

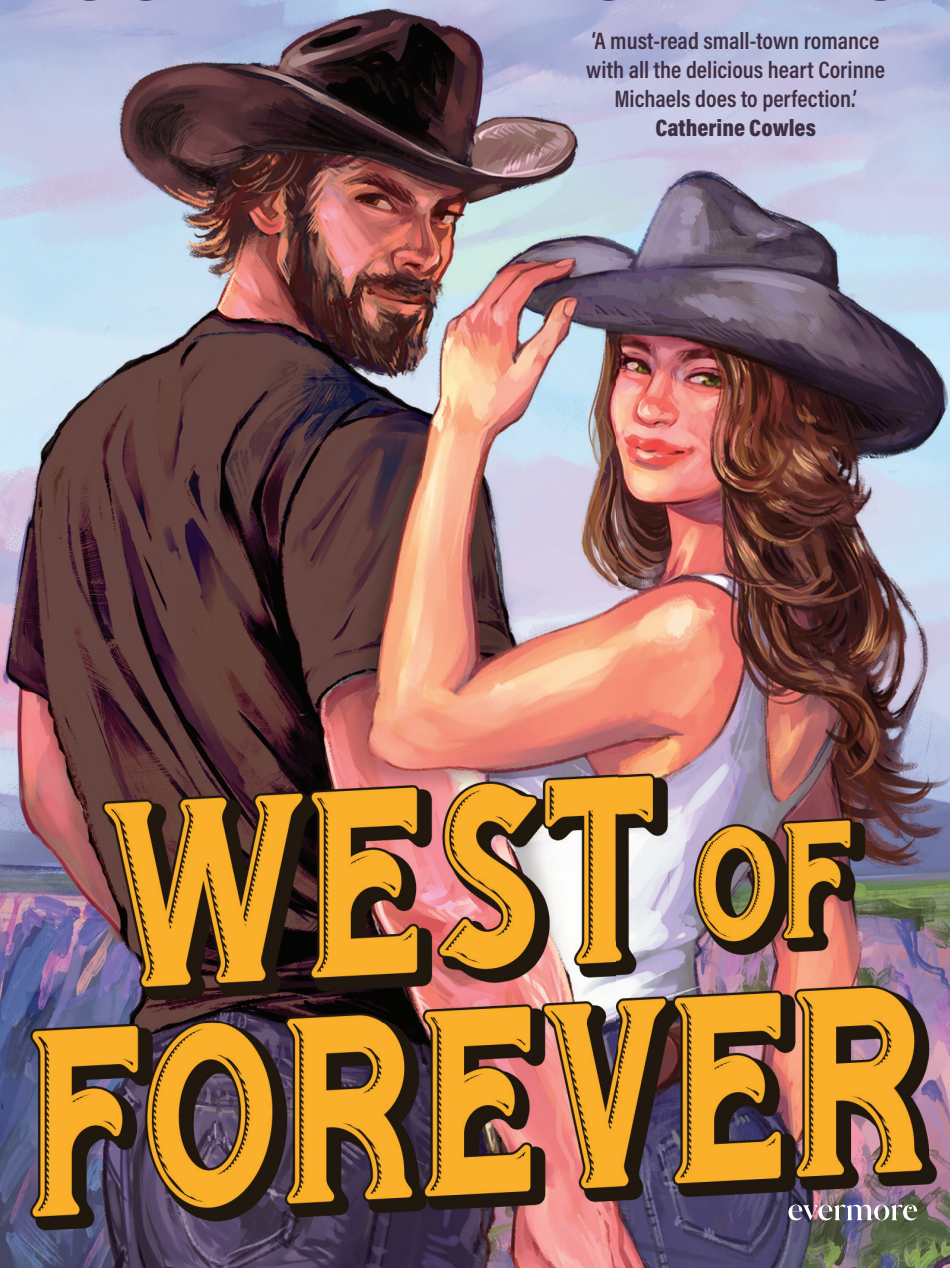
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Corinne Michaels is a *New York Times*, *USA Today* and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author of romance novels. Her stories are chock full of emotion, humour and unrelenting love, and she enjoys putting her characters through intense heartbreak before finding a way to heal them through their struggles.

Corinne is a former Navy wife and happily married to the man of her dreams. She began her writing career after spending months away from her husband while he was deployed – reading and writing were her escapes from the loneliness. Corinne now lives in Virginia with her husband and is the emotional, witty, sarcastic and fun-loving mom of two beautiful children.

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*To my daughter, who reminded me of how in the face of fear
we can choose to either let it overtake us or we can do brave things.
Thank you for giving me the strength to push past my own insecurities.*

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CHAPTER ONE

TRISTAN

Sadie: I'm tracking your location and see you're almost home.

I LAUGH ONCE AT THE FACT THAT SHE WATCHES WHERE I AM ALL the freaking time. Kids.

My thumbs tap on the wheel of the truck as I focus on the road. It's late, it's raining, and I'm exhausted after driving six hours back from Wyoming, where I dropped off the eight horses we sold. Of course, five minutes after passing the border into Colorado, the rain started coming down. It hasn't stopped—if anything, it's only come down harder. Summer storms are really ruining plans as of late.

