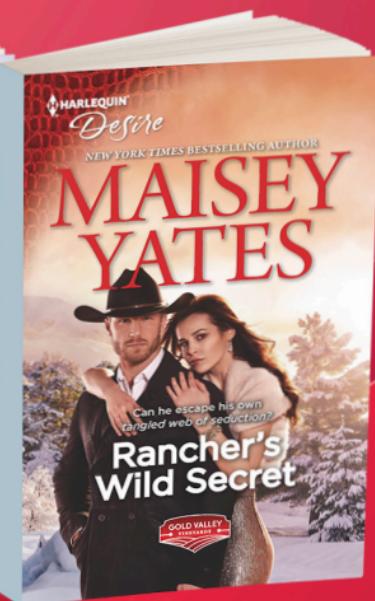
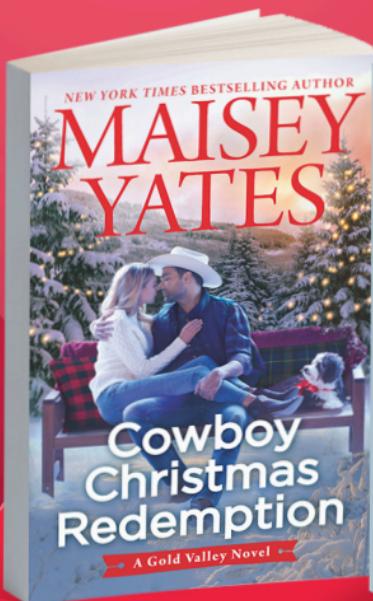




*'tis the season
to read Maisey Yates*



A SAMPLER

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MAISEY YATES

Cowboy Christmas Redemption

A Gold Valley Novel

Praise for *New York Times* bestselling author Maisey Yates

“Fast-paced and intensely emotional... [One] of the most heartfelt installments in this series, and Yates’s fans will love it.”

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(starred review)

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(starred review)

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—*Publishers Weekly*
on *A Tall, Dark Cowboy Christmas*

“The banter between the Dodge siblings is loads of fun, and adding Dallas (Bennett’s surprise son) to the mix raises that humor up a notch or two.”

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Cowboy
Christmas
Redemption



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Cowboy Christmas Redemption

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For anyone who needs some extra hope this season.
Romans 15:13

Cowboy
Christmas
Redemption

CHAPTER ONE

ELLIE BELL COULD sometimes imagine that she lived an entirely different life. Not because she didn't love so much about what she had, but because it was nice, even for a little while, to set down the various burdens that she carried around with her and just focus on the moment.

Getting chickens had been an interesting endeavor, one that had proved to be quite a bit more sanity-preserving than she had anticipated.

Sometimes when she was out collecting eggs, she felt like she'd fallen through a time warp. Where she was younger than twenty-eight. Not a woman with a heavy burden of responsibility, or the crushing weight of loss deep inside her.

But somebody liked. Somebody carefree. Whose only responsibility was to collect eggs and look out at the beautiful view that stretched out before her.

Her little farmhouse was modest, and it was old, with a porch that had white peeling paint that she hadn't been able to rally herself to fix. But she'd hung baskets of flowers from the rafters, and she supposed that was something.

At least it was something she was much more up for than painting.

Maybe someday she would get it together and do all the renovation that the place needed.

She took a deep breath, and she focused her gaze on the horizon. On the long stretch of emerald field that faded into the evergreen-covered mountains, currently bathed in a rose-gold glow from the setting sun. The days were getting shorter, heading into the Christmas season, and honestly, that was something else that just made her tired.

She had to do things.

For Amelia's sake.

Well, handily, Tammy Dalton was always around to do something. The Daltons had been her late husband's surrogate family, and after Clint's death, had become hers and Amelia's, as well.

Tammy always made a wonderful Christmas dinner, and the gathering that they had was spectacular. And it gave Ellie an excuse not to make a big fuss about Christmas at her house, which always felt vaguely sad to her.

She didn't want to drag out the ornaments that she had gotten with Clint. And she didn't want to get rid of them and get new ones, either. They'd had cozy Christmases in their apartment back by the high school in town. Their own ornaments. First Christmas, with a bride and groom. The Bells, on a big silver bell...

She'd loved him so much. Right from the beginning. He was just a nice man. In spite of the fact he'd had a rough upbringing. He'd been open, and he'd laughed easily. He'd taught *her* to laugh a little easier.

He'd taught her to love in a way that was so different from the way she'd known love as a child.

She'd spent her growing-up years craving her mom's attention, while her mom craved only the attention of whatever man had her heart at the time.

She'd hated it. And she'd sworn off love herself. But then she'd met Clint.

He'd been tall, with dark hair and a slight build. Rangy and athletic. He was the kind of guy who had to climb up the side of a rock face on a hike if there was one; the kind who had to jump over obstacles just as easily stepped over.

He'd been the one thing to distract her even slightly from her laser-focused vision. She'd wanted to go to college, be a teacher. Because it was teachers who'd given her the support, the help, that her own mother didn't.

She'd made Clint wait to get married until she was finished with school. She'd been strong that way. She'd been determined to forgo boyfriends, especially while she was studying. But she hadn't been able to stay away from him. He was so magnetic and happy, and she'd wanted that.

As soon as she'd graduated, they'd gotten married.

They'd lived in little apartments near the high school, and Ellie had gotten jobs substitute-teaching in the area, and then spent a year as a teacher's assistant at the school right near their house.

They'd been young when Clint wanted to try for a baby, but he'd been so excited about it. So they'd started trying, and not just for a baby but also to find a house.

They'd found the farmhouse. She'd found out she was pregnant.

He'd been the proudest, happiest man alive that day. And four weeks later he'd died.

Before they'd moved into their home. Before he'd ever even gotten to hear his child's heartbeat.

She'd never had a Christmas in the farmhouse. Her and Amelia's Christmas traditions were built around the Dalton family, and that was okay with Ellie.

Her egg-collecting was feeling terribly sad at the moment. But she blamed the upcoming Christmas season for that.

It was inescapably bittersweet.

Always, she thought about that first Christmas without him. When she had been eight months pregnant and so miserable. So alone.

Alone, except for Caleb Dalton.

The entire Dalton family had been good to her in the years following the loss of Clint, but no one had been quite as good as Caleb.

Caleb had been Clint's best friend in the world. A man who was like a brother to him, so he'd said often. He'd talked about Caleb all the time, from the beginning of their relationship. She could still remember going to her first Dalton family barbecue with Clint. He'd been nervous, because it had been like meeting his parents, he'd said.

All three Dalton brothers had presence. A perfect combination of their father Hank's charm and charisma, and their mother Tammy's beauty and quick wit.

Caleb had been unlike any man she'd ever met. A daredevil with an easy smile, and he was so big. Larger than life, both in height and in presence.

He could fix anything. If her car needed a tune-up or an oil change, Caleb could just do it. Why call the landlord when their apartment had an issue? Caleb could always handle it. She'd been in awe of that. The way his hands worked to puzzle together anything that might have been broken.

She could see why Clint loved the family the way he did, and Caleb in particular. She'd bonded with him easily, quickly.

And now...

Caleb had become her best friend in the entire world. She'd always liked him. But he became something more during these long, lonely years.

He'd become her rock. Her salvation.

He was always on hand in an emergency. If she needed cold medicine in the middle of the night for Amelia, yet didn't want to drag her little girl to the store, she could call Caleb. And he would go get the cold medicine. He would bring it to her. If she wasn't well, he would be the first person to come by with soup, and to make sure that Amelia was taken care of while she convalesced.

He had built her chicken coop. Had been the one to help her figure out what you were supposed to do with chickens in the first place.

And when she had partnered with his brother Gabe to help start the school that she now taught at on the Dalton family ranch, Caleb had immediately partnered with her, too.

He had helped make her dream a reality, the moment that she was able to have dreams again.

She felt much happier, thinking about Caleb.

He was definitely a lot more of a safe space than Christmas could ever be.

As if thinking of him conjured him up, she heard the sound of truck tires on gravel, mixed with the sound of an old engine from a Ford F-150.

It was Caleb, coming home with Amelia. Amelia had spent the day with Tammy. The school that Ellie had been part of founding, and that she worked at full-time, specifically geared toward troubled boys, was on the Dalton family ranch, and Hank and Tammy Dalton lived there in a large house. Tammy had graciously of-

ferred to watch Amelia after preschool on the days when Ellie worked.

It just so happened that today, by the time Ellie had finished up, Amelia and Tammy were in the middle of a baking project.

Usually, Ellie would have hung out, but today she had been eager for escape. For a moment in silence. Out of time.

And she wasn't even sorry it was over. Because Caleb was here. And so was Amelia. No matter how difficult or chaotic life could seem, she loved the people in it.

She stepped out of the coop, her basket clutched in her hands, and she made her way across the field, toward her driveway. Her floral dress caught the breeze and fluttered around her legs, strands of blond hair whipping across her face. She pushed them away and smiled as Caleb got out of the truck.

"Was she good for you?" Ellie asked.

"We've been singing the theme song to a show I've never heard of for twenty minutes," he said, opening up the driver-side door wider so he could put the front seat down.

And there was Amelia, strapped into her car seat and looking extremely pleased with herself. "It was *Shimmer and Shine*, Caleb," she informed him.

"*Shimmer and Shine*," Caleb amended, directing that toward Ellie. "I think I like *Peppa Pig* better."

"You and me both," Ellie said.

She took a step toward the truck and Caleb grinned. "I've got her."

He pushed his black cowboy hat back on his head, his blue eyes catching the light. He had a dusting of light stubble on his jaw, not unusual for him at this hour of the

day, and his muscular arms were still streaked with dirt, she noticed, as he began to unfasten Amelia's seat belt.

He had battered workman's hands. He worked the ranch that his family owned, and he was a firefighter by trade. He'd ridden rodeo for a while before that, though not for very long. But still, everything he did had a certain amount of labor involved, and no small amount of danger.

She'd always liked curling up on the couch with a book, safe indoors, over doing anything outside. She knew that for his own reasons, that would be torture for Caleb. He was a man who needed movement, who needed open spaces. A man who preferred hands-on learning over book learning.

It unnerved her that he continued to fight wildfires, even after what had happened to Clint. But she knew that it was unreasonable to ask him to quit his job.

Didn't mean she didn't want him to.

He set Amelia down gently on the ground, and her little girl launched herself at Ellie. She swung her up for a hug before depositing her back in the driveway. "Did you have a fun day with Grandma Tammy?" she asked.

Tammy Dalton was the closest thing Amelia had to a grandmother.

Both Clint and Ellie hadn't had involved families at all. In fact, it was one of the things that had bonded them together when they'd met.

Ellie had been cautious. She'd never dated. Not after watching the way her own single mother had burned through men, the quality of which had been incredibly variable.

Of course, she had ended up a single mother anyway.

Which seemed fully unfair, given how very much she had tried not to perpetuate the cycle she'd been

born into. She'd gotten into school. She'd finished. She'd started a teaching career. Gotten married.

But she'd been widowed.

If there was one thing she'd learned, it was that you couldn't plan everything, no matter how much you might want to.

"It was good," Amelia said. "We made chocolate chip cookies and peanut butter cookies."

"And where are the cookies?" Ellie asked.

"We ate them all," Caleb said.

"Did you really?"

She hunted around behind him, trying to see if she could find a plate of cookies in the truck.

"Of course not," he said. "I have some for you."

"Can I take the eggs in the house?" Amelia asked.

"Sure," Ellie said, handing her daughter the basket.

She raced up the stairs as quickly as her little legs could carry her, her pink cowgirl boots glittering with each movement. A gift from the Daltons. So of course, they were Amelia's favorite.

"Thank you," Ellie said. "It was nice to have a few minutes to myself this evening."

"No problem. You're on my way home."

"I am. It's handy."

It really was. More than handy. A lifeline. The man was like one of the mountains that surrounded her home. Stalwart and steady, never changing, even as the seasons around them did.

Evergreen.

He reached into the truck and pulled out a plate of cookies, handing it to her. She didn't wait. She dived in, taking a peanut butter one from the top and helping herself to a large bite. "Your mom is a genius," she

said. "I try, based on everything she's taught me, but they still never turn out this good."

"I don't even try," he said, shrugging. "I just eat them."

As if to demonstrate his point, he grabbed one of the chocolate chip ones from the top and put the whole thing in his mouth.

"That's mean," she said. "You could have taken some more from your mother's house."

"I did," he said.

"Then you have no call taking my cookies."

"It's a delivery fee."

"For my child or for the snacks?"

"Thanks for reminding me," he said, this time taking a peanut butter one.

She expected him to go then, because it had been a long day, and it wasn't like she hadn't seen him at work earlier. But he didn't. Instead, he stood for a moment, his expression uncharacteristically thoughtful. "I might not be able to drop Amelia off at home as often in the future."

"Oh?"

It was abrupt and weird. Especially considering she'd just been thinking about what a stalwart Caleb was.

