

Because
of **YOU**

KRISTINA O'GRADY

Kristina O'Grady

**Because Of You: A blazing
hot cowboy romance**

«HarperCollins»

O'Grady K.

Because Of You: A blazing hot cowboy romance / K. O'Grady —
«HarperCollins»,

‘I didn't want to put it down’ – Shari (Goodreads) One sizzling night... One life-changing moment! Beth Copeland has made a terrible mistake. She slept with her long time crush Mark Asher...the man she couldn't get out of her head, the man she dreamed about...the man who recently broke up with her best friend, Kelsey Woods! Beth is consumed with guilt and is certain she will never let that one night of passion be repeated, but sometimes a gorgeous cowboy is hard to resist...The second blazing novel in the brand new Copeland Ranch romance trilogy from Kristina O'Grady THE COPELAND RANCH TRILOGY Book 1 – I Choose You Book 2 – Because of You Book 3 – All for You Praise for The Copeland Ranch Trilogy ‘Great second chance romance.’ – Megan Wylke (Goodreads) on All for You ‘This is a story with an engaging plot, great, well portrayed characters, family drama and history that is dramatically revealed with near fatal consequences.’ – Elaine (Goodreads) on I Choose You ‘This is a truly engaging story and the two main characters are interesting, romantic and totally hot for each other.’ – LJT (Goodreads) on I Choose You

One sizzling night... One life-changing moment!

Beth Copeland has made a terrible mistake. She slept with her long time-crush Mark Asher... the man she couldn't get out of her head, the man she dreamed about...the man who recently broke up with her best friend Kelsey Woods!

Beth is consumed with guilt and is certain she will never let that one night of passion be repeated, but sometimes a gorgeous cowboy is hard to resist...

[Also by Kristina O'Grady](#)

Debutantes Don't Date

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Because of You

Kristina O'Grady



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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HQ

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KRISTINA O'GRADY

has always loved telling a good story. She took up writing at a young age and spent many hours – when she should have been doing her math homework – scribbling romance stories in a book she hid in her sock drawer.

She grew up on a cattle ranch in Western Canada and loves reminiscing by writing about cowboys and their horses.

In 2000 Kristina met her own knight in shining armour/cowboy who swept her off her feet and across the world to New Zealand, where she now lives on a sheep and beef farm with her amazingly supportive husband, three gorgeous young kids, seven working dogs and one very needy cat.

Because of You is her fourth book.

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Blurb](#)

[Book List](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Author Bio](#)

[Acknowledgement](#)

[Dedication](#)

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Epilogue

[Excerpt](#)

[Endpages](#)

About the Publisher

Without certain people the story of Beth and Mark would never have seen the light of day.

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A special big thank you to my family and friends. I Love you.

And finally to my editor, Victoria Oundjian, thank you for everything you do for me and for my writing. Without a doubt this book is here *Because of You*.

To Mick, because I love you.

Chapter 1

Sunlight bounced off the white sheets and shone into her eyes. With a groan, Beth Copeland rolled over and covered her head with her pillow. God, her head hurt. It was way too early to be up. The mattress dipped beside her.

WTF?

She peeked out from under her pillow. Skin. A glorious expanse of golden skin greeted her eyes. It took her a moment of brazen observation before images of last night filtered through her mind.

Flashes of strobe lights and sweaty bodies gyrating on the dance floor swept through her hazy memory. And booze, lots and lots of booze. She groaned and covered her face back up with the pillow. No wonder she didn't feel so hot. But there was still the matter of the expanse of skin lying next to her. She peeked again, this time following the trail of skin up towards the other pillow.

Her eyes swept across his face, taking in every glorious feature as she slowly moved her eyes upward.

Oh no. It couldn't be.

Blue eyes pierced hers through his heavily lidded lashes.

She sat bolt upright, clutching the sheet to her bare breasts. She looked at the man lying next to her in horror. *Sweet Jesus, he was naked!*

'You alright, Beth? You look like you've seen a pink cow.' Mark Asher, the man who she'd had a crush on since forever, grinned up at her.

She opened her mouth but no sound came out. How could she have gone home with him? She looked down at her own nakedness flimsily covered in a sheet. How could she have done *that* with him? Oh my God, he was practically *married*.

He sat up, obviously not caring if his half of the sheet covered all his important bits. No matter how hard she tried not to look, her eyes kept straying to what should have been under the covers.

'Like what you see, B? Instead of just looking, we could make use of it, you know.' Mark grinned at her again, this time his smile full of the mischief she was used to on his face.

She clutched the sheet tighter against her breasts, 'Not on your life, Mark, put that thing away.' She deliberately averted her eyes and looked out the window at the trees in his back yard. 'How did I end up here? Naked. In your bed?'

'Don't you remember, B?' He reached out and tucked a wayward strand of her hair behind her ear, still not bothering to hike the sheet any higher. 'Helga left with Ben, along with her keys. You were stuck at The Jackson and decided to hang out with me and the boys once all your friends left. One thing led to another and we ended up here'

'We...um, never did...um,' she said, waving her hand between them, 'anything, did we?'

'Trust me, B, if we had sex, you'd remember. We did get a little frisky, but you passed out and I'm not the sort of guy to take advantage of a friend.'

Beth turned back to face him. 'What's going on, Mark? Why am I here and not Kelsey? What are you playing at?'

‘Nothing,’ he said, letting out a long sigh. ‘You know as well as I do, B, Kelsey and I broke up weeks ago.’

‘But everyone thought you were getting married. You were dating forever.’ She squirmed. It was so uncomfortable sitting naked in the bed her friend Kelsey not long ago shared with the man lying next to her. She shifted closer to the edge and looked around for her clothes. It was well past time she’d left.

Mark reached out and touched her arm. ‘Hey, it’s alright,’ he said gently. ‘We never did anything last night. I promise.’

She looked into his eyes and trusted him. In all the years Beth knew Mark Asher, she never knew him to lie. At least not to her. He always, no matter how painful, told her the truth. She nodded. A tear slipped down her cheek. What *had* she done? How could she even be here with him? It didn’t matter that he’d broken up with Kelsey. Her friend was going to kill her...and with good reason. Even if they hadn’t done anything, she was still naked in his bed.

Beth had never breathed anything to anyone about how she felt about Mark, especially since Kelsey started dating him. But ever since the first day her brother Ben had dragged Mark home with him when they were kids, she was lost. Lightning struck and from then on she was ruined for anyone else. Sure she’d dated, but no one could live up to her brother’s best friend. Having him lying next to her, naked, was more than anything she could have ever hoped for...him being her friend’s ex was a nightmare.

She checked the room again, this time not caring if he actually noticed what she was doing. Where *were* her clothes? Surely she didn’t leave them behind at the bar. She desperately tried to recall what happened after they arrived at Mark’s but her mind stubbornly stayed blank.