I turn off the familiar exit, winding to the left before coming to the one traffic light that sits at the edge of the boundary into my hometown of Infinity Ridge, and I finally feel some relief.

Home.

Almost.

Usually the views of the majestic Rocky Mountains that I can see with my eyes closed are like a welcome sign, but right now all I see is rain.

Lots of freaking rain.

I voice a text back to Sadie when I see it's past ten already. I drove up to Wyoming yesterday, thinking it would be a quick drop-off, that I'd spend the night and be back on the road.

Me: I am. You should be in bed. You have physical therapy tomorrow.

I can picture her rolling her eyes like all twelve-year-olds do when they think they're twenty and can do what they want.

Lord knows my three sisters were always doing that whenever Mom or Dad tried to tell them what to do.

Sadie: I was waiting for you.

Me: I'll be home in twenty and then it's lights out.

Sadie: Whatever you say, Daddy.

That's a lie. I grab my coffee and toss the rest of it back, then see lights on the side of the road.

Only the vehicle is not *all* the way off to the side...

It's still partially in the road.

I'm at a tight curve, and swerving into oncoming traffic could end in disaster.

Shit.

I hit the brakes, hoping the horse trailer doesn't swing out and cause me to slide, but thankfully I have enough time that I come to a stop about five feet before I hit the truck.

The flashers are going, but with the rain I can't see anything. Hopefully the driver is safe. I grab my jacket and get out of my truck, pulling my hat onto my head to give me a little relief from the downpour as I go to check on the stranded motorist.

I bang on the window, and the woman inside lowers it, already

talking. "I'm so sorry. I know I'm in a bad spot, but I'm stuck in the mud and my tire..."

A light inside her truck turns on, and all I see is sable hair and the greenest eyes to ever exist. For a moment my heart, that organ that hasn't worked right in years, starts to beat again. Then, as lightning stretches across the sky and recognition dawns, I realize who it is and let my heart go back to being dormant.

If I didn't have bad luck, I'd have no luck.

Of course, the woman half pulled over with a flat tire is Lark Gatlin.

Lark, the most stunning, kind, and off-limits woman I know. There's no way in hell I will ever be involved with anyone from her family. No thanks. I don't need that kind of drama in my life. I have plenty between my daughter and my own family.

I tamp down the desire that always flows when I see her, and I glower, getting soaked. "Is flat," I finish for her. Her wipers keep going, flicking water at me.

"It is. Thanks for stopping, Tristan, but I'll be fine."

Lark is the only Gatlin I am actually even willing to pause to help. If it were either of her dickhead brothers, I'd already be in my dry, warm truck. Their family has been the bane of my existence since the day I was born.

They're selfish, arrogant, and full of shit and they love nothing more than trying to make my family's life a living hell.

Things go missing, we had instances of vandalism, and the cops show up at my farm every fucking week with some bullshit accusation that we're targeting the Gatlins, when I'm pretty sure they're the ones doing it themselves just to make us look like the bad guys.

Even with the generational hate between us, the idea of leaving her here doesn't sit well with me.

"Is someone coming to help?" I ask.

"I'm sure they are as soon as they can."

That's a no. "I'm not going to leave you on the side of the road. Do you have any flares?"

She sighs. "No, I don't."

I imagine what my mother would say if she were still alive. She'd tell me to always do the right thing, especially for a lady, no matter what.

Sometimes it really sucks having parents who raised you to be a gentleman.

"Stay here. I'll move my truck so we don't all die, and then I'll change your tire."

"No! No, you don't need to do that," she argues, but I'm already walking away.

There's no way I'm leaving her stranded on the side of the road. Once I'm inside, I send a text to Sadie.

Me: I'm going to be a little later. Someone is stuck and I need to help them. Go on to bed and I'll wake you when I get home.

Sadie: Okay, Daddy. Be careful.

Me: Always am, Cupcake.

I back up the trailer and truck a little, giving us some buffer so if anyone hits us, they'll hit the empty horse trailer first. After that, I get out and head back to Lark.

Out of her truck, she's trying to pull a sweatshirt over her head, but her tank top is getting soaked. "Seriously, you don't need to help me."

"Need to or not, I'm going to. Get in the truck so you don't get drenched."

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"Too late. I'll call my brothers or something."

"You didn't call them already?" I ask.

Lark huffs and wipes her wet hair off her face, then gives up on the sweatshirt and tosses it into the truck, since it wasn't doing a damn thing to help anyway. "I was going to, but then you came, and I thought you were Jeremy, but he told me he didn't want to drive in the storm..."

"Your boyfriend? You called him, and he didn't want to come out because it's *raining*?"

Her glare is sharp enough to slice, but I don't give two shits. If my woman called and needed me, I would be here. No excuses. Not a fucking thing would stop me.

Lark's voice turns defensive. "He did, but I... Whatever. I don't need to explain anything to you. My point is, I'll call my brother. It'll be fine. You can go home."

I should get back in the car, but honestly, I'm getting a little joy knowing that my helping her will just piss her asshole brothers off more. I'm already soaked to the bone—might as well stay now.

"Where's your spare?"

Her jaw grows tight. "I don't have one."

