



Cowboys

&

Horses



Cowboys & Horses

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Dedication

For all those people needing a heart-warming uplift for the soul, and for all those authors who are hesitant to delve into contemporary romance...

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Chapter One

‘Welcome to our home—your home from home during your stay.’

I slid my fingers over the smooth, glossy brochure of the ‘Black Mustang Working Dude Ranch’. The picture of the gorgeous dark horse on the front of it brought an immediate smile to my face. I could picture it already—galloping across the wild, open plains of the Sonoran Desert, my hair lifting in the breeze as I head towards the empty horizon on my trusty steed.

“Miss, Miss? You need to leave the plane now. You’re the last passenger.”

I was brought back to reality by the sickly, sweet voice of an air hostess. She had enough make-up cemented on her face to rival any thickness of concrete. I debated whether I could actually peel it off her.

“Oh, sorry,” I said, jumping from my seat. “I was waiting for the mad rush to end.”

I tried my hardest to ignore my burning cheeks as I collected my hand luggage and headed for the door. The butterflies churning around in my stomach were making me





nauseous. I'd never been on holiday on my own before, let alone thirteen hours away.

I wandered through Tucson International Airport and found my luggage on the baggage carousel going around and around on its own. I hauled it off the belt and plonked it on the white tiled floor in front of me, narrowly missing my toes.

Trying my hardest to appear cool, calm, and confident, I squared my shoulders, lifted my head up, and marched towards the entrance lobby. I hoped it masked over the flustered mess I was actually feeling right now.

Nerves had me. Badly. Why did my mum insist this idea of hers and Zoe's was a good one? Chewing on my lip, I realised that over the course of our friendship, which had started in childhood, Zoe had always had an uncanny ability of getting me into questionable predicaments. However, when my eyes first landed on the mighty fine cowboy stood holding a board with my name on it, I mentally congratulated her on managing to best the time I'd jumped into my parent's holly bush in a bid to escape being grounded.

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This guy was hot. So hot, I couldn't stop my instant reaction being to half-laugh, half-smile, and say, "Wow."

Deep brown eyes glittered back at me, a quirky smile tugging at his plump pink lips. "Miss Woods?"

I almost shivered from his drawling accent. "Yes."

He tucked the board under his arm and waited for me to approach him. My smile dissolved into a frown as my image of the handsome man coming to take my bags from me quickly evaporated.

If you wanted a definition of tall, dark, and handsome, this guy was it. Bronzed skin, jet black hair, broad shoulders, and nicely muscled arms showing through his red checked shirt—he looked like he'd just come to life from a poster.

Just as I reached him, he turned and walked towards the exit, still no offer of help for my bags, nor even a civil greeting. I would be having words with Zoe about this, that's for sure.

He strode outside, marching towards a huge black truck, leaving the glass exit doors to shut in my face. I pushed my way through them and followed him, silently simmering at his rude behaviour. The wall of heat that hit me as I stepped outside nearly took my breath





away. The scorching, dry air had beads of sweat rolling down my face within seconds.

Heading to the rear of the vehicle, I was pleasantly surprised to see he'd left the tailgate down so I could load my suitcase up. I sat my hand luggage on the baking tarmac, and wrapped my arms around my giant bag. Inching it up my chest, I leaned against the rear of the truck with the intention of shimmying it up my body before then throwing it in the back.

It wasn't working so well with sweaty palms, aching legs, and a tired body.

"You want a hand with your bags there?"

I glanced up to see he'd placed a black Stetson on his head. The shadow it cast across the sprinkling of stubble over his chin gave him the perfect rough and rugged look. The only thing that spoiled it was the arrogant smirk he was wearing.

I ground my teeth together. "No, thank you." I bent my knees and sprung back up, lifting my suitcase at the same time, and almost breaking my chin. "I'm fine."

A deep chuckle sounded through the air, making me even more embarrassed. Before I knew it, he'd taken my cherished possessions from my grasp and slid them into the back of his truck.

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“Wouldn’t want you to break a nail,” he said, slamming the tailgate shut.

He sauntered back to the driver’s door, shaking his head. I glanced down at my hands to look at my stick-on nails. I’d had a girly night out before my long-haul flight. What was wrong with wearing pretty nails?

Grabbing my hand luggage, I headed for the passenger side and began to seriously question how on earth I was going to survive for four weeks out here when I couldn’t even lift my own luggage into the back of a truck.

The half an hour journey back to the ranch was silent. He cranked up his stereo with some country music whilst I mused over the brochure for the millionth time.

‘With over 3,000 acres to our ranch, take some time to reconnect with nature, and more importantly, yourself.’

An ironic twist curled the edges of my dry mouth. Did I even know who I was anymore?

I shut the silky pages and looked out of the window at the bleak landscape rolling by. Everything was so... sparse. The few spots of plants and vegetation here and there looked so out of place. Aside from the grey road cutting straight through the middle of the





sandy environment, it looked uninhabitable. It was beautiful, but its splendour would surely match its lethality.

We finally turned off the road and headed across the dirt, clouds of dust kicking up behind us. As the sight of a wooden gateway appeared with the name of the ranch swinging on a wooden board above, excitement began to replace my nerves. This was it—this was the beginning of my little adventure.

I leaned forwards in my eagerness, impatient to see the cute Hacienda style chalet I would be staying in. To the left was almost a little village of the guest houses. Around a dozen pink bricked buildings all sat in a circle, each having its own small gravel walkway. With dark wooden doors and dark wooden frames, they were just lovely.

He swung the truck towards the quaint houses, skidded to a stop, and jumped out. I joined him outside where he was retrieving my suitcase. Sitting it on the floor, he reached into his pocket and pulled out an old iron key that looked like something from a gothic vampire movie.

“You’re in number ten,” he said, pointing towards one of the larger chalets. “Do you need anything else?”

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I hesitated, unsure whether it was a genuine question or not. “No, thank you.”

He touched his hat with his fingertips. “Dinner is at seven. Call the main house if you need anything.”

And just like that, he climbed back into his truck, and left me stood there.





Chapter Two

The bitter taste the hot cowboy left in my mouth soon vanished when I entered my cosy dwelling. I walked inside to gaze upon an exposed wooden beam ceiling, wicker furniture, and antique dressers. The colourful bedclothes reminded me of the padded saddle blankets they use out here. The Native American Indian feel to them intrigued me as much as the desert landscape I was surrounded by.

