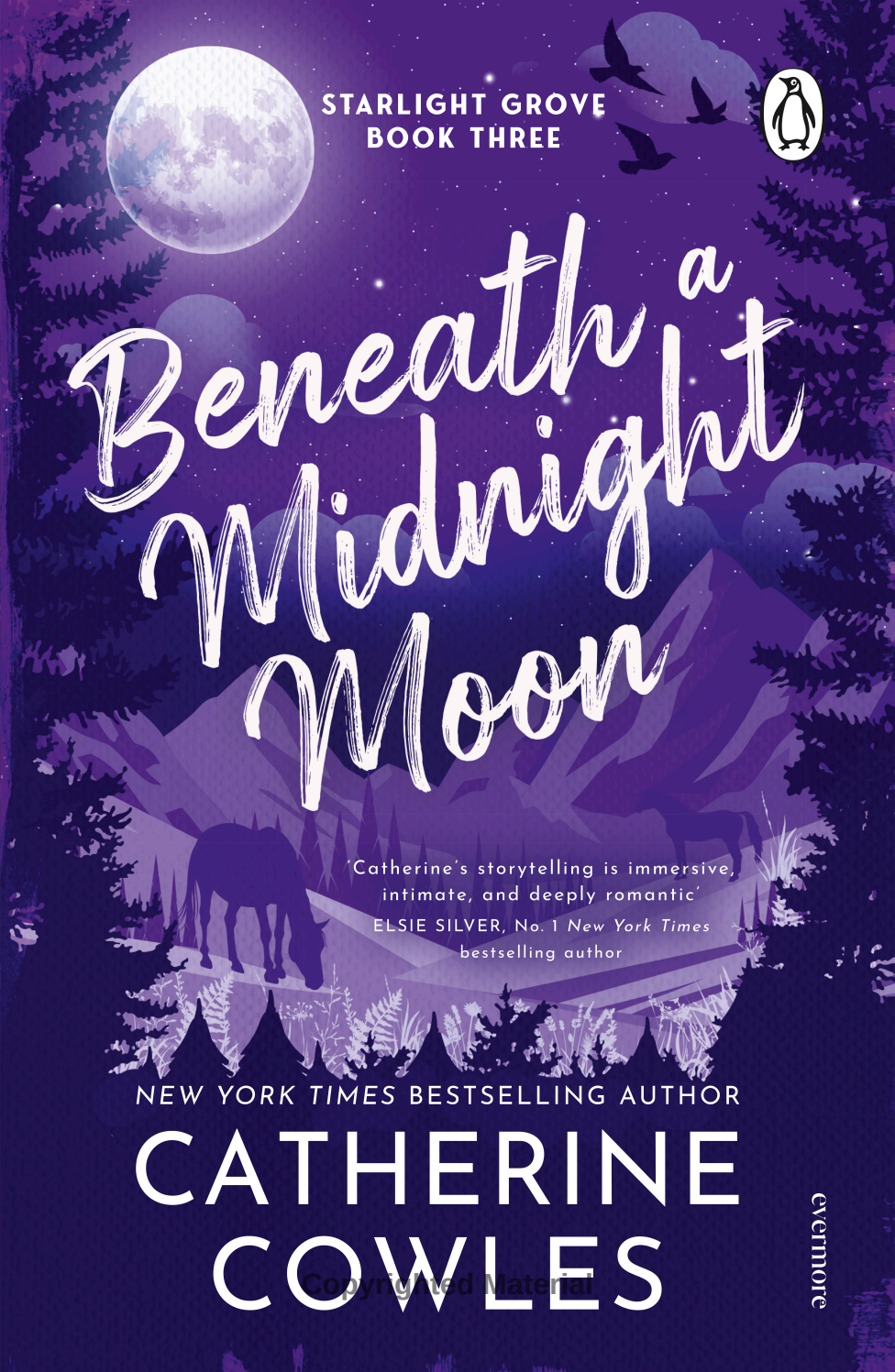




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Beneath^a
Midnight
Moon

*For all those walking through a hard season.
Sometimes, it's the toughest journeys that bring us to
exactly where we need to be. If we can just be brave enough
to share that journey with others along the way.*



Prologue

ASTER

TWELVE YEARS AGO

DO YOU THINK THERE'S ANYWHERE THE STARS ARE brighter?"

I spoke the words barely louder than a whisper, the dark gobbling them up like some sort of silent vacuum, but Maverick still heard them. He always did. It was as if he could hear things I didn't even say. Maybe because he listened so intently, or maybe because he gave me a safe place to say the things I wasn't comfortable letting slip free anywhere else.

His strong fingers flexed around my shoulder, pulling me closer to him in the bed of the truck. "I don't think there's anywhere they're more beautiful."

The whole landscape was breathtaking—the back pasture of Twisted Oak Ranch, where we could see the forests and fields, and even the pond on my granddad's ranch peeking out through the trees.

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Everything about it felt like my favorite place to be. With Maverick, most of all.

I let the heat of his body seep into mine, my eyes drifting shut for just a moment. I only allowed myself brief, stolen moments like this one when I could pretend that Maverick was more than just my confidante, my partner in crime, and my best friend. When I could pretend my father didn't hate him and his entire family with a fiery passion. Stolen moments when he was simply *mine*.

I forced my eyes open, not letting myself linger in that place where I longed for things that would never be for so many reasons.

"There's something about the stars here," I agreed, as I rubbed my cheek against the soft flannel of his shirt. It didn't matter that it was early June; the nights in Starlight Grove still got cold. Something about that tip-top Northern California mountain air.

Mav absentmindedly tangled his fingers in my hair. "Maybe because it's darker here. It means they burn brighter."

"I like thinking of it that way." Because there was darkness here. Despite the quaintness of the small town that we called home, with its adorable shops and idyllic beauty, there was always darkness. And we'd both learned the hard way that pitch-black could hide behind the tidy yards and smiling faces.

I shivered, and Maverick pulled me closer, always making sure I was okay. But as he did, I felt his wince. Heard the hiss of air between his teeth.

I instantly sat up. "What's wrong?"

Mav grimaced but shook his head. "Nothing. Come back. You're my personal heater."

A scowl twisted my lips as I tugged up his flannel and the tee beneath. Even in just the moonlight, I could see the bruises. Angry, black-and-purple mottling that I knew meant more than one blow. And I didn't miss the scars below the bruising. Or the tattoo that spanned his chest and some of his rib cage. I'd seen the scars before, knew what they were, but they never ceased to stop me in my tracks.

My fingers itched to ghost over the raised and puckered skin as if

they could magically erase all the pain that had come with them. Pain of the mind and the body.

“What happened?” I gritted out.

Mav’s hand covered mine, pulling down his shirts. “Nothing new. Ben and his goon squad got me outside the party last night.”

My scowl only deepened, both at Ben’s assholery and Maverick’s need to hit up every party graduation week had to offer. Sometimes, it felt like he was determined to swallow up everything life put in front of him. Like if he missed one tiny thing, he’d cease to exist.

I bit the inside of my cheek, feeling the sting of my teeth against the flesh. “What was it this time?”

Maverick shrugged, shoving up to sitting and leaning against the cab of his truck. “The usual. Doesn’t want my serial killer blood tainting his town.”

Anger flooded my system, making my face flush so hot it felt like my cheeks were burning. “You need to tell someone.”

Maverick stared back at me, those dark-hazel eyes going the same inky black as the forest around us. “Tell them what? That he spoke the truth?”

