



**A**dam Cavanagh strode across the parking lot, his thoughts clicking right along with his boots on the slick pavement. Was he honestly slinking home like a whipped pup? He'd be right back under his stepfather's grinding thumb once he drove up the ranch road. How could that be an improvement over risking life and limb every time he blasted out of the chute on the back of a bronc?

His decision had been easy ten years ago. Get out. Make it big. Thumb his nose at Declan Cavanagh.

It wasn't so simple now. Not when Declan would throw him into the saddle with a self-satisfied grunt and order him to work like he was a delinquent child. Adam needed Door Number Three. So far, it had failed to materialize.

"Get your hands off me!" a shrill female voice demanded.

Adam tensed, his step faltering. Where was that coming from? He couldn't tell in the darkness.

A low male voice answered. The woman replied more calmly. Firmly.

She must be okay, and it probably wasn't any of his business. Plus, he was starving. Still he hesitated, scanning the parking lot again, but nothing appeared to be happening in any of the pools of light from the street lamps. Nothing besides angling sleet.

Adam shook his head and entered the brightly lit restaurant. He was imagining things. It happened a lot ever since his buddy's nasty accident in the arena with thousands of fans watching.

*Please wait to be seated.*

The dining room had a few empty tables, and the aroma of fried liver and onion rings wafted his way. His stomach growled. Where was the hostess, anyway?

The door behind him swung open, ushering in the cold November night. Adam glanced over, and his gaze collided with a woman with wild eyes. She wore jeans and a down parka. Cowboy boots on her feet. Good Montana girl. He nodded in approval.

She hesitated, glancing around the restaurant, back through the door closing behind her, then over at Adam.

What was with her? He couldn't help grinning. She was stinkin' cute. If that had been her yelling in the parking lot, he wouldn't mind coming to her rescue one little bit.

She launched at him, and her arms wrapped around his neck. “Pretend you love me. Kiss me.”

Who was Adam to argue with an invitation like that? Besides, his arms had already shot around her, mostly to keep his balance from the impact of her slight body.

He kissed her.

She kissed him back. Wow, did she ever.

The door cranked open again. Footsteps. Boots, again. Heavier this time. “Riley! I didn’t mean — whoa.”

Adam moved his lips over hers for a few seconds longer, but he really needed to see what trouble had arrived on the heels of this thirty-second diversion.

The girl — Riley? — opened her eyes slowly and smiled up at him. “Thanks,” she breathed. “You’re a lifesaver.”

Being her champion sounded good. He pressed his lips to her forehead and looked over her curls to see the guy she’d been escaping from. No way.

“Scotty Erickson?” Adam couldn’t keep the disbelief out of his voice. It was probably reasonable to run into people from his past when he was less than an hour from the family ranch, but why did the first guy he saw have to be this dirt-bag? He tightened his arms around Riley. If Scotty wanted a woman who didn’t want him back, he’d have to go through Adam to get her.

“You.” Scotty all but spat the word. “Let go of my girl. Come on, Riley. Enough stalling. Time to hit the road. It’s gonna start snowing soon.”

Riley shook her head slightly against Adam’s chest.

“*Your* girl?” Adam managed a sneer in his tone. “Ry, honey, you two-timing me?”

She blinked up at him, her back still to the other guy. “Never.”

That sounded promising. “Get lost, Erickson.”

Scotty braced his feet.

Adam took a quick scan for a weapon but didn’t see one. The scum wouldn’t likely be that stupid. “Hey, did you get a chance to pick up the engagement ring today?” He nuzzled Riley’s curls, still eyeing Scotty. “When will they be done resizing it?”

She pulled back.

He got a little distracted by those wide eyes. Oh, and the soft lips. He kissed her again.

“Uh... not yet.” She sounded breathless. “Maybe in a few days.”

“The sooner the better. I can’t wait to make you my own.”

Scotty scoffed. “Get in line, Cavanagh.”

“We don’t want any trouble in here. Do I need to call the police?” A pudgy middle-aged man stood beside the hostess desk, eyebrows raised.

“Not at all. My fiancée and I met here for a peaceful celebratory dinner.” Adam jutted his chin toward Scotty. “He was just leaving.”

