

MAYA ALDEN



The
**LONELY
ROAD**

the lonely road
WILDFLOWER CANYON

MAYA ALDEN

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book description

THE LONELY ROAD



I was hired to destroy her. I did. Then I fell in love with her.

I'm Mason Brooks, and this is my story.

When powerful men have problems, they call me. I'm a morally flexible fixer—the best in the business.

Taya Morningstar is a problem I've been hired to handle.

She's a lawyer with a savior complex—principled, honorable, too big-hearted for her own good. She works for people who can't afford to lose. This time, she's fighting for someone in my employer's crosshairs.

My job is simple: get close to Taya, dismantle her case, and walk away.

So I seduce her, let her believe what we have is real—then I hand her case to opposing counsel and make sure she loses.

But for the first time in my life, I can't walk away from the devastation I caused, because I've fallen in love with my mark.

If I want to be the man Taya deserves, I have to do something I've never done before—earn back the heart I broke.

The Lonely Road is an angsty cowboy romance featuring your favorite tropes:

- 🐎 Major Betrayal & Grovel
- 🐎 Cowboy
- 🐎 Small Town
- 🐎 No Cheating
- 🐎 Complete Standalone

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author's note



Dear Reader,

The Lonely Road contains significant Southern Ute cultural elements, including depictions of the Bear Dance, traditional regalia, language, ceremony, and community life.

I worked with sensitivity readers and consulted those familiar with the Southern Ute community throughout the writing of this book, and I am deeply grateful for their generosity and guidance.

Any errors that remain—and there may be some—are entirely my own, and I offer my sincere apologies for them. It was never my intention to misrepresent a culture I have enormous respect for, only to honor it as truthfully as fiction allows.

One aspect of that intention shaped a specific choice on page. Native words throughout this novel appear in standard typeface rather than italics. The convention of italicizing non-English words—while common—functions as a form of linguistic gatekeeping, marking certain words as foreign, exotic, or outside the default.

For a character like Taya, who grew up speaking Ute, who carries her grandmother's language in her body the way she carries her grandmother's beadwork on her wall, italicizing wíitsin or Núuchiu or mama-kwa-nhká-pú would be an act of othering—a typographical signal that these words

require special handling, that they exist at a distance from the reader rather than at the center of the character's world.

There is a growing movement among writers and editors to abandon this convention, recognizing that it centers English as the default and positions everything else as a deviation from it. I am glad to be part of that shift, and grateful to the scholars and Indigenous writers whose work shaped my thinking on it.

Sincerely,
Maya Alden

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CHAPTER 1

mason



The fact that she's beautiful doesn't surprise me. I've done my homework. I know her as well as one can when you read through a hundred-page profile of someone.

What does surprise me is that I'm attracted to her.

I watch her without being watched—which is what I do best—from the far end of the bar at The Rusty Spur, where I sit with a tumbler of bourbon I haven't touched.

The place is loud, wall-to-wall—the usual for a Friday night. A live band hammers out something heavy on steel guitar.

Nobody's paying attention to the man in the corner. That's by design.

I dress like the locals. I talk like them. I become them—wherever I am.

Taya Morningstar is twelve feet away, and she has no idea I exist.

She's at a high-top with two women—one dark-haired and rancher-built, one blonde with the kind of easy laugh that fills a room.

I clocked them when I walked in—Aria Delgado Kincaid and Joy Kincaid.

They're both in the file, tied to significant land in this valley through Maverick Kincaid—Aria's husband and Joy's brother. Impressive company for a woman who's been here just over six months and has already worked her way into the fabric of the place.

I wondered how she'd embedded so fast—but one look at her tells me why.

Some women lean into what their beauty does to a room. Others don't. That's the difference between a woman who has female friends and one

who doesn't—and she clearly has them.

She leans forward, says something, and they all crack up. The laughter is contagious and attractive, and several cowboys glance their way. They turn away fast enough. Mav Kincaid, from my files, is known to be a hard-ass—no one in Wildflower Canyon would dare to fuck with someone under his aegis.

“And then it went poof,” she says.

I can't hear her clearly, but I manage to read her lips. It's another skill honed during years of working for Uncle Sam. The education I got on the military dime is profitable and handy now that I've gone mercenary.

She talks with her whole body. She's not performing—I don't think so. I think this is who she is.

Alive.

Her hair is down, dark, and thick past her shoulders. She's in jeans and a blood-red blouse. She appears to be someone who dresses for herself and achieves something devastating in the process.

I was already impressed by what I read in her file.

Born in Denver, raised in Ignacio on the Southern Ute Reservation. She is Núuchiu.

Harvard Law—natural resources and water law. Top of her class.

Clerked for a federal judge handling water adjudication.

Six years at a top land-use firm in Aspen—partnership track until it got derailed.

Now she represents ranchers in water disputes against firms like the one she used to work for.

The file said she was formidable.

The file was an understatement.

I pick up my bourbon and take a sip.

Get it together, Brooks. She's a job.

As a fixer, when someone powerful (read: wealthy) has a problem they want dealt with discreetly and well, they call me.

A month ago, Senator Otis Jessup called me to a corner office of a corporate client of mine in D.C. My client, the CEO of a DOD-friendly arms company, did the basic introductions and left.

Plausible deniability is a mantra in government circles.

The office was on the fourteenth floor of a building in D.C., designed to make one feel small. Big desk, American flag, framed photographs of the

CEO with men like the Senator arranged in ascending order of importance—Jessup was number two. Number one was the President.

I've sat across from men like Jessup my entire career. I know the type. I don't like the type, but they spend their money the same as anyone else's, and I stopped judging clients when I went independent. That's the difference between a government payroll and your own: you can say no. I exercise that right occasionally, usually when the fee doesn't match the work I see coming. Also, I don't do wet work. Not anymore. Within those two limits, my moral flexibility is considerable.

Jessup slid a file across the desk without touching it himself, like he didn't want his fingerprints on the act. Men like him never do.

I flipped open the file and gave it a cursory skim.

"The lawyer. She's the problem," he commented.

Taya Morningstar, I read.

I saw her photograph, a professional headshot (one that did not do justice to the reality). The camera lens reflected back her sharp eyes and attractive face, but it didn't translate her personality.

"She's representing a rancher named Clara Whitman in a water rights dispute. If their lawsuit succeeds, it kills an acquisition. Two years of groundwork, three hundred million in investor commitments, down the fuckin' toilet."

Blah. Blah. Blah. Blah. Money.

I closed the file. "What do you need?"

He smiled the smile of a man who never had to do his own dirty work. "For her case to fall apart."

Across the bar, Taya tips her head back and laughs at something the blonde says, and the sound cuts clean through the noise of The Rusty Spur and the steel guitar and the thirty years of acquired professional distance I keep between myself and anything that may matter.

She seems happy. I didn't expect that either.

From the profile put together by an investigator I trust, another military man who went mercenary, life hasn't been easy for Taya Morningstar lately.

She left the law practice at Aspen rather abruptly—right before what seemed to be an offer of a partnership. I dug into that gap, as I do with every gap, and found a senior partner named Griffin Cole. My investigator dug some more and found receipts: security camera footage, emails, and so on.

She doesn't come across as the type to fall for the oldest line in the book—"Honey, I'll leave my wife for you"—but I've heard that love makes fools of the smartest people.

To give Cole credit, he had been separated when Taya got involved with him. That part was clean. What wasn't clean was the exit. When he went back to his wife, he didn't just end things with Taya—he took her career with him. His wife made it a condition of reconciliation. No custody fight over their two kids meant no Taya. And just like that, Taya's years of work became a liability he needed to shed. She left before they could push her out.

Barely.

I glance back at her. She's listening now, head tilted, attention locked on whoever's speaking.

I've read about that quality—interviews, colleagues' quotes. She makes you feel like you're the only one in the room.

I'd filed it under "useful trait" and "potential vulnerability".

Experiencing it in person is different.

I drain the rest of my bourbon.

I wish I could see her eyes better. Is she guarded with these women or open?

People who've been burned by someone they trusted tend to armor up. That's usually useful information. You find the seam. You press.

But Goddamn it, the kind of pressing I want to do has nothing to do with Otis Jessup's job.

Her file said she was smart. It didn't say she was the kind of person you orient toward without meaning to. It didn't say her laugh sounds like it costs her nothing and means everything.

The file was incomplete.

I already knew this was going to be a delicate job. Now, I revise that *delicately* upward. And as I do, *she* glances across the bar—the unconscious scan of a woman who's learned to be aware of a room. For one flat second, her eyes pass over me.

Nothing.

She doesn't register me.

Why would she? I'm no one. Just a man at a bar with an empty glass, in a town I arrived at a day ago, with a job to do.

I look away, catch the bartender's eye, and signal for another drink.

She's a means to an end, Brooks.

I say it to myself the way I've said a hundred things to myself over the years. I do it to keep things clear and clean.

This time, however, it lands a little less cleanly than it usually does.

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CHAPTER 2

taya



I notice him.

He's at the far end of the bar, tucked into the corner as if he put himself there on purpose.

There's a glass of bourbon in front of him, barely touched for a while but then emptied in a hurry.

He's not scrolling through his phone or talking to anyone. He's not watching the band the way everyone else is, with that loose Friday-night attention that says the week is finally over.

He's watching the room.

That's what alerts me. It's not his face, even though objectively it's a damn good-looking one in that contained, *I-know-exactly-what-I'm-doing* way that I have learned, at some cost, to be suspicious of—it's the *watching*, like he's cataloging.

I recognize it because I do it myself.

In courtrooms.

I lean toward Joy. "The man at the end of the bar. Dark hair, corner seat. Do you know him?"

Joy swivels with zero subtlety. I love her for it and also want to put my hand on her face and redirect it.

"Nope." She swivels back.

I turn to Aria.

She shakes her head. "Haven't seen him. Could be a tourist."

I arch an eyebrow. "He's not a tourist."

Aria arches an eyebrow. "Barely six months in and you can already tell?"

"He's too still," I explain. "Tourists move differently."

They both stared at me as if I spoke in an alien language. I shrug and pick up my drink. "Occupational habit."

Aria grins. "Sure."

Joy chuckles. "The fact that he's hot as hell...nuh-huh, that didn't even cross your retina."

I tilt my head back and laugh. They join me.

I file the stranger away in the part of my brain that doesn't stop working just because it's Friday night.

Joy orders a second round of drinks, and the band starts playing something that makes the whole dance floor move.

Six months in Wildflower Canyon, and I've learned who belongs where. It's a small town, where a new face lands like a stone in still water, and the ripples reach everyone before the weekend's out.

By the end of the night, Moxy will know his name, his drink order, and probably his credit score.

Right now, I don't know anything about him, and I find that I'm paying attention to it more than I should.

New man in town.

Watching.

Not from here.

Let it go, Taya.

File closed, pending more information.

I turn back to my friends and let the noise of the cowboy bar, far away from the swanky cocktail lounges of Aspen, pull me back in.

"Clara Whitman is in love with you." Aria props her chin on her hand. "Thanks for taking her on as a client."

Aria sent Clara to me.

I pat her on her shoulder. "No, thank you for helping me get business."

Joy picks up her beer. "Who is Clara Whitman?"

Aria owns a ranch attached to Kincaid Farms, one of the largest operations in these parts, and even though Joy is a Kincaid, she's definitely not a rancher. She has a clothes boutique on Main Street: Bringing You Joy. Unless you want to go all the way to Aspen, Joy's place is where you can

find high-quality jeans, leather jackets, and *dresses sexy enough to stop a man mid-sentence*—her words, not mine.

“Remember the woman I told you about? Who lost her husband in that equipment accident a while ago?” Aria reminds her sister-in-law.

Joy nods vaguely.

“Clara owns Silverbell Ranch,” I continue. “Fifteen hundred acres, up in the north valley. Her husband Deke died eighteen months ago. Since then, she’s been running the place *alone* with two kids, a part-time foreman, a mortgage, and a water rights claim that’s been in her family since 1948.”

Aria shakes her head in disgust. “And one of those high-falutin’ corporations wants to take those rights away from her.”

In places like Wildflower Canyon—and there are hundreds of them across the West—there’s a war being fought in slow motion. On one side, working ranch land: hard, unglamorous, not nearly as profitable as the labor demands. On the other hand, the same land valued by outside money that wants to turn it into the next Jackson Hole or Bozeman—luxury resorts, private airstrips, and ski chalets for people who think a Stetson is a fashion choice.

The ranchers who’ve held on are those who understand that the fight isn’t just economic, it’s existential. This is their way of life that they’re protecting. As Duke likes to say, “*I’ll be damned if they’ll replace American meat with crap grown in Brazil and put a parking lot on my ranch. Fuck that.*”

Men like Mav Kincaid and Duke Wilder, who owns the massive Wilder Ranch, have been on the front lines of the fight—working with lawmakers, anchoring the community, making sure small operations like Clara Whitman’s have enough ground to stand on so they don’t have to sell their family’s legacy.

“Not take the rights, per se, but challenge them. There’s a difference, *technically.*” I pause. “Not much of one. The development corporation behind the challenge has investors, lawmakers, and a law firm that charges more per hour than Clara Whitman makes in a week.”

Joy’s eyes sparkle bright. “But she has you, and you’re better than all those motherfuckers!”

These women remind me of my grandmother.

Delia Morningstar raised me in Ignacio after my parents died in a car accident, and she never once wavered in her belief that I could do anything

I set my heart to. When people told me I was being too ambitious—*applying to Harvard Law, really?*—she told them to mind their own business.

“You’re going to be just like Pearl Casias,” she’d say.

The famed Pearl grew up on the Southern Ute Reservation and went on to become the first female Tribal Chairman of the Southern Ute Indian Tribe—one of the first Native American women to attend Harvard Law School.

To Wíitsin, grandmother in Ute, Pearl wasn’t a legend. She was proof. And the fact that Pearl’s grandmother was also named Delia and had raised her just underscored the point in her book.

Wíitsin had more faith in me than I ever had in myself—that I could climb any mountain I set my heart to.

Since she passed, I’ve felt the absence of that like a missing floorboard, which you don’t notice until you step the wrong way. And Griffin didn’t help. What he did didn’t just end a relationship—it took a sledgehammer to my ability to trust people I thought I knew.

But sitting here with these women, whom I met at Wild Coffee one ordinary morning a week after I moved, I can feel something I’d stopped expecting to find again outside of Ignacio: the warmth of people who are simply and quietly in your corner.

“Well, I don’t know about being better than all of them,” I say. “Some of those guys are pretty good.”

“Yeah, but you’re Mac’s protégé.” Aria grins. “So you must be the best.”

I came to Wildflower Canyon because of two men.

Jack McCready, known to everyone here as Mac, part lawyer to half the ranchers in this valley and a full-time cowboy at heart. And Elder Nokoni Red Clay, who had known my grandmother for forty years and understood, without my having to explain it, what it would mean for me to use my skills in a place worth fighting for.

I had already accepted a job in Chicago when Mac called. My heart wasn’t in it, but survival has its own logic, and I had told myself that leaving Colorado was practical, not permanent. I love these mountains. They’re in my blood. But Aspen had become a place I needed to escape, and Chicago felt like a clean break.

Then Mac told me he was winding down—that he wanted someone to take over. The wills, the community work, the water and land rights cases that nobody else in this valley had the expertise to handle. At first, I said no. I didn't think I was ready to be on my own, to carry all of it without a firm behind me.

Elder Nokoni asked me the crucial, life-changing question: “What would your Wíitsin want for you?”

So, I agreed to have a conversation with Mac about it. I made no promises.

I am so glad he used emotional blackmail to get me here, because it was the best decision I ever made. I didn't know work could feel like this—like I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

Though when I first saw Mac's office on Main Street, I was certain I wouldn't take over his business.

The office smelled of old paper, better bourbon, and the dust of a disused place. He'd never used the office himself—Lulu, his niece, had handled the filing there until she left for university in California.

“Well, this is yours now.”

My gaze swept the room. “Mac, I haven't said yes to anything.”

“You will.”

I rolled my eyes. “And what do you mean by mine?”

“I mean, I'm giving it to you. That's your first task, by the way—write the contract for it, will you?”

I arched an eyebrow.

He grinned. “I own the building. I'm selling it to you.”

I raised both my eyebrows. The man had some gall. He wanted me to take over his business and pay for it...

“I don't want any of this, Mac. I agreed to talk to you because Elder Nokoni—”

“Let's say ten dollars,” he cuts me off.

That stopped me in my tracks. “What?” I croaked.

The building was in the ass-end of nowhere, but it sat right on Main Street, two doors down from the diner and across from the feed store. People spent their whole lives waiting for a piece of property like that to come up for sale, and when it did, it didn't go for ten dollars.

“Fine. Fine.” He raised both hands, palms out. “Five dollars.”

“Mac, you can't just...give this away?”

“Why the fuck not?”

“But—”

“But what?” He shook his head, then ran a finger over the desk and picked up some dust. “Nokoni says you’re the best water rights lawyer he’s ever met.”

“Elder Nokoni is being generous,” I said, chagrined.

I had spent enough years at a top law firm in Aspen to know that the law doesn’t decide what’s right—it just decides who wins. And I was very good at helping clients win. I helped developers legally buy ranches, transfer water rights, and sometimes change that water from irrigation to more profitable uses. I never took a case against tribal interests—not once did I cross that line—but I knew exactly how the game was played.

Mac waved a dismissive hand. “I’ve known Nokoni a long time. He’s not given to exaggeration.” Then he shrugged. “He’s been waiting for you to be done with that fancy Aspen. Maybe, Taya, it’s time for you to start fighting the people who want to take what isn’t theirs.”

Elder Nokoni had said the same thing to me on and off for the past couple of years. I countered by telling him that what I did was legal and above board. And he reminded me that, legal as it might be, it still often devastated rural communities.

“You mean I should start fighting the kind of people who used to be my clients?”

“Yes.”

I had been thinking about it for a long time, and even before the debacle at the law firm, a part of me had wanted to become more careful about who I helped win. It was probably why Elder Nokoni kept at me—never pushing hard, but always reminding me that I could do better, not financially but spiritually. And now all the seeds he had planted in soil he had prepared long before anyone else knew there was a garden were coming to fruition.

“Mac, I’ve never worked alone,” I told him. “I’ve always had a team and help, and this is...well, this will be a one-woman operation.”

“True,” Mac said. “Kid, I’ll help you. I’ll work with you on the big cases if you need it. I just have one demand.”

I pinned him with a look. “What?”

“I want you to argue with me! I can’t stand yes-people.”

I smiled then because I had made a decision I didn’t think I would. “I’ve never said yes to anything I didn’t believe.”

He smiled then, slow and dry. "Good. We're going to get along fine."

That evening, Elder Nokoni called me about my meeting with Mac.
"Well?"

"I'm going to do it."

"Excellent. How does the law firm look?"

"Law firm might be a slight exaggeration," I muttered. "And it looks like it needs work."

"Everything worth having does."

So that's how I ended up owning a building on Main Street and taking over all of Mac's clients. There were many of them with very different needs.

Write me a will.

Read over this grazing lease.

My neighbor moved his fence—what do I do?

The bank says I'm in default—what does this mean?

Can my daughter build a house on the back forty?

They want an easement for a pipeline.

They want an easement for a road.

They want an easement for power lines.

The county says my well isn't permitted.

The state says my water right was abandoned.

My brother and I don't agree on who gets what after Dad dies.

The brand inspector says the bill of sale isn't right.

The IRS sent me this letter.

My husband died, and I don't know where to start.

In a small ranch town, being a lawyer didn't mean specializing. It meant you were the person people came to when something in their life went wrong, and they didn't know who else to ask.

It is the most satisfying and cleansing work I've ever done.

"You're going to win it," Aria assures me. "Clara's going to keep her water."

"If I can get the hydrology expert qualified in time for the hearing." I straighten as I think through everything that still needs to be done. "And if opposing counsel doesn't come in with something I'm not expecting."

"Would they?" Joy wants to know.

I pick up my beer bottle and turn it slowly in my hands. "They're well-funded, which means they have options. More experts. More filings. More

ways to make this expensive and drag it out until Clara can't afford to keep fighting." I glance at her. "I used to be a lawyer representing *them*. I know exactly how they think."

"But you're not *them* anymore," Aria reminds me.

I shake my head. "No. But I know where they'll search for leverage. They'll try to disqualify my expert. They'll try to challenge the historic use. They'll try to bury us in motions, so we're always responding instead of arguing. And the judge on this case...." I exhale. "He tends to lean toward development. Everyone knows it."

Aria's mouth tightens. "So what will we do?"

We?

I meet her eyes. "We don't give them a single mistake to use against us."

And right then, it's there again—the sensation of being seen with intention. It's not the casual drift of a gaze passing over a room, but the deliberate weight of attention.

The man in the corner.

His eyes graze mine.

He doesn't seem familiar, not even a little—and still, my chest tightens.

The feeling is absurd and precise—that this isn't the first time our paths have crossed. Just the first time I remember.

Wíitsin used to say some meetings are arranged for you.

I close my eyes.

Stop it, Taya. You're just horny. The man is hot. That's all this is.

When I open my eyes, he's not watching me anymore. But the angle of his head is wrong, just slightly, for someone who's simply sitting alone at a bar.

There's something searching about it.

Hot guy on the prowl—maybe he's just looking to get laid.

I hold the space where his gaze just was and feel the shape of my interest and the warning light of recognition.

I don't know him. I've never seen him before today.

And yet....

He picks up his glass, signals the bartender for another.

He does not look at me again.

New man in town. Not from here. Watching...me?

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CHAPTER 3

mason



“I’m glad you’re here to help us out,” Brian Feig says as he shakes my hand.

Mr. Brian Feig of Feig & Sons—even though he has no sons or children of any kind—is the legitimate reason I am in Wildflower Canyon. He has a permit to build a new rodeo right outside of town, the kind the ranching community has been lobbying for since they decided Wildflower Canyon deserved to compete, one day, with the Fort Worth Stock Show and the Cheyenne Frontier Days. It’s an ambitious dream for a small Colorado valley.

As a certified land surveyor, I’ve been hired by the engineering firm Feig to assess the site—drainage, soil load, access roads, and the unglamorous groundwork that happens before a single post goes into the ground. It’s work I’m genuinely qualified to do. That’s the thing about a good cover—it works best when it’s mostly true.

Feig is compact and energetic, talks with his whole body, and overfills every room he enters.

We meet at the Horseshoe Diner, as his office is a trailer on the future rodeo grounds, and the heating is broken. In early March, when Colorado is still weeks away from real spring, that’s a necessity.

He knows *everyone*.

Before our coffee arrives, I’ve met about six people, mostly ranchers, except for one.

Kazimir Chase.

I know him from the file. Kaz works with developers and ranchers—trying to strengthen the community—making him both popular and a villain, depending on where he stands.

The introduction is exuberant—but then Feig is a boisterous man, and he talks about everyone like they're a god.

"Without Kaz here, I wouldn't have gotten the rodeo contract." Feig thumps Kaz's shoulder with a large hand.

We shake hands like men do when they're sizing each other up. His entire demeanor screams ex-military and current...not a rich land developer, not with the way he moves.

We size each other up.

I file him under *revisit*.

He files me under something, too.

Kaz props his hip against the bar counter where we're seated and nods at Eunice Knowles, who owns the place. She smirks at him, pours black coffee into a to-go cup, and slides it to him. He doesn't slide back any money—house account, probably, or just the privilege of being Kaz Chase in a town where everyone knows him.

She arches an eyebrow. "Your truck was parked outside the Keaton ranch."

"And how is that any of your business, Eunice, my love?" Kaz picks up the coffee.

"Bree is my business," she retorts defiantly and with some amusement.

Bree Keaton.

The file says that for an absolute mercenary, Kaz went out of his way to save her ranch, which she inherited from her uncle, a friend of his.

"Then you know I was there to help her with her pump." Kaz straightens. He doesn't like the invasion of his privacy, but this is a small town, and one has to expect the interference.

Janine, one of the servers who's walking by, chortles. "Is that what we're calling it these days?"

"He was fixin' her pump *all night long*," Eunice cackles.

"Feig, Brooks, I'll see you, gentlemen, 'cause I have to leave before I am booked for murder." Kaz walks out of the diner while the two women high-five each other, laughing.

He's probably sleeping with Bree Keaton, I deduce.

I get more information about Kaz from Feig, with interruptions from Eunice, who, it appears, listens to every conversation in her diner. I make a mental note to come to the Horseshoe every morning to get the Wildflower Canyon news.

“He bought the Hendricks spread three years back, turned it into a golf course. People were mighty upset with him about that,” Feig tells me.

“But he ain’t like that. Protected Bree’s ranch, didn’t he? And helped out Duke and Mav. Hell, he saved Sarah and Cade’s lives when Violet went crazy,” Eunice interjects.

I pretend I have no idea what they’re talking about, but I do. Wildflower Canyon has had a spirited few months, what with the scandal of now-disgraced and deceased Congressman Landon Mercer, who raped young women and was murdered by his wife. One of his victims is a vet in Wildflower Canyon and is married to the Congressman’s brother, to boot.

Small towns and their incestuous ways.

Feig waves a hand to dismiss Eunice. “You know I love Kaz, Eunice. He’s good people.”

I do my pretend job for the day and get back to my real one when I overhear Joy at Wild Coffee inviting Elena Wilder to dinner at Blackwood Prime with the girls.

Blackwood Prime is a steakhouse owned by Mav Kincaid and the only fine-dining option in town. Polished leather booths, wine lists in French and Spanish, perfume in the air instead of beer—the complete antithesis of The Rusty Spur.

I don’t wear a suit, but I do put on a fresh white dress shirt with my jeans and boots. Anything with a designer label stays back at my place in New York—storage, more than anything.

I hardly ever use the apartment in Chelsea. I got it when I realized I owned more than I could carry in a suitcase. It’s not home.

Then again, I haven’t had a home since the divorce. It’s not in Florida, where my parents are getting older, and not with my siblings, scattered across the country, in houses where I’m always a guest.

There isn’t a place in the world I can call mine. I tell myself I don’t mind it.

But this morning at the diner, I felt a flicker of something—what it must be like to be *known*. To have people who track your life, who poke into your business because they care about you and the people around you.

I have friends—my brothers from back in my military days. They’re a safe place. People I call when I need their expertise, like the guy who does my investigation work for me, but they’re not *home*.



According to Joy, dinner is at seven, so I get there by six thirty.

I take a seat at the bar at Blackwood Prime.

I want to get the lay of the land. I also want to be there when *she* arrives. I haven’t seen her walk yet, and I absurdly want to.

The people at Blackwood Prime are dressed up as much as one can be in Wildflower Canyon. There are men in suits with cowboy hats. Women who are elegantly dressed—though I did see one in jeans. It’s an eclectic sartorial space—but everyone who is here needs to be able to afford a seventy-dollar steak.

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this,” Kaz says from behind me. I clocked him as soon as he came into the establishment, so I’m not surprised he made a beeline for me.

He’s not in a suit *and* isn’t wearing a cowboy hat either. He’s in slacks and a T-shirt—both Kiton. The man has wealth, and from my file, I know it’s tech money. He founded a company that sold to one of the big giants, and he brought himself and his money back to Wildflower Canyon, where he grew up.

I offer my hand. He shakes it, measured as before, then takes a seat.

“Bailey, darlin’, I’ll have the usual.”

Bailey, darlin’, is the bartender, and she doesn’t seem like someone who anyone could call “darling” if she won’t allow it.

“How’s it goin’, Kaz?” Bailey muses as she pours a finger of Macallan 12, same as what I’m drinking, for Kaz.

“Good enough.”

“Heard your truck was parked all night at the Keaton ranch.” Bailey folds her arms and gives him a once-over.

“I was fixin’ her—”

“Pump,” Bailey finishes for him, and there’s a glint of mischief in her eyes. “You were fixin’ it all night?”

“Christ, woman! Don’t you have other customers to hassle?”

Bailey laughs and walks over to the other end of the bar, where someone called Noelle, a woman who is more primped up than she needs to be, wants a drink for her and her date, a cowboy who looks old enough to be her father but probably isn't.

Kaz shakes his head and grins. "So, you're a land surveyor?"

He says it like he doesn't believe it.

"And you're a land developer," I counter, like I don't believe it.

Kaz is working for some alphabet government agency, I'm sure of it.

"Feig's been tellin' stories."

I tilt my head in acknowledgment.

"Where you from?" It's not an interrogation, technically.

"I have a place in New York."

"You don't look like a New Yorker."

I shrug. "Originally from Ohio."

That is met with an arched eyebrow and a long draw of whiskey.

I was born and raised in Toledo. My father drove long-haul until his back gave out, and then he drove anyway because there was no alternative. My mother worked the Holiday Inn front desk for twenty-two years and knew every guest's name by the first morning, and none of them ever knew hers.

I was raised in a solidly working-class home and couldn't wait to get the hell out of Dodge. I did when I enlisted in the Army at eighteen, partly because I wanted out of my hometown and partly because no one in my family had ever gone to college, and I didn't yet know that was an option for someone like me.

My younger siblings both went to college—I paid for it, or rather, the US Army did, once they determined that my set of aptitudes was most useful in contexts that didn't appear in any recruitment brochure.

My younger brother was the first in my family to receive a degree in chemistry and is now a teacher in Orlando. My younger sister is the success story who moved to California to study at UC Berkeley and then climbed the corporate ladder at an IT company. She's made more money than most people dream of. I'm proud of both of them.

I was in special operations—the part of the military that lives in the gap between what governments authorize and what they need done anyway.

I was good at it the way some people are good at mathematics—not because I enjoyed it, but because the aptitude was there, and the institution

found it and put it to use.

I did two tours.

I was also part of three operations I will never discuss in any context because they are classified.

I could—and can—enter a room, read every person in it, identify the threat, the asset, the exit, and the variable—in that order—in under ten seconds. I can hold a cover identity for months without the seams showing. I can make a decision with incomplete information and live with the outcome, which is the rarest skill of all.

One that still comes for me sometimes at three in the morning, not with guilt exactly—guilt requires a belief that you could have chosen differently, and I'm not sure I could have—but with the weight of knowing exactly what you're capable of and having to decide, every day afterward, what to do with that knowledge.

I got out at twenty-eight with a clearance and the absolute certainty that the skills I'd spent years developing would not disappear just because I'd changed employers.

"How long are you planning to stay in town?" Kaz isn't exactly interrogating me.

"Until the work's done."

"The rodeo's a good idea. Wildflower Canyon needs it." He turns his glass slightly. "You do much of this kind of work? Site assessment?"

"Enough." I let that settle. "You?"

"I'm on the acquisition side. Different part of the process." He finally meets my gaze, as if now he needs to see my eyes. "Where were you before this?"

"Here and there."

"Military." It's not a question.

"Yes." Because he seems to be waiting, I add, "Now, private. You?"

His expression shifts—barely, but I've spent years reading *barely*.

"Similar."

We sit with that for a moment—two men who have said almost nothing and understood quite a lot.

"Army?" I ask.

He picks up his glass. "Does it matter?"

"Does it to you?"

That gets a reaction—not a smile exactly, but an emotion adjacent to it. He sets his glass down. “Marines. Two tours.”

“And then you built a company, sold it, and came here.”

He studies me carefully.

“Feig’s been tellin’ stories,” I repeat his words.

“He doesn’t seem to know your stories.”

That’s his way of telling me he’s checked up on me. I’d expect nothing less.

My backstory—a mix of truth and careful embellishment—satisfies a standard security check and reassures anyone who digs deeper.

“I got no stories,” I say easily. “The usual. Stayed too long in the military. Left and started my own business. I consult now. Travel the country.”

“No attachments.”

I let out a quiet chuckle. “Let’s say that no one’s asking me about where my truck was parked last night.”

He picks up his drink and raises it in a toast. “*Touché!*”

We clink our glasses.

We recognize each other.

I suspect he’s not entirely who he says he is, and he feels the same about me. We’re both from a world where recognition bypasses the usual machinery of getting to know someone and lands in a place where pretense is already thin. There are two ways to handle it—one is to deal with it, and the other is to let the chips fall as they may. The latter, I’ve always felt and experienced, is the best approach.

“Now for the more important question,” he drawls in mock seriousness. “Giants or Jets?”

“Neither. I’m from Ohio.”

“You live in New York.”

I give a small shake of my head. “I have a place in Chelsea, but that doesn’t make me a Jets fan.” I rest a forearm on the bar and lean forward a little. “In fact, nothing makes you a Jets fan. That’s a choice people make when something has gone wrong in their lives.”

Kaz laughs. It’s the first *authentic* emotion he’s allowed me to see. He narrows his eyes. “Bills?”

“Broncos. It’s a geographic loyalty. Non-negotiable.”

He drums his fingers on the bar counter. "I spent two years in New York when I was building the software company you mentioned. I was a Giants man. Felt like the right call for someone who wasn't planning to stay."

"You didn't intend to stay?"

He scans the bar. "Nobody plans to stay in New York. You either leave, or you stop planning."

I check my watch; it's five minutes past seven. Any minute now, she'll walk through those front doors.

"There's a whole biography in that qualification," I murmur.

And that's when it happens. She comes in with Bree Keaton. The room changes for me, and I think for Kaz, too.

Maybe he did stay the whole night at Bree's ranch, *fixin' her pump*.

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CHAPTER 4

taya



In Aspen, I had an office with a view of the mountains, a Herman Miller leather chair, and a Jacques Deneef mahogany desk—everything I’d once promised myself I’d have.

Now I have a desk Amos Langley gave me when he got a new one, and a folding metal chair that even Mac agrees looks unsafe. Instead of the original artwork the Aspen firm leased from museums, I have—just like I did in Aspen—a beaded tail bag my grandmother made for me when I passed the bar.

It hangs on the wall behind my desk, long and narrow, the panel tapering toward the bottom and ending in soft leather fringe. Tiny glass beads in red, turquoise, and cream stitched into geometric patterns—diamonds and stepped shapes, the lines so straight they look painted rather than sewn. Up close, you can see the hours in it, the patience, the way every bead sits exactly where it belongs. From a distance, the colors blur into something that reminds me of the land around Ignacio—red earth, blue sky, the pale spaces in between. Wíitsin said the colors were those of home, so I would never forget where I came from.

My office window overlooks the feed store. Instead of Maseratis, there’s usually a truck with a stock trailer—and once last week, an actual horse tied to the hitching post.

In Aspen, clients came in tailored suits, already knowing what outcome they wanted. Here, people come in wearing dust and worry and sit across from me and say: “I don’t even know if I need a lawyer, but something doesn’t feel right.”

There, I moved water on paper. Here, water rights mean whether a family keeps their land.

The office smells like coffee and old wood and, very faintly, the linseed oil I used on the windowsill last month when the paint started to crack. It's not a smell anyone would bottle. But it's mine in a way nothing in Aspen ever was.

I am understandably bitter about Aspen. About how my life took a turn I don't regret, but that hurt me in ways that left marks.

I don't think about Griffin often. I've gotten good at not thinking about him, which is a different thing from being over it.

Oh, I'm over Griffin. Absolutely. But I'm not over how I let a man diminish me when I was supposed to be better than that. Griffin Cole was brilliant and careful, nearly a decade older, and had a way of making me feel—for long enough—that I was exactly where I was supposed to be. That the life we were building together was real. That the way he used my work, my contacts, my judgment to advance his own position was just the natural overlap of two people in the same field, in love.

It took two years to name it—another year to leave.

The thing I'm most ashamed of isn't that I trusted him. People trust people—that's not stupidity, it's just being human. What I'm ashamed of is that I'm a lawyer. I argue for a living. I cross-examine. I find the weakness in every position. And I gave Griffin a pass I never would have given a witness on the stand.

I notice the time and know my eleven o'clock will be late, so I start the coffee. Clara Whitman is managing kids, a ranch, and a life that doesn't leave room for punctuality. I understand. That's the other thing about running McCready & Morningstar—I'm not billing my every precious hour.

In Aspen, everything was tracked in six-minute increments. Every phone call, every email, every moment accounted for and justified on a client's bill. Here, I charge flat fees when I can, contingency when it makes sense, and sometimes I send an invoice I know will arrive after calving season, when people actually have money coming in.

My job isn't merely to win cases. It's to keep people out of court when I can, write wills that make sense, set up LLCs so a ranch survives the next generation, and explain contracts in plain English instead of legal Latin. Since I started, I've drafted grazing leases, water-sharing agreements, and

right-of-way easements. I help people put land into family trusts, so the IRS doesn't take half of it when someone dies.

I review mineral rights contracts and well agreements, and the handwritten partnership deals neighbors make over coffee that hold up fine until someone dies and the kids want everything in writing. And most importantly—the first case of its kind for me, representing the defense instead of the challenge—I'm defending Clara Whitman's historic water rights in water court.

Clara walks in looking apologetic. I wave it off, pour a second cup, and set it in front of her before she's fully in the chair. When I first met her, I hated how she held herself—careful, upright, bracing for the next thing to go wrong. She'd come in with documents she'd organized herself, edges aligned, labeled in her neat schoolteacher handwriting. Deke would've done it on the ranch computer, she told me. He was good at the paperwork side. She was learning.

I keep telling her she's doing well because she needs to hear it.

"They sent more documentation?" she asks.

"This morning." I slide the filing across the desk. "It's the same play—flood us with paper until we can't keep up. I know how it works because I used to run it."

She looks at the stack with the expression of someone receiving a bill they already knew was too high. "So they just want to bleed me out."

"They're going to try." I lean forward. "We're not going to let them."

She meets my eyes the way she does whenever I say something definitive—wanting to believe it and afraid to because hope is something she can't quite afford. It does something to me every time.

"My hydrology expert gets qualified next week. Once his testimony is on record, their prior appropriation argument falls apart at the foundation. After that —" My phone buzzes. I silence it. "After that, they either settle or we go to court."

She's quiet. The tired kind of quiet that's been building for eighteen months.

"Will they settle?"

"Probably not. They've put too much into this project to settle." I pause. "The real question is whether there's a number that works for you. I have to ask."

“No.” Not sharp—just certain. The word of a woman who has already made this decision and doesn’t need to revisit it. “Deke’s grandfather filed that claim in 1948. I’m not selling it to make their golf course viable.”

“Then we go to the preliminary hearing first. They establish standing—show the judge there’s enough substance to litigate. They don’t have to prove they’re right, just that it’s worth a fight.” I watch her face. “After that, full discovery. Depositions, expert reports, the ditch company records, water commissioner reports, and aerial photographs going back decades. That’s where these cases are actually decided.”

Clara turns her coffee cup slowly in her hands. “And what are they going to try to prove?”

“One of three things. That your right is junior to theirs. That you abandoned it at some point. Or that your current use is different enough from the original decree that part of the claim is invalid.” I let that settle. “The first argument is weak—the 1948 documentation is solid. It’s the other two I’m watching.”

She goes still.

She stares into her coffee for a long moment. “There’s something I didn’t tell you.”

I set my pen down.

“A few months after Deke died, Tom Reyes helped out—worked the north pasture and used water off the upper ditch in exchange. He put up hay for me that winter, fixed the irrigation headgate, and helped with our 4H steer.” She looks up. “It was just neighbors helping neighbors.”

Of all the things I expected, it wasn’t this. Because this—a neighbor arrangement, no formal transfer—is exactly what a development company’s lawyers build an abandonment case around.

“Who else knows about this?”

“Tom. The kids, maybe. A couple of people from the ditch company, possibly.” She reads my expression. “How bad is it?”

“It’s manageable,” I say, and mean it. “But they could argue unauthorized change of place of use—that the water went to a different parcel without court approval. They could try to claim partial abandonment on the north pasture during the time it wasn’t irrigated.” I hold her gaze. “They’re going to look for exactly this kind of thing.”

“But we were still using it. The water stayed on the ranch.”

“Yes. And that’s our argument—it was agricultural use throughout, the water never left the property, no intent to abandon. Deke was dying, Clara. Judges are human. That matters.”

“What if we just...don’t mention it?” she whispers.

“I can’t hide it if they ask in discovery. That’s how lawyers lose their licenses.” I say it without heat, just clearly. “What I can do is make sure we’re never surprised by it in court. We get ahead of it. We build the record ourselves.” I pick up my stylus. “What’s the ditch company showing for those years?”

“For what?”

“Delivery records. Who ordered water, when, which headgate. If Tom was running water off your upper ditch, there’s probably a notation somewhere.”

The color drains from her face. “You’re saying there’s a paper trail?”

“In water law, there’s always a paper trail.” I hold her gaze. “In the West, water leaves a record longer than most marriages.”

She sits with that for a moment, and almost smiles, and then doesn’t. “I can ask.”

“Tell me the company. I’ll start digging.”

“Cottonwood Ditch. Jeb runs it. Honestly, Taya—I’d be shocked if he’s kept records of anything.”

“Men like Jeb always keep records,” I tell her. “Maybe not on a computer. But somewhere there’s a notebook, a ledger, a box of index cards. And in water court, a handwritten delivery log from 1972 is as good as anything printed this morning.”

We wrap up twenty minutes later. I walk her out, watch her truck pull away, and stand in the doorway with my hand on the frame and the cold mountain air coming in.

I need coffee.

I go to Wild Coffee, four doors down. There are plenty of things about Wildflower Canyon that are nothing like Aspen, but when it comes to coffee, I have zero complaints. They use Panama Geisha beans, known for their tea-like body and intense jasmine and stone-fruit aromas. This was clarified for me the first time I came in, when my eyebrows shot up at the price of a cup.

“You can, of course, get our specialty-grade Arabica for half the price,” Vernie Meyer—who, for reasons no one has adequately explained, is called

Hellion—told me, in a tone that suggested I would be revealing myself to be a lesser human being.

I push through the door into the smell of espresso and something baking, already running through the hydrology deposition, the upstream diversion records, the three things I need to draft before five—

And then I stop.

Mason Brooks is at the counter.

I met him last night at Blackwood Prime. Before that, he was just the man at The Rusty Spur who caught my attention without even trying. Last night was a handshake and a hello, a brief introduction before Kaz and Bree started arguing again—which they do with alarming regularity.

I suspect it's because they're holding off the inevitable. Kaz keeps her at arm's length, treating her like his friend's niece instead of the woman he watches when he thinks no one is paying attention.

Mason turns at the sound of the door—the way people do in small rooms—and we spend half a second deciding whether to acknowledge each other or pretend we didn't just make eye contact.

We both decide to acknowledge it.

"Counselor," he greets.

It's not what I expected, and it lands with a small, unexpected warmth, like an endearment.

"Mr. Brooks."

I step up to the counter and order my usual—an Americano, black, no ceremony—and turn to find him still there, cup in hand, in no apparent hurry to be anywhere.

"Maybe if we spent some time together, you wouldn't call me mister." He gestures toward the small tables by the window, casual enough to make it easy to say no.

I don't have time to sit and chat over coffee. I have a deposition to prep, a motion to draft, and Clara Whitman's case file spread across my desk, waiting for me.

"I have fifteen minutes before my next appointment."

It's a lie. I don't have an appointment. I also don't have fifteen minutes.

We take the table by the window, overlooking Main Street, where Pryor Feed Store hums through its midmorning business, and someone's horse trailer blocks half the road.

Mason sets his cup down and turns his attention outside. “How long have you lived here?”

“Six months.” I wrap my hands around my cup. “You?”

“Less than a week.”

“What do you think of it?”

Most people answer reflexively—beautiful, so peaceful, the mountains—the tourist answer, but he takes his time, looking at the street as if actually considering.

“It knows what it is,” he says finally.

His insight surprises me.

Wildflower Canyon is what it is, and it’s not pretending to be something else. Not like Aspen, trying to turn itself into a playground for the elite, borrowing style and purpose from some chalet-filled town in Switzerland or France.

I sip my coffee and wrinkle my nose as if in thought. “Is that Dōgen?”

He quirks an eyebrow.

“Dōgen was a Zen master who—”

“I know who Dōgen was,” he cuts in smoothly. “He argued that existence itself is a *place* where sentient beings and insentient things are deeply intertwined in a single expression of reality. The idea being that the world is aware of itself.”

I let my surprise show before I can stop it.

Amusement flickers in his eyes. “Didn’t think a land surveyor would know of a thirteenth-century Japanese philosopher?”

I smile. “How’s the rodeo project coming along?”

He huffs a quiet laugh. “Is that really what you want to talk about?”

“I have a feeling your knowledge of philosophers might outpace mine.”

Oh God, I’m flirting with him.

A hint of a smile touches his mouth. “The rodeo project is going fine. We’re doing assessment work. It’ll take a few weeks.”

Of course. He’s only passing through. A small, unwelcome flicker of disappointment runs through me. “And after?”

“Depends on where my next contract comes from.”

I nod and take a sip of my Americano.

“You’re a water rights lawyer, from what I understand.”

“From what you understand,” I echo. “You’ve been asking about me.”

He doesn't flinch. "Small town. Feig talks. I listen." A beat. "It's a habit."

I hold his gaze. "The listening?"

"Is that a problem?"

"Depends on what you do with what you hear."

He finishes his coffee and sets the cup down.

My fifteen minutes are up—and so, apparently, is whatever time he's given me. Irrational as it is, a flicker of disappointment I can't quite justify courses through me. He hasn't said or done anything to earn it.

"I should go." I push back my chair.

He stands when I do, which is an old-fashioned thing to do. It charms me more than it should. "I'll let you get to it."

I pick up my cup. "The rodeo project...it'll be good for the town, if it comes together."

"That's what people keep telling me."

"It's true." I pause at the door. "Don't let Feig oversell the timeline. He's optimistic."

The corner of his mouth lifts, easy and unguarded. "I noticed that."

I step out into the cold and walk back to my office. I sit down at my desk and look at Clara Whitman's file spread out in front of me.

The deposition. The motion. The five things I need to finish before five.

I should get to it.

But I give myself a minute to settle, because as uneventful as that conversation with Mason was, it left something behind—something I don't entirely mind.

CHAPTER 5

mason



As I drive to Aspen, the roads are clear, the sky is doing something theatrical with the light, and I spend most of it trying not to think about Taya Morningstar, which means I spend most of it doing exactly that.

How is it that a woman I talked to in my life for no more than fifteen minutes is taking up so much real estate inside my head?

I have no answer that makes sense. It's all irrational shit, like chemistry and past-life connection.

I pass a minivan doing forty in a sixty-five. A family—three kids in the back, somewhere between two and ten. The father looks hassled. The mother, who is behind the wheel, looks worse.

What's between Taya and me is subtle—a tension that manifested loudly at Wild Coffee, where I was waiting for her. She usually gets a cup of coffee between noon and one in the afternoon, so I knew she'd come by.

My intention was to talk, flirt, and ask her out to dinner.

I did talk to her. We did flirt. But I didn't ask her out because when you meet someone who is on the exact same wavelength as you, so much so that they can see you and you can see them, it screws with your head.

It definitely screwed with mine.

Snap out of it, Brooks!

She's a job. She doesn't know that, but you do. So, the fact that she's attracted to you is a positive.

But my being just as attracted to her is *not*.

I slow down as 82 becomes Main Street, turning over how I'm going to handle the Taya situation. I brought up the fact that she was a lawyer—that's something. A setup to get to the Whitman case, which I'd have done over dinner. The dinner I didn't ask her to.

She doesn't seem the type to blurt out case strategy just because she likes a man. Which means I need the dinner.

I've slept with marks before. I don't have a problem with it as long as it's consensual and everyone's having fun. I make no claims about emotional involvement—that's a line I don't cross. The question is whether I can keep it that clean with her.

I turn on my right blinker and get on South Galena Street.

Of course, I can keep it clean.

If we fuck, we fuck. No harm, no foul. She has some fun. I have some fun. I get what Jessup needs. And then I'm gone—just some guy who passed through, took her to dinner, and moved on.

I turn left onto East Dean Street.

The thought sits wrong before I've finished having it. A blip in her life. I'll just be a blip.

I don't like that.

I hand the keys of the rental truck to the valet outside the St. Regis.

Senator Otis Jessup is staying here for the week, in a suite that runs four thousand a night and looks exactly like every other four-thousand-a-night suite in every luxury hotel in every mountain town in the American West—pale stone, reclaimed wood, a view of the Rockies that costs extra. The whole place is designed to make you believe money is the natural state of things, and everything else is a failure of imagination.

Jessup's man is waiting in the lobby and takes me up without a word. I haven't seen anyone from Wildflower Canyon, but the valley is small, and the precaution is real—my connection to Jessup stays quiet.

The senator is standing by the window when I walk in, in a silk robe, a drink in hand. It's very Hugh Hefner—his way of making it clear I'm the help.

Like I give a fuck.

I work for men like Otis Jessup—men who think they have power. But when something actually needs to get done, they come to people like me who are morally flexible, efficient, and willing to get our hands dirty, so they don't have to.

They think they own me.

It's the other way around.

I decide how much help they get and what kind. I let them win when it suits me—when they pay me enough.

"Mason." He says my name with a warmth of ownership. "Appreciate you making the drive."

"Senator." I take the chair he gestures toward.

I don't take the bourbon he offers. "I'm driving."

He saunters to the couch that's across from me and takes a seat. He's a man who behaves as if he's never been uncomfortable in a room in his life. Silver-haired, fit as money tends to make a man, with a smile that he's been told is charming for four decades—and has taken it as fact.

"So." He sets his glass down. "I wanted to get an update from you on our situation in Wildflower Canyon."

"I've been there a week."

He arches an eyebrow.

"Senator, what is it that you want to know? If you could be precise, I can give you an answer. If you want a general update—that ain't happening."

Irritation makes his eyes narrow. He's not used to disobedience. Well, he can go fuck himself.

"Do they suspect why you're in town?" he grits out.

I refrain from rolling my eyes. "Senator, if they suspected, I wouldn't be doing my job. I have a legitimate reason to be there."

"Which is?"

I let out a long, deliberate breath. "In this line of work, Senator, the less you know, the better for you and for me."

He gives me a withering glare, but Senator Otis Jessup didn't get to where he is by losing his temper at the wrong time, and this would indeed be a miserably erroneous time to do so because he can feel my back is up, because I've let him know it, which was intentional.

"Have you made contact with Taya Morningstar? She's the one we want to tap." He chuckles now at the *double entendre* he accidentally (or not) let slip.

"Yes." I don't give him details. I don't give anyone details.

He sighs but comes to terms with how I work and maybe even appreciates my discretion. I won't talk about my work with anyone—not

even to the person who hired me.

How careful can one be? In my line of work? Never enough.

“I know you’re busy and probably didn’t like being summoned here.” He pauses to give me space to reassure him that I don’t mind being *summoned*, but I do mind, so I give him a blank stare.

He nods slowly and continues, “This case has gotten me into a stranglehold. We thought it would be won and done by now. The Whitman woman would take the money, and that would be the end of the story. But then she doesn’t want the money...she wants to keep her fucking water rights. She finds this lawyer who used to be on the other side...our side at a law firm down here in Aspen, but... anyway, according to our lawyers from Texas, this Taya Morningstar woman is formidable in court. Wins more cases than she loses.”

He has a file on Taya as well, and that does not sit well with me. I have no idea why, because it isn’t a surprise that he’s had her investigated. I just don’t like it.

“If she wins”—he closes his eyes and shakes his head as if even the thought is debilitating—“it sets a precedent that makes *things* considerably more complicated.”

He’s being deliberately vague as if I don’t know how he’s connected to the High Mesa Development Group. Sure, there are three layers of holding companies between it and Jessup’s son-in-law—but a nosey bastard like me knows *things*.

High Mesa Development Group wants to consolidate ranch land in the Wildflower Canyon valley, as they have in a couple of other places in Colorado and several in Montana and Wyoming. They know, as I do, that water rights are the load-bearing wall of the whole structure. They can’t build what they want to, can’t rezone what they want to rezone, if the water belongs to ranching families who’ve held it since 1948 and have a lawyer who knows exactly how to prove that legal fact.

“You said you want her case dismantled,” I remind him softly. “And I’m working on it. But these things take time.”

Jessup leans back into the sofa. “I get it! But don’t take too much time. The preliminary hearing is scheduled for late summer, and I want the Morningstar woman to be looking down the barrel by then so she will encourage her client to settle. We just need to know what her strategy is.

Her theory of the case. Our legal team is excellent...but a little extra light would be appreciated.”

He says this the way you’d ask someone to pass the salt.

“As I said, these things take time.”

“You have until the end of summer.” He takes a long sip of bourbon. “I understand you’ve already made some useful introductions.”

This is the part where he shows me his.

I wait.

“Kaz Chase mentioned you,” he says, reading my expression with the satisfaction of a man who enjoys knowing *things*.

Kaz has been known to work with land development companies, so his knowing Jessup isn’t surprising. What is surprising is that he mentioned me, and that they have that kind of direct line. I haven’t mapped that connection yet. That’s useful as well as mildly inconvenient.

I shrug. “Wildflower Canyon is a small town. People talk.”

“That they do.” Jessup smiles.

The door opens behind me.

I know, before I turn, from the way Jessup’s smile changes—becomes more plastic, the version he wears for an audience—that it’s his wife.

Celeste Jessup is forty-four, blonde, the way women are when they’ve been wearing their hair in a certain way long enough that nobody remembers otherwise.

If memory serves me right, and it usually does, she enters a room like a woman who has spent two decades making sure she’s always the most attractive person in it.

She’s good at achieving her goal. I’ll give her that.

“Ah, Mason, here is Mrs. Celeste Jessup,” her husband announces with just enough of a sneer that tells me this couple is never going to get divorced; they’re just going to live in their own toxic filth.

I rise, nod. She sees me and doesn’t miss a beat.

“Mason Brooks.” She goes on tiptoe, brushes my cheek with her lips, and sets her hand on my arm in a caress. “It’s been too long.”

“Celeste.” I keep my voice even.

I met Celeste two years ago, before this job, before Jessup was anything to me except a name in someone else’s file. It was at a fundraiser at a Georgetown townhouse, more bourbon than I usually drink, a woman who made it very clear what she wanted, and was right about me wanting it, too.

We spent a weekend together—mostly unclothed.

She likes her champagne Bollinger and her fucking inventive. Gives excellent head, enjoys it even, and looks damn good naked.

She's the kind of woman you do in D.C. No complications. At least, I'd thought at the time.

The complication is now behind her, holding a drink.

"You didn't tell me you work with Mason." She settles into the couch next to her husband with the ease of a long habit. Her breasts push up against Jessup's arm as she plants one on his mouth.

The senator smiles at me, his eyes keen with knowledge. He knows I've fucked his wife. "Darling, I didn't know you knew him."

There's nothing threatening in how he holds my gaze.

Jessup is not a jealous man—he's a man who's made his calculations about his marriage and arrived at a functional place, which is the same calculation Celeste has made about it. They suit each other. That kind of arrangement always produces the same texture of unhappiness: cushioned, chronic, invisible to everyone except the two people inside it.

I recognize it because I lived the non-cynical version of it with my ex-wife, Blair.

Celeste studies me the way she did in Georgetown—interested, available, and utterly unconcerned that her husband is sitting right next to her.

I am not interested.

Not because of Jessup—I'm not in a position to claim any moral high ground there.

It's because mixing someone like her with a job is the kind of variable that turns clean work messy—and ends careers.

Or worse.

"How long are you in Aspen?" she asks me, her eyelashes fluttering.

"I leave as soon as I'm done talking to your husband."

She accepts this with a small smile. "Darling, maybe you can ask Mason to stay longer."

"Maybe another time, darling," her husband retorts smoothly.

She pouts but lets the matter go. No boy toy for her this time.

He won't talk business with her in the room; neither will I, so I leave right after.

Jessup shakes my hand at the door and tells me he has every confidence, which is what men like him say when they've bought someone and are confirming the transaction. Celeste touches my arm again on the way out—brief, proprietary, a reminder that she hasn't forgotten.

I take the elevator down alone and pause in the St. Regis lobby—pale stone, reclaimed wood, women who look like Celeste, men who look like Jessup, the whole place humming like a circus where money performs.

I think about Blair because spaces like these were ones she enjoyed—even if she found them vapid. They were like a guilty pleasure.

I don't think of my ex-wife with grief but with clarity.

She told me, near the end, that I was the most competent person she'd ever met and the least present. She didn't say it as an accusation, just as a fact that she'd learned during our time together.

She wasn't wrong then. If she said it now, she wouldn't be wrong either.

That competence opened doors—and built a life that, from the outside, looked like a man who'd made his choices and was fine with them.

What I hadn't built was anything that required me to stay in one place long enough for it to matter—to be present.

The highlight of our divorce was the absence of a fight. That was the saddest part for her. After two years of marriage, we sat across from each other in a lawyer's office and divided things with the same civil competence we'd applied to everything else. And that was that.

I push through the revolving door of the hotel into the Aspen cold.

The drive back to Wildflower Canyon takes an hour and a half, and by the time the road narrows and the canyon closes in around me, the tension in my chest releases, slightly, in a way I haven't figured out yet.

I've worked in a lot of places.

Cities around the world.

Places that hum with the business of being important.

I know how to move through them, how to find the room within the room, how to make myself useful and then invisible.

This is different.

Wildflower Canyon doesn't hum.

It *sits*.

The mountains hold it on three sides, and the sky is enormous in a way that cities train you not to notice, and the town itself—Main Street, the Horseshoe Diner, The Rusty Spur with its cracked mirror behind the bar—

has the quality of a place that knows exactly what it is and has made its peace with that.

It's the kind of place people live in.

I have not, in fifteen years, lived anywhere I'd describe that way.

The Ridgeline Inn is at the north end of Main Street, a three-story Victorian that a couple from Denver bought six years ago and restored with more love than sense and got right. My room has a window that faces the mountains, a quilt that weighs about twelve pounds, and a radiator that ticks in the night like it's thinking. It smells like such inns do, of lavender sachets and clean wood oil.

I drop my keys on the nightstand and sit on the edge of the bed.

Somewhere in town, Taya Morningstar is working a case that I've been paid to dismantle.

I think about Jessup's hands. The gesture of a man asking for something small.

I think about Blair saying *I'm competent and not present*.

I think about the way Taya paused at the door of Wild Coffee and said, "*Don't let Feig oversell the timeline*," like she wanted me to know I was someone worth a piece of honest advice. Like I'd earned something minor and real.

After a while, I lie back on the bed and stare at the ceiling, my thoughts still turning.

My life, measured out in hotel rooms, other people's problems, and the work of making inconvenient things disappear. Years of it. Good money. No complaints I'm entitled to make.

I just hadn't expected Wildflower Canyon.

I hadn't expected to drive back into it at dusk and feel—though I'm not going to examine why tonight—a sense of returning.

The radiator ticks.

I close my eyes and tell myself I'll figure it out in the morning.

Spoiler alert: *I don't*.

CHAPTER 6

taya



I push through the door of Buck's Mercantile, shopping list in hand, slightly irritated with myself because I forgot to order coffee beans online. Now, I have to pay Jay Buck's markup, which is the tax you pay for the convenience of not driving to Durango or God forbid, Aspen.

The mercantile is a store that has been making the same decisions about where to put things for forty years and sees no reason to revisit them.

Hardware in the back left.

Dry goods center right.

A refrigerated case along the east wall that hums as if it hasn't been upgraded since the eighties.

Rope, nails, motor oil, and locally made jam share the same aisle. Why? Because it's been done that way since Jay's grandpappy's time.

Jay is sweeping the front stoop when I arrive. He's a solid man in his early fifties who has an unhurried efficiency about him. After all, he's been running this store for decades and will not be rushed by the modern world.

He nods at me.

"Afternoon, Taya."

"Afternoon, Jay."

My attention is drawn to the *new* ice cream and pastry place next door, where a group of middle school kids is crammed into the booths, loud and varied, with someone's backpack already knocked onto the floor.

Laughter spills out every time the door opens. I pause for half a second to watch the ease of a town going about its own business on an ordinary weekday.

The Lick opened three years ago, but is still called the *new* ice cream place, which is weird since there is no *other* ice cream place in Wildflower Canyon.

It sits next door to Buck's Mercantile on Main Street, a narrow storefront that used to be a tack repair shop and now smells like waffle cones and brown butter. Wren Foss, who moved here from Glenwood Springs with a pastry degree and what she describes as a grudge against *big* ice cream, makes everything from scratch.

On Saturdays, she serves a flavor called Canyon Mud that has a thirty-person waitlist, which is considerable in a town the size of Wildflower Canyon.

I know all of this because Joy told me, and Joy knows everything about every food establishment within twenty miles...or maybe a hundred, because she also knows where you can eat in Aspen better than I do, and I lived there.

I grab a basket and start down the aisles, building dinner in my head as I go.

Brown rice.

Devil's Slip 'n Slide hot sauce, made by a Núuchiu from Ignacio. It costs a pretty penny, but it's good enough that I splurge and use it sparingly—partly because of the price, mostly because it'll take your head off if you're not careful.

A bag each of yellow and blue dried hominy. The weather calls for posole, and once I make it, I can have it for a couple of days or more.

Pork shoulder, cut into thick chunks.

Garlic. Yellow onions. Fresh cilantro. Limes.

Green Pueblo chiles—grown in the Arkansas River Valley—are meaty, bold, with a heat that lingers instead of burning out.

I grab a handful, then reach for the Hatch chiles Jay gets in from New Mexico, because I like the mix.

Dried Chimayó red chiles for the broth—deep, earthy, the kind of flavor that tastes like it took time to build.

Two cans of black beans, because not every meal has to be a project.

Blue cornmeal. I still make my own tortillas when I have the time.

Then I veer and pick up a box of bronze-cut pasta—the kind that holds sauce properly.

San Marzano tomatoes. Jay might mark things up, but he gets the good stuff.

Parmesan that costs more than it should.

The good olive oil—something Jay started stocking a year ago when health food made its way to Wildflower Canyon, and people suddenly developed strong opinions about cooking fats.

I stand there for a second, taking in everything in my basket.