Anger swirled with worry, creating a riotous stew. “You’re not your father.”

Pain swept across Mav’s face, digging grooves that spoke of things far beyond his eighteen years. “He’s in me.”

I moved on instinct, placing my hand on his chest and pressing my palm hard against the spot over his heart. The beats came faster than normal, more erratic. “You’re nothing like him. You are good. Kind. Caring. He has nothing to do with you.”

I couldn’t imagine all Mav and his four older brothers had been through. He’d only talked about it a handful of times since coming to live with his great-uncle Waylon in Starlight Grove seven years ago, when he’d arrived still recovering from injuries at the hand of his father—a man they’d discovered had killed thirty-six women and nearly one of his sons.

Much of the town hadn’t been pleased about their arrival—my parents included. Others became obsessively fascinated by the Archer

brothers, wanting to know every gruesome detail. But me? All I could think about was the emptiness in the eyes of the boy who sat two rows over from me in class.

Maverick's hand covered mine, pressing it harder against his chest as if he were trying to permanently meld us together. "You don't know. Maybe a switch will flip someday, and I'll want to hurt people, too."

Pain swept through me. I wanted to burn out every doubt Mav had, shine light on every demon. "Do you really think that?"

His gaze drifted to the left, toward the forest, the place he'd escape to when he needed to breathe. "I don't know what I think."

"Mav," I whispered.

Those haunted eyes came back to me.

"I see you. All of you," I said. "The good and the bad. The light and the dark."

A hint of fear edged into his expression, the muscles around his mouth tightening.

"You're impulsive. Sometimes, downright reckless. But there is nothing in you that wants to hurt others. The only thing you want to do is help: fix a broken tractor on the ranch, help a mama cow give birth, make sure no one you care about is alone when they need you."

"You sound so sure." His voice grew rough, as though his throat were strangling each word.

"I am. Because you shine that light on me." And there was nothing like basking in the glow of Maverick. No other high could touch it.

"Rebel." He lifted a hand to cup my cheek, the roughened pad of his thumb gliding over the apple of it.

I tried to grab hold of every sensation, burn it into my brain so I'd never lose it. His nickname for me ghosted over my skin, and I tried to hold tight to that, too. The moniker he'd given me from the moment I'd snuck onto the Archers' ranch, trying to catch a glance of the infamous boys.

"Gotta be a rebel if she's brave enough to steal away over here. I say we keep her."

And they had, in a way. *He* had.

Maverick's body shifted, leaning closer to me. My breath caught,

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lungs seizing at the what-if. My mind went wild, wondering if maybe, just maybe, this was the moment I'd imagined ever since I no longer believed boys had cooties.

He was so beautiful, staring at me in the moonlight, his dark-brown hair a little wild...just like him. Those haunted eyes were so captivating, even with the ghosts that lived there—maybe partly because of them.

His gaze dipped to my lips, tracing their curve and swell. My heart hammered against my ribs, and blood roared in my ears. I wanted to know what it was like to have Mav's mouth pressed against mine. To know what he tasted like. To feel the heat that always seemed to engulf him.

I leaned forward ever so slightly, but Mav didn't miss it. He never missed anything about me. He closed the distance, moving slowly, giving me every chance to stop him. I knew I should—for so many reasons.

But I didn't.

Instead, I played with fire.

Maverick's mouth eased over mine, all heat and gentle pressure. And my body felt like a live wire, sparking to life with an energy I'd never felt before. His fingers slipped into my hair as his tongue slid into my mouth.

He tasted like oranges. Oranges and a hint of something earthy I couldn't name. But my body recognized it as everything I'd ever wanted.

I moved into him, instinct taking over. It didn't matter that I'd only kissed one boy before this: Gabe Jensen in a stupid *seven minutes in heaven* dare. My body knew what it wanted. More Maverick.

Only Maverick.

I let out a tiny mewling noise, a vibration that swept from my mouth to his. Maverick reacted instantly, lifting me onto his lap so I could straddle him. His tongue drove deeper, and my hips rocked against him.

Mav let out a moan, only spurring me on. I wanted more. I wanted...everything.

A ringing sound broke through the buzzing in my ears. Not a phone call, I realized—an alarm. I tore my mouth from Mav’s and grabbed my phone, a curse slipping free.

Maverick’s lips twisted in that lopsided grin I loved so much. “Aster Carrington, as I live and breathe. Did you just drop an F-bomb?”

I glared at him as I silenced my alarm. “I curse sometimes.”

He arched a brow.

“Occasionally. When the situation calls for it.”

That grin only grew. “And now calls for it?”

I let out a huff of breath. “I have to go home.”

It was Mav’s turn to scowl. “We’re going to college in a couple of months, and your dad still insists on a curfew?”

My lips thinned. “You know how he is.”

Maverick shook his head. “He’s an asshole.”

My mind filled in other descriptors.

Controlling. Manipulative. Brutal.

“I don’t want to push him,” I said quietly. It was a delicate dance as it was, getting him to let me go to UC Davis instead of Vassar like he wanted. If he’d known Mav would be there, too, he might not have been so understanding.

Mav’s hands moved to my hips, squeezing gently. “You can’t let him control you.”

“It’s complicated.” And that was the world’s greatest understatement. Christian Carrington was always playing chess, while the rest of us were playing checkers.

“Camilla can’t cover for you?” Mav pressed.

I shot him a look that encompassed how ridiculous it was to think my twin sister would help me with anything. As identical as we were in appearance, we were the complete opposite in every other way. “She’ll dance a jig if I’m late and make sure my dad knows by exactly how many minutes.”

“How your sister is such a bitch is beyond me,” he muttered.

Maverick might not understand it, but I did. My dad grew it in her, nurtured it with his own cruelty. And because I could see that, I could never bring myself to hate her. If anything, I felt sorry for her.

A *ding* sounded, and I worried it might be Dad even now, checking on my whereabouts. But my phone screen was empty.

Mav swiped up his cell, unlocking it. "It's Sean. Wants to know where I am."

"See?" I said softly. "You have places to be, too." Another night, another party. The thought of it twisted my stomach, especially when there was so much unsaid between us.

Maverick dropped his phone, his hands coming up to frame my face. "The only place I want to be is with you."

My heart gave a riotous tumble and twirl. "Okay."

He stretched up, brushing his lips against mine. "Okay. We'll talk tomorrow."

My pulse thrummed, making blood whoosh in my ears. Would that be a good *talk*? Or a this-was-a-mistake talk? It had to be the former. That organ in the center of my chest did another dip and roll. "Tomorrow," I promised.

Maverick pressed his forehead to mine. "Let's get you home."

I climbed off Mav's lap, even if it was the last thing I wanted to do. "I'm gonna take the shortcut," I said as I slid off the tailgate of his truck.

He moved to follow me. "Rebel, it's pitch-black. Let me drive you."

I made a face. "It's right next door."

Twisted Oak Ranch, home to the Archers, butted up against my grandfather's ranch, Moonridge Meadow. The place that had always been my refuge—except for the ten acres he'd given my father and the ostentatious house Christian Carrington had built, which didn't fit with the rest of the place. The house that had never felt like a home.

Maverick frowned. "He'll be mad if I drop you off."

It wasn't a question. It was a sad reality. Still, I offered, "Two more months, and we're at college. Two more months, and it won't matter."

Mav's fingers wove through mine. "Two more months."

His words felt like a vow, and I held on to them with everything I had.

My phone sent out another reminder.