Turning to my bags, I took my time to unpack my life and rearrange it for the next four weeks. Four weeks. Twenty-eight days. It kept going around and around in my head. Why had I listened to Mum that two weeks wasn't enough?

I flopped down on the soft, cool bed, and closed my sore eyes. The ceiling fans hummed away above me, circling the air with a gentle breeze gliding over my skin. For the first time in weeks, I found myself relaxing. The tension leaving my muscles felt like a dead weight being lifted.

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Just as I began being lulled into the beginnings of a deep sleep, unwelcome images appeared, burning the insides of my eyelids once again. I jumped up, glancing over to the bedside cabinet at my sleeping tablets. The dream free slumber they gave me was bliss, but the chemical hangover the next day was never welcomed.

I headed for the shower. The cold water would wake me up for the few hours I needed to get through dinner.

By the time I showered, dressed, and wandered up to the main house, the delicious aroma of cooking meat filled the air. The sun was starting to hide behind the glorious mountains in the distance, taking the sweltering heat with it. Arizona in July was perhaps not my smartest move.

The main house was also a beautiful Hacienda type. Orange and yellow brickwork, dark wooden edgings, weeping trees, colourful plants, and of course, cacti, it really was quite something to behold. In front of the house was a sandy pink coloured patio area. Several wooden tables were dotted about with tall night lights scattered between them,





giving the whole atmosphere the perfect twilight glow.

Chatter and laughter flowed all around, making my solo appearance less obvious. I did my best to merge into the scenery, selecting a table near the edge of the area, partially hidden by the encroaching darkness, and away from anyone else.

“Sophie!”

Friendly American drawl headed my way as John, the ranch owner, strode towards me. His bushy grey moustache combined with his carthorse built shoulders stood out a mile away.

He extended a shovel sized hand towards me before he sat down on the opposite side of the table. I shook his hand with a smile, trying to hide my pain as he crumpled my hand inside his. At least he had a proper man’s handshake.

“Nice to meet you, finally. How was your journey?”

I laughed. “Long. Thank you so much for accommodating me at such short notice.”

He waved his hand through the air. “Not a problem. We’re a helpful kind of folk. Besides, Zoe did kind of stress the importance of it.”

I blushed and glanced down, my cheeks heating up with every passing second. “She’s

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a good friend. I'm lucky she has such great family."

"Ah, think nothing of it. Consider yourself part of the family."

"Thank you," I said, meeting his friendly gaze. "What's with your moody cowboy by the way?"

He grinned. "I see you met Brady. Take no notice of him. He can be a little cold at first with outsiders."

"Are you sure he's the right sort to be working with guests and all?"

A deep laugh boomed from his chest. "Brady Lancaster is one of the finest cowboy's you'll ever meet. What that man can't do on a ranch isn't worth knowing." He chuckled away to himself, and stood up. "Best get back to the meat before I get blamed for burning it. I hope you enjoy your stay with us. Any problems, you come see me."

I nodded. "Thank you. I really appreciate this."

"Well, from what I understand, it may well be needed." A flash of sympathy passed over his weathered face before he tipped his hat, and strode back to the grill.

I tried not to think of the problems I currently faced—Zoe being one. A huge fall out with my best friend a mere few hours before my life crashed around me was not





something I wanted, or needed. We were inseparable, but our arguments could be more than volatile. Even though we weren't on speaking terms, she had still been looking out for my welfare as soon as my mother filled her in on my situation. For that, I owed her a massive hug at least.

I looked down at my left wrist, rubbing my right hand over it as I lost myself in thought. My hair fell forwards, the wavy brown strands covering my threat of tears. I blinked several times, washing them away and burying my self-pity.

I glanced around, waiting for the crowd around John and the food to disperse before attempting to grab something to eat.

It was then I spotted him staring at me—Brady. His silhouette against the dark blue evening sky was like something from a poster. The nearby night light picked out the twinkle in his eyes, and despite our frosty interactions, I couldn't deny he was fascinating just to look at.

He leaned back on the waist high brick wall surrounding the patio area. With his ankles crossed and supporting himself on an elbow, he looked every inch the sexy, casual guy. Lifting his burger to his mouth, he tore at it

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with a blasé attitude, almost as if it was only there to serve as a prop to his image.

He continued staring as I glared back at him. It was a very rare occasion I felt vulnerable, but over the last few weeks, I'd never felt more exposed in my life. Now I was thousands of miles from home, on my own, I couldn't afford for people like him to see this weakness in me.

I crossed my arms over my chest and leaned forwards, resting my elbows on the table. After a couple of minutes, he finished his food, nodded in my direction, and disappeared into the house.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I came here for a holiday, a chance to relax. Over my dead body would some attitude ridden man ruin that.





Chapter Three

After managing to scavenge the last of the burgers off the barbeque, I crept back to my chalet without having to socialise. I took a full dose of my sleeping tablets instead of the usual half, and slept like a log. No nightmares haunted me which was welcomed with open arms.

When I finally awoke to the annoying screech of my phone alarm, I was amazed to see it had been blaring at me for nearly ten minutes. Usually, I'm awake before it even goes off.

With the dreaded foggy head from the tablets, I wrapped my dressing gown around me and shuffled towards the shower. I'd just stepped inside the bathroom when a sharp knock sounded through the door.

Who on earth is that at seven am?

I grumbled to myself as I trundled over to the early morning disturbance with the beginnings of a headache knocking on my skull. Pulling the door open, I couldn't help my surprise at seeing Brady leaning against the wall. One leg crossed in front of the other, hat

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on, arms over his chest—he was a pleasant sight first thing.

“Morning, Miss Woods. Just checking you were up.”

I frowned. “I have an alarm for that job, thank you.”

One of his dark eyebrows raised and he quirked his lips into a playful smile. “We have quite an itinerary today, Miss. I didn’t want you to be late.”

I raised my eyebrows back at him and folded my arms in front of me. “I’m never late, but thanks for your concern.”

“Just trying to help.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I know you city girls aren’t too fond of the way we work out here.”

“I’m not a ‘city girl’ as you put it, but thanks for the label, cowboy.”

He grinned and pushed himself away from the wall. “Every woman loves a cowboy, Miss.”

“I prefer men, thank you. See you later.”

Feeling triumphant considering my hazy head, I pushed the door shut. I tried to calm my rising anger as I showered. I wasn’t going to let him get under my skin. How dare he think he had me all figured out?