I laugh, because I can't stop it. Well, I was hoping to just change her tire and go home, kiss my daughter, and sleep for at least a few hours. Seems there's another plan at play.

"All right then, get in my truck."

Those jade eyes flash with annoyance. "I'd rather not."

"I'd rather have been home right now, tucking Sadie into bed and climbing in my own since I'm dead on my feet after driving for six hours, but I'm not leaving you on the side of the road in the pouring rain, darling. So you can get in my truck, or we'll sit here together and wait for one of your brothers to come get you."

She lets out a groan as her head falls back, rain hitting her beautiful face. "Ugh! I swear!" Lark looks back to me. "*Fine.*"

"Fine, what?"

"Fine, you can drive me home. Last thing I need is to hear Deacon's mouth about Jeremy, and at least this might show my family you *do* have a heart."

I have a heart. It just doesn't bleed for any Gatlins.

"Glad you're finally seeing sense."

She moves to my truck and climbs into the cab. I walk over to the horse trailer and start to unhitch it.

Lark's voice breaks through the storm. "What are you doing?"

I look up, water pouring off the brim of my hat. "Knitting a sweater," I yell back.

"Cute. I'm a size small."

I roll my eyes and go back to pulling the hitch.

"Tristan? Seriously, what are you doing?"

This woman is trying my patience. "I'm removing the horse trailer so I can hook up the winch to actually pull you off the road, so your truck doesn't get slammed into and...someone doesn't die."

"Good call," she replies and then closes the door.

Good call. Unreal.

"Glad you approve."

I get the trailer off and head back to the truck. I might as well have not even worn rain gear, because I'm sopping wet.

I pull forward and adjust my vehicle to face the front of her truck. My winch is mounted to the front end, and I need to pull hers forward.

Without a word, I get out, and she does the same. "What are *you* doing?" I echo her question from before.

"Helping."

"Just get dry—I've got this." I do my absolute best not to look at her soaking-wet body. The way that tight shirt clings to every curve and valley.

I do my best, but I fail.

Lark grumbles about men and stupidity before going to the winch. "Go ahead and let out the lead. I'll hook it up to my bumper."

I could argue, but I'm pretty sure it would be the equivalent of me trying to catch the rain and put it back in the sky, so I go in, grabbing the remote to the winch, and we work together. Lark does a great job securing the clip, so we won't rip off her truck's grille when I pull it. Then she gets in her truck, hopefully putting it in neutral, and flashes her lights.

Taking that as a sign she's ready, I pull so the winch is tight and start to move her as slowly as I can. Inch by inch, we get the truck to come forward enough so that it's now safely off the road. Lark hops out of her truck, disconnects the clip as I pull the winch back in, and climbs into my cab.

"Thank you," she says softly.

"You're welcome. I'll go hook my horse trailer back up, and then we can go."

She nods, and I back up to try to reconnect. I could just leave it here, but I don't want to deal with it getting stuck, which is most likely what will happen with the ridiculous rainfall we've had lately.

It takes me no time to dash outside to get it hitched, and I climb back in.

"You're soaked," I say, hating that I give away the fact I notice.

"We both are."

I reach behind her seat, grabbing my bag and pulling out a dry shirt. "Here, throw this on."

If she's covered, I won't be tempted to keep looking.

She clutches it to her chest. "I'm fine, but thank you."

"Suit yourself," I say under my breath. I lean forward, pulling my shirt off and tossing the wet clothing in the back.

She shifts, turning her body toward the window, and I smirk. I reach back behind me, grabbing another shirt and putting it on.

Before either of us can say another word, her phone rings, and she immediately answers it. "Hello? Yes. I'm fine." A pause. "I'm getting a ride with a neighbor." I snort a laugh, there's a reason she doesn't want to say my name. "I understand that, but what did you want me to do? Sit out here all night? I thought you would at least *try* to come get me." Another pause, and I can hear his voice getting louder. Lark sighs heavily. "I get that it was raining, I was stuck in it—with a flat tire and I couldn't get off the road because I was stuck in the mud."

The person I'm assuming is her deadbeat boyfriend is talking. I can't make out his words, but Lark clearly doesn't like that response, as she damn near growls: "You know what? I'm not having this conversation right now because I'm going to say something I don't mean. I'm going home, Tristan is going to drive me, and we can talk tomorrow. Good night."

She hangs up, then tosses her phone into her purse and stares out the passenger window. I remember when my wife would do that. She'd get so angry that she couldn't look at anyone, or she'd cry. I learned the best way to handle it was to let her have her time, so I don't say a word as I pull back out onto the road, heading toward the Gatlin farm.

It's been nine years. Nine years without Emmy Jo. Nine years of raising Sadie alone.

Some days it feels like yesterday. Others it's been a lifetime.

I don't even make it a quarter of a mile before she shifts in her seat. "What is wrong with men? Are you all stupid?"

"Considering you're in my truck after I just spent forty minutes in the rain helping you out, I wouldn't lump us all together."

"Fine, not all, but...seriously? He didn't even make an effort. Who does that?"

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 "Assholes," I answer.

She crosses her arms over her chest. "Clearly that's what I attract.

He was just going to leave me out there. He figured when he didn't hear from me, I called one of my brothers."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I knew what they'd say," she admits.