"I gotta go."

"Text me when you get home. I want to know you got there safe."

He always did.

I simply nodded as I jogged to the fence, hopping over it and onto the bike I'd left there. I took the makeshift trail across Moonridge Meadow Ranch. The horses were in for the night, but I could still make out the silhouettes of the cattle illuminated by the moonlight. It was comforting somehow, knowing I wasn't alone, even in the darkness.

My hair flew behind me as I pedaled harder, trying to channel the energy of all the reckless mountain biking and rock climbing Mav favored. I raced past two massive barns, the bunkhouse, the foreman's house, a few guesthouses, and Granddad's sprawling place that somehow still felt homey.

In a matter of minutes, I saw the glow of the Victorian-style house Dad had built. Everything about it was fancy and ornate—but somehow fake, too. Because it wasn't actually old with character and endless stories. Nothing about it said *family ranch*. It was all formal stiltedness.

I jumped off my bike, hurrying to store it in the equally ornate garage. I had two minutes to spare. I quickly typed out a text.

Me: *Home.*

The reply was instant.

Maverick: *Miss you already.*

My body warmed as I headed into the house. Not even the coldness of this place could chill me now. I moved as quietly as possible. It was better not to be noticed. Flying under the radar was always better.

It had gotten easier over the past few months, as my parents spent more time in Santa Barbara, where my dad had opened a financial planning office. It was the perfect job for him, helping the rich get richer. Now, he was rarely in Starlight Grove.

But whenever he was, it felt like an infinite number of invisible mines had been placed under the floorboards of the house. One wrong move, and everything would detonate.

I crept through the kitchen, listening for something, anything. There was no crackle of a fire in the fireplace, no hum of some news program on the TV, no clink of glasses. I let out a breath.

But I shouldn't have.

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“Aster.”

His voice cracked like a whip, making my spine snap straight and every muscle in my body turn to stone.

I forced myself to swallow, to breathe. Turning slowly, I took in the man sitting in the near dark of the library. There was only the glow of a reading lamp, illuminating a newspaper and a lowball of bourbon sitting on the side table by the leather chair.

Sometimes, I felt like I didn’t recognize the man who’d raised me: the dark hair gone silver at the temples, the lines bracketing his mouth, the glasses that did nothing to hide the coldness in his eyes.

Nothing about our appearance was similar. His hair was so dark it was almost midnight. Mine, a pale blond. His eyes were amber, and mine were so pale blue they were nearly translucent. Even Camilla’s were darker than mine—still light blue but more pigmented. She always said mine were like zombie eyes. But most of our shared appearance came from our mother. We had none of our father’s dark features.

My throat constricted as he rose from his chair. “Sir,” I greeted, using the address he preferred. No *Dad* or *Daddy*. Not even *Father*.

His gaze scanned my face, then the rest of me, as if looking for evidence. “Where were you?”

My pulse thrummed in my neck. “Riding my bike.”

Not a lie. That was the key. Never give an untruth. He could read them.

He scoffed. “In the dark.”

I shrugged. “The moon’s nearly full, and it’s finally cool.”

My father’s gaze narrowed. “Why do I feel like you’re lying, Aster?”

My airway tightened, making it nearly impossible to breathe, let alone speak.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway. “I know where she was.”

There was such glee in my sister’s voice—pure joy at giving our father every piece of ammunition he needed. Maybe it was that she was still making up for the stunt she’d pulled junior year, running off to LA for a month and getting caught up with a rough crowd. She’d done thirty days in rehab before she was allowed home.

And our father had been solely focused on her misery for months after. He and my mother had made up a story about an eating disorder, but even that had cost them. As if they couldn't stand the thought of any child of theirs being less than perfect.

"She was with Maverick Archer," Camilla finished, the joy in her words only intensifying.

Panic set in. My forearms cramped to the point of pain as my hands curled into fists.

My father's head swiveled slowly, away from my sister and toward me. There was nothing on his face. No fury or disappointment. Only emptiness. And that scared me more than rage ever would.

But Camilla? She grinned. Maybe facing so much of our father's cruelty had made her this way. Perhaps it was because she so badly wanted a break from his focus that she *reveled* in the times when I caught it.

It could've been because I was usually so good at flying under the radar. A 4.1 GPA. Always completed my chores. Never missed a curfew. Bit my tongue so hard it bled when I wanted to speak out.

Maverick was my only weakness.

And now, it had caught up with me.

"Is that true?" Dad's voice was deceptively calm. But I knew better than to lie to him.

"Yes."

A muscle fluttered beneath his eye. The only tell.

"Camilla, leave us."

My twin's smile only widened. "Of course, sir. Can I get ice cream with Edison?"

The last thing she was going to do with her boyfriend was get ice cream at ten o'clock at night, but I swallowed my words like always.

"Sure," Dad said, his gaze flicking to her. "Because you show good judgment in your company."

Camilla preened under his praise. "Thank you, sir."

She didn't wait. She ran for the front door. It was a smart move and didn't leave room for our father to change his mind, which he did often and on a dime.

There was a time when Camilla and I had been allies. I had brief snatches of memory of us hiding from our father when he was in one of his *moods* or jumping to each other's defense. Not anymore.

Now, I was alone with the monster. Mom was rarely around in the evening hours unless she needed to give a command performance. She would take a pill and tune out the world, slipping away from her bleak reality and into a Xanax-fueled haze. I didn't blame her in some ways. But in others, I held her wholly responsible. Because she *knew*. And yet, she stayed. Forced *us* to stay.

My father folded his hands in front of him. "I told you that I didn't want you spending time with that boy."

I didn't speak, simply cast my gaze downward.

"Yet you disobeyed me."

It wasn't a question, but this time, I knew he demanded an answer. "Yes, sir."

"You're so smart in so many ways, yet stupid enough to get mixed up with trash."

My head jerked up. "He's not trash."

A flash of anger—rage—streaked across Dad's face. "His father slaughtered over three dozen women, and you want to tie his name to ours? *Carrington* means something in this town. And I will *not* have you sully it."

The backhand came so fast and fierce I didn't have a prayer of stopping it. His knuckles hit me right in the mouth, the lips that had, just minutes ago, buzzed from Maverick's kiss. Now, the coppery taste of blood bloomed.

I stumbled back a step from a mix of shock and the force of the actual blow. My father had never hit me in the face before. I'd gotten about a dozen blows to the torso over the years and had been forced to kneel on rice on the floor for two hours when I broke a prized vase at the age of nine. I'd even been made to sleep on the floor with nothing more than a blanket when I spoke out of turn at one of the dinners where Dad had hosted business associates.

He liked his creative punishments, rarely stooping to physical

violence—it was a last resort. But I could see it now: the glassy eyes, hair askew. He was drunk. And his restraint was gone.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

I swallowed more words. Let the blood from my split lip fill my mouth. I didn’t tell him that Maverick Archer was the best thing to ever happen to me. That he provided me with the only place I felt safe, the only place I truly felt like myself. I pulled it all inside of me and held it close. A silent vow.

My dad stalked toward me. “You’re not sorry. You’re a lying little slut. Probably spreading your legs for that killer filth. And I won’t stand for it.”

The punch took my breath and sent me crumpling to my knees. I’d barely sucked in a wheezing breath before his loafer-clad foot connected with my ribs. I swore I felt the crack before the blazing, white-hot pain engulfed me.

Spots danced in front of my vision as a second kick landed, this time somewhere around my kidneys. Blow after blow until one connected with my head, and everything went blissfully black.

