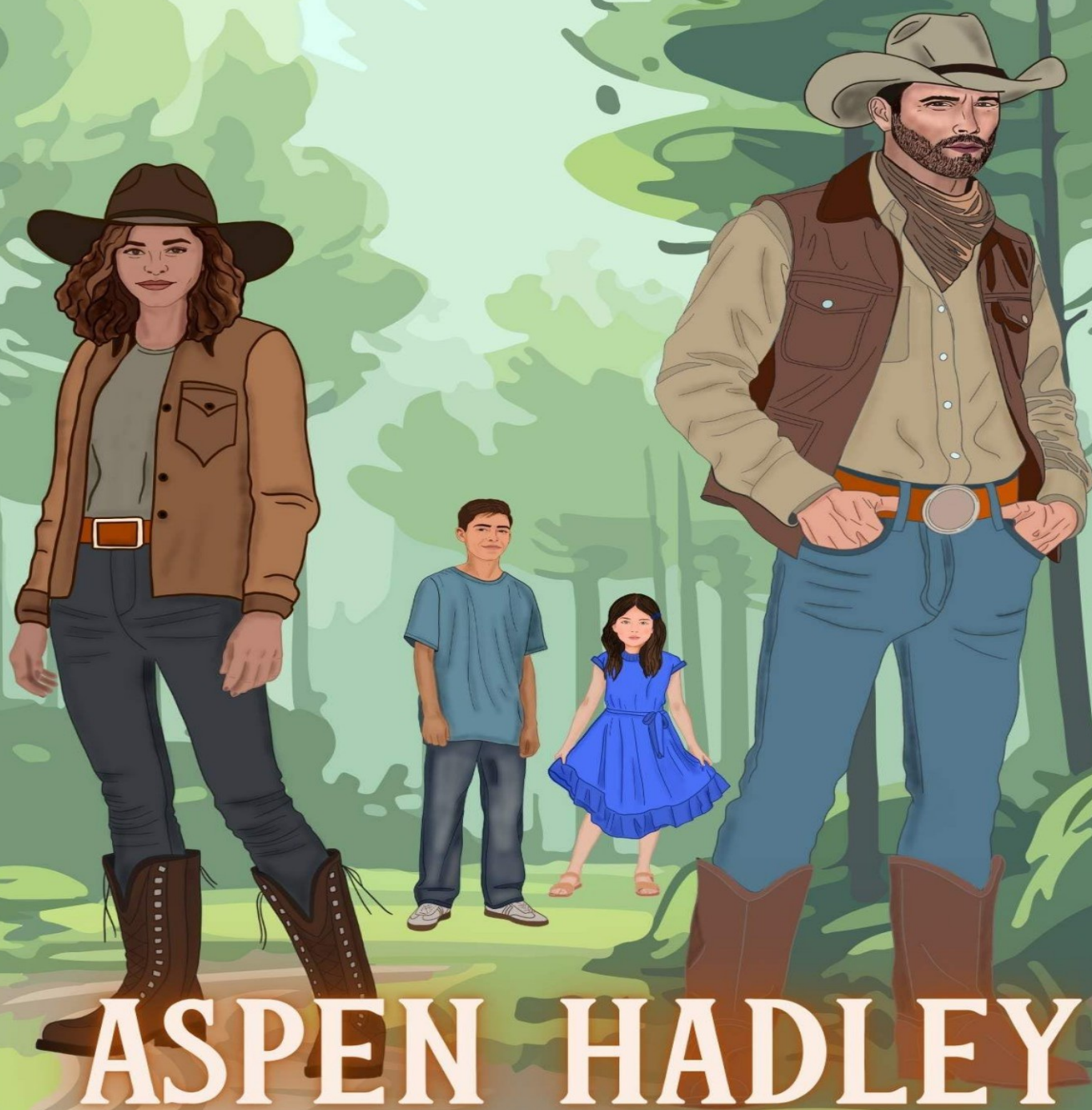


A CRAWFORD RIDGE RANCH NOVEL

HOLDEN

Bucked by Love



ASPEN HADLEY

Holden: Bucked by Love

Aspen Hadley

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To my husband, Steve.
I think we can both agree after twenty-six years of marriage,
that it isn't always easy.
I'm so grateful that we're still together riding out the lows
and celebrating the highs.
You and me, Goose.
Same team.

CHAPTER 1

Holden

LENI'S EYES WERE THE first thing I really noticed about her. They're the same brown as soil in spring, or the worn leather of my favorite pair of old cowboy boots, but I only made the mistake of describing them that way once – she didn't find it very romantic. They turn to slits when she's angry, and round when she's surprised. They become glassy with tears when something makes her especially happy. My favorite, by far, is the shape they become when she laughs. But it's been a long time since my wife has laughed when I'm around to see it.

The air is heavy with leftover heat, and I know when I take off my cowboy hat that my dark hair will still be slightly damp. The radio continues to play in my truck even though I turned off the engine a few minutes ago. It's an old country song, the melody quiet in the background as I watch Leni do one of her yoga poses against the backdrop of our little cabin and the setting sun. Her tight athletic clothes are brightly colored, and follow the movements of her body in a way that highlights her commitment to the practice. Leni always chooses to do her evening yoga outdoors in the summer, after the heat of the day starts to wane and twilight creeps in. She says it soothes her and helps her sleep better.

It's late now, something that snuck up on me. It's harder to gauge time well during these lighter months, and I rarely bother to check a watch or clock. Usually it's my stomach that tells me if I've missed dinner, and tonight it wails at me from behind a shirt that's lost its fresh scent. If Leni saved me any dinner it's cold now, but it's doubtful that she even bothered filling a plate. She gave up that pretense a while ago. We both did. Why pretend I'll be there when we know I won't?

Our kids are jumping on the trampoline and my stomach swirls with regret as I watch them bouncing up and down. Mason's dark hair – which he keeps begging to grow out thanks to his hero worship of my middle brother Walker – stands on end as he descends from the air, a huge smile on his twelve-year-old face. His sister, Josi, doesn't get quite as high thanks to her smaller, seven-year-old legs, but her grin is big and her dark hair is a halo cloud of static. Leni always puts effort into Josi's hair, but it never sticks for long.

I hear their voices through my rolled-down window and memories of summer nights with my two brothers fill my mind. It's a magical time of life, being young and playing outside as the sun sets against the foothills. I remember chasing my brothers around the yard, our ever-present ranch dogs nipping at our heels with friendly barks, our parents on the porch with a cold drink in one hand, and their other hands clasped together. It felt like security in a way I never thought to appreciate.

Mason calls something out and Josi giggles, and I love them both so much it makes my chest ache.

The radio stops playing, a sign I've sat here too long. Strange how I can miss my family so much, but my body seems to be in no hurry to get out of my dirty, ranch-weary truck, and join them. They somehow seem slightly independent of me these days, which is a hard truth to swallow considering the reason I'm away so much is out of motivation to give them everything I possibly can.

I step out of the truck and dust puffs off my boots as they land on the gravel driveway. Three heads turn my way when they hear the door slam. My legs ache from a rough day in the saddle as I walk toward where Leni is glancing at me from upside down, her body shaped like a triangle with her feet and hands both touching the boards of our deck. Her dark, wavy hair is pulled back, her lean, athletic body tense as our eyes meet for a flicker of a moment before she turns her head back into the pose.

My greeting dies in my throat at the brush off. I've done something wrong, and I frown as I try to figure out what it could be. My head is full of cattle, grazing fields, water rights and fence lines, and sometimes it takes me a few minutes to get into home mode. Leni isn't offering me any clues and refuses to look at me. I bite my lips and try to work up the energy to puzzle it out.

I catch sight of little Josi running my way, her mouth wide on a smile that shows me she lost another front tooth. Some of my weariness fades as I take in her apple-red cheeks and short legs pumping. She's wearing a flower crown with ribbons that fly out behind her as she hustles along. Josi is our little bookworm. Introverted with anyone outside of our family, so any time I see her free and happy like this it makes my heart want to explode. It doesn't hurt that she looks so much like her mama, something

that has always pleased me.

"Daddy," she squeals, launching into me, not caring that I'm dirty.

I catch her with a chuckle, and lift her up, pressing my nose into her hair, knocking my cowboy hat off onto the wooden slats at my feet. She smells sweet, like strawberry, which tells me she's been into Leni's lip gloss again. It's a strong contrast to my smell right now, but I hold her close regardless.

"Hey, princess," I laugh, my voice sounding hoarse to my own ears. That happens on days like today, when I spent hours yelling over the bawling of cattle. "How are you?"

She squeezes my neck and giggles when I rub my dark stubble against her soft cheek. "We got ice cream after Mason's meet, and then Mama let us go out for hamburgers too."

Mason's swim meet. I close my eyes and grit my teeth, holding back a deep sigh. That explains the extra chilly reception from Leni.

Mason has joined us now. At twelve he no longer runs to me when I get home, but he's smiling and I'm grateful that he never seems to hold it against me when I miss an event of his. He may be sports-crazed and social, but he's also sensible – a mix I find entertaining. That pragmatism is something I'm grateful for. He understands that cattle never take days off.

Then again, neither do parents, according to Leni.

After twelve years I still haven't figured out how to balance it, and sadly, the animals keep winning the draw.

"Mace," I say, setting Josi down and wrapping an arm around his still-thin shoulders. "I'm sorry I missed your meet today." I can smell the chlorine in his hair, a scent that will last all summer and then pick up again over the winter swim season. He seems an inch or two taller, and I wonder when that happened. "We were moving the cattle to the north grazing fields and found a few broken fences. Long day."

Mason wraps one lean arm around my waist and tips his head against my shoulder in a pre-teen type hug as he nods. "No big."

I look at Leni to see she's now standing with her hands on her lean waist. Her tank top is damp from heat and exertion, and her look tells me it was, actually, a big deal. Those gorgeous eyes of hers are slits. I'm in it.

"Mason won both of his heats," she says, offering Mason a big smile, which makes him stand straight and beam back at her. "I took a video. Maybe you two can watch it together."

"Thanks, Leni," I say, meaning it. "Let's watch it now, huh, bud?"

Mason agrees and snags Leni's phone from the picnic table near the back door. I pick up my hat and amble over to stand next to him, feeling dusty and sad, wanting out of these stained jeans with an intensity that borders on feral. A shower and dinner are calling me too, but this has to come before all of it. Leni stalks in through the back door, probably off to shower herself. I remember days when she'd invite me to join her. I briefly wonder when that stopped.

Josi hops into my lap as soon as I sit down at the picnic table, still not caring that I'm covered in junk, plus a stain from the mayo that slid out of my sandwich at lunch. She's a ranch girl, born and raised, and doesn't bat an eye at the things that come with it. Even better, she wears flower crowns in her hair. Mason sits next to me and navigates to the video. My smile grows as I watch my son do first the backstroke, and then breaststroke. I cheer as he wins each heat, and his eyes crinkle up just like his mama's do. I hug him to my side.

"That was great," I tell him. "I wish I could have seen it in person."

"I know it's busy right now," he says, shrugging his shoulders and standing. "I get it."

I know he does. He's a fourth generation ranch kid, it's in his blood, but still . . . "I know, buddy, but you're important too," I tell him.

"I know, Dad. No big," he says for the second time.

When did my lack of presence become *no big* to him?

"Uncle Landry came," Josi says, hopping off my lap, referring to my youngest brother. "He cheered so loud that Mama told him to quiet down before she pushed his head under water."

Josi laughs and I do too. Mason grins and nods. "He's loud."

"I heard," I say, recalling my brother's voice in the videos.

I try not to be jealous that Landry was there. He can be. He has the least responsibility on the ranch. I should be grateful that Mason had the support, but I feel my shoulders tensing as I follow them through the back door into the cabin. It should be me. I should have asked Landry to pick up the slack today and gone myself. Heck, Landry should have offered.

I'm plagued lately by mounting *should haves*.

"I'm guessing Auntie Steph was there too?" I ask, referring to Leni's older, single sister who dotes on our kids like they're her own.

"Yeah," Mason replies.

Another pinprick in my conscience.

The kitchen is dark, and I flip on a light as I search the fridge for leftovers, hunger winning out over showering, and find there's nothing much to choose from. I end up pouring a bowl of cereal and grabbing a banana. I need way more food than this

to make up for the hard work I did today, but I'm not about to nag Leni about my needs when she has taken on the entire running of our household. Plus, I do not need another argument about how she's not my mom and we should be partners. She's right, but she truly has no idea what my days are like, and I'm far too tired to try to paint that picture for her when it will only end with her listing out all the things she does too. I refuse to engage in comparison that goes nowhere.

Leni comes out of the bathroom in her pajamas, her dark hair twisted up in a towel, and joins the kids on the couch. They don't even talk about it, they all simply congregate there, and Mason picks up the remote to turn on a show. I recognize it as the evening wind-down. Summer days are long here, and my wife and kids take advantage of them to make up for the winter days that are short, cold, and dark. I stand at the counter, still hyper-aware of my messy state, and watch over their shoulders, sort of wishing one of them would invite me to the huddle. Leni has an arm wrapped around each of our children and they snuggle up, three little peas in a pod that I'm not a part of.

I chomp down cereal as they laugh at the antics of some cartoon I'm not familiar with, working my way through three bowls by the time the show is over. Leni sends Josi off to bathe, reminding Mason that he's next. Mason tosses me a "night, Dad" over his shoulder and disappears into his room to do who knows what while he waits his turn. Leni takes the towel off her head and her damp hair falls down her back in waves. She'll let it air-dry overnight, and by tomorrow it'll look perfectly styled. Her hair is thick and heavy and always smells like coconut from the shampoo she uses. I miss running my fingers through it and having that scent sneak onto my clothes.

By the time it's my turn in the bathroom, the kids have both gone off to bed and Leni is nowhere to be seen. I spent a total of an hour around my family today, and spoke what feels like a max of twenty words to them. It's disheartening.

And I'm still hungry.

Thankfully there's enough hot water left in the tank for me to let it run over my shoulders and back, loosening muscles and washing away grime. Once I feel more relaxed, I turn the water to cold and let it blast the last of the day's heat away until I feel fresh. I sneak a little of Leni's shampoo to wash my hair, and I can still smell it as I towel off and get dressed in boxers and a thin tee.

The wood floors are cool against my bare feet as I head back to the kitchen, needing another glass of water before bed, and a few pain pills to make up for getting my knee head-butted by an angry heifer who was not interested in being herded today. My beard growth feels itchy, but I don't care enough to shave. It protects my face from being in the sun all day, and it's not exactly scratching at Leni lately.

I turn the corner and am surprised to find her sitting at the small dining room table holding her head in her hands. Her nails – always kept short – sport chipped red nail polish and her eyes are hidden from me as dark waves of hair cover both sides of her face. Her shoulders sag and she lightly taps one of her bare feet against the floor. The slapping sound of it matches the tick of the old cuckoo clock she inherited from her grandmother two years ago.

Tap, tap, tap.

Tick, tick, tick.

"Hey," I say, feeling like I should let her know I'm there.

She looks up. "Sit," she replies.

Now she's said five words to me today.

I do as she asks, skipping the water and pills for now, and we hang in a silence that weighs heavy on my shoulders and chest, retightening muscles I'd barely finished relaxing. I know something big is coming, and I wait for it with the same stoicism I've employed since becoming a husband at nineteen, and a father less than a year later. Don't let them see your struggle or your worry or your fear. Prove to them all that this marriage wasn't a mistake.

Be. The. Man.

It had been hard at first, but I've transformed myself into someone dependable and strong. Someone whose family never goes cold or hungry. Someone respected in the community.

Someone who is watching his marriage crumble and can't seem to find any way to save it.

It's a cruel twist of fate, how the harder I work to take care of her, the faster she slips away.

Leni sighs and tips her head up, tucking her hair back and resting her chin on her hand to look right at me. She doesn't have any make-up on and I love her this way. Her skin is so soft, her eyes so dark and deep. I know how her mouth feels against mine, how her exercise-toned body feels in my arms. I miss those things.

I lick my lips and fold my calloused, work-roughened hands on the table in front of me, the only sign that I'm not totally relaxed.

"Holden, this isn't working," Leni's soft voice says at last. "At all."

CHAPTER 2

Leni

YOGA DID NOTHING TO help me settle down tonight. Neither did a shower or snuggling with Mace and Jo-Jo. My heart is thundering out of my chest, making me feel like a hot flash is coming on. I'm too young for hot flashes. I'm only thirty-two. Plus, I should be prepared for this. I've known for weeks that this conversation needed to happen, but Holden missing Mason's swim meet today was the last straw. He's so completely disconnected, and I can't do it anymore.

I can't be lonely every single day, missing a man I chose and not even registering in his life anymore.

I push the words out, and all he does is nod. He stays silent, and my eyes turn to the angry slits that have become so familiar to both of us. Of course he's not going to say a word. He never talks to me anymore. I've started wondering if he actually has thoughts, or if they all evaporated as he transitioned from beloved spouse to robot.

I sigh, long and slow. "I'm miserable, and you're silent, and I just . . ." I wave a hand around and bite at my lips. I knew it would hurt, but this is far beyond simple hurt. I'm tearing out my own heart. "I can't." I state painfully. "I just can't."

I watch him, hoping for some sort of response to this announcement, but he takes it all in as though he isn't surprised. He used to know me through and through, so maybe he understands on some level that my unhappiness runs deep. If he does, that ticks me off even more.

He finally confirms this in low, soft tones. "I know."

I tilt my head. "You know?" I pause, leaving him an opening to say more, but his words are stuck behind the wall he built, the one that holds back the soft places inside him. I lick my lips and suck in a deep breath through my nose. "Okay. All right." I slap my palms on the table, the noise loud and echoing out into the darker parts of the house where our two children sleep. "I promised myself that I'd be patient and have a civil conversation about this, but, honestly, why try to spare your feelings when you're apparently aware of how sad I am and you've accepted it?" I push to stand, my movements tight with annoyance. "You won't talk to me anyway." Agitated, I whirl in a circle and stop, facing him again. "When did you stop talking to me?" Another pause. "And why? We were a team. We were supposed to be a team." My words end in a whisper that has him leaning toward me.

I take him in, my eyes running over his familiar face. Holden's dark brown hair is still damp after his shower. He keeps it short because he wears a hat most of the time, which is proven by the stark white tan line across his forehead. The rest of his face is sun-bronzed, making his hazel eyes pop. Eyes that Josi shares. His full lips are tense in a straight line, and I suddenly miss his smile with a ferocity that makes me want to weep.

If I thought weeping would help anything, I'd gladly crumple to the floor and wail right now.

He stands, abruptly. "Leni . . ." he starts, coming toward me around the table, but I hold up a shaking hand.

The clock ticks as he stares at me. Tick, tick, tick.

I drop my hand. "I want to separate," I whisper through clenched teeth.

The words, even though I think we've expected them, punch us both in the chest. My lungs feel compressed and I watch his body fold in on itself, his shoulders bowing forward.

"What?" he breathes, like he can't believe they've been spoken out loud, like he can't catch any air in this stale space either.

I nod, and my body softens in relief as the long-held words break free. It's the strangest thing, but I feel cold and clear, like I've plunged into a pool of crystal-clear water and it's jolted me awake.

"I want to separate, Holden." I say with more confidence. I pace back and forth between the table and the kitchen counter, watching my feet as my two fingers tug at my lower lip, a move I do when I'm deep in thought. "We'll go live with my sister, Steph."

"We?"

I look at him quizzically. "Yes. Me and the kids. You don't think I'd just leave without them?" I scoff, lips pinched. "You're never home. They need to be where I am."

The first sign of anger slashes across his features. I can see pain in his eyes, but it's buried quickly. "You can't take my kids."

I huff. "Holden, I don't want to take your kids away from you. You're a great dad, but let's be honest here – that's only when you're around. They need a parent, on site, with them. They come with me."

He shakes his head, running his work-roughened hands through his dark hair. I wish I could read his thoughts, but if they're anything like mine, they're swimming in pain and I can't carry that for both of us. I swallow around the lump in my throat. I may be relieved to have the words spoken, and I might know it's the right thing to do, but it's still slicing my heart in half.

"Thirteen years," he whispers shakily. "You can't walk away from that so easily."

I lash out without thinking. "You did."

The words shatter his stiff expression and he sits back down with a heavy thump. "No, I didn't. Everything I've been doing has been to take care of you and Mason and Josi. Everything."

I shake my head, sick of this reasoning. "Maybe that's how it started out, but somewhere along the way you stopped knowing what we really needed."

His breathing has grown fast, his eyes heated. "What did you really need that I haven't killed myself to give you?"

It's almost funny that he asks, because he should know. I've been asking for a long time. "You, Holden. We needed you."

The silence falls again, deafening against the cuckoo clock as it sounds the hour. Ten p.m. I should be sleeping by now. I used to sleep so well next to him, enjoying the hard press of his bigger body against my side, feeling safe and protected. Lately it's been silent and cold, and I never feel rested. Maybe now that the big unspoken monster is out I can find some respite. Holding it in has made me squirmy and on edge.

"Stay here. Please," he says at last. "It's your home. It's the kids' home. I'll go."

I nod once, some of my worries alleviated by the offer. I didn't want to leave this cabin and have to explain to the family and the entire town of Pinehaven why I wasn't living with my husband. I want privacy while we try to figure this out, and I don't want to yank the kids away from their grandparents and uncles, who live on the same land.

I may be ready to separate, but I'm not totally ready to burn it all down. Yet.

"Where will you go?" I ask him.

"I'll stay in the camper. I'll be close."

The camp trailer parked on the backside of our property is a good solution I hadn't thought of. It's within eyesight, but not hearing distance and will give him access to the kids still, which is the biggest reason I've had for delaying this conversation. Mace and Jo-Jo love their daddy, and I don't take separating them lightly.

"That's a good plan," I reply.

"To be clear, Lenora, just because I'm saying I'll stay in the camper, doesn't mean I'm okay with this separation," he adds, the words harsh and firm.

Ugh. His use of my full name means he's angry. Where was this fire and fight as we slowly drifted? Or when I asked him to re-engage, to step back from some of the ranch responsibility? When I was literally begging for his attention? Now, I'm not sure it's welcome. I'm so, so tired.

I fold my arms across my chest, the silk of my pink pajama top cool against my forearms. "It's too late to pretend this isn't where we were headed. I need some space to figure things out."

A flicker of fear chases down my back as I speak things that can't be undone easily. Everyone knows that separation is the first step to divorce. I look at his face and can't believe we're here. We were going to beat the odds. Holden and Lenora – a fated match if there ever was one. I can't bear to think about it too much, it hurts so bad.

He stands once more. "I'll pack a bag. I think there's already bedding in the camper. We can talk to the kids tomorrow."

I nod, pretending he'll actually be around tomorrow to have that conversation and that it won't fall to me to handle everything. I move to the living room and sit on the couch, watching as he goes down the hall past where our children sleep in their first-floor rooms, unaware that something major just transpired. Our room is upstairs, and the darkness surrounds him as he makes his way into the loft area.

How did this happen when Holden was the only thing I truly wanted in life?



If there's anything more satisfying than venting to your sister, I haven't found it yet. My older sister, Stephanie, is my biggest fan – and I mean that in a humble, grateful way. She honestly seems to believe that rainbows shoot out of my head, and fairies sleep next to me on my pillow. The fact that she believes the same thing about herself makes the entire thing amusing. Steph's belief that I can do no wrong is exactly what I need a couple of days later as we walk the dirt path surrounding Maple Pond while Mason and Josi are at the pool on the adjoining property.

The morning was rough, which seems to be par for the course this week. Josi is ticked that I'm making her take swimming lessons. She'd much rather be at story time at the library, ignoring all the other humans. Mason is ticked that he'll have to watch her after his swim practice until I get back – a full five minutes after it all ends.

I'm ticked that they're ticked, but I can't act like I am because someone has to be the adult around here, and that lot has fallen squarely on my shoulders. It's safe to say that for the past few days we've all been on edge and short with one another. The kids are mad that Holden is living in the trailer, I'm mad that I had to tell them by myself, and Holden – actually, I don't care how he's feeling right now. In fact, I hope the trailer has an infestation of wasps. Picturing his body covered in stings is satisfying regardless of the fact that it's beneath me.

I didn't bother with sunscreen today, and I already regret it. The summer sun beats down hot in the higher elevations of the mountains we call home. I'm wearing a visor, which will thankfully protect my face, but my neck, ears, and shoulders will be pink this afternoon. My skin may be naturally tan, but I do my best to protect it, so it's still maiden territory for the sun's rays. I start to worry about it, but then a mopey moment hits and I figure why care? Nothing else is going right. May as well slowly turn into the woman with alligator skin.

"Len, you're already turning red," Steph says, echoing my thoughts, her walking shoes crunching across some pebbles as she presses a fingertip to my skin. "Honestly, you need to take better care of yourself."

I shoot her a look, and she cackles. Steph doesn't giggle or chuckle or laugh – she cackles from some deep place inside of her. She has my same dark, wavy hair and olive complexion, the same deep-brown eyes, and the same wide smile. At only eighteen months apart in age, we're often mistaken for twins, which we don't mind. Steph is taller than my five-foot-six frame, and where I'm lean, she's muscled – the result of an obsession with working out that hit in our late teens in which I chose yoga and running while Steph went all out in weight lifting and boxing.

I'd bet on her in a fight.

"Why?" I whine. "I'm a separated, thirty-two year-old mom of two kids. I should let myself go."

Steph slaps my back. "Not if you want Holden to feel the pain of losing you. Think of yourself as a beautiful buccaneer – a pirate of hearts, plundering all over town."

I groan and walk faster, needing to sweat out all these emotions before I'm back on parenting duty. "The very last thing I want to do is parade around town stealing hearts," I reply. "In fact, it would be best if no one in town knew what was happening between us."

Steph keeps up, her breathing growing heavier. Weight lifting doesn't require much speed walking. "If you can keep this separation a secret I will personally cover myself in honey and let Bob McGraw lick my arms like he's always asking to do."

I have to stop walking when I'm overcome with a wave of laughter. Bob McGraw is in his fifties and has been sniffing after Steph since she turned eighteen. At thirty-three, she's over it, but the man is nothing if not persistent. I don't doubt he'd happily lick honey off her arms and thank her for the privilege. The image makes me forget my worries for a moment as I work to catch my breath.

"Oh my gosh," I huff, wiping the tears from my eyes. "You should have accepted one of his marriage proposals. He's been incredibly loyal. I think you're the only woman he's noticed for the past twenty years."

"That type of loyalty is not what I'm after."

"Well, I want to take the bet. My separation stays secret, you go out with Bob."

Steph cackles again. "You'll lose, sis. I know Mace and Jo-Jo aren't going to say anything because they're sad and won't want to talk about it. And you can count on me to keep my mouth shut. But what about Mom and Dad? Or the Crawfords?"

I wrinkle my nose at the mention of our parents who moved away from northeastern Utah to warmer climates ten years ago. "I'm not telling our parents."

Steph raises her eyebrows. "Bold choice."

"Well, they don't visit often, and when we do talk on the phone Holden is usually working anyhow. To them it'll be business as usual when there's no sign of him." She doesn't bother asking about our oldest sister, Tina, and that's because she's so far removed from our lives she might not know Josi exists. "Besides," I admit in undertones, "they weren't happy we got married in the first place, and I don't need an I told you so from them."

Let's be honest, no one was very excited when only one year out of high school Holden and I announced we'd be getting hitched, and then produced Mason a scant ten months later.

The Crawfords, however, are a different story than my folks. Holden's family members are our direct neighbors. The ranch has been in the Crawford family for three generations – four if Mason decides to keep it going – and as Holden and his brothers each came of age, their dad, Abe, gave them a one-acre plot to build a house on. When the youngest, Landry, built his house, their mama, Rae turned the sprawling family homestead into an occasional B&B. Meaning, when she's in the mood to take a reservation, she does.

The Crawfords are all wrapped up in one another. They work the ranch together, and see each other daily. Plus, I help Rae with the housekeeping duties for her B&B guests. My kids are often there too. There is zero possible way they won't know trouble is afoot.

"You know what?" I say, firming my posture and pinching my lips, "Holden can tell his parents and brothers. I'm going to be as silent as a church mouse about it. His family, his news."

"He did make you tell the kids all by yourself," Steph reminds me. "Poor pumpkin. I'm surprised you didn't eat an entire quart of ice cream by yourself that night."

"Who says I didn't?" I smirk.

CHAPTER 3

Leni

MY RESOLVE TO LET Holden share the news of our separation with his family fizzles out the next day when his mom calls me to the homestead to help with room cleaning after guests checked out. It's laughable that I thought I could hold my tongue. For the first few years of my marriage I'd had to woo Holden's mother into accepting that I was here to stay and I'd put in the work to love her son. RaeAnn Crawford is a strong, no-nonsense rancher's wife, and a mother to three strong sons. It took some time for her to relax and show me her warm side – mostly because her practicality had no room for two nineteen-year-olds and their raging love for each other. (To be clear, she never would have used the word raging. That was our own description. Very dramatic.)

Being fully accepted as Rae's daughter at around the same time my own parents moved away, meant I had latched on to her. Over time I developed a habit of word vomiting all my thoughts and feelings to the one stable mother figure in my life. Which is exactly why I blurt it out while holding the other side of a queen-size fitted sheet in the Blue Room.

One minute the sheet is up in the air between us, sky blue and lavender scented, and the next it's flat against the bed as we tuck the corners over the mattress and I'm saying, "Holden moved out. I asked for a separation."

Rae finishes tucking the corners on her side and looks up at me with her piercing brown eyes. The room is warm in the June heat, with the sun shining into the big picture window and no breeze coming through. I'm already baking from the work of changing bedding and vacuuming, and giving new life to a bathroom that was abused, plus the heat from carrying a secret that's a burning coal in my chest.

She puts fisted hands on her hips and tilts her head a little, her long toffee-colored braid falling over her shoulder. She's thin in the way of women who work hard, and in her fifties she shows no sign of softening or slowing – even her hair hasn't dared to go fully gray yet, containing only a few strings that seem a little scared to take over. I grimace as she sniffs lightly.

"I know I didn't hear you say what you just said." She shifts, crossing her tan arms over her typical button-down denim shirt. "Baby, you two fought too hard to be together to let it all go now."

A lump rises in my throat and I lick my lips, pulling in a breath through my nose that smells like window cleaner and pine furniture polish. The homestead is quiet around us, with the men out working and my kids home having a flop day with me away.

"It takes two to keep it going," I reply with more confidence than I feel under her scrutiny.

Nerves crawl up my spine at the look on her face. Rae is usually patient with me, but in this situation she's looking at me like I'm a child who needs a good reality check.

"I shouldn't need to remind you that ranch life has little room for romance in it. Holden works hard and carries a lot on his shoulders. You need to be strong enough to be alone and not take it personally." She sighs and softens her stance at whatever expression she reads on my face. "We talked about all of this before you two got married. I thought you understood what it would mean for you to join this family."

We did. It was a conversation she thought was necessary since I'd been raised as a "city girl" – a fact that is hysterical considering that "city" was Pinehaven, population five thousand, and that I went to school with her boys. I've considered myself a country girl all the way, but because I didn't grow up on a working ranch, I was seen as more citified than the Crawfords. Rae had doubts and I still haven't forgotten the chat we had. Besides, even if at that point I didn't fully understand what a ranch requires of a person, I've lived here for thirteen years now. I've watched the family work day in and day out.

This isn't me being a whiny, delicate woman. There's something different, broken, with Holden and me.

I pick up the freshly washed top sheet and toss it in the air. Rae catches her side and together we smooth it down, buying me time to formulate my thoughts.

"The thing is, it's different with us," I start . . .

Rae interrupts. "Every couple thinks they're different."

I clear my throat. "Maybe. But the thing is, Abe still loves you."

Rae finishes tucking her corner military-tight and then she's looking at me again in that assessing way that washes away any attempts at what she calls "baloney". I know she wants to roll her eyes, but she refrains and I'm grateful.

"You're wrong if you think Holden no longer loves you, Lenora."

My full name again. Sigh. I shake my head and grab the hand-quilted blanket that makes this the Blue Room. It's a pieced quilt that Rae made when her boys were little and quilting was the only thing that gave her some peace and quiet on a working ranch. The squares are all different shades of blue in an intricate pattern that makes me sad she uses it for the B&B guests. I can't bear to think of it getting ruined – and based on the bathroom I just resurrected, it may not survive for long.

"Actions speak louder than words, and he doesn't act like he does," I respond, but the waffle in my tone makes it sound pretty whiny even to my own ears, which makes me angry. I'm strong and independent, and those words don't fully represent the depth of my loneliness and hurt. Rae opens her mouth and I jump in. "I know how that sounds. And if I didn't think he still had some feelings for me I'd probably be doing more than a separation, but you can't pretend you haven't noticed that he's always here. Haven't you wondered why he's never at his own house?" Rae closes her mouth and pinches her lips with a nod. I continue, "Yes, you're married to a rancher, but Abe always makes time for you. In the busy times, he invites you along, and I see you two sneak off for picnics or at the very least sit on the porch together in the evenings. Holden doesn't even try anymore. He's a ghost. His side of the bed is usually empty when I'm awake, and if the pillow didn't have a dent in it in the mornings, I'd wonder if he actually sleeps there."

Rae works her lower lip between her teeth as she picks up the decorative pillows and gets them settled on the bed against the ancient headboard someone handmade a generation ago, while I pick up the extra blanket and fold it perfectly along the footboard.

"I miss him," I whisper, tears clogging my throat as the words come out. I look up to meet her eyes, and they're sympathetic at last. "I've been patient, and understanding, but I'm hurting, and I need more from the most important relationship in my life."

Rae comes around the bed and pulls me into arms that are stronger than they appear. She's taller than me, and she puts a hand on the back of my head like I really am her baby as she nudges my head against her shoulder.

"You know I have to be loyal to my boys, but you're my girl, Leni. It hurts to see you two struggling, but I understand what you're saying. Maybe what that man needs is a shock to his system, and I'm sure this separation will do it." She squeezes once more, nearly lifting the breath from my lungs, and lets go, keeping her hands on my shoulders. "What can I do?"

Now the tears do fall and I offer her a quivering smile. "Make him suffer by not cooking dinner for him?"

She laughs, a sound low and gravely and delightfully sinister. "I can do that. Where is he staying?"

"In the camper on our property."

Her expression grows mischievous. "You're a smart girl. A little hardship might be good for him."

I sigh and my gaze moves out the window. This room overlooks the side yard, and from here I can see the big barn and all the activity going on there. Walker breezes past, his long blond hair waving behind him, and disappears into the barn. Not far behind him is Holden. The tense way he's holding his shoulders tells me Walker just delivered some bad news. Empathy born of habit settles in my chest and I have a sudden urge to go to him and ask what's happening, but I shove it down. That line of thought will only wound. He won't tell me, and I'll be left feeling more alone than I was before.

Rae claps her hands like she always does when a room is ready. "Should we move on to the Green Room?"

I hurry to face her again and nod. "You have two rooms booked this weekend?" I ask.

She hustles out of the room carrying the bucket of cleaners and rags, and I follow, grabbing the mop and bucket as I do.

"Yes. But I'm still planning to have a tea party with Josi on Saturday afternoon," she tosses over her shoulder.

Rae started having tea parties with Josi once a month, and it's my favorite thing. Josi is so introverted, and this has been a wonderful way to get her talking and hopefully help her build confidence around social settings. Initially Josi was pretty quiet, but now Rae says all she has to do is pour a cup of peppermint tea and Josi starts spilling her guts. I'm grateful on so many levels. I would have loved this type of time with my own grandmother.

We make quick work of the Green Room and then I'm off, out the front door and to my car before I notice Holden has come out of the barn. He calls my name and I look his way at the same time I'm unlocking my door.

He's wearing his typical outfit of worn jeans, worn boots, and worn hat. The only thing that ever changes is the color of his short-sleeved Western-style shirts. Today it's blue and green, and I smile to myself thinking about the fact that nothing about ranch life makes for a fresh dresser. It's all routines and then sub-routines. I know life isn't meant to be an adventure every day, but there should be something new every now and again.

"Hey, Leni," he says cautiously as he approaches.

I haven't spoken to him since he moved into the camper. According to my ridiculous ability to stew on the situation, it's been four days and thirteen hours. Sadly, not a record for us, even when we were technically living together.

"Hey," I reply.

"Uh, wondered how you're doing," he says, pulling off his hat and scrubbing at a face that's sporting more of a beard than I've ever seen on him.

I blink, wondering how to answer. The truth is, I'm miserable, but that's also the norm, so maybe I'm doing the same as always? Or maybe I just tell him I'm fine, because that's become my go-to answer. Would kicking him in the shins and throwing his hat in the watering trough make my feelings clear?

I shuffle my feet, kicking dirt into my sandals, and squint up at the tree over his head before looking back.

I go with the age-old, "I'm fine." Which screams I'm anything but fine, but the dummy accepts it.

"Good. That's good. So, maybe the kids could come over tonight? Sleep in the trailer with me?" He tucks his free hand into his pocket, and honestly I'm surprised it doesn't tear – that's how worn out those jeans are.

It's the first time he's asked to have time with them, although that doesn't mean he hasn't seen them. They've bopped over to the camper when he comes home at night, and according to Mason he's sent a few messages on the phone. Still, it's a gut-punch reminder of the fact we aren't sharing space right now – the fact that this could be our future. Co-parenting from separate homes was never in the plan, and my heart pinches for the millionth time in the past four days.

I swallow down the ache that never wants to clear, and nod. "Sure. Is there bedding in there for them?"

"Yeah."

"Is there a certain time you want me to send them over?"

I brace myself for what I know will come next. It'll be late, and he won't be feeding them dinner. Sadly, I'm proven right.

He taps his hat against his thigh. "How about nine o'clock? I think I can be there by then."

"Good thing it's summer, eh?" I say, tugging my car door open with more force than necessary. When he frowns in confusion I huff out a bitter laugh. "Because during the school year, Josi would long be asleep by nine." His expression grows sad, and I'm perversely glad to see it. He should know that kind of stuff, and he doesn't. "It's fine, Holden. I'll send them over at nine." I pause and my shoulders drop in weary acceptance. "And don't worry about waking them up before you go in the morning. I'll plan to feed them breakfast when they wander over to the cabin."

His eloquent reply is a nod and then a second nod. Pretty romantic stuff . . . really giving me something to hang on to.

I don't bother saying goodbye. I simply get in my little SUV, start it up, and drive the half-mile to our plot of land. I turn off the car and put my sweaty hands on my bare thighs as I lean back into the seat. It's hot today, and I always wear shorts and a tank while I'm helping Rae clean. My thick hair is pulled up in a ponytail and it doesn't do much to cool me off. Emotional heat isn't helping either.

I'm so angry.

But, I don't get to wallow, because inside that cabin are two sweethearts waiting for their stable parent to arrive. Mason has swim practice in an hour, and Josi wants to go to the library for the second time this week. I honestly have no idea if other seven-year-olds are capable of reading like she does. Maybe I'll get a book for myself too, something to take the edge off and give me a little escape. Maybe one where the wife gets away with murder.