‘Hang on, B, I’ll get your clothes for you.’ Mark seemed to read her mind. He hopped out of bed and went out into the hallway, not bothering to pull on some pants before he walked across the room. Beth’s eyes were glued to his backside; she couldn’t look away even if she tried.

He came back into the room with her clothes from last night in his arms. He dumped them on the bed. ‘They stink,’ he said, wrinkling his nose. ‘Did you bathe in bourbon last night or something?’

The stench reached her nose and a wave of nausea swept through her and she had to breathe through her mouth and swallow several times before she trusted herself enough to say anything. ‘Take them away,’ she gasped. It did smell as though she had taken a bath in bourbon...and rye and tequila. *Oh God*, she was going to be sick. She struggled to untangle the sheets from around her legs while trying to stand up at the same time. She needed to get to the bathroom – fast. The sheets refused to let go and she fell across the floor in a heap. Of course they decided to unravel at that moment and leave her naked and exposed on the floor.

Mark grabbed the offending clothes, chucked them back into the hallway. ‘I guess now we know why we left them out there. You can borrow some of mine,’ he said as he reached down and pulled her to her feet.

The shock of his bare skin touching hers sank the contents of her stomach back down where they belonged.

[Chapter 2](#)

Her skin felt like silk.

Mark slowly slid his hands down her arms. The soft hairs sprung up at his touch. He circled her wrist and drew her a step closer, her feet still tangled in the sheet on the ground, making her stumble slightly against him. Her bare breasts brushed against his chest. Heat rushed through him until he couldn’t resist any longer. He lowered his head down to hers until his lips were a fraction away from her mouth.

He wasn’t sure if the moan he heard came from her lips or his. He didn’t stop to find out. He couldn’t arrest his descent. He’d waited a lifetime for this moment. He tangled his hands in her hair and tugged her the last few inches towards him.

Her lips were soft and welcoming. Her mouth opened for him on a gasp. Desire consumed him, making him lightheaded and single-minded. His hands roamed her back and across her shoulders. He caressed her skin everywhere he could reach. Reality was far better than the fantasies he'd had about her all these years.

Mark stepped closer until Beth was completely pressed against him, hip to chest. He shuffled her backwards until her legs bumped against the bed. Slowly he lowered her down to the mattress, his lips remaining locked on hers the entire time.

She reached up for him, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him down on top of her. Pleasure rushed through him at the evidence of her wanting him. This was the moment he'd only dreamed of. There was no longer any room for second guesses or regrets.

Mark slowly trailed kisses along her jaw and down her neck, savouring every moment. She writhed beneath him as his lips slipped closer to her exposed nipples but he wasn't going to rush, no matter how much his body screamed at him to enter her.

With reverence, he skimmed his hands over the muscles of her stomach. Her skin rippled with his touch. He remembered from their childhood that she was ticklish. He lightly kissed her ribs. She jerked beneath him and laughed breathlessly.

'Mark!'

'Sorry,' he whispered against her breast and drew a nipple into his mouth. She cried out and arched her back, her laughter gone. Her hands clutched at him and pulled him tighter against her. Her body was hot beneath his lips as he rolled her nipple with his tongue.

He reached down to her hot centre. He flicked her bud with his thumb and she shivered beneath him. His erection grew and he moved his lips to her other breast.

'Mark!' she gasped on an indrawn breath as her hips arched into his hand.

He released her nipple and brought his mouth back up to hers, kissing her fiercely.

'Beth, I need you,' he whispered against her lips, 'Now.' He couldn't wait any longer.

'Hurry,' she moaned, clutching at his shoulders.

She didn't need to ask him twice. He positioned himself and slid into her with one thrust. Pleasure rushed through him with each stroke. He had never experienced ecstasy anything like this before. He gritted his teeth, trying to stay the inevitable. Beth's muscles contracted around him seconds before she fell apart. He thrust once more and with a starburst behind his eyes, he collapsed on top of her.

Mark was heavy lying on top of her but she revelled in the weight. Her heart felt as though it was finally home. She breathed in the scent of his skin. He smelled of last night, man and sex. A small smile graced her lips.

He lifted his head and looked at her for a moment before he smiled, kissed her lips and then rolled off her, bringing her with him until she was snuggled against his chest.

Beth couldn't have moved if she wanted to. Pleasure still hummed through every vein of her body but every muscle was slack and listless. Mark was warm and comfortable against her back. In moments her eyelids drooped and sleep claimed her.

The sun was higher in the sky when she opened her eyes again. The bed beside her was empty but still warm. She could hear water running in the en suite. Mark must be in the shower. She felt so much better now that she'd had a good sleep.

There was no clock in Mark's room. She didn't have a clue how he managed to wake up in time for work every day without an alarm, but she'd never heard of him being late.

Beth pulled on one of Mark's shirts and her underwear she found on the floor next to the bed. She cautiously approached her booze-contaminated clothes in the hall and fished her cell phone from the back pocket of her jeans.

Jeez, it was lunchtime already. Her phone beeped with a text from Ben.

Rough night last night?

She smiled. Trust Ben to find the humour in any situation. She typed fast and chuckled as she sent her reply.

Helga took car keys home, had to catch a ride. At Mark's...don't tell Mom!

She knew Ben would laugh at the mention of Mom. It was a running family joke. When they were kids they always said '*don't tell Mom*' whenever they were doing something they shouldn't be.

She was just about to turn her phone off and find some pants in Mark's closet when her phone beeped again. Ben wasn't the only one trying to get hold of her. There were twelve messages waiting for her. She opened the message folder.

Ice rushed through her veins when she saw the message.

I think Mark went home with someone last night! His phone is off.

Beth stared at the message in horror.

Can you come over?

Oh God, how could she have forgotten about Kelsey?

Chapter 3

Mark was just getting out of the shower when he heard Beth rummaging around in his room. He could hear his drawers being pulled out of the dresser and the screech of metal hangers being dragged across the bar in his closet. *What the hell...?*

He wrapped a towel around his hips and stepped into his bedroom. Beth was pulling up a pair of his sweatpants and trying to shove her feet into her cowboy boots at the same time.

He grabbed her arm to steady her before she fell over. The panic in her eyes made him take a step back.

'Are you alright, B? What's happened?'

'Sorry, Mark, I've got to go,' she said, bending down to tug on the tabs of her boots. 'My clothes stink. You said I could borrow some of yours? I'll wash them and give them back.'

The happiness he'd felt when he woke up with her in his arms faded. She wouldn't even look him in the eye.

'Beth, what's wrong?'

She slowly raised her eyes to his. His heart stopped with the look she gave him.

'I can't stay.'

'I can see that.' It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure she wanted to leave. 'But why? What's happened?'

'Kelsey sent me a text.'

Shit.

'She was your girlfriend only a month ago, Mark, and she's one of my friends. What we did this morning was so wrong on so many levels. If she ever finds out...I just can't do this to her.' She shook her head, the panic in her eyes no less intense than it was when he came into the room.