Hazy images passed. The art on the staircase. The ornate runner in the hall. The gingham checkerboard of my duvet. But none of them lasted. The darkness claimed me again.

When I woke, it was dark, and my cheek was pressed to the carpet in my bedroom.

Confusion swamped me, but the moment I tried to move, the memories surged, bringing the pain right along with them. Everything hurt. Even my toes.

My phone dug into my hip like a tendril of hope. I forced myself onto my back, letting out a whimper of pain as I did. Breathing through my nose, I hoped I wouldn’t throw up. In a few minutes, the worst had passed.

I moved slowly, tugging at the cell in my pocket and finally pulling it free. The screen was blurry. *Concussion*? It didn’t matter. There was only one person I could call. One person I trusted to help. One person who might be able to get me out without anyone else knowing.

My fingers fumbled over the screen until I reached Maverick's contact.

It rang and rang and rang until the voicemail picked up.

I hit *end* and called again. More ringing and voicemail.

Again.

Ringing and voicemail.

Hot tears flooded my eyes, spilling out and down my temples, into my hair. I managed to type two words. *Need you.*

But it didn't matter how long I waited. He didn't come. And as the familiar figure stepped into my room, head shaking, letting out a tsking sound, that was the moment I found out my hurt was far worse than lies and broken promises. It was more than that. It was betrayal. At the hands of my best friend. And it was when I learned the most valuable lesson of all.

The only person I could count on was myself.



Chapter One

MAVERICK

PRESENT DAY

YOU ALL ARE THE SORRIEST SONS OF BITCHES I HAVE EVER seen in my three decades on the job,” Chief Parker called out across the parking lot at the edge of the picturesque park.

“Sons and *daughter* of bitches,” Tabby called as she jumped up from a burpee.

Chief scowled at her. “Ten more, thanks to the smart-ass over here.”

“My abs are going to murder you,” Nick snarled in her direction, his dark-brown hair slicked down with sweat.

“Your abs need it,” she shot back. “You’re starting to get a beer gut.”

I snickered. “She’s not wrong, buddy. Ever since you shacked up with Diana, you’ve gone soft.”

“Not me,” Logan managed between heaved breaths. “Abs of steel.”

“Too bad it’s accompanied by a douchebag personality,” Tabby wheezed.

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Sean and I both barked out a laugh at that one.

"Traitors," Logan hissed, narrowing the blue eyes he used to his advantage with every woman he came across.

"Hey," Chief barked. "If you can laugh and talk, you're obviously not working hard enough. Double time for a minute."

Everyone groaned at that. And when he blew his whistle, we collapsed onto the pavement. While it was only March, the sun was out in full force, and I was drenched after our three-mile run.

But I didn't care. This was simply the pain required to get to the other side. That other side being a current member of the Starlight Grove Fire Department, my employer for about eight months out of the year. The other four were spent working for the U.S. Forest Service as a smokejumper, parachuting into the worst, most isolated forest fires. There wasn't anything I wanted to do more.

Maybe it was helping people, maybe it was the adrenaline rush when I walked into flames instead of running away, but I couldn't imagine doing anything else. I just had to get through the training Chief liked to put us through at regular intervals throughout the year—training that often ended with us heaving into trash cans at one point or another.

"Why do I feel like this gets harder every year?" Sean moaned, laying an arm over his eyes to shield them from the sun.

"You're just getting old, Grandpa," Logan chided.

Sean was a year above Logan, Nick, and me in school, and we never failed to remind him that he was gonna go gray before the rest of us.

Tabby grinned as she sat up and grabbed her water. "So glad I have both youth and beauty."

At four years our junior, with freckles and a pixie cut, Tabitha Hanson was equal parts shit-stirrer and Tinker Bell.

Logan flipped her off. "We know the only real beauty around here is Mav."

I flicked invisible locks over my shoulder. "I'm so glad you noticed."

"Hey, assholes," Chief called. "Stop yammering and start your wall sits."

"Fuck," Nick muttered. "Who pissed in his Cheerios today?"

Sean poured a little water over his head of close-cropped black

hair as we crossed to the outer wall of the park's office and bathrooms. "I heard he found out Clover Creek has a weeklong boot camp every year. Got jealous."

I scrubbed a hand over my face as I winced. "He's the most competitive asshole I know. He once got into a brawl over a game of quarters *without* the alcohol."

"We're all gonna be paying the price for him finding out that little tidbit," Sean said, shaking his head.

"I said wall sits." Chief's voice boomed across the parking lot.

Everyone picked up their pace. We scattered along the cinder-block wall, taking seated positions against it without the support of a chair.

"I wanna see ninety degrees," Chief ordered. "No cheats."

Darren grimaced next to me, his red hair and pale complexion only making his strain more evident. "My knees don't wanna do this shit no more."

It was the wrong thing to say.

Chief strode toward him, bending down and getting right in his face. "And what happens when you gotta carry some bastard down three flights of stairs when everything's burning around you?"

Sweat poured down Darren's brow. "I'm gonna give him to Mav. He's young and dumb. He can handle it."

"The *real* gramps is showing his age and his cantankerous attitude," I shot back, my muscles starting to burn.

Darren only grinned at me. "Not afraid to sacrifice."

"Brutal," I murmured.

I couldn't help but keep an eye on him, though. He'd cracked fifty this year, and this sort of thing got harder and harder on the body. Not to mention the fact that fifty-seven—and mandatory retirement—was around the corner.

"Let's make it interesting, boys," Chief called out.

"And girl," Tabby singsonged.

He waved a hand. "And girl."

Tabby just grinned. She *loved* giving him shit.

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“Whoever lasts the longest has no cleaning duties for the next two weeks.”

Logan let out a hoot as he shook sweat from his blond hair, a dimple popping in his cheek. “No question, I got this. Not cleaning a damn bathroom after you pricks drop bomb after bomb in there.”

A series of snickers passed through the group.

“No way,” I shot back. “My ass is so tight you could bounce a quarter off it.”

Sean’s lips twitched. “You been working that second gig at the strip club again?”

“Please,” I clipped. “Bachelorette parties only. I’m classy like that.”

Tabby snorted. “I’d pay you to keep your clothes *on*.”

“That hurts, Tabs.”

She just rolled her eyes.

“We’re past the two-minute mark. We’re playing for honor and to not have to clean up Nick’s shit stains,” Chief boomed.

Nick flipped him off, but I didn’t miss the wince on his face.

Darren dropped first, shoving off the wall and walking in circles as he panted. One by one, my squad members fell away until it was just me, Nick, Tabby, and Logan.

“I could do this all damn day,” Tabby singsonged.

“That’s because you’re about a hundred pounds soaking wet,” Nick clipped.

She glared at him. “Can still carry you and your beer gut.”

And she could. She was small, but she could likely kick the ass of most everyone on our team.

“Aw, hell. Cramp.” Nick shoved up and off the wall, rubbing at the back of his thigh.

Logan chuckled. “That’s karma.”

Nick flipped him off, too.

Logan looked at me and Tabby. “And then there were three.”

Tabby was great at keeping a poker face, but I saw the way her thighs were trembling. It wouldn’t be long before she dipped out.

Thirty seconds later, she simply slid to the pavement. “Dammit. Next time, I’m burying you both.”

I shot her a grin. "At least you kicked Nick's ass."

"I heard that," he called from the water refill station.

"I meant for you to." I turned my head to look at Logan, farther down the wall. "Givin' up yet?"

