

TO BE
YOUR
ONLY

rae kennedy

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CHAPTER 1

I LICK MY FORK CLEAN OF THE DECADENT CHOCOLATE FROSTING and drop it on my plate next to the remnants of my second slice of cake. Yeah, I had two pieces of cake. No one is at the cake table tallying how many each person has. There is no cake gatekeeper. Besides, there were two different kinds of cake—the bride’s cake and the groom’s cake—and I can’t be expected to pick. Actually, I did pick, I chose both. And I’m the type of girl who likes to have my cake and eat it too.

And right now, the piece of cake I want is Wes.

“I’m going to go talk to him,” I say as I stand from the table.

Gracie—the Bonnie to my Clyde, the Thelma to my Louise, the Sid to my Nancy... Fuck, do they all die at the end? I can’t remember but I think they all die at the end. Anyway, Gracie—my best friend, who doesn’t die at the end—gives me a little squeal and a thumbs up.

“Peacock away!”

Peacocking, I can do.

I strut through the grass toward him. Strut would be a loose term here, because can one really strut while wearing

RAE KENNEDY

heels in grass when your left heel sinks into the earth on every third step? Well, I'm making it work. Remember your training. Shoulders back, suck in the tummy. Oomph. Definitely ate too much potato salad.

Wes is standing near the dance floor, talking with Gracie's older brother, Eric. Neither of them brought a date to the wedding—not that I'm surprised Eric doesn't have a date. But thank God Wes doesn't, because if I had to spend the evening watching him dance with someone else I'd probably tear my hair out. I already had to watch him date Gracie's older sister, Court, for four years. Four fucking years—much to the chagrin of my tender, pre-teen heart.

And now, on Court's wedding day, it is finally going to be my turn. I mean, they broke up five years ago and now she's married—he can't possibly pine over her any longer. Right? I've hoped and wished and dreamed these last few years that Wes would finally forget her and notice me, but he hasn't. He sees Gracie as a kid sister and I am just Gracie's friend, sidekick, the weird girl who always tags along and never shuts up. But not tonight.

Tonight is my night. Tonight, he is going to notice the shit out of me.

"Hi," I say as I stand in front of them, directing my smile to Wes and trying to resist the urge to tell him how nice he looks in his suit.

Because he looks fucking fantastic. His suit is navy and the pants cling to his muscular thighs while the jacket makes his shoulders look even more broad. He isn't wearing a tie, just a light blue dress shirt with the top two buttons undone, revealing a hint of his toned, tan chest. But if I tell him about how I like his suit I will probably start spewing about how his shirt is the exact same shade as his eyes. His

gorgeous, beautiful, perfect eyes.

“Rosenbaum,” Eric says.

I glance to him, narrowing my eyes. “Gallagher,” I return flatly before gazing back at Wes.

“Hey, Kyla.” Wes flashes me his bright white smile and my uterus flutters. It definitely does. That’s a real thing. “You look real nice tonight.” Wes glances down at my dress briefly before returning to my face. He’s too gentlemanly to blatantly ogle me, even though my boobs are right here. Like, they look amazing in this dress. Not going to lie.

“What are these?” Eric flicks my earring.

I reflexively smack his hand away and glower at him. “They’re peacock feathers.”

“Huh.” He looks at my earrings then down to my dress, definitely lingering on my legs and boobs. He shrugs. “They match your dress. It’s a good color on you.”

Wrong. This dress is the perfect color on me. It’s a deep emerald green that complements my dark auburn hair and fair skin to perfection. Anyone who has picked out as many dresses as me or been through the pageant circuit knows their colors. I look best in a Fall color palette, particularly jewel tones.

“Thanks,” I say, keeping my voice even, then turn back to Wes.

Ah, Wes. He makes the smile return to my face.

“I noticed you haven’t danced all night and neither have I, and I was wondering if you’d like to dance with me?” There, that’s how a normal person might ask someone to dance, isn’t it?

Wes opens his mouth to respond when Eric cuts in.

“I’ll dance with you.”

I tamp down the desire to growl at him. “I wasn’t asking

you.”

I turn back to Wes, giving him a sweet smile.

“Are you sure?” Eric interjects, forcing my attention back to him.

Him and his stupid little smirk. He thinks he’s so funny. Funny looking maybe. Well, I used to think he was funny looking—short, wiry, bright red hair. But he has sort of grown into his looks. He’s still a head shorter than Wes but he has filled out quite a bit and his face is symmetrical or whatever. He has a nice-looking mouth—but I only notice that because I’m forced to look at the stupid little grin he always has because he’s constantly laughing at his own dumb jokes.

“Yes, I’m sure I know who I was talking to.” I scowl at him before looking back to Wes. “So, dance?”

He looks between Eric and me for a second.

“Uh, sure. I’ll dance with you.”

I beam and grab his hand before he has a chance to change his mind. “Let’s go. They just started a new song!” I turn and head to the dance floor with determination, Wes following behind, my hand firmly wrapped around his.