"Yeah," he said. He braced himself on the truck, and her eyes were drawn to his biceps, to the way the muscle shifted beneath his tanned, scarred skin.

She wondered what the scar on the inside of his arm was from. Barbed wire? An angry bull? Maybe just from a youthful misdeed. It was very hard to say with a man like Caleb.

It really was a wonderful arm. It had to be said. Objectively speaking, Caleb was a perfect masculine specimen.

He wasn't pretty. No, he was too raw to be anything like pretty. Even with those blue eyes, which were the kind of blue that women had difficulty letting pass by without remarking on. But he was scarred, and he was weathered from working outdoors, and, as she had previously been thinking, his hands were rough.

Though, they could be gentle when they needed to be.

If she had a single friend, she would definitely set her up with Caleb.

"I... Why?"

"I'm buying a new piece of property."

"Really?" Caleb hadn't given any indication that he was thinking of moving away from the acre lot that he lived on.

"Yeah," he responded, maddeningly opaque.

"Details, Caleb." Having a man for a best friend could be annoying, because they didn't tell you things, like the fact that they were considering moving. And then, when they finally did tell you, they didn't tell you anything about it.

"I bought Jehoshaphat Brown's place."

"You didn't," she said.

Jehoshaphat Brown was an eccentric who lived a few miles up out of town, and had the largest Christmas tree farm in the area. "I did," he said. "I mostly don't believe it because I don't believe he would move. But he is. He's moving to Hawaii."

"Now, I really don't believe that," she said.

"Hey," he responded, "believe whatever you want, but he is. He's moving to Hawaii, taking a job as a bartender at a resort. Oceanside. He bought a condo with the money I paid him."

"But you are... You're going to run a Christmas tree farm?"

"At least temporarily. Everything's ready to go now, which means finishing out the year, or the next few years, is guaranteed money in the bank to begin other ventures. There's contracts already made with outfits around the country, truckers on hand to drive the things to their destinations. And he owns that small lot down on the main street of town. So, I'm all set not only to sell this year's crop around the country, but also sell it here."

"But you don't... You don't actually want to...be a Christmas tree farmer?"

"My ultimate goal is cattle," he said.

She'd had no idea. None at all. Not that he wanted his own ranch, not that he'd been unhappy at the school. Was he unhappy at the school? Was he leaving?

"What does this mean for your position at the school?"

"I will be leaving. Which I will be talking to Gabe about later tonight."

"But..."

"With West Caldwell coming into town, there's no need for me to hang around. He's going to be working on the ranch."

"Your half brother that you've never met. That's putting a lot of stock in a man you don't even know."

"Gabe figures we owe him. And, since Gabe is awash in guilt over the whole half-sibling thing, I figure that works in my favor."

As much as Ellie loved Hank Dalton, the patriarch of the Dalton clan, it was becoming more and more clear that he was problematic. A couple of years ago it had been discovered that he had a daughter that none of them had known about. McKenna Tate. She'd come

into town after discovering the identity of her family, and after some adjusting, the Dalton family had welcomed her into the fold. But on the heels of that revelation had come another one.

There were three more children. All adults now. Hank had never known about them. But Tammy had. It had changed the relationship, that reveal.

But Hank was awash enough in the guilt from the actions in his past, that the two of them were trying to work through it, to an extent. And Ellie really hoped that they did. For some selfish reasons, if she was honest. Because she loved them, and they were the closest thing to a family for her, and she didn't want to lose them.

"But... Don't you want to wait and see if it's going to work out?"

"No," Caleb said. "I don't want to work at the school forever. This is what I want."

That made her...angry, and she couldn't figure out exactly why. He deserved to have dreams; of course he did. But she'd just...assumed he was happy with the way things were. She'd somehow meshed his dreams together with hers.

Had decided that what she was doing with his family ranch, with the school, was what he wanted, too.

But if she didn't feel great about him fighting fires anymore, maybe he didn't, either. And she'd never asked. She'd only thought about it in terms of her own comfort. That wasn't right at all.

Still, the idea of him having his own endeavors, his own life farther away from her and not right all around her while they worked...

She needed him. She really had. She still did. She didn't like this...this change. But she should be

happy for him, and it made her feel... She felt bad. And she didn't like feeling bad about something that was good for her friend.

"I'd... Well, congratulations," she said. Even though she didn't feel like congratulating him at all. She felt like having a tantrum.

She really didn't know why.

"Thank you," he said, his mouth quirking up into a half smile that made it very clear he was well aware she wasn't having the best reaction to his news.

"I'll miss seeing you." The words more plaintive than she'd intended.

"I'm not moving away," he said.

"Yeah, but I see you *all the time*," she protested.

"You will still see me *all the time*."

"But you won't be dropping Amelia off when I want you to."

"Probably not."

Her stomach twisted, but that wasn't what was upsetting her. She knew it wasn't.

And then it hit her, as strongly as that melancholy had when she'd realized it was nearly the Christmas season.

This phase of life was over.

The one where he was here to carry her. Where she had a crutch to get her through what life looked like without Clint. Being a single mother.

It was changing.

It had begun to change months ago, when the idea for the school had come about. She had gone back to work.

But she'd been a fledgling, and he'd been there to help her.

In the years since Amelia was born, she had lived off the insurance settlement she'd gotten after Clint's death.

And settlement money from the helicopter company, which had been found negligent. It was overloaded, and they knew it, knew that it didn't have the capacity to carry the number of people that had been on it.

Every man who'd been on the helicopter had died.

Money didn't bring back people you lost.

It in fact seemed like a laughable pursuit when you were grieving a husband. But once she'd had it she'd realized why it mattered. Because she hadn't been able to do anything beyond the bare minimum to keep herself alive. And she was having a baby.

It was how she'd bought this house.

And all the furniture in it. Everything that had made the place a home that she and Amelia could inhabit. And even when it had been difficult to care about such a thing, part of her had known that she had to.

And it had been Caleb, of course, who had assembled it all. Who had helped with everything.

And now she was being a jerk about something that he'd achieved. After all he'd done for her.

Well, the little scolding session she gave herself was nice, but she still felt unhappy. But that didn't mean she had to act unhappy. She had ample experience with pretending to be more okay than she was. She should be able to do it now.

"I'm happy for you," she said. "Really. I'm sorry. We can go get furniture that's difficult to assemble, and I'll help you put it together."

"Meaning?"

"I'll...offer you a drink while you put it together?"

"Right." He nodded. "Sounds about right. Hey, don't worry about it, Ellie. Things are going to be fine."

There was so much she wanted to say to him, but

she didn't know how to articulate it. Mostly because she couldn't quite explain the discomfort happening in her own chest. So instead, she just watched him get into his truck, and didn't even scold him when he stole another cookie.

She tried to figure out exactly what the feeling was as she watched his truck disappear down her driveway. Then she turned and walked to her porch, sitting down on the bottom step.

"What is wrong with me?"

And suddenly, it hit her.

He was moving on, and she hadn't.

It was different, because of course, he had been Clint's best friend. She'd been Clint's wife. So Caleb moving on from the whole situation was easier. More expected.

But she wished... Well, she wished for a whole lot of things.

Things that were coming up more and more often. Her best female friend at the moment was Vanessa Logan. Vanessa was pregnant, getting ready to have a baby with her husband, Jacob, a man who loved her so much that just looking at the two of them together made Ellie's whole body hurt.

She didn't want that. She didn't want to fall in love. She didn't want a relationship. But she wanted...

It would be nice to be kissed under the mistletoe, maybe. To have something to wear a dress to. To go dancing in that dress.

And suddenly, those thoughts she had in the chicken coop, about those moments that felt out of her life, that felt like an escape, crystallized.

That was what she wanted. Just some moments. To

feel like something other than a tired single mother, or a sad, grieving widow.

A moment to feel like a woman.

Maybe she needed to make some changes, too.

Maybe, instead of dreading Christmas, she needed to get started on her wish list.

CHAPTER TWO

CALEB DALTON HADN'T had much to smile about for a long time. It had been a bear of a few years, since his best friend's death, and while time might ease a wound, it wouldn't ever bring Clint back.

But that permanence made space for movement, around the grief, around the pain. And finally toward a future he'd been planning for a long time.

Clint had been, honest to God, one of the best men on earth. The hole he'd left behind had been huge, and Caleb had dedicated himself to caring for his friend's widow and child in his absence.

That had been his life, his whole life, for nearly five years. And it was fair, because it had been Ellie's life, too.

He cared for Ellie. A hell of a lot. He'd met her because of Clint, but she'd been in his life now for more than ten years.

His feelings for Ellie were complicated. Had been from the beginning. But she'd been with Clint. And there was no doubt Clint was the better man. More than that, Clint was his brother. Maybe not in blood, but in every way that counted.

Caleb had never claimed to be a perfect friend. Clint was one of those people who'd drawn everyone right to him. He was easy to like. Caleb's own parents had been bowled over by Clint from the time they were kids.

And Caleb's jealousy had gotten the better of him once when they'd been younger. Something that made him burn with shame even now.

He hadn't let it happen when they'd been adults. No matter how tempting it had been. No matter how much he'd...

A muscle in his jaw ticked.

He gave thanks that there was a space in front of the Gold Valley Saloon, and he whipped his truck there up against the curb, ignoring the honk that came from behind him.

He turned around and saw Trevor Sanderson in his Chevy, giving Caleb the death glare.

"Hold your damn horses, Trevor," he muttered as he put his truck in Park.

He should have been quicker.

Hell, that was life in a nutshell. Sometimes, you were just too late. For parking spots, and for women.

He'd tried to get that image out of his head. More times than he could count over the past decade. Had tried to erase that first time he'd seen Ellie.

It was at his parents' barbecue. Late one summer afternoon.

He'd been talking and laughing with his brothers, and he'd lifted a beer to his lips and looked out away from the party. Then he'd frozen.

It was like the world had slowed down, all of it centering on the beautiful blonde walking toward him. The golden light from the sun illuminated her hair like a halo, and her smile seemed to light him up from the inside out.

As she'd gotten closer, he'd taken in every last detail. The way the left side of her cheek dimpled with that grin; her eyes, a mix of green and blue and a punch

in the gut. Her lips were glossy pink, and he wondered if it was that stuff that women wore that smelled and tasted like cherries. He couldn't decide if he hoped that it was or not.

Twenty years old, more experienced with women than he probably should be, and ready right then and there to drop down to his knees and propose marriage to the one walking in his direction.

It took him a full minute to realize that the beautiful blonde was holding hands with someone.

And that that someone was Caleb's best friend on earth.

It was a surreal moment. It had been a sea change in his soul. When his feelings for Ellie had tipped over from nothing to everything.

A revelation he hadn't been looking for, and one he sure as hell hadn't enjoyed.

It was like the whole world had turned, then bucked, like a particularly nasty-ass bull, and left him sprawled out on the ground.

It had been the beginning of a thorny, painful set of years. As he'd gotten to know Ellie, as his feelings for her had become knit deep into his heart, into his soul. She'd become more than his friend's woman, and more than a woman he'd desired. She'd become a friend to him.

In many ways he was thankful for the depth of the feeling, because it was the reason he'd been able to put aside the lust. The idea that he'd fallen in love with her at first sight.

When Clint had first started dating her, she'd been in school, so she hadn't been around all the time. But during the summers, and on breaks, she came around with Clint.

Went to the lake with them. Went fishing. Came to Christmas and Thanksgiving.

The summers at the lake, though, that had been a particular kind of torture. All of them swimming out in the water, her and her swimsuit. A tiny bikini that had left little to the imagination.

And he had been so very interested in imagining all the things that it did conceal.

And he'd felt like the biggest, most perverse asshole.

Then there had been the time that Clint had asked him to take her out riding.

Just the two of them.

Because Clint trusted him. Of course he did. Why wouldn't he trust his best friend? So he'd done it.

Had taken her out on the trails that wound behind the Dalton family property, up to the top of a mountain. And he looked over at the view with her, watched the sunset. And everything in him had wanted to lean over and kiss her on the mouth. To act on the feelings that were rioting through his chest.

For just a breath she'd looked back at him, met his eyes. And he'd thought maybe she'd wanted it, too.

Yeah, it would have exploded his relationship with Clint, but for a minute it seemed like it might be worth it.

Then she'd looked away. And then he'd come back to himself.

Clint was his brother. In every way but blood.

And he couldn't betray his friend like that.

Anyway, Ellie loved Clint.

She didn't love Caleb.

And no matter how much he might not want to, he had to respect that.

So he hadn't kissed her. They had ridden back down

that mountain, and nothing happened between them. But late at night, Caleb had taken himself in hand and fantasized that it had.

Two days later Clint and Ellie had been engaged.

Caleb had agreed to be the best man.

She'd married Clint. And while his feelings for her had remained, they'd shifted. As they'd had to.

He wasn't perfect. He'd never touched Ellie. Not like a man touched a woman, though that hadn't stopped him from going over the accidental brush of fingertips, of their elbows touching, over and over in his mind if it had happened on accident.

