

A man wearing a light-colored cowboy hat and a green and blue plaid shirt is leaning on a wooden fence. The shirt is unbuttoned, revealing his muscular torso. He is looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with trees and a clear sky.

BONNIE POIRIER

Can a rugged cowboy
teach the principal
a lesson or
two?

the
ASSIGNMENT

THE MORTON FAMILY SAGA

THE ASSIGNMENT

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BONNIE POIRIER

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CHAPTER 1

A blue Ford F-350 drove into the yard, and a man about ten years older than me got out. He was tall, with broad shoulders. His chestnut brown hair peeked out from underneath his cowboy hat, and he had enormous work-calloused hands that engulfed mine as we shook hands.

I knew Nate Gables to see him, but I hadn't ever spoken to him. Occasionally, he haunted my dreams on nights when I was lonely. It was going to be strange having someone help out around here without Kate or Tyler being here as well.

Tyler, my sister Kate's husband, must have heard the truck approaching and came walking out of the barn to join us. He was tall, with dark hair and easy on the eyes. I knew exactly why my sister had been in love with him secretly for years. In the back of my mind, I wanted to know what that felt like. He looked at Nate and back at me. "Delaney, this is Nate Gables. Ranch boss at our ranch and the one person I trust completely with this place. This is Delaney. Good luck. I need to get back home. Kate doesn't need to know if there are any problems. I need her resting, so if there are any issues, let me know. Nate, why don't I show you around?"

Life had seemed to settle down after the year we weathered as a family. Who was I kidding? The past year could almost have been described as a train wreck. After Kate and Tyler's marriage, our family and ranch had taken one hit after another, and the whole thing was almost a complete write off. I kept hearing how gracefully I'd handled it all, but inside, I was a cyclone.

Kate leaned on Tyler, Mom leaned on me, and I had nobody. Even before I had broken up with my long-term boyfriend, Jack, I had nobody. I guess you could say I was used to it, but that didn't make it any easier. We had fallen into the too comfortable with each other category easily, and by the time I broke up with him, he was just a roommate.

Back in Austin, I worked day and night hoping to make professor. When I'd heard that the superintendent of the high school I attended here at home was trying to get it back to proper academic standards, I moved home and took the principal position. The job was a welcome distraction from the emotional turmoil of the last year. I had never been the teacher that counted down the days until summer, but this year I was ready for a break.

"Delaney, things here are going to get busy, so Gables will be here full time for now." Tyler had that concerned scowl on his face.

"What's wrong, Tyler? Kate hasn't been around here for days." He was usually happy-go-lucky, especially these days, but this side of Tyler was protective. He was worried.

Tyler turned pale as he told me, "She's struggling, TJ isn't sleeping, crying all the time. She's having a hard time adjusting to being tied to the house and not being able to be out here working. You know your sister, she won't ask for help and gets mad when I suggest anything." Tyler ran his hand through his hair and let out a frustrated breath.

"Okay, well, she's going to rest whether she likes it or not. If Nate's willing to teach me, I'm happy to help. School's done in a week and then I can be here all day." I put my hand on his shoulder. "You need a break too. I don't want you back here until after my sweet nephew is settled and Kate's back to herself. You know I am more than happy to help. I mean, maybe not at night, but if Kate needs a break, you can call me." Tyler's face changed from exhausted to relieved. "I know it's hard with Mom away, but I'm here too."

After a quick tour, Tyler went over a few things he had been planning with Nate, and it all sounded like gibberish to me, but I stood, there looking interested. "I should head home and see how

things are. Again, call me if you need anything.” He looked from me to Nate, and we both nodded.

“Don’t worry, boss, there isn’t anything here we—” Gables glanced at me and looked back at Tyler. “—I can’t handle.” Tyler tried to hide his laugh, but I saw it and frowned at him. The men shook hands.

We watched Tyler drive off. Standing there in silence, I could tell he was looking around and making notes in his head about what needed to be done. I scanned the property, trying to think like him, but I didn’t like what he was seeing. There was so much work to be done.

I opened my mouth to say something, but he beat me to it.

“Delaney, I know you haven’t done much around here, but that has to change. If I am going to get this place back in working order, I’m going to need help.” I hated it when I was talked to like I was stupid. There wasn’t a thing around this place I couldn’t do. Wanting to do it was a different story. “With your mom gone for the month, I’ll stay there. No sense in you changing houses for me.”

I nodded. “Fine. When do we start?”

“Now. You’ll need gloves, a hat, and you’d better change your clothes. Those shorts and sandals will not cut it.”

I stared at him and had so much to say, but words didn’t leave my mouth.

“I don’t have all day. Let’s go.” He was gruff, demanding and rude, traits I found annoying, but when they were directed at me, I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I had never been great at taking orders.

Turning, I walked over to my house and changed into jeans and boots. I grabbed Dad’s gloves off the counter and went back outside. He started walking, and I followed.

“I know your schedule for the next week is busy, so I won’t expect you to be around much, but when school is out, I need you here.”

Somehow, it felt like I was the student walking into a brand-new school.

I had to run to catch up to him. Gables had already reached the barn and was headed to work. “Okay, I’m going to treat you like a greenhorn ranch hand. You might not like it, but I don’t care.” He

pointed to the barn, directing my gaze. "So, first get over there and muck the stalls. It looks like they haven't been done for a few days."

There wasn't any point in arguing, so I just nodded and got started. Kate had always had this job. I'd always helped Mom in the house, which usually meant my day was over far sooner than Kate's, and I would dive into a book. Nobody expected me to help with the ranch, and I never tried to help unless they asked.

When the stalls were mucked and fresh straw was ready for the horses, I went out to find Gables. He was out in the pasture working with one of Tyler's new horses. Walking over to the fence, I rested my arms over the top rail and watched him.

He was calm, and his demeanor relaxed. The rope he was swinging made consistent circular motions with the flick of his wrist. He held the lead rope from the horse with his other hand and walked in circles, leading the horse. Every so often, he would make a noise and the horse would jump. Nate's voice was soft, soothing, and the horse would calm down.

He stopped moving and walked up to the horse, wrapped his arm around its neck, and patted it. I could see his mouth moving, but couldn't hear the words. Walking over to the pen's gate, he opened it and let the horse out into the pasture and came toward me.

"Got the barn done?" He was wiping his hands on his pants as he got to me.

"Yep, I did. What's next?" We walked on opposite sides of the fence to meet at the opening.

"Well, I need to go ride and check the cows in the north pasture. Are you coming with me?"

I nodded and walked to the barn to saddle my horse. My cell phone rang and, grabbing it from my back pocket, I looked at the number. Jack's face was staring back at me. I pressed end call and made a mental note to delete his contact later.

CHAPTER 2

I saddled a horse and waited for Delaney. She was a little rusty saddling her horse, but I didn't want to take over for her. She slipped her foot in the stirrup and threw her leg over the horse's back.

"Well, where are we starting?" she asked as she rode up beside me. "Look, I might not be the best ranch hand around, but I know how to ride." She kicked the side of her horse and was off like a shot. She never even slowed up for the fence. The horse jumped over it. Slowing, she turned back, waiting for me.

Laughing, I shook my head and rode toward the gate. This was going to be an interesting few weeks, I thought to myself. "Sorry I'm taking the long way around."

"Chicken," she called to me.

Once I rode to her, I had questions. "Where did you learn to ride like that?"

"Kate ran barrels, I rode equestrian. Mom always wanted to jump horses, but back then she did the rodeo circuit. So her dream became mine." Delaney shifted in her saddle and looked at me.

"Don't you ever want to leave the Morton ranch?"

The question I had asked myself quite often when I was younger. "Well, at some point it just became easier than striking out on my own. I came from Montana with the family ten years ago. Walking away from the only place I had ever known in life was scary, even at thirty-three. I took a chance, and the family has always been good to me." I shrugged and kicked my horse to move a little faster.

Delaney took no time catching up to me.

Our afternoon was pleasant, and I was almost sad to see it come to an end. Back at the barn, we brushed down the horses, got them fresh feed and water, and closed everything up for the night.

“You did good today. Tomorrow we will work some heifers and move them to the south pasture.” I walked toward the main house.

“Hey, Nate, want to come over for supper?” I stopped and turned. “I would like to, thank you.”

“Go get settled in and come over in about thirty minutes?” She shrugged, and I nodded.

Changing out of my dirty clothes, I was ready to make the walk over to Delaney’s place.

Knocking on the door, I waited for Delaney. The door swung open, and her smiling face stood before me. Her long curly blond hair was all over the place. It wasn’t messy. It was perfect for her.

“Come on in.” She moved out of the doorway, and I took a step into her home. It was small, but I should have realized that from the outside. Her home was simple, minimal, but homey.

“Thank you for inviting me over. I hadn’t thought much about supper, even though Tyler made sure I had supplies since your mom was gone.” Suddenly I felt like I was twelve and meeting a girl for the first time. This was ridiculous. My palms were sweaty, and I was fidgeting with the hat in my hand.

“Here, let me hang your hat up.” She reached out, and our hands brushed as she took it from me. I looked up, and she was looking at me. Her smile was infectious, and I smiled back. She turned and hung my hat on the hook beside the door. “Why don’t you have a seat at the table, and I will get supper on.”

Everything smelled delicious, and even better because I didn’t have to cook. Delaney, while maybe not the most experienced working the ranch, knew how to make a person feel comfortable. From what I had heard, she was just like her mom. Nobody had anything bad to say about Julie. She was a wonderful hostess, and her door was always open.

We kept our conversation light, and she was easy to talk to. There was more to her than a pretty face and a bubbly personality. Under everything she showed people there was sadness, maybe

even a loneliness, but unless someone sat down with her, they would never know.

“Would you like coffee with your dessert?” Delaney stood and walked into the kitchen. She took a pie out of the oven and set it on the counter. “I made this yesterday and put it in the freezer. I hope you like apple pie.”

“My favorite. I will take a coffee, please.” I grabbed our plates off the table and walked them over to the sink, then went back to clear the rest of the table.

“Nate, you don’t have to do that. Go have a seat.” Delaney’s voice was sweet, but I could tell she appreciated the help.

“Nope, my mother raised me better than that, ma’am.” Her laugh was light as she handed me the two plates of pie. Then she grabbed the coffee, and I followed her to the couch. “I hope you don’t mind me saying this, but I really think people aren’t giving you enough credit. You knew what you were doing out there today.”

She took a bite of her pie. Somehow, I envied the fork sliding between her lips. Taking a sip of her coffee, she took a deep breath. “It was one of the few things that I had to do growing up. Moving, sorting, and checking cattle were pretty much a family outing. So that’s easy for me. The day to day around here, not so much.”

Shifting on the couch, she turned and looked at me straight on. Crossing her legs under her, she held her cup as if it was her lifeline. “Supper, dessert, that’s my thing. Ask Kate to make a pie? She will call me, and I will do it. You need a calf delivered? Call Kate and she will do it.” She gave a slight shrug that I would have missed if I hadn’t been watching.

“Well, I appreciate the help.” She just about glowed. I wondered when the last time she had been thanked or complimented for her work around this place had been. If I had to guess, it would have been never.

She kept talking, but if they had questioned me, I wouldn’t have been able to tell anyone what she said. I was focused on watching her light pink lips moving. As if being pulled toward her, I leaned in, and our lips met. I had never been so forward in my entire life. She froze until I swept the crease of her lips with my tongue. Then she seemed to melt, wrapping her arms around my neck.

It had been a long time since I had held a woman, too long. Before I knew it, she was in my lap. She felt good in my lap, and I tightened my arms around her. Running my hand through her hair, I placed it at the back of her neck and ran my thumb along her skin. She sighed and tightened her arms around me.

We broke the kiss and sat staring at each other. "That was the best thank you for supper I have ever had." Her smile lit up the room and the dark recesses of my heart.

I cleared my throat.

"It was a very good supper and dessert."

She beamed before leaning in and pressing her lips to mine again.

CHAPTER 3

The kitchen was still a disaster from supper last night, but by the time Nate left, I hadn't cared about cleaning. His kisses were intoxicating. Never in my life had I thought I would end up in the arms of a cowboy. They had always been the men I swore I would never fall for, but there I'd been, making out with one in my living room.

His lips were tender, his hands rough as they had combed through my hair. I could almost feel his strong arms around me all night. Maybe that's exactly what I wanted. Who was I? This was not me. I didn't do things like this. I didn't climb into the laps of random cowboys and make out with them for the better part of the night.

I loaded the dishwasher, washed the pots I'd used last night, and left them to dry on the counter. Looking at the clock, I figured I needed to get out and see what my jobs were for today. What would he be like this morning? The anticipation of seeing him was making me nervous.

Grabbing my gloves, I walked out to the barn. I found Nate in the round pen, working with the chestnut horse again. "Bout time you got out here, I thought you might stay in bed all day." His surliness was confusing. Had we not less than twelve hours before been making out like teenagers?

"Good morning to you too. I thought maybe you would have woken up on the right side of the bed today." Turning, I headed to the barn.

“Delaney, where do you think you’re going?” His gruff voice stopped me in my tracks, and I refused to turn around.

“I’m sure I have to muck stalls or something.” I could hear his footsteps coming up behind me.

“Saddle up. We have a fence to fix. I noticed it yesterday when we were out riding.” He brushed by me without touching me and kept going.

This is why I steered clear of cowboys. I couldn’t believe I let myself get caught up last night. It didn’t matter that he was an amazing kisser and I felt safe in his arms. It wouldn’t happen again.

Thankfully, I saddled the horse faster than I did yesterday, and I was the one waiting for him today. We rode together to the gate, and I didn’t move to open it. He climbed down and opened the gate wide enough to get the horses through. I grabbed the reins of his horse, and it followed me through the open gate. Nate closed it and climbed back onto his horse.

We rode and worked in silence; it was a beautiful day, but I wanted to know what was going on in that head of his.

