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Chapter 3

“Oh, Dirk! This is exactly what I wanted!” Olivia walked ahead of Dirk, clapping her hands as she went, looking around the dusty barn. There were two barns on the property, both about 4,000 square feet. When the ranch was fully operational, all twenty-four stalls were used. Now, they just had the one barn with only three horses.

Dirk used this second barn to store things. He hadn't been in the barn for several months. It was too painful. This had been one of the last places he had been with Shelly.

Dirk glanced over at the corner where she had surprised him, pulling him down into some hay. He could hear her giggling, feeling her breath on his neck, her fingers tickling his back.

“Thanks for letting us do this,” Jack said, pulling Dirk back to the present, while Olivia was pacing the other side, talking to herself. “I know that this can't be easy.”

“Shelly would have wanted you to use it.” Dirk shrugged.

Shelly had wanted people to use this space to get married. It was going to be her next big venture. Something they could do to offset the cost of the ranch. Maybe reduce the number of cows. Or hire more help so he could focus on what he liked to do, train horses. She had shown him other places, and the prices they were charging to let people come in and use their barns. He

hadn't hated the idea. But now, the thought of other people starting their lives together while his was gone seemed like a slap in the face.

But when Jack called and told him the news of his engagement, he heard Shelly in his head, telling him to do it. Let them be the first.

"You really going to get this all done? Christmas Eve is just around the corner." Dirk remembered it took Shelly months to plan their wedding. How on Earth was Olivia going to pull one off in a week was beyond him.

"I hope so. But you know me. I could get married in the courthouse. Olivia has her heart set on this barn wedding though."

Dirk shrugged and didn't tell his friend he thought he was crazy, marrying a girl he had just met. But then again, he had never seen Jack so into a girl as he was Olivia. Dirk turned his attention back to the bride-to-be. She was pretty, with dark hair and eyes. He remembered her from the high school rodeo scene. She did barrel racing. She was decent. Probably could have been better. Jack says he vaguely remembered her, but he and Dirk were certain they were going to be big rodeo stars and focused on nothing else. Girls had never been a priority for them.

Until he met Shelly.

Dirk pushed Shelly out of his mind. He had gotten good at that, forcing himself to forget about her. It took two years of practice.

"Daddy!" Dirk turned to see his daughter, Henley, running down the hill at him, Daisy, their shepherd mutt racing beside her. Henley still had on her backpack and carried her lunch pail.

"Hey!" Henley ran into him, full bear hug like she did every day after school. "How was school?"

"Good! I'm going to check on Dolly! Hi Uncle Jack!" She was off again like a bat out of hell. She looked so much like Shelly. And acted so much like him.

"Hey girlie!" Jack laughed, shaking his head. Olivia came back, hooking her arm through Jack's.

"Did you ask him yet?" She looked up at her husband. Her eyes sparkled and Jack seemed to puff up, beaming with love, and even Dirk had to admit that there was a little magic between the two.

"Not yet." Jack looked back at Dirk. "I was wondering if you would stand

up there with me. Be my best man?”

“Of course.” Dirk was happy on the outside and shook his friend’s hand. But inside, he didn’t want to be anywhere near the wedding. It would be too hard to block out Shelly. But Jack had been there for him, including being the best man at his own wedding. He had been there when he lost everything. He owed it to him to cowboy up and deal with his issues.

“My best friend Isabella, Izzy Davis, is going to be my maid of honor. I called her right after we got engaged. She will be here tomorrow.”

“Where is she from?” The name sounded familiar to Dirk, and a fuzzy picture formed in his mind. A girl, sitting on the top rail at the rodeo. Same spot every week, smiling and laughing.

“Here, originally. But she lives in San Diego right now.” Olivia’s phone rang. “It’s Daddy. Hopefully, he got enough people to work the wedding!”

“We better get back to work.” Dirk said, heading out the door. Jack called to Olivia, motioning for her to follow.

“Thanks, Daddy!” Olivia hung up. “Daddy got everyone to agree to come to work and cater the wedding! One thing checked off! No! Make that two!” She smiled at Dirk again. Dirk wondered if Hank Rosilo, the owner of the local Italian restaurant, had given people the option to not work his daughter’s wedding. He was a nice guy, but sometimes gave off the vibe of being part of an old-school Italian mob. Shelly had liked his food, and they had gone to eat there whenever they wanted something fancy. Dirk had always waited for a mob boss to arrive and smoke in the corner.

“Four. Best man and maid of honor.” Jack said to his wife-to-be.

“True! We are killing this wedding planning!” She and Jack high-five, laughing. “Is it okay if I stop by over the next few days? I want to get the place in order.”

“You guys could just stay here, if that would be easier?” Dirk surprised himself with the invitation the second it came out. He looked up at the big ranch house. It was too big for him and Henley. But he had promised he would make this Christmas a little happier than the last two. Maybe having people in the house would help with that.

“Really? No, we couldn’t impose.” Olivia glanced at Jack.

“It would be no bother. You could stay in Jack’s old room.”

“Well, okay. But Izzy was going to stay with me.”

“She can stay too. That barn is going to need a lot of work.”

“Oh wow! Thanks, Dirk!” Olivia hugged him again. “I will cook dinner every night as a thank you!”

Dirk smiled, tapping her back lightly in reply.

“Deal. Henley will like food that isn’t frozen or burnt.”

As if summoned, Henley came out of the other barn, backpack still on but missing a lunch pail.

“Still no baby.” Henley sighed.

“It’ll come soon.” Dirk let Henley hang off his leg while she looked over at Olivia.

“Hey, Dirk. Would Henley like to be a flower girl?” Olivia looked at him. It annoyed Dirk when people spoke to him about Henley as opposed to speaking to her directly. She was young, but she had a mind. She could make it up herself.

“For what?” Henley asked before Dirk could say something.

“I’m getting married, Henley.” Jack said, “To Olivia. We would really like it if you would be in the wedding.”

Henley looked back at her father.

“Your choice.” He never forced Henley to do anything she didn’t want to do, but encouraged her to try new things. He wasn’t sure she even knew what a flower girl would do.

“Okay,” Henley shrugged before racing up to the house, disappearing inside.

“Five things done! Only a million to go!” Jack hugged Olivia.

* * *

“Jack and his fiancé, Olivia, are going to be staying with us for a week. And one of Olivia’s friends.” Dirk told Henley that evening. His daughter was sitting at the table, kicking her feet, writing out something on a piece of paper.

“Why?” Henley didn’t stop writing.

“They are going to be getting married in the barn. They want to get ready for it.” Dirk stirred the noodles in the pot. He was good at mac ‘n’ cheese. And lucky for him, Henley never got sick of it. “I also thought it might be nice to have some people in the house for the holiday.”

Henley stopped what she was doing and looked at him.

“Is this the wedding that they wanted me to be a flower girl for?”

“Yes.”

“What is a flower girl?”

“Well, you will carry a basket of flowers and drop them in the aisle in front of Olivia.”

“Why?”

Dirk did not know the answer to that. He didn’t understand a lot of traditions in weddings. And he was sure his daughter would ask why a lot over the coming week.

“I’m not sure. It is just a tradition that people do.”

“Okay. Seems like a weird one.” Henley picked up her pencil again. Dirk was pouring her share of mac ‘n’ cheese into the bowl when she asked, “Will I have to wear a dress?”

“Probably.”

“Ah, man.”

Dirk laughed to himself because his daughter hated it when he laughed out loud at her comments. Henley was a full tomboy. She wore jeans, boots, and T-shirts. In the winter, she wore the same hoodie all day every day. He knew it was probably because she was around men and rarely had a female influence. But she had no love for the girlie toys, playing with the tractors and the dirt. He had to take a garter snake away from her when she was two, and she cried and cried.

Shelly had never cared, loving that her daughter was fearless. Just like her Daddy, she used to say, smiling and rocking her to sleep.

Dirk set the bowl of mac ‘n’ cheese in front of her and she pushed the paper aside.

“What’s that?” He asked, sitting next to her.

“Just a letter.”

“To who?”

“Santa.”

“Oh yeah? What are you asking for this year?”

Last year, Henley had asked for a new bridle which she had gotten. This year, she had been asking for a goat. To raise for 4H.

“This one is personal.”

Dirk stopped chewing for a moment, looking down at his daughter. She was chewing slowly, avoiding his gaze.

“Okay.” He wanted to read it. But he wouldn’t. Henley kept very little from him. He feared the day when she didn’t even want to talk to him anymore. He didn’t think it would come this soon. He also didn’t want to push it and then push her away.

“If you finish it tonight, I’ll take it to town tomorrow and drop it in the mail for you.”

“Okay!” Henley perked up.

After dinner, Henley did her evening chores, running down to check on Dolly before bed and sweeping the kitchen and dining room. They watched TV together for an hour, Dirk still very aware of how empty the spot next to him on the couch was. After her bath, he came in to say good night.

“Is your letter done?”

“Yep. I put it on the table. Don’t read it!”

“I won’t. Good night. I love you!” She gave him a kiss and a hug around the neck.

“I love you too, Daddy.”

He would be back in fifteen minutes to check on her. She would be fast asleep. With Henley in bed, the house felt eerily quiet. He went downstairs and turned off the TV. Walking into the dining room, he opened the bar and pulled out a bottle of whiskey. He poured himself a couple ounces over a few ice cubes and sipped it slowly, looking at the letter on the table, taking in the house’s silence. Having people here wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world. He looked into the living room, remembering Christmas’s with Shelly. She would have decorated the entire house the day after Thanksgiving.

Maybe he and Henley could go get a tree in the next couple days. They could

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start small. A tree. Maybe a wreath.

He left his daughter's letter to Santa on the table, going back upstairs, peeking in on her. She was asleep, just as he predicted.

Yes, he thought, watching his daughter sleep. People will be good.

4

Chapter 4

Dirk's old truck rumbled down the mountain highway that led to town. In the seat next to him was Henley's letter, addressed to Santa in her careful handwriting. She made him promise once again to not read it before heading off to catch the bus this morning, which just made him want to read it all the more. He knew that the last thing the post office needed was another letter in the mail addressed to Santa. He could pull over, read the letter and then just tell Henley that he had dropped it off.

He never lied to his daughter. And reading the letter would break the trust. He was going to pick Henley up at school and have her put the letter in the mail. If he could resist the temptation to read it that long. It was the last day of classes before winter break. Maybe they could go for a treat at the bakery before heading home. They could celebrate the start of the break.

He ran his usual errands, stopping in at the feed store to pick up some grain and supplies. He had a couple horses coming in to train next week. Christmas presents for kids. He hoped that he wasn't breaking in a horse that would be a lawn ornament in a few months when the wonder of owning a horse is met with real-world responsibility. After a trip to the grocery store, stocking up on more essentials for guests, he found himself with time to kill before Henley would be done with school.

Dirk knew he was going to go. He had grabbed a bunch of flowers while on his way to pay at the store. Had purposely left home an hour before he needed

to. The truck knew exactly how to get there, parking in the same spot it always did. He stared into the cemetery. It was nicer in the summers. Everything was green and the little town took care of the landscaping. But it looked run down and uninviting in the winter. Hard to dress up a graveyard when everything in the world was dead and frozen. It surprised him to see another car in the lot. Few people visited in the winter. Or in the summer. Or at all. He was often alone. He liked it like that. He glanced at the car, noticing a rental sticker in the back window. Visitor. Probably home for the holiday's, stopping to see someone.

