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EVERYTHING LOOKED BETTER behind the lens of a camera. Ashley Ozark focused on a group at the end of the bar, and the shutter of her Canon EOS 5D Mark III made a delightful swish as she captured a head thrown back in laughter, a sardonic look from a friend, another face shadowed by a cowboy hat and a fourth wiping his brow. She smiled, happy with the result of the image, a conversation between friends and rivals, so intimate she almost felt like she'd overheard it.

She knew those men, rodeo boys, probably egging each other on, making bets, relieving tension before the county fair and rodeo this weekend.

A sharp-nailed, *rat-a-tat-tat*, on the top of her head made her lower the camera.

"Ouch."

Her older sister, Beth, stood to her side. "You're supposed to be helping bartend tonight. Not spending the entire time behind that camera."

"I've been hired to take pictures by the County Fair Committee. I'm just doing my job here."

"Yes, and you've also been hired to tend bar tonight." She indicated the long line of patrons waiting to be served. "By our father, I might add, who is also on the Fair Committee."

"Okay, okay." Ashley sighed, tucking the camera away into its bag and storing it under the counter. "I got some great candids in here."

"I'm sure you did." Beth tossed an apron at her head, but Ash caught it before it hit her face. "Now put that on and get to work."

"Tyrant," she muttered.

"You got that right."

"Bully."

"Exactly. Now get to work before I kick your ass."

"Like you could."

With a grin, Ashley tied the apron around her waist and lifted her chin at the next person in line, indicating she was ready to take their order. While she helped out at the bar on the odd occasion

because the Prospector Saloon in the Gold Dust Hotel was owned by her family, it really wasn't her scene. She preferred her quiet job at the flower shop, Heart's Bouquet, down the street. However, during the county fair it was a given—all hands on deck. That meant all five of the Ozark girls were required to help: she and Beth behind the bar, Brandi on the floor and the twins, Zoe and Chloe, in the kitchen. This year it was even more imperative because it was Half Moon High's Centennial celebration, so they expected more out-of-towners than normal. Based on the crowd tonight, it was an accurate assumption.

Ashley was happy to help. It meant extra dough, both working at the saloon and taking pictures, and every penny she made was going toward her *Get-the-hell-out-of-Half-Moon* Fund. So she plastered on a smile and kept the cold ones coming. Already the bar was standing room only, even though the festivities didn't officially start until tomorrow. The din from people talking and laughing was so loud, it drowned out the sound of the band. That was until her sister Brandi got up on stage between songs and grabbed the mic.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," she bellowed and yet still managed to sound sultry in a way that only Brandi could with her practiced, husky voice.

People stopped talking and heads turned—or at least, every *male* head turned, like a flock of sheep.

Baaaaa.

"For those who are visiting, welcome back to Half Moon Creek. We're so pleased you were able to come to the rodeo and fair this year and to celebrate Half Moon High's Centennial Celebration. We'll be kicking everything off Friday morning—Oh, my God! That's tomorrow, already—with a parade followed by the rodeo and opening of the fair grounds. Don't forget to pick up tickets for Saturday's big formal banquet. Tickets are still available at the front desk and..."

"Sweetheart?" came a voice from her left. "A little help here. I've been waiting for fifteen minutes and..."

Ashley spun toward the deep voice. She turned up the volume on her smile when she saw who it was. Colton Cross. Figured. The cocky, bull-riding cowboy was exactly the kind of person who would think it was okay—no, not okay—he probably figured she'd be *flattered* by him calling her sweetheart.

"Well now, *honey baby*. What can I get for my *sugar pie*?"

“What?” Colton mouthed the words, *sugar pie*, with a look of confusion on his unfortunately handsome features.

“Oh. I’m sorry, *sweetie*, aren’t we on a ‘terms of endearment’ basis?”

“Umm...” Colton’s brows drew together so close they formed one line across his forehead. “Ahh... whatever you say, darlin’. Can I get two pints of Beaverhead draft and an order of nachos—”

“You did not,” Ashley said, leaning across the bar. This was exactly why she couldn’t wait to leave Half Moon. Macho rodeo jerks like Colton Cross.

“I did not, what?” He asked slowly.

She rolled her eyes. “Call me *darlin’*—”

Oomph.

Beth elbowed Ashley out of the way.

“Hey, Colt,” Ashley’s oldest sister said with a genuine smile, while inconspicuously giving Ashley a side kick to the butt. “Don’t mind my sister. She’s weird.”