Half of it is the food I grew up with.

The other half is the life I built somewhere else.

None of it feels like a contradiction anymore.

With the basket growing heavier with each step, I reach the coffee section. Jay carries four options, which is three more than I'd expected when I moved here, when I become aware that someone came down the aisle behind me.

I know before I turn.

I can't explain how.

Sometimes you're meant to meet the people you meet.

Wiitsin used to say that.

Mason Brooks is holding a basket with one item in it—a six-pack of Bud. He comes to stand next to me and stares at the same four coffee options as me.

"Counselor."

"Mr. Brooks."

"Still with the mister?"

I shrug in response, my heart beating fast at his closeness. He wears cologne. Something spicy and musky.

Down girl! Your heart is still healing, no reason to mess with that process by getting involved with a man who is just passing through.

He glances at the shelves. "Is there a correct answer here?"

I point without hesitation. "Third from the left. Hawaiian Kona. Everything else is *okay*. That one is actually good."

He takes it off the shelf and puts it in his basket without hesitation.

"You shop here often?"

"For everything but coffee, and then only because I forget to order online. Jay's markup on coffee is criminal."

From the front of the store, I hear Jay call out, "I can hear you, Taya."

"I know, Jay."

Mason gives me an almost-smile—it lives at the corner of his mouth but doesn't commit. "He's not wrong to charge a premium. He's the only option."

"He knows he's the only option. That's the problem."

Jay Buck makes a sound that might be a laugh and might be a disagreement, or maybe...no, definitely both.

We drift down the aisle together as two people moving in the same direction in a small space, touching and not touching.

It's organic, this meeting and closeness. It's unsettling how much I like it.

"How's the case going?"

I frown enquiringly at him.

"The water rights case," he clarifies. "Someone at the Horseshoe mentioned it."

Everyone knows about Clara Whitman's travails, and everyone is sympathetic. "It's ongoing."

He nods. No follow-up.

It should mean nothing. He asked a question, and I gave him an answer. End of story.

And yet, I notice the absence of the next question—the question that should come, the question that usually does. It feels like a cross-examination that stops just short of the point. It's a technique—give the witness room, and they'll fill it.

I know this because I use it.

I don't fill it.

"Ah...I'm going to go pay for these." I dip my chin toward my basket.

He extends his hand.

"What?"

"I'm going that way as well. And your basket seems heavy. How about you carry mine and I'll carry yours?"

It's sweet. Really, really sweet.

So we exchange baskets.

"Just coffee and beer?"

"I'm staying at the inn, can't stand the shit coffee Gary makes, so I told him to give me a machine so I can make my own. The beer...well, sometimes you want to lie in bed and watch a ballgame, you know?"

I can picture him immediately, in bed, watching a game, relaxed, as he drinks his beer. And I'm lying next to him and—

Damn it, Taya! Snap the F out of it.

When we reach the register, Mason sets my basket down. I give him his, and he takes it and waits behind me.

Jay's gaze moves between us. He doesn't comment, which is comment enough.

Jay eyes Mason head to toe. "Been seein' you around."

"Yes, sir, you have."

"I'm Jay Buck. I own this place."

"Mason Brooks."

They shake hands.

"You're working with Brian." It's not a question. Jay knew who Mason was before he introduced himself.

A shadow of amusement flickers across his mouth. Again, it doesn't commit. "Yes, sir."

Jay nods. He scans a couple of items from my basket and then stops.

"You eaten at the Horseshoe yet, Mason?"

"A few times," Mason replies.

"Eunice treating you all right?"

"She's informed me of several things I didn't ask about."

A surprised chuckle slips out of Jay. "That's Eunice." He starts ringing up my stuff, now, with alacrity. "Last week, she wouldn't give me salt for my soup. Said I ate too much of it, and it wasn't good for my blood pressure, like I'm eighty or something."

"Did she check your blood pressure herself?" Mason asks in good humor.

"She tried. Woman has one of those new-fangled machines with her." Jay shakes his head. "I told her I'll take my chances with the salt."

Through the window, a fresh burst of noise erupts from The Lick—the school kids, someone shrieking with laughter, the door swinging open, and three of them spilling out onto the sidewalk before someone pulls them back in.

Jay watches them with the dry affection of a man who has been watching generations of Wildflower Canyon folk grow up through this window.

I hand over my card.

“You going to Mav’s thing next Friday?” Jay asks me.

Mav loves a good party, and he’s throwing an end-of-season barbecue up at Kincaid Farms. Every so often, I’ve been told, he does a whole spread.

“Yes.”

“I hear he’s going to try a new barbecue rub, too, this time.”

“I heard the same thing.”

“Elena is not happy about that.”

“I heard that, too.”

“You’re welcome as well,” Jay tells Mason and then grins at me, “if someone invites you, that is.”

It’s the least subtle thing I’ve heard in this town in six months, and that’s saying something.

I know Mason isn’t looking at me, and I’m not looking at him—and the space between those two deliberate absences is deafening.

“Ah...you’re most welcome to...ah...come along...be there.”

Good God!

I glare at Jay, who doesn’t care that I do. But I know Mav—for a party like this, he’ll say the more the merrier.

“Thanks. May I get back to you on it?” His words are even, but his eyes are bright with laughter.

Jay nods as if this is settled.

Mason picks up my grocery bags and his—a gentleman.

We walk out together.

“I’m there.” I jerk my head toward my Wrangler.

“Mine is next to yours.”

I see a pick-up truck with Wyoming license plates—a small indication it’s a rental.

Our cars are parked together. Like destiny intended it.

Taya, this is just the geometry of a small town where everything is within two blocks of everything else. That’s all. The universe is not giving you a sign.

The Lick kids have migrated to the sidewalk and are debating something with the conviction of young people who have never been wrong about anything and know everything.

“The Kincaid thing on Friday,” Mason prods as he puts my bags in the trunk of my car.

“It’s a good time.” I arrange the bags so they won’t fall and spill their contents. “Half the valley shows up. Mav does brisket.”

“And he’s trying a new rub, but Elena is not happy about it,” he interjects.

He is a truly handsome man. Not pretty boy handsome like Kaz, who would hate hearing that, but it’s the truth. No, Mason is...just ruggedly handsome.

God! Next, I’ll be quoting Elsie Silver!

“Elena is Elena Wilder. She and Mav are close.” I pause.

“Maverick Kincaid is married to Aria—she owns Longhorn.”

I let out a soft laugh. “You’ve got the intel on everyone! Yes, Mav is married to Aria, and Elena is married to Duke...Duke Wilder. They own Wilder Ranch, which I think is the largest in the state.”

“Ah.” He closes the trunk of my car and leans against it. He’s holding his bag in one hand and is gazing at me intently.

I swallow.

“I should go,” I mumble.

It’s time to go. It’s chilly, and I’m cold.

No, you’re not. You’re all heated up, you horny bitch!

“I’d like to take you out for dinner. Are you free this weekend?”

His directness is its own form of disarming. No, maybe we could go out—or, if you’re not busy—just the question, clean and placed, waiting.

I am not ready to be involved with a man, not after what I’ve just been through.

I hear my grandmother’s voice then.

“You have to learn to live in the present, Taya. The past is gone. The future isn’t here. All you have is now, so grab it with both hands.”

She advised me just to be where I was at times and not think about every possible consequence of an action.

“Not this weekend.”

He nods, his lips tight.

“I...I can do Monday evening,” I blurt out.

His lips twitch slightly as he holds out his hand. “Give me your phone.”

I tilt my head and consider his request for a moment and then unlock my device and give it to him.

His fingers move easily on the screen. He has nice hands. Strong hands. They’d be—

“Here.” He hands my phone back. “I’m in your contacts, and I sent myself a text, so I have your number.”

“Okay.” There’s something about this man that makes me feel like an ingénue instead of a grown woman. I never felt this way with Griffin or any of my other boyfriends.

With them, I was always the one making decisions, the one in charge. But with Mason, I can just say okay, and somehow, I know it will be.

“Send me your address,” he orders as he straightens.

Okay, Mr. Cocky, slow the F down.

He grins and adds, “Please.”

I can’t help it. I smile back at him.

“I’ll pick you up around six on Monday. Does that work?”

“Yes.”

“See you soon, Counselor.”

He walks away, and I hurriedly get into my Wrangler and make a valiant and successful effort not to watch him get into his truck.

I drive home.

I bought a small cottage on the east bench, about a mile and a half out of town—a 1940s rancher that the previous owner fully renovated, blending modern functionality with its original ranch-house character.

It sits on two acres of scrub and sage with a creek running along the back of the property that freezes solid in the winter and runs fast and cold by spring.

The views face west.

Every evening, without trying, I get the mountains blushing pink at the edges and the canyon below filling with the soft dark of dusk.

It’s the first home that feels like it’s mine.

I owned my apartment in Aspen, but that felt performative. And I still have my grandmother’s house in Ignacio—but that’s hers. I’m just the guardian.

It’s on tribal land, so technically it’s held in trust, but it’s mine through her, and I keep it as my primary address to maintain that line. I go back often enough that it still feels like home—and when I’m not there, it doesn’t sit empty.

A younger cousin stays there some of the time while she’s working on her PhD. It gives her a foothold, and it gives me some peace of mind

knowing there's family in the house—someone to keep the proverbial kettle on and a literal light in the window.

This one is mine in a different way—chosen, not inherited.

I brought everything I had in my Aspen apartment, and somehow the designer furniture, the ranch-style cottage, the mountains—they all fit together, like they're part of the same whole—an amalgam of me.

I pull into the gravel drive and sit in the Wrangler for a moment.

I just said yes to dinner with a man who makes my body react in ways I don't entirely trust.

Damn it!

I grab the grocery bags and head inside.

The house settles around me the way it always does—quiet, solid, familiar.

I set the bags on the wide wooden kitchen counter and start unpacking, one thing at a time.

I turn on the Bose speaker from my phone and let *Libiamo, ne' lieti calici* from *La Traviata* fill the air. It feels apropos as Violetta and Alfredo talk about drinking from joyful cups, urging everyone to embrace pleasure, love, and wine because life is fleeting.

I hum along with Maria Callas as I put away the things I bought.

Coffee beans go into the airtight can next to my De'Longhi espresso machine.

The brown rice into the glass jar in the small pantry.

The Devil's Slip 'n Slide hot sauce gets a place of honor in a cabinet above the range, next to the salt cellar and the olive oil.

I line up the dried hominy—yellow and blue—beside the canisters of flour and cornmeal in the pantry. The blue cornmeal goes into its tin, which I use when I have the time to make tortillas from scratch.

The chiles—Pueblo green, Hatch, and the dried Chimayó reds—get spread out on the counter for a moment before I sort them, fresh in the crisper, dried in the pantry.

Pork shoulder goes into the fridge.

Cilantro into a jar of water by the sink.

Limes in the bowl that always seems to have something green and bright in it.

The pasta, the good kind, goes into the cabinet above the stove.

San Marzano tomatoes next to it.

Parmesan into the fridge, wrapped carefully.

I finish with the olive oil, setting it on the shelf by the stove, within reach.

The kitchen is set the same way the rest of the house—part practical, part deliberate, nothing wasted.

Open shelves with stacked white dishes.

Cast iron hanging within easy reach.

Knives kept sharp and visible.

Beadwork I inherited from my grandmother, who inherited it from hers, hangs just past the doorway, where I can see it from the counter.

“What should I cook tonight?” I ask myself.

Posole, I decide. It’ll take time—and I can use that time to think.

I open the wine fridge I brought over from Aspen and had installed in the kitchen, pull out a bottle of Barolo. It’ll go nicely with the posole.

I open it and pour myself a glass.

Like Julia Child always said—wine first, then cooking.

Maybe I should invite him home for dinner, I think for a moment. Maybe—

My phone rings, and a feminine automated voice cuts off the music and says, “Call from Griffin Cole, answer it?”

I sigh and pick up my phone.

I don’t want to hear from him, but my old firm still owes me money—the bonus they withheld after Griffin unceremoniously gave me the boot from his life and the firm—so I take it.

“Taya.” His voice is the same.

It’s incredible how his voice sounds exactly the same, despite everything he said to me with it. The warmth when he says my name, the careful intelligence in how he speaks—it’s all unchanged.

Everything else isn’t.

“How are you?” There is warmth in his tone, like he has a right to ask me a damn thing.

“Is this about the bonus payment?” I am unable to keep the edge out of my words.

People say getting over someone is a victory. Not feeling anything for them is a victory. Not letting them hurt you is a victory.

I don’t know about that.

I was hurt. I can admit that. And every time I think of him, there's still a sharpness to it—because he made a fool of me.

I'm fine with that. Now.

If I missed him—missed us—it would be a problem. But I don't, and in fact, what I feel is simpler than that. Griffin is a man without integrity, and I don't need to get over that.

He's silent for a moment—it's his way of protesting.

He doesn't like my directness. He liked the version of me that softened things, that gave him the diplomatic answer, that had learned over our time together to make his reality comfortable for him. I spent a long time being that version.

I am not her anymore.

"I've been thinking about you," he says.

Disgust crawls up my spine. He's now back with his wife, and he's hitting on me?

What a douchebag!

At least, when we were together, he and his wife were separated.

Officially. I'm no woman's other woman.

"If that's the case, how about you send me my check?"

He ignores that, and I realize how much I dislike that he lives in his own world and talks about things only he cares about. He's a self-centered prick, and I was a moron.

"I heard you're in some ranch town doing basic legal work?"

"Griffin, if this isn't about—"

"Baby, you're better than that."

"I'm better than *you*," I snarl. How dare he make my life small? How dare he insult this life I have built?

He chuckles. "You've always been the better person, baby."

The endearment grates, and my nerve endings scream.

I sip my wine and walk to the tall windows and watch the beautiful mountains—they don't care about my emotional drama; they stand there stoically, millennium after millennium.

"I miss you." He blurts the words out, like he's been building up to them. "I know how things ended between us. But I think about you and I—"

"How does your wife feel about you missing me?"

"This isn't about her. This is about *us*."

Now, I'm amused, on top of being disgusted. "Buddy, there is no us."
"Baby...."

This man has some balls on him. He took my career away from me because his wife asked him to, making it a condition for reconciliation. I had to be gone so he wouldn't be tempted. Well, she obviously doesn't know her husband well enough.

"Griffin, if this isn't about my bonus check, I'm going to hang up." My voice is even, and I don't even have to put any effort into it.

Maybe this is the victory.

"That was—" He stops. Starts again. "I handled it badly."

Handled it badly?

Is that what he calls it? The future I'd built in my head—a floor I thought I was standing on—gone one morning, and I'm supposed to act like I'd known all along it wasn't load-bearing.

Suddenly, I know something.

An epiphany.

It wasn't the relationship that broke me. I could survive the relationship. It was that I didn't see it coming.

Me—a woman who cross-examines witnesses for a living, who finds the gap in every argument, the crack in every foundation, didn't expect the blow.

I had looked at Griffin Cole with the full force of my professional intelligence and seen exactly what he wanted me to see. I let that be enough—and the failure of that tool, the one I trust most, is what still rankles.

"I handled it badly," he says again, like the repetition makes it more effective—maybe even sufficient.

"Yes," I agree. "You did."

"I want to make it right."

I burst out laughing. "Send me my money, Griffin, and don't call again. If you do, I'll tell your wife."

I hang up, feeling rather good about myself.

CHAPTER 7

mason



Feig drives like a man who has somewhere to be and hasn't accepted that he might not get there on time—it's a kind of optimism I've noticed is general to him.

He talks the entire thirty minutes.

I let him.

"Biggest social event of the calendar outside of the Fourth of July," he says, for the second time since we left the inn. "Every rancher in the valley will be there. Mav buys every year. Duke shows up. Cade Mercer bought a steer last year—changed his life."

I raise an eyebrow.

He guffaws. "The steer had health issues. Now he's married to the vet."

Dr. Sarah Kirk. In the file.

My gaze drifts to the window.

The road runs south along the valley floor, mountains on either side, the creek catching light in flashes through the cottonwoods.

I wonder, without meaning to, if Taya is somewhere out there. She said she was busy this weekend, but not with what.

Stop thinking about her, Brooks. She's a job.

"So when I was going through the documentation for the rodeo site," I keep my tone conversational, "I didn't see anything about water rights. The permit was clean on access and zoning, but nothing about water allocation."

Feig nods vigorously. "That's because it's grandfathered in. The rodeo site sits on the old Hendricks parcel—had a small irrigation claim attached to it since the thirties. When Kaz bought the Hendricks spread three years

ago, the water rights transferred with the land. That's how it works in Colorado. The water stays with the land unless someone expressly severs it, and old Hendricks never did."

So, Kaz Chase owns the water rights on the rodeo site. Interesting.

"Isn't that risky?"

"Absolutely! That's why everyone's scrambling for senior rights right now. If you've got an early priority date in this valley, you're sitting on gold." He slows down behind a horse trailer. "I mean, two years ago, when it was dryer than a nun in a drought—people got fucked."

"But you have a plan," I prompt.

He grins and presses on the gas pedal when the horse trailer turns off onto a dirt road. "I sure do. An augmentation plan. We'll buy water on the market, maybe lease some shares from one of the ditch companies. It's all junior rights anyway. You just make sure you can replace what you use."

Across the American West, water rights are a high-stakes survival issue governed by "first in time, first in right," a doctrine that pits agricultural tradition against expansion, and ranchers against developers, one dry summer at a time.

"I thought for anything new, you need to get your rights in place." I am trying to get him to talk to me about Clara Whitman.

"Oh yeah." Feig takes the exit that says Cattle Auction Grounds. "New construction, new development—water comes before everything. Before permits, before groundbreaking, before you've even fully committed to the project." He shakes his head. "Killed more deals than I can count. Smart developers come in, and the first thing they do is sort their water."

"How does that work exactly if the rights go to the person who got it, I don't know, a hundred years ago?"

Feig glances at me, mildly surprised at the question but too pleased to have an audience to question it. "Well, the way it works is that whoever put the water to beneficial use first has the senior right—they get their water before anyone else in dry years. Junior rights get cut off first when the river runs low." He waves a hand. "So if you're planning something that needs guaranteed water every year—a resort, say, or a housing development with a golf course—you need senior rights, or you're rolling the dice every summer."

"And if there aren't any available senior rights to purchase?"

“Then you go after those that exist.” He says it plainly, without malice, the way a developer talks about these things when they’re not thinking about the people attached to the rights. “You challenge them. Argue abandonment—that the owner stopped using the water for its beneficial use. Argue that the use has changed from the original decree. Argue that the point of diversion is different. Water court is its own world. Cases take years. Costs a fortune.”

“Sounds like a way to run someone out.”

“It is.” He doesn’t flinch. “Not saying it’s pretty. But it happens. Smaller operations and family ranches can’t always sustain the litigation. They settle, take the money, move on.”

“Or get a good lawyer,” I say.

“Or get a good lawyer.” He turns at the sign toward the parking lot for the Livestock Auction Grounds.

“I met one the other day...ah....” I pretend not to remember her.

“Taya Morningstar?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, she’s the only lawyer around here now that Mac is slowing down.” He slows for a cattle gate being opened ahead of us. “She’s representing Clara Whitman. She runs Silverbell Ranch up in the north valley. Lost her husband about eighteen months back.”

“And...you think this Clara Whitman will be able to keep her rights?” I ask it casually like I’m only mildly curious.

“Who knows!” He downshifts. “The development company—High Mesa—they’re backed by some serious money out of Texas—they’re challenging her water rights. The ranch had it since 1948. Deke...that’s Clara’s deceased husband; his grandfather filed the original claim.”

“What’s the challenge based on?”

“Prior appropriation argument—they’re saying there’s an upstream diversion that predates her claim. But from what I hear from people who know these things, that’s thin.” He eases through the gate.

“Can they win?”

“The development company has real money and real lawyers.” He pulls into the parking area, a flat field already half-full of trucks. “They’ve probably already sunk millions into a project that depends on that water. Clara Whitman has Taya Morningstar—who’s excellent—but she’s running a one-woman shop against a Texas barracuda firm.”

He kills the engine.

“If I were their lawyer—which I’m not—I’d be looking hard at any years her use wasn’t consistent. Her husband got sick before he died. They had a bad season or two.”

He gets out, already scanning the crowd.

I stay in the truck for one additional moment and parse through what he’s told me: nothing *monumental*, but some new information about a claim regarding irregular use.

I file it carefully—something to give to Jessup’s Texan vultures to pick through.

Then I get out of the truck.

The auction grounds are exactly what I expect.

The lot is a spread of corrals, auction rings, and structures added over decades without a master plan, the whole thing growing organically, incrementally, and without vanity. The air smells of hay and cattle and woodsmoke from the barbecue that’s been running since before I arrived, judging by the quantity of smoke and the length of the line in front of it.

Half the valley is here. Maybe more.

I follow Feig into the crowd.

It’s cold despite the blue sky and the shining sun. It’s early spring, and the icy fingers of wind get into your collar no matter how you wear it.

Feig buys us coffee from a woman he calls Auntie. I figure they’re related until the next person in line calls her that, too. I’ve seen it before—on reservations, where titles like that mean respect, not blood.

My companion disappears into a scattering of men cut from the same cloth—businessmen in ranch country, but not cowboys or ranchers.

Coffee in hand, I do a quick recon of the place. There are clusters and connections in how certain people orient toward each other.

Ranching families in work gear.

The auction ring in the center, where the stock moves through, is fast and technical, watched with the seriousness of people for whom this is not entertainment but economics.

I find a place along the fence where I can see both the ring and the crowd.

Someone arrives, and the air shifts, like a change in weather.

The cause, I note, is Mav Kincaid.

He’s in my file—which is how I clock him.

The crowd adjusts around him, almost imperceptibly, pulled by the gravity of a man who owns a significant portion of this valley and knows it—carrying that weight without arrogance or apology.

He's big, dark-haired, with a physical ease that comes from spending your life working the land. His wife is at his side—Aria, her hand in his. I instinctively know that this couple holds hands because they mean it, not for the audience.

Behind them is Joy Kincaid in a burnt-orange jacket that has no business looking this good at a livestock auction. Beside her, half a step behind, is a man who is keenly aware of where Joy Kincaid is at all times and works hard not to show it.

He's not in my file, but he doesn't need to be. The way his attention tracks her. The ranch gear. The two coffees, one handed to her without comment, taken without acknowledgment—like it was always hers.

Hunt Blackwood. Wilder Ranch's foreman.

According to Feig, he and Kincaid's sister have something going on.

I recognize Duke Wilder because I looked him up, and he's with his wife, whom I have seen at Wild Coffee. She's the cowboy in the relationship. He used to be a suit. She's a horse woman through and through. You can see it in how she moves, talks, and scans the animals, ignores the people.

Three people converge on them immediately.

Elena walks away, leaving her husband to handle them, and he does it with the relaxed authority of someone who runs a hundred thousand acres and has gotten used to being the biggest bear wherever he is.

"Hey," Bree Keaton greets me like a long-lost friend. She slaps my shoulder. "How's it hangin'?"

I chuckle at that. "A little to the right these days."

She laughs and wags a finger at me. "Good answer."

"Bree, I got new cowboy boots," a young girl calls out as she runs toward us. The kid is maybe four. She's got a miniature cowboy hat that's slightly too big for her head. "See!" She kicks her red boots up.

"They are gorgeous, Evie." Bree crouches and gives the girl a hug.

A man and woman join her.

Cade Mercer and Dr. Sarah Kirk.

They popped up when I did basic research on Wildflower Canyon. The scandal of Congressman Landon Mercer may have died down, but it made a

whole lot of noise when it exploded.

Bree introduces me to Cade and Sarah. He's a big man, broad-shouldered, who likes to keep his arm around his new wife. She's honey-blond, with a focused, calm presence and a smile so wide I wonder if it's hurting her face.

They go their way, and Bree waves the catalog at me. "You buyin' anything?"

I shake my head. "I don't think I'm allowed to have a steer in my apartment in New York."

Her eyes widen. "Is that where you live?"

I nod.

"Joy used to live there, too."

I nod again because that detail is in my file, along with a police report she made and then withdrew about a boyfriend who gave her a date rape drug.

"Are *you* buying anything?" I turn her question back on her.

"No, she's not," I hear Kaz answer for Bree.

She turns around, shooting daggers. "Who are you to tell me how I run my ranch?"

Kaz tucks his hands in his pockets, almost as if, if he didn't, he might wrap them around Bree's neck...or other parts. "You don't need to buy anything right now. You need to focus on—"

"It's my ranch," she cuts him off as she plants both her hands on Kaz's chest and pushes. He doesn't move.

"When people said you both are highly entertaining, I didn't get it. But I do now," I interject in good humor.

They both look at me, annoyed.

I raise my hands, palms out. "Just sayin'."

"Bree, this isn't a good idea, and you...." Kaz trails off when Bree turns to me.

"He thinks I don't know good from bad. I am running a ranch—and it's profitable, and he treats me like a child." She holds up the catalog. "You forget, Kaz, my uncle ran a herd for twenty years. I know what a good Angus looks like."

They both fall silent and stare at each other.

"Fine." Kaz sighs. "Do whatever the fuck you want!"

With that, he walks away, his hands still tucked into his pockets.

We stand in silence, watching Mav Kincaid bid on a lot of Black Angus heifers with the economy of movement of a man who knows exactly what he's willing to pay. His paddle goes up twice, drops, and goes up once more.

He gets them.

Bree makes a face and lets out a groan. "I wasn't even going to buy anything. I just came to look, but then he says shit, and it gets my back up."

I stay tight-lipped. It seems like the right thing to do.

Bree wants to vent.

"I wish he'd just...you know, stop seeing me as Uncle Andy's niece and see me as...*me*. I'm like twenty-eight, and he treats me like a child."

Well, she kind of is. I'm nearly forty, and Kaz is probably a few years younger than me, so I can understand his conflict—his dead friend's niece, young enough to complicate everything.

But I wisely keep my mouth shut.

"Let's get something to eat," she suggests on a long-suffering sigh. "The barbecue tent is soon going to be too crowded to get through."

CHAPTER 8

mason



The barbecue tent starts serving at noon—brisket and ribs that have been smoking since before dawn, set on tables beside the corrals with the pragmatic abundance required to feed a crowd.

The whole event migrates from the auction ring to the tables, then to the open area between the barns, where a band is tuning up.

I don't know what I expected. Something more transactional, maybe. More purely economic. This is something else. This is a community performing its own continuity.

I get a plate of brisket and look for somewhere to stand to eat, finding—without being entirely surprised by it—that Taya Morningstar is twenty feet away.

She's in dark jeans and boots and a jacket the color of pine needles, talking to Joy with the ease of two people who have found their shorthand.

I want the same with her, I think out of nowhere.

I don't want the careful politeness of a new acquaintance—I want *comfort* with her; I want to give that to her.

She hasn't seen me yet.

I watch her for exactly as long as I can justify, which is not long.

Then I start moving...toward her because she is irresistible.

She sees me when I'm still a few steps away. Her expression shifts the way it did at Wild Coffee and then at Buck's—a brief recalibration, a decision made quickly.

"Mr. Brooks."

"Counselor." I nod at her friend. "Joy."

Joy looks between us with bright curiosity, like she has discovered something interesting and decided to be useful about it. There's a mischievous glint in her eyes when she says to no one in particular, "I need to find Aria," and then disappears with suspicious efficiency.

Taya watches her go. "She's not subtle."

"No," I agree. "She's not."

The problem is, neither am I when it comes to the only female lawyer in town.

Joy saw my interest in Taya. For the purposes of the work I'm doing here, that's useful—she'll assume I'm circling, which means she'll talk.

But it's not just the job keeping my attention on Taya.

It's vitally...*her*.

We stand side by side, watching the barbecue smoke drift north, the band kicking into *Cotton-Eyed Joe*. Several people walk up to the dance area.

"You follow cattle auctions?" she asks.

"No. This is my first."

Taya's mouth curves. "How's it going?"

"Bree was going to teach me, but then Kaz came along and...you know how that goes."

She laughs—it's authentic like the one I noticed at The Rusty Spur. "Oh, do I know!"

"I think those two need to just...you know!"

She grins. "Those two need to be left inside a closed room alone for a few hours. I have a feeling if we did that, they'd sort their differences out."

I jerk my chin in acknowledgment. "As long as the room has a bed."

She scoffs. "Those two don't need a bed."

She pushes some errant strands of hair off her face. She's braided her hair today. Her earrings are small silver drops set with turquoise, worn smooth from years of use.

I hold up my plate to her. "Would you like to share with me?"

She swallows. "I...I can get my own plate."

I hold her gaze. "I know you can."

She lets out a long breath.

I give her my plate. "How about you take this and find a place for us to sit, and I can go get some more food? Would you like something to drink?"

She studies me carefully and then picks up the plate of brisket. “I wouldn’t mind a beer. Something local they have on draft.”

I can’t stop looking at her.

She’s beautiful, and there’s something in her eyes that tells me she recognizes me, knows me. “Will do, Counselor.”

She finds us a quiet corner at the end of one of the long tables, and I find us more food and a pint each.

We eat, and we talk.

Carefully at first, the way we’ve talked before, but the cold air and the noise and the general loosening effect of being somewhere communal shifts it.

“You’re obviously not from around here—so where are you from?” she asks.

“Why would you say that?”

She lifts a shoulder and lets it drop. “You dress like *them*, but you’re not *them*.”

“Them?”

“Ranchers,” she explains. She picks up the plastic cup of beer her local draft is in. “I mean, your clothes are...*normal* for this part of the world. But you don’t have their swagger.”

“What do I have?”

“A different kind of walk.” Now, she smiles. “I’d say military.”

“You would?”

She laughs uncertainly. “I’m cheating now. Bree told me that you told Kaz that you’re ex-military.”

“I grew up in Toledo.”

She wrinkles her nose. “What was that like?”

“Exactly as you think, considering the look on your face,” I tease.

She grins, stabs her fork into a piece of meat. “You go back often?”

“Not at all. My parents are in Naples, Florida, now, and my brother is in Orlando. My sister lives in San Francisco.”

“Wow! Everyone’s spread out. Are you close?”

I tossed up my shoulders. “I guess. We see each other for Thanksgiving. For Christmas...sometimes, but it’s become less and less. Do you have siblings?”

I know she doesn’t, but I ask anyway to keep the conversation going.

I have revealed to her more than I normally do, and none of it was embellished.

It's a surprise—but then again, maybe not, considering this woman has a peculiarly mysterious effect on me.

She shakes her head. "Not...by blood. I was...ah, an only child, and my parents died when I was just a toddler."

"I'm so sorry." And I am because a sadness enters her eyes.

Her lips lift, but it's a fragile thing. "I'm lucky despite it. I was raised by my grandmother, the amazing Delia Morningstar."

She says it with pride, and she should.

Delia Morningstar isn't just a name you hear around Ignacio. She's known well beyond it—tribal councils and state offices. She was part of the team that helped bring the first National Museum of the American Indian in D.C. together. She did the kind of work that doesn't make much noise but changes things anyway.

"And now you're a lawyer. Went to Harvard, I hear."

That makes her giggle. It's not what I expected because she's so composed. She looks wildly happy that I mentioned Harvard.

"Quite something for a girl from a tribe to get there, isn't it?" She sets her fork down and picks up her beer. "People told me I was getting too big for my shoes...you know how they do, when they worry about you being disappointed?" I nod, and she continues, "But my grandmother...she was always on my side. When I got in, she behaved as if *of course I had*, because in her mind there was no other option."

I lean back, enjoying her. She's got big dark eyes, and I wonder how she is in court. Does she hide all her emotions? Because right now, she's letting me see everything.

"You like being a lawyer?"

She considers that question. "More than before."

I raise an eyebrow.

"I used to work at a law firm in Aspen. One of those fancy ones. They paid well. But now...I'm confronted with the suspicion that I was on the wrong side of many of the cases I pled."

There, we're getting somewhere.

"How?" I prod.

"Well..." She looks around and licks her lips. "I used to work against communities like Wildflower Canyon." She straightens. "Never took a case

against a tribe. That was a red line.” Then she relaxes some. “For example, right now I have a water rights case, and in the past, I’d be on the team that was trying to take my client’s senior rights and doing it, legally, *but* heartlessly. Nowadays...I’m fighting those who want to take what doesn’t belong to them. It’s more fulfilling.” Then she laughs, rolling her eyes. “Pays considerably less, though. But money isn’t everything, is it?”

I definitely think so.

Money is the reason why I’m sitting here trying to manipulate this woman, this entire town to give me what Jessup needs to make sure Taya loses her case, her client loses her water rights, and ultimately, her ranch.

The band gets louder. The area between the barns fills up with people, and the outdoor fireplaces start to get a little more power.

Cade Mercer dances with Evie—spinning her while she shrieks with delight—and Sarah Kirk is watching them with her hands wrapped around a coffee cup and an expression that could rearrange anyone’s, even my cynical self’s, understanding of the word *soft*.

Joy is doing something with Hunt that technically qualifies as dancing but is clearly designed to test his self-control. He is failing. He knows it. He doesn’t stop. He wants her. She wants him.

I file that away as information I probably won’t ever need, but is good to know.

Mav and Aria are dancing the way people dance when they’ve been doing it long enough to know each other completely—unhurried, present, loving...and almost romantic, not that I know what the fuck that actually is.

Bree Keaton appears at the edge of the dancing area, watching, and then Kaz materializes behind her and says something low, and she turns and says something back, and for a moment they’re doing the thing they always seem to be doing—having an entire argument in the space of four words, neither of them moving, both of them absolutely aware of every inch between them.

Taya waves at someone, and I clock them.

Duke Wilder is deep in conversation with a man I haven’t met yet.

I know him from the file. Nokoni Red Clay, Southern Ute, chairman of the tribal council. He waves back at Taya, and then Duke nods at her, smiling.

The men go back to talking to one another.

“Who’s that with Duke Wilder?” I ask unnecessarily.

“That’s Elder Nokoni.” She stands up and brushes her hands on her jeans. She holds one out. “Dance with me.”

She’s looking at me with the expression of someone who has already decided and is waiting to see how I handle it.

“I’m a shit dancer.”

Her face flowers into a broad smile. “Me, too. Come on.”

I place my hand in hers, charmed by her boldness, her candidness, her openness.

Moral flexibility means I don’t feel guilty about taking advantage of all those personality traits. I decide to feel secure in that thought.

I’m not a shit dancer, as I said. What I am is functional. I know where to put my hands and how to move without embarrassing myself, which is the floor requirement.

I have danced before. With women. With women whom I have slept with. But none of them fit in my arms the way Taya does—which is perfectly.

Her hand in mine is warm. Her body brushes against mine, feminine and luxuriously perfumed.

We’re not doing anything complicated, but her nearness is making *everything* complicated. I want her. Not just to fuck—though I want that, too, but to have.

Brooks, buddy, get your head out of your ass, yeah? This ain’t gonna be a Mav-Aria-style romance. You have a job. Hell, she is the job.

I silence the voice in my head and just enjoy having this vibrant woman in my arms.

She’s careful—all around—but when she decides that someone is *okay* as she has me, she’s even more vivacious.

“How long will your work here last?” she asks, her eyes holding mine.

I sense emanating from her the exact radio waves of *want* that I’m giving out.

This has never happened before.

Usually, when I am interested, it’s a physiological function, not an emotional one.

Maybe I should tell Jessup I can’t help him?

The thought comes unbidden—a thought I’ve never had before. I don’t walk away from jobs that pay this well. A quarter of a million to dismantle a

case is not unheard of—but it is generous even if it’s my going rate. Fixers like me are rare and busy. You want to buy our time, you have to pay for it.

The job didn’t look difficult when I took it on. It’s still not difficult. But it is getting knotty because of the woman I am holding, smelling...*wanting*.

“A few weeks.”

I see her disappointment, and I wonder if it mirrors mine.

“So, you’re just passing by.”

“Yes.”

“And asking me out to dinner.”

“Yes.”

She nods slowly and lets out a long breath, and then we’re in a bubble, everything else is gone, and it’s just us.

The moment holds itself, taut and unhurried, and I am thinking—for the first time since Toledo, since the army, since any of it...absolutely nothing useful whatsoever.

“Taya,” a voice pops our bubble.

She turns and smiles. “Maiku, Elder Nokoni.”

I let go of her, and they hug.

Nokoni gives me a measured look.

“This is Mason—”

“I know who he is,” Nokoni smoothly cuts her off, his eyes on me.

I hold out a hand and introduce myself all the same. “Mason Brooks.”

We shake. There’s nothing competitive about it. It’s also not warm.

“He’s working on the Feig rodeo project,” Taya supplies.

“Land surveyor.”

“Yes, sir.”

A pause that lasts exactly long enough.

“Good project for the valley,” he clips, then ignores me completely and with his whole body. “Taya, I will see you on Sunday?”

She puts a hand on his shoulder. “Yes. I’ll go straight to the offices, so we’re ready for Monday morning.”

“You’ve looked at the documentation?”

“No, I’m going to wing it,” she deadpans.

Nokoni laughs and pats her head with the familiarity of a long acquaintance. He’s known her since she was a child and came to Ignacio. He was good friends with the great Delia Morningstar.

“Mason,” he acknowledges before he moves away from us, his steps unhurried.

I wonder if we can dance again because I liked holding her, and I want to do it some more.

“I have to get home,” she tells me.

I frown. “Really?”

She makes a woe-is-me face. “I do. I have to work on a few things, and I leave for Ignacio tomorrow. There’s a water board meeting on Monday morning. I have to be there in person.”

“You work for the tribe?” I didn’t have this in my file.

“Just started...well, it’s not working like *working* and getting paid. Elder Nokoni wants me to help.”

“And you do whatever he says?” My words come out stiff, unplanned.

She raises a sharp gaze at me. “What?”

I shake my head. “Sorry. I’m...I guess I’m just disappointed we won’t be dancing anymore.”

She holds my gaze for a moment. Something in her expression has that extra layer I’ve been aware of all day—not suspicion, but heightened attention.

The band starts playing *Shallow*, and she steps closer. “I wouldn’t want you to be disappointed.”

I set my hand on her waist, and hers finds my shoulder again.

We move without speaking—slowly. It’s just a shift of weight, a turn, the quiet rhythm of bodies that fall into step without trying.

Again, I marvel at how effortlessly we fit together.

We part with the natural pause of the music, and I’m standing in the cold Colorado night, thinking about one half-step and a moment that didn’t complete itself, doing nothing about it, because I am a professional and this is a job.

“Now, I really have to go.” Her voice is husky.

“Monday evening,” I say, wanting very much to remind her—and myself—that this isn’t over.

She studies me with her dark, precise eyes—gives me the same look she gave me at Buck’s Mercantile when she handed over her phone, assessing and accepting in the same breath.

“You’re only passing through,” she warns. “So we keep it simple.”

“Yes,” I agree.

It's a lie, and we both know it.

Because none of this is simple. What's between us is not some casual, disposable thing. I've been with a lot of women in a lot of cities, and I've never had whatever this is. It's as if she were designed to react to and with me. To set off something controlled and catastrophic.

I want to ask if she feels it, too.

I don't.

I'm not the kind of man who does.

I'm the kind who waits—who lets the moment stretch until it snaps.

The music pauses just long enough for both of us to notice its absence. Another song fills the gap almost immediately, something slow and country and old, written for exactly our kind of trouble.

She doesn't step back.

I admire that about her—the way she holds her ground when most people would retreat into themselves. She stays—lets the pressure build. I match her, and for a few seconds, we're just two entities in a closed system waiting for the right conditions.

I reach for her. My hand hovers for a moment—and then it finds the side of her face, cool from the air, soft.

Her eyes stay on mine, steady and direct, and the relief that moves through me is so strong it's almost embarrassing.

Then she leans in. Just a little. The smallest concession.

It's more than enough.

I kiss her.

Our teeth almost knock because of the urgency on both sides. She tastes faintly of the beer she's been drinking.

The tip of her tongue duels with mine, surprising me.

My heart slams hard against my ribs.

It's a short kiss, but it leaves something behind—sweet and sharp and so distinct and loud that I half think people around us can smell it.

She smiles against my mouth.

Then she leans back.

"Okay," she says as if to herself.

"Okay," I echo.

She turns and walks away without looking over her shoulder.

I watch her go for exactly as long as I can justify.

Which is not long enough.

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CHAPTER 9

taya



The drive from Wildflower Canyon to Ignacio takes three hours if you go straight south on 550 and don't stop.

I always do.

There's a pull-off just past Durango where the road curves and the whole San Juan Basin opens up to the west—mesa country, the sky going enormous, the light falling differently than it does in the canyon.

I pull over here every time I drive back from wherever I was.

Something in me needs the pause, the transition, the moment of standing between one place and the other before I commit to arriving.

I stand at the pull-off for five minutes with my hands in my pockets, the cold coming up off the mesa, and the smell of sage and juniper takes me home before I get there.

I'm coming, Wíitsin, I think even though she's been gone three years, her home is just a house now—vivid with memories, but starkly dull because of her absence.

Then I get back into the Wrangler and drive the last thirty to forty minutes to Ignacio.

On a Saturday morning, the town looks exactly like it was when I left it a month ago.

The gas station on the main road has the same hand-lettered sign it's had since I was twelve. The Sky Ute Casino Resort sits west of town—a well-managed operation that funds a significant portion of what keeps this community running.

Healthcare.

Education.

Infrastructure.

The kind of institutional investment most small towns in rural Colorado would spend decades lobbying for.

I pass the KSUT radio building and the community center where I used to take beading classes from Birdie Lorraine every Thursday after school until we mutually agreed that my gifts lay elsewhere.

I pass the clinic where my best friend Sienna works. Her car is in the lot, which means she has a Saturday shift, which means I'll have to wait until she's finished work.

I pull into the driveway of the house that is still called Delia's.

It's yellow with white trim.

It has a porch that gets afternoon sun. A garden that my grandmother kept immaculate and that I've been keeping alive with moderate success, considerable guilt, and the help of hired help.

The rosebushes are done for the season, cut back and mulched.

The lawn is honest about it being early spring.

I go inside, using my key. Luna, my cousin, is not home as she's visiting friends in Denver. I am sad to miss her.

The house smells like Wiitsin, even now, after three years—her hand cream, the cedar in the linen closet, and what's just *her* and just *home*.

I put my overnight bag in Wiitsin's room, which is now mine, and hang the garment bag with my suit for Monday morning in the closet that still holds some of her clothes I couldn't part with.

Luna has taken the second bedroom, which used to be mine.

I check the time—an hour until I need to be at the council offices for tomorrow's prep meeting. So, I go into the kitchen and make coffee in my grandmother's old Moka pot. She never wanted a machine, preferring the old ways—the authentic ones, as she saw it.

I sit at the kitchen table with my mug and let the quiet settle.

My phone buzzes.

Sienna: *You here? Someone is asking about you.*

Me: *Cam?*

Sienna: *Who else? I'm done at two. Come for lunch?*

Me: *Yes.*

I head to the tribal offices and step into the conference room to find Auntie Carol already on her feet, and I'm engulfed in a hug before I've

fully cleared the doorway.

“Oh, but it’s good to see you.” She holds me like she’s checking that I’m still in one piece.

I kiss her cheek when she lets me go. “You keep getting more beautiful, Auntie.”

She flushes, waves me off, and then pulls a Tupperware from her bag, hands it over with the satisfaction of someone who has been waiting to do exactly this.

I don’t squeal—I try not to squeal—but I do hug her again.

Blue corn sugar cookies.

My grandmother’s recipe, or close enough to it—made with fine blue corn masa harina, which turns the dough a deep, striking violet. Auntie Carol adds juniper ash the way Wíitsin always did, for a nutty, toasted edge that tastes like home when you’ve been away long enough to miss it properly.

Elder Nokoni arrives a few minutes later, takes one look at the container in my hands, and raises an eyebrow. “Where’s mine?”

“People with diabetes don’t get cookies,” Auntie replies without looking up from her papers.

He waves a dismissive hand and pulls me into a hug instead. “Thank you for coming.”

“It’s my pleasure.” I mean it completely.

This is what Wíitsin always hoped I’d find my way back to—not that she ever begrudged me Aspen, never once made me feel small for wanting more or wanting different. She understood the hunger of it. She just always knew that eventually the work I was born for would call louder than the one I was chasing.

Two more elders arrive, and there are more hugs, more questions about how Wildflower Canyon is treating me, more good-natured insistence that I should simply move back to Ignacio, where I belong.

I laugh and deflect and feel myself settle.

The word *tribe* isn’t a category for me—it’s a structure.

It’s what holds me together on the darkest days.

It’s what celebrates me on the brightest.

It’s an extension of family—close, but not quite right. Family you’re given. Tribe is what holds you.

And right now, in this room, with these people, I am home in a way that is entirely different from my cottage on the east bench.

There, I belong to myself.

Here, I belong to something larger.

For a woman who has spent years building a life on her own terms, that isn't a loss of self—it's the deepest relief I know.

The meeting is two hours of precise, technical discussion—upstream allocation, federal reserved rights, the interaction between state prior appropriation doctrine and the tribe's senior claims, which in this valley go back considerably further than any recorded filing.

We're thorough in our prep, dissecting our presentation to the council the next day from three directions.

I make changes to the presentation, take notes, and ask questions.

After, Elder Nokoni walks me out.

"You're going to see Sienna."

"I have a gift for Cam," I tell him, smiling.

Cam is her five-year-old and my Godson. I bought him a sheriff's badge and a pair of boots he'll outgrow in about six weeks.

I have absolutely no regrets about either.

The sun is angled low over the mesa, the sky going pale gold in the late March afternoon when we stop outside the council building.

"You doing well?" he asks.

"I am."

"Mac helping out, or did he just dump everything and run?"

I laugh at that. "He's helping. Especially when I can't read his handwritten notes."

I have now taken over most of Mac's clients, but some insist on staying with him.

There are ranchers in Wildflower Canyon who are old school, and the idea of a woman—at that, a tribal woman—being their lawyer, is too progressive for them. According to Mac, they'll get educated fast enough after he lets his license expire, and they've got no choice.

It's fine by me. I have more than enough work, and even though it pays me half of what I made in Aspen, it's a hundred times more satisfying.

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"Bright and early," I confirm.

I drive to Sienna's hurriedly, wanting to see her and her family. I've missed them all.

Cam opens the door. "She's here," he screams over his shoulder and barrels into me for a hug.

I've known Cam since he was a baby; in fact, after his mother and father, I was the first person to hold him when he was born.

I love him like I would my own child.

I hold him close and take him in. He wiggles out after a long moment and grabs my hand to drag me inside.

Sienna's house is warm and comforting.

Daniel's history books on every surface.

Cam's drawings on the refrigerator.

Sienna's medical journals on the coffee table.

In the corner of the living room, a small beadwork piece her grandmother made sits in the place it always has.

"I'll be there in a minute," I hear Sienna call out from inside the house.

"I have a present for you," I whisper to Cam.

"You do?" His eyes go wide.

I hand him the gift bag I brought from Wildflower Canyon, and he dismantles it all with the enthusiasm only a child can have. He beams when he sees the boots and the badge.

Sienna comes out then, and her hands go to her waist. "You can't always bring him something, Taya. You'll spoil him."

I help put the badge on Cam and tap it proudly. While he struggles to put on his boots, I give Sienna a warm hug.

I look around the house. "Where's Daniel?"

"He went to see his father. But he'll be home soon to take Cam off my hands so you and I"—she tilts her head toward the kitchen—"can open a bottle of wine and catch up."

As if on cue, Daniel comes through the door, and Cam rushes to show him his new badge and boots with the urgency of someone who has been waiting approximately two minutes too long to share this information with one of his favorite human beings.

"Look what Auntie Taya got me." He preens, flaunting his boots and badge.

"Sheriff Cam." Daniel crouches down and examines the badge with the serious attention of a man who teaches history and understands the weight

of ceremony. "This is a big responsibility."

Cam nods solemnly. "I know."

"And those boots are spiffy."

Cam wrinkles his nose. "They pinch."

"Which means they are authentic." Daniel looks up at me over his son's head. "Thank you for arming him."

"He was always going to find a way," I joke. "At least now it's official."

Daniel straightens and gives me an easy hug. He has been Sienna's person long enough to become mine by extension. "Good to see you, Taya."

"You, too." I mean it. There is something about Daniel Runningwater that makes every room he's in quieter in the best possible way. He's calming, just like his wife, and I'm grateful to have them in my life.

Sienna gives Cam a kiss and then her husband. "Now shoo."

Daniel smirks. "I expect the usual payment when I return."

"Ugh," I whine as expected. "Please, can we do S-E-X talk when my tender ears are not around?"

Daniel chuckles. "Come on, Sheriff, time for us to go see Grandpa so your mother and Taya can indulge in some debauchery."

"What is deba...cherry?" Cam asks.

"It's what we will be doing with the pumpkin ice cream that your grandma made," we hear Daniel tell his son as he leads him away into the house to get him ready to go to see his favorite people—his grandparents.

Cam is lucky to have both sets of grandparents close by who spoil him rotten just as much as I do.

I go into the kitchen, where Sienna is opening a bottle of Tempranillo. "Have you eaten?"

I shake my head.

"I made bison stew. It'll go well with the wine."

"Everything goes well with a good bottle of wine," I counter.

"And you," she adds.

My heart warms.

We eat and drink and catch up the way you can only catch up with someone who has known you since you were kids.

Which auntie did what?

Who's getting married?

Who's getting divorced?

Who's been seen in a truck that isn't their spouse's?

The usual inventory of a community that keeps a close track of itself.

Then we take the wine into the living room, settle into opposite ends of the couch with our feet tangled in the middle. Sienna pulls a handwoven throw over both of us, and we *talk*, now about ourselves rather than others.

“So, he’s still calling you.” She shakes her head when I tell her about Griffin. Not with surprise—Sienna has never been surprised by men behaving badly—but with disgust. She was never impressed by him to begin with.

“What can I say. I know how to pick ’em.”

“You seeing anyone?”

I hesitate.

She narrows her eyes. “Taya! Spill!”

“There’s nothing to *spill*...yet.” This is technically true and also not the full truth, and Sienna knows the difference immediately.

Her eyes go wide—the same expression Cam had when I told him I had something for him.

I tell her about Mason Brooks.

“Sounds like a romance,” she remarks when I’m done.

“We had coffee, and we’re going to dinner. That’s not a romance. It’s a nothing.”

“It’s not a nothing.”

“No,” I admit.

“You like him?”

“I don’t know him.” I turn my wine glass in my hands. “But I’m attracted to him in a way I haven’t been before. Not even with Griffin.”

“Griffin is an asshole.”

I huff a laugh. “True! Griffin, I think, was me wanting to be close to someone I looked up to.” I let out a long, deep breath. “He was someone I thought I wanted to become. I did fall in love with him—I’m not going to pretend I didn’t—but the foundation of it was wrong from the beginning, and some part of me always knew that.”

“Your insight into yourself has always been annoying,” Sienna quips.

“My lack of insight into Griffin, though....”

“You loved him, and he screwed you over. Those two things can both be true.” She tucks her feet further under my leg. “What does your gut say about this one?”

I consider that.

I am not a woman who confuses attraction with love or sex with commitment. I'm discerning about who gets my time and my body, not because of any rule I've made for myself but because I've always understood that both are finite and worth treating accordingly.

"My gut says there's something there that's bigger than it deserves to be." I lift a shoulder and let it drop. "Time will tell."

She doesn't press further. She knows I haven't finished parsing it—parsing *him*.

That's the thing about Sienna—she knows the difference between the thoughts I'm ready to say out loud and those still forming, and she leaves space for both.

"You could just have fun with him," she suggests after a moment. "He's passing through. You know going in that it has a deadline. There's something freeing about that."

I give a shrug that is meant to be careless but doesn't quite land that way. "Maybe."

She reads it correctly, says nothing, and refills my glass.

"Do you miss Aspen?" she asks later, after we've moved on and come back around the way long conversations do.

"I miss having a team," I reply honestly. "Paralegals. A research assistant. Someone to hand the filing to. Here I do everything myself, light and heavy."

I set my wine glass down on the coffee table—Daniel's work, solid and careful. I have one, too. Like mine, this one bears the same carved paw pattern along the edge.

I run my thumb over it, the way I always do.

"But I don't miss the work itself. Not anymore."

"Do you feel guilty?" Sienna asks. "For the years you spent on the other side of it?"

I level her with a thoughtful stare. "What do you mean?"

"I know you, Taya. I know Auntie Delia always told you that you were meant to help people. And I know a part of you has always wondered whether you failed her by going to Aspen first."

I am quiet for a moment. "I worried she thought less of me for it."

Sienna sits forward. "She never...not once. None of us did." She puts a hand on my arm. "We were proud of you. We still are. Wanting things, working for things—that doesn't make you greedy. It makes you human."

“You could have practiced outside the reservation,” I point out.

“I’m not you,” she says simply. “You had the courage to go out into the world and build something from nothing. I didn’t want that. I wanted this.” She looks around the room—the books, the drawings on the refrigerator, the life she and Daniel have here. “Neither of us is wrong.”

I tell her about Clara Whitman then. She listens the way she listens to patients—fully, without judgment, taking it all in before she speaks.

“So they offered her good money, and she said no.”

“A significant amount.” I drink some wine and taste the Tempranillo’s spice. “And I’ve negotiated deals like that before. I sat across from families like hers, and I told myself they were coming out ahead financially, so everyone won. I believed it.”

“And now?”

“Now, I understand that Clara Whitman’s fight isn’t about dollars—it’s about leaving something for her children to inherit. It’s about her husband’s family name, meaning something beyond this generation. She’s fighting for her way of life.” I exhale slowly. “So many of them are.”

Sienna smiles warmly. “And you feel a kinship with that. Because that’s what our people have been doing for a thousand years.”

“Yes.”

“Then stop carrying the guilt of Aspen with you.” She holds my gaze. “You were always you, Taya. In that glass building in a tailored suit, in Wildflower Canyon, and here in Ignacio. You were always this person. Big-hearted and ready to help anyone who needs it.”

I stay for dinner.

I put Cam to bed, which takes four stories and one extended negotiation about whether the sheriff’s badge can be worn to sleep. It can, we decide.

The boots *cannot*.

When I finally get back to Wíitsin’s house, I sit on the porch for a while in the dark.

I’m more at peace with Wildflower Canyon than I’ve been since I arrived—about the work, about who I am in it, about the decision I made that scared me and turned out to be right.

About the other *thing*—the man with the blue eyes who has been occupying more space in my head than I’ve given him permission to—I am less settled.

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CHAPTER 10

mason



I've been awake since five, which is not unusual—thinking about tonight since approximately five-oh-one, which definitely is.

I've thought about how tonight should go approximately forty-seven times, and not once—not once—have I thought about the Whitman case.

About what I'm supposed to be extracting.

About the shape of her strategy. The weak points in her argument. Anything Jessup is paying me to find.

This dinner isn't about the job, which is a problem.

Instead, I've been thinking about whether she'll like the restaurant I picked.

That's the problem, right there, and I know it.

And since I don't have an answer for why a man like me is behaving this way, I go for my morning run, hoping it will clear my head.

The canyon road in the early morning is dark.

In early spring here, it takes a while for the sun to clear the peaks. I don't mind it. In fact, I like it. It's quiet, peaceful, and very indifferent to whatever is happening inside one man's chest at the butt crack of dawn.

Should I stay the night with her, I wonder.

Fucking hell, Brooks. You gotta get past this. You're taking her out to dinner to pump her for information. And that's about it.

I run harder.

It doesn't help.

I come back to the inn, take a shower, and my mood gets worse because I'm getting excited about tonight, like a teenager taking his crush to prom.

I spend the morning doing survey work—the legitimate cover.

Feig needs revised load calculations for the arena access road.

So, I spend three hours on-site with a level and a measuring wheel, and my boots in the mud. The honest satisfaction of work that produces real numbers. I'm good at this, too. You can't fake competence in the field, not to people who understand it, and Feig understands land even if he doesn't understand much else.

By noon, I have three pages of notes for him.

I write them up at the Ridgeline, make a call to my investigator in Denver—I need a deeper look at Kaz Chase's connection to Jessup, a variable I haven't fully mapped—and then I look at the ceiling for a while.

The radiator ticks.

I didn't break into her office on Sunday night.

I had planned to.

I'd discovered the loose window in the back during recon—I had the time, the tools, the expertise.

I even walked past her building twice on Sunday evening. Both times, I kept going.

I've been turning that over since, like something I found and can't quite identify.

The thing is that it felt wrong.

Not operationally wrong—there was no risk I could point to. I realize, as I watch a watermark on the ceiling, that I want her to tell me about the case herself.

I don't know why.

Yes, you do, you, motherfucking idiot. You just don't want to say it out loud...yet.

As I get impatient for the day to move faster so I can go get her and be with her, I force myself to work. I have two other projects that have come my way, and I'm ostensibly deciding which one to take on because they both are time-sensitive and overlapping.

One is a private equity firm based in Chicago that has acquired a small regional newspaper and wants to know which of the remaining investigative journalists on staff are working on stories that could complicate an upcoming land deal in California. The ask is framed as due diligence. I know what it actually is—politics.

The other is a defense contractor in Virginia who needs to know how a procurement decision got leaked to a rival. Corporate espionage dressed in the language of internal security review.

I read through what was sent on my encrypted laptop and find that I have no clue what I just read because in another hour, I'm going to pick Taya up.

I made a reservation at Atelier Noir, forty minutes away—up Highway 133 through the canyon, past the marble cliffs that gave the town its name, to a place most people in the valley still call the quarry resort, even though it's been called something else for three years now.

The Carrara Lodge was built on the footprint of an old quarrying operation just outside Marble—a town of barely a hundred people that has no business hosting a property like this and hosts it anyway, with the indifference of a mountain landscape that has been remarkable for long enough to stop caring what gets built at its feet.

The architects kept the bones of the original quarry structures—the stone loading dock, the scale house, the narrow-gauge rail bed—and built around them in a way that was both expensive and restrained.

It's very polished.

It has to be for what it costs to stay the night there.

It draws the wealthy who want to be completely unreachable—you know the kind who need to go away somewhere to detox with spa treatments and Michelin-star food. Which is why, in its second year of operation, the resort hired a French chef from Lyons who spent a decade in New York.

Atelier Noir has twelve tables. Reservations open thirty days out—gone in four hours.

I called in a favor.

It's a considerable effort to make for a woman I know who likes French food, because I read it in a file that included receipts for dinners for two and for one at the French Alpine Bistro and Crêperie du Village in Aspen.

Then there's my preference—which is to take a break from diner food and local beer for some caviar and French wine. I'm not a food snob, but I like variety. For two weeks now, I've been eating decent food—but a man sometimes likes his eggs poached in red wine sauce.

When I first thought about dinner, Blackwood Prime was the easiest and safest choice.

Close by.

Elegant.

All around a good idea.

But it was still in Wildflower Canyon, which means we'd bump into people she knows, whom I have met. And for some reason, that I don't want to examine—denial is starting to become a way of life for me at this point—I want to give her and myself an evening that has nothing to do with either of our current circumstances.

I leave the inn at six-fifteen in dress pants and a jacket I recently bought in New York but haven't had the opportunity to wear. I packed it, just in case I needed something beyond jeans and a chambray.

The drive to her house takes seven minutes. I park outside and am greeted with warm light in her windows, the Wrangler in the gravel drive, and the mountains going dark behind the cottage.

This is where she lives, gets comfortable.

It's a simple home. The kind that knows what it is, just like this small town with big ranches.

She opens the door before I knock—she heard the truck. She is in a dress the color of deep water, her hair down, and silver earrings that catch the light.

She has dressed for somewhere.

Her gaze flicks at me, then at the truck, and then back at me.

"Nice threads!" There's a teasing quality to her voice. "A little excessive for the Horseshoe, don't you think?"

"Damn!" I play along. "I *was* thinking of going there, *but* you're too beautiful for a local diner."

"Smooth," she murmurs, then steps away from the door and gestures for me to step inside. "Where are we going?"

I stay outside her door, knowing that if I cross this threshold, there's no clean way back.

"Atelier Noir," I tell her, buying time. "It's in—"

"Marble," she finishes excitedly, and I know I made the right choice. "I've been wanting to go there ever since I heard about it."

"Come in," she urges softly. "I just need to get my coat."

Stop being a putz, Brooks, and go into her house. You're going to have to, eventually, whether she invites you or not.

Breaking and entering into her office felt wrong, so I wonder if I'll be able to rummage through her house as I would anyone else's when I'm working, looking for something my mark is hiding.

I walk into her living room just as she disappears deeper into the house, out of my line of sight.

It's open-plan and renovated—modern yet warm. The coziness, however, isn't architectural; it's *her*.

There's a deep-seated sofa in cognac leather, worn to the softness of something loved rather than maintained, piled with blankets in jewel tones I've come to associate with her—turquoise, rust, cream.

A Navajo-style rug anchors the sitting area, geometric and bold. It's the kind of thing you buy because it moves you, not because it matches.

The art is Aspen money and Ignacio's soul in equal measure.

A large abstract canvas above the fireplace—all ochre and burnt sienna and the deep blue-gray of mountain shadows. Beside it, smaller, a framed print of a canyon landscape. On the far wall, a series of three photographs—black and white, large format, stark, precise landscape photography.

The fireplace is river stone.

The mantel holds three things: a small, unglazed clay pot, a legal mystery paperback, and a photograph in a plain frame—two women, one young, one old, squinting into the same sun—her grandmother and her.

There are books everywhere—stacked on the coffee table, doubled up on the shelves flanking the fireplace, a paperback face-down on the arm of the sofa where she left it mid-read. Law books and novels, and what looks like a well-used field guide to Colorado wildflowers, with its spine broken.

This is the home of a woman who left a glass building in Aspen, brought the best parts of that life with her, and set them beside the parts that were always hers—and somehow, the two coexist.