He and Shelly had never even talked to each other about what they wanted when they died. Because they were only in their thirties and they had a lifetime together. Selfishly, whenever he had allowed himself to think about it, he always hoped he would go first. Statistically, he had the more dangerous job. Working with cattle and horses. She had been a photographer. She was the only local photographer, so she was often busy taking family portraits or capturing weddings. She had been coming back home for a senior photo shoot when it happened. Everyone called in a tragic accident. He called it a crime.

He forced himself out of the truck and walked the familiar path to her grave, cradling the flowers that were already wilting in the cold. His eyes found it in the crowd, halfway back. She had been buried next to her grandparents, with slots open for her parents. He took off his hat, gently laying the flowers on the grave.

He never spoke when he was here. Just thought about her. He couldn't really see her face anymore. It was getting fuzzier by the day. And he knew his daughter would have very few memories of her mother. He never asked, but he wondered how often Henley thought about her. The first few months after the accident, Henley would come to him, crying almost every night. She could never articulate what the dream she had was, but Dirk had never needed her to say it. They were living the bad dream. After three months, Henley only cried at night sometimes and after six months, hardly at all. Dirk still woke in a sweat, reaching for the empty spot next to him. But even that had become less frequent after the first year.

He forced himself to focus, to see Shelly's face smiling at him. He really had to focus now, to remember her features. Her long nose, her wrinkles, the scar on her chin. Movement out of his peripheral vision pulled his eyes up from the stone. A woman was several plots away, kneeling in front of a grave. She was brushing away debris and Dirk could hear her speaking, but not loudly enough to catch what she was saying. The woman turned, their eyes meeting across the cemetery. Dirk felt his heart stop.

She was beautiful, with blond hair blowing across her sharp blue eyes. She stood quickly, wrapping her long coat around her and moving gracefully away. She was tall, and she was all city. She wore high heels that clicked as she walked down the path towards the parking lot. Dirk knew he was staring as she moved. He liked the way she moved.

He shook himself, returning his eyes to the grave for a moment, feeling guilty. He was good about having eyes for his wife only. He could hear Shelly laughing at him. When he heard the rental car start, he turned around to watch it drive away.

It had been a long time since any woman had caught his attention. He remembered about six months after his wife had died, women began bumping into him, at the school, in the store. They would chat his ear off. They would touch his arm. On the rare nights Jack could get him away from the ranch, women would throw themselves at him. Jack would tease him. But Dirk had loved one girl his entire life, and she was gone. He didn't need to love again. He had a little girl to take care of. And from what he remembered of stepmothers from storybooks, they were never kind or caring.

But this girl. He felt something in that look. It shocked something back to life. She was not his type. He had grown up making fun of the girls who put so much effort in their appearance. He liked women like Shelly, who woke up beautiful.

Shelly had been petite with dark hair and eyes. She was all country, running around without shoes most days, hopping up on her horse in a dress. He had loved her fearlessness.

Dirk shook himself. He would never see that woman again. And even if he did, he wouldn't let anything happen. Because he could never replace Shelly.

Moving on meant forgetting her. And he would not do that.

He moved over to the grave the woman had been at.

Leah Davis.

That name was familiar. He was halfway back to his car when he stopped.

Isabella Davis.

He would see the girl again. He walked faster to his car. He wanted to get home.

Henley was talking to her teacher when Dirk pulled up. School had let out a few minutes before and he got stuck in a long line of parents who had all apparently had the same idea as him. The bakery might have to be skipped that day. Ms. Munch, Henley's teacher, walked over to the truck and Dirk braced himself. Harriet Munch was a pretty girl, but ten years too young for him. She was only a second-year teacher, and Dirk had taught her how to ride a horse when he was in his early twenties, and she was just a kid.

"Hey Mr. Campbell!" Harriet said when he rolled down the window while Henley clambered into the back and buckled in. She no longer had to ride in a booster seat, but he still made her ride in the back.

"Ms. Munch. I bet you are excited for the holiday break."

"Oh, I am. But I will miss seeing all my students, especially Henley!"

Dirk hoped that Harriet couldn't see his daughter roll her eyes.

"I'm sure she will miss you too."

"I hear you are hosting the Rosilo/Perez wedding."

"I am." Dirk wondered how she had heard. Maybe Henley had told her.

"Olivia's sister and I are pretty good friends. She told me. I hope to see you there? Maybe have a dance?"

Dirk felt himself blush, and he glanced back at his daughter, panic in her eyes.

"We will see. Not much of a dancer." Dirk put the car into drive. Harriet's face faltered, but she did not drop the smile. "Merry Christmas, Ms. Munch."

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Campbell. Bye Henley!" Dirk rolled up the window and Henley waved. They got out of the school parent loop and had to wait for traffic before turning onto the main road.

"You don't like Ms. Munch, do you?"

“I think she’s a nice lady...”

“No, Daddy, I mean like her, like her.” Dirk glanced over his shoulder at his daughter.

“No hun, I do not like her, like her. I think she is a pleasant woman, an excellent teacher. But you don’t have to worry about her and your ol’ dad.”

“Good.” Henley leaned back, relaxing. Dirk held back a laugh. He was glad his daughter felt the same way.

“How was school?”

“Good. We had a party. We learned about different holidays celebrated other than Christmas.” Henley looked out the window as they drove.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. It was the same as last year. But we got cupcakes.”

Definitely skipping the bakery.

The post office was only a few blocks from the school. They pulled up to a spot, and they both got out, Dirk handing his daughter her letter. It surprised him to see a little red and white box next to the regular blue drop box. In black lettering it said “Santa Letters.” Well, Dirk thought. That’s clever.

Henley hurried up to the red and white box, holding her letter to her chest for a second.

“What’s wrong?” Dirk asked.

Henley shook her head, shoving her letter in and turning to him. Determination burning in her eyes.

“I just wanted to be sure what I asked for is what I wanted.”

“Okay.” Dirk sighed. He should have read the letter. Henley took his hand, skipping back to the truck with him.

“Want to give your old dad any hints as to what you asked for? Maybe Santa can’t get it, but I might be able too.”

“No. If he doesn’t get it, it’s okay. It’s something for both of us, anyway. I wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise.” Henley smiled at him, buckling up in the back seat.

Should have read the damn letter.

They drove home, Dirk tried switching to all the tasks he needed to get done that night. Henley hummed along with the radio, watching out the window.

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Dirk kept glancing back at her, wanting to ask her about the letter again. But his fear of pushing her away and being locked out kept him from asking.

“Whose car is that?” Dirk’s heart sped up. It had been her. Isabella Davis’s rental car was sitting in his driveway.

5

Chapter 5

Isabella hated plane rides. For one, turbulence always made her nervous. And with her noise canceling headphones, it left her alone with her thoughts. She did her best to focus on the book she had bought in the airport bookstore, but she kept thinking about the last time she had been in Colorado. She and Kurt were still together, and he had flown with her. She had clung to his hand the entire time, fighting tears as they landed in Colorado Springs and made their way out to the sleepy town she had grown up in. She made it just moments after her mother passed.

She never got to say an official goodbye. Her mother had been sick for a long time but had never told Isabella how bad it had been. So when Isabella had gotten the call from a nurse in hospice, it threw her off guard. They had caught the earliest flight they could and stayed long enough for the funeral. Olivia had been there of course. Her uncle and a few friends. No one else was there.

Closing her eyes when they hit turbulence, Isabella felt the absence of the hand she used to squeeze when this happened. But she forced herself to remember what Ryan had said when she told him what had happened.

“It’s good that he did it this way. Because if not, you would have never gotten over him. And you would never move on to find your person.”

She needed to move on. But she would not find a person. Because she didn’t need a person.

She rented a car in Colorado Springs and was on the road, calling Olivia to tell her she was in the state and would be in town in two hours, if traffic and weather cooperated. Olivia gave her an address at the ranch where the wedding would be. She would be there that night, working on some details. Isabella was excited she would get to see the ranch before tomorrow. Give her time to understand what Olivia wanted.

The drive down south was full of flat roads, but Isabella had forgotten how beautiful the Spanish Peaks were. They stood slightly apart from the others, staring down I-25. Their peaks were covered in snow.

Maybe Olivia would get her dream of a white Christmas wedding. Isabella doubted it. It never snowed on Christmas. That was too much to hope for. In the three days since she had been told about Olivia's wedding, Olivia had managed to find a ranch to get married at. And she had scheduled a day for them to go look at wedding dresses. That left them with four days to get the place in order.

Initially, Isabella had regretted coming down so early. It did not seem like Olivia needed her. But Olivia assured her she needed all the help she could get. Her mom was working around the clock at the local bakery, getting everyone's Christmas orders down, and her father was busy at his restaurant. Olivia's sister was eight months pregnant, and her brother was going to take leave and fly in on the eve of the wedding.

"It really will just be me and you and Jack planning this whole thing. And you can imagine how helpful he is." Olivia had told her the night before while Isabella packed.

When she arrived in her hometown, Isabella headed towards the graveyard. There was some snow piled on the corners of the street and still in the grassy parts of yards. The roads and sidewalks were clear. Isabella had not missed snow. She found the graveyard, not surprised that the lot was empty.

Isabella shivered, the icy mountain air slipping in under her coat as she walked down the slope towards the graves in the back. She should have worn another layer.

The gravestone was small, and there were dead weeds working their way around it. Isabella did her best to clean it.

Leah Davis. Beloved Mother.

A snap of a branch caused her to pivot. Standing close to her, looking down at his own gravestone, was a tall man. His black cowboy hat was pulled low, hiding his face from hers. His hands were shoved in his jean pockets, and she saw fresh flowers at his feet. She turned back to her mother, brushing the gravestone.

“I’m sorry mom. I should have brought you some flowers.” Isabella sat back on her heels. “I guess I wasn’t the best daughter at the end. So maybe it is fitting that I didn’t.” She sighed, pushing herself up. “I’ll come back before I leave.”

Turning, she saw the cowboy staring at her. A breeze blew around her. His eyes held her. He looked angry with her for being there. She blushed, putting her head down and shoving her hands in her pockets. She kept her eyes averted, moving past the cowboy and towards her car. She should have said something. She had just as much right to be there as he did. She started the car and saw him, still standing at the grave, watching her drive away. His stare was intense and Isabella considered going back to confront him. She forced herself to keep driving. She would never see him again. Five days and she would be back in California.

It took the 10-minute drive to the ranch for Isabella to shake the eyes of the cowboy. She passed under the metal entrance for Second Hope Ranch. The drive was lined with pine and aspen trees, all showing off the snow and frost of the cold December day. The drive was firmly packed and wide. It took her breath away when she found the house. A large cabin with a wrap-around porch and green metal roof stood in the center of a field. Behind it were two large barns and corrals. Several cars were parked in front of the house. The sun was setting quickly and a light glow from the windows welcomed her. Maybe she wouldn’t have hated this town so much if she had grown up here.

She parked off to the side, hoping she wasn’t taking anyone’s spot, and got out.

The door to the cabin flew open, and Olivia was running towards her.

“Izzy!” She crashed into her, a mess of brown curls and muscular arms.