He let go of her arm and ran his hand through his wet hair. 'Yes, but that was true a few minutes ago as well. It didn't seem to bother you while you were sleeping in my arms. Why the rush to leave now?'

Beth tossed her hair over her shoulder in a move he's never seen her do before. The fight went out of her and she deflated before him. 'She knows you went home with someone,' she whispered. 'How am I going to tell her that it was me? She'll be heartbroken.' She started walking down the hall toward the door. In a moment she'd be gone.

'How is she going to know it was you?' he called after her but she'd already gone out the door. His feet wouldn't listen as his mind screamed at him to chase after her and he stood there rooted to the hardwood floor as she walked out of his life.

This morning he'd thought all his Christmases had come at once, but now he knew he had an even harder battle to convince her that they belonged together. And how the hell was he going to do that?

Beth pulled her truck up in front of Kelsey's small house. She could have walked from Mark's; it was just around the corner, but she had the feeling she might need to have a quick get-away so she went over to The Jackson to pick up her truck first, digging her spare keys out of the junk...glove box. She sat in her truck for a moment trying to gather her courage for what she knew she must say.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door, knowing if she was going to do this, she had to do it now. Not wanting to put off the inevitable any longer, Beth ran up the steps and knocked on her friend's front door.

Beth had always liked Kelsey's house. The dark-green front door welcomed you up onto her tiny porch and the butter-yellow siding made the white trim of her windows pop. The rustic WELCOME sign on the door above the brass knocker and the two wicker chairs on the porch completed the look.

Beth only had to wait a moment on the front step before Kelsey opened the door. Beth took a step back in shock. Not even when Kelsey and Mark broke up, did she look this bad. Her face was puffy and pale from crying. Tear tracks stained her cheeks and her eyes were red and almost swollen shut. She clutched bunched-up tissues in both of her hands. Her nose was red and raw looking.

'Can I come in?' Beth asked hesitantly.

Kelsey didn't reply but opened the door wider before turning and walking away from her back down the hall towards the kitchen.

The inside of the house was just as pretty as the outside. The cream-coloured walls of the hall showed off the pictures Kelsey had hung. Each room off the hallway had different tones of yellow on the walls, making each one unique but still connected with the rest of the house.

Beth followed Kelsey into the kitchen and cautiously sat down at the table.

'Want some coffee?' Kelsey asked. Her voice was flat and defeated, like she'd given up on life. It scared Beth and made her feel even worse than she already did.

'Look, Kelsey, there's something I need to tell you,' she began, 'It's about last night.'

'I already know.' Kelsey's tonelessly replied. 'Mark went home with that bitch Helga Hansen. Don't think that I don't know you tried to hide her identity from everyone. People are so dumb in this town. I can't believe they fell for your lies about her name being Jane Whatever. So what if her hair was in those stupid little ponytails and her eyes were overly enlarged by makeup. I knew it was her as soon as you two walked in together...But I got my own back, don't you worry.'

'Um, Kelsey, that's not why I'm here. It's about Mark, not some movie star that may or may not be in town.' Inside Beth was trying to stay calm. The mention of Helga had thrown her and she would love to tell Kelsey how lovely her new room-mate was but that wasn't why she was here and Helga's one stipulation to staying at Beth's Country Home was that no one was to know where she was staying.

'I went home with Mark.' *Shit*. She didn't mean to blurt it out quite like that.

Kelsey's face froze in a look of disgust and shock. 'You?!'

'The girls I came with left without me and I had no way of getting home and I couldn't drive, could I? I drank way too much. A lot of the night, I can only vaguely recall. Mark took me to his house and looked after me. I was pretty sick this morning,' Beth continued with a blush as she remembered the state she was in when she woke up. There was no way she was telling Kelsey she was naked in Mark's bed. 'I've been there all morning.'

'I know how you feel about him, Kelsey, and I'm really sorry but I had nowhere else to go... and he is still a friend of mine, not to mention Ben's best friend.'

'It was you? Not Helga?' Kelsey still looked at Beth with shock, but the disgust on her face was now gone.

'It was me.'

Beth looked down at her hands while Kelsey poured them both some fresh coffee. The look on Kelsey's face had changed to joy. Beth couldn't bring herself to look at.

'I'm so happy you came over,' Kelsey said, handing her a steaming cup. 'I was up all night thinking that he'd taken that...girl home with him and had sex with her. I couldn't handle it, you know? Imagining him entwined with someone else was torture but now that I know it was only you, well, it's all okay. I think we could get back together, you know? If I could just find out what the problem was, I could change. I could do that, you know? It wouldn't be too hard. I just don't know what went wrong. Do you think that he doesn't like brunettes? Maybe I could dye my hair. He always said yours caught the sunlight so nicely. What do you think? Could I pull off a blonde?'

Kelsey plopped herself in the chair opposite Beth and tossed her brown hair over her shoulder.

The breath seemed to be stuck in Beth's throat. How was she going to tell Kelsey what really happened this morning now? Her heart had leapt with joy when Kelsey mentioned Mark noticed her hair. How could she feel this elated about something like that while sitting across from his ex-girlfriend who was clearly still in love with him? What horrible kind of friend did that make her?

'I...um...don't think your hair colour is the problem, Kels, Mark's not that shallow. And I'm not sure you should change, just to make him happy. *You* wouldn't be happy then. I think the best thing to do is to let him go.' Beth inwardly cringed as Kelsey's smile fell from her face. 'I want you to be happy. Show him how wonderful you are. Stop trying to please him. He's a man. He'll only take advantage of that.'

Fat tears escaped Kelsey's eyes and tumbled down her pale cheeks. 'But how am I supposed to live without him, Beth? It feels like my heart has been ripped from my chest. I can't carry on like this. It's too painful.'

'Oh, Kelsey,' Beth reached across the table and squeezed Kelsey's hand, hating herself more every second. 'Don't do anything rash, please. He's not worth it.'

'I'm not going to kill myself if that's what you mean.' Kelsey snapped back at her. 'I wouldn't do that to everyone.' Kelsey's shoulders drooped again and she swiped her arm across her face, smearing snot and tears on her cheek. 'I thought we were going to get married. When Mark said he wanted to talk to me about something, never in my wildest nightmares did I think he was going to break up with me. I even went out and bought myself a new dress. I thought he was going to pop the question. How pathetic am I?'

'Oh God,' Beth moaned, putting her face in her hands. *This couldn't be happening.* 'I'm so sorry, Kelsey. Nobody saw it coming. We all thought you guys were for ever too.'

'Then what happened, Beth? What happened to us? One minute he was asking me what hockey team he should support and the next minute he said we couldn't stay together anymore. I just don't know what went wrong.'

Beth lifted her head from her hands and looked at Kelsey in confusion. 'What do you mean he asked you what team he should support? He's a huge Flames fan.'