I pushed him to the back of my mind as I made my way up to the main house for breakfast. Thankfully, he was nowhere to be





seen. I munched my way through a stack of Belgian waffles before downing a glass of orange juice.

“Morning, Sophie. Sleep well?”

I looked up to see John striding into the kitchen. “Yes, thank you.”

He grabbed a plate of pancakes before settling opposite me. “I’ve put you on the itinerary for today and tomorrow. I know you can ride, but it has been a while, and for legal reasons, we still need to assess your riding skill ourselves.”

I smiled and nodded. “I know. It’s fine, honestly. I didn’t expect you to give me a horse and leave me to wander off into the desert.”

Devouring two pancakes in one mouthful, he said, “Some of the people you’re with are... tourists shall we say, so just be patient.”

“No worries.” I grabbed another waffle and then decided to drop a subtle hint about Brady. “Oh, would you mind calling off the early morning alarm tomorrow, please?”

“What alarm?”

“Brady. He was knocking on my door at seven this morning. Apparently, he didn’t want me to be late.”

He chuckled. “Just ignore him. He hates tardiness. He usually does that to new guests,

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so don't take it personally. Says it helps create a proper ranch life feeling."

I snorted. "People come here for a holiday, not to get up at a normal work time."

"I know, but, people love him. We have several people who come back year after year because of him. He brings me a lot of business."

I struggled not to grimace. "Fair enough." I checked the time. "I'm due on horseback in five minutes. Best not be late, eh?"

He laughed and nodded, wishing me a good day.

I paced over the dusty ground towards the sprawling barns and fenced corrals a few hundred yards away. A dozen or so horses were all saddled up, tied to a fence rail. A group of people milled around near them, Brady at the front like a teacher readying his class.

He narrowed his eyes at me. "Ah, Miss Woods. Nice of you to join us."

I fixed him a steely stare but remained silent. I could feel the burning stares of the other guests and tried my hardest not to colour up, but the burn from my cheeks was almost as bad as the heat.

He started running through the plan for the day, beginning with an hour-long riding assessment for each of us. Brady and three of





his guys would evaluate the twelve of us, split into four groups of three. I didn't even have to hear my name roll off his tongue to know I'd be in his trio.

As the others wandered off to their respective wranglers, I rolled my eyes as he approached me, and a husband and wife.

"Dave, you can take Georgie, the bay gelding here. Sheena, you can have Barbie, the palomino at the end there." He locked his eye contact on me with a sly smile. "Sophie, you can take Cody, the buckskin."

I plastered a false smile on my face, ignoring the rising tension between us. "Thanks. I've always loved a nice dun."

"Actually, Cody doesn't have a dorsal stripe, so he is a buckskin. Brush up on your knowledge before trying to be smart next time."

My mouth dropped open and my temperature soared through the roof. How embarrassing. Trying to ignore Dave and Sheena whispering to each other, I wandered over to my horse.

He was a solid bulk of muscle, pure power emanating from every fibre of his body. His creamy coloured face displayed no emotion whatsoever. Big brown eyes stared back at me, glazed over with a blatant boredom. I

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chewed my lip as I realised this chap was a proper workhorse. He wasn't here to be fussed and made a pet of—he had a job to do and that was it.

I swallowed a lump in my throat. It'd been nearly eight years since I last rode. Had Brady given me this horse because he was difficult?

Whilst he was busy helping the other two, I took my time to check over the tack—to help steady my nerves and also, just to be sure. All I found was a loose girth, or cinch, to be correct out here.

“Are you not on board yet?”

I turned around, rolling my eyes at him. “I was checking my tack. Is that ok?”

“There's no need to check it. Unless of course, you don't trust me?”

“I was taught it as good practice. Just a habit.”

Without wasting another second, I put my foot in the stirrup and swung myself into the saddle. I had ridden Western on a few occasions before and actually quite enjoyed it. The saddles were so comfortable it was like being in an armchair.

I clicked to Cody, easing him forwards. We followed Brady and the other pair into the nearest fenced area. It was a huge space, at least twice the size of any dressage arena I'd ever ridden in. The surface was just the loose





dirt of the desert we were in, but the horses seemed more than happy with it. I thought back to my old dressage horse, Bubbles. She would have freaked out at this and the thought of getting her perfect hooves dirty, let alone having no soft rubber to bounce on.

Brady called both of us women into the middle whilst he watched Dave jog around for a while. He shouted out instructions every couple of minutes, altering his legs and hands here and there.

I sat for around half an hour, watching Dave and Sheena strut their stuff. They weren't bad in all honesty, just a little rusty.

“Right. Your turn.”

I looked down to see amusement written all over his face. He patted Cody's neck, his dark eyes twinkling. I pursed my lips and nudged Cody forwards.

Walk, jog, lope—none of it a problem. He was like a rocking horse, so easy to sit and relax to. I was grinning from ear to ear by the time we'd had our few minutes of fame. Brady remained silent for the entire duration, his arms folded over his broad chest.

I walked Cody over to him on a loose rein, saying nothing as I halted in front of him.

He pulled his lips into a thin line. “Not bad. You're typically English though. Relax on the

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reins, remember his bit has a long shank which puts pressure on his poll. When he gives, you need to loosen the contact. This isn't dressage. You're also rather rigid through your back, you're sitting on the saddle rather than in it. You need to loosen your shoulders, your hips and your legs. Let him carry you rather than you trying to carry him. He is well established in self-carriage if you give him the chance to show it."

I balked at his words, trying to ignore the stab in my chest. "Anything else?"

"Talk to him more, use your voice. Our horses are all voice trained. Use your weight through your seat to move him instead of your legs. If you're in tune with him, you will be able to think what you want, and he'll react to it as you picture it in your head. Don't be a passenger or an instructor, be a partner."

Receiving constructive criticism had never been a problem for me. To ride at Prix St George's level dressage, it came with the territory. However, this guy was talking to me in a way which irked me. Whilst his advice made perfect sense to me, the way he said it got under my skin.

I let out a deep breath, determined to take it on board and try and improve. "Ok. Care to watch and advise?"





“Not today. It’s time to get out on the trail. At least I know you can manage him.”

He left me there, mouth agape, as he fetched his own horse from the barn. He never even looked back.

