

**THE ROMEO ARRANGEMENT**

A SMALL TOWN ROMANCE

NICOLE SNOW

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## CONTENTS

### [About the Book](#)

1. [No Place to Crash \(Grace\)](#)
2. [No Dull Moment \(Ridge\)](#)
3. [No Fight Left \(Grace\)](#)
4. [No Easy Way Out \(Ridge\)](#)
5. [No Place Like Home \(Grace\)](#)
6. [No Change of Plans \(Ridge\)](#)
7. [No Surrender \(Grace\)](#)
8. [No Kept Secrets \(Ridge\)](#)
9. [No Rest for the Weary \(Grace\)](#)

10. [No Comfort \(Ridge\)](#)
11. [No Lucky Break \(Grace\)](#)
12. [No Buts \(Ridge\)](#)
13. [No Place to Hide \(Grace\)](#)
14. [No Grand Scheme \(Ridge\)](#)
15. [No Controlled Burn \(Grace\)](#)
16. [No Regrets \(Ridge\)](#)
17. [No Dreams Too Small \(Grace\)](#)
18. [No Cold Feet \(Ridge\)](#)
19. [No Waking Up \(Grace\)](#)
20. [No Calm Before Storms \(Ridge\)](#)
21. [No Trust Undone \(Grace\)](#)
22. [No Counting Chickens \(Ridge\)](#)
23. [No Faking It \(Grace\)](#)
24. [No Loose Ends \(Ridge\)](#)
25. [No Substitute \(Grace\)](#)

[Accidental Knight Preview](#)

[About Nicole Snow](#)

[More Books by Nicole](#)

**ABOUT THE BOOK**

He never bothered with hello.

The shrieking hot stranger had me dizzy the instant he said we're engaged.

Then he chased off the bully on our heels and dragged me back to his place  
for the night.

Pure insanity, right?

Wrong.

You don't let pride do the talking when you're homeless, on the run, and  
hauling around your sick father in a truck so old it must've been on Noah's  
Ark.

You definitely don't complain when Ridge Barnet takes charge.

(In)famous heartthrob. Stinking rich. Fed up owner of one angry rooster.

Eyes set to permanent storm.

Of course, it doesn't end there.

My unexpected Romeo doubles down on this ridiculous “fake fiancée”  
rescue scheme.

One blazing kiss shatters worlds.

I'm swept up in a small-town fairy tale, wishing I hadn't lost my faith in  
wishes years ago.

He's saving my life. Hero and done. Nothing more.

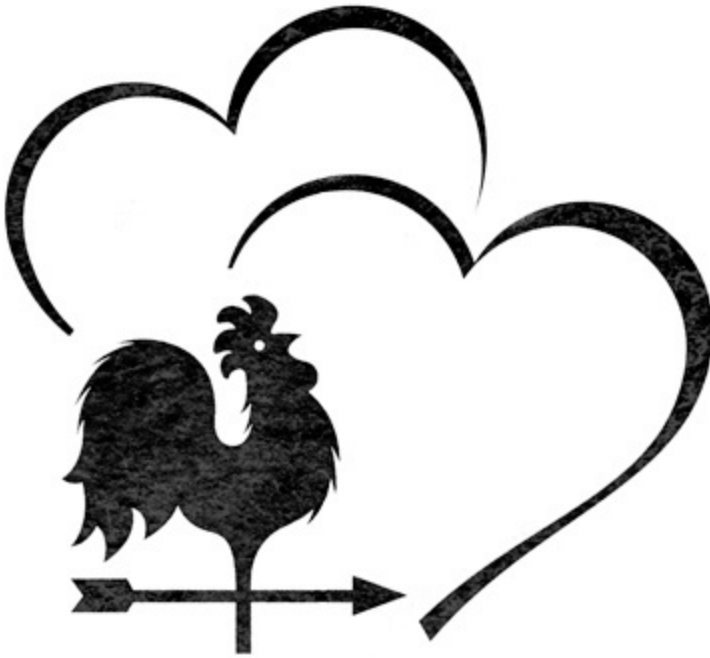
Prince Charmings don't really marry pumpkin farmers from Wisconsin.

Give me strength.

Tell me his gaze doesn't scream obsession.

Save me from his oh-so-believable growls.

Help me believe our little arrangement never, ever ends in “I do.”



1

## **NO PLACE TO CRASH (GRACE)**

“Careful, Gracie. This snow’s getting to be too much,” Dad growls, his eyes flicking across the road.

“Just a little longer. There has to be something up ahead.” I bite my lip, hoping to every star above that I’m right.

And it’s hard to hope when the stars are walled off behind the dense, angry clouds intent on burying us for the last hundred miles.

Oh, I've got all the fire under my ass a girl could ever need, but I'll tell you one thing—I'd *kill* for a touch of real fire right now.

I feel a mad affection for every human being who ever shivered, scowled up at the sky, and said *winter, bite me*.

If only winter was the end of my worries.

The loud, ragged cough coming from my father in the passenger seat has me

more nervous than the heavy snow drifting across the highway in blustery white

sheets. It's been snowing for hours.