“Hey!” Izzy hugged her back, instantly feeling better about making the

journey.

“I’m so glad you came!” Olivia took a step back, her smile taking over her face. Her friend had always been the beautiful one with olive skin, dark eyes, and radiant velvet hair. She wore a long southwest print cardigan over a black skintight shirt, snug jeans, and cowgirl boots. Isabella noticed that she still wore her belt for barrel racing.

“Of course I came!” Isabella grabbed Olivia’s hand and let out a whistle at the princess cut diamond on her finger.

“I know, right? He did good!” She shivered when a chilly breeze blew right through them again.

“Let’s get you inside!” Olivia hooked arms with her. “Jack is cooking us dinner. He is so excited to meet you. Well, meet you again. He says he remembers you from school.” Isabella listened to Olivia ramble on while they stepped up onto the porch. There were several chairs around, but Isabella was drawn to the two wooden rocking chairs at the corner of the porch, overlooking a pasture. It would be the perfect sunset spot in the summer.

“This is a nice place!”

“Yeah! It’s Jack’s best man’s place. Do you remember Dirk Campbell?”

Isabella thought back. The name sounded familiar, but she couldn’t put a face with it.

“I remember the name...”

“He was older than us, ran on the rodeo circuit for a long time. Roping mostly, but he rode broncs too.” Olivia opened the door while Isabella tried to place a name with the face. “This was his wife’s family place. He’s letting us get married here. In the barn. It is going to be perfect!”

Olivia grabbed Isabella’s hand and drug her through the cozy living room towards the kitchen. Jack was standing there, his hat on the counter, an apron wrapped around him, staring at a cookbook.

Isabella instantly remembered him from high school. He had been a quiet kid, and she was sure he sat behind her in a math class that he had to take a second time. She also remembered seeing him at the rodeo when she would go with Olivia. He had filled out since then but was still lean and was as tall as Isabella. He had a five o’clock shadow on his face and his eyes sparkled, like

he was about to tell you a joke and couldn't wait to get to the punch line.

"Jack, my dear, this is my one and true friend Isabella." Olivia presented her, her smile filling the room this time. Jack was an attractive man. He was fit, with a slight scar under his left eye and a few lines creased in around them from smiling. He deepened the wrinkles now, smiling as widely as Isabella. He wiped his hands on the apron and shook hands with her.

"It is nice to meet you or I guess see you, again. I think we had a math class together." Isabella returned to sentiment. "This is a crazy time. I'm glad you could come out." Jack said returning to his cooking.

"Would you like some wine?" Olivia was already fetching her a glass and pouring out a large helping of something red.

"Thanks," Isabella accepted the glass eagerly, taking a long sip.

"How was the drive down?" Jack asked. Isabella liked Jack. His personality was calm, easygoing. Just based on her first impression, she knew it was going to be a good fit for her best friend. He would balance her out.

"It was fine. Easy once I got out of the city." Isabella took another sip. The rumbling of a diesel was heard outside.

"Dirk must be back." Olivia glanced at the door. "You'll like him, Isabella." Olivia patted her arm and winked. Isabella rolled her eyes.

"What are you cooking?" Isabella changed the subject.

"Just a pork roast and some potatoes and carrots." Jack shrugged. "Hope that is okay?" He glanced at her, his eyes showing his concern.

"Sounds great!" Isabella wasn't a fan of pork roast, she found it to be dry. But, she wouldn't turn down a meal or worry Jack about it. She was impressed that he could cook.

The door opened, and Isabella turned to meet her host for the next few days. Standing in the doorway, bags of groceries in hand, was the man who had glared her down in the cemetery. He stood there, looking as startled as she felt.

"Dirk! You are holding up dinner! Where is Henley?" Olivia went to him, taking a few of the grocery bags.

Isabella blushed, focusing on her wine.

"She's out checking on Dolly." Isabella could feel his eyes on her. The same

intensity as before.

“Dirk, this is Isabella, Izzy, my best friend and maid of honor.” Isabella forced herself to put on her best real estate smile. His face held no reaction. His eyes were assessing her, looking her over. As if she were a piece of livestock up for sale. He was sporting a week-old beard that needed a trim and his dark hair a little long. He was tall, muscular and handsome. Isabella could hear Ryan in her head saying, “Yuuuummmm.” Isabella told imaginary Ryan to shut up. This man was married. Olivia had said this was his wife’s family’s place, and Jack had asked where she was. Isabella wondered why she hadn’t seen her at the cemetery.

“Hi Dirk,” She said. He nodded at her. He set the bags on the counter.

“Good to meet ya.” Then he turned his eyes away from her. He moved to the fridge, pulling out a beer. The door flew open, disturbing the awkward tension in the room. Isabella turned, expecting to meet Henley, Dirk’s wife. Instead, she discovered a spunky girl of about 8 kicking off her pink and camo boots. She wore dirty jeans and pulled off a hoodie that was way too big for her.

“She’s still not had that baby!” The girl announced, stomping over to join them. She froze, her eyes falling on Isabella.

“Henley, this is my friend, Isabella. She is here to help us plan the wedding.”

“Hello,” Henley came over to Isabella and shook her hand. Her hair was in two pigtail braids, but they were fraying. She had her father’s eyes and held onto Isabella’s for a long time. She looked just as surprised as her father that she was there. Nervous, even.

“Henley is going to be our flower girl.”

“She’s making me wear a dress!” Henley stuck out her tongue in annoyance and Isabella laughed.

“Hey girl, go get washed up. Dinner is coming out.” Dirk ordered. Henley skittered off down the hall. Olivia ushered Isabella over to the table.

“Tomorrow, we are going to town first thing. We have an appointment at nine with my hairdresser to try out some styles for me, you and Henley. Then we have dresses at eleven. Momma is going to try to meet us there, but she can’t promise anything. Then in the afternoon, we are going to come back

here and figure out how we want to decorate the barn.”

“Well, that sounds like a full day.” Isabella took another long drink of her wine.

“I’m not done!” Olivia topped off each of their glasses. “Then Momma is coming over tomorrow night and we are all trying different cakes!”

“Are we staying here?” Isabella asked, looking around the beautiful cabin.

“Yeah, Dirk invited us to stay just until the wedding is all sorted out.” Isabella glanced at Dirk. He was handsome, but he didn’t strike her as the ‘welcome to my home’ sort of guy.

Dirk and Jack brought the roast potatoes, carrots and gravy to the table. It all smelled amazing and Isabella realized that other than her snack on the plane, she had not eaten that day. Henley slid to a stop on the floor, glancing at the empty chairs around the table before plopping onto the one next to Isabella. Dirk sat at the head of the table, on the other side of his daughter. Jack sat across from Isabella.

Isabella was reaching for a roll when Olivia took her hand, and then Jack’s. Dirk tapped his daughter, who reluctantly handed her hand over to her father and grabbed Isabella’s other hand. Olivia, Jack and Henley all bowed their heads. Isabella lowered her eyes, feeling very awkward.

“Lord, thank you for this meal that we are about to receive. Thank you for delivering our dear friend Isabella to us safely today. Bless those of us who are less fortunate and those who are no longer with us.” Everyone but Isabella murmured an Amen. She waited for someone else to grab food this time before snagging a roll.

“What is it you do, Isabella?” Dirk asked while he placed some potatoes on his daughter’s plate before his own.

“You can call me Izzy,” Isabella cut into her roast. “I am a Real Estate Broker. I work for a company called Dream Home Realty.” The roast was dry, and she considered pouring on more gravy.

“Must be exciting, living in a place like San Diego.” Jack was shoveling a pile of potatoes in his mouth. His plate was soaked in gravy.

“I like it. There’s always something going on, some place you can go, someone you can meet.” Isabella felt Dirk’s eyes on her again. She kept

her eyes focused on her food. "I enjoy being close to the beaches. It isn't very far from wine country. Always something to do. Very different from here. No snow. Lots of people. Sometimes too many people." Why was she rambling?

"As opposed to this place?" The tension at the table rose. Isabella looked at him, confused. He had stopped eating, his eyes locked onto her. "Nothing fun for a girl like you to do here."

"That is not what I meant."

"What did you mean then? Olivia told us you haven't been back here in what, three, four years? Home too boring for a girl like you?"

"No, that's not it." She couldn't say she didn't have a reason to come back. Because she had, Olivia and her family had practically raised her. She felt guilty. Had it really been that long since she had been home? "I... I just like California. I didn't mind living here, but I..." Isabella couldn't finish the sentence. She had left when she was 18 and never looked back. Everyone here had stayed. Isabella looked at Olivia and Jack for help, but they were looking at their food. Maybe they agreed with him. "There is just a different way of life out there that I think many people in Blackwood don't understand."

"Because the way we live is wrong?" Why was he angry? Isabella joined him.

"I don't know what I did to you, but I am sorry that I left and like where I ended up. Not all of us have a desire to stick around a po-dunk little town, stuck in the 1950s. Some of us wanted to go out and explore and improve our lives! I have a life, a full life in California. I'm sorry I never came home. But I'm here now!"

Silence decided on the table, and Isabella felt her face flush in a mix of embarrassment and rage. He may be good looking, but dear lord was he impossible. She shouldn't have to feel sorry for leaving. And he shouldn't be attempting to make her feel guilty for doing so.

"What's a broker?" Henley asked, breaking the awkward moment. Isabella looked down at the young girl, grateful for her question.

"I help people buy and sell their homes. Or help people buy buildings for their businesses."

"Oh, okay." Henley's face lit up suddenly. "My horse, Dolly, is having a

baby soon. After dinner, do you want to go check on her with me?" She was so eager, it was impossible to tell her no. Besides, it would give her a chance to see the rest of the ranch, or part of it, without appearing to be nosey. And maybe get away from the angry man at the head of the table.

"Sure! Only if you eat all your carrots, though."

"Deal!" Henley began scarfing down her untouched vegetable. Dirk looked surprised, and a little amused.

"How is the market in San Diego?" Jack delicately asked. Olivia glared at him. Isabella took a breath and focused on keeping things simple. She didn't know what she would say that might set her host off.

"Things were hot for a while, but it has slowed down. It usually does in winter." She chewed her food for a minute, contemplating bragging about herself. That wasn't really her style, and she doubted that the cowboy would care about her sales statistics. "What do you do here on the ranch?"

"Raise cattle, primarily. I train horses too." Dirk answered before Jack could. "My wife wanted to make it into a wedding venue or something like that. I guess there's a good market for that."

"You seriously should." Olivia said. "Everything I looked at was booked two years in advance. And the prices were outrageous."

Dirk shrugged.

"I wouldn't have time to do that and handle the cattle and horses. It was a good dream, but..." he trailed off, his eyes flashing. Henley shifted, looking at her dad. He offered her a sad smile, reaching out and squeezing her hand. "We will figure it out."

That was the second mention of Dirk's wife, and still the woman had not appeared. She looked at the father and daughter and thought about the encounter in the cemetery. It dawned on Isabella that maybe Dirk's wife had been there. She looked at the little girl who only had her father's eyes. Her mother must have been beautiful.

6

Chapter 6

“Geez, Dirk!” Jack hissed at him while they stacked dishes in the sink. “You could have been nicer to the poor girl!”

“Hey, I was only saying what she was thinking.”