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Chapter Four

The day itself was pleasant. The walking ride the wranglers took us out on was fascinating as they filled us in on details of the Sonoran Desert we were trekking through. For a scarce landscape, it was mesmerizing and beautiful in its own right. Seeing greenery dotted around the yellow ground was odd. Hundreds of cacti flourished out here along with various other plants. It was amazing how nature could adapt to thrive in such a harsh environment.

We were in the saddle for a good two hours before we returned for lunch. After then, we had a stint in the tennis courts which was great fun. Getting along with some of the other guests was liberating. Being away from home was the peace I needed, the part where I could just be me again.

I headed back to my chalet for a shower before tea. We were having a cookout this evening. The plan was to ride out to a specific area they used for occasions like this. I was curious and excited.

I dressed myself, pulling my boots on as my phone rang.

“Hi, Mum.”





“Hey, Soph. How you doing?”

“Yeah, ok. It’s great out here. I don’t want to come home.”

She laughed before turning serious. “Ben’s been asking where you’ve gone.”

My jovial mood popped in an instant. Thinking of my ex fiancé at the moment was not something I wanted to do. “And?”

“Don’t snap at me, Soph. Please. I’m kind of stuck in the middle here.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “Sorry. I just... I’ve been here barely two days and he’s already trying to ruin it. I don’t want to even think about him, let alone hear his name.”

“I know, sweetie. I’m sorry, but I just thought you should know. You were doing so good at patching things up... I just wish you could have carried on.”

I put my head in my hands. Having this conversation right now was not something I wanted, or needed. “I need some time, Mum. That’s all this is. I have to really think about my life from here on out. If he really wants to make this work, then he’ll respect that and wait for me.”

“Yes, ok. I understand. You know what he’s like though once he gets onto something. He’s worse than a terrier on a trouser leg.”

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I managed half a smile at her words, but I was done with this for now. “I have to go. I’ll talk to you tomorrow or something.”

She said her goodbyes before hanging up and leaving me in the same messy quandary I’d almost forgotten over the past two days. Thankfully, as I stepped out of my door, Dave and Sheena were walking past and invited me to walk down to the barn with them. It was just the welcome distraction I needed.

The cookout area was amazing. Nestled in between two hills and surrounded by dozens of plants, shrubs and trees, it was peaceful and serene. The sounds of insects and native wildlife echoed around us making the outdoor experience even more surreal. As night began to settle, John informed us we would be riding back in the dark with lanterns. The horses we had ridden this morning were the horses we would have for the length of our stay. I felt comforted by this. I liked Cody. He was relaxing, safe, sturdy, and picked his way across the loose ground with ease. His responsiveness and obedience were second to none.

I smiled, enthralled by the idea of the night time ride. How amazing would this be? As the





group laughed and chatted amongst themselves, I wandered off a few hundred yards, leaning on the fence rail marking the perimeter of the area. I stared up into the encroaching darkness, watching the stars glisten against their soft background. A cool breeze drifted through, gliding across my hot skin. I closed my eyes and revelled in the moment.

“Enjoying yourself?”

I sighed as I heard Brady’s voice next to me. The wooden fence beneath me moved as he leaned against it.

I opened my eyes, turning to face him. “Yes, thank you.”

“Quite a different sight for you city folk, hey?”

That term he kept using was really starting to grate on me. “And what makes you so sure I’m city folk?”

He smiled. “Your perfect hair, manicured nails, designer clothes. That mobile never leaves your side either. Your whole demeanour just says it.”

I snorted and shook my head. “Wow. You got it all figured out, huh?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I see a lot of people come and go. It’s not very often I’m wrong. Just be careful. Don’t come out here

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thinking you can master the Wild West, wanting to go home with stories of John Wayne and roping cattle like a pro.”

I arched my eyebrows in surprise. “Be careful? What the hell is that supposed to mean? Are you threatening me?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “Take it how you like. Just don’t make my job any harder than it needs to be, ok? That’s all I ask.”

I glared at him for all I was worth. “Wow. You’re a real asshole, you know that? Don’t worry, message received, loud and clear.”

I pushed off from the fence, turning to walk back to the friendlier people.

“I didn’t mean—”

“Don’t worry. I got it.”

The burn from his stare seared through my back the entire walk back to the group.

The ride back to the ranch was incredible. I held Cody back so we were bringing up the rear. It allowed me the gift of closing my eyes as he meandered along, following the others. I imagined what it must have been like years ago, in the real Wild West. Immersing myself in the reality of proper cowboys and galloping horses across the desert, I almost convinced myself I heard the clinking of spurs and the





neighing of desperate horses, giving their all to their riders.

The lanterns the wranglers held as they rode made it all the more real as the five lights struggled to illuminate the whole group of us. All the horses plodded on, not bothered in the slightest by the dark or their footing.

By the time we got back to the ranch, I was more relaxed than I ever had been. This was what I missed about horses—their ability to calm me and take my mind to places I couldn't take myself. It brought me to tears as the sheer joy and relief of it flooded through me, soothing me into a new sense of being.

We reached the barn, all the others handing their horses over to the wranglers. The youngest wrangler, Greg, came over to take Cody from me.

“Can I sort him out? Please?” I asked.

He smiled, his freckled face creasing. “Please don't feel like you have to, Miss Woods. We don't expect our guests to tend to the horses.”

“I want to.” I blushed and shuffled my feet. “I've kinda missed it.”

He nodded. “I understand, Miss. His stall is the last on the left.”

I thanked him before leading Cody to his stable. He stood stock still, his face

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expressionless as I tended to him. He was barely warm from the sedate walk. I started taking his boots off, the loud Velcro ripping through the air.

“What are you doing?”

I sighed as Brady’s voice haunted me again. I stood up, facing him. “Sorting my horse out.”

“I can see that. It’s also not your job. I told Greg to tend to him.”

“Well, I told Greg I wanted to do it. Ok?”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “No. It’s not ok. You’re not insured to be in here. There’s a reason we don’t let the guests in here with the horses. I would have thought you would possess the common sense to realise that.”

I stared at him in disbelief. I couldn’t believe he was insulting my intelligence on top of everything else. “What is your problem with me?”

“I’m fed up with your type thinking they can walk in here and do as they please all the time. Just because you earn more than us, you think that gives you the right to saunter around like you own the place. Well, reality check, sweetheart, you don’t. Out here, one wrong move can mean your life. A bit of respect wouldn’t go amiss.”





