



COWBOY BLUES

A NOVEL

JAMIE CRAIG

Cowboy Blues
by Jamie Craig

Amber Quill Press

www.amberquill.com

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Cowboy Blues
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By

JAMIE CRAIG

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CHAPTER 1

Sweat dripped down the back of Rebecca Rankin's neck, trickling beneath her top to make the blue ribbed tank stick to her skin, and the waistband of her shorts felt too tight, digging into her sides. It was the hottest Fourth of July in fifty years, and standing in the middle of sweating cowboys, screaming fans, and cranky animals only made the heat worse. The sun hung low on the horizon, but the hot air had been trapped against the ground. Even the growing dusk did not offer any relief. If she'd been smart, she would have pulled her hair up into a ponytail to try and ease her discomfort. But Spencer liked her hair down. Since she only saw him one night in the year, the hair stayed put.

Spectators packed the bleachers, shoulder to shoulder, and the announcement about the next event blasted from the speakers. Audible excitement shuddered through the crowd, and Rebecca inched forward from the spot Spencer had picked out for her. Most of the locals watched the annual rodeo from reserved seats on the east end of the arena, near the announcer's box, but Rebecca didn't join them. Spence put her in the chute area, away from the bulk of people, giving her one of the best vantage points to watch the rodeo. He had made special accommodations for her the year before, as well. He probably went out of his way for other girls he saw on the circuit, but it didn't lessen the thrill. She was Spencer Cole's guest. The only guest that mattered at this rodeo.

"Cole drew third." A voice at her elbow made Rebecca look away from the arena, and she smiled at the grizzled face of Max Clute. He helped every year with the logistics of the Oakley rodeo. She had met Max three years earlier, after Spencer had insisted Rebecca be the one to shoot all his local photos. Max had taken her under his wing, showing her more and more of how the rodeo worked. The friendship had led to writing a feature on Max for her father's newspaper, even though Rebecca's heart lay in her photography. She knew photography would be her ticket out of town one day.

She took the program he offered and scanned over the other names. "Who's going before him?"

"Plaisted and Bannerman. Make sure you get some pics of Bannerman. I got a gut feeling he's on the brink of something great."

Though Rebecca nodded, she was already imagining Spencer's ride. He was the best bull rider she'd ever seen, and Max's gut feeling would not sway her into believing someone else would actually win the event. Sure, Spencer lost his fair share, but ever since his magnificent ride four years earlier, Spencer Cole always won in her hometown. He called Rebecca his good luck charm. He didn't need a good luck charm. He was just amazing.

"What bull did he draw?" When an answer wasn't immediately forthcoming, she glanced up and saw the frown on Max's face. "Well?"

"You're not going to like it."

"Tell me."

Max looked away from her and out over the arena. "Rusty Jack Knife."

It felt like the air had been sucked out of her lungs with her dad's leaf blower set on reverse. "Oh, crap," Rebecca muttered.

Her head whipped around to scan the bull paddocks behind the chutes, but from her distance, it was impossible to tell the beasts apart. That was probably better. She didn't want to see this particular bull. She wanted to see Spencer on it even less.

Rusty Jack Knife had the reputation as one of the meanest bulls on the circuit. Nobody had taken him in over four years. More than that, he had a tendency to leave the riders who tried in pieces. One had even died, she'd heard. And now Spencer was getting his turn. The cotton candy she'd had earlier started to roil in her stomach.

Spencer would see it as a challenge. He thrived on taking impossible chances, and when it came to bull riding, the greater the risk, the worthier the reward. Trying to speak to him before his ride would be pointless, even if Rebecca wanted to. Talking to him now would only distract him, and he needed every ounce of concentration he could get.

"He's had worse," Max commented when she turned back around.

"I know."

"And he's good enough to handle this one."

"I know."

"Doesn't make it easier to watch, though."

Rebecca sighed. "No, it doesn't."

She barely saw the first two riders. She forgot about Max's suggestion to photograph Bannerman as she anxiously waited for Spencer to come out. But then the audience cheered over Bannerman's scores, and the announcer called Spencer's name, and she edged forward as far as she could to watch the chute gate fly open.

The entire crowd held its breath. She couldn't see Spencer from her position, but she could imagine him. Wrapping his right hand in the rope. Settling his weight over the panting bull. Checking the rope once more. Taking a deep breath. Maybe saying a prayer. Did Spencer pray? She never asked, but it seemed likely. She would be praying to every god and goddess she ever heard of if she were about to ride a bull like Rusty Jack Knife.

The gate flew open and the bull burst into the arena, all four feet in the air. The launch flung Spencer back, but he kept his seat and managed to adjust his weight before the bull went into the air again. Her heart began to lift. *He could do this.* She brought the camera up to her eye. *He's going to ride this sonofabitch.*

Rusty Jack Knife became a red and brown blur as he went into the air again and turned a full one hundred and eighty degrees. When he came back down on his front legs, Spencer slammed forward. The momentum was too much, and he didn't catch himself before the bull jerked its head back.

Everybody in the arena heard the collision between Rusty Jack Knife's head and Spencer's face.

The clock stopped at six seconds, the ride disqualified as soon as Spencer touched the bull. A split second later,

everybody in the arena realized something had gone horribly wrong. Instead of untying his hand from the thick rope, Spencer flopped backward. Rusty, still kicking its hind feet with every step, began to spin.

Rebecca's mind flashed to when her father took her to the Utah State Fair. She had been eight. He had bought a ticket for unlimited rides. The giant, rotating swing had fascinated Rebecca. She remembered standing at the base of the ride, watching as it spun faster and faster, until all the swings stuck straight out, extended horizontally by the centrifugal force.

Spencer was extended like that now, flying out from the bull, his arm still caught in the rope. She heard gasps, shouts, and cries. Everybody moved at once. The bullfighters jumped into the arena first, one trying to distract the bull, the other rushing to free the rope, anything except comical in their face paint, wigs, and colorful clothing. Each time they got close, the bull shifted out of reach, its sides still heaving, its feet still dancing in a tight circle. Rebecca held her breath until her lungs ached. An eternity later, the clown pulled the rope free and Spencer hit the ground. The bull, its anger soothed as soon as it lost the cowboy, trotted out of the arena without further trouble.

But Spencer didn't move.

Her shoes felt like they were filled with cement, but somehow, Rebecca pushed through the throng, fighting her way to the arena exit. A strong hand curled around her arm, and she yanked against it, trying to get free.

"You can't go out there." Max dug his fingers in harder, pinching the fleshy muscle. "You know that, Becky."

She probably outweighed Max by fifty pounds but he was still stronger than her. "You were watching. You saw what happened to him."

"That doesn't mean they're going to bend the rules for you. You have to wait until they bring him out."

She didn't care. "Did you see him? He's not moving, Max. Not. Moving. You know that's not good."

"Rules are rules."

"They're *stupid* rules!"

"They wouldn't let you out there, even if you were married to him." Firmly, but gently, he began walking, not releasing her. It only took two steps for Rebecca to realize he was leading her to the gate where they'd bring Spencer out.

As soon as the ambulance rolled out into the arena, Rebecca broke away from Max and ran to Spencer. The EMTs were securing his neck and spine, and his eyes were closed. His face was already turning different shades of blue and purple, and his eyes were swollen, his nose bleeding. He didn't seem responsive or aware at all. Nobody noticed her until she gasped, a strangled, shocked sound.

"Are you going to ride with him to the hospital, ma'am? Ma'am?"

She barely heard him. Spencer's lips were moving. She strained her ears. Had he said her name? Did he know she was there?

"Ma'am?"

"Yes, yes, I'm going." Who else would go? He didn't have anybody else in town.

The EMTs carefully hoisted the stretcher. The fans erupted in clapping and cheers as they loaded Spencer into the ambulance, and Rebecca hoped he heard them, hoped he knew they were all applauding him. The bullfighters waved their hats in the air, encouraging a louder response, and began stomping their feet. Soon, the entire arena vibrated with the force of their encouragement. Rebecca didn't make a sound. She only stared at Spencer's mouth, willing his lips to move again.

She crawled into the ambulance behind the EMTs and reached for Spencer's hand. They shut the door, blocking the sound of the spectators, and slowly rolled out of the arena. The nearest emergency room was twenty miles away, in the next city over. She jumped at the sudden blast of the siren, her fingers tightening on Spencer's hand.

"I know I always said you were crazy," she whispered, "but you really didn't need to prove anything to me, you idiot. I believed you without the practical demonstration."

"Excuse me, ma'am." Without the deafening chaos of the arena, the EMT looked to be as young as her, and it was hard to take him seriously enough to move out of his way when he tried to get closer to Spencer. "I need to monitor him. You have to sit back and let me do my job."

Rebecca slid to the bench on the other side, but her eyes never left Spencer. His normally tanned skin looked sallow in the artificial light, and the bruises from where he'd hit Rusty Jack Knife with his face were already turning ugly shades of

purple. She only wanted him to open his eyes. If he saw her, he'd know he wasn't alone. If she saw him, she'd know whether or not he'd be all right.

His eyelids didn't even flicker in the twenty miles.

It only took fifteen minutes to travel the distance, but it was the longest fifteen minutes of her life. As soon as the ambulance came to a halt, the EMT pushed the door open. She didn't know his name. It bothered her that she didn't know his name. He held Spencer's life in his hands, and she had no idea who he was.

A flurry of white and blue descended on the ambulance as nurses and orderlies met the ambulance. The man—the one she didn't know—filled one of the nurses in on the extent of the injuries. She heard every word he said, but she didn't understand anything. Somebody touched her elbow. The driver. She didn't know his name either.

"Ma'am? Come with me. I'll show you where you can wait."

Her feet moved of their own accord. Rebecca didn't see the path they took, and she didn't see the casual glances from the staff. She kept twisting to watch where they were taking Spencer. Why couldn't she go with him? She wouldn't get in the way. She was an expert at blending into the background. They had to know that.

Someone pressed a cup of coffee in her hands.

Someone else turned on the TV in the corner of the empty waiting room.

Rebecca didn't sit. She stood near the doorway and watched the hall. The coffee was cold and untouched by the time somebody approached the room.

She hurried to his side as soon as he entered, crowding his space. He was tall, the light above reflecting off the sheen of his bald head, with an open face, his eyes friendly but still reserved enough to be professional.

"Spencer Cole," she blurted. "Is he okay? What's going on?"

He smiled at her. "I'm Dr. Allan. Why don't we have a seat and I'll tell you everything I can."

She nodded and allowed him to lead her over to the chair she had ignored since entering the room.

"I was glad to hear somebody came in with him," he continued. "Sometimes we get cowboys who are stuck here alone for a day or more before family shows up. Are you family?"

She didn't want to give him an excuse not to talk to her, but it would be too easy for the truth to come out. "I'm a friend. Spence doesn't have any family. Just an uncle, who..." She wracked her brain, but slowly shook her head when the details escaped her. "Travels a lot," she finished. "He could be anywhere."

Dr. Allan nodded, like he wasn't surprised. "Mr. Cole sustained several injuries in the accident. He has a very severe concussion from the collision with the bull's head. There is swelling in his brain right here," he gestured at his own forehead. "We're going to keep him here for observation for a few days, because you can never be too careful with head injuries. But be aware he's going to be very confused for awhile. It's hard to say how long. Maybe a week, maybe a month. He'll have difficulty concentrating and following

conversations. He may not always remember faces. He most likely won't remember the accident at all."

Rebecca blinked. She felt like throwing up. "That sounds like brain damage."

"These are common symptoms after a concussion like the one Mr. Cole sustained. Most of the time, patients return to normal after the swelling subsides. But in my opinion, his career is over. We'll have to run more tests in a few weeks to know for sure, but brain damage would be the best scenario with another head injury. In the meantime, he'll probably need a good deal of help, and somebody to keep an eye on him."

She'd wanted information. Now that she had it, Rebecca didn't know what to do with it.

Bull riding was all Spencer knew. He didn't want anything else. He was successful because he threw everything he had into the rodeo. What would he do without it?

But more than that...

"He doesn't have somebody to keep an eye on him," she said. "He's only got me."

"He's going to need you. I don't want him traveling anywhere until the swelling has gone down, and he's going to have a very hard time taking care of himself. He's also dislocated his right shoulder and torn most of the tendons and ligaments. He'll need several surgeries to repair the damage, and he'll have very limited mobility. After the surgeries, he'll need physical therapy."

"How long will that take?"

"It's hard to say. He might be looking at a recovery time of six months or more with his shoulder. Mentally, he should be back to normal in four to six weeks."

She suspected it would take a lot longer than a few weeks for Spencer to be okay. She'd never met anybody who loved the rodeo as much as Spencer Cole.

"Doesn't he need to be local then? I live in Oakley."

The doctor shrugged. "I would rather he stay here in Park City, if possible. Or even live in Salt Lake, closer to the university hospital. But the last thing I want to see is him living alone right now. The extra twenty or thirty minutes on the road is a small inconvenience."

Rebecca nodded in blind agreement. When put like that, she couldn't argue. Spencer needed medical help. A nurse. Someone to be there for all those little things he'd always taken for granted. She wasn't any of those. The thought of having him so dependent on her terrified her.

But she had been right about one thing she'd told Dr. Allan.

She was Spencer's only choice.

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CHAPTER 2

Five Years Earlier

Her hands were sweating.

It was ridiculous to be anxious, Rebecca knew. Her earliest memory was sitting on her dad's shoulders so she could watch the bronc riders. She knew most of the names on the circuit better than her own family, and she'd seen more than a few of them give Hollywood celebrities a run for their money for bad behavior. So why was she so excited about Lonnie introducing her to Spencer Cole? He was just another bull rider.

With a great ass.

And brown puppy dog eyes.

And an aw-shucks smile that made her stomach do its best shake, rattle, and roll impression.

She wiped her palms on her jeans. She would not shake the man's hand and have him grimace in disgust because she dripped all over him. She intended to be calm and collected and totally not one of those annoying girls who ended every sentence with a giggle.

Rebecca didn't giggle. She was mature for her age; everybody said so. She was...

Oh, crap, he's turning around.

She stood a half-step behind Lonnie as he shook hands with the newest rider in the show. Spencer Cole was lean and muscular, and up close, taller than she expected. She liked tall. Rebecca stood five-ten in bare feet, and she hated

looking down at her latest crush. With his boots, he was probably six-three, and the tight denim hugging his long legs made it very, very, very hard not to let her gaze stray downward.

"And this is my cousin, Rebecca," Lonnie said. She smiled as he stepped to the side to face Spencer directly. "She's here in kind of an official capacity."

Rebecca lifted the camera hanging around her neck. "Semi-official. Which means I take whatever pictures I want and then my dad decides if any of them are good enough for his paper."

"Oh?" He flashed his aw-shucks smile at her now and politely extended his hand. His lazy drawl was at complete odds with the intense young man she saw in the arena. "You didn't get any of me, did you?"

She bit her tongue to keep from blurting out that he was featured in over half of the roll. "A few. I would've gotten more if your event didn't come so late in the show."

"That's because it's the crowd pleaser. The fans are all here to see the bulls. Isn't that right, Caleb?" he asked, his voice raised.

"Shut the fuck up," the other cowboy snapped as he limped by.

"Jealousy doesn't look good on you, Caleb," Spencer called after him before turning his attention back to Rebecca.

"Excuse his language. Hope you got a few of my good side."

"From what I've seen, you don't have a bad side." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Rebecca wanted to lasso them back. Could she sound any more like an idiot? Fighting

the faint stain creeping into her cheeks, she stuck her hands into her back pockets to hide the shaking and added, "Then again, I didn't see you flat on your ass like so many of the others. The way I see it, that's the only bad side a bull rider can have."

His smile was as slow as his drawl, and it made his brown eyes shine. "I had a good ride tonight. Jumpin' Jack is a tough bull to draw, but I've been on him before, and he gave me a good ride then, too. I was just going to scare up some dinner. Do you want to come with me?"

"I don't think that's a great idea," Lonnie interjected.

Rebecca wanted to tell him to shut up, but she didn't say a word before Spencer smiled soothingly. "I'm not going to let anything happen to her, Lonnie. You have my word."

"Not to mention, a girl needs to eat." With a fresh boldness that surprised even her, she moved up to Spencer's side, lifting her chin and daring Lonnie to drag her back. "It's just something to eat, Lon. And maybe an interview to go with my pictures. Tell Dad it's for the good of the paper."

"Now, Becky, come on. You know your dad wants me to bring you home at a reasonable hour tonight."

"I'll make sure she gets home," Spencer said, his hand going to the small of her back. She jumped at the contact, but Spencer didn't seem to notice. "Come on, let's get over there before the concession stands close."

Lonnie tried to stop them once again, but Spencer ignored him, gently guiding Rebecca around him and toward the dwindling line of people at the stands.

"I'm sorry about that. Lonnie's got this crazy idea that I need a big brother, which means he's bound and determined to make my life miserable, no matter what the cost."

"Ah, he's all right. He just wants to look out for you. It's my understanding cowboys don't have the best reputations with big brother types."

She cast him a glance out of the corner of her eye, unable to stop her sly smile. "Those are usually the ones with the best stories."

"I wouldn't know anything about that. I always behave myself." He returned her sly smile. "Well, mostly."

Any sense of intelligent conversation fled her mind then. Rebecca only knew how flippy her stomach was and how pretty his eyes were. How was she going to eat anything in front of him? He was going to catch her staring, or worse, she'd say something completely humiliating, and then she'd have to slink away with her tail between her legs. This could not end well, except...he'd asked her to eat with him. Her. Rebecca Rankin. Not any of the buckle bunnies hanging around, hoping to get one of the cowboys to look at them.

It didn't matter how this ended. It only mattered that it had started in the first place.

She stood with him at the end of the short line, watching him smile and joke with others who passed them by. When they reached the window, her stomach unexpectedly growled.

"Told you a girl needs to eat," she joked when he glanced at her. To the woman at the counter, she said, "Cheeseburger, fries, and a Diet Coke."

"Same." Spencer's nostrils flared. "That popcorn smells good. I'll take one of those, too." He glanced at her. "Do you like cotton candy? Well, if not, I'll eat it by myself."

Cindy, the woman who ran the concession stand every year, snapped her gum. "Is that all? Nine dollars."

Spencer pulled his wallet out before she moved and handed Cindy a ten. "Thanks, darlin'."

Rebecca glanced around at the thinning crowd. "You want me to go snag a table for us while you wait for the food?"

Spencer nodded and she tore herself from his side to find the nearest empty table. A cool breeze danced across her neck, and she watched two girls, a little younger than herself, point at Spencer and giggle. He seemed entirely oblivious to the effect he had on the people around him as he leaned against the side of the concession stand, his hat pulled low on his forehead.

Cindy served him the food on two paper plates with a brown paper bag for the cans of pop, and his box of popcorn. He paused at the table of condiments, squirting ketchup onto both plates before adding a heaping pile of onions and relish.

"I am famished," Spencer announced as he settled at the table. "I don't usually eat before a ride, and I missed lunch today."

The smell of the food made her salivate, and Rebecca tore apart her burger in order to load it up. "And you don't get sick of having rodeo food all the time?"

"Nah. But on the nights I can't stand the sight of another cheeseburger, I've got food back at the camper. A little kitchen, too. And Stella, Sam's wife..." He gestured with

hand. "Sam's in charge of the bulls. Anyway, she's always got food after an event."

So how come you're sitting here, having a burger with me? She didn't voice the question. She wouldn't have traded watching him sink his teeth into his dinner for anything, not even the new car her father kept promising he'd get her.

"You guys got lucky today." Rebecca dunked a thick fry into her ketchup. "I heard Shotgun Willie was out of commission with a bum ankle. If he'd been in the draw, things might have turned out differently for you."

Spencer offered her a lopsided grin. "Shotgun Willie? I'm not scared of that old bastard. He's a tough draw, no doubt, but I've been up on worse." He leaned forward, an excited light in his eyes. "Now, there's a bull on the circuit, Red's Kitten. He's not here this year, but he's going to be up in Laramie next week. Nobody's ridden him in six years. If I draw him, I'll get eight seconds."

Her brows shot up. She knew of the bull. The previous summer, another cowboy had missed having his arm shattered when Red's Kitten had tossed and almost trampled him. It had been front page news in her town. Granted, her town was barely a speck on the map, but still, the story had left its mark.

"What makes you so sure you can take him? I mean, you're good and all, but come on. Six years? You have a secret the rest of us don't know about?"

Spencer popped the last bite of his burger into his mouth, and then licked the tips of his fingers. "Oh, it's just a healthy dose of natural talent, a bit of optimism, and a pinch of what

my mama would call fool-headed stubbornness." He tapped the tip of his hat back, allowing her a clearer glimpse of his eyes. "You saw me ride tonight, and it sounds like you know about the circuit. Do you think I have a chance on the Kitten?"

She'd known his eyes were brown. She didn't know there were tiny amber flecks around his pupils that caught the fading light and made his eyes shine. For a second, Rebecca forgot all about his question in favor of drinking in the details, only tearing her attention away when he focused more closely on her than his food.

"I think you're the best rider I've ever seen. So yeah, if you put your mind to it, I'd say you have a chance." She smiled. "I'd even say you had a good one."

His grin widened, and she thought maybe his mouth was pulled into a perpetual smile, like he didn't have a care in the world, or a reason to frown. "That's very kind of you." Half of the floodlights overhead blinked off, and Spencer looked up. "I think that's their way of telling us it's time to clear out of the arena. The night's still young. You don't want me to take you home, do you?"

His question made her ears burn and her heart pound against her ribcage. Want to? Hell no. "There's not a whole lot else to do in town. Trust me. I know. I've been trapped here my whole life."

Spencer stood up and circled the table to offer her his hand. "Well, it sounds like we'll have to make our own fun. What do you say?"

Rebecca didn't even stop to consider saying no. She was eighteen now, and this was the opportunity of a lifetime. "Lead the way." Stuffing their trash into one of the bags, she tossed it into the nearby can before looping her fingers loosely through his and standing up. "You going to take your popcorn with us?"

"And the cotton candy," Spencer said, snagging the bag with his free hand.

He led her out the side gate that opened to a large field. The town used it for soccer games or pickup football games, but now campers, horse trailers, and even tents packed it full. It looked like the party had simply moved two hundred feet from the arena to the campground. They wound deeper and deeper into the vehicles until he finally came to a stop outside a pickup that had seen better days hitched to a small camp trailer that might have been older than she was.

"Home sweet home," he said, pulling the door open with a flourish.

Rebecca had to duck her head in order to step inside, but she was too caught up in the excitement to care about the low ceiling, or the narrow aisle separating the tiny kitchenette from the bench/couch running down the opposite side of the trailer, or the dim light casting the rear of the space in shadows. After a moment of hesitation, she sat down on the padded bench, pulling one leg up and out of his way as Spencer closed the door behind him.

"So how do you like your first year on the circuit?" Conversation. Normal conversation was good. Normal conversation meant she didn't have time to focus on his

gorgeous eyes, or how good he looked in his jeans, or the way she sat there, acting like he was just like any other guy she had ever known when he really, really wasn't.

Focus on the conversation. Don't stare at his ass.

"Oh, this isn't my first year. I'm doing more events now because I can actually afford the thousand dollar entry fee, but I started traveling with my Uncle Travis when I was fifteen, and started riding when I was seventeen."

He opened the cupboard above the tiny sink and pulled out a deck of cards, kept together with a rubber band. A bottle of tequila, a shaker of salt, and a lime from the narrow fridge followed.

"Know how to play cards?"

She tried not to stare at the tequila. Lonnie would tan her hide if he found out she'd snuck away to go drinking with Spencer Cole. She had never had anything stronger than beer. Did Spencer realize she was only eighteen? Well, she wasn't going to be the one to tell him. She wouldn't risk getting kicked out.

Rebecca smiled. "Depends on the game."

He sat down beside her, leaving enough room between them for the cards, and balanced the bottle and salt on the windowsill above their shoulders. Leaning across the narrow space, he pulled a shot glass from the drawer.

"Five-card stud. Rules are simple. No cards wild, and the loser takes a shot."

"Sounds good to me." She held out her hand. "I get to deal."

Spencer shuffled the deck, the cards fluttering quickly between his fingers. "You don't trust me?"

"I like to call it, evening the odds."

"Smart girl," he said, sliding the deck across the cushion.

Their fingers glanced across each other as she took the deck away. Squaring the cards in her hand, Rebecca quickly dealt the first four cards—an eight to Spencer, a king to her, another eight to him, and then a three to her. Her cards weren't even the same color, let alone the same suit.

"Crap," she muttered.

"You could still get lucky." She set a jack in front of him and a two on top of her three. "Look, all you need is a king, then you've got me beat." She didn't get her king, but she did get another three. Unfortunately, a pair of threes did not beat three of a kind. He winked at her. "Maybe we should have called deuces wild, huh?"

Rebecca scooped up the cards. "So first shot is mine, I guess." She began shuffling the deck to hide the trembling in her fingers. "Is this where I admit to never having tequila before?"

"Not once? I guess I better show you the right way to do it." He took a small pocketknife from his jeans and cut the lime into wedges, careful not to get juice all over the cards. He offered her the first wedge, the rind just an inch from her mouth. "Bite into this."

Rebecca obediently opened her mouth and bit into the green skin, holding it firmly with her teeth. A little of the juice dribble down her chin. She wiped it away quickly as he opened the bottle and filled the shot glass.

"You watching?"

She nodded and he took her hand, raising her wrist to his mouth. Rebecca stiffened as his tongue darted out and swiped across her pounding pulse, wetting the skin. Spencer sprinkled salt on the damp patch, and licked her again. The first time had taken her by surprise, but the second time he touched her with his tongue, a jolt shot through her body, making her fingers and toes curl. As soon as he pulled away from her, he downed the tequila, then leaned over and captured the lime with his teeth.

Watching and listening to him suck at the pulp made Rebecca's mouth water. She was pretty sure this wasn't the traditional way of drinking tequila, but hell if she would stop him from putting his mouth anywhere near her body. He'd been so close when he'd taken the lime she'd smelled the aftershave and drying sweat on his skin. How much more would she smell the next time he did it?

Her heart suddenly took off at a gallop.

Crap. She had to do this now. She *had* to lick *Spencer Cole*.

Her gaze strayed to his wrist. He was tanned and sinewy, light brown hairs disappearing beneath his cuff. Her mouth watered again.

"You're going to have to roll your sleeve up if I'm going to do this right."

Spencer set the lime aside and unbuttoned his cuffs, rolling both sleeves up his arms, exposing muscled forearms. He set his cowboy hat aside, revealing damp hair, smashed close to his head. Losing the hat made him look younger. His

grinning mouth closed around the rind of a fresh wedge of lime.

Taking a deep breath, Rebecca poured out another shot of tequila and set both aside to pick up the salt shaker. She took his hand and turned it palm up, exposing the smoother skin of his wrist, before leaning down, watching him through her lashes. Spencer didn't look away as she dragged her tongue over his pulse point. He didn't look away when she sprinkled salt on the wet skin. And he didn't look away when she licked it off.

Her body felt like it was on fire. She needed the tequila just to calm her racing nerves.

Picking up the shot glass, she held it to her mouth and tipped her head back as she'd seen him do. The tequila scalded where it hit the back of her mouth, and her eyes watered. Rebecca clutched the front of his shirt and yanked Spencer toward her, desperate for the lime. It had to help. It couldn't make things worse. She barely even felt him as she sucked the fruit past her lips.

The juice took a bit of an edge off the tequila, but not much. She gasped for breath, the lime falling from her lips unheeded, and tried to fan her hot face with her hands. Spencer watched her with dancing eyes, more amused than concerned by her flushed cheeks.

"It's got a bit of a kick, doesn't it? The first time I did that, it knocked me flat on my ass. You'll be taking shots like an old hand in no time. Deal?"

She gestured helplessly toward the cards. "You do it. Maybe I'll have better luck with you."

Spencer gathered up the pile of cards with a single motion of his hand. His fingers moved quickly as he straightened the deck and shuffled it. For a moment, the only sounds in the camper were the swish of the cards and the blood pounding in her ears. The tequila had gone straight to her head, already skewing her depth perception a little.

"Nine of hearts. Seven of clubs. Ace of hearts. Jack of diamonds." Spencer dealt out all ten cards, announcing the number and suit with each one he overturned. "And my pair of aces beat your pair of nines." He looked up and grinned. "Your turn again, Becca."

She blinked. "What did you just call me?"

He lifted his brow. "Becca, Rebecca. You don't like it?"

"No, I do," she rushed. "It's just, nobody calls me that. Everybody calls me Becky, which I hate, but nobody seems to care. Small town thinking, you know. We get stuck in our ways, and we don't know how to change, and I'm totally babbling now, aren't I?" She blushed, though that could have been from the tequila or her embarrassment. "Right. My turn. What is it I have to do again?"

Spencer poured her a shot, and then pointed to a spot higher on his arm, close to his elbow. "Lick here."

She leaned forward and dragged the flat of her tongue over his skin.

"Now the salt."

The tiny specks of salt looked bright against his dark skin, and her mouth watered, but not for the alcohol. He caught his breath when she touched him with her tongue again, chasing the granules of salt.

"Now drink," he instructed hoarsely before biting into the lime.

It wasn't quite as rough going down the second time, and Rebecca was more aware of closing the distance to Spencer's mouth. She caught the soft fruit with her teeth, but instead of pulling it away, she sucked at it right there, closing her eyes to stave off the dizziness threatening to overwhelm her. The juice ran down her chin. A light weight settled on her shoulder.

Spencer pulled away, but he didn't take his hand from her shoulder. She opened her eyes slowly, surprised at the effort it took. His face was still very close to hers, close enough she smelled the lime juice on his lips, though the wedge itself was no longer in his mouth. He brushed the back of his other hand across her chin, and it took a few seconds for her to realize he wiped juice away.

"You okay?"

Wordlessly, Rebecca nodded. Her lips felt swollen, her tongue too thick to speak. The room spun, though she understood that was from the tequila and not some freak of nature. The details of his face captivated her. He had a little scar on his cheek, high up near his temple, and she tilted her head in order to look at it a little better.

"Did you get this from bull riding?" she asked, reaching up to touch it.

"A bull clipped me with his back hoof. He came about this close," Spencer held his fingers an inch apart, "to smashing my skull in."

Her eyes widened, and her mouth made a soft o in sympathy. Without thinking, Rebecca leaned forward and skimmed her lips over the mark.

"You bull riders are crazy," she murmured.

"You'd have to be a little crazy, I suppose." To her surprise, he gently pushed her back to arm's length. "But you'll never find another high like it. It's worth a little risk to do something you love. I'll deal again."

Rebecca barely noticed the cards this time. She was too busy studying every bit of him, looking for previously unnoticed scars. He didn't seem to mind her intent perusal.

"Looks like you win," he announced, startling her back to attention. "Just a pair of fives, but I've got nothing."

The implication of his words took a moment to sink in. With a half-smile, he guided a lime wedge to her mouth, but when he grasped her wrist, ready to wet it for the salt, Rebecca yanked her hand back.

"Not there." Plucking the lime out, she repeated herself, pushing her hair off her shoulder. "I win, I get to pick where you take the shot from." She curled her fingers into the neckline of her top, exposing more of her shoulder and neck as she tilted her head to the side. "Here."

Spencer slid forward, heedless of the cards he sent to the floor, and gripped her shoulder. She remained motionless as he tilted his head, resisting the urge to lean into him. Her chest hitched as his warm breath fluttered across her skin, and chills rolled down her spine at the first brush of contact. His tongue seemed impossibly hot against her flushed body, but the moisture from his mouth cooled the patch of skin he

targeted. Goose bumps erupted across her arms and shoulders, and he sprinkled a pinch of salt across her neck. She wanted to watch him, but her eyes fluttered shut as soon as he touched her again. It might have just been her imagination, but she thought he lapped her skin more than necessary.

Spencer downed the shot quickly, then his mouth covered the citrus. He barely bit into the fruit before pulling away. She didn't have a chance to realize his intentions before he plucked the citrus from her lips and replaced it with his mouth. She parted her lips and the mingled flavor of lime and tequila exploded along her taste buds. The trace of alcohol remaining on his tongue was more intoxicating than both of the shots she drank, and Rebecca clutched at his shirt as his tongue slid against hers.

It was hardly her first kiss, but for the effect he had on her, it might as well have been. She tightened her grip on his shirt to quell the sudden shaking in her hands, and her lips tingled. It might have been the tequila, but Rebecca doubted it. This was all Spencer. God, if kissing him felt like this...

His hand slid beneath her hair to cradle the back of her neck. Any further need to debate vanished with the callused tips of his fingers massaging her skin.

Spencer cupped her breast with his other hand, his fingers brushing against her nipple. It hardened immediately beneath his touch, and she arched her back, pushing for more contact. They broke apart at the same time to gasp for breath, and he used the opportunity to pull her onto his lap. She straddled

him, the bulge in his pants pressing against her inner-thigh, and they hungrily sought out each other's mouths again.

Her world narrowed to his lips, his hands, and his body. Everything else fell away. He tore away from her without warning, his body tensing. Rebecca leaned back, confused, but before she said a word, the camper door flew open.

"Becky Rankin, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

The sound of Lonnie's voice made her scramble out of Spencer's lap, but the instant her foot touched the floor, the world pitched around her and Rebecca fell on her ass. Strong hands grabbed her arm to haul her back upright, but it wasn't the hot bull rider helping her. It wasn't even Lonnie. It was Officer Ferris. Her dad's best friend.

"Oh, crap," she muttered.

Spencer stood. "Hey, guys, this is just a misunderstanding."

Ferris released Becky long enough to grab the depleted bottle of tequila. "Giving alcohol to a minor, Cole? No, I think I have a perfect understanding of what's going on here."

Spencer gaped. "Minor? No, nobody's a minor here. Right?"

"I'm not a minor," Rebecca cut in. Ferris didn't blink, and Lonnie snorted. They were ruining everything. "I'm *not*. Eighteen is not a minor. It's just not legal for drinking."

"Eighteen? Lonnie, look man, I didn't know she was eighteen."

"But you didn't ask, either," he accused.

Spencer swallowed. "Okay, you're right, I should have asked before I got out the tequila. It won't happen again."

"You know we could bring you in front of Judge Spizer and get you banned from the entire county," Ferris warned. "We don't take kindly to your sort taking advantage of our daughters around here."

Rebecca stepped between them. If Spencer got kicked off the circuit because of this, it would be all her fault. She couldn't let that happen. "Don't do it, Bruce. Because then I'll have to tell about the party at graduation, when you kept buying for us. You were the one who went out and brought back the keg, remember?"

"Becky—"

"Shut up, Lonnie." She stepped closer to Ferris, shifting her tone. "Please, Bruce, this isn't Spencer's fault. It's mine. Don't punish him because I didn't mention my age."

Bruce looked from Rebecca to Spencer and back again, the hard light in his eyes softening slightly. "Fine. But this is your warning, Cole. I better not catch you doing something like this again. Understood?"

"Completely," Spencer said quickly. "It'll never happen again."

Rebecca threw her arms around Ferris. "Thank you, thank you, thank you. You won't regret it."

He patted her back awkwardly before pushing her away. "Let's get you home, Becky. Your dad's been wondering where you are."

She cast a glance over her shoulder, taking a deep breath before speaking. "Can I just have a second with Spencer? To apologize. I'll be right out. I promise. And if I'm not, you can tell my dad everything."

Lonnie looked like he wanted to argue more, but Bruce glanced at Spencer and nodded. "You have one minute, Becky. Any more than that, and..." He made a slicing motion across his neck.

"One minute. Got it."

Spencer waited until the door closed behind Ferris before saying softly, "I probably would have invited you here even if I had known."

Her eyes widened. Listening for sounds outside the door, she closed the distance until they were toe to toe. "I'm so sorry about all this. I should've said something, except I think Lonnie would have gone looking for another reason to get me out of here." She smiled. "Told you he was overprotective."

Spencer's fingers glided down her arm. "Don't apologize. It was worth the heart attack they gave me. And don't be too hard on him. If I had a cousin like you, I'd be overprotective, too." He leaned forward and brushed his lips across her cheek. The contact was almost innocent, but it still made her toes curl. "Maybe our paths will cross again next year, yeah?"

"Maybe. I'll even ditch the chaperone for you." Though it took stomping on every impulse she had to throw her arms around him, Rebecca retreated toward the door, not taking her eyes off him for a second. "Thanks for pretty much making my whole summer. And don't worry too much about Laramie next week. I have a feeling you're going to show Red's Kitten exactly who's boss."

"I'll dedicate the ride to you," Spencer promised.

She smiled, and opened her mouth to speak again, but the doorknob turned in her hand and Lonnie nearly pulled her off balance.

"Let's get going, Becky. Your minute is up."

Spencer raised his hand in a brief wave. "G'night."

She waved back, not trusting her voice to work again. She waited until they were in the parking lot to slap Lonnie's arm.

"You just have to go and ruin everything, don't you? He's a good guy. You didn't have to do that."

"He is not a good guy. He's a cowboy, and he's only after one thing, just like the rest of them. You deserve better than somebody who'll take advantage of you and ride away in the morning without a second glance."

Rebecca rolled her eyes. "Please. You act like I'm a virgin. I know the score, Lonnie. It's not like I haven't been coming to these things since I was two."

When Lonnie launched into how she shouldn't even know what the score was, Rebecca tuned him out. She'd heard it all before. The men in town had the patent on trying to protect the women in it. She just didn't understand why so many women tolerated it.

She wasn't going to. As soon as she had the chance, she was out of there.

And maybe Spencer Cole would be the first person she looked up.

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CHAPTER 3

A weight sat right between his eyes, pressing on his skull with dull intensity. His face felt smashed into bits. If he looked in a mirror, it'd be like looking at those paintings by Picasso his mother had loved so much. He ran his thick tongue over his teeth, surprised to find they were all still in his head.

It took several attempts to open his eyes, and ultimately, he gave up. Each time he cracked an eyelid, the light from overhead pierced his skull and sent a hot flash of pain through his brain. Spencer thought it wouldn't be so bad if he knew where he was, but he had no clue. He couldn't see. He couldn't smell anything. He must have been away from the rodeo arena.

Encouraged by the fact he still had his tongue and teeth, he tried to convince his lips to form three simple words. *Where am I?* When that didn't happen, Spencer shifted to something easier. One single syllable.

"Help?"

He heard the whisper of soft-soled footsteps and a cool hand touched his wrist. "I'm right here, Mr. Cole," a woman said. She sounded older, like somebody's wizened aunt. "Just relax."

Right where? Christ, why can't I open my eyes?

He licked his lips, and his tongue felt like sandpaper against the chapped skin.

"Water?"

Her light touch disappeared, and liquid gurgled as it was poured out of a pitcher. Then, a strong arm slid beneath his shoulders, easing him upright only an inch or two before pain shot through his upper body. He gasped, but only for a moment before the nurse pressed a glass to his mouth.

The cool, refreshing water quenched the worst of the Sahara in his throat. Spencer gulped, but after only a few mouthfuls, the cup disappeared, as did the woman's arm.

"That's enough for now. I'll be right back. Dr. Allan needs to be notified you're awake, and your friend is waiting for news on your condition. I think she's going to be very relieved."

If Spencer could have formed more than one syllable at a time, he would have begged her not to leave him. Clearly, he was in the hospital, but he had no idea why. How long had he been there? How long had he been asleep? Who was Dr. Allan? Who waited for him? A brief flare of panic moved through his chest, but frustration dampened it.