I can't wait to hear this one.

"Which is?"

Lark plays with the ring on her thumb. "That I should get rid of him. No one in my family likes Jeremy."

I know that feeling. My sisters date some real winners—and by *winners* I mean *fucking losers*. Guys who would undoubtedly leave them out in the rain to possibly get hit on the side of the road. I know exactly what I'd say to them as well.

"But you keep him around," I remind her. "Even though your brothers probably see something you don't."

She snorts. "Oh, now you're siding with my brothers?"

"Not even a little. I think you should marry him. Be with a guy who treats you like garbage," I lie. I may hate the Gatlins, but Lark isn't lumped in with them most of the time.

She's not out there trying to make my life hell. If there's one person who didn't get the asshole gene, it's her. Lark has always been the kind one, trying to make peace between two families who have sworn to take the other down. She was close with my wife, and I had to listen to her go on and on about how wrong I was about Lark.

"I have a hard time believing you'd give Harper, Veronica, or Fallon that advice," she says with a huff.

"My sisters don't ask me for advice."

"I wonder why. You're a veritable wealth of empathy and understanding."

I grin. "I'm glad you see what I see."

She lets out a soft giggle that causes my heart to sputter. "You know, you're not half bad for a Stone."

I'm not sure how to take that, but the way she says it, all soft and warm, makes me think she actually means it.

"And you're not half bad for a Gatlin."

I turn onto her road, and she shifts. "Well, who knew that the two of us could stand each other for even a few minutes? You can let me out here."

I glance over at her as if she's lost her fucking mind. "What?"

"Let me out here. I'll walk to the front."

"Lark, your driveway is a half a mile—at least. It's fucking pouring." As if Mother Nature needs to put an exclamation point at the end, the thunder booms and lightning fills the sky.

"Yes, and you and I both know exactly what will happen if you pull onto my property. My brothers are probably home, and really, with all the trouble you've caused my family, the last thing we need is bloodshed."

Her family is something else. They can't even put aside their hate and pride for Lark's sake. "It's dark and raining and you're worried about your brothers or parents being mad someone didn't leave you stranded?"

"No, I'm worried they would've preferred me stranded than to get help from you."

I blink. "You're serious?"

She nods. "It's just better this way. I really want to keep the fighting to a minimum."

That makes absolutely no sense. "You think they're going to be happier that I dropped you off, in the storm, a half a mile down the drive? No."

I put the car back in drive, and she reaches across, her soft hand resting on my forearm. "Please, Tristan, it's...trust me, it's better. They're not going to be mad. I promise. I'll make sure they know it wasn't your idea. Ryan has been in a mood lately—something happened to the fence again, which I'm sure you're aware of."

I tilt my head to look at her. "What does *that* mean?"

"We know it was you."

I try not to feel the change in my heart rate when her hand drops away, and I tell myself it's because she just accused me of doing something to her family's fence.

"Me?" I ask, my voice pitching a little too high. I clear my throat and bring it back to its normal baritone. "I have no idea what the hell you're accusing me of this time."

"I'm not accusing you. It's just that they spent all day trying to repair the fence, and the horses were in the wrong pasture because of it. I know you think it's funny, but it's causing us a lot of stress."

I push out the air in my lungs. "For the hundredth time, neither I nor any member of my family is doing anything to your family's fucking ranch. You know, there are other people who live in this town who don't like you."

Her jaw drops. "Who?"

"Oh, pick a name."

"The Matthewses."

Okay, they like the Gatlins. That didn't work in my favor. "Sorry, pick another."

Lark chews on her lower lip for a second. "Okay, the Yateses."

This game is not working well. "You have two families in the town that do like you. All right, here's a name. The Powells."

She gasps. "Mrs. Powell loves me. She says I'm an absolute delight."

"She doesn't say that about your dad or your brothers."

"Well, she's old and crotchety," Lark says, crossing her arms over her chest. "Anyway, you named one, and I named two. I win."

Dear God. "What do you win?"

"The knowledge that other people in this town dislike us enough to cut fence lines that don't even touch their property."

Yes, when we settled here, the generational gods were not smiling upon us when they put us next to the Gatlins.

"I bet your brothers are doing it," I say with disdain. "They're probably going out there, cutting the lines just to have some reason to come after my family. Also, how the hell could I have cut your fence when I was in Wyoming for the last day and a half?"

Lark bristles, shifting in her seat as she digests that one. I can't wait to hear this rebuttal. "We don't know when it was done, just that we found it yesterday."

"Right."

Her head falls back, and she groans. "I don't want to argue. Truly. I just... It's tense at the house, so it's better for all of us if you drop me off here. I promise I'll sing you as the hero you are."

I want to argue. I want to make sure she gets home safe and doesn't break an ankle or have some other horrible thing happen as she tries to make it back to her house, but I'm exhausted and we're getting nowhere.

"All right. I'll let you out here. Under one condition," I say quickly.

"What condition?"

"That you'll at least text me when you get in, so I know you made it."

Lark takes a moment before sighing heavily. "Okay."

"Okay."

