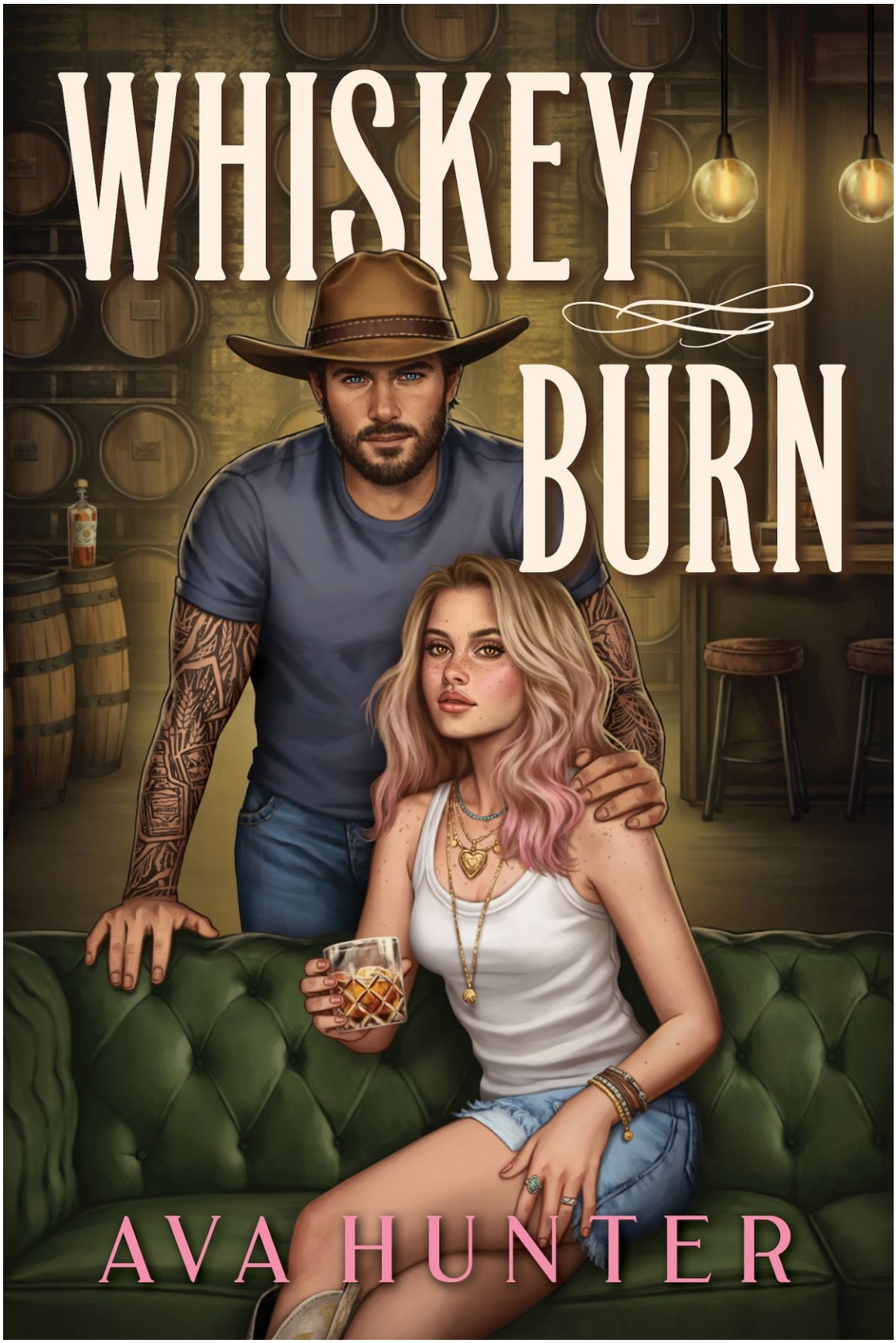

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Dedication

For anyone who's ever needed a morally gray hero covered in tattoos and wrapped in Wranglers, this one's for you.

And to me, fifteen years ago, who always wanted this, but thought she'd never have it. We finally fucking did it.

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Content Warnings

This book contains profane language and explicit sexual scenes containing whiskey play, masturbation, and praise.

This book features references to the death of family members (through flashback), dealing with grief, panic attacks, stripping (as a profession), violence and death on page, descriptive gore, violence toward women, references to sexual assault, discussion of human trafficking, child abuse (through flashback), consumption of alcohol, gun violence, and kidnapping.

If any of these trigger you, please skip this book.

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Cole’s Playlist

Sleeping on the Blacktop | Colter Wall

Oh Darlin’ What Have I Done | The White Buffalo

Come Together | Gary Clark Jr.

To Live Is to Fly | Townes Van Zandt

Wait so Long | Trampled by Turtles

Whiskey And You | Chris Stapleton

The Line | Bryan Elijah Smith

All I See Is You | Shane Smith & the Saints

The Promise | Sturgill Simpson

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Delilah’s Playlist

Whole Lotta Love | Led Zeppelin

The Moneymaker | Rilo Kiley

Quit You | Karley Scott Collins

Ain’t No Rest for the Wicked | Cage The Elephant

I Just Wanna Love U (Give It 2 Me) | Jay-Z

Dancing in the Dark | Rihanna

In Dreams | Sierra Ferrell

Slim Pickins | Sabrina Carpenter

Pink Pony Club | Chappell Roan

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Prologue

Delilah

My six-inch, clear platform stilettos could kill a man.

And I intend to do that. Just not in the literal sense.

I stand backstage, wearing heart-shaped panties and a bondage bra with exposed cups and fringe. Baby powder on my feet. My hair, a honey blond with the ends colored bubblegum pink, tumbles around my shoulders.

“Here, Lili, pucker up.”

A familiar tattooed arm comes around my shoulders. I glance over at Melly, whose shift is just starting, and lean into the offered wand of sheer lip gloss. “Making me beautiful.”

“No help needed.” Satisfied I’m sufficiently dolled up, Melly slathers on her own black lipstick—going for goth girl tonight—checks her garter hooks, and gives me a grin. “You game for chips and salsa later?”

My thoughts stray to Javier’s, our go-to dive Mexican restaurant, and my stomach rumbles in hunger.

I finger the heart-shaped locket around my neck. “And the biggest margarita.”

Melly's the devil to my angel. The one who befriended me when I first started at the club. She taught me all the tricks. How to slick my thighs with cream so jeans wouldn't chafe them during a lap dance, how to soothe bruised thighs from the pole. She's become my closest friend, someone who lights up the dark cracks around my heart. She'll never replace my sister, but she makes me feel like I don't have to take on this world alone.

DJ Dick's deep voice comes over the mic. "And now, you're in for one wild ride with our next dancer. Welcome to the stage, Lady Lawless!"

Lady Lawless. All the girls have to pick a stage name. It's for our protection, and it works as an alter ego. I do things as Lady Lawless that I'd never do as Delilah Grant.

Melly winks. "Kill it, Lady."

I blow her a kiss.

The music comes on—Britney Spears's "I'm a Slave 4 U."

My cue.

I smile brightly and stride onto the stage. Beneath the mirrored disco ball, my body glows and shimmers, as well as the stars on the outside of my lashes. Magic pulses inside of me.

I grab the pole and dip into a low squat, rolling my hips to the hypnotic beat.

A man with cuff links and curly red hair scoots closer to the front of the stage, mouth agape, eyes up. A forgotten plate of steak and potatoes sits in front of him. His hand hovers, stretches.

As I stand, I cast a surreptitious glance his way, then scan the club.

Saturday night, and it's packed with men in suits. Doctors, CEOs, men of power. In a corner, hoots from a jostling group of boys celebrating a bachelor party. Boys in polos stare, leaning back in their booths like they're

trying to relax, but I notice the way they squeeze their hands into fists. Horny. Desperate. Sad. Lonely.

I'm used to it all by now. It's work. My work.

A job that once put me back together when I thought I had lost everything.

The Velvet Belles Club is the biggest strip club on the outskirts of Las Vegas, a destination for the rich and horny. With two stages, six bars, and a roster of some of the hottest women I've ever seen, it's high-end all the way. The walls are adorned with rich velvet drapes. No windows, no clocks to remind you of your responsibilities. Neon lighting bathes the club in a pink glow. It's exclusive and clandestine and decadently Las Vegas.

Everything about the club—and us—abides by a set of perfectly crafted criteria. From the lingerie we wear—forty dollars for a G-string—to our stilettos—at least six inches—we provide a luxury service to our clients, and in return, Belle, our boss, takes great care of us.

I step closer to the end of the stage, gyrating, rolling my hips. Dollar bills rain onto the glossy stage. The honey shimmer on my arms glitters beneath the stage lights.

When I become Lady Lawless, I'm in control. Of my heart. My body.

Sexy, confident, free, and powerful.

No man can take that from me.

Not even this idiot.

The red-haired man's hand rests inches from my stilettos.

It's clear as crystal. He's going to touch me.

I fucking dare him.

I dance, pretending I'm far away, feeling the pulse of my body when the man runs his hand up my boot. I freeze. The sliminess of his palm curls my stomach. He stares back at me, clearly clueless about what he's done. I hear

the blood pump in my ears and the breath hitch in my body. But I don't flinch or cause a scene. I leave that to someone else.

Continuing my dance, I cut my eyes to Belle, the owner of the club, hovering near the bar, and dip my chin. It's dark in the club, but she reads me loud and clear. Our silent signal for trouble. She touches her earpiece.

I drop into a split in front of the man, his hand moving to my bare thigh. Might as well give him something to remember me by before his world is rudely fucking rocked. Because in fewer than thirty seconds, he'll be out on his ass.

I lower myself onto my back, arch my hips. The man slides a hundred-dollar bill my way. I don't touch it. Instead, I sit up, unhook my bra, and flash a bright smile at him.

He stares at me for a second before his eyes bug.

Sure, I'm a tease, but he deserves it.

He's leaning in by the time a large hand comes down on his shoulder. He jerks in surprise and twists in his chair. On his mouth, the beginnings of *what the fuck* form. But the joke's on him. Our massive bouncer, T-Bone, yanks him out of his chair, effectively dousing any alpha machismo the man had hoped to muster. The bachelor party bros holler and hop up and down at the free show they're getting. As the man's shoved toward the exit, I conjure a flirty smile and a little wave.

Lady Lawless takes no prisoners.

The song ends. I tuck the hundred-dollar bill into my garter and slip my bra back on. As I come offstage, Belle's waiting. Her silver hair swirled into an elegant bouffant, she wears cat-eye sunglasses despite the dimness of the club.

"You okay, Lady?" Her voice is raspy, aged by cigarettes.

"Perfect."

Pleased, she smiles. “Good girl.”

Nothing fazes Belle. Even though I was an adequate dancer when she first interviewed me, I wasn’t up to Belle’s standards. She put me through bartending school and made me hostess for a year before I was even allowed onstage. Eventually, I found my groove and my confidence. She got me out of a bad situation, and I’ve been grateful ever since.

Belle tucks a lock of hair behind my ear, assesses my attire. “Sammy’s here for you.”

My gaze darts to the long hallway that leads to the private rooms. “Which room?”

“The Penthouse. He’s already paid.”

The Penthouse is our most special room hidden from sight behind a sliding velvet wall. Belle charges $3,000 an hour.

“Be good to him, Lady, he’s our best customer.” Brow arched, Belle gives me a quick pat on the ass. “Go get pretty.”

Before I go see Sammy, I stop in the locker room, the space we use to change and do our makeup.

Stella, her head of black curly locks lowering, snorts cocaine off the back of an eyeshadow palette. “Where’s Clea?” I ask, casting my gaze at the empty vanity.

She shrugs, rubs the last bit of powder on her gums. “Not sure. Hasn’t been here for the last month.”

Strange. We never got too deep, most girls prefer to keep their personal lives separate, but even I knew Clea was working nights to put herself through medical school.

I change out of my thong and into a black silk bra and panty set, then pair it with a sheer lavender robe with feathers around the billowing cuffs and hem. Next come high-heeled fringed, sequined boots. Starving, I slip a stale

Pop-Tart out of the shiny sleeve, cram it in my mouth, then chase it with a gulp of Red Bull.

I exit the room. As I walk down the hall, I rub my heart-shaped locket for good luck.

The second I slip into the Penthouse, my body's bathed in the soft glow of pink light. Long red-wine velvet couches line the walls. Swaths of emerald wallpaper. Two stripper poles and a small stage occupy a dimly lit corner. The room is warm. The harsh scent of cologne stings my nostrils.

A man's deep voice unfurls. "I missed you, Lady."

"I missed you too, baby."

All men are *babys* or *honeys* or *sugars*. You've never seen a man grin like a fool until you call them a term of endearment.

Heels clacking, I move to the minibar in the corner of the room. Bottles of liquor, a bottle of lube, and muscle relaxants. I glance over my shoulder. "Drink?"

"Whiskey. Bring the bottle."

I pour one for him, one for me. Sammy takes his whiskey on the rocks. Two ice cubes. On the audio app, I select the music. The Darkness's "I Believe in a Thing Called Love" fills the room with an electric energy.

On the couch, Sammy shifts. "How are you, Lady?"

Drinks in hand, I head his way. "I'm perfectly peachy, Sammy."

I hand him the drink, set my glass and the whiskey bottle on the side table, then slip off my robe. Sammy reclines into the leather couch. His olive-toned face has pockmarks, and his hair is dark and slicked into a comb-over. He's dressed sharply in a navy suit, with an expensive gold watch and a gold chain around his neck.

I sit on his lap, my thighs across his. "How are you doing, baby?"

Sammy sighs. There's a story written all over his face.

Everyone thinks sex happens in the back rooms. And it can.

But I don't fuck clients.

Most men want someone to talk to. And Sammy excels at it. He's been coming to see me for the last six months. He drops in. I dance. He talks. I listen. He pays.

I pick up on things in the club. I pick up on people. I can read them like nobody's business. Sammy works hard, and he's tormented by it. Luckily, I can make his night better.

I adjust his silk tie. Purr, "Have a good day or a bad one?"

He rolls his neck out. Gulps his whiskey. "Slimy."

"Sorry," I breathe and reach for my drink. The harsh bite of whiskey hits my tongue as I swallow it down. Good, but I prefer champagne.

"I'm in town for this work thing…"

It's always a work thing with Sammy. Though he hasn't told me what profession he's in, he looks like a banker. Or a politician. I don't ask questions. That's not why my clients pay me.

I lift my hips, straddle his lap. I hum happily to the music as I gyrate against his crotch. His dick remains limp in his pants.

In all the times I've danced for him, he's never gotten hard under my touch. Strange, but it makes no difference to me. Limp dick or gay, it's not my business.

"It's getting out of control." Sammy's breath hitches. "I don't know how to stop it."

I bat my lashes, wing up a brow. "Can you quit?"

His eyebrow quirks at my suggestion. "No. You don't just leave a job like this. They keep you in until the very end."

Fear and longing linger in his voice. I tilt my head and against my better judgment, ask, "They?"

With a pained face, he sips his whiskey. “I’m here because I have to do something, Lady. I have to escape.”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place.” I plaster a honey-sweet smile on my face. Give him a solution all the men like. “Relax and let Lady Lawless take all your problems away.”

“Can’t fix this.” His pockmarked chin tips down as he looks at me. “I like you too much to do it to you. But they want you as an asset. No more delay. But that’s the problem, isn’t it? I’m already in too deep.”

A chill creeps up my spine at his ramblings, but I keep my voice, my face, neutral. “I don’t mean to be rude, baby, but are you drunk?” I slide a hand up his chest and over his shoulder.

“Dance,” he barks sharply. His stony expression sinks my stomach.

“Pony” by Ginuwine pumps through the speakers. The levity, the energy from moments ago suddenly vanishes.

Silently, I slip off his lap. I dip, thrust my ass in his face, then spin around and sink between his legs. I make my voice breathless, innocent. “This good, Sammy? You like it?”

Sammy watches me for a few seconds, then drops his face into his hands. Whispers something.

Confused, I rest a hand on his knee. “Sammy? What’s wrong?”

Lifting his face, he locks his eyes on mine. “You know too much, Delilah.”

My pulse trips. *How does he know my name?*

I feign a smile. “All I know is that you’re the best client I’ve ever had, baby.”

He doesn’t smile, just stares. On my knees, I freeze. Panic unfurls in my stomach like a vine. That little gift of fear I’ve trusted a handful of times in my life. His dark eyes remind me of how my stepdad, Tom, would smile

when he got too close. The way Travis reached for me the night I left our apartment.

Bad men with bad touches.

That's when Sammy's hands close over my wrists. He grips them hard, yanking me up between his thighs. My stomach drops.

Fuck. I should have trusted my gut and the way it can read people like a pro. I was right. Something's wrong.

"Don't fucking call me that." His seething voice chills me to the bone. "*Baby*. I don't deserve it. After the things I've—we've done—I don't deserve you being nice to me."

"Sammy…" My breath hitches, but I try to play it cool, stay calm, when everything inside of me is a screaming siren. "It's okay. Just let me go."

"I tried to protect you as long as I could. I tried to keep you safe, but they won't wait. Not anymore."

I struggle against his hard grip, but the way his fingers dig into my wrists makes me gasp. "You're hurting me." I don't recognize my own voice.

"He likes to destroy pretty things. And you're the prettiest."

I wrench my wrists, to no avail. "Sammy—"

Desperate, wild-eyed, he abruptly releases my wrists. "Listen, listen to me—"

"Sam—"

His slap is sharp and quick and sends me falling onto my side.

I yelp as pain explodes in my cheek and then watch in horror as he throws the bottle of whiskey against the wall. It shatters. Whiskey streams across the floor, soaking my boots, my knees, my palms.

I sit there, stunned by the shock of what's happened. My hand goes to my hot cheek. "You motherfucker," I whisper, bent over in front of him on the

whiskey-soaked carpet. I wrap my hand around my gold locket and try to breathe through the fear.

Lucy, Lucy, Lucy, I think to calm my spinning mind.

“I—I’m sorry.” He collapses into the couch, his face twisting as he looks me over. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I just need you to listen.”

I grip my cheek. I can’t feel my face. Tears fill my eyes.

Frantically, I look around. No one will hear me if I scream. The room’s soundproof.

My gaze locks on the small black panic button located beneath one of the side tables, but before I can move for it, Sammy twists on the couch, grabs my shoulders, and pulls me up to eye level. His breath stings my face. My eyes water from their whiskey burn.

He pants as he shakes me, says, “Listen to me. If he catches you, Delilah, it’ll be bad. So fucking bad.”

I twist in his grip, meeting his frantic gaze. “How do you know my name?”

“I know everything about you. And they do too.” Releasing me, he reaches into the silken interior of his jacket pocket. “Take this.”

Into my hands, he presses a USB drive.

“Sammy, I don’t understand.” I open my palms, scared of what lies in my hands. “I don’t want this. Take it back.” It feels like I’m holding a bomb.

“I can’t.” His eyes are shriveled like dried-up prunes. “Listen to me.” As he leans in, his voice turns ominous, black. “They are going to take you if you don’t run. If you don’t run, Delilah, you are next.”

Before I can speak, Sammy reaches behind him and pulls out a gun.

My eyes flash wide.

Ashen, his lips part. “I’m sorry, Lady. I’m so goddamn sorry.”

I flinch, scrabbling backward on my hands and heels, waiting for the bullet to tear through my skin.

“Please, don’t. Please don’t do this…”

A ghoulish smile spreads across Sammy’s mouth as he lifts the gun, puts it beneath his chin, and pulls the trigger.

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1

Cole

She’s fucking gorgeous. Clean, sexy lines. All curves. No leaks. Just the way I like it. My hands move over smooth wood planks made from American white oak. The gorgeous honey color of the stave. Its smoke and vanilla scent. There’s nothing like raising a barrel.

Nothing like a good glass of whiskey.

The whiskey that’s in my blood. That fuels the fire in my veins.

It’s my legacy, my curse, and what pulled me back home six months ago after a successful bull-riding career.

Long before bulls or women, it was always whiskey.

Weston Whiskey.

Black tattoos flexing on my forearms, I pull long staves of wood from their shelves, then lay them out in a geometric pattern. Every single barrel is tabled to ensure there’s no leaning. Despite the neon orange sponges in my ears, I can hear the chatter of my raisers, the hum of the machines, and the croon of Randy Travis’s voice from the speaker.

My father, a fourth-generation rancher, loved woodworking. When he and my uncle started Weston Whiskey in their twenties, my father wanted to

make barrels himself. He was the first to build a cooperage in Montana since Prohibition. He trained all of us on whiskey, but I was his only son to take an interest in building the barrels. By the time I was fourteen, he was proclaiming me the fastest raiser he'd ever seen.

"It's your birthright, Cole," my father told me as we laid out those pieces of wood in our barn. He passed me his glass of whiskey and let me steal a sip, even though I was underage. "It's in your blood. It's up to you to carry on this tradition."

A promise I failed at. A promise I intend to right.

At the sound of laughter, I tug the sponges out of my ears.

Bo and Leon, two of the raisers who work under me, snicker as they toss scrap wood in a bucket.

Cy, another member of our team, adjusts his protective glasses. A smirk twitches his lips. "You gonna make love to that barrel, boss, or…?"

"You want to be on this team?" I counter with a glare. "That means you shut your mouth and work. I won't have bullshit in my coop."

Cy gulps. "Yes sir."

Tucking the sponges back in my ears, I keep my eyes on the guys, making sure they get back to the barrels. I take pride in the handcrafted process. By now it's science. I could raise barrels in my sleep. In ten years, I've never had a leak.

With a crew of four, we make four hundred barrels a week at Weston Whiskey. Most we use to age our whiskey; the rest we sell to bring in additional income for the ranch.

I wipe sweat from my brow, tuning out the world around me, the low conversation from my guys. I assemble the staves—thirty-one of them—into the temporary steel ring, making sure they're evenly distributed. The width, the size, the wood, it all comes into play to create that perfect barrel.

A crunching sound and soft voices drift from outside. I grit my teeth and look up, catching sight of my youngest brother, Wells. He leads a group of tourists through the open garage door. Our two distillery cats, Waldo and Jelly Belly, lazily trail after the tour.

Lifting a hand, I motion for Cy to stop the saw.

I tug the earplugs from my ears as the group filters into the room and give Wells a glare. He knows better than bringing a group back when I'm here. All I want to do is raise barrels, not make conversation with strangers.

Wells spins in a circle to face his group. His dark chestnut hair curls from the edges of his cowboy hat. "This is the cooperage. Or what we otherwise refer to as the Coop. It's where we make all our barrels. If I can just remind you here that no photos are allowed." He arches a brow, flashes a smile that's all charm. "Proprietary information, folks. Otherwise, we'd have to kill you if our secrets got out."

Chuckles and whispers float through the group. Their eyes widen at the monstrous machines that fill the space. The flung-open garage door offers a dramatic view of the rugged mountainside and surrounding tasting room and distillery. Blue Montana sky stretches to infinity. A soft breeze drifts in from the creek.

The cooperage is one of three main buildings that make up Weston Whiskey. It's sandwiched between the Stillery—where the whiskey is made—and the tasting room and gift shop. Backdropping the distillery are the rickhouses, our storage space for aging and storing barrels.

After more than forty years in business, and as one of the first distilleries in Montana, Weston Whiskey is a well-oiled machine.

And all of it sits on Copper Run Ranch. A 3,500-acre animal sanctuary nestled in the heart of western Montana that allows our guests to sip whiskey in beautiful natural surroundings while they feed our rescue animals.

Just like our father loved woodworking, our mother loved animals. While he ran the distillery on the east side, she made a career out of rescuing and rehabbing hurt or abused farm animals on the west. Animals she couldn't rehab stayed at Copper Run Ranch.

Wells lifts a hand, makes introductions. "This is our head cooper, Cole, and our raisers, Cy, Bo, and Leon."

I nod at the group of guests, then stick the sponges back in my ears and focus on my barrels. By now, I know my brother's spiel by heart.

Our grain is sourced from local farmers, our water from Sweetheart Falls. We are one of the few whiskey cooperages that firebend, heating a barrel over fire and then bending it to the final shape. Weston Whiskey is the official whiskey of the PBR, the Professional Bull Riders. Raising barrels is a dying craft, and we're one of the few distilleries that still do it.

Goddamn great facts. Facts that make me damn proud.

But what he doesn't talk about is the dark shadows that hang over the distillery. Our parents' murder. The death of our oldest brother, Jack. A rivalry that's lasted over a century. Most guests don't even realize its history. But the town of Tempest knows.

As Wells describes to the group how we send our barrels down the line for charring and toasting, I give him a once-over. Tall and lean, with the deep blue eyes all the Westons share, at twenty-eight, he's ten years younger than me, making him the baby of the family. Soft-spoken, kind, and a natural charmer, he always has a smile or a joke at the ready.

When he's not leading distillery tours, he's on the rodeo circuit working as a pick-up man. No one can tame our wild-at-heart little brother, although the world's tried. That kid's been through some shit that breaks my heart.

I watch Wells's mouth move. At me.

Fuck.

I tug a bright neon orange sponge out of my ear. "What?"

He grins at me. “I said, does anyone have any questions for our lead cooper?”

I let out a frustrated sigh. Whose damn idea was it to put the cooperage so close to the distillery?

I jerk my chin. “Why don’t you ask Cy?”

“You’re the expert.” Wells looks around the group, gestures. “Don’t be shy. My big brother looks grumpy, but he doesn’t bite.”

“Much,” Bo adds.

Snickers from the rest of the crew. Annoyance must show on my face because Wells lifts a brow and gives me a *play nice* look.

The guests stay silent, some looking down at their feet or playing on their phones. Finally, a man in a Harley-Davidson T-shirt decides to brave a question. “Where do you get your wood?”

Hands working on autopilot, I fix a stave into the skirt. “Missouri,” I answer tersely.

Another question comes my way. “How much flavor comes from the barrel versus the distillery?”

I grin. My answer’s bound to piss off Ezra. “At least eighty percent.”

Always the peacemaker, Wells whistles. “C’mon, now. Fightin’ words.”

The group laughs softly, and a blond woman on the tour bats her fake lashes at me. To Wells, she says, “I didn’t know we’d be seeing cowboys on this tour.”

I ignore her, and the comment. If I need any excitement, I have three younger brothers to boss around.

“Hey, I know you.” A man with a curly red beard pipes up from the back. “You’re the bull rider who won the million-dollar prize at the PBR a ways back.”

I grunt. Last year. And it was two million.

The man whistles. “That ride was epic. Why’d you stop?”

I bristle.

Because of my brothers.

You’ve been dipping your toe into the distillery your entire life, Warren, my older brother, said six months ago. *Starting over might feel good. You righted wrongs, you settled your shit with Jack, now come home.*

Come home. Easier said than done.

Four years older than me, Jack was my best friend, my idol. When he joined the rodeo, I followed. Even though he was the oldest, the golden child of our family, he was a rebel. He taught us how to get into trouble, then just as deftly, get out of it.

“We do wrong right, kid.” Jack grinned at me as he released the garter snake into the mailbox for our younger brother, River, to find. “Until Mom finds out and tans our asses.”

I cast a wary gaze at the photo of Jack that hangs over the threshold.

I should have died on that bull. Not him.

I exhale, trying to chase the cold from my chest, the memories from my head.

The fight we had. That hot, humid summer night at the bar in Texas. Too many drinks poured. Heated words exchanged, Jack telling me I was an idiot, that cocky smile on his face pissing me off so damn bad, I stormed out. I was eighteen, stubborn and stupid, and I left him there to meet up with some cowboys in the next town. And then—

I shake my head, clearing the scene from my memory.

If I had stayed…he would still be alive.

After that, I almost left the rodeo. At twenty-three, I was close. Close to retiring, to giving it all up and coming home to help Warren raise my younger brothers.

Then I learned Jack was sabotaged. By his greedy fucking manager, Pappy Starr.

So I stayed on the circuit. I kept riding. Kept winning. I bided my time. So hell-bent on revenge I shut out my brothers. I stayed away. Fifteen long years until redemption, until revenge came quick and sweet.

I ended Pappy's career. I went home.

But I'd be lying if I said I felt any sense of closure.

Guilt and rage claw their way up my throat. I put it to bed. Ended the man who took my brother's life. And yet, that victory still feels so damn hollow. It's like I'm stuck. I can't move forward, and I can't move back. The future's black, and I don't know where it leads.

All I know is I'm here for my brothers.

They needed me, needed help. The barrels they were putting out kept leaking, costing us money. And with Ezra's daughter having health issues, needing the money for her treatment, Tempest finally dragged me all the way back in.

It's the curse of our hometown.

Every time one of us has tried to leave, we always get pulled back. By tragedy. By loss.

Now, we refuse to leave. None of us have anything to leave *for*. Everything's still here. All our ghosts.

Maybe by being here on the ranch, by making barrels, I can make it up to my brothers for being gone all those years.

"Cole?" Wells's soft voice floats.

I clear my throat, my mind, glance around the Coop. Everyone's staring, waiting for an explanation on why I left the rodeo, so I grunt, "Too damn old."

Ripples of laughter. The blond reaches into her purse, her hooded gaze still on me.

I nudge my chin at Wells, anxious to get back to the barrels. “Wrap it up, Wells.”

He gives me a smug look. “Like I said, grumpy. Anyway…” I can see my brother winding down his monologue when there’s a loud commotion from the tasting room.

Looks of confusion ripple around the group.

I shift my gaze from Wells to the archway that leads to the hallway and into the tasting room. “Fuck.”

I rip off my gloves and stomp into the tasting room to find Kimmy, our bartender, hurling a massive ice cube at the chest of my older brother, Warren.

The guests at the bar blink.

“Fuck you, Warren.” Kimmy grabs her purse from beneath the bar and storms for the exit.

“What just happened?” I demand.

“Kimmy quit.” Warren scrubs a big hand down his sharp, stubbled jaw. His dark brown hair’s in disarray and his crisp white shirt is rolled to the elbows.

“No shit. Why?” At his silence, I rub my temple. “Did you sleep with her?”

He clears his throat. “Not recently.”

“Goddamnit, War.” This is just what we need. No bartender. At the beginning of summer when tourist season’s started.

“I’ll take over until tonight.” He steps back behind the bar and reaches for a bottle of rye. He nods a brief hello to the tour group that’s followed Wells. “Sorry for the ruckus, folks. Take a seat. I’ll get the tastings going.”

Guilt stains his face. Older than me by one year, Warren prides himself on being responsible and coolheaded, but beautiful women are his one distraction. He uses them to keep the darkness at bay, to keep things light. I chalk it up to him making up for the time he lost in his youth. Instead of chasing his hockey dream, he matured overnight and came back home to chase and take care of our three younger brothers.

River—at thirty-four—is the dark horse, wild child rebel of the family. The kid has demons even I don't know about. It's always been a push-pull between us. But he takes after our mother with his love for animals and helping people.

Ezra, two years younger than River, knows whiskey better than any of us. He'll run the entire distillery one day, and no one will dare take that away from him.

And last is Wells, the youngest of all of us. The baby. The one we'd kill to protect.

We're all close. Brothers. Best friends. We've spent our entire lives fighting and playing and making whiskey.

This ranch is our legacy to protect and damn if we won't make our parents proud.

"Don't worry, man, we got it handled." Wells appears and slaps me on the back. "Got you to say more than five words today. I consider that a win."

I shake my head. Wells always knows how to push my buttons. He's lucky he's my little brother.

Wells's smile fades as Warren pours out flights. "Ezra's going to kill you, War."

Puffing out a frustrated breath, Warren inclines his head at me. "A little help?"

"Nope. You're on your own."

My brother flashes a tense look in my direction. “See you tonight?”

I nod. “Tonight.” It’s a big night, a big deal, big plans, and suddenly those dark shadows close in around us. Wells stares out the window at the expanse of green earth and jagged mountains like we can all feel it looming.

The past.

Without another word, I head down the hallway to the Coop to find the blond waiting for me. “I’m in town for a few more days.” She flashes a bright white smile. “Call me, cowboy.” Into my hand, she slips a piece of paper.

“Not interested.” My tone’s hard, and as I pass her to duck into the cooperage, I crumple the piece of paper and toss it into a nearby trash can.

I’m an asshole, but it’s the truth.

There’s no time to get close to anyone. My focus is my family. Getting close to anyone means caring. Caring means loss. A damn agony I never want to experience again. The second I let my guard down, let someone in, they get taken away.

We’re Westons.

The only things we’re allowed are mountains, whiskey, and death.

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2

Delilah

Like my namesake, I'm already in treacherous territory.

Night air is cool on my face as I speed down the highway. Two days ago, I was a dancer. Now I'm in survival mode. On the run. In the middle of nowhere.

I've done anything to survive before—I can do it again.

Thankfully, Belle worked quickly that night. Soundproof walls meant no one heard anything. I stared at Sammy slumped on the couch, half his skull splattered on the wall. My ears rang from the force of the gunshot. I brushed something off my leg. Brain. Then promptly had a panic attack.

As T-Bone zipped Sammy up in a garment bag, Belle pulled me to standing. "You're a Velvet Belles girl, right? You keep your gorgeous mouth shut and let us handle it."

"Okay, Belle." I bobblehead nodded, fighting back tears, and leaned into her comforting hug.

"Consider yourself disappeared. At least until this blows over." She cast a withering eye at Sammy. "He won't be missed."

Frantic, I packed up my things and hopped in my car, headed north. I was thirty miles down the road when I realized I still had the USB in the pocket of my robe.

Now it's in the glove box, haunting me. I didn't tell Belle I had it. Whatever's on it, I don't want to know. Denial. It's always been my saving grace.

The last forty-eight hours have consisted of me singing along to the radio and telling myself no one's after me, even though I'm fully aware I just saw a man murder himself in front of me. Even though his words hinted I'm caught up in something darker than I can even imagine.

The stupidest thoughts flashed through my mind when Sammy pulled that gun.

I'm not ready to die. I have dances to dance, a rat to feed. Fucker's going to ruin my chips and salsa night with Melly.

Speaking of Melly, I sent her a short text after I made it out of Nevada.

On the run, on the road, tell you more later.

I slow-roll my '78 Pinto through a stop sign, watching the dark highway briefly sharpen before I punch the brake and gun the gas. All around me, nothingness. Exactly how I feel.

I grip my locket, wishing my sister were here with me. Sudden, hot tears flood my eyes. I miss her so much. She wouldn't know what to do either, but at least we'd be together.

A memory of the day Lucy gave me the locket floats through my mind.

"This is for you." She extended her small hand proudly, showcasing a gold heart-shaped locket. "For your birthday."

I gaped at her. “Where’d you get this, Lucy Lou?” Having just moved to San Diego, we barely had money for groceries let alone gold jewelry.

“It’s a secret. But it’s yours now. And it’s lucky.”

“It is, is it?” I held the necklace up to the sunlight and marveled at its sparkle.

“Yep.” Lucy’s smile was bright, broad. “It’s your lucky locket, Delilah, and don’t you forget it.”

My lips move in a muttered chant. “I can do this. I’ve done it before. I have all the luck. Right?”

Right.

Running has always been about survival. Independence. Everyone I love goes away. And anyone I trust hurts me. Which means I rely on myself. Always.

All the bags I packed in my twenty-four years, they’ll get me somewhere. I’m just not sure where yet.

Bag number one. My mother herding my eight-year-old self into a station wagon as she left our father in the middle of the night. I was forced to leave behind my favorite stuffed rabbit, Chester, but I had my little sister. I cuddled Lucy in the back seat and told her it would all be okay.

Bag number six. The night Tom came to my room. In slow motion, I watched his hand approach me. Doubt and disbelief crept over me like the blackest of oceans. He was an adult, and I was sixteen. I inched away from him. I said *stop*. I told my mother, but she said it was my fault. *You’re like that harlot I named you after, Delilah. You’re just like her.*

That night, I ran away. I tried to take Lucy with me, but…

My throat grows tight like I’m being choked by my own memories.

Clutching at my locket, I force my brain to a new one.

Bag number eight. The night Travis hit me before passing out on the couch. I packed a bag and left, but not before burning his police uniform, badge, and antique gun collection in the fireplace.

Maybe that's why I felt safe at the Velvet Belles. Because I finally had the power over men when all my life men have been trying to control me.

Which brings me to bag number twelve and this lonely highway.

It was in Utah that I realized I had no control. No plan. I've been driving aimlessly. Precisely my MO. I made some good choices in life after some bad things happened to me, so I'm hoping that this counts as a good decision.

I swallow against the burn in my throat. Anger flares inside of me. Fuck Sammy. I liked that job. I liked that life. To give it up, even for a short time, hurts.

Everything hurts. Everything's a scream inside of me.

I've thought about Sammy's face exploding over and over again. I thought about it as I stopped at a greasy diner and ate runny eggs. I thought about it as I drove up the 15, out of Idaho and into Montana. The gun. The spilled whiskey. Brains.

Tears building in my eyes, I run a finger over the cool gold of my locket. "God, Lucy Lou, what do I do? Tell me what to do." I'm well aware I use my dead little sister as a voice of reason, a Magic 8 Ball of sorts, but it helps.

A soft whisper. *Let it out, let it out.*

Heaviness settles in my chest. Panic. It builds and builds, until I'm pulling my Pinto over onto the side of the road, unbuckling my seat belt, and clambering across the seat to the passenger door.

I throw it open and fling myself to the ground. I gulp crisp mountain air. My entire body shakes, threatening to combust.

Breathe, Delilah. Let's not self-destruct in a field of cows.

I laugh like a madwoman and then I scream.

Sammy's words echo in the back of my mind.

If you don't run, Delilah, you are next.

What the fuck does that mean? Is someone really after me? Or was it the ramble of a lunatic?

The first time I met Sammy, he took my hand and kissed it, making some strange bow that I'd tell Melly about later. We'd laugh about it for weeks.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm Lady." I batted my lashes. One night with this guy and my rent and car would be paid for months. "Lady Lawless. The best you've ever seen."

"This one's perfect," Belle said, pushing me forward until I felt Sammy's hot breath on my face. "You need her."

"You deal in girls—so do I." Sammy looked at Belle and grinned. "I'll take her."

I shiver at the memory. Exhaling a shaky breath, I stand and crawl across the passenger seat into the driver's. I roll up the window and stare into the pitch-black night.

It's dark, late, I'm traumatized by whiskey and brain matter, and I don't know where I am.

I'm lost.

The thought brings tears to my eyes.

I swallow a sob and glance over my shoulder at my full back seat. I packed in a panic. Sure, I packed essentials—toothbrush, makeup, underwear, laptop—but I also packed my true loves, Strawberry Pop-Tarts, the B volume from my encyclopedia set, and my pet rat, Ratson. A small speaker for my music. My ballet flats and my stilettos.

Another bag. A new life.

I hold my breath as I pull the car onto the road and resume driving.

I speed past a sign twenty minutes later. Tempest, Montana.

Tempest. That's how I feel right now.

Fighting a yawn, I rub my eyes. I shouldn't be tired since I'm used to night shifts—but my body aches and I'm exhausted. I haven't slept in two days, running on adrenaline, and I want nothing more than a soft bed, a plush pillow, and good dreams.

That's when I notice the fog rolling in, making it harder and harder to see. I squint, the road almost swallowed up in the white mist.

"Shit." Deciding I don't need to add a car accident to my long list of worries, I pull the Pinto onto a side road, driving along the curve until I hit a gravel lot. It's so dark out, I can't see a thing. A squeak has me glancing over my shoulder. Ratson rattles his wheel, asking to be let out of his cage. "Rats, just give me a minute, okay?"

I grab my phone and open Google Maps. The bright blast of light illuminates the inside of the cab. Thankfully, I have service. I zoom out and out and out—

A tap sounds at my window.

"Miss?"

I gasp and jerk my head up to see an unfamiliar face. A deep voice cuts through the window. "You lost?"

Heart pounding, I inch it open a crack. A tall man with dark hair and a sharp jaw full of scruff leans down. Behind him, I can make out the silhouette of a motorcycle.

My hand blindly feels along the door, checking the button to make sure it's locked. "Sorry, I am lost. I couldn't see anything, so I pulled over."

He holds up a hand. "No need to apologize. Can't be too careful."

"The fog, it's wild."

His forehead furrows. “That’s Tempest. It comes alive at night. You shouldn’t be driving.”

I bite my lip and tuck my cell phone into the pocket of my sweatpants. “Is there a motel around or…?”

“Twenty-five miles that way.”

My heart deflates. Twenty-five *more* miles? I wipe furiously at my face as if I can get a head start on the tears that threaten to fall.

“Where are you going?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure.”

He stares as if considering something. “You know, if you’re up for it, and it doesn’t sound creepy as hell, my family and I have a house you can stay in.”

“Really?” My voice sounds so small, hesitant. Hopeful.

“Really.”

I watch him carefully in the light of my cell phone, remembering advice Melly gave me when it was time to decide whether I’d go into a VIP room with a man. *If they have mean eyes, they’ll give you trouble. Steer clear.*

And this man…

His eyes are kind.

I consider my options. Taking help from a strange man isn’t the smartest idea—he could be a serial killer or a rapist—but what do I have to lose? I’ve already seen a man blow himself away in front of my eyes. Might as well make one more risky decision.

The man backs up. Some of my anxiety eases when I spy the baby carrier strapped to his chest. Tucked inside it is a small, floppy-eared puppy.

I giggle. “Is that a—”

“Mangy rat I rescued from the ditch?” His raspy voice turns affectionate as he rubs the puppy behind the ears. “Yeah. It is.”

The wiggling puppy, combined with the man's kind eyes, makes me trust my gut.

I look at his motorcycle. His black leather jacket. I bite my lip, feeling bad. "You're on your way out."

He shakes his head. "Not a problem."

I unbuckle my seat belt and reach for the door handle. "I have mace and a nail file."

"I like a prepared woman." His tone is amused.

I inhale a steely breath. If I'm killed by a man with a puppy strapped to his chest, then so be it. I deserve my fate.

I punch open the glove box, grab the USB, then exit my car. The man keeps a respectable distance as I reach into the back seat to retrieve Ratson, my duffel bag, and a sparkly pair of thigh-high boots. I know I said necessities only, but this counts.

"Follow me," he says.

It's too dark to really see anything, but we trudge across rock, then long grass. In the distance, lit up by moonlight and silhouetted against the dark, are tall buildings that look like silos. "Is this a ranch?" I can smell hay and animal, mixed with a sweeter, more pleasant smell.

"Yeah," he says. "Me and my brothers own it."

We come to a stop in front of a small house. The man digs in his pocket for a ring of keys. "We call this the Creek House." He opens the door, flips on the light, and lets me pass.

After so long cocooned in the dark of the highway, I blink at the brightness of the lamp. Relief fills me as I survey my home for the night. Smiling, I walk around the small room. It's lovely. Thick wooden beams on the pitched ceiling. White walls. There's a leather couch in the middle of the room. Behind it, a Murphy bed. Next to a large window is a small

kitchenette with an island and two stools. The only separate room is the bathroom—otherwise it's one large living space.

"Everything's clean." The man's voice rumbles at my back. "Including the sheets. We use this place as a fishing spot but haven't yet this year."

"This is perfect." I settle my bags and Ratson on the counter, my boots on the floor, then turn to face him. "Thank you."

His eyes widen as they drift over me. "There's ice in the freezer." His voice is low, soft. "Might take some of the swelling down."

Shit.

I slide a shaky hand over my face, knowing what he sees. A black and blue bruise on my cheekbone, finger marks on my wrists. Pressure builds behind my eyes. It's too kind. Especially for me. All I can do is give him a watery smile, on the edge of hysteria, on the edge of saying too much.

"I'm River." In the light of the Creek House, his blue eyes sparkle. He's heavily inked, colorful tattoos peeking out from beneath the sleeve of his leather jacket. He's tall, handsome, intense, and serious. Good thing I'm not interested.

"Delilah." I reach into the pocket of my gray sweatpants, feeling around the USB to dig out a wad of cash. "Take it," I say, stretching out a hand, feeling desperate to pay him back for his kindness. "For the room."

He hesitates but doesn't argue, taking the money from me and pocketing it. "Listen, if I see you, or if I don't, I hope everything works out for you."

"Thanks."

After one last long look, he leaves the keys on the entry table and exits the Creek House.

I slide the USB out of my pocket. My fingers itch to get rid of it. I look around and find the perfect place. The sparkly fringed cowboy boot. I hold

it over the shaft, let it go, and it falls into the black void with a clatter. Good riddance.

I prop my palms on the counter behind me and sag back. My entire body feels dazed and hollow. There's the roar of a motorcycle and then silence. I let out a little laugh, then squeeze my eyes shut. My eyes begin to burn as I hold back emotion.

God, this fucking night.

When I open my eyes, I flinch.

There's a minibar in the corner of the room.

If I never see another glass of whiskey again, it'll be too soon.

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3

Cole

The Rusty Spur Saloon is the biggest bar in Tempest. It pulls city slickers, rodeo cowboys, and locals, creating the perfect storm of chaos. With its swinging doors and the original hand-carved bar from 1908, it's an ode, a testament to an old frontier saloon. The walls talk, littered with letters, photos, autographed horseshoes, dollar bills, lipstick kisses.

It's housed in a renovated historic two-story brick building that takes up an entire city block on Main Street. A building my brother, Warren, owns. A building that gives us the upper hand when we need it. The Rusty Spur pulls double duty: stocking our whiskey and collecting Tempest's secrets.

A slow wave of whispers travels through the bar, following me as I shove inside, my boots crunching peanut shells. I lift a hand to a group of ranchers huddled at a high-top. Devlin Millsap, our wheat supplier, gives me a nod. On instinct, my eyes sweep across the room, clocking the small camera in a mounted bull head over a Coors sign.

With help from Frank Langford, a former Tempest deputy, Warren had the bar wired with a professional setup. Audio, video, it's ours. We make it our business to know what goes on in our town. Because knowing means we keep people safe.

Especially our brothers.

“Special fuckin’ delivery,” I mutter as I slam the crate of whiskey onto the bar top.

“Doing a drop for Hassie?” From behind the bar, Warren makes quick work of surveying me.

“Yeah.” I glance at the bartender headed across the room with a tray full of drinks and arch a brow. “Don’t suppose you can spare a bartender?”

“Don’t even think about it.” He laughs, reaches for a rag to wipe down the bar top. “We’re running short here too, brother.” Dodging a barback, he pulls a bottle of Weston Whiskey off the top shelf. “Drink?”

I nod, but he’s already pouring out two fingers and sliding the crystal glass toward me. In addition to owning the Rusty Spur, Warren also makes the cocktail menu for our distillery.

I slip onto a stool, bring the glass to my lips, and take a sip. That little drop of liquid gold expands and blooms on my tongue until I taste caramel and vanilla notes. Weston Whiskey. It’s like drinking heaven.

“Busy tonight.” I scan the room. A local string band, the Moonshiners, jams in the corner. A few locals are hunkered down at a table, playing cards. A group of six slams through the double-saloon door, laughing and carrying shopping bags.

Tourists.

“And so it begins.” Warren lifts a glass of whiskey in a toast, and I do the same. Summer season in Montana brings tourists in by the truckload. With proximity to Glacier, tourist season means more guests at the distillery, more money in our pockets.

I take a deep breath and watch the happy group, envying their oblivion.

If they’re looking for a good time, cowboys and whiskey, the outdoors and rugged beauty, they’re in the right place. But if they’re looking for

ghosts, we've got those too.

Every small town has its secrets, but our small town has more than most.

Over the years, Tempest has seen a disturbing number of instances of fucked-up shit happen. People go missing in the woods. There's been whispers of trafficking. We've had serial killers, cults, meth labs.

And all of it has touched my family in some shape or form.

The curse of Tempest. How it destroys your world, then locks you in your grave. Leaving would be the simple solution, but we stay because it's our town. Our ranch. Leaving means our enemies win. Foolishly, like the animals we rescue, we hope one day we can save it.

Because even when we try to leave Tempest, it always pulls us back.

Warren slams a hand on the 1914 cash register. He peels a handful of change from the till and passes it to a server wearing a pearl-snap chambray and a large Weston Whiskey belt buckle. "Where are they?" Face creased in frustration, he scans the bar for our brothers.

I shift on my seat and sip my drink. "They'll be here."

Meeting at the saloon every Sunday is our end of the workweek ritual. Shoot the shit. Drink some whiskey. Play poker. Debrief the business.

The door to the vault behind the bar moves, opens, and then a husky, feminine voice is saying, "Boo, assholes."

"Jesus." Warren's blue eyes narrow as he twists to look behind him at the secret back room. "I told you to stop using the tunnels."

I shake my head at the whirlwind of a woman who's snuck up on us.

Hassie's lips form a stubborn smirk. "Well, guess what, War? You're boring, and I've never listened to you anyway, so why start now?"

Warren shakes his head as a smile cracks my face. She's sassier than usual.

Crossing his arms, Warren leans back against the bar. Always on edge, on guard when it comes to Hassie Holland. Another responsibility Warren never wanted when he became her guardian at twenty-six—after his best friend, and Hassie's brother, Rio died. She lived at our ranch for two years until she turned eighteen. She's like a sister to us.

Scatterbrained, free-spirited, and a carnival of emotion. No one's ever tried to tame Hassie. Not after what she's been through. All of us try to keep that light inside burning. If anyone tries to put it out, they answer to us.

I shove the crate her way. "Brought you your whiskey."

"Thanks, Cole." Copper head dipping, she rummages around the bar to steal a cherry, pops it in her mouth, then casts sympathetic blue-green eyes my way. "How are you doing?"

Like everyone in town, she knows what tonight means. It's the eighteenth anniversary of our parents' death.

"Fine."

Warren, back as stiff as the starched shirt he wears, narrows his gaze at her. "You didn't ask me how I was."

"You're cool and unbothered," Hassie snaps. "Like the asshole you are."

I clear my throat, changing the subject. "We're planning the launch party tonight."

"Cool. Let me know how I can help."

"Will do."

I stiffen as a sudden hush goes through the bar. I can feel it. Tension. Warren's attention drifts over my shoulder, and I twist on my barstool.

Rogan Hale, Tempest's newly reelected mayor, swaggers through the bar, celebratory cigar tucked above his ear.

"Don't look now," Hassie mutters. "But we got an asshole of the finest variety." Her face contorts in disgust.

Every muscle in my body locks. “What the fuck is he doing here?”

Warren arches a brow. “Victory lap.” He gives me a big-brother side-eye. “He’s here to rub it in. Don’t let him.”

Hassie spits the cherry stem out of her mouth, tied in a perfect knot, and bounces it off Warren’s broad chest. “I’m outta here before you go all alpha.”

“Front door,” he orders, but she ignores him, grabs up the crate of whiskey, and slips back behind the shadows of the vault.

“Fucking woman.” Warren blows out a deep breath, shoots back a shot of whiskey. When it comes to Hassie, he needs it.

I gesture for another drink. Nursing it would be smart, but I need an escape after today. Eyes still on Hale, I growl, “I hate that motherfucker so much.”

Warren snorts. “Looks like a flag threw up on him.”

I turn my head his way. “I know that damn election was rigged.”

I’m still bitter about it. Half the town hates Rogan’s guts. There’s no way he won fair and square. Now we’re stuck with him for four more years. No doubt he plans to make our lives miserable for every single one of them.

In Tempest, the Westons and the Hales are a local legend. A source of small-town gossip.

A bitter rivalry that’s lasted well over a century.

In 1910, the Hales and the Westons were two of the original homesteads of Tempest. Back then, the Westons were cattle ranchers. The Hales were our neighbors, living just over the hill and sharing a border with our land. We existed peacefully for a handful of years. In fact, the Hale founder built a general store and a trading post where they sold Weston beef.

That peace was shattered when Proctor Hale hit Bo Weston’s dog with his truck and left him to die on the side of the road. Incensed, Bo Weston

surprised Proctor one night in his own home, marched him to our ranch, and forced him at shotgun-point to dig a grave and bury his dog.

From there, it snowballed. Hale stopped selling Weston beef at the general store. This bankrupted our family for a decade, until my great-great-great-grandfather, Hezekiah, started breeding bulls.

There were more occurrences over the years. Rivalries that happened through the generations. The great bull-napping of 1945 where Landon Hale stole a prized bull from the Weston ranch and sold it at auction.

Knox Weston cementing over a prized honey hole where the Hales fished in 1968.

It went on and on. Spiraled through the years. Became a source of local lore.

But 1985, the year Weston Whiskey opened, was when the feud turned into a powder keg.

No one knows who had the idea first. What matters is that both the Hales and the Westons opened their own distilleries around the same time. My father partnered with his brother Vaughn; Granger partnered with his brother Junius. While Weston Whiskey soared, thanks to my father securing the water rights to Sweetheart Falls, the Hales' distillery, Old Hale Hill Distillery, went under. The Hales were forced to sell their land, which our father bought. Bitter, Granger and Junius Hale launched a vitriolic campaign against my family, claiming that our father stole their distillery's mash bill.

Guarded more closely than the crown jewels, the mash bill is a unique recipe of grains that each distillery follows to make their whiskey distinct from any other whiskey out there.

It was all a bullshit lie.

Together with my father, Uncle Vaughn came up with our distillery's mash bill years before Weston Whiskey even opened.

The sad fact of the matter is that the Hales' distillery didn't have what it took. Ours did.

Though Junius Hale died several years after the Hales' distillery shuttered, the legend of the mash bill theft is still lore around some parts of Tempest.

Granger Hale, intent on sticking it to the Westons in the only way he could, turned his attention to the land. With what little savings he had left, and savvy real estate investment, he started his own development company, Hale Development. It took off, gaining the backing of investors. He moved fast through the years, moved up in status, stature. Now, he's one of the most prominent businessmen in Montana.

He owns the land, sits on the board of the city council, and controls the cops. The cherry on top is that his son, Rogan Hale, is mayor. Another puppet he can control.

Rogan makes his way over to us. "Well, look who we have here." He nudges a Stetson up on his sweaty brow. "Can't take a shit in this town without running into a Weston."

"My bar, Rogan." Warren fixes his cuffs. "You know that."

My fists clench on the bar top.

I don't just want to punch Rogan Hale. I want to take him to the Pit, skin him, and bury him alive. Because both he and his father have fucked with my family. And I know beyond a shadow of a damn doubt that the Hales are behind my parents' murder.

Rogan's eyes narrow, his knuckles turning white as he grips the back of a stool. "Just came to say hello to my constituency. Not sure why you have a problem with that, Weston."

Coolly, I sip my whiskey. "Think the town has the problem with you, Hale."

The distillery and the Weston last name are respected in town. The Hales are feared except when it comes to big business, government. They're seen by locals as ranchers who forgot their roots and now push around the little people.

Anger reddening his face, Rogan straightens up, brushes aside his jacket pocket to discreetly flash a pistol. "Careful, Weston."

I pause, eyebrow raised, a laugh bubbling on my lips. Motherfucker couldn't hit shit. Hale was raised a poor, hardworking Montana boy, but now he sits in his flashy mansion on the outskirts of town and lets the Tempest police force do his dirty work.

Crooked law enforcement and a good ol' boy mentality. That's what Rogan Hale is all about.

His nostrils pulse as a slow smile spreads across his face. "It's a pity, isn't it? Here I am celebrating, and you're mourning two ghosts."

Warren hitches a breath.

I rip off my stool. "I should tear your fucking head off." The smirk on Rogan's face tells me he's deliberately pushing my buttons. He knows damn well what tonight means.

"Cole." Warren points at me, a reminder to keep myself in check. "Don't."

I release my fists.

Rogan holds up his hands. "Just being friendly."

"You want to drink or to talk shit all night?" Warren cuts in, his voice hard. There's murder in his eyes, but unlike mine, it's contained. "We don't have time for your bullshit, Hale."

"Whiskey." Rogan's bulging eyes scan the shelf, then a smug smile overtakes his face. "Blanton's."

Warren and I share a look. We've killed and buried two men in our life. What's one more?

Warren snorts, grabs a bottle of our rye, and fills a crystal glass to the brim. He slams it on the counter, looks Rogan dead in the face. "Drink it or not."

Rogan flushes red, takes the whiskey without paying, and strides off.

I smother a smirk. It's one of our best *fuck-yous* against the Hales. Rogan may be mayor, but we own the locals because Warren owns the main bar in town.

Warren shakes his head. "Asshole."

I watch Rogan shake a few hands, then sneak out the back door like a snake in the grass. Anger burns deep in the pit of my stomach.

One day. One day he'll get his.

"What'd we miss?"

I whip around at the sound of Ezra's voice. He and Wells stand there, shit-eating grins on their faces.

"Rogan." I roll my tense neck out on my shoulders.

Ezra's brow lifts like he already knows what happened.

"Damn," Wells complains. "We missed a fight."

"You don't need fights," Warren says from behind the bar. "None of us need fights."

Ezra dips his chin in agreement. The second youngest, born with brains most of us weren't, Ezra's always reliable for backup, but he never starts a fight. Usually that honor goes to me or River.

"C'mon, let's get started." Warren reaches for the vault door and swings it open. To his bartender, he calls out, "Keep an eye on things, Margo."

We follow Warren through the heavy vault door and into our own hidden speakeasy. What we call the Parlor. A dimly lit room filled with dark wood,

lanterns, and vintage western decor, it takes us back to the Wild West.

Our meeting spot for poker games, for business, for bullshit. On rare occasions, Warren rents it to locals for private parties and whiskey tastings.

Wells, Ezra, and I drop into mahogany leather chairs and couches, while Warren pulls out a bottle of whiskey and splashes the amber liquid into crystal glasses.

“Sorry we’re late.” Ezra groans as he kicks a boot up on his knee. “Had to close up the distillery, then Bugs got ahold of me.”

I give him a questioning look. “She okay?”

Emotion flickers across his face at the mention of his five-year-old daughter, Evangeline, but he tamps it down. “Girl gave me hell tonight. Three bedtime stories, and she still wasn’t out.”

Wells accepts a glass of whiskey from Warren. “What about Wyoma?” Ezra lives at the homestead with our aunt and uncle, who take care of Evangeline when he’s working.

“Bugs says only I get the voices right.” Ezra tries to sound annoyed but all he sounds is smitten. Damn sucker for the girl. We all are.

Ezra’s mustache twitches as he shoves his glasses up on his nose. “Heard we lost Kimmy.”

Warren hands him a glass and stares him down. “Heard right.”

Ezra gives Warren a look of disdain. “Couldn’t keep your dick in your pants.” He likes to boss just as much as Warren does.

“If I needed my little brother’s opinion, I’d have asked for it.” There’s a scoffing click in War’s throat as he shakes his head.

“What we need is a goddamn bartender,” Ezra complains. A thinker, methodical, anything out of alignment messes with his plan for the distillery. He hopes to be lead distiller any day now.

I roll my eyes as Ezra and Warren bicker like old men.

Wells flicks a quick look my way. “Think River will come down off his mountain?”

“He said he’d be here.” I remove my black Stetson and carefully place it on the whiskey barrel coffee table.

River pulls a few shifts for us at the distillery when we’re short-staffed, but he runs his tattoo shop, Bootlegger Ink, on Main Street.

As if on cue, the vault door swings open.

River, wearing scuffed-up boots and a black leather jacket, stomps in. “Hey, kid.” He squeezes Wells’s shoulder as he passes by. The typical Weston way to show affection.

I groan when I see the small bundle of fur strapped to his chest. “Christ, not another one.” River’s never said no to a rescue animal.

“You’re late,” Warren notes as he looks River over.

“Had to stop by the ranch and get Evvie’s old baby carrier.” Unfazed by Warren’s bark, River unhooks the carrier and sets the puppy on the wood floor. Tattooed hands flexing, he pats the puppy’s bluetick belly until it flops onto its side. “Gotta give this little fucker a name.”

Wells is already on the ground, ruffling the puppy’s ears and getting acquainted.

A vein pulses in Warren’s temple. “The dog pisses in here, it’s your ass.”

I look at River, eyes narrowed. “Where have you been?”

A muscle in his jaw twitches. “Got sidetracked.”

“With what?”

He leans back against the bar and crosses his arms. His dark brown hair is mussed from his helmet. “Something pretty.”

Warren and I share a doubtful glance. River’s been a damn monk since April disappeared.

Satisfied they're all here, I run a careful eye over my brothers. Warren, my ally. River, our rebel with a cause. Ezra, the steadfast, if not frustrating, voice of reason. Wells, the baby. And I couldn't get by without any of them.

"By the way." River shrugs. "Saw a light on in the Creek House. Think the wiring's acting up again." He turns to pour himself a drink, but not before I see a smirk flash across his face.

"Shit." I run a hand down my stubbled jaw, mentally tallying up tomorrow's list of ranch work. "I'll handle it in the morning."

River snorts. "All you do is work, brother. Ever think of taking a break? Getting a life?"

It's big brother instinct to throw it back in his face, *What about you*? But I bite it back. I don't need to remind River. He lost his life a long time ago.

So I settle for grunting. "I have one."

"Bulls and barrels don't count." River's lips turn up. "What about a girl?"

I glare at him. Out of all my brothers, River's the one who pushes my buttons the most. He also gives me the most worry.

I cross my arms and sink back in my chair, wanting to avoid this entire conversation. "No time."

I've seen all four of my brothers lose someone they love because of this town. Getting close, committing is not in my cards. Love. Happiness. Neither is something I need in my life, that's for damn sure.

"Now that we've got Cole's love life out of the way…" Snickers from Ezra and Wells as Warren lifts a big hand and surveys us. "Let's get down to business. We need to talk about the launch."

Every year, at the end of the summer, we host a launch party to announce our limited-edition fall whiskey. Everyone from town is invited to Copper Run Ranch to celebrate.

Ezra ticks off a list on his fingers. “We need a name for the new release. We need a label. We need a party that blows the roof off all past launches.”

I bite back a smile. Ezra would talk whiskey in his sleep. He lives for the science, the nerding out. As the distillery manager, he’s the one who keeps Weston Whiskey on track. Though I know he aims to take over the title of master distiller from our Uncle Vaughn one of these days. Although, he’s been stretched thin recently with Evangeline’s recent epilepsy diagnosis.

Like he’s read my mind, Warren gives Ezra a look. “You can handle all that?”

“I have to.” Ezra shrugs.

Wells glances at me. “You’ll be here for it?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” The question stings, and I realize that since our parents died, I haven’t been home for a launch party.

Fuck. Eighteen damn years.

A wave of guilt runs through me. Even though our parents’ death pulled us closer, a glue that held us together, there’s still a gulf between me and my brothers.

After the funeral, Warren had gathered us together, his arms around us. Wells, ten years old, had sobbed, inconsolable. But the rest of us stood, stone-faced, frozen, like giving in to tears would open a floodgate that would never stop.

“It’s just us now, okay?” Warren rasped. He gave all of us a long, desperate look. “It’s us, and all of you need to remember that. Because I won’t lose any more of you.”

But he did.

We all coped with our parents’ death in different ways. After we got custody of our brothers, I left Tempest and burned my rage off on the rodeo circuit. Warren stayed and became the boss, the father figure.

Every year, I told myself I'd go home, but every year I stayed away. Like bull riding made me closer to Jack. Like I could turn back time and change the past by chasing vengeance. Some stupid fucking notion I still don't understand.

My brothers expect me to disappear again, and I don't blame them.

"I'm here to make barrels for Evangeline." I take a draw off my glass, not wanting them to see they've hit a nerve. Any extra money we make from selling barrels goes to Evangeline's treatment. Ezra's made it his mission to get her the best, the newest treatments, no matter the cost.

"We need those extra barrels." Ezra evaluates me doubtfully from behind his glasses. I don't know if he's ever forgiven me for leaving, for not coming home sooner.

"I got you." I rub a hand over my jaw, my blood running cold with worry. They're depending on me. I won't let them down.

"Speaking of the limited edition, which whiskey are we planning to use?" Warren's arms cross over his chest.

"We have that immature rye that's been sitting for the last four years," Wells offers. "Tastes like gingersnaps."

"I was thinking something older." Ezra scoots forward in his chair, eyes searching us all. "Something from eighteen years ago."

We all stare at each other. Then it dawns on all of us at the exact same time.

"Mom and Dad's whiskey," I say, putting my hands behind my head as I lean back into my chair.

A hush falls over the room.

"It's ready." Ezra scoots forward in his chair. "Those eighteen-year barrels can't get any better." There's pride, excitement in his voice. "I tasted it today. It's more spice than sweet, and it finishes clean. It'll blow your

damn minds. It’s like nothing you’ve ever had before. You’ll never find this unicorn in the wild.”

River drags a hand over his mouth like he’s trying not to laugh. “English, Ez.”

“It’d be perfect for the limited edition.” Ezra exhales like he’s breathing fire.

The ghost of what he says hangs between us like a heavy shadow. No one speaks. We’re all thinking the same thing.

Those whiskey barrels are the last we have of when our parents were alive.

Using that whiskey feels like one more part, one more memory is slipping away.

“I don’t know, man.” River shakes his head.

Gaze downcast, Wells rubs a hand over the scar above his heart.

“We should use it. Hell, it’s perfect now. What are we going to do, let those barrels sit in the rickhouses for the rest of our lives?” A determined Ezra is hard to talk down. It’s how he’s gotten this far in life, even when his entire world’s fallen apart multiple times. “Mom and Dad would want us to. Jack would want us to.”

“War? What are you thinking?” I study his face as his eyes slowly lift to mine. He’s my partner in everything when it comes to whiskey and our younger brothers.

“I’m thinking our parents should be here right now.” There’s steel, anger in his voice.

“Hell, you all had them longer than me.” Wells’s voice is soft, no anger, only fact.

He was only ten when they died. He blocked out a lot after their death, after the foster home.

My throat closes up at the memory. The phone call from my Uncle Vaughn telling me my parents were dead. Packing up my rodeo gear and racing home only to find my younger brothers had been separated and shipped off to foster homes by a judge's order.

All because of Granger Hale.

Not content with letting my uncle or Warren take temporary custody, Granger used his power to bribe a judge to place River, Ezra, and Wells with foster families who hurt children. In one of the cruelest piece-of-shit moves, he hid their location from us.

It was six months of chaos as Warren and I tried to sort out our parents' will and fight like hell to become our brothers' guardians.

We only found them thanks to Aurora, Granger's daughter. A person who's decidedly not cut from the same cloth as the rest of the Hales.

Warren and I might butt heads at times, but we share one thing in common.

The need to protect our brothers.

With every breath in our bodies.

I look down at the scar on my right palm. One we all share.

From that night. That night that changed our world.

Breaking the silence, Warren's deep voice booms, "Let's use the whiskey." He glances around the room, and when he gets murmurs of assent from each of us, he lifts his glass. "To Mom and Dad."

"To Mom and Dad," we all echo. Each of us has a memory playing out across our face. Mine: my parents at my first rodeo. Their proud smiles stretched the heart in my chest so wide it felt like light was living inside it.

As we all finish off our whiskey, I shift my gaze back to the deep scar on my palm.

No more light. Not anymore.

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4

Delilah

Sleep. Glorious, glorious sleep.

Then, the shrill cry of a rooster. Cue murderous, murderous thoughts.

“Go away,” I mutter at the sunshine breaking through the blinds. Burying my face in the pillow, I lift an arm like I can shoo away the noise. I could sleep a thousand more hours. But apparently, nature won’t let me.

My hundred-pound eyelids fight to open. I blink at the strange surroundings. The room slowly comes into focus as my memory comes back to me.

Sammy. Dead.

Highway. Panic attack.

Cute guy. Creek House.

I groan, then pry myself off the bed. Bare feet hitting the floor, I stand and head to the bathroom to pee. After, I examine my cheek in the mirror, then I feed Ratson. His cage sits on the kitchenette counter. He squeaks as I drop in his kibble, then rolls happily in his bed of wood chips.

His beautiful black eyes stare up at me.

“I love you.” It’s just him and me in this new life, for however long. “Can I be a rat with you? And have rat worries?” Ratson squeaks and gnaws at his kibble.

My phone chimes from its place on the skinny bedside nightstand tucked beneath a window.

I swipe it up and climb back into bed.

A text from Melly. A flurry of emotions and emoji.

Lili! Where are you??? Everyone’s freaking the fuck out.

Montana. But don’t tell anyone.

Yeehaw, Lady Lawless going back to her roots!!! Kiss a cowboy for me.

And of course not. But come back. I miss you.

Miss you too.

Tell me something happy.

I watch the ellipsis on the phone disappear and reappear, meaning Melly plans to take longer than normal to get back to me.

I switch over to last night’s text with Belle, rereading through the thread.

Where are you, Lady?

I’m in Montana.

But where in Montana?

I stare at her text, still waiting on my reply, worrying my lower lip between my teeth. I ache to tell her, but I don’t want her to get in trouble.

Not when she’s done so much for me. Gave me a job. Packed up my things after I left Travis and sicced T-Bone on him when he came to the club pleading with me to come home.

No, the less she knows the better.

Belle will help me. I’m sure of it. She always has. Meanwhile, all I can do is wait and hope all of this will blow over.

Lifting my head, I scan the room. I need things. Coffee. Food. Clothes. Basic necessities. I need a plan. A new purpose in life for the next however many weeks. Something tells me that the cows in Montana outnumber the strip clubs. My eyes land on my sparkly fringed boots, neatly placed in a corner of the room. Panic claws at my throat. I need to get rid of that damn USB.

That feeling of the walls closing in immediately takes me back to living with my mother and Tom. Not knowing what tomorrow would bring. Not knowing how to get out, how to survive.

What if this doesn’t blow over? What if I can’t go back to Vegas? That little life I built gone up in smoke. No more greasy tacos with Melly. No more dancing at the Velvet Belles.

“Shit,” I whisper as tears cloud my vision. I clutch at my lucky locket, rub a thumb over the smooth gold.

What the hell is wrong with me? Sleep. I need to go back to sleep.

After working long nights at the club, mornings are my nemesis. Give me the bright lights of Vegas and starshine any day. Belle said lie low, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do. Sleep. Then get up, take a hot bath, have a cold beer, figure out a plan, and try not to lose my mind. Easy, right?

Then how come I feel like crying?

I inhale a steeling breath and wipe my eyes. There’s no one here to save me. I have to save myself.

I put my phone away and burrow into bed. I hug my pillow and toss one leg over the cool sheet, letting the warm sunlight stream in from the window to kiss my skin.

Smiling, I sigh and snuggle deeper. I close my eyes. A dream comes to me, and I float, Lucy and I reading our thrift store encyclopedias as we drive in a limousine with cherry lollipops in our mouths…

Thud.

Sleep and my impending dream melt away.

Thud.

My blood chills.

Thud.

My eyes flash open at the sound of boots inside, scuffing over hardwood floors. A rasp of a smoky voice. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding.”

Oh god. They found me.

Whoever they are.

Heart hammering, I burrow deeper under the sheet like it’s an escape portal. Panic sets in, and I imagine a man with a gun aimed straight at me.

“I can see you,” the voice gruffs.

Fuck.

Slowly, I uncurl, mentally noting instant weapons at my disposal. The coffee pot. Smash it and I have an instant shank. Plastic bag in the waste basket. *Smothering time, motherfucker.*

I bolt upright in bed.

Holy shit.

A gasp hitches my chest before I remember the steps to breathe.

Inhale, exhale. Real simple, Delilah.

It’s a man. A massive man. A cowboy. He stands in the middle of the room, fisted hands on his hips. Dark hair peeks from the edges of his black cowboy hat. A chiseled jaw with thick scruff and lush lips. Tight black T-shirt. Well-worn denim. Boots. Sleeves of black ink wind their way over his tan, corded forearms, reminding me of smoke.

At the sight of him, I forget fear. All I see is him.

Who is he? Why’s he in my room? And who decided he gets to look this good?

We gape at each other. His eyes flick down at my bare legs, my thin camisole. My cheeks heat. I grab at the sheets, yanking them back over me.

And then he’s growling, “Who the fuck are you?”

I almost laugh at the biting rudeness of his question. But his rudeness fuels my own.

I lift my chin. “None of your fucking business.”

“You’re on my ranch. It is my business.” His voice is gravel and fire. I shiver as it drags over me.

So do his eyes.

Those broad shoulders tense. His big hand goes to his back pocket. “Talk. Now. Else I call the cops and have you arrested for trespassing.”

“Please. No cops,” I blurt, and his brow furrows into an even deeper scowl. I drop the sheet before gathering it up again. My heart hammers. “I didn’t break in.” I rack my brain for the name of the man from last night, something related to nature, to a blue just like his eyes. “River! I met him last night. He said I could stay here.”

The cowboy sighs long and loud at the ceiling. Mutters some words that sound like *brother, idiot, kill him*. “Goddamnit.”

Brother. Brother.

I narrow my gaze, watching the annoyance play out on his face. “Your brother’s a saint. He was nice to me, which is more than I can say for you.” I didn’t expect the hostility; a friendly face would be nicer. At the Velvet Belles, sass gets me tips, but judging by the expression on this grumpy cowboy’s face, my charms won’t work with him. Which only makes me want to try harder.

He stares, and I stare right back. That square jaw of his tics, his eyes watchful and vigilant.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be out of here as soon as—” I tilt my head as it dawns on me that I have no idea where I am. “Where am I, anyway?”

“Tempest, Montana. Copper Run Ranch. Weston Whiskey.” Each word is an annoyed grunt.

Whiskey.

The word transports me back to the Penthouse. To that damn USB in the bottom of my boot. To Sammy’s words.

If you don’t run, Delilah, you are next.

It’s perfect. Hope fills my heart. If someone is after me, a small ranch in Montana is the last place they’d ever think to look.

A soft whinny and the stomp of hooves interrupts my thoughts. My head whips to the window. I gape as a mahogany-colored horse pokes its nose through the open window.

I giggle. “Is that a horse?”

The cowboy looks at me for a moment, holds me in his glare. “You’re on a ranch. Of course it’s a fucking horse.”

I arch a brow. “If you’re the ranch welcome wagon, you really need to work on your people skills.”

It’s brief, but it’s there. The right side of his mouth kicks up before those lush lips flatten into a stern line.

Suddenly, all I want to do is make this man smile. A challenge I accept. He just doesn't need to know that.

