A Hallow Ranch Novel A dark cowboy romance



Brittany Ann

Stay for Me

Brittany Ann

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Titles

Trigger Warnings

This book contains graphic and violent scenes.

Characters in this book were victims of mental, physical, and emotional

abuse.

Mental Health issues such as: PTSD, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and

depression are present in this story.

Burn injuries are present in this story.

Eating disorders are present in this story.

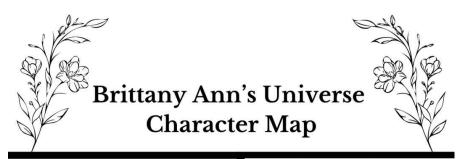
Child loss and death are mentioned in this story.

If you have an issue with any of these topics, please proceed with caution.

Playlist

Sleepin' on the Blacktop by Colter Wall (The Hallow Ranch song) Sin So Sweet by Warren Zeiders Breakdown by Seether Provider by Sleep Token (Mags' song) Bloodstream by Statless Cowpoke by Colter Wall Fall for Me by Sleep Token Bent by Matchbox Twenty (Diana's song)

For Reference



The Batter Up Series (St. Louis, MO)

Dean Connors: Ex-Baseball player Gwen Connors (Davenport): Dean's wife. Children: Aiden and Ava Connors

James Garner: FBI Agent in St. Louis Haley Austen: James' Fiancé/ Street Racer

Collin Stevens: Head of Italian Mafia Kay (Karina) Stevens: Collin's wife/ Jeremy's adopted sister

Jeremy Jones: Leader of Oasis and The Crew Casey Gomez: Jeremy's Fiancé/ Hacker for the FBI

Sullie: Owner of Sullie's Bar/Former leader of The Crew Dom: Sullie's right hand man

The Burnout Series (St. Louis, MO)

Jeremy Jones: Leader of Oasis and The Crew

Dontell Vance Michealson: Oasis Leader Mina Torrance: Dontell's wife/Leon's sister Cleo: Mina's daughter

Leon Torrance: Oasis Leader/ Mina's brother Amara Harris: Leon's woman/ Chief of Police

Cain Donavan: Oasis Leader Nikki Wells: Cain's woman/ Street Racer

The Langston Brothers Duet (Hayden, CO)

Denver Langston: Owner of Hallow Ranch Valerie Langston: Denver's wife Children: Caleb and Nancy Jane Langston

Mason Langston: Pro-Bull Rider/ Friend of Jeremy Jones Harmony Langston: Mason's wife

> Hallow Ranch Cowboys: Mags (friend of Grayson) Beau Jigs Lance Lawson

The Catch Me Duet (Astoria, OR)

> Red Snake Investigations: Joseph Grayson Hayes Mitchell Dominic Edwards Jake Murphy Ash Doss

A note to my readers

Dear Readers,

Whether you're a new reader or an old reader, thank you for being here. It means the world to me.

Hallow Ranch is a special place within the Brittany-Verse.

The Langston Brothers Duet (Breathe for Me and Sing for Me) are the first of my books that take place at Hallow Ranch.

Stay for Me can be read as a standalone and takes place at Hallow Ranch. You will see some old characters and discover new ones.

You do not have to read *The Langston Brothers Duet* first to enjoy this story.

That being said, despite the pretty cover, this is a <u>dark cowboy romance</u>. Hallow Ranch is home to hot, morally grey cowboys.

These men will not hesitate to protect their women and Hallow Ranch. You babes have been waiting for Mags' story for over two years and while I'm grateful for your anticipation, I need to be open with you about something. Whatever story you were expecting—throw it out the window. This story is filled with deep conversations, healing, messy feelings, and a ton of longing.
Diana and Mags both have their demons.
Diana, my sweet Diana, is a version of me I'd never thought I'd let the world see and I hope you love her.
Mags' POV contains a lot of flashbacks. After all, he's been at Hallow Ranch for over a decade.
This book was extremely hard to write. This book pushed every single limit I had and then some.
All that being said, I hope I did them justice.
As always, please refer to the *trigger warnings* and the *Brittany-Verse Character Map* before reading.
Welcome back to Hallow Ranch, babes.
Love,

Brittany Ann

To the people struggling with food noise, to the ones recovering from eating disorders, and to the ones who were made to feel guilty about what they ate as a child.

The days are long, the meals are planned, the calories are counted, and the guilt still remains.

Day after day. Year after year. Through the seasons of healing. The noise never goes away; the war is never ending.

Trust me, I know.

This isn't a war you're fighting alone and the calories you logged are not an indication of your worth.

You're worthy regardless of the deficit you try to stay in.

You're worthy regardless of the number on the scale you hate.

You're worthy regardless of all your failures in and out of the kitchen.

You. Are. Worthy.

You're beautiful.

You're strong.

You got this. I love you.

Prologue



Mags

Year One.

The bell above the door jingled as I stepped inside the small animal feed store, the chill of winter seeping into the space. My legs ached, scar tingling as my damaged left side radiated with pain. I bit down, grinding my teeth as the heat of the store hit me.

Fuck.

Warmth.

Never thought I would be craving heat again, but here we were.

As the skin of my cheeks began to sting, I felt the tension in my neck dissipate. My stomach growled, but I barely even noticed. I wasn't here for food.

In fact, food was the last thing on my mind.

Three pairs of eyes landed on me, studying me for two or three seconds before the owners went back to their business. As the door behind me slowly closed, I took a moment to enjoy the heat, grateful for something so simple.

It had been a long trek to this little town, and my survival instincts were kicking me in the ass. The logical thing to do would've been to stay in Denver, lay low, find a job there, save up some money, then move on in the Spring.

PTSD didn't factor into logic. It obliterated it.

A big city was the last place I needed to be. Just the sound of a car horn sent me back into a place I'd barely escaped from, drowning me in traumatizing memories. No, I couldn't live in a city.

I needed quiet.

I needed some fucking peace.

"Can I help you find something?"

Slowly, I turned my head to find an older man behind an antique cash register, wearing a thick flannel and an old straw hat. As I assessed him, he leaned forward to look over the counter and his eyes dropped to my boots, recognition flashing in them. I let him study me, from my boots to the tan duffel on my back. Curiosity was a part of humanity, and people—normal people—loved to stare at men like me.

No matter how much I hated it, I didn't have any say in the matter.

When the man's eyes hit my face again, he said, "Welcome home, soldier."

Home.

What a fucking joke that was.

I said nothing, walking to the counter, clocking the veteran's hat on the wall of pictures and antiques behind him. He braced his wrinkled hands on the counter, pride shining in his eyes. I gave him a nod.

That was when I noticed how quiet everything was in here.

I liked it.

For the first time in weeks, I felt like I could breathe, and my anxiety settled in my chest, the weight lifting off me, and I felt somewhat normal.

"What can I help you with?" the man asked again. "Anything you're looking for?"

"Work," I answered gruffly, the sound of my own voice foreign. I couldn't remember the last time I'd spoken to anyone. The days had blended together, time not granting me a shred of fucking mercy as I tried to figure out my life, wondering what the hell I was going to do with it.

"You don't look like the kind of man who would survive retail," he noted. I said nothing, only staring at him.

He clicked his tongue. "Do you know where you are?"

That was the only thing I was certain of. "Hayden, Colorado."

His eyes assessed me again, dropping down to my worn-out coat, lingering on the missing third button for a moment. "You get any injuries over there, solider?"

My next words were blunt, like the dull knife still lingering in my fucking back. "None that won't keep me from work."

"Can you ride a horse?"

"I'll learn."

The old man hummed, his eyes taking in my appearance. "You on drugs?" "Nope."

"You ever been on drugs?"

My jaw ticked and my grip tightened on the strap of my pack. I wasn't in the mood to be interrogated. "Not by choice, no."

He nodded and leaned back, sighing as he pulled out a notebook from underneath the register. "How much are you looking to make?"

"Enough to survive."

The old man's lips twitched. "Well, survival looks different for everyone."

No, a lot of people confuse survival with greed. I inhaled through my nose and hit him with my definition. "Enough to put food in my gut and clothes on my back."

His head tilted to the side, and, once again, silence fell between us as he studied me. "That's all?"

I could feel eyes on my back as I nodded once. "That's all."

The man nodded, an understanding sigh leaving him. "Well, I don't have any work for you, but Hallow Ranch might."

The hairs on the back of my neck rose, and I grunted, still feeling those eyes on me.

Fucking hell.

Taking a second, I looked around the quiet store, noting the few people in there, were no longer interested in me, having gone back to their business. My eyes stopped when they landed on a blonde head. The lights above created an illusion, giving the woman a halo of sorts, and for a moment, I wasn't sure she was real. "Denver Langston just got out," the old man informed me, pulling me back into the conversation. I looked back over to him, waiting for more. "The new owner of Hallow Ranch. He got out of the Marines about a year ago and took over."

That didn't give me much, but knowing this cowboy was a fellow Marine was something. I looked back to the veteran's hat displayed on the wall, wondering if the stranger had experienced anything remotely close to the hell I'd been forced to serve in.

"His father passed shortly after he got home, and his younger brother left town before that," the man continued.

I didn't give a rat's ass about Hallow Ranch's history.

I just needed a damn job.

The old man scratched his jaw, muttering something under his breath as he stumbled around behind the counter, looking for something. After a few moments, he handed me a business card, dated 1989. "Give that to him and tell him I sent you. That might give him some sway."

I pocketed the card. "Going to need directions."

He waved his hand, a smile on his face. "I'll drive you."

I shook my head, shutting him down. "I appreciate the offer, but I'll be walking to Hallow Ranch, sir."

His brows lifted so high, I was half convinced they would fly off his face. "It's a five mile walk, soldier. You sure you're up for that?"

I was silent again, staring at him and giving nothing away.

Like hell I'd be getting into a fucking car I wasn't driving.

Reluctantly, the old man sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Head north up this road for about three miles, take a left on County Road, and then walk until you see sign."

One hour later.

I tipped my head back, taking in the massive "H" on the barn in front of me. The entire structure was overdue for a fresh coat of red paint. I'd been on the property for all of ten minutes, bypassing a white house with a wraparound porch and heading straight down the hill to the barn. Even though the ground was covered in snow, I knew the ranch owner would be down here, tending to his animals. Twisting my neck, I took in the land around me, blanketed in crisp white snow, the rays of the sun peeking through the gray clouds above, causing the ground to sparkle.

I'd been all over the world. I'd seen and experienced all kinds of landscapes, but there was something about this piece of land that felt peaceful.

Peace was something I knew nothing about, and I was desperate to discover it.

"Yo!"

I looked over to the corral, finding a cowboy walking his horse towards the barn, a black hat perched on his head. He was tall—taller than me. A long, black beard hung on his face, his mouth set, and the bags under his eyes didn't take away from his intimidation. As he drew closer, I held his gray eyes and lifted my chin.

"You Denver Langston?" I called, my breath drifting into frigid air.

He stopped just in front of the barn, his horse neighing in protest as he studied me. Like the man in the feed store, his eyes scanned me, taking in my appearance, lingering on my boots. The cowboy said nothing, just turning and walking his horse into the barn.

I remained were I was, jaw twitching and feet planted firmly on the gravel, waiting.

From inside the barn, I heard a stall door close, followed by the soft crunches of a horse eating. Seconds later, the cowboy reemerged from the shadows, his thick black work coat draped over one of his shoulders, thick gloves on his hands. As he walked to me, he shoved the gloves in the back pocket of his jeans and then stopped a few feet from me. I could see the heat from him floating up in the freezing air, but from the looks of it, he didn't mind the cold.

"You the owner of this ranch?" I asked.

"Who's asking?" the cowboy finally replied, his voice deep, his eyes holding mine.

"I am. "

A short chuckle left him, and he looked away from me for a moment. "Fucking Marines. Cocky sons of bitches," he muttered.

"Guess it takes one to know one," I replied coolly, assuming this was Denver.

The man looked back at me, his lips twitching. "You going to give me your name, or are should I let you keep playing the role of smart ass?"

"I'm too tired for games, Mr. Langston," I said, holding my hand out. "Mags."

He eyed my hand for half a second before taking it and giving it a firm shake. "You got a last name?"

I shook my head once. "Nope. Just Mags."

As we dropped hands, he asked, "Man's gotta have a last name."

"Don't have one to give you."

He studied me, and behind him, I heard a voice coming from the building beside the barn. "Alright then, Mags. What do you want? I have a lot of work to do before this damn blizzard hits."

"Work," I informed him, flicking out the card the man from the feed store gave me. "He told me you'd have some for me."

Langston's eyes dropped down to the card and then flicked up to mine. "You want to work here?"

"Affirmative."

His dark brows came together underneath his hat, his eyes flashing. "What makes you think you can cowboy?" he pressed.

"Can't be much worse than war, Langston."

He grunted and looked out into the field. "You're right about that," he muttered.

I said nothing, waiting patiently for his next words and praying to whoever the fuck was running the show up there to let me have this one win. After everything I'd been through, in my opinion, it was the least I deserved. I had no home. I had no family.

All I had were the dark memories of my past and the clothes on my back.

I just needed this, and I'd be fine. I'd make it.

"I can't pay you much, Mags," he said, his voice serious. "This job is hard work, and right now, little pay."

"I just need clothes on my back and food in my gut, sir."

The cowboy studied for me for a long time then, and for a flicker of a moment, I was convinced he might have been seeing his past self in me. The man had demons, that much I knew. Unlike me, he wasn't even bothering trying to hide them. From his rumpled flannel, to his beard, to pale skin...I knew Denver Langston was drowning.

"When did you get back to the States?" he questioned, his voice level.

"Two months ago," I told him, unsure whether that was the truth or not. It felt like two months, but it might have been four...or six. Truth be told, I didn't remember much from my time in the hospital to me walking into my house, finding pain instead of a warm welcome.

That was all in the past now.

"Where's your vehicle?"

"Don't have one."

He reached up and adjusted his hat, a tired sigh leaving him. "You a drifter, Mags?"

I didn't answer because the fuck of it was, I didn't know how to.

After a few moment of silence, he clipped, "I can't hire a man who is going to bring trouble to my ranch, Marine. I have mouths to feed and a fucking son to protect."

"Don't have any fucking trouble to bring in the first place, sir. I'm just looking for work," I said, my spine snapping straight.

"You on drugs?"

"No."

"Have you ever done drugs?"

"Unwillingly."

He jerked, the moment so small and insignificant that if I wasn't who I was, trained like I was, I might've missed it.

"You got a record?"

"Nope."

"What was your job in the Marines?"

"Depends on who you ask."

His head ticked to the side. "I'm asking you."

I clenched my jaw. "To serve my country."

When he didn't respond, I—unfortunately--felt compelled to tell him the truth.

And so, I did.

By the time I was done, the Hallow Ranch owner was looking at me in a different light, the coldness in his gray eyes having melted away. "Mags," he said, testing the name. "Was that your call-sign?"

I shook my head. "Didn't have one."

"Nothing else?" he prompted, still stuck on me not having a last name.

"Mags is the only name I got. Sorry to disappoint."

Langston grunted and looked to his boots. After exactly ten seconds, he lifted his head and answered my silent prayer. "Right, well, if you want work, I have some for you. You'll get cash at the end of the month. I don't clock hours, but if I have to come into the bunkhouse to wake your ass up, you're gone. Understood?"

I nodded.

"This job is hard work and, again, little pay. Hopefully, in a few years, should you choose to stay on, I'll have more for you. Right now, I'm just trying to keep the fucking ranch above water."

"You don't have explain anything to me," I told him. "Just tell me what you want me to do."

He stared at me for a another moment then, a harsh winter wind swirling around us.

"Let's get you settled in. Work starts in the morning."

With that, he led me into the bunkhouse, introduced me to an older cowboy and his son, gave me a bunk, and told me to be in the barn before sunrise.

A few weeks later, when the snow was still on the ground, settled and waiting for the sun to melt it, I was deep in my work, pulling long days and even longer nights. My injury had proved to be only a slight problem, but I didn't make it known to the cowboys around me. I kept my head down and worked.

Jigs, the old bastard in charge of teaching me the ropes, had been impressed with how quickly I caught on. In a few days, after the corral had been cleared of the fresh snow, he was going to start teaching me how to ride so by the time spring came, I would be ready to help with the herd.

I leaned the shovel against the horse stall, surveying my work, feeling a bead of sweat trickle down my neck. I'd been in the barn since four AM, getting a head start on my chores because I couldn't sleep. Then again, I could never fuckin' sleep. Denver wouldn't be down here until later, after his son's doctor's appointment, and Beau was visiting his girlfriend at her college. It was just me and the old man on the ranch this morning.

So when I heard the loud roar of a shitty sounding engine coming from outside the barn, my body went on alert. I made my way to the barn doors, knowing the horses would whine when I opened them again. They were sick of the cold almost as much as I was. I heard the familiar sound of squeaky breaks, followed by a car door slamming as I pulled open the doors. My eyes went directly to a shitty looking Honda Civic parked in the muddy, iced covered gravel.

It was a dark day, the usual overcast winter sky sucking the color and light out of everything around Hallow Ranch, reminding me of my own soul.

Lifeless.

Colorless.

Dark.

As I stared at the car, a sound filled my ears. Sweet.

The sweetest sound I'd ever heard in my life.

My head snapped to the left, my eyes locking in on a light, a golden little light in the middle of this barren land.

Her hair was blonde, but not just any blonde—the color of honey. Her skin was fair, a beauty mark by her right eye, and those eyes—Jesus.

"Hi," the woman breathed out.

Jesus, but she was fuckin' real, wasn't she?

My eyes dropped away from her stunning hazel ones, taking in her appearance and noticing two things. One, it was too damn cold out here for her to wearing that dress. Two, she loved color. Her dress was yellow, tights underneath it a dark purple, her rain boots hunter green, and there was thin pink scarf around her neck that was doing nothing to keep her warm.

"I'm just here to see Denver," the woman continued, brushing some of that honey hair out of her face, her teeth chattering. "Is he here?"

I shook my head.

She moved closer to me, and I watched as frustration came over her eyes. "Do you know where he is?" she asked, standing less than three feet from me now.

The wind blew then, coming from behind her, and her scent—Christ. Sweet.

So damn sweet.

My mouth watered.

"Um. Sir?" she called, her brow pinched with worry.

"Langston's not here," I grunted.

"I gathered that—"

"Don't know when he'll be back," I informed her, the sound of my own voice unfamiliar to me. This was the first time I'd spoken more than one or two words in weeks.

She looked up to the house, wrapping her arms around herself, her teeth chattering. I didn't know who this woman was to Denver, but she needed her ass spanked for not wearin' a fuckin' coat.

"You need a coat," I grumbled.

Her head snapped back to me, eyes wide, cheeks red. "I have one in the car."

I gave her nothing else, needing to get away from her.

"What's your name?" she asked.

I stared at her, knowing the probability of me seeing her again was low, so I decided right then I would give her this and only this. She would have my name only. "Mags."

"Mags," she repeated softly, testing it.

It was then I knew.

It was then my short lived peace came crashing down around me, revealing to me a new version of hell I hadn't had the pleasure of experiencing yet. The universe wanted me dead, and it couldn't kill me in the war. So now, as penance, whoever the hell was up there ruining my life decided to show me what heaven was supposed to look like, dangling it in front me, teasing me—torturing me.

It was then I knew I would never know peace because I could never have her.

Chapter One



Diana

End of July.

"My client has made their demands. If you want to negotiate, we can set something up, but yelling at me over the phone isn't going to get you anywhere," I said, leaning back in my chair, darting my eyes up to the ceiling. The pain in the back of my skull hadn't lessened since nine this morning, my stomach was growling, and I desperately needed some water.

I didn't—no, I shouldn't be dealing with this asshole on the phone.

Today was supposed to be an easy day. *Yoga at eight. Get to the office by nine thirty. Work until one. Lunch. Meeting at three. Hallow ranch at four thirty for an*

Hallow ranch at four thirty for an in-person meeting with Valerie Langston.

That was my day, planned out in my color-coded pink Filofax.

Due to the lightness in my schedule, I'd been looking forward to this day for over month. Today, I would actually get to sit down and eat my lunch, savoring it instead of scarfing half of it down and throwing the rest away, going about the rest of the afternoon with a burnt tongue. I usually didn't have time to eat. Between client meetings and court appearances, I barely had time to think about anything else other than my firm.

Silently, while studying the ceiling of my office, I channeled Emily Blunt's character from *The Devil Wears Prada*.

I love my job.

I love my job.

I love my job.

As the ranch owner on the other end of the line carried on about things that didn't matter to me or my client, I let out a soft sigh, closing my eyes. Today was Wednesday, which meant I'd written my to-do list in purple and my schedule in baby blue in ink—with sparkles. Wednesdays were usually, despite my hectic schedule, my only good day of the week. The mid-point. The halfway point. The lull. Wednesdays were also cookie days, the one day of the week I allowed myself to eat the only food that brought me pure, unadulterated joy. I was set on eating said cookie after savoring my lunch, but from the looks of it, I might not be able to do that.

I don't know which pissed me off more: the man on the phone insulting my client, or losing my cookie time.

"I'd like to speak to your supervisor," the man snarled through the phone, derailing my train of thought about sweet treats.

The answer was A.

This man definitely pissed me off more, and now, he'd given me the opportunity to put him right where he belonged: in his place.

A slow, wonderful smile spread across my face as my eyes opened. Suddenly, that annoying throb in my skull lessened, as if my body was allowing me this one gift, and my craving for the sea salt chocolate chip cookie sitting on my counter disappeared.

Oh, how I was going to enjoy this gift.

The gift of verbally shoving my success up this man's ass.

"Sir, this my law firm," I told him sweetly. "The only boss here is me."

He scoffed. "How can you claim to represent ranchers and small businesses when you treat us like this?"

I didn't even stop my eyes from rolling. Victimizing was an old game, one I'd grown tired of playing. "*You* mistreated *my* client. As previously stated, look over those terms, and if you would like to negotiate, we can set something up."

The man huffed, calling me a bitch before ending the call, and I couldn't help but laugh.

As I pulled my phone away from my ear, I muttered, "A basket of sunshine that cowboy is."

Onto the next thing.

For the next hour, I forced all the other crap from my mind to focus on my meeting with my everything girl, Emma. She worked out of her three bedroom apartment in Denver and was the best investment I'd ever made for my business. She took care of my client schedule, booked court dates, managed the website, and funneled in new clients. She also helped me with keeping up with the books, making sure I had a vacation at least one a year. Without her, my firm would be in disarray. She took care of the little things so my paralegal and I could focus on the big things.

Emma, my Everything Girl.

"Things are looking good, Diana," she assured me from her side of the Zoom call. "I have a possible new client wanting to meet with you."

My ears perked up. I hadn't taken on a new client in over a year. "Oh yeah?" I asked, picking up my pen.

Emma's blue eyes shined with excitement on my screen as she pushed some of her purple hair back. "Yeah, small ranch outside of Colorado Springs."

Music to my ears.

"Send over the questionnaire please," I murmured as I jotted down a note.

"Already in your inbox."

I looked back up, a smile stretching across my lips. "Have I told you lately that I love you?"

Emma grinned. "Yes, but you can tell me again. I love to hear it."

We chatted for a few more minutes, going over the next month and when we were done, she closed her tablet and leaned back in her chair. My eyes narrowed. "What?"

She shrugged, acting nonchalant. "Just wondering when I need to book that vacation for you."

Sighing, I reminded her, "You do understand I don't have to vacation the same time every year, right?"

"I've been working for you for seven years, Diana. Not once have you not booked a vacation for late summer."

"Well, maybe I just wait until early next summer. You know, take a regular beach vacation."

She nodded. "You can absolutely do a beach vacation—this year. I can have you on a plane on Saturday."

I blinked and reaching for my Filofax. "Next Saturday wouldn't work for me, Emma. You know I have the—"

"Things can be rescheduled," she noted.

Panic balled up in my throat. My schedule was already ironed out and colored-coded. There was no way in hell I was going to drop everything and take a vacation. Emma's eyes scanned my face, and a second later, a soft, musical giggle escaped her.

"God, you should see your face," she said, laughing.

My lips thinned. "Goodbye, Emma."

She was still laughing when I ending the meeting.

I should've never given her that dang bonus.

I rolled my neck before closing out my documents on my desktop, grabbed my laptop, planner, and pen bag, packed my bag, and swiped my key off the hook before heading out of the office.

"Good afternoon, Diana."

I looked over my shoulder as I locked the door to my office building to find a Hayden local, Martha Shelly, passing by, walking her dog.

"Good afternoon," I greeted, giving her a smile as I faced her, hiking my bag over my shoulder.

Martha was born and raised here, like most of the people in Hayden. She was married to the elementary school principal. In fact, they just celebrated their thirtieth anniversary. "Oh, happy late anniversary," I added, trying to ignore the sting as thoughts of the future, uncertainties, and doubts began to flood my mind. The internal clock ticking away inside my body seemed louder than before as I took in the state of the old woman.

She was only fifty years old and had no visible gray hairs thanks to the hairstylist we shared down at the salon. Of course, there were some fine lines and wrinkles on her face, but I'd always thought they were a sign of beauty, a life well lived.

"Thank you, dear," she sighed as her little dog came to sniff my heels. "It seems like only yesterday we were on our honeymoon, planning to buy our home." She paused for a moment, looking down the sidewalk, a small smile teasing her lips. "Time flies by when you're in love."

Her words were like an arrow piercing my heart, a direct hit.

Time didn't just fly--it all but disappeared whenever love was involved.

I nodded when she looked back at me, studying me with her kind eyes. I knew what she was thinking, the same thoughts everyone in this town had about me.

Diana, the workaholic.

Diana, the single woman in her thirties. When is she ever going to settle down? When was the last time she went on a date?

Would she ever fall in love?

"Will I see you at book club on Friday?" she asked shortly after I cleared my throat and shifted my weight.

If she were anyone else, I might have told her to shove off, but she was a good person down to her core.

I shook my head, grateful for the change of subject. "No, I have some work to catch up on, but I plan on being there next month."

We were planning on reading *Rage Becomes Her* by Soraya Chemaly next month, and there was no way in hell I'd been missing that.

"Right, of course," she murmured softly, smiling at me before her eyes flicked up to my law firm sign.

Ten minutes later, I was in the front seat of my pride and joy, heading to out of town as I tried to brush off the small conversation. It was easier said than done today, and it frustrated me. My hands tightened on the steering wheel as I silently reminded myself of the facts.

I was a successful lawyer.

I made a life for myself in Hayden, Colorado.

I owned my own home and car.

I had no debt, multiple healthy savings accounts, and stock investments.

I had two employees and over fifty clients across the state.

I had a job that helped the little guys, and I was damn good at it.

"Brush it off, Diana," I pushed out through my teeth as my chest began to ache. "What's meant for you will find you."

For the next three minutes, I whispered my affirmations, and with each word, the ache began to fade away.

My little red Mercedes flew down the two-lane road as my playlist softly spilled from the speakers. It was a bit of a drive out to Hallow Ranch, but I didn't mind it. In fact, I looked forward to coming out here. Denver Langston was one of my oldest clients. I'd been working with him for over a decade now, and if not for him, I didn't think my firm would be where it was today.

He was the first ranch owner to take a chance on me, the young, naïve lawyer, fresh from the bar exam.

I smiled as the memory of our first meeting came to mind. He had to duck his head to come into my office, and he'd been covered in mud, his clothes drenched from the rain. He took one look at me, and asked if I was good lawyer. I nodded, and he hired me on the spot. He needed me to handle the Hallow Ranch accounts, including the sponsor contracts for Evergreen Feed for his younger brother, Mason, who was a professional bull rider. Denver also trusted me to handle the custody negotiation with his son's mother, Cathy. That was years ago, and now, all those problems seemed to have faded away.

Turning on my blinker, I hummed as the Hallow Ranch sign came into view to my left, and I slowed the car. As soon as my tires hit the gravel, I felt a sense of peace. I took in the beauty of the long driveway, my eyes scanning over the healing mountain-side in the distance, thankful the trees were finally starting to bloom again. The grass was green, the sky blue, the clouds pure white, and the sun bright yellow.

So much color.

So much life.

So much beauty.

The main house come into view, the crisp white paint matching the clouds above, the black roof of the red barn poking out from down the hill. My stomach fluttered, and before I could let myself ask the one question that, without fail, always came to mind the second I parked my car, I shook my head. "Nope," I muttered, popping the "p" and grabbing my bag, opening my door and swinging my legs out. The sunlight hit my pencil skirt, finally letting me see the true color of it.

An extremely dark, rich purple.

I hummed in approval, getting out of the car and closing the door with my hip before walking across the gravel--smoothly. It'd taken me at least five years to get the hang of walking in pumps across Denver Langston's gravel, but now, it was breeze. I didn't even have to watch my feet anymore. As my heels hit the brick of the porch steps, I saw movement in the porch swing.

Caleb, Denver's son, was sprawled across it, his hands behind his head, his cowboy hat covering his face.

I watched him for a moment, trying to wrap my mind around how fast the darn kid was growing. He was almost my height now. Last year, he only came up to my shoulder. Then again, his father and uncle were both six-foot-seven, and I knew by the time he started high school, he would be towering over me and his step-mom. I watched his chest rise and fall steadily, a soft snore echoing from underneath his head.

I shook my head.

Cowboys.

They'll nap anywhere, anytime.

I turned and softly knocked on the screen door. Valerie didn't make me wait long, the main door swinging open seconds later. Her forest green eyes brightened as her lips spread into a breathtaking smile. "Hey, girl," she greeted.

I returned the smile. "Good afternoon, Val."

She gestured for me to come inside, a high-pitched baby laugh filling the foyer as she shut the door behind me. I looked over into the kitchen to find Denver and Val's baby girl, NJ, sitting in her high chair by the butcher block island. Her little mouth, chubby cheeks, and hands were covered in juice from her strawberries and blueberries. She clapped wildly at the sight of me.

"Di! Di!" she babbled as her mother laughed, heading into the kitchen. I followed, my heels hitting the old hardwoods, the sound providing me a comfort as I stared at the child.

"Every time I come out here, she gets bigger," I muttered, reaching out to stroke one of her chubby little arms with the back of my finger.

Valerie snorted. "I know between her, Caleb, and their father, I'm always running out of food."

My eyes met hers, jerking my thumb over my shoulder. "Since when does Cowboy Jr. take naps on the porch swing?"

Her eyes widened. "Caleb is out there?" she breathed, laughing slightly. "Is he not supposed to be?"

NJ laughed again, only this time, because of her mother laughing first. "No. He's supposed to be in pasture four with the rest of the cowboys."

We both fell into a small fit of laugher, knowing Denver was going to be upset his son skipped out on work.

"To be fair," Val said as the laughter died, "Caleb has been working really hard. He gets up with Denver and doesn't go to bed until he's finished his summer reading."

I raised my brows. "You actually convinced him to do it."

She shot me a look. "Let's not forget what I used to do for a living. Convincing cowboys was my job." Valerie used to work for a pipeline, one of the shadiest in the business. She only did it because it paid well, and she needed the money to pay for her mother's medical bills. When Valerie came to Hallow Ranch years ago, ready to convince Denver to sell his land, everything changed. The memories, both good and bad, hovered between us as the brightness in her green eyes dimmed slightly.

I cleared my throat and set my bag on the island. "Well, you have a new career now," I said with glee. "And I'm happy to share some good news with you."

She chewed on her thumbnail, her nerves clearly eating at her. "Yeah?" she asked tentatively.

A smile stretched across my lips as I pulled out my laptop and her file. "I spoke with the owner this morning, and they are willing to give you the keys on Monday."

Valerie was *technically* a new client. I didn't see it that way, though, because before she'd asked me to help her with this, she had become a friend. "Are you serious?" she breathed, reaching out and grabbing my arm. "Wait—so that means—"

I beamed, my entire body humming with happiness like it always did when I closed a deal. "They agreed to the terms and signed the contract this morning. You are officially a storefront owner—"

Eyes wide, Valerie squealed and jumped for me, her arms locking around my neck. "OH MY GOD!"

I stumbled back but managed to catch myself before returning her embrace, squeezing her tightly.

"Oh my God, Diana," she breathed after a few moments, her voice cracking with emotion.

"You did it, Val," I whispered, looking at her daughter over my shoulder, knowing that, someday, she would be able to take over Val's floral shop, continuing the family dream.

Valerie's mother had owned a similar floral shop in Texas for years, and Valerie grew up helping her mom, Nancy, run it. When Nancy fell ill, they had to give it up, selling it to pay for medical bills. Now, nearly two years after Nancy's passing, Valerie would be handed the keys to start her own shop.

"Have you decided on a name yet?" I asked softly after hearingValerie sniffle, her body starting to shake.

"I'm torn," she answered, stepping back and wiping her eyes. "God, I'm sorry for being a sap."

I grabbed her hand, pinning her with a look. "Don't apologize for your grief, Valerie Langston."

She pressed her lips together, but that didn't stop me from seeing the bottom one start to quiver. "I just want her to be proud of me," she rasped.

"Nancy is proud of you," I assured her, squeezing her hand. "I am too. We all are."

My sweet friend nodded once more and looked over to her daughter. "I just want to make sure everything is perfect and set up before—"

"Take all the time you need, Val," I cut her off gently. "There's no rush now. You have the store. You can open it on your own time, at your own pace."

She nodded, brushing some of her dark hair back. "I know. I just—" She cut herself off, looking to NJ. "I just wanted it up and running before her birthday."

"That's doable," I told her, opening her file and grabbing her copy of the contract, handing it to her. "Also, while I'm thinking about it, when I was in Denver last week, I ran into my contractor. His schedule isn't too full next year, and if you would like his information, I could get you his card."

She looked at me, blinking. "You--you have a contractor?"

I nodded, completely oblivious to the look on her face. "He did my house renovations as well as my office."

"Why did you hire a contractor when you have cowboys at your disposal?"

Oh, crap.

I bit the inside of my bottom lip, knowing I'd made a mistake. "Well..." "Diana," she scolded. "When did you do renovations?"

Darn.

Darn.

Darn.

I had so many cuss words on the tip of my tongue, but I withheld them, sticking to my resolution I'd made on New Years.

Valerie set the papers down beside her little one, crossed her arms, and then it was her turn to pin me with a look. Suddenly, I felt like I was in the principal's office, getting reprimanded. I opened my mouth to speak, but she beat me to the punch. "Denver told you to call him if you ever needed anything," she reminded me, her mom voice taking over.

I managed to shove down the urge to wince. "Yes, I know."

She arched one of her perfect brows. "Anything doesn't just mean protection, Diana. It literally means anything."

I looked to my feet, not knowing what to say. Denver had said that. Multiple times. He'd also said, again, multiple times, that I was a member of the family. This, of course, felt good, considering I wasn't close with mine anymore.

However, I couldn't get too close with Hallow Ranch.

For the sake of my own heart and sanity, I had to keep a reasonable distance from the cowboys—*one in particular*.

When I met Valerie's green eyes again, I gave her a half-truth. "I didn't want to bother anyone. Everyone here had so much going on last year. It seemed easier to hire out." For added measure, I gave her a half-shrug.

Her eyes narrowed.

I smiled. "Promise."

My friend sighed, shaking her head. "Yeah, well...don't do it again," she told me, smiling and pointing a finger at me.

"Considering I don't plan on purchasing anymore property in my lifetime, I won't be doing it again," I replied smoothly. "Anyways, I didn't come here for me. This meeting is about you. Did you still want me to look over your business plan?"

An hour later, I was sitting on the living room floor, my bare feet tucked underneath me as I gently brought NJ's hands together, playing Patty Cake. Valerie was on the couch, legs crossed, smiling at us. NJ giggled as I began another round of the game.

"Patty cake, patty cake, baker man! Bake me a cake as fast as you can," I sang, clapping the child's hands together. "Roll it up! Roll it up! Throw it in the pan!"

"Di! Di!" she shouted, giving me a smile that showed off her three front teeth.

"She loves you," Valerie noted softly as I picked up a toy and handed it to NJ.

"I love her," I said honestly, brushing some of NJ's dark hair back. "So what's been going on in cowboy land? Have the twins been getting up to anything stupid?"

Valerie took a deep breath, blowing it out through puffed cheeks. Then, realization hit her. "Holy crap, I forgot to tell you about Abbie."

My head snapped up. "Abbie?"

"Yeah, she's—"

"Abbie is back?" I gaped.

Valerie leaned forward, holding her hands up. "Wait, wait. You know about Abbie?"

I scoffed. "Don't insult my intelligence, Val. Beau has been hung up on her for years."

Valerie hummed. "Well, she's back, living with Beau in a cabin-"

"The one John Langston built for Jigs?" I assumed out loud.

Her face flattened as she glared at me. "How am I supposed to have any good gossip for you if you know everything already?" she deadpanned.

Laughing, I said, "I don't know everything. I just know about Abbie—and the cabin."

"Well, a lot went down last month, and some of it...you know."

The air in the room shifted then as something in my head clicked, remembering hearing about the incident at the diner. A man had gone into the diner and forced a woman to leave with him at gunpoint.

"Denver told me not to worry about that," I said cautiously. "Are you saying that was—*holy crap, was that Abbie?*"

Val nodded, bringing her hands together in her lap, her gaze falling. "It wasn't just Abbie, Diana."

Last month, I'd been on the other side of the state, dealing with a client. I'd been wrapped up in a week-long court case that drained every ounce of mental energy I had. When I'd gotten back into Hayden, there were whispers about what happened at the diner, and I didn't think to question it. I assumed the Hallow Ranch cowboys were on it, and if not, then Sheriff Bowen was. There were a lot of things I knew about this ranch, good and not so good. The not so good stuff, I disregarded. It protected the town. In the eyes of the justice system, it was morally wrong. However, in the eyes of humanity, the things these cowboys did was justice-- justice our own justice system could never deliver.

"Harmony and I were with her when...when that man came into the diner."

A chill swept down my spine, and the next thing I knew, I was on my feet, leaving NJ to her toys on her blanket and moving around the coffee table to sit beside Val. I took her hands in mine as a shadow fell over her face, her eyes refusing to meet mine. Her focus was on her daughter, and I could tell she was being pulled back into the past.

"Tell me what happened," I demanded.

"I can't—"

"—I'm not your lawyer right now, Val. I'm your friend. Now, tell me." I said gently--but firmly, squeezing her hands.

As my sweet friend began telling me all the horror I'd missed in the town I'd grown to love, the gaping pit of guilt in my gut widened.

Chapter Two



Diana

I stared at Val.

For how long, I didn't know.

I didn't—I couldn't. I'd missed all that?

"Diana?" she called out softly, leaning towards me slightly, concern coating her beauty. "Diana, what is it?"

"Denver told me not to worry about it," I murmured, trying to wrap my mind around that very fact.

Why didn't he want me to worry about it?

Val, my friend, and Harmony, someone I was slowly becoming friends with, had both been in danger. I could've helped. I could've--

"It wasn't your problem to worry about. The boys got it taken care of," my friend whispered, cutting off my thoughts. The tone in her voice compelled me to meet her gaze once more.

"You're my friend. It is absolutely my problem to worry about," I countered sharply, pulling my hands from hers. "You had a gun pointed at you, Valerie!"

She pressed her lips together, knowing I was right. If the roles had been reversed, she would be acting just how I was.

My throat thickened as I looked out the window, hoping the beauty of this ranch would somehow calm my nerves. "This happened last month," I murmured in disbelief. "Weeks, Val. *Weeks*, and no one filled me in."

Truth be told I wasn't mad at Denver for not telling me, but he should've.

How the hell was I supposed to be his lawyer if I didn't know what was going on?

I was more upset my friend had gone through something traumatic and I hadn't been there for her. I'd spent the last few weeks in my own little world, worried about my own problems, blissfully unaware of the horror my favorite people had endured. I pressed my tongue to the roof of my mouth and looked down to my lap, closing my eyes.

"Diana—"

"Last month!" I repeated, louder this time as my head snapped up. Out of the corner of my eye, on the floor, I saw movement. Turning my head, I found out NJ's attention on us now, her green eyes wide and unknowing. I winced. "Sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to raise my voice."

Valerie looked puzzled, her brows scrunched together now. "You don't need to apologize for expressing your emotions, girl. I'm sorry I didn't tell you. In all honesty, I thought Denver would've told you."

I had the urge to kill that man. Truly, I did.

Shaking my head, I reached for her hands again, squeezing. "I just—I didn't know it was you and Harmony involved in that. I'd heard about it and brushed it off." A new sense of guilt fell over me then.

Valerie's shoulders fell, her brows coming together slowly. "Diana—"

The ring blaring from my cell phone on the coffee table cut the conversation short. We both twisted our necks to look at the phone vibrating on the kitchen island while the shrill ring tone blasted from it. With a soft sigh, I excused myself and swiped the device up.

"This is Diana," I answered, heading into the foyer, praying it wasn't a client.

"Hey, Diana. It's Dale up at the Weatherford Ranch."

Just my luck.

Holding my tongue, I looked over my shoulder and pointed to the front door.

Valerie nodded and mouthed, "Take your time."

As I stepped out onto the porch, I replied, "Ah, Mr. Weatherford. How are you?" My eyes shot over to the porch swing, finding it empty. Caleb must've gone back to work—or to hide somewhere else.

The old rancher sighed, and instantly, I knew it was going to be a long night. "Got a problem up here, Diana."

I stood in the middle of the Langston porch, looking down at my feet, focusing on the hot pink polish on my toes. "Well, don't sugarcoat it for me, Dale," I said kindly. "What's going on?"

For the next few minutes, the rancher began explaining the horrid situation that occurred during his afternoon horse riding lesson with an eleven-year-old boy.

"Did the parents sign the waiver?" I asked once he was done, ignoring the way my stomach twisted as my mind painted the picture for me.

My client sighed, and I could hear the worry in his voice. "Yes, but they don't care. You know how it is. They want to sue."

I said nothing, already assuming they might. However, the waiver had been solid, drafted by me. There was no way the parents would win in court.

"That's not all," he added, almost as if he was afraid to say it.

I closed my eyes, bracing for it. "What else do they want?"

"They want me to put the horse down. The mother said she would go to ends of the Earth to make sure that would happen."

As his words hit me, I let my head fall back, keeping my eyes closed as my brain conjured up different ways to solve this problem. A jury—one filled with parents—might agree with the mother.

The old man's voice changed then, shaking slightly. "He's a good horse, Diana. The kid was rough with him. It was his third lesson, the first time he would ride to the other end of the corral and back to me. He just...That damn kid started hitting the horse and yanking on the reins. It came out of nowhere, and by the time the horse bucked the kid off, it was too late."

So, the kid was an asshole, didn't listen to instructions, and abused the horse. Great. This was just—

Did I just mentally cuss?

Did I just break my resolution? After eight months?

On the other end of the line, panic began to take over my client, his anxiety causing him to second-guess every single decision he'd ever made.

Okay, I could worry about my resolutions later.

"Mr. Weatherford, take a breath for me," I urged, looking out to the field in front of the house and putting my hand on my hip. "How bad were the kid's injuries?"

"He walked away, but I'm fairly certain he had a concussion."

"No broken bones or bruising?" I pressed.

"No. He landed on his back in the dirt, had a helmet on and everything. He was only on the ground for a moment or two. By the time I got the horse settled and away from him, he was already starting to sit up."

I nodded, even though he couldn't see it. "Okay, we can—"

"I can't—I can't lose the horse. I can't lose the horse lessons...or the ranch. Dammit, am I going to lose the ranch?"

"No," I said firmly, walking down two of the porch steps, the sunlight hitting me. "You aren't going to lose the ranch or the lessons. I promise. The parents signed the waiver, they were informed of the risks." My client brought in extra income with those horse lessons and he had good standing throughout the county. They were essential to his livelihood now.

"They said they have some hot-shot lawyer," Mr. Weatherford said, fear and anxiety lacing his voice.

I ran my hand through my hair, tossing the length over my shoulders, letting out a soft sigh. "Well, you have a hot-shot lawyer too," I told him plainly. He was silent for a moment, my words and the truth within them settling on the line. I hoped it was enough to curb his anxiety, at least until I could get in contact with opposing counsel. "Take another breath for me, Mr. Weatherford." As I looked down to my feet again, he did as I asked. "Alright, what's the plan?"

"First, I need their names and information. Second, did you give them my card?"

"No, they didn't give me chance," he answered.

Of course, they didn't. "Alright, so I need you to sit tight. Until they officially serve you papers or their lawyer reaches out to you, I need *you* to sit *tight.*"

"Diana—"

"No, Mr. Weatherford," I said firmly, cutting off his protests. "I can't do what you hired me to do if you don't do as I say. Understand?"

He was quiet for a moment. "What do I need to do with the horse?"

"For now, start using your other horse for lessons," I instructed.

We chatted for a few more minutes before I ended the call, fairly confident the rancher would actually listen to me. Sighing, I checked some notifications on my phone, pulling up the text thread between me and my paralegal, Thomas.

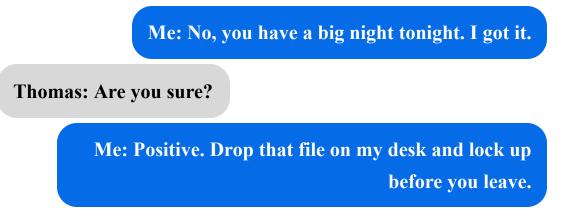
> Me: I need you to pull the Weatherford file before you leave today. You can just leave it on my desk.

Thomas: Done. What's going on?

Me: Kid abused the horse during his riding lesson and the horse bucked him off. No major injuries, but the parents are wanting to go after our client and everything he has.

Thomas: Okay, I can take a look at the waiver.

My lips turned down into a frown, knowing he had a date with his girlfriend tonight. It was their one year anniversary. I'd had it on my calendar for months.



I let my hand fall to my side as I tipped my head back, closed my eyes, and took a slow, deep breath. Inhaling for three, holding for ten, releasing for five. I repeated this process four more times, and when I finished, I righted myself and turned to head back inside—

A scream left me as I jumped back against the railing, my hand flying to my chest, eyes wide.

The cowboy standing ten feet from the porch said nothing, his perfect lips in a flat line, his eyes, dark as night, barely visible underneath the shadow of his hat. Still, I could feel them on me, holding me hostage as they always did. "Mr. Mags," I breathed out. "I'm so s-sorry, I didn't see you there." Or hear him, but then again, he was as quiet as a mouse, always had been, despite his size.

Mags said nothing, and it took all my willpower to look away from him. His dark beauty was sometimes too much for me to bear, and today,—it was definitely too much. His hair was longer now, covering the back of his neck, hanging over his shoulders by an inch or two. That sharp, strong, knee-weakening jaw was dusted with dark hair. He'd shaved his beard since the last I saw him, but I knew it would be back within a few weeks' time. He was tall, towering over me even when I had heels on. He was only a few inches shorter than the Langston brothers, but he had more muscle, and the black button up he was wearing did nothing to hide them. Neither did his wranglers.

Slowly, he reached up, touching the brim of his old, black cowboy hat to tip it to me.

My nipples hardened instantly, my heart crying out for him.

The screen door flew open, snapping me out of it, and I turned my head to find Valerie running out onto the porch, shouting my name. "*Diana*—oh. Mags, hi!" She stopped short, her chest heaving.

Her green eyes bounced over to me, and I realized I was still plastered to the railing with my hand against my chest. "I heard you scream, and I thought—well, I didn't know what to think."

Quickly, I righted myself, heat flooding my cheeks.

I could still feel Mags' eyes on me.

I kept my focus on Valerie and apologized. "Sorry. I was—I didn't see Mags. He gave me a fright, that's all," I stammered.

"A fright?" Val parroted, looking over to the cowboy as her brows rose.

A fright? Really, Diana?

Suddenly, every curse word in the history of man was on the tip of my tongue and I was ready to unleash them all. Unable to handle the embarrassment, I looked at my feet again, wishing I was anywhere by here. I could handle coming to Hallow Ranch. I could handle the dark things these cowboys did, things the eyes of the law wouldn't like. I could handle knowing that, on Denver Langston's mountain, there were ashes of cruel men scattered in the dirt, men who thought they could take whatever and whoever they wanted. I could handle going to court. I could handle winning and losing cases.

I was Diana Harper.

I could handle almost anything, but not the cowboy in front of me. I couldn't handle anything about him. Not his eyes, his beauty, his presence, or his--

"Just here to drop these off," he said, the jagged edges of his voice slicing me open, seeping into my bloodstream, tainting it with everything that was....him. His beauty. His darkness.

Yeah, I couldn't be here. I needed to leave.

I heard Valerie move down the steps, the scent of her perfume floating in front of me. "Oh. Thank you, Mags. You didn't have to do that today."

I couldn't bear to hear his voice again, so before he could speak, I raised my head and looked at Valerie. "I have to go," I told her, holding up my phone. "There's a client emergency."

My friend looked shocked, blinking a few times before reminding me of my promise. "So you're not staying for dinner?"

Mags' eyes were on me again, heating every single inch of my body. My heart rate picked up, my mouth suddenly dry. I shook my head. "Sorry. Maybe some other time."

Before she could get another word out, I was heading up the porch steps and pulling the screen door wide open. I didn't waste time, grabbing my purse and keys before slipping on my heels. NJ was in her playpen, clapping her hands and chanting, "Di! Di! Di!"

I chewed the inside of my lip for a moment, looking to the door and then into the living room where she was. Mags was still out there, but Valerie's body blocked my view of his face. NJ squealed, and my feet were moving then, leaving the kitchen and carrying me to her. I leaned over the railing of the playpen, pressing my lips to the top of her head, the smell of her coconut baby shampoo filling my nostrils. "Bye-bye, my sweet girl," I whispered. "I'll be back soon."

As I walked out the front door, all I could here was my heart pounding, and I kept my head down as I walked by Valerie. "I'll see you soon, Val," I murmured, rushing down the steps.

"Oh. Okay. Bye, Diana!" she called out to my back as I walked by the dark cowboy, my body humming now.

I didn't even raise my hand over my shoulder like I usually did. I kept walking, and when I was a few feet away from the porch and that damn cowboy, I lifted my head to focus on my car.

Keep walking, Diana. Don't look back. Ignore the heat on your back. Keep walking. Almost there.

I rounded the back of my car, clicked the locks, and yanked the door open. I tossing my bag and keys into the passenger seat as I folded in. With a shaking head, I pressed the start button, and when the familiar purr of the engine filled my ears, I wasted no time hightailing it out of there, leaving Hallow Ranch on the cowboy who'd had my heart for the last decade in the dust.

Forty-five minutes later, I was back in my the sanctuary of my office. The building was quiet and empty as the sun began its descent, the town of Hayden slowing down for the evening as everyone drifted back into their homes for the evening. A pitiful sigh left me as I dropped by bag in the plush purple chair in the corner of my office and plucked the Weatherford file from my desk. I opened it with a sense of urgency, walking around to my chair, my eyes scanning over the words on the first page, not retaining a single detail.

I couldn't focus.

All I saw was him—all I felt was him.

My butt landed in the cushion of my sage green office chair as a rush of air left my lungs. I looked up from the file, staring at everything in my office yet nothing at the same time. The lump in my throat had grown since leaving Hallow Ranch, and my heart, well, she had no intentions of slowing down anytime soon. At this point, I wouldn't be surprised if I went into cardiac arrest right here and now.

The blaring sound of my office phone ringing cut through the air, causing me to jolt.

"Crap!" I breathed out, my eyes darting for the ugly, clunky black device perched on the corner of my marble desk. It rang two more times before I managed to answer it.

"Harper Law. This is Diana," I answered.

The line was silent for a few seconds, and the hairs on the back of my neck rose. "This is Harper Law Office. How may I help you?" I asked, steadying my voice, the Weatherford file forgotten.

The person on the other end started breathing heavy, and I opened my mouth again, but they beat me to the punch. "Diana."

Goosebumps scattered across my skin like frost in the night, covering every inch of me in coldness, seeping into my soul. "What do you want?" I asked through clenched teeth.

The man scoffed. "That's no way to talk to your father."

"You stopped being my father years ago when I cut you off. What do you want?"

"Blood is blood, Diana," he said, growling at the end. "I've about had it with your games."

None of this had ever been a game. However, both my parents seem to think that my decision to cut them off was a cry for attention. Then again, apparently everything I did that didn't suit them was.

"Is anyone dying?" I asked calmly, taking this time to focus on my breathing and calculate my responses. My father didn't deserve to hear or witness my emotions.

"What? No, of course not. That's—"

"If no one is terminally ill or dead, then there is no reason for you to be calling me," I replied, crossing my legs and leaning back in my chair. All thoughts and desires for the cowboy had vanished the second I heard my father's voice.

"It's time for this little act to end, Diana. What's it going to take for us to be a family again?"

"There's nothing on this Earth that would make that possible. Have a good day." I leaned forward and calmly put the phone back into the receiver. Then, silently and swiftly, I packed up my things I needed to work from home for the next few days, locked up the office, and headed home for the night.

Once there, I sent a text to Thomas.

Me: My father called the office this evening. When you get there in the morning, please block that number. I'm going to be working from home for the rest of the week.

His reply was almost instant.

Thomas: Yes, ma'am. Whatever you need.

Chapter Three



Mags

Year Three. Hallow Ranch.

"Mags!"

Jesus fucking Christ.

Hell was likely going to freeze over before I could finish tending to my damn horse.

I looked over my shoulder to find Beau headed for me, the gravel crunching underneath his boots. There was a look of worry painted across his face, and something in my gut twisted. There were a lot of things in this world I didn't like, and that look in Beau's eyes was one of them. As he drew closer to me, my eyes shifted, looking over to his girlfriend, Abbie, standing by the bunkhouse. She was talking to Jigs, using her hands to explain something as the old man laughed.

Clearly, whatever Beau was concerned about wasn't bad enough for them to worry.

"Denver needs you up at the house," Beau said once he was a few feet from me, throwing his thumb over his shoulder.

I looked up at his face, waiting for an explanation. By now, he should've known I needed one.

He took off his hat and sighed. "It's bad, Mags. Caleb's mom is stirring up her usual bullshit."

Of course, she fucking was.

Grunting, I looked back to Midnight's horseshoe and hammered in the final nail before lowering it back to the ground. "There you go, girl," I muttered, dusting my hands off and rising to my full height. I gave my horse a few pats and turned to face Beau. "Is she up there with Kings?"

Kings, as I'd come to learn, had been Denver's call-sign in the Marines. This discovery was made when Denver invited everyone up to the house for dinner one night a year or so ago. Jigs, Beau, and I shared a good meal with our boss, and when the sun had set, Denver brought out an old bottle of his father's whiskey. Jigs and Beau went back down to the bunkhouse, and my boss shared his story with me. I'd been working for him for a little over a year back then but we barely knew each other. I stuck to my roll and he stuck to his. It was simple—peaceful. However, as Kings' son, Caleb, started growing, I noticed the rancher craved connection, someone to talk to.

So that night, I let him talk to me, and I listened to every word.

By the time he was done, I knew about his childhood, the tragic loss of his mother, the fallout with his brother, and shit he had to deal with regarding Caleb's mother, Cathy. She was a fucking piece of work, and no one on this ranch could stand her.

I was happy to find out I wasn't alone in that. From the moment I saw her, I knew what kind of woman she was: a leech.

"No, she isn't here. I would've sent her on her way already," Beau said.

Thank fuck for that. I couldn't stand the sight of Cathy. She was nothing but trouble, the kind of trouble that rotted you from the inside out.

"Alright. I'll get Midnight put up and head up there," I said as I wiped my hands with my bandana before tucking it into my back pocket.

The young cowboy stared at me, frozen solid. "I think that's the most words you've said to me in three years, Mags."

I said nothing, ignoring his sarcasm as I turned to grab Midnight's reins and head into the barn.

"It was a good talk, Mags! We should do it more often," Beau called out to my back as the sun beat down on it, irritating the sunburn on the back of my neck. Annoyance filled me then, and I had half a mind to break his jaw for being such a smartass. Sadly, I mentally reminded myself his mouth was half of his fucking charm. He, along with everyone else on the ranch, was always trying to bust my balls for not talking, but there was no reason to talk if I had nothing to say.

Majority of the time, I just didn't have anything to say.

Once Midnight was put up, I gave her some fresh hay and an apple for being a good girl today. She neighed, the sound echoing through the barn, exciting the other horses as I gave her one more pat on the neck.

"Get some rest," I murmured, looking into her black eyes. In the stall next to her, Ranger stuck his head out, searching for an apple. I shook my head at him before giving him one.

Minutes later, after all the horses were given a treat, I headed back out in to the sun to find Jigs, Abbie, and Beau nowhere in sight. Twisting my neck, I noticed Beau's old truck wasn't behind the bunkhouse anymore.

I'd been so focused on the horses, lost in my own head, that I didn't even hear the truck start up. I'd knew they'd be leaving soon. It was Friday night and Jigs always took the couple to dinner somewhere in town so the three of them could catch up. Still, it bothered me that I didn't hear Beau's truck.

Maybe it had finally happened—I'd truly lost my mind.

Shaking my head, I shut the barn doors and locked up for the night. I turned to head up the hill to the main house and stopped in my tracks, my heart coming to a stop nearly as fast as my boots.

There, parked next to Denver's old Chevy, under the old oak tree, was a navy blue Honda civic. There was only one person in my world who drove a piece of shit like that. And just like that, my day went to shit.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Goddamn it.

Those words repeated themselves over and over in my head until I was two feet from the front porch, the shitty little Honda sitting behind me, its owner completely unaware of how she affected me.

Diana Harper.

I came to a slow stop, staring up at the house, wondering what torture awaited me inside.

She was here—yet again.

After three months of peace, she was back in my little corner of the world, disrupting all I'd done to try and heal.

When I first came to Hallow Ranch, I'd thought the universe had given me a break amidst everything I'd been through. It was the least I deserved. Then, that all went to shit the second I laid eyes on her. In that moment, the peace I came here to find and had only gotten a taste of was shattered.

Peace was unreachable now, a myth, a sham.

As long as she was in my orbit and I in hers, I would never know peace. I'd traded one jail for another. After all the trauma, torture, and agony I'd endured growing up and serving my country, none of that could be compare to the agony of being around her. So, over the last few years, I tried to get used to her presence, and thankfully, she didn't come around often.

But when she did, my insides burned, set ablaze by the way I longed for her.

"Denver, I can take care of this," her voice sounded from inside the house, pulling me out of my thoughts as the wind picked up. I looked up to the sky, finding dark clouds looming towards the east. A storm was coming.

"I can send out a C&D and—"

Her sweet, intelligent voice was cut off by Kings' harsh one. "Diana, that woman is never going to fucking learn her lesson unless I do this. She can fuck with me. She can try and fuck with what's left of my fucking ranch, Diana, but so help me God, she does not get to fuck with our son."

Cathy.

Fucking hell.

I sighed through my nose as my jaw jumped, ignoring the thunder rolling through the air. That damn woman. Instead of focusing on being a good mother, she was hellbent on making Kings' life a living hell.

"Think about this for a moment, Denver. Please," Diana begged, her voice louder than before.

A second later, Kings came barreling onto the front porch, still dressed in his work clothes. His gray eyes landed on mine, hat in hand as he pointed at me with it.

"You got plans tonight?" he clipped.

He knew the damn answer to that. I shook my head once, leaving my hands hanging down at my sides despite how uncomfortable I was. I couldn't let him or, God fucking forbid, her, see that. So I put on my mask and did my best to keep my composure. I didn't want to be here.

I wanted to be in the bunkhouse, taking a fucking shower, and then going to bed to pass out. I kept my eyes on him, silently hoping his lawyer would remain in the house.

Out of sight, out of mind, or whatever the fuck the normal people say.

I couldn't see her, not today. I was still trying to get over her last visit three months ago. The way she laughed at Jigs when he'd cracked a stupid joke, the way she lit up the entire ranch the second she unfolded herself out of her shitty car, and that damn dress she decided to wear—it was all still burned into my mind. The dress was simple, but because she was wearing it, smiling in it, laughing in it, the dress might has well be a fucking ball gown.