The back door opens and Jo-Jo pops out, still in her pajamas, enjoying a lazy day of summer. This pair has her favorite cartoon character on them, and her silky brown hair is ratted. The kids love the times I'm away cleaning, because it's all TV shows and cereal bowls. I remember feeling the same sense of freedom when my mom was away as a kid. Jo-Jo waves at me and her toothless grin has my heart settling. I'm so lucky to be their mama.

I smile as I get out of the car and follow her inside. I'm greeted by the sight of Mason attempting to wipe up some spilled milk and fruity cereal rings. Behind him the TV is blaring at decibels that would make the cattle bawl if they were anywhere near.

"Mama," Josi says, taking my hand. "What happens if I mess with my belly button?"

I look down at her and run my free hand through her hair to detangle it. "What do you mean?"

"If I pick at it too much, will it make my skin fall off?"

Mason stops wiping and screws up his face into a mocking expression like only a sibling can. I notice a wet spot on the basketball jersey he's wearing, most likely from dribbling milk while zoned in on the screen.

"What are you talking about?" he asks her.

"You know how when Grandma Rae sews things she has to tie a knot in the end? Is my belly button the knot?"

It takes me a few minutes to realize that Jo-Jo thinks her belly button is where her skin is all tied together, and when it becomes clear in my mind I start laughing. Hard. Harder than the situation warrants, for sure. I swing her up in my arms and bury my face in her sweet little neck and laugh and laugh while Mason does his best to explain to her that a belly button is where a baby gets food from its mother in the womb.

That explanation doesn't go well at all, and only brings on more questions about why she had a tube sticking out of her and if I still have that tube floating around in my guts, which makes me laugh to the point of tears.

CHAPTER 4

Holden

I WATCH LENI DRIVE away and in an effort to shove down the frustration of my entire situation I swing my hat hard against my leg two more times, throwing off dust and making things feel a little more bearable. She looked tired, and I hate it when Leni looks tired.

"What did that poor hat ever do to you?" Walker's booming, cheerful voice calls from behind me.

I don't bother turning around, knowing he'll step up beside me, his bulkier frame shading me from the sun. Walker has both inches and pounds on me and Landry, but it's all made up of sunshine and goofiness, traits I typically enjoy but have no interest in right now. So, I don't bother responding. Instead I put my hat back on my head, and when Leni's car disappears around a corner I head back to the barn.

Walker follows, picking up on another conversation I'm not in the mood for. To be fair, there's not much anyone could say to me right now that I'd be interested in hearing, unless it's solutions for my marriage. Of course, that would require me to talk about it, and that's not happening.

A waft of some sort of wood-scented cologne drifts from Walker as he lifts his hat to adjust his shoulder-length hair and I glance over at him, trying to pay attention to what he's saying. In my defense, he talks a lot and I tend to tune him out because of it.

"Herd inspection starts tomorrow. Are all the cattle accounted for?" he asks, referring to the full veterinary check each animal receives before we move them to the summer pastures.

I nod. "As of last night all cattle are accounted for and ready for inspection."

I know I sound like a robot, but I don't appreciate it when he playfully lifts his arms, bent at the elbows, and says back in an overly robotic voice, "Ok-ay, group lea-der."

I sigh and roll my eyes. "How many days do you think the vet checks will take?"

He drops his arms as we enter the barn where he's begun setting up his workstation. It's a big job, pushing hundreds of head of cattle through for him to examine, vaccinate, and treat as needed. We do it bi-annually, and I know how lucky we are to have a fully trained and licensed vet in the family. It saves us thousands of dollars, so I try to shove my emotions back even further and engage with him.

"Depending on what we find, I'm thinking it'll take around three days. But the visual checks and spot checks have been going well this spring, so I don't foresee any major issues." We stop next to the back door of the barn and look out over the big pens where the cattle will be staged starting tomorrow morning. "Speaking of issues, everything okay at home?" he asks me, obviously having picked up on the vibes earlier.

I nod. "Yep."

"You'd tell me if there was something going on?" he presses.

I finally make eye contact with my younger brother. We're a few years apart in age, but age doesn't matter that much when you grow up in the country like we did. You trust and rely on one another. Still, there are some things that are too painful to talk about, and some wounds too fresh. Walker may love my family, but even he can't fix it.

"Nope," I say, but I paste on a sideways grin and he slaps my back good-naturedly as we step outside once more.



It's dark and I'm using an old lantern to light my side of the camper. I still haven't gotten around to running an extension cord

up to the cabin to supply power, and the battery died days ago. Thankfully it's summer, so I don't need a heater, and I still have enough propane to keep my small fridge cool. Not that there's much in the fridge. It's not luxury living, that's for sure. Leni accuses me of neglecting her and the kids, but sometimes I think I neglect myself even more.

Mason and Jo-Jo are asleep in their bunks and I glance their way, taking in their sleeping faces. I can hear their deep breathing and shifting in their sleep, and I'm grateful for it. The silence of the camp trailer has been almost eerie. Being separated from them is almost as bad as being separated from Leni has been. They remind me so much of her, in their expressions and mannerisms. I barely kept myself from hugging them too tight and too long, needing the contact.

I made it here by nine o'clock, but it was a close thing, and guilt was my companion when I put the truck in park and found them sitting anxiously on the back porch of the cabin, waiting for me. I suddenly wondered how many nights they'd waited on a dad that hadn't come home on time.

The ranch has taken over my life, and the past few days have opened my eyes in an undeniable way.

They'd been freshly showered and well fed, and I'd hurried to shower off my day in the tiny bathroom full of cold water before playing a couple rounds of cards with them. Josi's wide yawns had told me it was time to wind it up and I took the opportunity to tell her one of my favorite childhood stories from memory. It had been satisfying to have her little hand hold mine from her bunk as I stood there and quietly spoke. Her long, brown hair trailed over the edge of the bed as her eyes closed, and I took in her little face. At seven she's losing some of that roundness in her cheeks and I hadn't registered the change until now.

Once she was sleeping, Mason and I slid to the side of the camper that holds the larger bed Leni and I share when we go out, and sat together with our legs crossed, playing another round of cards while he told me a little about his swimming and some of the kids he's friends with. It was like going mining and striking gold. I loved hearing this directly from him rather than begrudgingly from his mama – or worse, never hearing it at all.

I'm weary but restless, unsettled away from home. I need to sleep, though, so I open the small cupboard above my bed to pull out pajamas and my hand connects with something hard behind the clothing pile. With a frown I lean up on my knees to see better and find a cardboard box with red marker hearts drawn on the side. My breath hitches as I recognize it immediately. A smile breaks through the crusty set of my mouth as I pull the box out and sit back down, pulling it into my lap.

I completely forgot this box existed.

The top flap is worn with age and I'm surprised it still holds together as I pull it up to reveal the interior. Three rocks greet me – all heart shaped. Under them lies a faded piece of cream cardstock, folded into fourths and held in place by the rocks.

My hands tingle and I swear I can smell Leni's perfume and hear her laughter as I pull out the rocks first. She had a theory that the shape of a heart could be found anywhere, and she often pointed out heart-shaped clouds, plants, and, yes, even rocks. These three had been found while we were dating and she'd kept them as a memento of three of our most perfect days.

I still remember where all three are from. The regular brown rock is from the night of our first date. I'd felt so much pressure to get it right, and failed, taking her on a horseback picnic only to discover she doesn't like horses, plus I'd packed smoked salmon that she couldn't bring herself to eat. It had been such a failure that we'd both ended up laughing hard, and she'd picked up a rock to commemorate that it was only going to get better from there. The reddish-colored rock is from our first kiss near Maple Pond. Yeah, it was a perfect first kiss. The white rock is from the day we decided to get married.

My fingers trace over the smooth rocks and my chest tugs as I remember her in her cut-off jean shorts and tank tops, laughingly challenging me to beat her to the top of any trail we'd hiked. Loser had to give the other a piggy back ride on the way down. I had purposely lost every single race. There was no way I was letting Leni attempt to pack-mule my larger frame down the rocky slopes. Besides, I had never complained about carrying her. I loved holding her close and feeling her hair tickle the back of my neck when she'd lean forward to press kisses to my cheeks.

I hold the rocks one at a time in my hands and let the memories wash over me. It's not easy to open myself up this way. I'm out of practice. I squeeze them and I swear that a part of me cracks as I do. Fear and worry, shame and sorrow rage through the crack and have me clutching at my chest. How did we go from gathering rocks to living apart? How did I fail so spectacularly?

With now-shaking hands I put the rocks on the tiny shelf next to my side of the camper bed and delicately pull out the card stock. I'm not sure how well it's weathered the changing seasons stuck in a camper closet, but I'm dying to see what we wrote when we were still so full of hope.

Leni's teenage handwriting greets me and I smile again as I read the big, bold, black letters across the top of the page.

"Lenora Stilton and Holden Crawford's Buck-It List"

I remember the way she laughed and laughed at her play on words. *Come on, Holden, it's funny.* She'd fallen onto her back and tugged me with her, until we were both looking up at the blue sky through the leaves and branches above us. *We're too special for a regular old bucket list. You're a rancher. Get it? Buck – It?*

I got it, but I played dumb just to get her to tickle at my ribs until I wrapped her in my arms and kissed the breath right out of her.

Eventually we'd sat up and started our list. I'd never romantically or officially proposed to Leni. It had simply been decided one day, and never questioned again. The next week, we'd sat together and written this Buck-It List. Because – according to

Leni – our relationship was different, and it was going to stay that way. We weren't going to get old and boring, and stuck in our routines like we'd seen the *cow folk community* around us do. And this list was going to be the way we kept things interesting.

I read through the list with my heart racing. It hadn't been long, or too crazy, if I remember right.

1 – Ride the mechanical bull at the County Fair every June – until we're too old and might break a hip.

2 – Enter the pie eating contest on July 4th

3 – Enter a line dancing contest

4 – Karaoke. Both have to sing – solo

5 – Skinny dip in Maple Pond

At this one I chuckle under my breath. Leni thought it was so scandalous, and I kept telling her that we'd be married and people would practically assume we were skinny dippers. Heaven knew my parents had done it regularly enough that my brothers and I had stopped telling them how gross we found it, and simply accepted that it was happening.

6 – Ride a tandem bike down Main Street while playing the song "Endless Love" on a loudspeaker.

I groan at this one. No way that was actually happening, ever. I did not need or want the attention.

7 – Get married and become the most fun parents, and stay in love forever.

I sigh and wonder what Leni would think if she saw this list now. We'd gotten married on one of the happiest days of my life, and I think we're pretty good parents, but are we still in love? Or, maybe the real question is, is Leni still in love with me? Because I might have been an absentee husband for a while now, but my feelings for Leni still run deep and heavy, like she's been poured into my soul's footings and my life won't stand firm without her.

I fall asleep holding the list, thinking about what happens from here, and when I wake to my alarm far too early, I leave the list sitting on my bed. I get dressed as quietly as I can so that I don't disturb the kids. I'm not worried about leaving them here. They're essentially sleeping in our backyard, which is a regular summer activity in these parts, and Leni's car is in the drive. She knows I go early, and she'll most likely be up, watching for them.

My stomach growls as I walk toward my truck, shoving my cowboy hat onto my head. I'll have to snag some breakfast from the homestead when I get there, if I can find something. Lately my mama's been stingy with the food, which is confusing on top of all the other things I'm dealing with. My food stores in the trailer are empty, and I'm getting a little desperate. Not enough that I'm going to bother anyone with it though.

I glance toward the cabin and see that, sure enough, the small window in our ensuite bathroom is on. She's up. I can picture her wavy hair falling into her sleepy eyes, and the way she shuffles into the bathroom on feet that don't want to move. Leni looks so snuggly and sweet in the mornings, but she's more like a feral hog that was disturbed from her hibernation. I miss her grumping at me.

Two hours later, I've had a cold breakfast that I had to sneak out of my childhood kitchen, and I'm riding my horse, Twister, far from the homestead in a pasture that I'm hoping will be ready for grazing next month, when my phone alerts me to a text. I tug it out of the front pocket of my Western-style shirt and see it's from Mason. At twelve, I don't think Mason has any business having a phone, but Leni disagrees, saying with how often I'm gone – including overnight sometimes – he needs a way to communicate with me, without her being the go-between. We'd settled on a phone that can talk and text but nothing more . . . and she was right. I love having a way to connect with him.

Mason

What's this list I found on your bed?

I imagine Mason reading the Buck-It List and I'm not sure how to respond at first. I hadn't thought about them possibly finding it. Things are a little off kilter with me being out of the house, and I'm doing my best not to rock one single boat. How will Leni feel about Mason finding the list? What would she think about seeing it again?

In the end, I decide on honesty, and hope it's the right move. As a parent, it usually is.

That's a list your mom and I made when we were engaged

Mason

Oh, I get it, a bucket list. <laugh face>

Mason has Leni's sense of humor, and I love that he immediately got her joke.

I smile and shift as Twister side-steps a rock in our path. I'd nearly forgotten we were walking, but Twister knows all these paths by heart. We walk them many times every year, and I trust him with my life. Which is why I kept moving while texting. It's not as dangerous as driving and texting, but still. I pull Twister to a stop and he's quick to settle into a relaxed stance – another thing a ranch horse knows about. There's a lot of standing and observing in our days.

Me: Yea

Mason

Did you do it?

Nope. We put it in the box and forgot about it, I guess

Mason

You should do it now

My stomach clenches. That list was made by two kids about to turn nineteen, who had no earthly clue what they were doing or how married life would change them. I can't imagine doing it now. The very idea of approaching Leni with it kicks up nausea. I know she'd reject it out of hand. Possibly scoff. Would there be any softness in her gaze as she read the lines we'd written together?

I don't think so, buddy

Mason

Why?

I take off my hat and scratch at hair that's already growing damp with sweat in the June heat. I feel trapped. Leni usually guides these types of conversations. But she isn't here, and I'm the dad, so I guess I'd better figure it out.

Things with your mom and I are kind of uncertain right now

Mason

Maybe doing these things would help

I frown and suck my lips into my mouth against my teeth. He has a point. Maybe some fun is exactly what the two of us could use. This kid of mine.

When did you get so smart

Mason

So yes?

Let me think about it

I don't hear back from him, and figure he's run off to swim or whatever it is he's doing during his summer days to stay busy. I squeeze my calves to get Twister moving again, and when I'm satisfied that this grazing pasture is growing how I need it to, I move on toward the east field where I need to check on some possible damming of our water source. Walker began the health assessments this morning and mentioned he was seeing some signs of dehydration, which most likely means access to water has been restricted somehow.

It takes me twenty minutes to lope over, and as I do I let my thoughts run on to the animals and pastures, water and fencing, my parents and brothers, and the ranch hands we employ. The weight of caring about all of that so deeply sometimes makes my shoulders feel heavy and my breathing tight. But the ranch is running as well as it ever has – better if I'm to believe my dad – and even I can admit that it's thanks to my hard work.

So why do I feel empty?

I dismount near what should be a full creek at this point in the summer and give Twister his head so he can drink deeply as I drink from my canteen and scan the area. It doesn't take me long to find the blockage. We had a major storm high in the mountains last week and the debris finally caught up to us downstream. I'll need my brother Landry to bring the UTV and a few guys over to haul the big logs out of the way and get the water flowing again.

I pull out my phone to text him and see a text waiting from Leni. I want to read that one first, but duty calls and I know that if I put it off there's a chance I'll forget. So, once I've dropped a location pin to Landry with instructions, I open the text from my wife.

Leni

Did you put Mason up to this?

A picture of her holding the Buck-It List is under the text and my throat goes dry. Mason showed it to her and she sounds angry. Not good.

No. I found it in the camper last night and left it on my bed. He must have seen it this morning

Those three dots appear telling me she's typing and I nearly go crazy waiting to see which way this one is going to go. I actually cross my fingers, hoping that the universe will be on my side.

Leni

I forgot about it

My shoulders relax. I can work with this. Thank you God, universe, and all the magical fairies Josi tells me about.

Me too. It was fun to read

Leni

Yeah. Lots of memories.

There were three heart rocks in the box too

Leni

Really? They didn't get lost?

No. They're by the camper bed if you want to see them

Leni

Maybe another time

That stings, but I let it go, not willing to start something when we're having a halfway decent conversation that's lasting more than thirty seconds and isn't about our children.

While I think about how to reply, a text from Mason dings and I see that he's started a group text with me and Leni. That little pot-stirrer.

Mason

You two should do the list

I'm not about to be the first one to reply, and I watch to see what Leni says, but when she doesn't respond either I have a thought hit. Leni chose to separate herself from me because she thinks I don't care. Me not responding is going to confirm that, and it's not true. So, I take a huge breath and send something I pray doesn't make things worse.

Oh, yeah

There. Nice, safe, non-confrontational. Curious. Open. I feel good about it.

Leni

I don't think so, buddy

Knife, meet confidence balloon. Popped.

I can admit my reply lacked enthusiasm, but still, at least I didn't shoot it down like Leni did. I take off my hat and slap it against my leg, causing Twister to look up from where he's been casually munching wild grasses. Dust flies off my jeans and hat, and I'm suddenly angry. I'm out here working my tail off for her, day in and day out, for thirteen years, and *she* gets to be the one who's hurt? She doesn't want to engage with *me*? What about what I want or what I need? Maybe I need some attention too.

Maybe I'm tired of being the bad guy. Maybe she should see how it feels to have the kids look at her with disappointment.

I practically crack my phone as I force my fingers against the screen and type.

I think it would be fun

I hit send and thankfully the anger and frustration keep me from immediately feeling regret. *Chew on that, Lenora*, I think with a smirk.

Mason

Yes Dad!!!!

My son is obviously on my side and the solidarity feels amazing.

Mason

Say you'll do it Mom! Please!

Yeah, Leni. Ball's in your court this time.

Mason

I can help you. Josi would love it too.

Oof. Little man pulling out the big guns. I laugh out loud, in the field, and Twister glances at me again, the sun catching his shiny coat.

It's not like me to get competitive . . . actually, it used to be exactly like me. I'd forgotten the rush of challenging someone to something, and knowing I could win. Leni and I used to egg each other on all the time, and a thrill chases up my back. Now I have to hope that my old Leni is still in there somewhere – the one who would meet me head-to-head and that my sudden emotional explosion didn't make things worse.

Leni

Fine. Let's do it.

This time, I toss my hat in the air and whoop. It is on.

CHAPTER 5

Leni

I WANT TO HATE myself right now, but there isn't time for it because I'm standing in too-tight jeans and cowboy boots that I haven't stuffed my feet into for months, and I'm tuning out Josi who is tugging at my hand repeatedly and asking if I'm really going to do it.

By *it* she means ride the stupid mechanical bull I'm staring at. It's huge and brown, and was possibly sort of fuzzy at one point, but the back has been worn down from countless rides. Its eyes are missing some paint, and it appears to be staring into space – probably begging for mercy from another season of fair goers. I'm one hundred percent sure it's not mechanically sound.

Dumb list, and dumb Holden for finding the list and leaving it out for our kids to see. And dumb Holden for suggesting we do it. He actually said "I think it sounds fun". As though Holden and "fun" have shared a sentence in years.

Especially dumb me for taking the bait rather than maturely setting a boundary that, no, I will not be crossing off bucket list items with my estranged spouse. Why would either of us want to do it?

I glance down at Josi whose cocoa hair is braided down her back, her hazel eyes that are crinkled with a smile as she looks between me and Holden, who is standing on her other side also holding her hand. This is why I caved. I look at the bows tied at the end of her braids, her childish innocence obvious, and sure, I didn't want Holden to make me look bad by agreeing to do something I didn't want to do, but it's more about giving something to my kids. A part of me sees doing this as a soft way to say goodbye – a final scene in our family story before we go our separate ways. The thought hurts, but it sits among the other little hurts that gathered along the way.

Mason is on Holden's other side and he leans across his dad's broad chest to grin at me. "You going first? Or is Dad?"

His own dark hair falls across his forehead and I smirk at the sight. His hair is unruly at best. He wants flowing locks like his Uncle Walker has, but he can't seem to understand that he doesn't have the same type of hair and it's not really working. I'm riding it out. Eventually his swim coach is going to make him trim it up, I'm sure, so I'll let him be the bad guy. His lanky arms flow out of the jersey tank he's wearing over basketball shorts, and I wonder once again if he'll be inclined to carry on with Crawford Ridge Ranch when he's older. So far he isn't showing much interest.

I glance at Holden to find his head turned in my direction. His eyes are shaded by his worn hat, but I can see the crinkles at the outer edges that tell me he's smiling at me. I blink a few times and chew on my lower lip. His gaze is . . . well, amused I guess. Warm and relaxed. It causes me to swallow and I turn away to watch the bull swinging around the blow-up ring as it tries to toss a woman wearing a summer dress. At least I was smart enough to wear jeans, I suppose. I definitely don't need to add flashing to this event.

How is he relaxed and almost happy about this?

"Dad should go first," I say. If he's so chill, he can prove it.

Holden chuckles, low and soft. "Chicken."

I barely hear the word over the cheering of those watching the ring.

I gasp and look his way. "You did not just call me chicken."

His lips tug up. "Yes, ma'am, I did."

My back goes straight and Josi giggles. "Uh-oh, Daddy, you made her mad."

I force myself to smile down at our daughter. It's not her fault I'm mad at her dad for being happy. Seriously – why am I mad that he's happy? Something is wrong with me. The heat in this tent is not helping, and the scent of sweat isn't either. But, again, that's not the fault of anyone standing with me. That's the sweat of a thousand people who came before, melded into the very fabric of the transportable ride.

"I'm not mad, Jo-Jo. Who should go first?" I ask gently.

Josi's face splits into a smile, toothless and darling. "You. Show him how to do it."

I laugh and raise an eyebrow at Holden. "You hear that? Jo-Jo thinks you need a lesson, and I'm just the woman to offer it to you."

Holden's expression remains amused. "You've never ridden a mechanical bull in your life."

I release Josi's hand to put my own on my hips as I turn toward him. I hope I look fierce and ready, because what I truly feel is nervous and unsure. It feels too personal somehow, standing here with our kids, bantering and egging each other on. This is who we used to be, not who we are now, and my skin feels too tight. He's right, though. I've never done this. I may live on a ranch, but that's never involved riding something that's trying to unseat me. I don't even have my own horse. I'm the lady who takes the UTV when I go out on the land.

"And you have, Crawford?" I ask boldly.

He simply shrugs, but as he opens his mouth to retort, a rough hand lands on his shoulder with a thump. I glance behind him to see Walker in all his blond, muscled-up glory, grinning like the big happy goof he is. Walker is the biggest Crawford man by a few inches – inches he loves to lord over his brothers. As if ranch work isn't enough, the man is into strength training and too-tight shirts that hug his biceps like they're trying not to split. His hair lands on his shoulders and if I didn't know better, I'd honestly think he uses a flat iron to get those waves.

Some Viking ancestor genes rose up when Walker was in the womb, and I find it immensely funny seeing him between his two dark-haired, leaner brothers. Speaking of brothers, I look around expecting to see Landry in his wake, but he's not there.

"What's happening here?" Walker asks, his light green eyes gleaming with brotherly mirth under his cowboy hat. "Because it looks like someone might be thinking about riding this bull." He slaps Holden's back, and I wince at the thumping sound. Walker turns his laughter-filled look on me. "Or, could it be that the fair Lenora has decided to try her luck against the bucking monster?"

I laugh and roll my eyes. "The bucking monster?"

Walker grins. "Aye, lassie."

"Since when are you Scottish?" Holden murmurs.

Walker pulls a face and looks down at Mason and Josi. "Hey, there," he says, tugging on Josi's braid and squeezing Mason's shoulder in a much softer way than he'd manhandled his brother. "What's up, my little people?"

"Mom and Dad are both going to ride that," Josi points at the bull.

Walker raises his eyebrows. "That is excellent information."

"Yeah," Mason joins in. "They wrote a bucket list a long time ago and now they're doing it."

"Hmmm." Walker looks back and forth between us and folds his arms across his chest. His poor, short-sleeved denim shirt isn't handling it well, but so far the buttons down the front are holding. "It gets more interesting. I'm glad I wandered over when I saw you here."

"Yeah, it's cuz they don't live together anymore and we want them to have fun so that maybe they'll want to live together again," Josi adds in a matter-of-fact tone that has my heart hitting my toes.

Walker's gaze loses its teasing gleam and immediately cuts between me and Holden. I freeze. Shoot.

Shoot, shoot, shoot.

I don't dare look at Holden. His family, his news – even if I did totally already tell his mom.

The tent walls seem to shrink, and the background music and catcalling of friends ribbing each other over their riding attempts all fade into the background. This is awkward as heck, and I don't think I've ever blushed harder or prayed more for sudden death.

"So you really meant it the other day when you said you'd keep me in the dark if something was going on?" Walker asks, taking pity on me and glaring at his big brother. "That's cold, man."

"Not the time," Holden responds.

And then, Holden just walks away, heading to the stand where you sign up to ride the bull. That rude bumhead left me here holding the ball and waltzed off like it was nothing. I'd shank him in his sleep if we still shared a bed. Although, I'm not above sneaking out to the trailer tonight. This is the kind of thing that makes me steam. I'm so done handling the uncomfortable parts of life for him.

Walker looks at me and relaxes his stance, letting his arms drop to his sides, making himself look less formidable. I've seen him do it countless times, as though he understands his size can be intimidating. I nearly smile, because nothing about Walker is actually intimidating once you know him. He's the biggest tail-wagger in the world.

"You okay, Leni?" he asks softly. Concerned.

Walker was fifteen when Holden and I got together, and sixteen when we married. He's as much a brother to me as he is to Holden in a lot of ways, and the thought almost makes tears rise, because losing this family would kill me, but I tamp them down and nod.

He twists his lips and sniffs. "Come here."

He sighs as he gently wraps an arm around my shoulders and pats me in that sort of awkward way that's really sweet but totally means a person doesn't casually do this sort of thing. I lean my head against the side of his upper arm for a minute and

soak up the support. The Crawfords aren't big touchers with each other, which makes Walker's side-hug that much sweeter.

He releases me quickly, and I do feel a little better as he looks down at me with a frown.

"I don't know what's going on, but I do know it's got to be his fault. He lives with his head shoved so far . . . " He glances down at the kids, suddenly remembering they're listening with big, open ears and eyes. He bites his lip and coughs, and even though it might be unfair, I adore that he immediately blamed Holden for the issues. "Where's he staying?"

I find it satisfying that he assumes Holden would be the one to leave the house. It makes me feel like he sees me as someone strong and able to stand up for herself.

Mason answers. "In the camper in the yard."

Walker cracks out a laugh. "Good. I hope the water is cold."

"It is." Josi nods, her eyes big. "He forgot to plug it in and he doesn't even have lights." At this Walker shoots a funny face at me that has my lips tugging up in a smile. Why do brothers so enjoy watching each other suffer? We look back to Josi when she adds, "I hope he moves back in by winter."

Walker tugs at her braid again and she giggles. "I hope so too, Jo-Jo." He looks to me and nods, sincere once more. "I hope so too."

We fall into silence as Holden wanders back to our side. He no longer looks amused and relaxed. His no-nonsense, hard-nosed persona is back in force and I want to shiver at the chill of it. I do not like this guy. He's got the same body as my husband, but the soul is missing. Body snatched.

"Ooooh." Walker makes a show of shivering and rubbing his arms. "A chilly breeze just blew in."

I tamp down on a laugh and Holden ignores the obvious jab.

"We're on the list. I'm first, then you." Holden states in the same tone he uses to hand out work assignments to the ranch crew.

I can't help but salute. "Yes, sir."

I'm not about to mention that Josi wanted me to go first. I see his brows drop under his hat at my response, but he doesn't say anything, and we all watch the next two riders in silence. Awkward, regretful silence. This had potential to be an okay experience, but it feels like too big an ask for us to play family right now in the midst of everything falling apart.

"Where are all your friends?" Mason asks Walker while we're waiting, and I'm grateful for the interruption to my inner meltdown.

It's only then I notice that Walker is alone. Strange. He's never alone. Everyone loves the guy. I glance his way, curious too.

Walker shrugs. "I'm supposed to meet some people for burgers and pizza, but that can wait. This is so much better."

When Holden's name is called, Mason and Josi clap and cheer, and Walker gives a booming "yee haw" that has people turning to see what's happening here. Holden takes off his hat and sets it on Mason's head, which has him smiling big. Then, with a subtle nod at me, he marches in the direction of the entrance to the inflatable bull ring.

Everyone else has entered with a laugh and a smile. Holden enters like he's off to battle and he *will* conquer this challenge. Our Buck-It List was supposed to be fun, but we're both treating it like a to-do item that needs to be crossed off in big, black marker, never to be revisited again.

He's in great shape and jumps onto the bull's back with zero effort. I don't hate the way his muscled thighs look in his jeans, or how his forearm flexes when he grabs the strap. He gives a terse nod to the operator, and he's off. The operator must have been real impressed – *sarcasm* – with Holden's warm demeanor when he signed us up, because he has that bull take off like we're at a Professional Bull Riders event and Holden drew the meanest guy around.

Holden manages to get into the groove of the ride. His free arm goes back and forth for balance, his thighs gripping the bull and before I know it, he's smiling. Without his hat on I can see it stretch across his face and lift his cheeks, making his eyes into the tear-drop shapes that call to me. A few seconds in and he starts laughing. It sounds familiar, but not, at the same time. Like I'm hearing something I should know, but have forgotten. His laugh grows as the clock ticks toward the minute mark, and the operator continues to do his best to treat Holden like a man who needs a beating.

Mason and Josi start to cheer and clap, and Walker joins in with a few whistles. Soon we're all laughing, and when the timer hits fifty seconds, the operator gives it one heck of a jerk, and Holden flies off to the side, landing face up on the soft, air-filled material. He's still smiling when he turns his head to look over at us. He raises his two fists and lets out a whoop, and I swear my heart whoops with it.

It's so incredible to see flickers of him again.

He jumps to his feet and makes his way out of the arena, offering the operator a friendly handshake before coming to my side.

"Think you can beat that?" he asks me with a taunting grin.

"Please," I playfully retort. "Stand aside and watch."

My name is called, and I tug down the front of my red linen button-down shirt as I walk to the operator stand and then on into the arena. I may not be used to mounting animals, but I do enough yoga and strength training that I have the muscle to get up onto the beast without embarrassing myself. Thankfully.

I glance over at my crew and see that Holden has his hat back on and is resting a hand on the shoulder of each kid while watching me. I can't really read his expression from here, but his body language tells me he's excited to see what happens.

I offer him another salute, and he shakes his head, which makes me laugh as the operator counts me down.

He definitely goes easier on me than he did on Holden, and I appreciate it even if it irks a little. How am I supposed to win the competition if I get a gentler ride? I manage to keep my seat, and I'm proud of myself, even shooting glances at Holden that let him know I think I'm pretty great. But, as usual, my sudden cockiness comes back to bite me when I call out to the operator.

"Is that all you've got?"

No, he had more. But I did not, because the second he cranks it up, I lose my seat. My shoulder gets jerked as I try to hold on to the strap and keep myself on the bull, but I finally realize I need to let go and I fly away. I soar so far that I hit the inflatable wall with my face and slide down, ending up on my belly, with a face full of blown-up plastic.

My shoulder aches, but other than that I'm fine. In fact, I start laughing and push myself up a bit so that I can take in air, when I'm startled by being suddenly lifted to my feet. I scramble to adjust, and plant my hands against a firm chest. I look up into hazel eyes I've known forever, and the concerned expression of my husband.

"You okay?" he asks.

I nod with a giggle. "I suppose you're going to tell me I lost?"

He smiles. "Depends on what the competition was."

I step back out of his hold, not quite ready to be so close even if my body remembers this feeling. "What do you mean?"

He steps back too, his smile slipping a little, but his voice stays amused when he answers. "If the competition was for most humiliating dismount, you won."

I scoff and laugh, shaking my head and rolling my eyes. "And if the competition was cowboy with the biggest attitude problem, you won."

He nods and chuckles. "Guess we're both winners today, then."

He offers me his hand and I take it, but only because walking across this bouncy-house style floor is hard when you've just had your backside handed to you by a smirking bull-ride operator.

I let go of his hand as soon as we're back on solid ground, and the kids and Walker come hustling over. The kids offer me hugs and Mason can't stop laughing at the memory of me flying through the air. It's real heart-warming stuff, and I'm super grateful he was too entertained to ask Walker to take video.

"What's next on the list?" Josi asks, clapping her little hands.

"A nap for Mommy," I reply quickly. "And a doctor for Daddy. I think he hurt his pride, falling off like that."

I'm gratified to see Holden grin. "I think we'd better get Mama some ice cream. She deserves it after the whole town watched her face-plant."

Walker laughs and, as Holden takes off with the kids toward the food stand, he puts a light hand on my shoulder. "How do I get in on watching you two complete this bucket list?"

I shake my head. "I'm not sure we will."

"You will."

"Why do you say that?" I ask, watching my family turn the corner.

"Because, you two are the best parents I know, and your kids are loving this. You'll do it for them, if for no other reason." And then he drops this parting nugget. "Plus, the way Holden raced over to make sure you were okay? Yeah, it's happening."

CHAPTER 6

Leni

IT'S BEEN TWO WEEKS since the mechanical bull riding adventure, and here we are in the same place. Holden is still gone all the time, I'm still basically single-parenting it around town, and the summer heat marches along.

To be fair, one thing has changed. The kids have stopped asking when Daddy is coming back to live in the cabin. It's sad, really. He makes an effort to be home a couple nights a week and the kids have slept in the camper with him twice, but I never in my wildest dreams thought things between Holden and me would end up like this. From the very first moment I stopped him in the hall at the beginning of our senior year of high school, I was a goner. I didn't play hard to get, I didn't play coy. I laid it all out on the line.

"I'm Lenora, I like you, let's date."

At which point he reminded me that he'd known me since kindergarten, he knew friends called me Leni, and he wondered why I thought I needed to introduce myself. He said all of that with a side-tilted smile that had melted my insides until my heart synched up with his breaths and I gave up the search for anyone else. I sassed him back with something about how he'd finally become worth noticing, and he asked me if it was because he'd hit his growth spurt over the summer and put on some muscle. Again, I hadn't played coy. I'd nodded, told him I liked this new version of him, and reiterated that we should couple up. He, being pragmatic to the bone, asked how I knew I liked him considering this was the longest conversation we'd ever had. *It's something in your eyes*, I'd responded seriously. He'd laughed, but he hadn't told me to stuff it and take my shallow teenage hormones somewhere else. Instead, he asked me if my eyes had always been that brown, and I told him they'd been that color since kindergarten. He'd grinned, and we'd stared into each other's eyes for ten whole seconds before a mutual smile tugged at our mouths, and that was the moment I'd known I had him as much as he had me. I'd found my man.

Now that man is not to be found anywhere.

I sigh as I scrunch curl-enhancing cream into my still-damp hair and work it through with my fingertips before taking a few minutes to blow it dry on low heat with a diffuser to get everything set. The end of June always means I can count on one thing – a birthday party for my father-in-law, Abe. The parties always involve the family, but this year things have snowballed into a community affair because Abraham Crawford is turning sixty.

Rae and I spent hours today cooking in the homestead kitchen with my kids, while Holden and his brothers mowed the backyard and set up tables and chairs, along with a few shade canopies for guests. The grill was cleaned by Abe who trusted no one else with this job, and now we're all home getting gussied up for the affair. It feels a little hollow standing in my small ensuite bathroom without Holden puttering around me, reaching for his deodorant, or trying to spit his toothpaste into the sink while I chat about who's coming and what I've heard recently about them.

I am equal parts looking forward to the party and dreading it. By this point the Crawfords all know we're separated, as does my sister Steph, but I don't think word has leaked to the community. Mostly because my kids don't want to talk about something that makes them sad, and the Crawfords all seem to be operating under the assumption that this is a phase and we'll be reconciling soon. (Ironically, given the amount of promising and pleading Holden and I did when we got married to convince them that we could do this. Now we're the ones unsure about our relationship while others act like it's a forgone conclusion that we belong together. Plot twist!)

I wish I had their faith. As of yet, I've not seen enough of a change in Holden to believe we have a chance. As the weeks pass, I know I'll have to make a firm decision sooner than later, but I can't stomach it yet. It's terrifying.

Which means that tonight we have a public face to put on. I am going to have to act normally around Holden, and I've never been great at faking my emotions. I did my yoga this morning, and kept up cheerful conversation in the kitchen with Rae, but the long day is catching up to me and I feel vulnerable and alone. From my open bathroom window I can see the camper. I picture that large cowboy in that tiny bathroom and almost feel bad for him. Okay, I do feel a little bad. I want him to be miserable missing me, not overall miserable in life. There is a difference.

Jo-Jo appears in the bathroom doorway, dressed in a ruffled pistachio-colored summer dress and matching sandals. This is an *occasion* and Jo-Jo doesn't mind getting dressed up for those. Courtesy of Grandma Rae and their tea parties, she has plenty of fancy dresses to choose from.

"Grampa likes green," she says, twirling around in her dress, her long dark hair whirling with her. She's wearing the flower crown Rae bought her last month and it looks adorable on her. "I'm a fairy princess."

"You are," I smile down at her. "How thoughtful of you, Miss Jo, to wear green for your grandpa."

She smiles, toothless and happy, and I motion for her to come into the small room so I can do her hair.

"How fancy?" I ask, hanging the wreath of flowers on a towel hook before running my fingers through her locks to comb out some snarls.

She bites at her lips in thought. Josi is not one to make spontaneous decisions. She's thoughtful and likes there to be a reason for the things she does. Basically, she's more Holden than me. It's really fun to parent someone who needs an explanation for everything. Thankfully she's mostly good natured and can reason things out quickly, but before she could talk it was a bit touch-and-go there.

"No curls. Two braids, with bows on the end," Josi states.

It's a good choice. I can quickly do two braids and tie ribbons at the bottom. No curls will save even more time, and for bonus points, it will keep her hair out of her face and off her neck on this warm night. The floral crown will top it off perfectly. I hum a lullaby while I braid, and she stands quietly watching in the mirror with her big round eyes taking it all in. If she keeps observing me so closely, I suspect she'll be able to braid her own hair by a far earlier age than I learned to.

I didn't figure out how to do my hair until I was twenty. True story.

I'm tying the bows when Mason pops in. He's dressed in a short-sleeved Henley tee and joggers, and I have to try not to laugh at the fact he's left the top buttons on the tee open and pushed the collar to the side to show some chest. Man, this kid is trying so hard to be Walker, and it's cracking me up. His dark hair is slicked back behind his ears, and he's giving off *desperate bar patron seeks company*, which is not appropriate for a twelve-year-old even if I want to snap a pic and send it to Steph with laughing faces.

"Mace, I'm going to have to make some changes here," I say as I tie off Josi's last bow.

His face is set in stubborn lines that Holden would say remind him of me. "No way," Mason replies.

"You're not old enough to dress like that," I state, while praying that by the time he is old enough to dress that way he'll choose not to.

I mean, at least he's not in sports gear for once.

"What's wrong with it?" he asks, looking down at his outfit.

"Let's do up that button and close the collar a little," I reach out and do it while he grumbles and pouts.