“You don’t know that!” Jack sighed. “Isabella is a sweet girl. I don’t think she meant anything by that stuff. She seems nervous.”

Dirk shrugged. Isabella may be sweet, attractive, and have a way to get his daughter to eat carrots, but he resented the idea that California was better because they always had something to do. He recognized that he may have reacted in the same way a young boy would have, by picking on the girl he thought was cute. He looked out the window to see Henley leading Isabella down to the barn, flashlight bobbing in the dark. Isabella followed obediently, wrapped in her designer coat, balanced on her high-heeled boots. She was lucky the ground was frozen solid.

Dirk was drying his hands when Olivia wrapped her arms around Jack and planted a long kiss on him. Dirk took his cue to leave, heading down to the barn. Dolly was due at anytime. He wasn’t worried about the delivery. She was a healthy mare and this would be her second foal. Henley did not remember the last foal and was beyond excited and eager for the new arrival.

He wasn’t sure what he would find when he stepped into the barn, but nothing could have prepared him for what he saw. Isabella was standing,

exactly the way Shelly always did, with his wife's horse, Willow, rubbing her face against her. Willow had not done that to anyone in two years. For a minute, Dirk saw his wife, not the girl from California. It took him back to better days.

If Shelly had been alive, she and Henley would have camped out in the barn the next few nights, monitoring Dolly. Dirk didn't suggest the idea to Henley and made the trek down every few hours.

"Any change, Henley?" He wanted them to know he was there. He wanted Willow to step away from the city girl. Willow did not pull back. Henley went back to Dolly's stall, stepping up onto the stool he had gotten to help her into the saddle.

"No. Still no baby. She seems tired."

"She's just resting." Dirk couldn't take his eyes off Isabella. She seemed at home in the barn, her hands gently running down Willow's neck, a small smile on her face. "Come on, let's let her get a good night's sleep." Henley whispered something to Dolly before hopping off the stool and coming to Dirk.

Isabella turned and joined them. Dirk watched as Willow bobbed her head up in down, ears forward, watching Isabella walk away.

"Beautiful horses." Isabella told him as they moved back up to the house. Daisy, the dog, trotted with them, walking along with Henley. Dirk had found Daisy in a ditch when she was young, and she attached herself to the family right away. But she was extra protective of his daughter. If she was outside, so was Daisy.

"Thank you." Henley stopped on the porch, giving Daisy a hug and a kiss goodnight. The dog's tail wagged, watching the girl go inside. Sometimes, Dirk let Daisy into the house at night and she spent it curled at their feet or on the edge of Henley's bed. But Daisy came off the porch, wagging her tail at him for a moment before heading back to the barn.

Isabella had stopped at her car and she pulled out two bags now. Dirk picked them up as she closed the trunk and headed back into the house.

"I'll show you to your room." He offered while she took off her shoes.

"Thank you." They went up the stairs to the second floor. "There's the bathroom," he nodded to his left. She peeked in as they continued down the

hall. Dirk led her to the guest room just next to his room and across from Henley. It was the smallest room in the house. It had been Shelly's office, but he had gotten rid of all that stuff six months before and put in a bed. He wasn't sure why. It wasn't like they needed another guest room. The one downstairs stood empty since Jack had moved out.

He set her things down by the dresser and turned to her. She was looking around the room, assessing again. Dirk wanted to make peace with his guest. He had behaved poorly at dinner.

"Thank you for being kind to my daughter. She is a little wild child, but she has a good heart."

"Of course. She's a little spitfire." Isabella smiled at him, a real smile, and he felt his heart melt a little more. He liked her genuine smile a lot more than the plastered on one she kept putting up downstairs. "Thank you for letting me stay here. I know it must be odd, putting up with a girl you've never met before."

"We have met before."

She tilted her head, her blue eyes scanning his. Her brow wrinkled a little.

"Back in high school. You used to come to all the rodeos. You always sat on the fence with Olivia and a couple other girls. You didn't ride. But you were always there." The memory was clear to him. She dressed like them back then. Jeans, boots, t-shirts. She wore her hair long then too, in braids most of the time, and never said much. He used to see her laugh a lot.

"I'm sorry, I don't remember you?" She said. Dirk shrugged, a little disappointed that he didn't stand out back then.

"It was a long time ago." He shuffled his feet, glancing around the room. "Let me know if you need anything."

"I will."

He looked her over again, and a desire to kiss her came over him. How could he be so annoyed with this woman one second and lusting after her the next? Instead of saying anything, he nodded his head once and left, closing the door behind him as he did.

He sighed. He needed to not be interested in this woman. She lived in a different city, in a different world. If he was ready to find someone new, it

needed to be someone from around there, willing to be on the ranch.

He walked down the hall and found Henley in her room, humming to herself, brushing the hair on one of her horses.

“Bath time, kiddo.”

“Ah man,” Henley carefully put her horse back in its designated spot on her shelves. Dirk waited patiently while his daughter drug her feet down the hall.

“Wash your hair too. You are going to the salon tomorrow with the girls. Don’t need them thinking you got fleas.”

“Daddy, that’s gross!” Henley closed the door. Dirk waited for the shower to turn on before heading to his bedroom. He closed the door halfway and sat on the bed. He opened the drawer. Inside was a Colt 45 Revolver, a dusty copy of the bible, and pictures.

He pulled out the pictures. They were all of Shelly. The first was Shelly, holding Henley on her first birthday, blowing out the candles on the cake. The second was of Shelly, wearing a little black dress, at a New Year’s Eve party she had dragged him to years ago. He didn’t expect to have much fun, but they had, drinking way too much champagne, laughing the night away. The final was of Shelly, feet up on the railing of the house, leaning back in her rocking chair, her face smiling softly at him. She looked sleepy. He studied her face, reminding himself that this was the woman he loved. The woman who had given him a beautiful baby girl.

Just like at the grave, he couldn’t talk to the pictures. He could say nothing out loud. But, for the first time, he was wondering if maybe it was time to let her go. He could hear her in his head telling him to move on.

“I want you to. It’s okay.”

But it wasn’t okay. Because it wasn’t just him that would move on. He had Henley to think of.

He heard the bathroom door scrape open, and Henley came down the hall. He quickly put the pictures away, closing the drawer just as she came in, carrying her hair brush. She climbed up onto the bed in front of him.

“Daddy, how fast does Santa get letters?”

“I don’t know. Why?” After Shelly had passed, he had been petrified of the moment he had to brush his daughter’s hair for the first time. It turned out

to be not as hard as he thought, and he only made her wince a few times. He was lucky. Her hair did not tangle much at all. He knew she was probably old enough to do it now, but enjoyed the moments at night when she still allowed him to do this.

“Do you think the box we put my letter in went straight to him?”

“Maybe. He has some special magic on his side.” Dirk was still in awe that his daughter even still bought into the Santa myth. He was certain school would have ruined it by now. But she had never asked, and he didn’t tell. Santa may be a myth, but it was something for Henley to believe in. “Why do you ask?”

“I just think he might have already read my letter.” She turned to him and snuggled into his chest, wrapping her arms around him.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I think he sent what I asked for.”

“What is that?” Henley shook her head into his chest.

“You’ll see.”

Damn. He really should have read that letter.

He tucked Henley into bed, telling her she could read for thirty minutes. She happily picked up her book, and he left her to her own devices. Downstairs, he walked in on the telling of Olivia and Jack’s first meeting to Isabella. He stopped at the base of the stairs. It was the fourth or fifth time he had heard Olivia’s version of events.

“It was about a month ago. I was waiting in line at the market. I told my mom I would handle getting all the Thanksgiving stuff this year. And, of course, I wait until the last minute. Like seriously, the day before Thanksgiving. And everything is almost out. I’m freaking out, because I’m supposed to be heading over to my mom’s to start on the cranberry sauce and have everything ready for the lunch tomorrow. And I can’t find a turkey!” Dirk shook his head, peeking around the corner. Isabella was sitting in a chair in the living room, wine in hand again, the fake smile from earlier back on her face.

“I see this pretty girl digging through the meats, looking ready to cry. Naturally, I have to help her.” Jack said, covering Olivia’s hand with his

own. "I go over to see what is wrong. When she turned and looked up at me, I knew this was the girl I'd been looking for!" Olivia blushed.

"I remember looking up and seeing him and forgetting all my problems, just for a moment. When he asked me what was wrong, I was literally speechless." Olivia shook her head, her perfectly curled locks fluttering around her. "When I finally remembered how to use my voice, I told him my dilemma."

"I had killed a turkey during the season and had frozen it. So I offered it to her." Dirk didn't mention that the turkey had wandered into the barn. Jack had not been out hunting.

"I asked him what it would cost me." They were looking at each other now, reliving the moment.

"One night on the town."

"Worth it!" They kissed, and Dirk held back a laugh.

Jack's version had been much simpler.

"Met a girl yesterday. Gave her my turkey. Hoping to get some turkey in return, if you know what I mean."

It had been a horrible line, and Dirk had told him so.

"I know. But, really. This girl is...different."

For the next two weeks, Jack had shown up late and left early a few times. But even Dirk had not seen the proposal coming. He wanted to tell his friend he was moving too fast. That he needed to take things slow. But then he thought about Shelly. He had known that she was the girl for him after two dates. And if he could go back, he would have taken it faster. Maybe had more time with her.

"That is a really cute story!" Isabella took a long sip of her wine.

"Hear it a few more times, it won't be anymore." Everyone turned to look at him. Isabella seemed amused.

"Join us, you creeper!" Olivia motioned to the empty chair next to Isabella. Dirk drug his feet, coming to sit next to her. He felt awkward, sitting next to this beautiful woman, mainly because of his conflicted feelings for her.

"How are things with you, Izzy?" Jack poured Dirk a whiskey. Dirk took a long swig. He preferred beer, but whiskey was good. Isabella watched him drink it, and it made him very self-conscious.

“Oh, you know. Same old, same old!” She shifted, and Dirk wondered if she was going to talk about how wonderful San Diego was again. “I am almost ready to buy that Victorian I’ve always wanted.”

“Really? That’s wonderful!” Olivia looked pleased. Dirk felt his heart fall a little. Stop it, he told himself.

“How come you didn’t bring a date? Pretty girl like you has to have a ton of boyfriends in the city.” Jack winked at Dirk. Isabella’s face changed for a moment. She looked down at her hands. Dirk recognized the sign of heartbreak. He had seen it in his reflection for the last two years.

“I’m not seeing anyone right now. Busy with work.”

“I don’t believe that!” Jack pressed. Isabella stared at him for a moment before a sly smile came to her face.

“Maybe I just need to go to the market and look for a turkey?” Isabella grinned at Olivia. The couple laughed and Dirk had to give it to the girl. She was good at getting attention off herself.

“If it is alright with all of you, I think I might go to bed. Traveling always takes it out of me.” Isabella stood, and the happy couple wished her good night, thanking her for coming again. Dirk watched her go, taking another sip of his whiskey. Wonder who broke that girl’s heart. And maybe that is why she had a fake smile. Because someone broke the other one.

