

TIME FOR

WYATT

Bonus Novella--Book 1

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TIME FOR WYATT

LA with Mikey

“**W**hat’s your plan for today?” Mikey asked once we were on the road.

“I’m going to go to her place again. No one answered yesterday, any of the times I went there.” I supplied, feeling a little hopeless, but definitely not defeated—yet. You got some of the conversation Mikey and I had on the way to the jewelry store, but there was more. To save you from having to rehash what you already know, I’m going to give you the things he left out.

“Could she have moved? I mean, I know you said things didn’t exactly end on a high note, so could she have gone somewhere to get a new start?” He pushed, and while I understood where he was coming from, Jackie, moving would not be a good thing at all.

“I sure hope not. If she moved, it’s a real dead end. Her roommate wasn’t my biggest fan, so I am hoping she didn’t answer because Jackie wasn’t there. I just need her to open the door so I can tell her I love her. If she still wants nothing to do with me, then I will respect that. I can’t

even call her because she either has me blocked or she got a new phone number. I am going to try the place I used to work after we go pick up your mom's bling for your dad."

"Tell me more about her. What does she look like? How old is she...I want all the pertinent information so I can help you look for her." Mikey pressed, and I handed him my phone before I thought about how I would best answer.

"Here. She's my lock screen, and you can go into my photos and see more of her. There's got to be at least a hundred of them, but she is quietly beautiful. Like...you can see it immediately, but as the seconds tick by, it becomes more and more obvious. The way she smiles, the freckles on her nose. She has the slightest space between her two front teeth, that's perfect. She has dark auburn hair. It's dyed, as you can see, but that color suits her as if she was born with it. Her eyes are the color of a storm, which makes sense because she demands a response, and she is capable of taking you out while leaving you utterly destroyed in what seems like no time at all. Mikey, she is so far out of my league, and she knows it, until ghosts from her past pull her away from reality. No one on this earth could ever take her place. She is a terrible singer, but I love listening to her belt out songs as if she has no idea what she sounds like."

"Look at you. You look so happy just talking about her, Wyatt. What the heck happened between you two?" My friend questioned, and that part I had the answer to, regardless of the fact that it didn't make a lick of sense to me.

"She grew up working on a ranch that kept her and her mom poor. When she learned I wanted to go back to that life, that I actually missed it and was thinking about doing it here, even, she wanted no part of it. When I asked her to at least come and see what *our* ranch was like,

she started getting ugly. She said some things I would have forgiven, but when she told me she regretted wasting her time on me, I let go. I figured, if she really felt like that, then I certainly wouldn't waste any more of it. You know, for someone who chased tail as if it were a sport I could medal in, and not for a single second would have thought I would want the one and only lifestyle, I wanted it with her. I could see myself living the rest of my life with *her*."

"Well, I am going to say the very thing I hated hearing, but mostly because of how true it is and there's not much you can do about it in the meantime. What's meant to be, will always find a way. That being said, finding her seems like the logical first step. I mean, how will she even know how you feel, and that there's even a way, until you present it as an option?"

"I don't believe in that stuff, Mikey. I mean, sure, it worked for you and Ri, and I am real glad for it, too. But fate or the idea of there being some ultimate matchmaker up above that's working things out for *me* seems a bit too good to be true. If I'm being honest, I think He has pretty much done some crazy matchmaking in Spring View already, and while I will admit all of you make it hard not to want the same for myself, I just don't see where there's any evidence that it's going to work out for me that way. Right now, my plan is to apologize and beg her. If she wants no part of it, then so be it. It will suck, that much I know, but it is what it is, you know?"

"Not really. I believe in Yah, and I know He is capable of doing the impossible for those in covenant with Him."

"Well, there you have it. I am not in covenant with Him. Mike, I appreciate you, but I'm not ready. Moreso, I'm not sure I even want to be. I love living my life the way *I* see fit. This is the only life I have, and I want to live it up. I don't want to worry about if I am offending some being above, or worse, even breaking some rules that are so outdated

they aren't even possible to keep. Enough about that. How does it feel to be married to your girl?" I changed the subject because I didn't want to debate whether or not there was a *god*. It was hard to miss that he noticed and wasn't fully on board with me trying to change the subject, but his smile showed he'd play along for my sake. I knew what he offered was simply a pass. The topic, however, would come back up, and to be honest, if it didn't, I wouldn't think too highly of his convictions. Either that, or we weren't the friends I thought we were.

"I don't think there are words for me to answer how it truly feels. Listen, I wasn't sure if we would ever *be* again, and then, well. There are some difficulties. They're small, and on the grand scheme of things, the pros outweigh the cons by the millions. I know what she saw hurt her, but Wyatt, it's always been Riley for me, too." He confessed, and it was clear to see the pain that he was feeling in his admission.

"I don't want to beat you up over it, and for me, it's clear to see she is just trying to figure out how to trust what she always believed was solid ground. I get it, you get it, even Riley, I'm sure, gets it deep down, that what her eyes saw and what she made up in her mind are nothing more than heartbreak. You two were never meant to be separated. What you have is the stuff that only gets stronger each day because you are going to make it. Bumps and bruises, cuts and scars may be a result when you cross the finish line, but you *will* cross it, and that's what counts. And maybe that's really what it's all about."

"I feel like I'm betraying her when I want to know more. I fight myself to keep from asking you for all the details of what she said that night. I want to know how to fix it all for her. I want to be *us* again. It's like I have my girl, but something is different. I get that our time apart changed things, but it feels like there's more to it. And hey, when did you go and get all philosophical and full of wisdom?" Mikey added, clearly struggling.

“For starters, I pretty much told you what was said. I’m sure she told you the rest herself. The two of you found something that most people don’t, especially when you factor in how old you were when you started to notice something was there. I’m sure there are things that when you both can trust that it’s real again, that you two are married. Mike, you are *married* to your *girl*, so when the dust settles, and it’s clear once again, it will come up, and you’ll work it out together. Just don’t let her go. Don’t let her push you away. She needs you to be the person she has always known you to be. She is doubting *herself* more than you, I promise. You are Riley’s everything. She really struggled without you, but she never for a second stopped believing in you. And she never stopped loving you.” I stated, hoping he would trust the reminder of the truth he already knew. Once I saw him nod his head, I added, “And I’ve always been full of wisdom, you just thought I was your competition and wouldn’t listen,” which caused him to smirk before he agreed.

After the Pickup of Expensive Jewels

“Alyssa, please. I am literally begging you to just hear me out. I prefer talking to your face, but I will shout it through the door if I have to. I love her. I haven’t for a second stopped loving her. In fact, from the moment she walked out my door, I have wanted to fix it, but I was so afraid of hearing I was in it alone that I didn’t chase after her and that is entirely on me. What she wanted was exactly what I was trying to give her, only it wasn’t here in LA. I will give it all up and figure out how to make it work if she would only give me another chance.

Nothing about my life is okay without Jackie. Please, tell her I came back and make sure she knows that I will do anything if she gives me a chance to tell her how I feel.” I begged Jackie’s roommate, who was never on team Wyatt.

The fact that they were roommates and not really friends made it a non-issue when Jackie and I were together but knowing that any chance I had depended on Alyssa giving Jackie my message wasn’t filling me with any warm and fuzzies. I knew Alyssa was there; that’s why I chose to plead my case through a closed door. I also knew that Jackie wasn’t. If she were there, she would have opened the door even if it was to shut me down and tell me to go away.

“Fine, I will sit in my vehicle and wait for her to come home then. Alyssa, I’m not leaving until I get a chance to tell her how I feel.” I assured, and that got a groan.

“She doesn’t live here anymore. She moved out about a week after she found out you left. Wyatt, it was fling. She knew you were a player, and she wanted your skill for however long you’d give it to her, but she always knew you’d move on, and you did. Let her go. Either way you look at it, someone is going to get hurt, so just cherish what you had, and stop trying to make it into something it was never meant to be.”

“I will do just that, when I hear it come from her and not from you through a door.” I conceded. If it were true that she moved out, staying any longer would be of no use. Just as I was about to get back in the vehicle, a person I vaguely remembered called out, effectively grabbing my attention.

“Wyatt, right? I’m Coleen. Jackie and I were washroom friends. We hung out in the laundry room where we aired out our laundry, so to speak, both literally and figuratively, but she told me about you. I will make sure she knows you came looking for her.”

“Do you have her number? Can I give you mine? That’s dumb. She knows mine already. I’m sorry. I just...never mind. Thank you. I really appreciate it.” It all seemed to happen so fast. The look in the stranger’s eyes seemed to be one of genuine concern. I mean, why would she offer me a bone if she had no dog in the fight? She called herself a *friend*, and like I said, she did seem familiar enough that I somewhat recognized her, so I had to trust that she would do as she said. After all, she was the one to offer.

When she turned to walk away, I fought to not beg her to do it right then and there like some sort of sociopath. Thankfully, I won that battle and got into the driver’s seat, where Mikey offered me a grim look he clearly hadn’t wanted to offer, only he failed at preventing it from showing up on his face. He did manage to offer an attempt of words of encouragement when he said, “I feel like you can trust her to tell Jackie.” All I could say back was, “I don’t think I have any other choice. She might be my last hope.”

I’m Gonna Have to Catch the Next One

As much as I wanted to be there for Silver. No, Riley. Um, that’s not right either now, is it? Tara...as much as I wanted to be there for *Tara*, I was sort of glad that Bronx told Mikey he’d have to hang back and watch things from the limo. I’m sure that seems a bit selfish, on my part. I mean, I could have asked to hang out with Chris, seeing as I was pretty confident, he wouldn’t be hanging out with Mikey in the limo when Snow was the other half of the singing equation, but I was running out of time.

"I hope you find her," Mikey offered, and I was relieved when it was clear he had meant it. I'm not sure why I thought he wouldn't have, I'm just saying it was nice to know that he did.



"Evans, my man. You looking to get your old job back?" Julio, my one-time boss, asked the moment he caught sight of me. I didn't have high hopes of finding Jackie at the club we met in, but I wasn't going to leave California without looking every possible place I could think of.

"I'm afraid not. I was around and figured I'd drop by. How have you been?" I returned, figuring I would leave off the real reason I was there, hoping he'd provide information without me having to come right out and ask him.

"Things are good. Business is steady. How's Jackie?" And just like that, that one question turned him into another dead end. I offered a little back and forth, so I didn't come across as rude or distracted, without committing to too much. I never told him Jackie and I ended things, just as I left off that I moved back home. I didn't lie to him, per se, I just left a whole lot unsaid on my part while allowing him to fill in all the blanks for himself. He assumed, and I didn't make any corrections, so it was pretty convenient when he was needed in the back, and I was able to take off without wasting any more time in a place that had nothing to offer.

After I left, I ended up driving all over the place.

I went up and down each road I could think of, and ones I had never been on before. And then I drove down the ones that surrounded all

the ones I'd just been on. The more area I covered, the less likely it seemed that I was going to find her.

Once I started feeling as if whatever hope I was holding onto was getting ready to throw itself out the window, I called my dad. I forgot all about the time difference, but he answered right after the second ring.

"Wyatt?" was all he said, but it covered everything while promising he had my back no matter what I said in return. I didn't share too much about Jackie with the people back home, but my dad was one of the few I had told, about her.

"Dad, I can't find her. I thought...for just a freaking moment, I let myself believe that I could have it all, too. That I could have the fantasy with all of you, but it's not in the cards for me, it seems. So, tell me how to forget her. How do I scrub her out of my mind?" I got out, and as each word followed the next while I emotionally gutted myself, I didn't even bother trying to fight away the tears.

"Oh, Son. You're still in California, so I suggest you hold off on scrubbing her away. Wyatt, you love her, and I think that is a pretty significant thing that you need to be grateful for. I get that it hurts, especially not knowing if you will get another chance, but don't give up." I tried to absorb some of my dad's *go-get-um son* motivational speech, but there was no way I was ready to be grateful for what we had if it meant I'd never get to see Jackie's face again. Don't get it twisted either, I'm not saying that I'm ungrateful, I'm just saying that I couldn't accept even the idea of me not finding her.

"Is there life after love? Has anyone ever answered Shania yet?" I threw out teasingly. I meant it, but I wanted to pull myself out of the funk I found myself in before I became an official buzz-kill.

“I have to believe there is, but if I lost Momma, I don’t think I’d answer the same. Just keep on searching, Wyatt. Even after you get back home, *if* it comes to that,” he tried to comfort, and I loved him for it. We didn’t do the serious talks all too often. I knew I could, only I never really took him up on it until recently. I also knew I could have just as easily called Mo. Hell, he’d understand just a little more, that much I knew.

My dad had a tough go of things until he ended up moving to Spring View, but he never spread himself out as thin as I had. He may have broken a heart in his past, but my birth mother broke his when she said she never wanted to be a mom and left the two of us. The fact that he met Lily, and we found our place on the ranch, was the best thing that could have ever happened to either of us. The heartbreak part that I knew he dealt with, assured me that he had an idea of how I was feeling.

Once the call ended with my dad, I drove back around, hoping this time I’d find her after she had gotten off of work or something. When my phone rang, a part of me wanted for it to be Jackie so much, thinking maybe the laundry girl kept her word and even got through, but instead, Riley’s name popped up.

“Hey, Wyatt. I just wanted to know if you were okay flying home tomorrow night or if you wanted to go home with Mike and me?” She got out the second I answered her call, and I couldn’t help but feel like I wasn’t the only one feeling things that didn’t make sense that night.

“I’m okay waiting. You good, Silver?” I asked, and when I heard her sigh, I pressed, “Ah, you’re ready to see that house of yours, huh? He did you right, Ri. You’re going to love it. Safe travels, and text me when you’re on the ground. Love you, Silver!”

Here's the thing. I knew Riley was up in her feels, just as I was. I also figured that she was with her husband, and he could help her through whatever it was she was dealing with, and that is why I pushed her over to the positive. The home Mikey had worked on for years was perfect for the two of them, so it wasn't a lie. And the fact that I felt like I was chasing insanity each time I came up empty on the Jackie front had me convinced that I wanted no part of sharing the det's of what had me caught up in *my* feels while Riley was in the midst of her own issues.

When Can I Flip the Switch?

I wasn't upset that Chris bailed and spent all of his time with Snow. Actually, a part of me was jealous that he got the girl, but all along I knew he was the settling-down type, no matter how hard he tried to convince himself it wasn't true.

It all started with Marybeth, and while she had a completely different effect on both of us, she was still influential or maybe the better word would be *detrimental*. Marybeth showed me a good time, and since she was just a girl I knew, I was more than okay with what she offered freely without getting my heart broken in the process. After messing around with her, I wanted more, so I started to chase sexual release like an animal, and the more ways I found there were to get me there, the more I wanted to master them all and even try to come up with new ideas altogether. I may not have wanted a monogamous lifestyle, but I took care in making sure I wasn't a selfish lover either.

Being young, dumb, and horny led me to break a few hearts in the beginning, but once the rumors of my tail-chasing worked its way around our town, I made sure I didn't tell lies just so I could score. I wanted the girl I was with, in the moment, to have a good time, and I tried to make sure that whoever it was understood that I wasn't the relationship type. Being honest didn't always work, however. For some dumb reason, I became a challenge that far too many foolishly hoped they'd be the one that would get me to change my mind. I fully blame all the mass-produced, fictional garbage of tales, where the right girl has this nearly supernatural ability to change the tortured soul of a womanizer into a one-woman man. It's stupid. It's played out, and in my opinion, the girl should have never given a single second of her time to the idiot from the beginning. And while I fully admit Jackie found a way to make me want to forget everyone but her, it's the exception, never the rule, and it breaks way too many hearts with its ridiculous idea suggesting that there's always hope.

Anyway, enough of that. Chris, being preoccupied, offered me alone time to give myself a much-needed pep talk, while creating a habit-forming, brain-transforming mantra to convince myself that I was wrong. What I had was a case of delusional, misplaced feelings that were based solely on the fact that Jackie gave me what no other person ever had before. She played hard to get, and then she rejected me. I told myself that I wasn't in love with her, I was just hellbent on making her love me. I understand how much that doesn't make sense, but you need to understand that I had to do something, and in that moment, I chose to live up to the man-whore I'd always been. After all, your brain ends up believing what you tell it, so I kept telling mine that Jackie was no one special. It would take time, but I figured the more I repeated it, the faster I'd stop the pain. Right before my father

called, I thought about ripping my heart straight out of my chest, so I wouldn't have to feel myself dying inside. Sure, that would make it a bit hard to keep on living, but it seems heartbreak has a funny way of turning you into an imbecile.

"Did you find her? I hoped not hearing from you meant you re-connected." He asked, and knowing I didn't want to punish him for caring, I answered, "Nah. But I'll be home soon enough, and life will get back to normal, for good. I really think being here surrounded by love-sick people caused me to remember things a bit better than they were. Hey, Dad, thanks for calling and checking in, but they just called first class, so I have to board. See you later."

"Wyatt...wait. Oh, never mind. Kid...just know that I love you, and I'll see you when you get home. Safe travels." It was obvious he had more that he wanted to say, but he knew me well enough to know it would only make things worse. Was I happy that somewhere along the line I became the one who would end up alone? Not in the moment, but I figured if I got back into the game, I would learn to be again. After all, having something new whenever you wanted had its perks. What I shoved away was just how incredible it was to really get to know someone while realizing in order to really do so, it would take a lifetime. A lifetime where I would have happily studied, searched, and memorized each and every detail of her life while allowing her to see the me I had ignored until I found her. Yeah, I shoved all of that away, but when I took my seat, I thought I may have understood the way Riley felt the night she thought her life with Mikey was over.



I planned on taking a car service home from the airport, only Mr. Durand already had someone waiting for me. I made sure I thanked

him for the whole trip and then I rested my head back and closed my eyes. I figured a two-hour ride with a stranger who wouldn't say a word unless I made it clear I wanted him to, was far better than having to chitchat with one of the many people I loved who meant well, but would only make things worse.

As we drove, I thought about the time Jackie and I spent with one another. At first, I tried to shut the memories out, only I decided to relive them instead, hoping if I did, I could let them go and move on.

Let's Back Things Up a Bit, Shall We?