"Relax, there, Cole," his uncle's voice said. "The doctor is coming. He'll tell you what's going on. Keep it together."

Normally, Spencer didn't appreciate it when Travis Cole's voice invaded his thoughts, but now he was grateful for it.

The door opened and snicked shut again. The footsteps approaching were slower, heavier, the heel of a boot instead of a nurse's shoe.

"Spence?"

Becca?

He had to see her. He didn't care if his head was smashed in and his eyes refused to cooperate. He had to know it was

her. He took a deep breath through his mouth—his nose wasn't good for smelling or breathing—and forced his right eye open. His vision immediately swam with tears but, gradually, Becca's familiar face came into focus.

"Happened?"

Her fingers fluttered over his brow. "Your arm got caught in Rusty's rope, and you were down in the well. God, Spence, you scared the crap out of me. You weren't waking up and...but the doctor let me crash in the waiting room until you did." It looked like she was trying to smile, but with his blurry vision, he couldn't be sure. "Those chairs are made for short people. I had to fold myself in half to squeeze my ass into one."

"Don't remember," Spencer croaked. In fact, the last thing he remembered was drawing Rusty Jack Knife. He tried to lift his right arm, but like most things, it refused to cooperate. He moaned softly and let his eye drop shut again. "What's wrong?"

She took a few seconds to answer. That couldn't be good. Nothing fazed Becca.

"You dislocated your shoulder. Tore up some tendons. Some ligaments." She took a deep breath. "You got a concussion, too. But Dr. Allan can tell you all about that. I don't know much about the specifics."

Spencer's lungs and heart stopped. She might as well have told him his arm had been ripped off. He knew plenty of cowboys with torn tendons and ligaments—and very few of those ever joined the circuit again. He tried to tell himself it could be relatively minor. He tried to tell himself it would be

okay. But black despair settled on his chest and limbs like a blanket.

"Becca, please...will I ride?"

Her fingers trembled where they touched his arm, telling him more than anything she might say.

"Dr. Allan said they'd have to run tests to be sure, but...he doesn't think you will. I'm so sorry, Spence."

Something in his chest withered, shrunk, until it was a tiny speck left in a very empty space. Spencer couldn't even find the energy to acknowledge he had heard her. The pain in his head increased tenfold, and now he felt it in his arm as well. A sort of slicing agony that went bone deep. Spencer didn't understand how it could be true. One stupid accident ruined his entire career? His entire life? It couldn't be true.

Her hand disappeared when the door opened again, but he didn't bother opening his eyes as the doctor swept in and introduced himself. Poking and prodding followed, with pain in places that hadn't felt pain before. When the questions started, he answered in the same monosyllables he'd given the nurse. He didn't have strength for anything else.

"...after the surgeries, though, you're going to need extensive physical therapy. Good thing for you, you've got Ms. Rankin to help you out."

Spencer barely paid attention to the doctor—what could he possibly say that Spencer would want to hear?—but Becca's name caught his attention.

"What?"

"Well, you're going to need some help, Mr. Cole. Ms. Rankin said you didn't have any family around here, is that right?"

Spencer had been so overwhelmed by the crushing news Becca had delivered it never even occurred to him to worry about his short-term care.

"No family." His lips pulled into something resembling a grin. "No insurance, either, Doc."

"You can take payment up with Accounting, then. My job is to make sure you get well. With Ms. Rankin's help. You're a very lucky man. Most cowboys I see don't have anybody."

"Oh." He didn't understand. He suspected confusion would become his natural state. He liked Becca. He looked forward to seeing her every year. But she barely had any more reason to take care of him than she would to take care of a perfect stranger. "Why?"

"Your head injury makes it necessary for you to have someone available to you, round the clock. You're going to have very limited mobility, Mr. Cole. Someone is going to have to be responsible for making sure you get to physical therapy, as well as seeing to your needs on a daily basis. At least until you can take care of yourself."

"I don't mind, Spence." Becca's soft voice. "But if there's somebody else you'd rather have do it..."

"No...Nobody else." Except Travis, and Spencer didn't even know where his uncle was. He could have been anywhere in the country. The man didn't even have a cell phone. Tracking him down would take days, if not weeks. Was his head injury really so severe? Beyond the pain, and the confusion, and the

pain, he more or less felt fine. Not like his brains were scrambled at all. "Thanks."

"I'll leave you two to talk while I go arrange with the consultant for your first surgery." The white coat blurred out of his line of sight, leaving Becca's darker outline somewhere off to the right. "If you need anything, just ring for the nurse."

Spencer waited until the doctor left before he tried to speak again. "In the well, huh?" He paused, focusing his thoughts and formed a second question. "Didn't get my ride?"

"No, sorry." She loomed larger again, and the side of the bed creaked slightly as she perched on the edge of it. "The clock stopped at six seconds." Her hand returned to his arm, heavier this time like she wasn't afraid of hurting him. "How do you feel?"

"Like shit. Tired."

"Do you want me to go so you can sleep?"

Spencer hesitated for a moment before whispering, "Yes." He didn't necessarily want Becca to leave, but he wanted to be alone.

"Oh. Okay." She sounded disappointed, but she rose from the bed anyway. "I should probably go home and shower. And my dad has left a zillion messages on my cell phone. Everybody's going to want to know you're all right."

Spencer wondered if maybe he should apologize, but he didn't have the words. Or the energy. He did force his eye open so he could look at her again before she left. But he only caught her back, and the fall of her dark hair down her shoulders. It was the only bright thing in the room.

Rebecca hadn't known what she'd expected when he woke up. Dr. Allan had warned her about the disorientation, and she'd talked to a few of the nurses throughout the night about head injuries, but when he'd opened his eye—and just the one, God, it was a good thing he didn't have a mirror—and she'd had to tell him about the prognosis, the desolation she'd seen there had nearly ripped her heart out. She knew what bull riding meant to him. It was all he had. She didn't need to be a mind reader to know what losing it felt like.

But she kept her chin up, and went about going home, cleaning up, calling everybody who'd be worried about Spence. When she talked to her dad, she carefully left out the part where she'd volunteered to be responsible for his short-term care. She was twenty-three years old. She didn't need to get approval about what she did with her own time, especially since the small house she called home belonged to her. Granny Bert had made ownership very plain in her will when she'd died. Rebecca was her only grandchild; she had wanted Rebecca to have a measure of independence.

She wasn't hungry, but she grabbed a cold piece of chicken from the fridge anyway. On a whim, she packed up some chocolate cake, too. A concussion didn't mean Spencer couldn't eat. This just might bring a smile to his face. Anything to make his stay there better.

The nurse on duty was the same as the one from when they'd brought him in the night before. Flashing a smile, Rebecca asked, "Can I see him?"

"He's asleep. But you're welcome to wait in his room until visiting hours are over, if you like. His surgery isn't until the morning."

Grateful, Rebecca gave her a little wave before heading down the hall. She hoped Spencer woke up, even for a few minutes. She wouldn't get to see him at all in the hours after his operation.

The door threatened to creak when she pushed it open, but Rebecca slid in quickly, catching the knob to keep from letting it slam behind her. Against the stark white sheets, Spencer was a menage of color, tan and bruise purple and pink where his skin stretched over the swelling. It didn't seem natural to see him so motionless. Spencer Cole was one of the most vibrant people she had ever known. In and out of the ring.

He began to stir about thirty minutes after she settled beside the bed. The index finger on his left hand twitched first, and then his eyes fluttered beneath his lids. She recognized the movement. He tried to pry his eyes open, but of course, the swelling wouldn't allow that.

"What?" A mere croak of breath.

She stood in a heartbeat. "Hey, Spence," she said softly. She risked touching his arm, letting him know where she was. "You want some water?"

Spencer began to nod, but immediately caught his breath and froze as fresh pain etched across his face.

"Yes."

Rebecca poured a little water from the pitcher sitting on the table, and gently cradled his head, lifting it from the bed.

A soft moan escaped his throat, but he opened his lips eagerly for the water. She gently wiped away the drops dribbling down his chin before settling his head back on the pillow.

"Can't see," he whispered, clearly distressed.

"That's just temporary," she assured him. "Rusty walloped you pretty good, but the swelling should be down in a day or two, the doc says."

"Where 'm I?"

Her heart stopped. They'd already had this conversation.

"The hospital in Park City. Remember? You went in the well last night."

"No. I don't...don't remember. Tell me."

Haltingly, Rebecca sketched the details of the ride, the visit from Dr. Allan earlier that day. Spencer never said a word, but she watched him intently, reading every response, every flicker of his eyelashes.

"The nurse said your first surgery on your shoulder is tomorrow morning," she finished. "But Dr. Allan will probably come in later and fill you in on everything tonight some time, I'll bet."

"I don't want to stay here."

"I know." Rebecca stroked his arm. It was still so strong. It gave her hope he'd pull through this faster than the doctor said, and maybe even the doctor would be wrong about his never riding again. "But it won't be for too long. Then you're going to come stay with me while you recover."

Spence didn't reply immediately, and for a moment, she thought he had fallen asleep. A part of her hoped he had.

Maybe when he woke up again, he would remember everything. But Rebecca soon saw he wasn't asleep. He was just thinking.

"Not going to ride again, am I?"

"The doctors don't think so, no." Telling him the truth wouldn't get any easier, no matter how many times she had to say it.

"I hoped I dreamed that part. But it's real?"

"Yeah. Is there anything I can do for you now, though? Anything you want me to bring in to make things easier for you here?"

"No. I...where's my truck?"

Rebecca panicked. Where was his truck? She'd been so worried about Spencer she hadn't given a second thought to anything else.

"Max took care of it," she lied. "You want me to have him take it out to my place until you're up to driving again?"

"Yeah. My dog...Jake...is in my trailer."

A dog. She'd never taken care of a dog. She had grown up with cats. What did she know about taking care of a dog?

About as much as she knew about taking care of a broken bull rider. And she hadn't hesitated to shoulder that responsibility.

"Don't worry about Jake." She made a mental note to call Max as soon as she got out of the hospital. She would have to run and get some food for Jake, too. Dogs probably didn't like chocolate cake. "When did you get him?"

"Um..." She almost regretted asking when she saw how much effort it took to speak. But then the edge of his mouth lifted. "March. He had a...cut paw. Almost got trampled."

She resolved to give the dog every ounce of affection she had to spare.

"I'm going to go let the nurses know you're awake. Just in case there's something they need to do."

"Becca...don't go yet. Please."

She immediately stopped, her heart pounding at the need in his voice. "Okay. Whatever you want." She smiled, though he couldn't see it. "I just didn't want to outstay my welcome."

"No. You're not. You're...taking care of me?
I'm...imposing."

"Never. I'll be glad of the company." Sliding her hand down his arm, she laced her fingers through the back of his. "And hey, when you're all better, you can finally teach me how to do body shots the right way. No fears of being busted this time."

Spence tried to smile again. "You were pretty good at it. How long...until we're drinking again?"

"Probably a few weeks, at least. Not until they're done with the surgeries on your shoulder, and I've got you home. Otherwise, I'll be the one who gets busted this time."

Spencer licked his lips. "Thirsty again."

Rebecca went through the same process as before. He drank more water than before, the column of his throat working as he swallowed. She thought he looked better. His face wasn't so twisted. Maybe it was just hopeful thinking.

"Oh," he rasped, after she wiped the water from his skin, "I bet you'd look cute in cuffs."

Her cheeks warmed. This was the Spence she knew, the one who'd charmed her off her feet every year since she'd first been lucky enough to meet him. Nobody made her feel quite so good about herself as he did; having him around for the next few months was definitely not going to be a bad thing.

"I might be able to conveniently borrow a pair of Bruce's as soon as you're up to it." Her thumb caressed the heel of his hand. She couldn't allow more contact, even if she wanted to stretch out beside him. "Any other requests I can take for you?"

"Yeah." He cracked one bright eye open. "If that doctor...says I can't ride again...you tell him. You tell him to shove it."

Her gut twisted, but she gave him her best smile. "You betcha."

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CHAPTER 4

Four Years Earlier

Spencer ducked behind the paddocks and doubled over, emptying his stomach of its watery contents. After six years of riding bulls professionally and nearly a decade of riding anything that would try to buck him off and trample him, he knew he should be over the urge to puke. But it never went away. After every ride, no matter how successful, his stomach rolled and twisted, forcing him to hide until it passed. It seemed shameful to him.

As soon as his stomach calmed, he rinsed out his mouth with the bottle of water he carried for that purpose and made his way back to the arena. He didn't want anybody to notice him. Of course, every person he passed noticed him, clapped him on the back, and told him he just had the "best damned ride I ever saw."

Spencer couldn't even be modest about it. It probably *was* the best damned ride they ever saw. He'd already seen two replays of it, and he couldn't quite believe he was watching himself on the back of Cat Daddy. He couldn't believe he had a score of 94.75. He couldn't believe he had won the purse of twenty thousand dollars, plus a five thousand bonus... One eight second ride netted him a prize of twenty-five thousand dollars. And people called him *crazy*. Did anybody else make this sort of money for eight seconds of work?

And the ride qualified him for the Extreme Bulls. Bigger purses, more events, and a chance to qualify for the PBR

tour. Just thirty minutes and eight seconds ago, he had been another face on the circuit, and now he was practically a star. With all the additional pressure. One bad ride...getting on a bad roll...a bad run of luck...

Spencer shook his head. Not going to happen. He didn't even have room in his body for negative thoughts. He was in the Zone—the mythical place where everything always went a cowboy's way, from the fit of his boots to the dues to the rides itself. He had hit the Zone the previous month, he sat there comfortably, and he'd be damned if one good right—one fucking fantastic ride—would push him out.

"Hey, Cole! You be sure to celebrate tonight!" Ricky called, pulling him from his thoughts. The lanky blond cowboy carried his gear over his shoulder and offered a friendly grin.

"Because it's never gonna happen again."

"All skill, Ricky. I hope you were taking notes."

"You got lucky."

"This is my third purse in as many weeks. How lucky does that sound?" Spencer asked easily, not at all perturbed by Ricky's dismissal. The other man was jealous. They were all jealous, to one degree or another. He didn't blame them. How many weeks, months even, had he gone barely scraping together enough for his dues and gas? Once, he almost had to drop out of the circuit.

But those days were behind him now.

Even so, he intended to celebrate. And he knew exactly who he planned to celebrate with. If he found her.

A picture of himself on top of Jumpin' Jack was clipped to the sun visor in his truck. It was perfect. The bull had all four

feet off the ground, and Spencer's spine was ramrod straight, his arm straight in the air. The lens had a tight zoom, and the spectators behind him were nothing but a gray blur. This picture wasn't amateur. It was professional quality work.

To think it came from the camera of an eighteen-year-old girl stunned him.

He hadn't been able to forget about said girl. He knew a lot of women. He didn't have one in every town, of course, but he never had a chance to be lonely. But a girl who should have known better than to go back to his trailer with him stayed lodged in his mind. Spencer knew she might not even be there. Hell, she didn't seem thrilled with how things stood in her one-horse town; she probably packed up and made dust as soon as she had somewhere to go. But if Rebecca Rankin still called Oakley home, he'd find her.

Spencer emerged from the bleachers to the picnic area and stopped short. Maybe he wouldn't have to look too hard. She was exactly the way he remembered her—long dark hair swept away from her face, a wide, friendly smile, and curves that made his mouth water. Her breasts, her hips, her ass just made him want to sink his teeth into her. He hadn't asked when they met, but she looked like a girl who had been raised on a farm, a girl built for work and play. When he had learned her age, he was just relieved she wasn't younger. Contributing to the delinquency of a minor wouldn't have been an easy rap to beat, but getting caught fucking a minor was about a thousand times worse, and he didn't intend to keep his hands off her this year.

Spencer approached her from behind while she talked to a handful of girls. They noticed him, but she didn't until he tapped her shoulder. "Excuse me, ma'am?"

All their giggles were immediately hushed as she turned around. Her blue eyes widened in surprise, followed immediately by the brilliant smile that had prompted his initial invitation the previous year. "Hey. Congratulations. You were amazing tonight."

Spencer didn't brush off the compliment. Putting up the best score of the year meant he didn't have any room for false modesty. "Thanks. I was pretty amazing." He nodded politely at the four girls who were still staring at him. "Ladies. Rebecca promised to give me a tour of the town last year, and we never got the chance."

Her friends whipped their heads around to stare at Rebecca, whose cheeks had turned the most delicious pink. She didn't back down from his suggestion, though.

"And here I thought I'd have to play cards again." She moved to his side and looked back at the girls. "I'll catch you later, guys."

"I was a little worried I wouldn't be able to find you this year," Spencer said as her friends reluctantly drifted away.

"I can't believe you even remember me. Well, except as the girl who almost got you busted."

He grinned at her. "Are you kidding? That was the most fun I've had with both feet on the ground in well, a long time." He began walking, but not toward the trailers. "But I figured this year we'd leave the tequila out of it. And go somewhere your cousin can't find us."

She fell into step beside him. "No worries about Lonnie. He's in Salt Lake City with my dad." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her bite back her smile. "I found out what night you were going in the arena and found a convention they absolutely, positively had to go to. The last thing I wanted was a repeat of last year."

Spencer slipped his fingers through hers, thrilled she had been looking forward to seeing him like he had been looking forward to see her. He just wanted to find a quiet corner and get her alone, finally. "Well, if they're out of town, and I remember to lock the door, then my trailer should be safe."

Her hand tightened in his, and as they walked, she edged closer to him until their arms were touching. "You mean, you really don't want that tour? And here I was all excited about showing you some of my favorite spots."

"Is one of your favorite spots private and dark?"

This time, Rebecca looked him in the eye. The twinkle he saw there shot straight to his groin. "I'm a photographer. All my favorite spots are private and dark."

"Then on second thought, I'd love a full tour."

She fell silent while he shifted their path toward his truck. Even up close, her age startled him. Nineteen now. Granted, he only had five years on her, but Spencer had been sure when he'd met her the previous year they were about the same age. Maybe because of her height, or maybe because she was very obviously built like a woman. But it was most likely the fact that Rebecca didn't act like other teenage girls he met. She didn't play games or get all coy. She didn't need to.

"There's a lake outside of town," she said as they approached his truck. "It's not very big, but the way it sits, if there's any kind of moon, it always catches it." She tilted her head back, gazing up into the darkening sky. Her long hair trailed down her back, curling at the ends where it hit her ass, and Spencer had to force himself to look away from the soft, inviting flesh. "I thought we'd start there. Everybody's going to be in town celebrating, so the lake'll be deserted. We'll have it all to ourselves."

Spencer yanked the passenger door opened and touched the brim of his hat. "Your chariot."

He had unhitched his trailer before the event—something he never did—hoping Rebecca would be willing to leave the grounds with him. He double-checked to make sure there were blankets in the back of the truck. With anybody else, he would have grabbed a cooler of beer, but he didn't want to risk involving alcohol again.

She was staring at the sun visor when he slid behind the wheel. "This is one of my pictures. I wasn't even sure you got them, let alone thought you'd actually keep them."

"Yeah, they caught up with me in Sacramento," Spencer said, starting the engine. "I thought they were all great, but that one's my favorite. You didn't happen to get any shots of tonight's ride, did you?"

The corner of her mouth lifted. "Miss out on shooting my favorite rider? Not on your life. I stowed my gear in Bridgette's car after your event so I didn't have to lug it around for the rest of the night." Her gaze strayed back to the visor. "I can get you copies of them, too, if you want."

"Great." Spencer carefully navigated through the rows of trucks. "Just send 'em like you did before. They'll find me again." He lapsed into silence until he made it to the road, leaving the field behind them. He hoped the lake wasn't too far. His hand snuck across the narrow space between them to rest on her knee. "What else do you plan to do with them? Sell them?"

Rebecca glanced down at his hand and shifted toward him. "If there's any my dad likes, he's going to use them in the Sunday write-up on the rodeo." She pointed at the upcoming stop sign. "Turn right up there. That road will take us out to the lake. It's about five miles out of town."

"You're going to waste those shots on your dad's write-up? I had the closest thing to a perfect ride you're probably ever going to see, and if the shots are half as good as the ones you took last year, you could make a pretty penny."

"Maybe," she conceded. "But it's not my call. Dad pays for all my gear and all my supplies, so he gets first dibs. And the ones he sent out for me last year didn't get me any attention at all." She shrugged, reaching up to pluck out the photo and look at it more closely. "I've got more to learn before I'm good enough to get out of this town. But I'm going to do it. Someday."

Spencer abandoned her knee to tap the photo. "He sent that out and it didn't get any attention? I think you've got all you need to get out of this town. You've got brains and some talent. I didn't even have that much when I set out."

"Maybe, but I don't think anybody's got as much nerve as you do."

The pavement gave way to dirt, and he began to catch a glimpse of the glimmering water through the trees. He easily forgot about the town they were leaving behind. Everything was still, the moon above providing the only light besides his headlights. Despite the dim light, he stole glances at her, and the back of his neck itched. The same sort of itch he always got before an event. Anticipation, and excitement, and a little bit of anxiety. Just enough to keep him honest.

She reached across the seat, her hand resting high on his thigh. It seemed to him she had plenty of nerve.

"Maybe you just haven't found it yet."

"It could be I'm using everything I've got on you tonight." Rebecca's voice was soft, and in spite of the touch connecting them, she watched the sky outside her window. "If you hadn't found me, I planned to ditch the girls and see if I could track you down myself. I figured if nothing else, I needed to tell you how sorry I was for not being upfront with you last year." Her fingers began to stroke his leg, the tips finding the seam on his inner thigh. "Thanks for not holding it against me."

Spencer hadn't held any grudges. Getting busted by her cousin and a cop wasn't exactly sexy, but it hadn't been enough to kill his boner. The worst thing to come out of their first meeting was the most painful case of blue balls he ever had in his life. He hoped nothing happened to interrupt them now, because her hand on his thigh, and the fact she would have sought him out, made his groin tight.

"Don't worry about last year. We'll just have to make up for that rather disappointing finish tonight."

Moonlight caught her vibrant smile. "The way I see it, neither one of us is going home disappointed tonight."

As they approached the lake, she guided him off the road and onto a grassy track that brought them closer to the water's edge. Silvery glints reflected off the surface, not a ripple in sight. When he killed the motor, there wasn't a sound to be heard, either. Nothing but the hush of Rebecca's breathing.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" she murmured.

"Yeah," he agreed softly, his gaze fixed on her. "Come on. Let's get some fresh air."

The sound of the truck doors slamming echoed across the water, but only disturbed the stillness for a moment. He met her at the back of the truck and lowered the tailgate. She ignored the hand he offered her and crawled into the bed, grinning over her shoulder as she straightened the thick horse blankets. He returned the grin and lifted himself onto the tailgate.

"I love this place." Stretching out on her stomach, Rebecca rested her chin on her hands as she gazed out over the water. "When I finally get out of this town, I'm going to miss this the most."

Spencer settled beside her on his side, setting his hat on the wheel-well. "You can always visit."

He watched her watch the water for several seconds, content to trace her body with his eyes. But it wasn't long until he needed to touch her. Unable to keep his hands to himself, he smoothed his palm down her spine to rest on her ass. She turned her head and parted her lips, but he cut off

her words with his mouth. She didn't resist his kiss, responding as he deepened the caress. This time, she didn't taste like tequila and lime, but she reminded him of sweet cola and fresh air.

"I like the way you kiss." Rolling onto her side, she reached up and touched his mouth. "I thought that the tequila made my head spin, but turns out it was you."

"I'm sure the cheap tequila had something to do with it." He took her wrist and kissed the pad of each finger, then pulled her against him again. "I like the way you kiss, too. Like it enough I spent the last year thinking about it."

"No more thinking then."

Her breasts were soft where they pressed against his chest, the scoop neckline of her T-shirt revealing the full swells, and he brought his hand up to touch her. When his thumb brushed along the visible point of her nipple, her breathing quickened, to be hushed by the sudden return of her mouth to his.

Spencer pulled her shirt free from the waistband of her jeans and pushed his hand beneath the material, seeking out her startlingly warm skin. He had tried to keep an ear trained for any possible approach, but he didn't have the energy to focus on anything except her body. The soft texture of her skin, the way her lips gave beneath the firm pressure of his mouth, the faint sounds she made in the back of her throat. The first brush of her fingers against him sent a shock through his system, and he paused long enough to drag her hand to his zipper.

Rebecca fumbled for a moment with the button on his Levi's, but as soon as she freed it, she dragged the zipper down and reached inside. Spencer groaned at the hot slide of her palm against his cock. It felt better than he'd imagined. He had a strong suspicion the entire night would be better than he'd imagined.

"Please tell me you brought condoms," Rebecca panted against his mouth. "Because I really don't want to have to stop and go back to the drug store."

"In my wallet." He had been optimistic and made sure he had two tucked inside. "Wasn't going to risk messing this up."

Spencer unbuttoned her jeans and his fingers immediately went between her legs, seeking out her hot skin. He sighed against her mouth as he buried his fingers between her lips. He rolled her onto her back without moving his hand or breaking the kiss, his knee slipping between her thighs to push them apart.

Rebecca whimpered when his thumb glanced across her clit, squeezing his cock as if in response. She started to ride his fingers, her legs strong where they tightened around his knee, and her free hand smoothed over his back before settling at the loose waistband of his jeans.

"Can I see you?" she asked. Spencer pulled back to gaze down at her, at the way her dark hair fanned across the blanket, at her full mouth made more swollen from their kisses. Under his attention, she smiled. "I want to know if you look as good as you feel."

He pulled his hand away from her reluctantly and straightened to push his pants down his hips to his knees.

She watched him unabashedly as he fisted his shaft and stroked it once. His thumb flicked across the head of his cock, spreading the drop of pre-come over his skin, and his balls tightened as her tongue darted out to lick her lips.

"Take off your shirt. I want to see you, too."

For the first time since meeting her, Spencer saw Rebecca falter. Her hands went to her waist, tugging down the hem of her shirt and then smoothing it over her stomach. "Do I have to?" Her eyes darted around, and she quickly added, "The blanket's itchy."

He bent at the waist again, bracing himself on one hand as his other hand went to the hem of her shirt. "It's not that itchy," he murmured, his lips brushing against her cheek. "I've been thinking about this for a long time." His finger snuck beneath the shirt and touched her stomach, then skimmed across her ribs to caress the swell of her breast.

"So get your wallet out," she urged. Her hands went to his hips, scratching slightly against the skin as her hot hands sought out his cock again. "Why should we wait any longer?"

Spencer outlined the edge of her low collar with his lips, then moved lower to catch her nipple with his teeth. He bit gently, sucking on the point through the thin material of her T-shirt. He knew he'd still be thinking about her when he headed out of town the next morning, and he would like a full mental image of her body, but her hand around his cock drove him to distraction.

"We shouldn't," he rasped, kicking his pants down his legs. Once they hooked around his ankles, he pushed them off completely and reached for his wallet.

Cowboy Blues
by Jamie Craig

While he dug one of the condoms out of his wallet, Rebecca shimmied out of her jeans, pushing her panties down at the same time. She kicked them toward the end of the truck bed and sat up, plucking the packet out of his hands.

"Let me," she said, tearing open the foil. Her eyes danced as she pulled out the rubber, but when she gripped the base of his cock to hold it steady to slide it on, she hesitated. "But let's wait just one more minute."

Spencer groaned in protest, but in the next moment, Rebecca ducked her head, her lips parting as she sucked the tip into her mouth.

He dropped his head back, staring up at the stars as her tongue swirled around the crown. He wanted her to swallow his cock completely, but he loved the way she sampled him, the way her tongue caressed his sensitive skin. Spencer rested his hand on the back of her head, gently urging her forward. Her mouth slid down his shaft without pause, drawing him deeper and deeper.

"Oh God, Becca..."

Her soft sigh fanned around the base of his cock, and with her mouth now holding him steady, she slipped her hand between his thighs. His balls already ached, but the feather touches of her fingertips along the sac had him struggling not to jerk his hips forward.

"I love the way you say my name, you're the only one I know who calls me Becca."

Spencer hesitated for a moment. He longed to kiss her again, to push his tongue into her mouth and lower her to the blankets and finally take what he wanted. But her mouth felt

amazing, and she used it on his cock with enthusiasm. Like she wanted to blow him as much as he wanted her to—which was rare. At least, in the girls he dated. Most of the time, they acted like they were doing him some great favor.

He could still smell her arousal on his fingers, and that made the choice for him. He took her by the arm and pulled her into a kiss, his fingers curling into her hair.

The touch of her hand on his cock again made him shudder. The condom felt cool where it slid down his heated shaft, but Rebecca's hot fingers compensated for that, straying back down to cup his balls when he was completely sheathed. Not once did she break from his mouth. If anything, her kisses grew more demanding.

As did her hands, once they were free of the condom.

With surprising strength, Rebecca pushed against his shoulders, forcing Spencer to sit down. She immediately straddled his hips, her wetness rubbing against his length.

Spencer gripped himself between his thumb and his finger and guided the tip of his cock to her opening. Her dark eyes reflected the moonlight, and he thought they were more beautiful than the stars overhead. He didn't look away as he thrust his hips forward, pushing into her tight heat. She tightened her grip on his shoulders, digging her nails into his skin.

"Oh yes, that's it." She rocked her hips, and he moved with her in shallow strokes. "God, that's it."

Spencer smoothed his fingers down to cup her luscious ass, and Rebecca caught her lower lip between her teeth, her breasts scraping across his chest with every rapid breath. The

new hold drove him deeper into her pussy, and the soft flesh filling his hands made him want more.

"This...this...oh God, Spence..." She shivered as she matched his fresh thrusts, and her lashes fluttered shut. "I'm so glad you came back this year."

"So am I," he grunted. "This place...is my new favorite stop." The truck began to rock as their bodies came together faster and harder, and each clench of her pussy around his shaft sent shocks through his body. He kept one hand on her ass and cupped her tit with the other, massaging her nipple with his thumb.

Rebecca buried her face in his neck, her teeth scraping against his skin. Her arms tightened around him, and the tremors wracking through her echoed into his flesh until Spencer didn't know if it was the truck shaking so hard or them. He felt like he was freefalling when she cried out and clamped around his cock.

Spencer gripped her chin and guided her lips to his, moaning into her mouth as his body clenched and his cock jerked against her walls. Her flesh throbbed against his as he shot into the rubber. They rocked together, but the rhythm gradually slowed, until they were still. She collapsed against his chest, resting her head against his shoulder, and he naturally wrapped his arm around her, holding her tight as his cock slipped out of her.

Spencer pressed his lips against her temple, her hair tickling his nose. The first thing he did once his breathing returned to normal was inch her shirt over her ribs.

Rebecca lifted her head, catching his hand at the same time. "What're you doing?"

"When I think about being with you tonight, and I definitely will, I want to think about all of you." Spencer kissed the line of her jaw to her ear. "Don't be shy with me, Becca."

"I'm not..." Her breath was warm on his neck. "I don't exactly look like most of the girls who hang around the rodeo."

Spencer frowned, doing his best to piece together what she meant. It wasn't easy, because she was still on his lap, and her heat radiated through him. It wouldn't be long until he was hard again.

"You're hotter than most of them," he said slowly. "But I don't think that's what you're trying to say."

Her eyes glowed in the moonlight, and there was an unexpected solemnity in the set of her full mouth. "No," she agreed. "It's not. But...you think I'm hotter? Even though I'm not a size two?"

Spencer smiled, comprehension finally dawning. "Becca, darlin', I didn't even notice any of the other girls at the arena, let alone what sizes their jeans were. I put up the best score of my life tonight, and all I really worried about after the ride was finding you so we could finish what we started last year."

Her intake of breath was audible. Slowly, Rebecca leaned back, separating their torsos, and without taking her eyes off him, grabbed the hem of her shirt. In one, swift motion, she pulled it over her head and tossed it onto their pile of their jeans.

"My bra does up in the back," she murmured.

Spencer reached behind her and freed the hooks slowly, never looking away from her face. The straps fell down her arms, and he pulled the soft material away from her as she shrugged it off. It joined the growing pile of clothes, and he finally looked down. He caught his breath, his eyes widening. She looked better than he imagined. Her breasts were round and full, her nipples large and a dark pink, and he just wanted to pull each point into his mouth. He leaned in to kiss one, then the other.

A small noise escaped her throat. "Okay." Her hand came up to the back of his neck, her fingers toying with the longer strands of hair. "You win. I was totally silly not to do this earlier."

"Totally silly," he agreed, his tongue flicking over her hard flesh. "You didn't plan on going home before morning, did you?"

"The drug store closes at eleven."

Spencer smiled against her skin. "I've got a box back at my trailer. We should be covered for the night."

Her fingers tightened in his hair, forcing him to look up and meet her smiling eyes. "Then I'm not going anywhere. If you promise me one thing."

"Name it."

"Skinny-dip with me before we go back to your trailer." Rebecca deliberately looked down at his still-covered upper body. "If you get to see all of mine, I get to see all of yours."

"That lake is probably cold as fuck." He grinned widely. "You're on. We'll just have to find ways to warm each other up afterward."

She scrambled off his lap and he quickly unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it aside. Spencer jumped out of the back of the truck and offered her his hand as she lowered herself from the tailgate to the ground. Hand in hand, they walked down the beach to the shimmering water. Their fingers slipped apart as he hesitated at the edge, but when she ran into the lake without pause, he could only smile and give chase.

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CHAPTER 5

The dark glasses didn't do anything to alleviate the piercing July sun or dull the sharp pain behind Spencer's eyes. Dr. Allan had warned him that he was still recovering from a severe concussion, and his eyes might be sensitive to the light, but Spencer didn't think it had anything to do with his head injury. He had spent the last two weeks trapped in the hospital, most of the time without even a window to let a hint of sunshine into the room. Spencer felt like he had been locked in a fucking cave. He wasn't built for enclosed spaces. He needed to be outside.

But now that he was outside, Spencer didn't think he could handle it. His head throbbed, even though the drive from the hospital to Rebecca's home was relatively short. Each mile increased the tension around his forehead.

The pain in his skull wasn't even the worse of it. A deep ache resonated in his shoulder that no painkiller touched, further souring his mood.

Spencer only vaguely recognized where she drove him. He knew the road she took once they reached Oakley. It took them past the rodeo arena and the post office. It was the same road he took up to the lake—an encounter he barely remembered now. Dr. Allan had assured him the memory loss was only temporary.

Rebecca pulled to a stop outside a small white house, just off the road that would continue to wind up to the mountains. A pasture stretched behind the house, where two horses

sedately grazed. A sharp yelp from inside the house greeted them as Rebecca turned off the engine, and a familiar brown and white face stared at them from the window. Spencer immediately brightened.

"You've got Jake."

"Oh, yeah. Me and Jake are best buddies now." Shaking her head, she pulled the keys out of the ignition. "Except you could've warned me about his addiction to corn nuts. Aaron down at the gas station is starting to think I have a problem."

Spencer laughed softly. "Did you give him any jerky? My poor dog eats like a cowboy."

Her eyes twinkled. "Does that mean I can blame the Froot Loops thing on you, too?"

"I guess you haven't gone through my trailer yet. Froot Loops is about all I own." He looked around. "Where is my trailer?"

"It's parked at Max's." Rebecca opened her door and climbed out, going around to the trunk to get the small bag of stuff he'd accumulated at the hospital. "The rodeo people decided to let him keep an eye on it, since he's the one they work with." She paused as she slung the bag over her shoulder. "Did you want to head over there later? It might be good to go through your things and figure out what you want to bring over here."

Spencer reached over his body with his left hand and pushed open his door. His right arm hung like a dead weight in a sling around his neck. "I was thinking maybe I'd just stay there. I know what the doc said, but..." He swung his legs out

of the truck and moved to stand, but as soon as he began to straighten, it seemed like all the blood rushed from his head.

He didn't even see Rebecca move. She rushed to his side and scooped her arm around his back, bracing him until the vertigo passed, then held him for a couple more minutes.

"The doc said it because the doc was right," she said quietly. "And you told me you were okay with this. Don't get all hardheaded on me now."

"I'm not getting all hardheaded, but you can't tell me this is how you thought you'd be spending your summer vacation."

The blue eyes she leveled at him were solemn. "Maybe not, but it's like Granny used to say. Life happens whether you're looking or not, so it's better to keep your eyes open so you don't miss it."

"Becca, darlin', I don't have any idea what you're talking about. Was that Granny's way of saying to just cowboy up?"

Her mouth twitched. "Pretty much, yeah."

"Well, then, it sounds like Granny was a wise woman."

Spencer wanted to take his bag from her, but he knew his own limits. His left arm was uninjured, but the added weight might topple him over. Becca's arm around his waist acted as a good reminder that he could barely support himself.

Becca guided him to the front door, pausing once they reached the porch to unlock it. As soon as she pushed it open, Jake came barreling out of the house in a blur of white and brown fur. He was a small dog—he probably didn't weigh more than twenty pounds—but Spencer didn't have the chance to brace himself for the impact. As Becca pushed Jake

away with one hand, and steadied Spencer with the other, he trembled with deep frustration, and even self-loathing.

If a dog can knock you down, you know you'll never get back on a bull.

The door opened up into a cozy living room, with an overstuffed country plaid couch on the far wall and a matching recliner in the corner. Photographs dotted the walls, their subjects everything from tranquil landscapes to the occasional action shot from rodeos. For some reason, they looked familiar, but for the life of him Spencer couldn't figure out why.

"I've got some potato salad and strawberry rhubarb pie, if you're hungry." Becca nudged Jake away with her foot as she guided Spencer to the chair. "Or if you're thirsty, I've got iced tea and Diet Coke."

Spencer sat down heavily, silently grateful to be off his feet. He wished an unseasonable blizzard would descend from the mountains. At least then, he wouldn't resent being trapped in the house.

"I'm not really hungry." He rubbed his jaw absently. "Can I eat solid food? Did the doctor say?"

"Sure, you can eat whatever you want." She jerked her thumb over her shoulder to the hall. "I'm just going to put your bag in your room. I'll show you where it is later, okay?"

Spencer swallowed the new wave of frustration. They had warned him again and again that his memory would be patchy, splashes of information coming and going without any real pattern or reason. He still hated being unsure of his own care and feeding.

"Yeah, thanks." He waited until she returned before adding, "Iced tea sounds good."

Becca smiled before heading off again, this time through the adjacent dining room. The distant sounds of a refrigerator opening and closing, followed by cupboards, were almost foreign. Too domestic, a little voice whispered to him. But he didn't have time to contemplate it before she returned, two tall glasses in her hands.

The ice clinked as she handed it over, and she took a seat in the corner closest to him, curling her long legs up beneath her. "My dad's letting me work from home while you're staying here." She wasn't drinking her tea. Her fingers kept playing in the condensation collecting on the side of the glass. "But you should know, he's not too thrilled I'm doing this. He might show up and give us a hard time once in a while."

"Tell him to fuck off, then." Spencer frowned as soon as the words escaped his mouth. He meant them but he never intended to say as much. "Sorry."

She smiled a little. She really did have a pretty smile. "If I thought he'd actually hear it, I would. And don't apologize. It's not like I've never heard you swear before."

"Maybe, but it was little rude. I didn't...mean to say it. Christ. You work for your dad?"

"Yeah. Still. Which, I know, is kind of sad considering how often I've bitched about wanting to get out of this town. But..." She took a sip, and ran her tongue over her wet lips. "It helps pay the bills. And it won't be for much longer. My portfolio is looking better all the time."

"Your portfolio?" Spencer paused. If he played it cool, chances were good he would remember what the hell she was talking about later. If he asked for clarification, she would just look at him with a hint of sympathy before explaining—again?—what she meant. "That's good. You should keep working on that."