The floor shakes as the man storms toward me, the scent of leather and sunlight and black coffee filling my nose. As he gets closer, my eyes widen. He's more mountain than man, with sculpted biceps, tan forearms corded with muscle and veins, and a square jawline that could cut glass. Standing over six feet tall, he exudes confidence and strength. His eyes are piercing, depthless blue.

I could never trust a man this perfect.

Good thing I don't have to.

The cowboy's gaze holds judgment and doubt as he casts a skeptical glare. "Go home, lady. Wherever that is."

Heaviness sinks into my shoulders. Tears spring to my eyes. I'm suddenly despondent. "I don't have anywhere to go," I say softly, but not weakly. The thought of looking for another place to stay is daunting. God, I don't want to do this. Beg. I haven't been vulnerable in so long, and I especially don't want to cry in front of this man.

"Nowhere?" He tips up his cowboy hat to get a better look at me.

It's hot. The hat and the action. I bite my lip and squeeze my thighs together.

I force my gaze to his. "No. Nowhere." Hopeful, I try again, mustering my sweetest smile. "River said no one lives here. Is it…not for rent?"

"No." He crosses his arms, causing his biceps to bulge in his tight black T-shirt. "It's not."

The cowboy's face remains hard, impassive. Jesus, it's like trying to crack a safe. I'm impressed. Not to mention slightly turned on. It's a rare occasion when my flirting skills don't make a man bat an eye.

“I’ll be so quiet. You won’t even know I’m here.” Trying again, I give him my sweetest smile.

His gaze dips to my chest and bounces away. “I doubt that.”

Heat sears my cheeks. I snap open my mouth. “Listen—”

“Town’s about twenty-five miles that way.” He nods his sharp chin, glancing at the door.

With that, he storms out of the Creek House. I watch through the window as he mounts his horse, kicking it into a gallop. I stare longer than I should, catching a glimpse of tight sculpted ass, a broad back rippling with muscle, before he disappears around a corner of the house.

I pull in a shaky breath and flop back on the bed. There’s a flutter in my stomach that I chalk up to annoyance.

One thing’s clear in Tempest, Montana.

The cowboys are anything but gentlemen.

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5

Cole

She had glitter on her face.

I hate myself for the thought. That it—and the girl—are still stuck in my head even after I stable my quarter horse, Pryor, and make the short trek from the animal sanctuary to Ezra's house. Surrounded by trees and towering mountain ranges, the west side of Copper Run Ranch plays host to our animal sanctuary and our houses.

Bright May sunshine and bold blue Montana sky. Wildflowers are scattered in the long grass. The scent of pine and evergreen sweep in on the brisk spring breeze.

I stomp up the steps and into the homestead.

Like it always does, my chest tightens when I step inside the kitchen. Though my aunt and uncle left their house on the other side of the ranch to live here with Ezra and Evangeline, it's still our parents' house. Still holds every memory.

My mother, tongue scrunched out the side of her mouth, puzzling out her puzzles at the long kitchen table. My father, letting us boys taste whiskey

well before we were twenty-one. Our parents dancing in the kitchen, their laughter filling the house long after we went to bed.

The scent of biscuits and gravy hits me. A child's plate left on the kitchen island. "Sinners Like Me" plays on the radio. Wells, Ezra, and our Uncle Vaughn lean back against the kitchen counter, deep in conversation.

"Hey, Cole." My uncle looks up, his thick mustache twitching in that know-it-all way. With his sun-leathered skin, Vaughn wears the same flannel every day regardless of the weather. "You here for coffee or whiskey or a little of both?"

"A little of both." I grab up a coffee cup and hold it out for a shot of my favorite whiskey. How it's been every morning since my parents died. One of the easiest ways to get through my day.

My Aunt Wyoma hustles through the kitchen, her long gray hair wrapped in a bun. "Cole, honey, have some breakfast too." She waves the spatula in her hand like a threat.

I set my hat on the counter. "Just coffee, Wyoma."

Her *tsk* is one of loud disapproval.

"Somethin' tells me coffee's not the only thing on your mind." My uncle arches a bushy brow.

Vaughn Weston, one of the original founders of Weston Whiskey, works alongside Ezra as our master distiller. He and my Aunt Wyoma helped Warren and me raise our younger brothers after we got custody. He's kept us on the straight and narrow the best he can, but he's no stranger to a little Weston wild either.

Vaughn's the polar opposite of my father. Rebellious, wild, he was always telling us tall tales about his past, the best ways to get into trouble. But they were brothers and best friends and trusted in each other, especially when it came to whiskey.

“Anyone want to tell me why there’s a half-naked girl in the Creek House?” I demand, running a hand over a chip in the counter from River slamming a wooden sword into it when he was six.

Brow arched, Ezra lifts his cup of coffee. “Because god felt generous?”

My hackles rise.

“Because River felt like pissing you off?” Wells leans low on the counter and rubs a hand over his smile. He lives over the ridge, closer to the pasture and barn.

The front door slams. I growl when River walks into the house, a squirrelly looking smile on his face. It’s a rare occasion when he’s at the ranch, which means he’s here because of the fucking stunt he pulled.

I point at River, eyes narrowed. “You did it on purpose.”

“Did what?” The edge of his mouth twitches.

I shouldn’t give him a reaction, but I do. “You put that girl in the Creek House knowing I’d find her there.”

Talk about a bad start to a good day.

I had been up for hours this morning feeding the animals, then I went for a ride, heading for the Creek House to see what was up with the electricity. No idea that she was waiting for me. Unable to help it, my mind drifts. To that long, tan leg tossed lazily over the sheets. Her big brown eyes. The curve of her breast beneath the sheet. She had no damn business looking that good. Like a fucking dream you can’t forget.

I expected the girl to cower at my presence, but she surprised me when she squared up with me. A fact that pisses me off. Her flirty sass, her sharp tongue turned me on. I haven’t stared at a woman like that in a long damn time. Haven’t let one affect me like that either.

“She showed up in the middle of the night, lost in the fog and looking for a place to stay. What was I supposed to do?” River shrugs.

I shake my head. I’m not a patient man like my brother. “This is a sanctuary for animals. Not people.”

“Since when?” Wells snorts.

River accepts a cup of coffee from Vaughn. “I thought she’d be good for you.”

My brother must be fucking insane. A relationship’s the last thing I want. Not to mention the girl’s at least fifteen years younger than me.

Ezra chokes on his coffee. “Like what? Cole’s pet project?”

I grind my teeth. “Tell her to go.”

“You do it.” River drops his motorcycle helmet on the counter. “You’re the only one with the issue.”

“She’s trouble. We have enough problems this summer.” We don’t need some strange, half-naked girl who showed up on the ranch without a word of explanation. My mind is still locked on the way she went rigid when I mentioned calling the cops.

A bluff. When it comes to the Tempest PD, I’m about as trusting as a wolf, but the way she reacted tells me she’s hiding from something.

A barking laugh pops out of my uncle’s mouth. “Seems like you boys better figure out a solution, seeing as how she’s getting comfortable.”

Five pairs of eyes snap to the big bay window that overlooks the entire ranch. It gives a clear view of my house and Avalanche Creek. It also looks directly at the Creek House, which sits about twenty feet away.

Christ.

We all gather at the window.

The girl stands on the porch. Stretching. Her face aglow in the sunlight, she wears pom-pom heels, a garter on her right thigh, and an oversized band tee. With every lift of her hands, the T-shirt threatens to rise above the curve of her pert ass.

A current of hunger thrums through my body. I clench my fists to fight the feeling.

“Her name’s Delilah.” River’s eyes cut to mine. “If you were wondering.”

I give her slender body a once-over. “I wasn’t.”

A snort from Vaughn.

“I wanna see, I wanna see!”

I drag my eyes away from the girl to my niece, Evangeline. Her dark hair is a mess of wild curls, and she bounces on her tiptoes. It’s hard not to smile whenever I see her.

“Up, Uncle Cole, up!” She waves her rainbow-painted fingernails.

“C’mere, princess.” Giving in to Bugs, I grab her up, toss her in the air, then set her toes on the window ledge, ignoring the cluck of a tongue from Wyoma.

If there’s one person who can get us to let our guard down, it’s Evangeline.

River leans in. “What’s the verdict, Bugs?”

Bugs. The nickname goes back to when she was two. She always used to demand carrots for every meal and would chomp into them with a scrunchy bunny face.

Bugs gasps. “She’s *sooo* pretty.”

Of course, Bugs loves Delilah on sight. She’s like one of her cartoon princesses come to life. Minus the ball gown.

“She is,” Ezra agrees. His mustache widens as he smiles. “But not prettier than you.”

Bugs giggles, blushes. “Daddy.” Her big blue eyes take me in. As serious as her father’s. “Do you think she’s pretty, Uncle Cole?”

All eyes swivel toward me.

Damn it. I swear the kid has a sixth sense for putting me on the spot.

Without being too obvious, I steal a glance at the girl. No bra, bedroom eyes, petite and slender with long blond hair that waterfalls to the small of her back. Yeah. She's fucking breathtaking.

River sips his coffee, eyebrow raised. "Tell us. Do you?"

My back teeth grind together. I glare at River.

"Cocksucker," I mutter under my breath.

Bugs inclines her head. "What's a cocksucker, Daddy?"

"Goddamnit, Cole." Ezra glares.

Wells covers his mouth, no doubt a smile behind his hand, and thinks on it. He's the Bugs whisperer. "It's like…a douchebag."

"What's a douchebag?"

Another sigh from Ezra.

"Mayor Hale," I tell her, setting her on her bare feet. "That's the epitome of a douchebag."

It's then Wyoma swoops in. "All right you Wild Westons, put a lid on it. I need a little girl to make nice with some water." She narrows her eyes then lets out a playful growl.

Bugs giggles as she darts out the kitchen, down the hallway, and up the stairs to her bathroom. Wyoma chases after her.

I look back at the window. I shake my head and cross my arms as the girl collapses into a chair on the porch and stretches out like she's a cat in the sun. A disbelieving scoff bubbles in my lungs. I told her to leave, and she's settling in to stay? Her audacity has my cock flexing in my jeans. Has my eyes locked on her as she stretches a toned leg to the sky.

She's making me stare long and hard at something I haven't had in a damn long time.

Like I said. Trouble.

“You want to tell her to go, or should I?” I look at my brothers.

River leans back against the counter, staring me down. “She flinches when you move too fast.”

Anger creeps over me. My mind calls up the bruises on her wrists. Her cheekbone. The soft tremble in her voice when I told her to go.

But I force myself to shrug, to not care. “Sounds like her problem.”

“C’mon, dickhead. You’re not that heartless.” River frowns.

I’m not, but they don’t need to know that. The girl showed up in the middle of the night. She’s looking out for herself. Afraid of something. Or someone. She shouldn’t be here. Baggage, whatever she has, is her own. We’ve had enough drama in our lives to last us a lifetime.

Wells absently spins the wide leather cuff on his wrist. “It’s a sanctuary for a reason, isn’t it?”

Frustration ignites in my chest. Out of us all, Wells is the most optimistic. “Wells, you’re not helping my case.”

River grins at Wells. “I knew you were my favorite brother.”

“He’s just grumpy because it messes with his routine.” Amusement laces my uncle’s tone.

The observation only makes me scowl. Because he’s right. I like my life the way it is. Black coffee. Whiskey. Barrels and bulls. Nothing gets in the way of my work.

Especially not a woman.

I look at Ezra, wanting to change the subject. “You talk to Kimmy?”

“Begged. Pleaded. No dice.” From upstairs comes the sounds of splashing and Evvie’s playful squeals. “She ain’t comin’ back.”

“Fuck.” I run a hand over my jaw. Feel the muscle pulse. Just what we need. Short a bartender. Anyone from town who needed temporary summer work has already been hired by now.

“I could bartend.” Ezra’s gaze shifts to our uncle, expression pensive.

Vaughn shakes his head. Silent until matters concern the business. “You’re stretched thin in the distillery as it is. We need all your focus on the launch.”

“And you have Evvie,” Wells adds. He looks at me. “I could—”

“No,” River and I say in unison. He has the animals. The rodeo. We don’t want our little brother to have more on his plate.

“And we’re not even going to ask you.” Ezra’s lips bounce as he looks at River.

River extends his middle finger without looking at him.

I shift my eyes to the girl once more. Still there. Still in the sun. That halo of golden hair, that slim leg kicked up on her knee is like a punch to the chest. If she weren’t so damn pretty, maybe I’d have some fucking common sense.

Starting now.

I take a step toward the door, intending to tell this pretty new stranger to pack her bags, then send her stubborn ass back to wherever she came from, when Ezra’s voice sounds. “Wait.”

I turn his way.

Behind his glasses, his eyebrows lift in the way that tells me he has an idea. “Think she can bartend?”

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6

Delilah

It’s humid and hot, and the spring sun is warm on my skin.

After my surprise visit from Mr. Grumpy Cowboy, my heart hammered for an hour. But once the adrenaline wore off, bone-deep exhaustion set in again. I stretched, then found an Adirondack chair on the front porch of the Creek House and slunk low. Now, I laze. My body craves sleep. Munchies. I need both.

In the distance, the gentle burble of the creek. Far off, the lowing of cows. It’s quiet here, so unlike the constant buzz of Las Vegas. I wonder what other beauty lurks around this place.

I close my eyes and sigh. If I’m leaving, there’s no point in looking around. Why get attached?

Before I can muse over my next move, there’s the sound of boots stomping on the porch. A shadow darkens the sun. A big shadow. Looming.

“Can you move?” I wave a hand, not bothering to open my eyes. The man’s really messing with my sleep schedule. “You’re blocking my rays.”

“I told you to go.”

“Waiting until dark.” I lower my sunglasses to grin at him. “I’m a vampire.”

He grunts. Without his hat, the man’s dark brown hair is mussed and long at the nape of his neck. My fingers itch to run through it.

“Are you always such a grump?”

His eyes flick to my bare legs. “Do you always prance around half-naked in the morning?”

“More so at night.” My eyebrow arches, and I sit up. “Why? Were you watching?”

The slight flush beneath his scruff, the clearing of his throat tells me he was. I may have trauma and terror, but I know for a fact I have great boobs.

The man props a boot on the edge of my lounger and rests his blue gaze on me. “You can stay in the Creek House.” There’s a hint of frustration in his tone.

“Really?” My cheeks lift.

A nod. “You can stay if you pull your weight like everyone else.”

“I can do that.” Relief has my shoulders loosening. Relief I don’t have to find another place to stay. Relief I don’t have to hit the road again. “What do you have in mind? Shovel horse shit? Pull weeds? I’m an awful cook, so don’t even think about it.”

“It’s temporary.” The man’s dark gaze tells me this is the last thing he wants. “We don’t want drama.”

“Tell you what, if there’s drama, I’ll go. Easy as pie.” My stomach cramps with guilt. I shift to the edge of the chair and make strong eye contact. “So, what’s the job?”

“Bartender.”

“I can do that. With my eyes closed.” I smile.

The way the tension melts from his shoulders tells me I'm getting them out of a jam.

"I've bartended in the past. But…I thought this was a ranch." I lower my voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Are you getting the cows hammered, cowboy?"

That gruff smile. It's back, tilting his lips, crinkling his eyes at the corners before it's quickly smothered.

I like it. It seems a rare occurrence. A challenge to myself to make him do it often.

"We're also a distillery." His attention drifts to the landscape to the east, to where I saw those tall silos last night. "Weston Whiskey." He claps a hand on his thigh. "We need a bartender for our tasting room. Pour flights. Mix whiskey drinks. Chat up our guests."

Sammy. Spilled whiskey. Brain matter.

"I don't…love whiskey." I glance down at my hands, grimacing. "It's a recent development."

"Means you haven't had the right one yet." Some life flickers to light in his eyes. "Means you haven't had ours."

I nod, sweeping hair from my face. "I can do it. I'm your girl. I'll be the best damn bartender you've ever had in exchange for a bed."

He gives a curt nod, turning to go, then changing his mind. "What'd you do before here?"

Fuck. It's the last thing I want to talk about. Not because I'm embarrassed…but because others judge. Self-conscious thoughts slosh around in my brain, those irrational parts always waiting to slink out of the shadows. Rejection. Judgment. Disgust.

"Do you need a résumé?" When he's silent, I slump back in my chair. "I'm a dancer," I say and wait for his reaction.

His blue eyes flicker. Curiosity? Disdain? Either way, they're unreadable. The man's poker face is impressive as hell.

"What kind of dancer?" His voice roughens.

"The kind that makes it rain." I arch a brow. "Curious? Want a dance?"

His face hardens. "Darlin', I don't dance."

I wing up a brow. "You couldn't afford me anyway."

A muscle tics in his jaw. I smile. Riling him up is a joy.

I rise from my chair and take a step toward him. Releasing my breath, I stick my hand out, say, "We haven't properly met. I'm Delilah."

A long second passes, and then he takes my hand. "Cole."

Cole.

My skin heats at his touch. His hand is rough and calloused and massive and all but engulfs mine. He's so handsome. Raw and rugged and like no man I've ever seen before.

As he pulls his hand back, I notice the W-shaped scar, cut jagged across his palm.

"So, are you the one?" I bite my lip and look up at his face. His eyes are as blue as the Montana sky above the ranch.

Something strange settles over Cole's broody face. "The one what?"

"Showing me around the place?"

Abruptly, he takes two steps back.

"My brother," he grunts. His brows knit together. "He'll handle it."

I barely have time to lift a hand before his broad-shouldered form storms down the porch steps and disappears.

* * *

After a quick shower, I scarf a Pop-Tart then change into a casual dress and peep-toe heels. I brush my teeth and glance in the mirror.

Shit. The swelling's gone down, but my cheek is still a nasty shade of yellow. I apply some cover-up, toning down the bruise. It'll have to do.

I sweep through the Creek House and exit onto the porch where I find another handsome man waiting for me. This time, one without a scowl. And standing beside him is a little girl with wild dark curls.

"Let me guess," I say. "A brother."

"One of five." And I wonder if I imagine the brief wince that crosses his face. Holding out his hand, he says, "If you stick around, you'll meet all of us eventually. I'm Ezra."

I hurry down the steps to meet him. "Delilah."

Ezra looks like Cole with his chiseled jaw and dark hair. But he's leaner, clean-shaven, and polished compared to Cole's scruffy stoutness. He exudes calm and wears wire-framed glasses and a button-up, scrambling all my preconceived notions of what it means to be a rugged rancher.

Broad shoulders. Chiseled chips-of-ice blue eyes. Stetsons and big belt buckles and over-six-foot-tall frames. The Weston genes ought to be auctioned to the highest bidder.

"And who are you?" I ask the little girl. She's wearing a unicorn dress.

"I'm Evangeline." She props small hands on her hips. "I have a secret. Want to know it?"

"Of course."

She looks at my heels. "I like your shoes. They're very fancy."

"Oh, well, thank you. I like them too."

Ezra gives me an apologetic look. "We read *The Secret Garden*, and now secrets are all she can talk about."

I think of my own secret burning a hole inside of me.

“Should we get started?” Ezra asks.

I force my mind to the present. “Let’s do it.”

Evangeline tugs on Ezra’s pant leg. “Daddy, I wanna go.”

Worry flickers in Ezra’s eyes. “Evvie, I don’t think—”

“It’s okay. She can stay. I don’t mind.” I like kids. She reminds me of Lucy.

Ezra loops his fingers through his belt loops and exhales. “Cole says you have bartending experience.”

“I do.” My hand lifts to my necklace. “I worked at a club where I bartended for a year. All I know are basic drinks, but I’m a quick study. I can pick up anything.”

“You’re helpin’ us out a lot, you know that.” Relief creases Ezra’s handsome features.

“Least I can do.”

“Do you know anything about whiskey?”

Yeah. I know a man who blew his brains out after drinking two fingers.

I force a smile. “Just how to pour it.”

He inclines his head. “C’mon. I’ll show you around. It’s about a fifteen-minute walk over to the distillery.”

I glance down at my heels, doubtful, but I’ve never been a quitter.

My heart swells as Evangeline slips her hand into mine.

“New friend for life.” Ezra’s gaze bounces to our linked fingers.

I smile down at Evangeline. “I’ll take it. My first friend in Tempest.”

Slowly, we tour the property. Rays of sunlight stream through the cloudless sky. Crisp mountain air fills my lungs. The scent of pine and honey. Copper Run Ranch is picturesque. It seems so strange for whiskey to be made in such a stunning setting, but it only adds to the charm.

“The ranch is divided into two halves,” Ezra explains, gesturing behind us where the Creek House sits. “To the west—where you’re staying—is Copper Run, which operates as a working ranch and animal sanctuary.” His hand stretches in front of us. “To the east, is the distillery, Weston Whiskey.”

I really want to see the ranch and the animals, but Ezra seems focused on whiskey, so I let him lead the way. As we pass over rock and long grass, I realize that my peep-toe pumps and sundress mean I dressed poorly. But it’s not like I had a choice. I’m completely out of my element.

“You work here?” I ask, gingerly stepping over a mud puddle.

He nods. “I’m the distillery manager.”

Evangeline nods wildly. “Daddy’s busy.”

“Too busy,” he mumbles beside me. Then continues, “Weston Whiskey has a long history. We live here, we distill, and we ranch here. We’re one of the first distilleries in Montana since Prohibition.”

“Prohibition, like mobsters and bootlegging and tommy guns?”

He smiles. “That’s right.”

As we get closer to the distillery, I spy the silos. “What are those?”

“Rickhouses. We store our whiskey there.”

As we walk the grounds, Ezra waves to employees. He introduces me to an older couple, his Uncle Vaughn and Aunt Wyoma, before they head into town for the day.

Soon, we come to a path that leads up to several buildings. Squashed kernels of stray corn trace a Hansel and Gretel path between the entry gate and the distillery. Arching over the entryway is a wrought iron sign that proclaims COPPER RUN RANCH | WESTON WHISKEY.

“Another brother you haven’t met.” Ezra nods at a tall man leading a group of people. “We have three tour guides. Wells is one of them.”

Evangeline giggles. “Uncle Wells is scared of spiders.”

“You’re very skilled at secrets.” I glance at her. “Tell me one about your Uncle Cole.”

Her lips pucker in a pout. “His whiskers scrape my face when he smooches me. He thinks I like it, but I do not, oh no.”

Lucky girl.

We approach two mammoth steel buildings looming in the center of a green field. They almost look like garages. In front of them both sits what looks like an old American West–style saloon that Ezra soon tells me is the tasting room.

Already the distillery is alive. Cars pull into a gravel parking lot, a crowd of people headed to the tasting room. Outside the tasting room, people stand around tall barrels dotting a large patio, sipping spirits and talking. Some toss bean bags in the field next to the distillery.

Weston Whiskey looks like a celebration of the historic American West. Set against the backdrop of the Rocky Mountains, it feels like another place in time. It’s like cowboy core meets raucous speakeasy.

“When are you open?” I ask.

“Wednesday through Sunday, eleven to five. We’re about thirty minutes from Missoula and catch the tourists on the way into or out of town. But our reputation also speaks for itself.

“We’ll start with the distillery first.” Ezra leads me to the back of the buildings. We enter through the large garage doors, and the smell hits me. A tangy, pungent scent, like yeast and vinegar. Evangeline makes a face and pinches her nose closed.

Ezra lifts a hand to the crew of workers stacking white corn on pallets. “We make the whiskey here.”

I listen, nodding along as Ezra explains the fermentation process. Massive vats that heat corn back up against the wall.

As we move along, my eyes widen at the large copper stills that sit at the center of the room. “They’re huge.”

His eyes shine with pride. “The stills are all original. Been in our family since we opened back in the eighties.”

“What do they do?”

“That’s the distillation process.” The way his voice kicks up, fast, almost breathless, tells me he lives for this. “The alcohol that’s formed during fermentation evaporates out of the corn brew, which gives us unripened whiskey.

“Unripe whiskey is called moonshine,” he says, nodding at one of the distillers who’s filling a glass flask with a clear liquid. “It’d sear your taste buds clean off.”

“So how does it get its color?”

He arches an impressed brow. “I like you already. You ask the good questions. Follow me.”

Stepping outside, we cross a rocky path. Each building flows into the other, and we enter the middle building. Inside are large, loud machines and what looks like a wood-fired brick oven.

A fat tabby cat darts across our path, eliciting a loud squeal from Evangeline. She rushes after it to plop in the shade outside the building and tickle its belly.

One eye on his daughter, Ezra gestures at our surroundings. “This is the cooperage, or what we call the Coop. We make our barrels here. And those barrels create some of the best damn whiskey you’ve ever had. Flavors and diverse profiles that aren’t found in any other bottles.”

Awed, I look around the space. “You make it sound like state secrets.”

“It is,” he says. “Our father and uncle forged a path, and we haven’t deviated from it in over forty years.” Ezra’s eyebrows arch. “Our team of people have been with us for years. We have it down to a science. Sensory team. Barrel raisers. Blending and bottling team. It all comes together to make Weston Whiskey what it is.” He grins. “Pretty goddamn perfect.”

I take it all in. Inhale the char and the vanilla scent.

Cowboys making whiskey. It’s so Wild West.

Speaking of wild…

My body tenses as my gaze lands on Cole. Together with a group of men, he hefts planks of wood. Muscle and veins strain beneath his skin, stretching his pearl-snap denim shirt tight, as if his entire body is chiseled from granite.

“He works here?” I breathe.

“He does.”

“What’s he doing?” I watch Cole smooth his big hands over the wood. My skin tingles.

“Raising barrels.” Ezra evaluates his brother. “He’s the best. He’s never had a leaky barrel.”

“Really? Never?”

“Never. Which is why we practically had to twist his arm to come home.”

Without being too obvious, I steal another peek at Cole as he easily stacks wood in a strange pattern. I need a cold shower after watching the man work, because the skill he displays at his profession is goddamn sexy.

“Where was he?” I murmur.

Ezra’s silent for a long moment, then he says, “Away.”

Ezra’s cloudy tone tells me I’ve hit a nerve. I change the subject slightly but am unable to resist the urge to pry a little deeper into the man that is Cole Weston. “Does he live on the ranch too?”

“In the house behind yours. He’s your neighbor.”

Great. I can’t escape him. At least he’s nice to look at. Too nice.

A man like that would never want a girl like me. Hot mess. Disaster. Danger zone.

Not like it matters. I’m not in the market for a man.

This ranch is a place to lie low. Not get flirty with Cole Weston. Even though I’m sure it’d be a damn fun time.

I force my attention back to Ezra, who walks the space. “Now Cole would say the barrels are where the magic is made.”

“That’s right, little brother. I would.” Cole’s rough voice scrapes over my skin, causing me to shiver.

I look over, and we lock eyes. The man’s sexy as hell even when he’s grumpy.

Ezra scoffs. “I’d say it’s a combination. The char of the barrel *and* the distilling of the whiskey.”

A whistle comes from one of the men beside Cole. “They’re impossible to argue with, you know that.” He has pale skin dusted with freckles and thick black glasses tucked behind his safety glasses. He gives me a quick grin. “Hi, I’m Cy. Cole’s right-hand man.”

“Hi, Cy.” The way Cole glares at him, it’s hard to hold back my smile.

“I’d say you’re wrong, Ez,” Cole interrupts, lifting a strong hand, his skin calloused and rough. Brotherly tension pulses between them. “It comes down to the char and nothing else. That’s where the real whiskey happens.”

I can’t resist poking at him. “What’s the secret?”

His gaze comes up from the barrel, dark, distrustful. “That’s proprietary information.”

Amusement flashes across Ezra’s face. “And that’s why Cole’s not a guide.” He tosses his brother a look. “You’re a rude asshole, you know

that?”

I laugh, Cy joins in, and Cole’s glare deepens.

Ezra launches back into his spiel, and I steal another glance at Cole.

He’s still watching me.

Probably thinking up all the ways he can run me off.

We spend another ten minutes in the Coop, then Ezra leads me into the tasting room. Low conversation sounds, and sunlight streams through the big windows that overlook the front of the ranch.

I take in the majestic view of it all. Across the highway, mountains surround wide, endless fields. Tall grass grows wild on either side of the road. Through the tall aspen trees, a crisp breeze floats. The perfect place to disconnect from real life for a while.

I turn my attention to the tasting room.

In the center of the room stand four high-tops made from stacked whiskey barrels. Along the wall are display shelves showcasing Weston Whiskey. A Distiller of the Year award from the American Distilling Institute hangs next to a photo of some cowboy shaking hands with Clint Eastwood. Scratched onto a chalkboard menu, clearly in a man’s handwriting, are the whiskeys and featured cocktails. But the most eye-catching feature is the hand-carved mahogany bar with a huge half-moon mirror hanging behind it.

The place is full, even though it’s only noon on a Thursday. For being in the middle of nowhere Montana, judging by the awards on the walls and the overflow of customers, business must be steady.

The relaxed vibe of the tasting room is no busy nightclub, but I’ll take it.

The money isn’t important to me, but peace is. It’ll be something to do until it’s safe for me to go back to Vegas.

I miss Melly and Belle desperately. After losing Lucy Lou, the little family I forged with them was something I treasured.

I crane my neck and listen as Ezra runs over the day-to-day of the tasting room. “Right now, we’re short-staffed, so it might be chaos until you learn the ropes. All you have to do is mix drinks, remember the color of the whiskeys, and you’ll be a pro by the end of next week. We’ll bring in our mixologist to show you our cocktails.”

“Do you serve food?” I ask.

“No.”

“You should.” I think of the happy hour at the Velvet Belles. “Guests always stay longer, spend more when there’s food.”

Ezra looks like he’s making a note in that brain of his. “It’s a lot, right?” He gives me a worried look like I’m planning to bail out right then and there.

I give him a smile. It looks like he needs it. “It is, but I’m a fast learner.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

From the wood shelf, I pick up a bottle of Weston Whiskey and study it. WESTON in gold, embossed cowboy-inspired script takes center stage. Beneath it, the slogan: *Drink Like a Cowboy*. I turn the old-fashioned bottle in my hand, watching the way the liquid spins in the bottle, the slice of sunlight that brightens the rich amber color.

It’s beautiful. Raw, real, cowboy.

Inhaling a breath, I smile and glance up at the tasting room.

I’m hopeful being put to work will take my mind off the last few days. I need to disappear, to forget, and if that includes mixing drinks and smiling pretty, then I’ll do it. Here, with people, I won’t be scared of my own shadow.

As if he can read my thoughts, Ezra asks, “How long do you think you’ll be in Tempest?”

“Let me guess, you want at least two weeks?”

“I’d appreciate it.” He laughs, then looks sheepish. “Give me the summer at least.”

“I’ll do my best.” No promises. It’s cleaner. Less heartbreak.

The sound of footsteps has us looking over. Evangeline stands there, tabby cat cradled beneath her arm. “I got him, Daddy.” The cat lets out a pitiful mewl.

Ezra chuckles. “I can see that.” He looks at me. “You’re hired.”

“You might fire me by the end of the week,” I tease.

“You taking bets on that?”

The two of us turn at the gruff voice. Cole stands there, leaning in the doorway, arms crossed. Muscles pop on his tan forearms. He watches me with shrewd eyes the color of the sky.

If this were the club, he’d be my first stop. I’d slip onto his lap, glide my hands up his chest and over those broad shoulders to slide my fingers in all that messy dark hair. I’d get close, pressing myself up against him, feeling the heat in his powerful body. They’d have to pull me off his lap when the music stopped. And that’s saying something. I don’t swoon for a client, let alone a man. No dating. No fucking. But this cowboy…he’s beautiful. Too bad he’s an asshole.

Ezra’s mustache quirks. “Stop lurking. I have it handled.”

“Ain’t so sure about that.”

The way Ezra glares tells me Cole’s pulled the older brother card.

Keeping my voice light and airy, I ask, “Bored back in the barrels, cowboy?”

He regards me from the doorway, unsmiling, his hard eyes sliding down my body. “Two things you’ll be needing before you start this job. Pants and close-toed shoes. Got that, darlin’?”

I scoff-laugh at his condescending use of *darlin’*.

“Keep calling me darlin’, cowboy, and one day, you might wanna keep me.” I lock my gaze on his, letting him know he can’t ruffle me. Any other time I’d flirt, enjoy the banter. But right now, I’m just about survival. Arguing with some grumpy cowboy isn’t worth my energy.

His jaw tics.

Ezra’s brows furrow. “Don’t be a jerk to her.”

Evangeline’s lower lip pushes out. “Yeah, Uncle Cole, don’t be a meanie.”

“Not trying to be mean.” The contrite tone in his voice tells me he’s making amends more for Evangeline’s sake than mine. Cole hooks a thumb under his belt buckle. “My brother won’t say it because he’s too nice. You need work clothes. Safety regulations being on a ranch and all.” He turns in the doorway, preparing to go. “In case you missed it the first time, town’s __”

I flap a hand, cutting him off. “Yeah, yeah, twenty-five miles that way. I got it. Thanks for the tip.”

“Leave her alone, man.” Ezra shakes his head.

Squaring my shoulders, I take a deep breath and return my attention to the tour.

I hate that Cole’s gotten under my skin. But as I glance back over my shoulder at the darkening of Cole Weston’s handsome face, I realize I may have gotten under his.

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7

Delilah

Despite its ominous name, Tempest is stunning. Victorian homes line the jagged mountains towering above the town. Wood awnings and tall brick buildings make me feel like I've stepped onto the set of a movie. Main Street boasts a saloon, numerous restaurants, boutiques, a coffee shop, bookstore, and even a tattoo parlor. Red, white, and blue banners hang over the street congratulating Mayor Hale on another four years.

I've never lived in a town like this. One that asks you to stay, to settle in.

Tempest makes me feel like I'm simultaneously miles away from civilization and stuck in the middle of it all.

Everything about it is charming, but on the fringes an air of danger lurks. Like the Old West still lives.

Or wants to, at least.

I hate that Cole Weston was right. A trip into town is exactly what I needed.

My heels click-clack over cement as I stroll along Main Street. So far, I've hit up a boutique and purchased jeans, tees, and sneakers. Ranch-style garb, I hope. Then I grabbed some protein bars, bottled water, and canned

goods from the general store, along with dog kibble for Ratson and all the junk food I can carry.

Across the street, a woman stops in her tracks and stares at me. When I make eye contact, she glowers and ducks into the nearest shop.

I sigh, a brick sinking into my chest. I've been getting judgmental looks all day. To say I'm an unwelcome stranger here is an understatement.

Maybe they've been taking lessons from Cole Weston.

I slow my stride when I notice them. Missing persons posters. They're tacked on streetlights, stop signs, and mailboxes. I tilt my head and evaluate a faded black and white poster of a pretty girl with long, pale blond hair. April Sawyer.

She's been missing seventeen years.

The dark, morbid thought sneaks up on me. Maybe this girl is still out there, somewhere. I don't have that hope with Lucy.

Fingering the tattered edge of the poster, I give the girl one last long look. Blowing out a breath, I lift my bags and continue down the street.

Above, bright neon catches my eye. Urban Cowgirl Collective. The sign is a hot pink cowboy hat with a lightning bolt sitting in the ribbon. The funky signage makes me smile.

Juggling my bags, I kick the door open with my heel and step inside.

The aromas of leather, vanilla, and musk saturate the air. Country music plays on a vintage-looking speaker. I set my bags down and wander past tables filled with candles, ornate belt buckles, leather goods, and gold jewelry. On the walls hang a beautiful selection of cowboy hats.

"Help you?" A girl emerges from the back room. She's dressed in a gingham shirt tucked into tight blue jeans, and boots cover her feet. A chocolate-colored flipped-brim cowboy hat sits on top of long, dark copper-red hair. She looks like a fierce, dolled-up cowgirl.

“No. Just browsing.”

“In the market for a hat?” She wiggles her eyebrows. “I can make you the best damn hat this side of the Mississippi.”

I look around the store. In the corner is a long table with baubles like charms, feathers, ribbons. Stools surround it.

It’s a hat bar.

“I’m not a cowgirl.”

Her vibrant turquoise eyes glitter. “You will be once you get a hat on your head.”

Opposite the hat bar is an actual bar. Stocked on the shelves above is Weston Whiskey. God, I can’t escape it. *Him.* Cole’s handsome, surly face flashes in my mind. I clench my thighs together and force away the image.

The girl points a finger at me and pauses a few feet away. “Let me guess. You’re either a tourist or new here.”

I smile. One look at my cute black pumps and my slinky slip dress, and it’s obvious I’m not into the typical Tempest attire of flannel and boots.

“New.”

The girl whistles.

“I get the feeling that *new* isn’t very welcome in this town.”

“You’d be correct.” Gaze appraising, she circles me. Laughs. “Oh, people are gonna talk about you.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re gorgeous. And you’re fresh meat. And the small-town gossip mill never gets old. They’ll sacrifice you to feed their bloodthirsty rumor-mongering souls.”

Great. Just what I need. More attention.

A smirk tilts her lips. “That look means you’ve already gotten the strange side-eye.” She flicks a cavalier hand. “Don’t let it get to you. Our town

doesn’t like strangers.” She shrugs. “But we need ’em, so we do the polite thing of letting them spend money in our establishments, all while talking shit behind their backs.”

She tips her head at me in question. “Where are you staying? The Newkirk?”

I bite my lip. “I’m staying at the distillery.”

Her jaw drops. “Copper Run Ranch?”

“Yeah.”

Her eyes get big, then she guffaws. “Oh, fuck me, I need this story.” She gives me a bright, genuine smile. “I’m Hassie.”

“Delilah.”

I smile. She’s bold and weird and brazen. I already like her.

Hassie moves to the bar. “You want a drink?”

“Anything but whiskey,” I say as her hand reaches almost automatically for the bottle of Weston Whiskey that sits on the top shelf.

She flashes me a mischievous grin. “So, you’re not drinking the Kool-Aid at the distillery. My type of girl. Champagne?”

“Perfect.”

As Hassie pours out her glass of whiskey, adds two ice cubes, my thoughts stray to Cole.

“You stock Weston Whiskey.”

“Everyone does. The Westons are like kings in this town.” Not elaborating further, she hands me my flute, and we settle on a black velvet couch at the back of the shop. She leans in. “So give me the scoop. How in the hell did you end up at the Weston Whiskey Distillery?”

Leaving out the murderous specifics of why I’m in Tempest, I tell her about my Las Vegas detour, my late-night arrival and run-in with River, Cole and his surprise ambush, then Ezra and his job offer.

She’s being so nice to me. I almost wish I could tell her everything. Spill all my secrets to a stranger. But if the cops are after me, I can’t chance it. There’s no one I can trust.

“Is that…okay?” I tilt my head, curious now. “They’re not serial killers, are they?”

She stiffens, and I’m afraid I’ve said the wrong thing. “No. They’re good guys.” She sips her whiskey, narrows her stunning blue-green eyes. “What do you think of them?”

It takes me a second to realize she’s not being nosy, she’s being protective. Of the Westons.

“I’ve only met Ezra, River, and Cole…”

“Let me guess, Cole growled the second you met him.”

“How’d you know?”

Her laugh is husky. “That tracks with Cole. Averse to pretty girls and conversation that consists of more than two grunts.”

I laugh. My mind drifts to the cowboy who makes it obvious he wants to shut out the world. I’ve never seen a man who so clearly looks like he’s trapped in his own head.

Hassie releases a long breath. “Okay, look, Delilah, if you want real town gossip, you have to know three things.”

Hassie’s energy is electric. I lean in, eager for Tempest’s lore.

“One. Don’t go on the outskirts of town after dark.”

I smother a laugh, unsure if she’s joking. “What happens after dark?”

“Bad things in the woods. Bad people. Two. Never trust the cops. The Hales own them.”

“Who are the Hales?” My mind calls up the banners I saw on Main Street.

“Which brings me to three—and this is the most important—there are two main families in Tempest. The Westons and the Hales.” Hassie taps a finger on her crystal glass. “Think of it as a Hatfield and McCoy situation.”

Eighth grade history comes back to me. “They hate each other.”

“Bingo.” Every muscle on Hassie’s pretty face tenses. “There are the Westons and the Hales, and you only trust one of them.” The look in her eyes tells me it’s the Westons.

“What do the Westons do?”

“They protect this town.” She juts her chin at the window. “This entire block of buildings we’re in isn’t called the Weston Ward for nothing. They own it. Opened a food bank a few years ago. Let a local barber use River’s tattoo parlor to give free haircuts to whoever needs them. Shit like that.”

My stomach swoops, a warm, buttery feeling. “They sound too good to be true.”

“Don’t worry, they’re not.” She sets her glass on her knee.

Gaze drawn to the window, it lights on a building I’ve noticed all afternoon. How could I not? It looms over the town like a sentry. “What’s that?” I ask and point. On the mountain high above the town is a strange industrial-looking facility. Around the tall building that resembles a block of cement, access is blocked by razor wire. Video cameras are mounted on poles. Bright red warning signs are barely readable.

Her blue-green eyes drift to the gray sky outside the shop’s window. “That’s Moriah Mountain Complex—we call it the Complex.”

I sit taller. “What’s that?”

“Used to be a military base. Now it’s supposedly used for agricultural research or some shit like that.” Her voice drops ominously. “We call it Montana’s Area 51. Some weird government shit goes on up there.”

“Like what?”

“Like those.”

I watch as, in the air above the mountain, green orbs of light blink in and out like lightning before disappearing.

“What are those?” I ask breathlessly.

“The Green Mountain lights.” She kicks one leg over her knee and rests her elbow on it to look at me. “No one knows what they are. They happen randomly with no explanation. Some think they’re supernatural. Some think they’re man-made. A signal from the Complex to whoever is out there watching.” She shrugs. “But whatever they are, the Complex leaves us alone, so no one pokes around too much.”

I stare, wondering about this strange town I’ve landed in, when Hassie sits back on the couch and returns to the conversation. “Anyway, like I said. The Westons. Whatever you’re running from, you’ve come to the right place. The Westons don’t just take in animals. They take in people.” She takes a long sip of her drink, exhales. “I lived with them for a few years.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’m like the little sister they never wanted.” A brief flash of pain crosses her face.

“The oldest, Warren”—she rolls her eyes—“was my guardian back in the day.” She cocks her head, studying me. “Have you met him yet?” Though her question is light, it’s edged with caution, curiosity.

“No. Not him or Wells.”

“Wells is a sweetheart. Warren is a menace.” She jerks her chin. “He owns the saloon down the way. Which makes us unfortunate neighbors.” She grins. “But not to worry, I do my best to terrorize him on the daily.”

Impressed, I lift my eyes. “This is your shop?”

“Yep. Born and raised in Tempest. Probably die here too. No one ever really gets to leave.” Her expression hardens, and she swallows her whiskey

in one long slug. “No matter how much you scream into the fucking void.”

Despite her edged tone, I envy Hassie. For having a safe place to land, a hometown to keep her. It’s the secret hope of my heart.

Hassie flashes a tepid smile. “I’m glad you’re here. I board my horses at the ranch, so I’ll see you around.” She lifts her empty glass. “We should do drinks—more drinks—and next time we will not talk about men. Maybe get drunk and make a hat.”

“I’d like that.” I smile. Barely twenty-four hours in Tempest, and I’ve already made a new friend. She’s kind of weird, kind of mean, kind of honest. My favorite type.

“C’mon. Let me hook you up.”

We shove off the couch and head to the table full of beautiful trinkets. Hands moving without faltering, Hassie plucks various pretty pieces from the gold trays.

“Who did that?” she asks, head down as she arranges the items in a small box. “To your face?”

Fear pinches my stomach. I palm my cheek. “Some asshole.”

“Yeah. We got those around Tempest too.” She looks up and meets my gaze. “You handle it?”

Sammy and his blown-out brains flash in my mind.

“I hope so.” I’m as honest as I can be.

“Good.” Her brow lifts. “Because if not, I know someone who can.”

With that, she slaps a brightly wrapped package in my hand. “Welcome to Tempest, Delilah.”

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8

Cole

I sit at the kitchen table with a glass of whiskey by my hand and a laptop in front of me. Technology has done more harm than good, but I'll use it to my advantage when I can. When I moved back to Tempest six months ago, I renovated the historic ranch house that came with the land from the studs up. All wood floors and walls. More rustic than fancy. Exposed beams. An antler-style chandelier hangs above the dining table.

The big windows that look out onto the porch and ranch are open to the brisk night breeze, giving a stunning view of the ranch and creek. During the day, golden light floods the ranch house, but I'm never around to enjoy it.

Though it's only a fifteen-minute walk to the distillery, my ranch house, flanked on either side by a grove of evergreens, feels tucked away. How I prefer it.

It's simple but it's my escape. Peace and quiet. My sanctuary. I rarely let anyone who isn't my family inside my home.

I click through the newspaper articles about my parents' case. A rabbit hole I go down time and time again whenever I have a full whiskey bottle

and a late night.

At the keyboard, my hand cramps. I curse the pain and make a fist, hoping to relieve the tingling sensation that's been happening the last year now. Wrist pain rodeo. It's the name of the game. Years of gripping the leather rope, of jamming my thumb during a ride, gives me an achy left hand. Raising barrels won't help, but I never had a pain I couldn't shake off.

I flex my hand open, the scar stretching, then rub my opposite thumb against the ache.

At the creak of a screen door, I sigh. I can place my uncle by the thud of his bootsteps.

He strides into the kitchen. "Burnin' the midnight oil?"

I motion at him to sit and close my laptop. "And then some."

He pulls up a chair and a bottle of whiskey. "Ezra told me you're using the barrels for the limited-edition launch. I think it's a damn good idea, Cole. It'll be a big deal."

A nostalgic look comes over my uncle's face, and I suppress a grin. I can tell he's getting ready to reminisce over a story I've already heard a hundred times by now.

"I remember on Weston Whiskey's opening day, we weren't much more than a single canopy and a few chairs set out on the patch of land where the Coop sits now." Into a crystal glass goes a splash of whiskey. "Your parents would be proud at how far you've all come."

"I don't know about that." I sit back in my chair and cross my arms. "Not when we still haven't solved their deaths."

To this day, we've never bought the story behind our parents' deaths. The cops claimed murder-suicide. According to their official report, our parents were grieving Jack's death, and they ended things. Which is a fucking lie.

Our father would have never killed our mother or himself. They were a mess after Jack, but they had three young sons to raise. This town believes us, but the lies spread by the cops persist. Like most of the other crimes in the county, the death of our parents was filed away, and the case is considered closed. But not by me. I want the truth to be known. The killer to be caught. I won't rest until that happens.

I just don't have any solid leads. Yet.

Vaughn shifts in the chair, gives my laptop a side-eye. "You've been looking back into it." A statement. Not a question.

"I'll never stop," I grit out. Now that Jack's killer is taken care of, I'm free to turn my attention to my parents'.

"Cole." Vaughn stares at me long and hard. "Your brothers know you're doing this?"

I knock back the whiskey. "They don't need to know."

Vaughn's mustache thins as he flattens his lips. "You've hired a PI. You've used Langford. I don't know what you think you'll find on the internet."

"We need someone on the inside. The cops have that file. They closed the case with a hundred fucking lies, and they know it. If we had that case file…"

Our one connection, our father's friend on the force, Deputy Langford, was banned from the case and fired shortly thereafter. The Tempest Police Department refuses to release the details or the case file. Another way Hale continues to fuck with us.

I look at my uncle. "There's nothing else you remember?" My uncle is the one that found them in the distillery that night. Covered in blood. One shot through the left side of my father's face. One between my mother's eyes. The gun my mother kept in the drawer beside her computer was

missing along with the case of bullets. I've poked and prodded his memory relentlessly.

He lets out a sigh and says, "I've told you all I know, son. I was headed from my house to the distillery for our monthly meeting. Eight p.m. sharp. Your father said he had something to show me. When I walked in, your folks were lying there, and there was something, words maybe, scrawled on the copper still, but… After that moment, I blanked." The stoic look masking his face slips, revealing pain. "Seeing your brother's body… It's a memory I wouldn't wish on anyone."

I stay silent, hating that I'm an asshole who keeps dredging up the past.

"I don't like the look in your eyes." Vaughn's thick brows knit together in worry. "Dwelling on it won't do you or this distillery any good."

"I need to know the truth."

I'd bet the ranch it was the Hales. By then, Granger Hale had the cops in his pocket, and he and my father were feuding over water rights to the falls. But it makes no difference if I'm wrong or right. Because whether it was a Hale or a stranger they're ending the same way.

With a bullet to the fucking brain.

It's not the right way, to live by the sword, but my parents deserve a better end than what they got.

I make a disapproving sound. "I thought you wanted to know."

Vaughn should want it just as bad as me. His brother was killed. He's the one who found the bodies. Who called to tell me they were dead. The tears in his voice, the doubt, the disbelief, still haunt me.

My uncle sips his whiskey. "Hell, I want the truth too, Cole, but what would your mama think of you spending all this time and energy on their deaths? It's been eighteen years. Let ghosts lie."

I drill a big finger on the table. “It’s not finished. It’s not finished until I find who did it.”

He clears his throat. “You keep looking for the sword, one day that sword’s going to find you.”

Vaughn shakes his head, but the shake changes to a full-on swivel when his attention drifts to the window. Tires crunch gravel. The flash of headlights.

The two of us watch as Delilah slips out of a cherry-red Pinto. She walks gracefully on those high heels, long legs moving to her trunk.

“That her?” Vaughn asks, a smile tugging at his lips. “Your new ward.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, cursing River once more. “Not mine.”

My thoughts drift back to today. Delilah lounging in that deck chair and giving me hell. The touch of her small hand in mine had me feeling like I might forget to let her go.

A dancer, she had said. Fuck. What kind of dancer?

Don’t know why I’m kidding myself. It’s obvious by the clothes, the shoes, that gorgeous toned body, that flirty little smile, exactly what kind of dancer she is. I grind my teeth at the thought. I’m not surprised by much these days…but fuck…a stripper?

At the thought of her dancing—dancing for me—sexy lingerie hugging her curves just right, that wild honey-blond hair up all around us, my cock jumps in my jeans.

“We met her today.” My uncle’s voice drags me from my daze. “She and Ezra sure looked good together.” His eyes crinkle, mischief in his craggy features.

Jesus, I’m not interested in her. She’s too young for me. The last thing I need to do is babysit. But my uncle’s words send fire through my bloodstream.

Today, at the distillery, I couldn’t miss her. Every time I looked up, she was there. Curiosity etched across her delicate features. And at the same time, she’s feisty. Even when I was an asshole about her clothing, she was unwilling to back down.

“Ezra’s got too much on his damn plate,” I growl. “The last thing he needs is a woman.”

“Might agree with you there.” Vaughn rises from the table and clasps my shoulder. “Till tomorrow, kid.” How we say goodbye in our family. Hopeful for another goddamn day.

I nod. “Till tomorrow.”

I wait until he’s gone. Then, standing, I grab my black Stetson from the counter and pound out the front door and down the steps.

Shoulders rigid, jaw tight beneath the shadow of my hat, I storm toward her.

That baby blue slip dress lets me see every slender curve of her petite frame. On her leg, a blue silk garter embroidered with her name. She wore that into town? Christ. I can only imagine the rumors.

Delilah pops her head up from the trunk, staring right at me. “You come with guns a-blazing, cowboy?”

In the moonlight, her eyes are huge, liquid brown and mesmerizing. She’s feminine, soft and delicate. Not tall, not short, fit, pretty. Gorgeous if I’m honest. She walks with ease in her high heels on the gravel.

She continues before I can say anything. “Per your explicit, surly instructions I have clothed and fed myself.” She crosses her slender arms and appraises me. “I had a coffee at the Beanery and hit up at least a dozen shops on Main Street.”

Irritation sinks into me. She didn’t see Tempest the right way. She saw it in a tourist’s light. Not the way I know it.

From the trunk, she removes a handful of shopping bags from various shops around town, tucks a footlong sub under her arm and a bottle of wine under the other.

A growl vibrates in my chest.

“What?” She puffs a strand of blond hair from her eyes. “Is wine not allowed?”

“Shouldn’t shop at Bob’s store. He overcharges.”

She slams the trunk shut. “Bob’s a saint. And you’re bossy. And grumpy. A dreadful combination, I fear.”

She pivots toward the Creek House, bags straining her arms.

The impulse is so instinctual I can’t stop it. I reach forward. She takes a step back. There it is again, that fucking flinch.

“Your bags.”

She stares at me, her beautiful face a picture of stubbornness.

“Let me.”

At her nod, I step closer. I smell it on her skin. Honey, vanilla, baby oil. It gets me so fucking hard I forget how to think.

Goddamn it’s going to be a long summer with her in my space.

Reaching out, I take her bags, easing her burden.

“I guess you can be a gentleman.” She stares up at me, her voice breathy. “Who knew?”

“Lead the way,” I grit out.

Out of her purse come her keys, and I follow her to the Creek House. She unlocks the door, flicks on the light, and we enter.

At the counter, I deposit her bags, and she instantly starts unpacking. Water bottles, canned food, bags of chips, Pop-Tarts, and gummy bears. Annoyance curdles in me. She should be eating better than tin cans of beef stew and greasy sub sandwiches.

Amid the jumble of bags, my gaze locks on a small, bright pink box.

“Take it you met Hassie.”

“I did.” Her hands unpack the box. Slender fingers with short sparkly black nails. “She gave me a blade in case I run into trouble.” Her eyebrow lifts as she looks at me. “So be very prepared, cowboy.”

I can’t help it. I chuckle.

Delilah opens the blade and examines the pearl handle. “Ezra says we’re neighbors.”

I watch the blade shine in her hands. “Unfortunately.”

She purses her lips, a scrutinizing gaze on her face. As she shuts the knife, she hisses a gasp.

Fuck. A fist clamps around my heart. I take a step closer. “Let me see.”

“Fooled you.” Her seductive brown eyes land on my face.

“Not funny.” I take a step back, not trusting myself around her.

High elegant cheekbones. Glossy blond hair. Slender shoulders. Toned legs. I feel like a walking hard-on every time I look at her. Her shoulders are dusted with a glittery powder.

My hand itches to lift her chin, fist all that gorgeous silky hair, and drag her mouth to mine.

Setting the blade aside, she smiles and reaches for the wine bottle, uncapping it. “Wine?” she offers.

“No.”

The wine bottle *glugs* as she tips the mouth into a glass. “Let me guess, you only drink whiskey?”

“I do. You should too—you’re working here.”

“I drink everything.” She shrugs a shoulder. “I learned a lot about your town today, cowboy. Westons. Hales. A rivalry that’s gone on a century.”

She wiggles her brows. “Cow-napping. Cementing in a fishing hole. It’s all pretty diabolical if you ask me,” she teases.

I snort, not in the mood to get into the Weston–Hale feud. “How long you talk to Hassie?” I make a note to have a conversation with her later.

She bats her eyes. “Long enough to get the gossip. Long enough to think you’re not as grumpy as you pretend to be.”

As she finishes unpacking, I survey the room. A laptop on the nightstand, next to a half-finished cup of coffee. A lone *Encyclopaedia Britannica* lies on the coffee table. An assortment of stilettos by the door. Tall fringed, sequined boots that are almost as big as she is. Some lacy, pale peach things piled in a chair. Panties. *Fuck.* My cock flexes.

I’m well aware I’m acting like a nosy bastard. I tell myself it’s because I want to know who’s on my ranch, not because I’m curious about the girl.

A squeak from the counter draws my attention. In a plastic cage, a gray rat runs on a wheel.

Delilah follows my gaze to the cage. “That’s Ratson.”

“Ratson?”

Her lush lips part as she sips her wine. “He’s my son, and he’s a rat, hence, Ratson.”

I shouldn’t, but I grin. She’s adorable.

The thought instantly pisses me off.

I give the room one last scan, then freeze. Her fringed boots. There’s blood on the toe. I’m damn sure of it.

A bleak feeling creeps up my spine.

I glance back to find Delilah’s eyes on me, watching me nervously.

“You never told me why you’re here.”

She smooths her long honey-blond hair behind her ear, looking skeptical at my question. Before replying, she takes a long drink of her wine, then

says, “Haven’t you heard, cowboy? A little mystery can be fun.”

Her flirty tone is forced. I watch as she rubs her wrist. The yellow and purple bruises imprinted in her creamy skin. I wonder if she even knows she’s doing it. Wonder if she knows that the shiner she’s desperately tried to conceal with makeup isn’t fooling anyone.

“Like to know who’s on my ranch.” I stare at her hard, like I can get to the bottom of her bruises and her bullshit.

Her lower lip pushes out. “I’m Delilah. And that’s all you need to know.” The fear in her eyes makes me want to punch something. Most likely the person who put it there.

“Drinkin’ that wine like you’ve got a memory to erase.”

Her chin lifts, and she tips more of the bloodred liquid in her mouth. “Maybe I do. What do you care?”

I let out a low laugh. “I don’t. I have my own problems; I don’t need yours.”

She flinches but stays silent.

It’s that long, stretching silence between us that tells me she has secrets. She’s allowed that. Bad pasts, dark pasts, are my business. What’s not allowed is bringing trouble to Copper Run.

Delilah clears her throat. “I still haven’t seen the ranch. Are there animals?” Her brows lift in curiosity, her pretty face schooled into a neutral picture of innocence.

The change of topic gives me whiplash, and I harden my expression. “You don’t need to see them. You work at the distillery, and that’s how it stays. Just do your job and stay out of my way.”

“You’ve made your point.” But her slender shoulders fall at my harsh tone, betraying the weight she carries.

Without another word, I turn my back on her and let myself out of the Creek House. As I head to my ranch house, I tell myself I don't need to know about Delilah, don't need to know why she's here, or what's put the shadows in those big brown eyes.

One thing's for certain. She's a beautiful little liar.

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9

Delilah

“Ain’t No Rest for the Wicked” by Cage the Elephant blasts through my Bose speakers. One of my favorite songs to dance to. The changing tempo, the loudness, the bright burst of energy. My body pulses with anticipation, with the music. But instead of dancing, I’m frozen.

Like I’ve forgotten the moves.

Puffing a lock of hair from my face, I shove the ottoman out of the way. The coffee table’s been moved to the porch. I need space, but it all feels off.

It’s been like this for the last two days.

I can’t dance. Can’t move my body in ways that feel powerful and strong.

Every time I try it feels like I’m reliving that night again. Dancing for Sammy. The silver flash of the gun. Blood.

“Fuck.” I curse and rub my palms across my face.

The last two days have consisted of good sleep. The kind where you wake up and can’t figure out what year it is for half a second. I finally feel over the exhaustion. Tomorrow, I start work in the distillery. I’m glad for it. To give my thoughts, my anxiousness someplace else to go.

Staying busy is what I’m good at.

Even if that means more questions. Cole Weston and his dark prying eyes. The man's protective of his ranch and his family. Who can blame him? I don't want to drag him into my mess. Looking out for myself is my only option.

My gaze drifts to my boot. Cole saw right through me. He knows something's up. The USB drive reminds me of the story "The Tell-Tale Heart." An ever-present reminder until I'm slowly driven insane.

Truth is, I'm afraid of what I'll find on there. Terrified if I open it, it will send me off the precarious cliff I'm standing on to someplace far below.

I shake it off and restart the music. As I roll my hips, I feel my body loosen, my pulse kick up. I lie on my back, moving into my floor work. Lift my legs and move them like waves. Calm happiness flows through my body.

I've loved dancing all my life. It came to me as naturally as breathing, a way of expressing myself when I couldn't find the words. As a little girl I always wanted to be a ballerina, but we never had any money for actual lessons. I begged to go to *Swan Lake*. My and Lucy Lou's favorite encyclopedia was volume B, and I studied every move under "ballet." As I got older, I loved doing silly little dance-offs with my friends, and I watched YouTube videos to train myself. Jazz, hip-hop, modern dance.

I was good. But I got even better when I was hired at the club.

I'm not a stripper because I had a bad childhood. I'm a stripper because it pays well. Because I love dance. Because owning and doing what I want with my body is power. I've never felt sexier than when I'm wearing six-inch platforms and a lace G-string, and hearing a damn good song.

My first time onstage, I was terrified. Embarrassed. I forgot every move I had rehearsed. But that night, I made $500, and I felt better about myself. Within a week, I got my footing. I learned it's an art. Strippers are normal

people, not whores or sluts or whatever the pearl-clutching Karens of the world want to think.

I provide a service and get paid. A good fucking amount too. I support myself on my own with no help from anyone. I showed up for myself. I made my life.

And now I have to remake it again.

Exhaling, I sit up, then roll myself backward and slide down onto the floor.

My phone pings. I rise and grab it from the nightstand. I've been trying to get in touch with Melly, but she hasn't gotten back to me.

Instead of Melly, it's a text from Belle.

> You haven't been talking to anyone have you?
>
> No. Only you.
>
> Promise? Lady, I can't help you if you're not honest with me.
>
> I promise. Why? What's happening?
>
> The cops have been around the club. Asking questions about Sammy.

Her reply stabs through me. Fuck. I'm fucked. A crack of fear runs through my chest, spreading through my insides. Now I really can't go back. Now I really am on the run.

A ping from my phone.

> Don't you worry, baby. I got you. I promise you, you're safe. All you have to do is tell me where

you are. I don’t want my girl to be scared and alone.

Doubt and despair crest over me. *Alone. Alone.* That’s what I am. And always have been.

Fuck.

I feel sick, dizzy, like I can’t breathe.

Blood. Brain matter. The shimmer of spilled whiskey.

My phone hits the ground with a clatter. I drop to my knees on the cool hardwood floor. The tightness in my chest burns. I squeeze my eyes shut and watch the prick of black dots dance on the backs of my eyelids.

To focus, I finger the locket on my neck.

Lucy Lou. I miss you.

But she doesn’t answer.

The darkness comes closer. The memories. Red and blue police lights, a white sheet covering a small body, me, standing in the middle of the street as my mom screamed at me that it was all my fault.

And it was. All my fault.

I’m inhaling, exhaling, when I hear the click of the screen door. Then, the tiniest of giggles.

I crack an eye. “You can come in.”

Evangeline pops her dark head inside. “Hi. Do you want cookies? I made some.”

I’m about to say yes, because god knows I love a good cookie, when I realize they’re mud cookies. I smile as she sets the cookie tray on the rug. “They look delicious. What kind are they?”

“Brownie and gummy worms.”

“Does your dad know you’re here?” I pick one up and mime eating the goopy mess.

“No.” She drops her eyes. “My daddy worries a lot.”

I shift my position, crossing my legs and setting my cookie down. “He sounds like a good daddy. You should probably tell him where you are.”

Evangeline sits on the ground with me. There’s a delicate scattering of freckles over the bridge of her nose and apples of her cheeks. “He is. Do you want to know a secret?”

“Only if it’s okay to tell.”

“My brain has an owie. That’s why my daddy worries.”

“Oh, well, you know a lot of secrets.”

“I do. I am the secret keeper.”

I lean in. “Guess what? I have secrets too.”

A large shadow looms in the doorway, and a chill creeps down my scalp.

Then Evangeline’s leaping up and my fear eases. “Uncle Cole!”

Face hidden in the shadow of his hat, he wrenches open the screen door and steps inside. As soon as I look up, my mouth waters.

My god…this man…

Cole wears boots, a big belt buckle with a bull on it, and a pearl-snap shirt with the cuffs rolled up on his tan forearms. His blue jeans strain tight over his thick thighs.

“Hey, princess.” My stomach takes a nosedive as he catches his niece in his arms and tosses her onto his back. The man has a way with women. Just not me.

“You’re always here.” I stand.

“Could say the same about you.” His eyes scan the length of me. I wear clear stilettos, gray shorts rolled at the waist and a sports bra.

Fuck.

Don't ask, please don't ask.

He doesn't.

But Evangeline does. "What are you doing, Delilah?" Cole's mouth is pursed in a frown, but his lifted eyebrows betray his interest.

"Dancing. Well, trying to. The space is small, so I moved some things around."

"In those?" Jaw dropped, Evangeline points at my stilettos.

"My favorite is ballet." Reaching into my duffel bag, I pull out my tattered pink ballet shoes. "These are my pointe shoes. I practice in these sometimes too."

Evangeline's arms thread around Cole's neck. She squeezes and he fights a cough. "Can I do dance, Uncle Cole?"

He lifts his eyes to her. "You'll have to ask your father. Who is looking for you." I smother a smile as he gives her a frown. It looks like it takes effort, even for him. "You know better than to run off like that."

At her pout, Cole sets her on her feet. "It's time for your medicine, Bugs."

"I hate it."

"I know." He dips his chin. "But get on back to the homestead or else you're gonna get a bear hug."

Evangeline squeals. "No, Uncle Cole, no! Your whiskers hurt." She spins and waves. "Bye, Delilah." Then she's out the door, rushing across the green grass to her home.

"Sorry." I step closer to him. He smells like leather and sunlight. "I didn't know she wasn't supposed to be here."

"Not your fault." A muscle flexes in his jaw as he stares after his niece. "She has epilepsy. Got diagnosed a couple of years ago. Everyone's a little

on edge, especially Ez."

"You're good with her."

"I try to be. I haven't been around much. She's one of the reasons I came home."

"How long have you been back?" I tilt my head.

"Six months."

I wonder where he's been. Wonder at the sadness, the guilt that's etched on that handsome face. This massive, stoic cowboy looks like he's carrying a heavy weight on those broad shoulders.

Up close, I take him in. The salt and pepper at his dark temples is barely there, but I see it. And I like it. Feeling brave, wanting more, I rest a hand on the brim of his black Stetson. He stiffens but doesn't pull away as I tilt it up. "You have nice eyes, Cole."

"Shouldn't be talkin' about my eyes," he gruffs, and I smile at the unease that strains his voice.

"You're too serious for your own good, you know." I bite my lip. "You should have some fun. Smile more." I bet his eyes crinkle at the corners when he does. I'd love to see it.

"No time for fun."

"Shame. Bet I could get you to smile." Ten minutes and a dance with me and I'd blow his fucking mind.

"Darlin', all you're doin' these days is giving me an ulcer the size of Texas." The rumbling annoyance in his deep timbre makes me smile.

"So you're saying you think of me?" I cock my head.

It's fun to flirt with Cole. Mostly because I don't know what he's thinking. Those clenched fists. That square jaw. Stormy blue eyes. Call me a sucker, but I like to see the man come undone. He's so stoic, so serious. I like to push his buttons. Push him until smoke's coming out of his ears.

He looks down at me, and our gazes lock.

Everything inside me sparks as something fiery and kinetic pulses between us. Attraction, curiosity, and a strange magic that makes my heart race.

Which is ridiculous.

I don’t even know him.

Except, it feels like I do.

The spell’s broken when Cole takes two stomping bootsteps back.

“I should go. I’ll let you get back to your…” A smile ghosts my lips as he trails off, then says, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

My breath hitches. “What’s tomorrow?”

He gives me a look. “Work.”

“Right. Work.”

Then he’s gone, closing the screen door behind him as he exits the Creek House.

I straighten and shake off my daze.

Keep my head down. Do my job. Forget all about Cole Weston.

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10

Cole

I may raise barrels, but Delilah's raising fucking hell.

For the past hour, I've tried to stay focused on work. Never mind the fact that I can hear Warren's deep baritone coming from down the hall, followed by Delilah's silvery peals of laughter. Or the fact that my raisers are acting like a bunch of goddamn teenagers.

Cy sets a barrel on the hydraulic press. "You see the new girl?"

Leon whistles. "Think everyone in town came to see the new girl."

"Back to work," I bark at Bo, who's lingering in the archway.

He glances over his shoulder to look at me. "There's a line, boss."

I grit my teeth. There's been a line for the last week.

Everyone from Tempest has come to gawk at the new out-of-towner. Tempest loves gossip. Hates strangers. Delilah's the perfect person to feed the rumor mill.

It doesn't help that the girl's got legs for days, a garter that hugs her slim thigh, and a mouth that won't stop.

Still, everyone coming to stare bothers the shit out of me.

Bo saunters back to his place on the line. “She’s good for business.”

That bothers the shit out of me too.

I toss down a stave and curse, annoyed by the direction of my thoughts. The direction my boots are taking. Toward her.

I make my way into the tasting room. It’s packed, conversation at a loud buzz.

Delilah stands behind the bar with Warren. Hunger thrums throughout my body.

The black Weston Whiskey Distillery T-shirt fits snugly across her breasts. Her long honey-blond hair fans out around her slender shoulders like a golden halo.

Frankly, it’s obvious why there’s a fucking line out the door of the tasting room.

She’s gorgeous.

“Like this?” Delilah shakes a cocktail mixer and expertly pours out our signature Espresso Whiskey martini into a coupe glass.

She does this cute little thing where she rolls her bottom lip between her teeth as she pours with exceeding carefulness. I hate myself for noticing. I hate that I like it.

Warren pulls a bottle and fills a guest’s glass. “Perfect.” He looks at me. “Come to supervise?”

“How’s she doing?”

“A natural.”

Delilah gives me a flirty little grin. “Pisses you off, don’t it, cowboy?”

It does. She’s only been here a week, and Delilah looks like a pro. She moves quickly, naturally, doesn’t get frazzled. Best of all, she’s good with the customers. Chatting them up, making them feel welcome. She’s warm, attentive, funny. A sunshine femme fatale. They love her already.

Which means she needs to go.

My groin tightens as she slips around me. She smells like a goddamn love potion; her plump breasts and tight round ass have me gripping the edge of the bar to control myself.

Warren dodges Delilah, using his height to grab a bottle of our rye. “Ah, hell, honey, he’s pissed off about everything.”

She smirks. “Well, I have been told I’m rather unmanageable.”

The conspiratorial chuckle they share makes me want to put a fist through the wall.

“Not that one,” Warren says as Delilah goes to pour the rye first. “Go from right to left. Start with the unpeated whiskeys and work your way toward the more heavily peated. It goes our classic, then single malt, then rye, then the one from our Montana Cask collection.” She nods as he helps her arrange Glencairn glasses in the slotted flight board. “Remember, everyone who takes a tour gets a flight included with their ticket. If they want anything else, start a tab.”

It’s a gut punch when I spot the flash of the silk garter on her thigh, high above the hem of her blue jean skirt. “Fucking unreal,” I mutter.

“Taste?” Warren pours a shot and offers it to Delilah.

I frown when she takes a step back. “I’ve tasted it,” she says with a wobbly smile.

My eyes narrow. She’s lying. I don’t know what to make of this strange girl who refuses to drink our whiskey. I’ve seen her put away a glass of wine, so I know she drinks.

Warren pushes the flight board toward her and gives her a nod. “Take this to table two.”

“Got it.” And then she’s off to deliver the flight to a guest at a high-top.

Warren watches her go, eyebrow arched.

“Don’t even think about it,” I warn, stepping in front of the bar to ruin the sight of Delilah’s departing ass.

He takes the shot he poured Delilah. “Why? You put a claim in on that?”

“She’s not a gold mine.”

He whistles. “Looks like one.”

“You know why.” I jab a finger. “We lost our last bartender to you. We need this one to stay through the summer. Hands off.”

My brother and I have never come to blows over a woman. I don’t want to start now.

Over the speakers comes an unfamiliar song. Not our typical bluegrass or country, the up-tempo synth has me cringing. “What’s with the music?”

His mouth tips up in an amused smile. “Delilah changed it up.”

“Well, she needs to change it back.”

“It’s just music, Cole, Christ.” Warren rubs his brow, his telltale sign of older sibling irritation. “You want to tell me what’s really bugging you?”

“Why’s she really here, War?”

I think of last week, finding Evangeline in Delilah’s Creek House. I caught the tail end of their conversation. Something about secrets. One thing’s for certain: Delilah has a story. Maybe she messed up. Maybe she’s on the run. She’s young. But her eyes, haunted, desperate, look older than they should.

I have to remind myself it’s not my business. It’s not my job to interfere.

“Doesn’t matter. All that matters is she does her job.”

I glance over my shoulder in time to catch a guest snag Delilah’s wrist to get her attention. I stiffen but watch as she expertly moves away. As she chats up another table, I keep my eyes on the man who grabbed her. It’s an irrational feeling, an urgency to keep her close.

“Lookin’ a little too long, brother.” A chuckle from Warren has me turning my head. *Dick.*

I cross my arms. “Looking out for the bar.”

“She’s under your skin.” Warren pulls out a pitcher and fills it with water.

He’s right. She is.

I’m fucked.

Maybe it’s because I haven’t been with a woman since I returned to Tempest. I’ve been focused on the distillery and reconnecting with my brothers. No time for women. But Delilah’s different from all our small-town girls. From every buckle bunny I’ve slept with on the circuit.

She’s gorgeous. She stands up to me. And it makes me hard as a goddamn rock.

But all the hard-ons in the world don’t matter. Not when she’s temporary. Not when pretty attachments are the last thing I want.

The bell above the tasting room door chimes.

“We got a cop at two o’clock,” Warren says.

A growl escapes my throat, but when I look up it’s just Frank Langford, sauntering my way.

The only cop I trust.

Vietnam vet, ex-deputy from the Tempest Police Department, Langford was close friends with my father, and he’s the only one we trust to rely on memories of that time.

“How you been?” I ask as he exhales a heavy breath and takes a seat at the bar.

“Can’t complain.” Like everyone else in the tasting room, his gaze lands instantly on Delilah. His silver eyebrow lifts. “Came to see the new girl everyone’s talking about.”

“That’s her,” I say in a low gravel.

The lift of Delilah's eyes from across the tasting room tells me she's noticed Langford too. Lines appear on her brow, and she seems to freeze in place.

"Pretty girl." He opens his hand for the glass of whiskey Warren slides his way. "Need me to look into her?"

With a heavy breath, I drag a hand down my jaw. I consider his offer.

Before I can say anything, Warren leans down low beside me. "No, leave her be."

I nod, seconding his decision.

I don't trust Delilah, but I also won't invade her privacy.

I reach into my back pocket and slide Langford a wad of cash. "You have anything for me on my parents' case?"

With his less-than-legal access to agents in the FBI, I use Langford as another way to glean information on my parents' case. But any leads have been achingly slow. It's been eighteen years of dead ends. None of Langford's high connections matter, not when we can't get into the one place we need: the Tempest Police Department.

"Kid," Langford says, and I'm hit by a memory of him dropping by our house with saltwater taffy for all of us boys. "I'm gonna be honest. The well is dry when it comes to your parents." His palm covers the cash, but he doesn't take it. "I'm afraid I can't go any further."