This old truck, which had seen better days long before we left Wisconsin, has already been working overtime to pull the horse trailer up and down the rolling hills.

I'm keeping the speed low so I can try to avoid any mishaps. They're all too likely with the sort of luck we've had on our journey thus far. We must've lost a

good hour back in Minnesota, straining to change a flat.

Every time I glance at the old Ford's dashboard, I'm expecting to see red.

A check engine light. Low oil pressure. Battery, alternator, brakes, another broken thingamajig.

Nothing would surprise me.

Still, despite being rusted up and dented, no thanks to my teenage driving

skills years ago, the truck soldiers on. It's almost like family, an old workhorse with the air of an immortal.

Only, the signs of aging are as impossible to ignore as its scabs of rust.

I know it's a cheap metaphor for my father, who hacks up another coughing fit next to me.

Ask me how much I care about metaphors right now.

The once robust Nelson Sellers, who used to practically juggle hay bales, has

shrunk the past few months. It's not just his weight and musculature.

He slouches, even when sitting, something he always used to get after me for

as a kid.

Dad's demeanor has changed, his energy flatlining as his body limps along.

His once coppery-brown hair is dull silver, and that fiery shine in his blue eyes

that made him Dad is just...gone.

All depressing signs of the crushing weight we've shared lately.

But deep down, he's still a Sellers. He won't stop, and neither will I.

As long as this old Ford trudges on, so will we, all the way to Montana.

Same with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—aka Rosie and Stern—the two

horses riding in the trailer behind us in my rearview mirror. I'm not sure who loves them more, Dad or me.

They were his pride and joy once, and my best friends growing up.

Practically the only friends I'd had when we'd left the city for the small farm north of Milwaukee to raise pumpkins.

Yes, *pumpkins*.

Feels like an eternity ago now. I'd finished high school while living on the farm, moved out, went to college for interior design, and dreamed of covering pretty places in prettier ideas.

Sadly, pretty anything hasn't been in the cards for a long time.

I watched too many dreams get demolished on that farm. And then one day, when there was nothing left but smoldering ruins, we threw together our things

and hit the road while we still could.

Someday, I'll have my freaking slice of pretty.

Even if it feels like someday might as well be in the next century with this dark, deserted road and white dunes that could swallow a person whole crowding every mile.

"Gracie," Dad says, breathing heavy. "It's getting damn near impassable.

You're gonna have an accident. Pull over."

"I can't just stop here, Dad. There's nowhere to park." Not without

potentially trapping the truck in an icy grave, and us with it. Believe me, I would

if I could. Even in my boots, my toes are frozen nubs because the heater can't

keep up with the cold air invading the cab. "I can't make out a shoulder, let alone how deep the ditches are."

It's the truth, but I don't need to say it.

Dad's eyes aren't that bad.

He can see the snow-covered road and the huge flakes swirling around in the

beams of our headlights before splattering against the windshield and being swept away by frantic wipers.

"We'll pull over as soon as I find a hint of civilization," I tell him, scratching

my cheek.

"There has to be a town somewhere. I checked the map a hundred miles back; I know I saw something," he grumbles.

"Only *you* still read off of a paper atlas. Every phone has GPS that works most of the time, even when the service sucks." I give him a teasing smile, but it

fades just as fast when I see the look on his face.

I can tell how he's trying to hold in another cough. It's there behind the slight sideways quirk of his lips.

My heart hurts for him, and worry sours my stomach.

Congestive heart failure.

*Probable.*

That's what the emergency room doc said last week. We didn't get a chance to stick around for the follow-up with the cardiologist. Honestly, his ticker running out is the whole reason we're in God Forsaken Nowhere, North Dakota.

As soon as we got the bad news, I said we had to go.

Leave.

Before it's too late for him to find a little peace.

I'm still praying it isn't. Nobody deserves to spend their last days on earth being hunted.

"Can't believe how long this is taking," he says, reaching up to wipe at his side of the windshield. "There has to be a pit stop up ahead, a gas station... *something*."

"You'd think so," I say, hoping to lighten the mood. "But I'm pretty sure there are more oil drills than people out in these parts."

"Yeah, yeah. I heard all about the oil boom out here a few years back. Hell of an industry to be in," he answers dryly, but with a hint of a smile. "Oil crews

gotta eat, though. That means a town somewhere in this mess."

"It's coming," I say. "And then we'll stop for an overdue breather."

"Not too long," he reminds me, tapping a finger against his seat belt. "Just enough to take a leak and give Noelle a call. You said she left a few messages?"

"Right. I just haven't had time to—"

Those words stop short in my mouth when I notice an odd purple flashing light in the swirling wintry darkness beyond the headlights.

My eyes narrow to a squint.

It's almost like the purple light winks right back at me the harder I stare, holding the truck in what I hope is still our lane.

Weird.

I haven't seen a patch of clear pavement or another vehicle for miles, and I'm almost wondering if I'm seeing things. Hallucinating out of desperation.

Nope.

Purple lights. Still there. Still pulsing.

I'm hoping it's a business, not just some kind of derelict radio tower or utility site. My hands are cramped from white-knuckling the steering wheel for

what's felt like hours.