Jake appeared from nowhere and propped his paws on Spencer's knee, thumping his tail against the floor. Becca stretched to the side, and as soon as her fingernails scratched against something, Jake's head snapped toward her, bounding to her lap in the next moment.

"I hope you spoiled Jake before," she said as he munched on the corn nuts in the palm of her hand. "Otherwise...sorry."

"Yeah, I spoiled him rotten. It was the least I could do, since he was all I had for company. He's a good rodeo dog." Spencer gently rubbed his right shoulder. "He's going to miss the circuit as much as I do."

He caught the softening of her eyes before she ducked her head. "He'll be good for doing some of the physical therapy exercises here at home. He'll chase after things I throw until the cows come home."

"We both know I won't be throwing anything to him for a long time, though. Hell, the doctor isn't even sure the surgeries will work. I might not be throwing anything to anybody again."

"Then you can kick 'em. Your legs still work, don't they?" Spencer wiggled his toes and smiled a little. "They seem to."

"And I think this little guy has missed you." Rebecca dusted the crumbs from her hand and pushed the bowl closer to him. "He curls up so close with me in bed at night, I don't know where he ends and I begin anymore."

Spencer raked his gaze over her body. Despite his laundry list of problems, the trauma hadn't affected his libido at all. "Lucky dog. I wish I could trade places with him." He sighed. "And I said that out loud, too, didn't I?"

Her laughter was light and genuine. "Oh, trust me, cowboy. You've said a lot worse."

"At least I haven't lost most of those memories. What did the doctor say about that? Did he say my bed rest needs to be solitary?"

"I can honestly say it didn't come up." A faint pink stained her cheeks, despite her direct gaze. "But tell you what. You get his permission, and I'll let you sleep wherever you want. Deal?"

"I don't see why that didn't come up. What else did he think I'd want to do with you?"

For a split second, her eyes widened, and the teasing twinkle disappeared. Spence wasn't sure how he'd upset her, but she pushed Jake off her lap and rose to her feet before he figured it out.

"It didn't come up, because I didn't ask." Rebecca went the awkward way along the coffee table rather than past his legs. "I'm gonna go call Max and see if there's a good time for us to show up today. Go ahead and watch some TV if you want. I'll just stay out of your way."

"Becca..." The thought of her leaving sent a fresh shot of panic through him. He didn't want to be alone in a strange house, when most of the world didn't make sense. "Did I do something wrong?"

She stopped at the sound of her name. At his query, Rebecca looked back over her shoulder, and after only a moment, her soft smile returned. "Of course not. But I do have to call Max. How about I bring the phone back in here so you can talk to him, too? He'll be glad to hear your voice."

Spencer nodded with a small smile of relief. Maybe later he'd want to be alone, but he needed her too much right then. "Yeah, I should talk to him and make sure he's taking proper care of my truck. I'm going to need it to get back to the rodeo."

He thought he caught something else in her face, but Becca only nodded and went into the kitchen. A minute later, her low tones filtered from the other room, but it took several more for her to return with the phone in hand.

"You're going to have about a dozen dinner invitations to choose from," she said, holding it out to him. "Max says everybody wants to know how you're doing."

"Of course they do. Now they have their own tame cowboy in town," Spencer said, surprised by his own bitterness. At Rebecca's frown, he tried to soften the words with a smile, and accepted the phone. "Max? Yeah, I'm doing good."

He did his best to sound like he meant it.

She had done a lot of preparation for Spencer's arrival in her life, but the reality was far different than any scenario she imagined. The doctors had warned her, of course.

"You can't trust his memory yet," they'd said. "He's going to seem like he's fine, and then he might forget something as simple as whether or not he's put on his shoes."

And she'd believed them. She'd listened. She'd taken notes, like a good wannabe nurse, and she'd even read up on the Internet about others who'd suffered the same kind of trauma as Spence.

But seeing him stumble just getting out of the car...hearing the fear in his voice when he thought she would leave him alone...listening to him talk about what he needed when he went back to the rodeo...

Nothing prepared her for that.

His careless words indicating all she might be good for was sex had stung most. She'd wanted to lash out, but then common sense had prevailed and she'd tried to make a graceful getaway, and let him have his space to adjust to his new surroundings. It had to be hard, being in his shoes. And she was a veritable stranger, in a lot of ways.

But then he'd turned those eyes on her, and Rebecca couldn't stay mad at him. His eyes would forever be her downfall, and they were enough to make her anger vanish.

The truck bounced slightly over the dirt road leading down to where Max had parked Spencer's trailer. Spence hadn't said more than a few words since they'd left the house, and the way he leaned his head against the seat made her worry they'd taken this step too soon. Maybe he should have had a nap before they'd ventured out again. Or maybe they should have waited until the next day. Rebecca chewed on her lip, wondering if she should have called the doctor to ask, but

then decided it would have made her look even more incompetent than she probably already did. She was just going to have to take this one step at a time. They'd learn together.

"Here we are," she announced as she pulled to a halt parallel with his truck. "Any ideas on what you'll want to take back with us?"

"I've got some clothes. And I think I have cash hidden away. At least enough to help keep me fed." He had been speaking softly, but his voice dropped another register. "I don't remember what else is in there."

The desolation in his face sent her stomach plummeting, but Rebecca kept her smile firmly in place. "Then it'll be like Christmas, won't it?" She opened the door. "Come on. Let's go do some unwrapping."

Once again, she helped him out of her truck, and he had to lean on her a little bit more than either one of them was comfortable with. She didn't falter under his weight as she led him to the door of his small trailer. With the two of them working together, he climbed the short stairs and stepped into what had been his home for years.

"How do we want to do this? I have a duffle bag in the closet by the bed."

The inside of the trailer brought a lump to her throat, and she tried to swallow it as she helped him sit before fetching the bag. His jeans were carefully folded and stacked on the upper shelf of the closet, while a variety of shirts hung from the narrow rail.

"I'll just take it all, okay?" She shot him a brilliant smile. "Less laundry for me."

"Yeah, that's fine. I think everything in there should be fine to wear." He pulled open a drawer near the fridge and caught his breath. She almost asked him what was wrong, but the shine from the gold belt buckle caught her eye as he held it up to the light. A quick glance proved it wasn't the only buckle in the drawer. "I won this in June. I didn't even remember that ride until now."

"But that's good. Things are coming back."

Spencer snorted. "Sure, my memory can come back, and I can relive every moment the doctors say I can never have again. Sounds like a great time to me."

"It's better than not being able to remember it at all." Dumping the clothes onto the small table, she started rummaging through the tall cupboards he couldn't reach from his seat. "You got anything like a photo album or something that might help you remember other stuff? Like your Uncle Travis, maybe."

"I have an envelope...I think. It should be somewhere near the bed. Newspaper clippings, rodeo programs, pictures...things like that."

Rebecca abandoned her search to walk the short length of the trailer to the narrow bunk at the end. Crouching down, she looked underneath, only to find dust motes and a chew toy. She snagged the toy and tossed it back with the other stuff, but it took a few more minutes of moving things around to find the envelope in question.

"Huh," she said as she flipped through its contents. "The only pictures you have in here are the ones I took."

Spencer's brow furrowed. "The ones you took? Can I see them?"

"Sure." She came back and sat on the opposite end of the couch, passing over the envelope for him to dig through. "I've got more at home. I only ever sent you the really good ones."

Spencer bypassed the clippings and programs without a second glance, his attention entirely focused on the glossy photographs she had sent him over the years. He studied each one intently as he flipped through them, his eyes suddenly shining with interest. He paused on the one she took the second year she knew him. The one of his nearly perfect ride.

"Now that's a night I haven't forgotten. It was one of the best."

She wouldn't forget that night, either. But this errand wasn't about her memory. It was about his.

"It was," she agreed. "You were fantastic that night."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "So were you. I loved it when you sent me these shots. I can't believe I forgot you were the photographer."

His soft praise warmed her through, and she leaned a little bit closer. "Do you remember the lake?"

"I remember. I think it'll take more than a concussed brain to make me forget that. Though it seems to be enough to wipe everything else away." He pushed at the pictures with enough force to scatter the entire stack, and they fluttered to the floor. "Fuck."

Any pleasure she might have gotten from knowing the memories of her had survived vanished with his sudden outburst. Rebecca slid from the couch to pick up the photos, putting them back in the envelope before they upset Spencer further.

"What else should we take home?" She needed to stay focused on why they were there.

Spencer rubbed his forehead, grimacing as his fingers connected with the unhealed bruises. "I've got some CDs and books in a box under the bed, to keep myself occupied. My shaving kit in the mirror above the sink." He paused, an increasingly familiar look of confusion on his face. "My paperwork, receipts, taxes, everything like that is in a lockbox somewhere around here."

Rebecca gathered the things as he spoke, digging through the closet again, and back under the bed. Tucking his toiletries into a sack made her feel like she was invading his privacy. When she glanced back at him, Spence was gazing off into the distance, lost in a world of his own.

The razor clattered into the sink, jerking his attention back. Rebecca scooped it up and threw it into the sack.

"Do you want to hang out here for awhile and maybe reminisce some? You can tell me what you remember about some of your times here."

"No. The things I remember hurt enough."

"Oh. Okay." She filled her arms and headed for the door. "I'll just run this stuff out to the car then. I'll be right back."

"You sure it won't be easier for everybody if I just stay in the trailer? I promise I won't try to drive myself out of town."

She didn't think he'd remember where he put his keys, but Rebecca kept that comment to herself. "I'm sure." She hesitated at the door. "But maybe when your arm's out of the sling, we can get it moved out to my place. I'd still be close enough to help you then and you could get the privacy you want."

Spencer's smile was almost teasing. "I think you mean you won't have to put up with my moody ass anymore."

"Now why would I want that?" Opening the door spilled bright sunshine into the trailer, and she smiled back at him as she climbed down the stairs. "I've always loved your ass."

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CHAPTER 6

Three Years Earlier

When Max pulled Rebecca aside to tell her Spencer Cole had requested her as his one, and only, official photographer in Oakley, she thought things couldn't get any better.

She was wrong.

"Cole done good tonight," he commented. "Bet you got some good shots."

"You bet I did."

"Want me to send Lonnie back in a few to pick you up?"

"No, I've got a ride home already, thanks." She didn't, but she hoped Spencer would volunteer again. He'd already gone to great lengths for her; she was pretty sure he didn't mean for their night to end when the rodeo did.

Max spit into the dust, rolling the tobacco around in his cheek. "You know where to find me if you need me."

Rebecca watched him amble off for only a moment before turning her attention back to the cowboys streaming out of the arena. There might be more than a few people around town who'd like her to stay a little girl forever, but Max treated her with respect. She was glad Spence was in contact with him. Anybody else might have downplayed her abilities or discouraged Spencer's attention.

"I'm beginning to think you're my good luck charm," Spencer said from behind her. He wrapped his arm around her waist before she turned around, pulling her against his

hard chest. "What are the chances of you running away from home to join the rodeo?"

Tilting her head back, she met his laughing brown eyes and melted right on the spot. No matter what he might claim, her photos never did him justice. She might know every twinkle in every picture, but seeing him up close and in hard, delectable person made her work look like a child's scribbles.

"Who'd be around to turn you into a local legend then?" She folded her arm over his, a shiver going through her at the hard feel of his hand against her fingertips. "I take that responsibility very seriously, you know."

"Local? I'm not stopping until I'm a national legend. Paul Revere, Johnny Appleseed, and me." He leaned forward and brushed his mouth across hers, a mere hint of the things to hopefully come later. "How are you living up to that responsibility?"

"Not too bad, if I do say so myself. I got some great shots tonight."

"Can't wait to see them. You got any plans for tonight I should know about?"

"On your only night in town? Never."

"Then let's get something to eat, because I'm going to starve." He released her, but the break of contact was only temporary. As soon as she turned around, he put a hand in the small of her back and guided her toward the concession stands. His fingers were hot through her shirt, and she wished he was touching her bare skin, wished his rough fingers were gliding down her back. "I wasn't exactly kidding

earlier, though. It feels like when you're watching, I can ride any bull they put me on."

A pleased flush crept up her neck. "You've been doing great everywhere, though. Look at what you did with Lights Out in Missoula. People still don't know how you stayed on him."

"Too bad you didn't see my ride. You know what you should do? Come to Vegas this December. I aim to be in the finals."

"Vegas?" The invitation took her by surprise. She'd daydreamed more than once what it might be like to see Spence outside of the Fourth of July rodeo, but she knew they were only fantasies. Until she found a way out of town for good, she would have to settle for one night of fun with him and be grateful for it. Besides, she wasn't so naive not to know why he might want her around. He'd said it himself. She was a good luck charm, and cowboys were nothing if not superstitious.

"My dad usually lets Lonnie go with one of his other reporters, but maybe I can work on him to let me go instead." She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "When you make the finals, of course."

"If I have more nights like this I will, easy." His brow furrowed beneath the rim of his hat. "Of course, that's what I thought last year, and I missed it by four points. One bad night in Cheyenne was all it took."

They came to a stop at the end of the line outside the concession stand. The smell of hamburgers and popcorn

made her mouth water. Almost as much as looking at Spence did.

"You're so far ahead of the others right now in points, it's not even funny. You'd have to mess up big time not to make it this year."

"I'm in the Zone. But one bad night could ruin that." For a moment he seemed strangely subdued—far more serious than she was accustomed to. But it only lasted for a second. She barely had a chance to register it before his grin returned and his eyes twinkled. "Still, if I were you, I'd clear your schedule in December." The line shuffled forward, and they moved with it. "Do you want to take dinner back to my trailer? Or we could drive up to the lake again, if you want."

Rebecca glanced up at the cloudy sky. "Considering how cold you thought the water was last year when it was hot?" She grinned. "I vote for trailer. And I promise not to take advantage of you with body shots this time."

"If I've done my math right, you're not twenty-one yet anyway. As far as you're concerned, I don't even have tequila in my trailer."

She laughed. "No, of course you don't." On a whim, she leaned in, her mouth hovering at his ear. "But next year, all bets are off."

Spence turned his head quickly and pressed his mouth to hers. His tongue teased the corner of her lips, but just as she parted them to allow him to deepen the caress, Spencer lifted his head. "I'll be sure to have enough for a real party then."

Rebecca barely heard him order. Though she did her share of dating when the rodeo wasn't in town, none of those boys

even compared to Spence. She knew the whole cowboy allure was part of it. Cowboys were dangerous and forbidden and, like Spencer, sexy as sin. And he wanted her and not one of the skinny minnies who used to make her feel like a lumbering ox, clodding through the school hallways.

Spencer had a way of making her feel like there was nobody else in the world but her. He was funny and sweet, and he thought she had talent. She would have crushed on him for that alone.

"You know what we should do?" she said as they made their way back to his trailer. "Get some shots of you around the rodeo itself. Kind of a backstage thing. I don't know how good they'd turn out, but maybe you can use 'em if you need something more casual for promo."

"Sure," Spencer said as he unwrapped his hamburger. "Do you want to go back to the arena and the chutes before they turn off all the lights?"

"Yeah." Now that he'd mentioned the possibility, Rebecca liked it more and more. "Know what would be nice? A shot of you standing alone in the arena, looking up at the empty bleachers."

Spencer made his hamburger disappear in two bites. "I think it's more interesting when I'm riding, but I'll take your word for it."

They turned away from rows of trucks and campers, making their way back to the arena. All of the floodlights were still on, but only a few spectators still lingered in the stands. Most of the people who remained were volunteers

cleaning up the trash, volunteers packing up the concessions, and cowboys signing autographs and flirting with pretty girls.

"Tell me where you want me."

Circling slowly, Rebecca looked for the best backdrop for her shot. Posed photographs were a first for them. All the photos she'd taken of Spence so far had been candid shots. She had no idea if a staged picture would even turn out right, but damned if she wasn't going to try with everything she had.

"Here." Grabbing his hand, she dragged him several yards away from the gate, and then grasped his shoulders to angle him in the direction she wanted. She stood back and cocked her head, assessing whether or not the shadows would hide all the best bits. "Yeah. That's going to look great."

He stood patiently while she referred to the eyepiece of her camera, checking and double-checking the frame. "Now you're making me feel all shy. I think that's a first for me."

"Trust me." She crouched down some in order to get a better angle upward. "You've got nothing to feel shy about." Before he moved, she took the shot, swallowing her excitement at catching his half-smile. "Do you ever come out before a show and just look around?"

"Depends. If I've never been to an arena before, I do. Or if I'm making sure a certain pretty girl is in the crowd like she promised she'd be. You want me to pretend I'm doing that now?"

"Yeah. Just pretend I'm not here."

Spencer snorted. "You make it sound like it'll be easy."

He moved along the perimeter of the arena, his heels sinking into the combination of soft dirt, hay, sawdust, and manure. He turned toward the chutes first, strolling past each numbered door, pausing occasionally to check inside the compact space.

Rebecca waited until he'd walked some first, giving him time to forget just what it was they were doing, for the tension in his shoulders to relax. She took her first picture when he tilted his hat back to wipe at his forehead, the second from behind when he looked down the length of the arena. Shooting from the side gave her the best angles, but in one he simply stopped and looked up into the stands. She took it straight on from the back. The floodlights turned him into a silhouette. If there was a finer shaped man in this rodeo, she'd eat her camera strap.

"When do I get to take a picture of you?" Spencer asked as he circled back to face her once again.

Rebecca laughed. "Oh, I don't get on the other side of the lens. I like it just fine where I am, thank you very much."

"Is it fair that you have all these photos of me and I've got nothing of you?"

"Maybe not, but I'm the one with the camera."

Spencer grinned. "For now. You're not going to have that thing in your hand all night."

"Oh?" Matching his smile, she started to back up toward the gate. "Who says?"

He quickened his pace slightly. "I think it won't be long until you forget you even own a camera."

"Somebody's awfully sure of himself."

"Somebody's got precedent to fall back on. Or am I wrong?"

The gate nudged her ass, and Rebecca slipped outside. "I'll send you all the photos I took this time."

"I'd still rather have a picture of you. You're cuter than I am."

"Ha! That's a matter of opinion. You're pretty darn cute yourself."

"I think most objective people would agree with my opinion." His long legs began to close the distance between them, and he held out his hand. "Just one picture."

They stepped clear of the stands, but she only saw Spencer and his laughing brown eyes. "You don't strike me as the master of restraint. I give you one, then you'll want two."

"Maybe," Spencer conceded. "But no more than three. Three will be the absolute maximum, I promise."

"Until you want four."

So caught up in the game, she shrieked out loud when he suddenly lunged for her, turning on her heel and bolting for anywhere but there. Laughter bubbled from her throat, and she hugged her camera close to her stomach to keep it from bouncing against her. She didn't have an aim in sight. She just ran. It felt glorious and free and wonderful, and when she risked a glance back over her shoulder, she saw Spencer taking chase, a wide grin splitting his features.

There wasn't even a flash of lightning or a rumble of thunder to warn her of the imminent rain. One moment, she was dry and running toward the trailers, and the next, she couldn't see more than a few feet in front of her face and

water plastered her hair to the top of her head. The sudden storm didn't slow her, but it forced her to choose a destination. A loud whoop from Spencer let her know he was closing in on her heels, and she half-screamed in response as she darted for his truck, cold water running into her eyes and down her neck.

He grabbed her six feet from the door, long hands circling her waist to yank her back into his chest. Rebecca gasped against the sudden hardness of his body, but the moment she leaned into it, rain splattered along her camera.

"If either of us wants any pictures, we'll get inside now." She laughed, cradling the camera into her chest.

Spencer walked toward the trailer without releasing her, and reached up with his free hand to yank the door open. She didn't need any encouragement from him to step inside, and he followed, slamming the door behind him.

"This trailer may not be much to look at, or have a lot of room, or smell too great, but it'll keep the rain out."

Rebecca pushed back the wet hair dripping into her eyes. "I like your trailer. It's cozy."

"Cozy is one word for it." He turned on the light above their heads, casting a soft, golden light over everything. He gripped her hip and pulled her close to him again. "Though you certainly brighten up the place."

Tilting her head, she closed her eyes as he nuzzled her neck, sending an array of gooseflesh rippling under her clothes. "I should dry off my camera before my joke about it being ruined comes true."

"Okay, but I think we should get you out of your wet clothes first. You know, so you don't get sick."

Rebecca twisted away, scooting down the trailer's length for the towel hanging next to the sink. "Uh huh. Like that line ever really works."

It wasn't really possible to escape him, since the length of the trailer couldn't have been more than a few yards. Spencer took advantage of that, looking over her shoulder as she dried it. She felt his mouth near her ear, his breath hot on her chilled skin. "One picture. That's all I want."

She smiled, though she kept herself—somehow—from looking back at him. "All you want? What happened to all those precedents you were so proud of back at the arena?"

"Hmm, you got me. All I want with the *camera* is one picture of you."

Turning around within the circle of his arms, Rebecca leaned against the edge of the sink. His hat had kept his hair from getting wet, but droplets still clung to his cheeks, making his skin glisten. He looked good enough to eat, and knowing she'd get that very chance made her swallow in anticipation.

"Tell you what, I'll make you a deal. You get one of me, I get one of you. Any way I want."

"That sounds fair to me." His hands went to the button on her jeans. "But I want to take a picture of you first."

She knocked away his hand. "Hey, who said I was going to be naked, buster?"

"That's the kind of picture I want. And since I'm the photographer..."

Though they had been teasing up to this point, it took only one look at Spencer's face to know he meant what he said. Rebecca flushed. She didn't like getting her picture taken with her clothes on, and certainly never with them off. If her dad found out she posed for nude photos, he'd take all her equipment and have a bonfire, right after he locked her in the basement for the next thirty years.

But Spencer had never once made her feel self-conscious about her size. He liked her curves. He liked her body. And after he left, she would lay in bed at night, thinking about him looking at the pictures she gave him.

"Promise me nobody sees these but you."

"Of course, I promise." His fingers returned to her jeans, and he popped the button free. The zipper followed. Instead of pushing her pants over her hips, he shifted to the buttons on her shirt. "I think the shot should be of you on the bed."

As he slid the wet shirt from her shoulders, her nipples puckered beneath her bra, hardening to tight points visible even beneath the lace. Spence cupped her left breast, his rough thumb dragging over the tip, and the sound of his callused skin against the delicate fabric sent more shivers down her spine.

"I'm going to get your bed soaked if I keep these jeans on." She sounded breathless, even to her own ears. She really hoped Spencer didn't see her as so naive.

Slipping away from him, she held out the camera until he took it away from her, then turned her back to him as she pushed her jeans down her legs. She had to kick her shoes

off first, but one glance over her shoulder said Spencer more than appreciated the view.

He licked his lips and nodded. "After you."

The bed was at the front of the trailer. It wasn't very big, narrow enough to be more suitable for a single man, but it was surprisingly comfortable. She suspected he had invested in a good mattress, even though he didn't seem to spare a second thought to other creature comforts. She climbed onto the bed, and the trailer floor creaked as he followed her.

"Wait a minute," he murmured, taking her shoulder. "Let me help you with this." A moment later, her bra loosened as he unsnapped the back.

Rebecca shrugged it off, leaving her only in her damp underwear. Stretching out on her back, she coiled one arm above and around her head, trying to give him as much room as possible. "How do you want me?"

Spencer's smile was almost wolfish. "What a good question." He knelt on the foot of the bed and brought the camera up to his eye experimentally. "I think I like you just like this."

She itched to reach down and pull the sheet up, at least to cover her stomach, but he snapped a picture before she moved. "Okay," she said. She pushed herself to a sitting position. "My—"

The camera clicked again.

"Hey!" Laughing, Rebecca dove forward. "It was my turn!"

"You can have your turn later." Another click. "I'm sorry, but I just I can't help it." He reached out with his free hand and skimmed his fingers over her tight nipple. The shutter

opened and closed just as a fresh wave of goose bumps erupted across her skin.

"Unfair." But she didn't push him away, even when he cupped the full flesh, caressing the underside as delicately as he'd touched her nipple. "At least do me a favor and get undressed, too. You're getting the bed all wet."

He stood, but he didn't relinquish the camera. It wasn't graceful or quick, but he managed to get his belt unbuckled and his pants unzipped. There were splotches of discolored skin on his legs and ribs—a testament to the falls he had taken and the hooves he hadn't quite dodged. "Don't worry." Spencer brought the camera back to his eye. "Pretty soon I'm going to want both my hands free."

Rebecca fell back onto the mattress and stretched again. It was impossible to feel self-conscious in front of Spencer, and already her nerves were fading away. "You know what just occurred to me?" She slid her hand down her stomach, toying with the waistband of her panties. "It doesn't matter how many pictures of me you take. You only get what I send to you."

"You'd hold all the pictures hostage?" His hand joined hers, but he didn't try to push the thin material aside. Yet. "Or will it be for ransom?"

"I might. What would you be willing to exchange for them?"

Spencer gently tugged on the waistband, slowly dragging them down the tops of her thighs. "Sexual favors?"

Lifting her hips, she gave him the room to pull them all the way off. "You mean I don't get those anyway?"

She couldn't see his face, but she didn't need to gauge his reaction. He moaned softly, and his cock twitched. "I guess you'll have to name your price."

She had no idea what to ask for. She already had more than she wanted. Nothing could make their time together better.

Rebecca bent her leg, resting her foot on his thigh as she spread her legs. When it came time to print up these pictures, she would be blushing from here to kingdom come, but for now, she felt sultry and sexy in ways she never did with anyone else.

"I'll think about it. Though knowing you, you're likely to charm them out of me anyway."

Spencer swallowed audibly. "I'm certainly going to give it the old cowboy try." He gently set the camera aside, as careful with it as she would have been. "Starting right now." His shirt followed, and then he stretched out beside her, all warm flesh and firm sinew against her softer curves.

Rolling onto her side, Rebecca caressed his carved chest, marveling at how someone so hard could be so tender with her. "You taking off first thing in the morning?" she asked softly.

"Not first thing. But I really shouldn't leave any later than noon." He leaned in to draw his mouth along her jaw. "I'm on the program in Grand Junction."

She turned her head to brush her cheek along his, his slight stubble raking deliciously across her skin. Her tongue followed afterward, sampling the rain and sweat seeping from

his pores, and they both groaned when her breath tickled across his ear.

"At least it gives us all night." Rebecca nipped at his lobe as her hand molded down his side. "Think you can make it that long? Or did that bull get the best of you, cowboy?"

"I think I can make it. How about you climb up and find out?" Spencer rolled onto his back, pulling her with him.

Rebecca straddled his hips, her hair a dark curtain where it fell around his head. She knew from experience last year where the condoms were, but though the hard length of his arousal rubbed along her pussy and clit, she wasn't ready to take him in just yet.

They had all night.

As she bent her head to kiss him, Rebecca vowed to make the most of it.

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CHAPTER 7

Spencer knew pain. He could live with pain. Tolerating pain defined his existence. He faced it head-on without blinking. But the agony centralized in his shoulder was unlike anything he understood. Rebecca had given him his dosage of painkillers after dinner, assuring him it would make his shoulder feel better and put him to sleep. But the pills had done neither, as Spencer expected. How could so much pain, a whole galaxy of pain rotating through his body, be touched by two little pills?

Rebecca had put him in her bedroom, insisting he would be comfortable in the larger bed and it would be easier for both of them. Spencer might have argued, but it hardly made a difference to him. He wouldn't sleep anyway. All he could do was lay awake, miserable and aching.

Focusing on his memories distracted him from his shoulder and the steady throb behind his eyes. Unfortunately, focusing on his memories didn't improve his mood. He tried to think about Becca lowering herself on his cock, her pussy gripping him until he'd go cross-eyed from the pleasure. He tried to think about the other girls he had known in other towns. How many of them would have opened their home to his worthless, crippled ass? None of them.

But mostly, he thought about the bulls. His clearest childhood memory was watching Travis fly ten feet off the back of a furious red bull, nearly cracking his skull in the process. Spencer hadn't cared anything about the possibility

of injury; he had been too enthralled with the animal itself. Travis had seemed like the bravest man on the planet. It had been the day after his tenth birthday, and the first time he met his Uncle Travis, his father's youngest brother. Maybe he had latched onto Travis because he had never known his father. Or maybe he just wanted to climb on the back of one of those heaving, bucking, vicious, frightening, beautiful animals.

He had followed his uncle's career, begging the older man to teach him how to ride, worshipping him from afar, and doing everything he could to practice. He rode anything that stood still long enough to let him—mostly sheep at first, but then he had graduated to horses, first with saddles and then bareback, with his eyes always on one goal. He practiced daily until he turned fifteen, when he tracked Travis to Denver, a homeless orphan who still only had one dream in mind.

Spencer never made it past his sophomore year in high school. He didn't have any skills, except riding bulls. He didn't have any life, except riding bulls.

Darkness seeped around the curtains at Rebecca's window, somehow thinner than that within the room. Becca had put up blackout blinds to keep the sun out, but when she'd shown him the room earlier, he'd asked for them to come down. He didn't want to hide away from the sun. The sun was one of the few things he understood. Without it, it would be too much like being locked away in a crypt, moldering away, and his thoughts were already bleak enough.

She had complied. Without an argument. He wished he'd asked her to take the curtains down, too.

A floorboard creaked in the hall, proof he wasn't alone. When the door pushed open, the light from the living room behind her outlined Becca's plush curves, turning her soft blouse transparent. She didn't come in. One hand stayed on the door, while the other gripped the jamb.

"You need anything before I go to bed?" she half-whispered.

"Do you have any more drugs?"

"Yeah, but I can't give you any more for at least another hour. I'm sorry."

"Why? What difference does it make?"

"Because that's what the doc said. Your system can only take so much. Does it really hurt so bad?"

"What are we saving my system for? Because I've got such a great future ahead of me?" Spencer sighed and looked away from her. "Never mind. I'm fine. I'll see you in the morning."

The light slashing across the room didn't go away. Neither did her shadow. Spencer closed his eyes to block it out, but the click of the door closing never came.

"I have a heating pad," Rebecca said. "Maybe that might tide you over for awhile."

"Yeah, a heating pad. That should solve all my problems."

"Well, no, but it might do something about this one, at least."

The darkness on the other side of his eyelids brightened, and he heard her footsteps move down the hall. A minute

later, she returned, and he looked over in time to see her crouch down at the side of the bed.

"I'll stay up for another hour," she said when she sat back on her heels. She held a small, square item, and she leaned forward to mold it over his aching shoulder. "So you can get another dosage before I go to bed."

The heat did help, almost immediately. The pain subsided long enough for his head to clear, and he felt a prick of guilt. "Sorry for snapping at you."

"That's okay." She took her time rising to her feet, and even more retreating to the door. "Just call me if you need anything else."

"Becca..." Spencer wanted to add more, but he was momentarily too overwhelmed to speak. He hadn't been kind to her, despite her infinite patience. Seeing his buckles and those photos had created a different sort of agony. And he had been intent on taking it out on her, so it didn't seem fair to ask her to stay now.

Rebecca paused, waiting for him to continue. The light gilded her profile, and her blue eyes shone. When he didn't speak, she smiled softly and said, "Try and sleep, Spence. I'll see you in an hour."

Closing the door cast him in darkness yet again.

He couldn't sleep. When he closed his eyes, he saw the first bull he ever tried. Uglier than sin, its face had been cut and marked from dozens of fights, its hide splotchy, the hair clumped and filthy. It had a look in its eye—something entirely unnatural. Like the damned thing *knew* Spencer. He had been sixteen and shaking with more emotions than he

had ever felt up to that point. The bull had been called Red Tequila Sunrise—a name far too pretty for such a beast.

Spencer had clung to it for three seconds before the bull flung him across the yard. The time he spent riding broncs hadn't prepared him for the power between his legs, and he didn't even react fast enough to put a hand down to break his fall.

So he tried again.

And again.

Dr. Allan had said he'd never ride again. A part of Spencer hadn't believed the good doctor. But now, in the darkness, with the throbbing pain in his shoulder, he believed it. The fear he had experienced when facing down Red Tequila Sunrise couldn't touch the terror clutching his heart now. They told him he was lucky to survive the blow to his head—lucky his skull wasn't shattered, lucky he didn't have a bone shard lodged in his brain, lucky his neck hadn't snapped in two. Spencer couldn't say he agreed with that assessment. He wouldn't characterize his life, his condition, as lucky.

He didn't even hear the floorboard this time. One moment, it was dark. The next, Rebecca was back, and the bottle of pills rattled in her hand.

She didn't say a word as she took the heating pad away. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she set the glass of water she'd brought on the nightstand and popped the drugs open, rolling two out in her palm and holding them out to him. Spencer took them and swallowed them dry, forcing them down his tight throat even when it tried to rebel.

She sighed softly. "Have you slept at all?"

"No. I can't."

"Cause of the pain?"

"No. The pain isn't so bad now."

"Is it the bed?" She looked down its length. "I know it's bigger than you're used to. Do you need more pillows or anything?"

"No, it's not the bed. It's...I just want to ride again."

Her "Oh, Spence" was more of a breath than anything else, but it weighed on his skin, his bones, his very marrow. She rose to her feet, but did not leave him alone again to brood in solitude, moving around the end to the other side of the bed. The mattress bowed slightly as she lay down next to him, and she curled her arm beneath the pillow to watch him.

"Is this okay? Because I can't sleep if you don't sleep, so maybe if we're both not sleeping, we can talk or something."

"Yeah," he said softly, relieved he didn't have to feel like he was further imposing on her. "What would you do? If you couldn't take pictures anymore?"

"I don't know. I've never thought about it. I guess it depends on why. Did I lose my hands in a freak baking accident, or did I go blind, walking in on Lonnie and Sharelle doing it on the chest freezer?"

Spencer snorted. "The latter. I think that's more detrimental to your profession."

"So I can't see anymore..." Her eyes took on a faraway glaze, her small teeth worrying the corner of her mouth as she contemplated the possibilities. "I'd probably try working out at the vet's office. I don't think I'm smart enough to get any kind of degree, but I'm good with my laptop, and I love

working with the animals. I could probably find something there to make me happy."

"I don't have any sort of idea or backup plan. I know that's stupid. I knew I couldn't ride bulls forever. But these accidents...they happen to other people. Not me."

"Just because you didn't have one, doesn't mean we can't figure out one for you now. What did you do when you weren't riding?"

"What do you mean? Between rodeos, or before I started on the circuit?"

"Between events." Her small smile was genuine. "You told me you started traveling with your Uncle Travis when you were fifteen. I figure anything that might have interested you before then doesn't count too much."

"Well, I drive a lot between gigs, since I don't like to fly, and most guys do. If I'm not driving or at a rodeo, I usually read or research bulls."

"What about for fun?"

"I ride...rode...bulls for a living. That was all the fun I needed. Plus, I thought it was fun to trace the bloodlines of bulls. Are you saying you don't think that's a good time?"

"Well..." Rebecca brushed her knuckles along his forearm, back and forth in soothing strokes. "I should probably say, to each his own. I get a strange thrill locking myself in a dark room with funny chemicals and glowing paper to get pictures the old-fashioned way when digital is a million times faster, so I'm probably not one to talk."

The pills were starting to take hold of him, dulling the pain into a manageable roar. "I'm an idiot. I'm probably just getting what I deserve now."

"Nobody deserves this. We'll just find a way to help you deal with it, is all."

"Yeah, right. I can't help but think if I used my brain for something other than holding up my hat, I wouldn't be in this situation and imposing on your life."

She flicked her nails at his bare skin, just the tiniest of stings to catch his attention. "You're not imposing."

"I'm sleeping in your bed, aren't I? Eating your food? Snapping at you for no reason?"

"I'm not doing anything for you I wouldn't do for any other friend."

"I guess if nothing else, I've got you and Jake. Things could be much worse."

Her soft touch returned. "Much worse," Becca agreed. She fell silent for long seconds, seconds he felt with each throb of his shoulder, every sweep of her fingers. Then... "You think you might be able to sleep now?"

Spencer knew he should be strong and tell her absolutely, all the dark thoughts were banished, and the gray despair didn't creep over him. He would need all of his strength just to get through every day, and if he gave in to hopelessness, he'd be too weak to do anything. But his hopelessness lingered.

"I don't know." He studied her face for a moment, catching the shape of her nose and lips in the line of light from the open door. "Have I been here before?"

She swallowed before she answered, but the hesitation said far more than her words. "Yes. Two years ago. We came here instead of staying in the trailer."

"Oh. We weren't ever really friends, were we?"

"I guess...that depends on your definition of friend." Her hand stilled, though she didn't pull it away. "I mean, we only ever saw each other the one time a year, but...we always got on good, even outside of the physical part. I wouldn't have done this if I didn't think of you as a friend, Spence."

"I know. I just meant..." Spencer dropped his head back to the pillow and stared up at the ceiling. "Christ, I feel like half the things I say are incomplete. I meant, I wasn't...I was a shitty friend to you." His eyes felt heavy, like if he closed them, he might not open them again. "Should have called once in awhile. Wrote you."

"I never expected you to. I liked what we had. I still like what we have." Carefully, Rebecca edged a little closer, her breasts soft where they pressed against him, and her arm moved gently over his waist. "Is this okay? I'm not hurting you, am I?"

"It's more than okay. It's actually really good. You feel really good. And you smell really good, too."

Her warm breath wafted across his shoulder, and he felt something tickle along the skin there. "I can stay here until you fall asleep, if you want," she whispered. "I don't mind."

"Thank you." His lashes fell. "I'll try to be better tomorrow."

"I know." Another tickle, this one lingering a little bit longer. "Good night, Spence."

Cowboy Blues
by Jamie Craig

"Night, Becca." He didn't want to drift away from the security of her body against his, or the sweet smell of her hair, or the assurance in every soft word. But now he couldn't keep his eyes open, even if he wanted to. He just hoped all of those small details followed him into his dreams.

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CHAPTER 8

Two Years Earlier

Spencer's hands were clammy and his stomach unsettled. A re-ride had fucked with his head, and he had damned near broken his wrist the second time on the bull. He had gotten his eight seconds, but his nerves hadn't quieted. He knew the source of anxiety—Rebecca Rankin. Their previous two meetings had been amazing, beyond amazing, but this time would be slightly different. For one thing, they had a pre-determined meeting place, to save them both the time and energy of searching the arena, and for another thing, he had a gift for her.

It was not the greatest gift ever. It might not have even been appropriate. What did he know about buying presents for girls? The women he met usually only wanted one thing from him, and it wasn't material goods. But Becca had sent him two sets of amazing photographs, and he appreciated both sets. Very much. Especially the second one that had included every frame he had taken of her. He thought, at the least, a gift would be polite.

As soon as he finished his paperwork with the rodeo officials, he went directly to his truck. He had unhitched it from the trailer when he parked, in eager anticipation of taking Becca away from the rodeo stands. He wanted to drive her some place dark and private, and he wanted to get her there as soon as possible. Fortunately, Rebecca's eagerness

always matched his, so he suspected he wouldn't have to wait long for her arrival.

He didn't know who saw who first. There he was, sweeping the darkness for any sign of her, and when his head swiveled back, looking off to his left, there she was, striding toward him with that beautiful smile on her face.

Spencer had consumed more hours than he wanted to admit studying her pictures, memorizing the details, remembering how soft she'd been above him, next to him, below. But seeing her in the flesh, with those legs that went on for miles, the plush curves that made his fingers itch to sink into her, put those images to shame. She wore a simple white top and jeans, and her camera hung around her neck as proof of her official capacity. He matched her smile, straightening against the side of the truck as she approached.