Fuck.

Restless energy thrums beneath my skin. "We need someone on the inside," I complain to Warren, to Langford. "This *on the fringes* shit isn't working."

"You turn Deputy Craddock, and I'll be impressed." Langford swallows his whiskey. "In fact, he's parked up the street right now waiting to catch any overimbibers leaving your distillery."

“Christ,” mutters Warren. He slices a hand across his throat to Delilah, who’s approaching the bar. “Stop serving anyone who’s had more than a flight.”

I rub my brow. Deputy Wayne Craddock will always be a pain in our asses. Anything he can do to fuck with our business is fair game.

“Is everything okay?” she asks with wide, questioning eyes.

“Just do it,” I snap back, not wanting her involved.

She narrows her gaze at me. “Again with the manners, cowboy.” Then she motors away.

“Don’t worry.” Langford shoves up from the stool, leaving behind the cash. “I have a police scanner, and it looks like there’s about to be a 459 in progress on Main Street.” His bulbous nose is red from whiskey. “I’ll run him off for you.”

I watch him go with a chuckle. After Langford was ousted from the police department for “interference” and Craddock took over our parents’ case, there’s no love lost between the two men.

“Hey, Ez.” Warren jerks his head at Ezra, who’s shouldered his way into the tasting room.

I cross my arms and shake my head. “It’s either whiskey or a woman that’s got your ugly face looking like that.”

“It’s the launch party.” Strain shows on Ezra’s face. “If I can just get a goddamn spare second, I can order everything we need.” He pulls out his phone to type out a list but is instead interrupted by a frantic succession of *pings*. “We need to book a band, order more glasses, put out a press release __”

“I can do it,” a soft voice says.

Heads swivel.

Delilah stands there, one hand propped on the curve of her hip. “I can take it on.” A swallow jogs her throat; she looks uncertain now. “If you want.”

“No,” I say, bristling at the thought.

A snort of a laugh comes from Warren.

“I wasn’t asking you, cowboy.” Delilah rolls her eyes.

“Are you sure?” Ezra taps his fingers on the bar top. “It’s a lot.”

Uncertainty streaks across Delilah’s face. But just as quickly as it appeared, it’s gone. She straightens her shoulders and gives a curt nod. “I like a challenge.”

Ezra gives her a grateful nod. “You’re a lifesaver, Del.”

I don’t much care for the nickname or the way Delilah’s pretty face lights up in a smile.

“Of course. It’s the least I can do.”

“C’mon. I’ll give you a crash course in all things distillery.” Ezra stretches out an arm, wrapping it around Delilah’s shoulder as he leads her to the back office. I glare at my handsy little brother.

Warren, wiping down the bar, chuckles. “Like I said. Under your skin.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Tonight.” Ezra glances back over his shoulder, gaze dipping between the two of us. “Nine o’clock. We’re trying the limited edition.”

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11

Cole

“C’mon, assholes, chime in.” Ezra lifts his whiskey glass and takes another sip. “What do you think?”

Uncle Vaughn, my brothers, and I stand in a circle around the limited-edition barrel Ezra pulled from the rickhouse. The garage door to the distillery is thrown open, letting in the buzz of the wild Montana night.

“You were right. Damn near perfect.” Warren holds his glass up to the light.

Uncle Vaughn echoes Wells’s nod. “That’s the good stuff, right there.”

We always have two to three tasters, enough people to have a consensus, but at the end of the day Ezra always has the final say on whether the whiskey is ready. He never went to school or pulled a degree, but like Uncle Vaughn, he has that gift.

“Don’t look at me.” I hold my glass to the light and then take a long smell. Layers of flavor jump out at me. “I just raise barrels.”

Wells winks. “But you drink whiskey.”

I take a swig of the whiskey, running the liquid over my tongue. There’s something about it that makes it different from all the rest. It’s a higher

proof than usual. The perfect balance of oak, cinnamon, and caramel. This one, ready for a fall release, is darker, smokier than any I've ever had.

I finish the whiskey in my glass, then say, "We're going to sell a shit ton of it."

Instead of his typical stoic expression, our younger brother wears a big grin on his face. If anything can make him smile, it's whiskey. "That's what I like to hear." He pulls the whiskey thief from the hole in the barrel, gives everyone one last taste, then corks the barrel. "We need a name."

"Mom and Dad always named their whiskeys after things they loved," Wells says.

An age-old tradition. Every limited-edition whiskey we launch is named after something beloved. There's the Sweet Caroline Rye after our mother. The Big Sky Islay after our father's favorite place on earth—Montana.

"We need it fuckin' ASAP." Warren gives Ez a look. "It'll be fall in less than five months."

"And you've got a party to plan," Uncle Vaughn says as he finishes his whiskey.

"I'm not planning it. Not anymore." Ezra grins. "Delilah is." Ezra tells the group about Delilah's offer to plan the launch.

Vaughn nods. "Not a bad idea."

An image of Delilah leaving the tasting room today, the pockets of her apron teeming with tips, pops into my head.

"I ain't so sure about that," I say, just to be a contrarian. It irks me that Ezra is letting some stranger, some girl who waltzed onto our ranch plan the limited-edition launch party. Because it isn't any typical party. It means more. It's for our parents. We have to do it right.

"What's your deal with Delilah?" Ezra glares at me, glasses slipping down his nose. "She hasn't missed a step yet."

“She keeps changing the music in the goddamn tasting room,” I grumble.

“That’s what your problem is? The music?” Ezra gives me a doubtful look.

“Try harder, Cole,” Wells drawls, then leans against the wall in amusement.

I stare into my glass, willing away the memory of her. Yet since the day she landed at the ranch, she’s been a constant thorn in my side. A distraction.

River shrugs his shoulders, siding with Ezra. “You said she’s good, right? She can handle it, Cole. Relax.”

I drain the last drop of my whiskey, letting it warm my blood. “I’m gonna head out.” I don’t want to argue anymore. Delilah’s already taken up too many of my thoughts.

“We’re doin’ bottle and bonfire tomorrow.” Ezra directs his gaze toward me. “Want to join?”

A question he’s been asking the last six months. A night I’ve been avoiding.

Once a month, our family gets together to cash a bottle of whiskey while we bullshit about our lives over a bonfire. A tradition our mother started. *Cowboys and bonfires*, she always said. *They need each other. They purge each other.*

“We’ll see.” I set my glass down on the table behind me.

Wells frowns. “You always say that.”

My gut sinks, and I immediately feel like an asshole. It’s a talent of mine. Avoiding my family. Guilt, grief won’t let me. Like if I get too close, I’ll lose someone again.

I’m not good at telling my brothers how I feel. That they matter to me, that I’m sorry for staying away all those years and chasing the rodeo instead

of dealing with the loss of Jack and our parents.

I don't deserve them. Not with being gone as long as I have.

Ezra doesn't like my answer, but he says nothing, only nods.

My stomach hardens with regret. As I head for the open garage door, River follows. "Cole."

I stop. His tone is edged.

"Heard from Syd. He wants to do another run."

I exhale, tension immediately tightening my shoulders. "When?"

"Soon. I'll set up a meeting."

I glare. "*I'll* set it up. You don't need to be around guns, River."

River's voice burns with bitterness. "Yeah, well, there's a lot of things I shouldn't have done in my life, but here we are."

River's a moody son of a bitch, but I know where his mind's gone.

April.

Always April.

My lovesick brother's never gotten over the disappearance of his high school sweetheart. One night, after graduation, she was just gone. Tempest police claimed she was a runaway, but River never bought it.

Soon after, River went off the rails. He became a different person. Drugs. Alcohol. Gave up his art. He lost his mind wondering what happened to April.

Years later, desperate, River broke into the police station for April's file. A scuffle broke out. A cop was shot. Tempest PD claimed River was the shooter. It was bullshit. He never had a gun on him.

He went away for seven years for a crime he didn't commit. Everyone in town believed he was April's killer. Even now, three years out, some folks still accuse him of having something to do with her disappearance.

It was a setup. Prison was an excuse for the Hales to get to us. To hurt him.

“Listen to me,” I growl. “You stay away.” I stare at the blackbird tattoo on his forearm. He gives himself a tattoo for April every year on her birthday.

River rolls his eyes. “You’re a miserable fuck, you know that.”

“You’re one to talk. You live on a mountain.”

We share a chuckle, then I give him a nod and clap his shoulder. “Till tomorrow, little brother.”

I’m halfway out the door when he sends it back to me. “Till tomorrow.”

I take a few steps toward my secluded corner of the ranch, then stop. The light in the tasting room is on. From where I stand, I can hear the frenetic pump of music blasting. Who the fuck is throwing a goddamn party?

Hand going to the gun on my hip, I backtrack, stomping up the patio and through the tasting room’s front door.

Delilah stares down at a long roll of paper unfurled across the bar top. A pen dangles from the corner of her mouth before she captures it in her hand to scribble something on the paper.

Her soft voice floats as she leans across the bar to turn down the music. “Come to check up on me, Cole Weston?” She doesn’t look up.

I sigh. There’s no escaping her.

“You had a long day,” I grunt. “Should be in bed.”

“I can’t sleep. My schedule’s all off.” She shuffles her bare feet over the wood planks. She’s in a long flannel shirt that ends at her thighs, barely covering whatever she has on underneath. Damn. She’s got some legs on her, tan and toned. My hands itch to run over them.

“Thought I’d come here and do a little party planning.” When she glances up, her amber eyes shimmer in the dim light. “Your brother gave

me a job. And I happen to take that very seriously.” Her eyebrow arches. “The most important part of any party is the music.”

“Not your music.”

“Then help me plan it, since you’re so picky.”

“I’m not picky.” My voice hardens. “I just have good taste.”

“So smug.” She laughs aloud.

“If you’re looking for live music, there’s a band in town who might work. The Moonshiners.” I clear my throat, shove my hands in my pockets. “They’re local. Play the music Tempest likes.”

I’m not prepared for the beam of a smile she flashes my way.

“That helps a lot, Cole. Thanks.” She makes a note in her notebook.

As I get closer, I see that she has blueprints to the distillery and surrounding grounds. “What’s the plan with those?” I stand beside her at the bar.

She wrinkles her nose and traces a finger along the perimeter of the patio and field. “I want to map out where everything is happening. Then start booking and ordering.” She bites her lip, uncertainty showing on her pretty face. “I think.”

“You ever do anything like this before?”

“No. Have you?” Her question is earnest.

She’s got me there.

“What have you done before?” She runs a hand through her long blond hair. “You know, for past launches?”

“Not sure.” I tilt up my hat, swallowing against the guilt in my throat. The reminder that I haven’t been back for any launches, content to let my brothers handle all of it themselves. “Just follow Ezra’s lead, and you’ll be fine.”

“A show of faith.” She bats long, dark lashes. “I’m touched.” With that, she begins to roll up the blueprints and pack up her bag.

I don’t want to be impressed with her, but I am. Her planning the launch party is a risk. To my head and to my cock. She’ll be around the distillery, around me, more than normal. All the goddamn time. Distance kept won’t be easy. Not with this girl around.

I stomp toward the door, intending to leave her, then stop. Something won’t let me. I tell myself it’s the cowboy in me.

After a hesitant moment of silence, I say, “I’ll walk you back.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Goin’ that direction anyway,” I gruff. “Besides, you shouldn’t wander alone.” If my aunt were awake and walking alone at night, I’d give her shit too.

“Why?” She tucks the blueprints beneath her arm, and together we step outside to make the fifteen-minute walk back to the ranch side of the property. The summer night air is crisp. A thousand glittering stars fill the sky. Fuzzy dandelion seed heads sway in the breeze. Delilah, walking beside me with light footsteps and a graceful gait, is so close I can smell her honeyed scent.

Even just the outline of her silhouette in the moonlight makes me hard.

“Because it’s Tempest.”

“Everyone’s so cryptic. What happens in Tempest?” She lifts her hands and wiggles her eyebrows. “Boogeymen?”

If she only knew. “This town’s got a long history of weird.”

“What’s the scariest thing you’ve ever seen in Tempest?” she asks.

“California license plates in front of me.”

Her lips twitch, then she bursts into laughter. A bright musical sound that soothes my restless blood.

She shuffles closer, swiping at dandelion fuzz as it's carried on the breeze. "So you can make a joke."

I chuckle, unable to resist her charms. "Do you always say what you think?" I'm trying not to be in awe of this girl but consider myself failing fucking miserably.

"Mostly." She dips her chin, blond hair falling around her face. "I can't decide if that's really brave or really stupid. Probably some of both."

"Don't do that. Call yourself stupid."

Her lashes lower. "But I have done stupid things in my life."

"Like what? Running to Tempest?"

Fuck. It's the wrong thing to say. Her face clouds and her shoulders sag, but surprisingly, she answers me.

"I've always run. Packed precisely twelve suitcases in my life, and come the end of the summer, I'll pack another. Lucky number thirteen."

I frown at her words. They're tinged with sadness. My eyes lock on her face, to the cheek that holds no evidence of that bruise she had when she arrived.

"You in trouble, darlin'?" When she's silent, I press. "You came to my ranch with bruises on your face."

A swallow jogs her throat. Then she says, "Not your problem, cowboy."

I grit my teeth at my own words flung back at me.

In the distance, bells chime. A melancholy, haunting tune I've known my entire life. Delilah lifts her eyes skyward. "What's that?"

"The old church. It chimes every hour. Plays 'Take Me Home, Country Roads' every quarter hour." Usurped by Pastor Sawyer's megachurch, it sits abandoned on the outskirts of Tempest. But not forgotten. For the last two decades, an anonymous individual has been winding the mechanical

clockwork system periodically by hand, ensuring that it still chimes for the entire town to hear.

We listen as it chimes ten times, then Delilah says, “That reminds me. I need to make pancakes.”

It’s so abrupt, I blink. “For dinner?”

“Breakfast is the only thing I can cook.” A smile crosses her face. “When my sister and I were little, I’d get up early and cook for both of us. Eggs, pancakes, black coffee.”

Black coffee. One thing we can agree on.

“I don’t eat breakfast.”

“Well, you should.” She leans in closer. “It’s the most important meal of the day, or haven’t you heard? It sets everything in motion. Just the sun and the quiet and the closest people in it.”

There’s emotion on her angelic face. But something darker lurks. Sadness, mystery, pain. The impulse to reach for her, to dive deeper into whatever she’s hiding, makes me take one step toward her.

Fuck.

I need to go.

I don’t need dark conversations at late at night with a girl so beautiful she lights my blood on fire.

“What’d you do tonight?”

Delilah’s breathy voice calls me back. My mind replays my conversation with River. Our upcoming run. “Nothing you need to concern yourself with.”

The truth. This girl’s innocent, sweet, despite her sassy tongue, and needs to stay out of trouble. Needs to stay away from me.

“You have fuzz.”

“What?” I go rigid when her soft, small palm of velvet strokes its way down my cheek.

“See?” She pulls her hand away. In her palm, the white fuzzy seed head of a dandelion. Her cheeks puff out as she blows it away. Together, we watch it sail on the breeze.

My chest constricts. My cheek burns from the feel of her palm on my skin. I stare at her pretty pink lips, pouty and plump and slick with a gloss that smells like honey.

Fuck. I need her gone. Need her out of my space before I do something I regret.

Shifting my weight away from her, I nod my chin at her Creek House. “You work tomorrow. You need sleep. Get outta here and go to bed.”

She tosses me a flirty grin. “You want to put me there, cowboy?”

Great. She doesn’t listen either. Another reason to stay the hell away from her.

I give her my hardest glare. “Git.”

In return, she bats her eyes. “Good night, Cole.” As she turns to leave, the hem of her shirt flips up, giving me a look at the pink silk fabric covering her pussy.

Fuck.

I wait, watching her walk the distance from my house to hers. She slips inside and shuts the door.

I stare, longer than I should, a sudden gnawing urge to check her door. To make sure she’s safe. My pulse spikes imagining it unlocked. The bad things that could happen. Then, warring with myself, cursing my idiocy, I trek to her place. Creep onto the porch and test the handle.

Locked.

Relief settles in my shoulders.

By the time I make it back to my house, all thoughts of a shower are gone from my mind. Instead, all that lingers is Delilah. The girl with the sad eyes and the sharp mouth has already taken up too much of my interest.

What I need to do is stay away. Get her out of my head. For good.

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12

Delilah

Monday kicks off the start of our weekend, and I head into town that afternoon to restock my small kitchenette. I've already polished off an entire box of Strawberry Pop-Tarts and my cans of beef stew.

I wander the aisles of the Meadowlark Market. Shelves lined with cereals, candy bars, and chips. On a back wall, a neon sign flashes, BAIT. The scent of smoked jerky perfumes the air. I pick out what I need and drop the items into my basket.

I love the liminal vibe of gas stations and small-town stores. Like the last resort before the wilderness. Stocking up on snacks. The buzz of fluorescent lighting. My mom and sister and I were always on the road traveling, and Lucy and I looked forward to our gas station stops. We'd sit in the backseat, swaddled in blankets, and eat our candy bars and tell stories about princesses in high towers who waited for their prince.

It's how I feel out at the Creek House. Lonely but at peace, thoughtful but melancholy, and homesick for something I can't quite remember.

My gaze flicks to my right. Pinned to the bulletin board on the wall is a travel brochure featuring Weston Whiskey Distillery. Clearly, it's king in

this town.

I don’t know what I was thinking of offering to plan the launch party. I don’t know the first thing about whiskey or parties, but it was a trigger reflex to help. Ezra sounded so stressed. And the Westons, they’ve been so kind giving me a place to stay. It was the least I could do.

Maybe I’m in over my head. But maybe I’ll have a purpose. Even if it is only for the summer.

Into my basket goes a bag of dog kibble—Ratson’s favorite—and a box of pancake mix for me. As I round the narrow aisle, a voice carries over the shelves.

“That’s the girl. The one living at the distillery.”

My entire body freezes. No way they’re talking about me.

After a moment, another woman speaks up. “With the Westons?”

“Word is she showed up in the middle of the night.”

Shit. She is talking about me. I remember what Hassie said about Tempest being an unstoppable gossip mill. Looks like it finally found me.

I peek through the crack in the shelf to see a woman with gold hoop earrings and a violently chopped bob.

“No surprise to me the Westons are taking in strays.”

“Can you blame them? After their parents… But that girl…” A *tsk*. “Roy Devereaux went down to that distillery three times last week.” Disdain hangs in her voice. “Respectfully, I think she’s a fraud. Some con artist who dresses like a whore.”

The heavy beat of my heart thunders in my ears. I feel myself wanting to disappear inside of it.

Home-wrecker. Slut. Foolish girl. I’ve been called it all. But fraud is a new one. Nothing hurts more than that. A reminder that I don’t belong.

It’s how I’ve always felt in life. I got boobs too young and was mercilessly teased by my classmates. My mother choosing Tom, *believing* Tom over me. My profession being treated with side-eye and snark when it’s so much more than that.

“I heard she’s a stripper.”

Irritation crawls up my skin, and I try to shake off the words. If I had a dollar for every woman who was appalled that I’m a dancer, I’d be on my own private yacht right now.

The woman’s tone turns huffy. “It’s slim pickins in this town, and if some floozy stranger thinks she can get her claws into one of those boys, she better think twice and get in line.”

I feel the *fuck you* forming on my lips. Nothing makes me feel more alive than putting gossipy bitches in their place. But I stop myself at the last minute and force myself to breathe. I’m new here, and I don’t want to cause a scene. Quietly, quickly, I take Ratson’s bag of food, leave my basket on the dirty linoleum, drop a ten-dollar bill on the counter, and exit the market.

Outside on the street corner, I turn my face to the setting sun. My cheeks flame.

Everyone always talks. But it still stings. Jesus, what’s a girl to do? I get naked for a few dollars onstage and suddenly everyone’s a critic.

I look down at the bag of food in my hands.

There went dinner.

Lifting my gaze, I glance around the town, at its brightness, brick buildings, happy families exiting restaurants and bars, and feel the tears form in my eyes.

“Fuck.”

Alone. I feel so alone in this, in everything. No one to trust, no one to turn to.

My gaze lands on my Pinto. I should leave Tempest and never come back to this town again.

But where would I go? The thought of starting over, even if I've only been here for ten days, feels daunting. And do what? I could dance, but I need a big city for that, and a big city only brings me more attention. I'm stuck.

My eyes flood. My lip trembles. I reach up to hold my gold heart.

Don't give up, Delilah. You can do anything.

Delilah.

"Delilah!"

I blink myself out of my daze when I realize my name's being called.

"Delilah!!!"

I look across the street. Evangeline. She stands out front of the Blind Pig café with Ezra and her family. She hops on her tiptoes and waves frantically.

Her happy face sweeps away all the bad parts of today.

She takes a step toward me.

Toward the street.

Ezra launches himself at his daughter, and I hold up a hand to stop her. Even though facing the Westons is the last thing I want to do, I wave back, wait for traffic to clear, then cross the street.

"Hi," I greet them all. Ezra, Wells, and River stand there, tall and blue-eyed and rugged. Beside them are their Aunt Wyoma and Uncle Vaughn.

Piecing together the Westons is like trying to puzzle out one of those detective boards with all the strings. In the short time I've worked at the distillery, I've learned River owns the tattoo parlor in town and lives in the mountains above the ranch. Wells is in the Stable View cabin on the west side of the ranch. Warren, the oldest, lives in the apartment above his bar.

My mind locks on what the woman had said in the grocery store. Something about their parents no longer being here. More pieces.

Ezra smiles. “Long time.”

River, leaning back against the brick wall like some cowboy James Dean, chuckles. “Hear you’re killing it at the distillery.”

“I hope so.” I linger on the sidewalk, feeling awkward and out of place.

“She’s a natural,” Wells says.

“Find anything good in town?” Vaughn asks.

I nod at the bag of rat food in my hand, thinking of my own dinner I left behind. “Rat restock.”

“We’re going to get ice cream,” Evangeline chirps, and I smile at the thought of all these big bad cowboys ordering ice cream cones. “Want to come?”

Before I can answer, I hear bootsteps.

We look over to see Cole coming out of the hardware store. A flush creeps up my cheeks. Not prepared for his rugged face to show up in my line of vision. Sure, the other brothers are beautiful to look at, but none have the magnetic pull on me that Cole does. Tucking a plastic sack in his back pocket, his dark gaze slides to me. Expressionless. Assessing.

He strides our way, stopping close enough that I smell his leather and whiskey scent.

It’s annoying to think so much about a man who clearly detests me. I thought we made progress after our late-night conversation, but apparently not. He’s avoided me at the distillery for the last week. There’ve been no surprise visits, no growling ambushes in the tasting room. Instead, he’s stayed in the Coop. I won’t pretend I’m not disappointed.

“Well, would you look at that…” Wyoma moves to smack a kiss to Cole’s cheek. “We’ve got almost the whole family here.”

Family.

God, it’d be a dream.

To have a place that welcomes you as much as you welcome it. A person who loves you as fiercely as you love them.

Sometimes I feel like an idiot for even hoping for that much.

“Not staying. Needed to grab a screw for the hoop press.” Cole lifts a hand, flashing the jagged scar on his palm. All the brothers, except Wells, have one.

“Uncle Cole,” Evangeline cries. “Come get ice cream with us!”

Conflict shines on his handsome face. Like he’s warring with himself. “Not today, Bugs.”

Ezra and Wells share a look like it’s not the first time he’s said no.

Evangeline insists. “But Delilah is.”

I die a little inside.

“No, it’s okay. I don’t want to crash your party.”

“Please, crash it.” River pushes off the wall.

Wells steps beside me. That grin of his is a charmer. “Best ice cream you’ve ever had.” My stomach growls, a reminder of my lost dinner.

Expression doting, Ezra ruffles his daughter’s wild curls. “Maybe she has plans, Bugs.”

“Adults have too many plans,” she pouts.

“Do you?” I glance over at Cole’s rumbling voice. “Have plans?” He watches me with eyes the color of the sky.

My face heats. “Hot date,” I tease, and he goes unbelievably tense. Muscles, neck, body coiled tightly.

Evangeline tugs on my hand. “Please?”

I look at Cole. “I’ll go if you go.”

I remember what he said that day in the Creek House about being back for only six months. But it looks like he’s been on an island when it comes to his family. Like he doesn’t know how to fit back in.

Maybe this broody cowboy has secrets too.

Cole inspects my face, something flashing behind his dark gaze. “Ice cream it is.” Squeals and giggles erupt from Evangeline.

Butterflies erupt in my stomach as I follow Cole and the Westons down the block.

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13

Cole

Crammed in a picnic table, I wipe the sweat from my brow and watch Delilah's ice cream cone melt. She sits on top of the table, a bag of dog kibble beside her, white sneakers propped on the bench. Today, the ends of her honey-blond hair are dyed a mint green. Her tongue gives the chocolate swirl a long, slow lick, and my dick flexes.

Fuck.

I look away.

Already I regret coming along. I heard the dare in Delilah's soft voice asking me to go. I couldn't refuse her.

There's something addictive about her that makes me want to stay, to open up. She isn't afraid of me. Speaks her mind. Our conversation from that night has run through my brain more times than I can count. Which is why I've kept my distance.

The girl's trouble.

I need to stay away from her, let the summer end, have the fucking launch party, then make her go.

“Well?” Wells asks, twisting to look at her. Our family takes up two picnic tables in the old drive-up ice cream parlor. “Best ice cream you ever had?”

“The best.” She looks almost as happy as Evangeline. “It tastes just like a chocolate malt.”

“We’ve been comin’ here since we were kids.” Ezra gives me a shit-eating grin. “Cole’s favorite has always been the chocolate malt.”

“Could be anyone’s favorite.” I rub a palm along my jaw, hating my brother right now.

Delilah’s gaze drops to mine. “Want a taste, cowboy?”

She hovers the cone in front of me. “Temptin’ me won’t work, darlin’.”

Those long, dark lashes flutter. “It’s just ice cream.”

Not with this girl.

I’m defenseless against her gaze, and that fact scares me to death.

I turn on the seat, attention snagging on my brothers, who talk in low tones. “What’s goin’ on with the launch?” Anything to get my mind off this girl in front of me. Because she sits there, eating that ice cream cone, so goddamn gorgeous I can hardly stand it.

“Not planning it anymore. Remember?” Ezra gives me a smirk like he knows what I’m trying to do. “Ask Delilah.”

Fuck.

She flushes. “Oh, well, I’ve been working on a few things. But I wanted to confirm a few details first.” Delilah licks the ice cream cone, licks those pretty, pink lips. “Any particular reason for Labor Day weekend?”

“That’s when we always unveil the new limited-edition whiskey,” my uncle explains. “A whole barrel. We tap it in the tasting yard and let everyone drink as much as they want.”

River grins. “Fall down drunk.”

Wyoma makes a face. “Cleanup is your problem, boys.”

Wells finishes his rocky road. “It’s a big deal this year.”

Delilah cocks her golden head. “Why?”

I cross my arms. “It just is.”

Wyoma cackles. “That’s our Cole. A man of many words.”

“Don’t worry, honey, he’s nicer than he looks.” Vaughn chuckles.

Wells grins. “Cole likes bulls and barrels and not much else.”

“Jesus, you assholes.” I shoot him a glare. My family’s harassment knows no bounds.

Ezra cocks a brow. “My daughter takes criticism better than you do, Cole, and she’s five.”

“Okay, well…” Delilah straightens her shoulders. Excitement lights her eyes. “I was wondering if it would be okay if I reached out to some of the whiskey magazines to see if I could get Weston Whiskey a feature?”

“Like an article?” Ezra asks.

She nods. “Yes. It’s an idea I had. But if you don’t like it—”

“I love it.” Ezra looks around the group. “This could be the kind of press that opens all kinds of new doors.” He exhales, looking lighter than he has in years. “You’re a saint, Del.”

Gratefulness rolls through me at the way Delilah’s been able to take so much off my brother’s plate. A feeling I don’t much like.

“It’s a great idea, honey.” Vaughn tugs at his mustache. “You think you can swing it?”

Delilah smiles. “I’ll damn well try.”

Vaughn gives her an appreciative nod. “We sure appreciate all you’re doing. Taking a hell of a lot off our hands.”

“Of course. It’s the least I can do.”

A wave of irritation sweeps over me. Irritated that she's too nice. Irritated that my family sits here fawning over her. Irritated that I care, that I'm curious. But suddenly I am. What the fuck is she doing here?

I shift on the bench and cross my arms. "Your family know you're here?"

Stubbornly, she sits there and glares. "No."

"No, they don't know you're here, or no, no family?"

River groans. "Christ, Cole."

She looks at me distrustfully. Her hand goes to the locket on her throat. "You ask a lot of questions for someone whose main choice of dialogue is grunts."

Wells sends me a second glare. "Damn, man. Ease up."

My lips tick up. "Just making conversation."

"Some call it being nosy," she mutters.

The fine hair at her brow line is damp with sweat. She toys with her locket, running the gold between her fingers. Nervous now.

"Where did you say you're from again?" I fail to keep the interrogation out of my tone. She gives me a dirty look, like she knows what I'm doing.

"I didn't. I moved around a lot growing up, so now I kind of have a minor existential crisis because I'm not really sure where home is." A little laugh pops out of her mouth. "I was born in Phoenix, then lived in Austin when I was in first grade. Then we picked up and moved to California. I bounced around some of the suburbs through my teens, then I landed in Vegas three years ago."

Though her voice is steady, a spark of sadness ripples beneath her words.

She looks down at her lap, wipes up a drop of ice cream on her bare leg with her fingertip. "I don't have a hometown or a family. Not like all of you."

"No one comes from nothing," I grunt.

“Sometimes it feels like it,” she says quietly.

Wyoma juggles Evangeline on her lap. “What’d you do in Vegas, honey?”

My neck tightens.

She takes a deep breath, then says, “I was a dancer.” Her dark eyes find mine, daring me to say something.

But it’s not me. It’s River.

He leans in, brow arched. “Like a—”

“Not important,” I grunt, unsure why I suddenly want to shield her from questions when I’m the one who started it.

“It’s okay,” she cuts in, side-eyeing Evangeline, who’s too busy battling with Vaughn over the last bite of sugar cone to pay attention. “Like *that*. Disco ball, black lights, G-string, everything.”

Fuck. I was right.

My stomach twists at the thought of Delilah spreading her legs. Delilah, taking off her clothes for somebody she doesn’t know. It’s not that she can’t handle herself, it’s that I don’t trust the situation. Imagining what the wrong person might do to her has my blood pressure through the fucking roof.

A nostalgic smile brightens Delilah’s face. “Lady Lawless was my stage name. It’s nothing like you think it is.” Her eyes sweep around us. “It’s just like any other job. Most times I enjoyed doing it. Other times it was mind-numbingly boring.” Her brow flicks up. “But I got the best workout of my life and made two thousand a night.”

River whistles.

Wyoma cackles. “My god, I hope you emptied those men’s wallets, honey.”

I can’t smother the grin that appears on my face. Nothing rattles my family. And apparently nothing rattles Delilah either. She says what she

means without sugarcoating it.

The smile fades from Delilah's face. "You could say that."

"And now you're here," Vaughn says.

"I had some trouble at the club and needed a break."

River's eyes flick to mine. I shift in my seat, hating the way I'm bothered by that sentence.

Wyoma pats her hand. "Good riddance to trouble."

"I want to dance, Daddy." Evangeline spins on her tiptoes.

"We'll see." Chuckling, Ezra stands from the picnic table. "Now let's see about getting some of that chocolate off your face."

With that, my family gets up, tossing napkins and bowls in the trash. I should join them, but instead I stay seated with Delilah.

The parking lot at the drive-in is bustling with locals coming in and out. Parked in a spot near Main Street is an unfamiliar white van. Inside, the driver sits, dark glasses on. Head bowed.

I narrow my eyes and try to relax the tension in my muscles.

Delilah, my family, they aren't helping. It's been too damn long since I've done this.

"It's okay," Delilah murmurs, and I glance her way. "I wouldn't know what to think of me either."

How I feel about Delilah dancing is none of my business. It bothers me more that she has to do it.

"Not worried about you…" I gruff. "Worried about what other guys could do." The impulse to take care of her is so unfamiliar, I fight to shut it off and return to numbness, but I can't.

Delilah releases a shaky breath. "I know about bad men, Cole. Don't worry. I can handle myself."

Realization rages through my blood. No more doubt.

Someone hurt her.

The pounding of my heart thrashes in my ears. *Motherfucker.*

I don't want to feel this angry. Not again. Especially for this girl I barely know, but I do.

If someone hurt her, at that club where she works…

Is that why she's here? Trying to escape? Running from the person who put hands on her?

Before I can say anything, Delilah dusts her hands off and rests them in her lap. "Thanks, that was good. Especially since that was dinner."

I frown at the bag of rat food on the picnic table. "Thought you went to the market."

"Oh, I did. I just ran into the gossips, who were out in full force."

I wince. Rumors foam at the mouth in our town. No telling what she heard. "What about?"

She looks into the sun, her chest rising and falling. "Me."

A growl rises in my chest. "What'd they say?"

She hugs her waist. "Stupid stuff."

Not stupid. Because I can see it's affected her. Her light's dimmed, her eyes sad, and it's that combination that fucks with my heartbeat.

"Tell me," I demand.

At her hesitation, I give her a firm glare. She sighs. "Apparently I'm the whore of the town, and my sole focus in life is getting my hooks into one of the Westons."

A growl vibrates in my chest. I dig my fingers into the edge of the picnic table and resist the urge to reach out and comfort her.

I don't like the fact that people are talking about her. Worse, I don't like the fact that their words have hurt her. No matter the rumors that flew in

this town, my brothers and I always had each other's backs. Someone needs to have hers.

"Who was it?" I ask, trying to school my anger, even though I'm ready to find Tempest's gossip committee and issue a stern warning.

"Big hair, bigger mouth."

I can automatically think of two people who fit the description. Gretchen Hale and Lisette Craddock.

"It's okay. I'm used to it." She lifts a slender shoulder. "I bought what I needed and got the hell out of there."

My chest constricts. She bought her goddamn rat food but forgot about herself.

She turns her head. The air in my lungs stills. She's fucking breathtaking. The setting sun kisses her high cheekbones, the gold in her eyes. My hands burn to touch her. To run over her velvet skin and thread my fingers through her silky hair.

Delilah slips off the picnic table. Her voice a soft, sad scold. "You're not that big and scary, Cole Weston. If you want to run me off, just ask. I've been on my own before, I can do it again."

Fuck. Her words sting.

I remember what she said about packing her bags. Something in her tone hints that independence wasn't a choice, it was about survival.

Is this what she's doing here? Surviving?

As Delilah heads across the parking lot, I stand and cross my arms, watching her departing figure from beneath the brim of my hat.

Ezra settles back beside me. "You want her to go, don't you?"

"She should." When I'm sure she's made it back onto Main Street, I glance at my brother. "She's hiding something. If it's trouble, Ez…"

He releases a sigh. "I don't want her to go."

My head jerks back.

“You like her?” Jealousy slices deep. Fuck if the thought kills me. For one single second, I want to punch my brother.

“No. Evangeline loves her.” Ezra looks pained. “She’s the first woman she’s been around since…” He swallows. “Since Shannon. I think it’s good for her. *She’s* good for her. She’s good for the distillery.” His face hardens. “She stays. For as long as she wants.”

I drag a hand down my jaw. *Fuck.*

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14

Delilah

The smoky caramel aroma of whiskey permeates my senses. I wipe down the bar top, refill the cherries in the condiment holder. It's Friday, the June sunshine is bright, and the tasting room is filled with both tourists and locals.

I like bartending. The shift moves fast, and the tips, while not quite as good as they were at the club, are all I need for this small-town life. I've stayed busy planning the launch party. Taken up a needlepoint class on Tuesday nights at the local library to kill time when I'm not working. The Weston brothers are friendly.

Well, most of them.

I cast an eye at Cole storming past the window, his handsome face shadowed with irritation.

Jesus, he's in a mood. Has been for the last week.

Cole's barely given me more than a grunt since the ice cream parlor. Distance kept, no doubt, after hearing what I used to do for work. Typically, I'd shake it off. But this time, I can't.

I don’t care what people think of me, but I hate that I care about what Cole thinks of me.

My brain whispers all the bad things in my ear. I’m a dumb stripper that no man wants around for longer than a lap dance. Especially not Cole Weston. Because I’ve never truly been wanted. Never permanently belonged anywhere. A fact Tempest is making perfectly clear.

By the time I make my way over to a table of guests from California, I feel shaky and unsteady. But I slap a happy smile on my face. Another tip from Melly. *Smile even when there is a man you want to murder.*

“Any refills?”

They order whiskey flights, and I head back to the bar.

As I key the order in the POS, I feel eyes on me.

I glance over my shoulder. A cold jolt flashes through my spine.

A man in cargo pants and a crew cut stares.

Swallowing, I turn my face away, and when I look up again, he’s gone. I watch the bells swing above the door.

I’m reaching for a bottle of Weston Whiskey Classic Single Malt when, from beneath the bar, my phone pings.

I bite my lip, guiltily. I shouldn’t check my phone during work, but it’s been ages without a word from Melly, and I’m desperate to hear from her.

“I need a minute,” I tell Jill, the other bartender. Before she can answer, I disappear into the back office.

Holding my breath, I swipe open my phone. Only it’s not Melly. It’s Belle.

The cops are asking about you, Lady.

Fuck. My skin prickles with dread. I breathe out, my fingers flying over my keypad.

What do you mean?

Eyes fixated on the screen, I watch the text bubbles appear. Disappear. Appear.

They’re looking into your past. Your time spent with Sammy.

Oh god. A wave of disbelief crests over me, and tears flood the backs of my eyes. That seals it. I can’t ever go back to Vegas. Panic rises, and I grip the phone tighter. I’m all alone. Like always. Doomed to have nothing and no one.

I fire back an agitated text.

Holy fuck, Belle. What do I do?

I’ll handle it. Just tell me where in Montana you are.

I chew my lip, debating. Doubting that little voice in my head. I have to trust someone. And I trust Belle. If she can help me, maybe, just maybe, I can go back to my life. I can see Melly again.

Tempest.

That’s my girl.

My pulse quickens and I clench my fingers around my phone. Then I shut it off and pocket it in my jean shorts.

Rattled, I return to my post. Jill, shaking two cocktails at once, gives me a withering glance.

“We’re swamped, Delilah.” She splashes out whiskey into the tulip-shaped glasses. “Get those tasters going.”

“Sorry.” I blink away tears. “I got you.”

Without looking, I grab the nearest bottle of whiskey, but I stop short of pouring it at the deep boom of a voice. “That’s the wrong bottle.”

Surprised, I glance over my shoulder to find Cole glaring at me.

On edge from Belle’s text message, I snap at him. “It is not.”

He looks at me dryly for a long beat. “You gonna argue with me or listen?”

“You don’t work here.” I give him my fiercest scowl. “I do.” After working in a club for three years, it’s easy to read people. And the wave of fury coming off this cowboy is obvious.

“Wrong.” Cole prowls toward me. “Darlin’, this is a five-hundred-dollar bottle of reserve whiskey. Ninety-four points. Gold medal winner. You think I’m gonna let you pour tasters for some frat boys who don’t know the difference between this and their Coors Lights, you’re out of your mind.”

He grabs the base of the bottle, and I grab the neck. For five seconds, we play a stubborn game of tug of war, then my hold slips and the bottle smashes onto the ground.

Shit.

Flecks of broken glass cut my bare shins. I gasp and jump back, but not before I see the deep copper label. My shoulders drop. Cole was right. It was the wrong bottle.

Hot tears fill my eyes. My chest tightens in that familiar way it's been doing since that night in the Penthouse.

I stare down, horrified, fascinated, and watch the whiskey slowly spread across the cement floor.

Sammy. Blood. Whiskey.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

"Goddamnit, Delilah," Cole growls.

I wrench my eyes open to find his burning stare on mine.

Humiliated, angry at myself, my hands shake. I back away from him. "I'm sorry."

Turning, I run through the tasting room, the hallways, the Coop, and the distillery until I'm finally outside. Heat nips at my face. My lungs clench and won't release. Tears build in my eyes.

Breathe. In. Out.

I stick my hands in my hair and double over, gasping. My breathing's off-kilter, my mind racing.

The cops are after me. Melly, my friend, is missing. Another person I left behind. Something's wrong. Something's wrong, and I know it. Just like that night with Lucy Lou—

"Oh god."

"Breathe, Delilah."

Cole's deep timbre, his heat sears as he steps behind me. I can't help it, sheer relief has me sagging back against his chest. His body feels like it's made of steel and mountain.

Big hands on my shoulders now. "Breathe."

My gasp erupts to a sob. "I can't."

"Darlin', you've got to breathe. You pass out, I won't be too happy about it." His chest rises, helping me along. A harsh breath hits my neck. "In and

out.”

I gulp air.

Cole’s mouth skims my ear, his voice rumbling straight through me. “The first time I ever rode a bull, I had a panic attack. Couldn’t get air. Couldn’t see straight. Couldn’t do a damn thing but panic. My brother talked me down. He said, ‘Nothing is ever so bad you can’t conquer it.’”

A lump rises in my throat. I lean my head back against his chest and look at him. “What if you can’t?”

A thick forearm hooks around my waist. “You can.”

I close my eyes as he and I take several slow deep inhales. Both of our chests rising and falling in a deep, calm rhythm. When I finally feel less shaky, I turn and face him. His deep blue eyes find mine.

“I’m sorry about the whiskey,” I say. “You were right, it was the wrong bottle.”

“I don’t care about the whiskey.” Cole looks down, his brow furrowing. “Your legs.”

The low swoop of my stomach has my heart racing faster. He’s here? For me?

I tuck a lock of hair behind my ear. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine. You got nicked.” Expression unreadable, he takes my elbow, guiding me to a low barrel. “Sit. Let me look at your leg.”

I smile as he crouches in front of me. Tucked under his bicep is a first aid kit. “Are you always so prepared, cowboy?”

A chuckle leaves his lips. “Have to be. Especially with you around.”

“I’m not normally such a klutz.”

Cole grunts and tears open a rubbing alcohol pad. There’s a coolness on my leg, and my breath catches, not at the sting of antiseptic but at Cole’s touch. His hands, calloused from ranch work, run over my legs. One big

hand palming the back of my calf, while the other wipes away the blood. My nerve endings stir.

I sit so still, almost in awe of his gentle touch, but when our gazes lock, he withdraws his hand.

My eyes drift over him. He looks like the finest specimen of a cowboy. Gorgeous in a light blue chambray pearl-snap and his dusty black cowboy hat. His boots, dark brown with copper Ws, are almost as rugged as he is.

As Cole snaps the first aid kit shut, snaps me out of my daze, his deep voice rumbles. “How long have you had the attacks?”

“Since I left Vegas,” I admit.

“Why?”

He meets my eyes, and for one brief second, it feels like I’m not alone in the world. Like I could have help. A friend. Someone to trust.

Then, just as quickly, I remind myself it’s not his business. Who am I to drag this man into my mess? My heart and I have done it alone all these years. We can do it again.

“It’s a long story.”

His eyes narrow at my quick dodge of the question. I pat my long blond hair, the wild strands whipped by the wind.

“You don’t trust easy, do you?”

“No. I don’t.” I think it’s the first time I’ve been honest with him.

Cole stares at me, emotionless. Until his fingers reach up to drift through my hair, tucking a lock behind my ear. Unlocked jaw, concerned deep blue eyes, he almost looks…soft. His thumb falls to my cheekbone, ghosting across my skin.

My heart stutters, shocked at his tender touch.

There’s a strange intensity in his gaze as he stares up at me. “You feel okay now, darlin’?”

Darlin’.

Joy spreads in my chest.

His tone isn’t condescending. It’s…caring.

Oh god.

I feel okay with Cole. Something tells me I could always feel more than okay with this man.

“I do. Thank you.”

He gives a soft smile, one that reaches and crinkles his eyes, and that deeper sneak peek behind the hard shell of Cole Weston has me melting.

I shift and redirect my gaze to the distillery. Wipe my sweaty palms on my thighs. “I should get back to work.”

“Jill’s got it.” Cole shoves up to standing. Long, thick fingers rake over his stubbled jaw. “Come on. I’ll show you the ranch.”

I bounce up beside him. “Really?”

An almost-smile tugs at his lips. “Yeah. It’s about time you saw it.”

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15

Cole

As we walk from the distillery to the ranch, Delilah's proximity tugs on all my senses.

She's small and delicate beside me, and her honey scent floats between us. Her tan, toned legs lure my gaze. That halo of blond hair, her creamy skin, sparkly kohl-lined eyes and lids… She's breathtaking. And as uneasy as she makes me, as much as I want to push her away, it's undeniable after today. I can't.

I'm doing the one thing I promised myself I wouldn't do.

Get close to Delilah Grant.

She's not my responsibility. But she broke that bottle of whiskey and started shaking like crazy. I yelled at her, worried she had hurt herself, and she ran. It was instinct to go after her. To care.

I'm not that fucking heartless.

Still, calming someone isn't a skill I possess. Dancing with two-thousand-pound bulls, wrangling wild brothers, now that I can do. Talking down a gorgeous girl in a panic is new to me.

I chance a careful glance at her. "Sure you're okay?"

“Better now.” Her voice wobbles. “Thanks for…calming me down.” The small smile she gives me fucks with my heartbeat.

“Anytime,” I grunt, and find myself meaning it.

I’ve been acting like an asshole the last week. I think it’s time I fixed that.

During the fifteen-minute walk, I force myself to walk slower, to keep beside her. As we approach an emerald pasture, the air, previously spiced from the smell of whiskey, now takes on a raw, outdoorsy aroma.

“This is Copper Run Ranch.” I stop beneath the iron sign.

She lifts her gaze, then pins it on me. “What kind of animals do you have?”

I point at the barn in the distance. “Horses for day-to-day tasks, but at the sanctuary we have a little bit of everything.”

“I love this already.” Delilah clasps her hands to her chest. “Can I see more?”

“This way.”

The rock beneath our feet melts to earth. Oak trees dot the rolling hills that climb along the landscape until we come to various pens. Above, a large awning creates a canopy of shade. A wooden sign proclaims, “Welcome to the Barnyard.”

“We have ten acres of terrain that we use for the rescues,” I say. Awareness crackles beneath my skin as she slips by me to enter.

I watch Delilah crouch down and croon at each pen. Opossum. Raccoon. Fox. Two speckled piglets. A fawn healing from a fractured leg.

She takes her time with each of the rescues, her lips curving in a serene smile that tells me she loves the sanctuary as much as I do.

Brushing dust from her skirt, Delilah stands, then giggles. “They live in luxury, Cole.”

“They do.” I smother my chuckle. “It’s all we spend our money on. Whiskey and animals.”

She cocks her head. “Could be worse.”

From there, I show her the aviary where we have our wild birds. A red-tailed hawk, barn owl, raven, and dove.

“Next are the cows,” I tell her. “We have Angus and Holsteins and a few other breeds.”

I incline my head, and she follows. I lead her to a fence that backs up to a wide-open pasture. I hold my hands up to my mouth, let out a lowing bellow, and wait.

Within seconds, two fluffy red heads poke up from the herd of black angus. The cows trot happily toward us.

Delilah gasps. “Oh, Cole.” Her hands clasp her heart. “What kind of cows are these? Because I made up my mind, I want a million.”

I run a hand over my smiling mouth. The joy in her eyes is a sight to see. “Highland.” I nod as they approach. “That’s Otis and Neon Star.”

Gaze sliding from me to the cows, Delilah stretches out a hand. She giggles as Otis nuzzles against her outstretched palm. “Fluffy babies,” she croons.

“We rescue and rehome cattle, but we landed these brothers a couple of years ago. Their owners died, and they needed a place to go.”

“I want a thousand of them,” she breathes.

I’d give her a thousand, I think, then shake off the inane thought.

“How’d you go from whiskey to cows?”

I chuckle at her question. “It’s always been whiskey *and* cows.” I step around her to scratch Neon Star’s shaggy head.

“Copper Run used to be a cattle ranch, and then my great-great-great-grandfather got into breeding bulls. My mother’s father was a bull rider, and

she was raised around them. That's how she met my father. Bulls." A ragged breath pulls from my chest as the memories come back to me. "She always loved them, and one day, a few years into their marriage, she rescued one and couldn't stop." I lean on the fence, taking in her sun-kissed skin, her glossy blond hair. "Lots of people take in ranch animals and can't handle the responsibility. Some abuse or neglect them. We're a place they can go. If they can't get rehomed, they stay."

"And you work here?"

"When I'm not at the distillery, I'm on the ranch."

She smiles. "Sunup to sundown."

"That's right."

Delilah's face turns serious as she looks back at the cows. "You protect all these animals. That's a beautiful thing, Cole."

Her sweet, melodic voice pierces my armor.

Heat rising in my neck, I nod at the box of fresh produce in front of the pen that Wells stocks every morning. "You can feed 'em." I rough up Otis's red head. "That's really why they're here. Food."

Eyes alight with excitement, Delilah rummages through the produce box and pulls out two carrots. Instantly, Otis and Neon Star are pressing against the fence, earning Delilah's giggles and sweet smiles. I try not to be a jealous man, but hell, I lose the fight.

I clear my throat. "Guests can take a glass of whiskey, walk the ranch, and feed the animals. Any money we make goes to the rescue."

I watch as she stuffs her tips from the pocket of her shorts into the donation slot that's attached to the fence. "You should keep those," I gruff.

Her full lips rise. "I don't need them."

I make a mental note to tell Ezra to give her back her tips, then watch her croon at Otis and Neon Star for several more minutes. When she's finished,

she hits me with a blazing smile. “Where to next, cowboy?”

Our last stop sits at the edge of the sanctuary, nestled in front of a long thatch of trees. The bull pen. A round pasture safely gated, with a small hut offering shelter. Three massive Brahman bulls nose at hay.

“These are retired rodeo bulls.”

My lungs hitch as I watch Delilah walk right up to the massive beasts. Girl’s not afraid of anything. Glad for the fence between them, I run a hand over my jaw and watch as she climbs on the first rung of the fence.

“Can you pet them?”

“It’s best you don’t.” Worry surges through my body, and I settle beside her. My gaze drifts over her pouty lips, her delicate features.

Even pushing up on tiptoe on the fence, she’s tiny. Her body is perfect for me. Petite, slender, the right size to scoop up and toss over my shoulder. What I wouldn’t give to take her in my arms and hold her against me.

“Each bull is different like people are different, and just like people, they can be unpredictable.”

“But you love them.” Delilah’s gaze dips to my belt buckle. “You said you rode bulls?”

“Yeah.” I nudge my hat up and grin at her. “I did. Made a long career of acting like a reckless idiot.” I shake my head at the memories. Those dusty days on the rodeo circuit. “Concussions, rib fractures, you name it.”

Her eyes widen. “Do you have scars?” she breathes.

Chuckling, I open my hand, show her the scars on my knuckles, then hike up my shirtsleeves. “Bull stomped me here. Broke my arm.”

Delilah’s hand snaps out, taking my arm, and I go rigid. Her touch is warm, soft. “From the bulls.” A slender finger traces my scar, then moves to my sleeve of inky tattoos. “For the whiskey?” She hovers over a piece of wheat, then moves on to a whiskey bottle.

I nod, dry mouthed. That knot inside me coils tighter.

Her hands run down my arm. She turns my palm over, then dabs a finger directly in its center over my scar. “What’s this from? A bull?”

“No.”

Her eyes lock on mine, watching me from beneath long, dark lashes as if trying to see inside me.

I need to pull it the fuck back.

I’m talking like I know the girl. Like I trust her.

This girl doesn’t need to know the things I’ve done. Abandoning Jack. Abandoning my brothers for vengeance. That dark night we found Wells that changed our lives forever.

She needs to keep the fuck away from me. This bright, beautiful girl never needs to see inside my darkness.

I retract my hand. “Ranch accident.”

Her gaze narrows like she knows I’m lying.

A snort from the pen has us glancing over. I level a finger at a big black bastard slowly sauntering our way. “And that…is the last bull I ever rode. Whiskey Business.” I reach over and run a hand down one of his long, pendulous ears. “I’ve ridden him three times, and he bucked me off twice.”

Her eyebrow arches. “And you rescued him?”

“Had to. No ill will toward him. We were both doing our jobs.” I rub a hand down my jaw, face her. “Darlin’, rodeo is a sport of skill, but it is also of the heart. You have to be brave to ride those bulls. Be the best. Look that bull in the eye and forgive it, even if it tosses you on your ass.”

“Why’d you quit?”

“I was too beat up, too old to keep going anyway. Saw it as a good time to retire. To help my brothers.”

“Which brother helped you? When you had a panic attack?”

Everything inside me clenches. Not ready. Not fucking ready to talk about Jack.

And yet…

When I turn my head, I find the deep, rich amber of her eyes inches away. Damn if the whiskey burn of her gaze doesn't sear. Doesn't carve open something inside of me.

"My brother." My voice sounds like sandpaper. "Jack."

"Jack?" Her brow furrows in a question, then her eyes shoot open in realization. The blood drains from her face. "Oh, no. Oh, Cole."

"He was the oldest. My best friend." I probe the dark edge of my memory, every nerve in my body on edge. Not sure why I keep talking, why I'm telling her this, it goes against every instinct in me to let her in, but I do.

I take a breath to fight off the tightness in my chest.

"He died in a bull-riding accident on the circuit. He was trampled to death." My jaw works as I glance at her. "He was only twenty-two."

It's all I can get out. All I can give.

Delilah's eyes get a shiny, faraway look to them. Her lower lip trembles. "I'm sorry, Cole. I am so sorry."

That's when I realize she's off the fence. She's beside me, her hand on my arm. That beautiful face tilted my way, her cheeks damp with tears.

I'm not prepared. For this conversation. For this girl.

But it's out, and she's here, and suddenly everything feels unstoppable.

She feels unstoppable.

Maybe that's the reason I'm letting her in. Building trust to get her story. To protect my family from the trouble she's brought our way.

But I don't know if I buy my own bullshit. Not anymore.

Not when I'm talking to this girl like I know her.

I back away from Delilah. The temptation.

“Didn’t tell you that to make you cry,” I gruff. “It’s just the fact of the matter.”

“I hate facts sometimes,” she says softly.

I chuckle. “You tell it true, darlin’.”

She tucks a lock of hair behind her ear. “I should get back to work. Again, I’m sorry about the whiskey.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. Just hands off the five-hundred-dollar bottles.”

Delilah touches the brim of my black Stetson, tilts it up. “I could drive you crazy, cowboy.”

“Already are,” I mutter, biting down hard on a smile.

Smiling, she shrugs her shoulder in that flirty little way I like. “Bye, Cole.” Then she turns toward the distillery.

An ache settles in my chest. I stare after her for minutes, for miles, like she’s the only light I can see.

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16

Delilah

Cole’s story has taken up space in my head. Ex-pro bull rider. And he looks the part. Massive, chiseled in jagged scars and rippling muscles. A cowboy who could be carved from smoke and mountain. That’s Cole Weston.

The man I thought hated me, helped me yesterday. The way he held me, calmed me down, hijacked my pulse.

Surprisingly, he also opened up. He lost a brother. I ache for him. Because I know the feeling all too well. He and I share that in common at least.

Loss.

Lucy Lou.

My precious little sister would be sixteen now. The same age I was when I left that house, promising her I’d come back. Promising her I’d get her a better life.

“You’re leaving me?”

“Not leaving you. I’m getting help, okay?” I tucked Lucy safely into the closet where Tom couldn’t find her, hating the fear in her big brown eyes. “Stay here. Keep quiet. I’ll only be gone an hour.”

She shook her head and tugged at the locket around my neck. “I don’t want you to go.”

“I’ll come back. I promise. Look.” I opened the locket to show her our photos inside. “I have my lucky locket. It always brings me home to you.”

And it did. But I was too late.

I shake off the memory, slipping into my pointe shoes, letting the music fill me up from the inside. A crisp breeze flitters through the open window, nipping at my skin. The living room of the Creek House is crowded with furniture. Dipping low, I shove the coffee table across the rug and into the wall. Then I bend into a plié, feeling the music wrap around me. My one comfort.

I try to focus on the dance, but once again, my mind strays to Cole.

A current shifted between us yesterday. A change.

There’s so much more beneath his hard exterior. Scars. Danger. He harbors a strange darkness that should scare me, but it doesn’t. The man’s an enigma I want to piece together.

What is it about him? His masculine strength? His captivating presence? He fascinates me, calms me, and infuriates me all in one breath.

Which means I should stay away. I have my own damn problems. Like the cops for one. Puzzling out this complicated, broody cowboy shouldn’t be another.

I don’t want a man and I don’t do relationships. My heart is mine and mine alone. Loss, rejection, pain, I don’t have it in me for more.

I am not the woman for Cole Weston, even though for one brief, foolish second, I want to be.

“Mustang Sally” by Wilson Pickett thrums through the Creek House.

I lose myself in the music, that itch to dance skating over my skin and skittering into my blood. I do my pole warm-up, a few easy spins and

stretches, ending with some cat-cows on the rug. As if the dance has cleansed it, my brain empties all my fears, my worries.

Finished, I slip out of my ballet shoes and pad barefoot to the kitchenette. After downing a glass of water and feeding Ratson, I grab my laptop from my nightstand, my boot from the floor, and settle at the table.

It's now or never. Do or die.

I'm sick of being scared. Sick of wondering what's on this stupid little stick.

After my talk with Cole yesterday, I realized I can be brave too.

After the computer powers up, I insert the USB into the port. An icon pops up, and I click it. I'm directed to a folder.

Online safe deposit box.

I tap a nail on the table and stare at the screen.

That means whatever Sammy gave me is confidential. Important.

My fingers hover over the touch pad.

Do I want to know? Will I regret it?

I inhale a deep breath.

Fuck it.

I click.

A web browser pops up, asking me to put in a password. I try the usual ones, 1111, 1234, but I'm no criminal mastermind, and it stays locked.

Am I relieved? Disappointed? Both?

Squinting at the screen, I settle back in my chair.

Good, I decide. *I don't want to know.*

With shaking hands, I rip the USB from the port, then toss it back into my boot.

Now, on to Melly.

Into the search engine, I type in *Melly Farina.*

No results except for a pasta recipe.

I think about it.

A memory hits me.

“Everyone calls me Melly, but really my name’s Carmella. Like that badass bitch from The Sopranos*.” Melly appraised me. “You need a nickname.”*

I arched a brow. “I like Delilah.”

“Yeah, but… What about Lili? It’ll be my secret, sexy name for you.”

Now, I type Carmella Farina.

The search loads with results. I stare, bile rising in my throat.

“Missing Woman Carmella Farina Last Seen in Las Vegas”

“Carmella ‘Melly’ Farina Missing Since May”

The date leaps out at me.

She went missing the day after I left Vegas. She’s been gone almost an entire month.

Why didn’t Belle tell me?

Nausea swirls in my stomach. I squeeze my eyes shut. Fuck. I don’t know what to do.

Blinking fast, I swipe a hand over my face.

Instantly, I’m transported back to the night I ran from the club.

Sammy pushing that USB into my hands. Sammy saying, “They won’t wait. Not anymore.”

And now Melly’s missing.

She and the USB are connected. I know it. But how? And who’s *they*?

I need to walk, to move, to run. That’s how I deal with stress. Running away like some foolish girl, packing a bag, but that’s always been my MO,

so why change it now?

I throw on jeans, a tank top, and the tattered sneakers I've been wearing to work in the distillery. I exit the Creek House. Beyond the front porch, the midday sky is dark. Gathering clouds have bulldozed their way across the horizon.

Despite the heat and the humidity, I shiver.

It's exactly how I feel right now. Stormy weather inside of me.

I hold my breath as I set out across the ranch. Instinctively, I'm drawn to the animals. Maybe it was the cows, maybe it was Cole, but either way, I need peace.

I'm passing the barn when a booming voice makes me jump. "Movin' fast."

I look over to see Cole standing in the doorway of the barn. Lying on the ground beside his boots is an array of tools.

I prop my hands on my hips. "Wouldn't you know it, I'm running away."

He doesn't like the answer.

His dark brow furrows as he comes towards me. Stern. All business. My heart hammers. Even covered in sweat, he's gorgeous. Tight jeans clinging to massive thighs, tan, rippling forearms, that dark hair long at the nape of his neck. I ache to run my fingers through it. In another life, I'd be a different girl, and Cole Weston would be mine.

Only it's a fantasy.

But Cole's not.

He's a real-deal cowboy.

Butterflies erupt in my stomach as he prowls closer. He reminds me of a burly bear that's just come out of hibernation.

Cole props a rough finger beneath my chin, lifting it to inspect my face. I almost purr at his calloused touch. "You okay?"

“Out for a walk.” I change the subject before he can dive deeper. “What are you doing?”

“Ranch work. Need to fix some fencing, clean up the pasture, feed the bulls.”

“Can I help?”

“It’s borin’ work, darlin’.” Amusement flashes in his blue eyes.

I think of the USB drive, Melly. “I need boring.” Need Cole. Just being beside this man calms me.

“Day off. Should be restin’.”

“I could say the same about you.” At the wry arch of his brow, I press a hand to my heart. “I’ll listen. Scout’s honor.” I gesture at my clothes. “I’m even dressed for it.”

I shiver as his blue eyes drag the length of my body. They dip to my legs, then travel to my mouth.

An almost-smile tugs at his lips, before it resets in a stern, flat line.

Without saying a word, he disappears inside the barn, then minutes later, reappears with a honey-colored horse outfitted with a saddle and reins. I recognize her from the day he surprised me at the Creek House.

“What’s her name?” I rub up the horse’s long velvety nose and look into her big dark eyes.

“Pryor.” Into the canvas saddlebags, he drops his tools. “We’ll take her over to the pen. Quicker that way.”

Cole swings himself up into the saddle, and I fight a shiver at the sight of him. His physique is a massive, chiseled rock of strength. I’ve never seen a man like him.

Leaning forward, he drapes an arm over the saddle horn. “Ever been on a horse?”

“No.” I grin. “But there’s a first time for everything.”

He nods in approval at my answer. Holds a hand down to me. “Ready to take a ride?”

On you? Yes.

My face flushes. I reach up a hand.

He clutches it and swings me up into the saddle in front of him like I weigh nothing. Then he reaches around me and takes the reins.

Oh god. His arms, his outdoorsy, raw scent, his closeness. I regret taking him up on his offer to ride.

“Relax.” He leans closer. His warm breath tickles my hair, skates over my skin in a pleasant shiver. “I got you.” With that, he nudges Pryor into a smooth canter across the field.

Mountain scenery blurs by. Wind in my hair. The tightening of Cole’s muscles as he presses closer. He steers Pryor past the barn, up a hill, and across a meadow to the cow pasture where we were yesterday.

Cole stops near the pasture gate. He dismounts and reaches for me. Twisting toward him, I slide off Pryor, clinging to his broad shoulders as he helps me down. He sets me beside him, his big hand resting on my hip. “You good?”

“Yeah,” I breathe, and he steps away.

No. I’m not good. The way this man commands my senses is unfair. His size, those unrelenting blue eyes, his powerful masculinity, this cowboy is nothing like I expected. I’m so damn dizzied by him.

Cole ties his horse to the fence and grabs the canvas saddlebags.

The lowing of cows fills the air. Beside the fence is a tumble of sticks and weeds that looks like some sort of burrow.

Curious, I inch toward it.

“Careful.” His deep voice vibrates through me. “That’s a jackrabbit lair. You get too close, and they’ll get you.”

I stand there, frozen, terrified, then a smile stretches my cheeks. “Cole,” I breathe, delighted. “You made a joke.”

He rubs a hand over his smirking mouth. Like he doesn’t quite know what to do with his smile. But I do. I stare at it. He looks so damn sexy.

He stops near a silver fence post, props a hand on top. “We’re gonna fix this gate. Think you can hand me tools?”

“Most definitely.” He kneels and I follow suit. “What happened?”

“A guest leaned over too far and popped a wire.”

As Cole tugs at the wire, he gives me a crash course about fixing fences. Tornado wire, termination knots, it’s all Greek to me, but I nod dutifully and listen.

“What we’re gonna do is tie off the ends around the post with termination knots. We got thirteen line wires and thirteen termination knots to tie, so let’s get to it.”

As he works, I calmly watch Cole. He grunts, his entire body straining, his biceps rippling as he pulls the slack wire tight. The veins in his arms and hands pop as he wraps the first wire in a familiar pattern. “Wire cutter.”

Within minutes, we lapse into a routine of silence. Cole grunts and knots wire. At his nod, I hand him the cutters. Soon, the fence comes together. It’s near the end, on knot ten, that Cole pulls back and massages his left hand like it’s hurting him.

“Let me do it.” I scoot forward, holding out my hand for the wire. Wordlessly, Cole steps back, folding arms across his broad chest.

I’m slow, the wire is taut and hard, but I’m determined to impress this cowboy. With careful movements, my fingers deftly work the knot. Under, over, under, over, tail through the hole, under, lazy loop, two tight wraps, then Cole snaps its end.

His gaze falls to mine. “How’d you know how to do that?”

I smile with pride. “Girls can do hard things, cowboy.”

“No insult, darlin’, it just ain’t every day I see a woman able to tie a near perfect termination knot.”

His deep rumble, his compliment slides across my skin like silk. “Like I said, I’m a Jill of many trades.” His raised eyebrow tells me he’s listening, he’s curious, so I go on.

“I like to know a little bit about everything. We didn’t have much money when I was a kid, but my mom got me a set of used *Encyclopaedia Britannica* from a thrift store. My favorite was B for ‘ballet.’ And then K. Knots. Kakorrhaphiophobia.”

He nudges up his hat. “What’s that?”

“Fear of failure.” I shrug a shoulder, reaching for one of the slack wires. “I never went to college or anything, but I always thought those encyclopedias made me hungry to learn.”

His blue eyes flash with interest. “You can’t put a price on that.”

“No. You can’t.” I swallow hard at the memory.

As if sensing a lapse in conversation, the sky rumbles.

Exhaling, Cole turns his face to the dark clouds. “Most beautiful sound in the world.”

“Why’s that?”

“Rain. The more we get the better. No water means no whiskey.” He lifts his chin to the mountain looming in the distance. “We source our water for the distillery from the falls.”

My mind recalls the guidebook I bought on my first day in Tempest. “Sweetheart Falls? I’ve been wanting to go for a hike up there—”

“Don’t.” Cole’s entire demeanor turns to lead. “Don’t go to the falls.”

I stare at him, confused. “Why not?”

A muscle tics in his square jaw. “Some people were murdered up there.”

“Really?” The way his face looks…

He reaches a hand behind his neck to squeeze it. “They happened every few years back then.”

“A serial killer?” At Cole’s answering grimace, I ask, “Did they catch him?” This town keeps getting more and more intriguing.

“No.” Worry bleeds into his harsh tone. Twisting toward me, his gaze pins to mine. Stern. Deadly serious. “I want you to stay away from there, Delilah.” As if to bring his point home, he steps forward and cups my cheek. “Promise me.”

My body combusts.

Stunned by his touch, I dazedly nod my agreement. “Okay,” I breathe. “I will.”

His gaze dips to my mouth, and for one second, I’m certain he’ll kiss me. My body craves it. This man, all over me. Hard and rough and like no one I’ve ever had before. Cole’s different. I can already feel it in his calloused touch.

But no such luck. His hand lowers from my face as he glances back at the fence line. “Let’s keep going.”

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17

Cole

A hard day’s work just got a hell of a lot harder with Delilah around.

Never had a woman working alongside me on my ranch. Let alone *this* woman. I like it. A whole fucking lot.

She’s intriguing. Easy to talk to. It still doesn’t mean I trust her.

I wipe sweat from my face and look up from beneath the brim of my hat. Lips pursed in concentration just like at the distillery, Delilah sweeps sandpaper over a rusty fence post. The work’s been a grueling, all-day affair, hot and humid, and she’s stuck it out.

She’s a hard worker. Stays quiet. Listens. Hasn’t once complained. I respect the hell out of her for it. Hell, I pegged her wrong.

At lunchtime, Wyoma brought us out bottled water and roast beef sandwiches. We ate them in the shade of an oak tree, barely speaking. Now, it’s nearing quitting time, and the sky above us is black.

“Think we can finish before the storm?” Delilah scans the horizon, hands propped on her trim hips. In her tight blue jeans and sexy little white tank top, she could pass for a cowgirl any day of the week.

“Not a race,” I call out from my place near the bull pen.

She wiggles her brows. “Everything’s a race. Besides, you said you wanted it done. We can do it.”

I chuckle. Stubborn girl.

My gaze locks on her bee-stung lips, her thick halo of golden hair, and a rush of heat floods my gut. Fuck. Whatever this woman is doing to me is dangerous.

Fifteen minutes later, light rain begins to fall.

“Pack up,” I call out as I stalk toward her. “I’ll feed the bulls, then we’ll get the hell out of here.”

She nods and scrambles for her tools.

I keep an eye on the clouds. We’ve got nasty weather on top of us. Summer storms in Montana are nothing to scoff at.

I step into the bull pen, keeping a hand out to ward off Whiskey Business and Bulldozer as they circle. They know me, their wagging tails show it, but even I don’t trust the bastards. Bulls can turn on a dime. By the time I check their water and refill their food, the rain is coming down in sheets.

When I glance at Delilah, packing up the saddlebag on Pryor, I see that her white sneakers are soaked through by mud and rain. She’s freezing. Fuck.

As I head to the gate, ready to get us both to some shelter, there’s no warning. Lightning flashes. A violent crash of thunder shakes the air.

The bulls panic. Bulldozer runs to the shelter of the galvanized awning, but Whiskey Business charges his way into the fence frame. It shakes, bends, and then he’s out, bucking his way over the damaged wire.

I move my boots, sprinting after him. “Fuck.”

And then I see Delilah.

Whiskey Business is headed right for her.

I wave my arms and bellow, “Delilah, run!”

Her eyes flash open.

The bull surges forward.

Panic seizes me. A roar rips from my lungs. “No!”

But I’m too far away. Too late.

Everything that comes next is a nightmare in slow motion. Whiskey Business rushes at her. Delilah turns and runs, but after a second, stops and then dives to her right. She hits the muddy ground, hard, and doesn’t move.

I hold my breath and run, racing toward her, praying that the bull doesn’t decide to turn around and charge. Luckily, he doesn’t, disappearing into the tree line near the end of the fence.

My heart lurches as I crash to my knees beside her. Delilah’s sprawled face down in the mud, her long golden hair fanned out.

I turn her over. “Darlin’.” My hands cradle her face. “Talk to me, Delilah.”

Face slack, she lies limp in my arms, and when I think my lungs will give out, when I think my heart will stop, she cracks an eye and smiles. “Fooled you.”

My lungs release in a great rush of relief.

“Not funny.” I eye her warily, undecided if she’s fucking with me or playing it off so I don’t worry. “Are you hurt?”

She winces as she sits up. The rain comes down in sheets, soaking us both. “I don’t think so. Those bulls make you move fast.” Her eyes are wide in the dark. “I don’t know how you do it, cowboy.”

“Lots and lots of practice.” I try to keep my voice even, try to keep my worry at bay even as it courses through my veins. Hurt. She could have been hurt.

She could have been fucking killed.

I scoop her up and stand. She’s featherlight, and I hold her in one arm as I swing us both up onto Pryor’s back. I grab the reins and nudge us into a gallop.

She lays her head back against my chest. “Where are we going?”

“My place.” I need to get her inside. Check her over.

“What about the bulls?”

“Wells has them.” Rather, he will after I call him.

We make it to the barn in record time. I stable Pryor, call Wells, then we make the five-minute trek to my ranch house in the rain. By the time we shove through the door, we’re both dripping wet and covered with mud.

I rip off my Stetson and drop it onto the table. Grab a blanket, toss it over Delilah’s shoulders, then I pick her up and settle her on my kitchen counter. Delilah gasps as I wedge a thigh between hers. My hands settle on her taut thighs. I squeeze. “What are you doing?” she breathes, eyes hooded as she stares at me.

“Checking you over.” I look at her. “Tell me if anything hurts.”

Her full lips part slightly. “Will do, cowboy.”

I plant my boots in front of her as I assess her body with a rough touch. Too rough. But I’m unable to stop. Seeing her lying there—it stirred something in me. Instinct to take care of her. Instinct to make her my responsibility.

My hands drift down her body as she trembles in the dim light of my kitchen. I squeeze her delicate calves. Slip off her shoes and rotate her ankles. When Delilah tries to tell me I’m fussing, I ignore her. I won’t be satisfied until I see for myself.

As I run my hands over her cold arms, that live wire of adrenaline in my body eases. My heartbeat comes back to normal. My jaw unclenches.

She’s here. Not broken, but okay. Alive. And so goddamn beautiful I can hardly stand it.

It’s impulse for my hands to frame her jaw, my gaze taking in her delicate face. Delilah’s whiskey-colored eyes shutter, lashes dark against the pallor of her face.

“Look at me,” I order, and she does.

I trace a thumb over the apple of her high cheekbone. Our breathing steadies, and I become painfully conscious of the heat between us. The erection straining the crotch of my jeans. I need to let go, step back, but I can’t. I ache for this girl.

Delilah trembles as she licks her lips. “If you’re lookin’ for an excuse to touch me, Cole, you don’t have to ask.” She shifts, and the blanket slips from her shoulders. Her white tank top’s plastered to her skin, her dusky nipples visible through the wet fabric.

The red-blooded male in me wants to haul her to my chest. Take those pouty lips and kiss her senseless.

She’s like the whiskey we make on this ranch. Addictive. Dangerous.

A smarter man would make her go. Instead, I wrap a hand around the nape of her neck. “You should shower. Get warm.”

“Here?”

“Here.” Not ready to let her out of my sight. Not yet.

Her eyes linger on me, then with a small sigh, she palms the counter. I step back as she slips off. “Just down the hall.”

After a glance over her shoulder, she disappears around the corner. I exhale a breath, grip the back of my neck, and wonder how the hell I got here.

This girl in my house, infiltrating all my defenses. Fucking unacceptable is what it is.