I lead him to the middle of the dance floor. The band is playing a slow song. The sky is black and strings of lights hang overhead as a warm summer breeze tickles across my skin. I wrap my arms around his neck, resting them on his muscular shoulders, and he places his hands lightly on my waist. It’s the perfect romantic moment for him to suddenly realize how wonderful I am and that we should totally be together. Seriously, fall in love with me already!

We sway gently to the music, surrounded by several other couples. Wes’s movements are small, little steps, a slight roll of his shoulders. It’s basically high-school-dance

style slow dancing, but that's okay because Wes is dancing with me and everything is magical. I take a step closer and swing my hips a bit to entice him to loosen up a bit. He gives me the cutest little smile and then looks out into the night as the music plays on.

And I think he just tightened his hands around my waist more? Could have imagined it. I'm choosing to believe otherwise.

While he's not looking at me, I take the time to appreciate his gorgeousness. I haven't been this close to him since that time in eighth grade when he helped me up onto a horse—and then had to promptly get me back down again because I was terrified. His neck is thick and muscular, like the rest of his body, and tanned from working hard outside all day. His face is basically the definition of masculine beauty. The type of beauty every sculptor attempts to achieve. But they couldn't possibly do him justice, so they should stop trying.

His chin is strong with a little cleft in it. His nose is exactly right with just a slight curve on the left side from when it had been broken during a football game his senior year—he still completed that pass, by the way. His eyes are baby blue, framed by the cutest blond eyelashes. His forehead is broad and masculine and his blond hair is short but when he lets it get a little longer, it starts to curl.

"You're still working on the ranch for Gracie's dad, right?" I already know for a fact that he is, but hey, got to start somewhere.

"Yeah, of course." His eyebrows knit together slightly, like he's confused by the question. Bah, of course he knows I know this.

"Just making sure, haven't really been around the ranch much the last year since Gracie was gone at school."

RAE KENNEDY

“Oh right, yeah. Gosh, it’s crazy that you two are old enough to be in college now. Did you go to university, too?”

“No, I stuck around here.”

“I know how that is. But it’s nice to be home, yeah?”

I nod. “It is.”

We dance in silence for a minute. We are at arm’s length again, even though I swear I closed some of this distance earlier.

“Are you still working at the diner?” he asks.

“No, I got fired.”

“Fired? Doesn’t your family own it?”

“Yeah. My mom fired me after I dumped the entire contents of a large strawberry milkshake over Jimmy Rogers’s head. Some may or may not have splashed onto Emmie Miller’s face as well. Mom claims the ‘accidental’ nature of it getting on Emmie is up for debate, but I staunchly maintain my innocence.”

Wes’s eyes widen. “Wow. Well, I’m sure whatever Jimmy did, it was well-deserved.”

“Oh, it was. He and I made out in the bowling alley parking lot”—okay, we did a little more than make out, but I’m sure my future husband doesn’t want to hear those details—“and then he asked me to go out with him that Friday night. I told him I couldn’t do Friday since I was working, but he said he had a family party Saturday—it was this whole thing. So anyway, come Friday night, he walks into the diner with his arm around Emmie, looking all smug, and when they asked for a strawberry shake with two straws so they could share I lost my shit.”

“Rightly so.” Wes nods approvingly. “Sounds like Jimmy has some growing up to do. Don’t waste your time on guys like that. When the right one comes along, he won’t treat

you like second best.”

“You are so right.” I smile sweetly.

Now all I need is for him to realize he’s the right one. I’ve known it for years. We are destined to be together. He’s reserved and sweet and I’m—well, I’m not exactly those things, but we’ll complement each other. Opposites attract and all that. I know he’ll be the perfect husband and father... Not that I’m looking to get married and have kids quite yet—I’m only nineteen, almost twenty, but someday I’ll be ready, and I want him for my partner.

The song ends and Wes drops his hands from my waist and puts them in his pockets as he takes a step back. He stands there awkwardly for a second, giving me a shy smile, and I’m just about to ask if he wants to dance some more when Eric swoops in between us.

“I’ll take this dance.”

What the actual fuck?

He grabs my hand then wraps his other arm tightly around my waist so that our chests are almost touching. The next song is more upbeat than the last and he starts swinging me around and doing spins and shit. He’s only a couple inches taller than me, but with these four-inch heels he is firmly in shorter-than-me territory and it feels awkward as fuck dancing with him after having to crane my neck to look up at Wes.

“What are you doing?” I screech as he dips me so low my head almost hits the dance floor.

He leans over me, his face close to mine and looks at me with a mischievous glint in his honey-brown eyes. “Fuck me, but I think we’re dancing, Rosenbaum.”

I roll my eyes as he lifts me out of the dip and spins me around again. It makes the skirt of my knee-length dress

RAE KENNEDY

twirl around and, yeah, okay, that's kind of fun.

"No shit, we're dancing. I meant *why* are you dancing with me?"

"Oh. I didn't realize I was supposed to answer the question you *meant* to ask instead of the one you *actually* asked." He starts doing this shuffle step so I have to follow him back and forth and then side to side. I think we've taken a tour of the entire goddamn dancefloor.