It hadn't stopped him from keeping and cherishing secrets with her, even when he knew he shouldn't. Hadn't stopped him from pushing some boundaries that not even Ellie had realized he'd been pushing at.

Ellie was the one who'd realized, for the first time, that he was dyslexic. And he'd sworn her to secrecy. And in that secrecy had come secret reading lessons.

And he'd...well, he'd lost control of his own feelings again. And once he'd recognized that, he'd cut them off. Cut her off.

But then Clint had died, just a month later. And everything changed again.

Since then, his relationship with Ellie was about their coming together to try to fill the gap Clint had left behind. His helping where she needed it.

Helping with the house, with her grief, with Amelia. That was all.

He got out of his truck on a groan and pushed the door open to the Gold Valley Saloon. It wasn't too busy, being early on a weeknight, but the locals were definitely out, drinking and playing darts. Sitting around

eating fried food and complaining about their bosses and day jobs—which around here often meant livestock.

A rancher was beholden to his animals, and Caleb did know that.

He wasn't under any illusion that a life raising cattle would be an easy one. But it was the one he wanted.

His dad had wanted better for his sons. He'd said that, in his own words.

Hank Dalton had been poor trash from the trailer park made good. He'd earned himself a whole lot of money on endorsement deals and championship purses in the rodeo, and he'd expected that it would make his sons want to be scholars. Just because they had the opportunity to go to college.

Sadly for Hank, none of them had a very deep abiding interest in higher education.

After Gabe had gone to the rodeo, followed by Caleb and Jacob, he'd seemed to accept that more or less.

But Caleb knew that Hank had been hard on his oldest son.

Sometimes, Caleb wondered if it was because he had the foresight to not want them to be like him.

He hadn't seemed to possess that level of concern with Caleb.

He'd wanted Gabe to go to college. He'd wanted it for Jacob, too.

He hadn't even thought for a moment that Caleb would go.

But then...he'd been right. Caleb would have rather had metal rods shoved under his fingernails than continue on in school a minute longer than he had to.

Though whatever Hank did, it might have had a lot more to do with being worried his boys would follow in his footsteps. His bad behavior had caused a lot of tur-

moil during their growing-up years, but it was recently that the full extent of the consequences became clear.

First with the appearance of McKenna, and then with the revelation that followed about West Caldwell, and about the other as yet to be named half siblings.

All Hank's infidelity, wandering out there in the world. Mistakes that were more than thirty years old.

Caleb frowned. He supposed that wasn't fair. To think about other people as mistakes.

For his part, he hadn't thought much at all about his half siblings. Gabe seemed to feel driven to make it right, and given the fact that his brother was the only person who knew that those half siblings existed back years ago, he could understand why Gabe felt some guilt about it.

Caleb had too much guilt and responsibility as it was, and he couldn't take any more on.

He saw his brother sitting at a table over in the corner and he made his way over there, crossing the scarred wooden floor and scanning the room as he did.

There were two women who made eye contact with him. Offered him a smile.

And he waited.

For something.

For a lick of interest.

Something to make him feel hot. To make him feel that tug low inside of him. That anticipation of a potential hookup. A conversation that might lead to flirtation, which might lead to dancing and kissing and a whole lot more.

That was part of the problem with taking care of Ellie like he had for the past few years. He hadn't been interested in other women.

At first he'd put it down to grief. He didn't like the taste of food. Why would he want sex?

But as the sharpness of the loss faded, he'd started to realize it had to do with the proximity to Ellie.

And that was one of the things that had spurred the purchase of the ranch.

He needed something else. He needed his own life.

The fact that he hadn't had sex in four years—nearly five—was getting a little bit ridiculous.

And the fact that he'd finally realized that made him a little bit less of a sad sack. Maybe.

"Hey," Gabe said, nodding and pushing a beer bottle to the center of the table.

Caleb sat down and pulled the bottle toward him.

"Thanks."

"No problem. I see you got Amelia home safely."

"No," he said. "I left her in the truck. Told her to play with my air freshener."

"Well, I know you're lying, because your truck doesn't have an air freshener."

"Why would I cover up the glorious scent of work boots and sweat?"

"Why indeed," Gabe said, taking a sip of beer. "So, what's on your mind?"

"How do you know something is on my mind?"

"Because sometimes we happen to get a beer after work. But you rarely make an appointment with me to grab a beer."

"Yeah, there's something I wanted to talk to you about," Caleb said.

"Fire away."

"I'm leaving the school." He cleared his throat. "I'm leaving the ranch."

"Oh," Gabe said.

“What? You sound...”

“I don’t know,” Gabe said. “I just thought it was kind of a family thing. Especially with West coming...”

“West isn’t family. I mean, he is. Genetically. But he hasn’t earned a place with us as family.”

“That’s not how that works,” Gabe said.

“Yeah, it is. We had Clint. Clint was like family. Because we knew him. Genetics is about the thinnest link I can think of in family. And it’s definitely not necessary.”

“I’m not...trying to replace Clint with West. It has nothing to do with Clint.”

“I didn’t say you were,” he said.

“I guess not. But it sounds to me like you’re worried about it.”

“It’s just that from my perspective, having West on the ranch will give you the help that you need. It doesn’t make it...some family thing we all need to be involved in.”

“Are you...avoiding involvement with West?”

“Nope,” Caleb said honestly. “I don’t really have any feelings one way or the other about the half-sibling stuff.”

“Why not?”

“Because. Because we have a full life. I have a full life. They’re adults. It’s not like they’re children that need to be taken care of.”

“Are you upset about the idea of them getting a piece of the inheritance when Dad dies?”

Caleb drew back. “No. I don’t care about money. I have my own. I might not be rich like Dad, but I had enough to go out and buy my own ranch. That’s what I want. I want to make my own way. I don’t need to take any of Hank Dalton’s fortune.”

“I’m sorry,” Gabe said. “I guess I’m just having a

hard time figuring out why you and Jacob are so disconnected from all of this. I can't be. You love McKenna..."

"I know," Caleb said. "And it isn't that I'm not going to make an effort to get to know West. It's just... I've got a new ranch that I want to run, and you know, Ellie will probably still need my help..."

"Is this about Ellie?"

"Why would it be about Ellie?" he asked.

A little disingenuous because he'd just been thinking about the link between her and his celibacy. But it was complicated.

It always had been.

"This is about *me*," Caleb said. "You went out and did the rodeo, and now this...this school, this is what you want. Jacob is happy there, too, because he's with Vanessa. You guys went out, you made your own thing. Why wouldn't you think that I'd want that?"

He did want it. More than that, he needed it. Needed to prove to his dad that he could make something of himself.

Needed to prove that he tried, and that his best was good enough. Damn good enough.

"I guess because Jacob's plans ended up aligning closer with mine."

"Yeah, I know that seems surprising."

Jacob and Caleb had been the hellions. Irish twins and always in scrapes together.

They had gone into the rodeo at the same time, and gotten out at roughly the same time, too. They had decided to get into fighting wildfires along with Clint, because the money was good, and it had seemed like an adrenaline high. Which was something the three of them were all very into.

Of the three of them, it had always been very hard to

say which one was the instigator. They had been equal partners in crime, for all of their lives. And losing Clint had been a blow. One that had changed things. Even between him and Jacob. It changed the dynamic. Because they had been the Three Musketeers, and they had become two, and right between them had been a deep, intense sense of mortality that hadn't existed there before.

Jacob had closed himself off, guilt nearly destroying him, until he'd met his wife, Vanessa. And as for Caleb...

His purpose had become Clint's memory. Had become his legacy. Caring for Amelia. Caring for Ellie.

But Ellie was getting back on her feet. Ellie was teaching at the school again, back in the saddle of her dream. Building a life that didn't revolve around what she'd lost. He would always be tied up in that loss. It was inescapable. Utterly and totally.

That was just one of many reasons it was best to take a step back. Perhaps take a step into something else. A different kind of life.

"Not about you, Gabe. I know that might be difficult to understand."

"It's not difficult for me to understand."

"Sure it is. You're the oldest. And a lot of things happened to be about you. And us following you. But we're grown-ass men now."

"Christmas tree farming," he said.

"*Cattle ranching*. But I would be a fool not to make the most of the revenue that's on my land."

My land.

That made him feel something good. Because he was going to have something. Something that was his. He wasn't going to work on his father's ranch. He wasn't going to follow in his brother's footsteps in the rodeo.

He wasn't the disappointment. The son who'd barely graduated high school.

The least of the three. Soon to be the least of more when they found the others, because he was sure he'd find a way to pale in comparison in Hank Dalton's eyes, even put up against the kids he'd just met.

But now Caleb had something that was *his*. And it might be a Christmas tree farm.

But from where he was sitting, the idea of being out there, in one of those large flat fields, surrounded by evergreen trees...

Silence.

Yeah, it didn't sound so bad.

"I want you to have the boys work at the Christmas tree lot," Gabe said finally.

"What?"

Gabe rolled his eyes as if Caleb had been demanding he rephrase. "Can the boys work at the Christmas tree lot this season? It would give them something else to do."

"Yeah, I guess it would."

As much as this whole school thing wasn't his ideal—hell, that was an understatement; anything to do with school was his nightmare—he did have a soft spot for the boys. Maybe because in some of them he could see himself. Kids who were struggling to do what was so easy for seemingly everyone around them.

And if he could help them out, give them something to do outdoors, show them there were plenty of vocations and passions out there for people who found sitting and reading to be exercises in torture...

Well, that was fine by him.

“Sure,” Caleb said. “How much do you suggest I pay the little devils?”

“Fair wages,” he said. “It’s been good. Physical labor. You know it’s helped.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I know.” He sighed heavily. “I may have other work, too. If you have a kid that is keeping up with his schoolwork, and who might benefit from a little bit more time outdoors.”

“I think Aiden might be a candidate,” Gabe said.

A kid who had come at the beginning of the school year, along with the rest. He was a tough nut to crack, and last month when Vanessa and Jacob had been going through some things, the stress of the tension sent Aiden over the edge. He’d ended up running away from the school.

Jacob had rescued him, because somehow he’d fallen off the trail and ended up halfway down a cliff.

He was an angry kid, and he’d been through the kinds of things that could destroy people who weren’t half as strong. He was a brat.

And they all loved him.

“Yeah,” Caleb said. “That would be good.”

“Well, why don’t I make up a schedule and send it to you? We can debate the logistics of Christmas tree farming. Maybe I can enlist Calvin to paint some signs for your lot. With Vanessa’s oversight, of course.”

Calvin was another kid at the school. One who had discovered he had a little bit of an affinity for paint.

Caleb sighed. “Yeah, yeah. I’m still part of your bleeding-heart project.”

“Good.” Gabe shook his head. “We are family. You can’t get rid of us that easily.”

“I wasn’t trying to get rid of you.”

It had less to do with his brother than he'd ever understand. It was about him, carving out a path for himself, a life that he'd built. Where he would have something to be proud of. Something to shove in Hank Dalton's face.

It was easy for Gabe. He'd become a champion in the rodeo. He'd not only denied their father's desire that they "do better for themselves" by going to college instead of working with the land, but he'd excelled, too.

Jacob had never cared what anyone thought. He'd brushed off their father's expectations with a cocky grin and extended middle finger.

But then their father had offered to pay for college for Jacob. It had been his choice to refuse it.

Hank hadn't offered it to Caleb.

But Clint, who had been an effortless straight-A student, had gotten an offer from Hank. And Clint had deserved it.

There was no call for Caleb to be angry that he hadn't been offered something he didn't want. But he would show Hank now.

"Let me buy another round," Gabe said.

"What?"

"To celebrate. Your Christmas tree farm."

He grimaced. "Don't say it like that."

"There's no other way to say *Christmas tree farm*."

As his brother got up to get that next beer, Caleb leaned back in his chair and wondered if he really was insane.

Actually, he knew he was insane. He had a decade of proof on that subject. But oh, well. Insane he was, then.

And apparently, now he was a crazy Christmas tree farmer.

When Gabe brought back the beer, Caleb knocked it back as quickly as possible.

It was going to be a very interesting holiday season, that was for damn sure.

CHAPTER THREE

ELLIE WAS FEELING a bit like a badger by the end of the next school day. Restless, cranky and unsettled.

And she was in the mood to badger Caleb. Because it was the only thing that might manage some of the emotions that were clanging around inside her.

She'd been thinking about his move, and not only the move, but what that meant for her, for nearly twenty-four hours now.

She was still a bit ashamed of herself, and the general possessiveness she felt over him and his life.

The fact that it seemed to shock her that he had dreams and aspirations.

She had never thought of him like that.

He had existed, for so long, to serve her.

And that wasn't fair. Not really.

He hadn't come by her classroom today, either, and she wondered if she had made it so apparent that she was a selfish jerk when he had spoken to her yesterday, that he was a little bit mad.

Of course, the other piece of having a male best friend. He often didn't pick up on subtext, which meant that he usually wasn't mad at her when she thought that he might be. Because he hadn't realized she had done anything that should make him mad. As soon as school ended, she left her classroom, wandering out toward the barn, hoping that she might find Caleb.