'Yeah, I know but he kept asking what team we should get behind. I said I'd support whatever team he wanted to and that I would get us season tickets and all that.'

'But you like the Oilers.'

'Yes, I know, but I thought it would just be easier if we both supported the same team. Besides, he's a Flames fan, I should at least like the same team as him, right?'

'No, Kels, you shouldn't. Don't you see what he was doing?'

'Trying to pick what team to support. That's what I've been telling you.'

'No, honey, that's not it.' She reached out to Kelsey again, 'He was trying to get you to make a stand for what you believe in. Don't you see? By trying to always please him, you were kinda smothering him. He needs someone who can be their own person.'

Kelsey pulled away from her. 'What, so you're an expert on Mark now? You don't think we belong together, is that it? Are you on his side? Jesus, Beth, I thought you were my friend.' Kelsey

got up from the table and left the room. 'You can leave anytime you want,' she shouted from down the hall. It was clear from her tone it wasn't an invitation to stay and make herself at home.

Beth got up from the table and went to Kelsey's room where she knew she'd be hiding. She didn't try to go in but spoke through the closed door. 'That's not what I meant, Kels. I honestly thought you two were going to get married one day. It's just that I know Mark. He loves hockey. He wouldn't be able to understand how you couldn't support the team you love just because he likes the other team. He's a man, you have to remember their brains don't work like ours. I'm sorry I upset you. I'll show myself out. I'll call you tomorrow, okay?' Beth couldn't wait to get out of Kelsey's house. Her head hurt and her heart felt like it was slowly breaking. She could actually feel its pieces falling into her stomach.

She slowly walked to her truck where once inside she sat for a few minutes with her head resting on the steering wheel. She still hadn't told Kelsey what really happened at Mark's today. How was she going to be able to find the words for that? And how was their friendship going to survive that revelation? If Kelsey ran away and hid from her when she thought Beth was 'on his side', how was she going to react when Beth told her they'd had sex this morning?

[Chapter 4](#)

Beth absentmindedly reached for her phone and dialled the familiar number.

'I'm sorry, the number you have dialled is no longer in service.' The automated voice on the other end of the line shocked her out her dream.

She dropped the phone in its cradle and buried her head in her hands. After all this time, sometimes she still forgot. Mornings were the worst. Remnants of dreams still filtered through her mind upon waking and sometimes it was easy to forget her reality.

The worst thing was the pain. It was like losing her sister all over again. And mornings such as these, she relived the last few weeks of her sister's life all over again.

One would think the pain would've lessened over the last two years. It hadn't.

Beth curled herself up into a ball and let the memories take over. She knew there was no point trying to fight them.

Her older sister was twenty-five when she was diagnosed with stage IV breast cancer. From the beginning there really wasn't much hope for her, but Rachel was determined to squeeze as much life as she could into the time she had left. She'd even gone into remission for a while and life, for a brief moment, had gone back to normal. Rachel moved home and started painting again and Beth applied to cooking schools all across the country.

But it wasn't to last. Three and a half weeks was all it took for the cancer to take her sister away when it came back.

They'd all gathered around her bed and waited. Waited for her to live. Waited for her to die. Those last weeks were the longest of Beth's life. And the shortest. They were filled with laughter and with tears. When Rachel slept, Beth spent her time begging God to take her instead. But, in the end, he didn't listen. He took her sister in the dead of night. Ben was with her when she'd died. She'd taken Mom and Dad home to have a shower and get some sleep.

Perhaps that was why mornings were always the hardest. She'd woken on that last morning to Ben's voice on the other end of the phone telling her that her best friend was gone for ever.

'Rachel,' Beth said into the empty room, 'I need you.'

A single tear tracked down her cheek as she spoke to her sister. She took a deep, shaky breath and carried on the one-sided conversation, curling herself into a tighter ball.

'Mark and I slept together,' she whispered. 'I know, I know. He's supposed to be with Kelsey. Everyone thought they would get married. Okay...maybe not you. You always said she wasn't right for him.'

Beth sat up and scrubbed her face with her hands, rubbing the tears into her skin.

'It was amazing,' she whispered, taking her hands away from her face. 'Mark was so gentle and calm.'

Beth rubbed at her eyes. They were sore and gritty. She'd been crying all night, ever since she'd gotten back from Kelsey's, until she'd finally fell into a restless sleep at dawn.

'I had to tell her,' she said. 'I couldn't just let her think it was Helga. I couldn't do that to either of them. It was the hardest thing to do, Rachel. But I couldn't get all the words out. How do you tell one of your friends you slept with the man she thought she was going to marry? I couldn't. I couldn't bring myself to do it. But I know I have to.'

'I tried, but the words just wouldn't come past my lips.' Beth stood up and walked around her room, picking up objects she'd lived with for years and then putting them back down. 'I did tell her Mark took me to his house because I was so drunk – which is true! I haven't had that much to drink since your wake. I just left out the details, you know? I couldn't hurt her like that. How am I supposed to look her in the eyes again?'

Beth pulled on her bunny hug and a pair of sweats. She drew her blonde hair up into a messy ponytail without bothering to brush it first and looked at herself in the full-length mirror opposite her bed. Her hair was a mess and her eyes were puffy and red. Tear stains covered her cheeks. She looked like she felt – like shit.

She opened the door into the hallway and padded softly down to the bathroom, not wanting to wake Helga if she was home.

She was just spitting the toothpaste into the sink when she heard someone pull up, and by the time she splashed some water over her face, whoever it was was banging on the door.

Mark stood on her front porch not sure what to do. She hadn't answered his knock. He knew she was inside, her truck was out front and he could see the light on in her room upstairs, but he didn't want to just burst in.

Growing up without much of a family, he'd spent every spare moment at the Copeland's that he could. This ranch felt more like home than the small house he grew up in in town. His father left not long after he was born and his mom was so busy trying to make ends meet she was never at home to look after him. When he went to Bassville High Ben Copeland took him under his wing and introduced him to the cowboy life. But gone were the days when he was a part of the family. It was a long time since he felt like he was Beth's brother. In fact he wasn't sure if there ever was a time he hadn't loved Beth Copeland.

And after yesterday he was through loving her from afar. Now that he'd had a taste of what he always wanted, Mark wasn't sure if he could go back to pretending he just wanted to be friends.

He admitted it was horrible timing; breaking up with Kelsey just a few weeks ago, but the heart wants what the heart wants, right? And his had always wanted Beth.

He knocked again, then turned around and looked out over the valley; he'd spent every summer riding around these hills as a teenager. If he had his way he would have become a cowboy. But he'd spent enough time while growing up not having enough money and he wanted to look after his mother and knew a ranch hand didn't provide much of a living. So instead of climbing in the saddle every day like his best friend, he took the scholarship offered to him and went to law school.

He now spent most of his days locked up in a little office in town dealing with people's wills and property deeds. But he missed the open air and the horses.