"You're annoying."

Taking both of my hands, he turns me around again, this time whirling me in close so my back is to his chest and our arms are crisscrossed across my stomach.

"I think you *meant* to say charismatic." He spins me out away from him so we are facing each other again.

"I actually meant to say you're a pain in the ass."

"Charming."

"Infuriating."

Eric just smiles and pulls me in closer, slowing his steps, one hand firm on my back and the other laced through my fingers. "To answer your question of *why* I'm dancing with you, when you so eloquently pointed out to Wes and me that we hadn't danced with anyone all night, I thought you were offering to help alleviate us of our loneliness."

I try to hold back my eyeroll again, but dammit, I can't. "I wasn't—"

"Right. You were just offering your company to Wes, then?"

I narrow my eyes at him.

"Oh, come on. It's obvious you have a crush on Wes. So what, are you finally making your move on him?"

"Something like that. Not that I want to talk about it with you. But since you're obviously so interested in my

life, I'll have you know that Wes and I would be perfect together. He just needs to open his eyes and look at me. I mean, hello, I'm right here in front of him."

The song ends and Eric dips me low one more time, holding me there for a moment to lean in close again. So close I could count the freckles on his nose if I wanted. His gaze flickers to my mouth for a split second.

"Yeah, must be frustrating."

CHAPTER 2

I HOLD MY HANDS UP, PULLING MY FINGERS THROUGH HIS hair on both sides of Grandpa's head to measure the length.

"That looks nice and even, Pops."

I straighten and spray more water over his head then run a comb through his silver locks. Grandpa used to have thick, dark hair, almost black. It's thinner now, mostly white with flecks of gray but it's still handsome when I style it. I part it on the side like he always did and comb his freshly cut hair away from his face.

"You look dashing. Now, let's do your face."

He makes a small noise, almost like a gurgling grunt in his throat. Alarmed, I look to make sure he's all right, but he has a serene little smile on his lips and he gives me a shaky nod and lifts his chin.

I lather the shaving cream along his jaw and neck and reach for the straight razor from his shaving kit.

"Now, where were we? Oh, yeah. Gracie. Well, she decided—in a crazy turn of events—to run away with the band from the wedding rather than tell her parents she lost her spot in her summer school program. They think she's away at school when she's actually traveling on tour

around the country all summer with four sexy rock stars. Can you believe it, Pops? Gracie—my Gracie, who is always so sweet and innocent, the perfect daughter and friend and student—just running away? And everyone always says I'm the bad influence in our friendship."

I make an exaggerated huff as I continue sliding the blade carefully down Grandpa's cheek. The first few times I'd used this blade, I'd been scared shitless, but it's second-nature to me now. Grandpa always liked to keep a neat appearance and since he hasn't been able to keep it up himself the last few years, I've taken it upon myself to give him daily shaves and weekly haircuts. I know he appreciates it. He also might be the only person on the planet who appreciates my skill for talking.

I think he likes me talking to him, anyway. He always enjoyed our conversations when I was little. He'd let me ramble on and on while he picked me up from school or took me to lessons or practice when mom was working, and he never tried to change the subject or tune me out like other adults.

"Okay," I continue, "so perhaps I did encourage her to go and have fun. And I helped her pack. And I drove her to their motel so she could leave with them in their scary van." Ohmigod! Is this how Gracie dies at the end? If she does, it would be my fault. I'd never forgive myself, and it would officially be known for all of history that I, Kyla Jean Rosenbaum, am the bad influence in any and all relationships.

Jeanine pokes her head into the room. Today, her bright blue scrubs have little whales on them. "Kyla, dear, are you going to be around for a bit? I need to leave soon but Susan isn't quite here for her shift yet."

RAE KENNEDY

“I’ll be here.”

“Great, thank you so much.” She waves and smiles at Grandpa and raises her voice, “Bye, Jerry. I will see you tomorrow.”

Grandpa turns his head slightly and his eyes blink rapidly a couple times, but other than that, he doesn’t seem to acknowledge her departure.

“Oh! Pops! I forgot to tell you the best part of the whole night. Wes and I danced. A slow dance. It was amazing and romantic and I swear to you he is the nicest, most perfect gentleman there ever was. I hope you get the chance to meet him soon.” I always tell him about Wes. I think he should know how wonderful his future grandson-in-law is and I can tell he likes hearing about him.

I wipe off the excess shaving cream with a hand towel and inspect for any missed spots.

“I think we’re all done.” I hold a small mirror up for Grandpa so he can see. “Very handsome.”

His steely gray eyes visibly light up when he looks in the mirror and his lips pull back in a smile. His head bobs in a nod and then he lifts his hand to gently pat mine. His fingers are cool to the touch and his skin looks as thin and fragile as crinkled tissue paper, but it’s soft. He looks up at me with shiny eyes that seem to hold a glimmer of recognition as they focus on mine.

I put the mirror down and lay my other hand over his. “Hi, Pops.” I smile in hopes this is turning into one of his good days—one of the few days we get to have a conversation.

He pats my hand again. “Colleen,” he says with a content expression.

