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THE BAR HAD finally cleared out, and the Ozark girls were busy cleaning up and counting receipts. Because of the two-hour time difference between Chicago and Montana, Jazz had faded around midnight, and Ashley had forced her to go up to her room at the hotel and go to bed. “We’ll catch up tomorrow,” she’d assured her before Jasmine left.

The back door banged, and Ash, Beth and the twins looked up. Brandi came striding in, her hair mussed, her lipstick smeared, an unrepentant look on her face.

“Where the hell have you been?” Beth asked, hands on her hips.

“Saying good-night to an old friend.” Brandi dumped her apron on the bar, giving Beth a withering look from beneath her lash extensions. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“We’d all like to get out of here tonight, so, yeah, it is my business.”

“Seems to me that the one you should be worrying about is our precious youngest sister.” Brandi narrowed her gaze at Ash, and Ashley’s stomach cinched. She knew where this was going.

“What the hell are *you* doing with Colton Cross?”

“We’ve been seeing each other.”

“Since when?”

“Since a while ago. We just—I just didn’t want anyone to know.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m not going to be here much longer, and I didn’t think it was anyone’s business and...”

“She’s just using him for sex,” Beth said, ever the helpful older sister.

“You’re sleeping with Colton Cross?” Zoe asked, glancing at Chloe, asking silently whether she knew about this.”

Before Ash could answer, Brandi spoke up. “As if *she*’s having sex with *him*.”

Ash propped her fists on her hips. “Of course I am.”

“Right.” Brandi stuck her elbows on the bar and leaned close. “Tell me about it.”

Glancing from Brandi to the twins, then to Beth, Ash said, “No. It’s none of your business.”

Brandi shrugged and went back to counting her money. “Because you’re not doing it. I can tell when someone’s getting some. You—my uptight little sister—are not getting *any*.”

“You’re disgusting,” Beth said. “Mom and Dad sure dropped the ball on the class gene when they had you.”

Brandi ignored Beth—as usual—and poked Ash in the shoulder. “I don’t know what you’re up to, or why, but as far as I’m concerned, Colton Cross is still fair game.”

“Oh, my God. You’re jealous,” Beth said, throwing her arms up in outrage. “You think you’re the only one who can attract a man around here? Seriously, Brandi. Just because Ash doesn’t dress like a tramp, she’s just as pretty as you. Plus, she’s *way* nicer.”

“Yep,” Chloe concurred. “Way nicer.”

Ashley appreciated the support, but what she really wanted to do right now was change the subject, finish cashing out and get home to bed.

“Oh, what a surprise. Everyone gang up on me and defend poor Ashley.”

“You’ve just been outside with someone, doing who-the-hell-knows-what, and now you’re moving in on Ashley’s guy?” Beth shook her head, muttering obscenities beneath her breath.

The perpetual fights between her two older sisters was reason number 4,392 for why she *needed* to get out of Half Moon. Her family drove her bananas, and as long as she stayed, it would be high school *forever*.

Drumming her hands along the bar top, Ash said, “I’m done and I’m out of here.” She grabbed her camera and purse from beneath the bar and waved to her bickering sisters. “Night, all.”

“Get some rest,” Beth called.

“Night, Ash,” the twins called in unison.

“This isn’t over,” Brandi called after her.

Ash tilted her head toward the ceiling and whispered, “Mom, wherever you are? Your fourth child needs an ass whooping.”



COLTON FINISHED UP the morning chores with the other ranch hand, Curtis and then headed to the bunkhouse to shower before breakfast. He had taken over one half of the bunkhouse after the longtime ranch hand, Thaddeus Knight, had left. Turned out there was a lot more to old Thad than

they knew, like he'd been hiding from the law for over ten years. Turned out he was innocent, and now he and his girlfriend were out east somewhere.

So Colton had offered to help out on the ranch on a temporary basis until they found someone more permanent. The Half Moon rodeo was always his first of the season before the rodeo season really got underway. He loved it. Different town every weekend. Riding, flirting, making a living doing the things he loved. Nothing to hold him or tie him down, just living in the moment every day of his life.

And this year was his year. This year he was aiming to qualify for the pro tour, which would mean competing professionally all year long.

After dressing, he made his way from the bunkhouse to the big guesthouse that his brother Dillon and his wife, Gloria, ran. It was already warm and it promised to be a perfect day for the rodeo.

"Where is everyone?" Colton asked as he sat down to a strangely empty dining room table. The guesthouse was fully booked for the weekend.