To say it was a long day would be an understatement. I was hot, frustrated, and confused. He helped muck the stalls when we got back, but again, words were only spoken when the job required it.

There weren’t enough happy thoughts when the day was over. I mumbled goodbye as I left the barn. If Nate said anything, I never heard him as I walked home.

There was a knock at the door, and I walked over to it and opened it. I had expected Nate, but Kate stood at my door, eyes red from crying and baby-less.

“Kate, what’s wrong?” I asked as I pulled her into the house.

“I think I’m losing my mind, Laney. I haven’t slept in days. Every time I put TJ down, he cries. I’m a terrible mother.” She flopped down on the couch and dropped her head into her hands. I walked to the fridge and opened the freezer, grabbed a pint of ice cream and two spoons, and went back to sit with Kate. Elbowing her, I handed her a spoon and held out the ice cream.

“Where’s TJ?” Asking this made me nervous. I knew Kate wouldn’t do anything, but this wasn’t the Kate I knew.

“Tyler has him. I’m sure he went to his parents’ place for the evening. He told me to get out of the house. I didn’t know where else to go.” Her crying increased, and I wrapped my arm around her.

“Have you been eating?” She felt thin, and when she was upset, she would stop eating.

She shook her head. Grabbing the ice cream from her, I closed it and tossed it back in the freezer. I opened the fridge and took out the leftovers from last night. Warming them up, I set the plate in front of her and put the fork in her hand. “Eat. Then we’ll talk.”

“Laney, this is a pretty fancy dinner just to have in the fridge, and pie?” Her color was coming back around and her eyes started to have life in them again. Kate’s sniffles stopped, and she dried her eyes. It was as if she needed to be reminded that she was more than a mother. She went into full-on sister mode.

“I had a friend over for supper last night.” I tried to brush her off.

“This isn’t just a friend over for supper type of food. Delaney, are you seeing someone? Oh, please tell me Jack isn’t hanging around trying to get you back.” She set her fork down on her plate, and her eyes bored a hole through me.

“It’s not Jack.” She looked at me like I was hiding something, so certain I was seeing Jack again. “I had Nate over for supper. Just trying to be nice since he dropped everything to help out around here.”

“Nate?” She took another bite of her food and waited for more information.

“Okay, look, we had a good day working, and I figured the last thing he wanted to do was cook supper. So I asked him over. That’s all.” I sat back on the couch and crossed my arms.

“Nope, that’s not all. Your face is doing that thing when you want to say something but are trying not to.” She scrunched up her face, trying to imitate me.

“Fine. I hate you can read me this well. We may have kissed.” I frowned at her.

“You may have or you did? There is a big difference.” Kate set her plate down and grabbed a pillow, waiting for an answer.

“We did,” was all I replied.

“Tell. Me. Everything.” She squealed and waited for me to keep talking.

“He came over for supper. We had a nice visit and then moved to the couch for dessert and coffee. We were chatting, and he leaned over and kissed me. That led to a full make-out session well into the night.”

Kate had raised the pillow to cover her face, and she excitedly tapped her feet on the floor. “Delaney, that’s exciting. Oh, but how were things today? Awkward? More kissing? Well, judging from the fact that you were alone, I’m guessing awkward.” She looked at me and waited for an answer.

“Well, we only spoke if he needed to tell me something, and then it was short. I think I did something really stupid, Kate. Look, I knew I should have stopped it, but it was so nice. He was so nice.” I wrapped my arms around myself and took a deep breath. “He’s the opposite of Jack in all the right ways. He seemed interested in me. Not like interested, interested, he just listened when I talked. Jack never did. He was always preoccupied with something. By the time we broke up, we didn’t even say good morning or hello.” I had never confided in Kate. We were too different, but right now I needed to talk.

“Delaney, I didn’t know things were that bad. Why didn’t you ever say anything?” Kate shuffled over and sat beside me. She put her arm around me, and I rested my head on her shoulder.

“I don’t know. You were always busy, and then when I came home, all the stuff with Tyler was happening. I didn’t want to bring you down. So I just kept it all to myself.” One tear rolled down my cheek, and I wiped it away with the sleeve of my shirt.

“You know you can tell me anything. I know we haven’t always seen eye to eye or understood each other, but you are my sister. Nobody in the world can ever replace you.”

She kissed the top of my head, and I thought that was such a big sister thing to do. “This is silly. You came here wanting to get away from crying, and all I have done is cry and whine about a guy when there isn’t anything happening. Besides, he’s way too old for me.”

“Okay, first, you let me cry, so we are even tonight. Second, I’m an old married woman, so I need to live vicariously through you now.

Third, maybe you need a man and not a boy.” Her smile was mischievous, and it made me laugh.

Grabbing a pillow, I hit her with it, and that started a pillow fight. We were both laughing so hard when there was a knock on the door. I got up to answer it.

“Nate. Is there a problem?” I asked, gaining my composure.

“No. Tyler just called, wondering if everything was okay. He couldn’t get a hold of Kate, and your cell phone is off.” He stepped into the house.

“I better call him. Laney, where’s your phone? Mine is out in the truck.”

“It’s in the bedroom on the charger.” She walked to the room and closed the door behind her.

“Well, I should head back now that the message is delivered. Sorry to interrupt your evening.” He nodded and turned to walk back to Mom’s house. I wanted to run after him, but I stood where I was until Kate came back out.

“I should head home. Sandra managed to get TJ to sleep, and he probably needs to eat soon. Thank you for this, I needed it.” She wrapped her arms around me.

“You come here anytime and please don’t wait so long to ask for help. I am always here, and I will drop anything for you,” I whispered. She nodded and let me go.

“I would see what happens with him. The way he looked at you, I can tell there’s a spark there. Let him in, Delaney, and maybe chase him instead of waiting for him to chase you.”

Closing the door, I sat on the couch. Her words rang through my head. Maybe I should chase him.

CHAPTER 4

“*T*hanks for coming over, Rob. With Delaney at work, I just needed help with branding these stragglers Tyler couldn’t find.” I shook Rob’s hand when he got out of his truck.

“Hey, no problem, happy to help. So how have the first few days been around here?” We headed to the corral.

Small talk wasn’t a problem for Rob and me. We had a special bond because of one night that changed our lives.

I was seventeen and my mother had passed away. My father drank most of the time, the meanness coming out more and more as time went by. It wasn’t a good place to be, so I’d left. I had no place in mind, and no place to go.

Setting out before dark, I’d hoped to make it to the next town, or at least a ranch with a barn to hunker down in for the night. There had been a lot of commotion around the Bar M Ranch. Brian Morton had pulled over and asked if I had seen his son, Rob. He was seven and had run away. I said I would keep watch, and he drove off.

The wind picked up, and the temperature dropped, and suddenly I was in the thick of the search for this little boy. Wandering in the trees, I used my flashlight to check any place I thought a little boy might hide.

Snow started falling, and I began regretting leaving home that night. I was having a hard time seeing, and the flashlight was almost useless at that point because all it was doing was illuminating the snow directly in front of me. I’d heard a snuffle and a cry.

“Rob, are you here?”

“No,” came from behind me.

“Come on, Rob, everyone is out looking for you, and the weather is getting bad.”

“Who are you?” He had been to the left of me. I needed to keep him talking.

“My name is Nate Gables. I live in town.”

“I know who you are. Nate, I’m tired.” His voice had faded.

“Rob, don’t stop talking. Please don’t stop. Tell me about your horses.”

“I have three. Titan and Joker are chestnut quarter horses. General is a paint.”

Fortunately, I hadn’t needed to figure out what else to get him to talk about because I stumbled over him.

“Hey, buddy, come on. Let’s get you home.” I’d had him climb on my back, and we had started walking back to the road. “You think you can tell me how to get back to your ranch?”

I felt him nod. “Pal, you can’t go to sleep on me, okay? It’s too cold. You need to keep talking.” He nodded again and kept talking about his horses.

Back at the highway, I’d found a road sign, and I knew I needed to turn right to get back to the ranch. The snow had been ice pellets by then and hurt my face as they blew in the wind. Rob’s face had been tucked down into my neck, and he was hanging on for dear life.

Suddenly there were lights, and a truck had stopped. “Get in. I will call the search off and get you boys back to the ranch.” The state trooper had turned the heat on full blast in his truck for us. Rob wouldn’t let me go, even though we were safe.

Rob’s mother had flown out of the house when we drove into the yard and gathered him up into her arms. I couldn’t help letting tears fall because it had made me miss my mom.

A large hand had clamped down on my shoulder and made me jump. “Son, you are a hero. Let’s get you in the house and warmed up.” Brian walked me into the house. When he’d looked at me, he had seen my black eye and the cut across my cheek. “What happened?” Brian’s demeanor had changed, and his face had turned dark.

“Nothing, sir.” I dropped my head and looked at the floor.

“That’s not an acceptable answer, Nate. Yep, I know who you are, and I have heard stories about what’s happening at your home.” My head had shot up, and I’d looked at him.

“You aren’t going home. I expect you and Rob had more in common tonight about why you were out on that road. Were you running away?”

All I could do was nod.

“Sandra, let’s get Nate some food. Then I will set him up in the bunkhouse with the other hands.” Brian turned to look at me and smiled. I couldn’t remember the last time I had been smiled at. “Son, you have a home here for as long as you want.” He’d patted me on the back.

I was home.

“Earth to Nate.”

I startled back to the here and now. “Sorry.” I shook my head out of the clouds.

“You were thinking back to the night you rescued me, weren’t you? You always get a look when you think about it.”

I nodded. “You know, everyone says I saved you that night, but in reality, Rob, you saved me. I don’t know what my plan was, but I was sad and lonely. When your dad offered me a home and a job, I had a purpose again.”

“I know. That night, you became a brother to me. One I didn’t even know I needed.”

“Enough, we have work to do,” I grumbled.

“Oh sure, it’s my fault we went down this memory lane.” Rob laughed, and we wandered to get our work done.

Several hours later, my ears heard the sound of Delaney’s car driving up the road. I refused to acknowledge how my heart sped up at the sound and the idea of seeing her again. The calves were branded and turned back out to their mothers, and I needed to talk to her. Finding her in the barn brushing down her horse, I cleared my throat so I didn’t scare her.

“How was your day?” She looked up at me and arched her brow.

“You’re talking to me now?” The horse chuffed, and Delaney went back to brushing him.

“Delaney, I’m sorry. I never intended to ignore you. This isn’t easy for me.” I walked closer to the stall. She stopped her brushing, but this time walked closer to me. “I’m not good with feelings. Never have been. So I end up a little skittish.”

“Really, I’m sorry too. I was jumping a lot of steps in my head because I enjoy being around you.” Delaney walked closer to me and put her hand on my chest. She stood on her tiptoes and tilted her head up and pulled me toward her. Her kiss was hungry. I grabbed her by the rear, and she wrapped her legs around me. Walking to the wall of the barn, I pressed her against it. Our mouths waged war with each other. She threw my hat on the pile of straw beside us. I trailed my kisses down her neck and then nibbled on her ear.

A vehicle drove into the yard, and we both froze. I set Delaney down. “I will see who it is.” She nodded.

“I will go out the side door. Nobody has to know.” Bending down, she grabbed my hat and handed it back to me. “People will suspect something if they see you without your hat.” Her smile melted every part of me I had kept frozen.

Putting on my hat, I nodded to her. “I will see you later.” With a wink I turned and walked out of the barn. As soon as I turned, I felt a sting on my ass. Looking back over my shoulder, I saw Delaney making a beeline for the door. Before she escaped, she looked at me and grinned.

I hated being interrupted. Briefly, I thought maybe we could hide in the barn and nobody would find us. Her flirting and the slap on my ass had me a little too hot and bothered to be seeing who was outside.

CHAPTER 5

Saturdays were usually the days I did nothing, but Nate had things to pick up in Hammond, and I tagged along.

While at the diner eating lunch, Nate sat back and looked at me. “So, what’s the real reason you came back? It seems like you were on track to make professor, and to just up and come home for a principal’s job seems kind of like a step backward.”

“It was time. Life really is more than working. I had nothing keeping me there, and my family needed me. Especially considering...” I trailed off, and Nate reached out and put his hand on mine, giving it a squeeze. Shaking off the thoughts of the trauma of the past year, I mustered a small smile and picked up my coffee and took a sip, making it clear the conversation was over.

“Should we head home?” Nate was sweet, and he didn’t push anymore.

Nodding, I grabbed my purse and slid out of the booth. He paid before we left, and we walked out to the truck side by side. Anyone who had seen us and not known our situation might have thought we were a couple. If I hadn’t been so afraid to open that part of myself up again, I couldn’t imagine anyone better than Nate to be my other half.

We were silent, but it wasn’t uncomfortable, which was something I hadn’t experienced with Jack. He hated silence and talked all the time, even if he just nattered.

Nate turned down the gravel road, but instead of continuing on, he pulled over, put the truck in park, and flung off his seatbelt before

he leaned over to embrace me. His kisses were passionate, dominating, and intoxicating.

I drank in his every masculine feature, the strength of his arms around me, the abrasion of his stubbled face on mine, and the scent of worn leather engulfing my lungs as he explored my mouth with his tongue. We broke apart. "Sorry, I've wanted to do that all day." Turning back to the road, he drove the rest of the way home.

Hopping out of the truck, I turned and looked over my shoulder at Nate, who was leaning against the side of the truck, watching me walk away. Arching my brow at him, I smiled as I looked him up and down.

It had the desired effect. I heard the crunch of approaching footsteps on gravel behind me as he slid his hand over my ass and squeezed it.

We crashed through the door together, wrapped up in each other's arms, and he kicked it closed with the toe of his boot. Guiding me to the couch, he placed his hands on my shoulders and pushed me down, I stared up at him and felt like I was completely out of my league—greener than the pastures—in his presence.