Distractions are dangerous. Delilah's proximity is dangerous. I can only have so many emotions, so many troubles at once. Loving a woman isn't on the agenda.

Needing something to do, something to keep me busy and my mind off her, I start dinner.

My kitchen is one of my favorite spaces in my ranch house. Nothing beats relaxing after a long, hard day on the ranch with a glass of whiskey and a steak.

From the bottom cabinet, I pull my mother's cast iron skillet. From the fridge, two filets and a bottle of rosé Wyoma left. I uncork a bottle of whiskey, pour a finger, and swallow it down. Pour a glass of wine for Delilah, then glare at it.

What the fuck am I doing? I should demand she drink whiskey. I should make her get the fuck out of my house.

Because right now, she's showering in my bathroom. I'm hard in my jeans just imagining her soaping up those gorgeous breasts, my dick buried deep in her sweet pussy.

Christ.

I clear my throat and adjust my erection. Restraint.

Goddamnit, man. Pull it together.

After a couple of minutes, there's the pad of bare feet over the hardwood. Delilah returns, wearing one of my Pro Bull Riding T-shirts. It's big as hell on her and damningly short. Lithe, toned thighs. Perky, plump tits. A tiny nipped waist. Her damp hair, waved from the shower, spills over one shoulder. Her beauty's ethereal.

Smiling, she gestures at her shirt. "Bulls tried to kill me today, so it only makes sense." She bites her bottom lip, worrying it between her teeth. "Hope you don't mind. I found it in a drawer."

“You always go through people’s drawers?”

Her smile is teasing. “Drawers. Pockets. Medicine cabinets. You don’t know the half of it.” Something tells me she’s not joking.

Slowly, she approaches the island, stands on tiptoe to peer over. “You’re cooking.”

“Stay for dinner.” It’s a rasp. Damn near a plea.

“What if I have plans?”

My head jerks back, and she smiles. *Fooled you*, she mouths.

Death of me, I think and run a hand across my jaw to smother a grin.

“Gotta eat sometime.” I add a hunk of butter to the cast iron. An electric sizzle fills the kitchen.

“Are you sure?” she asks, leaning on the counter to watch as I season the steaks. “I’ll probably just get in your way like today.”

“No. You helped.” I give her a look, wanting her to understand that she did something today. She’s not just a gorgeous face. She’s a hard worker. As smart as she is beautiful.

Her gaze flicks around my kitchen, the half-full coffee pot, the radio, a folded-up newspaper. “So this is where you live. I pictured you in a barn or something.”

I release an amused grunt. I like her no-bullshit way of getting to a point. It’s endearing, yet innocent.

“I’m impressed.” She settles onto a stool, and I fixate on the steaks. Her in my kitchen. It’s a feeling I don’t want to get used to. “But what I’m really impressed about is that you have a bathtub, Cole Weston.”

“You like baths?”

Nostalgia bleeds into her sigh. “They’re my favorite. After a long day at the club, I’d relax with a glass of wine and some music.”

“Got your wine.” I grab the glass of rosé and set it in front of her. Give a nod at the record player behind her, and she glances over her shoulder. “Got your music too.”

Her eyes light up as she turns to me. “Can I put something on?”

“Whatever you want.”

“No.” Her smile’s mischievous as she takes her wine and slips off the stool. She crouches, exposing blue silk panties that make my dick throb, then pulls a record from the console. “I want to hear what you listen to.”

I cock a brow. “How old are you exactly?”

Her back to me, she says, “I’m twenty-four.”

A chuckle rumbles in my chest. Jesus.

“How old are you?”

“Thirty-eight.”

Record in hand, she stands, settling it on the turntable. One hand propped on her trim hip, she turns toward me. “Why? Do you think I’m too young for you?”

I feel the need pulsing from her to me. She wants me. In a way that fucks with my heartbeat. But I stand firm. A relationship, sex, with this girl is only asking for trouble.

“Well?” Gaze pinned to me like a dare, Delilah drops the needle, then returns my way.

“I’m an old man, darlin’.”

“Not to me.” She leans over the counter and bats her eyes. “I like your eye crinkles.”

Jesus Christ, this girl.

I open my mouth to refute her claim, only I’m sucker punched.

“To Live Is to Fly” by Townes Van Zandt trickles through the speakers.

The melancholy song freezes me.

It was Jack’s favorite. He was the sunniest guy, but he liked the most depressing fucking music.

I would always find myself putting those records on when I wanted to think about him. Like I could conjure him back. Like he was right there beside me, listening too.

All we can do is fly, Cole Jack once told me before a ride. *Fly, and hope to hell you land where you should.*

“Cole?”

When I look up, her eyes are on me, like she can see inside that dark part of me. I swallow, ask, “The song… Have you heard it before?”

“No. It just looked like something I’d like.” She tilts her blond head, curiosity etched on her pretty face. “Do you like it?”

I push out the words through the brick in my throat. “Yeah, I do.”

Delilah sways her hips and drinks her wine. As I cook, I can’t help but watch her dance. Can’t stop picturing her onstage, on a pole, on some guy’s lap. And just like that, I’m jealous.

When the steaks are finished, we take our plates and head to the covered back porch. The faint strains of the record player drift through the screen door. The rain comes down in sheets, drenching the entire ranch. Fog curls its way around the perimeter of the long grass.

“Must be the storm of the century,” Delilah breathes, staring out over the ranch.

“Nah, darlin’. Just summer in Montana.”

“It’s so beautiful here. It makes me feel happy. At peace. Safe.”

I shake my head. That’s definitely not Tempest. But I’m glad Delilah’s found a safe space.

We eat, making small talk about the ranch, the distillery.

Groaning, Delilah shoves her plate away. “This is so good, Cole. Delicious, actually.”

“You sound surprised.”

“Impressed. I am atrocious in the kitchen except when it comes to breakfast. Then I shine.”

“Looks like I got dinner.”

A gorgeous flush darkens her cheeks. “Guess we’re set.”

A beat passes, and I can’t play off what I said. Wishful thinking that there’s more to come, more to *us*.

Fuck. I’m making all kinds of mistakes tonight. Must be the whiskey. The gorgeous girl in front of me.

I clear my throat, searching for something to say, then find it.

“That’s what my mother always called it. Steak, potatoes, green beans. A true cowboy dinner.”

“Cole?” Delilah hesitates, taps a finger against her wine glass. “Can I ask? Where are your parents? I’ve never seen them at the distillery so…”

Remaining quiet, I lean back in my chair.

“You don’t have to answer,” she says with a rushed breath. “I’m being nosy and—”

“Gone. Eighteen long years now.”

“What happened?”

Needing a second, I down a big swig of whiskey. Then I look at her beautiful face. With her wide eyes, she wears vulnerability, innocence like a second skin.

“My parents were murdered.”

She gasps. “I’m so sorry.” She sits, as if she’s stunned, then murmurs, “You’ve had so much death.” Her gaze takes on a sad, faraway look as she reaches a hand up for the gold locket around her throat.

“We have.” I return my gaze to the yard, the fog that curls on the edges of the long grass. “It’s this town. It takes.”

“And it took them?” she whispers.

My fists ball at my sides at the way the story burns inside me. The way this girl keeps getting me to open up is like a fucking drug. I want to tell her everything if it’ll get her to do the same. Because when she listens to me, it feels like she’s hearing everything I’m not saying. The traumas of my past, how I’ve been a failure of a brother, how I’ve run away from everyone, and how damn much I miss my parents and Jack.

I’m not a man of many words, but I want to give them all to Delilah.

So, I tell her about their deaths, the police cover-up, and my suspicions about their murders. “There’s no doubt in my mind a Hale did it. But their case file’s been lost to time. Most likely the Tempest PD.”

“You think they’re hiding it?”

“I do.”

She hesitates, then asks, “Did your parents die on the ranch?”

“They did.” I take a sip of whiskey. “But the building they died in isn’t there anymore. My uncle demolished it and built what you see there now.”

“And he raised you?”

“He helped.” I swallow down the emotion. “But no, Warren was the one who raised our younger brothers after he got them out of foster care.”

“And where were you?” She tilts her head, eyes narrowed like she wants to see through me.

“On the rodeo circuit.” I sit back and drag a hand through my hair. “Chasing some fucking idea of vengeance when I should have been back here with them.” She bites her lip hearing the bitterness in my voice, but I won’t lie to her. Or myself. Not anymore. “I wasn’t there. I wasn’t there for my parents, for Jack, or my brothers. I’ve been too busy trying to find out

who the fuck did it all these years, and I've gotten nothing. It feels like it's been a waste."

"But you're back now." She stretches her hand, and her fingers rest against mine.

Leaning in, I look over and meet her eyes. My chest is heavy with adrenaline, with grief, with guilt. "This town takes, darlin'. And the sooner you get the hell away from it, the better."

My words are rough, and she flinches.

"You talk like you hate Tempest."

"Could say that."

"Then why do you stay?" I search her soft brown eyes, see her confusion. "You could move the distillery. Go somewhere else. There's nothing keeping you here."

She's right. In theory, we could pack it all up. Settle our business in another state. But it feels too much like giving up. Our legacy. Our parents' memory. Tempest has always been a piece of the Westons, no matter how much it has devastated us over the years.

"Grief," I say simply. "It makes me stay." Fuck, I need to shut up. Apparently, this girl can get me to open up to just about anything.

A sad smile plays across Delilah's face, before she whispers, "It can make you run too."

"That's who this launch party is really for." A fresh wave of heartache sweeps through me, and I sigh. "My parents. We're using the last of their whiskey to make this limited edition."

"Cole." Her eyes are wide with shock. "Oh my god…" She gives a sad shake of her head. "It'll be amazing. I promise."

"What about you?" I ask, taking in the silhouette of her face. "You said you didn't have family?" She hesitates. I pin her with a stern glare. "I told

you a lot about me, Delilah. Need something from you."

"I have family. But I don't see them anymore." Once again, I notice the way her hand clutches her necklace. "I ran away from home when I was sixteen. I was always on the road with my mother, so it just made sense for me to keep going. I lived in my car once." Her lashes lower, black, dense on her cheek. Her words are slow, stilted like she's choosing them carefully. Like she's wondering if she can trust me. Her eyes meet mine, a sad smile tipping her mouth. "I had a bad relationship with a bad man. Travis."

Travis.

I want to punch something, preferably Travis, preferably more than once right in the fucking mouth. But I swallow my anger down, not wanting to stop her from finally opening up.

"And then I met Belle. She owns the club." The look on her face is one of heartbreak, resilience. "She took me in. Got me away from Travis. Gave me a job. She's like my guardian angel."

"You been in bad spots, Delilah?" I want to know what exactly she's running from. Who the fuck put that haunted look in her eyes no amount of time can erase.

Her smile disappears. "Hasn't everyone?"

"I'm talking about you."

Fire flashes in her eyes, and damn if I don't want to kiss every ounce of stubborn out of that gorgeous body of hers. "I've always been alone, Cole. This isn't anything new."

Fuck, it hurts. That she thinks that. That running is something normal for her. But hell, who am I to judge? I've been running my whole damn life. Maybe that's why I understand her urge to run and not stop.

"Cole?" She blows out another nervous breath before taking a sip of her wine. "Do you think less of me for…for dancing?"

I consider it. Why it burns me up inside, why it has me raging at men I've never met, then say, "No. It makes me worried about you."

The bright smile on her face socks me in the gut. "Cole, you care."

Fuck. Maybe that's the reason why I want her secrets. Because I care.

"Never said I didn't."

The impulse to kiss her is overwhelming. Can't stay away. Can't play off what this night is doing to me.

I've never invited a woman to my home, let alone cooked a woman dinner. It's a cracking of my sanctuary, my shell, inviting someone else in. But it's easy with Delilah. She's a different woman than I'm used to. There's a sexy confidence about her, and yet, she's also filled with a softness, an innocence I want to keep. Protect.

It doesn't hurt that she's so beautiful it's painful.

"The rain's stopped," Delilah whispers like the dark can hear her.

Taking it as a sign to call it a night, I grab her plate and mine. We put the dishes in the sink, then, forgoing cleanup, drift to the leather couch in the living room. Delilah reclines into the cushions, her body relaxing like a weight's lifted from her shoulders.

"I needed this day. Well, maybe not the whole run-from-the-bull bit, but *this*." She holds up her drink. Her pouty lips pull into a tired smile. Her cheeks are pink from the wine. "I needed this."

"Why? What happened?"

Delilah looks up at me, shadows shifting in her eyes. "My friend's missing."

"From Vegas?"

She finishes her wine, leans forward to rest the glass on the coffee table. "Yes. Melly. She worked at the club with me."

I narrow my eyes. “Are you in trouble, darlin’?” I hate that I want to know. Two weeks ago, I was worried about the distillery, but now I’m worried about her.

Her jaw hardens, gaze avoiding mine. “Trouble is relative, Cole.”

I run a hand down my jaw, feel the muscle pulse its irritation.

She’s good at listening, good at charming, but she’s not so good at answering questions about herself. There has to be more to her story. Why’d she arrive in the dead of night? What about the blood on her boot? And why is she jumpy at every shadow that comes her way?

“As long as you’re on this ranch, I plan to keep asking.”

Dread creeps into her expression.

“You ask too many questions, cowboy.” Yawning, she leans into me. Her body warm and soft, and I fight the urge to tug her onto my lap.

“Had to. Grilling little brothers was a fine art.”

“Who? And why?”

“River. And his go-kart of death.” I chuckle at the memory of our sibling alliances, always shifting, despite age. If someone needed a cover-up, there was always a brother to help. But that meant there was always a brother ready to bust our ass too.

“He was always sneaking off at night to the riverbank. Wouldn’t tell any of us where he was going. One night, he came home covered in nettles and ripped to shreds by river rock. He was bleeding from his head, and while Warren was pissed, Jack kept a cool head. We sat him down, grilled him until he told us what happened, then patched him up before our parents got wise.” A chuckle rumbles from my chest. “Goddamn, he sure could make that go-kart fly.”

Delilah’s soft *mmm* pulls me from the memory.

I glance down at her face. Delilah’s head rolls on my shoulder, her hair waved from the shower, her eyes closed. She’s fading quickly. Ranch days will do that to a person.

I lift Delilah’s slack body and carry her down the hall.

“Where are we going?” she whispers.

“To bed.”

I should take her to the guest bedroom, but I don’t. I take her to mine. I want her in my sheets, her smell, her heat.

She nuzzles against my chest, my nose filling with her soapy scent. “But you’re comfier than a bed, cowboy.” Her voice is a sleepy murmur, and I chuckle. Goddamn adorable.

The door to my room appears at the end of the hall. As I lower her onto the bed, she whispers, “You can stay if you want. Sleep beside me.”

“No,” I rasp. Duty won’t let me. Even if no single man in his right mind would turn her down.

A happy sigh filling her chest, Delilah tosses a slender leg over the sheet. She’s out the second her head hits the pillow.

I slip back to the hallway. I check the house, making sure it’s locked, then leave the dishes in the sink. They can wait until tomorrow. I turn off the lights, then head toward the hall and the guest bedroom.

Only I don’t go in.

I’m gripped by an overwhelming urge to see Delilah. A prowling, primitive ache in my chest has me turning, walking down the hall, and not stopping until I reach my bedroom.

I open the door and stare at her. My chest clenches.

Like the first time I saw her in the Creek House, she’s a side sleeper.

She’d be perfect beside me, backed up against me, her small body curled in my arms.

A dream.

I've never slept beside a woman or stayed the night. Buckle bunnies were sex only. It's what a cowboy does. No room for attachment. It's what my heart demanded.

I walk deeper into the room. Perching on the edge of the bed, I trace a light finger over her cheek. Soft as fucking velvet.

She doesn't stir, taken under by slumber, overworked by our time on the ranch today. Long blond hair waved over the pillow. Full, pouty pink lips, parted slightly as her chest rises and falls with her soft, feminine breaths. Those long, dark lashes feathered over her high cheekbones. A fucking angel.

A growl rumbles in my chest.

What the fuck am I thinking? Why the fuck am I in here? Staring at her like a man obsessed.

And yet, that's exactly what I am.

I'm attracted to her. I want her.

I'm going to fall in love with her.

The realization tears through me like a bullet.

That can't happen.

She has secrets, she's chaos. I have darkness. The distillery. My brothers. We're no match for each other.

Delilah shouldn't be here. In Tempest. It's dangerous for her. *I'm* dangerous for her.

Fists clenched, I shove up from the bed, my chest heaving as I stare down at Delilah's peaceful face.

That girl's a burning flame I can't hope to capture. If I do, I'll only dim her light. Her fire.

But that's exactly what I want.

Her.

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18

Delilah

New joy in life unlocked: Cole Weston’s bed. Groaning, I stretch out in the sheets and bury my face in the pillow, huffing all the cowboy scent I can. Pine. Whiskey. *Man.*

I have a faint memory of the door opening, a sliver of light, a big dark shadow. But I wasn’t afraid. Was that Cole?

Taking one last deep breath, I sit up in bed, my head turning toward the window. Sunlight. Birdsong. My limbs hurt like I moved bricks all day. Which, I guess, isn’t far off.

Yesterday was chaos, but I loved every bit of it. Because it included Cole Weston.

He opened up to me. Shared so much of himself it made me ache. And what did I do? I ran, I hid, I lied.

Guilt bubbles in my stomach, and I struggle to swallow it down.

I want to tell him about those sad, dark parts of me, but I’m afraid. I wish I could be honest with him, but I don’t owe him anything. The only thing I owe him is a job well done at the distillery. Cole Weston doesn’t get my secrets. Or my heart.

Even though it longs to trust him.

He cares. He told me that.

With Cole, I feel like he actually sees me as more than a pretty face. He listens when I talk. Asks questions. Doesn't think less of me for being a dancer. Doesn't try to fuck me. Which I love. But I'd also love those big hands on me.

He thinks I'm too young for him, but I'm not. I also know what I like.

This gorgeous, overbearing cowboy who grunts more than he talks has my full attention.

I could even call it distracted.

I want *this man*. I want more closeness. I want kissing. More nights in this bed, only with him in it.

It's risky. We work together. I'm leaving. Then why does my entire body feel like it could catch fire whenever I'm with him?

I remind myself the launch party is my focus. Especially now more than ever. Knowing the launch party is for their parents changes the game. Everything has to be perfect. For Cole. His family.

I slip out of the tangled sheets, off the bed and pad to the bathroom. I gather my dirty clothes, stuffing them into a plastic sack I find beneath the sink. I survey his bathroom. Masculine. Sparse. One toothbrush. One towel.

As I enter the bedroom, my attention snags on Cole's sherpa-lined bomber jacket. It hangs on a hook on the back of the bedroom door.

An idea comes to me. Giggling, I slip off my panties and slip them into Cole's pocket. Give this stubborn gentleman of a cowboy something to remember me by.

I head down the hall and into the kitchen, where I find Cole standing by the coffee pot. And just like that, I head right for him as if magnetized. My

footsteps creak the old wood floors as I round the island and enter the small nook of his kitchen.

“Coffee?” His powerful body moves easily in the small space as he grabs a mug from the cupboard.

“Yes, please.”

I watch as he pours me a cup. His tight denim jeans hug that ass in ways most women would call unfair, and his muscles flex in that massive, chiseled torso of his. His dark hair is damp and unruly from a shower, and my fingers itch to tangle in it.

I bite my lip as he sets the steaming mug near me. “What about breakfast?”

Cole leans back against the counter, biceps pulling taut in the plaid button-down he wears. “Don’t eat breakfast.”

“You should. I make a great one.” My eyes trace their way up the dark tattoos winding over his tan forearms as he lifts the coffee cup to his lips. “A cowboy can’t live on coffee alone.”

“I could.” A grin tilts his lips as he scrutinizes me from head-to-toe. “How’d you sleep?”

“I could have slept better with you.” Bold words, but it’s the truth. I want this man in a way that is foolish and lovesick and fearless. But that’s always been my MO, so why stop now?

“Darlin’, you don’t know what you’re doin’.” The rumbling authority in his voice sends shivers down my spine.

I take a step toward him, tilting my head with a playful smile. “I do. I’m flirting with you, cowboy.”

“You’re too young for me.” He runs a hand over the thick scruff on his jaw.

I blow out a frustrated breath and count the sexy crinkles around his eyes. The man has the patience of a glacier.

“Says who? Because I think the only two people here who matter are me and you.”

“Not looking for a relationship.”

“Same here.”

I press closer, so close that I could crawl up his chest and cling to his sculpted frame.

“Delilah.” Cole’s deep boom is an order. I gasp as he grips my hips, stilling me. But that only makes me arch into him, my breasts sweeping against his chest.

My heart starts to hammer when I see the feral look in his eyes, a dark sea of want that has me heating, that has me inching closer to him.

I don’t breathe. I don’t move. I watch anger shroud his face, tension twitching a muscle in his stern, chiseled jaw. It should tell me everything, yet it tells me nothing. The man’s a marvel of self-control, and it makes him even sexier.

A lump rises in my throat. “If you don’t want me, just tell me.” He stares unflinchingly, and I stare back. “I’ll go, Cole, leave the ranch, and you’ll never—”

And then his mouth slams to mine, kissing me with harsh, unrestrained desire. A soft moan escapes me before I can stop it.

Our bodies connect like we’ve been waiting for this for years. A rumbling groan erupts in Cole’s chest as he pins me against him. His mouth tastes like whiskey and sin. His big hands shift over my waist.

He kisses me so good I go weak in the knees, and I grip his broad shoulders to hold myself up. I feel so small and fragile beneath him,

captured against his hulking chest, his body weight pressing against mine, and yet, I already know this man would never hurt me.

My hips roll into his pelvis. Cole breaks away, muttering, “Goddamn, Delilah,” and then his mouth is back on mine. A strong hand grips my jaw. He’s kissing me like he can’t get enough, like he’s trying to breathe me in.

I cry out, wrapping my arms around his neck as throbbing waves of heat pulse between my legs. I’ve never felt this way, never had these emotions. Different, it all feels so different, so much more intense than every man I’ve ever kissed.

He breaks away again, this time to glare at me.

“Now was that so hard, cowboy?” I pant for air. *Holy shit, the man can kiss.*

“Christ, Delilah, what’s a man to do?” His deep, frustrated rumble vibrates through me. The sexiest sound. Cole Weston with his guard down. “You’re looking so goddamn beautiful…” His jaw is so tight, like saying the words, like the kisses have killed him.

Maybe they have.

I restrain myself from attacking full force, trailing a hand along the trim waist of his jeans. “Why are we stopping?” I can feel him through his jeans. Big. Hard. Hot.

Air rushes out of him. His hand fits to the nape of my neck, big, hard-worn fingers tangling in my hair. “Gotta be in the saddle soon.” He looks like he wants to do anything but that.

“So?” My pulse hammers, and I grip the front of his shirt, wanting to bury my face in his broad chest, his masculine scent. “I’d be soft. I’d be sweet. I’d be fast.” I press up on tiptoe to nip at his throat and murmur, “I could dance for you, Cole.”

It’s fun to flirt with Cole. Tempt. Tease. But he has his own ways of driving me crazy. Most likely his cold shoulder.

“Not today, darlin’.” I see it in his face. That twitch of his strong jaw. Lust flaring in those intense blue eyes. He wonders what I look like when I dance.

“Then when?” I whisper. Already, I want more. I lean in, feeling the warmth of his breath only inches from my mouth. “Don’t tell me you don’t want to slam that headboard against the wall.”

His chest expands with a deep, resolute breath. His hands glide up the length of my torso, caressing, pulling me against him. “Baby, I’d fuck you like the man you deserve.” His harsh voice shakes my body, has my thighs pressing together.

“Then what’s stopping you?” I ask breathlessly.

“Don’t trust myself around you. What you do to me.” He sounds tortured. And yet, he doesn’t let me go.

“And what’s that, cowboy?” Unable to hold back my smile, I study the way his eyes drink me in.

He runs his thumb over the high arc of my cheekbone. “Damn, if you don’t make me want to give you everything.”

My heart overheats.

And then, there’s the slam of a screen door.

Cole and I pull apart. Ezra and Evangeline stand in the entryway of the ranch house.

Shit.

Evangeline’s eyes bug. Her gasp could be heard in the next county. “You had a sleepover?”

Cole covers his mouth with a large hand. “Uh.”

With a smirk, Ezra looks down at his daughter. “It’s personal business.”

“It’s not fair—I want a sleepover too.” Evangeline stomps into the kitchen, her gaze as stern as her father’s. “Next time you have a sleepover

with Delilah, you tell me, Uncle Cole."

Cole and I share an amused look at the finger she wags.

"Tell you what, princess…" Cole picks up his coffee and takes a sip. "Next time, you'll be the first one we call." His gaze flicks up to his brother. "What's going on?"

Ezra shoves his glasses up his nose. He wears a T-shirt and a backward baseball cap that must be his relaxed fit on his days off. "Syd wants to meet tomorrow night."

Cole's entire body coils tight. When his eyes flick to me, expression strained, I take a step away from him. "I should go."

"I'll do these." Cole rests a hand on mine, stopping me before I can take my sack of dirty clothes. "You don't need to go into town."

"Oh, well, thanks." I cross around the counter, flushing as I suddenly remember I'm pants-less *and* panty-less.

"Can I go with Delilah, Daddy?" Evangeline's already slipping her hand into mine.

Ezra nods. "Stay by the house."

I lift a hand, wiggle my fingers at Cole. "Bye, cowboy."

He stares after me as we leave, a dark dangerousness on his face.

Dangerous.

That's what this thing between me and Cole is.

I hate that I'm losing myself in this gorgeous, mysterious cowboy. But that's exactly what I'm doing. What's the harm? Neither of us wants a relationship. But even as I tell myself that, there's a longing, a connection with him. I wonder if he feels it too.

Damn, if you don't make me want to give you everything.

His words run like a chant through my head. Impossible to forget.

Evangeline chatters as we walk back to the Creek House. She picks wildflowers from the long grass, assembling a bouquet in her small hands. “Do you like Uncle Cole, Delilah?”

I smile at her question. “Are you asking me for a secret, Evangeline?”

She giggles. “Yes.”

“I like him,” I admit in the middle of the sunlit field, feeling sun-drunk and still dizzy from Cole’s kiss.

She leans forward and whispers, “I think he likes you too.”

A girl can only hope.

“You take this flower,” Evangeline instructs as we climb the Creek House steps. She waves delicate purple flowers in the air like a fan. “And I take this one, and we each have a flower, and that means we are best friends.”

I smile at her and take the lone flower she offers. When I reach for the doorknob, what I see chills the blood in my veins.

“Evangeline, honey, can you go back to your Uncle Cole’s?”

“Okay.” She twirls, then rushes across the green grass. I watch, waiting until she’s scurrying up the front porch steps, then turn away.

My heart hammers as I stare at the big palm print pressed against the glass covering my screen door.

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19

Cole

Tires crunching gravel, I pull my truck to a stop in front of the tasting room. After hours, the tasting room is closed, and the night is quiet. Pistol tucked into my side, I cut the engine and hop out. A gust of wind lashes my face, and I adjust my Stetson and my sherpa-lined bomber jacket. Last night's storm cooled off the high summer temperatures. I wish I could say it did the same for me.

Delilah.

I run a hand over my mouth like I can still feel her burning lips on mine.

My brain has been locked on that girl ever since she walked away yesterday morning. I can't stop thinking about her. Our night together. What the fuck was I thinking letting her stay over? It was like the rational part of my brain shut off. And then I kissed her.

She was talking nonsense about her leaving the ranch. If I was smart, I would have let her go. But her words ignited something in me, like a stolen moment that was near to slipping through my fingers. I can't explain it.

Her kiss was honey and whiskey. Heaven and hell. Owning me with one soft sweep of the stroke of her pouty lips.

Delilah’s nothing like I expected and everything I should stay away from. And yet, all I can think about is when I’ll see her again.

Shaking off all thoughts of Delilah, I stomp through the tasting room and into the back office where I slide open a hidden wall that leads down into the copper tunnels that connect to the ranch. Back in the 1880s, copper was king in Tempest. There are over ten thousand miles of abandoned tunnels underneath the town, including Copper Run Ranch, which sits at the base of the mine. Tunnels once used to smuggle moonshine now keep us off-the-grid and let us evade Mayor Hale when we need to. Our fortress in the night.

The air turns colder as I descend several feet, then empty into the mouth of a large room. The sounds of machinery and drills are loud in the vacant space. Two large industrial lights hang from the rock ceiling.

Syd’s crew, clad in leather motorcycle jackets, is already there assembling our whiskey pallets. Syd slips out from between two of his guys and heads my way. The stomp of his boots echoes around us.

“Cole.” Skull rings on his fingers glinting in the bright lights, Syd extends a hand. “How you doing?”

I shake his hand. “Been better.”

I’ve known Syd Nicoletti since we were kids. Always liked him. He’s River’s best friend. Hates Rogan Hale almost as much as we do. As president of our local motorcycle club, Sons of Tempest, he also owns the Mountain Mechanic autobody shop on Main Street and considers himself the unofficial mayor of Tempest. Like us, S.O.T. holds sway over Tempest with its political and business dealings. Syd is who you call when you need a favor and maybe someone to conduct a little criminal activity on the side.

I tilt my chin at the noises happening in the corner. “We on schedule?”

“We are.” Syd scans his crew. “They’ll be finished assembling the pallets tonight. Then we’ll load up the goods, and when we get word from our

contact, they'll be shipped off to places you needn't worry yourself with."

I cast a withering glare at the pallets. I don't like the illegal activity. I don't like the Weston name attached. I don't like jumping when some faceless, nameless connection of Syd's says boo. All I want is out. To be done. To run our ranch and distillery and focus on my family.

But we have no choice.

I've already lost one brother; I'm not losing another.

For the last two years, we've been using our distribution service to run guns out of Weston Whiskey and send them to Syd's suppliers. A deal I struck with Syd when River went to prison. *Protect River. We'll owe you*.

It's the way favors work in Tempest.

You give to get something and hope it doesn't own your soul.

A decision I'd never regret. Syd's men kept River alive in prison. He came out without a fucking scrape or a scar on him. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, that would stop me from keeping my brothers safe.

"You have an ETA on this run?" I ask.

"Why? You in a hurry, Cole?" Syd claps my shoulder. "Don't look so pissed off, brother. You have one more run, then you're out."

I chuckle. Ever since I moved back to Tempest, it feels like the devil's hanging over my shoulder, ready for whatever ride I take him on next. "Let's not make this a habit."

Syd flashes me that mischievous smile I know from our youth and innocently lifts his hands. "Hey, man, I'm in the favor game—you ask, I provide."

"You're still a little shit," I grumble.

The wall slides open to reveal River and Ezra. They both stride our way. River and Syd shake hands, embracing.

Ezra looks resigned as he crosses the floor to stand beside me.

“You don’t have to be here,” I tell him.

“No. I do.” A muscle tics in his cheek. He’s thinking of Evangeline. “It’s all our asses on the line if we get caught.”

Fuck that. If anyone goes away, it’s me. No one else.

I rub a hand down my jaw, searching for something to reassure him. “War texted me earlier. Craddock and all his cronies are at the bar. They’re not looking for us. Not tonight.”

Ezra relaxes. Slightly.

Syd rubs his hands together. “Let’s talk logistics. It’s the same as it’s always been. When we get the call from our contact, we place an online order for two hundred bottles of whiskey. In the notes section, it’ll have the date of the run. Should be end of the summer, but no guarantees.”

I cross my arms, steeling myself. We’ve done the runs at least four times a year, and it never gets easier. We’re only one fuckup away from getting caught.

“You and Warren stake out the off-ramp to I-90.” Syd swings a finger from me to Ezra and River. “You two are on County Road 294. This way, if the cops show, you pull your trucks out there and jam up the roads.” There’s only one way out of Tempest. Main Street links up with the freeway. A straight shot, but also a bottleneck.

“All that matters is that truck getting out of town,” Syd finishes.

“Oh, we’ll get it out of town, all right,” Ezra grumbles. “Then be done with this fucking bullshit.”

“Nice doing business with you too, Ez.” Syd flips him off.

I shake my head. “Are we done talking about this?”

“Yeah. We’re done.”

Syd steps back and heads toward his men, leaving me with my brothers.

“You gonna stand sentry all night like some grumpy cowboy?” River’s deep voice echoes as he inclines his head toward the men assembling the pallets. The gold necklace of April’s he wears wrapped around his wrist glitters in the dim light. “They’re not going to move any faster if you keep watching ’em.”

I narrow my eyes at the hand-rolled cigarette tucked above his ear. “You’re gonna get lung cancer by forty.”

He shrugs. “Fingers crossed.” Not like River cares. Ever since April disappeared, since prison, his attitude is all devil-may-care.

A smile tugs at River’s lips. “Heard you had a sleepover last night.”

I scowl and look at Ezra. He’s the responsible one, but not even he’s immune to good family gossip.

He shoves his glasses up on his nose. “What can I say? Word travels fast.”

River stares at me for an amused beat. “So you’re almost human after all.”

I shift uncomfortably, run a hand through my hair to squeeze the back of my neck. I feel a headache coming on, courtesy of two younger brothers. “Nothing happened.”

The words feel like a lie. Even though I didn’t fuck Delilah, I shared a meal, a conversation with a woman. I told her about my parents. I told her about Jack. Two things I haven’t done in years. It was more intimate than sex has ever been. I should tell my brothers that, but I don’t.

River arches a brow. “You gotta lighten up, man. Have some fun.”

“Delilah isn’t fun. She’s an employee.”

“So I if asked her out, you wouldn’t care.”

My head jerks to Ezra so fast it feels like whiplash. The motherfucker grins.

A growl rumbles my chest.

“Playin’ with fire there, Ez.” River whistles.

My chest tightens. *Fire.*

That’s Delilah.

Dangerous.

But who the fuck am I kidding? I’m the dangerous one. My gaze surveys the scene, the assembled pallets, Syd walking a perimeter around his men.

Memories hammer at the walls of my mind.

The gun in my hand. Wells’s soft whimper. My boot slamming into flesh and bone.

My throat burns. What would she think if she knew what I was involved with? What I’ve done?

Christ, I want her. More than I’ve ever wanted anyone in a long time. Her body. Her conversation. But she’s temporary. She’s too young for me. She has secrets. And so do I. I’ve already gotten too close, too involved.

I don’t deserve anything she can give me.

Ezra’s voice pulls me from my grim memories. He watches as a couple of armed men stack pallets. “You know where these are going?”

“Don’t need to know,” I gruff. The last thing I want is them involved any more than they need to be. “This is our last run. All we need is the go-ahead.”

River nods. “Cole’s right, focus on the whiskey, Ez.” The guilt on his face stings. He feels responsible that we’re in this mess, but it’s never been on him.

I nod, wanting him to take his own damn advice, then stick my hands in the pockets of my jacket. Tense at the feel of silk. My heart hammers against my chest.

I clear my throat. “Gonna head back.”

My brothers murmur their goodbyes. Darkness swallows me up as I creep through the tunnels and back to the distillery. Cold air blasts me in the face as I enter the tasting room. There, in the dim light, I pull out what's in my pocket.

Panties.

Delilah's panties.

Tension knots my shoulders. A chuckle leaves my lips.

The girl's ballsy.

They're light blue silk, the edges lined with delicate white lace. Expensive. Sexy as fuck.

I bring them to my face. Immediately, the scent of her hits my nose. My dick turns rock hard. Her. The smell is all her. Baby oil and honey. Heady and delicate and sexy as fuck.

A groan erupts in my chest. Goddamn, I ache to eat the fuck out of that pussy.

So I do the next best thing. I lick the seam of her panties, panting against the silky fabric.

Urgency scorches through me. My balls are as heavy as lead.

I reach for my fly and release the button. I wrap the panties around my dick, stroking them over the shaft. Closing my eyes, I imagine it's Delilah's pussy, wet and pink and ready to be fucked by me.

"Christ," I groan. My hand shoots out, twisting the panties tighter over my dick. "Fuck, baby. Fuck, Delilah," I grunt, pumping roughly into the silk of the panties. Sweat drips down my spine. "Let me deeper, darlin'. *Deeper*."

Delilah's face flashes in my mind. The sway of those gorgeous hips. That ass. Her sweet innocence and wild beauty as she dances for me. Her

pleading and writhing beneath me as I bury my cock in that warm pussy. Taking all of me like the good fucking girl she is.

"Good girl," I grunt, stroking faster, grinding to get closer. Rutting in the soft silk like it's her drenched pussy. "*Good girl.*"

My entire body clenches, then erupts. I slam a palm on the lip of the bar, bellowing as I pulse thick wrenching spurts of come into her panties.

Fuck.

I breathe heavily, bow my head as I grip the bar top. Delilah's panties dangle around my softening cock.

Breathless, I rub a hand over my face, remembering where the fuck I am. Our tasting room humping her panties like a goddamn dog. I wipe up the mess with a handful of cocktail napkins, then stick her panties back in my pocket.

Fact is, I'm not the same man I was before Delilah came along. The girl's doing things to my brain, making me obsess, when hell, I've never wanted a woman like I want her.

I'm the one who's fighting this—this feral desire between us.

Maybe that needs to fucking change.

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20

Delilah

“Feather or flower?” Hassie pauses at the hat bar’s long table. Her graceful fingers, nails painted black, hover over my two options. A tray of dried, pressed flowers or an assortment of feathers in all the colors of the rainbow.

I take a deep breath and debate, then say, “Feather.”

“Good choice.” Hassie closes the distance between us and opens the tray. “Which color?”

I lift my champagne. “Pink.”

Yesterday, I ran into Hassie at the Weston stables, where we made plans to meet up at her shop for a girl’s night. *Let’s get drunk and make a hat*, Hassie proclaimed, and so here we are. After hours, her hat bar closed, country music blasting on the speaker, her fully stocked bar ravaged.

After a month of living in Tempest, it’s nice to have a friend. To feel a small slice of belonging.

“You’re gonna knock ’em dead.” Hassie takes the soft fawn-colored hat I’ve selected and lifts a steamer. “New cowgirl in town, won’t know what hit ’em.” There’s a loud burst of air as she bathes the hat in steam.

I think back to the conversation I overheard at Meadowlark Market. “People are talking.”

“People always talk. You can’t let the assholes bother you. They live for the gossip grapevine almost as much as hunting season.” She snorts and swallows a sip of her whiskey. “Let me guess, big hair, fake tan?” When I nod, she says, “That’s Deputy Craddock’s wife, Lisette. She’s one of those girls that peaked in high school.”

Despite the gossip, I like Tempest. It’s weird, quirky, creepy, but it’s also charming. Main Street has worked its magic on me. The distillery, the ranch, and the Creek House feel like home. Every time I steal away to visit Otis and Neon Star, I feel at peace.

As if she’s read my mind, Hassie asks, “How do you like the Westons?”

I blush. I haven’t seen Cole in three days, not since our kiss.

“Biting that lip so hard you’re tasting blood,” Hassie observes.

“No. Just thinking about a cowboy,” I admit.

Hassie whistles. “Who isn’t? Those Weston boys are trouble.” She cocks her head, asks, “Which one’s claimed your heart?” Though her tone is curious, it’s also edged.

“Not my heart.” I giggle. I tell her about leaving my panties in Cole’s jacket pocket and her eyes bug out.

She doubles over, cackling. “Holy fucking shit, Delilah. If that doesn’t de-grump that man, nothing will.”

We share a giggle, then Hassie says, “Well, if you picked Cole, he’s the safest bet.”

My heart speeds up just hearing Cole’s name.

Safe. That’s how the man makes me feel.

Like nothing and no one could ever touch me.

I think of the strange palm print on the glass of my screen door. I so badly want to tell him everything, but if I do, that pulls him into my mess. Maybe it's reckless keeping it to myself, but I don't want to give the Westons more trouble. I'm not their responsibility. My troubles are my own. Besides, it was probably a guest from the distillery, lost on the ranch.

Once again, my mind drifts back to that morning. Cole's kiss put me on the clouds. I still don't think my feet have touched the ground since. We've kept our distance, probably a smart idea, but I miss him.

"Every woman in town wants to claim a Weston."

"Why's that?" I ask breathlessly, returning from my thoughts.

"Because they like a challenge. And none of those men have ever been wrangled."

"What about Ezra? I mean, he has Evangeline. Was he ever—"

"Married?" Hassie's eyes are hard. Protective. "Thank fuck no." I listen as she tells me about Ezra's ex, Shannon. "She fell in with the wrong crowd. In Tempest that's the easy thing to do. Drugs. Drinking. Then she got pregnant. Ezra loved her, and he did everything he could, but…some people don't want help."

"Was Evvie okay?" I ask softly.

"She was. That bitch was fucking high when she went into labor." Tipping her chin down, Hassie stares at the feather she twirls between her fingers. "I could have killed that woman. Everyone could have. Anyway, a couple of weeks later, Shannon signed over parental rights to Ez and left town." An exaggerated scoffs pops out of her mouth. "Good fucking riddance." Hassie nods and looks at me. "Ez never got over that kind of betrayal. It's why he's so…buttoned-up, ya know?" Hassie moves down the hat bar. "But he has us to help with Evvie. Even if he is an idiot and never wants to ask for it."

So much love with this wild, reckless family. One I've never experienced outside of Lucy Lou. The type of love where people fight for you, cry for you, are just simply there for you. It leaves an aching feeling in my chest. A deep need to find this type of fierce love for myself, grip it with both hands and hang on.

"So yeah. The Westons." Eyebrow quirking, Hassie looks at me, leaning her elbows on the bar top. "They're the traumatized brooding cowboys everyone wants to tame."

"What about you?" I ask with a coy smile, wanting to get back to a lighter conversation. "You ever set your sights on a Weston?"

"God no." Hassie feigns a shudder, but her ears are pink. "I need a man like a hole in the head."

Not me. I need Cole in a way that is irrational and stubborn and pussy throbbing. I've made a lot of bad choices in my life, but Cole makes me think he could be the best one.

"What'd you do in Vegas?" Hassie's husky voice pulls me from my daydream. "I don't think you ever told me."

"I was a dancer." It's getting easier and easier to say it.

Rounding the counter, she plops the hat onto my head. She stares down at me, gnawing at her lip as she adjusts it with perfect precision. "Like a boobie-tassel dancer?"

"Yes. At a club."

Hassie quirks a brow, no judgment in her pretty face. "I'd be a stripper, but I can't stand the thought of men being happy."

I laugh.

"Turn around," she orders, making a scrutinizing face. I do. When I turn to face her, she removes the hat and goes back behind the bar. I watch Hassie work as she steams the hat and then adds a small band of leather

around the crown. She's empowered and fierce, and damn if I don't have a girl crush.

She adds my pink feather to the crown, tucking it beneath the leather strap, then securing it with hot glue.

Her boots scuff hardwood as she walks my way. The hat settles on my head like it's been made for me. "There." She smiles at me, and I notice her left eye has a speckle of brown in its blue-green depths. "Now you're one of us. Cowgirl cool."

Her words make my heart swell. "Thanks."

We take our drinks, head to the velvet couch, and sit.

"What made you start your own business?" I ask, sipping my champagne. Two glasses in, and I'm warm and fuzzy inside.

She shrugs a shoulder. "Needed something of my own."

"I admire you." I survey her pretty shop. "You're so strong. You did it on your own. You knew what you wanted." I look down into my glass. "I wish I did."

"Don't let the *I-have-my-shit-together* act fool you—I wasn't always like this." She grits her teeth against a scoff. "I've had a lot of bad habits. A bad past. *I* used to be the hot shit on the gossip grapevine."

"Why?"

She meets my eyes and pulls in a deep, hesitant breath. "It's a fucked-up story, Delilah."

"If you tell it, I'll listen. But you don't have to." How can I ask her to share her truth, when I'm still hiding from mine?

"No." Her chin tilts decisively. "It's like a Band-Aid. Every time I let the fucker rip, it hurts less and less." She nods stiffly, gathering courage. "CliffsNotes version, otherwise, I just spontaneously combust." Her husky voice takes on a detached, robotic tone. "I was thirteen. My mom had just

died. My dad was sad and searching. It was like that for a couple of years, until one day, he met these people who lived down near the river. White tents. Weird clothes. Chanting."

"A cult?"

"Yeah. A cult." Her hand drifts to cover the leather cuff around her right wrist.

"My daddy was always a unique man. Off-the-grid. Free spirit." A nostalgic smile lifts her lips. "Hell, he named me Hassle if that tells you anything about him. So he drifted in that direction. He kept going back until he told me we were moving there. It was weird. I didn't want to go. My big brother was away at college. And he was my dad, right? So I…I went along with it. He sold everything we owned. Our trailer. My horses. He pulled me out of school, and we went and lived on the compound in the Borderlands."

She chugs the rest of her whiskey. Exhales. "They called themselves the Halo of the Dawn. They were all about salvation and apocalypse and strange gods.

"My time there's a big blur. I don't remember much. Except they wouldn't let me leave. They drugged me and—" Her voice hitches and she shakes her head.

"It's okay." I reach out and touch her hand. My chest squeezes around my heart. I can see there's so much stuck inside of her she still can't voice.

"Anyway. It got bad, and one night it all erupted." Pain twists her pretty features. "Google the Tempest Cult Massacre if you want all the gory details.

"My big brother, Rio, was looking for me." Her lower lip trembles. "He never stopped." Around her finger, she twists copper strands of hair until the tip starts to turn purple, then releases it. "My brother died that night trying to save me."

The haunted hush in her voice makes my chest ache.

My thoughts drift back to one of the first conversations I had with her. “You said Warren was your guardian?”

Her stare gets glassy. “He and Rio were best friends. Rio appointed him as my guardian when I went missing. He knew our father was out of his mind.”

“What happened to your father?”

“Prison.” Her eyes harden. “Hopefully, he rots.”

“What about the cult?”

“They’re still out there.” There’s fear in her voice. Anger too.

I swallow around a hot ember. “I’m so sorry, Hassie.”

“I lost my brother, but I gained some too.” She makes a face. “Even if Warren is a pain in my ass.” She laughs. “He’s bossy, and I don’t listen to him, which pisses him off, but makes me obscenely happy.”

“Those cowboys can handle it.”

“Yeah, they can.” She puffs out a breath, tucks a lock of hair behind her ear. “Everyone in this town has a secret. You’ll figure it out if you stick around long enough.”

My main thoughts have been so occupied with survival that I haven’t even considered staying long-term. *But what if?* My hand goes to my locket. *What if, Lucy Lou?*

I jump as Hassie slams her hands on the thighs of her jeans and shoves up. “Now I need a very large, very amnesia-inducing drink.”

Panic kicks through my veins as, through the front window of the store, I spy a police cruiser slowly trolling Main Street.

Fuck.

What if they’re here for me? What if they—

“Shit. I’m out.” At the bar, Hassie frowns and tips the whiskey bottle. Turning toward me, she stretches out her hand and wiggles her fingers.

Seeing what she wants, I rise and take it.

The sensation of her steady hand in mine calms my nerves. Cools the paranoia that's been bubbling inside of me ever since Belle's texts.

"C'mon." Hassie pulls me over to a brick wall with a bright purple neon sign that says KISS A COWBOY. "We're getting drunk tonight."

With that, she kicks the toe of her boot on a small notch near the floorboard. Like magic, the wall unhinges.

I gasp. "Holy shit."

Hassie smiles and pulls me through the thin crack. Instantly, we're enveloped in darkness, clammy air. "What is this?" I ask.

"A secret passage. Town's full of them. Copper tunnels. Mining town. Bootleggers." She lowers her voice. "Monsters."

The throb of music pulsates the walls.

"Where does it go?"

Hassie smiles in the dark. "You'll see."

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21

Cole

Poker with my brothers is as much a tradition as it is a religion.

The air around the table is tense as we all evaluate our cards. The heavy thump of the band reverberates through the walls of the secret back room. The Rusty Spur on a Monday night is as rowdy a time as any weekend.

Finally, I set my hand down. Straight flush.

I look around the table at my brothers and shove in a stack of chips. “Raise.”

Poker was our mother’s game. When we were kids, she taught all of us how to play. It taught me strategy, math, and how much of a cutthroat Caroline Weston was when it came to winning quarters off her sons.

“I don’t know why I believe any damn thing you say as truth,” Wells drawls. “You fuckers told me jackalopes were real and they were coming to kill me at night.” A round of snickers fills the air. He chews his lips, evaluates his hand, then lays them down. “Fold.”

Ezra, saying nothing, lays down his hand.

River, sunglasses firmly in place, already out in the first hand, crosses his arms to watch the action.

“Bullshit.” Across from me, Warren leans into the round table. His long fingers stack the chips beside him. “I think you’re bluffing, Cole.” He leans back in his seat, finishes his whiskey, then smirks. “Call.”

Fuck. I don’t know how he does it. Every damn time.

On a groan, I show my cards. My brothers hoot when Warren shows his royal flush.

Warren grins. “Better stick to riding bulls, brother.”

“Cards aren’t the only thing he’s bluffing about these days.” River pointedly looks at me.

My shoulders tense as Warren casts the table a questioning look.

Wells collects the cards we toss his way and starts to shuffle. “Haven’t been on the ranch to see the blossoming romance.”

“I highly doubt Delilah wants to go out with you,” Ezra says as Wells deals, collecting his cards and smirking at me. Ezra likes to bust my balls when he’s found my weakness. It’s the little brother in him. “She’s way out of your league.”

“Jesus.” I rub my brow, shoot Ezra a glare. “There’s no romance.”

Gaze burning with interest, Warren refills his whiskey glass. “Cole isn’t the kind of man to get pussy-whipped.”

He’s right. I’m not.

I haven’t had sex since I left the circuit. Buckle bunnies don’t hold the same allure they used to in my twenties. And they sure as hell don’t come close to Delilah. The last few days I’ve felt fucking starved without her. Her cherry-red Pinto was gone when I left the distillery tonight. We keep missing each other at work. Not sure who’s staying away. All I’m sure about is I need to see her again. Soon.

“Most dangerous man to be,” Warren mutters, accepting the cards Wells deals.

“Not pussy-whipped,” Wells says softly, rubbing at the scar on his chest. I can’t tell if it still hurts or if it’s just an unconscious reflex by now. “Heart-whipped.” Jaw clenched, he stares at his cards. “*That’s* the most dangerous animal.”

Warren meets my eyes. *Fuck.*

I stare right back.

I wish I could get a better read on Wells. He lost Aurora after that fucked-up night at Sweetheart Falls. On the outside, he has it together better than any of us. But it’s the inside we worry about.

“Whatever you want to say about Delilah, she got us back on track,” Ezra says, saving me from further scrutiny. “Got us a new POS system, changed up the music, reached out to some whiskey magazines for the new release. She’s smart.”

Pride flares in my chest. Smart doesn’t even come close. That’s Delilah. Stubborn, sweet, independent. Damn if she doesn’t try to do everything.

“So you’re tellin’ me she’s good.” Warren rests an elbow on the table, cocks a brow that means trouble. “She could help me at the bar.”

My fingers clench around my cards. “She stays at the ranch.”

“One problem with the release, Ez…” River lifts his sunglasses. “It needs a damn name.”

Ezra grumbles, smearing a hand down his mustache. “I’m working on it.”

I look down at my cards, in the middle of debating how much I should bet, when the wall slides open.

Ezra and Wells both jump.

Delilah and Hassie stride into the room. “Idiots,” Hassie says in greeting.

“What the fuck you doin’, Hassle?” Warren complains, taking the interruption as an invitation to boss and bark. “Front door.”

Hassie smirks. “The front door’s boring, but you know that, don’t you, boss man?” She glances down at his cards. “Aces. Nice.”

Warren swears.

My eyes launch to Delilah.

Delilah’s big brown eyes go impossibly wide when she sees me. Her face flushes, then resets into a soft smile.

Fuck, it’s like a grenade going off inside me.

All I can do is stare. I take in her beauty from head to toe. She wears a short leather skirt and stilettos. Her honey-blond hair tumbles around an oversized moto jacket that covers a tiny white tank top. And on top of her head, a fawn-colored cowboy hat.

So fucking beautiful.

“You like it, Cole?” Hassie’s voice shakes me out of my daze. “Her hat?”

“Hat looks fine.” I grit my teeth.

“Hat looks *nice*,” Wells amends, reminding me of my manners. “You look nice too, Hassie.”

“Thanks, Wells.” Hassie props a hand on her hip, content to harass us. “Looks like a cowgirl, doesn’t she?”

Delilah’s mouth flattens in amusement, her amber eyes glittering.

“What do you want, Hassie?” A vein pops in Warren’s temple. “We’re in the middle of a game.”

The way Hassie looks at Warren is a combination of laughter and loathing. “We came for more whiskey, but now that we’re here…” Her eyes scan the room, then, a mischievous smirk tilting her lips, she looks at Delilah. “You know what, fuck it. Let’s go enjoy the local riffraff.” She wiggles her eyebrows. “Monday night, the place is bound to be hoppin’.”

Taking Delilah’s hand, Hassie steers her through the room.

“Mr. Weston,” Delilah breathes as she passes by me, giving me a hat tilt. My cock flexes. She knows exactly what she’s doing.

I watch as they disappear out the vault door and into the bar.

My blood’s on fire. Delilah out in that bar, without me…

Hell, any idiot can tell the entire bar’s going to be on Delilah the second she sets foot in there.

Warren sighs long and loud, knowing our night’s just been sideswiped. “We goin’ to supervise?”

I shove up from the table. “We’re goin’ to supervise.”

Damn fucking right we are.

When we step into the bar, I search the crowd. It may be Monday night, but it’s packed. The band onstage plays a frenetic cover of “The Devil Went Down to Georgia.”

Surveying the scene, I exhale out a frustrated breath. Deputy Craddock sits at the bar. Tyler Hale, Rogan Hale’s delinquent brother, trolls the crowd. Rowdy out-of-towners take the high-tops. In a corner booth are April’s parents, Frances and Adder Sawyer.

Fuck.

It’s like every awful person in Tempest arrived at the same fuckin’ time.

I needle my brow, the aneurysm brewing. Mentally calculating the logistics of keeping everyone apart.

Warren turns to us all, lifts a big finger. “Stick by the jukebox and stay out of fights.” After a stint in the NHL before he was brought back to Tempest, Warren can fuck anyone up like the best of us, but when it comes to his brothers, he always plays the responsible card.

I nod my agreement. Fights mean we have eyes on us. Unwanted attention we don’t need. Especially with the run coming up at the end of summer.

River meets my gaze but says nothing. Warren hops behind the bar to help his bartenders. Ezra gives me a nod, telling me he's heading home to Evvie.

My gaze zeros in on Delilah.

Hand in hand, she and Hassie squeeze through the crowd. Jaws drop. Eyes widen.

Christ, she came prepared to put me in the fucking grave with the outfit she's wearing.

I've already forgotten other women. No one in town has Delilah's face, her body, those brown eyes that burn like whiskey.

She's everywhere. Delicate and beautiful and fiery. The leather skirt she's barely wearing is a distraction at best and trouble at worst. With every long-legged stride across the dance floor, it slides up and up, dangerously close to giving it all away. And those high heels? Tempest's never seen anything like it.

On my way to Delilah, a familiar group of women in a corner booth catch my eye. They're giggling and nodding at Delilah. Blood boiling, I turn their way. I'm putting a stop to this shit right now.

I'll protect her name in this town if it's the last thing I do.

I step up to the booth and hold up a finger, getting their attention. Lisette Craddock's lip curls when she sees me. "Cole."

"I want to be very clear." I harden my voice. "Delilah's a guest at my ranch. If I hear you speak bad about that girl again, you're fucking done."

Gasps sound from the women, but I'm already moving.

For Delilah.

By the time I close the distance, Hassie and Delilah are dancing to a cover of "Neon Moon."

I anchor my hands on my hips, clear my throat.

Hassie lifts Delilah from a dip. “Cole Weston willingly crossing a dance floor? Never thought I’d see the day.”

My gaze locks on Delilah. “Need to talk to you.”

Delilah stares at me, her expression unreadable, her face flushed. “Please.”

“What?”

Her brow arches. Stubborn. Fierce. Fucking beautiful. “You say *please*, cowboy.”

Hassie snickers.

Fingers flexing, I take a step closer, aching to be next to her warm softness. “Come with me to the jukebox? Please.” My voice is hoarse. Damn if I don’t sound so fucking desperate. I’ve taken on bulls, but Delilah’s the biggest challenge I’ve ever faced.

She nods, then flicks her gaze to Hassie, who moves deeper into the dance floor.

I take her by the arm, steering her toward the empty jukebox, then changing my mind, I pull her into the hallway, away from the crowded dance floor, from prying eyes. My chest collides with hers as I trap her between the wall and my body and lean in impossibly close.

She gasps. Squirms. “Cole, what—”

“Found your panties,” I grit out against her cheek before pulling back to take in her expression.

A sultry look overtakes her big brown eyes. “And?”

“I fucked the hell out of them. So hard I saw stars, darlin’.”

Her lips twitch at my admission. “Sounds like you liked it.”

She’s so damn flirty. If she’s baiting me, it’s working.

“I did. Moaned myself hoarse.”

Hunger burns. Her honeyed scent inhabits my blood, makes me lose my mind. How the fuck have I gone this long without touching her? Kissing her?

Delilah tilts her hips into my erection. “I’ll let you keep ’em if you dance with me.”

The resolve I’ve been clinging to is all but gone. I step closer, shoving my thigh between her legs. I drag calloused fingertips up the soft skin on the inside of her thighs, inch the leather material higher on her hips. “Would rather keep this,” I rasp, pressing a finger into the crotch of her silk panties. Fuck. Already soaked.

One thing I know I can’t wait for is to eat the fuck out of that pussy.

She makes a noise in her throat, licks her lips. “What’s wrong, cowboy? Scared of a little dance?”

I should be, but I’m not. I want to dance with her. I want to do things with this woman I’ve never done before.

Reading the answer on my face, Delilah moves into my space. Adjusting myself, adjusting her skirt, I take her hand and lead her onto the dance floor.

I draw air through my nose as everyone stares at us. There’s no way I’d leave her side. Not when she looks this damn good. Not when every eye in the bar is on her.

Delilah lifts her chin as she spins around, smiling. “Do you want to watch me *really* dance, Cole?”

She swivels her hips. My breath stops, and I tense. I don’t mean to, but it’s like a knife to my gut.

“Not here,” I grit out. “Not—”

In front of everyone. I’ve no right to ask that of her…but goddamn. My mind, my blood overheats at the thought of her dancing for another man.

Those hips as sweet as honey grinding on some random asshole's crotch, those pink pouty lips whispering her secrets.

She knows what she's doing. That feisty flicker of fire, of flirt in her eyes has me hauling her to my chest and holding tight. In my arms, soft, sweet, she feels unreal.

I grip her chin, tilt her gaze toward mine. "Just dance with *me*, darlin'."

"Okay, cowboy." Her lashes lower.

Keeping her small hand clasped in mine, we sway, slow and steady on the dance floor.

I touch the brim of her hat. "Hat suits you." The light fawn color brings out the depth in her brown eyes.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You look beautiful, but you already know it, don't you?"

I'm rewarded with a smile so bright my chest twists. "It means more when you say it."

A bartender, sent by Warren, comes by and takes our drink orders. They return with whiskey and a glass of champagne.

"Still haven't tried our whiskey, have you?" I guess as I lift the glass to my lips.

"No."

"That means you need to see the distillery right."

"Ezra already gave me a tour."

"*My* tour."

"Well, cowboy, you just say the word."

The music kicks up into a faster rhythm, yet we stay locked together, melded like two halves of a whole. I don't realize how little self-control I have then when I'm in front of Delilah. As we dance, my hands run over her hips, following her curves, the dip of her spine. Can't get enough of her. I

pull her against me, on me, all over me. She's a flash of gold, of pouty pink lips, wild and molten and beautiful.

"Cole, everyone's staring," she murmurs.

"Let 'em." I slowly slide a hand around her tiny waist.

She tips her head at the booth of women. Makes a disgruntled face. "Especially them."

My chest heaves with a determined breath. "They won't talk about you again."

She bats her lashes, her lips curving into a curious smile. "What'd you do? Threaten them with death?"

I grunt. Wouldn't be the first time.

I give her a small twirl, then bring her back to me. "Boot in their ass. It's the only way."

Giggling, Delilah presses against me, soft and warm. She bats her lashes, says in a breathless, beautiful whisper, "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you're afraid of me, Cole Weston."

"Yeah, darlin'." My hands grip her hips. "I am." She's called it straight and true.

"Why?"

"Because it'd be too easy."

"Too easy to what?"

"To keep you," I say, and her eyes widen.

The words are careless, reckless even, but they fall easily from my lips. I've known her for less than a month, but I've shared more with her than anyone. My patience has run out. Whatever's between us, I won't take back. It's not the kind of man I am.

Hands sliding up her cheeks, I kiss her, soft and slow and uncaring of who sees. Delilah whimpers, then her arms of velvet wind around my neck.

Damn this girl’s secrets. But I don’t care anymore. I care about her. I care that she’s on my ranch, that talking to her is like an unraveling, that her light pushes at every crack in my defenses.

I’ve never felt so alive.

I need to get a grip on myself, and yet, at the same time, I want more.

Delilah sways when we pull back, panting and dazed. “Well…” Her hand lifts to her swollen lips, and she gives me a sexy little smile. “You sure know how to make a girl happy, cowboy.”

I step closer, erasing any inch of space that’s ever existed between her gorgeous body and mine. I can’t take my eyes off her, let alone let her go. “I’m not done with you.”

There’s flirtation in her eyes, and she nods her agreement.

But before I can say anything further, there’s the clatter of glassware. The mood shatters the instant I look to the source of the noise.

Tyler Hale and River are squared up. Tyler says something to River, which causes him to storm in the direction of the Sawyers’ table.

Smirking, Ty follows, Deputy Craddock at his side like a bulldog.

I pause our dance. “Shit.”

Delilah’s in my arms, so close I can feel the hammer of her heart. “Cole? What’s wrong?”

“Cops,” I say, and she flinches. I don’t miss the way she backs up into me, into the shadows of the dance floor.

Before I can say anything, there’s the sound of shattering glass. I whip my head to the left in time to see River slam a hand on the Sawyers’ table. I let Delilah out of my arms and move her to the side of the dance floor. “Stay here.” The last thing I want her involved in is a bar fight.

I head for River.

Everyone’s headed for River.

Warren hops the bar and gets there first. When I arrive, I catch the tail end of the conversation. “It’s my bar,” Warren argues, trying to keep the peace. “You can’t kick out my customers.”

Deputy Craddock splays a hand on his bloated stomach. “Now, Warren, the Sawyers just want to have a good time. Staring at their daughter’s killer kinda dampens the mood, don’t you think?”

River’s fists flex. “I didn’t kill April.”

Everyone in the bar leans in, hoping for a fight.

“Why would you do that?” River’s chest heaves as he looks down at April’s parents. “Why in the hell would you do that?”

“Stand down.” I grab his arm, wrenching him away. I’m not sure what’s got him worked up, but he’s not helping himself right now.

I turn to River, blocking him from Craddock. In a low tone, I ask, “What happened?”

“The Sawyers declared April legally dead.” Pain stains River’s voice. “Yesterday.”

Fuck. The news has cut him deep and left him low. That place I never want him to go back to.

Smarmy and smirking, Ty points a finger at River. “Having some felon hanging around our bar isn’t a good look for the town, deputy. Or my brother.”

I grit my teeth as I try to keep my shit together and not deck the motherfucker.

Ty Hale’s the fuckup, the black sheep of the Hale family. He likes to throw his weight around because his brother’s the mayor, all while he grows his shitty shotgun weed in his trailer.

“I concur.” Craddock nods at Warren. “Think it best your brother gets the hell out of here.”

“You can’t tell him what to do.” I groan as Wells shoves his way to River’s side.

“This is your fault, asshole.” Hassie steps into the fray. She gives Ty’s chest a shove. “You started running your mouth about April.”

Hassie has a habit of calling anyone—especially men—out on their bullshit. I’m proud of her, but it also worries me. One day she’ll say the wrong thing to the wrong man. A feeling I know Warren shares by the way he groans.

“Tell you what.” Ty leers at her, nods at Craddock. “You go on a date with me, and I call off my dog. We have a nice night.”

I bristle. Ty’s been obsessed with Hassie ever since he discovered what a hard-on is.

Hassie makes a face of disdain, but it’s Warren who growls, “Absolutely-the-fuck-not.”

“If that cult couldn’t put you in your place, I will.” Ty bares his teeth at Hassie.

Hassie balls a fist. Warren inhales sharply. But it’s Wells who grabs him by the back of the neck and slams his face on a high-top. “You say that shit about her again, I dare you, motherfucker.”

Wells is the biggest teddy bear but will gladly kill anyone who messes with Hassie. They’ve been inseparable since grade school, and that connection only deepened when Hassie came to live at the ranch.

Hoots and hollers sound around the bar.

I groan.

“Let me go.” Ty fights against Wells’s grip as Craddock stands uselessly to the side.

We have the bar’s rapt attention. “Everyone outside.” I step between my brothers, needing to defuse this. “Wells, River. *Now.*”

I herd my siblings outside to stand beneath the velvet black sky. Gravel crunches beneath our boots. A live wire of tension surrounds us. Running our mouths and getting kicked out of bars is nothing new. But Craddock pulling this shit is just another way to fuck with us.

The last thing River needs is to go back to prison.

“What are we going to do about this mess?” Craddock swaggers.

Ty rubs his neck, glares at Wells. “I was attacked. He attacked me.”

“Shut up, Ty,” Hassie snaps.

“Leave Wells the fuck alone,” I snarl.

“You want a raid, Weston?” Craddock’s jowls shake from his bluster as he looks at Warren. “Because that can be arranged.”

I tense. Fuck.

Warren draws himself up and stares down Craddock. “You shut down my bar—the town will riot. I don’t know if you or Mayor Hale want that kind of problem.”

“Think the problem belongs to your brother.” Craddock’s hand goes to the billy club on his hip as he gives River a pointed glance.

I feel it inside of me, the darkness, the anger. My fists twitch, fighting the urge to take a swing at Craddock and put him on the ground like he deserves.

“Fuck you,” River blasts. In the back pocket of his jeans, I spy one of April’s missing person posters.

“Shut up, Riv.” Hassie tugs on his arm and drags him toward her.

Craddock lifts his hands. “It’s settled if he leaves. Sound good, Weston?” he says remorsefully, as if he’s not the one creating the problem.

“That’s not right. They can’t do that.”

Delilah’s soft voice floats over our huddle. A small hand slips around my bicep.

I turn to her. “Darlin’, you okay?”

Craddock looks down at Delilah. “Who’s this?”

Get your eyes off her.

I don’t like it. His interest.

Suddenly I don’t want her here. In this town. In this bar. Around me. Anything we touch is a liability. And Delilah’s right in the middle.

The idea alone is enough to strangle me.

“No one.”

Delilah stiffens beside me. It’s an asshole thing to say, but I want Craddock’s attention off her. I check my rage before turning back to Craddock. “It’s done. Let’s move on, deputy.”

As if a countdown’s begun, the bells of the old church clang like thunder. A familiar, melancholy tune that has everyone lifting their eyes heavenward.

A murderous black storm cloud swirls over River’s features. “I’m going.”

He stomps to his motorcycle. The very last thing he should be on right now with his mindset.

Warren gives me a nod.

I turn to Delilah, not wanting to leave her, but needing to talk sense to River.

“Fuck. I have to go.”

Delilah exhales. “It’s okay. Go. Go to River.”

I take a step, turn, then clutch her hand. “Tomorrow night.” I shouldn’t say it, should keep her away from me, but I can’t.

She stares at me with big, beautiful brown eyes. “Yes,” she breathes.

I look at Wells over her shoulder. “Make sure she gets back to the ranch safe.”

Letting go of her hand is a slow, painful torture.

And then I turn and run after River.

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22

Delilah

My shift at the tasting room crawls by. I pour dozens of whiskey flights, chat up the customers—a bachelor party and a group of fishermen celebrating their success at the lake—and reorder a case of glassware for Ezra, all while feeling Cole's burning stare on me.

Tomorrow night, he'd said.

Which means tonight.

Which means I've been lost in thought all day. Anticipating our evening has me strung tight. Being around Cole Weston is thrilling. Like every inch of my body, my soul comes to life when I see him.

We danced. He kissed me. In the bar. In front of everyone.

The way my body felt in his arms tells me it would always be like that with Cole Weston. Incinerating, reckless harmony. We'd fit. Impeccably.

Even if I know I should draw a line between us.

Because there is no us.

But I can't help but wonder, am I in his thoughts the way he storms through mine?

After my shift, I head to the Creek House, shower, change, pour a glass of wine, and sit. Like I'm waiting for something. And I am. Because when the velvet dark of the sky unfurls and the stars come out, there's a thud of boots and a knock at my door.

Cole.

He came, like I knew he would. Like I felt *him*.

My heartbeat kicks up as I rush to answer it. I swing it open.

He stands there, tall, big, and imposing. His cowboy hat shrouds his eyes, but I feel his intense, heated stare on me. "Hey, darlin'." The rumbling cadence of his deep voice sends a shiver down my spine.

"Hi," I breathe. He looks so damn handsome. The chambray shirt stretched over that broad chest of his. Thick muscles in his legs flex beneath the tight denim.

With a lift of his big finger, he tips his brim up to see me better. "You ready for that after-hours tour?"

I thrill inside. An entire evening with Cole Weston awaits.

"Yes."

He grips my hand and helps me outside. "You okay walkin'?"

"Lead the way." I clutch his hand, marvel at its size, his scarred knuckles, his strength.

Before I can say anything, he says, "I'm sorry, Delilah."

"For what?"

"For what I said last night. That you were no one."

My mouth parts in surprise at his apology. I can't deny it stung. But I told myself Cole had a reason for his sharp words. I saw it on his face when that cop got too close: *Protection*.

"I didn't want you anywhere near that mess." His face creases. "You're too good for any drama that Tempest brings."

I smile. “Apology accepted, cowboy.”

I look up at his chiseled profile, worry sweeping through me. “Is River okay?” It wasn’t fair last night. The cops treated Cole and his brothers like they were trash.

“Yeah.” Cole’s sigh is tired, like he’s used to it. “Probably won’t come off his damn mountain until winter after hearing about April.”

“Who’s April?” I feel like Tempest has so much lore it’s dizzying.

“She was his girlfriend. She disappeared seventeen years ago.”

I listen with rapt attention as Cole tells me about April’s disappearance and River’s jail time.

“When April disappeared, there was rumor of a trafficking ring in town. It’s been River’s quest. Find her. Even got himself locked up because of it. Framed.”

“By who?”

“By the cops.”

“And you know that how?”

“I know my brother. I know the cops. They’re corrupt as fuck, and my brother never had a gun that night.” Cole half-grunts, half-laughs. “River never cared about going to prison. All he cared about was finding April.”

“And all you care about is River,” I muse.

“That’s right.” Cole looks at me like I get it. “We won’t lose him again.”

The June night blooms with heat, humidity. The lowing of the cattle fades as we make our way onto the distillery side of the property.

“Is that how the cops are in Tempest? All assholes all the time?”

“Craddock—the man you saw last night—is a monster.” A muscle flexes in Cole’s jaw. “He’s in Mayor Hale’s pocket. Put our brothers in foster care after our parents’ death. Kept them from us until War and I became their

guardians. I'll never trust that man or any local cop." Cole gives me a stern look. "And you shouldn't either, Delilah."

A fist squeezes my chest at the mention of the cops. What would Cole think if he knew they were after me? If he knew what I'm running from?

Here, on the ranch, busy with work, in this new life, it's been easy to forget, to deny. But a little voice inside of me tells me escape is never that easy.

The garage doors of the distillery have been left open. Bright light shines out from the space into the field.

We step inside. It's strange seeing it empty. The copper stills glow. "Beast of Burden" by the Rolling Stones drifts through the speakers. Lined up on the bottling table is a selection of Weston Whiskey. Glencairn glasses. Crystal water pipettes.

I point. "Is all that for me?"

"Thought I'd ease you into it." Cole's grin is crooked, ruggedly sexy, as he says, "Gotta taste our whiskey sometime."

"Looks like tonight's the night," I murmur, seating myself on a high stool. It's a fight to steady my nerves, to not go back to that night with Sammy. The image in my nightmares is whiskey, blood, brain. But maybe, after tonight, things will be different.

I watch Cole's eyes trace up my bare legs, the sundress I've worn, my breasts, my lips.

Dropping his hat on the table, he steps away from me, the muscles in his back barely straining as he pulls a barrel from the side. "Starting with this." I watch as he grabs a strange-looking object. "This is a whiskey thief," he explains. He uncorks the barrel and dips the whiskey thief in the hole. When he removes the thief, it's filled with a clear liquid.

"This is what we call white dog." He drops the liquid into a glass.

“It’s clear.”

“Exactly. It’s raw, unaged whiskey. It hasn’t had a chance to age for years in the barrels.”

“The barrels are where it gets its color?”

“You’re a fast learner.”

I lean in, arching a teasing brow. “I may be a dancer, but I pick up quick.”

He frowns. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Can I try it?”

He chuckles. Hands it over.

I gulp a sip and then sputter a cough. An inferno in my mouth.

Cole’s already ready with a glass of water. “Baby sips, darlin’, baby sips. White dog’s seventy percent alcohol. You ain’t John Wayne.”

I blow out a hot breath and sip the water. “I could be.” I cough again. My taste buds are on fire.

He threads a hand through his dark locks, stares at me like he doesn’t know what to think.

“You ready to try that whiskey?”

A flutter of panic in my chest. But I push it down and nod.

“This is our classic single malt.” He pours out a finger into two glasses. One for him, one for me. I lick my lips, then open my mouth and take a sip.

I let the whiskey sit on my tongue for a second before I swallow it down. As I do, I find only one word rolls through my head: *safe*.

It’s a moment of crystal clear clarity. I’m okay. Nothing happened to me. Something tells me nothing will as long as Cole’s around.

I exhale, breathing out fire. When I lift my eyes, Cole’s assertive gaze is on my throat, my face. His nearness is nearly unbearable, a needy warmth

gathering between my thighs.

