shit coming from? I’d never have the courage to be so filthy and so ... open, I guess, with anyone else.

Only Ava. I feel at ease with her in a way I haven’t in forever. Maybe because I know I’ll never see her again? There’s no pressure to be anything other than myself.

Doesn’t hurt that she makes me feel sexy. Alive. Wanted.

She makes me feel like I’m *easy* to want. To like. It’s a nice change of

pace from feeling like a burden all the damn time.

Everything about this has been easy. Dancing with her, talking with her. Having fun with her.

Why don't girls like Ava exist in Hartsville?

Or maybe just a different version of me exists here in Austin, and the better question is: why am I not like this more often at home?

*Because I have a kid I love more than life itself.* And that kind of love comes with responsibility.

Hard to be fun, to have any kind of freedom, when you're a parent. Much less a single parent.

But I'm not going to think about that right now. Right now, I'm going to enjoy the fuck out of this tiny bit of freedom I do have.

"Deal," Ava says, wrapping her hand around my dick. She puts the other on my chest, flattening her palm so that her first finger brushes my nipple. A bolt of lust cracks down my middle.

"Fuck, Ava." My voice shakes. "Get. On. My. Dick."

She brushes my nipple again. "No one wants that more than I do."

My fingers flex on her hips as she lines me up at her entrance. The breath leaves my lungs at the hot press of her pussy on my head. Even through the condom, she feels silky soft. So tight that I have to grit my teeth.

I watch her face as she sinks a little lower. A groove appears between her eyebrows, deepening the further she sinks.

"Oh, Sawyer," she pants, biting her lip. "You're a lot."

"Too much?" I tighten my grip on her hips, holding her up.

"No." She shakes her head, her hair falling over her shoulder onto her chest as she closes her eyes. "Just give me a minute."

"You got it, pretty girl." I grab the hand she has on my chest and twine our fingers. "Press back on my hand. I'll hold you up as long as you need."

She nods again, her fingers curling around mine as she does as I told her and leans her weight into my hand. I wait, sweat prickling along my scalp and spine. I can't breathe.

I don't say that being an inch inside her, maybe less, has me seeing stars.

I don't say that I'm dying to yank her down so I'm sunk to the hilt inside her.

I don't say a fucking thing. I just watch her and wait. Heart drumming all the while.

She sinks a little lower, her breath catching. She opens her eyes, and they

lock on mine.

I'm hit by the idea that she's looking for something. Comfort. Encouragement.

Safety.

My body responds before my brain does. I swipe my thumb across the back of her hand, same way she touched me. Ordinarily I'd shy away from being so openly affectionate, but I'm able to do it now because I'm not worried about scaring her off. After tonight, we'll never see each other again. Might as well leave nothing on the table.

It's a small gesture. But her green eyes still soften. She sinks a little lower so that I'm most of the way inside her, the tight grip of her pussy on me unreal.

So Ava likes the dirty talk *and* the gentle caresses. The vicious neck bites and the sweet, simple way our fingers are tangled.

She's hungry for it all, and that makes me feel at home—at peace—with my own hunger. Like I'm not some deviant for wanting her the way I do. For saying the things I'm saying.

Goddamn, a man could get addicted to this feeling.

I could get addicted to Ava.

## CHAPTER 7



*Ava*

**TAKING A DEEP BREATH**, I shut my eyes and sit all the way down on Sawyer's dick.

There's a blinding flash of pain, which draws a moan from deep in my throat. My legs tremble. I hold his hand in a death grip as the burning stretch between my legs throbs in time to my heartbeat.

I always feel full when I'm on top. But the fullness I feel when I'm on top of Sawyer is next level. His cock is thick, and when I look down, I see myself splayed open around him.

Weird that I like the feeling of being split in half? The burn, the pain, the anticipation—it's aching hot, scorching me from the inside out.

Especially when paired with Sawyer's tenderness. He's got a filthy mouth, and he's not afraid to get rough. But he's also capable of being gentle just when I need it.

Case in point, he does that thing again where he draws his thumb over the back of my hand. "Keep breathing, pretty girl. We can change positions if you want? Try something a little less —"

"No." I keep my eyes closed, focusing on my inhales and exhales. I want more, not less. "No. I like the fullness. It hurts, but in a good way."

His other hand moves from my hip to my breast, where he flicks my nipple with his thumb. "You're so tight. So fucking perfect. Fair warning, I ain't gonna last long."

"I ride fast for a living." I feel my lips curl into a grin. Opening my eyes, I see him looking up at me in awe.

The burn between my legs dissipates, pleasure rising in its place.

“You can go slow with me.” He cups my breast, feeling its weight. Marveling at it, really. Then he reaches up and tucks my hair behind my shoulder. “I wish you could see yourself right now, Ava. Being brave and taking my dick like this—you’re red”—he swipes my cheek—“and you’re lit up. So strong.”

His voice gets a little hoarse on the last words. My chest hollows out. This man’s earnestness might just be the sexiest thing about him. He doesn’t play games or hold back. He bares himself to me in a way no man ever has before.

He’s supremely confident. And that makes me wanna be confident too.

I rock my hips a little, making him hiss.

“You ready to come?” His hand glides down my belly.

I nod. “Please.”

“So polite when you wanna be.”

“Are you?” I pant. “Ready to come?”

“You got no idea. Show me what this pussy can do, pretty girl. Show me how well you ride, and I’ll give you what you want.”

He rolls his thumb over my clit at the same time I rise up, then come back down. A baby thrust. But the combination of the friction and his thumb on my clit sends me spiraling. The need in my core coils tighter as his thumb works steady, patient circles over my pussy.

His stomach caves when I rock my hips harder, quicker, his pecs and biceps drawing taut as he starts to move his hips too, hitting me on the apex of my own thrusts. My tits bounce. He watches them, his lips parting, nostrils flaring.

“So fucking good,” he says through gritted teeth. “C’mon, Ava, come for me. Right now. Lemme feel you. How much you like my dick—lemme feel it.”

My thrusts become uneven. My heart goes wild inside my chest as I approach the edge. My cunt flutters around him, making our fit painfully tight, and then he presses his thumb *hard* against my clit.

At the same time, he grabs my breast and pinches my nipple.

“*Oh!*” I cry out, shutting my eyes as sensation slams into me.

I *come*. The release pounds through me on a tidal wave of hot, heavy throbs. My entire body seizes as my pussy clamps down on Sawyer’s dick. The sweetness of it, the intensity, is unbearable. I realize we’re still holding hands when I squeeze his so tightly that he lets out a dark chuckle.

“I’m here, pretty girl.” He squeezes back. “I’m right here. You feel incredible. Keep going.”

I come for what feels like a small eternity. Streaks of neon light erupt behind my closed eyelids as I hold on to Sawyer for dear life. I use his words as a kind of mantra, a reminder to stay in the present.

*I am here. I am here. I am here.*

The silent chant moves through my body in time to my frantic heartbeat.

When I finally float back to earth, I smile. I feel exquisitely, joyfully alive.

But when I open my eyes, I see that Sawyer’s face is tight with emotion. I can’t read him. All I know is his eyes are lit up like twin blue flames, somehow hot and icy cold all at once.

He’s got an almost ... bewildered look on his face, like he can’t believe how good this is either.

We’ve known each other for, what, a few hours? And already this is the best sex I’ve had in years.

Maybe ever.

“What?” I ask.

“Just.” He blows out a breath. “You. So fucking pretty when you smile. I can’t—goddamn it, Ava.”

Before I know what’s happening, he’s flipping me onto my back and climbing over me. His dick slips out, but then he tosses one of my legs over his shoulder and uses his hand to guide himself back to my entrance. He slides home on a deep, hard stroke before capturing my mouth in a bruising kiss.

He thrusts once, twice. Three times. All deep enough to have me crying out again. The ferocity of his kiss, the rough, wild way his body moves over mine—it’s overwhelmingly sexy.

I am legitimately *overwhelmed* by how much this man seems to want me. I fucking love it.

He’s an animal when he pounds into me, pinning me to the mattress with his enormous weight so that I can barely breathe.

But I’m the animal when he suddenly pulls out, my leg slipping from his shoulder, and he falls back on his haunches. My pulse skips a beat when I see him rip off the condom and toss it aside. I stare at his cock and lick my lips, unapologetically thirsty for his taste.

“Gimme,” I bite out.

Fisting himself, he meets my eyes as he rolls onto his back, bending his other arm behind his head. "I'd love for you to swallow. All of me. Whatever I give you."

The need between my legs coils tighter. "*Gimme.*"

"You gonna just say the word? Or you gonna show me how pretty you look with my dick in your mouth?"

I'm gripped by a full-body tingle. He's being lewd. Obscene, even.

And I have never been more turned on in my life, even after the epic orgasm I experienced a minute ago.

It's obvious this guy is crazy for me. He's hanging by a thread. So instead of feeling demeaned by his assertiveness, I feel empowered.

I can do no wrong here.

In that vein, I get on all fours and crawl to his side of the bed. He watches me, eyes going dark as he strokes himself.

I swat away his hand, wrapping my own around his length. "This is for me, cowboy. Only me."

He grits his teeth. "You best put your money where your mouth is."

Grinning, I tuck my hair behind my ears and lick his tip. He groans, his hips jerking. I taste salt and heat. His skin is velvety here, soft to the touch.

I suck his head into my mouth. He puts a hand on the back of my head at the same moment I bob down, careful not to catch him with my teeth.

"That's a good girl. Such a—" His breath catches and his abdominals contract when I take him deeper, his tip meeting the soft palate at the back of my throat. "*Jesus*, you're so good at this, Ava. I wanna see you gag. Think you can do that?"

I meet his eyes. *Yes.*

He pushes my head down. I take him as deep as I can, so deep that my gag reflex comes alive. My eyes water and he immediately takes his hand off my head. But I keep going.

I bob up. Down. I work his shaft with my hand, keeping a firm grip. He rocks his hips, letting out these little moans as he fucks my mouth.

"Aw, pretty girl, you got me so close already." He puts a hand on my face. "I love the look of you with my dick in your mouth. Now show me how good you swallow, yeah?"

I increase my speed. So does he. Together we milk him until his hips jerk and he bites out, "*Fuck.*"

A burst of salty heat fills my mouth. I continue to pump my hand as I

swallow, and swallow, and swallow. There's so much of him that I worry I'll choke.

Just when I think I can't take any more, his body goes limp. The barrel of his chest rises and falls as he struggles to catch his breath.

His eyes are on my face. It strikes me that he's rarely taken them off me all night. Not at the honky-tonk. Not in the lobby. Not here in this bed. It's like everything I do—my every movement, every expression—fascinates him.

When was the last time a guy wanted to know more about me?

When was the last time I wanted to *share* more?

Because I'm suddenly hit by the need to do exactly that—to explore every position, every limit. Every square inch of my body and his.

My heart hammers. Good thing Sawyer and I only have one night. Any longer, and I think I might fall in love with the guy.

Giving his tip one last, lingering kiss, I lift my own head.

"That good enough for you?" I tease.

He grabs my face. "Get up here, gorgeous."

I let him pull me in for a kiss as I tuck my body in beside his. He doesn't mind tasting himself, clearly. And I don't mind it either. The kiss is soft, tinged with an earthy flavor that wasn't there before.

We're both breathing hard. I notice my skin is still sticky from the champagne. And, yeah, the sex too.

"You're *real* good at what you do," he murmurs into my mouth. "That was —"

"Wild?" I laugh. "You're welcome."

He breaks the kiss. I open my eyes to see him looking at me, head turned on the pillow.

He's finally smiling again. "I don't know what I was expecting, but you just blew it all right out of the water."

"Feels good, doesn't it?" I run my hand over the wiry hair on his chest, snuggling closer to soak up his warmth. "To let go. Have a little fun."

Sawyer scoffs. "That was more'n a little fun."

I flush with pleasure. "It was a lot of fun."

"The most fun I've had in a long-ass time." He trails a hand down my arm, brushing his fingers across the swell of my breast. He must notice the stickiness too, because he says, "Any chance you'll let me clean you up again? For real this time? Shower's pretty awesome."

I blink at the question. I didn't realize until, well, right now that while I definitely want to stay for another round, I assumed I'd get dressed and get the hell out of here.

I *definitely* should get dressed and get gone. Nothing worse than a hookup who lingers, right? He's probably just trying to be polite, the way most guys are when they really want you to leave.

I shift, trying to roll away from him. "As nice as that sounds, I should probably get going —"

"Where do you think you're runnin' off to?" Sawyer's hand wraps around my arm, keeping me close. "Stay. Please."

Our eyes lock.

"Look, I totally get it if you want some peace and quiet —"

"I want you. All night." His blue eyes search mine, full of earnestness and heat. "We got two boxes of condoms to get through, remember? And a whole other bottle of champagne. You're not gonna make me drink it by myself, are you? I understand if you wanna leave, but ... yeah. I'd really like you to stay."

My stomach flips. I don't know Sawyer well—let's be real, I don't know him at all—but somehow, I know he's not fucking around. He means what he says.

He really does want me to stay. And Lord help me, that fact gives me butterflies.

"You really don't get out much, huh?" I ask.

He grins. "Nope. We gotta make this count. So come take a shower with me. I'll clean you up so I can get you all messy again."

"I like the sound of that."

I scurry to the bathroom to pee while Sawyer cleans himself up with the tissues he found beside the bed. I nearly laugh when I see the shower. It's huge, the size of my bedroom in the new apartment Junie and I will be moving into next week, with high glass walls and two showerheads.

I scurry back out to the room to grab a hair clip from my purse. Sawyer's heading toward me, still naked. He's holding a pair of frosty water bottles in his hands, which he must've plucked from a hidden mini fridge somewhere.

"Gotta hydrate if we're gonna go all night," he explains, setting one bottle on the bedside table so he can unscrew the cap from the other. He holds it out to me. "Don't want you giving up on me, pretty girl. I got big plans for you."

I look at the water. Look at him. I don't know why this small gesture has

my heart doing backflips—am I really *that* shocked when a guy is kind or engages in an act of service?—but for a full beat, I can only stare at him.

“Thanks,” I say at last, taking the water and drinking a good bit of it down in a single gulp. “God, that’s good.”

“Riding is thirsty work.” He smirks as he brings his own bottle to his lips.

“It is when I’m riding you.”

He runs a hand over his naked stomach. “You sayin’ I make you thirsty?”

“Very.”

*I think I’ve been dying of thirst for a while, but being with you makes me feel like I’m dancing in the rain. Water is suddenly everywhere.*

Sawyer plays his hand on the small of my back. “C’mon, let’s get this champagne off you.”

In the bathroom, Sawyer hangs a pair of fresh towels on the hooks beside the shower. He turns on the showerheads—both of them—waiting until the water is warm before stepping back to hold the door open for me.

“After you.” His dimples pop when he grins.

*Surely* he’s only this thoughtful—this motivated—because he’s trying to get laid again. Right? Because I don’t think I’ve ever met a man who does nearly as much as Sawyer’s done for me in the past few hours. First the club soda, the towels, and the replacement beers. Then the whole episode in the store downstairs where he took charge and paid for everything. *Then* the insistence that he make me come first, and the bottled water I didn’t know I needed, and now this—getting the shower ready so I don’t have to lift a finger.

I don’t know why I’m still shocked when Sawyer pulls a Sawyer and immediately starts to lather me up with deliciously scented body wash after we get in the shower. I giggle like a girl when his soapy hands linger on my breasts. I sigh when those hands move lower, gently working my pussy open. I put a hand on the thick ball of his shoulder to steady myself.

“You sore here?” His eyes flicker.

“A little. Nothing bad enough to keep me from going for round two.”

Sawyer arches a brow. Steam curls around him in a kind of hot, hazy halo. “What about rounds three and four?”

“Jesus, you really meant it when you said all night.”

“I mean everything I say.”

“So I’m—*oh*.” I dig my nails into his shoulder when his slippery fingers glide over my clit. “Learning.”



“You’re so responsive.” His eyes dart between mine. “Like a live wire, always ready.”

Swallowing, I manage to shake my head. “This doesn’t—I’m not like this usually.”

His gaze sharpens, as if he likes the idea that he’s the only one who gets me going this way. “What’s your story, pretty girl?”

I scoff, rolling my eyes as an excuse to look away. I’m not annoyed he keeps prodding, wanting to know more about me. In fact, I kind of like it.

Who am I kidding? I like it a lot. But like I said, this is how the trouble starts. A few innocuous questions, some great sex. Even better conversation. Then boom, suddenly I’m at someone’s mercy again.

Yeah, maybe I’m jumping the gun here. Making some assumptions that probably aren’t true. Really, you can’t get in *that* deep with someone over the course of one night.

But I’ve learned it’s always better to play it safe.

“My story’s boring.” I turn to pump body wash onto my hands. “I’m more interested in *your* story. Specifically, the one your body’s about to tell me.”

“You’re not as good as you think you are at changing the topic.” Water hits the crown of Sawyer’s head, ricocheting down his neck and shoulders as he looks me in the eye. “I mean that as a compliment.”

*Of course you do, cowboy.* Bet this Boy Scout’s never told a lie in his life.

He’s definitely never been divorced. I feel like cowboys are the one-and-done type. In my imagination, their promise to love and honor a woman is real. They respect her by pulling their weight at home, by being real partners who shoulder their fair share of the burden of raising a family.

I’m not sure a man like that actually exists. I have yet to meet one. My girlfriends and I all dealt with the same issue in our marriages, how we felt like we didn’t get nearly enough help from our husbands. I used to joke that I was a single married mom because I did literally everything. The nighttime wake-ups, the cooking, the cleaning, the scheduling. When I got pregnant, I told people I’d left the barrel racing circuit because I was ready to retire. But really, it was because I struggled so mightily to juggle my career and my pregnancy that something had to give.

That something was the job I loved. I was a damn good racer, and I’ve missed it. A lot. It’s one of the many reasons I’m thrilled to have landed this new gig at the Wallace Ranch. I truly can’t wait to start, even if I feel more

than a little anxiety. Pardon the pun, but so much is riding on me doing well at the Wallace Ranch. I get child support and alimony from Dan, but it's not enough to live on. I'm rebuilding my savings and retirement from scratch. This job has to work.

I have to succeed if I want to support myself and my daughter. I have big plans for Junie—college, grad school if she wants—and I need money to make those dreams come true.

Taking the wheel in my life after letting someone else drive for far too long has been liberating. I'm finally free, and it feels fucking fantastic.

The thrill of that freedom pounds through my bloodstream as I work my soapy palms over Sawyer's massive shoulders. My hands move south, smoothing over the firm slopes of muscle that cover his chest and stomach.

"I like that about you," I breathe, reveling in the way his abdominals clench beneath my touch, "how generous you are with your compliments."

He grabs my wrist after I draw my fingertips over his nipple. "Generous, huh?"

The water is a smidge too hot. Or maybe that's the way he's looking down at me, something like adoration in his eyes as he guides my hand to his dick.

"In every sense of the word."

He's not hard, but his velvety warmth still fills my hand. His eyelids go heavy as I gently stroke him with slippery fingers. I'm not trying to get him worked up. I'm just exploring, touching.

This man *loves* to be touched, and I love how much he clearly appreciates it.

I love how wild his confidence in me makes me feel. He's a filthy talker. What other fun, filthy things would he be into?

What other things am *I* into? I suddenly want to explore that, too.

His lips part. Water droplets catch on his eyelashes. "You keep playin' with me this way, I ain't ever lettin' you leave."

"Remember, we have not one, but two boxes of condoms to get through," I say, parroting his line back to him. I cup his balls, gently kneading them. I put my other hand on his shoulder, my fingertips toying with his neck. "I could stay a while, sure."

He groans. "Better get to it then, huh?"

"You in a rush?"

"No." Searching my eyes, he loops his arms around my waist and crosses

his wrists at the small of my back. His long, broad fingers tickle my ass.  
“And yes. How long you gonna let me have you?”

I grin, leaning in to kiss his mouth at the same time I thumb his tip.  
“Tonight is all we got, cowboy. Let’s make it count.”

## CHAPTER 8

*Sanyer*

PUBLIC INDECENCY

**I'M WRAPPING** Ava in a towel when she spots the speaker on the vanity beside the sink.

Her eyes light up. “Perfect! Here, lemme get my phone and I’ll put something on. Any requests?”

“Surprise me.” I grab a towel and dry myself off before knotting it at my waist.

Ava ducks into the bedroom, clutching her towel to her chest. I glance in the mirror above the sink and blink at my reflection.

Something’s different. My eyes, maybe? My hair is a fucking disaster, but that’s nothing new. I’ve always had too much of it, a thick mop that Mom used to love ruffling with her fingers when I was little.

*My handsome boy*, she’d say.

Even now, almost thirteen years after she passed in a car accident, I feel that sense of love, of being cherished, that her touch provided.

And even now, the memory of it makes my chest cramp.

I blink again, refocusing on the mirror.

I don’t look exhausted. *That* is what’s different. The perpetual circles under my eyes have magically disappeared. My skin is flushed. Eyes bright.

I look—feel—like a whole new person.

Ava reemerges, phone in her hand. Her towel is nowhere to be seen.

“What?” Her lips twitch as she scrolls.

Reaching for her, I grab her hip with one hand and squeeze her ass with the other. Heaviness gathers between my legs, my dick beginning to perk up again. “Don’t ‘what’ me, pretty girl. You’re a naked person, aren’t you?”

“A naked person?” She hits a button on the little speaker, and a beat later a Thomas Rhett song fills the bathroom.

“You’d walk around naked all the time if you could.”

“Wild, remember?”

Turning up the volume, she drops her phone on the vanity and drapes her arms around my neck. She turns a little so her body melts into mine, tits pressed into my chest. I circle her waist with my own arms, my fingertips marveling at how smooth and soft her skin is.

“Lemme guess. You’re not a naked person, even with this ridiculous body.”

“I’m not.” I debate telling her *why* I’m not: because I’ve been a dad for what feels like forever. I don’t remember a time when I could stride bare-assed through my house without worrying I’d scar my daughter for life.

But then Ava is untying the knot at my waist. The towel falls to the floor. My thickening cock meets with her belly as she goes up on her toes and presses her lips to my ear.

“Lemme rub off on you, then?”

I nearly bite off my own tongue when she nips at my lobe, sending a full-body shiver through me. “I like a rub.”

“Who doesn’t?” She grabs my hand and starts to pull me toward the bedroom. “C’mon, let’s dance.”

I feel more than a little awkward as I let her lead me out of the bathroom. When I see that she wants to go out into the living room, I dig my heels in.

“Oh, no no no,” I say. “Those windows—let me at least draw the curtains —”

“Don’t you dare.” Glancing over her shoulder, she smirks. “Like you said, we’re hot as fuck. Let them see. Better yet, let them watch.”

“Watch what?”

She cocks a brow. “The show we’re about to put on.”

Then she gives my arm a hard tug, and together we stumble into the middle of the living area. The inky-black darkness fills the windows; no doubt the people below could see *everything* if they looked up.

You wouldn’t know it by the way Ava begins to dance. She throws up her arms and bites her lips and moves, hips carving slow, deep circles in time to the music.

A rush of blood sends my dick full salute. I never recover this quickly.

I also never have naked girls dancing in my living room.

Her hair is still in a clip, allowing me a glimpse of her long, lean neck. I'm gripped by the very real urge to wrap my hand around her nape and hold her still while I pump into her.

She twines her arms above her head. Turning, she beckons me to join her, her eyes pure liquid fire as she crooks a finger.

The music plays. My blood runs hot. I'm already leaking everywhere, the drip of my pre-cum hot on my skin. Being around a free spirit like Ava is medicine I didn't know I needed.

*Fuck it.*

Turning to the table by the door, I rip open the pack of cigarettes and tuck one behind my ear. Toss a handful of condoms onto the nearby couch.

Then I pop open the second bottle of champagne. This time, I don't bother with cups. I take a thirsty swig, wiping my chin as I watch Ava sway her hips, her tits impossibly full and soft and beautiful as they sway with her.

I take another sip of champagne. Feeling the beginnings of a renewed buzz in my knees, I stride into the center of the room, curl an arm around her waist, and start to dance with her.

I close my eyes, and I move like I'm not dancing buck naked in a life-sized fishbowl.

The deep, throaty sound of her laughter fills my ears. I slip a leg between hers, my skin feeling two sizes too tight as she grinds against me, this steady, athletic roll of her hips that has me grabbing the back of her head and pulling her in for a hard, rough kiss.

*Who the fuck am I? I wonder, opening my eyes. Was this unhinged exhibitionist inside me this whole time? Or did Ava bring him to life?*

She laughs into the kiss, pulling back to nod at the bottle. "I'll take some of that, please." Then she opens her mouth and tilts back her head.

Goddamn this girl is fun.

I pour into her mouth, trying to be careful. But it still spills everywhere, and she cups her hand underneath her chin in a futile effort to catch it.

"Aw, pretty girl, I thought you were better at swallowing than that," I say, laughing.

"How 'bout you show me how good *you* are at swallowing? On your knees, Sawyer." She puts her hands on my shoulders and pushes me down.

The carpet bites into my kneecaps. Not like I give a shit. Not when Ava is grinning down at me, using her fingers to tip back my chin. She holds up the bottle and pours champagne into my waiting mouth.



Again, it goes everywhere. All over my face. My chest. Her belly.

Again, I laugh, feeling stupid happy as I grab her by the hips and yank her to me, pressing a scruffy kiss to her stomach. She seizes with laughter, clearly ticklish, bending at the waist as her free hand finds my head.

My dick throbs as I kiss my way to her pussy. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a blinking red light move across the nearby window. An airplane, maybe, or a helicopter.

The idea that we might actually be watched is ... really fucking hot.

“You wanna give ’em a show?” I look up at her and use my hand to guide her thighs apart. “Let’s give ’em a show.”

The last thing I see before I lick into her slit is Ava bringing the bottle to her lips, her eyes alive with laughter. Her breath catches when I flick her clit with my tongue again and again.

Zach Top comes on next.

Because *of fucking course* Ava is a Zach Top fan. He’s only my most played artist on Spotify. As a fan of ’90s country, I love his throwback vibe to the days of classic George Strait and Tim McGraw.

Can’t help it. I stand up. I grab the bottle from her and take a long, thirsty pull. I set it down, and then I roughly spin her around and bend her over the back of the nearby couch. Leaning in, I gently bite her right ass cheek. She yelps, the sound morphing into laughter when I move to the other cheek.

“I been wantin’ to do that all night,” I say, using my knee to spread her legs apart. “You got the sweetest little ass, Ava.”

She glances at me over her shoulder, her lips twitching. “Yours isn’t so bad either.”

My balls are in *agony*.

I give her ass a soft smack. “You noticed.”

“You were shaking the thing all over the damn place.”

I grin, reaching between her legs. “Course I was. You were there.”

“What does”—she shudders when I nudge her entrance with my middle fingertip—“that mean?”

*Means you make me wild too.*

We both make a noise when I press my finger deeper and find her slickness. I press deeper still, stretching her to make room for me. She goes up on her toes as my heart thunders in my chest.

“There she is,” I breathe, gathering her arousal on my finger. Then I gently paint her pussy with it. I circle her clit, getting her nice and wet. At the

same time, I run my hand up the furrow of her spine. I curl my fingers around her nape and press her face into the cushions, spreading her pussy wider around my fingers.

“That’s it, pretty girl,” I grunt. “Open for me.”

I dip my finger back inside her. She’s wet enough now that I slip another finger in beside it. She moans, rocking her hips so that she guides my fingers deeper. I slip them in and out, in and out, getting her soaked all over again.

“Perfect pussy. Perfect ass. Perfect tits. God, if I had more time, I’d fuck you everywhere.” I give her nape a squeeze. “Bet you’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

She moans in reply, nodding her head. “Yeah.”

“Gimme a condom.”

Wordlessly she grabs a foil packet from the sofa and holds it up to me. I know you’re not supposed to open these things with your teeth, but this girl’s clearly enjoying me fucking her with my fingers.

Case in point, she cries out when I pull away to roll the condom on.

“Greedy,” I say with a chuckle. “How deep you gonna take me this time, huh?”

She’s grabbing at me, hand finding my waist. “Hurry. Please. Sawyer, I can’t—don’t make me wait —”

“Aw, baby, you’ll wait as long as I please.” I tap her ass with my latex-covered dick. “You been teasin’ me all night. Now you know how it feels.”

“You’re evil.”

“You’re begging.”

Lifting her chest off the cushions, she gives me one of those hot looks over her shoulder. “I will.”

“Tell me.” I guide my tip through her swollen slit, back to front. “Tell me how much you want it.”

Ava digs her teeth into her bottom lip. “So fucking bad, Sawyer. Please. I’m dying.”

I press myself against her clit. Her legs shake. I’m learning it’s her tell.

“Aw, baby, look how close I already got you. Want me to make you come?”

Her eyebrows curve upward, like she’s in pain. “My God, yes.”

“You gonna let me feel it? You squeezing my dick so hard that I see stars?”

“Yeah.” The word is half breath, half moan.

I flick my head over her clit again, and again, and again. “I want all of you, pretty girl. Don’t fucking play with me.”

“Sawyer.” She grabs on to the cushion. “I’m so close. So, so close. Please —”

“Stop it.” I grit my teeth. I’m not even inside her, and I already can feel how hot and soft she is through the condom as I circle her clit with my tip. “Stop it and come. Right now, Ava.”

Her back arches, the muscles in her legs drawing taut as she pushes up on her toes again and *comes*.

“Sawyer. Sawyer. Oh, please, God, this—I can’t—Sawyer.”

The way she chants my name—how she reaches behind to grab on to me—the feral way her nails dig into my side —

I fucking can’t.

I can’t take it.

My hand shakes as I notch myself at her entrance and push inside her while she’s still coming.

“Oh, fuck.” My voice—that shakes too as I grab on to her shoulder and pull back, thrust. Pull back again. “Fuck me, pretty girl, you feel like heaven. Fuck. Keep coming.”

“More,” she manages. “Deeper. Go. Fast, please —”

I cut her off as I impale her on an especially vicious, hard thrust. Her pussy grips me like a vise, making my balls contract. I feel unhinged as I thrust again, just as hard and deep, our bodies making a lewd slapping noise.

Ava rewards me with a happy shout. “Yes.”

“You like that, me balls deep.” I pound into her. “You like that so much, I can tell. Such a greedy fucking girl.”

But I’m the one who’s greedy. I want more. I want to see her face while I fuck her. Watch her eyes go all hot and hazy as her body melts.

It takes Olympic-level effort not to blow my load while I wait for Ava’s orgasm to subside. But somehow I manage to do it, and then I’m looping an arm around her middle and pulling her upright.

Her back is to my front. I’m holding her up so I’m able to still be inside her. For a second I just hold her like that, marveling at how deep and full the angle feels.

Her chest rises and falls in a rapid beat. Her clip is gone, and her hair hangs in disheveled waves over her shoulders and back.

I reach around and cup her breast, thumbing her nipple just how she likes.

“Oh,” she breathes, her fingers finding the hair at the nape of my neck just how *I* like. “So good, Sawyer. This feels so good.”

She’s practically boneless as I pull out of her and spin her around. Kissing her mouth, I back her toward the wall of windows on the far side of the room.

“Arms around my neck, pretty girl. I need you to hold on to me. Think you can do that?”

Pulling away, she meets my eyes and nods. “Yeah. Wait, are you gonna—I’m not light —”

“I got you.” I glide a hand down to her thigh. “Arms around my neck, Ava. Don’t make me ask twice.”

“Or what?” Her lips twitch. “You gonna spank me again? ’Cause I liked that.”

I stare at her mouth. “Now who’s the evil one?”

“You’re rubbing off on me too, I guess.”

I lift her leg so that her knee is notched at my hip. “When I lift you, wrap your legs around my waist. Then I want you to put me inside you.”

Ava glances over her shoulder at the windows. “You’re taking this put-on-a-show thing pretty seriously, huh?”

“I take everything seriously.” Grabbing her other leg, I guide it to my hip. “Ready?”

She tightens her arms around my neck. “Ready.”

Curling my palms around the backs of her thighs, I lift her up. At the same time, she wraps her legs around my waist, and I press her back against the windows. Wordlessly she reaches between us to grab my dick, lifting her hips a little so she can put me back inside her.

“Look at that teamwork,” I pant as I sink to the hilt.

Her features soften. Ava looks *good* when she’s satisfied. All swollen lips and pink cheeks and happy eyes.

“Look at this show,” she replies. “They’re gonna see everything.”

“They’re gonna be jealous.”

Ava smiles. “Future me is jealous. Hard to come by this kind of sex.”

“No shit.” I begin to thrust.

“You don’t mind it?” she pants. “Me being ... like this?”

I grunt. “Like what?”

“The opposite of ladylike. The opposite of good.”

*How could this be anything other than good?*

*How can you be anything other than perfect, just as you are?*

“Fuck good,” I manage. “Good is boring. You’re better. So much better than that.”

She rolls her hips in time to mine, creating exactly the kind of friction I need. “Can we pretend like tonight’s gonna last forever?”

Something about her voice makes my heart twist. There’s tenderness in the question. Vulnerability. Like thinking about tomorrow hurts her.

I get that.

“Just as long as you don’t expect me to last forever.” I lean in to nip at her neck. “You feel too fuckin’ perfect.”

She laughs, burying her face in *my* neck. “Go, Sawyer.”

I do. I fuck her every way I can think of. First I have her crying out against the windows. Then we’re on the floor. On the couch. She’s sitting on my dick while I’m sitting in a chair, her tits in my hands.

I have no idea how I last that long. The condom, maybe? Whatever the case, by the time I come I feel like I’ve pulled every muscle in my body. The release is brutal in its intensity, brutal and blinding, and I find myself smiling when Ava, who’s still on my lap, plucks the cigarette from behind my ear.

“You might need this more than I do.”

I can’t catch my breath. Pinching her nipple, I smile. “Forgot. About that.”

“You gotta have a balcony, right?” She glances around.

I nod. “Off the bedroom. Chilly out, though. Lemme grab us some robes.”

Ava pauses, her green eyes searching my face. “You’re—well, you’re not sweet.”

“Thanks?” I laugh.

She shakes her head. “I don’t like sweet. Sweet is fake. What I’m trying to say is, you’re really thoughtful. You’re genuinely, deeply kind.”

“You’re genuinely, deeply good at compliments.” I press a kiss to her mouth. “I like that.”

*I like you.*

I help Ava into one of the hotel’s plush terry-cloth robes. I put one on too, and then I rummage around the suite until I find a box of matches.

The view from the balcony is stunning. Sliding the door closed behind us, I fall into the metal chair that’s tucked into the corner and pull Ava onto my lap.

“Gimme that.” I reach for the cigarette in her hand, but she shakes her

head. Instead, she carefully places it between my lips, her thumb trailing through my scruff when she pulls away.

My dick twitches. Jesus, at this rate, I'm not gonna be able to walk tomorrow. How many times can I fuck this girl before my legs give out?

I light the cigarette and take a deep, and deeply satisfied, inhale. Wyatt's the smoker in our family, but I'll occasionally bum a Marlboro or two when I'm especially tired or stressed.

"Fuck, that's good." Holding the cigarette between my first two fingers, I offer it to Ava.

She takes it, looking like a golden-age Hollywood siren when she takes a slow, unhurried drag. The cherry burns a bright shade of crimson, the earthy smell of tobacco filling the air.

"Really good," she says, passing it back to me. "Can't remember the last time I smoked."

Holding the cigarette between my thumb and forefinger, I bring it to my lips. "When was the last time you came that hard?"

Grinning, she curls an arm around my neck and tucks her fingers into my robe, running her fingertips over my collarbone. "Can't remember that either."

"What do you think makes up chemistry? Like, why does it exist between some people and not others?"

The question comes out of nowhere. Or maybe it's been simmering in the back of my mind since Ava and I collided on that dance floor back at the Blue Stallion.

Whatever the case, I'm dying to know what she thinks.

Lifting the cigarette out of my fingers, Ava brings it to her mouth and takes a thoughtful inhale. "There's physical attraction, which is a big part of it. But chemistry goes beyond that, right? I think it's about connection." She wiggles her ass, pressing it into my lap. "You can be attracted to someone, but you can only really *feel* them when they turn your mind on too."

Of course she'd have a thoughtful answer to my random question. *This*, I want to tell her. *This is chemistry. Being understood. Being able to talk without worrying about being judged for who you really are and what you really want.*

"Yeah," I say instead. "Maybe that's why it's so rare."

She holds out the cigarette to me. "But when it hits, it *hits*."

"Ain't that the truth?" My head buzzes as I suck down the last of the

Parliament. "I value sleep above all else. Like, sleep is my happy place. Except right now." The smoke swirls between us as I meet her eyes. "I don't wanna waste a minute sleeping tonight."

Ava bites her lip. "Let's have another cigarette, then. Just because we can."

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We fuck again in the bed. This time does Ava in, and she nods off after I clean us up.

Much as I wish I could say I stayed awake, I don't. But before I pass out, I call room service and order some breakfast to be delivered in the morning. The longer I can keep Ava here, the better.

Then I give her shirt a quick soak in the sink. When I'm satisfied the stain and the smell are gone, I hang it up to dry with a hanger I hook on the doorknob.

I climb into bed and pull Ava against me. She sighs, reaching up to touch my nape.

I drift off with her fingers in my hair, her body curled up against mine.

## CHAPTER 9



*Ava*

NOBODY'S DARLIN'

I'M sore everywhere when I wake up early the next morning.

Between my legs. My back. My head throbs.

God, why did we drink all that champagne and smoke those cigarettes?

*Because it was fun.* The most fun I've had in ages.

It's the pleasant soreness in my chest, though, that really alarms me. Turning my head on the pillow, I see Sawyer sleeping peacefully beside me. His arm is still slung over my middle.

His handsomeness fills me with an ache deep in my center. His scruff has filled in overnight. His eyelashes look especially dark against his skin in the thin, early light. And that mouth, the way he said *fuck good*—the way he worshipped my wild —

*I gotta get out of here. Now.*

Panic is familiar. So is the tenderness inside my breastbone, although in a more distant way. It's a vague memory, a feeling, coming to visit me out of the blue.

The feeling isn't a bad one. In fact, it's warm and it's welcoming, and I could bask in it like sunshine.

*Freedom.*

Too bad it never, ever lasts.

Last night was wonderful, sure. But it was also a fantasy in so many ways. One-night stands can be sexy because there's no time for the other person to let you down. I loved spending the night with Sawyer, but I'd bet my bottom dollar that if we kept hanging out—if our hookup turned into something more—he'd just end up disappointing me. Sure, things are sexy

and fun now. But they won't always be. He'd get comfortable. Bored. He'd end up taking me for granted, just like Dan did.

He'd smother my spirit. And that's something I refuse to tolerate.

I am done being someone's long-suffering significant other. I promised myself I'd do better, if only to show Junie what her standards should be when it comes to relationships. I don't want her to think it's normal that men treat women the way I've been treated.

But God, Sawyer is pretty. And kind. And *excellent* in bed.

Which is exactly why I need to get out of his bed, stat. Even though going back to reality just might kill me. My parents help me out a lot with Junie, but overnight breaks like this one are few and far between. I relish them, even if a break does make for a brutal return to real life.

Careful not to wake Sawyer, I slip out from underneath the covers. I'm naked, and the air hits my skin in a cold, bracing rush. Teeth chattering, I dig through the mess on the floor for my clothes. I find my jeans, socks, and boots. But my underwear is MIA, and so is my shirt.

I don't find the undies, but I do find the shirt hanging in the bathroom. The breath leaves my lungs when I see that the stain on the front is completely gone. When I smell the fabric, there's no hint of stale beer. Did Sawyer get up and clean it at some point last night?

Why does that thought make me want to cry? This man is endlessly endearing. Everything he does makes me like him more. It makes me want to let my guard down, what-ifs swirling in my head.

What if he's different?

What if the adoration he showed my wild side means he values authenticity as much as I do?

I cut off that line of thought at the pass. I gave Dan a chance. Many chances. I thought he might be different too, and look how that turned out.

Yanking the shirt over my head, I grab my purse and jacket and tiptoe to the door, where I put on my boots. My heart leaps to my throat when I hear rustling behind me. I quickly push down the knob and open the door.

I'm walking out of the suite when I notice a table, draped in white linen, that waits in the hallway. The smell of coffee fills my head as I take in the spread. There's a silver coffeepot, a tiny pitcher of creamer, a Saran-wrapped bowl of cut fruit. A pair of stacked cardboard coffee cups sit beside two ceramic ones.

*Holy shit, did Sawyer order room service for us?*

“Wasn’t sure if you’d want your coffee for here or to go.”

I whip around at the sound of the deliciously deep, sleepy voice behind me. Sawyer is standing in the doorway, one arm held up over his head, his elbow resting on the doorframe. His thick hair sticks up every which way. My fingers twitch with the desire to run them through that dark, wavy mass.

The only thing he’s wearing is a sheet around his waist, which he holds in a fist placed distractingly close to the chiseled V of his groin.

My knees literally wobble. I rest a hand on the table to steady myself.

“I ... hi. Hey. Good morning, Sawyer. I’m so sorry, but I think I need to head out.” The excuse, or really the lack thereof, is pathetic, but I still tilt my head toward the empty hallway.

His blue eyes darken with disappointment. “Why you runnin’, pretty girl?”

My heart is in my mouth now. I *love* the nickname he gave me. I also love the way his voice sounds right now, still rough with sleep, edged with obvious desire.

He wouldn’t want more if he didn’t enjoy how unhinged I was last night. How *unladylike*. He likes who I was—am—the crazy exhibitionist who loves cigarettes and doggy style a little too much.

Only it wasn’t too much for Sawyer. It was just right.

Which makes *me* feel just right, just as I am.

I *have* to go, or I’m worried I’ll stay forever.

I glance at the table. “Did you —”

“Call room service at three a.m. to request breakfast be delivered at six?”

The muscles in his chest bunch as he straightens, dropping his raised arm so he can run his hand over his naked stomach. “I don’t know about you, but I worked up an appetite last night. Didn’t want you goin’ hungry.”

Like his voice, his accent is different in the morning. It’s thicker, slower, dripping with honey. I nonsensically blame that fact for the renewed sting in my eyes.

Sawyer fucked me all night, and now he wants to feed me this morning? It’s supposed to be the other way around, right? He buys me dinner first, and then we get naked?

Who am I kidding, one-night stands don’t usually include food. Especially breakfast. Sawyer really wants me to stay, doesn’t he?

My headache pulses. I pinch the bridge of my nose and close my eyes, hoping the burn there goes away. But the desire to go back inside that room

and have coffee with this wildly attractive man thrums through me, making the burn worse.

“Hey.” I hear the sheet rustle as Sawyer steps closer. “You all right, Ava? If you don’t wanna stay, it’s no problem ...”

*I do want to stay, and that’s exactly the problem.*

“This.” I open my eyes and drop my hand, gesturing to the breakfast spread. “It’s so kind of you. Thank you, Sawyer, truly. I appreciate you thinking of me more than you know. But I really do have to run. My sisters wanted to hit the road early, so ...”

His expression flickers. Disappointment? “I understand. Can I convince you to take something to go, then?”

I shake my head. “I’m really all right.”

I’m doing the right thing here. The smart thing.

Why, then, do I feel like the world’s biggest asshole?

“Thank you, Sawyer. I had—my God, the best time with you. I really needed that.” I swallow the lump in my throat and paste on a smile. “Good luck with the cowboying.”

He scoffs, his dimples popping for a split second. “Thanks. Good luck with the racing.”

I don’t race anymore. But I’m still pretty damn fast.

Offering Sawyer a cringeworthy wave, I all but sprint down the hallway. “Bye, Sawyer.”

He holds up a hand. The other still clutches the sheet at his waist. “See ya, Ava.”

The conversation should end there. But because I have zero self-control around this man, I find myself calling out, “Also, thanks for not killing me!”

His warm, velvety laugh fills the hall. “You’re the one killin’ me. Safe travels, yeah?”

I press the elevator button. There’s a ding as the doors slide open. Stepping inside, I wait for the doors to close before I cover my face with my hand and burst into tears.

I don’t know why I’m crying. I just feel so ... full, I guess. I’m happy and I’m sad. I’m satisfied and I’m starving.

I thought having a one-night stand that was actually good might put whatever sexual hunger I’d had to bed.

Instead, it’s made me want *more*, and I don’t have room in my life for that. I don’t want to want whatever it was that Sawyer gave me.

But I do. And it hurts.

Wiping away my tears with the flat of my palm, I tell myself I'm just tired and hungover. I'll feel better—more centered—tomorrow, when I'm back in my routine. I'll snuggle with Junie on the couch while I have my coffee, and life will go on. It always does.

Eventually I'll forget about Sawyer and the taste of his mouth and the way he made me feel.

Or maybe I won't. Maybe the memory of how cherished and safe I felt to just be myself with him will be a potent reminder of what I deserve. What I'm looking for in any potential relationship.

The doors slide open. I'm greeted by the glow of thin morning light that reflects off the marble floor of the hotel lobby.

I take a deep breath and step into the day.

## CHAPTER 10

*Ava*



THRIVING

## THREE MONTHS LATER

“HOLY SHIT.” I look up from the timer in my hand. “Billie, you just shaved half a second off your time! Personal best!”

My student, Billie Wallace, beams from the saddle as she catches her breath. “That felt good. I tried to run as straight as possible to the second barrel, like you said. How’d my hands look? Don’t think I stayed two-handed long enough, but the thought was there.”

Putting my sunglasses on, I tuck the timer into the back pocket of my jeans. “You’re developing that muscle memory, which is so important in this sport because things move so fast. You’ll get there. Right now, it’s all about repetition.”

I glance at Sally Powell, the head of veterinary programs here on the Wallace Ranch, who’s cupping her hand over her phone screen as she looks down at it. “The tape ready to view?”

Sally taps her finger against the screen. “Yep. Just putting it in slow motion. Billie, you turn a pretty barrel.”

“Trying, girl, trying.” Billie slides off her horse with the athletic ease of someone who’s been riding her whole life.

“Loretta is on fire,” Sally adds, referring to the gorgeous spotted Appaloosa horse that Billie rides. “She picked right up on you asking her to make more space between y’all and the barrel.”

I nod. “She ran straight and square. Excellent work, truly.”

“That’s because I have an excellent trainer.” Billie unbuckles her helmet.

Grinning, I cross my arms. “Trying, girl, trying.”

My heart swells as I inhale the scents of hay, dirt, and leather. Horse people are my people. I love everything about my job as the ranch’s first and only head trainer. The Wallaces became wealthy over many generations of cattle ranching, and the current owners decided to put that money to use by building world-class horse breeding and training programs on the ranch. My job is training horses and riders in barrel racing, a rodeo sport where riders run a cloverleaf pattern around three barrels as fast as possible.

I absolutely love working with Billie and Sally. Billie is Mr. Wallace’s

daughter. She's a cowgirl through and through, having grown up working cattle and breeding horses alongside her parents and brothers here in Texas Hill Country. As a twenty-fifth birthday present to herself, she's decided to try her hand at barrel racing. Her goal is to compete in a local rodeo.

Judging by how far she's come in the three months since we started, we're definitely going to make that happen. I feel giddy just thinking about it.

I'd be lying if I said part of that giddiness wasn't on account of the fact that words like *rodeo* and *cattle* make me think of Sawyer. Austin happened months ago, but I can't quit thinking about that cowboy with the slow hands and big ... heart.

The sense of freedom I experienced that night has carried over into other parts of my life. I know that has a lot to do with moving away from my hometown—and from my ex. I'm free to be myself in a way I never have been before. But I think the way Sawyer was so turned on by me just being *me* has provided a much-needed boost of confidence to start my new life.

I'm not worried about being the “right” kind of woman at work or at home. I just *am*, zero fucks given.

And go figure, everything is finally falling into place.

Which means I seriously, seriously need to stop thinking about that man already. Our one-night stand was good *because* it only happened once. If I ran into him again, chances are the experience wouldn't be nearly as electric or memorable.

Sally, Billie and I all huddle around Sally's phone, which she turns away from the ardent afternoon light. We're outside in the corral today, thanks to the fire that partially destroyed one of our barns. We converted the newly constructed arena into temporary stalls for the horses.

The winter air is chilly, but the sun seeps through my jacket to warm my shoulders and back. I don't love the cold, but it sure as hell beats the heat. Besides, spring—my favorite season—is right around the corner. My heart leaps when I think about how much fun Junie's going to have meeting all the new calves that are about to be born. She's also going to have a ball swimming in the Wallaces' gigantic pool—they've already offered to heat it for us whenever we want to use it.

For so long I worried that divorcing Dan would ruin Junie's life. At the very least, I worried it would damage her in some irreparable way. My therapist tried to convince me otherwise, but I didn't believe her.

Slowly but surely, however, I saw how our life got bigger. Freer. Happier.

Moving to Hartsville just turbocharged that change, and I'm realizing that being happy has made me a more patient, more present parent.

The Wallaces welcomed us with open arms. Not only did they provide the cutest housing for us—a light-filled, two-bedroom carriage house apartment—they also gave me the flexibility I need as a working mom. I'm a salaried employee, complete with benefits like health care and a 401(k), but I pretty much make my own hours. I'm also able to hire any extra help that I need to run our programs—Sally is a perfect example. We've become close in the month she's been part of our team.