"Walker leaves his shirt open," Mason argues.

Not actually true. He doesn't button it up like he's some prim country maid, but he's not showing off his belly button either.

"Walker is grown up," Josi says, turning to look at her brother. "What's wrong with your hair?"

I tamp down on a laugh and watch as Mason pushes past his sister to claim the small spot in front of the mirror. He turns his head and does his best to look at the back of it, and when he faces Josi again it's with a frown.

"Nothing's wrong. It looks fine," he says.

Josi giggles and shakes her head. "It's strange."

Mason tosses her a patronizing look. "Just shows you know nothing about fashion."

Josi turns her bright eyes up at me. "Tell him, Mama. It's strange."

Mason rolls his eyes. He's grown a lot in the past year and I've only got an inch or two on him at this point. Pretty soon he'll outgrow me, and I can already see shadows of that man when I gaze at his set jaw and flashing eyes.

"Leni? Kids?"

Holden's deep voice calling from downstairs interrupts us before I have to break Mason's heart by telling him his hair actually does look strange. The kids immediately forget what we were doing here and take off with smiles, headed down the stairs to greet their dad. I'll let Holden drop the news on the hair. It's his turn.

I work my way to my bed where I've laid out my outfit. My hair has finished drying, and I fluff it a bit to give it some lift before changing into the violet halter-top dress. I picked it on purpose to make Holden look twice. He loves me in violet. He says it makes my eyes even more stunning. I liked it a lot when Holden thought my eyes were stunning. I'd like it even more if he ate his heart out tonight.

I finish off the outfit with black sandals that have enough of a heel to make my toned calves look amazing. Yeah, I'm playing dirty tonight.

"Leni?" Holden calls again, and I'm honestly surprised he's still here. I expected that he'd take off with the kids and I'd meet them at his parents' place, but I guess he's waiting. "You almost ready?"

Rather than answer, I grab my small purse and head down the stairs to find him waiting with the kids standing on either side of him. It looks like such a normal family moment that my toes tense in my shoes as I descend. Holden isn't wearing his hat

tonight, and his dark hair looks good freshly washed and combed. He's left the beard growth, but trimmed it up, and his dark jeans look brand new.

Maybe he's playing dirty tonight too.

I catch a whiff of his pine-scented body wash as I come to stand with my family and say, "Hey."

He nods, his jaw flexing. "You look nice."

My lips twitch. My scheme worked, because he's looked twice now. "Thank you. You do too."

"Figured we could ride over together, you know, keep up the image and all," he states gruffly.

And . . . my hopefulness vanishes like he's flipped a switch.

"Of course," I respond, all warmth gone from my tone. "Don't want to deal with uncomfortable questions."

I breeze past him and out the door, and the kids – subdued now by my obvious mood shift – follow me. I'm up and into the passenger side of Holden's truck before he can get there to open the door for me. I watch his stiff shoulders as he rounds the front of the truck, and I turn to tell the kids to get buckled.

Mason's hair has been fixed. It still looks like he put too much product in it, but now it's a little messy and less smarmy. Sadly, even that's not enough to put me in a good mood.

Holden gets us moving on the short drive to the homestead, and it's frigid inside the car. I hold myself stiff, facing out the window, cursing the blockhead in the driver's seat. Every time I think there's a glimmer, he has to be a total numbskull and set us back. I'm mad. I'm glad I'm angry, actually. Anger will keep me in a realistic place, and out of the clouds.

"I didn't mean . . ." Holden says as we turn onto the dirt road to his parents' house.

I stop him by holding up a hand. "I know what you meant, and you're right."

"I don't think I was," he mutters. "It came out wrong."

"Forget about it," I say. "I know my duty tonight. This is Abe's night, and I won't do anything to hurt him."

Holden parks and glances at me with sadness in the depths of his gaze. "I know that. I misspoke. I . . ."

Mason whispers something to Josi and they hop out of the truck, leaving me alone with their daddy, who I mostly want to kick at that moment. I watch the kids walk away and sigh.

"It's fine, Holden," I say. "Let's get through tonight."

"I, uh, signed us up for the pie eating contest next week." He surprises me by saying. He sounds unsure.

I purse my lips and look toward him. "What?"

"The, uh, pie eating contest. We're signed up."

It takes me a second to realize he's talking about the second item on the Buck-It List, and when it hits me, I scoff.

"Why would you do that?" I shake my head.

He blinks. "Because it's on the list. I thought we agreed to do the list."

Oblivious man.

"We did. And then you disappeared on me for two full weeks. Doesn't make me feel like this," I gesture between us, "is high on your priority list. I forgot we were doing that."

"Is that why you're angry?" His expression clears, as though he's finally landed on some answer that had been eluding him. "I'm sorry. There was a damming issue, and then Landry got caught up helping his buddy Beau with some construction project and I had to pick up the slack with the boarded animals. Walker pulled his back out with a new exercise he was trying and couldn't lift anything for two days, and Mama is on us boys about setting aside some land for wedding events. Things were insane."

I listen to his list of reasons he wasn't around and my chest grows heavy. They're all the same reasons I've heard a million times – or at least a variation on them. The wedding event thing is new to the list, but not news to me. Rae's been talking about hosting weddings for months now.

"I see," I respond, because what else is there to say, really? I came last, again. Not one person on that list was named Lenora, Mason, or Josi. I grab the door handle to leave and suddenly stop. I turn to look at him and he's still watching me, and I remember that I'm ticked off. "Actually, Holden, that's a lie." I fully face him. "I don't see. I don't see how cattle and your brothers and your mom's hopes and dreams all come before me and your children." His expression shifts, hardens. It's an old argument, but I don't believe he's ever actually listened to it, and I'm the idiot who is trying again. "Where am I on that list? Do you even want me to be on the list?"

His lips flatten and he runs a hand over his face. "Of course I do."

"Really?" Now I do pull the door handle. "Then act like it." I get out of the truck and slam the door, then lean back to the open window. "Prove it, Holden. Because right now, not one thing you *do* tells me that I'm even on your radar. What's the point of having a husband who doesn't seem to actually want a wife?"

I stomp off, leaving him sitting in his truck, and by the time I round the corner to the backyard the party is really taking off. I paint on a smile and join right in, laughing and talking with family and neighbors. Holden eventually joins, and no one seems to notice that he's quiet and slightly withdrawn . . .

That's who he's become, and it makes me want to weep.

CHAPTER 7

Holden

I'VE BEEN CHEWING ON Leni's words for a full week. *What's the point of having a husband who doesn't want a wife?* They echo around the camper all night, and torture me all day. I can't forget the look on her face, or how she mostly avoided me at my dad's birthday party. Everyone had been in high spirits, and Leni had looked gorgeous in that violet dress that made her eyes glow. I'd wanted to be in that radius, but I'd kicked myself out through words and actions.

This past week I've tried to be better. I've handed off some work to Landry, who always seems to have more free time than me, and made sure to be home by seven on the nights I have the kids. I finally ran a power cord from the camper to the cabin and that's made it possible for me to make the kids dinner twice. I have no idea if Leni appreciates my efforts or not. She's been pretty chilly toward me.

Now I'm walking across my back lawn on the morning of July Fourth, going to pick up my family to head off to the town festivities. It starts with a parade, and then a carnival, a family cook-out, and finally back to town for the fireworks. It's Leni's favorite holiday. She always dresses up herself and the kids, and gets me a new Western shirt in reds and blues.

Today I'm wearing last year's shirt, which is depressing. Another reminder that I'm losing her.

I have no idea how this day is going to go. I'm grateful she agreed to go together, even though I know it's mainly for the sake of the kids not having to split from one or the other of us today. Regardless of the reason, I'm praying I don't mess things up, and that we can have a good time. I haven't mentioned the pie eating contest again, but we are signed up and I hope she'll do it with me. It feels like a test, somehow.

Josi steps out onto the back porch of the cabin as I begin to step up. She's wearing a red, white, and blue striped romper with her hair in pigtails, and she looks adorable as she grins and launches herself into my arms, bringing with her the scent of sunscreen.

"Morning, Jo-Jo," I say, kissing the top of her hair. "You look festive."

"Mama got us new outfits," she says, wriggling out of my hold as Mason comes out, carrying a picnic basket that I know Leni will have filled with a delicious lunch.

I do a double-take, noticing his hair is trimmed and tidy, but I'm not about to mention it.

"Hey, Dad," he greets, and I'm dying over his red muscle-tee with an American flag across the front. Since when did my boy wear muscle tees, and how did he convince Leni to buy it? "Mama will be out in a second. She's getting the water jug filled."

I know from experience how heavy that jug is. It'll sit in the bed of my truck and be the go-to water source for the entire family all day. Without thinking about if I'm welcome or not, I make my way through the back door to help her with it.

She's standing at the sink using the retractable spray faucet to fill the five-gallon jug. Her back is to me and I take her in for a second. She's wearing a blue and white tie-dyed tank, jeans shorts, and has a red bandana tied around her pony tail. She already has her full summer tan, which is helped along by her naturally bronze skin, and she looks perfect in my eyes as a million memories wash over me.

I'm not a husband who doesn't want a wife.

I step close and mutter, "Let me help with that."

She doesn't start, most likely having heard my voice outside and my cowboy boots cross the floor when I came in.

"All right, thanks. It's almost full," she responds, not bothering to look at me.

My gut hits the floor and I glance around the kitchen while I try to decide what to do or say. It's not as tidy as usual, and the things that were used to make the lunch still sit strewn across the countertops. I want to ask if she's doing all right. Leni likes things clean and orderly, and this isn't that.

"Happy fourth." I try something harmless.

Now she does glance my way. "My favorite."

I nod. "I know."

She takes in my outfit. "I like that shirt."

"Makes sense, you bought it last year." She nods again, and goes back to filling the jug. "What's the story with Mason's muscle tee?" I ask, forcing a light chuckle.

I watch her lips tug up and she shakes her head. "He's killing me. He said I could trim his hair if I let him get that shirt. Seemed like a good deal."

"It's a great deal. The hair was so out of control I was thinking about giving it a name."

She laughs and the feeling of victory is strong. She turns off the water, caps the jug, and steps aside, and I reach for it, managing to brush her shoulder as I do. The contact sparks up my arm and I heft the jug with more strength than it needs, causing it to bump hard into my chest. Thankfully I manage not to grunt like an idiot and spin quickly to keep from seeing the face I know she'll be making.

The kids are waiting by the truck, Josi bouncing on her toes and Mason staring at his phone. His friends are taking up more and more of his social time lately, and it's a mixed bag of emotions for me about that.

I tell Mason to open the truck doors for his mama and sister, and he does so with a grumble and an eye roll. I'll be chatting with him about that privately.

We get settled in, and Mason begs me to turn on some hip hop music, but Leni cuts him off and tells him we will be listening to Neil Diamond the entire drive into town – it's tradition. He sulks for about five minutes before he's singing along to *America*, and Josi is waving a little flag out the window, singing along too. The thing in my stomach that's been twisted in a knot all morning starts to loosen as the miles pass. The sky is blue and the stream of trucks and cars heading into town grows thicker as we get closer. It feels right, and normal, and needed.

"So, today is the pie eating contest, right?" Mason asks as I drive the side streets of Pinehaven looking for parking. The entire town shuts down and shows up for the fourth. It's bigger than Christmas around here, and parking can be tough, considering everyone drives big trucks that don't park easily.

I look to Leni to answer. She knows I signed us up, but she hasn't told me if she's going through with it or not. She meets my look and must see the right thing in my expression because she nods.

"Yeah, buddy. Dad signed us up."

My heart soars, but then it drops when Mason says, "I hear it's cherry pie this year."

I hate cherry pie. I groan and Leni laughs, sure she'll win the contest because I'll be gagging the thing down while she laps it up.

"Don't laugh too hard, Leni," I state, finally finding a spot and pausing to guide my truck into the space. "Just because I don't like it doesn't mean I can't eat it."

She raises her dark, well-groomed eyebrows and smirks. "We'll see, Crawford."



"Have you read this release form?" Leni asks several hours later as we sit behind the long plastic tables, on the stage area. "It's cracking me up."

"I'm surprised you're reading it and not just signing it," I tease. Leni never cares about the fine print, which is why I've always had to care.

She slaps at my arm. "Shut up. Listen to this. 'I know that eating pie at a fast rate of speed is a potentially hazardous and an uncomfortable activity. I should not enter and eat unless I am medically capable. I realize that this is all in good fun, and I agree to be a good sport. I assume all risks associated with eating in this type of event including, but not limited to, indigestion, that stuffed feeling, contact with other contestants, a general dislike for pie after I am done.'" She's laughing by the time she finishes.

"I generally dislike cherry pie already, so no loss there," I respond with a grunt, but I'm smiling too. It is pretty funny.

She waves the form under my nose. "Are you medically capable of this, Holden?"

I push the paper away and purse my lips. "I'm the most fit person at this table."

Which isn't true. Leni – that exercise-obsessed wonder – is more fit than I am, probably. But the other eight contestants look like they could actually vacuum a pie into their bodies every night, and I doubt we have much chance of winning. The thought is depressing. I do love to win.

"What's the prize for winning?" Leni asks.

I shrug. "I have no idea."

"You can't be serious. What's my motivation here?" she responds.

I point out into the crowd where our kids are standing, practically bouncing on their toes in excitement, although Mason is trying to play it cool. My parents and brothers are all there, along with Leni's sister, Steph, and Landry's friend Beau and his

girlfriend, Kit. Walker is surrounded by five or six of his regular crew, which only ramps up the pressure.

"That group of people who will shame us," I state.

She looks at our people and nods. "The kids are so happy we're doing this. That's my motivation."

It suddenly occurs to me that half the town is standing there looking up at us. They all have bemused expressions and it hits me that they're shocked to see Holden Crawford on the stage. It makes me square my shoulders even as I shrink inside. I don't have any need to be the center of attention at all. I'm not known to be playful or participate much away from the sidelines. My stomach dips and I'm worried that there's no way I'll get that pie down with this bout of anxious nerves that's suddenly arrived.

What kind of young idiot thought pie eating would be a good idea when writing that list?

I look to where Leni is beaming, waving at friends and neighbors and giggling as they make faces at her. Leni thought this would be a good idea, and I always went along with her ideas because they mostly turned out to be fun.

"I've never eaten an entire pie," Leni laughs. "Do you think they'll give us aprons or something to protect our clothes?"

I don't care about my clothes right now. I care about getting off this stage with one ounce of my dignity intact.

At my silence, Leni looks over at me and frowns. "You all right?"

"This was a bad idea," I mutter, trying to keep my face from slipping into a horrified expression when I know so many people are watching.

Her frown deepens. "Then why did you agree to do it?"

I breathe in deeply. "Because it's on the list."

"You don't have to do the list, you know. We can tell the kids we tried, but it didn't pan out." She crosses her arms and her eyes slit, and I know I've ticked her off again.

Does she honestly not remember this about me? How I'm a leader with my family and on the ranch, but everywhere else I'm happiest in the back row, watching the action from afar. Does she really think I'm rejecting *her*, or her ideas? The thought is sobering. She probably thinks something entirely wrong about what's going on in my head, and I need to get over myself and tell her what's actually happening. I wipe sweaty palms down my new jeans and swallow.

"I hate being in front like this," I say. Her face smooths out and she watches me curiously, so I press on. "I don't mind having some fun, and I like doing things with you, but I don't need the whole town watching me smear pie across my face."

She nods. "Oh."

"My shy is showing," I try to crack a joke.

"Right," she says. "Bucket lists *are* about getting out of your comfort zone."

I click my tongue against the dry roof of my mouth. "Mission accomplished."

"You could have passed on this one," she states thoughtfully.

"Not happening. I'm not chickening out. I'm just telling you that this is awkward for me."

She nods. "Fair enough."

"It's not about you," I reiterate.

Her eyebrows raise. "Why would you say that?"

"It's not about me not liking your idea."

We're interrupted by a community council member coming down the line handing out big checkered aprons for all of us to tie around our necks, and I'm relieved to set the topic aside. I get mine on and look down the row at the others. Everyone seems genuinely pumped up about this contest, while I'm still trying to talk my mind into pretending we're alone at home and the pie is apple – my favorite.

I look out at the crowd, and I'd bet my horse that it's doubled in size. Walker is happily pointing his phone at us, and I'm sure some really wonderful pictures will be circulating within the hour. Landry has Josi on his shoulders and is bouncing her up and down gently, and while I can't hear her laughter I can see from her face how much she's loving it.

I swallow hard, trying to get moisture into my mouth as I get winks and nods from a few townspeople. This is my nightmare. I look at Leni and see her clapping her hands together. Losing her is a nightmare too, so I guess I'm going to have to toughen up and not run off this stage.

I only half listen to the rules, and two minutes later there's a banging noise as someone hits a gong at the end of the table – our signal to start. I dip my face into nasty, vile, cherry pie. And I do mean vile. These aren't the pies that people make to be judged or to serve their neighbors. These are pies that can be wasted on a little hilarity. It's basically canned cherries topped with whipped cream in a frozen, grocery-store crust that seems to be only halfway baked based on the chewiness.

I gag.

I close my eyes and listen to the screams of the crowd while doing my best to take in mouthfuls of something I wouldn't feed to the ranch dogs. Breathing isn't easy when you're trying not to embarrass yourself by coming in last, but I manage not to pass out while chewing this concoction to the point of swallowability.

I can hear my name being chanted in loud male voices and I fight to keep going, wishing my brothers would get swept away into a crack in the earth and burn in the magma at the core.

Then I hear Leni giggle. It's muffled, because she has a mouthful of pie, but it causes me to open my eyes and glance over at

her. She's looking back at me, her entire lower face covered in smeared whipped cream and cherries. Her cheeks are bulging, her hair is slipping from her pony tail, and her eyes are freaking magical. She's magical.

I try to grin back, but my mouth is full and when my lips part, pie comes spilling out in what should be a humiliating moment. Instead, I laugh. She shakes her head and leans forward to let her own mouth empty back into the pie plate. It's hopeless. Neither of us can snarf an entire pie.

Luckily, the gong sounds again and the crowd cheers, and some big fella I don't recognize stands up with his hands in the air and cherries slipping off his chin. The winner is announced, and I'm totally fine with it not being me. I won in other ways today.

"Do you think that guy goes from town to town taking trophies and winning prizes for pie eating?" I ask.

Leni nods with a giggle. "It's the only explanation. He's a professional, and we weren't prepared to go up against that."

Leni and I use the aprons to wipe at our chins and grin like idiots at each other in a shared moment of amusement.

"I was wrong," I say as I work to get the sticky mess out of my beard. "This was a great idea."

Leni bites at her lip and nods. "It really was."

CHAPTER 8

Leni

THE FIREWORKS ARE ABOUT to start, and I'm wiped out. July fourth might be my favorite holiday, but like most of them, it's a lot of work for the moms. I didn't want much for dinner after the pie eating contest, and chasing the kids around the carnival left me feeling sweaty and rubbery. The traditional cookout at the homestead ended up being a big party, with Walker and Landry's friends joining in, and Steph too, which kept me busy filling glasses with water, and making sure Abe had enough meat to grill – don't even get me started on keeping the condiments fresh. People will be people, and the holidays make it worse.

Now the sun has set, and the stifling heat is fading a little in the twilight. It's still too warm for a jacket or blanket, but the sweat that's been eternally coming from my pores today finally provides some relief as the cooler air shifts over me. I'm sitting on Holden's tailgate where his truck sits along the edge of the community park, backed in to face the field where the fireworks will shoot off. The entire perimeter is filled with cars and trucks, with the center of the park roped off to keep people away from the flammable display. People are settling on blankets and lawn chairs, sipping cold drinks while kids run around with glow-in-the-dark sticks and sparklers, their laughter filling the air.

I've kicked off my shoes to let my feet breathe a little while I watch Mace and Jo-Jo live it up. Mason has been included in the guy's tag football game that they play every year. Holden and his brothers are competitive in real life, but on this night they mostly just ham it up good-naturedly. I've played with them a few times, but this year I'm content to watch. Landry's friends are there too, with Kit being the only girl who shows any interest in joining the game – mostly because she's sporty and unafraid. Also because her boyfriend, Beau, is bossy and practically shamed her into playing. I hardly know them, so I'd never say it out loud, but I think it. The six of them play in teams of three, and there's more smack talk than one park can handle. I love that this tradition remains when it feels like other things have crumbled.

Rae and Abe are seated in Abe's truck bed next to me. They're both dressed in festive shirts that are years away from their day-to-day clothing, and they wave their own small flags at anyone they recognize in the crowd. They have a little blow-up couch that leans against the cab, and a cooler filled with drinks, along with giant bags of popcorn. They both smile as they watch their boys play, and I can relate. I love watching my children have fun together.

Jo-Jo is running around by herself, waving glow sticks around in a sort of dance, and it's not the first time my heart pricks, wondering if she has friends at school or if she really is okay spending so much time alone. I'm so social, it's hard to relate, but I relax at the brilliant smile on her face and try to remember that life has a way of giving us the things we need.

Steph walks up and slaps my bare thigh with an open palm, making it sting and drawing my attention to her. It's a thing we've been doing since we were children, and in our thirties we should probably grow out of it, but some things really do stay the same forever. Her dark hair is braided like mine, and she's wearing a sundress that nearly makes my eyes burn with its festive styling. Around her neck is a long string of glow-in-the-dark sticks hooked together.

She took off after the cookout to meet up with a guy she's been toying around with, and he's a few steps behind her, which makes sense because Steph blazes a trail everywhere she goes. She occasionally chats with Walker about weight routines and he's mentioned that her strength training takes half the time his does, even though they're doing similar programs. It's no surprise that Steph met this mystery guy at the gym when he tried to offer her some tips on weights and she reversed roles by teaching him a lesson or two. For some reason, her ruthless moment kicked off a spark of interest, and here they are together.

"Hey." She leans close to me. "This Ryan guy is super into me, and I just want you to know that kids should not be looking in our direction tonight," she says under her breath a second before Ryan joins us. I roll my eyes at her and smile at him as she introduces us. "Ryan Keddington, this is the younger and much more disappointing version of me, my sister Lenora."

Ryan is about the same height as Steph, who at five foot seven, has an inch on me. He's got dark blond hair and blue eyes and is built stout and strong, like a rugby player. He's wearing regular street clothes, which makes him stick out here tonight. Not because of his taste in clothing, but because of the fact he doesn't look like a red, white and blue rodeo barfed on him.

"Nice to meet you, Ryan." I hold out a hand. His grip is firm and his smile doesn't show teeth but does reach his eyes as he shakes mine in greeting. "Steph will eat you up and spit you out if you're not careful. Don't believe a word she says about anything."

Steph huffs playfully, thigh-slapping me again, as Ryan gazes between us. Then, deadpan, the man says, "So I'm guessing she never wrestled a wild cougar to save your little girl on a family hike?"

Steph gasps at the same time I do, and it doesn't occur to me that we were gasping for different reasons until she says to him, "I never said that."

His lips tug. "I know, but it wouldn't surprise me if you did, and I wouldn't believe it for a minute."

Steph slaps her lips shut and I laugh out loud. Maybe she's finally found a guy who will be strong enough to hold her interest. While I've been married forever, Steph has gotten into her thirties without anyone touching her heart. I'm officially intrigued.

Music suddenly blares over the park loudspeakers, a sign that the show will begin in five minutes and people should clear the area and get seated. Steph hooks her arm through Ryan's and drags him off to wherever she's set up her Venus flytrap man-catching station. The Crawford men are sweaty as they make their way back to where our trucks are parked. Beau says something in Kit's ear that makes her scowl and lightly shove at his shoulder. When he mockingly shoves her shoulder back, it nearly takes her off her feet and Landry is there to catch her before she tumbles. His face is dark with an expression I so rarely see from the unflappable youngest brother that I can't take my eyes off the exchange. Beau rolls his eyes and shrugs as he walks toward his truck, leaving Kit standing there with Landry's hands holding her shoulders as they both glare at him.

Trouble is brewing, and I'm a sucker for any drama that isn't mine. I'm a little sad to see Kit shake it off and follow Beau to where they have chairs sitting together. I wish she'd tell Beau what he can do with his attitude. Landry isn't far behind, but I can see he's having a hard time moving back into a good mood as he takes his seat on the other side of Beau. He picks up his cowboy hat and covers his dark hair, pulling the brim low to hide his eyes.

Landry has a wild streak and can come off like he doesn't care about anything, but I know for a fact that's not the case, and seeing him brooding raises my eyebrows. Out of habit I look to see if Holden noticed and find him also looking at his brother with a frown. Our eyes meet and he nods at me, telling me we're on the same page about this strange turn of events.

Walker, however, is doing great. The women that tend to follow him around have reappeared, and a few of the guys too, and as usual, the golden boy is surrounded by people as he flops down on a quilt that has definitely seen better days. He holds up his hand toward Rae, who tosses him a cold soda from the cooler at her feet, and he cracks it open, all the while keeping a running monologue going to entertain his fans. Walker is hysterical, and popular, and I fully understand why Mason worships him.

Mason and Josi also get drinks from Rae before taking a seat in their chairs at my feet. Mason is breathing hard from trying to keep up with the adults, but he's smiling and I tap his shoulder with my bare toe.

"Have fun?" I ask.

He nods. "Totally."

Holden has a soda in his hand when he makes it to us, and he turns to pull himself up onto the tailgate next to me. I don't know how he can tolerate wearing full jeans and boots in the heat like this, much less playing football in them, but he never seems to care much. He fans his shirt and blows some cool air from his mouth up onto his forehead, making his hair sway before settling back in place. It carries the scent of pine my way, familiar and nice.

"Mason's getting fast," he says loud enough for our boy to hear.

"He looked good out there," I agree, and we both smile as he lifts his shoulders a little and puffs out his pre-teen chest.

"Jo-Jo invented a new dance," I add in, knowing our daughter can hear too. "She's so graceful."

"She really is," Holden picks up the cue.

Jo-Jo giggles at Mason who offers her a smile just as the first firework explodes in the air above our heads. It shouldn't, but it startles me, and I jump enough that Holden reaches out to steady me, his warm palm landing on my bare knee. We both look down at his hand and he moves it.

"Sorry," he says under his breath. "Habit."

My shoulders slump. "When did that happen?" I ask.

"What?"

"You having to apologize for touching me." I tap my chest. "Your wife."

He mulls that over for a minute, and answers after the next explosion. "I think when you stopped wanting my touch."

The words are painfully honest, and I'm okay with the talk being on hold while sparkling lights fill the sky above us. I can feel the reverberation in my chest, and the sound of good old Fourth of July music blaring through the speakers. It's peaceful enough that my guard comes down a bit.

"I fell into resentment," I say hesitantly.

He nods slowly. "An emotion I'm familiar with."

Surprised, I glance over. "Really?"

I can tell he wants to scoff at me, but he buries it. "You're mad that I'm gone so much, and I sometimes resent that you're angry

over me working hard to provide for you."

I bury my own scoff. "That excuse grew old, especially when I've watched your dad prioritize your mom for years."

"And how do you think my dad has had the time to prioritize Mama in the years you've been around to see?" he asks.

I bite at my lip, and shame blooms as I realize it's a question I've never asked but already know the answer to.

"You," I whisper, and he leans in close to hear.

"Yeah. Me. I stepped in and he had the time. It wasn't always that way. Mama spent a lot of time alone with us boys, especially as Dad decided to work on expanding the operation. He wanted us to have a piece of it, and he knew that we'd need to grow beyond a simple ranching operation if there was going to be enough work and profit for all of our families." His shoulder is pressing against mine and I don't pull away. I don't want the kids to hear this conversation, and I can't yell to be heard over the aerial display. He clears his throat. "I thought you wanted to be home with our kids. I worked hard so that you could."

If only things were that simple, but they weren't. I *had* said that, and I'd meant it. I love being home with our kids, but I didn't realize that my husband would lose himself in making that possible.

"I did want that. I still do, sort of."

"Sort of?" he asks.

"I guess I didn't realize how lonely that would be, or how much of myself I'd have to give up. We're already isolated out on our property, but add to that the demands of parenting little kids and I . . . I tried not to bother you with my loneliness. I knew your job was demanding, and I felt guilty complaining."

"Mama was only two minutes away," he states.

Now I do roll my eyes, but I soften it by playfully shoving at his shoulder with mine. "Just the cure for loneliness . . . your mother-in-law."

He gives me a look. "She's great."

"She is," I laugh. "Truly. She's been kind and helpful, and I've enjoyed talking to her. But she's also nearly twice my age and not at all in the same phase of life I am. Plus, I can't complain about my life to her when she thinks you pooped out the sun and stars and are personally responsible for all good in the world."

"You were lonely for someone to complain to?"

I shake my head, chuckling some more. "Of course I was. This is Wife 101. It doesn't have to be big things, but we connect with other women over dirty socks and beard hair in the sink, and how hard it is to go days on end during calving season without your husband coming home, or sick kids and messy houses and picky eaters. It makes us feel like we're all normal and it's going to be fine."

"I hated being away so much, but I didn't know how else to make the ranch into what it's become. I love it, but it can be a burden, and I didn't want you to carry all that worry too. I wanted you to always know that you'd have food and shelter, and if I told you about the lean times or the ways I put in extra work, well, that might make you feel less secure."

I pat his leg and feel his thigh flex under my hand. "You could have told me that. Instead it was all *this is how it is being a ranch wife, you'll have to toughen up*," I say in a low tone meant to represent him. "I literally thought you never missed me."

He crosses his booted ankles and my hand falls back onto my lap. "I missed you. You could have come too, slept out under the stars like we always talked about."

My answering smile is sad. "With two babies? Not as fun or romantic as you'd think. It was easier to let you go and do my best at home."

"Where you were lonely and feeling resentful."

"Yes, just like you, out under those stars, feeling lonely and resentful."

His mouth twitches and he nods. I let silence fall between us as I process through all we've shared tonight. I feel like I understand a little more about Holden's reality over the past twelve years. I hope he understands a little more about mine.

And I really hope that maybe, just maybe, if we keep talking like we did tonight, we might find that we're still connected underneath it all.

The fireworks wrap up pretty soon after that, and we gather our tired babies and our blankets and chairs and follow the long, steady stream of slow-moving automobiles out of the park and down the main street. By the time we reach the outskirts of town, the traffic is clearing, and we leave the windows down as we fly along the paved two-lane highway that leads to Crawford Ridge Ranch, and home.

Josi zonks out quickly, and Mason rides with his head propped against the doorframe, letting the wind hit him in the face as he listens to the music I selected on the radio. It's peaceful, nice. A good kind of tired.

Holden's arm rests out the window and he steers with his right hand. I watch his face in the glow of the dash and think about what we spoke of tonight. He carried so much weight, and I was so busy carrying my own that I wasn't great at seeing his. Some of the resentment I've held onto begins to melt into curiosity about what his experience has been. Is this one of those hazards of marrying young? Were we both too immature to see outside of ourselves?

"Thanks for today," I say as the wind blows through my hair.

He looks over. "It was good, but I'll never eat another cherry again."

I laugh, and the wind takes the sound away, but not before I see Holden's smile in a pair of headlights coming the other way.

It's that same smile he had when we were young, and he found me delightful. I hope he can find me delightful again someday.

CHAPTER 9

Leni

HOLDEN CAUGHT ME OFF guard the next evening by calling – not texting – to ask if he could take Mason and Josi for a few hours the next day. He'd like their company, and figured I could use a break. I had nearly fallen off the kitchen chair I'd been sitting on drinking my evening post-yoga tea. I'd quickly agreed, but right after I'd hung up Mason had reminded me that he had swim practice in the morning and then he was meeting up with friends to go play basketball at the community park afterwards. I'd thought about canceling all of that and sending him with his dad instead, but then Josi's hopeful little face had made me realize that some alone time with her daddy might be exactly what that little cherub needed. Mason misses Holden, but Josi longs for him in a different way.

I could hardly sleep that night, picturing all the things I could do with some time totally to myself. It ran the gamut from doing extreme couch surfing and catching up on my reality TV to hitting the gym with Steph, from reading in bed to going on a donut run and not sharing. In the end, I decided on going for a trail run. Blissfully alone. So, once Mason is at swim and Jo-Jo is settled with Holden, I drive the thirty minutes outside of town to my favorite place. It gets me to a cooler elevation, and I've never stumbled across anyone else in this area. As always, I have water, bear spray and pepper spray, my phone, a small GPS transponder to share my location, and a tiny first aid kit all shoved in my fanny pack. I'm dressed in biker shorts and a running tank, with my hair pulled up under a visor, and it feels good – really, really good – to be out here solo.

The terrain is rough under my trail shoes, and I focus on my breathing as I set a steady pace that allows for the occasional shift to miss logs and rocks. Music plays in my headphones, and I let my mind float away. Gone are thoughts about groceries and dishes, laundry and bills. I think about Holden's face at the pie eating contest, and Mace playing football with his uncles, and Steph dragging that poor Ryan guy into some shady area during fireworks. I think about Jo-Jo dancing with her glow sticks while waiting for fireworks, and then I circle back to my sister.

Mental note: Call Steph and get a Ryan update.

Then, I go to that secret place in my mind and daydream about opening my own yoga studio on the ranch, as sort of an off-grid, nature-inspired retreat. It's a dream I haven't shared with anyone, and I doubt it'll ever come true, but I love to imagine how I'd arrange it, and the types of people I'd get to meet. I'd paint all the walls in pastels that bring nature inside, and use scents like sage and pine, or maybe cedar, to make it feel like the walls don't exist at all. Sometimes you'd hear the cattle mooing, and birds chirping, and it would be so peaceful.

I'm about twenty minutes into my planned hourlong run when my phone rings. I glance at my watch to see Holden's name flash on the screen. I immediately stop running and dig for my phone, still breathing heavily, my heartrate climbing even higher. He so rarely calls.

"Hello?" I breathe when it's in my hand.

"Hey, uh, listen. Josi's pony got spooked and she fell off into some rocks. Looks like her arm is probably broken. I'm on my way to the clinic. I thought you'd want to meet me there." His voice is calm and steady, and I don't find that fact annoying like I have in the past. It's a welcome reprieve from my own racing thoughts. "Where are you?"

"I'm out on the Richards Creek trail. It'll take me at least an hour to get back to town." I've already started running back toward my parked car. Running. Not setting a steady pace, but a full on sprint to get back to my baby girl. "How is she?" I don't hear crying in the background. I hope that doesn't mean she's passed out from the pain. "Where are you?"

"We're in the truck, just leaving the property."

"Why was she on a pony that spooks?" I ask, agitated. Go figure the one morning I send them off with someone else, disaster strikes. "There's a whole barn full of old horses who are deaf and blind and don't shy away from anything." That's not actually true – the Crawford horses are work companions, and they're healthy and capable. They're also reliable and well-trained, which has me confused about this situation. Maybe he put her on one of the horses that they board. Can they do that? "Do you know this horse?"

"I know the horse," he says, and there's only stillness in his voice. "I wouldn't endanger Josi. This was one of those freak moments where Landry came racing around the corner on an ATV and didn't realize she was there. He had to dart around her, and the horse was forced to side-step quickly. He tossed his head in protest, and Josi lost her seat."

"Landry should prepare to be maimed."

"I'll leave him to you, but he feels terrible about it."

Of course he does. Holden's brothers are cuckoo for my kids, and I can picture Landry's blue eyes filled with remorse. I'm also picturing them filled with pain after I punch him in the throat. It's satisfying.

"Josi's okay," he continues. "I took the time to splint it at the homestead and get her some ice and some pain meds. Right now she's sucking on a popsicle that Grandma gave her. She's been real brave."

"You splinted it? And iced it? And gave her meds?" I ask in disbelief.

His answer edges into sarcasm. "I know how to handle a basic injury."

I shake my head, which is a mistake, because losing focus makes me stumble and I catch my elbow on a tree trunk, giving myself a scrape. I hiss at the sudden pain, but keep moving.

"Leni, honey, slow down. I can picture you up there racing your legs off, but if you hurt yourself then I'm going to have two girls to rescue today and I think one is enough."

"I just bumped a tree, I'm okay."

"Slow down. Josi is really okay. I'm here. There's nothing more important than she is."

His words have their desired effect and I slow from a sprint back to a quick jog. It's more manageable, and my breathing evens out as I listen to him tranquilly describe where he's going and what his plans are.

"What about the ranch?" I ask, my throat dry.

"The ranch can wait."

It's such a simple statement, but not one I'm sure I've ever heard him utter. The thought chokes me up, but I can't do tears right now because they'll blur my vision, and my stinging elbow reminds me I need to fight off distractions.

"Thank you for being there," I say.

"Where else would I be?" he asks, and again, it's said so naturally that I almost forget all the times he had plenty of other places to be.

He tells me they've arrived at the clinic at the same time I spot my car parked at the trailhead. What took me twenty minutes to do going up took only fifteen coming down. I will suffer for that but I don't particularly care at the moment. Holden lets me talk to Josi while he parks and comes around to get her out of the back seat of his truck, and she really does sound okay.

I hang up when they get to the check-in desk and manage to make the thirty minute drive to town in twenty. I figure if I get pulled over, I'll most likely know the cop and can explain the situation. Thankfully, Pinehaven is free from patrol where I'm driving, and I arrive with no problems.

I push through the clinic doors and am almost to the desk when the receptionist sees me. "Oh, Mrs. Crawford, she's going to be just fine. Josi and her daddy are back in room three. I'll buzz you in, go on ahead and join them."

I can't even think of her name right now, but I nod and thank her and am shoving through the door before all the words have fully left my mouth. I find room three quickly and push open the door to see tiny Jo-Jo lying on a bed with her arm professionally splinted. Holden sits on the bed at her side, holding her free hand while the doctor explains things, and the scene stops me in my tracks as all three sets of eyes swing my way.

I don't think Holden has been with one of the children at a doctor's office since they were born. It was me. All me. Until this moment I would have believed he didn't know where the clinic was, which is silly because he grew up here, but still.

"Hey," Holden greets as he stands and moves aside to give me access to my girl. "Josi's all right."

He's said that to me no less than a dozen times, which nearly makes me smile. I sit where he was, the bed still warm from his large presence, and run my hand over her forehead and through her hair.

"Hey, baby," I coo. "I hear you were really brave."

"The bravest," Holden confirms, and Josi's eyes crinkle up just like his do.

I take her uninjured hand and look to the doctor. "What's the situation?"

"There's a fracture in her forearm, the ulna. The swelling is high, so we've got her in a splint for two days and then we'll have you come back and cast it. She's young, and the break is clean, so she'll most likely only need six weeks," the doctor tells me. "Your husband mentioned that he thought she might like a waterproof cast, with it being summer, and I agree. We'll make sure she doesn't miss any pool days." He smiles down at Josi and pats her shoulder. "You did well during that x-ray too. Not all kids can hold that still when they're in pain."

Jo-Jo, always so serious around people outside of our home, looks up at him. "It's 'cause my Daddy held my hand."

The doctor has no way of knowing how those words hit me straight in the heart, and based on how Holden sucks in a breath, it did the same to him. His kids need him. Him being available to them matters. I've told him that countless times, but I think it's finally connected for him as he sits in this room with her.