He merely placed his hands behind his head and smiled like he could do this all day. "You're gonna be cryin' tomorrow when you gotta bend down and clean the shitter."

I snickered. "That's gonna be you when Chief has you bleaching the grout in the showers. But maybe you can toss a little in your hair, save yourself a trip to the salon."

Logan narrowed his eyes at me. He took comical pride in his blond locks, keeping them as long as he could without getting dinged for breaking a regulation. "This is natural, sun-kissed beauty right here. And your jealousy's showing."

I barked out a laugh. "Apologies, golden god."

"I don't know," Tabby teased. "Mav's got that whole dark-and-mysterious thing going on. Could have you beat, Lo."

"Betrayal," he hissed.

My quads and glutes burned, and I knew I wouldn't last much longer. I glanced over at Logan and saw the strain on his face, too. Just a few more seconds.

My legs gave way at the exact moment Logan's did, sending us both collapsing to the ground.

We lay on the pavement, chests heaving and breathing ragged.

"That was a tie, right, Chief?" Logan asked. "We both get off cleanup?"

A towering form I knew even by its shadow leaned over us. Chief Parker had put in decades on the job, and it showed in his graying hair and scruff. He was equal parts asshole and teddy bear. Although he was only showing the former today.

"No winner, no one off cleanup," he growled. "Show 'em what they do get, boys."

A second later, someone dumped an entire cooler full of ice water over us both.



“Play it again,” Tabby cheered, her hand wrapped around a beer as a few of our squad members filled the spots around a table at my brother’s bar.

My eldest brother, Wylder, had owned the Boot for almost a decade now. At first, we’d all been concerned. Spending every day in a bar when you were working to maintain sobriety hadn’t seemed like a good idea, but Wy always said that sometimes you had to look your demons in the face to deal with them.

As I took him in, busy behind the bar, a carefully blank mask on his face, I wondered if that was still true. He moved as if on autopilot, filling draft beers and making mixed drinks alike. But his dark hazel eyes, the same color all five of us Archer brothers had—the same color we shared with our father—were unfocused. It was as if he were a million miles away.

And that worried me.

“Look at your fuckin’ face,” Nick said, shoving the phone in front of me.

It was the same video they’d played half a dozen times already: Logan and me, getting drenched.

I shoved my chair back. “You know, they say ice baths are good for the skin, so I’m just glowing.”

Sean chuckled, shaking his head. “You need your head examined.”

He wasn’t wrong there, even if he didn’t mean it that way. But the idea of letting anyone into the fucked-up place that was my brain was terrifying.

“Anyone need another round?” I asked.

Logan lifted his glass. “I’ll take one.”

“More pale, watery stuff for the pale ass—got it.”

He sent me a comical glare in return.

Usually, I’d laugh, but I couldn’t quite muster it today. I wove through the happy-hour crowd toward the bar, taking in the expert

woodwork Wylder had painstakingly restored, and nearly collided with a familiar face.

Nova's gray eyes shone as she grinned up at me. Stretching up onto her tiptoes, she pressed her lips to my cheek. "You don't call, you don't write. The only proof I have that you're still alive is Sky telling me she shot you with Nerf darts."

I chuckled. "Sorry about that, Supernova. Gettin' into busy season."

"You mean we're getting into mountain biking, rock climbing, BASE jumping, and anything-else-that-defies-death season?" she challenged.

My lips twitched. "Takes one to know one."

Nova let out a husky laugh at that, and it was damn good to hear. She'd been through the wringer, having been held captive by a monster for an entire year. And when she was finally free, the monster's accomplice became dead set on making her life a living hell.

It was only thanks to my brother Kol that she was still breathing. But it worked both ways. They'd saved each other. And now, they were building a family together and giving my niece, Skylar, what she'd always deserved.

Nova's hand went to her hip. "I'll have you know I tackled a double-black-diamond trail without a single spill yesterday."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Just don't tell Kol. He already blames me for introducing you to those mountain-biking trails."

My second-eldest brother put the definition of *overprotective* to the test.

Nova just laughed. "Too late. He came with."

I arched a brow at that. "You got Kol to go mountain biking?"

She grinned wider. "He's doing pretty dang good."

"I need to see it to believe it." My gaze moved behind Nova to the bar as Wylder passed drinks to a couple I didn't recognize. "How is he?"

Nova didn't have to turn around to know who I was talking about. "Still quiet. I'm trying to give him time."

I wasn't sure time was the ticket for Wylder. Not when he'd been falling for the woman who'd helped murder countless people and terrorized his soon-to-be sister-in-law. At some point, he might need an

intervention. He already carried too much on his shoulders. I worried this might take him over the edge.

Reaching out, I gave Nova's shoulder a squeeze in silent understanding, then moved toward the bar.

Wylder didn't miss my arrival. Most days, he would've come out from behind the bar to say hello and shoot the shit, but not today. I gave him a once-over. The dark scruff covering his jaw was thicker now, and I didn't miss the dark shadows, both beneath his eyes and in them.

"Hey, man," I greeted.

Wylder simply lifted his chin. "Heard you got doused today."

I glared at my brother. "Nick needs that phone tossed in a lake."

"It was Tabby, actually." Wylder's mouth fluttered as if he were trying to smile but couldn't quite get his mouth to cooperate.

"She's tiny, but she's vicious," I muttered.

"Better not cross her," Wy warned.

I held up both hands. "I have no plans to."

"Need another round?" he asked.

"Lo wants another of that pale shit he drinks, but I'll just take a Coke."

Wylder arched a brow in question.

"Gonna go for a ride after this," I explained.

Wylder moved with practiced ease, not even watching as he filled the pint glass. "Which bike?"

One corner of my mouth tugged up. "The one with the engine."

"Be careful," he said as he handed me two glasses.

"Always am." I paused. "You wanna come?"

Wylder had a Triumph Bonneville that got minimal use these days. But maybe if we rode out somewhere, stopped in all the quiet that the land around Starlight Grove had to offer, he'd finally talk to me.

He shook his head. "Gotta work. Still down a waitress." His mouth tightened into a firm line the moment the second set of words came out.

Down a waitress that Wy had hired. The one who'd turned out to be a killer. The one I was sure Wylder blamed himself for not recognizing, just as he blamed himself for not realizing what our father was.

"Just shoot me a text if you change your mind," I offered.

He nodded but didn't say another word.

As I turned to head back to the table, an invisible fist wrapped around my rib cage. One that made it damn hard to breathe—because my brother was struggling, and he wouldn't let any of us in.

I took two steps and nearly tripped on nothing at all. Because there she was.

It didn't matter that I'd seen her at least weekly for most of the year or that I'd been seeing a hell of a lot more of her now that she'd befriended two of my brothers' fiancées. I'd never get used to catching even a glimpse of Aster Carrington.

If worry about Wylder was an invisible fist making it hard to breathe, Aster was a blow that meant I lost hold of oxygen altogether. But I couldn't stop myself from staring, trying to memorize every damn thing about her.

Maybe it was because I knew that, in a couple months, I'd be disappearing into the smokejumper station a few towns over and wouldn't see her for weeks on end. Maybe it was simply because she still haunted my every breath.

I reveled in the torture of looking at her, even knowing it was the last thing I should do. Her light-blond hair hung in loose waves around her shoulders with some sort of thin braid around the top of her head like one of those headbands. Everything about her was a hypnotizing juxtaposition.