I stand in the middle of it and feel, with a clarity that is becoming harder to argue with, that I have no business being here. Not because I wasn't invited—but because I don't deserve the trust that invitation represents.

I'm about to step back outside the cottage and wait by the truck when some beadwork by the kitchen catches my eye.

I move toward it without quite deciding to.

"That's a pipe bag," Taya says, from behind me.

I turn. She's put on a cashmere coat—Max Mara, if I'm not wrong. The bag she's carrying is Furla. I guess she used to have a designer habit.

“What’s a pipe bag?”

She tilts her head. “A bag that holds a pipe.”

I laugh at myself. “Right.”

“This one is old.” She comes to stand beside me, looking at it the way you look at something you’ve looked at your whole life and still find worth looking at. “My grandmother gave it to me. Her grandmother gave it to her.” She pauses. “It’s brain-tanned mule deer hide. The beadwork is traditional Ute—those are our sacred colors. Blue for fire, yellow for fire in another aspect, green for the earth.”

I want to put my hands on it, feel it.

I don’t.

“It’s extraordinary.”

“You can touch it. It’s empty,” she offers.

I shake my head. “Something that old—it belongs in a museum.”

“Beading is a thread between our ancestors and us, and we keep it alive by passing it down to descendants,” she tells me without ceremony, like it’s a fact she’s been raised with. “A famous Ute artist, Mariah Cuch—her work hangs in museums—says that beadwork should be touched and worn. It should be *alive*.”

She walks to the front door and opens it.

“What is...ah...brain-tanned hide?” I ask as I step out onto her front porch.

“It’s soft and breathable leather! They soak, stretch, and smoke the hide with,” she pauses for a dramatic moment as she locks the door, “the animal’s own brains.”

Pause.

“You’re making that up.”

She puts her hand to her heart. “Hand to God! I’m not.”

I shoot her a skeptical look. “The animal’s own brain?”

“Nature’s perfect tanning agent.” She winks at me. It’s cute. “Every animal has just enough to tan its own hide. Someone figured that out a *very* long time ago.”

We reach the truck. I open her door.

“And they make pipe bags with the hide,” I say.

“And moccasins, and shirts, and...,” she trails off.

“You learn something new every day,” I remark as I hold the passenger door open for her.

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CHAPTER 11

mason



The restaurant is very French, very *tres chic*.

White linen, high-end glassware, and long-stemmed candles that are burning without dripping wax.

It smells like expensive food and wine—and after The Rusty Spur and Horseshoe Diner, I, for one, have zero complaints if they want to serve me trout amandine with brown butter, along with a glass of Montrachet.

The maître d’ seats us by the window.

Outside, the dark presses against the glass. The mountains are invisible but present, the way they always are in this part of Colorado. You feel the weight of them at the edge of everything.

Taya picks up the menu.

This is a pretentious place, so the menu is in French on one side and English on the other. I flip it over and read the English while she peruses the French side.

She tells me with enthusiasm how much she loves French food, so I set mine down to just watch and enjoy her.

“There was this time...first spring break in Harvard, and my roommate insisted we go to Paris.” She stops and raises her head to meet my eyes, noticing that I’m focused on her.

“What?”

I flick my gaze toward her, humor tugging at my mouth. “Did you go to Paris?”

She smiles, nods. “My roommate’s father had more money than God. Texas Oil. So, yeah, we went on a private jet and all that jazz.”

“You still friends with her?” I work with a lot of oil people in Texas.

“Alas, she dropped out after the first year. I heard she married the heir of Texaco or one of those big oil companies.” She sets the menu down. Apparently, she’s made her decision. “It was a strange five nights in Paris. We stayed at this cool apartment—rooftop garden, view of the Eiffel Tower.” She becomes wistful. “A part of me wanted *that* life.”

“You did? The wealthy life?” I can afford a private jet and an apartment with a view in Paris, if that’s what she wants.

She smiles, shaking her head. “I *thought* I wanted that. That’s why I worked at the *fancy* law firm.” She says the word *fancy* with a small sneer.

“And now?”

“Now, I know what I want, and it’s not a private jet or a trip to Paris—as fun as they are, they don’t”—she pauses, as if trying to find the right words—“fill my heart. Do you know what I mean?”

Do I? Maybe.

But just because I know what she means doesn’t mean I agree with her.

Flying coach sucks.

Doing menial labor sucks.

I like my life.

I like that I have an apartment in New York that I go to when I’m able—and it’s alright because I can afford it.

I like that when I have time off, I can book a private jet and go wherever I want.

Last break I took, I flew to Tanzania and climbed Kilimanjaro. I had just spent three months sweating in Cairo, undercover as a hotel night manager. Profitable work but not *comfortable*.

We order.

She gets the duck confit.

I get the steak.

The sommelier arrives. She discusses the wine list with him in a confident, unhurried way, treating him as a collaborator rather than a resource, and he responds the way people respond to Taya Morningstar—with their eyes wide, eager to please.

They settle on a Burgundy from a producer I’ve never heard of. The somm goes away pleased.

“You know wine,” I remark.

"I know Burgundy," she corrects. "And Barolo. Everything else is geography."

The food arrives in the unhurried rhythm of a kitchen that doesn't need to prove its pace. Her duck confit is lacquered and dark, served with a lentil preparation scented with thyme and smoke.

The steak looks and tastes absolutely delicious.

She cuts into the duck and closes her eyes briefly when she tastes it.

It is, objectively, an extraordinary reaction.

Is that how she looks when she—

"Good?" I ask, my voice hoarse because I can now picture her when she releases, and the thought is erotic.

"Don't talk to me for a minute. I'm having a moment." Her eyes remain closed, her expression beatific.

Charmed, I eat my steak and don't talk to her for a *minute*.

"Okay." She opens her eyes. "You can speak now."

"High praise."

"The best duck I've had since Paris." She considers. "Maybe the best duck. The Paris one had the advantage of being eaten at midnight after walking twelve miles, which makes everything taste better—but on pure technical merit...." She gestures at her plate. "This might win."

"Was this the time you were in Paris, flying private?"

"No! I've been to Paris since. Several times."

"Paris at midnight." I pick up the wine and take a sip. I have to drive, so I'm making the one glass I allow myself last. "Deliberate or accidental?"

"Deliberately accidental. I was there for a water law conference—yes, those exist, stop looking like that—and I spent three days in a room with forty lawyers arguing about riparian rights under the EU Water Framework Directive. So on the last night, I decided that if I didn't walk until I found somewhere worth eating, my entire memory of Paris for that trip was going to be a conference center near Charles de Gaulle."

"And you walked twelve miles."

"I walked until I found a place with a handwritten menu, five tables, and a proprietor who looked like he'd stepped out of *Chocolat*." She lifts her wine. "And called me *ma chérie*."

"And you had duck."

"I did."

"But this is better."

“Most certainly.”

“Good.”

We order dessert—a *tarte tatin* for her, a Peruvian chocolate tart for me that looks like an architect designed it—and the conversation does what good conversations do in good restaurants, it moves entertainingly without an agenda.

“Did you like being in the military?” she asks.

“Yes.”

She sets her glass down and spears a slice of pear on her fork. “Where were you stationed?”

“Germany for a while. Parts of Central Asia. I spent a winter in a place I’m not going to name, that I would not recommend to anyone.”

“You sound like you enjoyed it.”

I consider her question and then tell her the truth. “I liked the structure of it. Doing without thinking too hard about what you’re doing—just following the edict that’s been set before you.” *And not worry about the morality of it.*

She leans back in her chair as she picks up her glass of Sauterne. Since I am driving, I’m having a double espresso with my dessert.

“You don’t look like the type who enjoys being ordered around,” she muses aloud.

I smile. “That’s why I left and started my own business.”

“Do you miss it—the military life?”

I think about this honestly, which is something I don’t always do with this question, but she compels candor from me.

“I miss being certain,” I explain. “You always knew what the mission was. What success looked like. Out here—” I pause. “The parameters are less clear.”

“Is that better or worse?”

“Both. Better because I decide what I will and won’t do. Worse because I have to decide what I will do and won’t do.”

She nods slowly, like that’s the right answer even if it isn’t a comfortable one. She turns her wine glass in her hands—the gesture I’ve come to know, which means she’s settling into something.

“I know what you mean,” she says earnestly. “In Aspen, at the firm, I took the cases in front of me and figured out how to win. Now I do the

same—but then, winning meant dollar signs. Now it means actually helping people. There’s freedom in that.” She pauses. “The stakes are also higher.”

Taya is not the first woman I’ve had dinner with in an elegant restaurant, but she is the first who has been this compelling—and so much so that I don’t try to elicit a single piece of information that Jessup wants me to get from her.

I drive her home.

The canyon at night is a different place entirely—dark in a complete, non-negotiable way, and the road cuts through it as if it were permitted to exist there rather than imposed.

She looks out at the dark like it belongs to her.

I pull into the gravel drive of her cottage and cut the engine.

The truck settles.

The tick of cooling metal.

The sounds of leaves rustling in the night air.

She meets my gaze without uncertainty. There’s a directness to her that leaves no room for guessing.

“That was lovely,” she murmurs.

“It was,” I agree.

Then, I reach for her.

She doesn’t move away.

My hand settles at her jaw.

She leans in—just enough, the same small deliberate movement she’s made before.

I kiss her.

It’s not like the auction kiss, which had momentum, a crowd, and weeks of slow build behind it.

This one is quiet.

Aching.

Her lips are warm, and she tastes like the Burgundy she drank, and meets me without hesitation, like the decision was made somewhere earlier in the evening, and this is just the confirmation of it.

It’s short.

It still lands the way things land when they’ve been inevitable.

When I pull back, she keeps her eyes closed for half a second, like when she tasted the duck.

Then she opens them.

She lets out a breathless laugh. "Okay."

I want to take her into her cottage and make love to her.

I want to peel that dress off her body.

I want to feel her curves.

Touch her.

Make her come.

But, I don't. Instead, I put my hands on the steering wheel and grip hard.

This feels wrong.

More than wrong to take advantage of our attraction to one another when I'm here on false pretenses.

For a man who always knew he was morally flexible, this inflexibility is surprising and devastating.

"Mason," she whispers.

"Go inside," I tell her through gritted teeth. "Before I forget how this is supposed to go."

She gives me a measured look and then nods.

"Goodnight, Mr. Brooks." There's the tilt of tease in her tone as if she wants to lighten the moment.

"Goodnight, Counselor."

I want to walk her to her door, but if I do, I don't know if I can resist the temptation to go all the way into her bedroom and inside of her.

She gets out, walks to the door, and I think she won't look back.

She does.

She waves, and then she's gone.

Then I drive back to the Ridgeline and into the canyon's dark that doesn't reflect anything.

Jessup's name is in my phone, and the file on Taya Morningstar is in my encrypted drive, and neither of them has been touched in a couple of days.

That doesn't usually happen.

My emotions are a muddle, and for a man who is usually emotionless, this is concerning.

CHAPTER 12

taya



April arrives in Wildflower Canyon not with fanfare but with tentative permission, like it's dipping its toe in the pool to see how cold it really is.

The snow pulls back from the lower slopes.

The creek behind my cottage runs faster and louder.

The mornings still bite, but by noon the sun has real intention behind it, and people emerge from their winter selves blinking and grateful, like they'd forgotten this was possible.

And through all this, there is Mason.

He and I have spent nearly every evening together.

In public.

There have been kisses on my porch, but nothing else.

I don't mind it.

I've always preferred to take it slow in relationships. To wait before getting intimate. I've never been profligate with myself—until I'm comfortable, until I feel safe. It's who I am. I have no beef with people who can maintain a gap between emotions and physicality—but, alas, I am not one of them.

"You sure it's okay I come along?" Mason asks as I drive us in my Wrangler to Mav's for the Kincaid spring barbecue.

"You're with me," I reply simply.

"And that's good enough?"

"At Mav's place?" I glance at him. "Yes."

"Good to know I'm with someone with influence."

That makes me laugh.

Mason makes me laugh.

Since I left Aspen and started building a life in Wildflower Canyon, I wouldn't say I've been sad or depressed—but I haven't been happy, either.

I've been busy.

Processing Griffin and the life I had there.

Accepting—becoming—who I think I was always meant to be.

But since Mason, there's a flutter in my chest, like buds stirring at the onset of spring.

"You look nice." He rubs the fabric of my dark gray jacket between his thumb and forefinger. I'm wearing it with jeans and a blue blouse.

All of it from Joy's place—or rather, all of it purchased there because she made me, insisting these were my colors, then giving it to me at an outrageous discount.

"Thanks."

I drive along the creek corridor, where the cottonwoods are just beginning to show that first impossible green—the pale, almost yellow that lasts about four days before deepening into something more certain.

"I love this time of year," I murmur.

"Yeah?"

"Spring is the season of possibility. Here, you earn your weather. Not like Florida or California, where it's sunshine and daisies all year."

Wiitsin called this the time of beginning. Not spring because it was too simple a name for something this unambiguous.

Mason puts his hand outside the open window—the first time it's been open since October—as if to test the air. "I like the seasons, too. *But* there are times when I just want warm, hot, and colorful drinks with umbrellas."

I slow down as an image of him on a beach, without many clothes, pops into my head. My cheeks heat up, and I step on the accelerator, aware that I'm behaving like a teenager with a crush.

"What kind of holiday do you like?" he asks, then, to my surprise. "Mountains or beaches?"

I consider his question. "Depends upon the time of year. If it's the middle of the freeze around here, I want a beach with sunshine. But in the summer, when the air is mild, no place beats Colorado."

"Will you..." He trails off, not finishing his question.

"What?" I ask.

“Nothing,” he says as if chagrined by whatever he intended to ask me.

Trucks are parked all the way down the fence line when we arrive. The smoke reaches me before I park—brisket, ribs, mesquite—and underneath it the smell of the land coming back to life, that green-mud smell that means the ground has given up on winter and is remembering what it’s for.

Mason is out of the truck before I’ve cut the engine. He comes around to my side with an ease that stopped being a performance some time ago and holds out his hand.

“Counselor.”

I roll my eyes. “Mr. Brooks.”

I put my hand in his.

We walk through the gate toward the yard where the barbecue is already in full roar, and somewhere between the truck and the gate it stopped being notable—his hand in mine, mine in his, the two of us moving in the same direction like people who have quietly decided that’s just what they do now. Nobody announced it. We didn’t discuss it. We’re just together.

The yard opens up ahead of us and Mason slows slightly, taking it in.

Mav’s spring barbecue at full capacity is its own kind of spectacle. Long tables draped in checked cloth stretch the length of the yard—fifty matching chairs, because Joy cares about these things. Professional chefs work the grill alongside Mav, who is overseeing a new dry rub he’s been treating like a state secret. No one’s revolted yet, which for this crowd counts as a strong endorsement. The band is set up near the barn—fiddle, guitar, a stand-up bass that looks like it’s survived decades of exactly this. Children run in the uncoordinated way of kids newly released from winter, not quite believing the outside is theirs again. Dogs underfoot. The mountains above everything, the high peaks still holding snow while the valley below has given up and gone green.

“This is massive,” Mason says.

It is. Kincaid Farms, I’ve always felt, is how you understand why people fight to stay on their land. The main house sits on a rise above the valley floor, wide porch facing west, the mountains framed behind it as if placed there on purpose. The pastures are greening. The horses in the nearby paddock look like they’ve also remembered that winter was not permanent.

“You should see the Fourth of July.” As soon as the words are out, I wish I could swallow them back. He won’t be here then. I don’t even know

how long he'll be here.

Joy materializes from nowhere and grabs my arm. I let go of Mason's hand.

"You brought him," she gushes, with barely controlled delight.

"I did."

She looks at Mason with the bright, assessing gaze she turns on everything she finds interesting. "He's very good-looking."

"Joy!"

Mason grins. "Thank you."

"I'm just observing." She links her arm through mine and steers us toward the food table.

"You're subtle as a chainsaw, Joy Kincaid," I mutter.

"You know it," she says cheerfully.

Joy Kincaid at a party is Joy Kincaid in her fullest expression—warm and loud and moving through a crowd the way sunlight moves through a room, finding every corner. She introduces Mason to six people in four minutes, because Joy knows how to network. He is gracious through all of it, asks the right questions, remembers the answers, and by the time Joy drags us to the food table he has exchanged ten minutes of genuine conversation with Amos Langley about land surveying rates in the valley and somehow emerged with Amos's business card and a standing invitation to the Blazing Saddles for a game of poker.

"Where's the Blazing Saddles?" Mason asks, leaning in. "I haven't seen it around town."

I chuckle. "It's a strip club at the edge of town."

He raises an eyebrow. "And Amos plays poker there?"

It's incongruous—Amos, who looks exactly like the accountant he is, playing poker while strippers dance around a pole.

"It's what passes for underbelly in Wildflower Canyon. Will you go?"

Mason makes a production of shrugging and thinking about it. "I mean, I have to. But only to play poker. I'll keep my eyes closed the whole time."

I burst out laughing, which attracts attention.

Kaz comes by, and I leave Mason with him—he's someone Mason seems to gravitate toward, subtle but consistent. Kaz is an enigma around these parts, and the feeling appears to be mutual.

"He's good with people," Joy murmurs close to my ear as we fill plates.

“He is,” I agree. Then, because I don’t want my friend to go off the deep end, I add, “He’s only here for a short while, Joy. It’s temporary.”

Joy looks at me. Then at Mason, who is now talking to Duke and a very enthusiastic Feig.

“Taya.” She turns fully toward me, dropping her voice. “Do you like him?”

I don’t have to think about it, but I do, because I want to lie—and ultimately don’t. “I do.”

“Okay.” She squeezes my arm once. “Then just feel it and enjoy it. Don’t think about the future. It isn’t here.”

“But it will be.”

“We’ll pay attention to it when it gets here.”

There’s something remarkable about the way Joy lives—in the present. I know she’s had difficult years, losing her parents, being raised by Mav—but she’s one of the most positive people I know, always finding something worth holding on to, even in the worst moments.

Clara Whitman arrives at noon with Dakota and Eli, who is carrying a wooden horse—hand-carved, a pinto coat with a braided mane. He holds it up when he sees me.

“My father gave him to me!”

I crouch down for a better look and nod appreciatively. “He’s beautiful.”

Clara’s hug holds a beat longer than usual. She looks better than she did in my office—still tired around the eyes, still carrying the weight of eighteen months of holding everything together, but the set of her shoulders is different. She’s starting to believe. That does something to me—the responsibility of keeping her ranch alive so she can keep living the life her family built.

Mason is at my side when she lets me go, and I make the introduction without quite planning to.

“Clara Whitman. Mason Brooks—he’s working on the Feig rodeo project.”

Clara shakes his hand. “The rodeo will be good for the valley.”

Mason’s lips twitch into an almost-smile. “That’s what I keep hearing.”

Eli tugs Mason’s hand. He crouches down. “Hey.”

“I’m Eli.”

“Hello, Eli. I’m Mason.”

Eli holds his horse out. “This is Ranger. I named him.”

Mason nods gravely. "That's a good, solid name for a horse."

Eunice commandeers the conversation then, and while she does, Clara leans over. "The ditch company records came in."

"I'll come by next week and get them."

When they drift toward the food table, Mason puts his arm around me. "She seems stressed."

"You'd be too, if you were living her life." I hear the snap in my voice and let it go. "Sorry—knee-jerk. Clara lost her husband a year and a half ago. She's managing the farm, the kids, and now a company trying to take her water rights. It's too much for one person."

He's quiet for a moment. "It's tough being a single mother."

"She's holding up, though," I say, the pride in my voice genuine. "She's remarkable. I just hope I don't let her down."

He squeezes my shoulder. "You'll do your best."

I lean into him. "She needs better than my best."

He kisses my hair. "You're a card-carrying do-gooder," he says, light and teasing, releasing the weight of the moment the way he does—with the ease of someone practiced at clearing air.

"Hmm. Compliment or insult?"

He turns my chin, and I look into his blue eyes. "You'll do everything you can for her. And if it doesn't go your way, that's not on you. You need to hold on to that."

Something in his tone catches me off guard. Before I can sit with it, he pulls me toward the makeshift dance floor. "Come on, Counselor—let's digest some of that barbecue we've been gorging on."

So we do. And it's fun. Deliciously so.

We leave in the evening, the mountains pink at the edges, the canyon filling with the soft dark of early evening. We talk the way people do after they've been somewhere together—unpacking the day, the people, the small moments worth keeping. Like a couple does.

A couple.

I stop in front of the Ridgeline Inn. "This is you."

He smiles, and I hold my breath. His hand cups my face. I've gotten used to that—to how he touches me, the roughness of his hands, his smell, his taste. His eyes search mine. "Thank you for a wonderful afternoon."

I swallow and nod because I have no words.

His mouth is a whisper away. I want to close the distance, but I want it slow—I want him to choose it.

He presses his mouth against mine, barely any pressure at first. Then I open to him, and he deepens it, one hand in my hair, and I slide my hand under the hem of his shirt and touch warm skin that somehow already feels familiar.

The kiss hums through my chest, down to my knees. I want him. It's such a good, uncomplicated wanting—the warmth of something just beginning.

He pulls back, desire clear in his eyes. “Kissing you is addictive.”

My gaze drops to his mouth. “I can say the same thing.”

He kisses my nose. “Goodnight, Counselor.”

“Goodnight, Mr. Brooks.”

He waits for me to pull away before he goes inside.

My lips tingle all the way home. So does my heart.

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CHAPTER 13

mason



Jessup calls at eight in the morning, which means he's been awake since six, thinking about it, which means he's nervous, which means someone above him in the chain is asking questions he can't answer.

Which means he's going to put pressure on me.

Son of a bitch!

I answer on the third ring.

Because the first or second would say I was waiting.

And the fourth would say I don't care.

The third is professional courtesy.

"Mason." The warmth of ownership in his tone is right on schedule.

"Senator."

"I haven't heard from you in a week."

"I've been working."

A pause that is designed to communicate displeasure. I let it communicate.

"And?" he demands.

"*And* things are progressing."

Which is true, in the sense that time has passed, and I am still in Wildflower Canyon, and I know considerably more about the valley than I did three weeks ago. What I have not done is anything materially useful to Jessup, and we both know it.

"Mason." His voice drops a register. The charm stripped back, the real ugliness underneath. "I need more than *progressing*. The preliminary hearing is very fuckin' soon. My legal team needs her strategy now."

“Good intelligence takes time.”

“You’ve had three weeks.”

“In a town where everyone knows everyone,” I protest without heat, “you push too fast, the whole thing collapses. You want it done right or you want it done fast?”

Another pause. He’s calculating whether he has the standing to fuck with me and arrives at the answer that he doesn’t.

“I want results.” He sounds like a child now, sulking.

“You’ll have them.”

“By when?”

“When they’re ready.” I let the motherfucker process that. “I’ll be in touch, Senator.”

I hang up before he can reframe my answer as another question.

I sit on the edge of the bed and look at the phone in my hand.

Three weeks.

I have been in Wildflower Canyon for three weeks, and I have had coffee and meals with Taya Morningstar several times, a first date at a fancy French restaurant, a barbecue at Kincaid Farms, and one moment outside the Ridgeline Inn that I have thought about with unreasonable frequency since.

I have not photographed a single file.

I have not extracted a single piece of privileged case strategy.

I have not done the thing I was paid to do.

This is not who I am.

I am very good at this. I have been very good at this for years, in circumstances considerably more complicated than a small Colorado town, a water rights case, and a woman who says *okay* like it means something.

The problem—and I’m now willing to call it that, out loud, to myself—is that I know exactly how this is supposed to go, but I’m doing nothing to *go* where I’m supposed to.

Not because I don’t have the skill.

I do.

I’m not doing it because of *her*.

But I know I will have to.

Then I remember her saying how she needs to do better than her best. I warned her then that even if she lost it, it wouldn’t be her fault.

It’ll be mine.

And the truth is that it's hard for someone like Clara Whitman to win cases like this. Taya knows this better than anyone, as she's been on the other side of that equation enough times.

It sounds like a rationalization for doing what I need to do—and, in the process, hurting Taya.

She's a big girl. Won't be her first loss. Or her last. She'll get over it.

But will I?

I ignore the sense of doom pervading through me and spend the day doing survey work—the real job, which doesn't require me to examine anything difficult.

The rodeo grounds in the April sun are warm now, actually spring-like with the mud firming up at the edges. I work for six hours and think about nothing useful, and I feel the satisfaction of a man whose body is doing something his mind can't interfere with.

Feig stops by at three with two coffees from Wild Coffee.

"Structural engineer approved the access road calc." He hands me a cup. "We're greenlit for the next phase."

"Good."

"Stick around." He raises his coffee in a toast. "This thing actually comes together...I'll need you through the summer. Also, I have another piece of land that you can help with."

I don't answer but look at him enquiringly.

"Good money," he continues. "And honestly?" He winks. "I think you like it here."

He means Taya.

Everyone saw us together at Kincaid Farms.

There is an acceptance that something is going on between us.

I take a sip of the coffee and say nothing, which Feig reads as modest agreement, which it is not.

I won't be staying here long. I have to leave. I have to get what Jessup needs and leave before I hurt her—or myself.

As a man who has kept his emotions locked down for most of his life, I have a fairly sophisticated understanding of what's happening to me right now—which is its own kind of torture.

I can name it. I can trace it back to its origin—The Rusty Spur, the corner of the bar, a woman who didn't know I was watching.

I can map every moment since with the precision of someone trained to do exactly that. But knowing the territory doesn't mean you can't get lost in it.

Like my ex-wife said: I am the most competent and least present person she knows.

I have spent fifteen years being extraordinarily good at being somewhere without being there—without leaving anything of myself behind, without taking anything away that I didn't intend to take.

Clean entries.

Cleaner exits.

This is the professional discipline of a man who understood, early, that caring about outcomes is a vulnerability and caring about people is a liability.

And then Taya Morningstar smiled at me and called me Mr. Brooks and the rest....

Fuck!

She texts me at five.

Taya: *Rusty Spur tonight? Bree talked Joy into a girls' night, but Joy is already lobbying to make it not a girls' night.*

Me: *Seven?*

Taya: *Yes.*

I look at my phone for a moment.

I should use tonight. I should steer the conversation toward the case, gently, the way I know how. She's relaxed at The Spur, among her people, in her element.

People are most unguarded in their element.

That's an operational fact, fifteen years confirmed.



The Rusty Spur on a warm April Friday is The Rusty Spur at full capacity—every booth taken, the dance floor already working, Moxy running three conversations simultaneously without breaking stride.

The band is better than usual or maybe I've gotten used to it.

The air smells of whiskey and the aliveness of a community that has come through a long winter and is celebrating that fact.

I get there before her and order bourbon.

Joy arrives first, with Bree in tow, and whatever the girls' night plan was has already collapsed because Hunt is behind them, and Kaz materializes from a corner booth three minutes later, and now it's five of us at the bar, and Moxy is pouring without being asked, and the evening is settling into itself.

Taya comes through the door at seven-nine, her eyes searching.

I stand.

She sees me, and her face blooms into a big smile.

She's happy to see me.

I'm happy to see her.

But just because she's crowding my heart and brain doesn't mean I don't watch my surroundings as I normally do, because at eight thirty, while we've polished off fried food that is sticking to our arteries, a man walks in.

Tall, in his early forties, wearing good clothes slightly ill-suited to the setting.

They're not his.

He's wearing them to fit in, and yet he's not.

He scans the room with an efficiency that has nothing to do with looking for a friend. He finds a seat and orders.

But the way he sits—back to the wall, clear sightlines—tells me who he is.

I sigh when I finally get a good look at him.

I know his face.

I don't know *him* personally. I know him from a file, two years ago, when I was doing a job in Salt Lake City and needed to know who else was in the room.

His name is Sid Trafton. He's a fixer—private sector, ex-DEA, operating in the Mountain West. His clients tend toward the corporate side: development, energy, and land acquisition.

I set my bourbon down.

Two possibilities.

First: coincidence. Trafton happens to be in Wildflower Canyon for unrelated reasons, which I don't believe, because I don't believe in coincidence in operational contexts, because they are rarer than a mission without variables.

Second: Jessup sent him on a parallel track. As insurance against the possibility that Mason Brooks is taking too long.

Which, to be fair, he is.

I watch Trafton. He's not looking at me. He doesn't need to look at me. He's done exactly what I did three weeks ago: walk into a room, map it, and find the thing he's looking for, which is Taya.

"You, okay?" Taya asks, her voice low, concerned.

"Yes. Hey, how did your meeting with opposing counsel go today?" I change the topic as she tells me about a case she's working on—not the Whitman one, but another.

I listen and watch Trafton out of the corner of my eye.

The man looks unremarkable, which is by design, except for the small scar on his left cheek. I happen to know he got it in a bar fight in Tangier, though he tells a different story every time someone asks.

He doesn't approach. He's doing what I did—he's accumulating.

I make a decision.

I won't deal with him tonight. I need more intel before I can do that.

I turn fully toward Taya.

Joy and Hunt end up on the dance floor in a suspended, unresolved manner—close enough to be unmistakable, far enough apart to be deniable.

Bree and Kaz are deep in what appears to be an argument about fence maintenance at her ranch, but it's clearly about something else entirely.

I ask Taya to dance.

She says yes without hesitation.

We dance the way we danced at the auction—easy, unhurried, her hand in mine.

But it's different now.

There's a familiarity to it that wasn't there before, the ease of two people who have had a gravel driveway moment and a French restaurant and a few coffees and an afternoon of chocolate cake, and all of it is in the dancing, all of it is present.

She pulls back just far enough to look at me, and there it is again—that look that is deciding something—and this time I know what it decides before she says anything.

"Come home with me."

"Yes."

I'm being reckless.

But I don't care.

I want her.

I've been wanting her for days—for years, for a lifetime, even before I met her.

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CHAPTER 14

taya



We dance in my cottage.

It's become our thing.

I turn on the music, and it hums low and sultry.

Mason's fingers trace the curve of my waist, rough and warm, sending little shocks of electricity straight to my core. His breath is hot against my neck, whiskey-sweet, and I can feel the hard press of him against my thigh.

I have never been aggressive when it comes to sex—not because I didn't want to, but because I was afraid my advances would be rejected. With Mason, there's a strange kind of freedom, one I've never experienced before, it makes me roll my hips, slow and teasing.

He groans softly.

His lips find my ear, teeth grazing the sensitive skin there, and his voice is a low growl. "You're playing with fire, Taya."

Yes, I am! I am so playing with fire and loving it.

Sienna once told me that she knew Daniel was the one for her because with him, sex felt right, *always*. It felt like coming home, with no shame or discomfort.

I press my chest flush against his, and his hands slide down to grip my hip, squeezing hard enough to make me gasp.

His hardness twitches against my stomach, and I can't help but rub against him, wet heat already pooling between my thighs.

The friction is delicious. It makes me whimper.

Mason drops kisses on my mouth, sometimes light, sometimes hungry. It's the most wonderful kind of foreplay.

His tongue slides against my lips. He tastes like sin and temptation, and I moan into the kiss as his fingers unbutton my jeans and cup me.

"Counselor, I have evidence here that you're aroused."

I giggle. He's doing what he's been doing since he met me. Bringing me joy—the kind that makes me feel loose and happy.

I bite his lower lip, tugging just hard enough to make him gasp with pleasure.

"The evidence *is* strong, Mr. Brooks. I think you should do something about it."

His hand fists in my hair, tilting my head back, and his other hand pushes my panties aside, fingers sliding through my slick folds.

"God, Taya!" He circles my clit with slow, torturous strokes.

I arch into his touch, feeling like I'm floating. "That feels so good."

"Let's see if we can do better than *good*." His fingers are plunging inside me, curling just right to make me see stars.

I writhe, which in itself is a novelty.

My nails dig into his arms as he pumps me with his fingers, his thumb is pressing down on my clit in tight, relentless circles.

"Sweetheart, come for me."

He's never called me *sweetheart* before, and as mundane as the endearment is, it rushes through me like heady wine.

I orgasm.

Before I can even catch my breath, Mason's spinning me back around, dropping to his knees. "I want to taste."

His tongue is devastating, licking into me like he's starving, sucking my clit until I'm panting, my fingers tangled in his hair.

He doesn't stop, doesn't let up, making love to me with his tongue until I'm coming again, my legs shaking so hard I nearly collapse.

But he catches me and picks me up, bridal-style. "Bedroom."

"Down the hall."

He carries me in and lays me down on the bed. The only light is the one coming through the living room.

He reaches and turns on the bedside lamp.

"I want to see you," he explains and then begins to undress me.

I let him.

I watch him as he does—as he unwraps me like I’m a gift.

I feel cherished as he kisses each stretch of skin he exposes.

When I’m naked, he stands and looks at me. I stretch languidly, feeling luxurious after the two orgasms I just had.

Two!

Most of the time with Griffin, I was lucky to have one.

I raise a leg and push my foot against his hard stomach. “Now it’s your turn.”

“In a minute.” He leans down and cups my breasts. “Beautiful.”

He kisses the top of my nipples and then begins to suckle.

His mouth is warm, tight, torturous. He spends his time on them, driving me crazy. When he looks up at me, his lips are wet, and there’s a look of satisfaction in his eyes. He’s the kind of man every woman wants to meet, one who enjoys his partner’s pleasure.

“I want more,” I tell him.

He straightens.

Grins.

And then, starts unbuttoning his shirt.

He’s fit. Looks as good without his shirt as I thought he would. Before he takes his jeans off, he pulls out his wallet and throws it on the bed next to me.

“Take out the condom, sweetheart.”

I open his wallet and, between a ten- and twenty-dollar bill, find a strip of three condoms.

“Someone is ambitious,” I tease as I drop the wallet on the bedspread and hold the condoms up.

“Someone is *very* hopeful,” he retorts.

When he’s naked, I let out a long, audible exhale. It makes him smile.

He’s beautiful.

His body is muscle and sinew—honed.

His body is that of a man who has used it, not one who sits behind a desk and gets fit in a gym with a personal trainer.

There are scars here and there—his history.

He takes the condom packets from my hand and tears one open.

“I am clean,” he says as he puts it on.

“Thank you. So am I.”

He crawls atop me. “Counselor, I’m going to fuck you now. Is that okay?”

I chuckle at that—the incongruity of asking for permission to *fuck*.

“Yes, it’s not only okay but very much wanted.”

His eyes stay on mine as he pushes into me, slowly, achingly so. When he bottoms out, he closes his eyes and takes a deep breath.

“Mason,” I whisper because I’m feeling it, too, this power of intimacy, of connection, of finding something that I never expected.

He opens his eyes and kisses me softly. He starts slowly, each stroke hitting that sweet spot inside of me.

“God!” I whimper at the feeling of fullness, of feeling whole and complete.

This isn’t merely sex. The thought springs out of the crevices of my brain and rests against my heart.

Soon his movements become frantic, frenzied. “You’re tight around me, Taya. So wet. So....” He pushes my knees up to my chest. “Wanna go deeper.”

He starts pounding into me. His eyes hold mine as he does. I can’t look away. He’s telling me so much—so very much as he moves in and out, and in and out, over and over until, until neither of us can think, until we’re both trembling.

“Now,” he orders, and his hand moves between us.

Even he can’t elicit a third orgasm from me, I think. I’m wrong because he does, right before he lets go.

After, he goes into the bathroom, and I close my eyes, enjoying the aftermath of luxurious lovemaking. It was sweet and hot and perfect.

I open my eyes when Mason lifts me off the bed, his arms flexing with effortless strength.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Take a bath with me.”

Liking the idea very much, I snuggle against him.

I feel spoiled and pampered when he sets me down on a towel atop a counter. He checks the water and turns off the faucets, satisfied with the temperature and amount of water in the tub.

I turn to look at myself in the mirror and let out a laugh. My hair is tangled. My lipstick is long gone. My cheeks are flushed.

“What?” he asks.

“I look thoroughly debauched.”

He comes up to me and kisses my lips reverently. “You look stunning.”

He slides his palms up my thighs. “I left marks on you.”

I look down at the red marks his fingers left behind.

“No one ever has,” I whisper.

He looks at me with the kind of possessiveness my heart craves.

I know he’s only passing through. I know he’s going to leave. And yet, whatever this is between us makes me believe—if only for a moment—that he won’t.

That he’ll stay because he can’t quite bring himself to go.

That this will work.

That whatever is growing between us, this beginning won’t also be the end.

I’m a practical woman who believes in facts—but right now, right here in my bathroom with my bathtub filled with water and lavender bath salts, I don’t want to.

The water is perfect.

He helps me in first, then climbs in behind me, pulling my back against his chest.

The tub is a nice big one that the previous owners put in, probably with something like this in mind, I think, with a smile.

I let myself float, melting into his arms, his heartbeat thudding against my spine.

His hands roam my body under the water, slow and lazy, mapping every inch as if he needs to memorize me by touch alone.

Mason reaches for the soap, lathers it between his palms, and starts to wash me, beginning at my shoulders and working down.

Each stroke is deliberate, a worship.

No one has ever cleaned me like this before. It is strangely intimate, and I’ve never felt so naked.

He tips my chin up from time to time, his thumb tracing my jaw, and kisses me, like he can’t get enough of me.

I turn in his arms, straddling him in the tub, water sloshing up the sides.

He is hard again.

I felt him when he washed me, but the sight of his erection makes my breath hitch.

He runs his fingers through my hair, massaging my scalp, combing out the knots. I close my eyes, content to let him take care of me, to surrender for a moment.

When I open them again, Mason is looking at me with something softer than lust. A crooked, secret smile, as if he now knows something he didn't before—like he knows something that I don't.

He kisses my nose, my cheek, every inch of my face until I giggle. His arms lock tight around me, drawing me in. "You're beautiful, Taya."

My throat goes tight. I want to crack a joke, to deflect, but the words tangle on my tongue. Instead, I find his mouth with mine and kiss him hard, pouring everything I feel into the press of our lips.

We stay in the water until it cools, until our skin prunes.

Then, Mason wraps me in a towel and dries my hair with surprising tenderness. When I reach for moisturizer because if I don't, my skin will turn into scales, he takes it from me and massages it into my skin from neck to toe. It's romantic, yes, but it's also organic, unplanned, *perfect*.

The sheets are cool when we get in. This time we make love slow and unhurried—a lazy burn instead of an explosion.

He lets me taste him, lets me hold him in my mouth, arouse him. When he's about to come, he pushes me away gently and then lies on his back. "Ride me, sweetheart."

He holds my gaze, both of us refusing to look away, as we make love again.

When I come apart one more time, it is quieter, like falling, and Mason follows me, groaning my name into the hollow of my neck.

After, he pulls the duvet over us, and we lie tangled into one another.

"Goodnight, Counselor." He kisses my forehead.

"Goodnight, Mr. Brooks." I kiss the shoulder my cheek is resting on.

I listen to the silence, to his heartbeat, to the sound of my own pulse skipping and stuttering in my chest. I've never felt so raw, so seen. I don't know what will happen in the morning, or next week, or ever—but right now, in this bed, with Mason's arms banded around me, I let myself believe in something soft. Something good.

I drift off, finally, my last thought a ridiculously giddy hope that he'll still be there when I wake up.

CHAPTER 15

mason



She makes eggs.

I didn't expect that.

No, that's not true. I don't know what I expected—coffee, maybe, the efficient morning of a woman who has a full practice and several cases in active litigation and no reason to feed a man she's known for a month.

But she makes eggs—scrambled with green chile, cotija cheese, and parsley from the herb pot on the windowsill that makes the whole kitchen smell like spring.

There's a choreographed grace to how she moves in the kitchen.

She knows where everything is without looking for it.

The cast iron comes off the hook and onto the burner in one motion.

She opens the refrigerator with her hip because her hands are already doing something else.

I sit at the counter, drink the coffee she handed me when I came out of the bedroom, and watch her cook, and say nothing, because I have learned that silence around Taya Morningstar does not need to be filled.

It can just exist.

"There's bread." She tilts her head toward the wooden box beside the stove. "If you want toast."

"Okay."

She glances at me. "You don't like what I'm cooking?"

That makes me smile. "Sweetheart, the way this is smelling, I can guarantee you, I'm going to like it."

"So...what's with the frown?"

“I...I think I’m surprised you’re making breakfast.”

She grins. “You thought I’d kick you out without food?”

“Well....” I feel gauche.

I, a man of thirty-nine who has had the morning after with plenty of women, am unsure how to react.

Yeah, hell has certainly frozen over.

“How about you do toast?” she suggests.

That gives me something to do, which is better than putting my foot in my mouth, which I seem to be doing with some alacrity this morning.

I cut two slices of bread and put them in the toaster.

She turns back to the eggs.

We eat at the kitchen counter with the mountains in the west window—blue-gray and enormous and utterly unimpressed with everything happening below them.

The creek runs behind the house.

The cottonwood outside the kitchen window has finally, definitely, committed to being green.

It’s the best morning I’ve had in a very long time. It’s not eventful or earth-shattering, just good in the plain, unvarnished sense of the word that I had forgotten applied to mornings...or any other time of day.

Taya Morningstar, what have you done to me that I’m turning completely fucking maudlin at seven in the morning?

Her phone rings just as we start cleaning up. She glances at the screen, straightens slightly, and answers.

“Morningstar.”

I stack the dishes into the dishwasher while I listen to her.

“When did this come in?” A pause. “Mac, I’ll pull everything from the ditch company for those two years and cross-reference with the water commissioner’s quarterly reports.” Another pause, longer. She’s listening to something that requires thought. “No—won’t concede that. The place of use hasn’t changed. The water stayed on the ranch. That’s our argument, and I’m not moving off it.” A beat. “I know what they’re going to say. I know it because I used to say it.” Her voice is flat and certain and entirely without doubt. “I’ll get the records by Thursday. I’ll draft the supplemental before the weekend. Thanks, Mac.”

She hangs up.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

She taps her fingers on the kitchen counter. “It’s the Clara Whitman case. You met her at the barbecue.”

“The mother of the boy who had the horse called Ranger?”

She nods, her lips pursed.

Now!

Now is the time to probe, to earn my money from Jessup.

My heart thunders in my chest.

Robert Frost’s words move through my head, unbidden, the way things you memorized in school surface at the worst possible moments.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry I could not travel both.

I look at the two roads.

Jessup isn’t going to walk away just because I did. He’ll keep Trafton here or bring someone new, and whoever finishes this job won’t have my reluctance about collateral damage.

She loses her case. Clara Whitman loses her water. The Whitman kids lose their ranch.

And if I handed Jessup his money back without an airtight reason, he’ll burn me. Men like him talk to men like him. One refusal on my end becomes a reputation, and a reputation in my business is the whole business.

Road two: I stay.

I finish the job. I get Jessup what he needs—her strategy, her theory of the case—and watch from a professional distance while I dismantle everything she’s built.

She loses her case. Clara Whitman loses her water. The Whitman kids lose their ranch.

She may figure out eventually that I was involved. By then, I’ll be gone.

But I keep my business. My credibility. My carefully constructed life of hotel rooms and other people’s problems, and the self-sufficiency of a man who has never needed anything he couldn’t walk away from.

Either way, Taya loses. The only variable is whether I lose with her.

It’s a rationalization. I know that.

But I am a man with a flexible morality, and I have already spent more time on this than it deserves, because the answer is obvious and has been obvious, and the only reason I’m standing in her kitchen performing a philosophical exercise is that I don’t want to do what I know I’m going to do.

Finish the job.

Get out of Dodge.

That's all there is.

"What's going on?" I ask.

She shakes her head and then looks up at me. "It's just how water rights work...if there is any discontinuation of the use of water, the other side has a case."

"Has there been a discontinuation?"

"I don't think so."

"But?" I prompt.

"But opposing counsel might." Pause. "I don't think the judge will agree." She looks out of her window at the mountains. "Sure, for a while, the neighbor used the water, but there are no records of it, and it was just neighbors helping neighbors. The usage didn't change. She didn't abandon the damn water, now did she?"

This I've already given to Jessup.

"No records whatsoever?"

She looks at me and shrugs. "The ditch company probably has some, but I don't know. We just got a notice from opposing counsel asking Clara to produce all ditch company records for the past five years, including any records of water delivery to or from adjacent parcels." She sets her phone face down on the counter. "Which means they already know, or they suspect, that water moved across the ranch's fence line during the years Deke was sick. They're not fishing. They're confirming."

I keep my face very still.

"They're framing it as a change-of-use allegation," she continues, thinking out loud now, not for my benefit but for hers. "If they can show that the water was used on a different parcel, even temporarily, even with no formal transfer—they'll argue it constitutes an unauthorized change of place of use, which under Colorado water law can trigger a partial abandonment finding on the affected acreage."

"What will you do?" *Tell me your theory of the case, Counselor.*

"We'll have to produce the records. Discovery is discovery." Her jaw is set in the way it gets when something is serious, and she's decided not to let it be frightening. "But producing records isn't the same as conceding the argument. I knew this was coming. I just didn't know they'd move on it this fast."

“You said there were no records,” I remind her.

She picks her phone back up. “I think there are.”

“What if you found it and didn’t share it with them?”

She looks at me like I sprang a second head. “That’s illegal. I’ll get disbarred for doing something like that.” She groans. “How the hell did they move so fast on this? I barely know about it.”

They moved on it this fast because someone told them where to look.

I know who that someone is.

I look at my coffee and away from her. I look inside myself and find that I don’t feel guilt, but there is remorse. A new emotion.

“Mason, I’m so sorry, but I have to go. Will you lock up?”

“Sure, sweetheart.”

I kiss her in the doorway—it’s the easy, unthinking kind of kiss, the kind that belongs to people who have established a habit. The domesticity of it feels unnaturally good.

I call Jessup on my way back to the inn.

“Your lawyers have what they need?” Maybe this is it, maybe I can leave now. Maybe the job is done.

“What?”

“I hear that you moved on the water use business.”

I hear a chuckle. “You do have your ear to the ground. Just like they said you always do.” A pause, the smile audible in it. “That request just went out this morning, Mason. That’s pretty fast work.”

No kidding!

It’s fast because I’m sleeping with my mark, and now Jessup suspects it.

“So...am I done here now?”

“Hell no!” Jessup roars. “We need it in black and white. I need documentation. I need it to stand up in court so the judge doesn’t dismiss the case during the preliminary hearing. So, get me the records that say the Whitman woman abandoned the water while her husband was dying.”

Fuck!

“What if there is no documentation?”

“There better be, Mason, because if we have that, we won’t have to do something drastic.”

“Like what?”

“Like you don’t need to know,” he snaps, then hangs up just as I pull into the Ridgeline Inn’s parking lot.

I slam a fist on the steering wheel.

The threat in Jessup's words was implicit. Drastic meant that he'd go after Taya or Clara Whitman himself. These people are capable of pretty much anything.

Wasn't there a land developer who tried to have Duke Wilder killed for his land not long ago? And wasn't Jessup involved with that?

Would they hurt Taya?

That thought haunts me.

What we have may be casual, but I don't want her to get hurt. I want her protected. Safe. Happy.

All things she wouldn't be if she kept on with this case. I already know I can't convince her to give it up. People like Taya, who find their purpose, don't budge from it.

I think they call it integrity.

I call it impractical.

It's no wonder I'm in a bad mood when I get to Wild Coffee for my late afternoon caffeine hit.

"Brooks," Kaz calls out. He's sitting with his laptop, which is closed, almost as a prop.

"How's it going?"

"Have a seat."

I do and drink my coffee. He obviously has something to say, and I decide not to dissect what he will before he does.

"Feig says you're greenlit for phase two."

Ah, we will start with small talk.

"Yeah, it's good news." I settle back and add to poke at him, "How's the Bree situation?"

He narrows his eyes. *Bullseye!*

"There is no Bree situation."

"Mm."

He gives me a look that is not quite irritation. "You sound like Joy."

"Joy is perceptive."

"Joy is a menace."

He leans forward, but before he says something, I hear the door open behind me and see Kaz's demeanor change. It's the slight shift in his posture and an alertness that comes from being trained—where your instincts flag something your brain has not fully caught up with.

I glance back.

Sid Trafton.

Daylight version.

Work clothes—functional, unremarkable, the studied plainness of a man who knows how to look like nothing. He orders at the counter without scanning the room, which is a tell in itself. People who are genuinely unbothered look at the room.

He takes his coffee to the table by the window.

“You know him?” Kaz posits it as a question, but it’s not. Not really.

“No.” The lie comes automatically, the way they do after years and years of covert ops.

“Saw him in town yesterday. At The Spur two nights ago.” He drinks some coffee, a forced casualness in his posture. “He’s not here for the hiking.”

“People pass through.”

“Nobody passes *through* Wildflower Canyon.” He says it with the flat certainty of someone who grew up here, left, came back, and understands exactly how the geography works. “He’s been asking about the Whitman case. Eunice mentioned it. Came into the Horseshoe yesterday, bought the meat-lovers delight, asked about the water rights situation and the lawyer handling it.”

Something cold moves through me.

“What did Eunice tell him?”

“What Eunice tells everyone.” He looks up, and his eyes carry considerably more than his voice. “Everything she knows. Which isn’t much. But he was asking expressly about Taya.”

Panic, unfamiliar, spreads its wings in my chest.

Not my Taya!

“Mason.” He says my name carefully. “I don’t know what your full picture is. I’m not going to pretend I don’t have suspicions.” A pause. “But that man is a different kind of operator than you are.”

“Still don’t know what you’re talking about.” It’s important to maintain the line. I know men like Kaz—they don’t fish, they wait for you to trip over yourself.

“I’ve come across his work before,” he continues, ignoring my lie. “In another context. What he does—” He stops, taps his fingers on the table. “He doesn’t have your restraint.”

He's telling me something specific without being able to say it *specifically*. I understand the construction because it's the same one I use.

I hold his gaze and say nothing.

He nods once and opens his laptop. "I guess you've gotta do what you've gotta do."

"Doesn't every man?"

"Yeah." He then watches Trafton until the man has no choice but to look at him. He does and gives him a small nod. A greeting from apparent stranger to apparent stranger.

I finish my coffee and walk out of Wild Coffee, afraid for the first time since I was a kid joining the army.

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CHAPTER 16

mason



Feig picks me up at Wild Coffee, and he's talking even before I get settled in his truck.

I don't mind because I'm not listening. And Feig doesn't mind because he doesn't require a conversation, just a witness.

"Good barbecue at Mav's, yeah?" Feig navigates the county road north with the cheerful aggression of a man for whom the speed limit is a mere suggestion.

"Yeah."

"Looks like you and our lawyer have gotten close?"

That gets my attention. "Shut up, Feig."

He laughs but changes the topic. "You gonna get a kick out of Jeb."

"Am I?"

"He's a...how do you put it...a Wildflower Canyon *icon*. Yeah, that's the word for it. He's been running water in this valley since before I was born." He passes a truck with reckless abandon, which almost makes me wince, but I control it because that's what men do. Stupid men. "And I ain't no spring chicken, if you know what I mean."

"You drive like a teenager," I mutter.

"Well, that's how I stay young in here." He taps a finger to his temple. "Anyway, Jeb knows where every drop of water in this valley goes, and he's never been wrong about a delivery in fifty years. If we're going to file the augmentation plan for the rodeo grounds, we need his sign-off on the historical flow data."

"Okay."

“But we got a problem.”

“Which is?” Sometimes it’s like pulling teeth with Feig. He’ll talk ad nauseam about shit that doesn’t matter, and when it does, he dances around it like a debutante at her coming-out ball.

“He’s ornery, and he hates paperwork.”

Ah, so this will be us digging through his files if he has any.

Excellent!

“Has he seen the site plans?”

“He’s seen the site. He doesn’t read plans. He looks at the land.” Feig waves a hand. “It’s a whole thing with him. You’ll see.”

I look out the window at the valley running north—the creek corridor, the cottonwoods fully committed to green now, the high country still carrying snow on the peaks, but the lower slopes are bare and warm.

It’s April in the North Fork Valley, and the kind of day that makes you understand why people stay in places like this.

But not people like me.

Right?

“Mason, man, you doing okay?” Feig glances at me.

“Tell me about the augmentation plan.”

He tells me in great detail. I listen with the part of my brain that can do two things at once, which is most of it, and I think about Taya and Jessup and Trafton as I watch the road.

The Cottonwood Ditch Company’s office is a converted equipment shed at the end of a dirt road that the county hasn’t graded since last fall. The building leans slightly to the left, which, when we arrive, Jeb Cottonwood explains, is intentional.

“Settles better that way,” he remarks, as if it is self-evident.

Nuts!

He’s seventy-something, angular, wearing a canvas work jacket that has been washed enough times to become a second skin. He shakes Feig’s hand with the warmth of an old acquaintance and mine with the measured assessment of someone deciding whether I’m worth the time.

He apparently decides I am, because he waves us inside.

The interior is what happens when a man has been accumulating records for fifty years and has a philosophical objection to throwing anything away.

Metal shelves along the walls, filing cabinets with handwritten labels, stacks of ledgers on every flat surface, and a woodstove in the corner that

has been burning since at least November and smells like it.

There are maps—handmade and hand-annotated—pinned to a corkboard that covers most of one wall. Delivery routes, headgate locations, ditch company shares, and property boundaries are marked in different ink colors representing different decades of notation.

It is, by any conventional measure, a complete disaster.

It is also, I suspect, perfectly organized by a system that exists entirely in Jeb Cottonwood's head.

"Flow data for the rodeo parcel." Jeb moves toward a filing cabinet. "That's the old Hendricks ground. Water's been running that irrigation claim since 1934. I've got all of it."

"What about the augmentation requirements?" Feig shifts in the uncomfortable chair. "For the new impervious surface—"

And they're off. The two of them are deep in the details of cubic feet per second and return flow obligations and junior rights and the arithmetic of Colorado water augmentation, and I am not needed for any of it, which is exactly what I was counting on.

"So." Jeb rubs his chest and looks up at the stairs with the expression of a man who has made a private calculation about those stairs and his knees and arrived at an unfavorable result. "I've got the historical flow data you want for the rodeo parcel. It's in the attic." He looks at me. "You mind?"

I stand. "Happy to."

He sighs like a man accepting help he doesn't want to accept. "Yeah. You're looking for the Hendricks parcel records—anything from 1934 forward. They'll be in a folder marked H or possibly Hen or possibly not marked at all." He waves a hand upward. "The ledgers on the left side of the attic are organized. Everything else is a situation."

No shit!

"Understood."

"Take the flashlight off the hook by the stairs." He's already turning back to Feig. "And don't touch the Christmas cards. Those are also organized."

Of course they are!

I take the flashlight.

I go up.

The attic is accessed by a wooden staircase that protests every step with the conviction of what it's been doing for a long time. The space above is

low-ceilinged and dusty and contains approximately fifty years of water court filings, ditch company correspondence, delivery logs, and what appears to be a complete collection of every issue of the Colorado Water Newsletter from 1967 to 1994.

It smells like old paper and a previous century.

I first find what I need to for Feig, which takes a good thirty minutes and a whole lot of luck. And then, because I've done my research and I know that Cottonwood provides water to most ranches in Wildflower Canyon, I look for another file: S for Silverbell Ranch or W for Whitman.

I find it in the third stack I go through, which is either luck or the instinct that fifteen years of finding things in places they shouldn't be has given me. A manila folder, unlabeled, tucked between a 1978 water court filing and what appears to be a Christmas card from someone named Earl.

Inside are delivery logs from 2019 and 2020. Jeb's handwriting is cramped and mostly legible. Water orders and headgate times, property by property, down the north valley corridor.

And there, in the 2020 log, a notation in the margin. Jeb's hand again.

Tom Reyes—N. pasture via Whitman upper gate—neighbor arrangement—Deke sick—no share transfer.

Three words that will hold up in a motion. No share transfer. Jeb documented it the way he documents everything—as fact, without editorializing, because water is water and facts are facts and you write down what happened regardless of whether anyone will ever need to know.

I photograph the page with my phone. Both pages. The cover sheet of the log has Jeb's name and the year. The notation.

Then I put the folder back exactly where I found it and go downstairs, feeling like a thief.

I hand over the historical flow data for the rodeo land to Jeb. They continue to talk as they were while I stand in the doorway, look at the annotated maps on the corkboard, and feel the weight of my phone in my pocket.

The Tom Reyes notation is not the killing blow. It's confirmation of what I already knew—the informal water transfer during the years Deke Whitman was sick.

Change of use.

Arguable abandonment of the north pasture. It's ammunition, if not a guaranteed verdict.

I decide, standing in Jeb Cottonwood's equipment shed looking at fifty years of water history, that this is what I give Jessup if I give him anything, and only if he agrees to keep Trafton out of the picture.

I tell myself this is a strategy.

I know it's something else—it's how I feel about Taya, even if I don't want to accept it.

I call Jessup from the truck while Feig is inside saying goodbye, which will take another ten minutes because Feig's goodbyes are structural and endless with a lot of, "oh, and" extensions.

He answers on the second ring.

"Mason."

"I've found something on the Whitman case."

"Tell me."

"There's documented evidence of informal water use on an adjacent parcel after the husband died. No formal share transfer. Potential change-of-use argument for your Texas team."

A pause. "Documented?"

Didn't I just say that? "Yes."

"Send it to the lawyers." And keep him out of it.

"I'll need some days to find the document." I am buying time, and I don't know why. I should close this down and get the hell out of town. That's what a smart man would do. That's what a sensible man would do.

"Of course. Take what you need." He's pleased that he finally will have proof that his investment, which is me, is working. "How many days?"

"A week or two," I hedge.

"And the lawyer herself? You've made progress there?"

"My methods are none of your business, Senator," I snap.

He laughs.

"One more thing," I cut the hyena sound off. "Are you running anyone else in Wildflower Canyon?"

A beat. A fraction too long. "No, 'course not. Just you."

"Good to know." I keep my voice pleasant. "I'll be in touch."

I hang up.

Jessup is a weasel, and like all weasels, he lies with ease—but I've spent my whole career in rooms with men like him, and I can read their tells before they've finished the sentence.

He sent Trafton, and the problem with a man like Trafton isn't that he's not effective; it's that he's loud. Men like him cost less than men like me precisely because they don't care about the noise they make, which can damage the client's position. It leaves evidence. It creates exactly the kind of exposure that careful work is designed to avoid.

But it doesn't just hurt the client. It hurts whoever is in the way.
And right now—Taya is in the way.

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CHAPTER 17

taya



The road to Silverbell Ranch runs north through the part of the valley that hasn't been touched yet—no development pressure, no rezoning applications, no corporate survey stakes in the fence lines. The land is coming back to itself after a hard winter, the pastures greening in patches, the creek running full along the eastern corridor.

I drive with the window down, and the discovery requests on the passenger seat, and the weight of knowing what's at stake.

I am trying not to let that knowledge become fear.

Fear, in my experience, is useful in small amounts. It sharpens. In large amounts, it paralyzes, which I cannot afford right now.

When I pull in, Dakota Whitman is mucking the near stall.

She's sixteen with her mother's jaw and her father's coloring and madly in love with horses.

She works the fork with the no-nonsense rhythm of someone who stopped thinking about it months ago and now just does it.

I know her schedule as I know Clara's.

They do chores—all of them, even little Eli—then they go to school, all of them, and come back. While Eli does his homework, Dakota does ranch work, and when Eli is done, Clara works while Dakota watches Eli and often makes dinner.

Clara keeps at it until it's time to eat and then does paperwork after the kids go to bed.

Dakota sees me and straightens.

"Miss Morningstar."

“Just Taya,” I say, for the fourth time.

She nods, for the fourth time, in a way that suggests this will never take. She’s been raised to address grown-ups in this way, and it’s how she intends to do it.

“Mom’s in the kitchen. You want coffee?” She says it with the dignity of a girl who has assumed the hospitality obligations of a household that needed her to do so before anyone asked.

I have to look away for a moment as my emotions catch. When Deke died, Dakota took on many of her mother’s responsibilities so Clara could step into his role.

“I’d love some.”

She nods and walks up to me, and then with me to the kitchen.

Clara is on the island with a folder of documents—her own, labeled in her neat schoolteacher hand. She looks up when I come in and offers a smile that is genuine and tired in equal measure.

“Dakota, baby, can you put on a fresh pot?”

Dakota goes about what she was intending to do when I said, “I’d love some coffee.” I feel guilty for adding to her burden.

Clara and I work through the discovery requests—what I need, what it means, what the timeline looks like. She listens carefully and asks good questions. It tells me that she’s been going through the materials at night after the kids are in bed. Learning the law the way you learn anything, when the alternative is losing.

When we’ve been through everything, and Dakota has left to get back to her work after she’s had a cup of coffee, I place my palms on the island and lean forward. “What’s bothering you?”

She looks at me. “How do you know—”

“You’ve been holding something since I walked in. Tell me.”

Clara wraps her hands around her coffee cup—a gesture I recognize from my own hands, in certain conversations, when you need something solid to hold.

“Yesterday...ah...last night.” She shakes her head. “This man came by. He said he’s with High Mesa. Very polite.” Her eyes fill. “But he didn’t look like.... You know... a corporate type.”

The hairs on the back of my neck tingle. “What did he look like?”

She shrugs. “He had a scar on his left cheek. A small one. And...I don’t know, Taya, there was something about the way he talked.”

I put my hand over hers. “What did he say?”

She glances at our hands and then at me. “He said they...High Mesa wants to revisit their offer. That they understand the situation is difficult, and they want to be generous.”

“How much?”

She tells me.

I keep my face very still.

It’s a significant number. More than the ranch is worth on the current market. More than enough to buy Clara Whitman and her children a comfortable life somewhere that isn’t a fifteen-hundred-acre burden she’s carrying alone.

“Okay.”

“I said no,” she continues, without drama. “He said...he said he hoped I understood this was their best and final offer, and that litigation has a way of being hard on everyone. Especially families.” She looks away, her breathing ragged. “Especially the children.”

