JT Whitloch sensed the blonde the moment he set foot inside the auction stables. Through the scent of anxiety ridden horses and a moving mass of humanity floated the fragrance of delicacy and wealth. A wave of disappointment dropped over him. He was male. He was in tune with the female sex. Without looking, he knew this woman was exquisite.

He didn’t have to glance around to know she was standing on the other side of the round pen. The quick squeeze in his chest annoyed him. He’d seen plenty of beautiful women in his twenty-five years. What was it about her that triggered his senses? If he’d look, he’d know. He refused to look.

The horse auction was a teeming crowd of rough men, ranch women, the country club set and every breed of horse God had created. Prospective buyers eyed the horses, chatted with good friends and new friends, and chatted with the owners. They searched for information, made the calculations, then determined which horse would fulfill their requirements.

The woman wore a bone colored hat with a gold plated band that cost more than his weekly feed budget. Her hat brim cast a shadow over her I’m-a-celebrity sunglasses that hid the top half of her face but not her flawless complexion. Nor did they conceal her delicate chin and sensuous lips that seemed ready to burst into a Mona Lisa smile. Two words popped into his mind - elegant and stunning - as elegant and stunning as the Arabian stallion they were both eying.

Behind that glamorous exterior he sensed something else - cool strength and determination. She may be used to winning but if she planned to bid on the stallion, she’d soon learn she was no match for Rose Whitloch, JT’s stepmother. What Rose wanted, Rose got, and she wanted to add this horse to her Crystal Creek ranch stable.

JT convinced himself it was the woman’s interest in the stallion that caught his attention. Not even to himself would he admit it was the tilt of her chin, the relaxed alignment of her shoulders, the tailored duster fitted over her toned physique, that made him want to stare.

She had the carriage of a woman well cared for, but not by the man who stood a half step behind her. That man, with his dust coated hat and cracked leather jacket blended in like a shadow and had companion stamped all over him.

JT couldn’t hear the conversation passing between the elegant woman and the man with a Colorado weathered face, but judging from the movement of her lips touched with a pale shade of lipstick, her questions were one or two words that the man answered with a word, a nod or a shake of his head. He leaned into her whenever she titled her head to him. She never stopped staring at the stallion.

The stud’s whinny rang in JT’s ears. It was a refined timbre practiced to receive immediate attention. Obviously, the attention wasn’t forthcoming within the expected time frame and the whinny filled the air again, different pitch, different tone, same anxious request, “Set me free.”

Freedom. Who didn’t want it? Man or beast, they both wanted to be free. Freedom was what JT had wanted and finally got when he came to Crystal Creek. He’d never go back.

Then he learned - the past didn’t let go.

The Arabian horse paced the length of his confinement - larger than that of his fellow boarders. His tail swished. His dark eyes flashed - first with anger then with pleading. His well-muscled form rippled beneath his glistening coat.

Something flickered over the woman’s face. She pressed a finger to her lips. Tilting her head, she spoke to her companion.

He didn’t touch her. A husband or a lover would’ve touched her. She was that beautiful. Any man would’ve made a possessive gesture warning all who looked, and everyone looked, that this woman belonged to him. This man did nothing, only listened to her.

The tension in JT’s shoulders eased. He was relieved.

He gave a soft laugh that made the ranch woman standing next to him give him one of those up and down looks. He smiled, touched the brim of his hat and moved to the rail pinning in the stallion.

The pain shooting through his jaw made him realize he was clenching his teeth. He relaxed, took a slow easy breath.

The blonde’s relationship to her companion didn’t matter to him for one simple reason -

He. Didn’t. Care.

He sounded the words in his head as if he were speaking to a child making sure he himself understood. That life was gone from him. He lived in another world now. No regrets. No longings.

He tipped his gaze upward.

Clouds pumped with snow slogged over the valley. A chill wind lashed sparse snowflakes against the bundled viewers.

He didn’t look at the elegant woman, but knew this - her companion kept a distance of at least two feet between them. Even when she leaned toward him to ask a question, he arced his body as if not wanting to invade her space.

Other viewers walked around the pen then moved down the alley to inspect other horses. Not this woman. She only had eyes for the stallion. The hitch in JT’s chest told him he wasn’t just aware of her presence. This woman could raise the intensity of the bidding.

By now, everyone at the auction had noticed her. Conversations stopped. People stared when the woman and her companion circled the pen. Some people looked at the stallion. No one missed the woman. Male instinct told JT every man at the auction was making his way to the pen under the guise of studying the stallion with the glistening black coat and the white blond tail and mane - men who had no intention of bidding on the horse - a horse whose price tag could tip higher than a two thousand acre ranch.

These men propped their elbows on the pen’s top rail and their dirt caked boots on the bottom rail with every intention of schooling their vision to an angle they thought others wouldn’t notice so they could watch the woman who wasn’t from Crystal Creek or the neighboring valleys.

She paced around the pen with the grace of someone who moved through jet setting circles, not with the mountain men and women crowding the center. She existed at a level above the country club set.

JT shook his head more to pull his gaze away from the woman. Let the other men watch her. JT was there to make sure this stallion was added to Rose’s stable.

Too bad the blonde didn’t realize she’d lose the bidding war.

JT tuned his senses to the sights, sounds and smells drifting around him. The air was filled with the anxiety of horses facing the unknown. Whinnies rose from the stalls. Hooves clicking along the concrete allies echoed against the rafters. There was no scent of the fresh hay that filled the Crystal Creek barns. The water in the troughs would be tepid - water Crystal Creek horses would sniff then ignore.

A glance at the woman was like a stitch in JT’s chest. There was something familiar about her, but he kicked that thought out of his head. He didn’t travel in those circles anymore. If they had met, it was when he lived a lifestyle he was glad to abandon. He moved away from the pen and mingled with the other buyers.

\* \* \*

When one, then two, then three horses poked their heads out of their stalls, the jolt of surprise that expanded in his chest burned into annoyance.

One hand was missing.

Bart Hill.

“Last I saw, still in the bunk. We tried to roust him, but he said he was sick. Again.”

“What’s the matter with him this time?”

The hand lifted a shoulder. “You’ll have to ask him.”

JT pushed away from the rail. “All right. I will.”

At the bunkhouse, JT took the front steps two at a time and shoved open the door. Sunshine and cold wind pushed him through the door.

The bunk in the corner squeaked and a form huddled beneath the covers flopped toward the wall.

“Close the door, will you? I’m trying to get some sleep.” The voice whined through a night’s worth of whiskey and cigarette smoke.

JT slammed the door. Hard.

The form in the bed jolted and pulled the covers to just below his eyes. A shock of black hair matched the bushy eyebrows arching over dark eyes. “JT. What do you want?”

“To find out what’s the matter with you, Bart.” JT’s boots clicked across the wooden flooring.

Bart winced with each click. “I’m sick. I can’t work today. I’ll work double tomorrow.”

“That makes the fifth time in two weeks you’ve been too sick to work.” JT pulled a chair from the table, whipped it around and straddled it.

Next to the bunk sat Bart’s pegged boots. JT wondered how Bart could afford such a pair on a ranch hand’s salary.

Bart squeezed his eyes tight. “Can you tone it down? I’m really sick. I must’ve caught this virus that’s going around. Can’t seem to shake it.”

“This virus seems to be one you catch whenever you open a bottle of whiskey.”

“Naw, that isn’t it.”

JT studied Bart’s bleary eyes that tried to focus on him. JT had his doubts when he hired the man, but he needed help and thought Bart would learn the job quickly. He would’ve but he had a greater love for drinking and womanizing.

Like JT.

Something dark and uncomfortable rose up JT’s throat. When he looked into Bart’s bloodshot eyes, he saw himself. He wanted to give Bart a chance, but not when it would prove detrimental to the horses. And not when it meant piling more work onto the other ranch hands.

“Bart, this job isn’t for you.”

“Sure, it is. Bart struggled to a sitting position. He bumped his head on the slats bracing the bunk above him.”

“No, and it wouldn’t be fair for me to have you stay in a job you don’t like. I’ll advance you a couple of paychecks. That should hold you over until you find something you like better.”

“JT, I like working here.”

“Tell you what. We’ll be hiring again in the spring. If you still want to work here, we’ll talk about it, and see what we can work out.”

“I’d rather just stay.”