"Daddies are pretty great," the doctor agrees.

We get discharge papers and Holden sweeps Josi up in his arms like a princess as we walk out. She giggles and wraps her good arm around his neck as he carries her to his truck.

"Oh," I say, when he opens the back door. "I can take her. I know you have things to do."

He shakes his head. "I told you, the ranch is fine. I made some calls on the way into town and the guys know what to do. I . . . want to be there for her. For both of you. Is that all right with you?"

I lick my lips and bite them before nodding. "Sure. Of course."

He puts Josi in and buckles her up, pressing a kiss to the top of her head, and then circles the front of his truck to where I'm still standing.

"I hope I did everything right," he says. "It scared me when I saw her falling and couldn't grab her in time, but I did my best to play it cool and act like this kind of thing happens every day." He pulls off his cowboy hat and runs a hand through his dark hair before putting it back on. "The truth is it doesn't happen every day, and especially not to my little girl."

The thing is, Holden is *the guy*, you know. The guy that people call when stuff does go down. He's calm and takes charge and is great at acting like he's seen this a million times. Which was exactly what his daughter had needed today. So it surprises me when he admits that it frightened him. He's more relatable in this moment than he has been for a while.

"If you acted with her like you acted when you called me, you did a fine job. You talked me down too." I smile. "It was kind of nice."

He smirks. "Not cold and removed?"

I roll my eyes. "More like good under pressure."

He nods. "I like that."

"Me too."

I follow Holden back through town and on out to our cabin, and then inside as he once again carries Jo-Jo, making her laugh. He sets her on the couch and goes to get her some more pain medicine, informing me that the doctor told him about alternating two types to stay ahead of the pain. I don't tell him that this is information I've known for over a decade now. I like that he's involved, finally.

He returns with water and a medicine cup with purple liquid and makes sure Josi takes it before he sits on the couch and puts his cowboy hat on the end table. Josi leans into his side, her hair the exact same color as his as she snuggles close.

"Daddy, have you fallen off a horse before?" she asks.

He puts his arm around her and scoots her in. "Yeah, lots of times."

"Did you ever break your arm?"

He nods. "Twice. Once was when I crashed an ATV because I was driving too fast."

"Like Uncle Landry?" Josi's voice turns to annoyance and I can picture her pursing her lips like a mother scolding someone.

"Yeah, like him." Holden squeezes her close. "The other time was when I thought I'd show off for your mama by trying to dismount from a running horse. I landed flat on my stomach with my arm twisted under me and my wrist broke."

He looks over his shoulder at where I'm standing in the kitchen making sandwiches. Our eyes meet in mutual memory. I had laughed and laughed until I cried . . . and then cried when I saw his limp hand swinging in the wrong direction, because I felt so bad for laughing. And then I gracefully ended the entire episode by nearly passing out because it was gross.

"It's amazing I ever came back after that," I joke.

"My summer won't be fun with a cast," Josi sighs deeply. "How am I supposed to hold a book if I can't make my arm straight?"

Because of where the break is, the splint goes up over her elbow, holding her arm in a bent position and we were told that the cast would as well.

"That's not such a big problem," Holden responds easily. He pulls his phone out of his shirt pocket and thumbs it on. "I already thought about it. Look at this." He turns his screen to show her something, but it's too small for me to see from where I'm putting mayonnaise on bread. "It's called a book holder pillow. It sits on your lap and you can rest your book on top of it, no arms needed. Thought you might want to order one."

Josi squeals and shifts to look at his screen while they scroll through options. I finish the sandwiches while she picks one with a butterfly print and Holden promises her it will be there in two days – just in time for her cast to be put on.

I bring sandwiches and ice water to the living area and sit on the floor across from the couch while we eat. Josi tells us about a book series she's been reading through at the school library, and when Holden tells her he hasn't read a book since he graduated high school, she fakes her own death, flopping back on the couch. It's hilarious, and both Holden and I laugh at her antics.

When I stand to clear away our dishes, Holden beats me to it, taking our plates and cups back to the kitchen. Unsure of what to do in this new alternate universe I've fallen into, I stand there watching him.

He sees me and smiles. "Give your girl a snuggle. I'll wash these."

So, I sit on the couch with Josi, gathering her close, smelling her bubble-gum shampoo and running a hand lightly up and down her arm until she yawns and grows heavy against me. She's much too old for naps, but it's been a rough day and so I lay

her down and cover her with a light blanket, letting her body start healing through rest. I meet Holden in the kitchen where he's finished cleaning up.

"Mason should be done in town pretty soon," I say.

He looks at Josi passed out on the couch. "I can go pick him up."

I shake my head. "I know you've got things to do on the ranch. I can ask one of the other parents to bring him home."

Holden shakes his head. "I wanted a day with the kids and for you to have a break. It hasn't panned out that way, but I still want to be here. I can sit with Jo-Jo or go get Mason. What's easiest for you?"

What's easiest for me? I don't compute.

It's not like Holden was ever mean to me, and for many years he took good care of me, it's just that I think he forgot I existed at some point, and now he's seeing me again and I'm not processing well.

"You were really great with all of this today," I say. "Thank you."

"You're an amazing mama, Leni. I don't tell you that enough. Our kids are the best, because of the time and effort you've spent. Thank *you*."

This feels confusing, and wonderful, and scary . . . because will it last?

"I guess I'll go get Mason," I say.

He nods. "I'll be here, no worries."

And I know he means that.

CHAPTER 10

Leni

BUCK-IT LIST ITEM NUMBER three is about to get crossed off, and like the first two times, I am a mixture of excitement and anxiety. I'd taken Josi to get her cast on this morning, and the lap pillow book holder Holden had ordered for her is safely on her lap assisting her as she devours a story about dragons. Rae agreed to watch the kids and she arrived with a plate of cookies and a new board game a few moments ago, just steps ahead of Holden who is waiting for me in the back doorway, filling the space with nervous energy.

Rae keeps swiveling her head between the two of us with a smirk, and when I dare to shoot her a look she shrugs and joins Josi on the couch, lightly hugging her and asking about her book.

We're going line dancing. Not only dancing, but we've entered a couples contest, per the list requirements. Thankfully, the establishment is outside of Pinehaven in a bigger city, which means we can remain more anonymous. I painstakingly chose my outfit, because if I'm going to humiliate myself on a dance floor, at least I can look good doing it. My wavy hair is pulled into a low, side ponytail, and I have on a floral ruffle-sleeve top and dark jeans that I hope will be comfortable to maneuver in, and the cutest little ankle boots you've ever seen. I topped it off with my cowboy hat, and feel like I nailed the mix of city and country with my look.

I give Holden a smile as I walk to where he's waiting, and he nods as he steps to the side to let me pass through the door.

"You ready for this?" he asks as we make our way across the deck.

I offer a shrug in return. "I like dancing, but it's been a long time and entering a contest feels a little . . ." I let the words hang. He chuckles. "Out of your comfort zone?"

I smile as he opens my door for me and I climb into the front seat.

Walker is in the back seat, and I immediately pick up his cedarwood scent as I buckle. I sniff twice, loudly – a longstanding joke between us when he's hit the cologne hard – and he laughs.

"Don't start," he says as Holden climbs in the driver's side. "It's perfect."

"If you're looking to overwhelm a woman with smells so you can bring her back to your lair," I respond as Holden pulls away from the cabin.

"Scent plays an important role in attraction," Walker states. "Look at the animals. They're always sniffing new people and other animals. Dogs for example . . ."

Holden groans. "There will be zero sniffing tonight."

I laugh and look over the seat at Walker. "I'll agree that it's important for a man to smell good, but knocking them over the head with it is the same as telling a lie. Once you shower they'll discover your true scent, and the deception will come back to bite you."

Walker and I teasingly argue as we make our way to Steph's house where she's waiting on her front porch. She's wearing a sequin shirt and flirty skirt, and the second she's in the truck she's joined the conversation with plenty of her own opinions. While Walker spends the entire drive talking about how much fun it's going to be, and how he's going to meet so many pretty women, Steph spends the drive telling him he's going about this all wrong and needs to join the modern world and step out of his caveman brain. She has it on good authority that people prefer the natural smells of other humans. Having raised two humans, and been married to another for over a decade, I'd argue for a little coverup scent.

They move on to protein and collagen and other supplements and diet plans, and I zone out, hanging on to the amusement of our earlier chatter. It helps me settle my nerves. The last time I line danced was, oh, before Josi was born, back when Holden and I were still committed to regular dates. So, yeah, at least seven years. A few online videos have helped as reminders this week, but I have zero business competing at all.

The Two Step is a big building with a lighting problem and a bigger crowd than I would have expected, and when we enter I'm glad I dressed up a little. Steph walks next to me with Walker and Holden following and I take it in with big eyes. Things

have changed since I was here last. Everyone showed up ready to wow, dressed in their best country-style clothing. I find an empty cafe-style table and claim it while Holden gets our four numbers from the registration guy. The number ten is pinned to my back, and I'm working to pin Holden's number to his back while Steph does the same for Walker.

Steph looks around his broad shoulders with a laughing grin on her face. "When was the last time we even line danced?" she asks.

"The way I feel right now, I'm not sure I've ever line danced," Holden rumbles from beneath his dress cowboy hat, causing a nervous giggle to burst out of me.

"Same. This idea is insane," I laugh.

Holden looks at me over his shoulder, hazel eyes amused. "I remember someone thinking this was a great idea."

"She has issues, probably needs therapy," I reply, still giggling like a weirdo.

"Good news, muscle memory and our exceptional athleticism make me feel like we have a chance here," Steph says, slapping her hands firmly against Walker's back to let him know he's all numbered up.

Steph is entering as a solo dancer, and so is Walker, who moves to a different table as soon as he sees some prey – translation: interesting women. He's somehow immediately nursing a drink while warmly chatting them up. In his defense, all the women in Pinehaven are familiar and Walker came looking for something new. It's not a surprise that he's succeeded in making them all fan themselves. He's warm, fuzzy, smart, and handsome. I have no idea how someone hasn't locked him down yet, but he says he's waiting until he turns thirty to be serious about dating. Until then, it's smart to see what's out there. I hope someone comes along and knocks him off his feet.

Walker and Holden are both wearing Western shirts – which is a departure for Walker who prefers denim – in shades of brown and blue, clean jeans, shined boots, and their dress cowboy hats. I don't bother to pretend I don't find Holden handsome like this. He holds his body stiff, and I know he's as out of his element as I am, but he's here, so that's something.

"I wish the kids could be here," I say. "They're the reason we're doing this."

Holden tosses me a relieved look. "No child should see their dad embarrass himself like I'm about to." He glances at Steph and points a tanned finger at her. "Promise me you won't take video."

Steph holds up her hands and tosses her dark hair over her shoulder, tugging at the sleeve of her sparkling top. "Please. Conceited much? I'm in the contest too, remember."

Holden doesn't press it, but he doesn't trust her either. Steph has a way of doing things that shouldn't be doable, including video-taping an unwilling brother-in-law while also competing herself.

"Where's Ryan tonight?" I ask her, changing the subject. "I thought he'd enter with you."

She shakes her head. "Please, Ryan has no rhythm and less interest in dancing than he does in living a spontaneous life. I'm over him."

I laugh. "Liar. He's crazy about you." She rolls her eyes. "I happen to know you've gotten flowers from him every single day, and been seen kissing on your front porch."

"Gross," Holden mutters.

Steph plays it cool. "Whatever. He's a free agent. He can buy flowers and kiss me and it makes no difference."

"Uh-huh," I respond with a knowing look. "Walker tells me you've been working out with him." My sister is a lot of things, but she's not a time-waster. If a guy doesn't do anything for her, she cuts him off immediately. The fact they've been at the gym together is a big deal. "And that you're smiling a lot."

"Walker should keep his giant eyeballs and even bigger mouth to himself," Steph grumps, but her mouth twitches in amusement.

"I think Walker's entire goal is to never keep his mouth to himself," Holden mutters, which makes me and Steph laugh out loud.

I hold up my hands and smile at my sister. I'll drop it for now. "Free agent," I say.

"Remind me what dance we're doing?" Holden leans down to ask a question that no one should be asking before a competition.

We've already lost.

"The Tush Push," I reply, having looked it up when I registered us for this.

A laugh bursts out of Steph. "I cannot wait to see Holden use those hips."

Holden's eyebrows raise. "You're kidding, right?"

I bite down on my lips to keep from laughing. "You've done this one many times."

"The hips never lie," Steph adds. "Sadly, your hips say *'hey, I'm grumpy and withdrawn'*."

I toss her a look – sometimes it's bad how much I confide in her – and Holden groans. "I'm neither of those things."

She makes a noise and shrugs. "Prove it, then."

Always up for a challenge, Holden nods once and sort of sinks into himself in a way I recognize as deep thinking. He's most likely doing the steps in his head now and preparing himself for what's to come.

"What are we proving?" Walker asks, joining our little huddle and looking curiously at his brother who has really gone

inside himself. He hooks a thumb at him. "This guy gonna make it?"

"I challenged your brother to prove he's still got moves and is not old or grumpy, or perennially ticked off by the act of living," Steph replies. She taps one of her booted heels on the floor, mimicking one of the moves. "Can he Tush Push? Yes or no?"

Walker takes in a breath and wrinkles up his nose as he adjusts the brim of his hat. "He's a Crawford. He'll make it happen."

A waitress comes up to us, her bright, coppery hair trailing down her back in glorious waves. She blows wispy bangs away from green eyes and looks at me and Steph with a friendly, albeit tired, smile. She looks completely out of place here and I'm instantly curious.

"Can I get you anything?" she asks, holding up a pad with a perfectly manicured hand.

Walker holds up a finger and gives her an obvious once-over. "Actually . . ." he begins, but she doesn't even glance his way.

"Nope," she says, looking at her pad. "Asking the ladies."

I laugh and Holden pops out of his reverie to smile at the waitress. Walker's jaw drops and Steph pats him on the shoulder.

"It's a special day when Walker Crawford gets the 'nope' from a woman. I'm just so pleased I was here to see it," Steph laughs.

Walker snaps his mouth shut and moves back to warmer waters, where the women are happy he's returned. The waitress, impressively, doesn't even sneak a peek as he walks away. She dresses in a way that tells me she's not local, and her accent confirms it. She speaks in rounder, softer tones that sound like she's spent some time in the south, but I couldn't possibly nail it down. She's on the taller side, and has lean curves that keep drawing Walker's eye even from a few tables away.

"I'm Leni," I say to her warmly. "This is my sister, Stephanie, and my husband, Holden."

The waitress's smile grows. "I'm Birdie."

"You new to the area, Birdie?" Steph asks, "Or did Walker's reputation precede him?"

"Walker?" she asks, turning when Steph points, to glance at the big, blond golden retriever who's pretending not to sulk. "Never heard of him." She shrugs and looks back to us. "I hope he's not your friend and I've offended you."

"He's my brother," Holden says, and poor Birdie blushes.

"I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. He needs a reminder every now and then that he isn't Mama's perfect angel," Holden says, his lips tugging up. "He'll be easier to live with for a while now."

"I'm new to this part of the country. Everyone told me to be careful around sweet-talking cowboys, because they'll take you for a ride," Birdie says with a light laugh. "I didn't listen, and I got burned. So now I'm trying to correct that mistake."

"Solid plan," Steph agrees. "I've avoided cowboys my entire life, and it's been smooth sailing."

Birdie grins, and it makes her face light up. There's something behind her eyes, though, that tells me she's all alone and a little sad. She said she was new here, and that she'd been burned, and my heart goes out to her. It can be lonely in this part of the country, even when you do know people.

"We're in the contest, so no orders right now, but I hope I'll see you around," I say to her as a sound squeals through the speaker system, letting us know things are about to start. "My last name is Crawford. We live over in Pinehaven. Maybe we could have lunch sometime?" I ask quickly, knowing our time is short.

She nods. "I'd like that."

And then Birdie disappears back into the crowd as my attention is dragged to the overhead speaker. The announcer explains the rules, and it's hard to listen because Holden is tapping a boot on the floor next to me. Steph is at my side, and Walker comes to stand next to his brother. He's already forgotten about Birdie and her slight, judging by the big smile on his face and excitement in his eyes. Walker loves a spotlight.

When we're told to take to the floor, Holden takes my hand in his and leads me out. It feels nice to have his large, warm hand wrapped around mine, and I don't resist the pull. He manages to get us in the middle of the group, which I don't hate. It will give us time to warm up without eyes on us. Walker and Steph take places in the front row, which totally makes sense for their personalities.

The music starts before I'm ready, and I look over to Holden who appears to be counting beats in his mind so loudly that he's going to crack. I tap his shoulder and he looks down at me. I offer him a wide smile, meant to convey that this should be fun and I don't plan on winning a darn thing. It does the trick, and I watch his arms relax, dangling loosely at his sides.

The dance starts with everyone moving into the first set of heel clicks. It takes a minute, but thanks to the online videos and the familiar music, the moves come back to me. By the time we've done our second rotation I am in the groove. I smile, clapping and swinging my hips, and sashaying sassily through the cha-cha parts. As we move back to the forward-facing place we first began, I feel a light caress across my back. Then another on my hip, and a little grab at my hand. Holden is making contact with me as we go, using his hands to show that we're a duo.

I've seen other couples do this, but didn't expect it from my anti public affection spouse. It warms my skin when he trails his hand down my arm, or lightly presses my lower back, and I find myself distracted but able to keep moving. The touches keep coming – trailing fingertips across my exposed neck, along my shoulders, and they all add up enough that I stumble a bit.

The stumble has us waved out of the group, and this time as we walk, Holden rests his steady hand against my lower back, guiding me to a seat on the sidelines. My breaths come quickly from the exertion of the dance, but it's not helped by the unexpected contact. How long has it been since he touched me this way? With easy affection? When was the last time he made my stomach buzz like this?

I climb onto one of the high stools with a back and Holden climbs onto the one next to me, draping his arm across the back of my stool. The heat and strength of him seep into my side and I want to lean closer. I want his fingers to wrap around my shoulder or play with the bare skin of my arm like he used to. I want the palm of his hand against the nape of my neck, easing away years of tension and loneliness – so when his hand does drop to cup my shoulder I nearly sigh in relief.

We don't speak, but we do watch Steph and Walker dazzle on the floor, and when the competition ends they've taken third and fifth place, losing to people who clearly do this all the time. Frankly, I think it's amazing they placed at all.

We're a laughing, sweaty bunch, and when the house music goes back to a slow song after the contest is called. Holden slides from his stool and takes off his hat, setting it on the table before holding out a hand to me, inviting me to two-step with him, something we haven't done in forever.

I take his hand and pull off my own hat. "I don't know if I remember the moves," I say, patting at my hair as he weaves his fingers between mine.

"If we could do that line dance, we can do this. Besides, I remember enough for the both of us."

I see Steph hold out her hand to Walker, who smirks and follows her onto the floor too, but I lose sight of them as Holden takes me in the proper stance and leaves a little space between us so that we can move easily. Then, with memory buried somewhere deep, we fall into the steps that used to come naturally.

His hand on my back is patient and strong as he guides me around the floor, his other hand in mine steady and warm. I swallow hard and look into hazel eyes that are relaxed and open, and that seem to see me, and only me. My heart is in my throat, and when he pulls me closer I go willingly. The press of his chest against mine and his arm wrapped around my back make me feel cocooned and safe. It's a feeling I've mourned the loss of.

And when I give up the official moves to lay my cheek against his shoulder, pressing my nose into his neck, he slows our steps even further and holds our hands against his chest in an embrace we've both needed for a long, long time.

CHAPTER 11

Leni

IT'S BEEN AN INTERESTING Saturday. I ran to town to grocery shop and when I returned home it was to two children who thought they should make cookies, and while I bake regularly with them, they aren't quite ready to be off on their own. The cookies were nasty, the kitchen was messy, but they were happy, and rather than get upset with them, I sent them out to the yard after making them help me restore order. I would not be cleaning up their mess by myself.

Then Rae called and asked me to come help her clean for a last-minute B&B guest, so I herded the children into the car and drove to the homestead. The kids immediately disappeared into the barn where Walker and Landry were doing who knows what, which reminded me I still had a bone to pick with the youngest Crawford, so I'd beelined it over to the boarding area and put my hands on my hips.

It would have been more effective if I hadn't been wearing an old pink tee that has I'm nicer than my face looks printed across the chest. Obviously a gift from Steph.

"Landry Crawford, I do not appreciate you speeding around and making my Jo-Jo fall off a horse the other day," I snapped up at him. I remembered a time when I'd been taller than him. He'd been only thirteen when I joined the family. "I hope you learned your lesson."

Landry's blue eyes had been filled with remorse, and he'd even gone so far as to take off his cowboy hat and hold it against his chest, exposing his chin-length, curling hair to the light of day. His blue eyes had been serious and sad, and he'd nodded along while I railed on him, never speaking back in defense. By the time I'd said my peace, I felt like he needed more comforting than Jo-Jo had. So, I'd wrapped that man in a hug and told him to get back to work.

I never did punch him, but he'd understood the message.

After an hour of cleaning for Rae, I'd gathered my kids who were now dusty versions of themselves and headed back to the cabin, where we all got cleaned up, and now we're lying in the shade in three hammocks that magically appeared yesterday afternoon, hanging from trees on the side of our yard. It wasn't really magic. I know it was Holden, and a flicker of those long-ago zings make me curl my toes. It was so sweet, but a little sad that there aren't four hammocks. Does he not think he belongs here too?

Jo-Jo is reading, which is a relief after her complaining about her itchy cast to the point where I picked up a stick and let her shove it in her cast to scratch it. Mason is madly speed-texting his friends, and I have my eyes closed with my arms folded across my stomach. I could nap here. I need to nap here. I'm tired, as always. It's funny, because for a long time I thought it would make no difference if Holden was out of my life. I'd be doing all the same work and carrying the same mental loads, but at least I wouldn't be resenting him for not being where I wanted him to be.

But over the past few weeks I'm wondering if he wasn't shouldering some of the burdens that I didn't see. He was right when he said I'd never gone without food or shelter. And, sure, he was distant, but I'd never had a true emergency where he didn't come through. After doing some of our Buck-It List items, I'm thinking a little differently. Hope has resurfaced.

And hope scares the bejeebers out of me by sneaking up, grabbing my hammock, and rocketing me to the sky.

I scream, Holden laughs, and the kids start giggling as the hammock rocks back and forth, nearly toppling me right out onto the ground. My heart pounds and my stomach swoops with the motion. All thoughts of a nap fly away.

"Holden Crawford," I screech, glaring at his smiling face. "You're the second Crawford man to force me to use his full name today, and that is never a good thing."

He steadies the hammock and when my head is through spinning, I shoot him a look that has him laughing again. It's a full-bellied laugh that I so rarely see, and I can't help but watch his handsome face in that moment.

"What are you doing here in the middle of the day?" I ask.

Jo-Jo climbs out of her hammock next to mine and wraps her good arm around her daddy's waist, her summer romper tugged up over her calves. "Hi, Daddy." She glows. "The lap pillow holder is so good. I can still read all the time."

Then she launches into a full-blown monologue about her and Mason's attempt at making cookies, and how she helped Uncle Landry brush the boarded horses, and how Mason talked to Uncle Walker about how to make his hair fancy. The entire time, Holden holds her gaze and listens patiently. He doesn't hurry her along or say he has somewhere he needs to be, and I think of the way he did that for me in the past. I used to chew that man's ear until he was praying to fall deaf, but he never complained.

He pokes a finger under his hat to scratch at his forehead, and his jean-clad legs spread a bit as he gets into a stance he can hold for a while. Her little voice drowns out the birdsong I'd been listening to and the clacking sound of Mason's fingers hitting his phone screen, and I close my eyes, content to let Holden have this moment. I'm off duty in the ear department.

Eventually, Josi runs out of words, and rather than climb back into her hammock she asks if she could watch some TV inside. At this point in the day I am fine with that, and I easily wave her off. When Mason hears that TV is in play, he jumps out of his hammock, and asks if he can play his video game system. I say yes, and he follows his little sister inside, but as he walks by he mutters, "I was not asking Walker how to make my hair fancy."

Holden and I manage to hold our laughs until the back door closes behind him.

Then, it's just the two of us. No kids, no siblings or parents, no neighbors. Just us. It's both familiar and awkward. The thing about our marriage becoming stale is that we didn't fight. We just . . . stopped. Stopped hugging, talking, or doing things together. So now, I'm not sure what to say to the man who is still looking down at me from beneath the shade of his cowboy hat.

"Get in a hammock or go back to work, Holden. Your staring is making my skin itch," I blurt out.

He tugs the brim of his hat and surprises me with a "*yes, ma'am*" before yanking off his cowboy boots and getting into the hammock next to me that Josi had abandoned. I almost fall out of my own when he settles in, placing his hat on the center of his chest.

Holden is hammocking at three o'clock on a Saturday afternoon. The world has reversed itself, and I'm confused.

There's not much of a breeze, but in the shade it feels pretty nice. Sometimes, depending on where the huge herd of cattle are located, I can hear them lowing in the distance, but today it's quiet. Too quiet. The birds must have flown away during Josi's elaborate description of her day.

"Did you know I wanted to start my own yoga retreat out here?" I say, words pushed out by the nerves in my chest.

"I don't remember you telling me that," he responds.

The sides of my hammock keep me from being able to make eye contact with him, and it makes it feel safer. "I didn't."

"Then how would I have known?" he teases.

"Point," I grumble.

"Tell me what you were thinking," he nudges when I fall silent.

I take a deep breath and dive in. "You know how much I love yoga, and good health, and the outdoors, and social time," I state. He makes a noise that tells me he's listening. "I was thinking I could combine them and build something on the property here where people could come take yoga classes to get away from the town and distractions. I could do daily classes while the kids are in school, and maybe connect with Rae to use her B&B for occasional weekend retreats."

I pause to see if I've lost him, and when I peek over the side of my hammock I'm met by hazel eyes peeking back.

"Keep going," he says.

I fall back and look up at the leaves above me. "Um, there's that shed between our plot and Walker's that is, I believe, twelve by twelve, which is 144 square feet. I'm thinking smaller classes, and something that size would accommodate me and five students. That gives more social time because when it's finished the smaller group could visit for a while before they head out. I could leave the double doors open unless the weather's bad, and it would provide shade and keep us off the ground, but maybe I could also create a little garden to the side where I could do outdoor yoga too."

"I know what shed you're talking about."

"Yeah, it's that blue one. I haven't looked it over, mostly because this is just a pipe dream right now, and maybe it would need a ton of work to make it tolerable year-round, but, it's something I've thought about."

I bite at my lips and play with my fingers while I wait for him to say something.

"I wish I'd known that was something you were interested in doing," he says at long last.

"Well, you're the first person I've told. It's been a secret dream," I respond.

"How long have you been wanting to do this?"

I hate to admit it, but I do. "Probably two years or so." I feel a little ashamed that it's been that long and I've never told my husband.

His silence feels like he's thinking the same thing, but he doesn't address it in the moment. Maybe he's also feeling the fragility of this conversation and wants to keep it going without angst creeping in.

"Any other secret dreams?" he asks.

A light breeze comes through and tickles at my bare feet, caressing my legs and arms as it passes. The breeze has a lulling effect, and I fall into its charm.

"Yeah," I say. "I secretly dream that someday I won't have to clean the B&B anymore."

Holden answers quickly. "You don't have to if you don't want to. Mama thought you'd like a little extra money."

"I know. It's honestly sweet of her to pay me anything at all. Families pull together, and I'd have done it without the pay. It was so helpful to be able to bring Jo-Jo along when she was a baby, and it made it possible for me to be close to your mom. But, I'm ready to move on." I pause. "Which is hard, especially when you said the other day that she wants to expand into weddings. I can't quit on her and do my own thing. Besides, it's not like I'm helping on the ranch like everyone else does. The B&B is kind of the only way I'm allowed to pitch in."

Holden makes a sound that tells me he's thinking on it. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you all run off and do ranch work and I stay with the kids and clean the rented rooms."

I'm sort of annoyed that he had to ask. It's obvious, right?

"I didn't know you wanted to help on the ranch," he responds, and I shrug in my little cocoon.

"It's not that as much as I'm the odd one out, and this helped me to feel part of things, I guess."

"Even though you don't enjoy it."

"Yeah. It's twisted, I know."

"Mama could hire someone else, you know. It doesn't have to automatically be you if you don't want it to be," he responds.

His words are sweet, but I'm not sure it's true. Rae depends on me, and I always live up to people's expectations. "It's nice of you to say it, but it's another thing to do it. A yoga studio business would take me away from the kids regardless of how well I try to schedule things, and they need a parent around," I say.

"I'm a parent," he responds, and I really don't want to make it a thing so I hum a little sound. He puffs out a breath. "A parent they can rely on to be available, you mean," he mutters, and I can hear the self-deprecation in his words.

"I wasn't pointing fingers," I reply.

"You don't have to. I get it. You've sacrificed your dream and made do cleaning with my mama because I wasn't available to support your endeavors and you felt the kids needed a parent more than you needed self-fulfillment."

Oof. How come, after months of wishing he'd get it, when he does get it, it stings to hear? Like, I actually feel bad listening to the defeat in his tone. Before I can tell him it's no big deal—basically lie again—he continues talking.

"We got married so young that I don't think we had an inkling of what things to talk about beforehand. It didn't occur to me to actually ask if you wanted to live on the ranch. I didn't think to ask what your dreams were because I was too scared about making any sort of a living. I didn't have time for dreaming when I had to get to work to simply live." I hear him shift in the hammock, but I keep my eyes up, desperate for him to continue. "I couldn't stand the thought of failing. All those people—our parents included—who told us to wait, that we were too young, that we'd regret it. I couldn't face them all and tell them they were right, that we weren't strong enough for the demands of marriage and parenthood."

I remember those voices and the way it made me more determined to succeed.

He continues, "And then, we're pregnant with Mason before we're even a year into our marriage. Both of us still nineteen, and the looks and whispers became pitying—like they were waiting for us to fall apart. I chose to work myself to the point of collapse in order to prove that I was a man who could care for his wife and children. I found pride in providing for you and the kids. I knew those people who'd doubted us would see you in your good clothes, shopping for meals, signing our kids up for activities, and they'd have to say they were wrong. That I did it. We did it. We weren't a statistic. And if I didn't get back in time for dinner, or had to sleep on the ground near the herd, it was okay, because you three were warm and fed and loved in that cabin. I . . ."

His voice seems to waver and he stops talking abruptly. I wonder if he was close to getting emotional, which is something Holden has very rarely been. Only at the births of our children, really.

I step in to save him, this man who just opened his heart to me in a way that hasn't happened for a long time. "Thank you for telling me all of that."

"I'm sorry I stopped talking to you," he replies, equally quiet. "I don't know why I did."

"I think you were tired, Holden. Bone-deep tired," I say sympathetically. "You were under a lot of pressure, and you did things the best you knew how."

The words aren't trite. I mean them. I wish I'd known that was the motivation behind his work ethic, but I'm glad to know now.

"I'm sorry you sacrificed so much while I was away. You raised our kids practically alone," he adds.

"We both made sacrifices," I assure him.

"Yours were bigger," he whispers.

But I'm no longer sure that's true. I'm starting to think Holden is the prizewinner of this competition.

CHAPTER 12

Holden

I'M AS TIRED AS I used to be when Mason and Josi were infants and they kept us up all night after a full day of hard work. This time it wasn't an infant, it was one of those special Utah summer thunderstorms that rage through the mountain ranges with low clouds, heavy thunder, and lighting—the echoes shouting across the valleys between mountain walls that keep them clanging back and forth.

I never sleep during those storms, too worried about what will meet me in the daylight, and this one came with an extra layer of concern as I sat in my camper bed fretting about my family. Finally, during the worst pounding part of the night, I'd thrown open the camper door and run to the cabin in my thin pajamas, and then stood dripping in the dark kitchen, listening for any signs of distress. Josi hates these storms and always crawls into bed with me and Leni, but it was blissfully quiet. There were no leaks in the roof, and no sounds of Leni comforting kids. I could hear the refrigerator hum, telling me power was still stable. Yet . . . I couldn't bring myself to leave them.

Instead, I dried off as best I could, tucked some towels under me, and did my best to rest on the couch with one ear open. It was restless at best, and I headed out before the sun started to rise in order to get dressed in the dark, cold camper. My family may never know I watched over them last night, but I know, and that means something to me.

Fully dressed, with a warm cup of instant coffee sloshing around in my stomach, I hustle across my muddy backyard, headed for my truck, ready to be on the road to the homestead where I'll meet up with the family to take stock and undo damage. This storm was particularly violent. My hat is low on my head, fighting off the drizzle that still lingers in the area, and I tug the sides of my waterproof canvas jacket together against the chill that comes with these storms. I glance at the cabin where my family is sleeping. I hate being away from them, and that hate is growing every day.

I'm reaching for the door handle of my truck when I catch a flash of activity near the back door and look up to see Leni jogging toward me. She's fully dressed in jeans and worn-out hiking boots, tugging on a flannel jacket as she comes toward me. Her hair is tucked under a wide-brimmed hat, and her expression is earnest when she reaches me.

"That was a bad one last night," she says, looking up at me. Her brown eyes draw me in, and I find comfort there for the first time in a while.

"Yeah," I respond eloquently.

"Are you heading to the homestead?" she asks, finishing buttoning up her jacket.

"Yep."

"Great. We're coming. You guys will need the extra help. The kids are getting dressed. Can you spare a minute so we can ride with you, or do you need us to come in my car?"

She says it all so quickly, like she's afraid I'll reject her offer to help. But after our talk in the hammocks, I understand how much she's wanted to be included and there's no way I'd say no. I'm filled with an emotion I don't know how to name. It's surprise, plus relief and confusion all jumbled into something that crash-lands in my chest and lodges there. We stand together in the still-drizzling morning twilight, and I'm so grateful she's here with me.

"I can wait," I say, and I barely flinch at the idea of my parents and brothers waiting on me, or the cattle that may have time to wander farther through fences that have possibly fallen. This is more important. She's more important. "Thanks for coming."

Leni jogs back to the cabin and I follow at a slower pace, my mind bouncing between the fact that she's joining me and the list of things that I'm afraid I'll find broken. I don't know which train of thought to settle on. I stay outside the cabin on the porch, not wanting to take the time to yank off my boots, and within five minutes the three members of my little family are joining me in various states of wakefulness. Leni obviously pulled them from a dead sleep, the one they probably finally fell into when the storm subsided. My lips lift into a half smile at the sight.

Mason is decked out in a hoodie, beanie, and shoes that are way too new and nice to have any business on a muddy ranch this morning. Josi is still in her pajamas, with a rain jacket over them and her hair in disarray. One arm of her rain jacket is

empty because getting her bent and casted arm into it is hard enough without her being floppy. I'm guessing Leni plans to leave them at the homestead for part of the morning and hopes that Jo-Jo will fall back asleep.

"Here, honey, let me take her," I mumble to Leni as I lift Josi's little body into my arms.

Her head sags comfortably against my shoulder as we move toward my truck. Mason doesn't speak, his head down as he trudges along. Maybe he'll fall back asleep too. Although, at twelve, I'm thinking it's time he started pitching in a little more at times like this.

None of us talk on the short drive, and that's fine with me. I'm busy processing down my mental list of things to check and who can do what, so that by the time my truck pulls in next to Walker's and Landry's, I'm ready with the assignments.

My parents and brothers are all standing on the front porch, dressed in full work gear, hats pulled low over sleepy eyes, and they watch as Leni and I gather our kids and head toward them. It's quieter than usual out here, a common affair when the clouds are low and heavy with moisture, like the entire barnyard is hunkering down against nature. The regular tink, tink, tink of water dripping from the large tree in front of the homestead onto the rain gutters is the only sound I can process.

"What's the plan?" Dad asks when we're all standing together.

Leni takes Josi from my arms and herds the kids inside, and my mom's knowing gaze watches them before landing on me. "I think I'll stay here with the kids this time," she says, surprising me. Mom always works alongside us. "That will free up Leni to help."

I immediately offer her a small nod of thanks as she follows Leni inside. Now that I know how often my wife has felt left behind, I'm grateful that she won't be this time. I don't want her to keep feeling that way. I want her to understand that she's important and wanted.

I look to my dad and brothers and launch into the plan. "We need to check fence lines and see if any debris was washed downstream that's going to clog up the creek and cause watering issues. We need to check stock for any injuries and get a head count—especially if we do find downed lines." They nod, expecting as much. "Dad and Landry, you check the creek for debris and clear it if needed." Dad slaps Landry on the back and they nod. "Walker, I want you and two of the hands to find the herd and check for any issues with health or numbers. I'm hoping we haven't lost any." Walker gives me two thumbs up and a ridiculously cheery grin for this horrible hour of the day. "Leni and I will check fence lines."

Leni doesn't really enjoy horseback, but prefers the UTV. Checking fences on a UTV is pretty par for the course, and a way I know she can comfortably help. I'll go on horseback to the rougher terrain and she can stay in the pasture areas. It feels like a win-win to me. I hope she'll feel the same.

"The radios should be charging in the barn. Everyone take one, keep them on channel five. Let me know anything you find that's concerning," I finish.

I feel Leni step up to my side before I see her. She has a smile as she looks between the four of us.

"Put me to work, Sarge," she says, and I'm immediately happy she's coming. I owe my mom for this one.

Dad, Walker, and Landry all hop down the front steps, and we follow as I explain the plan to Leni.

"Will you be warm enough in that jacket?" I ask with a frown. She has waterproof clothing, but she isn't wearing any, and I know how miserable these long mornings can be. "It's still wet, and the sun won't be up for another hour."

She smiles up at me. "I'm good. I have on layers."

There's a flurry of activity as we saddle horses and get radios. Leni takes off on the side-by-side before the rest of us are fully ready, and I watch her bop along the bumpy terrain that leads up to the eastern pasture where I asked her to start first.

"Breaker, breaker, this is Hay Bale Hottie reporting in for duty, over," she calls over the radio as she rounds a corner out of sight. My brothers and Dad chuckle, but when her next sentence comes through they all look at me and laugh. "I'd like to request that Horseshoe Hustler—I'm talking about you, Holden—stop scowling in my direction. I'm a grown woman and I know how to drive this thing, over."

"You made his whole face turn red, over," Walker says into the radio he's holding.

"It made his eyes pop, over," Landry adds from two feet away.

I ignore both of them and their idiotic teasing as I climb onto Twister and head out of the barn. Their radio banter continues, with Leni's laugh echoing through, and it's hard not to beat myself up when I hear how much she's liking being part of the team. How did I not realize the isolation she was feeling?

I don't have much time to analyze it all, because within ten minutes I'm getting radio chatter from everyone noting all the issues that need addressing. Leni found a post down, Walker's crew found a few cow escapees, and Dad noted some larger broken branches that they're using their horses to pull out in order to free the water flow. So, basically everything that could have happened did.

But my family was safe, so that's my silver lining.

"Holden?" Leni's voice breaks into a free space between calls. Something in her tone has me pulling Twister to a stop.

"Go ahead," I say.

"There's a calf stuck in a downed fence, over," she says, sounding concerned. I can hear the bawling mama cow in the background.