The screen door banged open behind him and he spun around. Beth stood there looking like she'd just rolled out of bed and his mouth went dry. *God, she was beautiful.*

'What are you doing here?' she demanded.

'I came to see you,' he said. He shifted nervously on her front step. He wasn't expecting her to still be upset.

'What do you want?' She stood in the doorway and it was obvious that she wasn't inviting him in, but Mark didn't want to stand outside in the heat all day so he pushed past her into the house. Her peach perfume assaulted his senses as he squeezed by.

'Mark,' she said, her voice full of warning.

What was she going to do to him if he decided to stay? She wouldn't exactly be able to throw him out, would she? 'I needed to see you,' he said, grinning at her.

She took a surprised step back but there was no fear in her eyes when he gently encircled her wrist and tugged her closer to him. He had to feel her again.

He stepped closer until her breasts just about touched his chest and she needed to tilt her head up to look at him. 'Beth,' he breathed. He'd come here to talk but he couldn't seem to stop himself from reaching out to touch her. He pulled her roughly against him and claimed her mouth. A moan rent the air and she sagged against him for a moment.

He knew the exact moment when she started thinking. Her back stiffened and she pulled from his arms.

'I can't do this, Mark. I can't. You're supposed to be with Kelsey. Not *me*. I can't do this to her. She still loves you, you know? I went and saw her yesterday. What have you done to her?'

'What do you mean, what have I done to her? I haven't even seen her?'

'Oh, Mark, you know what I mean. You've totally crushed her and you don't even care!' He'd never seen Beth so riled. Sparks flew from her eyes as she shot daggers at him.

He stepped back under the onslaught. This wasn't exactly going to plan. 'I can't be with Kelsey, B. I don't love her. Was I supposed to marry her just so her feeling wouldn't get hurt? How is that fair on either of us? Think how she would feel in ten years' time when I let slip that I never loved her.'

'Never loved her? But you've been dating her for five years, Mark. How could you not have ever loved her?' She stepped away from him. Revulsion flashed in her eyes.

Shame filled his veins. 'You wouldn't understand,' he said turning his back on her.

'Mark, you can't be here,' she whispered. 'I can't do this with you...not today.'

He gave her a jerky nod over his shoulder and stalked out the door. Today had not gone at all like he'd wanted.

[Chapter 5](#)

Beth yanked at the ragweed. The blasted thing wouldn't come out, but the fight of taking back her garden was just what she needed to stem the aggression coursing her ever since Mark left.

Who did he think he was, showing up here, kissing her, holding her? She shook her head to clear the image and got back to work. It didn't help that she could still feel his lips on hers, or his hands on her hips or taste his tongue in her mouth.

She yanked harder at the weed. It gave way with an audible *pop* and Beth fell onto her backside in the dirt.

She looked down the row of newly emerging corn that she'd already weeded. Satisfaction brought a smile to her lips. There was something about digging in the dirt that was good for the soul.

Another hour and she should be done this half of the garden. She got back up and dusted off her ass and grabbed the push-hoe. The weeds didn't stand a chance now.

When she'd moved into the 'Old House', this garden had long ago grown in but she'd fixed the fence around it, turned it over and planted new vegetable seedlings. But the Old House hadn't been used since her parents had first been married and the grass and wildflowers had a firm grip on the old garden. No matter how often she weeded out here, she always found long-forgotten weeds poking their heads through the newly turned dirt. Beth just hoped they wouldn't choke her vegetables.

The sun was past the zenith when she next looked up. She felt dizzy and her back hurt from bending over for so long. She stamped her feet to get some feeling back in her knees. They were absolutely covered in dirt from her morning's toil. But she felt good. While she was pulling weeds she'd sorted a few things out.

As much as it terrified her, she knew she needed to talk to Kelsey. She'd rehearsed her speech over and over in her mind until she was sure she'd got it just right. When she woke up this morning, she briefly thought about not telling Kelsey anything and just carrying on as though nothing had happened. But Beth knew herself; at some stage she would accidentally let it slip. Besides, she didn't know what Mark might say to her either. It was better that she told Kelsey now.

After she sorted out Kelsey, she thought about her own life. Six months ago she was excited about opening the bed and breakfast and she'd even convinced herself it was what she wanted out of life. But it wasn't. Not really.

Beth walked back to the house. It had been so exciting to spruce up the old place. Even though it hadn't been used for decades, it had always been looked after and wasn't too run down. Everyone had always assumed that Ben would end up living here one day, but after Rachel died he moved away and the ranch needed money so Beth convinced herself she wanted a bed and breakfast. So the Old House turned into Beth's Country Home. And in the end it was because Beth had set up the website advertising the B&B that the ranch was able to climb out of debt.

Thank goodness Brian Hargrave had happened upon her website. Without the filming contract, Mom and Dad would have had to sell the ranch and Beth couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

At the same time she now knew she also couldn't imagine running a B&B for the rest of her life either. Before Rachel got sick and money wasn't so tight and Beth thought dreams came true because she wanted them to, she'd wanted to be a chef.

Beth went straight to the bathroom when she got into the house and set to work trying to wash the dirt off her hands. It took a few scrubs of the brush and some elbow grease to get them clean. She then went to her favourite room in the whole house. Her kitchen. She absolutely loved being in here. The sun washed the wooden countertops in gold and the open white cupboards displayed all her crockery and glasses. The stainless steel of her gas hob and fridge sparkled in the sunlight. The butter-yellow walls and the bowl of fruit on the table welcomed guests to sit down and make their selves at home.

Beth poured herself an iced tea and sat down at the table. She still needed a shower to wash off the dirt but first she needed to rehydrate.

In Bassville there was a little café she'd fantasised owning ever since the cooking bug bit her. When she was a teenager she'd spent every available moment at the Cat's Whiskers Café. She'd always wanted to work there but there was too much to do on the ranch after school and over summer holidays for her to have a part-time job. But that didn't discourage her dream of owning it one day.

Rachel's death did that.

After Rachel died, Beth felt guilty about the pleasure cooking gave her. She shouldn't feel happy when her sister was dead. And yet, she couldn't stop herself from cooking either. It was the only time during the long days after Rachel passed away that she was able to forget the pain. She felt guilty for that too.

Her mom had suggested she open up the Old House to visitors. Beth admitted that it was the idea of having someone to cook for that persuaded her to open the guest house.

And having Helga around and cooking for her every day was great. Never once since she arrived had Helga acted like an actress. Not that Beth knew any actresses and therefore didn't know how they behaved. She supposed she was guilty of believing what the gossip magazines said. But Helga was lovely.

Speaking of Helga, Beth glanced at the clock on the wall. She had just enough time to take a quick shower before she started to think about making dinner. It was her favourite time of day when she could take a moment and sit down and decide what she would cook.