Most importantly, though, I found the most wonderful childcare in the form of Miss Lee, Mrs. Wallace's younger sister. It's a huge relief not to have to worry about June being in good hands during the day.

"All right." I hit the play button on Sally's phone.

We analyze each run in slow motion so Billie sees exactly what she's doing right and what she needs to work on.

"I can see right away that you've got a good seat. You're not popping up at the first barrel like you were before. All those drills we did practicing your slow work really paid off."

Billie shifts on her feet. "It seems easier the faster I go."

"That's exactly how it should feel." I point to the screen. "Yeah, look at your hands here—you're still not staying two-handed long enough. You put your hand on the horn when your horse is striding in to keep your butt and hips planted. Then you let go, and push forward with your horse when you go back to two-handed to 'drive' to the next barrel."

"Got it. And see, I think my legs were a little stiff there around the second barrel."

"But you did stay sat," Sally says. "I can see how you were pressing into your seat. Loretta definitely got a boost from your confidence."

We watch Billie make her final loop around the third barrel.

"Be honest," I say. "Are you still holding your breath the whole time?"

Billie chuckles. "You don't miss a damn thing, do you, Ava?"

"I can tell by your shoulders." I point to the screen. "You gotta keep breathing, Billie. Otherwise you'll stay stiff, and that muscle memory we're building up won't work for you. I wonder if some yoga wouldn't help with that? It'll also keep your core nice and strong."

"I could try yoga, yeah." Billie lifts a shoulder. "I'm all about trying new things these days, so why not? Maybe it will help with this quarter-life crisis

thing I'm having."

I nudge her with my elbow. "Better than having that crisis when I did with a new baby in my arms. Good news is, life is so much better on the other side. You just gotta keep going. And please, for the love of God, don't let a guy distract you from the work you're doing on yourself."

"Late bloomer here." Sally raises her hand, where a yellow diamond winks from her fourth finger. "I can attest the wait makes the payoff so much sweeter."

"You and Wyatt are the freaking cutest together." Billie kicks at the dirt. "I'm happy for you guys. Even if I am a little jealous that you got one of the good ones. They're few and far between, you know?"

Sawyer was a good one.

A really, really good one. So good that I've had zero interest in anyone else since our one-night stand. Not like I've had the time to pursue anyone anyway as I've started my job and helped June acclimate to our new home. I've become intimately acquainted with my showerhead and the new vibrator I ordered online after a friend recommended it.

Billie has to run, and so do I. I have to relieve Miss Lee so June and I can make some dinner and do bath time. I don't love this time of day—we're both tired, and I often wish I had the luxury of putting up my feet after work instead of picking up my "second shift" as June's mommy—but I do love getting to spend quality time with my daughter.

"So, hey," Sally says as we head across the corral. "That comment you made about guys not distracting you —"

"Don't worry, I've learned my lesson."

Sally grins. "Does that mean you'd be up to meet someone? A fellow single parent?"

Letting out a chuckle, I pretend to busy myself with the gate, which always gets stuck. "Who's this someone?"

"A guy who has a daughter the same age as Junie. I've known him forever, and I can attest that he and his little girl are pretty damn great."

"I appreciate the offer, Sally, but to be honest, I'm not really interested —"

"Oh, I'm thinking y'all would just get the kids together. You know, for a playdate or whatever. I'm not setting you up with him or anything."

I let out a silent sigh of relief. I need a man distracting me from the beautiful little life I'm building like I need a goddamn hole in my head.

Things are good right now.

Life is *good*.

Meeting another parent can't hurt, right?

"Junie is quite the little social butterfly, so I know she'd love to make some new friends in town. We're in."

"Great." Sally claps her hands. "I think he's coming to the barn raising tomorrow, so this will be perfect."

The community in this little corner of Texas apparently still hosts old-fashioned barn raisings, where neighbors party while also engaging in some pretty legit construction. I thought these events only existed in movies like *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, but Mrs. Wallace was dead serious when she said she'd been approached about hosting one to rebuild the fire-damaged barn here on the ranch.

That's how I ended up helping to plan a kegger-slash-HGTV-style party that will take place this weekend at a construction site a few hundred yards from the carriage house where I live.

I use the back of my wrist to push the hair out of my eyes. "I appreciate you thinking of me, Sally."

She cuts me a look. "Are you just saying that?"

"No." Shaking my head, I sigh. "I really do mean it. I was so scared that starting over would suck. Don't get me wrong, things did suck when I first got separated. But moving here ..."

I glance over the pasture that borders the corral. The winter landscape is stark, the gnarled old oaks and soaring pecan trees having lost their leaves long ago, but there is beauty in the bareness. The spotless sky is huge, a shade of blue so vibrant it makes your pulse beat faster. A slow-moving creek glistens over pale rocks. There's a calmness here, a wild stillness, that's hard not to fall in love with.

"It's been the best decision ever. Y'all have been so welcoming, and I'm more than happy to return the favor."

Meeting this guy, whoever he is, doesn't have to be a big deal. It's not like I'll run into him again, seeing as I live and work on the ranch and rarely, if ever, leave. Junie hasn't started preschool yet at the cute little school downtown. I've also been super busy getting our program up and running, which doesn't leave me a lot of time to do much else besides eat, hang with my daughter, and sleep. Mrs. Wallace gets a large grocery delivery once a week, and offered me the chance to have our groceries delivered too—so I

don't even need to go downtown to the store.

Sally grins, touching her hip to mine. "It's not a favor. But I'm glad to hear you're open nonetheless. This guy is actually Wyatt's brother."

"Ah, right. I remember him telling me —"

"Mommy! Mommy Mommy *Mommy!*"

I look up at the familiar squeal, smiling when I see a little girl with a blonde ponytail and Band-Aids on her face sprinting toward me. Of course my daughter has unzipped her jacket, which flaps out behind her in a sparkly whirl of pink and purple unicorns. Not far behind, Miss Lee pretends to hustle in an effort to catch up.

"You're so dang fast, little lady," she calls. "Bet you get that from your mama."

Sally calls back, "She sure does. I've seen her mama in action, and she's so fast on a horse you can barely see her when she passes by."

I open the gate and hustle toward my daughter, holding out my arms. "Hey, Junie! How was your snooze?"

"Good." She collides with me, wrapping her arms around my legs. "I love you, Mommy."

"Aw, June Bug, I love you too." I pick her up, settling her on my hip before pressing a noisy kiss to her cheek. Only it ends up being her chin, because she refuses to stay still. "Nice Band-Aids!"

June giggles. Like Nelly, she wears them as a fashion accessory. On my last trip to the grocery store, I grabbed a box of Disney-themed Band-Aids. Little did I know they'd end up being my daughter's latest obsession. The other day she grabbed the box off the counter and proceeded to cover herself in them while I made dinner. Face, hands, legs—she even stuck them to each of her toes. It was hilarious, until I had to peel each one off during bath time. I was sure the Wallaces could hear Junie's screams from their house a quarter mile away.

Today they're all printed in bright colors, which matches her tie-dye sweatshirt and leggings.

"What did you and Miss Lee get up to today?" I ask.

"Lots of fun things." Lee smiles. "What did we see, Junie?"

"Horses!" Junie's face lights up. "And the moo-moos. And we painted! And ate sandwiches!"

I wrap my hand around her little ankle, resisting the urge to lean in and bite that cheek of hers, Band-Aid and all. She's always been delicious. While

most of her baby fat has disappeared, she still has the chubbiest, yummiest cheeks.

“That sounds like the best day ever.”

“I love Miss Lee.”

“Aw, sugar, I love you too,” Lee replies with a laugh.

I almost feel faint with relief. When we first moved to town back in November, Junie had a hard time adjusting to me being gone most of the day. Made sense, considering I’d been home with her pretty much since she was an infant. The only real babysitters she’d had were my mom, sisters, and mother-in-law, so June didn’t take kindly to Miss Lee at first. Now they’re best buds, and I couldn’t feel more grateful.

Of course, I received an email this morning informing me that Junie got off the wait list at the preschool downtown. She’ll only be attending three mornings a week, nine to twelve thirty. But I still worry about putting her through another transition, even as part of me knows she’s ready for school. She needs more interaction with other kids. Living on a ranch is great, but I’m starting to worry that Loretta the horse is becoming my daughter’s best friend.

“Did June really do okay?” I ask.

Lee waves her hand. “She did great. She listened well and ate almost her whole lunch. We only had one meltdown, right, sugar?”

I groan. “Let me guess. We couldn’t plaster ourselves with *all* the Band-Aids, so we threw a fit.”

“Bingo.” Lee points a finger. “I hid them in the cabinet beside the sink, by the way.”

“Thank you.” I squeeze Junie’s ankle. “What’s up with you and the Band-Aids, June? You know they hurt to take off, and we can’t waste them if you don’t need one.”

“Oh, I’ve heard all about the Band-Aids,” Sally says. “But I get it, Junie. They’re so fun and colorful. Like little tattoos.”

“Tattoos! Please, Mommy, I want tattoos! The *Paw Patrol* ones.”

I laugh. “You’re gonna be trouble one day, aren’t you?”

“Only the best kind,” Lee replies. “We talked a lot about the barn raising tomorrow, right, sugar?”

Junie wiggles in my arms and I set her down, noticing she’s finally wearing sneakers. For the past few months, all she’d wear were the light-up, glittery rain boots my mom got her for Christmas.



“It’s a party with cake,” June announces.

“I’m excited.”

“I am too,” I say, not sure whether the words are a truth or a lie.

## CHAPTER 11

*Ava*

## BLAST FROM THE PAST

**THE NEXT DAY**, Junie and I walk hand in hand to the barn raising. Despite being over three and a half, she still takes an afternoon nap sometimes. Today she didn't wake up until almost two thirty, so we're running late.

I had hoped to lie down myself for a bit. But between catching up on laundry and paying bills, I burned through my two hours of "free time" without so much as a snack break.

I'm *tired*. Then again, when am I not?

"What's that sound?" Junie jumps up in an attempt to get a better look at the party happening just down the hill.

"That's the band. They're playing music at the party. It's fun, right? Think you'll want to dance with me?"

Junie smiles, nodding. "I like to dance."

"I do too."

Although I'm feeling weirdly ... nervous, I guess, about this whole thing. Which is stupid, because it's just a casual get-together of some locals. There will be food, beer, and yeah, maybe a little work involved. But it'll be a great opportunity to meet some neighbors. I haven't really done that yet, seeing as I threw myself into getting the Wallaces' training program off the ground as soon as we arrived.

I really would love for Junie to make a friend or two. If we're not feeling it, we can just leave.

I hate the idea that I'm nervous because Sally's introducing me to someone, even if she did pitch him as nothing more than a fellow single

parent. Being nervous means I care, and I don't *want* to care about a guy or what he thinks of me. I'm happy being alone.

I'm a better person *because* I'm alone. I'm not bitter or resentful or angry anymore.

I know this in my bones. And yet my stomach won't stop flipping the closer we get.

The music grows louder as we pass a stand of juniper trees. We crest a small hill, and then the party comes into view in the shallow valley below.

I draw up short in the stubby grass.

"What is it, Mommy?"

Swallowing, I adjust the hat on my head. Figured it was only proper to wear a Stetson to a barn raising. "Nothing. There's ... wow, a lot of people here."

Like, *a lot* of people. They swarm the damaged barn and the picnic tables that our crew set out around it. A large knot of people hangs by a pair of kegs in rubber buckets opposite the band, while others mill around the tables, picking at the enormous spread of food set out.

I helped organize the event, so I shouldn't be surprised. But when everyone we invited said they'd be coming, I assumed they were just being polite. Surely we'd have no-shows. Probably a lot of them, considering we were asking people to rebuild a freaking barn for free.

"The cake!" Junie shouts, tugging on my hand. "Mommy, I see the cake! It's chocolate! My favorite! Let's go, Mommy, please!"

I smile, despite the roiling nerves in my stomach. Mrs. Wallace is a big baker, and she loves making sweet treats for my little sugar monster. She never said as much, but I know she made that Texas sheet cake because it really is June's favorite.

Reason number eight hundred ninety-nine why I love our little life here.

I spot Mrs. Wallace by the nearest table. She's got a plate in one hand and a fork in another, which she's waving animatedly as she chats with Vince, the ranch's resident veterinarian. He and Sally work closely together.

An older couple dances in front of the stage, where the band is playing a Taylor Swift cover. The familiar song eases my nerves ever so slightly.

I let Junie lead me down the hill. I joke that I'm an extroverted introvert; I love to socialize with the right people, but I always need time alone afterward to recharge my battery. My daughter, however, is—like her dad—the most natural extrovert on planet Earth, even as a three-year-old.

I hear the roar of a chain saw, followed by the thunk of hammers. Glimpsing inside the barn, I see there's a whole mess of people there already at work. The fire was started by some bad electrical wire, and while the exterior of the barn escaped mostly unscathed, the interior is a disaster.

But judging by how many people showed up to work, it'll be fixed in no time.

There's a flutter inside my chest. Hartsville is a special place. The sense of community here—how people genuinely give a shit about each other—is kind of the best thing ever.

Junie makes a beeline for Mrs. Wallace and her chocolate cake.

"Mrs. Wallace!" My daughter slams into the older woman's legs and wraps her in a hug. "Mrs. Wallace, there's cake! Can I have some?"

I laugh. "How do we ask? And didn't I say you needed to have some real food first?"

"Well hey there, little lady," Mrs. Wallace says with a laugh. "It's so good to see you. Of course you can have some cake! But only after you eat"—she glances at the food—"some of Mrs. Nielson's chicken. Do you think you can do that?"

"But I don't like chicken."

My turn to laugh. "Sorry, Mrs. W. She's trying to play you. Junie loves chicken. Hey, Vince."

"Hey there, Ava. And hey, Miss June. Can I get another high five for how well you did this morning? You were such a big help." He holds up a hand.

Junie jumps up to slap it. Not gonna lie, this kind of thing makes me feel all warm and mushy inside. This morning, I took Junie out for a trail ride so we could visit the Wallaces' herd of cows. We ran into Vince when we were done, and he showed Junie how to untack our horse and brush him down. I don't know who enjoyed the lesson more—her or Vince. His boys are teenagers now, and I can tell he misses having little kids around.

"All right, Junie." I put my hands on her shoulders and start steering her toward the food. "Let's eat our chicken, and then you can have some cake."

We're just about to grab some plates when I see Sally approaching, hand in hand with Wyatt. I'm always struck by how much he reminds me of Sawyer—something about the shade of his eyes and his confident, steady stride.

Then again, everything seems to remind me of Sawyer, so I've never read too much into it.

Seeing me, Sally smiles and waves. My stomach flips, nerves returning with a vengeance.

*Stop it. You're going to be fine.*

I wave back and force brightness into my voice. "Hey, y'all! Thank you so much for coming. We're blown away by the turnout!"

Wyatt grins. I don't miss the way he keeps Sally close, their arms brushing as they absently swing their joined hands.

"Welcome to Hartsville, where everyone's nosy as hell but always willing to lend a hand." He nods at the kegs. "The fact that there's free beer here doesn't hurt."

I smile. "Least we could do."

"So, Ava," Sally says, glancing at her fiancé, "Wyatt and I would like you to meet someone."

Looking at Junie, I pretend to be surprised. "Oh? This sounds fun."

Junie, ever the optimist, screams with delight. Together we follow Sally and Wyatt into the barn. The singed smell of smoke burns my nostrils, but it's alleviated somewhat by the clean, fresh scent of new lumber. Several men and women are hard at work repairing some framing on the far wall. A little girl busies herself with a pink plastic hammer in the opposite corner, a safe distance from the construction.

My gaze immediately catches on a tall, broad-shouldered guy smack dab in the middle of the wall. He's in jeans and a flannel shirt he fills out to perfection, biceps bulging as he lifts a two-by-four—at least I think that's what you call those long, thin wooden boards? A tool belt is slung around his hips.

Even from behind, you can tell he's handsome. *Especially* from behind. The way his butt fills out those broken-in Levi's —

Wait a second.

Wait. A. Second.

Those jeans—that thick, dark hair—oh, God, now he's turning, offering me a glimpse of his side. He's got his sleeves rolled up, revealing a big, bold line of script tattooed on his thickly muscled forearm. *Ella*.

There's a faint buzzing in my ears that's overtaken by the panicked throb of my pulse. My head suddenly feels like it's being squeezed inside a vise, even as my heart leaps in elation.

Can't be. No way. No fucking way —

"Sawyer!" Wyatt calls.

*Oh my God it's him.*

And that's his daughter playing with the plastic hammer. Ella isn't his mom. She's Sawyer's daughter.

I'd laugh if I didn't feel like I was about to vomit. *Of course* he's a dad.

The offer to get me wipes, how he was always thinking ahead, anticipating needs. How he made sure I never went hungry or thirsty.

I've encountered very few married men who operate that way. But a single dad? Totally makes sense.

The little girl looks our way and immediately lights up, making a mad dash across the barn to hug Wyatt and Sally. "Uncle Wy! It's Uncle Wy and Auntie Sally!"

June tugs on my hand. "Mommy, can I play with her?" she whispers.

The man—Sawyer—turns to fully face his brother. The dimples in his cheeks pop when he smiles, and I feel a vaguely familiar tingle in my knees.

"Hey, Wyatt," he says. "Sally, it's always a pleasure seeing yo ..."

The word dies in his mouth when our gazes lock. Even in the dim light of the barn, the blue in his eyes is so piercing that I feel it like a knife through the chest.

"Hey!" It's the only word I can seem to formulate.

A pink flush works its way up Sawyer's thick neck. I notice his scruff is scruffier. His mustache isn't as neatly trimmed as it was back in Austin. There are purple rings around his eyes.

He looks as overwhelmed and bone-tired as I feel.

"It's ... good to see you," he says with a laugh, raising an arm to tug a hand through his hair. "Been a minute."

*How the hell have you been?*

*Do you ever think about me?*

I can't breathe, but somehow I manage to laugh too. "Yeah. Wow. What are the chances?"

Sally's brows snap together. "Wait, do y'all know each other?"

Sawyer's hand moves to the back of his head. He gives his hair a hard ruffle. "Funny enough, we do."



## CHAPTER 12

*Sanyer*

HOTTER THAN A TWO-DOLLAR PISTOL

WELL, fuck.

Ava in a Stetson —

Just.

*Fuck.*

I stand there, metaphorical dick in my hand, and stare at her like a deranged asshole. I'm vaguely aware of the sights and sounds around us—Ella's hair flying when Wyatt picks her up and tosses her into the air, the hiss of a nail gun—but really, I only see *her*.

The girl I took home that night in Austin.

The one who took a piece of me with her when she left, refusing coffee, water, a last kiss.

How is it possible that Ava's even prettier than I remember?

How could she have a kid and not tell me about it? Because she definitely has a kid. The little one tugging on her hand is a carbon copy of Ava, from the green eyes to the long blonde hair that hangs in a pair of braids down her back.

How did I not know? Or at least guess that she was a mom? My God, all these things we have in common—the things we could've talked about, commiserated over —

*Is that why she ran? Because she had to get back to her baby?*

"So what's the story?" my idiot brother asks, setting Ella down. "You two run into each other in the produce aisle or something'?"

Ava lets out a threadbare laugh. "Um, no, actually. We met in Austin."

"Austin?" Wyatt cocks a brow at me. "Bet that was fun. I'm sorry I

wasn't there to, ahem, witness it."

My face is on fire. "I spilled a beer on her at a honky-tonk because I'm smooth like that."

Ava laughs, but this time it's for real. The rich sound sends a shot of warmth through my skin.

"Be honest," she says with a smile, "I was the one who body-slammed you, which is why the beer got spilled in the first place."

Wyatt's eyes glimmer. "Body-slammed, huh?"

"Dude," I say, trying very hard to ignore the way that warmth in my center has spread to every inch of my skin.

"It was an accident," Ava continues, unfazed. "But we got it taken care of."

"A happy accident, I hope?" Sally says.

Ava's eyes search mine. "I'd say so, yeah."

That mean she thinks about me too?

She feel the way the air is crackling too?

She's being cute, confidently clever. But I notice Ava's cheeks are pink. Same color they were when I had her bent over the couch in that ridiculous penthouse suite.

She'd look so hot riding my dick while wearing that hat.

Clearing my throat, I run my thumb and first finger over my mustache. It's overgrown. But with Lizzie on the road—she is Ella's mother—I've been on dad duty twenty-four/seven. I've barely had time to shower, much less shave.

"Small world," I reply lamely. "Sally talks a lot about you. But I never would've guessed it was, well. *You*."

Her eyes get this look in them. They're soft, full. "Pretty wild, right?"

*You got no idea how wild you make me. I wanna pull you aside right now, ask you out before one of these other dickheads makes a move.* Because they will. Ava looks fucking *good*, all long legs and proud shoulders and perfect ass.

But I don't go out. Like, ever. Where would I take her? Who would watch Ella? Wyatt took her while we were in Austin. He said he had fun, but I also know he barely slept thanks to Ella sneaking into his bed at all hours of the night. I call her the world's cutest sleep terrorist for a reason.

"Totally wild, yeah." I don't know what to do with my hands, so I tug one through my hair again. "How've you been?"

Ava tilts her head to the side, making her hair fall over her shoulder. "We're doing all right. You?"

"We're doin' just fine." I nod at Ava and her little girl. "Y'all must be new to town."

"Yep. Junie and I moved to Hartsville back in early November, and so far we're really enjoying it. Right, June?"

My heart seizes. Ava lives in Hartsville now? How have we not run into each other yet?

Sounds like she's here to stay. I know the Wallaces have been keen for years now to build out their training programs, and old man Wallace is a smart guy. He wouldn't let someone as good as Ava slip through his fingers.

Because she is good at what she does. I've never seen her in action on a horse, granted. But judging by the ride she gave me?

Girl is top of her class.

Also, I love her daughter's name. Makes me think of the Johnny Cash song that was playing when I spilled beer all over Ava.

The little girl looks up at her mom and smiles. "But please, Mommy, can I play with her?"

"I see some future besties," Sally says with a smile.

Ava glances at me, then Ella. "Is she —"

"My daughter. Yes. Ella, can you say hi to Miss Ava and June?"

But Ella, being the shy little bird she is around new people, curls into Wyatt's chest.

"Ella."

I can tell by the way Ava's expression flickers that she's putting two and two together. She had to have seen the tattoo I have on my arm, but she didn't ask about it.

"Hey, cutie. I'm Ava, and this is Junie."

"Hi, Junie." I give her a little wave.

She smiles and waves back.

Goodness, she's cute.

"She's three years old," Ava continues. "How old are you, Ella?"

Ella blinks, pouting her lips.

"You know how old you are. Hold up those fingers," I say, wagging my brows. "Maybe I'll bite 'em."

Her pout morphs into a grin. "You won't bite me, Daddy."

"Wanna bet?" I take a step forward.

Ella screams, laughing. “Uncle Wy, tell him no! Don’t let him bite me.”

“I won’t.” Wyatt shifts her onto his hip. “But you gotta tell us how old you are.”

Ella holds up her fingers. “I’m free.”

“That’s perfect!” Ava pulls her hands out of her pockets. “So is June Bug. Y’all are the same age, so I bet you both like —”

“Cake!” Junie shouts. “I like cake!”

The whole barn laughs at that.

“I like cake too,” Ella says, wriggling in Wyatt’s grasp until he sets her down. She immediately makes a beeline for me, wrapping her arms around my legs.

“June is new here.” I put a hand on Ella’s back. “Think you could show her around?”

Ella shakes her head, tightening her grip on my legs.

*Dear Lord, give me strength.* How many hours until bedtime?

Speaking of bedtime: Ella’s recent bout of separation anxiety has been keeping me up way past mine. She does not want to be put to bed, and she definitely doesn’t want to sleep in her room alone. She’s been visiting me more often than not in my bed at all hours of the night.

Apparently it’s very common, but I can’t help but feel responsible. Guilty, even, because I’m raising her in a broken home. A nontraditional one, at least. Lizzie and I have a decent enough relationship as co-parents—as the lead singer of a country band, she’s been on the road pretty much nonstop since Ella was born—but ultimately, we’re not together.

Ella’s never lived in a home with a dad *and* a mom, and I hate that. My parents weren’t perfect. They did, however, have an incredibly strong bond until the day they died. My childhood was magical, and I worry all the time I’m not giving my daughter the life she deserves.

“How about this, Ella?” Ava drops into a crouch, resting her elbows on her knees. “Since you like cake, and June likes cake, maybe we can all get cake together?”

“Yes!” June teeters on her tiptoes. “But not the chicken, Mommy, okay? Just the cake.”

I cross my arms. “You’re missing out. That chicken is *good*.”

“No chicken,” Ella says softly.

Ava purses her lips, like she’s giving the proposal serious thought. Since when is she so fucking adorable?

Looking up, I see one of the Wallaces' ranch hands checking her out. I give him a death stare, mentally hurling knives at him until he takes the hint and gets back to work.

"Okay, fine," Ava says. "No chicken."

"Yay!" Junie shouts, making me chuckle.

I can already tell this kid's got a lot of personality.

I smooth Ella's hair out of her face. By now I've become a pro at ponytails. But like me, she's got so much hair that it ends up all over the place. Maybe braids might be better? I need to work on my braiding skills.

I wonder if Ava would teach me.

"You hear that?" I ask. "Miss Ava says you don't need to eat chicken first. Would you like to go and get cake, then?"

Ella nods. "Yes, please."

"Listen to those manners!" Ava pops up to standing, her eyes catching on mine. "Good job, Dad."

I blink away the slight but sudden pressure behind my eyes. It's a simple compliment. A small one. But when you're a parent, people always seem willing to point out what you're doing wrong. The compliments are few and far between. I appreciate Ava noticing this tiny but significant thing, my daughter being polite.

I appreciate being noticed, period. A counselor once told me that I was very much a typical middle child—I didn't want to draw attention, but at the same time I always wondered why nobody paid more attention to me.

Here's Ava, paying attention. Because I wasn't obsessed enough with her already.

That's another thing that keeps me up at night—memories from Austin. Our chemistry was pure fucking fire.

Still is, if my body's reaction right now is any indication.

I keep waiting for that fire to go out. I haven't had a ton of one-night stands, so my experience is limited. But none of them have stayed with me the way my encounter with Ava has. I'll regularly sweat through my sheets thinking about the thoughtful, intentional way she put her hands on me.

The way she made me feel like I was a whole man. Not a dad. Not a chef, or a chauffeur, or a middle-of-the-night nurse. Just a man, free to do what he wants. *Be* who he wants.

God, I miss that.

Wonder if she misses it too.

I also wonder what her story is. Where's Junie's daddy? Was he ever in the picture, or are he and Ava divorced? Separated? Doesn't sound like he moved to Hartsville with them. I feel like Sally would've mentioned him, as she's mentioned little June in passing.

Or—dear God—are they still married? Ava isn't wearing a ring, just like she didn't in Austin. But that doesn't mean she's not married.

Have a hard time believing she'd cheat, though. She was so *herself* when we were together. So uninhibited. Maybe I'm wrong, but I feel like she really fucking enjoyed not having to hide anything.

I enjoyed it too. A lot.

"C'mon, Dad." Ella gives my hand a tug. "Let's get cake."

Junie's already making a mad dash for the door.

"She's a pistol, huh?" I say.

Ava sighs, sliding her hands into the front pockets of her jeans. "That's one way of putting it."

I feel that sigh in my bones. Before Ella was born, I remember complaining all the time about how tired I was after a day spent cowboying on Garrett Luck's ranch. Now I wish I could go back and smack myself, because my level of tiredness then doesn't hold a candle to the utter exhaustion I feel these days.

Ella and I follow Ava outside to the picnic tables. I feel several pairs of eyes on us as we head for the cake. Or maybe that's just me imagining—hoping—people notice what a cute couple Ava and I would make.

*Stupid.*

Is it stupid, though, to think we might hit it off in real life the way we did that night in Austin? We live in the same town. Have daughters the same age. We both work on ranches.

I grab Ella's hand just before she shoves it into Mrs. Wallace's famous Texas sheet cake. "Whoa whoa whoa. Let me cut y'all some slices, okay? Let's just get some plates —"

"Here you go." Ava holds out a pair of paper plates. I notice she's also got plastic forks and some napkins ready.

Can't help it. I grin. "Tell me you're a parent without telling me you're a parent."

She grins too. "So that's why you were so distraught about not having your Tide pen on you. When I'm with her"—Ava nods at Junie, who's helping Ella up onto the wooden picnic bench beside her—"I always throw



one in my bag.”

“It makes laundry so much easier when you pretreat those stains, you know?”

“Wow,” she says.

I look up to see Ava staring at me. Maybe I gotta get out more with *her*. She feeling this energy between us too?

“What?” I ask.

She slowly shakes her head, a funny look on her face. “Just—that might be the sexiest thing to ever come out of a man’s mouth.”

I let out a bark of laughter. “What kinda men you been hangin’ out with?”

“The wrong kind, clearly.”

“We’ll set you right now that you’re in Hartsville.

Cutting two slices of cake, I grab the plates from Ava. Our fingers brush, sending a full-body shock wave of heat crashing through me. I look down, focusing on the plates which I set in front of our girls.

*I gotta get out more.*

“Hey, Elly Belly Boo, sit on your bottom, please,” I say.

My daughter is doing her happy dance while sitting up on her knees. She already has chocolate frosting smeared on her face from the single bite she’s taken. “Okay, Daddy.”

“Lemme go grab some wipes,” I say, meeting eyes with Ava. “I actually have some this time.”

She smiles, the kind that touches her eyes, and my heart hiccups.

“Of course you do. Thanks.”

I know I’m not imagining Ava’s eyes on me as I bend down to grab a pack of Huggies wipes from my diaper bag underneath a nearby table, because when I stand up I catch her looking at me. She’s got that funny expression on her face again, brow scrunched but eyes bright with curiosity. It’s almost like she doesn’t understand what I’m doing, or why I’m doing it.

It’s almost like she’s ... pleasantly surprised?

I’ll take that any day of the week, and twice on Sunday. ’Cause I’m shocked as shit that we ran into each other again too, but I sure as hell ain’t mad about it.

Nice knowing Ava isn’t, either.

*Don’t get ahead of yourself. It was a one-night stand, and she made a quick exit. Clearly didn’t want to stick around for seconds.*

Why flirt with me now, though?

Why look at me like *that* now?

God, I wanna ask her on a date. If only so I can finally get her to share her story.

Her last name, at the very least.

I hold out the wipes, and Ava takes a few. The girls are done with their cake, and together we wipe their faces. I have no idea what to do next. Do we go back into the barn? Let the kids play out in a nearby field?

All I know is, I don't want Ava to leave.

I don't want our conversation to end.

## CHAPTER 13

*Sanyer*

## DANCING IN THE DARK

**I DON'T REALIZE** the band is playing “Two Dozen Roses” until Ava starts bopping her head to the beat.

“One of your favorites,” I say without thinking.

“It is, yeah.” Her green eyes flick to meet mine. “You remembered.”

“How could I forget? It came on, and then you offered to body-slam me.”

She laughs. “I had some memorable lines that night, didn’t I?”

*Yes you did, pretty girl. I remember them all.*

“I think my favorite was, ‘Thanks for not killing me.’ ”

“Hey.” Ava lifts Junie off the bench. “Not all of us can be as smooth as you are.”

I should probably get back in the barn. Help finish framing that wall. We only have a few hours of daylight left to get the job done.

But Wyatt was coming to take over, right? I’ve been here since noon. A little break can’t hurt. I’m suddenly gripped by the fierce desire to dance. Maybe because I haven’t done it since dancing naked with Ava in my hotel suite.

Ava’s favorite song *is* playing. I feel like the universe is begging me to make a move.

“What do y’all think?” I help Ella off the bench too. “Should we go dance?”

“I can dance,” Junie says.

I squat, my knees cracking. The hammer in my tool belt claps against my outer thigh. “Bet you get your moves from your mama, don’t you?”

“I actually haven’t taught her the sprinkler yet,” Ava says with a chuckle.

She doesn't regret that night if she keeps bringing it up, right?

I puff out my chest a little, knowing she enjoyed it that much. I'm dying to ask her if she'd like a repeat. I have no clue what I want from her. Sex? Or more than that?

I just wanna be wild with her again.

I had the thought back in Austin: that freedom, that spark, was what I'd been missing in my search for a significant other. After Lizzie and I had decided we'd be better off as friends, I tried dating some. Nothing had ever panned out, though.

Now I'm realizing that maybe I was looking for the lightning I felt with Ava. The chemistry. The immediate, intense connection.

I made the mistake of thinking I could create chemistry with Lizzie, but I was sorely mistaken. Connecting with someone—the ability to just be *yourself* with a person—is rare. Even rarer when you live in a tiny town in the middle of nowhere.

Without that sense of connection, there's no way I could fall in love. And that's ultimately what I'm after—falling so hard, so completely, that I have no choice but to make that person mine forever.

Needless to say, trying to play it cool with Ava is fucking killing me.

“What about you, Elly Belly Boo?” I hold out my hand. “Can I have this dance?”

She leaps into my arms, giving me a big old bear hug. “Yes, Daddy. Can you carry me though?”

“Yes, baby, I'll carry you.” My hammer claps me again as I stand up with an exaggerated groan. “Dang, Ella, did you grow even more overnight?”

Wrinkling her nose, she holds her fingertips over her mouth and giggles. “I think I did. I'm a big girl now.”

“Big girls use the potty every time, remember?”

Ava lifts Junie onto her hip. “Are y'all struggling with potty training too? It's been slow going for us.”

“I'd rather get thrown by a horse than go through this again.”

“So much poopy underwear.” Ava shakes her head.

I shake mine too. “So much.”

“I didn't poop,” Junie replies.

Ava smiles. “That's good news. All right, you wanna show Mr. Sawyer how you can dance?”

“Okay.” Junie nods solemnly. “I'm very good at it, Mr. Sawyer.”

“I’m a good dancer too,” Ella says. “My uncle Wy says so.”

Junie reaches for Ella’s hand. “I love dancing.”

“I love it too!” My daughter giggles, letting Junie have her little hand.

I laugh too, heart twisting. I love seeing Ella open up like this. She has a few friends at school, but overall, she’s a quiet kid.

I love seeing her laugh.

Now that our girls are holding hands, Ava and I are *close*. Close enough that our arms brush as we head for the grassy clearing in front of the band.

Some older couples are already there dancing cheek to cheek, the Wallaces among them. My heart twists again. Can’t help but think of my own parents, how they’d definitely be out here crushing the two-step together.

This July marks what would’ve been their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary. By the time Dad was my age, he had been married for five years and already had a kid with another on the way. Hurts thinking about all the stuff he’s missed out on.

Everything *I*’ve missed out on. I wanna be married too. I wanna raise a bunch of kids too. I know I’m still young and have time to do all that, but I always imagined I’d have that shit figured out by now.

Instead, I feel lonely and more than a little lost.

But that’s some depressing shit, and I don’t have time to be depressed today. I might not have my dream life, but I do have my baby girl. So I take my daughter’s hand and begin to sway to the music, feeling a twinge in my lower back as I hold her on my hip.

Worth it, though. Ella giggles, glancing over her shoulder at the old man playing the steel guitar up on stage. He winks at her, and she buries her head in my chest.

“It’s okay, Ella!” Junie shouts over the music. “He’s just saying hi.”

My eyes find Ava’s and we laugh, the two of us twirling beside each other with our babies on our hips. Ava sings the lyrics while Junie watches her intently, a huge smile on her sweet little face.

The connection they have is obvious. If I had to guess, I’d say Ava is definitely the primary parent—the one who takes on the lion’s share of responsibility. Is her ex a deadbeat? Or does he just have a job that takes him away a lot, the way Lizzie’s does?

*Hit. The. Brakes.*

Finally, my self-preservation is kicking in. I’m thinking about Ava’s ex way too much. I’m thinking about Ava too much, period. Yeah, we had some

really great sex, but we're still strangers. She made sure I didn't dig too deep, find out too much. She wanted to keep the encounter as anonymous as possible.

But dancing beside her, our kids between us—this feels anything but anonymous. Especially when Ava sets down Junie, and Ella immediately squirms to get out of my arms. The second I set her down, Junie is grabbing Ella's hands and trying to twirl her.

Ella, though, refuses to budge. It's hilarious.

Ava doesn't miss a beat. Leaning down, she takes one of Junie's hands and one of Ella's, and together they rotate in a slow, silly circle that has June in stitches.

It takes a minute for Ella to warm up to the idea. But then June is grabbing her hand, and Ella smiles, and they're spinning faster and faster. Ava hollers with delight, her eyes catching on mine for a split second before the song ends and she collapses dramatically to the ground.

"Y'all, I'm so dizzy!" she says.

June and Ella fall into the grass beside her in a giggling heap.

"I'm not dizzy," June replies.

Ella shakes her head. "Me either!"

I nearly die laughing, though, when Ella tries to get up but immediately falls back down.

"Yeah, you're dizzy," I say.

She leans her head into Ava's lap. "Just a little."

"Yeah, Dad, just a little," Ava says, patting Ella's back. "Take all the time you need, sister."

Something that makes *me* dizzy? How quickly Ella is warming up to Ava and June. That doesn't ever happen with my little introvert. Hell, we're several months into the school year, and only now is Ella able to walk into her classroom without any tears.

Ava just has this warmth about her. It's magnetic. And really fucking sexy.

But this being real life, the fun comes to an abrupt end when my daughter finally stands up with a look on her face I know well.

"Daddy?"

"Yes, Boo?"

"I think I pooped."

The familiar clench of frustration in my chest has me biting back a cuss



word. “It’s all right. We’re gonna have to head home, though, because you already used the extra pair of undies I brought —”

“I have some extra.” Ava digs a hand into the pocket of her coat and pulls out a tiny pair of pink panties. “Never leave home without ’em.”

I’m grinning like an idiot for more reasons than I can count. “I call BS.”

“What’s BS?” Junie asks.

My face flushes with heat. “Um. I—sorry, I shouldn’t have said —”

“It’s an adult word, that’s all,” Ava replies easily, lips twitching. “Seriously, Sawyer, don’t worry about it. I use adult words far too often myself.”

I run a hand up the back of my head. “I am *super* smooth today, aren’t I?”

“I got the joke.” Ava passes the undies to Ella. “Set you up real nice for that one.”

We lock eyes.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

A beat of charged silence stretches between us while Ella examines the little butterflies on the underwear.

We really should get going. By the time I get Ella cleaned up and we drive home, she’ll be ready for bath time, and then it’s early to bed. Ella’s had a full day.

Just another epic Saturday night in the Rivers’ household.

Goddamn, I wish I had real plans. Or any plans, really. Ones preferably that involved Ava.

Should I ask her out? Ask for her number at least? I don’t want to scare her off. But I also don’t want to snub the universe after it dropped this incredible woman in my lap not once, but twice now.

Heartbeat throbbing in my ears, I pick up my daughter. “So, Ava, now that you know I’m really not a serial killer, I’d love to get your n —”

“Daddy.” Ella starts to cry. “My bottom hurts, so very bad.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. It’s like this kid knows *just* when to lose her shit, right when I’m about to say—do—something important.

“All right, Boo,” I manage. “I think it’s time for us to go.”

Ava wipes her backside as she rises to her feet. “I totally get it. Great seeing you, Sawyer. And great meeting you, sweet girl.”

Ella, however, is anything but sweet. She starts howling, the kind of sobs that have people looking at us.

“Let’s run into each other again, yeah?” I say. “A playdate. How about that?”

“Yes!” Junie yells. “Please, Mommy, please please *please* can we do a playdate? And a sleepover?”

Ava laughs. Am I imagining the flush in her cheeks at the mention of a sleepover? Wonder if her mind immediately went into the gutter the way mine has.

“We’d love to meet y’all for a playdate,” she replies.

“We’re wide open tomorrow.” I don’t think about the words, I just say them in the wild hope I get to see Ava twice in twenty-four hours. “Maybe meet at the park downtown?”

Ava blinks. “Well—tomorrow—yeah, okay. We could swing that. Ten o’clock?”

*Holy shit, this is happening.* She’s saying yes.

“Ten o’clock,” I say, my stomach swooping.

“Great.”

“Awesome.”

*Ask for her number. Just do it.*

Only I can’t, because Ella’s literally kicking and screaming now.

Lord save us.

“See ya then, Ava. Looking forward to it.”

She smiles. “I am too. I mean we—we’re, um, we can’t wait.”

Holding on to my daughter as best as I can, I turn, grab the diaper bag, and stalk toward my truck that’s parked in a nearby field.

I’m finally able to calm down Ella after I change her and get her buckled into her car seat. Climbing into my own seat, I start the ignition and crank the heat. Then I crank up some Johnny Cash.

I think about Ava the whole way home.

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“*Please.* Please, Ella, put on your shirt.” I hold up a sweatshirt dotted with sequined unicorns, the gathered collar pulled open in my hands. “I’ve already asked you three times to get dressed. We’re gonna be late for our playdate at the park with June!”

Pouting, Ella rolls onto her stomach on the floor. She’s naked, save for a

pair of *Peppa Pig* underwear. “But I don’t wanna go to the playdate.”

I grit my teeth, taking a sharp inhale through my nose. *She’s just feeling her feelings. You lose your shit, she’s going to eventually learn to hide those feelings from you.* “You had the best time ever with Junie yesterday.”

“I don’t remember.”

Mule, my dog, gives me eyes from his spot in the sunny hallway outside Ella’s room.

“Care to help?” I ask him.

He turns his head and sighs in reply.

I don’t know who’s more traumatized by mornings, him or me. Ella fights me on every damn thing. She asks for oatmeal for breakfast, so I make it from scratch and hide some ground chia and flax seeds in it for extra protein. I also add a good bit of butter and brown sugar. It’s fucking delicious. But when I set a bowl in front of her, she refuses to eat.

She says she loves unicorns, but when it’s time to put on the unicorn shirt we picked out together, she whines about not wanting to get dressed.

Don’t get me started on going potty or putting on her shoes. You’d think I was pulling out the kid’s fingernails judging by how she thrashes when I so much as attempt to make her pee before we leave. And brushing her teeth?

I shudder just thinking about it.

The only thing getting me through is the fact that I get to see Ava. I leaped out of bed like a spring fucking chicken earlier, more excited—more nervous—than I’d been in a while. Yeah, I’ve already downed several cups of coffee. But I have a pep in my step that wasn’t there yesterday.

Still, when Ella picks up a purple Magna-Tile piece and chucks it across the room, it’s all I can do not to yell.

“No throwing, please,” I manage through gritted teeth. “I understand you don’t want to get dressed, but your new friend is waiting for you. I promise you’ll be glad you put your shirt on.”

“Noooo! I’m not going, Daddy. Please let me stay with you today.”

“You are staying with me. We’re going to the park *together*.”

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I know without looking it’s one of my brothers. Probably Wyatt, because he’s the new foreman and he’s always looking for help with a task somewhere on the ranch.

I feel a potent stab of guilt. While I know my brothers don’t expect me to answer on a weekend, it still kills me not to be the one to ride to the rescue.

Growing up, I knew I’d never be the smartest, or the best-looking, or the

funniest. But I could be the one who always showed up. The one who cared the most, and who paid the most attention. That shit's important when it comes to family.

So, yeah. It's been tough juggling that role with my role as a single dad. While I'm technically a full-time employee and part owner of Lucky River Ranch, and I get paid the same as my brothers to help run our massive cattle operation, I definitely work less than them.

Much less. All four of my brothers are usually on horseback well before five a.m. on weekdays, and on most weekends too. But I'm not able to join in until Monday, when either my part-time nanny arrives at eight or after preschool drop-off at around nine thirty.

Then there are all the days I miss because Ella's sick, or my nanny is sick, or I'm sick because, well, my house is one giant petri dish. Don't forget about the work I miss because of doctor appointments, and occupational therapy appointments for Ella's poop issues, and *shit* I keep forgetting to find a pediatric dentist ...

My phone vibrates again. My stomach twists. Ella wails. I close my eyes.

*Mom. Dad. I really wish you were here to tell me what to do. To tell me that it gets better. I'm trying, but I always feel like I'm messing up. I miss you. So fucking much.*

How did they make parenthood look so easy? Rationally, I know it wasn't easy at all. Not by a long shot. Hell, they had *five kids*. All boys at that. But what I remember most is them bringing real joy to the roles as mother and father. They were happy, so we were happy.

Opening my eyes, I see that Ella has snuck out to the hallway and is giving Mule a hug that looks more like a headlock. Thank God he's chill. I debated for a long time whether or not I could handle keeping yet another living thing alive. But I felt so guilty about Ella not having any siblings, and research points to kids getting a boost of self-esteem when they have pets.

So a couple of years ago, we brought Mule home from a shelter. It was love at first sight for Ella. For him? Meh, not so much. But he tolerates her, which I'll take.

"C'mon, Elly Belly Boo, this will be fun." I walk out into the hallway and take advantage of Ella's momentary distraction, yanking the sweatshirt over her head. "Let's get our pants on —"

"No pants." Ella sits up and begins to peel off her shirt. "I want a dress."

Jesus. Effing. Christ.

Bribery is bad. Or so say the parenting books I read. But I'm out of tricks, and we really are running late at this point.

Yanking a hand through my hair, I say, "If you put on a dress and your shoes and you brush your teeth, I'll give you a piece of chocolate."

Ella goes still. "What kind of chocolate? The peanut butter kind?"

"Of course it's the peanut butter kind."

Reese's Peanut Butter Cups were my dad's favorite. When we were growing up, he always kept a bowl of miniature, individually wrapped ones on top of the fridge in the kitchen. When we were good, he'd let us have some of his stash.

I smile, knowing Ella loves them as much as Dad did.

She holds up her first and second fingers. "Two chocolates."

"I said one."

"Two."

"Ella."

"Fine." She gets up. "One chocolate. But I get another if I'm good at the park, right?"

Rolling my eyes, I follow her back into her lilac-painted bedroom. "Sure. Whatever. Now let's get dressed."

## CHAPTER 14

*Sanyer*

## STUCK IN THE MIDDLE

### THE PARK.

Ella loves it. I ... don't.

You ask me to my face if I'm a fan of Hartsville's newly revamped playground with its infinite number of swings, slightly terrifying slides (they are *tall*), and the adorable seesaws that are shaped like dragonflies, I'd tell you that yes, yes I most certainly am. Ella digs it, so I do too.

Only when you spend as much time at the park as I do, you get a little antsy when you're there. At least I do. Don't get me wrong, sometimes I do enjoy playing with Ella here. The two of us dig in the sandbox, making mermaid shapes with our hands. She'll ask me to sit on the swing beside her so I can teach her how to pump. She's almost got it.

But other times, like today, I'm really, *really* glad we're meeting friends here. Hopefully Junie will keep Ella entertained so Ava and I can take a load off. The prospect of being able to just sit, especially after the morning we've had, is more than a little exciting.

Tucking a purple-and-pink soccer ball under my arm, I slide on my sunglasses and wonder who the fuck I think I'm kidding. I'm not excited to sit.

I'm excited to see Ava.

"Daddy." Ella tugs on my free hand. "I don't see Junie yet. How will she play soccer with me if she's not here?"

"She'll be here. We have to be patient."

Ella pouts. "Waiting is hard."

"I know. But we can do hard things, right?"



Ella sighs. “Maybe.” Then she takes off toward the little climbing wall that leads up to one of the smaller slides.

My smile settles in the pit of my stomach. I’m so fucking proud of my baby. Proud of us. Because turns out that teaching your kid how to talk about her feelings is a great way to get you talking about yours too. Or at least *thinking* about talking about them.

I’ve thought a lot about the feelings I have for Ava.

Out of all the people I was expecting to see at the barn raising, she was not one of them. I was surprised.

I was turned on.

*Am.* I am turned on whenever an image of her pops into my head. Which is often.

All the time. I think about the woman all the damn time. Which is terrifying. And awesome.

I don’t know what my next move should be. I still have no idea what I want when it comes to Ava. Sex is a given. But the way I’ve thought about her nonstop—maybe I really do want more than a hookup?

My stomach bottoms out at the idea of wholeheartedly pursuing Ava. I clearly haven’t had great experiences dating. I’ve chalked that up to not being with the right person. What if I just suck at it, though?

What if I get invested, but Ava isn’t feeling it? What if *Ella* gets invested, and Ava and I have some kind of horrible, messy breakup? The kid’s already been through so much with her mom being gone and her dad being pulled in a thousand different directions.

I’ve been through so much. Heartbreak over losing my parents. Heartbreak over the fact that Lizzie and I never panned out.

That shit crushed me. I’m worried if I get crushed again, Ella will end up as collateral damage. I’ve worked hard to create our happy little life. Could things be better? Absolutely.

Is it worth risking our hard-won peace? I don’t know.

“Mr. Sawyer!”

I glance over my shoulder. I’m smiling all over again at the sight of the little girl in braids and cowboy boots making a beeline for me. She’s holding up a hand, which is covered in Band-Aids.