"The faster we get out of here, the happier both of us are going to be." She didn't stop until she stood right in front of him, and his hands went automatically to her hips as she tilted her head up. "Lonnie's trying to be clever. He told my dad you and I should go out with him and Sharelle after, to celebrate. So we have about two minutes before he shows up and tries to drag us back to civilization."

Spencer always enjoyed spending time with Rebecca, without exception, but he never understood why she gave a fuck about what her dad said or what Lonnie wanted. When he traveled with Travis, he'd tell the older man to fuck off anytime he started getting in Spencer's business. And he'd do it without blinking. Why would he care that Lonnie wanted them to go out to dinner? Why did Rebecca think he cared?

He never asked, though, or invited her to explain her family to him. How Becca's father treated her wasn't any of his business, especially since she was an adult in every sense of the word.

He greeted her with a slow kiss, exploring the sweet curves of her mouth and teasing her tongue. He had been thinking about nothing else for the past two days, and her mouth felt as good as he remembered. And God, did she know how to kiss.

"Where do you want to go, darlin'?" Spencer asked against her lips.

She smiled. "I've got a surprise. Trust me?"

"Of course. Just tell me where you want me."

She peeled away like doing so was the last thing in the world she wanted, and went around the end of the truck for the passenger side door. "Behind the wheel will do for now. I'll tell you how to get there."

"Yes, ma'am."

The box he intended to give her sat on the passenger seat, but she pushed it away without a second thought. He didn't understand why, until he realized he had forgotten to put her name on it.

He settled behind the wheel and started the engine before nudging the box toward her again. "Here. This is yours."

Becca glanced at him curiously before looking down at the package nudging her thigh. "Did I leave something in your trailer last year?" Picking it up, she opened the top before he had a chance to answer, and her eyes widened at the same time he heard her gasp.

He'd seen the camera case in Phoenix and known then he had to get it for her. It was light brown leather, tooled in simple sweeps along the front and top, with her initials "RR" emblazoned across the middle of the lid. Pockets at either end allowed room for various paraphernalia, and the three compartments inside were adjustable, to allow room for any size camera and more than a few lenses.

She set the box down on the floor in order to rest the case directly on her lap. Her fingertips skimmed over the designs, tracing the whorls and leaves, and when they reached the clasp, she opened it up to peer inside.

"This is amazing." The eyes she turned to him shone with delight. "You really got this for me?"

"Yeah." Spencer had hoped she'd like it, but now he knew she did, he felt more than a little shy. "I thought you might like it."

"I love it." Ducking her head, Becca pulled off her camera and removed the lens in order to rest both carefully inside. "I can't believe you went to so much trouble. Thank you."

He put the truck in gear and slowly pulled it forward, careful not to hit any of the other vehicles nearby, or the people milling around. "It wasn't any trouble. Besides, you go through more of a hassle for me every time you send me your photos."

"Right. Like I don't get anything out of that at all."

Spencer grinned. "What do you get out of tracking me down across the several states so the mail arrives in town when I do?"

Her answering smile was just as teasing. "You haven't seen the other pictures I got of you last year. I'd say the shot of you standing in the rain without a stitch of clothing on is worth every ounce of trouble."

"And the pictures I have of you on the bed are worth any trouble I had buying the case for you, so we're even."

Spencer rolled to a stop at the park's exit. "Left or right?"

"Left," she said without looking up. "Then turn right at the stop sign. The place we're going is just outside of town."

Just outside of town sounded like it would have both darkness and solitude. He tried not to speed through the small town—he certainly didn't want to attract the attention of the police patrolling the area or hurt any of the kids on the road—but his foot was a little heavy on the accelerator. He pushed the truck even faster once they cleared the town limits, but they didn't go far before Rebecca directed him to a small white house with a large yard.

"Is this yours?"

"Yep. Since last fall." Grabbing the strap of the case, Becca climbed out and waited for him to come around and join her before leading him up the front path to the porch. "My Granny passed and left it to me. It's not much, but it's mine, free and clear, and it means we have a little more room to knock about than we do in your trailer. Plus, I've got some chocolate cake and cold fried chicken in the fridge if you're tired of rodeo food."

His mouth started to water at the mention of food. His regular diet bordered on completely horrifying. Onion rings were the closest thing he ever got to a vegetable, and five

nights out of seven he ate hamburgers, or cheeseburgers if he wanted to shake things up a bit.

"I'm sorry to hear about your granny," he said, as he followed her into the house.

She reached across and flicked a switch on the wall. Light from a corner lamp illuminated a small living room, but Becca didn't linger, turning off to the left to cut through a dark dining room.

"You would have liked her. She really knew how to give everybody hell."

She flipped another switch, this time overhead in the small kitchen, shedding light on the domain of an elderly woman, with appliances twenty years old and faded yellow paper. But it was clean and cheerful, and Spencer leaned against the doorjamb, watching Becca as she went straight to the refrigerator.

She hesitated with the door open. "I'm sorry, you didn't actually say you wanted to eat anything, did you? I guess I just thought since we were here, I'd get to spoil you a little bit."

"Hell, while I'm here, I'll let you spoil me a lot." He crossed the small room and gently pushed the fridge door shut, curling his fingers around hers. "But first, I want a tour of the rest of the house."

Her eyes twinkled, but she tangled their hands together and let him pull her out of the kitchen. "Well, this is the dining room," she said, gesturing around them. "I don't use this room much except to get to the kitchen. Granny used to

always do Sunday dinners in here, but since it's just me now, it feels too weird."

"I don't understand why it's just you," Spencer said, as he guided her out of the dining room and into the hallway. "In fact, I'm always a little worried you're going to drop me a line to let me know you've found a guy smart enough to stick around."

"Never happen." At his glance, she shrugged. "Not while I'm living in Oakley, anyway. I don't need someone trapping me here. Someday, I'm getting out, and I don't plan on ever looking back."

"So I guess I don't have to worry until you decide you're moving on to see the world." Spencer stopped outside the door at the end of the hall. "What's in here?"

With a crooked smile, Becca reached past him to turn the knob. "Exactly what you're hoping is in here. And..." She pushed the door open wide enough to cast the light from the hall onto the nightstand, revealing a bottle, a salt shaker, and a bowl of lime wedges. "Something to celebrate me being legal for everything this year."

"God, I love a girl who brings her own tequila."

He backed her into the room, kicking the door shut behind him before he found her mouth. It was better than the kiss outside his truck, because he didn't have to worry about anybody seeing them, or interrupting them, or otherwise distracting him from the warm taste of her mouth.

Becca wound her arms around him, soft breasts flattening against his chest, as she returned the kiss with just as much zeal. He loved that she didn't hold back on anything. Not in

life, not in her pictures, not in passion. Without breaking any of the mouth-watering contact, she guided him to the edge of the bed, stopping only when she bumped into the footboard.

"I got everything we needed for the whole night." She panted when they broke apart. "I didn't want to miss a single second with you for anything."

"Good. Good."

His blood thrummed through his veins, and his cock pushed against his tight jeans. He took just enough time to undo his pants and relieve the pressure before focusing his full attention on Rebecca's clothes. He unbuttoned her shirt like unwrapping a gift, slowly exposing her luscious breasts and creamy skin to his eyes and fingers. She shrugged out of her shirt, pushing her chest forward, and he saw her dark nipples beneath the thin material of her bra. He bent to reach her breasts with his mouth, pulling her hard nipple between his teeth while his hands went to her pants. His mouth tingled for her, hungry for the musky, sweet taste of her skin.

Becca tilted her head back, one hand going to his nape to hold him closer, the other working at the front of his shirt. She didn't wait to get it open before slipping her fingers inside, and when her nails scratched over his chest in search of a nipple, Spence hissed and worked faster on her jeans.

With the zipper out of his way, he decided two could play her little game. He slid his hand inside the denim, fingertips rough along her stomach as he sought out her wet folds. He didn't part them, though. He simply settled on running his middle finger up and down the slit, hinting at what was to come.

Whimpering, Becca released him, slithering down the length of the bed to increase the distance between them. "You drive me crazy when you do that." Her hands went to her hips to push her jeans out of the way. "You know what I didn't tell you when I sent you those pictures? How I touch myself in the shower, thinking about the ones I have of you."

Spencer moaned at the thought of her in the shower, fingers buried in her pussy, drops of water clinging to her nipples and throat, her face twisted with pleasure. He loved watching her when she came because her features were so expressive.

He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled his boots off, tossing them aside before losing his pants. By the time he finished, her pants and shoes were on the floor as well, allowing him a view of her finely arched foot, the long line of her leg, and the curve of her thigh. He gently gripped her ankle and brought her foot up to his mouth, kissing the top before dragging his mouth farther up her leg.

Becca leaned back on her hands to watch him. The rise and fall of her chest quickened, evidence of her growing desire. The higher he moved, the faster she breathed, each gasp nearly audible by the time he reached the soft skin on the inside of her thigh, just above her knee.

Slowly, she lifted the other leg and ran her foot down his back. "Do I get new pictures this year?" she whispered. "You've had a whole year of living I need to record."

He nipped at the skin gently, and then soothed it with the tip of his tongue, circling the marks leisurely. "I guess that

depends on how you answer my question. Do I get new pictures this year?"

"Whatever you want." She answered without hesitation, without embarrassment. Sometimes, it was hard to believe she was the same girl who'd been so self-conscious taking her shirt off in front of him on the bed of his truck just two years earlier. Smiling, she added, "That doesn't mean you lost the old ones, does it?"

Spencer moved higher, the tantalizing scent of her arousal growing stronger. He cupped his palm over her mound, pressing against her clit through her damp underwear. "Trust me, if I ever lose them, I'll be writing immediately to ask for new copies."

Her response caught in her throat when he licked along the edge of her panties, curving along her soft thigh. Becca bent her knee, resting her foot on his shoulder as she spread her legs for him even more, and the fresh wave of her desire made him stop and bite at the tender flesh.

"You know the only thing that'll make this better?" Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips. "Getting to taste you at the same time."

Spencer almost protested—he had no desire to leave his position between her thighs. He'd happily spend the entire night right where he was. Until he realized it really would feel better to have her hot, incredible mouth wrapped around his prick while he fucked her with his tongue.

He stretched out beside her, his head resting on a pillow that smelled of her shampoo and lotion. He had noticed she

never wore perfume, but she still smelled of apples and cinnamon.

The smile she offered was pure delight. Sitting up on her knees, Becca reached around to undo her bra, tossing it into the darkness once freed. Her lush breasts were now there for the taking, but before Spencer reached forward to touch her, she shifted out of his way, wriggling as she took off her panties, too.

She settled on her hands and knees beside him, with her hip inches from his shoulder. Becca ran her fingers along the length of his cock, dipping into the pool of pre-come that had already collected on his stomach and massaging it into his skin. He expected her to lean over then, but again, she took him by surprise by lifting her hand up to her mouth.

Her eyes closed as she licked it clean, and a moan escaped her throat. The silvery light filtering through the window made her face and neck shimmer. He wasn't sure when he'd last seen something so beautiful.

Spencer ran his hand over her hip and down her ass, caressing the curve with his palm. He loved to watch her while she was completely at ease with him. The photos he had were great, but they couldn't compare to being with her or the way her skin twitched when he caressed her.

"Come on up," he said hoarsely as he gripped her hip. She didn't need a second invitation to settle over his shoulders, her stomach against his chest, her swollen pussy just inches from his waiting mouth.

She kept her hips tilted, out of his reach, as her shoulders bent down and her hard nipples brushed over his stomach.

Spencer smoothed his hands up the back of her thighs when he felt the first touch. A lick. Wet and firm, from the tip of his cock all the way to his balls.

"God, Becca." He felt a hint of cool breath against his damp skin, and then she licked him again, following the same path as before. That alone could have made him drop his head back and close his eyes with bliss, but her succulent flesh was too close to ignore. He dipped his tongue between her lips, lapping her juices.

Her smooth trail jumped an inch, her small gasp sending fresh breath wafting over his balls. The muscles beneath his palms trembled, but she didn't withdraw, choosing instead to lower her hips farther. Though Spencer used his thumbs to spread her wide, the firm grip of her hand at the base of his cock distracted him, as she tilted it away from his stomach to lick around the head without impediment.

He tried to mimic her speed and actions, circling her hole as her tongue danced around his head. Even though he only had one night and some of the next morning to enjoy her, he didn't want to rush this. He wanted to take his time to savor the way she tasted and smelled, the way she felt against his tongue and lips. But she made it difficult to keep his good intentions in mind, especially when she closed her mouth around his crown, sucking on the sensitive skin until he felt that heat through his entire body.

She had done this before, the previous year when they had spent the entire night celebrating in his trailer. But somehow, being in her bed made it better, more intimate. Now when she crawled between her pretty light blue sheets, she would

remember this night, this time, and his mouth. That knowledge curled his arms around her hips, pulling her more firmly down against his mouth, and it brought moans to his lips as Becca sank farther down his length.

Spencer responded by pushing his tongue past her entrance, sinking into her pussy. Her walls were like velvet around his tongue, and her moans reverberated through him. He curled his fingers against her flesh, kneading her softly as he began to thrust his tongue. Her mouth never stopped moving, covering inch by slow, deliberate inch. After what seemed like an eternity, he felt her soft lips against the base, her nose brushing against his balls. She held him like that for an impossibly long time, letting him grow accustomed to her rough tongue, her tight throat, and the hint of teeth brushing against his taut skin.

Becca slid back up, but when it felt like she planned to pull all the way off, Spencer growled in the back of his throat and dug his fingers into her ass. Her muffled laughter sent ripples down his cock. He half-expected her to look back over her shoulder with some wise comment, blue eyes snapping with humor. He couldn't even blame her.

Except she didn't. She sank down in a single smooth stroke, burying him inside her yet again.

They worked out a rhythm between them, hips and mouths and tongues moving in time. He had never really known a girl like Becca. One who knew just how to move, as if by instinct. One who enjoyed using her mouth to drive him out of his mind. One who was worth talking to after every event. Though talking was far from his mind, and he didn't

think he would get much more thinking done. Not if she kept flicking her tongue over the tip of his cock.

And not if she started squirming against his mouth.

He always knew when Becca was close. It was just like reading her face. She couldn't hold anything in. He knew from the sounds vibrating through his cock. He knew from the puffs of breath blowing across his balls when she swallowed him down, how they sped up, got hotter, tickling and teasing him as much as her talented tongue did. He knew from the desperate claw of her hands along his thighs, how one would dig into the hard muscle while the other started fondling his sac, caressing the skin behind it as her fingers trembled.

Spencer thrust his tongue faster, moving his hand between her thighs to seek out her clit. His balls ached, throbbing each time her fingertips skimmed across his sensitive skin. His thumb brushed over her clit, sending a shockwave through her that he felt from his mouth to his groin. Her pulse pounded, echoing his own, and he scratched his thumb over her again.

A cry strangled in her throat. Becca paused in mid-suck, her lips sealed just below the crown, and her tongue curled around the head, mimicking Spencer's treatment. This was it, Spencer realized. She wouldn't last long. She didn't even trust herself to continue the blow job. The thought of pushing her to the edge, driving her as crazy as she drove him, making her incapable of doing anything but laying there and taking it, prompted him to redouble his efforts.

His index finger joined his thumb. Just when he thought Becca might be ready to start sliding down his length again, he pinched her clit.

She tore her mouth off him completely as a long, keening scream filled the room. Her body quaked above his, muscles rippling from the force of her orgasm, and her nails dug into his thighs. Sensation prickled down his legs, but he didn't let it distract him from continuing the onslaught on her pussy. He only eased when her hands pushed feebly at his lower body, her soft cries of, "Don't, no more, I can't take it," filling him with satisfaction.

Taking a shuddering breath, Becca slumped to the side, off his body, leaving him cold and aching. She rested her cheek on his stomach, and the heat from her skin nearly scorched him.

"I swear to God, every time you do that, I feel like I'm going to bust." Her fingers played along his cock. "Just gimme a sec to catch my breath. I'm not nearly done with you yet."

Spencer pulled her hair away from her face, running his fingers through the dark strands as he licked his lips. "You better not be done with me yet." He sat up, his fingers still caressing her temple. "Turn over on your back."

She gazed up at him, eyes soft and bright. Her mouth was swollen and lush, like fruit ready to burst, but before she obeyed his directive, Becca stretched closer, taking his mouth in a long, sensual kiss. She licked along his lower lip, capturing the taste of her juices, and twisted with his tongue.

His heart thundered in his chest by the time she did as he told.

"Just because you got me to come first, don't think this means you win," she teased. "I've still got all night."

He rested on his hands and knees above her, lowering his head to lick her bottom lip. "I wasn't aware we were having a contest."

"Uh huh. Because you're not competitive at all."

Spencer's mouth twitched. "I am competitive, but only because I never lose."

Her brows shot up. "On the bull, maybe."

"Nah, anytime," Spencer promised, before repositioning himself to straddle her shoulders. She was literally the only woman he knew who not only didn't mind this position, but seemed to enjoy it as much as he did. The tip of his cock brushed against her lips, and his breathing quickened at the thought of guiding his length into her waiting mouth.

Becca smoothed her hands up his backside, massaging the muscles in his lower back before gripping his waist from behind. Parting her lips, she sucked the head past her teeth, but he stayed there for just a moment. She used her hold on him to prod him forward, deeper into the warm recess, along her hot tongue, hesitating only when he hit the back of her throat.

Her long lashes lifted. Pure pleasure gleamed in the blue depths of her eyes.

Spencer took a deep breath, his head spinning before he began to move again. She nudged him forward, and he sank deeper into her throat, sighing as her muscles constricted around the head. He cupped the side of her face, pushing the hair away, his gaze locking with hers.

He set a gentle tempo, in spite of the roaring desire racing through his veins. Becca might have gone to town sucking him down, but that had been when she was in control. This was different. She might enjoy the feeling of him fucking her pretty mouth like this, and she might lay claim to loving his weight on top of her, but he didn't have to be selfish about it. It meant not savaging forward until she was better prepared, because this angle wasn't nearly as easy for her to check as the other one. He didn't want to hurt her. The time for speeding up would come soon enough.

He reached behind him with his other hand and skimmed his palm over her nipple. She moaned, and the vibrations were even better than the tight suction around his shaft. He gradually increased the tempo, always waiting for her to adjust before going a bit faster. He wouldn't be able to stay in that position for long. Feeling and tasting her orgasm had made him throb, and now the pressure and heat of her mouth was almost enough to send him into orbit. But he didn't want to rush, either, because this one night would have to last him for three hundred and sixty-four more.

Becca began to lift to meet his thrusts, her lips tight around his shaft, soft and pink and glistening. Her eyes never left his, even when he caught her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. She simply swallowed, her whimpers reverberating through him. Spencer lifted off her body slightly, better to touch her flaming skin, but she took advantage of the new space. She let go of his side and brought her hand down to the lower curve of his ass,

caressing the taut muscle. One finger slid between the cheeks, continuing down, down, down to scratch over his sac.

Spencer jerked forward, fully sheathing himself in her throat. As soon as he eased back, she scratched over his sac, prompting him to slam forward again. "Fuck...Becca...if you do that again..."

He didn't finish his thought, mainly because he couldn't. She swallowed, muscles constricting around his shaft as she squeezed his balls. His eyes rolled back in his head, and his cock jerked against her tongue. It occurred to him if he pulled free of her mouth, he'd prolong the inevitable, but that wasn't going to happen. She swallowed again, the final trigger he needed. He shouted her name, burying himself in her mouth as he erupted.

Shudders wracked through him as her throat worked again and again. Becca flattened her hand against his side, and he didn't realize her fingers were shaking until he came down from his high. Small quivers of her skin against his. When he tried to reach down and cover her fingers with his, she pulled it away to use it to hold his cock steady as she licked up the length.

Her head fell back onto the bed. A fine film of sweat put a shine to her skin, but the smile on her face really got to him. Most girls wanted to be with him because he was a winner, and usually, Spencer was fine with that. Not Becca. He only had to look at her to know she would have liked him whether he won an event or not.

"I'm thinking we need to do body shots in the nude this time," she said. "It's going to make licking the salt off you way more fun."

Spencer shifted from her body and collapsed on the bed, gathering her up in his arms to keep her close. "Nude is really the best way to do body shots."

Resting her cheek on his shoulder, she traced idle patterns along his damp chest, not quite tickling. "You know what else is good doing naked? Eating chocolate cake. I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

"I could probably eat my hat. I went right to the truck tonight instead of stopping for dinner." He pressed his lips to her damp forehead. "I need a turn to catch my breath."

"That works for me. My stomach is ready, but my legs sure aren't."

His pulse eventually calmed, but even when it felt like he could walk, he didn't want to let her go. She felt good in his arms. He opened his mouth, almost ready to tell her as much—almost ready to tell her more—but he closed his lips again without speaking. He didn't want to stumble over words that could ruin their night.

"You stay here. I'll go get the food. And the tequila." He stole another kiss before disentangling himself and standing. He didn't really need to say anything more. There was already enough between them.

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CHAPTER 9

Rebecca had lived on her own for two and a half years. She had gotten used to her space. She had a routine, one she liked a lot and hated to disrupt, even when she craved a little more spontaneity in her life. She didn't have to answer to anyone, and if she wanted to sleep in until ten in the morning, the only person who'd complain was her father because she might be late for work, but then she'd just lie and say she'd been working on some pictures or something.

She loved her independence.

As much as she'd thought she'd been prepared for Spence's stay with her, she hadn't quite realized the reality of being responsible for anybody but herself. Especially when that someone kept forgetting little things, needed her to get from one room to the other without toppling over, and lost his temper when he got frustrated.

She liked Spencer. She really did. But by the second morning after he'd arrived at her house, she wanted to put duct tape over his mouth every time he snapped at her.

He'd only picked at his breakfast, and then spent most of the morning either flipping through the TV channels or petting Jake. Neither activity kept his attention for long. It was to be expected, of course, and Rebecca felt more than a little sorry everything was still so hard for Spence, especially since he was far more accustomed to being outdoors. So when he turned off the TV for the third time before lunch, she closed

her laptop and rose from where she worked at the dining room table.

"How about some fresh air?" she asked with a smile.

"No. The sun hurts my eyes."

"Oh." She'd thought that had been a fluke on his first day there, since he'd been cooped up in the hospital so long. Though it made sense his eyes would be sensitive since they were all part and parcel of the head trauma thing. "Is there anything you feel like doing then? I need a break from work."

Spencer closed his eyes and dropped his head back to his chair. "Not really. Every time I try to concentrate on something, I forget what I'm doing. Or why I'm doing it." He cracked one lid open, peering at her. "What are you working on?"

Rebecca wrinkled her nose. "A filler piece for Sunday's paper. Dad thinks it's time to start putting back to school stuff in already, so I'm stuck researching educational reform."

"Why? Who cares about that?"

"Apparently, my dad."

"Why don't you do something you care about?"

"I did. I got to write up the rodeo. Now I have to do the crap work he gives me to make up for doing what I want."

"I never understood why you didn't just leave. I really wouldn't have blamed you if I came to town one year to find out you had moved on."

Coming into the living room the rest of the way, Rebecca plopped down on the end of the couch, holding her arms wide for Jake to have room to jump up into her lap. "Sometimes, I wonder the same thing." She shot him a smile, trying to

shake her more somber mood. He didn't need her feeling low as well. "But if I'd done that, you'd still be stuck in the hospital, and neither one of us would like that very much, I don't think."

"I can't say I'd rather be in the hospital." She noticed the way his fingers tightened around the remote, and for a moment she worried he would throw it right at the television. But then he relaxed, dropping the remote on his lap. "I wish I could at least get through a fucking episode of *SpongeBob SquarePants*."

"Well, when you do, you'll be one up on me. His voice annoys the crap out of me." She meant it as a joke, but the dour cast of his face said he didn't take it as such. "It's only been two days since you got out," she said, softening her tone. "It'll get better."

"That's what you keep saying. It's hard to believe it. Especially when I just want to put my fist through a wall, for no good reason." He turned to rest his cheek against the back of the couch and gave her a small smile. "Don't worry, though. I don't think I'm that big of a dick."

In moments like these, when he gave her his *aw shucks* look, Rebecca knew why she was doing this. Regardless of everything else, she cared for Spencer. A lot. She had to be patient about his recovery.

"We could always get around to that sponge bath you wriggled your way out of yesterday," she suggested. "It might actually feel good with how hot it is already."

"I don't see why I can't bathe myself. I'm not going to drown in a few inches of water."

"It's not about drowning. It's about getting clean. You can't even lift your bad arm yet without it hurting. Admit it."

"Lift it, hell. I can barely move it. But I guess there are worse things than letting a pretty girl soap me up."

"So that's what we'll do." With renewed purpose, Rebecca gently pushed Jake from her lap and rose to her feet. "I'll get everything set up in the bathroom and be right back."

She didn't wait for him to argue with her. They'd argued about it briefly the previous day before she caved and let him have his way. He didn't like feeling helpless. She didn't blame him. But it had been over forty-eight hours since he'd left the hospital, and seventy-eight since his last sponge bath. Whether he liked it or not, Spencer was getting cleaned up, and if she had to be the one to do it, well...she didn't count it as a hardship.

With the tub half full and the stool in place, Rebecca went back to fetch him. "You want me to strip you down in here or in the bathroom? There's more room out here, but you might give somebody passing by a cheap thrill."

She didn't miss the sly glint in his eye. "If there's more room out here, then by all means. Besides, you know how I love to give people in this town a thrill."

"Maybe." Rebecca stooped next to him in order to slide her arm behind his back. "But there's never anything cheap about your kind of thrills."

Even though it had only been two days, it already took less effort to help him to his feet. Rebecca noticed, even though she doubted Spencer did. He was young and strong—she believed he'd be better sooner than anybody expected. "Is

there even anybody around here to thrill? I haven't heard a car pass by all day."

"Not outside, no." She waited until he felt steady, and then released her hold on him so he could stand on his own. When he didn't sway, she almost smiled. His equilibrium was better, too. A good sign. "But you've always got me to thrill, you know."

He arched his brow. "You want me to give you a thrill?"

"Smelling like you do now?" Rebecca eased his shirt over his head, taking care with his shoulder. "Maybe you should have thought about that yesterday when you turned down my last offer for a sponge bath."

"I guess that just means I'll try my luck when I'm smelling pretty." He pushed his shorts over his hips and let them fall to the floor, standing in front of her unabashedly. "Are you going to make me smell like a girl?"

"I should, just for being stubborn." It was hard not to take a moment and just look at him. She'd seen Spencer naked plenty of times—and had the photographic evidence of it—but never by the light of day. It showed just how sinewy he was, even more so now with his forced bed rest. "You want me to help you into the bathroom, or do you want to try walking there on your own?"

"I'll do it on my own," Spencer muttered. His first step was strong enough, and his second. She resisted the urge to rush to his elbow, to be there to catch him in case he stumbled. The third step faltered, and on the fourth step, his hand shot out to catch himself against the wall. "Fuck."

Rebecca hung back, watching his shoulders heave, his head bowed as he struggled to regain his balance. She knew she couldn't keep babying him. The doctors had warned her. The doctors had said a lot of stuff, but some of it was easier to stick to than others.

She held her breath when he ventured another step. His tanned hand never left the wall.

He paused again in the hallway, his shoulders very broad in the narrow corridor. They lifted and fell with each breath, and she tentatively moved closer, itching to reach out and touch his shoulder. He must have sensed her, because he put his hand up without turning his head. "Wait."

She stopped moving, even though she still harbored the impulse to help. He began shuffling forward again, gaining on the bathroom, inch by inch.

It was such a little thing. A task she took for granted every single day. The ability to move down her hallway, use the bathroom whenever the whim took her, bathe herself when the need arose. Seeing Spencer struggle told Rebecca she'd never take it for granted again. This was the farthest he'd gone without her help since getting out of the hospital. Though the sweat dampening the hair at his nape urged her to ignore his pride and help him, she held back, muscles tense and ready should he need her.

Spencer didn't stop again until he reached the bathroom door, and then he leaned against the jamb, his eyes closed. "I'm going to wait for everything to stop spinning."

Rebecca waited as long as she could, which in real time was probably only a few seconds, and came up behind him.

She longed to take him into her arms and carry some of his weight, but she knew he didn't want, or need, that right then. So she settled for curling her arm around his waist and leaning lightly into his back, skimming her mouth across his damp shoulder.

"I'll bet tomorrow it's not nearly so hard."

"I wish I could *do* something about it."

"Yeah, well, if there was a magic wand I could wave, you can bet I'd be using it, too. But sometimes, it just takes time."

Spencer pushed the bathroom door open with one hand and then began moving again. He made it as far as the toilet, before sitting down heavily. "That's the worst part. The waiting. I'm not...good at patience."

No, she didn't imagine he would be. In a world where eight seconds felt like an eternity, he'd had no reason to ever be worried about anything more than *right now*.

Deliberately not watching as he regained his breath, Rebecca went to the tub and crouched down to test the water. She'd filled it quite high—higher than the nurse had instructed—with the heavy stool she'd gotten for Spence sitting at the far end. She figured the extra buoyancy would be good for Spencer. Aid in getting in and out without making him feel more like an invalid.

"Feels good." She hesitated before rising. She didn't want to take away all his control by arbitrarily putting him in the tub. "You ready?"

"Yeah." Bracing himself against the sink, he pushed himself to his feet. He hesitated at the edge, and then held

his hand out to her. "No sense in slipping and breaking my skull open."

Rebecca smiled as she took it, putting her arm around his waist. Adjusting their angle, she moved Spencer closer to the tub and eased him in. He winced when his shoulder bent at an awkward angle, but she immediately compensated by crouching with him.

He skidded a little as he sat down, and her arm shot out to steady him. "You're going to soak me through before this is done, I just know it."

"There's an easy way to avoid that." He raked his gaze down her body. "Get naked, too."

"And encourage you to distract me from washing you even more?" Grabbing the sponge, she dipped it into the water to soak it. "Not on your life."

"I'm not going to distract you." He ran a wet finger down her chest, between her breasts. "I'm just looking for something to distract me."

When he put it like that, it was hard to say no. Especially since her nipples had already perked up at the sight of him naked in her living room.

"You know, it's a good thing I like you so much." Rebecca dropped the sponge into the water and sat back on her heels. In a swift motion, she pulled her shirt over her head. "But that's as much as I'm losing. And no touching or I'll put the shirt back on."

"No touching," Spencer promised, his hand resting on his lap, but his attention didn't waver from her chest. "For what it's worth, I like you a lot, too."

Heat rose up her neck. She hid it by bending down to retrieve the sponge floating at the opposite end of the tub.

"We do get on good."

"We do. We always have." Spencer watched the sponge work across his stomach, suds following in its wake.

"So...what if I had asked again this year?"

She refused to let her reaction show in her washing, though everything inside her went into knots at his question. It was the first time either one of them had mentioned his suggestion that she join him on the circuit. Rebecca had wondered if his earlier request would be the elephant in the house until he left again.

"I probably would have gone." It was the truth. If she could've gone the previous year... "Though I would've made you come with me to tell Dad and Lonnie," she added with a teasing glance in his direction. "You could've seen firsthand how crazy they both are."

Spencer snorted. "I would have told them. I've seen crazy, before. I'm sure those two have nothing on some of the cowboys I know." He paused before adding, "Well, I probably would have asked."

Rebecca paused at the top of his thigh. Though she didn't want to dwell on the *what ifs*, there was something infinitely satisfying knowing what might have been. It would never happen now, of course. Spencer was lucky just to be alive. But the possibilities made her smile, and she leaned across the side of the tub to brush a kiss across his cheek.

"We're going to have to find some things to keep you busy," she said, resuming her sponging again. "Any suggestions?"

"Yeah. Teaching myself to be left-handed."

She didn't think it would happen, but if it would keep him occupied, Rebecca supported exercises to strengthen his other hand. "Lonnie's got an old Nintendo I can hook up, if you want. Start with a little hand-eye coordination."

"I don't need to worry about hand-eye coordination." He lifted his hand in front of his face, flexing and relaxing his fingers. "I just need to learn how to hold on."

"What if..." The words choked, but she spit them out anyway. "Don't you think you should start thinking what you're going to do if the doc's right?"

"About what? My head? I'll wear a helmet, if I have to, but I'm not going to just sit around for the rest of my life and not even try."

"I'm not saying you don't try. I'm saying, you need to think about what happens if you can't ever ride again. You've got time now. Use it."

"Use it to do what, exactly? I'm not like you, Rebecca. I don't have all the chances you do."

"Really? 'Cause it looks to me like you've got more. I know you've saved some of your money, so that's one step on me you've got. And you've been able to see a lot of places already, so you know you're not stuck here. You can go anywhere you want, do whatever you want. Trick is, figuring out what those things are."

"The few bucks I have will go toward my doctor bills. Last I checked, they're not running a charity for busted up cowboys. And you're not stuck here, either. You've got a car, you've got some cash from your grandma if you sold this place, you've got experience working for your daddy, and you're smart. I've got a beat up truck, no skills to speak of, no education, no family, and no interest in anything except bulls. So you go ahead and tell me how easy it'll be when you're the one scared to leave your own front door."

Anger flared inside her. They were the harshest words he'd ever said to her. The only time they had ever talked seriously about her leaving Oakley was the previous summer, and the discussion had been curtailed as soon as it was clear why she wouldn't leave.

"You know more about bulls and riding and rodeos than anybody else I know." She shoved the sponge beneath the filmy surface of the water to rinse it out, splashing some onto her arms and chest. "And you're smart, too, even if you didn't finish high school. You think that's going to hold you back? Then get your GED. People do it all the time."

"Fine. I'll get my GED. Sure. No problem. Then all my problems will be solved, right? You know, if the specialists are right about my shoulder, I won't even be fit to shovel shit." Spencer closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. "This is stupid."

"I didn't say that." At least, that wasn't what she'd meant, but seeing him so frustrated made her frustrated, too. "Why won't you try to be at least a little bit positive about this?"

What's the point of automatically going to the absolute worst possible scenario?"

"I can imagine other scenarios. The problem is, I just don't believe them right now."

The rest of her ire faded into a dull roar. It was too soon. What did she expect? Spence had only been out of the hospital for two days, and at least he acknowledged those other scenarios existed. If things were truly unfixable, he wouldn't even be able to do that.

"Well, we got time." Rebecca rose and stretched to unhook the shower attachment. "Let's do your hair now. You want passion fruit shampoo or the lavender?"

Spencer didn't answer immediately, and then he lifted the corner of his mouth. "I thought I told you I didn't want to smell like a girl."

Rebecca grinned as she turned on the water to test it. "Well, fine, I guess I'll just go with the fuddy duddy fresh breeze stuff I bought for you."

Spencer's brow furrowed as he caught a glimpse of the bottle. "How did you remember what I usually use?"

She could have told him the truth. She could pick his scent out after their night at the lake, and had known the first time she opened the bottle it was his favored brand. But that was silly and bordered on too girlish and flighty for her, even if occasionally she indulged in silly and flighty things.

So she lied. Which was only a half-lie anyway.

"I saw it in your trailer when we got your things. I just made sure I bought all the same kind of stuff, so you'd feel at home here."

"Thank you."

They lapsed into silence as she poured warm water over his hair, wetting it for the shampoo. He sighed as she began to soap his hair, his shoulders slumping slightly. She carefully avoided looking at his erection, but she saw his cock twitch from the corner of her eye—evidence of just how much he enjoyed the way she massaged his scalp. When she began to rinse the shampoo away, his eyes opened again.

"About more positive scenarios. There is something...a ranch not too far from here, I think. They breed bulls."

His tone was wary, his gaze careful. Still...it was something. Rebecca restrained herself from bouncing in excitement.

"Maybe when the sun's not so hard on your eyes, we can take a road trip and check it out."

"Yeah, maybe we could do that." Spencer wiped soap and water from his eyes before adding, "Can you help me write something tonight?"

"Sure." She reached for the towel to hand it over, though she would have loved drying his hair herself. "What do you need to write?"

"A letter to my uncle. He's probably heard what happened by now. But I should let him know where I'm at, and I'm mostly okay."

Smiling softly, Rebecca nodded. "I think that's a great idea."

And it was. It was also a step in the right direction, one he'd taken without her.

He'd be fine. She knew it. Maybe the fact that he was likely to take off as soon as possible saddened her a little. But it was better for Spence to be well and happy. Besides, she couldn't blame him for leaving, since Oakley would remind him of what he'd lost. It was what she'd wanted all along.

And she'd do everything possible to make sure he got it.

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CHAPTER 10

The Previous Year

Laughter bounced off the tiled walls as Rebecca planted both of her hands against Spencer's back and pushed him toward the tub. "I don't care if you think motor oil's sexy. I'm not touching you until you've washed it all off."

"I wouldn't be covered in oil if you would have just left the car on the side of the road," Spencer pointed out, grudgingly unbuttoning his cuffs. "We could have walked the rest of the way. Or taken advantage of the backseat."

"You've seen my backseat, right? And you've seen us." She stepped around him to turn on the water, twisting the hot handle as far as it would go. "There is no way we'd fit comfortably in the back for nothing."

"If it meant finally getting my hands on you, I would have found a way." Spencer shrugged his shirt off and left it in a forgotten heap on the floor. His boots were next, but he seemed more interested in caressing her ass and the back of her thighs than he was in removing the footwear.

"When we've got a nice comfy bed here, just waiting for us?" Grinning, she slapped away the hand trying to sneak around and touch her breast. "I'm trying to get this going here, so unless you want to be boiled alive, you might want to hold off for two more seconds."

"Okay. One. Two." His fingers crept over her nipple again, but one stern look over her shoulder was enough to make him pull away, both hands going to his buckle. A new one,

marking another win in his career. "We don't have to wait 'til we get to the bed now, do we?"

Her gaze dropped to the long line of his erection. He'd been hard almost since they'd left the rodeo park. When her car had conked out a mile from her house for what seemed like no good reason, Rebecca had been ready to scream in frustration. She'd waited a whole year to see Spence, damn it. She did not need these kind of events conspiring against her.

"You get in the shower without any more trouble, and we'll see."

Spencer reached into his back pocket and pulled out a condom before pushing the jeans to the floor. He flashed it at her and grinned. "I don't plan to give you any more trouble."

She tried to be stern. Or shocked. Or anything but delightfully surprised. But because this was Spence, and this was her, and this was their only night of the year to revel in each other and she would never spoil it for anything, she failed miserably.

Laughing, Rebecca wagged a finger at him as she sidestepped to the closet to grab some towels. "You're lucky you're so cute."

"You know you love it," Spence said, tearing at the wrapper with his teeth. When she turned around to face him again, he wasn't wearing anything except the condom and a grin.

"I already told you, not until you're clean." She threw the towels at him, not surprised when he caught them cleanly. "Get in the tub, buster. I've gotta get my clothes off."

"I'll be clean by the time you get undressed," Spencer promised her as he stepped into the tub. "You learn to shower fast when you live in a camp trailer that's older than dirt."

Shaking her head, Rebecca toed off her shoes while she worked at her jeans. It took only a moment to strip, and another to round up all her clothes and stuff them in the hamper. By the time she climbed in behind Spence, he had his head bent under the spray, lathering up his hair.

"You need to invest some of those winnings tonight in a newer trailer," she said, molding over his back. She reached up and threaded her fingers through his damp hair, massaging his scalp until he groaned. "Sometimes I think you're the most frugal cowboy I've ever known."

"I spend all my money on gas these days. I can't afford a new trailer. Or much of anything else." He turned to face her, his hands going to her ass. "But it's not really suitable for company."