Son of a bitch.

“Taya, he was threatening me.”

I dip my chin in acknowledgment but say nothing.

It sounds like a threat and probably is one, but I don’t know if it’ll hold up in court. He was polite. He offered money—a lot of it—and then said something that’s technically true—trials and litigation are hard on people—especially children.

“Let’s get this down on paper. I’ll submit it to the judge.”

That’s the best I can do. So I make her retell it again and again until I have it down word for word, as close as she can remember. I write it as precisely as I can because, when I file this conversation, it will become evidence.

“They’re not supposed to talk to you *ex parte*.”

“I...I told him that. I said that this kind of conversation needs to happen with my lawyer.”

Now, she looks afraid.

“Clara?” I urge.

“He said he knows who Taya Morningstar is and that...I shouldn’t trust you. That you’re on *their* side.”

I pause.

“I don’t think that, Taya. You know that, right?”

I hate this man so much. I hate High Mesa so much. They're making what is a difficult time for this woman harder, and for what? Money? I may have worked on their side once, but I *never* stooped to tactics like this.

"I do." My jaw tightens. "I'm going to use what he said to make their case considerably harder."

She smiles at that, and then it falters. "He threatened my children, Taya. That's...that's not how this is supposed to be, is it?"

What is supposed to happen and what does...well, those are very different things.

"I have to ask you, Clara, wouldn't it be easier to sell, take the money?" I have to do what's right by my client and make sure she's weighed all her options.

She shakes her head. "This is not about the money. If it was then Deke would've sold Silverbell years ago. This is...it's about legacy." She lets out a scoff. "And I know some people say legacy doesn't pay the bills—but the thing is that it does. It won't afford us a life of caviar and champagne, but it's not a life we want, anyway."

I lean back and let out a long breath, impressed beyond measure with this woman.

She's quiet for a moment. Then she reaches across the table and opens the folder she had waiting when I arrived.

"Jeb Cottonwood's boy came by yesterday," she says. "Young Jeb. He manages the digital side of things for the ditch company now—his father has no idea he's built a proper database out of those attic records." She almost smiles. "He said he'd been going through the old delivery logs, trying to get everything entered before his father's system collapsed entirely. And he found something." She slides a printed page across the table. "He thought I should have a copy."

I pick it up.

It's a scan of a handwritten delivery log—the cramped, certain script of a man who has been recording water for decades. The year 2020. The north valley corridor, property by property. And there, in the margin, a notation:

Tom Reyes—N. pasture via Whitman upper gate—neighbor arrangement—Deke sick—no share transfer.

I read it twice.

No share transfer. Three words that bolster their case and hurt ours.

Then I set it down and look at Clara.

“Young Jeb brought this to you.” I want to be sure how it arrived.

“Said he thought we should know it existed before anyone else found it.” She folds her hands on the table. She laughs. “Asked if he should destroy it.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “What?”

Clara waves a dismissive hand. “I told him that would be illegal, and he said he wouldn’t mind doing it for me. Ain’t he sweet?”

“Yeah.” Sweet and illegal! Here are small towns for you.

“Is it—is this bad?”

“It’s manageable.” It’s the truth. “It’s the change-of-use argument I’ve been preparing for. This document actually helps us—because Jeb documented it himself in real time and noted no share transfer. The water stayed on the ranch. The use was agricultural. We can defend this.” I tap the page. “What I need to know is whether opposing counsel has seen it.”

“Young Jeb didn’t think so. His father doesn’t know the database exists. He’s been doin’ it on the side, you know.”

“Good.” I slide the document into my case file. “Then we get ahead of it.”

On my way back to town, I call Mac, and when he suggests I come by for an early dinner and bourbon, I tell him I’ll have the bourbon, thank you very much, but will pass on the dinner.

Mac can’t cook!

“I made shepherd’s pie,” he announces when I come into his place.

“It smells like....” I close my eyes and then give him a half-smile. “It doesn’t smell good, Mac.”

He throws his hands up in the air. “Everyone is a restaurant critic these days.”

We settle in his living room with some good Michter’s, and I tell him about Clara’s visitor, particularly, and the case in general.

He listens without interrupting, because that’s who Mac is. He absorbs, processes, and then gives his verdict.

“Intimidation of a litigant,” he clips.

“Potentially. Depends on how a judge reads it.”

“I’d like to see the judge who doesn’t read *“especially children”* as a threat.” He pours himself more bourbon. “What else?”

I pick up my drink. “What else what?”

“You’ve got the face you get when there’s more.”

I have been mentored by this man for six months, and somehow even in that short time, he's begun to read me as fluently as I read a deposition.

"Any news from the grapevine?" I ask, ignoring whatever read he's getting from me. "About High Mesa's legal team."

He's quiet for a moment, as if accessing the memory files he needs to give me good information.

"They're throwing serious money at this." He makes a *what else can we expect* face. "The kind of money you don't throw at a contained water rights dispute over a mid-size ranch."

"So it's not contained."

"It's not." He turns his glass on the table. "Someone with significant resources wants that water in a way that suggests it's load-bearing for something much larger." He looks at me over the glass. "And they're moving faster than they should be, which means something is pressuring the timeline."

I think about the water board meeting in Ignacio—the upstream allocation discussion—where the council members are going through High Mesa's latest filings, with a focus on people who have been watching this pattern develop longer than I have. About one of the elders saying that the pressure in this valley wasn't local—that it had the shape of something with a larger anchor point and a hard deadline.

And then I think about something I read on my phone on the drive back up 133, while parked at the pull-off outside Durango.

What was it?

A planning commission notice, buried in the county public records feed I'd set up months ago.

A permit application.

A site plan.

I pull out my phone. Open the planning commission document. Then the map.

There it is—the Silverbell Ranch water corridor, the upstream diversion point High Mesa has been contesting, and three miles north of it, on the flat bench land above the creek, the footprint of a proposed resort development.

Hotel, spa, golf course.

Two hundred and forty units.

A private airstrip on the south end.

The water from Clara's senior rights, rerouted upstream, would service all of it.

Without that water, the resort doesn't work. The investors won't commit. The whole thing dies on paper.

A reluctant smile forms on my face.

I turn the phone toward Mac.

"They're not after Clara's ranch," I tell him with the confidence of someone who's played on the other side of this equation for the resort builders for years. "They need her water. The resort is permitted, and the investors are in, and the only thing standing between High Mesa and a two-hundred-and-forty-unit luxury resort above Wildflower Canyon is one widowed rancher with the 1948 water rights."

Mac looks at the map for a long moment, then he picks up his bourbon. "Well, fuck! That changes things."

"In what way?"

"It means you're not fighting a water rights case anymore." He takes a long pull before setting his glass down. "You're fighting the whole project. Win the water, the resort dies. Lose it—" He doesn't finish.

"I know."

He looks at me with the steady, dry gaze of a man who has seen a lot of what money does to people who get in its way.

"Then don't lose it," he orders flatly. "You win the case. Cleanly, so there's nothing to appeal, nothing to challenge, nothing for money to grab onto."

"Easier said than done."

He smirks. "Isn't everything?"

I leave him to his shepherd's pie and drive home. Mason calls me as I get close.

"Where are you?" There's a tension in his tone that I haven't heard before.

"On my way home."

"I can be there in twenty minutes."

My pulse gallops at the thought of seeing him. "Good! I'll be there in thirty. You can wait for me."

"I'll shop for dinner at Buck's then. What do you feel like?"

It's so domestic, this talk about what to cook and what to eat. My heart bounces against my ribs in happiness. "Something simple."

“Okay.”

That night, we cook together—another act of household bliss that I once shared with Griffin. But then we never cooked *together*. I cooked, and he watched. He did help me clean up, though.

We make pasta.

He insists on making the sauce—simple, with crushed fresh San Marzano tomatoes, garlic, and a handful of fresh basil. I make the salad—again, a simple one with arugula and a lemon vinaigrette.

I open a bottle of Pinot Grigio to go with our meal.

“You are unexpectedly useful in a kitchen,” I remark when he sets the table after asking me where the napkins were.

He doesn’t use paper towels as so many do but wants the real stuff.

I like the real stuff—and always have washed and ironed napkins in the sideboard by the dining table.

“The military,” he replies.

“The military teaches a man to cook...ah pasta?”

“The military teaches a man nothing about pasta.” He runs a finger down my cheek, his eyes warm as they go over my face. “A lot of evenings alone teach a man about pasta.” He walks to the sink and drains the spaghetti water. “You learn to cook, or you eat bad takeout.”

“Ah!”

I want to know more about those evenings alone—and the ones when he wasn’t.

How many women?

How serious?

Did any of them come close to the thing I think might be happening here?

But something stops me, and I think it’s the set of his back—the way he’s standing at the counter right now that says he’s given me something real, and that’s as far as he goes tonight.

I understand that.

I’m the same way.

And just because I’ve opened myself to him doesn’t mean he has to reciprocate on my timeline.

Some people need more time to trust the frame before they’ll step across the threshold, and pushing only makes them step back, and I have no interest in pushing. I have spent enough of my life managing other people’s

comfort at the expense of my own. What I won't do is manufacture urgency where patience is what's actually called for.

I let it go.

We eat at the dining table with candles lit as the mountains go dark in the west window and the creek running behind the house and the beadwork catching the low light in the kitchen doorway, and it is—simply, without agenda—a good evening.

That night, when we lie together after we make love, and our breathing has settled, I decide to give him more so he'll trust me and return the favor, whenever he's ready.

"I want to take you somewhere."

He kisses my temple as I rub my cheek on his shoulder. "Where?"

"The Southern Ute Bear Dance. It's in two weeks. At Ignacio."

Will he still be here?

He strokes my back with a calloused hand, a slight stiffness entering his body. "What is it?"

I wonder if I've made a mistake, but I take the leap. If you don't take the risk, you won't get the reward.

"It's one of our oldest ceremonies. A celebration of spring, of survival, of coming back to yourself after a hard season." I raise my head to look at him. "Will you come?"

He's quiet for a moment.

"That's—" He stops. Starts again. "I'm honored."

I smile. "You are?"

"Yes. And I understand."

I frown. "Understand what?"

He holds my gaze. "What it means that you're asking."

I am so in love with this man. So completely and utterly in love that my feelings for Griffin, whom I thought was *the* man, pale in comparison.

"Good."

But later, in the dark, I lie awake and listen to the creek, doubts finding their way into my heart and my head as Mason sleeps beside me.

The Bear Dance is a *specific* invitation. A "this is my world, come into it" invitation.

I've never brought anyone. Not Griffin or anyone before him who was serious enough to ask.

I invited Mason so soon after we started seeing each other.

Am I being stupid, weaving a fantasy that he'll stay? Because he's told me that he's only passing through.

I close my eyes and make a decision.

I won't ask him how long he's going to stay, just as I didn't ask about his past loves—because he's not ready to tell me, and I'm not prepared to hear his truth.

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CHAPTER 18

mason



I was raised by a father who always insisted that the man drives—but I’m not my father, so I have no problem riding shotgun with Taya because that means I get to watch the land.

Somewhere around Montrose, I give up resisting my instincts and need, stop watching the landscape and watch her instead.

She’s wearing a dress the color of the earth around Ignacio—a deep ochre red, long, with a pattern at the hem in geometric shapes. Over it, she has on a light-blue cashmere cardigan.

Her hair is in two braids today, not her usual. Silver earrings, large, with turquoise stones, which move when she turns her head.

She dressed carefully this morning.

I watched her as she did, while I got ready myself. The domesticity of the moment, of sharing a bathroom, of a fragile caress as she passed by me, a kiss on her mouth from me because I can’t resist her.

The way I’m with her, which is new and not something I thought a man like me could want, settles in me like a stone in still water—heavy and inevitable.

She glances over. “What?”

“You’re very beautiful.”

She flushes. It’s charming.

“You’re a smooth talker, Mr. Brooks.”

“So says the counselor!”

She laughs, and my heart lightens.

I like to see her like this.

And that's when the dark thoughts surface—because once she loses this case and knows it's because of me, this laughter will disappear. I'm not being dramatic here or overemphasizing my impact on her. I am aware that there is something strong between us, and we will both be affected adversely when it ends.

Since it's a foregone conclusion and not something I can do anything about, I let it go. I'm good at letting things go. It's a skill a man with moral flexibility comes by organically.

The landscape changes—and canyon country gives way to wide open spaces as we drop south. The valley floor broadens, the mesa walls step back, and the sky gets bigger as the mountains stop holding it in.

We pass through Ouray, and then the road begins its long curve toward Durango. The San Juan Basin opens up on the left like a held breath finally released.

"Amazing, isn't it?" she remarks.

We haven't talked for fifteen minutes because my gaze has been arrested by the vista unfolding in front of us.

"Yes," I concur, feeling a buoyancy that is unfamiliar, one that comes not from managing my emotions or containing them, because one wouldn't want to let such a fickle feeling become too big, but a simple happiness that is all about being in her Wrangler, on a highway, going to her home because I want to.

When I told her it was an honor to be invited to the Bear Dance—I meant it.

I still do.

It is an honor.

I don't deserve it, but I'm selfish and greedy—and I'm aware it's moments like this that will come to my rescue later on when I'm back to being myself—back to managing myself.

I ask her a lot of questions about the Bear Dance. I could have read about it online, but I wanted the story from her.

"It's also called *mama-kwa-nhká-pú* in Ute or the woman-return dance."

She's told me that she's fluent in Ute; her grandmother insisted. It's another layer about this woman who is a lawyer who wears designer cashmere and is also grounded in her heritage.

"Woman-return dance?"

She chuckles. “Yes, because women choose their partners. It’s an endurance test that lasts four days or longer. Couples dance in lines inside a brush corral.”

“But we’re not going for four days.”

We left on Sunday morning, and we’ll be back Monday evening. We’re staying the night at her grandmother’s place. Her cousin, who is there some of the time and uses the house as a quiet place to work on her dissertation, is not there as she’s at a conference. So, it’s going to be just us.

“I go for all four days when I can, but...it’s been busy with work this year.”

“Four days is quite a commitment,” I remark.

She laughs. “Yes. But back in the day, it was a 10-day event. It was about strengthening social ties...and sort of a dating scene as well. The community used to encourage courtship.”

There is the strength of culture and tradition in her voice as she speaks—a love for her people.

She slows down to let a clown in a Mustang pass her.

“Those days, it was all about dancing, feasting, games, horse racing, and gambling. Now, we do the feasting and games only.” She glances at me. “Bear Dance is one of the oldest Ute ceremonies. It was first recorded by Spanish conquistadors in the 15th century...but oral tradition dates it to be a thousand years old or older.”

“How did it start?” I wonder aloud.

“There are several stories, but the one that is told most is about how the year’s first thunderstorm led two brothers to a female bear just out of hibernation. She stood upright and clawed at a tree as she moved back and forth. One brother stayed with the bear and learned from her. He returned to his people and taught them the Bear Dance.”

She continues to tell me why the bear is important to her people, as it symbolizes leadership, strength, and wisdom.

“You go back to Ignacio often?” I ask because I’m aware this is a drive she makes regularly—probably has for years.

“At least once a month, sometimes more if I’m needed or there’s a celebration.”

“Like the Bear Dance?”

The corners of her mouth move. “Yes.”

She turns off the highway at one point without explaining why.

It's a vista point.

"I always stop here on my way home."

"And on the way back?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "Then I drive past it."

We get out of the Wrangler and stand side by side on the lip of the vista point—the basin opening up below us.

Light here falls in the most unique way—it's not golden or dramatic, but it showcases the wide, wild beauty of nature.

"Why do you stop here?" I'm aware that I ask more questions of Taya than I have of anyone else—except if they're a job.

Taya is the job, Brooks!

"Because Wíitsin used to. She said from this point on, we were home."

I look at the mesa, aware that taking tangents like Taya does is not who I am.

In Toledo, there were no pull-offs or vista points. The landscape of my childhood was flat and industrial. I left at eighteen and didn't look back, and I've spent twenty years being very comfortable with the fact that I have nowhere that holds me. That has never bothered me—but right now, right here, I wonder what it would be like to have a sense of *home*.

She looks at the basin for another moment and then turns and gets back into the Wrangler. I follow her.

As we drive the last leg to Ignacio, we talk more—the landscape isn't something I've gotten used to, no one can because it's immense and larger than life—but it's occupying less space in my vision.

"You've done this drive a lot...does it change?"

She's quiet for a moment, thinking about it properly rather than saying the first thing that comes to her mind, which is one of the things about her I cannot get used to—the way she takes questions seriously instead of answering before she's considered them.

"It's a journey for me to come back to Wíitsin."

I taste the word Wíitsin in my mouth. She's used it before in passing. I know what it means. Grandmother.

"The first part looks like leaving," she continues. "The canyon, the valley—that's Wildflower Canyon country. But when the road drops and the basin opens up...."

"It changes."

She smiles as if to herself. “It does. And that’s when it starts looking like coming home.”

I look out the window at the basin. “Two homes—one you leave and one you come to.”

“Yes...both on my way to Ignacio and the way back to Wildflower Canyon.”

She tells me about her grandmother. I’ve read about Delia Morningstar, but I know what’s in a file is never the whole truth—case in point, Delia’s indomitable granddaughter.

“She was...amazing. She was always so sure about things—not rigid, mind you, but certain. Like she’d done arguing with herself a long time ago and arrived at her truth.” She smiles, looking at the road. “She’d think about things carefully and then make a decision, which always made me feel safe with her, because I knew she’d looked at every angle of a situation before imparting advice.”

The road curves. The light shifts. “You’re like that.”

She glances at me and frowns.

“You take your time and then you decide, and that’s the end of it.”

She considers this. “Maybe...at least, I hope so.”

I look at her profile. The braids. The silver at her ears. Once again, my truth, which I can’t seem to be able to negotiate with, speaks to my heart—the truth I’ve been fighting writes itself on the enormous sky: *I am in love with this woman.*

It’s not a revelation—more like a recognition, the way you do a street you’ve been on before and simply didn’t name. It was already true a minute ago. It’s been true for some time. I’m just done arguing with it. And the recognition, when I finally let it land, brings something I wasn’t expecting: joy.

Uncomplicated and irrational and sitting in my chest like it’s always been there, and I’ve been working around it without noticing.

I haven’t felt this in a very long time. Possibly ever.

I have, for the first time in my reprobate life, fallen in love.

I don’t know what to do with this knowledge—especially because it seems so unreal. I always wondered what being in love meant, and now I know.

It’s a sense of home. Being with Taya feels like home.

I'm also, underneath all of it, terrified. Because I know what I am and what I've done and what's still sitting in my phone, and I know that the joy and the terror are going to have to be reckoned with, and I don't know yet in what order.

But right now, I'm in a truck going south, and she's driving, and the San Juan Basin is spread out to the left of us like something enormous and patient, and I am—despite everything—happy.

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CHAPTER 19

mason



The Southern Ute Bear Dance grounds in Ignacio sit adjacent to the Sky Ute Resort and Casino, on the flat land between the mesa and the community center. They're marked by a brush arbor—the traditional dance corral, a large circular enclosure of cottonwood and willow branches woven into a fence, maybe forty yards across, open to the sky.

When we arrive, mid-morning, the grounds are already full.

Families have set up chairs in the shade—folding chairs and lawn chairs and a few old wooden ones that look like they've been making this trip for decades. Elders sit closest to the arbor, facing inward. Children move through everything, immune to the boundaries adults observe.

The women near the arbor wear dresses in colors that don't apologize for themselves—deep red, turquoise, the gold of mesa grass in late summer, a purple so saturated it looks painted. The fabric is often velvet or heavy cotton, the hems long, and the patterns at the borders—geometric, stepped, precise—carry the same visual language as the beadwork in Taya's kitchen doorway.

Around their shoulders: shawls in a range of colors, some with fringe, some plain, some beaded at the edges. Their hair is braided. Their jewelry is silver, turquoise, and coral, heavy and worn with the ease of things that have been part of the body for years.

"The shawls are important," Taya says, draping hers firmly around her shoulders. It's cobalt blue satin, with fringe nearly fifteen inches long, embroidered with geometric patterns, the stepped diamonds her grandmother stitched by hand.

“How?”

“Women invite men to dance by flicking their shawls toward them.” She smiles and demonstrates, flicking the fringe lightly toward me. “The fringe imitates the tall desert grasses that bears move through when they emerge from hibernation.”

The men wear ribbon shirts—solid colors with ribbon trim at the collar and chest, long-sleeved despite the May warmth—and some wear vests with beadwork or quillwork, and several have feathers in their hair. The older men carry themselves with the uprightness of people who understand what they’re participating in.

I’m in dark jeans, a chambray shirt, and the cleanest boots I own. I feel like a man who has arrived at something real and is only approximately equipped for it.

The singing is loud. Taya leans toward me to explain: the men around the growler box are rubbing notched sticks in steady strokes to produce the rhythmic rasp of a waking bear.

“The moraches,” she says. “The sound they make—” she pauses, listening— “that’s the bear coming back to itself. Not smooth. Rough and gradual and irreversible.”

I listen.

She’s right. It doesn’t sound like music exactly. It sounds like something physical—wood on bone, the texture of waking. The moraches and the drums together create something that isn’t quite melody and isn’t quite rhythm. Older than both. Below the categories.

I look at the men around the growler box, each in his own time and somehow all in the same time, and I think: this is what it sounds like when winter is over.

“How long do they play?”

“Traditionally, four days.” Someone stops and says hello to Taya and then she’s back with me, bright with laughter. The Bear Dance is a celebration, and her enthusiasm is contagious. I feel it, too.

“Now, there are those who play drums and dance—but they’re at the powwow,” she says, tilting her head toward the far side of the grounds where a different sound is coming from. Bigger. Faster. More voices. “The Bear Dance and the powwow happen at the same time, same grounds, but they’re separate things.”

“What’s the difference?”

She considers. “The Bear Dance is ours. Southern Ute. It’s one of the oldest ceremonies we have—some say it came from the bears themselves, that a hunter watched a bear emerge from its den and learned the dance and the songs and brought them back to the people.” She glances toward the arbor. “The powwow is intertribal. Nations come from all over—different tribes, different traditions, all dancing together. The regalia is extraordinary. The dances are competitive, but the competition is”—she pauses, searching—“it’s an honoring. You dance your best because the dance deserves it.”

“Which do you prefer?”

She doesn’t hesitate. “The Bear Dance. The powwow is spectacular. But the Bear Dance is quieter. It asks more of you. You have to stay with it.”

“Stay with what?”

She looks at me. “The return. Winter ends, you come back. That’s the whole ceremony. You just have to be willing to be in it long enough to feel it.”

The moraches go on. The drums go on. Someone in the powwow grounds lets out a call that carries over everything—sharp and high and proud—and Taya turns toward it with a look of pure, uncomplicated delight.

Then she takes my hand. “Come on. I see Auntie Carol.”

Auntie Carol is a small woman with a density that has nothing to do with her size. She takes Taya from me without ceremony, engulfs her, holds her the way you hold someone you’ve been quietly worrying about from a distance, and Taya lets herself be held with a completeness she doesn’t allow in Wildflower Canyon—her shoulders dropping, something releasing that she carries so consistently I’d stopped noticing it was carried.

When Auntie Carol releases her, she looks at me.

“Mason,” Taya says. “This is Auntie Carol.”

Auntie Carol’s dress is deep burgundy velvet with white beadwork at the collar. She looks at me the way small, powerful women look at men they haven’t decided about yet.

“You’re taller than I pictured,” she says.

“Auntie Carol,” Taya mutters.

“It’s an observation.” Then, because Taya is giving her daggers, Auntie Carol raises an eyebrow. “You told Sienna, and I got it out of her.”

Taya throws her hands up.

“If I didn’t do that, I’d never know what’s going on in your life.”

“Auntie Carol manipulates my best friend and me to tell on each other,” Taya explains to me.

“I’m gathering information.” Auntie Carol winks at me and steers us toward the communal dining tables.

Elder Nokoni takes me around when Taya drifts off to find Sienna.

“They’ll talk a mile a minute,” he says. “Come on.”

Walking with an Elder means that people stop continuously—to shake his hand, to exchange a word, to show him a grandchild. He takes it all with the patience of a man who understands that this is also part of the ceremony. Near the corral, he introduces me to the Bear Dance Chief, a busy man who makes time to shake my hand and welcome me. If I weren’t already feeling like an impostor for being here under false pretenses, I was now.

“How does one become Bear Dance Chief?” I ask as Nokoni walks me toward the dining area.

“Lineage and mentorship,” he says. He hands me a cup of something pale and cold.

I look at the drink, then at him.

“No alcohol on the Bear Dance grounds,” he says, with the mild satisfaction of a man who enjoys delivering this information.

“Of course.”

“This is sumac lemonade. John here adds honey.”

John, who is pouring drinks nearby, nods. “Also maple syrup. I’m experimenting.”

We stand by the corral and drink—Nokoni is having watermelon juice—and he tells me about the Bear Dance Chief’s grandfather, Edward Box Senior, who spent forty years as the tribe’s spiritual leader and who brought these ceremonies back into the light after decades of suppression.

“Did you know that from the 1880s until 1933, the U.S. government enforced the Code of Indian Offenses?” Nokoni says. “Traditional dances and ceremonies were essentially criminalized. And even after the ban was eased, the courage required to bring these practices back—that was its own labor. It wasn’t until 1978 that our right to ceremony was properly protected under law.”

I shake my head. No, I didn’t know. I didn’t even think about it.

He nods slowly. “Edward Box Senior said that knowing even one song allows the tradition to go on.” He looks out at the grounds. “That’s vital, isn’t it—so nothing sacred is lost.”

By the time Nokoni returns me to Taya, I have drunk too many sumac-ades and eaten the best bison stew I've ever had.

"You having fun?" Taya asks, her gaze sliding to Nokoni in a way that is asking whether he took good care of me.

"He met the Bear Dance Chief," Nokoni says, in mock indignation.

Sienna is Taya's best friend, and I'm uncomfortable meeting her—because she's the person who will be there to pick up the pieces when I leave, and when the case falls apart. I know this about her before she's said a word, and it makes me want to apologize before I've been introduced.

She's in a dark teal dress, her hair down around a beaded clip at the base of her neck, silver on her wrists. She pulls me into a hug when Taya introduces us, and the warmth in it is so genuine that I want to step back and warn her. *Be careful of men like me.*

I don't.

Her son finds me before I've finished the thought.

Cam is in a ribbon shirt—red, with yellow trim, perfectly pressed—and jeans and boots with the slight shine of a child dressed by a parent who cared. He attaches himself to my right boot and examines the lace with the focused intensity of someone solving a problem no one else has identified.

He looks up. His mother's eyes. His father's complete absence of social discomfort. "Are you Taya's boyfriend?"

Fuck me. "Ah—"

"She said she didn't have a boyfriend."

"Ah—"

He considers both of my answers. "You're okay. You can be her boyfriend."

"Thanks, bud."

Daniel appears from the direction of the shade structure with the slightly harassed efficiency of a man who has been given instructions about a tent pole and has mislaid them. Deep navy ribbon shirt, white trim, hair pulled back. He clocks his son on my boot and gives me the look of a man deciding whether to apologize.

"Don't," I say.

I take the other end of the pole he's holding, and we work it through together. He accepts the help with the directness of a man who doesn't need to perform gratitude.

"That was good work, Mason," Cam informs me gravely.

“Fair warning,” Daniel says. “You’re his now.”

Then the drums begin.

Four of them, set in a row under the shade structure, each struck by a drummer with a steady, unhurried hand. The sound doesn’t sit in the air. It travels through the ground first, up through the soles of my boots, and arrives in my chest before my ears have caught up.

The Catman—the dance leader—moves along the edge of the corral and the crowd begins to shift inward. Sienna explains that he’s inviting more people to join the dance.

The dancers form.

Women on one side of the arbor, men on the other, the space between them deliberate and held. The shawls come across the shoulders. The jewelry catches the morning light. The line the women form is elegant.

And Taya is in the women’s line.

She is the only person I’m looking at.

Her weight is settled already, heel to toe, heel to toe, moving in time with the drum before the first call has gone out.

The call comes—not quite a word, not quite music, something that carries intention the way music carries melody. A woman steps forward and lifts her hand toward her chosen partner. He meets her in the middle.

They move. Forward and back. Grounded, staying close to the earth, their bodies aligned but not touching. Small, contained, and entirely itself.

The round ends. They step back. The next call begins without pause.

Taya steps forward. She flicks her shawl toward Elder Nokoni.

“She just shawled him,” Daniel says beside me.

“What does that mean?”

“She asked him to dance. When a woman shawls you, you can’t refuse.”

Nokoni meets her in the middle, and they step into the rhythm, and I watch something happen that I don’t have a category for. He is a man who has been doing this for sixty years, the authority in every step absolute and unremarked-upon. And Taya matches him—meeting him there, in a language they both speak, in a place they both have always known.

The round ends. She steps back.

She dances again.

With her aunties, who carry themselves with the ease of women completely at home. With Sienna, who laughs once mid-step and falls back into the rhythm without missing anything. With Cam, who lasts forty-five

seconds before a dog catches his eye and pulls him clean out of the line, and Taya watches him go with a smile that belongs only to him.

Then she turns.

She looks across the line at me.

I see it coming about two seconds before it happens—long enough to understand what’s about to happen, not long enough to do anything about it.

She lifts her shawl and extends it toward me.

Daniel makes a sound that is half laugh, half warning.

“She just shawled you,” he says.

“What does that mean?”

“It means she asked you to dance.” He’s enjoying this considerably.

“And what if I refuse?”

“You don’t. That’s the point.”

“Has anyone ever turned down a woman for a dance?”

He thinks about it. “Not that I know of.” A pause. “It would be—not good.”

I look at the shawl. I look at her—standing at the edge of the arbor with her chin up and her shawl extended, the look on her face that says she knows exactly what she’s doing and has been planning it for the better part of the morning.

I step forward.

What I don’t know yet is that the Catman has struck his stick against the growler box—a signal, a permission. Taya will explain it later. What I know in the moment is that when she draws the shawl around both of us—the cobalt blue settling across my shoulders and hers, both of us inside it, the fringe falling at the edges—she doesn’t step back to the arms’ length the other couples kept.

She steps in close.

Her hand finds my arm. Her other hand takes mine.

She looks up at me with the Bear Dance in her face—all the looseness of it, all the rootedness. “The Catman opened the floor. Couples can touch now.” She smiles. “I’ve been waiting two hours so I can touch you when we dance...here...together.”

The drum finds us. The moraches find us. The rhythm that has been in the ground and in my boots and in my chest all morning finally has a direction.

We move.

The same step I've watched all morning—forward and back, grounded, close to the earth—but with her against me inside the shawl, it is an entirely different thing. Her weight shifts with mine. Her hand tightens in mine. The fringe moves when we move, and the May sun is on the grounds, and she is looking up at me with an open expression that has nothing managed in it.

I am completely, thoroughly, irretrievably done.

It's not a new feeling. I've known it for some time. But here, inside the shawl, in the middle of the Bear Dance grounds, with Taya Morningstar in her grandmother's regalia with her chin up and her eyes bright—the knowing of it drops all the way through me and settles somewhere I can't argue back out of.

I'm so screwed.

The thought arrives with something that feels, embarrassingly, like relief.

"You're smiling," she says.

"Am I?"

"You never smile like that."

"Like what?"

She studies me for a moment, the way she studies things she's decided to keep. "Like you forgot to decide not to."

The round ends. The Catman signals. The couples separate.

She steps back. Takes the shawl with her. Returns to the women's line without looking back, though she doesn't need to.

I step out of the men's line and find Daniel.

"My man," he says, with the quiet appreciation of someone who has witnessed something. "You're done."

Tell me something I don't know!

The pattern continues: the call, the choosing, the meeting in the middle, the return. Over and over. Not building. Not resolving. Just continuing, the way the drum continues, the way the moraches continue, the way the ceremony has always continued, whether anyone was watching or not.

I stand at the edge of the grounds with the coffee Auntie Carol put in my hand without asking, and I watch Taya Morningstar move in a world that has nothing to do with me. The humidity and the dancing have pulled some fly-aways loose around her face. Her face is open, and I'm aware that the version of her who operates in Wildflower Canyon is not here.

What's here is older than that.

It's rooted.

It's not longing or even admiration—it's larger than that. It's watching a person be completely, uncomplicatedly themselves in a context that has nothing to do with you and realizing, in that moment, that you love them. It is not the version of love built around what they give you—it's the one where you want them to have this world, these people, this slant of May light—forever, whether you're part of it or not.

And underneath it, there is a quiet certainty: *I don't deserve to be here.*

The feeling is an honest inventory of a man who has been standing in borrowed space and who has just watched the woman he was paid to destroy step into the center of the thing she comes from and move like someone who has never once had to question where she belongs.

The drums keep going.

So does the damage I'm going to have to find a way to name.

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CHAPTER 20

taya



They like him. Sienna. Auntie Carol. Elder Nokoni. Even Cam. They all like him.

And I am proud that they do. This is my man. I brought him here, and everyone likes him. I wish my grandmother were here because she'd have loved Mason.

I didn't tell him what to expect.

Not because I wanted to surprise him—I'm not a person who stages things for effect—but because I genuinely didn't know how to explain the Bear Dance to someone who hadn't grown up with it. And as my grandmother would say, some things you can only know by being there.

I watched him know it.

I watched him play with Cam, connect with Daniel, tease Auntie Carol, shake hands with the Bear Dance Chief, drink sumac-ade with Elder Nokoni—and watched him watch me as I danced.

Oh, but that was something, dancing with him here.

Dancing together has become our thing. But here, at the Bear Dance, that was special. Having my family see us together, accept him, that was magical.

My heart is full—so utterly content.

After Griffin, I didn't think I'd trust a man again, give myself to him—but then I met Mason, and it was like meeting someone destined for me. We connected not just here in the physical world but in the spiritual plane. I know it sounds like hooey, and I won't say it aloud, but I feel it, nevertheless.

In the evening, we eat together with the easy camaraderie that comes from everyone knowing everyone.

The food is set out on long tables at the east edge of the grounds, covered in cloth that keeps the flies off and the warmth in.

Frybread, pulled in rough rounds and stacked in towers.

Bison stew in a large pot.

Blue corn mush beside it, thick and warm, with a crock of butter that's half gone by the time we arrive.

Squash roasted beforehand and brought in covered pans.

Wojapi—the berry pudding Wíitsin made every year and now Auntie Carol—is delicious with chokecherry and plum, thick and dark and sweet-sour in a way that doesn't translate to any other flavor on earth.

Mason eats everything.

“Good?” I ask when he eats frybread.

“I don't understand how this is legal,” he says, taking another bite, making me feel like I won the lottery with him.

Auntie Carol, who isn't even pretending not to listen, makes a sound of deep satisfaction and puts another piece on his plate.

I feel something I haven't felt in a very long time: the uncomplicated pleasure of bringing someone I care about into something I love.

I once brought a law school friend, but she'd spent the whole time taking photographs on her phone, and I knew by noon that that was the last time.

Mason hasn't even checked his phone.

I've been coming here since I was four years old, and I am at home now as I was then.

My earliest memory is sitting on Wíitsin's lap, watching the line of women, not yet understanding that the observing was preparation. And that one day I would stand in that line. That the ceremony would pass through me the way it had passed through her, through her grandmother, through every woman in our family who had dressed carefully on a morning in May and come to this ground and stepped forward when it was time.

She made my first shawl.

The blue one I'm wearing today is not my first. That one fell apart years ago, worn past its life with the enthusiasm of a child who wore it to school twice and had to be gently discouraged. But she made this one too, cobalt with a stepped diamond pattern and a butterfly motif.

Cam is stuck to Mason, who has become his new favorite person, and Mason doesn't seem to have a problem with it.

He's comfortable with children.

He'll make a good father, I think, and I am immediately shocked by my line of thought. It's been just a short time since we've known each other, and I'm planning a family with him. Something I didn't even do with Griffin. With him it was abstract. We'll get married blah blah—but this is precise—because I can see a boy Cam's age who looks like Mason, making him smile in an unguarded manner.

During dinner, he rises and walks around for a bit, and when he's looking out at the mesa, I go stand beside him.

"Well, what's the verdict?"

He turns to me with the expression he wears when he forgets to be careful—open in a way he can't quite close before I see it.

"Thank you for bringing me."

"It's my pleasure."

I look at the mesa.

After my first Bear Dance, Wíitsin asked me if I felt it. I was four and didn't have words for it, but I said yes because I did feel it.

"Good that you did. Remember that feeling. You can always find your way back to it."

I've found my way back to it every year since.

This year, I found my way back to it with Mason Brooks, and the pleasure of it is massive, as big as the skies that are now darkening.

I look at him, and I think: *I love you.*

Fully.

Completely.

"Let's have dessert." I take his hand. "Auntie Carol made wojapi, and if you don't eat it while it's warm, she'll know, and she won't forgive you."

He glances at our hands, then back at me. "Can't have that."

And we walk back toward the tables.



Wíitsin's house wraps around me like warmth and home around us when we return.

I make tea. I move through her kitchen the way I've moved through it my whole life—this cabinet, that hook, the kettle that takes exactly as long as it's always taken—and Mason sits at the table and doesn't try to fill the quiet, which is one of the things I love about him, that he can be in a room without needing to make noise in it.

I set tea in front of him.

I sit down across from him.

I focus on him—not as a lawyer, but with the other lens, the one that has no professional category—and I say it.

“I love you.”

He stills and fixes his attention on me.

It's not a controlled quietness—I know that one. This is another kind.

He's not cold.

He's not indifferent.

He's looking at me like a man who's found something he didn't expect—and now doesn't know what to do with it.

I wait.

I know how to wait.

Outside, faint through the walls of this house that has held sixty years of her patience and her certainty and her love, the drums are still going.

The bear's heartbeat.

Steady as it ever was.

CHAPTER 21

mason



I love you.

She said the words I've been dreading to hear. The words I've been desperate to hear. She said it the way she does everything—directly, without performance, the fact set down between us like something she'd finished deciding and had no interest in revisiting.

I love you.

Three words in her voice in her grandmother's kitchen, the tea between us, the May evening going dark outside the window, the drums keeping time in the distance.

I am in love with her.

I have been since sometime in March, when she stood at the door of Wild Coffee and said, "*Don't let Feig oversell the timeline*"—meant it as a gift, a small honest thing offered to a man she barely knew because she'd decided he was worth the honesty. I've been in love with her through the auction and the restaurant in Marble and the barbecue and the kitchen and the Bear Dance grounds this morning, where she stepped into the women's line in her grandmother's shawl and moved like someone who has never once questioned where she belongs.

I am also the man who photographed her files.

The man who gave Jessup the shape of the Tom Reyes notation and has been making decisions about how much to give and when. The man who arrived in Wildflower Canyon with a hundred-page file and an assignment to dismantle her, and who has done—what exactly?

I am in love with her.

I am also the reason her case is vulnerable.

Both of these things are true. They are the two roads, and I cannot travel both, and now I am out of time to make a decision.

She watches me freeze. She doesn't look away.

She's not afraid of the silence. She's the least afraid person I know.

I should tell her.

I know I should tell her.

I should open my mouth and say: *I was hired to dismantle your case. I have documentation in my phone that could hurt you. I've been lying to you since March, and I'm sorry, and I would undo it if I could, and I love you, and I know that the love doesn't fix the lie.*

That's the honest path.

I look at her face.

The shawl still across her shoulders, the silver at her ears, the quality of her eyes when she's looking at me without the lawyer in them—just her, just the woman who drove me to the pull-off outside Durango.

If I tell her now, I take this day from her.

The Bear Dance.

Wíitsin's kitchen.

I tell her now, and all of it gets overwritten.

She'll think about it—she'll think about this conversation for the rest of her life—and the Bear Dance will be colored by what came after, and the pull-off will be colored by it, and the frybread and Auntie Carol and Sienna laughing mid-step and Cam on my lap.

I can't.

I know it's a rationalization. I am a man who is very good at rationalizing. I know I'm performing mendacity. I do it anyway.

"That's a bad idea, Counselor."

The words come out evenly.

Flat.

The voice I use when I'm managing something.

Her expression alters for a fraction of a second—the quickest thing, the fastest recalibration I've ever seen—and then she goes still.

It's not the stillness of shock but of a woman absorbing information and beginning to process it.

"Taya." I hold her gaze. "I'm only passing through."

It's the most cowardly sentence I've ever spoken.

The drums keep going outside.

She doesn't move.

"Not right away and—" I stop. Start again. "Soon. I have to—the project has wound down, and I have other work, and I've been—"

The sentences won't construct themselves. I am a man who has held cover identities for weeks without the seams showing, and I cannot finish a single sentence in my target's grandmother's kitchen.

Finally, I say it, "I won't be staying in Wildflower Canyon."

She studies me like she's trying to understand with the full weight of her attention, without mercy, without softness.

It's a silent cross-examination.

I can feel my cowardice, and the way it takes a real, complicated truth and files it under something too simple to be honest.

She deserves the real answer.

She deserves the whole truth set down on this table the way she set down *I love you*—directly, without preamble, without making her work for it.

Instead, I give her: *Because I'm not staying.*

She sits with it.

Outside, the drums go on. The bear's heartbeat. Steady. Patient.

She stands, smiles, holds her hand out. "Come, let's go to bed."

Her generosity blows my mind—breaks my heart, does things to me that are shattering and also gluing me back together.

"Taya Morningstar, you're the most remarkable woman I've ever met." That's the only truth I can give her.

CHAPTER 22

taya



“**T**hat’s a bad idea, Counselor.”

I’m not going to pretend that wasn’t a direct hit.

It landed exactly where things land when they’re true, which is somewhere below the ribs, in the place that the body will remember for years to come.

But I’m also not going to fall apart in my grandmother’s kitchen.

I also know what this is.

I’ve seen it in enough courtrooms, enough depositions, enough moments where a person knows the answer and can’t yet give it.

He’s not cold. He’s not indifferent. He’s a man who has made a decision and is executing it poorly because part of him doesn’t believe it.

I could push. I’m a lawyer. I know how to push.

I smile as I hold my hand out to him. “Come, let’s go to bed.”

“Taya Morningstar, you’re the most remarkable woman I’ve ever met.”

Then why can’t you admit you’re in love with me and stay?

The sheets are still warm from our bodies, the air thick with the musk of sweat and sex.

Mason’s chest rises and falls against my back; he’s still half-hard where he’s pressed between my thighs, sticky with the mess he left inside me because we’ve reached that point in our relationship where we stopped using condoms. It took a year with Griffin.

He made love to me like a man starving—like if he didn’t bury himself inside me deep enough, hard enough, right now, he’d die.

And I let him.

I wanted him to.

His fingers dig into my hip, possessive even now, even after he's come and left me trembling. His breath is hot on my neck, lips brushing my skin like he's memorizing the taste of me.

"Taya," he growls, low and rough.

I roll over, pressing against his chest, my nipples still stiff and aching from his mouth. He twitches against my stomach, already thickening again.

"Say it," I whisper, dragging my nails down his ribs.

He groans, hips jerking, his hand sliding down to grip my ass, fingers dipping into the slick heat between my thighs. "Taya—"

His fingers curl inside me, rough and perfect, and I gasp, arching into his touch. He knows exactly how to make me whimper.

"Don't, sweetheart, please," he begs, his mouth crashing onto mine.

I bite his lip hard enough to taste blood. "Liar."

He flips me onto my back, pinning my wrists above my head, his erection sliding between my thighs. "You want me to say it?" His voice is dark, dangerous. "Fine. I love how tight you are. How you scream when I make you come. How you milk me like you were made for me."

I whine, hips bucking, desperate for him to fill me again.

He doesn't.

Instead, he drags himself through my folds, teasing me, making me beg.

"Mason—please—"

"Tell me you don't love me," he dares, pressing inside just a fraction, just enough to make me choke on my own breath.

I can't.

I won't.

He moves inside me slow this time, deep and aching, his thumb circling my clit in perfect circles until I'm sobbing his name, until my thighs are shaking, until he finally spills inside me again with a groan that sounds like heartbreak.

And when he pulls me against him after, his arms too tight, his breath too ragged, I know the truth.

He loves me.

He just won't say it, and I don't know why.

He holds me close like he can't let me go and falls asleep.

His body surrounds me in the dark of my grandmother's room. I feel safe. Cherished. Loved.

I won't pressure him, I decide.

I won't ask again.

I won't revisit what I said at the kitchen table or look for signs that he's softened or construct theories about what his silence means. I said the thing I meant, and I let it stand, and whatever he does with it is his to carry, and I've made my peace with that.

What I haven't quite made my peace with is how much it costs to be the person who loves without conditions. How quietly and completely it costs.

I believe it as a strength—the ability to love without demanding that the love be returned in kind.

Wíitsin raised me to understand that love isn't a transaction, that you don't give it to get it back, you give it because it's true.

And I believe that.

I believe it in the way I believe the law: not perfectly, not without doubt, but as the best framework available.

Tonight, in the dark, his body around mine, it costs.

I close my eyes.

Eventually, I sleep.

When I wake, he's still there.

I notice it before I'm fully awake—the weight of him, the warmth, the sound of his breathing beside me. The pale light of early morning is coming through the curtains. Ignacio is waking up outside the window, a dog somewhere, someone starting a truck.

I lie still for a moment and let myself have this—just this, just the fact of waking up beside someone I love in my grandmother's house, with my shawl across the chair and the silver earrings on the nightstand and the drums from yesterday still somewhere in my body, in my chest, in the bones of my feet.

I get up, and I hear him, a soft rustle behind me.

"Taya, I'm sorry," he says,

I turn, glance at him, smile, no matter how much it hurts. "I know. I am, too."

I leave him and make coffee.

I sit on the porch in the early morning with a quilt around my shoulders and a mug between my hands, and the mesa going from gray to gold as the sun comes up, as the day begins.

When he comes out twenty minutes later, fresh from a shower, he is—
for just a moment, in the early light—like someone who has been
somewhere real and isn't yet sure what to do about it.

He sits beside me.

I fill a second cup from Wíitsin's moka pot. It's still warm.

We drink coffee on my grandmother's porch, and neither of us says
anything, and the not-saying-anything has a different quality than last night.

No pressure.

No aftermath.

"We should go," I say finally.

"Yes," he agrees.

We go inside.

I make the bed the way Wíitsin would want it made.

I close the windows.

I take one last look at the kitchen—the cabinet, the hook, the Moka pot
she never replaced—and I pick up my bag.

I lock the door.

Mason is already in the passenger seat of my Wrangler.

With a heavy heart, I drive us back north to Wildflower Canyon.

CHAPTER 23

mason



We pull out of Ignacio onto the road north, and the mesa country opens up around us the way it did yesterday, going the other direction.

I watch it from the passenger window and try to locate the version of myself that knows what he's doing.

He's not here this morning.

What's here is a man who held a woman in the dark and didn't sleep, and who woke up in her grandmother's bed in the early morning and lay still for as long as he could manage, listening to her breathe, before she got up.

Then he apologized for not being enough—for not being the man who could have her, be with her.

She said the words to me—and I now know her well enough to know that it took courage for her to do that.

When I rejected her—because I did—she didn't pout, didn't tell me I'm full of shit, even though that is true.

No—she just continued. Made love with me. Let me hold her like a drowning man does to a life raft.

She's not punishing me with the no-pressure. She genuinely doesn't operate in ultimatums. Her confession was hers, and what I do with it, according to her, is my business.

She told me her truth, and I replied with a lie.

Which is why this is unbearable.

She deserves someone who says it back.

She deserves it the way Clara Whitman deserves to keep her water—not because she’s asked for it, not because she’s fought for it, but because it’s hers. Because it has always been hers. Because taking it would be damaging something real, good, and irreplaceable.

I look out the window at the San Juan Basin.

We’re approaching the pull-off outside Durango.

She slows but doesn’t pull over—she doesn’t on the way back.

“You, okay?” I ask her because I’m a man on his knees begging for surcease, pleading for respite from the agony inside of me for the pain I put her through.

Talk about being selfish!

“Maybe.” And then, after a pause, in the careful voice she uses when she’s deciding to give me something, she adds, “But ask me in an hour, I’ll give you a different answer.”

Again with the honesty. The brutal candor.

My mendacity is in stark contrast to it.

Her phone rings, and she answers using the Bluetooth in the Wrangler.

“Hello, this is Taya.”

“Taya, it’s Hugh.”

Pause.

“Sheriff Dillon, how can I help you?”

“I’m so sorry, Taya, but there’s been a break-in at your office.”

I freeze—completely.

“What?” she almost shouts.

“There is significant damage and—”

“Is anyone hurt?” she cuts him off. It’s clear what’s important to her.

There’s a long, uncomfortable pause.

“Hugh?” Taya calls out, her voice high-pitched with anxiety.

“Mac was there.”

She puts a hand to her heart. “No. Is he okay? Is he—”

“He’s at County Memorial.”

“I’m on my way. Is he...is he....”

“He’s got a concussion—which is shocking since he has such a hard head,” the Sheriff deadpans, which is his way, I think of calming her down.

“Someone...hurt him?”

I clench my jaw. Fucking Trafton. Fucking Jessup.

“He surprised the intruder, who struck him in the back of the head. He didn’t see who it was.”

She goes silent and snuffles. I see tears streaming down her face.

“Taya?” Hugh says.

She doesn’t reply, just snuffles.

“Sheriff, this is Mason Brooks. What’s his status besides the concussion?”

I have never met the Sheriff, but I’m not worried that he doesn’t know of me—he would. Wildflower Canyon is a small town, and after the barbecue, it was clear that I’m connected to Taya.

“Just that, Brooks. They said they’ll keep him overnight, but that’s about it.”

“Thanks, Sheriff. We’ll be there”—I look at the time and assess where we are—“in ninety minutes.”

“Stop by the office first and...just do a quick recon. Mac wanted me to tell that to Taya. He’s worried about the client files.”

Once we end the call, I put a hand on Taya’s arm. “Pull over, Taya.”

“What?” Her voice is reed-thin.

“Come on, sweetheart, let me drive.”

She nods vaguely and does as I say.

Once we’re parked at a rest stop, she just sits, staring out of the window. “He was there for me...for the Whitman case. He said he’d go through the files and....” She takes a deep breath and lets it out.

I pull her into my arms, ignoring the console poking at me.

She leans against me, her forehead resting on my shoulder.



I drive carefully but do not respect the speed limit.

We get to Wildflower Canyon in fifty minutes. The county hospital is another twenty minutes away.

I take her to her office—because that’s what Mac wants. She agrees.

A man in uniform walks up to us as soon as we get out of the Wrangler.

“Taya.”

I go through my memory files and identify him.

Deputy Sheriff Wiley Buchanan.

And now I know that he has the measured delivery of a man who has given bad news enough times to know the delivery matters. “Mac asked me to wait for you and have you do a walk-through.”

“How bad is it inside?”

“I’ll walk you through. Don’t touch anything—forensics has been through, but I want you to see it with me. You’ll know better than I will what’s missing.”

He nods at me. I return the greeting. “Deputy Buchannan.”

He holds his hand out. I shake it.

“Mason Brooks.”

He lifts the tape. She goes in.

“You want me with you?” I ask.

She shakes her head and gives me a tight smile. “I’m good.”

I stay close to the doorway. This is hers to see. I don’t need to be in the middle of it.

The office has been turned inside out.

The desk is overturned. The chair is on its side. Both of the filing cabinet drawers are pulled open, one yanked so hard it’s bent at the rail. Papers are across the floor—not scattered randomly, pulled. Deliberately, quickly, in a hurry but not blind. Someone knew what they were doing.

Taya moves through it slowly.

She rights nothing.

She doesn’t pick anything up.

She just walks the perimeter of the room, her eyes moving across everything—taking inventory, building a picture.

“The computer’s still here,” she remarks. “Printer. The petty cash tin in the desk drawer—I can see it from here, the drawer’s open.” She looks at it. “Still there.”

“We noticed that,” Wiley says.

She moves to the filing cabinets.

“These were gone through in order,” she says, reading the drawers. “A through F, G through M—” she stops. “These are out.” She crouches beside a stack of files on the floor, not touching them, reading the tabs. Her voice changes. “The Whitman file. The Morrison easement. The Parson estate.” She stands up. “All north valley properties. All connected to water rights or land use.”

“You’re sure nothing was taken?” Wiley says.

“I can’t tell yet. I need to go through everything properly.”

Her gaze shifts to the wall, and I sense her relief when she sees her grandmother’s beadwork exactly where it should be.

She reaches out and touches it, like it gives her something steady—maybe it does. “Whoever was here—they weren’t robbing the place. They were reading it. Looking for something specific.”

“What do you think they were looking for?”

She’s quiet for a moment.

“The Whitman case strategy,” she finally says. “Documentation. Filings I haven’t submitted yet. My notes.” She moves back toward the center of the room. “This isn’t the first time someone connected to this case has tried to pressure a party. A man came to Silverbell Ranch a few days ago, said he was a High Mesa rep. But we don’t know because he didn’t present credentials, and Clara didn’t ask. He made an offer, implied it was final, and told her litigation would be hard on her family.” She scoffs in disgust. “Explicitly mentioned her children.”

Wiley’s expression doesn’t change, but his pen moves. “Did you report that?”

“I documented it—I was building the file to bring to the Sheriff and the judge.” Her shoulders sag as she faces him. “I should’ve come sooner. That’s on me.”

“I’ll need everything you have on that. Description of the man, exact language, date, and time.” He writes something. “And I’ll talk to Clara as well.”

“I’ll call her. Warn her you’re coming.”

“Tell her not to be alarmed. It’s protective—I want her to know we’re aware of the situation.” He closes the notebook. “Taya. You think these are connected.”

“I don’t think it. I know it.” She studies the pulled files on the floor. “High Mesa has a Texas law firm, significant resources, and a development project worth over 300 million that only works if they win this water rights case. They’ve been escalating. First, the legal pressure, then the intimidation of my client, now this.” She gestures at the room. “This is the next step. They couldn’t get what they needed through the courts, so they came looking for it directly.”

She lets out a long breath and gives Wiley a lopsided smile. “But I can’t prove any of it.”

“The law’s a bitch!” he remarks.

She lets out a breathy laugh. “Tell me about it!”

Wiley turns and gives me a measured look. “You know anything about this?”

Do I?

Unfortunately, fuck yeah.

“I’m just passing through,” I murmur and wince when I hear my words, the same when I told her it was a bad idea to love me.

At least, I didn’t hurt her this time, not visibly, because she’s focused on a file and not me.

The deputy narrows his eyes and persists. “Any theories?”

I shrug. “I’m a land surveyor. I know development corporations with legal exposure run parallel pressure when litigation gets complicated.”

“So, you don’t think this was opportunistic?”

“Is the Pope Catholic?” I say laconically.

He nods slowly and then turns back to Taya.

“Wiley—is Mac going to be okay? Honestly.”

“Honestly? He’s going to be insufferable.” Wiley hooks his fingers on his belt. “He’s already arguing with the nursing staff about whether a concussion actually requires bed rest or whether that’s just a recommendation.”

She smiles for a second and then there is just grief. “That’s Mac.”

“No shit.” Wiley lifts the tape again for her to duck under. “Go see him. Come by the office later and bring everything you have on the ranch visit. I’ll be in touch with Clara by the end of day.”

“Thank you, Wiley.”

He nods. “Take care of yourself, Taya.”

She turns and walks to the Wrangler.

I follow her.

As I drive us to the hospital, I know that the reckoning is coming, and whatever it costs me will not be enough to cover Mac taking a hit to the head, or for Taya’s broken heart.

CHAPTER 24

taya



County Memorial is the kind of hospital that knows what it is—small, underfunded, and quietly doing what a county hospital does without making a fuss.

The parking lot is half full at this hour on a Tuesday morning.

I am out of the Wrangler before Mason can fully stop it.

Mac is on the second floor.

He's sitting up when I come through the door, which is the first good sign, because a man who's sitting up is a man who's trying to win the argument with the nursing staff.

He has a bandage at the back of his head, a saline drip in one arm, and his reading glasses pushed up on his forehead like he was in the middle of something when all this happened.

"About time," he says.

"You're supposed to be resting, not reading...hell, Mac, is that the Whitman file?"

"I'll rest when I'm dead." He squints past my shoulder. "Is that Brooks?"

"Yes." Mac watches him for a long moment from the doorway.

"I only managed to get some of the pages." He lifts it up. "But you have everything on the cloud, too."

"I do."

I have backups of backups of backups. But this isn't about losing files—this is about someone reading through our plans and process.

“I don’t know yet what they took. Wiley walked me through. There’s damage.” I sit on the edge of the chair beside the bed. “Mac. What were you doing there?”

“Couldn’t sleep. I was going through the augmentation records you needed for the supplemental brief.” He shrugs carefully, like his body is warning him not to move too quickly. “I heard the back window and went to look.”

“You should have called Wiley.”

“I should have run faster,” he mutters. “Same difference.”

I put my hand over his on the blanket. He lets me.

Before I can probe him further, the room fills up faster than I expect.

Joy arrives first—she must have heard from someone at the Horseshoe who heard from Eunice who heard from whoever was on Main Street when the tape went up.

She glances at his blanket with disgust and pulls out a cashmere one from her bag. She removes the hospital issue without asking for permission and puts the new one on top of Mac.

“I could’ve been naked underneath,” he complains, but touches the fabric with appreciation.

Joy wiggles her eyebrows. “You’ve got nothing I haven’t seen before.”

“What I have down there is potent and not for young eyes,” Mac grumbles.

He’s in a good mood; that’s a good thing.

A very good thing.

Mav comes in behind her with Duke, and the room changes the way it always changes when those two men are in it. They have the gravity of people who have been anchoring this community long enough that their presence grounds.

Amos Langley arrives with the worst coffee in the world from the vending machine. He hands one to Mason without being asked. Mason takes it without looking at what it is.

He then gives each of us a cup, but not Mac.

“Your stomach lining will come off,” he tells me when he whines.

“But you’re okay with ours coming off?” Mav looks suspiciously at his cup.

“You’re a young strapping man,” Amos says casually and runs his hand over the cashmere blanket. “They’ve improved standards here.”

“I brought that,” Joy immediately announces. “Because Mac is special.”

Amos grins. “Darlin’, when I’m here half concussed, I hope you’ll do the same for me.”

Mac holds court from the bed.

He couldn’t sleep. He needed to check some files. The window. He went to look. He didn’t run fast enough. When he’s done, there’s a moment of silence because everyone is pissed as hell that this happened in Wildflower Canyon to one of us.

“He didn’t touch the beadwork,” he tells me because he knows it’s important to me.

“I know.”

“Would’ve protected it, Taya,” he adds.

I smile. “I know.”

Across the room, Mason disappears.

One moment he’s near the door, the next he’s not, and when I look into the corridor, I can see him at the far end near the stairwell, talking to Kaz Chase.

They’re standing close, not touching, both facing the same direction—the posture of two men having a conversation they don’t want to be overheard.

I watch them for a moment.

Kaz says something. Mason goes very still.

Then Mason nods once.

I leave them be, despite my curiosity. He’ll tell me if he wants to—or I’ll find out from Bree, who will find out from Kaz. She has her ways.

Hugh Dillon arrives around noon.

He talks to me, writes things down, and leaves again. He tells me before he goes that forensics will be done with the office by tomorrow morning.

“You can have it back on Thursday. There’ll be some cleaning needed.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“I can send someone—”

“I’ve got it.” Mason has reappeared in the doorway. Kaz isn’t with him.

Hugh looks at him. Then at me. He asks nothing.

“You can use my back office.” Joy puts a hand on my arm. “For client meetings. The space off the stockroom. It’s not fancy, but it’s private.”

“I have an office you’re welcome to,” Mav interjects, his eyes on his phone. “Main Street, two doors north of the steakhouse. I own the property.

Nobody is in it right now.”

That’s prime property.

He looks up from the phone. “It’s empty. You’d be doing me a favor using it.” He says it with complete flatness, which is how Mav offers things—as if his generosity were actually a practical solution, and it would be inefficient to refuse.

“Your clients would have to walk through mannequins in lingerie to get to Joy’s back office,” Mac says from the bed. “I’d take Mav’s.”

Joy whips around to face Mac, her hands on her hips. “I heard that.”

“You were meant to.”

Shortly after, Mac argues with the nurse about whether a single concussion mandates twenty-four hours or is merely a guideline open to interpretation.

The nurse wins by walking out mid-argument, which is the correct approach with Mac, as we all agree—loudly.

Mac is unimpressed.

I sit in the chair beside his bed and hold his hand and feel—underneath the fear and the anger and the steady professional assessment of what needs to happen next—the quality of being held by people.

I’m not alone in this.

I look at Mason in the doorway.

He’s watching me. Not with the operational attention—the other kind, which doesn’t have a name.

It’s nice, I think, not for the first time today—having him here, despite his reaction to me telling him what I hold true.

After the nurse shoos us all away, and with a twinkle in her eyes, says it’s because Mac needs a sponge bath.

“Fuck no!” Mac cries out.

We all walk out laughing as we hear him quarrel with the nurse, who is enjoying herself.

Mason drives me home. I let him because I don’t have the energy for it.

I lean my head back against the seat and look out the window at the canyon walls going gold in the late afternoon.

“You need help setting up at Mav’s?” he asks.

“I can handle it.” I close my eyes. “You don’t have to help me clean up the office.”

“I know I don’t.”

I open my eyes and glance at him. The side of his face. His jaw is clenched like he's holding on tight to something.

"Thank you." I put a hand on his, which is resting on the gear shift. "For today. For driving. For—" I stop. "For being there."

He doesn't say anything for a moment.

"I'm good at being useful in a crisis." He turns his hand and tangles his fingers with mine once before letting go so he can change gears. "It's the in-between parts I'm less reliable on."

It's more honesty than I expected.

"My ex-wife used to say that."