Not wanting to feel left behind, I grabbed my shirt and pulled it over my head, popped open the button of my jeans, and wiggled them down to my thighs. Nate's rough hands slid them the rest of the way off.

I wanted to see him. I wanted my hands on his bare chest. Sitting up, I grabbed the middle of his shirt and ripped it open. Thank goodness for snaps.

His body was hard. He had the abs of a man who had worked hard all his life and taken care of himself. Nate was big clothed but looked like a warrior without his shirt on.

Nate ran his large hand over my chest and inside the cup of my bra. A gentle squeeze led to a playful pinch. His free hand slid behind me and expertly undid the hooks of my bra. Before I knew it, I was almost completely naked in front of him.

"Nate, this isn't fair. I don't get to see all of you." Looking up at him, trying to be seductive, I pushed my breasts out to him. He chuckled and took his pants off. He was a fine man, every bit of him,

and from the looks of it, this would be a night I wouldn't forget any time soon.

"I think we need to get rid of these." His finger trailed along the waistband of my black lace panties. Just because I was out in the middle of nowhere didn't mean I had to stop wearing sexy underwear.

"What are you waiting for then?" He didn't hesitate. Hooking his fingers around the band, he had them off in one pull. Kneeling down beside the couch, he dragged his finger from the top of my shoulder, around each nipple, and down until he reached the sensitive spot between my legs.

"For a woman who has had a nonexistent dating life, you sure keep things maintained." He ran his hand over my bare mound.

"Just because my dating life has dried up doesn't mean the area gets neglected." His hand slipped between my folds, and he easily slid a finger in me. My eyes closed, and my head rolled back into the pillow as I let out a sigh.

"Nate, please." He spread my legs and stood up. Before I could open my eyes, I felt the pull of him sucking on my clit. The sensation sent electricity to the tips of my toes and it made them curl. I grabbed Nate's head and held him where he was. He alternated between sucking and licking. It was unlike anything I had experienced before.

"Nate, I'm going to..." He abruptly stopped.

"No, you're not." My eyes flew open, and there was a darkness in his eyes that hadn't been there before. "You'll come when I tell you."

I felt my heart race as his commanding tone turned me on even more than I already was. He crept up until he was positioned over me and leaned down to kiss me. I had never tasted myself before, but it, combined with the desire for his lips, made me want more. Greedily, I pulled him closer to me.

Nate was ready at my entrance. "You're still okay with this?" he whispered in my ear.

"Nate, get inside me." I didn't have to wait long for his answer. He thrust into me, and I had never felt so full. He didn't move for a moment, letting me get used to him before he started moving in me.

"Delaney, you're so tight." He stopped thrusting and leaned down to suck and bite my nipple.

His teasing was making me crazy. I ran my hands through his hair and scratched down his back. Moving again, I knew there would be nothing to stop me from coming.

“Nate. I have. To come,” I panted while he plunged into me.

“Baby, come for me now,” he whispered in my ear. Moving faster as he grabbed my breast, I spasmed harder than I ever had before. I had always heard of eyes rolling back in your head orgasms, but I had never had one—until now. Everything around me disappeared, and it was just Nate and me in the world.

“I need to pull out. I’m going to come.”

“No, please, I’m on birth control.” He claimed my mouth again. I felt him stiffen and tremble above me. When he relaxed, he rested his head on my shoulder for a moment. Our hearts beat together, slowing down, returning to normal.

“Well, I didn’t start out my day thinking we would be here,” I said as he sat up and grabbed the blanket from the side of the couch and covered us up.

“I can’t say I’d thought about it either, but you will not get a complaint from me.” His breathing changed, and I could tell he had fallen asleep. I was warm in his arms as I dozed off.

When I awoke, Nate was gone. It all felt like a dream. He was strong, confident, and commanding. I hadn’t ever had a one-night stand. Jack and I had waited over three months before we had slept together. Nate had only been there for a little over a week. Picking up my scattered clothes as I went, I did the “walk of shame” to my bedroom. The blanket I was wrapped in smelled like him. Worn leather with hints of citrus and lavender. Pulling it up closer to my face, I took a deep breath and suddenly dreaded seeing him again.

CHAPTER 6

Sneaking out of Delaney's house wasn't what I had planned. I wanted to wake up holding her. She was so soft. The way she had cuddled into me made me think things I shouldn't be. I wasn't the kind to get attached. I couldn't. Now that the Morton ranch extended beyond its borders, she was off limits. Brian had made that perfectly clear years ago. There was to be no fraternization between anyone on the Morton ranch. It kept the female ranch hands off-limits to the men who sometimes forgot they were gentlemen and made sure Sandra was always safe in a place full of men. Even a whiff of any hanky-panky going on, and the ranch hand was let go. I had to make sure this never happened again. Another three weeks here would not be easy.

There was an innocence about her. As much as she hid her vulnerable side, well, I could see through it all. She was a woman who needed to be loved and loved well. What was I thinking? She would never choose a man like me. I was thirteen years her senior, a self-proclaimed eternal bachelor who was never going to settle down. There had been more than enough options over the years, and I left those women crying in their pillows. I was too old to change my ways.

After a quick shower, I climbed into bed, thinking about our evening. She was perfect, and that loser she had been with hadn't done her any favors. I tucked my arm behind my head and wondered what her life in Austin had been like.

I fell asleep thinking about Delaney. What I never thought of was having to work with her the next day.

My alarm startled me out of a glorious dream that involved Delaney, the lake, and nothing for clothing. I slapped the clock beside the bed to shut off its ear-piercing buzzing. I threw my legs over the edge of the bed and wandered out to the kitchen to make coffee. With Julie gone, I had the house to myself. I walked into the kitchen and immediately froze. Delaney was standing at the sink with a coffee cup in hand, staring directly at me.

“Well, good morning.” She grinned and didn’t hide the drift of her gaze.

I spun on my heel and basically ran back to my room. Of all the mornings she had to show up here, it was this one. Slipping on underwear and then my jeans, I went back to the kitchen as I threw on my shirt.

“I’m sorry. I thought I was alone.” Sliding past her, I grabbed a cup and poured myself a coffee.

“No, it was my fault. I shouldn’t have just wandered in. It’s just habit. This coffee maker is faster than mine.”

I heard her take a breath and shift closer to me.

“Don’t be sorry. That’s the best morning view I’ve had in ages.”

She pushed away from the counter with her hip and headed for the door. She didn’t appear mad, but she didn’t stick around either. Damn, she looked good walking away, but she had looked better laying underneath me last night. Her moans were seared into my brain, along with the way she felt in my arms and the way I felt in her.

My overactive imagination was not an asset this morning. I took a swallow of my coffee, and it burned my tongue. I spit the mouthful into the sink and flopped down into a chair at the table. This would not be easy.

I couldn’t sit here procrastinating anymore. I had to get outside and get work done. Putting my cup in the sink, I grabbed my hat and gloves and went to find Delaney.

Knocking on her door had become our routine. She usually spent her early mornings looking at report cards and final paperwork to round out the year at the school. I reached out and knocked.

“Come in,” she yelled, so I opened the door and peeked my head in. “You ready for the day?” I saw she was at her kitchen table, surrounded by paperwork.

“Sorry, I have to get this stuff done. I won’t have time. All this needs to be done before tomorrow.” She waved her hands over all the papers in front of her and went back to focusing on them.

“Delaney, that’s not the deal. Your days off are spent working on this ranch. So let’s get going.” I moved so I was standing next to the open door.

“Mr. Gables, I know you don’t realize it, but I have a job outside of this piece of dirt that I am proud of. Spending all day in a barn, covered in dirt and shit, isn’t my idea of a good time.” Her blue eyes flashed, and they turned a shade of almost royal blue. Delaney pushed away from the table, stood, and walked toward me. “I will not be working with you today. You have a problem with that. Run to your boss and tell him, but I assure you it will not get you anywhere.”

Her arms were crossed in front of her, pushing up her breasts higher in her low-cut shirt.

“Delaney, is this payback for last night because I didn’t stay?” I closed the distance between us, and she took a step back.

“Nate, you have a very high opinion of yourself. No, this isn’t payback. These are work obligations that have to get done, and because of last night I am behind.” Her voice softened, and her eyes didn’t quite look like they could shoot daggers through me. “Once Wednesday is over, I will be at your beck and call.”

She was leaning against the table, and I felt like no matter how much I argued, I wouldn’t win. She was one of the most determined women I had met. I nodded, turned, and walked out of her house.

I had gotten used to her shadow behind me all day, and it turns out her chatter wasn’t really all that annoying. There had to be a way I could make an excuse to see her later today.

CHAPTER 7

Morning dawned quickly, and I had snoozed the alarm clock twice. I needed to hurry or I would be late getting to school. At record speed, I was ready and out the door. Granted, I had skipped breakfast and coffee. I would still be on time.

As I walked to my car, Nate was making a beeline toward me. I didn't have time to deal with him today, but he moved across the yard with speed and ease.

"Good morning. Get all your work done for today?" His black cowboy hat was pulled down low over his eyes, and it looked like his jeans were tighter than I remembered.

"Morning. yeah, I got done. It was a late night." I tossed my bag over into the passenger seat and turned to look at him.

There he was, holding out a to-go cup of coffee. "I know you weren't up in enough time to make coffee, so here you go."

"How do you know that?"

"Well, because from my kitchen window, I can see in your living room window, and you were running around like a chicken with its head cut off." My eyes glanced over to the window. I realized that probably meant he had seen me roaming around naked after my shower. I opened my mouth to say something, but he shook his head. "Think of it as payback for yesterday morning." His smirk was hot. If I hadn't needed to get to work, there wouldn't have been anything to keep me from jumping him.

I took the coffee from him. “Thank you. Care to have supper tonight?” I looked from the cup back up to his eyes, and he nodded.

“I’d like that. Have a good day. See you when you get home.” He backed away from my car and I got in.

I got out of my car, walked over to him, and took his hat off. Nate frowned, and before he could say anything, I moved in and kissed him. He wrapped his arms around my waist and held me close.

Breaking the kiss, I placed his hat back on his head and went back to my car.

It was hard to concentrate. I was sitting at my desk, accomplishing nothing. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. While I was straightening papers I called, “Come in.”

My best friend, Jane, walked through the door, smiling from ear to ear. “Hey, I haven’t seen you all day. That’s not normal.” She sat down in a chair and looked at me. I got up and closed the door and took the chair beside her.

“Sorry, I’ve been a little off today.”

“What’ve you done?” She looked me square in the eyes, and I had a feeling her asking was just a courtesy—she knew.

“Nate and I, well we, um, we. Had sex,” I whispered to her.

“Delaney, that’s fantastic.” She reached over and slapped her palm on my knee excitedly. “Tell me everything. How was it? How was he? Is he as hot as I imagine? He’s hard to miss around the ranch when I have gone to visit Kate.”

My head shot up and my mouth fell open. “What do you mean you imagine?”

“Hey just because I’m married doesn’t mean I’m blind. He is a distinguished older man who looks like he knows what he’s doing. She leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees. “Spill, now.”

“Jane, he’s... I’ve never had sex like that in my life.” The words I was saying weren’t doing Nate justice. How did I tell my best friend he was the most dominant, experienced, giving lover I’d ever had?

“Well, you’ve only been with Jack, so really, anything would be better than that.” She crossed her arms and leaned back in the chair. Jane had never made any ifs, ands, or buts about hating Jack. There

wasn't anyone happier to find out we had broken up. She even threw a breakup party for me.

"Jane, he's all I can think of. I avoided ranch work yesterday because I didn't trust myself to be around him. Which is crazy. This isn't me." I dropped my head into my hands and waited for her response.

"Maybe it is you. Maybe this man has awakened something that you needed a good man to draw out."

"Jane, he didn't stay the night. He was gone when I woke up." Closing my eyes, I held my breath, expecting a blowup.

"Did you two talk about expectations?"

"We didn't even talk about having sex. It just happened." I looked at her, and she was grinning ear to ear.

"Well then, before you let him in your bed again, ask him to stay. See what he says." She patted my leg.

"We didn't make it to the bed. Only as far as the couch."

"Girl, this was your first time not in a bed?" I nodded, and she squealed again. "Delaney, this is good for you. No matter what happens, you need this."

"Don't counsel me. You're my best friend. I don't need a therapist right now. You are only allowed to be that when we both have a glass of wine." I crossed my arms, sat back in the chair, and looked at her.

"Okay, look, what's so bad about having a fling? Lord knows I had many before I got with Kent. It's not like you had the best sex life with Jack. You have a month until your mom comes home. Have fun, don't overthink, just roll with it." She glanced at her watch and jumped off her chair. "I am meeting with Ashlynn Greate. She's decided she wants to change her classes for next year, but it's the fifth time. She's smart but lacks confidence, like someone else I know." Jane stared me down before walking to the door and leaving me sitting in my chair. "Hey Laney, it's good. Talk later?" I nodded, and she went back to her office.

The day was passing exceedingly slowly. I felt like I was looking at the clock every five minutes, hoping time would move faster. Suddenly, the shrill ring of my cell phone jolted me out of my daze. My phone never rang while I was at school, so it worried me.

“Hello?”

“Delaney, it’s Nate.” Even the sound of his gravelly voice sent a thrill down to my core.

“Hi Nate. What’s up?” I was trying to keep my voice calm.

“I have some salt blocks waiting at the livestock supply store. Would you be able to grab them when your day is over?”

My stomach sank when I realized he was only calling for ranch stuff. “Yeah, sure, I’ll swing by there.”

“Great, thanks.”

“Okay, well, I’d better get back to work.”

“Yeah, me too. Hey, Delaney, I’m looking forward to supper. Maybe more forward to dessert.”

“Oh.”

He laughed on the other end of the line. “Bye, Laney.”

“Bye.” I whispered.