His erection pressed into her stomach, a ready reminder of everything they had been waiting for since first meeting up at his truck. Rebecca smiled and pushed gently on his head, tilting it back under the water in order to rinse out the shampoo.

"Which makes coming back here all the nicer." Unable to resist, she leaned in and dragged her tongue along his collarbone. "No way could we fit both of us into your dinky shower at the same time."

"And the hot water runs out in about five minutes."

He flexed his fingers, kneading her flesh. She didn't want to take her mouth from his skin, and she moved from his

collarbone to his Adam's apple, his pulse point, and the sensitive skin beneath his ear that always made him squirm a little. His hands began to move, caressing her inner thighs.

"If you turn around, I'll wash your back," he offered.

Wash your back would lead to *kiss your neck* which in turn would lead to other actions on other parts of her body. Sliding her wet hands down his face, down to his chest, she skimmed a breath of a kiss across his mouth before turning in the circle of his arms. His cock nestled against her ass, but rather than do as he'd volunteered, Spence slid his hands up to cup her breasts.

"You big ol' fibber." Rebecca laughed. "Those are not my back."

"Well, your front needs to be clean, too." He released her long enough to pour her body wash into his cupped palm and work up a lather. He smoothed soap over her breasts, caressing each of her nipples until they were in hard, aching points. His lips, warm from the water running down his face, started at her neck, like she had expected, nibbling and licking her nape.

She leaned back against his chest, heedless of her weight. Since the beginning, he'd made her feel feminine and desirable. She never felt self-conscious or less than valuable. Spence accepted her—wanted her—and she could release all those insecurities that plagued her with other guys. There weren't many other men, but she didn't turn into a nun when Spence wasn't around, or pined for his return. But nobody else she dated ever made her feel like he did.

Spencer ran his hands down her chest to her stomach, and she had to stop herself from laughing and trying to break away when he found the ticklish spot next to her navel. His long fingers dipped between her thighs and skimmed over her lips, teasing her.

Lifting her leg, Rebecca rested her foot on the side of the tub, toes digging into the plastic curtain when Spence understood the explicit invitation. Shivers ran through her, hotter than anything that might come out of the shower. She dragged her fingers along the back of his sinewy hands, matching his languorous caresses with her own.

"I start dreaming about you...about this...in June. I swear, June is the longest, most tedious month." His thumb flicked over her clit with just enough force to make her body hum. "I don't think I can wait anymore."

"So don't."

Rebecca reached behind and found his cock, stroking it once carefully before separating enough to angle it downward. Her upper body tilted, one hand reaching forward to brace against the wall. She was tight with anticipation, nerve endings poised for explosion at finally getting him inside. When Spencer took the initiative and gripped his length, she let go, shuddering as he ran the tip back and forth across her opening.

Both of them sighed when he finally sheathed himself in a smooth, liquid motion.

"Oh, yeah," Rebecca breathed. "Just like that."

Spencer wrapped his arm around her waist, holding her against him tightly as he began to rock his hips. From that

angle, he hit her G-spot each time he pushed forward, and his other hand played with her nipple, rolling the hard point between his fingers. She heard his grunts of satisfaction beneath the roar of the hot water as it cascaded around them.

In spite of their earlier eagerness, neither one of them was in a hurry now. Spence seemed content to maintain his slow strokes, while Rebecca reveled in his touch. She reached back and caressed his hip with her free hand, suddenly aware that the added contact aroused her as much as the fucking. She'd missed him. He might spend June anticipating their annual tryst, but she would spend the next month regretting he had to leave in the first place.

His muscles were tight, his entire body hard against her softer form. In the back of her mind, she thought of each second, ticking down until the moment when he would climb into his truck and leave her once again. But it was also easy to imagine what would happen if she asked him to stay—even if he could, he'd be miserable. So she had to push those thoughts out of her mind, ignore the ticking clock, and fully enjoy each inch of contact, his deliberate rhythm, and the caress of lips on her shoulder.

He made it easy. He made a lot of things easy. Conversation, companionship, the simple joining of their bodies. Rebecca closed her eyes and turned her head to find his mouth, open and hungry for more than his callused fingers. Spencer returned the kiss without hesitation, never breaking his rhythm, never loosening his hold on her, and her head whirled from the throb of it all.

That's what Spence's visits did for her. For twelve glorious hours, life became crisp. It pulsed. When he was there, Rebecca felt alive.

Spencer kept their mouths fused together, tongues entwining, hot breath passing between them. When she opened her eyes, water ran down her lashes, but she hated to look away from him. He widened his stance and moved a bit faster, pulling out of her more each time he shifted back and thrusting forward harder. He didn't keep his thumb on her clit, choosing to apply pressure erratically, pressing on the throbbing flesh when it suited him.

Her foot slipped, forcing Spencer to tighten his hold to keep her from toppling over. It also broke their kiss, but Rebecca scrambled to balance again, hungry for his mouth, his tongue, the fire leaping between them. This time, there was an edge to the slides of her mouth. Her teeth caught at his lower lip, and the moans rose in her throat. She grasped his hip and dug in, urging him to move faster, and when that didn't quite encourage him, she sank her nails into the tight flesh as well.

"God, Becca..." He pushed her against the wall, abandoning her clit to brace himself with a hand above her head. He moved faster and faster, crying out with each hard thrust forward. Her cries matched his, especially when he shifted his angle just enough to pound into her G-spot and brilliant flashes of color erupted in front of her eyes. The roar she heard in her ears could have been water, but more likely, it was all the blood rushing from her head.

The cold tile against her hard nipples made her ache, but not any more than his desperate hand clutching at her skin. She shivered as he drove into her body, his tempo no longer smooth and rhythmic but needy and ravenous. Each stroke drove her closer and closer to the edge, but it took hearing her name fall from his lips yet again to propel her over.

Her cries turned into screams, and she scrabbled at the wall as the world tilted around her. Spencer's arms only got tighter, his body closer, but she barely felt any of it. All she felt were the ripples radiating outward from the center of her body, finding new life in her skin and stippling it with gooseflesh as she shuddered in his embrace. She vaguely heard herself repeating his name over and over again, though she thought it was more a plea for breath than anything else. Then even that dulled down to a soft roar inside her head.

Rebecca felt his cock throb within her, and he shuddered, his entire frame shaking. He didn't stop rocking against her body, he just gradually slowed, until neither one of them moved, except to take great, gasping breaths. She still needed oxygen when he claimed her mouth again, forcing her to forget she needed anything besides him.

Once they separated, she leaned her head to the side to give him room to rest his forehead against her shoulder. "Sex standing up always makes my legs jelly," she joked softly.

"Funny, that happens to me, too. Except that has more to do with the person I'm with..." He kissed the spot where her shoulder met her neck. "...than the position we're in."

Her lashes fluttered open, and she glanced down to see the sweat dotting his brow in spite of the shower spray.

Unable to resist, she reached to wipe it gently away, letting her fingertips drift down the side of his face. "You always say the sweetest things."

"Must just be that cowboy charm, darlin'." He kissed her once more before releasing her. "Why don't you finish up in here and I'll see what I can scare up for dinner?"

As soon as Spence moved away, she missed him, but she let him turn under the spray and peel off the condom without stopping him. "I've got plenty of stuff in the fridge. I wasn't sure what you'd be in the mood for, so just help yourself to whatever you find." She grinned. "But the banana cream pie is for dessert in bed. So don't touch that one yet."

"Yes, ma'am."

She watched him step out of the shadow and grab one of the towels she left out, tying it low, around his hips. Even though she still felt his body imprinted against hers, something about the way he wore his towel made her want more. She couldn't refocus on the shampoo until she heard the bathroom door open and felt a rush of cold air as he slipped into the hall.

Ten minutes later, she emerged from the steamy bathroom in her robe. She found Spence at the kitchen counter, whistling an old Hank Williams song as he built one of the tallest sandwiches she had ever seen. He looked up when she entered the room and grinned.

"I hope you like one with everything."

"Right now, I could eat an old tire, I'm so hungry." Leaning against the counter at his side, she tilted her head to sweep her gaze down his long, lean body. The towel he'd wrapped

around his hips sat low enough to make her want to take it off him right then. "Did you want to curl up on the couch to eat? We could probably find something to watch on TV."

"The couch sounds good. But I can already tell you there's nothing on TV I want to watch." He glanced up quickly, almost warily. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Oh? What?"

Spencer cut the sandwich in two and plated it before answering. "Your plans for the rest of the summer."

Rebecca laughed and pushed off the counter to go to the refrigerator and get a couple cans of root beer. "Why? So I can be all depressed for the rest of the night because my summers are so pathetic compared to yours?"

"Well, actually, I had hoped you would tell me your summer was super pathetic with no plans and no hope for anything fun or exciting. That way, my offer would be far too tempting to refuse."

She followed him out into the living room, tucking her legs up beneath her as they sat down on opposite ends of the couch. "What offer?"

"I was wondering if..." He paused, and if she wasn't mistaken, his cheeks were an unusual shade of red. "I was wondering if you would like to come with me. For the summer. The trailer isn't so bad once you get used to it, but if you don't get used to it, I can just as easily reserve hotel rooms."

Her pulse thundered in her ears. This was the last thing she'd ever expected from Spence. They had fun, and yeah, they got along great and the sex was phenomenal, but

neither one of them had ever made noises about being willing to extend it beyond their single night a year. Even the previous summer, when he'd given her the gorgeous leather case for her camera and gear, the issue hadn't been brought up.

She knew she wasn't in love with him. And she didn't delude herself into thinking he was in love with her. But he had recognized the fun they had might be something that could last longer than a single night of the summer. She'd thought so on the odd occasion, even wished their short hours didn't have to end. But the words coming from Spencer stunned her.

"I..." What? She what? She really had no idea, but she tried again. "Wow. I did not expect that."

"I was going to try to be a bit smoother with my approach instead of just blurting it out like this. But I thought we could have some fun, and it would be good for your photography. You could probably make a lot of money shooting the rodeos this summer."

"We could have fun," she agreed. And making money off photography would be her dream come true. Only one thing stopped her. "But I probably shouldn't."

"Why not?"

"Because of my dad. I shouldn't leave him right now."

Spencer frowned and set his sandwich aside. "Why can't you leave him?"

"He had a heart attack last month. A pretty bad one. He's only been home from the hospital for a few weeks, but he's too stubborn to make all the changes the doctors told him to.

I can't just pick up and leave. I'm the only one making sure he's not aiming himself for another one."

Spencer slid across the couch, closing the space between them. "God, that's awful. I'm sorry." He pushed a strand of damp hair behind her ear. "How have you been holding up?"

"I'm okay." And she was, mostly. Those first few days afterward had been the worst. Her father had always been a larger than life character to her. Seeing him pale in a hospital bed had shaken her to her core. Leaning into his touch, she gave him a small smile. "Weren't you wondering why I wasn't complaining about him all night?"

"I just thought I shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth, honestly."

Rebecca slapped at him playfully. "Don't worry. If I have my way, I'll be able to complain about him good and plenty next year."

Spencer smiled. "I hope so." He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her against his chest. He rested his lips against the top of her head, not quite kissing her. "I hope you know you're the only girl I ever asked to come with me."

Though he couldn't see it, she smiled. "And I hope you know you're the only guy I'd ever consider running off to join the rodeo with."

"Good, because if there are any other cowboys trying to lure you away, I'd have to deck them."

"Nope, only you."

"I might still try my luck next year. Your dad should be better by then, right?"

Cowboy Blues
by Jamie Craig

"That's the plan." Rebecca pulled back enough to meet his serious gaze. "And you can just bet I'll be ready for you."

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CHAPTER 11

Much to Rebecca's amusement and Spencer's chagrin, he began following the soap operas on in the middle of the day. She didn't have a satellite dish or cable, so it wasn't like he had any real options. And soap operas were easy for him to follow once he worked out the complicated relationships between the characters. Jake seemed to like them, too. At least, he didn't seem to mind the time he spent on Spencer's lap while he watched. Becca pretended to be exasperated with the shows, but he caught her attention drifting to the television more than once.

Regardless of how stupid she thought the shows were, she always encouraged him to watch as much as he wanted. She thought concentrating on anything for more than five minutes at a time was a good sign. His ability to remember who all the characters were and what was happening impressed her more. But the storylines never advanced, so Spencer wasn't terribly proud of his capacity to pay attention.

Another benefit of getting caught up in fictional drama was that he forgot his own. Bulls were always on the back of his mind, but when he found something else to concentrate on, he briefly forgot the pain and frustration. When Becca tried to draw him into a conversation about his future, he resisted. If he didn't talk about it, he didn't have to think about it. That seemed obvious enough to him, but he suspected Rebecca didn't appreciate his bullet-proof logic.

The days rolled by as they learned to live around each other. Or rather, Rebecca learned how to continue living her normal life with Spencer right in the middle of it. When he remembered getting better meant leaving her, something hurt in his chest. But he couldn't even consider imposing on her for longer than he absolutely had to. She didn't deserve that. Even if he liked her cute little house, and her comfortable bed, and the way she talked to Jake when she thought he couldn't hear her.

Ten days after he left the hospital, and one week after he wrote Travis, a knock on the door disrupted their routine and distracted him from *General Hospital*. His fists clenched and his jaw tightened before he reminded himself anger was not a reasonable reaction. It never seemed to take much to set him off.

Becca rose from her seat at the dining room table and stretched with an audible sigh. Her tank top pulled free of her shorts, exposing her soft, smooth stomach. As a distraction from his frustration, it worked. It worked well. So well sometimes Spencer wondered if she did little things like that just to diffuse his temper.

"You didn't order one of those strip-o-grams, did you?" she teased as she headed for the front door.

"In Utah?" Spencer snorted. "I probably couldn't find one. Maybe it's one of your admirers, wondering where you've been hiding."

"Or one of your buckle bunnies, ready to rip my head off for keeping you locked away for so long." Her broad smile

faded slightly when she opened the door, replaced by a politer, more distant version. "Hi, can I help you?"

Though she blocked part of the view, the long, lanky form on the other side of the screen was all too familiar. "Pardon, ma'am, but I'm looking for Spencer Cole. He sent me a letter saying he was staying at this address."

Rebecca immediately brightened. "Oh! You must be his uncle." Pushing the door open, she held it wide for him to enter. "Come on in."

Spencer straightened, his soap completely forgotten, and Jake jumped from his lap and raced for the door, barking joyously. Jake had always been a fan of Spencer's uncle, if only because the older man usually had a piece of jerky in his pocket. He pushed himself to his feet, partly from habit, but mostly out of pride.

"I didn't expect you to come by so soon," Spencer greeted.

Travis Cole was closing in on forty years old, each one weathered into his lined face. His hat hid his nearly bald head, while shrewd brown eyes peered out from beneath the slash of his blond brows. He turned that gaze on Spence now, sweeping down his length in swift assessment. The hard set of his jaw said the jury was still out.

"You've been laid up for nearly a month now. Reckon I'm overdue as it is."

"Well, it's good to see you. I've been going a bit stir-crazy." Spencer turned off the television and gestured to the sofa. "Here, take a load off."

Travis took a half-step toward him before glancing back at Rebecca for approval. She waved him on, shutting the front door with her welcoming smile firmly in place.

"How about I get you two some iced tea?" she offered. "And are you staying for dinner, Mr. Cole? We've got plenty."

"Travis. Call me Travis." He looked to Spencer. "I was thinking I might take you into town for supper, actually. So you can get me caught up."

Spencer nodded. "Sure, I think I could handle going out for grub." He glanced over to Rebecca. "Is that all right with you?"

"Oh." Travis frowned as he hooked his thumb through a belt loop. "I was thinking it would just be you and me. You know. Family." To Rebecca, "No offense, ma'am."

Her smile had frozen, but a faint pink stain had crept into her cheeks. "Oh, no, I understand. You two need to catch up. You don't need me tagging along."

"But..." But he didn't want to go out to dinner without Rebecca. Especially since she had been bending over backward to prepare three great meals for him every single day. It seemed ungrateful. But, more important, he didn't make a distinction between Rebecca and *family*. Not after the past three weeks. He looked from her to his uncle, weighing whether or not this battle was worth it. "Well, if you're sure you don't mind, Becca."

"Of course I don't mind." Her hands fluttered in the direction of her seat at the dining room table. "I've got work to do anyway. And as long as you think you're up to it, I think it's a great idea for you to get out of the house." This time,

the soft smile she shot him was genuine, the one she kept for those quiet moments when everything seemed almost normal. "You and I both know you're made for being outside."

"I guess I can't pass up on any excuse to get out of the house." He focused on Travis again, though he still felt Rebecca's eyes on him. "There's a diner up the road a bit in Kamas. You hungry now?"

"Starved." Travis touched the brim of his hat as he nodded at Rebecca, but that was the extent of his communication with her as he retreated for the door.

"I need to grab my hat. I'll meet you out at the truck," Spencer said. As soon as Travis left the house, Spencer shot Becca an apologetic smile. "What can I say? There's a reason the man travels alone."

"No, it's okay. He doesn't know me from Adam. I don't know if I'd want to share you with a stranger, either."

"Doesn't give him a right to act like a jerk." Spencer moved around the house fairly easily, and he fetched his hat and his dark glasses from the bedroom without trouble. When he returned, Becca still stood in the living room, and despite her reassurance, he still felt a twinge of guilt. On impulse, he tilted his head and brushed his mouth across hers. "Do you want anything?"

She looked less tense after the brief kiss. She touched the side of his face, letting her fingers trace his jaw for a moment. "Yeah. You to have a nice time. Come back with a smile on, and we'll call it good."

"Yes, ma'am." He didn't think it would be a hard promise to keep. He may not have liked the way Travis spoke to

Rebecca, but he was relieved to see his uncle. If anybody could understand what Spencer was going through, it was Travis.

The sight of Travis's dusty pickup waiting in the drive made Spencer forget the minor incident inside. It had been too long since they'd gotten to spend any kind of quality time together. Easing himself into the worn front seat was as close to coming home as Spencer could ever get.

Travis pulled away without a word, and didn't speak until the house was out of sight. "How's your head doing? Not going to mush being stuck indoors all day, is it?"

"It is mush, but I think that has more to do with the concussion."

"Thought that was supposed to have cleared up by now."

"It's been a gradual process. It's been better this week."

Travis harrumphed, his sinewy arms flexing as he navigated around a curve. "You need to get out and get some fresh air. That'll do you real good, not sitting around on the couch all day."

"Doctor said to take it easy. Besides, I don't want to make things more difficult for Becca."

"Well, there's easy, and there's sitting on your ass. It's good you got someone to help you out, but that don't mean you can't be getting ready to get back on the bull."

Spencer felt his back go up as Travis spoke. Until he mentioned getting back on the bull. Oakley fell away from them as they turned into Marion. "The doc said I shouldn't be riding again."

"Why? 'Cause you got hurt?" Travis shook his head. "You give up now, and the bull wins. I don't see any reason why we can't work on your left hand. Get some strength in it so you ride that way instead."

Spencer licked his lips. He wanted to jump on his uncle's suggestion. He was more than a little relieved to hear his own thoughts reflected, to know that, despite Rebecca's concerns, he wasn't wrong. But he didn't want to pretend it was as simple as strengthening his left hand.

"Another blow to the head could kill me, too."

"And you could get in a car crash tomorrow. You really want to live like you're too afraid to take chances?"

"No, I don't. That's the last thing I want. Becca's not going to like it, though."

"So? It's not like she's your wife." A frown creased his brow as he shot a glance at Spencer. "Unless there's something you're not telling me."

"No, she's not my wife. She's..." Spencer turned to watch the passing scenery—which mostly consisted of cows and grass. He wasn't sure how to explain Rebecca to Travis, because as far as he knew, Travis had never had anybody like Rebecca. "She's just a friend."

"So what does it matter if she doesn't like it then? You're a grown man. You do what you want to. Besides, if you don't ride, what else would you do?"

A lumberyard marked their arrival in Kamas, and Spencer gestured forward. "The cafe is on the left side here, just after the bank. And...I don't have anything else to do. You ever thought about what you would do?"

"Do that, and my head's not on the ride. That wouldn't be bright, now would it?"

"No, it really wouldn't be. Where were you thinking we'd do the training?"

Another frown in his direction. "I reckoned I'd take you back to Smiley's down in Tempe. It's been too long since I've seen him. It'd be good to visit."

"I'd like to stay here. At least until the end of the summer."

Pulling into the parking lot, Travis eased into a spot near the front door. "Because of that girl?"

"Because of her. And I like my doctor here."

Travis pulled the keys out and climbed out of the truck without a word. He waited on the sidewalk for Spencer to painstakingly join him before saying, "Well, I guess it'd be easier than trying to get a doctor caught up to speed on your therapy. We could probably stick around for a little bit."

Spencer bit his tongue to keep from clarifying he wasn't asking Travis so much as telling. But the past week with Rebecca had taught him to curb his automatic impulses, at least until he felt more like himself. And he hadn't missed the way Travis completely glossed over Rebecca, as though Spencer hadn't mentioned her at all. But he finally had somebody fully in his corner, and he wasn't going to mess that up by picking stupid fights.

"I'm glad you made it out here," Spencer said as Travis pulled the door open.

For the first time since showing up on Becca's doorstep, Travis smiled. Or he almost smiled. The corner of his mouth lifted, which for Travis was the same thing.

"Me, too, Spence. It's been too long."

As they settled at the table, it felt like old times, when Spencer was just a kid and he had a whole world of possibility in front of him. For the first time, he was beginning to feel that way again.

When Travis had asked if there was any place around to get a drink, Spencer had pointed him to a bar up the canyon. Travis had promised he just wanted one drink, but one drink easily morphed into two, and though he stopped himself and switched to cola early in the night, Travis didn't show similar self-control. In fact, he didn't even show any sign of self-control when Spencer had reminded him he needed to be back at Rebecca's by ten to take his medication. Spencer kept his annoyance at bay, reminding himself this was just who Travis was. Somebody who liked to party and liked to have a good time, but didn't mean anything personal by it.

He had refused to let Spencer drive, and he barely stopped when they finally returned to Becca's sometime after one.

"See you in the morning!" Travis called out as he sped away, leaving Spencer standing alone in the driveway. A familiar pain settled behind his eye and his shoulder throbbed with enough force to make his teeth ache.

He carefully made his way past Becca's truck and toward the front door. It took three attempts to get his key into the lock because he saw double, but he kept his cursing to muttered half-sounds. He didn't want to wake Rebecca up.

She would just worry about him and she didn't need the added stress.

Spencer eased the door open slowly, hoping Jake wouldn't start barking his head off. He didn't look very fierce, but he took his role as guard dog seriously, even if he was just protecting the house against Spencer. But Jake remained oddly silent, and when Spencer got the door open, he saw why—Rebecca held him on the couch.

She lay on her side; Jake curled into her stomach as she cradled him close, while the light from the TV flickered across her face. At Spencer's entrance, she turned her soft blue eyes in his direction, but they widened almost immediately when she noticed the stiff set of his shoulder.

Letting Jake go, she swung her legs around and stood up. "I've got your meds all ready for you," she said as she crossed to the dining room table. "I probably should've sent them with you. I wasn't even thinking."

"No, it was my own fault. I should have figured on Travis wanting to go out for a few drinks."

She froze, the glass of water and pills in her hands. "Were you drinking? I'm not supposed to let you mix these with alcohol."

"I had two beers about six hours ago. It'll be okay, won't it?"

"Oh, yeah, that's fine." Becca held them out, chewing on her lip as he took them. "Did you have fun?"

Spencer tilted his head back to swallow the pills, then smiled. "I had two beers six hours ago, darlin'. What do you think?"

Their fingers brushed against each other as she took the glass back. "I think it's good to see you smiling again, even if you didn't get to join in the party yet. But just wait. You'll be doing body shots soon enough."

"Not with any of the guys I saw tonight, I hope." He caressed her cheek with his fingertips. "I'm sorry I made you stay up late."

Rebecca tilted her head into his touch, her hair spilling forward to brush against his knuckles. "I don't usually go to bed much before this anyway. You know that."

"Still wasn't very nice of me." Spencer's shoulder felt hot and the pain wore on his frayed nerves, but he knew well enough that the pills would kick in soon. "I'm beat. I think I might pass out as soon as my head hits the pillow."

Her hand stole forward and curled into his. "Let's get you into bed, then. Come on."

The pressure of her fingers around his comforted Spence, the way her touch always seemed to. The tension started to ease from his neck and shoulders, and his pulse hammered with anticipation. He just wanted to feel her soft body against his, wanted to smell her hair, and listen to her breathe. That was probably one of the biggest reasons he told Travis he didn't want to leave. He had grown accustomed to falling asleep with her gently wrapped around him.

"Travis'll be around again tomorrow."

"That's good." She flicked off the lights as they slowly made their way down the hall, taking his weight when he needed to lean without offering a word of commentary. "Are you two going to stick around here and visit, or do you think

you'll go into town again? I can always get out of your hair if you two want some privacy."

"No, we'll probably stick around. Eat up all your food, get under your feet, and be general pests."

Rebecca chuckled softly. "Something tells me you two under the same roof are trouble, no matter where you are."

"We do tend to find trouble when we're together. Or trouble finds him. I haven't been able to figure it out."

"Oh, I'll bet you do just fine causing some of that trouble yourself." She guided him into the bedroom, but as had become their custom, left the light off. It was easier on his head, and neither one of them needed more than the spillover from the hall to get his clothes off. "How long is he going to stick around?"

"Awhile, I think. He said he's going to take some time off the circuit to help me get back on my feet." And back on a bull, but Spencer didn't want to mention that part. Not yet.

Rebecca eased him to the edge of the bed, pushing him gently to sit down. She knelt in front of him, and while she undid the buttons on his shirt, Spence toed off his shoes.

"So...is he staying someplace in town, or does he have a trailer? I can probably go over everything he needs to know tomorrow, if you want me to."

"Everything he needs to know about what?"

She kept her eyes focused on her fingers, rather than look up and meet his eyes. "About your medication schedule, and your doctor appointments, and things like that. Or if he doesn't want to be bothered with some of it, I'm willing to come over and help out."

"Why would he need to know...oh." He tried to keep his hands to himself whenever she undressed him, but now he took her shoulder, squeezing until she finally looked up to meet his gaze. "Look, unless you're kicking me out, which I would understand, I don't really want to go anywhere."

"I don't want you to go, either." He wasn't used to seeing her less than confident, but now there a hesitation lurked in her eyes, making him wish he could do more than touch her shoulder. "But Travis is family and I'm not. I just thought...I figured you'd want to stay with him, that's all."

"He might be family, but you're much nicer than Travis." He leaned over and inhaled. "You smell nicer than he does. You're cleaner than he is. I think I like you a bit more than I like him...wait, I know I like you more."

Her smile was a flash of something bright and warm, but the smooth glide of her palm over his torso as she slipped the first sleeve off his arm was even better. "My bed's more comfortable than any old trailer's, too, I'll bet."

"About a thousand times more comfortable. I'm used to all these creature comforts now."

Rebecca had to press closer to pull the shirt around his back without jerking his sore shoulder. The soft crush of her breasts against his chest prompted him to lean down and breathe in even more of her scent, his eyes closing as he got lost in it.

"Well, if it means anything..." It felt like her mouth brushed against his jaw, so slight a caress he could have imagined it. "I like spoiling you."

"And I'm grateful." He pushed her hair over her shoulder, exposing her neck. It just made him want to kiss her. They hadn't done anything like that in the ten days he'd been living there, and he wasn't sure if Rebecca wanted to. "Even though sometimes I don't act like it."

"But you're getting better, every single day." She worked at the sling, freeing his arm in order to ease the shirt off the rest of the way. "Just the thought of you being strong enough to go out in the sunshine is enough to make it all worth it."

"You should tell me, though, if you get tired of me hanging around. I know this was just supposed to be a short-term deal."

With his shirt now off, Rebecca sat back on her heels and finally met his eyes. "If I hadn't had the problems with my dad last summer, I would've jumped in your truck without looking back. Which would've meant spending a lot of time together. That hasn't changed."

"I wish that would have worked out. I think we would have had a lot of fun together."

"Me, too." At this point, she usually helped him stretch out before taking his jeans off, but for some reason, she didn't. Instead, she reached forward and skimmed her fingertips across his belly, upward to his chest. "Don't go until you're ready to. It won't be the same here without you otherwise."

Spencer looked down, watching her hand. He wouldn't stop her. Whatever she wanted to do, and for however long she wanted to do it, he would let her. "In about a month, when you want your bed and your normal life back, I won't hold those words against you."

Rebecca nodded, though her eyes had taken on a soft, distant quality, and her fingers continued to caress his skin. She brushed the pad of her thumb over his nipple, then did it again after he audibly caught his breath.

"And when you want your normal life back, I won't stop you from leaving." Her hushed voice matched the care in her touch. "Even if I'll wish it was the Fourth of July again so I could see you."

Spencer swallowed and his cock twitched the third time her thumb brushed his hardening nipple. "Are you...are you going to sleep in the other room tonight?"

Her hand hesitated. "Do you want me to?"

"I hoped you'd stay in here with me. Not because I expected anything...I mean, I just..." He had seen this woman in every state of undress and in what felt like dozens of positions. He knew what she tasted like and what she sounded like when she came. But now he almost felt shy. "I like it when you're here when I wake up."

"Then I'll be here." Straightening, she retreated to the doorway. "I'll be right back."

Spencer frowned as she left, but the comforting sounds of her moving around in the small house soothed his irritation. Carefully, he slid back onto the bed and lay down, but after a few tries, gave up on undoing his jeans. It was more fun when Rebecca did it anyway.

She came back in what had to be only a few minutes, but it felt like much, much longer. He caught a glimpse of her before she shut the door, her curves illuminated through the long, worn T-shirt she'd changed into. Then he was plunged

into darkness, and he couldn't see anything but the faintest of outlines.

"I took care of Jake." Her disembodied voice sounded nearer, and then her hands were at his waist, her fingers sure as she opened his fly. "Did you need anything else?"

"No. I think I've got everything I need here."

He helped her get his jeans off by lifting his hips, just a little disappointed when she stopped there.

"It'll be nice not to have to worry about waking you up when I leave," she said as she stretched out in the empty space next to him. Her hand returned to touching his stomach, though without his jeans on, it felt even more intimate than before. "How's your shoulder feel now?"

"Better." Good enough he thought about pulling her closer and kissing her throat. Good enough he focused on her fingers and let himself imagine her hand moving lower. He couldn't remember the last time he seriously considered either one of those things.

He felt the mattress move beneath her. Her lips pressed to his good shoulder, and she cuddled a little closer, her full breasts heavy against his arm.

"I should get the camera out tomorrow and get some pictures of you and your uncle. You probably don't have any recent ones, do you?"

"No. Travis isn't the sort to live in the past, anyway. Or the future. All that matters is what's happening right now. Hell of a way to live."

Rebecca laughed. "Gee, well, at least now I know where you get it from."

"You think I just live in the present?"

"I think..." Her fingers stuttered across his skin as she resumed her caresses. "You've never really thought about your future until now, and I think you only think about it now because you have to."

"Yeah. I guess you're right. It made sense to me, you know. After my mom died, it didn't seem like a good idea to dwell in the past. And Travis always said no good could come from thinking too much."

"Well, we don't have to think about it at this exact minute." She kissed his shoulder again, this time letting the tip of her tongue trail across his skin. "We could think about other stuff instead."

Spencer barely held back his moan. "What other stuff do you have in mind?"

Her hand drifted lower. "We can't do the stuff I wish we could, but...I think about touching you. About how we would've spent the Fourth if you hadn't had the accident. About how much I love this little dimple here..." As she tickled over a spot near his hip, her warm breath floated across his neck. "You've always driven me crazy, Spencer Cole."

Spencer sighed, goose bumps sweeping down his limbs. He wanted her to keep touching him, but more than that, he wanted to kiss her. Properly. Like he would have kissed her on the Fourth if the ride had gone as planned. "Can I show you what I'm thinking about right now?"

"You can do whatever you want to me." She slipped a finger beneath the waistband of his boxers and immediately

found the wet tip of his cock. "Just as long as you don't hurt yourself."

If Rebecca hadn't provided that stipulation, Spencer might have forgotten about his injuries. He hooked his good arm beneath her and pulled her partly onto his chest so he could reach her mouth. As soon as their lips touched, Spence wondered why he hadn't kissed her sooner. Her mouth was sweet and familiar, and so welcoming he immediately deepened the caress, sweeping his tongue against hers.

Rebecca cradled into his body, bending her leg over his knee, the soft skin of her inner thigh rubbing along his. Her hand pushed farther into his boxers, surer, stronger, seeking out his shaft in order to pull in long, intoxicating strokes. All the while, she never stopped kissing him, and she never stopped making those little moans in the back of her throat he hadn't realized he'd missed until that exact moment.

He pressed his palm into the small of her back, itching to touch her the way she touched him. Itching to pull her onto his body, to feel more of her. But he couldn't do anything except kiss her and caress her back, moaning each time her hand brushed against his sensitive crown. After so much pain, misery, and self-pity, he had forgotten such simple pleasure existed.

"I've missed this," Rebecca whispered. She rocked gently against his hip, the heat of her covered pussy seeping into his leg. "I would've been very disappointed if you'd left with Travis, you know."

"I've missed this, too." An understatement, especially when she twisted her wrist and her fingers caught the pre-

come, or her nails dragged across the base of his shaft. He couldn't remember the last time anybody had touched him like that—and he was pretty sure it had nothing to do with his loss of memory. The closer it got to the Fourth, the more his desire for other women waned.

Her mouth descended along his neck, reviving sensation in flesh he'd thought could only feel pain. He welcomed the desire. Wanted it. Becca managed to obliterate everything but here, and now, and how warm she felt against his body.

She didn't speed up her strokes, but her grip tightened, constricting around every inch of him. The sounds coming from her now were higher, the grinds of her hips harder, and Spencer dug his fingertips into the soft swells of her ass to encourage her to continue.

"God, you feel so good..." Lifting her head, she turned shiny eyes to his, her tongue swiping over her lower lip. "I'm not hurting you, am I?"

Spencer lifted his head enough to catch her mouth, and what he meant to be a brief caress evolved into another long, hungry exploration. He loved kissing her. He loved the heat and the shape of her mouth. He loved the way she tasted like she was hungry for him.

When they broke apart for breath, he murmured, "I hope that answered your question."

Her mouth curved into a pleased smile. "Oh, yeah." Without uttering another word, she sealed their mouths again, quickening the pace of both her hand and hips.

Spencer closed his eyes and concentrated on the widening circles of pleasure. It wasn't perfect. He would have much

preferred her to straddle him and sink onto his cock. But the fact that she touched him at all meant that more was a very real possibility. It meant they didn't have to stay in a polite limbo where touching was forbidden. It meant his stated intent to stay in Oakley wasn't just a result of wishful thinking.

He began rocking his hips, moving against her as his moans matched hers. Pressure built beneath his skin and his heart hammered in his ears. Her hand moved faster and faster until he couldn't stand the friction any longer. He broke away from her mouth to gasp for breath as his cock jerked and he erupted in her palm.

He barely heard her cry out, but he definitely felt the clamp of her thigh over his. Her body went rigid, her hand suddenly shaking, and her slippery fingers scrabbled to find a hold along his skin. The dig of her nails into his hip sharpened everything—the tremors wracking his flesh, the pleasure burning to the tips of his toes—and he sought out her mouth one more time, needing the taste of her to ride it all out.

Gradually, Rebecca relaxed, her plush form sinking against him. Each sweep of her tongue grew longer, and when she finally pulled away from him, a smile was already on her lips.

"Those sponge baths are going to be a lot more interesting from now on," she said.

Spencer kissed the top of her head. "And they were already my favorite part of the day."

"You might be able to move up to showers soon, you know. We do pretty good in showers, too."

"Better than pretty good." Her hair tickled his nose but he didn't lift his head. "I didn't know if you've missed...*this*."

The caress of her mouth against his damp skin spread the warmth suffusing his body even more. "No more worries then." She snuggled closer, and it seemed as if for the first time, she didn't handle him as delicately as she normally did. "Cause nothing's changed for me, Spence. Nothing."

Spencer closed his eyes, more out of relief than exhaustion. He hadn't realized it, but he had been waiting for those words. He never thought of her like he did the other girls, but everybody had always just wanted him for one thing. Or because of one thing. He needed to believe Becca was different. Even if he didn't know why.

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CHAPTER 12

Life took on a brand new perspective after the night Spence came home late. Rebecca hadn't been entirely proud of herself for practically jumping him when he asked her to stay in his bed, but seeing him smile, seeing him so close to his normal self, with the out-of-the-blue mood swings mostly gone, made him too tempting. She had just wanted to touch him as a woman, not as his nurse. His response pretty much clinched it.

He was more good-natured after that night, offering smiles and jokes far more often than before. The walls were down, too, any barriers she'd erected to give him the distance he needed now gone. Now there were touches when she was near, cuddling on the couch with his good arm around her shoulder as he watched television. She didn't bother with any pretenses about sleeping anywhere else but next to him, either. They both wanted her there. That was where she'd stay.

Rebecca understood Spencer's uncle contributed to his high spirits. Travis came back the second day, and the two men spent a good part of it just hanging out. They talked about rodeo stuff, and people they knew, and when it looked like their snacks and drinks ran low, Rebecca refilled them without being asked. Otherwise, she let them have their privacy. It was easier. Spencer needed to spend time with someone who obviously cared about him as much as his uncle

did, and Rebecca needed to separate from Travis's obvious dislike for her.

She never mentioned it to Spencer. She didn't want to sound like she was complaining. She just wished she knew what she'd done, or not done, to get on Travis Cole's bad side.

Sometimes, the two men disappeared for hours together. Rebecca very much wanted to know what they were doing. Spencer always came home cheerful, but he also too tired to do much more than follow her into the bedroom and spend the next few hours necking like teenagers. Such simple pleasures made both of them happy. After everything, they both deserved some happiness.

On the fourth day after Travis's arrival, Rebecca got a call from her dad. "Do you have hard copies of those fire photos you took last month?" he asked. "Someone's asking for 'em, and I don't have any left."

She cradled the phone in her ear as she went to her filing cabinet. "I've got a few. When do you need them?"

"Today, if you can manage it."

"Sure, not a problem."

Hanging up, she pulled out the folder she needed and wandered down the hall to the living room. "Spence, I need to go out for a little bit. Is there anything you need?"

"I need some ice cream. And beer, but I don't think you'll let me get away with that."

She laughed. "No, not just yet. Chocolate, right?"

"Yep, chocolate. How long are you going to be gone?"

"Probably a couple hours. Dad needs these pictures, and then I'll run to Foodtown." She grabbed her purse and dug around for her keys. "Since I'm going in, do you still want those leftover ribs for supper, or do you want me to bring something else home?"

"The ribs are fine." He held out his hand and gestured her toward him. "Come here for a sec."

With a grin, she sat down next to him on the couch. "Your seconds are usually more like hours."

"I don't plan to distract you for hours." Spencer cupped the back of her neck and drew her forward. "Unless you want me to."

"I'd love you to." She eased against his chest, automatically shifting to his good side to keep from hurting his shoulder. "Just hold on to that thought until I get back."

"Yes, ma'am." Despite his words, the kiss was long and slow, and perfectly designed to make her forget about the errands she needed to run. He kissed her like that any time she got within touching distance, and it always made her pulse flutter and her mouth tingle. When he lifted his head, she stared at his lips. "Come back soon."