I give him my full attention.

"She used to say I'm competent and not present."

All I can think is that he was married.

With whom?

For how long?

What happened?

Does he have children?

God! I've fallen in love with a man I barely know.

Then, as if reading my mind, he continues, "We were married for two years...nearly three years ago. She's an architect. Very precise thinker, sees what a structure is trying to do before she looks at what it's actually doing." He keeps his eyes on the road. "She said it near the end. It wasn't an accusation—just a fact she'd arrived at."

"Was...is she right?"

"Yes." No hesitation. "I was and am very good at being in a room and not being in it at the same time. She called it before I would have named it myself."

I turn that over.

"The divorce was easy." He changes lanes elegantly, just like he drives.

"What does that mean? An easy divorce?"

"We sat in a lawyer's office and divided things we collected when we were married, which were mostly hers. Neither of us fought about any of it, because we'd already been not fighting for long enough that there was nothing left to fight about." He exhales. "That was the saddest part. Not the ending. The absence of the ending."

I think about Griffin. About the way he ended things—with the coldness of a man executing a decision with no room for negotiation or even a

response from my side. I thought at the time that coldness was the worst version. Now I'm not sure.

The absence of a fight seems worse; actually, the absence of anything left to fight about is probably the ugliest version of it.

"Why are you telling me this?"

He's quiet for a long moment. "Because, Counselor, you should know the facts about the man you..." He trails off, doesn't say the words. "I am a bad bet, sweetheart. In the car, when I asked if you were okay. You said to ask you in an hour, and you'll give me a different answer." A pause. "Blair used to say that. Exactly that. When I asked how she was. She realized too late I was a bad bet. I promise you will, too."

That annoys me. "I'm not your ex-wife, and you're not to me what you were to her. I don't need what she needs. You don't even know what I need."

"I do, Taya." The certainty in those two words stops me.

He continues artlessly. "You need someone who stays. You need someone who is in the room—fully in it—not just passing through. You need someone who tells you the truth." He pauses. "Three things I have a complicated relationship with."

"You're in the room right now," I remind him.

"I am."

"And you just told me the truth."

He's quiet.

"I'm not making a case. I'm just noting the evidence." I look back out the window. "I'm a lawyer. I work with what's in front of me."

"Taya, fuck, sweetheart, I—"

"And what's in front of me," I speak over him, "is a man who drove me to Ignacio, stood in the women's line at the Bear Dance when I shawled him in front of God and Elder Nokoni and everyone, helped Daniel put up a shade structure, let my Godson use his body as a jungle gym, drove me to my vandalized office, sat in a hospital room with my people—and is now telling me he's a bad bet." I turn to look at him. "That's a lot of behavior that contradicts the argument."

A long silence.

"That's the problem, Taya. I keep on contradicting the argument."

"Maybe the argument is wrong."

He doesn't answer.

“Mason, I know you might leave. I know the survey work is done and you have other things, and I know you told me in Wíitsin’s kitchen that it’s a bad idea.” I pause. “I heard all of it. I’m not asking you to change what you said.” I look at the road ahead of us. “I’m just not going to pretend that what I see in you is a bad bet because what I see is a man who keeps showing up. And in my experience, showing up is most of it.”

He drives.

The canyon holds us on both sides.

After a long moment, so long I’ve started to think that’s all there is, he says, “My brother thinks I work too much. My sister thinks I’m emotionally stunted. My mother thinks I need to eat more.” A pause. “Everyone who knows me has a theory about what’s wrong with me.”

“And what do you think?”

He considers this with the seriousness he brings to things that actually matter to him. “I think I’ve been very good at moving. And I don’t know yet what I am when I stop.”

“Maybe, that’s what you’re finding out....” *With me.*

He doesn’t comment, but his hand finds mine across the console, and he holds it for the rest of the drive home.

When we pull into my gravel drive, and he cuts the engine, I sit for a moment before getting out.

“Mason.”

He glances at me.

“I’m glad you were there today with me.”

CHAPTER 25

mason



I open a bottle of wine. She tells me to pick a red, so I go with a Pauillac. It's been a long day—and a dry weekend in Ignacio—so I'm as ready as she is for something with a bite.

She sits at the kitchen island with her laptop.

Part of me says I should leave. *Now.*

I still have to deal with Trafton.

Then I have to go.

I also need to make sure Jessup understands that Taya and Clara Whitman are off-limits. Keep the intimidation legal. No more breaking into offices. It's an easy place to get into—Trafton didn't have to hurt Mac or tear it apart.

Then I go.

Her composure is *off*.

She's running on adrenaline despite the exhaustion of a day that started at her grandmother's place, ended in a hospital corridor, and has not, by any measure, been kind to her.

She takes a sip of the wine and murmurs a thank you.

The lawyer is operating—I can see it in the set of her eyes, the way she's ruminating—but the rest of her is very tired.

"Do you think they'll break into my place...here?" she asks without looking away from her screen.

"No."

Now, she looks up. "How do you know that?"

Because I'll fucking make sure.

“I’m going to set you up with security.”

She frowns at that. “This is Wildflower Canyon, most people don’t even lock their doors, Mason.”

“Oh, you’ll lock yours.”

Her eyebrows go up. “Mr. Brooks, you’re being very bossy.”

She can’t understand, can she, how fucking scared I am? Hell, I don’t understand it either but the thought of her being in her office instead of Mac is unbearable.

I lean down and put my hands on her shoulders. “Sweetheart, you have to be safe.”

She swallows.

“What?”

She pulls away from me and shakes her head. “I don’t keep everything in my office.”

I straighten. “What does that mean?”

“They were looking for something specific.” She stares at her wine glass. “The Whitman files. They went through the north valley properties first, which means they had a shortlist. They knew roughly where to look.” She pauses. “Which means they knew roughly what they were looking for.”

I stand on the other side of the counter, across from her. I don’t say anything.

She worries her lower lip with her teeth. “I…found something last week at the County Clerk’s office. I wasn’t looking for it. Even Clara doesn’t know about it. I’ve…barely processed it myself.”

“What?”

She lets out a long breath. “I found it by accident.”

My heart hammers in my chest. “What did you find, sweetheart?”

“It’s a supplemental decree from 1971—those documents are all on microfiche. You have to go to the courthouse, request the reader, and go through them by hand. I was just doing due diligence, trying to find something to strengthen our case.” She holds my gaze. “But what I found could tank it.”

I wait.

She’s telling me something she hasn’t told anyone—and I’m the last person she should be confiding in. But whatever this is could save Taya—it could get Jessup off her.

But that will mean she loses the case—Clara loses her farm.

“Procedural defect,” she continues. “The publication notice ran for two weeks when the statute required three. The supplemental decree covering the north pasture is technically vulnerable. Not fatally—I’ve been thinking about how to address it—but if opposing counsel found it and deployed it correctly, combined with the Tom Reyes informal water use, which they somehow got their hands on, then....” She trails off. “It’s the thing I’m most worried about.”

“This supplemental decree—there’s just the copy you have?”

She nods. “There’s nothing in any public filing. The only copy of the decree with my annotations is here. I brought the microfiche print with me.”

I cross my arms because I want to reach out and shake her—explain that no ranch is worth her safety. These men are criminals—they have no problem hurting her to get what they want.

“I mean...if I found it, someone else may, right? I just need to keep it quiet until I’ve found the counterargument. The historical use records go back to 1948, and the right pre-dates the supplemental decree—if I can establish that the supplemental was codifying existing use rather than creating new rights, the procedural defect becomes less significant.” She regards me steadily. “But it takes time, and if they find the decree before I’ve shored it up—”

Fuck it! I want her to win.

“Destroy it.”

She blinks at me, taken off guard.

“If there’s only one copy—”

“Mason.” Her voice is gentle. “I can’t do that.”

“If nobody knows it exists—”

“I know it exists. And destroying evidence that could be material to a proceeding—even evidence that hurts my own client—is obstruction. I’d lose my license.” She taps her fingers against the counter, thinking. “I won’t do that. I can’t build a case I’m proud of on top of something like that.”

Christ on a crutch! She means it. Of course, she means it. She is exactly who she has always been, and the fact that destroying one microfiche print would likely save the case, and she won’t do it because it’s wrong, is completely, entirely...*her*.

But I will know where the decree is. She’s going to tell me, and I’m going to do what I’ve already been building toward since the moment I saw her face in a badly-taken photograph in her file.

“Where is it?”

“Top drawer of my desk.” She tilts her head toward the hallway that leads to the inner rooms—her office and bedroom.

“That’s why you’re worried that they may break in here?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want me to check on it?”

She meets my gaze like I’ve handed her something valuable.

I’m a prized asshole.

“I just...I want to know it’s there.”

I go down the hallway.

The desk is neat, organized, and accessible, and the document is exactly where it should be. I open the drawer and pull out the microfiche print.

Five pages.

Her handwriting is in the margins in red pen—careful, precise, the same hand that labeled the client folders Wiley walked through today.

The same hand that’s held mine.

I stand at her desk.

I pull out my phone.

I photograph every page.

Five pages. Thirty seconds. I put it back exactly where I found it, walk back to the kitchen, stand across from her again, and pick up my wine.

I have been a man of flexible morality for many, many years, and I have done things in that time that I don’t discuss at dinner tables and some that I don’t discuss anywhere. I have always been able to account for them. Always been able to say: *this was the job, these were the parameters, this was what I agreed to.*

I account for it this time, too. This will keep Jessup away from her. And that’s all that matters.

“It’s there,” I tell her.

She closes her eyes briefly. “Thank you.”

Her gratitude grates because I don’t deserve it.

When she finds out—and she will—she’ll know that I did to her home what Trafton did to her office.

The same damage, different hands.

I am worse than Trafton because I photographed her files while she sat at the kitchen counter, trusting me with what she’s been protecting, the one

thing nobody else knows, the vulnerability in the case she's been building to keep Clara Whitman's children on their land.

And I did it anyway.

"You're exhausted."

"Yes."

"Go to bed."

She tilts her head and smiles. "Will you stay?" Her voice is small, not pleading but asking.

I should say no. I should leave now, tonight, while I still have something left to account for. I should not stay in her house with the photographs of her files in my phone and her trust across the kitchen counter between us.

"Yes."

She goes down the hallway.

I stand at the kitchen counter for a little while after.

The creek runs outside.

The mountains are invisible in the dark but present—you can feel them, the mass of them, the quality of space that large things create.

Eventually, I turn off the kitchen light and go down the hallway.

I use her bathroom where she's put a toothbrush for me.

I take a shower, a quick one, and then slide into bed where she's reading a book.

She puts it on the bedside table. It's a law book. Vranesh's Colorado Water Law.

She turns off the light and turns to me just as I hold my arms out for her.

It's how we sleep when we're together.

A habit formed in such a short time of knowing one another.

The comfort of homecoming when she puts her head on my shoulder, and I wrap myself around her.

Her breathing slows.

She doesn't move away.

I don't let her go, either.

This is the last night we will spend together.

I know that because there are photographs on my phone, charging on the nightstand that I will send to Jessup's lawyers in Texas tomorrow.

CHAPTER 26

mason



I leave before it's light.

I've gotten good at that.

She's asleep when I get up.

I dress in the hallway, shoes in hand, like a man who has done this before and is aware of every sound a house makes when you're trying not to make any.

I walk the two miles to the Ridgeline Inn. While I do, I send a text message because I need to deal with Trafton.

The response comes immediately, even though it's the crack of dawn.

I don't go into my room; I go straight to my truck.

I drive to the Broken Bit and find Kaz nursing coffee.

Miss Patsy is behind the bar and has the resigned patience of someone who has been opening this place before dawn since the previous century and finds the habit of it more comforting than the sleep she's missing.

Kaz looks up when I come in. "Left her bed like a thief, did you?"

"You sound like you're speaking from experience."

I sit next to him and nod at Miss Patsy. She knows I like it black.

She places a brown, thick mug of brown coffee in front of me and saunters away. She knows when men are talking business, and that's none of her beeswax.

"Trafton."

He doesn't ask how I know it was him.

He already knows I know.

“He’s alone—no backup, no second car. Jessup didn’t send support.” He pauses. “He sent one man because he thought one man would be enough.”

I was the man he sent, and he didn’t think I was enough, which is why he paid Trafton.

This is what happens when you let your dick...heart, same difference, lead you. You fuck up the job, and you get Trafton.

“What’s your interest in Jessup?”

He raises his coffee like he’s toasting me. “I’m just a land developer, Brooks. I just keep my eyes open.”

Like I thought. FBI. He knows who I am. He’s known from the start. This means that he’s investigating Jessup. But the man’s a senator, and they are hard to pull down from their lofty pedestals.

I drink the coffee and wince. It’s terrible. But then Miss Patsy sucks at making coffee. She makes a mean martini, though.

“Mason.” He doesn’t call me Brooks as he normally does. “You leave the man alive.”

“Okay.”

“*Alive*,” he repeats

I look at him, my jaw clenched. “I’m not Trafton.”

He holds my gaze for a moment. Decides. “Meadowlark Motor Lodge. Highway 65, twelve miles east. Unit nine. He parks the truck around the back, thinking it makes him invisible. It doesn’t.” He sets his coffee down. “He’s been sloppy. He’s always been sloppy. That’s why Jessup pays him less.”

I pull out two dollar bills and set them down under the coffee mug. “I’m gone after this.”

“That’s not a bad idea.” He lets out a long sigh. “Well, it wasn’t a bad idea until you decided to go fall in love with the only lawyer we got left since Mac’s retiring in Wildflower Canyon.”

“I’m not in love with her.” It’s a big fat lie.

He chuckles. “I got experience saying that shit, too.”

“She’s going to lose the case.”

He raises an eyebrow. “She’s going to lose the preliminary case since I am assuming you got what you came looking for, which is why you’re leaving.”

“I’m keeping her safe.”

“I don’t think she’ll see it that way.”

“That’s why I’m leaving.”

“You could stay,” he suggests.

I scoff. “She’s going to know I sold her out, Kaz. She’s going to be done with me.”

He nods gravely. “You could not give Jessup what he wants.”

“And put a bullseye on her?”

A shadow of amusement flickers across his mouth. “Rock and hard place.”

“Look, I do the job, and I get out of Dodge. That’s the way I work.”

He laughs now—and rolls his eyes. “You’re full of shit, Brooks. She’s going to lose the prelim, yes, but the case...she isn’t going to lose that.”

That’s a gift he’s giving me.

“You gonna help her?”

“Christ, Brooks. No. She doesn’t need my help. She’s going to win because she’s a kickass lawyer.”

My chest aches, hollow and sharp. “I know what she is.”

Kaz gives me an exasperated look. “How did you fuck this up so bad when you’ve been playing it clean and cool for eleven fucking years?”

I fell in love.

“I haven’t fucked it up.” Another big fat lie.

He lifts both his hands, palms out. “Whatever you need to say to get your peace, man.” When I am at the door, he calls out. “Mason, I’ll need you at some point when this goes down. I’ll need the evidence I know you have.”

He’s after Jessup.

That’s confirmed.

And he’s given me rope because he’s going to use me to get Jessup. I’m probably only one of the threads he and his team—because with the feds, there’s always a team—is following.

There are others.

With a man like Jessup, who’s corrupt up to his gills, that’s no surprise.

“And here I thought you were just a land developer,” I deadpan.

He grins wide. “Brooks, I’m a land developer like you’re a land surveyor.”



The Meadowlark Motor Lodge is the kind of place that has been exactly itself since 1974 and sees no reason to change. Twelve units in an L-shape, a vending machine with one light out, a parking lot cracked along the seams where the frost heave gets it every winter.

His truck is around the back of unit nine.

Tennessee plates—different from mine, different rental company, same instinct.

I knock on his door.

“Who is it?” Trafton’s voice, still sleepy, demands.

It’s a motel room door, so I just kick it in.

Doesn’t take much effort.

Trafton scrambles.

He’s in his briefs.

Christ!

But then he moves—the way ex-DEA does with the confidence of someone who has been the most dangerous thing in most of his rooms and has started to believe it as a permanent condition.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

I don’t answer him.

He’s good.

He’s big, and he’s fast, and there’s a reason Jessup pays him. He gets a hit to my ribs that’s going to hurt tomorrow. But I’ve been in rooms considerably more dangerous than a motel in rural Colorado, and the aptitude I developed over two tours has not diminished.

He goes down on the thin carpeted floor.

I crouch beside him.

He’s breathing.

He’ll be fine.

He’s going to be unhappy and will need to have his ribs taped, and get that nose fixed, but he’ll be fine.

“Get out of Wildflower Canyon.” I keep my lips close to his ear so he can hear me loud and clear. “Now—right after you wash the blood off your face. And don’t come back.”

He looks up at me. A recalculation is happening behind his eyes.

“Tell Jessup you ran out of runway,” I continue. “Tell him Mason Brooks sorted it. Now, say, ‘Yes, I got that.’”

His Adam's apple bobs. He's a dumb moron—but he's not *that* dumb. He knows he's beat.

"Yeah. I got that," he chokes out.

I stand, walk out of his room, and close the door that he's gonna have to pay damages for.

I get into my truck and drive back to Wildflower Canyon.

I sit in the parking lot of the Ridgeline with the engine running, stare at the steering wheel, and give myself exactly five minutes to get my shit together.

Then I call Jessup.

He answers on the second ring. He's been watching for my name.

"Mason." He sounds cheerful, like one does when being kind to the help.

"Senator." I keep my voice even. "Your man at the Meadowlark Motor Lodge is going to need a ride and a hospital. You should send someone."

A pause.

"I see." The cheer is gone from his tone now. The ownership he felt over me a moment ago is thinner now, stretched over something harder underneath.

I know that what I do next ends my line of work.

Not just with Jessup—ultimately, all of it.

I'm not worried about money. But I'm ending a way of life I built carefully over years and was, until recently, entirely comfortable with. I'm not comfortable any longer—in fact, I don't know what I am.

A man who has had clarity his whole life turns out to be surprisingly bad at boggy ground.

"I have something for you."

"Finally." Now he's back to sounding like an asshole talking while he smokes a cigar and drinks expensive whiskey. "I was starting to wonder if you were worth what I'm paying you."

I ignore his nonsense because that's what it is—an attempt to bullshit himself into thinking he has the upper hand. Obviously, he's more used to men like Trafton, who are all brawn and no brains. Men like me never give away their advantage.

Except when they fall in love!

"Your lawyers will soon have a real vulnerability in the Whitman case—not the change-of-use argument. Something deeper. A procedural defect

in a 1971 supplemental decree. Publication notice ran two weeks when the statute requires three.” I pause. “Nobody knows about it. Nobody except me.” And the lawyer.

The silence on his end has a quality to it—one of a man who is arranging his face from smug to serious.

“That’s something we can hang our hat on.” He’s back to talking like he’s comfortable now, even though he knows not to be. I beat up Trafton—and he knows, most definitely about my relationship with Taya—and he knows what I’m about to ask of him.

“I know.” I look at the faded striped wallpaper of the Ridgeline Inn’s meager lobby through the dirty windscreen of my truck. “I’m sending the documentation. Publication record, statute, and north pasture coverage. Your Texas team will know what to do with it.”

I pull the photographs. Thirty seconds in her office, while she sat in front of her computer, stressing and trusting me.

I send them.

“In return”—I let out a long, slow breath as I end my career as a fixer—“you pull your people. All of them. No more Trafton, no more pressure on the lawyer, no more contact with Clara Whitman.” I drop my voice to the register I use when I mean every word precisely. “If anyone connected to you comes near Taya Morningstar again, I will walk everything I have on you—the communications, the financial chain, the connection to your son-in-law’s holding company—straight to the Senate Ethics Committee. We clear?”

The silence lasts nearly thirty seconds, which is pretty long when you’re on the phone.

I don’t mind.

I have nowhere to be except out of here.

Finally, after weighing his options, I am certain, he says, “Crystal.”

He hangs up.

I don’t believe him.

Powerful men make agreements that last exactly as long as it takes to find a different angle, and I know this because I’ve spent years being the different angle.

But Jessup is no fool.

He now knows I set my job on fire for her, which means I’ll easily set him on fire if he harms her.

After a minute, I pack my bag and get ready to get the hell out of Wildflower Canyon.

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CHAPTER 27

taya



I'm reviewing the augmented flow report when he comes into the office I'm borrowing from Mav.

I know from the way he appears in the doorway—filling it, not entering—that something is wrong.

I've spent enough time reading courtrooms and witnesses to know what a man looks like when he's decided something and is here to say it, and Mason Brooks at noon in a doorway he's not walking through looks like a man who has already left.

"Mason."

"Hey." He comes in. Doesn't sit.

I set the report I'm studying down. I give him my full attention, which is what I do when I know something will require it.

He stands in the middle of my borrowed office.

His facial expressions are controlled within an inch of their lives.

"I'm leaving," he says.

"Right."

"I've finished the survey work. Feig's greenlit for phase two, and he doesn't need me for it." He speaks cleanly, evenly. "I've got other projects waiting. I've been putting them off."

"Mason." My voice is as level as his. "What are you doing?"

"I'm telling you I'm leaving."

I stand up. Not in anger. In the way you stand up when you need to see someone at eye level because you need to know what you're actually looking at.

“Don’t go,” I say.

Something crosses his face. Gone before I can understand it.

“Taya.” He says my name the way he said it in Ignacio, in Wiitsin’s kitchen with love and regret. “This was—it was always temporary. That’s what we said.”

“That’s what we said at the beginning. Before—”

“Before what?” His voice is careful. “Before what happened between us? It was—”

“Don’t.” I raise my hand to silence him, take one step toward him. “Don’t tell me what it was.”

He studies me for a long moment.

He doesn’t look cold.

That’s the thing that I’m going to carry—whatever this is, wherever it goes, that’s what I’m going to come back to.

He doesn’t look cold or unaffected. He looks like a man standing in front of a door he’s closed himself and can’t explain why he did it.

“I don’t love you,” he grits the words out.

The room goes very still.

“Liar.”

“Taya—”

“I’m not a coward.” I turn back to the desk. I pick up the report. My hands are steady. I am extraordinarily good at being steady when I need to be.

“I’m—”

“Be safe, Mason.” I manage to give him a small smile. “And if you can, try and be happy.”

He keeps his eyes on me for a long moment, and then he leaves.

I stand at the desk with the augmented flow report in my hands.

I don’t move for a very long time.

The words on the page don’t resolve into meaning—probably because of the tears in my eyes.

Outside, Main Street goes about its evening. Someone pulls a trailer down toward the feed store. A truck idles outside the Horseshoe.

I set the report down.

I pick up my phone and call Joy.

“What?”

“Is it too early for a drink?”

“At your place or mine?”

“Ah—”

“You down the street at Mav’s office?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m on my way.”



We go to my place.

I sit on the couch.

My home still has his shape in it.

It hurts.

God, it hurts.

Joy pulls out a bottle of Bollinger from her bag.

“That’s some good stuff there, Joy.”

“I heard Mason left town,” she says in response and opens the bottle with the softest pop. She pours two glasses and hands me one, takes hers, and sits next to me. “You wanna talk about it or do you want to cry about it?”

I drink the Bollinger down like a shot, and then a sob escapes me.

Joy refills my glass.

I tell her, slowly. Everything.

“I...I really didn’t think he’d leave, Joy. How dumb does that make me?”

“I think the dumb asshole in this equation is Mason, who obviously is head over heels, but like some other men I know may have hangups about commitment.”

“Hunt?”

She shakes her head. “We do that another time with another bottle—for him I’m gonna need whiskey...you know something stronger.”

“He didn’t look cold.” My eyes fill with tears. “That’s the thing. He looked like a man who had made a decision he hated.”

Joy takes my free hand in hers. “I’m sorry, babe.”

“I don’t know why...he can’t stay...why he can’t let us...you know, explore this amazing chemistry, this love, this....” My chest locks up like I’ve been branded hot. “And I can’t—I can’t file it. I can’t provide evidence

of it. He left, and he didn't look like he wanted to, and I have no legal theory for what that means."

Joy pours more wine into my glass. "Bottoms up, babe."

I stare at the glass of golden bubbles. "I don't know if getting drunk in the middle of the day is going to help me."

"You get your heart broken, you gotta drink. The hangover will make the heartbreak feel less painful...for a minute, at least.

I let out a watery laugh. "You're good at this."

"I've had my heart broken a few times."

We drink, talk, and eat ice cream—and when we get hungry, she makes Mav bring food.

Greasy stuff.

Chicken tenders and fries.

He doesn't ask questions. He's made this kind of food run for his sister before.

She stays the night.

Sleeps in bed with me—the same bed where Mason slept with me the night before.

"We have to change the sheets."

Then his scent will be gone.

"We need his scent gone," she continues.

"Right."

She winks at me. "Told you, I've done this before."

The hangover the next day is epic.

It does make me forget Mason Brooks for a good half hour as my head pounds and nausea replaces heartache.

CHAPTER 28

mason



The flight to JFK had a layover in Denver.

The flight to San Francisco was direct.

I used that as an excuse and ended up in the Mission District at my sister's townhouse.

Lana lives there with two cats and a rotating collection of houseplants—she kills them at a steady rate and replaces them with the same optimism, which is either admirable or delusional depending on your perspective.

She's been at it for years.

I call it her vanity project. She calls it a work in progress. The plants have no opinion, being dead.

"You?" She stares at me like I've grown a second head—which I feel like I have after drinking half a bottle of whiskey on a two-and-a-half-hour flight.

"Me."

She opens the door wide. "Either you're running from the law, or"—she pauses, glares at my duffel bag, catches the whiskey coming off me—"my word, Mason. This might be a matter of the heart." She delivers the last part with considerable sarcasm.

I hug her and lean into it.

I'm close to both my siblings, but Lana is different. She has some of my moral flexibility, which makes us allies against Jamie, who is straight as an arrow and takes his job shaping young minds with a seriousness that has always baffled me.

Lana is thirty-seven, two years younger than me, and has had the advantage over me her entire life of being able to see through people she loves before they've said anything useful.

It's infuriating.

It's probably why I don't visit more often.

"You know where the guest room is." She waves to the hallway. "Food or coffee?"

"You got anything stronger?"

"Food or coffee are your choices because I think you've drunk enough strong stuff."

"Then food *and* coffee."

I go to the guest room on the first floor, walk straight into the ensuite, undress, and stand under her shower for twenty minutes trying to wash off the feeling of complete failure.

What her fancy soaps and shampoos actually do is make me smell like peonies and lemons, which is exactly how Taya smells, which is the opposite of helpful.

I change into sweats and a T-shirt and head to the living room.

"There's lasagna, and there's coffee." Lana points to the kitchen island.

I sit and hang my head for a while. "I don't know why I'm here."

"Sure you do."

"The flight to JFK had a layover."

"That's a nice excuse." She pours herself a glass of wine and stands across from me. "Where are you coming from?"

One of the cats, a large gray one named Søren Kirkegaard, sits on the counter and watches me with professional contempt.

"Aspen."

"Job go bad?" Lana has a vague idea of what I do.

"You know it's not hygienic to have your cats sit on your kitchen counters."

"You know what else is not hygienic? Telling your sister how to live her life."

"Noted."

The lasagna is good. Most definitely takeout.

Lana can't cook.

She's a genius when it comes to coding and running a software company—food, plants, and relationships...not so much.

“Mace, talk to me.”

“How long have you had the philosophy cat?”

“Three years. Stop deflecting.” She strokes Søren. “Spill.”

“There’s nothing to spill.” I drink some coffee. She makes that well. Or rather, her insanely expensive coffee machine does. She likes her cup of joe and buys the best beans and hardware to go with it.

“You didn’t come all the way here to drink coffee and eat lasagna.”

“Or be judged by your philosopher cat.”

“You’re such a drama queen!”

Søren gives me a bored look that says, “*Come on, man, show some gumption.*”

Fuck, but I’ve been drinking too much if I can read the cat’s face.

“I fell in love.” I feel sick as soon as the words come out.

Lana gives me a pained look. “Wow! Just saying that made you go completely pale.”

While I polish off the lasagna and two coffees, I tell her most of it—the job, Wildflower Canyon, Taya, the case, the supplemental decree, and what I did with it.

I trust Lana, and this doesn’t border anywhere even remotely close to national security. It borders on me being an idiot, which she is fully qualified to assess.

“*Ouch.* If you were going to torch your career anyway, why give Jessup the decree?”

“Now they won’t come after her.”

She gives me the look, which has said you’re a dumbass in various ways since we were children. “They’ll just win the preliminary hearing. She’ll keep fighting.”

“Maybe she won’t. Maybe Clara Whitman will see this loss, take the money they give her and walk away. I don’t know, buy a condo in Aspen and live her best life.”

I don’t believe it. The woman I met, those kids—the people in Wildflower Canyon—they’re there not for the riches but for integrity and legacy.

“In any case, I bought her safety with this. They won’t come after her.” And if they do, I will dismantle Jessup piece by piece.

Bored with our conversation, Søren hops off the counter and parks himself on his bed on the floor, still glaring at me with the expression of a

sentient being who has arrived at a verdict.

Even the fucking cat has an opinion about me, and it is most definitely negative.

“He doesn’t believe you,” Lana drawls.

She pours herself another glass of wine. She’s drinking a Loire Valley Cab Franc. Taya would like that wine—she likes her wine slightly musty.

Damn it!

Is this how my life is going to be?

I’m going to smell her and think about her all the fucking time?

No way. People get over shit like this, don’t they?

I will, too. Of course, I will.

I don’t believe that either.

Lana tilts her head back and sighs long and loud. “You’re an idiot.”

“No, I’m not.”

“An extraordinary, professional-grade idiot.”

“I did what I had to do.”

Her eyes narrow with barely contained irritation. “You ran from her. She asked you to stay. I...that lady has some balls. She has courage. You, on the other hand....”

I pick up her wine glass and take a long sip. “You can’t make me feel any worse than I already do.”

“You stayed longer on this job than you normally do because of her.”

I drink some more of her wine. She refills her glass and pushes it toward me.

“You had an exit, and you kept not taking it. You could have given Jessup whatever he needed in week one and been gone. But you didn’t. And now you’re sitting in my kitchen looking like something the cat dragged in”—she gestures at the large gray cat, who does not acknowledge being mentioned—“because you made yourself fall in love with a woman and then ran away from her.”

“I didn’t make myself—”

“Mason.” Her voice is gentle in the way it gets when she’s being genuinely serious rather than performing it. “You’ve been waiting your whole life for something to feel like it was worth staying for. You found it. And then you left.”

I let out a low growl. “I did the job, and *then* I left.”

“And what did you do to her?”

A dry, cutting chuckle slips past my lips. "I fucked her over."

"Yeah, you did." She tilts her head, her eyes warm with compassion. "But it's fixable."

"I'm not looking to fix anything."

She flicks my nose.

"Ouch."

"The answer is almost always yes if you come back, and you mean it, and you earn it. The question is whether you're willing to do the work."

The thought warms me from head to toe, but I refuse to succumb to it. I don't deserve her. I don't deserve to fix this. "I don't want to do the work."

She throws her hands up in frustration. "God! You're so fucking stubborn. You always were."

I raise the wine glass as if in a toast. "That's what makes me good at my job."

She smirks. "You mean the one you don't have."

The cat loses interest in me and begins washing his face.

"I just need a couple of days of peace and quiet, Lana."

Her gaze softens with understanding. "You can have them."

"Thanks."

"But I'm going to keep telling you to go back to her. Because life is... fuck, Mace, life is hard, you don't need to make it any harder by giving up the woman you fell in love with."

"Peace and quiet, Lana," I remind her.

"*Fine!*" She relents. "I was going to watch a horror movie."

"Which one?"

"*Dusk Till Dawn.*"

"Classic."

So we sat in her cinema room—because she built a company that sold for enough money to have a cinema room, and she considers this a reasonable use of square footage—and watched a movie I'd seen with her before, and drank more of her wine, and I woke up the next morning with a respectable hangover and the absolute inability to go thirty seconds without thinking about Taya.

Which used to not be who I was.

I have compartmentalized entire wars.

I have walked away from things that would flatten most people and not looked back.

I have spent eleven years being the most professionally detached man in any given space.

Taya Morningstar takes up every *cell* in my head and has since I met her, and I don't know yet what to do about that except sit in my sister's place in San Francisco with a cat who hates me and wait to find out.

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CHAPTER 29

taya



I've been a lawyer long enough to know that prepared and ready are the same thing when everything else fails you—the relationship, sleep, the faith in your own judgment because you looked at a man for three months and read him completely wrong. Ready is what you have left, and you work with it.

The Delta County Justice Center sits on Palmer Street in the middle of Delta, a low brick building from the 1970s that has been added to twice since and doesn't quite cohere architecturally but does the job. I've been here four times since taking over Mac's practice. I know the parking lot, the security desk, how the morning light comes through the east-facing windows in the lobby and makes the whole place look more important than it is.

I know the water courtroom on the second floor—Room 214, half the size of the criminal courtrooms, with no jury box because water court doesn't use juries, just a judge and whatever documentation the parties have assembled over months or years of preparation.

The gallery has three rows of bench seating and a low wooden rail that separates it from the well of the court. The plaintiff's table is on the left. The defendant's table is on the right. Two windows on the north wall look out over a parking structure—not scenic, but enough light comes in that the fluorescents aren't entirely depressing.

I find Clara in the lobby. She's alone—the kids are at school. She took the day off work. She's wearing a dark green jacket with her jeans—what she calls her professional attire.

I give her a hug when I see her. She gives me a once-over. I'm in what I think of as my Aspen clothes—a charcoal Hugo Boss suit I bought a couple of years ago. I dropped a grand on it without thinking. Those were different days.

It's my lucky suit—the one I wore when I wanted to win, when I was on the other side of these cases. It fits differently now. Or I fit it differently. I'm not sure which.

Clara wiggles her eyebrows. “You look—well, like a boss lady lawyer.”

I laugh. “You look like a boss lady rancher.”

“I washed my hair.” She gives it a flip. “And I have mascara on. That's a win.”

Mac arrives stubbornly—even though he was told to stay home. He's still concussed, but he insisted. The only saving grace is that he let Amos drive him. He's in jeans, cowboy boots, and a jacket that I don't think has been dry-cleaned since the Clinton administration, and it shows.

He takes his hat off when he sees us. He kisses Clara's cheek and pats my shoulder.

“Seriously, Mac? You're still concussed.” I shake my head.

“Concussions are for wusses.”

Amos lets out an exaggerated sigh and greets Clara and me. “Call me when you're done, I'll come and get you. Oh, and Taya, don't let him go anywhere on his own.”

“I can't go anywhere. I don't have my truck keys,” Mac grunts.

“I had to wrestle the bastard to get them,” Amos tells us, and I don't think he's exaggerating. “I have a meeting down the street, so I'll see y'all soon. Good luck, Taya, Clara.”

We walk into the courtroom together.

Mac sits right behind the defendant's table as Clara and I take our seats. I organize my files as Clara sits browsing through her phone. She's nervous. We both want the judge to deny High Mesa's challenge and end this litigation now. But there's a chance they will prevail, and we'll have to get ready for a full hearing.

Mac raises his eyebrows at my files and the tabs. “What are those colored thingies for?”

“Telling me what is what.”

I have everything on my computer—but hard copies are still part of this business. I've organized by colored tabs and cross-referenced by exhibit

number. I check the documents again. It's my process.

Nothing makes a lawyer look more unprepared and sloppy than not being able to find what they need when they need it. That's especially relevant before Judge Raymond Colbeck, who has been on the water court bench for nineteen years and knows his case law.

I have appeared before him before. He's a compact man in his early sixties, methodical, gray at the temples, who has developed a finely calibrated sense of when a case is solid and when it isn't.

He leans toward development—everyone in the valley knows it, it's not a secret, it's just how he reads the public interest—but he's not corrupt. He's not going to rule against clear evidence. What he will do is give weight to procedural questions, to technical defects, to arguments that are properly documented and formally submitted. He likes his law clean.

I intend to give it to him clean.

The courtroom fills.

Opposing counsel arrives at ten past nine with three people—Harold Aldridge in front, then two associates I recognize from previous filings, both in their thirties, both in suits that cost more than Clara's monthly mortgage payment.

Aldridge is the Houston firm's senior litigator for western land acquisition cases, which means he has done this exact thing in six other states and knows what he's doing. He's tall, silver-haired, with the unhurried authority of a man who bills four hundred dollars an hour and has never once in his career been rushed. He carries a single leather portfolio. His associates carry everything else.

He nods at me when he takes his seat. I nod back. We've met a few times in depositions—but we've never been in court together before.

I turn my attention to the gallery side, where the plaintiff's table is already settled.

And behind it, against the rail, sits a man—mid-fifties, expensive suit, the type who doesn't carry a briefcase because he doesn't carry anything himself.

He is not local. He has the look of the kind of man who appears when the stakes are high enough to justify the travel.

"He's High Mesa's VP of Something," Mac whispers from behind me. "Shane Tannenbaum."

"Right."

“He’s close friends with more than a few senators.”

“You mean he funds their campaigns?”

Mac taps the railing once with two fingers. “That’s correct.”

I think about it for a moment. “Otis Jessup, probably. Isn’t his son-in-law running a land development company?”

“Yeah. I hear they may have invested in some resort property up north.”

“Not the one that’s relevant to our case.” I glance through the case files for the High Mesa-backed resort—the three-hundred-million-dollar property for the wealthy, powered by Clara’s water.

“Can’t track all the shell companies these assholes keep popping out like farts from cowboys living off canned beans.”

I chuckle at that.

Judge Colbeck comes in at nine-thirty exactly, which is characteristic.

He settles, arranges his papers, glances at both tables over his reading glasses. “Whitman versus High Mesa Development Group,” he announces. “Preliminary hearing on the question of legal standing and the threshold showing required for the challenge to proceed.” He turns his attention to Aldridge. “Counsel for the plaintiff. You may proceed.”

Aldridge stands.

He begins with prior appropriation—the upstream diversion predating Clara’s claim.

Standard.

Expected.

I’ve addressed it three different ways in my filings, and as he speaks I watch Judge Colbeck’s face, which gives away nothing and is thereby telling me everything.

He’s read those filings.

He knows where this argument goes.

He’s letting Aldridge run it because that’s how courts work—you hear the thing before you rule on the thing—but his pen hasn’t moved in three minutes, which means nothing Aldridge is saying is surprising him.

When Aldridge finishes, I stand and go through our defense along with a running list of documentary record submissions.

The judge makes a note. I sit down.

Aldridge’s first associate leans toward him and says something quiet.

The Tom Reyes delivery notation comes next.

I was ready for this, have been since Clara sat in my office and told me about the neighbor arrangement during Deke's illness. I've had two months to build the response, document the agricultural continuity, establish that the water stayed on the ranch, and the use never changed in kind.

Aldridge presents Jeb Cottonwood's delivery log with the deliberate pacing. He's good. He knows the material, and he's presenting it clearly.

I respect it professionally.

Morally, he's full of it.

I stand when he sits.

No notes—I know this cold.

I walk Colbeck through the delivery log's own language: *no share transfer* and file submissions to make my case.

"The water did not leave the ranch," I state. "It did not change in type of use. It did not constitute abandonment under any reasonable reading of the statute, and the defendant respectfully submits that the plaintiff's change-of-use argument fails to meet the threshold showing required for this court to find legal standing."

The judge makes another note. A longer one this time.

I sit down.

The court reporter in the second gallery row—a woman named Denise, who has the fastest transcription speed in western Colorado—has knitted an entire cardigan over the course of various cases I've argued before Colbeck, during pauses and breaks.

Aldridge's second associate is reviewing something on a tablet.

I look at the clock above the door: ten forty-seven.

We've been in session for an hour and seventeen minutes.

I allow myself, very carefully, a single degree of something adjacent to confidence.

I've been in this room four times. I've won three of those four hearings, and the one I didn't win was a boundary dispute where my client had genuinely moved a fence line and I was trying to make a silk purse out of chain link. This is not that. This is solid ground.

I look at Clara, who is sitting with her back straight. She glances at me during a pause.

"How's it going?"

"So far so good."

She exhales.

Aldridge straightens his portfolio.

He's not done.

I know he's not done because he always has three things—prior appropriation was the first, Tom Reyes was the second—and the third is the one that's going to hit hard.

I know this because I trained with lawyers like him, worked alongside them, and understood the structure of how they build a courtroom argument the way a builder understands how a frame goes up.

I don't know what the third thing is. But whatever it is, I know I can handle it. We may actually win today, and that makes my heart beat fast.

Colbeck glances at the plaintiff's table. "Does counsel have additional submissions?"

"We do, Your Honor." Aldridge stands. He places a new document on the table. "Your Honor, we'd like to draw the court's attention to a procedural defect in the defendant's 1971 supplemental decree."

The world pauses.

"The publication notice required by statute at the time of filing ran for fourteen days," Aldridge says. "The statutory requirement was twenty-one days."

Behind the plaintiff's table, the man in the expensive suit, who is not a lawyer and is not from Colorado, leans forward slightly in his seat—the first movement he's made in ninety minutes—and then as if satisfied with how things are proceeding, sits back.

"We have the publication records," Aldridge continues, "and the original decree filing, and we submit that the supplemental decree covering the north pasture is procedurally defective and should be considered invalid in the adjudication of this matter." He slides a document across the table to me. "Defendant's counsel will find a copy of all supporting materials in the submission."

I pick it up.

My hands are not shaking, but it's a close thing.

The publication record.

The original decree.

The statutory language from 1971.

The gap laid out with surgical clarity—fourteen days, twenty-one required—and the north pasture coverage described with the exact technical framing I developed in my private case analysis.

This is not opposing counsel's framing. *It's mine.*

Only one person knew about this until one evening, not long ago, when I asked another to check on it.

I hear my voice—even, professional, recognizable as mine—requesting a brief recess to review the submission.

I hear Colbeck grant it.

I hear my own footsteps.

The hallway outside Room 214 is beige.

Linoleum floor, the institutional beige of every public building in Colorado built between 1970 and 1995.

A water fountain at the end.

A bulletin board with bar association notices.

A window that looks out over Palmer Street, where someone is parallel parking a pickup truck with the laborious patience of a person who doesn't do it often.

I stand with my back against the wall, the document clutched in my hands.

My knees feel weak, threatening to give way under the weight of a betrayal I didn't see coming. Me—boss lady lawyer—never suspected that Mason Brooks was in Wildflower Canyon to get to me.

To get to my case.

Now I know he's the reason they got the Tom Reyes information so quickly. He was at Jeb's office—he told me what a mess the files were. That's where he found it, because Jeb Junior would not have handed it over willingly.

Jeb Junior is smarter than that.

Smarter than me, apparently.

I look at the beige wall.

The parallel parker on Palmer Street has given up and pulled into a different space.

I take a deep breath and go back into the hearing room.

I do my job.

Colbeck looks at both tables. "Before we proceed, I have a procedural question for plaintiff's counsel. The publication defect identified in this submission—can you speak to the discovery of this material and the chain of custody from source to filing?"

Aldridge rises without hesitation. “Your Honor, the documentation was obtained through a routine review of public records held at the Delta County Clerk’s Office. The original publication notices for the 1971 supplemental decree filing are a matter of public record, accessible to any party conducting diligent pre-litigation research. Plaintiff’s counsel conducted that research in the ordinary course of case preparation.”

Colbeck makes a note. “Defendant’s counsel. Do you wish to be heard on the provenance question?”

Aldridge’s framing was clean, practiced, and entirely plausible. Every word of it is defensible.

Every word of it was built on stolen work.

And I cannot prove a word of it.

“Your Honor, defendant does not dispute that publication records are public documents.”

Court is adjourned. Colbeck leaves. Aldridge and his people leave. Tannenbaum leaves.

“What does that mean?” Clara asks when it’s just us—her, Mac, and me—as I pack my papers into my leather folio.

“It means he’s likely going to grant their standing to proceed to a full hearing.”

Her shoulders slump. That lack of energy does something to me.

“Can we still win?” she asks, her voice unsteady. “Tell me the truth, Taya.”

“I always tell you the truth, Clara.” I give her a wan smile. “But I’ve told you from the start that there are no guarantees.”

Clara is quiet for a long time and then she frowns. “What was that supplemental decree thing they had?”

Mac lets out a cough. I look at him. “Clara, darlin’, we need to examine this new evidence, and then we can give you a clearer picture.”

She pulls her jacket closer. “I’m just so tired.”

“Clara —”

“I need some time,” she cuts me off and picks up her bag. “I need to go home, hug my kids, sit in my kitchen, and decide if I’m going to keep fighting this.” She faces me. “I’m sorry, Taya. I just need the time. I’ll call you.”

I watch her walk away—dejected, exhausted—and I hate myself for letting her down, for trusting Mason Brooks, for giving him parts of me that

he doesn't deserve and realizing too late.

"Come on, kid, let's get the hell out of here."

"Ah—yeah. Do you need to call Amos, or I can take you home," I say absently, looking around the courtroom, aware of the numbness settling inside me. That temporary shell shock when your life explodes.

"I texted him; he's on his way."

We walk out, and at this point, Mac is more spry than I am despite his age and his concussion, probably because a bomb hasn't gone off in his heart.

I stand still in the corridor. I look at the bulletin board. The bar association notices. A flyer for a continuing legal education seminar in Grand Junction. The water fountain at the end of the hall.

Mac puts his hands on my shoulders and shakes me gently. "This shit happens." He kisses my forehead. "Take some time. Then we'll come up with a plan."

A plan. Clara can't keep going on. I made a mistake, and she's going to lose her ranch—her husband's legacy, the thing she wants to preserve for Dakota and Eli.

I look at Mac, tears filling my eyes. "I know how they got that supplemental decree, Mac."

He nods. Waits.

I swallow.

"I found it. You know, a couple of weeks ago in a microfiche, the only copy. I was thinking about how to handle it and talk to you...and..."

"And?"

"I wasn't going to do anything illegal, Mac, I—"

"Kid, I know that. So, how did they get their hands on it?"

I close my eyes and draw in a breath. "I told Mason about it."

Mac stills, then his lips thin. "The sumbitch booked out of town in a big hurry—is this why?"

I shrug. "That's what the evidence says."

"Never looked right as a land surveyor," he mutters, his nostrils flaring. "You found out just now...in court."

It's not a question.

"You did nothing wrong," he insists in a quiet voice. "Trusting people is not a mistake. He was your man. Hell, Taya, I trusted him, too. Thought he was one of the good guys."

Nausea runs through me at his words—his comfort and the thought that rings true and clear is that I don't deserve his compassion.

"Go home, Taya."

Amos steps into the lobby. His eyes find mine—concern, recognition—and he nods, like Mac has already said enough.

They don't know yet. Not all of it.

I'll tell Mac. I'll have to tell Clara.

I'll have to admit I was a fool who fell in love with a man who only ever meant to use her.

"Drive carefully," I tell Amos and give Mac a stiff nod.

I walk slowly to the parking lot and get in the Wrangler.

I drive south, then west, then north, muscle memory taking me home.

I feel absolutely nothing.

Which means I'm about to feel everything.

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CHAPTER 30

taya



The Rusty Spur on a Tuesday isn't The Rusty Spur on a Friday.
The band doesn't play on Tuesdays.
It's quieter—booths half full.

Moxy behind the bar has more patience than usual—she doesn't snap at you if you take too long to decide what you want, because taking too long means you're not a regular, and if you were, she'd already know your poison.

I suggested we come, which is not in character for me.

But I can't be at home with the hook by the door where he hung his jacket and the coffee machine that still knows his preference.

My cottage, which has been my refuge since I moved to Wildflower Canyon, now feels occupied by a ghost I made myself.

Joy comes. Aria comes. They don't ask questions about my sudden need for greasy food and half-decent beer.

We settle at one of the high tables near the bar. We order. The drinks arrive, and I pick up my pint. I stare at the surface of the table for a moment, and then at two women who have known me for less than a year—less than the length of time I was with Griffin, less than most of the things I'd call formative—and I sense, with a completeness that surprises me, that they know me.

"Heard about the case." It's Aria who throws the opening salvo.

"You want to talk about it?" Joy asks.

"Yeah."

So I tell them.

All of it.

The Mason of it!

What I thought he was. What he actually was.

Aria goes very still when I say it. Joy does not.

Across the bar, Mav and Hunt are at a table with Duke. Joy looks over at them. Something passes between her and Mav—not words, just the frequency of people who have known each other their entire lives.

The three of them come over.

“Well?” Mav asks, his arm around Aria. He’s always touching her. Always with her. I thought Mason and I—

Joy glances at me for permission. I shrug, giving it.

She gives the three men the essentials of what I just told her. Succinct and clear. As a lawyer, I’m quietly impressed with her ability to cut to the heart of it.

Mav studies me for a long moment when she’s done. His expression doesn’t change, but something behind it does. Mav is anchored in this valley and takes it personally when the community gets hurt. I knew this, but I feel it now in a different way.

Hunt asks, very quietly, to no one in particular: “Where is he right now?”

“A man like that? Who knows?” Aria clenches her jaw. “But if you find him, I wouldn’t mind rearranging his face.”

Duke has his hands in his pockets. “Kaz.”

Mav sighs. “Kaz.”

Hunt nods and pulls out his phone. “Kaz.”

I look at these people—these men who would, without theatrics, drive to wherever Mason Brooks is and make their feelings known about what happens when you hurt someone who belongs here—and it feels good.

Really, genuinely good.

I have this in Ignacio. I didn’t have it in Aspen. I didn’t know how much I’d missed it until right now.

I finish my beer. “Let him be.”

“Yeah, can’t do that, darlin’.” Duke says it gently but without hesitation. “We don’t let people mess with what’s ours around here.”

I shake my head. “Forget him. Forget all of them. I’m going to win this case.”

Mav sets his elbows on the table and leans in. “Sure. Doesn’t change the fact that Mason Brooks deserves an ass-whooping.”

Hunt’s phone beeps. He frowns at the message on his screen. “Kaz says to mind my own business.”

“Ah, hell.” Duke groans. “That means he’s working a case.”

Aria sighs.

Joy looks at each of the men, then at Aria. “Why do I get the feeling you all know something I don’t?”

The men say nothing.

“What she said,” I add.

“Hunt.” Joy smacks his chest.

“Ouch.” He rubs the spot. He groans when she glares at him. “Well, he’s getting out anyway, so —”

“So what?” Joy demands.

Hunt glances at Mav and Duke. They shrug.

“Kaz is undercover,” he mutters.

Joy and I stare at him like he’s switched languages.

“Under what cover?” I say slowly.

“FBI.” This comes from Duke.

Joy and I look at each other, then at Aria, who raises both hands, palms out. “It was on a need-to-know basis.”

“Hold on.” I wave my hands to quiet everyone. “Does this mean Kaz is working with Mason?”

“Could mean he’s trying to get something out of him,” Mav offers.

“Or Mason is his target,” Duke says.

“Or he is working with him,” Hunt adds.

“Those are three entirely different things,” I point out.

“Yeah.” Mav gives me a look that manages to be both sympathetic and unhelpful. “Kaz can be damn cryptic.”

I go still. “Does Bree know?”

Aria gives us a sheepish look. “No, she doesn’t. And...we can’t tell her. That’s something Kaz has to do.”

“Talk about a cluster fuck.” Joy swings toward the bar. “Moxy, love, we’re *all* going to need another round.”

“And jalapeño poppers,” I add.

“Definitely the jalapeño poppers.” Hunt pulls a stool over and settles beside Joy.

Duke checks his watch. "Elena should be here shortly."

"Does *she* know, too?" Joy asks.

Duke draws a zip across his lips.

"So everyone knew but me," Joy says mournfully.

"And me...and Bree," I remind her, looking at Moxy, who brings our drinks over. "I'm gonna need a chaser with my beer."

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CHAPTER 31

taya



I'm back in my office, and it's like nothing has changed—which is both the comfort and the cruelty of it.

When Griffin betrayed me, it hurt. But it wasn't like this.

That relationship had had time to live, fester, and I was aware of who Griffin was—a weak man who desperately wanted to be strong.

Mason is a strong man, was a strong man, and to see him be weak like this has been monumentally disheartening. That's the euphemism. What it has actually been is heartbreaking in the way that only happens when someone you gave real trust to turns out to have been keeping a ledger on it.

Thankfully, there's a lot of work to be done, which gives me something to focus on, something to keep me from sitting too long with the pain of it—of being made a fool again, of giving too much of myself, too carelessly, and still not having all the pieces back.

Judge Colbeck gets back eighteen days after the preliminary hearing—*before* Clara does.

I haven't pushed her. I don't feel I have the right.

I'm not a coward, and when she's ready to talk, I will tell her what went wrong with the supplemental decree—but right now I'm not going to scrape open the wound before the bleeding is barely contained.

The partial ruling from Judge Colbeck arrives by email before the registered mail copy reaches me.

There is good news and bad news, which is how these things tend to go. Colbeck declined to invalidate the supplemental decree.

He found the procedural defect real—fourteen days, twenty-one required, the record is clear—but he also found that the historical use documentation submitted in my supplemental brief establishes continuous beneficial use of the north pasture dating back to 1952, predating the 1971 filing by nineteen years.

His interim order holds that the supplemental decree codifies existing use rather than creates new rights, and that the procedural defect therefore affects the decree’s formal validity but not the underlying right itself.

He has requested an additional briefing from both parties on whether the defect is material, given the historical use record.

This is not a win or even a ruling in Clara’s favor. But it’s a judge signaling that the ground is less solid for High Mesa than they believed when they walked into that courtroom with my own case analysis in their briefing.

I forward the email to Mac and call him. He reads the ruling, then chuckles. “The sons of bitches thought they had you.”

“They sort of have me.”

“Nah, kid. They think they’re the bigger bear because they’ve always been that. But here, in Wildflower Canyon, you’ve got to read the legacy, you’ve got to read the people, you’ve got to see the heart.”

“And?”

“And that would tell me you’re not just the bigger bear—you’re a mama bear, which is considerably worse.”

I laugh despite the hollowness in my chest.

“Maybe you’re right.” I rescan the email, leaning back in my new leather chair—the break-in did produce one good thing: I finally replaced the ghastly metal contraption. “They may have narrowed the supplemental decree argument, but we’ll proceed to a full hearing, and they’ll have to justify their position against fifty years of water commissioner records.” I swivel to look out the window. “They’re going to be very busy.” They’re going to make sure I’m very busy.

“Any news from Clara?”

“No. But I’m going to reach out. I need to tell her about this ruling.”

As if on cue, as soon as I end the call, my phone rings.

Clara.

“I want to keep fighting,” she says, without preamble—a tremor in her voice but also the steel that has carried her through everything since Deke

passed. “I talked to the kids, and they both want to keep”—a tiny sob—
“they want to keep what’s ours.”

I wait a moment to gather myself because I want to burst out crying with relief. “Thank you for trusting me, Clara. But I need to tell you why they knew about that supplemental decree, and then you can decide if you want me to continue.”

“What?” A pause. “I don’t want anyone but you, Taya.”

“Clara, it was my fault that—”

“I don’t care. I trust you.”

I close my eyes. Her words are a balm and a whip simultaneously. “I’ll come by this afternoon, and we can talk. We heard back from the judge and—”

“Is it bad?”

“No,” I tell her. “It’s mostly good. I’ll come by and explain everything. Okay?”

“Okay. And Taya?” Her voice drops. “This case is ours. I know you care about us. That’s what matters.”

I drive to Silverbell after Clara lets me know she and the kids are back from school, and she’s ready for me.

Dakota comes up to my Wrangler.

She’s in waders and work boots, her hair in a braid, a notebook tucked under her arm that she uses to log the headgate readings the way her father taught her—which headgates opened, which ones are silted, how much water is moving through the north pasture corridor.

She does it every day.

Luis handles the equipment side, and Dakota handles the water records.

She’s been doing it since Deke died, because she understood early that this knowledge needs to live somewhere, and she is the somewhere.

“She doesn’t want to take their money,” she tells me, by way of greeting.

“I know.”

“This is ours, and we want to stay. I want to run this ranch with Eli someday.” She shrugs, matter-of-fact about the size of the dream. “Like Elena does with horses. In my own place.”

I put a hand on her shoulder. “You’re going to make a great rancher, Dakota.”

She beams—just sixteen years old for one unguarded second—and then nods toward the house. “Mama’s in the kitchen. Eli just finished his homework.”

She walks back to her headgates and her responsibilities, and I go up the porch steps to face mine.

“I baked.” Clara pushes a plate of chocolate chip cookies toward me after she pours the coffee.

“How are you holding up?”

She shrugs. “Better now that I have help.”

I raise an eyebrow.

“Mav sent two of his people for the tagging. It’s that time of year—running the calves through for ear tags and brands before they go to summer pasture, two-person minimum just to work the chute, more if you want to keep your sanity.” She leans back. “Deke used to hire three extra hands for the week. Last year, it was me, Dakota, and Luis, and it took four days and nearly killed all three of us.” She picks up a cookie. “This year, Hunt showed up Monday morning with two of the Wilder ranch hands without asking.”

“Hunt?”

She gives me a wickedly pleased look. “Hunt knows how to work a squeeze chute. And he’s considerably larger than Luis, which helps when a five-hundred-pound calf has opinions about the process.”

“Hunt sure knows his way around cattle work.”

“Better than he knows his way around women.” There’s a lightness about her that hasn’t been there before—the easing of a woman who has made a decision and accepted help. “I asked him about Joy, and he blushed like a virgin bride on her wedding night. For a man that size, he’s kinda sweet.” She smiles wide. “We finished all the work in two days. Luis almost cried. I *did* cry!”

I study the cookies and think about what it costs a woman like Clara to accept help, and what it means to her that a community gives it without being asked.

“I’m glad you’re not alone in it.”

Her gaze lingers, assessing. “That’s the way here. Deke knew. He grew up here and understood it in his bones. I came from Grand Junction thinking I understood community, but I didn’t—not really, not until I needed it.”

We drink coffee quietly for a moment.

“Well,” she says, raising both eyebrows. “Spill.”

I tell her the real version. What happened, why it happened, and what I’m going to do about it. I tell her about Colbeck’s interim order, explain that it’s neither victory nor defeat, but a judge who has seen the historical record and declined to hand High Mesa what they came for. I tell her what the supplemental brief needs to accomplish and how long that will take.

She listens without interrupting.

“Can we win?” she asks when I finish.

“Yes,” I say. “But I want to be honest with you—we can also lose. I don’t think we will. But I need you to know the full picture.”

She studies me for a long moment.

“Okay,” she says—one word, flat and certain.

No accusation. No finger pointed at me for putting her way of life at risk.

I hold her gaze. “That’s it? No comment about what happened with Mason?”

Her expression softens. “Hon, you trusted your man, and he screwed you over. He screwed me over after he played with my kids at Mav’s barbecue.” She shakes her head. “It’s his failure of honor. Not yours. And you’re already in enough pain without me adding to it.”

My lungs forget how to work for a moment.

“No way you take the blame for his lack of integrity,” she says, with a fierceness that catches me off guard. “What he did is on him. And if he’s any kind of man at all, he’ll have to look himself in the mirror and make it right—for himself, for you, for the universe. But you have nothing to make right. Not with me. Not with my babies. No one.”

I straighten. I know she’s going to protest, but I have to do this for my own peace of mind. “Clara, there’s one more thing.”

She waits.

“I’m not billing you anymore. Not for the hours already worked and not for what’s coming, either.” I hold her gaze. “I trusted someone I shouldn’t have, and it damaged the case. You’re not paying for that.”

She opens her mouth.

I level her with a look. “Don’t argue with me. I’m your lawyer. This is my decision.”

She closes her mouth.

“I owe you a win,” I state. “I intend to deliver it.”

Clara smiles the smile of a woman who has just had a bet confirmed. “Hunt told me not to worry about paying you—said you wouldn’t charge me, and if you did, Duke would take care of it.”

I put a hand to my heart because the pressure of it—the faith of these people, the weight of being claimed by a place—is more than I can hold without acknowledging it.

“They shouldn’t—”

“They want to.” She stands to refill the coffee. “That’s the other thing I didn’t understand until I needed it. People here don’t help because they’re keeping a tab. They help because that’s just what you do.”

The kitchen settles around us—the coffee smell, the late afternoon light through the curtains, the sound of Luis’s tractor somewhere behind the barn.

I’m putting my files back in my bag when Eli appears in the kitchen doorway.

He’s in his school clothes still, one sock half off, his wooden pinto horse—Ranger—held against his chest with both arms the way he holds it when something is bothering him.

“Taya.”

“Hey, bud.”

He crosses the kitchen to me with the purposefulness of a four-year-old who has decided something. He stops in front of me and holds Ranger out. “You should have him.”

I look at the horse. The careful braided mane. The painted pinto coat. The slight wear at the ears where Eli holds him.

“Eli, that’s your horse.”

“I know.” He pushes it toward me more firmly. “But you’re trying to keep our water, and Ranger is for when you need help. That’s what Dad said. He said you give something important to someone when they need help more than you do.”

The kitchen is very quiet.

Clara has gone still at the counter.

“Your dad said that?” I ask, my voice careful.

“When I was little.” He nods seriously. “I was scared of the dark, and he gave me his flashlight. He said *some things are too important to keep when someone else needs them more.*”

I look at the horse in his small hands.

“I can’t take Ranger.” I push the words out through a choked throat. “He’s yours. Your dad gave him to you.”

Eli considers this with the gravity of someone working through a genuinely difficult problem. Then he holds the horse out one more time, deliberate.

“You can borrow him...until you win.”

I take the horse.

I hold it in both hands—solid, warm from his grip—and I think about Deke Whitman and a flashlight and a little boy scared of the dark, and about what it means that his son is standing in this kitchen holding out the most important thing he owns to a lawyer who is trying to keep his family’s water.

“Thank you, Eli.” I crouch and kiss his cheek. “I’ll take good care of him.”