Her hand rests on the handle, and then she stops, turning back to me. "Thank you, Tristan. I really appreciate you stopping and helping. I just wanted you to know that it means a lot to me."

The way each word feels like a shock to my heart, jolting it to come back to life, has me reeling.

I clear my throat. "You're welcome."

She smiles, and I resist the pull to say something else, but she does it anyway. "I'll let you know when I get to the house."

I nod, and she opens the door, hopping out into the rain. For some stupid reason, I speak: “Hey, Lark?”

“Yeah?”

“You should be with a man who would swim through a flood to get to you.”

Her lips part, and she blinks a few times. “Right.” She pauses and then forces a smile. “Thanks again.” She closes the door, and I see her jog down the drive, disappearing into the pouring darkness as I sit here, waiting for my chest to not feel like someone is sitting on it.

It’s been nine years. Nine years since my wife died. Nine years since I’ve felt alive, and it took one hour around Lark to suddenly feel something again.

It’s not right.

It can’t be her.

It won’t ever be Lark Gatlin.

CHAPTER TWO

LARK

AFTER THE LONGEST SHOWER I'VE EVER TAKEN, I'M LYING ON MY bed, staring up at the ceiling, waiting for some kind of divine intervention to make this one sentence stop playing on repeat.

"You should be with a man who would swim through a flood to get to you."

His deep voice. The way his brown eyes were smoldering. Yes, they smoldered as he said those words.

Tristan Stone, the man I'm supposed to hate more than anyone else, but I've never been able to.

How could I? He was always so cute. Truly, with a dimple in his right cheek, always sporting a smile, with that dark brown hair that looks tousled all the time. Tristan was sweet, especially around the woman he loved back then. It was...sweet and made him cuter.

Only now he's not cute, he's freaking off-the-charts gorgeous. He's growing out his facial hair, which, usually, I wouldn't think looks hot, but on him—it's perfect. I'm pretty sure I find him even more attractive because I'm not supposed to, but that's the whole appeal.

He's off-limits.

Then he was off the market when he married his high school sweetheart, who happened to be my best friend's sister.

Technically, he's always been off the market for me, but...a girl can dream about it, right?

And I did. Oh, so damn much.

Probably more so because of how much he loved Emmy Jo.

I wanted to find someone to look at me the way he did her. Even at the end, Tristan's eyes never left his wife. She was all sunlight and bright skies, and when she died, the world grew a little darker. I imagine if it weren't for Sadie, his entire world would've gone black.

I roll over and look at the clock.

"You should be with a man who would swim through a flood to get to you."

Well, I don't have that. I have a man who wouldn't brave the rain for me.

My phone pings, and I rush to grab it, hoping it's Tristan replying to my got home safe text, like an idiot.

Jeremy: I hope you made it home okay.

Oh, now he's worried.

Me: I did, no thanks to you.

Jeremy: I'm sorry, babe. I just don't see why you're so mad.

He doesn't see? Of course not. Jeremy is not like most of the men around here. He didn't grow up on a farm, raising horses or cattle. He does own a pair of cowboy boots, but he bought them only a few months ago when my brother started making fun of him for the sneakers he had on. He's...academic. He works as a land development engineer for his family's construction company. He makes great money, but he's not the guy I'd call if I needed help with a fence or anything that's not engineering related.

Still, Jeremy has always been sweet. He's the guy who brings flowers to your mother on your first date—which she loved. He's the one who remembers your five-month anniversary—which I loved.

He's just not the guy to come when you really need him.

More than that, I don't get that anxious feeling in my gut when I think about him.

He's safe.

He's...there.

He doesn't look at me like I'm the light in his sky.

"You should be with a man who would swim through a flood to get to you."

Ugh.

Get out of my head, Tristan Stone.

Me: The fact that you don't understand why I'm hurt is part of the issue. I'm not mad, I never was, just really hurt that I was stranded and you didn't really care. Look, I'm tired. I'm upset. I'll call you tomorrow and we can talk more.

Jeremy: So no breakfast?

Every day he comes to the farm before work. He lives alone, and my momma told him that every man should eat a hearty meal before he starts the day. So, yeah, he's here to eat the food.

Me: No. I'm sure the roads will still be a mess.

Passive-aggressive much? Yes. Do I care? Not a bit.

I go to put my phone down when it buzzes again.

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Tristan: Should I expect some sort of retribution from your family for letting you walk back?

I smile, feeling a tingle in my stomach.
I'm going to pretend it's gas.

Me: You'll be happy to know that they are completely unaware it was you who brought me back. My brothers were pretty drunk when I got in and asked no questions. Well, they asked a few, and I just explained that the tire blew, and that my dumbass brother is who took the spare out of the back, which required me to be rescued by a stranger. I reminded them that taking the damn spare out is a bad idea for reasons like this. I did tell them I called Jeremy, but he couldn't come, which they had some stuff to say about, but I stopped listening.

Probably way more than he was looking for, but whatever.

Tristan: We need to stop this.

My stomach drops at that. Stop this? What are we stopping?

Me: Umm...

Tristan: I don't like agreeing with your brothers.

I laugh and flip onto my back, staring at the phone. That seriously could've gone another way.

Me: I'm sure it can't be fun for you. Unfortunately, I think you'll soon realize we're a pretty smart family.