"Everyone went in to see the parade," Dillon said.

"Right. Why aren't you two there?"

"Too busy," Dillon said.

"Too pregnant," Gloria added, patting her belly. "What about you?"

"Parades aren't my thing," Colt said, filling his plate with bacon and eggs and helping himself to coffee. He turned to his brother. "Wish you were riding?" This would be the second year that his brother didn't ride in the rodeo, and it bothered him. Dillon had always been his idol, living the life of a rodeo cowboy.

But now?

Colton eyed his older brother from across the dining room table. He'd turned into their old man overnight. Giving up the excitement of the road to run a ranch. And seriously, the way he doted on Gloria, it was hard to watch. Finding any excuse to get his hands on his wife's growing belly.

His brother, the lone wolf Colton had always admired, had turned into a family man.

He never would have believed it.

"What time you heading in?" Dillon asked.

"Probably around noon. I'll help out with the stock."

"What time is your ride?"

"Three."

Dillon reached in his pocket and pulled out a set of keys. He tossed them across the table to his brother. "Use the trailer if you want. I cleaned it out last year, but the propane tanks are full. You can stay in it for the weekend if you like."

"Thanks. But, don't you need help around here?"

"Nah. We'll be good." Dillon glanced at Gloria before asking, "You seeing Ashley today?"

Holy hell. He'd almost forgotten. He was supposed to be *Plain Jane's* boyfriend. "Yeah," he said dismissively. "I'll probably grab some lunch with her or something."

Gloria, glanced at her husband and then set her female sights on Colton.

Oh shit. He knew that look. Let the inquisition begin.

"Ashley Ozark? Isn't she the nice girl at Heart's Bouquet, the flower shop?"

Colton had no idea if she worked there. "You know her?"

"Sure," Gloria said. "She's been so helpful with the last couple of weddings we've hosted." She carefully set her mug of tea on the table. "So, where'd you two meet?"

"At the Prospectors." Colton dove into his breakfast.

"She doesn't seem your type."

With fork midway to his mouth, he said, "I wasn't aware I had a type."

Dillon and Gloria looked at one another and then simultaneously broke into laughter.

"Why isn't she my type?" Colton asked, not appreciating the laughter in the least.

"Um, she's an artist. A feminist. A smart girl with a future."

Okay. What the hell did people take him for? An idiot who wasn't going anywhere? "You saying she's too good for me?"

Gloria pushed herself out of her chair, leading with her baby tummy. "I'm just saying that she doesn't seem like *fling* type material."

"Hold on, now," Dillon called after his wife as she made her way toward the kitchen. "Not to defend my depraved little brother, but it seems to me you tried to break up a fling last Christmas."

"Yeah, so?"

"So, you didn't call that one correctly."

Gloria may have waddled like a nearly full-term pregnant woman, but she could still spin around with the grace of a ballerina if the moment called for it. "What did you say?"

"I'm saying you were wrong the last time you tried to break up a fling."

She raised a single finger in the air and held it there, for effect.

Colton sat back in his chair, enjoying the show, glad the attention was off of him.

“I was *not* wrong.”

“Well, now...”

The finger was now pointed severely at her husband. “Jolie was not looking for a fling. Neither was Thad. Might I remind you, they are *still* together. By definition a fling would have ended long ago. Therefore, I was right.”

“However you want to spin it, Red. You do that.”

His fiery sister-in-law growled, right up until his brother stalked up to her, pulled her close and whispered loud enough for Colt to hear, “God, I love making you mad.”

Colton blinked. Then he frowned. Then he shook his head.

Just because *he* liked making the Ozark woman mad didn’t mean he had anything in common with his brother.

What he was doing with Ashley was a stunt. A game.

And if he also got a little turned on by making *The Righteous Sister* mad, it meant nothing at all.

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ASHLEY WAS PLEASED with the pictures she’d gotten of the parade. She scrolled through them for the third time, the marching bands, the brightly colored floats. The cowboys. She enlarged a few, but Colton wasn’t in any of them. After transferring her favorite images to a folder on her computer’s desktop, she sat back in her chair and rubbed her stomach. It had been feeling funny all day. Probably something she ate.

The doorbell sounded, and she unplugged her camera from her computer and went to the door. Jasmine was standing there, wearing a cute Western-style top, that sat low on her shoulders, and a denim skirt. Instead of the customary cowboy boots everyone else would be wearing, she was wearing sandals, showing off her professional pedicure.