"Is it injured?" I ask.

"Yeah, I can see some blood," she replies. "We may want to get Giant Blond Man out here, over."

I chuckle at her handle for Walker, who pipes in with, "Can I please be Muscular Hero? Over."

"How about Conceited Cowpoke? Over," Landry calls in.

"Tell me what you need, Hottie Hay Bale," I say, already turning my horse toward where I think she is.

"That's Hay Bale Hottie," she replies. "I am not an actual bale of hay. And Holden, you're supposed to say over, over."

"Roger that," I respond with a grin, knowing I won't.

"I need a bagel with a boatload of cream cheese, and something warm to drink, over," she says, and I can still hear the cow bawling in the background, only it's a little louder now and I'm concerned Leni's getting closer and could get kicked or headbutted by the distressed mother.

"Leni, give the calf some space, especially the mama," I radio as I nudge Twister into a lope. "What's your location?"

"I just want to hug it, over," Leni replies, and I groan, hoping she's teasing.

"Do not hug the cow," I call in.

"You can't honestly expect me, a fellow mother, to not show some empathy and try to comfort the poor lady"—a pause—"over."

"That cow is not human," I state.

"If not friend, why friend shaped?" Over," Leni replies with a laugh, quoting a silly meme that tells me she knows not to get within stomping distance.

I still keep Twister at a lope.

"Leni, what's your location, over?" Walker buzzes in.

"I'm by that one big tree with the twisty trunk where the hill goes down past the creek and into the west. The one where you guys liked to throw rocks at me and Holden when we were making out in the privacy of nature, over," she replies.

We all know exactly what tree she's talking about.

"You kissed out there? I'd have expected better, over," Dad says.

"They were in loooooove, over," Landry states with a singsong that has me shaking my head.

"There are much more romantic places on our land," Dad adds in. "Last week your mom and I found this secluded spot on the north border, just past the tree line where no one can see any—" There's a scuffling sound and then Landry, who's with Dad clearing out creek debris, comes on.

"Dad has lost radio privileges today. Please address all communication to me, over."

"Oooh, I'd like to know where that is, please," Walker comes on, amusement in his tone. "I have someone in mind who may like to explore that area, over."

"With you? Over," Leni chimes in.

"Obviously, over," Walker grunts.

"The calf seems to be . . . shoot! No, no, shoot . . ." Leni's radio buzzes off and I'm pushing Twister into a gallop now.

"Lenora?" Walker calls before I get my thumb on the button myself. "Do you copy?"

"That mama cow is maaaaad. Did you know cows headbutt? Over." Leni tries to crack a joke, but she sounds frightened and it falls flat.

"We're almost there," I say. "Give that cow some room."

"I'm sitting in the stupid UTV, Holden. I was attacked unprovoked. She's rabid, over." Leni's dropped trying to sound entertained, and her grumpy tone does more to ease my mind than her joking does. An angry Leni is a fighter, and she'll be all right. "She seriously keeps ramming the machine, over."

Sure enough, as I round a corner and take Twister over a small rise, I'm greeted by the sight of Leni sitting in her UTV with her legs up in the air in front of her, trying to use her feet to defend herself from a mama cow that seems determined to hold Leni responsible for her baby being stuck and in distress. The cow slams her head against the side of the UTV and Leni screeches as it rocks back and forth.

Walker appears on my right and he doesn't pause in his hustle to get down to the injured calf and restore order. We both arrive at the twisted tree about the same time, and our appearance distracts the mama cow enough that she stops hitting the UTV and looks at the horses with big eyes. If a cow can look mad, this cow is ticked. I push up toward the UTV, while Walker dismounts and heads toward the calf. Twister uses his size and training to herd the cow away from Leni and then comes to a stop next to her. I dismount quickly and Leni stands up out of the UTV with a perturbed look on her face.

"Like it's my fault." She huffs as she gestures to the cow who is now watching Walker a little too closely. "I get it. I'm a mom, and I'd beat up someone for my kids too, but jeez."

I wrap my arm around her shoulders without thinking and haul her in against my side. "In the age-old battle between cow and human, I think you scored one for human."

She tips her head against my shoulder briefly. "We were this close to having steak for dinner tonight."

"Holden, a little help?" Walker calls, breaking the spell.

I'm sad to let go of her, but duty calls, and we walk to where Walker is bent over the three-month-old heifer. Her back legs are wrapped in barbed wire, and they're bloody from her thrashing around. The two closest fence posts are knocked over, and I imagine this inexperienced calf tried to cross over the fence during the frightening storm last night. It's not a pretty sight.

"What are you thinking, Giant Blond Man?" I ask, earning a smile from Leni that makes my heart flip.

Walker doesn't bother to acknowledge the name, but that's okay, because Leni did.

"We need to get her out of this fence and back to the ranch. I'll examine and treat her there," he says.

We tie ropes from our horses to the fence to pull the wires apart, and while the horses stand steady, Walker and I use gloved hands to unwrap the heifer's legs. Leni's job—which she's not that thrilled about—is to wave her arms in the air and look really big while keeping the mama cow away so we can work. She grumbles the entire time, telling the cow how she'd better not mess with Leni or she'll be blacklisted from any tea parties that may or may not happen in the future.

Somehow, in the thick of a muddy, stinky, sweaty, wet, and cold situation, I find myself laughing.

Once we have the calf loaded on the back of the UTV, we start the trek back to the homestead main barn. Leni drives, constantly looking over her shoulder to make sure the calf doesn't attempt to leap to its demise, and that the mama cow is still following along, bellowing the entire way. Walker follows, radioing ahead to our mama that he's coming in with an injured calf and to have a few things ready for him. I'm hoping the kids are helpful too.

Technically, I could get back to checking fence lines and meet up with Leni again when she's dropped the calf, but I find myself following in their wake, feeling like part of a team in a new way. A better way.

And I know she feels the same, because as she watches Walker carry the calf into the darker interior of the barn, she looks up to where I'm still sitting on Twister and tips her hat back to meet my eyes.

"We make a good team, Crawford," she grins.

CHAPTER 13

Leni

WE'RE BACK AT THE Two Step and Holden won't get out of the truck. Steph brought Ryan this time, and the two of them gave up and went inside. When Landry and Walker arrived in their own trucks they shot me a wave and went inside, not bothering to offer any assistance. I don't think anyone is surprised that he's folding, and I'm wondering if inviting other people was a good idea. Seems like maybe we should have flown solo tonight.

I adjust the strap of my tank top and bite at my lips while I try to figure out how to handle my husband in this moment. He's a little resistant to this particular Buck-It List item, and I'm on a see-saw of my own here. Ever since I caught him sleeping on the couch during that huge thunderstorm I've been determined to see this list through, for us, because we need this. But I haven't told him about how much it meant to me to see him there, protecting us in his way, or about the new conviction it created in me, and I'm not sure now is the time. It might feel like manipulation, and I want him to want this organically.

Frankly, it's hard to want to karaoke organically.

Muted music sounds from the big, wooden structure, and dim lights shine through dirty windows, making the parking lot a place of shadows—a perfect hiding spot.

"I understand that karaoke is not everyone's cup of tea . . ." I begin, pulling at a strand of hair that tickles my shoulder, "but . . ."

He looks at me with pursed lips. "It's no one's cup of tea. It's embarrassing. I don't even sing."

I nod, not bothering to mention that both Walker and Steph practically begged to come along because it is, indeed, their cup of tea. I wasn't expecting Ryan, and when he climbed in the back seat of the truck, Steph gave me a stuff it look, which made me want to do anything but keep my mouth shut.

Instead of pointing all of that out, I respond with, "I don't sing either, but the point is that we're doing something out of our . . ."

". . . comfort zone," we say together, only his tone is a little more sarcastic than mine, and it makes me grin.

"Exactly. The same old routine wasn't working, you know?" I say.

The reminder of why we're here, and the reality of our still-separated situation, has him looking at the double entrance doors with a scowl. His hat is sitting on his knees, pressed up against the steering wheel as he fiddles with it, and he tips his head back and forth.

"The kids won't know if we actually sing or not," he says thoughtfully, like he's found a loophole he'd like to exploit.

"Actually," I hedge.

He sighs, his broad shoulders sagging. "Mason asked Landry to record it, didn't he?"

I nod. "Yeah."

"That explains why he's here."

Landry, unlike Walker, doesn't need the attention of the entire world and would not volunteer to be there. But, our kids are too young to be at a bar/dance hall/karaoke place like this, and they really want to make sure we're living up to our bargain. Landry is the best choice to video, considering Walker is a wild card on nights like this and might forget in the wake of floral perfume and dolled-up hair.

I don't mind, though. I mean, I do mind about singing into a microphone in front of people, but I don't mind that they want proof that it happened. I'd be the same.

Holden glances at me, and in the darkness of his truck cab, his eyes are the same color as his black denim shirt. He left his raggedy cowboy hat home tonight and brought a clean, black hat, but he's still wearing faded jeans and worn boots. I find myself appreciating his look while I wait for him to make a decision.

"Look," I finally say after a minute of silence, "I'm going to go in and do karaoke with our friends and family. You don't have to if you don't want to. I understand."

"What about the kids?" he asks.

It's sort of the wrong question, in my mind. I want him to be doing this for us. The kids were a good motivator to get us working together again, but by this time shouldn't it be less about them and more about our relationship?

I shrug, miffed. "You'll have to figure that out, I guess."

I turn to go, my own boots stirring up dust as I take a step, but before I get to the entrance of The Two Step, he's caught up and wrapped a warm hand around my elbow. I stop walking and he comes around to face me, blocking the light from the building.

"I don't want to only do this for the kids," he says, his words sounding somewhat forced. "It's for me too."

Still not an us, but I'll see it as progress. "Oh?"

He nods and I watch his throat work as he swallows. "I want to . . ." His lips work while he figures out what he's trying to say, and I wait patiently. "I want to change the status quo. I don't know that we can go back, or whatever, but I want to have what we had before. I want to have fun with you."

I'm glad I waited, because those words were worth hearing. I smile and place a hand against his chest. "I want that too."

He grimaces, but chuckles at the same time. "This isn't fun, though. Maybe it's doing damage to our goal?"

I pat his chest once and start walking again. He releases my arm and falls in beside me. "It's one song," I state as he reaches around me to open the door. "After that, we can sit back and watch everyone else."

"One song," he mumbles as I enter, sliding past him. "Together?"

I look at him over my shoulder. "You know what the list says. Solo."

We get inside and hook a left, past the bar and down a hall to where there's a smaller, darkened room with a little stage and a mic stand. The Two Step really has it all, which happens a lot in rural areas. You have to diversify to satisfy.

Steph, Ryan, and Landry are all flopped on scattered couches that have seen better days, while Walker is standing near a table using a remote to flash through a list of possible song options on the screen. I join Steph and Ryan on their couch and watch the screen a moment before realizing Holden is still standing in the doorway like a frozen fainting goat who is about to go down.

He's reading the list, looking like he'll bolt at any moment, but before he can, a waitress comes up behind him and politely asks if he can scoot aside so that she can come take our drink or snack orders. Holden, in his politeness, nods at her and comes farther in. As he steps aside, I recognize the waitress who'd been here when we came line dancing. Her gorgeous red hair is up in a high ponytail tonight and she has on a tee that has The Two Step logo across the front.

"Birdie," I greet with a cheery wave, and her eyes light in recognition as she beelines over to me.

"Leni, right?" she asks, glancing around the room. Her eyes land on Walker who has suddenly decided to puff out his chest awkwardly, and she raises her eyebrows at me. "Does he need physical therapy or something?" she asks. "Because that looks unnatural and painful."

Landry and Holden crack up as Walker resumes a normal posture without his expression even shifting. He takes her insult with a shrug as he goes back to looking at song options.

"You guys are not the typical karaoke crowd," Birdie says as she tilts her head toward Holden. "I'd have put money on never seeing your husband inside this room." Her eyes land on Landry—who wasn't with us last time—and she offers him a smile, which has Walker scoffing under his breath. "And you? Where do you fit in?" she asks him.

Landry stands, tugging down the front of his blue suede vest, and then tipping the brim of his hat as he takes a few steps to shake her hand. His grin is warm and kind, but not flirtatious, as he responds to her question.

"Landry Crawford. Youngest brother. I'm here to film and nothing more," he says in a firm tone that has Birdie grinning. "This is not, and never will be, my idea of a good time."

"All right," she says. "What is your idea of a good time?"

I watch with a smirk as Birdie warms to a man who obviously isn't flirting with her. Walker watches too, his eyes slitted, as does Steph, and I know what we'll be gossiping about next.

"I'm not sure telling you would make you like me more," Landry grins, his blue eyes dancing as he uses one hand to smooth over his goatee. "Let's just say, I probably should have grown out of it years ago, but when it's true love, it lasts."

Birdie laughs, and the rest of us join in. Landry's love of motorcycles and speed is, indeed, something his parents have often told him he's too old for.

"Fair enough. And you?" She looks to Holden. "You actually singing?"

"Sadly," he mutters. "Thanks to a promise I made."

Birdie's green eyes crinkle up. "I like a man who makes good on his word."

"Only a loser wouldn't," Walker pipes in, and Birdie doesn't bother to look his way when she replies.

"Well, I guess I've known a few losers in my time then." Her tone has gone from playful to sad, and I wonder once again what brought her here. Her body visibly stiffens and she paints on another smile. "What can I get y'all?"

We give our orders for drinks and chicken wings, and then Birdie disappears, promising to return with it soon. As I watch her walk away, I promise myself I'll invite her to lunch when she comes back.

"Is everyone ready?" Walker claps his big hands and stands, stretching the seams of his denim shirt as he does.

"Nope," Holden says, making the entire room laugh.

"I'm first," Steph says, stepping in front of Walker, who clearly wanted to go first, and taking her place on the stage.

She's wearing a sparkly vest over a white T-shirt, and a long skirt with black boots. The sparkles in the vest catch what little light there is in here. Maybe it's easier to sing in the dark, and that's why they make it feel like a cave. The music builds and Steph launches into a sad, sappy song about a person whose life has gone off track and who misses their love. Her voice is good enough to keep us from laughing, but she dances like she's attempting to tell the story with her body too, and we all clap along.

Ryan is eating it up, and I keep wiggling my eyebrows at her and tipping my head toward him. She turns sideways so she can't see me, and I love it so much that I whistle and cheer as she wraps up her song.

Walker is next, and he's completely predictable with his song selection. It's upbeat country music and he sings with his entire heart, pacing the stage in bouncing strides and trying to get us to yeehaw with him here and there—which Steph and I do happily. Landry scrolls his phone, watching motocross videos, and Holden and Ryan watch Walker without expression. If he's disappointed with the guys he doesn't show it.

Birdie comes in while he's singing the chorus with gusto and pauses to watch for a second. He smiles big at her, flashing teeth that he definitely has professionally whitened, and gives her an exaggerated wink. She rolls her eyes, purses her lips, and doesn't give him the time of day.

"Hey, Birdie," I lean close as she bends to set our food items down on the coffee table in the center of the room. "Want to exchange numbers and do lunch soon?"

She nods and smiles as she stands. "Yes, please." She pulls out her phone and hands it to me to program in my phone number. "I'll text you to set up a time," she says.

I nod. "Perfect. I look forward to it."

Walker hits a high note and it shifts our attention to the stage. He has his head tipped back, his long hair flowing down his back, his mouth wide open and eyes closed, and I hear Birdie snort as his hat falls to the floor.

"Okay, but you can't give that guy my number, no matter how many times he asks," she says.

I frown, torn between wanting to laugh at Walker's antics myself, and wanting to defend the nicest guy around. Birdie must see my expression because she backpedals and holds up a hand in a staying gesture.

"I'm sorry. I know he's your family. I'm sure he's . . ." she splutters.

I hold up a hand of my own and shake my head. "It's okay, I know how he looks in moments like this, and believe me, we tease him about it. But, he's a really hard worker with a huge heart. So, just, don't assume that what you see here is who he is."

She nods. "Yeah. Not everyone is who they seem to be."

I watch her look back up at Walker. Her cheek ticks a bit and then she looks back to me. "Sorry again."

"Don't be. And please, still text me about lunch. I'm always looking to make more friends," I say with a smile. "The pickings can be slim in small towns."

"Tell me about it."

She licks her lips nervously and nods rapidly before leaving the room. I watch her go, and when I notice the music is over I look back to see Walker also watching her leave.

That leaves me and Holden. I don't want to go down as the biggest pansy in the room, so I jump to my feet and rush the stage. But, Holden had the same idea and we get there at the same time.

"No way, I was here first," I cry on a giggle as I reach for the mic.

He steps up next to me and goes for a ticklish spot on my ribcage that has me dropping the mic with a squeal. He lunges for it, having to bend over to get it, and without thought I launch onto his back, wrapping one arm around his neck and dangling my other arm forward to grab at the mic that he's now holding away from me.

He laughs and straightens, and I hook my legs around his waist and hold so tight to his neck that he makes a gagging sound, causing me to lighten my hold.

"It's my turn," he states, but his shoulders are shaking with amusement. "I have the mic."

"You stole it from me, you rat," I respond, reaching again with my free hand. "Cheaters never prosper."

"I feel like I'm prospering right now, if you must know," he responds. He takes a few steps toward the podium where the songs are controlled, walking as though he doesn't have his wife hanging off his back like a monkey baby. "Now, which song do I want to sing?"

I squeeze his hips and use the hold to slide up his back and over one shoulder, hurriedly punching in the numbers for the song I chose. The music starts playing and he turns his head to look at me, eyes wide, mouth open, shocked.

"Traitor . . ." he starts, and then simply shakes his head.

I hop down, snag the mic and am just in time for the first words of the song to begin. It's a pop song that was well known when we were teens, and I do the dance moves that Steph and I choreographed in our shared bedroom. Steph claps and stands up, doing the moves with me, and every time I look at Holden he's smiling at me, fully entertained. I feel a thousand feet tall.

When I'm done, the others clap, and Holden gives me a bow before holding out his hand for the mic, which I very graciously

deliver to him with a deep curtsy that makes him chuckle.

As Holden is selecting his song, Landry's friend Beau and Beau's girlfriend, Kit, walk in, causing Landry to stand with a frown. He looks surprised to see them here, but not in a welcoming way. The music Holden chose has started playing, covering up any words the three of them are exchanging, and I suddenly wonder if I should record Holden, because his brother is clearly distracted.

But, before I can ask Landry, the music registers and my eyes snap to the stage where Holden is now standing, the mic in his white-knuckled grip, looking at his boots. I can't believe what song he chose. It's our wedding song. The country tune ramps up and tears prick behind my eyes as he starts to sing.

He's not good. His voice is soft and unsure, and he's not quite on tune, but it's my new favorite version of the song. Everyone is quiet, and Walker's hand lands on my shoulder at some point, squeezing with comfort. We all know how significant this moment is, and my heart soars with the music.

When he finishes, I stand up and clap loudly. The others take my cue, and Walker whistles a few times while Steph gives some cheers and air pumps with her fists. But Holden only has eyes for me as he steps off the stage. He walks directly toward me, his eyes searching mine, his cheeks still flushed with embarrassment, and I smile.

"Who says you can't sing?" I tease lightly, taking his hand in mine.

He immediately threads his fingers through mine and squeezes. "Everyone," he states.

"And everyone is right," Walker booms on a laugh, slapping Holden across the back.

The moment dissolves, and we all laugh, but Holden holds my gaze and squeezes my hand before we get caught up in whatever is brewing on the stage with Beau and Kit. Kit is dressed in what looks to be a softball uniform, complete with cap and grass stains on her knees. She's make-up free and looks like she's still sweaty. Beau, on the other hand, is dressed mighty fancy, ready to perform.

And perform they do. Beau goes all in, singing his heart out to some love ballad I don't recognize. He keeps nudging Kit to join in, but the small blonde just shakes her head and shrugs at us. So, he takes matters into his own hands by making Kit into his doll or something. He dances with her, and moves her around the stage, and when she tries to get down he tugs her back up.

I watch Landry grow more and more tense, and when Beau accidentally spins Kit too hard and makes her fall to her knees, all the men are on their feet moving toward her at once. Landry gets there first. He shoves Beau in the chest, making his best friend stumble backward, and then gives Kit a hand up.

Kit runs out of the room, and Landry seems torn between following her and giving Beau a verbal beating. He chooses Kit as the last notes of the song fade. Beau rolls his eyes and follows them, and in the silent wake of whatever that was all about, Ryan stands up.

I'd honestly forgotten he was there.

"So . . . my turn?" he asks.

I look to Steph, who rolls her eyes, and we laugh awkwardly. Then Walker joins in, and finally Holden, and poor Ryan stands on the stage in his fitted tee and dapper linen shorts, wondering what's so funny.

CHAPTER 14

Holden

MY PALMS SHOULD NOT be sweaty. Especially because I'm walking up to my cabin, to talk to my wife, and see my children. Nothing to be anxious about. And yet, I feel like I did when I went to ask Leni to our Senior Prom. The heat of the late afternoon presses between my shoulder blades and under my ever-present hat, and I wonder if I'm experiencing heat stroke or something. I'm a bundle of nerves, hoping the prettiest girl I know will say yes to me. The irony back then was that she was my committed girlfriend. The irony of now is that she's my wife. Yet something within me will never stop being surprised by those facts.

She's always been too good for me. Something I lost sight of for a time. I'm out here hoping to change that.

I knock on the back door of the cabin, count to five, and let myself in. I'm trying to respect that, for now, it's Leni's space and I can't simply enter at will. (Thunderstorms fall outside of those rules.)

I'm met by Josi's toothless smile and Mason's head lifting from where he sits at the kitchen table drawing what looks like a comic strip. The blinds are all open and bright sun fills the kitchen as I catch the scent of freshly mopped floors and lemony dish soap. Leni isn't there, but the footsteps I hear coming down the stairs tell me she's near.

"Daddy!" Jo-Jo cries, throwing herself at me with spread arms. Her heavy purple cast bounces against my shoulder as I bend down to meet her hug. "I saw a cat on the playground after swimming and he had really bad fur that needed a wash, but a girl told me not to touch him because he was dirty, but I said that sometimes dirty things just need a bath, but she said that was gross and I was dumb, and I said she's a meanie, and mom made me say sorry."

Leni enters the kitchen just as Josi finishes her rapid-fire story and she smiles at me. Her eyes are open and curious, happy to see me, and some of that anxiety drips away like the sweat running down my back. She's wearing cut-off sweats and the loose T-shirt that she prefers when cleaning. Her cheeks are rosy and her hairline is full of those tight little curls that come from hard work.

She looks beautiful.

"Wow," I say, tearing my eyes away to look down at Josi.

"I know," she responds, like my one word holds all the answers of the universe.

She slithers out of my arms and skips back to the living area where she flops down on a bean bag and picks up a book. Mason rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

"Go figure that when she does talk to people she gets in a fight about a dirty, old cat," he moans, clearly embarrassed like only a pre-teen can be.

Leni and I share a look as he goes back to whatever he's working on, and then it's all her. Everything else fades.

"It's four o'clock," she says with a teasing look. "I didn't realize you existed at this time of day."

"This is typically when I'm off in the forest scaring tourists into thinking Bigfoot still exists," I joke. Then I blink down at her, wondering how long it has been since I came home during daylight, cracked jokes, and chatted with my family. It feels odd somehow, like a faded memory of someone else.

"It's good of you to give the tourists a break," she nods seriously, one side of her mouth quirking up.

I shove my hands into my pockets. "I, uh, had fun at karaoke last night," I say quietly, for her ears only.

"Mom showed us the videos," Mason pipes in. So I hadn't been quiet enough. "I didn't think you'd do it." He laughs and sniffs. "I'm glad I wasn't there. It's so cringe."

"Landry managed to get me? Even with the Beau drama?" I ask.

"Yep." Leni nods with a smirk.

"And you're going to destroy it?"

She chuckles. "Nope. Playing that at your funeral."

I groan. "Considering I'm going to die of embarrassment, that will be soon."

She wiggles her eyebrows. "It's going to be memorable."

I find myself smiling down at her like a dummy and I snap my mouth shut. "I came over to see if you guys wanted to go on a date with me tonight."

"A date?" Mason asks. "With my dad?"

I give him a look. "Yes, it's a family date. You guys in?"

Leni's smile grows and she nods, Mason grunts, and Jo-Jo is on her feet tearing down the hall to her bedroom, presumably to get ready.

"What did you have in mind?" Leni asks, clearly so pleased that it actually makes me feel terrible.

This is such a small thing—taking my family somewhere, seeing them in daylight. I should have been doing this all along. Landry had been whittling something when I'd gone to see if he'd wrap up a couple things for me, and it got me thinking on the drive over that maybe he could pick up a little slack all the time. I certainly haven't had whittling time in a while.

"Dinner and ice cream?" I offer.

"Woohoo! Ice cream!" Josi yells from down the hall.

Leni's eyes crinkle up and I bask in it, taking in all of her familiar features. Her face holds all my best memories, and I want more.

"Ice cream it is," she says.

The three of them go off to get cleaned up for our date, and I do the same, taking a freezing shower in the stupid little camper bathroom, not willing to wait for the water to heat up with the sad, old heating system. I put on clean clothes and brush my hair, and even opt for nicer jeans than I usually wear. I leave off my hat tonight, not caring about my tan line. No one in Pinehaven will give two shakes about it, seeing as half the people look the same.

They're all waiting on the back deck when I return to pick them up, and I smile at them as I close the distance between my camper and my family. Leni's changed into a simple summer dress that shows off all the curves I love best, and her hair is loose and waving around her face. I can't tell you what the kids changed into, because my eyes are full of her and her alone. I reach for her hand and she takes mine, and together we walk toward the driveway.

"Let's take my car," Leni says, gently tugging my hand to move in that direction. "There's one hundred percent less manure on the floor."

She tosses me the keys, and I open her door to let her in, instructing Mason to do the same for Josi, which he says doesn't even matter because she's his sister. Leni and I share yet another smile and I feel a little spark shoot down my legs. It's a spark I've been hoping to get back. I hope she feels it too.

Josi and Mason tag-team running monologues about their days, their friends, and their interests as we make our way into town. I'm content to listen, so happy that the four of us are together and it's not for work or scheduled events. It feels spontaneous and fun, and I promise myself I'll try harder to make this happen now and again. I know I can't do it every day, but once or twice a month would be good for our family.

My family.

They mean everything to me.

We pull up in front of the only actual sit-down restaurant in town—a place I haven't been for years—and I murmur to Leni to sit tight while I walk around to let her out. Mason flat-out refuses to do the same for Josi, and I let it go for tonight but make a mental note to have yet another chat with him about gentlemanly manners. Not having a sister myself I can't fully understand his aversion to being chivalrous with her, but I do get the sibling dynamic and wouldn't have wanted to do many kind things for Walker and Landry as kids. Those years were more about wedgies and pranks than service.

I take Leni's hand and help her out, and I'm happy when she tucks her hand into my arm as I close the car door and turn to step up onto the sidewalk. She leaves it there while we walk the short distance, and once again, Mason keeps up a stream of chatter that has us smiling at each other.

"This is nice," Jo-Jo gasps when I hold the door open for her and Leni to go in ahead of Mason and me.

Mason looks inside and then up at me with a knowing nod. "Nice choice, Dad. You're going to get good points for this one."

"Good points?" I ask, chuckling as I pat his shoulder. "I'm not going for points."

He winks and nods. "Riiight."

I smile to myself but say nothing as I follow him in and then we all trail a waitress to a dark and cozy booth in the back corner that suits me just fine. I much prefer to be seated where I don't feel like I'm on display with the other diners. The booth is black and red leather, the table lit by a tiny lamp hanging directly overhead, and gauzy drapes fall across the window to keep the afternoon light filtered.

"Do you remember when your parents gave us a gift certificate to eat here as part of our Christmas present?" Leni says, looking over at me from where she's seated at my side. I nod and smile. "The food was terrible." She laughs and I join in.

"It's too pretty to be yucky," Josi frowns, taking it all in, her inner princess loving it.

"Wait. I'm not eating somewhere gross," Mason mumbles.

Leni shakes her head. "That was a different restaurant. This new one is better, don't worry."

"We'll see," Mason blows out a breath and I throw him a look. Either he's being weird tonight, or he's gone all teenager on me. He gives me a look back. "Just sayin'—we'll see. And we will."

Leni smacks her tongue and opens the menu. "And that is why he'll be sleeping in the camper with you for the foreseeable future," she says behind it with a side wink for me.

I know she's teasing, so I offer her a conspiratorial smile, even though I don't want to be in the camper for the foreseeable future.

It's a bit of an adventure getting food ordered, mostly because Mason has decided he's a food connoisseur and has ridiculous questions for the waiter about cooking conditions and meat tenderness that leave me baffled. Leni is fighting down giggles the entire time, and when she puts her hand on my knee and squeezes, I suddenly hope Mason will keep blathering on for another five confusing minutes. Her hand brings with it a warmth I've missed.

In the end, he orders a burger, which is zero surprise to me. Josi gets spaghetti, and when the food is delivered she slurps up a noodle and tells us it's just spaghetti enough for her—whatever that means. Mason, however, takes a bite of his burger and wants to ask if it was raised in fair conditions.

"Who is this kid?" I ask Leni out the side of my mouth.

She bites her lips and I watch, shamelessly. "I have no idea. He appeared tonight for the first time."

"He was raised on a ranch, but suddenly he doesn't understand anything about how beef cattle are raised?" I turn to my son.

"Do you even know what 'fair conditions' means?" I ask him.

He gives me a look. "Obviously."

"Okay, then what does it mean?"

"Free to wander and graze in a safe environment. Not in cages or stalls all day. Be the cow God intended them to be," Mason states.

"Like we do on Crawford Ridge," I state.

"Yeah."

I'm still confused about where he's coming from here.

"I'm in fair conditions," Josi pipes in, making Leni snort laugh and now it's my turn to put my hand on her knee and squeeze.

"I'm so glad, baby," I say to Jo-Jo warmly, stuffing down my own laugh.

"I'm not in a cage, and Mama lets me read all I want," Josi adds.

Mason rolls his eyes. "It's not the same, Josi." Then he takes another bite of his questionable burger and seems to swallow without chewing. "Cows aren't people. People automatically get fair conditions."

I hold back from telling him that sadly, not all people do live well.

Jo-Jo nods. "But cats don't. Remember that cat I saw . . ."

Mason groans. "We already know about the cat."

Jo-Jo won't be deterred. "If he had a bath, would that be fair conditions?"

"I wish I'd never said the phrase fair conditions," Mason grumbles.

I look over to see Leni's beautiful eyes all full of happiness as she watches her kids lightly argue about animal living conditions, and she must feel me looking at her because she turns my way.

"I'm not living in fair conditions," I tease under my breath, pouting out my lower lip playfully.

She smiles softly. "Poor guy."

"Daddy," Josi calls, dragging my attention from her mother, yet again. "Please tell Mace that goats don't hurt other farm animals for fun."

Somehow the conversation took a turn while I was wrapped up in Leni.

I smile. "Goats aren't mean."

"How do you know?" Mason asks. "We don't have goats on the ranch."

"Do you have goat experience?" I ask him, curious.

He shakes his head. "No."

"Then how do you know?" Leni asks.

He sighs. "This conversation is pointless."

This time when I reach for Leni's knee to signal my amusement, she's reaching for mine at the same time, and our hands get tangled briefly under the table. I take her hand in mine and place my fingers between hers, pressing our palms together. My face is still smiling, but my heart pounds hard with the contact.

After dinner, where we prevented Mason from asking any more questions about the meat sourcing here, we walk down the block to a small ice-cream shop. Leni passes, like she always does, and so I order a double scoop in a cup knowing she'll eventually cave and want some. The kids get cones, and we stroll around leisurely, eating our cones and chatting about this and that. Leni steals a few spoonfuls of my ice cream, and I'm glad that some of that closeness has crept back in. I'd feed her ice cream every night if it would make her stand close to me and be all soft and approachable like this.

By the time we get back to the ranch and our little cabin, the sun is beginning to dip in the sky. I walk with them to the back

porch and watch with a smile as the kids burst through the back door, calling dibs on the TV. It's an age-old battle that I fought with my brothers too.

I look at Leni, beautiful Leni, and try not to let my sadness show. I don't want to leave her here and go sleep alone.

"Tonight was . . ." Leni starts and then inhales deeply. "Amazing."

I grin. "Yeah?"

She nods. "Yeah."

I step closer, drawn to her in a way I don't think I'll ever get over. I watch her expression for any wariness, but she's open, and when I'm sure she won't rebuff me, I wrap my arms around her shoulders and pull her in for a hug. A hug—such a simple thing, but it feels powerful out here on the deck, on our land, after the things we've been facing. I haven't held my wife close like this, other than line dancing, in a long time.

She wraps her arms around my waist and sighs, settling in against me, both of us looking off in the direction of the sun that's dipping behind the tree line. I stroke down her back in a pattern I know she likes. Up and down her spine, then across her shoulders, and repeat. Her hold on me tightens and I dip my head to kiss her hair. Little streaks of feeling tickle at my arms and legs, and when she tilts her head back, I lean forward to press my lips to hers.

It's home.

She accepts the light contact, and I don't do anything to deepen it, not yet. She's willing, but she's not quite open, and I can feel that in the way she stays in my hold but doesn't snuggle closer. This moment is a test, in a way, and while I want to go for it, knowing how pleasurable kissing my wife can be, I hold back. If I get my way, there will be millions of kisses in my future, because I will never again stop kissing this woman.

With one last peck I pull away, letting her go, and she steps back. Her eyes are bright and her cheeks have a slight blush, and I have a feeling mine look the same.

"Goodnight," I say through a throat thick with longing. "Thanks for coming out with me."

"Thanks for asking me," she responds with a small, private smile.

I don't like stepping off the deck to walk to the camper, but I do it anyway. And when I glance back, she's still standing on the deck in her summer dress, her hair hanging down, and she waves at me. I feel that wave in the center of my chest, and when I turn back toward my trailer, I press my hand over that spot and leave it there for a long time.

CHAPTER 15

Leni

I'M SHAMELESSLY OGLING MY husband from the upstairs, east-facing bedroom of the homestead house. I'm supposed to be washing the window and changing the sheets, but I heard voices calling to each other and glanced out in time to see Holden leave the barn and stride over to Landry's truck. He's leaning against the driver's door that Landry has propped open, his back to me, and I am fully taking in the view. His hat is low on his head, his button-down shirt stuck to his back, and I have never been disappointed in the way Holden wears a pair of jeans.

I think about our family date, and that kiss, and how it felt amazing to be together that way.

"I booked our first wedding," Rae's giddy voice sneaks up behind me and I squeal and drop the glass cleaner. It bounces off the desk under the window and lands on its side on the rug below it. "Oh, shoot." Rae laughs as I hustle to pick it up before it spills. "Those stairs aren't silent, Leni. I was sure you heard me coming."

I'm blushing when I turn to face her, cloth in one hand and glass cleaner firmly in the other. "I was . . ."

The words trail off as she moves to stand near me and look over my shoulder out the window. She looks back at me with a knowing smirk.

"My boys sure are handsome."

I should not be blushing. I'm not a teenager with a forbidden crush, after all. I share a last name with the man in question. But, I blush anyhow, and make quick work of finishing the window and ignoring my mother-in-law's knowing looks.

"Did you need my help with another room?" I ask.

"Oh, no, I came to tell you that I just booked our first wedding."

My heart sinks. I know she assumes I'll be her right-hand gal with the weddings like I have been with the B&B, but I don't want to. Even more than that, I'd like to take back a few pieces of myself and shoot for my own dreams. It's just, I feel selfish putting it into words. I move to the mirror above the dresser and clean the glass until it sparkles, while thinking up a response.

"I thought you wanted to set aside some land for those events," I finally say, not meeting her eyes in the mirror.

"I do, for larger events. This is going to be really simple. The wedding party will all stay here, and they'll be married in the backyard and have the meal there too. There's no reception. It's sort of like an elopement, but they're bringing their parents along," Rae replies. "I thought it would be good to make sure we can pull off an event before I throw all my dreams in that basket."

She smooths out the bedding I replaced and I finally dare to look at the side of her face. She looks happy, and I feel terrible. I bite my lip as I settle the cleaners and rags back in their basket.

"I'll need help building an arch," she continues, "and we'll need to hire a florist to come cover it with flowers. You and the kids can help set up the long table and some chairs, and I'll hire a caterer to cook." She grins up at me, her eyes bright and her warm honey hair falling past her shoulders. "It's going to be a challenge, but I think it'll open some doors for us."

I know she expects me to be on board, because I've never given her a reason to think I wouldn't be, but my throat is sticky with dread.

"That's a big step," I say with a wobbly smile. "When is the wedding?"

"Next month. I warned them that August can be warm even in the high mountains, but they're both schoolteachers and want to get married before the end of their summer break."

"That's soon."

"It is, but we can do it. And, you're right, it is a big step." She takes a deep breath and stands straighter. "I'm realistic. I'm not looking to become a big player in the wedding industry. I'm thinking maybe five weddings a year is all. And, when Josi is a little older and you have some more time, you could expand if you want to." She walks over and takes my upper arm in her soft grip. "I'm in my late fifties, Leni, and my dreams are finally coming true."

Then, she walks out of the room humming under her breath. I can still smell her lavender scent and hear the clomp of her

boots on the stairs. It keeps time with my racing heart. I don't want this. How does a person go about letting their mother figure down?

I gather up the dirty linens and the bucket of supplies and head out after a few moments. I'm going to have to tell her how I feel, but I'm not sure I can do that when she only has a month until this first event. She needs time to hire someone else, or whatever she decides to do. Maybe I should do this first one with the caveat that she start looking for another person.

My thoughts have me distracted, so when the sheets shift in my arms and drop to skim the stairs, I'm not paying attention and my toe gets snagged. Next thing I know, I'm skittering on my stocking feet down the wooden staircase and fighting for my life. I reach out to grab the rail, but my hands are full with a cleaning bucket and more sheets, and I end up tipping forward. I gracefully catch myself by landing on my knees at the bottom of the staircase, my feet mummified in sheet, before falling flat on my stomach with a groan.

My toes are still on the bottom stair above me, my nose kissing the wood floor, when Holden finds me. I have no idea where the cleaning supplies have ended up, and frankly I do not care. My knees and ankles ache, and I'm still trying to figure out how I ended up here.

"Leni." Holden's voice interrupts my moaning and I watch his hat come into view as his hand lands on my back. "What happened?"

I take a deep breath and it feels shaky. "I fell."

I hear a little huff that tells me he shoved down a laugh. "I figured that one out."

"Sheet caught my toe."

"Let's sit you up, honey," he says gently, and between the two of us we manage to unwrap my feet from the sheet and get me moving.

As I shift to my hands and knees to press up, there's a sharp pain in my right knee that has me hissing, and my left ankle throbs. He hears the hiss and wraps his hands around my upper arms to pull me to stand, but standing hurts, and putting my full weight on my ankle makes me wobble. Holden bends without warning and swings me up into his arms. I grasp at his shoulders and make a surprised sound as he heads for the kitchen.