Everything about her, from her simple gestures to her compelling arguments, were burned into my brain, and I needed it scrubbed. Actually, I was highly considering a lobotomy. "Good," Kings clipped as he marched down the porch steps, putting on his hat. "Caleb is inside. Need you to watch him for a few hours. I'll be back before he goes to bed."

I tipped my hat to him, and his eyes cut to the storm clouds, his expression unreadable for a moment.

"Is everything alright?" I asked, turning when he walked by me, heading for his truck. He stopped his in tracks, and, behind me, I heard the screen door ease open.

Then, all I could feel was her.

"Denver, please, just—"

Kings raised his finger at his lawyer, his bearded jaw tighter than I'd ever seen it. I'd been on this ranch for years now, and never once had I seen the man this wound up. Smoke was practically pouring from his ears. "I don't need anything else from you today, Diana. You did your job. Now go the fuck home," he bit off.

My shoulders tensed as my back snapped straight. Denver was my boss and I owed him everything, but I sure as fuck didn't like the way he was speaking to her.

"Cool it, Kings," I warned without a second thought.

His eyes shot to me, and I stared back, unafraid.

A second later, he blinked, his anger slightly diminishing. He sighed, adjusting his hat and looking to his boots for a moment as he collected himself.

Smart.

I wasn't in the mood to break my boss' nose today.

I didn't have to look back at Diana to know her eyes were on me, burning into my back. Everything about her made me feel like I was on fire. Everything about her presence had my entire body running on hyper-drive.

I was in hell, and every time she came to Hallow Ranch, it was just confirmation.

Even though I'd only been around her a handful of times, I couldn't get a lock on it. This feeling in my chest, the way my heart sped up, the way something stirred in the dark depths of my scarred soul.

To make matters worse, every single time I saw her, she'd changed in some way—her style, the color of her hair, and, most importantly, her weight. Now, thankfully, she had some of it back. Her hips were fuller than they had been months ago, and there was more color in her cheeks, more life. Last winter, she'd shown up at the bunkhouse with papers for Kings to sign, and I'd hardly recognized her, she'd lost so much weight. For weeks, I lost sleep thinking about all the reasons why she would be losing weight like that. It was none of my fucking business, of course, but still, it worried me.

Her hair, usually a golden blonde, had been a light brown when I saw her last. I was too gutless to turn around and see if it had changed again, keeping my eyes on my boss. Darker hair looked good on her, just like every other shade, but blonde was my favorite. It brought out the green in her hazel eyes.

It was intoxicating.

She was a damn drug, and I was more than ready to become addicted to her, to live and breathe only her, to survive on nothing else. Hell, I didn't need much anyways. She'd be more than enough. I knew it. My heart knew it. My broken soul knew it.

But I hated it, how much I craved her.

Denver lifted his head with a regret-filled sigh and gave Diana a soft look, one usually reserved for his son. "I'm sorry. I just..."

He trailed off, and I heard her heels clicking against the wood of the porch. When one of them hit the first brick step, I bit down, grinding my teeth until it hurt. Still, I remained where I was, the right side of my body humming from her closeness.

"Denver, let me do my job," she begged, her voice cracking. "Please." Fucking hell.

I took a second to thank whoever the fuck was upstairs running this shit show, knowing full well if she'd ever said please to me like that, I wouldn't sleep until I was able to place the world at her feet.

"You can draft up the C&D," Kings said after moment. "But I'm still going to have a fucking discussion with her."

"But—"

"No, Diana. This is my fucking life—my son's life—she is disrupting. If she wants to be a mother, great. I'm not going to stop her, but this shit? This shit is unacceptable. My boy deserves better."

Her perfume filled my nostrils as a breeze hit us, a flash of lightning following.

"I know he does, Den," she rasped, ignoring the brewing storm around. "Caleb deserves the world."

My boss nodded. "Then let me do what I can to make sure I can give him the world," he said firmly.

Out of the corner of my eye, she took a step forward, wanting to say more, but he gave us his back and got in his truck. Her hair was still dark but no less beautiful. She would always be beautiful, and it pissed me off. As the Hallow Ranch owner drove off in his old Chevy, dust flying behind him, I heard her mumble something about cowboys and stubbornness under her breath. If I wasn't as fucked up as I was, I might've had the decency to laugh, maybe even engage in polite conversation with her. Hell, by now, I knew damn well I would've already taken her on a date or two, and if I was lucky, had her warming my bed every single night.

But I wasn't lucky.

I was fucked up, and this was hell.

Therefore, I said nothing as I turned on my heel, climbed the steps without so much as a glance in her direction, and went inside as thunder clapped in the distance. I needed her to leave before the storm hit, because there wasn't a chance in hell I'd let her go if a single drop of rain decided to fall from the heavens.

Diana Harper didn't belong in the rain.

Diana Harper belonged in sunshine.

I spotted her bag on the butcher-block counter in the kitchen, but ignored it, heading into the living room where Caleb played with a stack of blocks in the middle of the rug. I stood outside of the make-shift baby gate Beau and I made a few months back. The toddler's hand was unsteady, reaching up to the top of the block tower to place a blue block on top. He favored blue, I'd noticed, always saving the blue blocks last so they could be on top.

After a few moments, Caleb spotted me and he beamed at me, showing all his little teeth. I felt my lips twitch. "Hey, kid."

He babbled as he forgot about the block tower, rising to his feet. He began walking to me, his bowed legs wobbling, still getting the hang of it. I watched him like a hawk, letting him do it on his own but being there if he needed me. The screen door opened a second later, and I heard Diana's heels clicking across the floor, the sound changing when she hit the tile of the kitchen. The image of her was burned into my brain now, having looked at her a second longer than I should've.

Looking at her was always a mistake, one I repeated every time she was around.

I kept my eyes on the kid, not bothering to take my hat off until she was gone. I needed her gone, but of course, she wasn't about to do that, not without saying goodbye to Caleb. She cared about Hallow Ranch, truly. I could hear it in her voice and see it in her eyes whenever she was around.

The soft sound of her nails tapping against her phone screen was torture enough, but the small sigh of frustration that left her sweet lips nearly brought me to my knees. I tightened my jaw as Caleb's hands clung to my pant leg through the baby gate, demanding my attention. As I blinked, he came back into focus with a smile that had the power to melt anyone's heart plastered on his chubby face.

My lips twitched again. I didn't smile much, but when I did, it was only at him.

Diana's heels began clicking again as she walked out of the kitchen, and I silently prayed to...whoever that she wouldn't get near me.

A man could only take so much torture, even in hell.

My boots remained planted on the hardwoods as she came to stand next to me, bending over the gate to scoop up the little boy into her arms. Caleb shrieked with joy as she rose back to her full height, her hair brushing over her shoulder, the sweet scent of peaches filling my nostrils. "Hey, Caleb," she cooed, smiling at him.

A lump formed in my throat, and I cut my eyes from her, focusing on the rocking chair in the corner.

"Your daddy is going to be back in just a bit," she assured the happy boy, her voice high and soothing. "Mr. Mags is going to hang out with you until then, okay?"

Fuck this.

I stepped away, busying myself with taking off my hat and dropping it on a hook by the door. I didn't want to take it off, but I needed an excuse to get away from her.

Behind me, I heard her whispering to the boy. "Your daddy would burn the world for you, baby boy. Do you know that?"

Caleb answered with a loud babble, and the sound of her sweet, soft laughter followed. "Right," she muttered. As I turned around, I watched her open the gate and walk into the living room to set Caleb back down on his play mat, pieces of his block tower now scattered around him.

Slowly, she rose back up to her full height, her soft body hidden underneath her pencil skirt and blouse. Her hazel eyes met mine, and my jaw tightened when I noticed the moss green lingering around her irises, her hair framing her round face.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

She was so goddamn beautiful, full of light in this dark world.

With all the strength I could manage, I pulled my eyes from her, breaking her intoxicating gaze to focus on Caleb. Nothing was said as she moved back into the foyer. She cleared her throat and I heard movement, picturing her adjusting her bag on her shoulder, getting ready to go out and take on the world.

"Have a good night, Mr. Mags," she said softly from behind me.

Mr. Mags.

Fucking Christ. This woman.

As usual, I said nothing, remaining completely still as she went outside. When I finally heard that shitty Honda start up, I moved to the window, knowing damn well she needed a new car. As I watched her drive away, the sky opened with another flash of lightening, a clap of thunder, a sheet of rain following.

There was an ache in my chest now, the same one I'd always felt whenever she was around. The urge to chase her down coursed through my veins. That was my biggest concern—the way I yearned for her, the way I seemed to think I needed her.

She was dangerous.

The power she had over me was damning.



Four Hours Later.

I was on the front porch when Kings arrived, my arms crossed over my chest as I watched him park his shit-box of a truck and unfold his tall frame

out of it. The gravel crunched underneath his boots with every step, echoing throughout the night. But fuck, I could practically feel his anger from where I stood. It oozed off him like a toxic virus, plaguing everything around him. Though, there was no one on this planet who could blame the man for his anger, not with the cards he'd been dealt.

Denver Langston was an unlucky son of a bitch and, deep down, I hoped that, one day, happiness would find him.

I remained silent until he began climbing the porch steps. "You get it taken care of?" I asked, my voice low.

A deep, tired sigh came from him as he took off his hat, running his hand through his dark hair. "Yeah, Mags, I did."

I nodded and tipped my head back towards the front door. "Your boy is passed out on the couch."

Silence followed and his gray eyes held mine for some time, the moonlight stretching over the land behind him as the warm glow from his house illuminated his front. I watched patiently as his throat worked. "Thank you for watching him. I know it was on the spot, and it's not in your job description," he finally said, gratitude thick in his voice. "I hired a cowboy, not a babysitter."

His soft tone struck me in a way I wasn't prepared for.

I looked away from him then, focusing on the spot where Diana had parked hours ago, studying the way the moonlight showcased her tire marks. "My job description is whatever the hell you want it to be, Kings. Watching your boy for a few hours wasn't a hard ask."

"I know, but it's also Friday night," he countered. "I know you like these nights to yourself, since everyone usually goes into town."

I wanted to laugh.

No, I don't.

Solitude was the only place where I allowed myself to think, yes, but it was nightmare most days. I kept myself busy to keep the demons away, but they would always return when I was alone, in the night, drowning in memories.

My silence gave nothing away, and when he spoke again, I looked back over to him. "You've never left the ranch," he stated.

"No reason to," I replied simply, pushing off the post I was leaning against. Now wasn't the time or place for this conversation. In fact, this was a conversation I never wanted to have. Not with him. Not with Jigs. Not with my buddy, Grayson. Not with anyone.

His brow furrowed. "Mags—"

I cut him off, wanting to be done with this conversation—with this night. "Caleb had a full dinner. He ate everything on his plate and asked for seconds."

My boss ran his hand through his hair for a second time, looking away and taking the hint. "Good. That's good. I'm thankful that boy has never had a problem with eating," he said softly, chuckling at the end.

Again, I said nothing, but I also didn't leave. My boots remained planted on the porch despite everything in my body telling me to go back to the bunkhouse, to sit in the darkness and silence, to let the demons eat me alive.

"Want a drink?" he asked, clearly needing me to say yes.

I studied him then, seeing the pain of the past swirling in his eyes, tormenting him in a way I was all too familiar with.

Neither of us wanted to deal with our demons tonight.

I nodded once and watched the tension leave his shoulders. He looked relieved as he said, "Well, come on inside then."

Ten minutes later, after Caleb was upstairs in his bed, Kings poured me three fingers of whiskey and slid the glass over to me. I wrapped my fingers around the glass, waiting as he poured himself the same and set the bottle down on the butcher block. "How's the herd?" he asked, capping the bottle.

"Healthy and accounted for," I answered, thankful we were talking about something easy. Work. The Ranch. Simple and uncomplicated.

"I appreciate you being wagon boss today. Jigs told me you handled it well."

"Nothing to it," I muttered, remembering the old cowboy's compliment today. While the job was simple, it was the leadership that came with I didn't like. I'd done enough leading in my life and I sure as hell didn't want to do anymore.

But I wasn't going to tell Kings that.

If he needed me to be wagon boss, I'd be wagon boss.

He raised his glass and I mirrored him. "To Hallow Ranch."

"To Hallow Ranch," I parroted and then brought the glass to my lips. I took a healthy sip, enjoying the sting of the whiskey trailing down my throat. Kings drank all his in one go and poured himself another. I raised a brow.

Damn.

His eyes flicked up to mine, a smirk teasing the corner of his mouth. "My father was raging alcoholic during his final years, and my grandfather was too," he confessed.

"You lookin' to keep that tradition alive?" My question came out like all the others usually did: no bullshit and to the point. It shouldn't be any of my fucking business whether he drank. He was a grown man with a lot on his plate. Who the hell was I to judge?

"No, I'm not," he muttered, taking a small sip of his second glass. "And I have rules to make sure that fucking curse doesn't latch onto me."

"Good." I nodded and looked over to where my cowboy hat hung on the wall. Generational curses were usually a bitch to break, but I believed Kings had the strength to do it.

When I looked back to him, he lifted his chin. "You hungry? Did you eat?"

"I can eat at the bunkhouse."

Kings grimaced. "A bowl of the four day old chili Jigs made?"

That was the plan. "I've eaten a lot worse," I replied, and he chuckled as he walked over to the fridge.

"So have I, but that doesn't mean you need to eat that fucking chili," he muttered, pulling open the door and scanning the food. He looked at me over his shoulder as I took another sip. "So are you hungry or not?"

"I'm hungry."

"I'll grill us some steaks," he declared, chuckling as he pulled out two wrapped in white paper and then grabbed a large cutting board.

I finished off my glass, watching as he unwrapped the steaks and seasoned them. The pit of hunger in my gut grew at the sight, and I was thankful I didn't have to eat the fucking chili again tonight. There was no rules in the bunkhouse kitchen. You could eat what you wanted, when you wanted. However, it was difficult to cook when I didn't have anything to cook with, and going into town for groceries wasn't an option. So, since day one, I'd been eating whatever Jigs made. The old man was kind of the bunkhouse cook, and a damn good one at that. He knew I didn't ever leave the ranch. He knew I didn't buy groceries, and I wasn't about to ask anyone to buy them for me.

Kings and I drifted through the house, heading out to the back, where his old beat up grill sat. I leaned against the back of the house, my empty glass of whiskey inside on the counter, and watched him throw the steaks on. Neither of us said anything for a long time, and the smell of the steaks in the air made me salivate.

"How many tours?"

My eyes snapped away from the grill to find Denver studying me, his head tilted slightly to the right. My jaw tightened.

In the past, we'd talked about his time in the Marines, but never mine. It was something I never talked about—not even when the Corp sent in a specialist. Instead, thousands of taxpayers' dollars were wasted over the course of three weeks. Day after day, I was sent into a white walled room, with colorful furniture, and atop the dark green chair sat a trauma specialist, holding a notebook and pen, willing and ready to do whatever it took to get the demons out of my head.

No amount of time or money would achieve that.

I just had to learn to live with them.

I didn't say a fucking word, because none of what I went through, what I saw, was worth repeating. Simple as that.

When I didn't say anything, my boss added, "You know almost all my shit, Mags."

"Because you chose to tell me," I damn near snapped, my spine straight, my body preparing to go on defense.

He inhaled a deep breath and exhaled slowly, looking back to the grill. "You have a friend here," he said. "Only got one friend, Kings, and he doesn't even know."

A chuckle left him then. "He knows enough. That's why he's your friend."

"We don't have to do this," I told him, folding my arms over my chest. "My life before coming here isn't worth getting into."

He looked at me then, his brows furrowed in confusion. "Your life is your life, Mags. I consider you a friend, which makes it worth getting into."

I said nothing, grinding my molars to the point of pain.

"I also can't make you tell me shit, but know that when and if you're ever ready, Mags, I'm willing to listen." His offer was earnest, sincere, and rocked me to my fucked up core, but I still didn't tell him anything.

"I'm solid, Kings," I told him through my teeth, craving a damn cigarette. I hadn't had one since coming to Hallow Ranch, and right now, I was willing to dive head first back into addiction.

Eventually—thankfully—he dropped the subject, and we talked about meaningless things, ate our dinner, and drank more whiskey.

It wasn't until three months later, when half the herd had been auctioned off and Hallow Ranch was in the middle of one of the harshest winters in its history, that I finally opened up to him.

There was no other choice, really.

Kings had found me in the middle of the field, knee deep in snow, screaming at the sky. I'd been sucked back into the hell I'd thought I left behind, mourning the future I was promised. Memories of almost losing my best friend, bombs going off, a bullet ripping through my shoulder when we were ordered to fall back, the desert heat, the orphaned children, the endless flames, and most of all, the three months of darkness when I came back home, my body permanently damaged... It all came back to me when I didn't expect it, knocking my feet out from underneath me.

I was yanked under, running out of air when Kings pulled me out.

Then, he got me some help. Years later, the tables turned, and he was the one who needed help.

In the end, everything always came back full circle.

Chapter Four



Diana

I stared at the court documents, my eyes feeling dry, stinging.

"For heaven's sake," I muttered, lifting my head and closing my eyes, tears filling them as I shoved my hands into my hair.

I had a love-hate relationship with spring and summer. I loved the warmth, sunshine, and the colors. My sinuses, however, hated everything about them. We were weeks away from autumn, and then it wouldn't be

long after that when the temperatures would start to drop. The animals would go into hibernation, taking my seasonal allergies along with them.

Opening my eyes, I twisted my neck to look at the blue hydrangea bush outside my living room window. *Oh, how I loved her*.

You love the things that could kill you the most, apparently.

My mind immediately went to the cowboy with hair black as night and dark eyes to match. Goosebumps scattered across my skin, and I chewed on my thumb nail, silently cursing myself. It had been over a week since I'd made a fool of myself at Hallow Ranch, and since then, I'd been a recluse. I'd also made some horrible decisions in a poor attempt to forget said incident, which, as always, never panned out for me. Still, I did things I shouldn't have, and now, I felt like I was two steps back when I should be four steps forward.

Regrettably, I rose from my spot on the couch to close the curtains, my eyes unable to handle the sunlight right now, and when that was done, I turned on my air filter in the corner, the steady hum of it reminding me of a hospital. I tilted my head back and rolled my neck, stretching it like my physical therapist taught me, feeling a twinge of a pain on the right side. I winced and pressed my hand against it.

I was falling apart in my thirties. Everything Jennifer Garner taught me in *Thirty, Flirty, and Thriving* had been a lie.

My phone dinged with a text from Thomas, and I scooped it up.

Thomas: Mr. Weatherford called. Apparently, the parents' lawyer advised them to drop the case.

I had the phone to my ear within the next second, calling him. He answered on the second ring. "I knew I should've called, but I didn't know

how you were feeling," he greeted.

"Don't worry about me, Thomas," I told him, brushing it off, the clogs in my mind already turning. I chewed on my thumb nail a for a moment longer, fully prepared to get lost in what I called: The Harper Law Black Hole of Work-aholic-ness. Then, Thomas' voice cut through.

"Someone has to," he replied, his voice soft, making my heart jump into my throat.

Thomas, sweet Thomas.

A man too good for this world and definitely too good to be working for me.

"What did the client tell you exactly? What's their play here?" I asked, ignoring his comment. Though it was sweet, if I indulged him, it would eventually turned into a "you need to take care of yourself" lecture. I didn't have time for that, not today.

For the next few minutes, I paced back in forth in my small living room while he went over the details.

"I don't trust it," I murmured when he was done, looking over the curtains I'd just closed minutes ago, already missing the sun.

"I was hoping you would say that, because neither do I," Thomas said, humming in agreement.

"Who is their lawyer? Do we know?" I asked, moving to the window and giving in. In the next second, the precious light of the sun flooded my living room once more, and I ignored my stinging eyes. I'd get some eye drops the next time I was at the store. For the last week, I'd been trying to get this mystery lawyer to get in contact with me but kept getting roadblocks. The parents refused to talk to me, but that hadn't stopped them from going back to Weatherford ranch two more times to harass my client.

I'd already sent Thomas to deliver a C&D to their residence. They slammed the door in his face.

"No, but Mr. Weatherford spoke with him directly, and I told him to call you with the name."

I nodded, even though no one could see it. "Alright. Good. Anything else?"

"Denver Langston stopped by a few minutes ago looking for you."

I tensed, my feet stopping in the middle of the living room next to my coffee table. My question was loaded with caution. "Did something happen?"

"No, he just said he was just stopping by to check on you. I told him you were out sick."

My eyes widened. "Thomas, you didn't."

He was silent for three long seconds as I took in the state of my house, from the messy kitchen, the pile of laundry on my breakfast table, to the flattened pillows and scattered throws all over my couch. My eyes dropped down to my coffee table, my eyes widening in horror at the sight. It looked like there had been a mass tissue murder, the used pieces of cotton dotting the vintage wood along with the endless protein bar wrappers. Sitting on the edge of the table was my yogurt bowl from yesterday, the spoon perched inside.

All at once, I felt like Kathleen Kelly from *You Got Mail* when Joe Fox came to her apartment when she was sick. Denver wasn't my Joe Fox, but he was my friend.

A friend who would show up at my house when I was sick.

"Oh, God," I breathed, slapping my hand to my forehead.

"Was I not supposed to tell him you're sick?" Thomas asked, pulling me back into the present.

Right on cue, a powerful knock sounded at my front door. A groan left me then as I looked up to the ceiling, pretending I could see the heavens. "God save me," I sighed.

"What was that noise? Is that Mr. Langston?" Thomas uttered, and I could practically see the shock on his face in my mind.

"Unfortunately," I muttered as the cowboy banged on my door a second time.

"Diana!" he bellowed. "Open this fucking door before I break it down!"

"What's he going to do, kick the door down?" Thomas deadpanned.

"Yeah, actually."

My paralegal was silent for a moment. "Please don't let that cowboy kick down your door."

"I'll do my best," I muttered, knowing it was too late for me to tidy up. Another sigh left me. "I'll call you back, Thomas."

"Sorry for sending you the trouble, Diana. I know you need to rest."

"It's okay. I'll be back in the office on Friday." I hung up and tossed the device on my baby blue couch, watching it bounce as a third knock floated through the air.

"Diana!"

I eyed the tissues. "The cowboy needs to learn patience anyway," I whispered to myself before I cleaned up the trash, grabbed the bowl, and walked into the kitchen. Denver pounded on the door again, yelling my name as I walked down the hallway. By the time I got to the door, I was certain he was ready to kick it down. I yanked it open to find the six-foot-seven cowboy's gray eyes glaring at me, his nostrils flared, black cowboy

hat on his head and all. The outside air hit me, attacking my sinuses, and before I could utter a greeting, I squeezed so hard, it hurt.

"Denver," I greeted once I opened my eyes, sniffling.

He said nothing, his eyes scanning me as I held the door tightly. I knew it wouldn't stop the man from barreling into my home, but it never hurt to try. I really didn't need him, my first client, seeing me like this.

"What's going on?" he demanded, a crease of concern between his brows.

"I have a sinus infection, Denver. It's not a big deal," I answered softly.

"You running a fever?" he clipped.

I shook my head. "No, just a headache from hell. Oh, and I can't breathe, but that's neither here nor there."

He stared at me, worry swirling in his eyes. "Are you resting, or are you working on shit you shouldn't?"

My mouth opened and closed twice, heat rising in my cheeks.

Denver's eyes narrowed to slits, piercing my soul. "That's what I fucking thought. Move."

He didn't give me a chance to refuse before he stepped forward. I had no choice but to move, or he would bulldoze me over. I watched as he entered my house like he owned the place. I bent my head in defeat as his boots thundered down the hallway, and I quietly closed the front door before following him. As I walked into the living room, finding him standing in the middle of it, surveying the current state I was living in, I pulled my over-sized zip hoodie tighter around myself. I took a second to thank my past self for choosing this house, because without the high ceilings in the hallway and the vaulted one in the living room, Denver's presence would've made it look small.

"It's just a sinus infection," I repeated when his eyes finally landed back on me.

"What happened with the girls at the diner scared the shit out of me," he clipped, changing the subject.

My mouth turned dry as my lips parted, but nothing came out.

"You know all the shit my wife and sister-in-law went through with Moonie," he continued, pausing for my reaction. I nodded, and he looked away from me. "The last time I was that scared, the love of my life had been taken from me, trapped in that fucking fire."

Memories of that dark day shot to the front of my mind, projecting images I was hoping to forget. I'd never been so scared when I got the call from Beau that Hallow Ranch was on fire. In fact, the entire town had been fearful.

"I know, Den," I whispered.

His intense gray eyes snapped back over to me. "You don't need me to repeat what happened with that fucker. You know that no amount of justice you or any court would serve would've been enough for me—or Mason."

I knew Moonie was dead, his ashes on Denver's mountain. I knew those cowboys didn't have a problem with exacting their own version of justice. "I know."

"Then you need to understand that what happened at the diner couldn't have been your business. If you knew who it was and what went down, then you would be caught up in the bullshit Chase is dealing with."

Chase Bowen was Hayden's sheriff. He was also my friend.

My brows came to together, my body suddenly on alert. "What bullshit are *you* dealing with?"

Frankly, Chase could handle himself. He was good man and one hell of a cop. He protected this town in a way other cops couldn't. My concern was about my clients. If Denver and Mason were tied up in something, I needed to know about it.

Denver took off his hat and ran his hand through his dark locks. "It's not your concern, Diana."

"Like heck it isn't," I shot back, my hands falling to my sides as I took a step forward. "I'm your damn lawyer, Denver. What bullshit?"

He stared at me for a moment, testing to see if I would back down. I took a breath before giving him my two cents. "Need I remind you, when I found out about how you handled things, I didn't run away?" I asked, taking another step forward, the front of my legs hitting the back of the couch now. "Did I run and turn you in? No, I stayed because I came to care about you and your son. I wanted to protect Hallow Ranch just as much as you because of Caleb. When I confronted you about it, do you remember what you said to me?"

He stared at me as if I'd grown two heads, his mouth tighter than his bearded jaw, his hat hanging at his side.

"You're a good man, Den," I continued, my voice soft now. "One of the best I know, and everything I have, I owe to you."

"Diana—"

I held up my hand, shaking my head. "Don't try to down play how important you and your family are to me. Please. You were the only rancher within a hundred miles who was willing to take a chance on me. You saw something in me." Denver's features softened then, but I kept going. "Everything I own, this house, my car, the clothes on my back...I would've had none of it if you hadn't taken a chance on me." "Yes, you would've, Diana. You know-"

I cut him off. "In another city, maybe."

His brows furrowed. "What?"

A short, huffed laugh left me then as I shook my head. "Do you know how hard it is to get male ranchers to trust a lawyer, let alone a woman? Every person I talked to before I wandered over to Hallow Ranch told me to go to hell."

"Give me the names," he demanded darkly.

I shot him a look. "That last thing I want you to do is take a life for me, Denver."

Silence filled my house as we stared at each other.

Sometime later, he was the one to break it. "But you know I wouldn't hesitate, right?"

I shifted my weight, looking away from him.

"Diana, I care about you too. Very much. You're not just my lawyer. You're like the sister Mase and I never had," he confessed, his rough voice the softest I'd ever heard it outside of when he talked to his wife and children.

My heart halted as my stomach swirled and twisted in a way I wasn't prepared for. I pressed my tongue to the top of my mouth, unsure of how to respond.

The cowboy sighed and looked at the kitchen behind me, running his hand down his face. "The man who took Abbie from the diner...He was a wildlife warden."

"What?" I breathed, staggering back. "A-a warden?"

He nodded. "He pointed a gun directly into Valerie's face when she tried to intervene, Diana. She's still shaken up over it." I shook my head. "I didn't—"

"I came to your office to apologize to you. Val told me about your discussion the other day and how you left abruptly." He moved then, coming around the couch to stand directly in front of me. "She said you had a client emergency."

I nodded. "Yes."

He was quiet for a moment, and when he spoke again, he rocked my entire world. "She also told me Mags spooked you."

Oh...fuck.

As my New Year's resolution went up in smoke, Denver held me captive with his smoke gray eyes, and a bead of sweat trickled down my back.

Did he know?

Could he see right through me?

Could he see I was hopelessly, desperately, madly in love with his cowboy? That I had been for over a decade? From the first moment I saw him walk out of the Hallow Ranch barn and pin me in place with those endless dark pools he had for eyes?

"I'm sorry for that. I told him to be more careful around you," Denver said, breaking my train of thought.

Wait—what?

"I'm also sorry for not telling you about the situation at the diner. If Chase found out you were in involved, it might've destroyed the already damaged relationship he now has with Hallow Ranch."

All thoughts of Mags were obliterated. "What the hell are you talking about? Damaged?"

Denver didn't hesitate. "There was a case involving the warden, and Chase failed to mention that to us. His silence caused a lot of trouble for Beau, and Abbie almost died because of it." His voice was no longer soft, but cold, brimming with malice.

I cleared my throat and wrapped my arms around myself again as goosebumps spread across my body. "I'm going to need you to get me caught up."

"Diana—"

I held up my hand, stopping the usual protest about to flow from his mouth. "Right now, I'm not your lawyer. I'm your friend," I reminded him.

He scratched his beard, looking out the window. "You're a pain in my ass."

"Everyone except for Valerie and your children are pains in your ass," I deadpanned.

He shot me a look.

"Tell me everything," I demanded. He continued to stare at me, and if I was anyone else, I might have back down in fear. But unlike everyone else on the planet, I'd seen Denver Langston at his darkest—his lowest. Nothing about him could scare me, not after that. "Either talk or get out, Den. I have a lot of work to do. The university called and—-"

"Come sit the fuck down," he cut me off. "You look pale."

"You going to tell me what I want to know?" I prompted, crossing my arms and raising my brows.

He looked me up and down. "You do you know you're not intimidating in sweats and cat socks, right?"

I looked down at my feet, wiggling my toes in my lime green socks with black cats on them. I'd gotten them at a yard sale in the city a few years back. I looked back up at him, throwing my hand out. "I'm sorry, I left my intimidating socks in my gym locker." "You don't go to the gym."

My mouth shut, my arm falling to my sides as the sudden urge to punch him surfaced. He really was like a brother. An older, grumpy, slightly judgmental brother. "Ass. Couch. Now," he ordered.

"I'm not one of your ranch hands," I snapped. "You can't just order me around." As the last word left my mouth, a wave of dizziness hit me, and reluctantly, I moved over to the couch.

A deep chuckle left him, clearly not noticing my dizzy spell. "I almost feel sorry for the man who falls in love with you, Harper. He's going to have his hands full."

My stomach flipped as I took my seat in my usual spot, knowing damn well the future he'd hoped for was nothing more than that.

Hope.

The ranch owner sat down and told me everything I'd missed—including the horrible things Abbie had gone through with her stalker. By the time the story was finished, my flipped stomach was in knots, and I could feel the blood draining from my face. "Oh my God," I whispered, falling back into my couch cushions, covering my face with my hands.

Denver was sitting on my coffee table, hat back on, his hands hanging between his knees. "I'm sorry for not telling you sooner. I'm also sorry for brushing you off when you asked. Things have been complicated, and there were so many moving parts in all this..." He trailed off for a moment, looking at his hands. "I was scared shitless, Diana. I didn't know if we were going come out of it."

The lump in my throat was sharp, like shattered glass, slicing my vocal chords. Even though I wanted to say something, I physically couldn't.

When he looked back up, his gray eyes soft, I looked up, focusing on my ceiling fan as I tried to find the right words.

Nothing was said for a long time, the silence between us palpable.

My question was unsteady as it filled my living room, seeping into my walls, forever tainting my cozy little home. "How many bodies?"

"Five."

I closed my eyes and inhaled a long breath through my nose.

"Five people were involved in something dangerous. Five people tried to hurt my family," Denver rumbled.

I released the breath and slowly sat back up, feeling my hair shift around my shoulders. The cowboy watched me with cautious eyes, his mouth set in a firm line.

I reached out, placing my hand on his forearm. "Okay."

"Okay," he repeated.

"I'm the last person on this planet to judge you," I murmured, sitting back again.

"What did the university want?" he asked. "You said they called."

And that was that. Denver and I would never speak of this again. The cowboy did what cowboys did: protect their own. No one could fault him, or any of the others, for that. He told me, I took it, and now, we'd move on like we'd always done.

"They wanted to know if I could teach the spring semester next year," I told him, referring to the law school I taught at in Denver. I'd only taught three semesters so far, and my classes had been relatively small, but it fulfilled something in me. It was also a good excuse to escape the small town life when I needed to. Usually, I taught a small class during the fall

semester, but the Dean called last week and asked if I would be open to teaching the spring as well.

A grunt came from him. "You going to take it?"

I shrugged a shoulder. "I haven't decided. It depends on my case load."

"Well, things aren't going to be so complicated around here in a few months. All this bullshit will blow over when Chase closes the investigation," he assured me.

I couldn't help but give him a small smile. "Things are always complicated at Hallow Ranch, Denver. I can't remember a time when they weren't. Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if you told me you started working with the Mafia," I joked, laughing at the end.

When he didn't join in, my laughter stopped, his face unreadable. I felt the glass back in my throat again. "Why aren't you laughing with me? That was a joke, right?"

Nothing. He didn't say a damn word.

"Right?" I pressed, leaning forward.

"Sure."

I blinked. "Denver Langston, are you working with the Mafia?" I asked as calmly as I could.

He clicked his tongue. "Not at the moment, no."

I was on my feet before he could stop me. "*What the heck?*" I shrieked and he rose up to his full height, forcing me to tilt my head back. I was just a couple inches shorter than his wife.

He set his heavy hands on my shoulders as he chuckled. "It was a onetime thing—hopefully. Mason's friends in St. Louis needed some help. It's all taken care of now."

"You're not joking about this at all, are you?" I rasped.

The smirk he wore slowly spread into a devastatingly beautiful smile, a rare gift for me. "Sit back down. I'm going to cook you some soup," he said before moving into my colorful kitchen.

"You don't have to—"

"Diana Harper, sit your ass back down," he ordered, opening one of my cabinets, keeping his back to me. The authority in his voice had my spine snapping straight.

"I can take care of myself, Denver," I countered, needing to blow my nose all of a sudden. Truth be told, I felt like absolute shit, and despite this happening to me every single year around this time, I still had the gall to act surprised Ms. Sinus Infection knocked at my door.

"Family takes care of family. Now, sit down and rest. I got this."

I wanted to roll my eyes, but his words struck me somewhere deep in my soul, short circuiting my brain.

Family takes care of family.

As I tried to get my thoughts together, my gaze shifted to the window as I watched my flowers sway in the summer breeze. My mother's voice rang in my ears then, echoing the last time I'd ever spoken with her, recalling the utter judgment within her voice. It was once a voice I used to seek out whenever I needed comfort or advice. And now? Now, it was only a reminder of the pain she caused me and how everything could flip at the drop of a hat.

"Diana?"

Denver's voice snapped me out of it, and I swung my eyes back to him. "Hm?"

He raised a brow. "Are you okay?" he asked sincerely.

Brushing off my own issues, I faked a smile and nodded. "I'm fine, really. You don't have to make me soup. I can do it."

"Know I don't have to, Diana. I'm doing it because I want to."

My smile flattened. "Don't you have a ranch you need to take care of today?"

He gestured between us, his brows furrowed. "Fixing this was more important," he said.

"Careful, Denver. If word gets out you were nice to me, you might tarnish your reputation in the town," I warned, teasing him as I took a seat on one of my bar stools.

He glared at me then. "Told you to take a seat—"

"—and I have. You didn't say where," I countered.

"Fucking lawyers," he mumbled. "What reputation are you talking about?"

I blinked. "Half of this town is scared of you—literally terrified—-and the other half doesn't want to deal with you because you're an asshole."

He grunted, seeming to be impressed with himself, and turned back to the stove, working in silence for the next few minutes.

Both of us were lost in thought, and when he handed me a steaming bowl of taco soup, he said, "The entire town is grateful for Hallow Ranch, has been since my grandfather was running it. And this damn town knows I only give a fuck about a small group of people, Diana. *You* are one of those people."

My lip wobbled. "Thanks, Den."

"Shut up and eat your soup."

For once, I did what I was told, and when the Hallow Ranch owner left my house, despite all the information that had just been dumped on me, I could only think about Mags.

Chapter Five



Mags

Year Five. Hallow Ranch.

"You coming up to the house later?"

I looked up to find one of the newest ranch hands staring at me with a goofy smile on his face. I said nothing and returned to my book, ignoring the ache in my muscles, the new, yet repetitive, phantom pain on my left side. The walking fucking headache in front of me didn't move, and I was seconds away from pulling out my gun when another voice spoke, halting my thoughts.

"That one doesn't talk, Lance," his twin brother said from across the bunkhouse.

"I can see that," the headache, Lance, mumbled.

My eyes snapped back up to find his back to me as he walked over to his bunk. These new ranch hands had only been here a few months, and though they were fast learners, my patience had worn thin. Both of them liked to yap.

Like dogs.

The front door swung open then, and Beau walked in, his eyes as cold as the snowfall behind him. The shadow loomed over him hadn't changed since I saw him this morning, and I knew that by the time night fell, it would consume him.

"Hey, Beau!" Lance greeted over his shoulder, oblivious. "You coming up to the main house tonight?"

Beau took off his hat, gloves, and coat and hung them up before grabbing a beer out of the fridge and taking a seat at the table, not saying a word. He twisted the cap off and took a healthy swig.

I studied him for a few more moments, and when he finally lifted his chin to the twin in greeting, my eyes dropped back to my book.

Abbie and Beau were no longer together.

She'd left him in the summer, and he was a fucking mess.

However, Denver, Jigs, and I were watching him closely to make sure he didn't fall off the fucking deep end. We did the best we could not to leave him alone and drink his life away, but a man couldn't blame him. He'd lost the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, and nothing could compare to that pain.

"You coming up, Mags?"

Beau's question floated throughout the silent space over to the leather chair I occupied. My eyes didn't leave the page as I said, "Maybe."

One of the twins broke out into laughter. "Yeah, that's a no."

It should've been a no.

I didn't want to go, and Denver knew that.

Hallow Ranch was finally out of the deep end. It was a good year—a very good year. Denver hiring two new ranch hands was proof of that. Another sign was that Cathy, Caleb's mother kept coming around, asking for money. She said that town was taking notice of how well the ranch was doing, thriving again after the loss of John Langston, and she felt like she was owed.

It was a bunch of bullshit, but then again, anything that came out of Cathy's mouth usually was.

The year was so good that Denver's spirits were higher than normal. I'd been at Hallow Ranch for almost five years now, and Christmas was usually a quiet day for Denver and me. He'd spend the day with his boy and by the time Caleb went to bed, I was waiting on the porch with a bottle of whiskey. Somewhere along the way, Denver had become not only my boss, but a damn good friend to me.

I'd only had one other friend in my life: Joseph Grayson.

We'd served together in the Marines, been through hell and back together. For the last few years, I didn't have a cell phone, but we still communicated by mail. Every year, on the tenth of June, we'd write a letter to each other checking in, but I'd grown tired of waiting for his letters. He was buried deep in his company, Red Snake Investigations, but there were some days when the past would almost be too much, and I would need to hear from him.

Maybe it was time to change that.

The front door opened again, the howling wind outside compelling me to look up and find Jigs walking in, carrying a bunch of bags, snow on his hat and shoulders. "God damn fucking snow," the old man muttered. "God put me in a damn state full of fucking snow, and my dumbass chose to stay."

The twins chuckled, and I shook my head, used to the old cowboy's bitching.

"What the hell, Pop?" Beau asked, getting up from his seat to help his father.

Jigs looked to the twins, jerking his head back, his mustache dusted with snowflakes. "There's more in the back of the truck," he snapped. "Get off your asses and help."

The twins were on their feet, mumbling, "Yes, sir."

I made a sound of approval, and the old man's head snapped over to me, a smirk teasing his lips. "I like yelling at them," he said once they were gone. "Makes me feel young again."

"Used to like yelling at me too," Beau muttered, digging through the grocery bags, searching for his fucking snacks.

"Yeah, I know, son. That was the point."

A rough chuckle rumbled from somewhere deep in my chest, and Beau's head snapped up, his eyes narrowing. "So you'll laugh at the shit Pop says, but not at my jokes."

"Your jokes are shit," I replied as I continued reading the last page of the chapter.

"What? No, they're not!" he exclaimed, twisting his torso to glare at his father.

Jigs laughed then, the sound old and raspy. "Yes the hell they are. Even Denver told you so."

Beau rolled his eyes and waved his father off, and it was the first time I'd seen a glimpse of his old self since Abbie left. It was comforting to know the old Beau was still in there somewhere. We'd just have to dig him out. "I figured he was just in a bad mood, and I didn't take it seriously," he explained simply.

"You probably should've," Jigs replied, carrying two jugs of milk over to the fridge.

The twins came back in with a heap of bags, and as much as I enjoyed watching them lug heavy shit around, I closed the book and stood. My lower back screamed in pain, and I bit down, grinding my jaw. The pain would subside eventually. Hopefully.

"Jesus, Jigs. Did you buy the entire store?" one of the twins asked, breathless.

His question went unanswered. There were many things I liked and respected about the old cowboy, one of them being that he didn't respond to stupidity.

"Look who finally got off his ass," the second twin noted dryly as he plopped the bags down, his brown eyes on me. Beau's hand shot out and slapped him on the backside of his head. "Hey! What the hell was that for?"

"For being a dumbass," Beau answered, walking over to his bunk while pulling his thermal over his head. "You're going to have be more specific," Lance sighed. "Lawson is a dumbass ninety-eight percent of the time."

Lawson. That was his fucking name.

I grunted, unsure if I would remember that in the future. If they wanted me to remember their names, they were going to have to make a lasting impression, something beyond the usual stupidity they displayed.

Beau pulled a fresh shirt over his head and came up to me, his eyes guarded. "You doing alright?" he asked quietly.

He and I were the only ones who'd worked today. Kings didn't want the twins getting lost and freezing to death before the holiday. After the new year, though, he might. So, I'd instructed them to stay near the barn and gave them a hefty chore list while Beau and I headed out. He checked on the fence line in pasture two and three while I monitored the herd in the main pasture, the harsh winter wind howling and beating against us. Managing a herd of that size on your own could be difficult, especially in the snow, and the twins weren't ready for that yet. Honestly, it would be very easy for me to make them ready, but this morning, I wasn't in the mood for their bullshit. They goofed around too much on work days, laughed too much, occupying every last one of my damn nerves.

"Better than I deserve," I answered, tucking my book underneath my arm. Pain from an old, horrible injury flared in my shoulder then, stretching before crawling up my neck. I bit down, trying not to grind my teeth.

"The herd alright?" Beau pressed, his brows furrowed.

I nodded.

"You see any tracks?" he asked, referring to the wolves. There was a pack that settled on the mountain in the fall. I spotted them when I was out on a hunt. They came and went every year, but their pack had almost doubled in size since last year. That was a problem. About a week ago, Denver and I tried chasing them out, only to spot them on the trail camera's hours later, after the sun had set. They were back the next morning.

"No. You?"

His mouth was in a thin line as he answered, "Yeah. A few, but they went across the property line."

"You tell Kings?" I prompted, raising a brow.

Beau nodded. "I think I'm going to go out there later—"

I cut him off. "The only place you're needed tonight is up at the main house." His blue eyes held mine, and I could see the pain flickering within them. He wanted to be alone.

But leaving a cowboy alone with nothing but the company of his broken heart was a very dangerous game to play.

Beau needed to be about the people who cared about him the most. "You got me?" I pressed, my voice low and firm.

Thankfully, he nodded. "I got you, Mags."

Our conversation was cut short when one of the twins opened their mouth to spout off some more bullshit. "Oh, so he talks to Beau, but not us," Lance quipped, huffing.

I stared at him, wondering if Denver would mind being down a cowboy or two. We were doing just fine before they wandered onto the ranch. Plus, hiding their bodies would be easy—-

"So, at what point are you going to stop being a whiny bitch?" Jigs asked causally, pulling out his favorite cast iron skillet and setting it on the stove, silencing all thoughts of murder in my mind.

All eyes shifted over to the old man, and Beau chuckled from beside me.

Lawson shook his head, his eyes darting up to the ceiling. "I hate it here."

"You can leave whenever you want, you know," Beau suggested. "Not everyone can handle being a cowboy."

Lance pointed at his brother. "We can't. We owe a debt to Denver."

Jigs whistled. "Owing a Langston. That's..." He trailed off, and the twins started barking out questions.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Is owing him a bad thing?"

"Why are you all fucking laughing?"

I walked into the kitchen area and started checking the bags as Beau began arguing with the dumbasses. Jigs tipped his hat to me. "Afternoon, Mags."

"Jigs," I rumbled, pulling out the groceries.

"Now, they didn't have any protein powder this time around, so I got you some protein bars instead."

"Either is fine. Thank you," I murmured, pulling out a wad of cash and handing it to him. He eyed the money for a moment, hesitating like he did every month. "Either take it now, or it'll end up in your truck."

Another old laugh left him as he took the money, putting it in his breast pocket. As I unpacked the groceries, Jigs got to work cooking a meal for all of us, Beau settled in the chair I had been occupying, and the twins finally cut their shit out.

"Maybe we should put up a Christmas tree," one of the twins said, breaking the comfortable and peaceful silence all of us had settled into.

Beau's head fell back. "Rather shoot myself in the foot."

"Why shoot your own foot when I can do it for you?" I drawled.

Beau flipped me off.

"So that's a no to Christmas tree?"

Jigs put a second ribeye into the skillet, the sizzle filling my ears, and the smell—fuck, I was starving. "You want a tree, boy, then you need to go chop one down and bring it in here," he said. "No one is going to do it for you."

"Don't forget to water it," Beau added, closing his eyes, hands folded atop his abdomen.

"Water it?" Lance or Lawson parroted. I didn't know which one it was, but again, I didn't really care.

Beau groaned. "Yeah, idiot. If you're going to have a real Christmas tree, you have to water it so it won't catch on fire."

The twin's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "What the hell? Why didn't anyone tell me that?"

Jigs shot me a look before turning around to look at the twin. "Are you as stupid as I think you are, or is it all just an act?"

A low chuckle left me before I could stop it. Jigs was a funny bastard, I'd give him that.

"Lance, I know what I want for Christmas this year," his brother, Lawson, said as he came out of the bathroom.

"What's that?" Lance asked.

"For you to shut the fuck up."

A rich laugh came from Beau, and his father grinned. I knew he was happy to hear that sound again. That was a Christmas gift within itself.



Five Hours Later. The Main House.

The sharp teeth of the harsh winter night air nipped at my skin as I stepped onto the porch, feeling like I could fucking breathe for the first time in hours. I inhaled a deep breath, letting it go slowly and watching it drift higher into the air before fading altogether. The tension in my shoulders finally lessened as I brought my hand to the back of my neck, hoping that would relieve the strain.

Fuck, I needed a cigarette. Or a whole pack. Maybe a carton.

I'd been at this fucking Christmas party far longer than I'd wanted, lingering in the corner like some creep, watching Beau and the twins make Diana laugh from afar.

"What did I do to deserve this special version of hell?" I asked myself underneath my breath before taking a swig of my beer as I walked to the far corner of the porch.

Kings would whoop my ass if I gave him an Irish goodbye, but there was no way I could go back in there, not with Diana laughing the way she was, the bright color in her cheeks, her fresh highlights shining in the glow of the Christmas tree.

No.

There was no way in fuck I'd be going back into that house.

She was one more heavenly laugh away from me throwing her over my shoulder and carrying her down to the bunkhouse. All night, I'd been plagued with a sense of jealously, one I'd never experienced before—ever. I didn't like the way Beau was smiling at her, and even though I knew he was hopelessly in love with Abbie and heartbroken over her, I still wanted to break his jaw for making Diana smile back.

I wanted her smiling at me.

I wanted her laughing at my jokes.

You don't have any, dipshit.

I leaned against the house, hidden in the shadows in case anyone decided to come looking for me, and tipped my head back. Every year, being around her became increasingly more difficult, despite only seeing her once every three months or so. There wasn't a lot Kings needed her for anymore, not when Cathy was behaving. So, whenever she was here, I only got a glimpse of her which was more than enough for me.

Tonight wasn't supposed to be this difficult, but all I could focus on was the sweet peach scent that clung to her deep red dress and the matching lipstick painted on her bow-shaped lips. She had her glasses on tonight, something I hadn't seen since the spring. They made her hazel eyes bigger, magnifying their beauty and the purity within her soul.

From the moment I'd walked in, I'd been in agony.

She'd been playing a game with Caleb by the tree when I finally arrived. I avoided her, going into the kitchen to have something of a conversation with

Chase, the sheriff, but what we had to discuss wasn't appropriate for a damn Christmas party.

Eventually, Diana made her way to me like I knew she would, greeting me with bright smile and cheerful spirit that had every cell in my body stilling. It was in her nature to make sure everyone felt included—even the cowboy who didn't want to be. She was doing it to be polite, to spread her little light to anyone within her reach.

I didn't know which was worse: being addicted to her light or seeing her smile up at me like I was Superman.

The screen door popped open suddenly, pulling me from my thoughts, and my head snapped up, my eyes locking on her curvy frame as she put her cell to her ear.

"This is Diana," she answered.

All business, even on a fucking holiday.

She wrapped her arms around herself as the freezing air surrounded her, rubbing her free hand up and down her arm to chase away the cold. My palm itched to spank her plump ass for not putting on her fucking coat before coming out here.

She fucking knew better than that.

"W-what do you want?"

My spine straightened at her tone, my body on alert as I watched her stiffen, her shoulders snapping back almost as quickly as her spine straightened.

She was scared.

I was half a second away from moving to her, to do anything in my power to help her, to figure out why, instead of sweetness, there was fear laced throughout her voice. My eyes focused on the back of her head as I heard her stop breathing altogether. I lifted my boot—

"Lucas," she pushed out on a breath, hissing at the end of it. "You can't just call me like this out of the blue."

Lucas?

Who the fuck was Lucas?

My brows snapped together, my eyes on her shoulders, noting how rigid they were. Her body was on alert—a trauma response. "No, I—" A low muffled sound came from her phone then, cutting her off. She let out a defeated sigh, her fingers running through her honey golden locks. "You still loving me isn't my problem."

My jaw jumped.

The muffled voice grew louder, and before I could stop it, I was moving. The sound of my boots thudded against the wood of the porch, and Diana's neck twisted, her wide hazel eyes meeting mine. As I drew closer, the man's voice booming from her phone became more distinct.

He was yelling at her, verbally abusing her.

Fury boiled inside me.

In a flash, I had her phone in my hand and to my ear.

"You're such a fucking bitch, Dian—"

"—talk to her that way again, I'll cut out your tongue," I cut the bastard off, my voice sharp.

Diana turned her body to face me, her hand going to her mouth, stifling the sound of shock. I looked down at her, holding her eyes as the man started cussing at me. I ignored his threats.

"Who is he?" I asked, my voice low and vibrating with malice. It had been years since I'd craved this level of violence. Nowadays, killing was swift. Clean. Easy. Three bullets and no more. I didn't want to kill Lucas swiftly, and three bullets wouldn't be enough. Hell, an entire clip wouldn't be enough. I wanted his body in pieces, his screams ringing through the night.

No one talked to my Diana like that.

Ever.

Her hand slowly fell away from her mouth, drawing my attention to her red-painted lips. "Mr. Mags, you don't—"

Here we go again with the Mr. Mags bullshit.

My nostrils flared as I leaned in, her sweet scent surrounding me now. "Firefly, who the fuck is he to you?"

"Put Diana back on the phone now!" the man bellowed on the other end of the line.

"Mr. Mags," she whispered. She shook her head, her hazel eyes drifting to her phone. "I—I can—"

"It's just Mags and you fucking know it," I growled. "Answer my damn question. Who is he to you?"

Those beautiful eyes met mine again as she answered, "He's my ex."

That was all I needed to hear.

I pulled the phone away and ended the call.

She made a sound of protest, reaching for the device. I shifted my hand, holding it away from her.

"It doesn't take a fucking rocket scientist to know why he's your ex," I murmured, taking a step closer to her. "But let me make one thing very clear. Should you decide to waste your time on him again, know this: he calls you a bitch again, his body will burn on the mountain, just like all others. Do you understand?" Her lips parted on a gasp, and damn it all to hell, I didn't think those eyes of hers could get any wider, but they did. A roar of laugher erupted from the house, and she turned her head, following the sound. I didn't move an inch, staring down at her, wishing I could close the inches of space between us.

How long had they been together?

How long had she suffered his abuse?

How long had she loved him?

My questions halted when she looked back at me. "May I have my phone back, please?"

Please.

The more she said it, the more I began to enjoy that word spilling from her lips.

"Do you understand?" I repeated, my voice soft. I needed her to get me. I needed her to understand that, though I could never have her, I was willing to protect her, for the rest of my days.

She nodded then. "I-I understand."

I grunted, placing the device back in her soft hand before jerking my head to the door and looking out into the night. "Get back inside before you freeze."

"But—"

"Diana," I clipped, looking at her again.

Fuck, I needed a cigarette.

She raised her chin. "Merry Christmas, Mags," she whispered before giving me her back and heading into the warm house.

For a longtime, I didn't move, keeping my hat tipped down, staring at the spot where she once stood.

"Merry Christmas, Firefly."

Chapter Six



Diana

One week later. Hayden, CO.

As I swung my car in beside Thomas' at the back of my office, anxiety took over, flooding my bloodstream. I was powerless to stop it. My gut felt like someone plunged a knife into it, twisting my insides. My heart was pounding, the sound thundering in my ears as I shifted the car into park. Thomas knew that I wouldn't be coming out here today, and up until an hour ago, I had no reason to come into the office. And yet, here I was, sweaty palms and all.

I'd been in another meeting with a client when Thomas called me, telling me I needed to get back to the office as soon as possible. My day was supposed to consist of client meetings and driving across the state to said client meetings.

Of course, I had to cancel my last meeting in the city, which also included dinner.

My cheat meal dinner.

Last week, it was my cookie, and now, my cheat meal.

I got up at five this morning to work out and drink the same protein shake I had every other day of the week. During my workout, I was fighting the urge to run harder and go faster. The soup Denver made me last week was too damn good, and I ate more of it than I should've. Now, I was trying not to make myself pay for it by constantly reminding myself I was allowed to indulge in food outside of my plan.

To say I was furious because I had to come back to Hayden to deal with the mess that decided to waltz back into my life was an understatement. I was beyond pissed, and not just about the food.

The urge to bang my head against my steering wheel was strong when the back door of my building swung open, and my paralegal stepping out into the sunlight, his hands in his pockets, a scowl painted on his face. I kept my eyes on him as I grabbed my things and got out of the car, closing the door with my hip.

"Where is he?" I demanded.

Thomas' brow furrowed, his jaw tight with anger. "I sure as hell didn't put him in your office," he deadpanned. "He's in the waiting area."

I nodded. "Okay."

As I was about to pass him and walk through the door he held open, he caught my arm gently. My eyes met his, and I knew right then that not only would Thomas go to battle for me when it came to this job, but he would do so in every other aspect of life.

"I don't want you alone with him," he said.

The hair on the back of my neck rose, and an old, familiar fear slithered down my spine, leaving goosebumps in its wake. The idea of being alone with the man I thought I'd left behind was a nightmare in and of itself.

I nodded. "Okay, Thomas."

"The second he says some shit I don't like, I'm calling Chase," he warned, his blue eyes cold.

I put my free hand on his shoulder. "Deal."

Then, we went inside to face the impending doom that was my past catching up with me.

I dropped my stuff in my office, not even bothering to fully step inside before heading down the hall towards the front of my firm. My breath caught when I spotted him, the knife in my gut sinking deeper, causing more damage. The man rose from his seat the second he heard my heels clicking against the floor, his eyes scanning me from head to toe, lingering on my mid-section, then my hips, which were wider since the last we saw each other. In fact, every single aspect about me had changed since the last time I saw him.

When his eyes finally met mine, he decided it was the perfect time to open his stupid mouth, a mouth I thought I'd loved once.

"You've gained weight."

I pressed my tongue to the roof of my mouth and glared at him, waiting.

He scratched his scruffy jaw, laughing to himself. "You don't have anything to say to me?" he prompted, his ego clearly still in control.

I heard Thomas move from somewhere behind me, but he remained silent. My ex's eyes shifted over to my paralegal. "Is this the kind of man you fuck now?" he sneered.

Personal growth wasn't a term he was familiar with, I see.

"The kind of men I sleep with is no concern of yours, Lucas," I said, my voice steady despite the alarm bells going off inside my head.

My ex was the exact kind of man my parents wanted me to marry. He was tall and strong, had a decent job in finance to provide me with a home, and, last but not least, he wanted kids. Lots and lots of kids. He also wanted me to stay home with said kids and forget about my career altogether. He wanted me to cook, clean, and raise the kids while he went off to God knows were, doing God knows what.

There was a point in my life when all I wanted was to be the perfect little housewife for him, but that all changed the second he decided to sleep with his assistant. He didn't see a problem with it, and that was how I figured out he was a textbook narcissist—and a sexist. He didn't respect me.

He saw me as a maid and a womb, nothing more.

"What makes you think you can talk to me like that, Diana?" he asked with a furrowed brow and flat lips.

I laughed so hard, my head fell back, feeling my freshly blown out hair hanging down my back. "I almost forgot how ridiculous you were, how egotistical," I said, looking back at him.

His eyes scanned my hair, something he'd always loved. It was the only thing he'd ever complimented me on. "I don't know why you're being rude to me," he pushed out, trying to keep his cool. I took pleasure in knowing he was fuming now. "Get the hell out of my office."

He took a single step towards me, and Thomas cleared his throat. "I have the Sheriff on speed dial. Just a little FYI," he drawled.

Lucas peeled his eyes from me to focus on Thomas. "What I have to say to her is none of your business, boy."

"Then say what you have to say, Lucas," I cut in. "What are you doing in Colorado?"

He looked at me as if I'd grown three heads, utterly confused. "Your dad called and told me you're ready to come home."

My eyes nearly popped out of my head then, and the knife was pulled out from my stomach, leaving a gaping hole. "Excuse me?" I breathed.

Lucas nodded. "It's time, Diana. We've let you have your fun, but with your biological clock ticking, we need to get a move on."

Now *I* was the one looking at him as if he'd grown three heads. I opened my mouth, and nothing but a small sound of disbelief escaped.

Biological clock?

Lucas took this opportunity to keep talking, adding more gasoline to the hellhole of a fire he came here to start. "You've made your point, but now, it's time to be an adult. It's time to come home."

"What the actual fuck are you talking about?" Thomas bit off as he came to stand beside me.

Lucas ignored him, pulling out a small black box and opening it to reveal the ring he'd proposed to me with years ago when I was about to finish law school. It wasn't the ring I'd wanted, but he knew that. After showing him the one I'd wanted, he promised to buy it. That was a lie.

Everything about our relationship was nothing but a sugarcoated lie.

"Why are you still talking to my parents, Lucas?" I uttered, trying to wrap my head around the insanity flowing from his mouth.

He scoffed and threw his hands out. "Because they're *family* to me, Diana, and when we're finally married, it will be official."

When we're finally married.

I shook my head, fear coiling around my neck as the pit in my stomach stretched. "I don't know what world of delusion you've decided to take up permanent residence in, but you and I are over, Lucas. I left you and moved on over a *decade* ago," I said, each word gentler than the last, because narcissists didn't take rejection well. I knew this would make him explode, and I silently prayed the blast wouldn't be anything compared to the day I left him. The vein in his forehead began to pop and I looked over to Thomas, silently signaling him to call Chase.

Thomas gave me a slight nod, one Lucas was too busy to notice, and moved.

As he walked away, Lucas threw his hands into his thinning hair. "Diana, enough with the games!" he roared, causing me to flinch. "Your father said you were ready to come home and I'm here to make that happen."