He nods, satisfied. Then he turns and pads back down the hallway in his half-off sock, already thinking about something else entirely, the way four-year-olds do.

I watch the horse in my hand, as does Clara.

Neither of us says anything for a moment.

“He sounds like his dad.” She hugs herself, and the pain of losing her husband is etched on her face. “Every single day, he reminds me of Deke.”

I put Ranger carefully in the front pocket of my bag, where I can see him, and under his watchful eye, I drive home.

CHAPTER 32

taya



“So, if I had to guess, you’re working twenty-four seven to not deal with this?” Sienna comments over the phone.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I can’t keep the snark out of my voice.

“It means that when you are dealing with emotional fuckery, you ignore it and go to your favorite addiction—workaholism,” my best friend informs me cheerfully.

“I do not do that,” I protest. It’s a big fat lie. I do it all the time. “And I do not have emotional fuckery.”

“Honey, you have a whole mega emotional fuckery situation happening right now, and you know it.”

I sigh. “Look, I’m busy and—”

“The man I saw was in love with you.”

I growl loudly into the phone. “We will not be talking about *him* ever again.”

“Yeah, we will.” Sienna’s tone is butter smooth.

“You know what, I don’t have time for this.”

“Emotional fuckery makes you bitchy,” she says in a sing-song manner.

“I’m hanging up.” And I do so, feeling tremendously better than I had before I talked to Sienna and told her about Mason’s fuckery.

After Griffin, I didn’t tell anyone anything—just went on with life.

This time, I’ve pretty much told everyone who is in my life, and it doesn’t feel like I’m oversharing—it feels like I’m asking for support and getting it.

For years, especially in Aspen, I stood on my own, carried everything alone, but now I have a community again just like I do in Ignacio, and it feels good.

Really good.

What doesn't feel good is opposing counsel going batshit crazy, drowning me in filings.

Aldridge files his response to Colbeck's interim order—forty-seven pages, which tells me exactly how worried the Houston firm is, because forty-seven pages is not confidence, forty-seven pages is a firm that has been asked to defend a position it no longer fully believes in and is compensating with volume.

I file my response.

I go for a dignified, not-desperate twenty-two pages.

Clean, tight, sourced to the historical record, now running to four supplemental exhibits.

I know it's good because Mac reads it and says, "No notes."

Mac always has notes.

"Yo, Taya." Mav knocks on my open door and walks into my office.

"What's up?" I swivel my shoulders, having just pushed the send button on my response to High Mesa.

He sets his cowboy hat on the corner of my desk. "Wanted a quick chat. The Planning Commission published the resort permit application this morning. Two hundred and forty units, private airstrip, golf course, the whole thing."

"Yeah, I saw that. I think they did it because the judge isn't going their way...well, not entirely."

He folds his arms. "These assholes are making it all sound like progress, which it ain't."

I toss up my shoulders. "They're getting ahead of the narrative. I remember doing that once or twice in my previous line of work."

He grins. "Which is why you're so good at what you do now!" His expression turns serious. "This stuff is hairy as fuck, I'm not always clear about it, which is why you're my lawyer."

I laugh as I pull up the resort permit on my laptop and turn it toward him. "See that." I point at the water allocation section. "The only senior right in that corridor with the volume and priority date to support this is Clara Whitman's 1948 decree."

Mav studies the screen. “So without Clara’s water, their three-hundred-million-dollar development goes down the toilet.”

“Yeah.”

I look at my watch—I have a call in ten minutes. “Anything else?”

He studies me carefully, his eyes narrow. “How are you doin’, darlin’? Really?”

I level him with a flat, unimpressed glare. “Doing just fine, *Maverick*.”

“Yeah?” He tilts his head, as if trying to discern from my face if I’m telling the truth. “You sure about that?”

I grit my teeth. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

His expression shifts, just barely, mouth curving with control. “So, what you’re sayin’ is that you don’t want to talk about *him*.”

I give him a look that could’ve curdled milk. “I really don’t.”

“Fair.” He picks up his hat from the corner of my desk where he set it. He moves toward the door. Then stops. Turns. “You know what’s funny?”

“What?” I snap.

He smiles—the way one does when they know they’re about to say something that’s going to land. “You said you don’t want to talk about him.” He puts his hat on. “But you didn’t say you weren’t thinking about him every minute of every Goddamn day.”

I shoot him a withering look. “Get out of my office, Mav.”

I hear him laughing halfway down the street.

“Nothing funny about this,” I mutter.

And there really isn’t, because what he doesn’t know—and I won’t admit at gunpoint—is that I’ve been sleeping with a T-shirt Mason forgot at my place like a pathetic Scarlett O’Hara who knows better and does it anyway.

I miss him.

It’s an ache in my heart.

I can hear his voice—hear him say my name, call me sweetheart, ask me to dance with him, hold me close, make me feel safe.

Not talking about Mason—and Maverick, *the sumbitch is right*, as Mav would say—doesn’t mean I’m not thinking about him all the time.

The questions swirl inside me.

Why did he do it?

Why did he do this to me?

It was hurting already when he left—when he rejected me. Did he have to crush my soul on the way out?

Trust is a scarce commodity, and I was already in the red after Griffin. Now my heart is broken, and I don't think I'll ever love again. More importantly, to love again, I have to stop loving the man who got under my skin and over my defenses, because my spirit recognized him in a way it never has before.

I scrub my face with my hands, trying to stem the tears, the pain—which I know is futile.

My grandmother used to say that you can't escape pain. You have to walk through it like a warrior, and once you're on the other side, you'll be free of it.

The problem is that I don't think I'll ever be on the other side of this pain.

A sob escapes me, and I hold myself still as the despair of it overwhelms me—loving a man who didn't want me, loving a man who betrayed me, loving a man who broke me.

My phone rings, and I glance at the screen with tear-filled eyes. I wipe them furiously as I answer.

"Clara?"

"Taya—God, Taya. There...remember that man? You know the one who came? That man...oh God, Taya."

I stand up, my heart hammering. "Hey, hey, tell me what's going on."

"Dakota—ah—God!" Clara's voice breaks.

"Clara, is everyone okay?" Panic wipes every other emotion out of me.

"Yes. Yes." I hear her take deep breaths. "I'm in the bathroom having a nervous breakdown, Taya, so they won't hear me."

Clara is a strong person. Hearing her break apart like this is cause for concern.

"I'm on my way." I pick up my car keys and wallet. "Have you called the Sheriff?"

"What?" She sounds so lost.

"Okay. You sit tight, and I'll be there in twenty."

I hear Dakota's voice on the other side of the line. "Mama, are you okay?"

"Oh, yes, baby. I'm fine. I'll be right out. You—ah—you stay with Eli."

"Clara, go be with your kids," I instruct. "We'll take care of this."

I call Sheriff Dillon from the Wrangler.

“Dillon.”

“Sheriff, you need to head to the Whitman ranch. A man was there—the same one who threatened her earlier.” I put that much together. “And she’s scared.”

“On my way. I’ll see you there?”

“Yes, you will.”

I get to Silverbell in eighteen minutes, which is two minutes faster than I told Clara and involves a stretch of county road where I form my own opinion about the speed limit.

The Sheriff’s cruiser is already in the drive when I pull in. So is a second vehicle—Wiley Buchanan’s truck, parked at the far end of the drive where it’s visible from the road.

Clara opens the door before I reach the steps. She’s been crying—red-eyed, pulled together, running on the adrenaline of a mother who doesn’t want her kids to know she’s scared.

I hug her first. Tight. She holds on with the grip of someone who needed that.

Then she lets go and straightens.

“The Sheriff is here. Wiley, too.”

The Sheriff is at the kitchen table, coffee in front of him. Wiley is standing by the window, arms crossed. He doesn’t look happy.

In Wildflower Canyon, the police force dresses in civilian clothes and wears their badges on their belts—they mostly look like cowboys who’ve been deputized. Wiley’s hat is on the kitchen counter. The Sheriff’s is on the table beside him.

Wiley is in his mid-thirties with a full head of hair. Hugh Dillon is clean-shaved and in his early fifties, give or take. Between the two of them, they have the kind of law enforcement experience that matters in a ranching community.

I look into the living room.

Dakota is on the couch watching television. Eli is asleep with his head on her lap. She looks up at me and nods. She’s sixteen, so she knows today wasn’t good. She’s scared, too.

Part of me wants to tell Clara to take the money and be done with it—nothing is worth putting that look on your child’s face. But I know exactly

how companies like High Mesa work. They bribe and intimidate and bludgeon you into doing what they want. That's the whole point.

I walk over and crouch beside the couch. "You, okay?"

Dakota nods.

Her eyes find her mother through the doorway. She drops her voice. "Don't let Mama sell the ranch to them, Taya. I know she's had a scare, but—don't let her do that."

Losing her father and carrying the weight of this ranch has made her grow up fast. I put my hand on hers and squeeze. "We'll make sure y'all have nothing to worry about."

She gives me a weak smile. "You almost believe that, don't you?"

I hold her gaze. "I *absolutely* believe it. You should, too."

I go back to the kitchen and sit beside Clara.

"She say anything?" The Sheriff's eyes are on Dakota through the doorway.

I shake my head. "I just checked in."

"I don't want you talking to her," Clara says tightly.

"Not going to do that, Clara, unless it's warranted." His tone stays calm—important right now, because we can all sense she's holding on by a thread.

Wiley walks to the kitchen doorway and murmurs something to Dakota, then pulls the door closed between the kitchen and the living room. He goes back to his post by the window.

Now that the shock has settled into sequence, Clara is clearer.

"Walk me through what happened," the Sheriff says, opening his notebook.

"I came home, and there was a truck. I thought maybe it was Duke or Mav sending help, but it had Tennessee plates." She takes a shuddering breath. "I couldn't see him clearly from my truck, but I knew something was off. He was talking to Dakota." A sob escapes her. I put my hand over hers.

We give her a moment.

The Sheriff doesn't push.

Wiley gets angrier by degrees.

"Anyway, I get out of the truck and come running. The man—oh God, Taya, it was the same one. The scar on his cheek." She touches her right

cheek. “I ask him what he’s doing, and he holds up his hat like we’re in a movie and says some nonsense like howdy or what have you.”

Wiley’s jaw clenches.

“He then turns to Dakota and winks at her.” Clara shakes her head, eyes closed. “Tell your mama what I told you. And my kid—she has a spine, she does—she tells him there isn’t enough money in the world for us to sell our ranch.”

She picks up her coffee and drinks like she needs to loosen her throat.

“I tell him to get out. Just leave. He says I should listen to him. I ask his name and who sent him. He says Sid Trafton and I should know who sent him.” She spits the name out. “And that’s when Eli comes running out to the yard. He’s curious, so he goes straight to the truck—it’s red—and before I can get to him, Trafton walks up to Eli and asks him about his horse. Eli always carries one. You know that, Taya.”

I nod. Ranger is in my office—my new good luck charm.

“I yell for Eli to come to me, which he does, and Dakota picks him up and runs inside. *Runs.*” Clara’s voice cracks. “These people have scared us so much that we’re running into our own home on our own land.”

The Sheriff takes notes without reacting, but his jaw tightens slightly—the man beneath the professional. Wiley looks like a thundercloud, his eyes not leaving Clara.

“Dakota handled herself,” Clara finishes.

“She shouldn’t have had to,” Wiley says flatly. He pushes off from the window and walks to the table. He sits across from us beside the Sheriff. “Clara, I’m going to stay in my truck outside all night. Alright?”

“But—”

“It’s not a discussion.” He holds her gaze steadily. “You’re not going to have to run again.”

Clara’s eyes fill, and she nods slowly. “Thank you, Wiley.” She wipes at her cheeks that are wet again. “He’d been walking around the property—like he was taking inventory—when Dakota caught him and demanded what he was doing here.” Her hand goes to her heart. “Luis isn’t in today. She was alone with Eli. That man—anything could have happened to my baby girl.”

“I’m going to do a walk of the property first.” Wiley leans forward so he can hold Clara’s gaze properly. “Then I’ll stay posted at the end of the drive.”

“You can’t sit out there all night—”

“Won’t be the first time.” This comes from the Sheriff, who looks quietly amused.

“I have a guest room.” Clara straightens slightly. “It’s not much. But it’s a bed.”

Wiley glances at the Sheriff, who shrugs.

I nearly slap my hand over my forehead.

Wiley has a thing for Clara. It’s sweet, really.

“I’ll be fine in the truck,” he murmurs.

Clara frowns. “Why are you being so stubborn about this?”

“Because a man came to your land and dared to talk to your kids.” There’s heat in his voice, and his eyes are hard. “That’s why.”

Clara swallows, and her back firms up. “The offer of the guestroom stands if you change your mind.”

He picks up his hat and goes out.

Clara follows him, probably to check on the kids, probably to talk to him privately.

The Sheriff and I look at each other.

“Is that what I think it is?” I ask.

He chuckles. “I hope so. Wiley’s been single since his wife left and turned into an ornery bastard about it. But it’ll take time. You don’t get over a husband—considering what they had, which was a good marriage—just because he’s gone.”

I nod. “Do you know who Sid Trafton is?”

“Have an idea.” His phone buzzes. He reads it without showing much, but I cross-examine people for a living, and I can see he’s affected. “Why don’t you come by the Sheriff’s office tomorrow—say around ten?”

It’s not a request, even though it’s phrased like one.

“I’ll be there.”

He stands and puts on his hat. “I’m going to head home. You should, too. Wiley will take care of them.”

I stand, feeling more than a little helpless. “Do you think she should just sell? Is any of this worth it?”

The Sheriff gives me a long, deliberate look. “You of all people should know, Taya, that people don’t like being driven out of their homes. This isn’t about money—sure, dollar bills are necessary—but what’s more important is the kind of life you want to live. That’s the crux of it. Clara

comes from ranching people. Deke's family had this land for four generations. Just because something is hard doesn't mean it isn't theirs to hold on to."

I wrap my arms around myself. "I know. I'm just afraid for them."

"We'll make sure someone's here." He says it with the ease and confidence of a man who knows how this valley works. "Between Mav and Duke, we can get eyes on this place until you wrap up your case."

He says it simply. Not as a favor. As a fact.

That's how things are done around here—not because of money or power, but because of community. A way of life that people in Wildflower Canyon have been choosing, generation after generation, over everything easier.

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CHAPTER 33

taya



Since the Wildflower Canyon County Sheriff's office sits on Main Street, unassuming and solid, only a seven-minute walk from mine, I leave my office at ten to ten the next morning.

"How you doin', darlin'?" Opal Hennessey, the dispatcher and the town's unofficial gossip channel, greets me.

Opal can tell you who was arrested, why, and what they were wearing when it happened. She can also tell you who is sleeping with whom—regardless of who they're married to. She intimidates in the best way possible.

"I was summoned." I open the candy jar on her desk and pull out a caramel cream.

"He's been summoning a lot since that man—his nerve—was at Clara's place. Imagine, scaring those darlin' kids?"

The candy wrapper crinkles in my hand. I pop the sweet into my mouth.

Opal leans over her desk. "So—I hear that Kaz is FBI."

I roll my eyes. "Are you allowed to talk about that? Since he's—you know—" I trail off.

She scoffs. "Everyone and his mother knows that Kaz has an FBI-issued ball and chain. When Bree finds out—which is any minute now—there's gonna be hell to pay."

Kaz's cover is blown, and whatever is going on between him and Bree is going to come to a head very soon.

"Oh, and—" Opal looks around to make sure no one's listening— "did you hear that Noelle is getting married to that old guy from Denver?"

Now, that is juicy news.

Noelle Dunn behaves like a princess but is a rancher's daughter, with a reputation of sorts ever since she dated Cade Mercer and tried to stir up trouble between him and Dr. Kirk, one of the two vets in Wildflower Canyon. Noelle is not popular, and everyone knows she's been hunting for a rich husband.

"Old guy? Who?"

"He's the one who owns the titty bar on—"

"Opal, for cryin' out loud, woman, can you send people in instead of diggin' into their private lives?" the Sheriff calls out in mock indignation.

Opal waves a hand. "I'm your best investigator, Sheriff, and you know it." She grins at me. "Go on in, Taya. And FYI, Kaz Chase is in there. Been there for an hour."

"Noted."

She nods with attitude. "You check in with me before you leave. I'll give you all the tea on Noelle Dunn."

"I'll do that, Opal." I follow the hallway into the Sheriff's office.

He closes the door and takes the chair at the head of the table. Kaz nods at me from the window, arms crossed, a cup of coffee in his hand.

He doesn't look like FBI, I maintain. He's too pretty—the blue eyes, the dark wavy hair, that cheeky smile, and, well, there is the body. Bree is a lucky girl.

And just like that, I think about another man with blue eyes and a considerably good body, and my heart hurts.

Taya, you have to stop thinking about him. Completely. He's gone. He used you. Move on.

Sure. And while I'm at it, why don't I ask the flying pigs to give me a ride?

"Kaz. How's the FBI business?"

He rolls his eyes.

The Sheriff lets out a laugh. "You know how many people know? Your cover is way blown. And Bree comes back from Denver tomorrow. She's gonna know."

Bree's been in Denver for a wedding all week. If someone hasn't already called her, the minute she hits Wildflower Canyon, she'll know that the man who was her uncle's friend—her something—has been lying about

what he does for a living since she's known him. My heart goes out to her. I know exactly how it feels to be betrayed by the man you love.

"Can we get to the business at hand?" Kaz clips. "I'm starting to feel like y'all have turned into a sewing circle."

"*Puhlease!* A sewing circle would've resolved this by now," I mock.

The Sheriff chuckles. He's enjoying himself, much as I am.

"All of this is need-to-know." The Sheriff gestures at his computer screen.

"And I now need to know?"

"Yeah. You need to know." This comes from Kaz.

I lean back. "Read me in, fellas."

"Sid Trafton. Forty-three. Former DEA, left the agency under circumstances that are"—the Sheriff glances at Kaz—"complicated."

"Contested," Kaz interjects.

"What Kaz means," Dillon says, with the dry patience of a man who has learned to translate, "is that the official record and the actual story are not the same document."

"Color me surprised." I met another man whose official record and actual story didn't match up. He got into my bed and used me. He and Trafton would probably make excellent friends.

Tamp down the bitterness, girl.

"He operates in the Mountain West," Kaz continues. "Development interests, primarily. He does the things that lawyers and lobbyists can't do and that executives want deniability for." He drinks some coffee. "He's been in this valley on and off since March. He was engaged by High Mesa through Senator Jessup to run parallel pressure on the Whitman case—legal intimidation, property surveillance, the visit to Clara." He pauses. "The office."

I hold up a hand. "Otis Jessup?" I shake my head.

"His son-in-law, along with some of his closest friends from Yale—or wherever the corrupt rich go to college—have a company with a shell company that is heavily invested, to the tune of a hundred million dollars, in the resort project that needs the Whitman ranch water."

I process that and scowl. "I looked it up and didn't find any connection to Jessup, but—" I hold up both hands before Kaz can speak— "if you say so, I'll go with it."

“After the preliminary hearing, which they felt went their way, Trafton was asked to leave town. But—” Kaz quirks an eyebrow— “our boy got beat up by your man for messing up your office.”

“What?” I gasp.

Kaz shrugs carelessly. “Brooks beat the crap out of Trafton, told him to stay away from you.” He pauses. “But our man, Trafton, comes back to Wildflower Canyon to poke around and get a win for his bosses, even though they stopped paying him. Probably feels a professional obligation.”

Mason beat up Trafton. My ribs squeeze like a vice.

“So, he’s running without a leash,” the Sheriff finishes. “Which is why he shows up at Clara’s.”

“Which was a mistake, because by the end of today, I’m going to send your report along with Clara and Dakota’s testimony to Judge Colbeck.” My shoulders stiffen. “He may lean toward development, but he’s firmly anti-witness intimidation.”

I cannot wait to take these people apart. Threatening a sixteen-year-old and harassing a single mother, a school teacher, for the love of everything holy.

“Doesn’t change the fact that he’s got a grievance to settle for Jessup,” Kaz drawls.

“Do we know Jessup hired him and not High Mesa?” I ask.

And who hired Mason? Jessup?

Kaz walks over and rests his hip against the Sheriff’s desk. “We do. Jessup is involved to give High Mesa plausible deniability. No one has publicly connected Jessup to your case yet.”

Subtext: Or Mason Brooks.

“But you have,” I say.

“Yeah.”

“Because you’re investigating him.”

“Yeah.” I’m surprised he doesn’t prevaricate.

“And why are you telling me this?” I have a feeling they’re asking for my assistance, which I don’t mind—I’m an officer of the court—but doing this would also help Clara.

“Because.” Kaz picks up a pen from the Sheriff’s desk and flips it between his fingers. “Right now, especially after Trafton’s mistake, High Mesa knows you’re probably going to win the case. They can’t afford that.”

Rumor has it Aldridge has been talking to a partner at a law firm you used to work at to help”—he turns to the Sheriff— “what’s the word, Hugh?”

The Sheriff’s expression shifts, barely, his mouth curving with control. “*Soften*. They’d like to soften you, Taya.”

“With what?” I narrow my eyes. “A meat tenderizer? Or are they talking to my ex?”

“Griffin Cole has been added to Aldridge’s team as a consultant,” Kaz says.

Heat surges up my spine. “And his special expertise is me?”

“Yeah.” Kaz looks more entertained than he should. “So he’s going to approach you, and we’d like it if you don’t ask him to go to hell—just agree to listen.”

I let out a long sigh. “Kaz, I’m not going undercover for you.”

“You may just have to talk to the man and let him think you regret your move here, that you miss the money.” Kaz ignores my protest. “I mean, you did get your heart broken and all that.”

I shoot him a withering look. “My heart is just fine.”

He glances at me, lips twitching.

“So I talk to Griffin and then what? Wear a wire? Interrogate him?”

Kaz opens his hands, palms up. “I’d like you to have a conversation.”

“Those are all the same things.”

“Technically.”

I look at the Sheriff, who is studying the ceiling with the focused attention of a man who has decided this exchange is not his to intervene in.

“Sheriff?”

“Mm.”

“You have an opinion?”

He scratches his jaw. “I’m enjoying the view.”

I shoot him a glare brimming with frustration, which he doesn’t see. I turn back to Kaz. “Walk me through what you actually need.”

He sets the pen down. “Aldridge is hoping Cole can get to you in ways a Texas litigator can’t. What he doesn’t know is that Cole coming to you is the worst possible move they could have made. Because you are not the woman you were in Aspen. Now, you can see every angle of his agenda before he finishes his opening sentence.”

I roll my eyes, full performance. “Flattery, Kaz?”

“Fact.” He’s not smiling now. “Cole is going to make contact. He’s going to tell you the case is unwinnable. He’s going to make an offer for Clara—better than the last one—and he’s probably going to make you a personal offer.”

“An illegal one?”

“Bribing counsel to influence a case? Yeah, that would be illegal.”

I smile for the first time since I walked in. “That would get him disbarred. Maybe two to five if I’m lucky.”

Kaz gives the smallest shake of his head. “Disbarred, yes. Prison time, no.”

I make a *what-can-you-do* gesture. “That’ll do.”

“We need him to be explicit about why he’s approaching you and on whose behalf. We need him to connect the dots to Jessup.”

“Can he?”

“Yes. He’s been recruited by Jessup directly.”

I sit back. “All this to get to little ol’ me. I didn’t think I’d ever have a senator’s attention. I’m a hotshot.”

“Oh, yes, you are, Miss Morningstar.” The Sheriff’s face breaks into a genuine smile.

“He’ll probably give me Aldridge, too.”

“No.” Kaz shakes his head. “Aldridge is a puss boil on society, but a legal one. He’s not connected to Griffin or Trafton or....” He trails off, but we all hear him say Mason Brooks. “That’s our senator’s doing.”

“And people wonder why we’ve lost faith in politicians.” I pause as a thought strikes me. “Just because Aldridge keeps his hands clean doesn’t mean Tannenbaum will. I doubt High Mesa is entirely uninvolved in this.”

“We won’t get Tannenbaum through this. He’s not connected to Griffin and Trafton.”

“Then?”

“Tannenbaum is separate,” Kaz says. “Different channels.”

“What channels?”

He gives me a measured look.

“Right. Need to know.” I fold my arms.

“This all legal for the counselor, Kaz?”

“Yes,” I reply in the Sheriff’s stead, because I’ve already run it. “I’m a private citizen agreeing to a conversation. I’m not initiating contact—

Griffin is. I'm not misrepresenting myself." I look at the Sheriff. "I'll confirm with Mac, but I don't see an ethical issue."

A new thought lands. "Kaz, I'll do this—but you will submit an affidavit to Judge Colbeck. We can keep it under seal, but you will tell him how High Mesa and Jessup have been attempting to influence his court."

Kaz shifts uncomfortably. "Well, Taya, if the case is closed by then—"

"You will submit an affidavit, or there's no deal." I lift my chin.

He sighs. "If the federal attorneys give me the sign-off."

"Get the sign-off," I suggest.

"Counselor is playing hardball," the Sheriff murmurs appreciatively.

"Whose side are you on?" Kaz snaps.

"Mine." The Sheriff points at his own chest. "And hers, and probably the rest of the world's, before I'd be on yours. You've been a thorn in my side with your covert operations. Can't wait for you to leave the Bureau so I can arrest your ass next time you're doing seventy in a forty."

Kaz lets out a short bark of laughter. "Don't believe him, Taya. He loves me."

"Like a heart attack," the Sheriff counters.

We talk through the details—the how, the when, the limits.

"He'll make contact soon," Kaz says as we wind down. "He doesn't know we know he's been added to the team, so he'll think he's getting ahead of it."

"He always thinks he's getting ahead of something," I quip.

"Once he makes contact, we regroup."

The Sheriff clears his throat. "Ah—Kaz, you need to make sure all relevant parties are informed about Taya's involvement."

I frown.

The Sheriff wiggles his eyebrows. "Brooks is going to—"

"Mason is not part of this." I cut him off.

The Sheriff and Kaz look at each other.

It's a brief look—the kind two people exchange when they've already discussed something and arrived at a shared position.

"Taya." Kaz uses his patient voice, which I'm convinced he deploys when someone is digging in. "He's going to find out. He's gonna be worried about your safety. And when he—"

"He doesn't get a vote," I thunder. "He doesn't get to have feelings about my safety. That's not where we are."

“I understand that’s how you feel. He’s not going to feel the same way.”

“Are you working with him, Kaz?”

He goes very quiet.

I look at the ceiling the way Dillon did five minutes ago, except I’m looking for patience rather than entertainment.

Serenity now, Taya.

“I’m going to tell him,” Kaz continues, ignoring my question. “And I have a feeling that as soon as I do, he’ll be forty feet away from you. I want you to know that upfront.”

Are all these people out of their minds? Mason doesn’t care about me. If he did, he wouldn’t have done what he did. If he did, he would have loved me back instead of rejecting me in my grandmother’s kitchen with his jaw set and his coward’s answer.

“Upfront can go fuck itself and so can *he*,” I say saccharine sweet, with a massive sprinkle of sarcasm.

I stand, pick up my bag. “And if Griffin lays a hand on me”—I flip my braid—“I’m going to need you and your FBI friends to pretend you don’t see what happens next.”

I don’t wait for his response, but I hear the Sheriff’s snigger.

I walk out to Opal, who hands me a caramel cream. “Well?”

I take the candy. “I’m going to need that Noelle Dunn story to get rid of the bad taste in my mouth.”

“Wild Coffee.” Opal slides her purse strap over her shoulder. “Boss, I’m taking a break.”

“Woman, you don’t take breaks,” the Sheriff calls out. “You stage them.”

Opal ignores him magnificently.

We go to Wild Coffee and gossip. It’s an excellent distraction.

But it doesn’t entirely wipe away the feeling—the small, unwelcome, infuriating flicker of warmth—when Kaz insisted that Mason Brooks cares enough to show up for me.

Taya, you are a pathetic, lovesick moron.

CHAPTER 34

mason



Four weeks in the Chelsea apartment and I have established a routine.

I wake at five because my body doesn't know how to sleep in.

I run the West Side Highway path until the Hudson turns from black to gray.

I come back, shower, make coffee in the kitchen, which I use for nothing else.

I sit on the armchair by the window.

I read the public docket filings on the Whitman water rights case for as long as it takes me to feel sufficiently disgusted with myself to stop.

Then I do it again the next day.

I don't answer the phone.

Two new jobs have come in—people who haven't yet heard about my situation with Jessup, which could be the only reason they're calling.

I turn them down by saying: *Conflict of interest*.

Cleaner than a no, because rich men treat no as an opening position. Conflict of interest has the texture of me working for the other side or the wrong side, and that could cost them power—and that they respect.

Jessup has called ten times.

Left forty messages.

I haven't listened to the voicemails, but the texts tell me enough—he's moved through denial and bargaining and landed squarely in anger. The motherfucker is predictable if nothing else.

What I actually do, between the running and the staring at the Empire State Building from my apartment on 27th and 6th in Chelsea, and reading the docket filings, is drinking.

There's a liquor store downstairs where I pick up a bottle as needed—about once every two to three days—when I get back from my run.

My dasher and I have become friends—albeit our relationship is casual. He hands me food. I tip him in the app.

I spend a lot of time imagining her at the county justice center. I think a lot about the moment when Taya picked up the document Aldridge had probably given her victoriously, and she read her own case analysis in someone else's filing.

I've reconstructed it from the public record, from the timing of the recess request, from the interim order Judge Colbeck issued eighteen days later.

She recovered—filed a supplemental brief that I've read three times in the public docket.

It's remarkable.

She took the thing I handed Jessup's team and used the historical record to reframe it so thoroughly that the judge is now reconsidering whether the procedural defect is even material.

Forty-seven pages from Aldridge in response, which tells you everything.

And every second of every Goddamn day—I miss her.

I ache for her.

When I sleep, I forget she's not in my life any longer and dream about her. I wake up and then...I go for a run because missing her is a physical pain.

Also, my phone has zero missed calls from Taya Morningstar.

I check this more than I should.

It's seven-forty on a Tuesday evening, and I'm on my third bourbon, staring at a ballgame program I couldn't tell you about if asked at gunpoint, when there's a knock on the door.

I frown.

Can't be food delivery. I haven't ordered anything.

I was, and have been thinking for an hour, that maybe today is a good day to actually step out and enjoy June in New York City, as everyone

seems to be doing so through my window. But then the bourbon beckoned, and I...just gave up.

I open the door.

Kaz Chase is in the hallway in jeans and a blazer despite the heat, which I can bet my apartment is hiding his badge and weapon.

"How the hell did you get up here?" I have a concierge.

"Flashed my badge."

"Son of a bitch."

"Yeah, I know." He glances at the bourbon in my hand. "Put that down and get your wallet. We're going to dinner."

Like hell I'm paying if I'm eating with him.

"I've eaten," I lie.

"No, you haven't. We have a man on you, and you haven't even ordered takeout. Didn't think you were a Sweetgreen kinda guy."

He has people watching me? The fuck?

He cranes his head and looks into my apartment. "Nice. Your line of work pays well."

"So says the guy who lives in a fucking mansion."

He waves a hand and gives me a look that's brimming with mock sheepishness. "Man's gotta do, what a man's gotta do."

I stare at him, and he holds my gaze.

Fuck it!

I slam the door shut in his face.

I change out of my sweats, put on my shoes, and get my wallet. He's waiting outside, scrolling through his phone.

"Nice threads."

I look down at what I'm wearing, which I didn't pay attention to. It's jeans and a white button-down.

"Brunello Cucinelli," he adds.

My eyes narrow. "How the fuck do you know that?"

He shrugs. "I like fashion."

I close the door behind me. "Has anyone told you that you're weird?"

"Day doesn't go by when someone doesn't."

He leads the way, and I let him.

Ulvio is a block away on 24th, across from the Fifth Avenue Hotel. It's got one of those Michelin Bib Gourmand signs.

"I like this place," Kaz tells me. "Been coming here for a decade."

I live down the street, and I've never been here, but he has. Obviously, he has. Kaz has layers. Despite being an asshole—because he is—I tolerate him better than I do most people.

We sit at the bar, and he does a complicated handshake with the guy across from him, who introduces himself as Steve from Puglia. He has an easy air around him—one that comes from making drinks since before it was fashionable and has outlasted several trends without changing anything he does.

“The usual?”

Kaz nods.

“What's the usual?” I want to know.

“Sazerac. I make it with cognac,” Steve explains.

“Sounds good to me.”

Steve nods and gets to work, and the Sazerac he sets in front of us four minutes later is the kind that makes you understand why the drink exists—the absinthe rinse, the rye, the Peychaud's bitters, the lemon peel expressed and discarded, the whole thing cold and precise and not apologizing for itself.

I pick mine up.

Kaz picks his up.

We don't say anything for a moment as we drink, savor, which is the right amount of time.

“Fourteen months,” Kaz says when I ask how long he's been working on the Jessup investigation.

He tells me the shape of it over the first drink. Not just the Whitman case but the whole pattern. Bribery across three states, the investor fraud in the resort projects, and the coordinated use of political office as an instrument for private land acquisition. Jessup, with his son-in-law and other family members running the same play in Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming for six years, with enough corporate separation between himself and the action that no single investigation could close on him.

Until now.

Steve sets menus in front of us.

“I'm out in six weeks.” Kaz opens the menu. “Official resignation filed last week. My boss is furious, which I understand. Fourteen months of Bureau resources, and I'm walking away before the formal case closes.” He closes the menu without reading it. “But I'm burnt out. And too many

people in Wildflower Canyon know. The cover is done. And the case is too close to people I”—He stops and picks the menu back up. “It’s complicated.”

“Bree,” I deduce.

“Bree doesn’t know yet—or maybe she does. But she’s back next week from Denver and....” He says it the way you do when you know it’s going to cost you considerably, and you’re already making your peace with the price.

“Good luck with that one.”

“Yeah.” A pause. “She’s going to be pissed.”

“She’s going to be furious.” I look at my drink. “She’s going to feel like every conversation you’ve ever had was a performance. She’s going to feel like she doesn’t know which parts of you are real.”

He shoots me a withering look. “You aren’t helping!”

“No, I’m not,” I agree. “I’m describing what’s coming.”

“Great. Can’t wait!”

Steve appears just as I feel the first rumble of hunger—thanks to the smells emanating from the kitchen.

Kaz orders, still without reading the menu. He gets handmade orecchiette with *cime di rapa*, and I go for the branzino. Steve nods approvingly at both choices and disappears.

“Is the software company...the money...all that is a cover?”

He shakes his head. “It’s mine. Every dollar. I built it from nothing. Sold it and then joined the FBI. When I told them I wanted to go back home to Wildflower Canyon, they suggested I go undercover. They needed someone who could operate in that community without being detected.” He gazes at his Sazerac. “What I built in Wildflower Canyon is mine. What I did for the Bureau is separate.”

“Does that distinction hold up?”

He thinks about it. “Mostly.” He pauses. “Maybe not entirely. The house and...fuck, I like golf and can’t ranch, so that was a legitimate acquisition, and it supported my cover. The help I give to the community overlaps with the job, but I do it because I want to.” He downs his drink. “Bree is going to ask me that question. I need to have an answer she can believe.”

“Do you have one *you* believe?”

He shoots me a flat, unimpressed glare. “Not yet.”

The orecchiette arrives. The branzino arrives. We eat.

Steve pours a Fiano d'Avellino that he apparently decided we needed without consulting us, and he's right, and neither of us argues.

For a while, we don't talk.

We eat the food, which is exactly what food in a place like this should be—real ingredients, real technique, no performance—and Steve tops off the wine and moves down the bar like he knows we need the privacy.

"So, you're gonna live on the golf course and...do what for work? You don't need the money, but everyone needs to work." I know that better than most because I'm not sure what I'm going to do now that I torched my career as a fixer.

Kaz cuts a piece of orecchiette with his fork. "I've been thinking about that." He eats the pasta, then sets his fork down. "Security consulting. The valley is full of ranching operations that will continue to face such pressure from corporate acquisitions. They need people who understand both the threat environment and the community." He looks up. "They need people who know how the other side operates."

I raise both my eyebrows at his silent question.

"I'm not asking tonight." He swirls his wine. "I'm just thinking out loud."

"Sure you are."

A shadow of amusement flickers across his mouth. "I'll ask *officially* when the timing is better."

"When will the timing be better?" I methodically peel away the white, flaky meat of the branzino.

"When you've sorted out your disaster." He drinks his wine and sets it down. "Which brings us back to why I'm in New York."

"Yeah, tell me about that."

I stop eating as he tells me, and I lose my appetite. Entirely.

"I told Jessup to keep that asshole—"

"Our investigation says that Jessup told him to stand down," he cuts me off. "But Trafton is running his own agenda now."

I scowl.

"He wants revenge."

"For breaking his nose?" I can't fucking believe it.

Yeah, Trafton is an idiot, and he probably wants to get one on me.

Taya!

Everyone knows that she and I got together, but hopefully they also know I fucked her over—that will protect her.

Or not.

I have to go back.

That thought clamors through me.

I have to go back and take care of her.

I put my glass down at that point and don't pick it up again.

"Son of a bitch!"

"He's angry, he's sloppy, and he has a grudge, which is the most dangerous combination." Kaz watches me steadily. "A four-year-old was in that yard, Brooks."

Eli with his wooden horse. *Fuck!*

Steve, who has been giving us space, appears briefly to check the wine levels, reads the room, and disappears again.

He's good at his job.

"I owe her...them." Pressure clamps down behind my sternum. "Taya. Clara. Those kids." I clench my jaw at the effort it's taking to not scream out very loudly. "I owe them in a way I don't know how to fully account for. I've walked away from jobs before and not thought about it twice. You do the work, you get paid, you move on. That's been my life for eleven years, and I was comfortable with it." I turn to look Kaz in the eyes. "I'm not comfortable with this."

"Because you're in love with her."

I look away and sigh. "Are we doing this?"

"We're doing this."

I glare at him. "In a bar in New York?"

"It's a very nice bar."

I look at my wine and tamp down the urge to run home, pack, and catch a flight to Colorado and sit in front of Taya's cottage and office—wherever she is, so she isn't touched by a man like Sid Trafton.

"I have never in my professional life cared what I left behind when I walked out of a job. I did the work, I got paid, the situation was what it was, and whatever came after was not my problem." My chest aches, hollow and sharp. "Now, I think about what I left behind every single day. I think about what her face looked like in that courtroom when Aldridge deployed her own analysis against her."

I place my hands on the bar counter to center myself. "I can't make it not matter. That's new."

"You're in love with her," Kaz says again.

"We established that."

"I know. I just wanted you to hear it twice."

I shoot him an irritated glance. "This is why men don't talk about their feelings."

"Because men are insufferable about it."

"Exactly."

He sets his fork down. While I haven't been able to eat a thing, he's cleaned his plate. "The case with Aldridge. She's going to win it with or without anything you do. You know that."

"I know." Now, after reading her work.

"So the reason you go back isn't the case."

"Yes and no."

"It's a four-year-old in a yard and a woman you handed to Jessup's team and a community you spent three months embedding in under false pretenses." He grins widely. "And the fact that you're in love with her."

"I thought we were done with that part."

"We're never done with that part." He rests his elbows on the counter and rubs his hands over his face. "The question is whether you're going back to make yourself feel better or because it's the right thing to do."

I think about this.

"Both," I admit. "I'm not going to lie to you about which one is louder."

He nods, which is his version of respect for an honest answer.

Steve sets a small plate of almond cookies between us that we didn't order and leaves again without a word. We both eat one. They're excellent.

"The security company," I prompt.

"Yes."

"I'll think about it."

"Of course, you will."

We finish the wine.

Steve clears our plates. He doesn't set a bill down.

"There's a six a.m. out of JFK to Denver," Kaz tells me. "I booked you on it. I'm going to D.C. first—I have some meetings, and I need to hand off the background materials to my contact at the AG's office. I'll be in Wildflower Canyon in a couple of days."

“And you’ll have the full federal package ready?”

“With your documentation. We will build it together.” He narrows his eyes thoughtfully. “And then you go talk to her.”

“In that order.”

“Definitely in that order. Don’t show up at her door before the package is filed. You go to her with your hands clean, or you don’t go at all.”

I think about that.

“That’s good advice.”

“I’m full of good advice,” he mutters. “I’m terrible at following it, but I give it very well.”

I signal Steve for the check.

He shakes his head. “Taken care of.”

I look at Kaz. He shrugs. “He does that sometimes. I have no idea why.”

“He’s one of the owners,” Steve informs me.

“Of course, he is.”

We walk back uptown in the summer evening. At the corner of 23rd, we stop at a red light.

I decide to give him some advice—lessons I’ve learned recently that he might find useful. “Bree is going to be furious.” I tuck my hands into my pockets. “But she’s not going to be surprised. Not entirely. She’s smart. She’s been watching you for two years, and some part of her already knows something doesn’t add up.”

The light turns green, and we start walking again. “Tell her the truth. All of it. Don’t manage it.”

He’s quiet for a moment.

“Is that what you’re going to do? With Taya.”

“Yes.”

“How’s that going to go?”

“Badly. And then, I hope, better.”

He chuckles. “Good luck.”

“You, too.”

We go our separate ways in the New York evening—him uptown toward wherever he’s staying, me north toward the Chelsea apartment and the window that faces west, and the bourbon I’m not going to pour tonight because I have an early flight out of JFK.

I set the alarm and try to sleep.

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CHAPTER 35

mason



I rent a car.

I drive for three hours through canyon road, mountain, and the unimaginably beautiful North Fork Valley—all of it manages to calm me and also excite me.

I miss Taya. Yes. But I find that I missed the mountains.

It's a surprise.

As a man who traveled around the world and never felt the need for home, the Elk Mountains sing a siren's song that I follow right through 133, where the creek cruises alongside the road and through the cottonwoods.

I come with various plans, and the ones that have to do with Jessup and Trafton, giving the Bureau what it wants, are solid. I know what I'm doing.

The plan to get in front of Taya and ask for her forgiveness—beg for a chance for us to be what I now know we can be—well, that one forms and dissipates. I can't imagine her forgiving me because I can't imagine me forgiving me.

She had the courage to tell me she loves me, and I hid behind the job, my own special kind of cowardice, and rejected her, told her I was just passing through.

This drive makes a mockery of that statement because I didn't know it then—but I know it now—that when I came to Wildflower Canyon, I came home.

The mountains, the valleys, the people—and Taya.

Her most of all.

The ache in my chest grows—the part of me that doesn't do this kind of flutter, because men like me aren't supposed to feel *things*—and the pain I caused her settles into me more deeply than it ever did in New York.

My hands shake a little as I drive through Main Street, past her law practice, past Joy's boutique, past the Sheriff's office, past the diner, and by the time I reach the Ridgeline Inn, I know that I won't be leaving again—not in the way that's more than temporary.

This means that, plan or no plan, I have to fix what I broke—mend her heart and make her believe that I am the man who loves her more than anyone else ever has or ever will.

I'm flawed, yes, and she can probably—no, definitely—do better, but I won't be giving her that chance. Whatever it takes, I *will* fix this.

Even I have trouble believing myself—but that's all I've got.

Bravado.

False or not, it's my lifeline.

The hope I carry.

Because without Taya, I don't know how to live my life now. A few short weeks with her, and the entire DNA of my life has been rearranged.

It's exhilarating and terrifying in equal measure.

Gary at the front desk looks at me expressionlessly.

This is Wildflower Canyon, and taciturn he may be, but he knows what's going on in his town just like everyone else does. By sunup, everyone will know Mason Brooks crawled right back.

"Same room?" he grunts.

"Please."

"You're lucky it's still available," he says, the subtext clear: you're lucky it's still available *to you*.

I carry my bag upstairs.

It's the same room. No change. Clean like always.

The colorful quilt.

The infernally ticking radiator.

The window that faces the mountains goes from blue to rose to purple in stages, holding the light in the canyon for so long that you think it's a static painting.

I unpack.

As a man who travels a lot, it's the first thing I do.

I hang the shirts. I slide the underwear, T-shirts, and jeans into the drawers. I put the toiletries on the sink in the bathroom.

As a man who travels a lot, I travel light. In any case, Wildflower Canyon is not a place where you bring your Brunello Cucinelli or Loro Piana clothes. No matter how much Pretty Boy Kaz, who wears that shit, thinks.

After, I sit on the edge of the bed.

I run through my plans and the decisions I made during the drive.

First things first, I need to hand over Jessup—or my part of it—to Kaz. The operational part of me that has been doing this for eleven years and is, whatever else has happened, still functional—knows the sequence.

But the other part is sitting on the edge of a bed in the Ridgeline Inn, looking at the mountains and thinking about a four-year-old in a yard who walked past a man like Trafton because I wasn't honest enough and left a job half-done and called it protecting her.

I look at my watch. Six in the evening. I have dinner with the Sheriff at eight. Kaz set it up.

“Do we have to meet in public?” I mused on the phone when I got off the plane and returned his call, which had gone to voicemail while I was in the air.

“It’s Hugh’s call.”

“Right.”

“He likes his entertainment, and you’re gonna get slaughtered out there. They like Taya. They don’t like you.”

“Right.”

“He promised he won’t let anyone break any bones. The rest...well, you gotta roll with the punches.”

I’m starting to get to know Kaz, and I’m not sure I really like the man. I appreciate his candor, though.



“You’ve got some balls on you.” That’s how Mac greets me when he sees me come up to his porch, where he’s sitting, reading something on his iPad. His tone and expression are neither warm nor hostile. It’s almost like he’s been expecting me.

He doesn't look as bad as he did when I last saw him at the hospital. He has good coloring. He's reading a screen, so he's not still concussed—or maybe he's just ignoring medical advice, either way, the man looks well.

"That's what I've been told."

He shrugs.

"Hey, Mac, do you—" Mav steps out onto the porch and clocks me. His jaw clenches, and his eyes harden.

He crosses the porch and punches me in the jaw.

It's a clean shot. Controlled. He pulls it—not much, but enough to make the point without putting me on the floor. I've been hit harder, but not often, and not by someone who meant it the way Mav means it.

I straighten. I work my jaw.

I guess this is what Kaz meant about rolling with the punches—and he didn't mean it euphemistically.

"If you do it again, I may have to retaliate," I warn him.

Mav holds my gaze steadily. "You can try."

"Oh, stop being teenagers," Mac grumbles. "Sit your asses down."

We do as he asks. I take the armchair across from Mac and Mav, a wicker table between us.

Mav shoots me a look that's dripping with disdain. "You want to tell me why I shouldn't finish the job, Brooks?"

Mac sets his iPad on the wicker table. "Yeah, what he said."

A dry, cutting chuckle slips past my lips. "Because it won't fix anything. *And* because you'd rather see what I do next."

Mav's the kind of man who takes other men's measure accurately and quickly and doesn't often revise his assessment. I can feel him revising.

"You're right on both counts." He leans back in the chair, his demeanor king to peasant. "I'm reserving the right. You make this right—with Taya, with Clara, with this community—and I'll stand down. You don't, and we'll revisit." He studies me with the flatness of a man who means every word of what he's *about* to say. "And I want you to understand that when I say *this* community, I mean the whole of it. Everyone who trusted you. Everyone who thought you were just a surveyor doing a job. Everyone in this valley who has been in a fight against people like High Mesa and their ilk for years and had someone like you sitting in the middle of it gathering intelligence."

I hold his gaze. "I understand."

He nods once. Stands. Claps Mac on the shoulder. "Aria made lasagna. You want me to send some over?"

He shakes his head. "She makes it with zucchini and shit. It's too Californian for me."

"It's healthy," Mav remarks.

Mac waves a dismissive hand. "Have Eunice send me some meatloaf."

"That's *not* healthy."

Mac grins. "Are you tellin' me that lard isn't good for my arteries, son?"

Mav sighs, shaking his head.

"Tell her not to put the sauce on yet; I'll put it on myself."

"She's never going to agree to that."

"She never does. Ask anyway."

Mav shoots me a warning look that says he wants to bust my balls just on principle but is making a sacrifice and showing considerable restraint by not doing it.

Hell, he's lucky I let him punch me because, unlike Mav, I've been trained in unarmed combat. I would clean his clock.

Well, that's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

Mac leans back, his chin jerking in inquiry. "Your jaw all right?"

"Fine."

"Mav holds back more than people think." He taps his fingers on the arm of the chair. "If he'd meant to put you down, you'd be down."

"He'd try—doesn't mean he'd succeed."

Mac lets out a harsh laugh. "You know—I liked you for her. I thought you were good for her and then...why the fuck would you do a fool thing like that to the woman you're in love with?"

"How do you know I'm in love with her?"

"Son, I just needed to take one look at you when you were watching her. Everyone knew. Written plain on your face and hers."

So much for being the best poker face in the business.

"I'm in love with her." Every time I say it aloud, that tear in my heart cuts deeper because I single-handedly destroyed the woman I love—hurt her.

How does one get back from that?

"Tell me something I don't know." Mac leans forward, his eyes hold mine. "*Tell me something I don't know, Brooks,*" he repeats, his meaning unmistakable.

So I do.

When I'm done, he glances at his watch. "You meeting Hugh at eight?"

"Yeah."

"You know what that's about?"

I shake my head.

He lets out a bark of laughter. "Kaz is one cryptic sumbitch."

"He is."

He jerks his head in a decisive nod. Then he picks up his iPad and opens it. "Son, she's going to win this case."

"I hope so."

He looks up from his screen. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't doubt her abilities, Mac. I think she's fabulous. I've read everything she's ever fucking written for a courtroom."

This brings out a loud burst of laughter. "You're a lovesick fool, Brooks."

Tell me about it!

"I think she's remarkable—but the judge is pro development, Aldridge is no spring chicken, *and* I fucked up her case."

He waves a hand at that. "She'll wipe the floor with Aldridge's behind. She's going to out-lawyer your fuck up." He says it with the pride of a mentor who has watched someone exceed every expectation. "Just so you know."

I stand on Mac's front step.

The canyon is getting darker now—I can still see the mountains in the light of the setting sun.

A truck barrels down his driveway—and even though it's not a Wrangler, my heartbeats surge.

Could it be her?

It's not. It's Dilbert. Eunice's nephew. He parks and comes up to the porch with a paper bag.

"I tried, Mac, but she drowned it in sauce."

"Heartless bitch." Mac takes the bag.

He tips his hat at me. "Eunice wants you to know that you're a dirtbag."

I narrow my eyes. How the fuck does she know I'm here? Mav. Or just the air around here whispers gossip.

He waves both hands, palms out. "I didn't say it. She did. She told me I had to say it to you if I saw you."

I let out a long, elaborate sigh. "It's alright, Dilbert. You also think I'm a dirtbag."

"Yes, sir, I do," he tells me politely.

Mac studies me as if he's waiting for something.

"What?"

"You gonna pay him or what?"

Right. I gotta pay him. I pull out a twenty and hand it to Dilbert. He turns to me and then to Mac.

"Kaz says you got money." Mac glowers at me. "Give the boy a tip, Brooks. Don't be a stingy asshole."

"Eunice's meatloaf is ten bucks. I'm giving him a 100% tip." I pull out another twenty. Dilbert takes it and winks at me.

"It's fucking highway robbery," I mutter.

As he drives off, Mac goes to his front door with his iPad and dinner. "Brooks, you messed with Taya, and Wildflower Canyon ain't happy about that. So...you know, be prepared to get your ass handed to you until she forgives you."

"Will she?"

Mac opens his door, his back to me.

"Mac? Will she forgive me?" I ask again.

Another bark of laughter comes from him. "Lovesick sumbitch," he remarks and then goes inside without giving me an answer.

CHAPTER 36

mason



Eunice Knowles is behind the counter at the Horseshoe.

She sees me come in and watches as I take a seat at the counter. Then, she picks up a glass of water from the tray beside her, walks to me, and pours it directly on my head.

It's a full glass.

Cold.

The ice lands on my shoulder.

I sit and let it drip.

"Welcome back, dirtbag." She puts the empty glass down.

"Thank you, Eunice."

"I should pour the next one hot."

"That seems like a liability issue."

"I own the place." She doesn't give two shits about liability. She's been managing other people's behavior since before I was born and is fully prepared to continue. "You want something, or are you here to sit in your own mess?"

"A beer would be nice."

"*A beer would be nice,*" she parrots.

She places a cold one in front of me, and I'm relieved she didn't pour it on me. She puts a menu down without making eye contact.

Joy Kincaid materialized from a booth I didn't clock, because I was distracted by the water. She stands in front of me with her arms folded and her chin up. She looks like she's been waiting to have this encounter.

"Joy," I greet.

“I’m not talking to you,” she snaps.

“Okay.”

“I’m just standing here looking at you so you understand the full weight of my disappointment.”

“I understand it.”

“Good.” She unfolds her arms, refolds them, and stands there.

From across the diner, at a table by the window, Hugh Dillon watches all of this with the contained amusement of a man who came here for dinner and is getting considerably more than that.

He raises his beer to me.

I nod back.

Joy eventually returns to her booth.

“I’m with Hugh,” I tell her.

She glances at the Sheriff. “He with you?”

He shakes his head. “Don’t know him.”

Everybody is a fucking comedian.

I slide into Hugh’s booth across from him.

“You’re paying,” he tells me.

“I figured. Dilbert managed to get forty out of me for Mac’s dinner.”

“Yeah, you gonna leave Eunice a nice tip.”

I pick up a napkin and wipe the water off my face. “For dousing me with cold water?”

“For not dousing you with hot coffee.”

“Noted.”

“Two meatloaves, Eunice,” Hugh calls out. No one cares whether I want the lard-soaked—and granted—best thing on the menu.

“I was thinking about the house salad.”

“You keep on thinkin’ about it.”

Eunice brings two plates and places them in front of us without banging anything. It’s its own complicated form of grace.

We eat silently for a while. When half of our food has been eaten, and half our beers have been drunk, the Sheriff leans back. “You’re here.”

“Yes, I am.”

“You stayin’?”

“Yes.”

“For her?”

“For her.” I drop my fork on the plate. “And myself.”

“Good answer.” He eats some more and then finishes his beer.

I follow suit.

We both decline a second beer and ask for coffee. We’re driving. And I’m not drinking with a sheriff who is angry with me and would find it amusing as fuck to make me spend the night in a cell.

“What do you know?” I ask.

“Everything.”

I roll my eyes.

“It’s my county—and I know everything that goes on in my county.” He pushes his empty plate to the side. “I also know considerably more about the situation than most people have been kind enough to tell me officially.” He gives me a level look. “Kaz has been operating here for fourteen months. I’ve been aware of about eleven of them. We came to an understanding.”

Eunice brings coffee for us and gives me a dirty look. “It’s good coffee, be a waste to pour it on your head.”

“I appreciate you, Eunice.”

She scoffs and walks away.

“What kind of understanding do you have with Kaz?”

“The kind where he tells me what I need to know to keep my county safe, and I don’t file paperwork that would alert Jessup’s people that there’s a federal investigation running.” He picks up his coffee. “A working arrangement.”

I drink some of the coffee.

Eunice is wrong. Her coffee is crap, which is why Wild Coffee does good business. But this time of night, your choices in Wildflower Canyon are limited. This ain’t New York City.

“So, you’re keeping Jessup out of it.”

“Yeah. But we gotta investigate, so we talked to Tannenbaum and Aldridge about Trafton. They did the whole *never heard of him* business.”

“So, legally, you treat this as a guy who just showed up to harass Clara and broke into Taya’s office and hurt Mac?” My voice rises as I go through the list of Trafton’s sins. I should’ve broken the motherfucker’s jaw. His legs, too. Next time, I intend to.

“Yep! And when we find him, we will process him like we would any other person who commits a crime here.”

I set my elbows on the booth counter. “I will be contacting Jessup.”

“Kaz okay with that?”

“Yeah.”

“Good, ’cause Jessup will know you’re back in town. He’s got people.”

I look down at my empty plate of meatloaf. She makes it with lard, and it tastes amazing. Probably clogging up my arteries as I speak—but delicious nevertheless.

“Yeah, Jessup will know and won’t mind. He’s been hounding me. Wants me to *finish* the job.”

The Sheriff raises an eyebrow.

“He’s pissed that Taya didn’t back down—that the judge didn’t side with High Mesa entirely, and right now it looks like they’ll lose the next hearing.”

“Judges don’t like it when witnesses are intimidated. Makes them ornery. I know Judge Colbeck. He probably hit the roof when he read Taya’s brief about Trafton being on Clara’s land and scaring her sixteen-year-old daughter. Colbeck has a daughter. She’s sixteen.”

Before I can answer, someone shouts, “Hey, dirtbag, what you doin’ back here?”

I turn to see Jay Buck.

“Hi, Jay. How’s it hanging?”

Jay snarls at me and then sits at the counter.

“Clara and the kids okay?” I see the little boy with his wooden horse in my mind’s eye, and I’m just about ready to pour something hot over my own head.

“Yeah.”

“Do they need—”

“Wiley is there.”

I look at him in confusion. “Your deputy?”

“Yeah. He’s there. The first night after Trafton was there, he stayed in his truck by their gate. Second night he slept in the guestroom.”

“Am I missing something?”

“You and Clara Whitman both. Wiley’s takin’ care of her and the kids.”

Understanding dawns. “Ah.”

“Ah is right! He’s a good man. I hope she’ll give him a chance.” He shakes his head, humor gone. “It’s been tough, losing Deke. They were... you know the kind of couple you look at and think, yeah, they’ve got it.”

That's what I had with Taya—that rare relationship that glows for all to see. Now, I'm a dirtbag.

"What do you have on Trafton?" I ask the Sheriff.

He drinks some coffee. "He left the Meadowlark Motor Lodge six days ago. No forwarding. Paid cash for everything. His rental car was found at the Grand Junction airport, but he didn't take any flight out that we can trace." He considers me. "He's local. Somewhere in the valley or near it."

I think about this.

"I have an investigator. Former military. He finds people."

"I'd appreciate that. Ask him to do it quietly."

I nod. "That's his default setting."

"How you gonna handle Jessup?"

I straighten. "Gonna pretend that I'm here to *finish* the job."

"Will he believe you?"

I crack out a jagged laugh. "Yeah, he'll believe me. I have a reputation for getting things done. He doesn't like it that I threatened him, but he also thinks I like money more than I like Taya."

"Men like him don't know how men like you function."

I give him a sad smile. "The thing is, Hugh, I was a man like him."

He shakes his head. "Kaz had you looked into, Brooks, and you ain't like Jessup. You never took a job that put national security at risk, and you don't do wet work. You got lines. Man like Jessup, he got no lines. And you're here to take care of your woman. Jessup whores his out."

I wince at that.

Hugh arches an eyebrow.

I wave a hand. "It was a long time ago...I didn't know she was his wife and...it was in D.C. and a weekend."

Fuck, the way your past comes back and bites you in the ass.

"Be fun when Taya finds that out."

I glare at him.

"You should know that by morning, everyone in Wildflower Canyon is going to know you're back. Eunice tells Moxy, Moxy tells The Rusty Spur crowd, Gary tells the breakfast regulars at the inn." He gestures at the diner around us. "It's already in motion. Three people have walked past that window in the last twenty minutes and looked in. And then there's Jay and Joy and...well, you know, this is a small town."

I rub a hand over my face. The time zone change. The early morning. All of it is catching up with me.

“Yeah. I know.”

“Good.” He finishes his coffee. “Then you know you don’t have the option of being quiet about your intentions. People are going to be watching what you do.”

“I know that, too.”

He nods, satisfied, and stands. “I’ll expect a call from your investigator within twenty-four hours.”

“You’ll have it.”

He puts on his hat. “Tip Eunice well.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And, Brooks, for what it’s worth, Kaz may be a pain in my backside, but he’s got integrity. He vouched for you. He doesn’t do that lightly.”

I pay for dinner, leave a hundred percent tip, and don’t even get a smile for my efforts.

I go back to the Ridgeline, and I work.

I open my encrypted laptop and pull up everything I have on Trafton—the Salt Lake City file from two years ago, the background documentation I compiled when he appeared at The Rusty Spur, the financial records I accumulated as a side thread while building the Jessup package. I pull it all into a clean file. Then, I call my investigator in Denver.

He answers on the second ring.

“I need someone found.”

“Tell me.”

I tell him everything I have. Trafton’s real name, his operational history, his known vehicles, his tendencies, and the geographical parameters. The Grand Junction airport lead. The cash pattern means he’s not using cards but is buying supplies somewhere.

“I need this in twenty-four hours.”

“Sixty,” he counters.

“Twenty-four. The local sheriff is expecting a call from you.”

“Mason, I got other clients.”

“He threatened a four-year old kid and a sixteen-year-old girl.”

A pause. “Fine. Twenty-four hours.”

I hang up and open a second window on my laptop.

The Jessup documentation package is in two encrypted folders—the financial records in one, the communications in the other. I’ve been building this without knowing what I was building it for—the operational habit of a man who keeps everything because you never know when something becomes useful.

I work through the night organizing it.

The structural framework. The financial transfers mapped against the resort acquisition timeline, the communications indexed by date and sender, the connections between Jessup’s office and High Mesa’s legal team drawn with enough specificity that a federal prosecutor can follow the line without being told where to look.

The connection to Trafton’s operations. The authorization. The language of the instruction to exploit Taya’s case vulnerabilities, which is the piece that makes this not just financial fraud but a coordinated obstruction of legal proceedings.

At two in the morning, I open a bottle of water that Gary keeps in the noisy fridge in the rooms, “*Cause the Ridgeline is a three-star establishment,*” and sit at the window and look at the mountains.

I think about what Dillon said: *People are going to be watching what you do.*

I’ve spent years being watched in contexts where I was performing.

This is different.

This is a community that knows me and not merely the cover version. They know the man who danced with a woman at a barbecue and played with a four-year-old who recently lost his father—and they’re going to watch what Mason Brooks does, now that he doesn’t have the job as cover.