Whiskey tasting feels a lot like foreplay, and to be honest, I'm enjoying it.

"Well?"

I close my eyes, tasting the sweet caramel and vanilla notes. "Mmm. Delicious."

"You don't have to lie."

"No lie." I cock a brow. "At least not about your whiskey."

Satisfied with my answer, he shoots down his whiskey. I stare unabashedly at the bob of his Adam's apple, the hardness of his angular jaw, the gleam in those dark blue eyes.

I wish I knew what he tastes like after that first sip of whiskey.

Cole uncorks the next bottle and pours. "This is our rye."

I trace the foiled logo on the bottle with my fingertips. "Why's it named Copper Run Ranch?"

"There are tunnels," he says, "like the ones you saw last night on Main Street. All over this town. But we have 'em on the ranch too. Old mining town. During Prohibition, it's how the bars would run the liquor to whoever wanted it. Hence, Copper Run."

Awed, I cast my gaze around, feeling like I'm living in a reckless and lawless time of cowboys and bootleggers. "Where do the tunnels lead?"

"All over the ranch and distillery. Some I'm sure we don't even know about. But the tunnels to the east are blocked by Bellowing Peak."

I swirl the liquid in my glass. This one's darker and smells like spice. I sip, letting the whiskey linger on my tongue. "I like the rye, but I like the classic the best." I wrinkle my nose, thinking of the best way to describe it. "It has more punch."

He looks down at his glass. "That's my favorite too."

I hop off the stool, inching closer to him. When I press a palm to the hardness of his chest, his breath hitches. “Can I see the inside of one of your barrels?”

Pride lights his dark gaze. He pulls a barrel from the side, his back muscles flexing, and lifts the lid. “We just finished charring this.”

My heels echo through the space as I circle the barrel. The craftsmanship is impeccable. Smooth and finished with care, with love. It’s easy to see why Weston Whiskey is a powerhouse in the whiskey world. I run a hand over the brand emblazoned on the side of the barrel. A mark of ownership. Of dominance.

Gripping the sides of the empty barrel, I dip at the waist, stick my head inside, and inhale.

“It smells like fire and heaven and honey.” I straighten up. Bootsteps behind me.

A lightning storm crackles in my stomach as Cole presses against me and breathes, “Darlin’, that’s exactly the way you smell. Damn near torture.”

Wobbly from the whiskey, I spin around, finding blue eyes on mine. “You like torture, cowboy?”

Cole reaches out. Big, scarred fingers tenderly fix a strap on my dress. My breath catches, and my skin heats. “Thinkin’ I like torture when it comes from you, Delilah.”

Kiss me, I think, but he takes a step back, clenching his jaw like he’s reining himself in.

My gaze catches on a photo of a man hanging over the entryway to the tasting room.

“Who’s that?”

He follows my gaze, expression sobering. “Jack.”

I study the photo. Broad shoulders. The Weston blue eyes. Even captured in a photo, he exudes charisma. “He’s handsome. You look just like him.”

Beneath the photo is a plaque with the inscription, “Straight and true.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s a Jack-ism.” A swallow jogs Cole’s throat. “He always told us to tell it straight and be true. What that meant was up to us to decide.”

I turn into Cole. “He sounds like a smart man.”

“He was.”

I take in Cole’s coiled fists, his tense body. He’s fighting some sort of inner battle, fighting demons, and maybe I’m an idiot, but I want to dive in and fight them with him.

The whiskey has me wobbly, off-balance, brave and brazen. “Is he what haunts you, Cole?”

He makes a deep sound in the back of his throat. “Who says I’m haunted?”

“Your face. Those eyes that don’t smile.”

He’s silent for so long that I’m afraid I’ve pissed him off, pried too deep. Just when I’m sure he’ll storm out on me, he exhales.

“I left him that day. The day he died.”

The words sound torn from a ragged place in his heart.

“I was supposed to ride the bull, but Jack claimed that ride as his own. He thought it was too dangerous for me. I was pissed, young, hungry for fame, and we had words. Back then, I didn’t see what he was tryin’ to do, which was protect me.” A grimace twists his handsome face. “I thought he was tryin’ to hog the spotlight, to keep me back. I left him in the bar and caught up with some friends.” Cole drags in a deep breath, his nostrils flaring. “He died the next day.”

My throat closes.

“Christ, the things I said to him.” He flashes me a regretful sideways glance. “I learned later that Jack’s manager, Pappy, placed a $20,000 bet with the bull’s owner that neither Jack nor I could ride it. *He* got Jack drunk that night and drugged his drink. My brother wasn’t in his right mind when he got on that bull.” His eyes flash. “If I had been there… If I had stayed, I would have seen that. I could have stopped him.”

Guilt is etched in his deep, raw voice. A guilt I feel down to my bones.

I grip his shoulder. “Cole, no.”

“I fuckin’ let him down. I lost him because I made a mistake. Because I wasn’t looking out for him.” He shakes his dark head. “Brothers don’t turn on brothers… And what did I do? I left him there. So much damn guilt I’ve got. Stayed away all these goddamn years, missed out on my brothers’ lives, and for what?” A dark laugh shakes out of him. “Some piece of vengeance that feels hollow now?”

“You can’t blame yourself,” I whisper, wishing I could take my own advice.

“I tried my best not to. I spent an entire fucking decade waiting for evidence to end him. And last year, I got it. Pappy was trying to sabotage another bull rider just like Jack.” Cole rubs the back of his neck, his gaze distant with a memory. “Fallon McGraw. She was one of the best. Tough as shit. Stubborn as hell. I had evidence that Pappy had rigged her ride. Did my damnedest to warn her away from him, turned over the evidence to the PBR to put Pappy in prison, but…”

Cole grits his teeth. “But sometimes it still doesn’t feel like enough. It never feels over.” His hands find my hips, pulling me in for comfort. “I’ve blamed myself every damn day for the last twenty years, Delilah. It’s not that simple to turn off. Even when you save someone.”

“I understand, Cole. More than you know.” My hand goes to the locket around my neck. My voice wavers, and I fight to continue. “I lost someone

too.”

“Who?”

“My little sister. Lucy.” I gasp out her name, like the unlocking of a thousand years of darkness.

Cole’s blue eyes widen.

“Tell me.” His command is soothing, and it steadies the hammer of my pulse, the shake of my hands.

“I told you we moved all over when I was a kid.” He nods. I go on. “Well, that stopped after my mother met Tom. Tom was an asshole. Weird. Creepy. Never wanted me to dance. Always tried to tell me what to do.” Panic rises in my throat at the memory. “One night, when I was sixteen, he came to my room and sat on the edge of my bed. All I remember is his hand…moving toward me. It was like slow motion…”

“Delilah,” Cole grits out. It looks like his molars, his fists, might crack together from the pressure.

“He tried to touch me,” I whisper, my eyes starting to well up. “But I snapped out of it. I ran out of the room and told my mother everything, but she didn’t believe me. That was the worst thing, really. That the person who should have protected me didn’t.” I let out a ragged breath. Go on.

“I knew it was up to me. I couldn’t stay there, and I couldn’t keep my sister there. So, that night I left. I didn’t know where to go, who to trust, so I went to the police. But they wouldn’t listen. They thought I was a runaway, they brought me home…and…”

I press a hand to my mouth to stifle a sob.

“The last thing I told Lucy was, ‘I’ll come back for you.’ But she didn’t wait for me.” The tears start to roll down my cheeks in earnest. “She snuck out of the house after I left. It was late. She was trying to find me. And—and she got hit by a car on our street.” Memory floods my mind. “There

were so many lights, so many cops, and she was in the street covered by a white sheet. She was only eight."

A swallow jogs Cole's throat. "Christ."

My voice drops to a hollow whisper. "Lucy died thinking I left her there with that man. That I wasn't coming back for her."

"Fuck, Delilah, I'm sorry." Cole gathers me in his arms. I rest my head against his broad chest, listening to the beat of his heart. He holds me for a long few minutes, letting me gather myself, letting me know he's here.

"I never went back. I slept in my car. Flipped burgers until I turned eighteen." I grip the hem of his shirt and hold on tight. "It sounds stupid, but dancing saved me. From men. From my mother. From my sister's death. It gave me power, gave me a purpose. It kept me safe for so long, until…"

"Until…?"

Sammy.

His name is a whisper of a ghost inside my head.

I pull back to look at Cole. I touch my lips. Still burning from the white dog. "I've said too much."

More than I should. But the heady mix of whiskey and Cole's grief loosened my tongue. That urge to connect with this man, to be as honest as he's been with me.

Cole drops his forehead to mine, those big hands gripping my hips. "Nah, darlin'. You said everything right."

"Really?"

"Really. I'm glad I know more about you." He pulls my hand up to his mouth and kisses it softly, keeping his eyes on me. "And you're safe here. Know that."

My heart sings. His words mean everything. My insides are a jumbled mess from what this man does to me. He makes me feel at peace, makes me

want to open up my heart and let it all out.

I reach up to cup his strong jaw. “All the bad men in my life… But you, I don’t think you’re bad, Cole.”

His stern gaze sweeps over me. “I won’t lie. I’ve done bad things, darlin’.”

“But are you bad for me?”

A muscle tics in his jaw. “Yes. I’m bad. This town is bad. And if you know what’s good for you, you’ll leave at the end of summer.”

“I plan to.” I tilt my shoulders back. I wonder which of us can bluff the best.

“Good.” His blue eyes flash in anger, in unhappiness.

God, the man is ruthless, and yet, I want more. Crave more. His complexities captivate me. This rugged rancher with demons that can’t, or won’t, be soothed. And here I am, drifting toward them all, ready for whatever lies beneath this haunted man.

Our breaths heat the space between us. Cole’s fists curl, uncurl over my thighs, the hem of my dress as if he’s holding himself back from tearing it off me completely.

“Another drink?” He sets his gaze on me.

I sigh my relief. “Yes.” I never want the night to end.

“C’mon.” He steps back, and my body instantly cools from his absence. Then he places his hat on his head, reaches out, and takes my hand. “I’ve got the perfect nightcap.”

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Delilah

“Planning to put me to work, cowboy?” I ask Cole as he leads me into the tasting room.

He chuckles. “Not tonight. Tonight, I’m the bartender.”

I stand at the bar and watch as he grabs two heavy lowball glasses and sets them on the bar. From the shelf, he pulls an unopened bottle of five-hundred-dollar Weston Reserve.

My eyes widen. “That’s the top of the top, Cole.”

“For you, the best.”

My cheeks heat. Tonight, I feel like I’ve purged a small, dark piece of my soul. Maybe I have. Maybe Cole has too.

With the splash of the whiskey in my glass comes the flex of Cole’s muscled hand on my bare thigh.

I swallow down the liquid and moan. The whiskey coats my tongue. It’s not harsh like other whiskeys I’ve tried. It’s pure sin. Easy on the mouth. Just like the man in front of me.

A strangled groan escapes his throat. He’s trying to hold himself back, trying to act unaffected. He wants to touch me. The erection straining

against the front of his jeans tells me so. “Goddamn, you look beautiful, Delilah.”

I slick my tongue over my lips, anticipating his kiss, his touch. “You like me, Cole?”

“I like you, darlin’.” His big hand grips my jaw, a calloused thumb feathering over my lips. “My whiskey on your lips, there ain’t nothing more gorgeous than that.”

“Then taste it, cowboy. Taste *me*.” I take another sip of whiskey. I press up on tiptoe to brush my wet lips across his jaw, then I spit it into his mouth.

The air around us incinerates.

Cole’s pupils dilate as he swallows the whiskey.

Then, he erupts.

With a roar, without restraint, his mouth crushes mine, ravenously. His hands cup my face as he kisses me deeply, down to my soul. My hands go to his hair, diving in and through the silky strands. My skin aches from his rough touch.

He licks the whiskey-drenched rim of my swollen mouth. “Goddamn, woman.”

Over the speakers floats Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love.”

Slowing the motion of our kiss, I pull back. “Let me dance for you.”

His throat works, his breath warm on my skin. “Delilah…”

“I want to.”

With that, I take his hand and lead him to a chair in the middle of the tasting room. Cradling his glass of whiskey, he sits, leans back, and exhales. Striding behind him, my fingers slide over a wide, tense shoulder and into his dark hair. My pussy throbs. I’ve wanted to do that since I got here.

“Just relax, Cole.”

I move around to face him. I shimmy out of my dress. I wear a sheer white bra and thong. In the dim light of the tasting room, it shimmers like a million diamonds.

The angle of his square jaw moves in the dim light. His hands are balled into fists on the thighs of his jeans, masculine feral need pulses around him. He grips his whiskey glass so tight it could shatter.

“You’re fucking gorgeous,” he grits out.

I dance for him, rolling my hips, running my hands over my breasts, my throat, and into my hair. I haven’t danced, really danced since I got here. It’s easy to remember my confidence, my strength when I’m with Cole.

Slowly, my back to him, I lower myself to sit on his lap. I lean back. I rest my head on his shoulder, my arms around his neck tangle in his thick, dark hair.

The sheer size of him makes him a challenge. His massiveness is magnificent, and I feel delicate and small on his lap.

Cole breathes heavily as I grind against his lap. I feel his erection, hard, pulsing, in his jeans. One big hand settles on my leg, trailing possessively over my thigh, my hip.

I smile. The man’s getting into it. I wonder how long I’ll have to grind on his lap until it’s his final straw. Until Cole sees god and good common sense.

“You know, Cole, you can touch me if you want. I don’t bite.” I dip my head back on his shoulder, looking at him beneath my lashes.

“What if I do?” His deep voice caresses my ear.

“A girl can only hope.” My thighs clench.

I return my attention to the dance and stand. Cole stares up at me. After a beat, he swallows the rest of the whiskey in his glass.

My heels click-clack over the hardwood floors. The sound is loud in the empty space.

Then I climb onto Cole's lap like it's a throne. Like there's never been any man before him. Holding his shoulder, I lift myself up and roll my hips against his. Flames of desire ignite in his eyes beneath the brim of his hat.

"How in the hell are you real?" he rasps, his calloused hand palming my breast.

Ready to channel my inner Lady Lawless, I reach out, tipping his hat off his head and onto mine.

Cole's entire body changes to lead. "Darlin', you don't know what you've done."

I tilt my head, blond hair curling over my shoulders. "What's that?"

"Made yourself mine by wearing that hat." Cole's fingertips dig into my skin, restraint, hunger war on his features.

My heart flutters. I can't tell if he's serious, but I keep my eyes on his. "That so, cowboy?"

The dance isn't mechanical like it's been at the club. It rearranges my atoms with a rawness, a realness I've never experienced. It's not just another dance for another man. It's for Cole. This cowboy who has been kind to me despite my secrets.

As I move to the music, I feel him. Loosening up. Getting into it. He trembles as his fingers roam up my spine, a sinful caress.

"That's right, baby." I sweep my mouth over his stubbled cheek and whisper, "Feel the music. Feel me, Cole."

His hands squeeze my ass. Pressing myself up against him, I drag my breast over his mouth, and he moans.

Unable to help himself, Cole lunges. I gasp as he catches my breast in his mouth. Cole takes my nipple, hard and swollen, and bites it gently with his

teeth. Whimpering, I arc in his arms, my head falling back. His fingers, rough and possessive, trail over my breasts.

My lungs expand. This man. This dance.

It's different.

I whip my head back up, and when I do, Cole and I lock eyes.

It's explosive. Us.

Roughly gripping the back of my neck, he slams his mouth to mine. An instant, fiery connection that steals my breath.

"Fuck, Delilah." His tongue teases over mine as he pants between kisses. "Goddamn."

I attack him, pressing my furious body into his, my breasts plumping against his chest. My hands slide up his shirt, dancing up ridged abs, chiseled pecs. I ache to trace every cut indentation of muscle, but that will have to wait until later, if I get that lucky.

He whimpers as I tease him, the sound makes me smile. Turning this big, tough cowboy to a dazed, panting man is one of my superpowers.

"I've wanted you so fucking bad," he murmurs. "So bad."

"I want you too, cowboy." I clutch his shoulders and rock against him. "I want you so much. Need you."

I'm not sure if it's my words or if it's the changing of the music, but Cole Weston ignites.

I squeal as his muscled arms grab me up, and then we're moving, and he's slamming me down on the bar top beside the bottle of whiskey. I set his hat safely behind the bar. Then, giggling, I grab the whiskey and tip some into my mouth, spilling it down the hollow of my breasts.

"Fuck, baby." Cole's eyes are feral, pupils blown wide as he stares at me. His big body sways, lines of tension appearing around his mouth. Then he leans in and licks all the way up from my breastbone to my throat.

I giggle, stunned, delighted. “You look thirsty, cowboy,” I say, bringing the whiskey bottle to my breasts, tipping the lip and letting the amber liquid trickle over one nipple.

Cole moans. “Christ.” His mouth races to my breast, sucking and rubbing his tongue against the hard bud. I writhe in his hard clasp, my brain frying.

Cole pants when he pulls back. “Need to taste you.”

His words slay me.

“Here?” This can’t be smart. We’re in the middle of the tasting room, anyone could see. But the danger only amplifies my need.

“Here.”

“What if someone walks in?”

“If anyone walks in,” he growls, “I kill ’em.”

I thrill at the possessiveness of his words. At the illicitness of what we’re doing.

Cole hooks his arms beneath my thighs. There’s the squeak of my bare flesh on the bar top as he pulls me to the end of the bar. Cool metal from the bull leaping on his giant belt buckle presses against the inside of my thigh, and I whimper. I feel branded, his.

“Lie down,” he orders. His voice is smoke and velvet. I shiver as it curls around me, infiltrating my defenses and whatever I thought of Cole Weston and the dastardly thing called love.

Still gripping the whiskey bottle, I obey.

I teeter, dizzy from the whiskey, from my sudden descent. “Wait So Long” by Trampled by Turtles strums over the speaker. As my legs dangle over the end of the bar top, I stare wide-eyed, dazed at the overhead lights.

If this doesn’t bring new meaning to the words *tasting room*, I don’t know what does.

Cole lowers his big body between my legs and clasps my thighs. Rough, calloused hands split my thighs wide. Cole hooks a finger in the side of my thong and tugs it down my legs. “Christ. You’re leakin’ for me, darlin’.” His mouth brushes against the inside of my thigh, and my blood sings.

“You did that,” I gasp, my fingers diving into his hair. “*You.*”

“Gonna do a hell of a lot more too.” He runs a thumb down the seam of my sex. “I’m goin’ fucking insane without tasting you.”

Before I can say another word, Cole hooks my legs over his wide shoulders, then buries his face in my pussy. My mind evaporates, words disappear.

His deep rumble vibrates my clit, and then his tongue is there, lavishing, penetrating my sex. His neck strains, his big muscles in his back rolling and flexing as he works me over.

Oh god. It’s perfect. Everything about it. The pressure. The intensity.

The man dominates. The way he eats me is possessive, vicious, and hungry. I’ve never felt anything like it. One big forearm comes down on my hips, pinning me to the bar top.

There’s no holding back. Not with Cole.

It’s never been this way with any lover. He doesn’t just stand there, he works for it, a frenzy of madness, of man.

“Don’t stop, Cole. *Please.* Don’t stop.” I shamelessly buck and writhe beneath him. My breaths pulse, a warm glow spreading out in my stomach.

Cole yanks, pulls me deeper into his mouth. “That’s right, darlin’.” His deep baritone has me arching into his voice. “Beg for my tongue.”

“More. More, please,” I gasp, trembling and desperate.

I lift the whiskey bottle, spilling it over my stomach, letting the amber liquid run rivulets over my hips and my pussy.

On a growl, Cole crashes his lips on my pussy, gulping the whiskey with greedy abandon. The rough scruff of his beard rakes across the insides of my thighs as he kisses his way up my legs to my belly button, where most of the whiskey has ended up. My mouth's frozen in a permanent O as I watch him savor me, drinking the whiskey down before returning to my pussy.

"Come in my mouth," he pants. His other hand fondles and kneads my breast. "I need you, darlin'. Need your fuckin' taste on my lips." His harsh, possessive order slays me. "Can't stand it, baby, can't stay away. Won't. Not anymore."

My lashes flutter, my heart stretching out in my chest. No walls, no boundaries, nothing between us.

Nothing except everything.

Too many feelings. Too much of tonight. I need to remember I'm leaving. I need to remember to rein in my heart.

His lips are wet and hot as he feeds on me with reckless lust. He grazes his teeth over my clit. "Cole…" My whimper tears through the tasting room, reedy with pleasure.

Cole teases me with merciless kisses and long, languishing licks. The man's a powerhouse. Pressure builds. He takes his forearm off my hips, slides his hands beneath my ass, grips my flesh, and elevates my hips.

Oh. Oh fuck.

My gasps deepen as Cole finds the right spot and twists his tongue against my clit. My lower body twists, but he holds firm, and then, then…

A guttural scream leaves my lips as my body tears with the force of the orgasm. A torrent of endless relief crashes over me, making my chest heave. Making my body buck and jerk.

"Good, good girl," Cole murmurs until my quivery scream turns to a breathy cry.

I lie there, feeling limp and lovely, feeling like I'll never be the same again, when a big arm wraps around my middle. Cole lifts me up, peering down at me with a dark gaze.

"What now?" I breathe.

Cole brings the whiskey bottle to his lips, grins, and says, "Darlin', you and me, we ain't done."

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Cole

Whiskey tastes sweeter falling off Delilah's lips and onto mine.

I watch the graceful column of her neck move as she drinks down the whiskey with wild abandon.

"Easy, darlin', easy."

She giggles, drops the bottle.

My hand drops to her open legs, moving to her sex, her heat. "Fuck. Look at you. Drinking my whiskey and dripping for me." I drag a finger through her slit, and she whimpers.

I lift my fingers, soaked by the whiskey, by her come, and bring them to my mouth. I need to taste her. I ate the fuck out of her, but it's not enough. Something tells me it never will be.

"Cole," she says, eyes wide. "What're you doing?"

"You taste better than a bottle of five-hundred-dollar whiskey, darlin. Need to drink you up. Every last drop."

I stare at the way her lips tilt in a flirty smile, that curtain of long blond hair draped over her shoulder, ignoring the lingering feeling that I'm getting

too close. That this town will take the one good thing I've been lucky enough to find.

I've never wanted anything as much as I want her.

Then I lean my head down and kiss her deeply, hungrily. The spiced aroma of the whiskey has me drinking her up like the rarest vintage there is. Delilah mewls, grips my hair, and pulls.

This girl. Fucking heaven-sent.

I wasn't prepared for her dance. It messed with my mind, put a spell on me I can't shake off. She was so goddamn sexy, her hands all over me, and I can't stop the one thought hammering through my goddamn mind.

She wore my hat. She wore my goddamn hat.

In a cowboy's world, in a man's, it means she's mine.

Sliding my hands up her back, I pop off her bra.

I'm not prepared for the sight of a naked Delilah. She's built like a goddess. Toned legs, delicate curves, silky blond hair, and gorgeous tits… My erection's all but doubled in size.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I rasp.

"So are you," she breathes, sliding her hands up my jaw.

I've never felt a woman like this. Never memorized the shape of her body, her scream when she comes. Never been anything to remember. Because it's never been Delilah.

Delilah's slender arms wrap around my neck. "I want you so bad, Cole." She's so hot and wet and trembling for my cock.

"I know, baby. You've been puttin' me through hell." I drag her hips forward, and she squeaks as I yank her off the bar. I set her on those high heels, and her eager hands go instantly to my belt buckle and undo it, before releasing the fly of my jeans.

Her warm hand slips down my jeans to stroke my dick. My head falls back, and I groan. “You’re wreckin’ me, darlin’.”

“That’s the plan, cowboy.” She moves closer, her lips stretched in a coy little smile.

“Ah, Christ, Delilah.” Gripping her waist, I spin her around and bend her over the bar. Her shapely legs fall open. Her hips tilt. That pert ass stands at attention, ready for me. A fresh gush of wetness drips down the inside of her thighs.

I pull away from her briefly to fumble for a condom in the top drawer of the bar. One from Warren’s stash.

I shift my weight against her, nudging her legs open further. I let my hand drift to her pussy, gliding my fingers through all that slickness. “Goddamn, baby, is this all for me?” I groan as she sucks me right in. The deeper I go, the more she whimpers. The harder she clenches around me. My cock wants this so fucking bad right now. “I knew you’d drip just like this.”

“Only for you,” she purrs. “And no one else.”

Goddamn, that sass. I fucking love it.

She looks over her shoulder, regarding me from beneath dark fringed lashes, her bottom lip pulled between her teeth. Then she does a slow, seductive roll of her hips that lights my blood on fire.

She wants my cock.

The sight of her wet, pink pussy has me frantic. Reduces me to a greedy fucking man. I fall on her. Can’t wait any more. Need to fuck her. Now.

Tearing open the condom with my teeth, I roll it on. Without restraint or hesitancy, I line my dick up with the entrance to her pussy. “Spread your legs.”

She dips forward, that ass propped up, pussy glistening. It takes all I have not to slam into her. I force myself to go slow, to savor.

Gripping her thighs, I sink into her, watching my cock disappear into that pretty cunt. Small, breathy sounds tighten her stomach.

“Fuck me, Cole,” she breathes. “Fuck me hard.”

My blood pulses. She’s so fucking tiny, so goddamn delicate beneath me, for a second, I’m terrified I’ll hurt her.

Edging back, I briefly pull out. Then I push in again, this time, hard and fast, driving myself to the root.

Delilah cries out, liquefying beneath me. Her pretty mouth releases a moan.

“Fuck, you take me so good, don’t you.” In response, her tight channel clenches around me.

I reach out, my hands seeking any part of her I can have. I grip her breast, plumping it in my hand, stroking and tugging at her pink nipple.

Noisy gasps of pleasure fall from Delilah’s lips. “That’s right, darlin’. That tight little cunt’s begging for it, isn’t it?”

“Yes, yes, yes…”

I give three hard, ruthless thrusts, and she shakes with each of them. Her knuckles are white as she grips the bar edge. She rocks her hips, moaning and panting and whining for more. How she looks is how she fucks. Sexy. Sensual. Tormenting.

Draping my body over hers, I drop close to her ear, growl, “You know how to make me fucking feral, don’t you?”

Her scent’s all over me. Baby oil and honey. Glitter dust kisses every inch of her creamy, bare skin. Unable to help myself, I dip my head and kiss her shoulder.

Desire tightens in the deepest part of me.

Sex. It’s just sex.

It has to be.

At this point, I’m not entirely convinced that Delilah wasn’t sent to this ranch to single-handedly wreck my life.

As I rut inside her like a fucking animal, I glide a hand to her clit and rub the soaked flesh. Her hips lift, and her breath catches.

I have her where I want her. On edge. Ready.

I pull out of her.

Whimpering, Delilah looks over her shoulder. “Cole,” she gasps, lips pouting. “What are you doing?”

“Need your eyes on me when you come, Delilah.”

“Yes,” she says breathlessly, and reaches out her arms as she turns away from the bar and toward me. It’s that goddamn gesture, that small act of trust, of innocence that makes my heart clench.

I lift her up my body. She wraps her legs around my waist, and I pin her to the wall. She stares at me. I stare at her. Then I kiss her ravenously.

We groan together, shaking and clinging to each other as I slam my cock into her. Christ. She’s so goddamn wet.

My hand runs up her breastbone to her throat, where I give it a small squeeze. “You come when I tell you to, you understand?”

Eyes wide, she nods. I release her throat.

I pound hard, brutally, with such force the photos on the walls shake, the bottles rattle. Her eyes flutter, and she arcs into me. As I thrust myself to the hilt, I hold her so close I could absorb her. Because I’m addicted to her. Her scent, her sounds, her softness. In the morning this feeling will fade, but tonight I want to hold it close as long as I can.

“Cole…” Her pink mouth opens and closes. She’s on the brink of climax. And I’m nearly there too.

“Come for me,” I order.

She grips my neck. “Cole, I’m going to…”

“Now, Delilah. *Now.*” I thrust. Hard. Letting her know I’m not just another man fucking her. Tonight, I’m her man. *Hers.*

Her body jerks as she comes, clamping down on my cock. Her big brown eyes fly open and latch on to mine. I watch in awe as her face floods with emotion. She releases a scream. “Fuck, fuck, oh, Cole, fuck…”

In seconds, I’m bellowing my release. A grunting growl that charges the air between us. “Fuck, Delilah.” My head drops forward, burrowing into the curve of her throat, torturing myself with her scent.

We stand there, swaying for a few seconds. The tasting room pulses with our uneven breaths, with the music from the speaker. Then Delilah unfolds her trembling legs from my hips. Gently, I settle her on the ground. I cup her cheek. “You good, darlin’?”

She smiles and nods. “You know how to make a girl happy, cowboy.”

Damn if that doesn’t fuck up my breathing.

Giving her a grin, I tug up my jeans and go to work on finding her dress. I slip it over her head, straightening it and smoothing out its wrinkles.

“What now?” Delilah chews her lip as she looks at me. I glance at the clock above the bar. It’s early still. Barely nine o’clock.

I snatch my hat off the bar, dust it off, then set it on her head. A jolt of awareness crackles across my skin at what I’ve just done. “Come home with me.” This night isn’t over. I ache to keep her beside me.

Her smile is a beam of light that hits me square in the chest. “Yeah.”

We go back to my house, where I fuck her in the shower, cleaning the whiskey off her body between quick, frantic thrusts. When we’re finished, I towel her dry and put her into my bed.

Delilah snuggles into the pillow. Naked. Beautiful. One toned leg, kicked out over the sheets. “I should go back to my Creek House.”

I grunt as I shrug on a pair of underwear. “Not an option, Delilah.” Tonight, she stays beside me.

Leaning over, Delilah examines a framed Weston Whiskey napkin with my mother’s handwriting. *“To my little Wild Westons. I love you.”* She looks at me, stretching her body. “That’s sweet. What is it?”

“That’s what our mom called us.” With a rough swallow, I sit beside her. “Her little ‘Wild Westons.’ Hell, we ran half the town ragged back then.”

She laughs. “I can picture it.”

I close my eyes as she runs her fingers up my back. Her warm, soft touch feels so good. “She was always leaving notes for us on distillery napkins. I found that one, and I kept it.”

She flops back against the pillow, her pretty brown eyes shiny. “What were their names?”

“Jacob and Caroline.”

“What did your mom love?” She tilts her head, and my heart pounds at the question.

“Animals.”

“Your father?”

“Whiskey.”

“Real helpful.” Her smile is soft.

I reach my hand out, running it down her bare leg, feeling emotion wrench inside of me. It matters that she’s asking, that she cares. Neither of us say anything. We just look at each other, then I cup her cheek and shove to standing.

Delilah likes music so I put on a record. Johnny Cash’s faint warble fills the room. I join her in bed, pull her into my arms. I’m starving for more than just her pussy, I’m starving for the whole of this girl.

Delilah lays her golden head on my chest.

“I had fun tonight.”

“Me too.”

She hesitates, then pushes up. Her full lips flatten. “I want you to know, Cole, I’ve never slept with a man I danced for—”

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Justify, okay?” I tip her chin up to meet my firm gaze. “No shame. You don’t have to do that with me or anyone.”

It was a job. She needed the money. She needed to survive. She’s good at it. End of story. I’d never use it against her. Or use it to think less of her. And damn everyone else who has.

“Thank you.” She smiles, curls her slender fingers in my chest hair. “I liked dancing for you, Cole.”

Hand on her elbow, I pull her closer. I kiss her forehead, her nose, her lips. “I liked it too, darlin’.”

Goddamn, she’s gorgeous. Brazen. Beautiful. I kiss her pillowy lips. She ever dances for another man again, he won’t survive.

“Does your hand hurt?” Delilah scoots closer, and I glance down in surprise, realizing I’ve been absentmindedly massaging my palm. “I’ve seen you do that before. When we were fixing the fence.”

“It’s the casualty of a cowboy.” I flex a fist. “Tendonitis. Maybe arthritis.”

Delilah’s lips flatten. My heart stutters as she takes my big hand in her small one and massages it. “Stubborn,” she mutters.

Her fingers knead the fleshy part of my palm. It feels like heaven. I stare at her, and even in the darkened light of my bedroom, there’s something so fierce and fragile about her; I ache to protect her. She let me see her tonight. In every way that matters to a man.

But what would she think if she truly saw me?

“Cole.” Delilah’s soft gasp has me looking over. I follow her gaze to the window. Outside, smoke blackens the sky. “There’s a fire.”

“Not a fire. A bonfire.” My throat feels like there’s a brick in it. “My brothers get together once a month or so to bullshit over a bottle of whiskey. We call it bottle and bonfire.” A motorcycle revs in the distance.

“That sounds fun. Why aren’t you there?” Curiosity sparks in her eyes.

Somehow, she pulls it out of me. Grief. Truth. I rub my jaw, and suck in a burning breath. “I’ve stayed away too long, and now, I don’t know how to get back.”

“What if you go forward?”

“I don’t know how,” I confess. “After Jack…it felt like I’d been living my life on autopilot. I hated my new reality. I wanted to escape.” Emotion fills my lungs. “And I did. For a long time, I felt okay. But that was on the circuit…and coming back home just sharpened that grief somehow.”

She blows out a shaky breath, tears in her eyes. “What was the best thing about Jack?”

“He’d do anything for anyone. Even if he didn’t know you, and he wanted nothing in return.” A weight lifts from my shoulders. I smile at the memory, letting it take me away for a brief second, before I turn to Delilah. “What about Lucy?”

“Lucy.” Delilah exhales, her eyes wet, her expression pensive. “I love that there’s someone else out there who knows her name.” She collects herself, then says, “She was always funny. She could make anyone laugh. She was so kind and always loved giving little gifts that she would find in all the cities we lived.” Her fingers move to her neck, fingering the gold heart that lies above her breastbone and lifting it for me to see. “She gave me this locket on my sixteenth birthday. She always called it my lucky locket.”

“Lucky locket, huh?” I eye the pretty piece of gold.

“I don’t know why. She just did.” She smiles. “Maybe she knew more than I did.” A happy little laugh escapes her lips. “And she made the best fucking pancakes.”

“Breakfast.” I pull my hand from hers to brush my fingertips down her arms.

“Breakfast,” she echoes.

Silence stretches between us, comfortable, easy.

I think about how similar our stories are. She and I both fought to protect the people we love. When Delilah said she understood, she meant it.

Grief has been my shadow for so damn long, but tonight, it feels like the boulder on my heart has lifted.

I tuck her tiny body against my chest and rolls us onto our sides. With her back to my chest, I caress her face. Delilah sighs and relaxes against me. Our hearts thunder together. She reaches back and presses a palm to my cheek. “Night, cowboy.”

“Goodnight, darlin’.”

I don’t fall asleep, not right away. I lie there, Delilah in my arms, her breathing heavy and content.

But her story isn’t all mine yet. The reason she’s at the ranch, the distillery is still a mystery to me.

Only I’m learning fast that I don’t care. Not anymore.

Delilah’s not what I expected and everything I’ve been waiting for.

If I ever needed a reason to move on with my life, she’s lying right here in my arms.

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Cole

“Morning.” I set a cup of coffee on the nightstand, then sit down on the bed next to Delilah.

Rolling over in the sheets, she blinks up at me from beneath long lashes. “Morning.”

I hesitate, then…

Fuck it.

I lean down and kiss her. She looks gorgeous, hair mussed, pouty lips. Her hands go to my cheeks, pulling me down to her lips.

“Darlin’,” I murmur, “you get me back in this bed, we’re never leaving.” My cock jerks at the idea, but Delilah gasps and pulls away from me.

“What time is it?”

“Almost eight.”

“Shit.” She launches out of bed and hunts around the bedroom for her clothes.

“Where you headed?” I pull the hem of the T-shirt she wore to bed closer to me as my hand slides over the soft skin of her thighs.

“Straight to the distillery.” Twisting into me, she gives me a look. “I need to scrub that tasting room before we open. Either that or burn it to the ground.”

Chuckling, I slap her ass. “I’ll help.”

“No, it’s okay.” She extricates herself from my hold, shoos me with her hand. “Go do cowboy things.”

It’s what I planned to do. Round up the cattle, then tackle the fence on the north side before heading to the Coop. But because of Delilah, it’s a later than expected start. Not that I mind. I slept better than I deserved last night.

As she slips on her dress and panties, I grab my Stetson from the dresser, settle it on my head. I tilt my hat toward her, watch a gorgeous flush bloom on her cheeks.

“I’ll see you later?”

“Yeah. You will.”

She gives me a flirty little smile, then I kiss her lips and walk her out.

We part ways, Delilah heading to the distillery and me to the homestead, when I see Warren’s car parked in the driveway.

The cool morning air is crisp on my skin, but I soon trade it for the smell of coffee as I shove up the steps of the creaky old house and enter the front door.

Uncle Vaughn, Warren, and Ezra stand around the window that overlooks the creek. I pour myself a cup of coffee, then join them.

“Whiskey?” Vaughn lifts a gray brow in expectation.

I hesitate, then say, “No. Not today.”

“You’re in a good mood,” Warren observes.

“Have anything to do with Delilah leaving your house this morning?” Ezra shrugs off the glare I shoot him. “Bugs saw it. She’s on sleepover alert.”

I sigh. Great. Even my five-year-old niece knows I got laid.

“We got it out of our systems.”

Ezra sets his coffee cup down beside his laptop. “That’s the lie of the century if I ever heard one.”

“Never works, Cole.” Warren’s tone kicks over into know-it-all big brother. “Not when you got a girl who looks like that on your ranch. You’re gonna go back for seconds, thirds, and before you know it, you’ll be in over your head.”

Maybe he’s right. Maybe I am in over my head. Maybe last night was a mistake. Feelings are the last thing I need. Yet I don’t know if staying away is an option anymore.

We’ve been dancing around something ever since she came to the ranch, and last night we acted on it, but it can’t go any further than one time.

“Think it’s wise,” Vaughn asks, lifting his steaming cup of coffee to his mustached lips, “getting involved with some strange girl you barely know?”

“We ain’t involved. And she’s not strange.”

Delilah’s a fighter, as strong or stronger than any of my brothers. She’s real. The realest thing I’ve seen on this ranch. She’s used to figuring things out on her own. Used to running. To being abandoned. I hope she knows that she can stay here as long as she likes.

“Let me guess.” Warren gives me a skeptical look. “Stripper with a heart of gold?”

“Don’t call her that,” I grind out, meeting War’s eyes. A warning he’s this close to getting his ass kicked, and my older brother knows it.

My uncle clears his throat and exits the room. He knows a fight brewing when he sees it.

“You still planning to run her off?” Ezra’s brows knit together, and I can’t tell if it’s confusion or worry.

“No.” I pull out a chair and give him a pointed look. “We gonna talk about me all damn morning, or figure some shit out about the new release?”

At the glances Warren and Ezra exchange, I sigh. “What is it now?”

“We got that online order,” Ezra says. “Two hundred bottles of bullshit.”

He means the run. I lean back in my chair. “When?”

“A few days before the launch party. Seven p.m.” That puts us at the end of August.

“Fuck.” I drag a hand down my face. Dread and worry curl my stomach. “Are we ready?”

“Everything’s loaded up. A driver’s been provided by whoever the fuck Syd’s contact is.” That’s the way it’s always been. A nameless contact takes our truck along with the guns. In a month or two, it’s always delivered back to us—clean and empty.

Making a decision, I look at Ez. “I don’t want you there.”

Warren nods. “I agree. You have Evvie.”

“I don’t want to be there either.” Ezra shakes his head, looking conflicted. “But I won’t sit it out. We’re all in this. I go.”

Warren and I share a look. If it comes down to it, one of us will take the blame for Ezra. Hell, I’ll tell the cops I coerced him at gunpoint. Evvie won’t lose her father because of me.

Ezra grins. “Now, if you assholes are done barking orders, can we get back to the fucking launch party?”

An hour later, after we’ve hammered out most of the details of the limited-edition launch party that Delilah’s had approved by Ezra, I head back to my place. I grin when I catch sight of Delilah coming across the field, looking gorgeous in the pale morning light.

“All clean,” she says, puffing a lock of hair out of her eyes. “Barely.” Her voice drops, almost shyly. “We made a mess last night, cowboy.”

My cock swells, and I take a resolute breath. “Was worth it.”

I mean it. Denial, running away, closing down, it’s been my greatest superpower after Jack, after my parents. With Delilah, the pain feels duller. Almost like the blurry bad dream of loss doesn’t have me in its numb grip.

She smiles.

Reaching for her hands, my thumbs rove across the silky skin on the inside of her wrists. “You want to have breakfast with me?” There are still the cows and the fence to deal with, but damn if I don’t want to steal another moment with her.

If her eyes didn’t burn like the fire of whiskey, she might be easier to forget.

She smiles, a small, silvery laugh tumbling out of her. “You don’t eat breakfast.”

Today’s an exception.

Delilah’s an exception.

An addiction.

“How about just once?” I lie through my teeth like it’s second nature.

“Okay.” Her lashes lift, and she studies me like we both have a secret. “Just once.”

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Cole

I stand out front of the tasting room, watching Delilah jump around the field. Torturing myself with the sight of her in frayed jean shorts and a white tank top with little cherries all over it. Her long blond hair waves around her shoulders.

Fucking hell. I try to tear my eyes from her, but it's impossible. She's stunning. There isn't a man on the planet who could say no to her.

I stride down the steps and meet her in the middle of the field. "What are you doing?"

"Measuring." She laughs and stretches out her arms. In her right hand is a clipboard and a pen. "Three gigantic leaps for the launch party."

"You know, there's a better way to do that." I lean closer. "It's called a tape measure."

She laughs. Pats the pocket of her apron. "Got one." She tilts her face to the sun, amber eyes sparkling, and asks, "Can I show you what I'm thinking for the launch party?"

"Got time," I grunt. I'll be late to the Coop, but who the fuck cares? What's one more day off-balance?

I've been off-balance since I met her. Since we slept together. It's only been three days, and every damn night this week she's been in my bed. Fact of the matter, I'm fucking starved without her.

"Over here." Delilah grabs my hand. I let her lead me further into the field, walking me like a dog on a fucking leash if I'm honest.

"Okay, let me walk you through it." Arms splayed to the field, she moves one hand to the west. "Hassie will do a pop-up hat bar over there." A hand to the east now. "We'll have the band and the bar over there. I've already talked to Warren, and he's going to come up with a signature whiskey cocktail." Her head tilts. "In honor of your father."

"Then…" She spins and shimmies to the right, pointing at a spot further back, shielded by evergreens. "If it isn't too much stress on some of the animals, I thought we could bring out some of the rescues and set up a donation center for the sanctuary." She smiles. "In honor of your mother."

My chest feels tight. Too goddamn tight.

"What do you think?" Her teeth worry her lower lip.

"I think…it sounds like you have it handled."

But the frown on her brow only deepens. "Cole? Do you think Ezra has too much faith in me?"

I can hear the nerves in her words, the doubt that she can't do it. But that's where she's wrong. With Delilah's infallible determination and charm, I have no doubt she'll make the launch party a success.

"Ezra has faith in no one." I go to her, giving her my eyes so she can see how much I believe in her. "The fact that he trusts you to do this says a lot."

"I'm trying to pull this off, but what if I fail? What if I let your family down? What business do I have doing this when all I've ever been is a…a dancer."

“A dancer doesn’t have anything to do with it.” I step closer, fitting a hand to her cheek. “You won’t fail. If anyone can do it, it’s you.” My gaze roams over her, hoping she believes me.

“Really?”

“Yeah, darlin’. Really.” Every last inch of my body buzzes as I pull her completely into my arms. Soft. Sweet. Warm.

“Cole.” Palms on my chest, Delilah pulls back slightly. Eyes streaked with worry. “Should we be doing this? Out in the open?”

“I don’t give a damn what people say or think.” The truth. We’re not a commitment, but I’ll be damned if I’m keeping her a secret.

She whimpers as I nip at her bottom lip. That desperate sound jerks my cock and has me deepening the kiss. Delilah clings to me as I let loose a low moan in her mouth.

Never enough. Fucking never.

Something tells me ending this at the end of the summer is going to be harder than I thought.

Tires on gravel.

We pull apart, both of us looking toward the road.

“Shit.” I tense at the sight of a big black SUV coming down the dirt drive. Following behind it, a cop car.

A car door opens and shuts. Mayor Rogan Hale steps out. He stalks forward, dressed in a black suit and shiny red cowboy boots.

What the fuck is he doing here?

Seconds later, Craddock exits his cruiser, leaning back against it and crossing his arms.

My hackles bristle, hardening my voice. “You here on official mayor business? Or do they not pay you enough back at city hall?”

“Funny thing about being at the city hall. You hear things.” Hale settles in front of us. “And I heard you’re having a party.” His tone is easy and smug.

My gaze moves to Delilah, her own locked on Hale, her brows furrowed together like she already doesn’t trust the man. Good girl.

“Heard right.”

Hale’s gaze surveys the field, then Delilah. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

Delilah crosses her arms, and I glance at Hale. “Say your piece, Rogan. Then get the fuck off my property.”

“Now I don’t mean to be the bearer of bad news, but I’m afraid I come with some.”

“What’s that?”

“You need a permit, filed in the city hall at least seventy-five days prior to any special event taking place.”

A hitch of breath beside me.

The last thing I want this bastard to do is rain on Delilah’s parade. She’s so proud of everything she’s done.

“This is private property. We’ve never needed a permit before.” I stand at my full height, staring him down.

“You do now. New rule. Went into effect last year. Notified all local businesses, in fact.”

“We never got it.”

“Shame.” With a heavy exhale, he shakes his head. “Must have gotten lost in the mail.”

His subtext reads loud and clear. We were never meant to get it.

How fucking convenient.

“That’s a bullshit move, Hale.”

“Wish I could help, but I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do about it.” He sucks his lip as he checks his watch. “Seeing as how your party is Labor Day weekend, I’m afraid yesterday was the deadline to acquire a permit. I’m afraid any party plans you have, no matter how sentimental…” His lip curls. “Well, looks like they’re canceled.”

Rage, quick and hot, sears.

“You piece of fucking shit.” I advance, clenching a fist, the urge to hit him never too far off.

“Cole.”

A hand ghosts over my arm. Delilah’s soft touch has me standing down. Has the dark rage threatening to take me under dissipating.

“I’m so glad you said that, mayor, because I obtained one last month.” Delilah smiles and bats her eyes. Hale’s face instantly pales. “I can pull it from the distillery if you need to see it.”

She twists toward the tasting room, her beautiful face as cool as can be.

I can’t tell if she’s bluffing or not, but the satisfaction I get from watching his smug smile fade can’t be measured.

Hale stares at us, and despite his hat, a thin sheen of sweat drips down his temple.

“You heard her.” I cross my arms, a smirk of a smile tilting my lips. “Think everything’s in order here. Now get the fuck off my property.”

Face darkening, Hale sweeps his beady gaze around the distillery and ranch grounds.

I bristle as his eyes move to Bellowing Peak. The copper tunnels that lie below. That house, the truck, and the guns lined up and ready to go at a single word.

“You fucking Westons,” Hale snarls, gaze drifting to the hillside that used to be in his family before my father bought it up. “You take our land. You

take our whiskey. I look forward to the day someone takes something from you."

"That a threat, Rogan?"

"No threat. It's a promise." His eyes sweep the ranch. "Enjoy it while you have it, Weston."

Hale strides away, barking a short order at Craddock to get in his cruiser.

When the vehicles vanish down the road, Delilah breathes out, her sigh a soft exclamation beside me.

"You okay, darlin'?"

"That man has ice inside his veins." She glares down the road.

I chuckle. She's shrewd. Smart. Unforgiving.

"Yeah. He does." My hand falls to the small of her back, turning her into me. "Tell me you have that permit."

Fight flashes in her eyes and she smiles. "I do. I read up on all the rules the day Ezra put me in charge of the party."

"Fuckin' lucky." I shake my head. Whether she knows it or not, she saved all our asses.

"Yeah." Gaze moving to the long dirt road, one small hand drifts to her locket, cradling the gold heart in her palm. "Lucky."

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27

Delilah

The last week of June brings patrons into the tasting room at a steady clip. I watch a group of rowdy men who were shuttled here in a van grab a high-top. The population of Tempest has quadrupled during the summer, and I see now why the Westons were so desperate for a bartender.

“We need two more tastings on that high-top, and an espresso martini.” Wells, helping bartend for the day, steps around me.

“Got it.” Into a cocktail shaker I mix two ounces of Weston Whiskey and two shots of espresso. As I shake, my eyes drift, snagging on Cole, who storms into the tasting room. Those dark tattoos on his forearms flex. His dark hair is curled at the nape. I itch to run my fingers through it, then launch myself at his wide chest and hang on.

He’s an infuriatingly beautiful man, and I love it.

I bite my lip and try to focus on my task. Except it’s not easy. The man takes up too much brain space.

Cole raps the bar with his knuckles as he approaches, then steps behind it. “Delilah.”

I flush. “Mr. Weston.”

“Searching for a lighter.”

“Think there’s one behind the register.” More and more often he’s been finding an excuse to stop by the tasting room.

He cups the small of my back and leans in close. His warm, masculine scent swamps my senses. “Got plans tonight?”

With a flourish, I strain the dark liquid into a martini glass and shrug a shoulder. “Have a date.”

He growls, a fierce frown darkening his handsome face. “Delilah.”

I giggle. “Fooled you.”

He moves closer, trying to keep that grumpy scowl on his face when I can tell all he wants to do is smile. “Dinner?”

“Yes, dinner.”

It’s been two weeks since our tryst in the tasting room. And ever since that night, it’s become our ritual. After work, me, Cole, dinner, and whiskey. Which eventually leads to sex and spending the night. Then, mornings, black coffee and breakfast. We’ve spent nearly every second together. There isn’t an inch of his chiseled body I haven’t touched, tasted.

Our bodies pressed together this morning. Cole slipping into me, groaning as he found me already wet. “Pretty darlin’,” he whispered as he kissed me senseless and rocked his cock inside of me. “You feel so good, so perfect.”

Every day I spend at the ranch makes it feel like all my problems are behind me.

It’s easy to talk to Cole. When I first met him, I thought him emotionless and cold, but he’s anything but. He doesn’t make me feel judged. For such a big grumpy man, he’s gentle with me.

I told him about my sister. One of the first people I’ve ever opened up to about that awful time in my life. Foolish, maybe, but it was easy to talk to

him. If I can trust him with that…

Cole presses closer, his husky voice sending a shiver down my spine. “Can’t damn wait.”

I smile. Clearly, I’m not the only one enjoying our time together.

“Question.” Wells flicks a brow at Cole. “Do you raise barrels anymore or are you planning to hang around our bartender all day?”

Cole elbows his brother out of the way. “Mind your business,” he growls. He removes his hand from the small of my back and steps away from the bar.

As he goes, he gives me that hat tilt I love. A sweet gesture that means everything to me.

I blush, my cheeks heating in response.

Sex. Just sex, I remind myself.

If it’s anything more, we haven’t named it.

Which is fine with me. I have always loved too easy. Too free. I think of Melly, still missing. My sister. I can’t take losing someone else again.

We have boundaries. We’re having fun. Nothing more, nothing less.

One thing’s for certain. I’ve failed miserably at my goal of staying out of this man’s life.

Cole Weston can’t matter to me. This town can’t matter. Because sooner or later, I’ll have to pack a bag and walk away. It’s how it’s always been. Good things don’t stay.

I mix my drinks, lifting a hand to Cy and Leon, who’ve just arrived for their shift, then make my rounds around the tasting room. In addition to the tourists, the locals are out in droves.

I drop off a fresh round of drinks at a rowdy table, where a group of leather jacket–clad bikers sit. “There she is.” A man I know as Syd, River’s

friend, eyes the tray of shots with appreciation. “The woman of my dreams.”

“I’m only in your dreams because I come bearing whiskey,” I tease lightly and dole out the shots.

Another biker, rings on every one of his fingers, cleans his nails with a pocketknife. Only the slight arch of his brow tells me he’s amused.

“Gotta go, boys.” I flip my hair over my shoulder and move on.

“Hey, there, gentlemen.” My next table, unlike the last, is a table filled with unthreatening old men. They hold unlit cigars and work their whiskeys and crossword puzzles. “Can I get you anything?” Amid the mumbles, I glance at Swanny Jessup. Owner of the Ranch Supply Co. in town, he rented me the tables for the launch party at a discounted rate. “Whiskey neat for you, right? Nothing too sweet when you’re already filled with enough sugar.”

He flushes and guffaws. “You got a lot of sass, young lady.” Pink stains his cheeks.

I smile. I may not be able to win over everyone in Tempest, but this group of grumpy gentlemen is a start.

A man at a high-top cranes his neck and bangs his fist. “Hey, waitress. We’re here for drinks. Not your chitchat.”

I roll my eyes, flash Swanny a conspiratorial little smile. “Everyone’s a critic.”

Swanny and his crew mutter, shooting the high-top glares.

I head toward the bar, hefting the two whiskey flights Wells prepped and taking them to the impatient high-top. The group of overly loud and boisterous men wear polos and expensive watches. Definitely not the Montana kind. In fact, they’d be more suited for the Velvet Belles. They don’t take no for an answer. They cheat on their wives. And they always want another drink when they should have stopped hours ago.

“Here you go.” I set the flights down, then prop a hand on my hip. “Anything else?”

“Another cocktail, honey.” A man wearing a baseball cap downs the first shot.

I hesitate. The Westons have a rule not to serve anyone who’s shit-faced. And this guy’s definitely shit-faced.

“Finish your taster, and then we’ll talk.” I flash him a bright smile, hoping that’s the end of it.

Baseball Cap looks up at me, then blinks, his bleary eyes focusing. “Holy shit, it’s you. I remember you. How can I forget?” He groans, lost in thought. “God, you gave me the best lap dance I ever had.”

My heart gallops into a wild sprint. I recognize him from the club. A social media influencer celebrating his bachelor party. He did ten shots within an hour and ended up passing out on the bathroom floor.

He slaps a hundred-dollar bill down. Pats his lap. “What do you say, honey? Old time’s sake?”

All I’m good for. That’s what he thinks.

Hot tears of humiliation flood my eyes. My cheeks burn. I love dancing, love the power it brings me. But now, I’m anything but powerful. I feel naked, on display, and I want the floor to open and swallow me whole.

“This is that chick I told you about. The one who could work a pole like nobody’s business.” Baseball Cap turns, elbowing his buddy. “Hold on, let me get a photo of this.” Fumbling, he pats his pockets.

I watch as a phone’s pulled out. My heart hammers in fear. If the cops are looking for me—if this gets out…

“Can you put the phone away?” My lungs squeeze in my rib cage.

The guy looks at me like I’m stupid. “Just one picture, honey.” A smarmy smile twists his lips. “Relax, I’m sure you’ve done worse things.”

Panic twists my stomach. I can’t escape my past, but worse, I can’t escape what happened in that room.

“Give me a little wiggle.” The man cackles and lifts his phone. “And when you’re done dancing, get me another drink.”

I feel my temper flare. He wants another drink? I’ll give him another drink.

I grab a glass from his flight board, shoot the whiskey back, then I spit it into his rat-fuck face. “Fuck you.”

Cackles and hoots float around the tasting room.

“You little bitch.” He lunges, grabbing my wrist and pinning me to the table.

The group of old men stand at their table.

“Let her go!” Swanny shouts.

One of Syd’s men stands, flicking out a switchblade.

“You’re gonna have fucking problems, man, if you don’t back the fuck up.” Wells shoots out from behind the bar, coming to my side.

“Leave me alone, asshole!” I twist in his grip, wanting nothing more than to be free, than to run. But he only holds tighter, digging my wrist into the hard corner of the table. “You’re hurting me!”

“Take your hands off her. Now.”

I freeze as Cole claps a hand down on the man’s shoulder. In one quick move, he tears the guy off me and slams him into the wall. Bottles rattle. Patrons gasp. Murmurings of approval go up among the locals.

Baseball Cap twists in Cole’s hard grasp. “Hey, man, what the fuck?”

“Cole.” I bite my lip. Tears start to form in my eyes. “Don’t.”

Cole’s gaze abandons the man and settles on me, softening. I inch closer. “Please, don’t punch anyone for me, Cole. You don’t need a criminal record.”

“Whore,” the man spits.

Just like that, Cole’s face ices over. He returns his attention to the man still pinned beneath his hand.

“What’d you call her?”

“You heard m—”

It happens fast. So fast I almost don’t believe it.

Cole turns and punches the asshole in the nose. There’s the crunch of bone, the gush of blood, then Wells smoothly steps to the door and opens it as Cole tosses Baseball Cap out on his ass.

“Free drinks,” Wells announces, and the gaping patrons let out a cheer.

Cole doesn’t say a word. He just takes my arm and marches me out of the tasting room. Tears start to fall from my eyes as he opens the office in the back and closes the door behind us.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” I shake my head and sniffle, trying to rein in my tears, even as they roll down my cheeks. The last thing I want is drama for the distillery. “I can’t believe this happened.”

“Don’t apologize, you hear me?” Cole’s big hand closes around my wrist. “He had no business talking to you like that, Delilah. Touchin’ you.” He almost sounds tortured, agonized.

My heart trembles as Cole turns my wrist over in his big palm, examining the spot where the man had grabbed me. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Good.” His face darkens to a sternness that steals my breath. Tone demanding, he growls, “Because I think it’s damn time to tell me what you’re hidin’ from.”

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Cole

I’m pissed.

Pissed off about the fact that I walked into the tasting room and found some motherfucker with his hands on Delilah. Pissed off that she stands in front of me, tears in her eyes and trembling.

No more bullshit. I get her story. Right now.

“Darlin’, I think it’s time you start talkin’.”

“I don’t want my photo out there.” Her eyes flutter shut.

“Why?”

Her voice is a breathless whisper. “The cops are looking for me.”

It’s what I thought. She’s on the run. I harden my expression when all I want to do is take her in my arms and hold her tight. I need her story first. “Did you hurt someone?”

Her eyes flash open. Hurt stains her pretty face. “No. It’s nothing like that.”

“Did someone hurt you?” When she nods, I grit my teeth and fight the boil of my blood. “He the *someone* who put those bruises on your face?”

“Yes.”

A growl vibrates my chest. “Are you in trouble?”

“I—I think so.”

The office door opens. Delilah jumps as Ezra pokes his head in. “Cole, what the fuck—”

“Out,” I bark. “Now.”

Seeing the look on my face, he slams the door shut without argument.

Delilah trembles as she backs up against the boxes stacked in a corner.

“No more secrets, darlin’. Not with me.” Ah, fuck. She’s cracked my defenses. “Tell me why you’re hiding.” I capture her wrist, lightly running a finger over the bruise blooming on her skin. She doesn’t struggle.

“I’m scared, Cole.”

“I know. But I’m here. You don’t have to be afraid with me.” I want her to know she has someone now. Someone she can trust.

A single tear streaks down her cheek. Her delicate fragility, her beauty tightens the knot of longing in my chest.

She licks her lips. Slipping from my grasp, she starts to pace. “There was a man. In the club. Sammy.”

My stomach twists. Fuck if I’m ready to hear about this.

“He was a regular. A rich, big-shot client. I could tell. They have to be. He kept seeing me for six months.” She looks over, meets my eyes. “We never did anything. I danced, he talked.

“That last night in the club…there was something off about him. Something different. He kept talking about his job, how he was in too deep.” She wrings her hands. “He knew my name. He told me I was in danger. He said that if I didn’t run, I’d be next.”

Next. What the fuck does that mean?

“It was like he was possessed. He was rambling, and then he—he hit me.” Her hand drifts to her cheek. My body tenses. My fists clench. Rage flashes through me.

She releases a shaky breath. “There was whiskey spilled everywhere. I was so surprised, all I could do was sit there… And then…and then he—”

Delilah breaks off in a wild, abrupt cry, clapping her hand across her mouth. I see it play out on that gorgeous face of hers. Trauma. Pain. Terror.

Unable to stop myself, I stomp forward, erasing the distance between us. Every tense muscle in my body, softened by the gorgeous girl in my arms.

“Shh,” I soothe. “You’re okay, darlin’. You’re safe here.” I’m anxious to get the rest of her story, but I won’t push. It’s like working with a frightened animal. Slow and gentle is the way to go.

Hesitantly, she lifts her tear-filled eyes like she’s gauging my reaction. I want her to know nothing she tells me will change the way I feel about her.

“What happened, Delilah?”

“He shot himself in front me.” She gasps the words out, then buries herself against my chest.

“Christ.” My blood pressure’s through the fucking roof at the thought of her being on the other end of a gun. God, what I wouldn’t do to kill that motherfucker again.

I wrap my arms around her, drop my mouth to the top of her golden head. Kiss her crown. Inhale her honeyed scent.

It all makes sense. The whiskey. Her panic attacks. Her jumpiness.

I spent the last month thinking this girl was trouble. But I was wrong. This is worse. She’s alone, terrified, and in hiding. I hate it that she never came to me. That she’s been keeping it to herself and letting it eat her alive.

I gather Delilah to me, like I can protect her from the memory.

“Fuck, darlin’. I’m so goddamn sorry you saw that.” I can handle blood, I’ve done cruel, gruesome things, but Delilah seeing that gets to me.

Her voice is muffled against my chest. “It’s in my head, Cole. Brains and blood.” She lifts her tearstained face. “I can’t get it out.”

“What happened after that?”

Delilah shrugs, her eyes avoiding mine. “Belle told me she’d handle it, so I left. And now…now the cops are asking about me.” A tear slips over her high, delicate cheekbone. “I know it was stupid to run, but—”

“It’s okay. You didn’t do anything wrong.” I think on it. “Have you told anyone you’re here?”

She sniffles. “Just Belle.”

“The owner of the club?”

“Yes. She’s trying to protect me.” She looks up at me, her big brown eyes full of tears and apology. “I didn’t mean to drag you into any of this.”

“Drag me all you want. I’m in this now.” Gladly.

My mind locks on what Delilah’s told me this last month. Her friend going missing from the club. It doesn’t sit right with me.

“Text Belle back. Tell her you left Tempest.” A lie, until I can figure this out.

She worries her lip between her teeth. “Am I leaving?”

The thought has my pulse spiking. “No. You’re not leaving.” I cradle the fine bones of her face in my hands. She tilts her head and sighs. Silky blond hair waves around her shoulders. “You’re not alone. Not anymore.”

Her eyes widen. “I’m not?”

“No. You’re safe here, baby.” *Baby.* It slips out. I don’t fucking care. Not anymore. “You’re safe with me.”

She blinks, like she almost doesn’t believe me. But she needs to because I’m not going anywhere.

“I’ve got you now, Delilah. Believe me, darlin’.”

“I believe you.” Her slender shoulders sag, relief evident on her beautiful face. She gazes up at me, her eyes bright and hopeful. “I’ve never trusted any man like I trust you, Cole.”

Her words are the whisper of a caress. Healing dark shadows, raw wounds.

“Cole, listen,” Delilah whispers. Her throat wobbles with a hard swallow. “There’s something—”

But she doesn’t get any further because I drop my mouth to hers, slide a hand into the long strands of her silky golden hair, and pull her against me.

As I kiss her, my worry, my rage recedes, lust filling me up instead.

Our breaths speed up. Our hands fumble with clothing, with belts. I lift her up my body. She wraps her legs around my waist as I press her against the wall.

“I don’t have a condom,” I murmur into her mouth.

The sexiest moan pulls from her lips. “I don’t care. I need you, Cole.”

Fucking hell.

We gasp together as I slip into her. Each frantic thrust brings us closer, until I bury my face in the curve of her shoulder.

“Yes, yes,” she sobs against my cheek. Her fingers dive into my hair.

Then I kiss her, slow and gentle. A kiss that changes the currents charging between us.

Goddamn, I’m in this now. But it’s right where I want to be.

With Delilah.

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Cole

“She stays.”

“Cole.”

“I’m telling you, Ez, Delilah’s in some shit. She needs help.”

Warren, Ezra, and I are gathered at the homestead, crowded around the breakfast bar and half-empty cups of coffee. From upstairs come the sounds of Evvie’s bright chirp, followed by Wyoma’s low and husky singsong.

“So you’re what? Going to protect her?” He takes off his glasses to massage the bridge of his nose. There’s tension in his shoulders. “You assaulted a customer, Cole. How much worse can it get?”

I’m not sure. All I’m sure about is that she stays. My brothers want to argue about it, they’ll have a fight on their hands.

“It can always get worse, kid,” Warren murmurs, taking a sip of coffee.

“If you’re worried about that asshole pressing charges, he won’t. I smoothed it over.” More like threatened to chop his fucking hand off for daring to touch Delilah, but Ezra doesn’t need to know that.

“I asked Langford to look into it,” I tell Ezra. He looks like he’s about to pop a vein. “To see if whatever Delilah’s been hiding from is after her.” I

narrow my eyes and square off with my brother. I'm not turning her out. Or letting her deal with this alone. Whatever kind of man I am, it's not that.

"You want to tell me why the fuck you're arguing with me about this? All summer you've been fighting me to let her stay." I'm frustrated. Grasping at straws, not wanting to reveal all my cards just yet.

I don't know how to tell them Delilah's taken over my thoughts. Made me want to protect her. Made me want to fix whatever shit is coming after her. Good or bad idea, only time will tell.

Ezra holds up his hand. "I wanted her to stay because she was helping us. Because Evvie loves her." His voice drops. "But…this isn't fucking community service, Cole. We can't have trouble here."

"Cops poking around the ranch isn't my favorite pastime." Despite the seriousness of his meaning, Warren sounds bored.

With a heavy exhale, Ezra says, "We need this party to go off without a hitch."

"And it will." I stare him down. "Delilah's my responsibility now. I take that on." As soon as I say it, I realize how much I've committed to this girl. How damn desperate I am to keep her here.

"For how long?" Ezra looks doubtful.

"The summer. We still need a bartender, don't we?" It makes me feel like a disloyal asshole to negate all Delilah's done for us, to reduce her to an employee, but if it's what I need to do to get Ezra to back off, I'll do it.

Ezra studies me. "It's about the whiskey?"

"It's about the whiskey. Nothing more and nothing less."

"I think that's a crock of bull if I've ever heard it." I glance over at the dry voice, Wyoma crossing into the kitchen, brow arched, arms folded sternly across her chest. Just how she looked when I was young and she was ready to beat me over the head with some lesson until I started learning.

Then she says, louder, “You know what your mama would say about liars, Cole Weston.”

“Good thing she didn’t raise one.”

Wyoma *tsks*, her only disapproval a *can’t bullshit a bullshitter* frown. Her eyes narrow as she looks at my brothers. Wags a finger. “You Wild Westons stop raining on this poor boy’s romantic notions.”

Ezra rolls his eyes, but the corners of his lips twitch.

I drag my hands from my forehead down through my hair. “Christ, Wyoma.”

My brothers’ laughter is loud and brash.

“You’re different since that girl got here.” Wyoma studies me. “In that old Cole Weston way I know and love.”

“Still grumpy.” Warren adjusts his rolled sleeves.

“Grumpy but with heart.” Her hazel eyes sparkle as she bustles around the kitchen, clearing coffee mugs into the sink. “Sometimes you need to let it all go, Cole, and just go with the damn flow.”

These talks with Wyoma make it seem so clear. If I could shake my foolish pride, I’d claim Delilah. Make her mine. But I’m still so fucking scared that if I let anything light into my life, Tempest will claim it. I’ll lose her.

Wyoma dries her hand on a towel and tilts her head. “Although you Wild Westons never did anything easy.”

Blowing out a breath, I shake my head. “I’m considering this matter fucking closed,” I tell my brothers. “She stays.”

Ezra gives me a resigned nod as I move for the door, so fucking pissed off, so fucking relieved at the same time.

The hard heart in my chest hammers. At war with what I want and what I deserve to have.

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Cole

It’s taken Langford a week to work his Las Vegas police department contact, but finally, I have answers.

I exit my truck at the same time Delilah climbs out of her cherry-red Pinto. She went into town to handle some business with the launch party, and to stock up on extra supplies for next week’s Fourth of July celebration, while I met Langford after hours in the tasting room. We meet in the middle between her house and mine.

“Darlin’.” Before I touch her, I brush my dusty hands off. I don’t want any dirt to get on her.

“You don’t have to do that, cowboy,” she says in an admonishing tone, stepping close. “I like you just the way you are. Mean, grumpy, and everything in between.”

Like gravity, my hands move to her hips. “Talked to Langford. No one’s lookin’ for you. At least not in an official capacity.”

Her pretty brow furrows. “But Belle said…”

“Belle’s a liar.” The muscles along her spine pull taut. I move my hands, massaging out the tension. “There’s no APB, no warrants. The cops aren’t

looking for Sammy either.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means his death was never reported. It means you’re in the clear.”

“That’s good, right?” She looks relieved, but I’m not. Belle lied to her for a reason. The woman she thinks she can trust can’t be trusted. Worse, Belle knows where Delilah is. And even if the cops aren’t looking for her, someone less-than-legal could be.

If you don’t run, Delilah, you are next.

“It is good.” A white lie so she doesn’t worry. So Langford has time to dig in deeper. “But it means you still lie low.” I touch her chin, lifting it to my eyeline. “And don’t text Belle anymore.”

Her eyes widen. “But—”

“Darlin’, hear me on this.” All I can say. She’s too damn innocent for this shit. I don’t have the heart to tell her the people you trust with your entire heart and soul can turn on you on a dime.

“Okay. I hear you.” She glances at me, her expression hesitant, almost shy. “Are you sure it’s okay that I’m here?”

“I’m sure.” Even if my brothers aren’t.

“You’re safe here.” I run my hands up her arms. I don’t want her to be afraid or to worry. “Nothing changes. You still have a job. The Creek House. Stay. As long as you need.”

She nods dazedly, like the reality of the next few months is slowly settling in. Then she gives me a bright beam of a smile. “I’m glad you said that because on my trip into town today, I kinda, maybe, sorta did something.”

My eyes narrow at the sly, mischievous crook of her lips. She steps closer, presses up on tiptoe to kiss me. “Are you ready, cowboy? You can’t be mad.”

Her heat leaves me as she drifts toward her Pinto and opens the passenger side door.

Lying on the floor is a cream-colored calf. Its big black eyes stare up at us. Delilah coos. At the sound, its tail flicks back and forth like a puppy.

I groan. “Delilah, you didn’t.” It’s no surprise. She loves the cows. I’ve caught her more than enough times sneaking out to feed Otis and Neon Star.

Her chin tips out. “Her name’s Waffle.” She crouches to scratch the calf’s head. “Isn’t she just the prettiest little baby you’ve ever seen?”

“Waffle?” Goddamn, she named her. I try to frown, even though it’s the last thing I feel like doing. “Where’d you get her?”

“At one of the ranches in town. They had a sign on the side of the road.” Standing, she edges closer to me, hope lighting up her face so beautifully that I lose focus for a second. “I thought she could stay here.”

I rub a hand over my jaw. “She can’t stay in the pens with the bulls.”

“Do I have to give her back?” Her huge brown eyes own me instantly, completely.

“No.” I’d buy her nine hundred of the little bastards if it’d make her happy.

I lift my hat, run a hand through my hair. “Hell, guess I’ll build a pen.” Just like that, my entire afternoon sideswiped. I wouldn’t have it any other way.

Delilah releases a happy squeal, throws her arms around my neck. Her kisses rain on my neck, my cheek, my lips, and I have to fight the urge to toss her over my shoulder and take us both back to the house. Instead, I crouch down and lift the calf in my arms.

“I’ll help you,” she says, skipping after me. Her fingers trail over my forearm, then cling to my bicep.

I reach down and slap her ass. “Damn right you will.”

Two hours later, the July sun drifting beneath the horizon, the pen's built.

"What do you think?" she asks, evaluating the small, fenced area beneath a grove of trees.

"I think you got me wrapped around your finger, baby, but you already know that, don't you?" I take up her hand and kiss her fingertips.

"Thank you, Cole." Delilah stares out at Waffle, nosing her way around the pen. Then her lashes lift as she turns to look up at me. "I'll take care of her, do whatever I need to do until she's big."

"Welcome." I scrub a hand over my mouth, smothering a smile.

Smiling, she turns from me, the ends of her frayed shorts swishing as she makes her way to the pen. Her long blond hair glimmers in the fading sunlight. Her beauty is effortless, stunning, and fucks with my heart.

I watch her laugh as Waffle noses at her outstretched palm. I chuckle too, hitching my fingers through my belt loops and taking a good long look.

Realization chokes the breath from my lungs.

Fuck. I like this too much.

Whatever *this* is.

I've never committed to a woman, never been in a relationship, much less in love. I don't even know if it's something I'm capable of, something I deserve.

But Delilah…this girl. She cracks open my heart, my soul.

She trusts me.

Worry scratches through my blood.

But would she, if she knew about my past? The things I've done to protect the family I love. The deal with S.O.T. The night I pulled Wells out of that hellhole. My plan when I find the person responsible for my parents.

This bright, beautiful girl doesn't need my darkness bringing her down.

I'll let her stay as long as she needs. When the dust clears, I'll send her on her way. Get on with my life.

My chest tightens. I glance down at the scar on my palm.

Suddenly, the lie doesn't feel like enough.

* * *

Eighteen years ago

Gravel crunches under truck tires. Warren pulls the truck onto a small patch of our land behind Bellowing Peak surrounded by overgrown trees. No neighbors. No deputy or jury. Just midnight. Just us.

Warren looks at me in the passenger seat. At my clenched fists. "Easy, Cole."

I give him a look. He can tell me to go *easy* all he wants. We're already in this deep. He and I both know what we plan to do.

I shove open the door with my boot. From the backseat spill Ezra and River. Their lean forms move easily in the dark. River cradles Wells in his arms.

My gaze latches on my little brother, the rope burns on his wrists, and my stomach roils. "How is he?" I hope with all my heart that he doesn't remember a thing.

Eyes on Wells's face, River rasps, "He needs to go home."

Home.

He hasn't been home in six months. Not since Granger Hale had Wells, Ezra, and River hauled off to foster homes. River and Ezra were returned after we got guardianship. But Wells. They hid Wells.

Until tonight. That's when Aurora Hale brought us his case file, stolen from her father's office. We had an address.