As I stepped back, I lifted my chin. "I won't be going anywhere with you, Lucas." He was back to staring at me again. "Now, I'm asking you to leave, and this time, stay the hell out of my life."

My ex dropped his head, shaking it as he muttered something underneath his breath.

"If you have something to say," I called, "I suggest you say it with your entire chest." His head snapped up, his eyes filled with so many things, anger being one and hatred being the second. The young woman inside me, the one who was happy to be a wife and build a life with a man, trembled with fear, memories of Lucas dragging us back into the apartment by our hair bubbling up to the surface.

The grown woman I was now, wasn't trembling with fear, but that didn't mean I wasn't cautious. Lucas couldn't hurt me here. I was in a safe space. No one, not my parents nor the man standing in the waiting area of the firm I'd built from the ground up, got to dictate my life and the way I lived it.

I held my breath, waiting for the inevitable explosion.

"You little bitch," he pushed out slowly, his shoulders rising and falling. "I'm here to give you something you've always dreamed of, to give you the life you've always wanted and—"

"I'm living the life I've always wanted, Lucas. You knew back then all I wanted to do was to study law," I said firmly, a memory from a few Christmases ago lingering in the back of my mind. It was one of the longest conversations I'd ever had with Mags, and the entire thing was centered around the jackass standing in front of me.

He calls you a bitch again, his body will burn on the mountain just like all others.

As Mags' warning echoed in my mind, Lucas snarled, "Yes, and you went to school. You studied it and now look at you."

My spine snapped straight, knowing exactly where he was going with this.

He pointed at me, his upper lip curled. "This is why women shouldn't—"

"Careful now," I cooed, clicking my tongue. "Your sexist side is showing. You might want to tuck that back in before Chase gets here. He's not fond of assholes like you."

Lucas' face twisted in a mix of anger and confusion. "Who the fuck is Chase?" he barked as the glass door behind him opened. "That would be me," a deep, smooth voice said. The younger version of me inside my soul relaxed, forcing me to let out a small breath of relief.

My ex whirled to face the blue-eyed sheriff, taking in his tan uniform, badge, and the gun strapped to his hip. "You the man fucking my fiancée?" he growled, pointing at me.

I rolled my eyes. "For the last time, Lucas, I am not your anything," I said, my eyes shooting over to chase. "I would like this man to leave."

Chase nodded and moved to stand between my ex and me. "You heard her, man," he said, putting his hand on his hips, his right resting on the top of his gun.

"So you are fucking him. You're fucking a cop?" Lucas bit off, his harsh tone bouncing off the walls of my building now. I couldn't wrap my head around the obsession he had with me. It had been over a decade and still, in his mind, we were still getting married.

"Yo," Chase clipped, the word sounding like a gun firing. "I'm not going to tell you again. It's time for you to leave."

Lucas' eyes shifted from me to the Sheriff, hatred burning within them. "I'm talking to my woman."

I wanted to vomit. I couldn't believe I'd let myself be his anything.

Thomas returned, standing beside me as Chase began barking orders. He leaned in and whispered, "Maybe you should go back into your office."

My eyes met his, and I gave him a small smile. "This is my mess, and I need to make sure it gets taken care of."

This is my mess.

Embarrassment heated my cheeks, and I wrapped my arms around myself, looking to my feet as Lucas began shouting, the sound bringing back memories that should've been long forgotten...



Nine Years Ago. New Haven, Connecticut.

I stared at the package of Oreos, the middle row of cream-filled cookies now empty as the guilt weighed heavily on my shoulders, my pencil skirt I'd worn for a mock trial feeling tighter around my mid-section now. Of course, I couldn't wait to get home from said mock trial and get out of the damn thing.

I had a plan for tonight—a good, solid plan.

It didn't involve me staying in my small apartment, watching 2000s Romcoms, and fighting the temptation of gorging myself. I was going to get out of this skirt, put on some leggings, and go for a walk. A long walk through campus, and meet up with my friend, Jodie. Even though I was worn out from the week I'd had, I couldn't spend another Friday night in this apartment, fighting temptation.

And yet? I didn't even put up a damn fight. I was in my mid-twenties, about to graduate law school, and I couldn't even control myself around a package of cookies one of my classmates left here on accident. When I was climbing up the stairs to my floor, I'd gotten a phone call. I knew I shouldn't have answered it, but if I didn't, he would've just kept calling until I did. That was how Lucas worked, after all. Annoying, forceful persistence. He didn't even bother starting off with an apology—which I was owed. Instead, he began the first conversation I'd had with him in over two weeks by telling me all things I was doing wrong. He didn't fail to remind me how disappointed my parents were of me, because instead of staying in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania after graduating college, I went to law school.

Not just any law school—the best in the country. Yale.

That had been my plan since I was about seven years old, when I watched Legally Blonde for the first time at a second grade sleepover. I'd never seen a woman so confident and strong-willed before. Elle Woods was beautiful, smart, and kind—everything a little girl like me wanted to be when she grew up. When I'd gotten home the next day, I ran into the kitchen—where my mom always was—to tell her about this amazing movie. She didn't share my excitement. In fact, she was scared of it and did everything in her power to derail my newly-found career plans. She even went as far as calling my college to tell them I wouldn't be attending anymore, that I'd changed my mind. She didn't care that I busted my butt in high school to graduate a year yearly, taking summer school classes between freshman and sophomore year, taking college courses as a junior, giving me a head start.

Now, here I was, two months out from graduation, and the life I'd left back in Bloomsburg was catching up to me, binge eating cookies to cope.

I winced, standing in front of the mirror and promising to not give in to my food craving, with tears streaming down my face, I fucking did it again —all because I couldn't handle a simple phone call. Shame coated my tongue, and I couldn't even take that final cookie I'd shoved in my mouth a minute ago. I walked back over to the counter, staring down at the damn things until my composure snapped.

"What the hell is wrong with me?" I whispered to the cookies as I shoved my hands in my hair, tugging at the freshly dyed strands. "I can handle law school, but I can't handle this? How pathetic can you be, Diana?"

Okay, the negative self-talk wasn't helping, and I knew that.

But the mere thought of stepping on the scale tomorrow morning consumed me now as I envisioned myself stepping onto the pretty glass machine and it cracking underneath my weight. I'd worked so hard to lose ten pounds—so I could fit into this damn skirt—and now, that was shot to hell. All that work was had gone down the drain in a matter of ten minutes.

I bend my head, muttering more negative things to myself as if I deserved them, and the tiny voice in my head spoke.

You know how to get rid of it, Diana. If you want to feel better, just go to the bathroom and—

"No," I rasped, bringing my hand up and wiping my tears. "I promised myself I would never do that again."

Suddenly, there was a heavy pounding on my front door, causing me to jump. I twisted my neck, looking over my shoulder, eyes wide as my exboyfriend's muffled voice filled my small apartment. He wasn't even supposed to be here—at all. A painful lump formed in my throat, my gut filled with dread and, most of all, fear. The last time he'd driven out here, I'd gotten yelled at, judged, verbally abused, and kissed all within twenty minutes. That was after I'd confronted him about sleeping with his assistant. I'd broken up with him, but it was hard to cut ties with someone who refused to let go.

Which is why I'd come up a plan, one that involved me packing up everything I owned after graduation and moving to the other side of the country.

Another round of forceful knocks echoed through the door, followed by the one voice I didn't want to hear ever again. "Diana, open up this fucking door," Lucas bellowed.

The lump in my throat swelled, making it difficult to swallow, and I took a step back, blindly reaching for my phone. I shot a text to Jodie.

Me: Lucas is here.

Her reply was almost immediate.

Jodie: What??? Did you let him in??

Me: No, he's banging on my front door. I don't know what to do.

Jodie: I'll be over in five.

Me: No. Don't. I don't want him to hurt you. I'll handle it.

The text thread disappeared as her phone call popped up, a picture of us in the library filling my screen. I quickly answered. "Jodie, don't come," I whisper-hissed, keeping my eyes on the door.

"I know you're in there, Diana. Open up. We have to talk," Lucas clipped.

"I'm getting in my car right now," Jodie said, not bothering to listen to me.

My eyes shot up to the ceiling, hoping whatever higher power there was looming over me would fix this shit-show. "Okay, but just stay in your car. If I need you, I'll text you. Deal?" I asked, chewing on my bottom lip, glaring at the door.

My friend huffed. "Fine."

"Diana!" he yelled as I ended the call. More pounding followed. Sighing, I straightened my shoulders, lifted my chin, and headed to the door. I didn't bother unhooking the chain as I twisted the knob, pulling the door open as far as it would allow.

"What are you doing here, Lucas?" I asked softly, meeting his harsh eyes. He backed up, his brow furrowed as he gestured to the door. "Are you not going to let me in?"

There's no reason for you to come inside, asshole.

"Whatever you have to say to me, you can say it from right there," I told him, doing my best to keep my voice level.

His face twisted in anger. "No. Whatever I have to say, I will say to you inside," he declared, his voice cold. "Now, open the damn door."

From behind him, my neighbor's door opened, revealing his tall, lanky figure, his glasses perched on his nose. He was a student professor at Yale, and we'd been neighbors for almost a year now, but for the life of me, I couldn't remember his name.

"Diana?" he asked. "Are you alright?"

Great. He knew my name.

Lucas shifted, giving me a full view of the kind man. He was dressed in flannel PJ pants and a faded gray T-shirt. I gave him a forced smile. "I'm

alright."

Mr. Neighbor eyed me for a moment before his gaze shifted over to Lucas. "Is there something I can help you with, sir?"

"Why the in the fuck would you ask me something like that? I'm here to talk to my woman—

"-clearly, she isn't your woman, judging by the chain on the door and the fact you stood out here banging on it for five minutes," Mr. Neighbor said simply, cutting him off.

"Lucas, you need to go," I added softly.

He turned to me, fishing for something in the front pocket of his jeans. "I'm not going anywhere. Not until you agree to be my wife," he pushed out in a rush, dropping down to one knee.

I froze, unsure if my heart was still beating or even if I was still breathing. All I could do was stare down at the man who'd been abusing me since my freshman year of high school, gaslighting me into thinking that was how love was supposed to be. It had taken me nearly my entire time at college to finally develop the courage to break away from him.

Now, he was here to propose to me.

"Diana?" Lucas prompted, opening the black ring box, revealing a ring I'd never seen before.

"What is that?" I found myself asking. That wasn't the ring I picked out just to please him two years ago. He'd taken me out to dinner after my winter finals to "plan our future" and pick out rings. There was a small part of me, the weak part, that was actually excited. Picking out an engagement ring was something to be excited about. There wasn't a woman I knew who didn't spend a good chunk of their childhood daydreaming about their dream wedding. Lucas' eyes dropped to the little gold band with princess cut diamond perched on top. "It's your ring, beautiful."

That was the kindest his voice had been with me in over three months. He thought proposing to me would undo everything he'd done, erase the trauma and pain he'd caused me?

I watched in horror as he remained on his knee, his signature, practiced smile plastered on his face. Nausea hit me then, and suddenly, the Oreos I'd scarfed down didn't seem like they were going to be a problem much longer. Unable to look at him, I lifted my gaze, landing on the man watching. My neighbor's head tilted to the side as he shook it slightly, his eyes focused on the back of Lucas' head.

Lucas' next words cut through the air, lingering around me like a toxin. "What do you say, Diana? Be my wife? Make me the happiest man in the world?"

Suddenly, the picture-perfect life my parents had set out for me popped into my head, visions of me barefoot and pregnant in Lucas' old home, cooking and cleaning while he was out doing God knows what with God knows whom. I pictured him coming home late multiple times a week, the smell of alcohol on his breath, anger seeping from him. He would take that anger out on me, his good little wife, and I would be trapped in a loveless marriage, protecting my children from his wrath for eighteen years.

Then, they would be gone, and I would alone—with him. Trapped.

I shuddered, closing my eyes for half a second to collect myself. Part of me knew he was going to come back. It was only a matter of time. I was just foolish enough to hope he wouldn't.

Just do it now. You have a witness, and Jodie is on standby. Rip this toxic band-aid off and move on with your life. "Diana, babe? You going to give me an answer?" Lucas asked, sounding uncomfortable. His ego couldn't handle the fact that I hadn't unlocked the door and ran into his arms yet.

When I opened my eyes, the words were already on the tip of my tongue.

I spouted them out with zero hesitation in a clear voice, this new sense of unwavering strength manifesting from somewhere deep inside my soul. "Making you the happiest man in the world would mean me sacrificing my freedom, my womanhood, and my dreams," I answered. Out of the corner of my eye, I could've sworn I saw my neighbor smirk. "No, Lucas, I will not be marrying you. Since you clearly didn't get the message the first time: I'm breaking up with you."

He shot to his feet, his jaw slack as he fumbling with his speech, trying to find the right words, sputtering out my name and cursing.

"You've said what you needed to say, man. It's time for you to leave now," Mr. Neighbor stated.

Lucas stiffened, and in a flash, his slacked jaw was tight and popping with rage. He whirled around, the now-closed ring box clutched tightly within the fist at his side. "You stay the fuck out of this," he snarled.

My neighbor, cool and calm as ever, held up his phone. "The police are already on their way. I had a feeling you weren't going to leave."

As if on cue, two officers appeared at the end of the hall, and minutes later, Lucas was dragged out of my life.



Present Day.

"I'm not going tell you again," Chase warned, his voice lethal. "Walk away now."

Lucas ignored him, keeping his eyes on me. "You know, Diana, this is the second time you've had the police separate us."

I stopped myself from rolling my eyes yet again. "Lucas, you need to leave. Read the room."

For once, he actually listened to me, pulling his eyes from me to take a look around. I clenched my jaw, grinding my teeth together when I spotted a familiar, horrid gleam in his eyes. I could practically see the gears working in his head, coming up with an attempt to win me back. To him, I was only a prize, after all.

He shot one more glare in Chase's direction, then another to Thomas before finally looking at me. The same smile he wore when he proposed to me stretched across his face, revealing just how much he'd aged as he took a step closer.

"That's close enough," Chase warned, his voice low.

Lucas' eyes scanned my body once more. "I'll be seeing you soon, babe." *Babe*.

That was just a pet name he reserved for me. He called all woman that well, except for the women he didn't like. Those woman he referred to as "bitch."

The waiting area was silent as my ex spun on his heel, pushed open the glass door, and headed out into the sunny afternoon, whistling a soft tone. Once the door fully closed, my shoulders sagged, a deep sigh leaving me. "I'm so sorry, Chase," I said as the Sheriff turned to face me.

"Don't apologize to me for something like this, Diana." His brows were still furrowed, his lips tight with concern as the front phone started to ring. We continued to stare at each other as Thomas went around the front desk to answer it. "Harper Law Office, this is Thomas."

Chase took a step closer to me, and it didn't take a genius to figure out what was on his mind. "Is Lucas going to be a problem?" he asked, his eyes scanned mine.

"Lucas has always been a problem." I paused, giving him a knowing look. "Men like that are always the problem, Sheriff."

He let out a tired sigh and looked away for a second. "Let me rephrase the question, then." His blue eyes met mine, years of friendship lingering between us. "Is he going to be a problem for you? Are you in danger?"

Years ago, I would've given him a different answer, because back then, I was a different woman. Now, I was the woman I'd always wanted to be, and I hit him with the truth. "No, I'm not in danger. Lucas has a big ego, sure, but he doesn't have the balls to try and hurt me. Not in Hayden, at least."

"Men with big egos that get bruised can be dangerous, Diana," he noted softly.

Lucas wouldn't hurt me. Not here. Not in my safe space. I had the power here, he didn't.

I ran my hand through my hair and cleared my throat, my body needing to do something other than just stand in one spot, talking about my ex.

Chase, being Chase, saw right through me. "Do you want me to run him out of town?"

I scoffed, a huff of laughter filling the space between us. "Run him out of town?" I parroted, raising a brow. "This isn't the wild west, Chase."

"Tell that to the cowboys," he muttered before moving to the windows to scan the sidewalk and street.

I stiffened, and as Thomas talked quietly to whoever was on the other end of the phone call behind me, my feet moved for me, carrying me until I was standing beside him, both of us staring out into our town.

Now that he'd brought up Hallow Ranch, I decided to cross another thing off my to-do list. "I'm sorry I couldn't have been of more help with Abbie," I murmured after a few moments, feeling him tense beside me. I felt his eyes on me next.

His next question came out as expected, straightforward and void of emotion. "What do you know?"

"Everything," I said softly-gently.

Out of the corner of my eye, Chase bent his head, shame eating at him. I wanted to tell him everything was going to be okay, but the truth was, I didn't know if would be. It wasn't Denver he'd messed up with. It was Beau. "I didn't mean to fuck it all up. Had I known that fucker was Abbie's stalker, I would've handled it."

Goosebumps scattered across my skin then, his dark words rattling me me and my neck nearly snapped with how quickly I looked at him. "Handled it?" I parroted.

Chase's eyes met mine again, but he said nothing. He had the same look Denver got in his eyes when he needed to deal out his own version of justice. A chill swept down my spine, lingering as I reached out, grabbing his hand. "Whatever you're thinking right now, Chase, you need to let it go. It's over and done," I told him.

"I failed them," he shot back. "I failed all of them. After everything Hallow Ranch has done for me and for this town, I—"

"No, you made a mistake," I cut him off. "You're human, and you're allowed to make mistakes."

"Mistakes, in my line of work, Diana, cannot be erased. Or forgiven," Chase stressed, a sadness lacing his voice. The look on his face nearly broke my heart all together.

"Uh, Diana?"

Chase and I both looked over to Thomas, who stood behind the counter with the phone glued to his ear, a panicked look on his face.

"What is it?" I demanded, letting go of my friend's hand.

Thomas looked like he was about to be sick. "You need to head out to Weatherford Ranch. Now."

I braced. "What happened?"

"The boy's father killed Mr. Weatherford's horses-all of them."

Chapter Seven



Mags

Year Seven. Hallow Ranch.

I clicked my tongue and kicked my feet back, urging Midnight to move forward.

As she trotted towards the front of the ranch, my eyes scanned the field, searching for the lost calf. She'd gotten away from the herd last night, and I'd been out searching for her for most of the day. I tugged on the reins, guiding my horse through the entrance of the pasture, the main house in the distance to my left.

"Fucking hell, where is this thing?" I muttered to myself, thankful for the shade of my hat as the sun beat down on me. This had been one of the hottest summers I'd endured since coming to Hallow Ranch, and unfortunately, it was only going to get hotter. I looked to my right, slowly scanning the green grass for an either alive or deceased calf, but something else caught my eye.

Something shiny, cherry red, and not fucking good.

My jaw tightened, the sun gleaming off the windshield, the driver's side door wide open.

That was Diana's new fucking Mercedes.

What the fuck was she going out here?

I looked back to the main house, then back to the car, noticing she wasn't anywhere in sight as the hair on the back of my neck shot up, fear pooling in my gut.

Something was wrong.

"Dammit," I bit off, snapping the reins and kicking my feet.

Within seconds, Midnight was flying across the field, her hooves pounding against the grass as the wind whipped around me. I shouted, snapping the reins again as we got closer.

I looked all around for the woman, not seeing her, and the fear in my gut grew, threatening to take over all rational thoughts. I began to see nothing but red.

Where the hell was she?

"Diana!" I shouted once I was a few yards away, slowing Midnight down.

In the next second, I was off the horse, my eyes scanning the area as I reached for my pistol. The driver's seat was empty—as was the back seat. I pulled out my gun, raising it, my body on alert as something dark within my soul woke. It had been a long time since I'd killed a man.

I usually left that to Kings, but now, I was ready to start back old habits. "Son of a bitch!"

My head snapped up at the sound of her sweet voice, and, without a second thought, I left Midnight where she was, trusting that she wouldn't run off.

"Diana!" I clipped, rounding the front of her car, stopping short at the scene in front of me. Slowly, I lowered my gun, unable to take my eyes off her, my chest aching suddenly.

She was crouched down, barefoot on the gravel, in front of her tire, trying to loosen the nuggets. Her eyes were red-rimmed, trails of her mascara running down her cheeks as she struggled with the wrench, her knuckles snow white. My eyes narrowed, spotting her earbuds in, and my jaw tightened to the point of pain.

No wonder she couldn't fucking hear me shouting for her.

I moved then, taking slow steps and shoving my gun in the back of my jeans. When I was about a foot away, she noticed my presence, jumping back and screaming. The sound echoed across the field, and Midnight, who had taken this time to graze, popped her head up.

"Mr. Mags," Diana breathed, pulling out her earbuds, her chest heaving underneath her pretty yellow blouse.

Fuck, more yellow. More light.

"Just Mags," I damn near growled, closing the distance and holding out my hand. I needed her off the fucking ground before I lost my shit.

She eyed it. "What can I do for you?"

"You can get the fuck up, Diana. That's what you can do."

She flinched at my harsh tone, blinking away some of her tears. Regret coated my tongue, reminding me of the reason why I stayed silent most of the time.

"I have to get this tire changed," she said, her chin raised.

"Women like you don't change tires," I said, and before she could give me sass, I added, "Women like you also don't need to be fucking barefoot in the gravel."

I didn't wait for her to respond, and in a flash, my hands were under her arms, lifting her up. The image of her being on the ground with tears in her eyes would be in my mind for the rest of my life. That wasn't how I wanted to picture her, and it pissed me off that this image would never go away.

"Mr. Mags!" she yelped, her hands going to my shoulders, her fingers grabbing the fabric of my shirt. A deep grunt left me as I shifted, lifting her up bridal style, my arm curled under her legs, the feeling of her bare skin against mine burning me like a brand. I looked down to find the top of her head—not her eyes. I ignored the sting of that as I turned around, walked to the hood, gently placing her on it.

Then and only then did she finally lift her head to look at me, her cheeks tinted red as embarrassment flickered in her hazel eyes. They were more brown today, the moss green within them barely visible. My eyes dropped down, scanning her body and stopping at her knees, the sight of the red indentions in her skin from the rocks nearly sending me over the edge.

I held my breath as I continued my assessment all the way down to her feet.

"Don't move," I ordered, not looking at her face again. If I did that, I would do something stupid. Very stupid. Without another word, I headed back over to Midnight and opened a saddle bag. My horse whinnied but didn't move. As I tucked my water and small first aid kit under my arm, I patted her neck. "Good girl," I murmured.

Once I was back in front of Diana, I set the water and small leather bag beside her hip, ignoring the urge to trail my finger along the swell of it. I shouldn't have touched her.

Lifting her into my arms was the single worst thing a man like me could've ever done.

Now ,I knew what she feels like, knew the warmth of her skin, the weight of her body in my arms. It was the different kind of torture entirely. I could make do with being around her, but now that I'd had her in my arms, there was no other place I wanted her to be.

"What are you doing?" she whispered, watching my hands.

"Cut," I answered gruffly, my throat suddenly thick. Before she could give me more of her sweet voice, I moved again, catching the back of her right ankle in my hand and lifting her leg. She tensed as I rested her foot on my thigh, pouring some of my water over the cut on the right side of her foot. The gray dirt washed away, her skin now shining in the sunlight.

Then, the blood came, oozing from the wound, and every single cell in my body froze.

Blood.

Diana's blood.

It blended with the small stream of water, turning pink as it ran over her skin before dripping onto the ground.

"I didn't see that," she murmured. "I didn't even feel it."

There were so many things I wanted to say. I wanted to scold her, to punish her for hurting herself. I had half a mind to take her over my knee right here, underneath the summer sun, and spank her until she promised to call me the next time she needed help. My chest began to heave then, knowing she didn't have a man to take care of her, to protect her. She was alone, and when shit like this happened, she had to stand in the gravel barefoot, cut her skin on a rock—

"Mags?"

I blinked, and suddenly, everything came back into focus. My hand had slid up, holding underneath her calf, my fingers pressing into the soft flesh. My eyes flicked up, and our gazes collided. Those pretty pink lips parted, her pupils dilated, and her chest—fuck me, her chest was heaving now. Up and down, up and down, up and down, matching the pace of mine.

My mouth watered.

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

"Takin' care of you."

"I don't need you to do that."

I held her eyes as the words spilled from my tongue faster than I could stop them. "Not an option, Firefly."

Her eyes widened, giving me the same reaction she did two years ago at the Christmas party.

Firefly.

That was who she was to me, and that would never change, even on the days I wanted it to.

She said nothing, staring at me as if she was trying to see inside my soul. It was the only place I didn't want her to see. There was nothing good within it—within me. "Sit still," I ordered, pulling my gaze from her eyes and getting back to cleaning her wound. Once that was done, I put a bandage over the wound and set about cleaning the bottoms of her feet.

"What are you doing?" she asked softly.

"Don't need you ruining your shoes," I murmured, keeping my head down.

I pulled the bandana I always carried out of my back pocket, soaked it with water, and gently began wiping the soles of her feet.

She whimpered, stifling a giggle, the sound halting my movements. "What is it?" I demanded, looking back up at her.

"It tickles," she rasped, her foot jerking as I wiped the bottoms of her toes. I tilted my head to the side and swiped the fabric back again. She jerked as another beautiful giggle spilled from her lips. The sound alone was like a melody sent straight down from the heavens above, warming the coldest parts of my heart.

"S-stop that," she begged, the sound going straight to my groin.

I didn't want to stop.

I wanted to spend the rest of my life, an eternity, making her laugh, making her feel pleasure.

I wanted to spend the rest of my life taking care of the woman I could never allow myself to have.

Diana Harper was too good for this world, definitely too fucking good for me. I knew that. From the moment I saw her, I knew I'd been spending the rest of my life longing for beauty I couldn't have. Slowly, I looked back up, studying how the corner of her mouth was lifted slightly, the short breaths coming from her now, and the new glow in her cheeks underneath her tear streaks. "Apologies," I muttered before moving to her other foot. Not even a minute later, I was done, and I gently released her leg, letting it fall. I didn't bother saying anything else as I moved to the passenger side of her car, pulling it open and grabbing her heels from the seat.

"Oh, you don't—"

"Don't you dare move," I commanded. My head snapped up to find her trying to slide off of her hood. My jaw jumped. "Diana, what the hell did I just say?"

Her mouth opened and closed a few times as I rounded the hood. When I reached for her foot to slide her heel on, she whispered, "I can do that myself."

"I'm aware," I said, my voice even, putting on her second shoe. "Does this thing have a donut or a spare?"

She blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"The car, Diana," I clarified, looking out to my horse.

"It should have a full spare—"

My eyes met hers again. "Why were you cryin'?

She flinched but said nothing, fiddling with her earbuds in her hand. I watched her for a moment as she looked everywhere but at me. "Diana," I called, trying to soften my voice as much as I could.

She shook her head, the last few moments forgotten as her bottom lip began to tremble. "You don't have to do this, you know? You can just call Denver to come get me."

"You two got a meeting?" I asked, studying her profile.

Nodding, she wiped the tear that had just escaped with the back of her thumb. "Yeah," she pushed out, trying to blow past her emotions. "I was in a rush and ran over something on the main road." I moved then, going back to the passenger side to grab her bag. "Mr. Mags, what are you—"

I was back in front of her, towering over her, her knees spread for me. "Stop fucking calling me that," I clipped, anger coating my voice.

"I—ahh!"

I had her back in my arms again, her fingers digging into my shoulders. The way her body curved in my arms, pressed against my chest, made me feel like I was on top of the world.

"You don't have to carry me around. I am perfectly capable of walking," she huffed.

Slowly, I turned my head to look down at her, the shadow of my hat covering us both. "You're right where you need to be," I murmured as I approached Midnight.

Sucking in a breath she turned her gaze from to me to Midnight, her skin paling. "I can't—"

"Takin' you up to the main house for your meeting, and I'll get your tire taken care of," I informed her, getting ready to set her on the saddle. In a flash, her arms were locked around my neck tightly, her body tense and shaking with fear.

My spine stiffened and, instinctively, I backed away from my horse.

Diana's voice trembled against my shoulder as she rasped, "Please, don't put me on the horse."

"Never," I promised, reading her fear like an open book.

"I-I'm scared to death of them," she rasped, her voice cracking as her breath hit my neck. "Please, Mags."

Please, Mags.

Please, Mags.

Please, Mags.

Please, Mags.

Please, Mags.

Please, Mags.

Two words. Two little words, and I was ready to give her the world. Two little words and I was ready to be hers. Forever. I looked up to the sky above, trying to hold onto my sanity as her power over me threatened to take it.

I was not allowed to be hers. I could never be hers, and she could never be mine. Even though my mind knew I would never be hers, my body knew different—-my heart knew different.

Hell, my fucking soul knew different.

Focus, Mags.

Focus, Mags.

Focus, Mags.

Focus, Mags.

Focus, Mags.

Focus, Mags.

"Hey," I called softly, turning away from the horse. "Look at me." When she didn't, I tipped my chin down, getting further into in her space as my arms tightened around her, my fingers pressing into the flesh of her leg.

She didn't move, crying softly into my shirt, her shoulders shaking.

God fucking damn—

"Firefly, beautiful, look at me." The words came out as a plea, a forbidden, unforgivable plea.

Diana's head snapped up then, her eyes wet with tears as emotions swirled within them. Our faces were inches apart now, and I could practically taste the mint on her breath.

"Mags," she whispered.

The sound of my name on her lips was a fairytale in and of itself, the happy ending that years ago, was so out of reach, it damn neared insanity. Everything I wanted to say was on the tip of my tongue and the need to claim her mouth, to find out if she tasted at sweet as she sounded—

A truck engine rumbled behind me and my neck twisted to find Kings' shit box coming down the lane, dusting flying behind it. I looked back to down to Diana, taking in her honey golden hair and the blush blooming brightly on her cheeks.

I wanted to damn her for being so beautiful, and yet, I could only damn myself for being in awe the beauty she'd given me.

"I'm sorry I scared you," I said, meaning it. Scaring her was the last thing I meant to do. It was the last thing I ever wanted to do on this Earth. Women like Diana didn't deserved to be scared and preyed on.

They deserved to be worshiped.

"Mags, I—"

"Gonna put you down now, Ms. Harper," I said, clearing my throat and ignoring the flash of pain in her eyes.

Ms. Harper.

I'd never once called her that, but for my own sake, I needed to get her out of my fucking arms and as far away from me as possible. As Kings pulled up, I set her on her feet in the grass gently and backed away, each step more painful than the last. With the greatest amount of effort I could muster, I pulled my eyes away from her, finding Kings' gray ones as he walked towards us. "What happened?" he demanded, his head snapping over to Diana. "You alright?"

I couldn't look at her, so instead, I looked at my boots as she explained her tire.

"Mags."

My head snapped up. "Yeah?"

"Did you find the calf?" Kings pressed.

"Nope. Found your lawyer instead," I answered coolly.

Minutes later, after Denver had taken Diana back up to the ranch and I was halfway done changing her tire, the calf finally showed itself, coming out of trees about a hundred yards away from me on the fence line. I tightened the last bolt on the rim and shook my head.

"Little shit," I muttered.

Chapter Eight



Diana

The eerie sound of my doorbell echoed throughout my quiet house, halting my fingers, forcing them to hover my keyboard as my gaze landed on the dark hallway outside my home office. I held my breath, wondering if it had been my imagination. After the day I'd had, I wouldn't have blamed myself for going slightly insane.

All my client's horses had been killed, their bodies left out in the field and in the barn to rot. Mr. Weatherford and his wife had gone out for lunch, taking the advice I'd given them just the day before.

Do something for you this week. Take your wife out. Do something not related to the ranch that makes you smile.

The couple got dressed up for the occasion, heading into their small town for an early steak dinner, and while they were gone, all their horses were shamelessly killed. After Thomas received the call, I'd raced out to Weatherford ranch, trying to hold in my tears. Despite my deep fear of horses, I'd always admired their beauty from afar. They were magnificent creatures and deserved to be treated with tender care and respect. I'd spent the rest of the afternoon consoling the old rancher and his wife while the authorities and livestock officers conducted their investigation.

After questioning, the police and I were on the same page, suspecting revenge. By the time I left Weatherford ranch, the sun had begun to set, and the couple who'd sued my client were in custody. I was halfway home when Mrs. Weatherford called to tell me the little boy confessed, turning his parents in. They'd left him in the car while they went on their horse killing spree. I don't think I'd ever been so ashamed of humans in my life. Then again, I'd doubted the boy's parents possessed even an ounce of humanity after what they did.

A powerful knock echoed through my house, snapping me back to the present.

Alright, it wasn't my imagination.

"What the hell?" I whispered, checking my watch. It was nearly midnight.

I looked back up into the darkened hallway, a chill cascading down my back. Suddenly, I regretted putting on my dark purple silk nightie and matching robe. I'd only come into the office to check an email, but ended up getting sucked into work. I'd been in this chair for three dang hours.

Blindly, I reached for my mouse and looked back at my desktop, opening my security system and checking the front camera feed. I didn't have a doorbell camera; because this house was nearly fifty years old, and I wanted to preserve a bit of its history as I gutted out the old. So I'd left the antique, possessed-looking doorbell, only to discover that it sounded like something out of a horror movie two months later when the pizza delivery person showed up.

Now, years later, I had yet to change that dang doorbell, but I managed to install a security camera in the top right corner of the porch. My eyes narrowed as the camera feed finished loading to reveal a man.

Not just any man.

Lucas.

"Jesus Christ," I murmured, pulling out my cell phone, ready to call the police.

The doorbell rang again, and I found myself hesitating. If I called the police, then they would call Chase. Chase being Chase, he would of course call Denver. Lucas showing up at my office in the middle of the day was one thing, but Lucas showing up at my house in the middle of the night was something else entirely. I wished him having my address was a concern, but unfortunately, if anything that he spouted out of his mouth today was true, he received it from my parents.

I knew one thing for sure: if Chase called Denver, Denver would end up killing a man tonight on my behalf. I didn't want that, even though said man was a bigoted bastard.

With a quiet sigh, I slipped my phone into my robe, rose from my chair, and padded to the safe in the corner. The doorbell rang again for a third time, the sound alone enough to fuel my nightmares, as I put in the nine digit code. The safe opened with a soft click, and I grabbed my pistol—just in case.

As I walked down the hallway, the moonlight seeping in from the windows, I felt another chill sweep down my spine. My body was telling me to stop, warning of me of the possible danger, but I was too irritated to listen. Lucas barging back into my life was the last thing I needed.

I'd built a life for myself here.

I'd escaped the mold my parents tried to force me into.

I was happy—well, as happy as a person could be, anyway.

My eyes were locked in on the door; I knew from past experiences that Lucas was either one of two things: roaring drunk, which meant he would be sweet, almost loving or high as a kite. If he was drunk, he would beg for another chance, apologize for all the things he'd done to hurt me and, depending upon how much he'd drank, cry.

If he was drunk, I could send him away easily.

If he was high, however, that would be difficult, to say the least.

It wasn't until I was halfway through law school I discovered my high school sweetheart was an addict and I'd never forget the night I'd found him shooting up between his toes in my bathroom. The drugs, a mix of everything you could think of, made him angry—more so than normal. So, if he was, in fact, higher than a kite on the other side of my front door, I would have to be on my toes.

"Just send him away and be done with it," I whispered.

The doorbell rang once more as I reached the door. I had my gun in one hand as I wrapped my fingers around the door knob with the other. I held my breath and looked through the peephole. Lucas leaned against the brick wall, his head hanging, his body swaying slightly.

I stared at him for sometime.

Was he asleep?

I shook my head, already imagining the mess I would have to deal with in the morning.

Why me?

Suddenly, his head shot up, and he tried to straighten. "Diana," he called, his voice cracking. "Babe, open the door. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I was dick. I'm sorry I haven't been the man you deserve, but I'm willing to change that. I've spent the last ten years without you, babe. I fucking need you."

I let go of the breath, a small sense of relief settling on my shoulders, washing down my back like a waterfall.

He was drunk. Thank God.

"What do you want, Lucas?" I asked through the door, watching through the peephole.

His head snapped up, revealing red-rimmed eyes and a busted lip. Whatever bar he'd gone to must not have treated him well. That was the thing about my ex: he was a shit talker. He thought himself to be the alpha in whatever room he walked into.

"He must have pissed off a cowboy," I muttered under my breath. He looked like shit.

"Babe, let me in," he begged as his throat bobbed.

Here we go.

"You showing up on my front door at this hour isn't appropriate, Lucas," I said matter-of-factly through the door. "You need to back to the hotel."

Actually, he needed to go back across the damn country and stay there.

He braced his hand on the door, hanging his head again as he groaned my name.

I rolled my eyes, slightly frustrated that a younger version of me fell for this same act countless times in the past. "If you don't leave, I'll be forced to call the police," I warned.

He lifted his head again, looking into the peephole now, and even though he looked like he was stuck in a fishbowl, his words were damning. "I know about the job application."

My chest deflated, shock slamming into me like a runaway train, knocking me back. Chills spread across my body, leaving a trail of goosebumps as my mind began to race. I looked to the ground, shoving a hand in my hair as my gun hung at my side, the weight of it reminding me of the power it held.

How in the heck did he know about that?

"Diana, you can pretend in front of your little friends, but you can't pretend in front of me," he continued, sounding more sober than before. "You want to come home. It was just a matter of time."

"How do you know about the application?" I demanded, my voice rising with each word.

"Got a buddy who works at the school, babe. He saw your name in the system and told me," he explained, as if that didn't breach countless privacy laws.

I said nothing, wondering why he didn't say anything beforehand. Why wait until midnight and when he was drunk—-

I felt my mouth flatten as the realization hit me.

This had been his plan all along. He wanted to wait for me to be alone so he could try and sweet talk me, and after the fucking day I'd had, my finger was itching to pull the trigger. Just one good bullet in his kneecap would satisfy me; maybe that would teach him to stay the hell out of my life.

Last Christmas, I'd applied for a summer teaching position at Yale. Teaching for a semester here and there in Denver gave me the confidence I needed to apply to Yale. The university wouldn't need me until the year after next, giving me time to teach one more semester in Denver and get my firm prepared for my absence.

The hard truth was, I knew I couldn't do this forever, and I'd gotten this wild teaching idea from Valerie during one of our Wine Wednesdays. When I retired, there would have to be someone else to defend the ranches, big or small. After submitting the application to Yale, I knew it would be a long shot, and since I hadn't heard anything...

I'd honestly left that dream on the back burner.

"Diana, open the door so we can talk," Lucas demanded, his voice donning a sharper edge now.

A lump formed in my throat, an uneasy feeling looming over me. My privacy had been invaded. He knew about my plans. I thought he would've moved on by now. What we had took place a lifetime ago.

"Who is your friend?" I inquired, stepping closer to the door again, my fingers flexing on the gun by my thigh.

"What?"

I let out a deep breath. "Your friend who works at Yale. Who is he?" "Oh, you know him, babe. Mikey. You know, from school." *Mikey*. I looked up the ceiling, trying to put a face to the name. High school was, again, a lifetime ago, and with no one from it in my current life, it was easy to forget the people I'd spent four plus years with in classrooms. Unfortunately, I hadn't forgotten this one.

Mikey Grant.

He played football with Lucas and was a jackass.

"What does he do at Yale?" I asked, praying he was drunk enough to answer.

"Let me inside, and I'll tell you all about it. This is big, Diana," he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice—the sense of victory. He thought he had me. "This is huge, babe. I knew you would always come back to me."

My eyes rolled before I could stop them, and I tipped my head to the ceiling once more. I needed the universe to give me a dang break, just a small one. This was the second time within twenty-four hours I'd had to listen to this crap. "Lucas, it's late—"

"—let me in, Diana," he repeated, jiggling the doorknob.

I looked through the peephole again, my stomach dropping to the floor. After a few moments, he slammed his fist against it, letting out a growl of frustration, cursing my name. His head shot up then and slightly tilted to the side, giving me a closer look at his eyes.

What hit me next felt like a freight train, and no amount of healing and growth would let me escape it.

Fear coiled around my neck, the memory of him choking me the last time I had to deal with him like this rushing to the surface. I could feel his fingers around my neck, squeezing and cutting off my air as he pinned me to the floor of my apartment, yelling at down at me.

He wasn't just drunk.

"Shit," I breathed, my resolution long tarnished.

My mouth went dry as he ticked his head to the other side and snarled, "Diana! Let me in!"

I jumped back as he continued to bang on the door, shouting and jiggling the knob. My heart rate began to climb, my hand trembling as I lifted my phone and called Chase.

The call went straight to voicemail.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.

"Diana!" Lucas roared.

I pulled the phone away from my face and pulled up Denver's contact, my hand shaking so badly, I thought I was going to drop the damn thing.

Hallow Ranch was just ten minutes from my house, and knowing Denver, he'd be here in five.

"Please don't kill him, Den," I whispered as I dialed his number. As the phone rang, I raised my gun to the door, yelping as Lucas banged it hard.

He was trying to kick the door down.

"Pick up, pick up," I chanted underneath my breath, raising my finger to the trigger.

On the fourth ring, someone answered, a jagged, deep voice filling my ear.

"Diana."

Warmth slid down my back, chasing away the chill, and the pressure of Lucas' phantom fingers around my neck faded away.

"M-Mags," I breathed out. Where the hell was Denver?

"What's wrong?" he clipped.

"Where's Denver?" I whispered as my eyes dropped to the doorknob, watching it jerk. Thankfully, Lucas was too drunk to try and get in any other way, but I wouldn't put it past him.

"At the house. Left his phone in the barn," Mags answered before his voice changed. "What. Is. Wrong?"

"I need to speak to Denver, please," I begged, panting. Mags couldn't help me, no matter how much I wanted him to. The last thing he would do was leave Hallow Ranch to come for me. "Please."

I heard movement in the background. "Only gonna ask you this one time, Firefly," he growled, "and you better fucking answer me. Are you in danger?"

Firefly.

God, that nickname would end up being the death of me, and I knew I would never get to understand the meaning behind it. He'd only called me that a handful of times over the last few years, but those moments were some of my most cherished memories.

"God, I hope not," I replied, answering him without thinking. The banging stopped, and I moved over to the security panel, checking the cameras. He was still on the porch, against the door now, his chest heaving as he tilted his head back, eyes closed.

Mags' next words were filled with darkness, chilling every inch of my soul. "Where are you?"

"At my house," I pushed out on a quiet breath, slowly making my way back to the door.

"Gonna need more than that, Diana," Mags pushed. In the background, I heard more movement, followed by the slam of a door. *A truck door?* "What's going on?"

"Lucas," I rasped, watching my ex's head lull back and forth on the camera feed.

There was a brief moment of silence. "Your ex." Heat climbed up my neck, spreading over my face. "Yes." "Where is he?"

"He was trying to get into the house. He's drunk and high on something." There was no reply.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, Mags' silence unsettling me.

"You know, it's probably okay now. He stopped banging on the door and shouting. I think he's about to pass out, actually," I rambled, my words coming out fast but not fast enough for my brain. "I tried calling Chase, but it went straight to voicemail, and I figured calling Denver would be the next best thing"

More silence.

"I just—Lucas isn't the gentlest when he's high. When he's drunk, I can usually handle him," I blurted, laughing slightly. "Hell, in law school, I was either studying or dealing with his antics. I guess I'm kind of a professional."

Lucas' upper body twisted then, and he slowly raised his fist, plopping it against the door. "Babe, please," he called, doing the best he could to make his voice sound sweet again. "Please, open the door."

"Please get Denver, Mags," I pleaded. "I just—I need someone to take Lucas back into town."

Nothing. I pulled the phone away from my face to see if the call had ended.

It hadn't.

A lump grew in my throat as I hoped Mags muted his end to go tell Denver.

"Its going to be okay," I whispered to myself. "It's going to be okay, Diana."

I put the phone back against my ear and called out for the cowboy I couldn't have. "Mags?"

Nothing. Complete and utter silence. I closed my eyes and leaned my forehead against the wall, knowing I was going to be okay.

The Hallow Ranch cowboys protected their own.

Minutes later, the sound of an engine roared outside, and my head snapped towards the door, seeing a flash of headlights in the window above it. I opened my mouth to speak, but the phone call ended. I pulled up the live feed from the driveway to find Denver's red truck, and my shoulders sagged with relief.

Mags had gone to Denver.

The driver's side door popped open, and a dark figure emerged, a black cowboy hat on his head. I wanted to smile, but the disappointment inside my heart wouldn't let me. I wished it would've had been Mags. I couldn't count the number of times I'd dreamed of seeing him outside Hallow Ranch, walking through town, having a meal at the diner or getting a few groceries from the store. Hell, I'd even imagined him sitting at the bar, having a beer with the twins whenever they came into town.

But all of that was just a dream, a silly little dream formed inside my head.

Mags never left Hallow Ranch. He'd been there for over a decade now.

The figured prowled by the garage door, following the front path to my porch. When he rounded the corner, I switched to the porch feed and—

That wasn't Denver.

That.

Wasn't.

Denver.

My chest began to heave, my mouth falling open at the sight of Mags rushing up to Lucas. Lucas looked over his shoulder just in time to see Mags grab him. My eyes widened at Mags lifted my ex off the ground, twisted, and tossed him off the porch like he was a bag of garbage.

I moved then, running to the door, unhooking the chain and lock before yanking it open. Mags' back was to me, his shoulders rising and falling with each powerful breath, the porch light above him highlighting the muscles of his back underneath his black T-shirt.

"Mags," I rasped, ignoring Lucas groaning on the ground.

Mags was here.

At my house.

Off Hallow Ranch.

The dark cowboy twisted his neck, the shadow of his hat hiding his face, but I could feel his eyes, the heat in them—the anger. "Get back inside," he ordered, his voice cold.

I looked down to Lucas. "But—"

"Don't make me fucking carry you in there, Diana," Mags growled.

I opened my mouth but closed it when my cell started ringing. As I lifted it to my ear, Mags snatched it out of my hand.

"Bowen, you got one minute to get your ass to Diana's house, or I'm adding more ashes to Denver's fucking mountain," the cowboy threatened, turning to face me fully now.

He was going to kill Lucas.

I stepped forward, shaking my head. "No, please-"

Suddenly, my back was against the house, my gun pulled from my grasp, my hands pinned above my head, his single one holding my wrists together in a tight grip. The heat of his touch coursed through my body, warming me in a way I'd never felt before. The slight chill of the summer night couldn't diminish it. Hell, I was half certain the harsh Colorado winter couldn't snuff out the heat of him, his gaze, his touch. He was nothing but fire, a fire I wanted to be consumed by. My nipples pebbled underneath the silk of my nightie. The right part of my robe had fallen off my shoulder at some point, exposing the lace and thin strap of my gown.

Time stopped and all I could see, all I could feel, was him, my cowboy.

I whispered his name as if it were a prayer, my chest heaving.

In ten years, my favorite touches from him were the two times his fingers gripped my chin, holding me hostage as his gaze pierced my soul. Both of those times, I wanted him to kiss me. Both of those times, I'd silently begged him to give into this—whatever this pull was between us. Both of those times, I'd hoped it wasn't one sided.

Loving someone who didn't love you back was a version of hell I never thought I'd ever have to be in.

Yet, here I was, trapped in this endless torture for over a decade with no idea how to escape it.

I stopped breathing as he leaned closer to me, keeping his body angled away from mine. When his eyes came into view, I saw nothing but anger, both of us hidden underneath the shadow of his hat now.

"If you're going to carry a gun, then learn how to fucking use it," he pushed out through his teeth, his fingers tightening around my wrists as he brought up his other hand, both my gun and phone in his grip. "Disarming you was the easiest thing I've ever done, Diana." My eyes collided with his again, my lips parting.

His nostrils flared as his jaw jumped underneath his trimmed beard. It wasn't trimmed the last time I saw it. It had been wild, untamed, just like him. "If you're going to carry a gun, then make sure no one can take it from you. You got me?"

I blinked, unable to form words.

"Diana," he growled.

"You're h-here," I stammered, my voice cracking with disbelief. "Y-you came." His features softened then, his eyes flashing, the realization hitting him too. My next words were thick, filled with an emotion I'd tried to keep bottled up for years. "You're off Hallow Ranch."

Silently, he released my hands, and my arms fell, my robe fully falling from my shoulders, bunching at my waist. The cowboy sighed through his nose as he caught my chin in his fingers, his eyes scanning my face.

"You're here," I repeated, doing everything in my power to not wrap my arms around his neck and bury my face in his chest. Tears filled my eyes, my bottom lip trembling as I shook my head. "You—you came for me."

Mags left Hallow Ranch for me.

He came for me.

"Didn't like that fear in your voice, baby," he murmured.

Baby.

My heart cried out, aching for him. "You're really here," I croaked.

A muscle jumped in his cheek, his hand shifting to cup my face, his thumb hooking underneath my jaw. "Diana." His voice was soft, making me weak in the knees.

It hadn't been one sided. He felt it too. Slowly, I put my hands on his chest, holding his eyes. Lucas and all the other crappy parts of my day were long forgotten. "Mags," I whispered, my eyes dropping to his lips.

He said nothing, but like mine, his heart raced too.

This was it.

This was finally it.

The tears in my eyes spilled over, rolling down my cheeks. In the back of my mind, the small voice of doubt was shouting, warning me this was all just a dream.

It was too good to be true, something out of a fairytale or a heartpounding fictional romance.

Police sirens wailed in the distance, and that small voice grew silent, fading back into the shadows, where loneliness and heartbreak intertwined. No, this wasn't a dream. It was reality, and the moment ended as Mags dropped his hand, its warmth going with it. I could feel my heart splitting into two as he stepped away, and the absence of his touch nearly shattered me completely.

Why was he stepping away? Why couldn't he just give into this? Why couldn't he fall with me?

His eyes held mine as flashes of blue and red illuminated both of us, submerging us in the truth I wasn't ready to face: Mags would never be mine, and I would never be his.

Chapter Nine



Diana

"Hey, who the fuck are you?" Lucas asked the cowboy, sitting up in the grass.

He was doing everything in his power to seem intimidating, including puffing out his chest and curling his upper lip into a snarl. If any other man I knew pulled that move, they might've succeeded in trying to be intimidating but watching Lucas do it was just another reminder of how pathetic he was. I wasted years of my life on him, letting him abuse me.

"Lucas, I told you to stay the hell out of my life," I shot out, looking back at Mags, trying to burn the image of him standing in front of my house in the moonlight into my brain.

He was here.

He came for me.

My heart drummed, the sound filling my ears as Mags' dark eyes slowly found their way back to me. Heat bloomed in my cheeks, and my knees nearly gave out. Without a word, he raised my gun at Lucas as Chase's cruiser pulled into the driveway, sirens echoing in the night. All three of us were bathed in red and blue lights then, reminding me this wasn't a dream.

I just hoped it wouldn't become a nightmare.

"Do youuu fucking know this guyyy, Diana?" Lucas blubbered. My eyes snapped over to him.

"Don't you *fucking* look at him again."

My eyes landed on Mags again, his dark command spreading over every inch of my skin before seeping into my bloodstream. His nostrils flared as his wide chest expanded with each breath he took. He stood before me like Death, waiting to avenge me.

"Don't kill him," I whispered, pleading. I knew Lucas didn't deserve mercy, and yet, my soul still wanted to show him some. Mags was here, protecting me in a way I'd always craved, but I couldn't let him kill Lucas.

"She caaan look at meee ifff---"

"Speak again, I shoot you," Mags clipped coldly, the sharpness of his tongue causing me to flinch.

The cowboy pulled his eyes from me to look at my ex, his face unreadable.

Clearly, he wasn't going to listen to me, and me begging didn't affect him in the slightest.

My eyes wanted to followed his gaze, but I didn't, keeping my gaze on him and only him, just like he ordered. Out of the corner of my eye, I knew Lucas was glaring at Mags with a hatred so potent, I could taste it on my tongue, sour and vile.

"What the *fuck* is going on here?"

A car door shut as Chase's question hung in the air, snapping me out of it. I looked down and discovered the state I was in. Embarrassment slammed into me, seeing my peaked nipples and the blush spreading across my chest. It didn't take much for my body to react to Mags—it was borderline pathetic.

No, it was pathetic. Get a damn grip, Diana.

I shuddered and fixed my robe, pulling it back over my shoulders and tying it tight before wrapping my arms around myself. The chill was back, and I was desperate to have Mags' warmth surrounding me again. I was ready to drown in it. Chase appeared then, crossing the yard as his eyes came to me. He was dress in jeans, boots, and a wrinkled white T-shirt, his hair a mess. His tired eyes scanned over me, checking for injuries.

He'd been asleep.

A small twinge of guilt hit me then, hating that not only had Lucas disrupted my life, but those I cared about.

"Diana, are you alright?" he asked firmly, glancing at Lucas and Mags.

I rubbed my upper arms and lied. "Yes, I'm alright."

"He hurt you?" the Sheriff pressed.

Pressing my lips together, I shook my head.

Chase looked over to Mags, raising a brow. He wasn't fazed in the slightest to see Mags off Hallow Ranch, and I was beginning to wonder if this was actually the first time he'd stepped off the property line of his sanctuary.

"Wanna put that gun down?" Chase asked the cowboy, his tone flat.

"No."

Oh, Lord.

The Sheriff sighed, rubbing a hand over his head, muttering something I couldn't make out. "I'm asking you to put the gun down, Mags," he said, gesturing to the weapon.

It was in that moment I made the mistake of looking at the cowboy, his dark eyes already on me. I held my breath, waiting, praying he would do what the sheriff asked and not make this more complicated. Nothing was said between us as he continued to hold my gaze for a moment.

Finally, giving his attention to Chase. "And I'm telling you no," Mags replied gruffly. *Crap. Double crap.* "Your problem isn't with me, Sheriff. It's with the piece of shit in Diana's yard."

Lucas moved out of the corner of my eye, and before I could stop myself, I looked at him, watching him make a poor attempt to stand as he began shouting at Mags. As expected, it wasn't intimidating in the slightest, due to the fact that half those words were slurred. "You t-the ffffuckkingg ppiecce of ssshit—"

Mags pulled the trigger. The sound of the gunshot cut through the air, and I covered my ears, squeezing my eyes shut as a short scream escaped me.

"What the fuck was that?" Chase bellowed.

I opened my eyes, fully expecting to find Lucas bleeding out in my grass, but instead, I found him on the ground, in the fetal position, his hands covering his head, his shoulders moving harshly in time with his panicked breaths.

Did he just—

My head snapped over to Mags. "I asked you not to hurt him," I snapped.

"And I didn't, Diana" he countered smoothly, turning his head towards me. "Just fucking shut him up."

"You could've killed him," I argued, throwing my hand out and ignoring the way he made me feel when he said my name.

His eyes flashed, and all at once, I was pinned in place by the heat of his gaze as they dropped down to my chest and over my belly before scanning the length of my bare legs. Every inch of me felt like I was on fire, the flames swallowing me whole, scorching every inch of skin. Time, and everything around us, remained frozen as he trailed his gaze back up the length of my body. When those dark eyes landed back on mine, it felt like we were the only two people on the planet, both of us burning together.

His next words were low, laced with malice, chasing away the heat his gaze left me. "If I wanted to kill him, Diana, he would've been dead before you made it to the door."

Suddenly, the fire that surrounded me was gone, and a dark chill slithered down my spine, down my legs, swirling around my feet before slithering back up my front. In the back of my mind, a memory popped up, and Denver's voice echoed in my mind.

Mags is Mags, Diana. He's rough around the edges, but know this; that man would never lie. Not to you. Not to me. Mags may be many things, but the last thing he would ever be is a liar. His word is all he has.

"For fuck's sake, Mags," Chase groaned. "Don't say shit like that in front of me." Mags turned his head then, looking at Chase but not saying a word. The Sheriff was by Lucas then, gun in hand, nudging my ex with his boot. "Sit up."

"He fucking shot me!" Lucas shouted, pointing at Mags.

"Where?" Chase pressed, sounding tired.

Lucas slowly straightened and sat up again, patting his chest, abdomen, and legs, searching for the wound.

"Didn't shoot you. Shot the grass an inch from your foot," Mags informed him simply, tipping his hat to the grass.

Lucas gaped at him, blubbering out a string of words that even I, after all the times I'd seen him under the influence, couldn't make out.

Slowly, Mags stepped down from the porch, his demeanor shifting. "That's the only form of mercy I'll ever give you, you son of bitch," he vowed, his voice low. "You speak to Diana, bother Diana, or try to *touch* Diana again, I'll send you back to the hell you crawled your way out of."

My eyes swung to Chase as my lips parted on a gasp, hoping to find a voice of reason. His blue eyes told me all I needed to know. He was on Mags' side with this one, meaning he would let the cowboy kill my ex and most likely help him burn his body.

I mouthed "please," to my friend, knowing he would show mercy if asked. That was just the kind of man Chase was.

With a sigh, Chase bent down and slapped some handcuffs on Lucas who didn't put up much of a fight, instead staring up at Mags in fear.

"Get up," Chase ordered, helping him get to his feet as my eyes remained on the grass, wondering if this was all some twisted dream.

"Diana," Lucas pleaded.

"What the fuck did I just say?" Mags clipped, loading my gun again. My eyes snapped up just in time to see Chase shaking his head at the cowboy, jerking Lucas in the opposite direction. Once he was in Chase's cruiser, I saw Mags finally lower the weapon.

Nothing was said as I moved back to my porch. Not even a minute later, the Sheriff was back.

"Alright," he sighed, rolling his neck and gesturing to me. "What happened?"

"Are you taking a statement, or are you going to be a witness to murder tonight, Sheriff?" I asked calmly, raising my chin. Out of the corner of my eye, Mags moved, heading back to me.

Chase ran a hand through his hair before pinning me with a look. "Don't fucking start."

"Where are you taking him?" I demanded.

A muscle in his cheek jumped as he said, "To the fucking station."

"Will he be there in the morning?" I pressed, wrapping my arms around myself.

"If I had it my way, I would've sent him out of town this afternoon," Chase shot back.

"That doesn't answer my question."

"And you haven't given me a damn statement, Diana."

I opened my mouth to speak but stopped short when a hand wrapped around the back of my neck, the rough pads of Mags' fingers imprinting themselves on my skin.

"You don't need a statement, Bowen. Just get that piece of shit out of here," Mags clipped, his body heat near me once more. Chase's eyes lingered on Mags' arm for a moment before his blues shifted to me. "You sure you're alright?" he asked softly, his attitude fading now.

No, I was that furthest thing from alright, but I couldn't let him or anyone else see. I nodded and lied again. "I'm alright, Chase."

He returned the nod before taking a step closer, and Mag's fingers tightened on the back of my neck.

"I'm sorry I didn't answer when you called," Chase murmured, studying my face. "I was passed out, and I guess I thought it was my alarm."

The tension in my shoulders dissipated. "I'm sorry for causing you any trouble," I replied. "You, more than anyone in this town, need your sleep."

His jaw tightened, and he looked over his shoulder. "You didn't cause anything." When he looked back to me, he muttered, "I should've arrested him earlier today."

"I told you not to," I reminded him.

"I shouldn't have listened to you."

A smile teased at the corner of my mouth. "You rarely do."

"I did today."

I gave him a half smile.

"Next time your past storms into your life, I'll be there to drag it right back out," he vowed.

My eyes flicked over to the cruiser. "I don't think anyone else from my past is going to come out here," I mumbled, knowing my parents didn't have the guts.

They refused to see how far I'd come, how well I was doing.

Chase's mouth flattened, his brows furrowing. I knew he was holding his tongue because of the cowboy standing beside me. Mags didn't know anything about me, really. Yes, he knew about Lucas, and a few years ago, he'd overheard a conversation between my mother and me. It wasn't a good one. In fact, it was the most verbally abusive conversation I'd ever had with her.

Other than that, I was almost a stranger to the cowboy, just like he was to me.

After a few beats of silence, Chase looked to Mags, who stood behind me, the heat of his body radiating into my back. "You good?" he prompted.

The cowboy's words were straight and to the point. "Be better if you got that fucker out of my sight."