"Hey, Trouble. You've got something you want to say, or are you just going to keep on staring?" Is what came out of the mouth of the incredibly intoxicating young woman who I'm convinced stole my heart the moment she came into my field of vision.

"I'm sorry I've kept you waiting. I was just admiring how beautiful you are, and as I took in each of your features, I realized that you are the most stunning person I have ever met." I answered, caught somewhere between wanting to take her right then and there, and wanting to play cat and mouse just long enough to make things between us even hotter, later. Before I finished the last word, she rolled her eyes and shook her head as if she didn't believe a single syllable.

"We haven't met, and that line is lamer than the cliché ones I've heard nonstop since I clocked in. Why don't you just tell me what you're drinking, and then you can go and try that line on one of the girls that might believe it." She pushed, and if I hadn't caught her slip

as she begun to check me out after she looked over toward the group of girls she was referring to, I might have believed she was a dead end.

“Well, Alyssa, my name is Wyatt. I have zero interest in getting to know anyone other than you, and I’ll take a Jack and Coke,” I returned, and for some reason, I was hit with a squinted-up facial expression that made more sense when she threw back, “What makes you think my name is *Alyssa*?”

I smiled as she stared, and I grinned even wider that she nearly flinched when I flicked her name badge and then winked. Whatever bravado I thought I was working with all but fizzled out when she simply laughed and said, “Yeah, that’s right. *I’m* Alyssa. I’ll be right back with your drink, even though something in me is telling me that if I carded you right now, I’d be spared having to spend any more time with you.”

She had a point. My ID was fake, but I was hoping that my next move would be enough to throw her off her game. I pulled out my license, looked her dead in the eye, and lied through my teeth.

“You could check, but I have a feeling you just want to find out where I live,” I got out, and when she rolled her eyes again, I gave her my address. It was dumb because it didn’t match the fake ID I was offering up, but I was banking on her not calling my bluff as much as I was hoping she would remember where I told her I lived. I seriously didn’t know what she’d do next, but I was grateful when one of her coworkers walked up to her, causing her to break her part of our stare-down, and unknowingly rectified a situation she had no idea was even a thing.

“Jackie, that weird dude from the other day is back and asking for you. Go take your break. I can take care of this one for ya.” Jackie, her name was Jackie. As I looked back and forth between the two I smirked when *Jackie* sighed as she shook her head, spun on her heels, and

ordered, "Don't even think about following me," before she stopped, turned to look over her shoulder and added, "If you're smart, you'll be gone before I get back, or you'll try your lines on Mandi here, and you might even get lucky. I mean, she is a sucker for the ones with accents." When I looked at Mandi, I decided to see if I could get *her* to spill.

"Let me hear it. I'll try to guess where you're from, and if I get it right, you will owe me some answers." The blonde with a face full of makeup when she really didn't need it asked, and when I lifted my brow and replied, "Now how in the world is that fair?" She tapped her chin, bit her lip, and guessed, "North Carolina, but I am sensing I may be off a bit. Maybe Georgia?" I wasn't sure I wanted to know how she figured it out, but I decided to play along, hoping she would put in a good word.

"Well, I'll be. Not bad. I'm not sure how one would acquire such a talent, but good for you. So, what's your question?"

"Are you looking for a one-night stand, a few nights of fun, or something more? Because the first two options are not Jackie, and if you are dumb enough to try after I am being kind enough to warn you, then it's your funeral."

"Who said I was trying for any of the above? I think she is beautiful and I told her so."

"You are either super adorable or really good at playing a fool. All heads turn when you walk in a room. That being said, she, along with everyone else who works here, has seen you leave with a new person every night. That is a huge turn on for some of us, me, being one of the *us*," she started, and paused to wink and give me a look that made it clear she was offering herself to me if I was interested, before she continued. "So, really...what do you want with Jackie?"

“I just told her she was beautiful, and now I am being made into a villain. Hum. Well,” I tried to answer, only to be cut off with a look of *so not buying it*.

“Hold up, you can save that southern gentleman, false innocence for someone else. You’ve already been marked. You don’t exactly hide your player moves, so, for real. Just leave Jackie alone.” Before I could offer any more in my defense, the owner of the club called my name, and after I shook his hand, I turned back to the blond and winked. I may have gone to the establishment a few nights over the past two weeks, but it wasn’t just to score. I wanted to know what I’d be working with if I got the job I applied for. I had hoped to be a bartender, even though I wasn’t old enough, but I knew I would get the bouncer position which I was more than fine with.



I tried to be on my best behavior when I landed the job at the same establishment Jackie worked. I was hired as part of security, but not a doorman. I was there to keep an eye on the place from the inside. I wasn’t armed security; which they had, and they were pretty decent. My job was more of a dream than anything else. I was to stalk the place from the inside and intervene if necessary. I could dance, I could flirt, I just had to keep moving, and refrain from using any drugs or alcohol. The rest of the job details were pretty lax.

After my second week, Mandi started drilling me again. I have to admit, I was tempted to take her up on her offer a few times, but I really didn’t want to blow it with the one I was warned against. The more time I spent around Jackie, the more I wanted to know her. She was different than all the women I’d met before, and she had no idea just how beautiful she was. I think the fact that I had turned down all of my co-workers, repeatedly, helped her to no longer despise me as

much as she had. I didn't do it just for her though. I am a firm believer that you shouldn't eat where you crap, so it wasn't too hard for me to resist all the offers from our co-workers. As for working with Jackie, I would figure something out if things ever changed between us.

"I'm wondering if those girls you brought home were just damsels in distress and you, as a white knight, made sure they got home safely." Mandi teased as we cleaned the place after closing. I couldn't say anything, or I'd look like an ass, so I just lifted my brow and grinned. "And that grin. Wyatt, you are trouble, but that only makes me want you more. You know, I feel a little off my game. I mean, I pegged you for a player, and I still believe you are, only now I'm not sure if I've lost *my* touch. The only other thing I've got is that maybe you're afraid you won't live up to all the hype we built up around you?"

"I don't mix business with pleasure. It makes for a hell of a time after. I am just minding my business so I can stay housed and fed. Nothing personal, Mandi." I answered truthfully, and I noticed the slightest of a twitch in the corner of Jackie's lips from my peripheral vision, but wasn't sure if it was merely my imagination, so I forced myself not to look too much into it.

~ If I keep at this pace, you will get there eventually. But if I stay inside the club, Jackie and I both worked, it won't make sense how things went from nothing to something, just like that. And it was sort of *just like that*, only a little spicier, and a whole lot funnier—in theory. It wasn't actually funny, ha ha, but it was a night I will never forget. So, let's move this story along, shall we?

You Should Come Work with Me

My roommate's personal life and extracurriculars made me look like a saint.

His name was Mario, but the rest of the world called him *Zeus*. He made a killing as an entertainer at a male strip club and wouldn't need a roommate at all if he didn't have an insatiable appetite for expensive things. Anyway, one night we were hanging out watching a movie, which in itself was rare because he wasn't home all too often and when he was, he was in his room either sleeping or thoroughly worshipping whichever male or female he chose to *entertain*—sometimes one of each. Like I said, I was nearly virginal when in his presence, and I am not judging in the slightest. Anyway, back to that night. The two of us were watching a movie, and near the end, my mom video-chatted me. The fact that she was her sweet, loving self-caused Mario to literally blush beside me.

"Oh, my word. If I had a momma as sweet as you, I may be a whole different man," he let out, and my mom all but adopted him on the spot. Seriously, she even sent him care packages along with mine. After the call ended, Mario looked at me and asked if I wanted to make some extra cash. I raised my brow and was ready to turn him down, only he held up his hands and filled me in on the details.

"Listen, it's nothing illegal, and while it may not make your momma happy, it is still pretty PG13, well, that's a lie simply because there's an age limit. Maybe it'd be better if I compared it to the fact that you work in a club that is 21 and over, so what I am offering— you could use your *real* ID." I knew he was a stripper, but I wasn't really sure what it fully entailed apart from the taking off your clothes part, so I squinted my eyes and simply looked at him.

"I work at classy place that has rules. It's high-end and requires a certain *look* and talent, which is what sets it apart from the trashy joints. It pays a much higher rate than just your run-of-the-mill strip club. *You* have that good ol' boy look that will kill if you are willing to go, full-blown cowboy, while taking off your clothes as your admirers all but throw themselves at you. You won't be doing anything more than serious grinding during private sets, and your bat and balls will technically be covered. If you are worried about not being able to move, I can and will teach you, but I don't think you'll need much help. I've seen you in the clubs and know you like to score, so this offers you bank, for what you already do for free."

"It's not the same," I tried to protest, only Mario cut me off before I could say another word.

"How isn't it? I have to work tonight. Come, see what I do, and then tell me why you can't do it. It's all about the promise of sex and being the object of their wildest dreams. You are an actor playing a part, and as your roommate, I happen to know you play that part almost every night with a new female, so why not use it to your advantage?" I was about to tell him I wasn't a prostitute when two things happened. First, I realized that what I did was really no different apart from the way I seemed to have placed myself on a horse who happened to be quite high, all because I didn't get paid for the women, I freely gave my body to. And second was Mario, when he caught what I was thinking and called me out on it.

"You don't have to sleep with them. In fact, it's frowned upon for safety reasons as well as legal ones. You just dance while they dream whatever they want as they watch you and give you more money than you could guess if you tried to right now. I don't care what you say, you are coming with me tonight. And stop looking at me with all that judgment on your face."

"I'm sorry. I really don't mean to suggest I am better than you. I have no clue what you do. We don't have establishments like that where I come from. Yeah, there are strip clubs in town, but its only woman and not really my thing. I will come, but I can't promise you anything." I returned, and he smirked before he slapped my leg and said, "When I let you count my money, I think you will be singing a whole different tune."



I don't think I was fully prepared for just how right Mario was...

We didn't leave the club until three hours past close because *Zeus* and a few of the other dancers helped me work on getting the moves just right. My roommate got right up next to me and explained once again, "It's sex. You are selling them the promise or the illusion of sex, so treat them right, and you'll be fine. Let them believe that they can ride you, cowboy, and then we'll come up with your name, and you'll be bringing in the dough in no time at all."

"His name needs to be something crazy like, Outlaw Clint Cash or Thunder Rolls." One of the guys, *Maverick*, suggested while another, who went by *Angel* added, "It's too bad your real name's Wyatt, cause Wild Wyatt West fits."

"Nah, he is more of a Buck Bronco or Double B if you can handle the ride and stay in the saddle." Mario suggested, and the owner of the club simply yelled, "That's exactly who he is. Thanks for the added handle. Welcome to the club. I think you will find the payout to be well worth it. The ends always justify the means as long as you are willing to put on a show. Sell the fantasy. The guys will fill you in, and we can work out all the details after your first run at amateur night later tonight."

I was expecting to feel some sort of nervous energy the first time I took the stage as *Buck Bronco*, but I focused on the seductive part and fed off the crowd as they screamed and threw money my way. I was given a QR code that could be scanned by anyone wishing to pay me from their phone. My first dance felt as if it went by so fast, and while I made my way off the stage as women begged me not to go, I knew I would be back. I counted out 180 bucks after dancing for five minutes, and I was in.

The rest of my sets would be a little longer, I would have to pay "house fees", and my obligations after would vary in time depending on how many private requests were made, as well as photo ops and autographs. All in all, I had the potential to make more money in a night than I made a week working at my current job. Both options were less of jobs then they were getting paid to play and I was all about making that work.

Is It Just Me, Or Is It Getting Hot in Here?

It was my fifth night working my second job when a few of my female coworkers from my first job showed up. Clearly, they didn't know about my second source of income and they all but leapt from their seats catcalling the moment they recognized me. I was glad none of them called me by my real name, and relieved when I noticed Jackie

wasn't with them. A part of me was curious how she'd respond if she found out what I was doing for extra income, and there was another part that hoped she never would.

Working with Jackie, spending time with her, left me wanting some sort of connection to build between us. I wanted something I never wanted before but learned quickly that I would happily settle for whatever she was willing to give. Somehow, I figured this part of me, if she found out, would offer nothing more between us than work acquaintances, and I wasn't a fan of that thought in the slightest.

After I finished on stage, I stood in the back talking to a few of my coworkers and was informed that a group of females had booked a private twenty-minute session. Even though I was pretty sure who was behind it, I wished with all I had in me that when I got to the room, Jackie still wouldn't be one of the ladies waiting. A slight smile worked its way across my face when I looked at the familiar people and found my wish had come true, only when Mandi winked and said, "She is on her way, Loverboy, and she has no clue what's in store," my heartbeat quickened. I couldn't help but feel that once Jackie arrived, there would be no chance of anything starting up between us in the future. I wasn't happy with the idea, but I figured I would offer them the best show I could allowing the chips to fall where they may.

Jackie sparked something inside that I had never felt before, but it wasn't something that had the power to take me out yet. So, I decided to do what I was hired to; I worked that room and had each of my coworkers practically begging me to take them home. The moment Jackie arrived I locked eyes with her and walked right over to where she stood staring in obvious shock. As soon as I was close enough, I took her by the hand and led her to a chair where I encouraged her to take a seat.

“So, this is how you chose to spend your free time? And here I thought I might have misjudged you.” She got out just loud enough for me to hear over the music.

“Well, now, it isn’t nice to judge people based on things you know nothing about. I’m dancing, and *you* are clearly enjoying it.” I pointed out, but Jackie tried her best to deny the obvious.

“Hardly. I can’t say I’m surprised, though. I mean, you’re attractive, and you clearly know how to move to make women fawn all over you, but that does nothing for me. I *actually* respect myself.” She tried to assert while tearing me down in the process.

“Hum, well, tell me why you begin to pant when I do this? Or why you’re trying to make me feel bad about what I do when I am obviously affecting you? Oh, wait, is that it? Are you upset that your body wants me when you have been trying to avoid me this whole time?” I replied as I moved in ways she couldn’t ignore while clearly hitting a nerve.

Her breath caught right before she chose to play mean.

“Humans are merely animals, and we respond to the opposite sex. My body is doing what it was created to, but the thing that separates me from females in the wild is my brain being able to reject what is only going to end in either disappointment or heartbreak, and I am not interested in either.”

I chose to smile at her after she tried to shut me down, which only caused her to sneer, and then I licked my lips and threw back, “I can say with confidence I will not disappoint, and if your heart gets broken, that would be on you. I am more inclined to believe mine would be the one that is smashed, but what do I know?” And before she could utter another word, I stood completely up, ran my hand down my chest, and walked back over to where the rest of our coworkers were seated.

For the rest of the session they extended, I didn't so much as look at Jackie, but I knew each time she looked at me.



At work, Jackie tried giving me the silent treatment, and I let her for two shifts. It didn't make sense, but I was convinced that she was over it until I caught her glaring at Mandi when she asked me if I was ever going to take her up on her offer.

"I know your rules, so listen. I will quit this job so there is no conflict, and I will leave the rest in your clearly capable hands. I mean, I have a feeling that you will not only rock my world, but you may ruin all other men for me when you walk out my door."

"As nice as you are for saying that I never try to *ruin* anyone. I'm also not into making people quit their jobs. Besides, I thought you had a boyfriend." I answered the best I could without making things between Jackie and me any more uncomfortable than she insisted on making them.

"I don't do the boyfriend thing. I have a Milo, and I have a Jeff," she answered, and that's when I caught Jackie rolling her eyes. I smiled at Mandi even though the cause of it was the girl standing behind her, pretending not to listen and, even more, not to care.

I went back to work, and after the third time Jackie and I crossed paths that night, I offered her the smile she so easily brought out of me.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were stalking me." I teased, and was rendered speechless when she turned, gave me a nasty little look, and just before she readied herself to turn back around to walk away, she mumbled an explicit phrase and pushed me against the wall. The funniest part about what she had done was that she was a

great deal shorter than me and even smaller-framed. That didn't stop her from fisting my shirt, pulling me down, and claiming my mouth as if it belonged to her all along.

Her kiss was demanding and easy for me to sync with. Just as I was about to grab her face and deepen the kiss so I could keep her right there in that moment, she pulled back, licked her lips, and said, "Not bad, but not all I imagined it would be either." I licked my own lips in response and grinned from ear to ear. The only thing I said in return was, "Same."

She meant to throw me off my game only she slipped when she admitted she spent time thinking of me. I wanted her to know I was thinking about her too. I agreed to her lying assessment so easily to keep the game she was playing alive. I would pretend nothing happened between us, and when I needed to, I would call her out on her Freudian slip.

It was the very same night that Jackie found she had something more to say. We were out in the parking lot, and I was just about to get in my vehicle when she called out, "You going to your other job or meeting up with Mandi?"

I grinned with my back turned and threw back, "Neither. Why do you ask?" And right before I asked the last part, I turned around and said, "You jealous?" She didn't have to answer because it flashed in her eyes. Why she had to play games when I would do whatever she wanted if she'd just ask, I had no clue.

"Not even a little," she tried to play, but I took three fast and wide strides toward her, closing the distance, and once I was close enough, I looked her dead in the eye and challenged, "Don't try to lie to me until you figure out how to convince yourself, first."

When she had to fight just to swallow, I took her face between my hands, bent down and kissed her right. This time, I was in full control, and the way she moaned into my mouth as she gasped for not only air but more of me changed everything. There was no way she would be able to deny that she felt something for me. I wasn't delusional enough to think she wanted anything more than something physical, only I didn't want that. Wait...I did, but what I meant was that wasn't all I wanted from her.

"Now...that's more like how I imagined it to be," I admitted, still extremely close after I broke our kiss. Jackie, with her eyes just barely opened, licked her lips and nodded before she admitted, "I feel like I am going to regret this. I never should have kissed you. Can I take it back?"

"Nope. Do you really think you will be able to pretend it never happened? Because I will never forget kissing you, either time." I confessed.

"I bet you say that to all the girls," she uttered flatly, clearly bothered by her correct assumption that I was experienced. "What I don't understand, is why you had to mess with me?" She added, and that didn't sit well with me at all.

"What are you talking about. *You* drive me crazy. I haven't stopped thinking about you since the first time I laid eyes on you. You are gorgeous, and might I remind you that you kissed me? Now, I am never going to get you out of my brain," I started, pausing to place my hands at the base of her neck where my thumbs brushed against her jawline. Once she really looked at me, I pleaded, "Jackie, come with me. Let's go somewhere and talk. Nothing else, just...you know what...just get in, and we will sit and chat, but I don't want to walk away from you like this. You have all of these ideas about me that

I want to address. I should get an opportunity to defend myself, at least.”