The tension in my shoulders and neck makes my muscles burn. It hurts to turn my head enough to glance at Dad again.

"You see that?" he asks. "That purple light?"

"Sure do. Glad it's not just me."

Coming closer now, I see the flashing light belongs to a sign. A tall one hoisted high in the sky. Between the snow and the distance, I can't see anything

below the sign, yet.

An old motel, maybe, but it could be something else, too.

“It looks like...a cat?” I whisper, trying to make sense of the round face outlined in bright royal purple with what looks like two pointy ears.

“Definitely

a cat. Meow.”

Now I can see the whiskers, the cartoonish grin, one eye winking as the sign

flicks back and forth.

“Thank God. Hope it’s not just a snowmobile dealer,” Dad mutters.

I get the reference to a big brand in winter gear, but I’m pretty sure their logo

doesn’t look anything like this. That winking face is actually kinda ridiculous, and by far the happiest thing I’ve seen all night.

“I think we’re in luck,” I say, smiling.

We’re close enough to read the name stenciled in curly lit letters under the cat’s face.

*The Purple Bobcat*, it reads. *Good eats. Beer. Fun.*

“Looks like a dive,” Dad says as the building comes into view. “Whatever, it’ll do.”

I nod, holding my breath for signs of vehicles in the lot. I don’t want to get my hopes up unless it’s still open.

The bar itself is a one-story wooden building painted bright purple. The owner must be a huge Prince fan or just hellbent on grabbing attention out here in the sticks.

Coming closer, the windows are lit up bright with beer signs. Looks like a few trucks parked in front of the building.

I exhale that breath I've been holding.

It may not be much, but right now a parking lot and a few walls feel like a luxury resort.

"It's still open. Hope you're hungry," I say, easing my foot off the gas.

I refrain from tapping the brakes. It's hard to determine just how much ice is

packed under the snow.

The last thing I need is to send the trailer fishtailing across the lot and smack

right into some good old boy's favorite pickup.

Two little blue reflectors sticking out above the snow tell me where the

driveway is. I slowly steer the truck between the reflectors and pull up along what I'm assuming is the edge of the parking area where there's room to park without boxing in other vehicles. Plenty of room to make an easy turn when it's

time to leave, too.

"Don't forget your hat," I remind Dad as I shut off the truck and stow the keys in my purse. "Go on ahead of me; it's freezing out here. I'll check on Rosie

and Stern, then meet you inside."

Dad grumbles under his breath.

Something about being perfectly capable of looking after himself, but he puts

on his wool-brimmed hat to humor me. I smile as he pulls the side flaps down

over his ears, giving me a firm look that says *happy?* before opening his door.

I dig around on my lap and find my green-and-gold stocking cap, and then tug on my thick, fur-lined, made-in-Duluth Chopper mittens. The wind coming

in through Dad's passenger door is so bitter it rips my breath away.

When I open my door, the cold makes me shiver from head to toe.

"Winter, bite me," I say, mostly to myself because I don't think Jack Frost is listening. And if he is, well, the sweeping chill he flings in my face is worse than

a middle finger.

Tucking my chin into the collar of my coat, I pull the fur-lined hood tighter around my face to help block the wind. I hate every single big fat snowflake stinging my cheeks and catching on my eyelashes as I waddle past the truck in

my boots to the trailer.

Thankfully, it only takes a few minutes to check on the horses. They must be

freezing, but they aren't showing any signs of distress from the ride or bad weather. I feed them a couple carrots they wolf down like starving beasts before

my own stomach growls.

If my lucky streak continues tonight, maybe this place will have something that isn't oozing grease. A girl can hope. It'd be nice to keep my blood sugar levels in the happy range where I'm not hankering to chew my own arm off.

By the time I enter the bar, I'm ready to call the weather a winner.

I'm chilled to the bone. The dense snow packed on my boots makes my feet feel like they're twenty pounds heavier. It's a workout as I go stomping through

the door.

The Purple Bobcat isn't nearly so colorful inside.

Too bad.

It's smaller than it looked on the outside, dark and dingy, but fairly clean. No

ripped-up seats or rickety tables or cracked tile floors. No ugly crowd of guys missing teeth or gals with their boobs hanging out of their shirts over pool tables,

either.

The wood-paneled walls are covered with metal signs advertising retro beers

and off-color jokes. Dad's found a table where he's parked himself to look over

a menu.

One of the only occupied tables tonight, it seems.

If this place has regulars, or newcomers, or even long-haul truckers looking for a nightcap and a side of bawdy conversation, the storm has kept them all away.

Who could blame them in this blizzard?

There's an older man and woman in a booth near the frosty windows, picking at what looks like plates of gyros and fries. The table Dad chose is in the

center of the room, surrounded by other empty ones.

At the bar, I count four guys on stools. A couple big blue-collar guys in stained coveralls—oil workers, maybe—plus two tall figures at the far end with

several seats between them and the other men.

The maybe-oil-workers are quiet, focused on their tall beers, but the two on the opposite end are talking loudly.

Well, one of them is.

He's tall. Built. Ginormous. Loud.