"You should take a nap while I'm gone." Her voice had gone husky with desire, and she leaned in to taste the lower curve of his mouth one more time. "Make sure you're good and rested for me. I might make you eat that ice cream off me this time."

Spencer shifted against the couch, drawing her attention from his mouth to his erection. "I'm not sure how I'm

supposed to sleep with that image in my head, but I'll do my best."

"Which is more than enough."

With difficulty, Rebecca peeled herself away, straightening her shirt where it had twisted between them. Her hard nipples poked through the fabric, and Spencer's level gaze didn't make it any easier to retreat to the doorway. She waved and bolted for the truck. If she didn't, she'd find some reason to stay. She'd rather get done what she needed to, to have the entire night to spend with Spencer.

She stopped at the newspaper's office first. Growing up, Rebecca had spent as much time there as she did at home, learning more about the business than she ever wanted to. It wasn't her passion, not like photography, but she'd done what she could to help out. She was the only child, and though Gil Rankin might have nieces and nephews to step in, he always relied on his daughter.

"Becky?" Gil opened his office door and smiled with coffee and nicotine stained teeth. Thin gray hair stuck to his shining scalp and his shirt was almost as dirty as his teeth. His eyes darted around, as though searching for anybody else who might have followed Rebecca into the office. "I hoped that was you. Come on in."

"I only have two of each of the sets," she said when she stood on the other side of his desk. Opening the folder, she pulled out the plastic sheaths protecting the photos and slid them across his blotter. "If you need anything more, I'm going to need to do a print run."

He lifted them to the light and studied them with narrow eyes before nodding with satisfaction. "These are fine. So when are you coming back to work?"

"I'm working now, Dad. Are you asking when I'm going to be back in the office every day? Probably a couple more weeks at least." She chewed the corner of her lip as she weighed the rest of her response. As much as she hated leaving Spencer during the day, she knew it would have to come to an end sooner or later. "I could probably manage a couple short days in town now."

"That boy doesn't have any family to watch after him now? Didn't you say his uncle was in town?"

"He is, but Travis just has his trailer. That's no place for Spence to recuperate when I've got plenty of room at my place."

"Just don't start letting him take advantage of you." Gil sat down heavily, his ink-stained fingers fidgeting with a pen. "It must be nice, living with a pretty girl who'll wait on him, hand and foot."

Her hackles went up. "Spence isn't like that."

"Becky, he's a cowboy. And a young man. I imagine he's just like that."

"Well, if he is enjoying it, can you really blame him? That ride probably cost him his career. He's got some tough decisions to make here soon, so if I can make it a little easier for him now, you can bet I will."

"You're a good girl, but you're too kind-hearted." Gil shrugged. "I guess I should just be thankful you haven't

started picking up strays before now. Maybe I should come by and meet him."

Her stomach plummeted. Though the two men had never come face to face, Spencer had never refrained from expressing his less than positive opinion of the other man. Part of her worried about getting the two men in the same room. Gil could be more than overprotective. Then again, she'd never seen Spence be less than friendly and gracious with anybody, even rabid buckles bunnies at the rodeo. She wasn't giving him nearly enough credit in keeping them apart.

"You could come by for Sunday dinner," she offered. "Spencer's doing better every day. He'd be up for more company, I'm sure."

"Sunday dinner?" Gil opened the top drawer and took out a giant calendar, far larger than any desk calendar she had seen anywhere else. And far more inconvenient than just using a computer program to keep track of his schedule, but Gil Rankin's system worked for him. One he would never change. After perusing the crowded page for a moment, he nodded. "That'll work. Around six?"

"Sounds good." Leaning across the desk, she brushed a kiss across his cheek. "I'll see you then."

She left before he said anything else to rile her. She knew his opinion of Spencer, and her role as nurse, but surprisingly, it was a little more subdued than she'd expected. Still, it annoyed her to be questioned on her decisions. No matter what Gil said, Rebecca knew Spencer better than any of them. Nobody was taking advantage of anybody. At least not in the sense Gil meant.

Her good mood returned as she pulled into Foodtown. Her grocery list was small, and if she didn't want the ice cream to melt, she had to be quick. If she had her way, she'd convince Spencer to have dessert first, though honestly, she didn't think that would require too much work. He hadn't wanted her to leave, as much as she hadn't wanted to go.

Rebecca waved at a few people she recognized as she entered the store, but didn't allow herself to be drawn into any conversations. If she let them start gossiping, she would never be able to get away. But a familiar cowboy hat brought her up short, and she nodded to be polite, fully expecting Travis to ignore her and keep walking. But their eyes met and he moved toward her, not giving her a chance to escape.

"Hi there," she said with her best smile. "How come I didn't see you at the house today?"

"I had to drive to Salt Lake and pick up a few things for Spence. I plan to eat, then come by and get him this afternoon."

"Oh." She tried not to let her disappointment show. "He didn't tell me you were coming over later."

"You should expect to see me every day."

She laughed. "Just how much catching up do you two have to do?"

Travis pushed the brim of his hat back. "Catching up? We're not women. We have better things to do than spend the day gossiping."

Biting back her instinctive retort, she asked, "Then what are you spending all that time doing?"

"Practicing. Exercising. Getting strong enough to ride again."

Rebecca stared at him blankly. He hadn't just said what she thought he'd said, had he? "But the doctors told Spence that wasn't going to happen. His shoulder's not strong enough."

"That's why we've got so much work to do. He can't use his shoulder, but he can ride left-handed. I thought he would have explained all this to you already."

"No, he hasn't." He hadn't said a word, actually. Not since the topic had first come up way back in the beginning of his stay with her. "But Spence knows that's a long shot at best. Has he told you how many surgeries he still has to have on that shoulder? And about the physical therapy? And there's no telling what the concussion has done to his reflexes. He tries to ride left-handed, and he's going to kill himself."

"And if he doesn't try at all, he might as well be dead."

This time, she didn't even bother smiling. Her jaw set as she glared at Travis. "He can find something else."

"He rides bulls. That's what he knows. I don't expect you to understand, but I do expect you to stay out of his way."

"So you can kill him? I don't think so."

"If he has to go, I'd rather it be by riding bulls instead of letting a woman suffocate him to death." He tipped his hat in a parody of politeness and turned to walk away.

Rebecca grabbed his arm without thinking, yanking him to a halt. Unflinchingly, she met his eyes, grateful she didn't have to look up to see him. "Look, I know you're his family, and I know you care about him, but you don't know crap

about who I am or what I want for Spencer. The last thing I would ever do to Spencer is hold him back, but there's a difference between supporting his choices and encouraging him with something that's pretty much guaranteed to kill him. I'd hope you'd understand that."

"If you think the risk of death is enough to stop Spence, then you don't know him at all."

"It's more than a risk. It's near certainty. Spence loves the thrill, but last I checked, he didn't have a death wish."

"Maybe you should talk to him about it. This was his idea, after all."

Continuing this conversation wouldn't get her anywhere. And Travis had a point. Letting him go, Rebecca took a step back, her hand tightening on her purse. "Maybe I should. Though I guess I should thank you for telling me."

"Guess so. Try not to ride him too hard. We have work to do this afternoon."

Rebecca didn't wait for anything more. Turning on her heel, she marched back to the parking lot. Nobody would do any riding that afternoon. At least not the kind Spencer wanted.

Her anger had calmed slightly by the time she pulled up in front of the house, fading to be replaced by hurt. Spencer hadn't said a word to her. He'd been meeting with Travis for the past four days, and he'd never even hinted about his true intentions. For the first time, she wondered if her dad's words about Spencer taking advantage of her might have more than a grain of truth in them.

He was right where she left him, stretched out on the couch and watching one of his soaps. As soon as she opened the door, he smiled at her—a wide, charming, almost disarming smile. "Well, there you are."

"Here I am." Seeing him made it hard to hold onto her disappointment, and for a moment, she wished she hadn't rushed out of Foodtown without the ice cream. She'd let Travis get her upset. For all she knew, he'd been lying about all of it. "How are you feeling?" That was a safe question to start with. Much safer than, *are you really crazy enough to try and ride again?*

"Rested," Spencer said with a wink.

Smiling, she dropped her purse by the door, though she wasn't sure what to do then. If she sat down, he'd reach for her. If he reached for her, she'd melt. If she melted, she'd never find out the truth, because her brain would malfunction and she'd believe anything he said to her.

Rebecca settled for perching on the arm of the couch. It was a safe alternative. Maybe.

"Guess who I ran into at Foodtown?"

"The Foodtown mayor?"

Her mouth twitched. "No. Travis. He just got back from picking up some stuff for you in Salt Lake City." She paused, her gaze steady. "For practicing with, I assume."

The smile faded from his face and eyes. "Yeah. I...needed a few things to help build up my strength."

Ice settled across her skin. "So you really are trying to ride again?"

"I told you I wanted to, Rebecca. That never changed."

"You didn't tell me that's what you and Travis have been doing."

"I didn't want to upset you."

"Because you know I think it's going to kill you. And I don't want to watch you commit suicide."

"I'm not asking you to. But maybe you could at least try to understand."

That's what Travis had said. It hurt no matter whose mouth it came out of.

"I know you miss it, Spence," she tried, hoping the shift in approach would ease some of the sting. "I know how much you love it. I've got the photographic proof. But you haven't even considered any other options. We never even made it out to that ranch, the one that breeds bulls, like you said we would."

"How do you know I never considered other options? How do you know I haven't spent the last two weeks thinking about this? I want to ride. I don't appreciate anybody telling me I can't."

"I'm not...that's not what I'm saying." She didn't know why she was tripping over her tongue. "I know I don't get a say in the matter. It's not my life. It's yours. But you can't honestly expect me to be okay with standing back and pretending I think you're not making a mistake, can you?"

"Maybe I'm not making a mistake, Becca. Maybe I'm doing the best I can with the shitty hand that's been dealt to me. I don't want to go work at a ranch and be somebody's grunt."

"Who says you'll have to? I know you feel more like yourself, and that's great, but your shoulder isn't anywhere

near ready for this kind of a decision yet. You've still got at least two more surgeries ahead of you. Anything could happen."

"That's why I'm working on my left arm. I'll never be able to ride right-handed again. I know that. I just...want to feel like I'm actually doing something here. Travis shows up and tells me everything I need to do to ride again, and I...I don't want to let my last chance slip out of my fingers."

He had a small point. He'd been happier in the past few days than she'd seen him since the accident. She had just been naive enough to think the shift in their relationship had something to do with it. And he did need a purpose. She knew being locked up all day had been driving him crazy. He wasn't made for this kind of life at all.

"I think Travis is telling you what you want to hear. I don't think for a second he's considering all your options. But if you promise me all you're doing is strengthening your left arm, that you're not doing anything crazy like actually practicing to ride when you haven't even had the rest of your surgeries yet, I'll promise not to bother you about it."

"I haven't climbed on a bull yet. And I don't plan to for a long time. I don't...I don't harbor any delusions on this point. I know what it'll take to ride again...it's not something that'll happen next month."

No, but his every waking moment would be dedicated to reaching his goal. And Travis would be right there, prodding him along, encouraging him in something that nobody but the two of them believed could happen. Rebecca wanted to believe. She wanted to see Spencer happy more than

anything else in the world, and that had been when he'd been flying high in the ring. But she refused to ignore all the facts stacked against him. She couldn't pretend the doctors didn't know what they were talking about.

He's a cowboy. And a young man. I imagine he's just like that.

Rising to her feet, she rubbed her shaking hands against her shorts. "Do you need your meds just yet? If not, I'm going to get back to work."

Spencer's brow furrowed, and she couldn't tell if he was confused or in pain. Maybe a combination of both. "I guess you didn't pick up any ice cream."

"No. Getting blindsided by Travis kind of distracted me."

"Oh. Was he...if you want, I can tell him to go when he comes around later today."

She itched to reach out and smooth away the creases in his forehead. He seemed so genuinely confused, much like the first few days she'd brought him home. "No, you don't have to do that. He got you all that stuff in Salt Lake. You might as well use it."

"Yeah, I guess so." He pushed himself to his feet, moving stiffly. "I'm going to go take a nap. When Travis gets here, just holler at me."

A part of her thought he expected her to stop him. Or help him. Or do anything other than stand there and watch him take those uncomfortable steps down the hall. Rebecca never moved. She only exhaled after the bedroom door clicked shut behind him, and then, it felt like all the energy had been sucked from her body.

She did not want to step back from Spence. They had been in such a good place. If she chose to ignore all the signs, they could still be in a good place. But the signs were there. They all pointed to Spencer starting down a path that would only lead to a world of hurt. Not just physical pain, but emotional grief for her, as well. Because she cared about him. A lot. And it would be so easy to care for him even more.

She couldn't watch him die. Which meant doing the right thing now.

Even if it hurt more than watching him spin out with that bull.

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CHAPTER 13

Spencer had been in the habit of seeking out Rebecca's company, even if it meant sitting on the couch in the living room while she worked in the dining room. He would at least be able to see her, if he angled himself right, and hear her as she muttered and sighed to herself. But after she distanced herself again—even further than before—he didn't have the energy to stick close to her.

He didn't know why he insisted on staying in her house. He could handle his own medication. At the very least, he could move out to his own trailer. But if he went that far, why not just leave Oakley with Travis? Why not just bid her farewell, give her what cash he could for her time and his room and board, and go to Tempe like Travis suggested?

Why stick around somewhere he clearly wasn't wanted?

Spencer knew he'd never make Becca understand. If she didn't now, she simply never would. There wasn't anything to be done about that. But the thought of leaving her hurt him. Even if he might as well be gone because she was just the nurse he didn't necessarily need, he was just her patient she didn't necessarily like, and his future lay elsewhere. He needed to come to terms with that, because if he caved to her wishes and gave up his dreams of riding again, he wouldn't be any better than a bum, living off her good graces. He had more pride than that. She deserved better than that.

But every time Travis suggested Spencer move on, echoing his own thoughts, Spencer's temper would rise and

he'd lash out. It didn't matter if Travis was right. Spencer didn't want to go anywhere until he was damned good and ready. Or until Becca kicked him out. He thought that day would come sooner rather than later, and he tried to prepare himself for that, without much success.

In an effort to win back some of her favor, Spencer made sure he stayed on his best behavior. After she informed him Gil would be joining them for dinner, Spencer told Travis to stay away on Sunday. He even found his best shirt and pants, hoping she would notice he at least made the effort to look presentable. He resolved not to snap at the older man or otherwise embarrass Becca. He didn't even let Jake jump on the couch and get hair all over the upholstery he knew Rebecca had just vacuumed.

The phone rang just before noon, and in the kitchen he heard Becca swear under her breath when something clattered to the counter. Her soft voice murmured from the other room, comforting in its nearness. He'd missed it. He'd missed hearing her laughter, and seeing her accompanying smile. She wasn't laughing now, but just the reminder kept him distracted from the television.

She appeared in the doorway to the dining room, most definitely not smiling. "Dad canceled." The declaration came without fanfare, like she'd been expecting nothing less. "He wants me to get over to Coalville and get pictures of the county fair for tomorrow's run."

Doesn't he have an intern to send on such stupid jobs? Spencer bit his tongue. Regardless of his feelings, this was

Becca's job. And she took it seriously. So he would not antagonize her.

"The fair sounds like fun."

She had already started to turn down the hall, but his words stopped her. She searched his gaze with soft, hesitant eyes. "Did you...want to go and get out of the house?"

"If you don't mind being stuck with me while you're trying to work."

"Shooting a bunch of pigs isn't exactly work." But her tone was teasing, and a hint of a smile lingered on her mouth. One he hadn't seen in far too long. "But it's not fun going to the fair all by yourself, so yeah, I'd love for you to come with me." Her smile widened. "You can be my assistant. Help point out all the good stuff I might miss."

"I'm not sure I'd recognize a good looking pig if I saw one." He gestured at his clothes. "Should I change?"

"Probably." Her head tilted. "When was the last time you went to a fair? Just to have fun, I mean."

"I don't remember. Maybe when I was six or seven."

She laughed. God, it sounded good. "Then yeah, you need to change. Jeans and a T-shirt. We're going to be out in the sun all day."

The T-shirt sounded more than a little daunting. He could get in and out of his button-down shirts easily enough, but T-shirts were another matter entirely. Rebecca hadn't been helping him with his clothes, and he wasn't sure if he should ask her now.

"I don't mind wearing this."

"You're going to get too hot." When he didn't move, she glanced down the hall, at the room she hadn't entered since their fight. "If it's too hard to change, I can help. If you want."

Spencer didn't know if it was the best idea to be half-naked with her, but he certainly was not going to discourage her from helping him.

"It is too hard with T-shirts, since I can't straighten my shoulder."

"Well, come on then." With a smile, she started down the hallway. "Far be it for me to shirk my duties."

Duty. The word echoed in his head as he followed her. He didn't want to be just a chore for her. But he had the feeling things weren't going to change, so there was no point in dwelling on it. Much.

Once they reached the bedroom, Spencer went directly to the top drawer of the dresser. Rebecca kept everything very orderly, and he always knew exactly where to look to find the shirt he wanted. He pulled out a faded blue T-shirt that had been with him for years.

"This work?"

Rebecca nodded, and then she stood in front of him instead of hanging back. Her fingers danced along his buttons, barely touching though he felt every degree of heat, every glance of her skin. She couldn't quite meet his eyes, but the way her breathing quickened hinted that maybe it wasn't just duty for her. Sliding it off his shoulders, she tossed it onto the bed before taking the T-shirt from his hands.

"Let's get it over your head first," she said quietly. Bunching it up, she stretched and pulled it on, hiding her from his view for the seconds it took to get his head through the neck. Her soft breasts brushed against his bare chest, and he had to bite back his groan when he realized her nipples were hard.

Just the thought of her nipples made his groin tighten in response. When she had the collar around his neck, he looked over her shoulder to the wall behind her. The wall wasn't exciting or as interesting as the fresh lipstick on her bottom lip.

He thought she hesitated a bit before moving to his arms. "You looked good. In the other." She shifted slightly to pull the shirt onto his good arm first, which pressed their upper bodies a little more tightly together. "Dad would've been impressed."

"He wasn't necessarily the one I wanted to impress," Spencer admitted.

Rebecca looked up then. "It's been hard." She didn't phrase it as a question, but more a statement of fact. He didn't know whether he meant it had been hard for her, or hard for him. "I liked where we were."

"I liked it, too. I want to get there again."

"I don't know if we can." She chewed at the corner of her lip. "I like you a lot, Spence. More than I ever expected. And I know we've never really talked about anything more, well, except for last summer, but..." Her voice faded away for a moment before she shook her head. "And then I look at you

like this, and I forget everything I told myself. That's not fair."

"Sorry. I don't mean to use my killer looks against you. I'll try to be better about that." He straightened his elbow as much as he could and helped her fit the other sleeve over his arm. "But why can't we get back to where we were before?"

She swallowed. "Because I'm afraid of losing you. Because I think it would be really easy to do more than like you."

Spencer wanted to assure her she wouldn't lose him to anybody. He didn't want anybody more than her. Except, he realized, she wasn't worried about another woman.

"Yeah. I...well...I understand."

Her hand smoothed up his strong shoulder, stopping to touch the slightly rough skin of his jaw. "Yeah, well, I'm glad you do. I don't get this at all. Because right now, I wish I could just forget about everything and drag you out to the fair and eat cotton candy and then make out behind the beer tent."

"So, let's do that." He caught her wrist and brought her fingers to his mouth. "Let's just have some fun today. I owe you a bit of fun, I think, since I missed our date this year."

She rewarded him with another smile as she leaned forward, bringing her breasts back into contact with him. "The only problem with that is we don't usually actually get *out* on our dates," she teased. "Though I think I'd be willing to try something new."

"I like the thought of something new." Spencer grinned. "Especially if you let me get fresh with you behind the beer tent."

"Let me get my pictures, and I'll let you get fresh anywhere you want."

"Yes, ma'am." He wanted to get fresh with her right there, but he didn't want to stop her from getting her photos. Instead of wrapping his arm around her, he plucked his hat from the top of the dresser and pulled it low over his eyes. A thrill of excitement went down his spine.

The same sort of thrill he experienced right before the bell chimed and the chute door flew open.

The Summit County Fair was not the most impressive fair he had ever seen. There were several long barns for the livestock, and a giant field boasting the standard fair rides he had seen across the country. Another series of sheds contained the organic goods, the baked goods, the handmade items, and 4H exhibits. On one end of the grounds, the fair was set up, and on the other end was a rodeo arena. A long line of vendor booths marked a trail leading from one to the other. The air was rich with the smell of sugar, deep fried food, barbeque, popcorn, and a host of other aromas he couldn't name.

Spencer felt like he was on sensory overload as soon as he stepped out of Rebecca's truck.

She came around the front to join him. "How're you doing? There's a lot more people here than I thought there would be."

Spencer pulled his hat lower to shade his eyes. It had been a month since he had seen this many people in one place, and the sun was almost unbearably hot against the back of

his neck, but he felt fine. Better than he expected, given the circumstances.

"I'm good. Where do you want to start?"

Rebecca caught his hand with hers and curled their fingers together. Her camera hung from her other shoulder, safe in the case he'd given her, but she didn't make any move yet to pull it out. "How about some cotton candy and chili dogs? We didn't get lunch, and I'm starved."

"You're going to let me have cotton candy and chili dogs? I must truly be on my way to recovery."

Spencer pulled her toward the lights, bells, and whistles of the midway. He liked fairs because they had something in common with rodeos—no matter where he found one, it was always the same. Comforting in its familiarity.

Her bare arm brushed against his every step of the way, making him very glad she'd insisted on changing his shirt. She had brought his pain meds, just in case his shoulder started hurting while they were out, but honestly, Spencer didn't think he'd need it. His earlier trepidation had been replaced with excitement, and he only focused on how natural it felt to walk hand in hand with Rebecca through the crowd.

They stopped at the first booth they found serving hot dogs, and after they had placed their order, Rebecca leaned into Spencer's side.

"I think this was a great idea." She pressed a kiss against his cheek, her breath sweet and warm along his skin. "I'm sorry about the past few days. I know I didn't make it easy."

"I think I'm the one who doesn't make it easy. Maybe this was why your entire family and all your friends wanted you to stay away from cowboys."

"Trouble with that is I've never seen you as just a cowboy, Spence."

"But that's what I am. Born and bred. What else is there to see?"

"What I see." Her eyes searched his, but what she expected to impart, he wasn't sure. "The man inside. The one who makes me laugh. Makes me believe." Their food arrived in the tiny window of the food stand. "The one who buys me chili dogs."

Spencer smiled and took the tray of drinks in one hand while she juggled the dogs and fries. He scanned the area and found a table in the shade. There were few things in life that made him smile like finding a decent table in a long patch of shade. Maybe the only finer pleasure was Rebecca's soft mouth against his cheek.

"I won't stop at chili dogs, ma'am. I'll also be the man who buys you cotton candy, kettle corn, and funnel cakes."

She sat at right angles to him so her knee kept brushing along his. She didn't seem nearly as worried about incidental contact as she had been the past few days, but Spencer didn't know if she was throwing caution to the wind while they were at the fair or if it was a permanent change. Either way, he wouldn't ignore it. He was going to take every drop of contact and make sure she knew how much he wanted it.

Taking a big bite of her hot dog, Rebecca made a sound usually reserved for sex as she closed her eyes and chewed.

"God, I love fair food," she said after she'd swallowed. "I know it's bad for you, and maybe it's not the most hygienic place, but there's just something about it."

"There's something about it *because* it's bad for you and full of germs. You just can't get this type of food in a clean kitchen."

Her gaze grew contemplative. "Do you think about it a lot? How different it is staying with me instead of your trailer, I mean. Do you miss this kind of thing?"

"I...I don't know. Your bed is more comfortable, and though you insist on feeding me real food instead of grease and sugar, I can't say I mind it. But sometimes I miss the freedom. Waking up in one city and knowing I'd fall asleep in another. Seeing everything the country has to offer. Never having the chance to get restless or bored."

"You know, I was always so jealous you got to see so much." She sipped at her drink, her full lips drawing his attention even though he was sure she didn't mean for them to. "I mean, having to turn you down last year? Probably the second hardest thing I've ever had to do. I wanted to go so badly."

"The second hardest thing? What was the first?"

Her lashes ducked. "Getting into the ambulance after your accident."

Spencer wanted to touch her again. He wanted to know why he deserved to have somebody like her care for him.

"I'm grateful you did. Even if I wasn't awake for it."

She dipped one of her fries into the chili. "I would've gone into the ring if Max had let me. But, you know, there's rules. Even if they're stupid rules."

"I think most of the rules governing rodeos are stupid rules." He wiped a spot of hot chili from the corner of his mouth. "Do you have pictures of that ride?"

"Well, yeah, but..." She chewed slowly. "I didn't think you'd want to see them."

"Why not?"

"I figured you'd just want to move on. That you wouldn't want the reminders."

"It's not really a reminder if I can't remember it, is it? Besides, trying to pretend it never happened isn't going to help me."

Her head cocked at his declaration. "Can you really not remember? I mean, the doctors said you probably wouldn't, but I guess I figured they were exaggerating." She blushed. "I thought that kind of stuff only happens in the movies."

"I really can't remember. Most of that day is gone. I remember when I got to the arena, and I remember looking for you. The last thing is finding out I got Rusty Jack Knife. Everything after that?" Spencer gestured with his fingers. "Gone."

"Wow. I didn't realize it was that extensive. But yeah, if you want to see them, you're more than welcome to. Anything you want to know, I'll tell you. Only...can I make one small request and ask that we not do it today? Tomorrow, I promise. I just want today to be everything we wanted, all the fun and getting to be together."

"No, we don't have to talk about it today. It is a bit of a downer. What would you like to talk about instead?"

Rebecca smiled. Leaning in, she licked along his lower lip before brushing a kiss over his mouth. "If I asked, would you let me get some new pictures of you? We can make a trade. I'll give you the ones from the ride. You let me shoot some of you in the shower."

Spencer leaned forward enough to steal another kiss from her. "You know, you don't have to ask. I'm at your mercy. You tell me where to go and what to do."

Her soft fingertips traced the side of his face. "You always get a say with me, Spence. I don't want to just be your nurse."

The sparkling lights and bright bells, the crush of the crowd, the taste of his chili dog, and the heat from the midday sun all faded from his perception. "What else do you want to be?"

"Anything you let me." She kissed him again, soft, lingering. "One of the best days of my life was the day I met you."

"I don't want you to just be my nurse. But I don't want to make you miserable, either."

She continued to caress his jaw, though she pulled back a few inches, out of reach of more kisses. "I'm beginning to think it'll be worse not having you around at all. I'm not going to lie and say I've changed my mind about how I feel about the training, but anything that might put you in danger is months away. If it ever even happens. Maybe I just need to suck it up and take what I happiness I can get."

Spencer didn't want to tell her to suck it up and live with it, like she didn't have a valid concern. She did. And there was a reason most of the guys he knew on the circuit did not have the greatest relationships. But at the same time, he couldn't tell her what she no doubt wanted to hear. He couldn't form the words.

"You know, training with my left arm isn't just good for riding." He nodded at the booth behind her. "It's also good for throwing balls at bottles and winning stuffed bears."

"It better be a really big bear," she said with a grin. Sitting back in her chair, she dug into her fries again, though a new gleam appeared in her eye. "You know, I'm going to have to get a whole bunch of pictures for Dad. Maybe I can get some of you doing stuff around the fair today. I could do a little piece for the paper showing everyone how well you're getting on."

"If you think your dad would be interested in that story. Though he might be more interested in one about me leaving his little girl alone."

"Well, if Dad doesn't like it, I'll offer it to one of the other papers. You have fans. People worry about how you're doing."

"Then I guess I should give my public what they want. A story for them, assuring everybody I'm on the mend, and a big bear for you."

They finished their lunch with more chatter about the various games around the fair. By the time they tossed their garbage in the nearby can, Rebecca had talked him into trying one of the balloon races with her.

"Winner gets to pick what we do next," she said.

"Does the winner have to stick to fairground activities?"

She led him toward the nearby booth. "Winner has to stick to the fairgrounds. What the winner chooses to do on those fairgrounds is his or her business."

"I think this wager has some potential then." He picked up the water pistol and eyed it warily. "Of course, I'm not left-handed and so I might not be able to aim with my left eye."

"Consider it a learning experience then." She hopped on the stool next to him, their thighs rubbing together through their jeans. "Unless you're scared of losing to a girl."

"I'd never complain about losing to a girl if she's a better shot than me." Spencer leveled the toy gun, closing his right eye to stare down the barrel. "That'd be begging for trouble."

The girl manning the booth came over to take the money Rebecca held out. Within a minute, the rest of the stools were full.

"I dunno," Rebecca said, as she leaned into position. "I kind of like the idea of you begging a little."

"I'm sure if anybody can get me to beg, it'd be you," Spence muttered just before the buzzer sounded, marking the beginning of the race. In the first few seconds, Spencer was sure he'd lose. He couldn't aim directly at the clown's mouth, and water sprayed everywhere. He felt, rather than heard, Becca chuckle beside him, and knew he needed to pull it together. He switched eyes and focused more intently, until the spray found the clown's mouth and the balloon above its head began to fill.

The thrill that he might actually do this surged through his veins. *A little to the left.* He dared a glance at Becca's balloon,

but then his finger slipped and he jerked his attention back to his own. *Shut it out. Concentrate.* The roar of the music and the running commentary actually made it easier to focus. All he had to do was—

A shrill bell pierced the air, declaring a winner. The water trickled out of his gun, and he sat up, looking up and down to see who won.

"Number three," Becca said. "Looks like we both lose."

Number three didn't look like he was much older than three. He smiled broadly as he accepted his prize, and Spencer glared at him a little.

"I'm suffering from major head trauma," Spencer said, turning back to Becca, "what's your excuse?"

"The hot guy sitting next to me."

Spencer looked over her shoulder. "Who?"

Sliding off her stool, she scooped her camera case back onto her shoulder. "The one with the great ass. Didn't you see him?"

"No. Are you checking out strange men?"

"Nope. Just the one I plan on crawling into bed with tonight." She held her hand out. "Ready to move on?"

"I'm ready to hear more about that bit with the bed." He closed his fingers around hers, but resisted the urge to pull her behind a booth to get a bit of privacy with her. "Where we moving on to? Lady's choice since neither of us won?"

"We could go get some of the livestock shots out of the way. Then we can get back to fun stuff."

"Livestock shots. Thrilling." He rubbed the back of her hand with his thumb. "Don't you ever feel like you're better than taking pictures of sheep at the county fair?"

They walked in silence for a few steps, her silence as telling as any response she could have given. "Sometimes. But I've got to start somewhere. And it's getting better. More people are noticing my work. Like those fire photos Dad needed. The guy who wanted them said some really nice things."

Spencer didn't doubt that any time her photos made it past the tiny circulation of her father's newspaper, she attracted a great deal of attention. And it killed him to think of her spending the rest of her life being underpaid and underappreciated.

"What do you think it'll take to move on to bigger and better things?"

"Honestly? No clue. Except getting out of Oakley. I still want that."

"I want that for you, too. I wish I could have been the one to help you get out."

She squeezed his hand, leaning her head on his shoulder. "Sometimes, this last year, when I was waiting for the Fourth to come around, I'd think about what it would have been like. You and me. On the road. Those were some of my best daydreams."

"I'd think about it, too. When I got lonely. Or when I wanted to celebrate a particularly high-scoring ride. Jake's a good dog, but he leaves a bit to be desired when it comes to companionship."

"I almost went and saw you at Nationals last year. Then I thought, maybe you wouldn't want me dropping in unannounced."

"Why wouldn't I want you to visit me?"

Rebecca glanced at him before replying. "Because we only see each other once a year. And I've got eyes. I know you see other girls."

"I didn't have any girls with me at Nationals. And even if I had, I would have spent my time with you."

Her smile made him want to lean in and kiss her all over again. "We do go pretty good together."

"Yeah. Like chili and hotdogs."

"Or tequila and lime."

"Or Froot Loops and beef jerky." He squeezed her fingers. "A combination you would have learned to love if you traveled with me."

"You mean that's your fault and not Jake's? I owe that poor dog an apology."

"I think we both owe that poor dog an apology," Spencer said as they stepped into the long Quonset hut that served as the display case for all kinds of sheep. His nose wrinkled automatically, even though he was accustomed to the stench of livestock. But nothing could ever prepare him for the immediate nasal assault of sheep.

He didn't know what Becca wanted for her pictures, so he followed her quietly, watching as she framed belligerent goats and docile sheep and their camera shy keepers with equal dexterity. It only reconfirmed his opinion that she was too good for this gig—far, far too good.

After the sheep, they moved on to the cattle. The beasts piqued his interest a little bit—though not much. There were bulls, but none of them were good enough stock to be considered for the circuit. Still, there was something familiar, comfortable, and exhilarating about being near them. Bulls had an energy no other animal matched. He expected to feel a twinge of fear now that he had come face to face with an animal big enough to kill him, but he didn't feel anything like that.

"Spencer Cole?"

The voice came from off to his left, and Spence turned to see a gangly teenager standing just a few feet away, an excited smile splitting his acne-scarred features. His hands were shoved in his tight jeans, but as soon as Spence met his eyes, he pulled them out and took a few steps forward, thrusting one forward in greeting.

"I can't believe it's you," the kid said. "I've seen you ride so many times. After—" He noticed the sling for the first time, and immediately looked down at his own hand, letting it drop back to his side. "I didn't know you were going to be here."

Spencer smiled. "I didn't exactly alert the media. What's your name?"

His grin broadened. "Kevin, sir. Kevin Kelsey."

Spencer grimaced. "It's good to meet you Kevin, but I don't think you need to call me *sir*."

Horror widened Kevin's eyes. "Oh, I didn't mean to offend you, sir—Mr. Cole. Habit, I guess. My mom would kill me if I didn't say it." The grin returned. "Though I think she might make an exception in this case. She's as big a fan as I am."

"That's good to hear." He looked over the kid's head, but Rebecca was on the other side of the building. "So you came around here to look at the bulls?"

"Actually, I'm showing one." Kevin pointed to a black Texas longhorn a third of the way down. "I came around to look at the competition."

"Oh?" Spencer moved toward the bull, Kevin following close at his heels. "He's a good looking animal. You raise him yourself?"

"Yeah." The pride in his voice was unmistakable. "This is my first year getting to show. I'm hoping me and Buck do good, 'cause my dad said if we place, he'll let me have another."

Spencer wasn't as familiar with the requirements judges used in fairs, but he thought the boy had a chance at placing. "You ever try to ride one?"

"Once. But it was a lot scarier than I thought it would be, so I haven't done it again." Kevin looked at Spencer almost shyly. "That's what's so great about when you ride. You don't look scared of nothin'."

"Between you and me, I get scared a lot." His gaze drifted back to Rebecca. "It's easy to be brave when you don't have anything to lose, though."

Kevin didn't notice his distraction. "So if you're doing better, does that mean you're going to be riding again soon? I can't wait to see you in the arena again."

"Soon? I don't know. I guess the doctor has to give me the okay and..." He lifted his sling. "I've got to wait until I'm not

wearing this contraption anymore. Otherwise, I'll lose my balance and get my head knocked in again."

"Well, I'll be watching. And my mom." He brightened. "Oh! If I can find her, do you think you'd sign something for her? It'd make her year."

"Sure, I'll sign something. For both of you, if you want. I'll wait here for you."

"Thanks!"

With a bemused grin, Spencer watched him race off. As soon as he was alone, Rebecca returned.

"Who was that?"

"Kevin Kelsey. My second-biggest fan, apparently."

"What did you say to him to make him run out of here like that?"

"I'd sign some autographs. Though they won't be very pretty signatures." He flexed his left hand. "I can barely hold a pen, yet."

"Take it from your number one fan..." She looped her arms around his waist and pressed close. "What the signature looks like means absolutely nothing. It's all about those few seconds of getting to see you."

He returned the embrace and rested his mouth on the top of her head. Even in the middle of a hot barn, she smelled good. "You need to stick around for much longer?"

"I think I've got enough animal shots. We can go hit the rides after your autograph session. Have some us time."

"I think I'm getting a bit tired. How about we go home and have some us time?"

She pulled back enough to meet his eyes, and smiled straight away. "I like that idea even better."

"Good." Spencer liked fair rides, but his head was spinning enough without the added stimulation. And it didn't have anything to do with the aftereffects of the concussion. Becca had given him a lot to think about. A lot more than he had counted on.

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CHAPTER 14

Though Spence never made another complaint about being tired, Rebecca kept a wary eye on him the entire time she raced home. She caught him glancing at her speedometer more than once, but he never said a word, just squeezed her hand a little bit tighter and smiled.

Each time he did, her heart twisted. The day had not gone as she'd expected. She'd had every intention of keeping the distance, even if the past few days had been torture. But then he'd asked to go with her, and he'd gotten all dressed up, and she'd looked in those puppy dog eyes, and...

Lost. That's what she was.

It was silly to pretend she wasn't falling for him. She had never liked anyone like she did Spencer Cole. And he liked her. Nobody had ever treated her like he did, either. When they were in the moment, and acting like they always had—none of this nurse/patient crap, but the real stuff, the touching and the joking and the smiles and all of it—nothing compared. She realized, too, maybe it was a little silly to be terrified of something that might not ever happen. Better to embrace what she could have now than worry about a future that didn't necessarily have to come.

She rolled to a stop in front of the house. The sun was still high, with plenty of time left in the day to develop the pictures her father wanted. But Rebecca wasn't interested in working on a few photographs right then. She had promised

Spence time for just the two of them, and nothing would stop that from happening.

She went around to his side of the truck out of habit, and though he happily wrapped his arm around her for support, she suspected he didn't need it. Every time she let herself close the distance between them, Spencer took the chance to touch her. Which she didn't mind at all. She couldn't keep her hands to herself, either.

As soon as Rebecca closed the front door behind them, Spencer pushed her against it. She parted her lips for the inevitable kiss, but he paused, his mouth hovering above hers. "Hey, this part of our date is familiar."

She smiled. Though she knew what he meant, she said, "I don't remember any bodies slamming against doors. Who else are you bringing into my home, mister?"

Spencer skimmed his lips over hers. "Do you want a list of names? Because I don't remember those."

"Ha." She dug her hand into his hip, delighting in the hard lines. "I totally knew you were going to use that amnesia thing to cover your ass one of these days."

"You have to admit, it's pretty convenient. I could milk this for years." His lips moved across her jaw and down her neck. The tip of his tongue against her skin made her shiver. "If I can't remember your birthday, I'll just blame it on the serious head trauma."

Her eyes flickered shut as fresh warmth burned its way through her body. Not just at what his talented mouth was doing. At the implication in his words.

"You'd have to know when my birthday is, first." She tugged at his T-shirt, desperate to feel the smooth skin. The moment her fingertips made contact, she sighed in satisfaction.

"February twenty-fifth."

Surprise shot through her. "How'd you know that?"

"I have my ways." Spencer pulled her skin between his teeth and sucked gently. "You left your wallet out on the table and I saw your driver's license."

"Ew, and my crappy picture? How can you still want to kiss me after being subjected to the DMV photo of doom?"

"Oh, I thought it was cute. You looked like a little homeless girl."

Rebecca groaned as he caressed the side of her breast, his thumb flicking across the hard tip of her covered nipple. Such a simple touch shouldn't have felt so good, but she had been waiting an eternity to feel him again. Sleeping beside him was amazing. So was touching him whenever she wanted. But his limited mobility had made those few nights they shared more innocent than anything they had ever done before. This was the release they had both been hungry for.