“Let’s give it a break for now. Come by the office on your way out. I’ll have your check ready for you.” JT pushed the chair against the table and walked out of the bunkhouse.

From outside the door, JT heard Bart hurl a string of profanity and shove the bunk against the wall. JT’s heart beat dully. He hated firing a ranch hand, which rarely happened. If Rose hadn’t given JT the opportunity to work at the ranch, he would’ve followed the same path as Bart - too much drinking, too much womanizing. His first day of work, Ralph had laid out JT’s options – focus on the horses or find another job.

JT hoped Bart’s time away from the Crystal Creek Ranch would give him the discipline he needed to learn horse training and wrangling. Bart’s problem was that he knew how to talk a good line. He’d find another wrangling job.

JT’s jaw clenched.

Bart finding another wrangling job would make him the next rancher’s problem. Unless Bart learned his lesson. Right now, Bart was too stubborn to learn any lesson.

From the foreman’s office, JT saw Bart slam out of the bunkhouse, his phone crammed to his ear and a backpack slung over his shoulder. At first JT wondered who Bar was talking to, but brushed the thought aside. No doubt, Bart was networking to find another job. A muscle jerked in his JT’s jaw. He hoped Bart showed more dedication at his next job. Bart climbed into his truck and slammed the door. His truck kicked up dirt and snow and fishtailed down the service road.

JT’s phone signaled an incoming text. He pulled it from the case on his belt.

Rose’s picture wavered into view. JT scanned the text.

“Bart’s gone?” The text read.

He tapped the dictation button. “For now. I told him we’d give him another chance in the spring if he controlled the partying. I gave him enough for expenses until he found something else.”

“Hopefully, he’ll understand. The boy has talent,” Rose texted.

“Talent that’s being destroyed by his passion for drinking,” JT murmured to himself.

He couldn’t be too hard on Bart. JT had lived the wild lifestyle. Because of his partying someone else paid the price. Something hot and hard rose up his throat. He tried to close his eyes to the vision that haunted every moment of his life.

Emptiness gnawed in his gut. He had known there was more in life than wild living. As a child, he’d spent his summers at Crystal Creek. As an adult he remembered what he’d always held in his heart. There was more to life and the place to find it was at Crystal Creek.

\* \* \*

The doorbell rang. JT checked his watch. The the first shift from the nursing service Rose had hired had arrived. This should keep his father placated for a little while. There was nothing Max liked more than having a pretty woman fuss over him. JT’s job was to make sure his father to run off with this pretty woman.

JT answered the door. It took three long seconds before the word lodged in his throat edged out of his mouth. “Hello.”

“This is the Whitloch resident, isn’t it?” the nurse asked.

JT stared into the close set dark eyes set into a face that looked like it needed to be shaved every four hours. The man had a couple of inches on JT’s six foot two inch frame.

“Yes, it is.” JT opened the door. “Come in.”

“You looked a little surprised to see me.” The nurse stepped into the foyer. “Though I get that a lot.”

“My surprise is nothing. You’ll be looking after my father. I’ll take you upstairs then give you a tour of the house so you’ll know where the kitchen is when my father’s ready to eat.”

JT led the way up the stairs. He squelched the laugh building up in his mind. Rose may have been distraught with the decisions she needed to make, but that didn’t deter her sense of humor. When Max woke and saw the burly man who would care for him in Rose’s absence, Mount Vesuvius was going to seem like a jaunt on a teeter totter.

After instructing the nurse on his duties,

\* \* \*

At a table near the bar sat Bart with two other men. JT’s mouth flattened. It didn’t appear that Bart was interested in rejecting the lifestyle that led to his being fired just hours ago. Bart went rigid when he caught JT’s eye. JT gave him a two finger wave. Bart’s expression turned dark. He scooted away from the table and disappeared into the crowd. He had hoped Bart would want to return to his job at Crystal Creek. JT knew he needed money. Apparently the drinking and the partying called to Bart more loudly than his need for employment.

Bart moved to the doorway. His dark gaze settled on JT. The corner of his mouth hooked into a sneer.

Maisey looked up into Bart’s face. Her eyes filled. He bent his head low to hers. Bart was the last person Maisey should be with in her state of mind. She needed someone to talk some sense into her. She had to realize her future didn’t hang on the opinion of one person. Bart slipped an arm around Maisey’s trembling shoulders and guided her into the foyer.

Bart peered into the kitchen. JT’s gaze jerked to the doorway. Bart’s eyes flew wide. He ducked out of the opening.

Maisey whipped around. “Who was that?”

“Bart. He’s looking for you. Don’t go with him.”

“Bart’s not a bad person. You didn’t give him a fair shake.”

“Is that what he told you?”

Maisey’s gaze shifted sideways.

“Did he tell you he was drunk when he was training the horses?”

Maisey’s jaw slackened.

“Yeah, that’s right. He lunged a horse that ran into a rail. We didn’t hire him to injure our horses.”

“I don’t believe that. Bart would never hurt anyone or anything.”

“Let’s ask him.” JT strode out of the kitchen. Maisey’s boots clicked behind him.

Bart slouched against a post by an alcove. JT moved closer and he jerked his head up. Panic settled into his dark eyes. He backed away, his gaze twitching from JT to Maisey. Her pace slowed. Confusion settled into the lines around her mouth.

“You need to tell Maisey why I fired you today.” JT kept his voice low, though he didn’t care who heard him. If Maisey knew he’d fired Bart, then everyone in town knew.

“I don’t need to tell her anything.” Bart’s eyes shifted to the patrons surrounding them.

No one was paying attention. They only wanted to hear Gretchen sing.

“But I already told her,” Bart said.

“See, JT, you’re reading too much into this. Bart was just doing his job, but you were having a bad day and took it out on him.”

JT swung his head. “In all the years you’ve known me, have I ever fired someone because I was having a bad day?”

Her pupils dilated and she tilted away from him. “No, but there’s a first time for everything.”

“There’s no first time for me to be unreasonable.”

“Come on, Maisey. Let’s get out of this dive.” Bart jerked his head toward the door.

Bart had been one of those. He didn’t have a resume but begged for a chance. JT hadn’t wanted to hire him. Ralph looked past Bart’s shifting gaze and gave him a chance. There had been something about the way Bart had looked at JT when Ralph had first hired him, as if he’d remembered JT. JT never commented on it. If Bart had remember JT from his performing days, he never mentioned it – the way JT preferred it.

\* \* \*

He’d learned that when he was six years old. The girls at the Tallinn European School cornered him in the canteen and took turns kissing him. His outrage soon turned to pleasure. When JT and his friends tried to rescue him, he grabbed the prettiest girl’s hand and ran to the knoll where he and JT would spy on the secondary students when they were making out.

\* \* \*

He scanned the crowd. If Maisey was there, Bart wouldn’t be far away. He caught the dark stare standing behind Artur. Bart and Artur were talking and not in a casual way. It was if they knew each other. Bart lifted his gaze to JT’s. There was a start in his eyes. He turned away and slipped through a doorway.

Artur glanced over his shoulder, gave JT a thanks-for-nothing smile and followed Bart.

\* \* \*

I can’t remember his name. He left his card on the kitchen counter. I had planned to file it when I returned to the house after rehearsal, but the guys talked me into attending the after party for your old band and. . .wait, the person who looked at the furnace. I saw him at the party tonight. He was on the other side of the room, but he was waiting for your friend.”

The word friend was like a hook pulling air out of his lungs. He didn’t have many friends. It was better that way – he didn’t want his attention to divert from focusing on the life he wanted to live.

“What friend?” he asked.

“The woman. I think you called her Maisey.”

A cold darkness wrapped icy fingers around his chest. “Maisey’s friend is named Bart.”

“I don’t remember that. I only remember seeing them at the party. They left together.”

“When I drive you back here tomorrow, we’ll look for the card.” A light filtered through the blinds in the foreman’s cabin.

JT climbed the steps and rapped on the door.

No sound came from inside. JT knocked again. If Ralph was up, he was going to open the door.

As if understanding JT’s challenge, the muffled sound of boots crossing the wooden floor floated through the door. It opened a crack, enough to frame Ralph’s granite hard face.

“What’re you doing up?” JT asked.

Ralph gave one slow blink. He waited as if expecting JT to say something of importance.

“Come on, Ralph. You know you’re going to have to come up with some answers eventually. Let me in. You can start with me and explain why you left and why you came back.”