In the shower, inspiration struck. Back downstairs, freshly showered, Beth knelt down next to her sideboard, a gift from her grandmother, opened the door and reached all the way to the back of the bottom shelf. She smiled when her hands brushed the rough cover of her recipe folder. She pulled

it out from behind the bottles of liquor and brushed the cobweb that clung to the corner. It was her secret stash of recipes she wanted to grace the menu of her own café one day.

While she was there, she grabbed a bottle of red wine from bottom shelf for good measure and poured herself a glass, leaving the bottle open on the table for when Helga got back from today's set.

She sat at the table and, with reverence, opened the cover of the folder. The first page was filled with pictures she'd snipped out of magazines of the interiors of cafés and restaurants. She ran her fingers over the clippings. Some of them she no longer liked. She'd started the folder years ago and some of those places she'd so coveted were now really out of style. She grinned at the bright-orange walls of one of the cafes and she plucked at the corner of the picture but decided to keep it there as a reminder.

She turned the page.

Stuffed button mushrooms with blue cheese sauce was the first of the hors d'oeuvre. She slowly read the ingredients and in her mind's eye prepared them for a restaurant full of customers. Her stomach growled. She shook her head and laughed. She didn't need appetisers tonight.

She flipped further into the folder, past the starters, salads and luncheon dishes. Rare roast beef with fresh horseradish cream, buttermilk garlic mashed potatoes and steamed seasonal vegetables was the perfect thing for a trial run. Roast beef was the very first thing she had ever cooked. She could still remember putting it into the oven for the first time. She could make this dinner blindfolded. She'd make Yorkshire puddings too. Ben loved those and she was sure he'd be joining her and Helga for dinner a lot more since this weekend when they'd disappeared together. Beth was happy for them. Ben hadn't had a lot of joy in his life the last couple of years and, by the sound of it, Helga was in need of happiness too.

She took a large drink from her glass, relishing the tartness of the wine as it bit into her palate. She had another sip, this time smaller and set to work getting all the ingredients together. She hated starting a recipe only to find that she didn't have everything handy. It had the potential of ruining a dish if she had to stop to find something crucial to the outcome of the dish. After checking everything on her list, she was satisfied she had everything she needed.

She stood at the counter and looked out the window at her garden in the back. She loved that her sunflowers were starting to come up. They were her favourite thing out there and she could hardly wait until she could watch them follow the sun.

Her eyes shifted to the vegetables in freshly weeded rows next to the sunflowers. The corn had barely broken the surface of the dirt, the peas were still flowering and the tomatoes were still just greenery. The broccoli and cauliflower was no better and her carrots and beets wouldn't be big enough yet either. She hated to admit that she had no fresh veggies in her garden yet. In a few weeks it would be a different story, but for now she'd have to resort to what she'd picked up from the grocery store on Friday.

She opened her onion box on the counter and grabbed two onions and a head of garlic. She rolled an onion across the countertop until the skin crackled and peeled it with a sharp knife and did the same to the other one. She quickly quartered them and put them in the bottom of a roasting dish. She wacked off the top of the garlic, put it in the corner of the dish and drizzled olive oil over it.

She pulled another head of garlic out of the onion box and pulled off six cloves. Flattening them against the cutting board with her knife, loosening the skin, she carefully peeled them before slicing them into slivers which she studded into the roast and put it on top of the onions.

She sprinkled salt and pepper over the meat and a small smile touched her lips as the familiar dinner stared back at her. Comfort food tonight.

It didn't take her long to peel the potatoes and put them into a pot of water while waiting for the oven to heat. Once the roast was in the oven, Beth headed back outside to her patch of horseradish. The year Rachel died they had picked some out of the ditch on a trip to Saskatchewan and planted

it into a pot in her back yard. That trip was the last time her sister had left her home town. It was always with a touch of sadness that she pulled out a long root.

She took the trowel and loosened the dirt around the root and pulled it free. The air filled with the spicy wasabi scent and fresh dirt. She tipped her face up to the sky again; her garden could sure do with some rain, but there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

Beth's phone rang as she was pouring buttermilk into the potatoes. She snuck a peek at the roast on the way to answer it. The aroma of the roasting meat filled the kitchen when she cracked open the door. Yum. It was looking good.

'Hello,' she said absentmindedly into the phone. She was still focused on her meal. She couldn't wait to slice into that beef.

'Beth?' The soft voice on the other end of the line snapped her attention away from dinner.

'Kelsey. Oh, hi. I was going to call you tonight,' Beth said, sinking into the closest chair.

'That's okay, I've beat you to it. I wanted to apologise for yesterday. I was really raw from the night before and I kinda over-reacted. So, I'm sorry and I hope you can forgive me.'

It felt like a knife was twisting in Beth's stomach. Kelsey was not the one who should be apologising. 'No, Kels, it's me who needs who needs to say sorry. I wasn't completely honest with you yesterday and I really need to tell you something.'

Kelsey's tinkling laugh came down the phone. 'No, I think you were pretty honest in what you said to me. It got me thinking, and you're right. I do try to please Mark all the time. I never stand up for what I believe in or fight for what I want. I never noticed that about myself before. Have I always done that?'

Beth sat at the table with her hand over her mouth. *Oh God*, she moaned. If she could take back yesterday she would.

'Beth? Are you still there?'

The speech she'd prepared in the garden disappeared from her mind. She desperately tried to recall at least some of it.

'Beth?'

'I'm still here,' she managed to force out. 'You don't need to apologise for anything at all, Kels.'

'Yes I do,' she said. 'You were trying to help and all I did was snap at you and then run away like some spoiled brat. My behaviour all weekend has been horrible. I've done things I'm not proud of. And I've caused more trouble for someone who doesn't deserve it.'

'I think it's safe to say that we've both done things this weekend we're not proud of.' That was sure the understatement of the year.

'No, Beth, you don't understand,' Kelsey said. 'I think I've ruined someone's life. I've tried to take it back but now they are saying the story's just too big. I just hope they change their minds.'

Kelsey sounded really worried but Beth was sure she was over-reacting. 'Trust me, Kelsey, What you've done has been nowhere near as bad as what I've done. And I didn't mean to do it,' she rushed. She needed to get the words out before she chickened out. 'It just sort of happened. Not that I did anything to stop it at the time. I was a willing participant. I just wish I hadn't been so drunk... or hungover...or whatever I was. I'm so sorry Kelsey. It was an accident. A total, complete mistake.'

There was silence on the end of the phone for a moment and all Beth could hear was the sound of her own rapid breathing. She should be telling Kelsey all this in person rather than over the phone.

'What is it you've done?' Kelsey whispered. 'Please tell me it's not what I think it is.'

'Kels...'

'Please tell me you didn't sleep with him,' Kelsey's voice was so quiet Beth could barely hear her.

'I'm so sorry, Kelsey, it was an accident.'

'An *accident*?!' Her voice came thundering down the phone. 'Crashing a car is an accident. Slipping over on ice is an accident. But how in the hell is having sex with my boyfriend an accident?'