Lots and lots of colorful Band-Aids.

“Look!” She waves her hand. “I got new ones! They’re *Bluey*. I love them!”

“Well hey there, Junie! Lemme see what you got.” I hold out my hand, palm up, and she places her little hand in mine. I let out a long, low whistle. “Dang, girl. That’s impressive.”

“Thanks. Mommy said I could only have one, but I took more than that.”

“You took the whole box, you little sneak!”

I look up at the familiar voice. A weird trick of gravity that has me suddenly laboring for breath. Since when are my lungs not compatible with oxygen?

Ava strides toward me, her long, loose hair blowing back from her face as she walks. She’s wearing aviators, a smile, and a pink jacket that looks so fucking pretty on her.

She is so fucking pretty.

“Hey!” She nods at the ball I’m holding. “I’m so glad you brought that. Junie was in one of those little soccer leagues over the summer —”

“Soccer Start.” I bite my tongue to keep from swallowing it. “Ella did it in the fall.”

Ava lowers her voice. “It’s hilarious, isn’t it? The way they have more interest in the dandelions growing on the field than the ball? You couldn’t pay Junie to listen to her coach. She just sat there and picked flowers, happy as a clam not to participate.”

“I would have to drag Ella to practice. It wasn’t fun for anyone.”

“To be fair, soccer is pretty boring.”

“Right?” I need to stop staring. Can’t. My chest burns. Somewhere in the background, I hear our girls happily shrieking. “Which is why I brought the ball. Wanted to bore y’all a little bit. Keep your expectations in check so you don’t fall too hard for Hartsville. We can’t have a barn raising with a live band and cold beer every day of the week.”

Ava’s smiling, showing a flash of white, even teeth. She digs in her bag and pulls out a plastic tub. “Good thing I brought sidewalk chalk, then.”

“Please tell me you have cold beer in that bag too.”

She laughs. “No dice. I wasn’t sure what the open container laws are here.”

“Next time.” I don’t know how I manage to say the words with my heart lodged inside my mouth. It’s forward of me to assume there will be a next time.

I’m showing her my cards. Well. A card. One that screams *you make me forget myself*.

Ava turns away to look at the girls. There's a catch in my gut. Shit, twenty seconds into our conversation, and I've already gone too far. Time to backtrack.

She beats me to it. Keeping her eyes on the girls, who are currently following each other around as they dart across the playground with big old smiles on their faces, Ava says, "Y'all have a good morning?"

The easy answer is on the tip of my tongue. *This morning was fine. We got it done. Got out of the house on time, at the very least.*

"It was a shit show, actually."

Wow.

Wow.

Way to keep forgetting myself. My face is hot. I run my free hand over it, wondering vaguely if I'm experiencing some kind of catastrophic neurological event. Ava just made very clear she wants to keep this conversation friendly. Light. Easy.

Then I went and bulldozed ahead with one hell of a truth.

But Ava just chuckles, setting the chalk down on the latticed metal bench beside us. "Same. Why is it so effing hard for them to get dressed and brush their teeth? Never mind putting on their shoes."

"The shoes." I groan. "So. Many. Tears. Ella's, and mine."

Ava looks at me again. "But seriously, most mornings I do want to cry. I guess I was a nightmare too as a kid—my mom swears up and down that it took an act of God to get me out of bed—but I don't remember ever being *that* bad. I was also a middle child, so I think my mom forgets a lot about me. You know, gets me mixed up with my sisters."

"Classic middle child, insisting no one remembers jack about you."

Her lips twitch. I'm hit by the memory of just how soft they are, how sweetly hot they tasted. "You sound like you know what you're talking about."

"Number three out of five." Glancing at the playground, I see Ella and Junie giggling on one of the seesaws. I also see a guy shamelessly checking out Ava while he pushes his kid on a swing.

I scowl at him. He looks away.

My pulse skips a beat. I felt jealous watching guys check out Ava at the barn raising too. What's up with that? Cash is the possessive one. Not that long ago, he clocked some guy square in the face for hurting Mollie's feelings.

Me? I've never felt remotely territorial over a woman. But all of a sudden, I'm gripped by the need to keep that dickhead away from Ava.

Keep *all* the dickheads away from her. Which scares me.

I gotta pump the brakes. This is a playdate, for fuck's sake. We're here for the kids.

I can keep it fucking simple.

Easier said than done when the sense of freedom I felt back in Austin is carrying over into all my interactions with Ava. There's no pressure to be anything other than myself when I'm with her.

"I'm number two out of three. But five of y'all?" Ava lets out a low whistle. "Bet you had to throw some elbows."

I shrug, nodding at the bench. "You wanna sit?"

I tell myself I'm asking her that because sitting is more comfortable than standing. That's it. My request has nothing at all to do with the fact that Wandering-Eye Asshole won't be able to see her backside if she sits.

Because goddamn, her ass is a sight for sore eyes in those jeans.

"Yes." The word comes out of her mouth in a relieved rush.

My heart twists. Just how tired is she?

"This is why I love playdates," she continues. "It sounds terrible —"

"No it doesn't." I hold out my arm. "Playdates equal minimal parental participation, which equals —"

"Bliss." Sitting, she sighs and stretches out her legs. "I mean, the girls also get some socialization and exercise in. We're not being *total* bums by sitting here."

I try not to stare—I'm not a legs guy, but maybe I am?—and sit beside her, careful to keep an appropriate amount of distance between us.

Which is difficult. Ava gets it. She's not judgmental. Her honesty about how hard this parenting shit is—it's a breath of fresh air. Makes me wanna lean in. Know more.

Get closer, because this—our connection—feels easy. Safe.

She's wearing sunglasses, so it's impossible to tell. But behind the lenses I catch her eyelashes fluttering, like she's giving me a long, hot look up and down.

Maybe that's why I sense the charge in the air between us.

Ignoring it, I settle my ankle over my knee and clamp my hand over my jeans. Less chance of me reaching for her this way. Because sitting beside Ava makes me think of the time she sat *on* me. The slow, breathless way she

sank onto my dick as I cupped her tits and tried desperately not to come too fast.

Did that really happen? Because going from *that* to *this* is a mindfuck of the first degree.

“So. Number three of five.” Ava crosses her legs at the ankles. “I felt like I got lost in the shuffle a lot with three kids in the house. I can only imagine what it was like with five of y’all. Were you the peacekeeper? The troublemaker?”

I watch Ella zoom down one of the bigger slides, and let out a silent sigh of relief when she makes it down safely.

Am I also relieved that Ava is asking about my family? What does it mean that she wants to know more? I feel like I should proceed with caution.

Then again, I talk about my brothers with people all the time. How could I not? My family is my whole life.

“Wyatt was—is—the troublemaker.”

Ava nods. “I can see that. He and Sally are total opposites, but it works.”

“Never seen him happier. I guess I’d call Cash the peacekeeper, mostly because he had to be in control of everything. But me, I was the one who always showed up for my brothers.”

Ava clicks her tongue. “Aw. That’s sweet.”

“Yes and no.” I tip my head back and forth. “I always had this urge, or maybe this fantasy, of saving everyone. Keeping them safe.”

“From what?”

I scoff. “Themselves? Each other?”

“Example, please.”

Because of course she’d dig. Or, really, deepen the conversation. She’s not pushy. She’s just getting to know me. Which feels dangerous and thrilling and terrifying.

It’s just really freaking nice sitting down with a pretty girl on a sunny day. I’m relaxed, but also totally awake. Aware of the warmth in the breeze and the steady beat of my heart in a way I haven’t been for ... weeks. Months.

Probably a sign I should get up. Stop this conversation from going any further, because the more I talk to Ava, the more I like her. Even if I knew what I wanted—which I don’t yet—what if Ava doesn’t want me? I’m not Wyatt. I’m not content to pine after someone until it makes me sick. I don’t have time for that shit.

Masochism must run in the family, however. Because next thing I know I'm saying, "I wasn't always this way. My parents passed away in an accident when I was sixteen. I used to imagine that if I had just been there to shield them—catch them—warn them, maybe, I could've prevented the whole thing from happening. Magical thinking, yeah. But it helped me cope."

Ava pushes her glasses into her hair and stares at me.

"Sorry." I let out a thin chuckle. My entire being rings with shame. "If you suddenly have somewhere to be, I get it. A word vomit is almost worse than a real one."

"Not if it's projectile." The woman grins.

She fucking *grins*, her eyes soft as she sits up. Angles herself so that she's facing me, resting her elbow on the back of the bench.

Everything inside my rib cage—that softens too. Relief. Renewal.

I feel legitimately renewed, able to set aside the assumption that she doesn't want to go deep. Hear this stuff.

She doesn't get spooked easily. I like that.

"Fair point," I manage around the emotion that grips my throat.

"That really and truly sucks about your parents."

"It does suck."

She squints a little, thoughtful. "How the hell are you doing this without them? Single parenting?"

I chuckle, for real this time. "Like I said, it's a shit show."

"But you're so good at it."

"Am I?"

"I've known you as a dad for all of, what, mere days, but I already know the answer to that question is an unequivocal yes." The green in her eyes is so earnest. "I feel like you need a hug. Can I give you a hug?"

The emotion in my throat is making it difficult to breathe. A hug can't hurt, right? I hug people all the time, and it's always platonic.

A hug is, after all, just a fucking hug.

"I'd take a hug."

"Thank God." She leans in and wraps her arms around my neck. "I'd definitely have had somewhere to suddenly be if you'd said no."

Leaning into her is as natural as pulling air through my nose and mouth. She's warm, and she smells like flowers.

She holds me tight, so I curl my arms around her waist and hold her tight too. My body lights up like a night sky booming with heat lightning. At the

same time, a strange, not-altogether-unpleasant feeling settles low in my stomach.

What on earth did I do to deserve a random run-in with such a beautiful person?

"I needed a hug too, I think," she murmurs, and I have to resist the very strong urge to bury my face in her neck.

"Mommy?"

I immediately release Ava at the sound of the little voice.

"Yeah, Bug?" Ava asks.

"Why are you hugging Mr. Sawyer? Do you have big feelings?"

Ava's eyes catch on mine for a single, searing beat before she drops her sunglasses back on her face. "Junie and I hug it out when those big feelings happen."

"Hugs are the best, aren't they, June?" I ask, noting how artfully Ava dodged her daughter's question.

June smiles, and she looks like such a mirror image of her mama that I can't help but smile too.

"The best," she replies.

A tug on my sleeve. "Daddy, can you watch me go down the big slide? Please?"

I gasp, like I haven't already watched her do it twelve times. "You're gonna go down the big slide? That one? The really, really, *really* tall one?"

She giggles. "Yes!"

"Wait a second. Are you sure you're big enough?" I cross my arms, and it hits home how light I feel despite the heavy things Ava and I have shared.

"Daddy. I'm three and a half!"

I bop her on the nose. Cheeseball move, but can't help it. She's so fucking cute sometimes that I can't stand it. "Then show me what you can do."

She and Junie take off running again. They giggle like lunatics as they shoot down the slide. I whistle. Ava hollers. A minute later, the girls forget we're there and busy themselves gathering sticks behind a blue plastic climbing igloo.

"I'm glad Ella's taken to Junie so well." I shift, draping my arm over the back of the bench. "She's just so shy sometimes."

Ava relaxes so that her shoulder almost meets with my fingertips. "Junie loves having someone to boss around."

“I like a girl on a mission.”

Ava turns her head to look at me. “Of course you do.”

“That a dig?”

She sighs. “Just an observation. I still need an example, by the way. Of you putting on your superhero cape and saving all your brothers.”

“You really like talking about family.”

“That a dig?”

*Only something I find incredibly attractive.* “Just an observation.”

“Family is everything.” One side of Ava’s mouth kicks up as she looks out over the playground. “Hey, June, let’s not jam things up our noses, okay? That stick is gonna hurt if it gets stuck.”

“Okay, Mommy.”

“Anyway. Family is everything, whether it’s the one you’re born into, the one you find, or the one you make,” Ava continues. “So yeah, I’m curious about yours.”

Jesus, it’s like this girl read a manual titled *Things That Turn Sawyer Rivers on an Absurd Amount*.

She’s big on family. That mean she wants what I do? Marriage. More babies. Dogs and maybe some chickens and just the whole shebang.

“My younger brother Duke tried out for football back in high school. He was definitely going to make the JV team. Maybe even varsity. I was worried he’d get, like, paralyzed or something, because you hear all these horror stories —”

“How much *Varsity Blues* were you watching at the time?”

“Too much. So I quit the varsity soccer team to make sure there’d be a spot for Duke instead.”

Ava looks at me. And looks.

I clear my throat. “Because, you know, soccer is a lot safer —”

“Much safer.”

Her attention is unnerving. I can’t tell what she’s thinking.

“You loved soccer, though.” She says it like a fact.

How does she know?

Why does she care?

Is now a good time to ask her out on a date?

I shove the thought from my head. It’s too soon. Too much. We’re just fucking friends, damn it.

“I did love it.” What I don’t tell her? Coach Jenkins mentioned the



possibility of me playing soccer at the college level. Maybe even getting a scholarship.

Not like I had the grades or the desire to go to college. Still hurt giving that up, though.

Still don't regret it. Duke made the team and played all through high school. And I could sleep at night knowing he was safe. Knowing I'd showed up for him in a way I hadn't been able to show up to save my parents.

Over the years, that sense of responsibility morphed into a twisted need to ensure I was never the one who needed saving. My brothers were hurting so much, carrying around so much grief, that I didn't want them to take on my shit too. So I made damn sure I never added to their pain.

I made sure I could do everything in my power to take theirs away.

Ava's doing it again, looking at me for an uncomfortable amount of time like she doesn't quite know what to make of me. "That's a pretty incredible thing for a high school kid to do."

I lift a shoulder. "Family is everything."

June and Ella reappear, begging us to help them draw unicorns with the sidewalk chalk. Ava and I pop up. Wandering-Eye Asshole notices.

I fall into it too easily—the fantasy that Ava is mine and the four of us are a family.

Fucked up? Yes. Supremely satisfying? Also yes.

I take a seat on the sidewalk beside the girls so that I shield them from Asshole's line of sight. Feels ... good.

Feels better to laugh with the girls as we sit in the sunshine and draw malformed unicorns that look more like cows than anything.

I remind myself that the fantasy isn't real. Ava isn't mine to protect. Ella and June are just friends.

Ava and I are *just friends*.

But it's funny how accepting that truth requires so much pretending on my part. Because pretending not to want this woman—it's a Herculean task.

I'm nothing if not a hard worker, though. I can do it.

I will do it. If only to protect the one girl who is mine.

A couple of hours later, Ella conks out, hard, on the drive home. I tell myself I'm proud I didn't ask Ava for her number. Surely we'll run into her and Junie again at some point, right?

But it's regret that keeps me up way past my bedtime later that night.

## CHAPTER 15

*Ava*

## FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

**WE'RE NOT EVEN** in the preschool parking lot yet, but I'm already about to burst into tears.

Ignoring the knot of emotion in my chest, I attempt to sing along to "Happy Birthday." It's Junie's current favorite song, probably because we sang it to my mom last week for her sixtieth birthday.

"No, Mommy, you got it wrong!" She meets my eyes in the rearview mirror. "We're singing to *me*, not to Mimi."

"Oh. Right. I'm sorry, honey. You know your birthday isn't for a while yet, right?"

My daughter smiles at me. "Mimi said I can celebrate all the days. Even Saturdays."

I blink, tears welling in my eyes. This morning was yet again a disaster getting June out the door. She wants to do everything herself, which means making breakfast, getting dressed, and packing her lunch took a small eternity. Then there was the fiasco about her wanting to wear her sparkly rain boots instead of her sneakers, which resulted in an epic meltdown that lasted twenty minutes. Then she randomly decided it was time to beg me to let her play with sidewalk chalk. She's been obsessed with the stuff ever since our playdate with Ella.

In short, my daughter, like all three-year-olds, can be difficult as hell.

Right now, though, she's so fucking cute that I feel like my heart is about to burst right out of my chest.

When did she get so big? It's so true what they say about the days being long, but the years being short. I can't believe it's time for my baby to go to

school.

“I like that idea.” I hit my blinker and guide my Subaru into the preschool parking lot. It’s already busy, minivans and SUVs crowding the lot. Moms and Dads walk hand in hand with their kids toward the adorable farmhouse-turned-preschool, which sits beneath a pair of enormous oak trees.

My stomach flips. I think I’m even more nervous for Junie’s first day of school than I was for my own.

But June? She literally lets out a squeal of delight. “Mommy, is this my school?”

“It sure is.” I park and turn off the car. Tucking my hair behind my ears, I give my eyes a discreet wipe before putting on my sunglasses. “Isn’t it so cute? And look at all those kids! Junie, you’re going to have so much fun.”

She wiggles her little legs. “Can you unbuckle me, Mommy?”

“Let’s call Daddy really quick, okay? He wanted to talk to you before you go in.”

Junie pouts. “But I don’t want to talk to Daddy. I want to go to school.”

My chest clenches. I’d rather pry out my eyeballs than talk to Dan right now, but I feel guilty he’s not here for this.

Then again, that’s kind of his fault. He said he had to work this morning—that’s always his excuse—so he couldn’t make the hour-long drive to Hartsville. Of course he was all annoyed that I couldn’t push Junie’s first day to a date that was more convenient for him, but I’ve learned to stick to my guns.

Junie comes first. Always. I tried for years to accommodate Dan, bending over backward to keep him happy. Or, at the very least, keep him from being angry or grumpy. I always had dinner ready and June occupied when he got home from work so he could relax. I’d take her out of the house on the weekends so he could nap or watch football. I maintained solid relationships with both our families, and made sure we split holidays evenly so no one’s feelings got hurt. I planned every birthday party. Took June to every appointment and gave her a bath every night, all in the hope that Dan would never feel overwhelmed or resentful.

I did everything to the point that *I* was the one who ended up drowning in resentment. And yet no matter how hard I tried—how often I sacrificed my well-being, or my daughter’s—Dan was still a dark cloud hanging over our lives. There’s no pleasing the man.

Which is why, when I got the email about a spot opening up for Junie in

the threes class, I immediately took it, even though I knew Dan would give me a hard time about “not involving” him more in the timing—despite the fact that he agreed Junie needed to be in school.

It’s a classic case of damned if I do, damned if I don’t. No wonder our marriage didn’t last. Being Dan’s wife was like living in a cage.

Amazing how different I feel when I’m with Sawyer. I haven’t stopped thinking about our conversation at the park. It was fun and funny and real.

It was, in short, just what I needed.

Back in Austin, I’d felt so free when we were together. I could do no wrong. I didn’t have to babysit his feelings. Manage his expectations.

I just did what I wanted, and Sawyer didn’t mind that one bit.

In fact, he’d seemed to relish it. Same way he relished my honesty at the park. I hate feeling like I can’t be real with someone, especially about things like parenthood and family. My forthrightness used to embarrass Dan. He’d call me an oversharer and counsel me to be a little classier. A little quieter.

Somehow, I know Sawyer would hate me being quiet.

But that’s neither here nor there. Sawyer is a friend. A *parent* friend, the father of June’s new BFF. Sure, he’s sexy as hell. But that doesn’t mean we’ll ever have a repeat of Austin. Life is too good in Hartsville right now. I have no desire to rock the boat.

I grab my phone and hit Dan’s number, holding it up so Junie can see the screen.

He picks up and smiles. “Hey, June Bug!”

“Hey, Daddy,” she says.

“Today’s such a big day for you,” he replies. “Are you excited?”

“Yeah.”

His eyes cut to me. “Well, I wish I could be there. I’m so sorry to miss it.”

“Okay.” June glances out the window and tugs at her car seat straps.

I bite back a smile. “Junie, aren’t you excited?”

“Yes! Can we go now?”

It’s obvious Dan is trying to keep his annoyance in check. Rolling his lips between his teeth, he pastes on that smile again. “I tried to be there, Bug. I want you to know that. I’m really sad I’m not holding your hand right now.”

It’s all I can do not to roll my eyes. Dan’s attempts to guilt-trip me used to get me riled up, but now I just feel sorry for the guy. How insecure do you have to be to try to make the mother of your child feel bad at the expense of

that child?

It's no secret that June prefers me to him. I didn't engineer it that way as some sort of evil master plan, the way Dan thinks I did. I just showed up for my daughter. I did the hard work of caretaking—the late-night feedings, the baths, the playtime—while Dan ... didn't. I told him time and time again that if he wanted June to bond with him, he had to participate more. He'd always promise to do better, try harder.

But he never did. Which is how we ended up separated when Junie turned one, and divorced when she was two.

"Bye, Daddy!" June says. "Mommy, can you please unbuckle me now?"

"Magic word?"

"Please please please!"

"Okay." I angle the phone so I face the screen. "I'll report back on how it goes."

"Not like I can do anything about it if it doesn't go well."

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath. "All right, Dan. We'll talk later."

"Bye, Junie!" He waves, then hangs up.

*Nice of him to ask how I'm doing.*

Then again, what did I expect? Dan never asked about me when we were married.

Still, it'd be nice to have a little moral support here. Dan thinks I chose to go through this alone, but I didn't. I'd love to have someone hold *my* hand right now.

I'd love to have someone at least try to make me feel better about the fact that I'm dropping my daughter off with strangers at a strange place for the first time.

I don't have that someone. But I do have Junie. And I'm determined to make sure she has the best first day at school ever.

Together, she and I walk toward a door on the side of the building. Per the instructions sent to me in an email, this is the entrance for both of the three classes. An older woman with short brown hair and kind eyes stands at the open door.

"Is this June?" she asks, her face creasing into a smile. "I'm Ms. Sherman. It's so nice to meet you."

I paste on a smile of my own, trying very hard not to cry when Junie gets shy all of a sudden and tucks herself against my legs.

"This is June, yes." I run a hand over her back. "She's so excited for her

first day. Isn't that right, Junie?"

She doesn't say anything, but she does nod.

*Am I making the right decision? I feel like she's ready for school, but maybe starting in the middle of the year like this was a bad idea. She's just been through so much change. Too much. To add school to the list—what was I thinking—*

"How about this?" Ms. Sherman bends at the waist, holding out her hand to June. "You and I can hold hands while we go inside. That way you're not alone, okay?"

The lump in my throat is so big that it's difficult to breathe. "That's so kind of you, Ms. Sherman."

"We're going to have a ball today. We'll read books, and we'll play on the playground, and we'll even get to play with glitter!"

"Glitter? Wow!" I give June's shoulder a squeeze. "June loves glitter, don't you?"

"Yeah," she says quietly.

The New Parent Handbook the school gave me said to make drop-off as quick as possible. Makes sense—the longer you linger, the better chance there is of your kid having a meltdown.

Still feels wrong to gently pry my daughter off my legs. "You're going to do so great. I'll be back soon, okay?"

She looks up at me. Now *her* eyes are filled with tears. "But Mommy —"

"Junie!"

We all look up at the shout from the parking lot. Everything inside me heaves when I see a familiar figure—*two* familiar figures—heading our way.

Sawyer looks pleasantly surprised as he raises a hand in greeting.

It's all I can do not to slam my palm against my head. *Duh*. Of course his daughter goes to this preschool. It's the only one in the area.

Of course he'd show up right when I do. Barely a minute's difference. My stomach flips again, for a different reason this time. I'm not sure I believe in fate. But if I did, I'd think it was telling me something. This is the third time I've randomly run into Sawyer Rivers. Maybe it's not so random anymore.

*I like that idea.* I like it a lot more than I should. Maybe because I'm hit by a wave of something like ... relief. I don't know Sawyer or Ella well, but they're not total strangers. Seeing some familiar faces in such an unfamiliar



place is comforting.

“Junie! Hi!” Ella comes running, her pigtails bouncing.

“Mommy!” June jumps up, releasing her hold on me. “Mommy, it’s Yella!”

Laughing, I blink when a tear slips out of my eye. “I think you mean Ella.”

Ella drops her tote bag and collides with June, the two of them wrapping each other in a fierce hug like they haven’t seen each other in years.

“I like your braid.” Ella runs her hand over Junie’s hair.

Junie giggles. “Thanks. My mom did it.”

Sawyer’s deep, rumbling laugh sends a delicious shiver up my spine. “You gotta stop followin’ me around, Ava.”

I try not to stare as he stops a few feet away and tucks his hands into the pockets of his vest. Not an easy task, considering how hot he looks.

But really, how does he look this good this early? I feel like I’ve been run through a blender, and I’m sure I look like it too. Truth be told, I can’t remember if I brushed my teeth.

*Please, God, let me have brushed my teeth.*

“Technically, you’re the one who showed up after me.” I tuck my hair behind my ear. “Doesn’t that make you the follower?”

The side of his mouth kicks up. “Guess it does, yeah.”

Sawyer is in jeans and cowboy boots. He fills out the denim button-up underneath his vest to perfection, his shoulders and arms looking especially broad limned in the bright morning light.

He’s wearing that fucking backward hat again, his dark hair curling out from underneath it. And his scruff, the mustache, the dimples —

I am a dead woman.

Even Ms. Sherman is blushing when she waves at him. “Morning, Sawyer. Y’all know each other?”

“We sure do. These turkeys”—he nods at the girls—“were tearin’ a rug at the Wallaces’ barn raising this weekend.”

“How fun! I’m so glad June already has a friend on her first day.”

Sawyer’s blue eyes meet mine. “We feeling some nerves this morning?”

He’s obviously asking about Junie. But the way he looks at me—the soft, knowing gleam in his eyes—makes me think he’s asking about me too.

“Some, yeah.” My voice wobbles.

His kindness is making it harder to fight the tears.

The skin around Sawyer's eyes crinkles. "It only gets easier from here, I promise. No one knows that better than me."

Ms. Sherman laughs. "It's true. Ella had a rather lengthy adjustment period this year."

"And by that, she means Ella cried every day she came to school for what felt like months. Now look at her." Sawyer lifts his hand, which is still in his pocket, to gesture at his daughter. "All smiles. School is a happy place, and they're in good hands with Ms. Sherman here."

I swallow, hard. "Thanks for that."

"And you." Sawyer crouches so he's eye level with June. "You're going to march into that classroom, and you're going to have the best day ever, right?"

Be still my beating heart. It's jarring—jarringly wonderful—to see June being cared for this way by a man other than her dad.

The man who chose to go to work over being here right now.

Because apparently no one on earth is immune to Sawyer's charm, my daughter smiles and nods. "Can we sing 'Happy Birthday' in school?"

Ms. Sherman claps her hands. "As a matter of fact, it's Nolan's birthday today, so we'll definitely be singing to him. You girls ready to come inside? Get your bags from your parents."

"See?" Sawyer asks, handing his own daughter the tote bag she dropped. "You're gonna love it here, June. Shine bright today."

My heart flutters. At the same time, my eyes fill all over again. I'm glad I wore my sunglasses.

I hand Junie her bag and give her a quick hug. "Have a great time, okay?"

"Okay."

Funny how quickly kids adapt. Next thing I know, the girls are taking Ms. Sherman's outstretched hands and heading inside. My chest cramps as June climbs the steps and moves through the door.

Ms. Sherman glances at me over her shoulder. "She's going to be just fine, Mom. You did great. See you at twelve thirty."

I let the tears fall because I can't hold them in anymore. "Thank you. Bye, girls!"

I watch until Junie disappears into the classroom. Trying my damndest to hide my sniffles, I turn to Sawyer and manage a tight grin.

"Thanks for the assist."

He looks at me steadily, intently, his forehead grooved. "Sometimes I

think all these firsts are harder for us than they are for them. After dropping Ella off the day school started, I sat in my truck and cried until pickup. I looked so puffy that Ms. Sherman asked me if I'd had an allergic reaction to something."

I'm laughing and I'm crying, and it feels ... kinda good, actually. "Really?"

"You think I'd make that up?" His dimples appear when he smiles. "I'm a worrier. Always have been."

"Hard not to be when you're a parent." I lift my shoulder to wipe away my tears. "But thanks for the commiseration. No one tells you about this stuff. How hard it is."

He lifts a brow. "You okay?"

My heart takes a tumble. Wasn't I just saying to myself how much I wished someone would check in on me? The universe must've been listening, because here he is—the guy who's not only asking if I'm okay, but who also cares what my answer is.

Somehow I know Sawyer cares. Deeply.

"I'm okay." The reply is automatic. I don't know what else to say.

"You don't seem okay."

I chuckle. "What makes you think that?"

"You just dropped your sweet baby off at a new school in a new town for the first time. No one is okay after that."

I'm hit by the urge to sob. Why does Sawyer have to *get it*?

Why does he have to make me feel seen and looked after and safe? It's so, so nice, but also so, so scary. I could fall for a guy that makes me feel like this.

I could fall hard, and I could fall fast. Then what? I run the risk of being disappointed all over again, because that's what men do—they let you down just when you need them the most.

I thought I was fine with falling in love. Marriage? Hell no. But love, when it's good, can be wonderful. In my heart of hearts, I know it's the wrong move to keep myself closed off to the possibility of finding it again. I want to teach Junie that being brave is worth it, and that letting love in is always the right choice.

But life makes that difficult sometimes. It's easier to shut away the soft, vulnerable parts of you and focus on getting shit done, even though there's a part of me that resents being a productivity machine. It sucks, but it's simple.

Straightforward.

Nothing about the way Sawyer makes me feel is simple or straightforward. He already has me tangled up in the best, most tantalizing way. Which is why I should get out of here. Go home.

But I can't make my feet move. I don't need to work, I need a hug. Or at the very least, a sympathetic ear to bend.

"Part of me is so ready for Junie to grow up," I say. "I can't wait for the tantrums to stop, and for her to, you know, wipe her own bottom every once in a while. But another part of me aches at the thought of her not being a baby anymore. Like, how in the world is she already going to school? She was born two weeks ago."

Sawyer laughs, looking down to swipe his boot over the cracked pavement. "I know that feeling. They grow up too fast and not fast enough."

"Did you enjoy the baby stage?"

He nods. "I did, yeah. But I think I enjoy this stage more."

"I do too. I just"—I blink, tears spilling out of my eyes left and right—"she's such a cool little person, and I miss her already, but I'm also glad to get a break, and ..."

Sawyer looks up. For a split second I think I've gone into cardiac arrest, my heart tripping to a sudden, painful stop at the naked interest in his eyes. It's edged with heat.

Or maybe that's just wishful thinking. Whatever the case, a spark of arousal ignites low in my center.

"You wanna go grab a coffee or something?" he asks.

My heart starts working again, two hundred beats per minute. My brain, however, flatlines, which is probably why I blurt, "I'd love to. But please don't miss work on my account —"

"I'm not leaving you crying in a parking lot, Ava. Work can wait." He tips his head toward our cars. "C'mon, there's a coffee shop on Main. Follow me—I'm in the black Silverado."

## CHAPTER 16

*Ava*

JUST TO SEE YOU SMILE

**THE CAFFEINATED COWGIRL** might be the most adorable place on earth. It has a pink awning that matches the pink tables and chairs set out on the sidewalk in front of its brick building on Main Street. Its tagline, written in white script on the awning, reads *Drinking Coffee, Wrangling Hearts*.

The shop is also closed.

“What?” Sawyer cups his hands over his face to peer inside the front door. “They’re always open. Since when does Wendy go on vacation?”

I read the sign taped to the door for the third time. Wendy is apparently out west visiting Glacier National Park. Her BFF, a cat named Dahlia, is accompanying her on the trip.

“Good for her,” I say, even as I’m hit by a tidal wave of disappointment.

I was really looking forward to spending time with Sawyer. Which—again—is probably why I shouldn’t be spending time with him at all. Yes, I have a rare morning without any lessons or paperwork to do back at the ranch. But I need to be smart here. Need to protect myself so I don’t end up sacrificing myself—and my freedom—for the sake of keeping someone else happy.

Still, when Sawyer asks, “How ’bout we have coffee at my place, then? It’s just ten minutes down Highway 21,” I immediately agree.

“You sure you don’t mind?”

He shakes his head. “Not at all. I already had a pot on anyway.”

Following him down the sunbaked highway, I can’t tell if my jitters are excitement, anticipation, dread, or what. Grabbing coffee at a coffee shop is

one thing. Going to Sawyer's house is something else entirely.

I give Dan a quick call to let him know drop-off went well. He's his usual short, snippy self on the phone, and I hang up feeling annoyed but also relieved. I don't have to interact with him again until he picks up June next.

A few miles down 21, Sawyer hangs a left, and we pass beneath a shiny new archway that reads *LUCKY RIVER RANCH, EST. 1902*. My stomach dips.

I've heard a lot about Mollie Luck and Cash Rivers's ranch—how big and beautiful it is, and then of course I've heard from Sally about Mollie's plans to turn it into a Hill Country headquarters for her boot company, Bellamy Brooks. Mollie inherited the property from her dad, who struck oil on the land back in the '90s. He died a very wealthy man last year. Mollie inherited the ranch, then combined it with the Rivers Ranch when she got engaged to Cash Rivers back in the fall.

I follow Sawyer's truck down a dirt road that's bordered on either side by wide-open pastures. I notice there's some heavy machinery around—excavators, bulldozers, dump trucks—along with stacks of what appear to be irrigation piping and materials for fencing.

It's a mess, but having all this work done means big things are happening here.

It means Sawyer and his brothers care about the ranch. Judging by the scope of the project, they care *a lot*. I wonder how long this land has been in Sawyer's family. The idea of him being a careful, thoughtful steward of their legacy —

Heavens, my pulse won't quit fluttering.

But it's the house that comes into view after we crest a small rise that has my heart really pounding. It's modest—two stories, maybe fifteen hundred square feet—but it's beautiful. The exterior is limestone on the first level, white siding on the second. The house has a wide, rocking-chair front porch and light green shutters that gleam in the morning light.

My chest twists when I see the screen door that opens onto the porch, which is painted green to match the shutters. There's something about a screen door that speaks to me. Growing up, I distinctly remember the sound ours would make as my sisters and I ran in and out of the house to play—a noise somewhere between a *clap* and a *bang*. Those were happy times that have become happy memories I revisit when I need a boost.

Sawyer parks on a patch of gravel to the left of the house, and I follow



suit.

“This is beautiful,” I breathe as I climb out of my car.

Sawyer adjusts his hat. “Thanks. It’s the house I grew up in. Was kind of a mess, but we fixed her up over the fall. Ella and I moved in about a month ago.”

“How cool that you live in your family’s house,” I say. “Bet Ella loves hearing stories about y’all growing up here.”

His dimples pop again. I wonder if I’m going to faint.

“She does, yeah. As a matter of fact, she keeps asking Wyatt to teach her how to play poker. I told her that my dad taught all of us how to play, but that Uncle Wyatt is the best bluffer. She says ‘fluffer,’ which has him howling every time.”

“Y’all are cute.”

“Cute?” He tilts his head, frowning. “Last I checked, you said I was ‘hot as fuck.’ ”

My blood thrums with a rush of heat. Sawyer’s flirting with me.

I love flirting with him, probably because I’m able to let loose and just say what’s on my mind.

At the same time, I *need* to be *smart*. But I guess my need to have fun supersedes that.

“If memory serves, you were the one who said we were hot,” I reply. “I said we were cute.”

“Why not both?”

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “I think I like ‘hot’ better, too.”

His eyes flick down my body. It’s a quick perusal, but it’s intentional, shameless even, and very, very sexy. The spark between my legs flares into a full-blown fire.

Wow this is happening fast. In many ways, it feels like we’re picking up right where we left off that night in Austin.

In others, it feels like we’re starting from scratch. I found out *two days ago* that Sawyer is a dad. There’s clearly so much about him I don’t know.

I’m dying to do some digging.

I’m also doing my best to slow things down. I’ve been down this road before—Dan was great in the beginning too—and I have no desire to end up at a dead end all over again.

“You are hot, Ava.” Sawyer’s eyes meet mine, his lips twitching. “Now you say that I’m hot too.”

“That why you wore the backward baseball hat to drop-off? To tease us unsuspecting preschool moms with your hotness?”

“So you do think I’m hot.”

I laugh. *This* is why I love flirting with Sawyer. He doesn’t make me feel stupid or ashamed for being, well, *me*.

In fact, he very much seems to enjoy my less-than-appropriate side.

“Don’t ask me questions you already know the answer to,” I reply.

“And you like the backward baseball hat. Noted.”

My heart hiccups. He’s not asking me out. But the idea that he’s noticing what I like and doing more of it —

That has to mean something, right?

“I’m relatively certain almost every woman with a pulse likes guys in backward baseball hats.”

Reaching behind his head, he adjusts his hat again. “But not all guys in backward hats are created equal.”

“You’re really jonesin’ for an ego boost this morning, aren’t you?”

“Nah.” He’s grinning. “Well, okay, maybe a little bit. But really, I just wanna make you smile.”

A hot press of tears hits the back of my eyes. I blink. “Stop.”

“Stop what?”

“Being hot *and* nice.”

His expression softens. “I won’t stop. Not ever. Especially not the hot part.”

I laugh, and I feel myself slipping. Floating, more like it. Like all my vital organs are rising up into the air, weightless, immune to gravity. It’s the way your body feels when you crest a hill on a roller coaster and it plunges downward.

I’m so turned on that I could scream.

“C’mon, let’s get some caffeine.” He nods at the house.

I climb the front steps with unsteady legs, the smell of fresh paint and new lumber filling my head. Sawyer opens the door—*of course he doesn’t lock it, I bet no one in Hartsville does*—and gestures me inside.

“After you.”

Shoving my hands in the pockets of my jacket, I smile. “Thanks.”

I’m hit by a gust of warmth as I step inside, along with the sugary sweet smell of—yep, I bet that’s pancakes.

“I’ll take your coat,” Sawyer says, holding out his hand.

Taking it off, I watch him hang it on the nearby rack. Then he shoulders off his vest and hangs it beside mine. I notice the tiny fleece jacket that's covered in cute red-and-white mushrooms that hangs on the rack's bottom branch. There's something that looks like a life vest, or maybe a dog jacket, hanging there too.

Right on cue, a deliciously droopy dog ambles into the hallway.

Sawyer drops down to give the dog a pet. "Hey, Mule."

"Mule?" I chuckle, dropping down beside Sawyer. "That's actually a perfect name for him."

"That's the name he came with. I think it stuck because Ella was able to say it, even at one and a half years old. He's some kind of Lab basset hound mix we can't quite figure out."

Mule noses my outstretched hand. "You got a dog with a one-and-a-half-year-old in the house?"

Sawyer's shoulder brushes against mine when he shrugs. "Felt like Ella needed a playmate. Couldn't give her a sibling, so ..."

Not for the first time, I wonder what Sawyer's story is. He hasn't mentioned Ella's mom. Feels weird not knowing if he's a widower, divorced, estranged, or what.

Then again, I don't exactly love talking about my relationship with Dan. I imagine Sawyer will tell me about his past if—when—he's ready.

Mule lets me pet him, even leaning in to give my cheek a nice, sloppy lick.

"C'mon, dude, that's not polite." Sawyer gives the dog's collar a gentle tug. "We wait until *after* coffee to lick people."

"You have some interesting house rules."

Sawyer stands and offers me his hand. "You're tempting me to break them."

"Is it because I'm hot?" I take his hand.

He pulls me to my feet. "Yes."

Our eyes lock and we stand like that, hands clasped, for a beat too long. The tension between us—the heat—is back, and I can't help but bask in it. The fear and the uncertainty that plagued my morning are still there in my head and chest. But Sawyer's attention softens them. Makes them less immediate, less terrifying.

I have no idea if everything's going to be okay. But being with Sawyer makes me feel like it's okay to be myself at the very least. There's comfort in

that, a kind of ease I've never experienced with a guy.

"I'm glad you're here." His voice is low. Gruff.

I lick my lips. "I am too."

Mule's wagging tail hits our legs, waking us from our lust-induced stupor. I drop Sawyer's hand and he clears his throat.

"So, uh. Coffee." He puts his hands on his hips. "Right. This way."

My suspicion about the pancakes is confirmed when I follow Sawyer into a small kitchen at the back of the house. A box of blueberry pancake mix sits beside the stove, and a frying pan, spatula, and glass measuring cup sit in the drying rack beside the massive farmhouse sink.

Guess Sawyer doesn't leave dirty dishes in the sink to wash themselves.

Also. The man makes *pancakes* on a Monday morning. I gave myself kudos for throwing together some avocado toast earlier, which is much less involved.

He really just might be the most perfect man to ever exist.

The kitchen is lived in, but neat and very clean. A round table with four chairs is pushed up against the near wall, which is painted a pale shade of yellow. A bowl of fruit—bananas, oranges, pears—sits on the spotless countertop. I can just hear the hum of a dishwasher.

It's cute and cozy, and I love it.

Sawyer grabs the carafe from the coffeepot on the counter. "You take yours with cream? Sugar?"

"Just cream, please. I can grab —"

"Nope." Sawyer nods at the nearby living room that opens into the kitchen. "Go sit and relax. I'll be right there."

I wonder if it's hot in here, or if I'm just about to combust. Being with a man who's a doer—who not only notices when you're tired and need a break, but *gives* you that break—is quite possibly the most arousing experience I've ever had.

I wander to the family room, which is just as cozy and inviting as the kitchen. A rust-colored sofa sits underneath a wall of windows. The limestone fireplace is massive, the mantel almost as tall as I am. I'd bet my life Sawyer split the logs that sit in a leather sling on the hearth himself.

But it's the photos in silver frames that crowd the mantel that really catch my eye. There are dozens of them, some filled with photos blurry with age. Others feature close-up pictures of Ella as a baby, Ella dressed as a pumpkin, Ella in front of a Christmas tree.

Sawyer clearly treasures his people and the memories they've made together.

It's clear Sawyer is a family man at heart. He may be the world's best lay, *and* a cowboy, *and* a DILF to end all DILFs. But at his core, he loves his people, and he loves them fiercely.

I suddenly feel short of breath.

There are many, many pictures of Sawyer and his brothers on the mantel. I can tell by their blue eyes and crooked smiles that it's the five of them as kids. My stomach dips when I see a photograph of a woman with Sawyer's blue eyes alongside a man with his thick head of dark hair. I pick it up to get a better look.

"My mom and dad."

I glance over my shoulder to see Sawyer standing behind me with two steaming mugs of coffee in his hands. One of the mugs says *WORLD'S BEST DAD*. The other has the Texas state flag painted on its side.

"I can see that. You take after them both." I set the picture back on the mantel and turn to face him, taking the Texas mug out of his hand. "Your parents make a handsome couple."

"They did, yeah." He brings his coffee to his lips. We're standing close enough that I can see the freckles that dot his neck and cheeks. "I don't wanna, like, get too far into the weeds here. But I've been thinking about them a lot lately. How I wish they were around so I could ask them the billion questions I have about being a parent."

My heart clenches, my eyes burning all over again. "Parenting yourself while being a parent—it's really freaking hard. I lean on my parents a lot—I'm lucky they're still around—but now that we live far away, I can understand this a bit. Not to the extent you do, obviously. I really am sorry."

"It sucks." He lets out a breath, eyes meeting mine. "But Ella and I are muddling through."

"I get the impression your brothers help some?"

"They do, yeah. When I let them."

I sip my coffee. It's perfect, hot and velvety, and just the right amount of bitter. "Do you not trust them?"

Sawyer looks down at his coffee. "It's not that I don't trust them. I don't want to put them out, you know? I already feel bad not being able to help them out more. They're always so busy, and the work we do, it's draining. Feels wrong to ask them to babysit or whatever when they've been in the

saddle or shoveling shit for twelve hours straight. Ella is not an easy kid either.”

“I get that. Hard not to feel like a burden when you’re a single parent. Last thing I want is to make other people pay for my choices. The mistakes I made in my relationships.”

“Exactly.” He blinks, eyes flicking to meet mine. “And I want my brothers to enjoy Ella. I don’t want them to feel like they have to watch her or do things with her if they don’t want to.”

“Before I got divorced, I used to think it’d be easier to do this parent thing alone. You don’t have to deal with someone else disappointing you, you know? And while some aspects have definitely gotten easier since I’ve been single ...” I sigh. “Other parts, not so much. It truly takes a village to raise a kid, and I’ve had to rely on mine a lot.”

He frowns. “Who makes up your village?”

“My parents. My sisters. They don’t have kids yet, so Junie is definitely the apple of their eye. My ex is, eh, somewhat helpful, but he lives an hour away, so there’s that. Miss Lee, my nanny, has been wonderful. Oh! Mrs. Wallace helps out too. She loves teaching June how to bake. Vince, too, enjoys being with her. He’s teaching her all about being a ‘horsey doctor,’ as Junie calls it.”

Sawyer lets out a low whistle. “Damn, girl. You’ve lived here how long?”

I laugh. “You and Ella are welcome to be a part of our village if you’d like. Hell, judging by how well Ella and June get along, I’d say you are already part of it. I mean, here you are, already taking care of me.” I hold up my mug. “You’re going to have to let me return the favor.”

His expression flickers with emotion. “You don’t need to do anything.”

I’ve put two and two together. This poor guy thinks he needs to do everything on his own. He believes that he messed up by not being able to save his parents, so now he’s compensating by trying to save everyone else. All while feeling like a burden because he’s got a kid and can’t *possibly* be the safety net for his brothers that he thinks he should be.

I reach out and put my hand on his forearm. The fabric of his shirt is soft with age, and thin enough that I can feel the ripple of muscle beneath it. “But I want to. So let me.”

It’s when he looks down at my hand that I realize I’ve made a mistake. At the very least, I crossed a boundary and made him uncomfortable, because he’s quiet for a full beat, then another.

My pulse drums, face on fire. “Anyway,” I say, dropping my hand.

Sawyer immediately grabs it, fingers locking around my wrist. I meet his eyes, and the pressure between my legs becomes acute when I see the blue of his irises are burning with ...

*Hunger.*

Fierce, vibrant hunger.

Oh God. Oh God oh God oh God. We can’t. We shouldn’t.

But I want to. So badly.

“So pretty, aren’t you? Inside”—his eyes move to my lips—“and out. You wanna help me, pretty girl?”

The nickname. It’s just as hot coming out of his mouth as I remember.

Swallowing, I nod. “I do, yeah.”

“Lemme kiss you.”

“Yes.” I keep nodding like an idiot, struggling to breathe. “I’d like that. Very much.”

He chuckles. “And here I thought I was the only one dying this whole time.”

“I’ve been dead since the second you waved to me in the parking lot.”

“Six feet under since you dumped your beer on me.”

My lips twitch. “Hey, that was an accident.”

His eyes search mine. “This isn’t.”

And then he leans in, his thick neck slanting in the sexiest way imaginable as his mouth meets mine.

## CHAPTER 17



*Sanyer*

## SECOND BREAKFAST

**IT'S** the laughter and the adoration in her eyes.

The way she understands. Truly, deeply understands how I feel and why I'm so fucking tired all the time.

The way she makes me feel the opposite of tired, and how she noticed the photos, and the way she called me out on my bullshit in the kindest way possible.

Her offer of help—her genuine, no-strings-attached offer—has me all choked up. Which doesn't really make sense. People offer me help all the time, my family especially. Maybe Ava having to ask me point-blank to *let her* help has me realizing just how hard I am on myself.

Makes me realize my role as the helper—the one who catches everyone before they fall or fail—is maybe one that doesn't quite fit anymore. Which is terrifying. And liberating.

I can't. Fucking. *Take it.*

So like the sleep-deprived, sex-deprived, overly emotional asshole I am, I take Ava's face in my hand and pull her in for a kiss.

I'm kissing this woman like we're not strangers who just ran into each other in the preschool parking lot less than an hour ago.

*Are we strangers, though?*

Because she's kissing me like she knows me. Her lips melt into mine, a warm, soft press that draws a groan from deep in my throat. She reaches up with her free hand and digs her fingers into the hair at the nape of my neck.

Christ, that feels good. Goose bumps break out on my arms as she runs her fingertips over my scalp. Just how she did back in Austin.

Just how I like it.

Tilting my head, I slant my mouth over hers, using my teeth to tug on her bottom lip before I slip my tongue inside the seam of her mouth.

She's hot, eager, her tongue stroking into my own mouth as she deepens the kiss. My body ignites, blood moving through my skin in a frenzied rush. I set my mug on the mantel, pushing aside a pair of picture frames in the process, and grab Ava's and set it up there too.

Then her hands are on my chest, pinkie catching on my nipple through my shirt. Need rips through me, making me growl.

My hands are on her face, and our hips melt together as I draw her close. Our noses brush. Her fingers curl into my shirt, and a pulse of hot, blinding lust lands between my legs.

We fall into a deep, unhurried rhythm, our tongues, lips, heads moving in a choreographed dance that I know well. The kiss feels easy. Broken in.

I *really* gotta get to work. With calving season coming up, we're busier than ever.

But I can't stop kissing this woman if I tried. And how could I resist putting on my cape for her? She needed a shoulder to cry on, and I'll be damned if it's any shoulder but mine.

I see stars behind my closed eyelids when she moves her hands up my chest and onto my shoulders, her thumbs brushing my neck. She presses her tits against me, pulling me closer, and when she tenderly kisses my cheek, my jaw, I just about lose it.