She stepped into the structure where it was dim and cool, and heard the sound of mucking stalls. The unmistakable smell of shavings, and the musky odor of horse urine, mingled with dust.

It was a strange smell to feel any sense of nostalgia about, she supposed.

But it was indelibly linked to her joining the Dalton family.

Which she had done the moment she had become involved with Clint.

With that, she had inherited this whole scope of life that she hadn't even realized existed before.

She'd never ridden a horse, not till Caleb had taken her out on the trails one day nearly eight years ago. There had been something defining about it. Something in the memory that still made her stomach feel tense with anticipation. She could remember it clearly. The exhilaration of riding the horse along the rugged trails, the way they had broken through the trees and come out at the top of the mountain, at a clearing. And the look on his face as he took in the beauty in front of them.

He was a man connected to the land in a way that just seemed to be a part of him.

Of course he wanted a ranch. That was who he was.

His brother Jacob wasn't like that. Didn't seem to have the same affinity for it. No, it was more than an affinity. It was like it was in his blood. He was more than a cowboy. He was a rancher. Through and through. A man who needed to spend his life doing this kind of work.

She was the keeper of Caleb's biggest secret. She should have known all along he would want something like this, knowing what she did.

She'd figured it out a year or so before Clint had died, and she'd felt bad it had taken as long as it had.

She'd realized it watching him fill out a DMV form, of all things. And so many moments from the years had suddenly crystallized.

He was dyslexic.

She was the first person to put a name to what he'd struggled with all of his life. And she offered to help him. They'd sat together in her apartment, on the couch she still owned, and had gone over information about a host of different learning disabilities, piecing together his struggles, and ways they could combat them.

And she'd devised a lesson plan. She was a teacher, and it was what she did. And it had been such a great thing for her, to be able to use her passion to help someone she cared about so much.

The relief in his eyes as he'd learned about those things. As they'd found names, diagnoses and reasons for his struggles. Reasons that weren't: "I guess you're just stupid."

He'd confided in her that he'd been afraid he might be. That there was no other explanation for why he couldn't learn what everyone else seemed to be able to.

Caleb was intensely private and intensely proud. And he'd never wanted her to tell anyone, because he'd told her he hadn't wanted it to be seen as an excuse.

She'd honored that. She couldn't do anything but honor that.

He was the only person she would have kept a secret for like that. So perfectly she hadn't even told her husband.

She'd always cared very deeply for Caleb, but that experience had brought them closer. Until it hadn't.

The lessons had ended abruptly one day. Caleb had

just cut them off, with no real explanation. And she'd gone from seeing him like clockwork three days a week to not seeing him at all.

And then Clint had died and it hadn't mattered anymore.

Even during that time he hadn't been speaking to her, she'd known who he was. And somehow in the past few years she'd lost that sense of knowing him, wrapped in her own grief.

But she knew him. Of course he needed this. Of course.

She walked forward and looked into the door, and was not at all surprised to see him, turning shavings with a shovel, his tight black T-shirt stretching each time he flexed his broad shoulders, the muscles in his arms shifting, corded from the hard labor.

There was something about seeing him like this that made her heart swell, made it trip over itself.

She was selfish. So selfish to not want him to have his own ranch. Selfish to consider what it meant for her at all.

It didn't matter. All that mattered was what it meant for him.

"Hi," she said, leaning in the doorway.

He looked up, the brim of his black cowboy hat still shading part of his face. "Hi, yourself," he said.

"I haven't seen you today."

"I know," he said. "I haven't seen you, either."

"Are you busy today?"

"A bit."

She leaned forward, still clinging to the doorway with one hand. "I want to see your ranch."

He didn't pause in his shoveling. "Really?"

“Yes.” She cleared her throat. “I’m sorry that I was ridiculous yesterday.”

“Were you ridiculous?” He asked the question without looking at her.

“Yes, I was. I’m happy for you… Change hasn’t exactly been my best friend. So you coming to me and telling me things are changing… It freaked me out a little bit. I’ve gotten into this place in life now where it all feels a little more in my control, and you reminded me today it isn’t. I can’t control everything around me, which is fair and fine. But it hits me in a sore spot.”

“Right. I guess that’s understandable.”

“So anything changing makes me a little bit nervous. But I know we’re friends. Even if we don’t work together. Even if we haven’t worked together all that long.”

“It will be different,” he said, propping himself up on his shovel. “You’re working here now. I’ll be on the ranch. Before you weren’t working and I was just doing the wildfires. So I was either there all the time or gone.”

“Yes. I used you shamelessly as a babysitter, and a shoulder to cry on and any number of other things. And I appreciate that. But… It’s different now.

“You’re my best friend,” she said. “And I’m really happy for you. And I want to see the place.”

“Sure,” he said. “When?”

“Right now,” she said.

“Right now,” he repeated, his brows lifting slightly. “As in right this second?”

“Yes,” she said. “Your mom was planning on staying with Amelia for another hour and a half anyway. And that way I can look at things without answering questions. And then, when we finally do go with Amelia, I can look at things and answer questions for her.”

“You know, you don’t have to go today so that you can convince me that you’re excited for me.”

“That’s not even why,” she said.

“Then why?”

“Because I am excited,” she said, perhaps a little bit too brightly.

“All right, Ellie, let’s go.” He sounded a little too long-suffering for her liking. But she supposed she might deserve that.

“Are you going to have horses?” she asked, following him as he ditched his shovel and walked out of the barn.

“Yeah,” he said. He opened the passenger-side door to his faded red truck and she climbed in, realizing as she did that she took those kinds of actions for granted.

“Thank you,” she said once he was settled inside and had the truck engine turned on. “For everything. I mean, for things like opening the car door.”

“That’s nothing,” he said.

“It’s you,” she said. “You’re the most... The most helpful person. The most loyal. Caleb, I don’t know what would have happened to me if I hadn’t had you for all these years.”

“Why are you being mushy?” he asked.

It was a good question. But she definitely felt a little mushy. “Christmas? Change. There’s a lot of change happening right now. The new school, you leaving, West coming.”

“I doubt West being here will be a very big difference to you. In fact, it may all be the same. One cowboy is basically the same as the next.”

“Oh, that’s where you’re wrong,” she said. “Nothing is the same as you.”

She grinned at him, and he shifted, visibly uncomfortable as he pulled the truck out of its spot by the

barn, and headed down the paved road that led out to the highway.

“How far away is the new ranch?” she asked when they were on the road.

“About ten minutes off this way,” he said, turning left, away from town.

“What’s the house like?”

“It has seen better days,” he said. “In other words, it’s a bit rustic. But I’ll be building something new once I get around to it.”

“I don’t mind rustic,” she said. “The farmhouse is a bit that way.”

“This is more of a log cabin,” he said.

“Well, I like log cabins.”

“Good,” he said. “That’s good.”

But he didn’t really sound like he thought it was good, and she couldn’t quite figure out why. Also, though, she didn’t really want to ask, and she wasn’t sure why that was, either.

“Tell me more about West,” she said, digging for a subject change.

“I don’t know anything about him,” he said.

“Nothing?”

He sighed heavily. “He rode in the rodeo for a while, but Gabe doesn’t know him. Bull rider, I guess. And stayed more regional. Mostly in Texas.”

“So you do know some things.”

“Yes. Some things.”

“I would think that if he were any good Gabe would know who he was,” she said.

“That’s what I said,” Caleb responded. “But Gabe said that wasn’t necessarily the case. I wonder if he was just being kind, though.”

“Oh, that’s not like Gabe,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“I heard that Jamie was going to start riding pro next year.”

“That’s the word on the street,” he said. “By which I mean, at the ranch.”

Gabe’s fiancée, Jamie, had been wanting to ride professionally in the rodeo for years, and everything was finally coming together for her.

“Do you think that Gabe is going to leave the school?” Ellie asked.

“I can’t imagine he wouldn’t. But he’ll be back and forth.”

“It will be interesting to manage things without them,” she said.

“Well, you’re doing a great job.”

“I’m going to need help with the manual labor and stuff.”

“Yeah, I expect you will.”

“I guess I’ll have to ask West,” she said.

“You can still ask me,” he said, something in his voice getting hard.

“Okay,” she said. “Good to know.”

She fiddled with the radio for a while after that, turning up Dierks Bentley and giving thanks it was one of his party songs, and not one of his sexy songs, because that would just make it a little bit awkward.

She wasn’t sure why. Only that she knew it would.

Mostly because when you were looking for silence filler, you didn’t want that silence to be filled with sincere lyrics about erotic acts.

As if she could even remember what *erotic acts* were like.

It had been so long...

She swallowed hard and turned the music up louder

as she watched the pine trees melt together, a whiskey blur of green out the car window. And up ahead of them were the mountains, rising above wooden telephone poles that created a strange man-made grid with their wires as they zigged and zagged on the uneven roadway.

Caleb hung a sharp right, onto an even narrower paved road with a faded yellow line down the middle. Eventually, the asphalt faded away into gravel, which carried them up a mountain, winding around until they reached another turnoff.

This went back, the land flat suddenly, and a wooden cabin came into view.

It wasn't as worse for wear as Caleb had led her to believe, two stories and with a charming porch that spread out wide, wicker chairs and a love seat right there.

"I think it's lovely," she said.

"It's okay," he said.

"I think it's a little better than okay."

The place he lived in now was much smaller, but he'd said many times that he didn't have use for a big house. It was just him, and he wasn't one for throwing parties.

"Let me show you where the trees are," he said.

"I don't think I have ever been to a place that grew Christmas trees," she said. She looked out the window again. "Of course, all the mountains around us kind of grow Christmas trees."

"Yeah, that's Charlie Brown-looking shit," he said.

"It's God's own handiwork, Caleb," she said dryly.

"Okay," he said.

"Don't tell me that Hank Dalton got his Christmas tree from a tree lot," she said.

"Oh, I wouldn't tell you that." He chuckled. "We never had a real tree when I was growing up."

"You didn't have a real tree?"

“Hell no. The tree was Tammy’s domain,” he said.
“She prefers pink and tinsel.”

“I have yet to see a pink or tinsel tree in your mother’s living room.”

“She’s calmed down over the past few years. But when we were growing up, and we first had money, she went flashing it all around. And let me tell you, she didn’t spare any expense. She would do themed trees. Buy new ornaments every year, a whole new color scheme. It was tacky as hell. I will never forget her Las Vegas Cowgirl Christmas tree. You know, with a bunch of mini versions of that neon cowgirl in Vegas? But this was all light-up cowboy boots and all of that. It was insane.”

“Okay, that sounds a little bit much.”

“What about you?”

She realized that they never exactly talked about her childhood Christmases.

“Oh, we didn’t really do anything always. It depended. On where we were living. Who my mother was dating. When I was thirteen I found a small fake tree in the dumpster in our apartment building once. Like a table-top tree. I put it up in the kitchen and decorated it with some old ornaments I found, with a paper chain I made. My mom threw it out.”

“Your mom threw your tree away?” he asked.

She shifted, the incredulity in his tone making her uncomfortable. Yes, it had been a mean thing for her mom to do. And yes, Ellie didn’t have a relationship with her mom. But she’d also spent a lot of time sitting with the things her mother had done. They hurt her, but she’d also seen them as...normal. Because she didn’t know any different.

Caleb being shocked threw into sharp relief the fact that it wasn’t normal. Not at all.

“She said that we couldn’t have Christmas because it wouldn’t be right without Dave. He wasn’t even... He hadn’t even been around that long. He was just the boyfriend of the season. But every man was so important to her. So much more important than anything else. And I...” She swallowed. “I told her I wanted to have Christmas with her.”

She could remember it so keenly. That deep, desperate need to be loved. And that the tree—homely and broken and bedecked with homemade ornaments—felt like a piece of her heart.

“She said I wasn’t enough. To make it Christmas.” She cleared her throat. “So we didn’t have it that year. I got up early and wrapped myself in a blanket and ate cereal. I watched *A Christmas Story* on TV with the sound down.”

And she’d decided then she’d have to be enough for herself. That anything she did would have to be for her. And if she was happy, then that would have to be enough.

Thank God, too. Because if she hadn’t determined to find that inner strength, who knew where she’d be now. Who knew how life would have crumpled her up.

She’d figured out how to love without opening herself up the way her mother had. Without laying herself bare. Anyway, in Ellie’s mind that was obsession.

Ellie had found a brighter side to it. Companionship. Sadness swept over her and she took a breath.

“Sometimes, I don’t think I’m a whole lot better than her,” she said, feeling miserable as they pulled up to the field with its rows and rows of trees.

“Why don’t you think you’re better?” he asked. “As far as I know, you’ve never done something like that to Amelia. You’re a great mother, El. You’ve certainly

never told your child she wasn't enough for you. And damn, you've lost. And still..."

She took a breath. "I know. But we always go to your parents' house for Christmas. And I love it. Your mom has definitely refined her whole Christmas thing." She swallowed. "But we don't have Christmas things that we get out. I just... I haven't wanted to do it."