Ralph disappeared into the cabin’s darkness. JT stepped through the doorway and into welcomed warmth. A banker’s light sat on a wooden desk. Fire in the stone fireplace threw heat into the room.

“You want some coffee?” Ralph pulled two mugs from the single cupboard above the sink. He lifted a metal coffeepot from the gas stove and arched a brow at JT.

“Do you have cream and sugar?”

Ralph shook his head. “Sorry. I don’t get fancy.”

“Then I’ll pass.”

Ralph nodded and replaced one of the mugs.

“Why’d you come back, Ralph?”

The foreman filled his mug and set it on the table. With a nod, he gestured toward a straight back chair on the other side of the table.

JT folded his long frame into a chair designed to hold a Gretchen sized person. He rested his hands on the table top and stretched his legs out in front of himself. He didn’t stop staring at Ralph.

Ralph set his mug inside a ring stain on the table. “Son, I know you want answers, but I don’t have any. When Rose comes back, you’ll know the truth.”

“At least, tell Emily. She has a right to know.”

“I agree, but she’s Rose’s daughter, not mine.” He narrowed his eyes at JT. “Whatever Rose has planned, I won’t interfere.”

“How long will you stay?”

“Until Rose gets back.” Ralph’s swallow bobbed around his Adam’s apple

“And then what?”

“There’s always a place for a ranch foreman.”

“They won’t pay what Rose pays.” JT tapped his thumbs against the table top.

“I don’t need much.”

Headlights seeped through the blinds covering the windows. Ralph moved to the window and twisted the wand. He stared out the window as if soaking up a view he would never see again.

The sound of an engine moved down the drive lane.

“Who’s that?” JT stilled his thumbs.

“Must be friends of yours. No one around here drives that kind of car.”

“What kind?” Everyone JT knew drove a truck or an SUV.

He moved to the window.

The sound of the door to Ralph’s cabin closing clicked into the icy night. Ralph didn’t have much use for people. He would have no use for Artur.

\* \* \*

Bart had been the last person in the house before JT had driven Gretchen home the night she and her band had performed at the Empty Bottle. If Bart carried a vendetta, it would be against JT. Gretchen had nothing to do with JT’s firing of Bart. Unless Gretchen and Bart already had a connection.

The light was still on in the foreman’s cabin. He strode across the compound and knocked on the door. “Ralph?”

The door opened enough to reveal Ralph still wearing jeans, a long sleeved shirt and a vest.

“Sorry, I missed helping you today,” JT said. “Everything okay?”

“As usual.”

“What about Artur?”

“We’ll talk tomorrow.” Ralph edged the door shut.

\* \* \*

JT glanced out the sidelight. “The sheriff and the deputies are gone, but theres’ a truck parked by the fountain.”

A heaviness filled his chest. The truck belonged to the one person he hadn’t expected to see for a long time.

He opened the door. “Bart, this is a surprise.”

“I didn’t expect to be here, but I need your help.” He spoke as if he’d been running hard.

Gretchen stood beside JT. He felt the brittle tension building inside her.

Bart’s gaze shifted to Gretchen. His eyes widened. “I’ll come back.”

“If you need help, I want to hear what you have to say. You can start by apologizing to Gretchen.”

Bart grabbed his hat from his head and clutched it to his chest. “I am sorry, ma’am. It will take me awhile, but I’ll repay for the damage I caused.” He looked at JT then lowered his gaze. “And for endangering the horses at Crystal Creek. And other things.”

“Why did you damage Gretchen’s home?” JT asked.

Bart’s gaze dropped to his scruffy boots. “I was paid. I was given more money than I’d ever seen in my life and probably ever will.”

“By whom?”

“I met someone five years ago, someone who gave me money when I needed it. We kept in touch and then when he called me and said he needed a favor-”

“Who called you?” JT narrowed his eyes at Bart.

Bart exhaled a breath that seemed to draw strength from his body. “It wasn’t the person I met, but they said they had a connection with him. They asked for my banking information and I sent it to them. You don’t have to tell me how dumb that was. At the time, what did I care? Money’s money. Because Miss Kitty was your friend, JT, I felt like damaging her house was a way to get back at you, and help Maisey get revenge, but after I caused the damage, I had second thoughts. The money’s still in my bank account. I called the bank and told them to take it out, but they said they couldn’t.”

“I can help you with that,” JT said.

Bart tipped his head and peered at Gretchen. “I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me, ma’am.”

“It’s only property, Bart,” Gretchen said. “It can be fixed.”

“And with the horses. When I think of the injury I could’ve caused one of those beautiful animals…”

“I accept your apology, Bart. I don’t expect to be repaid. Now tell us why you’re here.”

“It’s Maisey. She hasn’t been the same since that party.”

“Artur’s party? What happened?”

“She won’t tell me. She ended up in the hospital that night and hasn’t been the same since. Gene wants her to sing at the Empty Bottle tomorrow night, and she was going to, but now she’s changed her mind. I think it’s because of what happened.”

“Thanks for letting me know, Bart. I’ll talk to her.”

“I wouldn’t’ve come but no one else has been able to talk sense into her.”

“I’m not making any guarantee, but I don’t want to see Maisey miss out on an opportunity that could help her career.”

Bart nodded his thanks and left.

“Maybe I should talk to her.” Gretchen’s eyes had that seeing not seeing look.

“Do you think that’s wise?”

“No, but I’m the one she blames for ruining her career.”

“How did you know that? Did she tell you?

“She didn’t have to. I remembered her and remembered how angry and hurt she was. Maybe if I talk to her, she’ll understand why I voted the way I did.”

“If she gives you the opportunity to talk to her.”

“There’s only one way to find out. I’ll go to the Empty Bottle tomorrow night and talk to her.”

“We’ll do this together.”

“JT, I don’t need your help.”

“I didn’t say you did. I’m doing this for Maisey.”

\* \* \*

The door from the great room whooshed open and Victoria Whitloch Reynolds swept into the kitchen. She pressed a hand to her stomach and propped a hip next to the breakfast nook. “Mom, I’ve looked everywhere for you. Have you been down at the barn?”

“Where else would I be?” Rose pulled cold cuts and a head of lettuce from the refrigerator. “What are you doing here? Yesterday, you weren’t feeling well. I told you to stay home today.”

“I’m feeling fine.” Victoria sank to the padded bench surrounding the breakfast table. “You’re the one who isn’t feeling well.”

“I’m fine now.”

“What are you doing?” A frown buried itself between Victoria’s eyebrows.

The parallel lines in Rose’s forehead zigzagged into her hairline. “It’s lunchtime. I’m making lunch like I do every day. These things don’t happen on their own.”

“Let me do that.” Victoria pushed herself to her feet. Her face paled.

“Victoria.” Rose breathed her daughter’s name.

JT stepped toward his half-sister. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I’m fine.” Victoria waved him away. She pressed her hand to her stomach. “Mom, do you have any antacid?”

Rose lifted a bottle from the cupboard and tapped it on the table in front of Victoria.

“That was loud.” Victoria shook a couple tablets into her hand. “May I have a -”

Rose set a filled water glass in front of her.

“Thanks.” Victoria threw the tablets into her mouth and chased it with a mouthful of water.

“You’re welcome.” Rose fisted a hand against her hip. “If you’d stayed on your honeymoon like you were supposed to, you wouldn’t’ve come back here and caught this bug that’s going around.”

“There’s no bug going around so I haven’t caught anything. It’s just a little bit of indigestion probably because I ate so much yesterday.” Her brows hooked above her nose. “I don’t know why I’ve been so hungry lately.”

Rose tilted her head at her daughter.

“No, it isn’t that. Mother, really.” Color flooded her high cheekbones.

“I didn’t say a word.” Rose pulled a loaf of bread from the pantry and spread slices on the sandwich tray.

“Let me make the sandwiches, Mom. I’m still not sure you’ve fully recovered.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me. I’ll make lunch.”

“Then I’ll make a tray for Dad.”

“Make sure he’s awake. When I checked on him this morning, he was sawing logs faster than a band wheel.”

“He has to wake up. He won’t sleep tonight if he sleeps all day.” Victoria dropped a teabag into a cup and filled it with hot water from the brewing system. She set the cup and a plate filled with pecan cookies on the tray. “Are his pills upstairs?”

“Next to his bed. Like always.”