My day was finally over. I went to the feed store and got the salt blocks for Nate and then ran to the pizza place and grabbed supper. Suddenly, I didn’t feel like cooking. More like I didn’t want to spend the evening doing dishes.

As I pulled into the yard, Nate came walking out from the barn to my car. I popped open the trunk. He opened my door, and I got out. “How was your day?” he asked as he closed the car door.

“It was good. How about yours?”

“Long.” He smiled at me. “But it’s looking much better now.”

I was leaning against the car as he moved in closer to me. He brought his head down to mine, and he kissed me. Light at first, but the passion increased quickly. It was like the day spent apart yesterday had made us need each other even more.

Placing my hands on his chest, I whispered, “I have supper in the car. Whenever you are ready, we can eat.”

“I’ll go get cleaned up and be over shortly.” He leaned back in for another kiss.

CHAPTER 8

I quickly jumped in the shower. I didn't know what tonight would hold, but I didn't want to get to Delaney's covered in dust and manure. My phone rang as I stepped out of the shower.

"Hello?"

"Hey, stranger, remember me, Rob, your friend?"

Laughing, I replied, "Yeah, the name is familiar. How's it going over there?"

"Well, the guys like working for you better than me. I have nobody to talk to, and you pretty much run this place." Rob was pouting and, deep down, it made me happy.

I couldn't deny he pulled his weight around the ranch, but being the owner's son put him on a different level. I knew the men responded to me differently.

"Well, just let them do their thing. They all know what their jobs are."

"Anyway, I didn't call to talk shop. I was wondering if you wanted to go grab a bite to eat." My stomach hit the floor. Would this be how I lost the only job I'd ever had and the only one I wanted?

"I have some plans tonight. How about a rain check?"

"Plans? Who is it? Do I know her?" Rob was relentless.

"Just a friend."

"It's Delaney, isn't it?" Rob's voice was light and joking.

"Rob..."

“You old dog. Good for you, she’s one of the good ones around town.”

“Rob, what about the no hookup policy?” My voice was quiet, and I was ready for my walking papers.

“Nate, really? Since I’m the one who makes the rules now, it’s a non-issue. Dad put that in to protect mom while he was gone to meetings. Then we started hiring female hands, and it made them feel safer around here. Plus, the Patterson ranch is Kate’s and not a Morton subsidiary. As far as I’m concerned, you are in the clear.”

Letting out a sigh of relief, I heard him laugh.

“Pal, if you are really worried, talk to Tyler. But know he and Kate expected this to happen. Anyway, I am keeping you from your evening, so talk to you later.”

The line went dead, and I got dressed.

One last check in the mirror, and I headed over to Delaney’s.

Knocking on the door, I heard her footsteps crossing the floor. It sounded like she was trying not to run. The door opened, and there stood the woman I had just seen in her work clothes, now dressed in a short black dress with cleavage that looked like nothing I had ever seen before.

Delaney was well endowed in the boob department, and this dress showed them off. All I wanted to do was to reach out to touch them. She stepped aside, and I walked in.

She had transformed her kitchen table into what looked like a table in a restaurant. A candle sat in a holder on the tablecloth that now covered the surface. Supper was laid out waiting. She had poured the wine. Everything was ready.

“I’m sorry. Did I keep you waiting? Rob called as I was getting ready.”

“No, I only just got things set up. Why don’t we eat, and you can tell me about your day.” She laced her arm through mine, and I walked over to her chair and pulled it out for her to sit down. She looked up at me and smiled. Bending down, I kissed her before walking around to my chair.

“This looks great.” She handed me the lasagna, and we started passing each other food. It felt comfortable, like we had been together forever.

“Can I ask you something?” Her voice was quiet, and she was looking down at her plate.

“Delaney, you can ask me anything, anytime.” Setting my fork down, I looked at her.

“When you didn’t stay the other night...was there something wrong?” I never imagined this would be a side of Delaney Patterson that existed. She came off very confident, and she was smart and full of life. The woman in front of me now looked like a woman who had been beaten down by life and past relationships.

“There was nothing wrong with the time we spent together, and the last thing I wanted to do that night was to leave you alone in this house. I never planned for that to happen, and I wasn’t sure you would want to see me in the morning, so I headed back to the main house.” My arms ached to hold her, to make love to her, and to replace all those bad feelings with new ones. “I’m going to stay tonight, just so you know.” Her eyes flew up to meet mine, and she nodded as she smiled.

“Thank you, Nate.”

We chatted as we ate. The tension was gone, and Delaney was back to her playful self.

With supper done and the kitchen cleaned up, we sat on the couch. Delaney cuddled into me, and it was the first time in my life I was content where I was.

“So, can I ask you a question?” I mumbled in to her hair.

“Anything.”

“Was the guy who broke your heart your first?” She nodded, and I pulled her a little closer. “I’m guessing he was pretty much only making sure his needs were met.”

“How can you tell that?”

“Baby, the other night, I could tell you experienced things you never have before. The way you responded? I knew I was doing things you never knew existed. So tonight, you are going to once again be the student, and I will be the teacher.”

“Are you going to be assertive like the other night?” Her eyes pleaded with me.

“Would you like that, Miss Patterson?”

She nodded and bit her lip. “Yes, Mr. Gables.”

I set my glass down and stood. I held out my hand, and Delaney grasped it and held on to it like she was clinging to a lifeboat passing by. Standing, she chugged back her wine, set her glass down, and followed me to the bedroom.

“Please, come in,” I said as I walked in ahead of her. A quick glance around her room showed it was exactly what I’d pictured. Soft colors, floral bedding, and curtains to match.

“Now, Miss Patterson, I understand you are needing more assistance with one subject.” She was giggling, so I knew I was on the right track.

“Yes, Mr. Gables, I am.” Her hands were folded in front of her. Delaney’s grin was intoxicating.

“Why don’t we start with removing this dress? You have been teasing me with this cleavage all evening.” I stopped walking around her and ran my finger over the top of her breasts.

“There is a zipper in the back. Could you please undo it?” Moving around to her back, I grabbed the zipper pull and slowly pulled it all the way to the hem of the dress.

The back of the dress was completely open, and I ran my hand over her round ass, slid it over her hip, and pulled her back to me. She gasped as she hit my chest.

“Delaney, you seem to have forgotten your lace panties tonight.”

“I don’t know where my head was when I got dressed.”

“That’s one check mark for you already, young lady.” I delicately made a check at the top of her mound, and she let her head fall back to my shoulder. As much fun as I was having, I was torturing us both, so I slid her dress off her shoulders, and it landed on the floor in front of her.

I walked around to face her. Her breasts were beautiful to look at, and her nipples stood erect, waiting for attention. Reaching up, I flicked one like I was shooting marbles. Delaney’s eyes fluttered closed.

Grabbing one breast in my hand, I slid the other down between her legs.

“My, my, aren’t we the teacher’s pet tonight.” She smiled.

“I’m just trying to get straight As.”

“You’re doing very well.” I slid a finger into her as far as I could reach. Delaney bent her knees, trying to get me deeper. Her mouth formed an O and her eyes were closed. She was panting, and I knew she was close. Slipping another finger in, I massaged her wet cavern. She grabbed my shoulders and rested her head on my chest as she rode the waves of an orgasm. The spasms flowed through her as I gave her no rest.

“Another aced test, Miss Patterson.” Her breathing was returning to normal, and I slipped my fingers out of her.

CHAPTER 9

The rain kept coming down. This was not how I had expected to spend my summer. It was usually hot and dry. Nate was anxious about all the rain and the cows getting sick. He was back and forth to the Morton ranch multiple times a day. Exhaustion showed in his face, his eyes drooped, and the lines of his face seemed to deepen by the hour. It was just one more time I wished I could do more to help.

The ringing of the phone shook me out of the daze I was in.

“Hello?”

“Hi, dear, how are things at the ranch?”

“They are good, Mom. How about with Auntie Suzie?”

“That’s why I’m calling. I think I’m going to need to stay a few more weeks, if that’s okay. You see, Suzie isn’t getting around as well as she needs to be, and I just can’t leave her struggling like she is.”

“Oh, don’t worry about rushing home. There isn’t anything going on here except for rain.” I looked up, and nothing had changed. The rain was still coming down, Nate was still out working, and I was wishing he was here with me.

“I have heard it’s not just ranch work happening, Delaney.” My mother’s voice was cheerful, and I knew Kate had blabbed about Nate and me.

“I knew I never should have told her. Being on bed rest has made her gossipy.” Grumbling, I waited for whatever my mother had to say.

“Delaney, have fun with it. Don’t overthink. Anyway, I need to run. Talk soon, sweetheart, I love you.”

“Bye. Love you too, Mom.”

The line went dead, and had the lightning not just flashed a little too close for comfort, I’d consider going to give Kate a piece of my mind. Just then, the thunder clapped, and the door swung open. Screaming, I looked into the face of a soggy Nate.

Flying off the couch, I ran and grabbed a towel and brought it to him. “You look awful. Come on, get out of your wet things and warm up.” I took his hat off his head and helped get him out of his coat. There wasn’t a layer of him that was dry. I wrapped the towel around his shoulders and walked him over to the fire. “Sit, let me get you some coffee.” I sat him down on the coffee table and ran to the kitchen.

I could see him shivering as I walked back with his cup of coffee. He reached and took it from me and took a long, slow sip. “Thank you,” was all he could muster before he took another sip.

“Why don’t you go have a hot shower?” I said as I took a seat beside him.

“Just give me a minute. I will be fine. I just have to go back out anyway.” He took another sip of coffee and sighed.

“What do you mean you have to go out again?” I was grumpy and just wanted him home with me.

“Delaney, it’s my job.” He stood and walked to get some dry clothes that he had brought over earlier.

I knew I sounded like the whiny girlfriend. When he came back, I changed my tune and tried to be happy. “How long do you have to be out this time?”

Nate walked up to me and wrapped his arms around me. “Well, I need to get the heifers moved from up north to the pasture here at the house for more shelter and to get them away from the river.” He ran his hand through his drying hair. “It’s going to be flowing pretty fast, and the water will be rising. It’s probably crested the banks by now.” Walking over to the door, I knew he needed help. This was always a job that Dad made sure he had help with.

“Nate, I’m going with you. Give me a minute to change. I’m not letting you go alone.” Before he could protest, I turned and went to

change into my work clothes. By the time I returned, Nate was ready to go. Grabbing my slicker, he helped me into it and handed me my hat. "Well, this isn't the strangest date I will have been on."

Nate laughed and kissed me before putting his hat on. "Let's get going. You look sexy in that outfit, and I would like to see you out of it," he said, slapping my rear end as I walked out into the rain.

I could hardly hear Nate's instructions over the pounding rain and the thunder, but together we were pushing the heifers to safety. Suddenly, in the flash of lightning, I saw one heifer turn toward the creek. Kicking Fortuna into action, I raced to cut her off and turn her before the entire herd followed.

The rain pelted my face as I rode as hard as I could. The heifer saw me coming and decided she needed to run too. Just as she got to the creek's edge, I got in front of her and got her turned. My horse lost her footing, and it threw me into the creek. The last thing I saw was Nate riding at breakneck speed, trying to get to me.

I bobbed up and down as I flowed along with the creek. I could hear myself yelling for help, but I wasn't sure if it was just in my head or if the words were really coming out of my mouth. Gasping for air every time I surfaced, I knew I was getting tired. My dad flashed before my eyes; he was standing alone on the hill. It wasn't now because there was a sunrise behind him. Oh lord, was this it? Was I meeting him on the other side? My slicker was weighing me down, along with my jeans and boots.

Popping up for what I was sure was the last time, I filled my lungs with as much air as I could. Regrets flooded through my mind. I wanted to be here for my nephew, be the crazy aunt who got him out of trouble so his mom wouldn't find out. Kate, she would be alone with mom now. Mom, how would she handle losing two of us in just over a year? There would be no more comforting arms wrapped around me after a night of passion. Suddenly there was a grabbing on the back of my jacket, and I was seemingly flying through the air. I fell to the ground with a thud, and something landed on top of me.

I was dead, I was sure of it. There were no trumpets, no streets paved with gold, just someone yelling. That seems odd. I never expected people would be madly yelling my name in Heaven. I wasn't an angel, but did I deserve to be yelled at?

“Delaney. Are you okay? Come on, Delaney, wake up. Don’t leave me, please,” A gruff voice hollered out into the night. There was a violent rubbing on my face. Someone slapped my cheeks a few times, then I nodded, and those strong arms I was dreaming about wrapped around me and held me tight.

“Come on, let’s get you home.” We rode together. He hung on to me tightly, but he felt rigid, the caring he had shown over the last few weeks was gone. I wanted to talk, but I couldn’t through the chattering of my teeth.

Finally home, Nate carried me into the house. “Let’s get you in the shower to warm up.” He walked through my bedroom to the bathroom and turned on the water. I slumped to the floor before he could turn around to catch me. “Hey, come on, let’s get you in there.”

“I’m too tired, please just let me sleep.” I was mumbling and struggling to keep my eyes open. My hands were so cold I couldn’t close them. The thunder was still rumbling right outside the door, and the rain sounded like it had picked up.

“What were you thinking, Delaney?” His voice was barely heard over the water cascading around us. He set me in the corner and started to pull off layer after layer, tossing my clothes into a corner, before stepping out and grabbing towels.

He turned the water off and dried me off.

“Can you walk? Dress yourself?”

I tipped my chin, feeling the cold start to seep back under my skin, and walked to my closet. He started to pace as I got dressed.

“What were you thinking out there? Why would you go after that animal? No animal is worth your life, Delaney.”

Dressed now, I walked slowly to the foot of the bed and grabbed my fuzzy throw blanket. He led me to the living room, his words short as we walked. “Do you have any idea what could have happened? Of course you don’t. You might’ve grown up here, but you don’t know anything about ranching.”

He gently set me onto the couch and tucked the blanket around me. Then he stomped, still fully clothed and dripping wet, to the kitchen. He banged around, his voice rising to be heard.