"There's nothing wrong with that."

"I don't know. I always felt like my mom was the Grinch. For not letting me enjoy Christmas. For making it all about her. Well, I don't really do anything different. It's all about me and what I don't want to do. And what I don't want to deal with."

"It's different," he said. "You lost Clint."

"Yeah. And my mom was often in a state of grief over men. And yes, it was different. But was it to her? It's weird. Sometimes I think about my mom and I get so angry. I think of all the things that she put me through, and how I would never, ever in a million years put Amelia through any of that. And then sometimes I just... I get tired. I get sad. I don't want to do a damn thing and I wonder... Is this what she felt, too? Did I just not know how hard it was sometimes? Because sometimes it's hard. Really, really hard. To put a smile on your face when you just feel crispy inside."

"Crispy?"

"Yes," she confirmed. "Don't you ever feel like that?"

"Define it."

"I don't know, like your insides are dry. And if you're not careful, they might just break. That's how I feel sometimes."

Silence settled between them like an itchy blanket. Heavy and uncomfortable.

"He was great," Caleb said, finally. "The best. I can't imagine growing up without him. He was my brother."

Her heart twisted. It was so easy to forget Caleb's grief in hers. In her worry about Amelia growing up without a father. But Caleb felt it right along with her. More than anyone else.

"I miss him," Ellie said. "I miss him every time Amelia has a birthday. Every time she asks me questions about daddies. Sometimes I get really tired of missing him." Her eyes felt scratchy, but there weren't any tears. She cleared her throat. "Okay. Let's look at your Christmas trees."

She nearly stumbled out of the truck, not waiting for him to open the door for her, and into the crisp late-afternoon air.

There was something about it that helped cut through the cloying sadness that had threatened to overwhelm her just a moment ago.

Wasn't that an awful thing to admit? That she was tired of grief. It didn't seem fair.

Some days she felt like she *owed* him her lifelong grief. Because he'd died so young. Because she loved him, and his parents didn't love him enough. And in many ways it seemed like the best thing to do was for her to carry an eternal flame for him.

But the very idea of that made her feel like she was trudging through a swamp, and in reality she wasn't sure she could bear it.

She walked across four rows of trees, looking down at the endless paths that were forged through the middle. "How many trees are here?"

"Thirty thousand."

"No way," she said. "Thirty thousand trees?"

"Yes," he said. "All in various stages of growth. But

there's about five thousand that are ready to go this year. The next year there will be twice that amount."

"Do you have enough room to have cattle and the Christmas trees on the ranch?"

"I should," he said. "If the trees are lucrative enough, I may never quit doing it. It's all lined out to keep going for the next four more years, even if I didn't replant."

"It seems like a pretty smart venture," she said.

"You sound surprised."

"No offense. And you know that I say this with a great amount of love. But you're not only a former bull rider, you're a current firefighter. And you fellas have a screw loose."

"True enough. Although, once I'm doing this full-time, I won't be doing the fires anymore."

"I..." Her heart twisted, did free-fall through her chest. "I'm actually really relieved to hear that. I tried not to be psychotic about it. But it really... It's always scared me that you did that still."

"I know."

"What happened to Clint was... Well, it wasn't even a freak accident. It was the result of neglect and poor safety standards on the part of the helicopter company. The odds of it happening again are so low. It was such a specific thing. But still, what you do is dangerous. And it... It scares me."

She couldn't fathom losing Caleb. She didn't want to. Ever.

"Yeah, well, I won't be doing it anymore. I don't really think you have to worry about any of these Christmas trees going rogue."

She smirked, happy to lighten the conversation a little bit. "I don't know. I seem to recall some late-night TV show. *When Christmas Trees Attack.*"

“That seems legitimate.”

She grinned. “Right?”

His lips turned up into a half smile, and he looked out over the field. There was pride there on his face that resonated inside her. His eyes looked so blue in the late-afternoon light, pale though it was. He walked down one of the rows, and she watched him, his long stride, the way his broad shoulders filled up her vision. Everything inside her felt warm.

Just looking at him made her feel... Calm. Happy.

He was the safest of spaces. Her port in the storm, and even if he was here, that wouldn’t change.

It wasn’t going to change between them. He would be here for her. Because he always was. The very thought made her heart feel slightly too big for her chest.

Caleb Dalton was one of the few things she could count on in this whole world.

“You know Amelia is going to love this,” Ellie said. “She could dress as an elf at the lot.”

“Well, I imagine that would bring in business,” he said, turning and grinning at her.

“During the day it could be a family-friendly affair, and after dark...you could sell the Christmas trees with no shirt on.”

The idea made a funny little zip race through her midsection, up and then disconcertingly back down. She squeezed her thighs together.

He arched a brow. “It’s going to be the dead of winter.”

“Sure,” she said. “But you know, it’s not for you. It’s for your female clientele.”

He snorted a laugh. “Should I ask you to come and wear a miniskirt, be my sexy elf?”

Another little shimmer radiated through her, and she

looked away from him, feeling slightly pinned down by the clarity and his blue gaze.

She sucked in a sharp shot of the cold air and looked down at the ground, trying to clear up some of the heat that had flooded her cheeks.

She looked back at him. “I don’t think me in a sexy elf costume would work. It’s well documented that women do most of the Christmas tree shopping for the household.”

“Well, there are some women who may want to see it, Ellie.”

“Okay, how about we don’t sexualize the Christmas tree farm,” she said.

“Possibly for the best.” He pulled a face. “Gabe wants me to have the boys working at the lot anyway. And I don’t want them around you if you’re to be dressed as a sexy elf.”

“No,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “I am their teacher.”

“Yeah, which means you know they already have inappropriate fantasies, but we don’t need to encourage it.”

“Yeah. Really no.” His blue eyes were somehow just a bit too blue right then. She swallowed hard, confused by the dryness in her throat, and wandered down the same path that he was on. “I can’t believe all this is yours.”

“That’s why I kept doing the fires,” he said. “I was able to bank most of my money. Combined with the meager winnings I still had saved up from the rodeo.”

She laughed. “Did you ever win in the rodeo?”

“Yes,” he said. “I might not have been a champion like Gabe, but I did win some.”

“You didn’t stay at it very long.”

“Yeah, Jacob was done. Clint had a wild new idea in mind...”

“Firefighting.”

“It seemed good. And hey, we got to travel around quite a bit. See the United States. I mean, mostly see the mountains of the United States on fire, but nonetheless.”

She stepped into the next row, peered around the pine tree and smiled at him. “Well, I like the Christmas trees. They are impressive.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Want to see the rest of the place?”

“I do,” she said.

The rest of the tour went easily, smoothly. No more strange pickups, no more moments of extreme sadness.

And all of it served to comfort her further.

Things might be changing, but Caleb was staying the same.

Because that was who he was.

Her comfort. Her safety.

No matter where he lived, that would be true.

She knew that she could count on that, of the many, many things she couldn’t.

With her intent to start moving forward, changing certain things, knowing that he would be ever constant, never changing, was one of the only things that brought her real comfort.

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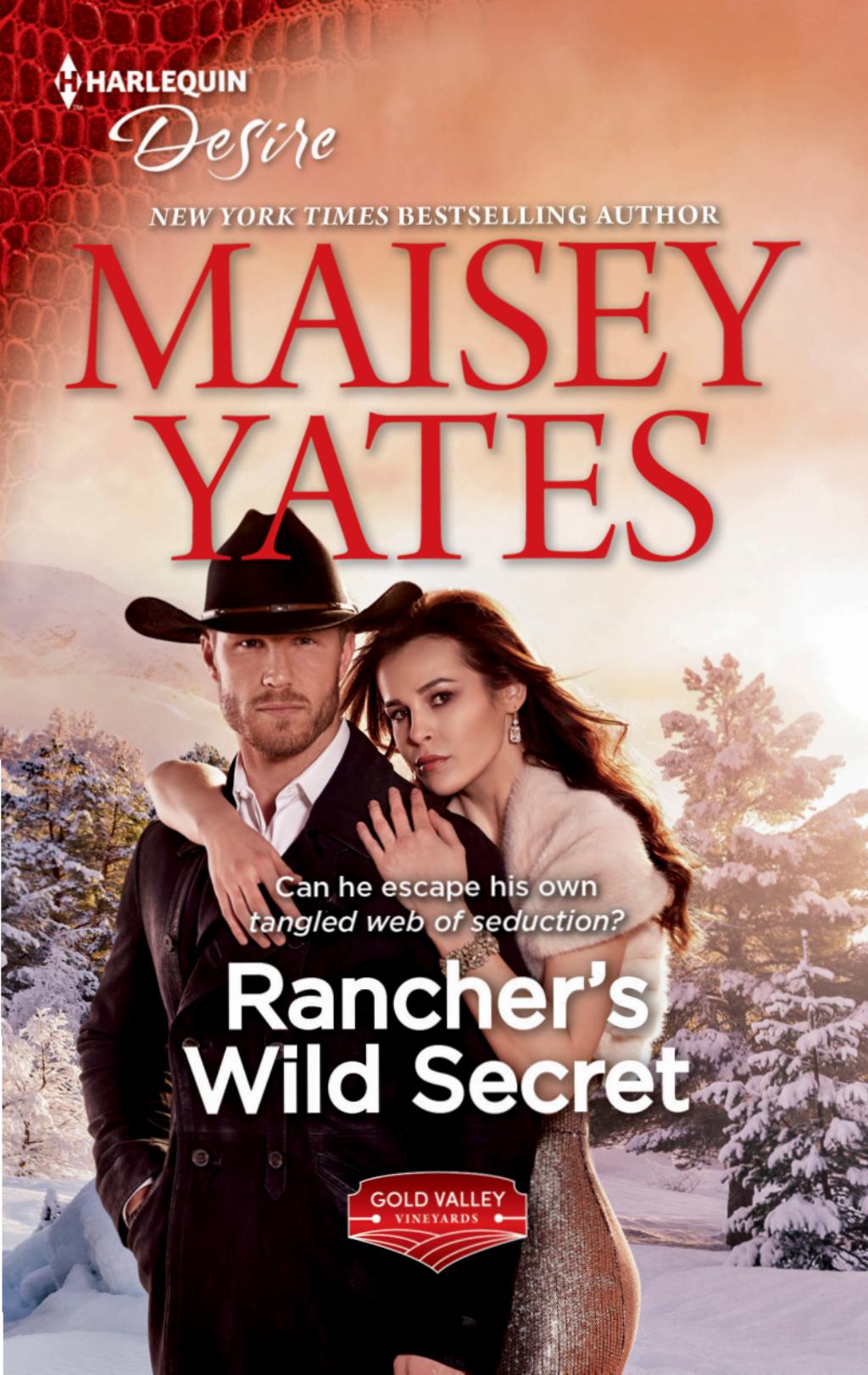


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Desire

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Can he escape his own
tangled web of seduction?

Rancher's Wild Secret



"I'll tell you what," he said. "I'm going to give you a kiss. And if afterward you can walk away, then you should."

She blinked. "I don't want to walk away."

"See how you feel after the kiss."

He already knew.

He already knew that he was going to have a hard time getting his hands off her once they'd been on her.

She took a step toward him, those ridiculous high heels somehow skimming overtop of the dirt and rocks. She was soft and elegant, and he was half dressed and sweaty from chopping wood, his breath a cloud in the cold air.

She reached out and put her hand on his chest. And it took every last ounce of his willpower not to grab her wrist and pin her palm to him. To hold her against him, make her feel the way his heart was beginning to rage out of control.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd wanted a woman like this.

* * *

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RANCHER'S WILD SECRET



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Rancher's Wild Secret

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One

The launch party for Maxfield Vineyards' brand-new select label was going off without a hitch, and Emerson Maxfield was bored.

Not the right feeling for the brand ambassador of Maxfield Vineyards, but definitely the feeling she was battling now.

She imagined many people in attendance would pin the look of disinterest on her face on the fact that her fiancé wasn't present.

She looked down at her hand, currently wrapped around a glass of blush wine, her fourth finger glittering with the large, pear-shaped diamond that she was wearing.

She wasn't bored because Donovan wasn't here.

Frankly, *Donovan* was starting to bore her, and that reality caused her no small amount of concern.

But what else could she do?

Her father had arranged the relationship, the engagement, two years earlier, and she had agreed. She'd been sure that things would progress, that she and *Donovan* could make it work because on paper they *should* work.

But their relationship wasn't...changing.

They worked and lived in different states and they didn't have enough heat between them to light a campfire.

All things considered, the party was much less boring than her engagement.

But all of it—the party and the engagement—was linked. Linked to the fact that her father's empire was the most important thing in his world.

And Emerson was a part of that empire.

In fairness, she cared about her father. And she cared about his empire, deeply. The winery was her life's work. Helping build it, grow it, was something she excelled at.

She had managed to get Maxfield wines into Hollywood awards' baskets. She'd gotten them recommended on prominent websites by former talk show hosts.

She had made their vineyard label something *better* than local.

Maxfield Vineyards was the leading reason parts of Oregon were beginning to be known as the new Napa.