A tiger of a man stuffed in a red-and-black flannel shirt. I'm a little embarrassed when he whips around with a smile meant for the bartender.

Maybe he sensed the weirdo staring, and with said weirdo being me, looking

like Jack Frost just kicked my butt up and down the playground, I...

I can't hold it against him for wondering who the miserable, crazy lady is who just dragged herself in from the cold like a wet cat.

*Am I still staring?*

Maybe.

Because maybe I'm suddenly feeling a whole lot warmer taking in the handsome face perched on his wide shoulders, a jaw so defined it was cut by a

mad sculptor, over six feet of defiant muscle that looks like it's ready to burst right out of that flannel corral barely holding it.

Maybe he's sporting *just the right* sandy-dark stubble to sear a woman's skin, like this otherworldly, beautiful freak who just leaped out of a fashion ad.

Oh my God.

Um, and maybe he's staring right back. Turning the most obscene blue-eyed lightning I've ever been struck with on my bewildered face.

It's a look that bites.

A gaze that's too intense, too assessing, too ready to reach down inside me and dredge up feelings I have zero time for and even less energy to give.

It's a fight to tear my eyes away. I stomp my boots on the rubber mat out front again, taking my sweet time, saying a quick prayer that the next time I look

up, the tiger will have moved on to other things.

*Oh, thank hell.* I let out that breath I'd been holding in.

He's not facing me anymore, and he's back to telling his boisterous, animated story that's got the bartender laughing away. Seems they're two giant,

steely-eyed peas in a pod. The bartender is also a wall of a man with a thicker

beard and a rougher look in his eye.

The other guy seated next to Tiger, on the other hand...

He's just out of place.

Lean, older, and his button-down shirt and tie look far too posh for a bar called the Purple Bobcat. Whatever they're saying, he's just nodding along, looking bored out of his mind.

I flip my hood down while giving my boots one more good shake, then pull off my hat and mittens. I walk to the center of the room and sit down next to Dad.

"The horses are fine," I tell him, remembering how to speak.

"Figured they'd be. And what about you?" He covers his mouth as he coughs.

"Still kicking," I whisper, reaching to slide his menu across to me.

"Anything good here?"

He can't answer while he's busy fighting his own lungs.

God. We've been on the road for over twelve hours, but with this weather, we still have a good four or five more to go to Miles City.

That concerns me a lot. Dad's beaten, worn out, drained.

It's hard to keep my eyes glued to the menu for the sake of being polite. But he hates it when I fuss over his health, even if I have every reason to.

With a soft sigh, I set my hat and mittens on the table while he takes a long drink of water.

“Listen...I think we need to call it a night. I’ll check to see if there are any motels nearby,” I say, pulling my phone out of my pocket.

“No, Grace. The horses can’t stay in that trailer overnight. They’ll freeze their rears off.” He inhales sharply. “I...I ordered us both some coffee, and he’s

making a fresh pot so we’ll have plenty more to go. We’ll wait for the snow to

let up and then press on. We can handle a few more hours. Noelle’s place isn’t

far.”

He’s so wrong I bite my tongue.

Jesus, I’m not sure if I can even *handle* a few more hours, but if he’s this determined...

I nod, but now there’s a new reason to be concerned when I look at my phone.

Three missed calls and a flurry of texts. They’re all from Noelle, and they say the same thing.

***Grace, call me ASAP.***

She’s my cousin, my mom’s side. I haven’t seen her since Mom’s funeral, but when I’d called in a nervous fit last week, she’d invited us to come to Montana and stay with her until our trouble gets sorted.

Our choices are pretty limited when we’re low on money, and Noelle is the

only family we know with a farm and plenty of space for us to bring along Rosie

and Stern.

Too bad Miles City is hundreds of miles from Wisconsin. I swear, we'd be there by now if it wasn't for that stupid flat and this intensifying storm we hit past Bismarck.

She and her husband have a hobby farm a lot like ours, only instead of pumpkins, they sell eggs, homemade cheeses, and other goods. She's always

wanted us to see it, and a small part of me was looking forward to being part of

something like that again.

That pit in my gut deepens, scrolling through the missed calls.

She's been texting for hours.

With the snow demanding every bit of my focus, I hadn't taken a hand off the steering wheel to do anything except hit the blinker switch to pull in here.

Crap. Whatever it is, I don't think she's just checking up on our progress.

The coffee arrives, steaming and black. I reach for a sugar packet and tear it right open, hoping nobody notices how my hands shake.

I thank the bartender before telling Dad, "Be right back. I need to use the ladies' room."

Tucking my phone in my pocket, I spot the restroom sign above a hallway near the end of the bar. Purple, what else?

Of course, I carefully avoid another awkward stare-down with Tiger Sex Eyes. He must be quite the comedian—the bartender and the oil guys are still roaring at whatever he’s saying.

Probably some crude joke that’d be too fitting for a place like this.

The hallway is short. I shove open the women’s door and enter the small, two-stalled room, pull out my phone, and hit Noelle’s contact.

She answers after one ring. “Grace? Oh my God, finally.”