Victoria nodded and lifted the tray. With her back, she pushed open the door and disappeared into the great room.

“What can I do to help, Rose?” JT asked.

“Can’t help when there’s nothing to do. Lunch’s almost ready. Call the hands. I’m surprised they aren’t prowling around here already.”

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I need to go to Jackson Hole and help my sister with her ranch. Her boys are overseas and her chemo treatments are zapping her strength.”

“Rose, you just recovered. How about if I go up there?”

“No.” Her tone was sharp. The flicker in her eyes bordered on an apology. “If I leave now, I’ll be at her place by eight.”

“There’s storm moving in. You should wait until morning.”

She gave a dry laugh. “JT, I’ve been driving in snowstorms since before you were born. Don’t worry about me.”

“What about Victoria and Emily? And Dad?”

“Victoria and Garrett are on their way to Jamaica to finish their honeymoon.”

“I can’t believe she left.”

“It took some convincing, but she finally agreed. I’ve hired a nursing service to care for your father.” She released a heavy sigh. “As for Emily, I’ve left a letter on her desk. Please tell her

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Rose wandered around the table to make sure the chip bowl and water glasses stayed filled.

Victoria slid into the empty chair at the end of the table. The ranch hands greeted her between mouthfuls of sandwiches and chips. Normally she joined the conversation, but today her mind was filled with the image of her father huddled beneath a duvet in the guest bedroom. She had brought him a cup of tea. He had been sound asleep. She left the cup on his nightstand in case he woke while she ate lunch. She’d check on him after the meal and bring him a tray if he were hungry. Since he’d returned to the ranch he hadn’t much of an appetite which explained his lean frame. She and Rose tried to encourage him to eat, but he ignored the trays they brought him and instead quizzed them about which horses were being trained for which shows and the cattle buying trips.

“If you’re going to stare at your sandwich, shove it over here. I’ll eat it,” Hank wiggled his red eyebrows at her.

“It’s yours.” Victoria shoved the plate across the table.

“All right.” Hank’s brown eyes widened like a shark in a swimming pool.

“Why aren’t you eating?” Rose placed a hand on the back of Victoria’s chair. Her gaze shifted from the disappearing sandwich in Hank’s hands to her daughter.

“Food doesn’t sound good to me right now. I’m sure it’s because I ate so much yesterday.” She looked up at her mother. “What’s your excuse? You made lunch for everyone, but now you’re wandering around the table watching everyone eat.”

“I have other things to work on. I’ll eat later.” Rose’s gaze shifted away from her daughter. “I’ll be in the kitchen if anyone needs me.” She moved down the steps to the great room.

Victoria pushed away from the table and followed her.

Rose stood at the sink and stared out the window. Victoria stood behind her.

“What do you mean you’re leaving?” Victoria’s already pale face looked white. “Where will you go?”

JT set his plate on the counter. “Rose, Vic, what’s going on?”

Rose turned to him. Her gaze dropped to the floor. “I have to leave. My sister isn’t well. With both her boys fighting in wars overseas, she needs my help to run her ranch. And there’s one other thing I have to do - to find out what happened to Ralph. Find out where he went.” She exhaled a rush of air that seemed to flatten her narrow chest. “Find out if he’s ever coming back.”

“Mom, is what Hillary said true?” The pleading in Victoria’s eyes squeezed JT’s heart. “Are you and Ralph married? Emily and I have a right to know.” Her voice rose with each word.

Rose lifted her gaze. The bleakness in her eyes was so unlike the strong, confident Rose who strode around the ranch giving orders and watching over her crew as she did her own children. “You do deserve answers, but there’s something I need to do, before I can discuss anything else.”

“I’m going to the barn,” JT said. The awkwardness between Rose and Victoria was like a scrape on the inside his chest. He moved toward the mudroom. “Rose, if you need me for anything -”

“Don’t leave, JT. I want you to hear what I have to say.” Rose’s voice hooked him to a stop.

He glanced over his shoulder. The discomfort in his head settled in his belly. “Rose, I-.”

“You have to know. The decision I’ve made is going to fall on you. With Ralph gone and Max not always aware of what’s going on, I want you to be in charge until I come back.”

“Mom, how long will you be gone.” Victoria’s voice begged for answers, answers that Rose didn’t know or couldn’t share.

“I’ll be in touch, Victoria. JT, I know I don’t have to tell you what needs to be done. You have my cell and my email. Call me if you need to discuss anything.”

“Don’t worry about the ranch, Rose.” The pain in his stepmother’s eyes twisted in his chest. Whatever secret she carried, he hoped she could find peace.

“Tell Emily I’ll be in touch.” Rose looked around the kitchen as if making sure she had everything she needed before she left.

“Mom, you can’t leave without saying goodbye to Emily.” Victoria’s eyes glistened with the pain reflected in her mother’s eyes.

“Honey, if I wait until she gets home, I won’t leave. I can’t do that to her. I promise I’ll be back soon.” She wrapped her arms around Victoria.

Tears streamed down her daughter’s face. “Why can’t you tell me what happened?”

Rose patted her back and stepped away. Her gaze shifted to the floor then the sunshine streaming through the kitchen window. “You’ll know soon enough. I only hope you can forgive me.”

“There’s nothing you could do that I couldn’t forgive.”

“You’re my daughter, and I love you.” Rose didn’t meet Victoria’s gaze. Instead, she turned away and strode to the mudroom. She pulled her hat and coat from the metal hook.

“Mom, aren’t you taking anything with you?” Victoria followed her.

“Everything I need is in my truck.” Her head high, she walked to the doorway. Her hesitation was slight.

“Rose, you don’t have to leave. We’re here for you. You know that.” JT wanted push away her pain.

Victoria’s tears seemed to freeze in her eyes. Her breathing caught.

JT felt the barrier rise. Rose was pushing everyone away.

She stared out the door. “I’ll be in touch.” Her gaze moved to Victoria then JT. She stepped out the door.

Victoria took a step then stopped. Silent tears coursed down her cheeks flushed with pain.

In the distance, Rose’s truck charged to life. Tires crunched over the snow then silence swallowed the sound.

“Come here, Vic.” JT wrapped his arms around his half sister.

Her warm tears seeped through his shirt.

“Why does she have to leave?” Victoria’s voice trembled.

“We’ll know soon enough.”

“And what about Em? What am I going to tell her?”

“I’ll be here when she gets home. I’ll tell her,” JT said.

“Thanks, JT, but I need to be the one who tells her.” Victoria pulled away and looked into his eyes.

“No, you won’t be here. You’re going to finish your honeymoon.”

“I can’t leave. Not with Dad the way he is. And you need help running the ranch.” Victoria swept her arms in a circle.

“I have help,” JT said. “I’ve got the ranch hands and Em can help. I’ll call a nursing service and have them send over someone to help me with Dad. We can last a week without you.” He pulled his cell phone from his back pocket. “Call Garrett. Tell him you’ll meet him at the condo. Pack your bags and get on the plane to Jamaica or wherever you went on your honeymoon.”

“He’ll laugh at me. He has a law practice. He has court cases due. He can’t just up and leave.” A smile shone through the tears glistening in Victoria’s eyes. She took his phone.

“You never know until you try. Once you’re on your honeymoon, maybe that stomachache you’ve been having will go away.”

Victoria pressed a hand to her belly. “I don’t know if there’s any cure for that.” She dialed her husband’s work number. “You’re sure you can take care of Dad while I’m gone.”

“I’m sure. I’ll check on him now and see if he’s awake and wants to eat lunch,” JT said.

“I already took a tray up there. I’ll bring it down before I leave.”

“Leave it. Get started on your honeymoon,” he said, but Victoria was curled up on the bench surrounding the breakfast nook and talking to her husband.

Hank pushed open the kitchen door. The other hands followed him into the kitchen. One by one they stacked their plates into the dishwasher.

“We saw Rose drive off. Is she going to be back for dinner?” Hank asked.

“Nope, but don’t worry. We’ll have dinner. Rose saw to that. You boys get back to work. I’ll meet you in the center in a few minutes.”

The hands followed Hank outside. Their mumblings filled with doubt about the quality of the evening meal.

“I can’t believe it.” Victoria swiped her thumb over the screen of JT’s cell phone.

“Garrett wants to continue the honeymoon,” JT said.