A floral blouse tucked into wide-leg jeans said she was just like you and me but with a professional air. The turquoise jewelry at her neck said she couldn't resist a little something extra. But it was the boots that peeked out from under her pant legs that told a story.

Dusty and scarred from years of helping out at her grandfather's ranch—the place she still called home. One that taunted me because it was so damn close. Those boots said she might look like beauty and grace, but she wasn't afraid of hard work.

My gaze lifted to Aster's face as she talked to my crew at the table, and I forced my feet to move. Looking at that face was the most painful thing of all. Fair skin that only got the faintest tan glow in the

summer. Cheeks with a permanent rosy hue. And those eyes. The palest of blue. Ghost eyes.

That's what I'd come to call them. Because that's what she was to me: a ghost who never stopped haunting me.

That ghost gaze collided with mine, and the shutters went up. I wasn't allowed to see what was truly in them anymore. And that killed me.

The pain only spurred a flicker of anger at what she'd stolen from me: the one place I'd truly felt at home, where I'd felt peace.

I set the beer down in front of Logan, not looking away from Aster. "Ice Queen," I greeted.

"Satan," she returned. "I thought the temperature was turned up in here. I should've known a demon was in our presence."

Nick snickered, and I resisted the urge to smack him.

I sent Aster my best cocky grin. "Pretty sure it's my general level of hotness you're feeling right now."

A scowl twisted her beautiful face. "You know, it's amazing your head even fits through the door of this place."

Logan leaned back in his chair. "You tell 'em, Firecracker."

I glared at one of my best friends. The fact that he'd given her a nickname ground at me.

Sean shoved back his chair and stood, moving to give Aster a hug and making that green-eyed monster breathe fire. "How the hell are you?"

She sent him a soft smile as they broke their hug. He'd always been her favorite of my friends. Maybe because he was the gentlest or perhaps because she knew he'd been through some of his own dark battles—losing his little sister to a house fire when she was only thirteen. Aster had always been drawn to the broken ones; that was likely how she'd ended up befriending me. But apparently, I was too broken even for her, and she'd thrown me away in the end.

"I'm good," Aster told him as he sat back down. "Busy. Gonna be calving season soon, and the practice is hectic."

She'd opened the first private mental health clinic in Starlight

Grove—one she shared with a psychiatrist. Yet again, tending to those with broken wings.

Nick popped a fry into his mouth. “How’s Boone doing?”

Aster shook her head, one corner of that perfect mouth kicking up. “Working too hard and being too damn stubborn.”

“What’s new?” I muttered, knowing her grandfather needed to start ceding the reins to his foreman. He was pushing himself too hard.

Those ghost eyes narrowed on me. “He could teach you a little something about hard work, Satan. You know, showing up when you’re supposed to. Not taking off to chase whatever high you’re working on next.”

I hid how every word felt like a damn gut punch and instead forced a wide grin. “Jealous that I know how to live and you’re stuck in whatever drill-sergeant schedule you think will get you an A-plus and extra credit? Spoiler alert, Ice Queen, we’re not in high school anymore.”

“I think it’s you who needs that particular reminder,” she clipped. Her gaze dipped to my friends. “My condolences on having to deal with that one on a daily basis.”

And with that, she turned on her heel and left.

Nick let out a low whistle but couldn’t disguise the hint of a grin curving his mouth. “That might be a new burn record.”

I flipped him off as I lowered myself into my chair.

Tabby leaned back, looking over at me. “When are you going to tell us what actually happened between you two?”

I wished I *could* tell them. But I didn’t have a damned clue. It was like Aster Carrington had simply erased herself from my life the night I kissed her. There were times I thought I’d imagined it all. But then I’d dream, reliving those precious moments over and over when darkness came, and knew I hadn’t imagined them.

Just like I knew they’d haunt me for the rest of my days.



Chapter Two

ASTER

MY FINGERTIPS TINGLED AS I WALKED AWAY FROM Maverick and his friends, his words echoing in my head.

"Jealous that I know how to live?"

"Spoiler alert, Ice Queen, we're not in high school anymore."

I shook out my hands, trying to keep them from cramping. I knew what it was, could easily define it, thanks to endless hours spent with the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. An anxiety disorder coupled with a healthy dose of PTSD.

When I did a one-eighty after that summer, abandoning my acceptance at UC Davis, I'd taken a scholarship from a small school in the Midwest and found psychology. I'd spent so many days and nights poring over the DSM and my textbooks, trying to understand what I'd gone through and attempting to rationalize *why* my father was the way he was.

Now, I could see that time for what it was: I'd needed to start healing myself before I could move on to helping others.

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I breathed in through my nose for a count of four, held for a count of four, then exhaled through my mouth for another four with one more pause for four at the end.

Just one cycle and the tingling in my fingers eased. I flexed my hands, taking in the feel of the stretch. I was okay. Safe. Whole. And mostly happy. I wasn't that terrified seventeen-year-old girl anymore.

My friend Brae grinned up at me from her table as I approached. Her blond hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she still wore her Boot T-shirt from her earlier shift, but she was now surrounded by criminal justice textbooks. "Finally free?"

I winced. "Kind of. I actually can't stay. Granddad needs an extra hand before we lose the light."

Brae twisted in her seat, studying me carefully. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Just one of the hands is sick, and I need to get the horses in." It wasn't a lie exactly. The only untruth was that I could've stayed for thirty minutes, maybe even forty-five. But not with Maverick here.

Even now, I could feel his gaze on me. It didn't matter that I couldn't see him; I knew it was Mav. His focus carried a specific sensation: heat and pain.

It seemed silly now to hold on to all that hurt. We'd been *kids*. He'd given me one kiss. It wasn't as if it was a promise of forever.

But I still remembered how it had all felt, the physical blows, one after the other. Though they'd been nothing compared to that final crippling emotional one. It wasn't just that Maverick wasn't there when I'd needed him, didn't answer, didn't bother to call back the next morning. It was so much more than all of that. What I'd found out he'd done that night? *That* was what had truly broken me.

That had made me steal away in one of Granddad's ranch trucks the very next day, with nothing more than a single duffel bag. I'd holed up in a motel, finally taking myself to urgent care a couple of days later. But it had been another two weeks before I really started to recover physically. And that didn't even touch the mental and emotional sides of it.

No matter how much inner work I'd done, how much healing and

self-discovery, I just couldn't seem to get past it. What I had done was learned to live with the pain.

Brae was quiet for a moment, taking me in, possibly reading some of the hurt seeping through the mask I'd grown accustomed to wearing. "You sure it doesn't have anything to do with the charming adrenaline junkie boring holes in the back of your head right now?"

The tingling was back in my fingers, but I ignored it. "What adrenaline junkie? I see nothing."

She laughed, pulling a knee to her chest and resting her chin on it. "Whatever you say."

"How's the studying going?" I asked, desperate for a subject change.

Brae tilted her head back and forth as if weighing her answer. "It's been a long time since I've been in school. I'm rusty."

I reached out and squeezed her shoulder. "You are amazing and can do anything."

Her hand covered mine. "Thanks for cheering me on. I'm not sure I would've gone back if you and Nova hadn't encouraged me. And it's been good to have a new challenge."

"I'm here if you need anything. Even a study buddy. I can work on chart notes while you work on..." I peered at her textbook, my nose wrinkling. "Blood spatter patterns?"

Brae laughed, free and easy. "Not your cup of tea?"

"Give me cattle afterbirth or a complex case of social anxiety any day."

"I guess we all have our things."