“Yep, it’s me.” Turning around, I lean my backside against the top of the sink. “What’s wrong?”

She goes deathly quiet. “Well, um...have you guys left Milwaukee yet?”

“We left early this morning just like we planned. Had to change a tire on the truck halfway through Minnesota, then this snowstorm we ran into...we had to pull over. But we’re coming tonight, just a few more hours and—”

“Oh,” she whispers.

Another heavy silence.

That one, innocent word kills me.

*Don’t do this, Noelle*, I think to myself, trying not to fall over with my heart frozen.

“I...I really hoped I’d catch you while you were still at home.”

My nerves are a jumbled mess, a little more frayed with every word she speaks. Noelle doesn’t sound like her usual bubbly self, and I’m scared of what’s coming.

“What’s up?” I force the question through clenched teeth. “Noelle...what happened?”

“Well, uh...God, I hate to say this, but...something’s come up. You and Uncle Nelson aren’t going to be able to stay with us after all.”

*No.*

My heart hits my stomach and shatters like a snow globe on cement.

“I’m so sorry, Grace,” Noelle says, sniffing like she’s on the verge of tears.

“I hope you have somewhere else.”

Sure.

If we had *somewhere else*, I’d have never called her and wept with gratitude when she said we could come. It’s not like we were asking to move in.

We only needed a month or so, a few weeks, just enough time to check on Dad’s health and figure out our next move.

“What changed, Noelle?” I ask. Then, because she’s known to sugarcoat things, I add, “Tell me the truth.”

Her sad, heavy sigh echoes in the phone.

“I didn’t hear the message. James did. It was on the voicemail at the gift shop. It mentioned you and Uncle Nelson...something about not making everyone in the family sing the 'Old Milwaukee Blues.' It was menacing and it

came from an untraceable number. James wouldn't let me or the kids hear it.

I'm...I'm so sorry, Grace. I hate this, but we have children. We can't get involved in—"

"I get it," I snap, rubbing at the awful pain in my temple. "No, you can't risk

it. You...you did the right thing."

The words feel so numb, I have to keep repeating it over and over in my head.

But there's a deeper question nagging me.

*How did they know?*

Dad hasn't talked to anyone, and I sure as hell haven't.

We've given that maniac everything. *More* than everything, but it'll never be

enough.

Not for Clay Grendal. He's a flipping two-bit gangster, but in his mind, he's

Al Capone and El Chapo spliced together.

"Gracie, I'm scared for you and Uncle Nelson," Noelle whimpers, her voice

so low. "You need to call the police, the FBI, somebody. Get help!" she hisses.

"Go to the law before it's too late."

My stomach churns, pushing angry bile up my throat. My head is pounding;

I still haven't had anything to eat, and now with this bomb I've had dropped on

my head?

Appetite, gone.

The police can't do anything for us. No one can. The time to risk something

like that was years ago, not while my father might be down to his last precious

days on earth.

Dad doesn't need even more stress, his hourglass running out under the gun.

Literally and figuratively with constant interrogations. Maybe they'd even lock him up.

Years ago, while working at the railroad yards in Milwaukee, my father took

on a side gig helping *transport* goods that weren't quite legal.

Actually, it was as illegal as it gets. Both the transporting and the goods.

"I just...I thought Uncle Nelson was done with all that mob stuff," Noelle says quietly. "I thought he got out when he bought your farm years ago? When

you moved out of the city?"

My teeth pinch together so hard it hurts.

He had gotten out, or so we thought.

For a little while, life was good, until my mom got sick and the medical bills started coming fast and furious. Dad reached out to his old associates for a loan.

At the time, Grendal said it wasn't a loan, but a gift, for Dad's past services.

Then the bad luck started, and Dad found out fast what kind of strings came with

accepting that gift—vandalism, a fire in the barn, and a string of other events that truly had nothing to do with random chance.

It left us destitute, barely scraping by on miscellaneous pumpkin sales plus Dad's railroad pension. Clay doled out more money, and this time he expected

repayment— *with interest*.

We gave him everything we had, even offered the farm, but it wasn't

enough. He insisted on his pound of flesh. I think even if we'd won the lottery, it

still wouldn't have been enough.

He knew what he wanted out of this all along, and it has nothing to do with money.

"Grace? Are you still there?" Noelle asks. "I'm sorry. I know it isn't your fault. I didn't mean to bring back bad memories."

My stomach revolts. The bitter taste of bile burns my throat, coats my tongue, and I swallow hard not to gag.

"Still here," I tell her. Still hopelessly cursed. "Dad's out, just like I've told you for years. Don't worry, you aren't in any danger." I'm certain of that. Clay

Grendal only wants one thing.

I know because I had to face the devil himself, and I'll never, ever do it again.

"Where are you? Are you safe?" Noelle asks.

"North Dakota now. Don't know the town, but we're not that far from the Montana line." I turn around, pacing the small area between the vanity and the

stalls, desperate to get my head screwed back on.

"Oh, Grace. I'm sorry. I truly, truly am."

"I know you are, Noelle. I understand. Family and little ones first."

There's a long pause, then I hear her take a strained breath.

"What're you going to do?"

