



Don't you think?"

Nathaniel Cavanagh pulled his attention back to the woman seated across the table from him. It took him a few seconds to remember her name. Kyra. That was it. "Sorry, I missed what you said."

"We should do something special for our one-month anniversary." She smoothed her hair over her shoulder and fluttered her eyelashes.

Nathaniel's collar seemed to be cutting off his ability to breathe. "We've only gone out twice."

Kyra reached across the table and ran a red fingernail along the back of his hand. "Everything great has to start somewhere."

"I, uh..."

Why had he allowed his twin to push him into dating again? He didn't want a third date with Kyra any more than he'd wanted the first one. He wasn't looking. Not really. It had been two years since the love of his life had ghosted him, and his heart was still shattered.

Noah had said his horse-loving client Kyra Cardston seemed nice. *Thanks, bro*. Nathaniel should have known better than to take the bait. If Noah thought Kyra seemed nice, he should date her himself, not pass her off to Nathaniel.

That should have been his first clue, but no. Noah was worried about him, or so he said.

Oh, Ainsley. Why, oh, why, had she left Jewel Lake without a backward glance?

He'd racked his brain — still did — trying to think what he'd said to send her to flight. What he'd done to her... besides the obvious. She'd wanted to save sex for marriage. So had he, but one thing had led to another, and they'd both given in. It had been fully mutual, hadn't it? Yes, it had been wrong, but he hadn't forced her.

With a disgruntled sigh, Kyra pushed her chair back and tossed her napkin on the table. "Excuse me. I need to use the ladies' room." She stalked away, her hips swaying in her snug cream-colored dress.

This wasn't fair to Kyra. She obviously wanted something more in a relationship than casual dating. Nathaniel didn't even want that much.

This restaurant was one of Missoula's finest, but the steak and shrimp he'd tucked away lay heavy in his stomach. Other

couples and families and groups of friends gathered around nearby tables. Everyone seemed to be having a good time except him.

How had he landed here? Not physically, but mentally?

Noah. No more interfering.

If Nathaniel was going to get over Ainsley, he'd have to do it his own way and in his own time. It might take years. It might never happen.

His mind slid to the little box in his sock drawer. He'd been so, so sure of Ainsley's love. He'd been within days of asking her to be his forever. There'd been no question she'd say yes.

He rubbed his fingertips over his furrowed brow. How could he have judged her so wrongly? There'd been no clue. None.

Kyra slid into her chair and eyed him speculatively as the server approached the table. "May I offer you the dessert menu?"

Nathaniel shook his head. "No, thank you. May I have the check, please?"

"Certainly, sir." The server dipped his head and gathered up the plates.

"I was thinking we might share a slice of pie." Kyra's fingers found the back of his hand again.

He pulled away. "I'm sorry. I thought you said you were full?" She'd left part of her chicken Caesar, after all.

Kyra offered him a pout. "There's always room for dessert."

No. He was done. Nathaniel pushed back his chair and rose. “I’m sorry. I’ll get you a piece of pie to go, and you can enjoy it at home.” Alone.

She looked up at him. “It’s better warm.”

“It won’t have time to cool off.” He dipped his chin and stared into her eyes.

The sultry look morphed into an uncertain one. “I thought we were going to the symphony.”

“I’ve changed my mind. Although, if you prefer, I’ll drop you off there if you’d like to attend without me.”

“Nathaniel…” Her voice held an edge of warning.

“I’m sorry, Kyra. You and I are simply not going to work out.”

“You hardly know me.”

“It’s not you. It’s—”

“Oh, that’s so old.” She slapped the table with both hands as she rose then advanced to his side.

Nathaniel wasn’t exceptionally tall for a man, but he was taller than most women. In her heels, Kyra might be a half inch shorter, if that.

Her eyes blazed into his from mere inches away. “What’s the real problem, cowboy? A smart woman intimidates you?”

Did she have to be so loud, so brash? In his periphery, he saw faces turn toward them. He cringed, hating to be the center of attention. Maybe he should simply agree with her to make this awkward scene go away.

But he couldn’t do that. She’d cut to the core of who he was, calling him *cowboy* as though it was a slur. Rebuttals

raced through his mind, each discarded as quickly as it entered.

Wide-eyed, the server stopped near the hostess desk, holding what was likely their check.

Not breaking eye contact, Nathaniel extended his elbow to Kyra. “Shall we go now?”

She held out her palm. “I’ll take the symphony tickets, thanks. This was supposed to be *my* night.”

Like he owed her anything. He raised his eyebrows and twitched his arm closer. “Outside.”

“Don’t like a scene, cowboy?”

So, so true. Nathaniel vastly preferred blending in and not creating waves. Too late for that now.



“I hate leaving Vivienne to babysit Bella. It feels like I’m taking advantage.” Ainsley Johnson shifted in the passenger seat of her friend’s car.

“Vivienne’s your sister. Besides, it’s not every twenty-five-year-old who’d take on her teenage sibling when their mom died. I’m sure she’s grateful to you and doesn’t mind watching Bella sometimes.”

It felt like Ainsley leveraged that far too often, but all they had left was each other. “Mom’s passing has been rough on her.”

“And for you.” Carey shoulder-checked and angled into the left lane. “All that after your accident. Do you remember what happened yet?”

Ainsley shook her head and sighed. “A few things here and there. It’s been almost two years now, and the doctors aren’t sure whether my mind will ever fill in the gaps. Hence this trip.”