“Delaney, what were you even thinking? You were in so over your head. I should never have indulged this fantasy of being a rancher.

You should have been in the house doing whatever you do while everyone else works.” I couldn’t even look at him. My hands gripped the couch. I felt like I could rip chunks out of it. “Do you know how close I was to losing you? If I had been half a second slower grabbing your coat you would have been gone. Then what would’ve happened to Kate and Tyler? And your mom?”

Taking the last few steps back, he set a cup of coffee and a bowl of steaming soup on the coffee table. He cupped my face again and looked down at me. He swallowed hard, the movement of his Adam’s apple drawing my delirious eye.

“And what about me? Losing you would’ve killed me, Delaney.” His voice cracked and he stiffened, his face hardening before he stepped back.

“I—I have to go.” He turned around and walked out, slamming the door behind him.

Tears flowed. I wasn’t sure if they were from what I had just lived through or the scolding I had just received from Nate.

CHAPTER 10

I paced the floor of my room and felt terrible for losing my cool with Delaney. There was no reason to scold her. I should have wrapped my arms around her and held her until she felt safe again. It took everything in me not to go barging into her house and apologize. Her lights were off, and I didn't want to bother her. First thing in the morning, I would go over and make things right.

The sun shone through the window, and I didn't think I had gotten any sleep. I tossed and turned, listening as the rain fell. I might have finally fallen asleep just before dawn. Rolling out of bed, I got my coffee and started my day.

I knocked on Delaney's door. There was no answer, but I needed to see with my own eyes that she was okay. So many terrible scenarios were running through my mind. Slowly turning the doorknob, I quietly opened the door. She was lying on the couch, wrapped up in blankets. All I could see was the top of her head peeking out.

Moving closer to her, I could faintly see the blankets rise and fall with her breathing. I let out a sigh of relief and leaned down to kiss the top of her head. Turning to go, I heard her move on the couch, and she sat up.

"That's all? You sneak into my home, spy on me, kiss the top of my head, and leave?" Kicking blankets off, she stood up. Her arms were turning interesting shades of black and blue with a little purple mixed in. There was a cut on her forehead I'd missed seeing last

night. She moved slowly and winced when she took a breath. “Last night I very nearly lost my life, and all you could do was yell at me about it. So why would you think I’d want you here today?”

To say I was taken off guard would have been an understatement. “I—I—I’m sorry. I just wanted to check on you. To make sure you were okay.” Stuttering wasn’t something I did often, but I didn’t know what to say.

“Well, I’m not okay, Nate. I only managed about three hours of sleep because every time I closed my eyes, I kept seeing that black water.” Her hands were on her hips, and the glistening in her eyes wasn’t easy to miss. I wanted to reach out to hold her. “All you could do last night was yell at me. Fine, I was in over my head, but I don’t think I deserved the things you said to me.”

She moved past me without touching me. I reached my hand out to take her arm, but she pulled away before I touched her. “Don’t. Thank you for saving my life, but you have lost whatever familiarity you had.” Pulling the cupboard door open, she grabbed the bottle of painkillers and swallowed two without water. Haphazardly, she tossed the bottle back in the cupboard and it fell out. Grabbing it, she threw it harder this time, and it fell out again, except it fell to the floor. Delaney slowly bent down and grabbed the white bottle and slammed it down on the counter before she pushed the cupboard closed. “Forget it, I’m going to need it again.” Bracing herself on the counter, she turned her head to look at me.

“Nate, please leave. I can’t do this right now.” Her voice was just above a whisper, tears falling down her face.

Slowly, I backed away from the kitchen and turned toward the door. “Again, Delaney, I’m sorry.” I didn’t look back. Her tears were too much for me. They made me feel even more guilty than I already did. I left as quietly as I had come in.

My head fell back against the door. What could I possibly do to make things better? This was not a situation I had ever let myself get into. Feeling vulnerable was not a thing I liked to be. Too many bad memories popped up when that happened, and now was no exception.

I knew exactly what Delaney was feeling every time she closed her eyes, because it was happening to me as well. Over and over, I

would see her tiny frame popping up out of the water and disappearing again. Her flailing, trying to grab for anything that would save her. I'd prayed for the first time since I was seventeen. Not for the rain to stop and not for the storm to pass, but for just one more day to have her in my arms. One more day to see her smile at me, because of me and for me. Another day hearing her laugh, saying my name, and being mine.

Walking over to the barn, I needed to get my day started, a day without Delaney working beside me. Thankfully, my days were routine, because I went through the motions of my job, but my heart wasn't in it. Most of the day was spent daydreaming. Fighting flashes of Delaney in that river and berating myself for what a fool I was.

The work took longer than I planned. The fences had held up well, but the creek was still too high to be trusted, so the animals would have to stay close to the house.

I had more than enough time to think and remind myself of what a fool I had been and still was.

"Captain, I hope I haven't lost her because of this." Great, now I was talking to my horse. I really needed to get a life. Brushing down the horse, I gave him fresh feed and headed out of the barn.

It was also past time to check on Delaney. I had left her alone for too long.

Heading to the house at the end of the day, I stopped and looked at Delaney through her front window. She was still fighting with that acetaminophen bottle, but this time she threw it across the living room. Chuckling, I continued on my way. I needed supper and sleep, and it didn't matter what order those things happened.

CHAPTER 11

Nate hadn't come back to the house yesterday. Maybe my outburst had been enough to scare him off. I slept a lot and soaked my tired, sore body in Epsom salt baths to help ease the muscle pain. The thoughts going through my head suddenly scared me. I was sure he would never speak to me again. When had this man worked his way into my every thought and heart? I had been determined to protect it at all costs, and here I was after two weeks of completely falling for him.

The couch wasn't comfortable anymore, so I decided my bed would be better tonight. Climbing in, I caught a whiff of Nate's cologne. The pillow beside mine smelled like him. Taking it in my arms, I held it close to me. Tears welled up and I let them fall. It hurt knowing what he really thought of me. The things I said to him were true, but I wished I hadn't ever said any of it.

Nate was different, and I knew he didn't intend to hurt me with his words, but that didn't excuse the fact that he said them. I drifted off to sleep clutching that pillow. My nightmares didn't scare me as much, feeling him a little closer than he had been tonight.

The sun blazing through my window woke me from another fitful sleep; I was damp and cold from sweating; I needed a shower. Making my coffee, I noticed Nate walking to the barn to start his day. I wanted to go to him; I needed to talk to him, but I let him keep walking.

My day was boring. I hadn't realized how much I would miss being out helping Nate with all the ranch work. He made it more fun

than dad and Kate ever had. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. I jumped off the couch, closed my bathrobe tighter around me, and quickly looked in the mirror. The woman looking back at me was tired, bruised, and her eyes were puffy from crying.

I was ready to face whatever he had to tell me, so I swung the door open. “Jack?” Standing there before me was the man I had walked away from. The man I’d finally forgotten.

“Hi, babe. Long time no see.” He pushed past me and walked into my home. I looked at him and wondered what I had ever seen in him. Compared to Nate, he looked like a teenage boy who hadn’t hit puberty yet. He was a good four inches shorter than Nate as well. Damn, I’d traded up.

“So, when were you going to tell me you weren’t planning on coming back to Austin?” Jack wandered around the house looking things over. Picking up small ornaments and putting them back down, he turned, “Well?”

“Jack, I am pretty sure when we broke up, you lost the right to know what I was doing with my life.” I moved to the kitchen. For some reason, I felt better having the counter between us. Backing up, I leaned against the sink, folded my arms across my chest, and wished I wasn’t so sore and tired. How was I going to be able to battle him? “Why are you here?”

“Babe, I have to have you back. These months have been lonely, painful even.” He’d brought his A game pouting face, and crying tearless sobs. There had been a time I would have and did fall for it, but I couldn’t care less this time. “Lane, you know how I feel about you.” He reached out, trying to get me to take his hand.

“The other women I have been seeing just aren’t you. I come home at the end of the night, and the house is empty. There’s nobody waiting with supper. Life without you is so lonely.” He was looking up at me with those puppy dog eyes. That always got him what he wanted. But not this time.

“Jack, come on, a few months? It’s been a year.” I didn’t take his hand, I moved farther down the counter away from him. “You don’t want me, you want a maid. No, not even a maid. You want a mother. And that’s not what I signed up for, Jack.”

“How are your folks? Did Kate end up getting married?”

“Seriously? Jack, you have no idea what I have been through. The fact that you come in to my home and ask stupid questions that you have no business asking makes me believe you haven’t changed.” I couldn’t even look at him anymore, so I turned to look out the window. A mistake I shouldn’t have made. Suddenly there were arms wrapping around me. “Jack, what the hell? Let me go.” I tried to wiggle free, but he just kept tightening his hold on me. “This isn’t going to end well if you don’t let go of me.” Talking through gritted teeth, I was growing more angry by the second. He must have sensed it because he let me go but didn’t move away.

“Because, Delaney, we are meant to be together.” His face brightened and his eyes danced. “I’m done playing the field. This break is over. Now.”

I knew I should stop talking and just try to get him to the door, but my mouth kept moving. My head telling me to shut up, but my heart was leading, and I was done with his nonsense. “Jack, it wasn’t a break. We haven’t been happy for years. We existed together. It wasn’t a relationship. We were roommates.”

“Roommates? Thirteen years and you thought we were roommates?” His voice got louder, and it looked like his eyes were going to bulge out of his head. As if someone flipped a switch, he changed again. “You must be confused since you have been away for so long. Delaney, please just come home with me, and everything will be wonderful.”

Had he always been this way or had something flipped for him? “Look, Jack, I need some time to think. All of this information is a little sudden. Right now, I can’t leave. Maybe when mom comes home.” I didn’t mean any of it, but I needed him gone for now.

We walked toward the door, and he stopped and grabbed me by the arms. “Delaney, please don’t ever forget you are mine.” His grip was tightening, and it was starting to hurt. “There is nobody on the planet who will love you like I do.”

I heard a horse gallop into the corral beside my house, and I wanted to breathe a sigh of relief. No matter what happened, Nate could be over here in an instant with one scream.

“Now, I think if I go into town and find the moving company, I can get boxes, and we can start packing your stuff up so you can come

home with me.” He leaned against the doorjamb and crossed his arms. “We can load up your truck, and then once we get back to Austin, trade it off on something practical for the city. I never should have let you keep buying trucks.” He trailed off on his tangent, but I had stopped listening. The anger in me was building, and I was about to lose my mind.

“Jack.” My hands had clenched into fists, and I yelled to get him to stop rambling. Through gritted teeth, I had to make him understand that this would never happen. “I am not going anywhere with you. Don’t get boxes, and don’t you dare show up here again.”

Something moved behind Jack’s shoulder. When I looked up, there was Nate, looking like he was ready to pounce. I hoped he could read my face. I needed him here. Now.

CHAPTER 12

When I was done for the day I headed back to the house, and spotted Delaney standing in the doorway. Something was wrong, she didn't look comfortable when I saw her look around the man. Her face was pale. Paler than she had been this morning. She was yelling at whoever this person was, and I didn't really like her being vulnerable. Her eyes were wide, almost pleading for me to come to her.

I had to get to my girl. When had that happened? I was completely in love with Delaney, and I wasn't even thinking of running. Changing my direction, I headed toward her house.

"Delaney?"

"Hey, Nate. This is Jack. He just showed up. I'm sorry I couldn't get away from here to help you today." Her eyes were puffy, and she looked a little pale. I looked over at this guy and immediately wanted to hit him.

"We need to talk about the cows, so, buddy, take a hike. There isn't any reason for you to stay." I walked up beside Delaney, and she backed into the house.

"And who do you think you are, old man?" Jack looked me up and down and placed his hands on his hips. He was a skinny thing I could have snapped like a toothpick.

"I'm the guy who runs this place, and I told you to leave. Don't make me escort you out of here. You won't like it much." I took a step closer to Jack and got in between him and Delaney.

“Delaney, I will stay in town. Call me later, and we can make plans.” The joker stared me down, which I’m sure he thought was intimidating, but he didn’t worry me. He was four or five inches shorter than me, and I didn’t think he had ever done a day of manual labor.

He grunted, turned, and walked to his car. I turned to Delaney, walked into her house, and closed the door. “Why didn’t you call me? I would have dropped everything to get here.”

Tears built in her eyes, and I pulled her into my arms. Glancing out the window, I saw Jack looking in the window at us. The scowl on his face sent a shiver through me. I knew he was going to be trouble.

“I’m staying here tonight. When he’s gone, I will go grab my things.” She was still shaking in my arms, and she held on to me tightly.

I saw him get into his car and speed away, but I didn’t let Delaney go until she had stopped shaking. “What did he say that made you so scared?” I directed her to the couch, and she sat down while I sat on the armrest, waiting for an answer.

“He didn’t really say anything. Just barged in and acted like we hadn’t been apart.”

“Delaney, did he do anything?”

Shaking her head, she looked up at me. “No, he didn’t.” I let out a relieved sigh, leaned down, and kissed the top of her head.

“Okay, I will be right back.” Delaney grabbed my hand and stood.

“I’m going with you. It seems every time I let you out of my sight, you disappear.

She wasn’t wrong. I had been doing a lot of disappearing at really bad times. I wasn’t prepared to feel this way about anyone. “Come on.” I motioned to the door with my head, and she walked ahead of me.

Walking into the house, Delaney beelined for the kitchen while I went to the room I was using to grab a change of clothes.

She was standing in the kitchen looking out the window, lost in her thoughts. Gently, I wrapped my arms around her and stood behind her. “What are you thinking about?”

Delaney shrugged. “We’ve had an odd twenty-four hours.” Her voice was quiet and distant. She kept staring out the window and

didn't relax in my arms like I had expected. "What did you mean about losing me, Nate?"