Confusing me with my mother doesn’t hurt as much as it used to. I smile wider and nod, willing tears not to well up

in my eyes.

“Yeah, I’m here.”

* * *

THE REAL COLLEEN IS IN A HUFF TO GET OUT THE DOOR WHEN I get home.

“Ah, there you are. Will you make sure to unload the dishwasher *before* the dishes start piling up today? And the living room really needs vacuuming. Actually, if you could just vacuum the whole house—”

“Okay, Mom.”

“Don’t roll your eyes at me, Kyla Jean. It would be different if you were in school, but since you chose not to go to school and you have yet to find another job, you can help out around the house.”

She’s still bitter that I dropped out of the Miss Teen Illinois pageant at the last minute two years ago. If I’d won, it would have meant thousands of dollars in scholarship money. But after hearing from more than one pageant official that I’d do much better at the state and even national level if I lost twenty pounds, I’d had enough of all of it. I’m never going to have a six-pack or a thigh gap and that’s cool with me.

“I help out around here all the time.” I cross my arms.

“As you should. You live here. Rent free, I might add. Do you have any plans? You can’t just lounge around here all summer again. Are going to get a job? You can always come back to work at the diner.”

“I thought you said I was too volatile to work with your customers,” I say flatly.

“You can work in the kitchen.”

RAE KENNEDY

“Ugh. Mom.” I get where she’s coming from but sometimes I wish I had a sibling or anyone else she could focus some of her attention on. Being on the constant receiving end of her concern and “helpful suggestions” is exhausting. Maybe I need to find her a boyfriend. No, me first.

“I don’t need to work at the diner. I already have work for the summer.”

She raises her eyebrows incredulously.

“I’m going to be helping out Gracie’s dad on their ranch.”

Her eyebrows have now completely disappeared behind her bangs. “You’re going to be working...on a ranch?”

“They needed some extra help for the summer and since Gracie’s going to be gone and—as you’ve already so clearly pointed out—I have nothing better to do than lounge around the house, I volunteered.”

She still looks at me skeptically as she heads to the door. “All right. When do you start?”

“Tomorrow.”

* * *

WELL, SHIT.

Now I actually have to convince Gracie’s dad to let me work on the ranch this summer. I mean, I’m very convincing when I want to be. I could probably follow him around, talking his ear off, and he’d give me some jobs to do just to get me to leave him alone. It’s a great plan, actually. I’ve needed an excuse to hang around Wes, and this will be perfect since he’ll be there too. I’ll just have to finagle it so that we are working together.

Yes, this will be perfect.

I smile to myself as I slather peanut butter and jelly on a slice of bread for a sandwich—my go-to dinner when I'm the only one home, which is...often. Anyway, it's not sad, it's delicious. Six-year-olds fucking know where it's at.

I rinse off my single plate and knife in the sink then go to put them in the dishwasher, which—*fuck*—I forgot to unload. So now I'm unloading the dishwasher. The clanking and pinging of glasses and plates seems extra ridiculously loud when the rest of the house is so silent. I have to cram the last glass in the tiny corner cabinet near the sink because the large cabinet just above the dishwasher has a glass front and, according to my mother, it's for displaying *pretty* things only. That's another term for all of the fancy shit we never use. I close the cabinet door—it's white with a little crystal knob that looks pretty with the pale blue walls. Pretty. Everything has to be pretty.

Normally, I would put the TV on so I can hear someone else's voice—Lord knows I hear enough of my own. Alex Trebek always had a very soothing voice, actually. But I find myself just looking out the kitchen window once the dishes are put away. I need to get out of this house and I know exactly where to go.

Hey, if I'm going to go through with this plan, might as well start implementing it right now.

* * *

I'VE DRIVEN THE ROAD TO GRACIE'S HOUSE SO MANY TIMES I could do it blindfolded. I know that's just something people say to exaggerate how second-nature something is to them, but I'm completely serious about this. I know every turn, every bump, every fucking rock on this route. It never

RAE KENNEDY

changes and it always takes exactly six and a half songs to get there, give or take a half a song.

There are a few more cars than usual outside of the house when I pull up from the long gravel drive. Of course, because it's Sunday, and they always have a big family dinner on Sundays. I know this—it just slipped my mind what day it is.

The gravel grinds underfoot as I walk up to the great white house and its wrap-around porch. It's a large two-story, century-old farmhouse. The paint is starting to peel in places and the wood boards of the porch creek a bit, but I couldn't imagine a more perfect house. Best of all, it's always full. Full of people, full of food, full of laughter. I think I spent more time here growing up than I did at my own house.

But I was always here with Gracie, and now, being here uninvited without her, I feel like I'm intruding. Like I'm on the outside looking in. Maybe that's because I am on the outside looking in—literally. I'm standing on the porch and looking in their dining room window like a creeper.

The whole family is there, minus Gracie. Her parents, Bev and Tom, her two eldest brothers, Jack and Charlie, and their wives and kids, her redheaded brother-who-shall-not-be-named, and her sister, Court, with her new husband, Tuck. I don't think they are leaving on their honeymoon for a few more weeks.