"Well, this little homeless girl is going to remember you said all that. In fact, I have a feeling I'm going to remember everything about today for a very long time."

"Then my master plan worked." His touch became bolder, his palm closing over her breast and pressing against her nipple. Her flesh responded through her T-shirt and bra, tightening and aching to feel his mouth. "Let's move this to the couch."

Sunlight had ripened to rich, honeyed tones, splashing across the room as Spencer took her hand and tugged her away from the door. She'd go anywhere he led, she realized. She always had.

He sat down in the middle, but when he tried to pull her down with him, Rebecca resisted. "Not yet." She stepped back, beyond his reach, and dropped her hands to her waistband. "When I'm done..." She toed off her shoes as she slowly pushed her shorts and underwear down her hips, making sure Spencer got the best view possible. "You're next."

Spencer's attention was locked on her body, and she didn't miss the obvious lust blazing in his eyes. His gaze traveled up her figure, lingering on the soft curls between her thighs. He didn't look away when she pulled her T-shirt overhead, but he focused on her breasts as soon as she dropped her bra to the floor.

"God, I love the way you look."

Pure pleasure settled in her veins. On a whim, she cupped her breasts, letting her thumbs toy with the dusky tips of her nipples. They filled her palms, soft and heavy. The heat in Spencer's eyes sent shivers through her thighs.

"Nobody ever makes me feel as beautiful as you do." She edged forward until she straddled his lap, but she didn't sit all the way down. She kept herself on her knees, though it killed her not to feel his arousal pressed against her pussy.

"That's lucky for me, though I don't know what's wrong with everybody else."

She pulled his shirt up his body, exposing his flat stomach and ribs. Despite the weeks spent in bed, he still had his athletic physique. One she loved to curl up to every night, and one she wanted to feel flex and move against her body. Working together, they got his shirt off, exposing his chest to her touch.

Her fingers danced along his shoulder, lingering at the tie of the sling. "I want to take this off," she murmured. "I want to touch all of you. But you've got to promise you won't push it."

Spencer inclined his head. "Go ahead. I promise not to get too crazy."

Sliding her arms around his neck, she worked at the fastening, moaning when Spencer took the new proximity to lick along her hot skin. He nuzzled along the inner curve, his lips searing fresh paths his tongue then followed, and she had to bite her lip in order to concentrate on what she was doing.

"How am I supposed to do this when you insist on distracting me?"

"How am I supposed to stop distracting you?" He pressed his palm to her back, holding her against him as he retraced his path with his tongue. "You taste good."

"And you feel good, not that I've had much of a chance to find out for myself yet."

Spencer lifted his hips, his rough jeans scraping across tender flesh. "Help me out here."

The sling came free, and she eased it off his shoulder, grasping his arm by the elbow in order to rest it gently on the couch at his side. Sliding off his lap, she sank to the floor

between his legs and smoothed her palms up his thighs. The bulge made her mouth water.

"You mean like this?" Watching him through her lashes, she leaned forward and ran her teeth along the denim-covered line.

Spencer lifted his hips again, moaning as she applied more pressure through his jeans. "Not quite like that."

"I dunno." She dragged a nail hard over the curve of his sac. "You seem to like it."

"I'll like it more when I can actually feel your mouth."

"Oh?" She bit into the tip briefly before finally popping the top button on his jeans. "I guess I did promise to undress you. The least I can do is keep my word."

"The very least." Spencer sighed as her fingertips brushed his erection. She pulled the zipper free slowly—slow enough to make him shift his weight impatiently. There was already a small damp spot on his boxers where his pre-come had leaked through.

Though it took every ounce of control she had, Rebecca slid her hands around his hips, under the tight muscle of his ass. She meant to grab the waistband and pull his jeans down. She really did. But feeling him flex against her palms short-circuited the impulse. Instead, she squeezed, leaning in to suck at the wet spot. The familiar taste did more than make her groan. It made her want more.

"Becca..." His hand slid down his body and he freed the tiny button on his boxers with his thumb. She pulled the material back, exposing an inch of his smooth shaft. Rebecca's tongue darted out, and she dragged the tip over

the skin she could see—an action resulting in tormenting both of them.

She closed her eyes. Before the accident, she could recall any and every aspect of Spencer's body with only the slightest effort. She had masturbated to the memories more than once. Nothing got her off faster, or harder, or better, than reliving the past few Fourths. For the past month, it had been more difficult. She saw the man himself at every turn. She saw him at his worst, saw him broken and bruised. She had to learn how to live with her memories given flesh, and hold back from pushing for more than he was ready to give.

Not one of the single nights they'd spent together before the accident compared to this. If they stopped now, Rebecca would still be satisfied, because it was more than she'd expected to get. He was more than she'd expected him to be. She'd meant every word she'd said to him at the fair. Now, she wanted to prove it to him.

Slowly, she pulled at his jeans, exposing inch after inch of his firm skin. Spencer watched as she sat back, his gaze flickering from her mouth, to her breasts, back to her face again. When both the jeans and his boxers were gone, she dropped a series of kisses along his leg, creeping closer and closer to his balls.

Spencer ran his fingers along her shoulder until his hand met her neck. As she kissed him, taking the time to savor each bit of skin her mouth touched, he caressed her, his fingers gliding over her body. He sighed her name again when her lips brushed over his sac, and his fingers tangled in her hair.

Her tongue circled the bristly skin almost delicately, purposefully creating circles too random for him to follow. Skimming her hand up his other leg, she gloried in each quiver of muscle, grateful for his strength, excited that he belonged to her for a little bit longer at least. She gripped his shaft and tilted it away from his body, licking upward to find more of the delicious pre-come that had teased her earlier.

Spencer arched his back, his eyes squeezing shut. She looked up the length of his body, noting the way his arms flexed and the tendons stood out on his neck each time she let her tongue slide over his crown. He moaned, low, gratifying sounds, until she closed her lips over his cock. Then the moans turned into words. "Becca, please."

She'd waited too long for this to ignore him. Sitting up higher, her nipples brushing across the coarse hair of his thighs, she angled his cock farther away from his twitching stomach, giving her room to sink down more than a few inches along his shaft.

"Oh, God...yes. Becca, it's been so long. And I..." His voice was lost in a groan. She watched him from beneath her lashes, and knew she didn't need him to say anything else. The light in his eyes told her what she needed to know. So did the pressure of his hand against her neck, light but firm, and the taste of his pre-come on the back of her tongue.

Her lips stretched tight around the hot, throbbing shaft, and she sucked back up to the tip, tracing the vein along the underside as she went. Tightening her grip at the base, she held him firm while she went back down, this time a little faster. Nothing compared to the friction of his cock along her

mouth. If she wasn't so eager to get him inside her, she'd do this all day and all night, taking him to the brink of orgasm only to slow down to make him wait a little bit longer.

Spencer cupped the side of her face, his thumb caressing the corner of her mouth as she moved her head. The calluses on his fingers were starting to soften, but his rough skin still made her shiver when it scraped across her sensitive lips.

Feeling his balls start to harden in her free hand finally prompted Rebecca to pull away. She licked one last time around the tip before sitting back on her heels, meeting his smoky gaze.

"How about I go grab the condoms from the bedroom?" she asked softly. "Think we can manage here on the couch without hurting your shoulder?"

"I think we can manage just fine."

Rebecca pushed herself to her feet and forced herself to turn toward the hallway, though she didn't want to leave Spencer alone. Even for the amount of time it took to snag a condom from the nightstand. By the time she returned, he had removed his boots and kicked off his pants, affording her a nice view of his entire body. Not that she didn't have a nice view whenever she bathed him or helped him dress, but this was different. Now she didn't have to pretend watching him didn't turn her on.

She stopped at the end of the couch, tilting her head to rake her gaze down his lean length. "I can't decide. Do I get my camera and take pictures of you now when you look this good? Or do I wait until after and take pictures of you

sleeping when you get that little smile on your face after sex?"

"You better wait until after. Because I don't think I can stand waiting much longer."

"Lucky for you, neither can I."

She ripped open the foil as she went back to the couch, perching next to him as she tossed the packaging aside. Rolling the condom down his length made Spencer groan and sink back into the cushions, but he sat back up again as soon as she settled herself on his lap.

"We're going to have to get all kinds of creative, figuring out how to do this without hurting your shoulder."

"I don't think we'll have to get too creative." His arm snuck around her body. The tip of his cock pressed against her pussy, and her entire body responded to the pressure, aching to finally feel him inside her. "Just hold on tight, darlin'. We'll be fine."

Coiling her arm around his neck, Rebecca sought his lips as she slowly lowered herself onto his length. His mouth was just as eager as hers, just as hungry. Spence used his hold to urge her even closer, fusing their naked torsos together so each additional inch scraped them even rawer. By the time she felt his thighs quivering beneath her ass, her nipples felt like they were on fire, and she squirmed against him, fighting for even more of the delicious contact.

Spencer moaned, his tongue probing deeper into her mouth. She needed the friction, needed to move, but for the moment, it felt so good to stretch around his length, to adjust to him again.

"I cannot go so long without feeling you again," Spencer said against her lips.

"You won't have to." Her fingers caught in the longer strands of hair at his nape, and she held him still as she devoured his mouth once again.

Spencer lifted his hips from the cushion and relaxed again, which was almost enough to prompt her to start moving. He leaned forward, his lips closing around her nipple, and he pulled the taut skin between his teeth. The sharp points sent a shock from her throat to her clit, which throbbed in response.

Her legs trembled as she lifted away from his lap, the long line of his cock now slick with her arousal. She had been wet most of the day, ever since they had agreed to their day of fun. Getting to hold his hand as they walked through the midway. Watching him with his admirers as he signed autographs for them. Tasting his kisses every time he got close enough. She couldn't have asked for a better day, and silently, she thanked her dad for canceling. Spence had his issues with Gil, but this day was a gift she didn't know how to repay.

She set a languid, careful rhythm at first. She wanted to take her time, to feel every inch of him as he pressed into her tight channel. She also didn't want to hurt his shoulder because they got too wrapped up in it all. In spite of his assurances, Rebecca refused to be the one to cause him pain.

Spencer didn't seem to be in a hurry to change anything. He let her guide the rhythm, his attention focused on her breasts, and then her neck, and then her mouth. From the

sounds of it, Spence wasn't in pain at all. Every moan and whimper seemed to be a direct result of extreme satisfaction. Satisfaction that spread through her own body each time she sank down, surrounding him.

"I have no idea how I went this long without you," she murmured between kisses.

"I missed you. I think I cursed your dad's heart at least once a week."

She smiled against his mouth. "Join the club."

Nipping at his lower lip, she sucked it into her mouth, tickling it with her tongue before he cupped the back of her head and forced her to deepen the caress. She pretended to struggle a little, spurring Spencer to tighten his grip, his fingers molding over her scalp. By the time she finally broke away, her head swam, and her lungs refused to cooperate.

They both gasped for air, and then their mouths were fused together once again. She didn't know who initiated the kiss, or if they both just moved together at the same moment, seeking the same thing. Despite her attempt to keep everything slow, he began working against her, moving and pushing until there was no ignoring what he wanted. From what seemed like a great distance, she heard the phone ringing. The high sound barely drilled through the fog in her head, and neither of them even looked up.

Sweat dripped between her breasts, slicked her bottom, stung her skin every time it slapped against Spencer's. At one point, she felt the faint touch of his other hand at her side, but true to his word, Spence didn't force the contact or do

anything to jar his shoulder. He just stroked along her hip each time she buried his cock inside her.

He gripped the top of her thigh with his other hand, his fingers kneading her flesh for a moment before sliding between her legs, seeking out her pussy. He ran his fingertips up and down her flesh, caressing her lips until she wiggled and moaned in protest. She felt him smile, and then his thumb brushed against her swollen clit.

Rebecca crashed down onto his length, crying out at the sparks racing through her body. She didn't expect to be brought into harder contact with his rough skin, or for Spence to take advantage of her nearness and caress the sensitive flesh in unrelenting circles, but there it was, and then she felt the familiar rush, the heat washing through her as her orgasm came barreling closer.

She quickened her pace. No more taking it easy. She needed to come, and then she was damned sure going to come again, because nobody made her feel like Spencer Cole did.

"Fuck, Becca...don't stop...don't stop, honey..."

She didn't intend to. She didn't ever want to stop. Each word of encouragement only made the burn intensify, until he crushed his mouth to hers, tongues and teeth clashing. She might have tried to shout against his mouth, but she wasn't sure. She only heard the blood rushing in her ears as the orgasm exploded through her. As she clenched around his shaft, his length jerked against her muscles, and the fingers on her hip tightened, holding her against him.

The tremors didn't stop until long after she'd sagged against his chest. His mouth was at her ear, his breath just as hot and ragged as hers, and he'd let go of her hip to stroke up and down her spine.

"Definitely a better idea than hanging around the fair," she panted.

"It was one of my better suggestions," Spencer agreed.

Becca kissed the line of his jaw, back and forth until he was all she tasted. "I hope you're going to suggest a shower at some point tonight. I think I need to get on my knees and show you just how glad I am we're home now."

"Mmm, that sounds much better than another sponge bath."

"And here I thought you liked my sponge baths."

"I like them fine. I just like showering with you more."

"And my mouth." She peeled away, gazing down at him with a smile. "Don't forget my mouth."

"I'd never forget your mouth." He traced her full bottom lip with his thumb. "I love your mouth."

Emotion swelled through Rebecca, and she ducked her head, kissing him again before he caught it in her eyes.

Maybe she'd been wrong. Maybe she wasn't lost after all. But finally finding him might be even scarier.

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CHAPTER 15

The child running from one end of the waiting room to the other did not help Spencer's headache. Especially since she literally shouted with every step. He couldn't be too annoyed with the girl, though. If it were acceptable for him to run around the small space and scream at the top of his lungs, he would probably do it. He thought about making his way down the hospital's long corridor to the Starbucks, but he didn't feel like walking. Even for something sweet and bad for him. He wished Becca was there. She'd get him something full of caffeine. And she'd hold his hand and reassure him everything was fine—he was going to be fine.

Rebecca had dropped him at the University hospital early that morning, promising she would return by the time he finished with his tests and consultation. If he had asked her to stay with him, she would have abandoned her errands and followed him into the hospital, he was sure of it. But he wasn't a child, and he didn't need her hovering over his shoulder while they X-rayed, scanned, prodded, and poked his body. He still wanted her company.

His stomach rumbled, a persistent reminder that he had barely touched his breakfast and hadn't made any time to go to lunch. It had seemed like such a good idea to schedule both consultations with a surgeon and a neurologist for the same day, but Spencer now knew the error of his ways. His eyes were gritty. His temples throbbed. Why didn't anybody

try to keep that damned kid under control? Why didn't parents ever do their jobs?

"Sit down," Spencer growled, when the girl crossed in front of him again. She stopped short, her blue eyes wide. He repeated himself. She kept staring.

"Don't talk to my daughter that way!" An older woman with shoe-polish black hair snatched the girl's hand and tugged her away from Spencer.

"Fine, lady. You tell her to sit down."

"She doesn't have to sit down. You don't own this waiting room, do you?"

"This waiting room is for sick people with head injuries. Do you think her screaming is helping anybody?"

"You should just mind your own business."

A nurse calling his name stopped Spencer from saying something he completely meant, but would probably regret. Shooting daggers at the girl and her crone of a mother, he pushed himself to his feet and made his way across the waiting room to the nurse.

"Just come right this way and Dr. Stevens will be with you shortly."

He frowned as he followed the nurse down the antiseptic hallway. Stevens was the neurologist. He'd expected to meet with the surgeon about his shoulder, though maybe those tests weren't complete yet. That consult would likely come after he finished with Stevens.

Spencer sighed. He didn't want to wait around another three hours. Hopefully, Becca would finish her errands early and come around to keep him company.

Dr. Stevens was an older gentleman, closely cut silver hair ringing his bald head. Warm blue eyes greeted Spence as he entered the man's office, and he gestured toward the seat opposite his desk, half-rising from his own in old-fashioned politeness.

"I hope your day hasn't been too difficult for you," Dr. Stevens said as they both sat down.

"It hasn't exactly been a picnic."

He nodded in sympathy. "It's too bad you're not staying in Salt Lake. You could have scheduled the tests for different days and not worn yourself out so much." He opened the file in front of him, though he didn't look down at its contents.

"I'm sure you're eager to hear how things went, though. Before I start, is there anything you want to ask, or tell me?"

He only wanted one piece of information from the surgeon. The sooner the doctor got to that, the happier he'd be. "No, I just want to know what's going on."

"Right. Well..." Now, Stevens looked at the file. "Let's start with the neurological tests. I'm sure you know concussions are quite common for athletes, but what differs, is how severe they are. You suffered a grade three, which is the worst you can get. It caused your headaches, your disorientation, your mood swings, and those kinds of things. Because of the severity, we have to be extra diligent in following up. The brain's a tricky place. Any number of things might go wrong. In your case, much of your basic motor skills seem to be fine for now, but it's the future you've really got to worry about."

"What part of my future are we talking about? I feel better. I thought I was recovered now."

"I have no doubt you do feel better. Your CT scan came back looking remarkably clear. No swelling, no clotting. Very good." Stevens folded his hands together and rested them on top of the file. "When I talk about the future, I'm talking about risk. Now, I know you know all about risk. Most athletes do, it's your job. You push your body to do things most of us normal people can't. But good athletes also recognize when the risk outweighs the benefit. In your case, your concussion is handicapping you in ways I'm sure you don't even realize. You don't go into the arena with the same odds other cowboys do, the ones who haven't had a concussion. No, what happens is after you've had your first, the odds of you having a second, triple. And if you have a second, those odds become eight times greater you're going to have a third." He paused, letting his words sink in. "I'm sure you can see where this is going."

Spencer licked his lips. "But there are no rules against wearing helmets. Wouldn't that make a difference?"

"Helmets help, sure. And maybe if you hadn't hurt your shoulder, I'd tell you to seriously consider it. But I've got the results here from your surgical consult, too. And...I'm not going to lie to you, Mr. Cole. It's not good."

"What do you mean? Dr. Allan told me it'd be better after a few surgeries and some physical therapy. I know the physical therapy won't be fun, but I'm ready to do it."

"The surgeries should help, yes. Those will attempt to reconstruct the ligament, and then temporarily hold the

clavicle in position while the ligament heals. But it's not definite. It can have complications. You might not get full range of movement back, or it could get infected, or it might not work at all. The point is, we just won't know for sure until after they're done, and even then, it can take twelve to eighteen months just for you to feel completely yourself again. Add in the increased dangers should you hit your head again..." His voice trailed off. He clearly wanted Spencer to connect the dots for himself.

"And you don't think I'll ever be able to ride bulls again."

Stevens inclined his head. "I think if you try, you might not come out of the hospital at all."

"So...that's it then? I'm just supposed to give up?"

"I can't tell you what to do, Mr. Cole. I can offer my advice, and inform you of the potential consequences of your actions, but ultimately, the decision is yours. If I had to make it? Yes, I'd retire. I think I'd prefer to live as healthy a life as I could than most likely finish out my days stuck in a bed, aware of my surroundings or not."

"But that's just a possibility, not a foregone conclusion. And bull riding is never without risk. I was perfectly healthy before, but I could have died on that bull. Or any bull. It's not like there are any guarantees..."

Spencer stopped, and Stevens continued to look at him with kindly, even patient eyes. Nothing he said to this man would change anything. He wasn't the one Spencer needed to argue with.

"Is there anything else?"

"No." Stevens leaned back in his chair, closing the file in front of him. "I truly wish I had better news for you. I wish I could say, take the risk, but I just can't lie to you about your odds."

"Yeah, I know." Spencer stood. "Thanks, Doc, but I've beaten the odds before."

Stevens might have had more to say, but Spencer didn't really feel like listening to more. And he didn't feel like sticking around for his next consultation. He just wanted to go home and try to do something about the pain threatening to burst completely out of his skull.

Rebecca stood outside the waiting room, heading in his direction with a smile as soon as she spotted him. "Please tell me you can leave soon," she said, pitching her voice lower. "There's a little girl in the waiting room who is driving me crazy."

"Yeah, let's get the fuck out of here," Spencer said, without slowing.

She whirled to follow him, matching his strides without a word until they were out in the parking lot. Then, she reached for his free hand, twisting her warm fingers through his.

"Are you still up for dinner?"

"No. I don't really feel hungry right now. Where did you park?"

"Over here." She steered him over a row, leading the way toward her truck. "What did the doctors say?"

"Nothing. I don't know. A bunch of bullshit."

Becca nudged him with her shoulder. "But they did the tests, right? The nurse said you were meeting with the neurologist."

"Yeah, they tested me. Stuck me in a bunch of machines and told me not to move. And then a guy named Stevens told me what all that meant." Spencer paused as Rebecca unlocked the truck. He didn't want to tell her what Stevens said. If he told her the truth, she would just freak out and they were in a good place. He didn't want to ruin that.

He was grateful when she didn't press, when they pulled out onto the street without another word spoken between them. But then she reached across the distance and rested her hand on his thigh, her fingers caressing him softly through his jeans.

"Something tells me you didn't like what he said."

"No, I really didn't. He said it could take eighteen months for my shoulder to fully recover."

"Eighteen?" The number sobered her even further. "That's more than what the doctors in Park City said."

"Yeah. It is. And the surgeries aren't guaranteed to work."

"What does that mean? They operate again until it does?"

"I think it means if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. He was vague on the details and big on the warning."

Though her mouth compressed into a thin line, her hand continued to graze along his thigh, creating patterns of distraction he would have enjoyed a lot more before that awful meeting. "I'm sorry," she finally said softly. "I know it's not what you wanted to hear."

Spencer rested his head on the window, looking out over the Salt Lake valley. In the distance, he saw the lake itself, shimmering in gold as it reflected the late afternoon light. He should have been in Colorado. He should have been preparing for the professional bull riding circuit. He could still go to Colorado, or anywhere else he wanted. He'd go with Travis, and try to get back to his normal life.

He could keep on running until all of this, even Rebecca, lingered behind him like a bad dream.

But when he shifted his gaze sideways, first glancing at her hand, and then seeking out her face, Spencer knew he couldn't do that to her. He wouldn't hurt her.

"You know what I really didn't want to hear? That if I land in the hospital again, and the chances are good I will, I probably won't get out."

Her gaze widened, true alarm showing there for the first time. "Crap. That's...why? Because of your shoulder?"

"Because of my head. The shoulder just complicates the situation."

"But you've been doing better. You don't get nearly as many headaches as you used to, and you remember most of what you're supposed to. What do they think is wrong with your head?"

"Actually, nothing is wrong with it at the moment. He said the swelling is gone and the scans look good. But he also said if I ride again, my chances of getting another concussion triple, and after the second one, the chances are even greater for a third. It'd be dangerous, but a helmet would help."

"Yeah." Though she sounded less than enthused. At least the worry was gone. Her forehead had smoothed again. "But it's good things are better. You can spend more time outside now, right? Fewer headaches. Nothing that's going to bug you."

"I guess that's what he meant when he said everything looked normal. Look...it's dangerous to ride bulls. You get on the back of a bull, anything can happen. I don't think this has changed anything."

"Maybe not," Rebecca conceded. "But at least it's given you some time frames to think about."

"I could be ready to ride left-handed in a year." But where he would live for the next year and what he would do to support himself were even larger obstacles. How he would get the required surgeries was another issue he didn't really want to think about.

"Travis won't stick around all that time, will he?" Her cautious question was unnecessary proof that she didn't care for the man. "That's a long time not to be on the circuit."

"No, he'll probably be leaving in a few days. And since my concussion is gone, he'll probably expect me to join him."

When she didn't respond right away, he glanced across to see the frown had returned. "The house is going to feel so empty when you're gone. I'm going to have to keep the TV going in the afternoon so it feels a little more normal."

"Do you...do you think it'd be best if I went with him?"

Her hand shook a little where it rested now on his leg. "No. If I had a vote, I'd ask you to stay. But I'm not going to be the one who tells you, you can't have your dream."

"I don't know if I can stay, Becca. I've never been the sort to settle down and live in one place. I've never had to try. I don't know what I'd be staying for."

"You could stay for me." The words were soft and formless, like if she gave them more weight, he'd use them against her. "I know the past six weeks have been tough for you, but..." She swallowed. "I'd miss you. A lot. My life without you would be pretty damn lonely."

Spencer didn't know how to answer her. Nobody had ever asked him to stick around, and a part of him desperately wanted to be needed. He liked living with her. He liked the dozens of little things she did every day without realizing how special they were. But that didn't mean he'd be good for her.

"I need to think about things. I don't know...I've just got to figure things out."

"Yeah, of course." She squeezed his leg one last time and let go, using both hands to steer them onto the highway. "You've had a lot of stuff thrown at you today. It's better if you give it some time to let it all sink in."

Spencer didn't know if giving everything time to sink in would actually help his situation. He didn't know why the decision was so hard. The rodeo was his life. Riding bulls was all he knew. The other cowboys were his family. It would be easy to go back. They would all support his decision to ride again. They *understood*. They knew the need to conquer fear, and the bull, for eight seconds. They knew the rush and the high. They'd help him.

But he just couldn't quite see himself going back there. And it had nothing to do with his injuries or his life. If he

hadn't been prepared to die, at least on some level, he never would have climbed onto a bull to begin with. He was beginning to think he had something, somebody, far more precious at stake.

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CHAPTER 16

Though the kitchen smelled wonderful—the garlic and sausage in the lasagna had Rebecca's stomach rumbling—the thought of the upcoming supper made Rebecca sick. Bad idea. It was a bad idea. There was no telling what her dad would say to Spencer. He'd promised her he just wanted to get to know the younger man, but sometimes Gil had problems telling the difference between getting to know and interrogating. This rescheduled dinner could either be completely innocuous and a relief to get over, or the worst catastrophe she had ever agreed to.

She might not have worried so much if Spencer hadn't been distracted ever since his latest consultations with the doctors. He wasn't sullen or snapping like when he'd first got out of the hospital, but his mood had definitely sobered. He spent long hours working on his left hand, and when Travis came around, he disappeared for even more time. When Rebecca asked, he confessed to going out to his trailer and just poking around, but he didn't offer too many details and she didn't press. It didn't take a genius to figure out he was getting ready to leave. She was simply going to treasure the time they had left together.

The timer went off, announcing the completion of her lasagna, and Rebecca grabbed a towel in order to pull out the pan to check it. Heat flushed her cheeks as soon as she opened the oven door, but when she gripped the hot dish, her

pinkie slipped off the towel and pressed firmly against the searing metal.

"Crap!"

Rebecca dropped the towel and kicked the oven door shut with her foot as she twisted for the sink. She shoved at the handle and gritted her teeth against the pain when cool water washed over her skin.

"Becca? What happened?" He hurried to her side—he definitely moved faster lately—and gently took her wrist. "Did you burn yourself?"

"Yes." She hissed as the angle shot fresh pain through her fingers. "Stupid pan."

"Do you have a first-aid kit around here? Or any burn cream?"

"There's stuff under the sink in the bathroom, but..."

There was no point in finishing the sentence. Spencer took off like a shot, leaving her with her hand half out of the water. She turned back to the sink and adjusted the temperature, even though she knew she wasn't supposed to make it too cold. Too bad. It felt better under the cold water.

He returned within a minute with a roll of gauze and ointment. Before taking her wrist again, he grabbed a clean towel and smiled apologetically.

"This is probably going to hurt a bit, but I have to dry your finger before I put the cream on."

Rebecca gritted her teeth against the pain, but let Spencer work. He was becoming quite adept with his left hand, she noticed. He used his right for certain tasks or to help his left, but the sling restrained him from much mobility. The

realization should have made her happy; Spence was getting stronger, recovering, moving on to compensate for his injured shoulder. But it also meant he was more likely to try his hand at riding again, which would entail him leaving.

There was nothing happy about that.

"I'm just thinking too much about dinner," she confessed.

"I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing."

"You're worried about your old man?"

She shot him a guilty look. "Yeah. Sometimes, he can be a little...gruff."

Spencer untwisted the cap on the cream with his teeth and squeezed a long stream of it onto her finger. "If it makes you feel better, I promise not to pick a fight with him."

"It's not you I'm worried about. I just wish he'd realize I'm all grown up now. Coming here to interrogate you is like I'm back in high school and he has to quiz me on all my dates."

"Is he going to ask me what my intentions are?"

Her laughter rang throughout the kitchen. "Oh, I don't think so. More along the lines of how long you're going to stick around so he doesn't have to worry about you taking advantage of me."

Spencer began bandaging her finger, working carefully not to apply too much pressure to the burn. "Am I taking advantage of you?"

"No, but he doesn't see it that way. He doesn't want to think I might actually fall for a cowboy, which is a load of crap because then he shouldn't have let me go to all those rodeos."

"I can understand his concern. If I ever had a daughter, the last thing I'd want her to do is fall for a cowboy." He kissed the tip of her pinky. "We're a bad sort."

Forgetting her burn, she stretched her hand to cup his face. "I like your sort."

Spencer wrapped his arm around her and pulled her tighter against his body. "When is he supposed to be here?"

"Too soon." Tipping her head up to brush a kiss across his mouth, she added, "And I still have to get the lasagna out of the oven before it burns."

"It'd be a shame if you burned the lasagna because of me." He released her and she couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. "Do you mind if I take Jake for a walk before dinner?"

Grabbing her towel again, Rebecca turned back to the oven. "No, go ahead. I just wish we could both take him out and leave Dad to eat lasagna all by himself."

"Well, we could, right? Leave him a note. We'll drive up to the lake."

"How about we go up to the lake after he leaves?" she countered. "It'll be our treat to ourselves for surviving supper."

"I still don't get why we have to sit through dinner with a guest you don't want, but I have no problem with going after we eat." He leaned over enough to kiss her cheek. "I'll be back soon."

Rebecca smiled at him as he left, and resumed pulling the lasagna out of the oven. She still wasn't looking forward to dinner, but knowing Spencer felt about it the way she did

helped. He would be there to back her up, no matter what her dad said. It was just going to be a matter of grinning and bearing it.

She was brushing olive oil over the garlic bread when she heard the front door open and close, her dad calling out to announce his arrival.

"In the kitchen!" Rebecca shouted back. "Just have a seat! I'll be right out."

Instead of sitting down like she instructed, Gil wandered into the kitchen and took a Coke from the fridge without comment. It always made her grit her teeth when he did that. For one thing, the sugar wasn't good for him. For another, this wasn't his mother's house any longer. He didn't need to act like he had every right to take what he wanted without at least paying lip-service to politeness.

"Where's your cowboy?" he asked, popping the top open.

"Out for a walk."

"And I'm back again," Spencer said from the doorway. "I left Jake outside in the shade. Can I help with anything?"

Relief flooded through her at the sight of him. "You can get the napkins from the cupboard and put them on the table. I'll bring the garlic bread in. Everything else is ready."

He grinned and nodded, leaving her alone with Gil once again. Rebecca took the bread out from under the broiler and set it on the cutting board, ready to slice up.

"Did you make dessert, too?" Gil asked. "I've been craving some of your chocolate cake ever since we rescheduled."

"No cake." At his scowl, she pointed with the knife at a covered pie dish cooling nearby. "I made a blueberry pie instead. It's better for you."

Gil harrumphed. "Like lasagna? I'll bet that's his favorite."

"No, it's mine, and if you don't play nice, I won't even let you have pie."

With a shake of his head, he ambled back into the dining room, leaving Rebecca alone to pile the bread onto a plate and follow him.

Her dining table was a large, heavy piece of furniture, and she half-expected Spencer to be sitting at the head. But he had chosen to sit to the right, and he stood as they entered the room. When Gil approached, Spencer smiled sheepishly and held out his left hand.

"Excuse my grip," Spencer said, as Gil politely shook his hand.

"I think that's doable, considering the circumstances."

They both waited to sit until Rebecca slid onto her chair. Gil picked up the spatula to start serving the lasagna before she had the opportunity, leaving her to take a piece of garlic bread and passing it to Spencer.

"How was your walk?" she asked him. Safe topic. It would show her dad Spencer wasn't just sitting around on the couch all day, too.

"Short. I didn't want to miss dinner. I think I need to take Jake out for a good run. He's not used to being cooped up like this for so long."

Gil took Spencer's plate without asking and put a large serving of lasagna on it. "What do you do with him when you're on the road?"

"What do I do with him? He rides in the truck with me."

"Jake gets plenty of time to run around, Dad." Rebecca held her plate out for her portion. "It's not like Spencer never gets outside."

"Oh, I know. I just didn't know how he was with all the horses and animals. He's just bite-size. It'd be a shame for him to get underfoot."

"He almost did. He was limping around the fairgrounds in Grand Junction, and startled the wrong horse. I grabbed him before he got his head smashed in. He learned his lesson about horses, though."

"Smart dog." Gil took a big bite of the lasagna. "Not all of 'em do." When he swallowed, he nodded at Rebecca. "You need to let me take some of this home. Nobody does it like you do."

She smiled at the compliment, relaxing slightly. "I made enough to feed an army, so there should be plenty of leftovers."

"What about you?" Gil had turned back to Spencer. "You probably don't eat like this on the road."

"No, nothing like this." He cut into the noodles with his fork, handling it like he had always eaten with his left hand. "I tend to stick to the basic food groups. Hamburgers, jerky, cereal, and corn nuts. Becca's spoiled me now."

"Yeah, Becky's good at that."

"Dad," Rebecca warned in a low voice.

"What? It's true." He looked at Spencer. "Tell me it's not true."

"She's certainly been a better nurse than I deserve."

"Stop it," Rebecca said good-naturedly. "You know I don't see it like that."

"You don't look like you need much nursing, though." Gil gestured toward Spencer's shoulder with his fork. "Except for that."

"Only because of Becca's skills. She got me through the concussion and the bruises."

"How long before the sling comes off?"

"A long time. I still have a few surgeries ahead of me."

Gil glanced between them, his frown slowly deepening. "Just how long are you expecting Becky to take care of you then?"

The doorbell stopped Rebecca from cutting her dad off, and she tossed her napkin onto the table as she rose to answer it. "Don't answer that, Spence. I'll be right back."

Rebecca knew she shouldn't be surprised to see Travis standing on her front porch. He was the only one who came around every night. He barely spared a glance to her before looking over her shoulder for Spencer.

"Tell Spence to get out here. We've got some work to do."

She gripped the edge of the door more tightly, trying not to let his brusque manner keep her from being polite. "We're actually in the middle of supper at the moment. Can you come back later? Or..." She braced herself. "You're welcome to join us, if you'd like. There's plenty of food."

Travis spit over the side of the porch before nodding.
"Sure, I could eat."

Holding the door open wider, Rebecca let him sweep past. "Let me just go get another plate," she said when he sat down next to Spencer. By the time she got back, Travis was already munching on a piece of garlic bread, crumbs falling onto the table in front of him.

Spencer offered her a small, reassuring smile. It worked, but only because he was there to smile. He could have run away as soon as she turned her back.

"I still haven't decided what I'm going to do with this shoulder, Mr. Rankin. Or when I'm going to have the surgeries. So I can't answer your question right now."

"I'll help Spence for as long as he wants my help, Dad." Concentrating on filling Travis's dish made it possible to sound calm about the whole matter. "He knows he's welcome to stay."

"He's not going to stay," Travis said, without looking up.

"Travis..."

"What? You haven't told her?"

"I haven't decided," Spencer said softly.

"Dad, he already said he can't answer that question. Let it go."

"Why am I the bad guy here? His uncle is the one who brought it up."

Rebecca's jaw tightened. "What Spencer decides to do is none of your business. It's between him and his doctors." To Travis, she added, "Maybe you should let Spencer make up

his own mind about what he wants to do. If he says he hasn't decided, he hasn't decided."

Travis rolled his eyes. "Right. I'm sure you haven't tried to sway him at all."

"I haven't," she shot back. "Though I don't think you can say the same, can you?"

"I've never done anything except tell the boy the truth. He was born to ride bulls. If he's undecided now, it's because you got your claws in him."

"Hey!" Spencer looked up sharply. "If I'm undecided now, it's because I don't have a death wish."

"You've always had a death wish, son. That's why you started riding to begin with."

"There's a difference now," Rebecca argued. "The risk is a lot greater than before."

"Everybody's gonna die sooner or later. Might as well go doing something you love, and not tied to some woman's apron strings."

"Excuse me, Mr. Cole." The tips of Gil's ears were red. Never a good sign. "My daughter took your nephew in when he had nowhere else to go. All she's done is take care of him. She deserves respect."

"She's turned him into a scared little boy. He was never scared before. Now, Spence, I'm not saying she's not worth a few rolls. But no set of tits is worth giving up what you were born to..."

Gil's face turned an even brighter red, and Rebecca opened her mouth, but it was Spencer's hand coming down on the table that cut off Travis's speech.

"Get out."

Rebecca stared at the two men. She hadn't seen Spence this angry since he'd first come home from the hospital. Travis's words didn't really surprise her; the words were blunt, but they echoed the sentiment he'd been conveying ever since he'd arrived in Oakley. But seeing Spence stand up for her made her want to throw her arms around him and smother him in kisses.

"You heard him," Gil said. Slowly, he pushed back in his chair and rose to his feet. "And if you don't care to leave on your own, I've got no problem helping you out the door."

"No need to show me to the door," Travis said, pushing his nearly full plate back and standing up. "We can find it. Come on, son."

Spencer stood, as well. His eyes caught hers for a moment, but he didn't say anything as he followed his uncle out of the house.

Spencer kept his left hand in his pocket to disguise the fact that he was shaking. He hoped Travis would just go quietly, because Spencer knew he would throw a punch, regardless of the sling or the risk of fucking up his head again.

"What the hell was that?" Spencer demanded, once the door slammed behind them.

"What?" Travis didn't stop walking, though he glanced back at Spence over his shoulder. "You're better off without her. Don't worry about your stuff. We'll swing by tomorrow and pick it up before we leave."

"I'm not leaving tonight."

Travis stopped short. "She cannot be that good of a lay, you need to stick around one more night."

"That's not why I'm staying. And I am staying. I won't be heading out with you tomorrow."

"Don't be stupid, Spence. You need to train."

"I can train here. If I need to."

Travis's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, *if*?"

Before Spencer had a chance to answer, the front door opened and Becca stepped out. Her color was still high from the insults Travis had slung around inside, but she seemed calm, even if Spence knew she probably wanted to kick his uncle's ass.

"Do you need anything?" she asked, directing the question to Spence.

Both Travis and Becca looked at him expectantly, waiting for his answers. He wished he had something satisfying and concrete to say. Travis was his only family. His only connection to a father he never knew and a mother who couldn't hold on. His connection to the rodeo and every dream he ever had. He didn't want to cut Travis out of his life, but if he didn't leave with the older man now, Spencer might never see him again.

"The doctor made it clear I need more surgeries. I need to look into that before I even think about training full-time."

Not a muscle flinched in Travis's features. "Those surgeries aren't going to touch your left hand. You waste time now, you're only that much more behind."

"I'm not so sure getting back on a bull is the most important thing anymore," Spencer admitted.

"Because of her?" Travis snorted. "I never saw you as a quitter, Spence. Especially over a piece of ass."

"Hey!" Becca barreled past him to get in Travis's face. "I can take you calling me names because, well, you don't know me from Adam. But you of all people should know the last thing Spence is, is a quitter. Do you know how hard he's been fighting to get as far as he has? No, because you weren't even around when he got hurt. And don't try and tell me you didn't know. He's one of the best on the circuit. Every cowboy from here to Butte knew about Spencer Cole's accident."