And her work, and her siblings' work, was the reason Maxfield Vineyards had grown as much as it had.

She should be feeling triumphant about this party. But instead she felt nothing but malaise.

The same malaise that had infected so much of what she had done recently.

This used to be enough.

Standing in the middle of a beautiful party, wearing a dress that had been hand tailored to conform perfectly to her body—it used to be a thrill. Wearing lipstick like this—the perfect shade of red to go with her scarlet dress—it used to make her feel...

Important.

Like she mattered.

Like everything was put together and polished. Like she was a success. Whatever her mother thought.

Maybe Emerson's problem was the impending wedding.

Because the closer that got, the more doubts she had.

If she could possibly dedicate herself to her job *so much* that she would marry the son of one of the world's most premier advertising executives.

That she would go along with what her father asked, even in this.

But Emerson loved her father. And she loved the winery.

And as for romantic love...

Well, she'd never been in love. It was a hypothetical. But all these other loves were not. And as far as sex and passion went...

She hadn't slept with Donovan yet. But she'd been with two other men. One boyfriend in college, one out of college. And it just hadn't been anything worth upending her life over.

She and Donovan shared goals and values. Surely they could mesh those things together and create a life.

Why not marry for the sake of the vineyard? To make her father happy?

Why not?

Emerson sighed and surveyed the room.

Everything was beautiful. Of course it was. The party was set in her family's gorgeous mountaintop tasting room, the view of the vineyards stretching out below, illuminated by the full moon.

Emerson walked out onto the balcony. There were a few people out there, on the far end, but they didn't approach her. Keeping people at a distance was one of her gifts. With one smile she could attract everyone in the room if she chose. But she could also affect a blank face that invited no conversation at all.

She looked out over the vineyards and sighed yet again.

"What are you doing out here?"

A smile tugged at the corner of Emerson's mouth. Because of course, she could keep everyone but her baby sister Cricket from speaking to her when she

didn't want to be spoken to. Cricket basically did what she wanted.

"I just needed some fresh air. What are *you* doing here? Weren't you carded at the door?"

"I'm twenty-one, thank you," Cricket sniffed, looking...well, not twenty-one, at least not to Emerson.

Emerson smirked. "Oh. How could I forget?"

Truly, she *couldn't* forget, as she had thrown an absolutely spectacular party for Cricket, which had made Cricket look wide-eyed and uncomfortable, particularly in the fitted dress Emerson had chosen for her. Cricket did not enjoy being the center of attention.

Emerson *did* like it. But only on her terms.

Cricket looked mildly incensed in the moonlight.
"I didn't come out here to be teased."

"I'm sorry," Emerson responded, sincere because she didn't want to hurt her sister. She only wanted to mildly goad her, because Cricket was incredibly goadable.

Emerson looked out across the vast expanse of fields and frowned when she saw a figure moving among the vines.

It was a man. She could tell even from the balcony that he had a lean, rangy body, and the long strides of a man who was quite tall.

"Who's that?" she asked.

"I don't know," Cricket said, peering down below.
"Should I get Dad?"

"No," Emerson said. "I can go down."

She knew exactly who was supposed to be at the party, and who wasn't.

And if this man was one of the Coopers from Cowboy Wines, then she would have reason to feel concerned that he was down there sniffing around to get trade secrets.

Not that their top rival had ever stooped to that kind of espionage before, but she didn't trust anyone. Not really.

Wine-making was a competitive industry, and it was only becoming more so.

Emerson's sister Wren always became livid at the mere mention of the Cooper name, and was constantly muttering about all manner of dirty tricks they would employ to get ahead. So really, anything was possible.

"I'll just run down and check it out."

"You're going to go down and investigate by yourself?"

"I'm fine." Emerson waved a hand. "I have a cell phone, and the place is heavily populated right now. I don't think I'm going to have any issues."

"Emerson..."

Emerson slipped back inside, and out a side door, moving quickly down the stairs, not listening to her sister at all. She didn't know why, but she felt compelled to see who the man was for herself.

Maybe because his arrival was the first truly interesting thing to happen all evening. She went in

the direction where she'd last seen the figure, stepping out of the golden pool of light spilling from the party and into the grapevines. The moonlight illuminated her steps, though it was pale and left her hands looking waxyen.

She rounded one row of grapevines into the next, then stopped, frozen.

She had known he was tall, even from a distance. But he was...very tall. And broad.

Broad shoulders, broad chest. He was wearing a cowboy hat, which seemed ridiculous at night, because it wasn't keeping the sun off him. He had on a tight black T-shirt and a pair of jeans.

And he was not a Cooper.

She had never seen the man before in her life. He saw her and stopped walking. He lifted his head up, and the moonlight caught his features. His face was sculpted, beautiful. So much so that it immobilized her. That square jaw was visible in even this dim light.

"I... Have you lost your way?" she asked. "The party is that way. Though... I'm fairly certain you're not on the guest list."

"I wasn't invited to any party," he said, his voice rough and raspy, made for sin.

Made for sin?

She didn't know where such a thought had come from.

Except, it was easy to imagine that voice saying all kinds of sinful things, and she couldn't credit why.

"Then... Forgive me, but what are you doing here?"

"I work here," he said. "I'm the new ranch hand."

Damn if she wasn't Little Red Riding Hood delivered right to the Big Bad Wolf.

Except, she wasn't wearing a scarlet cloak. It was a scarlet dress that clung to her generous curves like wrapping paper around a tempting present.

Her dark hair was lined silver by the moonbeams and tumbling around naked shoulders.

He could picture her in his bed, just like that. Naked and rumpled in the sheets, that hair spread everywhere.

It was a shame he wasn't here for pleasure.

He was here for revenge.

And if he had guessed correctly based on what he knew about the Maxfield family, this was Emerson Maxfield. Who often had her beautiful face splashed across magazine covers for food and wine features, and who had become something of an It Girl for clothing brands as well. She was gorgeous, recognizable... and engaged.

But none of that would have deterred him, if he really wanted her.

What the hell did he care if a man had put a ring on a woman's finger? In his opinion, if an engaged or married woman was looking elsewhere, then the man who'd put the ring on her finger should've done a better job of keeping her satisfied.

If Holden could seduce a woman, then the bastard he seduced her away from deserved it.

Indiscretion didn't cause him any concern.

But there were a whole lot of women and a whole lot of ways for him to get laid, and he wasn't about to sully himself inside a Maxfield.

No matter how gorgeous.

"I didn't realize my father had hired someone new," she said.

It was funny, given what he knew about her family, the way that she talked like a little private school princess. But he knew she'd gone to elite schools on the East Coast, coming back home to Oregon for summer vacations, at least when her family wasn't jet-setting off somewhere else.

They were the wealthiest family in Logan County, with a wine label that competed on the world stage.

Her father, James Maxfield, was a world-class visionary, a world-class winemaker...and a world-class bastard.

Holden had few morals, but there were some scruples he held dear. At the very top of that list was that when he was with a woman, there was no coercion involved. And he would never leave one hopeless, blackmailed and depressed. No.

But James Maxfield had no such moral code.

And, sadly for James, when it came to dealing out justice to men who had harmed someone Holden cared about very much, he didn't have a limit on how far he was willing to go. He wondered what Emerson

would think if she knew what her father had done to a woman who was barely her age.

What he'd done to Holden's younger sister.

But then, Emerson probably wouldn't care at all.

He couldn't see how she would *not* know the way her father behaved, given that the whole family seemed to run the enterprise together.

He had a feeling the Maxfield children looked the other way, as did James's wife. All of them ignoring his bad behavior so they could continue to have access to his bank account.

"I just got here today," he said. "Staying in one of the cabins on the property."

There was staff lodging, which he had found quaint as hell.

Holden had worked his way up from nothing, though his success in real estate development was not anywhere near as splashed over the media as the Maxfield's success was. Which, in the end, was what allowed him to engage in this revenge mission, this quest to destroy the life and reputation of James Maxfield.

And the really wonderful thing was, James wouldn't even see it coming.

Because he wouldn't believe a man of such low status could possibly bring him down. He would overlook Holden. Because James would believe that Holden was nothing more than a hired hand, a lackey.

James would have no idea that Holden was a man

with a massive spread of land in the eastern part of the state, in Jackson Creek.

Because James Maxfield thought of no one but himself. He didn't think anyone was as smart as he was, didn't think anyone was anywhere near as important.

And that pride would be his downfall in the end. Holden would make sure of it.

"Oh," she said. She met his eyes and bit her lip. The little vixen was flirting with him.

"Aren't you meant to be in there hosting the party?"

She lifted a shoulder. "I guess so." She didn't seem at all surprised that he recognized who she was. But then, he imagined Emerson was used to being recognized.

"People will probably be noticing that you're gone."

"I suppose they might be," she said. She wrinkled her nose. "Between you and me, I'm getting a little tired of these things."

"Parties with free food and drinks? How could you get tired of that?"

She lifted one elegant shoulder. "I suppose when the drinks are always free, you lose track of why they're special."

"I wouldn't know anything about that."

He'd worked for every damn thing he had.

"Oh. Of course. Sorry. That's an incredibly privileged thing to say."

"Well, if you're who I think you are, you're incredibly privileged. Why wouldn't you feel that way?"

"Just because it's true in my life doesn't mean it's not a tacky thing to say."

"Well, I can think of several tacky things to say right back that might make you feel a little bit better."

She laughed. "Try me."

"If you're not careful, Little Red, wandering through the wilderness like this, a Big Bad Wolf might gobble you up."

It was an incredibly obvious and overtly sexual thing to say. And the little princess, with her engagement ring glittering on her left hand, should have drawn up in full umbrage.

But she didn't. Instead, her body seemed to melt slightly, and she looked away. "Was that supposed to be tacky?"

"It was," he said.

"I guess it didn't feel that way to me."

"You should head back to that party," he said.

"Why? Am I in danger out here?"

"Depends on what you consider danger."

There was nothing wrong—he told himself—with building a rapport with her. In fact, it would be a damned useful thing in many ways.

"Possibly talking to strange men in vineyards."

"Depends on whether or not you consider me strange."

"I don't know you well enough to have that figured out yet." A crackle of interest moved over his

skin, and he didn't know what the hell was wrong with him that the first time he'd felt anything remotely like interest in a hell of a long time was happening now.

With Emerson Maxfield.

But she was the one who took a step back. She was the one whose eyes widened in fear, and he had to wonder if his hatred for the blood that ran through her veins was as evident to her as it was to him.

"I have to go," she said. "I'm... The party."

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

He took a step toward her, almost without thinking.

And then she retreated, as quickly as she could on those impractical stiletto heels.

"You better run, Little Red," he said under his breath.

And then he rocked back on his heels, surveying the grapevines and the house up on the hill. "The Big Bad Wolf is going to gobble all of this up."

Two

“Emerson,” her dad said. “I have a job for you.”

Emerson was tired and feeling off balance after last night. She had done something that was so out of character she still couldn’t figure out what she’d been thinking.

She had left the party, left her post. She had chased after a strange man out in the grapevines. And then...

He had reminded her of a wolf. She’d gone to a wolf sanctuary once when she was in high school, and she’d been mesmerized by the powerful pack alpha. So beautiful. So much leashed strength.

She’d been afraid. But utterly fascinated all at once. Unable to look away...

He worked on the property.

And that should have been a red light to her all the way down. An absolute *stop, don't go any further.* If the diamond on her finger couldn't serve as that warning, then his status as an employee should have.

But she had felt drawn to him. And then he'd taken a step toward her. And it was like suddenly the correct instincts had woken up inside of her and she had run away.

But she didn't know why it had taken that long for her to run. What was wrong with her?

"A job," she said blankly, in response to her father.

"I've been watching the profits of Grassroots Winery down in town," he said. "They're really building a name for themselves as a destination. Not just a brand that people drink when they're out, but a place people want to visit. We've proved this is an incredibly successful location for weddings and other large events. The party you threw last night was superb."

Emerson basked in the praise. But only for a moment. Because if there was praise, then a request couldn't be far behind.

"One of the things they're offering is rides through the vineyard on horseback. They're also doing sort of a rustic partnership with the neighboring dude ranch, which sounds more like the bastion of Cowboy Wines. Nothing I want to get involved with. We don't want to lower the value of our brand by associating with anything down-market. But horse rides through the vineyards, picnics, things like that—I think those could be profitable."

Emerson had met the owner of Grassroots Winery, Lindy Dodge, on a couple of occasions, and she liked the other woman quite a lot. Emerson had a moment of compunction about stepping on what had clearly been Lindy's idea, but then dismissed it.

It wasn't uncommon at all for similar companies to try comparable ventures. They often borrowed from each other, and given the number of wineries beginning to crop up in the area, it was inevitable there would be crossover.

Plus, to the best of her ability Emerson tried not to look at the others as competition. They were creating a robust wine trail that was a draw in and of itself.

Tourists could visit several wineries when they came to Logan County, traveling from Copper Ridge through Gold Valley and up into the surrounding mountains. That the area was a destination for wine enthusiasts was good for everyone.