“*She’s* your sister?” Colton said, looking back and forth between Beth and Ashley and then glancing over his shoulder at Brandi who was still on stage talking animatedly about some of the highlights of the weekend.

“There are two more of us hiding out around here, somewhere.” Beth gave a vague wave toward the kitchen. “Five Ozark girls in total.”

“Wow. I did not know you two were sisters.” He glanced at Ashley again, who was openly scowling at him because, seriously, the fact that Colton Cross had *no* idea who she was only confirmed her opinion of him: self-centered, chauvinistic, thickheaded...oh, she could go on. Egomaniac, cocky, disgustingly good-looking...

“Didn’t you two go to grade school together before you moved?” Beth asked.

“Yep.” Ashley said the word, short and clipped, giving him the coldest look she could muster. By the way he tilted his head to one side and then the other as he gave her a quick once over, she knew he had no recollection of her. Zip. No memory of Valentine’s Day in fifth grade when she’d gone and made him a special Valentine and he’d repaid her by spitting in her hair later that day in the playground. Didn’t matter that her family had known his family for years or that ever since he’d returned to Half Moon a few months ago to help his brother out at his guest ranch, he’d been the talk of the town. Well, the talk of the female population, anyway.

“Oh yeah,” Colton said slowly, covering up the fact he couldn’t place her. “Nice to see you again...*Bren-da*, right?”

Nice try, hotshot. “It’s Ashley.”

“Right. Now I remember.”

As if.

She poured the beer and slid the frosty glasses across the bar. “Tab?”

“Yes, please. Oh, and about those nachos...?”

She nodded and, without another word to him, rang in the order and then began serving the next customer in line.

“Try to be a little nicer,” Beth whispered in her ear.

“I am nice,” Ash said through clenched teeth.

“No, you’re ornery.”

“So?”

“So, the nicer you are, the more tips you make.” Her sister eyed her apparel and sighed. “It doesn’t hurt to flirt a little either, which would help because that outfit isn’t doing a thing for you.”

“Thanks. I appreciate the vote of confidence,” she muttered beneath her breath.

Once Beth turned her attention to the next customer, Ashley glanced down at her well-worn jeans and T-shirt with the slogan, ‘Well Behaved Women Seldom Make History’. It was one of her favorites. Plus, it could be interpreted as flirty, couldn’t it?

“Boo!”

It took Ashley a few seconds to recognize the woman who had jumped into her line of sight. Not because she didn’t know her—she had been Ashley’s best friend for her entire high school life—only because she hadn’t seen her in five years, and Jasmine Sweet was the *last* person Ash expected to see tonight.

“Jazzy?”

Her friend waved her arms in the air. “In the flesh!” She squealed, hopped up onto the bar—which was a maneuver that did not jibe with the designer clothes she was wearing—slid across to the other side, hopped down and enveloped Ash in a bear hug, making Ash’s eyes water from the combination of the fierceness of the embrace and the floral perfume that floated around Jasmine like the sweet scent of honeysuckle on a summer’s eve. Or...like a cloud of gnats before a rainstorm.

Ashley patted Jasmine's back until the woman finally let up, stepping back and smiling down at her, which was odd because she and Jasmine had always been the same height.

Short. Or, *fun-sized*, as Jasmine called the two of them.

"Look at you! You haven't changed a bit," Jasmine gushed.

Ashley was going to say, "Neither have you." But it would have been a lie. Jasmine had changed since she'd managed to escape Half Moon a week after graduation. She'd always been beautiful, but now she looked *different*. She was sophisticated, with her expert makeup and hair pulled back in a chic ponytail. Ash realized the height difference was due to a pair of red, high-heeled shoes that perfectly matched Jasmine's designer handbag. Her clothes were clearly expensive—tailored black capris and a sheer sleeveless top in white that accented her dark skin tone—simple and elegant while still being sexy.

She was the same old Jasmine, only improved—vastly—with age.

"You look amazing," Ash said, wiping her suddenly sweaty palms on the front of her old jeans. "What are you doing back here?"

"What do you mean?" Jasmine's dark eyes glowed with excitement as she glanced happily around the bar. "I'm here for the same reason everyone else is. To see old friends and to celebrate the centennial, Half Moon style!" Her laugh was infectious, as always.

"Wow." That's all Ash could come up with, still in a state of disbelief by Jasmine's unexpected arrival.

"How long has it been?" Jazz asked before holding up a hand to stop Ash from answering. "No, wait, don't tell me, it'll only make me feel like a terrible friend." She leaned close in order to whisper in her ear, "We have so much catching up to do."