CHAPTER 37

taya



I hear it all at Wild Coffee in the morning, where gossip is classified and managed.

Mason Brooks is back at Wildflower Canyon—after everyone knows he screwed over Clara and me and then got the hell out of Dodge—and that’s better tea than Noelle Dunn marrying a man twice her age.

“Gary says he checked in and is in the same room.”

“Eunice poured water on him.”

“Did you see Joy? If looks could kill, the man would be six feet under.”

“Jay Buck called him a dirtbag—*while* he was having dinner with the Sheriff.”

“Dilbert says he gave him forty dollars for delivering meatloaf to Mac.”

“Mac said Mav punched him as soon as he saw him.”

“Wonder if his jaw is broken.”

“Saw him at the Horseshoe—the jaw and the man. Both are just fine.”

“Does Taya know?”

I look around at the line behind me waiting for coffee like buzzards feeding on the carcass of my ex’s not-so-broken jaw and wave. “Taya knows.” *Now.*

I keep my cool. I have to. Everyone is watching to see how I react. That’s the thing with small towns—sure, they’ll show up to help you rain or shine, but they’ll also poke their noses in your business.

I don’t start to hyperventilate until after I get back to my office, lock the door behind me, and sit with my face in my hands.

He’s here.

He's back.

Oh my God.

What does it mean?

Nothing, Taya. It means nothing.

My email notification goes off. I don't check my inbox. I can't. I'm frozen. Part of me desperately wants to see him—to ask him why. Why me, why us, why any of it? Another part hopes I can keep my head high and tell him to go to hell.

And all of me aches for him.

My man. My love. Back in town after breaking my heart and my trust in the worst way possible.

My email beeps four more times.

I open my laptop.

Aldridge's firm has filed six motions overnight.

Discovery demands, expert qualification challenges, a request for additional briefing on the historical use records, a motion to compel production of all communications between defendant's counsel and any tribal water authority dating back five years, and two supplemental objections to exhibits I filed three weeks ago.

I lean back in the chair and look at the ceiling.

I know this play.

I ran this play.

You take a solo practitioner up against a firm with unlimited associates, and you bury them—not in one devastating motion, but in volume. You file constantly. You set deadlines that are technically compliant but practically impossible for someone without a paralegal team. You make them spend every hour responding instead of building. You exhaust them until they miss something, or until their client runs out of money, faith, or both.

Aldridge knows I know this play.

He's running it anyway because he has no choice—Colbeck's interim order scared them, and this is the only lever they have left.

I have one too: the ability to outwork everyone in the room.

I pull up the first motion.

I start reading.

As irritating as Aldridge can be, this barrage of filings is almost a blessing. It keeps my mind off a certain man who is checked into the Ridgeline Inn.

By noon, I have response frameworks drafted for four of the six.

I drink coffee and skip lunch.

I am completely in my element.

There's a knock at my door at four in the afternoon. My bones all but creak from lack of movement as I walk over and open it.

"Afternoon."

I wave Kaz in.

"You want coffee?"

"Need it."

He settles into a client chair, and I make coffee. I set a cup in front of him and drink mine like it's an elixir.

"He's back," he says after a long sip.

"I heard—because everyone won't shut up about it."

"I just wanted to remind you that I told you so."

"Go to hell."

He lets out a short bark of laughter. "You hear from Griffin yet?"

"No."

He nods thoughtfully. "You will. His wife's mother passed away, so he's been out of town."

I raise my eyebrows. "TMI, Kaz."

"Just sayin'."

"Is that why you came here? To ask me about Griffin? You could've texted."

He grins. "Ah, but I wanted to see your beautiful face."

"This beautiful face needs to get back to work. Aldridge is filing motions like they're going out of fashion."

"The desperate moves of a well-funded law firm." He drains his cup. "How did Colbeck respond to your complaint about the intimidation of Clara Whitman?"

"He's hopping mad. But he accepted the rogue actor assessment—partly because he saw Sheriff Dillon's report alongside mine."

"We're keeping Jessup out of it." Kaz runs a hand through his hair. "I haven't told Mason about the Griffin angle."

I cock an eyebrow. "None of his business anyway."

"Taya, men have a way of deciding what's their business when it comes to their women."

I let out a brittle laugh. "*His woman?* What are you smoking?"

“Whatever it is, it’s not nearly enough. I’m too sober for this conversation.”

And tired.

He looks exhausted. He’s winding down a career at the Bureau with only a few weeks left to close the Jessup operation.

He rises. “You hear from Griffin—you reach out to me. Immediately.”

“Aye, aye,” I mock.

I walk him out, wallet in hand, intending to find food, when we see Bree marching down Main Street.

Her pace suggests she has been waiting for this moment, has had the address and approximate arrival time for some time, and has been building toward it with the focused energy of a woman ready to kick some ass and take some names.

Joy is beside her, slightly behind, wearing the expression of a friend who agreed to be present for moral support and is now privately reconsidering whether she should have brought bail money.

“Uh-oh,” I say, almost gleefully.

“Hell.” Kaz looks simultaneously like he’s dreading what’s coming and relieved it’s finally here.

He walks toward her. Joy sidesteps them both and comes to stand with me.

“Would it be an invasion of privacy if I recorded this?” she muses.

“We can’t do that to Bree,” I say, with genuine regret, because this would be a video for the ages.

We’re not the only ones watching.

Main Street was going about its business, but within approximately ninety seconds, seven people had found reasons to be near the general vicinity of Kaz Chase and Bree Keaton, having a conversation at volume on the sidewalk outside my office.

“She could’ve done this discreetly,” I murmur.

“But that isn’t who Bree is,” Joy protests. “And this way we get something fun to watch.”

We can’t hear what Kaz says to Bree, but we see him put his hands on her shoulders, which she shoves off.

“You lied to me,” she yells.

His shoulders slump as he steps back. “Yes.”

“For how long?”

“Since the beginning.”

She takes a breath. I can feel her horror at realizing she doesn’t fully know the man she’s been in love with for years. But it’s also clear now why Kaz has been keeping her at arm’s length. How do you be with someone when you can’t tell them the truth about yourself?

“How could you, Kaz?”

“It was my job, Honey Bee.”

Joy and I look at each other and silently mouth: *Honey Bee?*

“What else did you lie about?” Bree demands, her voice rising.

“About why I was here,” Kaz says calmly. “About some of what I do. About who I work for.”

“You’ve always—since the beginning?”

“Since you and I met after Frank died. Yes.”

“And the whole software thing?” Bree demands.

“That was my company. After I sold it, I joined the...,” he trails off.

She waits and when he doesn’t say anything, she demands, “Joined the what?”

Kaz glances at the gathering audience. “Bree—”

“Don’t you *Bree* me. Who do you work for?”

“The FBI.” He lets out a long sigh. “For another few weeks. I have officially resigned.”

The small crowd processes this.

“I knew it,” exclaims Pete Rikowski, who was shopping at the feed store and still has a bag of feed in his hand.

“I thought movie actor,” says Birdie Lorraine, who runs the Wildflower Canyon Book Club at the library.

“I had CIA spy in the pool,” Janine from the Horseshoe mutters in disappointment.

“There’s a pool?” Joy wants to know.

“There’s always a pool,” Birdie Lorraine says, mildly offended by the question.

We keep watching.

“The pump,” Bree says, quieter now. “You actually fixed my pump.”

“Yes.”

“That wasn’t an operation.”

“No.”

“You just fixed my pump.”

“Yes.”

“At eleven o’clock at night?” She’s crying now, sniffing between words.

“The pump needed fixing. You needed someone to fix it. That had nothing to do with the job.”

Her eyes lock on mine.

“Is this—is this why you wouldn’t—”

“Yes.”

She shakes her head and wipes her tears.

Kaz says something we can’t hear.

“I’ll cry if I want to,” Bree shouts this. “I’m so angry at you, Kaz.”

“I know.”

“You should leave me alone for a while.”

“Okay.”

“A significant while.”

“I understand.”

She walks away from him and toward us. When she’s close, she turns back. Kaz is still there, watching her.

“You hurt me.”

“Yes.”

“You’re an asshole, Kazimir Chase.”

“Yes, Honey Bee.”

“I need a cry and then a drink.”

We pull her into a group hug, and Bree starts to sob.

Kaz stands on the sidewalk, his shoulders hunched, looking defeated. Then he walks away.

The small crowd disperses with the mild disappointment of people who expected a more definitive resolution.

CHAPTER 38

mason



Wiley Buchanan opens Clara's door when I knock.
I chose to go after seven, once the kids were in bed.
I can't face Eli and Dakota. Not when I put them and their home at risk.

For a man who thrived on his moral flexibility, this Taya-driven consciousness of right versus wrong and the cost of wrong is crushing.

"Who is it, Wiley?" I hear Clara's voice from deep in the house.

Wiley crosses his arms and stands, blocking my way. I know I'm at risk of receiving another punch, so I brace myself. He's the law, so I can't even hit back.

"Good evening, Deputy. I wanted to speak with Clara."

He studies me impassively and when Clara appears next to him, he asks, still staring at me, "You want to talk to this dirtbag?"

Christ!

"Mason, heard you were back in town." Clara puts a hand on Wiley's arm. "It's okay, Wiley. Why don't you go home now and get your stuff?"

Wiley is not eager to do any of that. "And leave you alone with *him*?"

Clara's lips twitch into a smile. "Hear that he's making apology rounds. Went to Mac. Made nice with Eunice. Gave her a massive tip."

Wiley grunts.

"You here to hurt me, Mason?" Clara asks, her eyes clear.

"No, ma'am."

"Let him in, Wiley."

Wiley glares at me. “I’ll let him in, but I ain’t goin’ anywhere until he gets gone.”

His Texan accent comes straight through—which happens to a man when he’s upset. I hate that he thinks he needs to protect Clara from me. But I can’t blame him. If someone did what I did and wanted to talk to Taya—yeah, I’d be where he is, and I wouldn’t pull the punch.

Wiley follows us into the kitchen. When we get there, he stands at the doorway, arms still crossed like he’s on guard.

“Coffee?”

“Yes, thank you.”

She picks up a kitchen towel and then all of a sudden, turns around and throws it at me. I catch it before it can strike me. Instinct.

“That was a shitty thing you did to Taya.”

I set the towel down on the kitchen table. “Yes.”

“Sit,” she mutters.

“You’re lucky it wasn’t something heavier,” Wiley murmurs, expressionless.

I take a seat at the kitchen island and take the risk of having coffee thrown at me—but I see through Clara, she’s not angry with me about what I did to her, but she is about what I did to Taya.

She puts the coffee in front of me. Stands across.

“You played with my son.”

“I did.”

“At Mav’s barbecue. He showed you his wooden horse.”

I nod.

“You went to the Bear Dance with Taya.”

“Yes.”

“And the whole time—”

“The whole time I was lying about why I was here.” I tip my chin in acknowledgment. “Yes.”

“I want to be very angry at you.”

“You should be.”

“I am.” She acknowledges me with a glance. “But I also know that Taya trusted you, and I know what that cost her, and I know you came back, and I know about the federal case.” She’s quiet for a moment. “And I know that you got to Trafton before he could do anything worse than stand in my yard.”

I don't say anything. She's well informed, and my guess is that her new guestroom resident has been revealing official matters to her.

He did it to make her feel safe.

"I'm sorry about Trafton. I thought I'd neutralized him."

She arches an eyebrow.

I wave a hand. "I mean...I neutralized the threat."

She now raises both her eyebrows.

I let out a long breath. "You know what I mean."

"She knows you beat the crap out of him." This is from Wiley.

"I didn't. If I had, he wouldn't have been back here." That still pisses me off, that he was here because of me, to take revenge.

"Dakota was scared when he was here, but she didn't show it. She's her father's daughter."

"Ma'am, I didn't know your husband, but I think Dakota is her mother's daughter. Remarkably brave."

"You tryin' to soften me, Mason Brooks?"

Wiley scoffs.

"Just saying it how it is."

We drink coffee for a moment. I set my cup down.

"I let you down. I let Taya down. I let...everyone down."

I drag a hand through my hair, forcing the words into something steadier. "This is my job—was my job. I'm not like Trafton. I don't do what he does. But in my line of work...things like this happen."

I swallow, the anger sitting hot and useless in my chest.

"It's never kept me up at night before," I admit. "Thinking about Dakota having to face a man like Trafton. Knowing his shadow got anywhere near Eli."

She holds my gaze for a long moment.

"Are you going to make it right?" she says.

"Yes."

"With Taya?"

"With everything I have, everything I am, and everything I can be."

Clara turns to Wiley and jerks her chin. I hear him grunt softly.

"I'm gonna head home for a bit and come right back. You stay here until then," he tells me. "And you make sure Clara and the kids stay safe. Can you do that?"

I turn to look at Wiley. "I'll protect them with my life." I mean it, too.

Wiley believes me because he nods at Clara and leaves.

Clara comes around the counter and sits on the bar stool next to mine.

"I'm working on locating Trafton. He'll never get near you again."

She glances at the doorway where Wiley had just been. "I know."

"I'm sorry, Clara. I really am."

She smiles. "You say it like a man who isn't used to apologizing."

I weigh my words before answering. "I never went back to where I worked—never saw the consequence of what I did."

"But you came back this time," she points out.

"Yes."

Clara regards me steadily. "She's in love with you, you know."

"I know."

"She hasn't said it to me. She doesn't have to." Clara picks up her coffee. "I know what a woman looks like when she's fighting herself about a man."

Eli appears in the kitchen doorway. "Mama, I had a bad dream."

He's in horse pajamas. His hair is sticking up on one side, a small wooden horse held against his chest with both arms, the way small children hold things when something has frightened them.

He doesn't see me at first. He sees his mother, and he goes to her—the direct line of a child who knows where safety is.

Clara opens her arms, and he climbs up onto her lap with the boneless trust of someone who has not yet learned to be guarded.

Then he sees me.

He stares.

I hold very still.

"You're the man from Mav's."

"Yes."

He assesses me for a moment and then purses his lip. "You made Taya sad."

You truly fucked up, Brooks, if even a four-year-old knows about your screw up.

"Yes, I did."

He thinks about this. The horse is pressed against his chest—I look at it more carefully now. It's not Ranger, who he had at the barbecue. It's a different one, smaller, darker, a bay with a weathered paint job that tells me he's been around for a while.

“Are you going to fix it?” he asks.

“I’m trying to.”

He considers whether *trying* is sufficient. His eyes drop to the horse in his hands, then come back up.

“Daddy said when you break something, you have to make it...okay.” He strokes the horse’s head. “Not just say sorry.”

Clara makes a small sound. Her hand moves to Eli’s back, steady.

I smile, touch his hair. “Your father was right.”

He holds the horse up toward me.

“This is Copper,” he explains. “Ranger is with Taya because she has to win in court. When she wins all the way, Ranger comes home.” He says it with the flat logic of a child. It’s endearing, and my heart does that thing it’s been doing since I met Taya—feeling like shit. “Copper is staying here until then.”

I look at Copper. “That’s a good system.”

Eli nods. Pulls the horse back against his chest. He glances at me one more time—the final accounting of a four-year-old who has said what he came to say. “If you make it okay, then Taya will be happy again. She’s sad. You can see it. Right, Mama?”

“Yeah, baby.” His mother kisses his hair.

“I’m working on making it okay. I promise.”

He seems to accept this, and then he cuddles into Clara. “Mama, I had a bad dream about a dragon.”

“I know, baby.” Clara stands with him in her arms. “Let’s go back to bed.”

She gives me a smile over his shoulder.

It’s not forgiveness, not yet, but the acknowledgment of two people who understand each other’s accounting.

“I’m going to put him to bed.”

“I’ll wait for Wiley.”

“Say good night to Mason, Eli.”

“Goodnight, Mason,” Eli mumbles, his little head resting against his mother’s shoulder.

She carries him down the hallway. I hear his voice going quiet, telling her about the dragon with green eyes that was mean to the horses.

I sit at Clara Whitman’s kitchen island, finish my coffee, and listen to the house settle around me.

Wiley's truck turns up the drive ten minutes later. He comes through the door. "She good?"

"Yeah." I rise. "Eli had a bad dream. She's with him."

He nods. "You can go."

I set my cup in the sink and walk to the doorway. "Thanks for letting me talk to her."

"She wanted to."

"And thanks for not throwing a punch."

A reluctant smile pulls at his mouth. "She wouldn't have wanted me to."

I mean to go back to the inn, but I end up driving to Taya's place. I have now talked to everyone I need to before I can face her.

I park in the gravel drive.

Her Wrangler is there. The lights are on inside. It's eight in the evening, which means she's probably working.

My nerves scramble as I walk up to the porch steps. I knock.

Nothing.

I knock again and, this time, call out her name.

Still nothing.

"Taya, open up. I know you're in there."

"I know you know. Go away."

Stubborn fucking woman!

"I'm not going away."

A long pause and then the door opens.

She's in jeans and a sweater. She has a legal pad in her hand. Her expression holds nothing—but it's too full to be nothing—but whatever it is, it isn't welcome.

She looks absolutely beautiful, and my gaze moves over her face. I've been starved for her—my body remembers, and something deeper answers.

"Clara texted. Said you went to see her."

"Yes."

"Stay away from my client."

"I owed her an apology. I gave it. I won't go back without your permission."

"What do you want?"

"Can we talk?"

She hugs her legal pad close to her and looks me up and down. "Fine, talk."

“Can we go inside, Taya?”

“You can stand on the porch.” She leans against the frame with her arms folded, her legal pad against her chest, and her chin up. “You’re not a guest.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry about?”

“About not telling you who I was. For...tanking your preliminary hearing.”

“Did you come to Wildflower Canyon for me?”

“Yes.” I look into her big, dark eyes. “I came to find out what your case strategy was.”

“And I made it oh so easy for you, didn’t I?” she sneers.

I shake my head. “No, Taya, you made it all very hard. Before you, I did the job and got out. I didn’t care what happened when I left. But I couldn’t do that this time. So, no, it wasn’t easy.”

“You photographed my files.”

“Yes.”

“And gave them to Aldridge.”

“Yes.”

“Why?” There’s such a rush of agony in her voice and demeanor that it almost fells me.

“Because that’s who I was. That’s...how I used to be. I did the job, and then it was done. But you haven’t been a job ever since I laid my eyes on you at The Rusty Spur.”

Her gaze sears into me, filled with pain. “I took you to my home. To my people. I told you I loved you and....”

My chest locks up like I’ve been branded hot.

“Taya, I fucked up. No two ways about that. But I’m here because I’m in love with you.”

A shadow passes over her face, and she takes a step toward me. What’s between us simmers.

It’s loud.

I can’t stop myself.

I have missed her like I lost a limb.

I put a hand on her cheek, touch her lips with my thumb. I want to kiss her, but I don’t have that right yet.

“Sweetheart, I am so in love with you. So fucking in love that—”

She kneels me so squarely and with such complete intention that I go down on one knee on the porch boards and have to put a hand on the railing to stay upright.

I deserve it. I don't say this because I'm busy holding my nuts.

She steps back inside the doorway.

"Feel better?" I manage.

"Marginally," she says smugly. "Don't touch me again without my permission."

"Understood."

"*Ever.*"

"Understood."

"And you don't get to say you love me—not when you ran away after stealing from me."

I let out a long breath—you gotta when your balls are in your throat. "Doesn't change how I feel. And, Taya, it doesn't change how you feel. You're angry. Fuck, yeah, you should be. But you still love me."

"Don't tell me how I feel," she snarls.

"Doesn't change how you feel," I repeat. "If you didn't, it wouldn't hurt like this."

She's all but ready to crumble at those words. I can feel her ache. I can feel her grief. I hate that I'm the cause of it. I have never loved a woman in my life—but I love her, and I hurt her. The weight of my crimes is devastating me.

She opens her door and steps into her home, then she turns to glance over her shoulder at me—still holding the legal pad, still in her reading glasses, utterly and completely herself, which is somehow the most devastating thing about this entire situation.

"I loved Griffin, too."

She says that to wound me. She succeeds. "Don't compare me to that asshole."

She rolls her eyes. "You're the bigger asshole, Mason."

"No. I'm not. I'm the man who's here. I'm the man who's showing up. And I'm going to keep showing up for the rest of your life." I suck in a breath and let it out in frustration. "Taya, let me make this right."

"I don't need you to make anything right. I don't need you, period."

Like hell she doesn't need me. But I keep that to myself. My balls are still bruised, and I don't want to poke the bear, as the saying goes.

“Let’s talk about what actually matters to me.” She arches an eyebrow. “This case of yours with Kaz—does it hold? And if it does...and if Jessup falls—how is my case impacted?”

Fuck, but she’s not going to make this easy.

You don’t deserve easy, Brooks.

“Yes, it’ll hold. Kaz has been building it for fourteen months, and I have documentation from inside the operation.” The pain between my legs is receding, and I can now speak in full sentences without wincing. “And, yes, when Jessup falls, I make sure High Mesa knows they’re next. When politicians get canceled, their friends become scarce real fast.”

She nods, studies me with something that is less than disgust. I decide it’s progress.

“And Trafton.”

“Being located. My investigator has a twenty-four-hour window. When he surfaces, Hugh will know.”

“Anything else you’ve been hiding?”

I shake my head.

“Okay then, you can go now. And stay away from Clara.”

“Okay.”

“I mean it, Mason.”

“I know you do.”

She assesses me for one more moment. “Can you stand up?”

“Give me a minute.”

She shrugs and goes inside.

The door closes.

I stay on one knee, my hand on the railing, the creek running behind the house, the mountains going dark in the west.

I know this isn’t the end of the conversation. It’s not even the beginning.

But it’s the first honest thing that’s happened between us since the night she said I love you in her grandmother’s kitchen—and I said it was a bad idea, meaning the exact opposite.

I’m a fucking idiot.

I had her, and I let her go, and now...I have no idea if I can find my way back to her; I don’t know if she’ll let me.

But then again, I’ve always been a fixer, and if I can’t fix this, I’m not worthy of that dubious title.

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CHAPTER 39

taya



Since Bree wants to get drunk and not in public, Joy offers up her place and comes to town to pick up wine, Bree, and me, and in that order.

Kincaid Farms in the evening is gorgeous—the big house is lit from the inside, the greenhouse is gleaming, there is the sound of horses, the smell of cottonwood and hay, and the delicious scent of a Colorado summer.

Mav is on the porch when we pull in.

He watches the three of us getting out of Joy's Jeep, at the case of wine, at our expressions.

"I'll go into town," he says.

"You're very smart," Joy tells him.

He gives Bree and me a quick hug. Kisses his wife on the cheek, gets into his truck, and goes without being asked twice, which is one of the many reasons Aria Kincaid gazes at her husband the way she does.

"We didn't let Aria cook," Joy puts the red wine, white wine, and champagne in their appropriate wine fridges.

Aria is a wine connoisseur—she used to manage a vineyard in California, so their home always has some of the best wine in the valley.

"I am a really good cook," Aria protests as she looks through the wine Joy bought in the fridge with a critical eye.

"She cooks like a granola head," Joy counters. "We are getting food from Blackwood Prime."

Bree pushes her blonde hair off her face. "I need grease with my alcohol."

Joy nods appreciatively. “Truffle fries are greasy.”

I miss Sienna in the moment. I wish she were here—she’d have a blast with these women.

I called her after the debacle with Mason, and she was gleefully delighted that I kneed him. I still can’t believe I did that. I feel awful about it—*mostly*. But a small part of me is a little pleased by his discomfort.

What lingers most, though, is relief—that he isn’t just the man who stole from me, but also the man who came back, apologized to Mac and Clara, and is trying to make it right.

I know what it is to look back at a life you lived and find that some of your choices haven’t aged well.

When I was at the firm in Aspen, it felt right—felt earned. And that doesn’t change, because I have a new calling. I’ve just evolved inside it. Nobody pointed a finger at me. Nobody called me a hypocrite. I arrived at the reckoning on my own terms, and I did something about it.

Mason may be on that same road.

And if I’m being honest, I never went back to look at the cases I worked on in Aspen. Never traced what my filings did to the families on the other side of them. Never looked for a Clara Whitman in my own history. It takes—real courage, or at least real honesty—to look at what you did when you believed you were doing it right, to see the fallout clearly, and to decide that better is still possible.

All of that is true.

It doesn’t unbreak my heart.

That’s the part I don’t know what to do with. The part that sits in my chest at three in the morning, regardless of what my mind has worked out. I can hold two things simultaneously—I can believe in his evolution and still be broken by what he did. I can understand the journey and still be the damage left behind.

Understanding a man doesn’t mean you’re healed from him.

Bree pours champagne into glasses. The liquid fizzes softly, catching the light as it tips. According to Aria, every evening must start with champagne, and then we can move on to other wines.

Joy is halfway into the bags from Blackwood Prime, the smell wafting through the air before anything even comes out—burgers wrapped in paper, fries dusted with salt and doused in truffle butter, fried chicken still holding onto heat, buffalo wings sharp with vinegar and spice.

She lays everything out without ceremony, one container after another, turning the dining table in the kitchen from polished to lived-in in under a minute.

“We ordered like we have six more people coming.” She does not remotely sound apologetic.

Last comes the cake—boxed carefully, handled with care.

When she opens it, the scent shifts again, darker now—rich chocolate, something dense and expensive, the kind of dessert that doesn’t pretend to be anything but indulgent.

“This”—Joy lifts the lid fully—“was non-negotiable.”

Dr. Sarah Kirk comes in looking like she’s lived through a war, which, judging by the blood on her sleeve and the way she drops into the nearest chair, she probably has.

“It’s fucking crazy,” she explains. “Had to reposition a calf that came in sideways, and the mama cow tried to kill me for it. Then a colt got into a fence and opened himself up like a zipper.”

She’s been part of this circle since she and Cade sorted themselves out and shows up to these evenings with the slightly dazed warmth of a woman who still can’t quite believe she lives somewhere that does this.

“Wine. And lots of it.” Sarah doesn’t drink in public, which I have learned is because she was assaulted by Cade’s brother when she was a teenager.

Yeah, sometimes Wildflower Canyon feels like a telenovela.

Bree hands her a glass of champagne.

Elena arrives twenty minutes later, which is late for Elena, who is punctual the way horse people are punctual—which is to say *obsessively*. She’s looking flustered, which is also not on brand for her.

“Well?” Aria looks pointedly at Elena.

She waves a hand. “I need to process.”

“Elena Rivera Wilder! Process what?” Joy demands. “Spill.”

Elena takes a deep breath and puts her hands on her stomach.

We all squeal, and then there is a whole lot of hugging.

“How far along?” Sarah asks, already in doctor mode.

“I don’t know...I just took the test this morning. But I have an appointment with Doc Ellsworth tomorrow.”

We carry the food, wine, glasses, silverware...everything outside the kitchen and onto the patio. Here, the view opens wide to the west—the

Rockies stretched like the spine of the earth, purple-shadowed and immense. It's quiet except for the soft rustle of the citrus trees near the porch and the low hum of wind rolling down the mountain slopes.

There's an outdoor fireplace, though we don't need it today. The sun is doing its job.

The table is solid wood—blonde, worn, the edges smoothed by time—surrounded by sculpted white chairs Joy insisted on because they look like branches. They do, in a way. Delicate until you realize they're not.

Aria, Mav, and Joy live here together. I know Joy had planned to move out when her brother got married, to give them space, but they wouldn't hear of it.

They're not just sharing a house—they're a unit.

We settle quickly, eating, drinking, sharing.

This is the thing about women who trust each other—the settling takes approximately four minutes, and then everyone is somewhere comfortable, and the conversation finds its own level the way water does.

Joy hands out plates as we pile them up with the greasy food. Aria puts music on—something low and warm, the kind that doesn't demand anything.

"Okay," Joy asks, once everyone has food and drink and a place to be. "Who's most miserable?"

"Me," Bree and I say simultaneously.

We look at each other.

"You should go first," I urge. "Your situation is, at least structurally, more recently detonated."

Bree shakes her head. "I don't want to talk about it." She drinks some wine. "You know what pisses me off the most?"

Everyone waits.

"That he's been pushing me away...like pushing me away...like pushing me away when I've been half naked, and he's all but inside me saying it's not the right thing."

Joy raises a hand. "You told me you haven't had sex yet."

"We haven't," Bree laments, "Because he won't let us." She drinks some more. "He shows up, fixes the pump. When I tell him I'm thinking of dating, he loses his shit and then goes all cold and says that I should tell him who, so he can...you know, make sure the guy is safe."

Sarah picks up a fry. "He's been gaslighting you."

Bree points a finger at Sarah and shakes it vigorously. “*Exactly!* He didn’t want us to date because of this stupid secret job, and instead of just saying that, he’s been making me feel like I’m some crazy lunatic chasing my uncle’s friend—like we’re in an age-gap forbidden romance, and he’s playing the noble martyr.”

“And now?” Aria prompts.

“Now?” Bree waves a dismissive hand. “He can take his dick and fuck himself.”

Elena screws up her nose. “Not sure how he’d do that...physically, I mean.” She puts a hand on Bree’s cheek. “Hon, the man fixed your pump in the middle of the night ’cause it needed fixin’, and someone had to do it. A man like that is not runnin’ an operation.”

“I know,” Bree admits miserably. “That’s the problem. If it were simple, I could just be angry and be done with him.”

“You can love him and still be angry.” Aria waves a chicken wing. “Both things can be true at the same time.”

“I am angry,” Bree mutters. “I’m *furious*. I’m also—” she stops. Makes a sound. “He called me Honey Bee in front of half of Main Street.”

“He did,” Joy confirms. “I was there.”

“In front of Pete Rikowski.”

“And Birdie Lorraine.”

“*God.*” Bree puts her face in her hands. “I’m so angry at him.”

“You kinda decided to poke the bear on Main Street so....” Sarah trails off.

“And Honey Bee is kinda cute,” I point out.

Bree makes a sound, which is not quite a laugh and not quite a sob.

Joy turns to Elena. “Hey, how did Duke take the pregnancy news?”

Elena blinks. “I have to tell him?”

We all give her a sideways look.

Elena puts her hand flat on her stomach, almost unconsciously, the way I’ve seen women do when they’re still getting used to the fact that there’s life inside of them.

“I told him this morning after I took the test, he looked like he couldn’t believe it.” She smiles softly. “All day he’s been expecting me to say it’s not true, and he—” She stops. “He put his hand on my stomach right before I left and just stood there for a full minute and told the baby he’s their father, and he already loves them.”

The room holds this.

Bree wipes her face with the back of her hand to wipe tears.

"I'm going to stop being sad about Kaz now," she announces. "For the next five minutes. In honor of the baby."

"That's very generous of you," Elena retorts dryly.

"I know. I'm a giver."

"And how do *you* feel about it?" I ask.

"Like I really need a drink right now, and I'm pregnant, so I can't get a drink, and it's really messin' with my head."

Bree chuckles. "Duke's gonna watch you like a hawk."

Elena groans. "He already does. Last week, he told me I shouldn't be letting a gelding crowd my space—like I haven't been doing this since I was sixteen. Now that I'm pregnant, he's going to go nuts."

"Speaking of nuts." I cut a burger in half. "Mason came by yesterday to talk, and I"—pause dramatically and look around the room—"kneaded him in his nuts."

The women clap appreciatively.

"I wish I'd done that to Duke when he was being a complete dick to me," Elena muses.

"Describe it in great detail, Taya," Joy prompts. "I'm still so pissed with the man."

"He was just—there. On one knee. Holding the railing." I stare at my wine. "He looked—" I stop.

"What?" Joy asks.

"He didn't look like he thought he didn't deserve it." I groan out loud. "He just—took it. And then he asked if I felt better? I said marginally, and then I told him to get out and stay away from Clara, and he said 'okay' and left." I pause. "Once he could stand that is."

"And then what?" Bree wants to know.

"And then nothing. He's at the Ridgeline. He's still here." I down the remaining wine in my glass.

Aria rubs a hand over my arm. "He came back."

"I know."

"And he told you *everything*." This is from Sarah.

"I know."

"And he's still here." Bree thinks about it. "Like Kaz."

I refill my glass with a red—I don't know what it is anymore. After a couple of glasses, you'll drink swill and not know. "I know all of that. I can't do anything with any of it yet."

"You don't have to." Joy winks at me. "That's what tonight is for."

The wine does its work.

By nine o'clock, the food is gone.

Joy cuts the chocolate cake, which we all decided must be eaten in its entirety by us. I help her plate each slice and send it around the table.

We move into the living room at some point.

Aria produces a third bottle of red, and the music gets louder without anyone deciding to make it louder.

Elena is beside me on the couch, her feet tucked under her. She's drinking tea. She doesn't even like tea, but she wants to drink something, and she can't drink alcohol or caffeine. She tastes the tea and whines. "These nine months are gonna be long."

"It's going to go so fast it'll make your head spin, and you know it." I put my hand on hers. "Congratulations...again."

She nods and then gives me a measured look. "You're going to be okay. I'm not trying to comfort you—this is just a fact that I arrived at when Duke and I were a total shitshow."

"How did it become okay?"

"It's organic." She lifts a shoulder and lets it drop. "Like working a horse that doesn't trust you, yet. You don't force it—you show up, you stay consistent, and one day it just...gives a little. Then a little more."

"And just like that, it'll be okay? I don't believe that."

She nods slowly, as if considering her response. "It's hard at first. It's supposed to be."

"Duke and I had...." She sighs. "There was a time when I didn't know if we were going to be *us*. If we were going to survive what we needed to survive." She focuses on her tea. "And then we did. And what was on the other side was better than what was before, because what was before didn't know what we were going to be."

I raise an eyebrow. "Plain English, please."

She laughs. "I'm not telling you what to do. I'm just telling you what the other side looks like."

"What does it look like?"

She puts her hand on her stomach again, that small unconscious gesture. “It looks like this, Taya.” Her eyes shine with happy tears.

Before I can conjure up the dream of being with Mason so completely that we make a family, Joy kicks the music up—the kind you dance to when no one’s watching, and because life is genuinely better when you do.

We start with *Single Ladies* because that’s how you start, whether you’re single or not. And evolve all the way to Paris Paloma’s anthem, *Labor*, which we all sing to in loud and off-key voices.

I am drunk.

Not obliterated—I’m still myself, still Taya, still aware of the hurt I carry. But the edges have softened.

And I am dancing barefoot in Joy and Aria’s home with women I have known for less than a year.

I know my grandmother would look at this room and know exactly what it was.

You’ll always have a home, my girl, if you let people be your home.

I know, Wiitsin. I know.

So we dance—with total commitment, zero self-consciousness, and without a care in the world.

This is the gift of it. The not caring. The room that holds you when you’re too tired to hold yourself.

CHAPTER 40

mason



The Barrel & Bridle is not a bar you choose, at least the first time.

You end up there—following someone who knows someone, or taking a wrong turn off Main Street, or, in my case, getting a text from Kaz: *Poker. B&B. 7 p.m.*

The Barrel & Bridle has been here since before Wildflower Canyon had paved roads and shows no evidence of updating its ambitions.

The floor is wood, so old it's soft underfoot. The bar is long and scarred and the kind of clean that comes from thirty years of wiping the same surface rather than any recent effort.

The smell is beer and fryer oil and the ghost of cigarettes that lives in the walls long after the smoking stops. There's a jukebox in the corner that leans toward Waylon Jennings.

God help us all!

Ranch hands fill most of the seats. Men who have been doing physical work since before daylight and have earned the right to be loud about it. Nobody is using an inside voice. Nobody gives a shit what you think of them.

I feel, unexpectedly, at home.

There are two places you can go to if you want to play poker in Wildflower Canyon, and that's two more such places than I know of in New York.

There's The Blazing Saddles, a titty bar where I haven't been, and the B&B that has its own version of a speakeasy-style gambling den that everyone knows about, but no one does anything about.

The back room has a table, six chairs, and a single overhead light.

It's a little seedy, a little speakeasy—but I've played poker in places where the exits mattered more than the cards, so this feels like a private room at the Bellagio by comparison.

I am the last to arrive.

Kaz has the dealer's chip. He shuffles with the proficiency of someone who learned in circumstances I probably don't want to know about and doesn't look up when I pull out the empty chair.

Mav Kincaid is beside him, filling his chair the way large men do—completely, without apology. He acknowledges my existence with “How you doin’?” I tell him good. Duke Wilder is on his other side, the two of them carrying the particular gravity of men who have been anchoring the same community for long enough that they don't need to announce it.

Cade Mercer sits across from them—lean, dark-haired, dry in the way of a man who has made some significant mistakes and made his peace with them. Self-contained in a different way than the others. Earned rather than natural.

Hunt is slouched at the end of the table. He's the Wilder Ranch foreman, and he's in whatever passes for a relationship with Joy Kincaid, which is interesting given that he is as ranch as it gets and she is as Upper East Side as it gets. I don't know much else about him except that he's not someone you'd want to meet in an alley, dark or otherwise.

I look around the table.

These men have a different level of camaraderie with Kaz than the usual Wildflower Canyon social ease—something older and less performed. Which brings me back to the question I've been sitting with since he texted me the address.

Why the hell am I here?

“Drink?” Duke lifts a bottle of bourbon. It's its own kind of welcome.

“Thanks,” I accept.

He pours without ceremony. I drink without ceremony. The jukebox bleeds through the wall.

“Five-card draw.” Kaz starts dealing. “Fifty-dollar buy-in.”

We play.

The thing about poker with men who know each other is that it takes about three hands before the actual conversation starts. They know each other—but they don't know me, and I don't know them. So, for me, the first

hand is calibration—taking the measure of everyone else's tells, establishing who bluffs and who doesn't, who plays tight and who plays the room.

Cade, I notice immediately, plays very still and wins the first hand on a pair of sevens, which means he either has no tells or he has them completely controlled.

Kaz plays like what he is: someone who has spent years being one thing while being another and has internalized the discipline of it.

Mav plays like a man who can afford to lose and sometimes does on purpose, which is its own kind of tell.

Duke folds the first two hands without expression and drinks his bourbon at a pace that suggests he's here for the company more than the cards.

Hunt plays carefully—very carefully. He doesn't bluff. He plays his hand, and he doesn't care who is bluffing, either. There's a cleanness about him that isn't suited for poker.

On the third hand, Kaz opens the conversation without preamble. "So," he says, discarding two cards. "How many of us have catastrophically failed the woman we're with?"

A pause.

"Raise," Mav says.

"Call," says Duke.

"All of us?" Cade offers.

"All of us," Kaz confirms. "Mason's just the most recent."

I look at my cards. A pair of aces, a king, and two cards I don't need. "I'd argue I've raised the bar considerably on catastrophic failure."

"You photographed her files," Mav nods. "That's—yeah. You raised the bar."

"Thank you."

"Wasn't a compliment."

"I know."

"But"—Duke pins Cade with a look—"he's hard to beat."

Cade grimaces. "No contest." He turns his cards over, pushes them away. "Fold."

Duke picks up his drink. "Elena was my father's mistress's daughter," he says to no one in particular, but mostly to me, because everyone else knows the story. "I didn't know that when I met her. We were kids. When I

found out—” He stops. Works the glass. “I blamed her. Not for what her mother did. For what the knowing did to me.” He exhales. “For a decade, I treated her like she was the source of the damage instead of someone who had been living in the shadow of it her whole life.”

The table is quiet. The jukebox plays something slow.

“How’d she take it?” I ask.

“Like a queen.” Duke smiles as if to himself. “Then she forgave me. The best woman I know.”

“But did you ever say that she was masculine and unattractive?” Mav muses, looking at his cards. “Raise.”

Those who haven’t folded raise, except Hunt, who folds.

I frown. “You called Aria unattractive? Are you blind?”

“You lookin’ at my wife, Brooks?” Mav turns on me.

I raise my hand, the one not holding cards, palm out. “Just saying—calling her unattractive makes you fucking blind.”

“Call.” Mav turns his cards over.

Three kings and a pair of fives.

“Full house,” he adds, like he’s already halfway to the pot.

Duke lets out a long exhale and folds. “Yeah, I’m out.”

Hunt doesn’t hesitate. “Not beating that.” His cards hit the table, face down.

Kaz studies Mav for a second longer, then flicks his hand in to fold. “Fuck!”

It comes to me.

I look at my cards again—two twos in my hand, the other two face down from the draw. Not much to look at unless you know what you’re holding.

I turn them over. “Two pairs.”

They all wait and then see that the two pairs are four twos.

Mav leans back slowly, the corner of his mouth lifting. “Well, that’s unfortunate.”

“Jesus,” Duke mutters.

Cade just laughs. “You drew into that?”

“Something like that.”

I pull the chips in, not rushing it. Mav watches me with narrowed eyes.

“You stayed in on a pair,” he muses.

“Of twos?” Duke shakes his head.

“I’ve stayed in on worse.”

Kaz taps the deck against the table, resetting the hand. “Yeah. I bet you have.”

The cards move again.

The conversation doesn’t stop. It just deepens.

Mav wins the third hand on three jacks and deals the next without looking pleased about it.

The jukebox shifts. Something with a fiddle. Someone at the bar laughs loud enough for it to come through the wall.

I look at my hand. Ace high, nothing underneath. I fold.

Mav does as well.

“Aria’s sister said some stuff about her, and I got the wrong idea.” Mav refills his and my glass of bourbon while the others play. “I treated her like shit for a while.”

“And then?”

“Then I fell in love.”

“She forgave you for the shit?”

He looked at me like I had grown a second head. “Yes, man, but I had to work for it.”

The conversation veers off women and lands on ranching. That seems to be the beat here.

“You still gonna open that security thing?” Duke asks Kaz.

He winks at me. “Yeah.”

They all turn to face me.

“I’m thinking about it,” I tell them.

They all nod and then go back to talking about some steer that Cade bought that’s changing his herd in the best way possible.

“You get the guy who went to Clara’s place?” Mav asks.

Kaz’s jaw tightens. “Almost. Arrested him in Grand Junction, then someone intervened and cut him loose before we could get there. By the time we untangled it, he was gone.”

Apparently, Trafton has more skill than I gave him credit for because he’s in the wind. So much so that even my investigator has come up empty.

Sheriff Dillon was ready to put his fist through a wall when he found out he’d been released.

The thought of him still out there sits badly. But Wiley is with Clara, and I’m with Taya, so the people who need covering are covered—for now.

The next hand goes to me on three sevens, which is not a remarkable hand but is better than anything else at the table on a night when nobody's head is entirely in the cards.

I look at the chips in the middle of the table. I don't pick them up immediately.

"You think I can win her back?" I ask, feeling like a jackass.

This isn't how I usually operate, talking to other men I barely know about matters of the fucking heart. But there's something about this group of men—no posturing, no need to be untouchable—that makes the question pop out of my mouth.

"You fucked up. No doubt about it." Hunt pulls out a cigar and looks around.

Mav nods, so he hands him one.

Duke shakes his head. "Elena is pregnant...and her nose is doing crazy shit. I smoke that she's gonna puke."

We all stare at him, especially Mav, who is close to Elena.

"She's...pregnant?" Mav's smile is as big as the mountains.

Duke grins. "Yeah. We found out this morning. Feels fucking surreal."

Mav hugs him, and there are some slaps and whistles and...more drinking.

"Look, man, you came back." This comes from Cade. "You came back, and you're working to make things right. That's about all you can do."

"Why did you come back?" Hunt muses.

I don't have to think about this.

"Because I'm in love with her." I deal. "And because what I did—that's damage I caused, and I don't...." I shake my head. "I've spent eleven years walking away from things and not looking back. I've been very comfortable with that."

I flip the last three cards on the table. "I can't do it this time. I've tried. I spent a month in my apartment in New York, and I couldn't find the part of myself that doesn't care."

"Hey, you recovered in record time," Kaz assures me. "I've been lying to Bree for over a decade."

"Yeah, it took me ten years to get my shit together with Elena," Duke agrees.

I roll my neck, working the tension out of my shoulders. "She kneed me in the nuts last night. On her porch. I went down on the railing."

Cade makes a sound that's both a wince and a laugh.

"Good for her." Mav nods appreciatively.

"I thought so, too. I deserved it."

Duke laughs. "What did you do?"

"Held the railing. Asked if she felt better. She said marginally. Then she told me to go away."

"And?" Hunt wants to know.

"I went away." I pick up my cards. "But I didn't leave town."

"Small blind." Duke drops chips on the table. "You know, Elena never did that, and I was a worse asshole than you could ever be."

Hunt follows with the big blind. "Elena is too soft on you."

"Hey, you and my baby sister have been sniffing around each other for a long while...so I don't think you should be commenting on how other men handle their women," Mav remarks.

Hunt glares at him. "Joy is a friend."

"Yeah, sure, and I'm Santa Fucking Claus," Mav quips.

Outside, the ranch hands are loud at the bar. The fryer oil, cigarette ghost, and beer-soaked wood hold us in.

Nobody wins the sixth hand outright—it splits three ways on a bizarre run of identical pairs—and the laughter about it is the first unguarded one of the evening, and it lasts longer than it should. By the end of it we are just men at a table in a dive bar, and the weight is still there, but it has been witnessed, which is its own kind of surcease.

CHAPTER 41

mason



Duke's phone buzzes at eleven thirty. He grins when he sees the message.

"Cade, Mason...you need to go pick up your women. They're drunk as skunks."

I scowl.

Taya is drunk?

Well, Kaz told me the women were at Mav's, which is why everyone was playing poker at the B&B. I got no problem with her having a good time—but if she's been drinking because of me, well, that twists my guts some.

"My pregnant wife is stone cold sober. Aria is asleep on the couch, Mav, and Joy is dancing," Duke continues. "And, ah, Kaz, Bree is stayin' the night at Mav's."

"She needs to go home so I can fuckin' talk to her without an audience," Kaz thunders. "Fuck it! I'm going home."

Hunt gets up. "Me, too."

Kincaid Farms is still lit up when we pull in—Mav, Cade, and me in our respective trucks.

Music is coming from inside. Joy's truck is in the drive. No Wrangler.

Elena meets us on the porch.

"She's in the living room," she tells me as she walks into her husband's embrace. "She doesn't know I called you."

"Okay."

“Mason.” She puts a hand on my arm. “She’s hurt. She’s not performing it. She’s actually hurt.” Her gaze holds mine. “Be careful with her.”

“I will. Thanks, Elena.”

“I know you know. I’m saying it anyway.”

The living room of Kincaid’s home looks exactly like it should when there’s been a bunch of women throwing back. There are empty wine glasses, a blanket pulled from the back of the couch, magazines scattered around.

Aria is asleep on a couch, her head on Joy’s lap, who still has a half-filled glass of wine in her hand, and she’s singing along with Celine Dion about love going on.

Bree is by the bookcase, looking through books. She scans for Kaz, and when she doesn’t find him with us, she’s a little disappointed, though I doubt she’d admit it.

Taya is in an armchair.

She’s not fully asleep—her eyes are closed, but she shifts when I come in. She’s barefoot in a pair of linen pants and a shirt. Her dark hair is loose. Her flats are on the floor by the chair.

She looks—undone in a way she never allows herself to be in daylight, with anyone watching. Except with me—when she didn’t know about my lies.

I crouch beside her. “Taya.”

She opens her eyes. It takes a moment for them to find me, and then they do—a flicker of complicated emotions moves through her face and settles into both warmth and despair.

“Mason,” she murmurs.

“Gonna take you home, sweetheart.”

She nods. “Okay.”

I help her up.

She’s steadier than I expect—Taya Morningstar apparently holds herself together even when she’s not sober, which surprises me but also doesn’t.

She says goodbye to Joy and Bree and sings along with Alicia Keys, who’s crooning now.

“You get her home safe,” Joy instructs.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She nods. One degree less frost. It’s a victory.

Taya’s quiet in the truck for the first ten minutes.

"I'm drunk," she announces.

"I know."

"Not embarrassingly drunk."

"No."

"Just—" she looks out of the window into the dark—"sad drunk."

I don't say anything.

She leans back and hums some song I don't catch. After a while, she muses. "Do you know what the worst part is?"

"Tell me."

"I knew." She says it to the window. "Not the specifics or the decree or the photographs. But I knew something was wrong. Since almost the beginning." She pauses. "I'm a lawyer. I cross-examine people for a living. I know what it looks like when someone is...ah...*managing* information. I chose to not know." Another pause. "Because I wanted—" She stops.

"What did you want?"

She doesn't answer for a moment.

"You," she declares.

Flat and honest and devastating.

"I wanted you. So I compartmentalized the things that didn't add up under *ask him later*, and eventually I just...stopped doing even that." She turns from the window and holds my gaze, which is more than I expected her to give me tonight. "That's not your fault. That's mine. I know that. I fell in love. I stopped asking the questions I should have been asking."

"Taya—"

"I'm not done," she snaps.

I fall silent

"What you did—" She pauses. "I have been in love twice in my life. Once with a man who was weak and used me to feel stronger. Once with a man who was strong and—" She stops to take a breath. "And who looked at me like I was the most real thing he'd encountered in a very long time, and who danced with me at the Bear Dance and held me in Wíitsin's kitchen." Her voice has gone very precise, which I know means she's sad, really, really sad. "And who photographed my files while I trusted him."

The creek runs alongside the road.

"Both of those are the same man," she continues. "And I don't—I can't make them into a version of the same man that makes sense."

“They are the same man.” I take the risk and put my hand on hers for a moment, squeeze, and then let go. “I was doing both at the same time. Dancing with you, falling in love, and planning to betray you. And that doesn’t make sense because it’s not a sensible thing to be.”

She lets out a long breath. “I know it happened.”

“What happened?”

“The Bear Dance was real, and the decree was real, and neither of those things cancels the other out.”

She falls quiet, and I wonder if she’s fallen asleep. I glance at her, see her eyes are open, and say, “But I’m here. I’m here, and I’m not leaving, and I don’t know what else to give you except that.”

She stares at the road for a long time.

Then she closes her eyes and leans her head against the window.

By the time I turn up the switchback to her cottage, she’s asleep.

She doesn’t wake up when I park.

I sit for a moment in the dark of her drive, engine off, the creek audible somewhere behind the cottage. She’s breathing slowly, her hands still tucked under her cheek.

I pick up her purse and find her keys. I open the door and come back to get her.

She makes a sound when I lift her but doesn’t wake. Instead, she cuddles into me.

I get the door open with my elbow and carry her down the hallway to her room and lay her down on the bed.

She doesn’t like sleeping in her bra, so I help her out of it. It’s neither clinical nor a lover’s touch. Her skin is soft, and she’s pliable. I leave her in her panties and pull the comforter over her. She likes to sleep under it even in the summer—because it’s cozy.

Then I see the T-shirt. A part of it, under the pillow beside her. I pull it out. It’s mine—the gray one I left here three months ago. I didn’t notice it was missing when I packed because I’d been thinking about other things. It’s folded with the care of something you can’t throw away.

It makes me both happy and sad to see it. Happy that she couldn’t let me go. Sad that I fucked up so badly, and if I hadn’t, she’d have me and not just my T-shirt.

I stand in the doorway of her bedroom in the dark for a long time and then go back to the living room.

I sit on the couch and think about how I'm going to fix what I broke.
I don't sleep for a long time.



I wake up in my underwear, covered by one of her colorful blankets, when she comes into the living room at seven in the morning. She's put on a pair of yoga pants and a tank top. She looks hungover.

She assesses my presence on her couch—and what it means.

"Good morning," I murmur.

She doesn't respond and goes into the kitchen. I hear the coffee machine.

I take the time to go to the bathroom, brush my teeth with the toothbrush I still have, which she hasn't thrown away, and put my clothes on.

She's in the living room when I return. There's a cup for me on the coffee table. She's holding one while she sits in her favorite armchair.

"You stayed."

"Yes."

"On the couch."

"Yes."

"I remember the drive over." She traces the rim of her coffee cup.
"Some of it." She looks up. "Did I say things?"

"Yes."

"Are they things I meant?"

"Yes."

She nods slowly. "Then I don't take them back." She holds my gaze.
"I'm hurt, Mason. Not in the way that goes away quickly. In the way that changed something, and I don't know yet to what degree." She drinks some coffee. "And I'm angry. Not all the time. Sometimes, I'm just sad. But underneath the sad there's anger, and I need you to know that I'm not pretending it isn't there."

"I know." I fold the blanket and set it aside before sitting on the couch.
"I don't want you to pretend."

"You saw your T-shirt, didn't you?"

I smile. "Yeah, sweetheart, I did."

“You think I’m pathetic, don’t you?”

There’s such hurt in her voice that I have to restrain myself from hauling her into my arms, comforting her.

“Taya, you’re the least pathetic person I know,” I manage to say through a choked throat. “You are—”

“Don’t.” She holds up her free hand. “Don’t say it yet. I know you feel it. I can see that you feel it. But I need—” She stops. “I need some more time before I can hear it and do anything useful with it.”

“I’m not going anywhere. You take your time.” I drink some coffee while holding the cup tight because my hands are shaking.

This woman owns me—makes me weak. And for once in my lifetime, I’m grateful for feeling this way.

“I love you,” she says.

My heart stumbles and then restarts, hammers.

“That’s not a gift, and it’s not an opening. It’s just the truth. I love you, and I’m furious at you, and I can’t forgive you yet, and I love you. All of those things are true.”

The morning light comes through the kitchen window and falls across the floor of the living room.

“I love you, too. And I’m going to make you less angry at me every day—so that after a time you won’t be angry or hurt—you’ll just love me.”

She opens her mouth to say something else.

Her phone rings.

She sees her phone’s screen. Something crosses her face—and she goes from my Taya to lawyer Taya.

She takes the call.

“Griffin.” There’s a lilt to her voice. It’s almost flirtatious.

She’s quiet as she listens to what that asshole says, and then she… giggles.

What the fuck?

“I heard about your mother-in-law. I’m so sorry.” A pause. “I have been, actually. Things have been—difficult. The case, and—” A soft laugh. “You always did know when things were hard.” Another pause, longer. “Yes. Yes, I think that makes sense. I’d be open to that. But let’s make it lunch.” She glances at me once, quick and deliberate, the professional acknowledging the personal without allowing them to collide. “Thursday works. Of course,

I can do Aspen.” More listening on her end. Another giggle. “Alright, Griffin, thanks for calling.”

She hangs up.

The warmth is gone from her face immediately. She’s back to herself—precise, clear, working through something.

She scans through her phone.

“What the fuck was that?”

She looks up at me. “That is none of your business.” She dials a number and waits. “Kaz, Griffin called. I’m seeing him in Aspen on Thursday.” Pause. “No, I don’t know where. He said he’ll send me a restaurant. I told him lunch.” She listens for a while. “He knows. He’s sitting right here.” Silence. “I don’t have time for your prurient nonsense. I’ll let you know when and where.”

She hangs up.

“What the fuck is going on?” I demand, and when she ignores me, I crouch in front of her and hold her chin in between my thumb and forefinger. “Tell me that Kaz hasn’t roped you into his shit so help me God.”

She jerks her face away. “And so what? You can be involved in his *shit*, but I can’t? Why, because you’re a macho man, and I’m some sad little woman?”

Rage punches through my chest. I stand and haul her up to me. “You are not going to talk to that asshole ex of yours. Kaz can figure this out without you.”

Her knee comes up. I turn her around and hold her, my chest to her back.

“Last time I deserved it. Not this time, sweetheart.”

She struggles, tries to step on my foot, but I don’t let her blow land.

“Stop it; you’ll hurt yourself.”

“Asshole.”

She goes very still. “Fine. Let me go.”

“Not until we have a conversation.”

“About whether I’m allowed to do my job?” she mocks.

“About whether I have to stand forty feet away and watch Griffin Cole put his hands on you.”

“He’s not going to put his hands on me.”

I turn her around, and we stand face to face. She meets my gaze with quiet, simmering resentment.

“Taya.” My voice drops. “I know you can handle yourself. I know you can handle Griffin Cole with one hand tied behind your back. That’s not what this is about.”

“Then what is it about?” she challenges.

I look at her.

“I spent three months gathering intelligence on a woman I was falling in love with. And now you want me to tolerate your ex-boyfriend running the same play on you and do nothing.” I let her go and step away from her. “That’s what this is about.”

The hard edges in her expression ease.

“Then do something...like...I don’t know be around when I talk to him,” she challenges.

“You flirted with him.”

She smiles, mischief dancing in her eyes. “Jealous?”

“Hell yeah.” I run a hand over my face. “You fucking giggled when you talked to him.”

“I know.” She rolls her eyes. “And he couldn’t tell that that isn’t me. What an idiot!”

“Tell me what this is about.” I walk to the kitchen and make more coffee.

We sit at the kitchen island and listen as she tells me Kaz’s plan.

“So, you’re going to do this.”

“I’m already doing this.”

“Taya—”

“Before you say anything.” She sets her coffee cup down. “I need you to hear me. I am a Harvard-trained water rights attorney who has been outmaneuvering men like Griffin Cole for ten years. I know exactly what he’s going to do in that room, and I know exactly how to let him do it in a way that puts Jessup in front of a federal grand jury.” Her chin comes up. “This is my case. My client. My play.”

I shake my head, knowing it’s futile to stop her, even if I want to chop Kaz’s balls off for involving her.

“I don’t like it.”

“I know.”

“I’m going to be there.”

She flips her hair with a little flair. “I asked you to be.”

“Yeah, you did—to provoke me. But in this case, it’s going to be one of those be *careful what you wish for* situations.”

“I’m not afraid of you, Mason Brooks.”

The ghost of something—not quite a smile, but the shape of one—moves through her face and is gone before it arrives. It looks and feels like progress.

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CHAPTER 42

taya



Griffin picks Cache Cache—most definitely to make a point.

The French bistro on Hopkins Avenue has been in Aspen since 1989 and has the authority of a place that has outlasted trends by simply being exactly what it is. It offers warm lighting, white tablecloths, excellent cuisine, high-end service, and a wine list that rewards people who know what they're looking for.

Griffin took me here the first time he wanted to impress me. He always confused familiarity with intimacy, which is one of the many things I understood too late and now understand completely.

I know the maître d'.

His name is Philippe, and he has the elegant discretion of a man who has been seating powerful people for thirty years and has seen every version of this lunch.

He greets me by name when I come in and leads me to the table Griffin has reserved—a corner one, sight lines to the door, the power seat already occupied by my ex, who stands when he sees me.

Two tables down are Mason with Kaz's partner, a woman from New Orleans who looks like a supermodel.

Agent Romy Boudreaux.

At the bar is a man I met this morning with Kaz—he's also an agent.

Kaz, I know, is outside in an unmarked van, listening to us.

"Taya." He leans in to kiss me, but I don't let him and take a seat quickly. I don't need Mason to blow our cover, and the way the man harped

on and on and on about me doing this on our way to Aspen, there's a chance that could happen.

Griffin looks well.

He's twelve years older than me, silver at the temples now, the polished fitness that comes from having a trainer and the time to use him. His suit is Italian. His watch is the same one he has always worn. A Patek Philippe.

I am looking forward to talking to Griffin—to interrogating him without his knowledge so that those who are listening to our conversation can bring him and his new employer down.

I didn't have to wear a wire.

Romy explained it to me when we met at the FBI office in Aspen. She has a brisk efficiency about her with a Cajun accent.

She set a small case on my desk, opened it, and showed me what was inside, which was not, notably, anything that resembled the wire I had been preparing myself for.

"We don't really do that anymore, sha," she drawled.

She held up something that looked like a garden-variety brooch—almost plain gold, shaped like a small magnolia blossom, the kind of thing a woman might pin to a lapel without anyone looking twice. "Goes on your jacket. Or your dress. Wherever it reads naturally."

"That's it?"

"That's it." She fixed it on my dress. A black sheath number, simple and one that shows my legs, which I know Griffin has a thing for. "Range is sixty feet. Audio quality is better than anything a body wire gives you, and there's nothing to find if someone gets close enough to look." She stepped back to assess her handiwork. "We've come a long way since the seventies."

I looked at it on my chest. "It's a magnolia."

"I'm from Louisiana. I have opinions about brooches."

"It's beautiful."

"It is," she agreed. "Also extremely illegal to replicate without a federal license, but from the outside—just a brooch." She looked at me steadily. "You're not going to touch it?"

"No."

"Good. Most people touch it and make my ears hurt. Don't look at it, don't touch it, don't think about it." She stood. "As far as Griffin Cole is concerned, you're a woman who wore a pretty brooch to lunch."

“And as far as I’m concerned?”

She smiled again, wide. “As far as you’re concerned, sha, you’re a woman who is about to hand us a senator.” Her smile vanished. “Oh, and Mason is going to be there. Non-negotiable on his end, and apparently Kaz is indulging him.”

“I know.”

“He’s going to be with me. Which means he’s going to have to watch you be warm to Griffin Cole without doing anything about it, which is going to be—an exercise in self-control.” She tilted her head, assessing. “Does he have self-control?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll keep him busy.”

I arch an eyebrow. “You keep your hands off my man.”

“Oh, sha, I play for the other team, you don’t have to worry about me.”

Griffin orders for both of us.

Pretentious asshole.

He does it the way he always did—without asking, presenting it as a gift, the confidence of a man who believes that he knows what you want better than you do.

He orders the duck confit for him and the steak *frites* for me, and a bottle of Burgundy that I recognize as the one he orders when he’s trying to signal generosity without quite reaching extravagance.

Griffin talks through the first course.

He does this warmly, with the appearance of disclosure that never quite gets to the thing being disclosed. He tells me about the firm. About a case in Denver that went well. About the partners he’s been brought in to work with on western water rights matters, which he describes as fascinating from a jurisdictional standpoint, and which I allow to pass without comment.

I eat the steak. It’s very good.

And, I let him talk.

He gets to Wildflower Canyon on the second glass of Burgundy, which is earlier than I expected. He’s nervous. I can see it in the way he’s drinking—slightly faster than his usual performance of restraint.