'But he's no longer your boyfriend, Kelsey. You guys broke up weeks ago.' Beth regretted her words even before she was done speaking them.

'You are such a bitch, Beth. I hope you rot in Hell.' Kelsey slammed the phone down so hard Beth's ear rang in protest.

Great. Not only could she not have Mark; she felt way too guilty to go down that road, she'd now also ruined her longest friendship. If she was honest with herself, there was no way she could expect Kelsey to ever forgive her for what she did. If the shoe was on the other foot, Beth knew she would have reacted much the same way.

She looked around her kitchen. She loved this house. She'd made it into her home, and she couldn't imagine living anywhere but on the ranch.

But she knew staying in Bassville would be torture for not only herself, but for Mark and Kelsey too. The town was so small there was no way they could avoid each other for long. Besides, they all had the same friends. She couldn't expect them to pick her over Kelsey. She was the one in the wrong. And, because she was Kelsey's friend, they'd blame her for the mistake more so than Mark. He was, after all, just a man, and therefore expected to behave like an ass. But she was one of the sisterhood. She should've known better. She was lower than low. She was a man stealer.

'Beth?'

She could hear Helga calling her but she didn't move from the chair.

'What's burning?' Helga asked, walked into the kitchen. 'Beth, what's in the oven?'

'What?' Beth looked up distractedly, 'Hmmm?'

'There's smoke coming out of the oven.' Helga pointed to the oven where smoke was seeping out from around the door.

'Oh My God!' She jumped up, knocking over her chair and ran to the oven and opened the door. Smoke billowed out. Sitting in the middle of the rack was her roast beef, totally shrivelled up and ruined. Instead of being the juicy piece of meat she was hoping for she was looking at a lump of charcoal. She dumped it onto the counter and looked at the blackened mess.

It was the last straw. Tears she'd been holding back since she'd got off the phone leaked out her eyes and coursed down her cheeks, dripping onto the hot glass of the open oven door.

Helga reached around her to shut the oven door and turned it off. She gave Beth a hug and patted her on the back. 'Oh, Beth, it's okay. I'll make us some sandwiches. It's no big deal. Here, sit down.' Helga led her over to the table and gently pushed her toward the chair she'd been sitting in moments before.

Beth sat down hard on the chair, jarring herself back to reality. Her menu folder sat open on the table. She slammed it shut, got up and shoved it unceremoniously into the back of the cupboard where it belonged.

At the back, out of sight.

She should just throw the damn thing out. She couldn't even manage to cook something as basic as roast beef, mashed potatoes and damn vegetables! She wasn't fit to be a chef. She wasn't good enough and she never would be.

She swiped angrily at the tears still pouring from her eyes. *Suck it up, Beth*, you're just not good enough. It was time to face facts. She was someone who loved cooking but she could never be a proper cook.

She sat back down at the table, filled her wine glass to the brim and took a big drink. Is this what her life came to? A glorified maid? She looked at Helga, who was cleaning up the mess she'd made and for the first time since meeting her, she resented her presence. She just wanted to throw Helga out. And that frightened her. Who had she become? Helga was lovely. Here she was, washing the dishes and cleaning up the evidence of Beth's fuck-up.

She downed the rest of her wine and refilled her glass. 'Helga, can you get my tablet for me, please?'

Helga turned from the full sink, 'Sure thing, honey.' She dried her dripping hands and left the room to find it.

While she was gone, Beth laid her head down on the table and closed her aching eyes. They were so raw from crying they felt like she had broken glass as lids.

'Here it is, Beth, oh!' Helga said as she rushed back into the room. 'Are you sleeping?' she whispered as she crept closer.

'No,' Beth moaned, rocking her head back and forth on her folded arms. 'I just wish I was dead.'

'Oh, Beth, it's not that bad, I swear.' Helga slid into the chair next to her and patted her arm.

'Helga,' Beth croaked.

'Yes?'

'Please go away. I'm s...sorry, but I...I c...can't...'

Beth felt Helga rise from her chair. 'Sure,' she said quietly, 'I'll be in my room if you need me. Goodnight, Beth.'

Beth waited until she heard the steps creaking as Helga went up to her room before she found the strength to open her eyes and lifted her head. Her tablet was there beside her on the table.

Beth dragged it closer to her and flipped the cover open. She typed *Culinary Schools Canada* into the search engine.

Pacific Institute of Culinary Arts jumped out at her and she clicked through to their website. It was gorgeous, but somehow that just made her feel even worse. She read through all the information she could find about the professional programs. Six months of pure cooking pleasure. And then she clicked into the fees. *Holy Shit!*

Eighteen thousand dollars! She slumped further into her chair, disappointment washing over her. There was no way she could afford that. No way at all. Not to mention the extra charges of twenty five hundred for uniform, toolkit, textbooks and registration, let alone accommodation. It was not possible.

She sat there for a long time thinking about how she could come up with that kind of money. The money she made from the guest house was put back into the ranch. Since the film company rented the land, the ranch was doing better financially, but it wasn't until the final payment came through that they would really be out of the woods. And as good friends that she and Helga had become, she couldn't ask her for that kind of money. But how else was she supposed to gain experience?

She glanced the remains of her dinner on the counter.

Obviously much-needed experience.

Except...maybe she could volunteer with the catering company looking after the film crew. She'd met them when she brought the German chocolate cake in three weeks ago. The lady in charge seemed really nice, even if the other chef was slightly standoffish.

She got up from the table and poured the rest of her wine down the sink. She needed to be ready for tomorrow.

[Chapter 6](#)

'Hi, Bob,' Beth waved at the older man manning the gateway into the film set.

He waved back at her and opened the gate. 'How are you today, Beth? Still working out there on the ranch?'

She rolled to a stop beside him. 'Of course. We're all getting ready for the filming to be moved out there. We're really very lucky they decided to shoot in town first.'

'Well, they've certainly been busy in here. Did you know every single person I've let through these gates has commented on your sister's painting inside the town hall? You should be very proud of Rachel. I just wish she was here to see it.' Bob smiled kindly at her, his eyes crinkling in the corners.

Beth knew people still had a hard time knowing whether or not if they should mention Rachel to her. That was one of the awful things about death. No one wanted to talk about the people who've passed.

'Thank you, Bob. I'll be sure to tell Mom you said so. She'll be so pleased. And we are all really proud of Rachel, that painting is amazing. I'm so glad it's there for everyone to enjoy.'

'Well it'll be famous now for sure, with it being featured in the movie and all.'

'Rachel would have loved that,' Beth smiled, thinking about the reaction her sister would have had knowing her art would be in a movie starring her favourite actress. 'And how's Jill, Bob? Is she feeling better?'

'Yes, she sure is. She got the all-clear from the doctor last week too. Hopefully they've gotten all the cancer this time. I'll tell her you asked. She'll be so pleased.' Bob stepped out of the way and waved Beth through the gate.