I catch a glimpse of Rae coming out of the main floor room that is used as an office, alerted by all the commotion, but she sees Holden carrying me and gives an eyebrow wiggle before disappearing again. She shuts the door behind her. Scheming, insightful woman.

"I can walk," I say to Holden because it feels like something I should say, even if I'm enjoying the ride. He smells like the sweet scent of hay and the muskier scent of horses, and it's familiar in a nice way. "You don't need to do this."

He grunts, but doesn't put me down until we're in the kitchen and he deposits me gently on the counter near the sink. My feet dangle as I scoot back to get seated more firmly, and I watch him disappear into the pantry where the first aid kit is kept. I don't think I need a full first aid treatment, but arguing isn't going to make any difference, so I wait while wiggling my ankle to see where it hurts, and rubbing a hand over my scraped knee. It's a warm July day, and I was working hard cleaning, so I'm wearing shorts and they did nothing to protect me. My knee is skinned and already bruising. Falling hurts more the older I get, regardless of how often I exercise to stay fit.

Holden is back and he tosses his cowboy hat onto the counter on the other side of the sink, exposing flat, sweaty dark hair. He sets the kit next to my thigh, his fingers accidentally brushing my skin as he opens it and rummages around for some antiseptic. At least that's what I assume he's doing, because he hasn't said anything to me. At all.

He finds the bottle and some cotton swabs, and gets everything ready, but I reach out to stop him before he touches my hurt knee.

"I can do it," I say, grumpy over Rae's announcement and his silence. I'd rather be alone than ignored. "Here."

He pulls away the damp swab and I look up to meet his determined eyes. "I think we both know I'm better at cleaning wounds."

I pinch my lips. "That may have been true when we were teens, but my experience as a mom means I've shot way past your skill level."

I reach again and he dodges, again. "That's what you think. I always wait until you're done and then do a second cleaning on the kids' scrapes and cuts."

I scoff. "There's no way that's true, considering you wouldn't have been around to give them a second cleaning."

It's snippy and rude, and I feel a little sorry for it, but he doesn't react. He simply lightly presses the cold cotton against my skinned knee. It stings and I grip the countertop tight to keep from kicking him in the kneecap, gasping.

His lips tug up slightly at the reaction before he reaches for a bandage. "Do you remember when we were out on the four-wheelers our senior year and you drove it into a rut that tossed you against a fence post?"

I bite my lip and nod. "We weren't supposed to be riding that day. Abe had specifically told us not to, but I don't remember why."

"I don't remember either. I only remember the ride back with you holding your arm, and then sneaking in here to get the first aid kit before doctoring your arm and leg in the barn." He grins and it lights up his face. "Surrounded by manure because I still

had to clean out the stalls."

"Man, we were so young that you still had a chore list," I tease, and then laugh, remembering. "Walker came in, all oblivious, and offered to get your mom to look at it."

"I bought him a new book on animal care to keep him from saying anything," Holden adds, patting my knee softly as he finishes bandaging it.

His eyes move up to meet mine, and they're all crinkled around the edges. Teenage Holden didn't have those lines, but they look good on him.

"You didn't tell me that," I smile.

He nods, still grinning. "It was a hard cover too. Not cheap."

"Walker is smarter than he gets credit for sometimes," I joke.

I wiggle my ankle and Holden watches, noting my flinch.

"Here," he says, before taking it in his rough hands and probing lightly.

The feeling is nice. I've missed his gentleness and care. Having Holden's attention is like having sunlight on you, and it's no wonder I've felt dark for the past few years. I've missed the sun. His hair shifts forward as he bends over me, varying shades of brown. While Walker's and Landry's hair gets even lighter every summer, Holden's stays dark, proof of his commitment to his hat. His skin, however, has deepened into the summer tan that always makes his eyes look a little more green.

"Your mom booked a wedding. Her first," I say, and his hands go still on my ankle as those hazel eyes move back to mine.

"Did she ask you first?" he asks.

I love that he asked that. I've gone with the flow for so long that somewhere along the way people stopped asking. The simple question makes me tear up, and I shake my head as I swallow hard and breathe in quickly through my nose. It's a little trick I use to keep tears from falling, and he knows it. His hand moves from my ankle and he wraps it around my wrist lightly.

"She didn't," he states.

I confirm it. "No."

"I'm sorry. You should be asked about things that will affect you. You don't have to be part of it. Not if you don't want to." He says it in a kind but firm way that I appreciate. "I'll talk to her."

I shake my head. "It's probably better coming from me. I don't need you to fight my battles."

His thumb grazes my inner arm. "Is talking to my mama the same as going into battle?" His lips twitch and I roll my eyes, shaking my head for good measure. "Good," he says lightly. "I was starting to worry that things were even worse than I suspected."

I manage a wobbly smile, the tears still fighting me. "She's going to be disappointed though. The wedding is next month. I can't walk away now. She needs someone to help her." I pause and then lean close and whisper, almost afraid to say it out loud. "I'm not a pot stirrer, and this feels like I'm stirring up trouble. Even worse, I think she's under the impression that I'll take over someday and run the business."

He frowns. "Why would she think that?"

I shrug, leaning back to meet his concerned eyes. "Probably because I've been helping with the B&B and never pushed back."

"The wedding is next month? That's fast for a wedding."

I nod, happy that he hasn't moved his hand from my wrist. "It's sort of an elopement thing. So, it's small and manageable. Like a test wedding." I wiggle my toes. "She says she wants to do five or six a year."

He sighs and our eyes lock as he searches my features. My stomach swoops and I curl my bare toes in at the feeling.

"I'm here to chat with Dad," he says thoughtfully. "I'll talk to her too. Last I heard she needed to get a few things in order before any of us are ready for weddings anyhow."

I place my free hand on his firm chest. "I'll talk to her about me though. Okay? I think she'll feel hurt if it comes from you. Like I ran to you and tattled or something."

He looks down at my hand on his chest and nods. "All right."

I drop my hand, and his eyes find mine again. The kitchen feels warm and cozy, which is silly because it's a large, family-sized room. But with me sitting on the counter and him standing so close that his stomach is nearly grazing my knees, his hazel eyes looking into mine, it feels private. That feeling has me taking a risk and hoping it will pan out.

"What are you here to talk to your dad about?" I ask.

It's a small question. It could be as simple as letting him know some supplies arrived, or as big as firing someone who messed up. The point in asking is to see if things are actually changing or if it's all in my head. He used to involve me in his life, but he stopped. This is me asking to be included again.

"I want to discuss the needs of the ranch," he says in a quiet, hesitant voice. I don't want to make any assumptions about what that means, so I nod, a sign for him to continue. "I want to redistribute things more evenly so that I can have better balance."

A smile teases my lips. "Work-life balance is all the rage these days."

He chews on his lips and nods. "I don't know how it looks yet, but I'd like to at least start the conversation."

"I love that."

He steps closer, closing the distance between my knees and his stomach, until I can feel his cold belt buckle against my unbandaged knee.

"I need to make some changes."

The hand that's been wrapped around my wrist releases and he trails light fingers up my bare arm to my shoulder and back down, watching the path as they go, and I lean into the touch. While Rae's announcement and my fall down the stairs weren't exactly good things, it brought me to this moment and I'm not complaining. I rest a hand on his shoulder and trace my eyes around his face, from his stubble-covered chin to the dark, unruly hat-head, and back down to eyes that are watching me closely. Eyes I've known forever.

"I'm glad you're talking to your dad," I whisper.

His hand wraps firmly around my biceps, and with a slight pull I slide in closer to him. His other hand comes to my cheek and brushes back a stray hair, and there's affection and desire in his gaze. Tingles chase across my chest. He kissed me two days ago, and I'd enjoyed it while feeling a little unsure at the same time, but here, now, I don't feel unsure anymore.

I want to kiss my husband.

So I slide my hand from his shoulder around to the back of his neck, and I guide him near enough that I can close that distance and press my lips to his. His mouth is warm and soft, and he pushes out a breath through his nose that tickles at mine. His hands move to my back and he wraps me in the same strong arms that carried me here from the staircase.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders, forgetting our surroundings and our current separated status, and kiss him with fervor and hope. Our bodies are both warm from the work we've been doing, but under that I can still smell his scent and I soak it up as I run my soft hands over his shoulders and neck. His hold on me shifts, one hand skirting to my waist to squeeze and the other moving up my spine and into my hair where he weaves his fingers through the waves.

I open my defenses to him, letting him in with full vulnerability, praying I can convey my tender heart through this connection. I'm jubilant and terrified. I know how beautifully Holden can love me, and how devastating it feels when he's cold, and I'm hopeful as our mouths move together and our arms band us in close that he'll feel how much I want him to eventually come home.

CHAPTER 16

Holden

Mason asked when we're doing our next Buck-It List item

Leni

It's almost been an entire week, I can see how he's worried about it. (insert sarcasm)

He's watching me send these texts. It's creepy

Leni

Oooh, cute, our baby is now our chaperone.

Something I didn't see coming

Leni

I'm not sure Mason will be happy about the next item.

What is it

Leni

Skinny dipping. Maple Pond.

His face turned red, he pretended to throw up, and now he's lying on the ground with fake convulsions

Leni

ha ha ha

Wait, he's alive. He won't make eye contact with me, but says we have to keep our promises

Leni

Is he going to require picture proof this time?

Oh my gosh, Leni, you just killed our son

Leni

ha ha ha.

He says no pictures, he'll have to take our word for it

Leni

So . . .

So . . .

Leni

It feels weird to invite my husband skinny dipping. Isn't that supposed to be a spontaneous thing?

We're adults. We practically have to schedule in our showers

Leni

Guess we can kill two birds then. Skinny dipping can be my shower. I'll bring the nature-approved soap.

I don't love my son reading these texts over my shoulder

Leni

Awkward

Mason says we have to do this tonight because he can't bear to worry over when our naked bodies will be in the pond. Like ripping off a band aid

You free later

Leni

Considering it's nearly 90 degrees today with no clouds at all and I've been stuck walking the property with your mom all day for wedding sights? Yes.

I'll meet you there after my yoga? Nine?

Is it dark by nine?

Leni

Doubtful.

I'd prefer it be dark

Mason just fake vomited again

Leni

Ha ha. Doesn't want his parents to scare the community?

Dark seems smart. Later then? Ten?

Ten is fine. Mason says he'll babysit Josi

Leni

So his parents can go skinny dipping?

He'd like to pretend we're going for pizza

Leni

Deal. Pizza at ten at Maple Pond. I'll bring towels.

See you there. (No actual pizza is coming.

I TUCK MY PHONE back into my shirt pocket and laugh at my son who is lying on the seat of our UTV, gazing up at the sky, probably wondering why he mentioned the Buck-It List at all. It can't be easy at twelve to be trying to match-make your parents. I imagine how I'd have felt if I was setting up a skin-only swimming adventure for my parents, and feel like flopping down next to him.

"You okay, Mace?" I ask, tugging off my hat and running my fingers through my hair as I lean against the frame.

"I want to be," he groans. "But this is gross, Dad. Why did you guys put that on your list?" He tilts his head to look at me, his dark eyes accusing. "I would never want to do that."

I fight back a smirk and stick my hat back on my head. "Bucket lists are supposed to be things you wouldn't normally do."

He sighs. "Oh, right."

Mason has been helping me this afternoon with some fence lines that were sagging and needed to be tightened. Because tools were required, we'd opted to take the UTV out for the repairs, and I'd let Mason drive a bit on the flat, straight areas. It's been nice. He talked my ear off about swimming and a video game he likes, and how Leni has seemed happier recently. I was happy to hear anything and everything he wanted to share.

Now, we're sweaty and tired and ready to pack up our tools and make our way back to the barn. He insisted on wearing a team jersey and basketball shorts, and they're filthy and have a few nicks in them where they caught on the barbed wire. He played it cool, but I think he'll wear better clothes next time.

"Think Grandma has any ice-cream sandwiches left?" Mason asks, already bouncing back from the horrors of this conversation.

I smile and stand up, heading toward where the tools are sitting next to the post we just finished working on. "I'm sure she does, buddy."

Mason helps me clean up, and as we head back down the rutted paths to the homestead my mind is completely on Leni. Ten o'clock is pretty late for me to be going anywhere but to bed, but I'm oddly excited about meeting up with my wife for some out-of-character, possibly scandalous behavior. It makes me think of young Leni who always wanted to push the envelope just far enough for a rush, but never far enough for actual trouble.

Man, she made me laugh. She drew me out and showed me a more fun side of living. I smile to myself and Mason kicks at my boot with his sneaker.

"I hope you aren't smiling because you're thinking about tonight," he mutters.

My smile grows. "I'm thinking about how much I like ice-cream sandwiches."

He rolls his eyes. "Right."

"Don't ask questions you don't want answers to," I tease him, reaching out to poke at his skinny rib cage.

When we've navigated the bumpier road and gotten onto a smooth, straight shot back to the main barn, I trade places with Mason and let him drive the UTV the last mile. It's slow going, but I don't encourage him to go any faster. There will be plenty of time for that in his life—especially if he's anything like his uncle Landry.

I watch him from the corner of my eye—because if he knows I'm looking he'll get weird about it—and catalogue the changes in him. Next month he'll be thirteen and heading into eighth grade. He's gotten leaner, losing the last of his childish roundness, and his nose and jaw are sharper. He's all arms and legs, and I'm sure a growth spurt is coming based on the fact that he keeps tripping on everything and doesn't seem to know where his body is located in space. At one point today I had to tell him he was standing on my foot.

We park behind the barn and unload the tools before we enter the barn and walk through the darker interior to the tool storage area. It's cooler out of the sun, and I'm grateful for the break. When we come out of the storage area we notice that Walker is in the barn, looking over a gelding we recently purchased from a neighbor. His hat is hanging off a stall post, his long blond hair pulled back into a queue with a bit of twine as he crouches down to inspect a front hoof.

"Walker!" Mason shouts, running toward him in gangly enthusiasm.

The gelding starts at the sudden sound and movement, tossing his head and snorting, and Walker is jostled a little. He puts the hoof down and stands, his big body unfolding as he does. He doesn't even frown as he looks at his nephew.

"Hey, Mace," Walker greets with his regular good cheer, putting his hands on his waist and flashing his white teeth.

My brother's self-grooming habits are an endless source of amusement to me. I've never seen such silky hair anywhere else. Ranch colors are brown and green, yellow and more brown. Walker is blues and whites and stands out big-time.

I, as always, pop the bubble when it becomes clear Walker isn't going to say anything.

"Mason, you can't come barreling in when Walker is working with a new animal. We don't know his temperament yet, and he could have been spooked and hurt your uncle."

Mason's joyous look fizzles and he hangs his dark head. "Sorry."

"No problem." Walker closes the pace between them and slaps a hand on Mason's thin shoulders. I'm honestly impressed that Mason doesn't drop to the floor. "Live and learn, buddy."

I raise an eyebrow at my brother and shake my head, but he ignores me and moves back a few steps to skim his hands over the head of the gelding. His hands are gentle and his voice calm as he chats with the horse. He squats down and his jeans get

pulled tight enough that I'm preparing for a show I did not sign up for.

"Dude, buy bigger clothes," I say. "Leave something to the imagination."

Walker looks over his shoulder. "They don't make them bigger than Goliath."

"Goliath?" Mason falls into the trap.

"Yeah," Walker looks back to the horse. "There's small, medium, large, extra-large, manly, superhuman, The Hulk, and then Goliath." He turns his head and flexes one arm, his muscles bunching up into little mountains. "Goliath."

I scoff and roll my eyes as Walker winks at my son and Mason laughs.

"What's his name?" Mason asks.

Walker stands back up and scratches the gelding's cheek. "I'm thinking Sir Loin."

Mason's face squishes up in thought as I sigh and roll my eyes. "No."

Walker moves to rub the horse on his big shoulder and nods at me. "It fits. We have beef cattle, he'll hopefully be working the herd, he's kind of regal. Sir Loin."

Mason, getting it now, laughs as the gelding, who seems to understand we're talking about him, stomps his front hoof against the floor.

"You don't like that huh? Thunder Hooves it is," Walker says with a nod that has some of his hair coming loose.

I swear Mason's eyes about fall out of his head as he blinks and then laughs again, this time louder.

I shake my head, even as a smile tugs at my mouth. "We are not having a horse named Thunder Hooves on our ranch."

"Why not?" Walker asks.

"Didn't he already have a name?" I ask in response. "The previous owners had him for a few years. They must have called him something."

Walker sniffs and pulls a face. "Bob. They named this beautiful, spirited creature Bob."

Mason stops laughing. "That's terrible."

Walker points at Mace. "It's a tragedy, buddy. Can you imagine coming home after a great day out herding cattle, checking fences, and watching the sun rise and fall, and your partner's like, *'Nice job today, Bob. High-five, Bob. You really showed those cows who's in charge, Bob.'*"

Mason nods solemnly as the three of us look at the chestnut quarter horse. I can't disagree. He's too handsome to be a Bob, but still, there's such a thing as melodrama, and Walker is dipping his toes in it.

"What about Robert?" Mason asks, and I hear Walker snort down a laugh that matches mine.

"Daddy!" A squeal breaks the quiet as Josi comes tearing into the barn, and I'm good with the change of topic. "You're back!"

Bob, the princely new addition, tosses his head and snorts again, but stays standing and watches as Jo-Jo approaches. Her hair is more orderly than usual, thanks to my mom's work I'm sure, and she looks adorable with some new teeth finally coming in.

"Hey," Mason says to her when she gets near, "don't you know you can't just run in here screaming? You'll scare the animals."

Walker and I exchange an amused look over Mason's shoulder as Josi stumbles to a stop. Her hazel eyes, wide with worry, meet mine and I immediately go to her side to assure her she's all right. Her little hand reaches for mine and she holds her casted arm at her side as she looks at the horse more closely.

"Who is he?" she asks.

"Sir Loin," Mason answers at the same time that Walker says, "Thunder Hooves" and I say, "Bob."

Josi wrinkles her nose. "That's a long name. I can't remember all of that."

We chuckle and I explain the name issue. She listens with focus and tilts her head, looking at the gelding who is also watching her. My children have been around horses their entire lives, but they're like Leni and haven't often had much interest in them. So it surprises me to see them both taking in the new arrival with such interest. I understand that for Mason it's more about connecting with his uncle. Josi, though, I'm not sure.

"He looks like a fox," Josi states after a few minutes. "His eyes are smart."

Walker scratches at the short beard growth covering his lower jaw as he looks back at the gelding. "Huh. Fox, eh?"

He then turns to look at Mason, who nods, and then at me. I nod too. Walker smiles down at Josi.

"Fox it is," he states.

Josi's smile blooms big and wide. "Did I just name a horse?" she asks in awe.

"Sure did, sweetheart," Walker nods. "All right, Fox, let's get you out to the corral to meet your new friends."

Mason, Josi, and I step back to allow Walker room to untie Fox's halter rope and lead him past us and out to the back paddock where a handful of our horses are lazily grazing. We watch as he guides Fox into a separate area, fenced off, where they can all scent one another and meet before being physically put together. Fox neighs and the other horses raise their heads in interest. When Walker and Fox are out of sight, I turn to my kids.

"What have you been up to today?" I ask Josi.

"Helping Grandpa sand some chairs to paint," Josi replies with a smile, showing me her dusty shirt. "He says I can paint one of them purple if I want."

I nod. "Purple would be nice."

"He says Grandma wants them to be fancy for her wedding parties, but that he'll make one just for me," she whispers, biting her lips in happiness.

It makes me smile and I'm thankful, once again, that my kids have grandparents who take care to spend time with them. As a parent I'm too busy working to care for them and to try teaching them right from wrong, but grandparents, man, that's where they get soaked in love.

"Grandma and Mama went to look at a field that has some big trees. Grandma thinks people will want to get married there," Josi supplies. "They left after lunch. It's almost dinner time."

I look out into the yard, past the homestead to where I imagine Leni and my mom are. I wonder if Leni has had a chance to break the news to Mama that she doesn't want to do weddings. Maybe I need to help that along.

"It's hot out today," Josi says. "That's why I stayed here with Grandpa in the shade."

I mumble agreement. Plus, it would be a long walk for her little legs.

"At least Mom and Dad will get to cool off when they go swimming tonight," Mason grumps.

I hustle to stop him from oversharing with Josi, but Walker overheard as he entered the barn again.

"Oooh, swimming huh?" Walker teases. "Just your mama and dad?"

Mason makes a face. "Yeah. With no clothes."

Walker's smooth gait stops and he glances at me with playfully large eyes. "Well, well, well . . ."

"No clothes?" Josi asks.

"It's gross," Mason says.

Walker laughs, big and loud. "This is interesting news."

"It's for their bucket list," Mason says. "I have no idea why they'd put that on there."

"Oh, I have a few ideas about that," Walker says, oh-so-helpfully.

I punch his shoulder, hard, and have to resist rubbing my fist when it feels like I punched a stone pillar. "Shut it, Walker."

"They're going to Maple Pond," Mason continues, and Walker howls, bending back at the waist.

"Nothing like some public indecency to bring a couple together," he hoots.

I look down at Jo-Jo who is standing with her arms wrapped around herself and a wrinkled forehead.

"Baby, Mason and Walker are teasing. You don't need to worry about it," I say to her, putting a soft hand on her shoulder.

"So you and Mama aren't going swimming without clothes?" she asks, looking up at me.

"Who's going swimming naked?" My dad joins us through the big open front of the barn and I groan, slapping my hands over my face.

I don't need to look at him to know that his bushy white mustache will be dancing with delight under green eyes.

"My parents," Mason says at the same time I say, "Nobody!"

I don't take my hands from my eyes, rubbing at them in annoyance. "This has gotten out of hand."

"There aren't many problems that can't be solved with a little skinny dipping," Dad cracks.

I throw my hands in the air and growl. "That's it. No one is swimming, ever, from this day forward."

"Yes," Josi cheers. "I hate swim lessons."

Walker and Dad laugh at that, but Mason scowls.

"But the bucket list," he reminds me.

"We'll find something else to do," I state, slamming my hands to my hips. "This family is banned from water." I make my expression stern. "And from telling each other anything, at all, ever. No news is the only news, got it?"

Mason shakes his head and Josi reaches up to take my hand. "But I have a loose tooth," she says. "Is that no news?"

My dad bends down to look into her eyes. "Let's see, sweetie."

Josi opens her mouth and wiggles a tooth, and my dad's wrinkled eyes nearly disappear with happiness over his granddaughter's loose tooth.

"That's a real winner, Jo-Jo. Bet the tooth fairy will bring a lot of money for that one." He grins.

"Just don't lose it tonight," Walker adds in. "The tooth fairy is tied up."

I glare at him as my dad disguises a laugh with a cough.

"She's busy?" Josi asks. "Doing what?"

I tug on her hand and get her walking out of the barn before my family can crack any more jokes at my expense. Dad and Walker laugh as we walk away, and Mason steps in beside me and his sister.

"Those two are a problem," I say under my breath.

"Sorry, Dad," Mason says. "I didn't mean to start something."

I'm not actually mad. I'm more embarrassed than anything. A family full of men is bound to rib each other, and I'm no angel myself. In an effort to practice openness, I put an arm around my son's shoulder.

"I'm not angry, Mace," I say, giving him a squeeze. "I'm sort of embarrassed, I guess. Your mom and I are trying to figure some things out and I don't like being teased about it. I know they love me and they don't mean to make me feel bad. It's okay."

"So this is a private thing?" Mason asks.

I nod. "Yeah, I think so."

"I can be more careful about private things," he says.

My heart warms and I snug him up against my side for a quick hug before releasing him. He's such a good kid, and that conversation went well. Maybe being open isn't such a bad thing after all.

"If we have to be good about private things, Daddy, then why are you swimming without clothes? Isn't that private?" Josi asks innocently.

I sigh. "Good point, baby. Your mama and I will figure something out."

Mason glances my way and I offer him a smile. "You have to finish the list," he says when Josi gets distracted by the blooming lupine flowers.

"We will, buddy," I say.

He stops me with a tug on my arm as Josi skips off to gather a few for Leni.

"Dad. I'm serious. This is important. The list needs to be done how Mom wrote it."

His brown eyes, so much like his mama's, stare at me with unbridled desperation, and I realize fully that my boy sees this list as the way his mom and I will be able to come back together. I don't tease, I don't push, I simply pull that lanky pre-teen in for a hug and promise him that I will.

CHAPTER 17

Leni

HOLDEN'S AGGRIEVED SIGH IS a sound as familiar to me as birds chirping and cows mooing, and right now it's coming at me through the speaker on my phone as I shift back and forth on nervously excited feet.

"Where are you?" he asks.

I shove down a giggle. "I'm on the north side, by the big diving rock," I reply.

Darkness fully fell about five minutes ago, and I stand at the side of Maple Pond that's the farthest from town—which isn't saying much, considering Maple Pond is in town. When the town started building out, the city planners put the pond in the center, making it and the area around it into a community green space. Apparently nineteen-year-old Lenora Stilton thought it would be hilarious to skinny dip in the only public pond around. She was trouble.

One side of the pond is bordered by businesses, and the other three by homes, so if we're lucky and people have gone to bed, no one will realize what this married couple is up to. Luck doesn't always follow me though, so I'm expecting some gossip to spread.

"I am way too old and respectable to be sneaking around to swim in a pond," Holden grumbles.

"Especially on a weeknight. You have a responsible big-boy job to get to in the morning," I razz him, pumped up by the pure adrenaline pouring through me.

"Why didn't we drive over together?" he asks.

"I don't know. It's more exciting this way?"

He scoffs. "Because swimming unclothed in this public pond isn't enough? You also get jazzed by me having to hunt you down first?"

"Marco . . ." I yell into the stillness around me.

He hisses into the phone. "Do not yell."

"You're supposed to say polo."

"I know the drill, Leni."

"How are you supposed to geolocate me without the polo part?" I tease.

He sighs, but there's amusement in his voice. "I see you now."

"Okay, you went spidey-senses. Good plan. Less obvious."

He chuckles and the phone goes dead right as his large shape comes out from the shadows fully dressed. Cowboy hat, Western shirt, jeans, boots, and belt buckle all intact. Like he simply walked straight from the ranch.

"You don't look prepared," I gesture at him.

He looks down at himself. "I was not driving over here in my birthday suit, Sunshine."

I laugh and blush with pleasure at his use of my long-ago nickname. He used to tell me I was nothing but sunshine, and he was a man who loved some sun.

I point at myself. "Swimsuit, cover-up, beach towels. I'm prepared to swim."

"And I'm prepared to have no one wonder why I'm driving through town at ten o'clock in my beachwear."

We hold each other's gaze for a moment and I shake my head and breathe in through my nose. "I have a plan."

"For what?"

"For how to . . . disrobe and enter the water."

He grins, his white teeth catching the moonlight. "Disrobe? I'm intrigued."

"I'll turn my back and you get undressed and in the water. When you're under you look away and I'll do the same."

He tosses his hat onto the grass leading up to the water's edge. "Why are we playing at modesty?" he asks.

I blink. "Because we're modest people?"

"Who have been married a long time and have two children together," he says deadpan.

My face heats and my heart races as I fold my arms. "And who have been separated for almost two months."

"Yikes, did you go through a molting phase I'm not aware of, turn into a bridge troll?" he jokes.

"If anything, I've had a glow up," I retort in a playfully regal tone.

He shrugs and starts unsnapping his shirt. "I'm not pressing for anything, honey. Your plan is fine with me. Turn around."

I do, facing the back yards of dark homes, hoping none of them have security cameras. The homes aren't super close, and any footage would be grainy at best, but the thought is enough for me to feel awkward about what we're doing.

"Why did you choose Maple Pond for this?" Holden asks, and I hear his belt buckle jangle as he unhooks it.

I chew my lip and kick off my sandals to wiggle my toes in the cool grass. "At the time I must have thought it felt scandalous. I had a thing for that."

"Congrats. It is indeed scandalizing me."

I laugh, put a little at ease by his obvious nerves. At least I'm not alone in questioning this choice. The air is still heated from the day, but with the sun having set, things will start feeling cool quickly in the high mountain range we call home. I know the water won't be warm in the deeper parts where we'll have to go to maintain some level of cover, and I shiver at the idea. How long do we have to stay in there for it to count?

At dinner tonight Mason had made me swear we'd go through with it, and the reminder of how much he wants us to figure things out had steeled my resolve.

"I'm not going to lie," I call over my shoulder, "I thought about coming out and pretending we'd gone through with it but not actually getting in."

Holden huffs behind me. "Me too. At the very least cheat a little by wearing a suit. But Mason got to me."

"Me too."

"After announcing to my dad and Walker that this was happening tonight."

I gasp, and without thinking turn to look back at him. "No!"

He's standing there holding his jeans in his hands, still wearing underwear, and smirks when our eyes meet. "Not feeling modest right now?" he cracks.

I spin back around quickly, my face hot again. "Sorry." I puff out some air. "I'm not looking forward to seeing Walker ever again, not because I'm embarrassed to do this, but because he'll never let the story die."

More movement from behind me, and then I hear the splashing of him entering the water. He makes a little eep sound at the temperature and after a bigger splash he calls out that it's my turn. His voice is a little higher pitched and breathless than usual, which has me fearing how cold it'll be out there.

I undress and run into the water at full speed before I can talk myself out of it. It's not so bad at first, the sun having warmed the shallow areas, but by the time it hits my belly I suck in a breath and make an eep of my own.

"Just drop in up to your shoulders real quick," Holden advises. "Get it over with faster."

I drop in and my breath is sucked from me. "This is the worst. It never gets better."

I shuffle out until the water is over my shoulders and my toes can still touch the bottom to keep me anchored, but once I've found a good place to hang out I tread to stay as warm as I can.

"How long do we have to be here?" he asks as he turns to face me from a few feet away. "The list didn't say."

"Until the cops are called," I reply, trailing my fingers through the water as my arms move side-to-side.

"Please tell me you're joking," he states.

I grin, and then laugh and splash water at him. "Of course I'm joking. Can you imagine? The police would take one look at us, laugh, and go back to the station because the idea of responsible Holden Crawford doing something so disreputable would be the joy of their week."

He splashes me lightly in return, and I catch him smiling back in the moonlight. "They'd cuff me and haul me to jail."

I wipe the water droplets off my face. "They'd buy you pie at Summit Sage."

We fall into amused silence and it's nice, actually. Quiet, but daring. Fun.

"I, uh, was checking out that shed on our property tonight before I came out here. The one you mentioned turning into a yoga studio," he says, too casually, looking up at the sky.

"Really?"

"Yeah. It has good bones. I think we could insulate the walls and put up sheetrock, paint it out, replace the floors, add some lighting and maybe HVAC of some sort so it could be used year-round. It has potential." He looks back at me. "If that's something you're still interested in."

I have to swallow over the lump forming in my throat. He listened, and then put it into action.

"Yeah. I am."

He smacks his lips together. "Okay."

"What about you?" I ask him. "If you could choose any path for your life, where would it take you?"

He's quiet, tipping his head back to dip it in the water and then rubbing the trails of liquid off his face when he stands straight again.

"That's both hard and easy to answer. I always wanted a family, and I like working the ranch. You'd think I have everything I ever wanted. And yet . . ." He pauses and my heart thumps as I wait to see where he'll go with this. "And yet, none of it has worked out quite how I hoped it would, you know?"

He looks to me and I nod, because I do know. On paper there's not a thing wrong with our life, but in reality, well . . . it got bent out of whack.

"What would it take to make it feel successful to you?" I ask, daring to keep pressing.

If we're going to come back together we have to rebuild this between us, even though I feel like I'm walking on a pirate gangplank every time I reach out. I'm brave, though, because he's begun to reach back, to keep me from falling off that proverbial edge.

"I'd like to step back a little. Dad semi-retired and I took it all without questioning anything. Walker has his place with the animal welfare and recordkeeping, so he's pretty set. Landry, well, I think he could take some off my plate, but at the same time, he's sort of the do-everything guy and just goes where he's needed. I'm not sure what it looks like yet." His hands float on top of the water like mine, and his shoulders sparkle with water droplets as he swishes around. "I want to be with the kids more. They're getting so grown up."

My stomach clenches as it does every time I really look at my babies and see how big they've gotten. "I know. Mason surprises me every day with how much he's maturing. Josi isn't a baby anymore. She has the most insightful thoughts. Can you believe they're almost thirteen and eight? I can still remember so clearly being thirteen."

"I'm missing it," he mumbles.

Now it's my heart that tumbles. "I know, babe. That's why I had to do something." His eyes swiftly move to mine, and I don't know if it's because of the pet name I haven't used for a long time, or because I openly referred to the fact that I sort of kicked him out, but I meet his gaze with raw honesty. "It felt like you'd forgotten us."

I watch his shoulders lift on a breath, but I can't read every thought that crosses his face because of the shadows around us and the distance we're maintaining. He's quiet and I can't decide if I should have said it or not, but things are shifting and changing, and I so want us to find a way to continue walking this path together.

"I didn't see it," he says at last. "Or, maybe I saw it but thought I didn't have a choice, that that's how being a husband and father is. I don't know." He makes an annoyed sound and shakes his head. "It wasn't on purpose."

"I believe that."

"It became habit to be away. You're such a capable person, and our kids are so great, and the ranch was expanding . . . I focused too heavily on that and . . ."

He tapers off, his tone sad and discouraged, so I splash him in the face with a little water, not much, nothing unkind, but something tells me to stop his words before he falls into a place of blaming himself for all of it. There were two of us there, and while self-reflection is good, self-flagellation isn't.

"Hey, thanks for thinking I'm capable," I say lightly.

His expression shifts and he flicks water back at me. "You are. And funny and beautiful and kind." He bites his lips and drops his voice. "I missed you."

The warm words have me drifting toward him. "So, I ask again, what would life look like for you if you could have your perfect version of it?"

His hand glides along the water and he runs a fingertip over the back of my hand where it's floating. "I'd talk with you more, like this." His hand trails up to my wrist and back down to my fingertips. "I miss that."

"It's been pretty solitary for both of us."

"Yeah." He turns my hand over and weaves his fingers through mine. "I'd like to have our days overlap more. Maybe we meet up for lunch a couple of times a week on the ranch somewhere. It doesn't need to be a big deal, simply having time together. We can eat in the saddle for all I care."

"I like that idea a lot," I say, and I do. Time is so important, and we've squandered it. "But I'll drive lunch out in the UTV." Even after all these years, I'm not a horse girl.

He smirks and reaches for my other hand, surprising me by tugging me along until we're spinning in slow circles, almost like weightless dancing, in the dark water. There's space between us and my skin is chilled from the cold water moving over me. I also sort of need to use the bathroom because I'm in my thirties now and I've birthed two children, but all of that disappears when we move into a position where the moon hits his face and for a moment I can see him looking back at me. He's smiling, his eyes bright and his dark hair slicked back from his head. He looks younger, weightless, and I smile back at him.

"I'd like to have a real vacation every year. Somewhere far, far away from ranch life. Maybe a tropical beach," he says.

My mouth drops open. "A beach? Really? I've never heard you utter the word vacation. I had no idea you wanted to take one."

He purses his lips. "I didn't think I could, so I stopped wishing for it and kept working. My hard work equaled providing for you and the kids. I couldn't be distracted from that."

I squeeze his hands. "We all need to be distracted once in a while."

"This is pretty distracting," he mutters, and I giggle like the teenager I was when we met, blushing as I do.

"I can't believe that made me blush," I joke. "I should be way past that by now. At ease, you know?"

"I'm not sure I'll ever be at ease while floating in a public pond without any clothing."

I laugh and he spins us extra fast so that my feet fly out from behind me. I should be too old for this, but I love it. I feel free and light and I toss back my head and smile big. I feel like giggling some more, and I didn't know that could still happen.

"What about you?" he asks. "What does your perfect life look like?"

He slows us to a stop and I'm sorry when he releases my hands. "Well, I like where you're going with making more time for the family and tropical beach vacations. You know I'm still into the yoga studio idea. Aside from that, I don't think I'd need a single thing. Being with my family and making a little dream of my own come true, it's more than enough." A thought hits me and I blurt it out. "I hope I didn't pressure you into working so much because you thought I needed more than that."

He shakes his head. "That pressure came from myself, and maybe from the need to prove I was up to the task of marriage and parenthood."

I sigh, relieved. "You know that all I ever wanted was you and our kids and our comfy little cabin."

"And some stretchy time with nature sounds around you," he cracks.

"Stretchy time?"

"Yeah. Yoga is stretchy."

I laugh some more. "I do love the nature sounds and wearing athletic clothing."

"You wear it well, baby."

He drops his voice an octave and wiggles his brows and while I'm totally caught off guard by the absurd, over-the-top, flirting, I love it. I splash him once more and start turning for shore.

"Let's get out of here. I'm freezing," I say.

He turns while I get dry and dressed, and then I do the same, and eventually we're both holding a wet beach towel, all dressed, still a little cold maybe, facing each other in the dark.

"I don't want to admit that it was fun because I don't want to do this again," he says, chuckling.

"Oh, yeah, same here. Fun and done."

He scratches at his head and puts his cowboy hat on, officially shading his face from my view, and reaches for my hand. I wrap my smaller fingers around his wide palm and follow him toward the parking area. I love that he's holding my hand.

"Still don't understand why we had to come separately," he grumps.

"All part of the adventure," I remind him.

We walk in silence for a bit and when we get to my car he pauses, leaning one hip against the hood.

"Do you think you could make that perfect life list of yours happen with me?" he asks, his tone serious and fragile enough to be nearly carried off in the night.

I put a hand on his arm. "I think so. Do you think you could build your perfect life with me?"

He covers my hand with his. "No doubt in my mind."

And when he leans forward for a kiss, I lean in too, welcoming it. Our lips are a little cold from our swim, but they warm up quickly, and when he sets his hat on the roof of my car and rests his hands on my waist to pull me in close, all the remaining chill is gone, replaced by a comforting heat that trails up my spine straight into my chest.

CHAPTER 18

Leni

"LET ME GET THIS straight," Steph says to me over the rim of a coffee mug a few days later. "You and your estranged husband tainted the waters of Maple Pond, and he did it willingly?"

I nearly choke on the blackberry pecan scone I'm chewing, and have to cover my mouth to keep from spraying it across the cafe table at her. I shake my head, eyes wide, mirroring Steph's expression, and hurry to swallow. So much to address in that one sentence. I don't like Holden being described as estranged. Sure, a few weeks ago I maybe would have categorized it that way, but things are different now. Is there a place between together and estranged? A middle state? Middling associates? Buffer zoned?

I forget trying to explain the nuance to my sister and instead say, "Oh my gosh, Steph, nothing was tainted."

She blinks her brown eyes slowly, exaggerating the movement. "But he was willing? Because I'm having a real hard time picturing that."

"Stop trying to picture Holden at all," I huff. "We're doing that Buck-It List thing, remember."

She takes a drink of her coffee, watching my face. "Because your kids begged you to."

I start to respond that, yes, my children are the reason, but the words stick in my throat. I take a sip of the chai in my cup and Steph watches me with that same laser stare she's been using for the past ten minutes. Why did I invite her out this morning? I should have used this precious time while Mason is at swim practice and Josi is at her swim lessons to go on a jog. Instead, I'm sitting in the Summit Sage Cafe being interrogated by my skeptical sibling while wondering how we managed to dress alike this morning, yet again. It happens too often. Today we're both in rust-colored sleeveless tops and jean shorts with our hair pulled up in a high ponytail. No wonder we're so often asked if we're twins.