After that, everything that came next was easy.

I stomp to the truck bed and lower the door.

A man blinks at me. His hands tied behind his back with thick rope. Blond hair, pale blue eyes, and a gaunt face. Ernest Doyle. A prominent rancher two counties over who sits on the board of Granger Hale's directors and takes in foster kids.

Well, not anymore.

The kind of people who hurt children and women don't deserve to live.

Hours earlier, we busted down Doyle's front door to find our brother on a soiled mattress in an upstairs closet. His bruised and bloody body curled in on itself. Duct tape around his wrists and ankles.

Vengeance.

The thought crawled into my body like gasoline for my soul.

It was what we wanted, what we needed to do. My brother was hurt, nearly dead. We'd go to the edge of the earth and the end of the law for Wells.

I grab Doyle's leg and yank him the length of the truck bed until he's standing on his own two feet. I give him a shove. "Walk, motherfucker."

When he stands there, muffled protests coming from behind the rag in his mouth, I pull the gun from my waistband and level it at him. "Walk. Now."

Adrenaline spikes. Moonlight guides our path as we walk in a line to the Pit, a remote, rural copper mine shaft that sits behind our ranch at the base of Bellowing Peak.

"What're we gonna do?" Ezra's soft whisper floats.

River's voice, hard as he carries Wells in his arms. "You know what we're gonna do." It's like the darkness of the night has seeped into his blood.

What takes minutes seems like hours, the walk long and tense. We all stop when we reach the edge of the mine shaft. The sounds of the Tempest night take over. A cacophony of insects mixed with a dreadful, still silence.

Spinning away from the mine, Ernest turns to us. The rag's fallen from his mouth. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry…"

"I'm sorry," I scoff. Rage incinerates my chest as I slam Ernest in the face with the gun, causing the man to drop into an untidy pile on the ground. His moans cut the still night air.

"Wrong fucking answer." I kick him in the side with my boot. My voice explodes in the dark like shrapnel. "You tell those kids *I'm sorry* when you had them locked in the fucking closet?"

Ernest weeps. Snot drips down his face. I step back, chest heaving, gun clenched at my side.

"If we kill him…" Even in the darkness I can see the panic flash across Ezra's face. He stands on the sidelines in the tall grass, watching. "We'll get caught."

"We won't." Our eyes go to Warren. Our oldest brother has all the answers.

"How do you know?"

"Because Hale doesn't give a shit about Ernest. He just used him to do his dirty work."

"Why don't you just go? You don't have to be here." River looks at Ezra likes he's a traitor.

"Fuck you," Ezra says.

"If we do this, it changes us." Warren presses his lips together and evaluates us all.

"Good," River says. "It's for Wells." He glares at Ezra. "Jack would do it."

He’s right. Jack would do something before all of us.

The world is better off without monsters like Ernest Doyle. We’re not saints. But if we can take one sick motherfucker out of the world, we’re going to do it.

“Please don’t kill me.” Ernest sobs.

Adrenaline floods my system. My hands shake as I raise the gun. Vengeance, anger fill the space where everything else has been. It’s all I want. All I have to do.

But I hesitate.

Warren sees. “I’ll do it.”

I hear my brother’s words. But then I hear Wells’s soft, pained whimper.

River rocks Wells against his chest. “We got you, sweetheart.” His voice breaks.

Decided now, I step forward, red fading the edges of my vision. My raw, pure fury grounds me to this moment in time. All I see is that closet where my brother was kept, the binds on his thin wrists, the bruises on his emaciated body, River wrapping him in a blanket as he stared up at us with unfocused little eyes.

All I feel is guilt. Guilt that Warren and I couldn’t find him, that he was left to live in that shithole for months, thinking we weren’t coming for him. That we had abandoned him.

I want my face to be the last thing Ernest sees.

Anger allows me to lift the gun.

Ernest whimpers. His eyes wild and white and wide in the dark of the night. “Please, please, ple—”

I pull the trigger. The gunshot rings out. A spray of blood arcs over the forest floor. Ernest topples on his side, a neat hole above his eye. A sound comes from his throat, then he stills. For a few seconds, the woods seem to

scream a warning, an omen from Tempest, a message that we've delivered on what it wanted.

"Good." Warren stands over Ernest, his face blank and unreadable.

"Fuck. Fuck." Ezra paces, hands in his hair, crying. I'm hit with a pang of regret that Warren and I let our younger brothers come along. They're just teenagers. They shouldn't have seen this.

I move forward and push Ernest's body to the side with my boot. I roll him to the edge of the mine and give him a hard shove. He disappears over the edge into the Pit. If anyone finds the body out here it'd be a miracle.

I look at my brothers. "It's done." Reality sets in as we all stare at each other. A live wire of tension crackles beneath my skin.

"Here." Warren slides a small, serrated blade from its sheath. "A promise. Brothers don't turn on brothers."

Jack's words.

Heads bowed, we huddle together. Warren lifts his blade, hissing a deep breath as he carves a W into the soft flesh of his palm.

I hold out my hand. Across my palm, Warren cuts the same W. The pain is deep, but it reminds me to be strong. Reminds me of the hell that Wells experienced. Reminds me to focus on the only people that matter. My brothers.

Ezra and River are next. The only one we leave untouched is Wells, still cradled in River's arms.

Warren comes up and stands next to me, watching as Ezra and River head for the truck. My hands flex and release as I hand him the gun.

"What do we do now?" I ask.

"We forget and we move on." He's quiet for a few seconds, and when he speaks next, his voice is almost unrecognizable. "We focus on the whiskey and each other."

My throat closes. I want to do that more than I have ever wanted to do anything else in my whole life. But in less than a week, I'll be back on the rodeo circuit.

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31

Delilah

Cole exits the Beanery at the same time I exit the Blind Pig café. He heads my way, handing over a steaming cup of coffee. “Here, baby. Coffee for the road.” Tucked beneath his arm, like it weighs nothing, is a bag of feed.

“Thanks.” I give him a bright smile. “You’re spoiling me, cowboy.”

He only grunts and drops a kiss to my bare shoulder. In the past week, we’ve barely been able to keep our hands off each other. It’s been different since I told him the truth about why I’m here.

Cole’s a protective man by nature, but I can tell he’s keeping me closer. Any excuse he can find to pop into the tasting room, or my Creek House, he’s there.

I adore it.

I adore this man.

I adore this town. As strange as it is, Tempest’s become a source of comfort for me. Beautiful. Dangerous. Surreal. And dare I say, home?

Banners line the streets gearing up for the Fourth of July parade and the rodeo that follows. The town’s blend of cowboys, off-the-gridders, hunters,

and hippies never fails to make me smile. There are still so many facets of it I haven't explored, but I plan to.

Ever since I left Las Vegas, I've had it in the back of my mind that, eventually, I'll have to pack another bag and leave. But what if I don't go? What if I keep Tempest?

And Cole?

"How'd you make out?" he asks as we walk back to his truck. With both of us needing to tackle errands—the ranch for Cole, the launch party for me—we split briefly for the day to finish our own tasks.

"Great. I—"

"Delilah!"

I glance over my shoulder. Headed toward me is the owner of the café, Harper Brown. She smells like fries and apple pie. She holds out my left-behind notepad. "You forgot this."

"Oh, thanks." I return it to my bag.

"No, thank *you*." Harper squeezes my arm. "We can't wait."

"I'm glad you're excited. I am too." Harper and I met at my Tuesday night needlepoint class. She's one of the few Tempest locals who wasn't new-girl-in-town resistant.

"Well, you got free pie on the house. Whenever you want it." Harper's gaze lifts. "You too, Cole. See you Tuesday, Del."

"What was all that about?" Cole asks as she disappears around the corner.

"I hired the café to cater the launch party. Nothing fancy. Burgers. Hot dogs. But I thought I'd keep it local." I arch a brow. "Ezra gave me a budget."

A deep chuckle rumbles out of him. "He did, did he?"

"He did." I lift a hand to return a wave from Opal Meyers, who runs the bookstore across the street. "And I intend to blow it all."

“Good. You should.”

I steal a quick look at him. “Want to hear some more good news?” At the lift of his dark brows, I go on. “The *Whiskey Enquirer* emailed me back.” It was an idea born on a hope and a prayer, how to give the Westons’ limited-edition whiskey the attention it deserves. “They want to send someone out to cover the launch.” I bite my lip as Cole stares at me. “They’re still finalizing details, but I think it’s going to happen.”

Tilting his cowboy hat up, letting me see his eyes as they crinkle, he says, “You’re doing a good job at the distillery, Delilah. We all appreciate it. Think the town does too.”

My heartbeat tumbles in happiness. Cole’s words mean everything.

He glances over his shoulder, narrowing his eyes at the alleyway behind him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Not sure yet.” He runs a hand down my arm. Moves around me to pop open the passenger side door of his truck. “Ready to head back?”

“Yes.” I lean across the passenger seat, setting my coffee in the cup holder before I climb in. When I pull back, my gaze lights on the dance studio across the street.

“You miss it?” Cole’s voice is warm against my ear. “Dancing?”

I nod. “I haven’t danced in so long. I’m getting rusty.”

“Rusty’s the last thing you are.” The gruffness in his voice tightens my sex.

“The Creek House is cramped with furniture. Maybe I’ll go out in the fields and dance with the cows.” He chuckles. I spin around to shamelessly nuzzle his throat, inhaling his leather and whiskey scent. His hand lowers to caress my bare thigh, traveling to tug at the garter I wear. “Or I could just dance for you, cowboy.”

I give him a flirty grin, watching as the barest trace of a smile tugs at his own lips before he smothers it.

“Darlin’, you can dance for me any damn day you like.”

Footsteps sound down the sidewalk. A man in his late sixties, black and silver hair slicked back, stops. He wears a black suit, nary a wrinkle in the expensive-looking fabric. The most well-dressed man I’ve ever seen in Tempest. No cowboy, that’s for sure.

Cole swears under his breath.

“Cole Weston. It’s been a while.” The man adjusts his tie.

A muscle jerks in Cole’s square jaw. “Granger.”

I look between them. Both men look like they’re refusing to make room on the sidewalk for the other.

“Heard you’ve been having late meetings out at your distillery.”

“No law against it.”

“Ah, there could be, if you just give me a reason.” He smiles wide as if it’s not a warning. It’s obvious the man hates Cole. In fact, it comes off him in waves. Violent, roiling waves.

“Granger, giving you ammunition is one goddamn thing I’d never do.”

“Still as arrogant as ever, I see.” The man’s shrewd gaze sweeps over me, pausing on my chest. “Now who’s this pretty little thing?”

Cole tenses. He moves his body in front of me as if to ward off the man’s words.

“None of your damn business.”

“I see you still haven’t learned your manners. Shame your mama’s gone.”

Shock hitches my chest.

“You son of a bitch.” Cole takes a step toward Granger, gaze leveled. Fists clenched.

But before he can go any further, extra footsteps echo loudly around us. “Dad, I got the gear for the tackle box…”

A young woman bounces out of the Meadowlark Market, a camera and a cooler in her hands.

She’s stunning. Dusty jeans, unkempt blouse, she looks unpolished next to the man in the suit. Her wild curls are threaded with various colors of gold. Her mouth falls open in surprise when she spots Cole.

He tenses. They obviously know each other.

My breath catches, and my skin heats. Jealousy. It’s all over me. When I have no right.

“We should go, Dad.” The girl moves closer to the man in the suit. A long, thin scar snakes its way up the center of her chest to poke above her blouse. I’ve noticed the same scar on Wells too.

“I believe you’re right.” He lifts a gray brow at us. “Excuse us.”

As they pass by, the girl falls back to catch Cole’s arm. Her voice is barely above a whisper. “Don’t tell Wells I’m back.” And then she’s moving again, hurrying to catch up with her father.

Cole stands stiffly, his gaze darkening beneath the brim of his cowboy hat. He rolls out his tense shoulders and loads the feed into the truck. An edge, an anger radiates around him as he moves.

We climb into the truck. Cole steers us out onto Main Street. We drive through town, exiting Tempest proper. On the outskirts of town, where the shadows thin, we pass the old white steepled church. Church bells chime, announcing that it’s noon.

I wait for us to be back on the highway before I chance a question. “Who was that man?”

“Granger Hale. He’s Rogan’s—the mayor’s—father.” Cole’s eyes are blazing with fury.

“The man who claimed your father stole their whiskey recipe?” My stomach sours with disgust as my mind plays connect-the-dots over all the little pieces of the stories Cole and Hassie have doled out to me since I’ve been here.

“That’s him.” Bitterness stains his voice.

“You hate that man, don’t you?”

“With every bone in my body. He’s a greedy, bitter bastard. My father and uncle never would have stolen shit from the Hales.”

“He threatened you,” I think aloud.

“They always threaten us.” He flashes me a rare grin. “It’s nothing we can’t handle, so don’t worry about it.”

But I will. I want to defend him. Fiercely.

I pull in a deep breath and release it. “And that woman?”

I picture Cole’s lost lover. An ex. Someone better than me. I despise the insecurity that needles its way through me, but it does.

Maybe I do consider him mine. Maybe I consider him something more than what I’ve been telling myself he is.

He chuckles. “That’s Granger’s daughter. Wells’s ex, Aurora.”

I blink in surprise, in relief as I process the information. “Wait. But if you hate *him,* and Wells dated *her*, that’s like—”

He arches a dark brow. “Romeo and Juliet? They pretty much were. No one knew they were together, not even us, until…”

I tip my head at him in question. “Until?”

A rough sigh escapes from his chest. “Until that happened.” He nods at the mountain in the distance. “That serial killer I told you about.” He glances in his rearview mirror, frowns. “The last victims. They were Wells and Aurora.”

“Oh my god.”

He scrubs his hand over his mouth like he's reliving the memory. "That night we went to the hospital, and they told us they had both been attacked by the Sweetheart Falls Slasher, we put it together pretty damn fast." Cole's face is grim as he looks over at me. "That's why you don't go there, Delilah. Ever. The killer was never caught. Understand?"

"Yes," I say, scooting closer. His worry is sweet. "I understand."

"My brothers have been through a lot. They haven't had it easy."

"It sounds like none of you have."

"My brothers matter. I don't."

"I wouldn't agree with that."

I look over at him, taking in the chiseled planes of his rugged face. The dirt on his collar. His hand, massive and tan, covered in scars and lines from hard ranch work, is the sexiest thing I've ever seen. He enraptures me. This man, who affects me like no other person ever has. I love how he always smells like whiskey. The way he looks after his brothers. His gruff kindness.

He's a good man. Why can't he see it?

I want to reach over and hold his hand, but that seems too intimate. We're not there. And never will be.

But why not? It was my choice to come here, and it could be my choice to stay. Stay in Tempest. Stay with Cole. But is that even what he'd want? Maybe we're a fling, destined to burn out when the summer ends.

Cole Weston is as smooth as the whiskey he barrels. And just like his whiskey, I want to drink him in for as long as I can.

He may be a bull rider through and through, but to me, he feels like mine.

It's Cole who reaches across the console to take my hand. My breath catches as he pulls my hand up to his mouth and kisses it softly, thick scruff sweeping over my knuckles, his eyes still on the road.

Then he gives me a look, a promise in his eyes of what's going to happen the second he stops his truck at the ranch.

We're halfway back to Copper Run Ranch when Cole abruptly takes a turnoff on the right side of the road. The highway soon turns unfamiliar and desolate.

I stare at him, my heart skipping beats in my chest, and I sit up straighter. "What's wrong?"

"Taking a back road," he says and checks the rearview.

We drive a few more seconds in silence, then Cole curses under his breath. "Fuck."

"Cole? What's happening?"

"We're being followed."

"What?" I twist in my seat to see a white van. It keeps a distance between us, but when Cole accelerates, it does too.

Anger leaks into his voice. "I saw the van last month in town, and then today turning into the alleyway."

Sammy's words come back to me. *If you don't run, Delilah, you are next.*

"It's following *me*." My skin prickles in dread. I don't understand what any of this means.

Cole's eyes flash when they meet mine. "I'm going to keep you safe, Delilah. Understand?"

"Yes," I say, my voice breathy but sure. Nothing but trust in Cole and his words.

His gaze travels back to the rearview mirror.

He's furious. It's written all over his rugged face, the tense way he grips the steering wheel, the white of his knuckles.

"Hold on, darlin'." He grips the stick shift and jams his boot on the gas.

"Cole, what—"

I scream as the truck is violently rocked. Punched by the reverberation, I lurch forward, held back only by the seat belt.

“Fuck.” Cole slams on the brakes and jerks the wheel to right the truck as it fishtails all over the road. My hand flies to my throat to grip my locket.

Another attack as the van slams into the driver’s side. There’s the groan of metal, the crunch of glass. The truck spins and the air evaporates from my lungs. The world tilts as we take a stomach-lurching nosedive into the ditch.

“Delilah!” Cole’s roar is desperate, ragged, and then—

The truck rocks to a halt. The world blinks in and out as I fight to make sense of it all, to stay conscious.

My ears ring with a terrible pounding. Blurry surroundings come into focus. I cry out in pain as I lift my head.

Cole.

I turn in the seat and gasp.

Unmoving, he’s slumped over the steering wheel. His black Stetson’s slid off to rest on the dash. Blood runs down the side of his face.

“Oh my god, Cole.” Glass crunches as I shift in my seat. Fumbling, I undo my seat belt. Tears form in my eyes as I shove his broad shoulder. “Wake up, please wake up.”

Cole doesn’t say a word.

Panic grips my spine and my muscles lock up.

Please don’t be dead, please.

“Fuck.” I look around for my phone. We’re on a remote road in the middle of nowhere. I’m not sure how far we are from the ranch or when the next car will come along. We have to get out of here, get the fuck away from that van.

At the creak of metal, I jerk around. My passenger side door jerks open. A man leans down, a grin on his face as he stares at me. “Found you.”

For a moment, I don’t know what to do. Then I scream. I scream like I did the night Sammy blew his brains out right in front of me. Like I did the night I saw Lucy lying in the street covered by a white cloth.

Anguished. Blistering. Haunted.

“C’mere, you pretty little thing.” He grabs me by the hair and jerks me out of the car.

“No, no! Let me go, motherfucker!” I look frantically back at Cole, where he still lies unconscious.

“Shut the fuck up and be quiet.” He wraps a big arm around my chest, trapping me to him.

“No! Cole!” My heels scrabble on the dirt and grit of the long, winding back road, and I beg for anyone to drive by.

I twist in his arms, trying to break his hold. Trying to hit him. I’m scared out of my mind, but I have to fight. I kick and scream, but he’s too big to feel any impact. My elbow slips free, and I manage to drive it hard into his stomach.

I lurch from his arms.

Free.

“You little bitch.” The man grabs my shoulder, spins me around, and slaps me hard across the face, knocking me to the ground. I’m lying there, blinking back spots, when he grabs my arm, jerks me to my feet, and drags me to the waiting van.

The door slides open.

Another man stands there. “Jesus Christ, hurry it up.”

“She’s feisty, this one.” The man tosses me onto the cold floor of the van. I lie there for a long second, dazed. My head throbs. My face pulses.

“Cole,” I whisper, fighting the darkness.

“Fuck. You touched her? Mr. Please is gonna be pissed.”

Please? Please.

The door slides shut. “No choice. She was giving me hell.” Rough hands on my arms pull me to my feet. “Get up! We don’t have time for this!” Cool metal surrounds my wrists. Handcuffs.

“No!” I kick, spit at him, but he’s stronger than me.

The man connects my cuffs to a long vertical bar that runs the length of the van’s ceiling. I hang there, dangling, my toes barely dragging the ground. My stomach muscles tremble.

“You’re a smart woman running halfway across the country.” He cups my chin, tilting my gaze to his threatening one. “But you know this is your fault, right?”

I glare into the black abyss of his eyes. “Fuck you!” I kick at him with my heels, but he sidesteps me, and the motion rocks my body, tears at my arms.

My heart lurches as the van starts to roll. Above me, my cuffs rattle. The driver has a cell phone to his ear, barking into the receiver. I hear my name.

“What do you want? Who are you?” Panicky breaths fill my lungs.

The man steps up and grips my jaw. “Sweetheart, haven’t you figured it out yet? We want *you*.” He grins, lips curling, as he steps closer. “And I see why Please worked so hard to track you down.” Fingers dig into my throat as his other hand fondles my breast and squeezes. I scream and jerk away from him. The brutal movement sends pain lancing down my arm. Snaps my locket and sends it clattering to the floor.

“Stop! Stop, please.” Tears burn in the backs of my eyes.

That’s when I hear a loud pop, the screech of brakes. The van fishtails. At the impact, my attacker slams back into a corner of the van. The front

windshield shatters. Glass explodes.

A sob escapes my throat. My body jerks back and forth like a rag doll as the van slows, then rocks to a halt as it smashes into something hard.

For a long second, silence.

Blackness threatens to take me under, but I fight it. I'm not sure I'm alive anymore. I'm not sure of anything. The driver's slumped over the steering wheel, dead or unconscious, I can't tell.

The crunch of gravel outside and then…

The sliding door rips open.

Cole stands there, a gun in his hands. His massive chest heaves. Rage on his face. My attacker tries to move in front of me, reaching for his waistband.

But Cole's quicker. He lifts the gun. "Step away from her, or your brains will be all over the highway." He keeps his eyes on me as he climbs inside the van.

I stare, shaken by the mighty power of Cole Weston.

"You don't know what you've done," the man threatens.

"No," Cole growls, and my heart rate rises. "You don't know what you've done." His gaze goes to me, studying the blood on my face, the cuffs on my wrists. His handsome features twist with anguish and fury.

"Unlock her cuffs. Now."

Eyes piercingly cold, the man steps close. I hold my breath as he unlocks my cuffs. Relief fills my entire body as they're removed. On shaky feet, I back up against the wall. Cole's gaze shifts from the man to me, the red marks around my wrists making his face contort in fury.

Satisfied I'm free, Cole focuses on my attacker. He's on the man in a second, bringing his gun up to pistol-whip him across the face. Cartilage

cracks. The man groans. His limp body slumps down to the floor, immobilized.

For a long second, I stare. Stunned. My heart hammers at the turn this has taken, and I have to press my lips together to keep from screaming.

“Delilah.”

At the sound of his deep, steady voice, my eyes fly to Cole.

He doesn’t say anything as he reaches for me. I let out a cry and launch myself into his arms. He hauls me against his heaving chest, crushing me in his embrace. I lock my legs around his waist and bury my face in his neck. I hold on tight, drinking in his masculine scent.

Him. He’s here. He came.

“Delilah.” His deep rumble rolls through me. I force myself to pull back. His dark eyes roam my face, his big hand cups my cheek. “Baby, are you okay?”

“I’m okay.”

A tremor shakes his big frame. “Fuck, Delilah. Fuck.” His arms tighten like steel around my waist, and it’s there, deep in my heart and soul, that I know this man will never let anything happen to me.

I look over my shoulder at the man on the ground. “What do we do now?”

Still holding on to me, Cole slides his phone from his back pocket. His face hardens as his eyes, now chips of cold blue ice, narrow. “We get answers.”

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32

Cole

The man hangs suspended from a chain attached to one of the rafters in our empty barn. He wants to chain up Delilah? The motherfucker’s going to get a taste of his own medicine.

He’s going to pay for every bruise on her body with his own.

“You ready to talk?” I prowl around him, my boots kicking up dust, my heartbeat pounding in my chest. Arms crossed, Warren and River hang back, content to run interference.

Both my brothers came as soon as I called them. There was no traffic on the back road, so we didn’t have to worry about the cops. While Delilah and I drove my truck back to the ranch, River took the van to Syd’s garage, where they plan to impound it. Warren took the driver to the Pit. Now, we’re in the empty barn we use to store our parents’ and Jack’s belongings. It sits on the outskirts of the ranch, far out enough that none of our distillery guests would wander here.

“I’m not telling you shit.” The man stays blank-faced and calm, a fact that tells me he’s a professional. Someone hired him.

“That’s where you’re wrong. You’re going to tell us everything. Starting with her.” I’m furious. My insides churn with the need to destroy. He tried to take Delilah. He should be six feet under right now for ever daring to come after my girl.

“She *is* everything.” The man looks at Delilah, who hangs back near the door. She all but strong-armed me into letting her be present, despite me ordering her to stay at the house. My heart can’t handle her near any more danger.

“Are you sure you want to be here for this?” I ask Delilah as I make my way back to her side.

“I’m sure. I need to know who’s after me and why,” she says quietly.

She’s strong. But I don’t know if she’s strong enough to see this.

Every time I look at her, I can’t stop thinking about today. Waking up in my wrecked truck and finding her gone. Her scream is imprinted into my brain. It was a risk shooting out the tire with her in the van. But I couldn’t take the chance they got away. Not with her.

Now, rage is fused with obsession. The desire I once had to let her walk away is twisted into something I barely recognize. I’ve never cared about protecting anyone other than my brothers, but suddenly, it’s instinct. A need.

Keep her safe. Always.

“Tell us who you are and who you work for,” Warren says calmly, adjusting the rolled cuffs on his shirt like he has all the time in the world.

“Fuck you.” The man spits. Blood trickles from his nose.

“We got a real wordsmith here.” River pockets the man’s cell phone, flips through his wallet. “Says his name is Dino.” He looks up. Smirks. “That’s a stupid fuckin’ name, Dino.”

“You don’t know what you’ve done.” Dino stares at Delilah. “Mr. Please had an entire year invested in you. Whether you took off or not, he always

gets what he wants. And he wants to take you."

One look at Delilah, and it's damn obvious why any man would covet her. Glossy golden hair, lush lips, high cheekbones, and a body to obsess over. But it's the word *take* that scares me shitless. *Take.*

A chilling smile curls his lips. "You're the best one yet. Even if you are a dumb fucking whore."

Delilah wraps her arms around her slender frame, her eyes glittering in the dust and light of the barn.

At my nod, River lowers the chain so that Dino's feet touch the ground. I step forward and strike Dino hard in his already broken nose. The chain jerks and sways as he wheezes and gasps for air.

"Did that hurt?" I taunt. "Talk to her like that again, and I'll cut out your fucking tongue."

"You don't threaten me." Blood sprays from his mouth.

"I just did." I shake my head, ready to quit the semantics and get to the point. "Who's Mr. Please?"

"He's a businessman who deals in pleasure. Pleasure for himself. Pleasure for others."

"What does that mean?" Warren steps closer, brow furrowed.

There's the sound of footsteps outside. My hand goes to the gun on my hip.

The door creaks open.

Ezra stands there. He gapes at the scene. "Christ. What is this?"

"Someone tried to kidnap Delilah. We're getting answers." Warren crosses his arms, unbothered by the scene unfolding. Ezra's gaze goes to Delilah.

"This ain't a fuckin' family reunion," River interjects, flashing a derisive look in Ezra's direction. "Get your ass in here or go, Ez."

Ezra hesitates. He could fight us on this, but he won't. Because we're brothers. He's already in, and he knows it.

Then he sets his jaw and steps inside.

My molars slam together. Despite being smarter than all of us, the middle child in him can't stand being left out.

"Back to Please." I order. Dino sighs, his face twisted in pain and resignation at his present circumstances.

"He wants her." He juts his chin at Delilah. "And the USB."

Warren and I exchange looks. "What USB?"

"The USB I have." Delilah steps into my frame. She's biting her lip, guilt etched across her beautiful face. "Sammy gave it to me before he shot himself."

"Fucking traitor." Dino shakes, jerking his chains. "You weren't supposed to make it out of the Velvet Belles that night. Sammy was supposed to bring you to Please. Unfortunately, he had a conscience. He made a mess that we had to clean up before we could come find you."

"I tried to open it, but it's encrypted." Delilah moves to me, one hand pressing against my chest. "If it was trouble, I didn't want to bring it to you."

I pull her against me, pressing my lips to her hair. "Goddamnit, Delilah." I want to simultaneously kiss her and kill her for being so stubborn. For putting herself in danger. But this isn't a conversation to have now.

Warren looks up at Dino's face. "What's on the drive?"

"Things."

"Enlighten us, asshole." River storms toward him. The buzz of nerves fills the barn.

"Things that Please wants to do to you girls." Dino's tone turns dark. "All his girls. They don't know what's coming. But you'll know soon, won't

you, Lady?”

Delilah pales. Rage rattles inside of me as the man tries to get into her head.

Warren steps in front of me, holding out a hand like he knows how close I am to snapping.

But it’s Delilah who moves. I make a grab for her, but she shoves me away, charging toward Dino.

“Did you take Melly? My friend from the club. Did you take her?” Delilah’s lip trembles, but she stares the man down.

Brave. She’s a force of a woman unlike any I’ve ever known. I keep my hard gaze on them, my fists clenched. Even her being within ten feet of the man who tried to abduct her has me on edge.

“Tell me!” she shouts.

“Belle gave her up.”

“Belle.” Delilah’s eyes grow wide. She’s rattled, stunned.

“She’s on Please’s payroll.”

“No.” A hand to her mouth, a tear slowly slips down Delilah’s cheek. The pain, the betrayal in her voice cuts me.

Dino wets his lips. “Belle gave Please the pick of any girl he wanted from her club. It made things easier than hunting on the streets.”

“Hunting?” River’s eyes move to mine. My blood chills.

The light from the sunset creeps through the rafters and beneath the door. The barn takes on an eerie, fiery tone.

“You’re fucked, sweetheart. When Please gets his hands on you, you’re gonna wish you were dead.” Dino’s smile is slimy as his gaze drifts over Delilah. “You know why they call him Please, don’t you? Because it’s the last word he hears when you’re begging him to stop.”

Delilah gasps.

Gasoline replaces my blood. I stalk forward, wrath weaving its way beneath my skin.

Silence descends as Delilah takes my bicep. “What are you doing?”

“Getting answers.” I wrap my arms around her, and press a kiss to the crown of her golden head. “It’ll be okay, darlin’.”

“I don’t care what you do to him,” she says, her voice sad, but strong.

I let her go and move toward Dino. “Wrong fucking answer.” I lower my voice to a harsh whisper. “You thought you’d come to my town, take my girl, and get away with it?”

I could have lost her today.

The realization roars in me, tears at me with fangs and claws.

From the corner of the room, I grab a metal chain that lies over a box of Christmas ornaments. Dino’s eyes widen. I swing it in an upward arc and snap it toward his kneecap. It shatters.

A keening wail fills the barn.

Ezra blows out a breath and turns away.

“Keep screaming, man,” River says calmly, unbothered. “No one can hear you out here.”

Warren leans back against a pole and crosses his arms. Delilah winces, pressing a hand to her mouth.

“You can take the pain.” My eyes lock on the blooming bruise beneath Delilah’s eye. “You hurt her, I hurt you. That’s how it works.” Dino jerks as he sobs, rattling his chains. Snot drips down his face, blood soaks his pant leg.

“Tell us where Please is.”

“She’ll see him soon. Don’t worry.” The man’s tone turns dark. His hard eyes land on Delilah, and despite the gasps that rock his body, he says, “Oh, Please is gonna take his time with you, honey. He’s going to start with that

sweet, ripe cunt, and fuck it all night. Fuck it till you're begging for him to stop."

A sob tumbles out of Delilah. It fuels the red bleeding at the edge of my vision. Fuels my fear. All I can see is Delilah gone. Hurt.

He hurt her. He tried to take her. Because I fucking failed.

My world stops. I stalk forward. Madness vibrates, thrashes inside me. I whip the chain, churning dust.

"Cole." Ezra holds up his hands. "Don't do this."

I knock him out of the way without a backward glance.

Dino cackles, a shrill, blistering laugh that echoes off the walls. "And then, when you can't take anymore, he'll move to your ass—"

The chain darts out, caving in his face. Blood spray-paints the wall of the barn a brilliant red. Dino hangs suspended, his caved-in head slumped forward, blood and tissue dripping down his chest.

"Fuck me!" Ezra's shout fills the barn. Face twisted with panic, he paces, his hands resting on the back of his head. "Fuck. Cole. Fuck."

Breathing heavily, I drop the chain to the floor.

"Cole." River's voice is urgent, a sharp snap that commands my attention.

I turn, glancing over my shoulder.

Delilah.

My gut twists with regret as harsh reality sets in. She's just witnessed something she never should have. My heart can't take the look on her face. This beautiful, innocent girl who's sideswiped my entire world.

Delilah's long lashes flutter for just a second, her tearstained cheeks paling as she takes in the blood on my hands, then her knees buckle, and her eyes roll back.

Heart hammering, I take two steps forward and catch her before she can fall.

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Delilah

A cool hand lifts my nape. A deep voice rumbles, soothing me, bringing me back to consciousness. “Open your fucking eyes, Delilah.”

My lashes flutter, then Cole’s face appears in front of me. He sits beside me on his bed. Distress and regret shine in those deep blue eyes.

I touch my brow. Cole’s hand follows mine, covers it, carefully weaving his big fingers through my hair. “What happened?” My mind feels muddy, slow.

“You fainted.” His chest heaves.

“Fooled you is all,” I whisper, giving him an innocent smile.

Cole growls at me, then drags a hand down his pulsing jaw. “You were in shock. You never should have been there.” Anguish twists his handsome face. He’s blaming himself.

Tears well in my eyes. “It’s okay, Cole. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine.” Twisting his big frame toward the nightstand, he gathers a roll of gauze and antibiotic cream. “Give me your hands,” he orders.

I obey.

He’s quiet as he cleans the marks on my wrists, red and raw, from the handcuffs. As he wraps gauze around each wrist, his gaze stays with me. My entire body aches, but it’s nothing compared to the shock of what’s just happened.

After Cole’s finished, he assesses the rest of my injuries. He gently runs his big fingers over the bruises on my arms. My jaw. A calloused thumb sweeps over my brow. Every bruise he sees causes his face to contort in fury. A sudden current sears through my trembling body. His rough touch calms, soothes, steadies.

If he hadn’t come for me today, god knows where I’d be right now.

Then, from his back pocket, he pulls out a flash of gold.

“My lucky locket.” I sit up. The heart-shaped locket hangs bright and bold, while the chain is kinked and soldered where it had been broken.

“Found this before we impounded the van.” He reaches out, his big hands clumsy, but he affixes it around my throat. “Tried to fix it for you the best I could.”

I grasp at the heart, the preciousness of his gesture, holding it to my chest. My heartbeat. “Thank you, Cole.”

His dark brows draw together. “Don’t thank me. Don’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“You should sleep.”

“No. We should talk.” I don’t want him to go.

He dips his head to stare at his hands, large and calloused, stained with blood. His palm marred with that long, jagged scar.

“I’m not an angel, Delilah. I’ve done bad things.” His square jaw flexes.

Hassie’s words from the day I met her come back to me. These cowboy whiskey tycoons who have half the town in their pocket. River’s and

Warren’s and Cole’s cool expressions as they chained Dino in the barn. It’s not the first time these cowboys have exacted revenge.

“For your family, right?” I swallow.

“I’m dangerous for you.” His tone is flat and numb. I’m not prepared for it, and it stings.

“No, you’re not.” I shouldn’t, but I say it anyway. “You’re perfect for me.”

His silence tells me all I need to know. He thinks he scared me. He thinks he’s bad.

I won’t let him push me away. Or punish himself. Cole didn’t scare me today. It was everything else. The attempted kidnapping. Melly. Dino’s cryptic words. The blood. It all had my mind racing and racing until I found my world blurring and myself falling.

But I knew Cole would catch me.

I have always been alone in my grief, my sadness.

Until him.

“You’re a good person, Cole.” His throat jogs with words he doesn’t say. His body’s a live wire, thrumming with tension. “You are. You saved me today. No one else would have done it. No one else ever has.”

I rest a hand on his thigh, and his haunted gaze moves toward me. I urge him to take it. To pull me against his strong chest. Instead, he stands with more force than necessary and straightens, before turning away from me.

His silence urges me to slip from the bed. “I can handle you, cowboy. Your past. Your dark. If you just let me try.”

I’ve always trusted my gut when it comes to bad men. Maybe it’s time I trust my gut when it comes to the good ones. When it comes to Cole.

Standing, I go to him, slipping my hands over his wide shoulders. He tenses. “Get back in bed, Delilah.”

“I’m fine.”

“You need to rest, goddamnit.” He still won’t look at me.

“I need *you*. Don’t shut me out. Please.” Wrapping my arms around his waist, I rest my head on his broad back. Inhale his scent. “I don’t care what I saw, Cole. Okay? Because I know the man that you are.”

“I just want you safe.”

“I am safe. With you.” He looked terrifying in that barn. Blue eyes fiery, his massive frame a seething whirlwind of rage and darkness. But I wasn’t afraid of him. I was afraid for whoever was on the receiving end of his wrath.

Cole’s breathing turns ragged. A beat of time passes before he turns around and locks his gaze to mine.

His blue eyes darken with lust. His hands cradle my cheeks. The space between us builds with heat. Hunger. “Delilah.” My name is like a plea cracking in his throat.

I’m stunned when Cole abruptly hits his knees. “I’m sorry,” he husks, wrapping his massive arms around my waist to bury his face in my stomach. “Fuck, darlin’. I’m so sorry.”

I drop my hand to his hair, threading my fingers through his dark strands. I feel faint, dizzy from the emotions pulsing off him.

“I could have lost you,” he grits out against my stomach. “I almost did.”

My eyes flutter shut. “You’ll lose me when I go, but not tonight.” It’s the safest thing to say. To push. To protect. Both of us.

He pulls back, eyes flashing in anger at my words, then stands. “You’re in my veins, Delilah. I won’t get you out. Don’t want to.”

A flat-out fact, and I stare up at him with a dropped jaw.

There’s no doubt in his voice.

Instead, all I hear is a deep and fierce need for me. The same one I feel for him.

I crane my neck, staring up at him, unsure how to interpret the look on his face. A look that terrifies me. A look that has my heart fluttering around inside my chest.

“Weak for you,” he murmurs, stepping into me to intertwine our bodies in a tight embrace. “Darlin’, I’m weak for you.” His jaw sets. “Don’t you know that?”

Breathless and pulsing between my legs, I lock my eyes to his. “Cole…”

I gasp as he pushes himself against me. I feel how badly he wants me. His hard erection strains against the front of his jeans. His intense stare burns. For one long second, I let myself pretend that he’s my man.

Maybe tonight, he is.

Maybe I’ve been pretending that there’s no us. Because he’s here, big arms locked around me, cradling me to his strong chest.

His calloused thumb strokes over the pad of my bottom lip. “You’re better than whiskey. Better than any addiction.” His mouth curves. “You’re my addiction.”

He hauls me to his chest and crushes his lips to mine. Desire crashes over me, piercing the strange veil of darkness enveloping us. I moan, my hands sliding over his wide shoulders and into his hair. His hands cup my cheek, rough and calloused and hot.

Unleashed, Cole’s need consumes me.

We waste no time. Our bodies slam together with such force we could combust. My hands go to his shirt and tear it open. Pearl buttons pop. Fabric slides off his wide shoulders. I take a second to stare, to drink him in.

Good lord, the man’s beautiful. Rugged muscle makes up the perfection that is his massive frame. Black tattoos wrapped around tan, veined

forearms. Raw, ruthless intensity emanates from every hard, chiseled angle. And those eyes, an urgent, vibrant blue that only seems to see me.

I move closer, running my hands over the hard angles of his abs. He feels like leather and steel beneath my touch. There's a whisk of leather as I unbuckle his belt. A clatter as the belt and its large buckle hit the floor. My fingers drift over his full, thick cock.

His head falls back, a rumble leaving his chest.

I stroke, lightly, yet firmly. Over and over, bringing him to the brink, and when he's almost there, I release his cock, press up on tiptoe and kiss him.

A dark roar of thunder passes over his lips. Savage carnality bleeds from Cole into me.

"Need you, Delilah." His mouth turns, searching and frantic, sending a hot electric jolt through me. And then I'm in his arms, cradled against the flexing strength of his torso. I whimper, breathing fast, and wrap my legs around his waist.

Molding together, Cole and I melt onto the mattress. Splaying hands on my hips, he strips off my T-shirt, giving a sinful caress along my bare breasts.

Slowly, I sink on top of him, crying out at the thickness of him. His pupils blow wide, fingers digging into my ass as he holds on to me. "Look at you. So fucking beautiful on top of me."

A smile caresses my lips. "Look at me. Riding my bull rider."

A dark chuckle leaves his lips.

My back arches in anticipation as I roll my hips.

"You take, darlin'," he grits out, staring into my eyes as I grind against his cock. "You take what you need."

All I can manage is a moan. Hand on his chest, fingers curling into all that dark chest hair, I work him over. I'm stretched so wide, I could snap.

“Eyes on me. Eyes on me, baby.” He grunts, cords taut in his neck as he palms my breast, watching me through it all. I lift my lashes to meet his eyes, feeling on display, but also seen. Cole sees me. He’s the only one who ever has.

A warm flush overtakes my body, sparks shimmering through me.

“Goddamn, Delilah, you’re leakin’ all over me.” His fingers hunt and claim as they slide through the wetness collecting between my thighs to bring it to his lips.

A loud gasp slips through me at the way he shamelessly eats. My cowboy with his dirty, filthy mouth.

A calloused thumb finds my clit, gently applying pressure, then twisting.

“Fuck,” I breathe. “Cole…” A blinding white heat blooms in my body. My chest flushes, my thighs tremble. I move fast, squeeze around him tighter, harder…

Then, the world moves.

Cole pulls me off him and flips me onto my stomach.

My nerve endings thrill, my sex drenched and ready for more.

He looms behind me, big, yet surprisingly gentle. “Need to be deeper.” There’s urgency, possessiveness in his voice. No more restraint. “Deeper inside you, darlin’.”

The truth of his words makes me ache. He’s all I want. No one else.

“Yes, yes.” I arch my back, hear the approving growl leave his lips. All my body wants is more.

His warm, heavy body covers me. With his thigh, he nudges my legs open then slowly enters me. He’s so hard, so thick, stretching me so close to the breaking point that I cry out. Heat swarms my blood. Cole’s breaths quicken.

“You’re so fucking tight.” His pleased growl caresses my neck.

I whimper, gripping the sheet corner as he pulls out, then slams into me with demanding possessiveness.

I rock back against him, the scruff of his whiskers scratching my skin. The feel of this man—rugged, rough—it's exactly what I need. I close my eyes, enjoying how good he feels. How he takes me away from anything bad.

With his teeth nipping at my shoulder, he grunts. "Goddamn, darlin', you can take all of me, can't you?"

I moan at his dirty talk, then whimper into the pillow as he buries himself to the root. Every great, thick ruthless inch of him plunders into me. I crave every hard thrust he can give. I can barely breathe. So full. So overwhelmingly full of this man.

"Tell me if it's too much." He growls, thrusting deeper, pumping fast against my body. Sliding a hand up my breastbone, he takes my neck and lightly squeezes. "You hide nothing from me again, you hear me?"

"Yes, yes," I sob.

Over and over, he slams into me at a fast and punishing rhythm.

"You're bein' so good for me, darlin'. My girl. My Delilah." Then, softer, against my ear. "*Mine.*"

My brain short-circuits, right before my release explodes in a bright burst of warmth and sparks. "Cole!" I scream, breathless and wild.

"Fuck, darlin', I'm coming." His forehead falls forward onto my shoulders, his massive torso tensing and jerking as he roars his release. "Fuck, fuck, Delilah."

Cole collapses onto me, burying his face in my neck. As he pulls me into his arms and softens inside of me, I feel his entire body shudder.

It feels life changing.

It feels like I'll never be alone again.

Lifting me off the bed, Cole carries me to the shower. We fuck again, this time slow and savoring. Cole soaps me all over my breasts, my thighs like he can personally take away the stain of today. But what he doesn't know is there is no stain. Not anymore. Not with him.

After rinsing me off, he wraps me in a fluffy white towel, a gentle, sweet motion that has me smiling.

Afterward, we slip into bed, tangled in sheets. With my leg thrown over his hip, Cole holds me in his arms, running a calloused palm over my thigh. I brush strands of dark hair away from his brow, stare into his eyes.

"How do you feel?" His voice is gruff as his dark, concerned gaze crawls over me.

I open my mouth to say I'm okay, when a rush of emotion overwhelms me. It's not just the blood and the kidnapping. It's Belle. She betrayed me. She betrayed her girls at the Velvet Belles, my friends, Melly. It's almost too much to take.

"I feel stupid." A tear slips down my cheek. "I was an idiot about Belle."

"Don't you do that, darlin'." His words are rough, decimating. "Don't you ever fucking blame yourself."

"She was like a mother to me." A ragged breath drags from my chest. "I don't know why I didn't see it…why…" The room pulses with my sobs as I let it all out. "Why would she do this?"

"Don't cry over her. She doesn't deserve your tears." Cole runs his fingers through my hair and holds me until my sobs quiet. Then, deep voice rumbling, he says, "You are everything kind and good, Delilah. Don't let her take that from you. Trust."

"I don't trust anyone anymore." My eyes lock on his. "Except you."

Cole looks like he wants to warn me away from him. But it'd be a losing battle. Especially after today. I'm sure I should care more than I do about

what happened. Cole killed a man for me. He's ruthless. But I've never felt safer. I see his demons, his grief, his bad habits, but I still see him too.

I run my hand over the scar on his palm. "Who's this for? You all have one. Except Wells."

"It's for Wells." His mouth tilts toward my brow, the rumble of his deep voice a soothing caress. "We tracked down his foster father and shot him." My heart skips a beat at his bluntness.

"What did you do with him?"

His hand runs up my leg. "We buried him in the Pit."

"The Pit?"

"It's an abandoned mine shaft behind the ranch. It's not on any maps. No one will ever find it. And it's where we'll put that motherfucker who tried to take you from me." Cole rests his eyes on mine. "I shouldn't tell you all this."

My heart lurches. "But you are." I study his intense, rugged face. "Why?"

He doesn't answer for a long second. "Maybe I want you to know what you're getting into."

I lick my lips. "What am I getting into?"

He grips me closer, his palm splaying low on my back. "My bed. My ranch. My entire fucking soul, Delilah."

My eyes widen in realization.

I want him to say more. I also dread it. "Cole…"

He leans down, our lips fitting impeccably, our hearts thrumming in sync. His tongue traces mine, our breaths loud and fitful.

When we finally pull apart, Cole kisses my brow and wraps me in his muscular arms.

It’s different. Everything feels different. Especially us. Especially after this day. That’s when it all comes back to me. What’s happened. What we’ve done. An overload of emotions that brings tears to my eyes.

“Cole,” I whisper. “What do we do about everything?”

“Go to sleep,” he demands, as if he already knows all my worries. His hand strokes through my hair. “Don’t worry. I have you.”

His declaration leaves me achy and breathless and grateful. His hand over my heart like a promise never to be broken.

I close my eyes and try to sleep, but my head pounds. Cole makes it sound so easy. In his arms, I’m not afraid. But morning will be here soon, and as I drift off, I wonder how many more nights I’ll have like this with him, how long I have before my past, and the man named Please, finds me again.

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Cole

My gaze lowers to the sleeping woman in my bed. Delilah, tucked up into the pillow like it’s her own personal protector. Golden hair spills over her bare back. She looks small, soft, and fragile, and I let myself absorb her beauty.

I was rough with her last night. Rough in ways that threatened to shatter my very existence.

Every time I look at her, guilt bleeds into every ounce of me. I can’t pry my mind, my emotions away from yesterday. Someone tried to take her from me. Fear. It’s fucking everywhere. The thought of losing her did something feral and animalistic to my blood.

Moving closer, I run a hand over her silky hair. Delilah stirs, a soft whimper that makes my chest ache.

Obsession. But it’s more than that. Especially after last night, after what happened between us.

I need this girl. Can’t let her go. Won’t.

She’s all the good that exists in the world. The sweetness and light that carve up my daily routine. I don’t know how I lived without her. How I

could have ever hardened myself to her. Forced her away.

I stand in awe of this woman. I told her about my past, and she took it without flinching.

Delilah releases a soft sigh and burrows deeper into the sheet. My gaze falls to the curve of her breast, those long slender legs, her smooth, golden skin.

Enchantress. Vixen. There are so many words I could use to describe Delilah, but my favorite one is: mine.

After last night, it's clear. The lengths I'm willing to go for her are endless.

I leave her sleeping and change. When I return, with black coffee, she's awake. I smile when I see her in my old PBR T-shirt. I've come to consider it hers.

"Sleep okay?" I kiss her lips, stroking a thumb across her cheekbone.

Her cheeks warm. "Better than."

I hand her the coffee and move to my dresser. Now that it's morning and my mind's clear, there's shit to do. My brothers have taken care of the mess in the barn. And I'll take care of Delilah.

I open the first drawer and clear out a stack of T-shirts. "What're you doing?" Delilah's soft voice at my back.

"Cleaning you out a drawer." I turn to see Delilah's fingertips go to her lips, smothering a smile.

"Cole, no."

"Darlin', yes."

I'll hear her arguments because it's fucking adorable when she's stubborn, but in the end, I'll win.

"I want you to stay at the ranch."

"I am at the ranch."

“I want you to stay with me.” No way in hell am I letting her out of my sight. After yesterday, there’s no doubt she’s in something dark. Someone’s after her.

“Cole…”

She tries again, but I silence her protest with a stern look. The fact that she thinks she’s walking around Tempest unprotected is laughable. “Someone’s after you, Delilah. This Please fucker. He tried to fucking kidnap you.” Just the memory makes my heart race. “You’re not staying alone.”

A sigh pushes off her lips, making them pout. “I don’t want to put your family in danger. Or be a burden.”

As I stare at her, the sadness on her face wrenches my fucking soul. This girl’s so fucking brave and strong to go through this. But she’s not alone. Not anymore.

She’s never been a priority to anyone, but I’m about to make her mine. She’ll want for nothing. She’ll always be safe. Because she has me.

“You’re not a burden. But you don’t have a choice. As long as you’re on my ranch, you stay here.”

Her eyes flash with fight, with fire. She shoves at the sheets. “Then I’ll go.”

I snatch her wrist before she can leave the bed. I yank her up on her knees on the mattress, her body hot and soft and trembling against me. “I think you misunderstood me, darlin’. There is no way you’re leaving this ranch. Not when you’re in danger. Not when you’re mine.”

She gasps, slamming a palm to my chest. I crush my lips to hers. She goes soft, pliant in my grasp. It takes all I have not to fuck her again, to force myself back to the important matter at hand.

“Where’s the USB?”

She sighs and relents. “It’s in my sparkly fringed cowboy boot. The right one.”

Of course it is. I rub my temple, and the sudden headache brewing. Hidden but in plain sight. My girl’s smart. Even if she is a pretty little liar.

I chuckle. “We gotta get better at your hiding spots.”

“What’re you going to do with it? Give it to the cops?”

No fucking way. Giving the USB over to the law isn’t something I’m prepared to do. Neither is putting Delilah’s life in someone else’s hands. I don’t trust what could happen to her. They could try to blame her, or worse, take her. We get answers first.

“I’m going to take it to someone who can see what’s on it.”

Her breath catches. “I want to come.”

“No.”

She deserves to know what’s on it, but not today. Not after what she’s been through.

I slide a hand into her hair, grasp her neck. “I promise I’ll tell you everything when we know it. We’ll find your friend.”

Before she can argue, I kiss her. “I want you to stay here today. You need something to do, feed the animals.” She bats her eyelashes, and I shake my head, warding off her charms. “Don’t text or call anyone.”

“Not even you?” She looks at me sweetly, biting that pouty lower lip of hers.

“You only text me.”

She makes a face. “Cowboy.”

I give her the same exasperated look right back. “Darlin’.”

Her lips turn up, ravenous as she yanks me into her and slips her hands up my shirt, lighting my blood on fire. My cock flexes. “Delilah,” I growl,

my palms going to the side of her face to still her, even though denying her is the last thing I want to do. “I have to handle this.”

One last kiss, then I’m grabbing my hat and setting out across the ranch.

I head to the Creek House, where I feed Ratson and grab the boot. Then I make my way to the homestead.

“We’re going dancing?” River lifts his cup of coffee to me when I enter. I ignore the dirty look Ezra gives me.

I turn the boot over, and the USB clatters onto the countertop.

“We’re going to get someone who can open this.” I nudge up my hat, looking at my brothers, minus Wells. Thank Christ the kid’s on the rodeo circuit for the next two weeks. “Syd’s brother.”

“He still a tech wiz guru?” Warren shoots a curious look at River.

“Sure is.” River elbows Ezra. “You two nerded it up years ago, didn’t you?”

“We’ll owe him. Again.” Ezra frowns, letting all of us know his disgruntlement with the situation.

I finger the USB. “There has to be something we can get off this that leads us to this Please guy.”

“And then what?” When I’m silent, Ezra’s frown deepens. “We distill whiskey, Cole, we’re not fucking detectives.” His voice drops. He looks furious. “You killed a man.”

“We’ve all killed a man.”

“What would Dad say?” Ezra asks.

“Dad would say good fucking job,” River flings back. “If Mom were in danger, you know Dad would be the first to protect her.” The heat in his voice tells me he’s thinking of April. “So don’t play that self-righteous bullshit game with me, Ez.”

“We don’t need more bodies in the Pit. We’ve got liabilities,” Ezra argues. “The distillery. Bugs.”

“Nothing will happen to Bugs.” Warren leans back against the island, face resolute. “We’d die before anyone touches her.”

A pang of guilt hits my stomach. None of us want this risk, but we also don’t turn our back on those who need it. Even if there’s a damn good chance trouble will show up here. Sooner rather than later.

“What about Delilah?” Warren asks.

“She’s staying with me.” I cross my arms, ignoring their exchanged looks of concern. My brothers can fuck off if they don’t like it. I’d crawl out of the fucking grave before I let another man take Delilah again. “I want a security guard on the ranch. Patrol at night. Fixes to any of the cameras. Until we get to the bottom of this, we have to be on watch.”

“I’ll talk to Langford, see who he can hook us up with.” Warren turns to Ezra, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “It’ll be okay, Ez. Keep your fucking head centered.”

Ezra relaxes a bit at Warren’s words. He’s the big brother, and if he says it’s okay, we believe him.

“Not a word to Wells,” Warren orders, and we all nod. It’s always been an unspoken agreement to keep Wells out of our messes. Keep that kid as innocent as we can.

“You get the barn cleaned up?” I ask, directing my gaze to River.

“Yeah. Took it all to the Pit and sent it back down to hell.” River hands me Dino’s cell phone. “Except this. Thought maybe it’d come in handy.”

It’s a burner phone. There are no texts. Only one number.

I dial it.

“What the hell are you doing, Cole?” Ezra looks at me like I’ve lost my mind.

Maybe I have. Maybe I always will when it comes to Delilah.

The line rings, five times, then picks up.

Silence. But over the line, I hear breathing.

I lean in close. “Don’t say a fucking word,” I growl. Hate for a man I’ve never met sinks like venom inside of me. “Your man’s dead because of one simple fact. He touched what’s mine. And if you come near Delilah again, if you so much as breathe in her direction, I’ll kill you next.”

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Cole

“Favors cost.” Syd crosses his arms over his chest.

River glares. “That’s bullshit.”

“It’s business, brother. Not personal.” A white car pulls itself into the garage, its muffler rumbling like thunder. “Bay two,” Syd calls to his guy without turning around. A tattooed hand goes to his chest. “Put yourself in my unique position. How’d it look if I got into the business of favors to friends?”

“He’s right,” I tell River, who still looks pissed. It’s not the kind of reputation any of us want to have. I reach into my pocket and pull out the USB. “Just warning you now, it’s trouble.”

“Tempest trouble?” Chili, Syd’s younger brother, asks as he walks past us, a bag of spicy cheese puffs tucked under his arm.

River speaks up. “No. Has to do with the woman living on the ranch.”

“So girl trouble.” Syd chuckles.

“Every woman is trouble,” Warren grumbles. “Some more than others.”

“You all okay with this?” I scan my brothers. From each, I get a curt nod.

Ezra looks at Syd. “Tell us what you want.” Despite not wanting to be involved, he always comes along anyway. It’s the way he’s built. As long as he knows every option, he feels in control.

“One more year of running barrels.” Syd grins.

“Fuckin’ great.” Ezra states the obvious, his voice one big sigh.

“You got a deal.” I stick out a hand, and we shake.

“Just because I like you, I’ll toss in something extra.”

“What is this, a Costco?” Ezra grumbles.

“What’s the extra?” I pass over the USB to Syd, who passes it down to Chili, who sits silently at the front desk and immediately plugs it into his computer.

“A favor.” Syd arcs a brow. “You’ll know it when you need it.”

“Appreciate it,” I say while thinking of Delilah alone in my house right now.

Chili pops his head up from the computer. Whistles and shoves his glasses up on his nose with cheesy orange-stained fingers. “The hell you Westons got yourself into now?”

Chili, whose real name is Josh, is a smart, skinny kid who loves spicy junk food, weed, and Dungeons & Dragons. He and Ezra were friends in high school. He graduated with top honors, went to Harvard, and got kicked out that fall for hacking computers and changing grades. We knew he’d be back. It’s the way of Tempest.

“It bad?” Warren’s arms fold over his chest.

“It’s encrypted as hell.”

“Can you do it?” River asks.

Chili scoffs like he’s been insulted. “Yeah. But it’ll take a while.”

“How long’s a while?” I ask, feeling my patience thinning. I’ll be on edge as long as someone is still out there looking for Delilah.

“A couple of days. A week.” Chili looks up at Ezra, hunching his shoulders as he blindly clicks around on the computer. “You’re lookin’ uglier these days, man.”

Ezra chuckles. “Not what your mom said last night.”

“You sure?” Syd asks me, reminding me of what I’m in for.

“I’m sure.” Delilah could wage a war, and I’d be right in the middle of it fighting for her.

“We’ll call you when it’s done.” Syd claps me on the back. His voice drops as he scans all of us. “The next run’s set for the end of August.”

“We got eyes and ears ready.” Warren nods.

We say goodbye and exit out back into the alleyway. Fat raindrops fall as we head to our trucks. It’s muggy and gray, like the day just wants to exist as night.

“What now?” Ezra sounds calm. Resigned.

“Now we wait.” Time’s my enemy. Not knowing who’s out there, who’s coming for Delilah. I hope Chili can work quickly.

“We don’t even know what we’re workin’ with yet.” River blows out a breath. “It could be an easy fix. An ex. An amateur.”

“What if it’s not easy?” Ezra drags a hand through his hair. “What if it’s worse?”

I dip my chin. “That’s what we’re going to find out. Until we do, I keep Delilah safe on the ranch.”

Ezra looks at me. “You trust her? That she’s told you everything?”

“I do.” More than anything, I believe Delilah. I understand her fear. That she didn’t want us to worry. That she thought she could handle it herself. She’s been on her own her entire life. No more.

“I think Cole has more than trust.”

I narrow my eyes at River and the shit-eating grin that's taken up residence on his face.

"You in deep with this girl?" Warren raises a brow like he's already expecting me to lie.

"No." My lungs heave out the words. "We're casual."

"I saw your face when that guy said someone was coming for her." From the pocket of his leather jacket, River pulls a cigarette. "That's not casual." His dark gaze dares me to argue with him. Wrenches the hard heart deep in my chest.

I tilt my hat up, squashing the urge to punch my brother in the face.

Ezra swears under his breath. "For fuck's sake. Admit it, Cole. You care about Delilah."

Instead of answering, I storm to the cab of my truck. I wrench open the passenger door and toss the powered-off burner phone I pull from my back pocket into the glove box. When I turn around, my brothers stand there.

"No hate if you do, brother." Warren's tone softens as he studies me. "In fact, Jack would say it's about damn time you stopped running. Maybe lying to yourself too."

I grit my teeth. I hate when he uses Jack against me. Two days ago, I'd deny it. But seeing Delilah chained in the van fractured any remaining resolve I had to stay away. To not consider her mine. To consider this only temporary.

It's a stroke of luck Delilah landed on our ranch. I'd be a fool to not see the best thing right in front of my face.

"You're fucked, man," River adds.

"She's wearing my shirts and sleeping in my bed," I say, "so yeah, maybe I am." The truth comes easily. It's been a long time since I've been honest with my brothers, since I opened up. I won't deny it feels good.

“Well…” Warren runs a hand over his jaw, staring at the dark sky overhead as he contemplates my words. “I guess we get ready and do what we do best. Buckle in.”

* * *

Delilah is gone when I get back to my place. Panic flares to life in my gut as I check the bedroom and bathroom. As I’m grabbing my keys and setting my hat on my head, the front door opens.

“Hi,” she says, stepping inside. Her hair waves around her shoulders. There’s a smudge of dirt on her jaw, and in her hands, her rat’s cage and a suitcase. “I went and fed the cows. Then I stopped at the Creek House and got Ratson and a few things.”

The sight of her eases the madness of my mind. Has one word cresting over me in a wave of possessiveness. *Mine.*

I open my mouth to give her a talking-to, but before I can, Delilah sets her things on the floor, rushes toward me, and launches herself into my arms.

The lecture on the tip of my tongue dissipates when she locks her lips to mine. Her kiss is wild and free, just like her, and I drink her in. Her body presses against mine, warm and soft. I grip her hips, pulling her as close as I can.

“I hope it’s still okay.” She stares up at me, her eyes wide and soft. “That I stay here.”

“More than,” I gruff, coming back from that kiss.

“How was it?” Her voice is hopeful. “Did you find anything out about Melly?”

I take her hand and lead her into the kitchen. “It’ll take some time, but we have someone working on it.”

She hangs back against the counter. “Who?”

I pull a bottle of whiskey from the counter and fill a glass. I take a sip, then hand it to Delilah. I tell her about our deal with Syd. How we owe him for protecting River in prison. How we upped our deal to one more year for one more favor.

I shouldn’t tell her. I should keep this girl clean, not drag her into it. But she’s been honest with me, and I want more of her, so that means I give her more of me.

When I finish my story, the whiskey in the glass is gone, and Delilah stares at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“Cole, I can’t let you do this.”

I grip her chin, forcing her gaze toward mine. “You can and you will.” She has to hear this. Accept it.

Lower lip trembling, Delilah tilts her head and stares up at me. Those beautiful brown eyes glassy with tears. “Cole, you were done running guns at the end of summer. Why would you do this? I’ve put your ranch, your family in danger. You barely know me.”

“I know you. I know you’re what matters to me.” I bring her in tight against me, feeling the sway of her hips, the heartbeat in her chest. “I want every part of you. I want you here with me.”

If there’s a light amid the darkness of everything that’s happened, that’s Delilah.

Not ready to let her go. Not ready to let her fend for herself. Protecting her runs rampant through my senses, tears at my soul. I won’t lose her like I lost Jack, my parents. If I do one good thing in life, it’s keeping her safe.

“Really?” There’s soft hope in her tone.

“Really. I’m crazy for you, darlin’.” She’s become my sanctuary. A better place to be instead of alone.

“I’m a little bit crazy for you too, cowboy.” Her bright beam of a smile feels like a reward all on its own.

My arms band around her possessively, my lips falling to hers. As I drink in her kiss, my heart hammers in my chest. Knowing there’s so much more at fucking stake now. Knowing we’re both in the deep end. Knowing that I’m playing with fire. Because like it’s done all my life, Tempest takes.

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Delilah

I rush around the distillery the entire afternoon trying to make sure everything is set for the upcoming limited-edition whiskey launch, unpack a box of Weston Whiskey personalized glassware for the tastings, confirm the band for the party, book an order for another shipment of Cole's barrels to be sent to Minnesota, and put together a snack menu for Ezra, who's decided that offering light bites might be the way to go. I'm in the back office scrawling out a produce order after my shift when the door creaks open.

Wyoma, Cole's aunt, a sweet older woman who watches Evangeline and makes the best damn peach cobbler I've ever had, pops her head into the back office to tell me Cole's gone into town.

"Anything wrong?"

"Oh no, nothing." She smiles. "He said to go straight back to his place after work."

I blush. It's no secret I've been living at Cole's place for the last two weeks. It's also no secret Cole's been obsessive about staying by my side if I go anywhere other than the ranch.

In the last week, I've discovered a lot about Tempest and the Westons. There's always feuding. There's always danger. There's always violence. But none of it makes me want to leave.

It hasn't been easy trying to shake off the devastation of Belle's betrayal. The one person I counted on to have my back didn't. But I've always bounced back. Only this time, it's different. Because I'm not alone. Not anymore. I have Cole and the Westons.

Copper Run Ranch may be a sanctuary for animals, but it's been mine as well.

I'm safe here. Cole's gone to the ends of the earth and back to ensure my protection. Cameras. Extra security. I'm never left unattended. And if I go anywhere, Cole's always by my side. Frankly, I'm not worried about myself. I'm worried about Melly. The thought of her being kept somewhere…it's agony.

"Okay, I will." I cap the pen, unsure how much Cole's aunt and uncle know about what happened.

Wyoma's eyes drift to the glassware. "Is that for the party?"

I ping a nail against the crystal and listen to it sing. "It is."

I've kept the theme simple. Old west. Cowboys. An ode to their parents, a testament to their whiskey. Everyone should see the indelible mark Weston Whiskey has made on the town.

"You're doing a good job, honey." Wyoma nods at my paperwork. "A born natural." Her brows rise as she gives me a pointed look. "With the distillery and with Cole."

My flush deepens.

"He's happier than I've ever seen him." Wyoma looks thoughtfully at me.

So am I. I miss my Creek House, but I like Cole's place better. I like cooking with him. Whiskey on his back porch. Pulling records and arguing

over whose musical tastes are superior. But most of all, I like the man.

I've forgotten all about playing it safe. Keeping this cowboy out of my heart. And I think he has too.

"I do hope you're thinking about staying after summer's over." Her voice is low and hopeful.

"We'll have to see." I smile softly, then stand. "I have to go and feed the cows."

"Of course, dear." She grins, and I nod, grab my things, and hurry off.

I rush over to the ranch, spend a blissful hour feeding the cows and brushing Waffle before I head to Cole's house. The sun sets in a soft glow, and I understand why Montana's the most beautiful place on earth. Why the Westons have fought for their land and for their whiskey.

I climb the old wooden porch steps and enter, hoping to find Cole, but despite his truck being in the drive, the house is empty.

"Cole?" My voice echoes down the hall.

I check the master bedroom and freeze when I pass by the bathroom. On the lip of the massive copper tub hangs a fluffy white bath towel. On the floor, a bottle of bubbles, a bottle of bath oil, a loofah, a magazine, and a pretty mix of saltwater taffy from the candy store.

My heart tumbles. I step closer.

No note. But I don't need one. The invitation's clear.

I'm dusty and sweaty, and a bath sounds like heaven.

I strip out of my ranch clothes and fill the tub with hot water, bath oil, and bubbles. I turn on the record player in the living room, Johnny Cash's warble filling the house. Then I let out a sigh as I sink beneath the water and chew a piece of taffy.

Oh god, I'm stupidly happy.

Cole's words from last week run through my head. *I want every part of you. I want you here with me.*

I want that too.

For the first time in years, it feels like I have a home. Like maybe, just maybe, I don't have to pack another suitcase and put more miles on that lonely road of life. I don't want to dance for strange men anymore. I only want to dance for Cole. He's the only one I want to see my body.

But what are we? Do I dare ask, hope, wish?

Worrying about it seems stupid. Especially with this threat hanging over all of us.

I sigh and sink lower in the water, watching as my locket shimmers and bobs beneath the bubbles. I close my eyes, tilting my head back, feeling the steam roll off the surface of the water. Before long, bootsteps. The changeover of the record, and then—

"You look like a damn goddess."

I open my eyes at the gruff growl. Cole stands in the doorway, bottle of whiskey in his hands. "Just washing away the day, cowboy."

He crosses the room to the tub, kneeling beside it. He removes his hat, sets it on the floor as his eyes take in my naked body. His scent drifts, sweat and oak and whiskey.

"Thank you for all of this." I place a hand over his, which curls around the lip of the tub, bubbles cascading over our fingers.

His throat works. "Saw it in town. Thought you'd like it." He dips a hand in the perfumed water, finding my thighs and following the curve of them up to tease the side of my clit.

I gasp, eyes fluttering shut as my head tilts back. "I do like it."

His hand roams beneath the water to slide up my torso, where he sweeps a calloused thumb over one of my nipples, cresting above the water. "Sure

feels nice and warm in there."

I crack an eye. "Have you ever had a bath, cowboy?"

"Reckon I haven't." He gives me a rare Cole Weston grin.

"Even with this great big, beautiful bathtub? Such a waste."

"That's what you're here for. To use it all you like."

"Well, I'd like it better with you." I arch a brow, water rippling as I lean both of my forearms on the side of the tub. "Grab that whiskey and get in with me."

"Delilah…" He starts to object, reconsiders, and shoves up to standing.

I smile at his easy agreement.

Shamelessly, I ogle Cole as he shucks his boots, jeans, and shirt, standing there in all of his naked, massive, chiseled glory. That broad back roped with muscle. Those tattoos, dark, curling smokelike over his cut biceps and chest. It's distracting how damn sexy, how intimidating he is.

Mine, I think, and my heart thrums in response.

Cole pours a glass of whiskey, and I scoot forward in the tub to make room for him. Water sloshes over the edge as he slips into the tub.

He exhales as he sinks beneath the water. He lifts me in his arms, pulling me down against his chest.

I tilt my head back against his chest and look up at him. "How was your day?"

He kisses my brow. "Busy. Finished some barrels. Mucked some stalls. Went into town to help War out with some things he needed."

"Any word from Syd?"

"No." His hand runs up my arm. With the other he sips from a glass of whiskey, then tilts a sip into my mouth. I drink it down. Whiskey always tastes sweeter with Cole.

“Just relax, darlin’.” It’s then I realize his hand has found the apex of my thighs. I take a breath as one calloused finger teases my clit, and I quickly feel the warm flush that has nothing to do with bathwater steal over me. I arch against him, feeling his hardness, his scent, the warmth of his body. Heaven. My bull rider.

I let out a moan and close my eyes. “Oh fuck.”

“That’s right, baby. Enjoy it.”

He rotates his finger against my clit. I arch, my body breaking the surface of the water, chill bumps chasing over my skin, as I pant for more of Cole’s touch.

“Oh god, Cole. More,” I beg him, and he complies.

No mercy from the man. He alternates his strokes, finding a quick, hypnotic rhythm. Light, sunshine spreads through me as I’m driven to the edge. My fingers curl on his thigh. Every single one of my nerve endings lights up as the orgasm crashes over me.

My whole body goes limp, my head lolling across his solid chest. A soft whimper escapes my lips.

“Feel good?” A rumble vibrates from Cole, his forearm curling around my hips.

I close my eyes, basking in the bliss. “Yes.”

I’m really, really happy.

Bathtub. A hot cowboy. Whiskey. And old country music.

It can’t get any better than this.

God, if Cole only knew how much I desperately want him. At the edge of the world with my heart pounding.

And just like that, doubt.

What if this all goes wrong?

What if Please finds me?

What if I don’t know what I’m doing? Yes, I want to stay in Tempest. But what will I do? I’m just a stripper with no degree.

I twist around in the bath, slipping against the slick side of the tub, but not falling. Cole holds me to his massive chest.

“Cole? What did you want to be when you grew up?”

He chuckles. “Bull rider. You?”

“Oh, no doubt a marine biologist.” Beneath the bubbles, the water, I find his hand at my thigh, and I put my hand on his, marveling at the size difference.

His lips rise at my answer.

“I’ve been thinking about what I want to do when this is all over…and… I’m not sure.” I bring his scarred palm to my mouth and kiss it lightly. It feels like we’re edging toward a conversation both of us keep tiptoeing around. “I want to dance but…just not in a club. Not anymore.”

Not for Cole, but *because* of Cole. He’s never asked me to stop, but I knew from the first moment I danced for him, I never wanted to dance for another man ever again.

For a long second, we’re both quiet. “I won’t lie, Delilah. I don’t hate that idea.” His thumb strokes over my cheek as if the gesture soothes us both.

“But what if I never find what I love? What if I never find what I’m good at?”

“You’re young. You have all the time in the world.” He frames my jaw with a steady, determined hand.

Just like that, I come down from my nerves. That’s what Cole does to me. He listens, he hears. Takes away all of my worries with that deep rumble of his.

Twisting into him, I kiss his temple. “Thank you. You make me feel like I matter.”

“You do.” He tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. “You’ll find your way.”

I stare up at Cole, realization a heavy, staggering thing.

I love him. More than he can possibly know.

“What if I’ve already found it?” I palm his cheek, run my fingers over his thick, dark scruff.

He doesn’t say anything. He only leans in to kiss me, but I saw it in those deep, darkening blue eyes of his.

He’s already found it too.

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Cole

I find Hassie bright and early this morning, perched on a stool at the Rusty Spur. Her copper hair's wound in a messy bun, and she's typing away on her phone. The bar's quiet and dim, not open until ten. Music plays low on the jukebox, the boisterous boom of Hank Williams Jr.

"Where's War?"

"Dancing with the devil in the blue moonlight. Guess what? I have a group party tonight." She wiggles her eyebrows, sets her phone face down. "Californians. Gonna take them for all they're worth."

I chuckle. Then lean in, steeling myself. "You got a second? I need to talk to you."

"You sound stressed, Cole." She twirls a shot glass between her fingers.

A chuckle leaves my lips. I am goddamn stressed. Front and center in my mind, every last day this week, Delilah. After last week's conversation in the bathtub, it was clear. I need to tell her how I feel. But it's one damn thing to climb on top of a fifteen-hundred-pound beast; it's another to tell this girl I want to keep her.

"I want to do something nice for Delilah."

“Like what? Take her on a date?”

“Yeah. Something like that.” I pause, hesitating over how much to give Hassie. Like Wells, I still always see her as a kid in my mind. Asking her for advice on women feels wrong. “I want to give her something…happy.”

Hassie stares. “Fuck me.”

“You gonna help me or run your mouth?” I grumble.

“Okay, okay.” Trying like hell to smother her smile, Hassie thinks on it, chewing her lower lip. “You could pack a picnic. Do strawberries, champagne, candles. The whole romantic shebang.”

“No. That’s not Cole.” We both look up at the clomp of boots. Warren strides forward, bottles of whiskey in his hands, the grin on his face telling me he’s overheard everything.