The host hesitated, his gaze ricocheting between them.

Adam turned his back on Scotty and threaded his fingers with Riley’s. “If you’ve got a booth away from the window, that would be perfect. Right, honey?”

“Sure would!” Riley glanced back at Scotty but stayed with Adam as he followed the man to a booth at the other end.

He slid in across from her. Wow, he’d lucked out this evening after all. She was cute as a filly and sassy besides. Too bad kissing was his limit these days.

“Your waiter will be right with you.” The man set two menus at the end of the table. “Can I get you something to drink in the meanwhile?”

Was that a flash of wariness in Riley’s eyes?

“Ginger ale and a black coffee, please.” Part of that whole new leaf thing. Besides, he needed his wits about him. “How about you, honey?”

“Ice water.” She stared at him as though calculating. “With lemon.”

The host nodded and stepped away.

Adam flipped open the embossed menu, but the aroma of liver and onions still called his name. None of the other entrees looked more appealing. “What’re you having? Order whatever you like.”

“Why?” Her elbows plunked on the table. “Why are you buying me dinner and being so nice to me?”

He leaned against the padded seatback. “Why not?”

“I don’t even know your name. Or why Scotty seems to know you.”

“The name’s Adam Cavanagh.”

She didn’t blink.

Apparently she didn’t follow the rodeo circuit. So, she wasn’t *quite* perfect, after all. “My stepdad owns Rockstead

Ranch northeast of town. And I may have missed your name, too. Riley...?”

“Riley Dunning.” She licked her lips in a nervous gesture. “Born here in Missoula and raised all over the west.”

“Riley Cavanagh has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?” He might have asked blandly, but his mind was skittering. Had a third option shown up, after all? There might be more than one way to shake up things at Rockstead.

“You’re some kind of crazy.”

Adam belted out a laugh. “You’re the one who asked a complete stranger to kiss her.”



One minute Riley was trying to ditch Scotty’s slimy attention and the next she sat across from a hot cowboy in an upscale restaurant with carte blanche to order what she wanted.

She’d see if he meant it. Who knew when she’d eat again?

When the waiter returned, Adam indicated she should order first.

Riley pointed to the menu. “Steak, medium rare, and crab legs. I’ll take the baked potato with extra sour cream, and may

I have the Caesar salad instead of the house salad?” She looked up at the waiter, avoiding eye contact with Adam.

*Here’s your chance to back down, buster.*

He leaned across the table and tapped the appetizer selections on the facing page. “Sure you don’t want a starter to kick off that feast?”

If he was going to be *that* way about it... Riley met his gaze and locked on. “Go ahead and order for both of us.”

Adam nodded and looked at the waiter. “We’ll have the nacho platter first, please. I’ll take liver and onions for my entree. Mashed potatoes and double up the gravy. The house salad is fine for me.”

“Right away, sir.” The waiter gathered the menus and bowed away.

The cowboy narrowed his gaze at her for so long Riley squirmed. “You said I could order anything.”

“I did. Meant it, too.”

Whew. “Then what’s the problem?”

Adam reached over the table and caught Riley’s hands. “Tell me how you know Scotty.” His hands were strong and rough and tanned, with a thin scar running from his wrist to his thumb.

She resisted the urge to trace it. “He seemed to think I owed him something because I hitchhiked a ride from him.”

“What’s a nice girl like you doing hitchhiking?”

Riley raised her chin. “Who said I was a nice girl?”

A glimmer of humor shone in his eyes. “The other kind would have considered giving Erickson what he wanted.”

“He can’t keep his hands to himself.”

Adam tipped his head back and chuckled.

What was so hilariously funny? She glared at him before becoming aware of his fingers squeezing hers. Oh. She pulled away, and he let her, though he laughed even harder.

He was so exasperating. And, yes, she owed him. Not only for rescuing her, but for an extravagant dinner.

Exasperating, but such a hunk. The bit of unruly hair peeking out seemed as dark as the Stetson hiding it. His face was strong, angular, and his nose a little crooked like he’d broken it once or twice. His lips... well, she shouldn’t be looking at those, because he was an amazing kisser. Like that was any test of a decent human being.