'See you later, Bob,' she called through her open window as she drove by.

She parked outside of Helga's trailer, next to her new SUV.

Beth had meant to get here earlier in the morning. She'd wanted to get here at day break when she knew the crew kitchen would be prepping for the day, but Ben called around this morning and she'd spent longer talking to him than she meant to. And now she was running late.

She wasn't sure if now was a good time to go and ask for a job. It had the potential to change her life and she was terrified they'd say no to her; she didn't have a backup plan.

She knew it was time she stepped out of the shadows. Life was too short to live on the side lines. If she could get this job she would hopefully be so busy she'd be able to avoid Kelsey and Mark at least until the filming finished and by then she'd have enough experience to get a proper job in a kitchen somewhere far from Bassville and the drama she'd found herself in.

Taking a deep breath, she pulled the door handle toward her and shoved open the door of her old beat-up truck. She swung her cowboy boot-clad feet onto the pavement and, with a straight back, strode across the lane to the centre of the town square where the portable kitchen trailer and marquee were set up.

With a confidence she didn't feel she walked up the steps of the trailer and knocked on the closed door.

She heard shouting coming from the inside and took a step back as the voice grew closer. Seconds later, the door flew back on its hinges.

'Oh, it's you, Cake Girl,' the man jeered at her. He was intimidating, standing there in his white chef's jacket. Beth thought he looked too tall and thin to be a chef but she recognised him from when she brought the cake when the crew had first arrived.

'Hi.' She gave a small wave. A small wave? What was wrong with her? She'd even wriggled her fingers at him. Ugh. She cringed at her own nervousness.

'Hi? You've come here to say hi? What would make you think that I have time to say hi to you?' he all but snarled at her.

She straightened her back at his condescending tone and took a menacing step towards him. She was pleased he took a small step back. 'I'm here to see Sheila. Is she inside?' Beth tried peering around him into the trailer, but he moved and blocked her view.

'No.'

She arched an eyebrow at the vile man. 'And do you know where I can find her?'

'No.'

Really? Were they going to play this game? She took a big, calming breath, it probably wasn't smart to antagonise the man she would (hopefully) be working with. She plastered a bright smile on her face and tried again.

'My name is Beth.' She held out her hand to him but he didn't make any move to shake it so she dropped it back to her side. 'I would like to talk to Sheila this morning. Do you know when she will be back?'

'No.' He leaned against the doorjamb and crossed his arms across his chest.

'Harrumph.'

'If that's all you want, Cake Girl...?' He stepped back into the trailer and shut the door in her face.

She stared at the closed door. 'Well I never.' She stalked down the steps and walked back into the adjacent marquee. In the far corner, away from the actors and extras getting their last-minute breakfasts, was Sheila. She was sitting at a table by herself, reading through some papers, jotting down notes every now and then.

Beth watched her for a moment until she realised she was being slightly creepy and was gaining strange looks from the extras sitting at the table to her right.

'Hi, Sheila?' she said when she approached.

Sheila looked up from her notes at her, the look on her face clearly conveying that she had been lost in her work and now was having trouble coming back to the present.

'Oh,' Sheila said as she stood up, 'Beth, isn't it? How nice to see you again. Come join me. Would you like a coffee?' She waved vaguely at the coffee carafe against the tent wall.

'Oh no, I've had three cups already this morning. I was wondering if I could have a few moments of your time.' Beth sank into the chair offered and tried to stifle her nerves.

Sheila looked at Beth with a kind smile. Her blood-red painted lips and perfect makeup were a contrast to her dark hair pulled severely up off her face in a ponytail and her spotless white chef's jacket.

Beth toyed with the plastic tablecloth. 'I was wondering if you needed help in the kitchen.' She looked up from where her hands were bunching the tablecloth and tried to convey her desire without coming across too pathetic. She took a deep breath and rushed ahead. It was now or never. 'I've looked into becoming a chef but, honestly, the cost associated with that isn't something I can afford right now and I thought that you may need help so then I thought that perhaps you might need help with all the people you need to feed and then I thought it could be a win-win for both of us.' Beth snapped her jaw shut with an audible click. She was babbling. This was not exactly the way she envisioned asking for a job.

Sheila smiled at her.

Beth didn't want her sympathy. She wanted a job. 'I can cook for large numbers. At branding every year we cater for more than one hundred people.'

'After you brought in a cake big enough to feed the entire crew and production team, I have no qualms about your ability to cater for large numbers of people. I *know* that's not an easy feat, but that was only one cake and my understanding is that branding is only once a year? There is a huge difference in doing it one day and doing it for months at a time.' Sheila leaned towards her. I would love to offer you a job, Beth, Lord knows I always need extra help.'

'But?' Beth knew there was a 'but' coming. She held her breath and waited.

'You're working for Miss Hansen. I can tell you now that looking after her is way more important than helping me in the trailer. You need to keep her happy and content. Besides, there's not a lot of room in the trailer and Jerry's not pleasant in close quarters, I can tell you,' she said with a humourless chuckle.

Beth felt her one hope slipping through her fingers. She really wanted this job. 'You don't need to pay me,' she said hurriedly, 'It's not the money I'm after, although I won't lie and say it wouldn't be welcome. I want my own café or restaurant one day. Cooking is something that I love doing and I can't imagine not cooking, you know what I mean? I just want to become better. Seeing the food you put out for all the crew is mind-blowing. I want to be able to do what you do. I really want to learn. I swear, I'll keep out of Jerry's way, at least as much as possible, and Helga won't mind, I'm sure, I just need to make sure there's dinner ready for her when she gets home. How hard would that be?'

Sheila looked at her with such intensity that Beth had to fight with every bit of her being not to start wiggling in her chair under the scrutiny. 'All right,' Sheila finally said, 'I'll let you help me, but only if you can still keep up with your duties to Miss Hansen. Therefore, I only want you here

for lunch prep and clean up, which usually runs from 9 a.m. to around 4. But, Beth, I'm warning you now, this is a tough job and the level of stress is unbelievable.'

Beth's heart was in her throat throughout this exchange, but she nodded at everything Sheila said and tried to smother the impulse to grin like an idiot. She clenched her hands together in her lap instead and continued nodding gravely.

'Go talk to Miss Hansen and I'll see you tomorrow morning.' Shelia glanced up at the clock and gathered her papers together, then got up from the table and shook Beth's hand.

Beth sat still and watched Sheila walk back to her kitchen before she slowly got up and went back to her truck. It wasn't until she'd shut the door and was sitting all alone inside the cab that she let out a whoop of celebration.

Chapter 7

Beth was so excited to start in the kitchen that she didn't sleep that night. It wasn't until just before her alarm went off that she dozed off. Now she was running late.

She waved quickly at Bob at the gate but didn't stop even long enough to say hi.

She pulled in next to Helga's SUV, smoothed her hair, straightened her shirt and jumped out of the truck. She ran across the road towards the kitchen.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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