As much as I didn't want to, I couldn't help the tears welling up. I'd had a rollercoaster of emotions in a short few hours and to come crashing down from a high like this was about as much as my fragile mind could handle right now.

He shook his head. "And there you go, turning on the waterworks. Just finish up and leave. The horses are not your concern."

I nodded, turning my attention back to Cody's boots. I heard Brady's footsteps stomping down the concrete. A burst of hot air ruffled my hair followed by a gentle nuzzle. I smiled, the tears flowing as the sweet gelding tried his best to cheer me up.

"I think he likes you."

I jumped, turning around to see Greg peering over the stable door. I wiped at my wet face, faking a smile. "I presume you mean Cody?"

His blue eyes bore sympathy as he nodded. "Don't take it to heart. He can be a bit harsh at times, but he does mean well."

"Sure."

"Here." He passed me an apple for Cody. "That horse has shown no one any affection in the five years I've been here. You should be jumping for the stars right now."

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I giggled and thanked him, offering Cody his treat. He sniffed it before nibbling at it with caution. Taking a sample bite, he satisfied himself it was safe before chomping through the entire thing.

“G’night, Miss.”

I said my goodnights before walking back to my room, alone. Right now, I felt my only friend in this world was that horse.





Chapter Five

At breakfast the next morning, we were briefed by John on the day's itinerary. The plan was to go rock climbing this morning and a trail ride this afternoon. After everyone had eaten and departed outside to the trucks, I hung back, waiting to speak with John.

"Hey, John. Can I have a word please?"

He turned around from his plate of food, cramming the last few bits in as he nodded to me.

"Um, I don't think I can do the rock climbing yet. With my arm and all."

He slapped a hand to his head. "I totally forgot. I'm so sorry." He swallowed the last of his breakfast. "Yeah, no problem. Hang back and entertain yourself. We'll be back around one."

I thanked him and headed outside. I'd spotted a small ledge about a quarter of a mile out, on the outer edge of the ranch perimeter. It looked over the desert and would be a perfect place to just sit and *be*.

I sat down on the rough ground, my legs dangling over the edge. I gazed out over the

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scenery, straining my eyes to see as far as possible. It was incredible out here, another world. How would I ever accept being back at home after this? Living in the middle of a city in a small but ridiculously expensive house, neighbours staring at me through every window, no grass or open landscapes. It was so claustrophobic, but this, this was just heaven on earth.

My phone chimed at me, breaking my peace and my blissful thoughts.

Hey. I hope you're having a good time. Tell Uncle John I said hi. I'm so sorry about all of this mess, Soph. I hope we can sort through things when you get back. If you need anything, please just say. Love Z xxx

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. Despite our situation of not really speaking, she was still there for me. Sorting things out with Zoe was something I desperately wanted to do but it would have to wait until I sorted me and Ben out. She knew that was the bigger issue for me at the moment.

With my fair skin, it didn't take long for the radiating heat to bother me. I could feel my skin burning with every second I spent out here. It was my own fault for not fetching my sun cream. I jumped up, brushing the dust off my jeans as I made my way back to my room.





A screech from above caught my attention. I looked up, shielding my eyes with my hands. I was treated to the fabulous sight of a huge bird flying overhead. Its silhouette against the bright blue sky was just magnificent. I couldn't help the grin spreading across my face as I watched it gliding through the air, looking for its next meal.

For some unknown reason, I decided it would be a clever idea to continue walking as I stared upwards, entranced by the magnificent bird of prey. As predicted, I tripped over my own feet after a few seconds. On instinct, my arms outstretched, ready to break my fall. My entire weight fell on my left arm, my fragile wrist taking the brunt of the fall. The shooting pain drilled through me before I'd even fully come to a stop. I rolled on my back, biting back tears as I swore at myself for being so damn stupid. I grasped my throbbing forearm and stumbled to my feet.

Shit.

With John and the majority of the staff out rock climbing with the others, there was hardly anyone around. I knew Brady was around somewhere, but I'd be damned before I went to him for help. I folded my arms over my chest and cradled my aching wrist.

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I walked past the barn, heading towards my chalet. The only thing on my mind was hoping and praying I hadn't broken it again.

"Are you going to let me look at that?"

I spun around to see Brady striding towards me from one of the corrals. From there, he would have been able to see me as clear as day. My heart stopped dead when I realised he'd seen the whole thing. How embarrassing.

I shook my head. "I'm ok."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "So, if I ask you to help me carry hay bales into the barn, you can manage that, can you?"

"You wouldn't ask me anyway. Guests aren't allowed near the barn."

"Touché." He inclined his head towards my arm. "I'm sure it's only a sprain. Bones are tougher than you think."

My face clouded over at his presumption. "Not when they've already been broken, and only been out of a cast for a week."

Something in his features changed. I would almost label it as concern if it hadn't been for our icy exchanges over the past couple of days. "Ah. I see your worry. Do you want me to take a look at it?"

"No, thanks. I'll deal with it."

I gave a brief smile and continued walking, trying my hardest to ignore him watching me.





The pain streaming up and down my left arm was immense. By the time I reached my room, tears were flowing down my cheeks through a mixture of agony and fear.

I drowned a towel in cold water before wrapping it around the core of the pain. I flopped back on my bed, running my hand over my sweating forehead. Worry consumed me as my immediate thought was another break. I didn't want to set myself back anymore. Upset and emotions all over the place, I did the only thing I could think of—ringing my Mum.

She picked up on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Mum?"

"Hey, Soph. How are you?"

As much as I tried to stop it, I couldn't. I burst into tears. "I think I've broken my arm again."

"Oh, Soph, no. How? Have you been to hospital?"

I relayed the ridiculous scenario back to her in a croaky voice, wiping at my tears every few words. With each passing minute I spoke to her, I calmed down, realising I was probably making a mountain out of a molehill.

"Sophie, honestly." A soft laugh trickled down the phone line. "Trust you to do something so silly."

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I smiled at her words. I had been a clumsy child, only growing out of it as I ended my teenage years. “The bird was pretty though.”

She laughed. “That’s ok then. Listen, on a serious note, you’re going to get it looked at, ok? Give yourself peace of mind.”

I agreed with her, telling her I’d let her know the results. I lingered around saying goodbye. I wanted to talk, to get things off my chest. Being my mum of course, she knew my funny little habits.

“You ok, honey?”