“Not only that, he was getting ready to call me. He received a call from the resort asking him if they should hold our reservation.” She scooted out of the nook. She wrapped her arms around JT’s neck. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. It’s Garrett who’s taking you on this honeymoon which is where you should be.” He wrapped his arms around her. “Now get home, get packed and don’t think about this place anymore.”

“It will be hard not too, with so much going on. I wish Mom had trusted me enough to let me know what happened between her and Ralph.”

“Get yourself packed and get out of town. I’ll call Rose tonight and see how she’s doing. I’ll send you a text.”

“Thanks, JT.” Her eyes clouded. “I have so much to do. I have to pack. I have to shop.”

“Shop when you get to Jamaica.”

“You’re right. Thanks for taking care of everything while I’m gone.” She kissed his cheek and scooted out the door.

The hands gathered around the dining room table for the noon meal, talked horses and shoveled roast beef and turkey sandwiches and potato chips into their mouths. A few munched on carrot and celery sticks dipped in ranch dressing. JT swallowed the last bite of his sandwich and picked up his plate. “I’m going back to the barn,” he told the hands. “I’ll be in the office with a schedule of what needs to be done for the rest of the day. Stop by and I’ll let give each of you a list. With Ralph gone, I’ll need everyone to pick up the extra work until I can find a replacement.”

“No problem.” Hank shoved the last of his sandwich into his mouth.

An agreeable murmur waffled around the table.

JT pushed through the kitchen door.

After checking the dining room to make sure the hands had cleared the table, JT started the dishwasher. For dinner tonight, he’d have the hands help with dinner and cleaning up. They’d grumble, but if helping meant eating, they’d help.

He had planned to go to town that evening and listen to Maisey and her pickup band play at the Empty Bottle nightclub, but with Rose and Victoria gone, he’d have to schedule that trip into town when Rose returned. He’d text Maisey and tell her he wouldn’t be there. She’d argue with him, say she needed his support, but Crystal Creek came first. She had plenty of friends most of whom would be at the bar tonight.

He checked on his father, who was still sleeping. The male nurse the service had sent stood next to the bed and checked Max’s vital signs.

JT had thought he could run the ranch and look after his father, but now had his doubts. If his father would rest, JT could meet his needs, but Max rarely rested. There was only thing he knew how to do and that was to take charge. Once Max learned Rose was gone, he would want to take over. He’d been away from the ranch too long and wasn’t familiar with Rose’s management style. JT wouldn’t risk what Rose had spent the last ten years developing. When it came to Max, JT planned to keep a close eye on his father. This afternoon, JT would move his belongings out of the bunkhouse and into his old room in the main house. He’d be close to his father and could meet any need or solve any problem his father caused.

\*\*In the barn, Magic lifted his head at the sound of the boots echoing down the alley. He whinnied and nosed his head out the stall door.

Ralph gave a low whistle. “Everyone said he had perfect lines. I thought they were exaggerating, but now I see they were understating his attributes. How’re you doing, boy?” His face cracked into a smile. He held out his hand to the horse who nosed his palm. “He seems to like his home even if it is temporary.”

“It’s temporary. His new owner bought the Vasquez place. She plans to improve the equestrian center. She wants to give Rose a run for her money.”

“She can try.” Ralph pushed his hat to the back of his head. “No one’s better than Rose, but your new friend will learn that soon enough.”

“My friend?” JT choked a laugh.

Ralph narrowed an eye at him.

The sound of the barn door opening echoed through the barn.

“JT?” Emily’s voice floated down the alley.

“Down here.” He stepped to the main aisle.

Emily dragged the door shut and turned to him. Her hand crunched around an envelope. Tears pooled in her Whitloch blue eyes. “Why did Mom -” Her gaze rested on Ralph and she froze. “Ralph, what are you doing here? I thought you-”

“I needed a job. JT hired me back.”

“Then you’re here to stay?”

“We’ll see when Rose gets back.”

“When is she coming back? She left me this letter but all she said was that she had to go away for a while. Why did she have to leave? I don’t care what she’s done. She’s my mother and I -” Her voice trembled.

JT held out his arms to her.

She fell into them. Her tears dampened his collar. “I want her back, JT.”

Emily was tall but JT towered over her. “She’s coming back. Give her a few days to sort things out. It does mean we’ll have to pitch in and do some of the things she does, but -”

“I can help. I won’t go to school that way -”

JT looked down at her. “Nice try, Em. You’re staying in school.”

“But, JT, we’re understaffed.”

“We’re staffed just fine. Ralph’s back and will take over the ranch. I’ll help him, and I’ll help around the house. The hands will have kitchen duty. Rose hired a nursing service too look after Max.”

“I saw the nurse, JT. A male nurse. Dad’s going to be mad when he wakes up.”

“He’ll get over it,” JT said though he knew that was the impossible dream.

“You’re going to need help, JT. There’s the cooking and the cleaning. You can’t do that.” Emily fisted a hand to her hip.

“Be prepared to be dazed and amazed, Em. It won’t be Rose’s cooking but it’ll be edible.”

“I’ll help.”

“If you get your school work done you can help, otherwise you won’t be setting a foot near that kitchen.

“What about tonight? You had planned to go into town.”

JT schooled his features to hide his annoyance. He’d only discussed his plans for the evening with one person. “Did Maisey call you?”

“Only to ask me to make sure you came to the nightclub tonight.”

“I’ll talk to Maisey.”

“If you’re staying home tonight because you think we’re short-staffed, think again.” Ralph’s lean form towered over the stallion. “I’m here. I know what needs to be done.”

“There isn’t just the ranch work that needs to be done. Even though Rose hired a service to look after Max, someone needs to be nearby just in case…you know.”

“I can help with Dad, JT.” Emily’s red rimmed eyes shined. “I’ve been helping Vic take care of him so I know what to do. Go to the Empty Bottle. Maisey’s inviting everyone she can think of to come to the nightclub tonight. She’s going to tape the performance and send it to Kitty King.”

“Why would Maisey send a tape of her performance to the queen of country music?”

“Because she’s the judge who voted Maisey off that television talent show America’s Got Country. Maisey should have won that competition last year.”

“I know who she is, and I know what happened. Maisey needs to forget the past. She’d more of a career than she has now if she hadn’t sent Kitty King those emails. The FBI takes a funny view on threats.” He wished his friend would think before she had reacted. Or at least talked to him about her plan.

“I agree she shouldn’t’ve done that.” Emily’s shoulders seemed to fold as if the air in her lungs were escaping through a pinhole leak.

“Maisey needs to leave Kitty King alone.” JT’s voice held an edge. “Anything she mails to Kitty is going to be intercepted. Kitty will never see it. Looks like I better go to the Empty Bottle tonight so I can talk to Maisey. You sure you’ve got everything handled, Ralph?”

“Don’t worry about me, JT. Have fun.”

“What about you, Em? You can help the nurse in case Dad gives him any trouble?”

“I’ve been helping since the day Dad arrived.”

“I’ll make it an early night. Thanks both of you for taking care of everything.” JT shook Ralph’s hand and gave Emily a one armed hug.

Magic whinnied.

JT stroked the horse’s forehead. “Don’t you worry, Magic. Ralph’s the best. He’ll take good care of you.” Touching two fingers to the brim of his hat, he strode toward barn door. Before opening it, he glanced over his shoulder.

Ralph and Emily spoke in low tones and stroked Magic. The horse bobbed his head and basked in the attention.

Whatever secrets Rose had kept all these years were about to affect the most important people in Rose’s life - secrets that would heal or tear the family apart. Only Rose knew the answer. So did Ralph, Ralph who rarely spoke.

JT only hoped the family and Ralph could move on when Rose finally revealed her dark secret.

He heaved open the door and stepped into a knife sharpened wind that bit at his face. Dragging his collar around his neck, he hunched into the wind and headed toward the bunkhouse.

\* \* \* Maisey, one of the barmaids at the Empty Bottle, had put together a pickup band. Gene, the bar’s owner, had agreed to let the band play a set tonight. Maisey had texted JT and other patrons several times during the past few weeks to make sure they would attend the performance. JT couldn’t tell her no. He’d been there once. Now he was committed.

But he had promised Maisey he’d watch her performance. He would uphold his promise.

Maisey’s claim to fame was runner up on the television talent show America’s Got Country. JT never learned why Maisey didn’t win, but the loss had left her bitter. After a few drinks, her anger would spill out. The judges were unfair. They chose the wrong winner. Maisey should have won.