It was clear she was unsure what to do, and when I offered to get in her car instead, she nodded and unlocked it with her key fob. Just before I was about to take my seat, I asked if it was okay if I moved it back, and as soon as I made enough room, I sat down, turned as much as I could to face her, and went for it.

“I’m not going to lie to you. Actually, I will never lie to you. It’s not my style and does nothing for me. I have been with a *lot* of women. You were right to draw that conclusion. But I don’t go around breaking hearts or being cruel,” I started, and when she closed her eyes and smirked, I asked her what was up.

“I have a hard time believing that you haven’t broken any hearts when you love and leave a new girl each night,” she accused, and turned her head to face me, hoping to find something, but I wasn’t exactly sure as to what she was looking for in that moment.

“I can’t tell you that some girl, somewhere along the way, didn’t feel things that were heartbreaking. But I can tell you that even in high school, I’ve never led a person to believe I was offering more than a good time. If I even sensed they wanted more, I wouldn’t continue. I have had a new woman each night, when I chose to, that is true, but not always, and not even one since I met you. I will not be made to feel sorry for the things I’ve done in my past. Even if, for some reason, I tried, it wouldn’t change anything, so it’s a waste of time and energy. As for this, I have no idea what happened when I first saw you, but something in me felt different.”

“That’s because I was the first person to tell you *no*,” she returned, so full of confidence it was incredibly sexy, it made me bite down on my lower lip and grin before I addressed the flaw in her reasoning.

“You know...I actually thought about that but even that isn't true. You seem to think I had this master plan of trying to seduce you, but you're wrong. And quite frankly, if that was my M.O., my game needs serious work. Jackie, I want to get to know you. I want to spend time with you and be the one who makes you laugh. Because when I see you smile, when you throw your head back and literally shake from the humor you allow yourself to feel fully, it reaches my soul. I don't know what I am doing. Hell, I have no idea what I am even saying. I just know, you are a person I want in my life always. Or at the very least, as long as you'll have me,” I defended, realizing I meant every word as they came out of my mouth.

“You don't even know me, though. Wyatt, it took me running away from what would have been a bad life to learn who I was and that I wasn't lacking. Even more, I learned I was worthy of goodness. You walked in, and I'm not blind. I noticed that you look a lot like perfect. But so has every other person with eyes—men included,” I smirked when she added the part about the men, which caused her to roll her eyes. “Don't do that. That's the look that made me kiss you, and I'm not sure what will happen if we kiss again.”

“Woe. Jackie, I told you I am not going to lie to you. So, I need to make something very clear, every part of me wants to kiss you again. If you adamantly refuse, I will obey, but I very much plan on tasting your lips again. Understood?” I declared, and while I admitted clearly how I was feeling, I ran my thumb across her lower lip and took in a deep breath the moment she sucked in a shaky one of her own.

“I know I am going to regret this, but the sexual tension is too much. I can't even think straight, and at this point, I feel like even if you never speak to me again after I cave, I won't regret it. Do you think if we just go back to my place, we can get the elephant that's hogging up all the room to step back enough so I can breathe?”

"I will not have any part in you wanting to get things over with. I also will not stop talking to you. Besides, this tension between us is unlike any I have ever felt before. It will not go away simply because we have sex. Once I get a taste of you, it's only going to become more intense. I'm sure of it. I want...No, I need *you* to be mine. It's all I can think about, Jackie."

"Again, you do things to me, and I want to believe you, I really want to, but it's so intense that I start second-guessing myself. Wyatt, I am afraid this isn't real. Even worse, I'm really no different than Mandi because I don't think I will be able to move on after you. Which *is* insane because I barely know you, and yet I can't stay away." Hearing her say the very things I felt yet couldn't understand, had me lifting her chin so I could look deep into her eyes. The light from the streetlamp made them visible but muted the beauty I knew was there. As she looked at me, I tried my best to make things clear.

"You do realize that statistically speaking, the man is more likely to disappoint. Now that you just admitted that I assure you that I'm afraid, too. I have this feeling that *you* are going to be the one who devastates me. I even have proof that my life has already changed. I haven't so much as looked at another woman since the minute I found you." Jackie shook her head slowly while keeping her eyes locked on mine. I nodded silently to confirm what I said was true, while leaning down to place the gentlest kiss on her lips that I could manage. Our mouths barely touched, and yet she moaned, demanding more. Jackie threw her hands around me and deepened our kiss, and just like before, a fire, so intense, burned between us. In that moment, I was convinced that she would annihilate me. Instead of trying to regain some sort of control, I added fuel to the flames, figuring I'd go out in a blaze of glory, and I'd take Jackie right along with me.

It's the Little Things

"So, we've got the kissing part down, but I want to take you somewhere. I want you to tell me everything about yourself. What is your idea of a perfect day?" I asked Jackie, and when she looked at me and asked, "Day, or date?" I pulled her into my arms before we sat down for our break, and answered, "Either. I only said *day* because you still get spooked when I say anything that remotely involves the two of us getting to know one another beyond our lips touching."

"Only because I am still not convinced you aren't going to take my heart and go home, leaving me..."

"Dead? You'd be dead if I took your heart anywhere. Lucky for you, I like your heart beating inside of your chest, and I am in no rush to go home." I redirected. It was still pretty new that we were even talking, but I was over her trying to shut us down every chance she got, even though it was already evident we were both interested in one another.

"Was your home life bad, or just boring?" she asked, and clearly didn't believe me when I answered, "Neither. I don't think any child pays attention to how good they have it while it's happening, but my life was pretty great."

"If it was so great, why did you leave?" She pressed before she took a bite of her sandwich.

"I wanted to find what was next for me. My hometown is pretty lightly populated," I tried to explain to be cut off with, "Did you run out of women to seduce?"

I knew if I questioned her or pushed back, she would deny that she meant anything about it and claim she was only joking, so I chose instead to clarify the thing that bothered me most about what she said.

“Seducing is suggesting that I trick or mislead people to get them into bed. They knew what I was offering, and they took me up on it willingly. Are you jealous of *them*, or upset that I haven’t tried to sleep with you?”

“You don’t have to be a jerk,” she tried to play, and when I lifted my brow, clearly questioning her claim, she corrected, “Maybe a little of both. Does that make you happy? Because I am far from it. In fact, I feel like an ass.”

“Well, there’s no need for any of that,” I assured, reached across the table, took her hand into mine, and rubbed my thumbs over her soft skin. “None of them matter, and when it comes to you, it has nothing to do with me not wanting to, I promise. So, will you let me know where I can take you so we can move past this doubt and get you to stop resisting me all the time? I am not the big bad wolf, Jackie.” She may not have been fully convinced but she told me her idea of a perfect day, and the next one we both had off, I brought her to the beach where I learned just how much I loved spending time with her.



One of the things that fascinated me most about Jackie was how she simply lived her life in such a way as if she didn’t care what other people had to say or think about it. She danced when she felt like dancing. She sang when a song came on that she liked; even when she didn’t know the real lyrics. Jackie would belt out whatever she thought they were saying with a confidence that made you question whether you were the one who got the words wrong—not her. She was so unapologetically true to herself that just being with her filled me with a true joy that I

could feel throughout every part of my body. But there was something else inside of her as well. As confident as she was, something tripped her where I was concerned, and I couldn't for the life of me figure out what it was. On the night I finally agreed to move us to the level she had been close to begging me for, I came right out and asked.

Everything about that day seemed nearly too good to be true, even for me. We were in sync in all things. Our mood, the things we wanted to do, and the food we ate together all fit and made sense. That in itself wasn't the shocking part. The more time we spent together, the more we learned just how much we worked. And for me, the more time I spent with Jackie, the more I knew I never wanted to live without her.

We started our day with a hike. The weather was ideal, and when we stopped for a break, things got a little steamy. I didn't want our first time together to be outside where people could stumble upon us. I also had made it a point not to move things to the next level until I knew without a doubt that she was ready for reasons beyond being turned on in the moment. I never wanted her to regret sharing herself with me, and while the setting was magnificent and could be something we might look back on fondly one day, I didn't want to rush or worry about anything but her. So, I pumped the breaks.

The fact that she took it as well as she had when I told her I wanted to wait, surprised me. Normally, she would pout, complain, or sometimes she'd close herself off when I wouldn't go any further. I figured those times she was held hostage by her hormones and being denied the release they were demanding in the heat of the moment. Regardless of her past response, that day she just nodded and smiled. I'm not kidding or overexaggerating when I say that everything about that day was like a dream.

So, later, when we were finished loving one another thoroughly for the first time, and something shifted in her enough that I noticed, I tried to offer her space to tell me what was on her mind on her own. Instead, she went to turn her back on me as she mumbled something that I couldn't fully comprehend. I asked her what she said and tried to prevent her from pulling away from me. With my arm under her neck, I repositioned myself, so I was on my side, and I ran my fingers through her hair as I waited for her to say something.

"That was unlike anything I have ever experienced before, and yet I have these voices in my mind that are trying to ruin it." She admitted before she closed her eyes, forced down a swallow, as a tear fell from her eye.

I leaned over while I cradled her closer and kissed away her tear, then, I encouraged her to get it out.

"If it's there, you can't ignore it. Jackie, that was unlike anything I have ever experienced, and if there is something trying to ruin this moment, then tell me so we can face it together." I kissed her forehead and held my position as I waited for her to open up so we could chase away her demons.

"I can feel you everywhere, it's like, and I know how stupid this is going to sound, but it's like we just created bonds that are meant to last forever, and yet, there's this voice inside me telling me that it was one-sided. I hear these questions in my mind that I don't even want to think about, because you didn't do anything to cause me to ask them." I placed my finger under Jackie's jaw, encouraged her to face me, and when she turned her head, I kissed her lips before I tucked her against my chest right underneath my chin, where I could feel her trying her best to relax.

"I was taught that sex forms soul bonds that last a minimum of seven years. I never paid attention to that because I didn't feel anything

more than the release in the past, and I always moved on. What just happened between us was nothing like I ever felt before, so I am right there with you. Just like I figured, being with you has only made me want you more. Jackie, if I did something wrong, tell me, and I will fix it, but I think this has to do with someone else. I feel like there's something more than *me* haunting you. Things seem to be simple between us sometimes, and then it's like a voice from your past, rips you away from me. What did he do to you, Jackie? Tell me, so I never do it. Tell me so I can prove to you that I am not him."

"It wasn't until *you* that I figured out that what he did still lingers. Wyatt, I am terrified that we are going to have an end, and I don't want an end with you. You're right, things are so easy sometimes, and he *is* the one who made me believe that I'm not enough. I don't want to feel that way ever again, because everything you do makes me feel as if I'm invincible. You look at me like..." I kissed the top of her head when her tears caught her words and stole away her breath.

"I've known you for a millisecond. I knew him my entire life. He made me believe I was someone special, but once he got his way, he reminded me that I wasn't good enough for anything more than to be his sex toy, or side piece." It all made sense as she cried in my arms. I was her biggest fear because I reminded her of her heartbreak. She let me in enough so I could navigate things with caution. I kissed her, and when I was above her, I asked her to look me in my eyes. Once she did, I told her how beautiful she was, and then I kissed each and every inch of her body and made sure she knew that I wasn't him.

Everything that happened between the two of us from day one was all new to me, but I wanted more with Jackie and didn't waste a single second fearing the unknown or worrying about the potential of severe heartbreak I'd be hit with if things came to an end. The only thing

I wanted was to live in the moment with her and let her know how much she meant to me while I hoped I would get the chance to every day for the rest of my life.



After Jackie fell asleep that night, I felt inspired to document my feeling—just for me. I'd been keeping up with all of Riley's posts where she shared her feelings for Mikey with the world, and I wanted to give it a try, but not publicly. I decided to make a TabOos post on a private account I created while I sat on a chair beside Jackie's bed. Each time I looked at her I felt my heart pounding inside my chest, telling me that she was the one. I had no idea what or why I felt the need to talk to myself, but I knew my life changed that night, and I never wanted to forget it. I spoke as quietly as I could, hoping not to wake her, knowing I wanted to remember exactly how I was feeling.

"I am convinced that I fell in love with you the moment I looked at you. I have no clue what I am supposed to do, I just know that I want you to be happy always. I look at you and find myself wishing I'll be given the chance to look at you every single day and night forever. You need proof that I am not going to hurt you, and I will do my best to give it to you. I will never get tired of showing you just how much you mean to me. Getting the chance to prove it—is a gift. No matter how many times you get spooked, I will be here, waiting and willing to chase away your fears. I will cherish each moment with you and hope that one day you will see just how much you mean to me. I want you forever, Jackie. Look how beautiful you are." I declared, beginning with the camera on my face until the end when I flipped it so it would capture the most beautiful woman in the world as she slept soundly in her bed. Once I finished, I climbed back in beside her and pulled her against my body, where I held her and fell asleep.

That Came Out Of Nowhere

The night Jackie offered just enough to understand that she was being haunted by her past, helped show me how to love her. I did all that I could to prove to her that I was serious, and it was enough to keep things going for weeks at a time as if there wasn't something from her past lurking within her. Each time her ghosts would surface, I met her with patience, and I made sure she knew I loved her. The days I focused all of my attention on her were the days she kept her footing. I tried my best to never to take her for granted, but when it was clear that some days, she still struggled, I did whatever I could to remove her doubt hoping she'd see that she was it for me. After I quit my job as a dancer, her self-confidence grew stronger, and her ghosts rarely even tried to bother.

The last night I performed as Buck Bronco was monumental. Jackie was itching for a fight all day, but I hated fighting with her. It was convenient that she drove me to work that night, because something was bugging her, and when she finally caved after I begged her to tell me what was up, she closed her eyes, squeezed her steering wheel, and finally confessed.

"There is a part of me that loves that every person in that room, hell, Wyatt everywhere we go, fantasizes about sleeping with you. It's hot. I mean, I did the same thing, but now that you're mine, I sort of want to stab them for the things I know they are thinking." I didn't mean

to laugh, but I couldn't help it, and I apologized when she told me it wasn't funny.

"Do you want me to quit? I will call right now, and I will happily make sure I take the time to prove to you that I don't care or even think about anyone other than you." I lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles when she shook her head and tried to convince herself that I was lying.

"You can't quit like that. I hate when I pull this jealously crap. At some point, you are going to get sick of it, but I can't help it," she sulked out, and I got out of the car, walked over to her side, and opened her door. She looked up at me, and before she could say another word, I lifted her so her feet were on the frame of her car and I held her so we were eye to eye and let her know, "If you are feeling jealous, then it's my job to assure you that you are the only one I want. Come in tonight. I can refuse private shows, and it's been the norm since you finally gave me a chance. I think you are in your head because this part of my life you avoid. I have nothing to hide, though."

While I knew she was worried about things that would never happen, it didn't matter what came of the rest of the night. Jackie let me know she was jealous, so I would be walking through those doors for the last time. I couldn't control everything that tried to steal away her happiness, but this...this I had full control over.

I held her hand, walked her to a booth up front near the stage, and had her take a seat. I told my boss I would pay him for putting Jackie in a high demand spot, as well as whatever she ate or drank while I was on stage. I also let him know that it would be my last set and cut him off the moment he tried to get me to change my mind. I ended up giving my best performance ever that night, making sure what I offered was top notch because I was fully putting on a show for one

woman. Regardless of the number of faceless females who were taking it in, Jackie was the only one that mattered to me.

“I have never wanted you more than I do right now. You can keep your job. I trust you. I’m still not sure how whenever you look at me, you make me feel as if I’m all that matters.” Jackie got out, causing me to turn, lift her off the ground, where I backed her against the wall, and kissed her. She wrapped her legs around me, and I held her in place. Before things progressed to a place beyond our control, I broke our kiss and said, “That was my last night. And I look at you as if you are all that matters because, Jackie, you *are all* that matters. I love you, and you need to know that a part of me wondered why you were okay with me dancing.” When she scrunched up her brow and asked, “Really?” I placed her back on the ground, and explained, “Yeah. It was mostly fifty-fifty. A part of me hoped you knew how much you meant to me and trusted I would never purposely do anything to hurt you, but the other part worried that you didn’t care enough for it to bother you.”

Every moment I spent with Jackie, I made sure I showed her how much she meant to me. I held nothing back. I can honestly say that I wasn’t looking for confirmation or expecting tit for tat. Our love life was all I could have hoped for, but that night, Jackie made it clear how she felt about me in ways that not only brought me to my knees, but as the night went on, what she was showing me almost revealed how much closer she was to letting go of her past and placing her trust in our future—together.

Does Almost Even Count?

You already know that I kept in touch with Riley, as well as everyone back home. I reached out to my sister in some way, either text, video chats, or phone calls, every day. I even found myself looking for things I thought she would like, and when I got enough of them gathered, I would send them to her. At first, I thought I was clinging to them so I could go home if things failed, but I learned pretty fast that I could go home no matter what and would always be welcomed back. I then found myself wanting to tell everyone about Jackie, but I just couldn't get myself to do it.

I wanted to tell them everything about her. I even sat down and wrote letters to my mom and emails to Riley because I knew they would love Jackie, but I never sent them because Jackie pulled away and became a completely different person whenever I talked about my home. She would ask questions, just as most people would when they were seeing someone, but it was as if she thought I was lying to her, so I stopped talking about my life in North Carolina altogether. The few times when she *would* ask me something, I'd answer as vaguely as possible to satisfy her query and move us beyond whatever brought it up. Each time I tried to figure out what she was thinking, her behavior led me to believe that what we had was all we ever were going to be. I found myself living a life with her that was almost secretive, and I loved her so much that I settled just so she would stay.

We never moved in with one another officially. I ended up moving out of the room I rented in Mario's condo and got myself a studio that I loved; mostly because Jackie spent a lot of time there with me. Money wasn't as abundant as it had been after I stopped stripping, but I had more than enough to get by, as well as a decent amount from working on the ranch that I could use if I needed it, only that money made me miss that lifestyle more than I figured it would. I'm not sure why though, because I loved everything about living on that ranch,

from the people to the everyday ins and outs. I missed it so much that I started looking for ways to get it back while I was on the other side of the country.