"Yeah," Ashley murmured, smoothing her own haphazard ponytail, awkwardly.

"But first—" Jasmine took in the lineup of patrons waiting to be served "—you look like you could use a little help behind the bar."

"Oh, no," Ash protested, assessing Jasmine's outfit and deeming it too put-together to be worn by a bartender in a busy saloon where it would undoubtedly get messed up. "Really, you don't need to do that."

"Did someone just offer assistance?" Beth sidled over, grinning broadly as she inserted herself between Ash and her friend.

"Beth!" Jazz squealed and gave Beth a hug.

“Was Ash surprised?” Beth asked.

Ashley blinked at her sister. She knew Jazz was coming and didn’t tell her?

Beth read her thoughts—as only Beth could—and said, “Jazz called to say she wanted to surprise you.” She winked. “By the expression on your face, I’d say Jazz got you pretty good.”

“She sure did. Wow.” Ash cringed internally. Really? Was that all she could come up with? Wow?

Slinging her arm over Jasmine’s shoulder, Beth said, “And you are even more gorgeous than ever. Seriously, Jasmine, what’s your secret?”

“No secret. Chicago agrees with me, I guess.” Waving her hand at the crowded bar, she asked, “Please, tell me I can help back here.”

“Of course you can.”

The next half hour was a blur of pouring drinks and taking orders and trying to keep all the bar tabs straight, but with Jasmine’s help, things went more smoothly and the tip jar was soon filled to overflowing. It didn’t hurt that Jasmine knew pretty much everyone and chatted them up in typical *Jazzy* fashion, as if she truly cared about each and every one of them.

Through it all, Ashley only spilled two drinks, one on herself and one on Jasmine.

“Oh, my God,” Ash cried, trying in vain to wipe the beer off Jasmine’s blouse. “I’m so sorry. This is probably really expensive.”

Jasmine only laughed as she took the cloth from Ash and blotted the stain in an equally ineffective manner, probably because the cloth was covered in beer, too. “It’s no big deal. Hazards of the job, right?”

That’s when Ashley noticed Jasmine’s hand. Or rather, the big, fat diamond ring adorning the ring finger of Jasmine’s left hand. Ash grabbed her hand to take a closer look. “You’re engaged?” She rubbed the stone. It was huge, something a celebrity might wear.

“I am.” Jasmine beamed. “His name’s Parker, and we’ve been living in sin for two years, so we figured it’s time.”

“Wow.”

C’mon, Ash. Plenty of words in the English language.

She cleared her throat. “Where’d you meet?”

“Chicago. At this party. It was really posh and I totally felt out of place.” She leaned close to Ash and whispered, “He said I was the most exotic woman he’d ever met.” She giggled. “Me. Little old Jasmine Sweet from Half Moon Creek, exotic? Can you believe it?”

This time Ashley managed to contain the *wow*, that sat tingling on the tip of her tongue. “He’s obviously got good taste.”

Jasmine squeezed Ashley’s fingers. “I was going to call to tell you, then I thought, why not come and tell you in person, instead?” She opened her mouth in a silent, happy scream, and a second later, Ashley found herself crushed once more in Jasmine’s arms, the wet patch on Jasmine’s blouse soaking into the only dry patch on her T-shirt.

“I’m happy for you,” Ashley said. “Really happy.”

“You want to see a picture?”

“Of course.”

Jasmine fished her phone out of her pocket and flipped through the photo app. “Oh, here’s a good one.”

Holy shit. Parker wasn’t just good-looking, he was...perfect. Perfect blond hair. Perfect clothes that were trendy and fit him...perfectly. Straight white teeth showing up in his perfect smile.

“He’s very...handsome.” Ash handed the phone back to her friend, who stuck it in her pocket again. “You must be very happy.”

“I am.” Clapping her hands with glee, Jasmine gushed, “But do you know what would make me happier?”

Ash slowly shook her head. Was it possible for someone to be happier than Jasmine currently was? Was it even fair?

“If *you* help me plan it.” She shivered. “Oh, it’ll be like old times. Say yes.”

“Of course.” Ash pulled her lips back in what she hoped resembled a smile of sorts.

They went back to serving drinks, and, if at all possible, Jasmine served with even more vigor than before. In fact, her energy was in direct proportion to Ashley’s sudden lack of enthusiasm, to the point where Beth asked her what her problem was.

“No problem,” Ash snapped.

With arms crossed over her chest, she studied her. Narrowing her gaze, she glanced at Jasmine, then back at her. “Take a break.”