Boom. The million-dollar question I don't think I could pry a dollar from.

I don't have a clue.

Here we are, almost flat broke, stuck in the middle of flipping nowhere, while Mother Nature has major PMS.

"Don't worry," I say again. "We'll figure it out. I'll call you in a couple of days to check in."

"Oh, please do. I hate this again, Grace. If it was just me—"

"I know, Noelle. But James is right. Listen to your husband. You have to think about your family." Which is exactly what I have to do, too. "I'll call you soon."

“Okay. I really am sorry. Do you want us to contact anyone if...if you don’t check in?”

I rub at my eye, amazed at how hard it is to answer such a simple, but loaded

question.

But if I’m not in any position to call my cousin two days from now, her running to the police won’t help anything.

It’ll just put her family in the crosshairs they’re trying to avoid.

“No, don’t bother. I know you mean well. Bye, Noelle.” I click off, drop the phone on the counter, and hang my head over the sink.

What the hell am I going to do now?

Pushing myself back up, I pick up my phone, enter a stall and use the facilities, with my heart sinking lower and lower. There’s nowhere else for us.

*Nowhere.*

Exiting the stall, I wash my hands. As I reach for the paper towels, I see a candle sitting on top of the metal towel holder. Not quite up to normal safety standards but it’s what’s lying next to the candle that truly catches my eye.

A match. A spent one with its end charred black.

It makes me think of Mom, and despite the hopelessness inside me, a grin tugs at my lips.

*If you’ve got a light, you’ve still got a wish.*

She must've said that line a thousand times. I don't know if she stole it from a movie, a song, a book, a story her grandmother told her, or what.

Sometimes it haunts me, but right now, I know my wish like I know this sickly adrenaline hangover coursing through my veins.

I wish this wasn't my life.

I wish I could wake up in a cold sweat, toss back a glass of water, and get out

of bed.

I wish I could start the day living a boring normal Wisconsin life. Not this lethal nightmare.

But it's not a horrific dream.

It's as real as can be, and this is a world where wishes rarely come true.

This is a life where I traded my faith in wishing to keep my sanity.

I stare at the blackened match for a few more seconds and shrug. We're not totally beaten yet.

My credit cards aren't quite maxed out, and I have enough to put us up in some cheap motel for a little while. So onward we go.

Walking out of the bathroom, I also wish I'd drank my coffee before calling

Noelle. It's sure to be cold now.

Lukewarm coffee has nothing on my insides when I reach the end of the hall

and spot the man who's just walked through the door.

He's tall. Bald. A human brick in neutral colors. A mosaic of shapes runs up one side of his face, more like a sinister mask than a tattoo.

I've never seen him before, but my instincts tell me he's more bad news—what else?—even before his eyes lock on Dad and he's heading for our table.

*It. Can't. Be.*

I shoot around the end of the bar, and in my hurry to get to my father, I bump

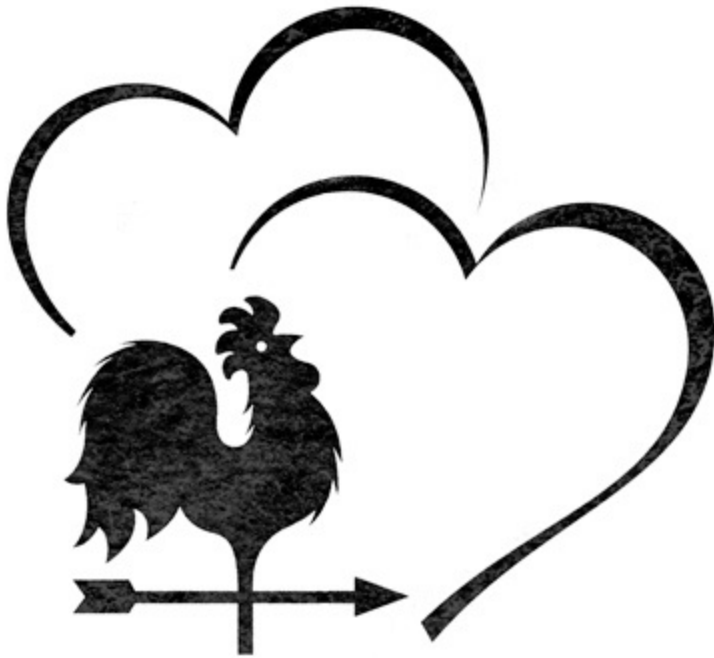
into the tall glum man dressed in business attire who's on his feet and making his way toward the bathrooms.

“Sorry!” I say and continue rushing toward the table.

Baldy has already arrived, though, and I can hear him snarling behind a nasty

smirk.

“Never thought I'd find your ass in this storm. You finally ready to talk sense, old man, or what?”



2

## **NO DULL MOMENT (RIDGE)**

“Man, if I know one thing about you—and I’ve learned all I need to know about Ridge Barnet for this lifetime—you’re full of shit. This place is perfect.” Grady gives me the evil eye, picking up another glass from the

washer behind the bar to towel dry.

I smile, throwing an arm around Tobin’s shoulders. He’s sitting on the stool next to me.