I found a few ranches that were hiring, and I even agreed to go and check out the one that was the closest to LA, hoping that I could keep things going with Jackie if she refused to move with me. I had no idea that when I brought it up, it would cause her to say some hateful things before walking out the door as if what we had for all of those months meant nothing to her.

“What did you do with your day off, Mr. Perfect?” Jackie greeted, as she slipped her arms around my waist and kissed my shoulder blade while I finished preparing dinner for the two of us. This was what had become the norm, and I loved it. I gave her a key to my place the day I moved in, and she all but lived there, but for some reason, she wouldn’t let go of the place she shared with her roommate, who despised me. Pushing her on the matter didn’t make sense since she barely went there. I figured her actions proved she wanted to trust in us, but she was only able to do so if she felt as if she had a way out or a safety net, in case we blew up like a part of her, unfortunately, still believed we would.

“I went to see about getting a job on a ranch. It’s entry-level, but I miss working outside so much, I am willing to start from the bottom and work my way up.” I answered, turned around so I could greet her properly, and asked, “How was your day?” after I kissed her on her forehead.

She didn’t even try to fill me in on her day; she just stiffened, glared into my eyes as if she was trying to see if I was joking, and spat out, “Why in the world would you do that? There are no ranches around

here, and I am not leaving. Besides, I already told you that life isn't for me."

"No, Jackie, you haven't. In fact, you tell me so little about your past that I feel like I knew more before you said anything." I wanted to keep going and I was holding on for dear life so she couldn't walk away, only she said, "Well, now you know. I hate that life, and I want no part of it. Even for you. Stop looking at me like that. Ranches are places where it's made clear who you are and who you will never be. I am not less than anyone, and I won't put myself in that position ever again," she finished, hoping she put me in my place and shut me up, while trying her best to get away, but I held her tighter.

"I have no clue what you are talking about. I grew up on a ranch, and it didn't separate anyone—that ranch brought us together. We were a family, and we worked together in all things," I tried to explain, only I somehow made it worse. This time, when Jackie pushed against me, I let her go. Not because I wanted to, but because she made it clear she was feeling trapped.

"If you believe that, then you were at the top, not the bottom. I can't believe I fell for it again. I am clearly an idiot," she vehemently rejected what I tried to explain, and when she went to leave, I moved in front of her and begged her not to go.

"Please, tell me what happened to you. All of it, Jackie. I can't prove myself to you while you're watching for things I know nothing about and using them against me as if my goal is to hurt you. I never want to hurt you, and each time you make it clear I have, it devastates me. I love you, Jackie, with all I have in me. Please, tell me why you can't trust that."

It was clear she was still planning on leaving, but she closed her eyes and, almost in a narrative voice, explained, "My mother was born because her mother believed the man who owned the ranch her and

her family worked on cared for her. They kept things a secret because he had no intention of doing anything more than sleeping with her, only he claimed he was trying to keep her from gaining a reputation. When it had become obvious, she was pregnant, he denied sleeping with her, and she was sent away to another ranch, labeled as *easy*.

"Would you believe it if I told you a similar thing happened to my mother, because it did. She fell for the wrong guy, only he strung her along even after he was married, so when she found out that I was hanging around the son of the rancher we ended up working for, she begged me to stop. I tried to convince her that times had changed, because he didn't seem to care who saw us together, and he would even come by and hang out with my mother and me sometimes. What I didn't pay attention to was *who* he allowed to see us. It wasn't his family or people he cared about. It was the hired help. He wanted me to trust him so I would sleep with him, and I did. I thought we were actually together, but when I saw him out one night with his friends, he made it clear that I was his side piece and even offered to share me as if I was nothing more than a whore."

I wrapped my arms around her as she cried. She didn't hug me back; she just stood within my arms. What she went through was unforgivable, and I hated that she could even think I would treat her the same. I tried to assure her in a soft voice while making sure she understood, "I am not him. I would take you and tell the whole world how fortunate I am to have you even look my way. I have tried to bring you into my world, but you shut me down, so I stopped because I didn't want you to run. I won't take that job. I will stay here and do whatever you want me to do, but I need you to see that this...what we have is *not* that." She pushed herself away again, and when I begged her not to go. When I cried out, "Please, stay. Let me love you until you

learn to trust that I will never stop,” she grabbed her bag, and shook her head.

“No. Because I know how this ends, and I won’t take part in it. Thanks for rocking my world. You were right, you did not disappoint, but your heart belongs on a ranch. It runs in your blood, and if we keep this up, you will grow to resent me for not wanting that life,” she began and held up her hand to stop me when I tried to close the distance she put between us. I wanted, with all I had in me, to keep on talking until she agreed to stay.

“I’ve wasted enough time pretending that I’m someone I’m not. That’s all this was. I mean, you didn’t even hide who you were when you performed for all of those women, Wyatt. All along, it was there. I just got caught up in the illusion of it. Guess I’m part of a generational curse. One where we never learn our place. Don’t follow me. If you love me like you claim you do, then leave me alone, and go back home since it’s so perfect there. Forget we ever met, because that is exactly what I am going to do. I have wasted way too much time on whatever this is, and I will not waste any more.” she ordered, and then she left.

The way she rejected me while hiding all emotion is the only thing that stopped me from chasing after her. I didn’t want to let her go; I wanted to fight for her but there was something in her eyes that matched what she was saying. I thought I would see heartbreak as she punched her hand through my chest and metaphorically ripped my heart out, but I saw resolve and belief that she was doing the right thing. It was as if she believed that by rejecting me, she would somehow heal the generational curse she just admitted she believed was true.



The only thing that saved me from myself that night was the fact that it was close to the time when Riley and Mikey would be moving

back to Spring View. Eight months of my life, I spent loving someone when I never thought it would be possible for me. It didn't take long for me to figure out that, without Jackie, I had no interest in staying in L.A. Even though I knew I would never stop loving her, staying would only make things worse. Besides, I felt as if I was being called home. It didn't make a lick of sense, but I felt it, nevertheless.

If Jackie hadn't quit her job and refused to talk to me, I may have stayed, but I had a month-to-month lease, and it was time to respect her wishes and let her go, no matter how that made me feel. I took with me the knowledge that I had it in me to love another person with all of my being. I also knew I didn't want to go back to living my life the way I had before I left. All I wanted was to get back to work, where I'd be surrounded by people who loved me. I wanted to be back with my family. And while I knew it was going to hurt, I hoped that in time, the pain would dull. I put a lot of faith in manual labor being what I would need to get my head and heart out of the place that felt as if my life choices had finally caught up to me.

Before our town learned the Truth, my mom would have called it *karma*. Now, I'm pretty sure my time just ran out.

Are We Caught Up Now?

I'm pretty sure we are at the part where I first get home. I didn't tell you about every single thing that Jackie and I did, because most of it was everyday stuff that could easily be considered mundane. Those little things are pretty damn memorable when you love someone though. And just being with them makes even getting gas or grocery shopping something to look forward to. Besides, reliving those moments after I

lost the girl—yeah, not really feeling it. The fact that my family didn't know about the girl who stole my heart was another thing I was hoping would move me past the heartbreak faster.



My sister was the first one to welcome me home. They were all there, waiting for me, only Abby ran and threw herself into my arms, and it felt good. It was the first time I wasn't overwhelmed with thoughts of Jackie. My dad was next, and then Uncle Marcus, and so on. I didn't skim over anything to be rude or ungrateful; it's just that you know the rest of the people on the ranch already. I skipped the rest because it was my mom who made my heart feel as if she was the one who had been calling me home all along.

"Wyatt. You look so grown-up. I know I saw you when we would video chat, but it's not the same. I missed you so much. It's good to have you back home, Son," she said while she held me in her arms as if she might have believed I wasn't going to come home.

"It sure is good to have you, back. Feast, and fire tonight, and then back to the way I like it—watching this ranch thrive because of all of you." Butch added, and I chose to focus on the sentiment, instead of the girl who rejected me over the very thing that we were about to celebrate.

The last person to say anything was Chris. I stayed in contact with him the best I could, but being away seemed to have driven a wedge between us. That's not entirely true. Things between Chris and me were off long before I left. I'm not sure why, but I had my suspicions. Most of the time it was good. Chris was one of my best friends. It was him, Mikey, and me since what felt like always, but apart from sports

and work on the ranch, I couldn't help but feel as if there was nothing else there for me. I felt like I was the odd one out.

Mikey only had eyes for Riley, and while I knew he didn't judge me for the way I lived my life, we didn't fully understand one another either. I also struggled a bit because I tried to keep tabs on everyone while I was away. I saw a post that a friend of his tagged him in, and it just didn't sit well with me. I tried not to judge him, and a part of me even thought it was nice that he was living his life in New York City, but I was living mine in LA, and I still reached out. Mikey shut us all out when he left, and I knew how much it killed Riley even though she tried to avoid talking about it. I'm telling you, apart from one stupid drunk text he sent before he decided to forget his life here, it was as if Mikey no longer existed, and that sucked.

"Hey, man. It is good to have you back, but I have to warn you, the Morris boys are rather skilled at this ranch life. You may have to fight for your job or do what I do, find a place to fish, and even better, nap." Chris welcomed, clearly hoping his cousins knew how much they were valued. His accolades weren't at all overkill. The Morris boys grew up on the ranch, and their father was a hell of a rancher. Being surrounded by men like Josh, Butch, and my dad—actually, all the people on Stolt Ranch were skilled at something, and they helped wherever they were needed. I knew what they taught us was far more valuable than anything we learned in school.

"Is there anything that needs tending to still? I mean, there are a few hours before dinner. Put me to work." I offered meaning it. Only Chris doubled down, letting me know that everything was under control.

"You want to go over to the stables? Butch hired Colten Black to work with the new horses, but I know you were getting pretty good at

gentling them before you left. Besides, I'm sure Chopper will be happy to see you. He has been spoiled by your sister, but she is not you," Chris redirected, but something was off. I was about to say something, only he stopped walking and continued, "Wyatt, did you find what you were looking for?"

I turned to face him, and the second I made eye contact with him, he shifted his eyes away from mine. It was the same thing he'd done since Marybeth, and I hated it. I made myself a promise that whatever was between us, I was going to fix one way or another. It wasn't going to be easy, I was sure of that, but this was my home, and Chris was someone I wanted to do life with. Just like what my dad had with his brothers for all intents and purposes, I wanted with my friends. And having ghosts from the past building walls between us was not the way to achieve that goal.

"I thought so, but it turns out, this is home. I missed this place. I missed *you* and everyone here. I almost took a job on a ranch as an entry level." I answered truthfully, and when he smirked at the last part, I asked him how things were for him while I was gone.

"Oh, you know. Same ol', same ol', and yet nothing much all at once. Thanks for trying to keep in touch." He returned, but I knew something was up, so I called him out on it.

"Chris, what's up, man. You know you can talk to me. I'm here. Look at me, I'm sorry. There's been something since..." I started, hoping if I just ripped the bandage off, we could finally work on setting things straight so we could heal whatever it was that was between us, but he shook his head and grunted, "No. I'm not doing this. *We* don't do this. We work together, and we played ball together, Wyatt. Sometimes, I'd get your sloppy seconds, but we don't—we just don't." And that hurt something fierce. All the things I suspected but ignored

because I didn't know what to say just made themselves undeniably clear, and I wasn't okay with blowing it off anymore.

"Why the hell not, Chris. You are one of my best friends. I love you, man." I assured but I wasn't going to push him. It all finally came to a head, but in no way did I want to make things worse. Marybeth was a wrecking ball that smashed something in our friendship five years ago. I may not have known what to do back then, but now that I chose to come home, it was time for me to pick up the pieces and rebuild what she broke.

"Because there is no good that will come of it, that's why. It's clear my life is here, and I'm good with it. You, apparently, decided the same thing, so we are good. I have to swing by my house. I'm sure you remember where the stables are. Catch you later."

I Guess There's Still Some Things to Address

I wasn't the person who liked to talk things out when I was growing up. My dad and the guys tried to stress the importance of it, only I found other ways to deal. Or, I suppose I didn't deal; I just chased girls. But something in me was relieved when I saw both my dad and Marcus in the stables when I turned the corner. If I wanted to make things better between Chris and me, I would need to find out all I could.

"Dad, Uncle Marcus, can we talk? If now isn't good, can we set something up for later?" Both of them looked at me and gave me the go-ahead.

"Well, I'm figuring this is going to be more than whatever time we got before dinner, so if you're busy, we can table it." I danced around, and my dad made me smile when he put his hand on my shoulder and

said, "Dancing around, whatever it is, isn't doing diddly apart from wasting time, so just get it out. Whatever it is, we'll deal with it."

I blew out a breath and started with what I hoped to be the easy part. "How was Chris while I was gone?"

Marcus and my dad looked at one another and then back at me, before Marcus answered, "He was, Chris. He started keeping to himself a while back, but you know that. He doesn't offer much as far as his thoughts are concerned, but he shows up and does his thing. Why?"

"You know I'm not one for talking, but there's been something up since the summer before we started high school. I don't know how to fix it, and I can't even tell you all of it because it's not my story to tell. But I'm back, I know I am meant to be here, and I want to figure out what my life looks like on the ranch, or who knows where, but Spring View is my home. I thought that things would work themselves out, but he still won't even look me in the eye," I began, knowing I would have to give them so much more for any of it to make sense, I just didn't know how. Thankfully, they worked on their communication skills over the years, and Marcus all but mastered them when he found his faith and began living his life for Yah.

"Well, if you can figure out how to give us more without betraying him, that would be helpful. Son, there is nothing you can't tell us. I hope you know that. I know I gave you a hard time when you were growing up, but it's just because I wanted more for you." My dad tried to open the door, but Marcus shook his head at him and my dad nodded in return; clearly, letting him know he understood, and then they waited patiently for me to open up.

"I am kind of glad you reminded me that you know what I was up to back then. The stuff between Chris and me, it starts with Marybeth. I'm not sure if you know that she was my first. As soon as we were finished, she moved on to Chris. I didn't know that he cared about

her, and I was not her first, just to be clear. Not that that really makes *any* of this better. The whole thing is busted. I was fourteen, and Chris was thirteen. I'm not going to lie, it felt good, and I wanted to do it again, and as often as possible. Marybeth and I hooked up a few times. I figured Chris was getting his as well, and he was, but she was playing some serious games. This is where things get messy. If I tell you only my part, it won't make as much sense, but I feel like I am going back in time and hurting him all over again when I swear, it's not my intention," I shook my head, feeling as if somehow, telling them would drag me back to the place where I watched my best-friend begin to die inside, over and over as Marybeth played with his heart as if it were nothing more than a cheap toy. I tried my best not to get caught up in the memories and decided to gloss over Chris's part, the best I could.

"Anyway, she would use his feelings for her against him, trying to get him to do things he clearly didn't want to, I'm guessing to see how much she could get away with. She brought me into it, but the second I found out what she was doing, I never touched her again." I didn't get to answer Marcus when he asked how she brought me in because Chris, clearly misunderstanding what he overheard, flipped out.

"You told them? What gives you the right to tell people *my* story, Wyatt? Yeah, I loved her, and she wanted *you*. So what? It's old news. But you had no right," he screamed before he turned to walk away. I closed the distance, and I reached for his shoulder to get him to stop.

"I didn't tell them your part fully because I don't know it all, Chris. What she did was wrong, and I had no clue. I am sorry. I never meant to hurt you. She came between us, and I can't live with this hanging over us anymore. Please, talk to me."

"She didn't mess you up at all, Wyatt. You are the superstar. You are the one everyone wants, so why are you so worried about it now? It's ancient history. Marybeth is long gone, and so are the other ones

you slept with and so graciously tossed aside for the rest of us,” Chris spat out, and while I knew there was something between us, I was completely oblivious to just how big it was.

My dad and Marcus stepped between us when I went to push him to go further, after he caught me off guard. Marcus, who had Chris, while my father had me, suggested we take a minute, and he led Chris away while my dad brought me up to the loft. Once we were alone in the home, I lived in the longest, my dad handed me one of the glasses of sweet tea that he poured for us, and nodded his head, so I knew to take a seat.

“Let’s have it. Tell me everything, but don’t worry about trying to figure out the psychology of it all, just tell me what happened,” my dad encouraged, and I had to fight back the overwhelming feeling that was trying to get me to shut down. Apparently, he sensed my struggle because he pulled me into his arms and held the back of my head against him as if he was shielding me while he promised, “It’s okay. There is nothing you can say that will change how I feel about you. You are my son, and I love you. I missed something big here, Wyatt, and I am sorry. Let me help you now.”

I went over what happened that night at Mikey’s party when Truth or Dare turned into Chris and me losing our virginity. And once I offered him the details, I shared what I learned after that night.

“Chris never said anything about liking her. She was Marybeth, and apart from making fun of Riley all the time, she wasn’t someone I thought about more than the typical things a kid thinks when he notices *girls*. Dad, she knew more than she should have, but I didn’t think about that in the moment. I didn’t think about how wrong it was that right after we finished, she did the same thing with Chris. She even wanted Mikey, but he refused, and I know that she wanted that mostly to hurt Riley.”

“Was that the only time she messed with you and Chris?” My dad asked, and while I knew he needed more and I wouldn’t lie, I also knew that the last time was the time when everything blew up. I couldn’t tell him that part fully because that was Chris’s story to tell, so I answered, “No. She talked a lot, but I didn’t care what she had to say. She would tell me about the two of them, I think, hoping to make me jealous, but I didn’t like her like that. I know how messed up that sounds, but I only cared about what she let me do to her, and what she did to me.

“It was wrong, I knew it, I remember feeling as if my body was telling me to stop, but it felt so good that I didn’t want to. Chris would ask me things about Marybeth, and I thought he was just comparing notes, but later, I learned,” I hesitated and closed my eyes, knowing this was the part I had to be careful with, but nearly feeling the disgust, along with all the emotions I felt the day the whole thing took place coming back to me. My dad squeezed my shoulder and reminded me that it was okay. Once I looked into his eyes and saw he was telling the truth, I continued.