“Well, I’m sure glad you remembered me!”

Traffic was bumper-to-bumper as they navigated around the roundabout.

“Aw, you were my best friend in Jewel Lake when we were kids. Of course, I remember you.” Even though they’d rarely seen each other since.

“Then it seems you should have clear memories of the guy who fathered Bella.”

“I know, right? It’s too bad you were away at college that winter, or you’d know.”

Carey snorted. “Or you could have told me in one of our Facetimes instead of mysteriously keeping your secrets tight to your chest.”

Why hadn’t she? The familiar headache threatened to blacken Ainsley’s vision at the glimpse of what she’d forgotten. There was so much panic in her mind. So much that Vivienne had done most of the driving over from Spokane as Ainsley’s fears ballooned. But wasn’t it time to get answers?

Mom hadn't wanted her to. "Leave well enough alone," she'd said. "There's likely a good reason you can't remember it all."

What could that good reason have been? The memories were too vague. A tall, dark, and handsome man. Probably a one-night stand, said Mom. But her mother hadn't been there. She'd been in Spokane, and Ainsley had been in Jewel Lake. At least, according to the pay stubs in her purse.

Surely Ainsley wouldn't have slept with some random man like her mother thought. Like her mother had done. Ainsley was lucky Vivienne was her only sibling, the way Mom had lived. Mom refused to answer questions about parentage and said what was good enough for Ainsley and Vivienne was good enough for little Bella.

"Ainsley, are you okay?" Carey's concerned voice came from a distance.

Black spots dotted Ainsley's vision, each a pulse of pain. She shook her head ever so slightly. Maybe she should have waited to try to find her way down memory lane, but she couldn't help wondering if the darkness would ever completely dissipate if she didn't discover the truth. Which was worse, the knowing or the not knowing? She wouldn't know the answer without more information.

"Look, we don't have to go out tonight. Just because Mom and Frank bought a restaurant doesn't mean we have to go eat there today."

Ainsley rubbed both her brows. “I’ll be okay. It’s just... there are so many memories, but none of them are complete. The headaches will probably get worse before they get better.”

The truth will set you free.

That verse from John 8 had become her beacon since Mom’s passing. Ainsley desperately needed release. Needed to fill in the gaps. The only thing that could get her there was truth, even though the path would be painful.

It was already incredibly hazardous. It seemed like it had been harrowing before she’d stepped out in front of that taxi running a red light, but she couldn’t recall why. She wasn’t usually preoccupied — was she? And yet, the police report clearly recorded what bystanders had said.

Ainsley had *not* looked both ways before crossing the street. She’d stepped off the curb, and *bam*.

She was lucky the trauma hadn’t caused a miscarriage. Bella had been the only light in the darkness. If she’d lost that glimmer, the shadows would have claimed Ainsley, too.

How did she know that?

She knew so many things she couldn’t pinpoint or reason out. Yes, she needed to find the truth. It would bring clarity.

“Ainsley?” Carey’s voice held more than worry. Maybe fear.

“I’m okay. Really. Let’s go get dinner. There’s no need to waste your mom’s gift.”

“You sure? Because we could go a different night. How long are you in town?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“Sorry. You’re welcome to stay as long as you need to. Want to.”

But Carey had a one-bedroom apartment. She didn’t have room for three extra people.

“I’ll look for a place. Look for a job.” But who would hire her with her frequent sudden headaches? Someone. God had this. If she couldn’t believe that, the darkness would win for sure.

The signal light began to tick, and Ainsley pushed her melancholy thoughts aside as best she could. “That’s the restaurant? It looks really nice. Upscale.”

“I’m so glad Mom found Frank after she and Dad split up.”

Carey’s parents’ divorce had happened around the time Ainsley’s mom left Jewel Lake. Sometimes Ainsley wondered if Viv was Carey’s half-sister, since Mom had worked for Carey’s dad back then. There wasn’t any evidence, though, and Vivienne didn’t look at all like Carey. However, the purpose of this return to Western Montana wasn’t really to uncover Vivienne’s parentage. It was to uncover Bella’s.

Carey pulled into the parking lot next to a shiny black pickup.

Ainsley smiled. Wasn’t that a sign she was back in ranching country? She’d probably even ridden horseback, but she wouldn’t know for sure until she tried it again.

Together, they walked into the restaurant’s brick and wood interior. Halfway to the other end, a gorgeous woman stood facing a man beside a small table.

The woman leaned in, her face a mask of fury. “Don’t like a scene, cowboy?” And then she belted him across the face.

The man’s hand came up to cover the cheek she’d slapped. The woman rammed her elbow into his side as she passed him then marched toward the door.

Carey grabbed Ainsley’s arm and yanked her aside. Good thing, or the angry woman’s elbow might have cleared her path between them, as well.

But Ainsley’s gaze snagged on the man as he turned toward them. He was... someone she knew. The woman had called him a cowboy as though it were a dirty word, but he nicely filled a black suit and tie with a light gray shirt. Cowboys wore jeans and boots and plaid flannel shirts and brown felt cowboy hats. At least, her cowboy had.

Bella’s dad was a cowboy.

Ainsley blinked as the black spots danced and grew.

This man... could he...?

But the shadows merged before she could form a complete thought.

Let Me Off Easy, Cowboy

Cavanagh Cowboys Romance 3

released in September, 2021