“No.” I closed my eyes as more tears escaped. “I can’t... I still can’t believe he did it to me. How could he do that? Ten years of my life, of our lives, just gone. Like that.”

Silence followed for a few seconds. “I don’t know, Sophie. I really am at a loss with him.”

My quiet tears became sobs, huge gasping breaths wracking my chest as I finally let everything out. “He effectively put me in a coma. I spent weeks in hospital with nothing else to think about. How am I supposed to forgive him for that? I can’t.”

She comforted me as much as she could over the phone. I nodded along, mute from my pain. To hurt emotionally, I could handle. To hurt physically, I could also handle. Both together? Well, that resulted in this, right





now. A whiny, blubbery mess melting into oblivion.

“Something made you attempt to patch things up, honey. Remember that.”

I snorted, my anger making a slow comeback, crawling over my distress with its red-hot tendrils. “The fact I needed care once I was out of the hospital. That was it. If it hadn’t been for the fact I was confined to my bed twenty-four seven, I wouldn’t have had the chance to soften to his meaningless crap.”

“You could have come home for your father and I to look after you. Something made you want to stay.”

“It’s my house as much as his. Why should I have to recuperate elsewhere because of him? Plus, running around after me constantly was the least he could do.” A smile crossed my lips at this, my cruel side peeking from beneath.

A long exhale sounded down the line. “Don’t think about it for now, ok? Get your arm sorted out and think about him another time. You can’t deal with all of it at once.”

I took a deep breath, agreeing with her before saying my goodbyes. At least something good had come of talking to Mum—my sorrow was now replaced with the familiar bubble of fury deep in my gut. At the

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moment, it was this which drove me forwards, kept me ticking over and on the side of sanity.

Feeling better, I splashed my face with cold water, swallowed some ibuprofen, and headed up to the main house to the movie theatre. Losing myself in an alternate reality was more than needed right now.





Chapter Six

The pain in my arm simmered to a dull ache by the time John returned with the group. My mood was back on a high after a morning of comedy films.

After lunch, we were told to collect our horses before heading out on another trail ride. I was almost skipping as I made my way to Cody. Riding hi

om this afternoon would only help me further. I tightened his cinch and jumped in the saddle.

“Err, what do you think you’re doing?”

I looked down to see Brady stood at the side of me, his dark eyes glaring at me as if I’d stolen something. “Um, riding?”

“I don’t think so. Get off.”

“I beg your pardon?”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “You heard me. Get off.”

My stewing anger decided to bring itself to boil. “Who the hell do you think you are? You’ve done nothing but speak to me like I’m a piece of shit on the bottom of your shoe since I arrived. Well I’ve got news for you,

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buddy. I'm a human being, just like you. Well, that's debateable to be quite frank, but regardless. Treat others how you expect to be treated. Back the hell off and leave me alone."

The hum of chatter around us fell into an awkward silence as we stared each other out.

"What's the problem?"

I turned to see John striding towards us, a deep frown creasing his face.

"Him." I pointed at Brady. "He's done nothing but be an ass to me since I arrived. He's now telling me I can't ride."

His eyes passed over to Brady. "Is that true?"

"I haven't been an ass at all. But yes, I am telling her she can't ride now. I've asked her to get off the horse and she won't."

My mouth fell open as I glowered at him. "You haven't even given me a justification for it!"

He looked back at me, his lips pulling into a sly smile. "You never asked."

"You absolute—"

"Alright, Sophie. Just calm down. Brady, why can't she ride?"

"She fell over earlier and hurt her arm. I'm not prepared to trek into the desert with an injured guest."

John glanced at me, running his tongue over his lips. "I'm sorry, Sophie, but he is





making the right call here. Have you had it looked at?”

I shook my head. “No. It’s fine. Honestly.”

He gave me a look of ‘don’t be daft’. “Come on, I’ll run you down to the hospital.” He nodded at Brady as he walked to his truck.

I gave Brady my best ‘if looks could kill’ stare before jumping off Cody and following John. If I was ever capable of murder, it was right now.

My arm was ok, but my wrist had a bad sprain. With a support bandage, orders of ice packs and rest for a couple of days, I came back to the ranch. I begged John to let me ride. He eventually caved in on the provision I only rode in the arena until the weekend. I had to also ride one handed which would be an interesting new skill for me to learn.

He stopped me just as I jumped out of the truck. “Listen. I know Brady can be a bit direct, but everything he does has a good reason behind it. I trust that man with my life.”

I nodded. “I think it’s just a clash of personalities. I’ll try to calm my temper.”

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He grinned. “Might not be a bad idea. We’re heading out for a cookout again this evening but we’re taking the hay cart and the draft horses.”

I nodded before heading back to my room. I don’t think I’ve ever been so grateful to collapse on a bed. What a day. I closed my eyes and tried my hardest to focus on the positives of my life, rather than the negatives.

A sharp knock at the door echoed through my peaceful room. I jumped and rubbed at my eyes, realising I’d fallen asleep. Perhaps a power nap would do me some good. I opened the door, my stomach sinking as I saw Brady stood there.

“We’re about to leave for the cookout. Are you coming?”

I frowned. “It’s only two?”

“No. It’s nearly seven.”

My eyes widened in shock. “Oh, my. I thought I’d only had a ten-minute power nap.” I paused as I yawned. “Yeah, I’m coming. Just give me a minute.”

He nodded, staying put as I closed the door.

I fumbled over to the bathroom, soaking my face in cold water in an effort to wake myself up. That had been my first sleep without the aid of sleeping tablets in weeks. I felt good considering.





I made my way outside, dreading the walk up to the barn. We walked in silence for a few seconds before he cleared his throat.

“How’s your wrist?”

“Ok, thanks.”

I continued staring straight ahead, making it clear I wasn’t bothered about small talk.

“Listen, about earlier—”

I shot him a dirty look. “It’s fine. Leave it.”

He pursed his lips before nodding, accepting the rest of our walk would be in an awkward silence.

The two Shire horses they had with the giant hay cart looked fantastic. Their tails had been plaited and tied up, and colourful ribbons braided into their manes. The leather driving harnesses gleamed in the fading sunshine. The cart looked like something from an old Wild West movie with its huge wheels and rustic looks. I couldn’t wait.

I climbed up inside the trailer, taking a seat at the back whilst Brady went to the front. I started to feel a little guilty for cutting him short but told myself it was the least he deserved.