"Life would be boring if we didn't," I replied.

Brae's phone lit up with a text from her fiancé, and her face brightened in a similar fashion. "Looks like I'm heading out, too. My boys are challenging me to a pizza cook-off."

A familiar war of emotions took root: joy that my friend had found happiness, a hint of jealousy at the family she'd built, and fear. I knew it was a PTSD response, a reaction to the reminder of what family had meant to me in the past.

Just like I knew that the family Brae had built was *nothing* like the

one I'd grown up with. Dex Archer, while occasionally grumbly and definitely addicted to caffeine, was the opposite of the cruel, manipulative father I'd had. And not only had he fallen reluctantly head over heels for Brae, but he'd also become the father that her son, Owen, deserved in spades.

"Sneak some Fear the Reaper hot sauce onto Dex's pizza," I teased.

Brae rolled her eyes as she gathered up her books. "You know him—he'd love it."

I chuckled. "True enough. One day, I'll find a hot sauce that does all the Archer brothers in."

"I can't wait to see it."

We headed for the front door, but as I wound through a mix of tourists and locals alike, I had that telltale feeling of his gaze on me. Heat and pain, burning into my skin. My fingers started to tingle again, only easing when the door had shut behind me and Brae and I were waving our goodbyes.

I sucked in air, relishing the cool pine scent. I'd done a year in Chicago after school, not sure I was ready to return home quite yet, but the air there had been stifling. Not just the bitter cold or blistering heat of it, but the fact that it never felt entirely cleansing.

Starlight Grove had that. Every breath felt like washing away whatever burdened you. And Granddad's ranch even more so. Maybe because his land had always been my refuge, the place I'd escape to when I needed to get out from under my father's thumb.

The only other time I had felt that was when I was standing in Maverick's light.

I shoved that thought down as I headed for my truck. The navy-blue paint had a healthy coating of dust thanks to the gravel and dirt roads crisscrossing Moonridge Meadow Ranch, and as I approached the vehicle, one corner of my mouth kicked up. Scrawled in the dust on the hood was *I Love You*.

My money was on Nova or Brae leaving that message. It could've been my friend Holly, who worked down the block, but it wasn't really her style. Still, I grinned as I climbed behind the wheel. Something

simple, a gesture done on a whim, but it could still brighten my day. And that was something to be grateful for.

The engine started up, smooth as silk, thanks to my granddad's nimble fingers keeping her tuned and all the ways he'd taught me to care for her, too. It was the same with horses. He'd taught me how to make sure they had all they needed—especially the ones with demons. Sometimes, I thought I learned more about psychology from Granddad and the horses than I ever had in school.

Reversing out of my parking spot, I took a moment to be grateful for the lull in traffic before tourist season. Because when we hit deep spring, Mountain View Way would be clogged with every kind of vehicle. People here for hiking and camping, wine tasting, fishing, white-water rafting, even girls' weekends at the local spa.

I didn't blame them. Starlight Grove was beautiful, with its sagebrush and tall-grass-filled meadows. And its ponderosa-pine-and-spruce-packed forests. Its countless bending rivers and streams. And Mount Lupine as a backdrop to it all, with its snow-covered peak.

It was only complemented by the picturesque downtown full of countless shops and restaurants. The buildings all carried an antique feel, though some went more in the Old West direction. Others had that aged-brick look. And more had a rustic air of aged wood. It was character through and through, and despite everything I'd endured here, I couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

It helped that my parents now lived in Santa Barbara, having sold the house at the edge of my grandfather's ranch. That helped me breathe easier, despite the fact that Camilla showed up unannounced every summer, dropping her son off on our doorstep without warning and expecting us to take care of him.

Even though she never seemed to change, she'd made a son who was her total opposite—gentle with the animals, not afraid of hard work, and curious about everything the ranch had to offer. I relished every moment I got with Eli and was already counting down the days until we'd likely have him back for those handful of weeks.

I just knew better than to let Camilla know that. If she knew how much I loved that time with Eli, she'd steal that away, too. There was

nothing to be done about it. Our father had dug his cruel hooks into her, ones that'd taught her to fight for dominance with whatever tools she had.

Rolling down my window, I let the cleansing air in. I breathed deeply and released everything that seemed to be stirring inside me. Maverick. Camilla. My father. I couldn't control any of them, so I simply let them all go.

I turned off Mountain View Way and took the winding roads that would lead me home. The gate for Twisted Oak Ranch caught my eye on the left, and somehow, letting go felt a little bit harder. But I pressed on.

Before long, I made the familiar turn, one I'd taken so many times I could've made it blindfolded. The massive gate looked more than a little imposing, sort of like my grandfather himself. It hid the healing magic that lay beyond.

I hit the remote on my sun visor, and the iron barriers swung open. The ranch itself was ten thousand acres of pristine beauty. It spanned fields and creeks, even a bit of forest. Granddad only used about half of it for grazing. The other half was meant to *"preserve the beauty around us."*

My grandfather was determined to keep Starlight Grove the magical place he'd grown up in, the place our ancestors had helped build when they came out to mine these hills and valleys for gold. They'd found more than a little success there and had turned it into property and businesses across the town.

Granddad still owned a lot of the property around town, but he didn't run the businesses. He wasn't much for spending time indoors. Something I understood.

My truck bumped along the road as I took in the massive ranch house, a blend of dark wood, stone, and large windows. He'd built it when my grandmother was pregnant with my dad, wanting a place they could fill with children. Sadly, she passed during childbirth, and Granddad had been left to raise his son alone.

Sometimes, I wondered if that trauma was part of why Dad was the way he was. The empathy that lived in me would catch hold of

that fact, and I'd start to feel bad for the man. Then, I'd remember everything he'd put me through, all the manipulations he still tried to execute, and I'd stop that train of thought.

I focused on the road ahead, which took me by the pond I'd spent countless summers swimming in, the trails I'd taken my horse Moonbeam on nearly every day until he got too old to carry me. I passed my cottage, with its dark wood and hint of stone that echoed the main house, and then I hit the horse barns.

I grabbed a makeshift parking spot and hopped out as I caught sight of Renata with one of her favorite horses, Whiskey. Her auburn hair was pulled back in a braid that hit her mid-back, and she wore jeans, boots, a long-sleeved shirt, and a cowboy hat that had earned its name.

A few years older than me, she'd garnered the respect of the mostly male crew she worked with. A grin tipped her lips as she gave me a wave. "Boone's on his way over to give you a hand with the horses," she called. "I'm heading back up to the northeast pasture."

"How's it looking?" I asked, knowing that was the next place we'd be rotating the cattle to.

"It'll be ready when we need it." Sticking a foot into her stirrup and grabbing hold of the horn, she hoisted herself up into the saddle. "Don't work too hard."

I shook my head. "That's you."

Renata's husky laugh that followed me into the barn was her only answer.

Grabbing a bucket of grain—a little motivation for the more stubborn catches—I headed for the pastures beyond the barn. As I stepped out the back doors, I nearly ran smack-dab into a lanky form. The gray and grizzled man scowled down at me. "You're late."

"Nice to see you, too, Harlan."

My words only made the foreman's scowl deepen. He'd never been a fan of women working the ranch. Renata and the two other female hands had needed to fight for their lives to earn his respect. I still didn't have it.

"Boone texted you two hours ago," Harlan clipped.

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"He did," I agreed. "He also said be home by six. It's half past five." I beamed up at him. "So, really, I'm early."