“The Whitman matter.” He says it carefully, the way you say things you’ve practiced.

“Mm.”

“I’ve been looking at the filing history.” He leans forward slightly. “You’ve done extraordinary work, Taya. The supplemental brief on the historical use records—that was a significant piece of lawyering.”

I smile shyly. “Thank you.”

“The challenge, of course, is the position you’re in structurally. A solo practitioner against a firm with Aldridge’s resources, with a client who doesn’t have the financial runway for a prolonged fight.” He tilts his head. “I’m wondering if there’s a version of this that’s better for everyone.”

I lean closer as if I’m all ears. “Well, Griffin, you’ve always mentored me and guided me about such things. Tell me what version you’re thinking of.”

He tells me.

It’s a good offer. Better than the last one—significantly better. It tells me how frightened the other side is by exactly how much they’re willing to put on the table to make it so that Clara and her kids go away.

He also tells me—carefully, in the language of plausible deniability—that *the people* who want this resolved have significant resources and motivation, and that I should understand the full landscape I’m operating in and, that if I do, I’d benefit as well.

“Who are *the people*?” I ask wide-eyed.

He picks up his wine.

“Taya.” His tone has the warmth that used to work on me. It doesn’t anymore. I’ve had better.

“I’d like to”—I sit straight and hold his gaze—“know exactly who I’m negotiating with.”

He smiles at me like I’m his pet. Any minute now, he’s going to pat my head.

“You were always particular about the specifics.” There’s condescension in his tone.

“This could get me disbarred, Griffin.” I drop my voice. “So...I...need to be careful.”

He nods thoughtfully. “That won’t happen.”

I lick my lips nervously. “But what if it does, Griffin? What will I do?”

He puts his hand on mine. I hear a chair jerking, and I glance sideways and see Romy yanking Mason’s hand, forcing him to sit back down.

Good God!

“I will take care of you, baby. You know that.”

I extricate my hand. No need to have Mason beat the crap out of Griffin.

"I know, *but* I need to know that these people...well, I know the High Mesa people, and they're not all-powerful. Hell, they're afraid of Colbeck." I pretend to think about it for a moment. "It's not the Judge, is it?"

He laughs like I'm an idiot. "No! Of course not."

"Then who?" I persist.

He gives me an assessing look, deciding how much to give.

"Senator Jessup's people have an interest in the outcome," he reveals.

Gotcha!

"Through High Mesa?" I keep the mock shock act on.

"Through interests associated with the development project, yes." He sets the glass down and lowers his voice. "The Senator's office would like this resolved quietly and professionally. And since you like exacts. There's a package being offered to you personally, Taya, not just to your client. A position that reflects what you're actually capable of. Back in Aspen, with a firm that has significantly more resources than your current situation." He levels me with a thoughtful stare. "I recommended you for it. I told them there was no better water rights litigator in the mountain west."

"That's very generous."

"It's accurate." He reaches out as if to touch my face, but I lean back, away from him. "I wish I could bring you back to my firm, but...you know Alice is...well."

Alice is his wife. She has his balls in a noose.

"Griffin." I pick up my wine glass.

"Yes?"

"The Senator's name"—I take a sip of the wine—"is Jessup?"

Something shifts in his face—the first crack in the performance. "Yes, Otis Jessup."

"And you're here talking to me on his behalf?"

"Ah...yes. Of course. He brought me in to talk to you. I mean...I'm on Aldridge's team as a consultant and all but—"

"So your job was to reel me in."

He straightens. "Taya—"

I raise a hand to silence him and tilt my head. "All that I'm a great lawyer, and my law firm is so amazing blah blah, and now you're reduced to bribing an officer of the court?"

He glares at me. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

I stand up, tap my brooch, and see Romy jerk, touching her ear.

Then I pick up the very expensive wine he bought and pour it over Griffin.

The full glass, tilted with deliberate care onto the front of his Italian suit, the Burgundy spreading across the white shirt beneath in a stain that is going to require professional attention.

He splutters, standing up.

The restaurant goes briefly quiet. A waiter comes running.

“That”—I gather my bag and grin at him as he futilely wipes wine off his clothes—“was for touching me.” I look at him—at the stain, at his face, enjoying his dawning understanding that the meeting did not go the way he planned. “And for thinking I was still the woman you could decide things for.”

I pick up the last piece of bread from the basket—because they do baguettes so well here, and it would be a waste—and walk out.

Behind me, I hear Romy read Griffin the Miranda rights.

Nothing ever sounded more beautiful.

“Mademoiselle Morningstar,” Philippe says calmly, his expression that of a man who has seen everything and is choosing to see nothing.

“Philippe,” I murmur. “The steak was exceptional.”

“Thank you. As always.”

“Oh, and there’s a gentleman at the bar with an FBI badge who will be settling the bill.” Like hell I’m paying for any part of Griffin’s meal.

He smiles gravely. “Already taken care of.”

I walk out onto Hopkins Avenue into the Aspen afternoon.

I stand on the sidewalk for a moment.

Kaz pops out of a white van and walks up to me. “Come on, let’s watch Romy perp walk him.”

Mason joins us.

He came out through the side exit, which tells me Romy had a plan for extracting him before he did something inadvisable to Griffin Cole in front of a restaurant full of witnesses. He falls into step beside us without a word, and I notice his jaw is clenching and unclenching as he exercises considerable restraint and is not entirely finished with the effort.

“He touched you,” he mutters.

“I handled it.”

“I know you handled it. I still—”

“*Mason*, I handled it,” I repeat.

He exhales. Turns to the restaurant door. “Yeah, you did.”

We position ourselves on the sidewalk across Hopkins Avenue—Kaz with his hands in his jacket pockets, me with my bread, Mason beside me, still working out his frustration of not being able to lay a hand on Griffin.

It doesn’t take long.

Griffin Cole comes through the front door of Cache Cache with his wrists in front of him, with the look of a man whose day has departed so dramatically from his expectations that his face hasn’t caught up yet.

His Italian suit has a dark, spreading stain across the front that Philippe’s most attentive waiter was apparently unable to fully address with a linen napkin.

Behind him is Romy Boudreaux.

She’s in her blazer, badge on her belt, moving with a slight laziness, though she’s very alert. The agent from the bar is on Griffin’s other side. The third agent—from the corner table—has the door.

Hopkins Avenue, in the Aspen afternoon, goes about its business because Aspen has seen everything, and the ratio of dramatic exits from its restaurants is higher than most places.

Griffin looks for me. He finds me.

Romy lets him look. She’s in no hurry. She stands beside him on the sidewalk with the expression of a woman giving a man exactly enough rope to fully understand his situation.

“Taya—” he starts.

“Mr. Cole,” Romy drawls. “You’re going to want to let that one go, *sha*.”

He glances at her—then back at me. He’s furious because he’s just understood that the woman he came to manage is the one managing him.

“Bitch! You set me up,” he yells.

I eat my bread.

“Now, see, that attitude”—Romy steers him toward the vehicle—“is exactly why I always say—don’t go to lunch with a woman smarter than you without checking for brooches first.”

She winks at me.

Griffin says something we can’t hear as Romy shoves him into the FBI car. She waves at us and gets into the passenger side of the vehicle, and right after, it pulls away.

The three of us stand on the sidewalk.

Kaz tucks his hands in his pockets. "She's very good at her job."

"She is," I agree.

Mason stares at the half-baguette in my hand. "The bread?"

"They do it very well." I sigh elaborately. "Well, they do everything well here. The steak was excellent. The Burgundy was wasted on his shirt."

Mason takes my free hand. I let him.

"The Horseshoe?" Kaz says.

I nod. "The Horseshoe."

We walk to Mason's truck.

The canyon road picks up south of town, and the mountains close in on both sides. The afternoon light does what afternoon light does in Colorado in May, which is make everything look like it was always going to turn out this way.

I eat the last of the bread as I watch the road.

I feel, despite everything and because of everything, entirely like myself.

At the Horseshoe Diner with coffee, and while Mason eats a steak—because he didn't eat a damn thing at Cache Cache because he wanted to fuck up Griffin, his words—Kaz debriefs us.

"We have the Senator's name, the position offer, the explicit connection between Jessup's office and the request to resolve the Whitman matter through your professional incentives." He picks up a fry from Mason's plate and chews on it. "That's bribery of an officer of the court, obstruction of a pending legal proceeding, and the use of political office for private gain."

"And Griffin?" I ask.

"Disbarment, minimum." He says it with satisfaction. "Potentially criminal exposure depending on what his arrangement with Jessup's office looks like in writing." He winks at me. "You did well."

"He touched my hand. Ugh!"

"The timing was perfect." Kaz raises his hand, and I give him a high five. "You got everything you needed first."

Mason hasn't said much. He's been applying himself to his meal.

"Mason?"

"Mm."

"He touched my hand."

"I know."

“And you stayed in your seat.”

“Well, Romy made sure I did.”

“Thank you.” I lean close to him and kiss his cheek.

He stills and sets his fork and knife down. “That’s not how we kiss, sweetheart.”

“Hey, there are kids here,” Kaz protests.

“Close your eyes, Kaz.” Mason pulls me close, and his lips touch mine.

The earth does shake—and I close my eyes and let him in.

It’s a soft and slow kiss. An easy one. Lovely. Romantic. Beautiful.

He pulls away.

“You guys done?” Kaz lifts his chin in theatrical disdain.

Mason picks up his fork and knife, keeps his eyes on mine. “No, Kaz, we’re just getting started.”

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CHAPTER 43

mason



The grand jury indictment came a week later.

I am closing down odds and ends of Mason Brooks LLC in Taya's office when she tells me. I am on a client chair across from her, and we're both on our laptops.

"Just got an alert." She turns her screen around to show me. It's a news article.

I scan the article. "Three counts. Bribery of a public official, obstruction of judicial proceedings, coordinated use of political office for private gain." I lean back, feeling immensely satisfied. "Federal grand jury moved fast."

"Kaz and Romy are good at their jobs." She smiles at me. "And I think a certain fixer helped them."

"And a certain counselor let her ex touch her hand."

She rolls her eyes, amused.

Griffin Cole managed to make a deal—he is a slimy lawyer after all.

He couldn't avoid disbarment, but he did manage to not get any jail time for his testimony against Jessup.

Aldridge wasn't touched by it—because he wasn't part of it.

We had hoped the judge would intervene, but the case is moving forward—High Mesa hasn't backed down. I don't blame them. It is, after all, a three-hundred-million-dollar project at stake.

"I poured wine on him. I can't believe you're still jealous."

"Always gonna be jealous of any man who lays a hand on you, sweetheart."

She smiles shyly.

We're not *there*—the promised land. We're working toward it, but the signs are damn good. I'm still sleeping at the inn, but we have breakfast together, and I sit in her office. I've helped her with some filing, which was a big step, which was her telling me she trusts me now, that she's forgiven me.

She twirls a pen in her hand. "I wonder what this means with regards to High Mesa."

"Still standing legally. But without Jessup's political infrastructure, they are weaker." I pause. "I'm going to go see Tannenbaum this afternoon."

Her expression fractures, surprise slipping through the cracks.

"Not officially," I explain. "Just a conversation."

"Mason—"

"Just a conversation," I repeat.

She holds my gaze for a long moment.

"Don't do anything that creates a problem for the hearing," she warns.

"I won't."

She nods once. Back to her laptop. Back to work.

It's there again. Her trust. In me.

It's everything.



Tannenbaum is at the St. Regis Aspen.

Of course he is.

When men like Shane Tannenbaum and Otis Jessup need to be somewhere in the mountain west and want to feel the ground is still solid under them, they go to the most expensive address available.

The St. Regis is that address in Aspen—marble lobby, mountain views, the hush of a place that costs enough to keep certain realities at a distance.

Certain realities are about to close that distance considerably.

I get Tannenbaum's room number from a contact who doesn't ask why I need it.

Fourth floor.

End of the corridor.

Mountain-facing, which means he paid extra for the view, which means he came here to feel powerful and is using the landscape to help him get

there.

I knock at four in the afternoon.

He opens the door in a bathrobe that has the St. Regis logo on it, his phone in his hand, and the expression of a man expecting room service.

He sees me.

The expression changes.

He knows who I am.

I've been watching faces process my arrival for years, and I know every version of it—the aggression, the performance of confusion, the careful blankness of someone who has done this before. What moves through Tannenbaum's face is something different.

He's recalculating.

He thought he understood the board and had just registered that a piece moved when he wasn't watching.

Followed, half a second later, by fear.

He's smart enough to be afraid. That's something.

"Mr. Brooks," he greets.

"Mr. Tannenbaum." I smile without any warmth. I've been told it's threatening. "May I come in?"

He steps back.

The room is cream and gray, the kind of furniture that photographs well, a desk with his laptop open and three phones, and the detritus of a man who has been managing a crisis from a hotel room for the better part of a week.

The mountain view is as advertised.

I sit in the chair by the window without being invited.

He remains standing, which is a mistake—standing in a bathrobe in your own hotel room when the man across from you is fully dressed and completely settled is not a power position. He doesn't sit because sitting feels like ceding something but standing in a bathrobe feels like exactly what it is.

I let him work this out.

"I don't know what you think you're doing here."

"Yes, you do," I reply pleasantly.

He glances at his phone. Calculating whether to call someone.

"You're welcome to call legal counsel." I set my arms on the rests. "I'd suggest you hear what I have to say first. It'll make the conversation with your lawyer shorter."

He puts the phone down.

I open my jacket and take out the folder—I didn't bring the whole package, just enough.

Three pages.

The financial transfers that connect Jessup personally to the authorization of Trafton's operations in Wildflower Canyon. The paper trail between his name and the instruction that put a man on Clara Whitman's property while her children were there. And, lastly, the documentation showing how, through several shell companies, High Mesa is connected to Jessup's son-in-law's development company.

He studies it.

"Jessup is done," I continue. "You know that. The political infrastructure that made this project viable is gone. The resort permit dies in committee without it, and the investors you've been fielding all week already know it." I lean forward slightly. "What they don't know yet—what you have approximately twenty-four hours to get ahead of—is whether your name appears in a federal filing connecting him personally to the intimidation of a ranching family in Wildflower Canyon County, Colorado." I hold his gaze. "A single mother. Two children. One of them is four years old."

I am bluffing. I have nothing connecting Tannenbaum to Jessup's crimes—but I've been bluffing for years, I'm good at it.

"What do you want?"

"High Mesa withdraws the Whitman challenge." I don't think I'll get it, but I have to try. "I don't want a recess or even a continuance. I want a full withdrawal, filed by eight a.m. tomorrow." I stand. I pick up the folder. "You do that, this stays where it is. You don't, and the FBI has it before noon. I think you know about Kazimir Chase by now."

He's a smart man—I saw it in the courtroom, I see it now, in the bathrobe with the mountain behind him.

"It's out of my hands," he says evenly. "There are others who want this project moving."

This is what I was afraid of. That his influence is limited, and those who have the power are hidden—like Jessup—and I don't have enough time to find them.

"But, if the judge rules against us...which is a distinct possibility, I will convince my investors to back out of this."

I rise. "Thank you, Mr. Tannenbaum."

I walk to the door.

"Mr. Brooks, are you still in the *fixing* business because I have a job for a man with your skills."

I turn and look across the room at him in his fucking St. Regis bathrobe. "I'm not in that business any longer—at least not on your side."

His head bobs enquiringly. "You're moving to the other side?"

I shrug. "Looks like it, doesn't it?"

He smiles, and it's the real one that says he knows where I stand. "Yes, it does."



That night, when Taya and I had dinner together at her place, which I cooked, I told her how it went down with Tannenbaum.

"Good," she assures me. "I want to win it cleanly. I want Colbeck to rule on the merits. I want the record to show that Clara Whitman's 1948 water right is valid because it's valid, not because the other side folded."

I put my hands on her cheeks and kissed her mouth. She lets me do that now. "I'll be there with you this time. On the right side."

"There was a time when I was on the plaintiff's side in such cases. And I went through a journey—just like you are to find the right side."

"My journey was you, Taya. I'm here because of *you*."

"And now that you are?"

I touch her lips with my fingers.

She lets me do that now, so I do it all the fucking time.

"I intend to stay, Counselor. I'm going to wear you down until you let me back into your life and your bed."

She pulls away from me. "You're a decent cook, Mr. Brooks. That's a plus in your column."

CHAPTER 44

mason



She drives the Wrangler. Insists on it. I think it might be a superstition—like her Hugo Boss suit, which she also insists on.

We pick up Clara on the way. She gets in the back in a dark green jacket, her hair done, mascara on.

“Good morning, Clara.”

“It’s very nice to see you, Mason.” She leans from behind and checks out Taya. “Hmm.”

“What?” Taya asks as she drives out of the Whitman Ranch.

“It’s nice to see you happy, Taya.”

Taya smiles shyly, and then she bursts out laughing. “We’re going to win today.”

The hearing is in the same room as before—Room 214, Taya tells me.

Mac is there with Amos. They both nod appreciatively when they see me.

In a small town like Wildflower Canyon, news travels fast, and the news that I helped Kaz get Jessup and that will help Clara has gotten me a whole lot of brownie points.

I sit behind the defendant’s table beside Mac.

High Mesa’s table has a junior associate—not Aldridge—and he looks like he was sent to *manage* the hearing to the best of his abilities and would rather be anywhere else.

Taya sets her files in order. She does it calmly, without rushing. She’s not afraid of this room. Pride surges through me.

“She’s something, isn’t she?” Mac murmurs.

“She’s remarkable.” And she is in her charcoal Hugo Boss suit and her silver earrings, with a determined look on her face.

Clara is nervous. She knows everything that’s been going on but this is her life, the legacy her husband left behind for her children. I wonder if there will ever be a time when I’ll forgive myself for what I almost took from her—would have but for Taya.

Colbeck comes in at nine-thirty exactly.

He settles. He scans both tables over his reading glasses.

He looks, briefly, at the gallery—at Mac in the back row, at Clara in the front, at the various people of Wildflower Canyon who have found their way into Room 214 on a Thursday morning because this is what the valley does when something matters.

He nods, apparently satisfied, and opens the file. Taya produces documents that she shares with opposing counsel and the judge, and she doesn’t look at her notes once.

The junior associate raises the supplemental decree defect because he has to raise it—it’s on the record, and his firm has obligations. She addresses it in four minutes.

Colbeck writes something. He looks through some documents. He takes his time. And after, he looks up.

“The court finds,” he says without inflection, “that the defendant’s 1948 water right is valid, senior, and continuous. The supplemental decree defect does not affect the underlying right, which predates the decree by nineteen years and is supported by an unbroken record of beneficial use. High Mesa Development Group’s challenge fails to establish grounds to proceed.” He closes the file. “Case dismissed.”

He stands.

He leaves.

The fluorescent lights hum.

I watch Clara Whitman.

She doesn’t move for a moment. She has her hands in her lap, her chin up, the dark green jacket, her hair done, and the mascara she put on this morning—and then Taya turns and something between them—some accounting that has been running since the first day Taya walked into Silverbell Ranch—settles.

They hug, and Clara breaks. Finally, when it’s done, she breaks. Crying helplessly as Taya holds her.

Mac, in the back row, taps the railing twice.

Kaz is waiting for us when we come out. He's leaning against the wall, jacket on, hiding his badge and gun—which he still has for another two weeks—and hands in his pockets.

He turns to Taya first. "Clean?"

"Clean."

He leans down and hugs Clara. "You did good, Clara."

Her phone rings, and she glances at the screen, sniffing. "It's Wiley. He's with the kids." She answers and walks away from us.

We watch her, excitedly telling her family that the ranch is safe.

"Taya." Kaz puts his hands on her shoulders. "I want you to know that the federal package that put Jessup in front of a grand jury was built with documentation that Mason accumulated. The connection between Jessup's office and the Whitman case—the explicit instruction, the authorization of Trafton, the financial chain—none of that moves without what he brought." He holds her gaze. "He could have walked away from this valley and never looked back. He didn't. He came back, and he gave us everything, including the parts that cost him." He lets go of her. "I want that on the record. Between us."

"Mason, I think you made a new friend." Her tone is light, but I know she appreciates Kaz talking me up.

I do as well, but I'd cut my tongue off before I told him that.

She pats Kaz's shoulder. "Thank you, Kaz. It's noted."

"In the plus column?" I ask.

Her eyes dance with delight. "We'll see."

"Kid, you did good!" This comes from Mac. "Real good. So, now that you've won your big case, I want you to know that I'm completely and fully retired. The business is all yours. You can take my name off the door."

"Not doing that, Mac." She loops her hand around his forearm. "It's always going to be McCready and Morningstar. It has a good ring to it."

Clara is in the back seat of the Wrangler on the phone—Dakota, then Luis, then someone from the ditch company, who apparently needs to know the outcome immediately.

She talks with the efficiency of a ranching woman who has six things to do and has just been told she can do them. The relief in her voice is something she has been holding for a very long time and is finally allowed to put down.

We drop Clara off at Silverbell.

Dakota is already coming down from the barn. Eli appears from somewhere at a run, his wooden horse in his hand, heading for his mother at full four-year-old velocity.

I watch Clara catch him.

Wiley stands back, as if letting the family have their moment, but it's obvious that he's part of the family now, too.

We step out of the Wrangler, and everyone talks at the same time.

Taya pulls Ranger from her bag and walks up to Eli.

He sees the horse before he sees her.

His eyes go to it immediately—the painted pinto coat, the braided mane, the slight wear at the ears where his hands have been.

“Ranger,” he exclaims.

She crouches down to his level, the horse held out between them. “He did his job.”

Eli focuses on the horse. Then at Taya. “Did you win?”

“All the way. Same as you said.”

He takes Ranger and holds him up. Then he presses him against his chest alongside Copper, both horses together, and grins at Taya.

“He kept you safe,” Eli remarks like he’s reporting a fact he already knew.

Taya ruffles his hair. “He did.”

Eli nods slowly with the gravity of someone whose system has been vindicated. Then he looks past Taya at me.

I hold very still.

He regards me for a moment. The full four-year-old assessment—the same one he gave me in Clara’s kitchen when he appeared in the doorway with his bad dream and his horse pajamas and asked if I was going to fix what I broke.

He looks up at me. “Did you help?”

“I tried to.”

“He did, Eli.” This comes from Clara.

He considers this.

“Okay.” He turns to his mother and holds up both horses. “Mama, Ranger came home.”

“He did, baby.”

Dakota has reached us by now. She's in her work gear, the notebook under her arm, the headgate records she does every day, regardless of what else is happening in her life.

"We won?" She snuffles. She's been crying.

Taya's head bobs. "We won."

Dakota launches into Taya; they hug and hold each other.

"Thank you, Taya," Dakota mumbles.

Luis joins us, and Eli goes to him to show his two horses, now both back in his care. "Look, Luis, I have both the horses. And Ranger is lucky. He helped Taya win the case."

Luis inspects the horses and agrees that Ranger is indeed lucky.

"Wiley, we're going to keep the ranch." Clara walks to Wiley, who's standing away from all of us, like he's waiting for permission.

"Yeah, babe, you did." His voice is hoarse.

Everyone stops and watches them. She takes two steps toward him, he takes three, and then they fall into each other.

"Wow! Finally," Dakota says with the unimpressed tone of a teenager who has been observing adult behavior with the patience of a scientist and the tolerance of someone who has seen every episode of every romance show ever made. "They've been circling around each other for days. It's been like watching Conrad and Belly—except older and with more livestock."

"Who are Conrad and Belly?" I muse.

"Duh! It's from *The Summer I Turned Pretty*," Dakota quips, like it's supposed to mean something to me.

"Right." I don't watch anything on TV except ballgames and news at times, so a teenage show goes over my head as it's supposed to.

I look at the north valley—the pastures green in the summer afternoon, the creek somewhere below, the mountains above doing what they've always done.

This is what it was for.

All of it.

This moment, this yard, these women, these children, and this land.

Worth it.

All of it is worth it.

CHAPTER 45

mason



She drives. I'm used to it now—sitting in the passenger seat, watching the land.

The access road from Silverbell winds back toward the highway, the cottonwoods full out on both sides. In the rearview mirror, I see Eli standing in the driveway with both horses held up, watching us go—Ranger and Copper together.

Lucky, Eli said about Ranger.

I look at Taya beside me.

She's driving with a smile on her face, which starts in her eyes. Her hand rests on the steering wheel, and her turquoise ring catches the afternoon light.

Yeah, I agree with Eli, *the luckiest*.

"You mind a detour, Mr. Brooks?"

"Not at all, Counselor." And then, because my heart is full and spilling over, I add, "With you, Taya, I want to take every journey and every detour there is."

She glances at me—her smile going wider than I thought possible.

I did that, I think with pride.

"You're one hell of a smooth talker, Mr. Brooks."

"So says the smooth-talking lawyer who just won her hearing in front of a judge who's known to be a hard ass."

She laughs. It's bright like the summer sun.

She turns off 133 about eight miles north of town, onto a county road I've never been on before. It climbs the east bench before leveling out onto

the mesa above the canyon.

She parks where the road ends at a natural pull-off—not a formal overlook, no sign, no guardrail, just a place where the land opens up, and the canyon drops away below, and the North Fork Valley spreads out to the north in the light of a late afternoon in summer.

She turns the engine off and leans back, her hands loose on the steering wheel. “I found this in October. About three weeks after I moved here.”

She opens the driver’s door and steps out. I follow.

We walk to the edge of the pull-off and look at the valley.

“I was driving, and I turned off without knowing why, and it reminded me of the Durango pull-off. Smaller. But the same quality of it. The land just...opening.”

“Like a breath.”

“Yes,” she decides. “Like a breath.”

The valley sits still but alive—the light moving across it, the shadows lengthening across the pastures below, the mountains above the canyon going from blue to the first suggestion of rose.

She’s quiet for a long time.

I’ve learned that her silences are not empty—they’re full of things that are still taking shape.

I wait.

“I forgive you,” she finally says.

The words are soft, without the routine of an announcement—it’s just the fact of them, set down between us like a truth she’s finally claimed.

“Not because everything is fixed. It isn’t. Not because I’m not still—” she stops. “There are things that are going to take longer. Things I’ll need time with.” Her gaze drifts over the valley. “But I’ve been carrying the not-forgiving, and it’s heavy. And I want to put it down.”

She turns back to me, steady, certain. “I forgive you. That’s real. What comes after it is going to be slow.”

“Thank you, Taya.” My heart does that thing it’s been doing—beating fast around her, coming alive like it’s been in deep hibernation.

It’s painful and exhilarating in equal measure.

“I’m still afraid.” She’s always had the courage to speak the hard things—without softening them, without making them easier to say or hear. “Not of you specifically. Of this. Of letting it be real and having it....” She

pauses, as if considering exactly how to say what she wants to say. Finally, she confesses, “I’m afraid.”

“I will never hurt you again. Not intentionally. That’s a promise.”

She glances at me, the corners of her mouth tugging upward. “I know. I believe you.”

I draw in an unsteady breath.

“You have to be patient with me,” she warns.

“I have all the time there is.”

Her eyes fill with quiet affection. “That’s not a small thing to offer.”

“To have the privilege of having you in my life, of being part of yours—nothing is bigger.”

A raven crosses the rim of the canyon, a minute there and then gone.

“I love you.” Her words are quiet.

They’re not the same as last time—the ones she gave to me in her grandmother’s kitchen in Ignacio. That declaration cost her because I froze and couldn’t answer. This is a confession that has come through authentic emotion. It is for lack of a better word, confident. Sure of me.

“I love you,” I reply.

She gazes at the valley for one more minute—the unhurried minute her grandmother used to take, the minute she learned before she learned anything else about what it means to know where you come from.

The minute means: *I see this. I’m here. This is mine.*

Then she exhales. Long. Complete.

A release.

A breath.

“Home?” she says.

“Home,” I say.

She drives.

The canyon closes in around us the way it always does—133 picking up, the mountains on both sides, the creek through the cottonwoods, the town appearing around the last curve the way it always has, knowing what it is.

I know this road.

I know this place.

I know the pull-off on the east bench and the eight miles north of town and the way the valley opens when you come over the ridge and the light at this hour and the sound of the creek at three in the morning and the hook by

her door where my jacket lives now, permanently, without anyone deciding it should.

I know this.

I know this place.

I'm not going anywhere.

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CHAPTER 46

taya



Mason leaves at seven-fifteen in the morning for milk. This is the mundane fact at the center of everything that follows—that I ran out of milk, which we don’t need for coffee, but we need for the pancakes I want him to make for us, because he said he makes fantastic crepes.

Not having milk is the kind of problem that arises when two people are beginning to occupy the same space and haven’t yet synchronized their inventories.

We spent the night together in my bed—holding each other because that’s what we needed, comfort and connection.

I’m not scared of making love with him.

But I’m also not in a big rush.

Okay, fine, I am, but he refused, so there you have it. He wants me to be sure.

Whatever! Men are weird.

“I’ll be twenty minutes.” He picks up the keys to my Wrangler.

“Eunice opens at seven. She’ll have milk.”

“Eunice is going to want to talk about the case.”

“Tell her I’ll come by later and spill the tea.”

He kisses me softly and leaves.

I stand in my kitchen in my socks, listening to my Wrangler back out of the gravel drive, and the cottage settles into the quiet of a place that has just had someone in it and is adjusting to the absence.

But he's coming back, and that's a reward that I have earned—and so has he.

I pour more coffee, sit at the kitchen counter, and open my laptop.

I have three emails from Colbeck's clerk regarding the filing of the final order.

One from Kaz about the federal case timeline.

One from Aldridge's firm, that is, I notice with satisfaction, the administrative closure of the Whitman matter—three lines, no pleasantries, the correspondence of a law firm that has lost and is executing the loss with minimum ceremony.

I forward Aldridge's email to Clara. She's going to want to see it.

I am about to write an email about another matter to another judge when I hear a sound.

It comes from the back door.

The sound is the result of my back door having a problem because it has a catch that requires knowing where to push.

I put the coffee down.

I am, before I am anything else, a woman who grew up in a place that taught her to trust what her body knows. And my body knows what it means when a sound occurs that shouldn't.

I go to the bedroom.

I keep calm. Being flustered isn't going to help me.

It's not that I'm not afraid—the fear is present. But the alarm and the quiet inside of me are not incompatible.

The lockbox under the bed takes four seconds.

It opens with my thumbprint.

The SIG Sauer P238, which Elder Nokoni gave me when I moved to my first apartment in Aspen alone, is exactly where it has been since I moved to Wildflower Canyon, cleaned and loaded.

I have shot at a range in Delta every month.

I am, my instructor told me, a damn good shot.

I rack the slide.

I stand in the hallway.

I wait.

I'm not surprised to see Trafton. I recognize him from his mugshots that Sheriff Dillon showed Clara and me. He comes through the back of the

house like a man who has done this before and is not concerned about the outcome.

He should be concerned about the outcome.

He's in the kitchen before he sees me—and then he stops.

He processes what he's looking at.

He's bigger in my cottage than he was in the mugshots—the scar on his cheek catching the morning light. He's holding a knife—a six-inch fixed blade, full tang, plain edge, the kind you choose for reliability, not intimidation.

This is a man who has been running a grudge for long enough that it has become its own kind of motivation.

“Mr. Trafton.”

He clenches his jaw. The element of surprise was something he wasn't counting on.

“You want to put that down.” He has a voice like someone performing calm over something that isn't.

He thinks he's threatening.

He is.

And he is not.

Because he brought a knife to a woman who owns a SIG and knows how to use it.

“I really don't,” I say.

He takes a step toward me. Men like him always think a woman won't shoot. Men like him are dumb.

“Where is Brooks?” he asks.

“Gone to get milk.” My hand is steady even though my heart is going faster than a racecar on the track.

“I got business with him.”

“Then you're in the wrong place. This is my house.”

His teeth flash as he smiles. “You're his business, so you're mine.”

I hold his gaze.

I hold the gun.

I breathe the way my instructor taught me—steady, from the center. “This is over, Mr. Trafton. Jessup is done. High Mesa has withdrawn. There's no case.”

He takes another step. “I don't care about Jessup.”

This stopped being about the case for him when Mason left him on the ground in the Meadowlark Motor Lodge and told him to get out of Wildflower Canyon.

“He touched me, and now I get to touch what is his.” There is menace in his tone. A shiver crawls up my spine.

How the fuck long does it take to get milk? I hope to God that Eunice isn’t chatting Mason up.

“No, you don’t.”

He comes at me.

He’s fast.

I’ll give him that. He crosses the kitchen in under two seconds, and he’s bigger than me, and he has the physical confidence of a man who has never once in his life had a woman point a gun at him and mean it.

I mean it.

I don’t aim for center mass the way the range instructor taught me for stopping power. I aim lower because I am a lawyer and have thought about what comes after this, and what comes after this needs Trafton alive and capable of testifying and answering questions in front of a federal grand jury.

I shoot him in the leg.

The sound in my kitchen is enormous.

He goes down—the way large men go down when something unexpected and decisive happens to them—with a kind of stunned disbelief, hitting the floor before the mind has finished processing what the body already knows.

His knife lands somewhere near the kitchen counter. He’d have to be one of those Marvel superheroes with an arm he can elongate to reach it.

He starts swearing.

Loudly.

Continuously.

His leg is bleeding—I hit the outside of the thigh, clean through—and he’s on the floor in my kitchen holding it and yelling at me.

Bitch being one of the words he uses excessively.

I keep the gun on him.

My hands are not shaking.

This surprises me.

“Don’t move.” My voice comes out cool. “I have four more rounds and significantly less patience.”

He doesn’t move. I doubt he can. In the movies, a man can get up after he’s shot and jump off a building, but in real life, a gunshot wound puts you down.

Mason comes through the front door forty seconds later.

I hear the Wrangler before I hear the door—the sound of it taking the gravel drive too fast, which tells me he heard the shot from the road.

He has his Glock in his hand and takes in the kitchen in under a second—Trafton on the floor, the blood, me standing in the hallway with the SIG held steady.

His eyes snap to mine—fear flashing, panic close behind. “Are you hurt?”

“No.”

His attention drops to the man bleeding out on my tiled kitchen floor. Thank God it’s not hardwood, I think inanely. Cleaning that would be a nightmare.

Trafton tracks him with an expression that’s moved well past grudge and settled somewhere closer to reckoning.

Mason pulls out his phone and dials. “Dillon, need you at Taya’s place. Got Trafton here.” Pause. “He’s alive.” Pause. “No, she did.” Laugh. Pause. “A SIG.” He hangs up and then walks to the kitchen counter.

He takes the dish towel off the oven handle. He crouches beside Trafton, not gently, and wraps the towel around the leg with the competence of a man who has done field triage and is not interested in Trafton’s comfort, only in keeping him alive long enough to be useful.

“You came to her house,” Mason snaps.

Trafton says something in the vicinity of “Go fuck yourself.”

“I don’t think so.” Mason ties the towel tighter. Trafton swears again.

He stands up and assesses Trafton and my handiwork. “Nice shot.”

“Thank you.”

“Outside of the thigh.”

“I know where I aimed.”

“I know you do.” He squints at Trafton on the floor. “He’ll live.”

“I know that, too. That was the point.”

Sheriff Dillon arrives in ten minutes.

Wiley is right behind him.

Then a second cruiser. The organized response of a county sheriff's office that has been watching this situation for months and has had its protocols ready.

Sheriff Dillon comes through the front door—it's unlocked from when Mason stepped in—and takes in the kitchen and nods appreciatively.

"Taya, Mason," he greets.

"Sheriff," I lower the gun and engage the safety. I walk to the kitchen counter and set it on the counter, where it can be collected if needed.

His eyes flick between Trafton, the towel, and me.

I pick up my coffee, which is still on the counter where I set it, and drink it. It's cold. I don't care.

"The gun is licensed and registered. I have the documentation. It's in the lockbox under the bed."

The Sheriff smiles. "No doubt."

Mason pulls me into a hug and rests his chin on my head. "My heart fucking stopped when I heard the gunshot."

"Mine, too," I admit.

Wiley moves past us into the kitchen and crouches beside Trafton and begins the procedure—the caution, the reading of rights.

"I'm glad she shot you. Saved me from doin' it." But because there are too many witnesses, I think Wiley would've punched the asshole.

Wiley and another policeman load Trafton into the cruiser.

The Sheriff takes my statement and then Mason's.

"Can we clean that up?" Mason asks about the blood.

The Sheriff takes several pictures. "Yeah, I think so. Clearly self-defense. He broke in, and this is Colorado ranch country, every mother has a gun. He should've expected it."

That's not protocol, but this is a small town in Colorado, and the Sheriff is the law, so he can do whatever he wants.

Once it's just Mason and me in the house, we make more coffee and drink it.

"Did you get the milk?" I ask when he starts cleaning up the blood.

"Yeah, it's in the Wrangler."

"I'll get it. You're still making me pancakes." I am trying to make light of the situation because Mason looks just about ready to punch his fist into a wall.

"He came for you." Mason wrings out the mop. "Because of me."

“He came because he has a grudge and bad judgment,” I counter.
“That’s on him.”

“Taya—”

“Mason.” I set the coffee down. “I need you to hear me. I handled it. I am a woman who lives alone on the east bench of a canyon, and I prepared accordingly, and I *handled it*.” I look him in the eyes. “You don’t get to carry this.”

He gazes at the floor.

“I’m going to carry some of it,” he grumbles

“That’s reasonable. Carry some of it. Don’t carry all of it.”

He wrings out the mop again.

“You shot him in the leg.”

“Outside of the thigh.” I like being specific. “Clean through. He’ll testify.”

“That’s why you—”

“He’s more useful alive and capable of testimony than any alternative.”
I pick up my coffee. “I know how court cases work, Mason.”

He shakes his head in disbelief. “You’re remarkable.”

“I know,” I say smugly.

CHAPTER 47

mason



We both needed to clean up after we cleaned up the floor—the pancakes have to wait.

We hit the shower together.

The water runs, steam curling around us, water sluicing down Taya's body in rivulets, catching on the tight peaks of her nipples before vanishing between her thighs.

She presses against me, skin slick and fever-hot, her mouth a brand on mine—hungry, punishing, forgiving.

I don't deserve this.

I definitely don't deserve the way her fingers dig into my hips, nails biting just shy of drawing blood, or the way her thigh grinds against me.

She moans into my mouth, and I swallow the sound like a prayer.

"You still have a lot of making up to do," she whispers, her hands sliding down, fingers wrapping around me with a grip that makes my knees weak.

"Yeah." I cup her ass and lift her against the tiled wall. Her legs lock around my waist. "But you love me anyway."

She laughs—dark, breathless.

"This is the adrenaline rush, sweetheart. You sure about it?" I pant, thrusting against her.

She moves and sinks onto me, taking me in, stretching around me like she was made for it.

"Shut up," she gasps, nails raking down my back.

I pin her, water cascading over us as I piston in and out of her, each stroke dragging a choked moan from her throat.

“You gonna come for me, baby?” I bite her shoulder, tasting salt and soap and her. “Gonna let me feel you squeeze me like you never want me to leave?”

Her answer is a scream, her body convulsing around me, her orgasm ripping through her so hard her thighs tremble. And Christ, the way she clenches—like a vise, like she’s trying to keep me inside her forever—it drags me right over the edge with her.

I come so deep inside her, I swear she’ll feel it for days. I know I will.

She’s still shaking when I finally pull out, her legs barely holding her up as she slumps against me, breath ragged.

“Still think this was a bad idea?” Her lips brush my collarbone.

I grin, already feeling myself twitch back to life against her thigh. “Nope. But let’s test that theory again. Slow this time.”

She laughs, low and wicked, and drags me back under the water.

By the time we stumble out of the steam, towels barely clinging, the last of the adrenaline drains away, leaving her and me loose-limbed and boneless, like a swimmer after a long, punishing relay.

Taya’s hair is a mess of wet tangles, her cheek striped with a pink flush, eyes half-lidded and glassy.

She looks wrung out.

She looks perfect.

We crash onto the bed.

We’re not as desperate as we were in the shower. No more teeth, no nails. Just skin on skin, the hush of cotton sheets.

My chest aches with want, and when she curls into me, her fingers twining with mine, I feel something unfamiliar that I suspect is peace.

I trace the line of her jaw with the back of my knuckle, slow, reverent. “Tell me you’re not going to regret this.”

The look she gives me feels entirely unearned—and cherished anyway. “Never. But you still owe me pancakes and at least a dozen apologies.”

I nuzzle her shoulder. “I’ll start with the apologies now, if you want.”

She giggles. “Right!”

“I can do it on my knees, sweetheart.”

She lets out a husky laugh.

I grin, feeling her smile against my neck.

God, I want to burn this image into my memory—her, soft and loose, the hard shell of anger melted away.

I roll her onto her back, sheets twisting around our legs, and kiss her again.

This time, I go slow—map her skin inch by inch, relearning her, now with a different kind of love and certainty.

She touches my face, a feather-light brush, and for once, I let myself be held.

I let myself feel safe.

I fit myself to her, careful now, every movement unhurried.

Our bodies find the rhythm of old lovers, new again, each small sound amplified in the hush of the room: her gasp, my groan, the rustle of sheets.

When she arches up, her pulse thrums beneath my palms, and my heart stutters—part fear, part awe

After, Taya tucks her nose against my chest, breath warm on my skin.

“Don’t hurt me like that again,” she whispers. It’s a plea.

“Never.” I stroke her arm, reveling in being able to touch her like this, hold her like this.

She yawns, cuddles closer. “Sex between us is pretty good.”

“I think we had some help with all that adrenaline running through us. But you know, it is a terrible time to make decisions.”

She’s lying with her head on my chest and her hand flat on my sternum.

“Really?” There’s a teasing quality to her voice.

“Neurologically speaking—”

“Mason.”

I continue, “The hormonal response to a threat creates a physiological state that is chemically very similar to—”

“Mason.”

“What.”

She lifts her head. Her hair is down. Her eyes are entirely certain as they hold mine.

“I’ve been thinking about this for a while now. The adrenaline was incidental.”

I frown. “Incidental?”

She shrugs. “Decorative. It was going to happen when I was ready. I was ready.”

“Okay.”

She lifts her head to look at me. “That’s all you’ve got?”

“I’m trying to be articulate about being grateful, but I’m having some difficulty.”

She puts her head back down. “You’re welcome.”

The cottage becomes quiet.

I run my hand along her spine.

She makes a small sound and doesn’t move.

This is the thing I couldn’t have named when I arrived here with a hundred-page file and a clear set of instructions. I couldn’t have comprehended this feeling of being somewhere entirely and completely.

“So, Kaz is done in another two weeks at the FBI.”

“Hmm.”

“He wants to start a security company.”

That makes her perk up. She sits up and straddles me. I shift to lean against the headboard. It’s nice to hold her like this because I can see her beautiful face.

“Tell me more.”

“It would be a security consulting outfit,” I explain. “Mav’s building, the one you borrowed for a while.” I kiss her nose because it’s there, and I have the right to do it. “We work with ranching operations and agricultural communities that face corporate acquisition pressure. The pattern Jessup ran in this valley runs in six other states. There are communities that don’t have a Kaz with fourteen months of federal intelligence or a water rights attorney who can outlitigate a Texas firm. They need someone who knows how the other side operates.”

“Because you’ve been on the other side,” she remarks.

“Yes.”

“Like me.”

I nod.

She thinks about it and tilts her head. “What’s the actual work? Day to day.”

“Investigation. Intelligence gathering. Identifying the playbook before it’s deployed—the shell companies, the political connections, the parallel pressure operations. Building documentation that communities can take to law enforcement or into court before the damage is done rather than after.” I run my hands down her arms to her waist and then go up to cup her breasts. “Physical security assessment. Protection work. Intelligence.”

“Mostly what you’ve been doing for eleven years,” she remarks. “But for the right people.”

“Yes.”

She traces something on my chest.

“Does Kaz have clients?”

“Duke and Mav to start with, and an operation in Montana and one in Utah. We’ll both do the work, but he’s gotta do the handshaking bullshit. Kaz is better at building relationships in a community than I am. I’m better at building the intelligence picture.”

She leans down and kisses my jaw. “You’re not bad at relationships.”

“I’ve had some notable failures.”

“You’ve had *one* notable failure.” A playful glint softens her gaze. “Which you’re currently addressing.”

“I’m doing my best.”

“What do you need from me?”

“What do you mean?”

“For the company,” she explains. “What do you need?”

“I...I haven’t even decided if I’m going to work with him. It’s just... you know—”

“Of course you’re going to work with him.” She slaps a hand down on my chest. “I mean, what else will you do? I have a job. You need a job, too.”

“I have money, Taya.”

Her lips tighten as her gaze sharpens. “And what’s that got to do with anything?”

“Just...I don’t want you to think I’m a freeloading bum who’s gonna live off you or—”

She bursts out laughing.

“Fine! So...yeah, I need a job. I have to work.”

“So I ask again, what do you want from me?”

I lick my lips. “I want you to tell me what you think. I want you to give me advice. I want *us* to make this decision together. I want to move in with you here. I want us to...build a life.”

The way she watches me makes it clear I’m no longer optional. That this, what we are, is as clear in her mind as mine.

“I think it’s a good idea. I think you should do it. I think you can help people like Clara. I think you can help lawyers like me who can’t afford

full-time investigators, though I expect the friends and family rate.”

I cock an eyebrow, feeling a surge of happiness—pure unadulterated 100% joy. “And what’s that?”

“I pay you off with...ah...favors.” She rubs against me suggestively.

“Sounds good.”

She shoots me a look full of unfiltered delight. “Call Kaz.”

“Now?”

She leans and picks up my phone from the nightstand and hands it to me.

“You’re sure?”

“Mason,” she snaps. “Call Kaz.”

He answers on the second ring.

“Heard you got Trafton.”

“I did,” Taya interjects.

“Afternoon, Taya.”

“He’ll do it,” she says.

Kaz is quiet for a moment, and then I hear a snigger. “Hey, Brooks, your woman doin’ the talkin’ for you now.”

“Yeah,” I say unabashedly.

“Excellent. Why don’t we celebrate with dinner at Blackwood Prime tonight?”

I touch her hair, stroke it. “Sounds good.”

“And we can go through the contract.”

I grin. “I’ll bring my lawyer.”

When we hang up, she laughs again, freely. “You’re going to stay.”

“Never going to leave, even if you get sick and tired of me.” I pull her down for a kiss that takes longer than either of us intended. I roll her off of me and under me. “I know it’s not been long since we met—but...my spirit knows yours.”

Her eyes fill with tears. “Yes. I feel it, too.”

“Will you marry me?”

She snuffles. “Where’s the ring?”

I kiss her nose. “I’ll get you a ring.”

“Well, you can get my answer then, too.”

“You’re my home, Taya,” I tell her as I look into her eyes and see everything she’s giving, grateful for all of it.

“Welcome home, Mason.”

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CHAPTER 48

mason



NINE MONTHS LATER

I now know the pull-off outside Durango, and I'm not surprised when she slows down.

I reach over and put my hand on hers on the wheel when she turns off the highway.

We step out the way we did a year ago, before my first Bear Dance, and stand with the San Juan Basin opening up below us in the May morning—enormous, still, and entirely itself.

She's quiet for five minutes.

I'm quiet with her.

As she watches the mesa, I watch her.

The braids she put together this morning.

The silver earrings that were her grandmother's.

The turquoise ring on her left hand that Lana found and that she said yes to in her grandmother's kitchen in Ignacio, which is where it needed to happen.

I knew that instinctively.

I didn't wait long to ask her. Not because I was in a rush or afraid of losing her—but because when you know, you know.

And we both knew.

I asked her three weeks after she shot Trafton and the hearing—three weeks after the pull-off on the east bench, when she said she forgave me

and asked me if I wanted to go home.

We had come to Ignacio for a weekend—Sienna’s surprise birthday party that Daniel was throwing.

She made dinner in Wíitsin’s kitchen the first evening.

I watched her, and I thought about the first time I sat at that table. The tea going cold. The drums barely audible through the walls. Her saying I love you with the absolute certainty of someone who had finished deciding.

Me freezing.

Me being the worst version of myself in the best possible moment.

I thought about all of it—the full accounting, the damage and the cost and the long road back—and I thought about her now, standing at the stove right now in her grandmother’s kitchen, stirring stew that smelled like green chile, her hair down, her feet bare on the flagstone floor.

I pulled the box from my pocket.

I’d been carrying it for two weeks since Lana sent it, after I told her what I was looking for, and she found the exact thing when I couldn’t.

I held it for a moment.

Then I walked up to her.

She turned and saw the box in my hand. Then she looked up at me, a smile on her face, and one eyebrow arched.

“Hmm.”

Not surprised. Of course, she wasn’t surprised.

I thought about making a speech, and then I thought about who she was and what she deserved, and I understood that what she deserved was the truth told plainly—the way she says everything that matters.

“You told me you loved me at this table.” I glanced at the kitchen table beside the island. “And I couldn’t answer you. But I’ve been answering you ever since—every day, in every way I know how. I want to answer you properly.” I held her gaze. “Will you marry me?”

She looked at the ring.

Rose gold with a deep blue-green turquoise—the color of the shawl she wore at the Bear Dance and the San Juan Basin sky and a hundred things that are hers.

“Yes,” she said.

With my heart full of joy, I slipped the ring on her finger.

She held her hand out and grinned. “It’s lovely.”

“Yeah? Lana helped me find it.”

"I know."

I frowned. "What do you mean, you know?"

She'd met all my family over FaceTime by now, and they all liked her better than they liked me, which I accepted as a permanent condition.

"Well," she said, with the expression of a woman who has been several steps ahead of a situation and is enjoying the reveal. "Lana wanted to make sure I'd like it." Then she squealed—actually squealed—and jumped slightly. "We're engaged!"

She threw herself into my arms.

I swung her around and thought this is what coming home feels like. This is what a full life means.

"She would have liked you," she said, against my shoulder. "Wiitsin. Eventually."

"Eventually," I agreed.

She pulled back. "Okay, stir that." She pointed at the stove. "I need to take pictures of this ring and send it to everyone I know."

We got married that New Year's Eve at the Southern Ute Multi-Purpose Facility and Chapel in Ignacio.

It was a small wedding—friends and family.

Southern Ute weddings often blend cultural traditions with personal touches, and our ceremony was no exception. There was a traditional blessing, and while she wore traditional regalia with eagle feathers, I wore a suit.

But as they say, it's not the wedding but the marriage—and so far, this marriage is going very well. I am grateful and proud every day to be the man in Taya's life. And now we're back in Ignacio for the Bear Dance—my second, our first as a married couple.

After half an hour at the pull-off, watching the basin spread out below us, she smiles at me. "Ready?"

I meet her gaze. "Yes."

She pulls back onto the highway and takes us toward what has become my home, too.

This time, I know where the Bear Dance takes place—I know the brush arbor, the two circles of the ceremony and the powwow running alongside each other, the families in their chairs at the edge of the arbor, the elders closest, and the children immune to all boundaries.

I know the smell of it.

Frybread and woodsmoke and the early-summer smell of the mesa—sage and the earth returning to itself.

Auntie Carol finds us in the first five minutes.

“You taking good care of her, Mason?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She turns to Taya as if to verify this, and Taya groans and tells her to stop harassing me, which Auntie Carol receives with the serene satisfaction of a woman who will always do exactly what she intends.

Taya is in an ochre dress—new, but the cobalt shawl is the old one, as is her jewelry, inherited from her grandmother.

“You’re staring,” she says.

“Yes.”

“Stop.”

“No.” I kiss her cheek. “My wife is too beautiful to look away from.”

She shakes her head. But the corner of her mouth moves.

Elder Nokoni takes me around while Taya goes off with Sienna to do whatever they’ve been doing together since they were seven years old.

I know more this year than last.

I know the moraches.

I know the Bear Dance Chief’s grandfather’s name.

I know the four days, traditionally, and what they’re for.

I know the difference between the Bear Dance and the powwow, and I know which one Taya prefers and why.

“I’m happy to see you both together,” Elder Nokoni says. “There’s a lightness about her since you married. It’s good to see.”

“Thank you, Elder Nokoni.” I have started to think of him as Taya does. He is an elder of the tribe she belongs to, and in some ways, now, I do, as well.

“And the business with Kaz?”

“Good,” I tell him. “Very good.”

And it is.

Kaz and I have a clear division of labor, and we work well as partners, which is not a surprise given how alike we are, and it is only slightly strange given that we somehow never step on each other’s toes.

Elder Nokoni walks me to the food tables and gets us both bison stew.

We stand at the edge of the grounds and eat as the moraches start up—the rasp of notched sticks on the growler box, the sound of something large

waking—and I feel it the way I felt it last year.

Through the ground first, up through my boots, and into my chest.

The bear's heartbeat.

Steady as it ever was.

Cam finds me before I find him, which I have come to expect.

I put a cowboy hat on his head—handmade this time, his name embroidered on the band, designed for him because Cam is the kind of child who deserves a hat that knows his name.

He's thrilled and runs immediately to show everyone within a fifty-foot radius.

"You spoil him." Sienna hugs me.

"He wants to keep being the favorite uncle," Daniel deduces, shaking my hand.

"Absolutely," I confirm.

The drums begin at mid-morning.

Four of them, in a row under the shade structure, each one struck by a drummer with a steady, unhurried hand.

The dancers form.

Women on one side of the arbor, men on the other.

I take my place in the men's line.

I look across at Taya.

She's talking to one of her aunties, her head tilted, and then she laughs at something—the full laugh that she gives to this place with nothing careful in it—and then she looks across the line.

At me.

She watches me as she does sometimes, like she's deciding something.

I now know what it means—it doesn't mean she's thinking about her choices—no, it means: *it's always been you*, and it means *I love you*.

This was the same look she gave me when I first saw her at The Rusty Spur.

It still does it for me.

She flicks her shawl toward me.

The long fringe moves—all fifteen inches of it—mimicking the grasses bears move through when they emerge, because the whole ceremony is about that: emergence, return, the things winter takes and spring gives back.

I step forward.

The Catman strikes his stick against the growler and opens the floor.
The signal and the permission.

She draws the shawl around us both.

The cobalt blue settles across my shoulders and hers, both of us inside it, the fringe at the edges, the stepped diamond pattern that has been in her family forever.

Her hand finds my arm.

Her other hand takes mine.

The turquoise ring is warm from the morning.

She looks up at me with the Bear Dance in her face—all the looseness of it, all the rootedness.

Just Taya.

Entirely.

The drum finds us.

Forward and back.

Forward and back.

Grounded, close to the earth, our bodies aligned, our weights shifting together with the rhythm of two people who have learned each other's timing.

She looks up at me.

I look down at her.

"You're smiling." Her eyes twinkle with amusement.

She's right. These days, I smile a whole lot. I can't help myself. "Yes."

"Like you forgot to decide not to."

"I remember when you said that."

"I remember *everything*. It's a lawyer thing."

I shake my head. I know her better now. "And a Wíitsin thing."

She tilts her head and grins. "And a Wíitsin thing," she agrees.

The drum goes on.

The moraches go on.

The Bear Dance goes on the way it always has—not building to anything, not requiring resolution. Just continuing, because that's what it does. Because that's what it is.

This is the ceremony of return. And the return doesn't end.

Winter ends.

You come back.

Over and over.

The same as it ever was.

I hold her hand beneath her shawl in the May morning of Ignacio, one year into the rest of everything, and with the clarity of a man who has stopped arguing with himself—who has nowhere left to go except here, exactly here—I understand what it means to be somewhere.

I'm not passing through.

I'm not managing the variables.

I'm not keeping an eye on the exits.

I'm here.

I'm present.

I'm home.

With her.



Want more Mason and Taya and the crew at Wildflower Canyon? Read the bonus chapter: **Wild Beauty**.

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the moonlit trail

EXCERPT



**She thinks I kept secrets because I didn't trust her.
She's wrong—I kept them because I didn't trust myself.**

I'm Kazimir Chase, and this is my story.

When my best friend died, I made him a promise—to take care of Bree and the ranch he left her, like he would, like an uncle.

I kept the promise when it came to the ranch—my feelings for Bree have never been anything close to avuncular.

I maintained an emotional distance from her because of the years between us. Because of my promise and...because I was undercover with the FBI.

I believed she deserved better than a man built out of lies.
Then she learned my whole sordid truth.

Now, she's done with me—done with the distance, done with the secrets, done with Kaz Chase entirely.

I don't blame her and give her the space she demands.
But winter in Wildflower Canyon has other ideas. A headstrong woman, a blizzard, a mountain cabin, one bed—it's a situation that's a reckoning.

Tropes

- 🐎 Cowboy
- 🐎 Age Gap
- 🐎 His Friend's Niece
- 🐎 Snowbound/One Bed
- 🐎 Unrequited
- 🐎 No Cheating
- 🐎 Complete Standalone
- 🐎 Novella



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CHAPTER 1

kaz



She hates me.

I mean, she *fucking* hates me.

I watch Bree Keaton from my new office on Main Street. It's Tuesday, which means my partner, Mason Brooks, and I are both in because Tuesdays are for the endless paperwork that comes with owning your own business.

I do most of it. Mason doesn't have the patience. Give him the toughest security job in the world, and he'll take care of it, as long as no schmoozing is required.

Mason does not schmooze.

Me, I don't mind it so much.

"Stop staring out the window," Mason says without looking away from his computer.

I pick up my coffee and continue to watch Bree.

I bought the beverage from Wild Coffee down the street, and I may or may not have timed my run for when Bree was there. And I knew Bree was there because—yeah, fuck, I've been—*what rhymes with talking?*—her.

What else am I supposed to do when the woman pretends I don't exist?

"She won't talk to me." I down half the tepid coffee. "I told her I'd fix her pump if it acts up again, and she gave me the finger."

"You gotta stop saying pump." Mason finally looks at me. "You're giving it an entirely wrong connotation."

I glare at him. "Her ranch needs a functioning pump."

Down the street, Bree steps into Bringing You Joy—Wildflower Canyon's only clothes boutique—with Joy Kincaid, who owns it.

She's in there for twenty minutes, which means she's buying something. A new outfit? A dress?

When they come out, I know I guessed correctly because she has one of Joy's pink bags with her logo on it. I wonder what Bree bought—and that's when the memory flashes, the one where she's in a red bra and panties, and—

Their laughter rings all the way to us in the office. They are absolutely gleeful about something as they talk animatedly.

Bree looks fine.

She looks *absolutely* fine.

No red eyes. No sleepless face. No days-old stubble.

She hasn't stumbled home drunk three nights in a row, either.

I have.

Technically, I stumble home in the early morning because I may or may not have followed her home first. Which means I don't start drinking until I know she's safe.

It's not like she doesn't know. This is Wildflower Canyon. Two cars is rush hour traffic, so she knows my truck is behind her.

Keaton Ranch sits right up against my property line, so it's practically on my way.

I do this for her safety.

I may or may not have done other things for her safety...like putting up security cameras on her ranch.

Not inside the house. I'm not that much of a pervert.

Also, I didn't know how to do that without her finding out.

But there are cameras on the outside, so I can see when she leaves and when she gets home. And I have a couple in the pens, barn, and stables.

It's about safety.

That's all.

I scrub my hands down my face. "She's standing there laughing, all happy, and I'm a fuckin' basket case."

Mason sighs. "Look, man, you were FBI, and you didn't tell her. I can see why she's smarting."

"I was undercover," I say defensively.

"Yeah, I get that. But from where she's standing, by not telling her, you treated her like everybody else in this town."

"Even if she was my wife"—and Christ, that word sounds good coming out of my mouth—"I couldn't have told her I was undercover."

"If she was your wife, you would've told her," Mason says confidently. Yeah, he's right.

I'm FBI, not CIA. We don't have to hide *everything* from our families.

But I'd been under for three years by the time it ended. The whole point of my assignment was to take down a corrupt senator who was using every means available—including putting bullets in people—to gain a foothold in Wildflower Canyon. He wanted to turn this place into the next Jackson Hole, the next Bozeman.

Except this is a small town with big ranches, and the people here aren't chasing money. They're holding on to a way of life.

They raise cattle. They grow alfalfa. They raise horses.

This is ranch country. Nobody here wants a private airstrip. If you want to get on a plane, you drive the two and a half hours over McClure Pass to Aspen and catch your flight there.

This is not a place that wants a resort.

Granted, we do have a golf course now. But it's private and on my property.

I put it there partly because I fucking hate ranching, unlike golf, and partly because it was a great cover.

I was undercover as a wealthy tech bro.

The wealthy part is true. I made a lot of money when I sold my software company.

So being the kind of asshole who buys the old Hendricks spread and turns it into a golf course complete with a natural water feature got everybody's back up. It also gave me an excuse to hobnob with exactly the kind of people looking to develop this valley in ways the folks who live here didn't want.

After a long and thorough investigation, we finally got Senator Otis Jessup. He was indicted on a long list of crimes.

And I lost Bree.

Mason checks his watch. "I gotta go. Lunch."

He has lunch with his wife every Tuesday.

Taya Morningstar is a water rights attorney, Southern Ute, Harvard Law, and easily the smartest person in any room she walks into—which she'd tell you herself if she thought you needed to hear it. Every Tuesday, Mason picks up their order at the Horseshoe Diner, where Eunice has it ready, and takes it to Taya's office.

It's a ritual.

He fucked up, too, 'cause he came to Wildflower Canyon to spy on Taya. To make sure she lost a case. And she *still* forgave him.

Now he's living in her cottage, there's a ring on her finger, and they're disgustingly happy.

Bree turns the corner and disappears from view, so I stop looking out the window.

Then I do what any normal person does. I pull up the camera feed that shows the driveway of her ranch, so I'll know when she gets home.

"You're such a mess," Mason announces as he gets ready to leave.

"Hey. It's been a tough few months. I quit the FBI. I started this business with you. And Bree won't even look at me."

He shakes his head, and I hear him mutter something that sounds a lot like pathetic.

He's not wrong.



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EXCERPT



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