The only vineyard that Maxfield Vineyards really viewed as competition was Cowboy Wines. Which Emerson thought was funny in a way, since their brand could not be more disparate from Maxfield's if they tried.

And she suspected they *did* try.

She also suspected there was something darker at the root of the rivalry, but if so, James never said.

And neither had Wren, the middle sister. Wren's role in the company often saw her clashing with Creed Cooper, who worked in the same capacity for

his family winery, and Wren hated him with every fiber of her being. Loudly and often.

“So what is the new venture exactly?” Emerson asked.

“I just told you. Trail rides and picnics, but we need a way to make it feel like a Maxfield endeavor. And that, I give over to you.”

“That sounds like it would be more Wren’s thing.” Wren was responsible for events at the winery, while Emerson dealt more globally with brand representation.

“I think ultimately this will be about the way you influence people. I want you to find the best routes, the prime views for the trips, take some photos, put it up on your social media. Use the appropriate pound signs.”

“It’s a... It’s a hashtag.”

“I’m not interested in learning what it is, Emerson. That’s why I have you.”

“Okay. I can do that.”

She did have a massive online reach, and she could see how she might position some photos, which would garner media interest, and possibly generate a story in *Sip and Savor* magazine. And really, it would benefit the entire area. The more that Maxfield Vineyards—with its vast reach in the world of wine—brought people into the area, the more the other vineyards benefited too.

“That sounds good to me,” she said.

“That’s why I hired a manager for the ranching

portion of the facility. I need him to oversee some new construction, because if we're going to have guests in the stables, everything needs to be updated. I need for him to oversee the acquisition of a few horses. Plus, the rides, etc."

"Oh," she said. "This...person. This man you hired. He's...tall?"

James shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't consider his height. Did you?"

"No," she said, her face flaming. She felt like a child with her hand caught in the cookie jar. "I just... I think I saw him last night. Down in the vineyard. I left the party to check and see what was happening." Total honesty with her father came as second nature to her.

She tried to be good. She tried to be the daughter he had raised her to be, always.

"You left the party?"

"Everything was well in hand. I left Cricket in charge."

That might be a stretch. But while she was as honest with her father as possible, she tended to leave out some things like...her feelings. And this would be one of those times.

"I met him briefly, then I went back to the house. That's all. He told me he worked on the property."

"You have to be careful," her father said. "You don't want any photographs taken of you alone with a man who's not Donovan. You don't need anything to compromise your engagement."

Sometimes she wondered if her father realized they didn't live in the Victorian era.

"Nothing is going to compromise my engagement to Donovan."

"I'm glad you're certain about it."

She was, in spite of her occasional doubts. Her father might not understand that times had changed, but she did. She felt certain Donovan was carrying on with other women in the absence of a physical relationship with her. Why would she assume anything else? He was a man, after all.

She knew why her father was so invested in her marriage to Donovan. As part of his planned retirement, her father was giving ownership stakes in the winery to each of his daughters' husbands.

He felt Donovan would be an asset to the winery, and Emerson agreed. But she wasn't sure how that fit into a marriage.

Clearly, Donovan didn't much care about how that fit into a marriage either.

And she doubted he would be able to muster up any jealousy over her behavior.

"Image," her father said, bringing her back to the moment. "It isn't what you do that matters, Emerson, it's what the world *thinks* you're doing."

There was something about the way her father said it, so smooth and cold, that made her feel chilled. It shouldn't chill her, because she agreed that image was important in their business.

Still, it *did* chill her.

Emerson shifted. "Right. Well, no worries there. Image is my expertise."

"It's all about the brand," he said.

"I tell you that," she said.

"And you've done it well."

"Thank you," she said, nearly flushed with pleasure. Compliments from James Maxfield were rare, and she clung to them when she got them.

"You should head down to the stables. He'll be waiting for you."

And if that made her stomach tighten, she ignored the sensation. She had a job to do. And that job had nothing to do with how tall the new ranch manager was.

She was as pretty in the ridiculously trendy outfit she was wearing now as she'd been in that red dress.

She was wearing high-cut black pants that went up past her belly button, loose fitted through the leg, with a cuff around the ankle, paired with a matching black top that was cropped to just beneath her breasts and showed a wedge of stomach. Her dark hair was in a high bun, and she was wearing the same red lipstick she'd had on the night before, along with round sunglasses that covered her eyes.

He wished he could see her eyes. And as she approached, she pushed the glasses up to the top of her head.

He hadn't been prepared for how beautiful she was. He thought he'd seen her beauty in the moonlight,

thought he'd seen it in photographs, but they didn't do her justice. He'd been convinced that the blue of her eyes was accomplished with some kind of a filter. But it was clear to him now, out in the bright sun with the green mountains surrounding them, and her eyes reflecting that particular blue from the center of the sky, that if anything, her eyes had been down-played in those photographs.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good morning to you too. I take it you spoke with your father?"

It took all of his self-control for that word to come out smoothly.

"Yes," she said. "I did."

"And what do you think of his proposition?"

In Holden's opinion, it was a good one. And when he was through ruining James and sinking his brand, Holden might well buy the entire property and continue making wine himself. He was good at selling things, making money. He could make more money here.

"It's good. I think a few well-placed selfies will drum up interest."

"You're probably right. Though, I can't say I'm real up on selfies."

That was a lie. His younger sister was a pretty powerful influencer. A model, who had met James Maxfield at one of the parties that had brought their type together. He was angry at himself for the part his own money had played in all of this.

Because Soraya had been innocent. A sweet girl from a small town who had been catapulted into a lifestyle she hadn't been prepared to handle.

Holden could relate well enough.

He certainly hadn't known how to handle money in the beginning.

But he'd been helping his family dig out of the hole they'd found themselves in. The first thing he'd done was buy his mother a house. Up on a hill, fancy and safe from the men who had used her all throughout Holden's childhood.

And his sweet, younger half sister... She'd tumbled headfirst into fame. She was beautiful, that much had always been apparent, but she had that lean, hungry kind of beauty, honed by years of poverty, her backstory lending even more interest to her sharp cheekbones and unerring sense of style.

She had millions of people following her, waiting to see her next picture. Waiting to see which party she would attend.

And she attended the wrong one when she met James Maxfield.

He'd pounced on her before Holden could say "daddy issues." And James had left her devastated. Holden would never forget having to admit his sister for a psychiatric hold. Soraya's suicide attempt, the miscarriage... The devastation.

It was burned in him.

Along with the reality that his money hadn't protected her. His money had opened her up to this.

Now all that was left was revenge, because he couldn't make it right. He couldn't take her pain away.

But he could take everything away from the Maxfield family.

And that was what he intended to do.

"I don't think we've officially met," she said. She stuck her hand out—the one that didn't have the ring on it. That one angled at her side, the gem sparkling in the sunlight. "I'm Emerson Maxfield."

"Holden Brown," he said, extending his own hand.

If James Maxfield weren't a raging narcissist, Holden might have worried about using his real first name.

But he doubted the older man would ever connect the younger model he'd used for a couple of months and then discarded with Holden. Why would he? James probably barely remembered Soraya's first name, much less any of her family connections. Holden himself wasn't famous. And that was how he liked it. He'd always thought it would be handy to have anonymity. He hadn't imagined it would be for reasons of revenge.

He closed his hand around hers. It was soft, desperately so. The hand of a woman who had never done hard labor in her life, and something in him suddenly felt desperate to make this little princess do some down and dirty work.

Preferably on his body.

He pulled his hand away.

"It's nice to meet you, Holden," she said.

"Nice to meet you too." He bit the pleasantry off at the end, because anything more and he might make a mistake.

"I have some routes in mind for this new venture. Let's go for a ride."

Three

Let's go for a ride was not sexual.

Not in the context of the ranch. Not to a woman who was so used to being exposed to horses. As she was.

Except, she kept replaying that line over and over in her head. Kept imagining herself saying it to him.

Let's go for a ride.

And then she would imagine herself saying it to him in bed.

She had never, ever felt like this in her entire life.

Her first time had been fine. Painless, which was nice, she supposed, but not exactly exciting.

It had been with her boyfriend at the time, who she'd known very well, and who had been extraordinarily careful and considerate.

Though, he'd cared more about keeping her comfortable than keeping her impassioned. But they had been young. So that seemed fair enough.

Her boyfriend after that had been smooth, urbane and fascinating to her. A world traveler before she had done any traveling of her own. She had enjoyed conversations with him, but she hadn't been consumed by passion or lust or anything like that.

She had just sort of thought she was that way. And she was fine with it. She had a lot of excitement in her life. She wasn't hurting for lack of passion.

But Holden made her feel like she might actually be missing something.

Like there was a part of herself that had been dormant for a very long time.

Right. You've been in the man's presence for...a combined total of forty minutes.

Well, that made an even stronger case for the idea of exploring the thing between them. Because in that combined forty minutes, she had imagined him naked at least six times.

Had thought about closing the distance between them and kissing him on the mouth no less than seven times.

And that was insane.

He was working on the ranch, working for her father. Working for her, in essence, as she was part of the winery and had a stake in the business.

And somehow, that aroused her even more.

A man like her fiancé, Donovan, knew a whole lot about the world.

He knew advertising, and there was a heck of a lot of human psychology involved in that. And it was interesting.

But she had a feeling that a man like Holden could teach her about her own body, and that was more than interesting. It was a strange and intoxicating thought.

Also, totally unrealistic and nothing you're going to act on.

No, she thought as she mounted her horse, and the two of them began riding along a trail that she wanted to investigate as a route for the new venture. She would never give in to this just for the sake of exploring her sensuality. For a whole list of reasons.

So you're just going to marry Donovan and wonder what this could have been like?

Sink into the mediocre sex life that the lack of attraction between you promises. Never know what you're missing.

Well, the thing about fantasies was they were only fantasies.

And the thing about sex with a stranger—per a great many of her friends who'd had sex with strangers—was that the men involved rarely lived up to the fantasy. Because they had no reason to make anything good for a woman they didn't really know.

They were too focused on making it good for themselves. And men always won in those games.

Emerson knew her way around her own body, knew how to find release when she needed it. But she'd yet to find a man who could please her in the same way, and when she was intimate with someone, she couldn't ever quite let go... There were just too many things to think about, and her brain was always consumed.

It wouldn't be different with Holden. No matter how hot he was.

And blowing up all her inhibitions over an experience that was bound to be a letdown was something Emerson simply wasn't going to risk.

So there.

She turned her thoughts away from the illicit and forced them onto the beauty around her.

Her family's estate had been her favorite place in the world since she was a child. But of course, when she was younger, that preference had been a hollow kind of favoritism, because she didn't have a wide array of experiences or places to compare it to.

She did now. She'd been all over the world, had stayed in some of the most amazing hotels, had enjoyed food in the most glamorous locales. And while she loved to travel, she couldn't imagine a time when she wouldn't call Maxfield Vineyards home.

From the elegant spirals of the vines around the wooden trellises, all in neat rows spreading over vast acres, to the manicured green lawns, to the farther reaches where it grew wild, the majestic beauty of the wilderness so big and awe-inspiring, making her

feel appropriately small and insignificant when the occasion required.

“Can I ask you a question?” His voice was deep and thick, like honey, and it made Emerson feel like she was on the verge of a sugar high.

She’d never felt anything like this before.

This, she supposed, was chemistry. And she couldn’t for the life of her figure out why it would suddenly be *this* man who inspired it. She had met so many men who weren’t so far outside the sphere of what she should find attractive. She’d met them at parties all around the world. None of those men—including the one her father wanted her to be engaged to—had managed to elicit this kind of response in her.

And yet... Holden did it effortlessly.

“Ask away,” she said, resolutely fixing her focus on the scene around them. Anything to keep from fixating on him.

“Why the hell did you wear *that* knowing we were going out riding?”

She blinked. Then she turned and looked at him.
“What’s wrong with my outfit?”

“I have never seen anyone get on a horse in something so impractical.”

“Oh, come now. Surely you’ve seen period pieces where the woman is in a giant dress riding side-saddle.”

“Yes,” he said. “But you have other options.”

“It has to be photographable,” she said.

"And you couldn't do some sexy cowgirl thing?"

Considering he was playing the part of sexy cowboy—in his tight black T-shirt and black cowboy hat—she suddenly wished she were playing the part of sexy cowgirl. Maybe with a plaid top knotted just beneath her breasts, some short shorts and cowgirl boots. Maybe, if she were in an outfit like that, she would feel suitably bold enough to ask him for a literal roll in the hay.

You've lost your mind.

"That isn't exactly my aesthetic."

"Your aesthetic is... *I Dream of Jeannie* in Mourning?"

She laughed. "I hadn't thought about it that way. But sure. *I Dream of Jeannie* in Mourning sounds about right. In fact, I think I might go ahead and label the outfit that when I post pics."

"Whatever works," he said.

His comment was funny. And okay, maybe the fact that he'd been clever a couple of times in her presence was bestowing the label of *funny* on him too early. But it made her feel a little bit better about her wayward hormones that he wasn't just beautiful, that he was fascinating as well.