He’d rescued her, though. Kissed her like she’d demanded. Held her tight against his broad, firm chest and sent Scotty packing.

Pretended they were engaged.

Riley shivered.

The waiter set their drinks and the nachos between them.

She reached for a chip and dragged it through the spicy cheese. It tasted even better than it smelled, and *that* had been amazing.

“Have you eaten today?”

Riley’s gaze shot back to Adam’s. “Um... not much.”

“How come?” He asked it for all the world like he genuinely wanted to know.

She ate three more chips, but his gaze didn't waver. "It's a long story," she said at last. "I doubt you want to hear the details."

Adam's gaze only intensified. "Try me."

"I'm... let's just say I'm between situations and leave it at that." She eyed him. "Besides, I don't know anything about you."

He shrugged. "Already told you where I live. My stepdad operates two of the biggest ranches in the region. My brothers and I will be inheriting one of them when the time is right." He studied her for a long moment.

"What, do I have salsa on my chin?" Riley dabbed with her napkin.

"Not at all. Just thinking... maybe the time is right."

Now he was getting weird. "Pardon me?"

"I've been away a long time. My stepdad and I don't see eye-to-eye on a lot of things, and he hasn't been willing to let me prove myself. I think he'd take me more seriously if I were engaged."

Riley stared at him. "Come again?"

"People break engagements all the time. It doesn't mean a life sentence."

"Wait a minute. You're asking me—"

His phone rang, and he held up one finger to silence her.

It annoyed her like crazy that it worked.

"Yo, Nathaniel. What's up?" Adam took a sip of his ginger ale then set the glass down with a clunk. The ice cubes

rattled as his gaze shot back to Riley's. "Erickson's faster than I gave him credit for."

Uh oh. She should have paid more attention to the fact that Scotty and Adam seemed to know each other.

"Yes, that's what he heard ... I didn't tell anyone about Riley because she's a surprise."

Riley snorted.

Laugh lines crinkled around Adam's eyes as he grinned at her. "We haven't made any firm plans yet ... Definitely, bro. You'll be the first to know ... How're things at home? How's Mom?"

He had a mother? He'd talked about his stepfather as though the man were his only parent.

Jaw tensing, Adam looked down at his free hand lining up the cutlery with the edge of the table. "Sorry to hear that ... Riley and I are waiting to be served, so we'll be a couple of hours at least ... Tell Mom I'll see her in the morning then ... You too, bro. Later."

Riley crossed her arms over her chest. "What's going on?"

"Erickson told his sister who told my brother who told my other brother who was understandably surprised since I didn't have a girlfriend yesterday. At least that he knew of."

"Sorry?"

"Don't be."

The waiter chose that moment to set their entrees in front of them. "Can I get you anything else?"

"I think we're good for now." Adam spread his cloth napkin on his lap.

Riley should do the same. She stared at the heaped platter in front of her. The steak was perfectly crisscrossed, and the crab legs joined the beef in sending up a mouth-watering aroma. If she had to get a to-go container later, that would be okay. It'd give her something for breakfast. Best to start with the crab.

She reached for the cracker tool then became aware Adam was still studying her. "What?"

"What are your plans for the next few weeks?"

"Um..." Her mind scrambled, trying to come up with something that sounded believable or important.

"Christmas with your family?"

Right, the holidays were coming. "I don't think so. My parents are..." *Remember how lying was a bad idea?* "Busy this year."

"How are you with horses?"

Riley blinked. "I've ridden some." Not as much as the rich kids she'd known.

"Come with me. We can always use another hand at the ranch. And I need a fiancée until about the new year. What do you say?"

Her jaw dropped as she stared at him. "What's in it for me? Besides you keep your hands to yourself." She couldn't believe for one minute she was entertaining his ridiculous offer.

Amusement glinted in his eyes. "Wouldn't it look odd if I didn't touch my future wife? Besides, she's pretty demanding about being kissed."

A flush crept up Riley's cheeks.

“There will be honest hard work you'll get paid for. A good reference at the other end.” He leaned on the table, wholly focused on her. “And did I mention kissing?”

What a preposterous offer. She really ought to laugh him off.

# **Marry Me for Real, Cowboy**

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