The wooden cart lurched forwards as the horses started moving us into the depths of the desert. As the rays of the blistering sun began to cool, I enjoyed the air flowing over

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me, cooling my skin and my emotions. The rhythmic beat of their trotting hooves combined with the squeaks and rattles of the tack and cart almost entranced me back to hundreds of years ago. Along with people's chatter and laughter, it was all just a welcome bubble of tranquillity I needed right now.

About an hour later, we stopped at an area which housed a beautiful creek to the side. Again, the cookout area had been marked with a fence as the perimeter. A few trees provided some shade over a few of the tables. The grill had been carved into the soft pink rock, hugging its home as if nature had created it. I couldn't help but think of The Flintstones for some reason.

After John's enviable food, we all relaxed with beers, and people chatted in their small groups. I took a wander down to the creek which was several hundred yards away.

A U shaped jagged formation of rocks encased the shallow water. Numerous trees covered it over, weeping and trailing into the small source of water. In the middle of the trees, at the apex of the U was a huge tree trunk on its side. I picked my way down to it, sitting on its rough surface as I stared into the pool before me. It was such an odd sight in the middle of this dry, bleak landscape. It was





almost like finding a diamond in a manure heap.

I heard the scuffling of feet behind me, mentally cursing whoever it was for disturbing my serene moment. My heart sank even further when Brady's gorgeous form appeared. That man could only be described as a rose bush. Absolutely beautiful to look at, but get too close and it stabs you for all its worth.

He sat down next to me which surprised me, and started throwing small pieces of dirt into the water. I watched the ripples moving out across the still surface, thinking back to my childhood with my dad teaching me and my sister how to stone skip.

Several minutes passed, the quietness between us only deepening. I continued staring straight ahead, trying my best to ignore it.

"How's your wrist?"

I smirked. "Same as it was an hour ago, thanks."

I caught his scrutinising look from the corner of my eye but refused to acknowledge it. My heart increased its steady pace, and a small sweat broke out on my palms.

"How did you break it?"

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I blinked, holding my eyes closed for a brief second as I chewed on my lip. “Car crash. It was my whole arm.”

“Oh. Bad wreck then.”

I shrugged my shoulders, finding a stray leaf between my feet. I picked it up, slowly shredding it to pieces. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Sorry to hear that. Did someone you hit you?”

“No.” I paused and smiled. “I was speeding.”

He said nothing for a few minutes as he carried on disturbing the peaceful scene in front of us.

“Was it just your arm you broke?”

“No. I broke my left leg, three ribs, and fractured my skull. I was in a coma for six days.”

He remained quiet for a minute or so, fiddling with something in his hands. “At least you’re better now.”

I bit my lip as I felt tears springing up from nowhere. I was not going to cry in front of this man. Managing to mutter a thanks, I started drawing patterns in the dust with my boots.

He coughed, wringing his hands together. “Well, I guess that was a lesson learned on speeding.”





His words cut right through me. What a pompous asshole. “As if I haven’t heard that enough already.”

“Sorry, it was just an automatic response. I was trying to lighten the atmosphere a little.”

Anger was simmering away in my gut once more. He didn’t know the first thing about my life, or the circumstances that led me to that awful car crash.

“Yeah, well don’t. I don’t need anyone’s pity, especially yours.”

He glanced across, surprise flickering through his dark eyes. “Ok, I’m sorry if I offended you.”

I snorted and stood up. “Whatever.”

“I am.”

“You lot wouldn’t know the meaning of sorry if it jumped up and bit you. Just leave me alone. I’ve got enough going on without you giving me a hard time just for the sake of it.”

With heat flooding my cheeks, I stepped over the log, and started to walk away. My emotions were running high once again and all I wanted to do was sit and cry it out. I’d come to this secluded little spot for some time out and yet again, that damn fine cowboy had ruined it.

“You know what,” I said, turning back around. “I’m not leaving. I was here first. I’m

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sick of men making me run away. That's what got me in this mess in the first place."

I plonked myself back down on the log and folded my arms over my chest. Glaring into the distance, I said nothing.

"Wow," he said, scratching his head. "I can see you have some stuff to work through. I'll give you some space."

As he stood up, I breathed a sigh of relief. Just the pressure I felt under when he was around was an added strain I didn't need. Yes, he was hot, but he was just as cruel to go with it from what I'd experienced so far.

"You know, sometimes it helps to talk to someone on the outside of the situation. Get a different perspective and all that."

I looked up at him with raised eyebrows. "Are you suggesting I'm going to get that from you?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm just saying I have a pair of ears, and I'm willing to listen."

I dropped my eye contact and went back to staring into the small well of water. The fact he was being nice was irritating me—I was finding it hard to stay angry. So overwhelmed by everything, it didn't take much at all for me to spill the dreadful truth.

"I was speeding the day I crashed because I came home to find my fiancé in bed with my sister."





Chapter Seven

An awkward hush fell between us. I continued staring into the water, as if all my answers might be found in the fluid serenity before me. A solitary tear escaped my brimming eyes and rolled down my cheek.

After what seemed like an age, Brady eventually broke the silence. “Is that why you came out here?”

I shook my head, lifting my head to meet his gaze. I was surprised to see his chocolate eyes swimming with concern.

“I attempted to patch things up with him.” I paused as I picked up a rock, and threw it into the water with a big splash. “Despite the fact they’d been having an affair for over three months.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Don’t.” I held up a hand in a stop sign. “Please don’t give me your sympathy. I don’t need it.”

He held his hands up in a surrender sign and fell silent.

For some reason, I found myself on a roll, telling him the ins and outs of it all. Maybe

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some part of me did need to talk it out with someone 'outside' of the situation, or perhaps I hoped he might ease up on me a bit.

"I needed help when I came out of hospital. I figured it was the least he could do considering he caused it, so he became my carer twenty-four seven. Unfortunately, that also gave him an opportunity to plead his case." I stopped and looked at the ripples fading on the water's surface. "Ten years together, that's a long time to throw away because of a three-month affair. That's what he kept clinging onto and eventually, he got his way. I agreed to try and make a go of it. He assured me he didn't love Alyssa, my sister, it was just a fling."

I hesitated, unsure whether he really wanted to listen to this or not. I became very aware of sounding like an idiot, doubting my reasons for being such a jumbled mess.

In a soft voice, he asked, "Did he then admit to loving her or something?"