"So today's ride isn't just a scouting mission for you," he said. "If you're worried about your aesthetic."

"No," she said. "I want to start generating interest in this idea. You know, pictures of me on the horse. In fact, hang on a second." She stopped, maneuver-

ing her mount, turning so she was facing Holden, with the brilliant backdrop of the trail and the mountains behind them. Then she flipped her phone front facing and raised it up in the air, tilting it downward and grinning as she hit the button. She looked at the result, frowned, and then did it again. The second one would be fine once she put some filters on it.

“What was that?”

She maneuvered her horse back around in the other direction, stuffed her phone in her pocket and carried on.

“It was me getting a photograph,” she said. “One that I can post. ‘Something new and exciting is coming to the Maxfield label.’”

“Are you really going to put it like that?”

“Yes. I mean, eventually we’ll do official press releases and other forms of media, but the way you use social media advertisements is a little different. I personally am part of that online brand. And my lifestyle—including my clothes—is part of what makes people interested in the vineyard.”

“Right,” he said.

“People want to be jealous,” she said. “If they didn’t, they wouldn’t spend hours scrolling through photos of other people’s lives. Or of houses they’ll never be able to live in. Exotic locations they’ll never be able to go. A little envy, that bit of aspiration, it drives some people.”

“Do you really believe that?”

"Yes. I think the success of my portion of the family empire suggests I know what I'm talking about."

He didn't say anything for a long moment. "You know, I suppose you're right. People choose to indulge in that feeling, but when you really don't have anything, it's not fun to see all that stuff you'll never have. It cuts deep. It creates a hunger, rather than enjoyment. It can drive some people to the edge of destruction."

There was something about the way he said it that sent a ripple of disquiet through her. Because his words didn't sound hypothetical.

"That's never my goal," she said. "And I can't control who consumes the media I put out there. At a certain point, people have to know themselves, don't they?"

"True enough," he said. "But some people don't. And it's worse when there's another person involved who sees weakness in them even when they don't see it themselves. Someone who exploits that weakness. Plenty of sad, hungry girls have been lost along that envious road, when they took the wrong hand desperate for a hand up into satisfaction."

"Well, I'm not selling wild parties," she said. "I'm selling an afternoon ride at a family winery, and a trip here is not that out of reach for most people. That's the thing. There's all this wild aspirational stuff out there online, and the vineyard is just a little more accessible. That's what makes it advertising and not luxury porn."

"I see. Create a desire so big it can never be filled, and then offer a winery as the consolation prize."

"If the rest of our culture supports that, it's hardly my fault."

"Have you ever had to want for anything in your entire life, Emerson?" The question was asked innocuously enough, but the way he asked it, in that dark, rough voice, made it buzz over her skin, crackling like electricity as it moved through her. "Or have you always been given everything you could ever desire?"

"I've wanted things," she said, maybe too quickly. Too defensively.

"What?" he pressed.

She desperately went through the catalog of her life, trying to come up with a moment when she had been denied something that she had wanted in a material sense. And there was only one word that burned in her brain.

You.

Yes, that was what she would say. I want you, and I can't have you. Because I'm engaged to a man who's not interested in kissing me, much less getting into bed with me. And I'm no more interested in doing that with him.

But I can't break off the engagement no matter how much I want to because I so desperately need...

"Approval," she said. "That's...that's something I want."

Her stomach twisted, and she kept her eyes fixed

ahead, because she didn't know why she had let the word escape out loud. She should have said nothing.

He wasn't interested in hearing about her emotional issues.

"From your father?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I have his approval. My mother, on the other hand..."

"You're famous, successful, beautiful. And you don't have your mother's approval?"

"Yeah, shockingly, my mother's goal for me wasn't to take pictures of myself and put them up on the internet."

"Unless you have a secret stash of pictures, I don't see how your mother could disapprove of these sorts of photographs. Unless, of course, it's your pants. Which I do think are questionable."

"These are *wonderful* pants. And actually deceptively practical. Because they allow me to sit on the horse comfortably. Whatever you might think."

"What doesn't your mother approve of?"

"She wanted me to do something more. Something that was my own. She doesn't want me just running publicity for the family business. But I like it. I enjoy what I do, I enjoy this brand. Representing it is easy for me, because I care about it. I went to school for marketing, close to home. She felt like it was...limiting my potential."

He chuckled. "I'm sorry. Your mother felt like you limited your potential by going to get a degree

in marketing and then going on to be an ambassador for a successful brand.”

“Yes,” she said.

She could still remember the brittle irritation in her mother’s voice when she had told her about the engagement to Donovan.

“So you’re marrying a man more successful in advertising in the broader world even though you could have done that.”

“*You’re married to a successful man.*”

“I was never given the opportunities that you were given. You don’t have to hide behind a husband’s shadow. You could’ve done more.”

“Yeah, that’s about the size of it,” she said. “Look, my mother is brilliant. And scrappy. And I respect her. But she’s never going to be overly impressed with me. As far as she’s concerned, I haven’t worked a day in my life for anything, and I took the path of least resistance into this version of success.”

“What does she think of your sisters?”

“Well, Wren works for the winery too, but the only thing that annoys my mother more than her daughters taking a free pass is the Cooper family, and since Wren makes it her life’s work to go toe-to-toe with them, my mother isn’t quite as irritated with everything Wren does. And Cricket... I don’t know that anyone knows what Cricket wants.”

Poor Cricket was a later addition to the family. Eight years younger than Emerson, and six years younger than Wren. Their parents hadn’t planned

on having another child, and they especially hadn't planned on one like Cricket, who didn't seem to have inherited the need to please...well, anyone.

Cricket had run wild over the winery, raised more by the staff than by their mother or father.

Sometimes Emerson envied Cricket and the independence she seemed to have found before turning twenty-one, when Emerson couldn't quite capture independence even at twenty-nine.

"Sounds to me like your mother is pretty difficult to please."

"Impossible," she agreed.

But her father wasn't. He was proud of her. She was doing exactly what he wanted her to do. And she would keep on doing it.

The trail ended in a grassy clearing on the side of the mountain, overlooking the valley below. The wineries rolled on for miles, and the little redbrick town of Gold Valley was all the way at the bottom.

"Yes," she said. "This is perfect." She got down off the horse, snapped another few pictures with herself in them and the view in the background. And then a sudden inspiration took hold, and she whipped around quickly, capturing the blurred outline of Holden, on his horse with his cowboy hat, behind her.

He frowned, dismounting the horse, and she looked into the phone screen, keeping her eyes on him, and took another shot. He was mostly a silhouette, but it was clear that he was a good-looking, well-built man in a cowboy hat.

“Now, *there’s* an ad,” she said.

“What’re you doing?”

He sounded angry. Not amused at all.

“I just thought it would be good to get you in the background. A full-on Western fantasy.”

“You said that wasn’t the aesthetic.”

“It’s not mine. Just because a girl doesn’t want to wear cutoff shorts doesn’t mean she’s not interested in looking at a cowboy.”

“You can’t post that,” he said, his voice hard like granite.

She turned to face him. “Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to be on your bullshit website.”

“It’s not a website. It’s... Never mind. Are you... You’re not, like, fleeing from the law or something, are you?”

“No,” he said. “I’m not.”

“Then why won’t you let me post your picture? It’s not like you can really see you.”

“I’m not interested in that stuff.”

“Well, that stuff is my entire life’s work.” She turned her focus to the scenery around them and pretended to be interested in taking a few random pictures that were not of him.

“Some website that isn’t going to exist in a couple of years is not your life’s work. Your life’s work might be figuring out how to sell things to people, advertising, marketing. Whatever you want to call it. But the *how* of it is going to change, and it’s going

to keep on changing. What you've done is figure out how to understand the way people discover things right now. But it will change. And you'll figure that out too. These pictures are not your life's work."

It was an impassioned speech, and one she almost felt certain he'd given before, though she couldn't quite figure out why he would have, or to who.

"That's nice," she said. "But I don't need a pep talk. I wasn't belittling myself. I won't post the pictures. Though, I think they would have caused a lot of excitement."

"I'm not going to be anyone's trail guide. So there's no point using me."

"You're not even *my* trail guide, not really." She turned to face him, and found he was much closer than she had thought. All the breath was sucked from her body. He was so big and broad, imposing.

There was an intensity about him that should repel her, but instead it fascinated her.

The air was warm, and she was a little bit sweaty, and that made her wonder if *he* was sweaty, and something about that thought made her want to press her face against his chest and smell his skin.

"Have you ever gone without something?"

She didn't know why she'd asked him that, except that maybe it was the only thing keeping her from actually giving in to her fantasy and pressing her face against his body.

"I don't really think that's any of your business."

"Why not? I just downloaded all of my family is-

sues onto you, and I'm not even sure why. Except that you asked. And I don't think anyone else has ever asked. So... It's just you and me out here."

"And your phone. Which is your link to the outside world on a scale that I can barely understand."

Somehow, that rang false.

"I don't have service," she said. "And anyway, my phone is going back in my pocket." She slipped it into the silky pocket of her black pants.

He looked at her, his dark eyes moving over her body, and she knew he was deliberately taking his time examining her curves. Knew that his gaze was deliberately sexual.

And she didn't feel like she could be trusted with that kind of knowledge, because something deep inside her was dancing around the edge of being bold. That one little piece of her that felt repressed, that had felt bored at the party last night...

That one little piece of her wanted this.

"A few things," he said slowly. And his words were deliberate too.

Without thinking, she sucked her lip between her teeth and bit down on it, then swiped her tongue over the stinging surface to soothe it.

And the intensity in his eyes leaped higher.

She couldn't pretend she didn't know what she'd done. She'd deliberately drawn his focus to her mouth.

Now, she might have done it deliberately, but she didn't know what she wanted out of it.

Well, she did. But she couldn't want *that*. She couldn't. Not when...

Suddenly, he reached out, grabbing her chin between his thumb and forefinger. "I don't know how the boys who run around in your world play, Emerson. But I'm not a man who scrolls through photos and wishes he could touch something. If I want something, I take it. So if I were you...I wouldn't go around teasing."

She stuttered, "I... I... I..." and stumbled backward. She nearly tripped down onto the grass, onto her butt, but he reached out, looping his strong arm around her waist and pulling her upright. The breath whooshed from her lungs, and she found herself pressed hard against his solid body. She put her hand gingerly on his chest. Yeah. He was a little bit sweaty.

And damned if it wasn't sexy.

She racked her brain, trying to come up with something witty to say, something to defuse the situation, but she couldn't think. Her heart was thundering fast, and there was an echoing pulse down in the center of her thighs making it impossible for her to breathe. Impossible for her to think. She felt like she was having an out-of-body experience, or a wild fantasy that was surely happening in her head only, and not in reality.

But his body was hot and hard underneath her hand, and there was a point at which she really couldn't pretend she wasn't touching an actual man.

Because her fingers burned. Because her body burned. Because everything burned.

And she couldn't think of a single word to say, which wasn't like her, but usually she wasn't affected by men.

They liked her. They liked to flirt and talk with her, and since becoming engaged, they'd only liked it even more. Seeing her as a bit of a challenge, and it didn't cost her anything to play into that a little bit. Because she was never tempted to do anything. Because she was never affected. Because it was only ever a conversation and nothing more.

But this felt like more.

The air was thick with *more*, and she couldn't figure out why him, why now.

His lips curved up into a half smile, and suddenly, in a brief flash, she saw it.

Sure, his sculpted face and body were part of it. But he was...an outlaw.

Everything she wasn't.

He was a man who didn't care at all what anyone thought. It was visible in every part of him. In the laconic grace with which he moved, the easy way he smiled, the slow honeyed timbre of his voice.

Yes.

He was a man without a cell phone.

A man who wasn't tied or tethered to anything. Who didn't have comments to respond to at two in the morning that kept him up at night, as he worried about not doing it fast enough, about doing something to

damage the very public image she had cultivated—not just for herself—but for her father's entire industry.

A man who didn't care if he fell short of the expectations of a parent, at least he didn't seem like he would.

Looking at him in all his rough glory, the way that he blended into the terrain, she felt like a smooth shiny shell with nothing but a sad, listless urchin curled up inside, who was nothing like the facade that she presented.

He was the real deal.

He was like that mountain behind him. Strong and firm and steady. Unmovable.

It made her want a taste.

A taste of him.

A taste of freedom.



Desire

*We hope you enjoyed this sneak peek of
Rancher's Wild Secret
by New York Times bestselling author
Maisey Yates!*



*He's come to Gold Valley with a hidden
agenda... not to fall for his enemy's
daughter!*

Emerson Maxfield is the perfect pawn for rancher Holden McCall's purposes. She's engaged to a man solely to win her father's approval, and the sheltered beauty never steps out of line. Until one encounter changes everything. Now this good girl must marry Holden to protect her family—or their desire could spell downfall for them all...

Rancher's Wild Secret is available November 2019 wherever Harlequin® Desire books and ebooks are sold.