I sighed. I'd never gotten into a relationship because I didn't want this conversation, but here I was. "Delaney, I never had a really good example of a healthy relationship until Brian took me in. My parents fought all the time. I thought that was what being married was, so I decided I would never get close enough with anyone." Turning her and leaning her against the counter, I brushed a stray piece of hair off her cheek. "My mom died when I was seventeen. She and my dad had gotten into it and he pushed her. She fell but got up like she had done hundreds of times before, but the next morning I found her in bed. She had passed away." Crying was one thing I had sworn off, but as I stood here baring my soul to this woman, I couldn't help it. All the old feelings I had pushed away sprung up again.

"They did not charge my father because her death was ruled inconclusive. It hurt knowing that she wouldn't get justice. I stayed for a few months, but the abuse got worse, so I ran away. By a strange turn of events, I stumbled into the Morton family, and they saved me." Delaney reached up and wiped a tear from my face. "I didn't want to turn into my father, so I decided I would never get close enough to a woman to fall in love. Then last night when I almost lost you, I realized somehow you had worked your way through the walls I had put up without me even knowing. When I saw you fall in, I prayed for you to surface again. If it hadn't been for a well-timed crack of lightning, I would have lost sight of you completely."

Wrapping my arms around her, I wanted to keep her safe forever. I felt renewed hope when she returned my embrace.

"Your arms make me feel safe. I haven't felt this protected for a very long time. I've only been around you for a few weeks, but I feel like our souls have always been paired. Wow, that sounds strange, I'm sorry."

Spinning her in my arms so she faced me, I lowered my head to kiss her. "It's not strange, I feel it too." Her arms rested around my neck as our tongues danced. "Let's go out on a date. Like a real date."

CHAPTER 13

I couldn't believe that Nate had asked me out on an actual date. When was the last time I had gone on a date? I couldn't even think that far back. There had been one guy right after Jack, but I don't really think that counted. It ended terribly, and I hid from him for a month when I saw him around town.

There was a knock on my door. I smiled and walked over to open it. Nate stood before me, dressed in what looked like his Sunday best, his black cowboy hat in his hands. The blue and white plaid shirt looked fantastic on him. But what would it look like laying on the floor?

"Hi, are you ready to go?" Nate arched his brow and smiled.

"Yes, I am. Let me lock up." Pulling the door closed behind me, I locked the deadbolt and turned back to Nate. He offered his arm, and I took it and let him lead me to his truck.

"I hope you don't mind driving to Hammond. I managed to get reservations at La Nourriture."

"Nate, that's fancy. Are we going to fit in?" I was suddenly self-conscious and remembered why I didn't go on dates.

"Delaney, don't overthink things. It's just me." His hand reached over to mine and squeezed it. We drove that way until Nate pulled up in front of the restaurant.

The music was soft, and there was barely enough light to see Nate across the table. The menu was in French, and I was thankful I had taken French classes. I stumbled through my order, and Nate ordered flawlessly. "Wow, you are full of surprises."

“My mother was determined I would have some culture, so she made me take French and Spanish. It’s come in handy over the years but never to order supper.” He chuckled.

Our meals were decent, but I needed Nate back in his element. Or was it my element?

“How about we get out of here? This has been nice and all but not exactly our style.” Nate’s words were music to my ears, and I nodded.

We walked to the truck, and Nate kissed me before opening the door. “So where should we go?” His whisper sent shivers through me.

“Somewhere I can have wings and fries.” My answer took him off guard, and he laughed as he helped me into the truck.

“Okay, well, let’s head to a bar. Maybe we could do a little dancing.” As he pulled out of the parking lot, he took my hand again.

“The only dancing I want to do is on my back with you.” I scooted over and sat beside him. Gently placing my hand on his knee, I ran it up his thigh. He clamped his palm over mine. We drove in silence, but it was nice. I rested my head on his shoulder and cuddled in closer to him.

Walking into the bar, Nate saw a few people he knew and waved at them but didn’t stop. We kept going until we found a table over in the corner. It was secluded, dark, and perfect. The music played but didn’t overpower our conversation, which had turned light and comfortable after the strain at the restaurant.

“Ladies and gentlemen, let’s get everyone up for some line dancing. Don’t let the young kids win this battle. Come on, old folks, show them how it’s done.” The announcer was egging the crowd on.

“Come on, Nate, let’s dance.” I grabbed Nate by the arm and pulled him on to the dance floor. Song after song came on, and we danced laps around all the others on the floor. We laughed, kissed, and had a great time. It was the first time in ages I let down my hair.

We left that bar, hysterically laughing at each other. “I have never been more embarrassed in my entire life. Who decided to try to keep up line dancing with those kids?” Nate opened the door, and I got into the truck.

“Hey, we kept up great. Taught those kids a few moves, and I think we will be sore tomorrow.” Sitting by his side again, I couldn’t wait to get home.

Nate pulled up in front of my mom’s house. “We aren’t staying at your place tonight. I know this isn’t my place, but right now, it kind of is.” He grabbed my hand and pulled me out of his side of the truck, and we walked into the house.

It felt weird being here with him alone, but I wasn’t going to let it stop me. I turned into his embrace, and he backed me up against the wall. Our kisses were needy, hungry, and passionate. The tension between us over the last few days was lifting.

“I need to apologize. I shouldn’t have gotten angry with you the other night during the storm. It wasn’t my place, but you scared me, Delaney. I don’t know what I would do without you in my life. I should have taken you in my arms and comforted you, not scolded you.”

“Well, a little scolding now and then might not hurt me.” I leaned in closer and kissed him again.

“Probably a safe bet that over the time we spend together there will be more.” Nate swatted my ass. “Delaney, I need to have you tonight. I need to hold you, show you how you should have been treated the other night.”

His hands roamed my body, and there was no doubt in my mind that I needed him too. “Well, what are you waiting for then? Stop talking and get showing,” I whispered as he walked me to his bedroom.

“This was my room growing up,” I said as we walked in.

“Really? I couldn’t tell.” I looked around the room, trying to imagine what he saw when he walked in. Pageant trophies, sashes, and crowns. Horse show ribbons and photos everywhere.

“Hmm, well, I guess it isn’t a surprise then.” Suddenly, I was kind of embarrassed. I could feel a red flush creeping up my neck.

“You know, I would like to see you in these.” Nate walked over to the pageant wall and turned back toward me, holding the largest crown I had won and a sash. “Only these.”

Laughter erupted from deep within me, and I moved closer to him. I slowly undid the buttons of my dress and let it fall to the floor. Reaching behind me, I unclasped my bra and slid it off. Holding my

hand out, I took the sash and slipped it over my head. Next was the crown. Nate handed it to me, and I placed it on my head, secured the combs, and stood before him.

“Delaney, my queen.” He growled and closed the distance between us. One of his hands grabbed my soft breast, and the other pressed against my butt cheek and pulled me close to his waiting arousal.

We made love for maybe the first time. It was different from the fun we had been having together. Tonight I felt like we had connected as lovers. There were things I had missed out on over the last thirteen years, but that all faded away as Nate and I grew more comfortable with each other.

CHAPTER 14

The day had been long, and I was more than annoyed. Granted, things between Nate and I were better, but there was still Jack to worry about. I didn't want to think about him, so the only logical thing to do was call an impromptu girls' night. "Hey, sis, want to go out for drinks? Jane and a few of the girls are meeting me at the bar."

"Let me make a few calls, and I will get back to you. Do you mind if I ask Jessica to come along?" I knew she was going to have to make sure Tyler didn't have any late work to get done.

"No, I don't mind a bit, the more the merrier." I hung up the phone and started to get ready.

The phone rang. "Okay, we are in. What time? I would assume I'm the driver too?"

"You bet you are. I didn't invite the nursing mother just so she could get out of the house. Wanna be here at seven thirty?" Plans were made, and for the first time in forever, I was feeling like me again. It wasn't just because I was going out, it was because of Nate too.

He made me feel like a woman, unlike Jack. I would be happy if he quit running, but I think I might enjoy the chase.

The bar was full and loud. It looked like everyone in town was here and on the dance floor. I looked around and didn't see Nate, so I relaxed.

An hour went by, and just as I was about to order another drink, a large, calloused hand slipped into mine. Our fingers interlocked, and

he pulled me toward the dance floor. I didn't need to look up to know who it was. His hand engulfed mine, yet fit perfectly. The same electric sizzle that charged the air around us was there, and I knew if I lifted his shirt, I'd see the scratches I'd left last night.

He pulled me close, and we swayed together as the music played. The feel of his arms around me was like they had always been there. All eyes in the bar were on us. We had been secluded away from prying eyes and judging thoughts. All people would be thinking is we should have been the last two people on the planet to fall for each other, but it didn't matter to me. I should have realized long ago the plans I had in my head were not the plans that would happen to me.

Our dance over, he leaned down and kissed me. "Now go back to your friends, but I'm taking you home." He walked me back to the table and walked over to the where the guys were. Tyler and Rob had managed to convince Sandra to keep TJ and Addie, so they joined the party. I watched him walk back to his table and couldn't help watching that Wrangler butt. The guys patted him on the shoulder, which made me happy. He had been so worried about his position on the ranch if he got involved with me, but it all looked to be fine.

I couldn't believe how much I'd needed this night out. It had been ages since the girls and I had gotten together. Then my night was spoiled. Jack walked in, looking around. Talk about a fish out of water. His sport coat, skinny jeans, and a pair of loafers looked completely out of place in a bar full of cowboy hats, boots, and Wranglers. I wanted to sneak out the back door, which I had done many times trying to ditch people in this bar, but he spotted me.

"Delaney, is that Jack?" Kate asked in disbelief. All I could do was nod.

"Who's Jack?" Jessica whispered.

Jane answered quickly, before I could brush it off. "Delaney dated him in Austin for thirteen years. She broke it off when she came home, but looks like city boy has it bad for our girl here."

"Ladies, I would like to steal Delaney away." Jack was a charmer, and I could see Jessica's eyes glaze over.

“I don’t know, Jack, pretty sure she doesn’t want to see you. What are you doing here anyway?” Kate replied, taking a sip of her soda.

“Kate, nice to see you. I came up last night, and I’m pretty sure I didn’t ask for you opinion.”

Kate stood and stared at him eye to eye. From across the room, I saw Tyler and Nate jump to attention. I grabbed her arm and pulled her back, so she sat down. Tyler relaxed, but Nate looked like he was ready to pounce at a moment’s notice.

“Delaney, come on. You don’t belong in this hick town. Come home with me. We can work out our problems, and I know the university will give you your job back.” Jack was always persuasive. And hot. His dark hair shone in the lights, his dimples seemed bigger, and his eyes pleaded with me.

I thought back to our last fight; he had accused me of running away, running home to Mommy and Daddy. He hadn’t sent anything when my father died, not even so much as a text. We would fall back into our regular routine of not talking, and when we did, we would fight.

Glancing over Jack’s shoulder, I saw Nate moving closer. My heart fluttered and my pulse increased. I felt the corner of my mouth lifting into a smile. He got the hint and walked over.

Nudging Jack out of the way, he leaned in toward me. “Care to dance?” His calloused hand outstretched, waiting for mine.

Nodding, I took his hand, and he led me to the dance floor. The music started. He pulled me close. “Wild West” couldn’t have been any more of a perfect song. I wanted to get lost in his arms. He was the cowboy I wanted to hold me close.

“What are you thinking?” he whispered in my ear.

“This is our song. I know it’s such a teenage thing to say, but it’s how I see you and me together. A little dangerous but full of passion.”

He pulled me tighter to him. “I’m never going to let you go. I’ll be your cowboy.”

The song ended, and we walked back to the table. Jack apparently hadn’t gotten the hint when I walked away from him.

“Delaney, come on. Enough dancing with this grandpa and come home to me.” Jack’s face changed, and I saw a flash of anger cross it. His words were laughable, and with each word he spoke, I was more annoyed.

“Excuse me, son, I might be a little older than Delaney, but trust me, I’m no grandpa. If you are the one who had been warming her bed, then I understand why she was so frustrated when she showed up here.” Taking a long look up and down Jack, Nate let out a chuckle and slid his hand from my shoulder to the top of my ass.

“Delaney, I have had enough of your latest antics. Let’s go.” Jack reached out and grabbed my arm. Panic flowed through my veins. He had a temper but hadn’t ever been mean.

Nate stepped in between Jack and me. Before I knew what was happening, Jack let go of my arm and was on the ground holding his nose.

“Now I suggest you leave and forget you ever met Delaney.”

Nate stepped back beside me, and Jack stood. “This is what you want, Delaney?” His voice muffled behind his hands. “An old man who resorts to violence to solve small disputes?”

I looked at Nate and back to Jack, “Yep, he’s exactly who I want.” I wrapped my arm around his.

“Nate, take me home.” My voice was breathy, my eyes pleading.

“There’s nowhere else I want you right now.” He growled.

Grabbing my things from the table, I smiled. “See ya, girls.” Nate and I left the bar.

It was dark. The only light to guide us was from the moon. We walked over to the truck, hand in hand. What did you see in him?”

I looked over at Nate and shrugged my shoulders. “We’d been together since college. It just became comfortable. I thought it was the stability which I had longed for.”

“And now?”

“A future with Jack would be more of what you saw tonight; frustrating and boring.”

“What about a future with me?”

I thought you weren’t a settling down kind of guy.”

“I didn’t think I was, but I can’t imagine any future without you, and I don’t want to try.”

“Oh, Nate.”

“Well, what do you think? Are you willing to consider a future with an old grandpa like me?”

A life together wasn't something I had ever let myself think of. I figured Nate wasn't the settling down kind.

“A future with you would keep me on my toes. It would be full of excitement and...”

“And...?”

“Good sex,” I whispered.