* * *

Dirk didn’t need an alarm anymore. His eyes came open at 4:45 every morning, regardless of the chore he had to do that day. It didn’t even matter if he stayed up late the night before. Rising, he sat on the edge of the bed, thinking about the tasks to accomplish that day. Winter was a slow time for him, making the days long. He had moved all 200 cows up to the closer pastures. His father-in-law had built a couple nice hay barns there for the winter months, making it easier to feed them. He also would need to chip away the layer of ice that would have formed over their water last night. He thought about the junk in the barn that Jack would need in a few days and added that to the list of things

to move. He also needed to check the corral behind the barn. With two horses coming in to train, he would need it solid. And at some point, he needed to sit down and pay some bills.

He dressed and went downstairs. Jack was up, brewing coffee.

“What’s the plan for the day?” Jack asked, filling their respective travel mugs. Dirk took his coffee black, but Jack poured a little milk into his. Pulling on their boots and jackets, Dirk ran through the plan with him.

“Sounds good. Liv will be happy if she can get in there and plan with Isabella.”

“Aren’t they going to town?”

“Yeah, I think she wants to do it this afternoon.” Jack took a sip as they walked down towards the barn. “She has a schedule.”

Dirk remembered his wife the few weeks before their wedding. She was a little on edge. He worried he would say or do something wrong. His father-in-law, his then boss, suggested he just keep busy with work. And that is exactly what he did.

As they walked through the silent morning in the dark, Dirk thought about how much he missed having Jack living on the property. He had never asked him to move in after Shelly had passed, but Jack had. The day after, Jack started staying in the downstairs master and helped get Dirk and Henley back on their feet. Dirk didn’t realize until about three months later that he was still paying rent on his apartment the entire time.

“I have a proposition for you and Olivia,” Dirk said. Jack glanced at him, an eyebrow raised. “What if you and Olivia moved in up here, into one of the old ranch hand cabins?” Jack glanced up the hill where the small cabins were hidden in a set of trees. Dirk had lived in those cabins when he first started working on the ranch. They weren’t in the best shape but they were liveable. And bigger than Jack’s tiny apartment in town.

“I would love that. But I’ll have to talk to Olivia,” Jack said. He grinned. “I would make my commute pretty easy!”

“No pressure, just thought it might be a better option than living in your place or trying to find something.” Dirk didn’t know what the market was like in his area. He just knew options had always been slim.

They were greeted in the barn by the horses, all knickering good mornings as they filled their hay bags. Dirk poured the special grain into Dolly's feeder and she skipped the hay and went straight for it, sucking it down like she wasn't chewing.

"You think she's going to have it today?"

Dirk shrugged. He hoped so. It would be a great Christmas for Henley if she had a foal. Dirk was looking forward to his daughter learning all the basics of raising a foal from the get go. He planned on making the foal Henley's rodeo horse. She was getting good at barrels. And she rode the poles well on Dolly. Dirk patted the mare and headed to the side-by-side. Daisy sat beside it, tail wagging, a hopeful look on her face.

"Come on, get in." Dirk pretended to be cranky, but the joy on the dog's face was clear as she climbed into the back. She stuck her head out the side, tongue hanging out as they drove down to the first pasture.

By the time they had finished feeding and breaking up the ice, the sun was coming out. They drove back into the barn to find Henley standing on her stool, brushing Dolly's hair in her pjs and boots.

"Good morning!" Henley didn't stop brushing.

"What are you doing, girlie?" Jack laughed.

"I had a dream that Dolly had the baby, I wanted to see if it was true!" Henley gave her Uncle Jack the best puppy eyes. "It wasn't." Dirk shook his head at his daughter.

"Come on, let's go get dressed."

Henley jumped down, tossing the brush back into the bucket before racing up to the house, Daisy giving chase.

"Man, to have that much energy this early in the morning." Jack shook his head.

"To have that much energy, ever." Dirk countered. "Let's go get some liquid energy and get breakfast going."

They stepped inside to find breakfast already set out on the table with fresh coffee ready for them. Henley sat at the table, watching the two women moving around each other with ease, chatting.

"Cold this morning!" Jack shook himself out of his jacket, slipping out of

his boots and heading straight to Olivia, giving her a long kiss.

“Ew,” Henley mumbled.

“Right?” Isabella sat next to the girl and Dirk noticed how happy Henley was to be sitting next to Isabella. The group assumed their spots from the night before. Olivia offered a simpler grace that morning before the group dove in.

“You girls ready for your busy day?” Jack asked while Dirk piled his plate high with eggs and hash browns. He took a few bites, glancing at Isabella. She wore a red sweater, this one a little tighter than the one from the night before. Her jeans were snug, too.

“I just hope we can get it all done.” Olivia sighed, looking over a list of tasks in front of her.

“What if Dolly has her baby while I’m gone?” Henley looked at her father. Dirk glanced at her.

“Well, you’ll see it when you get back. Aren’t you excited to go pick out dresses?”

“No.”

Isabella smiled into her coffee. Dirk’s eyes were dancing. He glanced at Olivia, who didn’t seem to have even heard her.

“Dolly will need me if she goes into labour.” Dirk sighed. Dolly would really not need any of them if she went into labour. But he understood his daughter’s excitement. Before he could figure out a way to fix this, Isabella spoke.

“How about if it happens, your father will call us, and we will bring you right back?” Olivia heard that suggestion and looked horrified at the idea, but she glanced at the little girl before sighing. Henley perked up.

“Okay!”

Dirk nodded to Isabella, who shrugged back, eating some more pancakes. Well, maybe she wasn’t as stuck up as he thought.

7

Chapter 7

Henley sat on her hands, kicking her feet while Jessica, the hairstylist, draped a cape around Isabella. Isabella saw her stylist every six weeks back in San Diego. She was a little nervous to have someone else messing with her hair. But it was just a style, not a cut.

“The highlights in your hair are fabulous! Your stylist must be talented.” The middle-aged woman looked a little intimidated, her fingers running through Isabella’s long hair.

“She is, but I’m sure you are just as good!” Isabella assured her, hoping her confidence would rub off on her.

“Your hair is so pretty!” Henley whispered. Isabella looked at the young girl.

“Thank you, sweetie. I like your hair too. Mine never looks that good when braided.” Henley touched her braid.

“My dad braids my hair.” Isabella was shocked. Jessica even stopped brushing it and they both stared at the girl. “My mom used too. But then he had to start. He practiced on the horses first. I saw him.” Isabella felt herself soften for the cowboy who had been so mean to her the night before.

Olivia stood from the chair on the other side of the room, bringing her phone over.

“I want her to have this,” she showed a picture to Jessica.

“Got it.” Jessica flipped her comb and did a deep side part, pulling Isabella’s

hair to the side. She seemed more confident now.

“Can I see?” Isabella asked, but Olivia was already back in her chair, showing her stylist another picture.

“It’s a side braid into a low bun.” Jessica said, beginning the braid.

Isabella could have done her own hair. It seemed silly that they were wasting money on her and Henley’s hair for the wedding. But Olivia had insisted that it needed to be done. And Isabella did not want to anger the bride-to-be.

Her hair style did not take long. She did a braid, tying it off at the base of her skull. She curled a few pieces and then did a messy bun, using a million hair pins to hold it in place. She stretched out the braid, making it look full. Isabella had never been good at the small talk with hairdressers. But Jessica chatted away, discussing her Christmas plans and how wonderful a Christmas wedding was. Henley sat patiently, waiting her turn.

“What do you think?” Jessica stood back, her eyes seeking approval from Isabella.

“Looks great! Thank you!” Jessica seemed pleased, taking off her cape. Isabella stood and Henley scampered up into her place. She squirmed in her chair while Jessica put a cape around her.

“What are you thinkin’ Ms. Henley?” The woman smiled, revealing slightly yellow and crooked teeth. Henley looked helplessly at Isabella, who sat in the chair next to her. Olivia was on the other side of the salon, babbling away at her normal stylist about all their plans for the day.

“Liv, what did you want for Henley?” Isabella asked.

“She can decide!” Olivia waved her hand. She was getting a full cut, color, and style done.

“Would you prefer your hair down or up?” Isabella asked Henley. The small girl shrugged. “Do you want it in braids?” Henley shrugged. Isabella sighed.

“Can...can I match you?”

“That’s a great idea!” Jessica said. Henley perked up, watching with wide eyes while the stylist worked, answering quietly when she was asked about school and friends. She told Jessica about Dolly and the future baby. Isabella watched, thinking about Dirk, with his rough ranch hands, teaching himself to braid his daughter’s hair. What other gentle things could those hands do?

She felt a spasm in her chest.

Jessica handed Henley a little mirror, and the girl stared hard at herself, twisting her head this way and that before giving a nod of approval.

Olivia was just getting her hair rinsed.

Isabella and Henley thanked Jessica, Isabella giving the girl a little extra tip for being so nice to Henley before they moved over to watch Olivia.

Olivia was enjoying the attention on her. She was browsing through magazines, pointing out things to her stylist that were cute, super gaudy, and what she would want.

“Do you approve?” Isabella asked, resting her hand on Henley’s shoulder. Olivia smiled.

“I love that you guys have the same hair! The only thing I would add would be flowers to each, but we can do that next time!” Olivia clapped in approval. “Now, Izzy, which one do you think?” Olivia set down the magazine and pulled up her phone.

One style was like what she and Henley had, with a second braid and extra poof in the bun. The second was nothing but curls.

“I like the first one. Henley?”

“Yeah, the first one!”

Olivia pursed her lips, looking at the options again.

“Ultimately, it is your decision!” Isabella said. “You would look fabulous with either.”

“I’d like to see the second one,” Olivia showed her phone to her stylist. Henley sat next to Isabella, and kept looking at herself in the mirror, touching her hair.

Forty minutes later, Olivia looked over her hair, using a hand mirror while facing the table mirror. It looked nice. But not anything special.

“Remember, you will have accessories, filling it out.” Isabella knew that Olivia was not happy.

“We will think about it.” Olivia decided, glancing at Isabella.

Olivia confirmed their appointment for the day of the wedding, Henley said goodbye to Jessica before they moved onto their next task.

There was only one wedding dress shop in town, and the girls had gone

in a few times in high school to get their prom dresses. Isabella had been unimpressed with its quality then. It seemed to have not improved over the years. The building smelled of mold, and many of the dresses looked like they were as old as the building.

Olivia explained to the older woman with gray hair and bent arthritic hands that she needed a wedding dress, and it needed to go home with her today or within the next few days.

“Shotgun wedding, huh? Getting it in before anyone can ask any questions?”

“No! We just want to get married at Christmas and we didn’t want to have to wait another year.” Olivia looked at Isabella, horrified. Had she really not thought people would think that? Isabella hid her face, looking around the shop. The saleswoman shrugged and shuffled off to the back of the store.

“I keep all my returns and closeouts back here. Everything else has to be ordered, and that takes a month or so.”

The rack was half full.

“Are those the bridesmaid clearance as well?” The clerk nodded, looking at Henley. She smiled, revealing a silver tooth.

“There are only a couple flower girl dresses, just there.” Olivia’s phone rang. She stepped away to answer it.

“Thank you,” Isabella said. “We will let you know if we need anything.”

“No, Momma, I understand. You take care of the business. Isabella will take all the pictures we need.” Olivia hung up the phone. “She can’t make it.” Olivia looked upset again.

“It is a busy time for her. And you never know, we may find a dress today.” Olivia nodded, sorting through the rack.