"I don't"—I lean down to nip at her neck before soothing the spot with my tongue—"wanna make any assumptions here —"

"Listen, cowboy." Pulling away a little, she puts her hands on my chest and shoves me backward so that I fall onto the couch. "Your assumption is one hundred percent correct."

Can't help but smile. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." She climbs onto my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck as she straddles me. "I definitely need some stress relief."

"I just so happen to be very good at that." I curl my hands around her waist. Run them up her sides so that my thumbs brush her breasts. "Any relief in particular you need?"

Tossing her hair aside, she throws off my hat and leans in to bite my earlobe. "You know the kind I like."

Fuck yeah, I do.

I kiss her mouth. Then I grab her waist again and toss her onto her back on the cushions. She laughs, a light, breathless sound as I pull off her tennis shoes. Without hesitating, I yank down her leggings, sucking in a breath when I see that she's not wearing panties. Her pussy is achingly small and soft-looking.

"You go commando often?"

"Only when I forget to put on underwear."

I chuckle, my dick thickening in my jeans. "Why would you ever forget to do that, Ava? Do you just have two full-time jobs, plus a tiny terrorist—I mean angel—living in your house?"

She laughs again, and my heart skips. "Two jobs?"

"I don't gotta tell you being a parent is a whole other full-time gig."

"It's my hardest gig by far." Her eyes flash when I pull her leggings off her feet. "But also the best."

I hike her leg over my shoulder, spreading her open as I fall onto my belly, pushing up onto my forearms and knees so I'm on all fours. Good thing this couch is oversize, allowing us both to fit on the cushions. "Stressful."

"So stressful." She digs her hands into my hair. I slide my hands underneath her ass, giving it a quick squeeze. "Thank God for coffee."

"That what we're calling this now?" I lick her clit, an unhurried stroke of tongue. "Coffee?"

Her eyes flutter shut. "I live for caffeine."

I hum my assent against her pussy. She tastes exactly how I remember, sweet and earthy and perfect. "The buzz is the best."

"It really i—*oh*." Her breath catches when I move my tongue lower.

"Holy shit, pretty girl, you're wet." I lap her up. My dick goes full salute. "Really wet."

She bites her lip, opening her eyes. They're heavy-lidded, hazy with lust. "Told you your little wave was a turn-on."

"I didn't know I had that kinda power. I wave to a lot of people."

"Then you're probably the reason sex toy sales have skyrocketed in Hartsville."

That makes me grin. I use my tongue to spread her arousal onto her clit. "It's on our Wikipedia page: *Hartsville has more vibrators per capita than anywhere else in Texas*."

Ava shuts her eyes again, rolling her hips against my mouth. "Hot cowboys plus backward hats equals—yeah, lots of fun with toys."

“Or tongues.” I press the flat of mine against her clit. Then I angle my head so I can swipe my tongue through her slit, a quick, front-to-back motion that has her hips punching off the couch.

Her grip on my hair tightens. “Yours is magic.”

“You do seem”—I suck on her clit—“much more relaxed.”

She bends her knees, putting both her feet on my shoulders. I pull my hands out from underneath her ass and put one on her stomach, pushing up her shirt. I splay my fingers so that I’m able to thumb her clit while I slip my tongue inside her entrance, holding her hips down while I work.

She moans, her knees falling apart. Her pussy flutters around my tongue. She’s getting close.

Glancing to the side, I notice the little tattoo on her ankle. “What’s that?”

“My tattoo?” She opens her eyes. “My sisters and I got them on a spring break trip. I was twenty and”—she sucks in a breath when I nip at her clit—“it seemed like a good idea at the time. Three hearts, one for each of us. Mine is filled in with pink, my favorite color.”

“It’s cute.”

“So are you.”

My dick strains against my jeans. I slide my hand up her belly, moving my tongue back to her clit while I cup her breast.

Her *bare* breast.

“No bra either?” I manage.

Her body rises, back arching as I flick my tongue over her clit again and again and again. “I got—after June—a breast augmentation. I don’t need to wear bras anymore, except when I ride to help with chafing. Implants made me feel—like me again.”

“You’re gorgeous.” I knead her breast, capturing her nipple between my first two fingers. Then I carefully—*carefully*—trace the scar on the underside of her breast. “I remember seeing this in Austin.”

Ava opens her eyes. “You really do remember everything.”

“I do when it comes to you.”

“Do you judge me?”

“For getting surgery that made you feel human again?” I shove up her shirt, baring her breasts. “How could I? They make you feel good, then they make me feel good. Or, you know, they put me in an extreme amount of pain.”

Ava laughs, throwing her arms over her head. “You’re feeling it too?”

“Pretty girl, you got no *idea* how fucking hard I am right now.”

“Will you let me relieve your stress, then? Any relief in particular you need?”

I nip at her clit, using my teeth to tease her. She yelps.

“You know the kind I like.”

She’s smiling and I’m smiling, and I feel something inside me crack open. Who the fuck am I, eating out a woman on my family room couch on a Monday morning?

Who the *fuck* do I think I am, ignoring every responsibility, every *should could would*, and doing what I want instead?

I feel reckless.

I feel wild as I eat Ava’s pussy, bringing her to the edge of her orgasm. I work my thumb over her nipple, stroking it in time to the movement of my tongue between her legs.

Legs that start to shake. Her hand finds my hair again, and she holds on to me as she rides my face, rocking her hips so I hit her just where she likes.

“Sawyer.” She’s practically yelling now, loud enough that her voice echoes inside the room. “Sawyer, Jesus fucking Christ you’re good. You’re so good, cowboy.”

I suck on her clit, drawing it inside my lips. “You taste better, pretty girl.”

“Sawyer.” Her feet press into my shoulders and her hand fists in my hair.

She comes. Hard. Shouting and smiling the whole time.

I kiss her pussy as she rides the wave. Her stomach caves and she thrusts out her tits, her nipple meeting with my palm.

The ache between my legs sharpens. Thank God I brought those condoms home from Austin. I hid them in my closet and haven’t touched them since.

Definitely gonna need one—two—now.

Ava finally falls back to earth with a happy sigh.

I press a kiss to her clit. “Feel better?”

“Much—”

“Helllloooooo!”

I go still at the sound of a familiar voice, followed by the *clack* of my screen door. Ava’s eyes fly open and meet mine.

“Sawyer? You home? I heard some shoutin’—”

“Stay there!” I yell, pushing up onto my knees. “Jesus Christ, Duke, you’re supposed to fuckin’ knock.”

“Where are you?” he shouts back.

I grab Ava's leggings off the floor, and together we scramble to put them back on.

"I said *stay there*," I reply.

"You okay?" I hear his heavy steps ambling down the hallway toward the kitchen. "We hadn't heard from you, so I came to check —"

"I'm fine, okay? Just—stay there. Don't come back here."

A beat of silence while I pull down Ava's shirt and reach for her shoes. I feel slightly less like dying when I see the little grin on her lips.

Ava *would* enjoy almost being caught. I love how she brings this steady, earthy energy to the room, but isn't afraid to let go and get a little wild too.

The combination is incredibly sexy.

It's addictive.

"Wait," Duke says. "*Wait* a minute. Are you —"

"I have company, yes."

Another beat of silence. Ava's face is pink from holding back laughter. Suddenly I'm trying not to laugh, too.

We're ridiculous.

We really are hot as fuck.

Ava is smoothing her hair with her hands, tucking it behind her ears. I grab a pillow and put it over my very obvious erection.

"Oh." I can hear the smile in my brother's voice. "Oh, okay. Then I'll just —"

"You can come in now, Duke," Ava says, reaching over to wipe my mouth with her hand. "I remember you."

It's weird hearing Ava say my brother's name.

The sense of familiarity, of warmth, is also kinda great. I may be bent out of shape by my brother barging in like this, but it doesn't ruffle Ava's feathers one bit.

Duke pokes his head into the kitchen. He's smiling like a Cheshire cat. "Well *hey y'all*. Good to see you, Ava. I heard you were here in town."

Duke didn't come to the barn raising because he had to work cattle at our ranch that day.

Ava offers him a little wave. "Hey, Duke. Great to see you again. And yeah, I mean, pretty crazy, right, that we'd all end up in Hartsville together?"

Duke smirks. "So crazy."

"Coffee," I grunt. "We—preschool drop-off—it's Ava's daughter's first day, and —"

“I was tired and a little emotional.” Ava’s eyes are on mine. They glitter with amusement. “So Sawyer gave me a —”

“Hug.” Oh, God, now I’m really gonna laugh. My sides hurt from holding it back.

Ava runs her tongue along her bottom lip. “I really needed a hug, yes.”

“Hugs.” Duke leans against the doorframe. He looks at the pillow on my lap, then at the hat Ava knocked onto the floor. “Right. Who doesn’t love those?”

“I should get going,” Ava says, rising off the sofa. “I have a mountain of work to get through.”

I give Duke a death stare as I stand, pulling my shirttail out of my jeans. That should cover my, er, problem. “Why are you here?”

My brother lifts a shoulder. “We thought you were dead. Did you not see anyone’s calls or texts?”

“Um. No.” I reach back to ruffle the hair at my nape. My skin is still alive with the memory of Ava’s touch. “I must’ve left my phone in the car.”

Duke’s eyes bulge. “You really are dead.”

“My brain is, yeah.”

“Does Sawyer not forget things sometimes like a normal human being?” Ava asks.

“Mr. Overachiever Father of the Year?” My brother shakes his head. “Never. Like, never ever.”

Ava looks at me. Despite her attempts to tame her long, blonde hair, it’s still a mess, the strands at her crown sticking up every which way. Her lips are a little swollen. Cheeks still pink.

She’s an animal, shameless and wide awake, and I love it.

My mind already races with thoughts on how I can see her again. Do I propose another playdate with the girls? Start slow? Then maybe ask her out on a date? Or do I just go in for the kill right away, tell her I wanna take her to dinner and then fuck her as many times as she’ll let me?

“I take that as a compliment, Sawyer,” she says. “My hugs are so good that I make you forget things.”

Duke shakes his head. “Hugs, man. When they’re good, they wreck you in the best way.”

“Please stop saying the word *hug*,” I snap. “Duke, you wait here. I’m gonna walk Ava out.”

Duke touches the brim of his hat. “Ma’am. Hope to see you around here



more often.”

Ava grins as she passes by him. “You were wrong about your brother, you know.”

“Oh yeah?”

“He is a killer.” Her eyes flick to meet mine. “Just not the kind I thought.”

“Interesting. I’m all ears.”

She looks at me, her gaze teasing. “Killer barista. Guy makes a mean cup of coffee. I’m still buzzing.”

Duke lets out a bark of laughter. “I like you, Ava.”

“See ya, Duke.”

I make sure the door is closed behind us after Ava and I step out onto the front porch.

Tucking my hands into the front pockets of my jeans, I rock back on my heels. “Sorry about him. Boundaries aren’t really a thing in my family.”

“I can see that.” Her eyes look translucent in the mid-morning light, a striking shade of hazel-green that makes the pink in her cheeks really pop. “I can also see you being everyone’s safety net, so of course they barge into your house without asking because they know you’ll be there to rescue them.”

I squint, trying to ignore the mushiness in my chest. Ava is smart. Direct. Weird that I find her honesty a turn-on?

“You figured all that out after one cup of coffee, huh?”

“You wear your heart on your sleeve. It’s a big heart, Sawyer.”

That same heart is going apeshit inside my chest. “Because I’m a gentleman, I won’t make a joke about the other big problem I have in my pants right now.”

Ava’s mouth falls open, her eyes going wide. “Oh, no, you pooped, didn’t you? I have wipes in the car —”

“Stop.” Laughing, I pull my hand out of my pocket and curl it around her upper arm. I give her a gentle shove, which she returns, the two of us clearly still eager to have our hands all over each other.

“You think your heart is a problem?” Her palm rests on my forearm.

“I don’t know. Maybe. Makes life more complicated, I’ll tell you that much.”

She looks at me, strands of her hair catching in the crisp winter breeze. “Big hearts and boundaries are a tough pairing to figure out, I’m sure.

Stressful.”

I’m smiling for what feels like the hundredth time this morning. “Very.”

“You might need some relief.”

“I just might, yeah.”

The sun slants onto the porch and warms the front of my legs. I feel that same warmth in my chest as Ava looks at me and I look back.

“Let me take you out.” I glance over my shoulder, making sure Duke isn’t watching us through the nearby window. “Someplace where we won’t be interrupted. Dinner sound good?”

Ava does that thing where she digs her teeth into her bottom lip. “Is there a place to get dinner in Hartsville?”

“I’ll figure something out. Just—I’m not letting you walk away again without getting your number.”

After a beat of heated, extended eye contact, she nods. “Okay. Yeah. I’d love to go out with you.”

“Here.” I start down the steps. “Let me grab my phone. How do I not have your number, by the way?”

Following me, Ava smiles. “I was wondering the same thing.”

“Thank God I finally grew a pair and asked for it.”

“Thank God I’m still alive to give it to you.”

I open the driver’s door of my truck and take my phone off the dash. “Not the kind of killer you thought, right?”

Her eyes glimmer when she replies, “Not in the slightest.”

She gives me her number, and then I slide my phone into my back pocket.

“So,” she says.

“So.” I put my hands on my hips. I have no idea what to do with them. Do I hug her? Kiss her? None of the above?

But Ava, being Ava, doesn’t miss a beat. She holds out her arms and goes up on her toes, pulling me into a tight, flirty embrace, kissing my cheek.

“Thank you,” she murmurs in my ear. “I can’t tell you how much I needed that.”

I press a scruffy kiss to her cheek. “Anytime, pretty girl. Answer when I reach out, yeah?”

She nods, nosing my neck. “I think I can do that.”

“Hope Junie has as much of a great first day as you’re having.”

Pulling back, she looks up at me and smiles. “I was wondering where your cockiness went.”

“Right here, honey.” I grab her hand and put it on my crotch. “Been here the whole time.”

The gesture is lewd, borderline inappropriate. But Ava just keeps smiling, cupping me through my jeans.

“Coffee at my place next time?” she asks.

“Only if you tell me your last name.”

Her lips twitch. “Another thing I haven’t given you.”

“Tell me.”

“Bartlett.”

I meet her eyes. “Ava Bartlett. That suits you.”

“Thanks. I recently went back to my maiden name.”

“Good for you.”

“Thanks. So remember—my place next.”

I’ve half a mind to throw her in the back seat of my truck and have her finish what she started. But my brother is still in the house, and I really need to get to work.

So I lean in and give her a quick kiss on the mouth. “Long as I get to eat you again for breakfast, I’m game.”

## CHAPTER 18

*Sanyer*

## “YOU SHOULD ASK HER OUT.”

Dropping my saddle onto its rack, I lift my arm to push back the hat on my head. Then I wipe my forehead on my sleeve, soaking the fabric with sweat.

I’m drenched partly from work. Partly from the raging case of blue balls I’ve had all day.

I glare at Duke. “I think you should mind your own goddamn business.”

“Just sayin’.” He hoists his saddle onto the rack beside mine. “She digs you, dude. You dig her. Go pick her up and show her a good time.”

“Ava Bartlett?” Wyatt strides into the tack room and meets my eyes. “Yeah, you should definitely ask her out. Sally is obsessed with her.”

“So is our boy here.” Duke smiles as he pulls off his gloves and tucks them into his back pocket. “I definitely interrupted something fun this morning.”

“Shut up.” I pull my hat all the way off my head and use my arm to wipe my forehead again. Despite the chilly winter temps, I’m still sweating like a pig. “Seriously, y’all need to learn how to knock.”

“She was smiling ear to ear.” Duke gives Wyatt a meaningful glance. “Apparently, they were hugging it out.”

“Aw, yeah!” Ryder strolls into the room, the ridiculous fringe on his leather chaps making a slapping noise I can hear from several feet away. “I heard you got laid this morning, man. Good for you.”

I stare at Duke. “What the fuck did you tell them?”

“Nothin’.” The bastard shrugs. “I told you everyone thought you’d died.

When they asked where you were, I just said that you were alive and very well.”

I might have started work later than usual, but it was still a long-ass day on the ranch. Because I was late, I ended up mucking stalls in the barn alongside Duke, and then Mollie and I helped Sally administer vaccines all through lunch. We only met up with the herd a few hours ago, where Cash, Wyatt, and Ryder were working cattle.

I hired Mrs. Sherman’s teaching assistant, Miss Caroline, to watch Ella during the week when she’s not in school. Since Caroline only teaches in the mornings (school runs from nine a.m. until twelve thirty), she’ll take Ella home and stay at my house until four o’clock. Which, judging by the angle of the sun, is fast approaching.

My arms are sore. My back is killing me. I’ve been fighting these blue balls all day. I have a long evening ahead. When I get home, I need to make dinner, do bath time, read thirty-eight books, and then hopefully put Ella to bed. Then I’ll clean up from dinner, pick up the playroom, change the laundry ...

Never mind the fact that Ella is either cranky or wound up or both this time of day. Hell, I’m usually cranky too.

But today—I don’t know, I keep fighting the urge to smile, even as my balls ache and my brothers rib me.

Only four and a half hours until I can take care of this horrid half chub.

“I was fine.” I pretend to busy myself with some nearby riding tack. “For the record, I did ask her out.”

“She’s too good for you,” Cash grunts as he walks into the room.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Thanks, dick.”

“You have to know that’s a joke. How many times we gotta tell you that *you’re* too good for, well, everyone?” He drops his saddle onto its rack and wipes his hands. “So, whatcha thinking? You gonna take her to The Rattler?”

The Rattler is Hartsville’s one and only dive bar. There’s a very good chance that Mollie and Cash had sex in the bathroom there. Wyatt and Sally made eyes at each other across the bar for years before finally getting together on the dance floor.

In short, the Rivers family has a lot of history at that place. While I love and respect The Rattler as the timeless institution it is, the bar doesn’t seem right for my first real date with Ava.

I shake my head. “Met her at a honky-tonk, so we’ve done that scene. I

wanna do something different. Something ... special.”

“Happy for you, brother. I know this is a big deal for you—being into someone enough to want to pull out the stops. Just gotta make sure you play your cards right.” Wyatt crosses his arms and leans his shoulder against the wall. “And you know you need to let one of us babysit Ella at night—maybe all night—if you want to make that happen, right?”

I remember Ava’s words. *I want to help, so let me.*

She clearly lets other people help her, and her village seems a lot bigger and more vibrant than mine. She’s part of a safety net, but she’s not *the* safety net. Which I think explains why she’s so much goddamn fun. There’s a lightness to her, an ease I fucking adore.

I’m wondering if my instinct to take life so seriously is part of why I’m so run-down. I’ve always felt this need to run around with my arms outstretched, on alert in case anyone falls, in case anyone needs me. I love my people, and I want to be there for them. Show up for them.

Save them, because I love them too fiercely to see them suffer.

But maybe I need to let people just ... do their thing, so I can do mine. As we’ve gotten older, my brothers have proven themselves to be capable adult humans.

Maybe they don’t need me to save them.

Maybe I never really had the power to prevent their suffering in the first place. Maybe I’ve suffered enough trying to fulfill a role no one asked me to take on.

“Didn’t Ella run you ragged while we were in Austin?” I still ask.

Wyatt shrugs. “I caught up on sleep after she left. We survived.”

“Mollie and I are happy to babysit Ella,” Cash says. “Got plenty of room at the house, and it’ll be good practice for us.”

Mollie got pregnant on their honeymoon back in the fall. She’s due this summer, and I couldn’t be more thrilled that Ella’s finally getting a cousin.

I nod, emotion clogging my windpipe. “I just might take you up on that. Thank you.”

Ryder lets out a low whistle. “You really do got it bad if you’re letting us help out with Ella not once, but twice now.”

“Is a picnic date cheesy?” I ask. “Supposed to warm up later this week.”

Duke shakes his head. “I don’t think it’s cheesy at all. You know I love any excuse to get out of town. And I bet Patsy will help you make a spread of food.”



“Patsy is the best,” Cash says.

Patsy is Lucky River Ranch’s chef—best in the business—and our adopted mother figure. She’s kind and patient, but she’s also not afraid to tell it like it is.

Duke grins. “And now that Wyatt knows all about wine —”

“My girl likes her cabernet.” Wyatt shrugs. “So I learned some and drank some more. I’ll drop off a bottle or three at your house tomorrow.”

My eyes burn. I resist the urge to look away. “Thanks.”

“Ella’s going to be fine.” Cash puts a hand on my shoulder. “And so are you. Name the date for your, er, date, and we’ll help you make it happen.”

Wyatt has a wistful look on his face. “Lovers, let them love.”

“Dude.” Ryder rolls his eyes. “You really need to keep that thought to yourself.”

But Cash just laughs. “Loving makes life worth living.”

“All right, Riley Green. Enough with the cheesy song lyrics.”

“What? It’s true.”

I smile, because he’s right.

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It only takes five books, twenty minutes of what we call “back scratchies,” and the promise of a special treat in the morning to get Ella to finally pass out at eight o’clock that night.

I always feel so lame for collapsing into bed ten minutes after she goes down, but tonight I’m downright giddy to get into bed.

I finally get to text Ava. Initially I thought I’d call her, but my brothers told me to cool my jets a little.

“She’s a single parent too,” Cash explained. “Meaning she’s just as beat as you are at the end of the day. There’s a good chance she’ll either miss your call or send you to voice mail. But a text—it’s not as much of a commitment. She can respond to it anytime, and it still lets you know you’re thinking about her without that layer of guilt that comes when you feel like you should call someone back, but you can’t for whatever reason.”

I don’t know when my grumpy, growly older brother became an expert in dating, but here we are.

Back at the barn, the five of us workshopped some text ideas before we

all headed home. Cash and Wyatt counseled me to keep it cute and fun. Ryder and Duke pushed me toward an agenda that was light on substance, heavy on sexting.

I decide to strike a note somewhere in between.

SAWYER RIVERS

Think you can get a sitter for Saturday night? I'd like to take you to dinner.

I try not to feel disappointed when she doesn't respond right away. I distract myself by scrolling through my email and the app our preschool uses to post announcements and photos. I smile when I see a picture Ms. Sherman posted earlier today of Ella and Junie going down the slide together on the playground.

My phone dings. My stomach drops.

AVA BARTLETT

Thought you said you were going to eat me for breakfast?

Dick perking right the fuck up, I grin.

SAWYER RIVERS

I'm a three square meals a day kinda guy. 5pm too early? I'll pick you up

AVA BARTLETT

5pm is our usual dinner time so this is perfect. Let me text my nanny to see if she's free.

BTW Junie was all smiles at pickup. She talked nonstop about how much fun she had with her BFF Yella 😊

SAWYER RIVERS

Funny, Yella did the same thing. Apparently Mrs. Sherman said they were inseparable. I was bummed to miss you at pickup

AVA BARTLETT

How was your day?

SAWYER RIVERS

Long

AVA BARTLETT

As long as your 🍆 was this morning?

I burst out laughing.

SAWYER RIVERS

You like torturing me don't you?

AVA BARTLETT

I think Mr straightedge likes to be edged

SAWYER RIVERS

By you? Fuck yes I do

How was your day

AVA BARTLETT

Much better after coffee.

SAWYER RIVERS

You should have coffee every day then. Preferably with me

AVA BARTLETT

Oh! Just heard from my nanny. She's free on Sat! What do I wear? Obvs will leave the underwear and bra at home

I resist the urge to type out *God I love you*.

My heart palpitates. Since when is *that* word part of my Ava-associated vocabulary? I know better than to get in too deep, too fast. But when it comes to her, I feel like I'm standing on a steep slope that keeps collapsing under my feet. Leaves me scrambling to find my balance.

Do I fight to stay upright? Or do I surrender?

*What if I'm already on my knees?*

My heart's beating two hundred times a minute. I take a deep breath. Another. And another. There is no need to panic, right? This is Ava. Being with her is easy. Fun.

It's good for me.

SAWYER RIVERS

But then I can't add them to my collection

AVA BARTLETT

You've stolen enough of my underwear. And Junie's too.

SAWYER RIVERS

Shit, forgot to give that back to you. I'll send it in with Ella tomorrow.

For Saturday, wear a coat. Looks like it should be warm but just in case

AVA BARTLETT

This sounds interesting

SAWYER RIVERS

We'll stay warm somehow

AVA BARTLETT

I have some ideas

SAWYER RIVERS

Hot cocoa?

AVA BARTLETT

Haha yes exactly. I do love chocolate

SAWYER RIVERS

Noted

AVA BARTLETT

Do you have a sweet tooth?

SAWYER RIVERS

I do. My mom loved to bake

AVA BARTLETT

Aw. Junie loves to bake with Mrs. Wallace. It's really cute. Ella will have to come over and join them!

SAWYER RIVERS

She'd love that

AVA BARTLETT

Maybe Wednesday after school?

SAWYER RIVERS

Should work for us

AVA BARTLETT

Great. Now can we sext?

I laugh again, my dick getting hard at just the thought of all the naughty shit Ava will no doubt come up with. Girl does not give two shits about propriety or playing it cool. She wants what she wants, and she's not afraid to ask for it.

She's a breath of fresh air, one I didn't know I needed until I reach under the covers and slide my hand inside my briefs.


SAWYER RIVERS

thought you'd never ask

And then, because I know she won't be turned off or offended, I add:

now send me a pic of your tits

AVA BARTLETT

only if you send me one of your 

I'm always fucking laughing with this woman. Tossing aside the blankets, I hold up my phone and snap a photo. I send it to her, pulse going haywire as I wonder vaguely if this is the third best night of my life. The first, of course, being the night Ella was born. The second was Austin.

SAWYER RIVERS

because my girl always gets what she wants

AVA BARTLETT

I want you, cowboy

## CHAPTER 19

*Ava*

## KNOCKIN' BOOTS

**RINGING THE DOORBELL,** I step back to admire the enormous limestone mansion.

It's got to be at least six, even seven thousand square feet, with a slick metal roof and huge steel windows that glint in the morning light.

Sally told me Lucky River Ranch is an exceptionally beautiful property, but I was still unprepared for just how stunning it is. From the moment I drove through the main entrance—it's different from the one I used to go to Sawyer's house—I couldn't stop staring.

The ranch is green, lush in a way I wasn't expecting. It's clear the dramatic landscape of canyons, cliffs, and springs has been lovingly cared for, and my pulse won't stop skipping at the thought of Sawyer being part of such an incredible stewardship.

Makes sense that Sawyer would take excellent care of his family's land. Look at the way the man cares for his family.

The way he cares for *me*. Even while we were sexting the other night, he made sure I came first. He turned me on, but I could tell he was careful not to make me uncomfortable. He constantly asked *you like that? Or is that too much?*

*Oh, cowboy, I'd wanted to text back, it's never too much. In fact, with you, I'm discovering it's never enough.*

I blink, yanked from my daydream when a gorgeous blonde woman opens the door.

"Ava! Hi! I'm so glad you could make it. I'm Mollie Luck. Please, come in."



“Your ranch is gorgeous,” I say as I step inside. “And this house! Wow.”

“Aw, thank you.” Mollie is dressed to the nines in a long blue dress and big earrings, the bracelets on her arms clacking as she crosses those arms over her chest. “Cash and I prefer his cabin. It’s much cozier. But the New House has actually come in handy as Bellamy Brooks’s temporary headquarters in Hartsville. Well, at least until our new studio down the road is done. I’m so thrilled Sally sent you our way.”

I grin. “Y’all make the prettiest boots on earth. I’m so excited to treat myself to a pair.”

Mollie clasps her hands underneath the slight swell of her pregnant belly. “I’m so excited you’re here. C’mon, I’ll show you our lineup.”

Following Mollie down a flagstone hallway, I can’t help but grin at her adorable little waddle. Sally told me Mollie and Cash had quite the whirlwind romance. Apparently they had absolutely hated each other when they first met, but two months later, they were engaged. Two months after that, they were married, and now they’re expecting.

I definitely feel a pang of ... *something* seeing her cute little baby bump. I didn’t love being pregnant. But I do love having siblings, and I always thought I’d have more than one kid for that reason.

Now, though? I’m not sure I could go through all that again. Babies really make you aware of the deficiencies in your marriage. The things you could sweep under the rug before—the shit you convinced yourself you could tolerate—is no longer tolerable with a tiny new human in the mix.

Before June was born, I was able to keep the house clean and cook all our meals and still have time left over for myself. But once I was up three times a night to nurse while also changing a truly shocking amount of diapers, *and* washing pump parts multiple times a day, *and* taking June to all her appointments at the pediatrician, I had zero time to do anything remotely fun or enjoyable.

Dan, meanwhile, was able to continue watching his football. He still played golf every Saturday. He slept through the night and returned to his job five days after June was born, tired but able to function.

It became painfully apparent how unequal our marriage was. When Dan refused to even the scales, I knew I had to leave or I’d drown in resentment and rage.

That being said, I really would love to give Junie a sibling. A sister, if I could choose. Sometimes I feel a tremendous amount of guilt knowing that

probably isn't going to happen.

Sometimes, like now, that guilt feels a lot like grief.

But I didn't come here to wallow in sadness over the things I'd lost or might never have. I'm here to celebrate my wins. And there have been a lot of them lately—Junie's having an awesome first week of school, work is going well, and we're slowly but surely establishing our "village," as Sawyer called it, here in Hartsville.

So when he asked me out to dinner, I figured I'd treat myself to new boots to wear on our date. I'd admired Sally's pair of Bellamy Brooks cowboy boots for months now. She set up a date for Mollie and me to meet so I could pick out my own pair.

"I hear you have a hot date with Sawyer." Mollie turns, and we enter a large room with soaring ceilings and windows that overlook a grove of huge oak and sycamore trees. "We're thrilled he's finally putting himself out there. He's such a great guy."

I'm not surprised Sawyer keeps mostly to himself. I *am* surprised he hasn't been approached by more single, lonely preschool moms like myself.

"He really is," I say. "I'm not sure I've ever met a guy who's so ... thoughtful. And kind. And generous. And, yeah, hot."

Mollie laughs, turning on the lights. "Cowboys, man. They're a whole different breed, aren't they?"

"Truly."

"So do you have any idea what you're looking for?" Mollie gestures to the far wall, where racks and racks of the most beautiful cowboy boots I've ever seen are stacked almost to the ceiling. "You want practical? Fancy? Colorful, or maybe more classic?"

The breath leaves my lungs as I cross the room to get a better look at the boots. "Can I have one of everything, please? Mollie, these are exquisite."

"Thank you." The pride in her eyes is obvious as she runs a hand over a metallic purple pair of tall boots. "We're really proud of what we've built."

"Hell yeah we are! So this must be the gal who caught Sawyer's eye."

Turning, I see a petite red head enter the room. She's holding an open laptop on her arm, and she's wearing one of those thick knotted headbands that would look ridiculous on me but is absolutely adorable on her. It matches the red suede boots she's wearing, which are trimmed with a line of fluffy red feathers down the side.

"I'm Wheeler, Mollie's business partner and true soulmate. Don't tell

Cash.” She crosses the room to hold out her hand. “I’ve already heard so much about you, Ava.”

“You have?” I laugh, my face flushing with heat. *Sawyer’s been talking about me?* So has Sally? I’m more flattered than I should be. “It’s nice to meet you, Wheeler.”

“It’s actually really cute how obsessed Sawyer is with you.” She sets down the laptop on a nearby desk. “He’s so freaking excited for your date, I can’t even begin to tell you. Actually, he won’t stop telling all of us about it.”

Grinning, Mollie shakes her head. “He wants everything to be perfect. I hope y’all have the best time.”

“I hope y’all knock boots,” Wheeler adds. “Preferably while you’re wearing a pair of ours. Which ones do you like?”

“All of them.” I put my hand on the almond-shaped toe of an ivory pair. “I’m in love with these. Weird if I say I’m kind of in love with y’all too?”

But I’m definitely, unequivocally *not* in love with Sawyer. I like him, yes. So, so much. That alone is terrifying. I can’t think about anything beyond that without my vital organs doing several unpleasant backflips, the kind that happen when you hit unexpected turbulence on a plane.

But this thing with Sawyer, whatever it turns out to be, is a hell of a lot of fun right now. How could I not enjoy the freedom he gives me to just be myself? The more I think about it, the more the realization crystallizes that I never had this much fun with Dan.

He never embraced my free-spirited side the way Sawyer does.

Wheeler loops her arm through mine. “The way you’ve lit Sawyer up, I think we’re all a little in love with you.”

My heart thumps. “He wasn’t lit up before?”

“Ella always lights him up, of course,” Mollie explains. “But from what I understand—I’m relatively new around here too—he’s had a bit of a rough road. Cash says Sawyer is the one who took their parents’ deaths the hardest. He’s always putting everyone else first. I’m glad he’s changing that up now that you’re around. He seems ...”

“Relaxed,” Wheeler says. “Less anxious.”

My chest *glows* at the compliment. Even as I feel like I don’t necessarily deserve it. Isn’t he putting *me* first whenever we’re together? I try to return the favor as best as I can, but he can be so overwhelming in his desire to please, to nurture, that it’s not an easy task.

*Oh, you poor, sweet, sexy-ass cowboy. I’m gonna show you the best time*

*ever on Saturday.*

“Aw, thanks for saying that,” I say. “You guys sure know how to make a gal feel good.”

Wheeler gestures to the wall of boots. “It’s kind of our whole job. So, Ava, talk to me about your ideal vibe for Saturday night.”

“Oooh, this is fun!” Mollie claps her hands. “I don’t want to give away too much —”

“So you know exactly what Sawyer is planning,” I say, blushing even harder. I’m going to kill this man.

And after that, I am going to kiss the shit out of him.

“I do. He required some of my, how shall we say it? Expertise in certain areas.”

Wheeler shrugs. “Told you he wanted everything to be perfect.”

My heart is in my throat now. He’s putting a lot of effort into this date.

Like, a lot.

Part of me wants to run for the hills. Sawyer doesn’t fuck around. He *likes* me.

But if I’m being honest, I *like* him too. How could I not? We’ve covered a hell of a lot of ground in the short time we’ve known each other.

Which is slightly terrifying if I think about it. I already feel all mushy and tender inside. I already can’t wait to see him again. When I ran into him at drop-off this morning, I couldn’t stop smiling after he cracked an innocuous joke that was actually very dirty—one about his coffee not being as good as it was the other day.

He ghosts me now, it’ll hurt.

He disappoints me down the road after I fall head over heels in love with him—maybe he, I don’t know, suddenly decides he isn’t so into my wild side—it’ll absolutely destroy me.

It’s not just me anymore I have to look out for. June is part of this too. So is Ella. Sawyer and I don’t have the luxury of falling apart if—when—shit hits the fan.

But God, does it feel good to be this excited for a date. I always thought my early twenties was when the magic would happen. And magic did happen in my mid-twenties, when I had June. I just wish someone had told me that the best was yet to come—that life doesn’t end after you get married, or have a baby, or go through a divorce.

In many ways, that’s when my life really began. *My* life, the one where I

get to be unapologetically who I really, truly am.

“She’s going to need to be warm,” Mollie is saying.

Wheeler taps a finger against her lips. “Warm, but cute. Like a cute, cozy, snowed-in-at-a-cabin vibe.”

“Honey, that’s your story,” Mollie says.

“Oh?” I ask. “This sounds interesting.”

“That’s another story for another time.” Wheeler waves her hand. “Okay, wait, Mollie—do you still have that Pendleton coat? The tan one, with the yellow and coral and black pattern all over it?”

Mollie gasps. “Ohmigod yes! The blanket jacket! Which she can use as a jacket or —”

“Duh, a blanket after Sawyer strips her naked.”

“Perfect! You’re a genius.” Mollie waddles across the room. “With some jeans and, like, a great slouchy sweater in that coral color to match the coat?”

I hold up my hands. “Whoa whoa whoa, y’all don’t need to lend me clothes or anything.”

“But we want to,” Mollie calls over her shoulder as she enters what appears to be a bathroom.

Wheeler puts a hand on my forearm. “This is fun for us. It’s not often that we miss Dallas—that’s where we started Bellamy Brooks. But we do miss the shopping and the clothes and the fashion. If you’re okay with it, we’d love to style you.”

“I’m definitely okay with it.” I chuckle. “I just don’t want to put y’all out.”

“Never.” Wheeler turns back to the wall of cowboy boots. “Okay, with this look, I’m envisioning something classic with a twist. Maybe echo that coral color? Ah! Yes! This gal.” She pulls a tan pair off the wall. They’re mid-calf boots, with an almond toe and coral-colored stitching on the toe box and up the sides.

“I love them,” I breathe, reaching out to run my fingers over the butter-soft leather.

“What size are you?” Wheeler looks down at my feet. “Nine?”

“Good guess.”

“Lucky for you, Mollie wears the same size, so we always have samples in a nine.” Wheeler tips the boot over to look at the sole. “Yep, that’s it. Let’s try it on.”

Mollie emerges from the closet. She’s carrying the prettiest patterned coat

I think I've ever seen, along with a V-neck sweater in a bold shade of coral.

My pulse flutters as the outfit comes together in my head. It's going to be fabulous. I'm not even wearing it, and I already feel prettier than I have in years.

I don't typically buy stuff like this for myself—working with horses and/or toddlers all day means my wardrobe is pretty utilitarian—so it's a thrill to try it all on, along with the boots.

Mollie guides me to the full-length mirror beside the desk. Taking in my reflection, I smile. Hard.

"Aw, sweetie, you look gorgeous." Wheeler gives my hair a fluff, pushing it over my shoulder. "Sawyer's not going to be able to keep his hands off you."

Mollie smiles too. "Exactly what we were going for. I think you're all set, Ava. Now go get your cowboy."

## CHAPTER 20

*Sanyer*



## LONE STAR STATE

**HEART POUNDING**, I park my truck beside Ava's Subaru outside the cute carriage house. I cut the ignition and wipe my clammy palms over my jeans.

It's not like me to get nervous. But here I am, nervous as hell as I shove open my door and step out into the warm twilight. Even though it's still technically winter, we've been getting some hints of spring. Lots of sunshine, temps in the sixties, a mild breeze. I don't hate it, especially when it allows me to take a girl out to a bonfire for a picnic dinner.

I really hope she likes the fried chicken. Patsy was so patient as she walked me through her Mamaw's recipe last night. My kitchen was a mess, but Ella got a huge kick out of dredging the chicken first in buttermilk, then in Patsy's secret flour-and-spice mix that we had to pinkie-promise not to ever, *ever* share.

Not gonna lie, I'm damn proud of how it turned out.

I grab the roses I ordered from an out-of-town florist—cost me a small fortune, but worth it for the inside joke—and head across the driveway.

Like the rest of the Wallace Ranch, the carriage house is thoughtfully designed and beautifully maintained. It's constructed in their signature limestone and painted timber mix, with a tin roof and steel windows.

I smile when I see a glittery purple scooter on the walkway, complete with a foam unicorn head and rainbow streamers on the handles. Is Junie as obsessed with riding her scooter around the ranch as Ella is?

Apparently they had a ball together baking with Mrs. Wallace on Wednesday. I had to work, so my nanny dropped off Ella and picked her up.

But Ella was all smiles that evening, and Ava told me they got along well when she and I were texting later that night.

Because that's our thing now. After we get the kids down, we text about everything and nothing. We catch each other up on our days. What we're thinking. What we're reading. No filter. No games. Just us shooting the shit. She's really into a gal named Martha Beck, and I can't get enough of the *Slough House* spy novels I bought after binge-watching the show *Slow Horses*.

Then we send each other nudes. I've thought about calling instead—I've never had phone sex, and I'd like to try it—but I don't want to push or overwhelm her. Figure we have plenty of time to explore that particular avenue. Plus, I like having the pictures she sends me for the morning, when, without fail, I wake up hard and hungry.

Apparently, Ava's turned me into a horny teenager again. I don't hate it.

I keep waiting for the spark between us to fade. For my hunger to lessen, or at the very least become manageable.

Instead, I think about her all day and dream of her all night. I go to bed sated after sexting but wake up hard enough to fuck a hole through my mattress.

The exponential acceleration of my feelings, our level of connection—it's scary as hell. Difficult to control. Even more difficult to believe. I've waited my whole life to feel this way, but now that it's happening, I feel unprepared. It's so much better than I could have imagined.

So much more of a mindfuck.

I carefully tuck the roses into the crook of my arm. Picking up the scooter with my free hand, I set it underneath the eave by the garage door. We're supposed to get rain tomorrow, and I don't want the scooter—or Junie's day—to get ruined.

Then, taking a deep breath, I head for the front door. Earlier, when I dropped Ella off at Cash and Mollie's place, Mollie said I looked "handsome as all get-out" in my jeans, button-up, and jacket. I debated wearing a baseball hat—backward, of course—but Mollie said I should definitely wear the brown felt Stetson I borrowed from Wyatt.

"Baseball hats are hot, but cowboy hats are *hot*," she explained.

Cash grinned, putting a hand on Mollie's growing belly. "Here's proof."

"I'm happy for y'all, really, but—yeah, please don't elaborate," I said, but I was smiling as I headed back to my truck.

Luckily Ella was thrilled to be spending time with Uncle Cash and Auntie Mollie, and she didn't give me a hard time as I left. My brother and his wife insisted they take her overnight, despite my warnings that my little sleep terrorist likely wouldn't want to stay in her bed in the guest room.

In fact, they seemed pretty thrilled about having her over. Cash bought Disney+ just for the occasion, and he told Ella he couldn't wait to become acquainted with Rapunzel, Elsa, and Ariel. Mollie wouldn't stop texting me this week about how excited she was to play with the scratch-and-sniff stickers she'd grabbed at the pharmacy downtown.

Go figure, my family really is okay with lending me a hand. No one seems any more overwhelmed than normal. No one seems to resent me.

I'm okay with it.

Mostly. On the drive over to the Wallace Ranch, I had to turn up the radio to keep from spiraling. Should I have scrapped the whole overnight idea? I don't want to have to rush through my date with Ava to get home, but maybe I should've insisted that Cash come to my place and babysit there for a few hours instead.

What if Ella wakes up twenty times and no one gets any sleep at all? What if she doesn't eat, or she fights them on going to bed, or she makes a huge mess and they're up late cleaning up after her? Cash and Mollie both have so much on their plates. They're overseeing a major overhaul of a ranch that's nearly the size of a small New England state, for crying out loud. Not to mention the fact that Mollie's expecting. They need their rest.

Then again, I also need a night off. And I'm not about to let Ava slip through my fingers. If I'm real about making a potential relationship with her work, then I have to make myself a priority every once in a while.

I have to make some changes. Like Wyatt said, Cash and Mollie get to put up their feet and catch up on sleep after I take Ella home. That's their break.

This is mine.

Lifting my hand, I knock on the door. My heart drums. Anticipation zips through my veins, making me feel lightheaded and nervous and ... giddy.

*Holy shit, I'm making changes.*

I'm thinking about a relationship for the first time since, well, Lizzie and I decided to call it quits. Am I getting way ahead of myself? Or am I doing what I should be and quietly putting a wish out into the universe in the hope that it comes true?

Being with Ava is the first time I feel like there's a real possibility that my wish actually will come true. Maybe it's stupid. Maybe I'm assuming too much, and it's going to end up biting me in the ass. But I don't wanna be alone anymore.

I want Ava.

I hear the familiar pitter-patter of tiny footsteps. Then the door swings open and Junie appears, smiling up at me with her big, toothy grin.

"Mr. Sawyer's here, Mommy!" she says.

I crouch, careful not to drop the flowers, and hold up my hand. "Hey, Junie. How ya doin'?"

"I'm good." She gives me a high five. I notice her hand is covered almost entirely in purple marker.

"Ella says hello. She can't wait to play with you again."

Junie nods. "Yella is my friend."

"She loves being your friend. Thanks for being so kind to her."

"Ella has been the best guide to preschool. Isn't that right, Bug?"

I look up to see Ava at the top of the steps that dead-end at the door. Her apartment is on the second floor while the garage is on the first, so the front door opens right onto the stairs.

"Yeah," June agrees. "She's the most special."

Meanwhile, I'm struggling to breathe as I watch Ava descend the stairs. She's in a pair of jeans and an oversize sweater that's the color of sunset on a summer day. Her long hair is loose over her shoulders and back, and today she's styled it in waves that frame her pretty face. Her lips are glossy and her eyes are bright, and I feel her excitement—her happiness—as a wallop to the chest.

"Hey, cowboy." She smiles.

I notice she's wearing a pair of new boots.

Bellamy Brooks boots. My heart skips several beats when I remember Mollie telling me how excited Ava was to buy a pair for our date.

*This is happening, isn't it?*

When I look into Ava's eyes, the realization hits home—we're both really, really into this. Into each other.

I should be scared. Cautious.

Instead, I stand up and hold the flowers aside so I can kiss her cheek, flattening my palm on the small of her back so I can press her hips into mine. "Hey, pretty girl."

Tucking her face into my neck, she takes a deep inhale. “You smell delicious. What’re these?” She nods at the flowers.

“Two dozen roses.”

Ava blinks, pulling back to get a better look. She glances up at me, her lips curving into a pretty grin. “That’s the song we danced to at the Blue Stallion.”

“And at the barn.” I hold them out to her. “Thought that’d make you smile.”

“Mr. Sawyer?” June tugs on my jeans. “Will you play duck duck goose with us?”

Ava blinks again before taking the flowers. “They’re beautiful. Thank you, Sawyer. And listen, Bug, Mr. Sawyer and I have to get going. You’re going to stay here and play with Miss Lee, okay?”

“Really, Ava, I’m not in a rush.” I smile down at June. “I could totally go for a round or two of duck duck goose.”

Junie jumps up and down. “Yes yes yes! Please, Mommy, let him stay. Just for one game.”

I love how excited she gets. Three is not an easy age, but it’s fun to witness how thrilling the world is to these kids. It’s a nice reminder that I wasn’t always a tired, overwhelmed parent.

I won’t always *be* that guy.

Ava looks at me. “You sure?”

“I’m sure.” Taking off my hat, I hang it on one of the hooks beside the door. Only polite to take off your hat when you’re indoors, especially when you’re visiting your date’s home for the first time.

I don’t miss the way Ava watches me run a hand through my hair, her eyes flashing with heat as I shoulder out of my jacket.

I follow them up the stairs. The apartment is beautiful, with a gabled beamed ceiling and newly refurbished finishes. The soaring living room opens up into a kitchen and dining area. Down a narrow hallway I can just glimpse a pair of doors, which I assume are the bedrooms.

It smells like Ava inside, girlie shampoo and that perfume of hers. I see her touches everywhere: the pink paisley kitchen towels hanging on the lip of the sink, the oversize couch piled with far too many pillows, and the bold, colorful art on the walls.

Ava sets the flowers on the kitchen counter. Junie immediately heads in the direction of the baskets of toys lined up on the living room wall. An older

woman is already sitting on the rug there, and Ava introduces her as Miss Lee, her nanny.

I bite back a smile when Lee gives me a once-over. She does it again, and again, her blush apparent as I sit cross-legged on the rug beside her.

“You know, I dated a cowboy or two in my day.” She sighs. “Those were good times.”

Ava sits across from me, the three of us forming a little circle. “Uh-oh, Lee. Were you trouble?”

“Only the good kind.”

I laugh. “Funny, but Ava’s that kind of trouble too.”

“I am,” Ava says, giving her shoulders a wiggle.

“Okay, I’m it.” Junie stands beside me. “Mr. Sawyer, do you know how to play duck duck goose?”

“I sure do. Ella taught me well.”

“Good. Okay, I’ll start.” June plops her hand onto my head. “Duck. That means you don’t get up and chase me yet.”

I give her a thumbs-up. “Got it.”

“But if I tap your head and I say *goose*, then you have to chase me.”

“Great refresher of the rules. Thank you, Junie.”

“You’re welcome,” she singsongs, skipping around our circle. “Duck. Duck.” She pauses beside me, before tapping my head and yelling, “Goose!”

I push up to my feet. “Oh, girl, you’d best run, ’cause I’m gonna get ya!”

“You won’t get me!” Junie is giggling as she sprints away. “I’m very fast!”

I make a big show of huffing and puffing while I chase her, wiping my brow with the back of my hand. “Goodness, June, you are fast.”

Junie is laughing so hard that she can barely breathe by the time I grab her and toss her into the air.

“Gotcha! Finally.”

Junie pats my cheek as I settle her on my hip. “You’re slow.”

“I’m old. There’s a difference.”

Ava is still laughing. “Is there?”

“Why is your face so spiky?” Junie asks, peering at my mustache. “I don’t like it.”

Ava’s laughing again. “I like it. A lot.”

“Y’all are putting me between a rock and a hard place right now,” I reply. “I value both your opinions. What’s a guy to do?”

Lee slowly shakes her head, a wistful look on her face. “Keep the mustache. Always.”

“Always,” Ava agrees.

“Can I play with Yella tomorrow?” Junie’s hand is still on my cheek. “She can come to my house.”

“She’d love to play with you tomorrow. Maybe y’all could come to our place this time? Give your mama a break from cleaning up after you heathens?” I glance at Ava.

Her eyes are soft. “We could probably make that happen, yeah.”

“Yay!” Junie yells.

“Indoor voice, please,” Ava says. “All right, it’s time for Mr. Sawyer and me to get going. Do you promise to be good for Miss Lee?”