Spencer didn't think Travis would take a swing at a woman, but he might not be above shoving Rebecca away from him. Travis wasn't known for his self-control. Spence took her shoulder and gently pulled her away from his uncle.

"This isn't about Rebecca. This is about a decision that's mine to make. Not yours. Not hers. Not the doctor's. Mine."

"And you're choosing to quit? This is all you've ever been good at. You quit, and what're you going to do?"

"I don't know. I don't have any idea. But I'm not a kid, and I'm not going to let you bully me back to the arena." Spencer took Rebecca's elbow and stepped back. "You should head out."

Travis looked between the two of them before snorting and shaking his head. "Never thought I'd see the day," he said, turning on his heel and heading for his truck. He didn't even bother with a good-bye as he pulled away.

"Sorry about your dinner," Spencer said, watching Travis's taillights disappear.

"It's not your fault." Her wide eyes searched his. "You know he's wrong, don't you? I know you're not a quitter."

"I think since I'm quitting, he's technically correct."

"You're...what? Are you sure?"

"I'm quitting for now. I can keep working on making my left arm stronger, but there's no way I'll be able to keep my right arm up and keep my balance until I have full mobility in this shoulder."

Her mouth softened, and she stepped closer, leaning in to brush her mouth over his. "Thank you for sticking up for me in there. I know you don't think of me like that."

Spencer pushed her hair behind her ear, his thumb brushing across her cheek. "He was right about one thing. I don't want to leave you behind."

"Well, I was ready to leave with you last summer if I could. That hasn't changed. You go, and I'll go. As long as you want me."

"Even if I wanted to ride again?"

She didn't blink. "If you get to the point where you honestly think you can again, I'll be there." She grinned. "Somebody's got to get your comeback pictures, and if you dare let that be anybody but me, you'll be in serious trouble."

Spencer tilted his head and caught her bottom lip. "Let's try to get rid of your dad. I need you to myself."

Looping her arms around his neck, she opened up to his kiss, teasing his tongue with soft, ticklish glances. "I'll give him the whole pie. That should do the trick."

Cowboy Blues
by Jamie Craig

"Being with you is definitely worth the loss of a pie," Spencer murmured, before claiming her mouth again. He was still more than a little lost, but at least he wasn't alone.

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CHAPTER 17

The ringing telephone startled Spencer out of his nap, and he glanced over to the wall, waiting for Becca to answer it. By the fourth ring, Spencer remembered she couldn't answer the phone because she wasn't home. By the sixth ring, he remembered she was in the habit of calling him before she left the office to go to the grocery store, though he had assured her repeatedly she didn't need to buy anything special for him.

He rolled off the couch and hurried across the room, snagging the receiver just before the machine picked up.

"Becca?"

There was a pause, and then someone cleared their throat. "I'm sorry," a woman said. A woman not Becca. "Could I speak to Rebecca Rankin, please?"

"Oh. Sorry. She's not here right now. But I can take a message."

"Yes, please. My name is Shelli Ferris. F-E-R-R-I-S. Like the wheel. I spoke with Ms. Rankin a couple days ago about a job opportunity, and I know she turned me down, but I hoped I could sweeten the pot for her a little bit." She chuckled.

"Ever since the author saw those photos she took of the wildfires, he's been adamant he has to have her."

"Ferris. Got it. And which job offer was that?"

"The one for the national parks? Since it's almost September already, you can bet we're getting just a little

anxious to get started. Those fall colors don't stick around for long, you know."

"Oh, that job. Right. So there's a rush on this one? What can I tell her your offer is?"

"Well, the money's going to have to stay the same, unfortunately." There was a rustle of papers. "But, we know how much the travel would set her back, especially with the price of gas these days. So on top of the flat rate for the work, we're prepared to cover all of her traveling expenses, based on the four weeks we already estimated it would take to gather all the necessary photographs."

"Travel expenses for four weeks? That does sweeten the pot considerably." Spencer held the phone between his ear and shoulder and adjusted his sling. "That sounds quite fair, Ms. Ferris. You've got a deal."

"Oh! Can you...I mean, how can be you sure she's going to take it? Not that I'm arguing, mind you, but the last time I spoke to her, it took everything I had just to get her to agree to listen to what we were ready to offer."

Spencer felt a twinge of disappointment that Rebecca hadn't thought to mention the offer to him. But he wasn't surprised—she wouldn't want to make him feel guilty for recovering in her home. "I am absolutely certain she's going to take the job. The past six weeks have been a bit hectic around here, but now everything has settled down, Rebecca will be eager to take the gig."

"Thank God. You have no idea how relieved everybody here is going to be when I tell them. I'll overnight the

contract so she can sign it, Mr. Rankin. Tell her it should be there some time tomorrow."

Spencer didn't bother correcting her assumption. He didn't want to risk her changing her mind about the contract.

"Fantastic. It was a pleasure to talk to you, Ms. Ferris."

She returned the sentiment and hung up, leaving Spencer to look at the phone. Becca probably wouldn't be home until later in the afternoon, which would give him plenty of time to figure out exactly how he should tell her he took the decision in his own hands. He suspected she wouldn't be thrilled, but he could not give her the chance to turn the job down. Not for him. Not for her father. It was time Rebecca did what was right for Rebecca.

It was time he focused on somebody besides himself.

Spencer found a plastic bucket under her sink and filled it full of hot, soapy water. Further investigation revealed a spray bottle with a mix of vinegar and water, a stiff scrubbing brush, a broom, and a multitude of rags. He put his supplies and a cold Coke in a bag, looped it over his good shoulder, and juggled the broom and bucket out to his trailer.

He couldn't remember the last time he had given the trailer a good scrubbing. It was fine for his limited needs, but it was not at all suitable for Rebecca. How could he offer her his hovel after spending nearly two months in her clean, sweet-smelling, pleasant little house? Just because the camp trailer was old, didn't mean it needed to reek of the rodeo, fast food, and just plain dirt. Plus, he had Jake's hair all over the place.

He was scrubbing out the shower stall when he heard her truck rumble to a halt outside. A car door slammed, followed soon by the house. It took several minutes for it to open again, but he didn't break from his cleaning, even when he heard the trailer door creak open.

"Spence? What're you doing?"

"Cleaning. Trying to make it smell like less of a barn."

She appeared outside the shower, her cheeks flushed from the late August heat. A slight sheen of perspiration glued the collar of her T-shirt to her neck, but her eyes were bright and curious, her smile quizzical.

"What can I do to help?" Her eyes flickered to the shower nozzle. "Though it's tempting to turn the water on and drench you. Soaking wet's one of your best looks."

"No soaking me. Not yet, anyway. I've got too much work to do to be stuck in wet jeans."

"Why? What's the sudden rush to get it cleaned up?" Her question was cautious, her tone not quite as playful as it had been. "Did something happen?"

"No. Well, yes." Spencer sat back on his heels. "You should probably go start packing."

"What for?"

"For four weeks of national parks."

Becca stared at him for long seconds before carefully saying, "How'd you know about the national parks?"

"The editor called today. She's a nice lady. I liked her. And when she told me about the offer, which now includes four weeks of travel expenses, I told her you'd accept."

"I'd..." She sat down heavily on the bench, never taking her eyes off him. "You had no right to do that, Spence. I'm not taking the job."

"You are, because she's sending the contract overnight, and I promised her you would. If you don't, you'll make me a liar."

"Do you even know what this job is about? Four weeks of driving. All over the place. And then traipsing around outside until I find the perfect shots. Four weeks. I'd have to go on leave at the paper. And I wouldn't be here to help you when you need me to."

Spencer pushed himself to his feet and stretched his back, nearly hitting his head on the low ceiling. Dropping the sponge, he stepped out of the narrow door and settled on the bench beside her.

"Becca, darlin', I think I should be asking you that question. Do you know what this job is about? Do you realize it's bigger than your dad's paper? Bigger than anything you've ever done. I know why you didn't take it, but I can't let you turn your back on this chance."

"There'll be other chances. You've got your surgeries. I can't leave you alone for that."

"No, Becca. You cannot live like this. You can't pass on opportunity after opportunity, promising yourself you'll catch the next one. If you do, you will never, *ever* leave Oakley. And if that's what you want, fine. Just admit it now. Besides, we haven't scheduled the surgeries yet."

"That's not what I want. I want out of this town. I just..." Her attention wandered, drinking in the trailer's interior. "Do

you think I'm good enough for this kind of job? Because I do know what it's about, you know. I know it's big. I just don't want to blow it."

"You've got to start somewhere, darlin'. I paid my dues for twelve rodeos and didn't get a single ride. Forget winning a purse, I would have been happy to just walk out of there with my pride intact. And I could have slunk off with my tail between my legs because it was all too big for me and I fucked it up. But instead I drew that thirteenth bull."

Her clear eyes came back to him, glowing with warmth. "Because you don't give up. You never have."

"You don't give up, either. But you've been worrying about your dad, and the newspaper, and me." Spencer squeezed her fingers. "I love that you don't give up on people, but I'm not going to be reason you stay here. And I'm not going to let your fear stop you."

"It's not just that." The long strokes of her thumb along the side of his hand were usually meant to soothe. Now, they seemed sensual, lingering on sensitive spots before gliding along. "I didn't like the idea of leaving you behind. Not after what happened with Travis last week. I still don't like it. Unless..." Her mouth canted into a half-smile. "You come with me. It'll be like what we were going to do last summer, except, well, no rodeos and lots of mountains. And maybe a bear or two. That's the only way I'll think about it. Because I like it better when you're with me than when you're not."

A smile tugged on his mouth. "You think I'm going to let you just take off with what is still my home?"

Her eyes widened. "Oh, I thought you were cleaning it up so it'd be more comfortable when you moved in while I was gone. Not that I planned to let you do that, but..." She stopped and shook her head. "Never mind. I think my brain is just short-circuiting from all of this. Let's start this over. So you'll come with me?"

"Yes, I'm going to come with you. I'm not going to let you take off for weeks without me."

He was knocked back against the cushion when she launched herself at him, her arms going around his neck. Hot kisses rained along his jaw, and he shifted along the bench in order to pull her more tightly onto his lap.

"I couldn't believe it when she called," she said. "I mean, I know Dad said those wildfire shots were getting attention, but I never in a million years expected this. You have no idea how hard it was to tell her no at first. But I just couldn't leave you, even if it was only for a month."

"Why didn't you tell me about it when she called?"

"What was the point? I wasn't going to take it. I thought it would just make you feel bad if I told you I'd turned it down."

"You're right. It would have. If only because there's no reason for both of us to be paying for my foolishness."

"Oh, please. One accident doesn't make it foolishness." Becca twisted in order to look over the trailer, this time with a more discerning eye. "You said she's sending the contract tomorrow? That doesn't give me much time for shopping."

"Shopping? What do you need to shop for?"

"Oh, you know, stuff to make it more comfortable in here for a month. Plus, we're going to be hiking quite a bit. We

won't be able to get the truck everywhere I'll need to get." She ran her hand up his sling, stopping just below his shoulder before letting it fall back to her lap. "Are you going to be okay with your shoulder? We might need to camp away from the trailer once or twice. The ground's not as comfortable as my bed."

Spencer smiled at her obvious enthusiasm. It was like a light had been turned on behind her eyes. Her whole face became animated, and she was already moving, her body catching up with her quick mind.

"Don't worry about me. I haven't gone soft yet."

"No, you most definitely haven't."

This time when she kissed him, she didn't bother with teasing. She went straight for his mouth, hungry and hot as her tongue demanded entrance. Spencer gave it willingly, pressing her even closer, and for several minutes, forgot about the half-scrubbed shower stall, or the bed that needed airing, or the bugs living under the sink. All that mattered was her mouth and how well they fit together.

"They're going to give me a hard time at the drugstore," she said when they parted. "But I'll just have to explain I'm leaving for four weeks with my hot boyfriend, and no way am I running out of condoms just because there isn't a store within a hundred-mile radius."

Spencer laughed. "I'll be sure to stop and buy some every time we pass a drugstore. In the mean time, think we can take a little break from all this hard work?"

"Are you kidding?" She clambered off his lap, scooping up the spray bottle and one of the rags. "We've got a lot of work

to do. But I'll make you a deal. We get this done, and after, you can have me for as long as you want, whatever you want. Okay?"

"That's fair." Spencer grinned. "I'm going to be all sweaty and it's been awhile since you gave me one of those sponge baths."

Her smile was just as mischievous. "And this time, I'll even take off my bra for you."

That was enough to push Spencer to his feet. "Well, hell, let's get to work. Daylight's wasting!"

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CHAPTER 18

Orange and mauve sliced over the horizon, reflecting across the water of Crater Lake, stretching in long fingers along its placid surface. The trees didn't move. There wasn't even a breath of wind. Rebecca sat on the rock she'd picked out for her shots, her knees brought up so her elbows could rest on them while she waited. Even if the ground hadn't been too uneven to allow her to set up a tripod, she wouldn't have used one anyway. Cradling her camera in her hands gave her freedom to adjust quickly. If she needed to shift an inch to the left to get a better picture, she could without losing time.

Static wasn't her style. Not anymore.

The sun inched downward, sinking below the craggy edge of the crater sliver by sliver. Part of Rebecca wished the book didn't have an autumn theme. The snow capping the mountains would completely change the shape and hue of the sunset. The colors would reflect off icy peaks as well as the water, and the result would be breathtaking. Not that it wasn't beautiful now, but Rebecca suspected it could be even more so.

Her shutter clicked, over and over again, as she followed the sun's descent. Once, she leaned forward a fraction in order to get a longer angle on the water, but other than that, Rebecca remained as still as the Oregon air, only her camera betraying her location.

As the shadows gathered around her, she heard the rustle and crackle of Spencer's approach. She kept her focus on the camera and the waning minutes of the sunset, but she wasn't surprised when she felt the brush of his knees against her back. He didn't otherwise disturb her or try to speak, his silence respectful of her work and the glory in front of them.

When the sun was completely gone, she lowered her camera and unscrewed the lens, replacing it quickly to allow for better shots of the reflections in the lake. She had to work fast. Light was precious, valued in seconds, and she could miss a spectacular shot by being clumsy.

She clicked until the lake was a black oasis spread out in front of her, swallowing even the stray glints of light coming from the stars. With a sigh, Rebecca lowered her camera to her lap, leaning back into Spencer's legs.

"If these turn out the way I think they will, I think we can officially cross Crater Lake off the to-do list," she said.

"That's good, because the itinerary Shelli sent doesn't really leave us a lot of time." He squeezed her shoulder, massaging the tension out of her muscles. "You hungry?"

"Starved. Please tell me you fixed something."

"The freshest fish you've ever had in your life. Complete with the required lemon juice."

Her stomach rumbled in approval. "Who knew taking so many pictures could make you so hungry?" Grabbing her case, she set the camera inside, ready to dismantle when they got back to the trailer. Spencer straightened and stepped out of her way, but with the first shift to stand,

Rebecca groaned. "Remind me next time to bring the cushion with me. My ass fell asleep again."

"You forgot your water bottle and your crackers, too." Spencer took her arm and gently helped her to her feet. He didn't seem to mind when she leaned against him. "I'm going to have to go through a checklist with you every morning, aren't I?"

"I could write it on my hand." She shot him a grin. "That always worked for tests in high school."

Spencer snorted. "I'll have to take your word for it." He wrapped his arm around her waist. "I still had some vegetables from that stand we stopped at the other day. And I've got something special for dessert."

"Mmmm, something special. I like the sounds of that."

The solidity of his arm was the best thing she'd felt all day. Resting her head against his shoulder, Rebecca breathed deeply, taking in the scent of his body wash as much as the evergreens surrounding them. Though they had been on the road now for over a week, it still amazed her how just the smell of him could trigger such a sense of peace. Like she recognized what being in his presence meant. Nobody ever made her feel as welcome or wanted as Spence did. Nobody had ever supported her like he did. Having him with her now was the best part of this entire job.

Their camping area was surprisingly welcoming. Jake jumped at the sight of her, pulling the leash Spencer had left him on taut in his desperation to reach Rebecca. A fire smoldered in the fire pit, and what looked to be a small Dutch oven resting on the hot coals. On the other side, there were

several fish wrapped in tinfoil and cooking on a rock. He had the chairs and a small portable table set up near the fire, with a cooler she knew would be full of water and Coke.

"You getting tired of roughing it yet?"

Rebecca dropped her case on the step of the trailer before heading over to sink into one of the chairs. "Nah, not really. Though I do miss my bathtub. With extra hot water and lots of bubbles." Her gaze strayed to the dark line of the horizon, blanketed in the encroaching night. "But it doesn't really compare to this, does it?"

She felt Spencer's gaze move up and down her body. "I don't know. I think in certain situations, a bathtub full of hot, bubbly water might be better."

The heat of the fire warmed her calves, but the appreciation in Spence's eyes warmed her everywhere else. "Do you think our travel expenses might include a night in a hotel when we have a chance? Someplace we can spoil ourselves rotten."

"Our travel expenses will probably cover more than a night. They didn't exactly give us enough to live in luxury, but then, I've been feeding you food I've scrounged up here and there."

Twisting to the side, she reached and flipped open the lid of the cooler, blindly digging around for a bottle of water. "How long did you last today? Your shoulder give you any problems while you were fishing?"

Spencer squatted beside the fire and pulled the foil packets farther from the flames. "Mostly fine. I had to take a few painkillers when I got back to the trailer. Not the good stuff."

She pulled out a bottle for Spence, too, opening it and setting it in his chair's holder. "Nothing that's going to get in the way of us celebrating our last night in Oregon, though, right?"

"Not at all." He looked around the fire and swore under his breath. "Be right back."

Before she asked what was wrong, he hurried to the trailer, pausing only long enough to scoop up the camera bag before bounding up the stairs. He emerged moments later, balancing two plates, a bowl of vegetables, and Jake's dinner. Though his shoulder was still immobile, it didn't appear to bother him anymore.

Rebecca rose to help him dish up, savoring each brush of their bare arms. Without the sun, the night grew chilly, but the fire helped stave off the need for jackets just yet. She liked seeing his bare arms, the way the muscles flexed with each movement of his hands. He had continued the strengthening exercises after they'd left Oakley, as well as switched the sling for an immobilizing brace. Getting dressed was a hell of a lot easier now, though Spence still played around and insisted she help.

"Is this much different from when you'd travel for your riding?" she asked after they'd settled in their chairs.

"Yeah. My schedule used to be tighter with the rodeo. Now if we get to Yellowstone in the afternoon instead of the morning, it's not a big deal. But being late two or three hours would mean missing the event and losing my entry fee. I'm eating better now." He balanced the plate on his leg and

began to pull the moist fish apart. "And I got better company now."

She smiled at the compliment. Watching him eat for a moment, she debated whether or not to ask the obvious question. Though they talked a lot, about a wide variety of topics, some issues were never raised. They had some unspoken agreement to leave it alone, and really, that's what Rebecca wanted. Most of the time.

Not now.

"Do you miss it?" She tried to make it sound casual, even though it was the first time she'd dared to broach the subject. "I wonder sometimes, that's all."

"Every single day. I'm not saying I'm going to drop everything tomorrow and run away to join up on the circuit again. But it's still a little strange, to think about where I would have been, what I could have been doing. How close I was to making it to the PBR."

Rebecca nodded. She hadn't expected anything less, and the truth should be in the open. She didn't want him secretly tucking away all his resentment until he simply disappeared.

"Would catching one of the rodeos help?" She broke off a large piece of fish. "I was thinking, before your next surgery, maybe we could find one and hang out for the day. If you wanted to."

"I don't know. Chances are if we do, everybody will just demand to know when I'm coming back."

"Well, if you decide you want to, I'm in. I want the chance to show you off."

"They've all seen me before, darlin'. I'd be showing you off."

She waved him off, even if it did please her to no end, and dropped the subject. She'd done what she had to. Spencer knew if he wanted to go, she would be right there at his side. The ultimate decision was his to make.

Her supper disappeared so fast, she wondered how she'd even made it back to trailer. With a groan of relief, she set the plate aside and stretched out, leaning her head against the back of the chair in order to stare into the sky.

"I don't think I've ever been this happy before," she said softly. "It just...doesn't seem real sometimes."

"It's not a bad life." Spence grinned. "It probably helps that you haven't spent a rainy night in my leaky trailer."

"Oh, sure, now you tell me it leaks. You held back that detail on purpose, didn't you?"

"Of course." He reached for her hand and brought it up to his mouth. "I had to make sure you'd agree to share it with me."

Her fingers traced his lower lip, her thumb tickling at the corner. She loved his mouth. "You could have distracted me with tequila and the promise of body shots. That probably would have worked, too."

"I'll make sure we have a bottle stocked in case we do get caught in the rain." He bit at her thumb, catching it lightly between his teeth. She yelped and pulled it away, earning another smile from him. "You have room for dessert?"

"When do I not?"

"There's a tub of whipped cream in the icebox. You get it and a blanket, and I'll dish up your surprise."

Rebecca nodded and pushed herself out of the chair. Spencer stood as well and pulled on a thick leather glove. She watched as he lifted the small Dutch oven out of the fire and removed the lid. She instantly caught the scent of hot, chocolate cake. The sweet smell was so strong, it momentarily overwhelmed the more acrid smoke from the fire.

When she returned from the trailer with the whipped cream and blanket, he had two plates with large helpings of chocolate cake and, she saw on closer inspection, cherries. The smell was even more divine.

"Now, you put on a bit of whipped cream and it'll be the best cake you ever had. Be careful, though, it's hot."

Her mouth watered as she dolloped generous spoonfuls onto the cake, watching it start to melt and slide down the side as soon as it made contact. "How did you learn how to make this? This smells amazing."

"My mom used to make it. Sometimes, if she couldn't make rent, we'd go on...impromptu camping trips. I learned how to make a lot of stuff with a Dutch oven, a few hot coals, and very cheap food."

"Remind me never to leave home without you, then." Rebecca laid out the blanket next to the fire and sat down, patting the place in front of her. "Get your ass down here. You're getting the first bite."

With a crooked grin, Spencer sat opposite her, and she scooted forward, draping her legs over his in order to curl

around his hips. It left their upper bodies within inches of each other, but she twisted away from his questing hands to pick up the nearest plate.

"You did the cooking, so I'll do the feeding." The fork sank into the cake, fresh steam rising from the chocolaty crumbs. "You're going to have to blow, I think."

"Funny, I was going to ask you to do something like that." He pursed his lips and blew a cool stream across the cake, making the steam dance between them, before obediently opening his mouth.

Her pussy clenched at the sight of his tongue trailing along the fork, of his lips pursing to make sure he didn't miss a single crumb. Cream stuck to his upper lip, and she leaned in to lick it away, giggling when he tried to chase her for a kiss.

"If it tastes as good as it looks, I've got no problem showing you how much I appreciate it. I could probably be talked into all kinds of appreciation, even."

"Here." He took the fork from her and cut off a bite of cake, making sure to get a good amount of whipped cream and cherry syrup with it. "You tell me how much appreciation I can look forward to."

His eyes twinkled with glints from the fire as he waited for her to open her mouth. Rebecca did so obediently, but the second the hot cake hit her tongue, she moaned and sealed her lips around the tines. Her eyes closed, allowing her to focus on the flavors. They had been eating halfway decent since they'd been on the road, but sweet stuff was usually limited to Froot Loops for breakfast or a candy bar when they stopped for gas. This was an explosion of heaven, rich,

melting chocolate and sweet, syrupy cherry cooled by the creamy whipped topping.

"Anything," she said as soon as she'd swallowed. "You name it, you got it. Just as long as I get more of this."

"So as long as I'm well stocked in cake mix and tequila, I don't have to worry about you running away?"

Smiling, she hooked her arm around his neck and pulled him closer. "Throw in some of those kisses that make my head spin and you're never going to be able to get rid of me."

"If I start kissing you now, you're not going to get a chance to finish your cake while it's still warm."

"Just one?" She nibbled at his lower lip. "I promise to eat all my cake after. Cross my heart."

"That's the problem. If I start..." He caught her mouth for a brief kiss. "I won't be able to stop..." Their lips connected again, and his tongue traced the seam of her mouth. "Any time soon."

With a sigh, Rebecca eased back, though it was the hardest thing she'd done all day. He'd gone to too much trouble with the cake for her not to savor each and every bite. Which, really, was not a hardship.

She didn't unhook her arm, though. Reaching sideways, she speared another mouthful and brought it up to his lips, laughing when he didn't catch the melting cream in time. "We're going to have to stop and find a Laundromat tomorrow if you keep making such a mess."

"I'm not making a mess. I know how to feed myself." He closed his lips over the fork before adding, "You're the one getting cake everywhere."

"I could always stop."

"Then I'll just go back to kissing you."

"Next bite'll be for me, then."

His heavy gaze followed the bend of her arm, the lift of the fork, the disappearance of the cake past her lips. Turned out the second bite was just as good as the first. Rebecca dug in for a third, but just before it hit her mouth, she changed her mind and held it out for him to have.

"In case I forget to say it later, thank you for the cake." She waited until the fork was empty before adding, "You always do the sweetest things for me."

He plucked the fork from her fingers and set it on the plate. "You deserve it."

Her heart thudded against her ribs. That particular look in his eyes made everything else in the world disappear. "Are we done with cake?"

"I am." He wrapped his arm around her. "It tastes fine cold. And I didn't spend my whole day thinking about cake."

"No, I just bet you didn't."

Kissing him now provided the release she'd been looking for ever since the sun had set. Another day gone. Another part of the assignment over. But she couldn't put a cap on it without Spence, without feeling his muscles flexing beneath her hands, or swallowing the breath he willingly shared. Neither bothered with teasing. They didn't need it. They needed the heat of their bodies and the taste of their mouths.

His hand traveled up her spine until he reached her neck. He caressed the sensitive skin at her nape before gripping her

with firm fingers, holding her as his mouth grew hungrier, more demanding.

Sometimes, Rebecca thought she could kiss Spencer Cole forever and not get enough of him. He always knew where to taste her, how to coax her into tasting him, consuming her without ever making her feel like she wasn't still in control. Even now, he held her still in order to devour her mouth, but not once did she resent it. It gave her permission to touch him, to smooth her fingers down his chest, scratch at his ribs through his thin T-shirt. She could steal every ounce of heat he had to give and he would only offer more. It was part of the magic they'd had from the beginning. A knowing she couldn't explain. A knowing she didn't want to dissect.

His mouth didn't leave hers until her lips were swollen from the force of the caress. He kissed a path along her jaw and down her neck, his mouth hot and wet when his lips closed over the skin. Rebecca moaned with each point of pressure, dropping her head back and arching forward to encourage him to continue. He moved from her left side to the right, his lips never abandoning her neck until he finally sought out her mouth again.

Their position made it easy to kiss, easier still to touch, but to progress any further would require moving. Rebecca didn't want to. She liked the slight graze of his erection into her pussy where their hips met, and she loved rubbing against his hard chest, tightening her nipples until they demanded more. She especially liked that he was pretty much at her mercy. With her legs over his, Spencer would have to work too hard in order to get out.

That point wasn't now. Now, she dropped her hands to his stomach, pulling his shirt up and exposing his delectable muscles to her determined fingers.

Spencer twitched when she touched him, like she hadn't been touching him almost continuously for the past week. Their tongues tangled, and her teeth and lips vibrated as he moaned. Rebecca shifted, scraping her tender nipples against him, forgetting the chill of the night air against her back as his heat soaked through their clothes and into her body. She pushed his T-shirt higher, seeking out more of his chest, and her mouth watered to taste his salty skin.

When she broke away from the kiss and slid back a few inches, Spencer scowled at her. She pressed her fingers to his mouth, cutting off whatever might have come out, and bent her head to drag the flat of her tongue along one side of his bare chest. The muscles hitched. So did his breath. She liked to tease him about how sensitive he could get, but at heart, Rebecca loved licking almost anywhere and provoking this kind of reaction.

"Can you get this off?" She bunched his shirt higher, prompting Spence to grab the hem and shuck it off. It dangled from his injured shoulder only for as long as it took her to grab it and pull it the rest of the way down. "That's more like it."

"I think it's only fair if you return the favor," Spence murmured, reaching under her shirt to find the clasp of her bra. His fingers worked it open easily before he traced the hem, the line guiding his hand to her breast.

Rebecca whipped her shirt over her head and immediately resumed caressing his chest. Her bra straps fell down her arms as Spencer cupped her breast, his knuckles visible beneath the plain white cotton. One swipe, two. Then a shudder wracked through her when his callused thumb brushed over her nipple.

"How is it fair when you turn me into a big pile of goo this way?" She followed her good-natured complaint with a bite at his chest. "I think if you're going to be really fair, you need to lose the jeans, too."

"You know how to get rid of them." He circled her nipple with the tip of his thumb, each caress maddeningly slow. "I hope no random hikers find us."

"That's not code for 'it's cold out here and I want to go in,' is it?"

"No, I just don't want anybody staring at you except me."

"I think we're safe." She wriggled the rest of the way out of her bra and tossed it onto the growing pile of clothes.

"Though you could always get on top if you're so worried."

Spencer leaned forward to catch one nipple between his lips, lingering for only a moment before shifting his attention to the other. "No. I like it here just fine."

She meant to say, "You would." It came out as a hiss instead, when he chose to bite at her breast instead of just teasing it with his tongue. Rebecca tangled her fingers in the hair at his nape and shivered with the fire rolling through her flesh. Her head tilted back. The ends of her hair tickled where they dragged along her spine. Everything conspired to

bombard her with sensations, but she felt the man was determined to make her crazy the most.

"Missed you today," Spencer said, and even the words felt like a caress. His lips and tongue danced across her skin, finding new ways to make her tingle and squirm against his erection. "That's why I like travel days."

"Me, too." And she did. She loved what she was doing, found it incredibly easy to get lost in the natural beauty of each park they visited. But every time something caught her eye, she had the same thought. *I wish Spence was here to see that.* Tugging at his hair, she forced him to look up and meet her eyes. "If you ever want to come out with me, you know you're more than welcome."

"I don't want to get in your way."

Her mouth slanted. "Silly. You're never in my way. Haven't you figured that out yet?"

"Apparently not. But I don't want you to miss the shot of a lifetime because I have a hard time keeping my hands to myself."

"You're worth more than any picture I could ever take." To prove it, she closed the distance between them, sealing their mouths together in a slow demand that he believe her.

Spencer responded to the kiss with the same heated fervor, as though he wanted to convince her of something, too. His hand moved down to her waistband, and he hooked his fingers around the pants, his thumb brushing across the button. He freed it with a hard tug, and then pushed down the zipper. The more he pushed at the pants, the more her

clit throbbed, until all she wanted was to feel his rough skin against her flesh.

Straddling his legs pulled her jeans too tight for him to do more than press the ends of his fingers over her mound. Her panties were soaked with need for him. The way he massaged over her flesh and scraped her clit across the wet fabric didn't help.

She got up, though abandoning the heat of their kisses and his touch made her grunt in frustration. She stripped the rest of the way, all too aware of the hungry fix of his eyes. Then, she knelt at his feet, tugging off his boots before going to his fly.

"Lay back," she said. "You might not want to be on top right now, but I'm more than ready."

Spencer took a moment to straighten the blanket behind him, then set his hat aside and settled on his back. He watched her from beneath heavy lids as she pulled his jeans down his legs and off his feet.

"In my back pocket," Spence said at Rebecca's questioning look. She snatched the condom from his pants and turned back to him. Spence took her hand, gently pulling her down until she straddled his hips, her knees cushioned against the soft blanket.

She sat back on his thighs as she grasped his cock. Already, the tip glistened with moisture, mouthwatering and clear. Swirling her thumb in it, she coated more of the velvety crown, never taking her eyes off Spence.

"So is this what you've been waiting for all day then?"

"One of many things." He caressed her thigh, his knuckles brushing against her lips, glancing over her clit.

Goose bumps erupted along her arm, and her grip tightened automatically. Spencer groaned, but the blaze in his eyes told her not to stop. Catching the foil wrapper in her teeth, she tore it open. She had been waiting, too. She needed him inside her as badly as he needed her.

Rebecca rolled the condom down his length, smoothing it along with both hands. Spence tugged at her arm after it was in place, and he was the one to pull her flush against his torso, cupping her ass as she rubbed against his sheathed cock.

"Something tells me you're a little eager," she murmured.

"Silly, I'm always eager for you. Haven't you figured that out yet?"

The world lurched sideways, and she crushed their mouths together as the emotion surged through her. Vaguely, she felt herself lift her hips, seeking out the tip of his erection to guide him to her opening. They didn't wait for any more foreplay; there was no need. Rebecca sank down on his hard length, reducing them both to shudders when he was completely buried.

"I think I might be starting to understand," she said against his mouth. "Just so long as you understand that I love you, Spencer Cole."

"Worthless cowboy that I am?"

Rebecca smiled. "Important thing to remember? You're *my* cowboy."

"I am," Spencer agreed, his words a hint of air across her mouth. "Always will be."

She rocked along his length, shallow strokes that barely had him leaving her body. But she couldn't speed it up, not yet, not and kiss him the way she needed to. She needed to show him how deep it went, how sure she was about what they were, what they could be. Her fingers traced along his jaw, caressing the stubble starting to make itself known, while she poured every ounce of love she felt into her touch.

When Rebecca lifted her head again, she saw the light from the fire reflected in his eyes. A log snapped, sending a wave of sparks into the air, casting an almost ethereal glow over his features.

"Love you, too, Becca. I think I have for awhile now."

Though she hadn't expected him to say the words, the swell of love for him they evoked prompted her to kiss him again. Long. Slow. Tender enough to make her ache.

"Funny how it all crept up on us," she said. "Only took us five years to get to this point."

"What can I say? I'm a cautious guy."

"Uh huh. I can think of more than a few bulls who might think otherwise."

"I intend to hold on to you for longer than eight seconds."

Though she smiled, Rebecca was done talking. Everything had been said. She loved him. He loved her. Things would work out, because that was what they wanted. They didn't have to dwell on questionable futures, of whether or not Spencer would ride again, or what she would do when this particular assignment was over. None of that mattered. All

that mattered was the circle of his embrace and the slick glide of her body along his. Now. This moment. And then the next.

Their mouths connected in a series of slow kisses, each building on the one before it. Her hard nipples scraped across the hair on his chest, and she felt each individual, wiry curl. Half of her body was cool, the other half overheated from the fire and Spencer's flesh. They kept the rhythm slow, moving in silent agreement toward the same goal. Spencer never closed his eyes, never took his gaze from her face, though she knew stars were glittering and spinning overhead.

Coiling their fingers together, she held onto his immobile hand while bracing herself on her other. They still had to be careful of jarring his shoulder, but this sensual pace stoked the desire beneath her skin. Her breath came in quickening gasps, small cries Spencer caught with kisses that only burned her hotter, and she clenched around him each time she slid up his cock. Then it was his turn to gasp, and her turn to capture him with kisses.

She felt Spencer shift, drawing his knees up to plant his feet against the ground. He changed the angle of his hips just enough so that when she slid down his length, her clit hit the base of his cock, sending a new shock of pleasure through her system.

"Oh, God, Spence..." Rebecca ground her hips on the next stroke, shivering in delight from the friction before pulling away again. "What you do to me..." She chased after that little jolt with ever increasing strokes, the hard dig of Spencer's strong fingers into her ass spurring her even more. She couldn't breathe, couldn't even suck in air. Everything

had narrowed down to the points of contact between their bodies, each rub and scrape and slap compelling her closer and closer to breaking.

"Becca...Becca...honey..."

She didn't think there could be anything sweeter, any sound better, than the way Spencer said her name as he neared the edge of his orgasm. A strangled sound reflected her own satisfaction, echoing through her. She slammed their mouths together one final time, stealing his breath for the scream building in her throat. Her clit coming in contact with his heated flesh snapped like a whip through her, and then everything shattered.

She couldn't stop shaking, sensitive everywhere they touched, incapable of peeling away and losing the touch of his skin. Clutching at him helped; so did kissing. It kept her rooted to the ground, to him, before euphoria had her floating away. Somewhere in the midst of it, more repetitions of *I love you* came out, and she wasn't the only one speaking. His claims matched hers, and she held on to both those and the man himself, unwilling to let either of them go.

Their kisses slowed, and eventually stopped, leaving her shaken and boneless. "Well, if there were any hikers around, I think they got one hell of a show," she said.

Spencer chuckled. "If they stick around for a few minutes, I might give them an encore performance."

"Gives me enough time to finish my cake." She traced his swollen lower lip, drowning in the smell of him. "Did I mention I'm going to eat it off you?"

Spencer bent his arm beneath his head and smiled. "I can't think of a better way for you to eat that cake."

"Neither can I." Though her body screamed in protest, she propped herself up and gazed down at him. Never had she seen a more gorgeous sight. "I've got some more appreciation to show, after all."

Spencer lifted himself high enough to kiss the corner of her mouth. "I think I've still got plenty of my own appreciation to show. You don't know what you've done for me, Becca."

"We can both show how appreciative we are," she said. "Because you set me free, you know. I could love you just for that." She grinned. "Though that smile of yours and your great ass sure don't hurt."

"Ahh, the truth comes out. You just want me because I'm pretty."

"Isn't that why you want me?"

"Among other things. You're a great cook, for example."

"Your chocolate cake beats mine." Reaching over, she scooped a large section of melted cream and cake and brought her fingers back to his mouth, painting it across his lips. "Speaking of which..."

Lowering her head, Rebecca proceeded to lick the confection away, ending in a kiss that had her dizzy within moments. When it came to perfection, this was pretty darn close, she decided. Just her, and Spence, and a starlit sky stretching as far as the eye could see.

And tomorrow. A future.

Their future.

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Jamie Craig

Jamie Craig is the collaborative efforts of Pepper Espinoza and Vivien Dean. Both successful authors on their own, they began working together in early 2006. Pepper lives with her husband and cats in Utah, where she attends graduate school, and Vivien resides in northern California with her husband and two children.

Don't miss Fortune's Honor by Jamie Craig,

available at AmberHeat.com!

Clay Putnam has always been the responsible one in his family. He runs the family ranch, Good Fortune, by himself and takes care of his ailing mother. He is happy to make sacrifices so his brothers can follow their own dreams, especially his younger brother, Ty, a bull-rider on the professional rodeo circuit. But he leads a very lonely life, and he longs to meet a woman who could love his home, and his family, as much as he does.

Paige Murphy fell for Ty's boyish charm and exuberance, and she agrees to spend her summer vacation at the Good Fortune Ranch while Ty follows the rodeo all over the western states. She is happy to be engaged to Ty. Until she meets his older brother. Clay is mature, thoughtful, and very attractive. She thinks he might be interested in her as well, but they resist their mutual desire out of love and respect for Ty.

Passion and a surprising tragedy, however, drives Paige into Clay's arms, but honor, not infatuation, dictates who they are...

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Can they transcend sexual orientation and find true love...again?

But before this question can be answered, both must confront a deadly peril just waiting to pounce...

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In 1892, reporter Sean Madigan is pitted against the New York police when he's assigned his first high-profile murder story, the slaying of the wealthy Marshal Haversham, clothing industry mogul and sweatshop owner. While Sean hunts for the killer in order to prove his worth to his newspaper editor, the madman goes on a violent spree, burning down Haversham's warehouses and sweatshops and killing young women who work within them. Each victim is found dressed in a fancy ball gown that was secretly made within the sweatshops themselves.

Cowboy Blues
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