“She figured out a way to have Chris show up right when we were in the middle of it. When he saw what was happening, he went to leave, only she called him over and told him to watch. In the moment, I didn’t care, but the second she tried to use his feelings for her to manipulate him, I stopped. I told her she was wrong and that I wanted no part of it from that moment on. I mumbled, *I didn’t know* to Chris, only I saw something in him break. When I walked away, I heard her messing with him even more, saying stuff that wasn’t right. I didn’t know what to do, and I didn’t know what to say to him, so I just made it clear that I wanted nothing to do with her. I tried to pretend that nothing happened, but it’s been there between us since that day.” I ended up crying and found myself in my father’s arms again, where I mumbled, “I didn’t know what to do, Dad, I didn’t know.”

“Of course you didn’t, son, you were a child. I am so sorry this happened to you,” he tried to comfort, but it struck something inside that caused me to pull back and reject what he said entirely.

“Nothing happened to me. I just took what she offered. Chris was the one who needed protecting. She ruined him. I learned that each girl, after her, opened me up to things that felt even better, and I learned how to make women feel good while they offered me the release I craved, but Chris has been busted since that day.”

“You were too young for that type of lesson, Wyatt. We are made to feel those things, that passion, that release was meant for one person, not multiples. I know that sounds crazy coming from me when I had more than one partner myself, but you know about soul ties,” my dad tried again to suggest I was a victim, but I still wanted no part of it.

“You’ve all said that, but not once did I feel any connection to any of them. If they did, that’s on them. I made it clear, and apart from Marybeth and one other person in my life, I never went back for seconds. Who knows, maybe that’s the key, or maybe I’m not meant to be one of the chosen. Either way, I made a choice. I wasn’t some poor, helpless kid who was taken advantage of. I knew what felt good, and I chased it.” I could see that he still had his thoughts, and they were far from mine. The fact that our time ran out when my sister came running up the steps was more than okay with me.

I hoped talking would create some sort of path where Chris and I could fix whatever was broken between us, but all I felt was regret for bringing any of it up. We had learned to be around one another, and the issue wasn’t with me in the first place. Chris was the one who was stuck in the past. As far as I was concerned, I should have let him figure it out on his own. Let him talk when he was ready. Forcing him to, was

selfish of me, and I'm sure it had everything to do with me not liking how I felt without Jackie.



The distraction that dinner offered was perfect. The fire, the food, and the people were exactly what I needed. I figured that out long before I took the first bite of my shredded beef sandwich, but living in the moment again helped take my mind off of the heavy to where I could just *be* in the moment. It was pretty easy to do until I realized Chris was nowhere to be found.

I listened to my sister as she continued to fill me in on all the things she felt I needed to be caught up on. Mind you, we talked the most out of all the people from home while I was away. I wasn't complaining in the slightest. The fact that she wanted to tell me things and, even more, that she wanted to hang out with me, was something I knew was special. And I made sure she knew how much it meant to me. When she went off to hang out with her friends, I took a step back and looked out at everyone just so I could take it all in.

A Mother Knows

"Hey, Wyatt...did you find what you were searching for when you left here?" my mother asked once everyone was busy with dessert. That was the second time I had been asked that exact thing. I closed my eyes, dreading the direction the question could go, coming from her. I wanted her advice, yet something about hearing my mom's thoughts—especially from the female perspective—left me feeling both intrigued as well as anxious.

"I don't get all this fuss. This could have easily waited until the normal Friday night fireside," I began, stalling a bit before I answered her question. "I missed everyone, but I don't deserve any of the attention. As far as your question, I'm not sure how to answer it." I offered but looked away, not wanting to chance seeing anything other than love in her eyes.

From the moment my dad introduced me to Lily, I knew she would stay. I'm not sure how to explain it, especially since I was only five when she came into my life, but I felt like I had a mom the moment she hugged me. I asked my dad that same night we first met if I could call her mom, and I'm convinced that was one of the reasons they got married so quickly, too.

"While you take a moment to think about it, I am going to remind you that you are a big deal around here. Everyone loves you, and we all missed having you around. You've been gone a while, and I think the people you leave behind feel it a little harder because they notice your absence everywhere," she explained, and I was about to cut her off, only she placed her hand on my arm and squeezed before she added, "I don't mean to suggest anything more than you were somewhere new. I'm sure you missed parts of this place, too, but you needed to find what's next for you. That's just a part of becoming an adult. No harm, no foul, I promise."

"Momma...I left because I hated how I felt here." I started and immediately regretted my word choice when I noticed her wince. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it the way it sounded. It wasn't about you or the way people treated me. It was the fact that I was surrounded by love, and the more time I spent here, the more it felt as if I would never find my person. I know that sounds ridiculous, the way I chased the physical all the time, but I knew those girls weren't right. Well, I'll be. I have never felt like a tool up until I just admitted to my mom that I

was a man whore.” My mom wrapped her arm around me and laughed before she stated the obvious.

“Son, you did not just admit something I knew nothing about. I knew. We all knew, Wyatt, I just hoped you would figure out that you deserved to be loved one day.”

“That’s not...I did it because it felt good, and now I feel as if I should apologize for admitting that to you,” I defended, or maybe I just tried to offer up the reason I told myself all my life because I didn’t really know why I did what I did. When she looked at me and frowned, I started to feel a bit vulnerable.

“Hey, I’m a safe space. In no way am I judging you or trying to get you to freak out. It’s just, as your momma, it was hard watching you try so hard to make yourself unbreakable. I know Marybeth started it, and Chris got run over by her. Riley and Mikey were always a thing, even when they weren’t, and sometimes it seemed like you forced yourself to callous over. I’m not saying you wanted either of them, just that you believed that you were the odd one out, and I saw it.”

“I don’t know if you are right or not, but I will say that I somehow convinced myself that I was okay with chasing the release. I left because I needed something new. Since we are being honest, and airing out my dirty laundry, I think I slept with more than half this town, and the other half I have no interest in. I look at Abby, and I know I would destroy anyone who even tried to touch her, and yet I did that. I tried to be kind and respectful, but that was all a lie that I told myself was true so I could sleep at night,” I confessed, and when I looked at her, I didn’t see anything other than what had always been there. I saw love.

“So, it sounds like you learned a thing or two while you were away. That’s what matters. If it makes you feel any better, Amber told me *all* about her time with you, and she made it clear that you were not a bad guy. People don’t usually chase after sex the way you did without

an underlying cause. Well, I suppose they can, but it's rare. People are created to connect on a deeper level with others; we aren't meant to be alone, as much as we can find ourselves wanting that at times. I do want to apologize for not knowing what to do when you were growing up. You were a gift to me from the moment I met you. Your dad always made me feel as if I was your mom, and in every way, I felt as if you were mine. But I was afraid to step on toes," she said, before she wiped away a tear that had fallen.

"Momma, hindsight is always twenty-twenty. Or so I've heard. I don't think it would have made a difference, but there's also no way of knowing. What I want you to know is that it took me moving across the country to fully realize just how good I had it here. I missed this place so much. I also learned that I no longer have it in me to chase after women. I just want to get back to work, and if Spring View gets some new blood, maybe, just maybe I'll see if I'm interested." I offered and laughed to make sure she knew I was over the heavy. I wanted to tell her all about Jackie, but it served no purpose. Jackie made it clear that we were done, so the best thing for me to do was figure out how to live without her.

"I can't tell you how good it is to see your face around here again, Boy. I really did miss you, and I am glad you're back." My dad said as he patted my back, took a seat next to his wife, and kissed her. It was my sister who had me smiling for real once again, when she climbed on my lap and made me promise I was back for good.

"And if you do leave again, you have to promise I can visit, but I'd rather you just stay," she said as she hugged me tightly. She remained right where she was until her best friend, Kalissa, and the Morris boys came to take her away.

“Hey, are we good with the Morris boys? I mean, I know they are great kids, but...” I began, and was cut off when supersonic hearing, Josh yelled, “You better watch it, Wyatt. My boys are great, and there is nothing you need to worry yourself about, even if one or two of them may be interested.” Just like that, I had another reminder of just how good life was on the ranch.

My mom was right; people are meant to be surrounded by other people. I may have missed the girl in LA, but in that moment, I knew I was home.

I Knew He Meant Well

“Wyatt. Do you have a minute?” Uncle Mo asked, stepping closer. I sensed that my mention of the past was about to cause trouble, and it wouldn’t fade until Marcus gave an all clear to my father. I rolled my eyes, then turned around, forcing a wide and obviously fake grin. “Hey, you might want to try again, that’s terrible. You really know how to hurt a guy, Doofus.”

“I’m sure you’re all broken up, Mo,” I said, folding my arms over my chest. “I’ll talk if it gets you off my back.” I offered hesitantly, before glancing away. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I think I was just trying to distract myself and figured, why not dredge up the past?” I tried to excuse. He wasn’t falling for it, though.

“Talking isn’t bad. Trust me, I know how you feel, and it took me years to see that it helps. It may get a little heavy and feel awkward at first, but it’s the only way to truly fix things. Your dad and I were a mess when we were first advised to talk about our feelings. I’m telling you, *we* were taught that only females did that stuff. Guys don’t cry,

they don't talk about their feelings, they man up and move on. You weren't, though, and yet it seems as if it was ingrained in your DNA regardless." Marcus shared, and while I knew he was right, it didn't help take away the feeling of dread I had at the thought of talking about the past anymore.

"Listen, I'm sure you're thinking that your dad put me up to this, but I want to tell you that's not the case. I came to you because I *was* you. You know I was a player before I met Leigh, and moved here. And just like I know you believe, I thought I was good until I realized I wasn't. I can't say for sure why you hunted women, but I have my suspicions. I *can* tell you that *I* was cocky, and I didn't have any role models to show me what love looked like," he shared, and while I knew his story for the most part, we never talked about it one-on-one.

"You grew up here, so that's the only reason why I have my suspicions. Only *you* know the reasons, though. You and Chris do have to talk things out. I'm trying to get him to agree to sit down with you. I even offered to be there, but he isn't ready yet. Wyatt, apart from it feeling good, do you know why you chose to play the field?" He asked, and I went on the defensive while reminding him that he *was* the pot calling the kettle *black*.

"Ha. What a question. I had sex with them because they lined up begging me for it. It did feel good, but you know that already. Listen, I'm glad you found Yah, *and* your wife, but seriously, nothing I say is going to take back what I've done. I never disrespected any of them. I just took what they offered and moved on. If I could undo anything, it would be opening my mouth last night. Chris and I would have figured it out, just like we did five years ago. Now, I'm the one that blew it up." I smart-mouthed him back, but I felt terrible as soon as I finished. I didn't do anything about it, but I still felt bad.

Marcus made a sound when he puckered up his lips and sucked in some air, more than likely trying to figure out what he was going to say next. It didn't take him long at all when he looked me dead in the eye and grunted, "You are more like me than I'd like to admit, I missed the cocky but here you are shoving it in my face. That being said, I am going to try not to lose my patience. I get feeling uncomfortable, but this tough-guy act is beneath you. You want to be treated like someone who has a place here on this ranch, then man up and act like it. Whatever happened between you and Chris is old news, but it clearly needs to be dealt with after what happened last night. You can't just shove things back in the closet after you open the door and let them fall out in front of people. And whatever happened in LA clearly flew home with you. I may be the only one who can see that you came home with extra baggage, but trust, you can tell me, and I won't say a word. The way you are looking at me tells me it was a girl."

How he did that, I have no clue, but Uncle Mo could always see through me. I think a few of them could read me like a book, but Mo was the one who always read what was written on those pages out loud.

I wasn't happy that he tore my baggage off my back and ripped it open without my permission, so I kicked one of the empty buckets that were close and grunted out, "Isn't it always a girl? It started with a girl. I got my face busted over a girl. And just when I learned how to get what I wanted without having them mess with my mind and break my heart, one comes around and does just that. I don't want to talk about her. I don't want to talk about any of them. I just want to forget about anything other than what needs to get done on this ranch and making sure that no one goes near my sister or Kalissa ever. I may not be able to change the things I've done, but I got what was coming to me. To make up for it, to right the wrongs, I will do whatever I can to protect the girls around here."

“Well, at least we are on the same page with the last part. The rest, I’m afraid, are things you can’t outrun or just wish away. It will always come back to mess with you until you figure out how to deal with it,” Marcus pushed.

“There’s nothing to deal with as far as what came with me from LA. She wants nothing to do with me, so diggin’ up bones will only get me messy for nothing. The other stuff, I don’t know how to fix, and if I were Chris, I’d be pissed, too, that the past was thrown at me without my consent,” I partially conceded. I didn’t want to be the jerk I was being, so I made sure to fix my tone at least.

“It may have hit him out of nowhere, but you did the right thing. He needs to face the things he’s been holding on to. It might get worse at first, but I promise, if you two talk about it, it *will* get better, and I honestly believe, you’ll mend what was broken and even end up stronger because of it.” Marcus put his hand on my shoulder before he added, “As far as losing the girl, I am truly sorry. That’s a pain I wish on no one. I may have gotten mine, but the heartache I felt when I thought I lost her was some next-level torture. I will be lifting you and hoping you find a way to heal, no matter what that entails. Try not to shut people out. And whatever you do, always remember, you are not alone.” All I could do was nod. I wasn’t happy that Marcus confronted me at first, but as I walked away, I knew it was for the best.

Uncle Mo never told anyone about our conversation. I was so convinced my dad had sent him to check on me, but he was just a person who cared and wanted me to know he saw me.

Confusing You Was Never My Intention

To clarify the timeline: I began recounting events just as I was heading home for the second time. Then, I went back to describe my first homecoming. While this might have seemed out of order, I did it for a reason.

The reason for this sequence is simple: to make sense of everything, you needed to know more about Jackie than just the fact that she existed. Because she didn't want to share her perspective, I had to fill you in. That's why, after starting with my second trip home, I circled back to the first. What happened between Chris and me was major, so I let you in on it.

There was a three-week period before all the crazy happened with little Miss Spider Monkey, Mike Edwards, and Riley (or in my case, *Silver*). I don't think the timeline was made clear when Mikey and Riley shared their story, but the brother-sister bonding trip lasted nearly three months. I already know some of you want to hear my side of kissing Riley, and I get that, but apart from learning what I already figured out before she asked me to kiss her, I was handed proof that I didn't love her like that.

Now that I've gotten that out of the way, I feel as if we need to go over what took place while Mikey was left behind. I understood his pain, but I knew they had a decent chance they'd end up together. I honestly believe that no matter what happened in life, they would always come back to one another because their souls were bound together when they were children, and soul ties that are meant to be will always find a way.



"Wyatt, I'm about to drop my end. Hold up." Big Mike, called out as the wooden swing he was holding the other end of began to slip.

I prepared myself for the weight to shift more on me as Dr. Edwards adjusted his grip.

The three of us spent as much time as we could making sure things were perfect for Riley. We had other things to do, of course, but each day, after we finished the things that needed finishing we brought all of Riley and Mikey's things over so they could finally start their lives in the house he had been gutting and refinishing since they moved across the street from the ranch.

It was true that she was refusing to talk to him. Heck, both she and Chris had everyone blocked but their parents, and as much as it hurt Mikey, I knew the siblings both needed the time they had with one another to fix what had been broken between them for way too long. The selfish part of me hoped that maybe Riley would be able to help her brother get over his hurdle. Even though I wasn't the actual cause of it, it still involved me, as you already learned.

Side note time~it took a lot longer than I thought it would, before Chris and I had the talk we needed to have. Unfortunately, you are going to have to wait to see how it panned out. And even though I wish none of it had happened, it goes to show that we are who we are because of the things we go through. Even the bad stuff builds character if we choose to grow from whatever life hits us with.

Okay. Back to it.

"What am I going to do if she doesn't come back?" Mike asked when it was just the two of us, after we had just finished hanging up the balloon lights for his girl. Before I let him step any further into his puddle of hopelessness, I answered, "She will. She just needs time, Mike. Actually, they both need this. I messed up and brought up the past." The last part of what I had to say had him sucking in a breath and taking a seat on the porch steps before he weighed in.

"I know it's not my business, but I knew there was something between you two after hurricane MB. She really packed a wallop of a punch, didn't she?" He began, but turned to look at me before adding, "Sometimes, the messy things we avoid need to be dragged out so we can find order. I don't think you bringing things up was a bad thing. It would have come up eventually, and waiting isn't always the best option."

"I hear you there, but Mike, he was not ready, and the way it happened made it so much worse. I thought he went home, but he didn't. And then he overheard me talking to my dad and Mo. I tried to leave out his parts, but let's be real, we were in it together, and separating things isn't as easy as it should have been. We learned how to work together again, but that's mostly because my dad found ways to keep us separated."

"I know you don't come to me with things like this, so I just want to say, thanks for letting me in now. I may have lived my life differently, but I was there, you know. I saw things, and I drew my own conclusions. Also, Marybeth liked to tell stories, and I knew what was really going on and could see through her lies. I was there the day she first made her mark and began to rip you two apart. I know you think I don't get it, and I'm ridiculous because I wanted to wait, but I'm not ignorant." Mike got out, and while it was true, I didn't go to him with things like that; he was wrong as to why.

"I never thought you were ridiculous. I didn't talk about it with anyone, and I definitely didn't with you because I didn't want you to judge me. I knew you didn't, because you never changed how things were between us. Mike, I was so afraid that if I talked to you about any of it, things *would* change, and I already had that with Chris. I couldn't chance losing you, too." I admitted, and it was easy to see something was working itself around in Mike's mind.

"I didn't know. I really thought it was me. I thought you felt as if in some ways you outgrew me, or just kept me around because I've always been there." Mike confessed, and while it was clear he was still trying to process what I told him, I could see a part of him felt relieved.

"You have a real bad habit of selling yourself short. You are solid, and you knew what you wanted and were able to wait for it. That's not a weakness or ridiculous in any way. So, now that you have left and returned with all sorts of wisdom, you want to tell me what your thoughts are on Chris and me? What conclusions did you draw, and how do I fix it?" He smiled, but it was clear it was more about the things I told him that he needed to hear. I really wasn't aware that I had more than Chris and me to work on. Turns out, not talking does end up causing more harm than good.

"I wasn't sure what caused you two to shift. I knew *you* were just looking to score, and Marybeth offered. I didn't blame you or think anything of it. Especially not that night. I was so lost trying to figure out how to talk to Riley and fix the space between us that I really didn't pay it too much attention. I also was hoping that neither of my parents came downstairs," he began and paused to offer a knowing look that had us both widened our eyes at the meaning, before he continued.