His eyes flick to my hand like he’s ready to tear it off. How he’s spent his life by my side, a glorified babysitter trying to save me from myself, I’ll never

know.

Poor bastard.

He's in his fifties now. He must've loved the few years I was in the military with Uncle Sam playing chaperone instead.

Probably the only time he's relaxed in his entire life. If only it'd convinced him I can look after my own sorry ass, but I keep him around because I know what a struggle it is for valets his age to find new work.

My ma hired him originally, then made him my personal valet when I got older. Mainly because at fifteen, a kid's old enough to avoid lighting the house

on fire, but too stupid to avoid speeding tickets and hangovers from contraband

booze—hopefully not at the same time.

“I'm right, aren't I, Tobin? Back me up,” I say, pulling him into the conversation with Grady, who's hell-bent on insisting we do a film here in town.

He's too proud of fixing this place up. Ever since he took over the Purple Bobcat from Wylie last fall, I think the bar's right up there with his kids in the

pride and joy department.

“Tobin,” I grunt, nudging him again.

“Do we really need to have this debate? Perhaps it's time we go,” Tobin answers, tugging down the cuffs of his white dress shirt and flicking my

arm away. “It’s still snowing, Ridge. The driveway will be drifted over by now, and

if it’s not plowed out by morning—”

“I’m not ready to go home to an empty house, where I’m sure we’ll be snowed in for days. We have four-wheel drive for a reason,” I tell him, taking another pull off my beer. “Lighten up and tell Grady here that Westerns aren’t selling like they used to. You know I’m talking from experience.”

That’s the excuse the producer of my last film used to explain why the movie

was a dud.

Hardly true.

The script sucked, the creative team bungled the plot, and the conflict was all

too predictable. They turned my glorious redeemed outlaw flick into a piss-poor

shoot ’em up with a flimsy romance so bad I think any Harlequin author would

jump at the chance to slap them upside the head.

Nothing like the stuff real Western fans want.

They like action. Mystery. Good guys and bad guys and heroines who sass off and give a dude a fight before they torch the sheets.

If you’re going to spend two hours glued to a chair, watching a screen, you expect something *gripping*, dammit.

“I tell you, Ridge,” Grady rumbles again, refilling Tobin’s water. “The market’s due for a comeback anytime. You hear the latest news from one state

over? They had a showdown worthy of John Wayne, a ghost town, even a frigging rock from—”

“Dude. This isn’t Heart’s Edge,” I cut in, holding up a finger. “This is Dallas, North Dakota. You want this place to be movie famous—or even Heart’s

Edge-documentary famous—you need a good reason to put it on the map.”

Grady drags a hand through his thick beard, his eyebrows pulling together.

“We’ve had to eat our drama pie. Hell, that tale with North Earhart Oil, how old

man Reed’s granddaughter inherited everything, and how Bella and her

bodyguard saved Dallas from those Jupiter Oil fucks...now *that’s* a story. Great movie material right there. She wound up marrying her bodyguard. Tell me that

ain’t romance.”

I snort, trying not to laugh as I glug down another sip of beer.

“I mean, Edison might be Hollywood stuff. He’s a lot more lovable than Bojack.”

“Shit, man, the only thing Edison the horse *can’t* do is speak,” Grady says, grinning as the oil guys laugh at our conversation.

Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard the whole wild story before.

I know Drake and Bella Larkin personally. They're my neighbors.

As close to real neighbors as they can be, with each of us owning more acreage than the eye can see. They're good people, and I like them. I've caught

their boy Edison on my property more than a few times and brought him home

after he Houdinis his way out every lock known to man.

Exactly why I'd never blow their privacy by pitching anything about their lives to the industry.

*Based on a true* story sucks for a lot of folks when it's their story.

Drake and Bella are too smart for that crap and too busy, practically employing half this town in the oil fields.

"Ridge," Tobin says in his slightly smarmy, always stern tone. "It's going on

eight o'clock."

"Oh, is that my bedtime?" I ask, letting out a chuckle, then looking at Grady.

"You see what I put up with? I'll trade you for the kids."

He rolls his eyes, topping off my beer.

Truth be told, I'm not nearly as drunk as I'm letting on. I just like pulling old

Tobin's tail every once in a while, waiting for the day I might be able to get him

plastered enough to stop fussing over damn near every detail of everything.

That's the good part about being an actor—well, *former* actor.

I can still turn the charm on and off on demand. The other thing about being an actor, you have to learn to believe in lies, in fiction, in the utterly ridiculous.

Maybe I've been doing that most of my life, even before making my first movie.

One thing that's true is that the winter this year doesn't want to end. It's late March, and we're still getting enough powder to make it look like the second coming of Christmas.

When I moved to Nothing, North Dakota, I'd wanted out of the limelight. A low profile and a chance to remake my life away from California and any gossip asshole ready to flash a camera in my face.

It was easy to get that here.

I just wish it didn't come with a metric fuck-ton of winter.

Tobin and I have been cooped up at the ranch for months going stir-crazy.

Even the biggest, sleekest places you spend a pretty penny having tailored to your specifications start to feel like prisons when there's only one person to talk

to.