“I promise.”

“You’re such a big, brave girl.” I give Junie a squeeze before setting her down. “Thanks for letting me borrow your mom tonight.”

Junie grins. “You’re welcome.”

“God she’s cute,” I murmur to Ava as we watch June make a beeline for Lee.

Ava grabs a jacket. “She is when she wants to be.”

“Aren’t they all? Here, lemme get that.” I take the jacket from her and hold it up. “We lucked out. It’s not as chilly as I thought it’d be, but you’ll still be glad you have this.”

Ava digs her teeth into her bottom lip before turning around to slip her arms into the jacket. I place it on her shoulders, arcing my thumb over the inside of her neck.

Her breath catches, a flash of heat moving across her eyes. “Thank you. Now let’s get the hell out of here before Junie changes her mind about her allowing you to borrow me.”

## CHAPTER 21



*Ava*

## BONFIRE

**SAWYER LOOKS—SMELLS—GOOD** enough to eat. The Stetson is just ... yeah, chef's kiss. And the flowers? I don't think I've stopped smiling since.

He also drove over twenty miles out of his way to pick me up.

Not only that, he was an enthusiastic participant in duck duck goose. He and his mustache even charmed my nanny, for God's sake.

Then there's the fact that his truck is neat as a pin. No disgusting cups of discarded tobacco in the cupholders—Dan left his everywhere, even in *my* car. No trash on the floor. There's not even a stray Goldfish or hair tie in the back, where Ella's plum-colored car seat is strapped in.

It's also a really nice truck. New. Safe. Cushy, even, with heated leather seats and a stellar sound system that pumps Teddy Swims songs as we drive through the deepening twilight.

"I had a cool, old F-150 before," he explains. "But once I could afford something newer—something safer and more comfortable for Ella—I got this truck. When Mollie and Cash combined our ranches, they made my brothers and me equal partners in everything. Got a big pay raise that day."

So that explains why he was able to splash out on all that champagne in Austin.

Also. It's obvious Sawyer *cares*. Not about luxury or showing off his newfound wealth. But he takes care of his things the same way he takes care of his people.

He's aware—he pays attention—in a way that makes my chest ache. He carries his weight. Takes on his fair share of life's work and then some.

I've never met a man like him.

To be honest, I wasn't sure they existed until—well, I met Sawyer.

"You feel all right leaving Junie tonight?" He drapes his wrist over the top of the steering wheel. He puts his other hand on my thigh, awareness blooming to life between my legs.

I love the way this man touches me. How casually, confidently possessive he is. I don't think he could play games if he tried. He likes me, he wants me, and he isn't afraid to show it.

"I'm getting better about it. I definitely needed the break. I'm a better mom when I can put my oxygen mask on for a bit, you know?"

"I know. I find myself snapping at Ella because I'm just so burned out. It's not fair to either of us."

I put my hand over his on my leg. "Still hard not to feel guilty."

"Really hard." His Adam's apple bobs. "But I'm hoping I'll get in the habit of going out more."

"Preferably with me."

He smiles at the familiar line, a handsome flash of white teeth and those fucking dimples. Could he be more devastatingly delicious?

"That's the hope, pretty girl."

My turn to swallow. "I'm not sure I remember how to date."

"I got no fuckin' clue what I'm doing." He turns his head a little to glance at me. "Maybe we can learn together?"

I curl my fingers around his and give them a squeeze. "You don't give yourself enough credit. You're already killing it."

His smile morphs into a smirk. "I've never thought of myself as an overachiever —"

"Stop. You're good at what you do, and you know it."

"Well, I'm good at doing you. I know that much."

The spark in my core flares into an all-out bonfire. How do I not devour this cowboy?

How can I stay focused and smart and rational when he's in the room?

*You don't. You go wild, just like you want to. It's who you are.*

Trusting the universe to keep me from falling on my face—trusting the belief that I should be proud of who I am, not ashamed—will take lots of practice. But it's a practice I want to commit to. Because the ability to be myself with Sawyer has been such a gift.

Maybe his adoration of my free spirit ends. Maybe it doesn't. Either way,

*I want to like who I am. I want to honor that woman by giving her the freedom she's always craved.*

*Always deserved.*

By the time Sawyer pulls off-road and drives at least half a mile into a rolling field of trees and grass, I'm sick with want.

*I'm vibrating with the need to have this man. Have fun.*

*Have the best first official date ever.*

He parks in the middle of nowhere beside a gnarled old oak tree and hops out of the truck, jogging around the front to open my door.

When he holds out a hand, his hat casts a shadow over his face. For a split second, he looks like an outlaw from one of those '50s Westerns—determined set to his square jaw, danger lurking in eyes I can barely see.

*Sawyer is dangerous. Just not in the way I thought he'd be.*

I take his hand and let him help me out of the truck. I close the door behind me. The air out here is crisp, slightly chilly.

Then—because why the fuck not, because I want him and I want this and I'm done denying myself—I put my hands on his chest and give him a hard shove.

He falls against the truck, his back meeting with the passenger door. Grinning, he holds up his hands. “Whoa whoa —”

“Since neither of us knows how to date”—I hook a finger into his belt loop —“there are no rules, right?”

His eyes darken. “Right.”

“So why not come first,” I say, unbuckling his belt as I drop to my knees, “and eat second?”

“Long as you let me eat, pretty girl.” His jaw tics. “You don't have to —”

“Finish what we started back at your place the other morning?” I unzip his jeans to find him already hard, his erection straining against his briefs. “Yeah I do.”

Nostrils flaring, he reaches down to cup my jaw. “You come to play, pretty girl?”

“Uh-huh.” I tug down his briefs so that his dick springs free. The rocky ground digs into my knees, but I don't care. “It's your turn to have some fun.”

I wrap my hand around his root and give him a pump, humming with pleasure when I draw a bead of pre-cum onto his head.

“Aw, baby, this is the kind of fun I like.” Gathering my hair in his hand so it’s out of my face, he tugs. “You’re gonna look so pretty with my dick in your mouth, aren’t you? Show me. Show me right now what you can do.”

I lick his crown, lapping up his cum. He tastes salty, clean, like the ocean. He hisses. “You like my cum.”

I murmur my assent, opening my mouth and flattening my tongue. Meeting his eyes, I silently invite him to do what he wants.

His nostrils do that thing where they flare. He looks huge, unhinged, the sinews in his neck popping.

“Then I’m gonna give it to you.” He firms his grip on my hair. “But only if you do what I tell you.”

I wait, my hand still wrapped around his dick.

“Put me inside your mouth. Go slow. You wanna suck my dick, you’re not gonna rush.”

I do as he told me, guiding his head into my mouth. I give him a gentle suck that has him cursing, using the hand he has on my hair to push himself a little deeper.

“You’re gonna let me fuck you hard here, yeah?” he says through gritted teeth.

I hum again. He pushes deeper. I swallow his saltiness, keeping eye contact the whole time. My nipples harden, suddenly sensitive to the nubby fabric of my sweater.

“That’s a good girl. Such a good fucking *girl*, Ava. My God.” He sucks in a breath as he pumps his hips. At the same time, he pushes my head forward.

I gag, tears flooding my eyes, but I don’t pull back. Instead, I swallow, and his tip meets with the back of my mouth. My pussy throbs when he gives my hair a hard pull, a tingly wave moving over my scalp.

“Stay still. Right there,” he says. “You gonna let me do what I want?”

I give him a nod.

“Good. Keep breathing. I want to feel you working for it, yeah? You want my cum, you work for it.”

This guy is *good* at being filthy. It turns me on to no end.

I hold still as he draws out a little, then thrusts back in. I gag again. He pulls back, thrusts. Pulls back and thrusts, picking up speed.

“Aw, baby, you feel so fucking good. Almost as good as you feel between your legs. You’re sweet everywhere, pretty girl.”

Encouraged by his praise, I give his head a quick, hard suck when he

pulls back. In reply, he slams forward.

“Fuck that feels good. Fuck. I’m gonna come and you best swallow all of it. Show me how much you want me, baby.” His thrusts become shallow, uneven, and then he’s closing his eyes and shouting my name. “Fuck, Ava. *Fuck.*”

He pulls back just enough to spill inside my mouth. There’s so much cum that I’m worried I’ll choke, but he pulls back a little more so I’m able to swallow.

Opening his eyes, he watches me take all of him, just like he asked. His blue eyes are wild, bright even in the barely there light. His shoulders are relaxed, rolled back, and his lips are parted as his chest barrels out with deep breaths that begin to slow.

It hits me just how much he needed that.

Just how much he enjoyed it. Just how much I did too.

I’ve never thought about it this way, but in my work life, I break horses and train riders all day long.

With Sawyer, I’m doing the opposite. I’m bringing out his wild. I’m not breaking him, I’m bringing him back to life.

I think he’s doing the same for me.

We look at each other for a full beat. It really is chilly out here, but I’m burning up. Judging by the sheen of sweat on his neck, he is too.

Loosening his grip on my hair, he pulls out of my mouth and grabs my elbows, helping me up to my feet. My knees hurt and so do my toes, but that’s nothing a few drinks and maybe an orgasm or two can’t fix.

Sawyer brushes the hair out of my face and tilts his head, pressing a hot kiss to my mouth. “Hey, baby.”

“Hi.” I tug on his bottom lip with my teeth.

“You’re real fuckin’ good at that.” Breaking the kiss, he thumbs the corner of my mouth. “Not a drop to spare.”

“You’re not the only overachiever here tonight.”

His lips twitch. “Bet I still got ya beat.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Before I know what’s happening, he’s circling my waist with his hands and he’s tossing me onto the hood of his truck like I weigh as much as a feather. Sitting me up, he parts my legs and steps between them, cupping my ass so he can pull me even closer. I loop my arms around his neck and play

with his hair.

Then he's kissing me, slipping his tongue into my mouth in a way that makes my skin feel two sizes too tight. He's unbuttoning my coat and slipping a hand inside my sweater. He curses when he finds my bare breast.

"Pretty girl, you best not be lyin' about leaving your panties at home too."

"You forget, I'm a naked person." Laughing into his kiss, I grab his hand and put it on the fly of my jeans.

He makes quick work of the fly. "Lift your hips."

I do as he said, and then he pulls down my jeans a little. He settles my bare ass on the hood, which is still warm from the drive here, and reaches between my legs.

I cry out when he finds my center, pushing his first two fingers through my slit.

"You were telling the truth." He smirks. "See? I'm the true overachiever, always getting you soaked."

I nod, hanging on to his neck for dear life. "It's the hat."

*And the mustache. And the emotional intelligence, and commitment to family, and the perfect dick and blue eyes and the ability to think ahead and and ...*

I could go on forever. Truly.

He sinks his middle finger inside me and his expression contracts. "Aw, pretty girl, you're burnin' up. So hot and tight."

I pull him in for a hungry kiss. My eyes roll to the back of my head behind my closed eyelids when he presses the heel of his palm to my clit. At the same time, he slips another finger inside me. The pressure is unreal.

Unreal, and wonderful.

He curls his fingers so that he's pressing against my G-spot. My hips begin to rock as sensation rises through my core, a tight spiraling that scatters my thoughts and clears my head. I am one huge, throbbing heartbeat, and I lose myself in the joy of just *being*.

I lose myself in Sawyer's kiss and his touch, the way he knows how to handle me with just the right amount of urgency and roughness. He kisses me like the world is ending, drinking me in deeply as he grinds his palm against my clit.

I press into his touch, dying for more friction. He trails his mouth over my cheek and jaw and onto my neck, kissing me there while I ride his hand. The pressure in my core is sweetly painful.

“Oh, honey,” I pant, curling my fingernails into the hair at the nape of his neck. “I *like* this.”

“You like me,” he growls, sending a hot gust of air over my throat. “Only me.”

The swift, heady sense of relief—of arousal—that swoops through me at his words takes me off guard. My heart is lodged somewhere in my throat.

All my talk of freedom. My adamant belief that commitment leads to the death of self. Yet here I am, turned on to an absurd degree by Sawyer staking his claim on me.

By Sawyer’s insinuation that we’re exclusive.

*Is that what I want?* I think wildly. *Can I be free and faithful at the same time?*

The orgasm tears through me. I yell his name on the hood of his Chevy like the animal I am. My toes curl inside my boots as I hold Sawyer against me in a death grip. He laughs into my neck as I come, and come, and *come*.

When I finally float back to earth, I ease my grip and open my eyes. Sawyer’s looking at me. The expression in his gaze—tender, adoring—has my heart falling a hundred stories.

A beat of stillness passes between us as he searches my gaze and I search his.

*I’m falling for you*, my pulse thunders. *So fast and so hard that it’s terrifying. I’m scared. I’m scared. I’m so fucking scared, but I can’t stay away.*

Maybe because freedom and fidelity don’t seem like such mutually exclusive concepts with Sawyer, the way they were with Dan.

The idea shakes me to my core. *I’m shaking.*

Sawyer loops his arm around my middle and pulls me against him, saying in my ear, “I’m right here, pretty girl. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Okay.” I’m embarrassed by how choked up I am. Part of me wants to smile. I *am* smiling.

Another part wants to cry. So I do. Tears silently streak down my face. I wait for Sawyer to pull away. To tell me to get it together.

But Dan was the one who’d do that. Sawyer just holds me until my heart rate evens out.

“You called me honey,” he says.

I squeeze my eyes shut. I already know the answer, but just to be sure, I still ask, “Too much?”



“That’s how you taste, you know.” Pulling back to look at me, he slips his fingers into his mouth, his tongue making an obscene smacking noise as he licks them. “Like honey.”

“You’re rude.”

“You don’t mind.”

My face hurts from smiling so hard. My eyes feel tired from tears. I press my finger into his dimple. “Not one bit.”

“Can I feed you now? Real food.”

He tucks my hair behind my ear. The tenderness of the gesture turns the stuff inside my chest to mush. He is absolutely *not* turned off by my show of vulnerability, and that fact hits me in the back of my knees, making me feel lightheaded and swoony.

“I’ve got quite the spread if I do say so myself.”

I blink back the burn in my eyes. “I’d love that, yes.”

“Hey.” Crooking his finger underneath my chin, he tips up my face. “You okay?”

God, why can’t this guy get at least *one* thing wrong? Why can’t he be, I don’t know, dismissive of my feelings, or at the very least turned off by how emotional I’m getting? Most guys I know would be hightailing it out of here right now. But Sawyer is staying.

He’s *listening*.

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Not to get too deep here—I know this is our first date —”

“I like deep.”

*Of course you do.*

He grins, cupping my face in the warm mitt of his hand. I tilt my head so I can lean into his touch. I even place my hand over his.

*Safe.* This feels safe. And good. And right.

“I’m not used to being treated this way is all.” My voice is tight and small.

His brows pinch together. “What do you mean?”

“You just—you let me be myself. You *like* it when I’m myself. You pay attention and you take care of my needs and you ...” I sigh. “You never judge. You make me feel like I’m a whole, complete person. Not some half-baked mess of things I need to change or work on.”

He looks at me for a long beat, adjusting his grip on my face. “You are a whole person. A person I like very much, just as you are. I hope I’ve made

that crystal clear.”

I wait for the panic to set in.

It doesn’t.

I’m struck by the fact that I keep doing that—waiting, breath held, for the disappointment to happen. For the shame to come raining down. It’s so deeply ingrained in me, this idea that I’m going to be punished for talking and acting freely, that I’m shocked when the shame doesn’t hit.

It never does when I’m with Sawyer.

“I’m worried you’ll want me to change.”

The creases between his brows reappear. “Why would you say that?”

“Because no one’s ever liked me for me. I’ve always been a free spirit —”

“Who? The girl who likes having sex in public?” Sawyer scoffs. “Nah.”

“You enjoyed it.”

“I loved it. Can’t wait to do it again.”

My eyes burn. “But not everyone likes that side of me. So for a while, I buried it. I was—God, so unhappy. So I chose freedom, which I’m very much enjoying. I never want to go back to feeling ashamed for who I am, or pretending to be someone I’m not.”

Sawyer’s eyes glimmer with emotion. “Who the fuck would *ever* want you to change? Being around you, it’s been a breath of fresh air for me. Your free-spiritedness—is that even a word?”

“I think so?” I laugh.

“Your free-spiritedness, it’s made me want to loosen up and have some fucking fun. You ever change, I’ll be mad as hell. Because then I’ll have to go back to being bored and lonely and just, yeah. Worse off.” He holds my eyes. “You make everything better, pretty girl. Just by being you.”

My heart thumps in my throat. Do I run? Assume that, no matter what this cowboy says, he’s eventually going to put me in a cage?

Or do I believe that he really and truly is different?

That *this* story, his and mine, has a different ending than the story I shared with Dan?

My stomach interrupts the emotionally charged silence by growling. Because of course.

Laughing, Sawyer pulls up my jeans and buttons them. “Glad you’re hungry, because I am too. I’ll build a fire, and then we’ll eat. Sound good?”

My heart has wings. “Sounds perfect.”

## CHAPTER 22

*Sanyer*

## SLIP AND FALL

I LAY down a blanket and tell Ava to relax while I set up.

Of course she doesn't listen, and instead helps me set up a fire in the makeshift pit my brothers and I dug a few years back.

"Y'all come here often?" Ava carefully angles the larger pieces of firewood to create a little pyramid. Then she tucks the smaller sticks and bits of kindling inside the pyramid, careful not to overpack it.

"Before Ella was born, we did. Back when I had the energy to stay up past seven thirty. I mean, there's not much else to do on a Friday night in Hartsville. Or any other night, for that matter." My knees crack when I crouch to light the fire. "So you grew up on a ranch too."

She grins, shaking her hair out of her eyes. "What gave me away?"

"The fact that you're a barrel racer." I nod at the wood, which crackles as the fire starts. "And that you know how to build a bonfire."

"Gotta get that airflow going underneath the big pieces," she says. "My dad loves a fire, even during the summer. I was very popular in high school because I could build a legit fire for our field parties."

I grin. "I remember those. Good times."

"This is better."

"Much better. Now would you sit the fuck down?"

"Let me help you set out the food first —"

"Sit." I point to the blanket.

She tilts her head. "Sawyer, you've already done so much."

"Ava, you started this date with my dick in your mouth. You've earned your rest, so sit your free-spirited self the fuck down."

She laughs. "You really are *very* rude."

"Yes ma'am, I am. Now sit, or so help me ..."

She looks at me. I look back. I'm gripped by the fierce urge to grab her. Kiss her. Make her come again.

She got emotional a little while back. I don't mind that. What I do mind is people lying about what they're feeling. Covering up that shit, or sweeping it under the rug.

Ava, though, came right out with it. Her honesty, her vulnerability, is a nice change of pace. It's also the world's biggest turn-on. If she wasn't starving and clearly in need of some food, I'd definitely be inside her right now.

I never knew I had this kind of stamina until I met Ava Bartlett. I barely need any time at all to recover when we're together.

I wonder if your dick really *can* fall off from fucking too much. Guess I'm about to find out.

Rolling her eyes, Ava finally sits. "But I'm helping you clean up."

"No you're not," I call over my shoulder as I head for the truck.

Patsy let me borrow a big wicker picnic basket, which I grab from my truck along with the reusable wine carrier Wyatt filled with several bottles that, his words, "are so good that they'll definitely get you laid."

He waved me away when I told him I didn't need help in that department. "No pressure, but Ava's a gem. Don't fuck this up."

Gotta love my brother for telling it like it is. He's changed so damn much in the past few months, and it's for the better.

I set everything down on the blanket. Then I run back to the car and grab my rifle from underneath the seat. Ava eyes it as I return to the fireside.

"Just in case," I explain, double-checking that the safety is on before setting it down beside me. "We spotted a bear earlier this week. But it was about ten miles east of here, so it shouldn't be anything to worry about."

Ava's eyes glimmer, reflecting the light of the growing fire. "That's not terrifying at all."

"I'm a good shot." I pluck a corkscrew from the wine bag. "You wanna start with white or red?"

"Oooh, red, please."

I open the bottle Wyatt told me to start with. Apparently you always drink the best wine first, because you remember it the most. A couple of glasses in, you might not care as much.

Or, in my case, you might be naked with your date by that point, so really, who gives a fuck what bottle you're on?

*Hold your horses, you horny bastard.*

I'm wildly attracted to Ava. No question about that. Of course I want to fuck her tonight, preferably multiple times.

More than that, though, I want to get to know her. Learn her. Who she is, where she's from, what her story is. Why she felt the need to bury her true self. The time we have together tonight—alone—is precious. As much as I wanna put my head between her thighs and stay there, we should talk.

I want to talk. Mostly because Ava makes me laugh. She also makes me feel like I can do no wrong. Conversation with her is effortless. Fun.

She also keeps it real.

So I pour us some wine and we cheers to the miracle of making it out on a date together, how many months after we first met.

Then I unpack the picnic basket.

"Sorry about the paper plates." I set a pair out on the blanket. "Mollie was horrified, but I thought her grandmother's china was a little much for our first date."

Stretching out so that her legs are straight and she's supporting her weight on one arm, Ava scoffs and rolls her eyes. "That's it. I'm outta here. Paper plates? Really, Sawyer, what kind of girl do you think I am?"

"Hopefully the kind who likes fried chicken." I lift the container out of the basket. "It's my first try making it, so be kind."

Ava blinks. "You made it?"

"From scratch. It's Sally's mom's recipe. Patsy did give me a major assist. Ella did too. We also made this cheesy jalapeño corn bread that's out of this world if I do say so myself."

Ava's smiling as she sips her wine. "What's the secret?"

"Patsy jazzes up plain old Jiffy Corn Muffin Mix. You know the kind in the —"

"Blue box?" Ava nods. "My mom uses the same thing."

"Patsy adds eggs, sour cream, and a shit ton of butter and cheese. She swears freshly grated is best."

Ava sits up, cupping her hand underneath the spatula I use to scoop a square of corn bread onto her plate. "You really went all out."

"Mollie helped me mastermind everything. Please tell me you're impressed."

Leaning in, she kisses the underside of my jaw. “So impressed. Thank you. I feel very special and very hungry.”

I pile our plates with chicken drumsticks, thick slices of corn bread, and the bean and green onion salad I threw together earlier today.

Ava bites into the chicken and moans. “*Sawyer.*”

“That’s the porniest sound I think I’ve ever heard.”

“That’s because this is the best thing I’ve ever eaten. Like, seriously. Wow.”

I tear into a piece myself. The coating is crunchy, just the right amount of flavor and salt, and the meat is perfectly cooked.

“That is good,” I say, taking another bite.

Ava sits cross-legged as she drinks her wine and cleans her plate. When I give her another plate, this one filled with a nice slab of brownie that I frosted with buttercream and drizzled with semisweet chocolate, she literally whimpers with delight.

She’s quiet as she eats. Can’t help but notice how adorably content she looks, wine in one hand, brownie in the other. The golden light of the fire catches on her eyes and hair, illuminating her against the darkness that surrounds us.

I’ve got a full belly. A happy woman beside me. A sky full of stars overhead, and a night to myself.

Have I ever been happier?

When can we do this again? Is a once-weekly date night too much? I’m not sure Ella would love it, but she’d definitely love having a daddy who’s happier, more patient. Maybe the girls could even join us once in a while. A family date could be cute.

All of a sudden, I wanna do everything.

Would my brothers hate me if I asked for more help? What if I asked Miss Caroline to babysit every Saturday night, a standing reservation of sorts? Ava and I could go riding. Go to The Rattler to dance. We could fuck in my back seat, make out in my bed. Cook a meal together. Watch a movie. Drive to Lubbock and go to the movies.

Now that I’m thinking about it, there’s so much to catch up on. Ava and I have had sex in almost every position under the sun. But I don’t know much about her family, or how she became a barrel racer, or why she transitioned into the role of a trainer. Why’d she pick the name June for her daughter? What’s her favorite color? Her favorite movie?



I can't remember the last time I asked someone those questions. I feel like I've spent the past three and a half years buried in parenthood. I'm finally able to come up for air—I'm finally getting a taste of freedom again—and it feels fucking good.

*The hard part is behind you. The good part is ahead.*

"Really, I don't get how you haven't been wifed up yet. Or would it be husband-ed?" Ava wipes her mouth with a napkin. "You're an incredible cook. You're excellent at duck duck goose. You look super fucking sexy in all kinds of hats."

I touch the brim of my Stetson. "Thank you kindly, Miss Bartlett. And you know, I've been a little busy raising Ella on my own. Her mom isn't super involved, so ..."

The light flickers across Ava's face as she reaches for the wine bottle and refills our glasses. "You ready to talk about it? I totally understand if you're not comfortable sharing that stuff with me, but I'm here if you need someone to listen."

Sipping my wine, I lick my lips. Wyatt really does know his shit when it comes to this stuff. The wine is delicious, intensely flavorful but not too sweet. I like the mellow buzz it gives me too.

With a groan, I stretch out on my side, my feet toward the fire. Its warmth radiates up my legs. "Is this the part of the night where we tell each other things we've never told anyone else?"

"I'm game if you are."

"How are you so willing to just, yeah"—I sigh—"go there?"

She laughs. "Go where?"

"You have no problem accessing your inner child. You can be silly, but you can also be soft. You're not terrified of the past—the truth—the way I am. I'm not good at being vulnerable."

Ava's eyes take on a thoughtful gleam as they search mine. "Just the fact that you can admit that means you're not as terrified as you think. But really, give yourself more credit. As parents, we're rewarded for being overachievers, like you mentioned. We're made to feel like the more we do, the better off our kids will be. It's hard not to get stuck in the mode of just, you know, getting shit done. Becoming a taskmaster machine."

I scoff. "I feel like that's all I do, get shit done. From the second I wake up to the second I crawl into bed, I am checking things off the never-ending to-do list I keep in my head. Been that way since my parents died. When you

stay busy, you don't have time to think too much about anything, you know?"

"Aw, Sawyer." She reaches for my hand. "Like you said, it's been your way of coping. Try not to beat yourself up too much."

"It's not a healthy way of coping, though. Rationally, I know that. But tough to get out of get-shit-done mode and deal with your baggage when you live with a toddler."

Ava nods, thoughtful. "As parents, we really have no choice. Shit does need to get done. But I get what you're saying about how easy it is to lose our true selves in the busyness. I figured out pretty early that if I spend all my time *doing*, I feel super productive, but I'm also cranky and resentful and just ... unhappy. So I try to let myself be a little less productive and a little more spontaneous—a little more fun. It's what keeps me sane."

"See?" I sip my wine. "You *let* yourself have fun. You're able to just do that, no angst."

"Oh, there was angst. I mean, it cost me my marriage."

My heart dips. From what she told me earlier, I had a feeling her ex was a big part of why she felt the need to bury her wild side. "I'm sorry."

Ava glances at the fire and lets out a long, low breath.

"It's a long story. I understand if you're not up for it." She glances at me.

I choose my words carefully. "I've wanted to know yours since the night we met. I'm ready."

Her expression softens. "Why are you so good?"

"Because you're teaching me how to have fun, which makes me happy, which in turn makes me an excellent listener. Talk."

She smiles, reaching over to give me a gentle push. "I don't exactly follow that line of reasoning —"

"Well, yeah." I'm smiling like an idiot, and I don't care. "Being around you kind of scrambles my brain sometimes."

"Didn't know I had that kind of power."

"Oh, pretty girl, you absolutely do know that."

Her eyes get this funny look in them. She doesn't need to ask me if I'm one-hundred percent sure I want to hear her story. She knows I do.

That simple, silent exchange—the intimacy of it—has me short of breath.

"Okay. Where to begin?" Sipping her wine, she sets it down on the ground just off the blanket. Then she pulls her knees to her chest and wraps her arms around her legs, shaking her hair out of her face. "Dan and I—we were young when we met in high school, and we were young when we got

married at twenty-two. I look back and wonder what the hell I was thinking.” Scoffing, she looks down at her legs. “I was so eager to play house, you know? I’d been working my ass off training during the day to stay on the circuit and then going to school at night, and I think I was burned out and looking for a place to land. Looking for an excuse to slow down.”

My heart thumps inside my chest. I don’t love hearing her say another man’s name. But I do love how insightful she is. Like me, it’s obvious she’s turned this particular stone over and over in her mind until its edges have been worn smooth.

“I get that,” I say. “College wasn’t in the cards for me, so I worked my ass off too. A lot of life happens between high school graduation at eighteen and turning twenty-two. I think you start to realize at that point just how tough adulting is. The monotony of it. Thinking, *Shit, I can’t do this for another twenty, thirty, forty years. I don’t know if I can do it for another two.*”

“Bingo.” She points a finger at me. “I loved racing, but I was struggling to break out. I was on the road a lot, and I missed so much at home. I have no idea how I got a degree, because I never went to class. I didn’t love my major, either, which definitely didn’t help. I mean, what was I supposed to do with a bachelor’s in business? Getting married, setting down roots—it seemed like the answer to all my problems. Dan and I dated all through high school, and everyone always assumed we’d get married. So that’s what we did. Yeah, he didn’t love the fact that I was a bit of a wild card sometimes, but I loved him so much that I was willing to try to be a little less ‘spirited,’ as he called me. A little more ... I don’t know, *good*. Proper, the way a wife should be. A couple of years later, I got pregnant with June. We both wanted kids, so we were excited.” Her eyes get wet, and she looks away. “Really, really excited.”

I reach over and put a hand on her knee. I don’t say anything. Don’t think I need to. Ava knows I’m here, I’m listening.

“Things were ‘fine’ ”—here she uses air quotes—“before June was born. I did everything, but I thought that was normal. That’s what my mom did, you know? And I wanted so badly to be good to Dan. So I did all the cleaning and cooked all the meals and made sure all the bills were paid. I organized all our date nights. Managed all the relationships with our families. It annoyed me, but Dan worked a lot, so I kind of let it slide. Never mind the fact that I was working too while also going to school at night. Then I got pregnant, and

I started to really notice just how skewed our marriage was in terms of workload. I distinctly remember being eight months pregnant and putting together June's crib all by myself."

"What?" Anger grips my windpipe and squeezes. "You shouldn't have been lifting any of that shit. Where the hell was he?"

Ava shrugs. "Working. Where else? I finally got sick of asking him to build the damn thing, so I did it myself."

"I have no words."

"I had a lot of them, and they all started with the letter *F*."

Leave it to Ava to find humor in a very dark story.

"Did he apologize?"

"He did. He promised to do better, but—spoiler alert—he didn't. When Junie was born, the wheels just totally fell off on our marriage. I was still trying to do everything on my own, but I couldn't."

"No one can. Not with a newborn."

"Thank God I had my parents. Well, my mom, really. I was drowning in resentment, and I begged Dan to help more. We'd get into these huge fights, both of us just screaming our heads off. He'd be a little more helpful afterward, but then we'd eventually settle back into our roles. I was the doer; he was the provider. That's one thing I hadn't expected when I got married and had a kid—all the unspoken expectations that came with being a wife and a mother."

"I haven't thought about it like that —"

"I mean, marriage is kind of a trap for women. A cage that keeps you from flying too far or too high. Really, I found it to be the death of freedom."

I blink.

"It's why I never want to get married again," she continues. "I had to sacrifice my freedom to keep my husband happy, and that's a crappy bargain."

Her words are like a punch to the chest.

"Wait. For real? You never want to get married again?"

She looks at me, her eyes going wide as the realization dawns. "Oh, wow, you definitely do, don't you?"

"Hell yeah I do. I've never been married. Lizzie and me—she's Ella's mom—we never tied the knot. Hell, we barely even dated."

"Talk about stories." Ava raises her brows. "That sounds like one."

I fight the crestfallen feeling taking hold in my chest. I am skipping

many, many steps ahead here. This is my *first date* with Ava. It's almost criminal to be thinking about marriage at this point.

Is it, though? Neither of us has the luxury of fucking around. We have kids. Demanding jobs. Lots of people rely on us.

I also know what I want at this point in my life. I want to have the kind of happy, respectful marriage my parents did. Have a family. Have more kids. Do it all with a partner who shows up and keeps her promises.

I want a partner who will stick around. Because this single-parent shit, it's lonely. And hard. And I would never choose to keep doing it all by myself if I had that choice.

"Finish your story first," I say, knocking back my wine.

Ava eyes me. "Are you all right?"

"Finish your story."

"I mean, that's pretty much it. I needed Dan to step up and help out more. He didn't. Meanwhile, I quit racing because I couldn't juggle everything. We went to counseling. Still nothing changed. I always had this secret belief that it'd be easier to raise June on my own, without having to worry about Dan and his feelings and his moods. I tried so hard to keep him happy. Keep him around. But the harder I tried to be the perfect wife, the more miserable we both were. So I let myself off the hook and moved out. Turns out life *is* easier when I allow myself to have some fun and put my needs first. Well, not easy —"

"Oh, I know."

"But better. Now here I am." She holds out an arm. "I can honestly say I'm happier than I've been since before I got married. But Lord, it was a *broken* road that led me here."

I squeeze her knee. "It led you to me."

She searches my face. "How can we have such great chemistry when we want totally different things?"

"Do we want different things?" I resist the urge to refill my wine. Ava can drink all she wants, but I gotta drive. "Ever think it's not marriage that's the problem, but the guy you were married to?"

She tilts her head back and forth. "Yes and no. Dan was a shitty partner, no doubt about that. But I also think we're all socialized to take on shitty roles without realizing it. No one talks about these things, but we live them day in and day out. Minute by minute. It's really hard to undo all that conditioning. I'm not sure if it will be any different in a relationship where

you're not signing marriage papers. I hope it will be, but ..."

"Do y'all split custody?"

"We do. Well, we're supposed to. I have June during the week, and he'll come grab her every other weekend. It's about all he can handle, even though his parents help him out a lot when he has her."

I slide my hand up her thigh. "I would die if I only saw Ella every other weekend."

"I know you would." She meets my eyes. "Most guys aren't like you, Sawyer."

"Maybe that conditioning you were talkin' about didn't work so well on me."

"Maybe." She searches my gaze, leaning in so her mouth is inches from mine. "Or maybe you're just trying really hard to get laid."

My eyes flick to her lips. "You're distracting me."

"Is it working?"

"You're one hell of a distraction, Ava. Of course it's working. I just wish you'd let me pick your brain a little more about all this."

She extends her legs and lies down beside me. I roll onto my back and she cuddles up next to me, putting her head on my chest.

Above us, the sky is a clear, cold blanket of stars. Nothing quite like the show Mother Nature puts on out here in Hill Country.

"Start by telling me about you," she says softly, drawing her fingertip across my sternum.

## CHAPTER 23

*Ava*



## LIFESAVER

**I HEAR** the rapid beat of Sawyer's heart as his chest rises and falls on a deep inhale.

*Is he nervous?* Why? I hope he knows I'd never judge him for what he says. I'd like to think that by now he trusts me the way I trust him.

Or maybe he's still processing the jarring realization that he and I have very different visions of what happily ever after looks like.

To be honest, I have no idea how to approach that mismatch. Should I even approach it at all? Seems way too serious to be talking about stuff like custody and marriage on a first date.

Then again, this isn't a typical first date with the typical guys I saw after my divorce. Really, I feel like Sawyer and I have been on several dates at this point. I'm glad we're getting to know each other on a deeper level. Glad we're talking about shit that's real, even if it does hurt a little knowing there's a good chance we won't end up together.

Because even though I know, rationally, that Sawyer deserves someone who's less jaded and more open than I am, I can't help but feel that we're good for each other.

At least, *I* feel good when we're together. I feel light and free and happy. I feel like *myself*. Right now in particular, I feel warm, the heat of the fire at my feet paling in comparison to the heat of Sawyer's body that seeps through my clothes and fills my skin with this starry, buzzy rush.

The guy really is a furnace.

I just don't know what to do with the fact that he wants the wife and the white picket fence. I have no interest in any of that.

I am, however, very interested in hearing his story.

So I keep tracing designs across his chest as I wait for him to start talking.

At last, he presses a kiss to the crown of my head, looping an arm around my shoulders before gathering me against him. It's his turn to trail his fingertips over my arm, the motion quiet, almost absent. It still makes my skin break out in goose bumps beneath the layers of my jacket and sweater.

"Lizzie and I also knew each other in high school. We were really good friends back then. She was there for me when my parents died —"

"You were sixteen, right?"

"Yep."

My heart plummets. "Sawyer. Wow. I'm so sorry. You were still a kid."

"I was, yeah." His swallow is audible. "Long story short, Lizzie and I always had this bond after that. The chemistry was never really there, but as we got older, I think we got bored and tried to convince ourselves that we could make our own chemistry. Hartsville is a small place. Neither of us had many options after we graduated. I was working on the ranch—everyone there was a dude back then—and she was trying to make it as a singer, so we started fooling around on and off. We never dated or anything. It was more of a friends-with-benefits situation."

"And you kept waiting for it to turn into more."

"Exactly. Neither of us could bring ourselves to commit, though. Then Lizzie got pregnant. We were both twenty-five, and for us ... life wasn't panning out how we'd hoped. So we thought, hey, maybe this is a sign from the universe that we should have this baby and be together. Start a whole new life as a family."

My chest literally hurts when I think about what comes next. "I remember thinking that a baby would fix things."

Sawyer scoffs. "We were stupid."

"We were young and hopeful. Big difference."

"Either way, it became apparent pretty damn quick that Lizzie and I weren't meant to be together. Ella was well on her way by that point, so Liz and I decided we'd co-parent as friends. That's been our arrangement ever since."

"So y'all share custody, too."

"Kind of." He hesitates. "Her career started to take off not long after Ella was born. She's actually touring with some pretty big names in country music right now. It was an opportunity I wouldn't let her turn down."

“Of course you didn’t,” I say, my own heart beginning to pound.

Sawyer is decent to a fault. Even when it leaves him holding the proverbial bag.

“So, yeah, I’ve been on my own with Ella for the past year,” he continues, reading my thoughts. “Even before then, I was always the primary parent. Lizzie ... her home life growing up wasn’t the best. Her family’s still a mess. We decided it was best that Ella live with me. Which I love. I always wanted to be a dad. I just—yeah, wish I didn’t have to do it alone.” He snuffles.

I flatten my palm over Sawyer’s heart, the sting in my eyes almost too much to bear. “Oh, honey.”

“It’s fine.” He reaches up to wipe his eyes. “Ella really did change my life for the better.”

“You’re an incredible dad.”

“Thank you.” He curls my hair behind my ear. “But now I’m almost thirty and—wow, I can’t believe I’m saying this out loud —”

“This is gonna be juicy, isn’t it?” I ask with a smile.

He laughs, a rumble that sends sparks flying down my spine. “You really wanna know?”

“I really wanna know.”

His fingers go still on my cheek. “Ava, I don’t know if I’ve ever been in love.”

It’s all I can do not to gasp. “Really?”

“Really. I’m worried—sometimes I think I’m gonna die without knowing what that’s like, falling for someone so completely that it takes over your life. I’ve always believed that kind of love—the kind my parents had—is what makes life living. Now, the love I have for my daughter—that’s its own thing. Deep and wonderful and just, yeah, mind-blowing in its own way. But I still feel like something’s missing. I want to commit to someone.” He pauses. “I want someone to commit to me. None of that wishy-washy bullshit I’ve experienced in the past. I want the real deal—in sickness, health, all of it. I’m ready, Ava.”

My heart cramps. What a beautiful thought.

What beautiful insight he has into his heart of hearts.

But where the hell does this leave us? Sawyer wants commitment. I want freedom.

I don’t know what to say.

I wasn't joking when I asked Sawyer why he hasn't been swooped up yet by a beautiful woman with a thing for cute cowboys.

Really, why *is* Sawyer alone?

Sounds like it's not for a lack of trying on local girls' parts. Lizzie tried, and I've seen the way the other moms check him out at pickup and drop-off. He could definitely find someone if he just opened his eyes and tried.

Maybe that's it. Sawyer doesn't let himself try.

He doesn't let himself do much of anything except be a good dad, a good brother.

Great first date.

"I know you're ready," I manage, tapping my finger on the center of his chest. "It's what you deserve, Sawyer."

"I also want Ella to grow up in the kind of house I did," he continues. "My childhood was magic. I loved having all that space, all my brothers. My family gave me a real sense of belonging and connection. We all had our parts to play, you know? I'd love to give Ella some siblings."

"Bet she'll end up having plenty of cousins?"

"One can hope, yeah. I still worry about her being on her own. If something happens to me ..."

Tears leak out of my eyes and onto Sawyer's shirt. "I get that. I worry about Junie being on her own too. My sisters are my best friends. And it's such a lifesaver having their help in dealing with my parents. I couldn't imagine doing it alone."

His thumb arcs over my arm. "But?"

"But bringing babies earthside is no small task. I don't—" I suck in a breath, feeling hollowed out by confronting all these hard truths. "I lost so much of myself during that time trying to keep my baby and my marriage alive. It's hard to think about going back there."

He's quiet for a long beat. I feel like this is the stage of the date where things kind of fall apart and we glumly agree to go our separate ways, disappointed that we're not compatible.

Really, disappointed that the universe failed yet again to put us in the way of someone who lights us up.

Thing is, though, Sawyer does light me up. He gets it.

He gets me. And I think my gut, my center, my soul—whatever you want to call it—is actually coming around to that fact.

None of this makes any sense in the context of what we each consider

happiness. For him, it's a wife, kids, commitment. For me, it's freedom and self-discovery.

Ultimately, though, don't we both want our lives to be filled with love? Don't we both want to love and be loved in return? I think we share the belief that love makes life worth living. There are different types of love, of course. Love for your kids. Love for your friends, your parents, your siblings.

Romantic love has a place too, though. A big one. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't interested in finding it again. I think about the lessons I want to teach Junie about staying soft, open, allowing herself to *be* loved.

"I totally understand where you're coming from," Sawyer finally replies. He speaks slowly, and I can tell he's being careful about his choice of words. "I obviously didn't go through pregnancy and childbirth and recovery like you did. I bow down to women, truly, for what y'all go through. No one gives you nearly enough credit. Or support." He curls his arm so he can twine our fingers. "And the loneliness you must've felt without your husband's help—I can't imagine."

My throat swells. "Thanks for saying that. Makes me feel ... not validated. But seen. Heard. No one really seems to care all that much about moms. Or parents in general."

"Hard agree." He gives my hand a squeeze. "Thank God we have each other."

*Thank. God.*

If I wasn't falling for Sawyer before, I definitely am now. Here we are, the two of us clinging to each other like life vests, and he's still brave enough to wade into deeper waters.

He's still brave enough to stay open and stay soft, when it'd be so much easier and safer to shut me down.

"Sounds like you were lonely too—that Lizzie couldn't be there for you the way you needed her to be," I manage. "I know your family is worried about you."

He chuckles. "How do you know that?"

"Mollie said you'd had a rough road. I get that your brothers annoy the hell out of you —"

"Honestly, that's just Duke. And Ryder. And Cash when he's being all growly and mean. Wyatt—well, he's actually grown on me since he and Sally got together —"

"But it's obvious they care about you. Bet they try to help you out, too."

And I bet you don't let them, because you feel like you should be helping them."

"Goddamn it, why you gotta—you just—you're smart, aren't you?"

I look up to see him grinning at me.

"I let Cash and Mollie help me out tonight," he offers. "Baby steps. Loving my people is the one thing I'm really, really good at, and I literally feel like I'm coming out of my skin when I think I'm letting them down, or putting them out."

"You're not putting anyone out by being human, Sawyer."

"My head knows that. My heart?" He sighs. "Needs some convincing."

"Well, as long as you're moving in the right direction."

"What direction is that, though? 'Cause all of a sudden, I'm mighty confused. I thought I knew what I wanted ..."

My heart drums inside my chest. "I did too."

"You got me thinkin', is all." He blows out a breath.

I meet his eyes. "That's never a bad thing."

"No."

"There is such a thing as too much thinking, though." I tilt up my chin to nip at his jaw. "Perhaps we should give our heads a rest and let our bodies do the talking?"

His chest rumbles with laughter as, quick as lightning, he rolls on top of me, parting my legs with his knee.

Trailing his mouth up my neck, he says, "Long as we're still talkin', I'm fine with that."

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It's late by the time we get dressed, put out the fire, and pack up the truck.

"I understand you gotta relieve Miss Lee." Sawyer opens the passenger door for me and holds out his hand. "But I'm still bummed you can't come over. Been too long since I had you in my bed."

I tried to get Dan to take Junie even though it's not his weekend so I could have the entire night to myself too. But no dice—Dan said he had to work.

Taking Sawyer's hand, I climb inside the truck. "You had me on the hood of your car. And on the blanket. And then again —"

“Not the same.” He reaches in to grab my thigh before closing the door. “Out here, I got creative with the setting. In the bed, I can get creative in other ways.”

“I’m listening.”

He grins. “Nah, baby, you gotta wait and see. Next time, my bed. Got it?”

“I like it when you get all bossy and possessive.”

His eyes flash. He suddenly leans in and presses a hard, quick kiss to my neck, like he can’t quite help himself. “I know you do.”

The sound of the engine is enormous in the quiet dark as we drive back to my place. Sawyer’s got his hand on my thigh again. My hand is in the hair at his nape, my fingers drawing lazy circles over his scalp and skin.

I feel ... sated. Happy. A little—okay, a lot—bummed that this night is coming to an end, even though I’m exhausted and ready to sleep.

At the same time, my head’s all mixed up. I love living by myself. I also love the idea of inviting Sawyer inside and having him stay for the foreseeable future.

I want to do nothing tomorrow. I also want to go over to Sawyer’s house and shamelessly flirt with him while our girls have a playdate. Maybe stay for lunch and dinner too, which we could make together in his cute little kitchen.

I want my independence, but I also want to be known and seen and heard the way Sawyer knows me, sees me, hears me.

He pulls up to the carriage house and puts the truck in park. He doesn’t cut the ignition. He looks at me and I look back, my stomach dipping. He looks impossibly handsome in the green and red lights of the dashboard.

“This is going nowhere,” I say.

His eyes flick to my mouth. “Total dead end.”

“We’re complete opposites.”

“Sad, when you think about it.”

I give his hair a little pull. “Can I pick you up next time?”

He laughs, a deep, satisfied rumble that draws my nipples to hard points. “I thought y’all were coming over for a playdate tomorrow?”

“I’m still invited?”

“You and June are still invited, yes.” His gaze locks on mine. “Y’all like grilled cheese and tomato soup? My dad used to make it for us on cold days. Ella’s obsessed and asks to have it for lunch all the damn time. I’ll make extra sandwiches for them to take to school on Monday. I also bought

bubbles and some new Play-Doh for the girls if the weather stays nice.”

I don’t know why his question has me biting my lip and looking away.

No, wait, I totally know why. It’s because he’s thinking ahead again. Already making plans, thinking about whose needs have to be met and when.

It’s work I’ve always done. Work Dan never appreciated and never did himself, even though I begged him to for years.

“I love your parents,” I blurt.

Sawyer’s brows pop up. “Uh. I do too?”

“They raised you right, Sawyer.” I move my hand to cup his cheek. “You just might be the best man I’ve met. Ever.”

“Because I make grilled cheese?”

I laugh and he laughs, and something like joy—pure, potent—zips through my veins.

“Because you make grilled cheese, yes.”

“The secret is to use lots of butter and pasteurized cheese product.”

“Psssh. None of that real cheese shit.”

“No ma’am, it just doesn’t get melty enough.”

I move my thumb over his stubble, stopping to linger on his dimple. “Your mom and dad would be so proud of you.”

He gets this look in his eyes—I can’t tell if he’s going to keep smiling or kiss me or start to cry.

“I think about them all the time,” he says quietly. “Now that I’m a dad, I wonder what my own dad would do if he were me. I wish he were here to ask for advice.”

I nod. “What advice do you think he’d give you?”

“I don’t know.” Sawyer shrugs, looking down at his lap. “He’d probably tell me to not be so hard on myself. I know he’d be sad to miss out on everything that’s happening. You know, the grandkids and the ranch and stuff. He’d tell me ...” Sawyer looks up, his eyes filling. “He’d say I should enjoy the time I have more. ’Cause we never know how much we got left.”

“Aw, honey.” I pull him in for a hug. Run my hand over the broad expanse of his back. “Can I enjoy it with you?”

He laughs. “You’re the reason I’m enjoying anything at all right now. You and Ella and June.”

“Tomorrow, then.” I pull back and wipe away his tears with my thumbs. “We’ll enjoy the shit out of whatever weather we get.”

“Yeah.” He clears his throat. “Okay. I like the sound of that.”



“I’ll bring —”

“Just yourselves.”

I give him a look. “You know I’m not gonna show up empty-handed.”

“And you know I’m not gonna open anything you bring. I got beer, food, and every color of Play-Doh under the sun.”

“Ingredients for a solid Sunday.”

“No Sunday scaries in our house.”

I smile. “No. None at all.”

## CHAPTER 24

*Sanyer*

**GOOD THING AVA** didn't spend the night, because Ella ends up in bed with me.

I was woken from a dead sleep by a call from Cash at half past two. Apparently Ella had gone to sleep just fine, but she'd kept waking up and asking for me.

By two o'clock, she was crying her eyes out. I went to pick her up and, too tired to fight her, I let her come into bed with me at home.