Chase grumbled something else under his breath before looking back to me. "See you tomorrow, Diana."

"See you, Chase."

As I watched Chase walk away, I wondered where my phone and gun were, but I didn't get the chance to ask until the police cruiser was backing out of the driveway.

"Where's my phone and gun?" I asked, doing my best to not react to Mags' touch as his grip loosened and his thumb began stroking the side of my neck.

"With me."

I tried not to let those two words seep into my soul as I rasped, "May I have them back, please?"

"You gonna be stupid like that again?"

Excuse me?

I jerked and tried to step out of his hold, but his grip tightened once more.

In a flash, he banded his arm around my front, tight around my midsection, and yanked me back against him. I gasped softly, our bodies flushed now, my hands instinctively going to his strong forearm, my fingers

curling around the corded muscles. My chest began to heave, and I felt his facial hair brush against the shell of my ear as the hand at the back of my neck snaked around to the front, holding me in place.

Gentle but firm.

"When a man like that shows up at your door and tries to get into your house, you shoot him," he growled, his breath sliding across my skin. "When a man like *me* shows up and wants to shoot him, *you fuckin' let me*."

My chest collapsed.

"When a man like *me* tells you not to look at a piece of shit like your ex, *you fuckin' obey.*"

"I—"

"Quiet."

His arm shifted back then, allowing him to splay his hand over my soft stomach, his fingers pressing in. He turned his head, trailing his nose across my hair, inhaling deeply. My eyes fluttered closed, my body doing everything it could to savor this moment, the feel of him against me, his hard chest against my back, his hand around my neck, his fingers against my pulse.

I hated how well we fit together, how perfect he felt against me, because I knew, down to the bottom of my lonely soul, I knew when he let me go, my heart would break all over again.

"When a man like me wants to kill for you, Firefly, you fuckin' let him," he murmured, the jagged edges of his voice tearing me apart. "Do you hear me?"

I sucked in a breath as he forced my head back, letting it fall onto his shoulder. His mouth was against my ear again, his breath harsh against it. "Answer me," he ordered, his fingers flexing on my throat.

I nodded, unable to say anything else, keeping my hands on him arm. He pressed into my stomach, forcing the rest of my body to press harder against him. I felt it then, his desire.

A sound left me then, weak and uncontrollable, as I shifted my hips, moving my ass against his hardness slightly. He said nothing as he forced my head to the side, trailing the tip of his nose up and down the column of my neck, the brim of his hat brushing against my forehead.

"Kill for you, beautiful," he rumbled, his lips against my neck now. "In a heartbeat."

"Mags." His name came out as a plea, the same plea I chanted in the dark hours of the night alone in my bed, when the only thing I had was my touch.

Now, he was here-touching me.

He was holding me.

"You drive me mad, Diana Harper," he whispered, pressing his lips against my neck.

Mags just kissed me.

My body hummed, my nipples hard, aching to be touched. The inside of my thighs were slick, my panties having been soaked the moment I realized he was here. I lifted my hand, ready to wrap it around the back of his neck, but in a flash, his arm around my middle was gone. He caught my hand in the air and slowly removed his other from my neck.

Wait—what?

I stood there, frozen, as he moved to my front, his dark gaze colliding with mine. Before I could utter a single syllable, he lifted my arm and pressed his lips to the inside of my wrist, the moonlight bright behind him. "Get inside," he commanded gently against my skin.

"W-what?" I whispered in confusion.

His dark eyes flicked up as he pulled his lips away, releasing me. The sting of his kiss seeped into my blood, forever tainting it as my arm fell. In an effort to stop the knife from twisting further, I put both of my hands on my stomach, pressing in.

"What are you doing?" I rasped, my voice cracking.

Was he—was he leaving?

His harsh features were impossibly soft now, and his eyes—God, his eyes were filled with agony. His next words came out on a jagged, heartbreaking whisper. "Diana, I need you to go inside now."

I peeled my eyes from him and looked down, the pain of his rejection hitting me, the knife twisting. As I tried to comprehend was just happened, my heart cried out, wanting another glimpse of what could be. The dream of us was ripped from my hands before I could get a taste.

"This was never going happen between us, was it?" I asked, my voice barely audible as an owl hooted in the distance.

I waited, God, I *waited*, holding onto the hope he would hook his fingers underneath my chin and take it all back. The cowboy didn't make a sound, didn't move an inch, but I could feel his eyes on me, watching me bleed out in front of him. I wrapped my arms around myself again, feeling more exposed than I should've.

When I finally mustered up the courage to look at him, he gave me an answer.

"No."

Pressing my lips together, I nodded as the knife sank deeper into my chest. "Right." I tried to swallow the shard of glass in my throat before I

asked, "May have my phone and gun back please?"

His face was unreadable as he pulled out my things. He handed me my phone first, and then, he unloaded the gun as he held my eyes. He handed me the magazine first, then the gun. Tears fell down my cheeks as I took him in, the beauty of him, darkness and all.

"Do you feel it too?" I whispered, my full hands hanging down my sides now. I took a step towards him, silently daring him to answer.

His dark eyes flashed. "Diana—"

"Answer the question," I ordered. His jaw tightened, but his eyes remained the same: warm and full of agony. More tears formed and fell, soaking my skin, trailing down my neck and over my collarbone. My next question came out desperate, pathetic, and broken. "Do. You. Feel. It?"

Nothing.

A forced laugh left me then, the sound bouncing off the porch walls. "So never, not once in the last *decade*, did you feel it?" I pressed, shaking my head in disbelief. This wasn't one-sided, it couldn't be. Not after the way he held me, caressed me. "The least you could do is give me the truth," I challenged after another round of silence from him. "What about when you found me on the porch on Christmas years ago? Or when my tire popped and you found me?"

"Diana—"

"You have no idea," I pushed out as a single tear landed on my cheek, "how badly I wanted to kiss you that day."

He stiffened, his eyes growing darker than I'd ever seen them.

"Every time my life tries to fall apart, you're somehow always there to make sure it doesn't," I croaked. "I see the way you look at me, Mags. I'm not a fool." My words settled, and I looked away from him with a huffed laugh. "God, maybe I am a fool." I reached up and brushed the tear off my face. "Nothing but a fool who thought I could have a man like you."

"Go inside, Diana."

My spine snapped straight, my mind desperately trying to remind me of the woman I was. My heart, damn her, wanted to fight—to do anything to get the truth of out of him, to wash away his denial. "Answer me this, Mags," I ordered, my voice wavering. "Do you want me?"

He gave me nothing, and suddenly, I was reminded of how foolish it all was.

Love.

Maybe it was never in the cards for me. Maybe all my life was meant to be was what I currently was: a successful lawyer and business woman. While building the life I had for the last decade, I'd also spent the better half of it silently loving the man before me, the broken cowboy. I didn't want to fall in love with him, and logically, it didn't make sense. We barely spoke to one another, barely saw each other, and I knew nothing about him.

Yet, whenever I saw him, my breath caught. Whenever he spoke to me, his voice was like a song I never wanted to forget, and on the rare occasion when he would touch me, I would melt.

No other man on this planet had that power over me.

I dropped my head, shaking it as I released a weak sigh. Suddenly, the voice inside my head wasn't mine, but Lucas'.

What the hell were you thinking, Diana?

It was all in your head.

No one, not even the lonely cowboy, wants you.

I couldn't look up at Mags again, his beauty—his darkness—was too much.

"Goodnight, Mags," I whispered, stepping back into my home. "Thank you for protecting me."

And destroying me, all within a matter of minutes.

I quietly shut and locked the door before heading down the hallway to my office. After putting away my gun, I got back to work, keeping my eyes on my computer screen.

It wasn't until the next morning, when I checked the camera feeds while sipping my coffee, that I discovered Mags didn't leave for three more hours. After I'd shut the door, he stared at it for a long time before turning and taking a seat on the porch step.

He'd lit a cigarette, taking a drag from it as he stared up at the moon. When the smoke released, it lingered around him, not wanting to leave. After he finished, he bent his head, staying that way for hours.

Then, he was gone.

Chapter Ten



Mags

Year Ten. Hallow Ranch.

The smell of smoke still lingered in the air, ashes spread over the ground, covering the green pastures in soot. Valerie was still in the hospital, and Kings...Fuck me, Kings was about to crumble. It had been two days since Tim Moonie's men kidnapped Valerie, left her on the mountain, and set it on fire.

We nearly lost her—Kings barely got to her in time.

I pulled my gaze from the scorched side of the mountain, shoving back my own nightmares of the past, and adjusted my hold on Midnight's reins as Beau's called my name. Looking back over my shoulder, I found him leaning on the corral fence, his jaw set. I clicked my tongue and tugged on the reins.

"Come on, girl," I muttered, turning her to head towards Beau.

Once I was close, Beau asked, "What's the plan?"

"Plan?" I parroted, flicking my eyes up to the main house and spotting Valerie's mother, Nancy, sitting on the porch swing with her nurse.

"Yeah. To finally kill this motherfucker and be done with it."

I looked down at him, seeing him in a different light now, the need for revenge flashing in his blue eyes. Every inch of him was drenched in anger, toxic and lethal. It was an anger I was all too familiar with, and after years of fighting it, I was finally in control.

"It's too soon to make a move on Moonie, Beau," I told him as Midnight shifted.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"You know damn well what it means. It's too soon. We have things we need to focus on here that are more important than going after that fucker."

He scoffed, pulling off his hat and using it to gesture to the ranch. "We were attacked, Mags!"

"Affirmative," I clipped, memories of the war crawling back to the surface. "We were fucking attacked, and we nearly lost a good woman." I leaned forward, baring my teeth. "Our priority right now is taking care of us. We heal. We regroup. We do not, under any circumstances, fucking go after the man who set this ranch on fire half-cocked."

I could still feel the heat of the flames, and I was barely holding on. Beau glared up at me, his nostrils flared. Rage consumed him in a way no one on

this ranch could understand but me. He'd lost the woman he loved, and his home, his only source of comfort, had nearly been taken from him.

Hallow Ranch was my sanctuary.

I'd found a family here, and I'd be damned if anything ever happened to it. I'd spent the first half of my twenties in a fucking war zone, fighting nameless strangers with a specific strategy and set of skills I had to teach myself. Right now, Hallow Ranch was in the middle of war, and we'd just lost a battle. We needed to regroup.

Fighting, at least right now, wasn't a fucking option.

"Take a breath, Beau," I instructed, and Midnight neighed.

He looked away from me, his eyes on the mountain as his jaw jumped a few times. "This is my home—our home."

"Yes."

"We can't let anything happen to it."

"Correct."

He twisted his head back to me and took a deep breath, rolling his neck. "Fuck, I feel useless."

There was a lot of that going around right now.

"It's okay to feel that way, Beau," I assured him. I'd found the man in the middle of the field where he'd proposed to the love of his life, Abbie, and she said no. He was standing, looking up at the moon with a bottle of Jack in one hand and his daddy's pistol in the other, ready to end it all. If I hadn't spotted him, the ranch would still be in mourning today. "I need you to keep your feelings in check. Get a lock on them."

He ran a hand through his golden hair, his eyes on the ground. "Know that, Mags."

"Promise me then," I challenged.

Beau's head shot up. "I promise." Good enough.

"Is Kings still at the hospital?" I asked, changing the subject.

When everything went down, I was ready to go to the hospital with Kings, to be there for him like he had for me all these years. He told me to stay.

So, as always, I stayed.

That didn't mean I wasn't desperate to know how Valerie was. She was a good woman with a heart of gold. All her life, she'd known nothing but struggle and pain, until she came to Hallow Ranch. I got to witness Kings fall in love with her, open up to her, and start to heal—all because of her.

They deserved nothing but the best, and yet?

I looked over to the mountain as violence seeped into my thoughts, the craving of revenge on my tongue.

"Yeah, they're releasing Val this afternoon," Beau answered, pulling me back into the present. "Diana hasn't left, though. She didn't want to leave Caleb."

I looked up to the house again, noting Diana's Mercedes was still in the same spot I'd found it in early this morning. Of course, she hadn't left Caleb. She loved that kid like he was her blood.

She loved that kid just like I loved him—with everything I had.

"Take the day, Beau," I ordered, looking back down at him. I didn't need to be thinking about Diana right now—or ever. The last time she was here a few weeks ago, she'd shown up at the main house for a meeting. It was the first time I'd seen her in over seven months. "The work is done."

"The work isn't done," he argued.

"Your work is," I corrected coolly before jerking my chin. "Go."

He dropped his arms from the fence, twisting his neck to look up at the house. "Caleb hasn't come out today, has he?"

"No, he hasn't," I answered, my gut twisting. The boy hadn't been outside since Valerie went to the hospital; this entire shitshow probably traumatized the boy more than he was willing to admit to anyone, including himself.

"I'll go spend time with him," Beau said. "Get his mind off all this."

"Good idea," I muttered as he turned to walk away.

I needed some fucking time to think.

It wasn't until he was at the top of the hill that I dismounted from Midnight and walked her over to the water bin, tying her to the post. I walked into the barn, needing some fucking silence. Once I was in the shade, I pulled off my hat and ran my hand through my hair, knowing damn well I needed to cut it. I just couldn't bring myself to. Hair held memories, and I just wasn't ready to let them go.

"You can't dictate my life anymore. I'm a grown woman," a female voice echoed from the other side of the barn. "I don't have time to talk about this. I have a client who needs me."

Diana.

I put my hat back on, my eyes searching for her.

"Cuss at me again, and I'm hanging up the phone. I don't have the time or patience to entertain this," she said sharply.

Who the fuck was cussing at her?

I moved then, my boots hitting the floorboards of the barn, not stopping until I spotted her in the last horse stall—the only empty one we had. She stood in the middle of it, wearing a gray pencil skirt, black heels, and a white blouse.

No color.

She wasn't wearing any fucking color—again.

For the last month, every time I was blessed with a glimpse of her, she wasn't wearing her usual bright colors. I detested this new monotone look she'd adopted. I needed her color, her flicker of light.

She shifted her weight, putting her hand in her now--blonde hair and gripping it like she wanted to pull it out. "Mom, I have a life here."

I took a step into the stall and didn't move another inch as she whirled around to face me, her eyes widening. "Mags," she breathed, dropping her hand to her chest.

On the other end of the phone, the female voice was yelling.

"Hang up the phone," I ordered gently.

She pulled it away from her beautiful face, swallowing as she looked at the screen and then back to me. "It's my mom."

"Mothers don't talk to their daughters that way," I replied gruffly. "Hang up the phone."

Diana didn't move.

Instead, she stared at me in a way that made me want to take her into my arms and tell her everything was going to be okay. She'd had a hell of a fucking week ,and the day of the fire, she'd arrived just after Denver and Valerie were pulled out. She ran out into the field and dropped to her knees behind the crowd, crying out for Denver and Val. If one of the twins hadn't gone to her, I would've lost my mind. I had been too busy holding Kings back so the medics could do their job.

Exhaling through my nose, I stepped forward and gently pried the device out of her hand, ending the call.

"We were in the middle of a conversation," she murmured.

"About what?" I asked.

Before she could answer with her words, her body did. The tears pooling in her eyes overflowed, spilling onto her heated cheeks, and that damn bottom lip of hers began to wobble. My body reacted before I could stop myself. My hand shot out, my fingers gripping her chin firmly as I stepped closer, tilting her head back.

"Your tears add to my agony," I confessed softly, my voice rough.

"I don't want you in agony," she whispered, her tears still flowing.

A day without agony would be my death, but she would never know that.

"Talk to me," I demanded. This was the first time we'd spoken in over eight months, and damn it all to hell, it felt too good to have her hazel eyes on me, her chin in my grip, her body so close to mine.

"My mother hates the woman I've become."

I said nothing, holding her gaze, patiently waiting for anything she would or wouldn't give me. I'd wait a lifetime for her to say just one word to me.

She inhaled an unsteady breath before giving me the truth. "She hates the woman I am because I'm the woman she wasn't strong enough to be." Her words hit me in a way I wasn't expecting. My jaw hardened, but she continued. "I was supposed to grown up, find a husband, and be a good little wife. I was supposed to have babies and cater to my husband's every need."

I grunted, not trusting myself to speak. I didn't want to offend her, but her mother sounded like a cunt.

"She's been calling me all week. I was supposed to go home last weekend, after years of my parents convincing me to visit them. They'll never come out here, because they refuse to acknowledge the life I've built for myself, to see how far I've come," she explained, her voice shaking. "And then all this shit with Hallow Ranch happened, and Cathy is God knows where. But today, I had to give in. I foolishly answered the call, hoping she would ask if I was alright or at least pretend to give a shit."

"They don't."

She flinched in my hold, her eyes snapping up to mine. "You don't—"

"Stop letting people into your life who only see you as a tool. They don't care about you, Diana. They want to control you. When you were born, they made a mold for you, and you, being the amazing woman you are, refused to fit into," I said.

As my words hit her, she blinked, and then, suddenly, she was looking at me different. "You're talking to me again."

I hadn't spoken this much to her in years, doing my best to avoid her. I'd hoped she'd moved on from her shitty ex, forgotten this connection between us, and found a man worthy of her time.

"Why are you talking to me again?" she whispered.

I jerked her closer to me, my voice low as I gave her the truth. "To remind you not to take any shit from anyone."

She sniffled. "Does that include you?"

"Especially me, Firefly," I murmured, scanning her face.

"Diana!"

Jig's voice echoed throughout the barn, and a part of me was grateful for the interruption. I was a second away from taking her mouth, the craving for her nearly consuming me. She jumped away from me, yelping.

The tips of my fingers burned from her absence, the same burn radiating in my chest.

I heard the old man's footsteps, and then, "You alright?"

I stood there silently as she stammered, "Y-yes, Jigs. I was just on a call." She didn't look at me when she passed, leaving me in the stall as she attempted to fix her hair. "Did you need something?" she asked, smiling towards the front entrance to the barn.

"Den is at the house. Said you had some documents for him to sign," Jigs explained.

Diana nodded as I stared at her profile.

Fuck, why was she so beautiful? Still, after all this time.

"Right," she breathed, still not looking at me. "Walk me up to the house?"

The old cowboy chuckled. "Sure thing, doll."

Then, she was gone, the sound of her heels echoing throughout the barn, leaving me alone.

I bent my head and rubbed the back of my neck. "I'm never going to be free of her, am I?" I rumbled to the empty space.

As usual, I didn't get an answer. Instead, the phantom pains returned, full force, eating me alive as the memories of the flames danced in my mind.

Chapter Eleven



Diana

"Get me out of here!"

Lucas' growling demand, laced with a mix of hatred and impatience bounced off the cinder block walls of his holding cell, his bloodied knuckles wrapped around the iron bars and he tried to force his head through. His eyes were bloodshot, his lips dry and crusted over.

"Diana."

I looked over my shoulder to find Chase, in uniform, leaning against the wall. He jerked his head in the opposite direction and, before I moved, I took one more look at my ex.

"Babe, let me out," he snarled, reaching for me.

I calmly took a step back, savoring the momentary feeling of power the jail cell gave me. He couldn't touch me.

Never again.

"I'm not your babe," I said, my voice sharp. "I'm not your woman. I am not your *anything*, Lucas."

I gave him my back before the final word left my lips, silently hoping this was the last time I would ever see him. Chase was in the hall, talking with one of his newest officers in a hushed tone. She was young, twenty-five at most, and around the same height as me—but in much better shape. The trousers of her uniform stretched down her long, toned legs, her crisp tan button up tucked in neatly. Her dark auburn hair was twisted back into a tight bun, not a single stray poking out. Freckles dotted the bridge of her nose, and she had a beauty mark on the right side of her upper lip.

Chase had told me about her when she was hired, but that was three months ago. Her first day had been yesterday, and she'd spent all night dealing with my horrid ex.

"Whatever we have to do," Chase said as I came up to them.

The new officer pulled her eyes from her boss, a smile stretching across her face. "You must be Diana," she greeted.

"Diana Harper," I introduced myself, holding out my hand.

"Cassandra Mining," she replied, shaking my hand. "You can just call me Cass." "Lovely to meet you, Cass. Thank you for staying here all night to keep an eye on the shitshow in your holding cell."

Understanding flashed in her eyes. "Of course, Ms. Harper."

Chase cleared his throat. "Cass, I need that report on my desk by noon, yeah?"

Her brown eyes swung to him. "Yes, sir," she answered before giving me a small smile.

Then, she turned around, heading for her desk and it was just the Sheriff and me.

"Did you get home alright?" I found myself asking, looking back at him. He still look exhausted, but better than I saw him last.

Chase's lips twitched. "Yeah, Di. I made it home alright. Let's talk in my office."

My butt wasn't even in the plush chair across from his desk before he asked the one question I'd hope he wouldn't. The second it was out in the open, my stomach plummeted to the floor, dragging my heart down with it.

"Why was Mags at your place last night?" Chase shut his office door, and I closed my eyes, my head dropping as I listened to him move to his desk. After a moment, when I didn't hear the familiar sound of his desk chair being pulled out, I dared myself to look up.

I shouldn't have done that.

Judging by the look on his face, I really shouldn't have whispered, "He came for me."

Chase's jaw jumped, and he moved in front of my chair, leaning back against his desk, gripping the edge of it. My hands began to shake, and before he could notice, I folded him together in my lap, mirroring the same position I usually took in court. Then, I leaned back, lifted my chin, and waited for his assessment.

"You called him?" he assumed.

"I called Denver."

His brow raised. "And he sent Mags?"

"Well, no," I began, clearing my throat as heat began to crawl up my neck, spreading over my jaw and up my cheeks like a dang plague. "I called Denver's cell because you didn't answer, and Mags—"

"—I'm so fucking sorry I didn't," he said, cutting me off.

I shook my head. "Chase, you're allowed to be human."

"Being human doesn't protect the people I care about," he returned, his voice low.

God, this man. My next words were gentle. "I only called Denver because I didn't know what else to do. Lucas wasn't going to stop, and Denver is the only other man I trust to handle something like this."

"Do you trust Mags?"

I blinked, taken aback by his question—his tone. My brows came together slowly. "Do you not trust him?"

Chase stared at me for a long time, the silence between us deafening. The only thing to be heard in his office was the steady tick of the standard issue clock nailed to the wall. Minutes dragged on, his eyes holding mine, and outside his office door, the police station rumbled. I shifted in my seat, anxiety swirling around me like a tornado, ready and willing to destroy everything in its path.

"Chase," I whispered, my nails digging into my knees now.

His head tilted to the side, his eyes narrowing. "Why did Mags leave Hallow Ranch last night, Diana?" A lump formed in my throat. "For me," I rasped.

"Do you trust him?"

The truth spilled from my lips without a second thought. "Yes."

Chase bent his head, inhaling a deep breath.

My voice cracked with my next question. "Do you know something I don't?"

My friend's eyes met mine again, shimmering with warning. "I've been around that man just as long as you have, Di, and after trying to look into him, I've found nothing. Mags, according to the US government, doesn't exist."

I said nothing.

"Last year, I met a friend of his. Grayson."

"Grayson?" I parroted.

Chase nodded. "Joseph Grayson is the owner of Red Snake Investigations and served in the Marines with Mags."

It clicked then. "Grayson is the bounty hunter Denver hired to get a message to Mason," I said, thinking out loud.

"I looked into Grayson, hoping to find something—anything--on Mags." My gaze lifted, colliding with his as he gave it to me. "I found something, but I couldn't confirm if it was Mags. All records around what I found were sealed."

I twisted my fingers together. "That still doesn't answer my question, Chase."

He leaned down. "How am I supposed to trust a man I know nothing about?"

"Mags is a good man," I murmured.

"Even good men have dark sides, Diana."

Breaking our gaze, I looked over to the painting on the wall. "Denver is a good man—the best man—and you trust him." I twisted my head, looking back at Chase. "What makes Mags any different?" He said nothing, folding his arms over his chest. "Mags came to me last night because he thought I was in danger." I let my words settle for a second before delivering the final blow. "Mags *left* Hallow Ranch."

"For you," he countered. "Which isn't surprising in the slightest."

I flinched. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means I'm not blind. Denver and everyone else at Hallow Ranch just can't see it."

My mouth dropped open. "I-""

"Saw it the second you two were in the same room for the first time, Diana," he cut me off, his handsome features softening. "I wasn't blind to it. I just never said anything."

"You-wait-you know?" I stammered, my chest heaving now.

"Know that he's head over heels for you? Yeah, I do," he clarified.

Suddenly, the only thing I could hear was the pounding of my heart, thundering in my ears, drowning out the world around me.

Mags, head over heels?

For me?

My mind snapped back to last night, the sting of his rejection slamming into me all over again, more painful than before. Shaking my head, I tried to ignore the tears. "You're wrong about that, Chase. You're right about a lot of things, but you're wrong about that," I rasped, my voice thick.

A muscle in his tanned cheek ticked, his eyes scanning my face. "You wanna tell me why you got tears in your eyes?" he asked slowly.

I pressed my lips together and dropped my head. The first tear fell onto my arm, the warmth of it shocking me as the second soaked into my skirt. He'd come for me, he protected me, he'd held me in his arms. Then, it was shattered—the dream of him. One word from that cowboy, and all my hope disappeared.

No.

I heard Chase shift, and then, I felt him close to me. "Diana, look at me," he ordered gently.

Shame coated me like slick oil, difficult to wash away, leaving irreversible damage. I lifted my head slowly, my hair hanging down around my face. I found the Sheriff on his haunches in front of me, his hands hanging down between his knees. "Tell me about those tears, Di. Tell me what's happening right now."

The pain in my chest made it difficult to breathe, and I braced for the incoming panic attack. Sometimes, they snuck up on me, while others, I felt them coming from a mile away. That was a different form of hell entirely. "I don't want to talk about this, Chase. I'm here to discuss Lucas."

"That fucker isn't worth my energy or yours. He's being released tonight and escorted to the edge of town. If he comes back again, I'll shoot him," he clipped.

Oh, no. "Chase—"

"Enough."

I flinched at his command, the anger in his voice. I knew it wasn't towards me.

His next question came out quick and sharp. "Why the fuck is my best friend crying over a cowboy?"

"I—"

"Don't want any damn bullshit. I want the truth."

I cut my eyes from him, attempting to swallow the lump in my throat.

"He hurt you?"

I shook my head. I couldn't talk about this with him—or anyone. I felt crazy enough about it already. Speaking about it to a third party would make me look even more foolish.

"Diana, talk to me," Chase pleaded.

"*I'm in love with him, alright*?" I snapped, my admission bouncing off the walls.

His blue eyes, usually warm and inviting, were now cold.

"Is that what you wanted to hear? Huh?" I shot up from my seat and moved away from him, pacing back and forth in front of the door. "I'm a grown woman who's been in love with that cowboy for over ten years!" My chest was heaving now, the pain of rejection oozing from me like a bloody wound. Shock flashed in his eyes, but he said nothing, watching me like a hawk as I moved. I opened my mouth, and the confession fumbled out. "I'm a grown woman who, no matter how hard she tries, cannot get him out of her damn head. From the first time I saw him walking out of Denver's barn, he's been in my head. There's a connection between us. It's unlike anything I've ever experienced in my life. I know it's crazy."

"You're not—"

I whirled to face him, putting a finger to my chest. "You want to know how you can trust a man you don't know, and I'm still trying to figure out how I can be *in love* with him."

"Diana—"

"This isn't lust. This isn't a crush. This is love. *Soul-crushing love*," I cried, throwing my arms out.

He opened his mouth, and my hand shot up, my fingers weaving through my hair. "I know nothing about him, Chase. Do you understand how insane that makes me feel? When he's around me, I can't breathe, and when I don't see him, breathing doesn't seem worth it anymore." My tears were free falling now. Chase slowly rose to his full height, a shadow looming over his face. "You got it wrong. He doesn't love me."

Chase rounded the chair. "Seen it in his eyes, sweetheart," he whispered. "Mags rejected me."

His brow snapped together as he growled, "Excuse me?"

More shame. More embarrassment. *God, I was pathetic.* I was in my thirties, for crying out loud. This wasn't some fairytale. This was real life, and I needed to get the hell over it. "It doesn't matter," I said after a few stretched moments of tense silence.

"So he did hurt you," Chase bit off.

"He had every right," I returned on a sigh, the weight of the last day settling on my shoulders. I was exhausted—mentally, emotionally, and for some reason, physically. But we could just tack that on to everything else. I met Chase's eyes again, finally feeling some clarity. "Mags doesn't owe me anything. He rejected me. I must've misread all the signs."

"Don't downplay this, Di," Chase warned, moving to me. A second later, his warm hands were on my shoulders.

I pressed my lips together, a final tear rolling down my cheek. "It was all in my head," I murmured.

"You're one of the smartest fucking people I know, Diana Harper. Whatever this is, it isn't in your head. I've seen the way he looks at you. This isn't just one sided. Take it from me, yeah?"

"What do you know about the way he looks at me?"

Then, Chase rocked me to my soul, knocking the breath out of me with a single sentence. "Because, in another life, Diana, that's how I would look at you."

I stilled. "Chase," I breathed.

He gave my shoulders a gentle squeeze, the side of his mouth tipping up. "In another life, Diana, you'd be the woman for me. You're beautiful, strong, brilliant. You have a big heart and, fuck me, Di, everyone in the damn state can feel the love you give. You're selfless, brave, strong, but also imperfect. You make mistakes, yes, but you own up to them with your chin held high."

Slowly, carefully, I wrapped my hands around his strong forearms, my stomach in knots. "Are you—do you—" I sucked in a breath. "Do you have feelings for me?" He shook his head, and a wave of relief washed over me. "Have you ever had feelings for me?" I asked.

"I wanted to," he answered, slowly dropping his hands from my shoulders and backing away. He smiled at me then, his usual warmth back. "When I first met you in the bar all those years ago, I was dead set on falling for you."

The memory flashed in my mind. It was the night after I saw Mags for the first time. I'd gone into town for a celebratory drink after signing a second client. Chase sat at the end of the bar, staring down at his badge. He was still considered "new in town" like me, and that night, we became fast friends. Never once had I suspected anything romantic from him. Then again, my head was filled with the dark, broody cowboy at Hallow Ranch, so I'd probably missed Chase's signals. My jaw loosened, my chest deflating at his words. "You were what?"

He nodded. "No bullshit?"

"Asking me that in the middle of *this* conversation isn't funny, Bowen," I quipped.

His lips twitched before moving back to his desk, and as he spoke, I followed him, taking my seat. "The night we met, I was in my head about shit. The option of a promotion had been thrown at me earlier that day—a possible election was on the horizon, and while I was grateful, I didn't know if I had what it took to be Sheriff," he explained, shooting me a glance before taking his seat behind the massive oak desk.

"You had what it took," I told him softly. He'd won by a landslide. "You still do."

He looked to the black and white picture on the wall, the one from his time at the police academy. "You know about my father," he said. "You know about the shit that went down with him and my brother." His eyes met mine.

I nodded. Chase's family past was nasty—nastier than mine.

"I've always believed I wasn't good enough for a family, but still, in the back of my mind, the perfect woman for me lingered," he said, his voice growing soft. "Spotted you the second you walked into the bar, and fuck, Di, you checked all the boxes."

I pressed my tongue to the roof of my mouth and folded my hands together in my lap once more.

"Then, I got to know you, and our friendship grew..." He trailed off.

"What? Was I too weird for you?" I teased.

He stared at me for a long time before he answered. "You didn't make me feel anything."

I had the sudden urge to laugh. "I didn't make you—what?

"You ground me, sure. But you didn't—I didn't—"

"—there was nothing there," I finished for him on a whisper.

He inhaled deeply and gave me a single nod. "There was nothing there."

"Just so you know," I began, "you're hot."

Chase blinked.

"Like really, really hot," I whispered. "There were times, years ago, I wondered if something was wrong with me because my body didn't have the slightest reaction you, even that one time I walked in on you working out in your garage."

He blinked again.

"You were in gray sweatpants sans shirt, for crying out loud, and it didn't phase me. To me you were just Chase."

"And what does your body do when Mags is around?" he asked carefully. Heat bloomed in my cheeks as his blue eyes scanned my face. "Fuck, but you love him, don't you?"

My eyes dropped to my lap. "I'd never thought I'd be here," I confessed.

"Having this conversation with me?" he guessed.

"No, loving someone who doesn't love me back."

When I looked back up, his eyes were cold again. "Want me to kick his ass?"

A chill went down my spine then, knowing the truth. "He'd kill you," I murmured.

"Probably, but I'd still give it my all." He tipped his head to me. "For you."

My bottom lip trembled. "Don't make me cry again," I pushed out.

"Look, Mags is a mystery. You and I both know that, but as a man—he has feelings for you. For fuck's sake, he *left* Hallow Ranch *for you*," Chase assured.

Something tugged at me. "Last night, you didn't look surprised to see him. Was that because he left—"

"—Mags has never left Hallow Ranch, never crossed the property line, never gone into town. Not once, Di. I wasn't surprised to see him there because of how he feels for you," he stated firmly, leaving no room for argument.

"I asked him," I rasped, "after you hauled Lucas away. I asked him if it was ever going to happen for us."

Chase was silent, waiting.

Another round of tears formed, falling down my cheeks. "He said no," I croaked.

My friend moved around his desk again, and, in a flash, his hands were on either side of my head, tipping it back to look up at him as he vowed, "He's going to regret that moment for the rest of his life, Diana Harper."

Chapter Twelve



Diana

Two weeks later. Hayden, CO.

I tilted my head back, shielding my eyes from the afternoon sun so I could look at Valerie's storefront. A sense of pride hit me then, knowing her mother, Nancy, would've loved it. The flower shop would be a beautiful addiction to our town—one that would last generations. My eyes scanned over the antique detailing etched into the wood as I hummed my appreciation. It looked amazing.

The sign was being delivered later this month, but that hadn't stopped my friend from painting the front of the old brick building lilac with green trim. It stood out, adding a pop of color to the street. Suddenly, I wanted to call Thomas to see if we could schedule a little spruce up of my building.

I'd just gotten back into town from meeting with a client and wanted to stop by to see how things were going—and to apologize to Valerie for avoiding her. I'd been a crappy friend for declining her invitations out to the ranch and even to lunch on Monday in town. I couldn't see her, because despite how much I treasured her, she was connected to Hallow Ranch. Right now, I needed to do everything in my power to not think about that place or the cowboy who worked it.

After the eye-opening conversation with Chase, I made the ultimate decision to try and distance myself from anything and everything Mags.

The jingle of a bell snapped me out of my thoughts, and I lowered my gaze, finding a tall brunette stepping out of Val's shop dressed in paint-stained overalls, her wavy hair piled into a bun on the top of her head. Her brown eyes met mine, and she froze, sucking in a breath.

Abbie.

I smiled, not able to stop it. "Abbie," I greeted warmly, dropping my hand from my forehead.

She blinked, and the splatter of paint on her cheek shifted when she returned my smile, the shock of seeing me fading away. "Hello, Diana," she said softly, taking me in.

"I was beginning to wonder when I'd see you in town again," I teased, stepping up to her, my heels clicking against the pavement. "I figured Beau would keep you hidden for a few more weeks, at least." From what I'd gathered, Abbie was moving back, leaving her life in Denver.

Abbie rolled her eyes, shaking her head and scoffing. "Don't get me wrong, he tried, but I needed to come up for air eventually. He can't keep me at Hallow Ranch forever."

I ignored the pit of jealously growing in my gut. Even Abbie and Beau, after all the pain and heartache, managed to find their way back each other. Valerie and Denver, despite hating each other at first, found love, and it was a beautiful twist of fate that brought Harmony and Mason together.

Then, there was me.

"I know my opinion might not mean much to you, Abbie, but I'm really happy you and Beau found your way back," I told her, meaning it. "I never gave up hope."

Emotion flashed in her eyes, and she cleared her throat. "Thank you, Diana."

An awkward silence fell between us, the history that tethered Abbie and me together coming to the forefront of my mind.

Six years ago, after she rejected Beau's proposal, I ran into her at a coffeehouse in Denver. We said nothing to each other, only staring, tables, and strangers between us. Eventually, she returned to her work, and I finished up mine. An hour or so later, I took the chance, packed up my stuff, and walked directly to her table. I'd never forget the way she tensed, expecting harshness from me, judgment.

But I didn't give her either.

I simply wished her well and extended a hand of friendship.

She never took it.

I couldn't blame her, as I was tied to Hallow Ranch and this town. I would've been a reminder of everything she had to move on from. Guilt tugged at me once more, reminding me of how I'd been treating Valerie for that last couple of weeks.

Clearly, the same memory was on Abbie's mind, as she cleared her throat and looked down to her paint splattered shoes. "Diana, about the coffeehouse...I'm sorry."

My brows snapped together, and I shook my head. "Don't you dare apologize to me for doing what you thought you needed to do in order to protect your peace," I said firmly, needing her to understand that how she acted was completely reasonable.

Guilt was now swimming in her brown eyes as she chewed on the inside of her cheek. "I was a bitch."

A laugh bubbled up my throat then, the first time I'd laughed in weeks. "Abbie, you are the furthest thing from a bitch, I assure you."

"Still, I wouldn't have felt right until I apologized," she countered softly. "I just...."

"You were protecting Beau, thus protecting Hallow Ranch," I reminded her, giving her a small smile. "Trust me, you had every right to act the way you did."

Her eyes widened, and she took a step forward. "You know?" she breathed, bringing a hand to her chest.

I nodded. "Denver told me everything."

She stared.

"I'm so sorry for everything that happened to you, Abbie," I murmured. "No one deserves that, least of all you." She looked down the sidewalk, finding it empty. This time of day, right after lunch, the town was always quiet. The foot traffic would ramp back up just before the schools let out at three. "It's weird being back here," she confessed, her eyes scanning the street.

"I can only imagine."

"Pastor Burton smiled at me this morning," she informed me, meeting my eyes again. "*At me*. The daughter of the home wrecker who ruined his marriage."

Her mother, Sheri Spears, was different kind of monster. I'd learned about her dark reach within weeks of moving to Hayden and starting my firm. That woman had ruined countless marriages and relationships in this town. Now, she tended to stick to herself, living in a trailer on the outskirts of town. I lifted my chin, holding Abbie's gaze and repeating the words my own therapist told me years ago. "Your mother's actions have nothing to do with you or the woman you've become."

She nodded. "I know that," she replied softly,

Thank God for that, because I still needed my therapist to repeat it to me every few months. I shifted my weight and adjusted the files in the crook of my arm. "Besides, you're famous around here."

She scoffed and brushed a loose chunk of hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear. "Yeah, I know all about the wall."

I bit back my smile. Beau and Bart, the owner of the town's hotel, decorated a wall with all of Abbie's news articles she'd written for *The Denver Tribune*. Each story had been framed and put up on display for the entire town and all its visitors to see. She was one of the best damn journalists in Colorado.

"To be quite honest, Abbie," I said, pausing until she looked back up at me, "the entire world deserves your writing. It's powerful."

She stared at me, her brown eyes shining, for a few moments before blurting, "Fuck, I can't quit!"

I tilted my head in confusion at her outburst, but before I could get a word out, she spun on her heel and dashed back inside. "Diana, what have I done?" she called out through the open door.

I followed her, the doorbell jiggling above me as I entered. I found Abbie pacing back and forth, yanking her bun out so she could shove her hands into her hair.

"Abbie? What's going on?" I asked gently, unsure of what to do.

She didn't answer me, muttering something underneath her breath as she moved to one side of the store.

Renovations were underway, the disgusting blue carpet from the eighties had been ripped up and thrown away—thank God--and old check-out counter had been pushed to the back wall. I knew Valerie was planning on putting in white and lilac tile, checkered. It was going to look stunning.

"I have to tell Beau," Abbie declared to me. "I have to call my old boss and take back my notice."

My eyes widened, and I looked to my right to where Abbie stood, watching her thumbs fly across her phone screen. *She—she quit the Denver Tribune?*

That was when I noticed the plethora of painting supplies around her. A cup of paint brushes and dirty water was perched on top of a ladder, cans of paint lined the wall, and an artist palette was carefully balanced on one of the ladder steps. I lifted my eyes, and my breath caught on the beginnings of a floral mural on the wall behind her. There was a butterfly peeking out

from behind Abbie's shoulder. It was nearly finished, and if I focused, I could see the sketches of the flowers lined on the sage green wall.

"I can't quit writing—I can't quit the Tribune," Abbie muttered frankly to herself as she put the phone to her ear. She looked over to me. "On a scale of one to ten, how likely is it for Beau's phone to get my call out in the pasture four?"

"Zero," I deadpanned.

She groaned as she pulled the device away. "I need to call and tell him I can't quit the Tribune. We said we would figure it out, and I was willing to quit and stay here, but what you just said..." She trailed off and let her head fall back on a groan. "I love Beau. I love him so much, but this—-

Panic shot through me like an arrow. "Uh, please don't leave that man again and definitely don't do it because of my compliment. I can take it back," I offered. She opened her mouth, but I was faster. "Your writing is terrible. Absolute crap," I lied.

Abbie blinked. "Has anyone ever told you you're a terrible liar?"

"There's a reason I didn't pursue criminal defense," I tacked on as a joke. She pressed her lips together, trying to hold back a laugh.

"You could call the satellite phone," I suggested, moving across the space to set my stuff on the counter.

"I don't have the number. I lost it years ago."

I looked over my shoulder. "Are you going to leave him again?"

She shook her head. "Leaving Beau was the hardest thing I've ever done, Diana. It nearly killed me the first time. I just got him back, and there's no way in hell I'm letting him go again," she rasped, her voice suddenly brimming with emotion. "I just—I need to find out if there's a way I can have both: the newspaper and Beau." I smiled, satisfied. "Good."

A minute later, my phone was against my ear as I waited for Denver to pick up to the phone. It was a rare occasion I had to call the satellite phone, usually only doing it for emergencies. When Denver was out in the pastures, I learned quickly it was wise to leave him alone. He had a ranch to run, after all. That job was hard enough. The phone rang six times before someone picked up.

"Hallow Ranch."

I closed my eyes as the world around me began to fade, the voice on the other side of the phone breaking me all over again.

Two weeks.

I'd spent the last two weeks doing everything in my power to forget the way he looked at me, the way he held me, the way he *shattered* me. I buried myself in work, took three new clients, skipped a multitude of meals, binged twice in the late hours of the night, and even spent three nights in some fancy hotel in downtown Denver in a poor attempt to escape the pull this cowboy had on me.

"M-Mags," I stammered, leaning back against the counter.

What the hell was he doing with the satellite phone?

His jagged voice changed then, from bored to alert. "Diana? What is it? What's wrong?"

Not this again. I couldn't do this again.

I opened my eyes and looked up to the ceiling, my heart pounding in my ears. "Where's Denver?"

"Wrangling a bull," he answered, his voice growing dark. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I said, clearing my throat and making the mistake of looking at Abbie. Her head was tilted to the side, a look of confusion and wonder painted across her features like the mural on the wall. Then, her eyes narrowed, and I looked away from her. "I'm here with Abbie at the flower shop, and she needs to speak to Beau."

Mags was silent.

No damn surprise there.

"Why are you at the flower shop?" he asked, clearly not giving a single shit about Abbie's needs.

"Because I can be," I snapped before I could stop myself.

He ignored that. "Beau is with the herd."

"And where are you?"

"Not with the fuckin' herd, Firefly."

"Stop calling me that," I spat, hanging up the phone. I let out a sound of frustration, slamming my cell onto my stack of folders before sinking my fingers into my fresh blow out, tugging at the roots.

"Holy crap," Abbie breathed.

My head snapped up, and I jumped back when I found her in my space, her eyes wide, jaw slacked.

"What?" I asked, playing dumb and hoping she couldn't see right through me. I looked to the wall, then back to her, then to the front door, and then... back to her. Her brown eyes were wide, a pull in them I couldn't fight, seeking the truth. She reared back, the silent truth hitting her, and my stomach dropped to the floor.

Was I really that easy to read?

She stammered as I shook my head. "I—I—you—"

Before I could think, I slapped my hand over her mouth. "Don't," I begged, my voice cracking as tears stung my eyes. "Don't say it. This is the first day in over two weeks I haven't shed a tear over that cowboy."

Abbie's shock melted away then, pity in her warm eyes. She reached up, setting her hands on my shoulders. After I let my words settle between us for a moment, I dropped my hand, my face twisting with grief. "Abbie," I rasped.

"Oh, babe," she murmured.

Then, I was wrapped in her embrace, and it was then I knew, Abbie was going to be a damn good friend.



"Mr. Gibsy, sir, I know—"

Abbie's words were cut off by the sound of a muffled male on the other end of her phone. I was sitting on the counter, ankles crossed, laptop balanced on my thighs, reading over a contract Thomas had sent.

It'd had been two hours since I came to the shop, two hours since Abbie discovered the truth about Mags and me, and two hours since I'd come to

terms with the fact that I would never be able to hear that man's voice again without hurting.

I looked up from my screen, my glasses perched on the tip of my nose. It had been the first time I'd worn them in months, giving my precious corneas a break from contacts. I watched Abbie as she chewed on her thumb nail, pacing back and forth.

"You and I both know I'm the best damn writer you have," Abbie countered, her voice steady.

I smirked.

"I can write from anywhere. You don't need me sitting in an office five days a week to do so," she argued. Pause. "If I need to find a source in the city, then I'll go to the city. I was never in the office anyways. I was out, hunting for leads, unlike Mark, who, last I checked, was contemplating the idea of letting an A.I. program write his articles."

Her boss shouted on the other end, his voice so loud, she had to pull the phone away from her ear.

Abbie shot a look to me, biting her lip. She had him by the balls now. I scrunched my nose at her.

My cell began buzzing by my thigh, pulling my attention from Abbie. I knew it was Thomas, checking in, so I blindly reached for it and put it to my ear.

"Hey, I'm almost done looking this over," I rambled. "It looks really good, Thomas. I should have it back to you in the next ten minutes."

The line was silent.

"Thomas, you there?" I asked, reading over the last paragraph while Abbie continued advocating for her career in the background.

"Who the fuck is Thomas?"

Mags' deep voice filled my ears for the second time today, shocking me so much, I nearly let my laptop fall to the floor. I scrambled to keep it steady, and my eyes shot up, making sure Abbie didn't see. Thankfully, she was too pre-occupied.

"What are you—"

"Two things, Firefly," he all but growled, the sound alone heating every single inch of me. "One, hang up on me again, I'll redden your ass. Two, who the fuck is Thomas?"

A sound left me, something between a squeak and a gasp. "I-what?"

"Not repeating myself."

I hopped off the counter, my heels clacking against the old tile, my teeth grinding. I closed my laptop. Abbie, who was facing me now, mouthed, "Who is that?"

I lied, mouthing back, "A client. I have to take this outside."

She nodded, waving me off as I moved across the space, pushing the door open, the late afternoon sunlight hitting my skin. "Where the hell do you get off on calling me and demanding to know my business?" I asked, my chest heaving as I stood in the middle of the sidewalk now.

He was silent.

I pulled the phone away, checking to see who's phone he was calling me from. I had everyone's number at Hallow Ranch, but I didn't recognize this one. "Whose phone is this?" I asked.

"Mine."

Wait—what?

"You have a phone?"

"Clearly, since I'm talking to you on it."

"Don't get smart with me," I warned.

He muttered something I couldn't understand before he clipped, "Called to make sure you were okay, Diana. Nothing more."

Nothing more.

"Why would you do that?" I asked sharply.

"Because no one at Hallow Ranch has seen or heard from you in two fuckin' weeks, and for all I know, your dumbass of an ex could be hanging around," he answered simply.

Lucas was not "hanging around." The day after Chase and I had our talk, he was escorted to the edge of town, given his car keys, and told to "fuck off" and to "never come back." It was unofficial, off the books, but so far, effective. I hadn't heard a peep from him or my parents—thank God.

"I—"

"You missed Harmony's birthday."

I froze, my eyes on the concrete. "What?" I whispered.

He said nothing.

"When was her birthday?" I asked, guilt hovering over me like a vulture. Mentally, I was flipping through my color-coded planner, knowing all the birthdays for this month were written in orange, double underlined and circled. Harmony's, I remember, also had a sticker beside it.

"Last week. Valerie told everyone you couldn't make it."

Now I was the one who was silent.

"Diana, we need to have a conversation," the cowboy said then, his rough voice unusually soft now, reminding me of all the other times he'd been gentle with me, like I was the most precious thing in the world.

That was the last thing I wanted. I didn't want to have a conversation with the man I was hopelessly in love with.

But I had to move on.

"Go ahead," I offered, a lump in my throat now. I moved closer to the building, hearing some locals walking down the sidewalk behind me.

Mags, being Mags, got straight to the point. "What happened between us doesn't need to ruin your relationships with everyone else out here."

I pressed my lips together and leaned against the building, my head bent. "I know that," I whispered. "I just needed some time."

More silence.

"Seeing you, after what..." I trailed off, looking down the sidewalk as I took a deep breath. "It would've pushed me over the edge, Mags."

Nothing.

His silence hit my nerves just right ,and before I could stop it, another confession escaped, riding on a broken whisper. "I feel like a fool."

"You have no idea how honored I am to know you feel that way about me," he finally said, his words gentle and honest.

A tear landed on my cheek, and I wiped it away quickly. I didn't know what else to say, so I chewed on my bottom lip, ignoring my heart crying out for him.

"Kills me, Firefly," he murmured.

My eyes closed.

"Fuckin' kills me."

"Stop," I begged. "You can't—you can't call me that."

"Never again," he vowed.

That hurt worse.

"Where do we—How do we—"

"When you're here, I'll be out of sight," he declared.

"But—"

"They're your family too, Diana. They love you and want to see you. You deserve to see them. It would be easier for us both if I stayed clear."

"You did that anyways," I countered.

He said nothing, and I thought about all the times I'd run into him.

When I was there, Mags never stayed clear. He was always around, lingering, watching.

"Hi, Diana!"

My head shot up to find Martha Shelly walking her dog. She was in a cream tracksuit, her hair twisted back and out of her face, her hand in the air, casting me a wave.

"Hi, Martha," I greeted softly, smiling.

"What are you doing on this side of town?" she chirped.

If my heart wasn't in the process of breaking, I might've laughed at her silly question. My office wasn't far from here, and she knew that. She was just being a nosy old lady.

"Visiting a client," I answered, hearing Mags move on the other end as I gestured to the flower shop.

Martha looked at it, recognition hitting her. "Oh! This is belongs to Denver Langston's wife, right? I heard a rumor about her opening a floral shop."

I nodded. "Yup, that's the one."

She looked at me and then to my phone, clearly reading the silent message. "Well, I'll let you get back to it. See you at book club!"

Crap, I'd forgotten about book club.

As she walked away, Mags cleared his throat.

"Sorry about that. I'm standing outside," I muttered.

"Don't you ever apologize to me, Diana," he clipped. "Ever."

My bottom lip wobbled. "Okay," I rasped.

Minutes passed before he broke me again. His words came out as a guttural, jagged whisper. "I'm sorry, baby."

I sucked in a gulp of air, pain shooting through me. "You can't call me that either."

"After I say goodbye, I'll never call you anything again," he promised. "Just have to right now, okay?"

I tipped my head back, the sunlight hitting my face as my eyes closed. "Just do it," I begged.

Silence.

My face crumbled. "Do it, Mags."

"Goodbye, Firefly."

I hung up before he did, and it took everything in me not to fall to my knees on the sidewalk.

Chapter Thirteen



Mags

Present Day. Hallow Ranch.

Goodbye, Firefly. Goodbye, Firefly. Goodbye, Firefly. Goodbye, Firefly. Goodbye, Firefly. Hallow Ranch was my sanctuary, the only place I'd managed to find a simple shred of peace in this life.

Diana had been here since the beginning, coming and going as needed, leaving me breathless each time I saw even a glimpse of her. And as much as I wanted to follow her, to know her, to hear her voice or the harmony of her laugh...I couldn't. My place was here, on this ranch.

I'd been here for over a decade now, never once leaving the property until two weeks ago.

I'd left my sanctuary, crossing the property line, to protect the woman I loved, but also to break her beautiful, precious heart. I hated every moment of it, from the sharp intake of her breath and the confusion in her hazel eyes to the pain in her trembling lip, and the loss of her touch.

I was gutted by every damn second, but the words I'd just whispered to her on the phone a second ago threatened to pull me under, the darkness clawing at my skin, trying to get a solid grip.

She needed closure—a push to move on from what never could've been.

I needed a fucking drink or a bullet in my chest.

I bit down, grinding my teeth to the point of pain as I stared at my phone, Midnight huffing with impatience underneath me, shifting her weight. If it wasn't for the work that still had to be done, I'd retreat—disappear for a few days on the mountain to clear my head to contemplate which one I was going to give myself.

A drink.

Or a bullet.

I'd spent the most of my life hating myself, but none of that could compare to the absolute hatred brewing in my soul now. Most days, I couldn't stand to look at myself in the fucking mirror, and now? Now, I had to go on, knowing I'd broken something beautiful, something filled with nothing but light and goodness.

My Diana. My fuckin' firefly. "Yo!"

My head snapped up, finding Mason atop his horse, heading in my direction.

Years ago, I wanted nothing more than to break the bull rider's jaw for all the shit he'd put Kings through. The longer I'd spent on the ranch as Kings' ranch hand, the more I grew to hate Mason fuckin' Langston. Then, when he showed up here after the fire with a way to take down Moonie, his new wife in his truck, things shifted between the Langston brothers. There was a lot of pain there, sure, but I never fully trusted Mason until he showed me the kind of man he was underneath that cocky, bull rider exterior. Thankfully, he was the kind of man to risk everything for the people he cared about—including Kings.

Now, Mason had not only my trust, but also, my respect.

When he was close, I pushed Diana away, shoved down the pain, and lifted my chin. "Something wrong?" I drawled.

Mason's eyes flashed under the shadow of his hat. "Gonna ask you something. and I need you to be honest with me," he started.

I stiffened, not liking his tone but saying nothing.

He looked away for a moment, his jaw jumping. When he looked back to me, he hit me with it. "Are you still up for killing the twins?"

I blinked.

Mason took off his hat and ran his fingers through his sweaty, dirty blond hair. "Cause I gotta tell you, Mags, I'm game if you are," he clipped, his nostrils flaring.

This was the last thing I needed today. "What the fuck happened?" I growled.

"Just answer my question and we can go from there."

"Ask me tomorrow," I bit off, pulling Midnight's reins. "Got work to do today."

"There's work to do every day," he countered.

I looked over my shoulder at him. "Ask me tomorrow. If I answer today, then your brother would be down two ranch hands." I left him with that, snapping the reins and taking off.



The small screen of my flip phone lit up, the device vibrating on my work table. The sound filled the space, breaking the deathly silence I'd been sitting in.

I'd been in my workshop for the last six hours, since the sun set. While the moon rose, I waited for this call—my lifeline. Slowly, I set the bottle of whiskey down next to my boots, the glass clanking against the concrete floor. As I rose from the rocking chair I'd just stained three days ago, my body ached, needing rest, but sleep was the last thing my mind needed.

If I went to sleep, I would be sucked into a new version of hell, the one where I break my firefly's heart over and over, her tears a constant stream as she crumbled before me.

I swiped up the shitty phone, flipped it open, and put it to my ear, saying nothing as I stared the only project I'd never finished: the desk sitting in the corner.

"Mags?" Grayson called, concern laced in his voice.

"Sorry to bother," I grunted, leaning back against my worktable.

"You never do," my friend said. "What's going on?"

There was so much I wanted to say, to confess to him. I'd told no one about Diana, which was typical of me, but not telling Grayson was something else entirely. Thankfully, my silence was all he needed.

"Distraction or mission?" he asked.

I couldn't handle the mission right now. In fact, I had half a mind to tell him to drop it. Years ago, when Grayson started up his company, Red Snake Investigations, I'd asked him to find someone for me. Grayson and his team were the best private investigators and bounty hunters in the country. They had a reputation even in the most powerful of circles, and if I wasn't so fucked in the head, I knew I'd be a part of his team.

But those weren't the cards I was dealt.

And Grayson, despite being the best, still couldn't find my half-brother. After pushing Diana away, I wasn't in the mood for more disappointment.

My answer was rough. "Distraction."

"Carrie wants to come see you."

My jaw tightened as the knife in my gut twisted, my head dropping. I closed my eyes, seeing Grayson's fiancée curled up in the snow, half frozen to death and leaning against Valerie's mother's grave. It was last winter when I found her, and Grayson, according to his team, fell to his knees when I radioed to tell them the news. Carrie was a light in my friend's life, giving him something no one else could.

Love.

"She's welcome anytime," I replied. "You both are."

Grayson was silent for a moment. "We were planning on dropping by in the fall..." He trailed off, leaving the option for them to come sooner hanging in the air.

"I'm alright," I lied.

"I can send her down tomorrow morning, you know? She's finished up the gallery wall for the bookstore yesterday, and her boss is finally back to work after her maternity leave," he offered, clearly reading me. He didn't want me alone. "I could come down on Saturday, but I gotta finish unpacking the Portland office."

"Got plenty of company down here."

He clocked me then. "But at night, you sit in the damn cabin with your demons and drown, Mags."

"Been doing it for years now."

"No, you were healing, Mags," he argued, his voice gentle. "You were fuckin' healing, settling into the life you'd built for yourself, and now—"

"-nothing has changed," I growled, cutting him off.

Nothing had changed. All I did was close a door that should've never been open.

"Bullshit."

My spine snapped straight. "Don't," I warned.

In the background, I heard Carrie's sweet voice. followed by a loud meow.

"No, you little shit, it isn't time for breakfast," my friend clipped.

"You better be talkin' to the fuckin' cat and not your woman like that, Gray," I grunted.

I heard some shuffling and then—

"Hi, Mags," Carrie greeted softly, sounding tired.

It was late, and I knew Grayson had waited until she was asleep before he called me. After my call with Diana, I finished my work and ate dinner with Mason and Harmony at their place before riding back to the barn and getting Midnight settled. Then, I headed to my cabin, the place I'd spend the rest of my lonely, damned life, and called Grayson. All I could hear was Diana's cracking voice, all I could picture were her tears.

Those were worse than the memories of war, worse than the sounds of bombs and guns going off.

I knew then, I'd take going back into a war zone over having to hurt her like that again.

But it was done.

She could finally move on.

"Mags?" Carrie called, snapping me out of it.

"Sorry," I murmured. "Hi, Carrie."

"You don't sound like yourself," she said. "Are you alright?"

I blinked. "What do I usually sound like?"

"Like my grumpy friend," she answered immediately, her words striking me. "But you don't sound like him right now. What's wrong?" I pushed off the worktable and bent to grab the near-empty bottle from the floor. "Long day, Carrie. That's all."

"You know you can talk to me, right?" she prompted.

If I wasn't currently rotting from the inside out, I might've smiled. Carrie, the broken girl with a heart of gold.

"I'm alright. Promise."

"Is this a bullshit promise or a serious one?"

"Considering you aren't here to do the stupid pinky shit, I'll let you take your pick," I rumbled, taking my seat again. "Where'd your man go?"

"Pinky promises aren't stupid."

"Carrie."

"Yeah?"

"Need a distraction, not an argument," I told her before lifting the bottle to my lips, taking a swing. The liquid burned my throat, but I wasn't fazed. This was the first time I'd drank this much in a single setting in a long time, the last time having been the night Grayson and I got our deployment orders.

"So you aren't okay," she surmised gently, knowing how it was between Grayson and me.

I tipped my head back, staring up at the metal ceiling, my eyes studying the grooves. The truth weighed heavy on my tongue, and yet? I couldn't give it. If anyone else knew about her, my Diana, I would never be able to forget.

"Just haunted by the past," I muttered, draining the last of the whiskey. It wasn't the truth, but it sure as fuck wasn't a lie.

"Well, we had another author signing at Rossy's," she began, and over the next hour, she told me about her job at Rossy's Books, and the Portland office. I closed my eyes and listened to every single word, grateful for her friendship. She didn't have to accept me, but she did. She accepted every aspect of Grayson's life, including me.