I closed my eyes, the painful last argument we'd had playing out in my mind. "Alyssa announced she was pregnant two weeks ago." A few more tears released themselves, running down my pale cheeks. "The due date is the date Ben and I were supposed to get married. Talk about irony, huh?"





He let out a low whistle, and shuffled on the log.

“I completely lost it—that was the last straw. I couldn’t cope with the thought of it. We had a massive row last week when I demanded he tell her to get rid of it.” I paused and clasped my hands together. “We’d been trying for a baby for over a year. In the heat of the moment, he turned around and said at least my sister could have his children.”

He raised his eyebrows and clenched his jaw. “What an absolute douche.”

I nodded. “The worst bit is, I fell out with my best friend only a few hours before it all happened. She’d tried to tell me that Ben was seeing someone else and I just...blew up at her. I called her all the names under the sun and told her not to speak to me ever again. I went home and, well, the rest is history.”

“Ouch. Does she know what’s happened?”

“Yes. She sent me flowers and things whilst I was in hospital. It was still too sore to speak to her. The weeks have all kind of merged into a mess since, and now it’s more a case of being too embarrassed. After I told Mum about our latest row last week, she called Zoe and organised for me to come out here. John is Zoe’s uncle.”

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“Ah, I see. That’s really good of her though. Surely that’s enough for you to pick up the phone and speak to her again?”

I stood up to stretch my legs out. Running my hands through my hair, I fussed over stones and rocks on the bare earth. “I don’t think you quite realise how much of a bitch I was to her. I...” Tears started falling again. “I need to figure out me and Ben first. One thing at once.”

He nodded and stood up, running a hand over his stubble dashed chin. “So, why did your mum and Zoe send you out to a ranch?”

I smiled, a couple more tears squeezing their way from my eyes. “Horses have always been my solidarity in life. They have an amazing ability to transport me to this place in my mind where nothing matters, I’m free of the world, my life. I’ve not had a horse in my life for nearly eight years and I miss them more than anything.” I shrugged my shoulders. “I guess they thought it was the perfect fit.”

A shrill whistle cut through the air, breaking the intimate peace between us.

He wiped his hands on his jeans. “Sounds like we’re getting ready to move.”

I nodded. “Sure. I’ll be there in a couple of minutes.”





He faltered, his dark eyes lingering on me for a second or two before he turned and made his way back to the group.

I let out a long breath, feeling as though a tonne of bricks had been lifted from me. I walked back to the hay cart feeling strangely happy with the evenings' events.

By the time I got back to my room, darkness had fallen, wrapping everything in its night time promises. I flicked the TV on and climbed under my duvet, snuggling into my pillow. I was so relaxed, I jumped when my phone started ringing. I looked at the display with a frown as it was my works number.

“Hello?”

“Soph?”

My heart stopped before doing a triple backflip. “Ben?”

“Hey, gorgeous.”

My tongue tripped over itself as my brain struggled to string words together.

“Are you ok? Sophie?”

Finally, my mouth cooperated with my mind. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I needed to speak to you. I... I miss you.”

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“Leave me alone, Ben. I came here to get away from you for a bit, not be harassed by you. What the hell are you doing on my works phone? Who let you in the office?”

“Tania. Look, please come home, baby. I didn’t mean what I said, it was just a heat of the moment thing. I think jetting off somewhere for weeks was a bit of an extreme reaction to a silly argument.”

My body began shaking. My hands trembled as a mix of anger and sadness swamped me. “A silly argument? Are you kidding me? You had a three-month affair with my sister!”

“But we got past that, baby. Come home, please?”

My voice crept up another ten decibels as I erupted into a fit of fury. “Got past it? Are you kidding me, Ben? How am I ever going to get past the sight of you and her in our bed? Let alone deal with a living, breathing reminder of you both?” I stopped as a laugh came from nowhere. “I’d be its Aunt, but also its Step-mum. How messed up is that? It would be a daily reminder that she gave you something I can’t. I can’t...I can’t do it. I’m sorry, but I can’t.” I slapped myself on the forehead. “What the hell am I apologising for? I need some space and I need some time. Don’t call me again.”





“But I love you, Soph. Please.”

“Well, I loved you. Perhaps I should get pregnant by another guy and see how you feel about that. What would you do then?”

He paused for a moment. When he spoke, he sounded like he’d just swallowed a bunch of lemons. “I’d forgive you.”

I laughed. “Of course you would. Coming from the guy who became jealous of the bond I had with a horse. A horse.” I clutched at the side of my head, desperate to make him understand, make him see what he’d done to me. “Just leave me alone. If I want to speak to you, I’ll be in touch.”

I hung up and sat for a few seconds, processing the brief conversation. In nothing but sheer frustration, I let out a scream and hurled my phone across the room. How dare he call me when I asked for space?

All the unbridled emotions charging around me had my head in a spin. I didn’t know what to do except dissolve into a thousand tears. How could he not see it from my perspective? He’d torn my heart from my chest, stamped on it, and shredded it into millions of pieces. There was nothing he could do to fix the deep wound inside me.

A gentle knock at the door ceased my sobs. I dabbed at my face in an effort to look half

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respectable. Opening the door, I was surprised to see Brady stood there. He held his hat in his hands, and his handsome face wore a nervous smile.

“Evening.”

I faked a smile, squirming as I realised he was seeing me at one of my worst moments.

“Hi.”

“Are you ok?”

I nodded.

“I err... I heard you shouting...”

My heart thudded with a dead beat. Had I really been that loud? “Sorry, I didn’t mean to disturb people.”

“No, you didn’t disturb anyone. I was just walking past and heard you. Just thought I’d check if you were ok.”

His thoughtful gesture had more tears springing to the surface. “Thank you. I’m honestly ok.”

He fidgeted from foot to foot. “You err...” He lifted his arm, making a tentative move with his hand towards my face. “You have some mascara on your cheek.”

I wiped at it straight away, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment. “Thanks.”

He placed his hat back on his head and nodded to me. “I better let you get some sleep.”





I said nothing and started to close the door.

“Don’t cry over him. He’s not worth it.”

My face burned to a hundred degrees in less than second. My heart raced its own record sprint. Was his attitude towards me changing? Or was this just pity?

I bid him good night and headed back to bed. I hung on to the possibility that perhaps the hot cowboy might actually care about my pain. That thought alone issued a smile on my face. It had been a long time since I last went to bed smiling.