They're all huddled around a large oak table in mismatched chairs. Their old hound dog, Angus, is trotting around to each seat, testing out who will throw him some scraps. A simple chandelier casts a warm glow on the whole scene as they pass around steaming bowls of mashed potatoes and grilled corn and fried chicken.

My mouth waters as I register the savory aromas and I watch as they eat.

Two of the little boys are running around the room and Gracie's little niece is hiding under the table, her blonde curls bouncing with giggles.

Gracie's dad is so engrossed in whatever conversation he's in with Tuck and Jack that I think he's entirely forgotten about the chicken leg in his hand because he keeps swinging it around and has already almost knocked two glasses over. Bev touches his arm softly, giving him a *you-need-to-chill-the-fuck-out* look—I can see it from here, clear as day. If they offered a degree in reading facial expressions, I would have a freaking PhD. He sets down the weaponized poultry and I can't see him smile at her from under his big copper-colored beard, but I can tell that he is from the way his eyes crinkle around the edges.

My parents divorced when I was three and my dad moved to Florida. I don't have a bad relationship with my dad—I think you have to actually have a relationship to classify it as such. I just don't see him. He sends me a birthday card every year, and that's about it.

Angus's deep howling bark pulls me out of my thoughts.

He barks again, and again. And now it sounds like he's scratching at the other side of the front door.

Shit.

And then the door swings open and Eric is standing in the glow of the entryway, one eyebrow cocked and that stupid little smirk on his face again.

"What are you doing, Rosenbaum?"

Fuck. "Umm..."

"Are you stalking me? Because, honestly, I'm flattered. But coming to my family's house and spying in the windows

RAE KENNEDY

is a little extreme, even for you. Besides, you really ought to peep through my bedroom window if you're wanting a show."

"Are you done?" I fold my arms, bored with his joke already.

He looks up, tapping his finger on his chin and considering for a moment. "I guess now that I know you'll be watching me through my window—you do know where I live, right? You'd be a pretty terrible stalker if you didn't—"

"Yes, I know where you live but it's not because I'm a stalker, it's because you're a twenty-seven-year-old who lives in his parents' barn."

"I don't live in the barn. I live behind the barn."

"Right. In a shed behind the barn."

"It's a cottage."

Bev pops her head out the door behind Eric before I can respond. "Oh, Kyla dear, what a wonderful surprise! Come in, come in."

"Thanks, Mrs. G." I smile sweetly at her—it's the one that's halfway between a shy smile and my beauty pageant smile.

I follow her through the door without another word to Eric, but he doesn't move far enough out of the way, causing me to bump against his arm as I walk by. I make a face at him and he shrugs.

Bev waves off my assurance that I already ate dinner and insists I sit and eat with them.

"So what brings you 'round?" Tom asks from across the crowded table.

Right. Let's just get down to business. "I actually came to ask a favor."

"Shoot," he says, leaning back in his chair.

"I'm looking for some work this summer, and since Gracie is gone, and I know she usually helps out around the ranch, and summer is your busiest time of year, I was thinking I could do some work for you."

He's quiet for a moment, running his hand over his beard.

"Oh, how lovely," Bev says with her hand over her heart then turns to Tom. "Don't you think that's a lovely idea, honey?" she says a little more forcefully.

"Could always use another set of hands," he agrees, assessing me with his warm brown eyes. "But you'll need to learn to ride."

"Thank you so much, Mr. G. You won't regret it. I am a hard worker, and I'm up for anything, and I'll learn to ride—"

He chuckles, smoothing out his beard and holding a hand up. "I don't doubt your work ethic or your determination to accomplish something when you put your mind to it."

Damn right.

"Have Eric or Wes give you some riding lessons," Tom says. "In the meantime, there's plenty you can help with around the homestead. We start work at five-thirty."

"In the morning?" I try to keep my eyes from bugging out. Of course he means five-thirty in the morning. I know they work early but a little part of me is still praying that I'd misheard.

"Yeah," Eric says, trying to hide his laughter behind the neck of his beer bottle. "Five-thirty in the morning, Rosenbaum."

I scowl at him because I really did know that.

I plaster a wide smile on when I look to Tom. "I'll be here!" I think I managed to sound convincingly enthusiastic at the unnatural idea of getting up before the sun.

RAE KENNEDY

When everyone gets up and starts clearing the table, Bev insists that I stay and takes my plate because I'm a *guest*. Of course this means Eric decides to slide into the now-vacated seat next to me, because why not?

He's wearing a foxlike grin. His whole coloring is foxlike, actually.

"So," he says. "Who do you want to give you lessons? Me or Wes?"

"Why are you asking a question you already know the answer to?"

"Right. So this is all part of your plan to get with Wes, then?"

"You make me sound so conniving. I'm not trying to trick him. But we do actually have to spend time together for him to get to know me and see how wonderful I am and realize we were meant to be together."

"Sounds totally non-stalkery."

I angle toward him in my seat. "You're just jealous because I'm not stalking you and you've spent the last hour choreographing a nude dance number you were hoping I'd see through your window tonight, which you're now realizing is useless."