When she was done, she asked, "Where are you right now, Mags?" "Workshop."

She was quiet for a few seconds. "Do you need me to come down there? I can make you my strawberry pancakes."

"Probably would go into a diabetic coma from all that sugar, darlin'," I drawled.

"Sugar is good for the soul, Mags. It brings light to it," Carrie defended.

I said nothing, opening my eyes to stare at the desk again.

Light.

A little light was all I needed, something to guide me home in the dark, to pull me up when I was under.

Diana's laugh rang in my ears then, and suddenly, I wasn't sitting alone in the workshop. I was standing in the middle of Denver's living room, watching Diana's head fall back, a sweet melody of laughter coming from her as Mason and Lawson bickered back and forth. When she was done, the laughter transitioned into a soft giggle, and she wiped a happy tear from under her eye as she looked over to me.

The smile on her face stretched, beaming at me and only me.

"Mags," Grayson clipped in my ear.

I blinked, shaking my head.

The desk reappeared in the corner, and I was back in reality.

"Here," I answered, setting the bottle back down before rubbing my hand over my face.

"Christ, Carrie's been calling your name for five minutes, man."

"Must've dosed," I rumbled, rising from my seat and taking one more look at the bottle.

That was it—I'd reached my limit.

One bottle to forget her.

One bottle to shove everything back down.

From now on, I wasn't allowed to drink with the thought of her in mind. Social drinks only until the pain dulled and the gaping hole in my heart scarred back over. Leaving the bottle where it was, I walked out of the shop, locked up, and turned to looked up at the full moon.

"What's going on, Mags? For fuck's sake, talk to me," Grayson ordered.

"Just dealing with another demon, Gray. That's all."

"What do you need from me?"

"All I need is time," I murmured before hanging up.

Time.

That was all I needed.

Unfortunately, I didn't know just how much I would need to get over my firefly, but as always, I pressed on.

Thankfully, I didn't dream of her when I finally made it to bed. No, the horrors of war filled my mind, and when I woke the next morning, I could still hear the bombs, smell the scent of burning flesh, and taste the blood in my mouth.

Chapter Fourteen



Diana

Two weeks later. The last day of August.

I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be here.

And yet?

I heard gravel crunching behind me and whirled to find Caleb walking up, dressed in running shorts and a faded tee. He was covered in sweat, most likely having finished with a run. I'd known him since he was just a baby, I remembered the way he felt on my hip, the way he giggled when I played peek-a-boo with him, and his sweet baby scent. The only certainty in my life was this: time was the thief, and the world wasn't going to wait for you to start living your life.

Which was why I was here, standing on Denver and Val's porch for the first time in weeks. I'd had this day marked in my planner for the last three months, highlighted in green with a mountain sticker in the corner.

Today was my break—my last taste of freedom.

On Monday, I would be heading into the city to teach my first class of the fall semester. My teaching schedule was hectic this semester and with my firm on top of it, I knew that for the next four months, I wouldn't have any free time. This was my last weekend to do something for me, and according to Emma, I hadn't done that since February.

Caleb looked up at me with his striking gray eyes and smirked, reminding me of his uncle. "Sup, Di? Long time, no see."

Guilt lodged itself in my throat then, making it difficult to reply. So, I gave him a smile, and Caleb, being almost a teenager, thought that was good enough. "Just teasin'," he muttered, walking up the steps, birds chirping in the tree by Denver's truck. "I know you're busy as hell."

My reply was instant, guilt be damned. "Don't say 'hell'," I ordered.

He stopped on the top step and stared. "It's a place, not a cuss word."

Those damn cowboys were rubbing off on him. "It's a cuss word to me, and you're a child."

Caleb was taller than me now, giving him the confidence he needed to argue. "I don't look like a child," he deadpanned, gesturing to his sweatsoaked shirt. My heart squeezed as visions of him running through the house with a superman cape flying behind him as his laughter bounced off the walls was all I could see. No matter how big or tall this boy got, he'd always be Denver's dark haired, chubby-cheeked, little boy to me. He would be married with four children, and he'd still be that precious baby boy to me.

"Until you turn eighteen, you're a child, and you cuss in front of me again...." I trailed off, trying to think of something that would scare him. "I'll pinch your ear," I threatened.

One of his dark brows rose, making him look more like his dad than his uncle now. "You'll pinch *my ear*?" he parroted, confused. "Is that all you got? Usually, the guys threaten to whoop my ass."

"Don't say 'ass!""

"It's a part of the body, Di," he grumbled.

"No. You say butt or—or tooshie," I blurted.

Now, he looked like he was trying not to laugh. "Did you just say 'tooshie?"

Yeah, I clearly wasn't getting any cool aunt points today.

"You're a nut, you know that?" he asked, pulling me from my thoughts. "Which is surprising because everyone else finds you intimidating."

"I am intimidating," I shot back.

Once again, he looked seconds away from laughing.

I pointed my finger up at him. "Don't test me, Caleb Langston."

He looked me up and down, clearly unimpressed. "Yeah, I'm not scare of you, Di."

I faltered, letting my hand fall back down to my side. Before I could utter another world, he moved towards the door, yanking open the screened one. "You coming inside or what?"

I didn't want to, I really didn't, but I had to.

"Also, why are you dressed like that?" he asked over his shoulder, his tall body gobbling up most of the doorway.

I looked down, taking in my hiking boots, baby blue leggings, and cropped gray shirt. It was the only non-work outfit I actually felt confident in, even if my rounded belly showed. Slowly, I was learning to accept and love my body while overcoming the toxic habits I'd picked up in college to stay sane.

"I was going to ask Val or your dad if I could hike up the west side of the mountain today," I answered, looking back up to him.

I didn't want to show my face to Denver or Val, knowing how crappy of a friend I'd been these last few weeks, but I wasn't about to use their land to work off my issues without their permission. The truth was, Langston Mountain was the best local hiking if you didn't want to drive forty minutes either way. Not to mention, I was familiar with these trails and didn't have the energy to figure out a new one. Here, I could get some sunshine, clear my head, and know where I was at all times—on Hallow Ranch.

"You don't have to ask," he chuckled, jerking his chin to the mountain. "Just go."

I hesitated. "I feel like I need to—"

"You're family just as much as anyone else on this ranch, Di," he said, waving me off. "Valerie isn't here anyways, and Dad's with the herd."

I wanted to ask why he wasn't with his dad, but I refrained.

"Oh," I mumbled, looking down to the barn, my eyes on the "H" slapped on over the red paint. "Where is Val?"

"The flower shop with Harm and NJ," he answered, waving me off for a second time.

I flinched, but thankfully, Caleb didn't catch it. He was too busy yawning. "Long morning?" I wondered out loud, studying him as he scratched his head.

"Yeah. I think I'm going to take a nap."

I looked down to the barn, then back to him. "Don't you have chores to do?"

He shot me a look. "You sound like Jigs."

"I—"

"Go. Enjoy your hike. I'll tell Dad you're here," he said, cutting me off.

I gave up, giving him a small smile. "Thanks, Caleb."

He shot me another smirk and disappeared inside.



I pulled over, parking my car in the grass by the barbed wire fence, and looked up to the mountain, taking in the lush trees. The sky was blue, the brightest it'd been in days, actually, and thick, fluffy, pearl-white clouds were scattered across it, stretching for miles. The other side of the mountain was still healing from the fire, but the trees had actually started to bloom this past spring. Hopefully, by next year, the scar of Tim Moonie would be gone, and he would be nothing more than a crappy memory. Then, and only then, would I feel comfortable hiking on that side. So far, I hadn't.

I didn't want to interrupt the healing.

After putting the car in park, I swung out and looked up and down the quiet road. No one, aside from the Hallow Ranch boys, drove back here, making it seem eerie in a way, but I knew my car would be safe. I walked around to the other side, opened the door to the backseat, and grabbed my backpack, pulling out the sunscreen. Once I was sprayed down, I locked up the car, hooked the bag on my shoulders, and made my way down the fence line, searching for the small gate door in the barbed wire fence Beau showed me the first time I hiked on Langston mountain.

Though I'd been hiking up and down this side of the mountain for years in nearly every season, this time of year was my favorite.

Autumn was approaching, and the trees were about to turn from green to stunning oranges, yellows, and reds. The sun was hot, yes, but it was cooler now as summer came to a close, making the hike more bearable.

Today was the perfect day to get lost in the woods, drench myself in sunshine, and leave my troubles on the road. Plus, my seasonal allergies wouldn't take such a beating after. All around me, the Earth was alive, blessing me with a beauty unlike any other.

My skin warmed underneath the rays, pale and blinding as always. No matter how hard I tried, I never tanned. I burned, healed, and reverted to pale.

"There it is," I muttered when I spotted the small gate about a hundred yards from my car. I wrapped my fingers around the straps of my backpack, adjusting it one last time as I came to a stop in front of the fairytale-style gate, the white paint chipped and fading.

There was similar gate in the fence line on the other side of the ranch, one that led to the cabin Denver had kept for Beau. It was originally supposed to go to Jigs, a home for him to raise Beau in, but he declined. I knew it was just a matter of time before Den asked me about changing the name on the deed, especially now that Abbie was moving in.

As I stepped onto the property, the wind around me shifted, and a chill crawled up my spine. I looked over my shoulder, my eyes drifting to the tops of the tall, magnificent pine trees across the narrow road. As the wind continued to hit me, sending my ponytail in every direction but down, I looked back to the forest in front of me, studying the tree line. The tops flowed back and forth in time with the wind, the branches moving in harmony. The chill on my back slithered up my neck and over my shoulders.

In the distance, I heard a cry of a hawk, and I looked to my right, seeing it soar towards me, the sun shining down on its beautiful wings. It flew over me, unbothered by my presence on before disappearing around the bend.

A memory tugged at me then, one from years ago. It was only of the only nights I'd dared to eat dinner in the bunkhouse—with the twins cooking. As usual, they'd been bickering, providing entertainment for Beau, Jigs, and me while we waited on Denver and Caleb to come down. That night, Mags opted out of dinner, choosing to stay in the barn and double check all the work the twins had done, apparently. After a while, the twins stopped arguing and asked Jigs if something was true...



"Come on, old man," Lance said, looking towards the front door, as if he didn't want Denver to walk in on this conversation. "You can tell us."

Jigs' mustache twitched, his shoulders shaking with laughter. "Tell you what? That your cooking is worse than Beau's?"

I looked up from the work I had to take home with me that night, laughing. "What? Jigs, you didn't teach Beau how to cook?"

"Don't listen to Pop, Diana," Beau drawled from the arm chair in the corner. "We all know I'm the best cook here."

Jigs turned in his seat, plucking his toothpick from his lips and pointing at his son with it. "I taught you many things, son, but I never taught you how to lie."

"That's not what we're talking about," Lawson grumbled, stirring something in the cast iron skillet.

I scrunched my nose, studying how the...substance started bubbling for a moment.

"Then what the hell are you talkin' about? Because I'm not a damn mind reader," Jigs said as I looked back down, re-reading the last paragraph, dragging my pen across each line.

I was dead set on tuning them out in order to finish reading through this contract before dinner was served, but Lance's question had my head snapping right back up.

"Is this ranch haunted?"

Beau snorted, and my wide eyes shot over to him. He gave me a look, shaking his head. His father, the person here who'd been at Hallow Ranch the longest, said nothing. Lance and his brother shared a look, and before anyone else could utter a word, the bunkhouse door swung open.

Mags, dressed in all black as usual, stepped in, his head down, the brim of his cowboy hat concealing his face. Behind him, in the distance, lightning lit up the dark sky and thunder rolled.

"Bet Mags knows," Lance muttered.

The cowboy lifted his head then, his dark eyes landing directly on me, and, like always, my breath caught. His dark pools studied me, tested me, beckoned me to come to him, to drown in him. He said nothing when he broke our gaze and walked back to his bunk. Goosebumps spread across my arms, and I shivered.

Lawson caught it and jerked his chin in my direction. "Sure has Diana spooked."

All eyes were on me then. "I'm cold, that's all," I lied.

"Uh huh, sure," Lance drawled, but all I could focus on were Mags' movements behind me. I regretted picking this seat at the table now. I hadn't

seen him in months, despite me coming here every other week to deal with Caleb's mother.

Jigs shook his head, running his hand through his white hair. "What brought this on, boys?"

Then, the twins dove in and explained about the "weird" things they'd seen on the ranch and in the buildings. About a minute in, I looked down, trying to focus on my work as my heart thundered in my ears, my body painfully aware of Mags' proximity. A minute or two later, Beau started snoring in the arm chair.

With Beau sleeping, the twins yapping to Jigs, and Jigs trying to pay attention to said yapping, no one in the bunkhouse saw what happened next.

I felt heat at my back, Mags' familiar scent all around me know. Slowly, I twisted my neck, looking up at him as he wrapped an blue and cream afghan around my shoulders. A lump grew in my throat. "What—"

"Should warm up in a minute," he said, his jagged voice the softest I'd ever heard it, before moving towards the door. I watched every second, clutching the afghan around me, my heart ready to follow him wherever he was going, logic be damned.

"Mags! Before you go, just tell us what you think," Lawson called out to his back.

Mags, hand on the doorknob, looked over his shoulder, his eyes on me. "Of course, Hallow Ranch is fuckin' haunted."

Then he was gone, taking my heart with him.



I blinked, mentally shaking off one of the many memories of Mags as well as the chill.

"This ranch is haunted, but I didn't piss of any spirits, so I'm good," I assured myself, pulling out my phone to make sure my location was on and available to everyone. I double checked that the gate was locked and headed towards the trail opening tucked between a large oak and pine tree. As I got closer, the inside of the forest came into focus, showing the beauty that awaited me. The sunlight bled through the tree canopy, highlighting the forest floor in an unpredictable pattern.

I took a deep breath, rolled my neck, and stepped inside.

It wasn't until forty-five minutes later, when I was halfway up the mountain, that everything went to shit.

My breaths were uncontrolled and labored as I swung my body around the tree, pressing my back against it as I looked all around me, searching for a better hiding spot. Behind me, on the other side of the tree—I didn't know how far away—-I could hear the bear running, twigs and leaves crunching

underneath his paws. I closed my eyes and bit down, trying to hold my breath.

The bear roared and started stiffing around.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

I slowly put my trembling hand over my mouth and opened my eyes again. In the distance, about a half a football field away down the hill, there was a small clearing. I knew this path, this trail. I knew it almost as well as the cowboys, and on the other side of that small meadow, was a hollowed log wide enough for me to hide in.

It was my only option and though not the best, anything was better than staying here to be Mr. Bear's lunch. I would be able to drop my backpack halfway, and hopefully, the bear would be distracted enough to so I could get away.

I slowly dropped my hand, bracing against the tree bark to push off.

One.

Two.

Three.

I shot away from the tree, my feet pounding against the ground as I skirted around trees, gaining speed the further I descended the hill. Another roar sounded off behind me, and I made the fatal mistake of looking over my shoulder. I barely got a glimpse of the beast before pain erupted in my ankle, and before I could comprehend what was happening, I went down. My body crashed against the hard ground, more pain sparking in my shoulder as I slid down the hill. I cried out, my body rolling. The world flashed around me, the sky, then the ground, then the sky again. My leg hit

something, but still, I didn't stop—gravity was in control now. With another cry, I stretched out my arms, searching for something to cling to, but it was no use.

I flipped over a final time, landing on my side at the bottom of the hill, covered in dirt, my body consumed by pain.

With all my might, I rolled to my back, the sky above still blue, the clouds still white, the sun still at its peak. Panic hit me, and I turned my head, ignoring the pain to search for the bear. My backpack was a few yards away, the teal fabric covered in dirt and leaves. I laid on the edge of the clearing for a while, not taking my eyes off the hill. Minutes or hours passed, I didn't really know, and when the bear never made an appearance, I closed my eyes, tears sliding down the sides of my head now.

I knew two things.

One, I was never going hiking alone again.

Two, pain. All I felt was pain.

Chapter Fifteen



Mags

I bent my head, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath, reminding myself of where I was—and who I was. It wasn't very often I'd hear the phantom cries during the day, but after Diana, I couldn't be surprised by anything anymore. Seconds ago, I'd heard a cry ring out through the air, but it was in my head.

My hell was in my head, the past haunting me, the present torturing me, the future looming over me, reminding me of all the lonely days to come.

Get a grip. Lock it in and shut it down.

I released the breath I'd been holding and lifted my head again, watching the cowboys work to move the herd into pasture three. Midnight huffed impatiently, clearly wanting to head back to the barn for the bushel of carrots she watched Jigs bring in earlier.

It was Friday.

None of us really wanted to be out here, but auction was next month, and we had to get the herd ready. In a few hours, the twins would head into town, Jigs would go over to Beau and Abbie's cabin for supper—which I declined to attend—Mason and Harmony would be in their home, and Val and Kings would spend the evening with the kids at the main house. As for me, I would be able to get a decent amount of sleep. My body had reached its limit, and I knew when my head it the pillow, I would pass out.

There was no other option—thank fuck.

I was settling into an old cycle, one my therapist wouldn't approve of.

I stayed awake until I couldn't. That way, I didn't get sucked into the nightmares. Before, they were replays of old combat missions, the ones that stuck with me, but now, Diana was mixed in, enduring pain I never wanted her to. I was half-tempted to call Grayson, to have him yell at me and pull me out the way I did for him last year when Carrie had been taken. His mind had warped the present and the past, forcing them together, and instead of watching himself be tortured by the terrorists who took him, it was Carrie.

He'd been sucked in, and his team called me, knowing I was the only person on the planet who would be able to pull him out.

I adjusted my hold on the reins and looked to the tree line, knowing what I had to do. I knew I had to talk to my therapist. I knew I had to keep Grayson in the loop, because it's what I expected of him, and he'd honored that tenfold.

You never take your own advice, man.

Both Grayson and Kings said those words to me—on the same night, in fact. Now, five years later, I still struggled with it.

Because you don't deserve a damn solution. You deserve to rot. You deserve to suffer. Especially after hurting Diana.

Weeks had passed, and still, I heard nothing—not a single whisper of her coming to visit the ranch. Guilt coated my tongue, vile and poisonous. Hurting her was the single greatest torture I'd ever had to suffer through, but knowing her relationship with everyone else on Hallow Ranch had been fractured because of our connection was a different kind of pain entirely.

The hair on the back of my neck shot pin straight as a second cry rang out through the trees.

Fuck.

Goddamn fuck.

That wasn't in my fucking head.

My eyes narrowed, scanning the mountain before snapping back over to the herd on the other side of the pasture. The rest of the cowboys were too far away to have heard the cries. I leaned back and blindly fished out the walkie from one of my saddle bags and radioed Jigs.

"Jigs. This is Mags. You copy? Over."

I heard a round of static. "You got Jigs. Over."

My eyes swung back to the mountain. "Are the girls hiking today?" Over."

"No," he answered. "Val and Harmony are in the town. Over."

My shoulders relaxed, but only slightly.

It was in my head.

"Wait—Mags. Do you copy? Over."

I brought the walkie up to my mouth. "Copy," I clipped.

"Mags—shit—" Jigs cut out, static following. My jaw tightened, the pain I'd been harboring for the last month becoming damn near unbearable. When Jigs' voice came across again, fear grabbed me by the throat, ready to choke what little life I had left. "Mags, Diana is hiking today. I repeat, *Diana is on the mountain*. Caleb just told me. Over."

My blood ran cold, and before I could think, I snapped the reins and shouted the command. Midnight took off instantly, hooves pounding as I steered her towards the base of the mountain, panic lodged in my throat.

Diana was on the mountain.

Diana was on the mountain, and she'd screamed—crying out for someone, anyone.

My firefly was in danger.

I snapped the reins again with one hand and lifted the walkie up once more, my body moving in time with my steed. "She's in trouble," I growled. "I'm going to find her. Over."

There was nothing but red in my vision as I urged Midnight to a halt and swung off, leading her to a tree. With eased practice, I tied her off on a low hanging branch and moved to the saddle bags, pulling out the satellite phone, a first aid kit, and my pistol.

"I'll be back, girl," I told my horse.

Then, I disappeared into the trees to find my woman.



I crouched down to my haunches, the shrubs giving me more than enough cover as I stared directly at a bear—the same bear that was supposed to be transferred off Hallow Ranch months ago. That didn't go as planned, seeing as how that entire crew was dead, their ashes on this very mountain. I stared at the beast, watching as it sniffed the ground and then plopped down in front of a berry bush.

Knowing the animal would be occupied for a while, I slowly backed away and moved east.

Once I was out of the bear's sight, I resumed tracking again. I'd spent the majority of my military career learning how to track, and after years of being on this ranch, I could track almost anything—including Diana. I stopped on the trail, my eyes landing on her footprints, and followed them for another twenty minutes until they veered off the trail, the tracks becoming messier, scattered throughout the dirt.

She had been in a panic, trying to run from something.

My mind immediately went back to the bear, the screams I'd heard echoing through the air ringing in my ears. "Fuck," I muttered, looking up the sky. She'd ran-from a *fucking grizzly*.

I whipped my hat off and ran my hand over my hair, visions of her scared out of her fucking mind--running from that damn beast taunting me. My chest began to heave, the red in my vision fading, replaced by black dots. My heart was pounding, and my hands began to tingle. In the distance, echoes of gunshots floated through the air, Grayson's voice at my side, barking out orders.

I was being sucked back in.

"Fuck!" I bit off through my teeth.

Lock it in.

Lock it in.

Lock it in.

Lock it in.

"Diana," I whispered, dropping my head. "Your only focus right now, Mags, is Diana. Find Diana."

Find Diana. Find Diana. Find Diana. Find Diana.

I inhaled a deep breath, held it for ten seconds, and let it go as I lifted my head and put my hat back on.

Find Diana. Find Diana. Find Diana. Find Diana.

I began moving again, stepping off the trail and scanning the forest floor for evidence of struggle. There was a bundle of pine needles shoved to my right, and down further, more shoved were to the left. As I ground my teeth together, I kept my focus on tracking her and, minutes later, I came to one the biggest pine trees on the mountain. It was one of my favorites, a landmark. I looked back, noting the destroyed wildflowers and crushed grass. My eyes narrowed, making out paw prints.

This must be where she'd spotted him.

The only positive I could take away from seeing the bear was that the beast wasn't covered in blood—Diana's blood. Which meant, by some miracle, she'd gotten away. I continued down the hill slowly, and at the halfway point, I froze, every inch of my body feeling like it was stabbed with hot pokers as I stared at the blue fabric hanging off a fallen tree.

Find Diana. Find Diana.

I moved, chanted those words over and over in my head, as I bent to grab the fabric. It was soft and stretchy, and I knew it had come from a pair of those damn fucking leggings. I'd only seen her in them a handful of times, and every time, I'd nearly give in to her, the temptation. However, finding a piece of said leggings on this hill made my stomach sink. I took a step back, refocusing, and after I moment, I saw it.

The path in which she'd fallen down the hill, gravity pulling her.

My stomach twisted, anger and fear boiling inside me, forming a toxin that seeped into my bloodstream. I bit down, grinding my teeth together as I descended the rest of the hill, chanting the same two words in my head.

Find Diana. Once I was at the base of the hill, I frantically scanned around for her, hoping to see her honey blonde within this deep sea of turning green. My throat tightened when I didn't see her, panic like a weight at the bottom of my gut, threatening to hold me down and suffocate me. The echoes of gunshots played in my head as I looked over my shoulder, my eyes tracking up the hill, following the disturbed path she'd slid down.

Fuck, my baby.

I knew, down to my broken damned soul, she was hurt—badly. A fall like that could've have killed her, and not finding her at the bottom gave me a flicker of hope she was able to scramble away. As the past tried to suck me back in, mixing with the heavy toxin of fear and panic, I looked straight ahead to the clearing currently blanketed in the autumn sun, its bright rays bouncing off the still-green grass. Keeping to the shadows, I scanned over the tree line on the opposite end, and then my eyes landed on a familiar teal backpack, my knees nearly giving out.

There, sitting against an old oak, was my firefly. Her head was tilted back as she looked up at something in the tree. For a moment, I let the cool rush of gratitude hit me, but it came to a screeching halt when I saw blood stains on her bright leggings.

There. Was. Blood. On. My. Woman. Her blood. Behind me, the talons of war latched on my to shoulder, digging into my flesh as shame whispered something in my ear. *"You couldn't even protect her here, in the middle of your sanctuary."*

With a growl, I rolled my neck and shouted her name.

"DIANA!"

Chapter Sixteen



Diana

A twig snapped on the other side of the clearing, and for the second time today, I was scared for my life. I don't know how long I'd been sitting here, trying to get my phone to turn on—which had gotten smashed somewhere along the way of me falling down the hill—-but hearing that twig snap had me paralyzed with cold, harsh fear.

I'd managed to pull myself up and hobble to the other side of the small clearing before sliding to the ground against a tree. From there, I finally mustered up the courage to look at my ankle. There was no blood, but I could feel the swelling inside my boot. I didn't have the energy to try and remove it. Instead, I assessed the rest of my body for injuries. My knee was cut, my leggings ripped in various places, but the biggest tear was at my knee. The wound was caked with dirt and dried blood. There was a significant cut on my right forearm, but nothing too major. My neck and head felt fine, but I still wasn't ruling out a concussion.

I kept my eyes on the shadows, looking for anything bear-shaped, and when nothing came, my shoulders sagged. I tilted my head back, looking up the tree, memorizing its beauty instead of focusing on the throbbing pain. "You're okay, Diana," I whispered, my voice trembling. "Everything is going to be okay. Caleb knows you're out here, and someone will come for you."

Not very convincing, Di.

Above, a cloud moved over the sun, taking its warm rays with it. I blinked away my somehow endless stream of tears to look up again, watching the turning leaves gently shift in the breeze. The green leaves were slowly being taken over by bright oranges, stunning golds, and deep reds. Even though I was in immense agony, and most likely my ankle was broken, at least I was surrounded by beauty. I looked over to my pack, my mouth dry, my stomach rumbling. I'd brought a protein bar to eat at the top of the mountain, along with a bottle of water. I didn't know how long I was going to be out here, and I definitely didn't need to open that bar if the bear was still around.

Something landed on a branch above me, the wood cracking. I looked back up to find the branch swaying harshly, disturbing the breeze and rocking the top of the tree in the opposite direction. A second later, the same hawk I'd seen before starting this disastrous hike was looking down at me, its yellow eyes bright in contrast to the now gray skies above.

"Hi," I croaked, giving the animal a smile. God, he or she was gorgeous.

The bird blinked, watching me with an eerie stillness that sent shivers across my arms, down my legs. It cocked its head to the side and from this angle, it looked as if he was frowning at me. "Great, even the hawk knows I'm a disappointment," I mumbled.

"Diana!" a deep voice roared, cutting through the air like a blade.

I righted my head again, a gasp leaving me as my eyes landed on a cowboy emerging from the trees—tall, broad. His hat kept his face shrouded in darkness, but I could feel his eyes, the heat of them.

He was burning me alive.

"Mags," I rasped, trying to sit up more.

"Don't move a fuckin' inch," he snarled as I caught a glimpse of his white teeth.

I froze, my eyes going wide. "But—"

He was nearly to me when he barked my name, causing me to jump. I clamped my mouth shut, watching him, and it wasn't until he was towering over me, chest heaving, jaw tight, that he growled, "Never, in my thirty-six years of life have I been so fuckin' terrified."

My heart squeezed.

"Never, Diana," he clipped, lowering to his haunches in front of me, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Mags—"

"Got blood on you," he growled. "Covered in blood and dirt, Diana." Those dark eyes dropped, scanning my body, and when they snapped back up to mine, he continued. "*What the hell were you thinking?*" "There was a bear," I whispered, my voice shaking.

"I'm aware," he clipped, eyes hard. "Saw him three clicks back. You don't ever—*ever* run from a fuckin' grizzly. You should know that."

I did. I did know that.

Suddenly, I was coated in shame, feeling small for the first time in a long time. Unable to handle his stare, I broke it, looking down to my lap. "I got scared," I whispered. "I-I was petrified."

The pain I'd been drowning in for the last few hours—or however long —-did nothing to distract me from the utter stupidity I now felt. The truth was, after all my years hiking this mountain, I'd never seen a bear of any kind on the ranch. Wolves, sure, but they didn't bother me. Bears? Bears scared the hell out of me. I'd had a client get mauled by one a few years ago, and seeing him, his skin ripped to shredded in that hospital bed gave me nightmare for over a month.

Mags' rough fingers gripped my chin, gently urging me to lift my head. My lips parted, finding him inches from my face now as he carefully avoided touching me anywhere else. "Fear, Firefly, leads to stupid mistakes," he rumbled. "Fear leads to death."

Glass appeared in my throat, and I could no longer speak. All I could do was stare at this cowboy, the one who'd made me feel alive and killed me all in the same breath. His eyes scanned every inch of my face. "Never been so grateful to whatever higher power is up there," he murmured. "Never been so fuckin' grateful and so fucking pissed at you."

A tear, hot as fire, leaked onto my cheek, sliding down, burning me almost as much as his touch. He watched it, his eyes still hard, still ice cold. He dropped my chin and rose back up to his feet, pulling out a walkie. "Jigs, this is Mags, Over," he said, looking over his shoulder, checking our surroundings.

Static filled the air before I heard the old man's voice. "Mags. Thank God. Did you find her? Is she okay? Over."

Mags looked down at me, his jaw tight. "Found her. No, she isn't okay. Taking her with me. Send Denver. Over."

"Copy. Over and out."

He pocketed the walkie and pulled out his pistol, pulling back the clip and loading it. "Can you walk?" he asked, not looking at me.

It took great effort to answer, and by the time I did, it looked as if he was about to lose his patience. "No," I croaked. "I think—I think I broke my ankle."

"You didn't. If you did, you'd still be screaming in pain or passed out from it," he confirmed, twisting the gun and holding the handle out to me. "Take this."

I looked down at it and then up at him. "Why are you—"

"Can't hold a gun and carry you at the same time. Need you to hold that just in case we see the bear again," he cut me off.

My stomach twisted. "I'm not shooting that baby," I breathed in horror.

He stared at me. "Diana, that *bear* chased you down, and you're on the damn ground, covered in blood and dirt."

"So you've mentioned," I quipped.

In a flash, he was in front of me again, my jaw engulfed in his hand as he snarled, "You aren't supposed to ever be covered in blood and dirt, Diana Harper."

I flinched and opened my mouth to speak, but he stopped me, his fingers tightening, digging into my cheeks.

"You're colors and smiles. You're beauty and grace. You are clean and whole," he pushed through his teeth, his body shaking with fury, my heart seconds away from stopping. *"You do not belong on the ground covered in blood and dirt."*

For only a moment, the universe allowed me to have a glimpse at the man I'd fallen for all those years ago. Underneath his tainted silence, his anger, his shield was nothing but dread. It lingered in his dark pools, beckoning me to join, to drag me down into the depths of his broken soul. It challenged me, knowing that it would take me years—perhaps the rest of my life--to put him back together, to make him whole again.

Mags shoved the gun into my hands, the barrel against his chest. "If I was half sane, I might make you pull the trigger, baby," he murmured, the darkness in his eyes changing as they dropped to my lips as I stiffened. "Might ask you to put me out of my misery so I don't have to see you like this anymore."

"Mags," I rasped, feeling the weight of the weapon in my hands, the raw, unchecked power of it.

"Thought I was used to the pain," he continued, as if he hadn't broken what was left of me. "But right here, right now, this pain is unlike anything I've ever felt."

I sucked in a breath, more tears falling now.

"Killin' me," he whispered, his voice more jagged than more. "Killin' me every single day, Firefly."

"Please," I begged. I don't know what for, though. For mercy. For his kiss. For his heart. For him to end my agony. For a chance to make him whole again, to prove he was worthy of it. He slowly dropped his hand then. "This might hurt like a bitch, so forgive me," he said gruffly, shifting to my side, getting ready to pick me up.

"My pack," I rushed out, looking over to it.

Without a word, he went to grab it, putting it on his back before coming back to me. "Lift away from the tree," he ordered gruffly. I did as he instructed, feeling his strong arms slide around me and under my knees.

The number on the scale I saw this morning popped into my head, reminding me of all the damaged I'd done these last few weeks. "Are you sure you can—"

His eyes cut to mine, sharp as a blade.

"Never mind," I squeaked.

Then, I was in the air—in his arms.

I expected him to take the path I'd originally was set to take before falling down the hill, but he didn't. Instead, he veered in the opposite direction, cutting across the clearing and not making a sound. I stared up at him, my arms wrapped around his neck, feeling his heat, his strength.

"Thank you," I whispered to his handsome profile.

He said nothing for a long while, carefully weaving me through the trees, making sure not even a leaf brushed my head. I took his silence as my answer and focused on the path he took; it wasn't a marked trail and I was lost.

"Don't thank me again," he said, his words so low, I'd almost missed them.

My head snapped up. "What?" I rasped.

He looked down at me, keeping his steady pace. "You heard me."

Silence fell over us once more. The only thing I could hear was my heart thundering in my ears as it climbed up my throat. Not even the songbirds could distract me from the storm brewing inside me. Then, a few minutes later, we emerged on the other side of the mountain, the bark of some of the trees still charred and blackened. Suddenly, the heat of the sun that had poked out from the clouds did nothing to chase away the chill skating over me. I shivered in Mags' arms, my eyes scanning all around.

"I never come over here," I said softly, my ankle throbbing more now than before. I winced, and Mags came to stop.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"My ankle."

He twisted his neck to look at it, a grunt rumbling up from his chest. "Do you like those boots?"

"Y-yes."

He looked back to me, studying me for a moment before he muttered, "I'll buy you some more then."

Fear coiled around my throat. "Is it bad?"

"Won't know until I cut it off you," he answered, moving again, stepping onto Jane Langston's trail, the small creek flowing, healthy and strong. Even in a drought, Jane's creek would flow. This was where her spirit lingered, where her soul danced and sang. After the fire, during one of many check-ins with Valerie, she'd told me about seeing Denver and Mason's mom while she was passed out from the smoke. She said it was the most surreal experience, and months later, Mason's wife, Harmony, had her own experience with Jane. She watched over her boys, loving them always.

Jane Langston, the angel of Hallow Ranch.

An engine hummed in the distance, and I squinted, making out a four wheeler on the other side of the tree line, Denver sitting on top. Then, I heard horses and panic swallowed me whole. Mags was going to leave me with them. He was going to leave me.

"Mags?"

Something in my voice made him slow, coming to a full stop just before we exited the forest. "What is it?" he asked, looking at me.

My hand on the back of his neck shifted, snaking around and up to cup his cheek, the rough hair of his beard scratching my palm. He stiffened, his jaw jumping underneath my hand. "Don't leave me," I pleaded. "Please, don't. Not now."

"Not going to let you out of my sight, Diana," he murmured roughly.

I nodded, relief washing over me like rain shower in the dead heat of summer.

"Mags!"

Both of our heads turned, finding Denver walking through the trees, his gray eyes filled with worry. "Diana," he pushed out, rushing over to us. "Thank fuck." He gently touched my cheek, his face twisted with a mix of fear and concern as he took in the state of me. "What the hell happened?" he asked, looking at Mags.

"I was stupid," I began, and Denver's eyes cut back to me. "There was a bear—"

"—I'm going to kill it," a voice said from behind Denver. "First our cattle, and now this."

Mason appeared a second later, looking more pissed off than his brother. His features softened slightly at the sight of me.

"No one is killing that baby," I snapped, pain be damned.

I felt all three pairs of eyes on me then, Mags' arms tightening.

"That bear is not a baby," Mags deadpanned. "It's fully grown."

"It's an innocent creature," I countered.

Denver looked to the heaven's. "Jesus fuckin' Christ, you sound like Val."

"And Harm," Mason mumbled. "She told me she'd divorce me if I ever killed a wolf or a bear."

"I'll sue you all," I warned. "Leave that baby alone. It just scared me, and I was in fight or flight."

The Langston brothers glared at me. "You ran?" Denver quipped at the same time Mason said, "Diana, you never run from a grizzly."

"That's enough," Mags snarled. Both men looked at him before he started rattling off orders. "Need to get her out of here so I can look at her ankle. Mason, go get her car. It's on the west side. Bring it to my cabin. Tell one of the twins to get Midnight. Denver, help me with Diana." Before they could respond, he moved, walking through them and out of the forest. On the horizon, I saw another horse—Beau's---barreling towards us, a river of hair flying behind its rider.

Abbie.

"Easy, Spirit, easy," she cooed as the horse came to stop a few feet from us. Her brown eyes flashed as they landed on me. She swung off the steed with ease before running to us. "Diana, what the hell?" she breathed out, grabbing my face and sweeping some of my hair back. "What happened?"

"Abbie." Mags' voice was gentle but laced with impatience as she looked up at him. "Need to get her to my cabin, yeah? You can either help me with that or move."

His cabin?

Mags was taking me to his cabin.

"Of course," she said. "Whatever you both need, I'm here. The rest of the family will meet us there."

What?

Mags was moving again, heading to the four wheeler. "Denver," he called, turning around.

"Right here," the ranch owner replied as his brother took off on his horse, heading back towards the main house.

"Take her for a moment," Mags ordered.

"I can stand—"

Mags cut me off as he growled to Denver, "She doesn't *touch* the ground, do you understand me?"

Oh, God.

I was transferred into Denver's arms, and as Mags got onto the vehicle, I slowly looked to my friend. His eyes weren't on me. No, they were zeroed in on his oldest friend, the gray in his eyes swirling with bewilderment.

Oh, God. He knew. Oh my God. He saw right through Mags.

Denver then looked at me, his brows coming together. I'd known Denver for as long time, and most of that time, he'd never scare me. Right now, in the moment, with *that* look painted on his face, I was scared shitless.

He saw right through both of us.

"Den," I muttered, my chest beginning to heave.

He said nothing, staring at me as if he was seeing me in a new light. Abbie appeared then. "We gotta get her to the cabin, Denver," she said softly. That seemed to snap him out of it, and he inhaled sharply through his nose and nodded. I looked to Abbie as he walked over to Mags.

"Thank you," I mouthed to her.

She gave me a small smile. "I'll follow."

"We'll follow," Denver corrected as he transferred me back to Mags. I tried to move to put both legs on either side of the seat, but Mags stopped me. "No," he stated, keeping me in a bridal style hold, my legs draped over his stretched out arm.

I looked down to the handle bars and then back up to him. "Are you sure you can drive like this?"

"Drove through a field littered with fuckin' land mines," he answered, looking over to his boss and tipping his hat.

Then, we were gone, heading to his cabin.

I may not have realized it right then, but this was the moment my life changed. Nothing—and I mean nothing--would ever be the same.

Chapter Seventeen



Diana

I'd made a pact with myself the day Denver told me Mags was moving out of the bunkhouse. That pact mainly consisted of not giving into my curiosity and staying the hell away from Mags' cabin. I didn't need to know what his home looked like, didn't need to know how it smelled on the inside, how he decorated. I didn't need to know any of that stuff, because I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, those things would only make me fall deeper. I had already been drowning.

Now, after everything, I wasn't sure if I ever wanted to come up for air.

Mags turned the four-wheeler slightly as we came into his field, his cabin standing tall in the middle of it, a smaller building at the back. It was a log cabin, sturdy and magnificent, just like him. There was a wraparound porch with two wooden rocking chairs perched on one side, a small table between them. The roof was metal, painted dark red, and all the windows had matching shutters. The sun was beginning to set now, giving the cabin a halo, making it look like its own slice of heaven. But I knew the truth.

Inside this beautiful cabin was where this cowboy battled his biggest demons.

Nothing about this cabin was his heaven.

Mags pulled the vehicle up to the porch before shutting it off and pulling out the key. "Hold on to me," he ordered.

Immediately, I wrapped my hands around his neck again as he lifted me so he could swing his leg over. Once he was on the ground, a small grunt left him, and guilt settled on my shoulders.

"I can hobble—"

"Now is not the time to test my fuckin' patience, Diana," he warned, not looking at me.

I shut my mouth and focused on his cords of his neck as he walked up the steps, the sound of his boots echoing across the wooden floors. As he adjusted his hold on me to open the door, I had only a few seconds to admire the delicate carvings etched into it before it swung wide, revealing his home. My eyes landed on the furniture first, taking in a long couch with dark blue cushions, a stunning wooden coffee table in front, on the other side of it a set of matching chairs in a similar style to the couch. Beyond his

living room furniture was a stone fireplace, a massive, dark wooden mantel above it, where three picture frames sat. Behind the couch was a small desk in front of a window, a thick leather journal on top, a single pen beside it.

Mags crossed the threshold, taking me to the couch as the clean scent of his home hit me. "Easy," he murmured as my body settled into the cushions. They felt so good, a whimper escaped me.

His head snapped up, the brim of his hat hovering over my forehead. "What? What is it?" he demanded, fearful he might've just hurt me.

I shook my head. "It feels good," I whispered, holding his gaze. "Your couch is so soft."

He said nothing, and outside, the others were arriving. He looked up to the door and then back to me. "They're going to hover."

What?

"What? What do you mean?"

He lifted his hand, tucking some of my hair behind my ear, stroking my ear lobe. "All of them. They'll hover and fuss over you because that's what you deserve, but the second you get overwhelmed, Diana, tell me," he pressed. "I'll send them away."

I stared at him, his dark eyes, tanned skin, dark furrowed brows, and untrimmed beard making my skin hot. "Why would you need to send them away?" I asked softly.

"Because you endured a trauma, and a crowd of people won't do anything to help you process it," he answered, his hand moving to cup my face. I wanted to tell him to stop, that we shouldn't be doing this after the boundaries we'd set.

But his touch felt too good, the rough skin of his hand, his heat.

I was starved for it.

His thumb swept across my face. "You tell me what you need, and it will be done, yeah?"

You.

I just need you.

The words were on the tip of my tongue, but I quickly swallowed them back down as Denver's voice cut through air. "You check out her ankle yet?" he barked.

Mags' eyes shot up, glaring at his boss. "Just got her settled, Kings."

Denver moved around the couch, looking at me. He was running on fear. I was his friend, someone he cared for deeply, and I'd been hurt—on his ranch. In his smoke gray eyes, all I could see was guilt. "You want me to do it, or do you want Mags—"

"-Mags," I rasped without thought. "I-I want Mags. Please."

The weight of my words settled on my shoulders after they left my mouth, but it was too late to take them back. Mags' hand, which was now on my shoulder, tightened ever so slightly.

Den's gray eyes flashed as he looked to his cowboy and then back to me. I held his gaze, silently pleading with him. Thankfully, he just nodded, giving in before moving into the kitchen. My eyes followed, hoping like a fool I would be able to have a conversation with him.

Then, the kitchen came into view, the simple L-shaped and butcher block counter tops reminding me of the kitchen in the main house. Instead of green cabinets, though, there were exposed shelves, stacked all the way up to the ceiling, anchored by metal piping. Mags' dishes, from his dinner plates to his coffee mugs were on display.

Though it was something so simple, I felt as if I was seeing a part of him I'd never seen.

It was just another cold, harsh reminder my love for him was built on a foundation of delusion and hope. I knew nothing about this man, but over the years, in my solitude, I liked to imagine how he would live if he'd ever leave Hallow Ranch. I'd always pictured his home to be simple but rustic. And his dishes—-I expected them to be plain, gray or black.

I stared at the stack of dark blue plates beside Denver's head.

I guess I'd been wrong.

"Diana."

I blinked, re-focusing back on Mags, who was now at the other end of the couch, looking down at my boots with a furrowed brow. "Y-yes?"

Mags looked back up to me. "Forgive me," he murmured, snaking his hand underneath the bottom of my calf, lifting it. My foot hung, and I bit down on the inside of my cheek to stifle the sound. "Scale of one to ten, how much pain?"

"Five," I pushed out, looking up to ceiling when he flicked open his pocket knife. "Please don't cut me." My plea was barely above a whisper, and I wasn't sure if he'd heard it until he vowed, "Never."

I dared to look down again, my chin tucked close to my chest as he wiggled the blade underneath my laces, the light from outside reflecting off it. In one, swift pull, he yanked up, cutting them all and I felt relief rush through me. "Oh," I moaned, closing my eyes. His fingers on the back of my leg flexed as his other hand worked to cut the boot off.

"Is it broken?" This came from Abbie, who appeared by my head, her arms wrapped around her body, her brow pinched with worry. I noticed she was wearing one of Beau's flannels, her hair braided over her shoulder now. My eyes met hers, and she gave me a flat, pained smile. "No," Mags answered, stabbing the knife into the top of his table, the blade going one fourth of the way in. He placed his hand below the heel of my hiking boot, the leather on top now sliced open, and begin wiggling it gently to ease it off me.

"Diana, if you can bend your foot, do it now," he instructed, his eyes on his work. Denver returned, first aid kit in hand.

All of us watched, the tension in the room thick as I slowly bent my foot down, pointing my toes to the fireplace. Thankfully, the pain wasn't bad. Not great, but it was manageable. Another plus it wasn't, in fact, broken. However, my foot was swollen beyond belief.

Mags, on his knees beside the couch, reached over the coffee table to snag the spare pillow on the chair. He placed it on top of the armrest by the fireplace and, ever so gently, eased my foot down. "Good?" he inquired, finally looking at me, his eyes soft.

I nodded, afraid to speak.

Abbie lowered herself to my level, putting her hand on my arm. I twisted my neck to look at hair. Emotion painted her face. "Harmony and Val are rushing here."

My tongue felt like a thousand pounds as I breathed, "I don't think—"

Abbie leaned into my space. "Don't fight this," she said smoothly. "Let us take care of you."

"Mags is going to wrap your foot, and when the girls get here, they'll get you cleaned up," Denver informed me, handing Mags the first-aid kit. Abbie and I didn't miss the look shared between the two cowboys.

Then, just for the sake of my own comfort and sanity, Abbie whispered something in my ear. "Everything is going to be okay."



The hot water steamed up the cozy, rustic bathroom as I sat on the toilet lid, staring at the floor. Val leaned over the edge of the tub, checking the temperature, Harmony on the counter top. Abbie had gone to fetch me some new clothes. Before the girls arrived, Mags had given me some medication for the pain, holding a glass of water to my lips, not letting me do a thing. My protests didn't mean shit to him. He'd only said my name, leaving the rest unsaid as Denver watched us from across the living room.

When Harmony and Val arrived, the ranch owner immediately went to his wife, kissing her forehead and murmuring something in her ear. Her green eyes widened before they swung over to me, horror and confusion painted over her face.

Of course, before I could let it sink in, Mags shifted, blocking the view and putting his hand on my neck. "You say the word," he whispered, his voice jagged again, "I'll send them away. All of them."

That was ten minutes before I was taken into the bathroom, and everyone was here now—including Chase, and Thomas was on his way.

Apparently, Jigs had done the honors of informing the Sheriff who then notified my paralegal. At this point, I could only assume Emma had been informed and I wouldn't put it past her to hightail her butt to Hallow Ranch from Denver.

The bathroom was silent, and despite the warmth the water created, I still shivered.

"Alright," Val said quietly, flicking the water off her hand as I looked up at her. "The bath is ready."

I nodded and sat up, moving my arms to take my shirt off. I winced, a sharp pain shooting through my right side.

"Whoa, Di. Slow down," Harmony rasped, her voice soothing as she hopped down from the counter, her Docs hitting the floor softly. She looked at her sister-in-law as she came to me.

"I got it," I said, shaking my head. "Just sore, that's all."

"Diana, look at me," Harmony ordered.

I tipped my head back, instantly reading the look on her face, the understanding in her blue eyes as her fire red curls created a halo around her head. "Don't make light of this," she warned gently. Silence drifted between us. Harmony, more so then anyone else I knew, had endured a lifetime of hell before meeting Mason by chance. She had been tortured, beaten, and raped by her ex-husband. She'd also suffered the loss of her unborn daughter at his hand. There was a reason her voice had a permanent rasp to it, a constant reminder of her past.

Because of her strength and all she'd overcome, I listened to her. "Alright," I said.

"Now, Val and I are here for you-nothing else," she began, looking at her sister-in-law, my dear friend. When she looked back to me, she continued. "You absolutely can get undressed by yourself, but speaking from experience, Di, it's going to hurt—badly."

A lump formed in my throat.

"You've endured enough pain," she rasped, tears pooling in her eyes. She had no idea.

I felt my own tears then, my eyes stinging.

"Let us help you," Val pleaded, coming to us and grabbing my hand, squeezing. Tears were already falling down her cheeks. "Please, Diana."

Her words—both of their words—had a double meaning behind them, and it broke me. Therefore, my next words drifted from my lips on a broken, cracked whisper. "I don't know—" My breath hitched. "I don't know what to do." My face crumbled then. "I don't—I can't—"

Valerie had my face in her hands then, hers inches from mine. "Let. Us. Help," she said, her voice cracking too. "Let us in."

I nodded, my hand slapping over my mouth to stifle the whimpering cry climbing up my throat.

By the time the girls managed to peel my clothes off me and ease me into the water, Abbie was back. Valerie had pulled the shower curtain closed three fourths of the way, leaving my wrapped ankle exposed, resting of the edge of the tub.

"Okay," Abbie breathed. "There wasn't much to choose from."

I heard Val wince. "Sorry, I haven't done laundry in a few days."

My voice was thick when I responded. "Whatever you have is fine, I'm sure."

"I got some PJ shorts and a t-shirt," Abbie continued.

"Good," Harmony added. "Loose clothes are best."

"Do you need help washing, Di?" Val asked softly through the curtain.

I looked down at myself, knowing if I wasn't so exhausted from the days events, I would've been ashamed of them seeing me naked. "No, that's alright."

"Where the heck does Mags keep the soap?" Abbie muttered as I heard her rummaging through his cabinets.

"Oh!" Harmony said. "He keeps all his extra supplies in the closet at the end of the hall."

"How do you know that?"

"I helped him put it all away after Jigs' last trip," Harm answered. *So that was who bought his groceries.* "Be back." I heard the bathroom door open and close.

"Do you want to wash your hair?" Val asked.

I wanted to laugh. "Yeah," I answered. "Can someone bring me a cup?"

"I will," Abbie said. The door opened and closed again, leaving Val and I alone. I saw her shadow move, getting closer and then lowering as she took a seat on the floor. A second later, the curtain was moved and her arm appeared on the tub ledge, palm upwards and waiting. My lip wobbled as I took it. Our fingers intertwined, and I let out a breath at the same time she did.

More silence.

I was focused on the ripples in the water when she finally spoke, asking the one question I never expected.

"How long have you been in love with him?"

I looked up to the ceiling, leaning against the tile, the pain in my heart more intense than the pain radiating throughout my body. "Over a decade, Val."

Her hand twitched. "You mean...?"

An unsteady breath left me then, a single tear sliding down the side of my side, down my neck, over my collarbone, heading directly to the organ that damn cowboy owned. "Yeah," I rasped. "From the moment I saw him."

"Oh, Diana," she whispered.

"Believe me, I tried to stop it, but it was too late."

She was silent.

"I'm pathetic," I confessed.

"No," she said, her hand squeezing mine. "Nothing about falling in love is pathetic—nothing about love is pathetic."

"I—"

"I didn't want to fall in love with Denver, Diana," she cut me off, her words shocking me. "He was the last man I ever wanted to be with. He was rude. Honestly, Di, he was an asshole. He treated me so horribly, and of course, he was well within his rights. I was trying to take his home."

I said nothing, waiting.

"But then, something changed. Something shifted between us, and suddenly, the cowboy I hated was the only person I could think about, aside from my mom," she explained, pausing for a brief moment. "You know, she saw it before I did."

"Saw what?" I asked.

"The love between Den and me. She was all the way in Texas, dealing with cancer treatments, and she saw it, Di. *She felt it*."

I looked down, closing my eyes.

"Nothing about love is pathetic, Diana. It's the strongest force in the world," she whispered. "How can you fight something like that?"

"He doesn't love me back," I croaked as I dropped my head.

She was quiet for a few long seconds. "If you truly believe that, Diana, you aren't truly seeing him."

I ignored the pain in my shoulder as I ripped the shower curtain back with my free hand. Valerie jumped, eyes wide, as I breathed out, "Are you telling me you've seen it? Truly? Because when he showed up at my house to deal with my ex—"

My friend's jaw dropped to the floor, and she shot to her knees, releasing my hand and bracing hers on the tub. "When Mags *what?*"

I stared up at her, my heart thundering in my ears. "He came for me," I whispered.

I watched the seven thousand stages of shock run across her face before she uttered, tripping over her words, "M-Mags left Hallow Ranch?"

Just then, the doorknob twisted, swinging wide to reveal Abbie and Harmony standing in the doorway, jaws slack, eyes wide. The silence was deafening, only to be broken my Harmony when she rasped, "Mags crossed the property line for you?"

Abbie put her free hand in her hair, shaking her head. "You didn't—you didn't tell me that."

"Wait, you knew about Mags and Diana?" Valerie cut in. I mentally kicked myself, instantly hearing the hurt in her voice. For years, Val and I were like two peas in a pod, but for the last few months, a gap had formed between us—because of me. Because of my fear.

"I didn't tell anyone," I replied quietly, completely forgetting that I was naked, my imperfect body on display for these three gorgeous women.

Harmony was still staring at me like she'd never seen me before, like I'd grown four heads and a tail.

"Harm?" Val called softly.

"Here, let's get out of the hall," Abbie suggested, putting her hand on Harm's back and ushering her inside. Harmony only took two steps, and Abbie had to squeeze around her to get into the bathroom. Abbie hopped up on the counter, curling one of her long, toned legs underneath her as her eyes bounced back and forth between Harm and I.

"Harmony," I murmured.

That seems to snap her out of it, and she blinked, her head shaking in disbelief. "I'm sorry—I just..." She trailed off. "I just can't believe he left the property—I mean, I always imagined him only doing it to protect someone he cares for, but..." She left the rest to hang in the air.

Valerie turned back to me. "Diana, why do you think—"

"He told me no, Valerie," I confessed sharply, tired of this day, tired of reliving this conversation, as if I hadn't spent countless hours going over every single detail of every interaction I had with that cowboy over the last decade.

I couldn't look at their faces anymore as I slowly shut the curtain before sinking down into the tub, hoping the coverage of the bubbles and warm water would drown out the screams coming from my heart.

Chapter Eighteen



Mags

"As if today couldn't get any fuckin' worse," Lawson drawled, a toothpick hanging from his lips as he leaned over my porch railing, his eyes on the sleek Volvo pulling up and parking behind Diana's Mercedes. "Got a fuckin' suit showing up after a badge." His eyes cut over to where Bowen stood at the base of the porch steps, dressed in boots, dark jeans, and his uniform shirt, his badge and gun strapped to his hip. Things between Hallow Ranch and the Sheriff were still tense after Abbie's shit went down. Chase withheld critical information from us and led to Abbie getting kidnapped.

The driver's side door opened, and a young man, around the twins' age, stepped out. He closed the door, coming directly over to us, his dark rimmed glasses aimed in my direction. He was dressed in a light blue button up and gray suit pants. He looked like a young Clark Kent. He paid no attention to us cowboys and addressed the Sheriff.

"Where is she?" he demanded, his voice tight.

Chase jerked his chin toward where I leaned against the frame of my front door, making sure no man entered my home while the wives took care of my firefly. "Inside, getting cleaned up," the Sheriff answered.

The man's jaw tightened and my stomach twisted, wondering who the hell this man was to Diana.

"Who the hell are you?" Lance asked, rising from one of my rocking chairs, his face guarded.

The suit's eyes shot up, glaring at the cowboy. "Thomas."

Just then, Kings rounded the side of the house, pulling his cell away from his face. He tipped his hat to the man. "Thomas," he greeted, knowing exactly who this man was.

My gut twisted, reminding me, once again, there were so many things about Diana's world I didn't know—things I didn't deserved to know. And fuck me, I still wanted to.

"Denver," Thomas said, sounding relieved and walking over to shake my boss' hand. "What happened?"

"Don't know all the details yet," Kings replied, shooting a look over to me. I bit down, grinding my teeth as Lawson moved closer to me, his body on alert at this stranger's presence. "Once Diana is settled, I'm sure we'll find out," Kings assured.

"Does she need to go to the hospital?"

"No," I answered gruffly, pushing off the frame and walking to the top of the porch steps. "She stays here."

Thomas looked me up and down, his brow pinched together in curiosity. "You're Mags."

I stiffened, keeping my face unreadable. "You know me?" I prompted.

The man looked offended. "I know everyone on Hallow Ranch," he said, jerking his thumb to Kings. "Ranch owner." He gestured to the twins, who were now on either side of me. "Tweedledee and Tweedle Dumb, Lawson and Lance." He twisted his torso, pointing to the cowboys coming to the cabin on horseback on the other side of the field. "Mason, Denver's bother, and Beau."

"Lance," Lawson gritted.

"Yup," he said, popping the "p" as they glared down at Thomas, anger radiating from both of them.

I was too worried about my firefly to care about their feelings, but this distraction could be somewhat entertaining.

"You think those glasses would look good on me?" Lawson asked, taking a single step down, his brother following.

Lance clicked his tongue. "Nah, they should burn with him."

I said nothing, watching Kings lip curl. "Chill out," he warned the twins. Thomas looked at Kings and then back to the twins, his eyes filled with panic behind his lenses.

"Nah, Den," Lawson drawled, pointing at Thomas with his toothpick as he kept his eyes on our boss. "It's one thing taking bullshit from a cop." Chase stepped forward, his eyes hard. They flicked to me for just a moment, flashing with something I couldn't recognize, before focusing back on the twins.

"It's something else entirely when we have to take shit from *a fuckin*" *suit*," Lance spat, finishing his brother's thought.

"Boys...," Chase warned.

Behind everyone, Beau and Mason were still approaching, the familiar sound of hooves drumming against the soil filling my ears.

Lance cocked his head at the Sheriff. "If you think we're going to give you even *an ounce of respect* after the shit you pulled, Bowen, you're even a bigger dumbass than I had you pegged for."

Mason and Beau eased both of their horses to a stop as they joined us, their faces guarded underneath their cowboy hats.

"What's going on?" Mason asked.

Beau paid attention to no one but Chase, the ice in his blue eyes visible underneath the shadow of his hat. His clean-shaven jaw was tight, the muscle jumping as he turned Spirit to face the Sheriff. "The fuck are you going here?" he clipped.

Chase turned his head, glaring at Beau. "I'm here for my fucking friend, Marks. Fuck off."

"Awe, how nice of you to give a damn about Diana, but not Abbie. Right?"

Fuck.

I shot a look to Kings.

We needed to shut this shit down. Beau would kill Chase if given the chance, and while I didn't blame the man, I couldn't let it happen. Chase, despite his past mistakes, was a good man. He also meant something to

Diana which meant I had to give a damn about him. "Beau," I clipped. His eyes sliced over to me. "Cool it."

Thomas looked over his shoulder and then back to the twins, his skin pale now. "I came here for my boss," he stammered. "No one else."

I blinked. Wait—Diana was his boss?

Lance began spouting off again. "I don't give a shit. You don't come on this ranch insult the cowboys who run it—"

Beau pulled out his gun, loading a bullet in the chamber. "What did I tell you, Bowen? I told you I would kill you if I ever saw you again."

"You wanna play that game with me, Marks?" Chase clipped, his hand on his own gun.

Mason leaned forward on his saddle, his forearms resting on the horn as he chewed his gum. Clearly, he was entertained.

"Maybe we need to get that fire started, brother," Lawson suggested darkly, looking at his twin. "Have ourselves a little bonfire tonight."

Lance took a step down. "That sounds like a swell idea"

"A suit and a cop," Lawson growled. "Tweedledee and Tweedle Dumb."

Beau started to raise his gun at Chase, a murderous snarl on his face.

"Enough."

One word.

One word, and all eyes were on me.

Mason smirked.

Fuckin' bastard.