With little prompting, she would swing her arms and narrow her brown eyes then spout a rendition that encompassed more details with each telling. The basic story remained the same - Maisey should’ve been the country star to win the contract with the recording studio.

\* \* \*A commotion sounded from the bar. JT shifted his gaze to see Maisey dressed in a red minidress with matching boots and hat. She pointed at the stage and shook her head, her curls twisting in the air. Gene, the bar’s owner, held up his hands and nodded his bald head. Maisey’s voice rose above the din of conversations crowding the nightclub. Her face turned red, and she stamped her foot. Several of the patrons surrounding them stared.

JT gave a rough exhale. Maisey’s hot head should’ve gotten her fired, but Gene wouldn’t fire her - she was the darling of the town.

When she left for Hollywood to appear on the talent show, friends, acquaintances and even strangers gathered to give her a sendoff befitting a country music star. Her singing voice mesmerized the local audiences. Everyone knew she’d win. She knew she’d win.

She didn’t win.

Maisey returned home humiliated and ashamed. With each day, her hatred for the judge who refused to acknowledge her talent grew. Anyone passing through town heard about the injustice she’d received. Maisey couldn’t accept the judge’s decision - that the other contestants sang better than Maisey. Never had Maisey received such criticism.

And for that criticism, Maisey found no forgiveness for the judge. Feeding on her hatred for the woman who didn’t let her win gave Maisey satisfaction. Each day the hatred consumed Maisey like a disease. Maisey’s voice had nothing to do with the judge’s decision. The judge hated Maisey and wanted to ruin Maisey’s career.

The day Maisey was eliminated from the competition was the shock of her life. No one had ever labeled her singing as second rate. In the small town of Crystal Creek, she won every competition. She knew she’d be the best in Hollywood.

She wasn’t.

The decision rocked Maisey’s world - rocked the town.

She returned home with a welcome she hadn’t expected. People greeted her but said little about the loss.

Tonight was Maisey’s big night. She’d been after Gene to let her perform at the club. Gene had scheduled the performances several months in advance and didn’t have an opening.

Judging from Maisey’s red face, her performance wasn’t going to be tonight.

JT picked up his tumbler of club soda and slid onto the barstool next to Maisey.

“Hey, what’s going on?” he asked.

“I’m trying to explain to Maisey -” Gene began.

“He’s trying to back out of our agreement. I’ve hired a band and have a set scheduled,” Maisey’s voice no longer held the silk that wrapped around her voice when she sang. She was shrill and angry.

“I know. I saw the van and bus by the stage entrance,” JT said.

“That’s not the van for my band.”

JT didn’t think Maisey’s face could turn any redder. It did.

“I could only afford to hire a pick up band.” Maisey’s high pitched voice was eardrum piercing. She didn’t care who heard her. “No way could I afford a band that traveled in that style.”

“Whose van is it?” JT asked.

Maisey crossed her arms over her chest and glared at Gene.

“This is what I’ve been trying to tell Maisey.” Gene’s bald head turned so darl it looked as if it would blister. “We have a surprise guest tonight. I didn’t know about it until just an hour ago. They’ll play one set then they’ll leave. Maisey and her band will have the stage for the rest of the night.”

“Yeah, when everybody’s whose left will be too drunk to appreciate my singing.”

“You’re not willing to share the stage with another band?” JT asked Maisey.

“No, this is my night. I’ve been planning this performance for months. Everyone in town is expecting me to be on stage in -” She glanced at the clock. “- two minutes.”

“Kitty King.” Maisey glared at Gene. Her eyes blazed. “You hired Kitty King to play in my place. That woman ruined my life.”

“Hold on, Maisey. I didn’t hire her. You know she and her band like to pop into small bars and play to the crowd like they used to before they were famous. Her manager called and asked if they could play a set, and I said sure. She doesn’t charge for these gigs.”

“This was my night, and you let the most evil woman on the face of the earth push me out of my chance to show the crowd what I can really do.” She raised curled fists at Gene.

JT caught her wrist. “Calm down, Maisey. Gene told you she’ll play one set, and then she’ll be gone.”

“It isn’t just anyone pushing me out. It’s Kitty King. Don’t you get it, JT? If it weren’t for her, I’d have a record contract. I’d be traveling the world performing at major venues instead of dive bars like Empty Bottle.”

“Empty Bottle isn’t a dive, Maisey.” The red creeping up Gene’s neck flamed his face.

“Let’s go outside, Maisey. We’ll take a walk. You can tell me what happened.” JT pulled Maisey away from Gene.

She shrugged from his grasp. “You want to talk, talk to him.” She shot a finger at Gene. “He invited that evil woman to play in my place.”

“Why do you say she’s evil?” JT’s body filled with adrenaline ready to jump in if Maisey lunged at Gene.

Maisey stuttered a laugh. “She said I wasn’t good enough. She said I couldn’t win. She said the boy band sang better than I did. Because of her, the boy band won. I should’ve won.” With each word, Maisey’s voice rose an octave.

“Maisey, you don’t need Kitty King to declare you a winner.”

“Ha! She declared me a loser. Don’t you get it?”

“You are not a loser.” JT’s voice was low and firm. He placed his hands on Maisey’s shoulders and stared into her eyes.

She shrugged her shoulders, breaking his touch. “Thanks for nothing, JT. I thought you were my friend.”

“I am your friend, but Kitty King’s decision not to pick you as the winner doesn’t mean you’re not good. I’m sorry you’re hurting. I’m sorry you lost the talent show, but you have your whole life ahead of you.”

“Knock off the platitudes, JT. I know what I have. Kitty King made me lose. That’s why I wanted to perform tonight. This was my chance to show everyone that Kitty King was wrong. You promised, Gene. You promised I could perform tonight.”

“They’re only performing for one set, then the stage is yours,” JT said.

“I can’t cut my show short. It’ll ruin everything. She ruined everything.” Maisey lunged at Gene.

The owner stepped behind the bar. A drop of perspiration beaded on his scalp.

JT stepped in front of Maisey.

“Why are you defending him?” She raised her fists.

JT grabbed her wrists. “I’m not defending him. I’m defending you.”

She jerked away from him. His rough hands scraped over her skin. He knew that had to hurt her.

She didn’t flinch. Instead, she fought the hot tears pooling in her eyes. “I don’t need you defending me. You want to protect someone, protect him.” She jerked her head toward Gene. “And protect your girlfriend.”

JT did a slow blink.

“Don’t look so surprised. I know she’s boarding her horse at your place. I know she bought the Vasquez ranch. She bought it so she could compete with you. Let’s see how much you like her after she brings her fancy horses to town and starts winning all the competitions. I’m not the only one who wants to see her gone. You can join the crowd.” Maisey whirled around and stormed through the crowd toward the entrance.

The bouncers stepped to each side of the double door entrance.

He had to find Maisey. The fear wrapped around his chest. JT had to find her and talk some sense into her. She was about to make a mistake that could haunt her for the rest of her life. Who knew better than he the horror of being hunted by memories. A cold stone of regret dropped to the pit of his stomach. The past never forgave. showed one person who wasn’t enthralled.

JT narrowed his gaze past the crowd.

Maisey.

Her overcoat covered the beaded costume she had bought for her performance tonight. Rhinestones and ostrich feathers trimmed her cowgirl hat.

She moved to the bar and grabbed Gene by the sleeve and pointed at the stage. It wasn’t just disappointment that clouded her eyes. It was anger.

Gene lifted his shoulders and walked away. She stormed after him and grabbed his arm again. He turned to her, his arms raised in explanation.

JT skirted the stage and strode across the room to the bar. He grabbed Maisey’s arm and dragged her into the kitchen. Gene followed.

“Where’ve you been?” JT demanded.

She shook off his grip. Grabbing the brim of her hat, she straightened it. “Not that it’s your concern, but I’ve been out.”

He could smell the whiskey on her breath. He winced. “What happens to you is my concern.”

“I’m an adult, JT. I’ll make my own decisions.” She swayed and grabbed the edge of the butcher block table.

“You’re drunk.” Jt reached out the catch her but she brushed his hands away.

“I wouldn’t be if I were on that stage like Gene promised.”

“Don’t blame Gene for a decision you made.”