She kept me up most of the night. She kicked. Talked in her sleep. Cuddled, but in this weirdly aggressive way where she either elbowed me in the face or kneed me in the nuts.

I wake up feeling like hell.

Grabbing my phone off the charger by the bed, my heart dips when I see a text from Ava.

She sent it twenty minutes ago.

AVA BARTLETT

Having coffee right now. Doesn't feel right without you.

SAWYER RIVERS

I'm glad I finally convinced you to have it with me at all.  
Remember that one time you left before I could give it to you?

AVA BARTLETT



SAWYER RIVERS

How are you feeling?

AVA BARTLETT

I'm feeling pretty damn great. Last night was wonderful, thanks again. You?

SAWYER RIVERS

Better, now that I heard from you.

AVA BARTLETT

Thinking we'll come in a few hours so I can get some stuff done here?

SAWYER RIVERS

Sounds like a plan

AVA BARTLETT

I'll bring snacks

SAWYER RIVERS

Already bought some cheese and crackers

AVA BARTLETT

Of course you did

SAWYER RIVERS

No rush

Fuck that, I wanna see you. Get your ass here ASAP

Oh and Ella won't stop asking when Junie is coming over

AVA BARTLETT

Ha no pressure

SAWYER RIVERS

Pretty girl don't you make me wait

AVA BARTLETT

I'll do as I damn well please

SAWYER RIVERS

Of course you will. Unless I got you on your back. Then you do as I please

AVA BARTLETT

Gladly, cowboy

My eyes feel like sandpaper and my back is killing me, but I still smile like an idiot as I down cup after cup of bitterly strong coffee. Ella giggles extra hard when I make a big deal out of losing Jenga to her not once, not twice, but five fucking times before I finally tap out.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I'm aware I'm tired as hell. But somehow, I have all the energy in the world as Ella and I go about our morning.

"Somebody's in a suspiciously good mood," Wyatt says when he and Sally swing by around nine.

"Date went well, then?" Sally asks, holding out a cardboard cup of coffee.

"Really well. Thanks, Wy, for the wine. It was a big hit." I take the cup. "What's this?"

Wyatt shrugs. "We heard you might've had a crappy night of sleep."

"I woke him up," Ella explains as she munches on her waffle.

My brother lifts her into his arms. "Uncle Cash says you missed your daddy very much. Maybe we need to practice our sleepovers more often, yeah?"

Ella runs her hand over his stubble. "What's a sleepover?"

"When you come visit your uncles and have the best time ever, like you did that one time at my house."

"Hey!" Sally smiles. "She visits her aunties too. Here, why don't you come play with me while Uncle Wy and Daddy have a chat?"

I eye my brother as he hands Ella over to his fiancée. "We're having a chat?"

"Yeah, we're having a chat. You're in love. As your —"

"Wait, wait. I'm gonna stop you right there. I'm not —"

"But you are." Wyatt's expression softens. "I know that look, because I had it too."

"Still do!" Sally calls over her shoulder.

Ella is leading her upstairs, no doubt because my daughter wants to show her the fort we built out of her canopy bed earlier this week.

"Anyway." Wyatt gently pushes me out to the front porch. "As your older, wiser brother who just went through something similar, I thought I'd impart some wisdom."

I run a hand over my face before crossing my arms over my chest, my coffee cup dangling against my side. It's sunny outside, but it still feels like winter. The air's got a bite to it that I hope mellows out by the time Ava and

Junie get here.

This is what I hate about this time of year. You'll get a couple of warm days that make you think spring has sprung, only for winter to return with a vengeance. It's such a tease.

Wyatt sips his coffee and squints at me. "She's great. Ava."

"She is." I swallow and look away. "She also doesn't want to get married again or have more kids."

"Ah. So y'all found the rub nice and early in your relationship."

Uncrossing my arms, I bring my coffee to my lips. If I have any more caffeine I'm likely to experience a cardiac event, but I feel strangely discombobulated talking about this shit with my brother. The cup in my hand—the smell of coffee in my head—helps me feel slightly less lost.

"I mean, we just met. This is crazy, right?" I keep my voice low in case little ears are listening. "But it felt so natural telling her everything. She's a great listener, and I feel like she understood where I was coming from. I don't want to scare her off, but I also don't want to lead her on."

"Because you're in love."

"Would you stop saying that?"

"Why?"

"Because." I draw a deep, slightly annoyed breath through my nose. "It's too fucking soon, Wy."

"I'm not so sure about that." He scratches the underside of his chin. "You've had lots of practice learning what you don't want. Makes sense that when you've finally found what you *do* want, you jump in with both feet."

Leaning against the railing, I tuck my hand into my front pocket and look out over the yard. "Remember when it got real cold that one winter and Dad flooded the yard so it would freeze into an ice rink?"

Wyatt smiles, pointing to a spot several feet away. "Grass still hasn't grown back. Mom hated it when we played hockey."

"Yeah, because we used it as an excuse to beat the shit out of each other. We thought Cash broke his nose."

"That was me." Wyatt's finger moves to the feature in question. "Still can't breathe right out of my left nostril."

I laugh. "Only what you deserved."

"That was a lot of blood."

"So much blood. Dad was gagging, remember?"

"I remember Mom trying not to laugh at what a wuss he was." My

brother toes at the floorboards before crossing his ankles. “Why doesn’t Ava want to get married?”

“Short answer? Gender roles are bullshit. Oh, and her ex is a dick.”

“I gathered as much. Sally’s filled me in on some details.”

“Yeah?” I glance up at Wyatt. “What’d she tell you?”

He lifts a shoulder. “He’s just difficult to deal with I guess—cheap motherfucker. Doesn’t want to help her out more than he has to.”

The lid on my coffee pops off. I grab it just before it tumbles to the ground. Didn’t realize I’d been holding the damn cup so tight.

“I get why she’s not interested in being tied down again,” I say.

Wyatt leans in. “But you don’t wanna tie her down. You wanna treat her the way she deserves to be treated, right?”

“Of course I do. I’d cut off my hands before I ever intentionally hurt that woman. But she knows what she wants, and it ain’t a man like me.”

“See? That’s where you’re wrong. I think you’re exactly what she wants. Keep showin’ her that, and she just might change her mind.”

“She shouldn’t have to change her mind. I don’t want her to. Same as I hope she doesn’t expect me to compromise on what I want.”

Wyatt is quiet for a minute. “You know, a ring is just a ring. Don’t mean a thing on its own.”

“Easy for you to say.” I glance at his left hand. “You want one, and you’re about to get it.”

Sally and Wyatt set a date for May. They’ll be getting married in a big old tent on her parents’ property. Frisky Whiskey, her mom’s band, will be performing, and the bride and groom may or may not have plans to literally ride into the sunset on their horses.

“All I’m saying is that you gotta do some digging here, Sawyer. What is it about marriage that speaks to you? That feels right? Other than the ability to not have to use condoms.”

I chuckle despite myself. “Can you not be gross?”

“Sorry, no. But what about shit like ... I don’t know, companionship? Trust? Having a real partner to help you shoulder life’s burdens? None of that requires a marriage license.”

“It does require you to commit to someone, and that’s exactly what Ava doesn’t want. You gotta admit, Wy, women get the short end of the stick a lot of the time in marriage. Dad worked hard on the ranch, but Mom worked harder at home. I mean, think about it. Her work literally never ended, even at



night. It was twenty-four/seven, three sixty-five, for decades.”

Wyatt nods. “I hear you. You recognize how unfair that was, though, right? You’re not blind to it. That ex of hers is *definitely* blind to it. And maybe that’s what she wants to avoid. Not marriage, per se, but guys who go into relationships blind that way. You”—he gestures in my direction—“are not that guy. You can’t be. Not as a single dad raising his daughter practically on his own. You’re the mom, the dad, the wife, the husband. You’re doing it all, and you know how exhausting it is, and you see how unfair it’d be to put it all on one person’s shoulders. Because it is unfair, Sawyer.”

I wipe away the sudden moisture in my eyes. “It’s fucking brutal, man. I don’t blame Lizzie for being gone, but ...” I let out a breath. “Hard not to feel resentful sometimes.”

He puts a hand on my shoulder. “You care too much and are too damn smart to ever treat someone like shit. Lizzie is a case in point. She’s able to chase her dream because of *you*. Show Ava that. Let her show you that she cares too. Help each other out. It’s that simple. Keep doing that, and y’all won’t be able to keep your hands off each other.”

“How sexy,” I scoff, pressing my thumbs into my eye sockets, “the two of us trading, I don’t know, oatmeal recipes.”

“Bet that oatmeal will get you laid.”

“I do make a mean oatmeal.” I blink the blurriness from my eyes and straighten. “Christ, Wyatt, since when did you get ... introspective?”

“I feel like I should be offended by that comment. I’m not, by the way. But I feel like I should be.”

“You’re just ...” I look at my brother.

He’s about as scruffy and rough around the edges as I’ve seen him. Hair is too long. Tattoos, some of them new, peek out from the sleeves of his jacket.

But he also looks well rested. Well fed. He’s taking care of himself.

Really, he and Sally are taking care of each other, and it shows.

An ache takes root in my gut. I want someone to take care of me that way.

I know I’m capable of taking care of someone else.

Question is, can I let them do the same for me?

“I’m just happy,” Wyatt says softly. “The opposite of the angsty, drunk mess I was three months ago? Why, thank you. If you’d told me back then that I’d be living my dream life with my dream girl, I would’ve laughed in

your face and then, like, secretly cried in my room for a week.”

“We’re all crying a lot these days, aren’t we?”

“That’s what happens when you feel your feelings. Ella’s taught us a lot about that, hasn’t she?”

I can’t help but smile. “We’re parenting her, and she’s parenting us too.”

Wyatt meets my eyes. “You told me once to keep moving toward the light. To share my heart.” He pats me on the chest. “I’m going to give you the same advice. Don’t let this woman slip through your fingers, Sawyer. Think outside the box and give yourself a chance. You’ll be glad you did.”

## CHAPTER 25

*Sanyer*

## LOVE IS LIKE A RATTLESNAKE

**I THINK** about Wyatt's little speech all morning as I brush Ella's hair and teeth, pick up the house, and make the tomato soup.

*Jump in with both feet. Move toward the light. It's that simple.*

Ordinarily, I'd take his words with a grain of salt. I love my brother, but he's never been the guy you go to for any kind of wisdom or advice.

Right now, though, I have to admit that he's living the dream. He's got the girl. He's thriving at work. He may still gamble like a degenerate, but he usually wins. When he doesn't, he just ... lets it go.

Why not give his advice a try? Who knows, maybe he's right about just showing up consistently, and showing Ava we belong together.

Really, what other option do I have? She's not looking for a grand gesture or pretty promises. I can only be there for her in the way her ex wasn't. Maybe that will be enough.

It has to be enough.

By the time the house is clean and the soup is done, I'm beat. I really start to feel it just as Ava texts me that they're on their way.

I'd love to be able to sit and take five, but I'm so tired that I'm worried I won't get back up. So I pour myself more coffee and push through, assembling the grilled cheese sandwiches, emptying the dishwasher, and quickly filling out a form online for the soccer camp Ella's attending over spring break. They give them these cute little jerseys that she's obsessed with, but if I don't get the form filled out in time, she won't get one. I can just imagine the meltdown she'd have once she found out.

By the time Ava pulls up, I'm fading fast. Telling myself I'll get a boost

when I see her, I make my way to the front door. Ella sprints ahead of me, shouting Junie's name.

"She's here! She's here!"

Laughing, I open the door. "She is! It's Junie! And Miss Ava!"

Ava's eyes catch on mine, immediately lighting up. The contents of my rib cage turn upside down as I take in her smile, her tousled hair, the sweatshirt she's wearing that's already stained with marker.

She's so pretty, it fucking hurts.

"Hi," she says.

"He—" I clear my throat. "Hey. Hi, Ava. You look gorgeous."

"You look tired," she replies, stepping inside to loop an arm around my neck and pull me in for a hug.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, it registers that Junie darts inside the house too. She grabs Ella's hand and they disappear down the hallway.

Chuckling, I wrap my arms around Ava's waist and pull her snug against me. "Thanks for the compliment. Turns out Ella isn't a fan of sleepovers. I had to grab her from my brother's at two in the morning."

"Oh, Sawyer, Jesus. I'm so sorry. If you wanna go lie down —"

"Nah." I bury my face in her neck. "I only wanna lie down with you. Since that's not an option, why don't we have lunch instead?"

Her breath hitches when I turn my head a little, my scruff catching on her skin.

"Smells good in here." She kisses my cheek, and my blood pulses. "Don't tell me you made that soup from scratch."

"Had to counterbalance the fake cheese somehow."

"Sawyer."

I tighten my grip on her waist. "Yeah, pretty girl?"

"I missed you." It's a whisper.

The intimacy of that admission, the sincerity in her voice—it splits me in half.

I kiss her neck. "I missed you too."

Lord, what I'd give to be able to take her to bed right now. I'd lay her down. Fuck her slow, because in this fantasy we'd have all day and all night to spend together. Then I'd pull her to me and we'd fall asleep. After a long nap, we'd wake up and I'd fuck her again before making cocktails. She'd sip her mezcal negroni while I made some comfort food. Steaks, maybe, with roasted potatoes and my mom's spinach and pecan salad. Something

chocolate for dessert.

But then there's a bang somewhere in the house, and I'm yanked back into messy, exhausting, very loud reality.

"Y'all okay?" I yell.

I hear a pair of giggles in reply.

"Thank God they're cute." I reluctantly let Ava go. "Thanks for comin' over."

She eyes me. "You sure you're okay?"

"I'll be all right." I run a hand over my face. "Just wish you and I could have a little more alone time is all."

She grins. "If it makes you feel better, I should be free next Saturday and Sunday. It's Dan's weekend to take June, so ..."

"Guess Ella will be practicing her sleepover again, 'cause I'm invitin' you over to my place."

"What if you come to mine? Leave the clothes, bring the condoms."

Heat gathers in my dick. I reach over and grab her ass, giving it a hard, rude squeeze. "Consider it done."

In the kitchen, Ava opens some longnecks while I make the grilled cheese. The girls are busy putting on every princess dress, bracelet, pair of sunglasses, and sparkly high-heeled shoes Ella owns.

"Wow," Ava says with a gasp. "Ella, you look just like Rapunzel, only with a maximalist twist."

"Rapunzel is my favorite!"

"I know. We watched it at my house when you came over this week, remember?"

Junie yelps with joy. "Can she come over again, Mommy, please?"

"She's welcome any —"

"Ow!" I don't mean to shout. But like an idiot, I grabbed the lid of the skillet with my bare hand because I was so happy and so tired that I was clearly brain-dead.

I shake out that hand, gritting my teeth in an effort to calm—or maybe ignore—the screaming burn on my palm.

"Daddy, you okay?" Ella asks.

"Yeah, Sawyer, are you all right?" Ava's eyes are wide.

I manage a tight smile. "Yeah. I'm good. Just—give me a minute."

I turn toward the fridge, but Ava stops me.

"You grabbing ice?"

“I was, yeah.”

“You’re not supposed to ice a burn.” She turns on the faucet and waves me over. “Run it under water instead. Can I see?”

“I’m all right.”

Ava gives me a look. “Sawyer, you just burned yourself. Show me your hand, then put it underneath the faucet. Now.”

“You’re cute when you’re bossy.”

“I’m always cute. Now show me your hand.”

Furrowing her brow, she clucks her tongue when she sees how red my palm is. Gently wrapping her hand around my wrist, she guides it underneath the cool water.

“That feels good,” I murmur. It’s not just the water. It’s her touch. The warm feeling I get being taken care of by her.

Being near her.

Her hair falls into her face, and she tucks it behind her ear with her free hand. There’s a freckle on her chin I resist the urge to kiss. Her leg brushes mine as she continues to hold my hand underneath the water.

Didn’t realize how manic I felt until, well, she got here. Suddenly I feel calm. And very, very tired.

*Stay forever*, I want to say.

“I’ll be okay,” I say instead.

Turning her head, she looks at me. “You’re not okay. You’re so tired that you just burned yourself. Go lie down. I’ll feed these turkeys and take them outside while you sleep.”

“I don’t need —”

“You do.” Her gaze bores into mine. “This is what I’m talking about, Sawyer. You gotta let people help you. You’ve been up all night and I can tell you’re about to fall over. *Go lie down.*”

Searching her green eyes, I’m gripped by this feeling of—Christ, I can only describe it as being completely and utterly overwhelmed. Like the dam inside me suddenly gives, releasing all the pent-up *everything* I’ve been holding back. The joy and the frustration. The panic, the anxiety, the fear.

The hope.

Most of all, though, what I feel is tired. The kind of bone-deep exhaustion you can’t ignore.

I look at Ava. She looks back. It’s obvious she’s not going to let me do anything but go to bed.



It's obvious she cares.

The girls are happily playing dress-up. Lunch is pretty much done. The kitchen is clean, although the dishes will need to be scrubbed after everyone eats.

"I've got it," Ava says, reading my mind. She nods at the grilled cheese I already made. "Grab a sandwich and go."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure." She shuts off the water. "If you don't sleep for at least three hours, I'm leaving."

"Three hours?" I scoff. "I need fifteen minutes, tops —"

"Three. Hours. Understood?"

I can't help but smile. My chest floods with relief as the realization hits me that I'm really allowing myself to do this.

I'm going to take a fucking *nap*. In the middle of the day. While I have guests in my house, and while dirty dishes pile up in my sink.

"Yes ma'am."

"Good." She holds up the plate with the sandwich on it. "Now go to your room."

I take the plate. "Okay, when you say it like that, I get a little excited —"

"Sawyer."

"All right, all right. I'm going. Ella, be good!"

"I be good!" she calls back.

I wanna kiss Ava. So I do, a quick peck on the lips. I know I'm risking the girls seeing us—I have no idea what we'd tell them, or if we should tell them at all—but I'm too tired to care.

I shove my grilled cheese in my mouth, and then I fall face-first into bed.

I'm asleep before I even take my phone out of my pocket.

---

I wake up with drool on my pillow. I'm a little sweaty.

Prying open my eyes, I see that the light in the room has changed. It's warmer, almost golden.

My stomach flips. *What time is it? How long was I out for?*

The house is silent.

Sitting up, I press the heel of my hand into one eye, then the other. I slept hard. I don't remember what day it is or how I got to my bed.

All I remember is Ava ordering me around.

My palm smarts as I dig my other hand into my back pocket, grabbing my phone. Oh, right. I burned this hand lifting the piping hot lid off a skillet.

"Holy shit," I murmur when I see that it's *four fucking o'clock*.

I slept for over four hours. Ava came over at eleven thirty, right?

To be honest, I could probably sleep for four more.

Really, I could sleep all day and all night and still not be caught up. But beggars can't be choosers, and I really do feel a hundred times better than I did earlier. I'm able to think clearly. My body doesn't hurt.

Go figure, letting people help you really, er, helps.

I have a text from Ava. Kinda scary that I was in such a deep sleep that I didn't hear the notification, but I imagine she would've woken me up if there was an emergency, right?

AVA BARTLETT

Hey! I didn't want the girls waking you up, so I took them to my place. I had an extra car seat in my car for Ella that Lee uses sometimes. Give me a ring when you wake up, which I hope isn't for several more hours. Proud of you for getting rest [heart emoji]

Seriously, when am I gonna stop smiling like an idiot?

Lifting the phone to my ear, I come up with a plan.

First, pack up the liquor.

Second, hit up the grocery store.

Third, head to Ava's.

No, wait, first I need to slip some condoms into my glove box. Just on the off chance we can get the girls to watch a movie. I only need a few minutes. Ten tops. It will be quick, but I'll make it good.

"Well hey there, cowboy," Ava singsongs when she picks up. "How was your nap?"

"Fucking amazing. Thank you. I drooled on myself and everything."

"Did you have a little sweat going on?"

"Hell yeah I had a little sweat going on."

"So satisfying when that happens. Means you slept well."

"Like a rock. How are the girls?"

“The girls are doing great. We stole your bubbles and have been playing with that big wand thing you got all afternoon. We broke for a snack, and now we’re coloring at the kitchen table.”

“Ella’s been okay?”

“She asked when you were going to come over a little while ago. But other than that, she’s been happy as a clam.”

There’s a sudden, heavy warmth in the center of my chest. I press my fingers into my breastbone, trying to figure out its source. It keeps growing, getting warmer, bigger.

It makes me want to laugh. Not only has Ella been at someone else’s house for an extended period of time without issue. She’s also already comfortable enough with Ava for that to happen.

Guess I’m not Ava’s only fan. I know Ella loves how fun Ava is. How easily she can access her silly side.

I love that too.

“Relieved to hear that,” I say.

“How’s your hand?”

“It’ll be fine. I was more tired than I’d thought. Thanks again for the break. I really appreciate it, Ava.”

I imagine her digging her teeth into her bottom lip.

“I know you do.”

“So, listen. I’m gonna grab a quick shower. Then I’m gonna head your way with dinner.”

A pause.

“That sounds so nice.”

“You like steak?”

“I do, but —”

“Mezcal?”

“Love it. But you already made lunch, so I thought I’d make din —”

“My turn to take over, and your turn to rest. That’s how this works. I’ll be there in an hour.”

She sighs. “You sure?”

“This is what you were talking about, Ava,” I tease. “Let people help you.”

## CHAPTER 26

*Ava*

## I'M BUZZED.

I have a full belly, a delicious mezcal negroni in my hand—my second—and a crowded dinner table.

My daughter is smiling. My house smells delicious. The stars are just blinking awake in the lavender sky outside the windows beside my chair.

Best of all, the four of us, Sawyer, Ella, Junie, and me, worked together to make this meal happen. Sawyer brought the food and mixed the drinks. The girls and I set the table, and then we played several rounds of duck duck goose while he seared the steaks in a cast iron skillet he'd brought over.

Because of course he'd thought to bring it.

And *of course* it's his mom's skillet, the same one she seared steaks in for him and his brothers when they were kids.

I helped out Sawyer, and then he did the same for me—*without having to be asked*. Same as I'd noticed him fading back at his house, he noticed I'd need a hand with dinner after having the girls all afternoon.

*The guy fucking noticed.*

Not because he's in trouble, or because he's trying to get laid. I'm starting to realize that Sawyer notices because that's just who he is. He's a decent, thoughtful, deeply kind human. And tonight, I get to be with him.

Look up *bliss* in the dictionary, and I'm pretty sure you'll find a picture of this moment.

"Sawyer, that was so good." I motion to my empty plate before glancing at June's. "I mean, even the kids ate it. A meal that appeals to the bigs *and* the littles? That's no small feat."

Sawyer looks at me, his dimple coming out to play as he gives the ice in his glass a shake. “Bigs and littles?”

“Bigs are the big people, like you and Mommy,” Junie explains around a mouthful of potatoes. “Littles are little people, like me and Yella.”

“Yeah, Daddy, we’re little,” Ella says.

“You’re also such a big girl, coming over to our house today all by yourself.” I hold up my hand, and Ella gives me a high five. “I’m proud of you, Ella.”

I turn and see Sawyer still looking at me. The adoring, and very hot, gleam in his eyes has my stomach doing a backflip.

*Oh, heavens, we are in it, aren’t we?*

One date later—*does this count as another date?*—and all of a sudden, we’re looking at each other like this. Like I hung the moon, and he lassoed it. Because I know I have that look in my eyes too.

How could I not? Sawyer showed up at my house with an overflowing grocery bag of ingredients that he used to make the most amazing steak dinner ever. He remembered everything, right down to the butter, kosher salt, and sprigs of rosemary he used to season the meat.

He cooked *vegetables*. Several of them. Ones my child actually ate.

He turned me onto mezcal and a band named First Aid Kit, and then he introduced my daughter to the tickle monster. It was love at first sight for June.

Might’ve been love at first sight for me too. That’s the only explanation for how down bad I am for him at this point in our relationship. I’ve never fallen this hard, this fast. Not even when I was sixteen and falling in love with Dan.

Imagine that—those raging teenage hormones don’t hold a candle to whatever shit is coursing through my being right now.

I’m floating.

I’m so scared and so excited and so *eager* to know what happens next. Because with Sawyer, every chapter just gets better and better.

I don’t want him to leave. Apparently neither does Junie.

She crawls into my lap and puts her hands on my face. “Mommy?”

“Yes, Bug?”

“Can Yella stay for bath time too?”

Ella’s face lights up. “Can I, Miss Ava? Please please please?”

“Y’all are shameless,” Sawyer says with a chuckle. I notice he’s blushing

a little as he runs a hand over his face. “Ella, we should probably get going.”

I put my hands on Junie’s little hips. “I don’t see why Ella can’t stay for bath time. Think we have enough water, Junie?”

“I think so.”

“And soap? Do we have enough of that?”

June looks at her new friend. “Yella, we have so much soap. Probably enough to wash my hair *and* yours.”

“So what do you say?” I look at Sawyer. “This way, you can put her right to B-E-D when you get home. Start the week off squeaky clean *and* well rested.”

“You sure?”

I smile. “Can we stop asking each other that already? I’m sure, Sawyer.”

*I’m sure about so much more than bath time.*

But I’m not ready to explore those feelings, much less talk about them. I’m not ready to face the fact that Sawyer wants a wife, and I am not at all interested in being one. So I stand up and hike Junie onto my hip, telling Sawyer to leave the plates.

He doesn’t, of course.

Junie wiggles her way out of my arms and onto the floor, and she and Ella promptly fly through the living room, where they dive into a basket of Magna-Tiles.

“I’ll clean this up real quick,” Sawyer says, hands full as he heads for the sink.

I roll up my sleeves. “I’ll help.”

I ignore him when he fights me, telling him that whoever cooks shouldn’t have to clean up. Waving the thought away, he scrubs the pots and pans and I load the dishwasher and wipe down the countertop, the two of us chatting about everything and nothing as we move inside the kitchen.

The arousal between my legs that’s been simmering all day bursts to vibrant life when, after Sawyer wipes his hands on a towel, he slips one into the back pocket of my jeans and pulls me to him, my back to his front.

“I’m dyin’,” he murmurs into my nape.

I bite my lip. “Think we can ...”

“You game to try? Really?”

It’s adorable how surprised he sounds.

*Of course I want to have sex with you. You’re hot as hell with your scruff and your smirks. You made lunch. You made dinner. You poured me not one,*



*but two drinks, and you did the dishes without getting all moody about having to “help.”*

“I’m absolutely game to try. But first, bath.”

“Right.” He nips at my shoulder. “*Then bone.*”

Laughing, I tell the girls it’s time to get in the tub. There are two bathrooms in the apartment, but the one in the hallway doesn’t have an actual tub. So we head through my bedroom and into the primary bath, where there’s a soaking tub big enough for several adults and about half a dozen kids.

I notice Sawyer glancing around my room as we pass through, no doubt imagining all the fun we’ll be having here next weekend. Although—shit—I only have a queen bed. Seemed like a smart, even prophetic, purchase at the time when I was mattress shopping after Dan and I separated. What did I need a king for, literally or otherwise? Having a smaller bed also meant I’d have more room for books, and the chaise lounge I’m saving up for—it’s where I plan to read all those books.

Standing in that mattress store last fall, I never imagined I’d need a king-size bed. I never thought I’d meet a guy I’d want to bring home, much less one I’d invite to sleep over.

Then I literally knocked into Sawyer, and suddenly I’m wishing I had gone with the king.

*Am I being an idiot? What am I missing?* Because I have to be missing something here. No guy is this good. This wonderful.

No guy is this committed to letting me be myself. Sawyer wants to get married. Doesn’t he want a proper, ladylike wife? Or am I the one misunderstanding the assignment? What if being a wife—being committed to someone—doesn’t go hand in hand with smothering who I really am?

I mean, what if I’m able to have my cake and eat it too?

Or—more likely scenario—what if that line of thought is yet another trap? One set to lure me into complacency, and then all of a sudden I’m settled down again and Sawyer is asking me to *tone it down* or telling me *nice married ladies don’t stay out so late*.

I honestly don’t know what the right answer is. All I know is that it’s time to acknowledge that Sawyer really is different. Dan was never this accepting, this worshipful, of my free spirit, even during the heady early days of our relationship back in high school. I just don’t know if that means my relationship with Sawyer will end up any different. Can I trust this guy to

keep his promises?

Or am I just setting myself up for more disappointment? More heartbreak?

The girls are giddy as the big soaking tub fills with warm water. I squeeze in some bubble bath, making Junie squeal with delight, and then Sawyer and I strip down the girls and lift them into the tub.

He and I kneel beside each other, the bottle of baby soap between us. His knee brushes mine, and even that small contact sends my pulse into a tailspin.

Yeah, we're definitely gonna have to find a way to have a quickie between now and bedtime.

The girls are freaking adorable together. Ella can't get enough of the little plastic mermaids I recently bought at the dollar store, and she and Junie have a ball singing an off-key rendition of "Part of Your World."

Sawyer grabs the plastic pitcher I use to rinse June, and he tells the girls to close their eyes. They scream, giggling, when he douses each of them, soaking their hair.

Then I pump soap onto my hands and go to town scrubbing the girls down. At first I hesitate when it's Ella's turn—is it weird if I wash her?—but then she's holding out her cute little feet to me, and I'm playing a game of "This Little Piggy" with her as I lather her up with soap.

Then Sawyer's dumping water on them again, and they're screaming and giggling and splashing around, and my hair falls in my face as I hold up my arms in a failed effort to defend myself.

Without missing a beat, Sawyer tucks my hair behind my ears. His fingers are wet, but that only helps my hair stay in place.

The gesture is small. Simple.

I also find it achingly romantic, this man helping me get my hair out of my face while our daughters have a ball in the bathtub together. I decide to set aside the jumble of questions in my head and just *enjoy* this time. What else can I do? I know better than to let the unknown ruin a magical moment.

I look at Sawyer and smile. "Ever think your best date ever would happen in a bathroom?"

"What's a date?" Junie asks.

Sawyer hands her the small plastic pitcher. "It's when two people who like each other go do something fun together."

Ella scrunches her nose. "Are you gonna kiss like Prince Eric and Ariel?"

"I don't know." Sawyer's head swings in my direction. "Are we going to

kiss, Miss Ava?”

Heat floods my face. “Kissing is ... fun. When it’s with the right person.”

“I never thought my best date would be in a bathroom, no,” he replies with a grin.

My heart pounds. “So this is your best date.”

“I took a four-hour nap before this. Of course it’s my best date. Might be my best *day*.”

Laughing, I give him a shove. “Sorry for the very embarrassing confession. I clearly need to get out more.”

“With me you do, yeah.”

He’s doing that thing where he looks at me intently. There’s this steadiness about Sawyer—this confidence he has—that is somehow enormously calming *and* wildly sexy.

He’s fearful of putting himself out there, but he does it anyway.

He does it with me.

I’m gripped by that same sense of wildness I felt in Austin, when I stripped Sawyer naked and demanded he dance with me for all the city to see. He loved it then.

Bet he’ll love it now.

After we towel off the girls and put them in front of a movie in the living room, I grab the front of his shirt and tug him back inside my bedroom.

“Close the door,” I whisper. “And don’t you dare ask me if I’m sure. You can’t leave me like this.”

“Like what?” Smirking, he pushes the door shut behind him, careful not to make a sound as he puts his hands on my waist and starts backing me up toward the bathroom.

*See? See how obsessed he is with this side of you?*

“Like I’m gonna die if I can’t have you.” I slip my hands inside his shirt, my pussy lighting up at the feel of his abdominal muscles contracting beneath my touch.

He’s so solid. Strong.

Like me, he’s burning up. We step inside the bathroom, the warm air still tinged with the lavender scent of the baby soap.

“Aw, baby, you got me.” He kicks the door shut behind us as he leans down to suck on my nipple through my shirt. “Anytime. For as long as you’ll let me stay.” Straightening, he looks me in the eye. “ ’Cause I wanna stay, pretty girl.”

My throat swells with emotion. I drape my arms over his shoulders. “I know you do.”

“Let me,” he murmurs, kissing my mouth. “Let me, Ava.” He kisses one cheek, then the other. “Please let me stay.”

I close my eyes, the burn there almost unbearable.

*I think I’m in love with you, I want to say. I’m scared out of my mind, but I’m thinking about it, Sawyer.*

*I’m thinking about letting you stay.*

Instead, I nod my head and bury my face in his neck. He wraps his arms around me and pulls me in for a tight hug.

I hug him back, my body—my fear—unfurling as his warmth and his certainty seeps into me.

*We’re okay, his heart says, beating wildly.*

Holy shit, we’re okay. He’s not pulling back or telling me to tone it down. He’s all in. Jumping in with both feet.

He’s as turned on by this spontaneous bit of fun as I am.

I slant my mouth over his. He’s grabbing the back of my legs and lifting me onto the sink vanity. I laugh into his kiss when the random shit I have on the counter goes everywhere. For a split second we go still, listening for the sound of little footsteps.

None come.

I reach for the fly of his jeans. He pulls down my own jeans as I work his dick free, giving him a firm pump before thumbing the head, smearing his pre-cum over the velvety skin there.

He groans, biting down my bottom lip.

“I have an IUD,” I breathe. “And I’m—there’s still nothing else to worry about on my end.”

Sawyer groans again. He reaches between us and thumbs my clit. “Same. Yes. My God, Ava, yes.”

“You still need to be quiet,” I whisper as I straddle his hips with my knees and pull him closer, notching him at my entrance. I close my eyes. “Think you can do that?”

“I got no choice,” he says as he sinks inside me the tiniest bit. “Oh, Ava, you feel—” He lets out a sputtering breath and leans his forehead against mine. “So fucking good. Let me. Please. For the love of God, please.”

The pleading edge in his voice turns my heart inside out. I open my eyes to see him looking at me. Grabbing his ass, I push him inside me a little

deeper. At the same time, he keeps circling my clit with his thumb, causing sparks to erupt up and down the length of my spine.

The burning pressure in my core builds as he sinks to the hilt. He looks me in the eye the whole time, his pupils blowing out so the blue of his irises is barely visible.

It's the animal in him, blinking awake. He grabs me, roughly wrapping an arm around my waist so he can control the rhythm of his thrusts as he pulls out, rocks back in. I whimper at the delicious feel of our bareness.

His other hand snakes between us and hikes my shirt up over one breast, then the other. I'm not wearing a bra—I rarely do when I'm at home—so he's able to tweak my nipples with his thumb and forefinger.

I bite back a cry. I feel myself contract around his length, my orgasm approaching with almost-frightening speed.

Sawyer groans again, this time loud enough to make me say, "*Quiet.*"

"I can't," he grunts, pumping into me.

I flatten my palm over his mouth. "You will."

His gaze goes feral.

Oh, my cowboy *likes* that.

"You best not give us away," I whisper. "You do, and there'll be hell to pay."

In reply, he impales me on a deep, vicious thrust, one thumb on my clit, the other on my nipple. I feel myself coming apart, my pussy fluttering around his dick.

"That's a good boy," I pant. "You're so good at this, honey."

Sawyer bites my palm. At the same time, he presses his thumb, *hard*, against my clit.

I come with such force that it literally hurts to hold back my scream.

The bareness, the quiet, the bite.

The dinner, the dishes, the way our daughters get along.

*I'm in heaven, aren't I?*

I'm shaking as I come back down to earth. Sawyer pounds into me, grunting against my hand before spilling inside me.

I gasp at the feeling of warmth that spreads through my center. I forgot how messy this was.

I forgot how lovely it feels to be, well, *loved* this way. So utterly and completely loved that Sawyer literally can't control himself as he adores me. I have to hold my hand over his mouth to keep his yells quiet.

It's like he wants the whole world to know about us.

I hold him as he catches his breath, pulling away my hand when I feel it's safe. His forehead is on mine again as he presses his lips to the corner of my mouth.

"Okay?" he breathes.

I nod. "I'm okay. You?"

"No." He shakes his head. "You won't be in my bed tonight, so I'm not okay. How can we fix that, pretty girl?"

I laugh against his lips. "Baby steps."

"I'm ready. You set the pace, but I need you to know that I'm in."

"We have this weekend. Next weekend. Whatever."

"I'll take what you can give me. Look." Rocking his hips, he pulls out of me. "Look how much I want you."

Together, we look down. His cum leaks out of me in a pearlescent stream.

The sight is lewd. And so hot, so weirdly *emotional*, I feel my throat closing in again.

"I like the look of me between your legs." He swipes his first two fingers through my slit, gathering his cum on his fingertips. "The feel of me. Do you?"

"Sawyer—"

"You can't tell me you don't." He paints my nipple with his cum. "I wanna be everywhere, Ava. All over you, every morning and every night. Once a day ain't nearly enough."

I swallow, hard. "It's not."

"So let me have you, pretty girl." He leans in to kiss my mouth. "I promise I'll make it worth your while."

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I walk Sawyer and Ella out, and then I put Junie to bed. The kitchen is already clean. The dishwasher is already running.

So I put on my jammies, climb into bed, and promptly burst into tears.

I feel shaky. Like I can't calm down or control my wild heartbeat. My wild thoughts.

Ones like, *oh God I'm in love again and how the hell is this so good so soon?*

I knew getting divorced was the right call. I knew I'd never be happy if I lived a life of self-betrayal. But part of me still saw ending my marriage as a tragedy. How could raising my baby in a broken home be a net positive?

But now I have a true, deep understanding of the fact that raising June in an unhappy home would be worse. Mostly because I see what a happy home—a happy relationship—*could* look like with Sawyer.

Do I trust him to stay true to the man I know him to be? Can I trust him to always respect my freedom?

Even if I'm able to trust him, I still don't want to be his wife. And I'm not sure it's fair of me to ask him to compromise on that. If he wants to get married, he should be able to get married. Everyone deserves to be happy. I couldn't live with myself if I knew my version of happiness came at the expense of Sawyer's.

I curl up into a ball and cry the kind of cry you feel in your chest. I wish I knew how to have the freedom I crave while also being in a relationship, but I don't.

How do I face Sawyer again, knowing I can't give him what he wants?

How do I even talk to him about any of this? Yeah, we talked about wanting different things that night we went on our first official date. But now it's time to move beyond that.

It's time to make a choice. And I have no idea what the hell I'm going to do.

## CHAPTER 27



*Ava*

## BAGGAGE

**DESPITE OUR JAM-PACKED** schedules and my very real misgivings about the future of our relationship, Sawyer and I see each other every day that week.

I guess neither of us can stay away.

After preschool drop-off, I sneak over to his place for chocolate-flavored coffee and some very hot shower sex on Monday.

Sawyer has Junie and I over for taco night Tuesday.

We meet up again on Wednesday after drop-off. I have a lesson I need to get to, so we end up having an athletic round of sixty-nining in the bed of his truck just off Main Street. I'm the one who suggested the location. And Sawyer, being the excellent human being he was, enthusiastically honored my exhibitionist streak.

Thursday, I have Sawyer and Ella over for chicken potpie. I use Ina Garten's recipe, and it's a huge hit all around.

It's another post-drop-off coffee date on Friday. We have sex, and then we play hooky for an hour and sit by the fire he lights at his place, laughing and talking about everything *but* the future of our relationship.

We do make plans for a weekend filled with sex, food, dancing, mezcal negronis, and more sex. Sawyer's brothers offer babysitting coverage for both days, and I confirm with Dan that he'll be taking Junie.

The prospect of having not one, but *two whole days* to do whatever I want has me both giddy and apprehensive. I need to tell Sawyer how I'm feeling—to talk to him about the doubts I have, and what we're going to do about our differing versions of happily ever after.

Dan is the normal amount of late on Saturday. Per our custody agreement, he's supposed to pick June up at twelve, the idea being that June would nap on the ride back to Dan's place. But he usually arrives around three or four, so I have her nap here first. I learned the hard way not to keep her up for him. We're going to have to revisit the schedule now that Junie is in school and he can't keep her super late on Sundays anymore.

Today, he knocks on my door at quarter past four. Luckily Junie took a decent nap, so she'll be in good spirits on the drive back to his place.

Doing my best to ignore the familiar twist of resentment in my chest, I open the door with a smile.

"Junie, look who it is," I say.

Dan steps inside. "Hey, y'all. Sorry I'm late."

*No you're not.*

"Daddy!" Junie screams, launching herself into his outstretched arms.

He wraps her in a tight hug, lifting her off the ground. "Hey, princess! Oh, I've missed you. We get the whole weekend together. We're going to have fun, aren't we?"

"The most fun," June replies. "Can Mommy come though?"

The feeling in my chest twists tighter. "Aw, Bug, you and daddy are going to have special time together, remember? I'll be waiting for you right here when he drops you back off tomorrow."

She pouts. "But I want you both to be with me today."

"Well, your mommy made that call." Dan pinches her cheek. "We can't all be together anymore."

"Hey," I fire back.

"What? You're the one who wanted it this way."

Exhibit A how my ex loathes who I am and doesn't understand the choices I make. Amazing how much easier Sawyer is to deal with. Talk to *Be* with.

"Dan, not in front of her, okay?"

"Clearly she knows this isn't normal." He puts June down, and she immediately wraps herself around my legs.

I pat her back soothingly. "It's all right, Bug. Mommy and Daddy are just having a little disagreement." I give him a look. "Do you not want to take her? Because I'm more than happy —"

"Of course I want to take my daughter. I just hate when she's all bummed out like this."

“She’ll be fine once she’s in your car. Isn’t that right, June? I packed her tablet and it’s fully charged. We downloaded *Rapunzel* —”

“Mr. Sawyer helped me do it!” June announces proudly. “He’s so nice. He’s always helping me and Mommy.”

My stomach dips as Dan’s eyes take on a hard, mean glimmer.

“Who is Mr. Sawyer?”

“Mommy goes on dates with him.”

Dan stares at me. My thoughts race.

*He and I are divorced. I’m allowed to go on dates with other people. I’m not doing anything wrong here. Yeah, maybe he’s questioning my decision to introduce June to Sawyer without informing Dan first. But really, how could I have avoided that? Our daughters go to school together, for crying out loud. They’re best friends. Ms. Sherman constantly tells us at pickup how inseparable they are.*

I planned on telling Dan about Sawyer. But this all has happened so fast, and I haven’t had a minute to call my ex and fill him in.

To be honest, I’m not sure what I’d fill him in *on*. Sawyer and I went from one-night stand to parent friends to way more than that in such a short amount of time. I guess part of me didn’t want to jinx it.

I didn’t want to stir the pot unless I had to. I knew Dan would react this way. It would’ve been better for him to find out tomorrow, after he dropped Junie back off. That way, he could go off and pout on his own without it ruining everyone’s weekend.

And then I think, *wait a second*. I don’t need to babysit his feelings or justify myself to him. He’d never justify himself to me, even when we were married. I’ve always made good choices when it comes to our daughter, and he has absolutely no reason to think I’d ever put her in harm’s way.

I’m just—Jesus, I’m so damn tired of this dance of ours. He gets upset. I bend over backward to keep the peace. Prevent an explosion.

*This is how the erasure happens.*

This is how I lost myself. Buried my voice. My opinions. *Myself*.

*My God, this would never happen with Sawyer, would it?* He’d never talk to me this way. He’d never make me feel stupid, or small.

“Did Mr. Sawyer come on a date here?” Dan asks.

“Hey, June?” I say, pulse throbbing in my ears. “Why don’t you go get your Kindle from your bag right there on the table? I’m just going to speak with your daddy real quick.”

Thank God Junie agrees, grabbing the tablet and disappearing into the living room.

“What the fuck, Ava?” Dan asks, eyes wide. “You bring a stranger around my kid and you don’t tell me about it?”

I refuse to let Dan ruffle my feathers. I know he’s just trying to get a rise out of me. Trying to make me feel bad with this whole guilt-trip bullshit.

But letting that shit go is easier said than done. My heart is pounding.

“Keep your voice down, please,” I reply. “And Sawyer is not a stranger. Junie made a friend in school. Her name is Ella, and Sawyer is her dad. Yes, he’s met Junie, and yes, we’ve been on some dates. It’s all very new, which is why I haven’t told you. He’s kind and patient, and he’s very good to us both.”

Dan’s expression twists, and so does my chest.

“You gotta be kidding me.”

“What’s the real problem here, Dan? Just say it so we can move on.”

“Why, because you have a date with this guy?”

I feel my anxiety continue to rise, alongside my exhaustion. I’m so sick of having to be the adult in the room.

So tired of pretending this dance of ours is in any way tolerable or acceptable. This man will never learn. He’ll never change.

“That’s none of your business,” I manage, emotion rising in my throat despite my attempts to stay calm.

“It damn sure is my business if he’s hanging around my daughter.”

I blink back the sting in my eyes. I *will* not cry in front of Dan.

I refuse to let him have the upper hand.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Sawyer, Dan. Like I said, he’s a really good guy, and Junie enjoys his company. I wouldn’t bring him around if I thought he’d be a problem. He’s a single dad—Ella’s only parent—so Junie would’ve met him regardless of whether he and I were dating.”

“But you are dating.”

“Yes.” I roll my eyes, nearly choking on my frustration. “I’m allowed to date people, Dan. I’m sure you’re dating too, which is great.”

“You have some nerve being annoyed with me when *you’re* the one in the wrong. Sure, I date, but I never bring anyone home when June’s around.”

There it is: the insinuation that I’m somehow defective. Improper. *Wrong*.

I clench my jaw. “Easy for you to say when you only have her two weekends a month.”

“I never wanted this whole arrangement.” He points a finger at me. “*You* did.”

My lungs burn. So do my eyes. I hate that I still cry when I get upset. I can be sad, angry, overwhelmed—any big feeling makes me tear up.

I’m a lot like June in that respect, I guess.

It’s also something Dan hated about me. He said I was too emotional. Too much.

I close my eyes. My voice wobbles when I say, “Dan, I think you should leave.”

“You’re being ridiculous. I’m just trying to have a conversation with you.”

“No, you’re trying to upset me, and I am so not here for it.”

“You say he’s a good guy? Prove it. Give me your phone.”

My eyes pop open. “Excuse me?”

“Show me what he says to you.” Dan holds out his hand. “Your texts with him. You want me to believe you, I need proof.”

I laugh. “Absolutely not.”

“Show me, Ava,” he replies, “unless you want this to become a bigger problem? My lawyer’s just a phone call away.”

I step back, barely able to breathe around the constriction in my throat. “I’m not going to let you bully me. Leave, Dan. Why don’t you leave June here while you’re at it if you’re going to act this way?”

“I’m not going to let you bring strange men around my daughter. Show me the phone, Ava.”

I can only stare at him. It’s crystal clear that this man does not like the person I am now or the choices I’m making.

Talking to him is like beating my head against a wall. So different from how *easy* it is to be with Sawyer. To talk to him. He never second-guesses me this way.

He’d never invade my privacy, because he trusts me.

*Sawyer genuinely trusts me.* Which makes me think I really can trust myself.

“I didn’t want to get divorced either, Dan,” I say, keeping my voice low. “But we are divorced, which means you have absolutely no right to look at my phone. June is really looking forward to having a nice weekend —”

“I’ll have a nice weekend once I know my daughter is safe.”

“Right, because I would intentionally put our three-year-old in danger by

texting with a guy.” I roll my eyes again and turn on my heel. “Whatever, Dan.”

“Don’t walk away from me.”

“Dan,” I say as calmly as possible, “please leave.”

“The phone, Ava.”

I glare at him. “Dan —”

“Just give me the phone.”

“How many times do I have to tell you no?” I turn back around to face him. “Get out of here. Now.”

“Mommy? Is Mommy okay?”

My stomach drops when I realize Junie can hear us.

“I’m fine, Bug!” I call. Then I meet Dan’s eyes and whisper, “I’ll do you a solid and forget you asked to invade my privacy if you go. Right now, Dan.”

He holds my gaze for a beat too long. “This conversation is not over. Really, what kind of mother are you, bringing random men to the house? If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were a sl —”

“Don’t.” Anger grips my windpipe. At the same time, I’m hit by the ferocious need to cry. “Don’t you dare say that word to me. Or to anyone.”

Silence, heavy and charged, hangs between us as he stares me down.

“Fine,” he clips at last. “But you best believe if I hear a whisper of this man hurtin’ our little girl, we’re gonna have a problem.”

I’m so angry and embarrassed and *sad* that I’m shaking. I still manage to bite out, “You’re the problem. You always have been. You’re the one who hurt me by not trusting me. By forcing me to bury who I really am. And you’re the one who hurt our little girl by not showing up the way we needed you to.” A tear leaks out of my eye. I quickly wipe it away. “Get out. Now.”

“Whatever.” Dan rolls his eyes, throwing up his hands. “You’re crazy.”

I laugh. It’s more of a cackle, really, the kind that scorches the back of my throat.

“What?” Dan asks.

I shake my head. “It’s just funny. Men love to call women ‘crazy,’ but y’all are the crazy ones thinking we’d ever settle for your bullshit.”

“Fuck you,” he spits.

“*Get. Out.*” I nod at the door. “And if I so much as hear a whisper about you putting bad thoughts or ideas into our little girl’s head, you best believe we’re gonna have a problem.”