The door opened and a second later, Harmony was beside me. All the men stared up at her as she shook her head. "What the hell is wrong with you all?" she rasped. "A woman we all care about is in pain, and you're all out here like stupid damn men arguing about the past, licking your fragile egos."

I looked down at her, wanting nothing more than to kick all of them out so I could take care of Diana myself.

My sanity was at the edge of the cliff, and if this fuckin' bullshit continued, I would jump.

"Little Song," her husband began.

She pointed at him. "And you are just sitting on top of that horse, letting it happen, Mase," she accused, disappointment laced in her voice.

He shut his mouth, staring at her. The twins, who now faced us, looked up at her with regret. Lance was the first one to speak. "We were—"

"The last time everyone on this ranch was fighting like this, I had just arrived," she reminded everyone.

I looked to my boots, remembering that day, remembering her confession.

"Every single one of you didn't trust me— not until I told you what I'd gone through," she rasped.

Mason was off his horse, coming to her now. "Harmony."

She ignored him. "When you learned I'd gone through hell, all of you stopped fighting," she snapped, turning her body and gesturing to the door. "Diana is walking through the depths of her own damn hell as we speak, and this is what I come outside to find."

My head snapped up, staring at Harmony as my insides burned me from the inside out, her words ringing in my head.

Diana is walking through the depths of her own damn hell as we speak. Diana is walking through the depths of her own damn hell as we speak. Diana is walking through the depths of her own damn hell as we speak. Diana is walking through the depths of her own damn hell as we speak. Diana is walking through the depths of her own damn hell as we speak.

"Sis," Kings tried, but she ignored him too, looking at me.

"She's asking for you, Mags."

I was back in the house, kicking the door shut before she finished. Valerie was in the kitchen with Abbie, their soft whispers coming to a halt as they both turned to look at me.

"Hi, Mags," Valerie greeted softly, studying me intently.

Jaw painfully tight, I tipped my hat to both of them. "Where is she?"

"Spare bedroom," Abbie answered.

I said nothing else, prowling down the hallway, my footsteps echoing through my home. I braced myself, unsure of what I should expect.. I just hoped all the blood and dirt was off her. If I had to spend another second of my life seeing her like that, like she'd been in the same war zones I'd been in, I would kill someone. I stopped in the doorway, finding her dressed in lilac PJ shorts and a cream shirt—Valerie's, I presumed. That blonde hair, only a small contribution to my addiction, was damp and braided over her shoulder. She leaned against the headboard, pillows behind her back, three underneath her foot. Her hands were folded in her lap, fingers laced together, but her thumb was moving back and forth, as if she was trying to self-sooth. She wasn't looking at me, but at the painting on the wall across from the bed, hanging over the dresser.

"Pretty," she whispered, sensing my presence.

Yes, yes she fuckin' was.

This was the most natural I'd seen her, and I was struggling not to fall to my damn knees, to give in to every single want—need—I had for her. Prettiest damn thing I'd ever seen. I'd been all over this damn planet, and nothing—no one—could compare. "May I come in?" I asked, my voice gruff, thick with a mix of agony and need.

She looked confused when those hazel eyes finally landed on me. "This is your cabin," she said.

"And for the time being, this is your room," I gently clarified. "Do you want me in or not?"

Pain flashed across her beauty as she nodded. Slowly, I stepped inside and pulled off my hat, holding it to my chest and ignoring the organ pounding inside of it. Her skin was clean now and I could breathe slightly easier, but the bruising on her thigh and the cuts up and down her arms made the knife in my gut sink that much deeper.

"You look tired."

I blinked, my eyes snapping up from her legs to meet hers. Her face was soft, her brows slightly bunched in concern. "What?" I asked.

She cleared her throat. "You look exhausted, Mags," she noted, her voice stronger.

My body was running on fumes of fear and adrenaline, but I knew it was only a matter of time before I passed out. The last time I'd gone this long without any kind of rest was overseas, in the middle of a desert. My squadron and I were under attack for six days straight, deep in enemy territory. While our lives were on the line, some bastards in suits over in D.C. spent five of those days weighing the consequences of sending in backup, not to mention air cover.

"I'm alright," I told her, the phantom pain on my left side making itself known for the first time in weeks.

My firefly stared at me for some time, and I let her, needing anything from her, even if it was just her gaze. "Mags," she began tentatively, "I can have Thomas or Chase take me home."

I stiffened.

No. Hell the fuck no.

She continued talking, as if she hadn't just scared the shit out of me for the second time today. "It might be for the best anyways. You need your rest, and the last thing I want to be is a bother to you."

I wanted her to be my only bother, for the rest of my damn life.

"I suggest," I started on a low growl, getting her attention, "that you snap that pretty little mouth shut."

"W-what?"

"You're testing my patience again," I pushed out.

"I was just suggesting—"

"—something stupid," I finished for her. "You were suggesting I let another man take you out of my home after carrying you down a damn mountain."

She flinched. "Mags—"

"You aren't fuckin' leaving, Diana," I declared, putting my hat on the hook on the wall. I'd put one up in every room. Her chest began to heave as I kicked the door shut and made my way to her.

"Mags," she breathed.

I was to the bed, and before I could think differently, I leaned over her as she sank down, my hands on either side of her head as I caged her in. Those hazel eyes, now greener than anything else, were wide, her pants filling my ears, giving me something to fill even more fantasies. For years, I dreamed of this moment. Me, above her in bed as she looked up at me in awe.

"Tell me, right here and now, that you want to leave me," I challenged.

"I—I—Mags, I was just—"

"You say my name and 'please' in the same fuckin' sentence, I'll give you anything you fuckin' want," I informed her, my heart bleeding now. "That's the kind of power you have over me, Firefly. Drivin' me insane, do you understand?"

Her pants grew louder, and my cock twitched, begging for something other than the hand I'd fucked myself with for over a decade.

"M-Mags," she rasped, her eyes dropping to my lips.

But fuck, if she asked me to kiss her, I would. If she asked me to take back all the pain I'd caused her, I would. If she asked for me to make love to her, I would.

All she had to do was say the goddamn words.

She didn't know my weakness, not until now. That made my next sentence more dangerous.

"You want to leave, you better say my name and 'please.' 'Cause that's the only fuckin' way I'm letting *anyone* take you out of here," I bit off. *"Someone tries to take you from me, I'll kill 'em."*

"Okay," she practically whimpered, the scent of my soap on her surrounding me now.

My eyes dropped to her lips, knowing in my soul she tasted sweeter than I could ever dream.

"Get some rest," I ordered softly. "I'll be back later with food."

Then, I was gone, shutting the door behind me.

It wouldn't be until hours later, after everyone had finally left for the night, that I finally lost my shit, letting my baby see the worst parts of me, the parts no one should ever see.

Chapter Nineteen



Diana

There was a soft knock on the bedroom door, or maybe there had been a few. I didn't know. I was too busy replaying what just happened with Mags. I was on my fifty-fourth reply when a sharp, loud knock sounded, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Come in," I called after clearing my throat.

I watched the knob twist, and then Thomas stood before me, his hair in disarray, his eyes solemn. "Diana," he greeted, his throat bobbing.

Tears formed. "Hi, Thomas."

He rubbed his nose and cut his gaze from me. "So, uh, I've decided you're not allowed to have any more fun days, and I'll be emailing Emma to loop her in on this decision immediately."

A weak but welcome chuckle came from me. "I'll make a note of that in my calendar."

"Speaking of," he muttered, revealing his briefcase to me, "I brought everything you needed. The cowboy—uh Mags—gave me his WiFi password."

I didn't even let myself get excited about what was in his briefcase as he walked over to the bed. "Mags has WiFi?"

Thomas shot me a look. "Apparently."

I blinked and looked down, focusing on my hands instead of the cuts on my arms. A second later, my Filofax appeared, and I lifted my eyes, giving Thomas a smile. "Thank you," I whispered, taking my precious baby from him. I opened it up, immediately flipping to next week to double check when my first class started.

Eleven.

Good. Later than last year, which gave me time.

"I was going to call the university and tell them about the accident, but I didn't know how you wanted to handle this," Thomas explained.

My head snapped back up. "What are you talking about?"

He gestured to my Filofax. "You know, to cancel your class."

"Thomas, I'm not canceling this class."

My paralegal stared at me for some time until, finally, a small smirk appeared. "Okay, good. That was a test, and you passed." I rolled my eyes as he handed me my laptop. "There's something else." "What's that?" I asked, logging into my computer, fully expecting him to tell me about something crazy that happened with one my clients.

"Yale called."

My fingers froze about my keyboard, my breath catching. My eyes met his, and he nodded, excitement beaming. "They want you, Di," he said.

All the air in my lungs left me on a whoosh as I fell back against the pillows, my shoulders relaxing.

Yale wanted me.

They wanted me to teach.

"Did they say—"

"They didn't give me any specifics, but I told them you would get back to them on Monday."

I nodded. Okay. This was good. Okay.

Yale wanted me—they actually wanted me.

Suddenly, I felt young again, remembering the day I opened my acceptance letter. I didn't have anyone to celebrate with; my parents didn't support it, and Lucas wanted me under his thumb. I remembered sitting on my bed, tears of happiness streaming down my face, clutching the letter so tight because I'd been afraid it was all a dream.

"I'm proud of you." Thomas smiled, shrugging as he put his hands in his pockets. "In case no one else says it, Di, I'm so proud of you. I'm honored to work under you."

"Thomas, don't make me cry. I've had a long day," I playfully scolded, already feeling the tears forming.

Another knock sounded.

"Can I come in?" Valerie's soft voice stretched across the room.

Thomas moved, letting me see her. She was chewing on the inside of her lip, her long, dark hair now swept up into a messy ponytail, her cheeks wet with tears.

"Of course, you can," I told her and then looked to Thomas. "Would you mind giving us a minute?"

He nodded. "Sure. I don't think the cowboys want to kill me anymore, so that's a plus."

I did a double-take. "Wait—what?"

"The men were being stupid," Valerie answered for him, giving him an apologetic look. "I'm so sorry for that, by the way. Cowboys are...rowdy."

"I'm aware," he said, turning and giving me a wink.

After he left the room, Val closed the door softly and turned, leaning against it, unsure of what to do.

So, I started. "I'm sorry."

Confusion twisted her features. "For what, Di? You did nothing wrong."

"I was a shitty friend to you," I confessed. "I avoided you because of my ____."

"—I don't care about any of that," she cut me off, rushing over to me. "My best friend almost died today. You think I care about you not seeing me for a few weeks?"

A lump formed in my throat as I looked up at her, wondering how the hell I got so lucky to have a friend like her. "You don't—you aren't mad at me?"

"Di, when my mom died, I didn't leave Den's bedroom for a month."

"That's different."

"Pain is pain. There is no justification. If you're hurting, you're hurting, and babe, you've been *hurting*. You needed time and away from the ranch,"

she stressed, her voice shaking. "Now, can I sit right here, or do you want me by the door?"

I pointed to the bed.

"Thank God," she breathed, plopping down and pulling me into her arms. I put my head on her shoulder, and then—the dam opened. Sobs took over my body, tears flooded my eyes, and suddenly, I was clinging to her as the pieces of my heart drifted further and further apart.

I didn't know how much time had passed. Abbie and Harmony were knocking on the door. Then, they ended up on the bed, holding me while I let it all out. When there were no more tears left to give, I settled back into the pillows, clicking my thumb and index fingernails together, my anxiety running rampant.

"Have you kissed him?"

"Abbie!"

Abbie rolled her eyes at Valerie. "Oh, come on, we were all thinking it. Hallow Ranch cowboys stake their claim with a kiss."

Val bit the inside of her cheek and looked over to me. "That's actually true."

I looked over to Abbie. "No, we haven't kissed."

Disappointment was painted across all their faces then and more silence followed.

"Maybe Mags hasn't had his 'fuck it' moment," Harmony guessed after a few minutes.

I sat up a little straighter. "His what?"

"You know, the moment when he loses control and gives in," Abbie said. "Beau had multiple with me."

"We know," Val and Harmony said at the same time.

"I don't know," I mumbled.

"Well, Mase's 'fuck it' moment with me was when he came over for dinner and then decided he needed to leave all of a sudden. He was acting weird, and when I asked him if it was because of me, he did the growly thing and kissed me in the middle of my hallway. It made my knees weak."

Valerie hummed. "I love the growly thing."

"Seconded," Abbie chimed in.

"I think...I think Mags just did the growly thing to me," I murmured.

All heads snapped in my direction, and Harmony's cheeks were tinted. "He did?"

"Look," Val began, "I'm not going to make you tell me something you don't want to tell me..."

"...but," Abbie picked up, "we wouldn't be opposed to you telling us every single detail."

Harmony smacked Abbie with a pillow. "We don't need to know every detail."

"Speak for yourself," Abbie deadpanned. "I still remember the day he showed up in front of the barn, asking Denver for a job." She looked to the window, the memory flooding back as she told us about it.

"I didn't see him until a few weeks later," I said once she was done, remembering the first time I saw him. My eyes dropped to my lap, my cheeks heating. "I fell for him right then. I was in love with him the second he looked at me." My voice was a barely a whisper now. Over ten years later, I still couldn't comprehend it.

The girls waited, and I continued, telling them about the last decade.

And like they asked, I gave them every single detail.

When I was done, all three of them had the same look in their eyes, but it was Valerie who whispered, "That cowboy is so in love with you, babe."

I was ready to deny it, shaking my head as I did, but when I opened my mouth, Abbie cut me off. "You know, it makes sense now."

"What makes sense?" I pressed, looking at her as she chewed on the inside of her lip.

Her smile was smile, but the weight of it was overwhelming. "Every time, without fail, when you're brought up in conversation, he has a reaction."

"What? No, he doesn't," Val chimed in.

"Mags is always quiet and broody," Harm mumbles.

"Yeah, but when Di is brought up, he either looks to his boots or he walks away," Abbie said, giving me another one of her small smiles. "You've had that cowboy wrapped around your finger for a while now. He's just too stubborn to admit it."

"He doesn't think he's good enough," I whispered, the realization slamming into me.

"You have to show him he is, babe," Val murmured.

"He's broken," Abbie added, meeting my eyes. "And I know you're the only one on this Earth who can make him whole again."

My body ached as I sat up further. "I don't know how to be—I don't know where to start."

"Talk to him," Harmony urged, leaning forward to grab my hand. "After everyone leaves, sit him down and have a conversation."



"Mags?" I called, hobbling to the mouth of the hallway, my eyes scanning over the empty kitchen, seeing all the dishes from dinner were cleaned and put away. I looked over into the living room, finding it spotless. There was no evidence that, just an hour ago, every single person who lived and worked on this ranch, plus Chase and Thomas, were all here for dinner made by Jigs, Valerie, and Abbie.

My eyes lingered on the desk on the opposite side of the room, the notebook open, the pen missing.

I'd come out here for the conversation, for answers.

Suddenly, the front door flew open, and Mags stormed through, his dark eyes filled with fire. "What the fuck are you doing?" he growled, moving around his furniture and coming directly for me.

"I was just—AHH!" I was in his arms then, being carried through the living room.

Mags set me on the couch a second later, his chest heaving with anger. "Told you to go to bed," he clipped, grabbing the Afghan from the back of the couch and covering me with it, his movements hurried and erratic. I gaped at him, the light from the small fire flickering on the side over his face as he planted his hands on the cushions behind me, caging me in like he had just a few hours ago. "I'm not a child, Mags. I can do what I want," I quipped. A muscle jumped in his cheek, and I took a second to take him in. He was still in his jeans and boots, but his hat and flannel were gone, leaving him in only a black T-shirt. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay," I finished softly.

He said nothing.

"Are you okay?" I asked, looking over to the desk and then back to him. "I didn't hear you come in after everyone left."

His answer was short and gruff. "Had to think."

"Oh."

More silence.

"Um, about what?" I asked, my stomach in knots.

Once again, Mags was back to his usual silent self.

The fire cracked and settled beside us as he continued to lean over me, the dark, endless pools of his eyes beckoning me to the depths as they always did. All thoughts of my hike gone wrong, my friends' advice, and the offer from Yale faded away as I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth, memorizing every inch of his handsome face, his dark, untamed beard only adding to my never-ending addiction to him. Locks of his black hair hung around his face now, drowning out the rest of the living room behind him. My eyes kept moving, unable to stop as they greedily took him in, and when they landed on his massive chest, my clit hummed.

Great—I'd fallen down a mountain today, and my body wanted sex.

No, it wanted him.

My eyes moved over to his arms, and from this angle, I could see the underside of his bicep—

Ice shot through my veins, chasing away my need for him when my eyes landed on it: the damaged, raised, discolored skin. It took up most of the underside of his arm, disappearing underneath the sleeve of his shirt.

That was burn mark.

Mags had been burned.

"What is that?" I asked, my voice cracking as my mind tried to comprehend the pain he'd suffered.

When he didn't answer, I gradually lifted my eyes back up to his, seeing nothing but devastation etched in his features. "Burn."

That was all he gave me before he pushed up and walked over to the mantel, staring into the fire. "Mags," I croaked, sitting up, wanting to go to him.

"Don't you fuckin' move," he growled, looking at me over his shoulder, a shadow hanging over him now.

"I just—"

"You need to rest," he barked, making me jump. "You coming in here to check on me is the last thing you should be doing. I told you I would take care of you and that's—"

"You didn't seem too worried when you let everyone else step in," I snapped to his back as he stood over the fire, his head bent, hand braced on the mantel. I clutched the edge of the blanket, my bottom lips wobbling. "You just stood off to the side and left me—"

He whirled on me then, pain in his eyes. "You have *no fucking idea*," he growled. "You have no idea the *restraint* I had to display this afternoon when they wouldn't leave you the *fuck* alone. When the girls took you into

the bathroom to clean you up, when Denver hovered over you like a fucking hawk, when the cowboys wouldn't leave you be." Goosebumps spread across my skin as the unhinged fury in his voice grew. "They *washed* you. They *clothed* you. They *watched* over you. They *cooked* for you. They made you *laugh*. They made you *comfortable*. *They took care of you*."

"I don't understand—"

My eyes snapped back to him when he roared, "I wanted that, Diana! I needed that! I needed to take care of you. To cleanse you. To put fuckin' clothes on you. To hold you. To make you laugh. To make you feel safe and comfortable. I needed it more than the air in my lungs, Firefly!"

Instead of sinking back into the cushions, I swung my leg over the sides of the couch, the blanket falling to the floor. "Then why didn't you—"

"I don't deserve to take care of the woman I've broken," he all but snarled.

Silence settled over us, our chests heaving, our panted, labored breaths filling the air as the fire continued behind him. That was the reality of it, right? Despite what happened to between Mags and me, the world would go on without us. Our feelings didn't matter to this world, but what I felt for him was the gravity of mine, holding me down, refusing to let me go.

"You had every right to break me," I countered.

He jerked back, his brows snapping together. "What the hell did you just say?"

"You heard me," I said, giving him a pained smile.

He stared at me, falling apart right before my eyes, and there was nothing I could do but sit here and take it. There was a war, endless battles upon battles, raging inside me, my ego verses my heart. Despite the raw need to go to him, to wrap my arms around his neck, and tell him how much I loved him, how worthy he was, how amazing he was—I couldn't. He didn't want me to, and until he admitted he did, I had to stand firm. I didn't want to feel the sting of his rejection again. I didn't want to feel like I was chasing him.

I wanted to be *wanted*.

I wanted to be chased.

I wanted him to look at me and tell me everything he said had been a mistake, that he couldn't live without me.

I wanted to believe all the sweet and wonderful things my friends had said to me this afternoon.

I wanted to have hope, but it was slipping through my fingers . Right now, in this cabin, I was silently begging him to restore it.

So, I waited, drowning in despair. I waited for this cowboy to speak, and when he finally did, my heart nearly gave out.

"Breaking you was the worst thing I've ever fuckin' done." He paused, his own agony seeping from him now. "Out of all the things I've done hurting you like that..." Mags' mouth snapped shut, and he cut his eyes from me, looking over to the desk. I couldn't look anywhere else. Even if he couldn't look at me, my eyes refused to leave him. "I'm drowning. I'm always drowning. Never get a second to breathe, to *live*, to experience the peace I came to Hallow Ranch to find. The only times I feel like I can is when you're around. Got a light in you, beautiful, and that light is the closest thing to peace I've ever experienced." His eyes were back on me, and I couldn't breathe. "I don't deserve you, your light, your beauty, Diana. Any of it. I don't deserve to take care of you."

His words hit me like a round of bullets, each one piercing the skin, leaving nothing but holes.

I don't deserve you, your light, your beauty. Any of it. I don't deserve to take care of you.

"I'm going to ask that question again, Mags," I whispered, my hands shaking as the future hovered over my head, circling like a vulture, ready to feast on whatever was left of me.

You say my name and 'please' in the same fuckin' sentence, I'll give you anything you fuckin' want.

His words from earlier echoed in my head as my next words came out on a broken plea. "I want the truth. Please, Mags, give me the truth."

The cowboy looked tortured, but again, he remained silent.

I looked up to the ceiling, knowing what the answer was going to be, but I had to ask it anyway. The girls, plus Chase, had messed with my head, telling me things that couldn't be true. Mags, despite his flaws, his trauma, his darkness, was a good man.

Good men don't lie.

When our gazes met again, the question flowed out of my mouth like an overflowing stream. "Do you want me?"

I expected more silence, more agony, more heartbreak.

I didn't get any of that.

His strong arms hung down at his sides, his boots firmly rooted in place as he rasped, "More than anything else in this world."

My bottom lip began to tremble, my eyes stinging, proving to me my body would never run out of tears. "But?" I prompted thickly.

He looked away from me to the desk as devastation washed over him. Seconds ticked by, and for whatever reason, insanity or hope-filled delusion, I waited. The tortured cowboy's eyes sliced back to mine, and just as he was about to say something, his head snapped over to the door, his body on alert. Suddenly, he was moving. "Lie down," he clipped, and a chill swept over the room.

I followed his gaze, a shiver sliding down my spine. "What is it?"

"For the love of fuck, Diana, just stay down," he growled, moving to the door and reaching behind him for his pistol.

My eyes widened, and I did as he asked watching as his entire demeanor changed. Suddenly, I wasn't looking at Mags, the cowboy. I was looking at Mags, the Marine. He moved fluidly to the window, pulling back the curtain and looking outside, gun in in hand, pointed at the door.

"Is it the bear?" I asked.

He dropped the curtain. "I wish," he muttered underneath his breath, moving to the door.

There was a single pound before Mags yanked it open to reveal Denver.

Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no, no.

"Den? What's wrong?" I asked, sitting up.

His gray eyes landed on me as he said, "Need to have a conversation with Mags, Diana."

Mags was quiet, glaring at his boss and friend. "This can't wait until morning, Kings? Had a hell of a day."

"Haven't we all?" Denver shot back, finally looking at his ranch hand. "A word."

Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.

"Denver, I—"

"Di, love you, and you know that, but right now, I need to have a talk with my cowboy, yeah?" the Hallow Ranch owner cut me off. "Let's get you to bed, Diana." My eyes drifted over to Mags.

No.

No, I didn't want to go to bed. I wanted to finish our conversation. I wanted to hear what he had to say. Still, I kept my mouth closed, grinding my teeth as he walked past Denver to help me off the couch. I wasn't going to say anything until he moved to lift me into his arms.

"I got it," I protested. "I made it in here alright."

His eyes met mine. "I know you did."

I was in his arms in the next breath, mine latching around his neck. As he walked me back into the hall, I stared at Denver. He said nothing, moving back out onto the porch, moonlight filling the living room, his guarded eyes on me. Mags carried me into the bedroom, his steady breaths doing nothing to calm me down.

"What does he want to talk about?" I asked as he set me on the bed.

"Lie back," he ordered, not answering my question.

"Mags," I snapped, putting my hand on his arm.

He tensed, but only for a moment. Then, he was back to tucking me in, pulling the covers over me. "Need you to get some rest, Diana. That's all you have to do."

"I asked you a question," I pressed, my voice cracking.

"And I need you to get some sleep," he clipped, his eyes hard.

Before I could utter a reply, he was gone, closing the door behind him.

Chapter Twenty



Mags

Years Ago. Unknown Location.

"You know what?" Grayson, aka Bullet, rumbled from beside me.

I'd been sitting in this same position for the last six hours, my feet having gone numb three hours ago. I didn't move my head, keeping my gun pointed at the window, my eye in the scope.

"What's that, Bullet?" I asked, my voice low, trying not to wake the rest our our squadron. "Someday, we're going to be happy."

My neck got tight, and it took everything in me not to look at him. "Who says we're not happy?"

"Getting my face sliced open gave me a bit of perspective," he said coolly, as if that wasn't one of the worst days of both of our lives. Grayson wasn't supposed to be here with me. He was supposed to be out, honorably discharged, starting the life he'd always wanted back home. Instead, he fought to come back here, telling our commanding officers the job wasn't done, and truly, it wasn't.

Now, the leader of the terrorist group who kidnapped him was within our reach, and I was going to be the one to send him straight to hell.

"Be happy when we get this fucker," I muttered.

"And what about Ashley?" he prodded.

"What about her?"

He was quiet for a moment, the moon high above us now. "Does she make you happy?"

My mind drifted to my wife, knowing that, some day, when my head was no longer plagued by the shit I'd seen over here, we could be happy. Maybe. She was beautiful, kind, smart. She told me she loved me when I was home last, and I believed her.

I wanted to love her again, but the distance, the tours, put a rift between us and with each passing day, it got deeper. It had been months since I'd gotten a letter from her, and I knew that could easily be due to the baby.

When I called—which wasn't often—she answered. She gave me updates, told me the baby was healthy, that she was getting the nursery ready. Then, the conversation would grow silent, and all at once, we were strangers again. My unborn child in her belly was the only thing holding us together, and I didn't know how to change it. I wanted to be the one to hold us together. I wanted to love my wife again, but there was something, deep inside, pulling my heart away from hers.

Truth be told, I didn't think I had a heart anymore, but damn it all to hell, I wanted to feel something other than rage and fear.

"Mags?" Bullet called.

I moved an inch, adjusting my arm as my finger rested on curve of the trigger. Through my scope, the target was finally emerging from his home, draped in nothing but black, trying to blend in with the night. I aimed at his head, pulled the trigger, and watched as the bullet went through his head, reaping his soul. When he dropped to the ground, I pulled back, rolled my neck, and looked to my friend.

"I think we can be happy," I rumbled. "It will take some work, but I want to be happy."

Something shifted in my friend's eyes and he murmured, "I hope you find it, brother. I really do."

"Wake the team. It's time to move."

Onto the next mission.

Onto the next target.

More ammo.

More shell shock.

More blood.

More death.

It was all the same.

A constant routine of tainting my soul for the love of my country.

Days or weeks later, who knew, my unit and I were under attack, taking heavy fire from behind enemy lines.

"Guess they're still a little pissed about you killing their boss, eh?" Chip deadpanned from beside me.

"You think?" I quipped, shoving a new magazine into my gun, reloading.

We'd been trapped here for days, and slowly, they'd been picking apart the squadron. There were only a few of a us now. I'd been begging for air support, but we never got it. Our backs were against a large boulder, Bullet just a few hundred feet away, crunched down behind the Humvee, shooting at the fuckers shooting at us. Above us, the sky was bright blue, not a cloud in sight as gunshots rang out, grenades going off two clicks away, the smoke and flames rising up members of my team screamed for mercy.

Fuck.

Fuck.

I closed my eyes, clenching my jaw.

"Joe, Pickings, and Rogers are dead!" Bullet shouted at us, pulling his gun back to reload. "We have to get out of here!"

I looked over to my friend again, the sad truth weighing down on me. We weren't getting out of this.

There was no way in hell, not without the air support we needed.

But I wasn't going down as a coward. I, along with Chip and Bullet, would go down fighting.

"Bullet is right," Chip yelled over the gunfire hitting the other side of the boulder, pieces of it flying onto our helmets. "We gotta get the fuck out of here."

"Agreed. I—"

Another wave of heavy gunfire fell over Chip and me.

Instinctively, I grabbed his shoulder, pulling him further down as I looked over to Bullet, who was moving to the back to the Humvee, firing back. I lifted my gun over my head, firing blindly as Chip stayed down. I was too busy shooting to feel his blood soaking into my uniform.

When the gunfire stopped, my eyes shot over to Grayson, relief hitting me to see him alive. "Alright, Chip," I grunted, sitting up. "Let's mo—" I bent my head, seeing Chip's body roll off my legs, landing in the sand with a quiet thud.

"Chip?" I called, hooking the strap of my gun over my head, swinging it around to my back before clawing my way to him. "Anthony!"

Nothing. I grabbed his shoulder, rolling him back to me.

My stomach sank, my breath halting.

Anthony "Chip" McGee was dead. Half of his face was gone. Blood oozing from his chest, shoulder, head, and neck. I put my hand over his heart and bent my head.

Fuck.

Fucking fuck.

He had a wife and two young boys at home. Without delay, I pulled off his tags and stuffed them in my pocket.

"MAGS!"

My head snapped up, finding Grayson running towards me, waving his hands.

Then, all I felt was heat.

All-consuming heat.

My ears rang as flames appeared around me, and then, everything went black.



Present Day. Hallow Ranch.

I stepped out onto the porch, finding Kings leaning over the railing, hat tipped back as he studied the moon. I said nothing, staring at his back and waiting.

"Mags, you've been with me a long time," he stated, not moving an inch.

"Why are you here, Kings? You should be in bed with your wife," I stated, my voice neutral despite the emotions coursing through me, tightening my muscles, poisoning my bloodstream. Before he'd pounded on my fuckin' door, Diana had seen the one thing I never let anyone see.

My burn.

Even when I was in the bunkhouse, I made sure no one saw me shirtless.

Now, that was all about to change.

"I'm here to make sure two people I care about don't make a mistake," Kings said, turning to face me, his arms folded over his chest. "I'm here to make sure this family sticks together."

I stiffened. "A mistake?"

His gray eyes flashed. "What would you call it?" he challenged.

"Nothing," I damn near growled. "I would call it nothing."

"I'll break your fucking jaw, you lie to me again, Mags," he threatened darkly.

I opened my mouth to speak, but he beat me to it.

"My mother had miscarriages," he began. "When I was old enough, she would tell me Mase wasn't my only sibling, that I had brothers and sisters in heaven waiting to meet us." He paused, leaning back against the railing and crossing his boots. "I'd always wanted a sister, mainly because Mase was such a pain in my fuckin' ass. I thought a sister would be less of a hassle."

"Where are you going with this?" I asked, leaning against my door.

My friend looked up at me, the anger fleeing from his gaze. "Diana is the sister I never had, Mags."

I flinched.

"You're also like a brother to me," he continued. "It may have taken a while, but I finally got to know you and a small fraction of the demons you carry."

"You don't think I'm good enough for her," I guessed, my voice cold.

He shook his head. "Never said that."

"Your actions damn well did," I snapped. "Showing up here in the middle of the fuckin' night to check on us, calling me outside for this 'don't hurt her' lecture."

"Mags—"

"I would die before cause her more pain," I clipped.

His brows furrowed. "More pain?"

"Go home, Langston."

"This is my home, Mags," he countered, uncrossing his arms and bracing his hands on the railing.

I took two steps forward. "Then get the fuck out of my face."

"Mags—"

"You know nothing about Diana and me," I cut him off. "You, along with everyone else on this ranch, have no fuckin' idea of the agony tethering us together."

The air between us shifted then, the tension leaving.

"Agony?" he parroted softly.

He had no idea. He'd never even had a taste of the agony—the longing—I felt for her. He'd longed for Valerie, sure, but his months would never compare to my years. I gave him nothing as I walked to the porch steps and jerked my chin. "Get gone, Kings."

He was staring at me now, his chest moving slowly as realization washed over him. I watched, gut tight, chest aching, I watched as the rest of his anger, judgment, and worry disappeared, softening his features as understanding replaced all three. "You're in love with her."

It was time to shut this down. "Not doing this with you, not after the day I've had."

"Brother—"

I cut him off swiftly. "You tried to control Abbie and Beau's shit, but I'll be damned if I let you try and do that to Diana and me."

"I did what I thought was right for Beau," he explained, his voice low as he pointed at me. "And you fuckin' know it. Abbie hurt him—destroyed him. I was trying to prevent that from happening again." He shook his head, looking into the night and pulling off his hat with a sigh. "Once I knew the truth, I realized my mistake and rectified it." I clenched my jaw.

After a few moments, he looked back at me, his hat by his side. "You just said you hurt Diana."

"I did."

I didn't miss his slight jerk. Any other person might've, but not me. His next question came out slowly, carefully. "Am I going to have to break your jaw, Mags?"

We both knew he'd only get one punch in before I ended up breaking his. Kings and his brother may have two inches on me, but that was it.

All that aside, he was here, seeking truth.

Even though he pissed me off, coming here at this hour, I knew he was doing it for Diana. Kings was a protector before he was cowboy, the kind of man to go down protecting the people he loved. He was just doing the only thing he knew how to do.

I respected that. I respected him.

Therefore, I gave him the truth. "I rejected her."

"What?" he asked in disbelief. "You—you rejected her?"

"Affirmative."

"Why?"

I cut my gaze from his, staring out into the night as I pulled out a pack of cigarettes—my last one. My eyes never left the pale moon as I plucked one out, put it in my mouth, pocketed the box, grabbed my lighter, and lit up. The soft crackling of the embers soothed me almost instantly, the smell of it intoxicating. Kings kept his eyes on me, waiting in a stunned silence I inhaled deeply, the familiar sting of smoke shooting down my throat, slowly killing my lungs. I held it for three seconds before slowly releasing it out through my nose, the smoke hovering as I finally looked back over to him.

"Thought you quit smoking," he deadpanned, his brow furrowed.

I took a drag. "If we're going to have this conversation, I'm having a damn cigarette, Kings."

He looked me up and down, confusion in his eyes. "Why the fuck did you reject her?"

Another drag.

When I didn't answer, a muscle in his cheek jumped. "Why did you reject a woman like Diana, Mags?"

With the cig hanging from my lips, smoking hovering, I confessed, "Because she's everything I dreamed of."

Another drag.

"Everything I don't deserve," I continued, smoking billowing from my lips.

Another drag.

"Everything I crave."

"Mags—"

Shaking my head, I pulled the cig from my mouth, giving him a sad smile.

"Love her, Den. Love her with everything I have, which isn't much."

"How long?" he asked.

I ignored him. "Diana's a good woman."

"She is," he confirmed.

A beat of silence passed. "I'm not a good man, Kings. You and I both know that."

Then, my friend rocked me to my core.

"Sometimes a good woman doesn't need a good man, Mags. Sometimes, a woman like that, needs a man like you, a man who isn't afraid to cross lines, who isn't afraid to break the rules, who would lay down his life for her." He paused. "Sometimes, good women don't need good men. They just need a cowboy with a tainted soul."

I stiffened.

"You'd die for her?"

"In a heartbeat."

He nodded, inhaling through his nose. "You'd kill for her?"

"In a heartbeat," I repeated.

"My wife is a good woman," he noted.

I put out the cig and dropped the butt onto the porch.

He didn't let up. "Harmony is a good woman."

My chest began to ache.

"Abbie is a good woman."

"Kings—"

"Don't sit here and tell me you don't deserve her because of the man you had to become in a war zone," he cut me off softly. "Don't try to convince me you don't deserve her, brother, because you do."

"Got demons," I muttered.

"Mags, I had a PTSD episode with Valerie, and you had to intervene," he argued. "Did I not deserve her because of those demons?"

Fuck me. "That was different."

He nodded. "You're right—it *was* different. Because it was me and not you. You told me not to be ashamed of fighting demons. You remember that?"

Breaking our gaze, I went to the porch railing, leaning my forearms against it, staring out into the field in front of my cabin. "I remember," I said gruffly.

"So why are you not holding yourself to that same standard?" he asked, coming to stand beside me, mirroring my position, staring at my profile.

I felt it then, the burning, the pain. My voice was low, barely audible. "She saw my burn tonight."

Kings, being Kings, didn't even give the words a chance to hang in the air. "Your injuries, your flaws, and your trauma has nothing to do with your worth."

God dammit.

Damn all of it.

I dropped my head. "She deserves perfection, Kings."

"I'm certain she's already found it in you, brother," he said softly.

His words rang in my ears, like the aftershock of a bomb.

She's already found it in you.

"Perfection isn't linear," he continued, as if he hadn't just pierced the depths of my fucked-up soul. "Perfection is different for everyone."

She's already found it in you.

"I'm more pissed I missed it," he muttered.

"Missed what?" I pushed out, my eyes on the ground.

"The way she looks at you."

My jaw tightened.

"The way you look at her."

"Stop," I pleaded, knowing our future.

She was leaving.

She was leaving Colorado to chase a new dream. I'd overheard her conversation with Thomas this afternoon. I'd gone back into the house to check on her, coming to a cold stop outside her door as he gave her the news. All of it, from my confession to this current conversation was all for nothing.

She's already found it in you. "You love her, Mags."

"Yes."

"She loves you."

I closed my eyes. "Yes."

"How long?" he asked.

"From the moment I laid eyes on her," I whispered, remembering the day. It was the best day of my life. "Came here to find peace, Kings. Came here to heal." My friend said nothing. "I haven't done either of those things, because all I can focus on is her. When she's here, she's all I see, and when she's not, I can't breathe."

"Jesus."

"Loved her for so long, Den. She's not only in my heart, but in my blood, my bones. Hell, before you arrived, I was about to make the fatal mistake of letting her into my soul."

"Fatal?" he questioned, his voice hard now. "What the fuck are you saying?"

I shot up, turning on him with a snarl. "She's fuckin' leaving," I clipped.

He hadn't moved, not even an inch, still staring out into the night. "Do you want her in your soul?"

A lump formed in my throat. I knew the power of her little light, the change it would bring. "Doesn't matter."

The cowboy moved then, rising to his full height slowly as he put his hat back on. "Of course, it fuckin' matters, Mags." His gray eyes met mine. "You're a cowboy in love. When a cowboy falls in love, his path is altered. Suddenly, it's not about the lifestyle, the pride, or the freedom. It's about her."

Fuck.

Fucking fuck.

"It will always be about her," he stressed. "Yeah, she's leaving. She got the position at Yale. It's something she's wanted for a while."

My gut twisted. Still, I remained quiet.

He looked to the door and then back to me. "You want her to stay? You want her in your soul? Make her stay, Mags. Fight for it." He moved to the porch steps then, giving me one more look. "You both deserve the love you're too afraid to give each other. I'm sorry I didn't see it sooner; maybe if I had, I might've been able to pull both of your heads out of your asses."

Then, he was gone.

You both deserve the love you're too afraid to give each other. She's already found it in you.

Chapter Twenty-One



Diana

The next morning. Mags' Cabin.

The rain had started in the middle of the night. I knew that if I didn't leave now, the road into town would be flooded for the rest of the day. Then, I would be stuck here, in this cabin, with a man who said he wanted me but couldn't—no, wouldn't—do anything about it.

After staying up half the night, drowning in my thoughts until lightning flashed outside the spare bedroom window, a powerful clap of thunder following it, I made a new pact: Get the hell out of Hallow Ranch, teach the semester in Denver, monitor my clients remotely while Thomas handled things I couldn't, and call Yale.

It was time to move on.

Time and distance were the only things able to heal this pain, and I was going to get both. The opportunity was right there, and it was time—well beyond time. Last night, Mags' confession struck my soul, like lightning struck the ground, searing it deep. Even though our conversation was interrupted by Denver, I knew what was coming.

The "but."

The secondary rejection.

I didn't have the strength to endure that again, and last night, I sure wasn't ready to face it. Thankfully, the universe knew me better than I knew myself. Denver's interruption was divine intervention. There was no other way to explain it. Instead of going to sleep, I quietly got up and packed my things, planning to sneak out in the morning. Luckily, the rain kept coming, as if the universe was trying to keep the cowboy asleep as I hobbled through his perfect cabin, snatched my car keys off the hook by his hat, and left.

It took me a good three minutes to get down the porch steps, but after keeping my ankle elevated most of the night, the swelling had dissipated and the pain was minimal. It was just a minor sprain. I could get by with that. Just no heels for a bit, which sucked, because despite being tall, I loved all my heels.

Now, here I was, bags in the car, keys in hand, standing in the rain, unable to move. My chest heaved as the rain soaked my clothes, sliding down my skin, drenching my hair. All at once, my brain was flooded with every single memory of Mags, from our first look to the devastation on his face last night.

My eyes squeezed shut as my heart thundered, matching the anger in the sky above.

My life was supposed to be better than this—more than this. Yes, I created it for myself, but I craved romance. I craved the love every person wanted, and when I found it, I was set on waiting.

Waiting was a fool's errand.

A loud clap of thunder made me jump.

Okay, enough of this, Diana. Get in the car.

I knew I shouldn't look back.

I knew it, and yet, I still did. My hair hung down my back, my clothes heavy with rain water as I looked over my shoulder to take one more look at his cabin.

A whimper flew from my mouth at the sight of him standing on his porch, arms hanging down at his sides, his dark eyes on me. He was barefoot with a pair of jeans on, the top button and his belt still undone, a dark gray T-shirt on his chest, his hat on his head. His beard was now trimmed, but his hair—God, his damn hair—-was still wild, hanging just past his shoulders.

The wild, silent cowboy, beautiful and damning all at once.

Go, Diana. Get in your car and leave.

There was nothing for me here. I knew that.

And yet?

I was leaving my heart with him, unable to take it back. She was his prisoner now.

My bottom lip trembled as I turned back around to grab the door handle—

"Where do you think you're going?" His question weaved through the steady stream of rain falling from the heavens, jagged, filled with rage, but still oh so warm.

I didn't get in the car, some unknown force—perhaps stupidity preventing me from doing so. Instead, I whirled around, watching him descend from his porch into the cold rain. He stalked towards me, jaw set, eyes heated.

I couldn't do this. Not again.

"Stop," I rasped, holding my hand up.

He did, three feet from me, drops falling from the brim of his hat. "Where the hell are you going, Diana?" he demanded, his voice hard, chest heaving, nothing but heat in his eyes.

My tears mixed with the rain as I shook my head, my hair sticking to my face.

He took another step, his presence alone making the world around us look small. "Where *the fuck* are you going?"

"It doesn't have to be this way," I tried, my voice cracking. "If I leave now, maybe in the future, we can work on our friendship."

"We were *never* friends, and you fuckin' know that," he seethed, taking another step forward.

I swallowed the glass in my throat before I rasped, "I don't belong here, Mags."

My words rocked him so much, he jerked back. Then, time all but stopped when he growled, "You're exactly where you belong."

In a flash, his hand shot out, hooking the back of my neck, pulling me to him as the rough pads of his fingers dug into my flesh. Our bodies collided, and a gasp left me as he bent his neck, his eyes ablaze. His other arm banded around my waist, hold me tight against him, the heat of his touch spreading across my skin as my heart shouted for joy.

"You're exactly where you fuckin' belong, my sweet firefly."

Then, God, *then*, his fingers slid into my hair and yanked my head back as his lips slammed down onto mine. My soul whimpered, my heart cried out, and my body crumbled against him.

Eleven years.

Eleven years, three hundred and fifteen days.

That was how long I'd waited for him.

My knees nearly gave out as I latched onto him, a moan climbing up my throat as my arms anchored around his neck. His lips commanded mine, his beard scraping my skin as his tongue stroked against the seam of my lip, begging for me to let him inside. Another small sound left me as I opened for him, my fingers weaving into his long hair at the base of his neck, feeling its softness as his taste—a mix of cigarettes and mint—flooded my senses, his tongue dancing with mine.

"Mags," I rasped, gasping for air.

A growl climbed up his throat, forcing our lips back together as he drank from me, consuming me. My back was against my car then, his hands cupping the sides of my face now as he slanted my head, taking control, kissing me with abandon as the rain pelted down around us.

Thunder clapped in the distance, but neither of us cared.

We'd waited long enough for this, the storms around us be damned.

My hands slid up further, pushing his hat towards me as my fingers held on, my body finally coming alive. His body was against mine, caging me in and chasing away the cold as the brim of his hat shielded our faces from the rain. His hands dropped down to the sides of my neck, his thumbs hooking underneath my jaw, forcing my head back.

He pulled back, and my eyes fluttered opened. Suddenly, I was drowning in his darkness. "My beautiful little light," he murmured. "My Diana."

Before I could respond, his lips were back on mine, stealing my logic as well as my breath.

Seconds, minutes, years, decades, centuries later, who knew—he pulled away with a low grunt, our foreheads pressed together.

"Stay for me, Firefly," he begged in his jagged voice, his eyes holding mine. "Please fuckin' stay for me."

Stay for me, Firefly.

Stay for me.

I kissed him again, my hands sliding down over his shoulder to his chest, my fingers gripping the wet fabric of his shirt. With a growl, his hands left my face, gliding over my arms, snaking around my waist and down, cupping my ass. I broke away, gasping as my body ignited. My nipples pebbled as my core constricted, wet for him, needing to be touched, to be filled.

"Christ," he grunted, lifting me up.

Without a thought, my legs wrapped around his waist, my hands coming to cup his face, his beard wet but still rough. "Mags," I breathed, feeling the bulge against his zipper, the buckle of his belt digging into my leg.

He pulled away slightly, looking up at me. "If I was less of a man, I'd fuck you on your car," he growled. "Rip those little shorts off and finally sink into you, finally fuckin' feel you."

Oh, God.

"But when you milk my cock for the first time, I want it to be in my bed, you laying in the same spot I do when I jack myself to the thought of you."

More wetness flooded me then, my clit pulsing.

He didn't give me a chance to speak, pulling me down again, our lips colliding.

My cowboy turned us, carrying me in the rain towards his cabin, and when I heard his boots land on the step, I pressed my lips harder against his. When he stepped into the warmth of the house, his tongue pushed into my mouth after growling my name. When he kicked the door shut, I moved my lips from his mouth to his cheek, peppering him with kisses as I pulled off his hat, dropping it on the hook by the door. His eyes held mine, our breaths labored, the air thick with need as he carried me down the hall, slamming me into a wall to kiss me until I was breathless and damn near ready to beg. His fingers kneaded my ass as I moved, grinding against him, desperate for friction.

"That's it," he praised, his lips trailing down my jaw to my neck, his teeth grazing over the sensitive skin there as he started to flex his hips against me.

It felt so good.

Too fucking good.

My fingers weaved through his hair holding him to my neck as he helped me grind against him, his arms flexing at my sides as we shamelessly chased our pleasure. "God, yes," I breathed, my head falling back against the wall, my nails scarping the back of his neck. "You feel so good, s-so amazing."

"Gonna stretch you, beautiful," he promised, moving up to my ear. "Been dreaming of your little cunt for over a decade." "Yes," I whimpered as he moved my hips faster.

"Make a mess for me to clean up, baby," he grunted, his harsh breaths in my ear. "Fuckin' need it, Diana. I'd spend a lifetime in hell just to have you once, beautiful. Give it to me."

My legs began to shake, and my mouth opened on a silent cry.

"Most fuckin' beautiful woman on this fuckin' planet, coming undone in my arms, grinding her little needy pussy against me," he whispered, voice jagged.

"M-Mags, I'm—oh, God!"

"Give that to me," he practically begged, licking the shell of my ear. "It's mine, Firefly. Give it to me."

It hit me then.

It hit me, and my entire body shuddered as I cried out his name, my hips moving erratically now. He kissed up and down my neck. I was still coming down when he pulled me from the wall.

"Jesus Christ," he grunted as he kicked open the door at the end of the hall—his bedroom. I didn't get a chance to look around before he stopped in front of the bed. "Eyes on me," he commanded, his hand going up my spine, halting my movements.

I brought my eyes back up to his, my heart racing, my body drunk on pleasure as I held his gaze, hypnotized by the darkness.

"Been dreaming of this day," my cowboy rumbled, the rain coming down hard outside now, hitting the bedroom windows.

"Yes," I breathed.

He shook his head, looking tortured. "Want you, baby. Always fuckin' wanted you. I need to know—"

I nodded, kissing him before whispering against his lips. "Yes."

"Diana—"

"The answer is yes, Mags," I rasped, reaching down and pulling the shirt over my head, along with my sports bra from yesterday. My breasts hung free, heavy and aching with need as I tossed them both on the floor.

His dropped, his jaw tightening at the sight, hunger in his eyes. In this moment, I didn't care about my pudgy belly or love handles. In this moment, all I cared was about giving him consent.

"You have my consent, handsome," I murmured, wrapping my arms back around his neck as his gaze collided with mine. I kissed him then, slowly and softly, savoring him. When I pulled back, I breathed, "I'm yours."

Suddenly, I was flying through the air, landing on the bed with a yelp.

Before I could get my wits back, his hands were at the waistband of my shorts, peeling them down my legs. A raw sound left him when he discovered I didn't have any panties on. I brought my knees together, the sight of him standing above me nearly too much. Without thinking, I brought my hands up, gliding my fingertips over my imperfect belly and up to my nipples, rubbing and pinching them.

I whimpered, arching my back, and just as I closed my eyes, his hands pried my knees open.

My eyes shot open just in time to see him climb onto the bed, his eyes on my pussy. "Mags," I pleaded.

The cowboy's dark eyes flicked up to mine. "You're going to scream for me, baby," he murmured gruffly. "You're going to scream and scream, begging for me to stop because the pleasure will be too much, and I'm not going to."

My lips parted on a needy whimper.

"I need you to understand that, Firefly," he said gently, his finger tracing down the inside of my thigh, leaving a trail of goosebumps behind. "What you just gave me, I'll never forget, and now, I want more of it." When it landed on my mound, he looked back down, watching his hand drive me insane. "See that honey coming from you?"

"Mags," I cried, his finger on my clit now, lightly rubbing.

"That same honey just soaked the front of my jeans." His finger started moving in small, slow circles. I cupped both my breasts in my hands, moving my hips, seeking more from him.

"Wanted that honey for a long, long time, beautiful."

"Oh, God," I moaned, my eyes rolling back.

"Want it soaking my fingers now, baby," he groaned, dropping down and slowly pushing one inside me. That raw sound came from him again as he pulled it out and then eased it back in, over and over as I squirmed. "Better than my dreams," he muttered.

My body moved, back arching, hips grinding, my hands twisting and plucking at my erect nipples, needing his mouth on them. I need his mouth all over me. "I can't—I can't." I sucked in a breath. "I need you, Mags."

"All the dreams, Diana, in all those fantasies, you were a good girl for me," he rumbled, his breath near my thigh as he added a second finger. "You let me have that sweet honey whenever I fuckin' wanted—whenever I needed." I opened my eyes, finding him lying down, his head between my legs now. He pressed a kiss to my mound, his eyes snapping up, watching me pant. "What are you going to do for me, Firefly?"

I whimpered, feeling my climax slowly start to build. "I'm going to scream for you."

A slow, breathtaking, wicked smile stretched across his face. It was the happiest I'd ever seen him. "Atta girl."

Then, as he continued fucking me with his fingers, he hooked my legs over his shoulders, keeping his eyes on my face as put his mouth on my core. My body arched, my hands leaving my breasts as I cried out, weaving my fingers through his hair. As his tongue slid up my sex, his fingers tightened on my thigh, indenting the softness, and the sound that came from him, primal and deep, had my eyes rolling back.

He dragged his tongue all the way up to my clit, flicking it twice before pulling away, his other hand still fucking me. His dark eyes flicked back up to me as he confessed, "I knew you would taste like beauty, knew I would want to drown in it, baby, but *fuck*—" He didn't finish his confession as he latched onto me again, curling his fingers to press against my G-spot.

"M-Mags," I stammered, pulling at his hair as he continued to suck, lick, and flick at my clit, his hand moving violently now, the sounds of my wet sex filling the room. "*Mags*."

"Fuck. *Fuck*," he growled against me, his arm shifting as his free hand went to my stomach, pressing down, holding me still.

"Oh, *God!*"

"God ain't the one with his tongue in your cunt, Diana," he bit off, his teeth dragging against my sensitive flesh. "You cry out *my* name in *my* bed. No one else's."

He removed his fingers and dropped down, his tongue entering me. I was on the edge, ready to fall into the abyss of pleasure. His thumb found my clit and stroked in fast, hard circles as his tongue plunged in and out, drinking from me. The cowboy pulled back slightly, his hand still working my clit as his teeth sank into my thigh. The pain, mixed with the overwhelming pleasure he gave me, was too much.

And I fell.

I fell into a state of pleasure I'd never experienced, and as I screamed his name, I heard his dark chuckle before I felt his mouth on me again, lapping at the mess he'd caused. My legs began to shake, and by the time I started to come down, both of his hands were at my thighs, his dark head between them, still eating me.

He didn't let up. He didn't listen to my pleas for mercy.

My cowboy ate my pussy like a man starved, not stopping until I was coming again. Again. Again.

I'd lost count of how many climaxes he gave me, but when he finally pulled his mouth away, my body was spent and shaking. My head rolled side to side as a breathless laugh left me, my knees coming together.

"Look at me," he said gruffly.

When I did, I found him standing again, his eyes soft, his lips and beard glistening with me. "Hi, cowboy," I whispered, my heart about to explode.

His eyes dropped from my face, scanning down my body slowly, studying every dip and curve before coming back up to my face. "Still trying to decide if this is a dream," he said, his voice thick.

I nodded. "Me too, handsome."

"If it is a dream, beautiful, then I pray to a God I don't believe in that we never wake," he murmured.

I said nothing as I sat up, getting to my knees and moving to him. He did nothing, remaining still and silent as I brought my hands to his waist, fisting the sides of his wet shirt. He stared down at me with an intensity I'd never seen from him as I began to pull it up, careful not to touch his skin. He let me, thank God. He let me, and when it was time, he lifted his arms up and pulled it all the way off. I kept my eyes on his face, knowing I wouldn't look at his body until he gave me consent.

Goosebumps spread across my skin, running from the heat radiating from him now. My nipples were peaked, only inches from his chest, our breaths quiet, quick.

"You can look," he said softly.

The shards of glass were back in my throat, and when I finally broke our gaze, my eyes dropping to his chest, the glass began to shred me from the inside out.

The right side of his chest was covered in dark hair, trailing all the way down between his abs before disappearing into his undone jeans. The left side of his chest, though, had less hair, the skin a dark red, almost purple, raised and bumpy. It stretched over and down his left side. My eyes trailed back up, finding it stretched underneath his arm and over to his back. Wrapped around his left bicep was a tattoo, a small, thin line with names etched across it in a delicate cursive.

In my gut, I knew they were the names of people he'd lost when he was in the military. My eyes slowly lifted back up to his, finding nothing but patience and warmth lingering within them.

All I wanted was to touch him. To kiss him. To cherish him.

"Please," I whispered, leaving my plea to hang in the air between us.

Little did I know, he was about to gut me.

"Haven't had a woman in my bed in over a decade, Diana."

My lips parted, my spine stiffening.

"Haven't felt a woman's touch in over a decade."

"I—"

"Came to Hallow Ranch knowing I'd never have either of those things again," he continued, as if I hadn't spoken, reaching out and cupping my face, his thumb stroking my cheek. "I was willing to survive without them, baby." My throat closed as his eyes dropped to my lips. "Then, on a day when I was lost in my head, battling demons I didn't know if I would survive, my eyes landed on you when I came out of the barn."

Both of my hands went to his wrists, my bottom lip trembling.

"Prettiest fuckin' thing I'd ever seen, in that yellow dress in the middle of the snow. A little light shining bright in all my darkness," he murmured. He paused, looking back into my eyes. "Wanted nothing but your heart, your body, and your touch since, Firefly."

"Stop," I begged, my voice unsteady.

"Wanted all that knowing I didn't deserve any of it."

"Mags, please—"

"Now, you're here, in my bed, letting me give you pleasure, waiting patiently for me to let you return the favor."

A single tear fell onto my cheek, and he caught it with his thumb.

"Y-you're the most b-beautiful thing I've ever seen, Mags," I stammered, my breath hitching.

His lips curled up slightly before he touched his mouth to mine. "Touch me, Diana."

Chapter Twenty-Two



Mags

"Touch me, Diana," I ordered softly.

When she didn't, I wrapped my arm around her body, her beauty, and pulled her closer, touching my head to hers. I let out an unsteady breath, my scar tingling. "Put your hands on me, baby," I pleaded roughly. "Touch your cowboy."

Slowly, oh so damn slowly, my woman placed her hands on my chest. The softness of her hands shot directly down to my already aching cock, her

honey still on my tongue, her cries still ringing in my ears. I watched with a strained patience as she took her time, dragging her soft fingertips down my chest, my abs, then back up, both hands going to my scar.

"Does it hurt?" she whispered.

"I get phantom pains sometimes," I told her, my voice soft. "I can feel a sting, and it feels so real, I wake up thinking I'm still in the damn hospital bed."

A small crease appeared between her brows then. "I'm sorry."

I didn't reply, my focus only on her touch skating over my burn. When her fingers brushed over my damaged nipple, a grunt crawled up my throat.

"Am I hurting you?" she asked in a rush, pulling her hands from me.

I grabbed her wrists and put her hands back. Her eyes shot up to mine, waiting for me to push her away.

I was done pushing her away.

I was done denying my need for her, my love for her.

"Don't stop," I begged, my voice cracking.

Over the next few minutes, I watched her hands moved over me slowly, over my scars, down my arms and back up, over my collarbone. Her fingers stretched through my beard and along my jaw, over my ears and into my hair again. She rose up higher, her eyes now holding mine as she pressed her skin to me, a needy groan leaving my throat.

"Fuck," I snarled, hooking my hand to the back of her head and crushing her lips to mine. As I drank from her sweet mouth, her hands dropped back down, trailing south, not stopping until she reached the waist band of my jeans, her baby blue nails tracing over the top of my boxers. My abs constricted as I pressed my hips into her, letting her feel me. My tongue commanded hers as she whimpered, my fingers sinking into her wet, honey blonde hair.

As she gasped, I nibbled her bottom lip, my free hand finding one of her wrists, guiding her.

"Touch your man, beautiful," I commanded, shoving her hand down. When her fingers wrapped around my cock, my head fell back, her name spilling from my lips. "Fuck, yes."

She moaned when I shoved the rest of my clothes to my hips, my cock finally free, already addicted to her touch. We both looked down then, my ears savoring the sound of her little noises, knowing she saw it—the small silver ball at the tip of my cock.

"Mags, what is—"

My fingers found her chin, forcing her to look up at me. "A piercing," I answered on growl, my hips moving slowly as I fucked her hand. Those hazel eyes widened, but she didn't stop stroking me. "That's it," I praised, my other hand going to cup her breast, feeling the weight of it, loving it.

"When did you get this?" she asked, staring at my cock.

"When I was twenty-one," I answered. "On a dare."

Diana's eyes met mine again. "A dare?" she parroted softly, still pumping me.

I bit down, grinding my teeth, the base of my spine tingling. "Fuck."

Her thumb swiped over my piercing at the same time my finger brushed over her nipple, her gasp louder than my groan. "You want me?" I clipped, holding her hazel eyes, getting lost in them. I didn't give a shit about the dare anymore. I wanted to be inside her.

"Yes," she panted, her eyes hooded as her other hand dropped to cup my balls.

I nearly let go then. "Jesus fuck, you drive me insane," I bit off.

My hands were underneath her arms within the next second, throwing her back onto the mattress. She didn't have a chance to protest before I was over her, my hands on either side of her head as I held my hips away from hers, my hard cock hanging between us.

Diana, my sweet firefly, stared up at me now, eyes wide, chest heaving with anticipated pants, her hair spread all over my pillow. Slowly, she opened her legs, curling them slightly as I looked down, watching it all. The tip of my cock hovered over her pussy, inches away from pleasure.

"M-Mags?" she breathed.

I looked back to her face, finding her trembling now. We were about to cross a line; one we would never be able to draw again. "What is it?" I whispered, my thumb stroking her temple.