"Chris, on the other hand, I suspected he was into her. Mostly because of the way he became a flat-out ass to his sister. Up until he set his sights on Marybeth, he was just being the brother who had a tag-along, but her hatred of Riley had him upping his game."

"You're right. I thought it was because he found out that you like her even after you swore you wouldn't, but that tracks," I thought out loud and found myself hoping that Mikey would figure out a way to help offer me a new perspective.

"I also overheard him talking to her once, right before that night. He pretty much told her he liked her, and she acted as if he had just

told her the sky was blue. I remember wishing I could get up the same nerve he had to tell her, and then when she dissed him, I remember being afraid that Riley would do the same thing.

“That night, though. As far as the two of you and what happened, I remember two things. When you came out and asked me if I was going to go in after Chris finished, I felt as if I already was guilty of something I had no interest in. When I told you I didn’t like her like that, you looked at me as if there was something wrong with me and said,” I thought I knew what I said to him, but I let him tell me his side as I tried to see things through a wider lens.

“I don’t like her like that either, but it still felt good. I never understood how that could be until I met Amanda. I still had those same feelings I had in my basement when Marybeth kissed me the first time. I felt guilty. And while I had intentions, and those intentions were to force Riley out of my mind, I learned what you meant. It can feel good when you figure out how to let your body do the thinking for once. The fact that you learned to separate your mind and soul from the physical, I’ll never understand. I couldn’t figure out how to, no matter how hard I tried.

“Marybeth had a lot to say that night, after you left. Chris was still there, and it was as if he had to force himself to make eye contact with me when she kept trying to get me to cave. She said some degrading things to him, and when he closed his eyes, she laughed and said she should have known he was too young. I let her know I thought you were all too young, and then she laughed at me and called me a pathetic loser for liking Riley. I don’t think I fully knew what it felt like to pity someone back then, but when I think back on it, that’s what I felt. I ended up texting my mom and asking if she could bring Marybeth home because Chris and I were spent. Once she was gone, Chris had so much on his mind that he paced the room. When I tried to get him

to talk, he said he needed to go. I think the only thing that kept us from blowing up was that I didn't have sex with Marybeth. I knew he wasn't happy that I liked his sister, but he was so up in his head he couldn't go there."

"Mike, I swear to you, I had no clue he liked her. The way she took control of my body and pretty much showed me what to do, I can't say I would have been able to deny her, but I may have prevented myself from being brought into the situation. I will say, she was no good for him. She messed him up even more as he kept trying to love her. I can't say whether or not it's possible or what it feels like when you're young, but you know that. Do you just know you love someone when you barely understand how you feel about anything yet?" I pushed, trying to figure out things I knew very little about. Up until Jackie, love was just a far-off notion of *that'd be nice one day*.

"I don't know how to answer that. I always knew I felt something for Ri, but when it was happening, I couldn't say for sure that I knew it was love. When I look back on it now, I know it was, but then there was so much confusion, doubt, hormones, distractions from life itself that were a bit challenging to navigate with certainty. I mean, certainty isn't even really certainty at all. I never, for a second, would have pictured the two of us apart or that we would—that I would see someone other than her. Whether Chris was truly in love with her or just overtaken by what she made him feel may never be known, not just to us, but even to him. Hindsight has a funny way of making you see things differently. The only thing I am sure of now, as I sit here with you, is that the bonds we have between us are strong. Things will work out. I just know it." Mikey finished offering his take on things, and for the life of me, I couldn't figure out why he couldn't work some of the hope he had for Chris and me into something he could hold onto for him and Riley.

Who knows, maybe it was the guilt he admitted to having. Or maybe it was the fact that he still sold himself short.

Whoever Said, *Boys Don't Cry*, Lied!

I'm not sure what brought me to the place where I ended up grabbing all the letters I wrote for my mom, the ones where I told her all about Jackie, and made my way over to find my dad, but something did. I reckon if I sat with it long enough, I would have figured out what I later learned, that it was the talk I had with Mikey. That hashing out stuff from the past made me feel things for myself that I was still trying to ignore. All I knew was that I wanted someone to know about the girl I loved, and my dad felt like the right choice.

I hung back and waited for him to finish up with Jose, and when he was walking back to the loft, I called out for him to wait.

"What's up, Son?" He asked and stood in place, clearly waiting for my cue.

"Well, I'm not sure. This goes against everything in me, but I feel like I need to do it regardless. Actually, I want to do it," I halfheartedly tried to set things up and looked off to the side so I could get the rest out. "When I was away, I wrote letters to Momma telling her all about a girl I met there. I can't give them to her now, but I want to share the person I fell in love with with someone, and I want it to be you. I promise you, I will tell you to give them to Momma at some point, but please, don't do it until I'm ready. I don't even know, Dad, what good giving these to you will do, but I suppose it's so that at least one person I care about gets to know her the way I did. I'm trying so hard to move on, and maybe the key isn't in forgetting what we had. Maybe it's

found by facing what was there and learning to remember the happy times. Whatever the reason, I want to share these with you.” I got out before I was able to look him in the eye and hand him the letters.

When he took them from my hand and placed them on his heart. I knew I made the right decision.

“I don’t think I can talk about her, at least not for a while, but I still want you to know her.” I tried to warn, but as I continued to look at my father, I felt the hot sting of the tears that were building in my eyes. Somewhere between the millisecond it took before my dad pulled me into his arms, I went from wanting to push him away to hanging on to him for dear life.

“It’s okay, Son. I’ve got you. I will wait for you to tell me what’s next. But Wyatt, thank you for trusting me with this. I know how hard this must be for you, and I promise, I will keep her protected,” he assured, and I knew he meant it.

A part of me felt like a child as my dad held me. Somewhere on this ranch, my dad learned how to feel his feelings, and so I saw him cry many times. I think I saw all of the men I knew, at some point, shed tears; be them happy, sad, or both at the same time, even, and I never judged them for it. If anything, I was grateful I grew up around people who lived their lives authentically. So, why was it so hard for me to just allow myself the same freedom? I couldn’t figure it out. Letting my tears fall while my father held me felt like it may have been a good time and place to start.

That happened the afternoon before I made a mess planning Mikey’s hunting trip. So, let’s go there why don’t we.



Mikey filled you in on what happened when Riley left him to go to her parents’ house after she learned that I didn’t include her to go

out hunting. We could talk about that, but it's pretty much a waste of time. I truly meant no harm, and it wasn't about being jealous of her. Silver and I may have had the tightest friendship I had going for me at the time, but there was something apart from the main reason as to why I didn't include her that I never admitted to. I just handed my dad a stack of letters so he could read about a girl I lost...I was in no way ready to spend the day having to witness the love that Riley and Mikey had, and that was honestly only a part of it. The rest truly was about spending time with my friend before their reception. They were already married, so everything was backward anyway.

What he left for me to tell was the major stuff that set things into play, which I never thought would be possible. Mikey and I were the last ones sitting by the fire when he asked what caused me to walk away from Yahuah. I would have thrown something out to appease him, like I would whenever I was asked about my faith, or lack thereof, only he didn't bring it up out of the blue.

Again, you knew there was more to the reason Mikey came over to the ranch that night, so Yah had already been a topic that had been brought up. Before I answered, I looked at him and let him know I was thinking about how to answer him honestly. He waited patiently for me to find my words or reason. Either way, I appreciated him for it.

"I don't know. I remember when everything changed back then. When we were all trying to figure things out. I think a part of me will always cherish those times, but something happened, and I felt like I needed to try things on my own. I have tried, recently, even to figure out what it was, but I don't think it was only one thing, but more of a bunch of little things.

"I felt something in me, the night I lost my virginity, asking me to stop. It was like I was led to a fork in the road where I was being asked to choose. I can almost feel as if there was a voice in my mind telling me not to go down the path I went down, and the second I picked my body and what felt good in that moment, the voice went away. I used to feel as if Yah was up there looking down on us all, but when I left your basement and walked home, all I saw were stars when I looked up at the sky. After that, all I could think about was how I could feel the way I felt that night. The more times I messed around with Marybeth, the more I wanted to be the one in control of my life. The way things went after I refused to be with her anymore, had me finding other things to do with my time, and seeking Him, wasn't on my agenda anymore." I confessed, surprised at how much I admitted when I purposely tried not to think about it too much over the years.

"That makes sense, actually. I'm sure telling you that He is still there isn't going to get you to go back to Him, but it's still true." Mikey supplied, more in such a way as to say he heard me, but still needed to share what he believed to be true.

Not trying to be mean, but wanting to prevent us from diving any deeper into things, I reminded, "He's only for those who walk in His ways, Mikey. I am so far off His path, I don't think He even looks my way anymore. If I am wrong, then He will shake things up and leave me no other choice."

"What would it take for you to turn back? What does a miracle look like to you, Wyatt?" Mikey encouraged me to answer. The way he asked is the only reason why I offered him anything at all. He wasn't preaching, he wasn't trying to force me into anything; he was simply asking because he cared about me and wanted to know.

"The only thing that would make me even consider it would be Jackie coming back to me. I say that believing she is my blessing as

well as my curse. She humbled me in such a way that it changed how I feel about women altogether. She showed me what it means to love someone so much that I would have done anything for her, and yet she left me as if what we had—meant nothing to her. It's like He finally had enough of me going from one bed to the next, that He sent Jackie to remove the desire for it. I deserve my punishment, though, that much I know.”

“I’m not sure I see things the same way as you, but I am glad you had an answer. I hope I get to meet her one day, Wyatt. And just so you know, I get what you were trying to do with the hunting day tomorrow. Isn’t it something how she was always the one who knew who she was, and now it seems as if she got a little lost along the way.” Hearing him say all of what he said before he walked back over to his parents really got to me. I wasn’t even aware that I was hoping for some sort of backup or agreement from one of my best friends until he offered it.

The fact that he said he was lifting me and hoping to one day meet Jackie was something I may not have believed I deserved, yet I was beyond grateful for his willingness to do so. And I found myself hoping he would get to meet her too as I readied myself to sleep for the night.

Well, That was Fast, and I am Not Complaining

I managed not only to get up but also to function after getting little to no sleep after Mikey left the night before. The fact that we agreed to meet at the main house helped, seeing as I’d been crashing in one of the rooms upstairs as my own, since I got back. My sister officially moved

into my old room when I left for LA, and I had no interest in taking it away from her when I got back. She spent far too long in the little room my parents set up for her, and while I knew she didn't care, I was glad she made the space her own. Bedrooms didn't matter so much on the ranch. In my opinion, they were for sleeping only, and even that depended on the day.

I spent more time sleeping outdoors, in the treehouse, over Mikey's or Chris's. In fact, for a while there, I think I spent the least amount of my time in my room. It wasn't for any other reason than it's where I ended up crashing after a long day. I admit that things changed a bit when I got back, and I appreciated living in the main house with Uncle Butch and Aunt Betsy, and I knew they were happy to have me.

When we went out hunting, and I found myself saying things that were easily taken out of context, but you know that already. I wasn't jealous of Riley anymore. I gave that up when I learned it was better to have her on my side than to try to compete with her. Granted, it took us having to move away for me to learn the lesson, but I was grateful I had. I didn't want to look too much into the situation, and yet a part of me felt off. I was doing something I enjoyed with people I cared about, and yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was a bigger jerk than I remembered being before I left.

I grew up around sarcasm. I was fluent in it to say the least, and yet while I was away, I rarely used it. When I was in LA, I found myself listening more and learned that when I used sarcasm the way I would on the ranch, people rarely found it humorous and instead found me to be fake. I tried to push things off, believing in this case, actions would speak louder than words, and made a mental note to work on myself to better each of my relationships.

We were a good distance from the ranch when, by the grace of Yah, Mikey's phone rang. We had been in that location before, and couldn't get a single bar, and yet his phone got a call from Riley, and he told me I was needed back at the ranch. I took off and made it about half an hour before I reached for my phone and prayed for a signal. Not knowing what I was rushing home to was making things worse, and Chopper was feeling every bit of my nervous energy.

The second I knew my call connected, I said, "What's up, Silver? I am on my way," trying my best to keep calm. "Wyatt, Jackie is here, and your mom is helping her," I heard her say, only I didn't believe her. The moment I heard her say Jackie's name, I thought *no way*, and then I remembered what Mikey and I had just talked about the night before, and still thought, *no way*.

Riley said that my mom was helping her, and before I could give too much thought to why that would be, I turned and saw Riley. I still hadn't said anything, and I still wasn't sure I believed her, so I asked, "Are you seriously telling me that Jackie is inside and this isn't some really bad payback for me not inviting you?" holding eye contact with Riley, as I disconnected, tied Chopper up, and waited for her to tell me one way or the other if Jackie was really there.

"Wyatt, look at me. This is your daughter, and I will gladly hand her over to you once you wash up. But yes, her mother is inside in my guestroom, and she probably could use you right now." Riley affirmed, and the fact that she said she was holding my daughter didn't fully register. It did, however, make its way into my ears, where my brain was trying to decide what to do with it. I was convinced in that moment that it was asking for proof that the woman I loved was inside before it even allowed itself to further delve into the baby in Riley's arms.

I made my way into the kitchen, took my shirt off and scrubbed myself without saying a single word. My mind was in complete disarray, but the moment I heard my mom ask a question and the voice I would never forget answer, I went into that room, still halfway believing that it was all some sort of a sick joke, until I saw her. The moment she looked my way she cried out and I was there, falling to my knees beside her saying things I don't even know what they were.

I kept looking at her as if it were a dream and noticed things that had changed in her appearance in the time that we'd been apart. Her hair was blonde and it somehow made her look innocent. She had always been petite, but when she reached for me, she looked frail, almost. Her eyes were the very same ones that at one time haunted my dreams for fear I'd never get to look into them again. Yet, there she was, looking at me, and I pulled her the best I could, into my arms as she kept repeating how sorry she was.

"Wyatt, I love you. I was an ass, and I hope you will forgive me. I will do whatever it takes to try and make up for how I treated you," she got out before a part of her past that haunted her tried to get her to trip like it used to.

That was the first time Jackie ever said that she loved me. I told her, but she never said it back. Before I readied myself to fight off her demons, I took her face between my hands and told her I loved her, too, and just before I went to kiss her, she revealed what I had sensed. "If you just want to get to know your daughter, I get it, but I needed to tell you I loved you. If you moved on," she started backtracking, almost as if she was preparing herself for me to shut her down, proving she didn't hear what I said.

Words didn't seem to work, so I kissed her, and when I pulled back, I told her again, "I love you. I have loved you since the second I looked

into your eyes, and I will never stop loving you, do you hear me?" She nodded as tears fell down her cheeks.

My mom handed me a shirt and let us know that she was going to give us a moment. I nodded and smiled, and before I did anything else, I pulled my phone out and sent my dad a text asking him to give my mom the letters. I already knew that everyone was going to love Jackie, but I didn't want any time to be wasted when they could have been loving her already.

Right after I sent the text to my dad, I drafted an email to Riley that said, *"I knew the moment I fell in love with Jackie that you and her would be friends. I wrote to you while I was away, sharing everything about her as I was falling in love with her. I so easily could see that she would be the best friend you always deserved to have. I love you, Silver, and I can't wait to do life with you and that husband of yours. I've gotta run (even though I am literally in your guest bedroom as I type this)"* Once I hit send, I lifted Jackie up, cradled her against my chest, and sat back down on the bed where I held her.

"So, what's wrong? I am going to ask you all about our daughter as soon as you tell me why my mom was in here with her worried face on," I asked calmly, and placed a kiss on her head as I stroked her hair. Before she could answer, I added, "I'm not sure what I thought your hair would look like under the red, but I had no clue it was so curly. You always had it straight or covered. Anyway, I know I like it. You are so incredibly beautiful. I can't believe you are here."

Jackie took in a breath and tilted her head so she could look at me. I smiled as I waited for her to answer. I ran my fingers through her hair again and brushed my knuckles down the soft skin of her cheek while she gathered her thoughts.

"I'm bleeding a lot. It started getting worse about an hour or two ago. Your mom wants me to go to a *clinic*, the place she works, I think, but I wanted to see you. I needed to fix what I broke." The fact that my mom hadn't said anything to me yet about taking Jackie to the clinic meant that we could talk. She actually alluded to it when she offered to give us time before she left the room.

I didn't want to focus on the heartbreak now that she was in my arms, but I had something on my mind that I needed the answer to, so I asked, "Did you know you were pregnant when you left my place the night you ended things?" I wasn't sure what I would do or how I would feel if she said she did, which caused my heart to pound nervously as I waited for her to answer.

"I didn't. I suspected a few days later, and when I finally took the test, it was too late. You already left. Alyssa had some terrible advice. I'm sure you could figure that out on your own, but I wanted no part of even thinking about what she suggested. I knew I wanted our baby, even if I never saw you again. I know I have no right for you to believe me, but it wasn't you, it was me. I...you, you were so patient with me, and all you did was love me, and I," she broke down and curled herself into my chest.

I placed her beside me and moved to be next to her on my side, so we were facing one another. I positioned her head, so she was looking at me and told her, "It's okay. I'm glad you figured out that you love me, but I promise, it's a good thing. The past has no power over us. It may have caused some detours, but I just want to love you and be loved by you. I want to show you that the things you feared have nothing to do with the home I want to build with you." Jackie smiled at me, but something wasn't right. When I lifted myself up to see if she was okay, it was clear she was weak, so I called out to my mom, who rushed in.

“Wyatt, I would feel much better if I could get her to the wellness center. I’ve called Big Mike and Andrea, who will be on standby if I need them, but please, let me find out how to help her.” My mother pleaded. I looked back at Jackie and said, “You hear that? My mom wants to make sure you’re okay. We are good. We are better than good, in fact. You are here, and we’ve got forever to work things out, but I need you to let my mom do her thing. Jackie, the only thing I need from you right now is for you to promise me that you will never leave me again. You can get all sassy and stubborn if you need to, but we need to be fighting for us no matter what. We are forever. You hear me? I will not let you go again.” Once she nodded to let me know she agreed, I lifted her into my arms and carried her out into the living room.