Tristan: Absolutely not.

Me: Could it be that all this time, the Stones were the ones who are the issue?

The response comes a second later.

Tristan: I repeat, absolutely not. It's you. I know it.

Me: Uh-huh.

God, I shouldn't have this floaty feeling texting with him. Especially not right now. Not when I have a boyfriend, I know this is stupid, and...I don't even like him.

Not really.

Not in a meaningful way.

I liked him when I was a little girl. One who didn't know anything about anything. All I was told was that Tristan was everything my brothers hated in this world. My father still won't even speak the Stone name.

So, yeah, this floaty feeling cannot exist.

Tristan: I'm glad you're all right. I'm beat and have an early morning. Night.

Me: Thanks for everything, Tristan. Good night.

I put my phone down on the nightstand, pull the covers up, and lie there, waiting for sleep to take me and hoping my dreams do not involve a Stone.

"Hey, butthead!" my youngest brother, Deacon, yells as I'm entering the riding barn.

I assume he's talking to someone else because he wouldn't be stupid enough to say that to me, so I keep going.

"Lark!"

I turn, realizing he is, in fact, that stupid. "I know you weren't calling me a butthead."

Of my four brothers, Deacon is my favorite. Also, he's the biggest asshole of the bunch. Still, there's nothing in this world he wouldn't do for me. Not that Ryan isn't the same on that front, but he's stuffy and annoying where Deacon is easygoing and affectionate. My other two brothers, Carter and Maverick, don't live in Infinity Ridge anymore. Carter joined the navy because he couldn't stand to live in Colorado, and we don't talk about Maverick.

Deacon and I have always been close. Maybe it's because we're only two years apart, while Ryan is the oldest and almost fifteen years my senior.

He's just...different.

Always serious. Always trying to make things better, even when we all know they're falling apart. He doesn't talk to us about any of his issues, he just...stews. I understand there's a lot of pressure on him to fix the ranch, but it's made being around him tough.

Deacon grins as I pause inside the largest barn on the property. This one is my favorite of them all—it's the tallest, with fifteen stalls, the hayloft, and three cupolas. "I was, but apparently not well enough that you knew it." He moves a little quicker, catching up to me. "What are you doing now?"

"I'm checking on the horses and going to exercise a few I know were overwhelmed during the storm, why?" As if they understand what that means, a few neigh, and I smile.

"Because I'm going to fuck off from my chores and wanted to see if you'd like to get into trouble."

As great as the offer sounds, there's no way I'm going to do that. With the intense rain we had, the horses need to work a bit, and I

was hoping Deacon would get the puddles—that look like freaking lakes—taken care of, since that’s what he’s supposed to do.

“No, you’re not, because you have to help me with the nasty stalls and the puddles everywhere.”

Deacon huffs, his dark brown hair puffing up with the air. “Not today, Tornado.”

I hate that stupid nickname. “Yes today, Buckaroo.” I give it right back, knowing that as much as I hate mine, Deacon hates his even more. He flips me off. “Anyway, you can’t screw off today. Ryan will throw a fit, Daddy will throw you out, and then I’ll have to throw you off Infinity Ridge if I have to muck out the stalls on my own. All in all, you lose all the way around.”

“Why do you always want to do the right thing?”

I don’t always do that. Like now, I’m lying to him and Ryan, omitting how I got back last night, and I did dream of Tristan.

Like an idiot.

I shrug and answer his question with sarcasm. “It’s a gift.”

“Return it,” he says with a laugh. “Hey, where’s your dumbass boyfriend? He didn’t come for breakfast.”

I was hoping to avoid this conversation for as long as possible. When I got home last night, my brothers were a twelve-pack deep and my parents were asleep. I got in with minimal discussion, and then this morning I explained the story to everyone with a little more detail but mostly steered it to focus on them and the tire.

All seemed well in the world thanks to a lot of omissions.

“No, I asked him not to.”

“Please tell me you finally see that he’s a fucking asshat and you’re done with him.”

I think I am, but... maybe I’m being stupid. Maybe Tristan put this stupid idea in my head and I’m reading it wrong. Jeremy isn’t that kind of a guy, but maybe that’s a good thing? I’ve dated the cowboys

in this town, and I know what they bring. It's not all sunshine and unicorns with that type of a man either.

It's why I was attracted to Jeremy. He didn't care about bronses and trucks. He didn't want me to come to the rodeo, where he could relive his failed youth as he dreamed of winning a buckle.

He's kind and funny and cares about economic impacts of trade and all the other things that I really don't care about, but being with him is easy.

"I'm not sure."

"After you told me that shit about how he said you should want more than just being a horse trainer, I wanted to kill him then, but you made me stop."

"Yes, that was just once, though," I lie. Jeremy brings it up randomly. How I could join his family's company and make more money, do something other than what everyone before me has done.

"He almost redeemed himself since he had your car towed here."

I blink, staring at him. "What?"

"Your truck. It showed up here about two hours ago."

"It did?" I ask, completely confused.

"I mean, unless that's someone else's truck that looks like yours."