"Wow. The accuracy. You've really got me pegged."

"I didn't take you for the type who's into pegging."

Eric spits out his beer, splattering it across the cream-colored tablecloth. He looks at me incredulously as he wipes his mouth.

"Shit, Ky. You're going to make me choke."

"Now choking, that seems more like your kink."

He blinks rapidly with his mouth open for a few moments before he starts to say something but his parents come back in the room before he forms a coherent word.

I stand and thank them for welcoming me in, the delicious dinner, and the opportunity to do some work. Then I wave goodbye sweetly to Eric as I leave, taking full advantage of the opportunity to wear the smug smile for once while he bites his lip.

“See you tomorrow, Gallagher.”

“Rosenbaum.”

CHAPTER 3

I SPEND MOST OF THE MORNING MUCKING THE HORSE STALLS while the guys are out doing Lord-knows-what. Know what mucking means? It means cleaning up shit. Literally, I am shoveling and scraping up horse poop and soiled bedding and hauling it off by the wheelbarrow-load. Anyway, it's fine. It smells. But it's fine.

Also, I'm sweaty. So sweaty.

It is actually sort of rewarding when everything is swept away and I can lay down some new clean, dry straw for the horses. It smells better at least.

I'm grateful when it's time to go up to the house for lunch because I am starving. Bev has an amazing spread of roast beef sandwiches with au jus. They're dripping with mozzarella cheese and definitely the most amazing thing I've had in my mouth in at least the last three months. That sounds like an oddly specific timeframe, but it feels right. She also has out fresh slices of watermelon and a vat of coleslaw. I always wondered how these guys can eat like they do and yet still have such lean, muscular physiques. Wonder no more, Kyla, it's called manual labor and they work fucking hard for it.

"You ready to ride after this?" Wes asks from across the table just as we are finishing up. His blue eyes are cheerful and his lopsided grin that flashes just the hint of his bright white teeth is the perfect mixture of boyish charm and manly sex appeal.

Very manly.

"I am so ready." I've been waiting for this moment all day.

"I'll help too," Eric chimes in while chewing a big hunk of sandwich.

"We're fine," I say keeping my voice pleasant. "I think Wes can manage to teach me on his own."

Eric shrugs and rips another piece of roast beef off his sandwich. "I don't have anything better to do."

Know that unamused emoji face? That is me right now.

Eric is either unable to accurately decipher facial expressions or he just doesn't care. My vote is for the latter.

So he follows us as we walk down to the stables.

I ignore him and focus on engaging with Wes. I ask him about his family. He's an only child like me and was raised by a single mom like me as well. He tells me his mom, Peggy, is doing well. She works at the bank in town and just got promoted to manager this year. I know all this already but it's nice to hear him talk. He's usually on the quieter side—not shy, just isn't the super chatty type. It's a shame because when he talks, one side of his upper lip curls up more than the other, and it's like he has a permanent smile on his face.

I could stare at that smile, that face, all day. The stubble growing in along his jaw makes him look extra rugged and his shirt is a dark blue plaid button-up that plays up his eyes. And those jeans. They're tight. Fuck. His thighs are

RAE KENNEDY

thick and his ass looks so good.

Avert your eyes, Kyla. Now, goddammit.

Back to the face. Much safer. Did I mention he's wearing a cowboy hat? Well, he is and it's glorious.

"Which horse do you want to ride? They're all pretty gentle," Wes says as we get to the super clean stables. And no, I wasn't looking at his butt again.

I step closer to him so that I have to look up, my arm just barely brushing along his. "Which horse do you prefer to ride?"

He flashes me a big smile. "I usually ride Gideon."

I follow him as he strides to the end stall where a tall horse is standing. His coat is a shiny, dark mahogany. He has a black muzzle and a long, black mane.

"I'll ride him, then."

"You should ride Daphne," Eric says from behind us.

Shit, I forgot he was there.

"Yeah, Daphne would be a great horse to learn with," Wes agrees.

I look to the chestnut mare by Eric with the pretty white dappling. She's shorter and wider than Gideon but I'm not going to let Eric take over my lesson.

"I want to go with Gideon. I think I can handle him."

"I'm sure you can," Wes says with a smile and a wink.

He winked at me. Oh my god. Is he flirting with me?

I watch as he saddles up the horse. He's explaining how to do it as he goes but if he were to give me a quiz on it later I would totally fail because I am completely distracted by his forearms. His sleeves are rolled up to the elbow, exposing his arms in all their tan and muscular glory. There are veins, people! Veins.

We go out to the little pasture that's connected to the

stables with Eric grumbling behind—probably about me going against his horse suggestion. This area is completely fenced off and not very big, which is good. There will definitely be no galloping and leaping going on in here in case Gideon gets excited.

“All right, let’s get you in the saddle.” Wes puts his hand out to me while patting Gideon’s neck.

Already? Sheesh, this seems quick. Is there maybe a PowerPoint presentation I could watch first? I mean, in driver’s ed, we had to get some classroom hours in before we were just thrown behind the wheel.