I walk past him in an attempt to end the conversation, careful to make sure our shoulders don't brush. Keeping my voice light, I tell Junie it's time to go. I definitely don't miss doing this kind of emotional labor, where I paste a smile on my face to maintain the peace in our house.

I *definitely* don't miss living with Dan and his moods.

At least he's kind to our daughter as they head out the door, telling her how excited he is to spend the day together.

For a split second, I wonder if I should let him take her at all. I'm not worried for her safety or anything. But it's clear Dan is *very* angry, and I hope he's not short-tempered with her. I also hope he doesn't put any bad thoughts in our daughter's head.

He is her father, though. And this is his weekend to have her. I can just imagine the shit fit he'd have had if I'd refused to let him take June. Not because he'd necessarily miss her, but because it'd have wounded his pride.

So I watch them pull out of the driveway and head down the paved road that leads to the ranch's entrance.

Then I curl up on the couch and let out the sob I've been holding.

After that, I call my sister. I decide on my older sister Dottie, since she's supposedly the wiser one.

I could really use some wisdom right now.



## CHAPTER 28

*Ava*

## LIFELINE

**“AW, SWEETIE, WHAT’S WRONG?”** Dottie asks after picking up on the first ring.

I scoff. “How’d you know something was wrong?”

“You’re supposed to be getting ready to see your cowboy. Tell me what happened.”

I’ve kept my sisters up on the developments between Sawyer and me. It’s been far too juicy of a story not to share. My sisters and I text every day and chat on the phone multiple times a week, so it’d have been weird if I hadn’t told them.

Bee takes all the credit for my budding relationship with Sawyer, seeing as she’s the one who, in her words, “*literally* pushed y’all into each other’s arms.”

Dottie loves hearing about all the sweet things Sawyer does for Junie and me.

After witnessing the hell I went through with Dan, I know they’re glad to see me putting myself out there again. To see me happy, happy enough to give a relationship a try.

Am I brave enough, though?

“Where do I start?” I take a deep breath. “Dan and I just got into a big fight when he came to pick up Junie.”

“I *hate* that guy.”

“He’s the absolute worst,” I say with a mirthless chuckle. “Long story short, he did what he always does and made me feel like shit about myself. Basically implied that I was putting June in danger by introducing her to

Sawyer.”

A pause.

“You’re kidding.”

“I wish I were. Dan even asked to see my phone so he could read my texts, because I’m clearly some, like, unhinged, unfit mother who’d neglect her child to go have sex with random men.”

“He’s threatened by you. That’s why he’s always tried to make you smaller. Less sure of yourself. You know that, right? That he’s always been afraid you’ll realize how much better you are than him, so he tries to put you down? Keep you scared and mixed up?”

I stick my tongue into my cheek. “I do, yeah. I just wish his bullshit didn’t still get to me. I know I’m doing the right thing—I’m making good choices, Dot—but now I feel bad. I’m also in no state to go see Sawyer.”

“Don’t you dare let that asshole second-guess yourself. And don’t you *dare* let him keep you from your cowboy.”

My face crumples. “Maybe it’s for the best.”

Dottie guffaws. “That’s a lie, and you know it. Divorcing a narcissistic jerk-off who tried to change everything about you—*that* was for the best. Blowing off the cute cowboy who worships every last bit of you? That’s not, and I refuse to allow it.”

The knot in my center loosens ever so slightly. My sister is right about Sawyer. I truly can’t imagine him ever accusing me the way Dan did.

I can’t imagine Sawyer ever trying to keep me mixed up. He’s not afraid of who I am. Hell, he’s not afraid of what I want, even though it’s the opposite of what *he* wants. He still lets me be, well, me.

“You’re in love with him, aren’t you?” Dottie asks, reading my mind.

“Jesus, Dot, way to put me on the spot.”

“You’re a poet and you didn’t even know it.” I hear the smile in her voice. “I mean, it’s pretty obvious, sweetie. From what you’ve told me about Sawyer, he’d never do anything to intentionally make you cry sad tears this way.”

I glance at the ceiling. The fan is on, casting shadows as it lazily stirs the air.

“But he wants to get married. Kids, dogs, white picket fence. The whole nine yards.”

“And?”

“And?” I laugh. “What do you mean? You know I have no interest in any

of that. He's a good guy, Dottie. He deserves the world. Everything he wants, he really and truly deserves. He's an excellent human being. He works hard and loves harder, and I don't want to stand in the way of him getting the happily ever after he's always dreamed of."

Dottie pauses. I hear her munching on something. Cashews, if I had to guess. She's a constant snacker.

"I don't buy it," she says at last.

I roll my eyes. "What don't you buy?"

"That you and Junie aren't his happily ever after. I mean, what if y'all have already found it? Paradise? Because really, what could heaven possibly be other than the freedom to be your freaky little authentic selves together?"

Feels good to keep laughing, despite the tears that continue to leak out of my eyes.

"I know you," Dottie continues. "What you value most in life are freedom and authenticity. Two things you were never, ever going to find with Dan. But Sawyer? Totally different story. You gotta give the guy a chance to prove you wrong, A."

I already know the answer. But I still ask, "Prove me wrong about what?"

"That romantic relationships equal inevitable disappointment."

Looking down at the sofa, I let the idea marinate inside my head. "I'm okay being on my own. I like my life as it is."

"I know you do. I also know that *you* know that family is the beginning and end of everything. All family is, A, is a bunch of people who love each other. Family is love. Ergo —"

"Love is the beginning and end of everything." Lord, the tears are *really* falling now.

"So let love in, damn it."

"You know what I love? How you can make me laugh *and* cry at the same time."

"I'm awesome. I'm also right, and you know it."

I take a breath in. Let it out. In. Out. Over and over, thinking.

Feeling.

"But he wants to get married," I say at last. "Sawyer grew up in this, like, picture-perfect family —"

"They're really great, aren't they?"

My stomach somersaults when I remember the way Mollie and Wheeler helped me pick out my boots and outfit.

Also, they refused to let me pay for the boots, telling me the only payment they'd accept is attendance at ladies' night at The Rattler on Tuesdays. Apparently Mollie is a big fan, even though she can't drink at the moment.

Also *also*, I know Mollie and Wheeler aren't Riverses by birth or blood. But they're part of this sweet little family I've found here in Hartsville. A family that Sawyer helped create, alongside the brothers.

Let's not forget the way Duke has quietly cheered us on from the sidelines. And then there's the fact that Cash and Mollie babysat Ella so Sawyer and I could go out the other night.

"Really great," I say, throat closing in all over again.

"But they're not perfect. No one is. Which is why I think you have some room to get creative here. Sawyer says he's looking for marriage, which you take to mean a white picket fence and babies and all that. What if—hear me out here—he's actually looking for commitment? Because marriage and commitment aren't the same thing. Maybe you can't give him a ring, but you can show up. Be a really great friend. You can be a great listener. You can be there for him and for his daughter. I think this is a classic case of *showing* being more impactful and important than *telling*."

I scrunch my brow. "Explain."

"Like"—Dottie lets out a breath—"you're showing him you're all in with what you do. Who cares about what the two of you say to each other on a stupid altar at a stupid wedding? Words mean nothing. Deeds are everything. Sawyer is a smart guy. I think he'll ultimately appreciate that more than your signature on a marriage license. You learned firsthand how worthless that piece of paper can be."

I dab at my eyes with my sleeve. "I like that idea. Really, I don't think you're wrong about Sawyer appreciating the small things—the everyday deeds. That's what I love about him. But I'm not sure that will be enough. I get why he wants the big white wedding with all his friends and family there. He's a family man at heart. A true romantic."

"And you're not?"

I let out a bark of laughter. "Dot, I'm the opposite of a romantic at this point."

"Hard disagree. You're in love right now. So in love that you can't fucking stand it, can you?"

"I am." Running a hand through my hair, I form a fist at my crown and

squeeze my eyes shut. “And I can’t.”

“Listen. We all want a guarantee that things will work out and we’ll be okay. Truth is, nobody gets a guarantee. You take risks and hope they work out, and that’s all you can do.”

“I’ve taken some really stupid risks,” I manage, my voice threadbare.

“Sawyer is not a stupid risk, sweetie. You and I both know that. Your experience with him is totally different from your experience with Dan. Sawyer loves you for who you are, not who he thinks you should be. Maybe that’ll change down the road. But I highly, highly doubt that.”

My pulse drums in my ears. “Why do you think that?”

“Sawyer knows what he wants, and in keeping with that, he knows who he is. He’s not trying to be something or someone he’s not. He doesn’t need to impress anyone other than you. Which he’ll go to the ends of the earth to do, by the way.”

*Let me stay. Please, Ava, let me stay.*

*I’m ready to run when you are.*

“I can’t go through it again.” I cover my eyes with my hand. “If things don’t work out—there’s Junie, and my job—life is so good right now, and I don’t want to start over —”

“You know it’d be a tragedy, right?”

“What would?”

“If you let this fear you have of people disappointing you sabotage what could be a really beautiful time in your life. I love you, but I can already see you thinking you’d be better off if you end things now before Sawyer inevitably lets you down.”

“Because he will let me down, Dot.”

“Of course he will! Everyone disappoints you sometimes. But I think the difference is, Sawyer will never disappoint you by asking you to abandon who you really are.”

My heart squeezes. *It’s true.*

Deep down, I know Sawyer will let me be the free spirit I am in a way that Dan never, ever did.

Sawyer will show up for me without insisting I change first. Without the condition that I be smaller, sweeter, *less*.

Reading my mind, Dottie continues softly, “You’re assuming the worst, Ava. You think he’ll let you down and your relationship will implode because he’s going to wind up thinking you’re somehow deficient. But how

about you tell yourself this story instead: that you love Sawyer for who he is, and he loves you the same way, and *that* is your happily ever after, full stop? Screw the picket fences and the joint bank accounts. It's about y'all, and the two of you clearly mean a lot to each other. I know this whole thing started with some really hot sex —"

"The sex is so, so good, Dot."

"So it's true that everything really is bigger in Texas, huh?"

"No comment."

"You lucky bitch. Anyway, y'all started as a one-night stand. But now I feel like you've somehow managed to become friends first, fuck buddies second? Like the whole thing's been reversed but in, like, the best way?"

"Sawyer is a really great friend."

"Dan never was." Dottie chews. "I rest my case. It's time to be brave, A. Dry your eyes, put on your dancing boots, and go tell your cowboy how you feel."

"Even if I'm a blotchy mess?"

"Especially if you're a blotchy mess. Something tells me Sawyer is gonna make you feel a hell of a lot better."



## CHAPTER 29

*Sanyer*

## AVA IS LATE.

She's never late.

Glancing at my phone, I see that she hasn't returned any of my texts. Makes me anxious. Everything okay? Something happen with June's pickup? I know her ex was supposed to grab her earlier. She and I had plans to meet up here at The Rattler after Caroline came over to my house at six to babysit Ella.

"Dude." Wyatt eyes me as he tips back his longneck. "It's just half an hour. I'm sure she's fine. Girls are late all the time."

Mollie grins, putting a hand on her swollen belly. "I can attest to that."

"Aw, honey, that's the good kind of late." Cash plants a kiss on her lips, smiling like a lovestruck idiot. "You're so beautiful."

She gently scratches his beard on the underside of his chin. "You're so hot. You know how much I love you in that hat." She reaches up to touch the brim of his Stetson.

"Wanna wear it later?" He smirks.

Mollie's eyes flash. "Like you even need to ask."

"Please don't lock everyone out of the women's restroom so y'all can bang in there," Tallulah, the bartender, pleads. "We have a full house tonight."

"That was only once," Mollie replies.

Cash nods. "But we made it count, didn't we?"

Setting my elbows on the bar, I hang my head. I love Cash and Mollie. They're great together, and I'm genuinely happy for them. But they're still in

that lovey-dovey phase that kinda grosses out everyone around them.

Or maybe that's just me being jealous, wishing my girl would show up already. 'Cause I miss her, even though I saw her yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that.

Really, we haven't gone a day without crossing paths since our date last weekend. If I wasn't addicted to Ava before, I definitely am now, looking up every time The Rattler's door swings open in the hope that it's her.

Mollie and Cash head to the dance floor. Sally is up onstage with Frisky Whiskey, the band she and her mom are in that performs at The Rattler every Friday night. They're here again tonight by special request.

By that I mean *my* request. I may have bribed Patsy and Sally with quarts of my homemade tomato soup to play two nights in a row so Ava could see them. She's a live-music gal, so I know she'll get a kick out of Frisky Whiskey's excellent country covers.

I check my phone. It's almost quarter till seven.

Duke gently elbows me. "You all right?"

"I can't shake the feeling that something's wrong."

He frowns. "You think we should check on her? We can take my truck if you want."

"Maybe." My heart lifts when the door opens, then promptly falls when I see its Goody Gershwin, Tallulah's wife. "This isn't like Ava."

"Y'all really know each other well, huh?" Duke eyes me as he sips his beer.

"Look, I get it. Ava and I are new. Really new. But I feel like we've covered so much ground in the time we've been together. I've never —"

"Connected with someone like that?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "You say that like you know what you're talking about."

Bringing his beer to his lips, he just grins and shrugs. "Just sayin', it's cool to see you finally get what you want. Because you've always known what you wanted, Sawyer."

"What do you think I want?"

Duke gives me a look. "Don't be a dick."

"No, I'm genuinely curious. Because that's where I keep getting stuck with Ava. All my life, I've wanted to get married, have a family. Do things the right way, in the right order. Which I clearly haven't done so far, but you gotta start somewhere. But Ava ... she doesn't want to get married."

“Who cares what order you do things in, as long as you get to do them?” Duke sets down his longneck. “When you really think about it, Sawyer—when you dig into why you’d want to get married and have a family—I think what you’ve always been looking for is a sense of home. Of safety.”

I blink. “That’s ... awfully insightful of you.”

“Dude, shut up.”

“I mean it.”

He turns, leaning his hip against the bar. “You run around always making sure everyone else is safe and taken care of. Ever think you might want that for yourself too?”

I turn my head to wipe my eyes on my sleeve. At the same time, I laugh, because he’s right.

My younger brother is fucking right.

“Hey.” Duke presses his fingers into my chest. “None of us is safe from heartbreak and loss. I think we learned that lesson early.”

“Too early.”

“No shit.” Duke’s eyes are wet now too. “But damn, have you tried to keep us all from hurting that way again. Which we never asked you to do, by the way.”

I sip my beer. “Yeah, well, someone needs to look out for you animals.”

“We’re grown adults, Sawyer. We’re all okay, so you can stop running your rescue mission now.” His fingers dig into my sternum. “Maybe if you stopped hurting yourself by putting everyone else first, you’d see that Ava ain’t gonna hurt you. You don’t need a piece of paper to tell you what you already know.”

“Yeah?” I sniffle. “And what’s that?”

He grins, his expression softening. “You already got your happy ending. The safety, the respect, the commitment—it’s happening right fucking now, Sawyer. Open your goddamn eyes.”

I shit you not, the door opens right then and a tall blonde in blue jeans and a cowboy hat strides into the bar.

“See?” he murmurs. “She showed. Y’all are gonna be just fine, I promise.”

I see Ava and my heart, my stomach—everything swoops, my eyes burning and laughter bubbling up inside me.

*Relief.*

That’s what this feeling is. Relief that I get to re-prioritize shit so I can

make sure I'm taken care of too.

I get to go live my fucking life with Ava. Whatever that looks like. Wedding, no wedding. We've got two babies between us, so Ella's gonna get that sibling I've always wanted for her. A built-in best friend.

Am I jumping twenty steps ahead? Hell yeah I am. But this really is what I want. Not a ring or a rented tux.

I wanna drink and dance with this woman, and only this woman, for the rest of my life. I wanna take her home—take her to *our* home—and show her what our happy ending looks like, pun intended.

The certainty of that conviction grips me and doesn't let go.

I can live without Ava becoming Mrs. Rivers.

I can't, however, live without Ava.

So I grab the beer I've had waiting for her and turn to greet her.

Seeing her face, I immediately draw up short. An ugly feeling cuts through my center as I take in her swollen, bloodshot eyes.

Hell, her whole face is swollen, like she's been crying for hours.

I hold my beer in a death grip. Jesus fucking Christ.

Jesus fucking *Christ*, what did that asshole do?

"I'm—" She clears her throat. "Sorry I'm so late. It was—I've had a day —"

"Who?" I bite out the word. My pulse jumps, palms tingling. I feel my brothers watching us.

Ava blinks, her throat working as she swallows. "What do —"

"Who did this to you?" I gesture to her face.

She looks up at me. "What do you mean?"

Despite the way my heart is going apeshit, I keep my voice calm. "Who made you cry? Who hurt you? Please tell me, Ava."

Her chin trembles, and next thing I know Duke's taking the beers out of my hands and I'm gently pulling Ava in for a hug.

"Are you okay?" I whisper, kissing the top of her head.

She nods. "I'm okay."

"You don't look okay."

"Fine, I'm not okay." Ava pulls back a little to look up at me. "Can we talk? I don't mean to ruin our date —"

"You're not ruining anything."

"Thank you, Sawyer." She looks like she's going to cry all over again. "I'm so sorry. Honestly, I've been looking forward to this all week, and I

really want us to have a good time, but I needed—I had to—I debated whether or not I should come, or if I should cancel ...”

“Is June safe?”

“June is safe. Dan took her. He and I just got into it before she left.”

I let out a breath of relief. At the same time, my chest tightens with growing anger. Dan took June, but he still obviously fucked up big time.

“You should’ve called me, Ava. You know you can call me, right? Anytime, day or night.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I needed to gather my thoughts and get myself together. Can we go outside? Talk there?”

“Of course.” Glancing over my shoulder, I see that all my brothers have gathered at the bar behind us. I can tell by the way they set down their drinks that they’re ready to leave if I need their help.

My chest swells. My family has always been there for me. But it’s only now that I’m willing to accept that I actually need them.

It’s only now that I’m willing to accept their help.

“Y’all okay?” Cash asks. Luckily the band hasn’t started yet so he doesn’t need to shout, which might draw attention to us.

I nod. “We’re just gonna go talk in my truck. Give us a few.”

“We’ll be here,” Wyatt says, cracking his knuckles. “Been a minute since we’ve had a fight in these parts.”

“That was once,” Cash replies, parroting his wife’s line. “And the other guy started it.”

I don’t love fighting. But if someone hurt my girl —

Yeah, he’s gonna have a date with my right fist.

Putting a hand on the small of Ava’s back, I guide her to the door and open it for her. The air outside is bracing, the darkness not quite complete now that we’re heading into spring.

She’s trembling. I curse, pulling her closer. Something bad definitely happened, and I’m definitely going to crack some skulls if that something was her asshole ex putting his hands on her or being abusive in any other way.

What kind of man makes somebody cry hard enough that her eyes swell up like this?

Makes me feel helpless. And angry. And now I wanna fix this, whatever the problem is, even though I just had a whole conversation with my brother about how harmful my pathological need to fix everything and save everyone

has become.

What if—for now—I just make a promise to listen? Because I know Ava, and she doesn't need me to punch anyone for her. She can hold her own. But she does need a friend. A shoulder to cry on.

*I'm your man, Ava.*

I open the passenger door for her and give her a hand as she climbs inside. I hustle to the driver's side and start the ignition, cranking the heat. Luckily the engine is still warm—I was only inside for a little less than an hour—so we get comfortable quickly.

“Your seat warmer is right there.” I nod at the button on her door.

Turning on the warmer with her thumb, she manages a tight smile. “You think of everything.”

“I hate seein' you like this,” I say softly. “What happened?”

I wanna touch her, put my hand on her thigh like I always do when she's in my truck. Let her know I'm here.

But I also wanna give her space. She wants physical comfort, I'm in. That's her call to make, though.

“Dan just lost his mind.” Ava takes off her hat and sets it on the console between us, letting her head fall back on the headrest. “I shouldn't let him upset me because I know that's what he wants. But he really got to me today.”

I drop my hand to my side so she can't see me make a fist. “I'm sorry. Co-parenting is not for the faint of heart.”

“No shit,” she says with a scoff. She looks down at her hands, which are clasped on her lap. Then she looks up at me. “We fought about you, actually.”

My stomach heaves. “Did I do something?”

“No! My God, Sawyer. You've done nothing except be awesome.” She elbows her hat out of the way and reaches for my hand, tangling our fingers. “Dan is just jealous. You're the first guy I've really dated since we got divorced, and I think it threw him for a loop.”

“Did you tell him about me?”

“Junie did. She brought you up because ... how could she not? You've been around so much, and you've been just so wonderful to both of us.”

My turn to swallow. “I am pretty great.”

“You're the best. Truly. And that's where I made my mistake. I should've told him about you earlier —”



“You get to decide these things, Ava,” I reply, my pulse skidding at the idea that she wants to tell her ex about me. That feels like a big step. “This is your life, not his. You tell him when you’re ready.”

Ava’s eyes are glassy when they meet mine. “But it’s all our lives, isn’t it? Because you’re a part of June’s life now, Sawyer.” She squeezes my hand. “I hope a big part. And I should’ve told Dan about us, because he’s going to be seeing a lot of you.”

Holy.

Shit.

For several beats I can’t speak. I just search Ava’s face, blinking a hundred times a minute to keep my own tears from spilling over. I don’t wanna cry, I just —

*Goddamn it, let yourself cry. This is a good moment.*

I bring our joined hands to my lips. “He’s got a problem with that, he can come to me.”

“You mean that?”

“Aw, pretty girl, I mean that.” I close my eyes and take a deep, shuddering breath.

“He asked to see my phone.”

“What?” My eyes bulge open.

“I can’t make this shit up. He wanted to see the texts you’d sent me. And then he called me a slut, because that’s his MO—hating on me.”

I am speechless.

Legitimately speechless for several heartbeats while I absorb this news.

“He didn’t actually say the whole word,” Ava continues. “I stopped him before he could. But the implication was there. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t make me feel ... not great.”

“Never.” The word comes out as a growl.

Ava’s eyebrows pop up. “Never what?”

“He never talks to you like that. Ever. He ever speaks to you that way again, he’ll deal with me. You got it?”

She looks at me for a long beat, her eyelashes fluttering. “Okay. Thank you. That makes me feel better. A lot better.”

“Good. Did you show him the texts?”

“Hell no. He has no right to see them. Again, I think he was just trying to upset me. He’s been holding on to this grudge against me since we split—he thinks I was the one who ended our marriage. To be fair, I did hire a lawyer

first. But that was only when I knew our relationship was over. I'd tried for years to make it work, but I realized Dan was never going to let me out of the cage he'd put me in. He didn't like that I was untamed, and he tried to change me. For a while, I let him. I believed him when he told me I was too emotional, too wild, too ... unlovable. But over time, I realized that I wasn't the problem. He was. He couldn't figure out a way to love who I truly was."

I grit my teeth. I see why Ava wouldn't want to go down that road again. For her, marriage was a prison. Who in their right mind would seek that out?

"You deserve so much more than to be married to a man who calls you awful names and wants to change who you are," I say.

Ava nods. "I know. Being with you has shown me what's possible. What's *good*."

"You cryin' like this ain't any good, pretty girl."

"But being with you?" She takes my hand, twining our fingers. "That's really good. The best I've ever had. Best I've ever felt. Because you *do* love me for who I am."

A bubbly feeling rises through my chest, settling in the back of my throat. "I do. So fuckin' much, pretty girl. I love you so fucking much. I love that you're always down for an adventure. You're spontaneous. Fun as hell. I love that you like to try new things. I love how you love your baby. Didn't realize how dead I was inside until I met you, and no matter what happens, I'll always be grateful that you brought me back to life."

Her expression contracts. "Thank you," she breathes.

"For what? Lovin' you for who you are? You don't gotta thank me for that. Easiest, best thing I've ever done has been falling hard and fast for you."

"Oh, Sawyer." She snuffles. "I'm ready, honey. I want you. But I know how important getting married and having more kids is to you, and I'm not sure I'll ever want those things. If that's a deal-breaker, I get it. But I'm all in if you'll have me as I am." She rolls her lips between her teeth. "I get that this is all so much messier than either of us hoped —"

"Really? Because I'm not sure it's very messy at all."

Her eyelashes flutter. "But we want —"

"The same thing, Ava. Each other. And help unloading the dishwasher."

Her eyes fill. "God." A pause. "*God* you're fucking good."

Laughing, I cup her face in my hand and pull her in for a kiss. "I love you, Ava. I wasn't joking when I said I've been in love with you since you bumped into me at that honky-tonk."

“Cowboy, I’ve been in love with you for what feels like forever.”

She kisses me back, a slow, unhurried caress that tastes like tears and feels like freedom.

There’s still so much we have to figure out. The kids, our exes. Will she consider moving in with me? That would make for a bit of a commute for her, though.

I haven’t met her family yet.

I also wanna keep dating her. It’s too soon for that phase of our story to be over.

Really, I wanna date her forever if she’ll let me.

Pressing one last kiss to her lips, I pull back. “So now that that’s out of the way ...”

She laughs. “This happened too fast.”

“Yes.”

“We’re being reckless.”

I grin. “Maybe.”

“But we’re going in anyway.”

“Definitely. Because there’s a good chance this is also the best decision we’re ever going to make.”

She’s smiling, the kind of smile that touches her green eyes. She arcs her thumb over the back of my hand. “I’m in.”

“Me too.”

She looks at me. I look back.

“Thank you. For turning a really bad day into a really good one.”

My turn to squeeze her hand. “That’s kind of my job as your boyfriend.”

“That makes me your girlfriend, huh?”

“I ain’t sharing if that’s what you’re asking.”

Her eyes get this bright, sated look in them. “I don’t wanna share you either, honey.”

“What do you think was the most upsetting part of your conversation with Dan?”

She thinks on this for a minute, her shoulders rising on a deep inhale. “My biggest beef with Dan when we were married was the fact that he didn’t seem to care very much about, well, anything except himself. He didn’t care about who I really was or what I really wanted. He just wanted me to be his perfect little wife who took care of him and made his life easy.”

I drape my free hand over the steering wheel, the deep rumble of the

engine filling the quiet between us. “It’s really hard when you feel like you’re the only one who cares. Who tries hard.”

“Hell, who tries at all.”

“I get that too.”

“Dan didn’t care for years. And now all of a sudden, he wants to go through my phone to read the texts you sent me.”

“Bizarre.”

“The guy has balls of steel, I’ll give him that,” she replies with a mirthless laugh. “Anyway, just his insinuation that I’d ever put Junie in danger—that I’d just bring around random guys while she was with me—it was insulting more than anything, and it pissed me off. But when I get really mad, I cry, so ...” She motions to her face. “I cried a lot today.”

“How did June react?”

“Luckily she was too preoccupied with her Kindle to really pay any attention.”

I curl my fingers around the wheel. “I don’t want to hate your ex —”

“I don’t want that either. Dan’s not usually like this, I swear. But ... yeah, there’s *many* reasons we’re not married anymore.”

“He’s coming back to bring Junie home tomorrow, right?”

Ava nods. “You wanna meet him?”

“I do.”

“Leave the gun at home.”

“Ava, I’m not gonna shoot the guy,” I say with a chuckle. “I may give him a black eye —”

“Don’t.”

“Kidding. I’m not one to start a fight.”

“Nah.” Her eyes flash. “You’re better at starting fires.”

My dick leaps. “You wanna get out of here?”

“I mean, I wanna do that.” She glances down at my lap. “But I don’t know. I decided a long time ago that Dan wasn’t going to ruin anything for me anymore. Why let him ruin tonight? Let’s go dancing.”

We exchange another long look. I don’t ask her if she’s sure.

I don’t ask her if I can go down on her real quick before we head back inside. We start that, we ain’t gonna finish anytime soon.

I just kiss her mouth and kill the ignition.

I jump out of the truck and open her door.

Then I take my girl’s hand and lead her inside the bar, where Frisky

Whiskey is playing a Johnny Cash cover.  
*Burns, burns, burns.*

## CHAPTER 30

*Sanyer*

## GENTLEMAN

**KILLS** me to drop Ava off at her place later that night after we danced for hours at The Rattler. We drank beer and sang along to the band and laughed our asses off. But we decided we wanted to have individual conversations with our daughters about our relationship before we do any kind of sleepover situation, so I drive home alone in the dark with the taste of Ava's pussy in my mouth and a big, dumb smile on my face. Caroline says I look "really happy" when I relieve her from babysitting duty.

I let myself sleep in on Sunday morning—well, as much as Ella will let me, anyway—because that's what I do now. I let myself rest when I need it. Ava's rubbing off on me in all the best ways.

Then I get a pot of chili going—I told Ava I'd bring dinner over tonight so I could meet Dan when he dropped off Junie.

After that, Ella and I head to the barn and tack up my horse, JJ. I got him last year when Ella was obsessed with the show *Cocomelon*, so she named him after her favorite character.

Together, we ride out to the south pasture where Wyatt and the cowboys are working cattle. It's a chilly, overcast day, but my daughter doesn't seem to mind. She squeals with delight as we ride alongside the herd, her pink little helmet bobbing in time to my horse's stride.

"Elly Belly Boo, you are looking so good up there in the saddle," Sally says. "I'm proud of you, sweetheart."

Ella turns her head and smiles at her soon-to-be aunt. "I like riding with Daddy."

"I can see that. Y'all both look happy." Sally's eyes flick to me. "Very



happy.”

I guide JJ closer to a calf who appears to be lagging a little behind his mama. “Y’all were great last night.”

“Thanks. I already checked on that little guy, by the way. He’s just one of the younger ones. We’ll keep an eye on him, but I think he’ll learn to keep up.”

“Sounds good.”

“You looked like you were having a good time on the dance floor.” Sally eyes Ella, and I know she doesn’t want to say too much. “I’m glad y’all were able to stay.”

“Me too.”

Sally smiles. “I think y’all made my mom blush, the way you were ... ahem, dancing.”

“Daddy, you went dancing?” Ella turns her head to look up at me.

“I did. With Miss Ava.”

“Miss Ava? Can I please see Junie today? I miss her so very much.”

Sally and I laugh.

“I might miss Ava a little more.”

Ella scrunches up her face. “Why would you miss her?”

“I’ll leave y’all to it,” Sally says. “I’m happy for you, Sawyer.”

“Thanks, Sal. Tell my brother to slow down, would you?” I nod ahead at Wyatt, who’s riding a hundred or so yards in front of us. “It’s Sunday, and I don’t wanna rush.”

Sally’s still smiling as she shakes her head.

“What?” I ask.

“I just like this new version of you is all.”

“What new version would that be?” I’m smiling like an idiot, but I don’t care.

“The one that takes his time. That enjoys a ride, instead of just enduring it.”

“Well, in that case, I like this new version of me too.”

“You should ‘dance’ more.” Sally uses air quotes. “I can tell you from experience that everyone’s happier when you’re dancing.”

“How many times do we have to tell you and Wyatt to get a room already?” I reply with a laugh.

“Just imparting some hard-won wisdom. Good luck, Sawyer.”

Ella and I trot in contented silence for a few minutes. Like her, I don’t

mind the cold. We've had a wet winter, so the herd doesn't kick up much dust at all.

I clear my throat, going over the thousand different ways I could approach this conversation. Kept me up late, thinking about what I should say. How I should say it. I don't want to overwhelm Ella by sharing too many details, but I also don't want her to walk away confused.

As much as I've longed for this moment to arrive, I feel really fucking unprepared. How do you tell the person you love most in the world that things are about to change? In a good way, obviously. But still. I already feel so much guilt about what Ella's been through. Her mom isn't around. I do my best, but I worry all the time about making sure she has stability and consistency in her life.

Introducing a new person—two new people—is a big, *big* change for us. Even if it's a positive change, it's still rocking our little boat in a way I never would have allowed before meeting Ava.

No one else seemed worth the risk.

"So, Ella, I have something I want to talk to you about," I say.

"Okay."

"You know Miss Ava." I clear my throat. "Of course you know her. And you like her, right?"

Ella nods. "I like Miss Ava."

"Well, Miss Ava is my new girlfriend."

"What's a girlfriend?"

"Um. It's someone who is very special to me. I like Ava a lot, too, Ella, and I'm hoping to become very, very good friends with her. She's going to be around a lot more—she'll be with us for dinner sometimes, and sometimes for breakfast or lunch. Other times, she'll just be hanging out with us."

"Oh. Okay. Are you going to marry Miss Ava?"

I wait for the disappointment to hit. And it does, in the form of a small but persistent tug in my center.

I think I'll always want to get married. That desire's not going to go away after a single moment, conversation, realization, whatever. But I recognize that beneath the desire for a ring—inside it—is the desire for safety.

The desire to be known by someone, witnessed at my best and at my worst, and still be loved.

My family loves me that way. So does Ava.

I'm not going to let the fact that she doesn't want us to be legally bound

stop me from loving her. Because being with Ava has made my life fuller and richer and *happier* than I think a stop at the altar ever could.

“We’re not going to get married, no. But you and Junie will be seeing a lot more of each other.”

“I love that.”

“I thought you might.”

“Does my mom know?”

Junie doesn’t talk about Lizzie much. It’s sad, but it’s also what’s best for everyone at this point. Maybe that will change. Maybe it won’t.

Either way, I’ve decided that honesty is the best policy when it comes to our family.

“I’ll tell your mom, yes. I’m pretty sure she’ll be happy for us, just like Auntie Sally was.”

Ella turns her head again to look up at me. “Daddy?”

“Yeah, Ella?”

“Is kissing yucky?”

I burst out laughing. “What made you think of that?”

“Rapunzel kisses Flynn.”

“Ah. Right. Well, you tell me.” I lean down and give her a scruffy, noisy kiss on her cheek. “Was that yucky?”

“So yucky!”

“Fine. I’ll just kiss Miss Ava from now on.”

“Okay, Daddy. If it makes you happy.”

I laugh, feeling lightheaded with relief. Relief and joy. “Oh, you best believe I’ll be kissing both of you for as long as I’m alive.”

---

I’m helping Ava change some light bulbs in her kitchen later that day when the crunch of gravel outside announces a visitor.

We meet eyes. It’s Dan and Junie.

“He won’t stay long,” Ava says. “Especially because you’re here.”

Ava told Dan that he’d get to meet me when he dropped off June this afternoon. Apparently he wasn’t thrilled about it. But like Ava said, it’s a classic case of damned if you do, damned if you don’t. The guy got in a shouting match with her over the fact that she didn’t tell him about me, but

now he's pouting because she did exactly what he asked and arranged a little meet and greet today.

Whatever the case, I'm making it a point to go high when he goes low. Ava doesn't need any more drama in her life. I also plan on being around for a while, which means Dan will be a regular fixture in our lives. Might as well make lemonade out of those lemons, best as I can.

I glance across the apartment to the living room. Ella has her back to us, pretending to microwave what appears to be a wooden pizza in the miniature kitchen set beside the TV.

I turn back to Ava. "You all right to see him?"

"I'm fine. Really. He did apologize over text this morning, which is better than nothing."

What a coward, saying he's sorry in a text. If I had my way, I'd grab Junie, bring her inside, and then chase this motherfucker away with my rifle. But my mama raised me better than that.

So I put on a smile. "Good. I'm glad he apologized to you. I hope he learned his lesson and never talks to you like that again."

"You're a really good guy, you know that?" Her eyes go soft. "Thank you. For being here. And for understanding."

I put my hands on her waist. "I'm here for you, pretty girl."

"I know you are."

I keep smiling when Ava opens the door. Junie bursts into the apartment, talking a hundred miles a minute while she charges up the stairs, then drops her jacket and water bottle on the floor.

"Mommy, hi! Daddy and I got doughnuts for breakfast! Then we went to the park, and after that we had quiet time, and now I'm here."

Okay, now I'm smiling for real as I pick up her discarded jacket and water bottle. Gotta love this kid's zest for life.

Straightening, I lock eyes with a guy several inches shorter than me. He's wearing a flannel and jeans, a pair of sunglasses hanging from his shirt.

He's also wearing a backward baseball hat. That fact alone makes me hate him, because I know that *he* knows how much Ava likes it.

"Hey, y'all," he says with a smile as he closes the door behind him. "How's it going?"

He's playing the nice guy. No trace of the asshole who made Ava cry into my shoulder yesterday.

Ava has Junie wrapped around her legs. "Apparently it's going really

well. You guys had fun, huh?"

June nods. "We did, Mommy. But I missed you."

"Aw, I missed you too, Bug."

"Yella!" June shouts when she sees my daughter. "Yella, hi! You're here! Hi!"

She makes a mad dash for Ella, the two of them colliding in a hug that ends with Junie lifting Ella off the ground.

It has us all in stitches.

"Patrick Swayze and that chick from *Dirty Dancing* have nothing on these two," I say.

"That your daughter?" Dan asks.

"Yep. She's a few months younger than June." I extend my hand. "I'm Sawyer, Ava's boyfriend. Pleased to meet you."

I don't miss the tic in Dan's jaw when he takes my hand and gives it a firm shake. "Dan Owens. So how'd y'all meet?"

"In Austin, actually," Ava says. "Then we randomly ran into each other again here in Hartsville."

I nod. "Been together ever since."

"Nice." Dan puts his hands in his pockets as he looks at me. "And you work here on the ranch?"

"I work on my own ranch, as a matter of fact."

"Lucky River Ranch," Ava adds, glancing at me. "It's one of the largest in the state. Sawyer and his brothers are co-owners."

A pink flush is working its way up Dan's neck.

Ain't my style to gloat, but I do allow myself a little smirk. "It's a nice spot."

"Sounds like it," he replies.

I turn my head to look at the girls, who are busy helping each other into princess dresses. "Your daughter is adorable. She's got a big heart, and she's been so good to Ella. Really helping to bring her out of her shell."

"Thanks," Dan says. "She is cute."

I look at Ava. "Y'all are doing a great job raising her."

"Takes a village," Ava replies, a small smile on her lips. "We're so proud of her."

"As you should be. It's an honor to be part of that village. She's a special little girl." I turn my gaze to Dan, and wait for him to say something back to me along those lines.

He doesn't.

He does, however, have the grace to look a little sheepish. He's gotta know I spend more time with Junie than he does. He should feel shame for that. I won't call him out on it, of course. But I can heavily imply that he's let these girls down in a big way.

Then again, I try not to judge Lizzie for the choices she's making, even though it's hard not to resent her for chasing her dreams while I'm here doing the hard work of raising our kid. Who knows what Dan's story is? Maybe he doesn't aspire to be the same kind of involved parent that Ava and I are, but it's obvious June adores him.

For that reason alone, I'll never, ever start shit with this man.

"She is special, isn't she?" Dan says at last. Rocking back on his heels, he tilts his head toward the door. "Welp, I should get going."

"Nice to meet you," I say. "Looking forward to seeing you next time."

*Yes, motherfucker, I'll be here. Just like I'll be here the time after that, and the time after that.*

Dan trots to the family room to give June one last hug. He does say hi to Ella, which I have to give him credit for—the guy's not a total loser. Ava wouldn't have married him if he was.

Then he's opening the door and walking through it.

"Here, I'll walk you out." Following him, I glance at Ava over my shoulder. "I'll be right back."

My heart skips at the steadiness of her gaze. She's not worried about me doing something stupid outside.

She trusts me. In a way I don't think she was ever able to trust Dan.

I wait until he and I are standing beside his truck to speak. I keep my voice low, tone even. Cool as a cucumber.

"So, hey," I begin, looking him square in the eye. "I'm gonna be nice to you in front of Ava and Junie, because they really do mean the world to me."

Dan peers at me from the corner of his eye. He's gripping the door handle of his truck like a lifeline. "Okay."

"But you ever make my girl cry again, I won't be this nice. Understood?"

His eyes narrow, flashing with anger. I notice his grip on the door loosens.

For a split second, I think *he's* going to do something stupid. Push me, or even try to land a punch. But I stay cool, holding eye contact despite the very real urge I have to ball my hands into fists.

“That was a misunderstanding,” Dan says at last. “I apologized to Ava.”

“I don’t care. You make her cry, you’ll see a side of me you’re not gonna like.”

His jaw tics again. “How long y’all been dating?”

“Long enough to know she deserves better’n you.”

He glares at me. “That’s uncalled for.”

“I said my piece. Long as we understand each other, Dan, we’ll be good.”

He keeps glaring at me for another long beat before finally yanking open his door. “Whatever.”

Climbing inside, he revs the engine and peels out of the driveway.

“Everything okay?” Ava asks when I’m back in the kitchen.

I pick up a wooden spoon and give the chili a stir. It’s been simmering on her stove for an hour now. “Everything’s perfect. Y’all hungry?”

“For you?” Smiling, she wraps her arms around my waist. “Always.”

## CHAPTER 31



*Ava*

WEAR THE HAT

**SAWYER DANCING** at a honky-tonk is sexy.

Sawyer climbing into bed naked and hard is hot.

But Sawyer doing cowboy shit in chaps and a Stetson?

Lord, that just about does me *in*. My mouth goes dry as I watch Sawyer emerge from the barn, a chestnut-colored calf in his arms. He carries the animal like it weighs no more than a human baby.

I mean, the guy isn't even out of breath.

He sees me and smiles, dimples and all. "Hey, pretty girl."

Giving him a little wave, I lick my lips. "You doing this on purpose?"

"Doing what?" Sawyer grunts when he sets the calf down.

The baby cow meanders over to a sow nearby that's munching on a patch of newly sprouted grass.

"Getting me all hot and bothered before our date even begins."

He straightens and wipes his gloved hands on his chaps. His face is flushed from the cold, and his scruff is a few days overgrown. He's covered in mud and muck from a full day of cowboying, and his blue eyes are bright but tired.

Throw in the thick arms and steady, confident way he walks, and I'm a goner.

"Well, yeah." He gestures to his legs. "Why do you think I wore my fancy chaps today?"

I saunter toward him. "Nice fringe."

"I know." Smirking, he curls a gloved finger through my belt loop and pulls me in for a kiss. "You're early."

“I was hoping to catch you in action. I don’t get to watch you cowboy nearly enough.”

I had a hair appointment downtown this afternoon, so I told Sawyer I’d swing by Lucky River Ranch on my way home to pick him up for our date. Wyatt and Sally are watching Ella tonight, and Sawyer and I are having a little sleepover at my place. It’s Dan’s weekend again with Junie, and he actually picked her up early, grabbing her from preschool earlier today.

Since it was my turn to plan the date—Sawyer and I try to get out at least once a week, and we switch planning duties every other time—I decided I’d combine work and fun, and give my boyfriend a little lesson in barrel racing.

Really, I wanted an excuse to watch him ride a horse. Nothing sexier than a man who knows what he’s doing in the saddle.

He nips at my bottom lip. “What else you wanna see?”

“Everything. Mostly, I wanna see you ride.”

“I think”—he ducks his head to suck on my neck—“I could arrange that.”

A hog whistle splits the air, and Sawyer and I break apart to see Duke walking out of the barn with a shit-eating grin on his face.

“I have a knack for interrupting y’all, don’t I?”

“Get lost,” Sawyer grunts.

I grin. “Hey, Duke.”

“Don’t worry, I’m leaving. Gotta get these two in their pen ASAP.” He nods at the sow and her calf. “I actually got somewhere to be.”

Sawyer rolls his eyes. “Lemme guess. The Rattler?”

“Not this time, no.”

“Aw, you have a date of your own, don’t you?” I ask.

Duke blushes, which might be the most adorable thing ever. “It’s not a date. But it’s also not *not* a date?”

“Who ya meeting?” Sawyer asks.

Duke smirks. “Wouldn’t you love to know? I’ll let y’all get to it. Told Wyatt I’d grab Ella tomorrow to get doughnuts and coffee downtown, by the way. You two take your time in the morning. Well, unless you wanna rush, because sometimes that’s fun too.”

“You’re gross,” Sawyer says.

“He’s not wrong,” I say.

Duke just keeps smirking. “Y’all have fun.”

“Who do you think he’s meeting?” I ask when Sawyer and I are in the car on the way to the arena at the Wallace Ranch. I have to smile at how *huge* my

boyfriend looks in my little Subaru, the top of his hat hitting the ceiling. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard him talk about anyone before.”

Sawyer, who insisted on driving my car, shrugs. “No clue. He and Ryder have always been wild cards when it comes to girls. Duke’s been mooning at Mollie’s friend Wheeler since they met...”

“Wheeler. Huh. I can actually see them together. They’re both firecrackers. Lots of personality.”

“She’s gotta have the same sense of wanderlust that Duke does if that’s ever gonna work. He likes cowboyin’ just fine, but I can tell he wants more.”

“She’ll love that about him.”

Sawyer lifts his fingers off the wheel. “Maybe. Whatever the case, I hope Wheeler knows what she’s getting into.”

I grin. “I think Duke’s the one who should be worried.”

“Why’s that?”

“She’s a lot of fun. I hope he can keep up.”

“Guess we’ll find out, won’t we?” Sawyer reaches across the console to put his hand on my thigh. “Bet I’ll be able to keep up with you tonight. I only been ridin’ since before I could walk.”

“But you haven’t been racing. There’s a difference.”

“You think I can’t win?”

I dig my hands into the hair that curls out from underneath his hat. “Honey, you did win. You got me.”

He laughs, a big, booming sound that fills the car and makes my core light up in the most delicious way. “Luckiest son of a bitch in these parts, no doubt.”

Sally is waiting for us in the arena. Because she’s awesome, she already has the horses tacked up and the barrels ready to go.

“I love that y’all are doing this for date night,” she says. “Wyatt and I really enjoy riding together. Sawyer, prepare to get your ass kicked. Ava is a tough coach.”

“Don’t I know it?” Sawyer’s eyes twinkle when they meet mine. “She’s always riding me hard.”

“You and Wyatt with the dirty jokes.” Sally shakes her head. “You need to get your filthy minds out of the gutter.”

“I don’t hate it,” I say.

Sally smiles. “To be honest, neither do I. You guys need anything else before I head home? Wyatt’s making dinner, so I should get out of here.”

“No shit,” Sawyer says. “Wyatt’s cooking again?”

Sally hands him the reins of a massive Friesian named Bumblebee. “Can you believe it? He’s one hundred percent domesticated now. Except when he’s not.”

“That sounds fun,” I say, grabbing my horse.

Sally’s cheeks are pink when she replies, “It is. Will we see y’all this weekend?”

I watch Sawyer smoothly mount his horse, his thighs straining against his chaps as he settles into the saddle.

“Yeah.” I lick my lips. “Sure. If I can tear myself away from —”

“Work,” Sawyer says. “We have lots and lots of work to do, don’t we, pretty girl?”

Sally grabs her jacket from a nearby bench. “Cute nickname. Enjoy, guys. Have a great weekend.”

And then it’s just me and Sawyer and our horses inside my home away from home.

The arena is state of the art. It’s brand-new, built less than a year ago. Apparently Mr. Wallace told the architect that the budget was there was no budget.

The soaring ceilings are semi-transparent, letting in tons of light during the day, and the walls are covered in this beautiful stained wood that complements the Wallaces’ signature colors of brown and white. A huge American flag hangs on one side of the arena, the Texas state flag on the other.

“All right, coach.” Sawyer puts a hand on his thigh and nods at the barrels set out in the dirt. “Show me what to do.”

Putting on my own Stetson, I climb into the saddle. My body immediately relaxes at the familiar, steady feel of the horse underneath me. Her name is Carter, and she’s a gorgeous three-year-old filly I fell in love with at first sight.

It’s all muscle memory at this point. Heels down, I press into the stirrups. At the same time, I sit deep in the saddle and squeeze my legs, urging Carter into motion.

“I assume you know how barrel racing works, right?” I ask.

Sawyer trots right beside me. “Been to a rodeo or two in my time, yeah. You run the cloverleaf pattern around the barrels.” He uses his arm to trace the motion. “Fast as you can go without knocking down the barrels or getting

knocked on your ass.”

“Exactly. You wanna keep your turns nice and tight. Be sure to stay sat—having a good seat is really going to be the thing that helps you most.”

He holds out his arm. “How do I look?”

*Like a cowboy.*

He’s all cockiness in the saddle, his hips rolling athletically in time to Bumblebee’s stride. The fringe on his chaps pops up as he moves, reins held in his left hand while he musses the horse’s mane with his right.

My skin tightens, need blooming to life between my legs. There are few things in this life as magnificent as watching a cowboy, well, *cowboy*.

“You look like you’re gonna lose,” I say, and then Carter and I take off.

I don’t wait for Sawyer to follow us. I don’t go slow, explaining why I do this or how I do that. I just ride, blood pumping, legs burning as I guide Carter in the familiar pattern around the barrels.

Laughter bubbles up inside me when I see Sawyer urge his horse into a gallop. How like him to not care a lick for his safety. He just goes full speed ahead, his face a mask of fierce focus as he charges after me.

Carter and I work together to turn a beautiful barrel if I do say so myself. I let out a happy yell, giving her more leg as we head for the second barrel.

Gravity and centrifugal force work against us, but she doesn’t stop and neither do I. My heart pumps loud and strong in my chest, and I keep my breathing even and deep. In through my nose, out through my mouth.

Giddiness rises up my sides and bubbles in my throat as we head for the third and final barrel. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Sawyer laughing when he knocks over the second barrel behind us.

“This is harder than it looks!” he shouts, his handsome face split in a smile.