The saleswoman coughed, having to cover her mouth with a handkerchief and spitting out a loogie. Henley stuck to Isabella’s side, glancing over at the woman with suspicion.

Olivia selected a dress to try on. It was three-quarter sleeves, with a white that was too white and shine that reminded Isabella of prom. Isabella spotted a long sleeve lace dress, with light tulle cascading from a high waist. With her urging, Olivia agreed to try on both. They plopped Henley in a chair outside

the dressing room, and Isabella helped Olivia try on her dresses. The first felt rough in her hands.

“I could probably do minimal adjustments, if I needed too.” Isabella heard Olivia’s voice from underneath the mounds of tulle.

“Let’s just get it on first and see what it looks like.” With a little tugging, Isabella was able to pull all the extra poof over her friend.

The dress looked horrible. Olivia looked like a little girl who had outgrown her Easter dress but had to wear it one more year. The sleeves were goofy, and the dress made it look like Olivia needed a shotgun wedding. Isabella kept her face neutral, waiting for the bride to decide. Olivia looked at herself in the mirror and shook her head. Isabella had a good feeling about the other dress.

With a few giggles, they tugged the ugly dress off of Olivia.

“Gaudy!” Olivia stuck her tongue out at the dress while Isabella hung it back up. She did not point out to her friend she had not even wanted to try another one on. The second dress was lighter and slipped over Olivia as if it had been made for her.

“Wow,” Henley whispered when Olivia stepped out to look in the mirror. The dress was all tulle at the bottom. Gathered at the waist, it transitioned into a lace top with a v cut into her back. She looked like a Disney princess heading to a ball. Isabella felt herself tear up.

“Wow, is right. You look amazing.” Isabella wiped her eyes, composing herself. Olivia smiled, relaxing for just a moment.

“That one is new.” The clerk said from the counter. “Only been here a few weeks. Ordered it for a girl who had to cancel her wedding. Shouldn’t even be on the rack yet.” Olivia’s eyes widened, looking at Isabella.

“Would it be bad karma to take a dress that was meant for someone else?”

Isabella didn’t believe in karma, or fate. She also found it silly that the girl who was getting married to a man she had known for five minutes could be picky about a dress and it’s past. She also recognized the signs of a deal about to fall through. Sales person claiming it was in the wrong spot. Isabella glanced at the tag, clearly marked for clearance.

“No! It just meant that wasn’t her dress.” Olivia relaxed a little, but Isabella could still see a minor panic. “Think of it this way, Liv,” Isabella turned her

friend to look at the mirror. "This dress is meant for a wedding. If you don't buy it, it won't ever see that wedding." Olivia nodded. She always believed everything had a purpose, even things like clothes.

"How much is it?" Olivia began turning, admiring herself.

"1200." The sales woman claimed. Olivia's face fell.

Isabella smiled. Hagglng. She did this all day. She glanced at her friend, then at the half price sign dangling over the clearance section.

"Originally?" Isabella fluffed the dress. She winked at Olivia, who turned away from the negotiation. The saleswoman looked surprised. Her fingers twitched and Isabella knew that she wanted them to leave. She needed a cigarette.

"The price is 1200." She didn't answer the question.

"Yes, maybe when it was new. But, not only is this dress a return, but it is last year's style. I googled it while we were putting it on. And, given that it is almost out of winter wedding season, do you really want that on your rack for another year? The sign over there says half off."

The saleswoman looked a little panicky.

"Beggars can't be choosers. You need a wedding dress in a rush. And we put it in the wrong spot."

"Yes, we do, don't we? We also need a bridesmaid's dress and a flower girl's dress. And a mother-of-the-bride's dress." Isabella ticked each item off on her fingers. The business woman's mind was doing the numbers. That was a lot of sales in between homecoming and prom. "My friend and I grew up in this town. When we discussed getting dresses, we stayed local, instead of driving to Springs or Pueblo or even Denver to get her a dress. Sure, they have more selection. But we wanted to support the community. Keep things alive here. So, you can give us 600 on the dress, which is an excellent offer for a returned dress, and we will buy our bridesmaid's dress, flower girl's dress and mother-of-the-bride dress here. Or we will caravan on up to the city and get us a cheaper dress and support some other place." The woman was glowering at her. "Also, someone accidentally put in the wrong spot and put a clearance tag on it." Henley giggled.

"800."

Isabella glanced at Olivia, who nodded feverishly.

“Deal.” Isabella shook hands with her and turned back to her friend. Her mouth hung open in awe, but her eyes danced. She was happy again. Isabella took the pictures for her mother before helping her friend out of the dress. They moved on to the next task.

Isabella found a long dress in red that Olivia approved of. Isabella was a little concerned that it was a halter top. Hopefully, it wasn’t freezing in the barn. They found Henley a little flower girl dress, and Isabella made sure it had sleeves to keep her warm. Each dress was on clearance for what Isabella found was a reasonable price. The saleswoman looked relieved that she didn’t haggle for anything else.

Olivia resumed her excitement when they were in the car. “Where did you learn to negotiate like that? You were amazing!”

“I’ve learned a few things in my time in San Diego.” Isabella winked at Henley, who grinned at her from the back seat. “You happy with your dress, sweetie?”

The girl shrugged.

“It’s okay. I don’t like dresses.”

“I know. But Olivia appreciates you wearing it for her!” Isabella said.

“I know. That’s the only reason I’m doing it.”

Isabella and Olivia held back laughs. Henley sounded so dejected.

Back at the ranch, Henley hopped out of the car and ran towards the barn. Daisy appeared at the door, wagging her tail in greeting at the girl. Isabella went into the house first to find Jack and Dirk sipping coffee in the kitchen, chatting.

“I have been sent ahead to order the groom to avert his eyes. The wedding dress is coming through!” Isabella announced.

“You got one! That’s awesome! How much?”

Isabella rolled her eyes and looked at Dirk.

“Come on best man! Turn him! Don’t let him peek!”

Dirk was staring at her again. He seemed to jerk awake when she spoke. He nodded his head and said,

“Come on, Jack, let’s go into the office.”

A COWBOY CHRISTMAS WEDDING

Jack asked about the price again, but Isabella ignored him, smiling at Dirk. And her heart fluttered when he returned it.

8

Chapter 8

“Invitations!” Olivia pointed at an unopened box on the dining room table. Isabella frowned at the box.

“Will they get out to everyone in time?” Isabella watched Olivia rip open the box with the enthusiasm of a six-year-old tearing open a Christmas Eve present.

“Almost everyone who’s coming already knows. Jack just insisted on formally inviting them. Everyone lives in town. They will get them.” Olivia handed a copy of the invitation to Isabella. It was silver with snowflakes around the blue wording.

“Together with their families Olivia Rosilo and Jack Perez invite you to join them for their wedding on December 24th at Five pm at Second Hope Ranch.”

“This afternoon we are addressing and sending all of these out.”

Isabella let her mind groan. She could already feel the hand cramp.

“Can I help?” Henley looked at Isabella. Olivia looked at her as well, panicked.

“You can lick the envelopes if you want.”

“Okay!”

Olivia looked relieved.

“Let me get the addresses.” The bride-to-be rushed up the stairs, her long sweater trailing behind her dramatically.

“How’s Dolly?”

“She’s good. She was napping again.”

“I would be too if I was that pregnant.”

“Do you want kids?”

Children had such an honesty to them, Isabella admired it.

“Maybe someday. Yeah, I would like some kids.”

“How many?”

Isabella laughed, pulling the box to her and unwrapping the envelopes. She set them with the invitations before setting the box aside.

“I don’t know. I think it would depend on what my husband would want as well.”

“Would you rather have a girl or a boy?”

“I would love to have either.”

Henley was gazing at her. The same stare her father gave Isabella whenever she came into the room.

Olivia returned, breaking the girl’s determined glare, and they set to work. The women put the invitations into envelopes, allowing Henley a pile to lick. They then started addressing them. Henley read each name and address off to them, reading carefully, sometimes having to spell names for them.

“This is going a lot better than I thought it would!” Olivia announced a little over a few hours later. With Henley’s help, they only had a few invitations left.

“I think it’s because we have such a good helper.” Isabella nudged the girl sitting next to her with her elbow. Henley blushed, nudging her back.

They had just finished putting stamps on all 100 of the envelopes when Dirk and Jack returned.

“Momma is going to be here in a bit with the cake. I should get supper going.” Olivia stretched. Isabella put all the addressed and stamped envelopes into the box. “You boys need to get cleaned up.” Jack stepped over to Olivia, giving her a quick kiss.

“Yes, boss.”

Dirk went to ruffle Henley’s hair, but she jerked away.

“Daddy! My hair!” He looked surprised but smiled.

“Sorry!”

“It’s okay. I just like it. You might have to learn how to do this.”

Dirk glanced at Isabella, and she thought she saw a hint of red appear under his scruff.

“Maybe, but that looks a little fancy for Dad. Maybe you can teach yourself?”

Henley nodded.

“Were you bothering these ladies today?”

“She was very helpful!” Olivia said. Henley beamed with pride.

“I licked all the envelopes! Look!” She stuck out her tongue. “I got a paper cut!” Dirk chuckled, giving his daughter a kiss on the cheek.

“Good girl.” He stood, glancing back at Isabella again before going upstairs.

“Should I run these down to the post office?” Isabella tried to avert her eyes as Dirk ascended the stairs. But he looked too good in his tight jeans and she stared.

“No. I can take them in the morning. They don’t pick it up after three, anyway.” Olivia followed her eyes and then smirked before going to the fridge, pulling out a chicken.

“I can help with dinner?” Isabella stood to join her in the kitchen. Henley slipped off the dining room chair, following her father up the stairs.

“You could pour yourself some wine and tell me why you are drooling after Dirk!” Olivia teased.

Isabella blushed, fixing her hair.

“I didn’t mean to!” The girls giggled, and Isabella sighed, sitting down at the island while Olivia prepared the chicken. “He doesn’t seem to like me much, anyway. Remember last night?”

“He was joking. He has a dry sense of humor.”

“He glares at me.”

“He stares at you...longingly.”

“Whatever.” Isabella looked around for the wine. “Kurt was back in San Diego last week.” Olivia stopped moving, her eyes flying up. Isabella was shocked by her own casualness.

“You guys are not getting back together, are you?”

“What? No!” Isabella laughed.

“Thank goodness. That guy was...” Olivia stopped herself, busying herself with the chicken again.

“He was what?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Liv.”

Olivia sighed.

“He was an absolute ass. And you weren’t yourself when you were with him.”

Isabella did not think that was fair. Yes, in the end, Kurt was an ass for leaving like that. But when they were together, he was... okay.

“I don’t know if that’s fair.”

“Come on, Izzy! Name one thing Kurt ever did for you that was romantic.”

Isabella thought. Every dinner, for every event, she had planned. Christmas gifts from her to him had always been thoughtful. She had spent weeks finding just the right thing. Two of the three years, he had gotten her a spa gift certificate that barely covered a massage. He forgot her birthday once.

He was so good at saying the right thing, making her feel special. She had liked their relationship. She was starting to gain momentum in her career and liked independence. He never was upset if she was at work late or had to go do showings early on the weekends.

She thought he was supportive of her. But now, looking back, maybe he had just never cared if she was there. Her absence was preferred.