“You ready?”

“Sure. C’mon in while I grab my stuff.”

Jasmine followed her through her father’s house to her bedroom.

“Seriously,” Jasmine said. “Your room is exactly the same. God, I wish my parents had stayed here in Half Moon. Their place in Denver just doesn’t feel like home when I go there.”

After graduating from college last year, Ash had come back to live with her father. It only made sense while she saved up money to leave again. Glancing around the room she’d grown up in, she

now saw it through Jasmine's eyes. While she hadn't bothered to change it because she told herself she wasn't staying long enough to go to the trouble, she now decided it wouldn't hurt to replace the posters on the wall with some of her own work. Maybe repaint, too. In fact, she'd stop by the thrift shop on Main and see if she could find a few new-to-her accents to spruce the place up a bit.

Draping her camera bag over her shoulder, she caught a glimpse of herself and Jasmine in the full-length mirror beside her door. Jasmine looking sophisticated and mature. Ashley? Well, she fit in perfectly with her old bedroom: looking like she was *exactly* the same girl she'd been in high school.

"Maybe I'll change," she said on a whim.

"Do you want help picking something out?" Jazz asked eagerly.

Ash opened her closet and sighed. "If you want. There aren't a lot of options, though."

Rifling through the limited clothes in Ashley's closet, Jasmine picked out a checked top and an old pair of jeans. The choices weren't much better than what Ashley was currently wearing, and she said so.

"Do you have scissors?"

"Yeah, why?"

"These just need a few alterations." After Ashley passed Jazz the scissors from her desk, Jasmine quickly cut the arms off the shirt and handed it to her. "Put this on." While Ash buttoned up the shirt, Jazz went to work, chopping the legs off the jeans. It happened so quick, Ash didn't have a chance to stop her and tell her those were her second favorite pair.

"Now these."

Ashley wriggled out of the jeans she was wearing and slid the shorts up her legs. She checked her image in the mirror. She looked ridiculous. The shirt hung over the too-short shorts, making it look like she wasn't wearing anything underneath. "I think they're too short and the—"

"I'm not done." Jasmine interrupted. Using her manicured nails, she distressed the bottom of the shorts, created a fringe of denim. "You have amazing legs. You need to show them off."

"I don't know," Ash said hesitantly, thinking the shorts were something Brandi would be more likely to wear.

"The shorts aren't too short. The shirt is too long."

Snip. Snip.

Before Ash could stop her, Jasmine had begun to chop off the bottom of the shirt. Once she was done, she removed all buttons from her navel down.

“Now, we just tie this in front like this.” She tied the two ends of material and turned Ashley toward the mirror. “Look at your stomach. People would kill to have a flat stomach like yours.” Jasmine smiled at their reflections. “I think this is exactly the kind of outfit that Colton would like, don’t you?”

“Do you think?”

“Uh, yeah. Watching him last night? He seems like a...manly man, you know?”

No, Ash did not know. Though a flashback from when Colton backed her up against the outside of the hotel made her catch her breath and warmed her skin. He’d certainly seemed *manly* then.

Jasmine reached around and unbuttoned another button so that the top of Ashley’s bra was visible. “He’s the kind of man that appreciates it when a woman looks like a woman.” She grinned. “And this should do it.”

Ashley gazed at her reflection. Did she want to tempt a guy like Colton?

Her sister’s snide remark rang between her ears, *What the hell are you doing with Colton Cross? ...I can tell when someone’s getting some. You—my uptight little sister—are not getting any.*

Who said she wanted anything from Colton Cross? She didn’t. But was there anything wrong with wanting people to think that she *could* tempt a cocky bull rider like Colton Cross?

Nope. Nothing wrong at all.

With shoulders back, Ash led the way to the front door.

Time to find the cowboy and enact a little simulated seduction.

However, once she and Jasmine arrived at the fairgrounds, Ashley forgot all about Colton. Or, nearly. He was like a morning coffee, long gone but the flavor still subtly lingering hours later.

She was too busy taking pictures of the grounds, the vendors, the contestants, the kids and games and food booths, while listening to Jasmine catch her up on the last five years of her life.

“I worked for a few years in my uncle’s law firm. It was okay, mostly administrative stuff. But I kept taking classes in the evenings.”

Ash focused the lens, zoomed in and focused again. A child’s face, crumpled, about to cry as his balloon slipped out of his fingers.

Click.