Scoffing, Hassie raises a brow, clearly unimpressed. “Like you know anything about romance. Let me guess, you want him to give Delilah some Carhartts, wine and dine her with some sandwiches in the feed truck?”

I roll my eyes, regretting asking for help. The last thing I need is these two idiots chiming in with their bright ideas.

“He *should* do it. Show her what she’s in for getting together with a cowboy.” Warren’s serious gaze goes to Hassie.

“Leave him alone. He doesn’t need your help.” Hassie grins. “He has mine.” She swivels on her stool to look at me. “Whatever you do for Delilah, she needs to be treated nice, Cole.” Her finger punches my chest. “So treat her nice.”

“I intend to.”

“Why aren’t you at work? You’re late.” Warren’s eyes haven’t left Hassie’s face, that smug smile long faded as he stares at her.

“Shit.” She checks the clock behind the bar.

“Your store opens at ten. And you have therapy today.” Warren has her schedule memorized like it’s his own. “That always comes first, Hassle.”

I watch Hassie bristle at Warren’s lecture. She’s never been one to follow law and order. Even when she lived with us for those few short years, she was unwilling to be bossed around by any of us.

“Blah blah blah, War. That’s what I hear when you talk.” Hassie rips off her stool, spinning around to look at me. “Will you tell your brother I’m a grown woman perfectly capable of taking care of myself?”

“Barely,” Warren counters, disapproval evident in his tone.

She flaps her hand dismissively. “Fuck you, boss man.”

“Gonna raise your fuckin’ rent if you’re not careful with that mouth.”

Hassie bares her teeth, looking like she’d like to bite out his throat. “I’d like to see you try my mouth, asshole,” she goads, and Warren’s cheeks flush. “Good luck, Cole.” She grabs her bag, gives me a sweet smile, and slams out the front door.

“Goddamn woman,” Warren complains, wrenching a hand through his dark hair.

“She wants to kill you.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” Warren sits beside me, his face serious. “So, what’s the problem?” A memory comes to me—sitting with him and Jack in our tree house, flipping through our dad’s *Playboys*, and talking about the girls we had crushes on in grade school.

“Do girls really look like this?” I asked, letting the centerfold fall open. Warren leaned in, mouth open.

“Some girls.” Jack cocked an amused brow. “Why? You thinking about getting one?” He chuckled when I made a face, trying not to let on that I was thinking about Chloe Crandall from history class.

“Well, you come see me when you get a girl, little brother. I’ll lay it all on you.”

“I don’t know.” I roll up my cuffs, the bar suddenly hotter. I’ve barely spoken about personal things to War since I left.

Warren regards me with a hard stare he usually reserves for our younger brothers. “What? You sick? What’s with you? You need a drink?”

I shake my head, shifting on the stool. “I don’t know, maybe I’m—”

“In love.”

“What?”

“You’re in love, Cole.” My brother sighs. “You fucking idiot. You fell for the girl.” He says it sympathetically, as if it were a thing I could have ever controlled.

I open my mouth to tell Warren I don’t know when I fell for Delilah, but it’s a damn lie. I do. The second I found her sleeping in the Creek House I was a goner. She’s deeper than physical attraction. I crave our conversation. There’s a damn ache in my soul when I’m without her. Grief, the vise around my lungs, disappears whenever she’s near.

This entire summer, slowly, I’ve been sinking.

All we should have been was temporary.

Now, I want this woman until the end of time.

“You’re right. I do. I love her.” Those three words fall easily from my lips.

“I could have told you that.” He laughs, shaking his head, before the grin on his lips forms a flat line. “It’s going to get messy.”

“It already is,” I say raggedly.

I’ve lived this last week like I’m waiting for the boot to drop. Too good to be true, especially in Tempest. But we have security. Cameras. She doesn’t leave the ranch without me.

“You ready for this? Her here in Tempest? This town takes, Cole.” Warren shoots me a concerned look. “She’s already come close.”

“She has.” I think of Jack, I think of my parents, and my heart wrenches. The thought of losing Delilah, of someone taking her is more than I can bear.

“You gotta show her it’s permanent.” Warren holds out his palm, flashing his scar. “Not this dark. But this deep.”

Forever.

Loving Delilah is easier than breathing. Because not once, not since I lost my parents, since I lost Jack, have I wanted to stop.

“She’s got you to come around.” Warren nods slowly. “This summer we’ve seen more of you than we ever really have.”

“I know,” I admit, scrubbing a hand over my jaw, letting myself feel the weight of the past. “I shouldn’t have stayed away as long as I did.”

“We’ve all run in our different ways,” Warren muses, a distracted tone to his voice.

I understand what he means. Ezra took over the distillery. River retreated to the safety of his mountain. Wells rescues others because he never had a chance to rescue himself. I left home because ghosts haunted every corner of it. War needs to win at everything he does, because if he doesn’t, everything he gave up would mean nothing.

“Do you blame me? For leaving?” I stare at his hockey picture behind the bar. He played two years before he returned home to take care of our brothers.

“No. You did what you had to do, and I did too.” He shifts his eyes to me. “You had a life, Cole.”

“So did you.”

“Yeah. But you all became my life.” He cracks a grin. “Too late, too old to get out of it now.” He slaps my back. “Forgive yourself. We have. Jack would.”

I swallow hard. I didn’t know I needed my brother’s words, but they crack my chest open. Make that dark hole shrink.

“You’re back now. That’s what matters.” He tilts his head. “You got a good woman. I hope she stays.”

“I hope so too.”

“You look like you’re about to climb on the back of one of your bulls.” Warren chuckles, amusement dancing in his blue eyes.

“That’s what it feels like.” A flurry of nerves floats through my stomach, and suddenly I wish I had a glass of whiskey to cut through the hard hammer of my heart.

I know what I want. Now I have to figure out how to say it.

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Delilah

It’s a Weston family affair, bottling whiskey.

We sit on stools at a long metal table in the Coop, assembling the limited-edition whiskey bottles. The bottling room is loud with the hum of machines and lively conversation. Tonight, it’s Cole’s choice of music. The Red Clay Strays’ lively guitar pulls blast from the speakers. Cy, Bo, and Leon head out for the day, shouting goodbyes as they exit the Coop.

At the filling rods, Ezra and Vaughn wait as the whiskey is poured into amber bottles. River works as a conveyor belt, quickly moving them down the line to where Wells, Hassie, Warren, and I seal them with a cork.

In a corner, Cole assembles boxes, then labels them with the bottling date. Evangeline dances to the music. Waldo and Jelly Belly weave around the distillery floor, their soft mewls a plea for a pet. Wyoma bustles between stations, humming her own song and pouring shots.

“Shots!” Wells, freshly back from Cheyenne’s rodeo circuit, pounds on the table, rattling bottles and glasses, and everyone lifts a glass to their lips. It’s Weston custom to take a shot every hour. Currently, we’re on hour three.

Strike that, hour four.

“I’m drunk already.” I hiccup and bring a hand to my mouth.

“Weston Whiskey’ll do that to you.” Cole gives me a heart-stuttering hat tilt, and I resist the urge to fly off my stool and kiss him until our lungs give out.

“Lord, remember two years ago?” Hassie’s lips pull to the side at the memory. “Our bottling session ended with nudity and fireworks.”

“Go easy on that.” Warren elbows her side, and she tosses him a scowl.

“I’m invincible when it comes to liquor.”

Wells snorts. “I think Mr. Johanneson’s shop class begs to differ.”

“What about the labels?” I look down at the collection of naked bottles. It seems like we’re doing this backward, but what do I know?

“Blame Ez.” River smirks at his brother. “A procrastinator until the very end.”

“A perfectionist.” Ezra states the obvious, pride in his tone.

“It still needs a name, honey,” Wyoma says, picking up a bottle to stare into the dark liquid like it’s a Magic 8 Ball.

“Hell, I don’t know what to call it.” Ezra’s brow furrows, an abashed expression overtaking his usually serious face.

“Son, you better get a giddy-up on that.” Vaughn’s admonishment makes Wyoma chuckle and pour Ezra another shot.

“Slap that damn label on last minute,” Ezra grumbles.

“I still have to design it.” River rolls his eyes. “Cuttin’ it damn close, Ez.”

With only a month until the launch party, it’s all hands on deck. The only person taking it in stride is me. I love the hustle of the distillery life. Planning parties, mixing drinks, overseeing the day-to-day operations, chatting up the locals and the guests. I could see myself doing this. What if I actually did?

“Yeah, and you’ll be the only one in here, putting labels on a thousand bottles of whiskey all by yourself the day before the launch.” Cole crosses the floor to us, his hand skimming my shoulder as his chest braces my back.

“You all are assholes,” Ezra grumbles, but I hear the smile in his voice.

“Hell, it’s how we always do it.” Wells takes up for Ezra. “Last minute, drumroll, nails bitten off, and all. It’s the stress that makes our whiskey the best.”

A laugh goes up. Ezra ducks his head as Hassie tosses a cork at it.

“Cole should name it.” Heads swivel to look at Warren.

“What?” Cole sounds suspicious.

“The whiskey. After something you love.” There’s an edge to Warren’s voice, a big brother push. A silent conversation happening between them.

I keep my gaze on the whiskey bottle, not trusting myself to look at Cole’s face. Not trusting my own emotions. He’s a man I feel in my bones, my soul, my heart.

“Makes sense,” Wells says, interrupting the awkward silence. “You’re back, aren’t you? To stay?”

Cole swallows. He’s at a loss for words for a moment, then manages, “I am.”

“Then name it after something you love.”

Thankfully, Hassie’s there to relieve the tension. “Bulls don’t count, Cole.”

Everyone laughs.

“Soon, we’ll have one more new whiskey birthed into the world.” Vaughn stares reverently at a bottle. No doubt remembering his brother.

“Whiskey daddies.” Hassie laughs.

“Christ.” Warren groans.

“By the way,” I say, the email I received earlier today coming back to me. “Nolan Kraus from the *Whiskey Enquirer* plans to come to the distillery.”

Ezra’s jaw drops, and he shoves his glasses up his nose. “You set it up, Del?”

“I set it up, Ez.” I use my best professional voice, feeling the excitement buzzing in the room. “He’ll be here in two weeks for a photo shoot and interview.”

“Fuck.” River looks around. Everyone’s smiling. “That’s big.”

Vaughn’s bushy brows rise. “You’ve done more for this distillery, Delilah, than this old man knew could be done.”

“You didn’t need the help.” Still, I bask in his compliment.

“But we needed you.” Cole’s voice is a husk in my ears. Around him, nods of agreement from his family.

“Thanks,” I whisper, twisting in his arms to smile at him. The sweet words nearly bring tears to my eyes.

After losing Lucy, I never thought I’d have this again. Instead, I felt destined to always be running, to stand on the outskirts looking in. Now, I’m no longer an interloper, some strange girl River found on the side of the road. I feel like I make up a part of their whole, and it’s the most indescribable feeling. To be accepted, wanted, loved. I deserve it.

Two more shots later, every bottle is filled, and Cole’s taking my hand and helping me off the stool. We walk, fingers linked, the hot August night buzzing around us. But instead of going to his place, he leads me across the tall grass to the Creek House.

“Moving me back in already,” I tease as I scan the front of the house. It looks freshly painted.

“Just trust me.” There’s a stern smile on his face as we climb the porch steps. He opens the door carefully.

I step inside and inhale sharply at what I see.

The Creek House hasn’t just been renovated, it’s been revamped. The wood walls are now a pale lilac. Floor-to-ceiling mirrors cover the length of one side. Stretching along the opposite wall, a balance bar. Speakers have been installed on the ceiling. In the corner, where the kitchenette was, is a small fridge. In a small basket above, Pop-Tarts, granola bars, and trail mix.

“What is this?” I breathe.

“Your dance studio.” Cole’s eyes don’t leave my face.

“Cole…” I’m at a loss for words, barely registering what I’m seeing while I try to make sense of my emotions.

“Do you like it, Delilah?” His rugged expression turns self-conscious.

My heart hammers.

“It’s so…it’s so…”

Permanent.

“Perfect,” I finish. Tears well in my eyes. “When did you do this?”

“Mornings,” he gruffs. “When you’ve been sleepin’.”

I clap my hands to my trembling heart, in awe of my hardworking man. Then I spin around and face him. “I think…I think it’s the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me.”

“Good.” Cole’s hands flex at his side.

I tilt my head. Every part of me is trembling. “Why did you do this?”

“I want you to dance, darlin’, and be happy here. I want you to stay with me. On the ranch.”

My heart skips a beat at his declaration. “You do?”

“I do.”

“But…but what about everything?”

“We can handle everything else.” He inhales a breath. “No more suitcases. No more running. You deserve to be worshipped. You deserve to feel safe. You deserve a home, Delilah. Make one with me.”

Hope, excitement flows through my veins at the promise of a future with Cole. Tears well in the corners of my eyes.

“I told you if you kept callin’ me darlin’ you’d want to keep me,” I say, risking a teasing little smile.

Cole’s blue eyes open wide, and he blinks for a moment. Then a growl leaves his bearded lips. “Delilah…”

My lips part in a laugh, then I throw myself into his arms and bury my face in his neck. “Fooled you,” I murmur, kissing his throat. “Yes, I’ll stay.”

“Thank Christ.” He crushes me to him, in those big arms, against that broad chest that racks in a relieved shudder, and I hang on for dear life, I hang on so tight I’m not sure where he ends and I begin.

My home.

With the man I love.

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Cole

Breakfast forgotten beside me, I shake out the kitchen paper and read through the morning headlines.

“Mayor Hale Settles into Second Term”

“Pig Chases Jogger into Cornfield”

“Hale Development Eyes Land for New Luxury Apartment Community in Tempest”

“Green Mountain Lights Spotted Above the Complex”

I shake my head. It all irritates the hell out of me, but maybe Tempest isn’t so bad with Delilah here. She makes me want to get this town back to what it used to be.

The soft pad of bare feet has me lowering the paper to see Delilah. She comes down the hall and enters the kitchen with bedhead and a sleepy expression on her face.

She’s in one of my favorite outfits. A crop top and cutoff shorts. Her creamy skin glows in the light from the kitchen window. Her long blond hair, with the ends freshly colored pink, cascades down to her waist.

“It’s our day off.” I close the paper. “You should have slept in.” She’s been working as hard as I have at the distillery. Long nights, late hours.

“No. I want to spend it with you.” Delilah smiles as she pulls a mug from the cupboard.

I watch her rummage around the kitchen, no doubt making it a goddamn mess, littering the counter with coffee cups until she’s found the perfect one.

I want this, right here, with her. Chaos. Wildness. But that’s when I remember I fucking have it. She’s staying.

I lost track of how many times we made love in the Creek House yesterday. We fucked fast and feral like we couldn’t get enough, like I was finally claiming what’s mine.

Mine. She’s fucking mine.

Maybe a man shouldn’t be this desperate, in this deep over a woman, but I don’t give a fuck.

I want to wake up the rest of my life with Delilah. I want her to wake up with me kissing my way down her gorgeous body. I want her to wake up with our babies.

Love. Life. It’s what Delilah breathes into me every time I’m with her.

There are still those three little words I need to say, but I’m planning on it later today. Hassie had a good idea with the picnic, strawberries, and champagne. A cowboy can do romance. I intend to show Delilah that.

“Hi,” she breathes, as soft arms wind their way around my shoulders. A kiss caresses the side of my cheek.

Not content with just a kiss, I reach back, take her wrist, and pull her onto my lap.

Doe-eyed and innocent, she bats her dark lashes. “Don’t get cute, cowboy.”

“Saved you some coffee.” My eyes trace the silk garter that tightly hugs her toned thigh.

“I saw that. How gallant.” She leans in, my mouth meeting hers, and we consume each other with an animalistic need I never thought possible.

My cock stirs. Restraint flies out the window as I slide my hand up her shirt to palm her breast.

“Cole,” she breathes, her pink mouth open, her eyes glassy with desire. I kiss her, clenching my fingers in the strands of her silky hair. Her soft whimper has me undone.

The girl I fucking love.

The slam of the screen door. Delilah breaks the kiss, twisting in my arms.

“We have phones,” I snarl.

“Tried that.” Ezra rounds the corner, a frown on his face.

I curse when I see my phone’s died.

Smoothing a finger over his mustache, Ezra scans the table. The strange yogurt Delilah made last night. “Why are you eating birdseed?”

“Because Delilah tells me to,” I grunt.

Her grin brightens the universe. “I do breakfast, and he does dinner, and that’s how we work.” She hops off my lap, adjusts her shirt. “Hi, Ez.”

“Hey, Del.” Ezra lifts my cup, sniffs it, looks at me thoughtfully.

“Just black coffee.” Since Delilah came into my life, I haven’t needed that whiskey in my coffee cup to get through the morning. I only crave Delilah. That electric snap in my blood I get when she’s near me.

Ezra nods, an impressed look overtaking his face, before it turns serious. “I got bad news.”

“What?”

He hesitates, his eyes sweeping over me then locking on Delilah.

“You can say it,” I demand, wanting him to know I trust her. My brothers need to see that. To know she’s here for good.

“The USB. Chili cracked it.”

Delilah moves to my side, and I reach for her hand.

“And?”

“I haven’t seen it yet.” Ezra’s pale beneath his glasses, his throat working in a hard swallow. “But from what River’s told me, it’s bad, Cole. It’s fucked.”

A gasp from Delilah.

“Shit.” My gut knots.

“They want us down at the shop. Right now.” He looks between the two of us.

Delilah’s small hand slides over my shoulder. “I’m going with you.”

* * *

Syd’s frowning when we enter the shop. “You owe us, Cole.”

I grimace at his words, a swirl of anxiety tightening my chest, but stick out a hand to make peace. “We’ll fix it. Whatever it is.”

River, already here, pushes off the wall.

Syd scans Delilah. “The bartender, huh?” When I nod, and Delilah’s brow shoots up, Syd exhales an appreciative laugh. “I see why you’re in this, man.”

Wide-eyed, Delilah asks, “Can you show us?”

Syd’s eyes slice to mine. “Are you sure? It’s not pretty.”

“I’m sure,” Delilah interjects, clearly annoyed Syd’s checking with me for confirmation. “I want to get to the bottom of this.”

I take her hand, pulling her close. She shouldn’t be here. But I have no right to keep her away. She deserves to know what’s after her. “Show her.”

“This way.”

We head into the back office where Chili’s already at the computer, clicking around on a massive, curved monitor that takes up most of the desk. Warren sits in a chair beside him.

Chili whistles. “We are gonna have some fun today, aren’t we?”

“Cut the theatrics, idiot,” Syd orders, coming around the desk to swat Chili on the back of his shaved head.

Ezra and River trade amused grins.

“All right…” Chili pulls up a black screen and types in a password. “The USB leads to a virtual safety deposit box.” Delilah nods along like she knows all this. “Which I cracked, you’re welcome.

“See this?” His mouse hovers on a file folder labeled PROSPECTS. Everyone leans in as he double-clicks. A grid of images appears. Women.

“Cole, tell me I’m not going to have a mental breakdown after looking at this.” Ezra’s eyes glide over the screen.

“There are girls in these files.” Chili looks at all of us. “From everything that’s in here, it looks like these are girls he—Please or whoever the fuck—plans to abduct. Their names, locations, places of employment, everything you could want to know, it’s all there.”

I can feel the room tense, every one of us holding our breath as Chili clicks into different images.

“Wait!” Delilah exclaims. “Go back.”

Chili does. The screen fills with a photo of a pretty girl with auburn hair.

“That’s Clea.” She stares at the screen like she’s willing herself to crawl into it, her face desperate. “She’s from the club.”

“It’s like a list.” Warren shakes his head.

“Like a menu,” Delilah breathes.

“Trafficking?” I ask.

“April.”

The rasp comes from River. Delilah looks up at me, confused. Ezra and I share a look.

“Is she in there?” River asks, coming closer, his face creased in pain.

“It’d take time to sort through them all.” Syd hesitates. Nods at Delilah. “But she’s in there.”

My fists clench at my side, my entire body becoming one pulsing heartbeat.

“Me?” She sucks in a sharp breath, and her gaze flies to me.

“Yeah. You.”

Fuck.

Chili pulls up Delilah’s file. She’s there, on screen, smiling and shiny and beautiful.

I pace away from the screen, flexing my hands, barely able to look. I want to put a fist through the fucking computer.

“What’s next?” Warren says calmly, like he knows how close I am to losing it.

“The movies.” Chili’s tone is dark.

“What kind of movies?” I whip around.

“I’ll show you.” A click on the screen. Another file labeled GOODS. “Hang on. It’s rough.”

I close the distance between me and Delilah, pulling her into my arms.

“As of last week, this is the most recent one.” Chili clicks play on one of the videos.

Grainy video footage kicks on. A hand focuses a camera. Blurry for a second, then…

The camera zooms in on a girl. She has curly red hair and wears a thin, silk nightgown. She's on a bed, hands twisted over her head and tied to the bedposts. Beside the bed, a black tarp. Her scream, a blistering rattle, echoes off the walls. "Please, please, please," she begs.

"Fuck me," Warren grits out.

A man enters the screen. He's dressed in a black suit and wears a cloth mask over his head. Back to the camera, he approaches the bed.

"Cole…" Delilah looks up at me, her voice low and filled with anxiety. I can feel the terror pulsing through her slender body.

"Don't look," I tell her, and she buries her face in my chest.

"Oh, Christ." River turns away as the man climbs on top of the girl.

"Speed it up," I snap, disgusted. No one needs to see this. Chili obeys and then resumes normal speed at around eight minutes.

The girl lies there, half-naked, crying on the bed. The man exits the frame, and when he returns, there's a rope in his hand.

"Fuck." I clutch Delilah tighter, keeping her safe, shielded, as dawning horror crests over me.

Hearing about something awful and seeing it with your own two eyes are completely different things. After her abduction, I knew Delilah was in danger. But I wasn't prepared for this.

We all watch as the masked man knots the noose around her neck. The girl thrashes, fighting, but her hands and legs are bound and it's useless.

My world stops, red blurring the edge of my vision.

Time ticks on.

Two minutes.

Six minutes.

Then the man steps away, the girl lies there limply, and the camera cuts out.

“What the fuck did we just watch?” Warren blinks, still dazed from the movie, then looks around at the rest of us.

Ezra stands there, trying to stay cool; only the absence of his glasses gives him away. He’s a mess.

“Torture porn.” River looks disgusted.

“It’s fake, right?” Delilah asks, her face pale and terrified, as she glances up. Tears form in her eyes. I can’t tell how much she’s seen.

“That’s the thing…I don’t think it is.” Syd’s tone turns dark. “I think this man, whoever this Mr. Please motherfucker is, is making these movies that start with sex and end in real murder, then selling them to the highest bidder.”

“Snuff films.” Revulsion burns up my spine.

“I thought those things weren’t real.” Delilah shudders against my chest.

Warren leans forward in his chair. “The legend comes from somewhere, doesn’t it? You can’t convince me there aren’t wealthy individuals trading and buying snuff films out there on the black market.”

“My guess is this guy has a payroll of men he hires to abduct women”—Syd nods at Delilah—“like your Sammy, then they bring the girls to Please, where he does his…dirty business.”

“Not fucking dirty business,” River snarls, looking more enraged by the second. He’s lit a cigarette and leans against the wall next to the closed door. “That’s rape. Murder.”

As dark as my heart might be, this person deserves instant death. Men who rape, who hurt women, are a fucking cancer that need to be wiped from the face of the earth.

My gaze drifts to the folder labeled PROSPECTS. “Fuck.” My voice is a scratch, my mind a mess.

I turn away from the screen, torso twisting, taking Delilah with me. I feel sick. Like I could throw up. I imagine Delilah being taken the day of her abduction, not being quick enough with my gun. She could be gone right now. Dead.

The thought is a knife to the fucking chest.

Ezra yanks the USB from the computer, and the screen goes black. “What the fuck do we do with this?”

“Burn it.” Warren jerks his chin.

“Hell, I’ll eat the goddamn thing,” River mutters.

“We know what to do with this,” I interject before my brothers can start squabbling. “We give it to Langford. Get it out of our fucking hands.”

“Good,” says Warren, looking at Delilah as he rises from his chair. “Then what do we do with her?”

Delilah lets out a sob, her entire expression fracturing.

“It’s okay,” I whisper, rubbing my fingers through her silky hair while I work to comfort her. “Shhh, darlin’. It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

I pull her in closer. Her touch is the only thing that keeps me from losing it right now, when my entire mind, my world feels clouded in that dark inhuman shadow. I take in a sharp breath as reality sets in, fear and rage making my heart plummet.

Delilah’s not safe.

The most important thing in my fucking world and a monster wants to take it away.

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40

Delilah

Cole’s kitchen is lit in light and awash in whiskey. Open whiskey bottles are strewn on the counter. The radio plays at a low level. To an onlooker, it’s a celebration. To us, it’s a war room.

I stand at Cole’s kitchen island, we all do, like the weight of the day is just now settling in. It all feels like a bad dream I can’t wake up from.

Wells, who by now knows what’s been going on, flashes a smile. “When I’m stressed, I’m gonna empty the cabinets.” The chip bag in his hand crinkles as he leans down on the island. “Gonna cost us money as a household.” He nods at Cole, pacing across the room. “But Cole, he’s just going to punch things.”

I give him a weak smile, keep my gaze on Cole.

He’s gone quiet, tense after what we saw today. Doing his best to hide his anger, his worry from me, but he’s on edge. We all are.

“Bottoms up.” River comes up beside me, slides a glass of whiskey my way.

I slam back the whiskey, trying to get the burn of those images out of my eyes. Cold-blooded, cruel, disgusting images that haven’t left me since we

left Syd's. It takes a bad man, a monster to drug, to rape, to kill. A weak piece of shit who's always gotten his way, who's never been stopped. Well, I intend to stop him. However I can. Whatever it takes.

Langford, an ex-deputy from Tempest, sits on a barstool. The USB drive glitters in his gnarled fingers as he examines it. "Something tells me this is just the tip of the iceberg."

"It's rough." Warren grimaces, shaking his head like he can't erase the images from his mind either. "Warning you now."

"I want you to give it to whoever can find this motherfucker. Whoever can stop him." Cole's tone is deadly, and I hear his unsaid words. *Before I do.*

Langford nods. "I know someone at the FBI who can dive into this." He's silent, and then his gaze moves to me. "Looks like you got yourself into a pickle, honey."

"That's an understatement if I ever heard one." I lean in. "We have to find Melly. We have to find and help all of those girls."

"We will. But we're going to need you, Delilah."

I inhale a steeling breath. "Tell me what to do."

"Would you be willing to travel if—"

"No," Cole interjects. "She stays here. You get someone to come out."

Langford mulls it over. Then says, "It might take some coordination to get a Fed out here to interview you."

"So coordinate," Cole demands roughly.

"I will, but that means…" Langford's eyebrows rise as he gives me a pointed look. "You're not safe."

The same panicked fear I'd felt in Syd's garage when we were watching those movies floods my system. Nowhere feels safe. Everything's a threat.

“That means you don’t leave the ranch.” Cole’s eyes lock on mine and I feel his pain, his worry, his rage. Those glacial orbs are dark with haunted shadows. “You can’t go anywhere alone.”

Suddenly, I’m not afraid, I’m angry. Angry at what men can do. Angry I can’t do anything but sit around helpless as a damsel and wait. How can I? It’s not about me anymore.

“Delilah, I know that look.” The hard set of Cole’s jaw tells me arguing is pointless. “You need to listen to me.”

Dino’s words ring through my mind. *He doesn’t give up when it comes to something he wants.*

“It’s not going to matter. Please is coming here. Or he’s already here.” My lip trembles. “For me.”

Cole’s by my side, his calming presence steadying me for a brief second. “He won’t get near you.” His palm, calloused but gentle, rubs up and down my arm. “I won’t let anyone take you from me.”

I stare into those intense blue eyes, loving him so fiercely that for one long second, I can hardly breathe.

Then I look around the room, and my heart drops. An icy dread fills my stomach. What am I doing? Staying only means danger. For everyone. Cole. Evangeline. Hassie. These kind people I’ve grown to love this summer like my family, the Westons, they’re all at risk. Because of me.

“So she stays.” Warren examines his empty glass. “What happens next?”

“I’ll be in touch.” Langford rises from the stool, pockets the USB. “My contact at the FBI will reach out when we know anything. Until then—”

“No,” I cut in, and all eyes turn to me. “I should go.” I need to help in some way, and if that means leaving, so be it.

Cole stiffens, breath hitching. “Delilah…”

Ezra, quiet until now, lifts his pale face. “Maybe it’s not a bad idea, Cole.”

Wells flinches.

“Back off, Ezra, I fucking mean it,” Cole snaps. Fear and rage quake through his huge body, his scarred knuckles bleaching white as he grips his whiskey glass like he doesn’t know whether to drink it or hurl it across the room.

“I’m leaving.” I shoot down the rest of my whiskey. Rallying strength, I press away from Cole. Breathe out.

“Absolutely fucking not,” Cole growls low.

“We have no plan except waiting, relying on someone else to help. That makes us all sitting ducks.” My voice shakes, but it’s loud, firm. I raise a hand, gulping out my next words. “I won’t put anyone else in danger.”

Cole storms toward me, expression darkening as he presses me back against the counter. “If you leave, I leave.”

The room goes deathly silent.

“You can’t. Think of Evangeline. The distillery. They need you.” I glare at him, even when all I want to do is fall apart. “Don’t be stupid.”

“Darlin’, when it comes to you, I don’t have one goddamn ounce of common sense in my body.” He slides his hands up my cheek, cradling my face. “Understand me now, I go where you go.”

“Stop,” I say, feeling broken inside.

“No one’s leaving.” Warren stands at the table, finality in his tone. “We all saw what’s on the USB. Cole stopped your abduction. Whether you leave or not, trouble still lands here.” He dips his head, gaze locking on Cole as an unspoken understanding passes between the brothers. “So you stay.”

“Stay before our brother has a goddamn heart attack.” River leans low on the counter, running a hand over his grin.

“I’m sorry.” My lower lip trembles as I look around the kitchen.

“Let us talk,” Cole orders. Chairs scoot back, glasses clink, and within ten seconds, the house is empty.

“Why? Why are you doing this?” Tears of misery slip down my cheeks, over Cole’s scarred knuckles as he holds my face in his big hands. I reach up and grip his wrists, wanting to simultaneously shove him away and pull him into me. “Let me go, cowboy.”

“Stop this madness.” His jaw tightens, a dark slash of pain. “I won’t let you walk away, and I will never let you go.”

“You have to,” I whisper, as his fingers weave through my hair, as he presses closer.

“Darlin’, truth is, I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because I love you, Delilah.” His voice shakes. “Because I’ve been a goner for you ever since the day I found you in that damn Creek House.”

I freeze, my heart bottoming out.

Love. Cole Weston loves me.

His words, his voice, are so certain, so fierce, they make me tremble. They scare me breathless. They land like a warm burst of sunshine inside my heart.

“You do?” I whisper, still so stunned I can barely get it out.

“I do.” A muted growl rumbles from his chest. “Fuck, this wasn’t the way I wanted to say it, but…it’s out. You have my heart. You have all of me if you want it.”

Cole’s head dips, those deep blue eyes desperately searching my face for something to cling to.

My lungs lose air, and I let out a broken sob. “I want you.” I grab his shirt, holding tight to this wild, wonderful man. “I love you too, Cole.”

Cole’s eyes close briefly, relief breaking across his handsome face, then he crushes his lips to mine. The sweet sting of his whiskey kiss has me gasping. Has me jumping into his arms to encircle my legs around his waist.

“Tell me again,” he commands, holding me tightly.

“I love you, cowboy.” I reach toward his rugged jaw, trembling fingers palming his scruff. Tears steam down my cheeks. “You are the best man I have ever known.” I giggle, a bright smile tipping my mouth. “And guess what? Now you’re stuck with me.”

The most beautiful smile crinkles his eyes, lifts his lips. I drink it in. It’s a sight to see.

“My darlin’, my girl, my Delilah,” he breathes against my skin, over the pulse points of my throat, and I feel the hard bob of his Adam’s apple as he fights back emotion. “Can’t live without you. Won’t.”

My eyes shutter, and I whimper, clinging even tighter to this cowboy of mine.

Inside my heart, I can hear Lucy Lou screaming her joy.

And despite the darkness of today, this moment feels like anything but that. It feels like a rebellion. It feels like hope and home and sanctuary. It feels like I won everything, because no man in the world will ever love me like him.

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Cole

Sky-piercing mountains rise up as I walk across the pasture to the small grove of ponderosa pine rustling in the breeze. Magpies and meadowlarks dart and dip among the burial site of our family, including my parents. But I don't stop. I continue until I reach a simple flat headstone in the earth. With my boot, I clear away the long grass, then settle down onto the ground.

Jack Weston. Brother. Son. Cowboy. Forever in our hearts.

Every time I see the epitaph, a fresh wave of grief nearly takes me under. That gravestone a reminder I've outlived him by almost twenty years. I should start putting the rest of my time to good use.

"Hey, Jack." After removing my hat to rest it next to my knee, I set the whiskey bottle and Glencairn glasses I carry on top of the headstone.

"Wanted you to see what we've been working on." I pour us each a glass, leave Jack's and pick up mine. "It's Mom and Dad's. The barrels from the year they were killed." I exhale. "Fuck. I'm glad you weren't around for that."

I hold up my glass to the dying sunlight, watching as sunbeams dance between the edges of copper and brown. "Still needs a name and a label, but

we’re working on that.”

There’s a rustle of wind in the trees, and I look skyward. I chuckle. Jack’s never more than a whisper away.

“Get on with it, that what you’re trying to tell me?” A smile tilts my lips. “Hell, you can probably guess I’m not just here for the whiskey.” I shoot the contents of my glass down, breathe out its burn. “I’m here to tell you I got a girl.”

I can’t help but smile at the memory of telling Delilah I love her. Her lips on mine, that *hold tight* feeling in my gut I knew would stay with me for the rest of my life.

“I’m gonna marry her. Ask her at least. If she’ll have me—I’ll have to wait and see. But she’s worth it. She’s the one thing in the world that could make me want a forever. After you, after Mom and Dad, that’s saying a lot.”

Jack would say it says everything. He’d ask me what the fuck am I waiting for, tell me to go ask her right now, ring be damned.

“You’d like her. Mom and Dad would too.” I chuckle, thinking about my girl. “She’s gonna keep me on my toes for the rest of my life.”

I run a hand over my mouth, feel the scrape of my whiskers beneath my palm, and exhale my grief. Never gone, but healed these last few months by Delilah. I fell in love with her because she wasn’t afraid to show me her pain, her past.

But she also wasn’t afraid of mine.

“I miss you, Jack. And I’m sorry. I don’t think I ever apologized for leaving you there that day. I hope you can forgive me.” I clear my throat, take a deep breath, looking off into the distance at the wildflower-freckled pasture, doing my best not to cry. “Because I finally fucking think I forgive myself. And damn. It’s good to be home.”

I grab Jack’s glass and take his shot for the both of us. He’d be proud of how damn good it tastes. “I love you, brother. Till tomorrow.”

With that, I settle my hat on my head, grab the whiskey and the glasses, and stand. My eyes snag on the cloud of smoke darkening the sky above the Coop.

I shake my head and chuckle before glancing back down at Jack. “Okay. I get the point.”

* * *

“I don’t fucking believe it.” Ezra stands, jaw dropped, when he sees Delilah and me walking hand in hand across the bonfire-lit field. “You came.”

“I came.”

“It wasn’t me.” Delilah gives me a teasing look. “He’s here of his own free will.”

Everyone’s here. A Weston-gone-wild spectacle of chaos and clamor. Adirondack chairs circle a bonfire. Whiskey and wine bottles sit on an empty barrel rolled out from the Coop. Music plays from River’s speaker.

“Uncle Cole!” Evangeline squeals and flies toward me. I catch her up, toss her on my shoulders. She kicks her bare feet like she’s trying to spur a bull. “Yay, yay, yay!”

“How about one more *yay* for good measure?” Wells gives me a grin. “Good to see you.”

“Let’s not make it a big deal,” I grumble.

“We’re here for marshmallows.” Delilah tickles Evvie’s toes.

I set Evvie down, watching as she grips Delilah’s hand and leads her toward the fire, where the rest of my family and a bag of marshmallows await. Before I can follow, my arm’s snagged by River.

“Cole. We got a situation with the run.”

“It can wait.” I shift my gaze from his tense face to Delilah’s. Bright, beautiful, lit up by firelight. “Whatever it is, we won’t solve it now.”

River nods and crosses his tattooed arms over his chest, an unspoken understanding passing between us.

Tempest might take. But not tonight.

We settle into chairs around the firepit, Delilah on my lap. Stars twinkle high above in the onyx sky. More beer, whiskey, and wine are poured. Wells strums our father's old guitar. Lively twangs fill the air.

Even though I'm beat and River's news about the run eats at me, I set it aside. Right now, there's no place I'd rather be than here with my family.

"We all set for the whiskey review?" Ezra asks Delilah.

She nods, relaxing against my chest. "Yep, Nolan gets in tomorrow at seven."

"I'm picking him up from the airport," Hassie says, flashing a look at me, and I nod. "Then I'll drive him to the distillery, where Delilah will work her magic."

Delilah smiles. "Rather, the whiskey will."

A round of laughs goes up.

I scrub a hand over my mouth and take it all in. The distillery, the ranch, its peace warms my hard heart. Despite the danger that lurks, life almost feels back to normal. I'm grateful to my brothers for understanding. For giving Delilah a safe place.

The last two weeks, I've been working at the ranch and at the Coop with Delilah by my side. Langford kept his end of the bargain, getting the USB to his FBI contact, all while conveniently keeping the death of Dino to himself. In less than four days, an agent from DC will be out here to interview Delilah. A conversation I intend to sit in on.

I don't trust the peace, because it's something that has never lasted for long. But right now, I'll enjoy it.

“You’re a natural at the distillery.” Ezra’s tone has reverence and pride filling my chest. He stares into his whiskey before looking up. “How’d you like to take over as manager?”

“Really?” she breathes.

“Really.” Ezra smiles, and I know it’s his way of apologizing for saying she should leave. “You’re staying, aren’t you?”

“I am.” Her cheeks flush pink.

“Congrats, Del.” River lifts his glass with a tattooed hand. “You wrangled the distillery, and you wrangled Cole. Truly, a miracle worker.”

“Thanks, asshole.” My tone is gruff, but I’m smiling.

“I’m sure he wasn’t always this grumpy.” Delilah jumps at the crackle of an ember.

“He was.” My uncle looks to me, trying not to laugh.

“Let’s face it,” Warren chimes in. “Cole came out of the womb with a scowl and a bottle of whiskey.”

Delilah and Hassie descend into giggles.

I laugh, full and genuine, and the sound turns heads. Vaughn gives me a nod. The way Wyoma leans into Delilah looks like she’s ready to start talking about wedding plans. I won’t lie. So am I.

Wyoma scoots closer and presses a palm to my knee, her eyes watering as she looks up, giving me a smile. “It’s about damn time you came home, Cole.”

She says it soft, hushed, just for me and Delilah to hear.

With a rough swallow, I take in her words, take a second before saying, “It took long enough.”

“But you did it,” Wyoma says as she looks at Delilah on my lap, and then back to me. “You let go.”

“Yeah,” I rasp, biting back raw emotion. “I did.”

It’s clear now.

There are more important things than looking for ghosts.

My brothers.

Our dynasty.

Delilah.

That’s all I need.

I let myself break, but in the process, I forgot to put myself back together again. And that’s what Delilah’s done this summer. She’s made me whole. Brought me back into the family fold without even realizing it.

“I need to put little girls to bed.” Wyoma huffs, breaking the heaviness of the moment, and rises with a sleeping Evangeline in her arms.

“I hope that includes me.” Hassie stands and stretches. Delilah hops off my lap and links arms with her. River and Wells follow them at a distance as Delilah walks her to her Bronco. Warren and Vaughn clean up the bottles. Which leaves me and Ezra.

I look at my brother, who stands to gather Evangeline’s teddy bear and tiara. I shove up, scrubbing a hand over my mouth. Summoning courage. Honesty.

“I’m sorry, Ez.”

He blinks. “For what?”

“For leaving all those years ago. For staying away as long as I have.” Out of all my brothers, he needs this the most. “I know you were pissed at me.”

“I’m not pissed because you stayed away, Cole.” Ezra’s brow creases. “You protected us from the road. You sent money back. You called every birthday. You came when Evvie was born. You did everything you could.”

I stare down at my hands, the W carved into my palm. The pact. That night. Our lives changed forever.

There’s a long pause, then Ezra says, “I’m pissed because I missed you.”

I lift my head.

“I had already lost one brother, and it felt like I had lost another.” Ezra sticks his hands in his pockets. “But I know you probably needed to do whatever you did on the road.” With a snort, his thick mustache lifts. “Even if riding bulls is a stupid fucking hobby.”

I chuckle, then sober, looking my brother in the eye. I need him to hear how much I mean it. “I should have come home a long time ago.”

“Well, you’re here now.”

We stand there, the only noise between us the crackle of the fire.

Ezra takes a quiet breath and goes on. “You’re a good uncle, Cole. I’m glad you’re sticking around so Evvie will have a chance to know you.” He shakes his head. “What you’re doing for her…the barrels and all that…I never told you thanks.”

“Not needed,” I gruff around the knot of emotion in my throat.

He gives me a curt nod, his eyes shiny in the firelight. “You’re a good brother too. In case you needed to hear it.”

Clapping my hand on his shoulder, I give it a squeeze. No more apologies. Only promises. It’s what I owe my brothers. “I’m here now. I’m not leaving again.”

“I know that.” He grins.

Silence for a long few minutes as the night buzzes around us. All the bullshit between us doesn’t matter now. It’s over. Done.

“Think of a name for the whiskey yet, Cole?” Ezra’s deep voice breaks the silence.

My gaze drifts to Delilah, standing near Hassie’s Bronco, watching me watch her, a soft smile on her face.

“Yeah. I have.”

* * *

When we get back to the ranch house, I take Delilah's hand and lead her into the living room, where I put on a record, not ready for this night to end. I take her in my arms, and we sway to the music.

"That was fun," she muses as she rests her head on my chest. "I never had nights like this. With family."

"You will. Lot of 'em in your future, darlin'." I brush a kiss to the top of her head. Her sweet innocence makes my heart clench. I'm holding my entire world in my arms. Nothing can stop this feeling.

"Good. Because, despite everything, I really loved this summer." Her voice fills with longing. "I can't believe it's ending."

I already know how this summer will end. With Delilah as my wife.

When the music switches over to an old George Jones song, Delilah lifts her head. "What kind of old man song is this?"

I chuckle. "Keep teasing me darlin'—we know how it'll end."

"Fun and games and your cock inside of me?" She flashes a coy smile, the one that can get me to do anything.

"Now that you mention it…" I grip her hand and press her back toward the wall.

"Cole." She bites down on her lush lower lip. My girl's as eager as I am.

I should have patience, should take her to the bedroom and undress her the right way, but I never said I was a patient man.

Fuck. I'm so weak for this girl I can't stay away. So weak I'm already on my knees.

I shove at her dress, slipping my hands behind to grip her ass and holding myself there as I grip her garter with my teeth. I drag it down her toned leg, then kiss every inch of her skin. Her inner thigh. Her knee. The birthmark on the curve of her ass.

Then I wrench her panties down her thighs. My mouth meets her pussy. My nostrils flare at her scent.

I stare, mesmerized at the way her inner thighs are already damp with desire. I feel like a fucking king.

A groan escapes my throat. “Fucking gorgeous,” I murmur, leaning in to lap up every last drop. Obsessed with her taste. “That’s my girl. Drip for me.”

“Fuck.” She closes her eyes, her fingers running desperately through my hair. “Cole.”

“It’s never going to be enough,” I rasp, fucking her with my mouth, feeling her clamp around me, feeling those breathless gasps shake her slender body.

When she’s close to coming, I stand. Holding her up against the wall, I grip her hair and force her dreamy gaze to mine as I sink into her with a rough thrust. “Need those eyes on me, Delilah,” I demand harshly, eyes locked. Terrified that she’ll realize I’m not the man she wants. Terrified I don’t have every part of her. This fierce, beautiful girl of mine. My serenity and my chaos, my life and my death.

It’s like worshipping a goddamn miracle. I’m undeserving, unworthy, but I’m willing to work the rest of my life to earn her love.

Her head tips back, her honey-blond hair a wild swirl around us, as her delicate fingers stroke their way up my back.

I bury my face in her neck, grunting out the words. “I love you, Delilah. I’ll give you everything if you’ll let me.”

“Oh fuck…yes, Cole…” Her soft voice launches to a begging cry as I thrust deeper.

Pulling back, I watch her face as she comes, refusing to lose any sight of her. Refusing to let her go.

I will *never* let her go.

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Delilah

I stand in Cole’s kitchen, a box of hair dye in my hand.

Or is it *my* kitchen?

The thought makes me smile, and I hum to myself as I open the box and unwrap a small brush and an applicator bottle. I mix the color, shaking and shaking it until the bottle’s contents turn a pretty shade of lavender.

Cole appears, shirtless, that wide chest carved in muscle and tattoos. “You should do that in the bathroom.”

I look up at him. “But I want to do it where you are.”

He looks down at me, amused, devoted, then kisses my brow.

“Let me help.” His big fingers pick up the brush. With a careful hand, he streaks it through the ends of my hair. “What color?”

“Lilac gold.”

He finishes the ends, then sets the brush in the sink. I turn to study his handsome face, his stern jaw covered by dark scruff. The sharp tic in his cheek tells me he’s worried.

“You’re hidin’ something from me, cowboy.”

“You’re right.” He smooths big hands over my shoulders. “I have bad news.”

“What?”

“We have to do the run tonight.”

“Why? What happened?” It’s not supposed to happen until a few days before the launch party.

“Craddock happened.” Cole’s face is hard. “Warren’s mic in the Rusty Spur picked up a conversation between Craddock and one of his deputies. They were planning to stop our trucks next week. If they did that, they’d have found the guns.”

“Oh god. They know.” My fingers fly to my mouth.

“They know *something*, but if they had anything solid, they’d already be here with warrants tearing up the place.” Though his voice is steady, his eyes betray worry. “Syd says we do the run tonight. This way, we slip past their defenses and catch them off guard. They won’t have time to pull anything together.”

“Is that safe?”

“Better than the alternative. But that means…”

“You won’t be here for the reviewer.”

“I’m sorry.” He swears under his breath, shakes his head. “I don’t like leaving you alone.”

“It’s okay. I have Wells, Hassie, and Vaughn.” I smile playfully. “Besides, I know your whiskey better than you, cowboy.”

Cole’s laugh is a low rumble in his chest. “Fightin’ words, darlin’.”

I press up on tiptoe to kiss him. When I pull back, he says, “Got some other words I want to ask you too, and soon.” He studies my face, watching my reaction.

I blush and bite my lip. “Cole.”

Before I can say anything else, he kisses me, then scoops me up and carries me to our bedroom.

* * *

The Wild Westons storm through the empty tasting room, adjusting Stetsons, tucking guns into waistbands. All business. Tension, chaos charges the air. But I'm learning it's always going to be like this. If I'm with Cole, there's a dark edge to his world.

I accept it.

"You got this, Del?" Ezra reaches for his keys.

"I got it. Ready to charm Nolan Kraus and get him blissfully soused."

"She does," Cole echoes, striding toward me.

My heart pounds as I return his smile. Despite my slight nerves, focus, determination stab through me. The Westons trust me to do this. Even better, I *know* I can.

Tonight, this entire summer, feels like it's meant to be my life. Like it's not just luck anymore that got me here. It's the love I have made.

"Hassie's on her way to the airport." Warren checks his watch, scowls. "If she's on time."

River, phone to his ear, talks in low tones to Syd.

"Where's the whiskey?" I look around. It's habit to grab my tasting room apron and wrap it around my waist.

"Behind the bar. Labeled and everything." Cole's body is tense as he comes to my side.

I gasp in surprise. "You picked a name."

Cole gives me that heart-melting hat tilt. "You'll see."

"Kiss your girl, then move your ass." Warren storms the floorboards, River and Ezra following him out.

I look into those worried blue eyes as Cole pulls me in. “We’ll be as quick as we can.”

“Don’t rush,” I tell him. “I have it handled.” There can be no mistakes tonight. I want my man coming home to me.

“Wells is at the house. He and Vaughn will drop in when Nolan gets here. Hassie too. Remember…” Cole takes my hand, pulling me close. “Stay on the ranch, Delilah.”

“And here I thought I’d go dancing.”

“Not funny,” he grumbles.

“Fooled you.” I grip his shirt, force a small smile. “Please be safe.”

Cole clasps me to his wide chest, and oh god, I never want to leave. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” Emotion settles in that steel face of his. He gives me one last hard kiss, then disappears out the door and into the fading sunset.

I stare after him for a long second before I shake myself out of my daze. I need to focus. It doesn’t do Cole or his brothers any good if I stay here and worry.

I get to work, turning up the lights, the music. The photo shoot will be an hour, followed by the tasting. I add flowers and candles to a high-top. I fix a small plate of charcuterie, a new menu offering Ezra’s approved, then pull out a flight board. I grab five bottles of Weston Whiskey from the shelves, arranging them on the bar as a backdrop for the photo shoot.

Before I know it, an hour has passed. I check the clock on the wall. Nolan should be here any second.

I survey my hard work.

Only one thing’s missing. The final touch. The limited-edition whiskey.

I bend down, putting all my strength into hefting the box of limited-edition whiskey onto the bar. Reaching in, I grab a bottle neck, eager to see

the new label, and pull it out. Set it down.

The label's beautiful, hearkening back to the bootlegging Old West era with its antique style, but it's the name that has tears filling my eyes.

The Darlin'

Distiller's Cut

American Single Malt Whiskey

Aged 18 Years

My breaths rush in and out, heaving my chest.

He named his whiskey after me.

My gaze glued to the bottle, I blink back tears, one singular thought on my mind.

I'm going to marry Cole Weston.

I feel ready to burst. I've never been so happy in my life. I can't wait to have a million sunsets with this man. A million babies. I cup a hand over my mouth, tracing my smile. Our life will be good and happy and maybe not perfect, maybe dangerous, but ours.

The crunch of car tires outside cuts through my daydream daze.

Quickly, I grab a corkscrew and flick out the knife. I cut through the foil covering the cork. As the door opens behind me, I slip the corkscrew into the front pocket of my apron.

Hassie walks in. Her body stiff, her eyes far away.

"Great, you're here." I peer behind her. "Where's Nolan?"

"I'm sorry." She approaches with hesitant steps. Devastation creases her pretty face. "I'm so sorry, Delilah."

"For what?" I frown in confusion.

"For this." The doorway behind Hassie darkens, and a man emerges from outside, a gun in his hands. He's big, barrel-chested, with blond hair and

narrow eyes.

My eyes widen, panic gripping my spine.

Hassie's eyes lock on mine, a tear slipping down her pale cheek. "He's not Nolan, Delilah, he's—"

"Stop talking." He grits out the words, jerking the gun at Hassie before looking at me. "Are there cameras?"

"Yes."

"Turn them off. Now."

I do, my voice stuck in my throat, my mind frantically searching for a solution. There's no one around to help. My phone's in the back office. The employees gone for the night. Vaughn and Wyoma and Wells are miles away on the ranch side of the property. The rest of the Westons are out on their run.

"Here's what we're going to do. You're going to come with me, and I'll take you to Please." He jabs the gun into Hassie's ribs, but she keeps a cool composure the Westons would be proud of. "You do that, she lives. You fight, she dies. It's real simple."

Barely discernible, Hassie shakes her head, mouthing the order, *Run*.

Never. If I do, he'll shoot Hassie. I won't risk it.

"Now!" the man bellows.

"Okay, okay." With a nod, I lick my lips. "I'll go with you."

I take a step forward, only to freeze when I see her.

Oh no no no no. Not Evangeline.

My lungs seize as she creeps out from behind the bar, coming fully into the man's line of sight.

"Delilah, who's this?"

Her tiny, innocent question turns me inside out.

“Fuck.” The man’s gaze turns flinty. The gun bobs in his hand. I remember the woman in the movie. These men are monsters. They won’t spare Evangeline.

Hassie’s eyes lock on mine like she already knows what I do.

We both move at the same time.

Hassie lunges at the man, screaming. But his gun jerks toward her, catching her on the side of the face in a crack of bone and crunch of cartilage.

I scoop up Evangeline, watching in horror as Hassie crumples to the ground. She lies motionless and twisted, copper hair shrouding her face.

“No,” I gasp. Panic seizes my lungs, my mind flooding with horror.

Is she dead? Hurt? I can’t tell.

The man advances. “I fucking warned you, bitch.”

Evangeline starts to cry, and I wrap my arms around her like a human cage.

The man kneels down and presses the gun to Hassie’s head, eyes locked on me.

I hold my breath.

“You come with me, or she dies.”

An overstretched smile fills the man’s face as he looks at Evangeline. “Maybe I should kill her too.” I recoil at his words, nausea gripping my stomach.

“Fuck you,” I fling out. This man will die if he touches her. “I’ll go with you—just don’t hurt her.”

“Get rid of her then.” The man nods, moving his finger off the trigger. But he still keeps the gun aimed at Hassie.

I crouch down and set Evangeline on her bare feet. “Run to the Coop. Hide there. Don’t come out until you hear your dad.”

Her lower lip juts out. “I don’t want to go.”

“Yes, you do.” I force a wobbly smile. “You have to tell Uncle Cole my secret, okay?” I lean in and whisper in her ear. When I pull back, I make my voice harder, meaner than I’ve ever spoken to Evangeline. “Go. Now. Run.”

Her dark blue eyes flick once to the man, then Evangeline turns and races down the hallway that leads to the cooperage. I wait until I hear her small footsteps fade to nothing, then I rise to standing.

I’m so sorry, Cole.

He’s done everything to protect me, but I have to protect Hassie and Evangeline. It’s the only way to save them.

The man approaches. His eyes slide lecherously over my body. “Mr. Please is going to like you.” He lifts the gun, falling into line behind me. “Move.”

Shaking uncontrollably, I walk toward the door, stepping outside into the darkness, where I make out the silhouette of a long black car idling in the parking lot. A limo.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Don’t you worry about that.” The man’s voice is sharp in my ear, and I feel a sharp prick on the back of my neck.

“Oh,” I moan. My veins instantly feel hot with whatever he gave me. All time and movement and thought slowing, blurring the edges of my consciousness.

The back door of the limo opens.

Numbly, I try to run, try to fight, but my arms and legs lack the strength to pull it off. As I reach desperately for purchase, for anything to hold on to, there’s a whisper in the blackness around me.

“Hello, Lady Lawless.”

And then, my eyes roll back, darkness floats in, and I’m falling.

Further and further away from Cole.

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Cole

With tense shoulders, I check the rearview mirror of my truck for any signs of red and blue lights.

“Relax.” War shifts in the passenger seat beside me. We’re idling on the shoulder of the road, a few feet from where the highway begins staking out the last distribution route out of Tempest. The glow of his cell phone lights up his face as he checks a text from his bartender. “Craddock’s cruiser is trolling Main Street right now. No one’s coming.”

Maybe not, but it still does nothing for my rampaging nerves. My heart’s been wrenched tight in my chest, ever since I left Delilah at the ranch tonight. Knowing I might be walking into something that could put me away for years.

The only thing keeping me together right now is the thought of Delilah, safe on the ranch.

“Delilah,” Warren says like he knows where my mind has gone. “She knows about this?”

“She does.”

“Then she’s in.”

“But should she be?”

“Don’t do this to yourself right now. Doubt.”

No doubt. Never about Delilah.

It’s about the danger that’s all around us. Tempest. Our dangerous side hustle. The past. The Westons are a target in town. My moral compass is gray at best, but I never want Delilah’s light to dim. My dark shadows can’t touch her.

“You’ve run too long, Cole. Let life in.” Warren shakes his head. He adjusts his cuffs. Always immaculately dressed, even for a lawless gun run. “You can’t control everything. You can’t stop the bad.”

“Another year of this,” I concede. “Once it’s over, we’re out.” Then there’ll be nothing to put our family, Delilah, in danger. Until then, it’s up to me to shield her the best I can.

He arches a disbelieving brow. “You going to wait that long to marry her?”

“Not a goddamn chance.”

“When are you asking her?”

“As soon as I can. I wish I had Mom’s ring.” The cops never returned it after her death.

Warren opens his mouth, but I lift a hand, cutting him off.

The rumble of motorcycles fills the air. Syd and his crew zip past. Which means our truck isn’t far behind.

Adrenaline surges in my blood. Jack’s voice is there, coaching me through it, just like he would before one of my rides. *Settle in, make your face mean, and nod your head, Cole. Leave it all on the line to make that eight-second whistle.*

Eight seconds.

Eight fucking seconds on that bull.

It always felt like a lifetime to me.

I stiffen, watching as the truck bearing our Weston Whiskey logo merges onto the highway that leads out of Tempest. In a flash, the truck's gone, taillights winking in the dark as it blends with the oncoming rush of late-night traffic.

Foot on the gas, ready to gun the engine and barricade the road, I glance in the rearview mirror, waiting for the telltale sign of red and blue flashing lights.

Nothing.

The road is dark. The guns are gone.

Warren blows out a breath, then reaches beneath the seat to pull out his flask. He takes a sip before passing it to me.

After taking a long pull, I lift my phone to my ear, dialing Ezra and River, who are parked five miles down the road. "We're good," I tell Ezra, who's picked up on the first ring. "The truck's all clear. Meet you back at the ranch."

I hang up at the exact same second another phone chimes.

"That you?" Warren pats his pockets.

I check my phone. "No."

Another chime. My gaze lights on the glove box.

I reach over and open it.

The burner phone. Dino's phone.

Fuck, I forgot it was in here. But I know I powered that damn phone down.

Fear. It's all around me in the truck, in the dark night air. My heart rate thunders, rage, dread, curling inside of me.

I reach in and pick it up, reading the message that waits.

Mine.

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Delilah

A man’s hand on my leg. His mouth on my cheek.

Cole.

I roll my head on a hard shoulder. Soft leather and the harsh smell of cologne. I whimper.

Not Cole. Not my cowboy.

“No…please…” I moan as I float in the hazy space between consciousness and unconsciousness. Reality and dream. Nothing makes sense. I’m caught in a slow, rocking movement that does nothing to calm the churning inside of me.

“That’s my name all right. Please. Get used to it because you’ll be saying it all night.” A chuckle from beside me. “Don’t worry, Lady. It’ll all be over soon.” A hand strokes up my leg.

I try to lift my head, but it feels like it’s made of lead. I’ve been drugged. I can tell by the way everything’s out of focus, by the way my bloodstream’s on fire. But slowly my eyes flutter open and catch sight of darkness whipping by. The silhouette of trees blur in my periphery. *A car. I’m in a car.*

The man’s voice is calm and gentle. “I don’t often lose the things I want. But you…you were the most beautiful. You made me obsessed with you. Made me need to possess you.”

My head falls back against the seat, my mouth parting in a silent scream, but nothing comes out.

“Shhh, Lady. We’re almost there.”

Oh god. A chill grips my spine.

He’s taking me somewhere. Away from Cole. From my home.

“Fuck.” A curse from the driver. “There’s a cop.”

Hope leaps into my heart as red and blue lights illuminate the inside of the car. I struggle to sit up.

“Pull over.” Please wraps an arm around my shoulders, stilling me, and coldness seeps into my bones, my skin.

All around me, movement slows. My heartbeat thunders in my ears. Gravel crunches. I hear the slide of a window and then the driver asks, “Is there a problem, officer?”

“Taillight’s out.” The slice of a shaky flashlight. “You in from out of town?”

“Yes sir. My client has business in town.”

“Late business.”

“International travel is a delicate matter.”

“I see.”

“Hh—” I struggle to make noise, to be heard but my voice sounds so very far away. “Hh—”

“Roll down the back window for me.”

Oh, thank god.

Darkness gives way to the bright beam of a flashlight. Light spills inside the backseat, and I blink. Squint. All I see is a towering frame of a khaki uniform. A firearm on the hip.

The arm tightens around me. “I’m sorry for the trouble, officer. My wife and I had dinner. She had a lot to drink. She’s a lightweight, I keep telling her that.” Please chuckles. A palm scrapes up my legs, squeezing the inside of my thigh. “As you can see, I’m taking very good care of her.”

A soft moan of protest falls from my lips.

I struggle to focus on the face that appears in the lowering window. When I see who it is, my stomach clenches. I know the man. Deputy Craddock.

Help. Help. I mouth the words over and over.

Craddock’s face is expressionless. “Hang tight while I get on the phone with my supervisor.”

No! my heart screams. *Come back. Help me.*

Please strokes a finger down my cheek. “Save your screaming for later. You’ll need all your strength for our movie.”

Tears blur my vision, despair engulfing me.

As I drift in and out of consciousness, I overhear brief snippets from outside the limo. Craddock. “…It’s her, I’m sure of it… Understood…Good night, Mayor Hale.”

Hard boot stomps and then Craddock comes back to us, sliding his cell phone in his back pocket. He leans down to face us, an overstretched smile filling his face.

“I apologize for delaying your evening, sir. I’ll let you and your…wife be on your way.”

My heart drops. Panic, adrenaline, horror—it all floods my system. *He knows who I am. He knows who I am, but he doesn’t care.*

“Thank you, officer.” Please cradles me against his chest. Slips the strap of my dress down to kiss my bare shoulder. “My wife and I plan to have a very good night.”

The men share a laugh of understanding. Tears stream down my face, choking on the revulsion, the rage that spreads through my entire body.

Craddock’s tall silhouette disappears. Doors slam. There’s the crunch of gravel as the police cruiser passes us by, and then the limo starts to move.

“We do it here,” Please says through tightly gritted teeth. “Before she gets loose again.”

“Yes sir.”

My head lolls against Please’s chest. A tear slips down my cheek.

“I love you, Lady Lawless. I promise, I won’t hurt you too much.” I barely feel it as a soft kiss is pressed against my brow. “But I have a few surprises in store for you and your cowboy.”

No. Not, Cole…please, please…

The sharp prick of the needle causes me to gasp.

“You’re a monster,” I choke out, stubbornly clinging to my last few seconds of consciousness.

“I’m truly sorry about this. I’m not a monster. I’m merely a man who loves to hunt very pretty things.”

My fluttering eyes look up in brief confusion, in rage, at the man who holds me, then, after one last deep inhalation, my world tumbles mercifully into blackness.

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Cole

I cut the truck's engine and leap out. My brothers are close behind me, tearing their trucks into the empty lot.

My heart hammers when I see Vaughn, Wyoma, and Wells running across the distillery grounds. "We can't find Bugs!" Wyoma shouts.

Fuck.

"When did you last see her?" Warren runs toward them.

"About an hour ago." Wyoma's hands clasp her heart. "She was playing in the tunnels."

Ezra curses, panic etched on his face. "I told you to keep her out of there."

I keep my breathing even but feel sick inside as I race toward the tasting room. Music blasts into us the second we charge inside. Amid my roaring pulse, the haunting melody of "Lungs" sinks beneath my skin in ice-cold dread.

A low moan has all of us looking over.

Pushing herself up off the ground, tucked into a corner of the room, a hand to her head, is Hassie.

“Oh my god.” Warren launches himself at her, dropping to his knees. His hands find her bruised cheek, bringing her glassy gaze to his. “What happened?”

I step closer, scanning the tasting room, taking in tonight’s setup, the overturned chair, the bottle of spilled whiskey. “Where’s Delilah?”

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, Cole.” Tears spill down Hassie’s pale cheeks as she finds my gaze. Blood soaks the side of her copper head. “I didn’t know…I didn’t…” She sucks in a sharp breath, fighting for control. “I got to the airport to pick up Nolan. But he wasn’t Nolan. He had a gun and was with another man. He forced me into his limo. Made me bring him here and —and…” Her face crumples. “I’m so sorry.”

“Fuck.” Warren, looking ready to stroke out, crushes her in his arms.

“Cameras are off,” River says.

Dread crashes over me. This was a trap. Somehow, someone knew we’d be gone tonight and used it to get access to the distillery. To Delilah.

“Delilah!” I bellow, racing down the hallway and into the Coop, the distillery. I call for her until my lungs give out, until I’m thundering back to the tasting room, where Hassie’s talking to Warren and Wells in low, distressed tones.

“How long ago?” I demand, flexing my fists.

“It was seven, like we agreed on.”

“Tell me everything.” My heart’s in my throat, impatience callously sharpening my words, but I try for calm. It’s taking everything in me not to lose it right now.

River grips my arm. “Breathe, Cole.”

“I had my Bronco. But he forced me inside a limo. There was someone in the back seat, but I couldn’t see who it was. The two of us left the other

man and came in here. He tried to make Delilah go with him, but then Evvie came in—”

Absolute silence.

“Wait.” Ezra crouches beside her, and I watch my brother’s stern demeanor snap like a rubber band. “Evvie was here?”

Uncle Vaughn swears.

“She snuck in. Somehow.” Hassie sucks in a sharp breath. “That’s when Delilah and I tried to fight. But I don’t know what happened after he hit me.” A sob escapes her throat. “I don’t know if he took Delilah or both of them…”

Wells screws his eyes shut. Wyoma bursts into tears.

“Evangeline! Bugs!” Shoving up, Ezra runs out of the tasting room, shouting. River races after him. Their frantic voices echo in the space around us.

The world tilts. I stare at the broken bottle of whiskey on the ground and grip the bar top to steady myself.

Delilah would never allow anyone to hurt Evangeline. She went with them.

The thought’s more than I can bear, and I close my eyes as terror frays my nerves. My resolve. My sanity.

Please has her.

He has my girl.

My heart thunders, rage and vengeance roaring inside of me.

When I stopped Delilah’s abduction, it only fed his obsession. Dino’s words come back to me now: *He doesn’t give up when it comes to something he wants.*

Please will stop at nothing to have her for whatever sick, twisted game he’s playing.

The man’s obsessed. Dangerous.

Imagining what Please plans to do to her makes me want to retch, makes me want to tear the fucker from limb to limb.

Not her.

Not Delilah.

My stomach churns, and I squeeze my eyes shut as helplessness and rage overtake me. I was her safe space, her protection, and I failed her.

Did they take her? Where? Out of the city? Out of the state? My mind runs wild, a firestorm of dread and howling nightmares.

Tempest takes, and tonight, it took Delilah.

Bootsteps.

I open my eyes.

The entire room breathes a sigh of relief as Ezra emerges from the hallway with Evangeline in his arms. The sight of my niece nearly brings me to my knees. River follows, his face murderous.

“Thank Christ.” Wells exhales.

“Where was she?” I stomp toward them.

“She was in one of the empty barrels.” Ezra kisses his daughter’s temple, his eyes filled with something heavy. “Hiding.”

“Who was here, princess?” I ask, looking over Evangeline. Except for a scrape on her hand, she’s fine, but even that’s too much.

“A man. A mean bad man.” Her lower lip pushes out. “He hurted Auntie Hassie. He wanted to take me and Delilah, but she said no.”

A fresh wave of rage stirs inside me thinking about what my niece witnessed. She and Delilah were supposed to be safe on the ranch, and someone came and violated that space.

“Delilah told me to hide.” Evangeline lowers her voice, giggling. “She told me to tell you her secret.”

I loosen my rigid fingers, reaching up to gently tug at one of Evangeline's dark curls. "What's that?"

"That she wants to marry you, silly."

I suck in a breath. It's like a knife through my heart.

Ezra's sympathetic eyes land on me. Twisting his body, he kisses Evangeline one last time, then swings her into Vaughn's arms. "Take her back to the house, now."

As my aunt and uncle head to the homestead with Evangeline, I scan the tasting room. Delilah's all around me. The place we made love. One of the best moments of my life.

If anything happens to her, I'll never forgive myself.

Her death is mine. Delilah lives in my soul; my heart beats for her and her alone.

Hassie moves to stand but falters and sways. Warren puts an arm beneath her shoulder to steady her. "You need a hospital."

"I don't." Hassie glares at Warren, shoves at his chest. "I'm not going anywhere until we find Delilah."

Get to her, get to Delilah.

The only thought in existence.

Panic digs its fangs in, icing my blood, making my lungs burn.

Emotionless. Unforgiving. Cruel. It's what I have to be to get her back.

"Cole?" Wells's voice rings out, a soft question in the still silence. "What do we do?"

I feel them waiting, tense. I feel River's hand clap my shoulder in a death grip and hang on, feel Warren's eyes telling me he's here, feel Ezra nod his agreement, feel Jack in the room with me, no wise words tonight, only an urge to listen to the darkness inside.

Rage quakes through my limbs, tensing my muscles and flexing my fists. I turn to face my brothers.

“Whatever we have to.”

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Delilah

My head’s so heavy. Sweat drenches my skin, waves of hot and cold threatening to drag me back down into darkness. I whimper, trying to move, to roll over onto a soft bed, but I can’t. I’m held tight.

Slowly, my eyelids flutter, even the simple motion of opening them seems like too big of a task.

I lift my head and stop breathing.

I’m in a church. The room is barren and musty except for a few crooked pews. Rotted wood floors. Hundreds of candles illuminate the space. There’s a hole in the roof letting in the moonlight. Sparkling stars stretch in all directions.

Tears fill my eyes.

I don’t know where I am. None of this is familiar.

Pain radiates through my head, and I whimper. I reach for my temple, but my hand stays right where it is. Locked to my side.

I look down at my body. I’m tied to a pole but instead of binding my hands and feet, thick ropes are wrapped around me, beneath my breasts and around my ankles.

Nausea sweeps through me.

Oh god.

Then, panic, as I frantically try to remember what happened. The tasting room. Hassie. Please.

Please took me.

Breathe, Delilah. Breathe.

Think.

Get out.

I almost laugh aloud.

But I can. I've gotten out of worse situations. I can do this.

For Cole.

I need to be okay for him. Because if I'm not, it'll destroy him.

Slowly, I inhale a deep breath. Then I tighten every one of my muscles and wrench my body against the ropes. A fresh wave of pain rips through me, and instantly, black spots dance in my vision.

The inside of my elbow stings, no doubt from the injections that got me here.

Eyes rolling, my head falls to my chest. I breathe evenly, fighting to hang on to consciousness. When it passes, I lift my head and twist my torso again.

The ropes are tight, but if I keep twisting, I could loosen them. I could get out.

I glance around the church. A ninety-degree angle is all I have, but I blanch at what I see. A bed with white sheets and black metal headboard is positioned at the altar like some twisted sacrifice. Pillar candles surround the perimeter of the church. A tarp beside the bed. A camera blinks its red light in the middle of the space.

This monster does this all the time. A kill scene for his sick, twisted movies.

I feel nauseous as I look around the space. How long has he been in town, planning this?

My breath catches in my throat at the sound of footsteps. Coming through the back door and into the dim light of the church is a man in a hooded mask.

The man from the video.

Terror engulfs me. My breathing grows faster, louder as he comes toward me.

He settles in front of me, a tall, imposing figure. Then I watch in horror as he reaches a hand to the mask and pulls it off.

Bile surges in my throat as I get a good look at Please. The man who's been after me for months. The man who took Melly. All those girls.

He's disturbingly handsome, with a square jaw, tousled golden blond hair, and ice-blue eyes. The expensive suit clinging to his slender, well-muscled physique reminds me of the boardroom CEOs who come to the Velvet Belles with money to spend. Looking at him, you'd never see a monster.

That's what makes him so dangerous.

Please's plastic face twists into a grin. "Sleeping Beauty awakes." He steps forward, stroking a finger over my cheekbone. I cringe. "I thought being tied to a pole was fitting. Seeing as how you danced on one like a common whore."

"Fuck you." My body convulses as I wrench at my bindings.

Please chuckles. "Don't worry. You won't be in those long."

A loud clang makes both of us jump.

Please swears at the noise. But my heart skips a beat as the familiar sound of church bells echo throughout the space.

The old church.

We're still in Tempest.

But far on the outskirts. No neighbors. No cars or people. Screaming won't help.

When the bells fall silent, Please looks up into the rafters. "It's loud. I should have taken you out of state, but I couldn't wait anymore. I couldn't take the chance you'd escape."

Blood roars in my ears, whipping panic, rage. "Who are you?"

"I'm Mr. Please. I produce movies."

"You produce madness." Tears sear my eyes and fill my throat. "You're a monster."

"You're right. I am. But I'm sorry to say, there are a lot of us monsters out there."

His eyes are chilling, and I flinch.

Please cups my cheek. "Monsters who want beautiful, unhealthy things."

"Don't touch me." With desperate effort, I turn my face away. Hatred simmers in my veins.

"Oh, Lady Lawless, I'm going to do more to you than just touch." His nostrils pulse, and he lowers his hand to grip my throat. "Look at me. Now."

I gasp for air but find none. Blackness overtakes me. My ears ring. When my eyes race to his, Please releases my throat, steps back, and despite the swimming world in front of me, I can breathe again.

"I have to tell you how much I love you, sweet Delilah." Please circles me, his smile growing more plastic with every step. "The first time I saw you dancing, I knew you'd be mine. I knew I had to have you. You were the

most beautiful woman I had ever seen." His lip curls. "And then you had to go and run. You ran from me."

I shiver at the malice in his voice. The sheer disbelief that for once in his sick, twisted little life he failed to get what he wanted.

He gestures to the camera. "I'm going to record a masterpiece of a movie. Or should I say, you will." He stops suddenly. "You put up a good fight, Delilah. You running actually upped the demand from my customers, if you can believe that. What can I say, they like a good chase. Which is why I gave you a little extra freedom the last few months." He laughs darkly. "You think you were that good at not getting caught? I could have had you anytime I wanted."

"Fuck you." I spit at him. It lands on his cheek. Eyes alit with a perverse joy, he wipes the spit off with his palm, then brings it to his mouth, where he sucks it off.

"You're a fucking psychopath." I gulp down fear, disgust.

"And you, Lady Lawless, were the best hunt of my life."

"We have the USB. We have evidence." My breath hitches, my stomach contracts as every muscle in my body aches to be free. To fight. "They'll put you away."