Resisting the urge to make a that’s-what-she-said comment, I fly around the third barrel and run home. Carter and I are panting, sweat breaking out on my scalp and forehead. My pulse drums in my ears. I’m aware of the air going in and out of my lungs, all the way to the bottom. Feels like I’m awake, alive, for the first time all day.

Feels like freedom.

Sawyer pulls Bumblebee to a stop next to us. His mouth hangs open in a neat O.

“Holy shit, Ava.” He wipes his forehead on his sleeve. “Holy fucking shit.”

“Holy shit, that was hard? Or holy shit, I’m good?”

“Both.” His chest barrels out as he struggles to catch his breath. “Baby, you are a *smokeshow* on horseback.”

I gather Carter’s reins in one hand and give her a pat with the other. “Thank you kindly. It’s nice to be able to race for fun now.”

“You ever think about goin’ back? Being on the circuit again?”

I shrug. “I miss training. Like, doing the training myself. I miss the thrill of getting a really good run in. But I don’t miss the travel and the financial roller coaster it was.”

“I get that.” Sawyer nods. “But hey, you ever wanna get out here and just do your thing—have some fun and get a little exercise—I’m happy to take the girls. Maybe, I don’t know, every Saturday or Sunday morning? You ride, and the girls and I will hang.”

I look at him, my chest filling with something I can only describe as joy. Or maybe it’s appreciation I feel. Appreciation for him truly seeing me. For him *thinking* of me.

Most of all, I think I appreciate that he’s offering me more of what I love—*freedom*. Dan always seemed to resent the time I spent training or racing. It’s part of the reason why I quit after Junie was born—he just wasn’t supportive of me being gone during the day to do something I loved.

But here’s Sawyer, supporting me. *Encouraging* me. He sees how happy I am in the arena, and so he wants me to be here more often.

He doesn’t want to tie me down. He wants to see me soar.

Cheesy line? Sure. But it’s true. And it proves just how different he is from Dan.

“You’re excellent,” I say, feeling a little choked up. “Really and truly an excellent human being, Sawyer. I just might take you up on that offer.”

He smiles, his eyes going all soft and hot. “I hope you do. I also hope you let us watch upon occasion. Ella would get a kick out of this.”

“Maybe we’ll have a pair of barrel racers one day,” I reply. “Ella and Junie, sisters from different misters, taking the circuit by storm.”

I see the way his breath catches at the word *sisters*. “They’d be badasses. Mostly because they were raised by a badass.”

I laugh. “What about you? Where do you fit into all of this?”

“Pretty girl, I’m just along for the ride.”

“All types of riding happening around here.”

His eyes glitter. “Gimme a lesson—show me how to race. Then I’m

takin' you home and giving you a lesson of my own."

My body pulses. "What lesson would that be?"

"The kind you'll like." He sits up in the saddle. "Now show me how the hell you got so good at this."



## CHAPTER 32

*Sanyer*

## WRECKED

**THE SECOND** THE door closes behind us at Ava's place, I throw her over my shoulder and head for the bedroom.

"Hey!" She slaps my ass, hard. "You can't throw me around —"

"Like this?" I toss her onto the bed, the mattress giving her a little bounce. "Watch me."

She toes off her boots. "I'm gross."

"So am I." I take off my hat and unbutton my shirt, tossing it onto the floor.

She unbuttons her jeans. "I really should shower."

"You really should leave that hat on."

I'm kicking off my own boots and losing my jeans and briefs. I'm hard as a fucking rock, and if I'm not inside Ava in the next thirty seconds I think I might literally have a heart attack. Watching Ava race tonight was torture in the best possible way.

She was determined. Graceful. Fierce. And the way she smiled after every race, a big, toothy thing that touched her eyes and made her look lit up from the inside?

Yeah, I've been hard for what feels like a small eternity.

Ava smirks, lifting her hips so she can slide her jeans and panties down the length of her legs. "I knew you liked the hat."

Those *legs*. Jesus Christ.

Taking my dick in my hand, I stand beside the bed. "Open your fucking mouth and taste just how much I like it."

Ava bites her lip. Then, using her knuckle to tip back her hat, she leans in

and presses her lips to my tip. At the same time, she reaches up and runs her fingertips over my left nipple.

I jerk, seeing stars at the hot, soft feel of her mouth as she opens a little and licks my head. Giving myself a stroke, I watch her lap up a bead of precum.

“Look at you, swallowing me like the greedy girl you are.”

“I am greedy.” Her eyes flick to meet mine. “I want all of you, cowboy.”

I lean down to kiss her, hard. I taste myself on her lips, the saltiness mingling with the clean flavor of her mouth. “You have me, pretty girl.”

Her fingers move to the Roman numerals tattooed on my chest.

“Ella’s birthday,” Ava murmurs. “Has to be, right?”

“Good guess. Best day of my life.”

She grins. “It really is, isn’t it?”

“Only started getting tattoos after becoming a dad. That weird?”

“That’s hot.”

“How hot? Open those legs and show me how wet I make you.”

Chuckling against my lips, she does as I told her. She scoots back a little on the bed, her knees falling open to reveal the hot pink heaven of her slit. She touches herself, her first two fingers gliding easily through her slickness as she moans my name.

I smile. Never gets old, hearing a gorgeous girl say your name when she realizes just how wet she is for you.

Giving myself another stroke, my balls tightening to an almost-painful degree, I climb onto the bed beside her. She takes my face in her hands and pulls me down for a deep, messy kiss.

Then, without warning, I feel something land on my head. Opening my eyes, I see that Ava’s not wearing her hat anymore.

I am.

“Hold up, hold up,” I say, cupping the crown of the hat in my hand. “I thought the saying was *wear the hat, ride the cowboy?*”

Her eyes flash. “You clearly haven’t been hanging out with enough cowgirls. The saying works both ways—you wear my hat, you ride the cowgirl.”

“Question.”

“Shoot.”

“Can the cowgirl ride me too if I ask her?”

Licking her lips, she falls onto her back, her hair a golden halo around her

head on the pillow. "Let's see what kind of stamina you got."

"Did you not see me tonight?" Climbing over her, I settle myself between her legs. "I didn't ride near as well as you did, but I still rode hard. I ain't a quitter."

"You're not."

My heart cramps when she runs her fingertips tenderly through the hair on my chest.

"Love me, Sawyer. Please."

"Aw, baby, like you even need to ask." Hiking her knee up to my side, I lift my hips. "Put me inside you. I been dyin' for this all night. All day."

Ava wraps her hand around my swollen length and guides it to her center. My head meets with her softness, and I bite back a groan. The feel of her raw, her baring herself to me in a very real show of trust, has my blood blaring.

I capture her mouth in a bruising kiss, and she closes her eyes and kisses me back with equal fervor, her tongue gliding hungrily against mine. It's like she's drinking deep and still can't get enough.

I prop myself up on one forearm and use my free hand to shove up her shirt and bra. Thumbing her nipple, I sink all the way inside her on a hard, unhurried stroke. The pressure and the pleasure are unreal.

Ava whimpers, her legs wrapping around me so that her heels are digging into my ass, urging me deeper. Her hand is on my face. The other is in my hair at my nape.

I get this feeling in the pit of my stomach. It's a wild sense of certainty, one born of the searing need that rips through my blood. Right now, wrapped up in her body and the warmth of her bed, I'm gripped by the feeling that this woman is never, ever going to let me go.

"Look at me," I growl into her mouth as I wrap my hand around her throat. "Open your eyes, pretty girl."

Her eyes flutter open and lock on mine as I begin to thrust. I draw back, using my abdominals to keep the stroke steady and thorough as I pump into her. Then I swivel my hips at the apex of my thrust so I'm able to graze her clit. I use the hand I have on her throat to hold her still, my grip firm but gentle.

"Honey." Her eyes are hazy. "What lesson is this?"

"The one where you learn no one else is gonna fuck you like I do."

I pull back, thrust forward. Her tits bounce. I move my hand from her throat, stopping to tweak her nipple before thumbing her clit.

“Where you learn you only wanna make love to me, because I ride as hard and as good as you do.”

Ava’s mouth falls open as her pussy contracts around me, making our fit so tight that it almost hurts. “You do. Honey, oh, you *do*.”

“Only me.”

I circle her clit faster. Her legs begin to shake. I rock into her in a steady, slow rhythm that has her eyes going heavy-lidded.

“Only you. Give it to me, pretty girl. Come. You’re close. Let go and let me catch you, yeah?”

Her fingertips graze my cheekbone as her eyes bore into mine. “Only if you let me catch you too.”

*Too late. I’ve already fallen so fast, so hard.*

We’re both sweating, our bodies getting slick, skin damp with exertion.

“Go, Ava,” I bite out. I shove inside her, pressing my thumb to her clit.

Clinging to me, she comes. Hard. Her back arches and her legs seize, her pussy contracting around my dick with such force that I come too. I paint her insides with my cum, hot spurts that have me howling her name.

Only when the rush subsides do I realize I’m lying in her arms, my weight pinning her to the mattress. Her hat is tipped all the way back on my head; I’m surprised it hasn’t fallen off.

“Aw, shit, Ava, I’m crushin’ you. I’m so sorry.” I push up on my elbows, propping up my weight.

But Ava immediately pulls me back down, her arm curling around my neck. “Don’t you dare go anywhere. I like feeling you this way.”

“Like you can’t breathe?” I chuckle.

She grabs the hat off my head and tosses it aside, trailing her lips up the column of my throat. “Like it’s just you, melting into me. Nothing else exists, only me and you and this bed.”

My chest twists. Pulse flutters.

*Let me have you*, I silently tell her as I kiss her mouth.

She kisses me back. *I’m yours, cowboy.*

---

Ava stirs beside me. The backs of my eyelids burn red.

Sunday morning. Late, if the ardent light is any indication.

I crack open an eye. Ava is stretching her arms over her head, the sheets falling to reveal her bare breasts. Her eyes are still closed.

She looks like a fucking angel. Well, a fallen angel, really, her hair mussed, her lips swollen and likely salty with the taste of me.

My heart pounds as I struggle for breath. *How is this my life right now?* A month ago, I was alone and overwhelmed, spinning my wheels.

Now I'm waking up in Ava Bartlett's bed with a full heart and hard dick. I'm still overwhelmed. I still spin my wheels trying to juggle the different parts of my life.

But I'm not doing it alone anymore. And that makes all the difference.

Funny how the things I thought would make me happy—rings, a wedding, a picket fence—aren't ultimately what bring me joy.

Joy is waking up next to the woman you love. Bonus points if she's naked.

"Good morning," she purrs, keeping her eyes closed.

I chuckle and reach for her breast, cupping it in my hand. "How'd you know I was awake?"

"Your dick is pressing into my leg. I was worried you were gonna start humping me in a minute here."

"Nah. I think I'd rather do this." I suck her nipple into my mouth, making her smile. Then I pull the sheets over my head and kiss my way down her belly. Settling myself between her thighs, I use my palms to spread her legs wider.

A moan of contentment sounds in her throat when I lick her slit, front to back. She smells like sex and tastes like heaven, and I have her coming on my mouth in record time, her hand fisting in my hair.

She's still coming when I slip inside her, hiking her leg over my shoulder. My thrusts are savage. Deep.

Orgasm imminent, I pull out. Then I come with a shout on her tits.

Instead of being grossed out or annoyed by the mess, Ava pulls an Ava and smears my cum over one nipple, then the other, eyes on mine as she plays with herself.

Plays with us.

"You're the only one I want," I manage. "The only one I want body-slamming me."

She bursts out laughing, her cheeks pink when she replies, "Thank God, because you're the only one I wanna body-slam, honey. The only one."

We take our time showering and getting dressed. I make the coffee, and Ava scrambles us some eggs while I butter toast and cut up a quart of strawberries.

We decide we'll grill chicken for dinner here tonight—that way I'm around for Junie's drop-off, and Ava isn't left alone with Dan. Then I throw Ava's sheets in the washing machine and fold the load of clothes she had in the dryer. I check in with Wyatt, who says Ella is out with Sally to see some baby goats.

"Wow," Ava says after shutting the dishwasher.

I hear it hum as the cycle begins. "Wow what?"

"You and I just tackled pretty much my entire to-do list for today. Meal planning, laundry, pick up the house ..."

Sauntering across the kitchen, I drape my arms around her waist and pull her to me. "Whatever shall we do with all our free time?"

She grins. "I think I'd like to ride."

"Can I come too?" I kiss her neck. "Pun one hundred percent intended."

"Well, yeah. But after that, I think I want to run some drills in the arena. Just me and Carter."

I nip at her earlobe. "My legs are fuckin' Jell-O right now, so good for you having that kind of energy. I'll hit up the grocery store and then grab Ella. We'll meet back here? Dan's dropping June off at four, right?"

"Right." Her eyes search mine. "I don't know how you manage to keep getting sexier, but you do. You really, really do, Sawyer."

"I try," I say, and I mean that literally.

The longer I'm alive, the more I realize how important trying is. Screw talent. Screw words. I'm never gonna be the smartest or most accomplished guy in the room. But I am gonna try my damndest to keep my people safe. I'm also going to let them keep me safe too.

Half an hour later, I climb in my truck and head down Highway 21 toward town. The weather's warming up, so I crack my windows and sing along to the radio at the top of my lungs.

*But seriously, who am I?*

Since when am I the guy who fucking sings in my car on a Sunday afternoon?

I slow down when I hit downtown Hartsville. The grocery store is a little ways past the busiest stretch of Main Street, which isn't busy at all right now. A few people mill around on the sidewalks, ducking into the Caffeinated



Cowgirl or The Rattler for Tallulah's famous bloody Mary bar.

I smile when I see a cute couple strolling past the library, their hands clasped between them.

Before, seeing people be all lovey-dovey like this would've made my chest tight. *Why not me, I'd wonder. Why can't I find my person?*

Now I'm just happy for these people, whoever they are. My heart bursts with gratitude that shit's finally happening for me. All the mistakes, the doubts and fears that kept me up at night—they led me here.

They led me to Ava. I'll never take that stroke of luck for granted.

Out of habit, I slow down at the crosswalk, even though this part of Main Street is quiet. Satisfied that the coast is clear, I hit the gas and glance in my rearview mirror at that lovey-dovey couple one last time.

Bet Ava and I are that fucking cute too. Maybe even as sickeningly cute as Mollie and Cash, and Sally and Wyatt.

Turning my gaze back to the windshield, my stomach plummets when I see a little boy in a striped shirt dart out into the road. I hear his mother's panicked scream just as I jam on the brakes and yank the wheel as hard as I can to the right.

Everything inside me heaves as my truck skids across the pavement, the tires making this terrible screeching sound. The mother—I think it's the mother—darts out into the street too.

*Oh God oh God this can't be happening again.*

*Mom and Dad. The car not stopping. Is this what they felt when they realized it was too late?*

My tires catch on the curb, and my stomach lurches into my throat as the truck goes airborne.

*Please, God, don't let me die now. Not when shit's just getting good.*

There's a scream.

Then everything goes black.

## CHAPTER 33

*Sanyer*

## EMERGENCY CONTACT

### I HAVE THE WILDEST DREAMS.

Everyone is in them. I hear Wheeler's voice. She sounds strangely subdued. Duke is there too, asking her if she's feeling okay. She asks for a trash can. There's a beep.

My hands are warm. I hear Ava's voice now. She's singing a song from *The Little Mermaid*. Softly, softly.

*I hope she has Ella. Elly Belly Boo, she loves you, she'll take care of you.*

Is Junie here? I don't hear her, but I need to get it together so I can make it to drop-off.

Fuck Dan.

My head is fucking killing me.

At one point, I think I wake up. Pain slams into me like a freight train. There's a searing pain in my side. I can't breathe, I can't breathe, holy *shit* I'm going to die, aren't I?

Ava's voice again. A sense of deep, deep calm comes over me.

Who is taking care of Mule?

I'm dying of thirst. My torso lights up with pain every time I breathe. It's my ribs, I think. My lungs too. My bottom lip has its own heartbeat.

Bits and pieces of the car accident come back to me with startling, terrifying clarity. Did it actually happen? Am I still dreaming? Whose scream was that? I think it was mine, but I'm not sure I'd ever made a sound like that before.

What happened to that little boy? What about his mom? Did I hit them?

Oh, God, please let them be okay. I did everything I could to avoid hitting

them, right?

Mom shows up in my dream. She's holding hands with Dad. They look very young, but they're cute together. Tender, the way Ava is tender with me.

*My handsome boy*, Mom says, gently running her fingertips through my hair. *You need your rest. Try to sleep. You'll wake up when you're ready.*

*Ready for what?* I want to ask her.

Also, who is going to grill that chicken for the girls tonight? I need to wake up, get going. I also need to remember to put those strawberries I cut up into Junie's lunch box. The metal insert for it was still in the dishwasher when I left.

Searing pain slices through my skull. I make a strangled noise, but that just makes the burn in my throat worse.

I hope Ella isn't a total nightmare getting ready for school.

I'm so proud of Ava. I wish I could see her. I'm scared and I'm hurting and I just want her here.

She's my person. Weird if I ask her to be my emergency contact?

*Nah.* I can just picture her smile when she shakes her head and says, *Of course I'm your emergency contact, cowboy.*

Now I'm the one smiling. My lip lights up with pain, but I don't care.

*She's here.*

Somehow, I know Ava is here. Maybe because my hands are so warm. And that *Little Mermaid* song I keep hearing—I have to laugh. The girls sing it nonstop in the bathtub together, their off-key rendition reducing Ava and me to stitches.

Our little family. I love us, and I will forever be pissed at God or the universe or whoever is in charge if I'm taken away from them.

A tingling sensation works its way down my spine and through the rest of my body. The pain in my head and side lessens. The song and the dreams stop.

But the warmth in my hands—that stays.

---

“Now that he's out of the ICU, we'll just keep an eye on him for the next few days. Once we can take out that chest tube, he'll likely be discharged the following day.”

It's a voice I don't recognize. A woman with an accent I can't place.  
The voice that replies? I smile just hearing it, making my bottom lip burn.  
*She really is here.*

"How much pain is he in?" Ava asks.

*A fuck ton*, I want to answer. My head is still killing me, so much so that I can't open my eyes. My lip hurts, and my side is sore as hell.

But apparently I'm still alive, so I'll take the pain.

I'm also still warm.

"We're doing our best to keep him comfortable. He'll have a raging headache from the hematoma —"

"The brain bleed."

"Right."

Ava's voice trembles a little when she replies, "That sounds so serious."

"We're monitoring it, along with his respiratory function. So far, everything is looking really good. Going forward, he'll need to be careful moving around with those fractured ribs. The stitches in his lip and that nasty bruise from the seat belt will definitely cause him some discomfort, but again, we'll do our best to keep him in a good place."

"Thank y'all so much."

"He's doing great, Ava. And so are you."

"Coffee is my new best friend," she says with a laugh.

*You're my best friend*, I try to say. Instead, I make this weird rasping sound that scrapes the sides of my throat raw.

"Sawyer? Sawyer, honey, are you awake?"

God, I love it when she calls me *honey*.

Prying my eyes open, I blink at the sudden onslaught of light. Late afternoon sun slants through a room with white walls and a tiled ceiling. A heart monitor beeps from somewhere behind the bed I'm lying in.

Christ, my head hurts.

My gaze meets Ava's. When I take in the purple circles around her bloodshot eyes and the crease in her forehead, my stomach dips.

"Hey, cowboy." She blinks, sniffing, and arcs her thumbs over the back of my hands. "How are you feeling?"

I try clearing my throat and end up croaking, "Like hell."

"Oh, Sawyer, I'm so sorry. I was—we've all been—" Ava blows out a breath. "Worried."

"How long have you been here?"

She grins, tears leaking out of her eyes. “The question you should be asking is how long *you’ve* been here.”

“Is the answer the same?”

“Yeah.” Rolling her lips between her teeth, she nods. “A little over twenty-four hours. I know you’re in good hands here, and that you’re going to be okay —”

“That’s good to know.” I chuckle, then immediately wince at the pain in my side.

“But I couldn’t leave you. Cash and Mollie have the girls and kept them overnight while you were in the ICU. Your brothers are taking turns coming to check in on you.”

“I’m fine.” I try to sit up a little, but my arm gets tangled in a tube that—fuck me—appears to be attached to my side.

“You’re not, though.” Ava gently presses me back down against the pillows. “That’s the chest tube they had to insert to help you breathe. You have three fractured ribs, a punctured lung, a busted lip, and a brain bleed, which you got when you flipped your car to avoid hitting some pedestrians.”

My heart hiccups. “They’re okay? I didn’t hit them?”

“You didn’t hit them, no. Everyone is fine. A little shaken up, but otherwise fine.” Her expression softens. “How like you to ask about them first. You’re going to be fine too, even if you don’t feel particularly wonderful at the moment.”

Eyes burning, I let out a hot, short breath through my nose, because using my lungs fucking hurts.

“Thank God everyone is okay,” I manage. “That could’ve been—yeah, a real tragedy. I can’t imagine if I had—” My voice catches.

Ava reaches up and wipes away my tears, feathering her fingertips over my face. Despite the pain and the shock, my body immediately relaxes at her touch.

“Bet that was scary.” Her voice is tender. “The woman said she turned to pick up a toy her little guy had dropped, and next thing she knew he was running into the road. It’s a miracle you didn’t hit him.”

I nod, even as a weird feeling settles in my gut.

“You’re thinking about your parents, aren’t you?” Ava asks. “How they didn’t get that miracle.”

I can’t get over how well this woman knows me.

I can’t stop crying.

“They were in this dream I had while I must’ve been out,” I reply. “My parents. My mom told me I’d wake up when I was ready.”

Ava’s smile returns. “She was right. They had to intubate you—give you a breathing tube—so your lungs could rest and you could heal. Apparently the pain meds they gave you were ...” Ava clucks her tongue and gives me the *okay* sign with her fingers. “Which is probably why you were having such wild dreams. I like the idea of your mom and dad visiting you, though. That’d mean the whole crew was here—your brothers, your parents. Even Sally and Mollie were here. I mean, the kids weren’t, obviously, because they had to go to bed. But you had a whole crowd here rooting for you, Sawyer.”

I look at her through a film of tears. “And you’re the one who stayed.”

She takes my hands again and gives them a squeeze. “I sure as hell ain’t leaving you.”

It hurts like a motherfucker to laugh, but I do it anyway.

“Thank you,” I say.

“I know this concept is hard to grasp for someone like you who never wants to be a burden. But you don’t have to thank people for showing up for you when you need them. I’m happy to do it.” She gives my hands another squeeze. “Really, I’m honored, because I finally get to return the favor for all the times you’ve shown up for me.”

I’m too choked up to respond. I just let her hold my hands and I quietly sob, tears dotting my mint-green hospital gown.

The crying feels cathartic, even if I’m terrified of my chest tube somehow getting dislodged.

*This* is what I was searching for this whole time. Somebody who stays. My parents couldn’t. Lizzie didn’t.

But here is Ava, refusing to leave my side even though it’s a major inconvenience. She doesn’t love me any less for being laid up.

In fact, I get the feeling she might love me more.

At the very least, I feel loved. Supported.

“I love you,” I say.

She grins. “I know.”

“One thing.”

“Shoot.”

“Please tell me my dick still works.”

She laughs, hard. “Yes, Sawyer, I believe you’re going to make a full recovery. How about this—Nurse Ava will confirm that your appendage has



full functionality once the doc gives us the thumbs-up?”

I pretend to scowl. “But Nurse Ava, I am not a patient ... patient.”

“Oooh, the new name is fun.” Ava’s eyes gleam as she gives her shoulders a little shimmy. “My hospital, my rules, Mr. Rivers.”

“My bed, my rules.” I gesture to the gurney.

She laughs. “When we get home. *Maybe*.”

My heart swells. *Home*. We have one now. Together.

Really, we have each other. And Ava feels more like home than anything else ever did.

## CHAPTER 34

*Ava*

## THE VILLAGE

**“BE CAREFUL,** or so help me God, I’m going to have to put my nurse hat back on.”

Chuckling, Sawyer lets me take his elbow so I can help him hobble toward the house. “But you’re so hot when you wear your nurse hat.”

“I am, aren’t I?” Even now, I blush when I think about the sneaky little hand job I gave Sawyer earlier today before he was discharged.

What can I say? The doctor had assured us Sawyer was good to go. She also told him to take it easy because he was going to be sore for a while.

A hand job seemed like a win for everyone. I didn’t want to excite him too much with a blow job. I definitely wasn’t going to risk climbing into bed with him for any kind of penetration situation.

So, after the nurse did her rounds, I grabbed the lube I’d bought while on a dinner run yesterday and confirmed that, yes, Sawyer’s dick did indeed still have full functionality.

“Why are everyone’s cars here?” Sawyer asks, looking around the gravel drive in front of his house. “Please don’t tell me —”

“They came to show their support because they love and miss you.” I give Sawyer’s elbow a gentle tug, making sure he climbs the stairs one at a time. “Such a crime, I know.”

Sawyer’s eyes meet mine in the fading twilight. He looks as tired as I feel. His mustache and beard are overgrown, and his face is still swollen from the bruises and lacerations he got from the accident. His lip looks a lot better, though, despite the five stitches it needed.

Despite all that—maybe because of it—he is still the handsomest man

I've ever laid eyes on.

"You invited them, didn't you?" Sawyer asks.

I shrug. "Who am I to tell your family they can't bring food over?"

"They all brought food at the same time?"

"Can you believe it? The nerve of them." Grinning, I reach for the screen door. The wooden door behind it is open, letting in the mild evening air. Spring is definitely on its way.

"Hey." Sawyer pulls me back for a second. "I'm still getting used to this shit."

" 'This shit' meaning letting people show up and take care of you?"

"Yes."

"Good thing I'm persistent."

His eyes flick to my mouth. "Good thing."

"Are you feeling okay?" I keep my voice low.

I can already hear noise coming from inside the house. Wyatt is singing something. A pair of little-girl giggles sounds above a deep belly laugh. Duke, if I had to guess.

Sawyer pauses. He's exhausted, but his eyes are still clear, bright with emotion. "I'm all right. Just glad—grateful—I had you at the hospital with me. I'd be feeling a hell of a lot worse if I was coming home alone."

"Aw, honey. Who knew hand jobs could be so restorative?"

He laughs, wincing. "That was your idea."

"It was, and you're welcome." I twist the knob. "Ready?"

"I'm ready, pretty girl."

I open the door, and as we step inside we're immediately greeted by the smell of something delicious cooking and a cacophony of familiar voices.

The door closes behind us with a familiar *thwack*.

*Home*. That's what this feels like. The home I grew up in.

The home I've longed for—that sense of wholly belonging somewhere. Of being safe and seen and supported.

When I floated the idea of a welcome-home party for Sawyer, the response from the Rivers family was enthusiastic to say the least. I didn't want it to be too big of a production—Sawyer is still in a good bit of pain, and we're both absolutely wiped—but I did want to mark the occasion with a family gathering.

Just felt right. We have so, so many things to celebrate, and Sawyer's accident hit home the fact that all of us being alive is foremost among them.

I don't think I'll ever forget the sheer panic I felt when I got the news that Sawyer had flipped his truck and was being taken to the hospital. I was putting Carter through her paces in the arena when Mrs. Wallace came running through the door, her face ashen as she told me to check my phone.

The EMT knew the Rivers boys, so Cash was the first to be contacted. Cash then called me. I was still in my riding clothes and hat when I walked into the hospital twenty minutes later.

Speaking of Sawyer's oldest brother, he's the first to poke his head into the front hallway.

His face splits into a smile. "He's home, y'all!"

The sound of little feet running fills the house, and next thing I know Ella and Junie are bursting into the hallway. They're wearing costumes—June is in a Spider-Man onesie, the mask pushed up on her head to reveal her sweet little smile, while Ella is in a sparkly mermaid dress complete with a tail—and they scream when they see us.

"Daddy! Hi, I'm a mermaid! Also I missed you!" Ella makes a beeline for Sawyer.

"You're the prettiest mermaid I ever did see," he replies, voice thick.

"We have to be gentle with Daddy, remember?" I say. "He has some boo-boos that still need to heal."

"Speaking of boo-boos." Sawyer lifts his head. "Junie, I brought you some cool Band-Aids the nurses at the hospital gave me."

My chest twists.

June's face lights up. "I like Band-Aids."

"I know you do," he replies with a smile.

Ella slows before gingerly wrapping her arms around his legs. "I'm gentle, Daddy. Are you feeling better?"

"I am, Elly Belly Boo." Sawyer blinks, hard, clearing his throat while he pats Ella's back. "I missed you too. So much." He snuffles.

I can tell it's killing him to not pick her up, so I do, hiking her onto my hip. "Wanna give Daddy a kiss?"

Sawyer offers her his cheek, tapping it with his finger. "Smooch right here."

"Okay." Ella lightly kisses his scruffy cheek. "I love you."

He plants a kiss on her cheek. I take the opportunity to kiss her other cheek, making her squeal.

"We love you too," I say.

Sawyer's eyes catch on mine, the silent communication between us as loud and potent as if we were actually saying the words.

*Thank you, Ava,* he says.

And I reply, *Stop thanking me for falling hopelessly in love, Sawyer. You and your baby made that too damn easy.*

Mule ambles toward us, his tail thumping against our legs.

"Hey, Mule," Sawyer says with a laugh. "Bet you missed me most, didn't you, buddy?"

"I think he was legit depressed without you," Cash says. "We could hardly get him to go outside."

Sawyer blinks for the hundredth time.

I run my hand over his back. "It's nice to be missed, isn't it?"

"Mommy." June tugs on my jacket. "Uncle Cashy let us ride the ponies! And Auntie Sally took us to see the goats. They smelled bad but were very cute."

My heart swells, ballooning to fill my entire chest cavity. While I was at the hospital with Sawyer, his brothers took turns caring for the girls here at the house. It was just easier to keep Junie and Ella together, and we figured they'd be a comfort to each other while he and I were away.

Seeing their lit-up faces, I'd say we were right.

Also, I love how she's already calling Sawyer's brothers and sisters-in-law *Uncle* and *Auntie*. I bet that's how Cash and Sally introduced themselves to my daughter. The way his family has welcomed us into their fold—no hesitation, no questions asked—has me tearing up too.

"Awww, look how cute the four of y'all are," Mollie says as she steps into the hallway. "Welcome home, Sawyer."

"Thanks, Mollie," he replies gruffly. "Appreciate you helping hold down the fort while I was laid up."

"Are you kidding?" She gives him a gentle side hug when he holds out his arm. "We had a blast with these two cuties. They're bona fide cowgirls now, aren't you? Uncle Cash made sure they learned to lasso and everything."

"Uncle Cashy is a cowboy," Junie tells me. "Just like Mr. Sawyer."

"I like cowboys," I reply with a smile.

"Who doesn't?" Mollie says with a laugh. "Y'all come on in. Wyatt's got pot roast in the oven —"

"And I got a couple of six packs of Shiner." Cash holds up his longneck.

“They aren’t gonna drink themselves. C’mon back. You need help, Sawyer?”

“Nah. I’m only mostly incapacitated.” Sawyer glances at me. “You good?”

My sweet cowboy, asking if I’m okay when he’s the one hobbling around with three broken ribs, a lung that’s only recently started to work again, and a busted lip.

I grab his hand. “Yeah, honey, I’m good. Really, really good.”

With Ella still on my hip, we head down the hall toward the kitchen. I allow Sawyer to go in first. He immediately draws to a stop when he sees that everyone is here—all his brothers, their significant others. Even John B and Patsy, Sally’s parents, showed up, along with Goody Gershwin, the ranch’s attorney, and her wife Tallulah.

I smile at the chorus of voices that greet his arrival. Everyone welcomes him home, Duke approaching to clap him on the shoulder.

“Dude, I miss the mustache,” he says with a smile. “You practically have a full beard now, and that’s my look.”

Sawyer starts to cry. Full-on shoulders-shaking, lips-trembling, big-fat-tears cry.

“Don’t worry,” he manages, wiping his eyes, “Ava already asked me to bring back the ’stache.”

Duke’s eyes meet mine over Sawyer’s shoulder. “She’s got good taste.”

“She did pick you, brother.” Wyatt hands Sawyer a beer he definitely shouldn’t drink but probably will anyway. “Of course she’s got good taste.”

Then he pulls Sawyer in for a hug, careful not to squeeze him too hard.

“Group hug!” Ryder calls out, and then everyone is piling on. Gently, of course. Ryder puts a hand on Sawyer’s back. Mollie grabs Sawyer’s hand, and Sally grabs the other. Junie wraps herself around his leg. Ella wiggles out of my grasp and wraps herself around Junie.

“Y’all,” Sawyer says, half crying, half chuckling. “This is ... a lot.”

“You’re welcome,” Cash says, walking past me to join the hug.

I’m not sure there’s a dry eye in the room as I lean in and press a kiss to the top of his nape and hug him from behind. “Try to make us stop. I dare you.”

But Sawyer just shakes his head. “Wouldn’t dream of it. Because I think this—y’all—it might be the dream. It *is* the dream.”

“You bet your ass I’m a dream,” Wyatt says.

Sally hushes him. “There are children present.”



“You bet your *behind*,” he corrects.  
“No, Uncle Wy, it’s *bottom*,” Junie says.  
Ella nods. “Or *heinie*.”  
“Y’all are so dang cute,” Patsy says with a smile.  
I lean in to murmur in Sawyer’s ear. “Happy?”  
Sawyer turns his head to meet my eyes. “Very.”

---

We go to town on Wyatt’s pot roast and Patsy’s mashed sweet potatoes. The girls are wild for the cupcakes Mollie brought from the Caffeinated Cowgirl downtown, which we serve with the hand-churned vanilla bean ice cream John B made for just the occasion.

It’s pure chaos. People eat at the counter, on the couch, and perched on the hearth by the fireplace.

It’s also a ton of fun. Sawyer doesn’t stop smiling. The girls love getting all the attention from the adults in the room.

Everyone pitches in to clean up. Patsy reminds us that there’s King Ranch casserole in the freezer and a roasted chicken in the fridge, which Wyatt and Sally stocked with essentials—milk, fruit, and yogurt and smoothie pouches for the kids.

My heart is bursting by the time it’s just Sawyer and me on the couch. He started to cry all over again when I informed him June and I would be staying here until he was fully healed. She and Ella were beside themselves to be put to bed together in Ella’s room a little bit ago. I can still hear them giggling together.

“They’re so fucking cute.” Sawyer puts a hand on my thigh.

I reach over to play with his hair. “You’re so fucking cute. How are you feeling?”

“Sore. Tired.” His gaze meets mine. In the light of the fire Ryder lit earlier, Sawyer’s eyes gleam with tenderness. “Happy. I missed everyone.”

“They missed you. We all did. Life wasn’t the same. I’m so”—my voice catches—“so relieved and so happy you’re back and you’re okay.”

“I’ll be okay as long as you’re here.”

I hold his gaze. “I’ll stay as long as you’ll have me.”

His eyes go wide. “That mean —”

“I’m asking to move in with you, yes.”

“But you don’t want —”

“I want you.” I gingerly press a kiss to his cheek. “And I want us all to be together. I thought we could put twin beds in Ella’s room so the girls can get their sleepover. And then we’ll put a king in your room so you and I can get ours.”

“I like this scenario,” he says huskily.

At my feet, Mule starts to wag his tail. My heart explodes into a thousand butterflies. I’m doing it—I’m trusting Sawyer. Trusting the universe.

I’m letting love win.

“Stay, pretty girl,” Sawyer continues. “Not so I can tie you down, but so we can be free. Together. Us and the girls. We’ll do whatever the fuck we want, *be* whoever the fuck we want, as long as we’re together. Because that’s what makes me happiest.”

I’m shaking and I’m laughing, tears rolling down my face. “That makes me the happiest, too.”

“Forever?”

“Forever. One condition, though.”

He reaches up to wipe away my tears. “Name it.”

“We have to have really ridiculous hotel sex at really ridiculous hotels at least once a year.”

Sawyer laughs. “I’ll bring the champagne.”

“I’ll bring the Tide pen.”

He’s still laughing when he leans in to kiss me. “Deal.”

## *Epilogue*

SAWYER

## SHOWER SEX AND SURPRISES

**TAKING A DEEP BREATH**, I shake out my shoulders. Tilt my head to one side, then the other, the sofa cushions groaning as I wiggle my body.

Ava laughs when my neck cracks. “You know braiding toddler hair requires significantly less effort than, say, working cattle, right?”

“Yeah, Daddy.” Ella looks up at me. She’s seated on the floor between my knees, her pretty blue eyes almost translucent in the morning light that slants through the family room windows. “It’s not *that* hard. Right Ava?”

“Right.” Ava reaches down to give her shoulder a squeeze. “We’re going to turn your daddy into a French braiding pro.”

“Can you do two braids?” Ella glances at Junie, who is seated on the floor between Ava’s knees. Ava patiently brushes the long blonde hair that courses down her back. “I want it to be like Junie’s was yesterday.”

I chuckle, even as my palms break out in a clammy sweat. Mule looks at me in sympathy from his perch by the windows.

“One braid at a time, Elly Belly Boo.”

“I’ll help him do two,” Ava leans down to whisper conspiratorially in her ear. “We’ll make sure it looks just like Junie’s did, I promise.”

It’s Monday morning. Eight fifteen a.m. A few months back, I would’ve dreaded this part of the day—the one where I shook off the cobwebs from the weekend and endured the crucible that was getting my three-year-old ready for school. A long week behind us, and another long week ahead.

Now?

I'm smiling like an idiot as I run a brush through my daughter's hair. She yelps. Ava stops brushing her own daughter's hair to grab a nearby bottle of detangler and sprays it on Ella's hair.

"That will help," Ava explains. "It keeps the knots from getting too big and hurting."

Ella grins. "Thank you, Ava."

"You're so welcome, sweet girl."

I've lived long enough to know my life is a dream right now. Ella is thriving. Her teachers tell me she's really come out of her shell now that she's in class with her bestie, June. Ava bonded with Ella right away, the two of them exchanging giggles and secrets like they're best friends too.

Junie has become the second daughter I always knew I wanted. She's so different from Ella with her extroverted personality and fearless approach to pretty much anything and everyone. But I adore her differences as much as I adore how much the two of them are alike. They delight in the smallest things. It's easy to make them laugh. They both love arts and crafts, almost as much as I love sitting down with them while dinner's in the oven to color or cut out shapes from construction paper—purple or pink only, obviously.

Best of all, June and Ella delight in each other's company. They play beautifully together. Don't get me wrong, they have their moments—sharing is very much a struggle right now—but they'll also have hour-long stretches where they entertain each other without calling for me or Ava a single time.

Needless to say, Ava and I are in heaven.

We also fuck a lot.

A lot a lot. Never thought that'd be the case with two young children in the house, but our (much) smaller version of the *Brady Bunch* has actually worked in our favor. The girls play, and so do the adults. Ava and I have become experts at slipping away for a quickie.

While the girls ride their scooters in the driveway, Ava and I get busy in the back seat of my parked truck.

While the girls watch a movie after bath time, Ava and I have some fun in our closet.

My favorite: the girls will often play together in their room before they come downstairs in the morning. That gives Ava and me just enough time for some hot, slow morning sex that fills my bucket in a way I never thought possible.

I can handle any crisis, deal with any tantrum, as long as I have my daily dose of Ava.

“To start,” Ava instructs, using her fingers to part Junie’s hair, “we separate the hair into two equal sections, right down the middle. Just like that. Doesn’t have to be perfect.”

I’m gentle as I do what Ava tells me. “That feel okay, Ella?”

“Yes, Daddy. I’m so excited for my braids. Ms. Sherman is going to think June and I are twin princesses.”

Ava laughs. “That sounds fun. Okay, now we start making our braids. Each of these sections is going to become its own plait. So now we divide this left section into three parts—yep, you’re doing great, honey.”

My chest squeezes at the endearment. I’ve always been a bit of a softy, so of course I love it when Ava’s extra sweet with me.

Same as I love being extra sweet with her.

“You speak too soon,” I reply. “I haven’t even started yet.”

Ava sits up straighter. “Then let’s do this thing. Okay, so you take the first strand, the one all the way to the left, and you cross it over the middle—no, the middle. The *other* middle.”

“Like this?” My fingers feel big and stupid as I try to mimic Ava’s motions. “How do you make it look so easy?”

“Because I’m an expert,” Ava replies smoothly. “Now try again. That’s right. Great. Now take the right strand and cross it—no, the right strand on *this* side.” She reaches over to show me which clump of hair I should use.

Ella sighs. “Daddy, you’re not very good at this.”

“No one is very good at something when they’re first learning how to do it.” Ava glances at me, the edges of her eyes crinkling. “We have to be patient with ourselves. Perseverance is everything.”

“She’s right,” I say glumly. “I’m just not used to being *this* bad at something.”

Ava nudges me with her elbow. “We all have to start somewhere. Now, back to the braid. We cross that strand over the one closest to it, like this. Yes! Yes, there you go.”

It takes several tries and more almost F-bombs than I can count, but eventually my daughter proudly tosses a pair of lopsided braids over her shoulders. Running to the mirror, she squeals with delight.

“Daddy, you did it!”

I lean toward Ava and whisper, “Thank God she doesn’t notice how bad

they are.”

“They were made with love.” Ava presses a kiss to my mouth. “Proud of you, honey.”

The girls hold hands and literally skip through the classroom door when we drop them off at school. As I watch them, my throat tightens.

“Aw.” Ava runs a hand across my back. “You all right there, big guy?”

I swipe my thumb over my cheeks. “Yep. Just feeling my feelings the way our daughters taught us. I never—for a minute there, I thought Ella might not have any siblings. Now she’s got a built-in best friend.”

“Sisters from different misters.”

That makes me smile. I pull Ava in for a hug. “Happy?” I ask.

“So happy,” she whispers. “But I’d be even happier if you joined me in the shower when we get home.”

My lips twitch. “I gotta get to work.”

“I’ll make it quick.”

“You’d better.”

Ava is pulling off her shirt before we’re even through the front door. When I slip a hand from behind onto her bare breast, she giggles, the sound turning into a sigh when I gather her nipple between my thumb and forefinger and give it a gentle tug.

“Hey, pretty girl,” I murmur into her neck.

“Get naked,” she pants. “Now.”

“Yes ma’am.”

I shuck off my clothes and follow her into the bathroom. Ava likes the water hot, and steam fills the room as she steps beneath the spray. I watch her for a second as she tilts back her head and lets the water soak her hair.

She’s so fucking pretty. Proud shoulders. Pert tits. That little triangle of curly hair between her legs.

I step inside and bend down to take her nipple in my mouth. Her breath catches. She grins.

“Hey.”

“Hi.”

“Can I lather you up?”

“I’d like that, yeah.”

I squeeze some body wash onto my hands and get to work. My cock thickens as I work the soap into a lather on her smooth, soft skin, my hand dipping between her thighs. She’s hot to the touch, her hips already rolling as

I graze her clit with my thumb.

I make her come that way. One hand on her pussy, the other on her tit. I play with her clit and her nipple, coordinating my fingers so that they work in tandem to bring her to orgasm.

By the time she throws back her head and shouts my name, I'm hard as shit and dying to be inside her. But then I notice how her tits are still lathered in glistening suds.

I'm gripped by an idea.

"Remember how I said I wanted to fuck you everywhere?"

Ava looks at me through heavy-lidded eyes. "When we were at the hotel in Austin? How could I forget?"

I take her tits in my hands. "How about here?"

"Okay," she replies with a lazy, sated smile.

Then she's climbing onto the shower's built-in, tiled bench. She's getting on her knees. She's fisting my dick and taking my leaking tip in her mouth. She arches her back so that her tits are thrust high. Giving me one last, hard suck, she angles my dick on her chest so that I'm placed between her breasts.

She pushes them together and meets my eyes. "I'm good. Are you?"

I bite back a curse. Her tits feel warm and soft, a sweet little valley that I begin to rock into. Slowly at first, despite my very real urge to jerk my hips and rut like an animal. The soap and water provide just the right amount of lubrication to help me slide easily in and out, in and out.

Ava looks down, watching my head disappear between her tits, only to reappear seconds later. "That's actually pretty hot."

"You kidding?" I put one hand on the tiled wall behind her head and go up on my toes. "It's hot as hell. You feel so good, pretty girl. You look so good with me fucking you this way."

Takes me all of two minutes to come on her chest. My entire body seizes as the wave hits, a brutal takedown that leaves me struggling for air.

Ava, being Ava, revels in me losing my goddamn mind. When I open my eyes, I see her swiping her thumb through my release. She brings that thumb to her mouth. Looks me in the eye and laps it up with her pretty pink tongue.

I cup her chin. "We're still fun, aren't we?"

She grins. "We'll always be fun."

I believe her.

---



Later, I'm on horseback riding out of the barn alongside my brothers. It's a beautiful spring day, warm and dry, and I'd be in an excellent mood if Duke wasn't a total space cadet.

"Dude, watch out," I say after he and his horse cut me off, causing me to draw up short.

Duke glances over his shoulder. "Shit, I'm sorry."

"You okay? You seem a little —"

"Brain-dead," Ryder finishes for me. He furrows his brow as he trots up beside his twin. "Seriously, now I'm worried. Something happen?"

"No." Duke makes a face. "Yes. I don't know. I think ... it's Wheeler. We had a great time together in Colorado —"

"You were a good man to drive all that way with her," I say.

Mollie and Wheeler were able to score a trunk show for Bellamy Brooks, their cowboy boot company, at a famous Western wear store in Aspen a couple of weeks back. The two of them had plans to drive a U-Haul full of their boots up to Colorado from Hartsville. But then Mollie, who's several months pregnant, was told by her doctor that she couldn't travel.

Duke immediately volunteered to help Wheeler drive to Aspen. No surprise there—it's pretty obvious he has a crush on Mollie's business partner.

What is a surprise is the fact that we can't get much out of him about what went down during their long weekend away. All I know is they got snowed in together at some swanky house on Aspen Mountain. My brothers and I have mentally filled in the blanks. But this is the first time Duke's opened up about his time with Wheeler.

"Are you kidding? It was an absolute pleasure to travel with Wheeler. Most fun I've had in fuckin' forever," he continues. "But since we got back to Texas, we haven't hung out much. I ..." He sighs. "I guess I just miss her."

Cash rides up on the other side of Duke, clearing his throat. "You try talkin' to her?"

"Of course I've tried. She won't return my calls or my texts. Haven't seen her at any meals. I get the feeling she's avoiding me. And you know, I accept the fact that she doesn't want to see me again. I just can't shake the feeling that something is wrong."

Cash clears his throat again.

"You chokin'?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Duke, you gotta talk to her."

“What?” Duke pulls on his reins, slowing his horse. “Do you know something I don’t?”

Cash looks away. His posture is stiff.

“Talk to her,” he repeats.

“How can I do that if she won’t pick up my calls? If you know something, Cash, I need you to tell me.”

Despite Cash’s deep tan, I’m still able to see the flush of red that’s working its way up his neck.

Oh, Lord. Something’s up.

“Not my place to say,” Cash replies evenly. “I’ll tell Mollie to tell Wheeler to call you.”

Duke grabs Cash’s arm, his eyes wide. “Tell me. I’m begging you. She okay?”

“She’s fine. Well, not fine, but —”

“Jesus Christ.” I look at my brother, shell-shocked as the pieces suddenly click into place. “She’s pregnant, isn’t she?”

I glance at Duke. Duke glances at Cash, panic written clear as day on his face.

“Fuck.” Cash closes his eyes. “I didn’t say that.”

“Is it true?” Duke’s voice is barely above a whisper. “Is Wheeler pregnant?”

Cash opens his eyes. They’re wet.

“Yes, Duke. Wheeler is pregnant.”

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**Thank you so much for visiting Lucky River Ranch! Need more Ava+Sawyer? I’ve got you covered. Grab their bonus epilogue [HERE](#)!**

**Be sure to pick up the next book in this series, [DUKE \(Lucky River Ranch #4\)](#). This is Wheeler+Duke’s snowed-in, accidental pregnancy romance!**

## *Acknowledgments*

Wow.

That's the only word I can think of when it comes to the dream team of excellent human beings who helped bring this book to life. SAWYER is around the thirtieth book I've written—I stopped keeping count a long time ago—and while writing never gets any easier, it certainly gets more fun when you're surrounded by the right people. A huge, heartfelt thanks to everyone who's made this chapter in life one of my best yet. I love y'all!

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Last but not least, I want to thank my little family for believing in me all these years. Our dreams are coming true, and I have never been happier (or more exhausted!). Ben, Grace, Madeline, and Martha—I love you with all my heart.

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## *About the Author*

Jessica Peterson writes romance with heat, humor, and heart. Heroes with hot accents are her specialty. When she's not writing, she can be found bellying up to a bar in the south's best restaurants with her husband Ben, reading books with her adorable daughters Gracie and Madeline, or snuggling up with her 70-pound lap dog, Martha.

A Carolina girl at heart, she fantasizes about splitting her time between Charleston and Asheville, but currently lives in Charlotte, NC. You can check out her books at [www.jessicapeterson.com](http://www.jessicapeterson.com).