After hearing another storm was due tonight, I'd insisted we go to town, stock up on supplies, and visit other human beings while we can.

Ideally, human beings who don't spend their Friday nights with an ironing board and Russian lit novels bigger than my head.

Hell, it could be two weeks before we even get mail again.

Not that I receive a lot that escapes being fed to the fireplace, but the whole rain, snow, sleet, or hail brag isn't true. Not when it comes to postal deliveries in rural North Dakota.

A junk letter offering a chance to win a million bucks in a sweepstakes isn't worth a mailman sliding off the road and turning up frozen solid in the spring thaw.

I'm only *slightly* exaggerating. Without a plow, those drifts outside could swallow a person whole until summer.

"Need I remind you, we have groceries," Tobin says, lifting his eyebrows.

I laugh, loving that predictable and endearing face he makes when he's really

had enough of me for one night but can't bring himself to tell me off. My eyes

wander the bar.

Banter, beer, and good company aside, I can't shake the sense that something's off with the vibe here tonight.

Not with me, but with someone close by. It's not Grady or the oil guys, or even that married couple in the corner enjoying a quiet dinner.

Call it a sixth sense. An instinct I should thank the Army for helping me develop. It saved us more than a few times when enemy combatants decided to

make our lives a little more interesting than the monotony of patrol.

Turning, I see the other couple, the girl and the older guy.

She'd caught my eye like a fly in a trap when she walked in, red-faced and bundled up and drumming her boots off. I know I've been cooped up in a Dallas

winter too long when a country girl who's a hot mess just looks...hot.

Fuck me.

I know how it sounds.

Desperate, outlandish, probably a little borked in the head. My buddy,

Grady, might be the first to tell anyone I'm *all* of those things, and I might tell him where he can shove it.

The woman was magnetic.

Two pale-blue eyes set in a shapely face, framed by a wavy mane of golden blonde hair she tugged free from her hat.

The cute kind of oval face that makes any red-blooded dude want to stare a little longer.

Long legs made for sin, supple frame, a little extra cushion in all the right places.

I've seen enough scrawny supermodels for this lifetime back in L.A.

She wore a puffy white coat, tight blue jeans, and insulated rubber boots that

came up to her knees. Black ones. They were so coated with snow when she'd

walked in she had to damn near dance on the mat to pry it off.

Seems too snow-packed to have just walked across the parking lot. She hadn't come inside until later, several minutes after the old man.

I couldn't even get a clear view at her goods, which tells me right now I'm more buzzed than I should be.

Like hell I'm admitting anything to Tobin, though.

I also can't decipher the weird look she gave me.

It had its own gravity. This desperate fencing stare that had me pushing my toes into the ground, ready to jump up and approach her if she'd let it linger a few seconds longer.

She didn't.

Doesn't mean I stopped keeping an eye on her between doling out plenty of crap to go around for Tobin and Grady.

Magnetic Girl isn't alone anymore. There's a third person at their table, a punk with a face tattoo who joined the old man and young woman.

I don't like it. Can't shake the sense that this visitor who walked in from the cold earlier isn't quite welcome.

I don't recognize them, though. For all I know, they might be locals, or just travelers unlucky enough to be passing through on a stormy night.

I've only lived here since late last summer, and due to being snowed in at the

ranch, I don't know that many Dallas folk.

Surveying the scene, I replay what I remember. They'd ordered coffee after walking inside, but she'd gone to the restroom before drinking hers, nearly knocking over Tobin in her rush back. The old man sat alone for a while, fighting back a cough between sips of water. Then came the prick who's hunched over, glaring across their table at them.

"Hey, Grady." I curl a finger, instructing him to lean over the bar and come closer. "You know those guys?"

I nod toward the trio.

"Nah, never seen them before. Why?" Grady shrugs his big shoulders.

"Guess I should see if they need more coffee. The old guy said he wanted to fill

up a thermos for the road. Can't imagine they plan to go far in this mess."

I spin my stool all the way around so I can get a better look at them.

Yeah, there's something seriously off here, no question.

The bald guy seems to be doing most of the talking, running his mouth like he's the center of attention. The girl keeps shaking her head. The old guy looks

thoroughly pissed, like he'd enjoy nothing better than ringing Baldy's neck, but

between his coughing and age, he doesn't have it in him.

I don't like this shit. I hate bullies, thugs, or scum-of-the-earth types throwing their weight around.

Whatever else I don't know about their situation, I know Baldy over there is all three.

"Ridge," Tobin says with a warning tone, gently jostling my shoulder with his elbow.

He must see the hawkish look in my eye.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to do anything," I tell him, already planting my feet firmly on the floor.

Then the bald fuck grabs the woman's wrist.

Change of plans.

"Oh, hell no," I mutter through clenched teeth.

Grady gives me a concerned look, but it's already too late.

I'm up, barreling toward them before my brain has a chance to catch up with

my stride.

There's a reason I can't stand to see some towering ogre jerk a lady around like she's his toy poodle. And right now, that reason comes back to me in hot,

angry red flashes screaming *do something!*

I know it's none of my business.