“Okay.” I walk up to the horse and take Wes’s hand, which is big and warm and slightly rough with callouses. It’s a nice hand. And I can’t even enjoy the fact that I’m holding it because I am staring at a horse whose back is almost as tall as me. “You’re going to be here the whole time, right? Like right here next to me? You’re not going to let me fall.”

“I won’t let you fall. Here—” He shows me how to put my foot in the stirrup and tells me to just lift and swing my other leg over the side.

That’s way easier said than done, by the way. I attempt to get my leg over the other side of this massive beast for several minutes before Wes finally gives a little boost to my bottom to help me the rest of the way.

He touched. My butt.

Jesus Christ.

Too bad it was while I was flailing around like an overturned turtle and had as much sexual suggestiveness as touching a potato.

I get my leg over and *holy shit*, it’s high up here. The horse shifts around under me and I am wobbling. Oh god.

Wes’s large hands hold onto my hips and help me back

into the saddle.

“Relax.” Wes’s voice is totally calm and soothing as he steadies me.

Focusing on him and how his fingers curl gently over my hips is much better than thinking about the thousand pounds of pure animal muscle I’m sitting on.

“Good. Now sit up straight, relax your legs.” Wes shows me how to hold the reins without putting pressure on the bit unless I’m telling the horse where to go.

His hands are soft over mine as he shows me how to lead the horse to turn and how to tell him to stop. Then he tells me to apply a little bit of pressure with my heels and Gideon starts walking.

Wes walks next to us as I ride around the perimeter of the enclosure, keeping his hand on Gideon’s shoulder the whole time. His hand is right next to my knee and it’s a bit distracting.

“You’re doing so good.”

“Yeah?” I smile down at him.

He returns my smile, the sun gleaming off his face. “Yeah. Your posture’s great—you look like a natural.”

“Well, if there’s one thing you get after years in the pageant circuit—it’s an unhealthy obsession with an unachievable beauty standard—but if you get two things, the second one is impeccable posture. And I am doing pretty great, aren’t I?” Okay, maybe I’m getting a little cocky. Gideon is going so slow, I don’t even think this pace would qualify as a trot. But guys like confidence, right? I’ve never been lacking in that department, might as well lean into it.

Wes chuckles softly and the sound is heavenly. He drops his hand. “You might be my best student.”

“Really?” Oh, the things I would let him teach me. I

smile down at him and he smiles up at me, his blue eyes twinkling.

It happens quickly and all at once. I loosen my grip and Gideon shakes his head, pulling the reins from my hands. I sort of panic—fine, I completely panic— and crouch down, stiffening and tightening my legs into the horse's sides. So, of course the horse thinks I mean “go.” And he goes. Not even fast, but now Wes isn't here anymore so I look behind to find him and that's when I lose my balance and all sense of direction and then I'm falling. There's nothing to grab on to and nothing under me until there is.

Spoiler: it's the ground and it's really fucking hard and it really fucking hurts.

I'm flat on my back for a second, just looking up at the little white puffy clouds in the sky wondering if this is how I die.

“Oh my god, are you okay?” Wes is at my side in an instant and cradles my head in his hand.

Yep. I'm dead and this is heaven.

Then Eric is at my other side. Not in heaven then.

“Don't move. Is anything hurt?” he asks in a tone that maybe, for the first time in his entire life, doesn't have any snark in it.

“I'm fine.” Actually my whole body hurts, though not as much as my bruised ego. I move to sit up.

“I said don't move.”

“Don't boss me around. I said I'm fine.” I sit up, giving Wes an appreciative smile as he moves his hand down to my back for support. “The only thing that really hurts like a mother is my leg.”

I point down to my calf where, yep, my jeans are ripped and there's a gnarly gash in my leg from where I fell on a

RAE KENNEDY

pokey stick. Said stick is still sitting a few inches away. The nerve it has to just lie there looking all innocent.

Wes makes a cringey face at my leg.

“Yeah, we’ll need to get that cleaned up,” Eric says, inspecting it.

“Wow. It’s like you missed your calling to be a detective,” I deadpan.

“Let’s get you up to the house.” Wes leans over and sweeps one arm under my knees and the other around my waist and scoops me up off the ground as if I weigh as much as a feather—and I assuredly weigh way more than a feather.

I wrap my arms around his solid shoulders, the warmth and hardness of his chest presses tightly to me. I can feel his heartbeat and the cadence of his breathing as he carries me uphill to the house. And, lord almighty, he seems to be barely exerting himself.

It’s just like in all the fantasies I have of Wes sweeping me off my feet and carrying me away—except in those fantasies he’s taking me to go find a place to fuck because he’s so overcome with desire. Oh well, I’ll take what I can get.

Eric holds the door open for us as Wes carries me over the threshold (swoon) and lets the screen door slam behind us.

“I’ll go get the first aid kit.” Eric disappears down the hall and Wes sits me down on a stool in the kitchen.

“Are you sure you didn’t hurt anything besides the leg when you fell?” Wes asks, the sweetest, most genuine look of concern on his face.