"I haven't—I don't—" She paused, looking away from me. I waited, suspended over her in fear, knowing if she didn't want this—want me—I would never be able to recover.

"Firefly," I pressed, voice jagged and weak.

"I haven't been with anyone in a long time," she confessed, still not looking at me.

My brows furrowed. I didn't understand it. "The men in that town are fuckin' stupid," I muttered, taking a guess. It was none of my business who she'd been with before me, but that didn't mean I wasn't prepared to hunt them all down. I was the only man on this Earth who should know what she felt like, what she sounded like. Unlike all the other men who'd had her, I cherished her.

From this moment on, I was prepared to spend the rest of my life worshiping her.

When she looked back to me, she gave me another gift. "There was no one else I wanted," she said softly, reaching between us, wrapping her fingers around my shaft again. My hips jerked and I lowered as she guided me to her entrance. "I only want you, cowboy."

I only want you, cowboy.

I pressed in, the head of my cock, piercing and all, finally feeling her silk, drenched in her warm honey. I bit down, jaw painfully tight now, and pressed my forehead to hers, caging her head in with my arms as her hands came to my biceps, her nails digging in. I gave her another inch, mesmerized by her beauty, the sound of her gasp, the perfect shape of her lips, the sharp intake of her breath, her breasts rising to brush against my chest.

"M-Mags," she moaned, her sex already fluttering.

I brushed my nose against hers. "Let me in, beautiful," I ordered gently, holding my hips still, my balls tight, ready to fill her.

Her eyes held mine, greener today than brown as she breathed, "Fill me."

With a growl, I pulled out and slammed all the way back in, her heaven swallowing every inch of my cock. She arched for me, exposing her neck, pressing against me as a guttural cry left her.

Peace.

All I felt was peace.

I held myself there, feeling her, loving her, utterly and completely consumed by her. Her nails dug into my skin as she gasped for breath. "So —so b-big," she gasped, her breath hitching.

My lips found her neck, and I pulled out again, pressing a kiss there before I filled her again, savoring her sounds. "And you take me so well, Firefly," I praised, shoving my need to hold her down, holding back from fucking her until I pumped her full of my seed.

There was something I wanted more than that.

I wanted her to come on my cock.

I scraped my teeth against her neck and started to make love to her with slow, steady, agonizing thrusts. Her arms wrapped around my neck, hands around my head, holding me there as she gasped and moaned, her thighs shaking at my sides. One of my hands hooked underneath her knee and pressed her leg higher, my cock going deeper. My pelvis moved against her clit, the tip of my cock hitting her womb over and over, my body pinning hers to the mattress.

She was at my mercy.

On that thought alone, the base of my spine tingled, my body ready to give her everything.

"Mags," I moaned.

"Yeah, baby," I grunted into her neck, my hips moving faster now.

"You're inside me," she said, her voice quivering.

I kissed her neck before lifting my head, holding her eyes as her jaw slacked. The realization hit her before me, and when it did, it might has well have been a damn train. We were connected. We were together. She was mine, and I, hers.

"I'm inside you," I confirmed softly, my voice thick with emotion. Tears filled her eyes.

"Mags," she rasped, her neck arching.

"Diana," I grunted, my fingers digging into the soft flesh of her thigh, my pace steady.

"You're stretching me," she panted.

God, fuck.

"You're taking me," I grunted, hand going to her hair, kissing her mouth. My tongue dove in as my cock filled her, our skin slapping together now. Our teeth scraped against each other, our lips fusing together as our tongues danced.

She pulled away, gasping. "You f-feel so good."

"Yeah? I feel good?" I taunted darkly, my mouth finding her ear. "My cock feel good, Firefly?"

She shuddered, her walls starting to flutter.

Fuck, but she liked the filth coming from my tongue, didn't she?

"Dreamed of this," I reminded her gruffly, thrusting harder now, barely holding on to my sanity. "You underneath me, taking me like a good girl."

"Yes! Oh, yes!" she cried, whimpering at the end.

"Fucked my hand thinking about this very moment, Diana," I growled into her ear. "Groaned your name and only your name every fuckin' night, right here in this bed, as my cum covered my stomach. Made a mess thinking about you, your curves, your hair, your lips, your kindness, your soul." She cried out, and my eyes closed, feeling it. "My little light. My Diana. Hell, even in the bunkhouse, I fucked myself to the thought of you."

"Mags!"

My name coming from her mouth would always be a treasure, but I needed her to scream it. I licked the shell of her ear before nipping it with my teeth. "You would always, without fail, come all over my cock right before I filled this sweet pussy, baby."

She said nothing, her breath hitching.

"Make my dreams come true, Firefly," I whispered, lifting my head again, brushing my lips against hers. "Come on my cock."

My woman, in all her beauty, came apart on me.

I watched in awe as I lifted, holding her hips into the mattress, pounding into her now. Her tits bounced with the force of my thrusts, her slick coating my cock as I looked down, watching her take me. When I looked back up to her face, her eyes had rolled back, her neck arched, and she cried out a single sentence that, even when I was dead and buried, my soul would never forget.

I love you.



The rain was steady as the third storm of the day died down, the drops hitting my bedroom windows softly as Diana lay in my arms, her head on my chest, body against mine, her thigh on top of mine. Like the rain, her breathing was steady, calm. I could feel her heartbeat, her breasts pressed into me. She'd been asleep for the last hour, her body spent along with mine.

Even though the morning had been a gift and my body was sated, feeling contentment for the first time in my adult life, my mind refused to shut down.

I looked down at her, finding her lips parted, face relaxed, her hair frizzy —a beautiful mess. The most beautiful one I'd ever seen. She was here, in my arms. *This was real*. I looked back to the ceiling, waiting for it to come as it always did on the mornings the ranch didn't need me.

I waited for the pain, for the demons inside to show their ugly faces, daring me to face them instead of shoving them back down. I swallowed the lump in my throat as I slowly removed Diana's arm from my stomach while sliding mine out from under head, quickly replacing it with a pillow.

The last thing I wanted to do was wake her—she needed her rest.

Once I was out of bed, I covered her up, watched her for a few moments, and then moved into my closet. I grabbed a fresh pair of boxers, jeans, and a T-shirt and headed into the bathroom to dress. My eyes dropped to my hardwoods as I walked out, seeing the trail of rainwater she and I left only hours ago, the sight making my heart race.

Fuck, but she was finally mine, wasn't she?

Minutes later, when the floor was dried and coffee was made, I headed out to the porch and took my usual seat. I sat in silence, sipping my coffee. When the cup was halfway empty, I pulled out my cell. With the phone to my ear, I listened patiently as it rang, and when my best friend's voice filled my ear, a new, unfamiliar sense of guilt settled in the bottom of gut.

"Grayson," he answered.

"Hey, Gray," I greeted, balancing the coffee mug on my knee, watching the steam rise. "What's going on, Mags? You never call on a Saturday."

"Got something to say," I told him. "You busy?"

There was movement in the background, the familiar sound of a gun being loaded. "Nope," he answered before addressing someone. "Dom, put the bomb down."

My brows rose.

"Ash said we need it," the man, a member of the Red Snake team, Dominic Edwards, argued.

The man they were talking about was Ash Doss, formal Navy SEAL. He was also part of the Red Snake team and helped Beau when Abbie was in danger.

"The last time we let Ash hold a bomb, Kansas City lost a building," Grayson quipped.

My lips twitched. Ash was a crazy son of a bitch, but he got the job done.

"I'm taking the bomb, Gray," Dominic declared.

"Mags, if we make it out of this next mission, kill me," Gray muttered, a door slamming in the background.

"Doubt Carrie would like that," I replied, leaning back in my chair. "Thought you weren't doing hunts anymore." Last year, Grayson was attacked, suffering from multiple gunshot wounds. There was significant damage to his leg, making it difficult for him to run.

"I'm supervising," he countered. "Now, what's up?"

"I have a woman."

My friend was quiet.

The guilt began to spread, but I held my tongue, needing him to stay something before I continued. And when he did, he rocked me, practically gutted me. "Please tell me it's the lawyer." My silence stretched on for some time. "You knew?"

A soft chuckle left him. "Course I fucking knew, Mags. Knew it, watched it, prayed for it."

"I love her," I admitted.

"Know that too."

My head fell as I shook it. "Bastard," I muttered.

"What shocked the hell out of me was that no one else on the ranch saw it."

"They fuckin' saw it yesterday."

"What the hell happened yesterday?" he asked.

"If I tell you, you'll fly down here and give her a lecture," I noted dryly.

"A lecture on what?" he pressed.

"Grizzlies."

There was a beat of silence before he spoke again. "Did that woman run from a grizzly?"

"Ran, fell down a hill, busted up her ankle, and scared the living shit out of me," I confirmed.

"Jesus. She alright?"

"She is now."

"Where is she now?" he asked.

"In my bed."

When he didn't respond, I continued. "I need help, brother. Spent the last decade losing my already broken mind over this woman, and yesterday, when I saw her covered in her own blood, her skin smeared with dirt..." I trailed off.

"I understand," he murmured. "I understand completely."

"Don't want to get sucked back in, Gray," I said, my eyes on the rain now. "The pains are back. So are the echoes."

He muttered something under his breath. "I can send Dominic to you." "No, that's not—"

Fuck, how the hell was anyone supposed to talk about this? You've been in therapy before, dipshit. Act like it.

"That's not what, Mags?"

I dropped my head back, jaw tight, eyes closed. "Have you told Carrie?" Gray, being the fuckin' mind reader he was, instantly replied, "Yes. Not everything, because there's some shit she can't know." He paused. "But she knows about the kidnapping and the torture I endured."

My mouth felt dry suddenly, visions of that dark day flooding back.

"She also knows you're the one who saved me," he tacked on.

I set the coffee down on the table beside me and rubbed my hand over my face. "Carrie—she knows about—"

"Of course she does," he said, confusion in his voice.

"Did she know when she met me?" I asked, leaning forward.

"Yeah, brother. Now, about Diana-"

"—I don't know what the fuck I'm doing," I clipped, more irritated at myself than anything.

"First things first, you need to catch me up, and then I can give you advice on how not to screw this up."

Before I knew it, I was leaning back in the chair again, watching the rain and telling my best friend about every interaction I had with this woman. He listened intently, making comments when I fell silent. He didn't judge. He didn't scold. He didn't warn. He just listened. By the time I was done, my chest felt lighter, and the guilt I'd been feeling all but dissipated.

"I had a feeling you were in your head about her when you called me last," Gray said after a moment.

"That was after I said goodbye to her," I mumbled.

He chuckled. "It's not that easy saying goodbye to the woman who's in your head."

She wasn't just in my head, she was in the very essence of my being.

"Hardest thing I've ever done, Gray," I whispered, staring at my boots now. "Never felt so much pain."

"I get that too," he muttered before clearing his throat. "So here's my advice..."

I braced myself.

"Hold on to her with everything you got. I'm not saying it's going to be all sunshine and rainbows, because it won't be. Your demons are going to show themselves whether you like it or not."

"I can't let that happen," I declared. "There's so much she doesn't know ____."

"Doesn't matter," he argued. "When you love someone and they love you, you both get a front row seat to the good, the bad, and the fucking ugly of your souls. That's what love is, Mags." I swallowed, and my knee began to bounce. "Love isn't a fully grown tree in bloom. Love is growth, down to the roots. Love weathers every season, and trust me, some seasons are going to be dark. If there's anything loving Carrie has taught me, it's this: there's beauty in everyone's darkness, and the only thing that can find that beauty is love." Beside me, the front door opened, and a second later, Diana appeared, my sheet wrapped around her, her hazel eyes flashing with worry.

There's beauty in the darkness, and the only thing that can find that beauty, is love.

"Thank you, Gray," I said, rising from the rocker, not taking my eyes off her.

She looked at the phone. "Is that Grayson?" she whispered when I got to her, my arm going around her waist, pulling her close.

I nodded at the same time Grayson demanded, "Put her on the phone."

Diana heard my best friend's rumbling voice, and her cheeks tinted a bright pink as she shook her head.

"Maybe later, Gray," I murmured, cupping her face, my thumb sweeping across her jaw. "Gotta make my woman some breakfast."

He chuckled. "Later."

"Good morning, gorgeous," I said, dropping my lips to hers.

Her fingers fisted my T-shirt as I tilted her head to the side, forcing her mouth open with my tongue. A soft whimper left her then, my tongue touching hers. I kissed her gently, savoring her as I backed her into the wall, pressing my body against hers. Her hands snaked up my chest, over my shoulders to hook around my neck, her breasts pressed against me now, the sheet still between us. My cock, already hard and ready for her slick heat again, wept in my jeans.

She pulled away, gasping for air as my lips moved over her jaw and down her neck, my hands dropping to her ass, grabbing two delicious handfuls. "Mags?" she called, her breath hitching as my tongue tasted the sensitive skin at her neck.

"Yes, Firefly?" I rumbled, my hips flexing.

"I—um—what happens now?"

My head shot up, my hands dipping lower to hook underneath her thighs. "What happens now," I began, growling as I lifted her, "is I get to eat my breakfast." Her legs wrapped around my waist as I walked back into the cabin, the sheet trailing behind us as I kicked the door shut and headed into the kitchen.

"Your breakfast?" she parroted softly as I set her down on the island.

My hands slide up from her ass to her bare waist, the sheet still covering her front. "Yeah," I whispered. "My breakfast."

Before she could utter a word, I pulled the sheet from her, gently eased her back, propped her heels on the edge of the counter top, and pushed her legs open, revealing her little groomed pussy. The morning light reflected off her arousal, glistening for me, and I felt my balls tighten. I braced my hands on either side of her hips, leaned down, and inhaled deeply.

"Mags," she breathed when I blew the air onto her swollen clit. My eyes shot up, finding her face. Instantly, I knew something was wrong.

I sat up and pulled her feet off the counter before reaching for her hands, pulling her up. "What is it?" I demanded, my hands cupping face as I scanned her eyes. Her cheeks, which were already flushed, grew even more pink, reminding me of the heaven I'd just left. "Baby, what's wrong?"

"I—" She looked away from me, clearing her throat. I slowly dropped my hands.

"Talk to me," I pleaded. "No matter how much I wish to, I can't read your mind."

Her voice was soft, timid. "Maybe we could move this into the bedroom?"

"We can do whatever you want," I replied instantly, and her eyes found mine again. When she didn't say anything, I prompted gently, "We don't have to *do* anything, Diana."

Those hazel eyes I loved so much widened, panic swirling within them. "No, that's not—of course I want to have sex again." I felt my lips twitch as she continued to trip over her words. In all the years I'd known her, I'd never seen her so flustered. "I just—you know—um—"

"Firefly," I called out gently.

"Yes?"

"Are you more comfortable in the bedroom?" I guessed. "Is that what you're trying to say?"

Her eyes dropped to my mouth for half a second. "I'm more comfortable anywhere there's not a lot of light."

I stiffened. "What?"

She ran her hand through her hair before gesturing to all the windows in the kitchen and the living room. "Before, you know, when we…" she trailed off. "Made love." She looked at me, waiting for me to correct her.

"Yes, Firefly, that's what we did," I told her, my voice firm. "It was beautiful, and I loved every damn second of it."

"So did I," she murmured.

"I made love to you in my bed, in the morning light, Diana," I reminded her before repeating her gesture to the windows. "Granted, it is a bit brighter now, but I don't understand why you only want to be in the dark." I paused, the gut-wrenching realization hitting me like a train. She was watching me with caution etched into her beauty now, leaning forward slightly, her hair slowly falling over her shoulder.

"Mags, I—"

"It's as good as it gonna be, baby," I said darkly, watching her jerk back. "The doctors did all they could to repair the damage the bomb caused. Multiple skin grafts and a ton of surgery, Diana. This is as good as it gets."

I didn't even blink as she grabbed my shirt and yanked me to her. Her arms hooked around my neck, pulling me down so our foreheads touched. She shook her head viciously against me, stammering. "No, handsome, God no. That's not—I wasn't—you're beautiful, Mags. So, so beautiful. I wasn't ____"

"Need you to spit it out, baby," I pushed, not fully believing her.

I never expected anyone other than the doctors to see my wound, let alone have a woman in my bed again. I knew it was hideous, that it was something the world didn't want to see, but fuck me, I at least hoped the woman in love with me wouldn't mind fucking me in the light.

"It's me," she blurted, halting my thoughts. "I don't want you seeing *me* in the light."

I blinked and pulled back, feeling her hands fall from me. "What?"

That sweet mouth opened and shut twice before I clipped, "I've already seen you in the light. Put my mouth on you, had you spread out in my bed, coming on my tongue, and I watched every single second, loved every damn second."

The heat in her cheeks spread down to her neck. "I was...we were..."

"So wrapped up in it that our insecurities couldn't stand a fuckin' chance?" I quipped, my voice harsher than I intended. When she didn't say anything, I nodded. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

"I'm thirty-five years old, and I've never felt beautiful." Her confession, a carefully spoken whisper, hit me like a damn grenade as she dropped her head. "You're the most beautiful creature I've ever seen."

Her head shot up, tears in her eyes.

"You've always been the most stunning woman to me, even when you change your hair," I said, stepping closer to her. "Even when you lose weight and gain it back. Even when you're not dressed up, ready to take on the world."

"Mags," she croaked.

"Even yesterday, when I found you against that tree, in the dirt and covered in blood, you were beautiful. You will be beautiful when you decide to stop changing your hair and let it go gray, when the smile lines around your mouth and eyes become more prominent. Even when you're old and walking with a cane, baby, you'll still be beautiful to me," I continued, my voice growing softer with each sentence.

Her question came out as a rasp. "You—you noticed when I lost weight?"

My jaw tightened as my nostrils flared. "Yeah, and we're going to talk about that, but not right now."

"What do you mean we're going to—"

"Spent over a decade lovin' you, and I don't even know all of you, Diana," I deadpanned. "You don't know all of me, but that's going to change. We have a lot to figure out, and it doesn't need to be figured out today. Today, I just want you as you are."

"Are we crazy?" she whispered.

I nodded once. "Yeah, we are, but who the hell cares?"

At that, she started laughing, and it was the most gorgeous thing I'd ever heard.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Diana

"Mags?"

"Mm?"

It was after breakfast, and we were back in bed, my head on his chest, his dark sheets tangled all around us. After I'd woken up and found him on the porch, he brought me into the kitchen, dead set on eating me out on the counter, but my stupid insecurities got in the way. So instead, after we had a conversation, he kissed me on the forehead, went into his bedroom, and came back with one of his flannels for me to wear. It wasn't super loose on me, but I could get it buttoned and it covered my ass. Then, he made both of us breakfast, instructing me to tell him about Yale.

As soon as our plates were empty, he carried me back into the bedroom to finish what he started.

"What is it, baby?" his deep voice rumbled, causing goosebumps to spread across my exposed skin. His hand, which had been tracing aimlessly up the curve of my spine, slowly came to halt and a second later, I felt his fingers underneath my chin, forcing me to look up at him. His harsh features were the softest I'd ever seen them, his eyes filled with nothing but love.

"I'm sorry about earlier," I whispered. I'd made myself look like an idiot, because I couldn't figure out how to express myself and ended up hurting him in the process. "You really are beautiful, you know?"

A muscle in his cheek jumped. "Don't apologize."

"I need you to know that, though. I-the last thing I ever want to do is make you-"

I didn't get a chance to say the rest, because he was on top of me, pinning my hands above my head, his mouth finding my ear. "You don't have to apologize. It's over and done. Get out of your head about it."

My nipples pebbled against his chest, his pierced cock hardening against my thigh. "Fair warning; I'm in my head a lot, cowboy," I told him as he rubbed his beard against my neck, humming.

"I'm aware," he replied, his tongue stroking my neck before I felt the graze of his teeth. "You be in your head. I have no problem dragging you out of it."

I chewed on my bottom lip. "I'm sorry."

His head shot up, his eyes darker than before. "Don't apologize," he commanded. "That's a habit I'm going to break you of, and I know it's going to take time, but I've got the patience for it."

"I—"

"Your ex abused you."

My mouth closed.

"He abused you, verbally and physically from what you told me on the phone the night you didn't want me to kill him," he went on.

"Wait—you actually listened to that?"

"Listened to every single word, Firefly, and every day, my regret for not killing the bastard grows."

"Mags!" I snapped.

He leaned down then, his voice deathly quiet. "That man put his hands on you, baby. You asked me not to kill him, and I didn't, but that doesn't mean I won't in the future."

"Lucas is long gone," I stressed. "Chase dropped him on the edge of town like in those old western movies and told him to never show his face here again."

"Diana, I know. I've been keeping tabs."

I jerked, blinking once-twice. "What?"

He said nothing, his hair falling around his face now, making him look like a god.

"You've been keeping tabs on my ex?" I breathed.

"On a man who threatened you? Yes. I also have tabs on your parents should they ever decide to show their faces in this town," he said simply.

"I—"

"To get to the point I've been trying to make, gorgeous: you've been abused, not only by your ex, but also by your parents."

Tears welled in my eyes. "You remember everything, don't you?"

"Yes," he answered, his dark eyes reaching out for my soul. "You've been abused and still have some healing to do. Healing is messy, but I can't be your safe space if I can't handle the mess. This is me telling you I can handle whatever mess you bring me. I'll still love you even when I'm cleaning it up."

I brought my hands up, cupping his face, stroking the stubble on his cheeks with my thumbs, feeling the strength in his jaw, his heat enveloping me. "I'm working on it," I promised, looking at his lips. "I've been fighting this...demon for a long time now."

"What demon is that?"

My eyes met his. "Food noise."

Slowly, his brows furrowed. "Food noise," he parroted, confusion lacing the jagged edges of his voice.

I nodded. "That's what the kids call it these days." I paused, scared to admit the truth to not only him, but to myself. "I suffered from an eating disorder from the time I was a sophomore in high school to when I graduated law school."

Something passed over his face then, dark and chilling, down to the bone.

When he didn't say anything, his eyes compelled me to tell him more. "I think about food all the time, calories always in the back of my mind, what I need to do to burn them," I rambled. "I haven't done it in a really long time, but I used to binge eat, feel immense guilt over all the food I consumed, and then...I would—um—force myself to throw it back up."

He was still silent, a shadow over his rugged features. My heart thundered in my ears, the beat of my pulse amplifying my anxious thoughts.

"I don't...I don't do it anymore," I finally pushed out, my voice cracking at the end. "I haven't in a long, long time, and when you mentioned me losing weight, I didn't lose it by doing that."

"How did you?" he prompted gruffly.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "Calorie deficit."

"And at the rate you lost all that weight, baby, I can only assume it wasn't a healthy deficit."

Now it was my turn to say nothing. He looked down at our bodies. "You're soft, Diana, in all the right places. If anyone makes you feel like that's a problem, you call me. I'll take care of 'em."

Panic slithered between us, around my neck, down my spine. "You can't kill someone because they think I'm fat," I argued.

"Sure, I can."

"Mags!"

"Diana," he returned, his thumb going to my lip. "Been my woman for over a fuckin' decade. I don't tolerate that shit."

I blinked. "We just got together this morning," I reminded him. His hips flexed against me, the ball at the tip of his cock pressing into my thigh.

"You've been the only woman on my mind, which means, to me, you are, and have been my woman," he stated.

I opened my mouth, but he cut me off.

"You need to establish a healthy relationship with food." My cowboy's voice was soft, gentle, everything I needed it to be for this conversation.

"I'm working on it."

"A healthy relationship with food includes not writing down which days you're allowed to have a fuckin' cookie in your planner," he deadpanned.

"I—how did you—I don't—"

His nose was against mine then as he growled, "Dropped that damn thing on Denver's porch three years ago. It popped open, and when I handed it back to you, I saw it. Wednesday. Six PM. Two Oreos. Written in damn lime green ink."

"I—"

He cut me off again, sharp but gentle. "That shit stops now."

"But—"

His eyes scanned over my face, brow furrowed. "You want a fuckin' Oreo, eat a fuckin' Oreo."

"The problem isn't eating one Oreo, Mags. The problem is, I want a whole row of them. I have no self-control," I admitted, heat climbing up my cheeks.

"Then eat a whole row, Diana. Just don't do it every fuckin' week."

I shook my head, frustrated tears burning in my eyes. He pulled back slightly, his fingers weaving through my hair, his arms on either side of my head now. "Tell me why you're crying," he commanded softly.

My eyes drifted from him to the window, the rain finally coming to an end, only leaving a thin sheet of sprinkles now.

"Firefly," he called.

"This was supposed to be a nice day. We agreed to have a nice day during breakfast, and I'm trauma dumping."

He rubbed his nose up the column of my neck, his beard tickling my skin. "Yeah?" he whispered, "And I love it." My eyes shot back to him, wide now as the tears fell down the sides of my head. "You love this?"

He nodded, his face serious. "Being your safe space is the only thing I ever want to be. What you're telling me isn't great, and if I'm being honest, it's making want to go hunt your fuckin' parents and Lucas down—"

"You're worse than, Denver," I muttered, looking away from him again.

Slowly, his hand came to the front of my throat, his fingers manipulating my head to face his again. When he spoke, goosebumps scattered across every inch of my body, leaving no room for doubt. "Let me make myself clear, beautiful. Someone hurts you, they answer to me. Someone crosses you, they answer to me. Someone disrespects you, they answer to me. Someone insults you, they answer to me. There are many ways I can handle them, twenty that would make you want to puke up your breakfast, fifteen or so that would make you want to call a fuckin' priest, and two that would make you want to run."

I stared up at him, heart pounding.

"But I just got you, and there is no way in fuck I'm letting you go, so I'm not telling you the last two. Also not telling you the others because one, I don't do religion, and two, I don't want to see you sick," he concluded.

"You're worse than Denver," I repeated on a breath.

A wicked gleam appeared in his eyes then. "Firefly, I'll be the damn devil if necessary to keep you safe."

"This conversation took a turn," I whispered.

His eyes dropped to my lips, his cock hard against me once more. "It's about to take another one," he decreed.

My nipples tingled, pebbling just below his chest. He looked down, a rare but rough chuckle coming from somewhere deep in his massive chest. "Fuck, but you're addicted to me too, aren't you?" His mouth was on mine before I could answer...



"Mags," I gasped, my fingers gripping his sheets.

He groaned, the sound vibrating against my clit as he devoured me, his fingers fucking my pussy from behind. It was our third round, both of us slick with sweat, and he was about to make me come on his tongue for the fifth time. We'd spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon in his bed, catching up on all we'd missed.

"Taste like fuckin' honey," he growled as he pulled his fingers from me, his hands spreading my cheeks open, exposing me as his fingers dug into my flesh. I knew that tomorrow, I would wake up with his marks on me, and my heart fluttered.

I was on my hands and knees at the edge of the bed, my cowboy's knees on the floor. He dragged his tongue from the tip of my clit, over my entrance, up to my ass. His tongue circled the sensitive hole, and my eyes rolled back, my breasts swaying as my hips moved, grinding back against his face.

He pulled away, leaving my body begging for more. "Please, Mags," I whimpered.

"Goddamn—fuck."

Then, I was twisted and in the air. I landed on my back close to the head board, a gasp leaving me. I was ready, so, so ready, for him. I needed it. I found him standing at the end of the bed, eyes on me, his thick, glorious cock in his hand, the silver ball shining in the light.

He pumped it twice, his eyes on my face, then two more times when they landed on my breasts.

"Mags," I begged, curling my knees and spreading them open. "Please."

Those dark eyes dropping to my core, flashing with hunger, and before I could stop him, his face was buried in my pussy again, his tongue flicking my over sensitive bundle of nerves. My back and neck arched as a guttural cry left me, my hands reaching for him, my fingers tangling themselves in his unruly hair. My hips moves on their own accord, my body needing release anyway it could get it. His hands wrapped around my thighs, holding them down and open as he feasted, low growls coming from his throat.

"Mags, babe, I need your cock," I rasped, feeling my climax build.

"Call me 'babe' again, Firefly," he begged on a groan, licking my clit lightly.

I let out a sound of frustration. "Give me your cock."

"Call me 'babe.""

"Not until you're inside me," I pushed out, pulling his hair.

"Not done with my meal, gorgeous," he grunted before he latched onto me again.

I whimpered, my thighs shaking, my orgasm nearly there. This one was going to be stronger than the last four, and I didn't know if I would survive it. My eyes closed as I lost control, fucking his face erratically as I gasped for air, one hand going to my breast, kneading it. He grunted against me, and I bent my head, finding his eyes, the wicked gleam within them, and I was gone.

My head shot back, sinking into the mountain of pillows as I rasped, "Yes, yes, yes. Babe, yes!"

I was still floating, my body still trembling when I felt his heat hovering over me. A second later, I felt his piercing against my overstimulated clit, causing my body to jerk. I lifted my eyelids open, finding my cowboy staring down at me, my cum all over his short beard. "Could eat that cunt for a lifetime and I still wouldn't be satisfied," he rumbled, shifting his hips.

I whimpered, lifting my sore ones, seeking him out.

"Put my cock in your pussy, Diana," he ordered.

Without hesitation, I reached down between us, my hand eagerly searching for his length. My fingers wrapped around it, feeling it's hard weight as I moaned, bringing it to my entrance. He held himself there, not moving, and my eyes shot up to his. "Please," I pleaded, lifting my head to brush my lips with his.

Suddenly, my head was back down, his hand wrapped around my throat, his lips at my ear. "When I fill you, you tell me how much you love your cowboy."

"Yes," I gasped, his fingers flexing.

"You tell your cowboy how much you love his pierced cock, yeah?" he growled, his teeth nipping my ear lobe, and goosebumps scattered across my flesh.

I nodded.

He slammed inside, sliding all the way home.

I gave him what he wanted. "I love you, Mags," I breathed, my arms going around his neck. "I love you so much."

Another harsh growl left him, his hands going down to my hips, pinning me in place. He pulled out and slammed back in again. "You love me, Firefly?"

"So much," I pushed out.

Thrust. "You love my body?"

"Yes."

Thrust. "You love my cock?"

"Yes!"

"You love all of me?" he asked, his voice shaking as he pulled back, meeting my eyes.

"Every part of you," I whispered, his hips moving steady now. "Even the parts you haven't shown me yet."

He dropped his face back into my neck, but I didn't miss the look in his eyes. His hands moved up from my hips, snaking underneath me as I wrapped my legs around his waist, feeling this scar on the left side against my thigh. I turned my head, pressing my lips to his ear. "I love you, all of you, Mags," I whispered, emotion clogging my throat.

His hips moved faster, chasing his own climax as I held on, telling him how much I loved him, stroking his hair. When he finally reached his peak, he gave me the words I'd been longing to hear. I love you, Firefly.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Mags

"When do you start teaching your class?" I asked, setting her plate down on the coffee table in front of her.

Diana cleared her throat as she set her beer beside it, leaning forward to grab her fork. "Monday." I froze, and her hazel eyes flicked up to me. "My class is at eleven," she tacked on.

We'd finally moved out of the bed an hour ago, and I drew us a bath, letting her soak in my arms for a while. I knew she was sore, not only from the fall, but from me. We were insatiable. The craving we had for one another had gone on for far too long, and I knew one weekend wasn't going to be enough.

It would never be enough.

If I had it my way, Diana Harper would never leave Hallow Ranch again.

However, this was reality, and my woman had a business to run. "You need to go home tomorrow then," I assumed, shoving my need to lock her away down.

My firefly nodded, running her hand through her wet hair. "Yeah, I have to prepare."

I said nothing, returning to the kitchen to grab my dinner, and neither of us spoke again until I was in the chair across from her.

"Though, I'm only teaching one class this semester, and the first day is easy," she rambled, moving her fork over the food I made her. "It's just me going over the syllabus. You know, setting the tone," she explained, popping a little red potato in her mouth.

My question came out easy, but guilt lingered on my tongue. "When did you start teaching?"

She blew out a breath and looked to the fire. "Uh, probably three years ago, maybe?"

The guilt moved the back of my throat, dropping down to my gut. This was going to be hard. I knew that, as did she, but fuck, if I didn't feel like an asshole for not knowing. The words were out before I could stop them. "I'm sorry."

Her eyes held mine, firelight dancing across her skin. "I'm sorry, too," she whispered as she dropped her eyes. "I feel like we've wasted so much time." My plate was on the table in the next second, and a half second after that, I was on my knees in front of her, taking her plate away. "No. No, see, Firefly, we're not going to do that," I said, my voice thick, my hands on her thighs. "We can't spend the rest of our time together regretting all the things we missed. That's no way to start this."

I watched her intently as she took a slow breath, her hands reaching for me. "Mags, I need to know what this is."

"I told you what this was, baby," I replied, my brows coming together.

"I need to hear it again," she demanded.

I watched her, studying the fear in her eyes. "Tell me what you're thinking," I ordered softly.

"The truth?"

"Always the truth, Firefly. Nothing else."

She chewed on the inside of her lip, looking over to the fire. "Last night, I was sitting right here, silently wishing—praying--you would tell me you love me."

My jaw tightened, but I waited. I wasn't going to push her, not now.

"And now, I know what you taste like," she whispered, looking at our hands. "I know what you feel like. I know how good it feels to be in your arms. I know you actually have the capability to laugh when you want." She looked at me, tears in her eyes. "I know you love me."

I nodded.

Her bottom lip trembled. "I also really don't want to go back to reality. I want to stay—"

"This is our reality," I told her roughly. "This is our fuckin' reality, beautiful. You and me. There's no going back." My hands left hers so I could cup her face. "This isn't a dream. This isn't going to go away. You're going to teach your class, run your firm, and I'll be here, working on the ranch and building furniture."

"But—"

"This is us, Firefly. This is you and me loving each other and building something together. This is you in my bed on the weekends and me in yours during the week." She jerked slightly, but I kept on. "This is you taking me into Hayden and showing me around because, fuck, it's time for me to leave this damn property. I know I'll probably fuckin' hate it and the nosy people in it, but if I'm your man, people in this town need to know that. I'm prepared to show them that. You deserve to be shown off, and I can't do that by keeping you here, even though what I really want to do is chain you to my bed." I paused, savoring the heat rising in her cheeks. "This is me introducing you to Carrie and Grayson when they come down. This is me letting you in. This is me giving myself to you and only you, because you're the only woman I've ever fuckin' loved. This is us becoming a family. This is me making love to you when we both need it, fuckin' the bad days out of both of us. This is me getting to eat your sweet cunt whenever and wherever I want. This is you seeing me-all of me-like no one else has. This is me being your safe space and you being mine. This is us being together."

"Mags," she breathed out, eyes wide.

"You get me?" I pressed. "I need you to tell me you get me. If you don't, then we have bigger problems."

"I get you," she whispered.

"You mine?" I clipped.

"Yes."

"Am I yours?"

She nodded. "You're mine, Mags. You'll always be mine."

Diana's words hit me directly in the heart, pulling up a memory I'd long forgotten. Slowly, Diana and the cabin around me began to fade as I was sucked into a time I barely escaped.



Years ago. Three days post-discharge.

"You sure you're alright?" Gray asked from the driver's seat.

I looked over to him, silently thanking the extended prescription of pain medication from the Corp. This was my first time being back in the States in over a year. I missed the birth of my son, stuck in a hospital in overseas, and now, he was nearly six months old.

"Mags?"

I blinked, and everything came back into focus. Grayson was turned towards me, his arm resting on the top of the steering wheel, his brow pinched in concern. "Yeah, I'm alright," I finally answered, clearing my throat and shifting my left arm. The burning was dull, but I knew once this round of meds wore off, the pain would be back in full force. Grayson's eyes flicked up to the small house he'd parked in front of. "You sure you don't need me to come in, help Ashley get you settled?"

I shook my head. "No, I need to do this on my own, " I said gruffly, slowly bending and grabbing my bag I'd settled between my legs at the airport.

"You need me, you call me. Yeah?"

His question was left unanswered as I looked to the house, the place meant to be my home. I didn't know this place. To me, it was just a building, but I was hopeful that, someday, the value would change. Without another word, I opened the door and got out of his truck. I swung my bag over my right arm, and crossed the yard, noticing how fresh the cut was.

More guilt, on top of all the rest, settled on my shoulders as my gut twisted.

I was about to meet my son.

The thought echoed in my head as I made it to the porch, pulling out the same set of keys I'd had since I enlisted, the house key beside my car key, an eight ball hanging beside it. I looked over to the garage door, knowing all the work I would need to do on the Mustang. Ashley had always been too scared to drive it, and I didn't expected her to do anything with it when I was gone. She already had enough on her plate.

Sucking in a quiet breath, I held the key in front of the lock, hearing Grayson's truck pull away from the curb.

My eyes closed as I forced myself to whisper the same three sentences I'd been trying to believe since I woke up in the hospital.

"Your life in the Marines is over."

"Your life with Ashley and your son starts now."

"You will be a good husband and father to both of them."

As soon as the last word was off the tip of my tongue, I pushed the key into the door and twisted. There was music playing softly throughout the house, the scent of lemons hitting my nose as I quietly stepped in and just as quietly closed the door behind me. I walked into the living room, my bandages underneath my loose shirt rubbing against my healthy skin. I ignored the irritation, focusing on the nerves knotting in my stomach as I rounded the corner, expecting to see Ashley.

No one.

My eyes scanned over the tidied space, from the folded blankets on the back of the couch to the baby toys neatly packed in a small blue basket in the corner by the TV. My focus lingered on the baby swing by the window, a ray of sun hitting it just right as my heart began to pound in my ears. I remained in place, revisiting the last time I'd seen my wife. She had been a little over two months pregnant then, but neither of us knew it. I stood with her in the middle of the living room, dressed in my uniform, my bags by the door. She was numb to it all, just as I was. Same job, same struggles, different day.

She hadn't even shed a tear for me like she had before.

No, she'd been numb then.

I remembered brushing some of her hair back, tucking it behind her ear before kissing her forehead. I told her I'd call her when I got to base. She'd said okay. We didn't even say 'I love you.'

Things were going to be different now. For me. For her. For our little family. I was willing to do whatever it took to make her happy, even if that meant trying to fall in love with her all over again.

I moved into the kitchen, finding it spotless and empty. I shifted to the backyard, finding it mowed, the bushes along the back fence trimmed. More

guilt hit me then, adding to the pile. She'd done a good job of taking care of our home while I was gone.

Now, it was my turn to take care of her.

Stifling a groan, I set my bag by the base of the stairs before climbing them quietly. They might be taking a nap, after all. On our last phone call, Ashley told me one of the nurses in the hospital told her mothers need to sleep when the baby sleeps. It was good advice, and I was happy to know she was taking it.

Once on the top stair, I looked to the left, my eyes on the cracked door at the end of the hall. The walls were painted a dove blue, soft playing music inside. Slowly, I walked to the door, every single inch of my body tight, braced for the unknown. I leaned forward, peeking through the gap, my eyes landing on the white crib against the far wall, a little human asleep inside.

My son.

He was on his stomach, butt in the air, feet curled under. His head was blocked by a stuffed teddy bear.

I wanted to see more of him, and my body moved before I could think. Pain shot through my left side as I pushed the door open with my left arm. I bit down, grinding my teeth and squeezing my eyes shut. A few seconds passed before the pain began to fade, and then I was tip-toeing across his room, coming to stop in front of his crib. My eyes locked on the boy and my stomach dropped, the floor underneath me about to collapse.

I heard soft laughter then, and I twisted my neck, looking over my shoulder, my eyes narrowing on the hallway. Before I could blink, I was out of the baby's room and charging down to the opposite end of the hall. Another round of laughter fluttered through our bedroom door, and I stopped in my tracks, recognizing her voice.

"We can't," my wife rasped.

"Yes, we can. He won't be up for another ten minutes," a male voice argued.

I sighed deeply as I dropped my head, the truth not hitting like I expected. I expected the force of an oncoming train, but instead, it was like a small gust of wind: meaningless to some, but to others, it could shake their whole world.

I'd gotten my hopes up.

I'd been a fool.

I lifted my right leg and kicked the door in, the force of it shaking our wedding pictures on the wall. Ashley yelped, grabbing the sheet to cover herself as I stepped inside, my eyes on the man in my bed.

My wife said my name.

My old name.

My birth name.

A snarl left me as I pinned her in place with a glare. "Told you to never call me that again," I clipped.

"M-Mags," she stammered, correcting herself immediately, scrambling up to her feet, taking a sheet with her. The man in my bed scrambled to grab a pillow to cover his junk.

My wife was pretty, always had been. With her dark hair that matched mine and big, blue-gray eyes, it wasn't hard for me to fall in love with her when we were sixteen. We both came from a small town, both desperate to get out of it. The easiest way for me to do that was to enlist in the Marines; not to mention, I wanted to get the fuck away from my father. "Who is this, Ashley?"

My head ticked to the side as I looked at the man who'd been sleeping with my wife.

I looked back to Ashley. "That boy in there isn't mine, is he, sweetheart?" I asked, my voice sweet.

"Mags," she started, "please. I can explain. I—"

"Ash, who the hell is this guy?" the man barked. "Why is he asking about Miles?"

Miles.

So that was his name.

She'd refused to tell me his name in the hospital, saying she wanted it to be a surprise. I could give her that; after everything I'd put her through, I had to give her that. I knew she would do right by our boy.

But he wasn't my boy at all.

"Miles," I repeated, testing the name.

There were tears in my wife's eyes now. "Mags, I didn't know you were coming home today."

"Thought I'd surprise my wife and son," I shot back, watching her flinch.

"What the fuck?" the man whispered, suddenly looking green. He looked over to me, his eyes filled with regret. "You're her dead husband?"

My brows lifted. "Dead husband, no." I tilted my head. "Charred and burned husband, yes."

"Mags," she whimpered.

"Is that what she told you? That I died last year?" I quipped, my jaw hard as I kept my gaze on the stranger.

The man shook his head, confusion twisting his features. "Last year? No, man, she told me she'd been widowed for two years."

If I wasn't in so much pain, I would've laughed. "Right," I muttered, reaching for the bottom of my shirt. I lifted it up, exposing my badges, my marks of honor. "I've been deployed for a while, and a few months back, I got hit by a bomb in the field. The Corp wouldn't let me come home until the chance of infection was below a certain percentage. If they had, I wouldn't have made the flight back," my eyes cut to Ashley, "which would've made your little lie true, baby."

"Stop," she begged. "I didn't—I just—well, what did you expect me to do, Mags?"

I stared at her, waiting for the remorse, the regret. When she gave me nothing, I shook my head, dropped my shirt and held up my hand, showing her the band on my fourth finger. "I expected my wife to honor the vows we both took in that shitty little court house years ago, Ashley. That's the fuck I expected you to do."

She stared at me, tears finally starting to form. Though, I didn't know if they were for me or for the relationship I just ruined for her. "I was lonely," she blubbered.

I chuckled. "You don't know the meaning of the damn word." I looked over at my replacement. "Leave her or stay, I don't care, but you better take care of that boy, understood? I know he's yours, but for the last six months, in my head, he was mine. You better fuckin' do right by him, or I'll kill you."

My eyes shot back to her, and I twisted off the ring and tossed it on the bed. "You'll get the papers in the mail. Keep the house. Keep the Mustang. I don't give a shit. I'm done."

I turned on my heel, and I was gone.

"Mags!" she called after me, but I didn't look back.

I was out of the door, bag on my shoulder, walking down the street into the sunset. As the miles stretched on, time passing me by without a second care, I waited for the heartbreak to come.

It never did.

Chapter Twenty-Five



Diana

"Mags?" I called after a few moments of silence.

He was no longer looking at me, but rather, at the front door, clearly in a different place. His hands had fallen from my face, and I watched in interested horror as the cowboy on his knees in front of me disappeared. A lump formed in my throat as I studied his profile, the fire in his eyes dimming slightly. I knew, after years of being around Denver and witnessing his PTSD, that this may very well be a flashback.

I also knew not to touch him right now, despite my dire need. All I could do was softly call him name and remind him of *where* and *when* he was.

"Mags, it's Diana," I said softly, leaning down. "You're here on Hallow Ranch, in your cabin."

I held my breath, waiting, watching, silently praying he would come back to me. Outside, the late afternoon sun had begun to shine between the clouds, its rays coming in through the windows, highlighting the floor. "I'm right here, Mags," I continued. "I'm right here, waiting for you, but I need you to come back for me."

He bent his head, lost in the past.

I took an unsteady breath, my hands shaking along with my voice. "You asked me to stay for you, and I have. Come back to me, babe. Please. Please come back to me, Mags."

Pressing my lips together, I looked over my shoulder to the journal on the desk—all his secrets, his nightmares and dreams, all in one place.

"Diana."

My head whipped back around to find those dark eyes I loved so much, his brow pinched with regret. He brought his hand up, running his fingers through his dark hair. "Sorry about that, Firefly. I'm so sorry. I just—"

"What was it?" I asked, still unsure whether I should touch him. "What triggered it?"

He stared at me for a long time. "You've seen this before, haven't you?" he murmured.

I nodded. "Yes. With Denver."

"Mm."

"I also know not to touch you when you have an episode," I noted, my voice still trembling.

He ended my short-lived torment then. "Put your hands on me," he commanded softly.

I lunged and wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him in as a sob left me. "I'm sorry. Whatever I did or said to make you go back to that horrible place, I'm so sorry."

His arms were around me, locking around my waist, his face in my hair. "You did nothing wrong," he whispered.

I was full-on crying now. "I—I—yes—"

His hands slid up to my shoulders, to my upper arms, gently pulling me back. "No, you did nothing wrong," he reassured me as his hands cupped my face once more.

I pressed my forehead against his. "Are you okay?"

Moments passed, my heart thundering in my ears, and when he closed his eyes, a tired sigh left him. "I know we said we didn't have to rush everything into one weekend, but I do need to tell you something before we move on, yeah?"

My nerves were eating me alive. "Anything," I assured. "You can tell me anything.

"Thinkin' maybe we need to eat before I do," he murmured softly, giving me a small smile. I'd never seen anything like it before.

My hands were at his wrists then, my fingers wrapping around him, the touch grounding me. "Nope. Don't do that," I pleaded, shaking my head. "Tell me now. My anxiety cannot handle this."

"Diana—"

"—I want to know everything," I cut him off, holding his eyes. "For the last eleven, almost twelve, years, I've wanted to know everything about you, cowboy. You say we don't have to do this all in one weekend, but I wouldn't mind it. I know there are somethings you can never tell me, and there are things I cannot tell you..." I trailed off, kissing him lightly. "But I want everything and anything you can give me, Mags."

"Always killin' me, gorgeous," he said. "Fuckin' killin' me and bringing me back to life at the same time."

I swallowed the cry trying to climb up my throat. "Can you do that for me, cowboy?"

"I'll give it all to you, Firefly," he vowed. "Every day, every hour, every minute. For the rest of my life."

My soul shouted in victory, but my heart, oh, my cautious little heart, stayed quiet.

Then, on his knees in front of me, my head in his hands, he gave me a piece of truth I never saw coming.

"Diana, I've been married before."

My jerk was immediate but unintentional. One of his hands fell away as the other snaked to the back of my neck, holding me steady as my hands dropped back into my lap. "W-what?"

His voice was gentle, patient, everything I needed it to be as my mind conjured this woman—his first wife—in my head. "Her name is Ashley."

Ashley.

The lump in my throat began to hurt, glass tearing into it now, and I couldn't speak.

"My family, baby--you will *never* know them," he declared, the pads of his fingers pressing in. "Ever. They don't get you. They don't get access to the only good thing to happen to me in this life."

The only good thing to happen to me in this life.

When I gave him no response, he pressed, "I need you to understand that, Diana. Not only did I shut that door when I was eighteen, I burned it to the fucking ground. You will never know them. You won't know what they look like, what they do, where they live. Nothing. I will tell you, eventually, all the shit they put me through, but not now. Ashley is first. Got me?"

I nodded, and he shook his head. "No, Firefly. I need verbal conformation. Can you give that to me?"

"Y-yes," I croaked.

"Never loved her," he said, his voice growing harder with each word. "We were kids when we met, and I was a dumbass boy. She made me feel things. She made me feel good when the rest of my life was shit. I admired her, yes, but I never once loved her. You wanna know how I know that?"

He didn't give me a chance to answer.

"Because when I came home after getting out of the Marines, my burns still fresh, ready to meet my son and rebuild our life, I found her in bed with another man, and my heart didn't break."

My chest deflated. "What?" I breathed out, my hands coming to him, latching onto his shirt. "You—you have a son?"

"Thought I did. She was two months pregnant when I left for my last deployment, but the boy wasn't mine. He belonged to the man my wife was fucking behind my back for two years."

My heart was breaking all over again. "Mags-"

"You're the only woman I've ever loved," he declared, his thumb stoking my skin. "Wanna know how I know that?"

Again, he didn't give me a chance to respond.

"Because I left my sanctuary for you, baby," he told me softly. "The second I heard that fear in your voice, I didn't even think. By the time I was

at your house, I hadn't even realized what I'd done."

Sobs attacked me then, vicious and unrelenting.

"Love you so damn much, Diana," he pushed out. "I'd go through everything, all the hell I endured, over and over again, to be with you."

My mouth was on his then as I kissed him with everything I had, everything I could give, hoping and praying it would be enough to heal his pain. With a growl, he shot up, forcing me back into the couch cushions as he loomed over me, one hand by my head, the other shifting to the front of my neck. His tongue stroked again mine as he took control, my hands clinging to his shirt at his sides. He took everything and gave it back to me tenfold.

"I love you," he grunted.

"Yes," I moaned, nodding against him. "I love you too."

The kiss ended as my cowboy pulled away. "The rest of my life is yours, Diana Harper."

The rest of my life is yours.

"I—"

"You have me, all of me, forever," he confirmed. "I became yours the moment I saw you."

Silence fell between us, our breaths colliding, our gazes unwavering.

"Can I have her full name?" I asked. "Her address?"

His eyes flashed, his lips twitching as he replied, "No, Firefly."

"She hurt you."

"I got over it."

"But—"

"Got over it and found you," he declared. "Your words triggered me, and yes, I got sucked into the past, but not into the war zone. The memory of the day I left her came up, and I got lost in it. I'm sorry for that. It's been a long time since I've..." His words faded as his head snapped up, eyes narrowing on the door.

"What? Was is it?"

"God fuckin' damn it," he muttered, pushing up from the couch and going to the door.

That was when I heard it; the low rumble of an engine.

Slowly, I rose to my feet, food forgotten as he looked out the window.

"Is it Denver again?"

Mags bit off a curse. "Fuck me."

A car door slammed, and then I heard footsteps on the porch. Mags looked over to me, his hand on the doorknob. "I'm going to apologize now, Firefly."

Uh. "Who is it?"

"Carrie and Grayson."



She was an angel.

There was no other way to describe this woman. From her snow-blonde curls and her bright smile to her even brighter blue eyes, Carrie was an angel.

They'd been here for over half an hour, Carrie immediately hugging Mags as soon as he opened the door, which was something I'd never seen before. No one ever hugged that man, not even Harmony or Valerie. I watched with stunned curiosity as my cowboy hugged her back. Her man, Grayson, however, hadn't been paying an ounce of attention to them. No, as soon as the door opened, his eyes shot to me.

I knew very little about Joseph Grayson, but I knew he was a bounty hunter, one of the best in the country. I never got to meet him when Denver hired him, and now, I was thinking that might've been a mistake. He was tall, the same height as Mags, slightly thicker build. His most notable feature was the scar that started at his temple and trailed all the way down into his beard. Like the idiot I was, I waved at him, shooting him a lame smile.

Thankfully, that worked, because his cold exterior melted away, returning my smile with a gorgeous one.

Introductions were made and before Mags could get a word in, Grayson asked to speak with him. What for, I didn't know, but I knew in my gut something was wrong. However, Carrie pulled me away, not giving me the time my anxiety needed to analyze it.

Now, from Mags' place in the kitchen, his eyes met mine, softening a fraction as Grayson talked to him in low tone, making it difficult for me to hear. His arms were folded over his chest, his ass against the counter, ankles crossed as Grayson stood beside him, body facing my cowboy, his hand braced on the counter while he talked with his other. Studying Grayson's

scarred profile, I could see the concern etched in his features, the tension in his neck, the urgency in the way his hand moved with every word flowing from his mouth.

Mags paid attention to none of it, keeping his dark gaze on me, his eyes heating with each passing moment.

"You're stunning."

I blinked, looking over to Carrie, who was on the other end of the couch, dressed in a lovely pink dress and jean jacket. "Sorry?" I whispered.

She smiled at me, her eyes filled with admiration. She was either oblivious to the conversation happening in the kitchen, or she knew and was trying to distract me. "You're stunning, Diana."

Okay, I could let her distract me.

My cheeks heated. "Oh," I murmured, my eyes dropping to Mags' shirt and boxers. "I feel a bit under dressed, if we're being honest."

"Your clothes have nothing to do with your beauty," she countered. "When I met Mags, I didn't even have shoes on."

Last year, Mags had spotted Carrie on the trail camera, trekking through the snow in the middle of a storm. Turns out, she had been kidnapped from her work in Astoria, Oregon and taken to a shitty motel just a few miles down from the far side of the ranch. She'd escaped—barefoot—and wandered onto Hallow Ranch. I had been in court that week, but when I returned to town, Valerie didn't hesitate to fill me on all the "Mags Drama."

"I'm sorry that happened to you," I whispered, my voice cracking. "When Valerie told me about it, I just...God, Carrie. I'm so sorry."

She leaned over, placing her hand on top of mine. "Fate's a crazy, wonderful thing, ya know?" I tilted my head in confusion, and a soft laugh left her. "I used to think the universe, God, or whoever hated me because of

all the things I'd been through. When I fell in love with Grayson, I truly believed it was a long overdue apology from the universe." She paused for a moment, her neck twisting to look over to her fiancé. "Then, I got taken, and I thought it was blip, that the short time we had together was just a mistake."

Oh, God.

Tears were shining in her eyes now, and the conversation in the kitchen had all but stopped. I flipped my hand over to hold hers, our fingers automatically intertwining. She held my eyes as she gave me a gift so special, it had me falling in love with Mags all over again.

"I passed out in the snow and woke up in this cabin, right there in front of the fire." She pointed to the floor. "I didn't know where I was, who I was with, and I was scared for my life. Denver and Mason were here, and Harmony, but they were strangers to me. A-and when Denver said Mags' name, I knew Grayson wasn't a mistake."

A whimper left me as I brought my free hand to my mouth, my eyes stinging.

"Mags saved my life, but he also gave me hope again," Carrie rasped.

"God fucking *dammit*, Sunshine," Grayson seethed, slamming his cup down before stalking across the living room, capturing her face in his hands and kissing her.

I bent my head, giving them privacy, and a second later, I heard, "Sorry."

My head snapped up to find Grayson smirking down at me. The scar on the side of his face was striking, sure, but he eyes, nearly as dark as Mags', had the ability to hold me captive. "You're allowed to kiss your woman," I blurted. "Don't apologize on my account." A rough chuckle left him as he took a seat on the arm of the couch beside Carrie, whose face was now beat red. "I'm also sorry for crashing your weekend, but," he paused shooting a look to Mags, "I'm a nosy son of a bitch."

"Gonna kill you one day," Mags grumbled, shaking his head. He was keeping his distance from me, and I didn't know how to cope with that. Whatever Grayson had told him rocked him, sure, but he was doing his best not to show it. The pit in my stomach began to grow.

"No, he won't," Grayson told me on a laugh.

"Okay, you came, you met her. Now get the fuck out."

"Mags," I scolded on a breath, my head snapping in his direction.

He ignored me, jerking his head to the door. "Get gone, Gray."

"He's your best friend," I reminded him gently.

"He's also a pain in my ass," my cowboy tacked on.

"Everyone is a pain in his ass," Carrie teased. "Except for you, Diana."

"Correct," he confirmed, nodding once. "Now, Carrie, I love you, but you and Gray need to leave."

"But we just got here," she said, looking at me, pleading.

I looked from Mags to the couple and back to Mags. "They can stay for dinner at least, Mags."

His eyes dropped down to our still-full plates on the coffee table. "Need to remake it," he grumbled.

"We can order pizza," I offered.

"You get pizza out here?" Grayson asked.

"I can get the twins to bring it out here, I'm sure," I said, reaching for my phone.

"Those greedy fucks will stay for the pizza, Diana. Hell the fuck no," Mags sighed.

"Stop being a grumpy bitch," Grayson shot out as Carried leaned in and whispered, "They bicker like old men."

"Yeah, I'm going to kill my best friend," Mags decided casually, rubbing his hand over his short beard.

"Try it," Grayson threatened.

I couldn't tell if they were joking or not.

Carrie shot up, taking my hand. "I'm taking her with me," she announced, guiding me to rise to my feet. "We'll be outside while you men bicker over stupid things."

Mags looked to the floor, muttering something underneath his breath as I was dragged by him. My hand shot out, cupping the side of his neck. His eyes shot back up to mine. "You okay?" I asked softly, Carrie waiting for me at the door.

After a moment, he nodded, grabbed my wrist, and brought my hands to his lips, kissing my palm. "Yeah, I'm okay." He dropped my hand and jerked his chin. "Go talk to Carrie, baby. She loves you already."

The second we were on the porch, she turned to me, brows furrowed. "I know you're going to ask, or you'll want to ask."

I blinked. "Uh—"

"I know this because if I was in your shoes, I'd want answers. I'd want to know what the hell those guys were discussing in the kitchen," she clarified.

"It didn't look like much of a discussion," I deadpanned, looking back to now closed front door. "It looked like Grayson was doing all the talking." Carrie pressed her lips together, looking out into the field. "I told him to wait on it," she murmured after a moment. "I told him to let Mags have his time with you before..."

When she said nothing else, I leaned forward. "Before what?"

"I can't tell you," she rasped, tangling her fingers together and shaking her head. "I wish I could, but it isn't my business or place to do so. This is Mags' life."

"So the information has to do with Mags?" I pushed softly.

She gave me that and nothing else. "Yes."

A breeze blew across the porch then, causing a shiver to run down my back as I looked over to the car parked next to mine. The sun was beginning to set behind the cabin now, basking the field in a beautiful orange glow, the glare of it reflecting off the black Jeep Grayson and Carrie came in.

"How did you get here so fast?" I found myself asking. "Mags was just on the phone this morning with Grayson."

"Yeah, Gray was supposed to go on a hunt with the team," Carrie said, moving to stand beside me.

"A hunt?"

"Sorry. A mission."

I waited for more. "But?" I prompted.

"But Jake—he's Red Snake's tech guy. Absolute genius." I twisted my neck to look at her, wrapping my arms around myself. "Anyways," she continued, "he found something, and then Grayson called me, telling me to get ready. We were on the helicopter within the hour."

On the what?

"You have access to a helicopter?" I asked, moving over to the rocking chairs.

"Well, I don't, but Red Snake does," Carrie said, taking a seat beside me. "Hayes—you'll meet him eventually—he was a pilot in the Air Force. He can fly almost anything." She jumped in then, telling me all about Red Snake and Astoria, not letting me ask the question I really wanted to ask.

What had Jake found?

Time passed as I listened to her, adding in whenever I needed to. I knew deep down that she and I were going to be fast friends. I cherished it. Our men eventually joined us out on the porch, announcing they made dinner. We shared a meal, and for the first time in a long, long time, I felt like I surrounded by family.

Grayson shared stories and I listened, greedily retaining every single word, loving the glimpses that he gave still lingered in the back of my mind.

Was Mags in trouble?

My thoughts drifted back to my conversation with Chase a few weeks ago, his discovery shouting in my mind over and over, trying to raise the alarm bells.

I've been around that man just as long as you have, Di, and after trying to look into him, I've found nothing. Mags, according the US government, doesn't exist. I found something, but I couldn't confirm if it was Mags. All records around what I found were sealed.

Once the meal was done, we all sat in the living room, Mags in his chair, me in his lap, Carrie and Grayson across from us on the couch.

"Thank you for dinner," I said to Mags, breaking the sudden silence, the air thick with tension. I was the odd one out and felt like I was being examined underneath a microscope.