A low chuckle sounded as someone with a familiar face rounded the foreman and slapped him on the shoulder. "She's got you there, boss." Jay shot me a wink, his brown eyes twinkling with mischief. "Your girl Daisy wouldn't come near either of us. So you might start with her."

"Thanks, Jay."

He'd grown up at the ranch. His mom, Nina, had been one of the cooks for the whole operation until she sadly passed from cancer a few years ago. But Jay had stayed. A couple of years ahead of me in school, he had a gift for roping, as if the lasso were merely an extension of his hand.

"Need to train that mare," Harlan grumbled.

I arched a brow at him. He had never been a fan of the way I did things or my ideas about the ranch. But just because he and I didn't share the same methods didn't mean I was clueless. I walked over to the fence line and let out a whistle. My paint mare lifted her head from the patch of grass where she was grazing. It only took Daisy a second to register who was calling, and then she began trotting over.

Jay chuckled, shaking his head. "You've got a way, Aster."

Harlan merely grumbled something under his breath and then turned. "I'm getting back to the northeast pasture."

I saluted his back but wished it were my middle finger instead.

Jay's grin only widened. "You need help gettin' 'em in?"

"I'm good. You should make sure Harlan doesn't bite anyone's head off because he's pissed at my mere existence."

Jay waved me off. "You know this entire ranch is used to his ways. No one's gonna take it personal."

That was a big, fat lie. No one liked being on the receiving end of Harlan's sharp tongue over whatever disapproval he wanted to level that day. But still, I nodded. "I got this, anyway."

Jay waited a moment, studying me the way he sometimes did the herd. "All right. Catch ya at dinner?"

"Maybe," I hedged.

The crew often ate together, Granddad included. Me? I was a fifty-fifty participant. But today had been a long one. An early morning ride, five patients, a Maverick run-in, memories knocking at the door... I needed a break.

Jay read between the lines. "See you tomorrow, Little One."

"Tomorrow, Giant."

He headed after Harlan as I stepped into the pasture. Sliding the halter over Daisy's head, I attached the lead rope and then gave myself a moment in the quiet. I placed my hands on her soft cheeks and rested my head against hers.

She chuffed, reminding me to breathe.

"Thanks, Daisy Mae." *For the reminder. For always being there. For teaching me so many things.*

I let myself stand there for a minute, even as I knew there was work to be done. Because you had to seize the little moments. When you looked back, it wasn't the huge wins, money, or awards; it was those tiny, everyday snatches of time that made a life well lived.

So I took it in and then moved deeper into the pasture. We had about three dozen horses to get into stalls for the night, and I needed to get to it. I started with Daisy and then moved on to others, repeating the task over and over but not rushing because I never minded being in my favorite place with these incredible creatures.

Most were part of Granddad's breeding and training operation, but a handful were all mine, mostly rescues I'd trained to work with me in my equine therapy program I was still building up with my friend, Marly. They were the ones I had a special bond with. I whistled as I approached the Appaloosa mare. Her ears twitched as she lifted her head, nothing but suspicion in her eyes. Twilight and I had worked through the basics. She'd let people pet her, even groom her, but no one had successfully ridden her.

"You know the routine," I chided, shaking the bucket of grain.

She sniffed the air.

"A snack and bedtime. In the swankiest barn to ever exist," I reminded her.

Twilight huffed, and I couldn't help but laugh. She still eyed me

suspiciously but didn't protest as I hooked the lead rope to her halter. I offered her the bucket as a reward. She took a few healthy bites.

"All right, time to go. You've had enough."

She blew air through her lips in protest.

I just grinned. "It's good to make your feelings known."

As we headed for the pasture's gate, someone stepped out of the barn. The light was low now, but I knew the outline by heart, and something in me eased.

We hadn't always had the bond we did now, but he'd given me a haven before he even knew it. One that had come by way of his fields and forests and how his ranch butted up to the best friend I'd ever known.

And when I was finally able to tell him the truth? He'd shown up for me in every way I could've hoped for.

"You been hidin' from me?" Granddad called, and my dog, Scout, raced toward me, careful not to get in Twilight's path.

I laughed, the sound catching on the evening air. "Just trying to keep up with your old bones."

"Watch who you're calling old, missy."

My smile only widened as I bent to give the cattle dog with piercing blue eyes a rub. She loved her days with Granddad on the ranch.

Granddad's gaze scanned me and then my equine companion. "How's she doing?"

My gaze flicked to the mare as I took a second to give her chin a scratch. "Need more time with her. Maybe this weekend."

He nodded slowly, adjusting his hat as he did. "I can spare you a handful of hours on Saturday and Sunday." He always could. And that was one of the greatest gifts of all.

"I'd love that." It had been a minute since it was just the two of us in the round pen, working with a horse.

"Then we'll do it." Those deep-blue eyes scanned the fields. "Looks like you did all the work for me."

Twilight was the last of the horses to bring in, just like usual.

"I try to do as ordered."

Granddad chuckled. "Who do you think you're fooling? You've always gone your own way."

"Eventually," I muttered. Because it had taken me far too long to find the fight to do it.

A hint of sorrow entered my grandfather's eyes, and I wanted to kick myself. When I finally told him what had happened in the house a stone's throw away from him, he'd wept. It was the one and only time I'd seen him cry. But then he'd done the thing I needed most: He'd wrapped me in his arms and said, *"I'm here. I'll always be here. You tell me what you need, and I'll do it."*

He'd offered to help me report Dad to the sheriff, even though it was five years after the incident. He'd offered to bar him from the ranch property or anything else that would make me feel safe. But I hadn't wanted any of that. I'd wanted to move on, and I wanted my father to know he hadn't broken me.

Granddad wrapped an arm around me. "Strongest girl I know."

"Love you," I whispered.

"More than all the stars in the sky and the blades of grass in that field," he whispered gruffly.

I burrowed into his side, soaking in the scents of leather, cattle, and a hint of tobacco. "You wanna come over for dinner?"

Scout let out a bark at the word *dinner*.

"Depends if you're gonna try and foist that vegetarian chili on me again."

A laugh escaped my throat. "What did beans and vegetables ever do to you?"

Granddad pinned me with a mock glare. "Lacked any flavor whatsoever." He sighed. "I guess I can bring some of that hot sauce Mav gave me."

I tried not to stiffen, but I couldn't help it. Granddad and Maverick had maintained a friendship over the years. He never pushed to know what had happened between Mav and me, but I knew he wished I would get over whatever the hell it was and welcome my friend back into the fold.

But I couldn't. It wasn't just that Mav wasn't there for me when I

needed him the most. It was so much more. I shoved the memories from my mind before they could catch hold.

Even thinking about it had my chest constricting. “Think you can get Twilight into her stall while I get a *healthy*, low-cholesterol dinner started?” I asked, desperate to change the subject.

He took the lead rope from me. “Yeah, yeah. Bring on the no-taste joy fest.”

“Your heart thanks me,” I called as I rounded the barn.

I didn’t bother getting in my truck; I simply walked the two hundred or so yards to my house. I needed the air, the cleansing. Because the memories were alive and well tonight.

As I climbed my front porch steps, I stopped on the top one and tipped my head back. The stars were just starting to peek out in the dark sky.

“I don’t think there’s anywhere else they’re more beautiful.”

I could hear Maverick’s voice as if it were yesterday.

God, I missed him. Or the person I’d thought he was. But a small part of me wondered if that Maverick had ever existed. Had he only ever been the phantom I’d painted him as in my mind?