“Look, Maisey.” Gene’s voice lowered. “This couldn’t be helped. Kitty King wanted to perform here. How could I tell her no?”

“All you care about is the money.”

“Of course, I care about the money. I’m running a business. I promised you could perform after she leaves or another night any night you wan, a weekend night if you want, and you don’t have to pay me back.”

“She’ll take it,” JT said.

Relief softened the lines digging into Gene’s forehead.

“You don’t speak for me.” Maisey’s hands balled into fists. Her face mottled, she turned on Gene. “I was supposed to perform tonight.”

“Like I said, Gene, she’ll take it.” He grabbed Maisey’s arm and dragged her to the kitchen’s rear entrance.

“Take your hands off me.” She twisted and jerked against him.

When they reached the doorway, JT released her. “What’s the matter with you?”

“You’re like everyone else. All starry eyed over Kitty King.”

“I’m not starry eyed. I came here to listen to you.”

“Then you should be defending me instead of siding with Gene.”

“He’s giving you a better deal - a weekend night and he’s not charging you.”

“He shouldn’t. I’ll bring in more business than Kitty ever would.”

JT released a stunned sigh to keep from laughing. His eyes half closed, he shook his head. “Maisey, what do you have against her?”

“She gave me bad advice. If it hadn’t been for her, I would’ve won America’s Got Country.”

“Did it ever occur to you that you may have lost because someone else was better?”

Her eyes turned bright with tears. “You’re like all the others.”

“Maisey, you’re not always going to win.”

“Don’t I know that.”

“But it’s not the end of the world. You’ll get other chances. Gene’s trying to give you one now.” He glanced back at Gene who dragged a hand over his bald head and paced by the counter cluttered with wire baskets.

“Where’ve you been tonight, Maisey?” JT narrowed his eyes at her..

Her gaze shifted. “Around.”

“Like hanging out by the backstage door around?”

“I don’t know anything about that.”

“I didn’t say anything happened.”

“I’m going home,” Maisey said.

“You know the highway’s closed,” JT said.

“Don’t worry about me, JT. I’ll find a way out of here.”

“That’s just it, Maisey. I am worried about you.”

“Stop and start worrying about your friend Kitty King.”

She flounced past JT, pushed through the crowd and into the cold night. The double doors slammed shut. The pounding left a hollowed out feeling inside JT’s chest.

Through the glass doors, JT watched Maisey trudge across the parking lot. Her head high, her hair swished back and forth across her shoulders. She stepped into the darkness and disappeared among the cars and trucks parked at angles to avoid snow scraped into piles around the pitted parking lot.

Something low and dark churned in the bottom of JT’s stomach. Maisey had been his friend. Whenever Gene gave her a chance to sing at the bar, JT had come to town to watch her. Sometimes, he’d play backup bass guitar and vocals if she had trouble throwing together a pickup band. Nobody remembered him from his days as lead singer of the group whose songs had hit number on the pop charts. JT left the band the night those lifeless eyes stared up at him from the bottom of the pool. That was the night he realized his life was spiraling into a pit. He had to escape. “I hope you got to see her. I’m assuming your friend is a woman.” Gretchen's fingers slowed. She didn’t sound jealous.

JT’s smile was slow and felt stiff. “My friend is a woman. All I did was see her. I wished I could’ve talked to her but she had something else on her mind tonight.”

“I’m sorry. I hope you can work it out.” Her eyes were dark and wide and reflected the concern she felt toward someone she didn’t know.

It would hurt Maisey knowing that Gretchen didn’t remember her. Maisey charged Gretchen with ruining her career – with stealing her one shot at fame. If Maisey knew

\* \* \*

Another woman walked past Gretchen and shoved a shoulder against hers. Hard. Gretchen stumbled backward. JT grabbed her around the waist. Even through the coat he could feel how delicate and small she was.

“Pardon me.” Gretchen’s mumble was breathless.

The other woman twisted her head toward Gretchen, her eyes hard, her lips thinned.

“Maisey, what are you doing here?” The grip inside JT’s chest squeezed air out of his lungs, made him wish he could drag her out of this place.

“I can be here if I want.” She didn’t look at JT. She glared at Gretchen.

Gretchen moved out of JT’s arm. The warmth he had felt filled with chilled air.

“You’re a friend of JT’s?” Gretchen cocked a brow at JT then extended her hand to Maisey. “I’m Kitty King.”

Maisey’s gaze dropped to Gretchen’s hand. In her eyes flashed something dark and sinister.

JT angled his shoulder between Maisey and Gretchen. He didn’t know what Maisey was thinking but the aura radiating around her felt evil and foul. With a gasp, Maisey drew back. The darkness in her eyes segued to something vulnerable and helpless. JT swallowed. He wanted to help her. Instead, hatred filled her eyes. With a sniff, she lifted her head and pushed through the crowd. She bumped into a man who stepped wide. Beer flew out of his bottle. He uttered an oath, wiped beer off his arm and glared at Maisey’s receding back.

She scowled at him over her shoulder then bumped into two men having a conversation. They split apart, let her pass.

“Looks like you and she didn’t part on good terms.” Gretchen looked up at him.

He stared after Maisey. “We didn’t, but not in the way you think.”

JT’s mouth tightened. He’d drag Maisey out of this place, even if she were kicking and screaming, but she’d come back. He only hoped she wouldn’t regret coming here tonight.

\* \* \* “I knew you wouldn’t deny it. You were always provincial. Must be that American side of you.”

“Except that you know I’m not American.”

“You’re American. There’s nothing European about you anymore.”

“You have no proof that your uncle contacted me.”

“Actually, I do.” He reached into his pocket. “Do you want to see it? After he sent you that text, he forwarded it to me to make sure he’d sent it correctly. He’s not the most phone savvy person on the planet.”

“You could say that about a lot of people. He sent me a text. Why aren’t you asking HM about it?” JT didn’t look at Artur, though he felt his friend’s hard stare pressing against him.

“I did. He’s too cultured to say something as base as it’s none of my business, but it is my business. He’s my uncle. Now tell me, what possible reason could my uncle have with you?”

“You must know something. Why else would you question me? Let’s hear it, Artur. The man barely knows me.

\* \* \*

“If I’m going to the barn, I’ll want to ride.”

Artur’s declaration was like an untuned guitar playing in the midst of the string section of an orchestra. Artur want to ride? Yesterday, he’d declared that he wouldn’t ride. Artur didn’t like horses, which was probably why he wasn’t a good rider.

“Are you sure you’ll want to ride?” JT asked.

“Of course, I’m sure.” Artur’s eyes turned dark.

JT wasn’t convinced. “Ralph’s down there. He’s the foreman. Tell him to saddle up Habiba. She’d be a good horse for you.”

\* \* \*

With her paws, she tapped at the lumps beneath the fabric, then settled into the center of the pillow. She tossed a glance at the man then stared st the ten year old calendar with a picture of a beach.

The man opened a key cabinet the size of a door and pulled out a set of keys. “Follow me.”

His weight shifting from one tree trunk sized leg to the other, he led them out a back door and through a maze of vehicles, old and new and some that would never touch their tires to pavement again, if they still had tires.

“There it is.” Gretchen pointed to the bright red truck that towered over a Mazda without a grill and a Porsche with a dent in its roof.

“What happened to the Porsche?” JT dragged his gaze over the smooth lines.

“What happens before they come and what happens when they leave doesn’t concern me.” The man’s voice was fast and monotone as if he recited the line twenty times a day. He was breathing hard and rested a hand on the Mazda.

Gretchen pressed the key fob.

“Pop the hood,” JT said to Gretchen.

“Now wait a minute.” The man pushed away from the Mazda and waved his hands. “I’m not responsible for any damage.”

“I know how it works.” JT moved to the front of the truck.

Gretchen climbed inside the cab and stared at the vacant space beneath the steering column. “I don’t know how to disengage the hood. Never mind. I found it.”

The heavy thud of a hinge releasing cracked into the air. The hood rose. JT lifted it. His hand resting against the edge, he peered at the shiny engine that smelled new.

“Start the engine.”

It purred, the vibration smooth.

“How’s the interior look?” He leaned around the hood and looked through the windshield at Gretchen. All he could see was the top of her head.

“Like it did when I bought it.”

JT shut the hood and brushed his hands. “We’re ready for the next step,” he said to the man.