"I miss Tina," I say, referring to our older sister who's never around and never cared to be. She's six years older than Steph, and I think it broke her heart to no longer be an only child. The comment is a light-hearted dig meant to get Steph to back off. "She'd never push into my business."

Steph scoffs. "Does Tina even know you have children?"

I grin. "Not sure."

"Exactly. She wouldn't care enough to ask the hard questions. Like, does Holden have the shoulder muscles I think he does?"

This time I do choke, both from her question and from the undeniable yes I almost said out loud. He does. Shoulders for days.

"He's your brother-in-law," I manage.

She smirks. "You didn't use to worry about that. When the two of you were dating you told me all about his finer attributes, to the point where I begged you to stop."

"I've matured."

"Mm-hmm. Because mature people sneak out to Maple Pond."

I laugh. "Bet you've thought about doing it a time or two."

She nods and takes a forkful of the quiche she ordered. "Not only thought about, but done." She points her fork at me. "When I was sixteen."

"Well, I wrote the list when we were teens, so blame it on that."

She smiles. "You've ridden a mechanical bull, eaten pie, line danced, and skinny dipped. I'm almost afraid to ask what else is on the list."

"A tandem bicycle ride through town . . ." My cheek twitches as I debate adding in the last, super cringe-inducing second part. "Playing a song on a speaker."

"What song?" she asks with a cheek twitch of her own.

"'Endless Love' by Diana Ross and Lionel Richie." I smack my lips and shake my head. What was I thinking?

"Yeah, you were definitely a teen. Are you going to do it?"

I take another sip of chai. "Mason won't rest until we do."

"Is that the only reason?"

I tap the side of my mug as I think on it. Initially, yes, we did the list because Mason was adamant that we do it, but now, I don't know. I can see how it's been helpful in getting us spending time together again, and talking more. So, yeah, I think I want to finish it, but not because we have to.

"Not anymore."

Steph sits back and pats her stomach before pushing her chair back. "Bathroom break. Don't go away."

Leave it to her to ask a probing question that gets me thinking and then dash off. I roll my eyes and nod, picking up my phone from beside my plate and shooting off a text to Holden.

Hey, do you think we should finish out the Buck-It List

I'm pleased when his response comes in immediately. It reminds me of when we were dating and he'd text me all the time, like he was waiting for communication from me. It's as flattering now as it was then, I bite at my lips as I read his reply.

Holden

Yes

Not exactly eloquent, but it gets the job done and he didn't hesitate.

I think doing the list has been good

Holden

I do too.

I kind of want to do it for us

It's almost silly how brave it makes me feel to say that to the person who I should have been able to express vulnerable things to all along. I take it as a sign that we're in a better place, which gives me the courage to send another.

Not just for the kids

Holden

Agreed. Isn't it the tandem bike one?

I smile, happy he remembers.

Yeah

Holden

Okay. I'll take care of it.

My smile grows big and my chest feels buzzy at the thought of him handling it.

And you remember the part about the song

Holden

Unfortunately.

Ha ha ha. Can't wait

Movement to my side has me setting my phone down and looking up to see Birdie, the waitress from The Two Step, standing above me. Her bright copper hair is in two braids down her back, and she's wearing an apron around her waist, over what I think are much nicer clothes than anyone else here is wearing. Her jeans and blouse do not look like she purchased them at the local supply store like the rest of us do.

"I want some of whatever has you smiling like that," she says with a wide smile of her own.

"Birdie," I exclaim. "I wondered where you got off to. I tried texting you but never heard back."

She closes her eyes and opens them again slowly. "I'm so sorry. A lot happened recently."

I take a closer look at the apron and the logo on it. "You're working here now?"

She nods, and there's a brush of sadness before her eyes clear again. "Yeah. The Two Step didn't work out, but I was lucky enough to get hired on here last week."

"Are you commuting, or have you been living in Pinehaven and I didn't realize it?"

"I didn't live here until last week." She makes a face and I can empathize with everything unspoken in that sentence.

"So . . . like you said, a lot has happened recently." I smile kindly, understanding how life can go off the rails.

"Yeah, going on month four of the epic unwanted, unplanned ride of a lifetime," she states, pulling at the apron ties around her waist. "I'm so sorry your text got forgotten in the mix. It wasn't on purpose."

I nod. "Not a problem."

"Anyhow, can I get you anything else? A refill on your tea or your sister's coffee?"

"Not right now, thanks, but would you be free for lunch soon? Or dinner if you work the day shift."

She bites at her glossy lips and consults a delicate bracelet watch on her wrist. "Actually, my break starts in five minutes. I could . . . I mean, if I'm not interrupting."

"You're not," I state, gesturing to an open seat next to me. "We'd love to have you."

This time her smile reaches her eyes and she nods as she heads to other tables to check in. I watch her go, wondering how someone so obviously different from the locals has ended up here. Everything about her says she's had a little more prosperity as a rule, but she's waiting tables in a tiny town in Utah, at a place where only locals really go. We're not even one of the destinations for outdoor enthusiasts. It's a puzzle.

Steph breezes back into her seat and picks up her fork to go at her quiche again. "What did I miss?"

"Holden is going to take care of the last bucket list item, and Birdie works here now. Remember her from The Two Step?"

Steph smiles over a mouthful of food. "The sassy redhead who put Walker in his place twice? Sure do. Love her."

"Good, because I invited her to sit with us during her break." I fiddle with the tea sachet. "There's something about her that makes me think she could use a friend."

Steph's expression grows thoughtful and she washes her quiche down with what has to be cold coffee at this point.

"We could be her friend," she states. "As long as she's open to a matronly older woman and a married lady with no regard for public exposure laws."

A laugh bursts out of me. "You are not matronly in any sense of the word, and there will be no talk of me or Holden or our clothes."

"Or not clothes."

"Steph!" I hang my head in my hands and groan.

Her answering chuckle is drowned out by the sound of the chair next to me sliding out.

"Are you sure I'm not interrupting?" Birdie's soft, slightly southern voice joins us.

I look up at her. "I'm so glad you're here. This one," I point at my sister, "needs to be interrupted."

Birdie smiles as she sits down and places a wrapped sandwich on the table in front of her. "I used to wish I had siblings, but sometimes I think I'm lucky to be an only child."

Steph and I both laugh, and I say, "There are pros and cons. Today is heavy on the cons."

Steph rolls her eyes. "So, Birdie, where are you from? Because it isn't Under the Notch," she says, referring to our area of Utah. "Not with those clothes and that accent."

Birdie's cheeks lift and she raises her eyebrows. "My clothes and accent make it that obvious, huh?" she replies, but it's in a light, teasing tone that says she's very aware of how she stands out.

I put a hand on her arm. "Steph is a wrecking ball."

Birdie pats my hand with one of hers and looks directly at my sister when we both let go. "I'm from Austin, Texas."

"That's a long way from here. You must be bored out of your mind," Steph says with a sarcastic lilt that tells us it's her who's actually bored. "So many cows, so much snow, muddy roads, and nothing big to offer unless you're into dinosaur fossils."

"Maybe I love dinosaurs," Birdie cracks, and I grin at her.

"Liar. You're too put together to be a dinophile," Steph retorts playfully.

Birdie's brows drop and she looks to me. "Is that a thing?"

I nod and tilt my head. "Yep." I pop the P.

Birdie sucks in a breath. "This place gets weirder all the time."

Steph taps a fingertip on the table. "Which brings me back to my point. What brings you here?" Birdie opens her mouth to answer, but Steph cuts her off. "Wait, I want to guess. It'll give me some sort of challenge for today, other than running all the stop signs on my way to my really exciting job as an insurance adjuster. You can take only so many statements on cases of kicks to the head before you start to get bored."

Birdie follows all of this with her green eyes dancing, and I'm happy to see she has a sense of humor. "All right."

Steph leans forward, her brown eyes raking over Birdie in a borderline serial killer way as she taps her fingertips against her lips. "I'm seeing rich only child escapes overbearing parents and regimented life by running away with a cowboy who

came into town and swept her off her feet."

Birdie sighs. "You're close enough to freak me out—and make me feel even dumber if it's such a common thing."

"You're not dumb, that much I do know," Steph says, and it's an oddly kind thing to say.

"Are you comfortable telling us what happened?" I ask, hoping my gentleness will make her feel at ease. "We aren't judging. I'm married to a cowboy, you know. I understand the appeal."

Steph winks big. "I'm proud to say I've avoided them at all costs."

Birdie grimaces. "That's my plan moving forward."

"See, you're smart," Steph states.

"I didn't think my life was regimented, exactly," Birdie says, playing with her sandwich wrapper. "I am an only child, and my parents are comfortable and mostly kind, but I've been on my own for a while and I guess maybe I was more lonely than I realized." Her nose scrunches as though she's embarrassed she said that much. "I worked in event planning for a big company. I, uh, was working a wedding and met a guy from this area. He was there as a friend of the groom. We hit it off, and after a whirlwind month of long distance he convinced me to come for a visit. Then, he spent that week wooing me into staying. I quit my good job in Texas, moved into his spare bedroom, started working at The Two Step, arranged to have all my belongings shipped here, and a month later he was gone when I got home from work. So . . ."

Steph makes a sympathetic humming noise. "Wow. You really could not have gotten dumped in a worse location. Why didn't you go home?"

Birdie unwraps her sandwich and shrugs. "Embarrassed, I guess. My things that I had shipped from home arrived two days after he left. I couldn't bear to ship them straight back and have to deal with everyone telling me they saw it coming. Plus, packing and shipping is expensive and I used up most of my savings getting it here."

I think about Holden telling me how much he'd worried about what people would say—proving to the community and our families that he could be successful at marriage and parenthood, even as a late teen, and how it had become a burden that had weighed him down and nearly cost us our marriage. I don't want that for Birdie. She seems sweet.

"We all do things to save face sometimes," I mumble, patting her arm again. "Would your parents not accept you back?"

Birdie smiles. "They would. They're not bad. It's more like I burned some bridges in the community I work in, quitting with no notice and leaving some large events hanging. It was a big deal. I'm blacklisted in my field." She shrugs. "Honestly, I'd be waiting tables there too. I figure if I stay here long enough to make it look like I chose to come back, and wasn't dumped like they all warned me about, then maybe I won't have to grovel so much?"

"That's tight logic as far as I'm concerned." Steph nods.

I rest my hand on Birdie's arm briefly. "I'm so sorry that happened."

"What was this cowboy's name?" Steph asks.

"Steven," Birdie responds. "Steven Herbert."

"Can't say I know him. He must be transient."

"His lease was only for six months," Birdie nods. "Which I found out courtesy of the eviction notice taped to the door when I got home from work."

I gasp. "No."

"Yeah. So, I found a cheaper place here in Pinehaven, and moved to this job, and I'm figuring it out. And that's the story of how I used up the rest of my savings. Don't even get me started on having to sell my car."

"Was it nice?" Steph asks with a grimace.

"Yes, but not nicer than having groceries and rent money."

We fall into silence and I'm not sure how to get us back to a more cheerful topic. Not that I can't be a listening ear, but this got depressing really fast. I finish off the last of my now-chilly chai, Steph does the same with her coffee, and Birdie takes a bite of her sandwich, and I think about a lot of things. Like how maybe having a stable and steady husband who worked too hard for us isn't all that bad, and that I should have helped redirect things long before it got to the point of me kicking him out to the camper. A swell of emotion for Holden and his goodness and commitment to caring for me and our kids washes over me. Why did I fall into a rut of resentment rather than pushing for communication?

I'm snapped out of my thoughts by a low voice breaking into the silence at our table. I glance up to see a stocky man with sun-tanned skin and bright blue eyes looking down at Birdie with avid interest.

"You new around here?" he asks, tipping his hat back to look directly at Birdie.

Birdie doesn't bother to look up, which doesn't really surprise me when I think about how she reacted to Walker at The Two Step.

"Nope," she says.

I don't recognize him, but Steph apparently does because her voice rings bored when she speaks. "Paul. Move along, cowboy. She's not interested, and even if she were I'd tell her all your dirty secrets and scare her off. I have access to your insurance records."

Paul shoots Steph a look but doesn't back off. "There are privacy laws, Stephanie, and I wasn't talking to you. I'm asking this

little lady a question."

"A question she already answered." Steph shakes her head.

"Come on, stop busting my chops." Paul's voice isn't as deep now and he tosses Steph an eye roll. He gestures at Birdie. "I'm interested in this pretty lady, not your sour face."

Steph huffs and Birdie looks up at Paul with an expression that's practiced in its bored nonchalance. It's chilly without being rude. "Paul, right? I'm going to give you something to think on as you walk out that door. Women don't like being addressed as *little lady* and *pretty lady*. We're more than the size of our bodies or the way our faces happen to be shaped. You'll have better luck when you figure that out." She looks back down at her food and essentially dismisses him.

Me and Steph both lose our composure, snorting and raising our eyebrows at each other. Who is this woman? I want to be her.

Paul frowns and then shrugs like he doesn't care either way and tips his hat to her. "Maybe I'll see you around."

"Probably not," Steph replies, and Paul shakes his head as he weaves out the front door.

"I want my daughter to learn from you," I say to Birdie, laughing openly now.

Birdie sips her water and offers a little tip of her head that says she's not bothered. "You'd be surprised how often women in event planning get hit on at the events we're running. I used to try to be lighter on the rejection, but honestly, some men do not take a hint. Paul seems like one of those." Her face softens and she looks between Steph and me. "I understand that I'm a fresh face in a place where everyone grew up together. I'm trying to keep my head down and offer no encouragement. The last thing I need is another guy messing up my life. Figures that the one guy I didn't brush off ended up taking me for a ride."

"Why can't it go the other way for once? You finally give in to a guy's advances and it turns out he's a secret billionaire and all he wants to do is worship the ground you walk on for the rest of your life?" Steph jokes.

"You finally admitted you like Ryan," I tease her. "Is this how you tell us he's a secret billionaire?"

"Sadly, no. But he does know the proper amount of aftershave to wear, and he's never called me little lady," she grins.

We all laugh and move on to talking about other things until Birdie's break is over and I've got a few ideas of my own brewing. Maybe Birdie and I can help each other out.

CHAPTER 19

Holden

IT SHOULDN'T HAVE COME as a surprise that in a town the size of Pinehaven, finding a tandem bicycle to rent would be a challenge, but I did not realize I'd have to break down and order a bike to be delivered to the homestead where I'd then have to endure the taunting of Walker and Landry while I put it together. Like either of them know anything about the sacrifices a man has to make to woo a woman—or that if he's successful it's worth it. They've never been serious about anyone outside of themselves. My only recourse was to mock them for being twenty-nine and twenty-six with zero romantic prospects. The barb didn't sting much, considering they both laughed and walked away without even attempting to jab back.

It's been five days since I told Leni I'd set up the last item on our Buck-It List, and I haven't wasted that time. My text game has been pretty on point, if I do say so myself. I've stayed in more contact with Leni this week than I did for an entire year before. Teasing her about my permanently pruned fingers after our date at Maple Pond, sharing memories when something pops into my head, and making sure that I'm home earlier and taking the kids now and then. We've had dinner together as a family twice, sitting on the back deck under a shade umbrella. It's been nice—better than nice. She's responded in kind and I feel more at ease than I have in a long time. I'm truly understanding how off-kilter my life had become.

Leni kept telling me that my family needed me, but it turns out I needed them too. And while my parents and brothers are family, they should have been the second string, not the priority. The ranch should have been my job, not my entire identity. These lessons were painful and I'm not going to forget it because I can't go through this again, and I won't do it to Leni a second time.

I throw the blue and white tandem bike in the bed of my truck, followed by the speaker that will be mounted to the handlebars when we get to town. My palms are already sweaty thinking about blasting a cheesy love song as we cruise down Main Street. At least it's not a weekend night, when more people would be around, but I'm still highly aware of how much gossip is going to be set ablaze by this. I'm pre-humiliated if that's a thing.

I shoot a text off to Leni.

I'm on my way, Sunshine. Wear pants with padding, because these seats are hard and we aren't teenagers anymore

Leni

I've been focusing on my glutes lately, they're ready.

How interesting . . . Tell me more about these glutes

She replies with an eyeroll emoji and I smile thinking about seeing her, and the surprise I have in store. I'm hesitant to admit that I have flutters of excitement in my stomach, but I do. To be fair, there's a healthy mix of anxiety in there too, because I need this to go well. I hope I can eat the dinner I have packed in a basket that I've rigged to go behind the second seat.

The drive to our cabin only takes a few minutes, and Leni greets me in the driveway holding two water bottles. It's early August now, and the days are hot and the sun stays up late, so she's wearing shorts and sneakers, and a visor that will shade her face while letting the heat climb out the top of her head to stay cool. Leni is a firm believer that her body is a chimney. When she's cold, she covers her head to keep the heat in. When she's hot, she leaves it uncovered to let the heat out. She swears it's science, and it probably is because she always seems a little more comfortable than the rest of us.

I'm in a cowboy hat, jeans, and boots, and I feel a lot warmer than she looks. Seeing her only makes the heat climb. My Leni is one beautiful woman.

"Are you seriously cycling in those boots?" She grins, her eyes crinkling with amusement as I climb out of the truck and meet

her near the hood.

I nod. "I don't have a lot of other options."

She laughs and goes to her tiptoes to press a light kiss to my scruffy cheek. I work to not grab her and turn it into more. If my plans go well, there will be time for that later.

"A cowboy on a bike," she smiles. "You're so earth conscious right now."

I chuckle. "I'm glad I can do my part."

I walk around to the passenger door and open it for her. I can smell her perfumed scent as she draws closer, and I cast aside my good intentions and wrap my hand around her wrist to draw her close enough to tuck under my cowboy hat and press a kiss to her cheek.

"Hi," I say, close to her ear.

I can actually hear her swallow. "Hey, yourself," she replies.

Satisfied with her reaction, I guide her to the door of the truck and she climbs in effortlessly with a shy smile on her perfect face. I put that there, and it makes me want to puff out my chest and announce it to the world, but I simply close the truck door behind her and circle around to the driver's side with my own smile.

"Are you going to tell me the plan, Mr. Secret Suspense?" she asks as I pull off the Crawford land onto the highway that leads into town. "You've been so mysterious . . . although Walker sent a text wishing me a good time with my giant marshmallow man, whatever that means."

I smack my lips and shoot her a grin. "Walker is an idiot and I'm not giving anything away. You're trapped on a tandem bike with me, which means you're literally along for the ride."

She fake grumps and crosses her arms. "You're loving this."

Amusement has my lips twitching. "I really am."

Leni, being the more boisterous and extroverted of the two of us, has typically been the one to lead out. I've been happy following along, especially because I'm the main decision maker and driving force at the ranch and don't mind handing the symbolic reins off to someone else when I get the chance, but it's fun to reverse roles a little bit tonight.

I voice a thought before I think it through. "Has it been hard, always being the one driving everything for our family?"

She blinks as she looks over at me, her dark eyes thoughtful. "I'm mostly okay being bossy," she starts, pulling a face at herself, "but sometimes, yes. Sometimes it felt like I was forcing you to do things, and I didn't want to be your mom."

I toss her a flirty look. "You're not my mom, honey, trust me."

She rolls her eyes and waves a hand. "You know what I mean. I don't like feeling like I have to push for it or it won't happen. Nagging is not attractive."

"Even for the fun things?"

"Even the fun things, yes." She nods. "I understand that you're overworked and tired, but it would be nice to not always be the one making plans and executing all the details. It's lonely."

The word lonely has been tossed around a lot over the past few weeks and I'm realizing how much both of us were feeling it, but neither of us verbalized it. Maybe we thought things were set and that was part of being an adult. I know that for my part I'd shove the thought away and tell myself to buck up, be stronger, whine less. I don't want to settle anymore.

"I think I fell into the rut of believing there wasn't room for fun when there was a family to support and a ranch to keep running. It felt irresponsible to set it aside and play," I murmur, processing out loud in a way I haven't done for a while. "I gave that over to you because you're a natural at it, and seeing my hard work provide entertainment for you and Mace and Jo-Jo, it was satisfying."

"Less satisfying than it would have been if you'd gone with us," she replies.

I reach for her hand and weave my fingers through hers. "I know. I didn't get that, but I do now. I'm sorry."

Her expression softens as she looks over at me. "Thanks."

"I wish you'd told me," I whisper.

She squeezes my hand. "I tried, Holden. In little ways. Maybe they were too subtle, and your rock-like brain didn't compute, but I always invited you." Her tone is purposefully light, and she tries to make it land with humor, which I appreciate.

But I don't respond in kind. "Until you stopped," I say sadly, honestly.

She nods. "Until I grew tired of the rejection."

My throat thickens under the admission, but even though it's painful I'm glad we're talking openly. "I didn't mean to reject you."

Her gaze moves out the window and she sighs. "I believe you didn't do it on purpose."

Not the response I would have wished for, but again, I'll take the honesty.

We arrive at the outskirts of town and I pull over and park the truck on the gravel that lines the small two-lane roads. I turn off the engine and Leni takes her hand from mine to run her palms down her legs. She plays a good game, but she's nervous about this too. It's a lot, even for someone as social as my wife.

"You ready?" I ask her with a wink. "Our reputation may not heal from this."

She laughs and bites at her lower lip. "Or, we're honored for our bravery."

"I'm not putting any money on that one," I tease as I shove open my truck door and she does the same.

It feels too quiet out here as I pull the bike out of the truck bed. No cars are passing, no birds are chirping, it's hot air and silence. I puff out a breath and set the bike next to the truck. Leni balances it while I attach the picnic basket to the back and the speaker to the handlebars. She watches in without saying anything, but her fingers tap the bike in a speedy rhythm.

"Are you committed to the song?" I ask, hopeful she'll let us off the hook. "We could simply ride the bike."

She takes a deep breath. "No, we have to do it as written. We committed."

We committed to a lot of things that we let slide, and since I want to break that pattern, I take my own deep breath and nod. It might seem silly, but doing the list as written has started to feel like taking our relationship seriously again. So, I turn on the speaker and connect it to my phone, having downloaded the song earlier today.

"Do we play it on repeat, then, or just once?" I ask.

"How long is the song?"

Sadly, I know, because I looked. "About four and a half minutes."

"And how long do you think it will take us to cycle Main?" she asks.

I shrug. "In actual minutes, maybe five. In minutes my brain experiences, a million."

She laughs and shakes her head. "I think one time would fulfill the list."

Gratefully, I nod. "No one said we have to play it loud."

She grins. "It just said loudspeaker, not the actual volume of said speaker."

I stand the bike upright. "You get front seat."

"Why?"

I nearly chuckle at this surprising show of deference and shyness from her. She was all over this type of stuff as a kid. Fifteen years ago not one person in town would have blinked an eye at seeing Lenora Stilton doing the splits on the basket of a hot air balloon floating overhead, but apparently she thinks the sentiment has shifted and she'll be mocked.

"I promise you that no one will think anything about you doing this. It's me who's going to get all the looks and the whispers," I respond.

At this, her cheeks tug up. "That's so true. You've become known as the town grump."

"I have not."

She nods vigorously. "Oh, you have. Everyone is always like, 'Did Holden Crawford lose his smile out on the range?'" she teases.

I'm happy she's teasing, because it means she's relaxing, so I don't push back on the exaggeration.

"Front seat, shorty."

"Maybe I want to be on the rear seat so I can watch you fight the pedals with your boots," she teases..

I hold up a foot. "These boots do everything I ask them to, and they do it well."

She tosses her ponytail, glances down Main Street once, and with squared shoulders she climbs on to the front seat. I hitch my leg over the back seat and she looks at me over her shoulder.

"Hit play, Holden. Let's give Pinehaven something to talk about."

I do not want to hit play, but with my wife's ponytail nearly tickling my nose, and the way she's trying so hard to be brave, I don't have a choice. I may get mocked for this for the rest of my life, but as long as that life is spent with Leni, I'm willing to take the chance.

I hit play, and as soon as the song starts wailing through the speaker, I count with Leni and we push off.

It quickly becomes obvious that we've never tandem biked. We're both trying to set the pace, and attempt to balance from different angles, and I have to put my foot down a few times to keep us from tipping over. Leni hilariously keeps scowling back at me, and when I stop fighting for my own way of doing it and sync up with her, things smooth out.

There's a lesson in that, probably, but I'm too busy desperately avoiding eye contact with anyone we pass to think on it much.

We don't say a word as we pedal down the road, passing the feed store and the cafe, the bakery and gas station. The people who are out pause and we get a few waves and whistles. I try to smile back, to make it look like I'm in on the joke and having a great time, but mostly I'm trying not to have a nervous bladder condition.

Leni, unsurprisingly, sheds the shy thing and gets into it. She's waving and hooting and singing along at the top of her lungs, and it's a good thing I'm pedaling and balancing, otherwise we'd have already crashed.

I'm a sweaty mess by the time we pass the last buildings in town and the song ends. Leni, however, tosses her head back and laughs at the cloudless sky as we keep cruising along. Her laughter settles my heart rate and I don't fight my answering smile. I don't laugh out loud—that's just not me—but I do take off my hat and wave it once around my head with a whoop, which makes Leni laugh again.

We stop pedaling once the buildings of town have grown small and the pavement has become rough. Leni's breathing hard as she puts her feet on the ground and twists to face me sideways, white teeth flashing in a smile wide enough to crack her skin.

"That was both embarrassing and freeing," she states.

"Not sure we'll live it down." I hold us steady with my feet firmly planted.

"I didn't see anyone recording us, so maybe it will become folklore," she giggles, putting a hand on her chest. "Whoo." Another deep breath. "Now what?"

I don't want to tell her just yet, so I tip my head at the road ahead and say, "We keep going, that way."

She looks down the road and then back at me. "You going to clue me in?"

"Nope," I respond with a smirk, and I put one booted foot on a pedal to signal we're moving again.

Leni chatters happily while we move along, and I give the occasional grunt or oh, yeah? to let her know I'm listening. She tells me about which teachers the kids were assigned to next year, meeting Steph for lunch, and how Mason's swim team is doing. I eat it up. I want her to talk. Her silence has been painful these past months. I love being the receptacle of her thoughts and ideas.

It's when her chitchat dies down that I realize she's caught on to where we're going. She doesn't ask—probably afraid to assume—but she's onto me, and when I tell her to take the dirt road to our right I watch a smile lift the side of her face that I can see.

"I've always loved this place," she says dreamily as we pull up to a grove of quaking aspen a quarter mile down the rutted road.

I brake and we come to a stop in some shade. The only sound here comes from the green leaves above us dancing in a light breeze that is saving me from heat stroke. I consider myself to be in shape. I lead an active lifestyle. But cycling a few miles out of town on a poorly paved road, with my heart rate increased by nerves, was harder work than I'd anticipated.

I step off the bike and Leni does the same, holding it while I unstrap the picnic basket and the speaker. She looks around and I see memories in her eyes. The same memories I'm experiencing, and the reason I brought her here.

This very spot is where we promised to have and to hold, from this day forward and forever. And it felt like the right place to see if we could start again.

CHAPTER 20

Leni

TO SAY I'M FLABBERGASTED as I stand in a green grove of trees, next to a silent cowboy, with more sweat gathered under my bra than I'd prefer, would be an understatement. Let's look at the facts.

1 – My husband purchased a tandem bike so that we could complete our list. (I know this because Walker and Landry teased me about it for days over text messages. I won't tell Holden I know, but I know, and it's adorable.)

2 – He actually got a speaker and played the song—a song that's still running through my head.

3 – He packed a dinner.

4 – He brought us to the place we were married.

But most importantly

5 – The man who always chose to sit in the back row of a classroom rode a bike through town for all to see, and he did it for me. For us.

He hands me the picnic basket and the handle is rough in my hands as I take it. I snuggle it against my stomach as he holds the speaker in his free hand and lays the bike gently on its side. I almost tease him about trying to protect the bike from damage, but according to his brothers it took him a few days to get it put together thanks to it being shipped without some bolts it needed. Instead I follow him to the center of the grove where there's a clearing large enough to host a small wedding.

I know, because that's exactly what we did.

He takes the big basket from me and pulls a blanket out, spreads it on the ground, and gestures for me to take a seat before he does the same. He gets comfortable, taking off his hat to reveal damp, nearly black hair, and that summer tan line that splits his forehead into half pale and half olive skin. Next he kicks off his boots and then his socks, sighing as the breeze cools his bare feet and head.

I do the same, toeing off my sneakers and socks, and then lean back on my hands as I wiggle my toes. I tip my face back to the dots of sunlight coming through the leaf cover and close my eyes.

"So, you might be wondering why I brought you here," he says, deadpan, and I laugh over at him.

"It's a puzzle," I respond, opening my eyes to take him in.

He grins, and I match it, my stomach twisting with affection. He reaches into the basket to pull out homemade ham sandwiches, two apples, and two individual bottles of sparkling cider. Honestly, the simplicity of the meal hits me harder than something fancy and candlelit would have. I picture him in the kitchen of the camper making sandwiches with his work-roughened hands, and I melt. It's so basic, but it's so him. Never looking for big things, content with what's on hand.

I unwrap my sandwich and take a bite, looking around the grove and remembering our wedding day. He'd been painfully handsome in his suit, clean-shaven, hair actually styled. But it had been the way his hazel eyes had tracked me as I came down the aisle toward him that had punched me in the chest. He was so young, hadn't even truly finished filling out his full masculine size, but he was the most incredible thing that had ever happened to me.

"It was a perfect day," I say when I've swallowed. "Fourteen years next month."

"You, in that dress . . ." He trails off as he sucks in his lips, his eyes growing soft. "We were so worried about an outdoor wedding in September," he says, his voice tender with nostalgia. "Everyone told us it was too risky to hold a fall wedding where we live."

"Only two nineteen-year-olds would have thought it wasn't a big deal. I think it was the only dry September on record." I grin. "The heavens smiled on us that day. Do you remember how bright yellow these leaves were?"

He looks up at them and tips his chin down once. "Yeah. The afternoon light made everything look like it was glowing." His eyes are warm with memory. "You were so pretty that day," he says again.

I flush at the compliment. "I remember pinching myself that I was marrying a verified hottie."

He rolls his eyes, but I see the way he enjoys the compliment.

My eyes take in the scene, and I play the memories in my mind. My dad walking me down the makeshift aisle, Steph waiting as my maid of honor. Walker and Landry standing up front with Holden. It was such a hope-filled day. A wave of sorrow and love for those two naive kids hits me and I set my sandwich down in my lap.

"We had so much hope," I say.

He hears the emotion in my voice and looks to me. "I still do. You're still my Sunshine." He clears his throat and adjusts his body so he's sitting facing me. "I'd do it again. I'd stand here and make those vows, only this time I'd take you home and do things differently." His hazel eyes glow intensely and he leans slightly forward. "I'd stop listening to the voices of others and talk to you. I'd stop trying to carry it on my own and leaving you to do the same. I'd include you in my ups and downs, rather than always trying to protect you from my worries. Instead of building a team, I set us on independent paths and I regret it so much."

I reach for his hand and scoot close. "I'd stop wishing you could read my mind and start telling you how I felt. I'd chase you down, and lay you flat out, and force you to hear me."

His lips twitch. "I was a one-track mind, but it was the wrong track. I'm truly sorry, honey."

Tears fill my eyes and I nod. "I'm sorry too."

He clears his throat and looks up at the sky for a moment before meeting my eyes again. "I've had a meeting with my parents and brothers," he starts, but I interrupt him with a slap to his knee.

"You had a meeting without me? Isn't that what we're not doing anymore?" I say.

He wrinkles his nose. "I thought about involving you, but I'm out here trying to grand gesture you, and so that meant a secret meeting."

I smile. "You're grand-gesturing me?"

He nods. "Yeah. That's what this is, right now. Take note, it's not something I do often."

My smile grows. "Forgiven. Please, continue with the grand gesture."

He smiles at me and his eyes drop to my mouth, which has me licking my lips, which has him looking back up at my eyes with a little more color in his cheeks. I don't hate it. The man is still a hottie.

"The meeting was for the purpose of redividing ranch labor assignments," he says. "It took a bit of brainstorming, but we all feel good about how things will go moving forward. The takeaway is that no one will carry the bulk, and everyone agrees that there needs to be life away from the ranch." He tilts his head. "Do you want the details, or . . . ?"

I blink teasingly. "Of course I do."

"I just, I'm not used to boring you with the details," he shrugs.

I shake my head. "Which didn't work out well in the long run, right?"

"Right."

"So, please, bore me."

He grins and scrubs a hand over his beard. "Okay. I'm going to continue to be over land management and animal movement. That means grazing pasture rotation, water resources, fencing repairs, and scheduling when the animals will rotate between resources. Walker will oversee animal welfare, which includes veterinary care, health-related recordkeeping, calving season, etc. Landry will be over the boarded animals, teaching riding lessons, and sorting and branding of cattle. He'll keep those records. We'll all work together when it's time to move herds, obviously. And we'll all help sort and brand where needed, but I'm not organizing it all anymore. Dad is going to help Landry, and we'll have two extra hands to help Walker and myself as floaters so that we're not having to run around so much."

I follow along, nodding and watching his expression as he talks. He looks excited and relieved, and I'm happy to see it.

"That sounds good. What do your brothers think about it?" I ask.

His mouth tips up. "Well, my parents told me it was time for me to pull my head out and stop trying to play hero, and my brothers said they'd miss being lazy bachelors but are willing to step up."

I laugh at the boys describing themselves as lazy. They work just as hard as my husband, but this makes sense to have defined roles rather than scrambling to fill the needs with one man organizing it all.

"I don't think when your dad decided to expand that he ever intended for it to all rest on you," I say gently, squeezing the hand I'm still holding.

His expression is sheepish. "I think you're right. But I'm the oldest, and the only one with a family, and so I made the assumption and got to work. If the ranch failed, so did my family's source of income. Walker and Landry had less to lose, in my eyes. It simply made sense that I'd work hardest."

"It made sense to *you*."

He grimaces. "To me. They never would have let the ranch fail either. I didn't see it, though."

"And your mom is still wanting to move ahead with weddings and events?" I ask.

"Yes." He runs his thumb over the back of my hand. "But I didn't talk to her about you at all. You said you wanted to have that conversation."

I gratefully smile. "I actually have an idea for that."

"Oh?"

"Remember Birdie, from The Two Step? I ran into her the other day and it turns out she was an event planner in Austin. She's moved to Pinehaven and is here alone, working as a waitress at Summit Sage, which is a job she's way overqualified for. I wonder if your mom would be willing to hire her on? She could help make the events successful, and she knows about marketing and what clients are looking for."

He nods slowly. "That makes a lot of sense. It would help Birdie and Mama both."

"And me," I tease, poking at his ribs with my free hand.

He grabs my hand with a grunt. "Most important part."

I laugh. "She'd have to hire someone else to clean, unless Birdie is willing to do that too. But I want to be done."

"Does that mean you've settled on what you want to do?" he asks me.

"I'm . . ." I wiggle my shoulders. "I'm unsure. I've been looking into what it would take to get a business license and open my own yoga studio on our land."

"And?" he prods when I fall silent.

"I think it's doable, but, I don't know. I feel like so much is going on right now with us and our kids, and maybe the timing isn't right. Maybe we need to figure us out before I try to do something big like that."

I don't dare look at him as I pour out my fears about the endeavor. Does it really make sense to start a business while trying to save my marriage?

He yanks at my hand until I'm looking at him once more. "Lenora Crawford, enough holding back. If you have a fear or a worry, we'll work through it together. If you want to open a studio I'll stand at the edge of the highway waving one of those signs to drum up business."

My face and chest grow warm as I see the sincerity in his eyes, and before I really think through what I'm doing, I've closed the space between us and pressed my mouth to his. He recovers from the surprise quickly, and slides his arm under my legs, lifting me into his lap without breaking the kiss. He snuggles in, holding me almost too close, and I wrap my arms around his shoulders as his beard tickles my chin.

His hand splays across the middle of my back, warm and strong, his other hand wrapping around my thigh to hold me in place, and the kiss deepens when I run one hand through the hair at the back of his head. We have so much history, but this kiss almost feels like our first as the connection I've been mourning seems to rush back into place, tethering us together once more.

Holden's scent rushes over me, the familiarity of it more enticing than ever. I trace a finger along his jaw line, and he pulls back to tease my lips with affectionate words I can't quite hear. I don't let the separation last long, my fingers curling around his shoulders once more, my mouth searching for his. I'm not sure how long we kiss, but time is meaningless. His lips are warm and firm, and the words my heart pounds out are ones I had hoped to feel again.

I love him. I love him. I love him.



I'm still floating in a love-blushed haze the next day when I make my way over to the homestead after dinner to help Rae prep some rooms. Holden and I had talked until the sun set, and then spent the ride back to his truck laughing as we tried to negotiate first the dirt road and then potholes in the dark on a tandem bike that wanted to buck us off. I'd had a hard time sleeping after another kiss on the dark back deck, but the hours awake hadn't been wasted. I'd made a few firm decisions.

I want my husband to move back in. And I want to open the yoga studio.

Step one is talking to Rae. Step two is finding Holden and telling him to get his fine rear end back to our place.

I leave Mason and Josi home watching a movie, grateful that an organic opportunity to speak with Rae has presented itself. I find her in the Blue Room when I arrive, cleaning bucket in one hand and fresh linens in the other. She has her hair braided and is wearing a smile when I come through the door. A knowing smile. The whole family obviously heard about our bike ride.

"How was last night?" she asks.

I set down the sheets and teasingly make a zipping motion across my lips.

She laughs. "Word is he built a bike and played a love song while you rode through town."

"Word spreads about as quickly as expected." I smirk as I start taking the soiled sheets off the bed. "When you get to town, make sure to let them all know it was against his will."

Rae wiggles her eyebrows. "The phone video I saw tells a different story. He's smiling."

"Someone took a video?" I squeak. "Oh, no. Holden won't like that."

Rae waves a hand and helps me start stretching the new sheets across the bed. "Don't worry, it's harmless and cute. I'm happy you were having fun together, and so is everyone else. This town loves you guys."

"The couple who made it against all odds," I say, tongue-in-cheek. "We're like a precious after-school special."

She glances up with a frown. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, we were married as teens, and had a baby right away, and statistically speaking that shouldn't have worked out." I spread out the flat sheet and grin at her. "But here we are."

"Here you are," she says thoughtfully, still frowning. "You know I was worried, but Abe never was. He said that Holden had a head on his shoulders and wouldn't be reckless with such a big decision."

I nod. "I knew how you felt. I had to prove to you that I hadn't drugged your son and dragged him to the altar, that we were taking it seriously."

Rae suddenly laughs. "I've often wished I could be more of a romantic, but I'm too pragmatic for that. I'm sorry it took me some time to stop fretting. Plus, I was in the middle of some big hormone changes and I hated everyone for two weeks out of every month. One night Abe snored so loud that I told him I was filing divorce papers, and I almost went through with it. I could not live the rest of my life with a snorer." Her smile remains as she pauses to look me in the eye. "I love you like my own, Lenora. I'm sorry I made it difficult at first."