“What kind of classes?” Ash asked, letting the camera dangle from around her neck as they wandered past the chili tasting booths. “Law? You thinking about law school?”

Jasmine snorted. “No. I’m not you.” She sniffed. “Aesthetics. Hair. Laser. Makeup. You know. Beauty school stuff.”

Ashley glanced sideways at her friend. Jasmine had never got the kind of marks that she had in high school. But she was smart; she’d just spent more time on her wardrobe than on her studies. “You could be a lawyer if you wanted, you know.”

“Doesn’t matter. I don’t need to work.”

Ash stopped and looked at her friend. “Why not?”

A weird smile crossed Jazz’s face. “Parker’s loaded. You should see our place in Chicago.” She grabbed Ash’s hands. “In fact, you should come visit. No. You *have* to come. You’re going to be my maid of honor.”

Typical. Jasmine hadn’t asked Ash. She’d just decided. Ash both resented and envied that in her friend.

“So, tell me about Parker.”

“Oh, you have to meet him. He’s so...suave. Elegant. You know? He’s like Mr. *GQ*. Or something.”

Ash used the camera as a means to tune out her friend and her recitation of her perfect life. She wanted to be happy for her, she really, really did. But sometimes it was just so hard when Ashley’s own life felt so insignificant and provincial beside her friend’s.

Holding the camera in front of her face, she stopped just outside the rodeo grounds, taking a picture of four cowboys heading through the gates: three black hats, one white, Western shirts, bowlegged gaits, their worn jeans fitting perfectly.

Say what you want about cowboys, but rodeo boys had seriously nice asses.

Click.

“Excuse me, have you seen a little boy? Four years old, blond hair, Superman shirt, green balloon?”

Ashley lowered her camera. A woman she didn’t recognize stood there with a baby in her arms and a worried expression on her face.

“I don’t think so. What’s his name?” Jasmine asked.

“Noah.”

Ashley scrolled through the images on her camera, finding the one with the child and the balloon. Sure enough, the boy was wearing a Superman shirt. She showed it to the woman.

“Yes. That’s him. Where was he?”

“Over by the ring toss. Maybe ten, fifteen minutes ago.”

“Thank you.” The woman hurried off.

Ash checked her watch. The opening ceremony for the rodeo would be starting in five minutes. She was supposed to get pictures. She hesitated. “Maybe we should go give her a hand.”

“I’ll go,” Jasmine offered. “You go on in. I’ll meet up with you later.”

“Thanks, Jazz.”

Jazz took off after the young mom, walking briskly to catch up. A sting-y something-or-other reverberated inside Ashley’s chest. How was it possible to both like someone *so* much but also resent them, too? Jasmine was her best friend, and Ash—well, she just had to say it—she was jealous of her. Thoroughly, bitterly jealous.

Always had been.

With a shake of her head, she entered the rodeo grounds, showing her press pass to the ticket takers at the door. *And what does she do about her juvenile jealousy? Does she own up to it? Oh no. She goes and makes up a boyfriend to deal with it. Stupid.*

“Ash, up here.”

As the chair of the Fair Committee, her father was sitting on the stage behind the announcer’s podium. Ash climbed up to join him.

“This’ll be the best spot for the opening ceremonies.” He checked his watch. “You were cutting it close. It’s starting right away.”

“Then I’d say I was just on time.” She took a quick pic of her father and the other board members, all wearing white hats. Then got a picture of the announcer, Hal Roberts, just as he welcomed everyone to the kick off of the rodeo.

The opening procession commenced with the flag bearers on horseback, carrying the county, state and American flags. The rodeo princesses followed, then judges and competitors until the ring was filled with people on horses, stomping impatiently, picking up on the nerves of the competitors.

Before the national anthem could begin, there was a commotion just below the announcer’s table.

Shit!

A little boy wearing a Superman shirt had slipped between the bars separating the ring from the stands and was now walking amongst the legs of the already nervous horses. His face was red, and he was crying loudly.

Hal's voice rose in a panic, "There's a young child in the ring. Can everyone please remain—"

Before he could finish, a cowboy slid down from his horse, jogged over to the kid and scooped him up. He carried him toward the stage and handed him over to Hal, saying, "You're okay, kid. Everything's fine."

That's when Ashley realized two things.

First, she'd been on automatic pilot, watching the entire thing unfold from behind the lens of her camera, capturing the scene, frame by frame.

Secondly, and more importantly, it had been Colton Cross who'd jumped down to save the kid.