Prologue

Elliot Cole

Tessa Buchannan arrived at Porter Mountain the second last Sunday in June.

Or should I say, the woman I *thought* was Tessa Buchannan arrived that day.

Sometimes an illusion is just that, nothing more than pretty smoke and distracting mirrors. And maybe that's what Tessa was to me.

Not real.

A distraction from reality, a mirage that I'd conjured up in my head.

Or maybe she was neither of those things.

Maybe she was both.

It was late afternoon by the time she arrived, a burnt orange sun sinking slowly behind the mountains of Northern Wyoming, and the summer sky stretched out for miles in every direction across Bowen River Ranch.

I'd stood out on the porch that afternoon, hot and tired after a long day working the horses, twirling a cold beer between my fingertips, watching a beaten-up Chevy navigate the curves of my driveway.

Dust and gravel flew out behind the faded red pickup as it moved closer to the house–a little too fast to my way of thinking–but I'd never forget that day for as long as I lived.

The breeze moved through Tessa's hair as she drove, the windows rolled all the way down, the music turned all the way up.

Long auburn tendrils danced around her face, and her elbow rested on the doorframe. I watched her fingers tapping to the beat of some sappy country song that filled the fields and made the horses skittish as she drove by.

But the thing I remember the most, the thing that struck me the hardest that day, was the look of complete and utter peace on Tessa's face as she headed toward the house.

It made my chest ache.

It was the kind of peace I hadn't felt in years.

Her lips were curved into an easy smile, her eyes shining through the dark clouds that followed her.

And I could tell there were clouds following her.

Despite her relaxed facade, behind the curtains she'd hung so effortlessly to hide the truth, I could sense the thunder coming right along behind her–swirling gray, rumbling skies and moving earth.

At the time, I wasn't sure why I felt that way.

All I knew was that I *felt* it alright.

I can't describe the way it felt, not really. Words would be cheap and empty, making the story that follows little more than a kitschy romance novel. And Tessa's story is anything but that. It holds weight. It sits heavily in the palm of your hand, a warm rock by the lake that you bounce a few times before you hurl it into the deep, deep water.

And while at times, just like that rock, you might be tempted to hold on to it a little longer than you should, to put the story away for another time when you're better equipped to deal with it, you know in all reality that you can't.

Tessa's story deserves more than that.

Tessa's story must be told. And not just because it's a story worth telling.

But because *her* story… is *my* story too.

Chapter 1

Elliot - Before

I pop the cork. Champagne explodes from the bottle, dripping all over my hands, pooling around my feet on the dry ground beneath.

I laugh and then crawl onto the picnic rug that's spread out on the grassy hill overlooking the ranch.

Keira turns and glances over her shoulder. "We did it. Can you believe it? We actually did it." She has her slender arms wrapped around her knees, her bare toes tickling the grass at the edge of the rug. She smiles at me and I'm instantly reminded why I married her in the first place.

That smile will always be my undoing. It melts my heart, makes my legs weak, and I still can't believe I get to call her mine for the rest of our lives.

"Seriously, El," she says, falling back onto the tartan rug, her long blonde hair spread out around her. "Can you believe we just bought a horse ranch?" She's smiling as she stares up at the sky, shielding her eyes from the sun.

She's so happy. And if Keira's happy, then I'm happy too. I'd do anything to make her happy.

She sits up again and gazes off into the distance, across acres of open land, through the trees that line the banks of the Bowen River to the east.

Taking the glass of champagne I just offered her, she crosses her legs, yoga style and takes a small sip. Then she reaches for a cracker and some dip from the picnic basket and shoves them into her mouth. "I still can't believe they accepted our offer," she garbles. "And the terms of our loan are totally do-able."

"You have zero manners, you know that?"

Keira nods, reaching for another cracker. "You still love me."

“You’ll do,” I tease.

I sit down on the blanket behind her, spreading my legs wide enough so that she’s nestled between them, and then she leans back into my chest like it’s the only place in the world she wants to be.

“We’ve got a lot of work ahead of us,” I tell her. “If we want to make a living out of this place. We’re going to be balls-deep in renovations and repairs for a while.”

“I know,” she agrees.

“The house is going to take some serious work. A remodel isn’t exactly in the budget. It’ll take time. And we’ll definitely need a new barn. The old one is too small, too dilapidated for what I want to do with the place.” I point over her shoulder, across the fields below. “We’ll build it right there, close enough to the stables but just far enough away from the house so the horses don’t disturb us.”

Keira’s hair catches in the gentle breeze, tickling my chin. “Can we paint it red?”

“Sure,” I tell her, brushing my lips against her temple. “I’ll order several gallons of paint once the plans are drawn up and sent off to the county office. I’m going to need your help running the business side of things. I’m no good with numbers, you know that.”

“No, you suck.” Keira takes my hand and presses her lips gently to the inside of my palm. “But you’re brilliant with horses, El. You’re a natural. I’ve never seen anything like it in my life. It won’t take long for you to make a name for yourself and

my guess is, once word gets out that Elliot Cole has gone into business for himself, we'll be so busy we won't know what to do with ourselves."

"You think so?"

"Of course I do, besides… I'm your lucky charm, remember?"

She's right. Keira is my lucky charm. She always has been. From the very first time I laid eyes on her, sitting up there in the bleachers, looking completely bored and not the slightest bit interested in highschool football.

But we won that game.

And we won the game after that too. And somehow, I won the girl, and no championship trophy will ever come close to how lucky I felt the night Keira first told me she loved me.

She turns, crawling up onto my lap so that her slender legs are wrapped around my waist, her core centered over mine, and I gotta give her credit, because the woman knows what she's doing.

"Let's have a baby," she suddenly says.

"What?"

"You heard me… let's have a baby."

"Really?"

She nods, biting her bottom lip. "I've been thinking about it a lot lately."

“You have?”

“Yeah.”

“And you want to start trying?”

“Only if you do.”

I take a deep breath, and from out of nowhere, I feel all warm inside just thinking about it. I like the way it makes me feel. I want to bottle the feeling up, just in case I never get to feel this way again.

I nod, slowly. “Okay. Let’s start trying.”

Keira smiles.

No. Keira beams.

I run my hands up her thighs and her floral sundress bunches up beneath my fingertips, her bare, smooth skin soft under my touch.

She drags her fingers through my hair, pulling herself in so close I can feel her heart beating hard against my chest. “We got this, El.”

“We got this,” I whisper back and then I find her mouth and I melt into a kiss that takes us both by surprise.

I kiss my wife until I can taste her, until I can smell her, until I can hear her and see her behind tightly closed eyes, bringing her into me and letting everything else simply fall away.

And we start trying for a baby right there on the picnic blanket, overlooking the acres of land that we'll call home for the rest of our lives.

Because she's right. We do.

We totally got this.