I sat Jackie down because I wanted to meet my daughter. When I looked at Silver as she held the tiniest little bundle in her arms, I all but melted. I couldn’t see her face yet, and my eyes were tearing up, making things blurry, but I knew with all I had in me that she was going to be the most beautiful little girl I had ever seen. I was not only right, but when I asked Riley if I could hold her and she handed her to me, I knew I already loved her. She was adorable, and she was so little, sort of like her mom. As I looked at her precious little face and said her name in my head, something clicked. I looked at Jackie and asked, “LA? Was that intentional?”

The slight smile Jackie offered confirmed my suspicion before she answered, “Yeah. I wasn’t sure if I would ever see you again, Wyatt,” which had my heart beating overtime. All this time, I thought she was my punishment for the way I lived my life; only to find she was the gift I believed her to be.

I smiled back when she continued, “But I never wanted to forget about the time we spent there, together. I should have chased after

you. I shouldn't have let you go. I have been miserable since the day we fought, and I said those terrible things to you. I'm so sorry. I don't care if we are poor. I just want her to know you and to be loved by both of us." Hearing her admit that our time apart was just as hard on her as it was on me led me back to where I sat her down. With our daughter in my arms, I told her again just how much I loved her. And the moment I knelt before her, I let her know, "We aren't poor, but if you want to live like it, then I'm game. I mean, ask Silver, shoes are overrated, and well, I'm all about throwing away my clothes."

It Didn't Matter What Came Next, I Had All I Needed to Start Living

I carried Jackie into the wellness center, and the way she clung to me when Big Mike and Dr. Olsen started talking with my mom in medical speak as we all walked together showed how afraid she was. Hoping to calm her down as much as possible, I looked into her eyes and promised her that I wasn't going anywhere and that she'd be fine.

"I'm scared, Wyatt. I know something is wrong." She cried out, and while I heard what was being said, I brought Jackie into one of the treatment rooms on my mom's side of the building.

"And these people here are going to help you," I tried to comfort, but Jackie moaned, overtaken by pain.

"Her pain, she stated, is constant, with more severe cramp-like periods that she relates to feeling like her contractions while in childbirth. I want to get in and see if my suspicions are correct," my mother informed her colleagues, and I decided to ask Jackie questions to distract her as Dr. Edwards and Dr. Olsen figured things out with my mom.

My phone rang, and when I saw it was Beth, I answered right away, knowing she was one of the people helping at Riley's with our daughter.

"Wyatt, I won't keep you, but I need to know if Jackie has any milk. Lena is hungry, and I don't want to do anything that her mother won't be happy with," she asked, and Jackie shook her head and let us know she didn't have any milk, and then she completely broke down. I pulled her into my arms, and my mother brought herself closer and asked, "Jackie, Honey. It's okay. Beth and Ashley are both still producing. I am sure Beth would be happy to help you you just have to let us know what you want. If you would rather use formula we can," at that, Jackie shook her head, and answered, "No. I don't want her to have formula. I don't think my milk is helping her, though. I don't know what to do."

"Okay. Don't worry, Jackie, we will take care of your little girl, no problem." Beth assured and disconnected.

"I didn't even know that was a thing. Why is this happening? What did I do wrong?" Jackie asked, and I was surprised when the man who had been like another dad to me answered her.

"This isn't your fault. You have what is referred to as a retained placenta. Which just means that some things that should have left after you delivered are hanging out in your uterus." Big Mike focused on Jackie, and yet it was clear he was still listening to what my mom and Andrea were discussing as they examined her. "We are going to try to be as minimally invasive as possible as we take care of things for you. Jackie, would you like me to give you something to help with the pain?"

"No. I don't want anything to mess with my milk. I want to feed my daughter." Dr. Edwards smiled and then turned his head slightly

to address Andrea, and asked, “Do you want me to start Misoprostol, or are you going to perform a D&C?”

“Neither. I think a Hysteroscopy will do the trick. Jackie, once we get this taken care of for you, I believe you will find that your breastfeeding will be more productive. And let me tell you something, Momma, you are doing great. The fact that you made it here from California is proof that you are one tough cookie.” I may not have understood what was going on fully, but I knew without a doubt that Jackie was tough.

They ended up giving Jackie a mild sedative, mostly due to her pain. They assured her that she would be able to pump and keep her milk for other purposes and then be able to feed Lena without any issues, which is what led her to agree. My mom left the room and let me know she was going to go and talk with my dad, and once they were ready for the procedure, I stepped outside and finally took a breath.

So much had happened in what felt like no time at all. I don’t even believe I fully processed all that had taken place, but I found myself reaching out to Yah and thanking Him for all of it. The oddest thing happened the moment I felt as if He had turned His ear toward me to listen, I knew without having to ask that Jackie was going to be okay, so I thanked Him for that as well.

Having that peace that all was good, led me to go out to the waiting room so I could be with my parents. The moment I walked through the door, my dad was making his way toward me where he pulled me into his arms. He then congratulated me and told me how much he loved me.

“Wyatt, if I am wrong, I am sorry, but I need to tell you how much reading your letters allowed me to feel as if I’ve known her through it all. Your love brought her to life, and each word I read felt as if I were

there beside you and her. The fact that you wrote them for Momma made me cry. I love you so much, Son. This is good. I just know it. This is real real good.”

I wiped a tear away from my cheek, and agreed, “Yeah. Yeah, it is,” and then I laughed as my tears just poured like someone forgot to turn off the faucet. I looked over to where my mom was sitting, and smiled when I noticed she was nearly finished reading one of the letters.

“I didn’t realize I was talking to Yah for so long. I thought I just left Jackie maybe five, at the most, ten minutes ago.” I mumbled to my dad, who let me know it had been closer to thirty minutes since my mom came out and he gave her my letters. “Momma, should I be worried? Does it always take this long?” I asked, but I already knew Jackie would be okay.

My mom stood up, assured me it would be finished soon, and that Jackie would be fine. And then she hugged me just like my dad had, only with her, it was tenderhearted in the way that comes with a mother’s loving embrace.

“Thank you. I haven’t finished but thank you for wanting me to know her. And the fact that she showed up, oh baby, I am so happy for you. You deserve this, Wyatt. I hope you not only know it, but you believe with all of your heart, that you deserve to be loved. I am so glad Jackie has come here, and you can finally start your life together right here at home.”

How Long Until the Meds Wear Off?

Jackie's eyes focused on my mother when she first started to come around. She smiled before she blurted out how pretty she was, and then she started talking, and man, did she ever have stories to tell.

"Momma Evans, I'm sorry I hurt your son. I really hope you will forgive me, because I really love him, and I don't want to hurt him anymore." My mom smiled and glanced at me before she answered Jackie.

"That's sweet of you to say. I'm glad you love him, because I know he loves you, too."

"I really think he might. He was so good to me, but he's so beautiful. Too beautiful even. I was afraid he was going to hurt me, so I was a jerk, but I just ended up hurting myself, though." Jackie further explained, clearly missing that I was sitting there holding her hand. Her surprised look and huge smile when she turned after I kissed her hand had me fighting to hold back a laugh.

"Woe. You are like an angel. You are gorgeous. Wait, are you really here? I thought I saw you before but thought I was just dreaming."

"I'm here, Darlin', and I love you, too." I let Jackie know, and then I asked my mother how long she'd be whacked out of her pretty little mind for.

"I can't answer that. It varies so much. They didn't give her much, but she said that was her first time, so." My mother answered just as my dad snuck in to let her know he was going to pick up food and head back to the ranch, while Uncle Mo stood in the doorway. When Jackie started looking back and forth between my mother and father as if she were lost, I introduced her to my dad.

"Jackie, this is my dad, Danny Evans. Dad, this is Jackie." Before he could say a word. Jackie looked hard at my mom, and in the loudest whisper ever, she asked, "Momma Evans, does Wyatt know? He has to know, right?" And then she looked at me.

“What are you asking, Jackie?” I pressed, figuring I might know where she was going, and when I looked at my dad, who was already smirking, I figured he was thinking the same thing. Jackie glanced over at Marcus in such a way as if she was trying not to let anyone see, and then she looked back at my mom, and in the same voice, she pointed out what she thought to be obvious.

“Are you sure he’s not the dad?” To make it even funnier, she pointed quickly as her eyes darted between the three adults she was calling into question.

When everyone laughed, Jackie looked at me, so I let her know, “That’s Uncle Marcus,” which only made her widen her eyes again, but she kept them focused on me. I smiled at her and explained the situation, and once it was clear, it began to resonate; she looked at all of them again and blushed.

“I like her, she *is* a keeper, Wyatt. Welcome to the family, Jackie.” Uncle Mo said, and Jackie turned her face into my arm and said, “Thanks. It’s nice to meet you,” clearly feeling embarrassed.

Okay. We Will Stay at the Edwards

“Oh, great. You are back. I just changed her and was going to reach out to see how you’re doing. Jackie, I’m Beth. It’s so good to meet you, officially.” Beth started, and once she handed Lena to me, Jackie wrapped her arms around her and thanked her while her emotions took over.

“Thank you. Thank you so much for taking care of my daughter. I don’t know how I will ever be able to repay you.”

“Well, there is no need for that. I’m just glad I was able to help. You are part of this family now, so anything I can do to help, let me know. I do want to tell you something. We tried to get her to take a bottle, but she just wouldn’t. I ended up feeding her, and I know that I should have gotten truly informed consent, but I acted in what I hoped would be her best interest,” Beth explained, and Jackie just pulled her in again, and thanked her. “You gave her what she needed. I appreciate that. In truth, I never thought about it, but how incredibly generous of you.” Jackie returned, and things immediately shifted, lightening the mood I hadn’t fully realized was tense until it was gone.

“Lena is hungry again. Everything is set up in Mikey’s old room, and it might be more comfortable for you in there, but wherever you think is best.” Momma April suggested, and I made introductions as we made our way to the bedroom. Beth followed and asked, “How’s your cramping?”

Jackie started chewing her top lip and said it was *so so*, which led Beth to offer her advice. “I know they had you pump at the center, and the best part of the way we were created is when you are able to produce milk, you can make more when your baby needs it. I looked up what was going on with you and what to expect while you recover, and it seems as if it will be similar to the cramping that comes right after childbirth. That, for me, was uncomfortable, but my husband was able to help a lot.” Beth took Lena from my arms and instructed me to get on the bed so Jackie could sit between my legs, where I could hold her.

Once Jackie was up against me, Miss April put a pillow on Jackie’s lap, and Beth placed Lena in her arms. The fact that they were helping Jackie with things they learned from their own trial and error, hoping to spare Jackie from having to go through her own, really meant a lot to me. Beth’s instructions were helpful. I even found that being involved

the way she showed us allowed me to feel as if I was a part of the feeding process.

“Wyatt, your main job is to help keep Jackie calm. It makes a huge difference when we can relax,” Beth explained, and Jackie agreed, “This is so much better than before. I couldn’t figure out why it was so hard, or why she had such a hard time. But, these cramps are kicking things up.”

“I thought that might be the case.” Beth sighed, and Miss April let us know she was going to go fetch a hot water bottle for Jackie to use after the feeding.

“If you are upset, she knows, and she won’t be able to settle. She has good suction, and I think you will both be just fine in no time at all.” Beth offered, before she said goodnight, and let us know we could call her anytime if we needed her.



After Jackie finished feeding, I asked her how she was feeling.

“I’m wide awake and nowhere near ready for bed. There are some faces I don’t know yet,” Jackie answered. I smiled before I told her I would happily rectify the situation for her. She turned and leaned her head back so I could kiss her, and just as I had a hundred times or more since I realized she was there, I thanked Yah. Once I was able to stand up, I took Lena in my arms and helped Jackie up.

All eyes were on the three of us when we walked out into the living room. “Okay, that’s not awkward,” I pointed out, and then made introductions, hoping they would stop staring. (This is where I handed my daughter to Mikey, and we sorted out the drama Riley tried to bring over her husband and mine’s prearranged marital plans for our children.)

Most of the people who were there had long since left when Doc Edwards stole my daughter and wouldn't let her go. Jackie looked over at me, and I noticed her eyes were watery, so I pulled her into my side and quietly asked if she was okay before I kissed her temple and held my lips there while I waited for her to answer.

"Yeah," she got out before her breath caught, and I pulled back to see what was going on with her. "It's just overwhelming. The love here is crazy. You tried to tell me, but now that I am here, wow. I almost," she started to explain, but I cut her off hoping to reassure her, and said, "That's in the past, Darlin. It's yours. This is your family. This love is for you both, and it will go hard and never give up. You may forget you have a child with all the people who will be spoiling her."

"Eh, that's valid, but not for a little while at least. She *is* the milk lady after all." Big Mike teased, and Miss April added, "This family lives out *it takes a village* in all possible ways. You and Lena are not alone, Jackie," and I couldn't help but get choked up at the truth of what was being said, as well as the fact that I was holding the love of my life, who gave me a daughter. I kissed Jackie's lips and closed my eyes in a moment of complete content when she curled herself into me and fit right in—both at my side as well as with my family.

A Lot Happened in One Day

When it was finally time to lie down together, Jackie curled up against me, and that overused saying, everything was right in my world, I felt only that there were some things I knew I had to work on. I promised, twenty-four hours earlier, that if the very thing I was feeling thankful for happened, I would return to covenant living. There were

also things I wanted to ask Jackie about. I wasn't surprised when she had questions for me as well, and just as I was about to start, she blurted out, "Can I ask you something?"

"I was going to ask you a few things myself, so how about we take turns? You can go first," I offered while I ran the back of my fingertips across her jawline like I would whenever she curled against me and rested her head on my chest.

"I am going to ask the question that matters more first. And I'm not even sure it's a real question, but more of wanting clarification on things that were said, that I know I heard," she started, and I encouraged her to continue when she hesitated. "There were so many options for us for tonight. And then there were even more for whatever comes next. How? Where do you live, or I guess I should ask, where did you live before I showed up here with a plus one?"

"Best surprise ever. Only thing I would change was the condition you were in, but in a way, I see it was all part of a much bigger plan." Jackie asked me to go deeper into what I had said before I answered her question, so I explained, "I believe that trust bonds were formed and strengthened much faster when my mom, Dr. Edwards, and Dr. Olsen stepped in to help you medically, as well as the ones with the people who were back here taking care of Lena."

"I didn't even think of that, but something in me knows I can trust all of the people who helped me at the center, and I feel the same about Beth. The others, I suppose, I feel what would have taken place if there hadn't been an emergency, so you are right. Now the living situation, if you will," she thought her agreement out loud, and she began to rub my left pec with her hand in random patterns while she waited for me to answer her original question.

"Miss April summed it up quite nicely. We are one big village, or family here. We take care of one another. I have been staying in the

main house with the Stolts since I came back from California. My parents gave my room to my sister, and while I knew I was welcomed there, and would have no problem staying in the area they created for her, I also knew that Betsy loved whenever people would stay with them. As for what was offered to us. That's nothing. There are so many options, I think you will find something that will suit all of your needs as well as dreams, and if not—we build. I personally would like to do that, as you heard me ask Mikey how he felt about it already. In the meantime, we can stay wherever you feel most comfortable.”

“You know, as nice as everyone was, I feel bad picking. You just said that the place you're staying, the owners like having your company. I can feel that Miss April would let us stay right here, and I like Dr. Edwards,” Jackie started working things out, and I stopped her just long enough to tell her that she should tell Big Mike that, and she sat up, smiled, and faced me, clearly hoping to really talk things out. I explained the options we were going to check out, and once everything was sorted, the best they could be without physically showing Jackie each place, she curled back into my side.

“I am a little torn about something, and I hope you don't get upset,” Jackie said, in a voice that was drenched in uncertainty.

“Darlin', you can tell or ask me anything. I love you, and nothing is going to change that,” I assured, and she started shaking her foot before she began.

“I'm not sure how to even explain this part, so just hang tight. I'm going to start from the beginning and tell you everything, and then we can see what's up. Riley, who you call Silver. When I first met her, she was so kind it was unreal. Wyatt, at one point, I thought she was luring me into the woods to kill me or something, that's how oddly polite she was. But there's something there. A part of me feels like she and I are going to be something, and I suppose that sort of goes hand in hand

with living the way you do here. Which, if I am being honest, a part of me is also still worried this might be a cult and all if it is too good to be true, because well...anyway, I digress. There's something I sensed with Riley, too. Do you two have a history or something?" I blew out a breath trying to figure out where to start, and smiled as I tried my best to explain Riley and life on the ranch.

"First, I would like to assure you that we have a history, but it doesn't involve the two of us being together. I was sort of a jerk to Riley. It was more teasing since her twin is one of my best friends, but it was a lot worse than I thought." I began and explained how things changed a lot when I was gone, as well as what happened after her and Mikey's drama when they came back and nearly ended things over a huge misunderstanding. "Things are still on the mend, and there's tension between Big Mike and Riley since he was part of the reason they broke up. Darlin', this place is full of drama, like a reality show that no one cares to watch but end up losing hours sucked into it anyway." I teased, and she laughed beside me, clearly waiting for me to tell her more. See. Point proven.

"I don't think you'll believe me, so I am going to show you. I knew after the first day we hung out that you and Riley would get along. I won't tell you all about her life, because that's her story to tell, but she went through some things. Riley is one of the most fiercely loyal people you will ever meet, but she never really had a girlfriend. Right now, she thinks she has found something in someone I wish would leave both her and her brother alone, but she is only going to end up hurt, I feel it. Anyway, nothing I can do about that, but I typed out emails to Riley, I just never sent them until tonight." I started explaining before I reached over, grabbed my phone, pulled up the first one, and handed it to her. "Until I sent them, I suppose they were more like me writing everything down so I would never forget. I knew

I wanted you in my life, but you wouldn't let me in. As much as I wanted everyone I cared about to know you, I knew it would kill me if I came back without you." Jackie read the first email I had written, and I could hear her snuffle.

"Oh, Wyatt. The way you speak of me, oh. How could I have been so blind? I mean, everything you said about our day is true. I had the best time with you each time. You never hid the way you felt. I just refused to see it. I don't want to do it ever again, but I am afraid I don't know how." She cried out, and I moved so I could pull her into me, where I assured her she wasn't alone.