Nate chuckled. He placed his hand on my leg and slowly ran it up to my inner thigh. His touch sent tingles to my center. The warmth of his hand radiated to my soul. His fingers grazed the top of my bare thigh and moved toward the ache he had caused. “That's right, baby, a lot of it. You have years to catch up on.”

EPILOGUE

Nate moved in, and shortly after that, mom approached us about switching houses with her. She wanted to downsize, and we were tripping over each other.

One night laying in bed, I was cuddled into Nate, watching the stars glittering in the sky. “Laney, do you ever think you want more from life?”

Shifting, I looked up at him. I was afraid of where this was going. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. We’ve never talked about marriage or kids. Baby, I’m too old to be a dad, and I never pictured myself getting married.” He had closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead.

“Nate, there are a few things I could tell early on about you. You weren’t the marrying kind. Love one woman forever, yes, but walking down some fancy white aisle and saying ‘I do’ in front of hundreds of people? Nope.” Sitting up, I swung my leg over him and straddled his lap. His lips looked inviting, and I took the opportunity to have them connect with mine.

“Here’s the thing. I don’t want kids either. I have enough at school every day. The life we are building together is more than enough for me. I want to be able to do whatever I want with you whenever I want.”

“Babe, but what if I need to marry you?” He brought one of his enormous hands behind my neck and pulled me to him. “When I was younger and things were so bad at home, I used to wonder if I could ever be really happy in a relationship. I had seen so many toxic ones

and that's the reason I never worried about finding anyone, but right now, at this moment, I can say I am truly happy. I love you, Delaney."

A few months later, when I had gotten home from a busy day at school, my hunky cowboy wandered over to me. "Come on, take a ride with me. I saddled the horses." He took my hand and walked me to the corral. I never thought going for a ride was romantic, but since Nate and I had been together, we had gone on more rides that turned out to be the most wonderful dates I could have imagined.

"Where are we going?" I climbed up onto Fortuna and waited for Nate to open the gate.

"Nope, it's a secret. I want you to be surprised, so let's go. Don't fall too far behind." He kicked his horse and took off like a bullet out of a gun. I laughed and kicked my horse into action.

It didn't take long, and I realized we were heading for the creek. I could feel my breathing pick up and a cold sweat breaking out on my forehead. Over the last few months, I had managed to avoid all the work around here. Nate pulled his horse to a trot when he realized I wasn't close enough.

"Delaney, it's okay. Please come with me." He waited for me to catch up, and I rode alongside of him.

Just over the rise, I saw a blanket laid out on the ground. There was a small picnic waiting. Nate dismounted his horse and took the reins from me, and I joined him on the ground. He let the horses wander off to the water and lead me to the water's edge.

We both sat down, and he poured a glass of wine for each of us and handed me mine. "Isn't it a beautiful day? Not a breath of wind, the birds chirping."

"I would have been okay with a spot a little farther from the edge of the creek." I lifted the glass to my lips, and Nate chuckled.

"Well, I brought you here on purpose. Delaney, this spot represents a time when I almost knew what it would be like to lose you. There has been too much loss in my life, and it scared me. Not only was I close to losing you that night, I almost pushed you away the next day. My life means nothing without you." He was nervous, and I thought maybe rambling a little bit, trying to calm himself down.

"Delaney, I want you to be mine forever. I need you to be mine forever, and I want you to be my wife. Please marry me." Nate was

on one knee, holding out a gold ring with a single princess cut diamond. It was simple and stunning all at the same time. "I brought you here because this deserves to be a happy, beautiful spot for you, and I hope this is one way for that to happen."

Tears were flowing down my face. "Yes, Nate. I will be happy to marry you." He slipped the ring on to my finger and then pulled me into his lap and kissed me. "I thought you weren't the marrying kind?" I pulled back, looking quizzically at him.

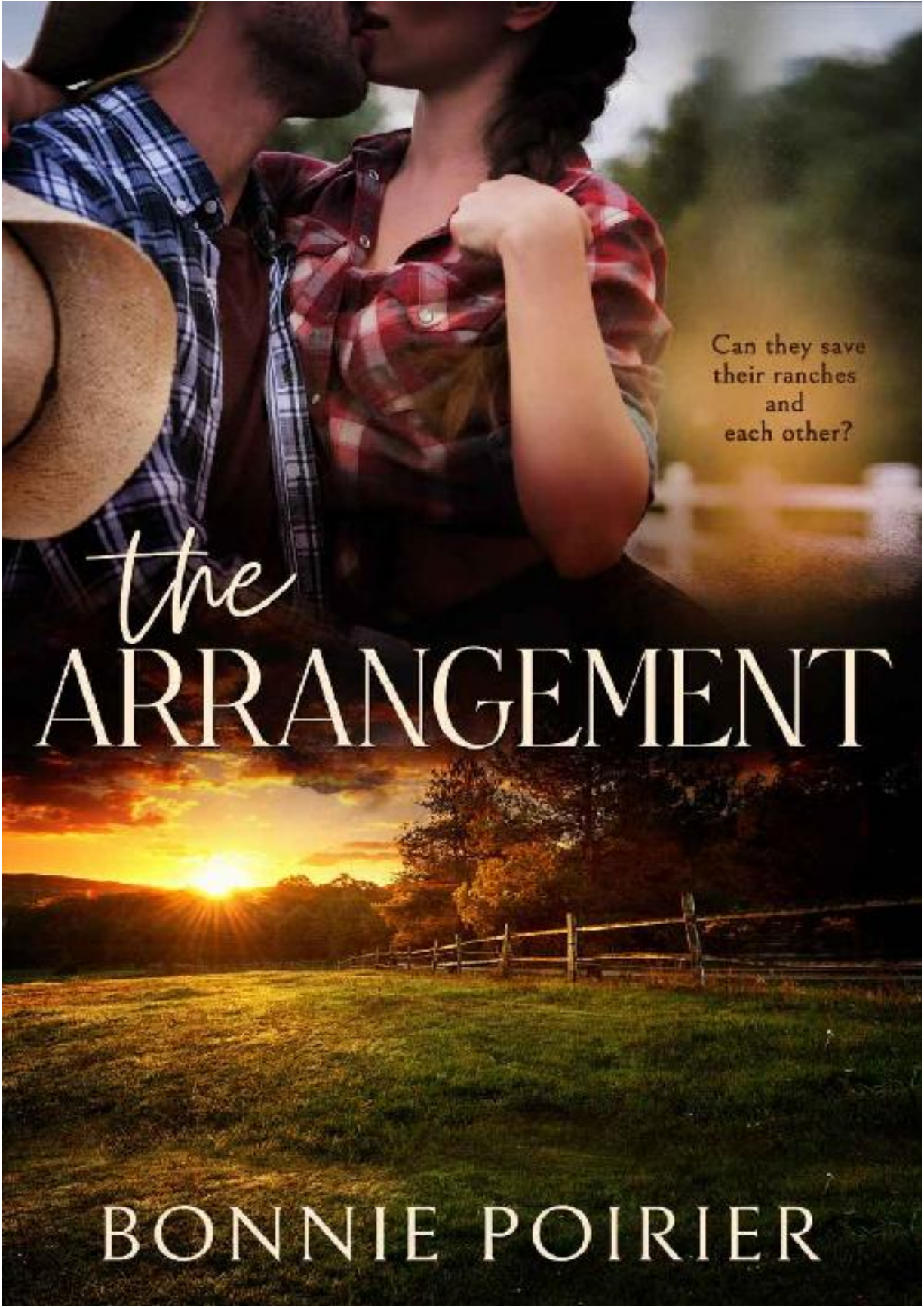
Nate laughed. "Well, you see, there is something about you that has made me rethink all my previous thoughts on life as a bachelor. Delaney, you have made me realize I enjoy being the type of man who needs a woman to keep him occupied, grounded, and in love." He trailed kisses down my neck.

"I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't driven onto the ranch that day. My life is so much better because you are in it, Nate Gables." The water ran gently beside us, and it almost made me forget how angry it could get, but that didn't seem to matter right now. "You taught me how to work on this ranch. Took the time that nobody else ever had. Nate, you saw me when everyone only saw the girl trying to overcompensate for being shy, for being overlooked, and just the 'pretty one.'"

"Delaney, I will spend the rest of my life making you feel like you can do anything you want. Gone are the days when people overlook you. You are fierce, strong, and passionate." Nate gently placed his hands on either side of my head and pulled me gently back to him. I wrapped my arms around his neck. We sat together listening to the river, enjoying one another, and being in the moment together. There wasn't any need to rush making plans. I would be content just how we were for the rest of my life.

Turning to look at the creek, I wasn't scared to be here anymore. The night of the storm seemed so long ago, it was just a memory. A memory that brought Nate and me closer than we ever could have been. I had stared death in the face and found my forever love.

The Arrangement



Can they save
their ranches
and
each other?

the
ARRANGEMENT

BONNIE POIRIER

Chapter One

“*Y*ou have got to be kidding! Why on earth would you think I would agree to something this insane?”

“I have no choice. I’ve got too much debt and borrowed from the wrong person. He’s demanding payment.” My father stood before me with hunched shoulders. His usual commanding voice was shaky, hesitant, and quiet.

“And the only decision you could think of was for me to marry one of his sons?” I shouted. Tears threatened to fall, but I willed them not to. I looked toward my mother, who hid behind my father; she sighed quietly and flitted her gaze to the ground whenever I looked at her. I had expected her to be arguing with me, or at least to appear angry, but she just stood there, holding on to my father’s arm, patting it when he needed moral support.

The sun beat down on the parched earth stretching between us. I have welcomed shade, except there was not a cloud in the Texas sky. This conversation was only making me hotter; my temperature had risen at least five degrees since my dad opened his traitorous mouth. They’d both lost their damn minds. This couldn’t be happening. My head was pounding and my brain felt like it was going to explode. There was no way I was going to agree to do something like this. Debt or no debt, I wasn’t doing it.

“Brian Morton extended the option as a way out of my situation and to save our ranch. I don’t have the money to pay him back.”

“So you’re going to sacrifice me? Use me as a pawn in your little game just so you can save this place? When did this ranch become more important than your daughter?” My voice was just above a whisper as I narrowed my eyes, staring a hole through my father.

He looked toward the ground and scuffed his boot along the gravel. “It’s not more important,” he disagrees, shaking his head, “but

it's our family legacy. It's all I have to leave you one day." Tears filled his eyes, and he turned away from me so I wouldn't see. I could count on one hand how many times I'd seen my father cry. He was the picture of a rancher: tan, weathered face from years of being out in the elements, bowed legs from living on the back of a horse, and his black Stetson only came off for a meal, church service, or bed. Dad was always the level-headed one, the only man in a house full of women, so he learned early on how to solve arguments, heartache, and dodge hormones. He kept his feelings close to his vest. More often than not, you would have thought he didn't care, but that was just his way.

While I'd like to dismiss this crazy idea, I knew how much the ranch meant to him. He was a cowboy through and through. He even wrestled steers in his youth, which is how he met my mom, a rodeo queen in her own right. I worried that if he didn't have the ranch, he would lose part of himself. It was all he knew. Come to think of it, this was all I knew, and the thought of it not being here scared me. I turned away from my parents and wrapped my arms around my waist, closed my eyes, and allowed a few tears to fall. It hurt seeing him like this. It perplexed me how things had gotten this bad. When I came home to help, I thought things had turned around. Wiping my nose on my sleeve, I turned back around to face them.

"So if I do this, it takes care of all your debt?" The words came out far more confident than I felt. I knew if I agreed to this, I would be saving my father and losing myself.

My father nodded, closing his eyes in what I hoped was a silent prayer for my future.

My heart raced, and I began to pace in front of my parents. I fidgeted with my untucked shirt. I felt a wave of nausea hit me. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and waited for it to pass. I heard myself say, "Fine." I let out a loud sigh. "So when am I supposed to get married?"

"A week and a half," Mom whispered as she stepped out from behind my father and took a few steps towards me. She tucked her blond hair behind her ear and clasped her hands in front of her, clearly bracing for my outburst like she had for years.

My mouth fell open, and it felt like my eyes would pop right out of my head. I stared at my mother and furrowed my brow, “Wow, you’re sure not wasting any time getting rid of me.”

A week and a half? They were as nuts as I thought. I looked at them both, waiting for something. Anything. Gratefulness? Praise, thanks or elation—but saw nothing. I turned on my heel and stomped away from them.

“Katherine Jean,” my mom called after me, but I didn’t stop. I didn’t need to hear any more of this twisted bargain. There was nothing they could say that would make me feel better.

Chapter Two

I stomped off to the bunkhouse which was across the yard from my parents’ house. Years ago I’d converted it to a little apartment, because I was the one who stayed. A whole lotta good that did me.

I paced around my kitchen. It wasn’t very big, and the island took up the majority of the floor space. I got dizzy making laps around it. Slamming my hands down on the counter, I let the bottled up tears fall. I wanted to yell. I needed to hit something, or better yet, *someone*, but there was nobody. No one followed me, and that hurt almost as much as this convoluted arrangement. I snatched up a coffee mug that was beside the sink and threw it across the kitchen. It hit the doorjamb, shattered, and fell to the floor. Grumbling to myself, I grabbed the broom and bent down to sweep the china into the dustpan.

“Hey, Kate, it’s nice to see you again.” My eyes followed his legs up to his head and I saw Tyler Morton standing at the threshold of my home, too good to knock. Or maybe he thought that because we were an unofficial family, what was mine was his. Or I hadn’t closed the door when I came home and it was an open invitation for him to come in. With him, who knew?

I had to admit; he was handsome. He was muscular; his eyes rivaled the clearest blue water, brown hair with highlights of gold from being in the sun, and the perfect amount of scruff on his unshaven face. It was just enough without encroaching on beard

territory. And most importantly, he had the best Wrangler butt I'd ever seen.