\* \* \*

Maisey slapped her tray on the counter and fisted a hand to her hips. “What game are you and Miss Kitty playing?”

“We’re not playing a game, Maisey. We’re helping. How about I ask you a question. Why won’t you sing tonight?”

Gretchen set her tray on the counter and stacked drinks on the tray.

Maisey turned on her. “First you steal my singing career, then you steal my waitress job.”

“Hon, I’m helping, but JT’s right. Gene’s been trying to get you on stage for days, and you’ve ignored him.”

Maisey turned away and looked for her order. “He had his chance.”

“Now he’s giving you one, but you’re too stubborn to see an opportunity when it stares you down.”

Maisey gasped. “Get out of my business.”

“What would it take to get you up on that stage?” Gretchen asked.

“You don’t know.” Maisey’s eyes changed.

“Tell me. I want to help.”

“It isn’t that simple.”

“All right.” Gretchen pushed away from the bar and moved through the crowd.

“What is she doing?” Maisey almost looked afraid.

“Maisey, when are you going to quit letting your pride ruin your life?” JT arched a brow at her.

“I’m not proud. Something happened and I don’t feel like singing.”

Blackness enveloped him. Last night, Sheriff Wright visited the ranch because of something Artur had done. Why was Artur wearing a bandage that hid half his face?

“It was Artur, wasn’t it?”

“What do you know?” She stared at him, stunned.

“I don’t know anything, Maisey. I know you were at that party. I saw the way Artur looked at you. I’ve seen it before.”

Maisey’s gaze dropped to the floor. “You told me to leave. I wished I had listened.”

“What did he do?”

“Nothing, to me, because I fought him off.”

“That would explain the scratch on his face. Did you do that?”

She looked down. “I can’t say anything else.”

“Is that the reason you’re not performing tonight?”

“Partially, but it’s not the main reason.” Her gaze followed Gretchen. “You call me proud but look at her. She’s the one who’s proud. And don’t tell me she isn’t. Why else would she be climbing on that stage now? She’s using tonight as an opportunity to promote herself.” Tears welled in her eyes.

“For once in your life, think before you speak.”

Maisey’s mouth dropped open.

“No, no, that’s not why I’m up here. I’m here because I want you to welcome my good friend and yours, Miss Maisey Brown.” She extended her hand to Maisey.

Maisey ripped off her apron and through it on the counter. “Her friend. She called me her friend. If she thinks -”

She stared at the crowd. One by one, each patron looked at her, applauded and rose to his feet. Her jaw dropped.

“If you’re going to leave, leave.” JT wiped the counter.

Tears spilled down Maisey’s face. She faced JT. “I didn’t think anybody liked me.”

“Maisey, Maisey, Maisey, now why would you believe that nonsense?” JT walked around the bar. He gave her a one armed hug.

“Because…because I didn’t win.” Tears tracked down her cheeks.

“Are you supposed to win every time?”

“I used to. I thought I’d win the America’s Got Country show, but when Miss Kitty voted against me...”

“Are you going to lock yourself into that moment, or are you going to climb on that stage and give these people what they want?”

She looked at him through tear flooded eyes.

“You call me when it’s over and let me know how it went,” JT said. He had insisted that he and Gretchen drive together to town. Now he was leaving. He’d have to take her with him.

“You’re not staying?” Her tears stopped and she stared at him through reddened eyes.

“I’ve had my fill of bars, but I’ll be thinking of you, Mais. Go. Now.”

She moved through the crowd. Someone gave her a pat on the back when she passed. Others hugged her. She climbed the stage. Gretchen reached down and took her hand and guided her to the center of the stage.

“Are you excited?” Gretchen called out to the crowd.

The applause rocked the timbers.

Gretchen handed the microphone to Maisey. She whispered something in Maisey’s ear. Maisey nodded and Gretchen hugged her then moved behind the keyboard and tapped out a few chords. JT looked at the two women on the stage. A vocalist and a keyboardist wouldn’t do. He walked through the crowd, climbed the stage and picked up the electric guitar. He turned the pegs and plucked the strings. Hank slid onto the stool behind the drum set and tapped the sticks against the skins.

Maisey wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and stared at the makeshift band. “What should I sing first?”

“Start with the song you wrote for the talent show.” JT strummed the opening refrain.

Maisey’s voice cracked. She looked out at the audience. The cheers and claps stopped. The waitresses tucked their trays to their sides. The bartenders rested their hands on top of the draft beer dispensers. Gene moved to a vacant stool in front of the bar and sat down.

Maisey lifted the microphone to her mouth and sang the first line. Her voice cracked, then it gained power, and she strolled across the stage reaching an arm out to the audience who seemed to lean into the stage.

The song ended. The crowd shot to its feet. Maisey’s shoulders jerked and she clutched the microphone to her chest. She moved to one side of the stage and extended her hand to JT, Gretchen and Hank.

Gretchen moved away from the keyboard. Shadows fell across the stage revealing a silhouette of her upturned nose and her smooth cheeks. She gave a slight nod, then extended her hand toward Maisey and clapped. Gretchen pressed a card into Maisey’s palm and gave her hug.

Maisey stuffed the card into her pocket, climbed down the stage and mingled with the audience.

“What did you give her?” JT asked.

“Something I should’ve given her a long time ago. My agent’s contact information. She thought that not winning the talent contest meant she couldn’t have a career. She can still have that career. I’ll see to that. Have a good night, JT.” She moved toward the steps leading into the audience.

“You do something kind for someone and then you disappear.” JT unhooked the guitar strap from around his neck and placed it in its stand.

Gretchen’s step froze above the step. “I’m not disappearing. This is Maisey’s night.”

“A night that you made possible. Why are you leaving?”

She looked over her shoulder at him. “It’s time I moved on with my own life.”

“You have a life. You’re a singer. You entertain.”

“Yes, I am a singer.” She stared over the audience gathering around Maisey then looked back at JT. “I’m going to call a transportation network and have them take me back to my place. There I’ll pack enough clothes to take to a hotel.”

He let out his breath. “Gretchen -”

“JT, my staying at Crystal Creek is not a good idea.”

“I agree. What happened before won’t happen again.”

She looked up at him. Her lips parted like that of child not receiving the surprise she’d expected.

“You look disappointed.”

“I don’t see how. Disappointment never entered my mind.” She moved down the steps to the seating area.

“My mistake,” he muttered and followed her.

“I’ll stay one more night at Crystal Creek.” She didn’t look at him. “Tomorrow night I sleep in my own home.”

“Tomorrow, we’ll go to your place and make sure it’s livable. You’ll need certification from the county declaring it a safe environment.”

“It’ll be safe. No matter what, I’m sleeping in my own home tomorrow night.” She strode across the bar.

JT gave a low laugh. He pushed his hat on top of his head and followed her across the bar.

A steady hum of conversation filled the room. Maisey sat at the bar. Gene set a goblet filled with pink liquid and an umbrella in front of her. A dozen men and women crowded around her.

Gretchen slipped behind the bar and lifted her coat from the hook. She thrust her arms into the sleeves and picked her way through crowd.

“Wait.” Maisey jumped off the stool and angled her body through the group surrounding her. She grabbed Gretchen’s arm.

Gretchen stopped, her gaze traveling from Maisey’s hand to her eyes. JT sucked air through his teeth.

“I…I…” Maisey stammered.

JT snorted. He’d never seen her at a loss for words.

Gretchen patted Maisey’s hand. “Hon, I don’t know if you want to thank me or swear at me.”

Maisey’s gaze dropped. “I don’t want to swear at you. I’m just sorry I didn’t realize you were nice.”

“You know how you can thank me? Share your talent with the world. You are one talented young lady.”

“But you voted against me.” Maisey squinted, the confusion in her mind spreading over her face.

“You don’t always have to win, hon. Maybe someday you’ll be telling that to some whippersnapper.”

Maisey’s laugh was filled with emotion. “I hope so.”

“You will.” Gretchen turned away. Her face tense, she searched the crowd. When she saw JT, she seemed to relax and moved toward him.

JT felt lift in his chest. It annoyed him. Whatever happened between him and Gretchen was over before it started. The sooner she left, the sooner he could convince himself he would never be a part of her life.

So why had he insisted she stay at Crystal Creek one more night?

\* \* \*

“I do appreciate them, but you and Gretchen and Hank, I appreciate you most of all.” She held out her hand to Gretchen.

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