“I’m sorry...” Olivia whispered. Isabella snapped back to reality.

“No, it’s fine. I guess I always knew that. Anyway, he did kind of solidify being an ass,” Isabella told Olivia what happened, or the jist of it at least.

“What an ass!” Olivia almost shouted. Isabella couldn’t disagree with her anymore. “Well, I just want you to know that Dirk is wide open. And he is a good man.”

“Yeah, let me get involved with a guy here in Colorado and then go back to San Diego.”

“You could do distance to see where it went.”

“No, that wouldn’t work. And besides, he has a lot of baggage. He’s a widower and has a kid.”

“Henley loves you!”

“Right now. As the cool city lady who is here for a couple days. No. Not worth it.”

“Fine.” Olivia threw the chicken into the oven. “You could always, you know...” Olivia raised her eyebrows a few times. Isabella laughed.

Olivia’s mother arrived about an hour later. She carried with her two large cake boxes and shoved them into Jack’s arms, before walking straight to Isabella and pulling her into a tight hug.

“Oh my dear girl, it is so good to see you!”

Mrs. Rosilo smelled like flour. She owned the local bakery. And her baked goods were amazing. Isabella missed her cakes and scones.

“You too, Mrs. Rosilo.”

“How many times do I have to tell you to call me Dina?”

“At least once more.”

Dina patted her on the cheek, taking off her jacket. Jack had placed the cake boxes gently on the table. He looked nervous.

“Momma, this is Dirk, Jack’s best friend. He owns this ranch.”

“Ma’am.” Dirk shook her hand. “This is my daughter, Henley.” Henley was sitting on the couch, watching TV. She waved at the guest, not taking her eyes off of it.

“I have seen you two around town. I believe I made the cake for your wedding. And your wife’s...” Dina trailed off, smoothing out her top.

“We try to always stop in for a cupcake when we are in town.” Dirk broke the awkward moment. “Henley likes your strawberry cake.” Henley only half nodded.

“Momma, where’s Dad?” Olivia opened the cake boxes, inspecting their contents. Isabella wanted to skip dinner and get straight to the tasting. Jack looked like he shared her sentiment.

“Not coming tonight. He has the early shift tomorrow.” Olivia looked disappointed.

“Dinner is almost ready.” Olivia hurried to the kitchen. Jack went with her.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Dirk asked Dina, who was inspecting the house with a critical eye.

“Just water, thanks!” She returned to the room, giving a thin smile to Dirk before taking Izzy’s hands and pulling her to the couch.

“Tell me, how have you been? How is San Diego? Work?”

“I’ve been doing really well. San Diego is great. Work is great! I am planning on buying a house there in the coming months.”

“Oh good! Setting down roots!” Dina patted her again. Dirk returned with her glass of water, and he brought Isabella her wine, which he had refilled.

“Yeah, something like that.”

Henley had looked away from her TV show.

“And men? What about men? What about that man, Kurt?”

“Things didn’t work out with him,” Isabella took a long drink from her wine.

“Ma! Leave Izzy alone!” Olivia shouted from the kitchen.

“What! I’m just asking!”

“It’s okay.” Isabella put on her real estate smile avoiding Dina’s stare. She glanced over at Dirk who was sitting with Henley, pretending to read a newspaper. “I don’t mind. I just have been busy with work. Haven’t found anyone worth giving that up for.”

“You will dear. It will come out of nowhere, and you will be just like these two!” She motioned to Jack and Olivia.

“Maybe.” Isabella took another long drink. She was certain she was done with love. Being that emotionally attached to anything but her cat and a few friends seemed like asking for pain. She was not into pain.

Dinner was more of Dina chatting away about town gossip. As the local baker, she knew all the gossip about who was leaving who to whose child was a demon.

Isabella helped Jack with the dishes.

“I can’t decide if she likes me or not,” He whispered to her. Dina and Olivia were setting up the cupcakes. “One second she seems happy and the next, she’s treating me like a...” he paused.

“Cowhand?” Isabella suggested.

“Yeah, a low one at that.”

“Dina takes a while to warm up to anyone. She is probably just concerned

with her daughter rushing off to marry you.” Isabella stopped herself and looked at Jack.

“You don’t think it is a good idea?”

“That’s not what I think. That’s what Dina is probably thinking. She’s just worried about her daughter.” Jack was focusing hard on her. “Look, Jack. If I thought Liv was making a terrible choice, I wouldn’t have helped her do all this stuff today. I would never have come.” He sighed, nodding. “Give her some time. It will all work out.”

Isabella sat next to Henley, who was looking excitedly at the cupcakes on the table.

“We will start with the basic flavors and move up to the more elaborate. Vanilla and chocolate fudge with matching buttercream. I also have strawberry and lemon, which I think are more summer flavors. Then we have a salted caramel with vanilla buttercream frosting, an orange cranberry and cream cheese frosting, peppermint and double chocolate and butter almond with white chocolate. I didn’t decorate anything, just wanted to get the flavors. We can discuss fillings and decorations when we’ve settled on a flavor.” Dina opened the box of cupcakes and began setting them out. Henley’s eyes grew wide.

“Momma, these all look so good!” Olivia looked as excited as Henley.

The next hour passed with everyone tasting and assessing. Isabella would take a small bite of one, nod along with Oliva and her mother who would bicker about details and then sip the water. By the end, the only thing Isabella could taste was sweet. Dirk and Jack had grown uninterested, sipping their beers. Jack nodded to everything Olivia said. Henley ate a few bites of them all, but Dina slipped her the full strawberry cupcakes and with an approving nod from her father, devoured it before disappearing back into the living room.

“I don’t know! Izzy, what do you think?”

Isabella took a sip of her water, her stomach hurting. Her favorites were the simple flavors. But she didn’t want to offend Dina or upset Olivia. Dina was pushing for the peppermint and Olivia was pushing for the salted caramel. Jack was peeling the label on his beer.

“I think they are all fantastic. But if I wanted to have something that stuck

out and most people would enjoy, I would do the butter almond.” Olivia and Dina grabbed the last of the cupcake, each sampling.

“You don’t think it is too simple?” Dina said. “You like the peppermint?” Dina slid a sample towards Isabella who took a small bite. The flavor exploded in her mouth, almost punching her. It was too much.

“Yeah, but some people don’t.” Olivia took another bite of the peppermint. Her expression said she was also overwhelmed with the flavor.

“Some people? Who cares about some people? It is your wedding!” Dina sighed. “I think you should do the peppermint.”

Olivia looked at Jack, who shook his head.

“I do not have a sweet tooth.” He said, looking at Dirk who took a swig of his beer. He was not getting involved.

“Think about it.” Dina said. “We can decide in the morning.”

“Okay.” Olivia looked flustered.

“But if you don’t call me, I’m making the peppermint.”

Isabella’s mind was racing. How could she fix this? She was still thinking on it when Dina put on her jacket to leave.

“Thank you for coming, Momma. I promise you are my first call tomorrow.” Olivia hugged her mom goodbye.

“You better. Peppermint dear, it would be good.” She patted her daughter’s face before turning to Dirk. “Thank you for hosting again. Izzy!” She hugged Izzy tightly again. “So good to see you. Jack.” She nodded at her future son-in-law and Olivia squeezed his hand, following her mom out onto the front porch.

“I hate peppermint.” Jack mumbled. Dirk chuckled, slapping him on the back.

“We will figure it out,” Isabella assured him. Olivia came back inside, looking exhausted.

“I don’t know what to do.” She sighed, looking at the cake boxes on the table. “Jack, be honest.”

Jack looked from Dirk to Isabella, who nodded.

“I’m not a huge fan of peppermint.”

“Me neither. But momma is making the cake for free. Should we just go

with what she wants to make our lives easier?”

“Well, your mom already doesn’t like me...”

Olivia looked at him, angry and horrified.

“That is not true!”

“Oh, it so is!”

Isabella looked at Dirk, who was inspecting the label on his beer.

Olivia paused, looking at Isabella and Dirk.

“We will talk about this later. I’m going to bed. Good night.” She walked off. Jack sighed and went after her. Isabella looked over at Henley and saw her passed out on the couch, half a strawberry cupcake still on the table in front of her. Somewhere between the cupcake tasting to the peppermint debable, Dirk had covered her with a blanket.

“Well, that went well.” Isabella began picking up the paper plates and wiping up the crumbs. Dirk set down his beer and helped her.

“Henley really did a good job today?” Dirk asked as Isabella transferred the remaining few cupcakes to one box, folding up the other for the trash.

“She was great. She seemed to enjoy herself.”

“She doesn’t get a lot of female time.” Dirk was watching his daughter. “I worry sometimes about that.”

“You are doing an amazing job, Dirk.” Isabella wanted to reach out and take his hand. But she stopped herself, settling on looking up at him. “You have had to deal with one of the worst things in the world. Henley isn’t going to be some horrible person because she was raised by only her father. She is going to be a wonderful person.”

“Thank you.” Dirk stared down at her and for the first time, he didn’t seem angry with her. His eyes were scanning her face. She wanted to step into him, give him a reason to lean down. He sniffed, breaking off the stare. “Going down to check on Dolly.” He had his boots on and was gone in a flash.

Isabella knew she needed to be out of the kitchen when he came back.

Chapter 9

Isabella let the water from the shower engulf her face. She was exhausted. The day had been jam packed, and she was ready for bed. She was used to being on the go from the second she left her apartment until she returned, but she had grown accustomed to coming home and being alone. She could unwind with Skittles, have a glass of wine, watch the TV. She wasn't on display anymore. She could wear her holey yoga pants and ratty tops and old slippers. Here, it was nonstop questions. Here, she felt like she was always on display. She needed to be the happy, supportive friend, the one who smiled and fixed all the problems. Here, she wasn't alone.

At home, there was no Dirk. She pushed him out of her mind, and the feelings she had, standing down in the kitchen with him. They were such different people. And lived so far away from each other. There would be no feasible way to make anything happen. Plus, just 24 hours ago, they were not getting along, and she didn't even know why.

Liv's suggestion of a one-night stand was tempting. That had just never been Isabella's style.

She finished her shower, not wanting to be a shower hog. She was drying her hair with the towel, when she heard his footsteps outside the door.

She peeked out the door and saw Dirk going into Henley's room, his daughter resting her head on his shoulder. Isabella wanted to go to the door, watch him gently lay Henley in her bed, and tuck her in without waking her.

The tenderness of this rough cowboy. She imagined what he would do, if she walked into the hall, the towel draped around her and nothing more. How tender would he be with her? She had to shake herself out of the daydream.

Instead, she hurried to her room, refusing to look in and gently closed the door to avoid a click. She leaned against the door and sighed.

* * *

Isabella surprised Olivia when she appeared in the kitchen just after six the next morning.

“Well, good morning! Look who is up so early today!”

“Ranch life, right?” Isabella smiled, accepting the cup of coffee Olivia poured her.

“Haha, that’s right.” The two friends sipped in silence, and Isabella looked out over the still dark ranch. She saw headlights of the side-by-side heading away from the barn.

“Better get breakfast going,” Olivia sighed.