"I love you too," I say genuinely as I pick up the heavy blue quilt and toss her a side. "And I hope that love is strong because I need to talk to you."

"Oh boy," Rae sighs, "that statement usually doesn't go my way."

"I think this one will be a win-win."

She motions for me to pass her the glass cleaner, and while I dust and oil the wooden furniture, and she cleans the glass, I tell her about my dreams, and apologize that they don't align with hers. She listens, not offering commentary, and when I mention Birdie as a possible replacement, and tell her about the interactions with Walker, Rae turns to me with a sparkle in her eye.

"I want to meet this woman," she says.

"So, you're not angry?" I ask.

She waves the cleaning rag at me. "Only a little sad that you kept these thoughts to yourself for so long. You don't have to share my dreams, but I do want you to be honest with me."

I nod. "I'm sorry."

"The first wedding is in two weeks. Do you think you could help me wrap up preparations while I see if Birdie would be interested in the job?"

"Absolutely," I respond, genuinely happy to complete this final task with her.

"Now, tell me again what Birdie said to Walker?"

"If you think that was good, wait until I tell you about Paul."

"Who?"

Together we make our way next door to the Green Room, laughing at the image of big, bulky Walker being put in his place by a firecracker from Texas, and how Paul won't call anyone else *little lady* for a long time.

CHAPTER 21

Leni

IT'S NEARLY DARK BY the time I get home from helping Rae set up the clean rooms. We ended up chatting the entire time, and I feel such a sense of relief that I nearly float through the cabin door. Mason has already put his little sister to bed and I reward him with a big hug that he doesn't see as much of a prize. My boy will be thirteen in three short days, and I'm trying to prepare myself for the natural pulling away that will occur over these next few years. His once chubby cheeks have already grown lean, and his limbs are lengthening as he prepares for a growth spurt that I know is coming.

I open my mouth to ask him how he'd feel about his dad moving back in, but swallow the words at the last minute. I don't want to assume that Holden is ready, and I don't want to get Mason's hopes up if things don't go as I hope they will. So, instead, I tell him I'm going for a little walk and give him free rein on the video games for the next hour. That, as far as he is concerned, is the real gift he's getting for watching Josi.

Back outside it's warm and beautiful, and I know fall will sneak in before I'm ready, so I enjoy the heat on my skin as I make my way to the camp trailer where Holden has been living. There are no lights on, but I knock anyway assuming he's already settling in for the night thanks to his early ranch hours. He doesn't answer, so I knock again and nothing. Stumped, I spin in a slow circle, wondering where he could be. He's been back here much earlier lately, and I wonder if something happened on the ranch today. Although, Rae would have gotten word if an emergency had occurred, so I know it's not that.

A soft hammering noise reaches my ears from the left and I hold my breath as I listen. It comes again. I take a few steps until I've cleared a low rise that blocked my view of the area. Up ahead is the old storage shed, and a light shines out the propped open door. I can see a man's shape inside, and I immediately recognize it. I head that way, motivated by curiosity and excitement. I'm imagining his eyes lighting up when I tell him I'm ready for him to come home. I can't wait to feel his heavy weight in the bed next to me and have the sounds of his breathing make me feel secure and safe.

As I get closer, I can see he's pulling up the old floorboards and tossing them out the door. One of them zings my way and I yelp as I dive to the side. The sound has Holden spinning around, eyes wide, already holding another board in his gloved hand. I wave and pull a sheepish face.

"I'm safe, no contact was made," I call, my heart rate erratic with all the emotion plus the near decapitation.

He stands straight, drops the board at his feet, and tucks a hammer into the tool belt around his waist.

"Hey, Sunshine," he says as he comes out the door to where I'm standing, and the easy nickname makes me smile.

"Hi, yourself. What are you up to?" I ask, glancing around at the pile of discarded floorboards near my feet.

He fiddles with the measuring tape hanging near the hammer and shrugs, playing it cool. "Cleaning out the old place, getting it prepped for renovations."

I look past his shoulder to see that the shed is empty. For the nearly fourteen years I've lived on this ranch I've never seen it empty. It's been a sort of catchall for anything that someone couldn't think of a better place for. I hitch a stuttered breath as I realize what's happening here.

"It's empty," I state, overwhelmed with what this means.

"Yeah," he says easily, casually, scratching lightly at his wrist.

"Where did all the stuff go that was in here?" I don't see piles of anything on the ground around us. It's gone.

"Mostly to the landfill." He sniffs. "Some of it was still useful, so that's in the big barn, or donated in town."

My lip wobbles and I press my teeth into it. "When did you do this?"

He pulls the measuring tape out and lets it snap closed. "It's been a slow process over the past couple of weeks."

I think back to when I first mentioned the idea of converting this to a yoga studio. Had he started working on it then? Before we'd begun to have deeper conversations? Tender heat chases over my chest and I press my palm over my heart.

"I can't believe you'd do this," I whisper, voice thick with emotion.

He looks at me and shrugs, and I see a man covered in dust after a long day of hard labor. A man trying so hard to please me.

His tone is self-deprecating as he says, "I know I didn't always give you a reason to believe this, but I'd do anything for you."

I launch myself at him, throwing my arms around his shoulders and accidentally bumping my hip on the hammer in his belt. His arms are instantly around me, and I hear the measuring tape hit the ground at our feet. I bury my nose in his neck, sniffing as tears begin to fall. He smells of hay and outdoors, and I wiggle closer to make any gap between us disappear.

"I love it," I say.

"I'm sorry that I didn't know you wanted this sooner," he says against my hair, one of his hands coming up to stroke down the length of it.

I shake my head. "I should have told you. You aren't a mind reader. You were tied up in your own concerns."

"You should have been my main concern." He pauses and his arms tighten further. "I love you, Leni," he says. His voice is low and a little raspy, like he's a little unsure about admitting his feelings. "I never stopped, not once."

"I love you too, Holden. So much. I actually came looking for you to tell you that I want you back home."

I press my lips against his neck, under his jaw and his body tenses. Then, with a whoosh of air, he gathers me so close that I'm forced onto my tiptoes as he adjusts our position so that his nose is pressed into my temple, his mouth against my ear.

"Thank goodness," he says with feeling. "I've been miserable away from you and the kids."

This moment feels heavy with promise and I reluctantly tug myself out of his arms—yes, tug, because he's a little resistant about letting me go—and take his two hands in mine. I meet his eyes as tears trail down my cheeks and suck in a deep breath.

"I promise that I'll communicate my needs better, and I'll ask you about yours more," I say.

One side of his mouth ticks up as he understands what I'm doing. He squeezes my hands. "I promise that I won't put work above you and our kids."

"I promise to try harder to overlap our lives. I'll meet you on the ranch for lunch, and help during roundup time. I won't focus too hard on the kids and forget about our partnership."

He nods. "I promise to talk to you about yoga and books, and ask what your crazy sister is up to, instead of only talking about fence lines and creek beds."

At this I chuckle. "I promise to pretend to care about those things."

He laughs, and the last of my tears fall as I join him. I'm downright giddy in this moment. My smile is wide as I look over his handsome face. It's a face I know better than my own, having looked at it every day for fifteen years now. The laugh lines around his eyes are deeper, and his jaw is firmer than that of the teen I married, but our shared history is there to be seen in the warmth of his eyes and the softness of his expression.

"Holden Crawford, will you live with me?" I ask.

He nods with a grin. "I'd love to live with you."

"And will you come do yoga here with me sometimes?" I ask.

His eyebrows raise. "This feels like a trap."

I laugh again. "Not a trap, or a test."

He clears his throat. "I'll come in here and read all the feedstore ads while you do yoga."

"Liar. You'll sneak peeks of me in my athletic clothing."

He shrugs. "Win-win."

I pull on his hands so that he's forced to step closer and then lean up on my toes to kiss him. He keeps hold of my hands as he moves to press our joined fists against my lower back, bringing me in tight against him, deepening the kiss.

The first time I kissed Holden as a kid I was the aggressor. He'd been a little timid, and held back, and I'd had to grab his shoulder and make things happen. He'd warmed up, but I'd been in the driver's seat. This time he deepens the kiss, and holds me in place with strong arms that band me to him. I love it.

When we break apart I bite at my lip and give him a teasing smirk. "By the way, I thought you didn't do grand gestures regularly."

He picks up the measuring tape we knocked loose during our straight-up make-out session. He slaps it against his thigh to loosen the dust and puts it back on with a shrug, even though his mouth is twitching.

"Yeah, seems like once I discovered the concept, I went all in," he responds.

I clap my hands. "I accept this."

With a big smile on my face I step into the shed to see what he's been up to. He stands in the open door and watches me move around the space, chatting away about my plans for each area and how many people I could fit inside comfortably for a class. I'm light and happy, bubbly enough to float away on feelings I thought I'd grown out of. My man is out here making my dreams a reality—pinch me.

When I'm done dreaming, I turn to him and hold out a hand. "All right, Boss, put me to work."

He shakes his head, taking off the tool belt and setting it on the dirt where the floor used to be, and then turns off the light. It takes a second for my eyes to adjust to the full darkness that has fallen, but when I can see again I take the hand he's holding out to me.

"If I'm going to put you to work tonight, it's going to be helping me move my things out of the camper and back into our

bedroom," he says, and I love the tingles that zip up my spine at his words.

"I like that plan," I say.

We walk hand in hand back to the camper, and as we do, a silly feeling sweeps over me—a sudden desire to make this a new start in a light-hearted way.

"I vow to never steal your drink, even if I'm thirsty and it's sitting right there," I say, out of the blue.

"That's true love," Holden cracks.

"I vow to unclog my own hair out of the tub, because you shouldn't be punished for my hair."

His laugh is more of a cough. "Do you know how to do it?"

"No. But I'm teachable and willing."

"We'll talk again after your first hair-rat experience."

I wrinkle my nose. "Gross."

"It is."

I wonder how many other gross things he simply took care of because that's who Holden is. My heart swells and I move from holding his hand to wrapping mine around his biceps and pulling close to press my shoulder against his arm as we walk.

"I promise to find the TV remote when it's lost, even if I'm not the one who lost it," I state.

"I don't watch TV."

"You're missing the point. New and improved Holden will probably start watching TV because that's how normal couples spend time together."

He chuckles. "I vow to try to stay awake during trash reality programs."

"The fact that you call them programs worries me."

"I vow to never call them programs again."

I squeeze his arm as my amusement sounds. "I vow to use actual recipes when cooking, rather than always experimenting on you and the kids."

He pauses and turns to face me. His expression is stoic, but his eyes are sparking. "Don't make vows you can't keep, honey."

I lick at my lips. "Fair enough. I vow to stop lying about what ingredients I'm using."

He smacks his tongue. "Still feels unachievable."

Now I bite my lips, fighting a smile. "Okay. I vow to stop pretending to care that you guys don't always like what I make, because you're lucky anyone cooks at all."

He nods. "I vow to keep pretending I like whatever you make."

I let the smile free. "See, marriage is about compromise. We're learning."

He sets us walking again and his voice softens with sincerity. "I vow to love you better than I have in the past."

It's a sucker punch, and he wins this round. I'm glad I'm anchored by his arm, because I sort of want to float away after that doozy.

We get to the camper and make quick work of packing up his truly pathetic life. It makes me sad to look around at the shabby curtains and chipped kitchenette. I imagine him stuffing his body into that shower stall daily and can confirm he's paid a penance.

We both have.

A few outfits, his pillow, and some food are all we need to carry over. He'd used a carryon suitcase to move it out, and that's about all it takes to move him back. It hits me that he's so worried about the ways he let me down, and vows to be better, but here he is with like three things in the world, and now it's my turn to feel a touch sheepish.

I stop him before we step onto the deck. "Holden, I need you to know that you weren't all to blame for how things went between us." The cowboy hat is back and I reach up to push it away. I want to see his beautiful eyes. "I let you down too. I may not be perfect, and I'll probably let you down again sometimes, but I vow to make sure you have the things you need in this marriage and life. I love you so much. I'm sorry I stopped showing that."

The thud of his luggage hitting the ground registers a millisecond before his hands cup my face and his mouth presses to mine. I drop the food I'm carrying, which means we've lost a dozen eggs, and possibly a pint of milk if the lid popped off, but it's worth it to grip his wrists and sink into the kiss. I've missed kissing this man. His hands are rough against my soft cheeks, his beard a little scratchy against my chin, but I wouldn't want it any other way. His large body heats us both as we lean into each other.

The sound of a clearing throat breaks us apart, and I look over my shoulder to see Mason standing just outside the doorway with a knowing, slightly disgusted look.

"So, Dad's moving back in?" he asks, all cool and casual.

Holden picks up his suitcase and the loaf of bread I also dropped while my cheeks pink at being busted.

"He is," I chirp happily.

"About time," he replies, and then slips back inside.

We gather broken eggs and an empty milk jug, and head inside to toss it in the trash and wash our hands. Mason stands in the

kitchen watching. He's playing chill, but I can feel the happiness vibrating off him. It's the same happiness zipping between me and his dad too. We give him hugs and send him off to bed, and then my husband follows me up the stairs to our room.

We don't bother unpacking his suitcase. Holden takes a quick—and warm—shower and then together we change into our pajamas and brush our teeth like we're in a race. At long last we fall into bed together. He wraps me close in his arms, my head resting on his chest, and my world rights itself as I fall asleep to the sound of his heartbeat.

CHAPTER 22

Holden

COUNTRY MUSIC BLASTS THROUGH the speakers that Walker hung from two trees in the backyard of the homestead, and a blast of meat-scented smoke hits me right in the eyes as I look up to see Leni scoot past me with a tray full of condiments. She looks amazing in cut off shorts and a tank with a belt around her waist. She's wearing the white cowboy hat I like best, because it makes her coffee eyes pop, and has put a paper birthday party hat on top of it. It's a look that makes me laugh.

I laugh a lot lately—sometimes even out loud.

Seriously. In the past three days since I moved back home it's like I can't wipe the smile off my face. A fact my brothers can't stop mentioning. Jealous idiots.

I flip the burgers and check the hot dogs on the grill below me, and keep on smiling. I smile even bigger when two slim, tanned and toned arms wrap around my waist and Leni's voice hits my ears a second before I smell coconuts and strawberries.

"Did you hear about the bread who started a band?" she asks, going onto her toes and pecking a light kiss on the back of my neck.

"He really wanted to jam." Walker joins us, carrying a fresh pan of hand-pressed burger patties, and answers before I can, slapping me on the back, making me hunch dangerously close to the grill for a moment. "It's a classic."

I can almost feel Leni roll her eyes. "Ugh, Walker. Did your mom not teach you that stealing the punchline of a joke is rude?"

"It's hard to understand the nuances of punchlines when you are one," a woman's voice responds, and I turn my head to see a waterfall of red hair walk behind me and down the porch steps to the wide lawn at the same time that Walker makes a strange disgruntled sort of sound.

I fight a laugh, and feel Leni shaking with mirth against my back.

"Welcome, Birdie," she calls.

"Happy you're here," I add in and Leni's laughter bubbles up again.

"Why *is* she here?" Walker grumbles with a frown.

"She works here now," Leni supplies, still sounding happy. I love that she's still hugging me close, her head turned to Walker so that her cheek presses against my spine. "She's going to start next week. I invited her tonight because she's new in town and could use some friends, and so that she can meet the people she'll be working with."

Walker hands me the burgers and stuffs his hands in his pockets. "Can't say I'm surprised that she's friendless."

At this Leni releases me and I hear her slap Walker lightly on the arm. "Be a good host, Walker. You don't know her story."

I look to see my brother watching Birdie make her way around the lawn, talking animatedly with Steph and our mama. She looks too sweet to be a verbal warrior, and it's not lost on me that Walker would be stumped by her reaction to him. Women have always loved Walker, and he's always loved them back.

"It better be a good story if I'm supposed to overlook her attitude," Walker states.

Leni sniffs. "We shouldn't only be nice to people who pass your pity test."

Walker crosses his arms. "Don't parent me, Leni."

"Then don't be a child," my wife states.

"What did I ever do to her?" my brother asks, clearly annoyed.

"Not everyone wants to be hit on," I supply and earn a pat on my bottom and a kiss on the shoulder from my wife. Rewards I happily accept.

Walker scoffs. "I've never tried to hit on the Ice Princess."

Leni lets go of me and puts a small hand on Walker's forearm. "Yes, you did. But flirting is your baseline so you didn't realize it." She pats his arm as he looks thoughtfully down at her. "Chew on that. Anyhow," she pats me once more, "everything is ready when the burgers and dogs are."

Leni strides away to mingle with our family and friends and it feels so normal that it's surreal. I take none of it for granted.

Having Leni fully back in my life is paradise. The changes at the ranch have been going into effect and I've been home for family dinner often enough that Josi commented on it the other night. Snuggling Leni in bed, getting grumped at in the mornings, and working together to throw Mason this thirteenth birthday party have gone a long way to me believing that it's all real.

I'm a lucky jerk.

Walker is still standing beside me and I look away from the cooking meat to give him a perusal. "Why are you still standing here?" I ask.

His green eyes meet mine. Walker's coloring is lighter than mine and Landry's, and it makes it easier to see when he's bothered, considering his face turns pink under the brim of his hat. Right now he's bothered, and he's still watching Birdie.

"I can't hang with my big bro at the grill?" he asks.

I roll my eyes. "You're usually talking, dancing, making balloon animals for Josi and generally being a social nightmare. So, yeah, I'm confused."

He shrugs. "Guess I'm tired today."

I look back to the grill and start taking off cooked meat. "Sure, okay. Has nothing to do with a new staff member from Texas?"

He scoffs. "Why would it?"

I hand him the plate of hot meat and reload the grill with the fresh burgers he brought out, waiting to see if he'll give up more when I don't supply some conversation. He does. He's so predictable.

"Why did they have to hire her of all people?" he grumbles.

I hide a grin. "There aren't many professional event planners that make their way to Pinehaven," I state.

Walker huffs. "Whatever, man. How hard can it be to throw a wedding? Buy a dress, order some flowers, get a cake, boom, done. Your wedding didn't take months and some professional woman to pull it off."

"To be fair, I never actually proposed to Leni, so I don't think we did it the normal way."

I can feel his eyes drilling into the side of my face. "You serious?" I nod. "Okay, remind me never to take advice from you."

I toss him a raised eyebrow. "And yet, who is the one married to the best woman around?"

Walker grins, some of his good humor seeping back in. "That's true. You lucked out."

"I did. Now, take those cooked burgers to the table and get people started." But he simply stands there. I turn again, waving the flipper under his eyes. "Walker, hello? Get moving." He blinks once and gets the message, his bulk making the porch stairs creak as he stomps down them. "And lay off the steroids, man," I call after him. "There's such a thing as too big."

He tosses his wavy blond hair in response, and I'm glad to see the signs of life returning.

Before long all the meat is finished and I join everyone at the long tables that my dad and Landry set up this morning. Leni and Mama decorated them with Josi's help, and Mason is busy playing DJ with the huge speakers that I can barely hear over. Everyone is wearing a party hat, including the newcomers: Birdie and Landry's friends Beau and Kit. I'm not sure Mason has met any of them before, but he welcomed them all to his birthday party regardless.

Birdie was invited, but no one was expecting Beau and Kit, so when Landry waltzed in with them in tow, Leni slapped hats on them, and Steph told them they better have brought a gift. I'm pretty sure I saw some cash being shoved into an old bank envelope and Mason's name being scrawled across the back. My son doesn't need it, but I found it amusing so I didn't put a stop to it.

I have mixed feelings about Beau and Kit being here, though. I've known Beau for years. Him and Landry have been tight since grade school, but the past few times he's been around, he and his girlfriend have caused some waves. Well, Beau has. And Landry has reacted poorly. It's the kind of thing that Steph tells me is worth gossiping about, because it's hot news but doesn't personally affect me. I don't have much interest in hot gossip, but I do want my brother to stay out of the way of whatever's going on there. And I especially don't need my son having it spill into his party.

Thankfully, when I sit down and tune in, everyone is talking about the first wedding taking place in two weeks. Birdie starts officially on Monday, and she has Mama and Leni on pins and needles as she gives them a few ideas to incorporate. She's already made some contacts in town, and it's obvious that she's knowledgeable about the event world. I can see the relief on both Mama's and Leni's faces, and I'm happy for them. Both of them can now chase their dreams and not have to worry about the other. My family being happy is all I need.

A little commotion to my right has me looking to the other end of the table. Walker, I'm surprised to see, is sitting in the very end seat, playing with the food on his plate. I have no idea what's gotten into him. He's typically the center of all family time, and eats double what the rest of us do, but tonight he's subdued. Not surprisingly, the commotion is coming from his left, where Landry's friends, Kit and Beau, seem to be having some sort of disagreement. Again.

I frown as Beau slams his drink on the table and leans close to Kit to whisper-yell something in her face. Landry, sitting across the table from them, is instantly on his feet and throws his hand down between the two of them, slapping his open palms against the table, effectively pushing Beau back into his own space. It calls the attention of the whole party, and all eyes shift that way as conversation dies off. Kit, who I've now seen a few times but don't really know, stands up. She's small and her body is held stiffly as she pushes thin-framed glasses closer to her face. She's blushing as she shoves away from the table and

starts into an easy jog that takes her around the house and out of sight.

This is a pattern I don't feel good about. They show up, Beau's a jerk, Kit runs off. Someone needs to get off that ride.

Beau is up like a shot and after her. Landry shoves his chair back and follows, his jaw set and his face grim as his chair hits the ground from the force of it. I exchange a look with Walker, who has finally tuned back into his surroundings. He offers me a tight nod and stands to saunter after them. It's not like we think our youngest brother can't handle himself, it's more that he seems as upset as the other two, and things might need to be diffused. Who better to settle a situation than the great golden retriever himself?

Leni's hand lands on my thigh and I turn back to her. "Is everything okay?" she asks.

I shrug, and put my hand over hers. "Trouble in paradise, I guess."

Her look is playful. "Something we know a bit about."

I tip my head toward her and press a soft, affectionate kiss against her lips, our hats competing for space. "All in the past, Sunshine."

She kisses me back and murmurs her agreement, and when Mason groans we pull apart.

"This is all they've been doing for three straight days," he says, which has the adults around the table laughing audibly. "It's not funny."

But there's a look in his eyes that says he's glad. Grossed out, sure, but glad. And I am too.

We clear up dinner while Mason and Josi take turns pushing each other on the swing, and then we gather in the shade of the big tree to open gifts. Everyone carries a chair over to make a semi-circle, and I take my place only to be surprised by Leni landing in my lap after she hands Josi a garbage bag and tells her she's on wrapping paper cleanup duty. Leni looks down at me, tips my hat back, and smiles.

I smile back and wrap an arm around her waist to anchor her close. Her arm goes around my shoulders, and together we watch our boy get showered with gifts from the people in that circle.

"We lucked out with him," Leni whispers to me.

"We did." Then I add, "We lucked out with all of it."



The kids are in bed, and I'm so tired I could collapse, but I'm sitting on the back deck of our cabin, nursing a drink with one hand and holding my wife's hand with the other. She's in the chair next to me, head tilted back, looking at the stars. We've both changed into our pajamas, and Leni's face is free of make-up, her wavy hair pulled high on her head. We should make our way to bed, but neither of us wants to break the spell.

"So, the Buck-It List, huh?" Leni says. "Who knew my silly ideas would be so transformational?"

I smile into the dark. "Truly inspired stuff," I reply teasingly.

She squeezes my hand. "Joke all you want, but I think there's something to it."

"Oh, yeah?"

"If we were to make a new bucket list, what kinds of things would you put on it?"

I let my mind wander to what kinds of things I would be willing to do that would be outside my comfort zone and keep the fun alive. The only problem is I'm not really a fun guy in that way, so I'm coming up short.

"We could enter the chili cook-off next July Fourth. Get the kids to help us," Leni says, sitting up slightly.

Her body language tells me she's into this, so I sit up a bit too and look over at her. "That could be good."

She grins, big, and I feel like I won the lottery. "I'll be right back."

She drops my hand and scampers into the cabin with energy that long ago leaked out of my body. I know my wife, which is why I'm not surprised to see her return with a pad of paper and a pen a few moments later.

"We could have made a list on our phones," I joke as she sits back down.

She shakes her head. "No way. Bucket lists are for paper."

"Not a Buck-It List this time?"

She taps the pen against her lips. "Nah. We already got bucked by life. I think this time we keep the universe from getting ideas."

I smile and nod. "Smart."

"What about a zipline adventure?"

"I don't like heights."

She points the pen at me. "You also didn't like cherry pie or singing karaoke or riding a tandem bike . . ."

I hold up a hand. "I take it back."

She writes it down. "Ooh, how about a hot air balloon ride?"

I shake my head. "None of these things sound like local items."

She shrugs. "We've already conquered Pinehaven. We need to expand our horizons. Keep things fresh, you know?"

"All right." Because am I really going to tell this woman no?

"What if we painted a mural?"

I've never painted a thing in my life, so I frown, confused. "Where? And how?"

She laughs. "We could do a family mural project on one of the walls of my yoga studio."

I grin. "Hey, it's your studio, if you want it to be stick figures and attempts at puppies that look like serial killers, that's your call."

"We can have someone draw the outline and we paint it."

"Always with the solutions," I say warmly. We pause while she scribbles on the paper, and an idea does come to me. "What if we each write a letter to one another to be dug up in ten years? I'll write one to you, Mace, and Jo-Jo, and everyone else does the same."

Her shoulders sag and her eyes grow large, and she nods. "I love that so much."

I swear my entire chest fills with helium in that moment. But it nearly bursts when she puts down the paper and moves to join me on my chair, snuggling into my lap and tucking her nose up against my neck. I hold her close and breathe her in.

We don't talk. The list is forgotten for now, but I have a feeling it's something that we'll talk about some more. And I'll support the new bucket list because I support her. I love the idea of including our kids too. Our family is, after all, the thing we've learned to fight the hardest for.

Epilogue

LENI – NEARLY ONE year later

I'm sitting in my yoga studio, sweating. Buckets of it. My hair is slicked across my forehead, my athletic tank stuck to my back, my yoga shorts molded to my thighs, and I don't do anything about it but stare at the open doors and the view beyond it.

My last class of the day just left, a buzzing group of chatty women with big smiles and a commitment to be back next week. I know they will, because they've come every Wednesday morning since I officially opened five months ago. They've weathered winter, spring storms, and now summer's heat, and they keep coming. They've formed a bond with one another and with me, and honestly, it's more than I'd dreamed possible.

The studio is small and peaceful, with light wood floors, and glass doors that let in the sun. There are hanging plants and a big mural of a sun that Holden had commissioned after I told him our family should paint it. He was sneaky, but he was right. Having it done professionally really sets a better tone.

Mason and Josi should be home from their summer camp by now, and still, I sit, meditating and sinking into a realization I've had hounding me for the past couple of days.

I think I'm pregnant.

I'm so sure it's a possibility that I bought a test yesterday, even though I haven't been brave enough to take it yet. Why? Because I'm thirty-three years old, with a nearly fourteen-year-old son, an eight-year-old daughter, and a flutter inside of me that feels both familiar and terrifying and every other emotion I can imagine. I thought we were done with two. Holden and I have never even discussed having another.

A drop of sweat slides into my eye, stinging and getting me moving. I pick up the towel next to me and mop myself up. I sanitize the yoga mats, blocks, and rollers before setting them in their storage shelves. Then I mop the floor and gather up the dirty towels to take back to the cabin to wash. I'm probably stressing for nothing. My period is only five days late. Nothing big. It's happened in the past.

So what if for the past week I've been fighting some nausea and haven't been able to stand the smell of the sanitizer? Maybe it's a bug coming on.

Sure. In the middle of summer, because that's when everyone gets the flu.

I close up the shed and pat the glass doors in a thank you sort of gesture before picking up the cleaning supplies and heading over the small rise to home. I think as I walk, about the past year and my marriage and my kids, and how it's all going better than ever, and I fret a little over what adding a new child to the mix would do to things. I don't want to rock the boat.

But at the same time . . . a baby! Another little Crawford to love.

Abe and Rae would be over the moon to have another grandchild. Holden really is the best dad. Walker and Landry would flip over it. Steph—man, she'd be in heaven. I know Mason and Josi would be thrilled too.

My hands are a little shaky as I make my way inside, thinking again of sleepless nights, unexplained fevers, and so many loads of laundry. I feel a little woozy and wonder if I drank enough water during that last session. It's been warm today and I get lightheaded when I'm dehydrated.

Mason looks up from the kitchen sink where he's filling a glass of water. He smiles at me, tossing his chin-length dark hair back from his eyes. I caved this year and let him grow it out. He thinks it's going to bring him luck with the ladies as he goes into ninth grade this fall. I'm not willing to think about that yet, even if it's happening.

Holden hates it. Walker loves it. Landry calls him Lady Killer, so I know where he stands too.

"Hey," Mason says. "How was yoga?"

A wash of love hits me square in the stomach at the same time I catch the smell of something I can't possibly tolerate. I drop the towels and mop bucket and hustle straight up the stairs and into our ensuite bathroom, barely slamming the door behind me before I empty my stomach into the toilet. I hear footsteps coming and a pause before there's a knock at the door.

"Mama?" Josi's voice calls from outside. "You okay?"

I heave a few more times and hear Mason telling Josi that it's fine and I just need a minute. Man, I love those kids.

I flush the toilet and stand on shaking legs to get to the sink where I rinse out my mouth and wash my hands.

"I'm okay," I call out, knowing they're still standing there even though they're being silent.

But it's a lie, and that same scent hits me from under the door, sending me straight back to my knees. I heave until there's no possibility of anything else coming up, and then I slink to my side and lie on the floor, pressing the side of my face to the cool tiles.

This can't be pregnancy. I wasn't this sick with the others. This has to be the flu.

A knock on the door is followed by it opening a smidge and Mason's head poking through. "You okay?"

I nod, my cheek sticking on the tiles. "Yeah, buddy. I'll be fine."

"I called Dad."

I blink and swallow and then burst into tears. "That was the perfect idea, Mace. Thank you."

Because all I want in the entire world right now is Holden. Only he can make me feel better.

A new urge makes itself known and I offer up what has to be a terrifying grimace of a smile. "Hey, can you give me another minute of privacy?" I ask.

The door closes and I stand to use the toilet, when I remember the test. I grab it out of the drawer where I'd buried it. There's no time like the present to find out if this is a nine-month situation or a twenty-four-hour bug. I take the test and set it on the counter, and then I spend a few minutes telling my kids I'm all right, washing my hands, and watching to see if those lines appear.

When both lines appear I gasp, which has Mason calling through the door again. "Dad's almost here."

I splash my face with water, heating up for an entirely new reason, and hide the test before I pull open the door to the sight of my two babies standing there. Mason's face wrinkles up with concern, which is fair because I'm not known to run into the bathroom and cry. He looks like he wants to say something else, but then the door pushes wider and it's Josi with a blanket.

"Here, Mama," she says, coming in and handing it to me. "It's okay if you don't feel good."

The tears start back up. I adore these two humans. How did I get so lucky? And now another one is coming. Will she or he have their same dark hair and eyes? Will they be athletic like Mason, or bookish like Josi? It's enough to make my heart beat harder. I'm crying again before I realize it.

Mason and Josi look at each other and now it's Josi's turn to frown. "She's crying a lot. Do we need a doctor?"

Mason licks his lips. "I don't think so." He looks at me. "Are you hurt?"

I do my very best to take a deep breath and settle the emotions. "No. I just need a couple minutes and I'll be okay."

Josi takes my hand and tugs me into my bedroom and to my bed where I sink down. She stands next to me and puts a hand on my leg. Mason leans his hip against the open bathroom doorway and crosses his arms, looking so much like Holden that I offer him a wobbly smile.

"Dad's coming," Mason says once more, and I wonder if it's for his benefit or mine.

"Thanks," I say.

The three of us fall into silence, and the nausea fades almost as quickly as it hit. I feel better. So, I dry my eyes with the blanket Josi brought and sit up straighter. I'm thinking about going back down to the main area of the cabin when Holden comes racing through the door and pounding up the stairs, calling my name.

Josi and Mason both greet him with ridiculous enthusiastic relief when he appears in our room, his hat missing. It nearly makes me laugh, but then I see the concern on his face and the laugh morphs into a sob which sends me walking toward him with rapidly filling eyes.

"You're here," I sniff.

I see the look he exchanges with the kids, and hear Mason say, "We don't know what's going on," before the two kids head out to give us some space.

Holden meets me halfway, his arms already open, and I walk straight into them.

"Mason said you were throwing up," he says, tucking me under his chin. "You okay?"

I lick my lips and wonder what to say. I land on saying, "I'm okay." And then, "I want to lie down."

He immediately puts his arm around my shoulders and guides me onto our bed. He kicks off his boots before climbing up to sit next to me, leaning against the headboard and pulling me into him so that I'm resting in his arms. In the silence I do the math in my head and land on a possible due date toward the end of January. A winter baby.

Our lives are about to change in a big way. I let it sink in a bit as I play with the buttons on Holden's Western shirt. It's dirty. He came in a rush.

"Did I pull you away from something?" I ask.

He shakes his head, his chin catching at my hair. "Nothing more important."

"I feel silly that the kids called you. It's not an emergency," I say.

He gives me a squeeze. "None of us know what to do when you're not okay," he chuckles, and I do too.

"Bunch of codependent wimps."

His chuckle deepens. "Guilty as charged."

I swallow. "So, I have a suspicion that we may be adding another item to our ongoing bucket list."

I can feel his confusion as his hand chases down my spine. "Food poisoning? Not really my thing, honey."

I smile and pinch at his waist, making him squirm. "What would you say to another baby?"

His hand pauses in its caress and his chest stops moving for a second on a held breath of surprise. Then he gently sits me up to look me in the eyes. I can see so many emotions in his hazel depths, but he's trying really hard to see if I'm serious before he reacts.

So, I smile and nod. "Yeah, babe. We're doing this again. Baby number three, coming in January."

His emotions flit rapid-fire across his face before a huge smile cracks his mouth wide. "Seriously? I didn't think we'd get to do it again."

"Did you want to?" I ask, filling up with happiness at his reaction.

He shakes his head. "I don't know. I hadn't thought about it, to tell the truth. But I'm immediately happy, so there you go."

I guess I'm pretty happy myself.

He pulls me to him for a fierce kiss. "Thank you, Leni. This is the best surprise ever."

Then, before I can respond, he's yelling for the kids to come upstairs, and he's telling them we're having another little Crawford. Mason doesn't even try to play it cool. He cheers and fist-pumps the air, and Josi jumps up and down in place, her wild hair flowing around her. We swear them both to secrecy for at least a few more weeks.

Then they climb into our bed and we snuggle up as a family of four. Holden rests his hand on my still-flat stomach, and we think about names and who will sleep in what room, and I realize that this is the number one most important bucket list moment of them all.

True Tales and Acknowledgements

TRUE TALES:

I have a couple of cousins who are avid outdoorswomen and find heart-shaped rocks on their hikes and adventures. They'll also find them in clouds or branches or leaves and flowers. They often post them on their social media accounts, and I love seeing them. I thought it would be fun to incorporate that into this book.

When Holden mentions that Mason doesn't seem to know where his body is in space, and he had to tell Mason that he was standing on his foot, that's happened to me several times with one of my sons. I'll look up, and up at this big human and say, "Buddy, you're standing on my foot," and he'll be surprised every single time. Ha ha.

When Holden tells his kids about trying to impress Leni by dismounting from a running horse, that's loosely inspired by a story of my Grandpa Roy trying to impress my grandma when they were newly dating by mounting a running horse, Pony Express style. He ended up tripping up himself and the horse and they landed in a dusty heap in the middle of the arena. It was a total hilarious fail, but Grandma still agreed to marry him and it was a loving marriage for 70 plus years.

Acknowledgements:

To my husband, Steve. I'm sorry I had to use your name for evil in this book. Expect that to continue in book two. Wouldn't want you to get too comfy :)

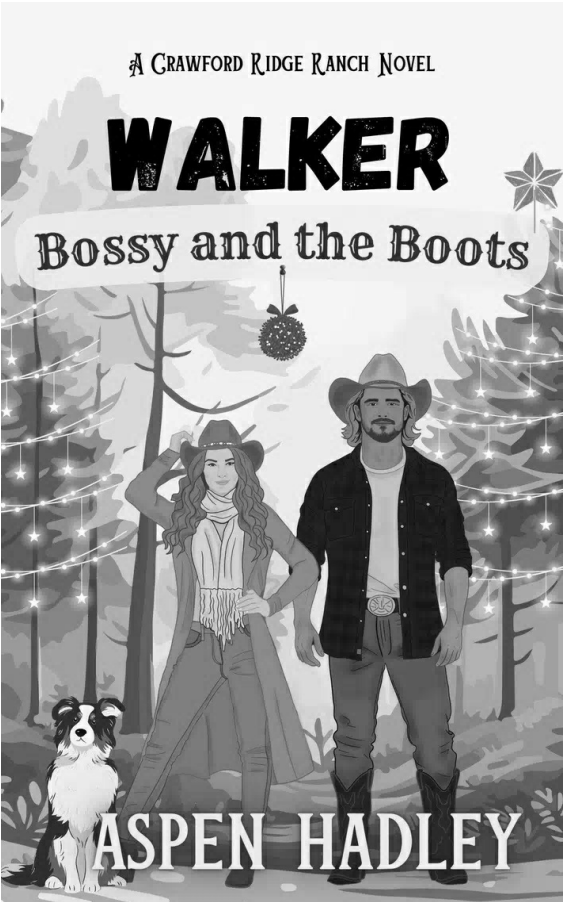
My kids. It's so fun that you're getting older and can support me in dedicating more time to writing, but sometimes I miss your sweet little faces from years past so much that it makes my chest ache. What a privilege it's been to be your mama.

My cover character artist Nicole. Your talent and generosity amaze me, and I'm so grateful that with as busy as you are you continue to create characters that are perfect for my covers and make my books so pretty.

To everyone who gave a great big YEE-HAW when you heard I was writing a Western trio. This is for you!

Next Up

I HOPE YOU LOVED the first book in the Crawford Ridge Ranch series! Next up is Walker's story. Has our golden retriever brother found his match in the strong and sassy woman from Texas?



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About the Author

Aspen Hadley is an award-winning author who is always working on the next story. She writes what she wants to read: kissing only, sassy, romantic comedy novels that give you a break from real life and leave you feeling happy.

Outside of writing, Aspen's number one hobby is reading. Number two is sneaking chocolate into and out of her private stash without being caught. Other favorites include: getting to the leftovers before her hungry teens can, playing the piano, traveling, a good case of the giggles, sleeping in, and off-roading in her Jeep.

Aspen lives in the red sands of southern Utah. She has one patient husband, 4 hilarious children, and one grumpy dog. They are her greatest happiness, and the source of all messiness.

You can follow along and share some laughs by finding her on Facebook at facebook.com/aspenhewriter/ and Instagram [@aspenhadley_author](https://instagram.com/aspenhadley_author).