"By the time they find you, I'll be so far out of the country, it won't matter," he says with an amused chuckle. "Men like me always come back. We always start again."

"What are you going to do?" I tremble against my bindings.

From somewhere behind me comes the soft sound of someone weeping.

Oh shit, who else is here?

Please's ice-blue eyes harden to stone. "I'm gonna fuck you, and you're going to beg for your life. And when I'm done, I'm going to kill you and leave your body for your boyfriend to find."

My heart pounds as a fresh wave of tears fills my eyes. Not Cole. He won’t survive it.

“But first…” Please leans close, his breath hot on my face. “I want to hear what you sound like when you really scream.”

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Cole

Chaos swarms all around me. Whiskey glasses litter my kitchen table. My brothers pace. Hassie sits in a chair, a blanket around her shoulders. Langford spreads out files and his laptop across the island. We called him an hour ago, forgoing the Tempest Police Department. The last thing they'll do is help. Instead, we're working directly with Langford's FBI contact, Special Agent Liam Byrne.

"Tell us what you have," Langford says into his cell phone.

The speaker phone crackles with an Irish accent. "Please's real name is Marcus D'Angelo. He's a producer in Hollywood. Makes bad action B-movies."

My fists clench at the information. We know who this motherfucker is.

But all of this information still doesn't give us Delilah.

Keyboard keys clack as Byrne says, "But now we really know what he's putting his producing credits toward. Raping and killing women for his sick movies."

I bury my hands in my hair, keep them there. Nausea churns my stomach. Just hearing the words is enough to break me. Is she hurt? Is she scared and

alone? Is she alive?

Every second that passes without seeing Delilah is a second off my life. I can't handle it. Can't do anything but pace and rage.

I see her everywhere. She's in the space all around me. Her mug from this morning, her box of hair dye, the love note scrawled on the whiteboard on the fridge. The sunshine, the warmth that she brought to my ranch house is gone, and the thought of never having it again is more than I can take.

River walks into the room with Syd.

"Anything?" I growl.

"No," Syd says. "I got my crew stationed on the roads in and out of Tempest. But no one's seen a limo in the last hour."

I nod, grateful for Syd. We don't have many we can count on, but S.O.T. being there tells me everything.

"We'll help your girl, man." Syd's tone is low, sympathetic. "She doesn't deserve this."

That's Delilah. She made everyone around her fall in love with her, including a lawless motorcycle club. Her charm, her sweetness, her light—it's all anyone can see.

Liam's voice comes through the speaker. "We have some updates. The people D'Angelo employs are ex-military. Which means it wouldn't be a stretch for someone to hack the distillery's email and get access to her calendar."

Warren refills his glass of whiskey. He hasn't put the bottle down since he got to the house. Or taken his eyes off Hassie. "So the man Hassie picked up worked for D'Angelo?"

"Yes." Langford scans his computer screen. "The driver's name is Whit Wakefield. He impersonated Nolan Kraus to get to Delilah."

"Is there really a Nolan Kraus?" Ezra wonders with a frown.

“There is. But he hasn’t been seen in over two days,” Liam clips. “We’re looking for him now.”

Christ.

“I’ve put a stop to all flights in and out of Tempest. I’ll call back when we have more information,” Liam says. “Sit tight.”

The line goes dead.

Like that last lifeline of hope.

“This is all my fault.” Hassie covers her face, starting to shake. Wells sits beside her, his arm going around her shoulder.

“Fuck.” Ezra sighs and removes his glasses to palm his eyes.

My heart wrenches, violently, and I clench the lip of the kitchen counter, needing something to hold on to.

It’s been three hours since she went missing.

I’ve never felt fear like this. Not when Jack died. Not when my parents were killed. This is soul-deep terror.

Thinking about Delilah being defenseless, hurt, takes my mind down a gruesome path of despair. One I won’t survive if she doesn’t.

“Hang tight, Cole.” Langford pockets his phone. “Agent Byrne will have agents here in the morning.”

“It’ll be too late by then,” I rasp, tearing a hand through my hair.

If we wait until morning, it’ll be a mistake. I feel it in my bones.

“Fuck this.” I grab my keys and my hat off the counter. Without another word, I stalk off toward the front door.

It slams behind me as I stomp down the steps. The night air is cool, balmy. The vanilla and caramel scent of whiskey scents the grounds. In the distance, silhouetted by deep, dark night, a gnarled fang of rock soars.

The screen door slams.

“Where are you going?”

I turn to face Warren and River. I can feel my control slipping, ready to take my rage out on anyone who tries to stop me from getting my girl.

“I have to drive.” I can’t sit around and do nothing while we wait. If I stay here any longer, I’ll punch a fucking hole in the wall.

“We’ll get her back.” River gives me a look of pain and sympathy.

“I should have been here. I *never* should have left her alone.” I pace away from the house, balling my hands into fists and squeezing my eyes shut tight.

“Cole. Don’t do this to yourself.” A rough sigh escapes Warren’s chest as he scrubs a hand over his face.

But I am.

It’s what I feared ever since Delilah set foot on the ranch.

Tempest takes.

The one person I can’t live without.

I’ll never fucking forgive myself.

“Cole. The phone.”

I snap my eyes open at the sound of a now-familiar chime. River’s pale in the glow of the porch light.

My scalp chills. I rip the burner phone from my pocket.

It’s a video call, and I accept.

A man in a black suit appears onscreen. Bloodlust fills my veins.

“Where is she?” I growl. Rage burns a path through my muscles.

“No pleasantries? Straight to demands?”

“Where. Is. She.” I grip the phone so tight it could shatter.

“Of course you’d be worried. You’re missing something that belongs to you.” He grins. “Sorry to say, Mr. Weston. This perfect, pretty creature of

yours is now mine.”

“Show her to me,” I demand.

There’s a soft hum, the jerk of the phone as it moves, and then the screen fills with Delilah’s tearstained face.

“Cole?”

Terror and relief hit me in one fell swoop at the sound of her shaky voice. Relief because she’s alive. Terror because she’s tied to a support beam with thick ropes. Her brown eyes are wide, her silken hair swims around her shoulders.

I fight to keep calm, fight not to lose it right then and there. “Hey, darlin’, how are you?”

Though her voice is light, it’s thin. “Oh, you know, just hangin’ around.”

I stifle a chuckle. Kidnapped, hurt, she’s still a force to be reckoned with. Awe-inspiring beauty, my girl with the soft heart but a spine of steel. She fought for Hassie, for Evangeline, and now she has to fight for herself.

“You okay?”

Her eyes tick to the left, telling me someone else is there in addition to Please. “I’m okay.”

“I’m comin’ for you. You hear me? You understand?” I search out Delilah’s gaze, and she finds mine back.

“I know,” she says, no tremor in her voice. “I know you will, Cole.”

Goddamn, her trust. Her strength. I don’t deserve either of them.

I stare at the phone, straining to fill in the missing pieces of what I’m seeing. But Delilah’s surroundings are faint, dim. A glow of lights, candles, maybe. Wood beams. A cement floor.

Please’s voice fills the speaker. “Maybe we should give him a sneak peek of what’s to come.”

Bells chime. Footsteps sound off camera. The phone shakes as it's passed off to someone. Delilah's terrified gaze ticks back and forth. Her whole body trembles.

"No," she whimpers, trying to shrink away from Please—but unable to, thanks to the ropes wrapped around her body.

"I will tear you apart if you touch her," I growl.

"See that's the thing, I'm here and you're not."

Delilah whimpers as he slides a finger over the front of her dress, tilting it down to expose her black bra. Gaze locked on me, he kneads her breast. Rage quakes through my nerves, my bloodstream.

You motherfucker.

She doesn't say a word, staring at me with a lifted chin. Strength burns in Delilah's eyes. I use it to temper my rage, remind myself what's at stake.

Both our lives.

"Now that's no good." Please looks at the camera, at me. "She's a fierce one, isn't she?"

I take calming breaths, barely hanging on to the last threads of my sanity, and growl, "You're a dead man."

"C'mon, pretty girl." Please frowns at Delilah. "Scream for me."

When he doesn't get a response, only a soft *fuck you*, he reaches behind her and grips her neck, squeezing hard on the pressure points of her slender throat. "Little fucking bitch. I said scream."

I see her fighting not to scream, to stay strong, but his fingertips dig deep, deeper. Tears leak from her eyes. Her breathing kicks up. And then—

A soul-shattering scream tears from her throat.

Rage locks my body, and I lunge at the screen. "Delilah!"

I watch her mouth move around my name, then her eyes roll back. A tiny whimper leaves her lips before her head falls forward, her chin touching her

chest.

She hangs there, motionless, eyes closed.

“Fuck, goddamnit!” I roar my rage out across the ranch.

Please tips her chin, giving me one last glance at her pale face. “Beautiful, even in sleep, isn’t she?” He grins. “Lucky me.”

The phone goes black.

Bile fills my stomach.

“Easy. Easy.” Warren grabs me by the back of the neck, bringing his forehead to mine. “Breathe, Cole. Hold it together.”

“We have to find her.”

“We will.”

“But how?” River curses.

My mind spins. She could be anywhere. Somewhere remote, where screams can’t be heard. A place where Please can play his dark games, film his twisted movies. He won’t be far if he grabbed Delilah tonight. He doesn’t want to waste any time. Not when he’s been waiting for her the last four months.

“She’s here.” I rub a hand down my jaw. “She’s in town. Please wouldn’t have had time to take her very far.”

“Where?”

I need something more. Something else.

I remember the cold calm I felt, waiting all those years to get Jack’s manager. I have to channel that vengeance now. Because if I lose it, if I make a mistake, I lose Delilah. I know it in my gut.

As torturous as it is, I close my eyes, replaying the phone call in my mind. The wood beams. The glow of the candles. The—

My eyes snap open.

The chime of bells.

Church bells.

“The church. The old church on Route 9. That’s where he’s holding Delilah.”

Warren shouts a warning but I’m already racing for my truck.

I rip open the driver’s side door and climb in, finding my gun wedged down between the seat and the center console.

The passenger door opens. I look down the seat to see River and Warren standing there.

“You’re not going alone,” Warren tells me.

River moves for the backseat. “Stay,” I order. I’d knock my younger brother out with a whiskey bottle before I let him get involved.

“That’s bullshit.” River’s eyes flare in anger, and for a second, I see him at ten years old, pissed off that Warren and I told him he couldn’t come fishing with us.

“He’s right.” Hand on his chest, Warren pushes River back, ignoring his furious objections. “It’s just us tonight, kid.”

With that, he slides in beside me and checks his own gun on his hip.

As I tear the truck down the long winding drive that leads out of Copper Run Ranch, I meet Warren’s cool gaze. He doesn’t ask what I plan to do. He doesn’t have to.

No mercy. Not when it comes to Delilah.

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Delilah

I wake on my back on the bare wooden floor of the church. I'm unbound, and my top's been pulled down to expose my bra.

Oh god.

Tears burn the backs of my eyes. He touched me when I was unconscious.

I shudder at that knowledge, shaking violently.

This fucking monster.

I won't let him win.

Never.

The room spins, a fresh wave of nausea rolling through me as I push myself up on hands and knees. I take deep, long breaths. Whatever drug I've been injected with feels like it's fading.

Lifting my head, I carefully look around for Please and the driver, who filmed the video call to Cole.

Cole.

I close my eyes. God, please let him be able to tell where I am. Please let him come. Please let me see him one more time.

“Delilah?”

My eyes fly open at the soft rasp of a voice. I whip my head to the right, gasping when I spy a dark-haired figure curled in the corner of the room.

“Melly.” My heart tremors. She’s alive.

She lifts her face. There’s blood beneath her nose and her lips are cracked and dry. She licks them. “Lili.”

A sob bursts free at the nickname, and I scramble for her. Her wrists and ankles are bound with rope. “Oh my god.” I wrap my arms around her as she trembles against the wall. She’s so thin. I can’t imagine how long she’s been here, starving, terrified. “I thought you were dead.”

“We will be,” she whispers. Her black eyes are haunted. “He’s waiting for you. He kept me alive for you. But now…” She shudders. “He’ll kill us both.”

Terror, adrenaline, fury flood my system. I palm her cheeks and hug her to me. “I won’t let that happen. I won’t.”

In Melly, I see my sister. All those girls who needed help, who never had a voice. I have to save her.

Quickly, I scan the church. The open doorway with moonlight spilling into it. No one in sight. But I know Please and the driver are still here. Lurking. Waiting.

Still, I have to try.

“We have to get out of here.” I turn back to Melly. Frantically, I work at the frayed cord around her wrists. It’s a scaffold knot. Thankfully, my muddled mind still remembers the steps to loosen it.

Instead of simply tugging on the end, I capsize the knot to release the tension. If I pull the wrong end, it can lock even tighter. Slowly, so slowly,

heart hammering in my ears, I work it open.

Melly freezes, her eyes lifting to my shoulder.

No.

I twist around and gasp.

It's Please. He's wearing that gruesome mask. He's terrifying. Emotionless.

My guts churn. It's time.

"I thought you'd be pleased I brought you a friend." Please reaches behind his back, pulls out a gun, and aims it at me. "Let go of her ropes."

I glare at him, positioning myself in front of Melly.

"Don't be stupid." He gestures toward the bed with the gun. "Get up and go to the bed."

"Fuck you." Hatred burns in my stomach like acid.

"Don't make me kill you." He advances.

I'd rather die here and now than subject myself to whatever twisted game Please has cooked up. The thought of him touching me, raping me, is too much to bear.

If I fight him, if I try to run, a bullet in the back would end it all.

My chest heaves. I could do it. Just run. Die fast.

Hold on, hold on, hold on. Lucy's voice pulses in my ears. A chant. A plea.

Don't give up. *Fight, Delilah.*

Tears spring to my eyes as I reach up and grip the locket around my throat.

Fight.

I close my eyes and think of all the good in my life. Happy things. Dancing in the Creek House. Mud pies with Evangeline. Cole telling me he

loves me, those deep blue eyes seeing every piece of me.

I have to fight. For Melly. For Cole.

He's out there looking for me. I can feel him. He will never rest until he finds me.

I just have to stay alive as long as I can.

"Now. Up." Please jerks the gun. "You first." His eyes move to Melly. "Then her."

I sway as I stand, heading for the bed in a dazed fugue. When I get there, laid out across the sheet is one of my costumes from the club. A beautiful burgundy silk slip dress.

"Strip," Please commands. "Dress yourself. They want to see Lady Lawless." His laugh cackles with a sick twistedness. He's enjoying himself. I've never hated anyone more.

I untie the apron around my waist. As I lay it on the bed, I feel something hard in the front pocket. My breath hitches. The corkscrew. The knife I used earlier to open the whiskey bottle.

The night air is cool on my bare skin as I undress. I feel Please's disgusting, lecherous eyes on me. "Exquisite." His hand bats against the front of his pants. "This is exactly the way I imagined you so many times. Just for me."

I dress as slowly as I can, putting the stockings on my legs. I step into the dress, then my stilettos.

Keeping one eye on Please, I fold and stack my clothing neatly at the end of the bed. It only takes the slip of a quick finger to tug the corkscrew out of my apron pocket. As I lean over, I discreetly palm it. I don't have many places to hide it on my body, in my skimpy lingerie, so I stick it in the garter high on the side of my thigh. It holds tightly. I pray it goes unnoticed.

“Beautiful,” he whispers. “You’re the most beautiful girl in the word, Lady Lawless.”

Please wants Lady Lawless. That’s exactly who he’s going to get.

Because this summer I learned who I am. What I want to do. Who I love. Every little piece of me I discovered, I treasure. I want it. I want my life.

Mine.

I won’t let this man take it away like so many always do.

I’ll die fighting to stop this monster. He will never do this to another girl.

“Get on the bed. Spread your legs.” After tucking the gun in the back of his waistband, Please turns on the camera. The red recording light blinks like a countdown clock on my life.

The thought of him touching me is so repulsive I cringe.

That hideous mask looms as he advances.

I glance toward the front of the church, catching a glimpse of the driver in silhouette as he stands guard near the door.

I steel myself. Cole. Melly. Lucy. One good swing.

I’m not prepared for his sudden movement. He’s on me so quickly I gasp. I fall back hard, knocking my head on the metal bed frame. There’s a prick of a needle in my arm.

Fuck. Fuck.

I already feel the drugs, warm, caressing. I have to move fast.

I start to scream. “Shush now,” he hisses, smothering my mouth with his own. “I’ll be gentle. So gentle. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, Delilah. Do you know that?”

I scream and buck and jerk as he spreads my legs and plays with my breasts. “Look me in the eyes, Lady. Look at me.”

Melly weeps softly.

The world swims, and I frantically grope for my garter. My fingers fumble around cool metal, the swirl of the corkscrew, but finally I have it.

I reach down inside of myself for every ounce of strength I have left. I send out a soft prayer to Lucy. *Lucy, give me luck.*

With my thumbnail, I flick out the knife. Then I lift my hand, the best I can with the drug coursing through my system, and stab.

The knife misses my intended mark—the throat—but it punctures the thin skin over Please's collarbone, pinning the mask to his body.

Please roars.

He jerks back in surprise, falling off me, off the bed to stumble across the room. He stutter-steps backward in surprise. Mask obscuring his vision, he knocks over a row of candles, toppling them like dominoes. The fire spreads quickly, catching the walls, rushing up the altar.

Fuck.

There's no time to waste. I scramble off the bed and rush to Melly. Orange flames lick in my periphery. The air stings with ash and heat, an inferno ready to rage.

"Hurry, Lili, hurry." Melly's chest rises and falls with panic.

My heart races, and a wave of dizziness rushes over me. My fingers are clumsy, like I have no strength left. Thankfully, with one hand free, Melly's able to shuck her wrist restraints.

Her eyes widen, and she screams, cringing into the wall. "Look out!"

I scream as a hand grabs a fistful of my hair. Pain explodes behind my eyes, the hollow of my temple as I'm wrenched away from Melly and tossed onto the hard ground.

My vision blackens. Movement above me, and then Please stands over me, breathing hard. His mask is off, fury darkening his face. Blood streams

down his chest. He levels the gun on me, and my entire body trembles in terror.

But around us, the fire spreads.

Any second, we'll all go up in flames.

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Cole

As we approach the church, tension locks my muscles. Delilah's close. So fucking close. I reach for her deep inside my heart, sending it to hers. Letting her know I'm coming. I'm almost there.

But what will I find? Is she hurt? Alive?

Every terrifying possibility lashes at me, drawing blood, grief, rage.

As we left the ranch, Warren and I talked about a plan. But right now, the only plan is kill Please. Save Delilah.

Tempest won't take tonight.

Not this time.

Not my girl.

"Cole." I look over at Warren. His voice is the kind of deep and dark I've only heard a handful of times in my life.

Our parents' funeral. The night Rio was killed. Wells and Aurora and a phone call that blew up our world.

Warren nods at the sky.

In the distance, the bright blaze of fire.

“Fuck.” I jam the gas pedal.

When we reach the church, fire is spreading up one side of the crumbling wall. There’s a limo parked in a grove of trees, barely discernible. A man stands behind it, phone to his ear, shouting something as he watches the blaze.

“The driver.” My jaw locks as I cut the engine.

“I got him.” Warren reaches for his hip. “You get Delilah.”

He jumps out, and I follow, crouching low beside the truck and racing for the church. Behind me, Warren fires two quick shots. *Pop. Pop.* They catch the driver in the neck, taking him out with an accuracy that has me lifting a brow.

I enter, the door opening into a large space. At the back of the church is an altar, and behind it, the fire spreads up the far wall. Heat sears. Rushing toward me is a dark-haired girl. *Melly.* She’s frail, trembling, ropes hanging off her wrists.

“Run,” I order, lowering my gun to let her pass. Warren will be there to help her.

A few more steps inside, and I see Please. Cold panic rises inside me.

He stands over Delilah, struggling on the ground. One hand grips her hair as he tries to drag her to the bed, the other points a gun at her. All he needs to do is squeeze that trigger, and she’s gone.

Dark, desperate violence explodes beneath my skin.

I lift my gun, finger curling around the trigger. “Don’t fucking move.”

Please looks up, a soulless smile twisting his plastic features. “Ah, the boyfriend’s back. And right in the nick of time too.”

I inch closer. He’s here. Twenty feet away from me. I can’t wait to kill him.

Delilah lifts her head, her dark brown eyes finding me across the room. She looks terrified, but at the same time, fearless.

She's fought all this time.

Goddamn, I love her.

"Let her go. Now. Before I put a bullet in your brain."

He laughs easily as he speaks. "Do I look fucking stupid to you? Not until I fuck this perfect whore of yours."

He tightens his grip, shaking Delilah like a rag doll. She flinches, but her eyes stay on me.

I fight to control my emotions, letting numbness overtake rage as I survey the details. My flesh crawls when I see the video camera. But all I have eyes for is Delilah. She's dressed in lingerie, thigh-high stockings, heels. Blood streams from the crook of her elbow. Empty syringes litter the floor.

He changed her. Hurt her. Drugged her.

My vengeance is boundless. Black and ready.

Please yanks Delilah to standing, violently tossing her onto the bed. He crawls behind her, pulling her back to his front. "Why don't you stick around and watch? Get some footage to remember her by?" He strokes his gun up her leg.

Don't fucking touch her.

The smoke is getting thicker. Every breath feels like sucking on a hair dryer. Delilah's body racks as she's hit by a series of coughs. I can tell she's disoriented. It's taking everything in her to stay conscious.

"Shut the fuck up," I order, concentrating on his trigger finger. Concentrating on moving closer, on getting that kill shot. But with Delilah being used as a shield, I need a fucking miracle.

And Tempest gives it to me.

The church bells clang.

The sound is loud, jarring, and Please looks up.

The gun bobs in his hand.

Delilah meets my gaze. The look on her face is one of determination. No fear in her eyes. Suddenly, she brings her elbow up sharply before slamming it back into Please's stomach.

Please yelps, doubling over as his hands fall away from Delilah. There's the clatter of his gun. The roar of the fire. The rose-colored windows at the back of the church shatter.

"Delilah!" I edge closer. "Run, go!"

Delilah scrambles off the bed and races toward me, as fast as she can with whatever drugs are in her system.

Pulse tearing through my veins, I raise my gun and fire off two shots in Please's direction. The first misses, but the second catches Please in the shoulder. He stumbles back, then pivots toward the ground.

I wait for him to stand, squeezing off another shot that hits him in the stomach. Blood spreads across his dark suit.

I don't see the glint of the gun until it's too late.

But instead of me, Please aims it at Delilah.

"No!" I roar.

A series of gunshots explode behind her. I watch in horror as Delilah's jerked around by the impact of a bullet. A scream tears from her throat.

"She's mine!" Please cackles, eyes and gun fixed on Delilah as he fires off another shot.

She takes it in the chest, staggering backward. I catch sight of her pale face, her glassy eyes, as she turns toward me, reaching. Then she collapses, lying motionless, twisted on the ground. Blood pools around her.

Rage. Red. It's all I see.

My senses heighten, the world narrowing to laser focus.

As bullets whiz around me, I storm forward, covering the space in three big strides, then I shoot Please in the fucking face. I let the body fall at my feet, watching as blood pools on the ground.

The bastard's finally where he deserves to be. Hell.

Delilah.

My heart explodes as I race to her side, crashing to my knees on the cement floor. "Delilah!" I cough and sputter. The back of the church comes smashing down around us, sending flames and dust spitting into the midnight air.

With no time to check for breath, for a pulse, I pick her limp body up in my arms and race for the door.

When I make it outside, I collapse to my knees in the dirt and lay her down gently. I take a deep breath of fresh air, but my focus is Delilah. I press a finger to her neck to check for a pulse. Thready, but it's there. I push her wild halo of hair away from her body, searching frantically for a gunshot wound. Her left arm is soaked in blood, but I keep searching, frantically running my hands over her skin.

I saw her take a goddamn bullet in the chest. I fucking saw it.

"Cole." Warren's voice above me.

"She got hit." Without taking my gaze off Delilah, I take the shirt he passes down to me and wrap it tightly around her arm, stanching the blood flow from the impact of the first bullet. As I sweep hair from her face, my gaze travels down her body to her heart. A glint of gold around her throat catches my eye. I stare, disbelieving.

Fuck.

"Is she alive?" Melly cries, hands clasped to her heart.

“Give me those eyes, Delilah,” I order, cradling her pale face in my hands. “Baby, wake up. Don’t fucking do this to me.”

Her lashes flutter. Her beautiful, dazed eyes meet mine as they slowly open. She licks her lips and whispers, “Fooled you, cowboy.”

“Goddamn, Delilah.” I keep my fingers on her pulse, closing my eyes in pain as she lifts a hand to cup my face. It takes all the effort she has.

“Melly? Sh-She okay?”

“She’s fine. She’s just fine.”

“L-Love you, Cole.” Her lips, tinged blue, tremble.

“Darlin’, you need to live.”

Delilah lets out a sob. “If I can’t…”

“You will.”

She has to. She’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.

I grip her hands, holding them to the center of my chest. Against my heart. “Feel it,” I growl. “If you give up, I give up.”

Tears streaming down her cheeks, she shakes her head. “Don’t. Don’t say that…” Her body’s racked by a violent tremor. Her eyes roll back, her lips parting in a soft, silent gasp.

“Fuck!” I roar. I shake her, rougher than I ever mean to be, but her eyes stay closed. My vision blurs with hot tears.

Not her time. Not yet.

“You’re not doin’ this, Delilah. You’re not leavin’ me now.” I pick her limp form up in my arms and look at Warren. “We need a doctor. And not the fucking hospital.”

My brother sees in my eyes what we need to do as we race for the truck. Sirens scream in the distance but we’re not waiting around for the cops or EMTs. I trust nothing and no one in this town. If the cops find us here, they’ll arrest us, and I’m not letting anyone keep me from Delilah.

I slide into the backseat, cradling Delilah in my arms. One hand applies pressure to the shirt wrapped around her arm, the other rests on the pulse point of her throat.

Warren speeds off, Melly weeping beside him in the passenger seat.

“Faster,” I order, staring down at Delilah’s pale face. Her breathing is shallow and ragged. Her pulse beats slowly beneath my fingertips. My heart hammers as I try to hold on to control, but I can feel it slipping.

“Fight for me, baby. Stay with me.”

“Fuck.” Warren’s phone is to his ear as he glances at me in the rearview mirror. His eyes are wild. He’s thinking of Rio. The night he found Hassie in the Borderlands. The night the world went up in flames. The night he killed a man.

“You know that second favor?” Warren grits out. “We need it. We found Delilah. We’re coming to the shop. Get a fucking doctor there. Now. Right the fuck now.”

The blackness of the highway speeds by as Warren drives like the devil is after him My heart hammers in my chest. Every second that passes sinks rage, helplessness deeper into my bones. We have to get her there in time.

“Hold on, darlin’. Just a little bit longer. Okay? I need you. I need you *here*.” I cradle her tighter and kiss her temple. The thought of her not making it threatens to end my very existence. Nothing and no one can take her from me. Not even death. I refuse it. Because I have nothing if I don’t have her.

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Delilah

There’s a pillow beneath my head and a hand in mine. Rough. Calloused. Calming. I groan, fighting to open my eyes, but failing. I try to move, but my legs and arms are heavy. My eyes fight to open, sick of the darkness that’s been keeping me here.

“Easy, darlin’. Just take it easy. You’re safe now. I have you.”

The deep, familiar rumble has me turning my face in search of the noise. I know that voice. This man.

Cole.

I blink open my eyes, then smile. Cole.

He’s the best sight I’ve ever seen, sitting beside me in a too-small chair, fists clenched on his knees.

“Hi, cowboy,” I croak.

“Delilah.” My name rips from his throat like a desperate prayer. His eyes are red, crazed, like I’ve been the source of his madness. “Thank god.”

He leans in, placing a big palm on my cheek before kissing my lips softly. He settles back in his chair, gaze still locked on my face.

“Where am I?” I scan my surroundings. At first, I think I’m in a hospital, but then I realize it’s a sterile-looking bedroom with medical equipment. Sunlight streams through a small window. There’s a bottle of whiskey on the nightstand. The faint scent of gasoline and oil linger in the air.

He inhales deeply and blows out a breath. “You’re at Syd’s shop. He has a doctor on site. You’ve been in and out of consciousness for the last two days.”

Cole’s voice is ragged, raw. As is his face. The man looks battered. Dark circles under his eyes. His scruff thicker than usual. He hasn’t slept or showered or changed. Ash and blood cover his wrinkled clothes.

“Hmm. An autobody shop and a hospital. I think I’ve seen everything.” Cocking my head, I give him a small smile. “What happened?” I try to recall my last memory, but my mind is fuzzy.

“You don’t remember?”

I touch my temple like the very act can conjure up a memory. “There was a fire…and a…” I strain my mind. As fuzziness gives way to clarity, so do the memories. The church. Please. Fighting for my life. Melly. Pain in my arm. Hot, searing. I remember the force of the bullet, so violent as it slammed into me.

His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. “You got shot.”

My eyes find the bandage on my upper left arm, then move to the IV stand next to the bed.

I reach up to clasp my necklace. Only it’s not there. I look to him with wide eyes. “Cole?”

“You got shot more than once,” he amends, and my heart stutters as he lifts the locket to my eyeline. I don’t miss the tremble of his hands. “You took a bullet in the chest, Delilah, but this stopped it.”

I swallow as Cole drops the locket in my palm. A bullet’s wedged deep in the center of the heart. I stare at it, breathless, teary-eyed.

“Lucky,” I breathe.

“Not lucky, Delilah.” His dark, serious gaze meets mine. “It was a miracle.”

“It was Lucy.” She was there with me that night. I felt her. She wouldn’t let me give up.

“Baby, you’re a miracle.” He reaches for my hand, bringing it to his lips to press a kiss against my palm, then white knuckles my hand like he’ll never give it up. “You have some muscle damage, but you’ll make a full recovery. You just need to go slow. Take it easy.” A chuckle leaves his lips. “Take it easy on *me*. Because you nearly put me in the grave waiting for word on you.”

“Just keeping you on your toes, cowboy.” I squeeze his hand. A second of hesitation, then I ask, “What about Please?”

“Dead.” Cole’s eyes harden, his expression merciless. Those broad shoulders tighten with tension. “His name’s Marcus D’Angelo. He was a movie producer in Los Angeles. Langford’s contact at the FBI is putting the pieces together. He found a library of movies, and a paper trail leading to a dark web browser. They’re arresting anyone who ever purchased any of his fucking movies.”

I blink back tears, but nod, needing to hear it all.

“It’s all over the news. They’re looking for the girls on the USB drive. They’ve recovered two alive, so far. But there are still hundreds out there.”

“Melly?”

“She’s safe. We got her a flight back home to her parents last night.” I close my eyes in relief. Cole continues. “They arrested Belle and closed the club. She’s going away for a long fucking time.

“The case is in the FBI’s hands. They want to question you.” The growl that leaves his lips tells me he’s not happy about that.

Tears blur my vision. I lean my head back against the pillow and breathe. Like a silent weight has lifted from my chest.

It's over. It's all over. Belle. The club. The nightmare.

Another memory breaks through the fuzzy surface of my mind. Cole screaming my name before the fire ate everything around us alive.

I open my eyes and look up.

"You came for me," I whisper. I remember Cole, storming into that church, his eyes so full of rage, of pain, of desperation. "You saved my life."

"No other option, Delilah." He grips my hand hard, fighting not to fall apart completely.

"How did you find me?" My chest constricts.

"The church bells." Shadows line his eyes. "After we talked, I put it together." Cole lifts my hand to his mouth, pressing a kiss to my fingertips. "I promised I'd find you."

A sob erupts from my mouth. I came so close. But he was there. Never letting me down. Finding me even when I thought I'd lost.

He's by my side in seconds, wrapping me in a hug that steals my breath. "I'm sorry, darlin'. I'm so goddamn sorry you had to go through that." He cups my face, bringing his brow down to mine.

Tears stream down my cheeks. "He didn't touch me, Cole," I whisper. "Not like…not like that."

"Christ. I thought I was going to lose you. And I couldn't—" He pauses, taking a deep breath as a tear tracks down his cheek. "I just couldn't. Nothing could have made me survive losing you." He blinks rapidly to stop the emotion sweeping over his rugged face. His breathing surges as he pulls me closer. "I'm never letting you go again."

I give him a teary-eyed smile. "I love you, Cole Weston."

“Baby, I fucking love you.” He presses his lips to mine in the softest of kisses, and warmth spreads through me. “My brave, beautiful girl,” he whispers as his thick fingers tuck a lock of hair behind my ear.

My chest tightens at his words. I grip the front of his shirt, his comforting scent wrapping around me. I never want him to leave my side again.

“What’s next?” I ask breathlessly, leaning back to look into those eyes of blue. “When can I go home?”

“Soon.” He gives me a stern look that tells me not to push it.

“You’re not in trouble, are you?” I’d imagine a less-than-legal shootout would be grounds for police investigation.

Cole strokes a hand down my arm. “Local cops are taking care of the fire, but there’s not much to take care of. The church is ashes. So are Please and the driver.” His voice lowers an octave. “I don’t want you to worry about that. The Hales, the cops—no one knows we were there. No one cares.”

He’s wrong. Someone knows.

My heart seizes as my mind remembers.

Craddock.

The lines on the heart monitor jump. *BEEPBEEPBEEP*.

Cole tenses. He frowns, his eyes surveying my face. “What aren’t you telling me, Delilah?”

“That man, that cop.” A breath explodes out of me. Tears sear my eyes at the awful memory. “Craddock. He saw me.”

“Saw you what?” A muscle tics in his jaw.

I shouldn’t tell him this. I know the second he hears it, he’ll lose it. But Cole won’t let me out of his hard gaze.

He nudges my chin up with a big finger. “Baby, talk. Now.”

“Craddock stopped us that night, after I was taken from the distillery, and…” A sob erupts in my chest. “He saw me with Please.”

Cole’s eyes widen, then narrow. I watch a dark kind of rage, of madness filter into those dark blue depths.

“Please told him I was his wife, but…Craddock knew I wasn’t. He called Hale. A-And he let me go with him.” Silent tears fall, dripping onto the sheet pulled over my lap. “He didn’t help. He didn’t stop him.”

A roar rips out of Cole. He shoves off the bed, dragging a hand down his sharp jaw. Breathing erratic, he squeezes his fists at his side, and the rage that exudes off him whips the air. He stalks across the room, the only sound the hard tread of his boots.

“*Fuck*,” he says, the word ripped from his chest.

“Cole?” I ask, my whole body shaking from inside out. My eyes water as I watch him pace. “Come back to me, cowboy.”

He whips his head back, turning to look at me as his hands move to rest on top of his head. The torment, the agony on his face pulls at my heart, and I worry that I’ve fucked up by telling him.

At the tremble in my voice, his haunted gaze clears. He returns to sit beside me on the bed. He holds my hand, but his body is taut like it’s taking all he has in him to remain calm. To not fly out of my makeshift hospital room and kill a man.

“I shouldn’t have told you.” I lower my gaze to our linked fingers.

“No. You should have.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Delilah.” He frames my face with his strong hands so I’ll look him in the eye. His voice is steady. Vicious. “You don’t understand. I’m going to fucking ruin him.”

I stare back at Cole. The hammering heart inside of me hardens to a cold piece of flinty steel before I lick my lips, lean in, and say, “Good.”

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Cole

The sight of the white Stetson slipping out of a police cruiser and heading to the tasting room boils my blood. This plan is a risk, but it has to work, or we'll lose everything we've fought for.

"Keep your head straight," Warren orders in a low voice as he steps behind the bar so as not to make Craddock suspicious about his presence. "Don't go fucking cockeyed."

I meet Warren's cool gaze. "Helpful."

"I do my best."

From behind the bar, he pours us a shot. We clink, drink, then I exhale.

Nervous energy pulses the air.

The chimes above the door jingle as Craddock steps inside, flashing a sneer at us.

"You Westons call, I come. Can't say that's not small-town service," Craddock remarks, tugging off his aviators and tucking them in the front pocket of his brown uniform.

"We also have whiskey. That doesn't hurt." I nudge a bottle his way.

Craddock’s greedy eyes move to the shots on the bar. He gulps one down. “Now what’s all this about a break-in?” His gaze surveys the bar. There’s cockiness in Craddock’s walk, his smile smug, pleased we’ve called him into our mess. “Things seem in order to me.”

We invited Craddock here with a lie about a break-in at the distillery, knowing he couldn’t resist gloating over our bad security. Knowing he’d never dig any deeper.

Now it’s us and the element of surprise.

“Had some precious things go missing.” After a beat, Warren nods his chin. “You planning to take notes, or…”

Disgruntled, Craddock pats his back pocket for a notepad and pencil. “When did it happen?”

“Saturday. The same night as the church fire.” Warren cuts limes from his place behind the bar.

“Fucking shame, isn’t it. That church has been in town for decades. The shit that went on there that night… Fire department’s still sorting through the ruins for more bodies.” He crosses the room, heaving his round gut over his belt. “Bad press for our town, I’ll tell you that.”

By now, the truth about Marcus D’Angelo has hit the media. His dirty fucking business has occupied the news for the last week. Craddock’s no doubt put two and two together that Marcus D’Angelo, the man known as a serial rapist and snuff film trafficker, was the man he stopped that night on the outskirts of Tempest. For all Craddock knows, Delilah died in that fire as well.

“Could do with some more security.” Craddock lifts a brow at Warren before turning to me.

“We’re working on it,” I answer as I lean back against the bar and cross my arms.

“Can’t be too careful, boys. Especially not after what happened to your parents.” He smirks, and I feel my patience thinning. Suddenly, all I want to do is fast-forward to the part where I break his face.

As Craddock goes through his worthless deputy motions, checking the lock, the marks on the door, he sucks his lip, says, “You had a waitress working here, didn’t you? Pretty girl, if I’m remembering correctly.”

My blood boils.

Warren sets the knife on the bar top, giving me a look to control my emotions. But that’s always been a losing game. My temper bests Warren’s every time. Especially when it comes to my family.

“Yeah, we did. In fact, she’s one of the important things that went missing that night.”

It’s a risk doing what we’re doing, but I’ve been off the fucking deep end for the last week. Craddock won’t get away with this. He left Delilah with that monster. Left her to be raped, to be murdered. He’ll pay.

“Sorry to hear that.” Setting his notepad aside, Craddock helps himself to another glass of whiskey from the bar, resting his liver-spotted hand beside the bottle.

“I doubt that very fucking much.”

He lifts the glass to his lips, studying me with a frown over the rim. “Son, you best watch your—”

I grab the knife from the bar and stab it through the top of Craddock’s hand. I hear the wet crunch of muscle, tendon, bone.

“Fuck!” Craddock screams as he tries to yank his hand away. But the knife’s deep, impaling him to the hard wood of the bar top.

“Looks painful,” Warren muses.

“What the fuck are you boys doing?” A pained gargle escapes Craddock’s mouth. Sweat streams down his face. A pool of blood spreads from his palm

as he struggles against the knife.

“It doesn’t matter what we’re doing. I want to know what you fucking did.” I calmly pour myself a shot even as fury rages under my skin.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” With his free hand, he fumbles for his holstered gun, but the front door opens, and River, waiting in the wings for when he’s needed, walks in.

“Don’t even fucking think about it.” Quickly, quietly, River relieves Craddock of his gun.

I place a hand on his shoulder as he comes and stands by my side. You don’t need an army to win a fight; you just need a fuck-ton of crazy brothers.

I look at Craddock. “You knew the whole time she was mine and she had been taken from me. You called Rogan Hale and told him what you saw. And in return, he told you not to intervene. You let her go to that church. You saw her that night with that fucking monster, drugged, helpless, and you did nothing. Nothing!” I roar, slamming a fist against the bar top.

Langford pulled Craddock’s phone records. The last person he contacted that night, right around the time Delilah was in the limo with D’Angelo, was Mayor Hale.

They saw Delilah as a way to get to me. To fuck with our family once more.

“Tell me,” I demand, leaning in so he can see the bloodlust in my eyes. “Tell me you were there, you son of a bitch, or I start cutting off your fingers one by one.”

He laughs, his eyes wild with pain and hatred. “Of course I was there. The chance to stick it to Cole Weston? Son, it gave me great goddamn pleasure to have a hand in taking away something you wanted.”

Not wanted. Loved. Needed.

I keep my mouth shut, saying nothing, letting him talk, even though I want to put a bullet in his brain.

“Damn but she was beautiful. You had good taste, Weston. Seems like such a waste.” Craddock’s given up the fight to get free. His gaze is black and beady as he grins at me. “I hope you got a video that you can remember her by.”

River hitches a breath.

Hatred bubbles like acid in my veins. But I wait.

Then, from the hallway, the click-clack of high heels.

My gaze locks on the doorway. On Delilah.

And there she is.

A wild halo of honey-blond hair, and a face so damn beautiful I almost forget to breathe. My girl. Everything I could ever want in this world.

It’s satisfying watching the light die in Craddock’s eyes when she walks into the tasting room. The look of shock on his face is searing.

Delilah heads straight for me. My hand rests possessively on her waist, pulling her closer. “You okay?” I run a gentle hand over her arm, careful not to touch her bandage. It still fills me with rage whenever I look at it.

She nods, her gaze soft and unblinking as she stares at me.

Craddock goes unnaturally still.

“I brought you this.” Into my scarred palm, she drops the USB like we’ve discussed. Then she presses up on tiptoe, kisses my cheek, and shoots a death glare at Craddock before exiting.

Craddock stands there in stunned silence.

Brow arched, River looks at Warren. “She don’t look dead, does she, War?”

“No, Riv, she sure as hell doesn’t.” Warren’s eyes don’t leave the Glencairn glass he’s polishing.

I chuckle, but the levity doesn't last long, because a moment later, Craddock wrenches the knife from his hand. Blood spurts. His burly body explodes across the room, heading for the exit, but River steps in front of it. He swings the gun out from behind his back, levels it at Craddock. "Don't move."

"Turn around," I order.

He does. "She's alive."

"No thanks to you."

"What are you going to do, Weston? Kill a cop?" Red rises up in his already ruddy face.

"You don't deserve to be breathing. Not after what you did to her."

"You think you're fucking cowboys. You'll go to prison the second you touch me. You fucking pussies. You pieces of shit." Spittle hangs from his greasy lips.

As much as I ache to, we can't kill a cop. I won't let that be the mistake that takes me from Delilah. There's a better way to kill Craddock slowly. And it starts with my parents.

"No. We're not going to kill you." I grin. "We're going to own you."

"You're going to help us." Warren comes around the bar.

Craddock scoffs. "Help you? Why would I?"

"Because otherwise, you're fucked. See this?" I lift the USB. "This is a list of everyone who ever purchased one of D'Angelo's snuff films. The cops are still combing through all those filthy fucking perverts. One word from us, and our source hacks it and adds your name to the list."

"You wouldn't." Craddock squirms.

"We would." I shake my head and cross my arms over my chest. "I can only imagine how this town will react."

I look to Warren, and he takes up the threat.

“Lots of people are going to be disgusted with you. And not just you. Your wife’s reputation is ruined. No more dinner parties with the mayor. Your daughter and her chances at a good college don’t seem so certain, do they?”

Craddock closes his eyes, sniffling.

My turn now. “You think Hale wants something this dirty touching him? You’re out of a job, Craddock. No more being Hale’s right-hand man. No more perks. No more piece-of-shit cop authority complex.”

Craddock gapes at me, a desperate look crossing his face. He knows I’m right. He’ll lose everything if this comes out. If he’s implicated in sex tapes, underage girls, murder. Craddock may be a crooked small-town cop, but this life is all he has.

“Prison isn’t exactly a walk in the park.” River’s voice is a taunt as he looks over Craddock. “Trust me, I know.”

Paling, Craddock bows his head and stares at the floor like he’s looking for the solution to all his troubles. His hard swallow is audible in the quiet. “So this is what? Blackmail?”

“You’re getting off easy,” I snarl. “I should rip your fucking dick off and shove it down your throat and let you bleed out.” Most preferably, with Delilah standing over him watching.

“Sounds like you’re fucked,” River offers helpfully.

“What do you want?” Craddock looks the three of us over with disdain.

“I want our parents’ cold case file.”

“Hale has it.” His chest rises and falls with desperation. He’s turned so fast it’s almost embarrassing.

“Then get it.” Warren’s gaze is stony.

“Forget Hale,” I tell Craddock. “You work for us now. You’re in our fucking pocket. Our boot is on your fat neck until we say it’s off.”

Craddock blinks rapidly, nodding, his desperate gaze ricocheting to the exit. At my nod, River empties Craddock's gun of its bullets, then hands it over.

He takes a step toward the door, stopping when I say, "And if you so much as look in Delilah's direction again, I won't hesitate to cut out your eyes."

Swallowing thickly, he gives a curt bob of his head before leaving the tasting room without a word.

"You think he'll talk?" River's doubtful voice cuts the silence.

"Can't be sure." I swing my gaze to Warren. "But he'd be a fool to. He's got too much to lose."

We know better than to let our guard down. But we have the upper hand now.

Let's hope Tempest keeps it that way.

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Delilah

“You better be in bed when I walk through that door.” Cole’s deep boom of warning rings out.

“Shit.” I drop the feed bucket and rush to the couch, tossing myself onto the pillows right before the back screen door bangs open. I try to look pathetic as Cole walks in, boots stomping over the hardwood floors.

I slam my eyes shut right as his big form steps inside the living room, fists clenched at his side.

“Delilah.”

I yawn and pretend to stretch.

Boot stomps.

“I don’t know who you think you’re fooling, darlin’. There’s a trail of feed from the back door to here.”

I crack an eye and give him my flirtiest smile. “I wanted to feed Waffle.”

“Waffle is fed. More than enough.” Smirking, he shakes his head. “She’s plumped up since she got here.”

I gasp even as a little laugh bubbles out of me. “Take it back.”

“You pull a stitch, and I will tie you to that couch.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time, cowboy.”

He crouches down beside me, sliding a hand up my good arm to pull me into a sitting position. His rugged face is tan from the sun, his blue eyes brighter than the sky above. “Death of me, you know that.”

“You love it.”

He sobers. “I do. C’mere.”

I reach for him, locking myself on his body as he carries me to the kitchen. I bury myself in his neck, his masculine scent intoxicating my senses. He smells like the Coop, full of fire and brimstone and American white oak.

Cole sets me on the counter, and I wait while he puts on a record.

It’s taken a week for me to feel back to normal. Cole’s been relentless about me resting. He wanted to postpone the launch party, but I refused to let him. His parents deserve it. His brothers deserve it.

We’re having the launch party next week, and everyone will celebrate.

Because the darkness is behind us.

A feat I never thought possible.

In the week that followed that night, Langford’s FBI contact came to Copper Run Ranch. It took hours of questioning, but I told him the entire story. Sammy. His death. Why I ran. Since Please is dead, they can’t prosecute, but they’re looking into everyone who has ever purchased or funded his films. They have a list of men a mile long. A terrifying thought about how monstrous men can get when they want something they can’t have.

So far, the FBI’s recovered twenty girls kept prisoner in houses across the United States. Belle’s facing human trafficking charges for her part in dealing out girls to Marcus D’Angelo like they were drugs.

“You saved those girls, Delilah,” the agent told me. “Without you turning over the evidence, we never would have caught this monster.”

Melly’s safe at home and healing. She has a good therapist. Something I need to get too. I’ll never get over that awful night. Nightmares plague both Cole and me, but we always wake up together.

I survived that night because of Cole. Because of Lucy. It was her voice I heard, urging me to hold on, to fight for myself.

Now, I can get on with my life. Put away my suitcase and find a peace I never imagined possible.

Cole returns to me as the ranch house fills with Hank Williams’s melancholy croon.

“Old music,” I tease.

“Can’t dance to this, darlin’.” His eyes crinkle in a smile that makes my heart leap. It’s the best sight I’ve had all day.

“I can dance to anything.” I stare at him with half-lidded eyes. My heart spins as he steps between my legs and runs his rough hands up my thighs. Nothing restrained or casual about the way he touches me.

The man’s addicted to me. But I feel the same way about him.

Cole removes his hat and sets it aside. “How ’bout I make some dinner, and we sit on the porch?”

“I’ll do anything with you.” I mean it. Anything with him, anything *for* him.

His chin angles down, the sweet, subtle brush of his lips ignites fire in my belly. He groans, moving closer as I wrap my legs around his hips, trapping him to me.

We kiss to the length of the song, tongues gliding together, hands wandering each other’s bodies. When it’s finished, we pull back, panting.

“Bedroom.” I hold tight to his massive belt buckle.

“Delilah.” His fingers run over my bicep, where my bandage is wrapped.

“But it’s been a week,” I protest, because it’s been too long since his hands have been on me. I arch a brow. “The doctor said it’s okay to be vigorous, cowboy.”

“Dinner first,” he grumbles, and I sigh, yielding to the command in his eyes. The man’s been fussing ever since I left Syd’s makeshift hospital.

“Whiskey first?” I ask hopefully.

Grinning, he briefly steps away from me to pull the bottle from the opposite side of the counter. I smile every time I see that beautiful label with my nickname. Gold woven through a delicate D. In a strange way, I feel like gold’s woven through me too. All those broken, cracked parts, never healed, but patched deep in my soul.

“What do you think?” He nudges a finger against the bottle beside us, then pours us a glass.

“*The Darlin’*, huh? You sure about that, cowboy?” Cole lifts the glass to my lips, and I take a sip. It’s so smooth, just like the man in front of me.

“Surest thing I’ve ever done.” Then he gently grips the back of my neck and stares into my eyes. “Are you, Delilah?” His voice is an unraveling thread of doubt.

Countless emotions pass over his face. I hear what he’s asking. I see it war in him. His dark side, his grief. That’s what that night ripped open. Old wounds. Anger. Fear.

But I will never let it take him under again.

No one’s ever fought for me like this man. I would do the same for him.

He studies my reaction, worried about my silence.

I take his hand, running a finger over that scar on his palm. “I’m here, Cole. I’m not going anywhere.” Part of being with Cole means being beside him. Being strong for him no matter what comes our way.

His eyes briefly close, as if he can’t—or won’t—believe my words. “It’s a lot, Delilah, this life.”

“I want it all. I want it with *you*.”

He leans down, wrapping his arms around my waist to rest his dark head on my breast. “You don’t understand, darlin’.” The hitch in his voice claws at me.

“I do. I couldn’t survive without you either.” I press myself tightly toward him, hooking my hands around his neck. “I love you, you know.”

“Goddamn, baby.” I feel him tremble. Emotion chokes his words. “I was so scared. So fucking scared. The thought of a life without you. The thought that I put you in danger—”

“Cole, no.”

“I can’t lose you. I won’t.”

That’s what he’s worried about, me being in the crosshairs again one day.

But I know what I want, what I’m getting myself into. I’m his harmony. He’s my darkness. He’ll never quit being that ruthless cowboy, but I’ll never quit him either. He’ll put down anyone who threatens me, and I’ll let him. In turn, I’ll protect him.

Loving Cole Weston is as easy and as smooth as the whiskey he makes.

“It’s a risk we take. But we take it together.” I kiss his hair, then pull back to look into the brilliant blue depths of his eyes.

“You have a good heart. The best heart.” His calloused hands frame my face. “And I won’t let anyone change that. Not even me.”

“I’m not afraid of you, Cole, or of what you’ve done. I’m afraid of being *without* you.”

“Then marry me.” A ragged breath erupts from his broad chest. His hand cups my cheek as he straightens up. “It won’t be an easy life, but I swear, darlin’, I’ll give you everything.”

My heart sprouts wings at his words. “Babies?” I breathe.

Fire and longing burn in his eyes. “Marriage. Babies. Family. You name it, you have it.”

“Yes.” I nod, sliding my hands around the back of his neck to pull him down to my lips. Tears form in my eyes. “Yes, you have me, Cole. I’m yours.”

His rugged face creases in happiness. Gaze darkening, he crushes his mouth to mine, clutching at my hips and wrenching me toward him. The space between us detonates, and I let that fire incinerate us, let this brutal, beautiful cowboy of mine ride me off into the sunset of our dreams.

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Cole

The distillery is abuzz with the noise of people, of family, of Tempest locals. The smell of hot dogs and hamburgers wafts toward me, coming from a food truck parked in the gravel lot.

I hitch my fingers through my belt loops and scan the festivities. Unable to help it, a chuckle rolls out of my chest. We goddamn did it.

The limited-edition launch party has gone off without a hitch.

Thanks to Delilah.

Hassie has a pop-up hat bar across the field. Whiskey barrels have been rolled out as high-tops. Locals stuff donations in an empty whiskey bottle next to the small animal rescue Wells set up. Waldo and Jelly Belly, our distillery cats, slink between boots. My raisers, Cy, Bo, and Leon, enjoy the day with their families. The Moonshiners play mellow country music. In the tasting room, Warren unveils his new cowboy cocktails. Syd and his biker crew hold court at the western game booth, where they help kids with the balloon toss.

A long dining table adorned with cowboy-chic decor and whiskey boards sits in the center of the field. There’s even a mechanical bull. I told her she

was crazy, but she insisted.

We sell out in an hour.

Every last drop of Weston Whiskey Darlin' Edition gone from our distillery.

But all five of us each kept a barrel to last the rest of our lives. I plan to drink mine at each big event in my life. My wedding. The birth of our babies. Solving my mother and father's murders.

Our parents' legacy, this whiskey, is one I'll treasure forever.

Thanks to Delilah.

She honored their memory with this launch party. They'd be so proud. They'd love her as much as I do.

My gaze snags on Delilah, who's escorting the editor from the *Whiskey Enquirer*. Enthralled expression on his face, the real Nolan Kraus snaps photos and samples flights. Nothing fazed the man, not even being tied up in his apartment for two days by Marcus D'Angelo. He's here, ready for a story. Apparently, any press is good press, even where Tempest is concerned. It doesn't hurt that Delilah's the one to show him around.

I watch as she pours Nolan the whiskey, occasionally lifting a hand to wave to the locals. Multitasking and charming as only my girl can do. Locals stop to chat her up, a few small business owners that Delilah used for the launch party dropping off flowers for her.

There's no question she's been accepted by Tempest.

Delilah's eyes shift to mine, and our gazes lock. I tilt my hat, watching the luminous blush rise in her cheeks. She blows me a kiss, and my heart wrenches. The wave of love, of possession that crests over me threatens to take me to my knees.

Here. She's *here*. She's chosen me and Tempest. We plan to build a life here, which means no more running. My goal is to right Tempest. Put it

back to what it used to be. Make it a home.

Tonight, we celebrate. Tomorrow, I buy a ring. Anything to make her mine.

I take a step toward her but am quickly intercepted by Ezra. “Cole, you got someone here to see you.”

“Who is it?” I grumble, following Ezra’s finger to search the crowd of guests.

“A couple who says they’re friends of yours.”

“Well, I’ll be goddamned.”

I chuckle when I see a woman wearing a long fishtail braid and a pissed-off scowl. Fallon McGraw. The too-tough-for-her-own-good bull rider who was hurt by Jack’s manager on one of her rides. She was the impetus I needed to take him down, while also giving me a run for my own money when it came to bulls.

I immediately recognize the cowboy behind her too. Wyatt Montgomery, the former pro bronc rider, Fallon’s husband, and the guy who saved her life when they were kidnapped by some psychopath last fall.

I grin as I stride toward her. “Friends, huh? I didn’t get the memo.”

Fallon laughs. “Oh, fuck off, Weston.”

“How you been?” My eyes take her in, my chest tight seeing a familiar face amid the celebration.

“Mostly a pain in his ass,” Fallon quips, nodding toward Wyatt.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” Wyatt drawls, hooking an arm around her shoulder. “She convinced me droppin’ in unannounced was the only way to surprise you.”

I shake my head at her ability to continuously raise hell. “No cane.” My gaze flicks over her.

“No cane.” She extends her arms, the whiskey glass glinting in her right hand.

“You look good,” I say, happy to see she’s tamed that fierce darkness inside of her.

“You too.” A lift of Fallon’s brow. “Saw your announcement on your socials and thought we’d come check out all the fuss over Weston Whiskey.” She lifts her hand, flashing the wedding ring tattoo on her finger. I notice Wyatt has one of his own.

“We brought some family along—hope that’s okay.” I follow the hitch of her thumb. On the other side of the field, a group of cowboys stand with their wives. Two toddlers squeal as they run across the grass.

“More than. Stay. Eat. Drink.” I tip up my hat. “But first I want you to meet someone.” Once again, I look to Delilah. Like she’s felt me, she catches my eye, and I wave her over away from Nolan to make introductions.

“This is Fallon McGraw. One of the best bull riders there’s ever been.”

Though Fallon scoffs, Wyatt, sipping his whiskey, nods his agreement.

“So you’re Fallon. I’ve heard a lot about you.” Delilah beams, brown eyes lighting up, as she relaxes into my side.

“Nothing good, I hope.” Fallon barks a laugh. She turns her shrewd gaze to me, tracking over my arm that’s wrapped around Delilah’s waist, then up to my eyes. A feline smile curls her lips. “Thought you said you didn’t have time for a woman.”

Amusement creases Wyatt’s rugged face.

“This woman, I do.” I pull Delilah closer, just having her, having her *here*, makes me proud.

“Glad to see it, Weston.” Fallon smiles as she studies Delilah’s face. “And nice to meet you. Roping Cole must have been a feat.”

“Oh, it was quite the summer,” Delilah says with a giggle as she smiles up at me.

With a chuckle, I gesture around the party. “Like I said, make yourself at home.”

“Thanks.” Wyatt takes his wife’s hand, pulling her in the direction of their waiting family. “See you around, Weston.”

“Hey,” I call out as Fallon walks away. “What do you think of the whiskey?”

“I think…” A soft smile overtakes her pretty face as she turns toward us, her gaze drifting to Delilah. “You finally got it right.”

* * *

I spend the rest of the party shaking hands and intercepting arguments and pouring whiskey. When the last barrel is empty and the guests have gone and the sky is starlit and twinkling, I find River in the middle of the field.

“You okay?” He’s been quiet ever since the FBI released the names of the victims trafficked and kidnapped by Marcus D’Angelo.

“April.” River’s jaw works. “I thought we’d find her in all those files.”

“It’s better we didn’t.”

“The not knowing kills me.”

“I know it does.” I stare into River’s haunted eyes and understand why he went crazy when April disappeared. After everything that happened with Delilah, I was on that precipice myself.

“She’s not under a rock. She’s out there. Somewhere.” River stares up at Moriah Mountain. Above the Complex, the Green Mountain lights blink.

I shift my weight and square my shoulders, wanting to tell him that it’s been seventeen years. April being alive, being somewhere, anywhere, is a long shot. But even I’m not that cruel.

Commotion behind us. River glances over his shoulder. Our big family barrels our way.

“Stay for the toast.” The tightness on his face, in his body, tells me he’s in his own head tonight. “Then go.”

He casts a sideways glance at me but lifts the glass of whiskey to his lips in agreement.

“Hi. I missed you,” Delilah whispers, squeezing beneath my arm. Tonight, the ends of her mussed-up hair are dyed a dark honey brown to match our whiskey.

“Missed you.” I stroke a hand over the small of her back, loving the feel of her against me. “How’d it go?”

“It went great.” She looks around our group. “Weston Whiskey is officially in next month’s issue of the *Whiskey Enquirer*.”

Mustache tipping, Uncle Vaughn lifts his glass. “Hear, hear.” The rest of our family follows suit.

“Delilah, slaying dragons and kissing cowboys,” Hassie exclaims.

“She’s right.” Ezra nods. “You killed it, Del.”

“She did,” I agree.

“I did, didn’t I?” Delilah blushes. “And I did want to make the party a little bit ridiculous, because that’s up my alley.”

I’ve never been so proud of her. She’s more than a dancer, more than a bartender. More than a beautiful face. Delilah flipped this distillery, and my entire world, around. Forever in awe of everything she’s accomplished. My strong, brave, beautiful girl. She rescued herself to survive. Not once, but twice.

“How’s it feel to have one less job on your plate?” River tips his head to Ezra.

Our brother cradles a sleeping Evangeline in his arms. “Feels pretty damn great.”

Ezra’s taken over the title of master distiller from Uncle Vaughn, relinquishing his distillery manager title to Delilah. She fields press, keeps us organized, and handles all administrative and operational decisions.

“Well, we fucking did it. It’s over.” Wells looks around at the mess and exhales. “Do we draw straws to clean, or…”

“I vote we sleep outside, under the stars like feral children.” Hassie gives a little spin, then stumbles into Warren, who steadies her.

“You’re already a feral child,” he grumbles, but even he’s smiling.

“I vote we do it tomorrow,” Wyoma says. With a firm gaze on us all, she lifts her glass of whiskey. “But I think, right now, Wild Westons, we need a toast.”

“That’s right.” Delilah bounces beside me. “We never did one.”

“Let’s cash this, baby.” Hassie pours each of us a giant glass of whiskey from one of the last limited-edition bottles.

“Cole, you want to take this?” Warren eyes me over the rim of his glass.

“Yeah. I do.” Delilah squeezes my hand, letting me know she’s here.

Throat tight, I lift my glass skyward. “To Mom. To Dad. You should have been here. But I hope we’ve done you proud.” A chill whispers across my skin, grief, ghosts settling heavy on my shoulders. My parents are here. Proud of us for getting this far. Telling us they’re still waiting for vengeance.

I clear my throat, meet my brothers’ shiny eyes. “To Jack. Till tomorrow.”

Everyone nods, not speaking, not able to. We swallow the last drop of whiskey in our glasses, then our family disperses. I keep my eyes on Delilah as she walks Hassie to her Bronco.

Only Uncle Vaughn remains, staring at the flickering remnants of the bonfire.

“It was quite a night, son.”

“It was. You okay?”

“Just thinking.” He lifts his chin and turns to me. “Are you sure, Cole? About marriage? Wyoma told me what you’re planning with Delilah, and well…thought I’d give you the talk your father always should have.”

“I am.”

“Be sure you think about it, son.” Vaughn hesitates, presses his lips together, then shakes his head. “You get in with the wrong woman, it changes you.”

A primal protectiveness jolts through me. I bristle when his eyes land on Delilah, headed toward us.

“I only have praise for that girl, Vaughn.” I harden my voice, making sure he hears me. “No doubt. Not when it comes to her.”

Delilah trumps grief, trumps anger, trumps vengeance. She’s the only thing that makes me believe in light existing outside darkness. In something better than myself. In a life, in a love I’d never entertained before.

“Forgive me. I spoke out of turn.” Chastised, my uncle shakes his head as if in a daze. He chuckles. “I’ve had a lot of whiskey, and that—mixed with the past—loosens my foolish tongue.”

He takes a step forward and claps me on the shoulder. “I just want you happy, Cole. Your parents would too.”

My jaw sets. “I am. My parents would love Delilah just as much as I do.”

“I know it.” There’s regret in his voice. For speaking up or for the past, I can’t say.

“Cole?” Delilah lingers at a respectful distance, her slender figure lit up by firelight.

Without looking back, I leave my uncle behind. I head straight for my girl, intertwining my fingers with hers and pulling her close.

Delilah.

For the rest of my life, for as long as my cruel heart beats, it will always be hers.

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Epilogue

Delilah

Four weeks later

“I think it’s official. I lassoed my forever cowboy.”

The best words in the universe.

I rush into the tasting room, the chilly fall breeze clinging to my bare arms, music blasting around me.

Cole follows, coming through the front door, a rare smile on his rugged face. “Married two hours, and you’re already making me chase you?”

“Too late to get out of it now.” Giggling, I lift my left hand, wiggle my fingers. “See?” My pink and lavender wedding ring sparkles in the distillery lights. With varying floral shapes of pink and purple sapphires surrounding a stunning diamond, Cole gave me a ring as sexy and chaotic as I am.

I bat my lashes. “Besides, what else would you rather be doing?”

He watches me from inches away, his blue eyes dancing in the light as I pull a whiskey bottle and two glasses from the bar. “Maybe drinking whiskey with you.”

“You’re in luck then.” I pour us each a glass of rye and flash him a bright smile. “I like my whiskey like I like my cowboys. At least ten years older than me and made in Montana.”

He laughs, then comes toward me. What a beautiful man I have. His dark hair unruly from his cowboy hat. He looks dapper and rugged, rocking his well-loved Wranglers with a rustic gray tweed vest and a white button-down shirt with the sleeves shoved up to his elbows. My cowboy doesn’t wear suits.

Instead of taking the whiskey, he takes me in his arms. “I am in luck.” His deep rumble ignites pulsing heat between my legs. “I’m the luckiest man in the world.”

Cupping my cheek with calloused hands, he dips his head. The sweet graze of his lips against mine makes my breath hitch. I drop my hands to his belt buckle and yank him in closer.

Cole’s obsessed with me. But I know the feeling. I’m obsessed with him myself.

Never over this. Not the feel of my body in Cole’s big arms or his generous heart or this life we’ve managed to build together the last few months.

It’s been a whirlwind.

Cole’s broody and complicated, but he never quits surprising me. The day Cole gave me the ring, he surprised me with a truck bed picnic complete with strawberries and champagne.

It was the best day of my life, and it only got better.

We planned a wedding in a month. Neither of us wanted to wait.

Today, we had a simple, intimate wedding on the ranch in a chapel Cole built for us up in the mountains. Vaughn walked me down the aisle to Sturgill Simpson’s “The Promise.” Currently, our reception is the perfect

mix of cowboy and glam. In a sentimental statement that had Cole choking up, I had a local baker recreate Cole's parents' three-tiered wedding cake.

But the cherry on top is my dress. I wear a designer strapless minidress with a tulle skirt and white stiletto cowboy boots. I made sure the dress was short enough to expose the blue silk garter on my thigh embroidered with *COLE*.

Around my neck, I still wear Lucy's necklace, bullet hole and all.

It's dark, morbid, and fits perfectly with this new life of mine.

"You okay?" Searching my eyes, Cole runs his hands over my arms, warming them. I catch the brief flinch on his face as he grazes my scar. "You need a break?"

In the distance, the musical laughter of our friends and family enjoying the reception lights up the October night.

"No." I take his face between my palms and smile. "I just need a few moments alone with my husband before we go kill it on the dance floor."

"You have me, Delilah," he promises, causing tears to fill my eyes.

I do. I have Cole.

My steady shelter, my protector. He's given me something I've never had before. The freedom to finally breathe. To stay. To make a home.

Tempest is rough around the edges, but so is my cowboy. My cowboy who's covered in tattoos, eats pussy like it's his last meal, and worships the ground I walk on. Cole Weston's a whiskey kiss with a touch of sin. He fights for his ranch, his brothers, and me. He's breathtaking madness, built from the wild earth on which he was born.

By no means perfect but still mine. I could never quit Cole. We go down together or fight together.

Forever.

“Is this a dream, Cole?” I hold his big, tan hand in mine. Admire the wedding band I had made for him, handcrafted from one of his own whiskey barrels. “Because if it is, I never want to wake up.”

“No, darlin’. It’s as real and true as my love for you.”

“Thank you for this.” I trace a finger along the sharp line of his jaw. Stare into those intense blue eyes.

“For what?”

“For everything.” I smile through my tears. “I love your family. I love this life. But most of all, I love you, cowboy.”

“Baby, you don’t even know what you fucking do to me.” A ragged breath shakes out of him as he grips my hips and squeezes. “You make me crazy, darlin’. Make me love you too damn much.”

His words whip something wild and primal inside of me.

I launch myself at him, devouring his mouth, sliding my fingers possessively through his hair. A blazing flame scorches the space between us. Cole’s breath explodes as he grabs the back of my neck and wrenches me closer.

He wants me. Here. Now.

The music changes from rock ’n roll to a high intensity beat. “I Just Wanna Love U (Give It 2 Me).”

An amused breath shakes out of Cole. Tearing his mouth from mine, he lifts his gaze to the speaker. “Christ, Delilah, this playlist?”

“C’mere, cowboy.” My mouth curves. Moving closer to his body, I straddle his rock-hard thigh.

“Baby, if I fuck you now, we’re never going back to the reception…” Even as he protests, his arms come around me, and he backs me up toward the bar.

Smiling, I roll my hips down his body, letting the music guide my movements. Watching as Cole's eyes turn heavy-lidded, lust-charged. My husband loves to watch me dance, especially when it's only for him.

"I need you." I pout, knowing he won't say no. "You can't turn your wife down on her wedding day."

"You make it hard not to." His big fingers tangle in my hair as he grips the back of my neck. Our mouths meet in a frenzied tangle of breaths and tongues. The rough scrape of his beard against my skin feels like heaven. My hips shift against his, grinding his crotch. He groans, his head tipping back in delicious agony, the taut cords in his neck straining in want.

"Delilah." My name's a snap of warning, a starter's pistol. Cole shoves at my skirts, his mouth heated and frantic against mine.

I'm already falling away, surrendering to my cowboy, lost in his touch.

Lost in our love and everything that comes next.

* * *

Cole

If there's one thing I'm going to do, it's fuck my wife when she demands it.

But first…I reach for the glass of whiskey on the bar. The corners of Delilah's pink, pouty lips curl up.

I lift the glass to her mouth and stare her up and down, my gaze lingering on her throat as she swallows down the whiskey.

"You thirsty, darlin'?" I stare at those pretty lips of hers, covered in my whiskey.

She tilts her chin, eager gaze dipping to my belt. "For you, always."

I tear at my belt and zipper. Delilah's breath kicks up. Every part of me hardens and heats as I spread her legs. She arches against the bar, so damn

exquisite in her beauty that it steals my breath.

Christ, it's dangerous. Fucking my wife with our guests just a few feet away. But goddamn, it's so fucking hot.

I step between her spread thighs and thrust. My cock so deep inside her that she gives a soft, breathless cry. "Cole," she whimpers, a slender arm sliding over my broad shoulder as I hitch her legs around my waist.

"Darlin', my darlin' girl." I thrust hard and deep, feeling her clench around me.

She tilts her head back, and I stare into the burn of those dark whiskey eyes that never fail to take my breath away.

"Fucking love you, baby. Long as I live. Long as I breathe."

"I know, I know," she sobs, writhing beneath me.

"Give me your eyes, Delilah," I command. Those fucking gorgeous eyes that see right through me.

"Forever," she promises, swallowing noisy gasps of pleasure. "Forever, Cole."

We fuck hard and fast, foreheads touching, hearts syncing, breaths pulsing in the space between us.

She's my queen, my salvation, my place of worship. Delilah's body, her mind, her beautiful soul are mine. There's nothing I wouldn't do to protect her. If anything or anyone ever tries to extinguish the beautiful light in her eyes, her smile, they'll answer to me.

Her body trembles in my arms. "I'm with you," I tell her, staring into her eyes. "Let it go, darlin'."

I thrust one last time, watching her as she comes. Wild and beautiful and free, heart trembling against mine. And then I let go, my entire body erupting, my long, low groan reverberating throughout the tasting room.

Breathing hard, Delilah falls against me. “Happy wedding day to me,” she gasps.

I chuckle, kiss her wild halo of hair. “Better go join the party.”

“But I like it better here with you.” A sweet laugh tumbles out of her, wrenching my heart.

“Baby, I do too, but we have the rest of the night.” I shoot back the rest of the whiskey, give her ass a squeeze. My cock already aches thinking about later tonight. “And I want a dance with my wife.”

I clean us up and fix her dress. Then I take her hand and lead us outside into the autumn night. Never in my life have I appreciated my home quite like tonight. The twinkling lights of the reception light up the field in a soft glow. I grin at the sight of my family, cutting a rug on the dance floor. Heat lamps crackle around the perimeter of the long dinner table. Nineties country music, laughter, and cheers fill the air.

Something tells me it’s not the last party we’ll have.

A soft, amazed gasp beside me.

“Oh, Cole. It’s so beautiful.” Delilah stands there, her slender curves lit up in the glow of the reception lights. Long blond hair waterfalls down her back, and her porcelain skin shimmers, as her mouth wears the hint of a content smile.

I stand in awe of my wife. Her mesmerizing, radiating presence. Her fight. She’s never let fear stop her from living her life.

A lesson I hope to emulate.

Delilah and I plan to build a life here, which means I need to right Tempest. Take all the dark and turn it to light. Run out corruption. Expose the Hales. There are still obstacles, but with Delilah by my side, I intend to fix what is broken so that our future is only bright.

In the distance, a trio of figures runs toward us.

“Search party,” Delilah murmurs.

I reach out, lazily curling my fingers around hers to pull her closer to me, erasing the distance between us.

Hassie waves wildly. “You missed the first dance.” She bulldozes between us to steal my hand and Delilah’s. I give her a twirl, and she throws her arms around me.

“And the second and the third.” Behind her, River broods.

Warren nods toward the dance floor. “You’re missing your own party, brother.”

Delilah tilts her head to meet my eyes. “We’re headed there right now.”

“Hope you saved some whiskey for the rest of us.” I lift Delilah’s hand to plant a kiss on the tips of her fingers.

“Don’t encourage them. I leave them alone for two minutes and they’re both thoroughly soused.” Warren takes a sip of whiskey, looks at Hassie over the rim of his glass.

Hassie rolls her eyes at Warren. “It’s a party, boss man, don’t be boring.”

“If it’s a party, let’s dance.” Warren drops his hands on Hassie’s shoulders, steering her back toward the reception.

As we all head toward the party, my phone buzzes with a text. I pause, Delilah stopping next to me when I pull it from my pocket.

Unknown number.

“Comin’, Cole?” River lifts his glass to me, his dark brow furrowing in a question.

“Be right there.” Protective gaze on my wife, I nod at River. “Take her.”

After pressing a kiss to my cheek, Delilah runs toward him and clasps the hand he holds out.

I watch as they head toward the bright lights of the party, then return my attention to my phone. I swipe open the message. My heart rate kicks up.

It’s a photo of my front porch. On the rug sits a stack of thick, brown file folders.

My phone buzzes again. Another message.

Enjoy your wedding present.

I download the image. Zoom in.

I let loose a dry chuckle and drag my scarred palm over my mouth in disbelief at what I see.

TEMPEST POLICE DEPARTMENT CASE FILE: Caroline and Jacob Weston.

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