“Let me. You relax and tell me what we are getting done today.” Olivia smiled at her friend, taking a seat at the bar. Isabella opened the large fridge. The kitchen in the house was nice, but not updated. Stop. She told herself. She was not assessing this property. She was not selling this property or trying to buy this property. She was just staying here while she helped her best friend prepare for a wedding. She was just attempting to cook breakfast as a thank you to the man who could have told her to go to the local motel. Even if she was never much of a cook, but she could scramble some eggs and fry some bacon.

“I want to focus on the barn today. Get it cleaned out.”

Isabella nodded as she worked.

“Oh, and apparently Dirk offered Jack one of the old ranch hand cabins to us.”

“For your first night?”

“No! To live in after the wedding!”

“Really?”

“Isn’t that crazy?”

Isabella shrugged, thinking it was. But, she knew that a ranch hand needed to be to work early and sometimes, depending on the season, worked late.

“Well, where would you live otherwise?”

“Probably Jack’s. He has a small place in town.” Isabella could tell her friend wasn’t fond of it. Olivia had not really ventured out of her own parent’s home. A three-story Victorian that her father kept in great shape. Similar to the one that Isabella had envisioned owning. Isabella flipped a couple pieces of bacon. She had spent a huge chunk of her childhood in that Victorian. Maybe that is why she wanted one?

“You could always look at it. What would the rent be?”

Olivia laughed.

“They didn’t talk about that.” Her eyes lit up. “We could look at it today, and you could be my agent. If we like it, maybe negotiate a good deal.”

Isabella did not know if she could negotiate anything with Dirk. Henley appeared, yawning. She had taken the bun out, and her hair was in a nice curl.

“Good morning!” Isabella smiled at her. “Do you need some juice?” Henley shook her head.

“I’m going to go check on Dolly!” Henley stepped into her boots.

“Jacket!” Isabella said when Henley bolted for the door. Sighing, Henley shut the door before pulling on her jacket. Then she grabbed the flashlight and raced out the door.

“I wish I woke up with that much energy.” Olivia took another sip of her coffee. “Do you think the house thing is a good idea? As a professional, not as my friend.”

“Well, do you have a down payment for your own home? If not, what sort of payment could you two manage a month? Is his apartment nice?”

Olivia shook her head and shrugged at the same time. Isabella wondered where all her money went if she didn’t pay rent, but she looked over her friends designer clothes and manicured nails and knew where that money went.

“You would need a contract, you would need to work out a payment plan,

whether that was part of Jack's salary or if you guys paid him so much a month. Because this is Dirk's property. And if something went bad, and you didn't have that contract, he could kick you out."

"Would you do it?"

"I would have to see the cabin. But..." Isabella turned off the burner and looked over the property. The sun was rising and Isabella felt the peace of the mountains. Things moved at a smoother pace here. Not that she would ever admit that she was homesick. "If it made financial sense, I would consider it."

"Maybe we could look at it today. Just me and you?"

"Sure."

Breakfast went the same as yesterday. Isabella was washing dishes when Olivia asked Dirk for the keys to the cabin.

"Izzy and I are going to go look at it sometime today."

Dirk nodded, fetching the key from the key rack, and handed it to Olivia.

"If you wait until later, we can come with you!" Jack said.

"I want to look at it without you," Olivia told him, slipping the key into her pocket. There was another silence. Isabella was used to dealing with couples who disagreed on everything from the color the front door should be to how many bedrooms.

"It might be better if you guys went together." Olivia looked at Isabella, shocked. "You will share the space. You both need to be happy with it."

Olivia sighed.

"Fine, but if I don't like it, you can't pressure me."

"Deal!"

Dirk had stiffened at the possibility of another fight between the two. He relaxed a little, glancing at Isabella.

"Can we clean out the barn today while you guys are working?" Olivia looked at Dirk, back to wedding brain.

"We actually have that as our task today too."

Isabella felt her heart skip a beat. She would work with Dirk all day? Watching him lift and move and sweat. *Stop it*, she told herself, focusing on the dishes in her hands.

“Okay! Let’s do this!” Olivia dashed back to the bedroom.

“Can I help?” Henley looked at Isabella. Dirk frowned, glancing at Isabella, annoyance flashing in his eyes. Isabella dried her hands.

“That’s up to your dad.” Isabella wanted to keep things peaceful between him and her. Henley looked at her father.

“Sure. But don’t forget, you have three stalls to muck out today.” Dirk added.

“Okay!” Henley ran up the stairs. Dirk followed, not looking at Isabella. Well, back to not liking her. It wasn’t her fault that his daughter liked her. And what was she supposed to say, no? Didn’t he thank her for being nice to her the other day? She pushed the irritation away from her and went upstairs as well.

Isabella changed into the oldest clothes she had brought, which was a t-shirt and a comfy pair of jeans she had only worn a couple times. Silly, she thought, for not bringing older clothes to a working ranch. She glanced in the mirror and knew that she was too dressed up for what they were going to do. Oh well. Something else Dirk could pick at her for. She was pulling on tennis shoes when Dirk came down the stairs.

“You going to work in those?”

Her tennis shoes were really more for walking on the beach, not working in a barn.

“Didn’t know I would be clearing out a barn. And you can only bring so many shoes when you fly.” Isabella sighed. The man and his moods. Why couldn’t he decide if he liked her or not? “Better than my heels at least?” She held her leg up, twirling her ankle around, hoping for a laugh. Dirk said nothing, going back upstairs. Henley appeared, stopping in front of Isabella.

“Like my hair?” Henley twisted her head. It was in two pigtail braids.

“Yes, I do! So cute!” Henley grinned.

“I braided them myself!”

“That’s great!”

Dirk reappeared and handed Isabella a pair of boots. They were worn but well kept brown cowboy boots with small swirls.

“See if these fit.”

Henley's face fell, and she looked up at Dirk. He squeezed her shoulder, going to the kitchen.

Isabella held the boots for a moment. Shelly's boots. He still had her boots. Sighing, she slipped off her shoes and put her foot into them, praying they would be too small or too big. But they slipped on like Cinderella's slipper.

"Thank you," Isabella said. "But I would be fine in my..." Dirk shook his head.

"They need to be worn. That's what they are for."

Isabella nodded, looking at Henley.

"Should we go muck some stalls while we wait for Olivia and Jack?"

Isabella had never cleaned out a stall. Olivia boarded her horse at a local ranch where she would take Isabella to ride. Someone else always did the cleanup. And the saddling. She wasn't sure why she had even suggested it. The look on Dirk's face had said enough. He was coming to watch her and be amused.

Willow perked up from her food the second she and Henley entered the barn. She knickered at her, bobbing her head up and down.

With Henley as her guide, Isabella put a lead on Willow's halter and led her out of the stall, remembering how to tie Willow securely at least. Dirk leaned in the barn's frame, arms crossed over his broad chest, cowboy hat titled back. He was keeping his face neutral, but his eyes were dancing. Isabella ignored his stare, picking up the pitchfork.

Henley was a good little teacher, showing her how to use the tools. Isabella did as she was told, and Henley supervised for a few minutes before heading off to clean Dolly's and Sarge's. Dirk did not move from his spot at the door and he said nothing.

Isabella did not hate what she was doing. It wasn't the most pleasant of tasks, but soon she finished mucking out what she needed to before shaking fresh straw into the bed. Henley moved quickly, finishing the two stalls by the time she finished one. Dirk ambled over to her while Henley heaved the wheelbarrow out the back. He looked over Isabella's work while Isabella gave Willow some attention.

"Not bad." Dirk didn't look at her, giving a quick glance over Henley's

work.

Isabella knew it was silly, but she felt a little proud of herself. And felt a little silly. What was she trying to do? Impress a man by shoveling horse poop? Really?

“Figured I needed to earn my room and food.” Isabella smiled at him.

“Well, a ranch always needs something. If you want any more chores, let me know.” Dirk smiled back at her. Maybe it impressed him? She felt the butterflies in her stomach again, turning away from him to focus on Willow. Henley returned and Dirk went to Sarge.

“Let’s put them in the back pasture for the morning, let them stretch their legs.” Henley hurried to Dolly and the three of them walked their horses down to the pasture, letting them off their leads. The pasture was brown, with frost still on the tips of the grass. The grass crunched under their feet as they opened the gate. Willow and Sarge trotted off together, nipping and playing as they went. Dolly huffed, following at a slower pace. The mountains overlooked them now, brown and green trees with white tips. There was very little snow left, but it smelled like winter here. Dirk took her lead and draped it over the rail before turning and walking up the well-worn path towards the barns. The ground looked like it should be muddy, but it was frozen solid. Down to the left, Isabella saw in another pasture separate from the horses, cows huddled close to the water, munching on the hay that had been put out that morning. The pasture was several acres wide and stretched farther than she could see. There was a hay barn close to the gate. The back of the pasture was lined with pine trees.

Henley and Daisy walked ahead of them, and Isabella felt unusual. She was not worried about the next client, the next day, the next hour. She knew things would be okay. Things would get done. The air was chilly but so clean, she could fill her lungs without coughing. She looked up at Dirk. His eyes were scanning the fence, the cows off in the lower pasture, his daughter. He was evaluating, checking. She felt comfortable walking up to the barn with him. She wanted to reach out, hook her hand through his, feel his warmth. She shoved her hands deep into her coat pockets.

They went to the second barn, finding Olivia telling Jack where she

envisioned the wedding and the chairs. The barn was huge, with large doors opening in the front and the back. It was full of junk, and clearly had not been used in a while. There was a layer of dust on everything.

“Izzy, what do you think?” Olivia turned to her friend. Isabella pulled her thoughts away from what it would be like if she was the one getting to live here and focused on her task as maid of honor. “I want the ceremony performed here, and the chairs here.” Olivia wanted the chairs looking back at the house with the alter in the center of the barn. Izzy looked over the barn, glancing back behind her. The opening framed the pastures and valley filled with frosted trees and snowcapped peaks. Isabella saw what Shelly must have seen.

“I would have it here, by the back door,” Isabella stepped back to the door. Olivia came with her, looking out over the view. “This would be your background. And also, you would be in the house, away from everyone while they came up here. Then, you would come up the aisle here,” Isabella walked back towards the front. “There is plenty of room in here for 200 chairs.”

“200! How many people did we invite?” Jack sounded in alarm. Dirk shook his head at him and Jack quieted down. Isabella looked over the equipment and was happy to see both a wagon and a sled.

“Are these functioning?” She looked at Dirk. He nodded.

“Should be.” Henley climbed up into the wagon, looking down at her.

“After the ceremony, you two could get up in the wagon and go off away from everyone, to have a few minutes to yourselves. Your photographer could go with you, take some pictures. Dirk and I could have everyone grab their chair and get the tables set up. Then we could have the drinks come out and while pictures are being taken, people can enjoy themselves before dinner.” Isabella stopped, looking around at everyone. Jack was staring from one point to another, trying to see what she saw. Olivia’s eyes were dancing. Dirk looked like he had just seen a ghost. Was that what Shelly had told him they would do? “I mean, obviously, we would do what you wanted. It is your wedding.”

“I want that! I don’t know why I was so focused on the middle.” Olivia looked at Jack. “Do you like that idea?”

“I do. I think it would be perfect.”

Olivia frowned, panic coming to her eyes.

“I just thought of some things we need to do.” She hurried to Isabella her hand gripping her arm. “I haven’t found a photographer or someone to marry us!”

Isabella pulled out her phone.

“On it.”