Jeremy had my car towed here? I don't... That doesn't make sense. He didn't even know where the truck was, let alone know how to get it here. I mean, sure, it's not like it's a deserted road, and I'm sure if he drove past it, then he might've known it was mine, but still, that doesn't sound right.

"Right. No. I'm just...confused."

"Well, if he didn't do it, who did?"

Yeah, that's the million-dollar question, and my gut tells me that there's only one person who could've done it, and I'm sure as hell not saying his name aloud.

Tristan Stone knew where my truck was, and he definitely knows how to tow a truck.

But he wouldn't, right? He wouldn't go out of his way for...me, would he?

All I know is that it wasn't Jeremy.

"Yeah, no clue," I say, feeling even more confused and needing someone to talk my emotions through with. "Deac?" I call my brother's name carefully.

He leans against the barn wall, eyes assessing. "Yes?"

"Can I ask you something?"

My brother's brows furrow, and I can see him gearing up for this. "A woman asking that question almost always leads to trouble."

I huff and put my hands on my hips, staring into his green eyes that are at least a little contrite. "Maybe it's because men can't help but say stupid things."

"Could be, but I'm betting you're about to ask me something that's going to trigger a response you really don't want to hear."

"Probably a bit of both," I concede.

Truly, he's not going to like it, but I need a male perspective that does not come from the enemy, who might have towed my truck to me.

"Ask your question."

This is a mistake, but I'm in too deep now. "If you were dating someone and she called you needing help, would you go?"

"Of course I would."

"Even if you didn't know how to help?"

Jeremy knows nothing about trucks or mud or pulling cars out with a winch. He's more of a "call the local farmers to get them to do it" type of guy.

At that he laughs. "I know how to help."

"Oh my God," I grumble. "Seriously, like, let's say she's stuck at

a party for work, and she needs someone to get her out without a scene.”

There, my brother has never attended a work party.

Deacon grins. “If the woman I was dating said she needed me, I wouldn’t fucking care what was going on, I’d go to her. If she needed out of the party, I’d stroll in, tuck her to my side, and walk her out. There’s no situation that I wouldn’t at least try to fix. I’m sure I’d fuck it up, but that’s what you do for the person you’re with.”

I close my eyes, hating everything he said, but also knowing he’s right. I know that if Jeremy called me for help, I would’ve gone or at least tried. Deacon and Ryan would’ve tried to stop me, because it probably wouldn’t be the safest thing, but I would’ve fought and basically told them to fuck off.

Jeremy didn’t.

“I’m going to tell you something, and I swear to God, you’d better react like a normal human and listen completely.” I do my best to forewarn my brother that he isn’t going to like what I have to say, but I need him to behave—or try to.

His jaw sets and his shoulders look broader.

Great.

“Tell me.”

“I told you and Ryan that I broke down last night and the tire was flat after you idiots removed the spare.”

“Yes, thanks to you, we had to listen to a lecture from Dad for an hour this morning.”

He’s not going to make this easy on me. Not in the least.

“Okay, and you know I got a ride home—they helped me get the truck off the road because I wasn’t far enough over when I stopped, and I was stuck in the mud thanks to the downpour. Anyway, before that, I’d called Jeremy and asked him to come help me.”

Deacon's green eyes flash with anger as he starts to piece it together. "That fucking prick left you there? In the fucking storm?"

"Well, he didn't leave me since he wasn't with me, but he didn't come either."

"I'll kill him." His fists clench, and I know we're about to have a nuclear explosion if I don't quell this.

"So glad to see you're reacting like a rational human," I say, throwing my hands up.

Seriously, they wonder why I can't talk to them about things. It's because they act like idiots and go off the deep end.

"Lark, you're my sister! You don't get left on the side of the road!"

"It was storming!"

Deacon doesn't look at all appeased by that. Not that I was, either, but I really do worry he'll beat the shit out of Jeremy if he sees him again.

"I don't care if it was the great flood from the Bible! You needed help. You called your stupid-ass boyfriend, and he didn't show. Fuck him, now the truck showing up here means nothing."

"Again with the flood," I say under my breath, but apparently Deacon is in the mood to listen more than he ever has.

"What was that?"

Oops. Almost let that slip a little too far.

"Nothing," I mutter and lean against a horse stall.

"So who brought you home? Because you didn't call me or Ryan or Dad."

Aw shit. Okay, well, I'm going to be vague and then use evasive maneuvers if I have to. "A Good Samaritan stopped."

"That's nice. Who? No one just rolls through Infinity Ridge."

"Some people do," I remind him. "We do have a highway."

Deacon scoffs. "We have a road with a light, not exactly a highway."

"It's called a highway," I remind him. I'm going to stick to this for as long as I can.

It's all about misdirection. If he goes one way, I'm going another.

"Lark. You're driving me nuts." He throws his hands in the air, walking around in circles, avoiding a large puddle.

I shrug. "That's nothing new. Listen, I think...I need to break up with Jeremy. He's sweet, but...I was really hurt when I called him and he didn't do anything to help. He just suggested I call you."

My brother looks like he could smash through a wall right now. "Of course you should've called me, because I would've been in the fucking car to you in minutes. There wouldn't have been a pause. That's the kind of man you need, Lark. You...Jesus, you're the best of us, and the fact that you spent any time on the side of a road—in a storm—not knowing if help was coming has me ready to punch something."