“No—”

Her sister took hold of her by the shoulders. “Your shirt is a mess.” She touched her hair. “This is a mess.” Using her chin she indicated the back of the saloon. “I’ve got a makeup kit and a stack of extra shirts in the office. Go get yourself sorted.”

“Fine.”

Ash slipped down the bar toward the door to the kitchen. Her skin felt tight, every inch of her sensitive to the sogginess of her shirt, the tickle of errant wisps of hair against her face, the cinch of her belt.

What was wrong with her?

Jasmine’s laugh chased her all the way into the kitchen, nipping at her heels and making her flinch with the cheery sound of it. She paused just inside the kitchen, leaning against the wall. The last time she’d felt this way was the day before Jasmine had up and left Half Moon Creek.

Memories flooded her. The first week as a freshman, when Jasmine’s family had moved to town and Jazzy had decided they should be best friends because they were in three out of four classes together. They’d become inseparable after that, hanging out after school, and on weekends. All the important firsts were shared: first time skinny-dipping at the quarry, first time trying cigarettes—Jasmine’s idea. First time texting boys—ones Jasmine liked. First dates—Jasmine’s. First kisses—also Jasmine’s...

Four long years of Ashley living in Jasmine’s shadow.

Now, after just an hour, she was right back in it. Only now the shadow was bigger than ever, and Ash wondered if she’d ever see the light of day again.

“What are you doing?” Zoe, the shiest of her shy twin sisters, said. “You look sick.”

“I’m fine.” Ash gave herself a mental shake and went on into the office in the back to freshen up. Beth’s makeup bag sat open on the desk, and she had a stack of identical black tank tops with the pub’s logo on the back sitting on the corner. After stripping off her sticky shirt, she pulled one on.

She checked herself out in the mirror. God, how could Beth wear these all the time? Yes, they were made of that stretchy spandex cotton blend, but Beth had at least two cup sizes on Ash, and the tank top was tight on Ashley. However, right now, tight was better than beer-sodden, so, after unsuccessfully stretching the material—it was like elastic, snapping right back into place—Ashley loosened her hair and ran a brush through it before refastening her ponytail. There was no way she could pull off the sleek, sophisticated look that Jazz had, but at least it was neat. *Neater.*

Never one to wear much makeup, she pored through all the junk in Beth's bag before finding a lip gloss that didn't look too bright and some blush.

There.

She blinked at herself in the mirror.

Marginally better.

"Oh, my God. That's a *thousand* times better," her sister said when Ashley reemerged a minute later.

"Look at you!" Jasmine cried. "God, you are *so* cute." She shook her head in wonder. "I tell you, you are *exactly* the same." She indicated the bar with a sweep of her hand. "Just like this place. I love it."

Something deep in the pit of Ashley's stomach let out a low, menacing growl.

"It's like time stands still here."

Errrrr...

"It's so comforting." Jasmine closed her eyes and smiled. "You have no idea."

The growly thing in her tummy reached up and snagged the inside of her throat, making it difficult to swallow.

"So, tell me, cutie-pie." Because she was wearing high heels, Jasmine had to stoop a little in order to lean Ash's way. "Anyone snatched you up yet?"

The hot, beastly thing inside of her had tentacles, one of which was snaking up her spinal cord and others that slithered into her extremities. Whatever it was, it was intent on possessing her, and the growl in her tummy slipped right out of her throat.

"What did you say?" Jasmine asked with a wrinkle of her nose.

Ash licked her lips, about to embark on a diatribe, about what? She had no idea. "Yeah, I've got a boyfriend."

"You do?"

"Sure."

Someone cleared his throat.

"Hey, honey, about those nachos...?"

Ashley spun. Colton Cross stood there, adjusting his cowboy hat so it tilted back on his thick head. Perfect. "Nachos?"

"Yeah." He squinted.

“You want nachos, *baby*?” She beckoned him closer. “C’mere.”

A puzzled expression settled over his features as he leaned across the bar. When Ash fisted her hand in the front of his shirt and tugged, his expression went from puzzled to wide-eyed surprise.

“Look, I’m sorry if I offended—” he began.

She didn’t let him finish. For whatever-God-forsaken-reason, Ashley leaned across the bar and planted a juicy one, square on Colton Cross’s lips, sucking his apology right out of his mouth before he had a chance to finish.

“What the—”

Her mouth still close to his, she whispered, “Pretend to be my boyfriend, just for tonight, and your nachos and beer tab are on the house.”