"Hey, Tyler, come on in." I stepped out of the way and most definitely did not look at his butt as he walked by. Removing his ball cap, he sat down at the table. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Sure, as long as the delivery is a little softer than what you used on that last cup." He smiled, and his eyes danced with laughter that he was smart enough to know not to let out.

"You saw that?" I cringed as I walked to the garbage can and dumped the broken cup. It clattered loudly as it hit the bottom of the can. The sound reverberated through my tiny house.

Tyler nodded. "Good throw."

"Do you know what's going on?" he asked, a little apprehensive.

"Kinda... wait. It's you?" I turned away from the counter, full pot of coffee in hand, barely avoiding splashing it, and looked at him. "You're the Morton brother I'm supposed to marry?"

He nodded his head, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. What? Seriously? I'd had a secret crush on Tyler Morton since they moved here from Montana. Carefully, I turned back to the counter to fill both cups. I looked out the window and fidgeted with the coffee pot, avoiding eye contact. My heart raced and palms suddenly sweaty. I thought back to the times I had seen him around. I had been too afraid to talk to him, and now here he was, in my kitchen, telling me we're going to be married. How was I supposed to pull myself back together to form sentences? I turned to face him again, took the cups back to the table, and went back for the milk and sugar.

"None for me, thanks. Black is good." Tyler shifted in the chair.

I smiled and walked back over to the table and took a seat across from him. "Did you just find out about this, too? It's a bit of a shock."

"No, our fathers wanted to keep this quiet. I told them there'd be no more hiding this from you and I was coming to see you today." Tyler took a sip of his coffee and waited for my response. "What's wrong?" The confused look on my face must have been more prominent than I thought.

"How long have you known about this?" I looked into my cup of coffee, refusing to meet his gaze.

“A week and a half.”

My head shot up and my mouth fell open. I had so many words and questions, but not a sound came out. My eyes darted from my cup to Tyler as I searched my brain for the words. I felt like someone had slapped me across the face. This wasn't something that had just happened. Everyone around me knew the plan for weeks, and apparently, I wasn't good enough to be included. They had decided my life for me, and here I'd been wandering around, living what I thought was my best life, only to find out I'd been fooled. The world around me was out of control.

“Look, we've known each other for ten years now, it's not like we're complete strangers. It's not like we're going in blind.”

“Tyler, you know who I am, but you don't know me.” I pointed to myself.

He nodded his head and took another sip of his coffee.

“May I ask your expectations for this marriage?” All of the sudden, I wasn't sure I wanted to hear his answer. It frankly terrified me to actually know what he was going to say. My hands were folded in my lap. I needed to start thinking of this as what it was - a business deal. I straightened in my chair and took a deep breath, locking my stare on Tyler. I was ready to argue with anything he had to say.

Tyler peered over his mug and smiled. “I want to get to know you. Learn who you are, but ultimately, I want us to have a real marriage. You know, a true husband and wife.”

“Well, I'll tell you that's not going to happen for a very long time. And I'm not hopping into bed with someone I've only really known for a week and a half. I'm not that kind of girl.” My brow arched, waiting for his response.

“And for some reason, you think I'm that kind of guy?”

The town playboy, the eternal bachelor. He preferred busty blondes who wouldn't last on a working ranch. Yet he sat here, trying to convince me he was an angel.

I rolled my eyes before I glanced back over at him. “You kinda have a reputation. I may not know you all that well, but I've heard stories. Girl's talk.”

“My reputation isn’t something I can deny. There was a time in my life when I didn’t give much thought as to who I was seeing, or how long we were together.”

“Days, Tyler. Most of them were days.”

“You seem to have kept tabs on me, Kate.” A sly grin stretched across his face.

He made my blood boil. He had the nerve to think that I had followed his every move? “That, I assure you, is not the case. It’s a small town, Tyler, and gossip spreads faster than flies on a horse’s ass.”

“Well, I’m happy to be an open book; what would you like to know?”

I stared at him blankly, then shook my head. I dropped my face into my hands. This was not how I imagined my life would end up.

“This is too much, Tyler. I don’t know if I can do this.”

“You don’t have to, but my father will not back down. I’m willing to marry you if you want to save your ranch, but ultimately it’s your choice. Saying I’m totally thrilled about this would be a lie. I don’t enjoy having choices made for me.”

Really, I shouldn’t have been surprised by his answer. That was the story of my life. I can’t deny that it stung a little to know I wasn’t who he wanted to be stuck with. “Well, I’m glad we both can agree this isn’t the choice we would’ve made. I’m not sure I’ll ever like it, Tyler. I’ve had about all I can take today. Thanks for coming over; I’ll see you at the wedding.”

He stood, walked to the door, and quietly left.

Chapter Three

After leaving Kate’s house, I balked at the things I had said. I wondered what I would do as an encore performance. Slamming my cap back on my head, I knew I hadn’t accomplished a damned thing except making an ass out of myself and making Kate retreat into herself. I said things that sounded like my father’s words and not my own. I said things I hadn’t intended and weren’t completely true.

She had one thing right; this is a small town and word gets around. It won’t be long before everyone sticks their nose in our

business, and when they do, I don't want them finding out the truth, which is why I hoped to get her on the same page. Dammit.

I shoved my hands in my pockets, my right hand brushed up against the ring I bought for her last week. I should've told her about this sooner. Maybe I should've been the one to tell her. She had every right to be upset about this situation. I know I was, but I'd had a week and a half to cool off and think about things. I'm not sure she'd had five minutes.

Plus, Kate was right. I didn't know her that well, but I had every intention of changing that.

I climbed into my truck and headed back to the ranch.

"Call Dad," I growled to the truck's Bluetooth. The phone rang too long, which made me even more irritated. He was never out of arm's reach of his phone. Finally, the call connected.

"Tyler, what do you need?" my father's gruff voice sounded on the other side.

"Hello to you, too. I just left the Patterson place."

"Ah, and how was your stunning bride?"

"Frankly, she's pissed. I don't know how you came up with this hare-brained scheme, but she ain't pleased."

"What's wrong with her? She's marrying one of the wealthiest bachelors in the state. Does she realize that?"

"Not everything is about money, Dad." I felt my blood start to boil.

"Son, trust me, once she realizes how wealthy we are, she won't give it another thought. This is happening, so whatever you thought you would accomplish with this call, didn't work."

The line went dead, and I slammed my palm on the dashboard in front of me.

Kate was a mystery, always had been. We'd been neighbors for ten years, and I'd only seen her a handful of times at local spring cattle branding days. I had always enjoyed getting together with ranchers from the area and helping them get their calves branded and off to summer grazing. For the life of me, I couldn't remember if I had ever actually spoken to her. We worked side by side at a branding one time... but did I talk to her?

I couldn't remember, but I should have. She was different from other girls, especially the ones I dated. She was strong, confident,

could work as hard as any man... and gorgeous. With her olive skin tone, her brown hair that looked like it had been kissed by the sun, dark brown eyes that flashed almost black when she was mad... just stunning.

I couldn't wait to see what else made them darken.

I'd always wanted an unencumbered life with nobody to answer to, no one to hold me down, or hold me back; a different woman when the mood struck, so they knew nothing would last. But the last few years had not been all it was cracked up to be. I longed for someone to be there when I got home, the comfort and familiarity of the same woman in my bed. Someone who cared about me, not my last name or the fortune that goes with it.

Today I was glad I'd built my home away from the main house where people couldn't see me coming and going. I didn't have to answer to anyone, and I definitely didn't need to be quizzed about having seen Kate today. I lay down on the couch and closed my eyes, hoping the next almost a week and a half would be over soon. Then I could figure out how to start my life as a husband.

Chapter Four

I sat in my office surrounded by my grandfather's books on the shelves. Rodeo buckles scattered around the room were passed down from him, although some were my own from my team roping days in Montana. The original ranch deed hung on the wall behind me. I turned in my chair and stared at it. This is the entire reason I agreed to this. I couldn't help thinking back to the meeting I had with Ben and my father.

They both came in to my office together that day...

"TYLER, YOU KNOW BEN PATTERSON." MY FATHER INTRODUCED him as they walked in.

I stood and held my hand out to Ben. "Of course, how are you? I haven't seen you around for a while."

“Hello Tyler, I have been busy over at my place.” Both men took seats, and I returned to my chair behind the desk. “So, to what do I owe this visit?”

“Well, son, I have entered into an arrangement with Ben, and it involves you.”

My father looked from me to Ben and continued, “Ben needed a loan from us and can’t raise the funds needed to repay it. I don’t need the money back but there is something else I need, and Ben has agreed to the terms.”

He smiled, and my father rarely smiled. The smirk on his face was slimy, and I felt like I was going to get the short end of the stick over whatever was going on here.

“I’m not sure I really want to know what this is all about.” I was hoping it wouldn’t be illegal.

“Tyler, I really thought our luck would improve before this loan came due, but it’s been a bad few years.” Ben looked worn out, and he fidgeted. The crease between his eyes had deepened, and sweat broke out on his forehead.

“Son, we have arranged for you and Ben’s daughter, Kate, to be married. It was the only agreeable option we could see.” My father looked at me with a straight face, and I figured this must be a joke.

“You are kidding, right? This is absolutely insane. This is not some business move; it’s dealing with people’s lives!” I looked between the two men.

My father clenched his fists, and his face reddened. I waited for his outburst. I looked over at Ben, who had closed his eyes, dropped his head to his hand, and rubbed his forehead.

Ben shook his head no. “I’m sorry, Tyler, but it’s not. I don’t like the idea of pawning my daughter off, but I need to keep my ranch. That’s all I have left to give.”

“So tell me, when is this all supposed to take place?” I spat out at them.

“A month from yesterday. Best to get it over with in a timely manner,” Dad said with a chuckle.

“I won’t do it,” I replied as calmly as I could, while I shook my head. “There is no way I’m going to do this,” I yelled and turned away from them, letting out a breath through pursed lips.

“You don’t have a choice son; it’s done. As long as you hope to have a future on this ranch, you’ll go along with it. If not, I will make sure you never work anywhere again.”

He was eerily calm; his words were calculated and authoritative. I turned back around to face him, and he smiled smugly. It was a look I had seen many times when he knew he held all the power. My entire life would depend on a marriage I had no control over.

“Well, now that we have discussed it, I think that’s all there is to say.” The two men stood and began to leave my office.

“Just a moment. I will be meeting with Kate; I won’t be going into this blind. We will spend time together. Ben, you have a week and a half to tell her. After that, I do. Am I clear?” Ben nodded, and the two men left the room. I sat there in shock. What on earth just happened?

My father sauntered back into my office. “Well, son, your life is going to change. I think that was the best deal I have ever done.” He sat down with a vile smirk across his face, and I could hardly look at the man. The bile rose into my throat. I was disgusted with him.

“The best deal you have ever done? Arranging a marriage between two unwilling people? For what reason?” I tried to remain calm. One of the few things I had learned about my father over the years was not to fly off the handle, because he was volatile when pushed into a corner.

“Son, you are 39 years old. Your reputation in this community is embarrassing to us as a family. You can’t fool around for your entire life. I’m doing this to save your future, the future of the ranch, and if we get access through marriage to the Patterson ranch, that’s icing on the cake.”

He sat back in the chair, folded his hands behind his head and continued, “You won’t be keeping company with that tramp of a woman anymore either, so you’d better break it off. What’s her name? Lona? Did you really think I would let her in this family? That trash of a woman? Think about it Tyler, she is just looking for the next rung on her way to a bigger fortune.”

I looked at him and stammered words, but nothing made sense. I finally gave up and threw my hands in the air.

“The Patterson’s are good people. Ben is respected, and Julie is a lovely woman. Kate is a smart businesswoman, a hard worker, and her father should have listened to her. But this worked out well for me,” he said as he nodded, looking very pleased with himself.

“What if Kate won’t agree to this?” I asked, hoping she wouldn’t have any part of it.

“Well, that’s up to Ben to deal with. It’s not my problem.” Shaking his head and holding up his hands, my father stood and began to leave.

“You expect me to take this news and not question it? Dad, come on. This makes no sense.”

“Son, it’s done. Get used to it or get out. If you choose out, you will never come back, ever.” I knew there was no more room for discussion, and with that, he left.

THE PHONE RANG AND SHOOK ME BACK TO REALITY. AS I looked at the number, saw who it was, and I accepted the call.

“Hello.”

“Hey Tyler, it’s Kate. I’m sorry for acting all pissy this afternoon. This is all a shock for me. Anyway, I have been doing some looking into what we need for our marriage, and we have to get a marriage license, but we have to be there together. I was wondering about going to Hammond to get it, that way we don’t have to explain anything to anyone here.”

“Sure, that would work. How about tomorrow? Let’s say 10:30? I will pick you up. That gives me time to check a few things at the office and allows you time for morning chores.” I suggested that way we would have to talk and we would need to have lunch somewhere.

“Ok, see you tomorrow.”

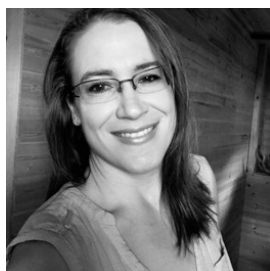
That was it. The line went dead. Our conversation was over. It was going to be harder to win Kate over than I thought.

Can Kate and Tyler fall in love, save their ranches, and each other in the process?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Bonnie lives in South Central Saskatchewan in the heart of the Canadian prairies. She's married to Terence, who farms, ranches and is a hunting outfitter and guide in the northern part of the province. Terence and Bonnie have two children. Emerson is five and loves helping with the farm and cattle. Cassidy, who is two, is mom's shadow, talking a mile a minute and loves helping in the garden.

Bonnie has been a Licensed Practical Nurse for the last nineteen years. She's worked in a busy city hospital, managed a long term care facility and is now working casually as a floor nurse to spend time at home raising the kids and helping on the farm.

When she's not writing, helping Terence and keeping the kids busy she enjoys vegetable gardening, tending to her flowers, reading and photography.