"You were trying to protect yourself, but I love you, and just like then, I will always be patient with you. I just need you to promise, as I said before, to never leave me. I will wait and work on whatever it is that has you thinking about pushing me away, only I won't let you actually do it. I don't care how long it takes, I will love you completely until you trust it's for real."

"I really love the way you talk to her. Sure, it's about me, and that part is strangely beautiful, but I can almost see the bond you have. It's like you are siblings." Jackie offered and all but thought I was joking when I told her about learning that lesson for real when we kissed in the lake.

"You know, there's a part of me that wants to say something snide like I used to," she teased, and I knew where her mind went, so I answered her anyway. "In all truth, a part of me always wondered. I'm sure my promiscuity had to do with it more than anything else, and of course, my pride. But I always knew she was Mikey's. I'm telling you, Darlin', the love the people have around here is something fierce, and has you wanting the same kind of love for yourself. You'll see."

"That may be true, but the only love I want is the love you tried to give. I just want to learn how to accept it. And I want to love you back

this time because I do. Wyatt, I really love you.” Hearing her say that was the perfect way to end our first day back together, as well as begin the rest of our lives finally on the same page. Of course, I kissed her and kept it as controlled as possible while her body healed, and then we drifted to sleep.

Looks Like We Are on the Same Page

You already know most of what happened at the party to celebrate Mikey and Ri, but what you don’t know is what happened while Chris and Mikey were talking outside. You know about when Chris was sharing that he and Snow were in the middle of something; however, Jackie wasn’t having any of it. After Chris got up, Jackie looked at Snow but asked Riley, “Did I miss something? Isn’t that your brother, and isn’t this a gathering to celebrate the two of you?” and then she looked Snow dead in the eye and said, “I was never a fan of your overly produced sound but I am even less impressed with the way you treat a person who is clearly in love with you.” She then got up, addressed Riley one more time, “I’m sorry that was rude of me to do here, but I am sick of people who think they are better than others simply because they have money. Please, forgive me,” and she walked off.

I followed her, and we ended up going outside. The moment Jackie saw Chris, she wanted to go over and make sure that he was okay, only I pulled her into my arms when it was clear he and Mikey were talking.

“I didn’t mean to act like that. Well, I did just not in front of everyone,” she apologized, but there was no need to.

“Jackie, you did the right thing, and you were the best person to do it. You do not need to apologize for sticking up for Chris.”

We tried not to eavesdrop and did a pretty decent job, but Jackie made sure to go up to Chris and introduce herself the moment he was close enough.

“You may want to hang out here for a bit longer. There’s some really bad singing going on in there at the moment,” she teased, but then she held her hand out and introduced herself. I wasn’t sure what I expected her to say and just stood beside her and watched as things played out.

At first, Chris smiled, took her hand, and said, “It’s nice to officially meet you, Jackie. I am Chris, but I am sure you knew that already.” Then he looked at me and smirked (if that’s what you call the face he made), and added, “Don’t believe all the things you hear about me, if you hear anything at all. Now, if you’ll excuse me. I need to get back in there before one of the women in my life starts complaining.” He nodded at me as if I went around talking about him in the hope of destroying his reputation or something, and he found out about it. Wait, I supposed from where he was standing, that was exactly what happened after the first time I had come home, and he overheard me talking at the ranch. I seriously hated that we couldn’t just talk things out, but Chris wanted no part of it, so instead, he would act like I was the bad guy. I wish I could tell you that I let it slide, and I did sort of. I rolled my eyes and shook my head, but I didn’t say a word.

“What was *that* about?” Jackie asked once Chris was inside, and we were alone in the parking lot.

“We have a history, and I’m not sure how to fix it. We are good for the most part, but every now and then it’s as if he is saying, ‘in theory’. I hate it, though.” I explained but lacked the ability to offer her anything

more. I really had no clue what it was because he wouldn't tell me, but I knew at some point, I would have to address it once and for all, or it would destroy the little we had left.

"Well, I will help anyway I can so you can fix that. I will also never tolerate that phony passive-aggressive bs that Snow was pulling, and I will always say something. So, that may make it harder for you to mend things." Jackie warned after she offered to help.

"I'm not so sure you will make things any worse. And I really want you to know, I am glad you said something."

Right before we agreed to go back in, Riley came out, walked right up to Jackie, and hugged her. "Thank you. I have wanted to say something about the way Snow has been treating my brother, but he and I *just* made up, and I was so afraid of losing what we worked so hard to get back."

Jackie smiled and let Riley know, "Anytime. I really was afraid that I blew it. I mean, the timing was,"

"Perfect. I never know what to do or say around Snow. I used to envy her, but now I seriously just hope she finds peace, and that the spell she has over my brother is broken. He deserves so much better." Riley amended, and when she looked at me, clearly ready to break down, I took her with one of my arms into my chest while I held Jackie's hand.

"I'm proud of you, Silver. You just saw Snow for who she really is instead of feeling less than in her presence. That's huge." I encouraged, but Riley saw things from a perspective most people didn't. I knew when she tried to make excuses and explain her reasoning, she still wasn't fully ready to embrace loving people from afar. That was a tough lesson we all have to learn at some point, but not in the parking lot outside a party that was meant to celebrate love.

Jackie may have just met everyone, but she was already proving that she had no problem standing up for what is right. She did so in such a way that the only people who really knew were sitting at our table, and the one who would never forget was Riley.

Life Turned Out Even Better Than I Could Have Dreamt

Jackie had Lena strapped to her chest in one of the carriers, which was just a large piece of material, tied in a way that held the baby securely while allowing the person holding the child to use their hands. Jackie watched me work with one of the new geldings, and knowing she was there had me feeling as if I was on top of the world.

“Hey, Darlin’. How was your morning?” I asked as I made my way toward her, so I could hear her answer.

“Informative. I’m going to head back over to the main house. Will I see you at lunch?” She asked, and I smiled because I loved hearing her say things that showed she was starting to feel as if she fit in. Right before she walked away, she added, “It makes sense.”

“What does?” I pressed, knowing the look on her face was one that had my heart kicking its pace up a notch.

“Why were you always so patient with me. You seem to know how to handle the wild ones.” She answered with a flirty grin.

“It’s not about handling them, it’s about respecting who they are and waiting for them to trust me enough to want me around.” I returned and threw her a wink to which she simply said, “Yeah, you do, and you look mighty fine while you are doing it, too.” I just shook my head and tipped my hat while my face lit up with a smile that her words brought to life.



I spotted Jackie the moment I walked into the main house for lunch. She was laughing with Betsy as if they had known one another for years and not a few weeks. My heart was beating with approval as I moved closer to her, smiling as each of my steps had me anticipating the kiss I was about to place on her lips. Right before I reached out to touch her elbow, she gasped, and all signs of her laughter ended, causing me to hesitate, hoping I'd be able to find whatever it was that caused the sudden change in her behavior.

"Wait," Jackie warned when her eyes met mine, and before she said another word, she scanned the room. Unsure of what she was looking for, I just stared at her, waiting to find out what was going on. Jackie looked at me and then asked everyone if she could have their attention for a minute. She nodded and offered a strange half-smile to a few of the ranch-hands before she began.

"Wyatt told me about all of you, well, he tried to, only I dismissed him, believing he was romanticizing his life. When I came here, you were all so welcoming and even treated me like family," Jackie paused, clearly choked up by whatever it was she intended to say, causing me to have to fight to remain where I was to allow her to continue.

"I was afraid that what was being offered was done because of who Wyatt is, and I want to apologize to each one of you for thinking such terrible things when you gave me no reason to. I went and spoke with some of the wonderful people who work here, and each one of them had nothing but good things to say. Not one of them feels as though they are treated less than, and more than one of them even claims to feel as if they are a part of this family. It was nearly impossible for me to trust something that was completely different from all I ever knew. I'm not sure how you managed to create such a loving environment,

but I am grateful you have allowed me an opportunity to be a part of it." Tears were falling as she spoke to the people before her, and when I went to move closer to her, her breath caught, and she began to truly cry.

I moved purposefully, needing to close the space between us, and pulled her into my arms, where I cradled her against me. I told her I loved her, but she pulled back just enough to look up at me and said, "Wyatt. I love you. Thank you for giving our daughter and me a chance to share this incredible life with you." I had nothing to say, so I leaned down and kissed her. I heard the people around us murmuring, and I caught a few sniffles from some of the women in my life who meant the world to me.

Jackie was correct, life on the ranch was almost too good to be true, only it was true, and it was undeniably a gift. I lifted Jackie into my arms, breaking our kiss momentarily. I looked around the room, and when I saw our daughter in Riley's arms, I carried Jackie out of the kitchen and made my way toward the stairs. I grew up on the ranch, witnessing each of the couples so caught up in their love that they snuck away, so I knew they'd get over it if they chose to give me a hard time at all.

As I brought us further away from the crowded kitchen to someplace more private, I overheard what I expected I might, and that was approval. Jackie pointed out just how fortunate we all were, and each of the people she had just addressed were caught up in the truth of it. I did chuckle when Butch playfully let out, "I am supposed to pretend that they are discussing the menu upstairs?" Which caused Jackie to widen her eyes and smack my chest, obviously feeling embarrassed.

"Oh, please. It's not as if they don't deserve to have this moment. As I recall, dear, I had to agree to offering you an official IOU just so

you wouldn't be late for your morning meeting. She is his wife, and it's quite a miracle that he finally found the one meant to care for his heart forever." Betsy retorted as she playfully reprimanded her husband.

Apparently, It Was Time for Me to Make a Decision

One look at Jackie revealed that the moment we had been caught up in was lost. When she wiggled in my arms, I reluctantly shifted so I could put her down. Not wanting to let her go, I held her close to me, and before I could say or do anything, Jackie asked, "They know we aren't married, right?" effectively causing a smile to work itself onto my lips. I had to think about what I was going to say next, seeing as it was all new to me as well.

Up until Riley and Mikey, no one had been married since learning the truth about Yah. I was working my way back into covenant living, and I even began sharing Him with Jackie, but we were still in the beginning phases. Jackie had begun reading Scripture on her own and was bringing all of her questions to Marcus, Mikey, Riley, and Lucas, when I wasn't sure how to answer her. With her staring at me, still waiting for me to answer the question she had just asked about the two of us, I looked at her and offered the best explanation I could.

"Are you opposed to being my wife, because I am quite sure they believe we are married. At least in the eyes of Yah, that is." Jackie scrunched her face into a look of confusion and then pushed, "Wait. Is it because of Lena?"

I'm not sure why her question bothered me as much as it did. I assume that my hormones mixed with the overwhelming love I had been feeling for her only seconds before Butch's voice cut through the

air and became a metaphorical door that was slammed in front of me, preventing what was about to take place, might have had something to do with it. Whatever it was, hearing Jackie's question while choosing to ignore whether or not marrying me was something she would be okay with led me to simply answer her. I pulled back, making it clear I understood the moment we had just been caught up in was over.

"Wyatt, what happened just now? Why do I feel as if you are mad at me?" Jackie asked, and I stiffened, blinked my eyes a few times, hoping to fix my face, and dismissed, "Nothing happened. Let's go have lunch before it's gone. We can talk later."

I didn't wait for her when I began to walk back into the kitchen, and I wasn't in the mood for the teasing that came the second I stepped inside either. I forced my face into a tight-lipped grin, hoping they would quickly hit me with whatever they thought they needed to say, so I could get back to work.

Funny how walking in the room and spotting Jackie had gone from good to great to wanting to forget the food entirely so I could get back to work.

Jackie fought so hard, hoping to keep me from gaining the ability to hurt her. Finally witnessing the moment she realized I wanted no part in causing her any pain was exhilarating until the moment I caught something in her eyes that revealed hesitation, or doubt, even, at just the idea of the two of us being married.

I spent all of my time begging Jackie not to run from me, and yet I was the one who needed to get away. I just wanted to hop on Chopper and put some space between myself and, well, everyone. I wasn't really running away as much as I was hoping to find a place where I could spend some time with my Maker. I knew I hadn't been doing things the way I was supposed to, and the reason for it was that I wasn't

sure if Jackie would want to live her life the way Yahuah instructs His children to.

Woe. That's One Horse That Was Never Supposed to Leave the Stable

Having babysitters all around was quite handy. Jackie and I got to spend plenty of time together without having to worry about who was going to care for Lena. The older she got, the longer she slept at night, which led to a weekly double date night at Benny's.

One of the nights when Riley was about halfway through her pregnancy with the twins, the four of us were hanging out doing our thing, when Jackie caught the eyes of some of the girls I had a history with. It wasn't the first time, and Jackie was usually pretty good at paying it no mind, only that particular night, the girls hoping to get my attention seemed to have had a bit too much to drink.

"I can't believe he married *her*. What can she possibly have that I don't?" Was clearly overheard, causing Ri to place her hand over Jackie's, where she asked, "I may cause a scene when this belly of mine takes up the entire floor, but I feel like dancing. Jackie, what do you say we go and show this place what we've got? I mean, that is, if you think our men can keep up."

I smiled, knowing what Silver was doing only I waited to see what Jackie was going to say before I went to make a move. Jackie had no problem standing up for herself, and she cared even less about making a scene, but this was the first time she was put in a position that involved me so boldly. Sure, people talked because that's what

small-minded people who have nothing better to do with themselves do when they are bored, but that doesn't make it okay.

When I looked at Jackie, I noticed what looked a lot like emboldened mischief in her eye that not only assured me she was going to dance, but she was also going to put the talkers in their proper place, and I couldn't wait to see what she had in store.

"Hey," she directed my way as she pushed her chair back, getting ready to stand. When I locked eyes with her, she asked, "Do you think you could let Buck take me out on that dance floor. I really miss the way he moves." Without a single ounce of effort on my part, she managed to pull a wide grin right out of me. I answered her request with a *Yee-Haw*, lifted my hat, and played right along, when I assured, "Your wish is my command, Darlin', but I'm afraid I will have to PG 13 your request. I wouldn't want to get arrested for indecent exposure."

Jackie laughed out when I lifted her up and tossed her over my shoulder, where I playfully swatted her backside and walked us to the center of the small dance floor.

Riley asked, "Who in the world is Buck? Do I even want to know?" and Jackie answered her friends with, "You may not, but everyone in LA wanted all he had to offer," and then she slid down my body and we danced with one another in such a way that proved we belonged to one another and no one would ever be able to come between us.

The confidence that Jackie exuded as she staked her claim on me was hotter than any dance, I ever performed. When we finished and went to sit back down, she mumbled, "I almost forgot how hot Buck Bronco is. Can I have the Double B experience when we get home?" just loud enough to cause Riley to admit she must have missed something.

The second we were about to sit back down at our table, Jackie turned toward the girls sitting at the table who had set the whole thing

off and declared, "The thing that separates me from you is that I know how to stay in the saddle and I am all the woman he will ever need," and then she winked, clearly to add a little salt to the wound she just inflicted.

Mikey, Riley, and I weren't the only ones who caught Jackie's display of confidently staking her claim. It turned out that my parents, Marcus and Leighton, and Josh and Beth walked up at the same time, Jackie hopped on my back and pretended to swing a lasso.

"What do we have here?" Marcus and my father said in unison while everyone else just greeted the four of us like normal people.

"Oh. My. Goodness. I don't know why I looked. I can't unsee it, and yet it makes sense. You couldn't keep your clothes on no matter what the temperature was and..." Riley blurted out, somehow missing that we had company. But the moment she realized her mistake; her eyes nearly bulged right out of her head. She smiled and went to shove her phone into her purse, only Jackie caught her hand and lifted it so she could see what she found.

"Hey, Buck. Can you believe they still have posters for sale? Why don't I have one of those?" Jackie asked, feigning her heartbreak as she jutted her bottom lip out, offering me a full-blown pout. I was torn between wanting to hide because my mother was there and my dad and uncles would never let me live it down once they learned about my short-lived alter ego, and wanting to make my wife happy. I chose my wife.

"Well, they're going to find out anyway." I admitted to myself out loud, and then I turned to Jackie and answered, "If you want a poster, I will get you a poster. Wait, why are they charging so much when I haven't worked there in way too long to be relevant?" I got out and

was truly shocked at the twenty-five-dollar price tag for a poster of me from when I worked at *The Man Cave*.

My dad and Mo walked behind us, believing they wanted to know what we were talking about, only to learn real fast how much they probably wouldn't.

"Wyatt!" My dad uttered, and Marcus just choked as his eyes widened while he shook his head. The moment he caught his breath; Marcus took Riley's phone and clicked on one of the videos that he found when he did his own search. The second I heard the recording of the house emcee's voice as he called me to the stage, I dropped my head, knowing full-blown that I was blushing.

"Ladies and...let me see, yup, there are a few of you— gentlemen...I suggest you hold on to your boots and lock your stables because we have a visitor from the wild, wild west here with us tonight. He is ready to show you how a real cowboy rides, and I assure you—this is not his first rodeo! Double B is packing a whole lot of horsepower, and he is rearing to go, so get your hands ready and your boots a stompin' for the stallion of the stage—BUUUUCCKK BRRRROOONCCOO!"

Jackie was giggling beside me, and Riley was doing her best to hold in a laugh. Only when I looked at her, she tilted her head and mouthed, "I am so sorry," and I knew she meant it. Thankfully, Marcus decided he did not want to watch me take my clothes off, so he stopped the video and handed Riley back her phone, where he then pretended like he needed to wash his hands.

I stole Riley's words when I looked at my momma and offered a sincere apology. "I am so sorry. There are some things I never wanted you to know, and that was one of my top three." My mom nodded and smiled, letting me know it was okay.

"Marcus, why do I feel as if you missed your boat? I know you could have pulled off the male review thing. I am telling you, the two of you

are so alike sometimes that if I didn't know any better, I would be convinced you were related." Leighton teased her husband.

Jackie leaned in so only I could hear and let me know that she, too, was sorry, only she added, "I never thought I would miss that part of you, and yet I find myself growing rather impatient for what's to come when we go home."

I turned my head and lifted my brow as if to ask her if she wanted to go right then and there, only to be disappointed when she reminded me that we drove to Benny's in Mikey's Durango.

THE END

Thank you for coming along and allowing me to share Jackie with you. I assure you that this is not the end and you'll be reading more from Chris's perspective as well as over in *The Awakening*.

Be well, and keep on keeping on, for Yahuah!!