“I’m sure, just the leg.”

“Oh good.”

Shoot. Maybe I should have played this up more and gotten Wes to play nurse to me. I mean, he did promise he wouldn't let me fall—it'd be only right if he kept watch over me through the night, you know, in case I need something... like cuddles. Or cock.

Eric comes back in and sets the first aid kit on the counter. He asks Wes to get some washcloths and hot water to clean up the wound.

"Let's take a look at this." Eric pulls a chair over and sits across from me. He takes my leg and removes my boot then gingerly lifts it so my foot is resting on his knee.

He inspects the cut through the bloody rip in my jeans, one hand on my ankle, his face leaned in and his eyebrows furrowed. Then he takes both hands and curls his fingers into the hole and tears my jeans with one loud rip. They split from my knee to the hem.

"Hey!" I really liked these jeans.

He looks up at me, cocking one eyebrow. "They were already torn and stained and they're too tight to push up. Would you have rather taken them off? Because, by all means, we can still go that route."

I grumble, "No," just as Wes comes back with the clean cloths.

Eric takes one wet cloth and presses it lightly to the cut.

"No need to put yourself out, Eric. I'm sure Wes can help me with this part and you can go back to doing... whatever it is you do." I smile up at Wes and flutter my eyelashes a bit, just enough to convey to him that I'll be a very good little patient.

He gives me a tight smile and backs away, one hand on his hip and the other fisted over his mouth. Dammit, can

RAE KENNEDY

nobody decipher facial expressions?

"I'm good," he says. "I don't do very well around blood."

I look down at my leg. It doesn't look to be bleeding anymore but there are some drips down my leg and bright red stains at the top of my white sock.

Eric just looks up at me with an unamused expression as he continues cleaning my leg. Right now his face is saying *shut the hell up already and just let me help you*.

Fine.

Once Eric cleans the blood away, Wes starts to shuffle back closer but still avoids looking directly at my leg. It's actually kind of cute.

"Doesn't look like you'll need stitches," Eric says. "But you should rest it tonight. Stay off of it as much as possible." He works on bandaging it up.

"Of course, Dr. Gallagher."

"Dr. Gallagher? I like that." He smirks. "Do you need a ride home?"

"No, I can manage. It's not even my driving leg. Besides, I'm not going home right away—I have to go visit my grandpa first."

"Already disobeying doctor's orders." He shakes his head at me. "Fine, but promise me you'll rest it after."

"Promise."

* * *

AND LIKE THE GOOD LITTLE PATIENT I AM, WHEN I GET HOME from my visit with Grandpa, I go straight to my room, get undressed, and slide under the covers with Chris Pine.

Chris Pine is my silver bullet vibrator—my go-to man. Chris Hemsworth is my big pink rabbit vibrator, also

wonderful and never a bad choice. I used to have a purple vibrating dildo named Chris Pratt but he broke and I had to throw him away. Chris Evans is a little black egg-shaped vibrator I haven't used in ages, but maybe I should give him a try because lately I haven't been able to quite get over that peak, if you know what I mean.

It's been a month. An orgasm-less thirty-two days, to be exact. That's the longest I've gone since I discovered the exact location of my clit when I was fourteen. But tonight it's going to happen—I can feel it. Because I've got some real-life, grade-A material to use for inspiration.

I turn on Chris Pine and nestle him between my legs right up against my most sensitive spot and close my eyes.

I'm back on the horse, and Wes and I are sharing a moment where we lock eyes, his heavy-lidded with lust. He isn't wearing a shirt in this scenario for some reason. Oops. And this time when I fall off the horse, he catches me so I never hit the ground. I'm wrapped up with his bulging biceps, and then he kisses me. A perfect, long kiss. The kind that goes deep but is still hungry for more. He's so overcome with need he carries me off, but he can't wait to get to the house, so he just lays me down in the grass, and he's kissing me and running his hands all over me and ripping off my shirt—

Wait, actually the grass would probably be all pokey and the ground is hard and shit. Let's back it up a little.

I rub Chris Pine around, slipping him lower then higher again, the gentle vibrations warming me all over. All right, this time *he takes me to the stables and lays me down on a soft pile of straw. He undoes his belt buckle, his cock straining behind his zipper, and then he starts to unbutton my jeans. I lift my hips so he can take them off but—*

Dammit, straw really isn't soft either.

RAE KENNEDY

Third times a charm. Okay, so *we stand up. I put my hands flat against the wall, bending over as he pulls my jeans and panties down to my ankles in one smooth motion. I hear the clink of his buckle as he drops his jeans too. Then he comes up behind me and—*

Motherfucker. The stables smell. Maybe if I hadn't been mucking in the stables all morning I could have let it go, but I can't. Just remembering the smell is enough to dry me up.

I look at the clock and son-of-a-titty-fucking-cocksucker, it's already late and I have to get up so unreasonably early and I'm not even a little close to coming. Fuck's sake. I reluctantly give up the crusade for a climax—again—and put my underwear back on.

Wes the fantasy just isn't cutting it for me anymore. I need the real thing.