I walk closer, taking his hand in mine and reaching up to kiss his cheek. I'm not reminding him that he wouldn't have come anyway because he was a six-pack deep, but that's semantics. "And that's why you're the best of us."

He doesn't look mollified, but he doesn't have steam coming out of his ears either.

My brother has a ton of faults—a ton—but love and sacrifice aren't things he struggles with. For the people in his life, he will do anything. He is truly a guy who would give you the shirt off his back. I've watched him do it.

To Deacon, this must be the ultimate sin.

"You're a grown woman, and I can't tell you what to do, but I suggest keeping Jeremy away from me if you don't break up with him."

"I'm going to end it."

"Good, because I might've had to end him."

I roll my eyes. "You're so dramatic. He's not bad, just not the right guy for me."

"There is no right guy for you. You're the best of us, and there isn't a man alive who is worthy of you."

"Aww, that was so sweet," I say, my heart near to bursting from that unusual show of brotherly love.

He snorts. "Yeah, yeah. I love you, Tornado."

And good feeling gone. "You had to ruin it, didn't you?"

He finally smiles and wraps his arms around me in a bear hug before releasing me. "Last one to the stalls has to muck out them all!"

He takes off and I run after him, grateful I didn't have to reveal the identity of my mystery savior.

CHAPTER THREE

TRISTAN

"I HATE PHYSICAL THERAPY," SADIE COMPLAINS AS SHE TOSSES THE paperwork with the exercises she has to do on the kitchen chair. "It's filled with stupid people who make me do stupid things."

"So is the world," I say, grabbing an apple off the counter.

"Thanks, Dad."

"You're welcome, Sadie."

She rolls her big blue eyes. "And school sucks. It's filled with more stupid people."

Ahh, to be twelve, back when your greatest worry was not liking the kids and school or failing a test. I'd happily go back to those days.

"You'll survive."

"Seriously, can't you homeschool me?"

I laugh louder than I planned. "Not a chance in hell."

Harper enters the kitchen, shoving me as she passes. Like the annoying little sister she is. "You don't want your dad to teach you anything—he's kind of stupid."

"I should've sold you in sixth grade. Jason Billings wanted to pay me ten dollars to swap siblings."

At least that would be one less Stone in the house. All the Stone siblings live on the property. In the main house are Pop, Sadie and

me, Veronica, and Harper. Fallon and my nephew, Knox, live in the converted loft in the barn. However, they're always in the main house because there is no kitchen in the loft. It's a close-knit family in more ways than one.

Harper sticks her tongue out at me. "Daddy would've beat your ass."

She's not wrong about that. "It would've been worth it if I meant I had Nick as a brother."

Harper lifts one shoulder and drops it. She twists the cap off her Diet Coke, chugs it, and then says to her niece, "Why do you hate school?"

"The boys are dumb, and they smell really bad too. Not like horse bad—I don't mind that—it's...other. Then the girls are really rude. Before school ended, Kristie told me if I could learn to walk better, maybe then the boys would like me. Then the other girls that were standing there started to laugh."

I'd like to rip this girl's head off, but she's a twelve-year-old kid, and that wouldn't be very adult of me. Even so, the father in me is raging. Sadie has done everything she could to overcome the injury to her leg. She broke it in two places when she fell, and the recovery was tough. We go to physical therapy every week, and she's made huge improvements, but still, people have to say something.

Harper goes to her and kisses the top of her head. "Auntie will kill Kristie's mommy, okay?"

"Now I'm sort of glad I kept you around," I say to my sister.

She grins and turns back to Sadie. "Listen, Kristie is clearly insecure about something and is taking it out on you. Trust me, the girls that are like that get their day of reckoning in the end."

"Was someone mean to you, Aunt Harper?"

"Yes."

"Did she get her day?"

This is a bad path we're going down, because the girl who made Harper's life an absolute horror show is married to her ex-fiancé. From all appearances, they're happy and living a good life one town over.

"She will," Harper answers.

My sister and I share a look, and I step in. "All of this sucks, Cupcake, but it does get better. Look at how far you've come with your leg."

"I want to go farther," Sadie says, and I know the argument that this is about to become.

"Sadie..." I warn, trying to use my best fatherly voice.

She crosses her arms over her chest. "No, Dad, you can't keep doing this. I'm not a little girl anymore."

That's exactly what she is. She's just refusing to accept that.

Three years ago, I almost lost her.

I will never forget that feeling. The fear, the praying, the unending bartering that I did with God just to let me keep Sadie.

Her surgery went great, but she didn't come out of anesthesia well. She had complications and an infection. It was really touch and go at one point.

I knew if she died, I would die with her. I couldn't handle losing Emmy Jo and Sadie in one lifetime.

Thankfully, I didn't have to endure that. We had a lot of tears, pain, and struggles, but with the help of my dad and sisters, we got through it.

There is just no way that I am ready for her to...risk it all again. I can't go through it. I know I can't put her in a bubble, but I sure as hell can insulate her a little.

"You're not ready to get back on that horse," I say, leaving no room for discussion.

"Everyone in this town rides, Dad. Everyone has a horse." She