

HOT SHOT Excerpt

It's dark now and quiet except for the crickets. In the distance, the town of North Ridge glows, the lights giving way to the dark mountain ranges behind it and beyond that, a clear, starry sky.

I immediately feel better but it's not enough. I need to walk, to get my head on straight, to get my heart to stop caving in.

I head down the slope to the barn. It's second nature to want to come here during hard times. Growing up, if anyone in the house was fighting—and it was usually Shane and Fox—this was where you'd find them afterwards, licking their wounds.

Right now the barn is empty, all the horses are either in their paddocks or the pastures. I glance up at the hayloft and contemplate going up there when I hear footsteps behind me.

I immediately stiffen. It's funny how you can feel someone's specific presence without seeing them.

"What's wrong with you?" Fox asks gruffly from behind me. Typical. Even if he's concerned, sometimes he comes across like it annoys him to be concerned.

I take in a deep breath and turn around. "I don't know," I say, my voice measured. "Just felt a bit nauseous."

He studies my face intently, so intently that I look away, my eyes drifting over the empty stalls. "I thought maybe I'd pissed you off somehow," he says.

Is he baiting me?

I meet his eyes. "Why would you think that?"

"You could barely look at me during dinner," he says, taking a step toward me until he's a foot away. "Was it something I did? Is this about Conan?"

He's so damn earnest in that last question that I have to laugh. I fold my arms across my chest. "No, Fox. This isn't about your squirrel. It's not about anything. I'm just...tired."

I can tell he doesn't believe me and the intensity has changed in his eyes. They've become more focused on me, like he's seeing me for the first time and nothing else around us matters.

"I like this," he says, his voice sounding thick. He takes a strand of my hair between his fingers and runs them down. "Your hair is so long. You should wear it down more often."

I roll my eyes and hope I'm not blushing. "You guys are all the same. A girl wears her hair down and puts on some makeup and suddenly you realize that she's actually hot. It's like *She's All That* come to life."

Oh shit. I probably shouldn't have said that last bit out loud since it's a whole bunch of assumptions and I'm not one to flatter myself like that.

But he just grins. One of those cheeky, warm smiles that makes his eyes crinkle at the corners, the dimples appear in his scruff. He doesn't smile like that very often and every time he does for me, it makes me feel...invincible.

"Del, I've always thought you were hot," he says, still smiling. No awkwardness or hesitation. He just comes out and says it.

And now I *am* blushing. "Yeah right."

"What?" he asks, tucking my hair behind my ear and—*hell*—his touch causes warm shivers to wash down my back. "It's true. I mean, look at you."

Don't read into it. Don't read into it.

"Do you remember that birthday party where we played spin the bottle?" I ask him, my voice sounding broken.

He nods. "Kind of." But he doesn't remove his hand, keeps playing with my hair.

I don't know why I'm feeling brave all of a sudden but I am. "Well you spun the bottle and it stopped right at me. No mistake about it. And you got up and said it was stupid and left. Fox, we were good friends and you acted like kissing me was the worst thing on earth."

His dark brows knit together but his eyes stay warm. "You remember that?"

"Fox. I'm a woman. I'm always going to remember when a boy rejects me, especially my best friend and especially at a young age."

"But we *were* young. And I was pretty stupid back then."

"You thought I was gross."

He lets out a soft laugh. "I can promise you I did not think you were gross." His hand then leaves my hair and trails down my arm to my hand. Sometimes Fox holds it and I know I shouldn't think anything of it but every time he does I wonder if he realizes what it does to me. Then again, I'm starting to think he's oblivious to absolutely everything.

"I didn't kiss you," he goes on, "not because I didn't want to. I did." He swallows, shrugs. "I just didn't want our first kiss to be from spin the bottle."

Hold up...what?

"What do you mean? Our first kiss?" I repeat, my pulse quickening.

"I don't know, Del. Back then, I kind of assumed that we would end up together at some point. You know all through high school I had just been waiting to make my move and ask you out. At least figure out if you liked me or not. But then you started going out with that guy with the big ears, what was his name, Ryan McGee? And that's when I realized that it was probably all in my head. You were just a friend. A sister, even. And I was just a brother to you."

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

This is way too much to process.

Fox thought we'd end up together.

He actually liked me back in high school!

"You look shocked," he says, raising a brow. "I thought it was pretty obvious."

"Obvious?" I blurt out. "No. No it wasn't."

He lets go of my hand and shrugs with one shoulder. "It's funny how life goes, isn't it? It was probably for the best anyway. Could you have imagined us dating? Being a couple."

Yes, fucking yes.