"No problem," Mags murmured, his thumb stroking my thigh.

My heart squeezed, but I could only manage to give a half-smile.

"Mags said you have a teaching offer at Yale," Grayson noted, taking a sip of his drink, studying me.

His words sucked away all the warmth, happiness, and love I'd been wrapped up in all day. My eyes landed on him, my words trapped in my throat as the plan I'd made months ago came crashing down around me.

"Really? That's amazing," Carrie praised. "When do you start?"

"Next year," Mags answered for me.

My spine straightened, and I forced myself to take a drink of my water, clearing my throat after it went down.

"Oh, how exciting. Are you going to move there?" Carried asked.

"If I accept the position, I would have to move there for the semester," I told them, shifting in Mags' lap. Suddenly, I was the one needing distance. I moved to get up, but his hand clamped down on my hip, holding me in place.

"She's brilliant," Mags said coolly. "She's been teaching at the university in Denver for a while."

"What made you want to teach law?" Carried asked, interest peaked.

I took another drink, feeling everyone's eyes on me. "I just want to do some good in the world. That's why I became a lawyer in the first place, and when I built up a solid client list out here, I realized I couldn't do this forever. A new generation of lawyers would have to take my place and these ranches and cowboys deserve to be taken care off."

"That's awesome," Grayson murmured, pride in his voice.

My mouth kept moving, spilling out words I never planned to say. "Yale isn't a forever thing, just an opportunity. I don't plan on teaching forever either. It was just something that popped into my mind on a Wine Wednesday with Valerie."

"Wine Wednesday?" Carried parroted.

I nodded. "Every Wednesday, the girls and I get to together for a glass of wine."

"I may have to adopt that with my girls in Astoria," she muttered.

Mags, like usual, had been silent, but his hand still maintained a firm grip on my hip, as if he was afraid I would lose me. I looked over my shoulder at him, finding his eyes already on me.

It hit me then, like an F-5 tornado, ripping up all my plans for my career I planted ages ago.

There was no way in hell, after everything, that I could leave Colorado.

Chapter Twenty-Six



Mags

"But—"

"Baby," I cut her off, pulling her into my shower, the water raining down on both of us now. She put her hands to my chest, gazing up at me.

"I just think we need to talk about it," she argued.

"We do, but not now."

"Mags—"

"—you're leaving," I clipped, my hands dropping to her waist, yanking her against me, my cock hard. "You're fuckin' leaving in about two hours. and I haven't had you to myself all damn day."

Her mouth closed, knowing I was right.

Last night, Grayson and Carrie left close to midnight, and after making love, we both fell asleep, only to be woken up by the entire population of this damn ranch banging on my front door at eight this morning with breakfast.

They were checking on her—on us. The girls, as always, were being nosy, Abbie the worst of the three. She was an investigative journalist, after all. It was in her damn nature to be nosy. Valerie was nosy because Diana was her closest friend, and Harmony? She was just observant, she and I sharing a connection of deeply rooted trauma. She was just looking out for Diana and me.

As for the idiot cowboys, they just wanted to give me shit, and if it wasn't for Jigs ordering everyone to head back home at three in the afternoon, the twins might've been dead on my front porch.

Of course, all this took place after Grayson and Carrie showed back up. They'd spent the night in town and were heading back to Astoria soon. We talked, we ate, we laughed, and Diana, being the amazing woman she was, soaked it all in, savoring every second. She'd hit it off with Carrie like I knew she would.

"Mags, I'll be back soon," my firefly whispered, pressing a kissed to my chest. "If I wasn't already on the schedule, if students weren't signed up, I would cancel the semester."

"No. Hell no," I growled, backing her into the shower wall. "You do not, under any fuckin' circumstance, change your career for me. You love teaching that class."

"Yeah, but I've also loved you for over ten years, and I finally have you," she countered, wrapping her arms around my neck.

"Love that, beautiful. Love you, but no. You will not be canceling anything on my account," I told her, dropping my hands to her delicious ass and lifting her. She gasped, instantly wrapping her legs around my waist, the tip of my cock, my piercing rubbing against her clit. "I'm a cowboy, Diana. I'll always be a cowboy. I'm not leaving Hallow Ranch, but that doesn't mean I don't want to watch you take on the world."

A moan left her, her hips moving now, her pussy desperate.

"Look at me," I commanded. "Give me those eyes."

My world was filled with hazel then, and I reached down between us, lining up my cock with her heaven.

"You." I pushed in an inch.

"Will." Another inch.

"Not." Another inch followed by a breathless moan from her.

"Cancel." I slammed the rest of the way in.

"Babe," she rasped, her fingers sliding up into my hair, her nails scraping against my scalp as I began pumping into her.

But fuck, I loved her calling me that. I felt it from my heart all the way to my cock.

"You going to be a good girl and continue to show the world how amazing you are?" I asked, my mouth going to her neck, her pussy taking all of me.

"Yes!"

"And you're always going to come right back home, right back to me, correct?" My teeth grazed her sensitive skin, my mouth watering as the sounds of our bodies bounced off the bathroom walls.

"Yes, Mags," she breathed out, her thighs shaking.

I slammed all the way in, holding myself there, my balls against her as I dragged my lips to her ear. "You do your thing, and you come home to your cowboy. Always and fuckin' forever."

"Always and forever," she confirmed, twisting her neck, her mouth colliding with mine. Her tongue pressed against mine, both of us starved for one another. It would never be enough.

Fuck.

Fucking. Fuck.

I pulled out, set her on her feet, still ravaging her mouth as my hands went into her hair, holding her in place. "Keep kissing me like that, I'll make you choke on my cock," I warned.

Her eyes snapped open, and she brought her hand down, wrapping her fingers around my length. "Please, Mags," she begged.

Suddenly, I had one hand on her throat, the other between her legs, two fingers entering her. "Told you if you said those two words, I'd give you anything you want," I bit off, pumping my hand as she jacked my cock.

My firefly—fuck me, her eyes flashed with hunger as she nodded in my hold.

"Tell me what you want," I challenged through my teeth.

A sweet, melody of a whimper filling my ears before she murmured sweetly, "I want to choke on your cock, cowboy." My eyes fell to her lips, watching as she begged. "Please, Mags, let me taste it."

My balls tightened, and I ordered, "Drop."

Slowly, the woman of my dreams, the love of my life, got down on her knees in front of me, water trailing down her beautiful face, falling onto her stunning tits before tracing over her curves. Her hair stuck to her skin, her cheeks were flush, lips parted, eyes pleading.

"Swear to Christ, your beauty and the chance to get even just a glimpse of it was the only thing that kept me going some days," I murmured, stroking her jaw and the column of her throat as I fisted my cock with the other. My hand shifted, moving to cup the back of her head, my fingers gripping her hair, holding her in place. "I'm in control, you hear me?"

She nodded, licking her hips, her eyes on the silver ball and my pre-cum on the head of my cock.

"Open," I commanded. "Tongue out, hands on your thighs."

"But I want to touch you," she said softly.

I tipped her head back further and bent down, getting in her face. "You'll do as I say, or my handprints will be on your ass."

"Yes," she breathed.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, sir."

I rose back up, a primal satisfaction humming inside my chest as she placed her hands on her thighs and opened her pretty mouth, tongue out, waiting. Holding her in place, I put the tip of my cock on her tongue, the warmth of it making me want to roll my eyes back. "So damn beautiful," I murmured, stroking my shaft. "Know you're going to be absolutely devastating with my cock fuckin' that little throat."

She moaned, her eyes closing for a moment.

"You're going to taking every inch, aren't you?" I taunted, ticking my head to the side.

She nodded, and then I began to move my hips, slowly shoving my length into her mouth, her tongue shifting back to make room. "Atta girl, Firefly," I growled, going in deeper, inch after inch, savoring her sounds, the feel over her wet mouth around my shaft, the tip of my cock hitting the back of her throat. I stopped, holding her head steady as she gagged around me.

My head fell back, a groan climbing up my throat as I stretched hers. "Breathe through your nose, baby. Relax."

After a moment, I felt her throat loosen, and I tipped my head down, finding tears in her eyes, her mouth stuffed, nostrils flared. Jaw tight, I pulled out slowly. I didn't give her a chance to suck in any air before I slammed back into her mouth, fucking her face at a steady pace. "Such a pretty little mess," I praised roughly, catching her tears as they fell from her eyes, the water hitting my back, my hips flexing.

Her hands curled, her nails digging into her own thighs as she stared up at me. "My beautiful woman, taking all of me." She moaned, my balls slapping against her chin. "That's it," I growled, my free hand going to the front of her neck, feeling my cock there. "Jesus, fuck. Yeah. Fuck, yeah, Diana."

White spots started dotting my vision.

I didn't want my cum in her mouth.

I wanted it in her cunt.

Without warning, I pulled out, guided her to feet, spun her around, and shoved her against the tiles. "Arch," I barked, my hand on the back of her neck, the other dropping down to her hip.

"Mags," she rasped.

"Want to fill that cunt before you have to leave me."

She arched, giving me her perfect ass, and I slammed into her violently, already seeing my cum leaking from her in my mind. "Fuck. Fucking fuck," I cursed, pressing my lips to the back of her head, my hips pounding against her ass. Powerful slaps of skin filled the bathroom, mixing in with her sweet moans and breathless pleas.

"Babe," she gasped, bracing her hands on the wall.

"Take it," I clipped. "Take me, Diana."

"Yes!"

I was on the edge, ready to fall. My next words were guttural. "All of me."

"Every day, my love," she promised.

My love.

I yanked her to me, my hand moving to the front of her throat, holding her against me. "Only way you get to leave me is with my seed leaking out of you," I declared as my free hand went down, my fingers stroking her clit in slow, agonizing circles. The contrast was sure to dive her crazy.

"I—oh, God!" she cried out, turning her head to mine as she bucked in my hold, her climax hitting her.

My mouth slammed down on hers, swallowing her cries of pleasure. Seconds later, I followed her into oblivion, shoving her back against the wall, pinning her there as I rammed into her, my seed shooting out, filling her. "Love you," I whispered in her ear, gently pumping my hips now. "Love everything about you."

She lifted a hand, bringing it to the back my neck over my hair. "I love you more, cowboy."



Two hours later, I stood on my porch and watched her red Mercedes drive away, heading back towards the main house. My feet remained planted there for a long time, and when the sun set, the moon slowly rising in the dark sky, I pulled out my cell and called Grayson.

"She gone?" he asked in greeting.

"Yeah, she's gone."

Gray had been patiently waiting for me to call him so he could deliver the news he tried giving to me last night. I'd been too entrapped by Diana, about our love being out in the open finally, to give a shit. Though my best friend tried, I didn't get him an inch, and when the girls went out onto the porch last night, I told him I didn't want any news. Not then.

"You still pissed I crashed your weekend?" he asked, humor in his voice.

I looked up to the stars and ignored his question. "I'm ready for the news, so give it to me," I demanded, already missing Diana.

"It's about—"

"Know who the hell it's about, Gray," I clipped. "How close is Jake?"

My friend was silent for exactly ten seconds before he answered, "Mags, Jake isn't close to finding him."

I stiffened, anger surging through me. "Then why came all the way down here—"

"Jake found him, man."

My gut twisted, my chest deflating as my hand shot into my hair. "What?" "I'm sorry it took so damn long, Mags," Gray murmured.

I sat down on the top step, my mind running in every different direction. "You're certain?" I pressed. "And before you answer, know this: I don't want you to sugar coat shit for me, Gray. You and your boys came close to finding my half-brother years ago, and we got nothing but a dead end."

Hell, for a solid two years, I actually believed the son of a bitch *was* dead. Then, Red Snake got a whiff of something else, leading us down yet another endless path. I'd all but given up on the idea of finding him.

"I wouldn't have come all the way down here if it weren't true," he shot back. "You think I like finding out that it took over ten years to find him for you? I made that vow to you in the Marines, Mags. This case, this hunt, means more to me than you'll ever fucking know. The second Jake told me, I knew I needed to get to Hallow Ranch. This couldn't wait."

My head fell, my hair falling around my face.

After saving Grayson's life, he came back to the unit, healed and ready to repay the debt. As a joke, I told him when he started his bounty hunting business, if he could find out where my long lost half-brother was, the debt would be repaid. My best friend took it to heart.

"You fuckin' found him," I muttered in disbelief, pinching the bridge of my nose.

"Yes."

A lump formed in my throat. "How old is he?"

I heard Gray sigh on the other end of the line. "Thirty-two."

Four years younger than me.

Fuck, I'd been right.

"Told Diana last night she would never know any of my family," I confessed. "Told her they don't deserve to know about her, about us, about our happiness."

"You're right, they don't."

I sighed deeply through my nose. "But I don't know him. Don't know if he's like my father."

"You aren't like that bastard," Gray reminded me.

Before I could stop it, a rough chuckle left me. "I could be, if I allowed myself to."

"But you won't."

I dropped my hand and looked back up to the sky. "No, I won't."

"Your father isn't in his life, from what I can tell," he assured me.

A chill swept down my neck. "You have eyes on him already?"

"Yeah, Hayes is on him, has been for the last twenty-four hours."

"What's his name?"

"That's the fuck of it, man," Grayson chuckled. "Everyone knows his damn name."

Every inch of my body froze. "You tellin' me he's famous?" I quipped.

"That's exactly what I'm telling you."

I was on my feet then, my hand going to the back of my neck. My next question came out cold. "Who is he?"

"Mags—"

"Who the fuck is my half-brother, Grayson?" I growled.

"Trevor Kensington, star quarterback for the L.A. Rams."

Jesus. "Fuck," I muttered.

"Again, you don't have to do anything," Grayson said, repeating the same thing he told me years ago.

"He's safe."

"Yes."

I rolled my neck. "He's well off," I added.

For years, I worried about him.

"Being one of the top QBs in the nation usually comes with money. So yes, Mags, he's well off."

"Need to call, Diana," I told him after a view minutes of silence, moving back into the house.

As I shut the door behind me, he said, "So glad you two finally gave it a shot."

"Finally pulled my head out of my fuckin' ass," I agreed, moving into the kitchen to grab a glass of water, my stomach in knots.

"Diana is a strong woman. She'll take this well. Lean on her, brother. You deserve it."

I said nothing, filling my glass with water from the tap and then downing half of it. I braced my hand on the counter. "Told her about Ashley."

Movement sounded on the other end of the phone, a door closing, and I knew he was moving away from Carrie. This meant Carrie didn't know about my ex-wife. This meant that my best friend let that memory die. "What did she say?"

"Got sucked in, Gray," I told him. "Got sucked back in. Diana said something that triggered me, and I—suddenly, I was in your truck and you were dropping me off at the house." "Fucking hell," he muttered. "Are you okay?"

"That was the first time I thought about that woman since leaving her. It came out of nowhere, and when I got out of it, Diana was there, waiting patiently." My mind went back, the gentle look in her hazel eyes warming me.

"What did she say?" he repeated.

"Nothing. Told her I never loved Ashley, that our marriage was a way for both of us to leave that shitty little town we grew up in." I paused, turning to face my living room, leaning back against the counter. "Diana is the only woman I've ever loved."

"I know. I've known that for a long time."

"But she will never know about my family. She will never know my old name. None of it, Gray. You hear me?"

"I hear you."

"That boy is dead," I whispered. "He's been dead for nearly seventeen years."

"Then don't dig him back up," he replied simply. "Diana isn't going to make you do so either. You set that boundary with her, and if she truly loves you like I know she does, she won't cross it."

She wouldn't, but that didn't mean Trevor would. "I don't know if I want to open that door, man," I admitted.

"Then don't. All I'm doing is giving you the key. Now, call your woman. Tell her we said hi."

Despite the half-brother shit, this was the best weekend of my life. She was finally mine, I was hers, and the future I thought I was destined to have, one filled with nothing but loneliness, had faded away.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



Diana

I answered on the third ring, my heart fluttering. "Hello?"

"Firefly," the cowboy greeted, the jagged edges of his voice warming my soul. "You get home okay?"

"I did," I answered softly.

"You ready for tomorrow?"

"Well, I was, but now, I'm getting the jitters," I told him, looking down to my work bags I'd placed on the counter. My laundry was done, my house was clean, and my Filofax was prepped.

"The jitters?" he parroted, something heavy moving in the background.

"Yeah," I laughed softly, knowing it was silly. "It's nerve-wracking. standing in front of a bunch of ego-filled college students who think they know everything." I got like this at the start of every semester, but by next week, the nerves would be gone, and my students would be too deep in the assignments to give a damn about what I was doing in front of the board.

There was a smile in his voice as he said, "Baby, you stand up in front of judges and defend clients."

"I'd rather take a judge over a twenty-year-old who's ready to take on the world," I mumbled, shutting down my desktop before heading out of my office. He was silent. "Are you okay?" I asked, checking the security system.

"Happiest I've ever been, Firefly," he murmured.

My bottom lip wobbled, and I braced my hand on the wall, my body not used to this level of happiness. "I need you to give me a warning if you're going to be sweet to me," I rasped, voice thick as tears filled my eyes. "I can't handle it."

"Get used to it," he muttered.

I smiled, heat going to my cheeks. "I still can't believe this is happening," I whispered, more to myself than to him. Still, he'd heard it.

"You're a treasure, Diana."

Minutes later, when I was in my room, sitting in the middle of my bed, listening to him tell me about his current furniture piece, peace settled over me. I knew we were going to be okay. My future didn't look so...lonely anymore. "Know it's late, but I need to talk to you about something," he told me softly as I picked excess fuzz off my blanket.

"Does it have anything to do with your bounty hunter best friend popping by?" I blurted before I could stop myself.

A pause, and then, "Yeah, it does."

When he didn't continue, I took a breath. "Whatever it is, we can handle it."

"Handle it?"

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. "Yeah, handle it."

"Told you that you were never going to know my family, beautiful. Told you they don't get you, your light, or anything else. Told you I would tell you what they did to me and nothing more."

"Yes, I know." I hated them already. I hated everything about them. Whatever they did to my cowboy was incomparable to what my family did to me.

"What I didn't tell you—because I'd lost all hope in it—was that somewhere out there, I have a younger half-brother," he said.

I sat back, falling into the pillows. "What?" I breathed.

"My father was a piece of shit, Diana. The worst kind of man. From the moment I could walk, he was beating the shit out of me and my mother. Then, somewhere along the way, my mother stopped protecting me. Instead, she would offer me up as my father's personal punching bag to save her own ass," he explained, his voice void of any emotion. He didn't sound like Mags.

He sounded like a ghost.

"Mags, we don't have to do this," I offered, my heart aching for him. I was half a second away from heading back to his cabin.

His voice was firm suddenly. "We do, and once it's done, we bury it, yeah?"

"Okay, babe. Whatever you want," I whispered.

"Never want to talk about it again," he pressed.

"Never, Mags."

A sigh left him then. "Told you when I met you that Mags is the only name I got and what I'm about to give you, Diana, I haven't given anyone else aside from Grayson. Not even Denver knows."

I stopped breathing.

"My birth name is something you'll never know, baby. The boy who had that name died when he was eighteen," he confessed.

My hand slapped over my mouth, my soul crying out now.

...died when he was eighteen.

...died when he was eighteen.

...died when he was eighteen.

"Mags," I croaked.

"That's my name. That's my *only* name. Understand?"

I nodded even though he couldn't see. "I understand."

"Now that's cleared up, my father stepped out on my mom—often. He had multiple women on the side, and when I was sixteen, I found a letter from a woman named Camille in one of the kitchen drawers." He paused for a second. "My father had gotten this woman pregnant, and when she refused to get an abortion, he threatened to kill her, so she fled. By the time she'd written that letter, my half-brother was seven and she was demanding child support."

"But he threatened her life," I noted.

"She was desperate for money, baby," he said. "I didn't do anything with the letter. I didn't ask my parents about it. I kept my head down, and when I was eighteen, I enlisted in the Marines with my birth name and left everything behind me. One night, Grayson and I were shooting the shit while waiting at an extraction point, and I told him about my half-brother. After I saved Gray's life a few months later, he vowed he would find my brother for me."

My mind wouldn't let me move on from Mags' birth name. "I-I have a confession," I winced.

"Chase looked into me, I know."

I blinked. "H-how did you—"

"Firefly, you and Chase are close. I knew he looked into me years ago and when I came to your house that night, I knew it would get brought up again."

"He didn't find anything."

"Know that too. Grayson has powerful friends, and because of that, I was able to get my military record sealed," he explained. "No one in my current life will know my old name, Diana. That isn't who I am anymore. I'm just Mags."

"And if you want to get married?" I prompted.

A soft chuckle filled my ear then, sending shivers down my back. "When I marry *you*, I have no issues taking your last name, Firefly. I don't have one to give you."

When I marry you.

I closed my eyes, tipped my head back, and silently thanked God for this cowboy.

"Settin' a boundary, gorgeous. I need you to understand that," Mags murmured.

"I won't cross it," I vowed immediately.

"Good."

"So, um, about your half-brother. Did-did Grayson find him?"

"Yup."

"Are—are you—"

"I was, but then Grayson told me who he was, and now, I'm not so sure I need to," he admitted, uncertainty hanging off every word.

Who he was?

"Who is he?"

"Someone who doesn't need me. I wanted to find him to make sure he turned out alright, that he didn't need any help. Our father was a piece of shit, yes, but I'm not a piece of shit. My half-brother is innocent. I just wanted to make sure life hadn't completely fucked him in the ass."

I shifted, stretching my legs and tucking them under the covers. "So he's okay?" I guessed, settling in.

A scoff came from him then. "Yeah, baby, he's okay."

"Well, at least you found him. You don't have do anything about it now, but it's comforting to know that when and if you're ready to reach out, you have the option."

Mags was silent.

"You still there?"

"Fuck, but I love you," he rasped. "I love you so much, Diana."

I smiled into my pillow. I would never get tired of hearing him tell me that. Every time was a gift, a wonderful, beautiful gift, one I never thought I'd receive. "Ditto, babe." His next question rocked me. "You don't want to know who it is?"

Of course I did.

But this was still new, and I didn't want to cross a line. So, I answered, "Only if you want to tell me. I'm not going to pressure you."

He muttered something underneath his breath about his head being in his ass for so long.

"Mags?"

"Yeah, baby?"

I looked at the clock. "I need to get to sleep," I whispered.

"Course, Firefly."

"Call you tomorrow when I'm on the road."

"And when you get there," he ordered.

I giggled. "And when I get there."

"Goodnight, baby."

I was drifting off to sleep before he hung up the phone, and when I woke up only a few hours later, I was in hell.



Outside Denver, CO. Three AM.

Lucas stared down Diana, fury burning in his chest.

She was passed out in the back seat of the rental car, the sleeping medication he'd snuck into her bedtime tea only hours before clearly working. Her wrist and ankles were bound, and Lucas heavily contemplated putting duct tape over her mouth, but he also knew she was allergic to it. It wouldn't kill her, but her face would be red and puffy for a few days. He was already trying to figure out a way to get that weight off her soon.

So no, he decided against the duct tape—even though she deserved it. *Weeks*.

For weeks, he'd being watching the woman who was supposed to be his wife continued to live her life as if she hadn't rejected him. As if she hadn't broken his heart again. He was over this little game of hers. He'd spent years waiting for her to realize her mistake, but he was done waiting.

Two days ago, when she left the house dressed in a workout outfit, he snuck into her home and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

She didn't come back until earlier this evening, and the flowers he'd gotten her had already been thrown out. He hid in her small attic, listening to her talk to that damn cowboy on the phone. He heard his Diana tell the cowboy she loved him.

That was lie, it had to be.

Diana would love no one but Lucas.

When she finally fell asleep, he made his move.

That was three and a half hours ago.

"Lucas, what have you done?"

He twisted his head to find an older couple standing a few feet from him, the lone gas station on the side of the highway behind them. The woman, Diana's mother, was everything a woman should be. Timid. Obedient. Submissive. He couldn't wrap his head around where Diana's parents fucked up with her. Somewhere down the line, mistakes were made. If they hadn't been, then maybe, Lucas would have the wife and children he was promised.

"Getting my life back on track, Mr. And Mrs. Harper," he clipped.

"What did you do to her?" Diana's mother whispered in horror, fear shining behind her glasses.

"What I had to do get her back home," Lucas seethed. "Now, get-"

"—you said we were coming her to talk to her," her father cut in, his voice firm. "Son, you told us she wanted to have a conversation. This isn't ____"

"We can have that conversation when we get home!" Lucas barked.

The couple stared at him in horror.

He slicked his hair back, feeling the drugs in his system wearing off. "Now, we don't have long until the sun begins to rise, and I don't want to be around when that fuck ass sheriff wakes up. Get in the car."

When they didn't move, Lucas rolled his neck, a frustrated sigh leaving him as he reached behind to grab his gun. He pointed it at them without hesitation. "Get in the car."

They both paled. "We have our car—"

He roared at them then, his patience obliterated. "Get in the fuckin' car! We cannot plan a wedding on the side of the highway in Colorado!"

"Lucas," Mrs. Harper whispered.

"Three seconds," he warned.

Approximately one minute later, everyone was in the car, and Lucas was pulling out of the parking lot, leaving Colorado and that fuckin' cowboy in the dust.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



Mags

She didn't call.

I'd woken up early, as I always did, got to the barn at five in the morning, had a cup of coffee with Jigs, woke the twins up, and started the day. It was now mid-morning, and I still hadn't heard from Diana. My focus wasn't on my work, the demons committed to torturing me, uncertainty spreading throughout my blood stream.

"Mags." Beau.

I ground my teeth, pocketing my phone for the fifth time this morning.

"Mags," Kings called out this time.

We were set to head out to the herd, a long day's work ahead, but something was stopping me. I turned around, the brim of my hat blocking the autumn sun as I looked at the cowboys, all of them perched atop their horses. "Something is wrong," I declared as Midnight brushed my shoulder with her nose.

Mason's eyes hardened. "What are you feeling?" he asked.

I looked out into the pasture in the direction of my cabin. "Diana hasn't called me this morning."

What I expected were jokes from the twins at the very least, telling me I was in deep or some other stupid shit they usually tease Beau or the Langston brothers about, but that's not what I got. Instead, the first sign of the cold front we were expected to get hit, a cold breeze flowing around us, reminding us of the dark winter we had ahead. My gut tightened, twisting so painfully with doubt, I nearly doubled over.

"Call her now," Beau said, dismounting Spirit and coming to me. He jerked his chin. "Call her now, Mags."

Holding his eyes, I pulled out my phone, dialed her number, and put it on speaker. As it rang, I held my breath, hoping I would hear her sweet voice any second. By the time the third ring came around, Kings was off his horse. By the time the air filled with the sixth ring, dread settled on my shoulders, and when I got her voicemail, my mind was racing with thoughts blended with the worst version of my nightmares.

"Fuck," I muttered, my chest starting to heave, panic shooting through me. "Fuck." I called her a second time, putting the phone to my ear and handing Beau Midnight's reins. I was pacing back and forth now, listening to the ten rings, and when it got to her voicemail, all I could see was the image of her against the tree, covered in blood and dirt. I pulled off my hat and looked at Kings. "Do you have her location?" I asked.

He already had out his smart phone out, and I moved to him, eyes on the screen. The little blue dot with her name on it was in the middle of her house. "It's active, Mags," Kings told me in a low voice.

"Maybe she overslept," Lawson tossed in. My neck twisted as I looked up at him. His brow was furrowed, his mouth set. "She had a hell of a weekend."

"When the body needs rest, it will get rest," Lance tacked on, nodding.

"Send Chase out there," Mason ordered to his brother.

"I'll call him," I muttered, looking back to my phone and stepping away. Last night, Diana told me since she started teaching, Chase would stop by her house with a coffee to wish her luck on the first day. I silently cursed myself for not thinking of calling him sooner. It was ten in the morning now, and Diana's class was set to start in an hour, which meant she should've been on campus by now at the very least.

He answered on the first ring. "Mags," he said, his voice on edge.

My spine snapped straight, the hair on the back of my neck rising. "Talk. Now," I bit off through my teeth.

"Is Diana with you?" he asked desperately.

My world crumbled around me, his question like a hot poker searing straight through my tainted soul, taking the little light within it, my firefly.

"Where is she?" I whispered, my voice fading along with my sanity.

"Stopped by this morning with her first day coffee and found the door open," he explained.

All eyes were on me then, but I didn't see them. I didn't see the barn in front of me, the beauty of Hallow Ranch around me.

All I saw was the woman of my dreams covered in dirt and blood.

"Her phone is here, the screen shattered beyond repair. Her bed is unmade, her office computer is shattered, all her kitchen cabinets are open, and there's trash all over her living room. I need you to tell me she's with you, Mags," Chase said. Right now, he wasn't a cop. Right now, he was Diana's best friend.

"Tell me, Mags," he clipped, not giving me a second to respond.

My firefly had been taken.

The vision of her on the forest floor morphed then, transforming into something else altogether...

Phantom screams filled my ears, and I dropped my head, suddenly unable to breathe. My phone was taken from my hands, and then I heard Kings' voice. "What the fuck is going on?" he all but roared.

My scar began to burn, and I looked at my hands, usually covered in dirt but now they were covered in blood. In the distance, I heard Grayson yelling at me, and I felt something—*someone* in my arms then. I blinked, and Anthony was there, bleeding out, his body riddled with bullets, eyes soulless. I heard my name, but it wasn't Grayson calling me. It was someone else, but I was too far gone.

I'd been sucked back in, my memories mixing with my deepest fears that had crawled up from the trenches of hell, their talons clawing at my skin, breaking it. I blinked again, and the weight in my arms shifted, the cold body suddenly warm with life, barely hanging on.

Honey blonde hair, soaked with dirt and blood.

Fair skin, marked with bruises and cuts.

Hazel eyes, the forest within them burning, scorching her soul.

"Firefly," I rasped, gasping for air.

"Call Grayson!" someone shouted.

I felt heavy hands on my shoulders then, pushing me back—away from the nightmare, away from Diana. My back hit something hard, and then all I could hear was Kings' voice.

"Alright fucker," he growled. "You told me years ago if I didn't snap out of it, you'd break my nose. Now I'm returning the favor." He shook me, the edges of the ranch coming back into view, the heaviness in my soul fading back into the depths, the talons plucked from my flesh, the wounds closing. "Come back to the present, Mags. Right fuckin' now, dammit, or I'll break your nose and your jaw."

I shook my head, and the sunlight was back, the burning sensation on the left side of my body spreading over the healthy skin. I was burning alive again, trapped in hell.

Something was put to my ear again, and Grayson's voice was there. "Mags, snap out of it," he ordered.

"I'm...," I pushed out, rubbing my chest. "I'm burning."

Denver's voice was still close. "Burning?" he whispered.

"No, you're not," Grayson clipped.

The smell of burning flesh filled my nose, talons penetrating my back, shredding the scar tissue. I looked down at my hands, finding Diana back in my arms, the flames around her now, scorching her hair. "Diana's going to burn with me," I rasped, shaking my head. The image was still there, branded into my retinas. "I can't—"

"The fire will never touch you again, brother," Gray promised. "Told you that when I dragged you out, told you that every damn day in the hospital."

I pressed the heel of my palms against my eyes, the memories tugging at me.

"You come back to the present, Mags. Right the fuck now," he ordered. "Take a breath and hold it for ten seconds."

I inhaled, expecting smoke but getting clean, fresh air instead. I filled my lungs and held.

"One," Denver counted, his hand on my shoulder squeezing. As he continued counting softly, I opened my eyes, finding my home right in front of me.

"Five," he counted.

My heart drummed in my ears. I was here. The fire was in the past. I was healed. Diana would never touch the fire; she would never be burned.

"Ten," Kings finished.

"Release it," Grayson commanded.

I let it out slowly, feeling reality settle around me.

"Good?" Grayson asked.

I reached up to take the phone and twisted my neck to find Beau holding it for me. "I'm good," I said, not only to Gray, but to all the cowboys around me. Beau's blue eyes flashed worry, but he nodded once, handing me the phone. I looked around, finding all the cowboys off their horses, brows furrowed, jaws set with concern.

"Don't blame you for getting dragged back, Mags," Grayson muttered in my ear. "But you're never going back." "I'm never going back," I said, looking up to the sky, my hat shifting against the wood of the barn.

"Chase is on his way here," Mason informed us all.

"You in the mindset to catch me up?" Gray prompted. "If not, give the phone to Denver."

I dropped my chin, finding the Hallow Ranch owner staring at me as if he'd never seen me before. "I'm good," I repeated, chest heaving.

"Then catch me up so we can find your girl, yeah?"



One hour later.

Chase entered Kings' office in the barn loft, badge and gun on his hip, a shadow of dread dragging behind him. Beau shifted beside me, folding his arms over his chest as Mason, who was on the other side of him, muttered a warning.

The Sheriff's eyes met mine. "I should've fuckin' killed him when I had the chance," he said darkly.

The tension in the room shifted. This was the first time he'd spoken like that in front of us, but I wasn't surprised, not after everything Diana had told me about their friendship when she was laying in my arms the night before last.

How quickly things could change.

"Red Snake is on it," Kings told him from his spot behind his desk, his cowboy hat sitting on top.

Chase looked at me. "Her house is a damn mess."

"Where's her phone?" I asked.

His eyes flicked over to Beau as he pulled out Diana's cell, handing it to me. Before I could focus on that, I turned to Beau, jerking my head to Chase. "It's done," I declared.

Beau's jaw jumped as he peeled his eyes from the Sheriff. "His actions put Abbie in danger."

"And you handled it," I shot back, stabbing my finger into his chest. "Known you a long time, Beau, and I know you care for Diana."

"I do."

"We all do," the twins muttered from the other side of the loft.

Holding Beau's eyes, I gave him the truth. "Chase is Diana's best friend. For that alone, he has my protection and my respect. My woman cares for him, which means this anger—this resentment—ends here and now."

Beau's throat worked. "Almost lost Abbie because of him."

"No," I shot back, shaking my head. "The second you told me she was at your cabin, I was there. Shot that fucker for you, for her, and for this ranch. You owe me, Beau, and I'm cashing in the fuckin' favor." I removed my finger from his chest and pointed at Chase. "Shit's done. Over. Abbie is here. Drop this shit so I can get my woman back. You get me?" "I get you," he replied.

Just then, my phone started to ring. "Mags," I answered, stepping away.

"Chopper is nearly there," Ash, one of Gray's men, said. "Two minutes out."

"Right," I muttered. "We got a location?"

Chase had given Red Snake Lucas' information so Jake could track his phone. Chase also contacted Diana's hometown police station. He and I were both in agreement that he would be trying to take her back home to fulfill the twisted, fucked up fantasy he couldn't seem to let go of. The Hayden Sheriff Department had been over at Diana's house all morning, taking photos and searching the house. About half an hour after my mental breakdown, Chase called back, delivering another blow.

Lucas had been squatting in her house, sleeping in her attic.

That was final shred of motivation I needed.

I would be killing him.

Brutally.

Slowly.

Painfully.

"You and Bowen were right," Ash confirmed. "He's taking her back to Pennsylvania."

My eyes shot over to Chase. "He's taking her back home."

His nostrils flared, and he turned, pacing as he muttered, "Should've killed him in when he was in my fucking jail cell."

My eyes sliced over to Kings, phone still to my ear. "I'm leaving Hallow Ranch."

He nodded.

"I'm not coming back without her, no matter how long it takes," I stressed, hearing the chopper overhead. I didn't give any of them a chance to respond as I pulled off my cowboy hat, handed it to Beau, and walked out.

Keep that light shining for me, Firefly. I'm coming.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



Diana

Pennsylvania. Diana's childhood home.

"You're insane," I whispered in fear as I stared up at my ex.

Lucas ticked his head to the side, clicking his tongue, the tree in the front yard of my childhood home swaying in the breeze behind him. I didn't know what day it was, but the sun was about to set, and my parents' quiet neighborhood was already asleep, the people in the houses around us old and uncaring. I was still in my PJs, my hair still in a braid, my feet still bare. I don't know what happened, but when I woke in the backseat of a moving car, my head in my mother's lap, I thought I was still sleeping, trapped in some twisted, fucked up dream. When she bent her head and mouthed, "I'm so sorry," I was certain it wasn't reality.

In fact, reality didn't set in until I saw Lucas in the driver's seat, my father in the passenger.

"When we're married, you talk to me like that, I get to pop you in the mouth." His voice was filled with pride, and he looked over to my parents, who were now out of the car, gawking at Lucas with fear in their eyes.

"Get out of the car, Diana," my ex ordered.

I looked back to him, my lip curling. "I hate you. I hope you know that."

He was in my face then, my jaw in his harsh grasp, his fingernails pressing into my cheeks, sure to leave a mark. "I have no issues doing everything in my power to make you love me as you once did," he whispered.

If any other man—any other person—whispered those words to me, I would've been okay. I would've taken them at face value and ran with it.

But this wasn't a normal man.

This man abused me for years, sucked the soul out of me, and the only thing in life I had to cling to was the simple pleasure of food. His promise wasn't a promise. It was a threat filled with nothing but violence, and suddenly, all the healing I'd done, all the strength I'd built, vanished in an instant. Underneath it all, I was just the old me, the foundation of my life.

Weak.

Frail.

Scared.

Nothing.

When I didn't respond, Lucas growled, dropping my hand from his face to my arm. There would be bruises tomorrow, mixing in with the ones I'd obtained on the mountain. I was ripped from the car then, and as he slammed the car door, he pointed his gun at my parents. "Get the fuck inside," he barked.

My mother, whom I hadn't seen in over eight years, couldn't take her eyes off of me as a whimper left her.

Oh, look, she cared. How lovely.

My father, however, was only looking at Lucas. "Hand me the gun, and then we can go inside," he said, his voice shaking as he held out his hand. "Son, please."

I looked up to the tree. After all this time, my dad still have the audacity to call him son. When no one moved, my eyes met my mom's. "Let's just go inside. Please."

My father opened his mouth, but Lucas stepped forward, yanking me with him, putting the end of it to my father's forehead. I said nothing, pressing my tongue to the roof of my mouth, settling into the disassociation. I didn't know if I would make it out of this, but I knew Mags would at least try. I was supposed to call him when I got on the road, and now I wasn't sure I would ever speak to him again. My eyes began to sting, my hatred for the universe building in my chest.

I'd only gotten a weekend with him, a taste of the dream.

I stared at the tanned concrete of my parent's driveway, remembering the last time I stood here, in a new pair of heels, feeling brave and strong for the first time in my life. I thought I'd broken the cycle then. I thought I'd proved them wrong, but now, I knew that was a lie. There was always something that would drag me kicking and screaming back into the past I'd escaped from.

Cycles had no ending, after all.

Between my father's borderline narcissism and immense desire for control and my mother's god complex and unhealed trauma, I was doomed from the start, the daughter who was never good enough, a record of unmet expectations longer than the list of traumas they'd given me.

As I was lost in my thoughts, Lucas tugged me again, pulling me in to a house I never wanted to step into again, the familiar scent of fresh laundry hitting my nose, the faint smell of lemons hanging in the air, the aftermath of my mom's obsessive cleaning habits. I looked over to the tanned couch, perfectly stationed in front of the large TV my father liked to watch football on and drink in front of while my mother got lost in her own world, using social media to escape the overbearing weight of this family.

My eyes lifted, landing on the family portrait from when I was only a freshman in high school. I studied the false smile on my lips, wondering how in the world no one could see the pain in my eyes. My mother's smile was real. The only time she ever truly smiled was for a camera, ready to show the world how perfect she was, how happy she was, how she could do no wrong. My father, on the other hand, wasn't smiling, the set line of his mouth filled with a cold malice, his eyes demanding perfection and instant gratification.

Once we were all inside, Lucas slammed the door, and my father ushered my mother further into the living room.

"Okay, son, we're in the house. Now let Diana go," my father ordered, not looking at me. I snapped then, the cord I'd been holding for so long breaking in two, releasing me from the burden of his approval.

A huffed laugh left my lips, and all three pairs of eyes landed on me. It only made me chuckle harder.

"Diana, please," my mother huffed.

Tears were in my eyes, the laughter uncontrollable. "He won't even look at me," I laughed, lifting my free hand to my father, the man who was supposed to protect me, to vouch for me, to love me without limitations or standards. "Your daughter is being held hostage by her abuser, and instead of looking at me, you keep referring to him as 'Son!""

My father, the coward, dropped his eyes to the floor, his throat bobbing.

I ripped my arm out of Lucas' hold and he moved, trying to grab me again, but I advanced my father. He was tall, maybe an inch or two shorter than Mags, but that didn't stop me from getting his face. "One day," I seethed, "because I will get out of this, so help me God, I will. One day, the universe is going to bless me with daughter."

My father's eyes snapped up, wide and shocked.

"And my daughter will never know you." My eyes sliced to my mother. "Either of you. She won't even know your names. Her light will never touch you, and that, God, *that* will be my revenge. Knowing she will never have to feel the pain, the *anguish* you put me through. I'd rather die than let her feel the things I had to when I was a child. *I'd rather die than let her cry the same tears I did.*"

"Babe, our kids are going to come over here," Lucas scoffed, aloof and stupid as always.

I turned, my braid flying over my shoulder. "If you think I will ever let you touch me ever again, then all those drinks, all that alcohol, must've really did a number on you," I snapped.

"Diana," my mother tried.

I backed away from them. "You don't deserve to know me," I whispered. "You never wanted to know me. You wanted to *control* me."

Mags words from years ago floated to the surface then, echoing softly in my head, the jagged edges of his voice a comfort.

When you were born, they made a mold for you, and you, being the amazing woman you are, refused to fit into it.

"Bitch," Lucas barked, snapping his fingers and pointing to the spot beside him. "Get over here."

My eyes dropped to the gun in his hand and just as I was about to open my mouth, I felt heat at my back. Then, my ears filled with jagged edges and promises of happiness. My knees nearly gave out, a breath of relief leaving me.

He came for me.

"What did I say would happen if you called her that again, Lucas?"

My parents' eyes lifted to the cowboy standing behind me, both of them frozen.

My ex staggered back, raising the gun, his hand trembling with fear as his voice shook with it. "Y-you..."

Mags chuckled darkly.

The front door was kicked in suddenly, a scream coming from my mother's throat, a large blond man stormed through. His foot went to the back of Lucas' leg, taking the piece of shit to the ground. The gun was plucked from Lucas' hand before I could blink, then his hands were cuffed, the blond man's knee in the middle of his back, pinning my ex to the carpet. When the man looked up, I saw the most beautiful green eyes I'd ever seen. He looked at Mags.

"Take him," my cowboy ordered.

The man nodded and looked at me again, his features softening. "Ms. Harper," he greeted.

"Uh, hi."

He didn't respond, yanking Lucas off the floor and then shoving him out the front door.

Mags' arm was around me then, like a steel trap I never wanted to leave, holding me against his body. I felt his whiskers against the shell of my ear. "You're safe, Firefly," he whispered.

I curled my hands around his strong forearm, his skin covered by black fabric. My head turned then, my eyes lifting to find his dark ones staring down at me. "You came for me," I croaked, my fingers touching his beard.

His voice was low, just for my ears only. "Always will, gorgeous."

"Who the hell are you?"

My attention snapped back to my parents, my eyes meeting my father's for the first time. "You don't deserve to know him," I quipped.

Mags said nothing, and a second later, Grayson stepped inside, dressed in black thermal, cargo pants, and boots. He jerked his chin to Mags. "Ready when you are." His eyes met mine. "You alright?"

I nodded. "Hi, Grayson."

His lips twitched. "Hey."

Mags moved then, taking my hand to lead me out of the house. He stopped in front of my father, looking down at him, his voice a deadly whisper when he spoke. "Diana's future daughter will be my daughter." I held my breath, tears stinging my eyes as the cowboy of my dreams set a hard boundary. "Heard every word she said to you, know all the words you never said to her."

My father chose this moment to open his mouth. "I—"

"You'll keep your damn distance," Mags growled. "That's all you'll fuckin' do. If you try to come into our lives, I'll end yours."

My mom looked at me. "This man is—is not—"

"He loves me," I countered calmly. "He protects me. He sees me."

Her mouth clamped shut.

"He's my everything," I murmured. "And I'm not sorry you won't get to see all the joy he's going to give me."

Mags' hand squeezed mine, tugging.

I followed his silent command, leaving my past, my parents, and the life they thought I needed behind.



Hours later.

Lucas woke up, his body in agony, his head weighing a thousand pounds.

It took a while, but when his eyes finally opened, he found darkness. When he tried to move his hands, he looked up, finding them bound and hanging from a large hook chained to the ceiling. A growl of frustration left him as he tried to break free, his body jerking back and forth.

"Won't work."

Fear slithered down Lucas' spine as his head snapped to the shadows in front of him, the familiar ember of a cigarette in the corner. The silence around them was deafening, and a second later, the end of the cigarette glowed brighter as the man took a drag. It was so quiet, Lucas could hear the soft crackling of the tobacco. Sweat trickled down his brow as his chest began to heave.

"Where is Diana?" Lucas demanded to know, his voice unsteady.

No answer, just another drag.

The smell of smoke filled his nose then, and he looked around. On the right, there was a wall of tools, rakes, shovels, a variety of horseshoes on the wall, plus saddle stool.

"Where the fuck am I?"

Panic clogged Lucas' throat then, the lump almost as painful as the way his body stretched. "L-let me go, man," he stammered. "You won. I'll leave her alone, alright? Just let me go."

Silence.

Lucas held his breath, his eyes narrowing as the cigarette bud was tossed onto the grown, a shadow covering it, putting it out.

"P-please," he rasped, his voice cracking.

After a few minutes of silence, a chilling voice floated out from the shadows, and Lucas knew then—he knew he was in hell.

"You left bruises on my woman."

The shadow in the corner moved, getting closer and closer. Lucas' heart was about to burst from his chest, fear coursing through his veins, hotter than boiling water. He was burning in the hell he'd made for himself. There was a single sliver of moonlight in the middle of the room, coming from the crack in the roof, and when Lucas saw the outline of a black cowboy hat, his stomach dropped to the floor, his bladder loosening. The scent of fearful piss surrounded him now as the cowboy's head slowly tilted to the side.

"P-please," Lucas blubbered.

The cowboy said nothing, walking over to the wall of tools. He grabbed something off the wall, but Lucas had no idea what it was.

"L-listen, I'm sorry."

"You're not," the cowboy rumbled, "but you will be soon enough."

Panic was in control now. "You can't! You can't do anything to me! It's against the law."

A slow, dark chuckle came then. "Cowboys are above the law here, boy."

Lucas didn't have a chance to respond before a sharp pain hit his side, stabbing him. He cried out, his body flailing, his own blood, lukewarm, soaking his shirt. The pain consumed him, and when his voice was raw from his screams, his body bleeding and bruised, his head bent, he whispered, "Mercy."

The last thing he heard before everything went black were the cold words of a lawless cowboy.

"Mercy doesn't exist on Hallow Ranch."

Epilogue



Mags

Summer. Hayden, CO.

The engine of my new-to-me truck rumbled lowly, parked on the side of Main Street a few doors down from Harper Law. I'd been sitting here for long time, watching the locals live their lives, my presence not effecting them whatsoever. The sun was high, the sky cloudless and blue, the trees green, the sidewalks dotted with flower pots and farmer's market signs. My chest rose and fell in a steady beat, the old radio blasting static-laced rock music, a melody I hadn't heard in ages.

I pulled my wrist from the top of the steering wheel and reached over to the glove compartment, popping it open. Inside, I had three things: my pistol, a fake registration courtesy of Red Snake, and a navy blue velvet box. My throat worked as I pulled the delicate box out, perching it in the palm of my hand, heart pounding.

This wasn't the plan.

It wasn't supposed to happen like this.

I was set to propose to Diana next month in Astoria. Carrie and I had spent the last few weeks planning out every detail. That plan went to shit this morning when I came home after doing morning chores to tell her goodbye. Something was wrong; I knew it in my gut the second I found her in the kitchen, staring off into space. There were a lot things we were both still healing from, but some days were harder than others, which warranted an extreme amount of patience and love from both of us.

We managed.

We opened up.

We grieved the time we lost.

We moved on.

We grew, not only as individuals, but as partners.

But something was wrong. I knew today would've been her first day teaching law at Yale, and no matter how much she denied it, I knew she was wondering what could've been. After Lucas kidnapped her, she told me she never wanted to go back to the East Coast again. She turned down Yale. I respected her decision. Though, I was grateful she wouldn't be gone from me months at a time, I still carried guilt. When I walked in this morning, I expected her usual brightness, her smile, or even her laughter. The last thing I expected was the hint of fear in her eyes. I asked her about it, and she told me not to worry, giving me a half smile and a kiss. After I walked her to her car, I went inside, needing to take a piss before heading back out to the pasture.

The pregnancy test was sitting on the back of the toilet, the wrapper in the trash bin beside it. The double lines were engraved in my heart, branded on my soul, highlighting a future I never thought I'd have.

I was going to be a father.

Immediately, I called Kings, telling him I was taking the afternoon to help Diana in town. He didn't mind; I'd only recently started going into town on a regular basis.

The first time was the day after I spread Lucas' ashes on the mountain and took Diana to her house...



"I hate him."

My firefly's whispered confession was louder than a grenade.

My hand cupped her face then, forcing her to look at me and not at her destroyed living room. "I'll clean it up."

She tossed her hand out towards her desk. "My desk is broken."

"Already have another built for you in the warehouse, beautiful," I countered.

Her brows came together as she jerked in surprise. "W-what?" she stammered.

Chase shouted something from the other room, but I ignored him, bending and brushing my nose against hers. "Designed and built it for you years ago, my love. It just needs a stain, which you can pick out."

Tears hit her eyes then, her bottom lip trembling. "Mags."

"Don't worry about your house," I told her, kissing her. "I'll get the twins out here to clean it up."

"Thought you said you were going to clean it."

My lips twitched. "I'm cleaning the office. Those lazy fuckers can do everything else."

"And what will you do?"

My answer was firm but warm. "Be with you."



I released a shuddered breath, opening the box up to reveal the ring I'd chosen for her months ago—the thin gold band, delicate and beautiful like her soul, the glimmering oval diamond, radiant like her smile, intoxicating like her heart.

The second I saw it, I knew it belonged on her finger.

"Fuck," I muttered, grabbing my hat from the dashboard and putting it on, popping my door open with the other hand. As always, once I was on the sidewalk, I kept my eyes to the ground and counted the steps until I reached my destination. I'd been back in therapy, having weekly sessions, and since coming back out into the public, I realized I have a small fear of crowds. Hayden wasn't a big town by any means, but even when the local grocery store was crowded on a Saturday, I couldn't get past the mental block of being in there, surrounded by strangers.

"Afternoon, cowboy."

My eyes lifted to find an older woman in a track suit, a small rat dog trotting in front of her. I tipped my hat and walked right by her.

"You better take care of her."

My footsteps halted, my shoulders tensing. I looked over my shoulder, meeting the stranger's kind eyes. "Pardon?"

She smiled and stretched out her index finger decorated with gold and silver rings, the nail painted a bright pink to match her tracksuit and pointed behind me. "You better take care of my lady lawyer, mister."

I stared at her, unsure of what to do. My knee-jerk reaction would be to tell her to fuck off, but according to Mason, that wasn't polite.

"I'm Martha," she tacked on, beaming. "I attend book club with Diana." Realization dawned on me then, and I nodded. "She's told me about you." "Did she now?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Martha's eyes looked me up and down. She was clearly sizing me up. "You're tall."

I gave her nothing else, and her rat dog moved to me, stiffing my boots.

"All those cowboys from Denver's ranch are tall."

"I suppose, ma'am."

She waved her hand. "You don't have to call me that. Martha is just fine." My jaw ticked, the ring box in my hand growing heavier by the second. When I was ready to say something, she beat me to the punch. "You have a good soul. I can tell. A little rough around the edges, sure, but...I see that goodness in you."

I looked away from her, feeling a tightness in my chest.

"I need you to use that goodness to take care of her. Diana deserves the world."

"Know that," I told her earnestly. "Plan on spending the rest of my days giving it to her."

Her smile softened, the lines around her eyes deepening at the same time as she gave me a look I'd never seen before. "You deserve the world too, cowboy."

My eyes dropped to my boots, that ache in my chest morphing into a burn.

"She'll give it right back to you, my sweet Diana," she murmured.

"Already has," I said before I tipped my hat and walked away.

I pulled open the door to Harper Law, a sweet floral scent hitting my nose. Thomas looked up from his desk, eyes widening slightly. "H-hey, Mags."

"She with a client?" I asked, skipping the bullshit and shoving the ring box in my flannel pocket.

"Uh, no. I can let her know you're here—"

I reached back, pulling out my wallet and plucking some bills from it. As I pocketed my wallet once more, I headed his way, holding out the bills. "Take an early lunch," I commanded.

"I actually can't. I have—"

My eyes cut to him, my chin dipping. "Take. An. Early. Lunch."

Thomas' throat worked. "Don't kill me please."

"Don't test me then," I clipped lowly.

Diana's paralegal was out of his seat and buttoning his suit jacket in the next second. The second after that, he was out the front door, and I didn't hesitate to lock it behind him, flipping the open sign to closed.

"Thomas?" Diana called from her office in the back.

My boots carried me to her, stopping in her doorway. I folded my arms and leaned my shoulder against the frame, studying her. Her honey blonde hair was swept back into a claw clip, her curled ends popping out every which way. She had on her thick black rimmed glasses today, perched on the end of her nose, neck bent, head eyes over the countless documents scattered all over her desk. I looked over to the coffee bar I'd built her a few months ago, noticing the pot was empty. My eyes scanned her desk, looking for her usual mug, but it was nowhere in sight.

She didn't drink coffee today.

My gut twisted, the sensation unfamiliar to me.

"Thomas," she called, clearly oblivious. "Do we have the contract for the Ressing Ranch ready?"

I watched in awe as she held up papers with one hand and reached for her pen with other, biting the cap off and jotting down a note on the contract that held her attention. She capped the pen and lifted her head. "Tho— Mags," she breathed out, her hazel eyes widening.

"Firefly," I greeted.

She looked behind me, then back to my face. "Wh—what are you doing here?"

Starting my fuckin' life.

"Checkin' on you," I answered.

She set the papers back down and started straightening her desk. "Why? Where is Thomas?"

"Sent him to lunch early." I pushed off the frame and closed her door, locking that one too.

Diana's cheeks heated. "Mags, I can't—um—" She cut herself off, trying to find the right words. "I can't have sex in my office."

"Not here for that, gorgeous," I murmured, coming around her desk.

Silence fell around us, and when I pulled out her chair, bracing both of my hands on the armrests, she cleared her throat. "Mags?"

"Don't like playin' games," I said.

"Games?"

I ignored her. "Too old for that shit. Don't have the patience for it. This morning, when I came to give my woman a kiss, she didn't meet my eyes. She was distant, in her head."

"I—"

"—after everything you've been through, Diana, I don't blame you. Was going to let you have that space and planned on making you talk to me about it tonight."

Her mouth opened and closed three times before she mumbled, "I wasn't in my head."

"In the seven months we've been together, you've always given me those eyes when we're talkin'. Hell, even when I have you spread out for me on every piece of furniture I've made, face buried in your cunt, you give me your eyes."

She breathed out my name, her face and neck turning red.

I tilted my head to the side. "Something was wrong with you this morning, baby."

"I'm okay. I just—I have a lot on my mind."

My eyes dropped to her chest, then to her belly before slowly lifting back up to her face. "I know you do," I whispered. She read me, and instantly, I watched the heat fade from her skin, her face growing pale, almost green as panic filled her eyes. "Hey, hey." I got down on my knees and grabbed her face, my thumbs stroking her cheeks. "None of that."

"I—I don't know how to—"

"First things first," I declared. "I'm going to ask you something, and I need you to dig deep and give me the truth. Can you do that for me?"

Her hands came to my wrists as she nodded. "I can do that."

I stared into her eyes for a long time, knowing my love for her was unwavering, before I asked it. "Do you want to have this baby?"

Her lips parted, and she leaned back, her hands falling from me. I let her go, giving her the space she needed. "What?"

"You're pregnant," I stated.

Those damn eyes I loved so much shined with tears almost instantly. "Yes."

I shoved down the warmth spreading through my body, pausing it. I couldn't allow myself to feel anything for it until she gave me an answer. This wasn't my choice after all.

"Do you want to keep it?" I asked.

Her answer, like her tears, were instant. "Yes," she rasped, her voice thick. My throat bobbed. "Yeah?"

She nodded. "I want to have your baby, Mags. I just—I was so scared this morning. We just got settled, you know? I mean, I only moved in just last week."

I said nothing, pulling out the ring box and popping it open. Her hand shot to her mouth, stifling a gasp. "Regardless of your answer to the previous question, Firefly, this was still going to happen," I began. Her gaze collided with mine, time halting, drowning in this moment. "Spent most of my days in darkness, baby. The second I saw you, I saw light for the first time. I call you Firefly because you're the only light I see, the only light I need."

"Mags...," she rasped, her bottom lip trembling.

My voice was jagged and thick now. "I would be honored, Diana, if you let me spend the rest of my days soaking in your light."

She began nodding.

"Will you marry me?" I asked.

She lunged for me then, her arms locking around my neck, her mouth crashing onto mine. I leaned back, stopping the fall, and snaked my arms around her. "Gotta give me a verbal answer, gorgeous," I said against her lips.

The love of my life, the one person I'd never thought I'd find, pulled back and gave me the world with a single word.

"Yes."

The End.

Author's note

Babes,

Holy...this is the end of an era. Mags was always meant to the be in the final chapter in the Hallow Ranch books and his happy ending is everything to me. As for the Red Snake men, their books are coming but I don't know when...because I have a super-secret project in the works and it's going to be big. *Huge*.

Lots of amazing things are coming to the Brittany-verse and I'm so grateful to have you along for the ride.

A note to my new readers: Hi, I am so happy you're here. FYI, all of my books take place in the same universe. There were characters mentioned in this story from the *Catch Me Duet* and the *Langston Brothers Duet*. *All* of my books are connected, forming this massive web of unforgettable characters.

If you're in the mood for a dark baseball romance that involves the mafia and the FBI, then my debut series is waiting for you! Start with Dean and Gwen's story, *Batter Up*! If you're in your cowboy romance era, head to Hallow Ranch, a place were good girls go to get tied up by dark cowboys. Start with Denver and Valerie's story, *Breathe for Me*! If you're a car girlie (like me) and you're obsessed with the OG *Fast n' Furious* movies, start your engines and head to Oasis. Start with Dontell and Mina's story, *Breakneck*! If you're curious about Red Snake Investigations, jump into the *Catch Me Duet*. Start Carrie and Grayson's first book, *Catch Me When I Fall*.

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Don't forget to leave your review for *Stay for Me!* Reviews help authors out so much!

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About the Author



Brittany Ann is an author of suspenseful, roller coaster romances with a sprinkle of dark on top!

Brittany has dreamed of being an author since she was fourteen years old.
You would always be able to find her with her nose buried in a book or scribbling down stories in old notebooks.
Today, she is living her dream by writing epic love stories with morally gray MMCs and strong FMCs.

She is extremely grateful for every single one of her readers.

Titles

The Batter Up Series A dark baseball/mafia romance series

Batter Up

Swing Batter, Swing

Strike Zone

Grand Slam

Slugger (a Batter Up Novella) *The Langston Brothers duet A dark cowboy romance duet* Breathe for Me (Denver and Valerie) Sing for Me (Mason and Harmony)

The Burnout Series A dark street racing romance series Breakneck (Dontell and Mina) Clutch and Shift (Leon and Amara)

Full Throttle (Cain and Dominque)

The Catch Me Duet A dark bounty hunter romance duet Catch Me When I Fall (Grayson and Carrie) The Hallow Ranch Novels Dark cowboy romance standalones

> Live for Me (Beau and Abbie) Stay for Me (Mags and Diana)